



Billionaire Bodyguard

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Linzey

Three years ago, I was kidnapped and imprisoned for weeks. He was there the day I was rescued. And he's been at my side every day since. As my bodyguard.

He sees me as a kid. A victim. A job. I'm ready for him to see the real me. It's no secret how I feel. Well, it's not a secret to anyone but him. I need him to know how I feel before I leave home and never see him again.

Adler

I have a secret...

Yes, I'm a bodyguard. It was supposed to be a temporary job to study how I could improve my company's tracking and protection business.

Then three years ago, she changed my life. She was too young, but I knew I'd never leave her. I was her rock as she recovered. I waited. And waited. All the while, I knew she would always be out of reach. It's unbearable. The last few months have been the hardest of my life.

She's been mine from the day we met. I just need to take the next step, but forces outside my control will put her in danger. It's time to make my claim and reveal my truth—a truth that might make her run. She doesn't know I'm a billionaire. She doesn't know my enemies. But those aren't my biggest secrets.

No, she's about to find out she's my obsession, the air I breathe, and I won't live without her.

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One

Linzey Grey

Safety. The warm arms wrapped around me tipped me off. Another nightmare. I must have been screaming in the night.

For four years, I'd had nightmares, but they'd grown less and less—until recently when I'd started meeting with my legal team. The man who'd murdered my mother was finally going to trial for my kidnapping and assault, and everything was coming back to me in crystal-clear, terrifying detail.

“God, I’m so weak,” I disparaged myself, whispering so I didn’t wake the man holding me. He barely slept as it was.

Adler Fredriksen. My bodyguard by day and night. My comforter since the day he'd rescued me from the hands of the man who'd taken me—albeit during the mission to save my sister who'd been kidnapped just an hour before.

Not me. He'd had me for thirteen days and seventeen hours.

My hand fisted, biting my nails into my palm to keep the memories and emotions from pummeling me again.

Otherwise, I didn't move. I wanted to enjoy the feel of Adler wrapped around me. His even breaths warmed my neck, and I could feel his pulse beneath me ear as I used his muscular arm for a pillow.

His other hand...

I fought back a moan and steeled myself from pressing my thighs together to alleviate my arousal from the way his hand splayed over my belly, beneath my pajama shirt. The sensation of his rough calluses against my skin was everything—everything I'd wished for over the past few years. But Adler... He was all business about being hands off.

Except in sleep, apparently.

He stirred, making a soft snuffling sound as I felt him coming awake. My hand covered his to keep him there just a few moments longer.

"I had another nightmare," I murmured. It seemed too quiet and still to break the silence with anything more.

"Mmm," he replied, noncommittal, but I didn't need him to tell me I'd been having terrors. My body hurt from it, the echoes from it evident in my aching muscles and scratchy throat.

I hated that I was so weak.

"Was I screaming?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't," he chided, his face in the hair at the back of my head. Since he'd never do that if he were fully awake, I doubted his brain was fully online yet. "It's... I'm here for you."

He was here to protect me, not to hold me in the night when the dreams got out of control. My breath shuddered. “It’s not part of your job.”

“I know.”

“It would be easier if you went to your own place at night.” Easier for him anyway. “I’m sure a big shot security guy like you has his own place that’s just collecting dust. I mean all the who’s who want protection from your company.”

“Hardly,” he scoffed.

“Enough of them do. You probably have a mansion someplace.”

“I don’t. Besides, if I was off in some mythical mansion, I wouldn’t be here for you when you have nightmares.”

I bristled, though it was the truth. “You know I’m an adult. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Are we going to have this argument again? At...” The muscles under my head flexed as he bent his arm to look at his watch. “Five-twenty in the morning?”

“I’m just saying...”

“Trust me. I’m well aware you’re an adult,” he grumbled.

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What? That almost sounded like...

He saw me as a woman? Finally. When he'd rescued me, I'd been seventeen, but that was four years ago. The way he treated me hadn't changed over the years—except we argued more.

“Adler, do you—”

He was off the bed and on his way to the door before I even finished turning over, leaving me with a view of his bare torso and the way his pajama pants, though loose, clung to his perfect ass.

“I'll go start coffee,” he said, without looking back, and closed the door behind him.

I groaned, flopping onto my back, hard enough to bounce.

That man frustrated the hell out of me.

Turning my head, I stared out the windows that lined one wall of my bedroom, a balcony on the other side. This was the city that didn't sleep, yet...this time of morning, it was almost as if it were napping. The streets were quieter, without the incessant sound of cabs honking, and the buildings were all darker than normal, most of the interior lights off or heavy curtains drawn over the windows. Even the sky was still dark, without even pre-dawn gray seeping into it.

In an hour, maybe a little less, bit by bit, the city would come awake and buzz with the life it was renowned for.

Climbing from bed, I walked to the windows and peered out before pulling open the door and stepping outside to let the cool spring air wash over me. Adler would hate it if he knew I was out here, but what he didn't know would keep him from annoying me. And lately, everything annoyed me because... Well, I wasn't sure. But I thought it was sexual frustration. And maybe, that meant I was healing. Or maybe, it meant, I wanted Adler, the one man I wasn't scared of. Well, not just him. I wasn't scared of Connor, the bodyguard who sometimes covered for Adler, and Booker, my brother-in-law.

But Adler. He was the only one I wanted.

My hands closed on the cold iron running the perimeter of the balcony. From twelve floors up, I felt like a princess held captive up in her tower. A movement down below caught my attention, and I turned my gaze toward it. A man stood down on the sidewalk, and I could swear he was staring up at me.

Impossible. He was too far away for me to know that, even in the pool of light from the street lamp. And I didn't have any lights on, making me an inky blob against the building.

Just my overwrought imagination...more shadows from my dream.

And when I looked back toward the man, he was gone. But no matter what I told myself, I couldn't shake the foreboding that settled in the pit of my stomach as if it would never go away.

Two

Adler Fredriksen

Protecting people often resembled a tactical video game. Or Tetris. Sliding all the

pieces into place to eliminate threats or create barriers around clients. Coordinating schedules to make sure protectees were always secure.

With most clients, anyway. I rarely had to Tetris pieces for Linzey since I was with her all the time. But at the moment, while she was in the penthouse's library, I stared at my computer screens to work out the protection detail for a pop star who'd be touring the US this summer and fall. I'd been working through details for over an hour and the flickering of the screens, though imperceptible to the eye, was beginning to give me a headache.

Just another day of living with a TBI. In reality, the symptoms I had were minor compared to some guys, but they still caused me discomfort and issues day to day.

Standing, I turned away from the monitors and pushed my thumb and forefinger into the inner corners of my eyes until the pain subsided. It would be momentary, but it was enough relief to clear the screaming in my head.

Leaving my office, I strode through the great room. and toward the wide corridor near the dining room. The penthouse took up the whole floor, with the private elevator access and service entrance in the center. The hallway ran next to and behind it, giving access to the kitchen then all the bedrooms, the media room and the library. The dining room, great room and my "borrowed" work space took up the whole length of the wall that faced the lift. My office, which doubled as a security room, was directly across from the elevator and just around the corner from the library. But I went in the opposite direction because I needed to move. And stretching my legs gave me a good excuse to get eyes on my girl without being too obvious.

Yeah...my girl. My woman. I'd given up on thinking of her as anything else. She was mine—even if I might never be able to claim her as more than the one I protected. I had too many enemies in my past and she had too many demons in hers. It wouldn't be fair to have her take on my issues.

But when we were here, enclosed in the bubble of this twelfth floor mini-mansion, high above the streets of NYC, I could pretend none of the problems mattered. I could pretend she belonged to me.

Which was one reason I needed eyes on her now. To refresh my well. To keep me going. To calm the dominant monster inside me that wanted to drill her into the nearest surface. I had to control that urge. This morning, she'd almost discovered how I craved her. The second she'd started to turn, I'd had to practically dive out of bed to keep her from seeing or feeling my hard on.

It'd been a close call.

My phone rang before I got a dozen feet from my office space and I pulled the cell from my pocket.

"Ghost," I greeted my friend as I headed back to the privacy of my desk. If he was calling me midday, someone had died or he had intel for me, a security clearance loosely granted me because of my association with Booker, Linzey's brother-in-law and an honest to God prince.

"Cyber," he returned, using my SEAL call name. "I have information."

"Go."

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“Eyes have been on Coval and his group. It’s just him and four others. He hasn’t recruited more since his brother was taken out, but they’ve been on the move. Powers-that-be have deemed them nonmalignant but to be watched.”

I knew all this. And I didn’t believe for one minute Andrej Coval wasn’t planning something. He’d vowed revenge when his brother, Edik, had been taken out during the last op I’d been on, rescuing Booker’s older brother, Xavier, the crowned prince, as well as his cousin, who was lesser royalty. Andrej hadn’t been there, but I refused to believe he wasn’t associated with the terror attack employed when they’d grabbed the crowned prince.

“He and his merry band offriendslanded at a private airstrip in Jersey last night. We don’t know their whereabouts after that.”

“No one followed?” They could have at least had a drone in the air.

“It was a setup. They deviated from flight plan—but they knew exactly where they were going. Five identical SUVs left the airfield, all going in different directions, and none heading your way.”

I’d bet my entire fortune one actuallywascoming here.

But did they know where I was? There was a good reason I didn’t keep an official address. Not that it would stop someone determined to find me.

“Thanks, Ghost,” I muttered.

“Anytime. I’ll be in contact as soon as we know more.”

We hung up, and I sighed, leaning back in my chair and scrubbing my hand over my face.

“Fuck.Fuck!”

This could put Linzey in danger. Fucking hell. I didn’t want to leave her with one of my guys, but if it was confirmed Coval was here, I might need to relinquish my position as her protector, ironically to keep her safe.

It would decimate me.

I guarded her, but she kept me grounded, something too many men suffering with TBIs needed.

By habit, I reached out to flip one of my computer screens to the security cameras positioned throughout the floor. They were completely unnecessary most of the time, but they let me track Linzey while I worked. Having eyes on her settled me.

And she was on the move. She’d left the library while I was on the phone. And now chatted with the two maids while they prepared to leave. I didn’t fail to notice the purse she had tucked under her arm

“Nice try, little girl,” I muttered. She was always trying to slip through my fingers. She claimed it was for a taste of freedom. I knew it was her spitting in the face of danger after the trauma she’d been through, a compulsion she didn’t quite control. Like some people cut themselves or did other self harm, Linzey tried to throw herself into peril. Different method; same result. This behavior always turned up after her worst nightmares.

Knowing the cause just made me a sick bastard, since watching her try to be sneaky made me rock-hard. I fought back my response as I stood to intercept her.

Ignoring the maids, I stepped in front of my girl. They veered into the penthouse's private elevator while I took Linzey's upper arm and propelled her to the middle of the great room.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She huffed and tossed her clutch onto the sofa. Angrily, she crossed her arms, her brat energy just edging up the dark need pulsing through me.

"You forgot to say 'young lady' like you're my dad. Which you're not. You're just the bodyguard my brother-in-law hired to watch over me. But you could leave me to one of your many minions. Why don't you go work in your actual office and leave me alone."

My hand curled just itching to spank that brat right out of her. I pushed down the crazy urge I never would have had before my brain injury. "I can work here," I said evenly, as if she hadn't just sassed me. "If you want to go someplace, I can escort you. As usual."

"I don't want you to escort me. What am I? Your prisoner?"

"For the hundredth time, no. But I promised you, you'd always be safe. And you will be safe. Even if I have to force it on you."

Fire slashed through her eyes, her pupils growing wide before she directed her gaze away from me.

"Don't you have other work to do?" she muttered.

My eyes burned into her. “No, actually. There’s no one but you.”

Three

Linzey

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“I hate you. You know that?” I growled at the immovable, infuriatingly handsome and frustrating man blocking the exit to my home.

“All I said was, wait five minutes and I’ll escort you,” he replied evenly, nonplussed by my outburst, the most recent of hundreds over the past four years. Clad in a perfectly crisp bespoke suit that fit his body to a tee and emphasized his wealth and power, Adler rarely broke character as my stone-faced bodyguard.

Rarely except for when he climbed into my bed in the dead of night when all the shadows of the past loomed closer.

To be sure, he wasn’t there for sex. I couldn’t imagine him getting into my bed for that.

Well... No, that wasn’t right. I could imagine it. I had imagined it. Many times. But actually happening? Yeah, no. Sex with him wouldn’t happen...never...ever. When he slipped in next to me, it was only to comfort me after nightmares. To protect me from the demons that tormented me—just an extension of his bodyguard duties, I supposed.

The rest of the time, I got this. My ever-present shadow and all-too-often roadblock. Adler excelled at being unemotional, ultra-reasonable—and at the same time exasperatingly unreasonable—stoic, and more unmovable than my own personal Stone Henge.

Honestly, the man could make Buckingham Palace guards seem emotive.

“I don’t want you to escort me,” I argued. “I’m twenty-one freaking years old. I’m perfectly old enough to take my own damn self to wherever I want to go.”

I just needed to escape here. My home was completely new in the past two years, but after my nightmares, the echoes of the past still lingered. I needed to get away.

His arms crossed, his biceps bulging against the fine fabric of his suit and his pecs stretching his crisp white button-down. “And where do you want to go?”

Where? Anywhere else. I didn’t have a specific destination in mind. A nail salon, a coffee shop, the library or a bookstore, a subway train to nowhere... I just wanted to go out. On my own.

Not that I’d admit it to Adler.

I threw my hands into the air, my palms toward him. “You know what? Never mind. I’ll go just back to my room—the room that’s inside my penthouse for God’s sake—and rot some more in my gilded prison. And you do whatever the heck it is you do in the office—that’s in my penthouse!”

Ending my tirade on a yell, I spun on the ball of my foot, snatched up my purse, then stomped back to my bedroom—the largest of the four in this place. It was the only one that would ever be occupied permanently because I would never meet a guy to make a family with. Strike that. I’d met the man I wanted, an irritating, annoying man. He was the only person I wanted to fill the position as my life partner and father of my imaginary children.

But he wasn’t remotely interested in me, so I’d probably die alone. Alone but well protected.

The slam of my bedroom door failed to satisfy me since my expensive jail had fancy

air hinges or whatever the heck they were called. The door shooshed closed quietly, resisting when I shoved it to move faster. I was so sosoordering new hinges off the internet. I'd install them myself if I had to. I'd spent a good deal of my life poor; I was handy enough to put in new hardware.

I flipped the lock, though I was sure Adler wouldn't follow me, then sank down, sliding my back against the slick dark-stained wood until my butt hit the highly polished hardwood planks of the bare floor.

I hated this. I was twenty-one, but I had less freedom than when I'd been a teenager. I almost felt guilty. I was the selfish, ungrateful half-sister to my sister's Cinderella story. I'd been given everything I could dream of, right down to an exorbitant allowance that I barely spent, just building up in my bank account.

Adler was part of the deal that came with the new life I'd been thrust into at seventeen. Getting to see my sister after she married a prince? Check. Penthouse so I had the illusion of freedom? Check. Online college? Check. An allowance so I could have any material item I could ever desire? Check. Sounded like a dream.

But all of it came with a stipulation. I posed a vulnerability for my sister, a possible target to coerce access to her. Because of that, I'd been given everything behind Door Number One, as long as I consented to constant protection. No agreement, no access to my older sister, my only living family member.

Of course, I'd said yes. Truly, I didn't care about all the trappings of wealth. Sure, they'd been fun at first, every poor girl's dream, but it grew old. All I really wanted was my family. Without my compliance, I wouldn't even have that.

So Booker, my brother-in-law, gave me his prized personal protection guard, his best friend, Adler. The poor guy had ended up demoted from guarding a prince to watching a girl twelve years younger than himself.

And Adler had been my bodyguard since he and Booker had rescued my sister, Marigold, and me from Rod, the deranged pervert who'd kidnapped us. Marigold had been lucky. He hadn't had much of a chance to do anything to her. Me...

Well, the guy was her stalker, and I was collateral damage.

I'd been his captive for two weeks.

Now, I had nightmares.

And coping mechanisms no one knew about.

And a bodyguard who didn't give me an inch.

For my own protection.

Ridiculous. The person who'd taken me was in prison, and I wasn't a royal like my sister. None of it was formysafety.

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It was for my sister and Booker. While I'd been captive, she'd met a freaking royal heir, her proverbial prince charming, who was the second son of the ruling family of Zenderland and third in line for the throne of the small European principality. She'd married him right after the rescue four years ago.

I'd been collateral damage then, and I was collateral damage now.

No one really wanted me. Not Rod. Not some proverbial dissidents, wanting leverage with the Zenderland monarchy. And not the bodyguard who was stuck watching my ass, day in and day out.

Of course, he didn't watch my actual ass.

Closing my eyes, I drew up my knees, tipped my head back against the door and took deep breaths to ease my anxiety. Every thought rattling through my thoughts sounded like a bunch of woe is me. And I really wanted to kick my own ass.

Mostly, the situation just pissed me off. I was stuck, bound in place and unable to do anything about it. Today, I'd just needed to get out of here, to escape the nightmares still taunting me, even into waking. Four years out from the terror and the memories remained as vivid as they were yesterday.

Even now, hours after leaving bed, my throat constricted with the memory of the chain tight around my neck, choking me while I fought my captor or shivered from the bone-deep cold that had been a constant ache.

"It's not real. It's not real," I whispered, rubbing a hand hard over my neck and

swallowing. “It’s not real. He’s in prison. He can’t hurt me. He can’t touch me. He can’t...”

My lips snapped shut, teeth grinding. I would not speak of what he’d done. The people around me didn’t know. Except Adler. He’d taken me to the doctors who’d secretly treated me. And my legal team and the authorities knew. Talking to them about Rod’s upcoming trial had likely brought on last night’s nightmare.

Four years later and I’d have to face him again because his lawyers had successfully appealed to have his murder trial separated from the assault and kidnapping charges—and because the judge knew Marigold’s case would be high profile, mine had been separated from hers, as well. In the coming weeks, I’d have to take the stand and come face-to-face with him for the first time since his trial for murdering my mother.

I hadn’t witnessed it, but he’d taunted me with it, threatened me with the same, while he’d had me. I’d been glad to see him convicted. She hadn’t been a good mom or really even a good person, but she hadn’t deserved to be murdered because she’d stood in a stalker’s path.

Huddled against my door, I shuddered as my brain spiraled into dark thoughts. My breathing grew choppy, bile burning in my throat. I swallowed hard and clenched my fists as I stared blindly across the room.

Adler had no idea I needed to leave the penthouse to escape the specters that haunted me today, exactly four years since that unspeakable day when Rod had grabbed me on my way home from school.

Black pinpoints danced in front of my eyes, and my chest ached.

Damn it! I’d been holding my breath again.

If he doesn't hear me breathing, if I don't move, maybe he'll forget I'm here.

The sound of a belt clearing its loops. A scream clawing into my throat—

No!

Damn it, no! I wasn't falling into a flashback!

Gritting my teeth, I brutally pinched the skin on the inside of my elbow to bring me back to the here and now. Focusing on the pain loosened the grip of my past, pushed away the clouds for a moment.

Heaving a breath, I lurched to my feet and yanked off the jacket and light sweater I'd put on this morning. Not caring that I was in jeans and a blouse, rather than workout gear, I strode over to the treadmill stationed near the big glass windows that bordered the length of one bedroom wall. From there, I could see a huge swath of Central Park and nearby city buildings. I could see the trees blooming, spring bringing the world back to life, the tiny people scurrying from place to place on the streets and sidewalks, the tourists on carriage rides.

The world was visible from my gilded cage, but I'd hardly notice a bit of it while I ran until I forgot anything but the relief of exhaustion dulling my thoughts. I wouldn't feel except for the ache of my bones from the repeated jar of my feet hitting the track and the weakness in my muscles from running miles but going nowhere. And maybe, for a little while, I just wouldn't feel at all.

Four

Adler

"Fucking hell," I muttered under my breath, my eyes glued on Linzey's delicious ass

as she took off toward her bedroom after tossing around another dose of her mouthy attitude. My fingers flexed, my desire straining against the iron hold I kept wrapped around it.

One of these days, I'd snap. Faster than she could gasp out No, I'd turn her over my knee and spank the brat right out of her.

This episode wasn't about brattiness, though. After four years, I recognized her patterns. I knew it was about the meetings she'd had to go to, reliving the past, and her subsequent nightmares.

Linzey was having a CPSTD episode. While it didn't look like what was shown in books, television and movies, she was suffering the effects which changed her moods and emotions as fast as lightning splitting a tree. She thought I was oblivious to her emotions. I wasn't. She just chose not to talk to me.

So even if I wanted to take her in hand, more than anything, I couldn't. She was under my protection. Off limits. And dare I say, my job.

She didn't have to be.

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I owned the company. Through wise decisions and good connections, I'd accrued enormous wealth through my business and investments, making me a billionaire who could live a life of luxury and leisure. With a single phone call, I could entrust Linzey's care to one of the men I employed and walk away from the day to day.

Theoretically.

In reality, Linzey bound me to her the moment I'd seen her chained to that wall in the abandoned building where she'd been kept. I freed her, but I would never be free. I just couldn't bring myself to leave her. I couldn't assign her care to anyone else. Linzey was mine.

So I spent my days with my obsession and my nights with my hand.

Until I could claim her.

If I ever could.

If she was ever ready.

If I was sure she was safe from the dangers of my past. With the information from this morning, that hope faded. I could take care of Coval and his men, but how many might come behind this threat.

I huffed a humorless laugh. That was the catch wasn't it. If she knew about my past in the SEALs, the morally gray things I'd done for our country, she'd never want me.

Even if I could fully assure her safety.

Knowing she wouldn't emerge from her room without my notice, nor would she escape through a window since we were twelve floors up, I returned to my office.

Almost immediately, as if sensing me, my computer trilled with a facetime request from Booker. I settled back in my chair and accepted the call from my closest friend.

"Your Highness, how can I help you today?" I said, teasing him with the title he rarely used. My lips quirked as I bit back a grin.

"Oh fuck off with that," he grumbled, also trying not to smile.

I chuckled. "What's up?"

"Checking in. How are things over there on the other side of Central Park?"

"Same as usual."

"Which means Linz is going toe-to-toe with you again, yes?"

I'd never spoken to my friend about my attraction to his sister-in-law, but I was sure he suspected. Though she was twelve years younger than me, she gave me a run for my money and then some. The woman was smart as a whip with an equally sharp tongue.

And that was without mentioning I wanted to pin her to a wall. With my dick.

"We're having a small difference of opinion about the level of protection she needs," I hedged.

“Oh. Is that all?”

Yeah, my friend knew exactly how it was. He was nearly feral when it came to his wife.

“Everything okay with your personal protection detail?” I asked, changing the subject. “Do I need to speak to anyone?”

I’d been the head of his protection until I’d rescued Linzey from the asshole who’d grabbed her. That day had changed everything for me. For all of us.

“Oh, please. You know they’re fine. You and your ex-special forces crew wouldn’t let a mosquito bite my ass. The only one better than my team is you—or maybe Connor.” Connor being my second in command and the only person I let cover me when I couldn’t be with Linzey.

“Good. So...”

“I’m calling to see if you want to grab a couple beers.”

“I—”

“You never take a break, Adler. It’s not good for you. Trust me. I’m a doctor. I know these things.”

“You’re a pediatrician.” Yeah...could the guy be more perfect? He was a doctor, a billionaire and a prince. Me, I’d joined the military my senior year of high school, just to get away from the inner city slum where I’d grown up. Worked my ass off to get a degree so I could qualify to be an officer. Then worked even harder to become a SEAL with a specialization in tech. I’d still be there if not for my last op.

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Silver linings, I supposed.

“And that’s still a doctor. Plus I’m your best friend. I know you.”

“I am...resting,” I said. He knew I had trouble sleeping, and lack of sleep acerbated the mild symptoms that remained from my TBI. It was a fucking lose-lose, since the TBI was the cause of the insomnia.

“It’s not only that,” I continued. “I got a call this morning about Coval.”

“Fuck... What is it? I thought he’d gone to ground after what happened with his brother. He claimed he didn’t have anything to do with it.”

I frowned. “We never believed it. Just couldn’t prove it. Not me—the government, the UN. You know I was out after Xavier’s rescue. Anyway, Coval and a small contingent landed in Jersey yesterday. Intel lost eyes on them.”

“So they could be here in the city?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “So...I should probably double up your protection.”

“Fuck that.”

“You sure you’re a kid doctor? That mouth.”

“Whatever. I’m not changing everything because of these assholes. Marigold and I have plenty of protection already.”

“You want to stay in tonight then?” I asked, figuring he’d change on that point anyway.

“No. Look,” he sighed. “We’ll be fine. Linzey can come over here to spend time with Marigold. My wife wants to talk to her about something anyway. God knows what. I think it’s to do with one of this spring’s fund raisers or something.”

My brain clicked through the logistics for having an evening out with the prince, while at the same time ensuring Linzey was safe.

“Sure,” I conceded, my head buzzing through everything I’d have to slide into place. It wasn’t as if we were just two schmoes going to an out-of-the-way dive bar. “I’m sure Linzey would like to spend some time with her sister anyway. God knows she’s annoyed with me. When are you thinking?”

“Tonight? Seven?”

I glanced at my watch, seeing it was only eleven. I could arrange things by then. “I pick the place?”

He laughed. “I never doubted you would. Tell your guys not to scare the staff when they do a safety sweep—and don’t you dare tell me that isn’t your intention.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. How long have you been a prince? You know the drill.” There hadn’t been a day in his life that he wasn’t protected, which made his job a bit of a logistics nightmare, but who was I to complain? I got paid for the headaches.

“Ha.” He pointed at me through the camera. “I wouldn’t be shocked if you bought a place, so you can clear it out whenever we want to grab drinks.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s not a bad idea—”

“Don’t you dare!” he laughed. “The atmosphere is half the point of going.”

In the background, I heard one of his nurses telling him his next patient had arrived. That was my friend. A prince, a doctor and the biggest news in all the most popular social papers and gossip shows. Between Prince Booker from Zenderland and Prince Harry from the UK, the country couldn’t get enough of royals on American soil. I even heard there was a crown prince attending school in Michigan right now.

“Got to go,” he said.

I nodded, grabbing a notepad to jot a list of things that needed to be done to make the evening happen. “I’ll see you tonight. Have a good rest of your day.”

We disconnected, and I leaned back in my chair, running my hands over my face then spearing my fingers into my short hair as I groaned. I already had a headache, and Booker was up to something—he never wanted to just grab drinks. I hadn’t a clue what plan tumbled around in that royal brain of his, though.

Surging out of my chair, I headed through the great room then down the west hallway toward Linzey. At the door to her bedroom suite, I rapped quickly. “Linzey.”

“What?” she called, sounding far away and out of breath. I hoped she wasn’t on the room’s balcony. The idea of her out there made me uncomfortable, though this high up, it should be safe.

Aside from snipers. Twelve floors would be nothing—

I shut down the thought. No one wanted to shoot or kill my woman. Though Coval and his men might if they thought she was mine.

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“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yep,” she said so fast I knew she was lying. What the fuck was she up to now? With her, it could be anything from contemplating base jumping from her balcony to cutting off all her gorgeous sable hair to masturbating for Only Friends, which I would spank her ass for in a hot second. Or it could be anything in between. God alone knew. Linzey was completely unpredictable, and while some of her ideas stopped my heart, I actually loved her volatility.

“Can I come in?” My hand was already on the knob.

“No!” she exclaimed, sounding panicked.

“Linzey—”

“Just give me a minute. I’ll be right there.” I heard a soft thud and *ashit*, ow!

“Linzey, I’m coming in,” I warned, my hand tightening on the metal. Any other protectee, I probably wouldn’t, but Linzey... Linzey was different, even if I couldn’t have her and she’d always be outside my grasp.

“No,” she cried again, her voice closer. “Damn it, I said I’d be right there.”

The door swung open just enough for her to look around it, revealing her face and one slim shoulder, now in a silk robe and not the sweater she’d worn earlier. Her flushed, perspiring face concerned me. Her big, chocolate-brown eyes were narrowed, her brows drawn in pain. Damp tendrils of her dark-brown hair clung to

her face.

“What?” she demanded quietly.

“Are you okay?” I asked in concern, studying her.

She rolled her eyes, and my fingers flexed. Every time the little brat bratted at me, I wanted nothing more than to give her a little of the dominant discipline simmering inside me. But she didn't need that from me, not with what she'd been through four years ago. Which was yet another reason I could never have her. I craved her submission to me, and if we were together, I wasn't sure I could restrain that part of me and not scare her.

“I'm fine,” she huffed. “I just finished running.”

My gaze scraped over her again. She looked exhausted. Beyond exhausted, and as we stood here and she cooled down, her face turned shockingly ashen. She clutched the door frame, and I steeled myself from diving in and lifting her into my arms. My body tensed, at the ready.

“Did you eat today?”

That was an issue I'd noticed more than once. I didn't think she was anorexic, but she'd go long periods without eating, almost as if punishing herself for something. Then at other times, less unsettled times, she ate normally.

Then the exercise... It always occurred after nightmares, and she'd run until her legs could barely hold her up anymore. Was that what had happened now? All signs pointed to yes.

“I'm fine,” she repeated, not answering. “Is that all? I need to shower.”

My hand flattened on her door as she started to close it. I didn't try to push it farther open. I just held it in place and didn't allow her to shut me out.

"No. That's not all. You're going to your sister's tonight."

A delicate brow lifted. "Excuse me?"

"You're going over to Marigold and Booker's for the evening."

"Why? What did you do? Make a play date for me so you can have the evening off? I don't need—"

"No," I interrupted. "Booker called me. Marigold wants to spend some time with you."

"And where will you be after you dump me at my sister's? You have a hot date or something? You don't need to send me someplace, so you can go fuck—"

"No." God, she was a brat. Didn't she have some idea—any idea—that she was the only one I wanted to fuck?

She stared at me, waiting, but I didn't give her brattiness more to chew on. Her lips pursed, eyes challenging me, and I fought back a groan. If I ever lost my grip, no wall, no damn surface in this place, would be safe.

"We'll leave at five-thirty," I announced then pivoted away before I did something rash. Almost immediately, I turned back, though. "Unless you want to go out to dinner first?"

Where the fuck did that come from?

I mentally kicked myself. I'd just invited Linzey out to dinner? Like on a date? What the hell was I thinking?

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That I wanted her, obviously. And my big head wasn't the one doing the thinking. The head inside my boxer-briefs was totally behind the question.

Every man had more than one breaking point, and apparently, we'd just found one of mine.

Five

Linzey

"So where are you going tonight?" I asked Adler as we took the elevator up to Marigold and Booker's palatial penthouse. My home was luxurious; theirs was fit for royalty.

"Booker and I are grabbing a couple beers at The Keg House," he answered, naming a bar I'd heard of but had never been to. I should have asked him about his plans earlier, but admittedly, I'd been annoyed. Whether it was at myself or at him was a toss up.

I'd been frustrated and angry at him when he'd knocked earlier, interrupting my post-run stretching. So when he'd invited me to dinner, he'd gotten a knee-jerk refusal. I hadn't even been nice. Instead, I'd snapped, "No!" and slammed the door.

Way to prove you're not a kid, Linzey, I berated myself.

It had been childish.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Why couldn't I get a grip on my emotions? My old therapist said it was because I was dealing with CPTSD—complex post traumatic stress disorder—from what had happened to me four years ago. I supposed she was right. I mean, she was paid to know what the heck she was talking about. Talking to her really had helped me to heal until she moved across the country to get married. I'd been improving, but now I was stagnating in a mire of ick.

It was no wonder Adler didn't want me. I was a hot mess. Not just hot. More like a fry-an-egg-on-my-attitude, incinerating-your-will-to-live disaster. Sometimes, though, I imagined he looked at me as if he might desire me. And sometimes, when he held me in the dark after my nightmares, I almost believed we were in love. Those few minutes gave me hope I'd find a way through my muddle.

My unrequited need for him was yet another of my demons. How many miles had I run to dull my craving for him. Hundreds.

And then, when he'd asked me out, I'd said no? What the heck? What was wrong with me? I'd regretted my refusal for every moment since I'd shut the door in his face. Sure, it wouldn't have been a real date, but it was the closest I'd ever get.

Embarrassed and frustrated, again, I'd avoided him until he'd come to tell me that the car was there to pick us up.

"I'm sorry about earlier," I said quietly, hoping I wouldn't need to explain what I meant. I glanced over at him from the corner of my eye and found his gaze locked on me, his mouth twisted in a deprecating, half smile.

"It's alright. I just figured we'd both need to eat."

Right. So it hadn't been more, just as I'd suspected.

As if to remind me that I still hadn't eaten, my stomach growled loudly as we stepped from the lift into the marble entryway of my sister's home on the opposite side of Central Park from my building. Her place was a two story penthouse with a rooftop terrace. I knew it well. Booker had owned it before they'd gotten together, then I'd lived with them for a couple years until I'd insisted I wanted to strike out on my own.

My intention had been to move across the country to go to college, and while there, I'd planned to live on campus. To be a coed and experience all that college life had to offer.

My family and Adler had other ideas. The next thing I knew, I was setup for online courses and Booker had purchased the home where I now lived. He gave it to me as a gift. It was chump change for him, being a prince and a multi-billionaire. I appreciated it, but I knew it had mostly been about keeping his wife happy.

Of course.

Which was fine. He owed me nothing. No one owed me anything—except maybe Rod.

I wasn't bitter about it or anything. I loved my sister more than anyone in the world, but just once I'd like... I'd like something to be about me.

I shook my head, knowing I was being selfish and jealous. I had everything I could want. Well, almost everything. I glanced over at Adler. I'd never have my true heart's desire. I was too...tainted.

He caught my gaze, his brows drew together at whatever expression he saw on my face. I forced a smile, but then my stomach growled again, and his scowl deepened.

“Didn’t you eat? When was your last meal?” he demanded.

My shoulder lifted in a negligent half-shrug. It wasn’t something I really cared about.

Before he could say anything, and I could tell he definitely had something to say, Marigold swept into the entry with Booker on her heels. She pulled me into a tight hug.

“Hi, Sweetie! Guess what?” she exclaimed.

“What?”

“We’re going out with the guys. Have you ever been to Bradford’s? It’ll be so fun. We can dance—”

“No dancing,” Booker interrupted. “It’s too hard for your protection team to keep you safe while you’re gyrating in a crowd of drunk suits out to forget the workweek. Someone might touch you.”

She trailed a finger along the placket of his shirt.

“You could come dance with me,” she murmured, a promise in her words. “And Adler can dance with Linz. She deserves to have some fun—even if her partner is her stiff, stone-faced bodyguard. No offense, Adler.”

Shock hit like lightning when Adler almost—almost—rolled his eyes at her.

“No offense taken, I’m sure,” he countered, smirking at her taunt.

What? What the heck? Who was this guy?

“We’ll talk about dancing after Linzey eats,” he added. “She...forgot...to eat today.”

“I didn’t say I forgot,” I whispered between gritted teeth, looking away from everyone.

“Right. You didn’t forget,” he growled, catching my chin and making me look at him.

His stare probing into me. “You chosenot to have anything.”

“What difference does it make anyway?” I shot back, tugging out of his grasp. “To you? What difference does it make to you?”

His lips parted and again, I saw his response right there, itching to escape, but he snapped his mouth shut and suppressed whatever it was. His customary expressionless mask dropped back into place. Damn it. Just when I’d been on the verge of seeing him worked up. Was it actually possible to agitate my bodyguard?

His hand clamped around my upper arm, and he drew me closer to him, his lips near my ear. “When we get to the bar, you will eat,” he growled, low enough that neither my sister nor her husband could hear him. “And if you don’t, so help me God...”

“So help you what?” I whispered. I glanced toward my sister, only to find the other couple had suddenly disappeared, leaving us alone. So this wasn’t my imagination. Therewassomething going on here.

How farcouldI push him?

“Little girl, do you really want to see what happens when you push me too far?”

Oops. Did I wonder that out loud? Shoot. I might have an unspoken obsession, but that didn’t mean I wanted him to know about it.

“Well?” he prompted, his dark challenge caressing over me, wrapping around me, tormenting me before he tightened his noose.

And damn it if a masochistic side of me didn’t want that.

“Yes,” I said, the word barely more than a breath. “I do want to see that. I do want to

know what you're like when you go over the edge."

His fingers tightened on my arm, and I halfway hoped I'd develop a bruise there, proof that this fever-dream moment had actually happened. My breath caught when he suddenly let go. He didn't move away, though.

He leaned even closer, and his lips brushed my temple as he spoke. "Haven't you heard: be careful what you wish for. The consequences might not be what you expect."

I licked my lips and looked up into his eyes. He should scare me. I should be scared. Terrified. I wasn't. Of all the men in the world, Adler made me feel safe. There was nothing he could do to change that.

I'd trusted him from the moment he'd turned from rescuing Marigold and seen me chained to that wall.

It'll be okay, he'd said, crouching next to me. You're safe. No one's hurting you; no one's touching you without your permission. Never again. I swear to you.

Since that day, he'd kept his word. Probably a little too well.

"I know exactly what I'm asking for," I ventured.

Adler quietly snorted his single laugh. "Oh, little girl, no. No, you don't."

Six

Adler

Oh, little girl, no. No, you don't.

I shouldnothave said that. It had been a mistake to bring Linzey closer, letting her peek behind the wall I'd erected around myself.

And yet, it wasn't.

Not completely.

I wanted to show Linzey exactly what would happen if she pushed me too far. I'd been fighting it for...well, since she'd turned eighteen a few months after I'd rescued her. I'd stayed strong for four years—stayed strong or removed myself from the situation, by having Connor take over. But tonight, my resolve was weak.

My head had been pounding already before we'd left the penthouse, and I'd known this night at the bar would be hell with the deafening music, noisy crowd and strobing lights. Sensitivity to light and sound were lingering symptoms of the TBI that had booted me from the SEALs after my last mission—the op where I'd saved one of Booker's brother Xavier and his friend, the Duke of Who Even Gave a Fuck. I hadn't, as long as both men were safely tucked in at their fancy castles. But the operation had landed me in Booker's circle. He'd taken an interest in me and we'd been friends ever since.

In a way, it was my own little fucked-up fairytale ending.

After my discharge, I'd used my tech know-how to earn money with security inventions, and Booker had helped me to invest my money wisely. It was at his suggestion, and with his assistance, that I'd formed my security agency. Protecting the rich, famous and/or royal didn't come cheap—for them. That income had been invested, too. With some luck, I'd ended up almost as wealthy as Booker.

“So I was thinking,” Marigold yelled to Linzey, who sat between us, with Booker on the far side of our group.

This was nothing like the evening the two of us had envisioned when he'd proposed a boys night out. He didn't care, obviously. As far as the prince was concerned, the sun rose and set in his wife's pants and she could have whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

Point in case: we were currently in a semi-private room, at a busy club, and not at the bar I'd selected, The Keg House. No, we were at Bradford's, a club where all the junior execs from the Financial District liked to let loose, and pretend they were bigger deals than they were, with the sole intent of getting laid. Not happening on my watch. As soon as the change in plans had been announced, I'd had a team over here doing a sweep ahead of our arrival. I'd also had them secure this space. From here, we could still see everything going on in the club. We were part of the raucous crowd, but they weren't allowed near us. Unfortunately, the half-wall partitioning us away from everyone did nothing to dull the noise.

“What were you thinking?” Linzey yelled back to her sister.

“Gala and award season is about to start. Booker and I have to go to everything—”

“Not everything,” he interrupted.

She side-eyed him without turning his way. “We have to go to almost everything,” she

corrected. “You should come with us this year. We’ll get you hooked up with some eligible guys so you can go on a few dates. You know...you can get out there. Get your groove on.”

Get her groove on?

Oh, hell no.

Thatwasnothappening.

“I don’t know...” Linzey hedged, shooting a glance my way. She seemed uncomfortable with the idea, and I had to admit I was glad she wasn’t jumping at the opportunity. If she wasn’t excited about hooking up with these random guys, it would be easier to turn her away from the idea.

“Come on,” her sister cajoled. “Pretty dresses, partying with the who’s who of the world.”

“Says the woman who hates it,” Booker reminded his wife.

“I don’t... Well, yeah, I do. But if I have to go, it’ll be better if Linzey is there.”

“I’llbe there,” he reminded her.

Turning, she patted his cheek. “I know. But this is different.” She turned back to her sister. “I don’t like that you’re so alone all the time. There are so many nice,hotguys—”

“And what do you know about that?” Booker demanded.

“Stop it. You know I don’t want anyone but you, your highness.”

“Damn right,” he growled. “We don’t have a dungeon, but I can arrange one pretty damn quick.”

Linzey looked over at me again as if gaging my reaction. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth as speculation filled her expression. It burned into me and my determination probably reflected back as I stared into her eyes. I hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol and I still couldn’t cage the beast that wanted out of me tonight.

Fuck me, this would be my downfall.

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“What do you think?” she asked. “Should I plan on meeting some nice, hot guys at these galas Marigold wants me to go to?”

Fuck, no.

Booker snorted, confirming he knew how I felt.

Fury burning in my chest, my hand fisted where it lay beside my glass of water. If she'd wanted to make me jealous, she'd hit pay dirt. And we'd both be sorry for it tonight. I'd kept myself in check for four years, and apparently, tonight was the point when my dominant side, which hadn't existed like this before the TBI, was saying fuck it. I wanted her...and I wanted Linzey all to myself.

“If you think for one second—”

Loud pops sounded across the throbbing music and stalled my words in my throat. Gunfire! Adrenaline surging, I dove, pulling Booker down as I took Linzey to the floor, knowing he'd bring Marigold with him. His guards were on him in a moment, getting him to cover while more shots rang out, screams joining the cacophony of noise.

My only concern was Linzey, and I cursed myself for not surveying our space better for escape routes and coverage. Keeping low behind the inadequate shield of the half-wall, I clocked the space again.

The only exit let out into the main club, accessed by a doorway to one side or going over the partition. Not happening. People were freaking out and continual shots were

fired through the artificially fogged air. Someone had hit the lights, plunging the club into near pitch-black. I couldn't see the crowd, yet the bodies from the last fire-fight I'd been caught in filled my mind's eye.

Struggling to stay present, I dragged Linzey toward the back wall and dialed 9-1-1 as we moved. Even through the darkness, I spied the shadow of the C-shaped lounge along the back of the room.

Earlier, I'd noticed there looked like just enough space to crawl behind it. It had bothered me then, but my guys had told me they'd cleared it. Now, it could be a safe haven, rendering us invisible in the darkness. Or we could be sitting ducks. I hoped for the former rather than the latter. It was our best hope. I just had to get Linzey there.

"Find the lights," someone yelled, the voice distinctly American. Not European. Not men from the Coval sect. I'd known they weren't. This wasn't their style. It still drove home a point. Danger always surrounded us.

"Where are the fucking lights?" another man bellowed.

"9-1-1 what's your emergency?" a woman tilted over the connection on my cell.

"Active shooting at Bradford's," I hissed, keeping my voice low. "Send help. There are at least two gunmen. There's got to be over a hundred people here—and a fucking prince. Prince Booker is here."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! This would be a goddamn international incident if anything happened to Booker. Hell, it could turn into a scandal if anyone found out he was in the middle of this. I just had to trust my guys were keeping him safe. I couldn't see where they'd gone, and that was probably good.

“Hurry,” I demanded.

The operator might have said something, but I didn’t dare keep my phone out since the illumination would reveal our location. I shoved it away, keeping the line open, while I hustled Linzey the final few feet to cover.

I pushed her to crawl into the small space I’d dragged us toward. It was a squeeze for me, but I wedged my shoulders through the opening after her and followed toward the corner where it got wider and we could huddle together.

I pulled her into my arms as soon as the area widened, curling my body around her to shield her from any bullet that might come through the seating.

“Shh,” I murmured into her ear as she heaved silent sobs into my chest, her fingers clutching my shirt. “It’s okay. It’s okay. We’ll be okay.”

“Where’s Marigold? Booker?”

“I don’t know. Their bodyguards are with them. I can’t text them, so I don’t alert anyone to their location.”

She nodded into my chest, her arms slid around my waist, squeezing tight while she burrowed into me. I cupped my hand around the back of her head, keeping her there. My lips pressed into her hair. I breathed her in as I prayed for her safety, my ears pricked for any sound that would alert me to danger closing in. The gunfire had slowed, but hadn’t stopped.

How much fucking ammunition had they brought? Jesus.

Linzey jerked with every barrage that started, her body shaking while she cried at the horror. I knew it would be a million times worse if Coval’s cell found us and

attacked.

Within minutes, though it seemed like hours, the pandemonium escalated as the NYPD converged on the scene. I didn't move. I wouldn't emerge from this hidey-hole until I knew we were all clear. I couldn't let anything happen to her, not again. Linzey wasn't merely mine to protect. No...she was justmine, and if we got out of this, it was time I showed her.

Seven

Linzey

"Stay with me," I begged Adler as he guided me into the penthouse, hours later.

I felt as if my heart was still beating ten times faster than it should be. Adler had held me the whole time we'd been hidden, but every moment, I'd been terrified that one of the shooters would find us, that something would happen to my sister or Booker or one of the bodyguards Adler employed. I knew many of them, and I couldn't bear for any of the men to be hurt.

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The cops had quickly taken down the three shooters who'd stormed the club. But my ears still rang with the screaming tonight—from the terrified club patrons, from the cops, from the gunmen. While we hid, we heard the police storming in and neutralizing the situation. We hadn't moved until the 9-1-1 operator had told Adler it was safe.

He'd crawled out first then held me to him while he carried me from the club, keeping my face to his chest with one hand. I knew people had been hurt. Though Adler had shielded me, I'd still seen the blood. I could barely breathe. People had probably died. People who'd just been out for the evening, hoping to have a good time.

Out on the sidewalk, we'd spoken to the cops and looked for the rest of our group. My knees had buckled when I'd seen my sister was okay. So were Booker and their entire security team, who'd hidden them behind the private bar in the opposite corner from where Adler had taken me.

Thankfully, Adler had caught me before I'd crumpled to the sidewalk.

"Baby girl, I'm not going anywhere," he said now.

Baby girl? I shivered. He'd never called me that. He'd never called me anything but Linzey that I could think of. Except little girl. He'd called me that earlier today, hadn't he? The things I'd felt when he'd said it, from the endearment and from the threat attached to it... Heat had suffused my entire body, my pulse beating heavily at my center. Little girl. I'd really liked that. Probably too much.

“No...I mean...” I dampened my dry lips, staring at his chest. “I need you to hold me. To stay with me. To be with me.”

His eyes met mine, dark promise in their depths. “Yes.”

One word. It told me everything. He understood I needed him.

His hand cupped the side of my face. “You still didn’t eat.”

“I don’t think I can,” I said honestly. “After what happened...”

“You can,” he insisted. “You will. You need to take care of yourself.”

I studied his stern face, a tremble throbbing through my core at the intensity of his gaze. My inner voice urged me to test him. I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“And if I don’t?” I dared to ask.

“Then you’ll be punished, little girl.”

My eyes widened before I could stop my reaction. Then, it was too late to hide what his words did to me. I looked away, lifting a shoulder. “I don’t believe you. You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, trust me. I would.”

“You can’t. You’re—”

“I’m what?”

“You’re my bodyguard. You’re supposed to protect me, not... Not do anything else.”

He crossed his arms, leaning against the wall, his head tipped slightly to the side.

“See I think that’s part of the problem?”

“What problem?”

“That you don’t understand the length and breadth of what protection means to me.” Straightening from the wall, he stalked toward me. He grasped my upper arms as he leaned over me. It should have scared me. It didn’t. It thrilled me the same way a little girl had.

“Protection,” he continued, “includes protecting you from yourself. It means utilizing whatever means are necessary to keep you safe.”

“Adler,” I breathed. “I—”

“You’ve been exercising until you’re ready to drop. Unacceptable. You haven’t been eating. Unacceptable,” he repeated on a growl. “And why? As a punishment? Exactly why are you punishing yourself?”

My sharp inhale seemed to echo through the great room as blood rushed past my ears, my pulse racing. Pain lanced through me. How could he know that?

“I’m not,” I denied, lying about my truth, my sickness. I’d thought I’d hidden my coping mechanisms.

Adler sighed, reaching for my hand and leading me toward the kitchen. “You are. And it ends today. You need an outlet? I’ll give you one. We’ll figure this out.”

I shook my head. He couldn’t figure me out. No one else could. I couldn’t. How could

he?

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“Sit,” he said, jerking his chin toward the breakfast nook along the windows, the city lights glowing against the dark night sky outside.

Knowing I wouldn’t win this battle, I sank into one of the chairs, resting my elbows on the table and dropping my face into my hands, feeling exposed. He knew. He knew what I’d been hiding, how I coped when the nightmares got to be too much.

And now, the gunshots and screams from tonight still echoed through my head, too.

Even with Adler there, curling his body around me, I’d been afraid I’d die. It was a wake-up call. I’d been living in a bubble of pain and anger and fear and resentment for the past four years. I’d let the man who’d kidnapped me keep control over me even while he was in prison. I’d swung between being numb or trying to numb that host of emotions dogging me.

And then there was Adler. Something had changed between us today, even before the club. But the shooting had pushed things even further.

I wanted to live. Really live. And I wanted a partner in my life. If Adler wouldn’t be that partner...I’d find one. Marigold wasn’t wrong. I never went out. I was always alone—at least as far as she saw things. Sure Adler was with me, but... But I was alone. Lonely.

Tears burned my eyes. I had to face it. I was tainted. He didn’t want me after what had happened to me. Someone else...they wouldn’t know the extent of my trauma. But Adler was the one who rescued me. He was there. He was the one who took me to the doctor, who helped me through testing and making sure I wasn’t pregnant. He

was the rock at my side through it all.

But he also knew the details. He knew it all. I was stained. Abused by Rod. Messed up in the head afterward.

The men Marigold had mentioned... They wouldn't know all that. But I didn't want some random guy.

I glanced over at Adler, my eyes scanning over his sculpted ass while he bent to look into the fridge then pull out food. He was who I wanted.

But you didn't always get what you desired, did you?

Aside from my messed up past, he was married to his job. Not just watching me, but also running his agency that protected people all over the country. He was always networking and supervising, making the best connections between his personal protection agents and the people they would protect.

I almost laughed. Maybe, I could get him to connect me with someone. My lips twitched, and I swiped away the wetness from under my eyes. It was ridiculous for me to be morose. I was alive, wasn't I? And with my sister's help, maybe I could get my mind off my obsession—or erase him from my desires completely.

A plate slid in front of me, and I blinked at the bowl of tomato soup and the melty grilled cheese, perfectly golden and cut in half diagonally. How...?

I glanced up at Adler as he dropped into the chair across from me, his own plate in front of him. God, I must have really been lost in my thoughts. I hadn't even realized he'd cooked...or that enough time had passed for him to make this.

I picked up my spoon, skimming it along the top of the steamy soup.

“What do you think of Marigold’s idea?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed and his lips pinched into a thin line. His nostrils flared as he looked at his food and picked up his spoon. “Do you want to date the guys she mentioned?”

I shrugged then set down my utensil, without so much as sipping my soup. “I want to datesomeone. She’s not wrong. I’m alone all the time. I’m lonely. Even just going to these events and talking to people would be nice.”

“You’ll look gorgeous. The men will be on you like flies,” he grumbled, his own silverware clattering onto the plate.

“I doubt it.”

A muscle ticking in his clenched jaw, he broke a corner off his sandwich. “Well, you’re wrong. If you want to know the truth, I don’t like her idea of trying to dangle you in front of those assholes like fresh meat.”

I licked my lips, thinking. “If you don’t want me to go alone, you could always be my escort, you know?”

“Me? Right,” he scoffed.

“Why not? Adler, I know you have money. I know you don’t need this job. You’ve made a small fortune with your company. You’d fit in with the gala crowd better than I would.”

“A large fortune, actually, not that it matters.”

“No, it doesn’t. Not to me. You know I don’t care about that stuff. Neither of us are

really part of that culture.” Me less than Adler. He’d blend right in, like a real life James Bond infiltrating a super-villain’s party. “You could rub elbows with the who’s who, and make new contacts. Besides, if you escort me, you could vet any of the men who approach me. If you wanted to do that for me. As a favor. You’ll have to be there, anyway, to keep me safe. As my bodyguard—unless you assign one of your guys. So why not? Two birds. One gala.”

“Or a dozen.” He shook his head, his eyes on the sandwich he was pulling apart, hiding his thoughts from me. He popped a piece of the grilled cheese into his mouth. “You should eat.”

“Adler...”

“Eat and I’ll think about it.”

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It was exactly what I'd asked for, that he'd think about it, so why wasn't I happy with that answer?

Because. Because I didn't want him to be okay with me dating another man. That was why.

Eight

Adler

My knuckles rapped lightly on Linzey's door. After she'd finished the meal I'd prepared, I'd left her at her bedroom before I went to my own room, so we could both get ready to sleep. While I preferred to sleep naked, I'd spent more time in pajama pants, the past four years, than I had since childhood. No shirt. Especially after our conversation tonight. I wanted her to see what I had to offer.

I growled quietly. Fuck. That. Linzey was not dating some other man, and tonight, I'd make that unmistakably clear. It might not be the wisest decision given the circumstances, but I'd never claimed to be a genius. However, I knew when I'd reached a crossroad. The decision had to be made.

I scoffed quietly to myself. The decision had been carved in stone a long time ago. I'd just been fighting it.

My eyes ate up Linzey as she swung her door open, wearing white satin pajamas covered in pale pink flowers. Oh fuck me. Neither of us would make it through tonight unscathed. Because... Yeah, tonight I'd claim her. And she'd claim me.

She stared at me for a moment. Her tongue dampened her lips while her gaze lingered on my mouth. Her throat convulsed then she sucked in a choppy breath.

“Come in,” she said, turning and heading back into the suite.

Before I could think better of it, my hand caught around her waist and I drew her back to me. Her hands landed on my chest, her wide eyes staring up at me.

“Adler,” she gasped, her breathing picking up while her pupils dilated, a pink flush creeping up the pale skin of her neck.

“You were a good girl, eating all your dinner,” I told her.

“Do I get a reward?”

I’d give her any fucking thing she wanted. “You’re already avoiding a spanking.”

Her lip pouted out, surprising me, then she made a face.

“Adler?”

“Yes?” My hands tightened on her waist.

“I...” Her breath caught. When she released it, she shook her head and stepped back. I let go of her, though it was the last thing I ever wanted. With several feet separating us, she crossed her arms over her middle. “Adler...” she sighed. “Why couldn’t you be the guy?”

“What?” I whispered. I must have misheard her. Couldn’t she see what I could see? Why did she think I’d just pulled her into my arms? I had to remind myself that she was young and wasn’t very experienced.

“The guy,” she repeated. “The one to sweep me off my feet, to whisk me away to his palace.”

I grimaced. “I’m no prince.”

“Maybe, not by blood.”

“Or any other way. I’m just a soldier who got lucky to be in the right place at the right time. To have a good friend and make excellent investments.”

“Bull,” she said, stepping close again. She poked me in the sternum. “You don’t have to concoct excuses for not being the guy for me. I get it.”

I caught her hand, reeling her closer before she could escape again. My other hand looped around her waist, our position mimicking a slow dance on the tiny dance floor of her room’s entry. Neither of us moved as we stared into each other’s eyes. Couldn’t she see my feelings? I wasn’t good with speaking them. It hadn’t been my place as her bodyguard, but I thought she knew how I’d felt and ignored it.

“You get what?” I asked slowly, sensing a direction I hadn’t foreseen. Maybe, I should have.

“That you’re not interested in me. Not...that way. Romantically. As a partner. I’m broken.”

“Not interested?” I said slowly. “You’re fucking with me, right?”

I pulled her closer to me, letting her feel the unmistakable ridge barely constrained by my boxer-briefs, the proof that grew whenever she was near. And having her in my arms...my dick begged for me to finally act. We were both tired of my hand.

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“Do you feel that? What you do to me? I’ve barely slept for years because of you.”

“Because you’re protecting me. Which is ridiculous. I’m not special—”

“Because I want you. You are special. You’re a treasure I don’t deserve, not that it’ll fucking stop me anymore,” I practically snarled. “This,” I thrust my arousal against her soft belly, “has no fucking thing to do with protecting. Hell, I want to do anything but protect you from me. I want to spread you out and have my way with you. To devour you. To show you whose girl you are, whose woman. But fuck, baby girl, after what you’ve been through. I know you don’t need someone making advances on you. You need someone you can feel safe with.”

She gasped, her eyes wide. Her head shook, and I didn’t think she even realized it. “No.”

Shit. My grip loosened. I’d pushed to far.

“I don’t need or want protection. Not from you. I want...I want...I...”

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard before she looked up at me. The waiting killed me, but I had to let her proceed. To lead. If she wanted me, I’d be in control, but to start... It was her decision.

Letting go of her hand, I cupped her face and brushed my thumb over her cheek.

“I want what you said,” she whispered. “I’ve wanted it for a long time.”

My chin dipped in a single nod. Before I could think better of it—and really, there was nobetter of it. Except walking away for her safety. And I couldn't do that. But before I could talk myself out of acting, I did what I'd wanted to do for hours, for years. I curled my hand behind her neck, pulling her to me, and covered her lips with mine.

I groaned, gathering her tight to me. Linzey clutched my biceps, going to her toes, struggling to get even closer. I lifted her, giving into the baser urges I'd fought for so long. It felt like an eternity.

Her legs went around me as my mouth explored hers, plundering as she parted her lips. I pressed her back to the wall beside us. My cock ground against the place I wanted to be most in the world, my home, my heaven and hell. It could go either way, depending on if she accepted me or rejected me.

Breathing hard from the fire burning through my body and pooling in my balls, I drew back the smallest fraction of an inch.

“Okay?” I asked, checking in.

She knotted her fingers in my short hair, dragging me back. “Yes.”

That was it. My restraint snapped. My mouth covered hers with a growl. I grabbed her ass, carrying her over to the bed. Keeping one arm around her, I wrenched down the blankets then placed her on the mattress. Worried as I crawled over her, I straightened my arms and peered down at her face. Her eyes were wide and luminous, her mouth already swollen from our kisses. She licked her lips and reached for me, but I only moved a little closer as she linked her fingers behind my neck.

“Anything you don't like, anything that scares you or makes you uncomfortable, just say no and I'll stop.”

“Do you want me?”

“More than anything,” I vowed.

“Then anything between us will be fine. I trust you, Adler.”

I nodded, overwhelmed by the faith she placed in me. I knew I’d still need to be careful. She might be fine now, but...a flashback was always possible.

“Just don’t be afraid to say no,” I told her, relaxing my arms and brushing my lips over hers. “I won’t be mad. I only want it to be perfect for you.”

“Got it.” She pulled at my shoulders, tugging me toward her as she lifted up to deepen the kiss. “I want it to be perfect for you.”

“Already done. I’m here with you. It’s already perfect.”

Perfect...so perfect.

I licked inside the warm, minty recess of her mouth, groaning, fisting her hair to hold her there, her silky tresses surrounding my hand. Linzey was a balm for my soul. A sweet perfume filling my lungs. A comfort surrounding me. Her soft sounds of contentment a symphony in my ears. This entire day had been a shitshow, but to end like this, wrapped in her arms, I’d relive it again and again.

Nine

Linzey

Fire seared through me as soon as Adler’s lips touched mine. And when he deepened the kiss, I didn’t care that he was over me, my back to the mattress. I wasn’t

frightened. With Adler, I was pretty sure, I'd never be frightened. Still he wasn't quite over me, staying to the side and giving me the room to push him away. I pulled him closer, darting my tongue against his.

He groaned, his sweeping inside my mouth.

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“Adler,” I said against his lips, turning my body to him and pressing closer. Need throbbed through me, stronger than any desire I’d ever had. Everywhere he touched electrified, my pleasure centers coming to life.

With deft fingers, he stripped away my pajama top, and his mouth descended on one breast. I cried out, arching, my hands clutching his shoulders. While I watched him, he drew on one needy peak. Our eyes met, his wary, and I nodded to assure him I was okay.

“Yes, Adler,” I gasped, my breathing uneven. “Oh, God, it feels so...”

My leg lifted around him while I tried to get closer.

His fingertips trailed over my side, down to my thigh, pulling it higher on his waist.

“I want to touch you,” he said against my skin.

“Yes. Please. Please...”

He nodded, kneeling back. My gaze devoured him, his bare chest with chiseled pecs and abs. His slim hips and the erection that jutted out, tenting his pajama pants.

He curled his fingers in my waistband and tugged down my silky pants. In a moment, I was bare to him. I waited for fear to descend. Nothing. Just burning need.

I grabbed his hand as he hesitated. “Touch me.”

“Baby...”

“I’m good. I promise. Touch me,” I demanded.

He didn’t need to hear more. His large hand cupped my mound, his thumb sliding in and stroking along my drenched folds. “Damn, you’re so wet. So hot. So perfect.”

“I want you. God...I’ve wanted you for so long. Please.”

Adler leaned over me, his mouth covering me while his fingers explored. Two fingers curled inside me and I cried out into his mouth, my hips jolting up into his touch. Slowly at first, he slid the digits in and out. I canted into every thrust until he was finger-fucking me in earnest, his thumb circling my clit. Tension coiled like a wild cyclone in my core, lightning sizzling along my skin. Suddenly, it unleashed and slamming through me and I scream, clutching at his arms.

“Oh my God, oh God, oh!” I cried, my first real orgasm tearing over me like a tsunami of unexpected pleasure. I felt him move over me, knew when he notched his cock to me. He paused and I pulled at him.

“Yes, now, please,” I begged.

“You’re so beautiful. Oh fuck,” he swore as he sank into my slick, pulsing walls, stretching them wide, filing me as I’d thought I’d never be filled. He remade me, creating something new. “Linzey...Linzey. You’re mine. Mine. God, you’re so perfect.”

“Fuck me then,” I demanded. I was half out of my mind with the climax still rolling over me. “You’re the only one who’s right. The only...one.”

“Damn right, I’m the only one. Never letting you go. Never.”

His hips crashed into me as we both gave in, and this time when the bliss shoved me over into mindless oblivion, I felt Adler coming with me...and in me, claiming all of me with the warm wash of his release.

I love you. I love you. I love you, repeated over and over in my head, in my soul, but I didn't say it aloud. Not yet. But I hoped someday, I could. It was the only thing that would make this intimacy with him more perfect than it already was.

* * * *

"When I was little, I was afraid of the dark," I whispered as I lay on my side, cuddled into Adler. My head was on his chest while his arms wrapped around me. I wasn't sure what caused me to reveal that, where I was going with the statement. Maybe, a little, I did know. I just hadn't meant to say anything aloud. I didn't want to ruin this moment. Being with Adler...it was so different from Rod. Tender instead of terrifying. Caring instead of evil. Pleasure instead of pain. Fulfilling instead of destroying.

Full of love not hate.

I loved him.

"Yeah?" he asked, running his thumb along the scar on the arm I'd rested on his chest. The mark on my wrist was one of the reminders of what Rod had done to me while I'd been his captive.

"Yeah. But I think I've figured out that worse things often walk around in full light. You know?"

It was a rhetorical question. I knew if he answered, he could tell me otherwise. I also knew he wouldn't. As a SEAL, he'd spent years hunting things that skulked in the

inky black of night. He didn't need to tell me that. I didn't live under a rock. I watched the news; I'd seen movies.

"I always feel safer when I'm with you," I continued, murmuring into the silence that had settled around us, while we lay there with our limbs tangled, almost as close as we could be.

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“You are safe. I’d kill anyone who tried to come for you. Hell, I might hurt any man who tries to get near you,” he growled.

I shivered, so turned on by how possessive he sounded, how protective, as if he’d do anything necessary to ensure my happiness.

“The gala’s gonna be hard for you, huh?”

“We’re still going?” he asked, sounding as if we’d be going to a couple’s root canal.

“Yes. You know Marigold’s going to insist.”

“God, is there anything I can do to get out of it. What would you do if I kidnapped you and hid you away in a remote cabin, just for me?”

“Mmm...” I hedged, feeling my body softening, begging for him to take me again. With my past, his question should not turn me on. But the idea of being alone with him, belonging to him, made me tingle. My pussy contracted while he spoke, wetness sliding into my throbbing slit.

Ready for more, I trailed my fingers along his torso, aiming for the thin line of hair that led to his already hard cock. Thick and long, just how I liked it.

He clasped my hand, stilling it. “Forget I said that. Even if I’ve thought it a million times, I never would. Stealing you away would make me no better than...him. I would never force you to submit to me.”

“I know, Adler. Don’t worry about that. I know you’re not like him. And I don’t want you to hold back your, um, more dominant side because you think I might be scared. Please give me all of you.”

He threaded his fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp. “How are you so strong?”

“Trust. You earned my trust. Four years and you’ve never touched me in a way that may me uncomfortable, never said inappropriate things, never let anyone else bother me. I’d even think of you as my friend.” I bit my lip, wondering if that sounded dorky. “Is that okay?”

“It’s...yes. I want to be everything for you.” He sighed. “But do you really want to go to this gala thing? What if I just flew us to Paris instead. We could go see the Eiffel Tower.”

“Sounds nice,” I hummed, my pointer finger making circles on his chest, “but I don’t have a passport.”

“Okay...we can go to Vegas and see the one there on The Strip.”

“You really don’t want to go to any of the galas, do you?”

“I really don’t,” he admitted.

“You know, the women will go crazy for you. You’re so handsome. You know that, don’t you?”

He chuckled. “I’m just a man who dresses nice, keeps in shape, and has a good haircut. Besides, I don’t care what any other female thinks. Just you.”

I turned, resting both arms on his chest and looking down at him.

“Oh, come on,” I scoffed. “You know you’re ridiculously hot. Don’t be fake modest. Admit it.”

“Then you admit you’re gorgeous.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m really not.”

“Says you. I’m hard for you all the damn time. Now that the seal’s been broken, you might find yourself on my dick every chance I can get.”

“No complaints from me.” I resumed my position with my ear over his heart. “You’re good for my ego.”

He chuckled. “You’re good for me.”

Ten

Adler

“Coval has been spotted in New York,” Ghost told me three days later. “We had someone on his ass, but he managed to slip the tail again.”

“Fuck,” I swore. “What do you think?”

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“I think it’s safe to say he’s coming right for you.”

I scrubbed my hand through my hair, my grasp on my phone tightening enough it should have cracked the device.

“We have eyes on your building,” my contact continued. “His men aren’t well known, though, and we don’t know who he might have contact with in the city. He could have recruited any number of the disenfranchised to join his cause.”

“His cause being to off me,” I muttered.

“Not necessarily.”

Which was even worse. I knew what Ghost intimated. Coval might be after those important to me. Revenge for his brother. An eye for an eye.

“Thanks for the update,” I said, surging to my feet and pacing my office. I paused at the window, staring outside at the busy street. He could be out there, blending in with the crowd.

“I’ll keep in touch; let you know if we spot him or learn more. You know, maybe he’s in town to get fitted for new suits at Alan David.”

“Right.” We disconnected and I crossed my arms, staring outside. Coval might think he was invisible, but he didn’t know me.

Turning away, I yanked out my phone again.

“Boss,” Connor, my second in command, answered. “You need me there?”

“I need the team to pull traffic and security cam footage in a three mile radius to my building. Run it through facial recognition, looking for Coval. Anything within a half mile needs to be a constant live feed into the software.”

Connor had been my dive partner in SEALs and he’d been on that last op with me. When it had been time for him to re-up a year later, he’d retired and come to work for me. He knew exactly who Coval was.

“He’s here?”

Quickly, I brought him up to speed, something I probably should have done sooner, and would have if I hadn’t been distracted by Linzey and all the places I could fuck her in this penthouse. Answer: plenty...but not enough. I already wanted her again. Which didn’t bode well for my work in the future, after Coval’s threat was eliminated.

“I also need you to get the safe house ready. Until we know what he’s up to, I’m moving Linzey. We need to get Booker and his family moved out of the city temporarily, too.”

“Got it.”

We hung up, and I stalked toward the media room where I knew Linzey was working on one of her online classes. I needed eyes on her and not through a camera.

The last week had been difficult enough without added danger and fear. I had no idea what I should share, or if I should keep it need to know...assuming she didn’t need to know.

The incident at the club had thrown Linzey into a spiral, barely eating...exercising even more...having nightmare upon nightmare. And I wasn't much better. I'd slept less than normal, and I couldn't settle, my restlessness driving me into perpetual action. While I didn't sink into a dissociative, PTSD-induced state, constant memories plagued me. I remained on edge, sure that danger lurked around every corner.

The only peace for either of us was when we were together, possibly why we needed sex so much. An obsession? Yes. A coping mechanism? Possibly. Love? Hell yeah. Neither of us had said the words, but it was there.

Having her in my arms at night helped. It helped both of us. And I never wanted it to change. I hadn't been in my own bed since before the day we'd gone to Bradford's. If she ever needed alone time I wasn't sure how I'd handle it. I was quickly becoming addicted to sleeping with my woman.

So, maybe, I should stop being an asshole and just tell her my feelings. I'd known how I felt for... Actually, I couldn't pinpoint when my devotion had turned to love. Longer ago than I knew, that was for sure. Then the shooting had happened, propelling me into action. Making sure Linzey knew she was mine. She still mentioned the gala we'd go to in a couple weeks and had started fittings for her dresses, but whenever the subject came up, it was us, as a couple, who'd be attending. Not her, looking for a man.

I still wanted to whisk her away someplace, but if she wanted to go to the fancy party, I'd give her whatever she asked for.

"Hey," she said, setting aside her laptop when I entered the media room. I sank onto the plush, leather seat beside her and pulled her into my lap, my mouth immediately on hers.

“Needed to see you.”

“Funny thing... I needed to see you, too,” she replied, her small hands sliding along my cheeks. I turned my head, kissing the inside of her wrist and running my tongue along the small scar there. Linzey shivered, arching into me. Turning my head, I buried my face in her neck, breathing in her pure-Linzey scent of clean linen and sunshine.

“Adler,” she moaned, turning to straddle me. My hand skimmed up her torso to cup her breast.

“Is your laptop off?” I rasped.

“Yeah. Why?”

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“Not giving your class or some rando professor a show.”

Reaching over, she closed the device. “Just in case. I’ve seen too many crime shows the past few years.”

“Good plan.” I shoved up her T-shirt then tugged down her bra to give me access to her lush breasts. Her nipples were pearled, begging for my mouth and hands. Cupping her, I flicked my thumb over on hardened tip while I took the other deep into my mouth.

“Oh God!” she cried, pushing into me while I sucked, my tongue lashing over a hardened peak. She grabbed my shoulders as the world seemed to shift, everything shaking.

Then something crashed over on the other side of the penthouse. An explosion from someplace below us rent the air, and I yanked back from Linzey. Holding her, I surged to my feet.

“What’s going on?” she exclaimed as the building shook. “Earthquake?”

In New York? Possible but unlikely.

I shook my head while I pulled her clothes back into place, trepidation heavy in my gut.

My phone went off. Connor. I yanked the cell from my pocket as I ran for the service door near the elevator, keeping Linzey close to my side.

“Talk to me,” I demanded.

“Explosions in the parking garage beneath the building. Not enough to bring it down. Yet. You need to evacuate. Don’t exit through the lobby. I already have a car on the way to meet you at the side service door.”

Right. Because Coval or his associates were probably watching. I had no doubt they’d see us, no matter where we exited.

I detoured to my office and opened the security panel built into the desk. After pulling out my weapons, I snagged my bulletproof vest and fastened it on Linzey.

“When we get to the door, keep your head down and close to me. We’ll have to run, but I’ll cover us and so will our pickup man.”

“Okay,” she gasped, breathless with worry. “I don’t understand. Do you think they’re after someone in the building?”

“Yes. Me.”

“What? You?” she cried as we hurried down the steps. We couldn’t use the elevator. God knew if there would be more explosives or if the first ones had compromised the system.

“Yeah.”

Another explosion rocked the building, and Linzey screamed. I yanked her up into my arms so I could run faster. At the same time, I gave thanks that the builders had constructed a solid structure or that the explosives were small. It would be just like Coval to do that. Well-placed munitions wouldn’t bring down the high rise, but would draw out the occupants.

After what seemed like forever, we reached the first-floor door to the corridor that led to the side service entrance. Placing Linzey on her feet, I shifted her behind me then drew my weapon. Cautiously, I cracked open the door then surveyed the area. Seeing it all clear, I pulled her into the passage and we rushed toward the steel outer door. I didn't suppose that we'd be as lucky when we opened it.

Pausing, I yanked out my phone again.

"We're at the exit. Is the car here?"

"It's there."

"Recon?"

"No one suspicious. Proceed with caution."

Following the same protocol as with the last door, I cracked this one open and again surveyed the surroundings. As Connor had reported, it appeared all clear.

"Okay, little girl, we've gotta run. Remember what I said."

She nodded.

"Head down; stay close," she said quickly, the words tumbling together.

"Good girl."

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Gun at the ready, I folded her against me, and we dashed for the waiting car. The driver, Matteo, stepped out, covering us from that direction. I heard a shot, and Linzey screamed again, ducking lower. Lifting her, I ran the rest of the way to the vehicle and dove inside. I'd barely slammed the door when Matteo peeled away, even as more more shots hit the car.

"Bulletproof," I muttered into Linzey's hair as she sobbed into my chest. My God, how much could one woman take? I was trained for this. She was not. She didn't deserve this, any of it.

I hugged her tight, knowing what I'd have to do and dreading it. She'd never forgive me.

Eleven

Linzey

"No," I denied, staring at Adler as we stood in the living room of the safe house.

"It's for the best," he said, his tone flat as he pulled his stone-faced persona around him. "They're after me for an old vendetta—"

"Why now?"

"Maybe, they just found me. Maybe, they were rebuilding. Doesn't matter. They're after me, and they'll use you to get to me if they think they can. As soon as your penthouse is deemed safe and the security is fortified, your new protection officer

will take over and—”

“No!” I exclaimed, interrupting again. Hurt tears burned in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “What? You got what you wanted and now, you’re using the first excuse to dump me off?”

“Baby—Linzey. Don’t be like that. You know that’s not what this is,” he pleaded, stepping toward me. I scrambled back, refusing to let him touch me. He froze, horror on his features, and I realized it was the first time I’d shied away from him. Ever.

“Do I?” I snapped. “Because it sure as hell seems like that’s the case. I guess I’m lucky I didn’t spread for you sooner, huh? You would have abandoned me years ago.”

His horror turned to rage, but he shut it down, going emotionless once more. His fingers flexed and released, giving away his agitation, before he spoke again, his voice deadly calm.

“Sleeping with you was not—”

“A diversion? A fun time? Your side gig?” I was all about the interrupting right now and didn’t even care. “Because it sure seems like it. Well, fine! Dump me on someone else. I’m no one’s side piece.”

“Linzey...”

I shook my head, silently stopping whatever he’d planned to say. “I thought...” Emotions made my voice crack and I struggled to speak. Adler reached for me, but I stepped away. “I thought what we had was special, that you actually cared about me. But now...you’re breaking up with me?”

“I’m not breaking up with you!” he yelled, his façade cracking.

“Well, it sure seems like it. How do you think this would even work? You’re leaving me with another bodyguard—”

“For your own safety!”

“Whatever. And what? You’ll sneak in to see me? No, you won’t, because you might be seen. And we can’t go out on dates. So what then? You’re my long distance boyfriend that I talk to over facetime once in a while? How is it different from me being alone? It’s not!” I cried. “It’s worse.”

“Calm down,” he ordered. “Little girl, so help me—”

“Don’t!” I yelled back. “You don’t get to talk to me like that. You don’t get to tell me what to do or where to go or when to eat or...” I shook with my fury and pain. “Or anything!”

I ran for the front door and yanked it open, dashing down the four steps to the sidewalk before Adler could stop me. I heard him yell, but I kept going, all the running I’d done coming in handy. A crowd of commuters, heading home from their subway stop surrounded me. I thought I’d get lost in the pack, but I realized my mistake in less than a minute.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” a man laughed, his rumbling accent, vaguely Eastern European, cutting through my anger and straight to the fear that lived in my soul.

I heard Adler yelling, but it was too late. I was tossed in a white van and we were moving.

* * * *

I stared at the blond-haired man standing across from where I sat in a straight-back chair, in a rundown apartment building. From what I could see, the dining set was the only furniture in the place, not that I wanted to check out the bedroom, the only room I hadn't seen. No thank you.

At the moment, I wasn't tied up, but the man I assumed was Coval had told me he'd shoot out my kneecaps if I tried to get up. The other man who'd been with him had left after he helped drag me in here.

"Shoot out my kneecaps? That's very mobster of you," I said dryly. I might be terrified, but I was over all this shit. Here I was, collateral damage again. This time because this guy had a vendetta against Adler. Why? Why did I always have to be the victim in these assholes' schemes to get at other people? Maybe, it would get me killed, but enough was enough.

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What reason did I have to shut up and take it? My sister, maybe. But she had Booker. And I... I was alone again. And apparently a pawn. Again.

And again and again and again. Again was the story of my pathetic life.

“Were you the one who shot at the car earlier?” I asked. “Because if you were, you’re a pretty shitty shot. I could probably make it to the door before you hit me.”

“Shut up.”

I rolled my eyes at him and crossed my arms, looking away. “So what’s your end game here. Kill me? You think Adler will care? He doesn’t care about me. I’m just his job. One failed assignment isn’t going to exact the revenge you think it will. I’m nothing to him.” I lifted my chin, hoping it didn’t quiver. “You might as well get it over with, then come up with a new plan.”

“I told you to shut up.”

“And I told you, I don’t care what you say,” I snapped back. Okay, maybe, I hadn’t said that, but it still applied.

He stared at me, his green eyes flashing as he probably considered gagging me. Shaking his head, he spouted off something in another language then turned away. Immediately, he turned back and pointed at me with his pistol. “Don’t move.”

I held up my hands. “Nowhere to go.”

Picking at a fingernail, I considered my options. I didn't have any other than waiting this out. My stomach growled.

"So how long do you think this will be?" I asked. "My handlers are so picky about how often I eat." Not a lie. Since the night of the club shooting, Adler had put me on an meal schedule he personally oversaw. "Apparently, I get hangry or something."

He pulled out his phone that looked like some sort of walkie-talkie cell. "Bring the bitch a box of granola bars and some water when you come back," he snapped into it before glaring at me. "Happy?"

"That was rude. You don't even know me."

"Thankfully," he muttered.

I fought back my smirk at the exhilaration that went through me. Winning. I might die within the hour, but in my last minutes, I'd finally found my power. And I was stronger than I thought. I was also pissed and tired of being used, whether as a pawn or a convenience or a momentary distraction.

I startled when I caught a movement on the other side of the front door, ten feet from me. The thing lolled on a single hinge, not shutting completely, which gave me a good look at the occupants of the hallway outside. My eyes went wide when I realized who it was.

I glanced back at Coval. He was so toast, no match for the irate man outside.

Neither was I, for that matter. Coval wasn't the only one in trouble.

"This isn't my first rodeo getting kidnapped, you know? And as far as kidnappings go, you're pretty shitty at it. Man... Bad at shooting. Bad at kidnapping. Poor guy.

You should probably try another line of work,” I said to distract him. “You didn’t even grab the right person. No one cares about me. You might as well shoot me now.”

Twelve

Adler

My blood ran cold when I heard Linzey tell Coval that he might as well shoot her. What the hell was she thinking? When I got my hands on her, she was so getting a spanking. I didn’t give a shit how mad she was at me. I was already pissed that she ran out of the safe house—though fuck, Coval must have had a tail on the car. He’d been right there to nab her.

Everything about this was a fubar—except Linzey’s tracker. That worked, and it was the only thing saving my sanity at the moment.

“You got any food in this place?” I heard Linzey ask. “I think my blood sugar’s getting low. Not sure I’ll make it until Igor gets back with the food.”

Coval’s accomplice, whose name wasn’t Igor, wouldn’t be coming back at all. He was in the back of a van right now and would be on his way to interrogation as soon as we took down his boss. The other three were in the wind, but without Coval, they weren’t much of a threat to me, the Kingdom of Zenderland or its royal family, including Booker. Not that Ghost’s team wouldn’t go after them.

“Deus...” Coval swore through his teeth, and I glanced over at the men with me as Linzey’s kidnapper stomped into the kitchen. The plan was for them to grab him while I freed Linzey.

I pulled down my mask, and stepped back as one of the team took my place. He

edged open the door, ready with a smokegrenade canister. I cringed at the loudscreechfrom the single hinge, but the canister shot across the apartment, clattering across the counter before Coval even had a chance to spin around. We flooded into the apartment.

I grabbed Linzey and ran outside while the others converged on her kidnapper, a man considered a terrorist after masterminding the explosives at her building. And kidnapping and terrorism were only two of his crimes. As long as he was neutralized and my woman was safe, I didn't give a rat's ass about the man.

"Adler! Oh my God, Adler!" she cried, her arms going around me in the hallway. I didn't speak, didn't stop moving until we were safely out on the sidewalk in the fresh air and away from the smoke filling the abandoned structure.

"You are in so much trouble, little girl," I growled, shoving off my mask and crushing her to me.

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“You rescued me again,” she whispered. “But I’m still mad at you.”

“Mad?” I growled. “I am so incandescently angry at you, you’ll be lucky to sit for the next week.” In contrast to my words, I ran my hands over her to ensure she was unharmed. She seemed fine. Thank God. Otherwise, Ghost might have a murder on his hands. “Don’t ever do that to me again. I almost had a heart attack when they grabbed you. And then I couldn’t get to you...”

“How did you even find me?” she asked.

I caught her hand in mine. Turning her palm up, I ran my thumb over the scar on her wrist, an action she had to recognize because I did it often. She just didn’t know why.

“Remember the day you were rescued from Rod? How you were injured? And I tended to you before the medics got there? Gave you two shots?”

“Yeah...”

“Only one of the shots was to numb the area... The other wasn’t an anesthetic.”

“You put a tracker in me?” she exclaimed. “You didn’t even know me back then.”

“Baby girl... I took one look at you and knew you’d be mine someday. My whole life from that moment has been for you.”

Her mouth dropped open, but before I could say anything else, before she could move past her shock and yell at me, Ghost and his team dragged Coval from the building. I

took a step forward, but Linzey sidestepped into my path, staring at him.

“I told you, you were a shitty kidnapper,” she taunted, and he swore at her in Zenderese.

Ghost shoved him. “Watch your mouth when you’re talking to a lady.”

Which reminded me...

I swung her around as the vans with the military prisoners took off, leaving us alone, my car half a block away. “How could you say that to him?”

“Heisa bad kidnapper.”

“That he should shoot you?” I raged, pulling her toward my vehicle. “How could you say that to him? Don’t you know my heart fucking beats for you? Don’t you realize how important you are? To me. To your family?”

She made a scoffing noise. “You broke up with me.”

I pushed her against the side of my car, my arms caging her in. She lifted her chin without a trace of fear, but I saw the vulnerability in her eyes, the demons that told her she wasn’t good enough.

“I didn’t break up with you,” I growled. “God damn it, I love you. And you’re mine. You think I’d lose the best part of my life? Fucking hell, Linzey!”

Her eyes went wide, then sunlight seemed to dawn over her features. She grinned. “I love you, too.”

“Good. Because you’re stuck with me.” My fingers threaded into her messy hair.

“I thought you were handing me over to someone else?”

I laughed. “A pain in the ass like you. I wouldn’t do that to one of my men.”

She shoved my shoulder, but I tugged her in to me and covered her mouth with mine, so fucking grateful that she was okay.

“But you said...” she started when we pulled apart minutes later.

“That was before. Let’s go home,” I said.

“We can’t. The explosions...”

I shrugged. “Already been inspected. The building is sound. Safe for residents while they repair the minor damage.”

“You’re sure?”

My curled fingers lifted her chin, and I brushed my lips over hers. “It’s safe. And you’re always safe with me.”

Epilogue

Linzey

Five years later

The park was pretty, the trees and flowers in full bloom. My legs crossed, I sat on one of the benches, watching children play on the 96th Street Playground, one of the twenty-one playgrounds in Central Park. Though I hadn't told him where I was going, I was certain my husband would be here soon. He took me anywhere I wanted to go, but every once in a bit, I liked to escape from the penthouse—usually when I was overwrought from one of the rare nightmares that still plagued me.

It was the most daring I got nowadays. Being in love and married to the man who was my happily ever after did that to me. He kept me calm and even keeled.

“A pretty little girl like you shouldn't be out here alone, you know,” a deep voice growled from behind me, and I suppressed a shiver.

I glanced at my watch. “Twenty minutes. You must be getting old.”

“I'll show you old,” he threatened, lifting me right over the back of the bench and throwing me over his shoulder while I giggled. “I was on a call with a diplomat from Spain, brat.”

“Let me down,” I demanded, my laughter making me unconvincing while I pummeled his back with enough force to be a tickle.

Still, he dropped me to my feet. I was immediately pushed up against the nearest tree. Adler's mouth was on mine, harsh, demanding and hungry. I knew if we weren't outside in the bright daylight, far too many people around, he'd have my pants down to my knees and his cock buried in me. A fairly typical occurrence for us—just not in public. He saved that for the privacy of our home. Private and often.

"I need to tell you something," I said against his lips.

"That you're sorry for sneaking out?"

"Not sorry at all."

"Naughty..."

I bit his bottom lip, only letting go when his chest rumbled. "Growly man. You'll make a really great daddy. Soon."

"You better believe..." His words trailed off as my meaning sank in. His hands cupped my belly. "We're...? You're...?"

"Yes, we're having a baby. Marigold brought me a test yesterday, and I took it this morning."

"I would have taken you to the doctor."

"I know." I curled my hand on his handsome face. At thirty-seven he was only getting more good looking. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Are you okay? Do you feel alright?"

"I feel great." I smirked at him. "A little hungry."

“Let’s go home. I’ll cook you something—”

I caught his arm. Pulling him toward me, I went to my toes and pressed my mouth to his. “All I want is you. I love you, Adler.”

He lifted me into his arms, striding toward our building. “And you have me. All of me. You’re my life, Linzey—you and our baby—and nothing else matters, not the job, not the money. Only you. I love you.”