



# THE FOX

THERESA BEACHMAN

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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# **THE FOX**

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GUARDSMEN SECURITY III

THERESA BEACHMAN

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Fox angled his mountain bike down the dark thread of the mountain track. Sunlight flashed through gaps in the trees, flashes of light between the green-dark coolness and the woodsy press of pine and birch. Hollers behind him confirmed Griff was still on his tail and closing the gap. Fox hunkered lower, removed his hands from the brakes and pedaled faster. Perhaps if he cycled fast enough, he could lose the burden of thoughts from the past few weeks. This hope had propelled him to accept Griff's offer of a weekend lost in the majestic scenery of Romsdalen.

He jerked the front wheel hard left, jolting over exposed tree roots and sending a spray of grit and pebbles clattering down the steep slope.

His last mission, rescuing an injured veteran, Abbie Allard, from rural Russia, had taken up residence in his heart in a way that made no sense.

Abbie was the only known survivor of Raptor's research program that had seen over a hundred veterans suffer a dark and freezing death at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, before Eli and Bea had found her alone and starving in a hospital in a hidden town in rural Russia. To aid her recovery, intelligence services had secreted Abbie away in the bunkers hidden under Helsinki to give her time to recover physically. He had thought of little else over recent weeks, worrying about how she was, and if progress had been made in locating her missing daughter.

Muddy water soaked his legs as he hurtled through a row of puddles left over from last night's rain that had left the air redolent with the scent of wet earth and leaves. Griff was right. This was what he needed, time away from everything and the sharp, cleansing air in his lungs. A change of scenery



would give him perspective.

He had done his own research to locate Abbie's daughter, Mia, but had found nothing. Raptor had buried the girl well, knowing she was their only leverage, and instead insinuated Abbie may have harmed her daughter and that was why she couldn't be found.

The idea made his blood simmer—that Raptor had Mia hidden away somewhere, keeping her in the wings for when they needed a bargaining chip.

A rusty red blur darted out from a thorny tangle of brambles. Fox swerved left.

*Not enough—*

His front wheel clipped a tree root jutting out of the packed mud. The handlebars wrenched free of his grip and the back wheel slid sideways.

Fox hit the ground, his teeth snapping electricity through his jaw as he landed with a bone-jolting halt that ripped the air from his lungs.

*Fuck.*

His feet snagged the pedals, and the bike landed on top of him in a wiry cage, wheels spinning.

A flick of orange and a white-tipped tail was the last he saw of his adversary. Fox yanked at the bike and shoved it free of his body.

Brakes screeched, and dirt pebbled his leg. "What the fuck, Fox?" Griff extended a hand. "You're meant to stay on the damn bike, not roll around under it."

Fox accepted the offer of help and allowed his friend to boost him back to his feet. He rolled his eyes at Griff's grinning face. "You're fucking hilarious. There was an animal. Fucking fox."

"Seriously?" Griff snorted.

"I know. What are the chances? Dusted by my namesake." He wiped leaves and mud from his arms. Damp soil blackened his knees. He rotated his shoulders and took a few steps, kicking away the prickly branches he'd taken down with him. He winced at the tenderness, but everything was working, although he had an impressive scrape running from elbow to wrist. "No bones broken."

"Wish I could say the same about your bike." Griff dismounted and toed the impressive buckle in Fox's front wheel.

Fox squatted, ran a hand across the top of his helmet. *Fuck.* He grabbed the frame and straightened the bike. The front wheel pointed left while the

rest of the bike faced straight ahead. The chain hung loose, split in half.

He unzipped the small toolkit strapped to the back of his saddle so he could remove the front wheel to straighten it.

“Perhaps if you weren’t so distracted?” Griff unclipped his water bottle.

“What?”

Griff took a seat on a low, moss-covered branch. “Your mind hasn’t been in the here and now much these last few weeks.”

“There’s a lot going on.” Fox spun the spanner on the central bolt, and the wheel uncoupled with a pop.

Griff swigged his water. “I know, but everyone needs time off.”

Fox straightened with a glare. “I’m here, aren’t I? Fucking having time off and enjoying myself. For all the good it’s doing me. *Fuck.*”

Griff was unperturbed, but his eyebrows rose. “This is exactly what I mean. You need more time off.”

“Situations like these don’t warrant time off. There’s a kid missing.”

“I know, but anyone would think it was your kid.”

The spanner slid from Fox’s grip, and rough metal abraded his knuckles. *Shit.* He rubbed his stinging fingers against the opposite arm.

“I am well aware she is not my kid.” Nor was Abbie his woman. Never would be, because he had found and lost the love of his life already. Men like him didn’t get second chances.

“Right.” Griff clipped his water bottle back to his bike.

“I’m looking for the kid because that’s part of my job, part of both of our jobs.” Fox wagged the spanner at Griff. “Keeping people safe. Or finding them and making sure they are safe.”

“Right. It’s all about the job.”

“Fucking is,” Fox growled.

“Not because you feel something for her mother?”

Blood coursed hot in Fox’s veins. “She’s attractive but—” He’d never been so grateful for the shrill tone of his phone.

Griff sighed and pressed his lips into a flat line as Fox swiped the unknown number to answer. “Fox.”

“Hello?” Female. Youngish. Unique accent. “Thom Fox?”

Griff glanced at him, clearly hearing the anxiety in the woman’s voice that could mean only one thing.

The woman didn’t wait for an answer. “Listen. You don’t know me. My name is Steph. I’m Abbie’s nurse.”

Abbie.

“Abbie Allard?” He had to be sure.

“Yes—”

“How is she?” His voice caught, and he had to cough to clear his throat.

“Great.” A pause as Steph collected herself. She was slightly breathless. “She’s been doing really great, actually. They removed the microchip from her head... but she’s decided to check herself out of the clinic. I can’t stop her—she’s not under arrest, but she’s vulnerable. I don’t think she should be on her own until she’s given her testimony.”

Her testimony. Her account of Raptor’s manipulation of the veterans who had signed up thinking they were working to find a PTSD cure for countless others, but who, in reality, were being used to refine a weapon.

Steph continued. “I can take steps here to keep her safe, but bureaucracy... Everything takes days and has to be signed off in triplicate. She needs someone to talk some sense into her *now*. She’s mentioned you, so I thought—”

“She’s mentioned me?”

“Yes. You were there. One of the team that found her at Tryokghgorny, no?”

Images seared his mind’s eye. Abbie, weak and malnourished, shadows under her eyes, her cheeks gaunt from lack of food and stress. But also her proud posture, even though her clothes, dirty and torn, hung from her frame.

“Look, Steph, I’m not sure...” A wave of emotion washed through him. Protectiveness. The same feeling that overcame him when he held Abbie in his arms at Tryokghgorny. He swallowed the emotion, its rawness and intensity setting him on edge. How could a woman he had only met once get to him like this? Make him feel so much with no effort at all?

He pinched the skin on the bridge of his nose, locking down his inexplicably intense reaction. *I’ve already loved and lost. I can’t do that again. Not now, not ever. It would destroy me.*

“Are you trying to give me the brush off?” Her voice rose a few octaves, a no-nonsense tone he recognized from his own days as a senior registrar. Then he’d been working in the emergency department under the tutelage of a draconian matron who made him repeatedly stitch bananas till he could pass as a world class seamstress.

*Fuck, no.* And if Abbie was involved? *Never.*

“No. I wouldn’t do that.” His ear smarted from the pressure of his phone.

“Good. I hoped not.” Her voice rose. Loud enough for Griff to hear.

Griff looked up from where he had the busted wheel wedged between his knees and waggled his eyebrows.

Fox looked the other way, trying desperately not to think of Abbie. Her amber eyes, the fullness of her lips against luminous skin.

*Shit.*

“So.” Steph’s tone firmed up. “Now that I’ve established I can rely on you. When can you get here?”

Griff stalled with his spanner rotations and stared openly at Fox, a bemused expression on his face. Fucker was waiting for his answer and didn’t care that Fox knew it. Fox exhaled. He should have walked away, had a private conversation.

“Tell me where you are.” He listened, committing the details to memory as he had done so many times before on missions when written instructions were only a hazard and a risk that could cost the lives of his team.

He ended the call as Griff secured his wheel back in place.

“Wonky, but you can freewheel down the hill. Get you where you need to be.” Griff swung onto his own bike. “Ready to go.”

Fox followed suit.

Where he needed to be.

He pushed off, already making travel plans in his head with only one destination.

*Abbie.*

**A**bbie Allard stuffed her belongings into a small backpack. It wouldn't take long. She only had a few changes of clothes, some toiletries, and a secondhand purse Steph had bought for her.

"You can't leave. What are you doing? This is crazy." Steph planted her hands on her hips, but she didn't intimidate Abbie. Deep down, Steph was a cinnamon roll and wouldn't stop her.

"I have to do this." Abbie surveyed her scant belongings. She swallowed the rise of emotion in her throat. Getting upset would only be a hindrance, because right now she needed her head on straight, her thinking clear.

"You can't leave."

"You've already said that, but I'm going anyway." She looked up at Steph's concerned face and then away again. Steph had been so kind to her in the time she had spent here, hidden away from the world. "I've been here for six weeks. Mia is still missing, and I can't sit around any longer and not do anything." She scrubbed at her arms. The need to see her daughter had lodged under her skin, a deep burning ache that gave her no peace. Action was the only thing that would soothe it, of that she was sure.

Mia was missing, and Raptor claimed they had nothing to do with it, that Abbie herself had sent her daughter away without a trace. Her memories of that time were hazy. Had she hidden her daughter away and then forgotten? It didn't seem possible, but nothing she'd experienced in the last six months, from having an AI chip implanted in her head, to almost dying in an abandoned hospital in the wilds of Russia, seemed possible, and yet it had been.

Steph crossed her arms across her chest. “I just think this is a mistake.”

“The chip is out, Steph, and today the doctor gave me the all clear.” She glimpsed herself in the pockmarked mirror on her bedroom wall, her hair shorn, a scar tracking the left side of her head above her ear. Ugly, but she took comfort from the fact that the chip Raptor had implanted in her brain was gone despite the trail of damage. “My stitches have healed. There’s nothing keeping me here any longer but fear.”

“And the tests?”

Abbie stopped packing, her hands clenched tight on the zipper of her small backpack. It was barely half-full. Raptor had ripped her old life from her and left her with nothing.

She swallowed the hot rise of bile stinging her throat, shook her head. “No more tests.”

She would find Mia, and then? She would make Raptor pay. The microchip in her head, implanted to neutralize the traumatic memories that had plagued her since she retired from the military had left her memories in disarray, but she remembered *enough*. Her testimony would count.

Raptor had recruited her for a submarine mission that she had narrowly avoided at the last minute after overhearing Raptor’s true intent. That she could remember such details, but not where she had agreed to send her daughter cut deep.

Steph sighed and sat down on the bed. She ran a hand through her long hair. “What about your testimony against Raptor? It’s in less than two weeks.”

Her testimony could end Raptor’s research. There was a lot riding on her staying alive.

“I’ll be there, but right now, this is what I need to do.” Abbie was breathing too hard, her nostrils tense as anger vented liquid in her veins. She had not signed up for this. Not only had Raptor taken her daughter, they’d reached right inside her head, changed who she was, her very being.

She touched the newly grown fuzz across the side of her head. She felt stripped to the bone, her long hair gone, till there was only her, raw and exposed. Somehow, in this stripped landscape, she had to find herself again and her daughter. “I can’t wait anymore, Steph. Finding Mia. It’ll be good for both of us.” God, she wanted that to be true, even though she didn’t know if it would be.

“So where will you go?” Steph plucked at the sheets on Abbie’s bed, but

her tone had altered, tinged with acceptance.

Where would she go? Away from here—this hidden city under Helsinki. She craved light and fresh air and familiarity, something that had been missing from her life for too long. “Home. See if something there triggers a memory, gives me a clue where Mia is.”

“And Fox?” Steph’s tone was casual, but the words were not.

*Thom Fox.* One of the security team who found her half-dead and starving, at the hospital in Tryokghgorny after Raptor had sent men to kill her in Russia.

Memories of him flickered through her unreliable mind. His large, warm hands. A gentle touch as he asked for her permission before listening to her heart and breathing. Corded muscle under his shirt as he tugged an emergency blanket around her shoulders, the whisper of his scent tickling her nose. A woody smell of masculinity that soothed her exhausted mind and promised safety and comfort.

Another time, another life, she would have been interested in a man like him.

He’d sent regular updates of his continuing efforts to locate Mia. But he hadn’t found her. No one had. There was only her now, and as a mother, it was her job to find Mia. Nothing else mattered.

She kept her tone casual. “What about him?”

“He’s been trying to help. Shouldn’t you at least speak to him before you leave?”

“He’s found nothing. His company, Guardsmen Security, checked all the schools in Norway and Sweden.”

Steph sighed and scrubbed at the corners of her eyes. “Abbie—”

The fluorescent lighting strip flickered above Abbie’s head.

It flared brightly, sputtered, went out.

Underground with no windows, the darkness was absolute. Abbie’s pulse jacked upward. “Steph?”

“Here.” A hand closed on her arm, and then the emergency lighting snapped on, giving the room a dim lilac glow from rods tucked between the ceiling and walls.

Goosebumps erupted the length of Abbie’s spine. “What’s going on?”

“There’s no scheduled alarm drill.” Steph fiddled with the radio clipped to her belt, but it remained silent. She whacked the unit against her palm. “It happens. Damp is an ongoing problem. There’s corrosion in the power

conduits. The emergency generators will kick in.”

“When?” Abbie smoothed her palms against her thighs, breathing in through her nose to quell her hammering heart.

“Soon. Now. Okay, usually they are back on sooner than this. I’ll give you that, but let’s not overreact.”

Light shifted in the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. Someone was on the other side.

Could be anyone.

The door handle rotated.

Instinct, honed by weeks surviving alone in Russia, made Abbie grab Steph and pull her behind the door. She breathed in, trying to make more room for Steph, but it was a squeeze between the door and the fire extinguisher.

The door opened, the angular spill of light highlighting the rumpled bed, her backpack.

The thick muzzle of a silencer eased into the room.

Nausea swooped through Abbie at the confirmation of her worst fears. Raptor was still hunting her. She pressed the flats of her hands against bumpy gloss paint. Her pinky skimmed the cold metal of the fire extinguisher.

The intruder swore softly. Another second and the gun would swing around, trapping them. The rage that had smoldered within Abbie for so many weeks ignited; like a match to potassium, it flared white hot.

She rammed her shoulder against the door, knocking the intruder off balance. The gun fired twice in rapid succession, softly muted thunks that punched into her bed with puffs of disintegrated fabric.

*Fuck.*

Abbie ripped the fire extinguisher from its hook, wielding it in both hands as she cornered the door and launched it at her attacker. She aimed high, screaming in terror as she smashed it into his temple.

His eyes burst wide in shock in the narrow slit of a black balaclava as his legs folded under him.

*Oh, God—oh, God.* Air locked solid in her lungs, resisting all her efforts to breathe. Abbie dropped the fire extinguisher to the floor.

“Abbie.” Steph clung to her, but Abbie twisted free.

*Get the gun. Get the gun.* She retrieved his dropped weapon with clumsy fingers.

The man groaned. Blood, black in the dim light, smeared his forehead.



There had to be more than one.

Abbie checked the clip. “We don’t have much time.”

“We have to call security.” Steph spoke through fingers clutched to her mouth, her skin grayish with shock.

A radio whistled on the intruder’s belt. Abbie unclipped it and held it to her ear. “Oliver, do you have the package? Please confirm. Security is disabled.”

Abbie thumbed the radio off and tossed it on the bed. “There’s no security right now.” She scooped her backpack onto her shoulder. “It’s not safe for you here. Come with me.”

Steph gave a wobbly nod. Mascara streaked her wet cheeks as she stepped over the unconscious man.

Abbie slid her fingers through Steph’s and pulled her nurse out the door, pausing only to tuck the gun into her waistband.

It was time to stop Raptor from sweeping people aside when it suited their purposes. Time for them to be held accountable.

She hustled Steph down the corridor as fast as she could, away from the threat that relentlessly hunted her down, no matter where she hid.

It was several minutes before reality intruded and she registered her freezing feet.

She was still in her socks.

Fox stalled at the top of the underground steps. He took a deep breath and then jogged down, two at a time, because if he was fast he wouldn't think too hard about the fact his destination was a hospital.

Concrete rose around him, locking him underground at the entrance to Helsinki's bunker city. The stairs opened out into a large concourse dominated by sheet concrete and post-war utilitarian architecture.

A row of ticket booths lined the wall on his right. Small shops selling dark roast Scandinavian coffee were on his left. He grabbed a coffee and a sweet apple pastry. His stomach was growling because he hadn't eaten in his rush to get to the airport. He burned his tongue on the too-hot coffee, but damn, it tasted good.

The underground train, like everything else under Helsinki, was punctual, pulling away from the station right on time, the hum of electricity rising through the soles of his feet. He chose to stand, the combination of caffeine and nerves getting the better of him. It had been weeks since he last saw Abbie. What would he say to her? Would she even want to speak to him?

Their first meeting had been intense, but also brief. They barely knew each other, were total strangers. He rolled his hands around the steel support pole, wishing instead he were prepping for a mission to somewhere dangerous instead of having to face the woman who in the fleeting moments of time he had spent with her had made him feel things he had not felt for so long. *Years.*

He dragged a hand across his face and stared at the map above his head. Theater, running track, hospital, swimming pool, supermarkets, cinema. They

hadn't been joking in the brochure he'd picked up when he arrived in Helsinki airport. Built to protect the citizens of Finland from a nuclear attack, this place really had everything you needed to live underground for a very long time and never stick your head above ground.

He pulled at his collar. The enclosed space of the train was claustrophobic, the warm dry air heavily reminiscent of the chapel where he'd had Julie cremated.

The train slowed to a halt, and the doors wheezed open.

Fox ducked out, grateful to be free of the metal confines, his nerves pinging at the rush of energy from the surrounding people. Ahead, a temporary red and white barrier had been erected across the platform entrance and an impatient-looking crowd was slowly leaking through, their papers being checked by two disgruntled guards. Fox didn't miss the bulge of weapons at their hips.

*Shit.*

What the fuck had happened in the short period since Steph had phoned him? He checked his phone. She hadn't called to let him know there was an issue. He rubbed the prickle of nerves at the back of his neck. He didn't like this at all. Not one bit.

Fox merged with the flow of traffic, heading in the other direction. Staff arriving at the hospital for their day shift, their papers being checked only slightly faster than those of the departing staff.

He flashed the hospital pass on his phone that Steph had sent him.

"Busy day?" He kept his tone light, but locked his attention on the admitting guard.

The guard shrugged, swiped the phone. "Some kind of lockdown on one ward. They're always running these practice trials." He sucked air through a gap between his front teeth. "Nothing but a shitload of work for us and no extra money. Fuckers." He waved Fox through and was onto the next person before Fox could reply.

Fox tucked his phone away and made rapid progress into the hospital building. Colored lines gave a clear path to different clinical areas. Blue led to Abbie's ward.

He hadn't set foot in a hospital since Julie died, and the smell of antiseptic wreaked havoc on his heart rate.

His nerves ratcheted higher the closer he got to the ward. People brushed past him. Not just medics, but police. Uniformed and in plain clothes. The

sense of tension and busyness grew as he walked, not lessening. Whatever happened was close to where Abbie was.

This wasn't good. His hand skimmed his hip, too aware of the absence of his weapon that air travel had required.

His jaw tightened, his blood pressure ticking higher.

Ahead, the corridor was closed off. Someone had stationed a uniformed officer on the other side of wide yellow tape. The man yawned and rubbed at the corners of his eyes before taking a final swig from a paper cup, which he tossed in the trash bin. He pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and swiped it open, distracting himself with the digital world.

*Perfect.*

Fox retreated to the nursing station he had just passed. A nurse hunched over the desk, scrolling her way through an excel spreadsheet of hospital beds. Yet another reason he had chosen the military instead of the traditional route in medicine, so he could actually help people on the front line and not spend his days pencil pushing. If he'd wanted to do that, he would have studied accounting.

The nurse didn't pay him any attention as he strolled right past to the cleaning closet. He tried the door handle.

*Unlocked.*

He ducked inside and pulled the light cord. Several cleaning trolleys were parked up, laden with bottles of cleaning materials, cloths, and mops. And even better on the back of the door, pale blue orderly jackets.

Fox pulled on one jacket. Snug, but it would do. No one would pay him any attention. He kept on his baseball hat and tugged the brim low as he maneuvered the trolley out into the corridor and back toward Abbie's room.

The nurse was on the phone now haggling over a bed. She didn't even blink when he shambled past, his steps heavy, head ducked low against the CCTV cameras as he headed toward Abbie's room.

Fox shuffled right up to the taped barrier. He kept his face down-turned, his shoulders rounded, and grunted at the guard.

The officer tore his attention from his phone and gave Fox a cursory glance, his gaze already grazing over Fox's shoulder to the bright chatter of two female nurses further down the corridor.

He moved the tape so Fox could pass by, hardly paying any attention.

Fox gritted his teeth. This was the kind of man they sent to protect Abbie? Fuckers.

Fox wheeled the trolley round the corner.

A body lay covered in the hallway, a thick smear of blood leading from the room to under the sheet, as if the victim had struggled to escape and failed. Fox gripped the cleaning cart handle as he took in the almost black blood saturating the sheet. The victim, going by the pooling blood, had been shot in the head. An execution.

Nearby, a plainclothes police officer talked to a colleague, oblivious to Fox.

The sole of a shoe was visible under the bottom edge of the sheet. A man's shoe. Not a woman's. The pain squeezing Fox's heart eased a little, but only briefly. If Abbie wasn't here, where was she?

And how had the police allowed this to happen? She was supposed to be fucking safe here. Locked away where Raptor couldn't find her.

Part of the corridor had been roped off enough to allow staff to pass and attend to patients on the far side of the corridor.

Fox glanced inside Abbie's room as he wheeled past.

His heart was in his throat, his hands inexplicably damp. He couldn't be too late. Not again. But inside, although the space was in disarray—a fire extinguisher on the floor and sheets hanging off the bed, bullet holes punched in the blood spattered fabric—there was no sign of Abbie.

He took a slow breath as he passed by. *She's not there.*

The plainclothes was in earshot now, his phone wedged to the side of his head, his voice rising in pitch. "... I want all the exits locked down... she can't have gone far. She's a patient here... No, this is my case. No, I don't care what Virtanen says, look..."

*Fuck.* Fox passed out of earshot. Abbie was alive, but *missing*.

At the end of the corridor, an orderly shuffled into the elevator. Fox sped up, catching the elevator door before it closed. You wanted answers; you asked the people no one ever noticed, the ones so gray they passed under the radar.

Fox jerked a thumb toward Abbie's room as he took his cell from his pocket and brought up the list of contacts. "You know what happened?"

The man shrugged. "Patient shot a visitor." He shook his head and grimaced, exposing stained teeth. "She killed him and disappeared. Whole damn hospital is looking for her."

Fox mulled over the statement. This had Raptor written all over it. They had found Abbie. But was she so desperate she would kill to escape?

The lift shuddered to a halt. Ground floor. The orderly exited without a backward glance.

Fox thumbed Steph's number, not wanting to approach anyone else or alert them to his presence. She was the one person he could trust.

Steph's phone rang, but it went to voicemail.

*Fuck.* He steered the cleaning cart out of the elevator and parked it against the ground floor wall. A crowd was massing in the main foyer as police and security processed everyone trying to leave the building. Fox pivoted and pushed through the fire escape doors into the back stairway.

Cool, gritty-smelling air hit him in the face as he hit the speed dial for the Guardsmen Security office.

His boss, Leo, answered on the first ring. "Fox?"

"Leo. I'm at the hospital in Helsinki—"

"Helsinki?"

"Not relevant." Fox dismissed the question with a shake of his head. There was no time to explain. "Listen, Abbie Allard's nurse called, so I

headed out, but when I got here something had already gone down.” He stared at a painted mural of gray sky leached of color. He closed his eyes briefly. *Where the fuck was she?* “Abbie’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Fucking *gone* gone. Something went down during the night in the super secure underground, no-one-will-find-her fucking hospital.” Stress plucked at his voice and he exhaled, searching for elusive calm. What was up with him? He tugged at his beard. He was no use to anyone, but especially Abbie, if the strain of events gained the upper hand. Right now, his primary objective was to find her.

“Abbie is missing and her nurse isn’t answering her phone. There’s a dead man outside Abbie’s room, and the police are arguing like a bunch of kindergarteners over whose case it is. I need you to find out anything you can from your end.”

“Jesus. On it. But, Fox—”

He knew what Leo was going to say already.

“She has a track record of disappearing.”

Fox ended the call. Yeah. Her track record.

He was trying not to think about that.

Fox abandoned the blue porter's jacket on the stair rail and headed back into the main lobby.

He scanned the frenetic clamor of people. Not the easiest situation in which to exit without being seen. Especially when everyone was looking for you.

He spun a slow circle, knowing in his gut Abbie had not left the hospital yet. She was still here, biding her time for the right quiet moment to slip out unnoticed. Survival was in her blood; she hadn't survived Tryokghorn by chance.

He strode over to the service desk, where a young man was answering calls on his headset. "Excuse me."

The young man looked up and covered his mic with his hand. "Can I help you?"

"The hospital. Does it have a library?"

The young man sized him up. "Yes, we do."



The library was vast and hidden away in the basement. The scent of dusty paper triggered memories of his undergrad days, endless hours cramming for his finals so he could save lives.

Except perhaps those who he loved the most, the voice at the back of his mind prompted him.

He dismissed the voice. Now was not the time. Distractions would lose



him Abbie, and he had to find her. The doors swung shut behind him with a whoosh of rubber kissing rubber. The checkout desk was unmanned, and several computers hummed with self serve scanners. A false cupola shone artificial daylight over a mezzanine floor that circled above his head, creating an airy feel despite the subterranean location.

Where to start? The place was immense. He climbed the stairs, doing what he would do in the same situation. Find a hidden vantage point and wait for the moment of opportunity.

He scanned the titles at the end of each shelving row. Horticulture. Trees. Algae. He ducked in where the false daylight seemed to penetrate the least, tracking down the extended line of the shelf. The regular quiet progression of books soothed his soul.

A whisper of sound.

He stopped, his ears straining.

Something hard prodded the small of his back, making his muscles tense.

A gun.

**A**bbie forced the silenced gun against the man's muscular back. It was like nudging the gun against rock. Broad shoulders rose from a trim waist. "Don't move."

He didn't flinch, and for a moment doubt washed through her. Her toes curled against the polished wood floor and she dispelled the doubt. She was doing the right thing by taking things into her own hands. She was finished expecting other people to keep her safe when they so clearly couldn't.

"Abbie?" His voice was little more than a growl.

He knew her? Doubt resurfaced, like flotsam that refused to stay submerged, making the gun tremble in her grip.

He spun and relieved her of the gun and pinned her to the book stack with one thick forearm before she could react.

Damn, he was fast.

Her mouth fell open.

She *knew* this man.

*Thom Fox.*

He was a monolith, the thick ridge of his shoulders blocking her view of anything else but him.

The pressure on her chest eased, but she was still going nowhere.

"Abbie. What the fuck? The whole damn place is looking for you." His voice was gruff, the rough timbre lifting the hairs on the back of her neck. Intense blue eyes scanned her face. The same ones full of care the first day she laid eyes on him, that fateful day in Tryokghgorny. Not a day had passed when she hadn't thought about her rescuer. About *him*.

She'd never expected to see him again. Yet here he was. In her life, and larger than she ever remembered. An absolute powerhouse of a man.

She forced her mouth closed, gathering herself against the disquieting effect of his closeness, the whisper of spice and clean male sweat. "Fox."

"Are you alright?" He lifted his arm from her chest and his fingers grazed down her side, setting her skin on fire.

Abbie worked her tongue against the dry roof of her mouth. "Yes... I'm fine."

He glanced to the side, his gaze assessing, not missing anything. "You're not alone?"

"No. Steph's with me."

A shadow lightened to Abbie's side, and Steph appeared, raising a hesitant hand. She'd never seen Fox in person and it didn't surprise Abbie to see Steph's eyes widen as she took in this dangerous-looking man.

"It's okay, Steph. I know him."

Steph nodded, worrying at her lower lip with her teeth. "Me too. I called him."

Called him? Abbie shook her head. Of course. All Steph's worry. She reached out for help.

"I was concerned about you." Steph spread her hands as if that were explanation enough. "All your talk about leaving..."

Abbie pinned her gaze back on Fox. "Is this true? Is that why you're here?"

He returned the intensity of her gaze. "Yes. But it seems I got here a little late." A crease formed between the shaggy darkness of his eyebrows.

Abbie leaned into the books at her back, the retreating wave of adrenaline making her knees loose. Nothing to do with the proximity of this intimidating man. Not at all.

"The dead man in the corridor?"

She frowned. "I didn't kill him. Dented his head with the fire extinguisher, maybe."

The blue of his eyes darkened.

"He tried to kill me." She shifted in his grip. "You can let me go now."

"He did too," Steph chimed in.

"Someone finished the job then. He won't be talking about who sent him." His lips pressed into a thin line, his gaze raking down her body as if cataloging, making heat flush her skin but then he stepped back, giving her

more space.

Her memory had not deceived her. He was as attractive as she remembered. Dark trimmed beard, strong jawline, and laugh lines around eyes that seemed to see right inside her

“No shoes.” His attention locked on her feet. “You didn’t wait for help to arrive, like the police?”

She curled her cold toes. “I’m supposed to be under police protection where Raptor can’t find me. So no, I didn’t hang around for the next assassin to turn up while I laced my shoes.”

Trusting people had gotten her into this mess in the first place, had torn her daughter from her. She had trusted Raptor, and they had taken that trust and not given a fuck as they used it for their own purposes.

*God. Mia.*

This was wasting time. She took a deep breath, taking back control of her errant body and made to slide past him, but the man was like a brick wall. A growly brick wall.

“Maybe I should leave you both alone to chat.” Steph glanced over her shoulder, edging toward the end of the bookstack.

*Time alone to chat.* As if they were a couple or some crazy thing like that.

“Steph, we don’t need—”

“She’s right.” Fox cut through her protest. “It’s better if Steph shows her face. No need to make her a target for Raptor too.”

*Target.*

An invisible burden settled on Abbie’s shoulders. The impenetrable never-ending weight of the hunted. “Sure.”

“You will look after her.”

A muscle bounced in Fox’s jaw at Steph’s comment.

“Yes... of course.” Steph raised her hands. “Sorry.” She stepped forward and hugged Abbie. “You have my number. Call me when you can.” She pressed a kiss to Abbie’s forehead, and then she was gone, leaving her with the grumpy bear man.

“So where are you going?” Fox tipped his head toward her backpack on the floor.

Abbie swung the weight back on her shoulder. It felt good there. Positive action after too long sitting around doing nothing. Waiting for Raptor to turn up and silence her. “I have to find Mia. Before anyone hurts her.”

He nodded, shadows crossing his eyes momentarily. “I can help you with

that.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“I’m not sure that’s going so well.” He toed her socked foot with his boot.

Abbie gritted her teeth. He would not draw her into a discussion about this. She tightened her grip on her backpack. “I managed fine earlier when they sent someone to kill me.”

His posture stiffened as if electricity had jolted him. “I’m not leaving your side.” He reached out and took the backpack from her shoulder. “We can move faster if I carry this for you.”

Pinpoint prickles danced over her skin as his fingers brushed hers. Her teeth ached from pressure. Who did he think he was telling her what to do?

“I’m coming with you and it’s not up for discussion.” The command in his voice was unmistakable.

*Damn him.*

“No. You’re not. This is something I have to do by myself.” Because no matter that he had been there for her in the past, things had changed. There was no one she trusted to not fuck her over. Not now.

“Did you miss the part about this not being up for discussion?” The inflection of his voice left no doubt that he meant what he said.

She rounded on him. “Why are you so interested in helping me?”

The words bounced off his bulk. He didn’t even blink. “I need a reason?”

She was breathing too fast, her chest rising and falling. The flood of carbon dioxide made her thinking fuzzy around the edges, her fingertips tingle. “Everyone has a reason.”

“Because I want to.”

“That’s a platitude, not a reason.” She gave a deep, weighted sigh.

Everything about him called to her and made her want to run all at the same time. His size and posture radiated authority that, after everything that had happened, made her want to escape while, in a way she could not explain, the way he looked at her.... She felt safe.

She’d nearly died and then spent several months in the hospital. Perhaps she was being rash. This man could help her get out of here, find her daughter. *But nothing more.*

He took hold of her arm with steely fingers. Firm enough to let her know he wasn’t letting go soon. “You know, you’re cute when you’re riled...”

Abbie couldn’t suppress a gasp.

“But while I’d love to stay here and chat, maybe we could get the fuck

out of here before Raptor sends a new hit squad? What's it gonna be?"

The screech of the fire alarm obliterated Abbie's answer.

Fox swallowed the words stinging the tip of his tongue. He so did not have time or energy for this shit.

Her mouth was a surprised O as he dragged her out of the bookstack.

"Hurry." He hardened his grip on the gun he'd taken from her, drawing comfort from it at his side.

He hustled her down the stairs and through the meshed glass of the doors, out into the corridor, which swooped with dizzying orange light. Office staff barged past, coats and belongings clutched to their chests, while nurses attempted to evacuate mobile patients.

What the absolute fuck now? Blood throbbed in his temple.

"Apparently there are regular fire drills," Abbie said, her expression hopeful as the alarm silenced abruptly.

She might make out that she could deal with anything, that her time in the armed forces made her invincible, but her skin was blanched, her lips bloodless. The wash of light drew his attention to the side of her head, where the wispy fuzz of newly grown hair failed to cover her scar.

This woman was a fighter, but she was also vulnerable and needed his protection. He wanted to soothe her with reassuring words, but now was not the time and, he reminded himself, not his place. His job was to keep her alive and ensure Raptor didn't put a bullet through her pretty head.

He gave a short, negative twitch of his head. "Yeah, right."

There was a map of the hospital on the far wall. He shoved through the crowd, taking her with him, and found the library on the map. He raised his

voice above the melee and tapped the laminate. “We can access the underground train down these stairs.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“The underground?”

“You want to leave, don’t you?”

“Yes—” Fear of the unknown danced across her features. Of what she might discover if she left this prison because that was what it was. A fucking prison. But the doubt concerned him. He needed her angry and strong to get her out of here.

He gripped her shoulders, forcing her to meet his gaze. God, he could lose himself in the stranded gold beauty of her eyes. “You’ve had the chip removed. You have nothing to offer Raptor anymore, Abbie. Nothing of value. You’re a big fucking mess they want cleaned up. A liability who’s planning to testify against them in court for their breaches of human rights.”

“You’re right.” Her shoulders toughened under his fingers, bringing steel to her slender frame.

*Good.* “Do you trust me?”



Fox took the stairs two at a time. Abbie kept up with him, her breathing letting him know she was working to do so. But she didn’t complain. The stairs bottomed out in an access corridor, at the end of which a door took them out onto the middle of the platform. To his right, the platform ended, and the tracks disappeared into a dark maw of a tunnel.

A train had just arrived, and paper scraps swirled on the platform as the doors hissed open and people surged forward out of the cramped compartments. The disembarking crowd cleared, and the next set of passengers stepped forward to board through the waiting doors.

Abbie’s fingers tightened in his grip. “Fox.” She ducked her head as she whispered.

Two men hovered, their backs to them, at the far end of the platform, scanning the crowds as they jogged and walked down the broad access stairs.

“Come on.” Fox pulled Abbie toward the nearest car, his eyes locked on the waiting men.

Six feet. Five feet.

Warm air from the car hit him in the face. Almost there.



He practically pushed Abbie into the car, not wanting the men to see her.  
Yes—

One man turned and locked eyes with Fox. Recognition flared in his gaze.  
*Fuck.*

The train announcer droned, oblivious. *Mind the gap. Doors closing.*  
The doors hissed closed.

Fox pressed his cheek to the glass. The men bolted to the train, but it was impossible to see if they boarded or not.

“Fox?”

“They might be on the train. Come on.”

He took her hand, closing his fingers around her smaller ones. Pulling her with him to the back of the car and through the connecting doors. The next car was more than crammed, and he had to force his way through the crush of bodies. Another connecting car, but this time, less busy.

“There’s no one behind us.” She pulled on his hand. Outside, the sound of the engines dimmed. The train was slowing, preparing to stop.

He shook his head. Not willing to allow her the benefit of that doubt. *No fucking way.*

The train slowed. Light flashed through the windows as it approached a new station. Dark uniforms paced the platform. Their pursuers had alerted the next station. *Police. Fuck.*

“Fox. There are police out there...”

He scrubbed at his chin. It was too fucking risky. There was no one he trusted, apart from his own team right now.

Her fingers twisted in his grip. “We can’t trust them.”

“No.” No argument there.

The doors opened, and a few passengers eased past them to get off the train. A station guard stalked toward their car, a fucking kid, his beard feathery and overly manicured. He bumped up on his toes to look inside the cars. *Looking for us.*

Fox tossed Abbie’s backpack on to the overhead shelf. “Come here.” He swung into the nearest seat and grabbed her, plonking her in his lap.

Her head whipped up in surprise as he locked his hands on the sweet curve of her hips. He half-expected a slap, but her pupils dilated in surprise.  
“What—”

Understanding dawned on her features. Her hands flew to the flat of his chest. He released her hips, clasped her face between his hands to shield her

face from prying eyes, and tilted it toward him. He claimed her mouth. There could be no doubt in the guard's mind. This had to look like the real thing.

For an instant, Abbie stiffened in his arms as shock doused her system, but it was momentary.

The seam of her mouth softened, granting him access to her sleek warmth.

*Fuck, she was kissing him back.*

A small animal sound escaped from somewhere deep inside her, half-protest, half-desire. The warmth of her tongue met his, hesitant and then more confident as she sank into the kiss, triggering a ripple of heated pleasure through his body.

The pressure from her hands on his chest eased, and her palms slid up his neck, pushing into his hair.

Furious need surprised him, thundering through his bloodstream, fueled by the chase, charged by the woman in his arms. The small, rational part of his mind was dumbstruck. This was not supposed to happen. This was a pretense, a fiction to distract the station guard, not—

Abbie pulled back breathless. Her pale face was flushed, her lips swollen and rosy.

He glanced over her shoulder. The guard had turned and was walking in the other direction. *Away from them.*

He dragged his attention back to Abbie, smoothing his thumb along the plump pillow of her bottom lip, his desire for so much more, raw and unexpected.

“Your ruse worked.” Her voice was hushed as the train doors hissed closed and the engines powered back up.

*His ruse.*

He cleared his throat. Found his voice again. “Yeah. Guess so.”

What the hell was this? She was his mark, his to *protect*. Nothing more. His battered heart had nothing to offer a woman like her. Fate had decided that a long time ago.

She slid from his lap back onto her feet, her absence leaving him bereft. Loneliness was a cruel cage around his heart, but it was a master he'd accepted long ago. It was the protection he needed, the one that kept his heart from being devastated again.

Otherwise, he couldn't survive, he was sure of it.

**A**bbie slumped low in the passenger seat as Fox drove the aging rental through the nighttime landscape. The moon was high and full, giving everything an unearthly milky glow, which fit perfectly with how shocked she felt right now.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, she had been in the hospital recovering from surgery. Now, one panicked escape later through Helsinki's underground, culminating in Fox paying cash for a beaten-up blue Ford sedan at a rundown rental dealership on the outskirts of Helsinki, she'd assaulted a man and was on the run with a man she barely knew.

She allowed herself a sideways glance. His attention was locked on the road as the headlights carved a yellow path through the night, leaving Helsinki far behind. He was taking her home, back to the house she hadn't been in for months.

His sleeves were rolled up and tension corded his thick forearms. Ink wound intricate details across his wrists and up his arms. In the rhythmic flashes of the streetlights, she glimpsed a kraken dragging sailors to their fate beneath churning waves, where a tiger shark with needle point teeth lurked for any who escaped the kraken's bone-snapping tendrils. The story vanished under the rolled up cuff of his black shirt.

Where did the ink stop and the man begin?

As if he sensed her scrutiny, he turned to look at her, those intelligent eyes missing nothing.

"You okay?" Genuine concern dented his brow. The same concern he'd shown at their first meeting in the hospital at Tryokghornny. She'd been

grateful then for the gentle kindness in his voice and touch, so at odds with his impressive musculature and badass tattoos.

“Umm, yes.” She forced her attention back to the window, to where her breath made small foggy patches. She attempted to appreciate the glint of moonlight on a distant body of water. Anything to get her mind off the intriguing man beside her.

*What about that kiss?* Jeez. Clearly, her mind was not on board with the change of topic.

She huffed and scrubbed at her face with her hands. She needed a hot bath and several days buried under a foot-thick comforter.

The kiss had been a ploy, an act to keep them both safe as they escaped. She fully understood his intention.

But it had also had lit something inside her. Something she hadn't felt for so long. A lick of desire that had grazed the edges of her frozen heart, the heart that for so long had only held space for her daughter. Because no man could better that. Not her ex before he'd abandoned his relationship with Mia, nor any man since. And she'd accepted that. The will to keep her daughter safe encompassed *everything* else.

But deep down, Fox's touch and the way he kissed her, as if it *meant* something to him, despite her best efforts to keep herself isolated, had attached itself to her closed off heart. Maybe a tiny part of her wanted it to have significance for him. Perhaps that would help explain why the kiss had left her feeling so unsettled.

She sighed and wiped the fog from her window. She was so out of practice, she couldn't even tell what was real and what was fake anymore. That was the real issue. That, and her overactive imagination.

“You should get some sleep.” His voice was a deep rumble that made the hairs on her scalp tingle. Didn't he ever get tired?

Abbie heeled her hands against her stinging eyelids, doing her best to ignore the funk of hospital antiseptic still impregnated in her skin. Sleep had never seemed so far away. “Too wired. Trying to get my head around things.”

“It's a mind fuck, that's for sure.” He rolled his hands on the steering wheel. “Want to talk?”

She shrugged. Talking was exhausting but also one of the few things that helped over the last few weeks—patching together loose scraps in her mind after the doctors had removed the chip. She touched the side of her head,

suddenly self-conscious of how she looked—getting a proper haircut just hadn't seemed like a priority while she was in the hospital. The ridge of the still healing scar was tender under her fingertips.

Who was she kidding? It didn't matter how she looked. No man would look further than the external mess that she was right now. And she wouldn't blame them either.

She exhaled a slow breath, studied her hands on her lap, and then wished she hadn't. Her hands were *shaking*.

“Why did you sign up with Raptor?” His voice disturbed her brief reverie.

Abbie dented half moons in her palms with her nails. “I thought I could help. Do something positive that would help other veterans. But also after my marriage broke up, and it was just Mia and me, it was really difficult financially. I wanted the chance to make things better for her. The money they offered would make all our problems go away.” She lapsed into silence. “That sounds so cold. It wasn't just about the money, but what the money could do for us. For our family.”

“Doing things to make life better for the people you love isn't cold.”

He fell silent, giving her space. Letting her think.

She shivered.

“Here.” He reached behind his seat and handed her a thick down jacket.

“This is yours—”

“I'm fine. Get sleepy if I'm hot.”

The fabric was soft against her cheek, puffy with feathers and air. She lifted it over her shoulders, instantly feeling the warmth sink into her bones. “Thank you.” He nodded but remained silent as he changed lanes, following the signs for the border.

“I really believed them, you know. That it would make a difference. I only wanted good to come from what I did, and instead the world just feels like a more dangerous place.”

“That's on Raptor. Not you.”

“Maybe.” She held his jacket close, breathing in his scent. God, he smelled good.

“Once you've testified. Once the world understands how they lied and played games with the truth to suit themselves. You'll feel better then.”

“I hope so.” Thickness filled the back of her throat. “The hardest part is right now, Mia might believe I was part of the deception. That I chose to hurt people and make money from it.” She blinked furiously, willing the tears to

stop before they could start.

“I’m sure your daughter wouldn’t think that of you. She knows you love her.”

“Yeah.” She sniffed, lifted her chin. “I need to find her so I can tell her the truth, so I can keep her safe from Raptor. The idea that she might be in their care right now...”

“Hey.” He reached out and squeezed her knee with his large hand. Powerful, capable-looking hands. “We’ll find her, I promise.”

*We’ll find her.*

His kindness resonated in her weary mind.

She had to trust someone. She couldn’t do this on her own, no matter how much she wanted to. And if she was going to choose to trust anyone, Thom Fox was right at the top of the list.

Abbie stood on the threshold of Mia's room, her chilled toes defrosting in the heavy boots she'd taken from the hall closet.

Emotion was a hot bubble in her throat. She hadn't recognized the house when Fox pulled up, but this room, her daughter's space; it was there in her memory. Cherished.

"We're clear." Fox was at her side after completing a sweep of the rest of the house. He lowered the nose of the handgun she'd stolen from her attacker. God, that seemed a lifetime ago.

Her eyes were gritty, but Fox seemed unaffected by the long drive. He examined Mia's room, his posture alert and ready. "She's tidy," he observed.

Abbie ran her fingertips across the immaculate desk. Neat pen pots, a homemade puzzle book perfectly centered on the golden wood. She'd bought the desk for Mia in a yard sale.

She studied the neat row of animals marching across the coverlet. Doubt expanded within her, making it hard to breathe, and the scar at the side of her head itched. Was her recollection accurate? Mia was tidy?

She sat on Mia's bed, pulled the stuffed giraffe from the pillow, and clutched it to her. God. Tears stung her closed eyes. In all the chaos of her life right now, *this* was familiar. She pressed the giraffe to her face, breathing in, Mia's scent triggering memories—her daughter's small arms around her, the softness of her hair, the roundness of her cheek as she hugged hard.

*I love you, Mamma.*

*I love you too, sweetheart.*

*I love you more, with sprinkles on top.*

A giggle. Small hands holding her tight. *Not possible.*

Broken jigsaw pieces tumbled through Abbie's mind and righted themselves. Fell into place.

Mia was *untidy*.

Abbie opened her eyes to the immaculate room.

This was not how her daughter's room usually looked. "This isn't right."

"How?" He was so close to her, his presence comforting and a distraction all at once.

"This room's too tidy. Mia's messy. She's always working on art projects, leaves them half-finished on her desk. Steps out of her clothes and leaves them in piles on the floor." Abbie clutched the giraffe tighter, brushing her lips against the brown rosettes that marked its head. "This just feels wrong. Mia was crazy about giraffes. They were her favorite animals. She would have taken the giraffe with her." *She wouldn't have left it here.*

Fox paced the room, restless energy bleeding from him, saturating the air. At Mia's desk, he lifted the puzzle book to read the title. "You think the neatness means something?" He winged an eyebrow at her.

"I don't know." She hated the desperation in her voice. "I can't make sense of it. Something just feels off. Like there's something I should see, but I keep missing it."

Fox sat on the bed beside her. The mattress sagged under his weight, and her thigh dipped against his. The warmth of him was a momentary comfort. She was not in this alone in this any longer.

But this was his job. This relationship, despite her fluttering feelings, was professional.

"Let's concentrate on what you remember. The rest will come. You just need time. The chip is gone."

She nodded, blinking back tears, rubbing the skin between her eyes. She had chosen this. How could she have been so naïve?

"What contact did you have with your daughter while you were in Tryokghgorny?"

"None."

"None?"

She braced herself from the surprise in his tone. "Save your judgment. I'm harder on myself than you will ever be. They told me I had to concentrate one hundred percent on the program. Just for six weeks. There was to be no contact with outside agencies for the duration to ensure the best success of



the program. I hadn't been able to find work since I left the military. Turns out there isn't a huge demand for cryptographers in public life." She sniffed, swallowing the saltiness pricking at the back of her throat. "The money Raptor offered. It was more than I could ever have hoped for. A fresh start for both of us." A grinding ache throbbled through her scar. "And I believed them. I trusted them."

"How did Mia feel about not having contact for six weeks?" His voice was compassionate, and she heard no criticism, but it was hard to explain what she had done. How she had left her daughter.

She steeled herself. She wanted him to know everything about who she really was. For reasons she could not even explain to herself right now, she didn't want there to be any pretense between the two of them.

She sighed.

Flashes came to her. Mia crying, her face crumpled as Abbie explained the project would separate them for six weeks.

"She was upset at first, but I explained to her it would get us back on our feet again. She's smart, and she understood it was a sacrifice that had to be made, but one that would be worth it in the long run."

Abbie took the puzzle book from Fox and flicked through the rainbow of carefully hand-drawn pages. "Mia made so many of these booklets. She shared my love of codes, hidden meanings. She would make me these books as gifts with puzzles for me to decode. At first they were simple word searches, but she got really good at them." She smoothed the paper on her lap, loving the neatly colored grids, desperate for the connection, needing it to stop her mind from running down dark routes that only ended with Mia hurt.

She held the paper to her lips, breathing in woody pencil and child.

Glass tinkled faintly.

Weight lifted at her side instantly. She opened her eyes, heart erratic in the cage of her ribs. Fox was at the bedroom door, his weapon ready. The gentle concern she had seen on his face only moments before vanished, replaced by the face of a hardened warrior.

An effortless metamorphosis.

Abbie tucked the small homemade book into the back pocket of her jeans. Fox jerked his head, motioning for her to get behind him.

*Time to move.*

Fox crept forward up the hallway. Pictures of Abbie and her daughter's life framed him on both sides.

He blinked.

*Focus.*

He was doing this because it was his job. Protection. The beat of reassurance within him at knowing Abbie was behind him and that whoever was causing the noise in the kitchen would have to come through him first was the same as he would feel with any client, right?

Except she wasn't even a client, was she?

Air whispered at his back. He turned. Abbie was gone.

*Fuck—*

She stepped out of the bedroom doorway he'd just passed. There was a freshly determined set to her mouth and a boxy handgun in her grip.

She drew up beside him, her mouth tantalizingly close to his ear. "This is my home, my daughter they're messing with."

"Abbie—"

"Are you going to tell me what to do in my house?"

*Apparently not.*

She indicated ahead. Two doors. Jerked her hand to the right. "Kitchen, you."

She moved left before he could answer.

*Shit. Woman is too damn fast for her own good.*

He eased up to the open kitchen door, dropped low, and stole a glance inside. Cool night air drifted in through the open back door. The lock was

busted, the glass panel above smashed.

*Bad guy entrance identified.*

He scanned the room. Fridge freezer on his left, kitchen counter on his right, hob with cherry red, cast iron lidded pots. A neat row of homemade preserves.

A muted crunch.

Fox froze.

Rasping breath disturbed the stillness. A mouth breather. Fox willed his pulse to slow.

*Come on. Show yourself.*

Moonlight from the window painted an elongated shadow on the worn wooden floor, an arm outstretched.

Fox exploded upwards, grabbed the barrel of the gun and jerked it upward. The gun discharged, showering him in plaster as he rammed the intruder against the kitchen island. Blood pounded hot and furious in his veins as he released his grip on the weapon and grabbed the man's wrist and hammered it into the marble countertop. The pop of cartilage rupturing was brutally audible. The invader's gun skittered free across the polished smoothness.

A grunt. His victim retaliated with a savage gut punch that propelled the air from Fox's lungs in fiery agony. He staggered back, hitting the counter on the far side of the room.

Seizing the advantage, the other man lunged to drive home his attack. Fox caught the edge of the fridge-freezer door, and jerked it open, whacking his attacker's head with a satisfying thunk.

"Gah!" The man toppled sideways, tripping over his own feet.

Fox was on him in an instant, pressing his boot to the man's neck with enough force to make him gag.

The invader clawed at Fox's boot, his fingers snagging in the laces, his eyes bugging under pressure.

Fox sucked in air against the needling pain stabbing bright stitches across his abdomen. It would be so easy to force his foot down. Bring this to an instant end. But that would deny them the answers they needed.

He released the pressure from his foot just enough to let the man breathe and ground the nose of his gun against his assailant's temple. "Who the fuck sent you?"

The man's gaze twitched. To Fox's right.

He dodged the swing of the second attacker, the wooden bat swishing past his ear with an almost disappointed sigh.

*Fuck.* Fox tumbled and rolled, concern for Abbie spiking in his blood. Had this man already hurt her? Fury boiled through him as he skidded upward, fighting to keep his feet under him as he powered toward the stove.

His fingers looped through the closest pot handle, losing the lid with his violent yank. He spun, flinging the hefty casserole pot at the second attacker. The man was stocky, smaller. The pot smacked into his throat. His boot soles kissed the air as he somersaulted backward, his spine colliding with the island. He screamed, hands scrabbling against the counter, searching for purchase. Gravity won, and he slid to the floor, his breath reduced to a hacking wet gurgle.

Fuck—

The first man was up again, wrapping his arms around Fox's waist.

They hit the counter. Crockery smashed as Fox fought to gain control. Lacerating pain bit his knuckles as the first man grabbed the pot lid and smashed it into the counter, missing Fox's head but brutalizing his left hand.

Jesus—

Agony engulfed Fox's entire arm.

"Fox." Abbie leveled her gun at his assailant from behind. "Out of the way!"

The man pushed off Fox, reaching for her.

*Don't touch her.*

Fox roared and grabbed two jars. He smashed them like headphones around the man's head, enjoying the rupture of glass and jellied ooze as he ground the glass against the man's head. The man shrieked, plucking at his crown of jammy glass shards.

Abbie reacted whip-fast. She cracked the butt of her gun once across the back of his head and he pitched forward, the whites of his eyes showing.

She stood over him, breathing hard.

*Thank fuck. She's okay.*

Fox caught her wrist, making her pause. Her pulse fluttered under his thumb, vulnerable but also feisty and fucking strong.

"You okay?"

She nodded and wiped a blob of red jam from her cheek. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

"Do what?" He skimmed her arm, checking for injuries, but she was

unharmd. Gratitude made him momentarily lightheaded.

“Take people out with kitchen appliances. I know you work for a security company, but you’re a medic. What kind of doctor does that?”

He spun several yards of baking twine from the counter top dispenser and wound them between his hand and elbow several times, making a thicker restraint that would hold their attackers for long enough for them to get away.

He shrugged. “Would you believe me if I said Scouts?”

**A**bbie couldn't take her eyes off him.

Fox was calling his team. His substantial frame dominated the kitchen doorway, his phone pressed to his ear as he spoke. The phone looked tinker toy sized in his grip.

He'd opened the back door, letting a strip of sunlight pattern the floor and the restrained legs of their two attackers. Fox had propped them up against the kitchen counter. Assailant one's left eye had swollen closed, the other eye was glazed and unfocused. His partner sagged, his head tilted, so it wasn't possible to see if he was still conscious or not. Not that it mattered. Fox had trussed them up like turkeys—they were going nowhere soon.

Once again, he'd put his life on the line, taking care of her, protecting her. She'd spent so long on her own, camped out at the hospital, it felt weird having someone fight with her. For her.

She chewed on her bottom lip, remembering *that* kiss again. Damn thing had worn itself into a nice little repeat loop in her mind. The way his scent had wound through her, unraveling all the worry knotted inside her, till she could think of nothing but him, wanted nothing but to be in his arms.

The locked down tightness that clamped around her chest since the rest of her cohort had left for the submarine base. The one that made it hard to breathe, trashed her sleep and shredded her nerves? Being with Fox loosened it for the first time since she could remember.

She sensed a kinship between them, one of loneliness. Maybe that was why she was drawn to him. Their chosen paths were similar, even if their origins were different.

But that was all it was, right? A shared experience? One accentuated by adrenaline and fear. Finding Mia and bringing Raptor to task. These were her goals right now—they were what was important, and required her commitment.

Not this big sexy man who'd stormed into her life and showed no sign of leaving soon. He checked over his shoulder at her and smiled, sunlight highlighting the silver gray in his beard, as if to make sure she was still there. That she was okay.

He didn't understand who she truly was. How she had failed her daughter. He wouldn't smile at her like that, set her heart racing, if he did.

And yet the more time she spent with him, the harder it was to not think about him. To not want him.

She tipped the broken glass she'd swept up into the garbage, taking a breath to clear her mind.

Fox was different, in the best way possible. He meant what he said. He genuinely wanted to help her find Mia, and for that, she was grateful. The kiss had been a pretense, nothing more.

"I've sent my boss, Leo, the mug shots of these two jokers. We'll see what Eli can dig up."

Fox pocketed his phone and stepped over the two incapacitated men.

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

His mouth turned down. "Not until we're ready to leave, unless you want to stay and have a nice pointless chat with them."

He was so close now. His knuckles were bloody, the skin torn. She took hold of his hand, feeling the rough callouses underneath scuffing her fingertips. She dismissed the faint raze of heat his touch triggered. Adrenaline had a lot to answer for.

His eyes met hers. "We should—"

"Get this cleaned up. It won't take long. I need to make sure there's no glass in the wound."

He sighed, but she ignored him and retrieved the ice cream tub that served as her first aid kit from the kitchen cupboard.

She motioned for him to sit. "So it's true then?"

"What is?" He did as requested, placing his large hands on the tabletop.

"Doctors are the worst patients."

Something shifted in his gaze, but he blinked, and it vanished. A smile tugged at the corner of his sexy mouth. "Generally, we don't have time to be

lying around getting looked after.”

“I’m going to rinse this.” She dragged her attention from his mouth and tucked a small towel under his hands. “This may sting a little.”

“That’s my line.”

Abbie shook the can of antiseptic spray. “I’m sure you say that to calm all the ladies.”

“Not a lot of ladies in my life right now.”

*Oh.*

Darkness flared in his eyes, and in the space between them, the air thickened and became harder to pull into her lungs.

Abbie forced a swallow and cleansed his wound, grateful to see there were no embedded splinters. She sprayed the torn flesh with antiseptic spray and pressed a soft white dressing in place, securing it with a gauze bandage and a safety pin.

He inspected her work, rotating his hand. “You would have been an excellent doctor... if you hadn’t joined the military.”

She met his gaze above the defined bridge of his nose, his blue eyes holding her captive. A dangerous intelligence burned in his gaze, so at odds with the sheer physicality of his rugged build. She sensed so much more to him, that right now she was only scratching below the surface.

His eye snagged on the puzzle book sticking out from her pocket. “May I?”

“Of course”

He reached around her, making her heart lose its rhythm. *Shit.*

He smoothed the paper on the table. “Mia’s artistic.”

“She loves color, design.”

He turned the paper in his hands, his gaze a little unfocussed. Mia’s artwork had triggered a memory. Something personal. It was there in the darkening of his eyes.

“You okay?”

“Sure. I’m fine.” He dismissed the shadows with a shake of his head. “It’s pretty.” He turned the paper over. “There are letters here mixed in with the symbols.”

“What?”

“Look.” He tapped the paper with a neatly trimmed nail. Abbie forced herself to concentrate on Mia’s puzzle book, not the play of muscle and tendon under his inked skin.



He was right. How had she missed this? But then she realized how. He was looking at the image upside down. She took it from him, turned the paper. Right way up, it was a kaleidoscope of color; rotated, it was something else. Letters, twisted, and warped, but letters, wound in a narrowing concentric design.

She sounded out the first few. W... E... S... What if this meant something? They had found the booklet on Mia's desk in an otherwise immaculate room. As if to minimize the distraction, and draw someone's eye to this one thing? Her blood slowed. What if Mia had left this as a message?

"This is too tricky. We need to write them down." She grabbed the magnetic shopping list and pen off her refrigerator, where it hung lopsided next to the dent from attacker number one's head.

"Read them out." She gave the puzzle book to Fox. "I'll write them down."

He smiled, making her heart somersault. "Sure."

A few minutes later, she had a list.

WESTMAYARDS.

"West Mayards?" His eyebrows met. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No." Abbie tapped the pen against her teeth. "Maybe I'm seeing things where there's nothing just because I want there to be *something*. I mean, why would she have left a message, anyway?"

"Maybe she overheard something that all was not as it should be and she wanted to leave you a breadcrumb trail. Like Hansel and Gretel?"

Abbie pressed fingertips against her aching eyes. The clarity of the last twenty-four hours was fading, and her thoughts were increasingly foggy. "I don't know..."

"Let's see." Fox took his phone from his pocket and tapped the screen. His dark eyebrows shot up, and something tightened in her belly.

"What?"

"Maybe not so random."

She waited, the muscles in her chest cramping.

"West Mayards is a girls' boarding school."

There was a catch. She read it in his face.

He showed her the phone. "In England."

Katarina tapped her foot as she waited for the secure line to connect. She glanced down and smoothed the silk of her blouse. Even after all this time, calling Leonid still set her on edge, made her heart skip beats it had no business skipping.

Theirs was a business relationship, nothing else. Or at least that was what she kept telling herself. There would never be anything between them. Business. Nothing more.

*Shit.*

She breathed out a long breath and held it, focusing on the thud of her heart, urging it to slow.

“Kat.” The video link had not connected yet, so there was only the deep, resonant tone of his voice.

It was enough. Katarina crossed her legs and pressed her thighs together. *Get it together, girl.*

“Leonid.”

Lines wavered across the screen, and the connection stabilized. Intense, mountain green eyes fixed on her.

His perfectly cut suit failed to obscure his body, instead only highlighting the lithe power of his musculature. “You’re looking well, Kat.”

*You too, Leonid. You too.* She sucked on her lower lip, allowing herself a momentary appreciation of the masculine specimen she would never have.

Unusually for him, there was a faint shadow of scruff on his cheek. Enough for her to wonder what it would feel like under her palm, to rasp her nails down his cheek, his neck...

Kat blinked. Centered herself. “I did those checks you asked for. I had to run them myself. If I put them through the usual channels, it would have attracted too much attention.”

“I appreciate that.” He leaned back in his seat, the crisp fabric of his shirt straining across the breadth of his chest.

*Goddamn.*

*Focus.* The sleepless nights with Leonid on her mind and the unsatisfied ache between her legs were taking their toll.

She opened the file in front of her, flicking through several unrelated pages just to give herself long enough to get her errant thoughts back under control.

“I couldn’t locate anyone with Mia’s name in the system. But that doesn’t surprise me.” She looked up, her libido back on a leash, the responsible MI6 agent back in control.

“Raptor, are slippery bastards.” His voice roughened.

Katarina nodded. “I looked for other aspects. The dates that Abbie says she gave up her daughter and all full-time boarders over the Christmas period. Boarding over Christmas is pretty unusual. I came up with fifty names. I think we have a match. Sending you the link now.”

She touched her keyboard and brought up the school record of the girl she suspected was Mia Allard.

“This is Mia Edwards. She joined West Mayards one week after Abbie said goodbye to her daughter. She’s spent Christmas and the spring half term there. A very exclusive and top-notch school.” She shrugged her shoulders, remembering her own school experiences at the local comprehensive. She might not have had every educational opportunity offered, but she had had a home and a family who loved her. You couldn’t put a price on that.

“Photo?”

She hit another key, and a school photograph replaced the school record. The girl’s arms were folded. She wore thick pigtails over her shoulders, and her smile was serious.

Leonid leaned forward to take a better look. So close that in real life he would have been close enough for her to sense his body’s warmth.

He gave a soft grunt that prickled heat over her skin. “It’s her.”

She had met Leonid in real life once. She’d been tasked with providing reconnaissance information to the Norwegian Military intelligence in a hostage situation. One where he’d led the rescue team. Since that day, they’d

kept in touch, sharing information when the bureaucratic paper shuffling got too much. It had served them both well in their careers over the years. She sucked in a shallow breath. Because that was why she kept in touch with this arresting man. *To further her career.*

“I also dug deeper than you asked.”

“Always going above and beyond.” His smile was pure sex.

*Damn.* Her mouth was dry, but there was nothing but wet heat between her legs. How could he do this so far away with only a few words? “So... her school fees *are* being paid by a pharmaceutical company.”

“But not Raptor?” He must have read her expression.

“No. Although I think given enough time, I can find a link. I’d hazard a guess they’re using this company to muddy the waters. The company is called Pharmasyn. It’s a US company that has been dormant for years but in the last year has become active again.” She paused, but Leonid was silent.

“Leonid?”

“The name, I’ve heard it before.” A dent formed between his eyes. “But I can’t place it.”

“It’s based in Alaska, and had a significant number of Russian ex-pats on the staff. The company came under fire thirty years ago for misappropriation of research data.” She skimmed the information in her files, looked up at him. “They were involved in trauma research, just like Raptor. Pharmasyn ceased trading after evidence surfaced that proved safety protocols were breached.”

“That’s a shitload of coincidence.” He sighed. “Thanks for this, Kat. I owe you.” The screen went blank, and he was gone.

She sagged back in her chair and circled her temples with her fingertips, hormones and thoughts in a dizzying maelstrom.

Leonid was right. The coincidences were falling hard and fast right now and that was a problem—in her line of work, there was no such thing as coincidence.

Fox's phone buzzed, dragging his attention away from the flashing blue lights in his rearview mirror as the police arrived in his wake at Abbie's house.

He turned on the speakerphone so he could talk while he drove. Moving was good. Sitting still made his skin itch and the pressure ramp up inside him. "Leo?"

"Fox. I have information on the school you sent me."

Fox glanced across at Abbie. "Abbie's here with me. Spill."

"The school is prestigious. Eye watering boarding fees. There's no Mia Allard registered at the school, but we have a Mia Edwards. The picture is a match for Abbie's Mia. I'm sending it now."

Abbie gasped as the picture of a young girl flashed up on Fox's screen. Abbie covered her mouth with her hand, tears welling in her eyes.

Fox reached across and squeezed her knee. "That's great, Leo. That's a positive ID on Mia."

"Yeah, I thought as much. There's no clear link to Raptor. A pharmaceutical company called Pharmasyn is paying her fees. Does that name mean anything to Abbie?"

Abbie shook her head, but didn't speak. Tears glittered on her closed eyelashes.

"That's a negative from Abbie, Leo."

"Pretty much what I expected." Leo sighed. "Nothing's clear yet, but Eli's doing some digging to see if he can find the connection to Raptor. She's a full-time boarder as far as we can see from the intel gathered. This

information is all unofficial. It will take several days for things to be processed through the correct channels.”

Fox stared at the road ahead. He could only see as far as the headlights cut through the night, the journey shrouded in darkness.

They didn't have several days.

“I need to go get her.” There was no hesitation in Abbie's voice, despite the absence of a clear path. Fierce love for her daughter shone from her eyes.

He hardened his grip on the steering wheel. While everything else was muddy, helping this woman was the path he needed to take right now. That much was clear.

“Leo, we can be at the school in less than forty-eight hours. Raptor might move her once official questions start being asked.”

Mia was Raptor's trump card, the one they might use to force Abbie to withdraw her testimony against them in the upcoming trial, but he didn't verbalize his fears; Abbie didn't need him to add to her anguish.

“My thoughts exactly. Stay in touch. I'll let you know of any developments here, including those mugshots you sent me.” Leo ended the call.

Abbie wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“Here.” Fox handed her a handkerchief.

She stared at it.

“It's okay.” He cleared his throat. “It's clean.”

An embarrassed laugh escaped her. “Yes, of course, sorry. It's just not often you see a proper handkerchief.”

He shrugged. If only she knew. “Sometimes the things you grow up with are hard to shake off.”

She dried her eyes and gave him a small smile. “You and I had very different upbringings.”

That was an understatement.

“Can you take me to the nearest airport?” She folded the handkerchief into a neat square on her lap.

“I don't think the airlines are a good idea right now. We'll take the ferry.” He needed to pull over and make some calls, arrange a fake passport for Abbie. “We can be in England by midday tomorrow.”

“We?” Abbie shifted in her seat.

He pinned her in place with a glare. “Are we seriously having this conversation?” He drew in a ragged breath. “You think I'm going to drop you

off and let you go find your daughter on your own?”

That moment was long gone. Perhaps if he was truly honest with himself, it had never existed. From the moment he'd laid eyes on Abbie, he'd felt compelled to take care of her, to keep her safe. And the feeling had not diminished. If anything, it grew stronger the more time he spent in her company, both confusing him and scaring the shit out of him because opening himself up to her couldn't happen. It would only end in pain.

He cricked his neck, bringing his focus back to the here and now.

Abbie sniffed and pressed the back of her hand under her nose. “That’s kind. I can’t afford to pay you, though I—”

“You fucking think this is about money?”

He jerked hard on the wheel and brought the car to a grit-spraying halt on the side of the road. His seatbelt snapped taut against his neck.

*Fuck.* The skin of his skull felt too tight. Constricted.

“This is my problem.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s not. It’s about doing what’s right and that involves me too. Stopping this shit from going any further.” He hadn’t been able to protect Julie, but this he could do. “I want to make sure you’re safe, that your daughter is safe. Let me do my job. I came to Helsinki because I was worried about you. Fucking seeing you there at Tryokghgorny... *fuck.*”

He scraped a hand through his hair, waiting for the rumble of the engine to soothe his battered nerves. This woman...

“This is not about money. Let me be your friend, Abbie.”

“Friend?”

“Yeah.”

*Shit.* She was shaking.

He unclipped his seatbelt and did the same for her, then pulled her into his arms. Here he could protect her from the ravages of the world. Her hair was soft against the underside of his chin, faintly scented with strawberries.

*Julie loved strawberries.*

He shunted the thought away, swallowed against the pain gouging the back of his throat.

He pressed a kiss to the top of Abbie’s head, closing his eyes so nothing could interfere with the moment, so he could capture it for himself and lock it away in his fucked-up mind. “Let me be your friend and help you out. That’s all I want from you. Nothing more.”

“I could use a friend right now.” Her voice was small, her hair silk

against his cheek.

“Well, I guess we have a deal.”

*Friend.* The word mocked him.

That was all he wanted, right?



Abbie forced herself to unclench her fists in her lap. Imposing filigreed gates protected West Mayards from the rest of the world, and on the other side, a vast gravel driveway swept out of sight to the actual school. Everything about the place looked like something out of a Regency movie.

Fox shifted the rental they had collected at Dover into neutral. “You ready to see Mia?”

She nodded, even though extreme tiredness made her muscles heavy. There had only been time for a few hours of restless sleep while they waited at Calais for the passports Fox had arranged to be delivered. She turned the document in her hand. It looked the real deal, but she’d crossed the channel to England under the pseudonym of Jayne Brown. She didn’t want to think about what connections he had to make this happen. She was just grateful.

West Mayards was in Cornwall, and Fox had driven the entire journey. He must have been exhausted, but when she looked over, his posture was alert as ever. The man must run on pure adrenaline.

Abbie squinted against the bright early morning sunlight and rubbed her sleep-gritty eyes, trying not to let the excitement get the better of her. The girl in the picture was her Mia, she was sure of it, but everything was such a tangle in her head right now she doubted even herself.

After Fox spoke into the intercom, a buzz sounded and the gates swung open in a wide arc.

Fox squeezed her hand gently. “Let’s go get Mia.”

He shifted gears and eased forward. The gravel underneath was tiny

polished stones. Not cheap rough gravel, expensive-sounding gravel, if such a thing were possible. Ancient trees lined the driveway, tall oaks and beech, providing a lush canopy of coolness.

Fox whistled under his breath as they rounded a corner, and the school building came into sight. Three floors of white Rose-pink sandstone was an elegant contrast to the emerald green of a perfect lawn.

God, everything about this place breathed money. Was Mia really here?

The driveway ended in a large loop in front of dark blue double doors. Ten feet tall, Abbie guessed. One door swung backward, and a dark-haired woman wearing a svelte charcoal gray suit appeared on the top of the front steps. Her hair was in an immaculate bun, her lips glossed with crimson lipstick. She raised a hand in greeting as Fox brought the car to a halt.

Abbie licked her lips, her heart racing.

“Recognize any of this?” Fox killed the engine.

“No.” She forced a smile. Had she been here before? Did she know where Raptor had sent her daughter? The realization that she didn’t know made her feel slightly nauseous.

The woman approached the car.

Fox exited and opened Abbie’s door before she could get out of the car. He held out his hand. “Abbie.”

She accepted and got out of the car, expecting him to release her. But he didn’t. Instead, he locked his fingers around hers in a firm grip, his thumb sliding into a press of comfort against the inside of her palm.

Tingles erupted in the base of her spine.

“Husband and wife, remember?” They’d agreed on this earlier, hoping a unified front might be more convincing. He met her gaze, his blue eyes unwavering. He had her back.

“Sure.” She swallowed the well of emotion that filled her as she turned to face the approaching woman. Her suit hugged a shapely body. Abbie put her age as late fifties. The woman’s smile was wide, genuine, and Abbie felt a pang of hope. This would be okay. They were here now. Almost done. Soon, this whole mess would be over.

“I’m Mrs. Davenport, West Mayards’ headteacher. A pleasure.” The woman extended her hand and Fox was the first to shake it.

“Fox Edwards. Thank you for agreeing to see us at such short notice. My wife, Abbie Edwards.”

*Wife.*

She'd never been married. Had long ago relegated the idea as something that would never apply to her. Mia's father vanished as soon as he found out she was pregnant. She'd done everything on her own.

"Pleasure, Mrs. Davenport. Thank you for agreeing to see us at such short notice." Doing her best to look like an *Abbie Edwards*, Abbie shook the woman's hand. Davenport's grip was warm and firm. She looked as if she would be kind to her charges.

Fox slid his arm around Abbie's waist in a gesture of husbandly support, his hand resting comfortably on her hip. Protective. *Possessive*. Sparks skittered across her skin. It felt so *right* to have him at her side. As if he belonged there, like the last piece of a complex jigsaw.

She allowed herself to soak him in. The warmth of his breath kissed her hair as he held her against his solidity. It was so easy to go with him, to accept the support he offered without expectation or catches.

Why did the timing have to be so wrong?

"Not at all." Davenport's smile was genuine. "Our girls' welfare is our primary concern, and obviously liaising with parents is part of that. This way, please." She indicated for them to follow her into the main building. "It is a pleasant surprise to see you both. I understand from Mia's Aunt Hannah that your business takes you away for long periods of time."

A question quirked across Fox's face. *Aunt Hannah?*

Abbie lifted her shoulders. She didn't have a sister. Doubt surged through her. Or did she just not remember? Surely she would have remembered a sister if she had one?

She thumbed her earlobe, searching for the right words. "Yes. Hannah, ah, she's been very helpful."

Fox hugged her waist a little tighter and saved her from having to answer.

When would she ever feel normal again and not have this anxiety riding her hard every minute of the day, making her second guess everything? And who the hell was Hannah?

If Davenport spotted anything suspect between them, she was too polite to comment. She continued to give them a canned history of the school's founders as they headed down an imposing parquet-floored hall. It smelled of linseed and polish. Gleaming glass trophy cabinets flanked them for every sport imaginable.

"We'll find Mia outside." The long corridor ended in wide French doors through which the sun warmed the glossy floor. "Wednesday morning is

devoted to sport for her year group.” Davenport pointed to a crammed trophy cabinet. “We take sport seriously at West Mayards, but of course you already know that from the brochure.”

“Yes. The brochure.” Abbie peered at the cabinet. Lacrosse? What the blazes even was that?

Davenport pushed the doors open. Abbie blinked as her eyes adjusted from the muted indoor light to outside again.

A wide semicircle of sweeping stone steps led down to perfectly manicured grass. To Abbie’s left, she could see the green mesh of tennis courts. To her right was an outdoor swimming pool where swimmers were already plowing up and down in a thrash of white water and navy swimming hats.

“Mia is on the hockey field with Mrs. Davies. Please follow me.”

Davenport descended the steps, her posture unbending as she escorted them across endless weed-free grass.

Ahead, girls’ shouts and the crack of wood filled the air.

Abbie’s heart raced as the field came into full view.

*Mia was here.* Her baby. They had tried too hard to keep her from her, but they had failed. God, it was hard to breathe.

The game was furious. Rocketing teenage girls, pigtails flying, their mouths menacing black snarls of mouth guard. Two girls raced ahead of the crowd, crouched low, thighs pumping hard, the ball ricocheting between them as they sprinted for the net.

Their teammates screamed as the two neared. The lead girl lifted her stick to score, but an opposing team member swung her stick low and scooped up the ball and fired it back down the pitch. Cheers turned to howls of pain as one of the opposing team caught the ball and smacked it into the unattended goal.

Girls shrieked and ran and jumped their teammate, who disappeared under the enthusiastic heap of bodies while the games mistress blew her whistle. Mrs. Davenport smiled. “The hockey team is very enthusiastic.” Her cell buzzed. She raised a hand before stepping away. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment.”

The pile of girls slowly shrunk as, match over, they turned to make their way to the changing rooms. They passed by, giving Fox more than a few curious glances.

Abbie savored a glance. Understandable. Muscles bulged on his folded

forearms. He exuded danger and raw masculinity. An intoxicating sight.

Only a few stragglers remained, collecting discarded sports sweaters. Chill sank into Abbie's bones. What if this lead was a dead end? What if this wasn't her Mia?

"Hurry up." The games mistress shooed the last two girls.

The goalie walked an awkward stride; her legs too wide with shin guards while her companion walked at her side, chattering, arms laden with sweaters. The chatter dried to silence as she met Abbie's gaze.

Doubt slid out of Abbie's mind.

Her baby.

*Mia.*

Fox read the tension in Abbie's body.

The girl approaching them had shorter hair than in the picture he'd previously seen. Her face was slimmer, rounded childish features morphing into the attractive young woman she would become. But there was still no doubt.

*Mia.*

The girl's face crumpled as she locked gazes with her mother. Her lumbering friend with the shin guards frowned.

Abbie rushed forward until only a few feet separated them. "Mia."

Mia turned to her friend. "Go on. I'll be right in."

"I came as soon as I could." Abbie stroked her sides, smoothing her clothes, searching for something to do with her hands when clearly all she wanted to do was grab her daughter.

Mia's eyes narrowed, her fingers whitening against the jumble of sweaters. "Hannah said you couldn't visit. That you were too busy."

That name again. Fox scanned the playing fields, smoothing the creeping sensation on the back of his neck with his fingers. Several acres of ridiculously green grass and then a wooded boundary where all kinds of fuckery could hide.

Abbie nodded, gathering herself, taking a deep breath. She sniffed, fighting the visible tremble that rocked through her. "I wasn't busy, Mia. I've been sick, but I came as soon as I could."

Mia studied her mother.

Abbie had gained weight since he first saw her in Tryokghornny, but her

cheeks were still a little over defined, her chopped hair still regrowing. She raised a shaky hand, her fingertips self-consciously skimming the ugly scar.

Fox quelled the fierce wave of tenderness that rose in him as she smoothed the scrappy regrowth. There was only room for anger in him, nothing more.

Something rigid broke in Mia's gaze. The girl's need for her mother, to know that she had not been forgotten.

She took a faltering half-step toward Abbie. "I thought you forgot about me..." Her lower lip wobbled, her eyes suddenly luminescent. "I wrote to you Mum, but I never heard back."

Abbie gasped, her hand covering her mouth. "You wrote?"

Mia nodded, tears welling and tracking her cheeks. "Every week."

"I never got them, baby. I never got them. I'm so sorry. I never meant for you to get hurt. I thought I was making things better for us, and all I did was make things worse."

"You didn't forget?"

"I would never forget about you." Abbie's voice was forceful. "*Never*. You're my baby girl. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, and I swear I came as soon as I could."

The line of Mia's jaw firmed. Abbie had fought tooth and nail to stay alive for her daughter in the direst of circumstances, but hurt still shone in the kid's eyes. Some things were harder to forgive when you were barely fourteen.

"They hurt you?" Mia nodded at Abbie's scar.

"This?" Abbie swallowed. She patted the scar tissue. "This is worse than it looks. I'm getting better."

Fox stuck his hands in his pockets, searching for calm against the thud of his racing heart. Would it be enough to just keep Abbie and her daughter safe? Or did he need to do more? Raptor had to pay for this, didn't they?

Abbie reached for Mia and brought her into the circle of her arms, but Mia's posture was awkward. They had found her, but healing the rift between mother and daughter would be another matter.

More shit that Raptor had to answer for.

*Fuck*. Fox blinked. Damn allergies were getting the better of him.

He directed his gaze away from the strained reunion to the headteacher who had finished her phone call and was on her way back across the grass toward them.

Davenport took in the uneasy embrace between mother and daughter. “Sorry, that was an important call. It’s been some time since you’ve seen your daughter?”

Fox cleared his throat, not wanting to appear as the uncaring father. “Uh, yes. Long time.”

Davenport beamed. “So nice to have a reunion, then.”

He adjusted his watchstrap, unease creeping under his skin as he repeatedly scanned the grounds. This was too damn easy. Why go to all the trouble of hiding Mia in a high-end boarding school and then let Abbie just walk in and find her?

“Just out of curiosity, what kind of security do you have here?”

“Well.” Davenport threaded her fingers together. “The grounds are walled, and where they’re not, there’s a nine-foot chain-link fence. We have two security guards patrolling our grounds twenty-four seven. I am sure you will find our security arrangements against intruders most satisfactory.”

Fox barely heard her.

*Intruders.*

What if Raptor was already here? They had no reason to break in as *intruders*. They could *walk* right in.

He was convinced now—Raptor was not far away.

Davenport patted the back of her head. “Perhaps you and your wife would like to share some tea with your daughter before you leave?”

Leave? They wouldn’t leave Mia here.

He looked again at Abbie and Mia. Their embrace had ended and out of earshot, Abbie talked earnestly to her daughter. Mia’s arms were folded, her expression conflicted. Was Abbie explaining who he was, the false pretense under which they were both here? Whatever it was, it was going to take some time before her expression thawed. He didn’t want to think about what lies Raptor might have told her about her mother.

“Perhaps you could give us a few moments.” He took a step toward Mia and Abbie. “It’s been a long time since we were alone as a family.”

“Of course. I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

“Thank you.” He moved away from Davenport, his gaze locked on Abbie. The gun tucked against his spine did nothing to allay his concerns.

He walked over to join them.

“Fox.” Abbie’s eyes were bright with joy. She slid one arm around Mia’s shoulder, and while Mia didn’t fight the contact, she wasn’t leaning in to it



either. The kid was hurting, and even though his heart went out to Abbie, he understood Mia's pain.

"Mia, this is my friend Thom Fox. The one I told you helped bring me here today."

"Hi." Mia studied him with suspicious eyes the same burnished color as her mother's. The freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose spoke of friendship, but the line of her mouth was set in a quirk of distrust.

"Hi, Mia." He extended a hand, but the kid just stared at it.

*Okaaaay.*

Abbie straightened. "*Mia—*"

"It's fine." He dropped his hand. "Your mother's been worried about you."

Mia glanced sideways. "Yeah." Her gaze fell to the ground.

Pain etched Abbie's features. She brushed her palm across the side of her head. "I had to have an operation, but I'm fine now. Everything is going to be better from now on."

Mia's bottom lip was petulant. "You've been gone for months."

"It's complicated, Mia."

The kid still hadn't dropped the sweaters, holding them between her and her mother like a wooly barrier.

"I needed to work away to get the money to look after us. I didn't want to go, baby. You know that. We spoke about it before."

Mia nodded, turning her face from her mother, but when Abbie hugged her again, stroking her hair, the line of her shoulders softened. Possibly progress, although there was clearly some way to go in repairing their relationship.

Abbie dabbed at her eyes with her cuffs. "All I've thought about is seeing you again, making sure you were safe and happy. Bringing you home."

"I like it here."

*Ah.*

"Well, that's great, but also I'd like you to come with us. Just for a while."

Mia pulled free of Abbie. "It's the middle of the week. I have drama tomorrow, and I have a part."

Fox inhaled a slow breath, tension inching across his shoulders. They didn't have time to discuss this. Every minute they spent here, they were sitting targets. He had to get Abbie and Mia out of here, and *soon*. "We

should leave.” He didn’t care that his tone was abrupt.

“What? Right now?” Abbie frowned.

“Yes.” He studied the endless rows of elegant windows, reflecting the sun, obscuring whoever was watching them on the other side.

And someone *was* watching them right now.

“Sweetheart, I need to speak to Fox alone for just a moment.” Abbie hooked her arm into his and pulled him a few paces away, but not too far. This mama lion was not leaving her cub alone ever again.

“What’s the rush? We need to give Mia time to get her head around this. It’s a lot to take in.”

He lowered his voice so only Abbie would hear. “Something’s not right.”

“Something’s not right?” Abbie knuckled her hands on her hips and shook her head. “This is the first thing to go right since Raptor left me for dead in Russia.” She faced Mia, who was scuffing grass with her hockey boots. “This is me getting my life back on track.”

“Raptor won’t stop because you feel like you have your life back on track.” The micro flinch of her face told him his words cut deep, but right now he didn’t care about her feelings or opinions. All he cared about was making sure both of them were safe.

“Raptor has *everything* to lose if you testify, Abbie.” He stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the kid. “They tried to kill you in Helsinki, and they won’t stop until they achieve their goal. Right now...” He waved a hand at the lush grounds. “Mia is the one connection they have to you, the one way of finding you.” He leaned in till his lips skated against the curve of her ear. “They won’t squander this advantage. They will use every damn inch of it. Believe me when I say they were waiting for us to come here. Waiting for us to show ourselves.”

Raptor had pursued Eli and Bea to the ends of the earth. “They don’t give up. And they don’t let anyone else win.”

“They won’t give up.” The light in her eyes died a little, and it killed him to see that.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” A tremulous smile on her lips. “Of course I trust you.”

Mrs. Davenport waved at them as she hurried across the too fucking perfect grass in her impractical heels. “I’m so sorry to interrupt again. I shouldn’t say—she asked that it be a surprise—but I thought you should know so you don’t miss her. Mia’s Aunt Hannah will be here shortly.”

Abbie blanched as Davenport directed a lipsticked smile at her. “She will be pleased to see you. Is she a relative on your side or her father’s?”

“We planned to take Mia out to lunch.” Fox turned away from Davenport, discouraging any discussion.

“Yes. Lunch,” Abbie agreed, picking up on his cue.

Fox increased his distance from Davenport. “We already have a reservation, so perhaps we can catch up with Hannah on our return.”

Mia tilted her head as if assessing the veracity of his words, but Fox ignored her and headed across the grass toward the wide French doors. Movement helped, but not enough. All kinds of alarms were dinging in his head right now. If Hannah was on her way here, they had even less time than expected.

Hopefully, Mia wasn’t an expert at reading faces. Griff always cleaned him out at poker because he had too many tells.

The French doors were open, revealing there was no one on the other side.

“Fox.” Abbie was at his elbow as he entered the building. She took the sweaters from Mia and piled them on a low bench against the wall, then took hold of Mia’s hand. “I think we’re okay.”

God, he hoped so. The gleaming corridor was empty, all the classroom doors closed on each side. At the end of the long hall, sunlight beckoned through the entrance glass.

Davenport clasped his hand with thin fingers. “It was lovely to meet you. Given the exceptional circumstances, I am sure it will be fine if Mia misses classes for just one afternoon. If you will excuse me.” As they drew level with an open doorway, she ducked off the corridor and crossed the airy

waiting area to what Fox guessed was her office. The office door was ajar, a man and woman waiting on the other side.

Fox hand pressed a firm hand to Abbie's lower back, hurrying her past the doorway, out of sight.

The man's gaze collided with Fox.

*Fuck.* Raptor was here.

"What is it?" Mia twisted in her mother's grip, trying to catch a glimpse back through the reception doorway.

"Nothing." Close to Abbie's heels, Fox retrieved his gun from under his jacket, dropping it low against his thigh. "We should hurry."

His mind raced. Around fifty feet to the entrance. Doors on all sides. No cover. *Sitting fucking ducks.*

Raised voices clashed behind them. Glass shattered.

*Fuck.*

Fox seized hold of Abbie's elbow and steered her through glass plated swing doors on her left.

Another endless corridor. Artwork plastered the walls, and the air was chalky with the scent of poster paint. He hustled Abbie and Mia past more classrooms, all of them full of girls, their heads bent over their books. Children. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"This is the wrong way." Mia pouted.

*No shit, kid.* He bit his tongue, tasted blood.

"Fox." Stress laced Abbie's words. "Where are we going?"

More shouts echoed behind them, louder this time. In pursuit.

The rainbow of art gave way to posters of atomic composition and the periodic table reminding him of his own errant youth creating explosives in the chemistry lab, which had earned him several weeklong suspensions.

The posters gave him an idea. "There's always a way," he muttered, as much for his own benefit as for Abbie and Mia. "Mia, can we exit the building from here?"

"Yes, but it opens out near the swimming pool—"

"Take your mother. Show her the way out. Abbie, I'll meet you at the car."

"What? No. We should stay together." Tendons tautened on her slender neck.

He hated to leave her. It went against every instinct thrumming through him. Protection meant staying by her side. But right now, the best way to

protect her was to split up and for him to create a diversion to give them time to get away.

He kept his tone gruff to dissuade any argument. "I'll be right behind you." He pressed the car keys into her hand. "Get the car started." He pressed his other hand over hers, to reassure her he wouldn't let her down.

"Okay." A sharp nod. Abbie took Mia's arm. "Come on, we need to go."

"But what about Aunt Hannah?" Mia asked as her mother frogmarched her in the other direction.

Fox missed Abbie's reply as he opened the nearest door.

*Chem lab one.*

There was a fume cupboard built into the wall on the far side of the room. If science hadn't changed too much in the last twenty-odd years, he'd found his diversion.

Three long strides took him halfway across the room before he looked right. A classroom of girls stared at him, their books open, pens stalled mid-word.

One in the front row with her braid over her shoulder and a chewed pen in her hand blinked at him. "We were expecting Ms. Tresize."

*Shit.*

He stopped.

Twenty pairs of eyes locked on him, waiting for an answer.

"Ah, Tresize was... detained. She asked me to come speak to you." He took another step closer to the fume cupboard.

No one had seen him step into the room, but they'd be checking the classrooms and would be here any minute.

Fox pointed to the double doors that opened out to the grounds. "Practical. Ms. Tresize asked me to help with today's demonstration. Everyone out." He made enthusiastic sweeping motions to get them off their seats and out the exit.

His command released the girls, and they stood up noisily, chattering, excited for the change in lesson plan.

Fox yanked open the fume cupboard. He skimmed the glass jars, checking the labels. Everything he needed was here.

The girls were almost all outside, milling around, notepads in hand. He dumped what he needed on the teacher's desk. She'd left her water bottle. Perfect. He emptied it into the nearest sink.

There wasn't time for protection. He yanked his jacket lapel over his

mouth and nose and poured liquid into the empty bottle. He filled a test tube with the second liquid, then lowered it into the bottle, releasing it so it bobbed gently. *Good, so far.* He screwed the lid back on.

Fox held his breath as he carried it over to the classroom door, which he opened a fraction, enough to create a small ledge on top where he could perch the water bottle. Agitated voices carried to him through the gap. They were close. He peeked. This time the woman spotted him, a calculating smile carved on her face. She nudged her colleague. *Gotcha. The hunt was on.*

Fox ducked back into the class, and perched the water bottle on the top of the door. He allowed himself a smile. *Now, we're cooking.* He jogged across the classroom and outside to join the waiting girls.

“Everyone down, and stay down. We don’t have time to put on safety goggles.” He ushered them all to their knees, well out of range of the windows. The girls did what they were told, eyes wide with excitement. This was definitely *not* on the curriculum.

“Sir. Is this safe?”

A shadow interrupted the light behind the propped open door.

*Absolutely fucking not.* “Not really.” He grinned. “Pop quiz. What’s the quickest way to the front of the school?”

One of the smaller girls pointed. Glass shattered inside as the bottle hit the classroom floor.

The blast boomed against his spine as he took off toward the school entrance. The girls screamed, but they were well out of range, which was more than could be said for the two Raptor agents.

His pursuers were down, but only for a short period. He had no interest in killing anyone in front of a class of young girls. The explosion wasn’t lethal, but it would give him the extra time he needed.

Fox ran.

**A**bbie flinched as an explosive boom rent the air and the school walls puffed plaster.

Mia faltered at her side, her eyes wide with fear. “What was that?”

“I don’t know.” She locked her hand around Mia’s, sure of only one thing. The explosion was Fox’s doing, and he was making sure they got away from here.

Seconds later, the fire alarm whooped into life and a sea of enthusiastic girls surged from every classroom, thrilled at the prospect of wasting time doing head counts in the fresh air.

Abbie allowed herself to be carried along by the flow. At her side, Mia merged with her classmates, unnoticeable in the melee.

“You!” The voice was right behind them. Abbie twisted in the jam of girls. Behind her, a man jabbed a finger at her. She didn’t recognize him, but the snarl warping his blistered face was enough.

He reached under his jacket, and matte blackness blurred the air.

*Gun.*

A tsunami of adrenaline swept through her. She had to get Mia out. She yanked Mia to the right, through the main entrance doors. Sunlight beckoned. Open space. Escape.

“Hurry.” She couldn’t get down the steps fast enough. A younger child blocked their escape. Abbie grasped the lost-looking girl’s hand, ducking low and out of view to speak to her. “It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s just a drill. Did you lose your class? Let’s get you out of here.”

She scanned the sweeping driveway and for one heart sinking moment



she couldn't see her car. Perspiration cooled her skin. *It was a rental; we came in a rental.* The faded blue car was right where they left it.

Shaky relief bubbled up through her. Thank God.

"There's a teacher." She steered the small girl toward a harried-looking woman who was trying to control a heaving mass of exuberant girls and solidified her grip on her daughter. "Mia. With me."

"What's happening? Shouldn't we—"

"We're leaving." She ignored the tightness across Mia's face. There would be time to deal with the consequences later.

Unwilling to trust Mia to get in the car on her own, she opened the passenger door and made sure she was in before slamming the door shut.

She sprinted around to the driver's seat.

Bullets punched holes in the gravel, and girls screamed.

*Hell.*

Abbie jammed the key into the ignition, gunning the engine before she even shut the door. Gravel spit around the car, cracking loudly off the paintwork. She crunched the gearstick into reverse and spun the car in a wide, crazy arc.

Their pursuer was still coming, arms extended, a two-handed grip on his gun.

*Go.* The rear driver's side window shattered, spraying her with safety glass. Mia screamed, flinging her arms over her head. "Get down!". Abbie rammed her foot to the floor, throwing her left arm across Mia. The wheels bit, and the car leaped forward, engine roaring.

Abbie accelerated straight down the side of the school building, the right-hand side of the car biting gravel while the left side churned a jolting path through pristine grass.

*Shit.*

She jerked the wheel hard to the right. The car lurched, and all four wheels hit the driveway in a spew of stones.

A figure sprinted in front of them

*Fox. It's Fox.* Her heart was in her throat, and she was sure she was going to throw up. Abbie swerved, almost losing control with fear-damp hands, before bringing the car to a grinding halt.

"Go!" Fox threw himself onto the glass-sprinkled back seat, scooping the door shut behind him.

The rear window imploded, showering him in more fragments. Abbie

held Mia's head against her knees as she spun the steering wheel with her free hand, before straightening and hitting the gas. The rear fishtailed briefly, and then she had it under control and they sped up the driveway.

"You okay? Mia?" Fox craned to see out the rear window, his gun resting on the parcel shelf.

Abbie nodded, struggling to speak. "Yes. We're fine."

He seemed unharmed. *Thank God.*

Trees whipped past in a blaze of green. The world was spinning out of control, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter, as if it was the only thing that could stop her life from careering out of control. How the hell was she going to make this better?

A powerful hand pressed against her shoulder and her breath hitched as she shot through the open entrance gate and out onto the road with a burn of rubber. Fox's voice was commanding. "Pull over, Abbie. Let me drive. I know where we're going."

"Where?" Where the hell could he take them that was safe? She swallowed her bitter words. He only wanted to help. With a shaky breath, she eased off on the accelerator, flexing her aching fingers as West Mayards vanished from sight in the rearview mirror.

"Somewhere safe." There was promise in his heavy tone. "Somewhere they can't find us."

Fox paid cash for the sleeper train to take them to London. The rental was a right off. He abandoned it in a multi-storey parking lot close to the station. There had been no sign of Raptor since they made their escape from the school, but he wasn't foolish enough to think it was the last they would see of them.

For now, he was taking Abbie and Mia somewhere no one would find them until Abbie's testimony against Raptor—and he wasn't leaving any trail to make it easy for Raptor to prove him wrong.

But, despite the soothing rattle of the train, he couldn't sleep. The bunk was too narrow, his brain too busy trying to identify any loopholes he had missed. How Raptor could get to Abbie and Mia. *All the things that could go wrong.*

The door of his sleeper compartment closed with a soft click, his body swaying with the train's cadence. To his left, in the adjoining compartment, Abbie and Mia were asleep. He'd already walked the entire train several times, and for now, until they reached the next station, they were safe.

When they arrived in London, he'd drive them to the one place he could protect them.

*Home.*

He made his way to the restaurant car. A nightcap would take the sharp edges off his thoughts to allow him to sleep.

It was after midnight, but the golden glow of lights confirmed the bar was still open. The barman was polishing glasses with white linen. Several of the booths still had customers, their voices a muted murmur that matched the soft

chug of the train.

Fox ordered whiskey and took a window seat. The moon was high outside; the landscape painted in soothing tones of purple and gray.

The bartender arrived with his drink, and leaving it on a square napkin, retreated, leaving Fox to his thoughts.

The whiskey smelled woody and tasted like almonds and brown sugar. He drank, the burn in his throat making him sigh and roll his shoulders.

“Fox. Isn’t it bad form to drink alone?” Abbie slid into the seat opposite him. She’d swept her cropped hair off her face, highlighting her cheekbones, pink from the warmth of the cabin. Even with her hair a shorn mess, she was beautiful.

“Hey.” He smiled, glad to spend some time alone with her. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Me either.” She cocked her head, her expression thoughtful. “Fox sounds so formal and we’ve been through so much—”

“Thom is fine. Only my mother called me Thomas.”

She beamed, and he wanted to cup her cheek, to feel her smile against his palm.

The bartender approached the table. “Can I get you a drink, madam?”

“I’ll have the same.” She gestured at Fox’s drink as the bartender left with a silent nod.

“Mia’s down for the count. She’s exhausted.” Abbie ran her hands through her hair, leaving some tufts standing on end.

The messy vulnerability was far too appealing to his bruised heart. *Rein it in, Fox.*

“I’m pooped too. Sometimes it feels like I haven’t stopped running since the day I chose not to board the *Architect*.” She spread her hands on the table. Her fingers were slim, her nails bitten to the quick.

Fox swirled the amber liquid in his glass. “How is she?”

“Furious. She doesn’t understand why I ripped her out of a school she loves after abandoning her for months.” Her voice was small, overwhelmed. “To be honest, I don’t blame her. I’d be pissed too.”

“It’s not for long. Just until you testify.” Fox reached across and tangled his fingers with hers. None of this made any sense. He shouldn’t be doing this. He should protect himself, maintain his distance, but touching her felt too damn good. She squeezed his fingers back, sending an unfamiliar wash of heat through his body.

The barman placed her drink on the table. Abbie lifted the glass to her nose and sniffed. She shot him a devastating look over the rim of her glass. “Of course, I have no idea what I ordered.” She smiled, and his heart stuttered.

She sipped with her eyes closed and licked her top lip. “Mmm. I approve.” When she looked at him again, the gold strands in her irises gleamed in the soft light.

He swallowed a groan, remembering the softness of her lips. That tiny taste of her he’d been gifted. He wanted to stop noticing these details, to stop noticing everything about her, but he couldn’t deny it. There was a connection between them, fragile, but there nonetheless.

“So at least now we know you have good taste in whiskey. What makes you so sure where we’re going is safe?”

He shifted in his seat. “It’s my home. If I can’t keep you safe there, what kind of man am I?”

“Your home is in England, but you live in Norway?”

He shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

Abbie took another sip, the fluid motion of her throat distracting. *Fuck.*

“What stopped you from boarding the *Architect*?” That felt safer, changing the conversation back to the problem at hand. And perhaps if he understood her choices, he would be in a better position to protect her. “Can you remember why?”

“Snatches. Not all of it. It wasn’t easy.” She rolled the glass between her hands. “When I volunteered, it was to help with new treatments for Post-Traumatic Stress. The microchip reduced the intensity of emotions people experienced in the aftermath of trauma. I did two tours in Afghanistan. I’m no stranger to disturbing experiences, although I was luckier than many of my teammates.” Her cheeks rounded as she exhaled and fiddled with her napkin. “I thought it was worth the risk, and I won’t lie. I’ve already told you, the money they offered was a big factor. You probably think I’m a mercenary, but it was more than that. Things have always been difficult for me as a single parent. The money, it promised a fresh start, a future for me and Mia.”

She frowned, and he wanted to reach over and smooth the crease that marred the skin between her eyes. “That worked out well for me, didn’t it?”

“No one can blame you for attempting to make the best choices for your family.”

She pressed her lips together as if curbing in her emotions. “That’s kind. Anyway, the testing shifted. They presented us with tasks that seemed less related to measuring how much the chip was reducing the intensity of past experiences, and instead, the tests shifted to tasks of dubious ethics. Inflicting electric shocks, cold water dousing.”

*Fucking Raptor.* Fox forced himself to keep his grip gentle, to not show the fury narrowing his vision.

“I became increasingly convinced the direction of the research was not what they’d promised, that there was an ulterior motive. Then shortly before we were due to depart for the *Architect*, I overheard one of the senior scientists, Bancroft, talking to one of the other scientists about the tasks we would have to complete underwater. They had handpicked veterans for their purpose—so they could run the *Architect* on a fully simulated mission that would involve the deployment of missiles. The test was a strategy to show the chip could override our ethics, our emotions, our very humanity, and that we would do whatever they ordered us to do.”

She leaned back in her seat, breaking the connection with him, and finished the rest of her drink. “I told them I wanted out, but it was too late. They wouldn’t listen. They canceled my payments, and when I still wouldn’t comply, they tried to... stop me.”

He didn’t even want to know what that meant.

Her lips pressed into a fine line. “Fortunately, that wasn’t long before the mission was due to start. I hid. They didn’t have time for an exhaustive search. They abandoned me and figured time alone in an inhospitable environment would finish me.” One shoulder lifted close to her ear. “The rest, you know.”

“We will stop them, Abbie.”

She ran her finger around the rim of her glass. “What about you?”

“What about me?” That caught him unawares.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Guardsmen Security—”

“Don’t bullshit me. I know what you do for a living. But right now, you’re not being paid to look after me. So tell me, why are you escorting a single mother with an insane company on her tail to your home in England? Don’t tell me you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart.”

Fox sighed. He glanced out the window at the moonlit slide of the landscape. Home couldn’t come soon enough. “I want to make sure Raptor

pays for what they're doing. They've already messed with two members of my team."

"Ah." Her expression pinched. *Fuck*. She thought all of this was about his team, not her. That it couldn't be further from the truth wasn't something he could verbalize right now.

"It's not just about my team or the money. I came to Helsinki to make sure you were okay because I wanted to. You matter to me, and you have since I pulled you out of that hellhole hospital. I'm not about to walk away now because things have gotten fucked up. I'm a determined bastard." He signaled the barman for another drink. "And I don't walk away from situations just because they're fucked up. You believe me?"

Her face was a pale oval, but she nodded. "Yes. So the house in Norfolk..."

He downed the second glass of whiskey all at once and sucked air through his teeth. It was easier to speak about Julie with liquid courage in his veins. "My wife, Julie, died three years ago, and after, I... I just had to be somewhere else. I moved to Norway."

Abbie's eyes widened, and she clamped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry—"

"It's fine. You didn't know." He was used to this. Surprise. People expected widowers to be in their eighties, not their forties. He braced himself for the familiar sting of a roused memory that he usually experienced when he spoke about Julie, but it didn't come. Not because he didn't remember his wife, his love. He could see her in his mind's eye just like always, feel the strength of his love for her just the same, but the acute rawness of his loss was muted.

"*Thom*. You okay?"

He snapped his attention back to Abbie, still processing this shift within him. *Later*. He'd worry about it later because right now he didn't have time.

"I'm good." The train rattled through a tunnel, and the darkness outside the window became absolute, just as it had been in his heart for so long. "It was three years ago. And staying in the house we shared? It was too hard. I kind of lost myself in my work. Leaving the country was an easy decision."

She reached out, her fingers lacing through his once more. "I can't imagine. We don't need to go there. We could go somewhere else. Really."

He shook his head. "It's time." Besides, of all the places in the world, Renton Park was the one place he was sure he could keep Abbie safe.

He bit down on a surge of emotion. He hadn't been able to protect Julie. In the end, he'd lost her to cancer, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep trying.

The smallness of Abbie's hand in his made his traitorous heart give an involuntary squeeze. He should pull his hand away from hers, isolate himself as he always did, protect his heart from the kindness she so easily wove around him, but as the seconds ticked on, he didn't and instead locked his fingers in hers.

For tonight at least, common sense and rationality could go fuck themselves.



To Abbie, the east of England was impossibly green and flat. They had rented a car after arriving in London, and now Thom drove over what seemed to be the flattest place on earth. Fields stretched for miles in every direction with nothing to break up the horizon. It was hard not to feel exposed.

But when she looked over at the man driving, at Thom, she didn't doubt he knew what he was doing. She had been alone for so long these feelings were unfamiliar, but she knew what it was. She trusted him.

The rhythmic rattle of the train had finally lulled her to sleep, but her eyes were still gritty, her thoughts churning over the rapid turn of events.

"Are we there yet?" Mia pulled at her ear buds and leaned up from where she slouched over the sketchpad she'd asked for. They'd done some shopping for some bare essentials to tide her over while Thom collected the car. Abbie's heart clenched. Lost in Tryokghgorny, she had feared she might never see Mia again. Having this time with her, doing simple things like taking her shopping, it made her heart feel full.

"Just about." Thom pointed straight ahead, where the glimmer of the sea was visible between budding trees. He hooked a right, and a few minutes later they were descending into a small seaside village of blue and whitewashed buildings.

He didn't slow as he navigated down increasingly narrow streets and instead hurtled through a constricted road, barely an inch to spare at each side of the rental. It would be a miracle if they returned it in one piece with its wing mirrors attached.

She breathed a sigh of relief when finally they entered a parking lot that ran alongside the harbor. At the far end, a slipway sloped to a sandy beach. The tide was out, and at the far reach of the rippled sand, the water sparkled.

The wind had picked up, and choppy white waves foamed on the horizon. There was no house. “Thom—”

“Come with me.” He killed the engine and got out of the car. Abbie followed, a sharp wind whipping at her clothes as she pulled her new waterproof jacket closer to her body. She still wasn’t back to her normal weight, and the cold dug deep into her bones.

“Here.” Thom tugged her against his body, shielding her from the searching wind.

He walked her to the end of the parking lot, to where the concrete sloped down onto the beach and disappeared under the wet sand before rising again to wind a sweeping curve out to a rocky headland. The road climbed onto the beach on the far shore and disappeared into a shimmer of trees.

Thom narrowed his eyes against the windy whip of sand. “The tide is on the turn, and when it’s in, it cuts the headland off.”

Abbie shielded her eyes against the sandy gusts of wind. “We’re taking that road?”

His nod was crisp. “The house can’t be seen from the mainland. Let’s go.” He tangled his fingers through hers, heat bleeding from him to her.

*A hidden house.* Back in the car, Abbie’s mind spun. Just when she thought she was understanding this man, he surprised her *again*.

Thom eased the car down the slipway and the wet smooch of sand replaced the smooth hum of tarmac under the tires.

“Whoa.” Mia leaned forward from the back seat, seatbelt off. Abbie was on the verge of telling her to put it back on, but Thom was driving at about five miles an hour. Besides, did you even need a seatbelt when you were driving on the beach?

The engine pitch changed as he drove up the beach on the other side, and then woodland enveloped them, the mainland disappearing in their wake as they entered a tunnel of spring green. Scrappy light filtered down from above, dappling the air, and the band of tension clamped across Abbie’s chest eased a little.

“Your house is *here*?” Mia asked, pressing her nose to the side window. Abbie understood the awe in Mia’s voice as Thom drove down a single lane road overhung with bowing trees and scrambling roses. It was a world within

a world.

Thom nodded. “Yeah. It’s been a while, though.” Abbie remembered what he had said last night. This was the first time he had come here since his wife died. She laid her hand over his, feeling the tension as he gripped the steering wheel. He glanced at her and smiled, and something long buried within her loosened. She breathed out, letting her shoulders drop, allowing the green light to welcome her. Just being here with him fueled hope within her. Perhaps her life could be different in the future?

The trees eventually thinned, the landscape morphing into open parkland as they swept through an open gateway, tumbling rocky walls standing sentry on each side. Smooth tarmac gave way to rutted gravel as they topped a hill summit, before descending a long slope of wild grass dotted with primrose clumps and lone oak trees. The sense of wild isolation was energizing and calming at the same time.

“Are those deer?” Mia pointed to small brown figures moving on the horizon.

Thom nodded as he slowed for a second gateway, this one secured by a closed wrought-iron gate. “Two herds. Red and Fallow.”

“Wow.” Mia’s breath fogged her window as she watched the animals turn from the noisy car.

Thom brought the car to a halt and typed a passcode into the keypad set into the side of the gate. Despite the abandoned appearance of the initial entrance, the gate swung open with a hum of efficient power before closing behind them with a solid clang, excluding the world behind them.

“Welcome to Renton Park.” Thom shifted the car back into drive. Immense oak trees now lined the road, reminding Abbie of a holiday she had taken in France a lifetime ago, when she’d driven miles down roads lined with lush chestnut trees.

“Holy shit.” Mia swore from the rear of the car.

“*Mia...*” But swearing aside, Mia was right. *Holy shit*. She’d suspected he was wealthy. Few people had spare houses in another country, but this?

The road curved around a central lake and on the other side was a glorious building, a four-story beauty straight out of a Jane Austen novel.

“This is your *house*?” Abbie’s jaw went lax.

“Yes.” He steered down one side of the lake toward the house.

“You have *fountains*.” Mia scrubbed her foggy window with her sleeve.

“Three, and there’s another around back in the walled garden.”

As they drew near, it became evident the house curved into an inviting U shape that welcomed visitors into the embrace of its immaculate pale blonde stone. More tall Georgian windows than she had time to count reflected the green of the surrounding land.

Thom killed the engine close to the polished pillars that surrounded the house entrance before opening the rear door for Mia.

Abbie got out the front, craning at the carved gargoyles leering from every corner. Every one was different no matter where she looked. Scowling, laughing, covering their eyes, each one was individual. It was almost too much to take in. “This is—”

“Ginormous,” Mia completed. “How many bedrooms are there?”

Thom frowned. “Thirty.”

Abbie made a choking sound. “Thirty?”

He shrugged. “I promised you this was a good place. I have plenty of room for you both.”

“I’ll say.” Mia was already halfway up the front steps, turning slow circles of open-mouthed admiration, her backpack hanging from one shoulder.

Thom took Abbie’s hand and led her up steps wide enough for an entire wedding party to the double-height front doors.

He gripped the ornate door handle and pulled.

From the shadowy interior on the other side, oiled metal clicked. Abbie faced the double barrel of a twin bore shotgun.

“Pen.” Fox cursed under his breath and, grasping the barrel of the gun, he forced it toward the floor. “How many times have we discussed this?”

The gun out of the way, the owner was visible in the hallway's gloom—a petite woman of barely five feet, straight gray hair scraped off her face. Red dachshund pajama bottoms peeked out from underneath her oversized green hunter's coat. She looked as pissed off as ever, and it warmed his heart.

Fox pulled her against him for a brief hug, registering her stiffness. Pen was never one for displays of emotion, but he was so relieved to be here, he didn't care. “It's been too long.” It really had been. He hadn't realized how much he missed her until he saw her familiar scowl.

He released her shoulders but gripped her free hand. The stern expression on her face melted.

“Thomas. *Sir.*” She lifted her chin. “Can never be too careful. I keep telling you that.”

“Yes. You do.” He gave her hand a last squeeze and released her. “Even when I've called ahead to let you know I'm coming.”

Pen tucked the gun against her leg and smiled. “Especially then. It's extremely good to see you, sir. Everything is ready, as you requested.”

Fox turned, sliding an arm around Abbie's shoulder. “Abbie, Mia, this is Penelope Hamilton, my housekeeper.”

“Just Pen. Welcome. Ma'am, Miss.” Pen stepped out of the way to widen the doors. “Please come in.”

Pen had lit the fire as he'd requested. Flickering orange light and the

scent of wood smoke came from the fire crackling in the entranceway fireplace. It mattered to him that the house would be warm and welcoming for Abbie and Mia.

Fox let out a slow breath. He'd braced himself for an onslaught of painful memories when he stepped through the doors, but it hadn't happened. The house was so familiar and comforting, and yet here with Mia and Abbie at his side, it felt new, altered.

On the far side of the stone-flagged hall, the grand staircase rose, splitting into two at the half landing before it rose to meet the balustrades of the first floor, where family portraits watched over him.

"Pen will do an excellent job of looking after you."

"Aye, that I will." Pen dipped her head.

Abbie extended her hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

Pen studied Abbie's hand but didn't return the gesture. She cocked her head. "Aye. Will you be having any luggage?"

His teeth met under pressure. Nothing was perfect. Some things, like Pen, though he loved her dearly, never changed.

Abbie shook her head. "Umm, just what we have here. We're traveling light."

"Well, if that's all, I have duties to be getting on with." Pen gave a perfunctory nod and, gun at her side, headed off to the kitchen.

"Well..." Abbie offered him a smile, but he read the tension bracketed around the corners of her eyes.

He took her hands and pressed them between his. "It's not you. Pen is like that with everyone. She prefers horses and dogs to humans."

Abbie smiled, but Mia hugged her sides and remained silent. She was going to be a tough nut to crack; the last few months had raised all her walls.

He gestured to the upstairs landing. "Let me show you to your rooms and then you can get cleaned up."

He led them up the carpeted stairs, taking comfort from the slide of his hand along the polished handrail. He hadn't even realized how much he missed this place until he stepped through the door and saw Pen. Being home felt good.

He took them to the room he had chosen for Mia first.

"This was my sister Emma's when she was growing up," he explained. The room was colored in pale greens and watercolor blues to match the views of parkland and the lake. Pen had prepped the room to perfection, a fire

glowing in the grate and the white linen bedding immaculately made. Everything gleamed, and the air was fragrant with beeswax polish.

“Wow.” Abbie dropped her backpack on the floor, her gaze drawn to the gilded portraits on the walls. “These are amazing.” She peered at the nearest one of a woman in a blush-colored gown, pearls threaded through golden hair piled on her head. Mia tracked a chewed finger along the nameplate. “Lady Geraldine Fox, 1880–1960. One of your relatives?”

Abbie crossed the polished floor to join her, cricking her neck to survey the woman. “She’s beautiful.”

“My maternal grandmother.”

But Mia wasn’t done. She moved to the next painting. “Louis Fox. Eighth Duke of Renton. Holy moly.” She straightened and took a step back to more clearly study the duke in full hunting regalia, then squinted at Fox. “I can see the resemblance. Your—”

“Grandfather.”

“So you’re a duke?”

“Yes.” His chest tightened. Would Abbie view him differently knowing this?

“Cool.” Mia flopped backward on the four-poster bed, unimpressed. She stared upward. “Wow. This bed actually has its *own drapes*.” Now she was impressed. She tugged them close so that only her new sneakers stuck out from under the embroidered fabric. “I’m good.” Her voice was muffled. “What time is dinner?”

Fox grinned. “Seven.”

A hand popped out from between the brocade and gave them a thumbs up.

“If you need her, your mum is in the next bedroom.”

The thumb wagged. “I’m surviving. No worries.”

Fox took Abbie’s hand and led her to the room that had been his mother’s. Not for the first time, he noted how perfectly her hand fit within his. “Mia seems happy, but you’re right next door, so if you’re worried, you can check on her easily.”

He pushed open the door to the neighboring bedroom. “Here we are.” The fire was lit here too, and the lick of flames gave a cozy radiance to the pale pink silk wallpaper. Pen had left the door of the connecting bathroom open.

Abbie ran her hand across a stack of fluffy white towels. “This is amazing.”

“There’s a connecting bedroom, which is mine. This way I’ll be close by.” He pointed to the large double doors, which led to his room. She didn’t reply, and he couldn’t read her expression. “That okay?”

“Yes. It’s perfect.” Her eyes shimmered as she fought to stay in control. “This is so kind of you. To look after us both like this. I can’t thank you enough.” She clutched her elbows, bracing her arms across her body, and shivered.

Fox drew her close and slid a finger under her chin, tilting her head up to look at him. “You’re safe here.”

She sniffed and nodded, and a tear escaped and ran down her cheek. He smoothed it away with his thumb.

“Thank you. I wouldn’t have Mia, in fact, I don’t even know if I would be alive if it wasn’t for you. Everything has just been so... crazy.” Her exhalation was ragged against his neck, tugging at all the careful defenses he had placed around his heart. She wrapped her arms around him, resting her head against his chest.

*God.* She felt so right there. Like she belonged. The feeling hit him hard, almost like a physical assault in the gut. He’d been so sure he would never feel like this again, but there it was, just as powerful as it had been with Julie, just *different*.

He couldn’t stop himself. He ran his hands along the curve of her spine, up to the choppy softness of her hair.

One thought dominated his mind. *Don’t think, just feel.*

He knew how brutally short life could be, and right now, despite all the anguish that had torn him apart over the last few years, he didn’t want to relinquish this woman. He kissed the side of her neck and breathed her in, skimming his mouth down the sensitive tendon to her collarbone.

“I knew you’d smell so good,” he muttered against her pulse, breathing her in.

She softened against him, a small sound of surrender escaping her.

The sound was fuel to his fire. He moved up and claimed her mouth. Her resistance was momentary, and then she slid one hand to the back of his neck and kissed him back hungrily. His need to protect shifted into something more potent. *Desire.*

*Fuck.*

The touch of her tongue against his was electric as she matched the nip and caress of his mouth. Abbie pressed up against him. Surely she couldn’t



miss the heat of his aching erection.

Her hold on him tightened, and he swore he couldn't let her go, but this wasn't what she needed right now. She still wasn't one hundred percent. Her body needed to rest, regain her strength. *She needs taking care of.*

He pulled back, fighting for breath.

Abbie panted, her breath kissing his lips. "What?"

"It's been a long day. You need to rest. You're running on fumes."

"Can't I be the judge of that?"

"Yes, and no. Believe me, there's nothing more that I want than this..."

When he was with her, the pain of the past faded a little. *Am I being greedy, wanting to lose myself in this woman?*

"You need your rest." His tone was firm this time as he made his decision and pulled away from her. What he wanted right now was not as important as looking after her and making sure she rested.

Even if it felt like the hardest thing he'd done since forever. "Good night, Abbie."

Abbie woke to sunshine slanting through the tallest windows she had seen in her entire life. She'd left the drapes open, wanting to see the sky after so long hiding underground.

Now she stared at the fresh blue of a new day and the new opportunity it brought. *No more hiding.*

The anguish of the past year that swamped her thoughts most mornings was less tenebrous this morning. Maybe this was recovery?

The tribunal was a week away. There was only a short period before she would testify against Raptor, and then she and Mia could move on with their lives, *wherever that took them.*

She scanned the opulent bedroom, the high ceiling, and the endless vista of land visible through the window when she got out of bed.

Not only her protector and guardian, Thom Fox was a duke. She still didn't know what she made of that, perhaps nothing, because it was the man who mattered to her, not his title.

As she moved away from the window, she caught sight of her disheveled appearance in the dressing-table mirror. Her fingers caught in the snags of her hair. Even though it was short, it was knotted from travel. She'd been too tired to shower last night once Mia was asleep, preferring instead to fall into bed, exhaustion wrapped around her in a smothering swathe.

A painting hung above the mirror. A landscape. Bold swathes of blue and green vying with rich tones of bronze and purple. *It matches the view out of the bedroom window.* Her gaze fell on the artist's signature. JF. Abbie skimmed the frame with careful fingers. *His wife.*

She blew out a breath, searching for focus. She couldn't change the past, the losses they had both experienced.

A pristine white terry bathrobe hung from the back of the bedroom door, so she shrugged it on and burrowed her face in the softness as a distraction. After the insanity of the last few days, wrapping herself in something soft was a balm to her soul.

She knotted it at her waist and let herself out of her room. The upper hall was still, the house asleep. She glanced left to where Thom's room adjoined hers. Last night when he'd held her in his arms, it had felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be, even though she'd resigned herself to a single life with two people in her small family a long time ago. She had assumed there was only room in her heart for her daughter, believing that was the path of the rest of her life. There was an elegant simplicity in that choice, even if it had been lonely.

But now she wondered what if she'd been wrong? The way he made her feel, it had to mean something, right? But then he had also pulled away from her. She huffed a small sigh. Even with his demons, she still wanted him.

She eased into Mia's room. The urge to see her daughter and know she was okay was strong. The drapes were pulled back here too. Mia slept on her side, hair spilled over her pillow, her youthful face smooth and relaxed in a dreamless sleep.

Abbie ran the back of her hand gently across Mia's hairline. She stirred, but remained asleep, mumbling a few sentences of indecipherable words.

Reassured, Abbie headed back to her own room for a shower.

The en suite bathroom was bigger than her entire apartment. The room was paneled in white wood with carved gold trim. A claw-foot tub rested under a large bay window that looked over the garden. She peeked out of the window. Did it count as a garden if it was the size of a football field?

The enameled tub was chilly under her fingertips as she walked around it, taking in the rest of the room. Twin sinks, white hand towels hanging underneath with mathematical precision, and a walk-in shower the size of her entire bathroom back home. There was shampoo and fresh soap in a recess in the wall. She picked up the shampoo bottle and flicked the lid. The scent sent a hit of heat to her core. *Thom*. Woody and masculine. She closed the lid and returned it to its position on the shelf, feeling like she had been spying on him.

*Crap.*

A framed photograph rested on a shelf between the twin sinks. It featured a couple. The man was unmistakably a younger Thom, laughing, clean-shaven, not even a hint of beard. His ink free arms were wrapped around a mystery woman as he pressed a kiss to her cheek. So different, but still the man she knew.

Who was she kidding? And this was no mystery woman. This was his wife. The one he mentioned on the train. The artist. Abbie lifted the photograph, pressing her fingertips to the woman's face. She was beautiful; her face a defined, delicate oval, her eyes bright with laughter, accentuated by the darkest lashes, and they looked very much in love.

Abbie bit the inside of her cheek and placed it back on the shelf with careful fingers. Paul had walked out of her life leaving her bereft, but their relationship had already cooled and it was his abandonment of Mia that had stung the hardest. She couldn't imagine what Thom had gone through, losing the woman he loved at such a young age.

The creak of a door made her turn.

*Hell.* Her mouth went dry. *Thom.* Barefoot. Navy sweatpants hung low on his trim hips. He blinked as if still half-asleep and swore under his breath. "Sorry. My mistake."

Abbie glimpsed another room as vast as hers behind him, but dressed in shades of navy and forest green—the main bedroom, paired to hers, the bedroom of the lady of the house. She was the intruder here. Not him.

She retreated, trying not to stare at the dark hair that covered his chest, competing with the intricate indigo ink.

"Don't be ridiculous. This is your home." She looked down in an effort not to stare. Big mistake. A line of thick black hair descended from his lower abdomen to the waistband of his sweatpants, which did little to conceal the fact that Fox was impressive everywhere.

She snapped her gaze back to his face, and a flutter loosed in her belly. His body was pure temptation. Something stirred deep inside her, something she had forgotten existed, matching what she saw in his face.

*Want.*

"I'll just... please... I'll wash up later." She practically threw herself back into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Her heart rattled her ribs as she slumped against the door, breathless.

A crazed pharmaceutical company wanted her dead.

Her relationship with her daughter was rocky.

But all she could think about was the man protecting her.  
She didn't need this kind of complication, did she?

Abbie dressed quickly, her skin still stinging from the multiple showerheads. She'd turned the water to cold for the last few minutes, enjoying the sharp intake of breath it triggered and the mind-clearing bonus. It worked far better than any of the drugs the doctors in Helsinki had prescribed, no matter how good their intentions were.

Dressed and feeling more like herself, she found Mia's bed rumpled and empty. She did her best to make the enormous four-poster, but she needed longer arms to make it look like it had the day before.

Knowing Mia and her stomach, she'd be in the kitchen eating, one of her favorite pastimes. Abbie headed downstairs, following the scent of salty bacon and the muted murmur of voices.

She found a large dining room, empty, dominated by a gleaming mahogany table that would seat at least twenty people. Off this dining room, she found a smaller room that had probably served as a butler's pantry, its walls lined with white china and silver urns, but she paid them scant attention, drawn on by Mia's voice and the hum of conversation.

Brick stairs spiraled downwards, their surface polished to a smooth curve by the passage of so many feet. She trailed her fingers against the plaster walls, grounding herself. The age and history of Thom's home. It just took her breath away.

She pushed through a rough wooden door at the bottom of the stairs and found herself in a massive kitchen. The ceiling was vaulted above her head, and yet another fire roared in a fireplace large enough to fit a bed.

Everything was so super-sized, as if the English had shrunk vastly over

time, leaving their giant houses like crazy mementos. Lustrous brass pans hung from a rail above the fire, every size and shape—

Her heart slammed to a halt. “What the *hell* is going on here?”

Mia looked over her shoulder. “Mum. Pen’s showing me how to aim.” Mia’s arms were outstretched, a chunky black handgun in her grip.

Abbie gasped as if someone had doused her with cold water. Mia holding a weapon. A fresh memory assaulted her, of pressing a gun to a teammate’s temple against her will, the chip in her head overriding everything, overriding her, stripping her of her emotion till she was nothing but an *instrument*. A weapon of war. *No*.

Blood roared in her ears, and for long, excruciating seconds she was a prisoner of her past, locked in that room, gun rammed next to the terrified stare of her teammate.

“*Mum?*” Mia’s voice brought her back.

Abbie clutched at her throat for a second, gathering herself.

Pen palmed the gun down to the floor and removed it from Mia’s hands.

Abbie rested her fingertips on the vast kitchen table so she wouldn’t topple, as black spots danced on the edges of her vision. “What the hell are you doing with my daughter?”

Pen checked the weapon and then tucked it in the waistband of her worn work pants. “No harm done, ma’am.”

“No harm done?” Her breath was coming in too short pants. What kind of goddamn housekeeper kept a handgun stuffed in the back of her pants?

“Mum, it wasn’t loaded. No biggie.” Mia glanced uneasily from Abbie to Pen.

“Mia.” It took all her strength to speak. “I need to speak to Pen for a moment, in private.”

A huffed sigh and Mia retreated to the far side of the enormous kitchen, where she picked a tomato from an earthenware bowl and popped it in her mouth.

Abbie returned her glare to Pen, but the woman looked like she would remain icy in hell. “*What* are you doing showing my daughter how to use a gun?”

“The gun wasn’t loaded. I was merely showing her the correct posture. She saw my weapon and asked about it. When Thomas was a young lad—”

“She saw your gun?”

The housekeeper regarded her with an impenetrable gaze. “Yes.”

“What, you just carry weapons around here?”

“Yes.” Pen rolled her lips together as if she were talking to an idiot, but Abbie was beyond caring.

Everything she had fought to keep a lid on over the last few days bubbled up inside her. “I don’t believe this.” She threw her hands in the air, her voice threatening to crack. “What kind of house is this? You walk around with guns?”

Pen folded her arms and cocked her hip.

Abbie stabbed a finger at her. “I don’t care what you taught anyone when they were younger. You do not go teaching my daughter how to use a gun.”

“Mum.” Mia crossed the room. She tugged on Abbie’s arm. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Mia, please.” She shrugged off Mia’s grip. “Don’t interrupt.”

She skewered her attention back to Pen.

“Good morning.” A firm hand clamped on her shoulder.

The thin line of Pen’s mouth turned upwards in a solar smile. “Sir. Good morning.”

Thom came around to face Abbie, concern creasing his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

Air hissed between Abbie’s teeth as she gathered herself. “Do all your staff carry weapons as a matter of routine?”

“Ah.” His gaze slipped to Pen. Pen raised her eyebrows and gave an imperceptible shrug.

Regret tinged his voice. “This is my fault. I thought it would make you feel safer if we were more obvious in our security measures. Pen is a highly trained markswoman. You should have no concerns in that regard, but I’m sorry. The last thing I intended was to make you feel uncomfortable.”

His words should calm her, but anger was still a bright beat in her head. “She was teaching Mia how to hold a gun. It could have gone off...”

“Pen?”

Pen rolled her shoulders. “I was, sir. Just like I taught you when you were younger. The weapon wasn’t loaded. If you’ll excuse me.” She inclined her head and left the room.

“Pen meant no harm, Abbie. No one meant to upset you.” He slid his hand down her arm, taking her hand, and the motion was comforting, but still...

Pen returned, carrying a vast tray of eggs.



Abbie fought the urge to stomp her foot. “Mia is barely fourteen years old. She doesn’t need to know how to handle a weapon, and if she does, I will teach her.”

A look passed between Thom and Pen that she couldn’t read.

“Of course.” He pressed her hand between his. “Pen, no more lessons.”

Pen didn’t look up from cracking eggs into a bowl. “Aye, sir.”

“Abbie?” He took hold of her shoulders.

Abbie exhaled a shaky breath and wiped her hands across her face. The memory had retreated, leaving her empty and physically drained. “I’m okay. Maybe I overreacted. Just...” The chip was gone. She couldn’t let it continue to rule her life.

“Perhaps some fresh air?” Thom flashed her an irresistible smile. “Can you ride?”

Fox boosted Abbie up into the saddle. She was patient as he adjusted her reins and made sure her boots were in the stirrups. Fitz, his gamekeeper, held the halter, feeding the horse nuggets of carrot.

Abbie had borrowed Pen's jodhpurs and a black riding jacket. The jacket was snug on her curves. She'd mostly worn shapeless clothes in the time he'd known her and this was the first he'd seen her in fitted clothes that showed off her figure—the inward dart of her waist, and the tempting swell of her breasts. He stepped back from the horse. Damn, he was paying way too much attention to her and he needed his focus to stay sharp and keep her safe.

He smiled at her. "Looking good. Patrick is a calm horse. He'll take good care of you."

"It's easy to look good on a magnificent animal like this." She stroked Patrick's sleek neck while Fitz unclipped the halter. Fitz tipped his hat in her direction, his grizzled face cracking into a rare smile. "Have a good ride, m'lady."

Abbie blushed. "Umm, I'm not—"

"Thanks, Fitz." Fox swung up onto his own horse, Declan, surprised Fitz's mistake hadn't upset him. Quite the opposite—hearing Fitz speak to Abbie like that had felt right, almost fitting. He glanced over at Abbie as she walked Patrick in a tight circle.

They'd only kissed, but the way he felt about her was deepening in intensity, and despite his deep-rooted fears, something about her was different, silencing old triggers. For the first time that he could remember in years, despite all the crazy shit going on with Raptor, he felt hope for his

future.

Fitz looped the halter over his shoulder and headed over to the waiting log pile needing chopped. “Enjoy the ride, sir.”

Abbie craned a last look back in the house's direction. “Are you sure...”

“Pen and Fitz will both take good care of Mia. You have nothing to worry about. Fitz was Special Ops. That’s why my father hired him.”

Abbie shot him a side eye. “That’s exactly what I’m worried about.”

Fox chuckled and urged Declan out of the courtyard and through the brick archway. “Don’t worry. They’re under explicit orders not to teach her any lethal skills while we’re out. Apart from the Xbox, Fitz is legendary on the Xbox. I take no responsibility for that.”

Renton Park spread out before him. Mist still clung to the park valleys, giving everything an ethereal quality, one of fresh newness. Distance had prevented him from appreciating how much he missed this. His home, this land, it was as much a part of him as the blood in his veins.

“I hoped Mia would want to come with us. She took riding lessons when she was little.” Abbie was at his side, her body rocking with the easy motion of her horse. “But I guess that’s teenagers for you.” She took a deep breath. “This is so beautiful. I can’t believe you don’t live here all the time.”

“I have a good life in Norway.”

“But to walk away from all of this.” She waved a gloved hand at the view.

He pressed his thumbs into the leather of his reins, all his reasons a tangled mess in his head. “Sometimes we have to walk away from the things we love, to do what’s best.”

Abbie smiled her understanding and urged her horse forward, and Patrick broke into a trot. She called over her shoulder, her beautiful face transformed by a rare grin. “Going to show me what you’ve got, then?”



The morning air was cool and damp against Fox’s skin as Declan galloped in long, easy strides across the parkland. Ancient trees, familiar friends from his childhood, dotted the landscape, but mostly, it was a clear ride. The powerful stride of his horse was exhilarating.

He loved to ride and the soft green of England in Spring. It differed from

the grays and blues of Norway, a country that he had taken deep into his heart. He had made a new life, a good life there. But England, his past, it would always be a part of who he was.

Abbie whooped from up ahead. True to her word, she was an excellent horsewoman. She rode with confident skill, guiding Patrick in a weaving path between fallen trunks. Seeing her so free, joy on her face when she looked over her shoulder, after everything she had been through—it had been worth the fight to bring her here.

*Crack!*

The gunshot came from nowhere, shearing apart the cool morning stillness. Birds exploded from the trees, shrieking their unhappiness. Ahead, Patrick stumbled, missed his footing, gathered himself.

*Crack!* Another gunshot.

Already spooked, Patrick reared. His forelegs slashed the air, and then he was off like a bullet.

Abbie screamed, throwing herself forward over Patrick's neck. She tilted dangerously to one side. She'd lost one of her stirrups.

"Abbie! Hang on!" A jab of his heels and Declan sprinted like a rocket. Fox urged him onward in pursuit, his heart wild in his chest.

Abbie had a head start, but Declan was a bigger horse, younger, stronger, faster. She just had to stay in the saddle long enough for him to catch up with her.

Patrick veered off into a thicket of trees, hind legs bunching with effort.

Fox followed, branches slicing at his face and arms. He ducked low, narrowing his eyes to protect them as Declan swerved and dodged bushes and rocks in relentless pursuit.

"Thom!" Abbie screamed from up ahead. The gap was closing, but not fast enough.

"I'm coming! Hold on!" Together they burst out of the trees onto a grassy slope. The ground here was more uneven, riddled with clods and ankle-breaking, wiry bunches of heather.

*Fuck.*

He lengthened the reins, leaning closer to his horse's head. "Faster, boy."

Patrick swerved around a stand of trees, nostril flaring.

It was enough. Declan gained the advantage. They were almost neck and neck. White flecks of sweat marked Patrick's flank. Abbie was flat against his neck, her eyes scrunched closed with fear.

Fox lunged.

Yes. His fingers closed around Patrick's reins.

He jerked back down in the saddle, reining Declan in, feeling Declan's pace slow under him and close by, Patrick did the same.

Another minute and they were trotting side by side. Patrick blowing noisy breaths, still skittish but going nowhere while Fox held the reins.

"Abbie." Fox reached over and stroked her arm. "You okay?"

Her eyes were wide, her cheeks flushed. "I think so."

"It's okay. He was spooked, but he's not going anywhere now." Nausea washed through him at the thought of what might have been.

Abbie pushed up to sitting as he brought both horses to a halt.

He dismounted, and after tying up both horses, he helped her down.

She fell into his arms, her entire body trembling as she laughed shakily. "Oh, my God. My legs are like jelly."

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her so tight her heart thudded against his chest wall.

That had been close. *Too fucking close.*

The trees surrounding them bent and swayed in the lifting breeze, but they were not giving up any secrets. The shooter, whoever and whatever, did not want to be seen.

"Was... was that gunfire?" Her voice was tremulous.

"Yeah."

She rested her face against him. "People hunt on your land?"

"No. Not legally, anyway." No one who was supposed to be here. His ears strained, but he heard nothing but the sough of the wind.

He released her and ran his hands down her sides. "You sure you're okay?"

She looked up at him and gave a single nod. "Sure."

Fierce life blazed in her eyes, her cheeks and forehead flushed pink with exertion. Desire erupted in him, triggered by the adrenaline-spiked nearness of losing her.

He walked her backwards with short, fast strides and pressed her to the nearest tree with his body.

"Thom," she panted.

"I almost lost you." He kissed her, loving the hungry moan that spilled from her lips.

She gasped as he shoved one thigh between her legs. "I'm here. I'm

okay.”

“Yes.” Desire coiled tightly in his gut. No one would touch this woman. She was his to protect. He stroked his thumb down the line of her throat to where her pulse reassured him she was alive and well.

He ripped at her jacket, forcing his hand inside to cup her breast. She arched under his touch. “Yes.”

He pressed harder against her, forcing both his hands down her flank before grasping her ass and lifting her.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as she kissed him greedily, her hands fisted in his hair.

*Sweet Jesus.* She bucked against him, rubbing the juncture of her thighs to his throbbing cock.

He moved his hips, pressing his hardness to where she was soft while blood thundered in his veins, obliterating everything but his need for her.

She ground her hips up to meet him, locking her legs tighter around his waist, using the friction of the layers of clothes between them to increase her pleasure. Fuck, that was hot.

He shoved his hand between the buttons on her shirt and pushed aside the lace of her bra. With greedy fingers, he closed his fingers over her nipple, rolling the erect bud till it hardened for him. Then he bent his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth, applying a light scrape of his teeth to the puckered flesh.

“God...” Abbie jolted, her body tensing as the pleasure of release ripped through her.

He caught her, loving the loose heat of her against him. Nothing had ever felt so right, and for a bright instant, he knew the joy of what it would be like to have a woman like her in his life.

She sagged against him and mumbled something he could not understand, but he didn't need to. When she finally looked up at him, her eyes were unfocussed and it made him so fucking happy to see the harsh alertness that stalked them, briefly gone.

He cupped her face between his hands and bumped his forehead to hers. “I'm here now, Abbie. You're not doing this alone anymore.”

**A**fter a scalding hot shower that made her tingle all over, Abbie left Mia propped up in bed, reading by flashlight. Her daughter's eyes were heavy, her yawns punctuating her sentences as she filled Abbie in on the fun she'd had whipping Pen and Fitz at Xbox and consuming more pizza and soda than good was for a person. She sported a clean blue T-shirt that stated *My Rice Krispies made me do it*.

Abbie mussed Mia's hair affectionately and kissed her. In the short time Raptor had separated them, her little girl had morphed into a teenager. She swallowed the heaviness in her throat. Endings also meant new beginnings. There was always a positive side to things if you looked.

"Lights off by ten."

"Uh-huh. Night." Mia didn't look up from her book, but she scrubbed at one sleepy eye with her fist.

Abbie pressed the door closed and laid her head on the cool wood. She smoothed the skirt she'd changed into, feeling slightly foolish that she'd made the effort when she'd eaten alone with Mia. Thom had apologized, stating he had urgent business to attend to, and she hadn't seen him since they returned from riding. *The ride*. Just thinking about it brought damp heat to the back of her neck.

*What was I thinking?*

She wanted him with a need that bordered on insanity. Was there a future for them? Was that too much to ask? To find happiness after everything that had happened? What if she'd been wrong all along? What if she didn't have to do this alone?

*So many questions, but no simple answers.*

Thom wasn't in the kitchen, but Pen was. The woman was a walking conundrum, hand guns over breakfast but flowery robes and peppermint tea in the evening.

She turned as Abbie entered, her hair tousled, softening the lines of her face and accentuating the graceful definition of her cheekbones and nose. Once, she had been stunning.

A cake was cooling on a wire rack on the Aga, scenting the air with the rich aroma of vine fruits.

"Ma'am."

"I was looking for Thom."

Pen poured hot water into a teapot, then tugged a wonky, knitted green cozy over the top. "He was out checking the property. He normally likes to spend time in the library later in the evening. I lit the fire there earlier."

Library. Of course. Fox had his own *library*.

"First floor. Blue door." Pen replaced the kettle on the Aga and turned her back to Abbie. "Good night, ma'am."

*Okay. I can do this.* Abbie took a deep breath. "I wanted to thank you. Mia had a wonderful time with you today."

Pen stilled but didn't turn.

Abbie plowed on before she changed her mind and chickened out. "I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot." She twisted her fingers together. How could an old woman unsettle her so much?

Pen finally turned, pinning her in place with piercing eyes that would fell a man at fifty paces.

Abbie swallowed. There, that was how. She forced her fingers apart. "So I wanted to apologize. This must be hard for you. Seeing Thom after all this time... and after his wife died. I know it's been a tough time for you too."

Seconds ticked by. "Aye."

"I forget. Everything that's happened, it gives me tunnel vision, and I forget to look beyond my own blinkers. I want you to know I'm still working on it. And I'm sorry."

The kitchen clock ticked loudly.

*Okaaay.*

Abbie turned to leave.

"Sleep well, ma'am."

Abbie checked over her shoulder. "Please, just Abbie."



A tip of the head. “Good night, Abbie.”

“Good night, Pen.” Abbie allowed herself a small smile. *Progress.*



She took the back stairs that once would have allowed staff to move between floors without cluttering up the house or impeding the lords and ladies. Now they were scrubbed clean but abandoned.

The first-floor hallway was quiet when she entered through a small anteroom. Flickering light called to her from ahead.

*Firelight.*

Her footsteps were silent on the thick runner as she approached.

The blue door was ajar.

She pushed the door wider, but stalled on the threshold. An open fire cast the room with a honeyed light, but that was not what made her mouth fall open.

Pen hadn't lied.

This was an honest-to-God, full-on *library*.

The room was vast, shelved floor to ceiling. Every single wall. Crammed with books of every shape and size. Books in rows. Books in neat piles. Books in sloping slides that spilled onto the floor. Heaven in book form.

She stepped inside. To her right, a ladder on runners was attached to a rail that circled the entire room, giving access to the top shelves. She pushed it with one finger, and it slid a few well-oiled feet.

*Wow.*

A grand piano was nestled in one of two bay windows, while the second featured a window seat of plump cushions and midnight blue velvet drapes still open and framing the starry sky.

She moved farther into the room, soothed by the flickering light, the warmth and resinous scent of the wood burning, the breathless scent of paper and hidden worlds.

Despite its size, this room was far less intimidating than the rest of the house. It felt lived in, comfortable. This was the heart of his home.

A circle of two seats and a sofa faced the fire, smooth leather reflecting the dancing light. Between them, a coffee table, stacked with more books. She lifted a few. *Free diving. Spelunking.* These were not for show. She

allowed herself a small smile. She didn't know this side of him, the one that liked to explore, dive, and swim. But she wanted to.

She flipped one book open.

Loopy writing in blue biro claimed ownership on the flyleaf. *Thomas James Andrew Fox. Age 13.*

With one finger, she traced the handwriting of the boy he'd been, and the man she knew now, sensing the connection to his past, and this magnificent house. There was just so much more to him at every turn.

"Abbie."

At her name, she looked up, and her stomach did a giddy somersault. He was dressed all in black, looking dangerous. When he came close, he smelled of man and fresh air.

"Hey. Pen said I'd find you here."

A sexy smile lit his face. "You found my secret hideout."

She nodded. She waved a hand at the room. "This is... this is something else."

"Can I get you a drink?" He lifted an expensive-looking bottle of whiskey from a cabinet close to the fire. A silver-framed photograph of the woman whose image she'd seen before sat beside the drinks.

"Sure, that would be lovely."

Glass chinked as he poured.

She spun a slow circle of awe. "I still can't believe you have an actual *library*."

He handed her the glass of amber liquid. "I can't claim it's all mine. It's been in my family for generations. I'm the latest caretaker. I only added a few books."

She smiled. "Yes, I saw." She tipped her head in the direction of the coffee table. "Cheers." She chinked her glass against his and sipped. It burned as she swallowed, lighting a fire in her belly that spread in a wave of warmth to her aching limbs. Horse riding used muscles she had forgotten existed.

She would bite the bullet. She needed to know how things stood between them. This afternoon after the ride, when he'd been busy, a small worm of anxiety had raised its head in her belly. What if he regretted what happened between them? What if he thought it was a mistake? *Fuck*. She swallowed, yanking her big girl panties as high as they would go. "Is that your wife in the photograph?"

Thom followed the direction of her gaze. “Yes.”

“She was beautiful.”

His smile was sad, and it made her heart clench. “Julie was. Inside and out.” He picked up the photograph and studied it for a moment before returning it to the cabinet.

“You loved her very much.”

“I did. Still do. We loved each other, and I still miss her every day. But she was very sick for a long time and...” He drew in a breath. “... A part of me was glad when she found peace.”

God. She wanted to run to him, to wrap her arms around him, and erase the pain blazing in his eyes. Instead, she gripped the whiskey glass till her knuckles turned white. If he wanted this, whatever this was between them, he had to choose it for himself. She was done with lies and half-truths. She wasn’t embarrassed to admit she wanted all of him. Nothing else would do. It was all or nothing.

He cleared his throat, some of the sadness dissipating from his eyes. “Julie wanted me to move on, to find someone else. She didn’t want me to be lonely, and she made me promise I would move on. But after she was gone...” He shook his head with a wry grin. “Saying something is easier than doing it, isn’t it? And I couldn’t. Even thinking about another woman in the most casual of terms felt like a betrayal. Guilt ate me up, whichever way I looked. And I was okay with that because losing her almost killed me. To be honest, I was sure it had broken me.”

Abbie’s heart sank and fierce tears sprang to her eyes. It was okay. Really, it was. She would respect whatever was important to him, no matter the cost, because she cared about him, even if this was as far as it went between them.

She stared at the whiskey in her glass, her throat suddenly too tight to swallow.

“Until you.” His voice was a deep rumble.

*What?*

She looked up. He’d closed the gap between them. He took the whiskey from her hand, placed it on the table, and turned, crowding her with his powerful body. “You, Abbie. You blew all of that away.”

**R**aw need geysered up through Fox as he moved closer to Abbie.

“It’s been so long I barely remember who I was before... but you make me want to remember what it is to feel alive again.” He didn’t care that emotion strained his voice, that she saw him at his most vulnerable. It was important to him she understood the damage to his heart. That she was under no illusions about what could be between them, that it was something he hoped for, but it felt almost unbearably fragile.

Surprise widened her eyes. “After earlier and then I didn’t see you all afternoon... I thought...”

“Business. So many things to sign when you haven’t been home in a long time.” He slid his palm along the edge of her jaw.

He’d neglected her, caught up in the estate’s business, and she’d thought he wasn’t interested, that the events of the last few days, that earlier today, had meant nothing to him.

She couldn’t have been more wrong. Just looking at her made his chest tight with forgotten emotion.

Her gaze locked on him, blotting out the rest of the world.

“With you, Abbie, I’m myself. Everyone else, when they know about Julie, they skirt around me, like I’m made of glass, someone to be pitied because of the loss I experienced. But not you. You treat me like a real person. I can’t get enough of that.”

“Maybe we’re more alike than you realize.” Her voice was breathy, fueling the blazing need roaring through his gut.

“Yeah?”

“Even in Helsinki, there were all these people around me, but I still felt lonely. They skirted me like the chip had changed me in some way, made me less than human.”

“No one could ever think that.” He tucked a stray strand behind her ear.

Touching her charged the air between them. He pulled her into his arms, loving that she didn’t fight him, but slid her arms around him and buried her face in his chest, relaxing against him.

The comfort she took from his embrace eased something in him for the first time since Julie had died: the need to be always out there, protecting the world from all the pain and hurt, fixing things, keeping people safe, trying to make good the fact that he hadn’t been able to protect Julie from the illness that had so cruelly taken her. All of it receded—until there was only Abbie, and he was happy to just be, to feel and breathe for the first time in far too long.

He smoothed loose hair from her forehead, kissed the frown denting between her eyes till it vanished. Her lips parted when he tilted her face up between his hands.

He skimmed his mouth over her temple, her eyelashes, the bridge of her nose, taking his time, loving the feel of her skin under his lips, before he found the warm sweetness of her mouth.

The taste of her was a heady mix of whiskey and woman. Blood scorched his veins, running hard and fast as savage desire punched through him. Fox walked her backward till she hit the ladder propped against the shelves. He boosted her up, so she was sitting slightly raised above him, her curves accentuated by the fitted skirt she wore. Then he took her mouth in a wild kiss that stripped any rational thoughts from his mind. She was perfect, and right now all he wanted to do was hold her in his arms and block out all the hurt and regret.

He nudged her legs apart with his hip, pushed her skirt up, and ran his hands up her thighs, her bare skin pulling a groan from his throat. *Fuck*. Blood rushed to his hardening cock.

Abbie tore at his clothes. Buttons popped from his shirt, hitting the hardwood floor with a rattle. She shoved her hands under his shirt, her fingers splaying across his chest, delving into the dark hair that covered his chest.

Her touch tore a mutter from deep inside him. “Tell me what you want, Abbie.”

She dipped forward, lifting his hand to her mouth, and kissed the inside of

his wrist where the coils of ink began. “You.” She tracked kisses up the inside of his forearm, tracing the path of his tattoo. She paused in the crook of his elbow, tracing the kraken’s tendrils. “These aren’t just art, they’re stories.”

Fox nodded. The tattoos had marked the period after he lost Julie. “They were my reminder I could survive.”

She looked up at him. “Stories of survival but also of strength, because here you still are.”

Her words hit deep. That his survival could be an indicator of resilience, not just wounds, or an accretion of past hurts. The light she saw in him, that he struggled to see but wanted so badly, gave him hope.

He slid his hands low to her hips, pulled her closer till there was nothing between them.

Abbie skated her hands down the ridges of his abdomen, her fingertips dipping in and out of the muscled valleys in a playful tease till she reached his pants waistband. She fumbled at the thick leather of his belt, finally ripping it free and tossing it to the floor, and then her hands were inside his boxers, her soft palms sliding around his aching erection. *Jesus.*

He caught her wrist, stilling her touch.

She met his gaze, her eyes wildly dilated.

“Patience.” He bent and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck, sliding his mouth lower along the sensitive stretch of tendon, across her collarbone. Her head tipped back, making a soft thunk against the wooden step, her chest rising and falling in rapid beats.

He freed her blouse from the waistband of her skirt, making quick work of the buttons, pushing the fabric back and exposing the flimsy lace of her bra. “So beautiful.” He pushed the fabric low, exposing the swell of her breasts, then cupped their soft weight in his hands, before taking one pink nipple in his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the sensitive areolae before sucking it to a hard nub.

Abbie gasped, her hips bucking against him, telling he was doing this right, making all the right connections. He released her nipple, blowing gently on her wet skin. “Don’t want the other one to feel neglected,” he muttered in a low voice, as he moved on, sucking hard enough to take her to the edge between pleasure and gasping pain, stopping his ministrations only briefly to flick the rosy bud with the edge of one nail.

“Thom.” A tremor rocked through her thighs as she clutched at him, her

skirt rucked high, her legs clamped to his sides in wanton abandon.

“Yes?” He stroked his thumb to the silk of her underwear, unable to stifle a groan as he registered how wet she was under that scrap of fabric.

“Don’t stop.”

His control was ebbing, superseded by a ravenous hunger.

Skin. He needed to feel her skin. Ached for it. He slid his thumb under the edge of her panties, pushing upward through her slick cleft to find the smooth bead of her clit.

*There.*

He pulled in a sharp breath and ghosted over the tight bundle of nerves, the callus of his thumb barely touching her. It was enough. She squirmed, lifting her hips, greedy for more. For him.

He abandoned her clit, eliciting a soft exhalation of disappointment.

*Not for long.*

Fox wrapped his fingers through the delicate fabric of her panties and, with a determined yank, ripped them free of her body. His hands shook as he dropped them to the floor. This woman, she turned his world upside down. He needed to taste her.

He lowered his head and sensed the tension in her thighs. “Relax.” He shaped his hands down her sides, soothing the tremor of excitement, readying her for what he wanted to give her. Then pressed a kiss to her hipbone, nipping her skin in a teasing promise of what was to come.

Fox lowered his head, found her clit, and ran his tongue over the swollen bud before pushing two thick fingers inside her.

The shock of his mouth lapping at her made her gasp. Her hips tilted, but he locked her in place, savoring the dark, pleasure-drenched cries his touch generated.

Unbridled lust roared through him as he drove her body to its peak. When she splintered, clenched around his fingers, her skin blushed with exertion, she cried out, her head thrown back displaying the exquisite line of her throat.

Fierce possession burned through him. So beautiful and all his. She already meant more to him than he ever could have imagined. How could he ever get enough of this woman?

Stars dazed Abbie's world.

She slumped against Thom, panting, her heart thrumming in her chest. As she came back to Earth, she was aware of the edge of wood digging into her spine. She hadn't even noticed it existed a few moments ago. The pleasure of Thom's touch had obliterated everything from her mind and body but him.

He ran his hand up her back with a possessive stroke. Then his hands dove through her hair, catching the short tufts and tugging her mouth upward to kiss her. Slower this time than the hunger of his earlier kisses, a languid kiss, rich with the promise of more to come and salty with the taste of her own arousal.

He broke the kiss, then slid his arms under her legs, lifted her from the ladder effortlessly, and carried her across the room toward another bookcase.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, aware her skirt was rumped around her waist and her blouse was too short to provide any modesty if they left the library. "Where—"

"Wait and see."

He pushed against the bookshelf with his hip. Deep behind the books, something clicked, and the shelf shifted subtly. Fox toed the bottom of the shelf.

Cool air skimmed her bare skin.

What the hell?

Her lips parted as she took in the staircase behind the shelves. "Is it a secret passage?"



“Yes.” He climbed the stairs two at a time, his stride easy, as if she weighed nothing.

“I thought they only existed in books.” The walls were smooth stone, forming a narrow column through which the staircase spiraled upward.

“Not just books. Fantasies exist here, too.” His gaze locked on hers as he shouldered the wall, now that they had reached a small landing. Abbie swallowed hard at the dark promise of what was yet to come in his eyes.

*Click.* A doorway became outlined in the wall and the door swung open, revealing a masculine bedroom decorated in shades of forest green and navy. The one she had seen a glimpse of this morning.

*His bedroom.*

Thom dropped her gently on the bed. For a second he caged her in, his fists denting the sheets, his bare skin licked with gold from the embers glowing in the fireplace.

Then he straightened and shrugged off his shirt, biceps bulging in a way that made her mouth water.

*Hot damn.* She drank him in. Cut abs, dark hair, and endless intricate ink. Perfection.

He gripped her hips, and in one powerful move, boosted her up the bed till her head hit a stack of plump pillows. Then he kneeled, before crawling up over her body, pure alpha masculinity saturating the air between them. When his face was level with hers, the wolfish hunger in his gaze sent shockwaves to her core. No one had ever looked at her like that.

His hands were quick. Her blouse was gone, and then he reached under her waist and tugged her skirt free so the only clothing remaining was her lace bra. He palmed her breasts, groaning as he molded them to his hands.

She reached up, coveting his skin, the virile mix of ink and coarse hair inflaming her till she was mindless with sensation. She skimmed her hands across his pecs, loving the hitch in his breathing her touch triggered. The intoxicating knowledge that she turned this man on as much as he did her.

*Powerful.* It felt powerful to know this man wanted *her*, just as she was, flawed and imperfect. Emotion swelled within her, stinging her eyes, jamming the breath in her throat at his acceptance. She wanted to show him what that meant to her, what *he* meant to her.

She skimmed her hands down his rock hard sides, her heart thundering so hard she was sure it might explode. Her stomach was a tight knot of anticipation. She had to touch him—no, scrub that, needed to touch him, to

have him right up against her. His skin mashed to hers with not even the air separating them.

*Now.*

She cupped his groin, palming the hard heat of him. *For her.*

Thom caught her wrist. He muttered under his breath and looked up at her, his eyes dilated, needy. “I didn’t plan this. I don’t have—”

She silenced him with two fingers against his lips, curved her hand around his head and drew him closer till her mouth skimmed his ear. “Part of my contract with Raptor was to have a contraceptive implant—after a full medical.”

Abbie released him, and he drew back, making eye contact, easing the damp hair from her brow. “There’s been no one since Julie. No one has made me feel like you do.”

His words took flight around her solitary heart, landing with the sweet softness of rose petals.

“Same.” It was all she could do to whisper. Desire was molten in her blood. “You and me, right now? We’re exactly where we’re supposed to be.”

He skimmed his knuckles down her side, from her collarbone to her hip, spreading his palm wide across her belly in a sensual claim of possession. “Mine.”

The brief flare of loss in his eyes vanished, replaced by feral want. And then his mouth was back on her, his tongue spearing through her folds, claiming her with every suck and lick. She arched, pushing against the slow tease of his tongue, a perfect play of taste and retreat, until she shook from sensation overload. He tore a gasp from her as he worked two thick fingers inside her, opening her, stretching her, crooking his fingers and hitting the spot that set every nerve on fire.

*Oh.*

The pleasure torture was too much. A shocked cry split the air as her orgasm hit her hard. A shameless, desperate noise as her body locked on the fullness of his fingers. She pressed on his hand, riding the bright release to the very edge.

She gasped as he withdrew his fingers, shucked off his pants and shorts, and climbed back onto the bed, kneeling beside her.

His thick cock bobbed against his stomach, moisture glinting on the thick, swollen head.

“Thom.” Her voice was tremulous, vulnerable.

He rocked back on his heels, devouring her body with his gaze, spreading his palm over the swell of her belly once more to trace her Caesarean scar. “So fucking beautiful.”

Heat scaled her cheeks, and her hands flew to the scar. Normally hidden by her underwear, she didn’t have to look at it. No one had seen it in a very long time.

Thom shoved her hand free and kissed the puckered skin. “When I say you’re beautiful, I mean all of you,” he growled. He leaned forward and kissed the jagged scar on the side of her head. “Fucking *all* of you.” His gaze was greedy with naked desire.

He grabbed her hips, yanking her toward him, aligning the wet heat of her core with the head of his cock. He took hold of himself and rubbed the fat head against her clit till she whimpered.

“*Thom.*” God, she wanted to feel him inside her, to be connected in the most intimate way possible with this man.

He grabbed one wrist and then the other, securing her hands above her head. She flexed her fingers against his grip, giving herself up to him willingly.

His gaze raked down her body, dark with feral want.

*Now. Please.* She’d never wanted anything in her life so badly.

He took hold of himself, nudging through her folds, pushing until the head of him was inside her. He gasped. “So fucking tight.”

He pushed deeper until his body locked against hers. His cock lodged deep inside her, filling her body with an exquisite stretch.

He paused, panting. “You okay?” His voice was husky, barely controlled, and his forehead shone with restraint. He looked straight at her, the intimacy while they were connected in such an animal way, making her breath catch. As if he could read all her secrets, imprinting himself on her body. Her soul. Her heart.

He shifted, pulling back with a slow slide that made her hands fist. Her skin was damp, electricity flowing through her nerves. God, it was as if he knew every nerve to flay to the point of obliteration.

He thrust into her again, a long, measured thrust that she could feel every inch of, until he was anchored against her body once more.

The torment continued, teasing intense thrusts bringing her to the point of mind-blowing fullness coupled with the slow slide of friction as he withdrew, winding her body so tight she teetered on the brink of explosion.

“I want your body to remember me tomorrow.” He continued his torment, his shoulders and arms bunching with the controlled effort. “To remember me fucking you. That you’re mine.”

“Yours.”

Restraint made sweat sheen his skin as he moved.

She couldn’t take much more of this. Her body craved the release that his tormenting pace kept just out of reach.

His nose bumped her forehead, the upward pressure of his hips making her insides squeeze tight. She wrapped her legs around him, angling her hips till his cock shifted deeper, buried inside her. Now, right now, there was nothing between them.

He groaned and buried his face in her neck. “Fuck, Abbie, you undo me.” His voice cracked.

“Please.” She didn’t care that she was pleading or that he heard the blatant hunger in her voice. She needed him. Wanted him more than anything else. This brave, dangerous man who had shown her what it was to feel again.

He raised his upper body and thumbed her clit. It was what she needed. Dizzying sensations overtook her, and her release crashed her over the precipice under the heavy press of his body.

“Fuck, Abbie,” Thom panted, as her body jolted with pleasure underneath him.

His rhythm shifted, falling apart, as he lost control and fucked her with an animal ferocity. Seconds later, he groaned, his back bowing as his release pulsed from him, his fingers denting her skin.

Gradually, her breathing slowed to a more normal pace.

Gentle fingers stroked through her hair as he kissed her eyelids and the tip of her nose. “Abbie...”

His fingers trailed down her shoulder, down the side of her ribcage to where her waist dipped and the fullness of her hips began. His touch was easy, but also bold, possessive. As if she were his and no one else’s.

She sank into it, not fighting it, silencing the murmur of worry in her head, that what she felt for this man was so strong.

She’d known it since she first laid eyes on him, but right now, for this brief moment in time, she didn’t care.

Fox woke to dawn striping his bedroom with peach light, and for the first time in what felt like forever, he was not alone.

Abbie slept in the curve of his arms, her bottom pressed to his groin, her breathing a muted huff that soothed his weary soul. He tugged the sheet up to cover the curve of her shoulder. She shifted and moaned. Pressed back into him, waking his cock. Last night had been extraordinary. But already he wanted her again, even with the press of events distracting him.

His past beliefs were fragile and gossamer-thin in the residual glow of the night before—his belief that he would always be alone and not just alone, lonely. That he would never love again with the same intensity he'd experienced with Julie.

He kissed Abbie's cheek, the shell of her ear, the scar Raptor had incised on her head. She was strong. Her pulse still beat in the slender column of her neck and despite everything Raptor had tried so far, she had defeated them.

Abbie was a warrior. Just like his Julie. Both women unique in their own way.

But now Julie was gone, and he faced a choice. His life could continue on the path set before Abbie rocked in and turned everything on its head, or he could choose a new way forward.

One that scared the shit out of him.

The devastated part of him was terrified, wanted to walk the other way, to make his life simple again. But this woman was his kryptonite, and deep down he knew he couldn't leave her. Not now.

"Hey." Abbie twisted, blinked at him, her gaze sleepy. He pressed a kiss

to her lips.

Cautious optimism hit him. He could choose a new path, one where he didn't have to walk alone anymore but instead could have this brave, fierce woman at his side.

She stretched against him, and all thought instantly deserted him as her warm hands found his erect cock. *Fuck*. A shiver pulsed through him as he absorbed the pleasure of her caress.

He stretched and pulled her close. He could never get enough of her and right now, he wanted more, so much more.

Abbie watched Thom cook from the kitchen table, where she sipped a mug of scalding brown tea. She was a coffee girl at heart, but she could get used to British tea.

She ran her gaze over him. The way the T-shirt stretched over his back muscles as he cracked eggs and flipped bacon, the way his black sweat pants hugged his very fine ass and muscled thighs.

She peeked at him over the rim of her mug, just soaking him in, still wrapping her head around the night before. So perfect it almost seemed like a dream, but the tenderness in her thighs, the ache between her legs, reminded her it had been oh so very real.

Mia had already been gone when she came down for breakfast. She was glad to have a little time for just the two of them to gather her thoughts and process the intensity of her feelings, but still, Mia out of her sight niggled at her. “Where did you say Mia went again?”

Thom turned, spatula in hand, a small portable TV muted behind him, playing some sitcom in *black and white*. The thing looked like someone had stolen it from a museum. “Pen took her out to show her the badger set she found. Mia’s been going on about it.”

“That’s nice of Pen.” She bit down on her lower lip, trying not to let her gaze linger too long on the physical perfection at the front of his sweats. *Good Lord*. “Are they—”

“Don’t worry, they’re not riding. Pen took her Land Rover.”

“Oh. Okay.” Abbie chewed that one over in her mind. She had seen the Land Rover. It looked like it originated around the same time as the house

was built. Still, at least it would just stop and not take off on a wild tear like a horse would. She settled back in her seat. *One less thing to worry about.*

For someone so grumpy, Pen seemed to have a lot of time for a teenager, and Mia had taken to the taciturn housekeeper like a duck to water. Abbie wondered if she was missing something, the connection between them. “Mia seems to really like Pen.”

Thom was moving from cupboard to cupboard. “Damn woman has rearranged everything. Where the hell has she put the bloody flour?” He jerked a bemused look over his shoulder. “She was the same when I was a kid. She used to tell my dad to fuck off if he tried to tell her what to do. But she had limitless patience with me.” He shrugged. “I think she finds adults with all their plans and rules too damn irritating.”

“She worked for your dad?”

“Not for. With. She was his close protection. Dad worked for the diplomatic corps.”

“She was your dad’s *bodyguard*?”

He grinned, his smile lighting up his eyes. “Yes. Ironic or what? So many people got the wrong end of the stick when she was working. She wasted no time putting them in their place.”

It lit her up inside to see him like that. She wanted to see more of that, to be the one to put the smile on his face.

“I can imagine.” She pitied the fools who got on the wrong side of Pen.

“Ah, here it is.” He lifted a red and white paper bag out of the cupboard. “Pancakes coming right up.”

Abbie stared out the kitchen window to the bright day outside, blue patches glimpsed between the clouds, the promise of a better day. “And then she became your housekeeper?”

“When she retired.” He dumped flour in a bowl and frowned at the scale. “She was part of the family by then.” He cocked his head, lost in his memories momentarily, wooden spoon in his hand. “She’s a good woman.”

Abbie crossed the room and wiped a smudge of flour from the end of his nose. “I can see that she’s a good person, just like you.”

He stilled in her arms and then kissed her, taking his time to taste her, his forearms locked to her sides, his hands floury behind her.

When they parted, she was breathless.

“*And now we go to the studio for the news...*”

Thom frowned at the TV and reached around the back for the cable to



pull out the plug. “I’ve told Pen I don’t like the TV in here. The news is fucking depressing. I wish she wouldn’t.”

“Wait!” She grabbed Thom’s arm. “Don’t turn it off.”

He froze, but she couldn’t look at him, couldn’t tear her gaze from the screen. It couldn’t be him, could it? Here, in England?

“Abbie, what?”

“It’s him.” She pointed, her finger shaking. “That man.”

She touched the screen, the fuzzy face in the background. Blurred and pixelated, but she’d know that face anywhere.

Thom studied the TV. “Nigel Horton?”

“Who?” The name was not what she expected him to say.

“Nigel Horton. He’s a member of Parliament.”

*An MP? What the hell.* “That man’s name is Deacon. *Deacon.*”

On screen, the press jostled Horton—or Deacon—as he attempted to make it to his waiting car. Security shadowed him, cameras knocking against their arms and backs as they protected the minister from the journalistic frenzy.

“Deacon? From Tryokghgorny?”

“Yes.” Her voice was faint, drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Abbie gripped the kitchen counter, fighting to breathe.

The news continued. “... Minister Horton is involved in a deal, due to be signed this weekend, to bring nine thousand jobs to south London. The American company, Pharmasyn, wishes to set up a manufacturing and research plant on the Isle of Dogs. Environmental protesters are enraged at Pharmasyn’s plans to drain the marshland at the location of the proposed building site...”

“Minister.” Someone thrust a microphone into the MP’s face, preventing him from entering his car. His mouth compressed into an irked smile.

“Do you deny allegations that Pharmasyn is owned by Raptor Industries, the company under investigation for the sinking of the *Architect* submarine last year?” The microphone bobbed, waiting for his answer.

Horton’s smile was worthy of a black widow. “We are in the last few days of finalizing the deal with Pharmasyn. A deal that will bring nine thousand jobs to the United Kingdom, and I will not jeopardize that deal by indulging wild rumors. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“Minister! Minister!” The shouts vying for attention continued, but Horton ignored them, his face settling into one of blank indifference.

He escaped into the car—the man who'd been at Tryokghgorny with Nyx. There was no longer any doubt in her mind. "It's him." She was *there* again, her stomach the solid nut of hungry pain she'd become inured to, her hope of escaping, of seeing Mia again, almost extinguished. "He was at Tryokghgorny with Nyx and Chambers."

She pushed away from Thom, ignoring the flash of hurt that crossed his face.

"He tried to kill me." Her stomach contracted into a tight, cramping tangle, and nausea washed through her. Pins and needles numbed her hands at flickers of memory as they fought on the gritty floor of the hospital. "He's working with Raptor, and he's a member of Parliament?"

Thom still held the flour. "Are you sure it's him? I mean—"

"It's him. I'll never forget his face," she replied, aware her tone was razor-sharp. The news item moved on. He was gone. "He's signing a deal with Pharmasyn this weekend. Before the trial. Not only is he working for or with Raptor, he's involved in helping them establish a new company. One that will enable them to plow on unmonitored." Her heart bruised her ribs.

She turned her back on the TV, her mind already made up. She would not spend her life running from these bastards. They were showing no sign of stopping—quite the opposite; their pestilence was spreading unhindered. Something had to change. "Can you arrange a meeting?"

"A meeting?" He looked perplexed, and then he realized her intent. "Abbie. *No.*"

"No?"

"No." He tossed the bag of flour on the counter and sliced the air with his hands. "This isn't a good idea in any way, shape, or form. I brought you to England to keep you safe, not to parade you in front of the enemy so they can take potshots at you. Your court case is next week. We can't jeopardize that."

She stabbed a finger at the TV. "It might already be too late. He's signing a deal with a company that's camouflage for Raptor. He's an MP, and the British government is running the enquiry into Raptor. If that isn't a conflict of interest, I don't know what is."

"Abbie, we don't know—"

She stiffened her posture, met him in the eye as best she could. She didn't want this, but if she didn't take a stand, no one would. Raptor had to be held accountable. "I need to see him, speak to him. You have contacts. You're a goddamn *duke*. Don't tell me you can't arrange a meeting with this man if

you want to.”

“Abbie...” She didn’t hear his no, only the waver in his voice, even though she understood his fears. But this snowball Raptor had created. It was becoming a bigger and bigger ungodly mess.

“They don’t even have to know about me. You can meet him yourself, and then I can just be there. See if that helps trigger his memory.”

“Abbie, I don’t...”

“Please, Thom.. We can’t ignore this. If we confront him, he might reconsider the deal. We don’t know what Raptor is planning next, but it won’t be good, I promise you, especially if they are doing it unseen”.

Thom sighed and dragged fingers over his eyes. “Abbie...”

She waited.

“If something happened to you, I would never forgive myself.” His expression shot through her heart. She saw how hard this was for him, what she was asking him to do.

“I understand, but I can’t live my life in fear. I have to stand up for what’s important, and this is... more than important.”

“The court case is only next week.”

“Next week might be too late. If this man, Horton or Deacon, whoever he is—” She fanned her fingers at the ancient TV. “If he is part of a bigger picture, who is to say that next week isn’t a foregone conclusion?”

Silence hummed between them.

“We can’t ignore this.” She wanted his blessing, his support, but deep down, she was doing this. With or without him. Some things were just too important to let lie.

“We could contact the police...”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Leo has contacts in MI6.”

She shook her head. “We don’t have time to jump through bureaucratic hoops. I’m talking about a conversation, not an armed raid.”

“Okay. Okay.” Thom held up his hands. “But you do exactly as I tell you when I tell you. Nothing less, nothing more. I will not see you hurt. My job is to protect you, and I won’t let you interfere with that. You understand?”

Abbie nodded. “Thank you.” She inhaled a shaky breath as she processed what she was going to do: walk back into the lion’s den.

Last night shimmered in her memory, like something perfect, glimpsed only once and never to be seen again. It would be so easy to forget what

she'd just seen. To take the easy way out.

But some things were more important than her personal happiness, and if the lives lost on the *Architect* had taught her one thing, it was that this was one of them.

Fox was struggling to manage his worry. It felt like everything was spiraling a little bit out of control.

Abbie's head rested against the glass of the passenger window as he drove. The windshield wipers thumped a monotonous beat. Rain streaked the glass, the distortion screening them from the gray-green fucked up world on the other side.

He rolled his hands around the wheel. "Are you still sure this is what you want to do?"

"It's not so much what I want as what I have to do." Anxiety pinched her voice, even though the set of her chin was resolute. She straightened her head, tucking her arms close to her chest in a protective fold, rotating Mia's puzzle book between her fingers like some kind of talisman.

"She'll be fine. Leaving Mia with Pen is the safest choice. No one knows where she is. Bringing her into London would be insanity."

"I know. I trust Pen, and it makes sense that Mia wouldn't come." Her head bobbed in agreement.

He reached across with one free hand and stilled her fidgeting. He placed the book in her lap and slotted her fingers between his. "It's going to be okay. Like I said before, Pen was close protection in the diplomatic corps. She knows what she's doing, and I'll kill anyone before they lay one finger on either of you."

The small smile on her face brought him a little calm.

"That's very kind, offering to kill so many people for us."

He turned his attention back to the horizontal rain cutting across his line

of vision. “Anytime. Obviously, Pen will kill anyone who comes near Mia too. Although don’t go thinking we make a habit of this kind of thing.”

“No. Of course not.” She stared out of the window. “I didn’t realize being a duke involved so much potential bloodshed.”

Fox shrugged. “It’s not a well-known fact.” He looked over at her.

The stress shaping her eyes had softened, and she shot him the side eye.

He squeezed her knee. He would risk everything to keep her and her daughter safe.

There was nothing he could add. They were doing this and nothing would change that now.



Horton had agreed to a meeting in a five-star hotel on the outskirts of the city. Fox parked in the linked subterranean parking lot and escorted Abbie to the elevator. He checked his phone as they crossed the bare concrete, the stink of oil and car exhaust fumes burning his nostrils. Nothing from Pen. He’d left her with strict instructions not to leave the house. He couldn’t think of anyone he would trust more to look after Mia, but his nerves were ragged. They always were at the beginning of a mission, but that was good. Nerves kept you sharp and prevented you from making mistakes.

And today, with Abbie’s safety on the line, he was making no mistakes.

He hit the button for the penthouse suite, his hand skimming the bulk of his gun in his shoulder holster in a familiar play of preparation.

Abbie raised her eyebrows at the glow of the top button. “Guess being an MP pays well.”

“Drug companies too.” He shifted restlessly from foot to foot as the elevator reverberated into life.

“I didn’t know you were so cynical.”

He slid a protective arm around her waist. “I’m not cynical. I just know people.”

The number thirty flashed red, and the elevator chimed.

“We’re here.” Abbie turned to face him. She caught the lapels of his suit and pulled him to her, claiming his mouth for a last-minute kiss. The kiss was fierce, lighting a fire within him. Then just as suddenly she pulled back, chest rising and falling in a rapid beat. “Whatever happens, I want you to know that

this, whatever this craziness is between us, is real.” She released his lapels, dropping back from the balls of her feet.

He framed her cheek with his palm and dropped his forehead to hers, all the words stuck in his throat, but wanting her to know that he felt the same in his heart.

The elevator door shuddered open. He raised his head. *Time to party.* After one last check of his gun, he took Abbie’s hand and led her out of the elevator.

Artificial carpet squeaked under the rubber soles of his boots, setting his teeth on edge as they approached the suite door.

Fox knocked, sidestepping in front of Abbie as they waited for an answer.

The door opened, and a narrow-faced man with a drooping mouth peered up at him.

“Thom Fox to see Minister Horton.” Fox glared.

The man blinked and motioned for them to follow. Two security guards with thickset necks and piss-holes for eyes were sentried just inside the door. Fox flexed his hands as they followed the weasel-faced man past security.

The Right Honorable Rupert Horton rose from the corner desk of a ridiculously spacious office. It was all white modern furniture and buffed oak floors with a breathtaking view of the Thames.

The Savile Row suit did little to disguise Horton’s muscular frame. This was a man who looked after himself.

He skirted his desk to greet Fox. He was good. The welcoming smile on his face faltered for only an instant when he saw Abbie. His handshake was firm as he shook Fox’s hand and then Abbie’s.

The minister gestured to several designer chairs arranged around a glass coffee table where a silver coffee pot steamed quietly in the afternoon sunshine.

Fox scanned the room. No extra security in here. His seat creaked ominously as he sat next to Abbie.

Horton poured three cups of coffee. He took his time, then sat back, smoothing his perfectly knotted silk tie, before sipping his coffee black. Self-assured fucker. Fox didn’t know whether to be impressed or pissed off.

Horton’s cup chinked against the saucer as he replaced it. “Your Grace, it’s a pleasure to have a gentleman of your stature wishing to join our investment portfolio in Pharmasyn.”

Fox ground his teeth. This was part of why he fucked off to Norway. All this peerage and title shit. “I have a confession. That’s not strictly why we’re here.”

Horton didn’t even blink. His eyes were dark in the slanting light as he turned his focus to Abbie. He smiled and tilted his head. “Perhaps you will enlighten me then, why you are wasting my time?”

Abbie leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and butted in before Fox could answer. “I know who you are, and you know who I am, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry?” Horton frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.” He lifted his coffee cup and drank some more.

“We already met at Tryokghgorny.”

“Are you environmentalists? My secretary Evie is supposed to screen for that kind of thing.” He eyeballed Fox. “I am disappointed that a man like you would become involved in such duplicity.”

Abbie shook her head. “You were there. It was you. *Deacon*. There’s no doubt in my mind. You spoke about your wife, how she died, as if that made everything that happened in that hospital okay.”

Horton’s façade faltered and became predatory. Like a shark. His smile was empty. “This meeting was to discuss business, not my personal life.”

“Raptor Industries owns Pharmasyn.” Tension vibrated from Abbie at Fox’s side. “But you already know that, don’t you?” She cocked her head. “I’m guessing they’re using it as a cover so they can continue with their unethical research and that you are helping them for whatever your own unscrupulous motives might be.”

Horton’s mouth thinned into nothing. “I would like to caution you both. That is a serious allegation.”

“I’d hoped if we met you in person things might have been different.” Abbie stood.

Horton mirrored her and gave a half-shrug. “I’m happy to have disappointed you.”

Fox slipped his hand through Abbie’s arm. He needed to get her out of here, but she resisted his gentle direction.

“You won’t get away with this.” Her tone was abrupt.

Horton’s face transformed from irritated to sly. “Who do you think they’ll believe, Allard? The upstanding member of the British Parliament who served in Her Majesty’s forces, or the deranged woman with an ax to grind and a hole in her head where they cut out a brain changing microchip?”



Abbie's posture locked. "The others saw you. Eli, Bea. They'll identify you."

Horton folded his arms and smirked in a way that made Fox's fists itch. He tapped the glass of his watch. "Tick tock. By the time you round up all your buddies to support your lies, it'll be too late for anything. Besides, an ex-Spetsnaz officer and the woman he's shacking up with? Reliable sources?" His voice dropped to a murmur of defiance. "There's nothing you can do. You are wasting my time."

Horton snapped his fingers, and the security thugs from the entrance door appeared. Horton flicked his fingers dismissively at Abbie and Fox. "Get them out of here."

Fox fought the urge to shove Horton and his fancy chair through the plate-glass window. Air whispered at Fox's back. He spun around. The nearest security guard gave him a black look, his suit straining at the seams.

Fox took Abbie's elbow, steering her away from the men, toward the exit but one lunged and caught her by the arm. Fox slammed to a halt. "Get your fucking hands off her." His vision narrowed to the thickset square fingers gripping Abbie. He could already hear the dull snap of the man's bone, the piercing screams.

He met the gaze of the fucker who dared to touch her. Blood roared in his ears, blocking out everything else. He could kill this man, and then Horton and the other gorilla for good measure. It would leave the world a better place.

But getting Abbie away was more important, so he reined it in, until it seemed the rage in his veins would incinerate him from the inside out.

Vague noises sounded. Horton telling the man to back off?

Didn't matter.

"Fox, no." A small hand dug into his bicep.

*Abbie.*

The bastard had released her, little realizing how close he'd come to losing the use of his entire body.

Fox sucked air between his teeth and propelled Abbie across the office, and out the open door. Fresh knowledge he'd only suspected until now coalesced diamond-hard in his mind.

This woman? He'd do anything to keep her safe, no matter what the cost.

Abbie jogged alongside Thom as he hustled her down the corridor, his hold on her firm but unrelenting.

“You can let go of me now.” She pulled at his grip.

He shot her an unreadable sideways glance. “I know, but I’m happier like this until we’re in the elevator.”

The door juddered closed, and Abbie released the breath she’d been holding. Her knees were jellied from adrenaline, and she had to fight the urge to sit on the floor.

“You okay?”

She nodded and inhaled a shaky breath. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He looked perplexed.

“For this. Bringing all this mess to your doorstep.” Her pulse skittered within the confines of her chest.

Thom made a disgruntled sound and spun her around to face him. “Is that what you think?” His expression sharpened. “This became my battle too the day I saw you in that hospital in Russia. There was no turning back from that moment, Abbie.”

He slid a possessive arm around her waist, and she leaned into the familiar comfort of his scent and strength. It was so easy and felt so good, but she still couldn’t shake the feeling that she was dragging him into something bigger than both of them.

“So, don’t be fucking ridiculous.” He planted a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m right where I want to be, looking after you. I don’t want boring perfection—I want you. Okay?”

Sensation shot through her body from where he had kissed her. “Yes.”

This was what he did naturally, taking charge, protecting people, ensuring they were safe. But she’d seen the other side of him too, his vulnerabilities. The chink in his armor that made him all too human.

“Horton, Deacon, whatever the hell he’s called is lying. It’s him. I might have been half-starved out of my mind, but I remember what he looked like.”

“I don’t doubt you.” The touch of his hand was calming. “But what now?”

Thom wasn’t the impenetrable rock he made out to be. Worry etched lines around his eyes.

She blinked. “I need to think. We need to come up with a plan.” The elevator doors slid open. “We have to get in touch with Eli and Bea.”

They were back in the underground parking. Yellow light flickered from grimy fixtures overhead.

“First, let’s go home, away from this fucking place. It’s giving me the heebie-jeebies.” Thom’s hand was a guiding press to the small of her back.

*Home.* Right now, she just wanted to see Mia, hold her, and know that her daughter was okay.

They had only taken a few steps when a woman approached them from the left. She hurried toward them, clearly keen to cross their path before they made it to their car.

Thom tensed, but the woman was alone.

She wore a fitted navy pantsuit, her hair neatly tied back in an efficient ponytail. Thom swerved to avoid bumping into her, but she skillfully dodged in front of Abbie. “Allard? Abbie Allard?”

Abbie halted with Fox at her side.

The woman fished in her coat pocket. A cream card appeared between her fingers, and she pressed it into Abbie’s palm before she could protest. She extended her hand. “Joanna Smith. I’m a journalist. I’d like to speak to you about what happened to you in Russia.”

Abbie eyed the thick embossed card. There was no paper or magazine listed. Just a name. “You’re with...?”

“Ah. Well, you could say I’m freelancing right now.” The journalist tucked her hair behind her ear, a blush hitting the top of her cheekbones. “I’d love to speak to you about your experiences, Ms. Allard, to share your side of the story.”

“You know I can’t speak to anyone before the trial.”

The woman adjusted the bulging briefcase hanging on a long strap from her shoulder. “Of course, I completely understand. I hoped to speak to you after the trial, an exclusive, shall we say?” Her voice lowered. “Perhaps then we could also speak about Horton and Pharmasyn?”

Abbie glanced at Thom. His mouth was a compressed line.

“I’m sorry. We can’t do this right now. I need to get back to my daughter.” Abbie started walking, but Joanna kept pace beside her.

“I understand. Maybe we could arrange a time to meet at a later date.”

“Maybe.” She had a headache brewing. Right now, she just wanted the day to end.

Thom opened the passenger side door. “*Abbie.*” His tone left no doubt he expected to be obeyed.

“Call me?” Joanna hovered out of reach, peering through the windscreen.

“I have your number.” Abbie waved the business card and climbed into the SUV.

Thom slammed the passenger door behind Abbie. “Determined,” he observed as he slid behind the wheel.

“What do you think she knows?”

“Honestly?” He twisted his hands on the wheel. They were dusted with masculine black hair. “Probably fuck all. The press were vultures when Julie died. They’re not in it for any kind of higher reason. They just want the grime on everyone. Raptor, Horton... you.” He shook his head. Conversation over.

He put the car into reverse and backed away from the woman. She lifted a hand to give a small wave as he drove around her. And then they were heading for the exit, where daylight and fresh air beckoned.

The drive back to the house seemed never-ending. Darkness settled over the countryside, bringing with it smoky low-lying clouds that promised rain and obscured the moon, matching the darkness that churned through Fox's mind.

Abbie would make her testimony, but what then? She might stop Raptor in Europe, but that wouldn't stop them from setting up shop in a new location. New research team, new microchip, new group of innocent volunteers thinking they might make a difference.

And as for Horton or Deacon or whoever the hell he was... *Fuck*. He needed time to think about that one.

He was grateful to feel the crunch of gravel under the wheels as they approached Renton Park. Lights blazed from the building as they pulled up. Fox checked his watch. It was after *eleven*.

He opened the car door and closed it softly. The scent of honeysuckle drifted on the breeze, and an owl hooted somewhere far off.

The night appeared calm, but hair pricked on the back of his neck.

"Fox?" Abbie climbed out of the vehicle.

"Wait here." He jogged around the hood of the car.

"Why?"

Dammit, she was right behind him, on his tail. He freed his gun from his holster. "Stay behind me." There wasn't time to explain. He needed to get inside the building right now, to put his mind at rest.

Abbie muttered a curse at his heels.

The kitchen door was open and light spilled across the worn flagstones

from the inside.

Fox sucked in a breath. *Fuck.*

Abbie scrunched her hands into tight fists at her side, willing herself not to cry. *Mia*. Where the hell was Mia? She craned around Thom, trying to see into the kitchen, but she couldn't see past the width of his shoulders, and it was impossible to squeeze past. He was blocking her intentionally.

He turned, placed his mouth to her ear. "Wait here." He eased up the entrance steps, his weapon raised.

"*Thom*." She whispered too loud in the night air, struggling to hear above the clatter of her heart against her ribs.

He held up a finger to one ear. *Listen*.

Her ears strained, but there was nothing but the moan of the wind. She had to get inside the house and *now*.

Thom mounted the last few steps to the kitchen.

Abbie cast around. She had no weapon. She backtracked from the kitchen door and wrenched the wood ax from the nearby block where she'd seen Fitz chopping logs. Its substantial weight gave her some reassurance, the honed blade reflecting yellow light escaping from the kitchen.

Thom paused on the threshold, and then he disappeared inside. Abbie rotated the ax in her hands, instinct screaming at her to move.

Fuck it. She wasn't built like Thom, but she could look after herself and her daughter, and if Raptor had laid one hand on Mia, God help them...

She followed Thom in a rush, blinking against the brilliance of the kitchen lights. She scanned the empty room, her heart threatening to rupture from her chest.

*Mia?*

They couldn't take her. Not again. She couldn't survive that.

Pen's immaculate kitchen was no longer. Someone had swiped the counters with violence, knocking everything to the floor. A bowl of apples crushed and scattered, mugs smashed beyond recognition, and milk upended in the middle of a widening white pool.

*Oh, my God.* What happened here? Her fingers clenched on the ax till it seemed her blood might actually stop.

A muffled noise.

She rounded the extensive kitchen counter. Thom kneeled on the floor, supporting Pen by the shoulders. Blood spilled from her ear, and she was unconscious. Her hands were tucked behind her back, her normally immaculate hair messy, giving the housekeeper a vulnerability Abbie had never witnessed before.

"Pen? Can you hear me?" Thom reached around and sliced at the plastic ties securing her wrists. Her head lolled worryingly. "*Pen.* It's Fox."

"Oh my God, is she okay?" Abbie dropped to her knees beside him as he shucked off his suit jacket and edged it around Pen's shoulders.

Pen shrieked as the pressure on her wrists released. Her eyes snapped open, opaque with pain. Thom helped her ease her arms to the front of her body, gently massaging her shoulders to get the blood flowing again. "Pen. It's me, Fox. I'm right here. You're safe."

Pen's bony hands were purplish and swollen, the fingers clawed. Abbie swallowed bile. This had Raptor's handiwork stamped all over it.

Thom handed Abbie his phone. "Call an ambulance. I'm going to check the rest of the house."

Abbie stared at his cell. Panic surged through her. Wait here? While Mia was in the house dealing with God knows what? She thrust the phone back at him. "What? No. I have to find Mia."

Thom grabbed her shoulders, his fingers gouging her muscles. "No, Abbie. You stay the fuck here. We don't know who's here. I'll check the house, and if Mia is here, I will bring her to you. You understand?" His eyes were hard flints, the gentle man she was growing to know and love replaced by the hardened face of a military protector.

*If Mia is here.* Bile burned the back of her throat, but she nodded, fighting to breathe through unbridled panic. She tapped in the emergency number with trembling fingers, watching Thom leave the room, gun in hand.

Pen sighed and her eyes fluttered shut. Her breath was soft against the



back of Abbie's hand as she tucked Thom's jacket under her chin. At least her breathing was regular although her hair was wet with blood. Abbie squeezed her eyes shut, forcing the sting of tears to recede. She was no use to anyone if she lost it. *But, God, please let Mia be okay.*

"Emergency services. Which service do you require?"

Abbie gave the necessary details and hung up. Then, her knees protesting from the cold kitchen floor, she collected the throw from the battered sofa in the corner of the room. Carefully, she draped it over Pen, making sure it covered her hands and feet. She stroked loose strands from Pen's cheek. "You're going to be fine. They said half an hour. You just need to hold on for half an hour."

She should have been here. Not this old woman. She should have ignored Mia's protests that she wanted to stay. Should have kept her at her side. It didn't matter that Pen was some hotshot close protection officer in the past.

Abbie collected the ax from where she had leaned it against the counter.

She should have been protecting her daughter, not on some wild goose chase trying to make Raptor pay. They were too powerful; they would always come out on top. She rotated the ax in her trembling hands, every nerve in her body straining. The house was so damn quiet. Shouldn't she have heard something by now? Some sign of life? Was Thom okay?

The phone beeped and thinking it was the emergency services; she looked. Her blood chilled, slowed, as she read the message.

Noise behind her made her jerk. Thom caught her wrist. "What the fuck, Abbie?" He plucked the ax from her grip.

"Where's Mia?"

"Did you call the ambulance?"

She nodded. There was no blood left in her body, no oxygen in her brain. "They said half an hour, Thom—"

"How's Pen?"

"I got her a blanket." Abbie forced herself to look at Pen. Her breathing was shallow, her complexion tinged with gray. God, she looked terrible.

"Good work." He took hold of Abbie's elbows. Her stomach plummeted.

"Where's Mia?" Her voice was too damn quiet as she waited for the answer she already knew.

He shook his head and turned. "She's gone."

Air left her body in a rush, the world swooping in to meet her. *No.*

Thom held her upright. This handsome warrior who would do anything

for her. She'd allowed herself to be blindsided by what she felt for him. Allowed her eye to be taken off the ball when it mattered most.

He pulled her into his arms, hugged her tight. Her legs were insubstantial, incapable of holding her up. "You need to see this." She lifted his phone and showed Thom the message from an undisclosed number.

*If you want the girl to live, make sure the bitch keeps her mouth shut until after the trial.*

Thom took the phone from her hand. "I promise you—we will find Mia, and when we do, these fuckers will pay."

Pain gained traction across Abbie's shoulders. If she moved too fast, she was sure she would shatter into a million pieces.

The ambulance crew had just left with Pen. Fitz had gone with her, but both men had insisted that Thom remain here with her. And not just for protection. She had read it in both their faces; Thom was here to ensure she didn't run off and do something risky to find Mia.

She wasn't going to do that. She didn't have a lead yet. But it would come, she was sure of it. And when it did...

Right now, they were in Thom's office, a book lined room, with burnished leather furniture and an unlit fireplace. Abbie swallowed and hugged her arms to her chest as Thom connected to his team in Norway. *Pen would have lit that fire.*

The computer blipped.

"Leo." Thom dipped his head in acknowledgment as his team leader appeared on the screen.

"Fox." The other man's face was strong, with an intensity to his gaze that was familiar. Of course, this was Eli's older brother. The resemblance was clear now, although there was a dangerous angle to Leo's face, as if there were a hidden knife's edge below the surface.

Thom checked over his shoulder, as if making sure she was still there. "Abbie, this is Leo. He runs Guardsmen Security. He's going to help us get Mia back."

She nodded, words stuck in her throat.

Thom turned back to the screen. "Raptor took Mia when Pen was

watching her. They messed Pen up pretty bad.”

A sharp intake of breath. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Fox. I know she’s been with your family for a long time.”

A muscle blipped on Thom’s jaw as he nodded. “My mistake. I underestimated them.”

Her heart constricted for him. He blamed himself for this.

Thom pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “I took Abbie into London to meet with Nigel Horton. We left Mia here with Pen.”

“Horton?”

“He’s an MP here. His name may also be Deacon. Abbie says he was one of the men looking for her in the hospital in Tryokghgorny. He’s a desk jockey now, but he served in the military. It’s possible.”

Not possible. *Real*. Abbie blew out a breath. He was trying to help her. She had to be patient to work with him.

Thom continued. “Horton or Deacon is investing in a pharmaceutical company called Pharmasyn. They have a new project underway, here in London.”

“Fuck. Wait... Pharmasyn?” Leo frowned.

“Yes—” Thom glanced at Abbie, obviously hearing the stress in Leo’s voice as she did.

“The same company that paid Mia’s boarding fees?”

Abbie’s head snapped upward, a dropping sensation in the pit of her belly. How had she missed this? How could she have forgotten something so simple? Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my God.”

Thom scraped a hand over his eyes. “Shit. Yes.”

This was her fault. She had been so caught up in Thom, wanting something for herself, thinking she deserved more, that she’d missed the obvious. The company Horton or Deacon was investing in was the same one Raptor used to hide Mia.

Thom cleared his throat. “They sent a message, that Mia would be okay as long as Abbie kept quiet until after the trial. They don’t want her to testify.”

Leo grunted. “Well, fuck that.”

“Exactly,” Thom agreed.

Both men fell silent, but the quiet was loaded.

“We need to get Mia back, Leo.”

“Yes.”

“We need surveillance on Horton. He’s our only link right now.”

“I’ll get Eli on that right away.” Leo scribbled on a legal pad, then looked up. “You need backup. I’m sending over Griff and Abe.”

Abbie swallowed. These men barely knew her, and yet they were pulling out all the stops to get her baby back. Her experience with Raptor had convinced her there was little good left in the world and that everyone was out to screw everyone over. Thom had shown her otherwise, but she’d thought he was the rare exception. However, as Leo and Thom made plans, that was clearly not the case. Help was coming. A small army of Guardsmen security.

“I’ll message you the flight details as soon as we have them. Speak soon.” The screen went black as Leo ended the call.

Abbie allowed Thom to envelop her in his powerful arms.

“We’re going to get her back safely. I promise.” He kissed the top of her head. “They won’t harm her. She’s their only bargaining tool.”

God, she hoped so. She melted against him, seeking to absorb his strength that he gave so freely, allowing the resilient thump of his heart to soothe her ragged nerves. She was going to need it.

He’d put so much on the line already. There was a name for that. But it was a word she was too afraid to voice.

Her carelessness had allowed Raptor to take her daughter. And if that told her one thing, it was that she didn’t deserve the meaning of that word.

Griff climbed out of the black Range Rover and cricked his neck—it had been a long drive from the airport. The small castle Fox called home slowly materialized in the faint glow of the breaking dawn. “Holy fuck.”

Abe joined him, jingling the car keys. “That, my friend, is extremely accurate.” He made a low whistle of appreciation.

The double front doors split open. Fox jogged down the steps, a sad smile on his face.

He spread his arms wide and shoulder-hugged them both. “Thank you for coming. I’m sorry it’s under such fucked up circumstances.”

Abe grinned, showing off perfect teeth. “No need for apologies. Fuckery is my area of expertise, and this is one giant fuckup that I am happy to help with.”

Griff squeezed Abe’s shoulder. “Such a finesse with words—”

“Hey. We can’t all be Shakespeare like Fox.”

Fox shook his head. “I’m not sure the crossword is equivalent to Shakespeare.”

“It’s all a matter of perspective, my friend.” Abe dismissed Fox with a wave of his hand. “Relax. We bring good tidings and juicy information.”

Fox’s shoulders lifted as if some of the weight he carried had shifted. He slapped Abe on the arm. “Come inside and share.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Abe followed Fox inside, scanning the vastness of the entrance hall. “Nice place, do you do Airbnb?”



Griff let Abe take the lead in explaining to Fox and Abbie that Eli had come through with some extremely useful information.

Eli had tracked Horton/Deacon in the early hours of the morning visiting a warehouse on the Isle of Dogs—nothing unusual in that, considering the millions he had invested in that development. But during the night, Eli had hacked into some nearby airfield drones and used them for a flyby. While the infrared showed several figures moving a circular route around the building, one remained motionless through the entire surveillance pass. Phone sweeps had also unearthed repeated food deliveries over the last twenty-four hours *and* located Mia’s phone in the warehouse.

The mission to retrieve her was officially a go.

Eli had sent detailed floor plans, so while Abbie crashed for a few hours, the three of them sat up nursing coffee and solidifying their plans to extract Mia.

Abbie brought them breakfast late in the morning—soft floury rolls crammed with rashers of bacon, and even more steaming coffee. Griff licked bacon grease from his fingertips, not missing the way Fox’s fingers lingered on Abbie’s hand when she handed him his coffee. Subtle, but there all the same.

Fox was in deep with this woman. The way he paid her attention, the subtle mirroring in his body language when she was close. He’d never seen Fox like this before. The man had been a closed book since his wife died, but now something had opened up within him, and it made Griff happy to see it, even if Abbie Allard had brought a whole lot of complications with her. Including a kid. But right now, seeing Fox pace up and down, fine-tuning every aspect of this rescue mission, you’d think it was his own flesh and blood that had been taken hostage. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to bring this kid home—that much was plain to see.

It was mid afternoon when Fox finally brought their plans to a close and stroked his beard. “Gentleman, I think that’s everything. We should all get some rest before tonight.”

“I love my bed. I’m ready. It’d better be a big one, Fox.” Abe shouldered his pack and was out the kitchen door with Abbie before Griff had even stood.

“Holy fuck. Griff, you gotta see this.” Abe’s voice echoed back from what Griff presumed was the stairs.

Fox rolled his eyes. “Shall we?”

Griff picked up his kitbag and followed Fox, who took him up what seemed like seventeen staircases to reach his room.

Fox opened the door to a gleaming white bathroom bigger than Griff's garage. "Bathroom is en suite so you can get cleaned up before we head."

"Perfect." Griff dumped his kitbag on the bed and sat down. He quirked an eyebrow. "Bouncy. Abe will approve."

Fox chuckled. "Thank fuck for that. I was worried he would leave me a bad review. Well, catch some Zs. We leave at nine."

Griff saluted from the bed. "Fox. It's good, even with everything going on, to see you in this place."

*This place in your heart.*

Fox looked back from under his eyebrows. "Sure." He closed the door behind him.

Yeah, whatever. Clearly, Fox was still in denial. Griff could understand that. After losing your wife, there was no guarantee you would ever get back on an even keel. Perhaps never, but for Fox's sake he was happy that might not be the case, that Fox might be one of the lucky ones who survived terrible loss changed, but intact. The man had been through enough. He deserved happiness.

Griff flopped back on the bed. He was happy for Fox, but coupledness wasn't for him. He had his ropes and mountains, and that was enough.

A loud voice traveled faintly from the neighboring room.

*Abe.* What the fuck? Griff got up and opened his bedroom door.

Abbie was right outside, backpack clutched in her hands.

"Hey."

She blinked. "Hey."

He gestured in the vague direction of Abe's hoots. "Sounds like Abe is enjoying his bath."

She smiled and shook her head, waving at the high ceilings and silk wallpaper. "It took me a while to get my head around all of this, too."

"Fox is a quiet one. None of us had any idea."

"Yeah, he keeps things close to his chest." She clutched the backpack tighter. "I haven't had the chance yet to say thank you. For coming here, for helping to get my baby girl back."

"This is what we do." He shrugged.

She shook her head. "This is well beyond what you do. Any of you. Thank you." Something moved in her gaze, but she looked away before he



could read it. “Well, I won’t stop you from getting your rest.”

She smiled and headed down the epic staircase.

Griff closed his bedroom door and stared at the wood for a long second.

He didn’t know what it was, but he was sure he had just missed something.

“I just think I could be of some help.” Abbie gripped Thom’s hands tightly in hers, as if she could persuade him through applied pressure.

Behind him, Abe and Griff threw enough tactical kit to invade a small country into the trunk. Dressed in badass black from head to toe, they moved and worked like the Special Ops warriors they had once been. She didn’t doubt they could bring Mia home, but not going with them, not being part of the fight to rescue her daughter, went against the grain so hard. She wanted, *no, needed*, to be doing something. Sitting around waiting was not her MO, never had been.

“I understand that.” He stroked his knuckles down her cheek. “I really do, but you need to let us do this, and you have to trust us. I can’t do my job if I’m worrying about your safety.” He slid a finger under her chin and tilted her face upward. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” And she meant it. No hesitation.

“Good.” He kissed her forehead. “Tell me again what we agreed.”

Abbie breathed out. “I’ll take Pen’s Land Rover and pay cash at the Travel Lodge. I’m to wait there and have my phone ready so we can stay in touch. You’ll call as soon as you have Mia.”

“Excellent.”

“Fox.” Griff held open the driver’s door. “We need to be making tracks.”

She gripped Thom’s hands which cupped her face. “Be careful.”

His forehead touched hers, his breath a sublime caress on her skin. “I’m bringing Mia home. As soon as we have her, you’ll know.”

“Yes.” If anyone could bring her baby back to her, this man could.

She waited until the taillights of the Range Rover had blinked out and disappeared into the dimming day. She was alone again, an empty house behind her, acres of countryside in front of her.

She rubbed her upper arms. How was she supposed to just wait, not knowing what was happening with Mia or the man she was falling for? And his team, Griff and Abe, they'd just picked up and flown straight out here to help. Their kindness brought fullness to her heart.

That they could also be hurt was just too much. She couldn't wait, not knowing what was going on, even though right now it was her only choice. She had to keep her side of the bargain.

Abbie turned back to the house and gritted her teeth. She found the spare keys for Pen's Land Rover hanging by the back door on a key chain attached to a miniature rubber chicken. She pocketed the keys, muttering a silent prayer for Pen to recover quickly before locking the back door and jogging down the gravel path to Pen's cottage.

The cottage was dark, but the Land Rover was where Thom had said it would be. The engine coughed and groaned, and for a few sickening moments Abbie was sure the damn thing wouldn't start and she'd be stuck at the house, but then it spluttered and roared, the headlights picking out the faded stone of Pen's cottage.

She shoved it into first gear and hit the gas, her butt bouncing on the unpadding shelf seat. *Time to go.*



Twenty-five minutes later, Abbie brought the aging Land Rover to a halt close to the boundary of Thom's land. It was only a short drive from here to the mainland, but before she went to the hotel, she needed a five minute walk in the fresh air, here on the edge of his estate where everything was wild and untamed.

She killed the laboring engine and climbed out of the ticking vehicle. Her backside was tender from the jolting ride, and vibration still hummed in her palms from the violence of the drive. It had been a long time since Pen's Land Rover had seen shock absorbers.

Samphire grew in clumps on the sandy ground, and the air was salty. She breathed deep, savoring the tingle the sea air brought to her aching limbs as

she crunched through wet bracken. She didn't care that the water permeated her boots, soaking her feet. It felt so good to be out and alone with her thoughts—the ones that made her too aware of the trouble she had brought to this place and to Thom. She bit down on a sigh.

Rough ground gave way to grassy dunes. The evening was still, the only noise the wet lap of water somewhere ahead in the dark.

Something caught at her ankle, and she stumbled. When she stood up straight again, a bright light blinded her, making her wince. She held up her hands. Two men blocked her path.

She faltered, her breath catching in her too dry throat.

Where the hell had they come from?

One man advanced a few paces, angling a torch into her face. "Allard. About time."

She shielded her eyes with her hand, waiting for her sight to adjust.

The accent was familiar. Not Deacon. Panic sang in her veins as the pieces fell into place. *Nyx*.

Fox reviewed the warehouse floor plan one last time. He could walk it in his sleep, but old habits died hard. Preparation had kept him alive during his military service.

“We ready?” Abe ran his palm along the top of his handgun.

Fox closed the tablet, his blood running hot in anticipation of bringing Mia home and Abbie delivering justice to Raptor. “Fuck yes.”

“Okay. Ding dong, let’s go, ladies.” Griff pushed open the rear door, his boots hitting the road with a splash of a puddle.

Fox led the way, jogging to the rear of the building, where a rusty fire escape wound its way up four floors to the roof. From there, they would cross to the roof of the warehouse where Mia was being held.

Griff held out his hands, providing a step. Fox jogged a few paces and jumped, using Griff’s hands to boost himself high and catch the lower rung on the fire escape. Loose metal flakes ground under his gloves as he swung himself up and onto the first platform. He reached down and unhooked the ladder, wincing as it dropped to the ground in a clattering rattle.

“Fuck me, that’s loud.” Griff climbed rapidly to join Fox.

Griff toed the platform as Abe joined them. Metal peeled off under the pressure from his boots. “Let’s not hang around. Metal’s decrepit.”

Rain sleeted the wool of Fox’s balaclava as he took point climbing upward, his breath coming in hot gasps against the thin wool. It hurt him to think of Mia being held here. If they had hurt her, he’d make them pay. “Hold on, Mia, we’re coming.”

They climbed the four floors and topped out on the rooftop of the

warehouse. “Just like the old days,” Fox observed. The surrounding area was a maze of shadowy buildings marked by the streaky glare of yellow streetlights.

Griff grunted acknowledgement. “Something fucking like that.”

Fox approached the roof edge, the tip of his boots meeting nothing but air. It was about five feet to the next building. Not a big jump. Unless you looked down.

Abe took a sideways gander over the side. “Feeling bouncy?”

“You pussies need to get out more.” Griff jogged a few paces and then leaped the gap, landing with a hissed exhalation and rolling to his feet.

Abe’s head ticked. “Fuck, he makes that look easy. Okay. Let’s do this.” He rubbed his hands together and took a running jump, landing neatly on the other side in a grind of gravel. He scooted to his feet and disappeared out of sight behind an air conditioning unit.

Griff was still visible and gestured to Fox. *Come on.*

Fox adjusted his pack, making sure it was snug against his back. He walked back a few paces to get a bit of a run and then jumped, landing on the opposite roof with an abruptness that made his teeth snap. He straightened and shook his head. One of these days, he would be too old for this shit. *Just not yet.*

Griff and Abe followed him across the gravel-topped roof to the central glass atrium that was part of their entrance plan. Fox took a knee, wiping a small area at the edge of the glass clean to see inside. They were so high it was difficult to see, but figures moved far below in the glow of orange, artificial lighting.

Abe crouched close by and slipped his pack off his shoulders. “How’s it all looking?”

“Quiet.”

Abe’s teeth flashed white in the drizzle, his eyes crinkling with a smile of anticipation. “Not for long.” He began unpacking small, compact units from his pack, lining them in a neat row against the window frame. Detonators. He began prepping them with confident hands. “Give me five and then we’ll be ready.”

Fox nodded and got to his feet and made his way to the roof edge, where Griff meticulously laid out his ropes. “About fifty feet straight down, with nothing but solid concrete to pulverize your bones and explode your brains.” Griff winked.

“*Let’s not fucking get it wrong.*” Heights had never been Fox’s favorite, but that no longer mattered. Mia was Abbie’s kid, and there was nothing he wouldn’t do to get her safely back to her mother. He exhaled as he retrieved his climbing harness from his pack and secured it around his hips.

Griff anchored their ropes on bulky pipework. “I’ve been asking you to come climbing for so long and you’ve always said no. This has to be a win.”

Fox shook his head and fought a smile. “I guess there’s always a silver lining. Ready?”

Griff attached his own harness. “Born ready.”

A touch to his ear to reassure Fox comms were in place. “Abe?”

“Copy that. Ready on your mark.”

“Griff?”

Griff nodded, threading a rope through his harness. “Get clipped in.”

Together, they made their way to the building’s furthest reach. Fox tugged on his lines. Everything pulled taut. Time to go.

“Abe. On you.”

“Copy that. Distraction in three. Three, two—”

Fox perched on the roof lip at Griff’s side, his body angled at forty-five degrees prepped for descent.

The sound of the explosion blasted through him, making his bone marrow vibrate with its power. Abe’s charges shattered the glass of the central atrium and the window disintegrated, splinters raining on the unsuspecting men below.

“Abe. We are a go.” Griff vanished, dropping off the building as if it were the most natural thing to drop into free air on the end of a rope.

*Hold on, Mia.* Fox followed, using the ropes to give him a vertical path down the exterior wall between the warehouse windows. He counted as he ran, Four, three, two, first floor. Now, he brought the slide of his rope to a juddering halt and swung outwards and inwards to land on a small window balcony beside Griff.

Fox crouched, checking inside. The room on the other side of the glass was empty, bathed in the pulse of orange light from the triggered smoke alarms. He scanned skywards to where smoke from the explosion rose lazily, twisting in the night air, carrying with it the hollered commands of men running to deal with the roof intrusion.

*Perfect.*

Kneeling, he scooped the glass hammer out of his thigh pocket, and

struck the lower windowpane. The glass was old and fragile, nothing modern or reinforced and it disintegrated like thin ice.

*Go, go, go.*

He thrust one arm in, unlocked the window from the inside, and pushed it open.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Griff swung in past him, his boots hitting the floor in perfect synchrony. Fox followed, the rubber of his boots absorbing the impact. He sprang to his feet immediately, lifting his gun.

The room was small, equipped with four desks and computer equipment. A secretarial pool for the businesses that had once shared the building until Raptor had taken over the lease and bought everyone else out.

He headed toward the only door as Griff did a quick sweep of the room.

“Clear.” Griff came up against the wall next to the door. He rolled his body and gripped the door handle. “Ready?”

Fox nodded, taking aim as Griff turned the handle and kicked the door open.

It smashed back against the opposite wall and Griff dove through, swinging left, his gun snug in the curve of his shoulder. “Clear.”

Fox swung right, paced the room to the next door. “Clear.”

Comms buzzed in Fox’s ear. “Guys, you have two unidentified climbing the stairs toward you. Tangos are armed. I repeat armed.”

“Copy that, Abe.” Fox motioned with his gun for Griff to get into position for opening the second door. “These jerks are everywhere. Abe, the first two rooms are clear. We are inside the building and moving to retrieve the hostage.”

Griff slid into place, and Fox turned the door handle, shoving the door open into the stairwell.

The rapport of the door hitting the bare brick wall was loud. Shadows jerked a few flights down. Fox adjusted his gun against his cheek. Griff slid to his right, joining him in a silent stalk toward the stairs.

Fox flexed his finger on the trigger. *Time to fuck with the fucks.*



Reality came back to Abbie in flashes of sound and pain. It was a fractured journey, blindfolded, her face pressed to cold metal, thick cloth jammed between her teeth, and the stench of oil burning her nostrils.

Then someone wrenched her to her feet and shoved hard against her back. Her feet, half numb, caught under her, almost tripping her up. Blood thudded in her head, and her pulse skyrocketed. Her arms strained, her hands secured at the small of her back. If she fell, she couldn't prevent herself from smashing face first into the ground.

As she walked, the surface under her feet changed from rough to smooth and the air changed subtly with it, chilly dampness replaced by the dry dusty smell of a storage facility.

She climbed stairs, wood creaking under her weight, a gun prodding her back. "Where are we going?"

There was no answer, and instead the gun shoved harder, hitting the bumps of her spine and making her gasp.

A door grated, and then she was jostled forward. Still blind, she tumbled sideways, stars exploding against the backs of her eyes. Pain seized her arm as she landed awkwardly. Abbie wheezed, sucking in the wet fabric of the gag when she needed *air*.

Her body convulsed.

Then the rag was torn free, and a door slammed.

She retched, her abdomen tight, her lungs cramping for interminable seconds. Then the spasm passed, and she sucked in greedy lungfuls, too fast at first, making her head swim with nausea.

*Air. Sweet air.* She forced herself to take slower breaths to calm her system, her eyes smarting tears under the blindfold.

She was still blind, but her attackers had left; she was sure of it.

Something scraped close by. “Mum?”

Her heart faltered against her ribs. “Mia?”

“Mum? Mum, is that you?” Emotion ripped through Mia’s voice.

God, it *was* her. Tears soaked Abbie’s blindfold. Her restraints no longer mattered. *Mia was here.* “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

“Yes.” But her voice was wobbly with fear.

“Mia, we’re going to be fine. I promise.” She yanked in frustration at her restraints. Nothing gave.

“Okay.”

It killed her that Mia didn’t sound sure. That she’d given up. That these bastards had won, grinding her family into the ground. Fury was incandescent in her blood. She had to get Mia out of here.

*Think.*

She scooted sideways till she hit the solidity of what felt like a wall and used it to inch up to a sitting position, her legs splayed in front of her.

Light peeped in the side of her blindfold from her exertions so she rubbed her face against the wall again. It was rough, studded with pebbles or something, and rough pimples snagged the blindfold, lifting it in tiny increments.

“Mum?”

“I’m still here, baby.” The wall scored her cheek and chin, brutally scraping them raw, but she kept going, and then with a triumphant shriek it finally came free, lifting above her eyes.

“I can see, Mia. *I can see.*” She panted, breathless with adrenaline.

Mia was in the far corner on the opposite side of the room, her hands also behind her back. But her legs were free. Likely, they didn’t see a single mother and her teen daughter as much of a challenge.

The room they were being held in looked like it might have been used as an office. Several shabby desks and worn office chairs with burst orange padding filled the space. Plastic coated calendars pinned to the walls.

The scream of a smoke alarm shattered her assessment.

Something was going down. Whatever it was, it was a distraction, which gave her hope.

If it was the last thing she did, she would ensure Mia got out of here.

She'd die before she let Raptor touch Mia again.

The door opened, and a wiry-looking man appeared. His nose was too large and flushed red. He wiped at it as he crossed the room and closed all the internal blinds on the windows that she imagined looked out into the warehouse.

"What's going on out there?"

He finished dropping the blinds, then directed a scowl at her. "Shut up, bitch."

The fluorescent strip lights flared above their heads and then extinguished. The blackness was absolute.

"What the fuck?" Chairs, or a table, screeched as the man stumbled against them.

Hot blood rushed Abbie's muscles. Now or never. She bumped her bound hands under her butt, scratchy carpet abrading her knuckles, and closed her eyes, blocking out the pain as she had in Russia when she'd believed she was close to the end of the line.

*I can do this. I can do this.*

*Harder, Abbie.* She pushed her arms, lengthening them as far as they would go, working her hands under her butt, and ignoring the grating pain in her injured wrist. *Fuck, it's tight.* She'd managed this before, during her basic military training, but that had been a lifetime ago.

"Don't fucking move, bitches. I can see you." But his voice was still on the far side of the room, but Abbie couldn't see him, so probably he was lying.

*Maybe tomorrow, buster.* She pressed harder, her pulse hammering in her ears, blocking out everything but her own tortured breathing and the agony of tendons stretched to the ripping point.

She exhaled, her wrists slipped, and then her hands were on the other side of her butt.

"Mum?" Had Mia heard something?

"I'm right here, baby. Don't worry."

The blinds rattled, one slanting up, but the light on the other side was paltry, only faintly outlining his silhouette as he peered out into the gloom.

Her hands were now under her fucking knees. Her pulse spiked. Fuck, like this, she was even more trussed up than she was with her hands behind her back. At least then she could run. Now she was stuck like an oven-ready chicken.

A crazy giggle bubbled out of her. She would not die in this fucking ridiculous position.

The noise drew his attention. “Crazy bitch.”

Abbie wriggled, fighting to get her wrists under her heels, cursing when the backs of her sneakers caught against her thumbs. Stupid shoes were in the way. She rolled on to her side and dug the toes of one foot against the heel of the opposite. One shoe popped free.

Sweat soaked her back.

“What are you doing over there?” He shifted from his window surveillance.

*Wouldn't you like to know, buddy?*

She switched feet, digging with her socked toes into the other sneaker.

Her socks were slippery, her toes non-compliant. She gritted her teeth, digging harder. Focusing everything in her body on that one foot. The pressure against her wrists was excruciating, the hard plastic rim of the cable ties slicing swollen skin. Her wrists were wet with blood.

She blocked it all out.

The sneaker flew free, and she curled instantly, tucking her legs against her chest, inching her feet under her bound wrists, and then just when she thought she was going to be stuck like a pretzel bug for eternity, her hands were in front of her and her legs were free.

“Bitch.” Air whooshed past her ear. Her captor was right beside her, and only the fact that she'd lain down had prevented him from hitting her with his gun.

She blinked sweat from her eyes. The flare of a discharged weapon bloomed momentarily through the window, somewhere in the warehouse below. The light was a micro distraction, but it was enough. Abbie rammed her legs against his knees, savoring the pleasing crunch of cartilage as she hit home. He squawked like a girl and toppled with a thud.

Abbie scrambled to her feet and dove forward. Her shoulder punched into his side, and then she was on top of him, and they hit the floor as one, his gun wedged between them.

She rocked to the side, fighting to gain a hold on the weapon, and almost sobbed when she got a firm grip. It took all her strength to wrench it from his fingers and thrust it upward against his Adam's apple.

He gagged, his breath sour against her face as he fought to dislodge her.

*Not happening.* Using her hips, she boosted herself higher, using her body

weight to pin the weapon against his throat. Pain speared through her injured wrists, making her eyes water.

If it was Mia or this man, there was no choice.

He wrestled with her, clawing at her arms, at her sides. Her socks slipped on the crappy floor as she battled for traction. She was just too light, even if she had dealt him a wounding blow to the knee.

*I can't hold on much longer.*

Blinding light scoured the room, and her eyes scrunched closed reflexively

Male voices.

*Fuck.*

Her attackers had returned. Mia was crying.

She was too late. Too slow. The man under her went limp. *What—*

“Abbie? What the absolute fuck?” Strong hands gripped her, lifted her as if she was flotsam and tugged her against a hard body.

Blue eyes that radiated confidence and power met hers above a black beard stranded with silver. Recognition made her muscles turn liquid with relief.

*Thom.*

The bindings on her hands cut. Abbie pulled Mia to her and hugged her close.

Mia was crying, great racking sobs of relief. Abbie kissed her and whispered soothing words, ones from when Mia had been a baby, and cuddles and words of comfort had solved almost everything. She held Mia so tight, certain she could never let go. In her arms, Mia was protected.

The man she'd been fighting with lay unconscious at her feet. A purple bruise already rising on his temple from where Thom had hit him, but he'd live.

Mia hiccupped, fighting for breath. "I thought... I thought..."

"Hush. You're safe now." She cupped Mia's head against her chest, not caring about the angry welts on her wrists from her escape artist routine of only a few moments ago.

She'd nearly lost her daughter.

All of this was her fault, stemming from the decision to become involved with Raptor. Her life had unraveled from that one point, hurting everyone who meant anything to her. It had to stop somewhere. Somehow she had to put the brakes on this, end it. And yet whenever she tried to, it seemed the knots just tightened.

Over Mia's shoulder, Abbie made eye contact with Thom. No man had ever meant as much to her as he did, and she couldn't imagine a future without him. She would do anything to protect him, this wounded man who had already suffered so much loss and yet still fought for those he loved.

He crossed the room, taking in the sight of her bleeding skin and the way

she favored her wrecked wrist.

“Okay?”

“I’ll live.” Her shoulders throbbed as if they’d been dislocated and then rammed back into their sockets. She glanced at the man on the floor. *So worth it.* “I nearly had him.”

Thom lifted one assessing eyebrow. “Yes, you nearly did. He also nearly had you.” He cupped her shoulder, making the three of them one.

This man, with his team, had risked his life to rescue Mia. It was foolish to believe she could walk away from him now. Where there had been only emptiness inside her for so long, something else swept in, scouring away the weight of loneliness from her weary shoulders, and replacing it with something new and fragile. It had only been a matter of days, but he meant everything to her now.

“Raptor...” He waved a hand at the busted door, the oscillating orange light that was giving her a headache.

*Raptor didn’t get me.* She lifted her chin. “If they think they can scare me from testifying, they’re mistaken. All of this, it only makes me more determined.”

“Fighting talk. I like it.” He examined her wounded wrist with a careful touch, lifting it gently against her chest. “Hold it here. It might be broken.” He smiled, but sadness hooded his gaze. The future she wanted to share with him, she didn’t know if he could be part of that, or if his past had taken too much from him.

“Can we save the happy hellos for when we’re somewhere with fewer bullets?” Griff ducked his head out the door and pumped out a volley of shots. He pulled back. “Abe, where are you? I have hostiles on the stair caning my ass.”

Thom lifted his hand, and her skin cooled. His eyes darkened as too familiar shutters locked in place. “Griff’s right. Let’s get you both home.”

Abbie nodded, following him to the door, fencing in all the bright hope inside her.

If Thom still wanted her, he would tell her. And if he didn’t, she’d survive. *Somehow.*

Fox drove with no idea where he was heading.

Abbie and Mia were back at the house in Abe and Griff's safe hands. Abe had insisted on setting up sensors throughout the grounds. If a mouse farted while Fox was away, it would be dead by the time he returned.

He'd left thinking he just needed some fresh air, but of course that wasn't true—he left because he couldn't face Abbie. He was a fucking coward because he couldn't give her what he saw in her eyes and heart.

The events of the last twenty-four hours—almost losing her and Mia—were only a brutal reminder of why he lived alone. The price of love, the pain of loss it risked, was too high.

He almost laughed when he found himself at City Hospital. He parked and slammed the wheel with his clenched fists. How the fuck did he end up here? The one place he'd avoided since Julie's death.

He stared at the building he hated so much. Even looking at the white brick towers made his gut heave.

But he knew why he'd allowed himself to be drawn here. *Pen*. He needed to see she was healing, that she was being cared for properly. She was the one constant in his life after his parents died and had been his safe harbor in the storm more times than he could count throughout his unruly adolescence.

*Fuck.*

He got out of the car and bought the biggest bunch of flowers he could find in the ground floor gift shop. A weird mishmash of hot house blooms in vivid colors that made his eyes water. He took the elevator up to the second floor, holding the bouquet in front of his face so he didn't have to look



anyone in the eye. All hospitals made him so fucking uncomfortable, but this one made him want to tear his skin off.

The pungent smell of antiseptic stirred sleeping memories. Bringing in Julie for interminable checkups, waiting with her while she received chemo, holding her hand while they marked tattoos on her skin for radiotherapy. He adjusted the flowers in his damp hands. The memories stung like acid, but he breathed through them, and they passed, like an infection being cleansed from a wound. Maybe he should have come here sooner, faced his devils.

The elevator binged, and the doors opened.

He strode toward the reception desk under the harsh, clinical light. The nurse looked up at the sound of his heavy boots.

“Pen Hamilton.”

The nurse checked her computer. “Room 106.”

“Thank you.” He headed to where she had pointed, dodging doctors and nurses, their clipboards heavy with assessments that would decide people’s lives.

The door to room 106 was ajar. He rapped with his knuckles and pushed the door open when a grumpy voice muttered something indecipherable from within.

Inside, Pen reclined, propped on pillows, the steel of her hair neatly brushed, a black TV remote in her hand. A daytime soap played out, muted, in the room’s corner. She blinked in surprise. “Thomas.”

“Pen.” He stopped at the foot of her bed, unsure of what to do or say. He’d spent too much time beside one of these beds, holding Julie’s hand. *Fuck.*

“I brought you some flowers.” He held out the bouquet and then realized it was far too big to give to her. “I’ll put them in some water for you.” He checked under the small sink and found an empty vase. Garish, but it would do.

He filled it with water, noticing a far more tasteful bunch of pink roses on her bedside table. “Someone beat me to it.”

Pen’s cheeks colored. “Fitz.” She looked away.

“Ah.” Fox raised an eyebrow, wondering if he really knew this woman who had been so important to him for so many years. But then he’d run away from this part of his life for so long.

Pen blinked when he placed his blinding Day-Glo flowers next to Fitz’s roses. She frowned at the flower nearest her. “What color of carnation is

that?”

Fox bent to check. “Umm... blue.”

“Fucking blue?” For an instant, her face was serious, and then she burst out laughing. A rich, hearty laugh that brought joy to his heart.

He missed laughter and couldn't help but join in with her. Damn, it felt good.

“What the actual fuck?” She wiped at her eyes with one finger. “Thomas, my boy, these flowers are monstrosities, but thank you.”

She sipped water from her bedside table and composed herself. “I needed that. They're trying to kill me with daytime TV. All the ad breaks are for funeral homes.” She stabbed the remote at the TV, where an aging talk show host was extolling the virtues of a stair lift.

Fox sat on the edge of the bed. “You look better with some color in your cheeks, Pen. You had us worried.”

She squinted at him, her sharp eyes missing nothing. Age had not dulled her in any way. “You of all people should know, Thomas. I'm harder to kill than I look.”

“Yeah.” He picked up her hand and gave it a squeeze, remembering the same hands showing him how to speed load a rifle when he was ten years old, slapping his fingers when he went for the largest piece of cake without offering it to others first, and feeding him hot soup on the night his parents died.

Pen tugged her hand free. “You'd better not be getting sentimental on me in your old age.” She wriggled against her pillow. “Here, sort these for me. Bloody nurses wouldn't know how to plump a pillow if you smacked them in the face with it.”

Fox shook his head and reached around to fluff the pillows to the required level. “Okay?”

She leaned back and grimaced. “It will do.” A soft exhalation. “Bastards disabled the alarm system. They knew what they were doing, Thomas. These were not amateurs. There were three of them in the kitchen before I knew what was happening.”

“It's okay. I know. The police?”

She shook her head. “I spoke to them, but that was a bloody waste of time.” She smoothed the sheet across her stomach. “The one who came to interview me was twelve years old. Hadn't started shaving yet.”

Age spots marked the back of her hands. Pen was ageless in his memory,

but here she was, changing, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Familiar anger bloomed inside him. Why did he have to lose those he loved?

“It’s good to see you, Thomas.” Her voice softened. “Fitz told me about what happened. I wasn’t sure you would come or if you’d even be able to leave Abbie and Mia.” She gestured at the room. “I know coming to this place is tough for you. After everything.”

“They’re in expert hands, and Julie would have wanted me to come.”

“Yes.” Pen made a dismissive clucking noise with her tongue. “Still don’t know what she saw in you. She was far too good for you.”

“Yes, she was.” He pinched the top of his nose against his stinging eyes.

“She was pure light. When she died, a blackness descended, leaching life from you, as if her passing took part of you with her.”

Fox stared at the red embroidery on the hem of the sheet, *City Hospital*. Blood roared in his head. “It did.”

“That’s why even though I missed you, I was so happy to know you were making a new life for yourself in Norway, finding a way forward through the darkness. I know that’s one of the hardest things a man can do.” She paused, as if considering her words. “Taking that risk of having your heart eviscerated, that’s the risk we take for love. And it’s not any easier the second time.”

*Second time?*

He shook his head. “Pen, there is no second time.” Having his heart ripped out and stomped on by life? Once was enough.

Pen sucked air through her teeth and shook her head. “When you came back to Renton, I understood why, as soon as you walked through the door with Abbie. She’s brought sunshine back into your life, her and that whippet of a kid of hers. I saw it as clear as day. “

“Pen, that’s not—”

She grabbed his fingers, her frail-looking hands deceptively strong. “Love doesn’t choose where it lands. It just is. And now you have the chance to love again.”

Fox shook his head. “I can’t do it. After yesterday. The chance that Raptor had harmed Abbie or Mia nearly killed me.”

“Pshaw.” She patted his hand. “The only thing that tells you is how much she means to you. You’re stronger than you know, Thomas. You survived Julie’s illness, and you will survive everything else life throws at you.”

“Pen—” The spike of his pulse drowned out everything else.

“Your heart wants to. Only your head is holding you back.” She tapped her temple. “And what’s in here? It’s all messed up.”

“Losing your wife can do that.”

“I know.” Her voice softened. “But it’s not the end of you.” She leaned back against her pillow, relief on her face. “Locking yourself away won’t achieve anything other than making it worse. But taking a risk with Abbie, if you have genuine feelings for her, it could be the best thing for you.”

“But—”

“No one loves without risk of loss. It’s the price we have to pay. Accept it.”

“You done with the psychoanalysis?”

She made a shooining gesture. “You have the biggest heart, Thomas. It’s not meant to be kept all to yourself. You survived despite everything, didn’t you?”

He did. He was still here. Still wanting to love. What if he was just scared? What if he was strong enough?

“Pen—”

“You are not fucking broken.”

“You speak to Mia with that mouth?”

She arced an eyebrow at him and sighed theatrically. “The food here is abysmal. What say you do some shopping? Bring me some edible food before you leave?” She closed her eyes. The conversation was over. “And some of those mini wine bottles too. Water here tastes like piss.”

He grinned and got up to leave.

“And, Thomas.” Her eyes were open again and laser sharp.

“Yes?” He paused at the door, his fingers gripping the frame.

“They won’t give up. Be ready.”

He nodded. “I am.”

Abbie headed to the screening room where Mia was watching a movie from the Marvel Universe with far too many guns. The ache in her shoulders was receding, but her wrist, although an X-ray had confirmed it wasn't broken, was still painfully tender.

The room was bigger than the entire ground floor of Abbie's apartment. Three rows of red velvet seats faced an enormous screen that filled an entire wall. The lights were dimmed as Abbie took a seat behind Mia, flanked on each side by the two Guardsmen.

Mia held a large bowl of popcorn in her lap from which Griff and Abe took handfuls, in between shouting tactical advice to the characters on the screen. Warmth from their laughter soaked into Abbie's bones. These good men were looking after her daughter, making sure she didn't dwell on what had happened to her. Looking out for her, because their hearts were big. Despite everything, these men reminded her there was still good out there, people looking out for others.

Mia was loving all of it, squealing with laughter at the ongoing commentary, her slight body shaking with giggles, barely visible between the two strapping operatives. Abbie couldn't remember the last time she had seen her daughter like this.

Even before Raptor, before the enormous fuck up of getting involved in all the research, things had been tricky as a single parent family. Abbie had done her best, but the requirements of her military career had put a strain on her small family of two. She no longer believed it was possible for one person to be all things for one child. A child needed more, not necessarily the

traditional two parents, but just *more*. People who loved them from all walks of life, who could share unique experiences, love them in different ways to their parents, and help round them out as a person.

That was what she saw now—Mia blossoming in the breadth of love and care surrounding her. Thom and his team had brought so much more into her life than safety. Without even trying, he had brought love and warmth, a sense of family and care.

She pressed her hands to her eyes. All of this made her relationship with Thom even more confusing.

She'd sensed his withdrawal over the last few days, since that night when she had dared to believe there could be a happy ending for the two of them.

The anger on his face when he'd found Pen on the floor was imprinted on her memory, that and the knowledge Pen had been hurt because of her. If Thom hadn't brought her to his home, none of this would have happened. She still couldn't work out if that was the reason he pulled away from her now, or whether it was deeper, his heart locked away since the death of his wife.

"Mum." Mia had spotted her.

Abe looked over. "Abbie. Come, take my seat."

She waved away his generous offer. "I'm fine here, thank you." She looped her arms around Mia's neck, smelling the apple scent of freshly washed hair. She breathed her all in. Her baby girl.

Mia reached around and snuggled against Abbie's hand. "Where's Thom?"

"I bet he's checking up on Pen." Griff answered. "Making sure she gets well soon."

Mia rummaged in the popcorn bowl. "Pen's bossy."

Griff raised an eyebrow.

"But I like her." Mia spoke with a full mouth, her pink cheeks bulging like a baby hamster.

Abbie's heart tightened with a pulse of love.

"I hope she comes home soon. She promised to show me how to cheat at Monopoly." Mia pinned her gaze on Abbie. "Thom said we could stay as long as we liked. Can we?"

"Well, I—"

Mia read the conflict on her face. "You do like him, don't you?"

Abbie's cheeks burned. "Well, I... Of course I like him, sweetheart. But we're his guests. We can't take advantage of his kindness."

“I think there’s room for us.” Mia rolled her eyes. She was getting far too good at that. “I really like him, Mum. Do you like him the way he likes you?”

Abe and Griff studied her with barely concealed interest, the film forgotten.

*God, could the ground just open up and swallow her?* “Well, I...”

Mia’s cheeks bulged with another handful of popcorn.

The words to explain what she felt in her heart, what she saw in Thom’s eyes, they wouldn’t come. “Umm...”

“You should. You should like him the way he likes you, and then you would be happy and I wouldn’t have to worry about you anymore.” Mia turned and faced front once more.

Abbie blinked, her vision fogging with tears she would not let loose. She sniffed. *Shit, shit.* Mia worried about *her*. This was all the wrong way around. “I don’t think we’ll be staying.”

“Why?”

“Well, Raptor might send someone to hurt you again.”

“If Raptor wants to hurt us, isn’t here with Thom the safest place for us to be?” Mia looked unimpressed.

“She has a point.”

Great, Griff was chiming in. Was this an ambush?

“Well...”

“Fox told me it’s important to stand up to bullies.” Mia tilted her head, an eyebrow crooked, as she assessed her mother. God, she had all the answers. This was a losing battle. Her baby had become a switched on young woman when she wasn’t looking.

“Well, that is true—”

“He said Raptor is bullying you and in school, they told us we should stand up to bullies or report it because if you don’t, they’ll just bully someone else.”

“That’s correct. Everyone should stand up to bullies, but it’s not quite that simple, Mia. So much has happened since we came here, and now Pen is in the hospital.”

She wanted Thom more than she had ever wanted anyone in her entire life, but if he didn’t want her, there was nothing for her here.

“That wasn’t our fault.”

“Mia—”

“Thom told me it wasn’t our fault, and I believe him. I like him. *A lot.*”

Mia fell silent and stared into her almost empty popcorn bowl.

Abbie stared at her hands.

“You’ve got a great kid there, Abbie. Maybe you should take her advice?”

Abbie’s belly flipped at the gruff voice behind her, the one that sent her traitorous heart skittering.

*Thom.*



**T***his is it.* Fox's heart thumped, making his vision waver. All his special ops missions had nothing on this—telling Abbie the true depth of his feelings for her.

Abbie rose from her seat, the graceful curve of her back to him for long seconds before she turned. "Thom."

"We need to talk." He took her hand. It was time to lay claim to this woman. To let her know how he felt, that he couldn't even contemplate letting her go.

"Where are we going?" She glanced over her shoulder to the screening room where the film was cranking up again and the bad guys were dying by the dozen.

"You'll see."

He led her from the breadth of the house's main staircase to one of the four spiral staircases that led to the roof. Outside, the air was sharp; threads of orange and gold streaking the sky and promising a beautiful day tomorrow. A fresh start.

He walked up to the battlements, placed her hand on the worn stone under his. "Look at all of this."

From here, they could look over the lake to the forest boundary, and in the distance the glinting promise of blue sea.

"It's breathtaking."

"Yes." His fingers laced with hers. "I forgot just how much."

Starlings swooped overhead, diving in an acrobatic display of curls and waves before disappearing into the trees.

“But none of this means anything to me without someone to share it with. When Julie died, there was no reason to stay here, to be in this place. And I didn’t expect that to change.” He caught her chin with two fingers and turned her to face him. He’d never seen anything more beautiful.

A shaky breath escaped his lungs. He was so scared of saying the wrong thing, of messing this up. “When I look at you, sometimes it’s hard to remember what I want to say.”

“Hey.” She cupped his cheek, stealing his breath. “I’m right here.”

He cleared his throat. “In that warehouse with Mia, when I saw you, when my brain worked through all the things that could have happened to you both... the hurt, or worse... it was a physical pain inside of me and that scared me so much.” He gripped her hand, drawing courage from her touch. Realization hit him low in the gut. He was stronger with Abbie by his side.

“When Julie died, I swear it almost killed me. I was so sure I couldn’t endure that again, that anything close to that would be the end of me and that being alone was the only way to survive this life.”

“I understand.” Her smile dissolved, and she bit down on her lip. “I really do. I’ve been alone for a long time. It’s hard, but there’s a safety in familiarity. You don’t have to explain.”

He pressed a kiss to her mouth, tasting sweet cherries. “No, I do. I have to explain. Because it made me a fool.” He nipped her lips, and she made a small animal sound. “I’m hoping to change that now.”

She pulled back a little, breaking their kiss so she could look him in the eye. “I only want you to be happy—whatever that is. I’m okay with it.”

He stroked one hand through her choppy hair. “Someone made me reconsider things.”

“Someone?”

“Mmm.” He smiled. “Reminded me I’m here. I survived all the shit life threw at me, and that if you try to avoid hurt in life... you might as well be dead anyway.” His tone was firm. Certain. For the first time in far too long, what he was saying, what he was doing, felt *right*. “Happiness is never guaranteed. Falling in love involves risk, opening your heart, and I’m okay with that. I’m done living alone. You here, Mia too... Everything is so much better with you both around, including me.”

“What are you saying?” A waver threaded through her voice, conveying a vulnerability that made him want to hold her close and protect her from the ravages of the world.

He pressed a tender kiss to her temple. “I want you, Abbie, in my life, now and in the future. And not just you, Mia too.”

When he pulled back, looked into her eyes, there were tears. *Fuck, he'd said the wrong—*

“That’s all I want too.” Her voice cracked. “You.” She pressed her mouth to his. The kiss was fierce, filled with love and possession that matched what he felt deep inside.

Hope blazed alight inside him. He was ready for this new step and all the scary risk and beauty it would bring to his life. Finally, he was ready to love again.

Fox strode down the main hall, Abe and Griff at his heels.

“Man, this place is gigantic,” Abe whistled as they passed through a saber arch held above their heads by suits of armor. “Where exactly are we going?”

“I have a plan.”

Abe and Griff exchanged glances, but he ignored them. Pen’s words rang in his head. *They won’t give up.* Pen was right. “We’ve been one step behind from the start. Time to change the game. Consolidate our advantage.”

He had been running for too long, Raptor chasing his heels, worry grinding him down, but things had changed, *he* had changed. He had struggled for so long, but now, with Abbie at his side, he saw a light in the darkness, and he was damned if Raptor was going to mess with that. No more running. Now he was going after Raptor.

“I like the sound of that.” Abe rubbed his hands together in barely concealed anticipation.

Fox grinned. *Exactly.*

“So, Abbie, she’s the one?” Griff’s look was curious as he kept pace.

“I just want her safe.” *And so much more.*

“Of course.” Griff smiled. “This is all about you being the safety guy. Perhaps you can give Abe some tips?”

Abe spluttered. “Man, I have no need for any complications. I have what I want when I want, if you know what I mean. No ties, no obligation.”

“Maybe you haven’t found the woman who will make you change your mind yet,” Fox said.

“It’s going to take more than one woman to make me change my mind,” Abe asserted.

“So a harem?”

“Now we’re talking.” Abe burst out laughing.

Fox shook his head, unable to stop smiling. He missed this. His teammates, the banter. Was there a way he could make all the things work? His woman, his career, Renton Park? Because being here with Abbie, it made him realize just how much he had missed his home in England.

Fox took the spiral staircase down to the kitchen.

Griff’s broad shoulders bumped against the narrow passageway. “So, where are we going exactly?”

The room was warm from the Aga, but Fox paid it no heed, heading for the scullery. “You’ll see.”

“This was not quite what I had in mind,” Abe commented, ducking under the polished gleam of a copper pan.

In contrast, the scullery was cool. The walls were whitewashed, as they had been for centuries, the floor terracotta tile worn smooth by generations. There was a nondescript door on the far side of the room. Fox fished Pen’s keys out of his pocket. “Abbie will testify in three days. They’re going to come for her because they’re almost out of time.”

Griff and Abe exchanged a dark look.

“We’re taking the initiative. My turf. My terms. Abbie and Mia will be safe, out of harm’s way. It’ll just be us.”

Abe grinned. “Just the way I like it.”

Griff scratched at his temple. “We’ve got Abe’s sensors maintaining a perimeter around the house, but what about weapons? There was a limit to what we could get through customs, even with Leo pulling strings.”

Fox grinned. “It’s clear you haven’t met Pen. In the past, this was the cool room. Then my father bought Pen a freezer, and she converted it.” He thumbed through the keys on the ring, and finding the correct one, unlocked the door.

He shoved against the heavy oak and pulled the light cord. A bare bulb blinked into existence, illuminating the utilitarian space.

Abe gasped at his shoulder.

“Holy cow,” Griff breathed. He turned a slow circle, taking in the rammed armory. Weapons covered all four walls. He pulled open one of the drawer units that sat below hip level, revealing endless rows of ammunition.

“Pen planning for the end of the world?”

Fox pocketed her keys. “It’s more her hobby than anything else.”

Abe lifted a sleek gun reverently from clips securing it to the wall. “This is a collector’s item. They only made ten of them. This belongs to your *housekeeper*?”

Fox lifted one of several sniper rifles from its fixing. “Pen worked close protection for twenty-five years in the diplomatic corps. It’s in her blood.”

Griff ran his fingers along the glass cabinets. “I am so looking forward to meeting her when she gets out of the hospital.” He turned to face the others. “Well, we don’t need to worry about weapons. Floor plan?”

Fox pulled out a wide thin drawer and retrieved several rolls of yellowed paper, which he spread out on the central table.

“These are the floor plans of the house and Ordnance Survey maps of the surrounding land.” He tracked a finger across the paper as he had done so many times as a child. “They have limited access to the island, across the beach when the tide is out, by boat or helicopter when the tide is in. We can use this to our advantage.”

“Bird will be too noisy.”

Fox nodded his approval at Griff’s observation. He tapped against the island’s beaches. “They’re most likely to come by land. That way, they can guarantee they will get here regardless of the weather—there are storms forecast over the next few days that could make a beach landing tricky.” He touched several points on the map. “We’ll need eyes here, here, and here. Warning systems on all these points.”

He looked up. “It’s a lot to cover, but if all goes well, we stop them before they even get to the front door and put this game of cat and mouse to rest once and for all.”

Griff tilted his head. “Pity you don’t have a moat.” He cracked a grin. “Joking.”

“Ah.” Fox grinned back.

“You’re bullshitting me.”

Fox shook his head. “My parents filled in the moat fifty years ago.” He shrugged, glad to be facing this challenge with these men, his blood brothers. “If only we’d known.”

“S eriously?” Mia peered into the gloom and then jerked her head back as if something had stung her on the nose.

Abbie squeezed her hand. “It will be fine. Just for the night.”

“And we are going down this dark tunnel with no obvious end in sight because?”

She had a point. The tunnel entrance was stone lined, set into a rounded hillock and slanted downward into the ground where, Thom assured them, it ran for several miles before rising to emerge on a secluded, private beach.

“Because being kidnapped once is enough for anyone. I want you safe and out of harm’s way.” Thom’s voice was uncharacteristically gruff. “Come on.” He took hold of Mia’s hand. She huffed, but fell into step beside him.

“She’s loving this,” Fitz remarked at Abbie’s side.

Abbie gave a non-committal grunt, her flashlight trained on the uneven ground so she didn’t trip. The downward-sloping tunnel only sported a few lamps and, mostly, was pitch black. Water dripped on the back of her neck, and the tunnel walls were streaked with black slime. “What was this used for again?”

“Smugglers,” Fitz replied. “There was a regular river of gin running through here in the eighteen hundreds.”

She couldn't imagine men carrying casks of liquor up this claustrophobic passageway. The floor was cobbled and treacherous. The idea of carrying heavy barrels made her scalp prickle.

“Nearly there,” Thom called from ahead.

The air changed subtly, a salty tang and movement, a breeze stirred from

the rush of waves.

Abbie blinked as the yellowy darkness of the tunnel gave way to the splash of moonlight on water. They were at the top of a cliff and, around a hundred feet below them, waves crashed on a short pebbled beach. Vertigo washed through her as she followed Thom down narrow steps cut into the cliff. “Where’s the cottage?”

Fitz pointed to what looked like a heap of large beach stones at the bottom of the zigzagging steps. “There.”

Thom was already opening the door when she arrived with Fitz. She followed inside as a match flared in the darkness, briefly lighting the handsome lines of his face as he lit a small wood-burning stove.

Fitz dumped his backpack and then draped a wool blanket over the windows to block out the light. Within ten minutes, flames licked against the stove glass, giving off a dry heat that forced Abbie to unzip her coat and remove her hat.

The cabin was cozy, and wood lined. A small kitchen nook in one end, a small sitting area in the other, and above, a tiny mezzanine with a bed.

Mia cast an assessing glance around the small living space, her lips compressed. “Are we going to be okay?”

“Yes, sweetheart.” Abbie hugged her. “We’re going to be just fine.” She met Thom’s gaze over the top of Mia’s head. She would do anything to protect her daughter from Raptor, and her heart clenched as she saw the same determination in his gaze.

“Why won’t they just leave us alone?” Mia twisted the hem of her fleece between chewed fingernails.

“It will all be over soon, my love.” Not for the first time a beat of rage at what Raptor had put Mia through welled up inside Abbie, thick and viscous. *I’ll die before I allow them to get near Mia again.* “The court case is nearly here, and once I’ve made my testimony, they’ll have nothing to gain by hurting us. In fact, they have everything to lose.”

Mia climbed up the ladder and stretched out on the bed, trying it out for size.

Thom took Abbie’s hand. “No one will find her here. Treacherous currents make the beach problematic to access from the water, and only family members even know of its existence. Our illegal smuggling history is not something my family is keen to advertise.”

Mia hung over the edge of the bed, her face upside down. “This is



fabulous. I'll be fine."

"We'll both be fine." Fitz unpacked his backpack, placing hot chocolate, marshmallows, and cookies on the kitchen counter. Electrical equipment followed. Wires and black boxes. "And once I've set up the alarm system, no one will be able to breathe near Mia without me knowing about it."

Abbie chewed on her lip. "What if she just stayed with us?"

Thom's expression was firm. "Too risky. This is the safest place for her. We can't let them find her or use her as blackmail."

He was right, of course. That was why they had come here after all. She nodded her acceptance.

"Oh, I almost forgot this." Thom lifted a rectangular box from the pack he wore on his shoulders.

Mia gasped, stretching her arms wide to encompass the box. "Oh my God, is this really for me?"

"Umm, yes. I thought it would help pass the time."

Mia was already ripping at the end flaps of the packaging. "Oh my gosh, this is so amazing—thank you!" Her voice shot up several octaves on the sheer excitement scale.

Abbie leaned in. "A PlayStation? You can't just bribe her with tech."

"Why not?" Thom studied Mia with benevolent affection. "Besides, it was the least I could do if we were hiding her out here for the night."

"She has to learn that some things are tricky and not everything in life is sugar-coated."

Thom wrapped an arm around her shoulder, the vibration of his deep voice making her skin tingle. "I think she knows that already. Let's go with the flow, shall we?"

Fitz nudged her. "I think he's smitten. Girls and their dads, huh?"

Fitz seemed not to have noticed his mistake and Abbie didn't correct him. Her heart squeezed tight at the thought of Thom as Mia's dad, because of course she wasn't alone in this relationship with Thom. Mia was involved, too. Her heart resumed its normal rhythm. She couldn't imagine a better father for her baby girl.

Fitz plopped down on the sofa and began ripping protective plastic bags off the selection of games Thom had brought.

Abbie fell silent, seeing the delight in Mia's face. It had been a long time since she had seen such joy, and if it took a bit of electronic gadgetry, then it was worth it.

“Let’s leave the oldies to work on the boring stuff while we Rage the Apocalypse.” Fitz waved a game in Mia’s face, and she squealed.

Thom zipped up the now empty backpack. “We need to be getting back. I want us to be in the house before it gets too dark.”

*Us.*

This wasn’t just about her any longer.

Thom engulfed Mia in an affectionate bear hug as he said goodbye. Butterflies danced in Abbie’s belly. No one would do a better job of loving her and Mia. Now, the only thing she had to do was stay alive long enough to testify against Raptor.

When Thom finally released Mia, she buried her face against Abbie’s chest. “Stay safe.”

Abbie breathed her in. “I will, baby girl.” Mia’s arms tightened around her and heat stung Abbie’s throat. The connection between them that she had worried was lost? It was still there.

Thom turned to Fitz and tipped his head to the gamekeeper’s rifle leaning against the far wall. “Shoot anything or anyone you don’t recognize. No questions asked.”

Fox was happy to have Mia safely tucked away in the smuggler's cottage, but right now he was eager to have Abbie safe and out of sight.

They hurried back through the tunnel, and from there took Pen's Land Rover back to the house. Fox drove through the gateway that marked the boundary between parkland and Renton's walled gardens. The gate was set in a stone wall that delineated a ten-foot-high boundary around the main house. It would take a determined intruder time to scale the wall, and in doing so they would trigger Abe's sensors.

Fox parked the Land Rover across the inside of the gates, which juddered closed when he hit the remote, creating a double barrier.

Abbie cleared her throat. "Pen okay with you parking her Land Rover across the gate like that?"

He made a small sound. "It was her idea."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. She told me to give them hell."

"She's something else."

"She is. I'm very lucky to have her. Just like I'm lucky to have you." A pretty flush rose on Abbie's cheeks at his words as she slotted her hand through his. He pulled her close and dragged his lips across the smoothness of her hair. "You ready for this?"

"With you beside me, yes."

They walked back in tandem down the driveway to the house, stones crunching under their feet.

Abbie was quiet, but he let her be with her thoughts. Dusk was settling,

and the softening light suited the somber silence as they headed for the back door. Inside, figures moved against the glow of the kitchen lights—Griff and Abe prepping ammunition at the kitchen table.

A lumpy shape stretched out on the back step drew Fox’s eye. He slowed, squinting into the darkness. *What the hell?*

He tugged Abbie to a halt, not wanting her to get any closer.

“What—”

He peered into the gloom, but he still couldn’t make out what it was. *Fuck.* Whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

“Thom.” Abbie’s voice was quiet at his side. Calm, no panic and for that, he was grateful.

He scanned the garden behind them. Awkward shadows danced and a light breeze made the bushes bend and sigh. “Wait here.”

“But—”

He silenced her with a squeeze to her hand and eased forward, painfully aware of the scrunch of small stones under his boots. The breeze whispered against cooling skin on the back of his neck, and somewhere a curlew screamed.

The kitchen step was wide, at least six feet, and now he was close enough to see what the shape was.

A doe.

*Fuckers.*

He palmed his mouth; swallowing oaths of rage then kneeled and pressed fingers to the animal’s neck. No pulse, the hide was cold.

*Bastards.*

With a heavy heart, he ran his hand down her neck, across her shoulders, and located the bullet hole just above her heart. At least it would have been quick. He closed his eyes, allowing the rage inside him to coalesce. If they thought they could come here to his home and do this to his animals and walk away unscathed, they were sadly fucking mistaken.

The sounds of Griff and Abe’s quiet conversation carried through the night air. Whoever had done this had done so silently, without drawing attention and worryingly they had managed to avoid triggering the alarms.

He straightened and walked back to Abbie, where he stopped in front of her, blocking the view of the dead deer. It was enough that it was dead. Seeing the animal laid out like some kind of sick warning would only upset her and make what was to come even more difficult.

“We’re going in the front door.” His voice was gruffer than normal, but he didn’t care. What mattered was getting Abbie inside as quickly as possible, where she would be safe.

“What is it?” There was an edge to her voice that he didn’t like one bit, but it also told him there was nothing to be gained from lying to her.

“It’s a dead deer. A doe.”

“Thom—”

“That’s all you need to know. Seeing it won’t change anything.”

“I’m not a child.”

He sighed. “I know that. Humor me? I need to get you inside with Griff and Abe. We’ve only been gone an hour. Whoever planted the deer is already here. You understand? We have all these plans, and they’re already here.”

She nodded, pursing her lips. “What do you want me to do?”

“Follow me to the front of the house.”

He locked his hand around hers, fearful if he released her she might bolt and he would lose her. Physical contact soothed the raw rush of protectiveness that made it hard for him to breathe. The bastards who had done this would not harm those he loved. He would willingly risk everything to ensure that.

He steered her away from the kitchen, around the side of the house where lavender bushes brushed at their legs as they approached the tall double front doors.

“Open the door.” He handed the keys to Abbie and bumped his spine up against hers, breathing in the innocent scent of crushed lavender as he raised his gun, searching the darkening landscape.

The heavy door lock clunked as it disengaged, and the hinges creaked as she pushed it open.

“I’m in.” The comforting jostle of her ass against his was gone as she stepped inside the house.

A final one-eighty sweep along the sights of his weapon and Fox followed. He slammed the door shut and, taking the keys from Abbie, he locked the door.

Footsteps sounded behind him. He spun around, and Griff faced him, looking down the length of Pen’s shotgun.

Griff exhaled and lowered the shotgun. “Fuck me, Fox, what are you doing coming in the front door?”

Fox stormed past him to the kitchen, to get the cleaning equipment he

would need to deal with the dead animal. “They’re already here.”

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Abbie flinched, her eyes meeting his.

He took it out of his pocket and stared at it.

“Thom, who is it?” Abbie was at his side.

He looked up. “Undisclosed number.” He thumbed the phone to answer.  
“Fox.”

He listened to the voice on the other end of the line, not quite comprehending what the nurse was telling him. Events were happening faster than he had expected. He hung up. “That was the hospital.”

“The hospital? Why are they calling?”

“Pen left something when she checked out, and they were asking if I would come and collect it.”

Griff adjusted his grip on his gun. “What the hell?”

Fox’s hand went to the key in his pocket. He had locked the door. The house was secure. “Pen checked herself out. Earlier this afternoon.”

“On her own?”

“The nurse said a couple collected her. Hannah and Ivan Smith.”

*Raptor went to the hospital and took Pen.*

“How long does it take to get to the hospital from here?”

“Just over an hour.” Fox knew every inch of that road.

Griff checked his watch. “So where is she if she left this afternoon and who the fuck checked her out?”

Fox shook his head. *No one touched his family without paying for their foolishness.*

They had no fucking idea what they had let themselves in for.

Fox found Pen's number on his phone and hit connect. He waited as it rang out and then switched to voicemail.

Dammit.

"She's not answering." He pocketed his phone. "We need to check the perimeter. Griff, you come with me. Abe, can you stay with Abbie?"

"Wait, I can help," Abbie said.

Fox shook his head. "No. Pen is missing, and we have a dead animal at the back door. I want you to stay inside—"

"I'm the reason they're here. I'm the one who brought all this trouble to your doorstep. I just want to help fix some of the mess I created. Thom—"

Her resistance triggered something deep inside him, a need to protect no matter what the cost or what she thought. This time, nothing would harm her. He would see to it if it were the last thing he did. "No, Abbie."

Her hands found her hips, and her chin jutted.

*Enough.*

He clamped his hand around her arm and frogmarched her out of earshot of Griff and Abe.

Time was short. He didn't have time to sugarcoat this, no matter how much he wanted to. "Listen, I appreciate the offer, but this is what we do for a living. You need to let us do our job—protecting you and Mia."

"But—"

Frustration flared within him, and he paced forward, caging her in with his bulk, until her back bumped against the stair bannister.

"This doesn't have to be an argument, but I'm happy to make it one, if

you prefer. This isn't making any judgment about your skill as a mother or your previous career in the military—This is me just doing my job, with Griff and Abe.” He sucked in a long breath, willing his temper to cool.

He framed her face with his hands. “You’re mine, and I will do anything to protect you.” His voice was almost a growl, emotion an inferno inside him.

Her lips were firm with disapproval for an instant, but at his words she softened, bowing under him. “I understand.”

Relief flooded him as he dropped a kiss to her forehead. “Good.”

She peeped up at him through dark lashes. “Bossy boots.”

He kissed the sexy smile lifting her mouth, nipped the plumpness of her lower lip with his teeth. “You have no idea.”

“Fox?”

Fox turned. Griff waited behind him, one eyebrow cocked.

He stepped back from Abbie. Time to get to work.



“Let’s move the deer while we have the opportunity.” Fox collected heavy-duty garbage bags, cleaning materials and rubber gloves from the scullery. Outside, thunder rolled ominously close. Rain was coming and soon.

Griff helped him to wrap the doe in the garbage bags and carry her body to the garage where they left her tucked out of sight.

After, Griff washed his hands vigorously in the garage sink, soaping up to his elbows. “That was so fucked up.”

“You’re telling me.” Fox waited while Griff dried his hands.

Abe joined them, his face grim. “Abbie’s resting upstairs in her room.”

Fox nodded. “Abe, I want you in the house. Griff and I will head out to the main gate and do a sweep of the grounds. These fuckers aren’t far away.”

Abe headed to the kitchen. “Stay in touch.”



A light rain had started, but Fox barely noticed. He soaked up the evening chill, fighting for calm even as an edgy tension bled through him. Everything was quiet, but somewhere out there was the enemy. *Hidden.*

“Your place...” Griff’s voice was a bare murmur. “It’s amazing.” His footsteps swished on the wet grass. “You haven’t been here for a long time?”

“No.” It was easier to talk in the dark, Griff at his side. “I needed to be away, but now...”

“That’s changed?”

“Mmm. Abbie changed everything.”

“Raptor really fucked with her.” Griff’s shadow stiffened.

Yes. “It stops here. She’s not dealing with this alone anymore.”

“Damn straight.” Griff gave a low chuckle. “Sign up with one of us and you get the entire team on board.”

“Maybe we’ll keep that from her for just now. Don’t want to freak her out too much.”

Griff met his gaze, his teeth flashing white in the gloom. “Good idea.”

They reached the gates. Still locked, Griff angled his flashlight through the ironwork. The road on the other side was empty. He shrugged. “Not expecting them to announce their arrival so publicly.”

“Let’s split up and complete a circuit of the house.”

“On it.” Griff moved away from Fox, his feet silent on the grass, the light from his flashlight blurring in the wet air.

Fox walked in the opposite direction and completed an uneventful circuit of the house apart from trundling hedgehogs, searching for slugs to snack on.

Griff was already back at the gate waiting when Fox jogged up to meet him. “Anything?”

Fox looped his fingers through the gate, his nerves pulled taut. “Nothing.” He peered into the gloom. Movement caught the edges of his vision, but when he looked directly, there was nothing there.

He blinked, forcing himself to relax his eyes.

“Fox?”

“I thought I saw—”

Brilliant white light flared on the other side of the gate.

*Headlights. Coming right at them.*

“Move!” Fox shoved Griff to the side as the headlights collided with the gates. Metal shrieked and bent under the force of the impact.

Fox rolled, following Griff, already scrambling back to his feet.

Wheels spun, chewing up the ground, as the vehicle, a black SUV, kicked into reverse, spitting mud and stones. It jerked forward again, and this time the gate succumbed, the two sections bursting apart. The SUV rammed into Pen’s Land Rover with a crunch of metal, crushing the driver’s side door and turning the glass into a cracked maze.

The SUV’s windows were tinted, and it was impossible to see who was inside. Fox froze, his weapon raised, finger poised on the trigger—Pen might be in there. He couldn’t take a shot. It was just too risky.

His skin flashed hot and cold. Was this a distraction to draw them away from the house? “Griff! The house.”

“Already there.” Griff took off, and Fox followed.

Behind, doors slammed. The SUV driver and any passengers. They were *in*.

Abbie paced the kitchen, her arms locked around her body. She'd been unable to stay in her room, it seemed too far away from everything. Nausea rolled in her stomach. When did she last eat? She had no idea. Food seemed so unimportant right now while Thom and the Griff were out there putting themselves in the line of fire.

"They should be back by now." Her arms were locked across her belly in a tight brace, forcibly keeping her emotions in check.

"Fox and Griff know what they're doing." Abe was perched on a stool beside one of the large windows, gun resting in his lap, his posture one of expert confidence. "And they will be back when they're finished."

"How can you be so calm?" There was no tension in his body, only alert awareness.

He turned a slow smile on her. "Practice, sweetheart."

She shook her head at his remarkable composure, rubbing her arms simply for something to do, because her heart told her there had to be *something* she could do. "I think—"

Shouts split the air outside.

Abbie ran to the window, and tweaked the drapes by an inch, but everything was dark, concealing the cause of the commotion.

The shouts continued. She twisted to look over her shoulder. "Abe..."

He was already moving toward the kitchen door with predatory speed. "Stay behind me."

A thud reverberated against the back door.

Abbie stifled a scream.

Locks disengaged, and the door slammed open to reveal Thom and Griff. Filthy with mud and soaking wet, but alive. Wet leaves, carried on the rising wind, hurled themselves through the open doorway, while rain spattered the white walls.

Abbie's happiness was momentary. Behind Thom, in the rain, a woman with her head lowered in submission, was flanked by two figures.

Pen.

“Thomas!” Pen looked frail, the rain plastering her clothes to her lean frame, but strength resonated in her voice.

Thom spun, anguish creasing his face. “*Pen.*”

She wore ill-fitting dark pants and a green shirt. Clothes that didn’t look like they belonged to her. Abbie’s heart contracted to see white tape on the back of her hand still attached to medical plastic tubing. She swallowed the anger simmering within her. These bastards had taken this injured woman from her hospital bed and brought her here to stand in the freezing rain to serve as a bargaining chip.

Abbie pushed past Thom and Griff. “Let her the fuck go, you bastards!” She lifted her handgun, aiming at the woman on Pen’s left. She was so sick of this shit. Right now, she should end it, once and for all, but her injured hand shook with the effort and pushed stabbing pain through her battered muscles.

“*Abbie*, no.” Thom snagged her upper arm, drawing her to him. “Fucking wait.”

“Allard.” The voice from outside was polished, *Russian*. “So much trouble for one woman.”

*Ice crystalized in her veins. Nyx.*

Pen stumbled forward a pace as if prodded from behind, and Nyx appeared in the light pooling from the house.

Thom swore under his breath. “Pen, are you okay?”

Pen raised her taped hand, curling the other around her waist as if for comfort. Her face was grimly wan, but the line of her jaw was firm. “I’m fine, sir.”

“She should be in the hospital.” Abbie leveled her accusation at Nyx.

The third figure moved into the light. The woman. Coppery hair coiled around her head. She wore a black dress with impractical kitten heels, and held a handgun fitted with a silencer in one gloved hand at her side. Rain pattered against her dress, patterning the fabric.

The woman arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “No Mia?”

Abbie’s jaw locked. She would not give this woman the satisfaction.

The woman cast around as if expecting to see Mia standing somewhere in the rain. “I miss her.” She smiled, her scarlet lips splitting her face into an approximation of a smile. “We’re close, you know.” A nonchalant half shrug of one round shoulder.

*Aunt Hannah.* This was the woman who visited Mia at school.

“All those visits I spent comforting her because her mother wasn’t able to be there for her.” Hannah’s lips pursed. “Because her mother was too busy thinking about herself. Selfish.”

“*Shut up.*” Abbie pulled against Thom’s grip. She could smack this woman in the face right now. “You don’t know anything about my daughter.”

Hannah grimaced. “I know enough.” She turned and tapped Pen’s forehead with the nose of her weapon. “This is a nice, simple exchange. You come with us, Pen stays here.” Another nudge with her gun. “Pen can go inside and have a nice cup of tea. I mean, you English, you’re all obsessed with tea, aren’t you?” Her gaze locked on Thom. “Never saw the appeal myself.”

“Don’t do it.” Pen blinked against the rain.

“Shut the fuck up.” Nyx yanked Pen’s arm, and she gasped.

Her gun was slick with sweat in Abbie’s hand. She wanted nothing more than to put a bullet through both their heads. Only the risk of hurting Pen kept her finger in abeyance.

“You’re wasting your time here.” Thom’s voice was barely more than a growl. “This won’t go the way you want it to.”

Nyx scowled. “So, this is how it’s going to go down. You want your housekeeper available to make you scrambled eggs. We want Allard to shut the fuck up. It’s not complicated.”

Pen hung her head, as if the effort of standing were more than she could bear. Her shoulders were so thin under the soaked fabric. Abbie dug her nails into her palms. She had failed to protect so many people, the veterans she had trained with, even her own daughter, but right now, she had the opportunity

to alter the direction of her life, of Pen's life.

"Your housekeeper stays in one piece if Allard comes with us. If not, we'll be returning the old woman in tiny old woman pieces." Nyx cocked his head, waiting for an answer.

Thom shook his head. "There is no way I am asking the woman I love to not do what's right."

*The woman he loves.* Thom's eyes were on her. What he said was true. *He loved her.* Was that the crazy feeling she felt in her heart whenever he was close? Love?

"Sometimes caring for people is more important than what's right. After all, isn't that what makes us human?" She squeezed his hand to convey the strength of her belief, and turned back to Nyx. "Okay. You have what you want." She laid her gun on the floor.

Thom jolted as if electrocuted. "What? No—"

Pen's eyes grew wide. "Abbie, don't do it—"

"Shut up, old woman." Nyx shoved Pen from behind, knocking her to her knees.

*Old woman.* Pen remained kneeling, her shoulders hunched in defeat. The polar opposite of how this proud woman had held herself every single day Abbie had known her. What the hell was going on here?

"Stop hurting her." Abbie shook herself free of Thom and then she was out in the rain, the chill water making her breath catch. She faced Nyx. "This has to stop. All of this. People have been hurt, some have died, and the world is just more dangerous because of what Raptor is doing." She spread her feet apart. "It stops here, with me."

A sly smile curved across Nyx's face as he processed her words.

"Abbie—" Thom was so close behind her, but she ignored him, biting down on her lower lip so she would not crumble.

She kept her gaze trained on Nyx, holding him captive. "Here I am. Take me."

Hannah's mouth warped. "Do we look stupid? The old woman stays with us until you have withdrawn your testimony. Make the call."

*Make the call.*

Abbie withdrew her phone from her back pocket and swiped it open with a wet finger. Rain soaked her shirt through, goose bumps pebbling every inch of her skin. In front of her, Pen shook from the cold, the chatter of her teeth making a brittle sound in the unforgiving night air.



Her mind raced frantically. What would she say?

Nyx growled, as if reading her mind. “Hurry. We don’t give a fuck what you say. Doesn’t matter, does it? Make the call.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“This is a limited time offer. Your choice.” Nyx pushed the nose of his gun to Pen’s temple, making her flinch. Her hands fluttered against her chest, her skin so paper thin the vulnerable blue tracery of her veins was visible.

Abbie found her lawyer’s number and hit connect.

The answering voice was groggy. “Jeff Cannon.”

“Cannon, I’m sorry. This is Abbie Allard.”

Rustling echoed down the line. “Abbie? What the hell is going on? Do you know what time it is? It’s after midnight.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Abbie ignored Thom’s gaze scorching her nape. She exhaled. “I’ve decided to withdraw my testimony.”

Cannon swore profusely. “What the hell? What do you mean, withdraw it? Everything rests on your testimony.”

“I know. This isn’t a decision I take lightly. Some things are more important, and, I’m sorry, this is asking too much of my family.”

“Abbie—”

“My mind is made up.”

“Well—”

There was nothing more to say. “I’ll talk to you in the morning.” She hit the disconnect button and narrowed her eyes at Nyx. “Happy?”

His mouth morphed into a satisfied smile. “You come with us until the court case is fully dismissed.” He lifted Pen to her feet and then pushed her toward Thom. “Out of my sight, old woman.” Pen staggered sideways with a small cry and collided with Hannah, her head hanging as if too heavy.

Rain stung Abbie’s bare cheeks, and for seconds there was only the clamor of the surrounding storm.

Pen whipped her head up in a sharp jerk, clinically head-butting Aunt Hannah. The woman screamed and staggered backward, blood spurting in dark gouts from her ruined nose.

Thom took a knee and fired, clipping Nyx in the chest. The Russian twisted, knocked off balance.

“Pen, stay down.” Pen sprawled to the ground at Griff’s command as his

aim punched a bullet into Hannah's thigh.

Hannah screeched as she landed on her backside, blood from her nose and leg mixing with the rain. She returned fire, but her injuries made her aim wild and one of the kitchen windows imploded.

Nyx stumbled, cursing as he fled in the opposite direction.

Every nerve in Abbie's body screamed. *He's getting away.*

“**G**riff. Abe. On me.” Fox was down the steps in an instant, pursuing Nyx in quick, long-legged strides, under Griff and Abe’s covering fire.

There were only seconds for assessment. The woman, Hannah, was gasping, fighting for breath, the wound in her leg bleeding profusely. He grabbed her hand and pressed it to the torn flesh. “Keep up the pressure.”

He moved on, tracking Nyx, wiping blood from his hands. The bastard was almost at the SUV; the vehicle stalled halfway through the gate, its hood bent upward in a ragged concertina from the crash. *Shit.*

Nyx flashed a glance over his shoulder before yanking open the bullet-ravaged driver’s door. He took cover behind the now open door and fired at Fox. Blue-white flashes of ammunition scorched the night, gouging the ground inches from Fox’s feet.

*Fuck.*

Fox retreated. The closest cover was behind the house entrance pillars. He dodged behind one as bullets bit holes in the polished stone. He sucked cold air between his clenched teeth. Fuckers, this was his *house*.

He took stock behind him, spotting Abe hustling Pen to the safety of the kitchen. *Thank God.* Pen was safe.

Griff took refuge across the steps from him, tucked into the lee of the opposite pillar, Abbie at his side. More stone exploded in deadly shards. Griff winced and dusted stone fragments from his sleeve.

Fox checked the clip on his gun. It wasn’t enough for them to take Pen, or to put Abbie and Mia’s lives at risk. Now they were fucking with his

property. “This building is listed!” he roared as he fired back at Nyx. Earth exploded around the car as his aim went wide with fury.

Round spent, he slid to his heels in a squat, back against the splintered stonework, catching his breath. He risked another peek. Nyx still squatted under the cover of the car door.

“Fox, I’ve got you!” Griff hollered.

Fox exhaled, slid around the pillar, and boosted up to running, in time to clock Nyx throwing himself into the car. Headlights flared, destroying Fox’s night vision.

*Fuck.*

Griff’s covering fire maintained a path of safety, so Fox kept running, his gun punching holes in the SUV hood. Nyx leaned out of the SUV, his eyes wild as he returned an obliterating round from a semi-automatic weapon.

Fox hit the stony ground. He pressed his cheek to the gravel, his arms splayed, as the semi-automatic gun razed the air.

A masculine cry of pain rang out behind him.

*What the—?*

Fox rolled, in time to see Griff clutch his shoulder and drop to his knees, agony warping through his face.

“Man down!” Abbie’s shout cut through the shriek of ammunition ripping the night apart.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Kneeling, Fox dipped his head to his knees, drawing on the last of his reserves. *This stops right here.*

The SUV roared into life. Bloody handprints marked the windshield. Nyx was a dark shadow behind the glass. He gunned the engine and spun the car into a screaming one-eighty.

“No!” Behind him, Abbie sprinted from the shelter of the house, Abe on her heels. The bloody glow of the taillights imploded as she fired with her retrieved gun.

But the car kept going, the driver’s door swinging freely as the car swerved to face the gate.

Gears protested and the vehicle shuddered alarmingly, wheels spinning ruts into the sodden ground.

Fox took aim, blinking against the smear of rain. His heart thudded against his ribs as he breathed out, finding his center. He held the exhalation, his sights pulsing with his heartbeat. Instinct took over. *One, two, three.* He applied gentle pressure to the trigger, blood raging against his measured

actions.

*Chunk. Chunk.*

The report was quiet, the impact quieter. Both back tires blew out, disintegrating into a mess of shredded black rubber, fabric, and wire.

The SUV fishtailed, stalled.

*Yes.*

Fox took off, legs pumping, the rain sleeted icy against his skin. He slowed as he approached the car in a cautious semicircle, his gun trained on the windshield.

The engine ticked, and the interior light burned bright, but rain obscured the glass, smearing shapes. He had to go around to the open door.

He kept his body angled away from the car as he checked the interior. Stuffing exploded in all directions from the punctured red leather upholstery. Fox swung to check the rear seats. Nothing.

*Empty.*

Nyx was gone.

Rain rattled against the wrecked metal. Fox pivoted to face trees bending and dripping in the downpour, searching for a motion that did not belong, even though he knew—injured but still mobile, Nyx was gone.

His pulse eased slowly from a frantic gallop, the threat vanquished.

“Fox.” Abe was at his side, T-shirt translucent on his bulky frame.

“Fucker’s gone.”

“Will we pursue?”

Fox thought of the acres of countryside that surrounded his property. The wild landscape of trees and places to hide. “We’ll set up a perimeter. He’s hurt, and he’s not coming back.”

He lowered his weapon, the remnants of adrenaline dissipating through his veins. “You would think this would get easier.”

“If it’s getting easier, it’s time to get out.”

Fox grimaced. “Truth.” He headed toward the house. He couldn’t see Abbie in the floodlit brilliance of the steps, and for an instant his heart skipped a beat. But then she was there, almost on him, walking into the rain. Her white shirt clung to every inch of her body. Thank fuck, she was unharmed.

She pushed wet strands of hair from her face with her uninjured hand, and then she was running toward him. She threw herself into his arms and he caught her like you might catch a wild thing, an escaped animal that you

didn't want to harm, that you had to protect.

But a wild animal couldn't be held.

And Abbie?

He pressed a kiss to the soft wetness of her hair.

He was never letting her go.

Griff gritted his teeth and pressed the dressing against his shoulder wound.

“Sit down.” Fox forced him into an easy chair in the kitchen. The wood-burning stove was still glowing, and the heat made steam rise from Griff’s clothes. He thumbed the tub of painkillers Abbie had given him and crunched two dry. The pain had him gasping for breath, but he’d endured worse. He’d live.

Across the room, Abe carried Hannah in and laid her on the kitchen table. Her head lolled, her arms and legs dead weight.

“See to the woman first.” Agony lanced from his shoulder and across his chest as he spoke. *Sheesh.*

Fox lifted an eyebrow.

“Bullet went straight through.” Griff gritted his teeth. “I’m good.”

“Okay.” Fox picked up the med kit and turned to the unconscious Hannah.

Griff sagged back against the chair. They had stopped Raptor from silencing a witness. Even as his vision wobbled with thudding pain, triumph coursed through him.

Across the room, Abbie was on the phone with her lawyer. Judging by the way she was raking her hands through her hair, he wasn’t appreciating the one-eighty on her decision to testify. Didn’t matter. Raptor would get what was coming to them.

Finally, Abbie exhaled and stabbed at her phone to end the call.

God, the relief on her face—it made everything worthwhile.

Fox stepped back, pressing his hands to the small of his back as he stretched. He'd finished patching up Hannah. A bulky bandage secured the gun wound on her thigh. Pain pinched her face, and her nose was a pulpy mess from the epic headbutt that Fox's housekeeper had delivered, but she would live.

Pen was busy ankle-cuffing Hannah onto a table leg. Now, that was his kind of housekeeper.

Abbie came up behind her and the two women hugged fiercely for a few moments before Pen stepped back, a satisfied smile on her face.

Fox caught Abbie in his arms and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Her features softened, her body leaning against his in easy familiarity, and for a moment Griff wondered what it would feel like to have a woman look at him that way. To have her body melt against his because of what she felt for him, not because they were getting hot and steamy for the one night.

He swallowed the unexpected emotion. That was so far off his radar, it didn't exist. He had his work and climbing to keep him sane. He spent every free second he had hanging off a cliff face, letting nature ease the trials of his soul. There wasn't space for a woman, and for the times he wanted more... he'd never had a woman turn him down for mutual fun.

Fox released Abbie and collected fresh medical supplies before approaching Griff. He lifted the edge of the dressing. "This will need stitches. I could do it, but you'll get a neater job if you go to the hospital with Hannah."

"Just when I was beginning to like England."

Fox grinned. "Wouldn't want to mess up that pretty body of yours for the ladies."

Griff grimaced as Fox re-secured the dressing. "Ha ha. I'll go to the hospital."

"We should get that X-rayed too. Make sure there's no damage to the muscle or bone."

*Muscle and bone.*

A thread of discomfort tweaked at Griff. Scars didn't bother him. He didn't give a shit about his looks. But functional damage to his body? There were many things he could live without. Climbing was not one of them.

He pushed the sliver of worry to the back of his mind as blue light washed in through the open back door. The police had arrived. *Better late than never.*



**T**hree days later.  
*High Court of Justice, London*

Fox held his hand to the small of Abbie's back as they made their way through the vaulted stone entrance of the High Court of Justice. Just touching her, knowing she was within reach of his protection, it calmed him.

"Wow." Abbie lifted her head to study the vaulted ceiling, her heels clicking on the patterned tiles. The immaculate white stone and dark slate on the roof and multiple imposing cupolas gave a majestic impression. "This place looks like a cathedral."

She wasn't far from wrong. The intricate tile patterns under their feet were stunning, reflecting light from windows tens of feet above their heads.

"A little daunting." She clutched her purse tighter, her knuckles whitening.

He pulled her to him and bumped noses with her, not caring who saw them. She was his, and he didn't give a damn who knew it. "It doesn't change a thing. You tell them what you know, what you heard. It's that simple."

"What if..."

"I'll be right there, right beside you, the entire time." He slid his hands to her hips. She was wearing a pencil skirt that hugged the fine curves of her body and showed off her shapely ass. He couldn't wait to get her home, hike it up, and put his mouth on her.

He dropped a tender kiss to her lips. "It's okay to be scared when you're doing the right thing. If it didn't scare you, it wouldn't be important."

The hazel of her eyes darkened to umber. "I know. You're right, and I'm

ready. It's time to move forward." She pulled herself upright and took a deep breath.

"For both of us." He kissed her on the top of her nose.

She tensed in his arms. "Oh, God. There they are. I recognize one lawyer from a Zoom briefing at the hospital."

Fox followed the direction of her gaze to where a dark-suited group of lawyers was in close discussion. Behind them, several assistants staggered under the weight of sheaves of documents.

His teeth met. "They better have their house in order, because with your testimony they are going to have to admit that Raptor was responsible for what happened to the *Architect*. That it should never have set sail without a stable crew."

She nodded and chewed on her bottom lip. "Yes." She smoothed her shirt and tugged at her cuffs, pulling them over the dressings on her wrists. "I owe it to everyone who died. I fought to live because of Mia, but also so that I could see this day and justice would be served."

"With your testimony and the mess they created sending Nyx to kill you, it's a done deal." Fox shook his head. Nyx was still unaccounted for, but 'Hannah' had been willing to share a significant amount of information for a measure of leniency. "And now, with Horton abandoning his car on a cliff edge and disappearing under some pretense of suicide, no wonder they all look like they're going to throw up."

Abbie's sigh was unhurried and soft as she briefly rested her head against his chest. "Yes."

"Ms. Allard?" An elderly gentleman wearing the traditional coiled white legal wig approached Abbie, his robes skimming the razor-sharp crease in his suit pants. He extended his hand. "Victor Cameron, Barrister. Your legal counsel."

Cameron beamed as he shook hands with Abbie and then Fox. His grip was firm, his palm dry. Fox approved.

"I believe we have some injustices that need correcting." Cameron gestured toward the ornate grand staircase. "Shall we?"

**T***wo weeks later*

Abbie bounced the suitcase down the last flight of the staircase. It was a miracle the damn thing didn't explode—it was stuffed to the brim. She had only taken Mia on one shopping trip since she testified in the trial. How could one child accumulate so much stuff?

Finally, she was back on the ground floor and could wheel it to the open front door and waiting car.

Thom jogged up the steps as soon as he saw her. "Here. Let me."

"I'm fine."

"I know." He met her gaze with a deadpan look. "*Let me.*"

She released her hold on the suitcase and let him pick it up. He threw it in the back of the car as if it were a paper bag filled with cotton balls. She leaned back in a stretch, rotating her healing wrist. She had almost all the movement back, although it still niggled when she was tired. "You know, one of these days the whole cave man routine will get old."

Thom covered the steps between them in no time at all. She still could not comprehend how a man so well built could move so fast. It defied all logic.

He grabbed her around the waist and spun her around, off her feet. He tilted her back, burying his face in the sensitive crook of her neck. That special place that only he knew made her legs go weak and her underwear dampen.

"Never," he muttered, his beard deliciously scratchy against her skin.

She laughed, and it felt good, rising from deep inside her, real and honest.

Since she had given her testimony, it was as if a weight had lifted from

her shoulders. Raptor's actions were public knowledge, and the threat to her life was gone. While the trial was still continuing, the prosecution was confident. Raptor would be accountable for the lives they had so carelessly taken, and the verdict was likely to bring the company to its knees.

He placed her back on her feet and captured her mouth with a kiss that stole her breath. A river of sensation washed over her, the cool spring air, the heat of his mouth, the desire he stoked between her legs. "We really have to be going," she muttered against his lips.

He groaned, his hold on her not faltering. "I know." He slid his hands down her flank. "Later." His voice was dark and rich with promise.

"Where's Mia?"

Thom lifted his head at the soft whack of gunfire. He chuckled and kissed her eyelashes. "I think I know."

He took her hand and together they walked to the rear of the house, across the formal gardens and through a gate to the rough grass of the parkland.

Pen and Mia faced away from Abbie, their attention trained on the makeshift gun range they had set up. They had stacked empty cans into small pyramids on a fallen tree.

Mia aimed her rifle while Pen walked behind her, adjusting her grip with a gentle touch and words of encouragement.

Mia fired. Missed. Fired again and took out the top can.

She looked up from the range, beamed at Pen, and then spotted Thom and Abbie. She pulled off her ear protectors. "Mum." She waved a hand. "I got the can!"

"I saw." Abbie waved back. "Brilliant."

Pen turned and inclined her head in acknowledgment. "Sir. Ma'am."

"Pen." Abbie smiled. Old habits died hard, and Pen had reverted to formal titles as soon as she was back at her duties.

"Miss Mia is improving and will continue to if she doesn't get distracted at school and keeps practicing." Pen cranked an eyebrow at Mia.

Abbie smiled. The title didn't stop Pen from dishing out what she thought was appropriate. All was just as it should be.

Mia hugged Pen. "I won't. It's only ten weeks till the holidays, and then I'll be back." She turned to Thom, and her eyes turned shy. "Thank you." She wound her arms around him and laid her head against his broad chest. "For everything."

Thom lifted his hands as if unsure of what to do with them, and then he

settled them on Mia's shoulders and hugged her close. "Anytime, sweetheart. It's a good school. If you're happy there, you should keep going."

Something thickened in Abbie's throat. She'd never seen Mia like that with a man, trusting him, soaking up the protection and care he offered. As if he were her father.

Thom winked at Abbie. "They were pretty excited about the donation for a new chemistry wing, too." Abbie blinked back tears. Damn. He was such a good man.

Pen cleared her throat and looked the other way, and Abbie allowed herself a smile while salt stung the back of her throat. Pen pretended like she was forged from steel, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Mia released Thom and rushed back into Pen's arms. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"Aye." Pen dropped her cheek to the top of Mia's head. "I'll miss you, sprout, but you'll be back in the holidays and every holiday after that too."

"Yes." Mia lifted her head. "We will, won't we, Mum?"

"Umm, yes. We will." Abbie was still getting her head around it all. Thom had arranged for Mia to continue attending West Mayards, and while she was at school, she and Thom would be in Norway, where his life was with Guardsmen Security. But during the school holidays, they would return here, to this place, to be with Mia and Pen.

She couldn't imagine anything better.

Thom tugged Abbie to his side, and she smiled up at his rugged face. Despite all the hardship she had experienced, she wouldn't change anything that had happened because it had given her this—the opportunity to love, and to experience the love of this man.

"Happy?" He stroked a finger down her cheek.

She nodded, but remained silent. There were no words to express what she felt. To have this man at her side, ready to fight and share whatever life threw their way.

"Are you ready to do this?" His voice was gruff.

She clasped his hand. "Absolutely." Because if there was one thing she had discovered over the last few weeks, it was that she wasn't broken. Perhaps she never had been. Whatever happened, with this man at her side, together they would work it out.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writer, mother, wife, science nerd, psychologist. I wear all these hats although not all at the same time!

I'm still gutted that Ripley never got it on with Hicks, so I write books where men with protection in their DNA fall hard for women with all the smarts.

I watch far too many sci-fi B movies, mainly ones with dodgy special effects and sharks!

*Drop by and say hi!*

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