



Edge of Desperation

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Mc

Description: Aurora...

Monsters don't always hide in the shadows. Sometimes, they're right in front of us. My job is to uncover the truth, but this time, the truth drags me straight to Hell, and I'm terrified that my nightmares will consume me.

As my life spirals out of control, protection comes from the most unlikely of places. With Jaxson, I'm safe, but safety can also be an illusion. Do I have the strength to hold on or do I succumb to the darkness with each new threat?

Jaxson...

Being a Marine, I've seen things, but I never imagined the toll my latest mission would take on me and my team. There's more at stake than any of us could have prepared for, but when push comes to shove, we know exactly what side we're on.

Somewhere along the way, Aurora became more than a mission. Lines have blurred, but before we can explore what's between us, she needs to face her demons and learn that she's not a broken shell. She's a warrior, and I'll do whatever it takes to prove it to her.

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PROLOGUE

AURORA

“Damn it, Aurora. I’m your boss, and I said you’re not going.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at my editor. Hugh Reed is a force to be reckoned with, but he’s never pulled rank on me before. Being an investigative reporter means sometimes rubbing elbows with unsavory individuals to get the story. I’ve been with the Boston Herald for three years now and love my job. The typical crooked politicians, insider trading, extremely high caseloads for social services, and overcrowding in school systems are just a few stories I’ve covered over the years.

For the first time, I have a story that could blow the whistle on organized crime.

“Screw you, Hugh,” I huff. “If I was one of the gu?—”

“Don’t!” Hugh yells. “I should’ve never entertained you digging into this story. It’s too dangerous.”

Heads pop up from the cubicles like little gophers outside of Hugh’s office. The glass walls aren’t exactly soundproof and give a great view of the scene playing out. My face burns with embarrassment and anger, knowing I’m going to be the center of gossip later. It’s not like me to get this pissed, but this is important. I’ve been chasing leads on this story for almost a year, and I’ve finally had a breakthrough. A real-life survivor, willing to talk.

I brace myself on his desk and lean forward. “I have an informant,” I say in hushed tones. “She barely made it out alive.”

“Give the information to the police, and walk away, Aurora. That’s an order.”

“It won’t hurt for me to at least meet with her and hear what she has to say.” I jut out my chin in defiance. “It’s not like I’m going to beat down their front door and demand answers.”

Hugh shakes his head. “When have you ever walked away after an interview?”

“I’m not stupid,” I say, defensively. “I know how dangerous this is. Let me talk to her. If I can get a lead on where they’re keeping the girls, I’ll go to the police. Plus, you’ll have a great front-page story. You’ll be a hero!”

He wags his finger at me. “Don’t you try to butter me up, Parks. Your dad will have the entire United States Marine Corps after my ass if anything happens to you.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m taking precautions. I’m going to meet her at a diner downtown during the day.” Glancing at the clock, I smooth my top. “In fact, I need to go. I’m meeting her in thirty minutes.”

After a pause that has me worried he’s going to say no, he finally grumbles. “At least tell me which diner you’re going to.”

“Now why would I do that? You know as well as I do, as soon as I tell you, you’ll have Jansen follow me.”

“I woul?—”

I hold up my hand. “Don’t insult my intelligence. You would, and I love you for it,

but I'm a big girl, Hugh. I can handle this."

"Fine," he concedes. "But you check in every thirty minutes or there'll be hell to pay when you get back, and I'll call your father."

I mock salute. "Yes, sir"

"Don't be a smartass."

"I'll be careful," I promise. "You'll see. I'll be back before you know it." I spin on my heel and pull open his door, rushing out before he can change his mind.

"I mean it, Parks... every thirty minutes," Hugh yells at my back as I run toward my desk.

I rush to my car as the wind howls, and small drops of rain begin to fall. I shiver and slide into my leather seat. Twenty minutes later, I pull into the parking lot at Lottie's Diner, a hotspot for the local businesses and college kids. I chose this location because it's laid back, and it will be easy to blend in. I grab a booth in the back corner facing the doorway and wait for the mysterious Laceto enter.

What I failed to mention to Hugh, was how Lace found out about me. I received an email at work last week, stating that Lace had escaped a sex-trafficking ring here in Boston. She was too scared to go to law enforcement because the traffickers have police on their payroll, and she didn't want to end up back in their grasp. If I can get all the answers I need, we can bypass the local PD and go straight to the FBI, but first, I need to find out if her claims are legitimate.

I'm lost in thought when the bell above the door jingles. A timid woman—well, more like a girl because she doesn't look a day over sixteen—slowly enters the restaurant. She's wearing a dark hoodie and torn jeans, but nothing to protect her from the cold

snap we're currently experiencing. Her cheeks are sunken in, and there are dark circles under her eyes. My heart clenches at the thought of what she must've endured during her captivity.

This has to be her.

My eyes find hers, and I give a friendly wave.

She rushes toward me. "Are you Aurora Parks?"

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“Yes,” I confirm. “Are you Lace?” She nods as she slides into the booth. “Do you care if I take notes?”

Lace looks around nervously. “I guess not,” she whispers.

“What can I get you?”

Both of us jump at the waitress’s approach, neither of us paying attention. I recover quickly. “I’ll take a coffee. Lace, what about you?”

“Do you have hot chocolate?” she asks.

“Coffee and hot chocolate,” the waitress repeats. “I’ll be right back with that. Menus are on the table.” She points to the stack of laminated papers behind the old-fashioned napkin dispenser. “I’ll take your food order when I get back. Pot roast with mashed potatoes and gravy with a slice of Dutch apple pie is the special today.”

“That sounds good,” I say to Lace as the waitress walks away. “Are you hungry?”

“I don’t have enough money to eat.”

“Don’t worry about that.” I hand her a menu. “This is a business meeting so I’m buying. They have good cheeseburgers and shakes here too.”

Shyly, she says, “Whatever you want to get me, is fine.”

“Do you have any allergies?” She shakes her head. “How about two specials then?”

That sounds good, and then I won't feel so bad having dinner and dessert by myself." I wink.

She giggles, but quickly shuts it down as if she can't believe she even still knows how. I'm relieved she hasn't scared herself into regretting this meeting. Instead, I get the sweetest smile that steals my heart, when she softly says, "That sounds amazing."

The waitress returns with our beverages, and I order two specials with whipped cream on the pie. Again, the corner of Lace's mouth turns up when I ask for extra whipped cream on her piece, but this time, her eyes glisten as if I'm her hero.

"How did you find out about me?" I ask, diving right in.

"You did a story a year ago on foster kids in the public schools and how much our education suffered from being passed around from family to family and school to school."

"You were one of the foster kids I interviewed?" I ask, incredulously.

"No, but my foster sister was," she admits. "She always talked about how nice you were and about how you actually listened and believed them."

I nod, remembering that story. It was so sad listening to children talk about packing up their belongings in trash bags like they were nothing and being shuffled around like their feelings didn't matter. Once the story broke, the state took measures to try its best to keep children in the same school districts so they would have some sense of stability. It didn't fix the entire issue, but I always prayed it helped a little.

"Can you tell me what happened to you?"

Lace picks at the hem of her shirt. "We weren't supposed to go out, but there were

these boys from school we liked.”

Thousands of questions bombard my brain at once, but this isn’t my story to tell. Unlike others I’ve interviewed, this is a fragile child who has seen and been through things that others can’t even imagine, let alone survive. Instead of pushing, I bite back my inquisition and let her lead me down the broken world she’s been living in. I’m fortunate to be her voice once she’s done and help her and others find justice.

I smile, encouragingly. “I remember those days.”

“It was a Friday night. We snuck out and met them at the basketball courts.” Lace takes a deep breath. “Everything was going great until one of them got a text from his parents telling him to get his ass home before he got grounded.” Her eyes glass over. “My sister and I took off in the opposite direction to head back home. Halfway there, we cut down an alley. A van pulled up blocking the exit, and we tried to run, but they were too quick. They grabbed both of us and tossed us in. They put black hoods over our heads and told us they would shoot us dead if we made any noise.” Lace’s head drops in defeat as a single tear slips free and hits the table.

“It’s okay,” I encourage. “We can take a break if you need to.”

“No.” Her head snaps up, and her blue eyes blaze with fury. “I need to finish.”

Even though we just met, I’m proud as hell of this girl’s grit. “Go on.”

“I didn’t make a sound, but Sam wouldn’t shut up. She kept screaming. I prayed she would s-s-stop,” Lace stutters. “I heard a loud bang and then nothing. I kept my mouth shut, but I was still crying.” I reach across the table and squeeze her hand. “It seemed like we drove for hours, but I don’t know how long it was. I didn’t have a watch. When they finally removed the hood, I was in a warehouse with other girls.”

“What happened next?”

She gulps. “Nothing I ever want to talk or think about ever again.”

“Sexual?” I ask, needing confirmation. “Against your will?”

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“Yes,” she confirms. “It wasn’t just physical. They didn’t always, you know...do that, but beatings were a part of the daily routine to keep us in line, along with being told how worthless we were. Bruises fade over time, but words scar. Even some of the worst foster homes I stayed in weren’t this bad. I wish I would’ve stayed home that night. At least I’d still be safe.”

My heart breaks as her words sink in.

“How did you escape?”

“I haven’t.”

I reel back as if I’ve been slapped. “What do you mean you haven’t?”

“I might’ve got away for now, but I’m marked,” Lace explains. She rolls up her sleeve slowly, exposing a UPC tattoo with Property of Krukov.

“What the fuck?”

“It’s their brand,” she explains. “I’m property of the Krukov family. If they find me, they’ll put me in conditions worse than what I fled, or ... they’ll kill me.”

“How’d you get away?”

“One of the Johns didn’t show up for his appointment, and I crawled out of the motel window while the guard was getting a blowjob from another girl.”

“Where’ve you been staying?”

“Nowhere,” she admits. “I’ve been moving around constantly. I sleep in the library during the day and hide at night.”

“We can go to the FBI.”

“No, they have people in their pocket at the FBI. I’ve been forced to service one or two of them to keep them happy for the Krukov family. Sometimes, they are the worst monsters out there.”

“I can’t let you get taken again,” I protest. “You have to let me help you.”

“You are.” Lace squeezes my hand back. “You’re listening, and you believe me. No one has ever believed me.”

“You’ve told others?”

“I used to tell the men who paid for sex.” She laughs with no humor. “They’d smack me or just laugh in my face and then use my body for what they paid for.”

“Mother fuckers,” I grit.

My phone dings, and I reach into my purse to pull it out.

Annoying Boss: You still alive?

Me: Yes. This is serious

Annoying Boss: How bad

Me: Worse than you can imagine

Annoying Boss: Be careful. Get back here ASAP

Me: Will do. Eating dinner and will head back

“Everything okay?” Lace asks.

“It’s my boss, wondering where I am.” I put my cell back.

We eat in silence, but when the waitress puts the dessert down in front of Lace, she lets out a tiny squeal of joy.

“Ohmigosh!” she gushes and shoves a forkful in her mouth. “This is so good.”

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I chuckle. “I’m glad you like it.”

After I settle the bill, I hand Lace my business card with my cell number written on the back. We walk out of the diner, and I pull my coat tight around my body to block the chill.

Lace pulls her hood over her head and shoves her hands in her pocket. “Thanks for the meal and for listening.”

“You’ll call if you need anything?” I ask, hopefully.

She shrugs. “Sure.”

Lace glances around cautiously and turns toward the alleyway. “Bye, Ms. Parks.”

I give a small wave. “Bye.”

I walk briskly to my car, my mind, and heart at war with each other as I watch that poor girl walk away unprotected again. I unlock my car, drop into the drivers’ seat, and pound the steering wheel with my fist.

Your dad and Hugh will freaking throttle you, but you can’t leave her out here alone to fend for herself. She’s just a baby. Lace is all alone in this world and has NO ONE to protect her. Who’s going to save her?

Mind made up, I throw the car in drive and slowly head into the alleyway, pulling up beside a startled Lace. I roll down the window. “Get in, you’re coming with me.”

“It’s nice of you to offer, but I c-c-can’t.” Her voice wobbles. “I’ll put you in danger. I can’t do that to you.”

This girl has no idea how stubborn I can be. “My dad is a General in the Marines. He can help protect you.”

“How?”

“You let me worry about that.”

My mind races with how I’m going to protect this girl. A plan forms... First thing, I’ll drive us down to Quantico, Virginia, and speak face-to-face with my father. He’ll know what to do.

I square my shoulders and give Lace my best Mom look. “Get in the car, Lace. You already took the biggest step you could with getting away from those monsters. Now, take the next step, and let me help you.” I raise my brows when she tries to interrupt. “I promise, my dad is the best.”

“Okay.” A tear slides down her cheek. “Thank you.” She opens the car door and slides in.

“Put on your seatbelt,” I say. “Let’s get out of here.”

I check my rearview mirror to make sure I’m not being followed. Once I’m sure it’s safe, I head home. I want to grab my gun, just in case we run into trouble, and grab a few things before heading to Virginia.

Me: Making a pit stop at my house

Annoying Boss: I’ll have Jansen meet you.

Me: No need. Literally running in and out. It'll take 5 min.

Annoying Boss: Text me when you're on your way back

Me: Not coming back today

Annoying Boss: WHAT????

Me: Heading to Quantico. Call later with deets

Annoying Boss: I want hourly updates. This is not up for debate. I mean it

Me: Sir, yes sir

Annoying Boss: Smartass. Remind me again why I don't fire you

Me: Because you love my sunny disposition

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Lace and I make small talk for the next thirty minutes on the drive to my house. She tells me about her parents and about how she lost them in an accident, and I tell her about my dad and how I lost my mom to cancer when I was younger. We pull into the driveway and climb out of the car.

“Hello, Kiska,” a thick Russian accent says from behind us. “You’ve been naughty.”

I whirl around to stare down the intruder, and Lace freezes. We were so distracted by our conversation that neither of us noticed the dark SUV pull up.

My body jerks like it's being struck by lightning before the world tilts on its axis.

CHAPTER 1

JAXSON

“No... no... please, stop!”

Screams assault my ears the closer I get to the closed door. My team has the shack surrounded and awaits my signal to breach it. I close my eyes and silently pray before raising my boot to kick in the door. Skin slapping skin and grunting noises rise above the pleas of a woman.

“Alpha team, go,” I growl at the same time my foot connects with the flimsy piece of wood.

I’ve seen a lot of fucked up shit in my life, but the scene in front of me threatens to

drop me to my knees. Five men litter the room in different stages of undress, and four of them are stroking their flaccid cocks. The fifth man is gripping the hips and thrusting wildly inside of the sobbing female who's tied to a table on her stomach.

My eyes seek out hers. I want her to know that the good guys are here, but when she turns her head, only a vacant look stares back at me. The man rutting into her is so far gone that he hasn't even noticed that I've entered the room.

The other men start screaming as the rest of my men descend. The kidnappers reach for their guns, but they're too slow, and each one drops as a bullet hits their forehead, ending their miserable lives. The fucker raping the woman finally comes out of his sex-fueled haze, picks a knife up off the table, and charges toward me.

"Come on, motherfucker," I taunt.

He swings the knife, but I grab his wrist and flip it back toward him, jabbing him in the stomach. He sags to the floor, the grin on his face nothing but pure evil.

"I broke her," he says with a laugh. "We marked her. She'll never be safe."

"That's where you're wrong." I lift my gun and fire one bullet between his eyes, watching him slump over.

"Rivers," Thomas calls out. "She won't let us near her."

I rock back on my heels and turn toward Aurora. Someone already cut her free from the table. They also covered her with a blanket which she's currently cowered under in the corner, but the flimsy material isn't larger enough to hide her.

I shift toward her with my hands in the air so she can see that I don't have any weapons and mean her no harm. "Aurora," I call out softly.

“No, please,” she begs. “No more. Kill me. Please, just kill me.”

“Aurora,” I say more firmly. “Your dad sent us. You’re safe. We’re here to take you home.”

She shakes her head. “Can’t trust anyone.”

I lift my brows and look around at my men. Thomas shrugs and moves to grab Aurora before I can stop him. A blood-curdling scream reverberates off the walls.

“Back the fuck off, Thomas,” I grit through my teeth.

Thomas takes a step back, his hands up in surrender. “I wasn’t going to hurt her.”

“I know that, but she doesn’t.”

Keeping my hands raised so she can see them, I step forward slowly. After a few steps, I drop to my knees, my hands placed in front of me. I will my facial muscles to relax so as not to show the looming anger that threatens to rise to the surface. Those fuckers died too quickly for my liking. I wish I could’ve taken my time and made them suffer the way Aurora and the others before her have. We recovered twenty-five other women before finally locating our main target.

“You don’t know us, but I swear we’re the good guys. I’m going to take off my shirt so I can cover you up.” I toss my helmet and bulletproof vest to Thomas, who catches it with ease, and slowly pull my shirt off. Aurora flinches, smacking her head into the flimsy wall. “Fuck... are you okay?”

She doesn’t answer but watches me, wide-eyed. Now that my shoulder is exposed, she can see my ink. A skull with an oar and knife crisscrossed behind it with gnarly wings on the side. Every Marine Force Recon has one on our team.

“Winchester,” I say with a silent prayer.

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Aurora's face lights up with recognition. "My f-f-father sent you?" she whispers.

Before we left, General Parks pulled me aside and whispered Winchester into my ear. He explained that it was their safe word and one that Aurora would recognize. I assume it's because of his love of guns.

Relieved, I nod. "Yes, we've been looking for you for ten days."

"It's only been ten days?" she says mostly to herself. "What happened to Lace?"

"Who's Lace?"

"The girl that was with me."

I gulp, not wanting to cause her any more distress. "We haven't recovered anyone by that name. I'm sorry."

"This is a fucking nightmare." Aurora pummels her head and begins pulling at the ends of her hair. Her eyes widen as she stares at the strands in her palms. "A real-life nightmare, and I can't wake up."

Aurora sobs harder, and her body shakes uncontrollably. She claws at her skin, drawing blood down her arms. Knowing that this might cause more harm than good, I move closer to wrap the little blanket around her tighter in an effort to stop her from hurting herself. Aurora swings at my head, but there's no weight behind the punch because she's so weak.

“Stay away from me!” she screams, digging at her skin once again. “I can’t get them off of me.”

Not wanting her to cause any more damage, I quickly wrap the blanket around her tight, pull her into my lap, and rock her. She struggles to get away from me, but I tighten my grip so she doesn’t hurt herself further.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it, but you’re safe now,” I murmur into her hair. “We’re going to take you home. It’s over. You’ll see.”

I glance at my men. The looks on their faces range from pity to rage. We were too late to stop the horrors she had to endure, but we got her back, and we will ensure she gets home safe to her father.

“Turn around,” I order my men. They all give us their backs. “Aurora, I’m going to drop the blanket now and put my shirt on you. We didn’t think to bring you any clothes, but this will at least fit you like a dress and keep you covered until we can get you home. We’re going directly to the airstrip.”

“Home?”

“Home,” I promise.

I pull it down over her head while she threads her arms through the sleeves, taking note of every bruise and cut that mars her skin. As I predicted, the shirt dwarfs her small frame. I stand, holding out my hand for her to grab and pull her to her feet. She stumbles forward, and I catch her before she falls. I cradle her bridal style against my chest, noting she weighs hardly anything.

“How long have I been missing?” Aurora inquires. “Everything is a blur. I hardly remember anything.”

“‘Bout fourteen days, give or take,” I respond.

“Jesus,” Bennett mutters. “Are you sure it’s only been two weeks? Look at her man.”

All I’ve done since we rid the world of those sons of bitches is stare at Aurora, but now that Bennett mentions it, her hair is brittle and grimy. Dark black circles have formed under her sunken eyes, and her cheeks are hallowed out. I’m not sure how skinny she was before she was taken, but her ribs are very noticeable.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Hudson inquires gently.

I admire this about my team. We’re all gruff, hard men, but we know how to tread lightly when necessary.

“I... I... I was in a warehouse somewhere with Russians,” Aurora explains. “Next thing I know, I’m on a cargo plane chained to a wall with a lot of other women. Omigod! The other women... Please tell me they’re okay.”

“Shhh, calm down,” I assure. “We found them a few days ago. They’re already back in the States.”

“Back in the States?” she asks, confused. “Where the hell are we?”

We all glance at each other, and Hudson rubs the back of his neck. “Uh... well... you see...”

“We’re in Sukhodil, Ukraine,” Carver answers.

Aurora turns her head to face him. “How could they get me out of the U.S. without a passport?”

Carver grimaces. “They smuggled you and all the girls out. Unfortunately, it happens all the time.”

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Aurora trembles, so I hold her closer to my chest.

“Enough,” I state firmly. “We can discuss this more on the plane. Fall out, we don’t know if they have reinforcements on the way.”

“Roger that!” all my men say in unison.

Thomas takes point and leads the way out of the shack where Aurora was being held. Each man takes a defensive position around me and the precious cargo I’m carrying, guns drawn, ready to fire. We hike the two miles back to our abandoned Hummer where I gently place Aurora in the back seat between Carver and Hudson while everyone else piles in.

“Please,” Aurora begs. “Please don’t leave me.”

I toss the keys to Carver. “You drive. I’ll sit back here.”

Carver catches them easily and gives Aurora a lopsided smile. “We’ll be back at the plane in no time.”

Hudson hands Aurora a bottle of water, which she opens and chugs greedily. “When was the last time you had a drink of water?”

“I can’t remember,” she says, sheepishly. Her stomach takes this moment to growl in anger. “Sor?—”

Before I can step out of the way, Aurora’s face turns a sickening grayish color. She

opens her mouth and projectile vomits the water she consumed all over my chest and pants, effectively soaking me. I lift her out of the Hummer and gently set her on the ground, where she continues to dry heave.

I rub my hand over my face. “Fuck.”

“Shit, sorry, Rivers,” Hudson says, handing me the blanket that we had used to cover Aurora.

Drying off the best I can, I lean down to check on her. “You, okay?”

Emerald eyes stare back at me. “I’m so s-s-sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hudson answers before I can. “I wasn’t thinking. You’re probably severely dehydrated. That wasn’t smart of me to let you drink water that fast. Once we get you on the plane, I’ll get you set up with an IV and get some fluids in you. The fault is all mine.”

“He’s right,” I agree. “It’s not your fault. We weren’t thinking. Come on.” I assist her back into the vehicle. “Let’s get you home. Step on it, Carver.”

Their death was way too fucking fast.

CHAPTER 2

AURORA

“How much farther?” I ask, wanting to be far away from this country.

Tensions are running high, and the men keep their guns at the ready as if they’re expecting the enemy to ambush us at any time. We’ve been driving for a while, and I

keep pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. The last thing I want is for this to be something my mind conjured up to escape the brutality I've been living for how long now?

Maybe two weeks... if that man was correct. Seems so much longer. When you're clawing your way through hell, every day feels like years.

"We're here," the driver announces.

Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. However, goosebumps litter my skin. In front of the Hummer is a private jet, not a cargo plane I expected for a retrieval mission. The men take a defensive position around the vehicle, and the man I've dubbed Shirtless holds his hand out for me to take.

"What's going on?" I shout, backing further into the car away from him. "This isn't right...NO!"

I'm not getting on that plane. They'll have to kill me first. I've lived through hell; I can't do it again.

Shirtless crouches to the ground to make himself appear like he's not a threat. "Aurora, remember, your dad sent us to get you."

I'm not stupid, they all have guns. "You could be lying."

"Winchester," Shirtless repeats kindly.

Even though I want to see my dad more than anything else in this world, I shake my head wildly. "You could've guessed that, or someone in our family could've told you."

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“Does anyone in your family know that codeword besides you and your father?”

“I-I-I don’t know.”

“Here.” One of the men tosses something at Shirtless. “We don’t have time for this. Shit could be coming for us at any second. We need to get in the air.”

“Where the fuck is my daughter?” My father’s voice pierces the night.

“Daddy,” I choke out and grasp for the man who isn’t there.

“Baby girl.” Dad’s voice falters only for a moment before his tone leaves no room for argument. “I know you’re scared. These are my men, ones I trust with my life and yours. Go with them.”

“But where’s the cargo plane?”

Shirtless clears his throat. “We didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves. This was more inconspicuous.”

“Aurora, get on the plane,” Dad pleads. “It’s safe, I promise.”

“O-o-okay.” I scoot to the edge of the seat and hold out my hand. Shirtless pulls me from the car.

“Rivers, I’ll meet you when you land,” Dad states.

“Roger that, Sir.” Shirtless, or I guess Rivers, hangs up the phone.

I sway on my feet, and Rivers swings me up into his arms. The men form a barrier around us as we rush to the plane. Each one is in perfect step with the other. No one stops until we reach the plane’s staircase.

The plane's cabin seats eight. Four chairs face each other, and four are placed together in another section. The last man enters the plane, securing the door behind him.

“We should go... now,” Rivers growls without further explanation.

The pilot comes over the intercom, telling everyone to take their seat and buckle up. Rivers sits directly across from me. I grip the armrests as the plane increases its speed for takeoff, praying that the Russians don’t suddenly show up. Once we’re in the air, Rivers begins to make introductions as everyone begins moving around the cabin.

“I’m sorry for not doing this earlier, Aurora,” he says. “Time wasn’t on our side, and we needed to get you out before anyone else showed up.” I nod, and he continues. “I’m Jaxson Rivers. Cranky ass over there who threw the phone is Felix Thomas.” Felix shoots his middle finger up in the air. “Next to Felix is Cooper Bennett, and Leo Carver is across from Bennett.” Jaxson unbuckles and stands. “I’ll be right back.”

Jaxson turns to head toward the cockpit, but before he does, he twists and points to the last man, who is rummaging in the cabinets with his back to me.

“That’s Ben Hudson, also our medic,” he explains. “He’ll make sure you’re comfortable until we get back to the States.”

Hudson approaches with a bag of fluids and some tubing, which I assume is an IV.

“May I?” he asks before reaching for me.

I shrug. “Which arm?”

“Hmm.” Hudson glances around and points above my head. “How about your right arm? There’s a hook right there where I can hang the bag.”

“Okay.”

“I really should clean up some of those cuts.”

I shake my head. “I’m fine.”

I could really use five minutes where someone isn’t touching or groping me. I want to close my eyes and forget.

Hudson grunts but doesn’t argue. “Do you want me to give you anything for pain?”

“No, thank you.”

Everything hurts, but at the same time, all I feel is numb. It takes him a few tries to find a vein, and he profusely apologizes for every wince he causes. I keep my mouth shut and don’t make a sound. Even though these guys are safe, it doesn’t mean my limited time in captivity didn’t teach me anything. Those in control like to hear your pain. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out as he finally gets the needle to take hold. The familiar taste of metal hits my tongue, and I gag.

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“Fuck!” Hudson shouts. “I need some help here.”

I shrink back in my seat as droplets of blood splatter down my chin. Thundering footsteps barrel toward us.

“What the fuck happened?” Jaxson quickly leans down to wipe the blood off my face.

“I don?—”

“H-h-he didn’t do anything wrong,” I defend.

“I know. Hudson’s the best medic we got. I trust him and all my men with my life.” Jaxson says, gently. “So, what happened?”

“I accidentally bit the inside of my cheek,” I mumble.

“That’s one helluva a bite if you’re bleeding,” he counters.

I lower my head. “I’ve had worse.”

Jaxson tips my chin up. “Never again.”

I meet his intense stare. “You can’t promise that.”

Jaxson squares his jaw but says nothing because he knows I’m right. There’s so much evil in the world, and as much as the good guys do their best to prevent it, it spreads like cancer.

Luckily, we're prevented from continuing this awkward conversation because Hudson returns with a bottle of water and a thick blanket, which he drapes over me.

"Here." He hands me the water. "Very small sips."

I follow his directions and take a small sip. Jaxson watches me like a hawk the entire time. It's like he can see every vile thing that was done to me. I shudder under his scrutiny and pull the blanket up tight around my shoulders.

Even though it's dark outside, I twist my head to stare out into the black sky. After a few minutes, my eyelids start to droop. I don't remember the last time I could close my eyes without fear that I would be abused.

"You sure it was two weeks, Rivers?" someone asks.

"General Parks said Aurora was last seen by her boss, Hugh, at the Boston Herald on the seventeenth. Hugh and Aurora made a deal that she could go meet an informant on a piece she was writing only if she checked in every thirty minutes. According to Hugh, everything was going well until after her meeting was over," Jaxson pauses. "Aurora told him she had changed her mind about coming back to work and that she was heading to Quantico instead. She was making a pit stop at home. A quick in and out. When Hugh didn't hear from her after repeatedly trying to call her for two hours, he went to her home."

"Why didn't he call General Parks right away?" a voice asks.

"The general said he didn't want to cause a false alarm over nothing. When Hugh got to her house, he found Aurora's car abandoned and her phone and purse lying in the driveway. Hugh called the general and told him everything about what she had been working on and that she was meeting someone who had escaped. Everything has been a covert operation. General Parks knew he had to assemble quickly. He searched high

and low and followed every lead until he could get us back, which unfortunately took three fucking days. No one was informed she was missing except us, and Hugh told everyone she worked with she was visiting her father and then would be out undercover for a story.”

“Fucking sucks we were out of the country.” Hudson sighs next to me. “We might have found her sooner.”

“Maybe, but you guys know the Russians are a well-oiled machine,” someone whispers. “That’s why they’re still doing this shit right under everyone’s noses.”

“How does Hugh know the general?” a gruff voice asks.

“If your only daughter was an investigative reporter, running leads on some unsavory topics or people, wouldn’t you want to put the fear of god into her boss?” Jaxson asks. “Because I sure as hell would. From what I understand, General Parks doesn’t interfere in Aurora’s life, but Hugh has been instructed to reach out if he thinks she’s getting in too deep and could get hurt. Fortunately, it never happened.”

“Until now,” Hudson mumbles.

“Until now,” Jaxson agrees.

After the first couple of days, I lost faith that anyone would know I was gone, even though I told my boss I would check in on my way to Quantico. I should’ve known Hugh would sound the alarm, but I didn’t expect it to be as fast as it was.

I tune out the rest of their conversation and try to clear my mind. I recline my chair back and settle into the buttery leather seat.

The feeling of a few dozen bee stings under my hairline at my neck jolts me awake. I

try to lift my head, but it's being held down by some sort of strap.

"Someone help me, please!" I yell.

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“Shhh, my pet,” a gruff voice replies. “There’s no one here to help you. It’ll all be over soon.”

“What’s going o?—”

A pinch in my arm causes my eyes to drift close once again. My pain disappears, but I feel as though I’m floating away from my body. I let myself slip back into the abyss. The next time I come to, I’m hanging upside down over someone’s shoulder. I’m too weak to open my mouth and ask what’s going on or where I am.

Nothing looks familiar. The walls are concrete, and there are several large water puddles on the floor. We pass by several doors that remind me of prison cells. I can’t get a good look at them because I can’t lift my head up. Suddenly, we stop, and a lock disengages.

“Not yet,” someone yells. “Boss wants her first.”

“He gets all the good ones,” the man holding me says.

“Better get her up there before he kills you.”

The man mumbles something in Russian and marches further into the corridor. He steps onto an elevator, and my stomach jostles with the movements of ascent. I groan and try to twist out of my capture’s hold.

Mystery goon grips my waist harder, which I’m sure will leave bruises later. He knocks on a door, and someone yells, ‘enter’.

He places me on a chair to face an opulent desk with a brooding man sitting behind it. I take a moment and study him as he does the same to me. Normally, I might find a man like this handsome, but there's something in his eyes that screams 'DANGER'.

"Who are you?"

"I'm your new master."

I jerk my chin out stubbornly. "I don't think so, pal."

My face whips to the side, and my body flies from the chair with the force of the blow. I grip my cheek and look up with wide eyes at the man who carried me into the room.

"Don't speak unless you're told to, slave."

Realizing this is not the time to be a smartass, I bite my tongue, but I don't lower my eyes.

"Oleg, don't put too many marks on the merchandise," the man behind the desk chastises.

Oleg grips my arm and tugs me back into the chair.

"My name is Dmitri Krukov," he introduces. "And you are Aurora Parks, investigative reporter for the Boston Herald. I believe you've been poking around for a story about me and my family for over a year now, isn't that right, pet?"

Fuck! Sweat trickles down the back of my neck, and my heart hammers in my chest as I whip my head around quickly, searching for Lace.

“Looking for someone?” Dmitri taunts. Remembering what happened the last time I spoke, I keep my mouth shut. Dmitri slams his fist down on the desk, causing me to jump. “I asked you a fucking question.”

“Where’s Lace?”

Dmitri laughs. “Oleg, where’s Lace?”

Oleg shrugs. “She got held up.”

“I’d be more worried about yourself, my pet,” Dmitri sneers. “You’re going to be so much fun to break.”

I’m trapped, but I’ll be damned if I go down without a fight. I jump out of the chair and dash around Oleg. Just as I reach for the door handle, my head snaps backward from Oleg, grabbing a fistful of my hair. He pulls me up by the roots until my feet are dangling in the air.

“Bring her to me,” Dmitri orders, pushing everything off his desk. Oleg slams my back down on the desk, knocking the wind out of my lungs. “Strip her.”

Oleg rips my shirt down the middle, exposing my lace bra. He licks his lips, and his eyes gleam with lust. I hear the click of a gun as he rips the buttons off my dress pants and starts yanking them down, and I claw at his hands.

“Now, now,” Dmitri says calmly with a sadistic gleam in his eyes. “We wouldn’t want to start putting holes into this lovely body. Besides, it won’t stop the inevitable.”

My panties are torn from my body. I scream as Dmitri slams into me. “Noooo, please,” I beg, tears streaming down my face. “Please, stop.”

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“That’s right, pet,” Dmitri grunts and licks the wetness off my face. “Cry for me. Your tears just make me harder.”

I scream and thrash to get away from him, but it’s no use. I’m trapped.

“Aurora!”

My eyelids fly open. Jaxson is inches from my face and gripping my arms. I flinch back into the seat.

It was just a nightmare... right?

CHAPTER 3

JAXSON

“Don’t touch me.”

Aurora wiggles free from my grasp. I hold my hands up in surrender, not wanting to freak her out more than she already is.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I say softly. “You were screaming and struggling in your sleep.”

“Looked like you were having a nightmare,” Hudson pipes up.

I share a look with Hudson. We don’t say it out loud, but we’re both thinking it. How

could anyone go through what she did and not have fucking nightmares? I'm surprised she's holding it together as well as she is.

"We're beginning our descent," the pilot announces over the intercom. "Buckle up."

I roam my eyes over her face once more before returning to my seat.

Aurora's shoulders slump, but she keeps a firm grip on the blanket around her. "How long was I out?"

"Bout ten hours or so," Hudson replies.

Fifteen minutes later, we're back on U.S. soil. Aurora attempts to stand, but her legs give out, and she crashes back into her seat.

"Let me help you." I weave my arms under her and lift her gently into my arms. Tears well up in her eyes. "Hudson, are we taking out the IV?"

"Nah, we'll keep it in." Hudson takes the bag down from the hook. "She needs more fluids anyway. Now the hospital won't have to poke her again." He places the empty bag against her chest along with the extra hanging tubing. "Hold on to this, okay?"

She nods. "My dad?"

"He's outside waiting for you," I confirm. "Alpha team, go!"

My men exit the plane first. We might be on a marine base, but Aurora is our mission until she's safe in her father's arms. Hudson marches off the plane behind me, taking a defensive position just like the men in front of me.

"Aurora!" General Parks shouts, rushing toward me.

“D-D-Daddy,” Aurora hiccups, reaching for him.

An anguished cry erupts from her small frame as I transfer her to her father’s waiting arms. I want to pull Aurora back into my chest, but I know it’s not my place to provide the comfort that she’s seeking at the moment. The longer she’s in her father’s embrace, the harder she cries. The EMTs surround them, and Aurora grips her father’s jacket tighter, fighting to stay in his arms. The problem is the medical workers are all men, and Aurora is screaming while trying to get away from them. General Parks is struggling to keep Aurora in his arms as she swings at another pair of hands that reach for her. I can’t take it anymore and push my way through.

“Get the fuck back,” I roar.

My men quickly form a barrier around the general and Aurora, pushing everyone back. Aurora calms slightly and stops fighting her father. Her sobs hit me directly in the chest, and I fight the urge to turn and snatch her back where I know she’ll be safe.

“We need to assess the victim,” one jackass yells.

“Call her a victim again, and I’ll rearrange your face, motherfucker,” Carver sneers.

“Aurora’s a survivor,” Thomas hollers. “Fucking treat her with the respect she deserves instead of pawing at her.”

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“We’re trying to do ou?—”

“Obviously, you suck at it,” Hudson interrupts. “Anyone who’s ever dealt with this kind of situation knows you need to explain your intentions to the person you’re treating and tell them who you are, jackass.”

Most of them dip their heads in shame and take a step back, except for loudmouth, who hasn’t quite learned yet that we aren’t fucking around.

“You did your jobs. Now let us do ours.” He steps toward Aurora again. “You’re not in char?—”

Crunch.

The crunch of breaking bone reaches my ears before I realize that it’s my fist that connects with the asshole’s face. Blood pools gushes out of his nose as he falls to the ground.

Fuck! Oh well... if I end up in the brig, it was worth it.

His buddies throw me cautious glances before scrambling to help him to his feet. One of them hands him a towel to catch the blood spilling over.

“Get the hell outta here,” Bennett orders. “We’ll handle this ourselves.”

“I’ll be pressing charges,” the asshole whines.

“Go for it.”

“No, you won’t,” General Parks and I say together.

I raise my brow at him in question. I hit a civilian, which could easily land me in deep shit. Granted, I wasn’t thinking, but we’re Marines. We’re taught to keep our cool in stressful situations, and I lost it when I saw Aurora screaming. Not my finest moment, especially in front of a four-star General.

“Do you know who I am?” General Parks calmly asks the EMTs.

He whispers something into Aurora’s ear that I can’t hear. She nods, and he places her on her feet. She sways, so I move to stand behind her so she can lean on me, which she does.

One thing you need to understand is that General Victor Parks never throws his weight around. It’s one of the reasons he has so much respect from his men. Not because his position demands it, but because he earned it. He paid his dues, entered the military much like the rest of us, and worked his way up. General Parks never played the political game and got where he is from hard work and the respect of his men and those above him. He was a member of a Marine Recon Special Ops team, so he knows the situations we face daily and backs us up.

“I’m assuming their boss,” another EMT answers flippantly.

“You’d be right,” his voice clipped. “I’m also the General who runs the base you’re currently a guest on. I have your complaint. Now, get off my base. Your services are no longer needed.”

“We’ll go over your head,” broken nose sneers.

“You can try.” General Parks smirks. “However, I’ll be filing a complaint with your superiors about how you handled this situation with my daughter and how she felt threatened under your care.”

They throw us dirty glances before getting into their ambulance and taking off.

I hang my head. “Sorry, Sir. I shouldn’t have lo?—”

General Parks rests his hand on my shoulder “You protected my daughter like I assigned you to do.” He scoops her back into his arms.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“Sir, I have a suggestion,” Hudson calls. “We’ll escort you to the Naval Health Clinic. I think it’ll be better for Aurora to stay on base anyway.”

Carver twirls a set of keys on his finger. “Let’s roll out.”

We split into two groups. I ride with General Parks, his driver, Aurora, and Hudson. The rest of the men ride behind us. It’s only a five-minute drive from the airstrip to the hospital on base. Hudson called ahead and informed them that we were on our way and also requested women providers, if possible.

When we arrive at the emergency room bay doors, two female doctors and three nurses are waiting for us. I exit the vehicle first and open the door for Aurora. I lean down so only she can hear me.

“Aurora, you’re safe,” I promise. “My men and I will be here for you. We’ll stand guard outside of every room if you want us to. You’ll never be alone, I swear it.”

Her emerald eyes search mine as if she’s looking for any sign of deceit, which she

won't find.

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Aurora's bottom lip wobbles. "You won't let anyone in?"

"No one that doesn't have authorization to be in there with you," I clarify. "And if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable, all you have to do is shout, and we'll come running."

She squares her shoulders. "I'm ready."

I squeeze her hand before picking her up and transferring her to the gurney. While I was talking to Aurora, Hudson informed the healthcare team about the severity of the situation. Everyone explains who they are as they wheel her inside. I follow behind the stretcher, flanked by my men, each holding the same promise on their faces that I gave Aurora in words.

We'll make sure she feels safe, and fuck anyone who gets in our way.

CHAPTER 4

AURORA

"Ms. Parks, I'm Dr. Sheppard."

This is the second doctor I've met since being brought to a private bay in the emergency department. As promised, Jaxson is standing guard in front of the door, blocking entry to anyone who attempts to approach. My father asked if I wanted him to come into the room, but I waved him off. I don't need him to witness my humiliation.

“Aurora,” I insist.

Dr. Sheppard smiles kindly at me. “I know this is difficult, but can you tell me where you’re having pain?”

I squirm. “Um... everywhere,” I admit. “Mostly in my vaginal area. My ribs are really sore, along with my wrists and ank?—”

“Listen here, shit for brains,” a voice shouts behind the closed door. “That’s my best friend lying in that bed. Move out of my way or I swear to G?—”

“Willow!” I scream.

The door bursts open, slamming into the wall with so much force it knocks a scenery picture to the ground. Jaxson runs in with Willow on his heels. Everyone in the room freezes.

“Aurora, what’s wrong?” Jaxson demands.

“W-W-Willow,” I sob.

I don’t know how I have any tears left to cry.

My best friend of fifteen years dashes to my side, kicks off her shoes, and gingerly climbs onto the bed with me, pulling me into her arms.

I take a deep breath and gather myself, knowing that things are going to get a whole lot worse before they get better, and I pull away from her embrace. Everyone in the room is deathly quiet, still watching the scene unfold before them. Jaxson is a statue at the foot of the bed, watching our interaction.

Willow sticks out her tongue at him. “Told you I was her best friend.”

Jaxson’s lip curves upward. “Maybe, but I wasn’t informed of you, nor was I told you were coming.”

Willow shrugs. “Victor called me. He said that Aurora was found and needed me. So here I am.”

“Here you are,” he repeats. “Aurora, are you good with her being here?”

“Yes,” I answer. “I need her.”

Willow squeezes my shoulders. “You heard the woman.”

“Sir, I need you to leave,” Dr. Sheppard commands. “The longer Ms. Parks goes without treatment, the more likely infection can set in.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jaxson turns on his heel, picks up the picture that fell, places it back on the nail, and shuts the door quietly behind him. He resumes his position in front of the door, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Miss, I’m going to need you to get off of the exam table,” Dr. Sheppard demands.

Willow scrambles to hop off and put on her shoes. She comes back and grips my hand in hers. “Sorry,” she mutters.

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“Now, where were we?” Dr. Sheppard taps on her keyboard. “Oh, yes. You said your ribs hurt?”

“Yes,” I respond.

Dr. Sheppard comes around to the side of the gurney and gestures to my shirt. “May I?”

I sit up and lift the fabric under my breasts, revealing dark bruises around my ribcage and stomach. Willow gasps and covers her mouth.

“April, please take Aurora for X-rays first,” Dr. Sheppard requests. “I’ll send the order now.”

April helps me slip out of Jaxson’s shirt and into a hospital gown quickly before pulling over a wheelchair. Once I’m seated, Willow opens the door for us.

Jaxson stands with his arms crossed, blocking our exit. “Where are you taking her?”

April huffs. “I’m not at lib?—”

“X-ray,” Willow interrupts.

Jaxson nods and falls into step with us.

For the next thirty minutes, I’m put in different positions and made to stand and lie down for pictures. The tech explains that they are looking for broken bones and

internal bleeding.

After the X-rays are complete, we head to the ER with Jaxson in tow. His presence gives me some semblance of peace, even though I'm scared to death of what is about to happen.

"I'll be out here if you need me," he promises.

"Thank you," I whisper as April wheels me inside.

Once we're back in the room, Dr. Sheppard wastes no time jumping into action.

"April, do you have the rape kit ready?"

"Yes," April replies. "Do you want a full blood workup as well?"

"Full blood panel and full STD testing panel as well," Dr. Sheppard orders. "Also, give Aurora one milligram of morphine now and every four hours for pain." Dr. Sheppard glances at me. "You don't have any internal bleeding, which is good, but you do have a couple of broken ribs. Unfortunately, the only thing we can do for that is wrap them."

April approaches me. "I know you've been through a lot, and the last thing you want is for me to poke you, but I need to take some blood."

I could refuse, but I'd rather know if I've caught something. I hold out my left arm and let her draw the blood. April is surprisingly fast, and I barely feel the prick. The extra fluids that Hudson gave me rehydrated me enough that she didn't have to stab me multiple times. Luckily, the pain medication can be inserted into the port through the IV, and I feel the effects quickly.

April rushes out the door to take the blood samples to the lab. Dr. Sheppard steps forward with her gloves and protective wear.

“I’m sorry we have to put you through another traumatic experience, Aurora, but we need to assess your injuries and take samples and pictures. My other nurse Carol, will be taking pictures for me,” Dr. Sheppard explains. “After we’re finished with the internal exam, we’ll get the rest of these cuts and scrapes cleaned up.”

I knew they would have to perform a thorough exam and take pictures, but it’s different knowing about it and actually having to live through it. It’s humiliating. I know they’re just doing their job, but I feel like I’m on display all over again. I bite my lip and squeeze Willow’s hand.

“I’ve got you,” she whispers.

The scraping of metal reaches my ears, and I look down to see stirrups sticking out of the end of the exam table.

“Scooch down for me, please. Place your feet here,” Dr. Sheppard instructs. “Wiggle your behind down a little further for me.” I scoot down until my ass hits the end of the table. “Okay, relax your knees, and let them just fall to the sides... That’s it. Okay, I’m going to touch the insides of your thighs first. Now, I’m going to begin the exam... Deep breaths.”

I hiss as she spreads me wider, tears cascading down my cheeks, and the flash of the camera reminds me that my shame is being recorded. I grip Willow’s hand like a vice. Right now, she’s the only thing holding me together.

I jerk back when Dr. Sheppard probes my anus. “Fuck,” I hiss.

“I’m sorry, Aurora.” Dr. Sheppard apologizes. “You have vaginal tearing and

multiple tears in your anal cavity. They're going to require stitches. I'm not going to lie, they won't be comfortable, but we will get you numb before we start."

Willow grabs my face, her eyes brimming with tears. "You are so brave," she tells me. "Hold on a little longer."

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I don't answer because if I open my mouth, I will start screaming, and I won't be able to stop. Dr. Sheppard gets to work. The pinpricks of needles stab me in the most intimate places, and it takes everything I have not to kick the good ol' doctor in the head.

After I'm good and numb, Dr. Sheppard gets to work stitching me back together. Through all of it, Willow never let go of my hand.

"All done," Dr. Sheppard announces. "You can sit back now. Be careful."

"Here." Carol sets down her camera and steps up beside me, taking my other hand. "Let me help you."

Both she and Willow navigate me back to the head of the bed. I lean against it with a sigh of relief.

"I'm going to have April come back in and clean out those wounds on your ankles and wrists." Dr. Sheppard removes her gloves with a snap. "I'll be back when she's finished to check and see what else needs to be done. Carol will take some more pictures."

"When can I take a shower?" I shiver.

After being poked and prodded, all I want to do is wash the filth off of me, scrub my skin raw and forget this ever happened.

Dr. Sheppard smiles sympathetically. "Once April cleans your wounds, she can help

you with a shower.”

“No,” I state firmly. “Willow will help me.”

“It’s hospital pol?—”

Willow places her hands on her hips. “I’ll help. If I need assistance, I will pull the cord in the bathroom or yell for muscles outside the door to grab the nurse.”

I giggle for the first time in days. Willow is that friend who will always have my back. She’s up for anything and everything and will do what I need her to do and ask questions later. She’s exactly who I need in my corner right now.

Dr. Sheppard narrows her eyes. “Fine, I’ll be back to check on you soon.”

After she leaves, Jaxson pops his head in. “How ya holding up?”

“She’s doing great,” Willow answers for me. “The other nurse should be back soon to clean up her wrists and ankles.”

Jaxson scowls. “They haven’t cleaned those wounds yet?”

“We had more important areas to tend to,” Carol snaps.

“I understand that.” He aggressively runs his hands through his hair. “Fuck, I should’ve insisted Hudson do that on the plane.”

“Jaxson.” His eyes snap to mine. “Hudson asked me. I didn’t want him to touch me any more than he had to.”

A soft knock at the door interrupts what he’s about to say, and April pokes her head

into the room. “Are you ready for me?”

“Yes,” I answer.

Jaxson heads for the hallway. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“Jaxson, huh?” Willow bumps my shoulder. “I like him.”

If you had asked me a few months ago, I probably would have said I like him too. But now? No one is ever going to look at me and want this broken, used body ever again.

April lifts my ankles first and places a pile of towels under them, followed by a basin full of water. She picks up a scrub brush and gives me a sympathetic smile. “This might sting a bit.”

At first, the pressure is steady and bearable, but the more she digs into the wound, the more uncomfortable I get. My foot jerks uncontrollably when she hits a spot by my tendon.

“Shit!” I hiss.

“I’m sorry.” April drops the brush into the bucket. “I need to change out the water real quick, and we’ll get the other ankle.”

Forty-five minutes later and with a few death threats from Willow, April is finally done. Dr. Sheppard returns and surveys the damage.

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“These could have used some stitches,” she complains. “Too late now. I’ll let you take your shower, then we’ll have April bandage you up. You might have some scarring from those injuries, but you can consult a plastic surgeon if you want to later about that. You can get cleaned up now. Call the nurse if you need any help.”

Everyone files out of the room, leaving me and Willow alone. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and slowly lower my feet to the ground.

Willow helps steady me and digs her phone out of her pocket. “I’m gonna text your dad and have him go buy you some clothes.”

“Thank you,” I choke. “I couldn’t have gotten through that without you.”

Willow hugs me. “We might not be sisters by blood, but we’re sisters just the same. I will always be there for you.”

“Same, girl. Same.”

“How ‘bout that shower?”

“Yes, please!”

Willow leads me to the bathroom. Up until now, I didn’t realize how badly I have to pee. She gives me some privacy as I take care of business. Burning pain radiates all around my vagina as I fight back screams. It takes a moment for the fire to subside and a little bit longer for me to find the strength to stand. Once I have my bearings, I hobble to the sink like a penguin so my thighs don’t rub together and wash my hands.

The door swing opens, and Willow holds up a sack.

“Your dad is a saint,” she declares.

Yes, he is.

The shower has a seat in it and a detachable shower head for easy washing. Willow sets the temperature for me and helps me get into the shower. My energy is depleting, and I have no idea how I’m going to be able to wash myself.

“Do you want me to help you?” Willow asks.

“I... I...” I hang my head in defeat. “Please.”

Willow lifts my chin. “Aurora, you’ve been through a lot. You’re exhausted. It’s okay to need help.”

“Um... this is embarrassing, but when I was going to the bathroom,” I pause. “It really burned.”

“Probably the stitches,” she states matter-of-factly. “I’ll use body wash all over, and we’ll just let it flow over your sensitive areas.”

“Okay.”

Willow begins washing me, taking care not to scrub my open wounds. I ask her to turn the water up hotter. She doesn’t refute me, but she raises her eyebrows because the water is already hot. After she rinses off the soap suds, she begins to lather my hair.

“Aurora,” Willow’s voice trembles. “What’s on your neck?”

“My neck?” I reach behind my head and feel around. “Do I need to have the doctor come back and look at something? I don’t feel anything. Nothing hurts back there.”

“It’s a tattoo,” she mutters. “It looks like a UPC code and says Property of?—”

My world spins out of control, and the room plunges into darkness.

CHAPTER 5

JAXSON

“Jaxson!”

Desperation vibrates off the walls as I plow through the room toward the bathroom where my name is being bellowed. Gripping the doorknob, I yank the door so hard that the frame cracks. I stop dead in my tracks and take in the scene. Willow is struggling to hold up a passed-out Aurora. I whip around and yank a sheet off the bed. I storm back into the shower, wrap her like a burrito, pick her up, and cradle her close to my chest. After I lay her gently on the bed, I flip on Willow.

“What the fuck happened?” I hit the call button for the nurse.

Willow’s face is streaked with tears. “I-I-I don’t know,” she gasps. “One minute I was washing her hair, and the next, she was out.”

I move away from Aurora and round the bed to stand in front of her friend. I grip her arms firmly but not hard. “Take a deep breath,” I encourage. “Was she tired? Were you talking about anything?”

“The tattoo!”

“What tattoo?”

Nurse April comes racing into the room. “Can I help? What happened?” She rushes to Aurora and presses a button on the wall before lowering the head of the bed.

“She fainted in the shower,” Willow sobs.

General Parks barrels into the room with my men on his heels, and he halts at the foot of the bed. Behind them are Dr. Sheppard, another doctor, and more nurses.

“What’s going on?” the general demands.

Dr. Sheppard steps forward. “Everyone out now!”

General Parks puffs out his chest. “That’s my daughter, I’m not leav?—”

“Sir.” Dr. Sheppard puts her stethoscope into her ears and bends over Aurora’s motionless body. “I can’t properly care for your daughter with all of you in here. I promise I’ll update you as soon as I have some answers.”

He deflates. “You heard the Doc, everyone out.”

We all file out of the hospital room and move toward the reception area. As soon as we’re far enough away from Aurora’s room, General Parks spins around to face Willow.

His eyes brim with unshed tears. “Was she breathing?”

Willow nods. “I swear, Victor, she just fainted.”

The general opens his arms, and she steps into them. He hugs her protectively. “She’ll be okay.”

I don’t know who the general is trying to reassure more, Willow or himself.

“Do you know what caused it?” Hudson asks, and Willow shakes her head.

“Wait,” I say. “Willow, before the nurse came in... you mentioned a tattoo. What were you talking about?”

Willow takes a deep breath. “I was washing Aurora’s hair, and I lifted the ends to rinse them and noticed something on the back of her neck.”

My eyes cut to General Parks. “Does she have a tattoo?”

“Not that I know of.” He rubs his hands over his face.

“I don’t think she knew about it,” Willow mumbles.

“What do ya mean?” I press.

“I asked her what was on the back of her neck, and she said ‘nothing’,” she explains. “She said her neck didn’t hurt and asked if Dr. Sheppard needed to look at another injury. I told her it was a tattoo.”

Thomas moves closer. “Did you get a good look at it?”

“It looked like a UPC code.” Willow snaps her fingers. “But it did say ‘Property of Krukov’.”

General Parks picks up a chair and throws it into the wall. “Son of a bitch!”

I push Willow behind me as the general continues to hurl chairs around the room. He smashes his fist into a portrait hanging on the wall before turning his wild eyes back to Willow. “What happened in there, Willow?” his voice low, daring.

Willow shakes her head vigorously and takes a step back. I step with her, using my body as a shield. The general isn’t thinking clearly right now. I understand his only daughter is laid up in a hospital bed after suffering the unimaginable, but I’ll be damned if he uses Aurora’s best friend as a verbal punching bag.

“I-I-I can’t say,” she stammers.

The general roars and lunges for another chair. Thomas yanks the seat out of General Parks’ grasp and holds up his hand. “Sir, you need to calm down before we get kicke?—”

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“I didn’t fucking protect her!” General Parks shouts, reaching for a side table.

Hudson and Bennett rush General Parks and restrain his arms behind his back. The waiting room is destroyed. Chairs are overturned, pictures are ripped from their hooks, and there are several new holes in the wall courtesy of the general’s fists.

“I’m calling the police,” the receptionist shouts.

Fuck, the last thing the general needs is the military police showing up.

“Shit,” Carver mutters. “I’ll take care of it.”

The receptionist places her hands on her hips. “You all need to leave now.”

“We apologize for the disturbance,” Carver says placatingly. “The general’s daughter is here, and as you can see, it’s been rough on him.” He gestures around the room. “We’re more than willing to pay for the damages, ma’am.”

She harrumphs. “See that you do, but if you can’t keep him under control, we’re going to have to ask you to leave. We have other patients here to worry about.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. The hospital can try to remove us, but at the end of the day, they wouldn’t get very far. I’m not about to tell her that, and neither is Carver. He gives her a toothy grin and returns to our group.

Hudson and Bennett release the general, who falls back into the only chair remaining upright. Thomas and Carver start picking up the overturned furniture and putting the

room back in order.

Willow moves to crouch in front of General Parks. "I'm sorry, Victor."

"No, Willow." He brushes the tears off her face. "You're like another daughter to me. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I would never hurt you, and it was never my intention to scare you. Please forgive me."

She places a kiss on his cheek and stands up as Dr. Sheppard rounds the corner and comes to a grinding halt when she sees the destruction before her.

Dr. Sheppard's brows pinch in confusion. "What the hell happened in here?"

General Parks stands and clears his throat. "I'll take care of the damages and make sure that the hospital receives a sizable donation this year."

"Yes... well, okay," she says, flabbergasted. "General, may we speak privately?"

The two walk out of earshot behind the nurse's station. The longer the doctor speaks to him, the more the general's shoulders slump in defeat. I keep a close eye on the situation, ready to jump in if he loses his temper again. Dr. Sheppard places her hand on his shoulder before she spins on her heel and hurries back down the hall.

"Willow," General Parks calls.

Willow hurries over to where he's waiting. He says something to her before she disappears back toward Aurora's room. General Parks makes his way toward the exit and gestures for us to follow him outside.

"Is Aurora okay?" I blurt the moment the fresh air hits my face.

Ever since we were rushed out of her room, all I can see is her lying so still on that bed, wondering if she was truly alright or not.

General Parks' gaze pierces mine. "She fainted. Aurora will be fine, physically, anyway. Mentally, I don't know." He clenches his jaw. "Those fuckers grabbed mybaby girlin front of her home with no thought about the consequence of being seen by anyone. They think they are untouchable."

"What do you want to do, Sir?" Hudson asks.

General Parks faces me. "Rivers, you and your men are going to find these assholes and put them in the fucking ground. Every last one of them. Recover any and all victims and return them to their families."

This... this I understand. I need something to kill, maim, torture. After what we rescued Aurora from, I can't even begin to imagine what horrors are out there that others are experiencing right now.

I cross my arms. "When do we leave?"

"We'll have an Operations Order Brief at zero seven hundred at my home. Donotdiscuss this with anyone outside of this group. This remains a Black Op covert mission. I'm not taking this up the chain of command. Are you all with me?"

None of us even hesitate as we all shout, "Oorah."

"I'm going to go see my daughter." General Parks heads back to the entrance.

"Sir," I call, and he looks over his shoulder. "Will you let Aurora know we're being sent back to our stations?" He whips around, but I hold up my hand before he can interrupt. "Don't tell her what's really going on, but let her know we had to get back

to our assignments now that she's with you. I promised her we'd be around to make sure she felt safe."

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“I’ll make sure she knows,” he replies.

The men head toward the vehicles while I stay rooted in my spot. “Do you have a plan to keep her safe?”

Gen Parks crosses his arms. “I’m calling in Benson and his team. No one knew she was missing except for a handful of us. I kept it under wraps. It’ll stay that way.” His tone leaves no room for argument. “We will give her life back to her one way or another. I’ll have Benson’s team watching her if she decides to go back to Boston. I can protect her myself if she stays here. She’s like her mother, though, stubborn and independent.”

I raise my brow. “And her father, Sir?”

“Smartass,” General Parks chuckles. “Thank you all for bringing her home, Rivers.”

“Glad we found her, Sir.”

I wish it would’ve been sooner.

CHAPTER 6

AURORA

TWO MONTHS LATER....

“How’s the new apartment?”

Jessa tucks her legs underneath her ass. After trying a few different psychiatrists, I never felt comfortable until I met Dr. Jessa Stark, who insisted on me calling her Jessa. When I arrived for my first appointment, she led me into her office, plopped herself down in a leather recliner, and snuggled in like we've known each other for years. Jessa never pushes me to talk. Even when we sit in silence, it's never awkward. There are days when I won't say anything. At the end of those sessions, she tells me how nice it was to see me, and she can't wait to see me again.

I sigh. "It's good."

"But you hate that you had to leave your home?" she offers.

While I was recovering in the hospital, I broke down and told my dad there was no way in hell I could ever go back to my house, but I didn't want to leave Boston either. My home was no longer my safe haven. Dad didn't even hesitate. He sent in movers, had everything packed up, called a realtor, listed it, and set me up in a high-rise apartment close to work with top-notch security.

"Not exactly." I shrug. "I let them win. They forced me out of the first place I bought with my own money that I could call my own."

Jessa cups her chin and places her elbow on her knee. "I see it differently."

"How so?"

"Yes, you moved," she agrees. "But they didn't win. You sitting here talking to me proves they didn't. You're alive, taking back your life. It will take time to feel safe again, but you will get there. Letting them win means rolling over and becoming a shell of a person."

That's where our opinion differs. I'm hollow. Sure, my broken ribs have healed, and

the stitches have dissolved, but something inside me died when I was taken and my body was abused. I plaster on a fake smile when I need to convince the outside world I'm doing fine, but on the inside, I scream, where no one can hear me. I want to claw my way out of my body and find a new one to inhabit. This one no longer suits me. All I see is filth when I look in the mirror. The constant reminder of what happened to me is etched into my skin permanently. I can't even wear my hair up anymore, or someone might see it and start asking questions I don't want to answer.

"I'm going out for lunch today," I blurt, wanting to change the subject.

Jessa raises her brows. "Is Willow dragging you out?"

My lips curve up. "No, she's been really supportive. She spends the night when I ask her to."

Jessa nods. "Who are you meeting?"

"My boss," I explain. "He wants to talk about me coming back to work. I've put it off long enough."

"Are you ready to go back to work?"

Aren't you supposed to be the one telling me that?

I look at her pointedly. "I don't know. Do you think I am?"

"That's not something I can answer for you," she counters. "Only you can decide if you're comfortable and feel safe enough to attempt going back to work."

"I guess I'll see how lunch goes."

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“Good enough for me,” she says. “Remember, there isn’t a time frame on healing. There’s no rush.”

“My bank account would disagree with you,” I joke half-heartedly.

Jessa scowls. “There is always FMLA, and we can apply for programs to assist you financially. Has your boss been pressuring you?”

“No, not at all.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “Eventually, I have to go back to work, though. I can’t leave them hanging forever. It’s not fair to them.”

Hugh’s been a godsend through all of this. Not only did he alert my dad that I was missing within hours of my disappearance, but he held my job for me without any pressure about returning. I’m the one who reached out to him because I’m going stir-crazy sitting in my apartment alone while everyone else is at work.

“Our hour is up for today.” Jessa untangles her legs and stands. I follow suit. “Call me if you need to meet before next Wednesday. Good luck at lunch today, but remember, don’t rush yourself.”

“Thanks, Jessa.” I drape my purse over my shoulder. “I appreciate it. I’ll see ya next week.”

Before leaving the building, I spot my vehicle and slowly push the door open. I whip my head around, taking in all my surroundings before I briskly walk to my car. I climb in, lock the door, and start the engine. My phone connects to the speakers through Bluetooth, and I dial the same number I’ve dialed every week since I started

seeing Jessa.

“Hi, baby girl.” Dad’s voice soothes me instantly. “How was your appointment?”

“It was good.” I put the car in drive and head toward downtown. “I’m on my way to meet Hugh for lunch now.”

“Aurora,” Dad draws out.

“Dad,” I interrupt before we have the same argument, we’ve had for the past two weeks. “I appreciate you want to help, but it’s time for me to take back my life. I’m not going to decide anything today. It’s just lunch.”

Dad sighs. “I know, but I’m your dad. I worry, it’s my job.”

“Have you heard from Jaxson?” I ask, nonchalantly.

When I woke up in the hospital, Jaxson and his team were gone. Dad explained that they had to get back to their assignments. I never did get to thank them all for rescuing me. To be honest, ever since they left, I haven’t felt safe, either. I’m always looking over my shoulder, and I’m afraid that will be my life from now on. I wish I could’ve said goodbye.

Living in a building with twenty-four hour security helps, but it doesn’t stop my fear completely. Dad wanted to hire a security team, but I fought him tooth and nail. If he knew how scared I still am, he’d probably have me locked up at Quantico with him and Vera, my stepmom.

I shudder at that thought.

“Not since the night they left,” he responds quickly.

“Oh.”

“What’s wrong?” Dad goes on full alert.

“Nothing,” I deny. “I wish I could’ve thanked them and told them goodbye.”

“When I talk to them, I’ll let them know,” he assures me. “They should be checking in soon.”

“That’d be great, thanks Dad.”

“Anytime, baby girl.”

“I’m pulling into the cafe now,” I announce.

I agreed to meet Hugh at a small cafe down the street from the office. I didn’t want to take him away from work for too long, but I also didn’t want to face anyone from work quite yet.

“Okay, text me when you get home,” he orders.

“I will,” I promise. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you.” He disconnects the call.

When I enter the restaurant a few minutes later, Hugh is waiting for me. He stands and pulls me into a hug. I tense, and he releases me quickly.

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As soon as I'm seated, the waitress rushes over to take my order. I haven't seen Hugh since the day I was taken. We've spoken on the phone, but that's all. He's wanted to come and visit, but I've kept everyone but my dad and Willow at arm's length.

"Hi," we both say at the same time. I giggle nervously and gesture for him to continue.

"Aurora... I... I." Hugh pauses to take a deep breath. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"No, Hugh," I rebuff. "Nothing was your fault. I chose to do the story. It was my choice to meet with my informant alone after you insisted I take Jansen with me. The fault lies on my shoulders alone." I reach over to grab his hand. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. Who knows how long it would've taken for anyone else to realize I was gone?"

"Doesn't feel like it was enough." He slams his fist on the table. "Two fucking weeks, Aurora. I thought... we all thought..."

I dip my head to hide my unshed tears because I know exactly what he's trying to say. "I'm here because of you."

"How are you holding up?"

This question plagues me in my dreams. The one that keeps me up at night. What's the correct response to that, except fine? I can't tell everyone I'm breaking. Healing is what they want to hear.

“Healing.” I paste on the same fake smile I do for everyone else. “One day at a time.”

Hugh rubs his hands together as the waitress sets down our sandwiches. Acid rises in my throat, but I swallow it down and nibble on the corner of the bread, not wanting to draw attention to my sudden change in mood.

Hugh excitedly explains all the stories they are currently covering and how happy everyone is that I’m possibly coming back to work soon.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and goosebumps erupt all over my body. I scan the restaurant for whatever set off my sixth sense. I don’t see anything out of the ordinary—normal diners enjoying lunch with family and colleagues.

Calm down. You’re in a public place with your boss in the middle of downtown Boston. You’re fine. There’s no one here stalking you. Get. A. Grip.

“Hugh, I don’t know if I’m ready to come back,” I admit. “I know that puts you in a predicament, and you might have to replace me.”

“Stop. I’m not replacing you.”

“Hugh, you have a paper to run.”

“And you’re one of my best reporters,” he argues. “I can’t lose you. What about working from home?”

“I’m not in any shape to interview anyone either,” I counter.

Hugh smirks. “What if we set you up with a pen name, and you write some articles that require research? If anyone needs to be interviewed, I can send another reporter out to get the questions answered, and they can email those to you.”

I lean back in my chair to consider his proposal. This could work. I love research, and having a pen name would keep me out of the spotlight a little longer. I could work from the comfort of my own home, behind the security of my building.

“How long would you be comfortable letting me do this, though?” I ask hesitantly.

“For as long as you need,” he answers.

I stick my hand out. “You got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER 7

JAXSON

“Help!”

A muffled voice echoes through the night as we wade through the shipping containers to find the one our intel says holds human cargo. This is the fourth country we’ve raided since we rescued Aurora, and we’re all tired. The son of a bitch at the helm of the organization keeps evading us. Every time we think we are close to eliminating him, he slips through our fingers. Despite this, we have managed to recover almost fifty trafficking victims.

I hold up my fist. “Did you hear that?”

All of our heads swivel when a thump reverberates to the left of us. Switching to hand signals, I form a circle with my thumb and pointer finger and hold it up to my eye indicating to my team to be on the lookout for hostiles and then wave them forward to the storage unit.

Pop. Pop.

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Our guns are equipped with silencers, but the guard falls from the roof of the container. Immediately, boots stomp across the pavement toward the dead body. We duck into another row as shouts in Russian fill the air and bright flood lights penetrate the darkness that hovers over the giant box.

So much for the element of surprise.

“That pissed them off. They’re fanning out,” Thomas translates quietly. “There’s at least six on the ground. Three coming from the north and three from the east.”

“Roger that.” I duck to the south, lift my hand, and wave forward for everyone to follow. We circle around so we’re on the backside of the unit a few rows down. The floodlights are sitting on each of the four corners of the container holding the victims. “Bennett, can you get close enough to take those bulbs out?”

Bennett grins. “I thought you were gonna ask me to do something hard.”

Before I can deck him, he takes off. The shattering of glass reaches our ears, and sudden blackness descends upon us again.

Thomas chuckles. “They’re going back to the front of the box.”

“We could cut a hole in the back of the container and get people out that way,” Carver offers.

“Too loud,” Hudson interjects. “Plus, we have no idea what shape they’re in. Are they gonna be able to walk on their own, let alone be quiet?”

“Hudson’s right,” I agree. “They know we’re here. Might as well have some fun.”

Bennett jogs back to my side. “Oorah,” he whispers. “There are six hostiles total.”

“Thomas, you and Carver take the left,” I order. “Hudson, you’re with me. Bennett, get your ass on the roof and cover us.”

“Roger that,” they say in unison.

We edge closer to the unit, our backs plastered to the wall. Carver cups his hands, and Bennett slips his foot in. With a push from Carver, Bennett scales the eight-foot wall with ease. I give the signal, and we make our way toward our targets.

I step around the corner first and come face to face with a giant behemoth Russian.

“Who the fuck ar?—”

I pull my arm back and strike with my fist in his carotid artery. His eyes roll into the back of his head before he falls forward, landing flat on his face.

“That was anticlimactic,” I mumble, pulling out my marine-issued Cold Steel SRK from its sheath. I lift his head off the concrete and slice his neck like a hot knife through butter.

Blood pounds in my ears, and adrenaline pushes me to seek another target to destroy. Carver is grappling with someone but seems to have the upper hand. A shot rings out, and a body drops behind me. I look up to Bennett, who is saluting me behind his sniper rifle. Thomas stabs another man in the heart repeatedly before putting a bullet in his head. Two more shots ring out, courtesy of Bennett. Bodies litter the ground, but we don’t have time to focus on cleanup.

“Hudson, get those doors open,” I command.

Hudson pulls the bolt cutter out of his pack and cuts the padlock off. Bennett flips off the roof, ready to assist with the victims. Thomas and Carver lift the latches and swing the doors open.

The rancid stench of urine and feces hits us like a brick wall. One girl stands, clutching her torn shirt around her while everyone else is slumped against the wall. Hudson shines a light into the container, and the female places her hands in front of her face to shield her eyes.

“Please,” she begs. “I want to go home.”

I move forward slowly. “We’re here to take you home. What’s your name?”

“Alexis,” she sniffles.

“How old are you, Alexis?”

“Fourteen.”

Red clouds my vision. Growls from my men penetrate the air, and Alexis shrinks back.

Hudson rushes to her side. “We didn’t mean to scare you, sweetheart. We’re Marines, the good guys. Don’t worry, we’ll take you home.”

“Promise?” she asks, hopeful.

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“On my life,” Hudson promises.

He leads her out the open doors, and the rest of us wade through the throng of bodies. Their eyes are unfocused, in a zombie-like trance. Thomas tries asking them questions, but none of them are responsive.

“Including Alexis, we have twenty-two people. Appears to be at least three males, and the rest are females,” Bennett reports. “I don’t know for sure, but based on looks alone, I think Alexis is the youngest.”

“How are we getting them back to the boat?” Carver inquires. “They’re in no shape to walk out of here.”

“You’ll have to put your hotwiring skills to use,” I say with a smirk. “I saw a flatbed by the observation tower. You and Thomas head that way. Keep an eye out. We have no way of knowing if they called for backup.”

“Roger that,” they say.

I survey the bodies slumped against each other, and one catches my eye. “Hudson!” I call.

Hudson runs toward me, and I point at the woman in a blue dress with her arm bent at an unnatural angle. Hudson sidesteps me, leans down, and presses his fingers to her neck to check for a pulse.

“Motherfucker,” he mutters. “She’s dead.”

“Fuck!” I tug my hair at the root, but the pain doesn’t ground me enough. I focus my attention on the steel panel, pull my fist back, and slam it into it over and over again until Hudson wraps his arms around my chest and pulls me out of the container.

“Enough!” Hudson yells. “You’re fucking pissed. I get it. But losing your shit isn’t going to help the ones who are still alive. You could’ve scared the fuck out of them.”

I hang my head, knowing he’s right. Pain radiates up my arm, and my hand begins to swell.

Hudson looks at my hand and shakes his head. “Dumbass,” he mumbles. “That’s broken.”

“We were too fucking late,” I snarl, as he wraps my hand so I can’t cause further damage to myself.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “We lost one, but we still have twenty-one we rescued. That’s still a win. Now, let’s get them home safely.”

Twenty-one more people to add to the forty-three we already rescued. How many more are out there waiting for a hero to save them? How many more will lose the battle before we can get to them?

CHAPTER 8

AURORA

“Are you sure you feel up to coming tonight, baby girl?” Dad asks for the fourth time.

We’re in the back of the limousine with my stepmother, Vera, riding to the annual State Dinner in Washington, D.C. Normally, I don’t attend these, but this year, my

dad is being honored for his service. I took an extra Xanax and gave myself a pep talk before getting dressed for the evening. It's been a week since my lunch with Hugh, and the first time I've been around this many people since before I was taken.

Vera clings to Dad's arm. "Of course, she feels like coming, don't you, dear?"

She's wearing a beautiful sequined lavender gown with a deep v-neck that highlights her flawless porcelain skin and pale blonde hair.

"I want to be here, Dad," I confirm. "It'll be exciting to eat a nice meal for once."

Dad chuckles. "So, you're just here for the free meal and not to see your old man get a service achievement award."

"Oh, is that what this is for?" I joke.

"Brat."

Vera clears her throat. "Why didn't you wear the dress I sent over, Aurora?"

I lock eyes with her. I can't believe she has the audacity to even ask me that. Vera is nice, but she is very obtuse. She buries her head in the sand when bad things occur, thinking that if she doesn't allow herself to hear them, they don't actually happen. She made no effort to come and visit me in the hospital, and when I was finally released, she told me she was glad I recovered from my tragic accident. Like I got hit by a car or something.

The dress she sent over was emerald green and absolutely gorgeous and, in another life, I would've worn it. It's a silky halter with a slit that goes up mid-thigh and completely backless. Instead, I opted for a modest black cocktail dress that stops below my knee with lace sleeves. It took everything I had and a phone call with Jessa

to keep me from dressing in sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

“Willow saw it and practically begged me to let her wear it on her date,” I lie. “She was going to an opera with someone.”

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“That was nice of you to let her use it,” Dad says.

“You didn’t wear your hair up,” Vera whines.

I roll my eyes. “You know I can’t.”

“Let’s not talk about any unpleasantness tonight, dear,” she says dismissively like I was the one to bring it up.

Dad pats her knee and gives me a sympathetic smile. We continue the rest of the ride in silence.

The closer we get to the venue, the harder my heart pounds in my chest. Cold sweats break out beneath the fabric of my dress. For once, I’m thankful for those extra swipes of deodorant and that I wore all black so no one can see any sweat stains I might have. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and count to ten as we pull to the curb. When I open them, Dad’s brows are drawn together in concern. I give him a weak smile as the door is opened by our driver.

Dad squeezes my shoulder as he helps Vera out of the limo. I steel my spine, and with one last deep inhale, I clasp my father’s hand and let him pull me out onto the sidewalk. My dad steps in between Vera and me, offering us each an arm. He escorts us toward the reception hall while I keep my head down until we are safely within the building.

The venue has outdone itself. The opulent ballroom sparkles with crystal chandeliers, and black tablecloths and gold accents decorate the tables. Even the plates and

napkins are gold, and a beautiful golden sculpture of an eagle grasping an American flag in its talons is the centerpiece.

There's a twelve-piece orchestra set up to the right of the stage and a dance floor where couples are already swaying to the music. A full bar is in the back of the room, and a small line has already started to form.

Vera gestures toward the line. "Shall we go ahead and get our drinks?"

Dad looks at me. "Do you want a drink?"

"Sure," I answer. "A glass of champagne would be nice."

"Well... well... well," a booming voice says behind us. "They'll let any ol' riff-raff in the door."

My dad laughs. "Senator Briggs," he greets. "Good to see you. You remember my wife, Vera, and my daughter, Aurora."

Vera holds out her hand. "How lovely to see you again, Senator."

"None of that Senator nonsense," he dismisses, lifting her hand and kissing it. "Call me Tim." He turns to me. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting your daughter."

The way the senator says pleasure sends chills down my spine and not the good kind of chills. The kind that makes me want to find a dark corner and hide. Something about his voice tugs at the back of my brain, but for the life of me, I'm drawing a blank.

I want no part of this man touching me, but I also don't want to embarrass my father,

so I hold out my hand to shake his. “Nice to meet you, Senator Briggs.”

The senator’s eyes rake over my body as he snatches my hand and brings it toward his lips. I gently tug my hand back, but not before my eyes latch onto the scar that looms just under the collar of his shirt. I take a step back, and that’s when I notice the same scar on his wrist peeking out under the cuff of his shirt.

“Call me Tim,” he says, his lips curving up into a crude smile.

“General Parks... Vera,” another guest beckons from across the room. “Come and meet Senator Dyson and his wife.”

“Go on ahead,” Tim insists. “I’ll escort Aurora to your table.”

Dad shakes his head. “I think we be?—”

“Sweetheart, our table is right there,” Vera points out. “Surely, the senator, I mean Tim, can accompany Aurora to her seat. We’ll be right behind them.”

I’m frozen, too scared to speak. The blood in my veins turns to ice. I want to shout to anyone who will listen that the man standing here is a fraud and isn’t who they think he is. I feel the stupid fake-ass smile still plastered on my face. My dad must take that as I’m fine to leave me here with Tim as my chaperone because he leans over and kisses my cheek.

“We’ll join you in a few minutes.” Dad grabs Vera’s hand, and they make their way through a sea of people.

“Tsk... Tsk... Tsk,” Tim leans close to my ear. “Dmitri is very upset with you, pet.”

I shudder as his breath tickles my ear. He’s too close, but with the orchestra playing

and the mountains of people gathering, to anyone looking at us it would appear we are just engaged in a friendly conversation.

“I don’t know who yo?—”

In a bone-crushing move, Tim grips my elbow and pulls me into his side. “Now, now. We wouldn’t want to cause a scene, would we?” he asks, condescendingly.

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I shake my head as Tim leads me deeper into the crowd, keeping his mouth close to my ear. He casually rubs his nose along the side of my face, sniffing my perfume.

“Still as intoxicating as ever, pet,” he coos. “I must say, I was a little disappointed when Dmitri told us you were being shipped off to Ukraine, but now that you’re back, I might have to make sure the Krukov family keeps you around.”

My steps falter, and the only thing keeping me from falling to the ground are the fingers digging into my arm. “I-I-I’m not go?—”

Tim laughs. “Oh, my dear, you delight an old man with your stories,” he announces as he pulls out my chair. He leans in close one last time. “Make no mistake, pet, now that we know where you are... we are coming for you. There’s nowhere you can run. You’ll never be safe.” He stands to his full height. “It was such a delight to meet you, Aurora. Until next time.” He waves to the rest of the table. “Ladies, gentlemen... have a good evening.”

“Senator Briggs,” they all acknowledge.

“My dear, are you alright?” a kind lady next to me asks. “You look awfully pale.”

Not trusting my voice, all I can do is nod. I fidget with my clutch to distract myself from my churning stomach and tightening chest. The longer I sit and wait for them to arrive, the more anxious I get. I glance around the room quickly to see if I can spot them. My dad and Vera are still engaged in the same conversation, but Tim has his back to me.

I push back from the table quickly, almost knocking over a glass of water. “I’m so sorry.” I apologize. “Excuse me for a moment.”

I rush out of the ballroom and dip into the first restroom that I can find. I don’t breathe easier until I’m behind the locked door.

I have to get out of here. Don’t think... Run.

I yank my phone out of my clutch and search flights leaving D.C. to take me back home to Boston. There’s a flight leaving in three hours I can easily catch. Next, I book an Uber. Luck is on my side so far as there is a driver two blocks away who can pick me up in five minutes. I open the bathroom door and step into the hall cautiously, swiveling my head from side to side as I make my way outside.

The Uber driver pulls up a moment later. I verify her name with the name on my app before I slide into the backseat and give her the name of the hotel we’re staying at. I type out a quick text as we pull away from the reception.

Me: I had to leave. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you

Dad: I was looking for you. Are you okay?

Me: I’m fine. Tired.

Dad: Are you sure? We’ll head back as soon as the awards are done

Me: No, you guys have fun. Seriously, Dad I’m fine. I’ll probably just watch tv and take a bath. Go to bed early

Dad: If you’re sure

Me: You deserve this, have fun. Love you

Dad: Love you, baby girl

We pull up to the hotel, and I hesitate to get out. Fear shakes me to my core, and suddenly, I wonder if I was followed. I have everything I need to get on the plane in my purse, and my car is parked at the terminal in Boston since I flew into D.C. Whatever is up in the hotel room can be replaced. It's not worth the risk.

"On second thought," I say. "Can you drop me off at the airport? American Airlines terminal, please."

"That'll be extra," the driver replies.

"I know. My card's on file."

Thirty minutes later, I'm in line at the counter to get my ticket. The tightening in my chest recedes once I'm in the air and even more when I land in Boston. I parked close to the terminal and a guard shack for my own comfort, but it still doesn't stop me from glancing around to see if anyone is following me.

When I get home, I wave to Gill, the security guard, as I wait for the elevator to take me up to my apartment. Once I'm behind my locked door, I unravel. I slide down to the carpet in a heap and scream at the injustice of it all as the floodgates of memories open and assault me.

The platform spins slowly as I'm chained like a dog. My knees are bent, and my ass is resting on my legs which are spread wide for everyone to see my nakedness, and my ankles are shackled to the ground so I can't move. My wrists are handcuffed behind my back and also connected to my ankles, forcing my chest out. My muscles protest, but there's nothing I can do. A ball gag in my mouth keeps me from crying

out. Tears run down my face, and goosebumps form all over my body from the cold.

“Gentlemen.” Dmitri’s voice fills the room. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. This will be her only time on the auction block. I’m the only one who has sampled the merchandise... And I must say, Aurora’s as delicious as she looks.”

“You’re only going to let one of us have a go at her?” someone shouts angrily.

“Now, now,” Dmitri chides. “You all know me better than that. For the right price, I’m willing to let a number of you try her out.”

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“How much?” another voice shouts.

Dmitri laughs. “If you’re asking how much, you shouldn’t be here. Oleg, get him out of here.”

Bang. Bang.

“Any other stupid questions?” Dmitri asks, stepping out of the shadows and onto the platform. He bends down and twists my nipples hard. I scream past the gag. “Do you see how responsive she is?”

“One million,” a deep voice calls.

Sobs wrack my body, but my shackles keep me firmly in place. Dmitri brushes my hair away from my face. “Sold!” He bends over and licks my tears. “I’m going to enjoy watching them break you,” he whispers.

Oleg disconnects my wrists from my ankles, letting my body slump forward. He unchains my ankles from the stage and throws me over his shoulders, keeping a pair of handcuffs around my ankles and wrists. I learned quickly the first day, it doesn’t do any good to fight. I’ll bide my time, find a hole in their security, and run like Lace did.

Oleg drops me on the ground. “Be a good pet,” he orders before connecting my wrists to my ankles again. He spins on his heel and leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Bound as I am, I can't move. I look around, and my heart begins to race as pure terror washes over me. I pull at my restraints, but the metal is unforgiving, and something wet begins to drip down my foot. I close my eyes and pinch myself, praying this is all just a nightmare.

The walls are lined with different whips, crops, and canes. There's a cross with restraints leaning on the other side of the room, and there are several different benches placed all around. It looks like a BDSM torture chamber.

The door flies open, and five men enter. I tremble as they surround my naked body.

"This will never do." One of the men removes the ball gag. I recognize the voice as the one who paid the million dollars. "We want to hear your screams."

I whimper and attempt to flinch away, but it's futile since I can't move. They all begin to strip off their suits. I try to memorize something about each of them so when I get out of this situation, I have something to tell the police, but there isn't anything special for my memory to latch onto. Except for the man standing directly in front of me, they're all typical middle-aged men. Noting the burn scars on the entire right side of his body, I realize he's the only one I'll probably have luck with remembering.

"Look, Briggs." One points to something behind my back. "She started without us."

"Naughty, pet. We're the only ones allowed to make you bleed," Briggs scolds. "Jameson, turn on the cameras. Dmitri wants a show, and we're going to give him one."

The man he called Jameson jogs over by the door and hits a button on the wall. Red lights start flashing around the room.

"Uncuff her and strap her down," Briggs orders, pointing to a bench in the middle of

the room.

“No... no... please,” I beg, tears streaming down my face. “You can’t do this... Please, don’t.”

“Shhh.” Briggs strokes my head. “It doesn’t do any good to beg.”

“I want her cunt,” Jameson cackles as he unsnaps the lock on the handcuffs on my wrists, separating them from my ankles.

Fuck this, I’m going down swinging.

My fight-or-flight instincts take over, and I whip my head back hard into Jameson’s face. I smirk when I hear a satisfying crunch, but it’s short-lived when a fist connects with my cheek and dark spots dance in my vision. I’m airborne before I can stop it, and thrown down on my stomach, hard. The wind is knocked out of me, and I gasp for breath as my arms and legs are pulled tight and once again restrained.

“That fucking bitch broke my nose!” Jameson screams.

I know I probably shouldn’t, but I can’t help it when the corners of my mouth tip upward.

Briggs stands in front of me and grabs a fistful of my hair, causing me to cry out. “It won’t be so funny for long,” he taunts. “Potts!”

I can’t turn my head to see what’s going on because Briggs still has a hold of my hair, I hear the crack before the pain registers. Fire spreads across my back and thighs. I scream until my voice is hoarse.

“Enough!” Briggs shouts. “We want our pet conscious for all the fun we have

planned.”

The men around me laugh sinisterly.

“Her pussy is mine,” Jameson demands.

“Potts, you can have her mouth first, then Tyson, and Dows,” Briggs commands. Briggs kneels in front of me. “Has anyone ever taken your ass, pet?”

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My eyes widen in fear. I shake my head vigorously.

Briggs smiles evilly. “That’s about to change.”

Potts steps up to my face and smacks my cheek with his dick. “Open, pet,” he orders. “But if you even think about biting, I will have Dmitri bring me someone even younger, force you to watch, and then start cutting off body parts to send to your family. Do you understand?”

My eyes widen in fear. “Ye?—”

He slams his cock into the back of my throat. I gag and try to pull away. He fists my hair and thrusts forcefully until his movements become erratic, and he erupts in my mouth.

“Swallow!” he commands. I shake my head. “Briggs, I think we should try the cattle prod.”

I gulp. Potts pulls free, and I barely have time to gasp for breath before the next man pushes his way past my lips.

“That’s it, pet. Suck my fat cock.”

Jameson slams into me from behind, and the man in my mouth groans, increasing his speed. The onslaught continues, and I lose track of time as I’m raped over and over again. Just when I think it’s over and my body is covered in cum and bruises, Briggs steps forward.

“You didn’t think I was done with you, pet?” he snarls.

Briggs runs his hands down my back and glides them over my buttocks, pulling apart my ass cheeks. “Gather around, gentlemen.”

“No more, please,” I cry, my voice barely audible.

He slams into me without any prep and without warning. I scream, and then darkness overtakes me.

My living room comes back into focus. I blink several times and take some deep breaths before I stand on shaky legs and drag myself to the bathroom. Placing my hands on the sink, I stare at my reflection. A hollow shell stares back at me. This apartment, working from home... It’s nothing but a false sense of security.

Briggs’ words play on repeat in my head.

Now that we know where you are... we are coming for you. There’s nowhere you can run. You’ll never be safe.

He’s right. I’ll never be safe. Jaxson and his team are out saving the world, as they should be. No one is ever going to believe that a senator is caught up in a sex trafficking ring without proof, either. If I go forward, it paints a target on my back and will ruin my father’s career, but I can’t let myself be captured again.

Yanking open the medicine cabinet, my eyes roam over the bottles. I grab the leftover Percocet from when I had broken ribs, and the Xanax and Ambien that Jessa prescribed. I have about six Percocet left and half a bottle each of the others.

I scramble into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water, twisting off the top. Then I toss back a few pills at a time until they’re all gone. Grabbing a piece of paper and a pen, I

write a quick note:

Dad,

I love you so much. You mean the world to me and are the best dad in the world.
Forgive me.

Love,

Aurora

My head starts spinning, and I sway on my feet. Using the wall for balance, I make my way into my bedroom. I barely make it to my bed when I tumble forward and hit the mattress.

Peace washes over me, and I fade into nothingness. I no longer need to cling to the edge of desperation.

CHAPTER 9

JAXSON

“Have you found the son of a bitch yet?” General Parks growls in my ear.

It's been three months, and we're no closer to finding the bastard than we were when we went in search of Aurora. Our only saving grace is the victims we have found and rescued. Every day is a battle with conditions worse than the last for each layer we uncover. Unfortunately, I had to call and debrief General Parks on our progress.

“No,” I admit angrily. “Fucker keeps slipping through our fingers. He's always one step ahead. I don't know how he keeps evading us.”

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“How’s the recovery coming along?”

Today, we’re in Romania, where we found thirteen more victims of human trafficking. All bore the same tattoo that the others had...Property of Krukov.

“We’ve rescued a total of seventy-seven people,” I report. “Mostly female, some male, and the youngest so far...” I take a deep breath. “Ten.”

“Fuck!” General Parks shouts so loud that I have to pull the phone away from my ear. “Where to next, Rivers?”

I gesture to Carver to hand me the map. “Looks like we have a lead in Belarus.”

“Good, good,” he says absently.

Desperation eats away at my insides to ask how Aurora is doing, but it’s not my place. The terror on her face when we rescued her from that shack still haunts my dreams to this day. I know the general has her best interests at heart and will make sure she has the best care possible to overcome this.

My mouth, however, doesn’t get my brain’s memo. “How’s Aurora doing?”

Hudson’s head snaps up and turns in my direction, as do the rest of my men.

Carver mouths, “What the fuck are you doing?” I flip him off because I really don’t know. I need closure, to know Aurora’s doing well and that she’s safe.

Despite being confused with my behavior they all gather around, so I put the call on speaker.

General Parks sighs. “It’s not good, Rivers.”

Instantly, our postures all stiffen. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he says, defeatedly. “Aurora accompanied me and Vera to the State dinner in D.C. because I was getting an award.” I glance at Hudson, knowing he’s thinking what I am. She was probably in no shape to be around huge crowds, but we keep our mouths shut. “I didn’t want her to go, but Vera insisted, and once Aurora found out I was the one receiving the award, she wouldn’t be deterred.”

Well, that explains that. I had a feeling she was a daddy’s girl at heart.

“Sir?” I say, prompting him to continue.

“Oh yes, um... Aurora left before the event started, but she sent a text saying she was going back to the hotel. I knocked on her door when we returned, but she didn’t answer. I thought she was asleep.” We all draw in a sharp breath. “The next morning, still nothing, and I panicked. I had a spare key so I opened the door, but she wasn’t there. The bed looked like it was never slept in. Her stuff was there, but Aurora was gone. The limo driver said he never saw her after he dropped us all off. He had no idea she had left either.”

“Where the fuck was Benson and his team?” I snarl.

“Benson followed her to Virginia,” he explains. “I told him and his men to get some rest since she was with me. I can protect my daughter. At least, I thought I could. We were going to a State Dinner with government officials, for fuck’s sake.”

I signal the men to start packing up. “Where do you think she is?”

“I ended up tracking her phone back to her apartment,” General Parks admits. “I sent Willow over to check on her.”

We all raise our brows in anticipation, wondering where he’s going with this.

“Aurora... she... I...,” General Parks babbles.

I’m barely holding on by a thread. “Sir,” I interrupt. “What happened to Aurora?”

“She tried to kill herself!”

The blood in my veins boil. I pick up the nearest chair and throw it into the wall, puncturing a hole in it. “Fuck!”

“Willow found empty bottles of Percocet, Xanax, and Ambien in the bathroom after she called nine-one-one,” he says. “Fortunately, Willow got there in time. She barely had a pulse, but she had one.”

All of my men have matching looks of fury etched on their faces. I clench and unclench my fists repeatedly to keep myself from destroying our room any more than I already have.

“Aurora was doing so well,” he explains. “She’s in therapy and went back to work. She seemed happy.”

I can’t hide my shock. “Aurora went back to work?”

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“Remotely,” General Parks clarifies. “She met with Hugh, and he offered her a position writing articles under a pen name. Aurora doesn’t interview anyone anymore. She only writes what others give her.”

That makes more sense. So, what caused this episode? If she was happy and doing well, what made her want to end it all?

“What are the doctors saying?” Hudson pipes up.

“I should’ve known you’d put me on speaker,” General Parks mumbles. “They won’t tell me much because of HIPAA. As far as I know, they’re keeping her for at least a seventy-two-hour involuntary psych hold and evaluation. I hate that they’re doing that to her, but I have no idea how else to help her. Willow’s in there with her now. I stepped out to take your call.”

I lock eyes with Thomas. “What about Yazzie?”

Thomas rubs his chin in thought. “I could get a message to him.”

“Do it,” I order. “General, I have an idea.”

Thomas pulls out his phone and begins texting.

“I’m listening.” He sounds hopeful.

“I have a friend in Fairbanks. He raises Wolamutes.”

“What the hell is a Wolamute?” he asks, confused. I scroll through my pictures, searching for the one of a dog that would put the fear of God into anyone, and hit send. “What the hell is that thing?”

I smile. “It's a crossbreed. A gray wolf and an Alaskan Malamute. Very loyal dogs, and as you can see, they're also huge and very intimidating. They also make very good guard dogs,” I explain. “Our buddy, Yazzie, breeds and trains them for vets with PTSD.”

“You think he'd have one for Aurora?” he asks, hopefully.

“Yazzie has one,” Thomas announces. “Who's gonna pick him up and when?”

“You are,” the General states. “Pack up. You boys are coming home. Bennett, get the travel plans ASAP. I want you in the air in two hours. Debriefing in my office in seventy-two hours, gentlemen.”

“Sir,” Carver inserts. “What about our mission? What about the other missing victims?”

“I'm sending another team out today. Carver, send whatever intel you have over to Benson's team,” he orders. “I'll see you on Friday.”

“Roger that,” we all respond before he disconnects the call.

Hudson breaks the silence first. “I can't believe she tried to...”

“What do you think triggered her to do something so drastic?” Bennett asks the question we're all thinking.

I shake my head. “Who knows? Could have been overwhelmed by the crowd, or

something might've triggered her. We'll have to ask her."

Carver rubs the back of his neck. "Hate to say it, man, but if she ain't telling the general, she sure as fuck isn't going to tell us."

I scowl at him because he's right. We're not close to her. We feel a special connection to her because not only is she the general's daughter, but we also saw her at her lowest. We were there when she lost control. Sure, we've rescued other victims, but we didn't see the same horrors we did the night we found Aurora. That's a bond that'll never be broken.

I turn toward the bedroom. "You heard the general. Wheels up in two hours."

A chorus of 'Oorahs' follow me.

CHAPTER 10

AURORA

"You're lucky to be alive," the doctor says.

Willow sits beside me and squeezes my hand in solidarity. I hate that she was the one to find me. When I swallowed those pills, I wasn't thinking about anything except never falling into Dmitri's grasp again. All I wanted to do was save myself from any more torture and abuse. Instead, I put a haunted look in the eyes of my best friend and father.

"Are you sure you want your friend to stay while we talk?" the doctor asks.

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“Willow’s my best friend. She can stay.” My eyelids threaten to fall. “I’m sorry, Dr...?”

“Dr. Lee,” she huffs. “As I was saying, you’re very lucky to be alive. That was quite the cocktail you took. Unfortunately, we were unable to save your baby.”

What the fuck did she say?

Willow and I whip our heads toward each other. My mouth drops open, but no sound escapes.

Willow recovers first. “Excuse me, did you say baby?”

“Mhm,” Dr. Lee confirms.

“She wasn’t pregnant.”

Dr. Lee clicks around on the computer. “Yes, she was about twelve weeks. However, she lost the baby.”

I killed my baby. I didn’t know... I didn’t fucking know. Another fucking ounce of control those assholes stole from me. I could’ve run, hid, disappeared. I don’t know what I would’ve done. Anything else but take those pills! Please let me wake up from this godforsaken nightmare.

“No. No. No!” I scream. “They told me I wasn’t pregnant. Dr. Sheppard did a test. She did a test!”

“Ms. Parks, you need to calm down, or I’m going to have to sedate you,” Dr. Lee warns.

My chest tightens, and my breaths are shallow. The air is thick in the room, and dots spin around in my vision. I jerk my hand free from Willow and claw at the IV. Blood squirts across the blanket as I toss the needle aside and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. Nausea threatens to drop me to my knees, but I run toward the door. Before I can escape, it swings open, and three nurses surround me. The first one reaches for my wrist, but I dodge her.

“Ms. Parks,” Dr. Lee says authoritatively. “Get back into bed.”

Willow runs to my side. “Aurora, please. We’ll figure this out, I promise. Get back in bed.”

My shoulders slump in defeat, and I crash to the floor. I curl up in the fetal position, sobs wracking my body.

“Don’t you fucking touch her,” Willow warns before multiple hands land on my body all at once.

Screaming like a banshee, I kick and claw while someone throws their weight on me.

“Aurora!” Willow bellows, but her voice isn’t close to me. “Her father will have your fucking license for this.”

A sharp prick in my thigh jolts my movements. Within seconds, my eyelids grow heavy, and I’m unable to stop the hands from groping me and placing me on the bed.

Nightmares plague me, and Dmitri’s smug face plays on repeat. No matter how fast or far I run, he always catches me.

Voices penetrate the air around me. “What the fuck did you do to my daughter?” My dad’s normally calm voice is raised.

“Sir, lower your voice, or you’ll be asked to leave,” Dr. Lee orders. “I can’t give you any information due to HIPAA laws.”

“Willow, what happened?”

I’m trapped in my body, unable to move or speak. My eyelids are heavy like lead still, I plead silently to Willow. Please don’t tell him I was pregnant.

“Aurora was a little distraught when she woke up,” Willow begins.

“Distraught?” Dr. Lee interrupts. “She ripped out her IV and pushed a nurse.”

“You’re a damn liar!” Willow shouts. “Aurora ripped out her IV, but she didn’t push anyone. She moved away from the nurse who tried to grab her, and then when I had her calmed down, she collapsed to the ground. The three of them seized her like she was a common criminal, and one jumped on top of her!”

“I’ll be transferring her care immediately,” Dad sneers. “Get me the CEO of the hospital right now.”

“Sir, you can’t—”

“Dr. Lee,” Dad interrupts. “My name is General Parks. You will get Mr. Bradshaw on the phone immediately, or I will have this place crawling with reporters regarding the poor care my daughter received.”

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The door slams shut, and I slip back into unconsciousness to once again face my demons.

Sometime later, my eyes flutter open, and my brows scrunch in confusion when I see my dad slumped in a chair next to me. “Dad?” I croke.

Dad startles. “Aurora, you’re awake.” He jumps up from his chair and sits on the bed, taking my hand. “You took twenty years off my life, baby girl.”

I blink back tears. “I’m so sorry, Daddy.”

“Why?”

My eyes shift down at the ugly polyester blanket so I don’t have to look my father in the eye. “I don’t know,” I lie.

“Promise you won’t ever do that again”

“Promise,” I squeak. “Can I get some water?”

My mouth is parched. As Dad hands me a cup of water, there’s a knock at the door. He moves to the foot of the bed and crosses his arms as the door slowly opens.

“General Parks,” the man greets, holding out his hand. “I was informed you wanted to speak to me.”

Dad doesn’t move a muscle. “Mr. Bradshaw, I want my daughter prepped for flight

within the hour.”

“I-I-I’m sorry, what?” Mr. Bradshaw stammers.

“You heard me.”

“Your daughter needs a medical procedure immediately before she can be moved,” he says condescendingly. “If you remove her, it will be against medical advice.”

“Can it be done in a few hours?”

“Well... I’d have to confer with Dr. Lee,” Mr. Bradshaw states.

“Screw Dr. Lee,” Dad bellows. “We’re leaving. Your staff has already shown their incompetence. And you better believe I’ll be filing a complaint with the medical board on how you treat rape victims.”

Embarrassment floods my cheeks, but at the same time, my heart soars. I don’t want people to know what I went through, but they shouldn’t treat people the way I was treated.

“I’m sure she didn’t know,” Mr. Bradshaw protests.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dad hisses. “It shouldn’t have happened to her or anyone else. Send all her medical records to the Naval Health Clinic in Quantico, Attention Dr. Sheppard. The chopper will be here in thirty minutes. I want her ready by then.”

“I’ll send the nurse in.” The administrator spins on his heel to leave.

“Mr. Bradshaw,” Dad calls. The man glances over his shoulder as he reaches for the handle. “You better not send in any of the ones who attacked my daughter.”

He nods and rushes out the door.

Dad returns to my side and brushes the hair out of my face. “You gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“Not yet,” I whisper.

He kisses my forehead. “We have time, baby girl, we have time.”

“Where’s Willow?” I ask.

“I sent her home to get some rest. She’s been up all night.”

“Did you tell her I’m going back to Virginia?”

Dad nods. “I also invited her to come stay as long as she wants.”

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I'm going to need her to get through this. Without her, I'll sink into the abyss and never be able to crawl back to the surface.

How do I go on knowing what I did? I just made a promise to Dad. They fucking won! Screw promises.

Two and a half hours later, I'm back in front of Dr. Sheppard. "I have the O.R. prepped. Let's move," she demands as the gurney is pushed through the hospital.

"Dr. Sheppard," my dad calls. "Will she be okay?"

Dr. Sheppard's eyes soften. "Aurora will be sore, but she'll make a full recovery."

"That's all I need to know."

Once we're in the O.R. and Dr. Sheppard is scrubbed in, she approaches the table I'm lying on. "Aurora, I'm so sorry for your loss."

Tears spill down my cheeks. "You said I wasn't pregnant!" I accuse.

Dr. Sheppard's eyes soften. "When we tested you, the test was negative. You said you were on the shot and had just had one administered two weeks before you were taken." I nod because everything she says is accurate. "I'm sorry, the shot must've failed, and it was too early for any hCG levels to show up on the test."

My lip trembles. "What happens now?"

“You have to have a D&C. A dilation and curettage, which is where we go in and scrape the lining of the uterus. You’ll be sore for a while, and there will be heavy bleeding and discomfort.”

“Do I have to stay here?”

“You’ll be with us for a while so we can monitor you and do some evaluations.”

My brows shoot up. “Evaluations?”

“You’ve had a huge shock,” she explains. “A suicide attempt and a miscarriage, not to mention you’re a survivor of human trafficking. We’re going to have to do some psychological evaluations as well as keep an eye on you medically to make sure you heal properly.”

I close my eyes as the medicine takes hold.

How much more can I take before I truly lose myself to madness?

CHAPTER 11

JAXSON

“How long has it been since we’ve had a home-cooked meal?” Carver smacks his lips as he rings the doorbell.

I roll my eyes and shift on my feet. Lykos sits obediently at my side, waiting on my command. It’s been almost three weeks since General Parks pulled us out of Romania. After our crash course with Yazzie on Lykos’ training, we flew back to Quantico. The moment we stepped foot on the base, we were held at bay from seeing Aurora until she was released from the hospital. The general thought it best if we

gave her a couple of days so we didn't overwhelm her. Not only with our presence, but also her soon to be new companion.

Thomas snorts. "What year is it?"

Bennett sniffs the air. "Wonder what we're having?"

"Morons," Hudson mumbles.

I glare at all of them, but before I can yell at them to grow up, the door swings open. My brows furrow as I take in the General's appearance. He looks as if he's aged ten years. There's more gray in his hair than there was before, and his cheeks are thinner.

General Parks smiles weakly. "Gentleman, come in." He waves us into the entryway before he realizes that Lykos is with us and takes a quick step back. "What the hell is that?"

"Lykos." I scratch behind the Wolamute's ears, and his tail thumps against the wood floor.

The general squares his shoulders. "My office, now."

"Shit," Carver mutters under his breath.

I'm surprised by the general's reaction, especially since I'd already informed him of what type of dog Lykos is. He was the one who approved our journey to bring him back from Alaska. Lykos falls into step with me as we follow the general to his office. General Parks ushers us inside and takes a seat behind his desk, gesturing for us to sit down as well.

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Hudson and I sit in the leather armchairs across from him. Carver and Bennett sit on the sofa against the wall, and Thomas leans against the window sill with his arms crossed.

I snap my fingers and point at the floor. Lykos slinks to his belly and lies his head on his paws. General Parks' eyes widen, and his brows raise in shock. Lykos is jet-black and massive, so he takes some getting used to. He weighs one hundred seventy-five pounds and is three feet tall. His eyes are onyx, and the only way you see him in the dark is if you're close enough to see the white surrounding the dark orbs. Lykos looks like a hound from Hell and will protect Aurora at all costs. Not only that, but he's also been trained in helping people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Deciding not to beat around the bush, I jump-start the conversation and give the general a pointed look. "You look like shit."

He sits back in his chair. "Is that any way to speak to your superior officer?"

"No," I admit. "But in this case, I have to ask, Sir, what the hell is going on?"

The general hangs his head. "Things have been... rough."

"How so?" Hudson interjects.

"The night terrors, for one." The general rubs his face. "Aurora wakes up in the middle of the night screaming. She jumps at her own shadow and has barely eaten anything since I brought her back here from Boston."

My men and I exchange concerned looks. “Lykos should be able to help with some of that,” I say.

General Parks chuckles. “He looks like he could eat her.”

“In theory,” I joke, and then straighten in my chair. “I’ll teach Aurora all the commands she’ll need to know. The first thing we need to make sure of is that they’re compatible with each other. If they’re not, we’ll figure something else out.”

General Parks claps his hands together. “I promised you a meal.”

Carver’s stomach grumbles, relieving some of the tension. “What’s for dinner?”

“Caesar salad, chicken fettuccine alfredo, and Dutch apple pie with vanilla bean ice cream,” General Parks responds, rising from his chair. “My cook really outdid himself.”

General Parks leads us into the dining room, where the smell of garlic permeates the air. He indicates where we should sit, and I have Lykos lie down between myself and Hudson.

“Where’s Mrs. Parks?” Bennett inquires.

General Parks sighs. “She left Monday for a benefit gala in Washington.” He lowers his voice. “Vera can’t handle Aurora’s distress. It’s killing her. She’s going to stay with her family for a while.”

“Dad, is it ti—” Aurora comes around the corner and freezes in place. In a voice barely above a whisper, she says, “Jaxson.” Those piercing emerald eyes stare briefly into mine.

“Baby girl.” General Parks stands to escort her to the table. “Rivers and his team are back. I thought it would be nice for them to join us for a home-cooked meal. What do you say?”

I guess he didn’t tell her we were coming over... or back from our mission.

Aurora drops her gaze and picks at her sleeve. “Um... sure.”

When I close my eyes at night, the image of her lying naked, tied to that table, haunts me. I’m pretty sure that’s about to be replaced with the vision in front of me. Aurora is beautiful. She’s dwarfed in an oversized sweatshirt in an attempt to hide her body, but no matter how hard she tries, there’s an aura around her. Long, dark chestnut hair frames her heart-shaped face. Her soul-piercing emerald eyes lock with mine, and they give me hope that not all is lost. She’s in there somewhere. Now to drag her ass back out.

Everyone starts scooping up their portions and digging in as soon as Aurora is seated. I try not to be obvious as I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She pushes food around on her plate to make it seem as if she’s eaten something, and she doesn’t attempt to engage in conversation. If anything, she slumps further into her chair.

“When will Aurora’s mom be back?” Carver asks in between bites.

Without looking up from her plate, Aurora mumbles. “Stepmom.”

Carver swallows. “Oh, sorry.”

General Parks clears his throat. “Um... Yes, Vera is Aurora’s stepmom. I remarried when Aurora was eleven. We lost Ana to cancer unexpectedly. Didn’t get the diagnosis until it was too late.” He takes a drink. “I didn’t want Aurora to grow up without a mother, and you know how our life is, always on the go.”

We all nod in agreement.

Bennett and Thomas both reach for the last piece of garlic bread. Bennett's elbow hits the rim of his glass, sending it sailing over the edge of the table, where it smashes into a million pieces.

Aurora screams and throws herself out of her chair. She huddles against the wall, covering her head.

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“Aurora,” General Parks shouts. I hold him back when he goes to comfort her.

As much as I want to run to her, we also need to see if Lykos is meant to be Aurora’s. I was going to wait and introduce them after dinner, and I fucking hate that they are meeting like this, but this will really show me if they will do well together.

Lykos darts under the table, belly crawling over to her shaking frame. He pushes his massive body against hers. She startles, and her breath hitches. Aurora slowly drops her guard, and Lykos places his head in her lap. She holds her hands up, unsure if she should touch him or not. I hold my breath and release it when she gently rubs the top of his head, and Lykos starts to whine lightly. Tears stream down her face, but her breaths are evening out.

I take that as my cue and slowly approach them. Holding out my hand, I wait for her to take it before I pull her up off the floor.

“Come on.” I snap my fingers at Lykos and signal for him to follow. “Let’s go outside and talk.” I glance over my shoulder to everyone at the table. “We’ll be back.”

Lykos brushes up against Aurora, lending his strength but careful not to knock her over. Aurora’s hand grasps his fur around his neck as she leads the way to the backyard.

She plops down under a tree with Lykos right beside her. He lays his head in her lap, and she immediately begins petting him again like she did in the dining room.

“You have a beautiful dog,” she mutters without looking up from her task. “What’s his name?”

I don’t want to tower over her or sit too close, so I put five feet of distance between us and sit on the ground, too. Since I’m a tall guy, it’s hard to get comfortable. Pulling my knees up, I wrap my arms around them and answer her question. “Lykos. It means ‘wolf’.”

“Lykos,” she repeats. Lykos’ head pops up, and he stares at her for a moment before resting back on her legs. “It suits him. He’s a beast.”

I chuckle. “He’s your beast.”

“W-w-what?” she stammers. “Mine... Why?”

I shrug. “I’m not gonna lie, your dad’s worried about you. I suggested Lykos.” I nod toward the dog. “He’s a trained therapy dog for people with PTSD and an awesome guard dog.”

Her voice sounds hopeful when she asks, “Guard dog?”

“And therapy dog.” I stand and slowly approach both of them. “Want to see what he can do?”

Her head bobs up and down enthusiastically. I run through the same commands that Yazzie taught us and have her go through them several times as well. Lykos is a machine and listens to his new charge well. There’s no doubt in my mind that these two were meant to be together.

An hour later, after running through hand signals and commands, Hudson opens the back door and sets out a bowl of water and some food for Lykos. Aurora gives him a

timid smile and a small wave before telling Lykos to go. The Wolamute bounds over and digs in. Hudson scratches behind his ears before retreating back inside.

I sit back on the ground, waiting for Aurora to join me. We still need to talk. I don't know if she's going to hate me or not after this, but it's time for some tough love. Pussyfooting around isn't doing her any favors.

Aurora waits for Lykos to finish and do his business before calling him to where we are. She immediately curls back into herself. Her chin is tucked into her chest, and Lykos' head is on her lap, where she pets him lovingly.

"I know we had to leave abruptly after we returned you to your father," I begin. "We needed to get back to our posts. I'm sorry we didn't get to tell you in person."

"I understand. Dad told me it was urgent. Military brat, remember?" She slowly raises her head. "I never got to thank you and your team for rescuing me."

"You don't have to thank us."

"Yes, I do."

"How have you been?" I ask casually.

Aurora shrugs. "Fine."

Fine. I fucking hate that word. Everyone knows that when a woman says 'fine', she's anything but fine. Hell, just one look at her, and anyone can see that she's not.

"You sure about that?"

"Whaddya mean?"

“You didn’t eat anything more than a bite or two at dinner,” I point out. “You have dark circles under your eyes like you haven’t slept in we?—”

“Is this your polite way of telling me I look like shit?” Aurora growls. “Well, excuse me. I’ve lived through hell. Fucking hell, Jaxson. It's a damn battle to get out of bed every single day!”

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Lykos sits up and gives me a pointed look. He pushes the front part of his body into her lap and lays his head on her chest. He whines until she starts to pet him once more.

I decide to press my luck even further. "Is that why you tried to kill yourself?"

Her shoulders slump forward, and she buries her head in Lykos' fur. There are so many things I want to say to her.

If someone doesn't intervene soon, she might try to kill herself again. Defeat is written all over her face. Fuck it! She can hate me later.

"Aurora, look at me," I plead. Haunted emerald eyes stare back at me. "I know you don't want to talk about whathappened... And you don't have to, but if you had been successful and killed yourself, those bastards would've won." A tear slides down her cheek. "I can't even begin to fathom what you or any of the others went through. Hell,Istill have nightmares about the night we rescued you."

"I'm tired, Jaxson. So fucking tired," she cries. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Stand up and fight... take your life back. Be the stubborn, strong, independent woman your dad told us about."

"I don't know if I can."

"You can," I encourage. "You have to want it bad enough. The shitty things that happen to us don't have to define the rest of our lives. Do you lie down, watching

your life pass you by, or are you gonna stand up and give those motherfuckers the middle finger? Show them they didn't break you. If you keep trying to destroy yourself, they will win. Don't fucking let them."

With those parting words, I stand up and dust myself. I hit her with a lot today. Aurora needs time to absorb everything that I've said and to get to know Lykos alone without an audience.

There's still a spark behind those captivating eyes of hers. It's small, but it's there. Aurora might not see it, but I can. Someone just needs to help her turn that spark into a burning flame.

I'll gladly fucking volunteer.

CHAPTER 12

AURORA

"Call me if you ever need to talk."

Jaxson strolls back to the house, leaving me to ponder his words. With one last glance, he opens the door and heads inside. I continue to stroke Lykos' fur. I'm shocked that Jaxson thought enough about me to bring me a dog. Lykos is huge, and at first, I was afraid he was going to try and tear me apart. But when he laid his head in my lap, I was a goner.

"What do you think, Lykos?" His head snaps in my direction at his name. "Jaxson says that if I would've been successful with my..." I gulp. "Plan... Then they would've won. Didn't they already win? They took everything from me. Everything!"

Exhausted, I lie down in the grass. Lykos lays his giant paw on my stomach and his

head on my chest above my heart. I wrap my arms around him while he absorbs my pain. I'm so sick of crying, but instead of a sense of heavy foreboding, this release feels cathartic.

Is Jaxson right? Can I still have a life after all the shit that has happened?

Once my tears dry out, I slowly drag myself over to a patio chair with Lykos at my heels. I love sitting in the grass, but my body is stiff and sore from lying on the ground and sitting with Jaxson this afternoon. The sun is slowly starting to set. I'm so mesmerized by the different soft color tones of oranges and reds that I don't realize I'm no longer alone.

"They're gone." Dad leans against the house.

I grab my chest. "Jesus, Dad!" Lykos takes a defensive stance in front of me, growling. "Lykos, down." He immediately settles but eyes my dad warily.

"Sorry, baby girl." Dad pulls up a seat next to me. "I wanted to let you know the guys all left."

"It's okay." I scratch under Lykos' jaw. "I zoned out."

"How do you like him?" Dad gestures toward Lykos.

"He's great," I say. "Are you okay with a dog around the house?"

Dad smiles. "I'll do anything that'll help put you at ease. Besides, it seems like he's pretty smitten with you already."

Lykos licks my hand and drops back down on his paws, resting his head.

I choke up. “Thanks, Daddy. What about Vera?”

“She’ll get over it,” he says dismissively. “You’re more important.”

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I stand and give Dad a peck on the cheek. “I’m going to head to bed.” I pat my leg. “Lykos, come.” Lykos trails behind me dutifully.

Although I’m safe in my father’s home, I still lock my bedroom door before entering my ensuite. I brush my teeth and comb the tangles out of my hair. I tug Jaxson’s shirt over my head, letting it fall over my body like a security blanket. I was going to give it back to him, but he left before I could, so I continue to use it. I’ll eventually hand it over.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that. You feel safe when you wear it.

Patting the bed, I command, “Lykos, up.” He jumps on the bed and scoots close to me.

I curl up to his warm body, and my eyes drift close.

The next thing I know, the scent of bacon wafts up my nostrils, and my stomach growls. “Mhm.” I rub the sleep from my eyes and glance at the clock. It’s nine in the morning.

I slept until nine... without any nightmares!

I give Lykos a pat and kick my legs over the side of the bed. He stands and stretches his long body. I move into the bathroom, place my hands on the sink, and stare at my reflection in the mirror.

I don’t recognize the stranger staring back at me. Her eyes are no longer vibrant and

mischievous, and dark circles show exhaustion. Her skin is paler than usual, and her cheeks are hollow.

“You don’t get towed!” I pound on the counter. “Jaxson’s right. It’s time to fight back.”

I refuse to let them have any more control over my life. There’s only one person pulling the strings now, and that’s me. I determine what will happen from this day forward. Those bastards are going to regret the day they ever took Aurora Parks or any other victim. Even with my newfound determination, I know I need help learning how to fight and defend myself.

I know just the man to help me out.

I shudder at the thought of being around any man for an extended amount of time alone, let alone a team of men, because, let’s face it, Jaxson is always with his team.

I trust Jaxson and his men. They got me home, and if they wanted me gone, they could’ve easily made me disappear.

Mind made up, I take a quick shower. I throw on a pair of leggings, a t-shirt, some socks, and a pair of tennis shoes before throwing open my bedroom door. Lykos bounds off the bed and follows me out.

I fill Lykos’ water dish and make sure he has food before heading into the dining room, where my dad is already seated and going over his briefings.

“Morning, baby girl,” he greets, looking up from his paperwork.

I sit beside him. “Morning.” I fill up my plate with eggs and bacon, suddenly famished.

“Glad to see your appetite is back.” Dad smiles. “What’s on your agenda today?”

“Can I ask a favor?” I shove a bite of eggs into my mouth and groan.

Dad leans back in his chair, his focus solely on me. “What do you need?”

“Do you have Jaxson’s number?” Dad raises his brow. “Right, of course you do. Can you call him and have him come over?”

“You want me to ask Jaxson to come over?”

“Please.”

Dad nods. “Sure, I’ll call him after breakfast. When do you want him to come by?”

“As soon as he can.”

I know he wants to ask questions, but he keeps them to himself, no doubt planning on grilling Jaxson with them later. I’ll tell my dad my plan on learning self-defense if Jaxson agrees to teach me.

We finish our meal in silence. I leave my dad in private to call Jaxson while I take Lykos out to do his business as my plan starts to take more shape.

Time to take back my life.

CHAPTER 13

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JAXSON

Ring.Ring.

I grumble as I reach for my cell phone and see the general's name flash across the screen. Fuck my life, this can't be good.

Was I too hard on Aurora? Should I have minded my own fucking business?

Knowing I can't ignore his call, I hit the green button. "Hello?"

It took forever to fall asleep last night because I couldn't stop replaying my conversation with Aurora. "Did I wake you, Rivers?"

"No, Sir." I rub a hand over my face. "Everything okay with Lykos?"

As much as I want to know how Aurora is doing after our visit yesterday, I don't want to appear eager to ask questions. The general is very perceptive, and it would raise suspicions that his daughter is constantly invading my thoughts.

"He's fine. Made himself right at home."

"I was hoping he'd be a good fit."

"Aurora asked me to call," General Parks admits. Tiredness forgotten, I bolt upright and wait with baited breath for him to continue. "She asked me to have you come back over today, if possible."

“Do you know what she wants?”

“No, and I didn’t ask.” He pauses. “I don’t know what happened between you two yesterday, but today was the first day I saw a glimpse of the old her.”

“General?” I need an explanation.

“She ate breakfast and smiled for the first time in weeks,” he says proudly. “Whatever you did, keep doing it.”

Little does he know, I’d do anything for Aurora. The more time I spend with her, the more her soul calls to mine. I’ll never press her for anything other than friendship, and if that’s all she ever offers, I’ll gladly accept the hand-out. Make no mistake, if she ever shows any interest, though, she’ll be mine. Either way, no one will ever touch her again without her permission.

“What time do you want me to come over?”

“As soon as you can. I don’t want to give her a chance to get inside her head and change her mind.”

Even though my heart is racing at the possibility of spending more time with Aurora. I pretend to ponder my schedule for the day.

“I have to meet up with the team before lunch.” I head toward the living room. “How about I grab a pizza and head over there after that? Around noon?”

“Perfect. Aurora likes supreme.”

“Supreme. Got it.”

General Parks clears his throat. “Appreciate it, Rivers.”

“I just hope I can help.”

“If anyone can, it’s you,” he says before disconnecting the call.

A million scenarios run through my head as to what Aurora could possibly want. Maybe she wants me to show her some more commands for Lykos, not that there’s much to show her. Yazzie told me to give her his number, and he’d be glad to give her some training techniques if there were more skills she wanted the Wolamute to learn.

Maybe she forgot some hand signals? Who cares? Either way, you get to see her again.

I step toward the bathroom when a knock at the front door stops me. “Fuck,” I mumble. This is what happens when you move into an apartment complex and live on the same floor as your entire team: easy access to each other at all hours of the day.

I should’ve bought a house.

I throw open the door and glare. “What do you assholes want?”

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Carver sniffs the air. “I smell coffee.”

Bennett and Thomas push past me into the kitchen, with Carver right behind them.

“Can we come in?” At least Hudson has the decency to ask.

I throw up my hands. “Might as fucking well.”

Thomas throws a bag at me. “What crawled up your ass?”

I open the bag, and saliva pools in my mouth. Inside are two warm, freshly baked honey croissants. As Bennett passes out cups of coffee, I take a big bite and moan a little.

“Awe, is the Captain hangry this morning?” Carver teases.

“Fuck off,” I say without any heat.

“Any word from the general?” Hudson asks casually.

I swallow hard. I was hoping to talk to Aurora without telling the team to find out what she wants first, but I should’ve known one of them would ask. We all hate seeing her deteriorate.

“Just got off the phone with him,” I answer.

Thomas’ head snaps up. “When were you gonna fucking tell us?”

Felix Thomas is one helluva Marine, but he sometimes lets his emotions get the best of him. Normally, he can keep them in check. However, this assignment has him twisted inside. His sister was kidnapped by a close family friend when they were kids, and even though they eventually found her, she was never the same.

“Settle the fuck down,” I command. “I literally hung up with him right before you degenerates shoved your way in here.”

“Sorry,” he mutters.

“What’d he want?” Bennett asks. “Is there a lead on the Krukov family?”

I shrug. “He called on Aurora’s behalf.” I hold up my hand to keep them from interrupting. “He doesn’t know why, but she wants to see me.”

Hudson’s brows furrow. “Do you think she wants you to take Lykos back?”

All eyes land on me. We were all a bit worried when we picked up the Wolamute. His size alone was enough to intimidate anyone, let alone Aurora.

I shake my head. “The general said that, and I quote, ‘She ate breakfast and smiled for the first time in weeks.’”

“Hell yeah!” Carver cheers. “I wonder what she wants.”

“No clue.” I finish off my pastry. “Will you dickheads get out of here so I can get ready to go? I need to stop for pizza on my way there, too.”

“Pizza?” Bennett asks, hopefully.

“No... No way,” I chastise. “I’m going alone. I’ll fill you all in later.”

“Roger that,” they say in unison.

Fifteen minutes later, they finish their breakfast and coffee. Hudson hangs back as the others head out. “Be careful.”

I clench my fists at my side. “Excuse me?”

Hudson rolls his eyes. “You’re falling for her.”

“Fuck.” I run a hand through my hair. “Is it that obvious?”

He chuckles. “Remember, I see what others might not. Aurora’s fragile, she’s still healing.”

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“Don’t you think I know that?” I sneer.

Hudson holds up his hands. “You do, but you’re also a protector. You’re gonna wanna do whatever it takes to protect her. Don’t overwhelm her. It could do more harm than good.”

“In other words, ignore every instinct I have.”

He laughs. “Yep.”

“Shit.”

“That about sums it up.”

I flip him off when he walks out of the apartment, his laughter echoing down the hallway.

Ringling the doorbell at the general’s home, I shift on my feet with excitement like a teenage boy arriving for a first date.

This isn’t a date.

Aurora swings open the door, and my heart stops. There’s color in her cheeks today, and even though there are still circles under her eyes, they’re less prominent. She’s wearing leggings that hug her curvy figure and a purple t-shirt that makes her emerald eyes sparkle.

“Jaxson,” she greets shyly. “Thank you for coming.”

My brain misfires, and I mentally kick myself to jumpstart it. “Uh... Hi.” I shove the pizza box forward. “Your dad said you like pizza.”

You’re a complete fucking idiot! What are you twelve?

She giggles nervously. “I love pizza. Come in.”

I follow her into the house, noting Lykos is right beside her. I’m really distracted not to have seen the giant beast standing beside her. Hudson’s right, I need to keep my game face on. She leads me to the backyard to an outdoor dining area.

“I’ll grab us something to drink.” She rushes inside, returning a moment later with two cans of Coke, paper plates, and some napkins. “I hope this is okay.”

“Perfect.” I open the box. “I hope supreme is okay.”

“It’s my favorite.” She takes a bite and groans.

That sound sends a shockwave right to my dick. Obviously, he didn’t get Hudson’s memo about not overwhelming her. I try thinking about anything other than the sounds she’s making while she’s eating her pizza.

Dentists, the plague, taxes, running drills...

I pick up a piece of pizza. “How’d it go with Lykos last night?”

“First night that I didn’t have nightmares,” she admits. “Thank you for bringing him here.” She pauses, inhaling deeply. “I bet you’re wondering why I asked my dad to call you.”

“I figured you’d tell me when you were ready,” I reply before taking a drink.

“I want you to teach me to fight.”

Choking on my Coke, I stammer, “W-w-what?” Never in a million years did I expect to hear her say that.

“Fight,” she states matter-of-factly. “I want to be able to defend myself. I never want to feel vulnerable again.”

I puff out my chest. Instantly, Hudson’s words replay in my head, and I deflate.

She trusts me enough to teach her. How could I ever deny her that request?

“What do you want me to teach you?”

“Everything,” she says breathlessly.

“On one condition,” I stipulate.

“Okay?”

“We have to tell your dad.” I raise my hand. “Not to get his permission. This is your choice, and I’ll do whatever you need to feel safe. However, this is his base, and we’ll need to use the facilities. I feel better teaching you here in an environment I’m familiar with.”

She puts her hand out. “Deal.”

I slide my hand over hers, and electricity shoots up my arm. Her mouth drops open, and she pulls away quickly.

“When do you want to start?” I ask.

Aurora recovers from her shock. “As soon as we can.”

“Is your dad home?”

“He’s in his office.”

I collect our trash and toss it in the receptacle. “Let’s go talk to him.”

She pats her leg for Lykos to follow. The general’s door is open when we approach his office. “Dad,” she calls. “Can we talk to you?”

General Parks looks up from his computer. “Absolutely. Come in.”

It’s déjà vu all over again. I drop into the leather armchair with Aurora next to me. “I need to request to use some of the facilities on the base, Sir.”

General Parks sits back in his chair studying my face. “You don’t need my permission to use anything on the base, Rivers. You know that.”

“Not for me, General.” I gesture to Aurora. “For her.”

The general swings his gaze to his daughter. “What parts of the base would Aurora need access to?”

“Before he answers you,” she inserts. “I asked Jaxson to teach me to fight.”

Red slowly creeps up the side of his neck. “Fight?”

“Yes, fight.” She stands and walks over to him. “I need to be able to defend myself, Dad. You taught me a lot growing up, but everything you showed me was useless against them. Please Daddy, I need this.”

The general stands and pulls her into his embrace. “If this is what you need, then you can have it.” His eyes shift to mine. “Rivers, whatever you need access to, you let me know, and you’ll have it.”

“If you can get me the schedules of when the gun range, obstacle course, and gym will be in use, I’d appreciate it,” I rattle off. “I’ll also make sure we go during times that no one is around so we don’t draw attention to ourselves.”

“I’ll have that emailed to you by the end of the day.”

I hate to leave, but I need to get started on a game plan. Might be better if I inform the rest of my team what's going on. As much as I would like to have Aurora all to myself, we've all perfected skills over the years, and she would benefit from learning from each of us.

I push out of my seat. "Aurora, are you okay with the rest of my team joining us? I think they'll be able to help us out."

"Um... sure," she says hesitantly.

"If you ever get uncomfortable, we can kick them out. We'll do this at your pace."

She juts out her chin and narrows her brows in determination. "I'll be fine."

"Can I have your phone?"

She pulls it out of her pocket, unlocks it, and hands it to me. I type in my phone number and text myself before handing it back to her. "Now you have my number, and I have yours. I also put in Yazzie's number."

Her brows raise in question. "Yazzie?"

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“He’s the one who raised and trained Lykos,” I explain. “Call him anytime if you have any questions.”

A smile tugs at her lips. “Thanks, Jaxson.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I warn. “You might be cursing me to Hell by the time I’m done with you.”

The general roars with laughter. “You giving her the ol’ Marine welcome, huh?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Bring it,” she challenges.

“Don’t worry, I will.” I wink. “I’ll text you when I have all the details ironed out.”

The general steps around his desk. “I’m going to walk Jaxson out.”

Excitement courses through my body knowing I get to spend an undetermined amount of time getting to know Aurora.

Too bad you also got to share her with the rest of your team. Fuck!

CHAPTER 14

AURORA

“You seem to be in better spirits today.” Jessa smiles.

It’s our weekly FaceTime therapy session. I promised my dad I would continue working with Dr. Stark since she was already familiar with my case. I didn’t want to find a new psychiatrist who could also do therapy or have to meet with two different people. Besides, I really enjoy Jessa’s demeanor.

“Jaxson brought me a surprise, and for the first time in weeks, I slept without nightmares,” I announce.

“What did he br—” Lykos’ head enters the screen, causing Jessa to gasp. “What the hell is that thing?”

“Wolamute.”

“Is he a wolf?” she whispers.

“He’s half wolf, half Malamute.” I scratch his head. “Down, Lykos.” He lays back down at my feet. “He’s a licensed therapy dog for people with PTSD and a trained guard dog.”

Jessa whistles. “Impressive. So, Jaxson is back?”

“Yep.”

“How do you feel about that?”

How do I feel about that? I hadn’t really thought about it either way. Don’t kid yourself, you want to see him again. Only to thank him... That’s it.

“I mean, I finally got to tell him thanks for rescuing me.” I fidget with my shirt.

This conversation is going down a road I'm not ready to travel. I'm finally starting to feel good, and I don't want to rip open wounds again. Jessa must sense my withdrawal because she switches gears.

"Do you have any special plans while you stay with your dad?"

I grin. "Actually, I asked Jaxson to teach me self-defense."

"I think that's a fantastic idea!"

"My dad taught me the basics growing up," I say, opening up for the first time. "W-w-when I was with them, I froze. I couldn't fight back." I blink back tears, refusing to let them fall.

Jessa straightens in her chair. "Even if you had fought back, no means no, and you were taken against your will."

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“I never want to feel that helpless again.”

“I understand.” She nods. “Promise you’ll be careful and not push yourself too hard. Even though you think you’re ready, some situations that Jaxson may put you in, could trigger you.”

“Promise.”

“Alright.” She glances at her wrist. “That’s our time. I’m very proud of the strides you made in the last two weeks. I can’t wait to hear about your progress next time we speak. You know the drill, if you need anything before then, call me.”

“I will. Thanks, Jessa.” I disconnect the video chat and take a moment to gather my composure before typing in the next number. I cross my fingers, hoping he answers.

“Hello?” A long-haired man with a bushy beard answers.

I stare at him for a moment before I speak. “Are you Yazzie?”

“Who’s asking?” Lykos jumps up and barks at the computer screen. “Lykos! Quiet.” Lykos immediately stops barking, but his tail wags enthusiastically at seeing his old handler.

“Lykos, down,” I command. He sits by my side, watching the screen.

Yazzie clicks his tongue. “You must be Aurora.”

“I am.”

“Lykos is working out for you?”

“He’s amazing, thank you.”

Yazzie smiles. “That’s what I like to hear. What can I do for you?”

I tap my fingers on my desk. I didn’t think this all the way through before I called.

“Jaxson said I could call you if I had any questions about Lykos’ training.”

Yazzie cocks his eyebrow. “That’s right. Something wrong?”

I wave my hands frantically. “No... no... nothing like that. How can I teach him to attack a certain body part?”

“Which body part?”

“A dick,” I answer honestly.

Yazzie winces. “Jaxson explained that if you give the g-u-a-r-d command, Lykos will respond and act accordingly, right? He’ll protect you at all costs even if you don’t say it?”

“He did,” I reply. “If Lykos ever feels I’m in enough danger to attack on his own, I want to be able to direct him to an area that will totally incapacitate my assailant.”

“Brutal,” he wheezes. “Alright. Here’s what you do. Lykos already knows certain commands, as you’re aware.” I jerk my chin in agreement. “Good. Now, you need a word that will coincide with the area you want him to attack if you’re ever in that situation. Let’s hope you’re not, though,” he tacks on.

“Crotch!” I blurt.

“Crotch.” He scratches his chin. “I like it, but how about we use the German word for it instead? This way, if you say ‘crotch’ it won’t give your attacker a heads up.”

I snicker. “That’s probably a good idea. What’s the German word?”

“Zwickel,” he replies.

“Zwickel,” I repeat. “Cool. Sounds close to pickle.”

Yazzie’s face turns serious. “Next, you’ll need someone or a dummy for Lykos to practice on.”

“A real person?” Sweat beads on my brow. I never took into consideration that Lykos would actually need real-life training experience. This could be difficult.

“Yep,” he says, popping the ‘p’. “Or a dummy. When you’re targeting a specific body part, the dog needs to know exactly where you want him to aim for. Point and specify the attack, along with the word you’re going to use.”

“Wow.”

“Lykos is pretty smart,” Yazzie brags. “I have no doubt he’ll pick it up in no time. He will become aggressive during training, but that’s what he’s supposed to do. Give him the command to settle and wait him out. Once he’s calm, slowly approach, praise him, and give him a treat.”

“You think I can do this?”

“Definitely,” he confirms. “If not, Jaxson ca?—”

“I’d like to keep this between us for now, if possible,” I say, the words coming out in a rush. “I’ll eventually tell him, but for now, this is something I need to do for myself.”

Yazzie's eyes soften with understanding. “I’ll forward you some training videos I have.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“Call me if you have any other questions.” He gives me a mock salute before hanging up.

I rub Lykos’ head. “Looks like you and I have some training to do, buddy.”

Lykos gives a soft bark and licks my hand in response. “First, we’re gonna do our research.”

My fingers dance over the keyboard as I use the program Willow installed on my computer the last time she visited. She's an extremely talented software engineer. It encrypts all of my files and allows me to search anything on the internet without leaving any trace in my history of what I was looking for.

Thank you, Willow!

The first article I uncover is a bill introduced by Senator Timothy Briggs on human trafficking and how tougher laws need to be instituted to prevent or reduce the growing threat within our nation.

The bill stipulates that the government will boost support and protection for human trafficking victims by increasing law enforcement, providing more services for recovered victims, and strengthening the laws to ensure that both buyers and sellers who engage in sex trafficking are held accountable and prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

In one of his speeches, Senator Briggs also pledges to raise money to build rehabilitation homes for victims around the country.

Bile rises up the back of my throat, and I race to the bathroom, crashing to my knees in front of the toilet. I gag between bouts of retching into the bowl. Lykos whines and nudges me with his nose until I lay my hand on his fur. I inhale deeply through my nose and blow out through my mouth until my stomach settles.

That stupid low-life son of a bitch! He's a goddamn fraud.

After a few minutes, I feel well enough to stand with Lykos' help. He presses his body against my wobbly legs, steadying me while I grip the counter. I wash my face and rinse out my mouth before returning to my computer.

The more I read, the more my blood boils. Everything the senator claims to stand for, written in black and white in front of me, is a farce. I've seen his true colors and bled for him and his cronies. Hell, I was probably even bought and paid for by the American people's tax money.

A picture in a local paper catches my eye in the corner of my screen. Standing next to the senator, are the remaining assholes who were in that room the night I was broken.

They didn't break you. Remember what Jaxson said...Don't let them fucking win.

I grab a piece of paper and pen and jot down the names of the five men staring at me.

Kill List

1) Senator Briggs

2) Terry Potts

3) Cal Jameson

4) James Dows

5) Patrick Tyson

Ping. Ping. Ping.

I glance around for my phone when it goes off again and scoop it off the bed to read.

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Jaxson: We can start tomorrow morning. Gun range first?

Jaxson: Do you own a gun?

Jaxson: Nvm. Your dad's a general. You have a gun.

Jaxson: Pick you up at six

Jaxson: A.M.

Me: I'll be ready

Jaxson: See you then

Grinning, I pick up my kill list.

I'm coming for you, assholes.

CHAPTER 15

JAXSON

"Damn!" Bennett hollers.

The six of us have been at the gun range for the last two hours, firing rounds with different types of weapons. So far, Aurora seems the most comfortable with the Springfield XDM 9mm and Smith & Wesson Shield 45mm.

I push the button to bring the paper target forward to see how accurately she hit. I'm not surprised to see multiple headshots and a few in the chest and gut.

Bennett's not wrong. She's pretty fucking good... A natural.

"You didn't tell us you could shoot," Thomas accuses. Hudson elbows him in the stomach. "What the fuck, man? I'm just saying... She didn't tell us."

"Dumbass," Carver mutters. "Her dad's a general. It didn't once enter your little pea brain... I don't know... Hey, maybe General Parks taught Aurora how to shoot?"

We all howl with laughter. Aurora's skin flushes, and she bites her lip to keep from laughing as well.

"Doesn't hurt to brush up, does it?" she offers. "It's been a while since I've fired my gun. I'm rusty."

"Rusty?" Bennett says, incredulously. "You were more accurate than some Marines."

"Nah." She winks. "I normally get all the headshots. I missed a couple."

Fuck, this woman!

My dick hardens instantly, and for once, I'm grateful that I decided to wear my Utilities. They give me more room, and my arousal won't be as noticeable. My cock's been in a constant state of steel since I picked her up this morning. Dressed in simple yoga pants and a t-shirt, she's gorgeous without even trying.

"What's next?" Hudson asks, interrupting my thoughts.

We won't have access to the obstacle course and gym until later in the day, so I had

to devise a different plan. Carver helped me work on it all night until it was perfect.

“We’re going to head back to the general’s,” I announce.

Aurora’s brows furrow. “That’s it?”

I shake my head. “Got a surprise for you. Since the gym and obstacle course are being used, I came up with something else while we wait.”

She doesn’t look convinced but follows me out of the range. When we get to the general’s house, I ask her to get us some drinks while we scramble to hang her gift.

Bennett is climbing down the tree when Aurora walks out the patio door.

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She stops suddenly and gasps. “What the hell is that?”

Hanging from the tree is the ugliest-looking dummy ever created. Neither Carver nor I have great sewing skills, and it shows. We cut up a sheet and formed a body, stuffing it with fluff from pillows that we destroyed. We added two stuffed arms, legs, and a head, along with two plastic translucent globes for eyes. We added weights inside the legs to keep it from moving when he’s hit as well. The mouth is a drawn-on frowny face with gnarly teeth, compliments of my Sharpie, and a rectangle nose. Not to be outdone, Carter added his own personal touch of curly pube hairs at the crotch before I could stop him.

Aurora doubles over laughing. If I never hear anything in this world again, I could die a happy man. It’s carefree and light, something I wondered if I’d ever get the chance to experience.

“Dude, that’s fucking ugly,” Thomas quips.

Hudson pokes it with a stick like it has a disease. “What’s the point of this?”

“You’ll see,” I say cryptically. “Aurora, can you come over here, but tell Lykos to stay first?”

She gives Lykos the command and strolls over to my side, waiting for instruction. The last thing we need is for Lykos to think his owner is in danger. If I give the command, he might listen to me, but it’s better coming from Aurora.

“Thomas isn’t wrong.” She crosses her arms. “Ted is pretty ugly.”

“Who the fuck is Ted?” Carver asks.

Hudson snickers. “You named him?”

“Alright, alright,” I say, trying to gain control. “He’s not the greatest looking punching bag, but it’s the best we could come up with on the fly.”

“So, he’s not just for scaring the birds,” she jokes.

“Hardy har har,” Carver huffs. “I’ll have you know my fingers were bleeding last night from all the damn needle pokes. Those fuckers are sharp.”

“Aww... Does the poor baby need a Band-Aid?” Aurora’s hand flies to her mouth, her eyes widen in shock. “I-I-I’m... I-I-I didn’t mean... I’m sorry, Carver.”

Carver steps closer to her. “Aurora, stop,” he says gently. “I actually do need a Band-Aid.” He glares at me. “Fucker wouldn’t give me one.”

Carver shoves me out of the way to demonstrate how our prototype works. I cross my arms and watch as he holds her attention. The spotlight that I wanted is now his, and the greenmonster is rearing its ugly head. I stomp toward the table, grab a bottle of water, twist off the top, and chug a mouthful.

Hudson jogs over to grab one as well. “Careful, Captain,” he warns. “You’re showing your cards.”

Fuck! I was afraid of that.

I crack my neck and recenter myself before walking calmly returning to where Carver is finishing his explanation. “Did you show her the lights yet?”

“Nah,” he answers. “Figured you’d want to.”

He wanders over to the other guys, who are patiently waiting to see what this monstrosity can do.

“Did Carver explain that this is a pressure point dummy?”

She nods. “How will I know I’m hitting the right area?”

“You’ll see.” I cock my arm back, aiming for the neck, hitting directly between the neck and shoulder. The lights on the doll light up bright red.

“Wow,” she mumbles. “You made me my own 3 Ninjas practice dummy! This is amazing!”

I scratch my head. “What are you talking about?”

“3 Ninjas,” she says, exasperated. “Only one of the greatest nineties movies ever!”

“Hit it again!” The peanut gallery yells.

“You guys ever heard of a movie called 3 Ninjas?” I holler.

Everyone shakes their head except Carver, who smirks. “Where do you think I got the idea for the light-up eyes, genius?”

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“Of fucking course,” I mutter.

Aurora runs over and gives him a high-five. “Badass, Carver.”

Carver puffs out his chest. “Only the cool kids understand.”

“Alright, Aurora. It’s your turn.” She returns to her spot by my side, and I point to his crotch. “Kick him right there.”

She doesn’t even hesitate. Squaring her shoulders, she steps back on her right foot and kicks Ted so hard that I swear I feel it.

The eyes light up and groans filter throughout the yard.

Aurora dances around, stopping suddenly when she realizes we’re all watching her. “That felt good.”

I chuckle. “I never want to be on the receiving end of that kick. You have power in those legs.”

Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and she moves to kick Ted again. I show her all the pressure points on the body where we placed the lights. My guys and I take turns giving input on proper stances and how to produce the most power behind a hit or kick.

We stay for most of the day, only stopping long enough to have some lunch. The longer we’re here, the more comfortable she appears to be in our presence.

Unfortunately, I can't stop the gnawing feeling in the back of my mind that something's about to happen. What? I don't know. But I've never ignored a feeling before, and I'm not about to start.

One thing's for sure, nothing will fucking touch Aurora again.

CHAPTER 16

AURORA

"Kick his ass!" Willow shouts.

I throw my fist toward Jaxson's face, which he deflects before charging me. I roll onto my back, kicking my legs up and hitting him directly in the gut. He flies over my head, landing on his back. I spring back onto my feet before he recovers and piledrive my elbow into his gut, knocking the wind out of him.

"Time out, killer," Hudson calls, rushing onto the mat.

In the past few weeks, I've learned many strategic moves from Jaxson. He's a fantastic teacher and the one who volunteered to teach me hand-to-hand combat techniques. One time, he clipped my cheek, bruising the left side of my face, and swore he was done. It took a lot of begging and pleading, and Hudson convincing him nothing was broken, but eventually, he caved and resumed my training after the bruise faded.

Today is the first time I've put Jaxson on his ass. I'm usually the one limping out and taking an Epsom salt bath to relieve my sore muscles. A small part of me hopes this time it's him that needs help.

Jaxson bounds to his feet and smirks in my direction. "It'll take a lot more than that to

keep me down, Parks.”

Oh yeah, and now he’s calling me Parks.

“Is that why Hudson had to run to the rescue?” I taunt.

Jaxson scowls. “Dammit, Hudson! You’re ruining my street cred!”

Hudson holds his hands up. “Sorry, sorry.”

Willow comes down from the stands to hand me a water bottle. Even with my long hair in a ponytail, I’m drenched from our sparring session. I’m comfortable wearing my hair up around the guys and Willow, but around anyone else, I still wear it down since it could lead to a million questions I refuse to answer. Swiping the sweat off my forehead, I uncap the straw and take a long pull of the ice-cold water.

“Damn girl,” Willow says. “You got moves.”

Carver saunters over and drapes his arm around her. “I taught her everything she knows.”

Willow steps out of his hold to stand by me, batting her lashes at him. “Think you can teach me too, stud?”

“Well... uh... Yeah, sure,” he stammers, rubbing the back of his neck. “I-I-I can do that.”

Willow and I both look at each other before breaking out into hysterics.

“I think you broke him,” I whisper yell to her.

Willow winks at me. “Not yet.”

She marches over to Carver and pulls his head down a little. She stands on her toes, whispers something into his ear, steps back, and shakes her hips as she takes her place on the bleachers.

Carver grabs his chest and sinks to the ground. “I’m gonna marry her.”

What the hell did Willow say to him?

Thomas whistles. “Back to your corners, children.”

“Ding, ding,” Carver hollers as if we’re at a wrestling match.

Jaxson flips him off before waving me to the middle of the mat. “Let’s practice the move where I grab you from behind,” he says carefully. “Are you okay with trying?”

I gulp. The last few times Jaxson tried grabbing me from behind to teach me to get out of his grasp, I tensed up and had a panic attack followed by a flashback. It took him thirty minutes to calm me down. We weren’t going to attempt those moves anymore, but I’ve been working through them with Jessa, and she gave me some coping mechanisms to help me focus. Today will be the first day I get to experiment. Besides, who says an attacker is always going to come at you from where you can see them? The Russians sure didn’t.

I shiver and take a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

“Bennett,” Jaxson calls. Bennett swaggers over to us. “Keep an eye out for any distress.”

Bennett raises his brow in question. “Oh, shit... You’re not gonna do what I think you’re gonna do, are you?”

I nod. “I’m ready.”

Bennett and Jaxson share a look I can’t decipher before Bennett moves to the side, ready to intervene if it gets to be too much. Jackson leads me to the edge of the mat on the other side of the gym.

He points to Willow. “I want you to walk toward Willow without turning around. I don’t want you to anticipate my attack.”

“Okay,” I say, breathlessly, wishing Lykos was here.

We learned right away we couldn’t bring Lykos to these training exercises. Even when I would tell him to be calm or stay, his hackles would raise, and he’d growl and snap. One time was all it took for a unanimous decision to leave him at home.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I focus on Willow’s encouraging smile. Goosebumps break out all over my body, and my chest tightens. I clench my fists and close my eyes to steady myself when Jaxson attacks.

He wraps his arm around my neck, and I instinctively drop my chin to prevent him from putting any more pressure on my esophagus. Black spots cloud my vision, and my legs shake uncontrollably.

Dmitri’s smug face appears in front of me, taunting me. “Give up, pet.”

“Fuck you!” I spit.

I grab his forearm with both of my hands and step to the side. Swinging down with my right fist, I clock him in the nuts. He grunts and leans forward slightly. Pulling my right fist back up and crossing my arm across my chest, I swing back hard with that elbow directly into Dmitri’s face. I stumble forward when I’m suddenly released.

“Son of a bitch!” a voice behind me shouts.

The red haze eventually clears, and I swing around to see blood pouring out of Jaxson’s nose, not Dmitri’s. Everyone is staring at me, frozen in shock.

I can’t believe I hurt Jaxson like that. What the hell did I do?

“Holy shit!” I rush to him which sends everyone sprinting into action. “I’m sorry, Jaxson.”

Hudson nudges me out of the way. “Never thought I’d see the day.” He shoves cotton up Jaxson’s nose and breaks an instant ice pack. “For your dick.”

Jaxson wheezes. “Fuck!”

Willow runs up next to me. “Are you okay, Aurora?”

“Um, babe,” Carver interjects. “I think it’s Jaxson you should be asking about.”

“Not your babe,” she hisses.

“Yet.”

“What?”

He grins. “Never mind, continue.”

Willow grabs my hand. “As I was saying before I was interrupted, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I reassure her. “I can’t believe I did that. Omigod, I could’ve broken his nose!” All of a sudden, I can’t catch my breath because the air is too thick around me.

One of the people I would never want to hurt... And I did. He’s done so much for me.

Hudson steps in front of me. “Aurora, focus on me. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.” I mimic him the best I can. “Good, again.”

Once I have control over myself, I ask, “Is his nose broke?” Hudson shakes his head and is about to speak before I hear my name.

“Aurora,” Jaxson calls. I peek around Hudson and see Jaxson standing.

I walk slowly toward him. Blood soaks his beige t-shirt, and bruising is starting to form under his eyes. I wince. “I’m so sorry.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “You already said that.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

“Your fight or flight instincts took over,” Bennett pipes in.

Thomas nods in agreement. “Did you see her eyes?”

“My eyes?” My brows furrow.

Thomas taps his temples. “You looked defeated, ready to tap out. Then they were burning bright. Hard to explain, but I see it in soldiers when the adrenaline is really pumping.”

“Oorah,” a chorus erupts around me.

I bump my shoulder into Jaxson. “No hard feelings?”

“No,” he replies. “This is what we’re training you for.”

Not exactly the response I was going for. What about ‘you kicked my ass... congratulations’... Something!

“Fellas, it’s been fun and all, but I think Aurora is way overdue for some quality girl time.” Willow grabs my hand and tugs me toward the exit.

“Wait!” Carver hollers. “Can I come?”

“No!” we both yell over our shoulders as we race out the door.

Ten minutes later, we burst into my dad’s house and Lykos greets us in the foyer.

Willow scratches him behind his ears and pats his back. “Who’s a good boy?” Lykos licks her hand and soaks up the attention.

My dog's an attention whore.

"C'mon, I need a shower."

We race into my room like we're teenagers again, Lykos trailing behind us.

"I can't believe you beat the shit out of Jaxson," Willow says, plopping down on the bed. Lykos jumps up and makes himself comfortable next to her.

"It was an accident," I admit, sitting next to them. "I've never done that before."

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“Girl, you kicked ass today. I had no idea you were learning how to do all that.” She fans herself. “I might have a crush on you.”

I throw a pillow at her face. “Speaking of crushes... What the hell was that between you and Carver?”

Her cheeks turn bright red. “Nothing”

“Oh no you don’t, Willow Marie Grant,” I chastise. “What did you whisper to him?”

Her face turns an ever darker shade of red. “I might’ve implied that there’s nothing he can teach me but there’s a whole lot I can teach him, and if he ever wants to see heaven, all he has to do is ask.”

My mouth drops. “No wonder he was clutching his chest.”

“Enough about me,” she says, dismissively. “What about you and Jaxson?”

“What about him?”

“Seriously?” She raises her brows. “He totally wants you.”

I vigorously shake my head. “No, he doesn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Willow, I’m not the same woman I was six months ago.” I pick at my bedspread.

“Jaxson saw those monsters doing things to me he’ll never be able to unsee. He’s never going to want someone who’s used up.”

“Aurora Parks, you look at me right now,” she orders. My eyes lock with hers. “You are not used up. I can guarantee you that Jaxson could care less about that. He sees you for the strong, independent, loveable woman you are.”

A tear slides down my cheek. “I don’t know if I can ever...”

“There’s no pressure,” she assures. “Just don’t close yourself off to the possibility.”

“I’m gonna grab a quick shower.” I stretch, and my muscles ache in protest. “Keep Lykos company?”

“Sure.” She flips on the television. “Maybe we can watch Beauty and the Beast.”

I laugh. “Always a smartass.”

“You love my smart ass.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Ditto.”

I close the bathroom door and start the shower. Steam fills the room, and I slowly strip out of my sweat drenched clothes. I let the hot water cascade over my body, loosening the knots in my back. I shampoo and condition my hair before applying a generous amount of body wash to my loofah.

When I’m clean, I step out of the shower and wrap myself in my towel. I walk through my bedroom toward my closet, yank open the door, and squeal when Ted Jr.

falls at my feet. Lykos jumps off the bed and stalks forward, growling.

“Settle,” I command.

“Aurora, why is there a dummy in your closet?”

I blow out a breath. “This is Ted Jr. He’s Lykos’ attack training simulator.”

“I thought he was already trained?” she asks, confused.

“He is,” I say. “You have to swear what I’m about to tell you stays between us.”

“You know I’ll never tell anyone.”

She’s right. There’s no one I trust more in this world than Willow.

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Except my dad... And Jaxson.

I quickly explain how Jaxon and Carver made me a practice doll with light-up pressure points.

Her eyes sparkle with recognition. "Like 3 Ninjas?"

"See, you get it." I wave my hand toward Ted Jr. "Lykos needs something to practice on, but Ted is made out of sheets, and I knew he'd tear it to shreds. So, I went online and found this six-foot grappling dummy for martial artists."

"Still doesn't explain why you need it if Lykos is already trained to attack."

"Look closely around his waist area."

Willow's eyes dart to Ted Jr.'s middle. "Holy shit!" she shrieks. "What the hell happened to his crotch?"

I grin. "That's what I'm teaching Lykos... To rip the balls off someone."

She stares at me for a long moment before a smile spreads across her face. "Diabolical! I love it."

Knock. Knock.

"Just a minute, I'm getting dressed," I call. I stuff Ted Jr. in the closet and haphazardly throw on some clean clothes.

I pull open the door to find Vera on the other side.

“Ladies,” she greets, peering inside. “Aurora, your father and I have a dinner tonight in Norfolk. Would you and Willow like to accompany us?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “No thanks, Vera. We’re going to have a relaxing night here. We have a date with old movies and take-out food.”

Willow waves from my bed. “Hi, Vera.”

“Hello, sweetie,” she says. “It’s good to see you. Well, I’ll leave you girls to your fun. We’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” we both say.

The rest of the night, Willow and I catch up while we give each other pedicures and manicures. We stuff our faces with junk and binge watch our favorite nineties movies.

This is exactly what I needed.

CHAPTER 17

JAXSON

3 MONTHS LATER...

“This guy is a slippery fucker.” Benson’s voice booms through the phone’s speaker.

The general and I share a look before staring at the map sprawled across his desk. Red dots pinpoint every location where we’ve rescued victims from the Krukov

family. All of the countries are close to Russia, but the intel we receive has never indicated that the family is actually there.

“How many people have you recovered now?” General Parks asks.

“Only sixteen, Sir.” Benson sounds tired. “Krukov is either getting smarter, or somehow, he knows we’re coming.”

I lean forward on the desk. “What do you mean?”

“We got a lead about a shipment coming through Lithuania. As Jaxson is aware, they will leave the package for twenty-four hours so as not to draw suspicion. They bring them in by either boat or plane.” He sighs. “This particular one was coming in by boat. We were in place around twelve-thirty, and when we converged, the cargo was empty.”

General Parks leans back in his chair. “Maybe the intel was wrong,” he says hopefully.

“I wish it was, Sir.” Benson pauses. “There was vomit and feces all over the container.”

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“Fuck!” The general slams his fist on the desk.

My sentiments exactly. Maybe it’s time for a new approach. One thing we know for sure is that they are Russian. Instead of following the leads, we should hit them in their native homeland. “General, send the team to Russia.”

General Parks swings his head in my direction. “Why?”

“They’ll never see us coming,” Benson says excitedly. “We can leave a false trail, make them think we’re headed back to the States with our tails between our legs, and hop over into Russia.”

“Pack up your team,” General Parks commands. “Head out. Benson, I want these assholes taken out.”

“Roger that,” Benson responds. “How’s Aurora doing?”

I answer before General Parks can. “She’s fine.”

Benson sighs. “I wish we would’ve known she was back in Boston that night, Sir. We would’ve made sure she was okay.”

“Stop beating up yourself, Benson,” General Parks orders. “No one knew she flew back to Boston, and we still don’t know what caused her to take all those pills.”

“She still not talking about it?” he asks, his tone laced with concern.

“No,” I grit. “It’s not our place to rush her either. She’ll talk when she’s ready... if she ever is.”

Benson clears his throat. “I’ll get started on transport.” The phone disconnects.

I pace the floor, not sure what has me more aggravated: Benson’s concern with Aurora or Krukov’s Houdini act. “We’ll get ‘em, Sir. Obviously, our strategy wasn’t working. Don’t get me wrong, we’ve rescued a lot of people, which is great, but it’s time to cut off the head of the snake.”

“I agree.” He leans back in his chair. “How’s Aurora’s training going?”

My steps falter. “Better than any of us thought.”

“Explain.”

“Bennett doesn’t have any worries about her capabilities in handling firearms. Her accuracy rate is better than some of the Marines on the base.”

He beams with pride. “That’s my girl. Anything else?” He looks at me expectantly.

“She bested me the other day during our hand-to-hand combat drills,” I admit. “Hell, Aurora could probably be a UFC fighter if she wanted. She has power behind her punches and kicks.”

“I would’ve paid to see that,” he says, chuckling.

“Carver probably has a video of it,” I joke. “In all seriousness, Sir, I don’t know what else we can teach her. She’s tough and resilient, as you’re well aware. Carver taught her how to throw knives, and she’s a natural, by the way. Hudson taught her basic first aid if she’s ever in a situation where she needs to administer it, and Thomas

annoyed her enough that she fought back on the days she wanted to give up.”

We all contributed to helping Aurora achieve her goal, but she put herself together again. I hate fucking telling him the truth because I don’t want to lose her.

I don’t want to be shipped back overseas, but I also want Aurora to be able to sleep peacefully at night without the damn devil chasing her. If it takes me flying to Russia to cut Dmitri’s head off myself and delivering it to her in a gift-wrapped box, then that’s what I’ll do.

“Sounds like Thomas,” he ponders. “I know you’re probably itching to get back in the field, but I’m going to continue to be a selfish bastard.”

Wait. What?

I don't even blink as I wait for him to finish.

“Aurora’s changed since you and your team have come back into her life.” He stands, walks over to the window overlooking the backyard, and points. “She spends hours practicing on that dummy you built for her. She’s eating and laughing again.” He turns to face me, his eyes brimming with tears. “I see my daughter again, and I have you to thank for that.”

“Aurora did that all on her own,” I say. “There’s a fire deep inside her. She just needed help igniting it again.”

“And you gave her the match.”

I dip my head.

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There's nothing else to say at this point. We're staying, at least for the time being. I'll take whatever time I can get with Aurora.

Let's hope Benson gets somewhere in Russia so we can bury this nightmare for her once and for all.

CHAPTER 18

AURORA

"She bested me the other day during our hand-to-hand combat drills," Jaxson admits. "Hell, Aurora could probably be a UFC fighter if she wanted. She has power behind her punches and kicks."

My dad will probably kill me if he finds out I'm standing here listening to his conversation with Jaxson. How many secrets are they keeping from me? I wouldn't know what the hell was going on if I hadn't been coming back inside from taking Lykos out. Jaxson sounds proud of everything that I've accomplished.

Why didn't he ever say it to me?

All this time, they've been searching for Dmitri Krukov, and neither of them bothered to inform me. Who the hell does that? I was the one taken, raped, beaten, and tortured repeatedly by that man. I have a fucking right to know what the hell is going on. Dad had a team following me and never told me. That explains the feeling of being watched after I returned to Boston, but why didn't he trust me enough to tell me?

You haven't exactly been forthcoming, either.

I shake my head and dash up the stairs to my room, Lykos hot on my heels. Unlocking my desk drawer, I pull out the information I've gathered on the great Senator of Virginia. Tonight's the night I've been waiting for. Senator Briggs is hosting a fundraiser for his anti-trafficking bill in Richmond. Dad and Vera received invitations to attend, and of course, they R.S.V.P.'d.

I contemplated going, but for my plan to work, I need to blend into the shadows. Wearing a dress and heels will only hinder that. Instead, I'll wait outside the venue and bide my time, follow the senator home, and rain hell down on him.

A knock at the door startles me, so I throw all the papers back into the drawer and lock it.

"Come in," I holler.

Dad pushes open the door. "Hey, baby girl. Vera and I have that dinner in Richmond tonight. Do you want the guys to come here and hang out with you?"

I roll my eyes. "Dad, I know you're worried about me, and that fault is entirely mine. I did that to you, but I'm twenty-seven years old. I'm perfectly capable of entertaining myself."

Dad's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I know, baby girl. I'm sorry."

I walk over and wrap my arms around him, squeezing him tight. "I love you, Daddy. Always and forever. I made a promise to you. Never again."

Dad tightens his hold and places a kiss on the top of my head. "I believe you. Alright, we'll be home late. Have fun."

“You, too.”

I close the door behind him and rush to my closet, pulling out my go-bag, thankful that you can order almost anything you want online and have it delivered right to your door. I double-check the inventory inside, knowing that I’m more than prepared to take on the devil.

Lykos sits patiently in the passenger seat while I lift the binoculars again to watch the rear exit. The dinner started at seven-thirty, but there was no reason to wait in the car for hours for it to end. I parked in a lot a block down, which gives me a great view of the building. Not only can I see the front, but I can also see the back. Right now, I’m keeping my eyes on the back since there are a couple of black government-issued SUVs parked there. My money’s on one of those being Tim’s ride home tonight.

Ping.

I dig in the center console for my phone, and when I find it, the light from the screen illuminates the dark car. I immediately switch my cell to dark mode so as not to alert anyone of our presence. As I read through the texts in the group chat, I chuckle.

Carver: Can I have Willow’s number?

Jaxson: She’s not giving you her number

Carver: Why not?

Bennett: Willow’s too good for you

Carver: WTF Man?!

Hudson: Willow will eat you alive

Carver: That's what I'm hoping for

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Thomas: How the fuck do I unsubscribe to this shit

Jaxson: LMAO... You can't

Bennett: You're stuck here... Forever... With US

Thomas: AURORA. GET ME OUT OF THIS CHAT HELL

Me: Sorry, Thomas. No can do. If I have to suffer, so do you.

Thomas: FML

Carver: So can I have Willow's number

Me: No

Carver: Please! I'm begging here

Me: Fine! I have to ask her first. Now, leave me alone.

Carver: Woohoo

Bennett: Did you just woohoo

Me: Enough! I'm trying to sleep

It's almost eleven, so my lie is believable. My cell immediately quiets, and I reach

over to pet Lykos as my heart thumps wildly in anticipation. The doors of the building fly open, and people flock to their vehicles in droves. An hour later, the senator exits the building with this team. I wait a few minutes before I start my car and slowly follow.

We drive for about thirty minutes before stopping in front of a gated community. I didn't consider this and mentally smack myself. I lift the binoculars and focus on the guard shack. It's empty! The SUV pulls up and waits a moment before the steel pole rises, allowing them entry.

The fence surrounding the community is wrought iron, so I watch as the vehicle drives down the road and pulls into the driveway of a large colonial home. The senator waves off his escorts and enters his house as the SUV pulls away and heads back in our direction. I push Lykos' head down and wait for them to pass before I open my car door.

My foot barely touches the pavement when I glance up and see the senator's garage door open. I yank my foot back in, and close the door. A large truck backs out of his drive and toward the gate.

Where the fuck is he going?

Luckily, he turns in the opposite direction of where I'm parked. I keep my headlights off and follow him at a safe distance. We drive to a bunch of old abandoned warehouses at the edge of Richmond. He eventually stops in front of one of the buildings that has a few lights on. I slowly ease my car out of sight where I have the perfect view of the front door.

A scream pierces the silence, causing the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and my heart beats rapidly. Another man appears, dragging a female toward the now-open door the senator entered moments earlier. The man whips around and backhands

the woman, reaches into his jacket for something, and stabs her in the arm. She slumps to the ground, and he picks her up as if she weighs nothing and tosses her over his shoulder.

Grabbing my duffel bag, I climb out of the car, sling it over my chest, and tap my leg for Lykos to follow.

“Quiet,” I tell him. “Guard.” His hackles rise, and he bares his teeth but makes no sound.

I’m dressed in all black from head to toe, and my hair is pulled back into a tight bun so no one can grab it. My six-piece throwing knife set is strapped to my leg, and I have four magazine clips on my belt to go with the Springfield XDM in my hand. We move quickly and quietly toward the building.

I slowly open the door, praying it doesn’t make any noise. There’s a slight squeak, but no one comes running in our direction. I stick to the shadows, keeping my back along the wall with Lykos right beside me.

“You gave her too fucking much!” Tim yells.

“She was fighting too much,” someone argues.

“You can’t handle one little girl?” Tim snarls. “You know I need their screams. I need the fight.”

Someone grunts. “Give her an hour. She’ll be ready.”

“I want to fuck her now!” Tim shouts.

“We can fuck her now,” the man says. “After she wakes up, she’ll wish she never

did.”

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Someone claps, and I cover my mouth to keep from puking all over the floor.

Stop! There's no time for this. Fall apart later. She needs help.

I square my shoulders and step into the light, my gun aimed at their backs. "By the time I'm done with you, you won't have a dick to fuck her with."

Both men spin around to face me, their mouths dropped open. Senator Briggs recovers first, a sinister smile replacing his shock. "Pet, how lovely to see you."

"I'm not your fucking pet."

Briggs gestures toward me. "Potts, you remember our gorgeous friend."

Potts licks his lips. "Oh yes, she loved my whip."

Terry Potts!

As much as I would love to torture them both, I don't know how long the girl lying on the floor will be out.

"I don't have time for this bullshit." I raise my gun and fire a single shot directly into Pott's forehead. He crumbles to the dirty floor. "Bennett was right. I'm good."

"Seems my pet has grown some balls," Briggs sneers. "You can't touch me, I'm a senator. People will care if I go missing."

“Here’s the thing, Senator,” I say. “I. Don’t. Give. A. Fuck.”

He dives for me, but before I can pull the trigger again, Lykos leaps in front of me, barking deeply and snapping his teeth. Briggs jumps back, and I hold on to Lykos’ collar as he continues to bark threateningly.

“Is this your big plan, pet?” Briggs taunts. “Let your scary guard dog intimidate me while you wait for the police? It’d be your word against mine, you know? You’re holding the murder weapon, not me.”

I smile and let go of Lykos’ collar. “Zwickel.”

Lykos takes off like a rocket and lunges for Briggs. He latches on to Briggs’ tiny excuse of dick and whips his head back and forth, causing Briggs to fall backward onto the floor. His screams are music to my ears, and I let Lykos have a little bit of fun, enjoying every second. Poor guy was cooped up in the car with me for a long time. He deserves this as much as I do.

“Heel,” I call. Lykos bounds over to my side, and I scratch his head. He continues to snarl at Briggs’ quivering body. “Settle.”

I walk over to Briggs. “How are your balls, pet?”

His wild eyes glare at me. “You crazy fucking bitch!”

I wink. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

I’m wearing the steel-toe boots I invested in because even though Jaxson said my kicks are strong, it never hurts to pack a little added punch. I slam my foot down on his mangled crotch and giggle as he howls in pain.

“P-P-Please,” he stammers. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

“I begged,” I sneer. “You didn’t stop.”

“I bought you!”

“I wasn’t for sale, you piece of shit!” I punch him in the throat and watch him struggle to catch his breath. “I’m a fucking human being. The very person you were supposedly raising money for tonight, remember?”

Jogging over to my bag of goodies, I pull out my handcuffs with the two-and-a-half-foot chain that separates the wrists. Pulling one of my knives out of the sheath, I stroll back over to Briggs. There’s a steel beam a few feet away, so I grab onto one of his arms and start tugging him toward it. He reaches out to grab my ankle, but I swipe down, slicing his wrist.

“Fuck,” he hisses.

“No touching,” I chastise, pointing my gun at his head. “Stand up. Take off your pants and underwear.”

“Why?” he growls. “You gonna kiss it and make it better?”

I roll my eyes. “You can do what I say, or I can shoot it off and make sure it never works again.”

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“Fucking cunt.” His movements are jerky, and with his injuries, it takes him almost five minutes to do what I say.

I chuckle when his mangled dick comes into view, courtesy of Lykos’ handiwork.

“Put your arms around the beam,” I order.

He does as instructed, and I lock the handcuffs in place around his wrists. He hisses when the metal digs into his cut. “You’re going to pay for this,” he snarls.

“It’ll be worth it. Now, get on your hands and knees.” I lean close to his ear. “Tell me, Senator, has anyone ever taken your ass?”

His eyes grow wide as saucers, and before he can protest, I shove the blade of my knife directly into his asshole. Thick red liquid gushes out like a geyser, and a blood-curdling scream echoes off the warehouse walls. Briggs’ body gives out, and he slumps to the floor.

I shift from foot to foot, waiting for him to come to. Finally tired of waiting, I kick him. There’s no response. The last thing I want to do is touch him, but I put my fingers on his neck to check for a pulse.

Fuck! It was just getting good.

I survey the room. I have two dead bodies, a girl still passed out in the corner, and no clue what to do. I blow out a breath, knowing I’m going to be in hot water over this mess. I tug my cell phone out of my pocket and hit the one name I was hoping I

wouldn't have to call tonight.

Jaxson needs to add body disposal to our training.

CHAPTER 19

JAXSON

"I need help," Aurora begs.

When my phone rang and I saw Aurora's name flash across the screen, I stepped away from the game of Call of Duty the guys and I were playing. As I answered, I couldn't help but silently pray that she would ask if we'd come hang out with her or vice versa, but my prayers weren't answered. At the panic in her tone, everyone whips their head in my direction.

Dread fills my insides at how scared she sounds. "What's wrong?"

"I-I-I can't talk, but I need your help," she whispers. "I'll send you my location. Please hurry."

She disconnects the call before I can ask anything else. A second later, my phone pings with her location.

Richmond, Virginia. What the fuck is she doing there?

I stare at my phone, dumbstruck, while my men jump into action.

Thomas snaps his fingers in front of my face. "You gonna stare at her location all night, or can we get the fuck outta here?"

All of them are checking their guns, and Bennett grabs extra magazines out of my hall closet before tossing us each a couple. Carver races out of my apartment and returns a few minutes later with his knives strapped to his leg. We have no idea what's going on, and as a Marine, we're taught to always be prepared.

"Roll out!" I holler.

"Oorah."

Hudson, Carver, and I take one vehicle while Bennett and Thomas follow closely behind in another. Before tearing out of the parking lot, I text Aurora's coordinates to Bennett in case we get separated on the way to Richmond.

My knuckles turn white from gripping the steering wheel so hard. "She better not be hurt, or so help me God..."

"She didn't ask for me," Hudson points out. "She asked for you. I don't think she's hurt."

"Hey," Carver interjects. "Isn't the general in Richmond tonight for a fundraiser?"

"Yeah," Hudson confirms. "Maybe you should call him. He's closer."

I shake my head. "She called me for a reason. If she wanted her dad's help, she would've called him."

Hoping I'm making the right decision, I push my foot down on the gas pedal until it hits the floorboard. A million thoughts race through my head as I wonder what we're about to walk into.

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Somehow, I manage to not get pulled over in my race to get to Aurora, even though I break a few laws. My heart sinks, and my stomach rolls as we approach the red dot on my maps. There's nothing here except a line of vacant buildings. Wondering if I'm about to find her dead body inside has a wave of fear washing over me. My head whips around, looking for any sign of her.

"There's her car!" Carver shouts, pointing to the right.

A small two-story warehouse is nestled in between a couple of larger ones. The lights are on, but I don't see any movement as I maneuver our vehicle beside her car and kill the engine. We file out and wait for Bennett to park.

"Any communication with Aurora since we left?" Bennett asks as we crouch behind the vehicles and start to plan.

"Radio silent," I say. "I have no idea who or what is inside. We can't go in hot."

"Cut the lights?" Thomas asks.

Hudson's brows furrow. "No, it could scare Aurora. She could be alone."

"We go in nice and slow," I instruct. "Keep your eyes open, and watch my signal. Any hostiles, shoot to kill. Be careful, we don't know if there are any other innocents besides Aurora."

"Roger that," they all mumble.

We edge toward the building quietly, our guns drawn. Once we reach the door, we split into two groups, each taking a side. I hold up my fingers, counting down from three, and when I reach zero, Bennett swings it open. I aim my gun and swiftly enter with the others at my six.

Inching our way further inside, I faintly hear growling ahead. I glance over my shoulder at my men, who all shrug. I point at my eyes and then forward toward the noise before we start walking again.

Please, let that be Lykos with Aurora.

We round the corner and come to a grinding halt.

Surely, I'm hallucinating.

It looks like a fucking massacre took place, and Aurora is standing right in the middle of it. Lykos is standing in front of her, and he's tense and ready to attack any threat. Her hands are covered in blood, and there are splatters of crimson on her face. My eyes roam over her body, searching for the cause of the injury, but I can't locate the source. I take a few deep breaths to calm the beast inside that wants to break free and destroy whoever put her in the middle of this fiasco.

"What the fuck?" Bennett mumbles.

"Settle." Aurora affectionately rubs the top of Lykos head. "You're gonna need a bath."

Lykos looks up at her, and I swear the damn dog grins... fuckinggrins.

Did I just enter the fucking 'Twilight Zone'?

My eyes snap to hers as I march toward Aurora, but Hudson darts around me and intercepts her before I reach her.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” he asks.

“No,” she says, her eyes never leaving mine.

Hudson nods. “I wouldn’t want to be you right now.” He steps out of my way.

Waving my hand around at the carnage, I demand, “What the hell happened here, Aurora?”

“It wasn’t my intention to call you tonight and bother you,” she says, dismissively.

“Not your intention...bother me...” I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose to try and calm down.

“Rivers!” Thomas hollers. “We got a big problem, man. Better come take a look at this.”

I throw my hands up. “It can’t possibly get any worse.”

I step next to the face of the body Thomas is hunched over.

I was wrong.

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“He look familiar to you? Thomas asks.

“Shit,” I groan. “Is that Senator Briggs?”

Everyone except Aurora runs over to check out what we’re discussing.

“That’s definitely the senator,” Bennett confirms. “But what’s he doing here?”

“Dude, look at that.” Carver points to the senator’s ass where a knife handle is protruding out, and a puddle of blood is underneath him.

How did I miss this? Your focus was on Aurora, and it will always be on her. Those emerald eyes are your kryptonite.

The five of us turn and stare at her. Aurora crosses her arms and taps her foot impatiently as if we’re the ones causing an inconvenience.

“Well, what do I do now?” she asks, annoyed.

“Aurora, honey,” Carver placates. “What do you mean what do you do now?”

She huffs in frustration. “You guys taught me how to fight and kill but never how to clean up after myself.” She glares at each of us. “This is your fault,” she adds.

“Our fault?” I choke. “In what world is this our fault?”

“If there had been a Disposal of Dead Bodies class in our training, I wouldn’t have had

to call you tonight,” she says matter-of-factly. “In fact, don’t stand there fucking judging me, Jaxson Rivers. None of you have earned that right. Fuck you all and the goddamn horse you rode in on. Just leave, I don’t need you. I don’t need any of you. I’ll figure it out myself.” She takes a deep breath and screams, “Leave!”

She crumbles to the floor, sobbing hysterically. Lykos pushes his way into her lap, offering her comfort.

What. The. Fuck. Just. Happened?

CHAPTER 20

AURORA

“Aurora,” Jaxson says softly.

I can’t bring myself to look at him. The utter shock and horror on all their faces when they realized I was the one who killed the men in the room hurt, but Jaxson’s reaction gutted me. He’s the one person I thought would understand why I’m doing this. Instead, he looked at me as if I’m insane and need to be institutionalized. Hell, maybe I do.

Why can’t they comprehend how important this is? Those pricks needed to pay. I wanted them to hurt, feel what I felt when they defiled me. Why can’t Jaxson see that?

I wrap my arms tight around Lykos’ neck, resting my head on his back. He pushes his body against mine, which grounds me and helps me remain focused.

Footsteps shuffle toward me. “Don’t come near me!” I shout. “Guard.”

I release him reluctantly, and Lykos doesn't hesitate at my command. He springs up on all fours, growling at the approaching angry squad. They immediately stop in their tracks.

"Call off Lykos," Thomas demands. "We're not gonna fucking hurt you."

"Okay, shit for brains," Carver mocks. "Because that just screamstrust us."

"Do you have a better idea, asshole?" Thomas growls.

"Aurora," Hudson says gently. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

Physically... Not anymore. But yes, I fucking hurt. I hurt EVERYWHERE!

I shake my head, refusing to answer with words.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," Bennett calls. "We have an unknown female over here."

Hudson jogs over to Bennett. "Shit." He drops to his knees and places his fingers on her wrist. "She has a pulse."

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Great. They probably think I tried to kill her, too.

“She was drugged.” My voice sounds robotic. “She’s been out almost two hours. The one with the hole in the head injected her with something.”

Hudson scrambles over to Potts, digging in his pockets. He pulls out a vile and studies it. “Ketamine.”

Thomas bounces on his feet. “Will she be okay?”

“Yeah,” Hudson says. “I’ll monitor her until we can get this mess cleaned up, and then we’ll drop her off at a hospital. She’ll be out for a while.”

“Let’s get started,” Bennett says.

They all fan out, opening different doors and pulling out buckets and mops. Lykos isn’t growling anymore, but his focus is unwavering as he watches their every move. As for me, I’m too tired to move. Hell, I’m too tired to breathe.

Jaxson drops to his knees a few feet away. “Winchester.” My head jerks in his direction. “You can trust me, Aurora, just like that day we rescued you. Please let me help you.”

“Help? I asked for help, Jaxson, and you all stared at me like I’m a goddamn monster. Me, not them.” I wave my hand toward Potts and Briggs. “Settle,” I whisper to Lykos so only he hears me. He lies down with his head in my lap, keeping his eyes trained on Jaxson and the others. I brush my hand through his soft fur and hum.

“Aurora, we have a dead senator,” Jaxson states. “That’s gonna require an explanation.”

“An explanation.” A maniacal laugh bubbles out of my throat. “Do you hear that, Lykos?” My dog looks up at me. “Jaxson wants an explanation. Let’s give him one, shall we?”

“That’s not wh?—”

“I used to be a dedicated undercover reporter who wanted to help shed light on the darkness in the world. Unbeknownst to me, I stumbled upon a story about human trafficking taking place on the East Coast. I met up with an informant who disclosed the name of the family involved, and the poor girl couldn’t have been over the age of sixteen.” I point to myself. “This reporter wanted to save her. I convinced the young girl to come with me. My father is a general and could protect her, but I lied. You see, I made a huge mistake and stopped at my house, thinking no one was following us, because I didn’t see anything. I was wrong! Now the young girl is dead, and I’m changed forever.”

“How do you know she’s dead?” Jaxson asks.

“No one escapes the Krukov family,” I deadpan. “You’re either killed, or you wish you were.”

“You’re not dead.”

“No, but I should be, shouldn’t I?” I point out. “I live in fear every damn day. You have no idea what it’s like to wake up and not know if someone is going to be lurking around the corner. Well, I found out, didn’t I? They’re everywhere. There’s no escape. My only hope is to destroy them before they destroy what’s left of me.”

“Why the senator?” he asks, confused.

“Why are you so fucking concerned with the senator?” I scream. “Senator Timothy Briggs, along with Terry Potts over there and three other men, bought me while I was chained naked on a stage for one million dollars from Dmitri Krukov. Do you want to know what happened next?” Silence fills the air as I pause to take a deep breath. “The lovely senator had Jameson tie me down on a bench, and then he turned on cameras to film the whole thing. Potts over there beat me with a whip until I bled, then he shoved his cock down my throat while they watched. They all took turns raping me, over and over and over again. Finally, just when I thought it was over, Briggs asked me if anyone had ever taken my ass. You can guess what happened after that.” Tears slide down my cheeks. “That’s not the worst part. I know what you’re thinking...How can that not be the worst part? This was my life for... How long was I missing? Oh, that’s right, about two weeks, give or take. I thought I was finally safe until I went to the State Dinner with my dad and, low and behold, guess who was there? Ding, ding, ding, you guessed it. Senator Briggs, who told me point blank that I’d never be safe, and now that they knew where I was, the Krukov family was coming for me.”

Jaxson clenches his fists. He makes no move to speak, so I continue.

“That night, I ran. I went home and swallowed every pill I had. I wasn’t going to let them take me back to the hell you helped me escape from. Instead, I created my own personal hell, but what I didn’t know was that I was pregnant.” Gasps fill the space around me, but I ignore them. “Dr. Sheppard gave me a pregnancy test when I was first admitted, and it was negative. No one thought about it again because I was on the shot, and it was administered a couple of weeks before I was taken. Turns out, the fucking shot failed. I forced a miscarriage with my attempted suicide. Those bastards took the last bit of control I had in my life and stripped it from me,” I cry. “I was so scared by Briggs’ threat that I let it consume me. I didn’t think, I acted.” My shaking body sags against Lykos as I let out a guttural scream.

I scream at the injustice of it all, and my heart shatters into pieces once again. Strong arms scoop me off the floor and pull me close. Lykos keeps his head at my back, lending me his strength.

“Shhh,” Jaxson soothes. “I’ve got you. It’s not your fault.”

I pound on his chest and sob. “It’s my fucking fault because I should’ve known. I should’ve felt something.” Jaxson makes no move to stop me from beating him. “I don’t know what I would’ve done when I found out I was pregnant, but I wouldn’t have taken those pills, Jaxson. Please believe me,” I plead.

“Baby, I believe you,” he says soothingly. “You were traumatized. You had every right to your feelings, and you did what you felt you needed to do to protect yourself. I fucking wish you would’ve told your dad what was going on, but I understand.”

I stare into his stormy gray eyes, looking for any sign of deceit, finding none. “What do I do now?”

“You? Nothing.” He scowls. “The rest of us are going hunting.”

I push out of his embrace and stand, and Jaxson follows suit. We’re toe-to-toe, staring at one another as if we’re both prepared to go into battle.

Anger bubbles inside me. “The fuck you are. Not without me, you’re not. You can’t take this from me, Jaxson. I need this. I need to see the life drain from their eyes, to know I broke them like they broke me.”

“They didn’t break you,” he growls.

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“Yes, they did,” I mumble. “But you put me back together. All of you did.”

He inhales sharply. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t. Neither one of those assholes touched me. Besides, I have Lykos,” I say. “And you don’t have my kill list.”

“She’s got a fucking kill list?” Carver hollers from behind us. “That’s badass!”

“Shut the fuck up, Carver!” Jaxson bellows. “We’re not encouraging her.”

The shock and emotional toll of the day hits me again, and I double over laughing. Once I have control over myself, I wheeze. “That s-s-ship already sailed when you t-t-taught me how to maim and kill someone.”

Jaxson roughly runs his hands through his hair. “Fuck. Okay, fine. But there will be rules.”

I raise my brow. “Rules?”

“Yes, rules.”

“I’m listening.”

“First, I have to be there.” He holds up his hand when I open my mouth to argue. “You can do the killing, but I will be there to help if things get out of control. Second, you never go anywhere without Lykos. Third, if for some reason you find yourself in

over your head and I'm not around, you immediately send me your location and text 'Winchester'. I don't care if you're in the middle of the goddamn Sahara Desert, you text me."

I can live with those conditions.

"Deal." I stick out my hand to shake his.

Does Jaxson shake my hand? Nope. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close to his chest. Before I can grasp what's happening, he presses his lips to mine. It's a sweet, short kiss, and I don't even have time to reciprocate because as quickly as it started, it's over, and he's walking away to help the rest of the guys finish cleaning up my mess.

I brush my fingertips across my lips and replay our first kiss in my head.

Jaxson Rivers kissed me! Holy shit!

CHAPTER 21

JAXSON

"Are we going to talk about tonight, or are we going to pretend that none of that just fucking happened?" Thomas asks.

After we cleaned up the mess, Thomas and Bennett took care of discarding Senator Briggs' corpse while Hudson and Carver took the girl who was drugged to the hospital. Fortunately, they were able to avoid the cameras and left her outside. Hudson made an anonymous call, and they didn't leave until hospital staff found her.

While they did that, I drove Aurora and Lykos to my place in her car, and I'm glad

because she passed out pretty quickly. I knew the adrenaline crash was coming and didn't want to risk her driving herself.

When we got home, I carried Aurora to my bed. I wanted nothing more than to crawl in beside her and cradle her in my arms, but she was passed out cold. I would never get into bed with her without her permission, not when she already had so many choices taken from her. Instead, I wrote her a note and told her I would be down at Carver's place if she needed me.

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it all," I say.

Carver passes out coffee. "Man, I knew it was bad... but hearing her say it out loud? It gutted me."

"Yet, she survived," Hudson mumbles.

"Fucking barely," Thomas sneers. "She was so fucking scared of getting dragged back to Krukov that she tried to fucking kill herself because of a threat from a senator."

"In her defense, who would've believed her? An elected government official who, by the way, is an advocate for anti-human trafficking, or the general's daughter that no one knows was a victim?" Carver points out.

"We would have believed her," I snap.

"We weren't here, Jaxson," Hudson says.

"Don't you think I fucking know that?" I slam my fist on the table. "We should've never left. I promised her she'd be safe. Ifucking lied to her. Ifailed her."

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Thomas' eyes blaze with fury. "No, you didn't. You went after the one person who put her in that situation to begin with, the cause of her pain, the devil in her nightmares, Dmitri Krukov." He pauses. "We didn't know about the senator. How could we? Sure, we knew there were other men based on how we found her, but not who they actually were. Obviously, she never told anyone because I, for one, know that fucker wouldn't have been able to get close to her if the general knew. Briggs would've been dead and buried."

"You're right," I concede. "I know promising Aurora that I'd help her puts you all in a tough spot because now you have knowledge of my off the book activities, and I don't expect any of you to keep it to yourself if pressed. This can bring a shit ton of heat down on all of us if I'm ever caught, but she needs this, and I'm going to help her get closure. Whether or not you wanna take the risk to your career is up to each of you."

"You're not cutting me out, fucker. Screw keeping secrets... I'm in all the way." Carver narrows his eyes. "That's my little sister and my future wife's BFF. If anything happens to her, and Willow finds out that I knew, I'll never be able to put a ring on it."

Bennett smirks. "Did you just quote Beyoncé?"

"Yeah, so?" he challenges. "The song has a good beat."

We all laugh, easing some of the tension.

Hating to dampen the lightened mood, I put the question to a vote. "All those in favor

of helping Aurora get her revenge?”

“Oorah,” the four shout unanimously.

Carver winks. “You didn’t think you’d get to have all the fun, did you?”

I flip him off. “I was hoping I could leave you home.”

He grabs his heart, frowning. “That hurts, man.”

“What’s the plan?” Hudson asks.

“Aurora has a kill list,” I answer. “I’ll get a copy of it, and we’ll start helping her do recon.”

“Seems like she already has that down,” Bennett says proudly. “I mean, she did bag two guys on it tonight by herself.”

I take a sip of my coffee. “She did good.”

“Good?” Thomas raises his eyebrows in disbelief. “Did you see Brigg’s cock? It was barely dangling by a thin layer of skin. It was almost completely ripped from his body.”

“That was Lykos,” Hudson explains.

“What?” I ask, shocked. “How do you know that?”

He shrugs. “I asked her after you kissed her and ran off.”

Son of a bitch!

“Whoa... Whoa... Wait. Time out,” Carver stands up. “You kissedmysister?”

“She’s not your sister,” I mumble, glaring at Hudson.

“Aurora’s adopted,” Carver says. “Don’t tell her though. She’ll be devastated.”

“She’s not justyoursister, asshole,” Bennett argues.

“Yeah,” Thomas agrees. “She belongs to all of us.”

Carver places his hands on the table and leans toward me. “So, what are your intentions withourlittle sister?”

I mimic his stance. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

He narrows his eyes. “No, answer the question.”

“Jesus!” I throw my hands up. “I wouldn’t fucking hurt her. I think I’ve been in love with her since I first saw her. When General Parks asked me how her training was going, and I had to admit there wasn’t anything else we could possibly show her, it almost killed me. I knew it was risky to tell him the truth. I could’ve lost her forever, but I also knew it meant going back to the task at hand, finding that son of a bitch, Krukov, and ending her nightmare, once and for all. That kiss was the first time I ever made a move.”

“Good enough for me.” Carver sits back down and plops his feet on the table. “You guys good with that?”

“Yep,” they answer.

“Took you long enough,” Thomas mumbles. “Never thought you’d grow a pair and finally claim her.”

“Fuck you, guys,” I say without any heat. “Can we get back to my question?”

I was worried about how they’d feel once they found out I’d fallen for Aurora. The look of shock on her face when I kissed her tonight told me everything I needed to know. She’s just as affected by me as I am by her. I need to show her we can have a future together.

Hudson taps his chin. “What question?”

“Asshole,” I mutter. “What did Aurora tell you about Lykos?”

He laughs. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“After what I saw tonight, I think you’d be surprised.”

“She called Yazzie and asked him how to train Lykos to attack certain body parts, specifically the crotch.” I grab my dick at that revelation and groan. “He gave her the German word for it, which, by the way, is Zwickel. Then she bought a grappling dummy online and trained him herself.”

“That’s one brilliant woman you have there, Captain,” Bennett compliments.

“I know,” I confirm.

If I can convince Aurora to be mine, I don’t think there will ever be a dull moment in our lives.

CHAPTER 22

AURORA

“Oh, Victor. I can’t believe it,” Vera wails.

Vera’s distress annoys me as I fill Lykos’ water bowl. We spent the morning working out and just came in for a quick drink. Thirst quenched, I make my way toward the living room to see what’s going on, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the news story on the television.

“... body of Senator Tim Briggs has been identified. His remains were identified using the serial number on a metal knee replacement implant two days after the burning wreckage was discovered on Highway 301. Details of the accident are unknown at this time, and the investigation into the senator’s death is ongoing, although foul play is not suspected. Tragically, this news comes after the proposal of Senator Briggs’ anti-trafficking bill.”

Damn, those guys are good.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling while Dad paces the floor, and Vera clutches her pearls.

“I thought security drove him home after the gala?” Vera asks.

“They did,” Dad confirms. “He must’ve gone somewhere after they dropped him

off.”

“This is terrible,” Vera shrieks. “Those poor women he was trying to help. Now, what’ll happen to his proposal?”

Dad rubs his hands over Vera’s arms in an attempt to soothe her. “There are many people in favor of this new legislation, my dear. It’s bound to keep momentum.”

Vera pats Dad’s hand. “That’s good, that’s good,” she says absently.

I watch the screen for a few more seconds before silently inching my way to the staircase and racing up to my room. I close my door, flip the lock, and fire up my computer. Almost immediately, FaceTime opens as a call comes through.

After accepting the call, I wave at the smiling face in front of me. “Hi, Jessa.”

“Hi, Aurora.” Jessa digs right in. “How’s the self-defense training going?”

I snort. “Great, although I overheard a conversation I wasn’t meant to hear.”

Jessa folds her hands under her chin. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Jaxson told my dad that there isn’t much more for him to teach me and that if I wanted, I could be a UFC fighter. He said I was tough and resilient.”

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“Sounds like Jaxson is a very smart man.”

My cheeks burn hot. “I guess so.”

“How did you feel when you heard him say that?”

“Honestly?” I blow out a breath. “A little pissed.”

“Why?”

“He never said it tome. Sure, he’d say, ‘Good job’ when I finally got a move right, but for the most part, it was always, ‘Keep working at it.’ I had to hear it secondhand.”

“I can see why that would be frustrating.”

“We talked,” I say. “I told him about what happened, things I haven’t been able to talk about with anyone, not even you.”

She nods. “We open up at our own pace. You’re not on anyone’s schedule but your own, and there’s no rule saying you have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. That being said, I’m glad you found someone you could open up to,” she says. “What did he say after you confided in him?”

“He kissed me,” I blurt.

Jessa studies my face. “Did it make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” I state. “He wrapped his arms around me, kissed me fast on the lips, and ran to the other side of the room.”

Okay, so he had to clean up a dead body, but I can’t tell her that.

“You sound disappointed.”

“A little,” I pout. “I didn’t even get to kiss him back.”

“Do you want to kiss him back?” she asks.

I hesitate. “Yeah.”

“But?”

“What if I can’t? What if I freak out?”

“Your feelings are valid,” she assures me. “But I think you’re putting too much pressure on yourself. Take it one step at a time. If Jaxson is half the man you’ve described to me, then he should be comfortable with you taking the lead. Does he pressure you at all?”

I shake my head. “No. That was the first time he’s ever touched me like that. What if the kiss didn’t mean anything?”

“Do you want a relationship with Jaxson, something more than friendship?”

I smile. “I think I do.”

She grins. “My advice, talk to Jaxson. Communication is key in any relationship.”

Am I strong enough to do that? Can I tell Jaxson how much I care for him?

CHAPTER 23

JAXSON

“Remember, I need him to see me,” Aurora repeats like we would forget.

We’re in a booth surrounded by a mass of sweaty bodies gyrating to the rhythm of the live music’s bass. Carver and Hudson sit across from us, wearing matching scowls. They aren’t thrilled with the plan, but this is Aurora’s show and likely the only chance we’ll get to grab Patrick Dows.

“Doesn’t mean we have to like it,” I growl.

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Dows is a recluse and, according to Aurora's research, doesn't leave home very often. Briggs' was his best friend his whole life, and when Dows caught a rape charge a few years ago, his career as a cop disintegrated. Briggs stepped in, and charges were dropped, but Dows' reputation was ruined. He was let go by the force, and from what Thomas was able to find, he was being bankrolled by Briggs.

Thomas and Bennett are in a van in the alley, waiting to grab Dows once Aurora leads him out there. Using her as bait is the part of the plan none of us are on board with. Aurora is going to get close enough to Dows for him to realize it's her. Then, hopefully, he'll follow her outside where the guys can get him.

The band announces their break, and the dance floor clears. Aurora starts to slide out of the booth, but Hudson grabs her wrist.

"Stop," Hudson says as he casually points across the club. "Dows slipped something into that woman's drink at the bar."

"Which one?" Carver cranes his neck to see.

Hudson jerks his chin. "Red top, black jeans."

"We need to abort," I tell them. "Hudson, move in and wait for the opportunity to protect the girl from the scumbag."

"We're not leaving," Aurora snaps. "If Hudson can keep her focus on him, he'll keep her safe. After we get Dows outta here, alert the bartender that you saw someone put something in her drink."

Hudson takes off like a jet toward the woman and Dows, leaving me to argue with Aurora while Carver's head bounces back and forth between us, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Dows won’t be paying attention to who’s walking around now,” I point out. “His focus will be on the woman he drugged.”

“Then I’ll improvise,” she sasses.

I don’t have a chance to ask her what she means by that when my phone vibrates.

Bennett: We’re getting bored

Me: Ran into an issue

Bennett: Need us?

Me: No, Hudson’s dealing with it. Might have to abort

Bennett: What the fuck is going on in there

I look up from my cell to ask Carver his thoughts on how we should proceed, and see Aurora’s gone.

“Where’d she go?”

Carver points out to the floor, and I twist my neck toward the bar, searching for Aurora. My heart stops beating when I see her stroll closer to Dows.

“Aurora!” I bellow across the room. As soon as I say it, I realize my mistake. I did exactly what she wanted. I duck back into the booth, hoping I’m not seen when heads

start to turn in an effort to find the source of the commotion.

That little minx.

Luckily, Carver can keep his eyes on her from his position on the other side of the table. He pulls out his phone and calls Bennett. “Dawn is coming early, but night is following closely,” he says and disconnects.

“We go out the front,” I say.

He slides his cell into his pocket. “Roger that. Here comes Hudson.” Carver jabs his thumb over his shoulder.

Hudson jogs up next to us as we exit the bar. “She never drank it.”

“What?” I ask, rounding the corner of the building.

“The woman,” Hudson explains. “She never took a sip. Dows gave her the creeps, so by the time I got to the bar, shespilledit.”

Carver laughs. “She has good intuition.”

“Yep,” Hudson agrees. “Didn’t have to say a damn word. Turned around and followed you two sorry asses. By the way, what was Aurora thinking?”

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“That’s what I want to fucking know,” I fume.

We barrel into the alley just in time to see Thomas knock Dows out. Bennett has Aurora behind him, and she doesn’t look happy.

“Damn it, Thomas,” she shouts. “I wanted to do that.”

Thomas picks the fucker up and throws him into the van while Bennett leans over Dows, and ties him up. “You get to do the fun part,” Thomas pouts. “I only hit him once.”

I rush over to her, grabbing her arms. “That little stunt wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I know,” she concedes. “I saw an opening, and I took it. I wasn’t going to let this opportunity get away.”

“If anything would’ve ha—” She presses her fingers to my lips.

Her emerald eyes stare into my soul. “I trust you, Jaxson, wholeheartedly. Every single one of you. I was safe.”

I haven’t touched her or spoken to her about the kiss we shared the night of the senator’s untimely death. I’m trying to be respectful of her space, but I also don’t want her to doubt my intentions by dragging my feet.

To hell with it, I’m done waiting.

I cup her cheeks and lean close. “Auro?—”

She slides her arms around my neck and pulls me close, initiating the very kiss I was about to take. I release her face and wrap my arms around her waist. Her lips are soft against mine, and her tongue darts out to tease the seam of my mouth, demanding entry.

Who am I to deny this goddess anything?

I open up, allowing her tongue to pass through. Her body molds to mine as I squeeze her tighter. My cock strains against my jeans, and I worry this might be too much for her. Slowly, I ease back, looking for any signs of doubt. She smiles shyly and tries to step back, but I keep my grip firm, resting my forehead against hers.

“You two done?” Bennett hollers. “I’d like to get outta here before we draw any attention.”

I maneuver Aurora to the front passenger seat next to Carver, who’s driving, and I climb in the back with the rest of my team.

Carver gags as he glances at me in the rearview mirror. “Don’t make out with my sister in front of me ever again.”

I flip him off. “Technically, she started it.”

Aurora’s laughter fills the van, and Carver grumbles to himself about sisters being more trouble than they’re worth as he drives toward the abandoned warehouses where Aurora killed the senator.

The building we chose already has everything we need at our disposal. It’s vacant, and remote on the outskirts of town. Perfect for what we’re about to use it for. When

we arrive, Thomas tosses Dows over his shoulder in a fireman's hold and carries him inside, the rest of us following behind him.

“This is your show, babe,” I say. “What do you want to do?”

Aurora bats her eyelashes. “Can one of you strip him for me and hang him over there?” she asks, pointing to the hook suspended from a steel beam that runs across the ceiling.

“Bennett, you heard the lady,” I gesture toward our guest of honor. “Cut his clothes off.”

Dows screams behind the Duct tape over his mouth as Bennett approaches him. “Why do I have to strip him?” Bennett mutters. “Why can’t Carver do it?”

“Because I’m the favorite, dickhead,” Carver brags.

I smirk. “Carver gets to string him up.”

“What the fuck?” he says disgusted. “I don’t want his naked ‘lil smoky anywhere near me.”

Aurora strolls over to Carver, her eyes wide. “Please big bro,” she pleads, her lower lip wobbling. “F-f-for me?”

Carver backpedals real quick. “Oh shit... No... Please, don’t cry,” he stammers. “I’ll hang him.” The rest of us bite back our laughter as Carver picks Dows up and slings his tied wrists over the metal hook.

When he’s sure Dows is secure, Carver marches toward Aurora. “You played me, didn’t you?”

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“Maybe.” She points to his chest. “Gross Carver, you have pubes on your clothes.”

“Oh gross, what the hell?” Carver freaks out. “Get it off!” No one holds back their laughter as Carver shrieks and strips off his shirt. Once he’s composed himself, he wags his finger at Aurora. “You got me good. Remember ‘lil sis, payback’s a bitch.”

“Noted.” Her brows furrow as she weighs her next words. “Promise me, all of you, you won’t interfere. No matter what happens. Ihaveto do this myself.”

“Oorah!” we answer.

Aurora carries her duffel bag closer to Dows, unzips it, and fumbles inside until she finds what she’s looking for. With a knife in her hand, she unrolls a plastic tarp underneath where Dows is dangling, and then she stands and rips the Duct tape from his mouth.

“Fuck!” he shouts. “What the hell is going on? Do you know who I am?”

“Patrick Dows,” Aurora answers.

“Ah,pet,” he mocks. “It’s good to see you again. We were so upset when we heard Dmitri decided to send you abroad.”

“Lucky for me, it didn’t last.” In a lightning-quick move, she flicks her wrist forward, slicing open his chest.

“You bitch!”

“I’ve been called worse.” She bends over and pulls out a lead pipe. “This might hurt.”

“I’m a cop!” he yells. “People will be looking for me.”

“Funny,” she says. “The senator said the same thing. Although, I’m pretty sure they ruled his death an accident.”

The color drains from his face as the severity of his situation dawns on him. Aurora holds the pipe like a baseball bat, squares her shoulders and bends her knees, and swings with everything she has. She hits him over and over, nailing him in the ribs and knees before taking one final swing right at his flaccid cock.

An ear-piercing wail bounces off the walls as Aurora drops the pipe and runs around Dows’ flailing body like she’s rounding home base in a baseball game, giving us each a high-five and screaming ‘home run’.

Bennett leans over and whispers, “Remind me to never piss her off.”

“Y-y-you won’t get away with this,” Dows cries.

“Yeah, pretty sure I will,” Aurora says confidently. “And even if I don’t, it’s worth it to watch you suffer like I did.”

“Suffer?” Dows cackles maniacally. “Pet, you didn’t suffer. You loved it. You wanted our fat cocks shoved into your tight pussy and wet mouth. You were dripping for it.”

I ball my fists, reminding myself of the promise I made to Aurora.

This is her show.

I know what the fucker is doing. He wants this to end quickly, so he thinks that if he

pisses us off, one of us will put a bullet in him. It kills me to stand by and do nothing as he taunts Aurora about one of the worst nights of her life, but I keep my feet planted firmly in place.

Her movements falter for a moment, but she regains her composure and runs her knife along his naked flesh. “See Dows, that’s the only way you can getpussy,” she taunts. “You have to buy it from unwilling women.”

Dows hisses and yelps as Aurora slashes across his body, leaving behind gaping wounds. She grabs a clear spray bottle from her bag and douses his body with the liquid. The smell of rubbing alcohol fills the room as he lets out one last wail before his head falls forward.

“Hudson,” she calls. “Do you have anything that’ll wake this dickhead up?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “Absolutely.” He digs in his medic bag and pulls out a syringe. “Adrenaline.” Hudson hands it over. “Jab it in his thigh.”

She injects it into his leg, and Dows’ eyes snap open seconds later. “That was rude to fall asleep. We were having so much fun.”

“You’re fucking crazy.” he spits.

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” She grips a metal contraption I’ve never seen before. “Open wide.”

Dows snaps his jaw shut and glares at her.

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She clicks her tongue. “Jaxson, can you help me?” I join her in front of our captive. “Can you make him open his mouth?”

I smile. “With pleasure.” I haul back my arm, ball up my fist, and let it fly. The satisfying crunch of breaking bone never gets old as Dows’ head whips to the side, and blood gushes from his nose.

Aurora crosses her arms. “You weren’t supposed to hit him,” she scolds.

I shrug. “My arm slipped.”

“Motherfucker,” Dows curses, his eyes wild.

He locks his jaw in defiance. I grip his nose between my fingers and squeeze. He cries out in pain and Aurora slips the contraption between his lips. With a couple of clicks, his mouth is pried open. I raise my brows in question.

“Speculum,” she responds.

“Do I want to know?”

She shrugs. “Probably not. And you might want to stand back.”

Taking her seriously, I rush back over to my men and wait to see what she does next.

She steps close to Dows. “Remember when you told me to suck your fat cock?” He shakes his head vigorously. “Oh, sure you do. I think it’s time I returned the favor.”

Aurora takes a pair of pliers from her back pocket, latches on to the tip of Dows' dick, and tugs it straight out. With the six-inch serrated hunting knife in her other hand, she slices his cock off and shoves it down his throat, causing him to gag.

"Suck it, asshole," she growls.

Blood cascades down his legs as he thrashes and tries to dislodge himself from his mouth.

"Will that kill him?" I ask Hudson, genuinely curious.

"Not necessarily," he replies.

Before I can ask him what he means, a gunshot rings out. Spinning around, I grab my piece, searching for the threat. Standing in front of us, Aurora has her gun aimed at Dows. There's a single bullet hole at center mass.

Carver chuckles. "Bet he's dead now."

"That'll do it," Hudson agrees.

"Alright, guys," Aurora beckons. "Time to clean up."

Oh yeah, I'm gonna marry this woman.

CHAPTER 24

AURORA

"What do you guys want to do tonight?" Carver asks.

That's the million-dollar question but one I'm afraid to answer because I don't want to subject myself to the Spanish Inquisition from the overprotective alphas in my life. It's been an endless parade of teasing since we left the warehouse a few days ago, and Carver keeps taunting me with his stupid rendition of 'Jaxson and Aurora sitting in a tree' like we're in fucking kindergarten instead of grown-ass adults. Jaxson and I haven't spent one moment alone to discuss what's developing between us, and I'd really like to do that before my courage disappears.

Sure, you can kill three people without blinking. Tell a guy you have feelings for him, nope, that's too much.

I mentally slap myself and shake my head to focus on the conversation. Lykos bumps me with his nose, and I lean down and kiss his head while giving him a scratch behind his ears and whispering, "I'm okay."

"Bowling?" Bennett suggests.

"Let's go see that new horror movie," Thomas says. "The one with all the gore. I think Aurora might get some new ideas."

I grin and tap my temple. "You don't want to know the thoughts I have up here, Thomas."

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Mind made up, I dig my phone out of my purse and send a text for reinforcement.

Me: HELP

Willow: Carver or Thomas

Me: The whole gang

Willow: What'd they do? They still singing about you and Jaxson kissing. Cause girl, got to admit... HOT

Me: Willow focus!

Willow: Sorry

Me: I haven't got any time alone with Jaxson to talk about what happened or us, if there even is an us. The guys are always around. I'm starting to lose confidence here.

Willow: We can't have that. I'll take care of it.

Me: What are you gonna do?

Willow: Leave it to me

A minute later, multiple cells ping simultaneously, and each of the guys reach for their devices.

Carver scrunches his forehead as he reads the text and then smirks at me. “Well, I finally got her number.”

Jaxson’s phone is the only one that didn’t go off. I lock eyes with him and gulp at the intensity of his gaze. It’s filled with lust, and amusement. Everyone else reads the message on their phone, mumbles some excuse about something coming up, and one by one files out of Jaxson’s apartment. My cell vibrates in my hand, and I glance down.

Willow: Have fun

Me: I owe you

Willow: You can pay me back by giving me all the deets

Me: Gotta go! Love you

“You wouldn’t have anything to do with that, would ya?” Jaxson asks, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

He damn well knows I did. Two can play that game.

“Maybe,” I say coyly. “Would you be upset if I did?”

He marches over, lifts me off the couch, spins, and sits with me straddling him. “You good?”

“I’m good.”

“How’d you get rid of them?”

“I didn’t,” I answer honestly. “Willow did.”

Jaxson throws his head back and laughs, and I join him. Lykos tilts his head, watching us as if we’re crazy. My body vibrates against his as we both struggle for breath. I freeze, gasping as Jaxson’s cock hardens beneath me. His laughter dies, and his eyes smolder with promise.

I attempt to slide off of his lap, but he grips my hips, holding me in place. “You don’t have to move unless you’re uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine,” I say and drop my head in embarrassment.

Can I really do this? Yes, yes, I can because I want this man. I’m taking back control.

He lifts my chin. “What’s going on in that beautiful mind of yours?”

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Here goes nothing.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly unbutton my top and let it slide down my arms to reveal my lavender lace bra.

“A-a-are you sure?” Jaxson chokes.

I hesitate for only a moment. “I don’t know, but I want to try.”

Jaxson grips my neck and crashes his lips to mine. His tongue demands entry, and I gladly oblige. He stands abruptly, and I wrap my legs around his waist. Lykos jumps off the couch and begins to follow us so we pull apart long enough to yell at the dog to stay as Jaxson carries me into his bedroom and kicks his door shut.

He lays me gently on the bed. “We go as slow as you want. You say the word, and we stop, okay?” I nod my agreement. “Need the words, babe,” he coaxes.

“I’ll tell you if I can’t handle it, promise.”

“You’re in charge,” he reminds me. “Clothes off or on?”

“Off,” I say breathlessly.

He reaches behind his back and tugs his shirt off in one swift movement, revealing a rock-hard six-pack. Next, he unbuckles his belt and whips it out of the loops like they do in the steamy romance books Willow loves to shove in my face. Jaxson with his clothes on is sexy, but Jaxson practically naked is sinfully so.

Leaving his boxer briefs on, he crawls toward me. My heart hammers in my chest the closer he gets. Goosebumps break out over my body, and my skin tingles with anticipation.

He lays above me, holding his weight with his forearms in a plank, leaving a trail of kisses from my mouth to behind my ear and down my neck. I moan and reach to pull him closer. He slides an arm under my back and flips us over so I'm on top.

“Your show, baby.” He winks.

My heart melts at his consideration as I let my fingers explore his pecs. I place featherlight kisses along his jawline, down his neck to his chest. I drag my nails across his stomach, stopping at the band of his boxers. He raises his eyebrow in question, and I tug gently while he lifts his hips off the bed, allowing me to remove them.

I swallow hard when I see Jaxson's size. He's long and thick. I'm nervous about having a panic attack, but my desire for Jaxson wins out. Dipping my head and licking his cock from base to tip, I entice a moan from him. I swirl my tongue around the head before gently sucking it into my mouth and flicking my tongue over his slit. I repeat the movements, gradually pulling him partway into my warm mouth. His hands twist my hair, and I immediately stiffen under his hold.

You're okay. You're safe. It's only Jaxson.

He lets go immediately and grips the sheets. I continue my ministrations until I feel his legs lock up.

“Baby, you have to stop or I'm go?—”

I know I'm not ready for that, so I release his cock from my mouth with a pop and

wrap my fingers around him firmly, stroking fast. He comes with a grunt, erupting all over my hand.

In a lightning-fast move, he flips me onto my back.

“Can I taste you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I squeak.

He slams his mouth to mine, and our tongues duel for dominance. He nips and sucks his way down to my breasts.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he mumbles as he reaches behind me, unclasping my bra. Jaxson slides the cups out of his way and nibbles on my soft flesh until my nipples are hard peaks.

I arch my back, forcing myself further into his mouth. “Jaxson, please,” I beg.

He releases me. “Do you need more, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Your wish is my command.”

He kisses his way between the valley of my breasts and down my stomach before stopping at the waist of my yoga pants. He raises his brows in a silent question, and I tip my chin before he peels them and my panties off.

Suddenly unsure, I cover myself. Jaxson doesn’t comment or make any attempt to move my hands. He kisses them and around my thighs, until I let my arms fall to my side. He massages my feet and legs, and my muscles slowly relax. I close my eyes

and let his touch comfort me. He nudges my legs apart, and his breath tickles my inner thighs. With the first swipe of his tongue, I bolt upright.

“Omigod!”

Jaxson presses firmly but gently on my stomach to hold me in place. He attacks my clit with enthusiasm until I’m a spineless mess. I lace my fingers into his hair, holding on for dear life. He inserts a finger and pumps it in and out until I’m withering beneath him.

“Jaxson, don’t stop,” I plead.

The hand resting on my stomach slides up and tweaks my nipples as he adds a second finger, hitting that delicious spot deep within.

“I’m gonna come,” I warn as I detonate.

He nips my clit and sucks hard as my legs grip his head, locking him in place. When the pleasure subsides, he places a kiss on my stomach and climbs up beside me, gathering me in his arms.

“Was that okay?” he asks.

“It was perfect,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 25

JAXSON

Ring.Ring.

I tighten my arms around Aurora and inhale her sweet vanilla scent. The shrill sound of my cell echoes throughout the room, and I close my eyes and sigh. Not wanting to wake Aurora, I slide my arms free, sit up, and hit the green button without checking to see who it is.

“Give me a minute,” I grumble, swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

Aurora stirs and stretches out beside me, and the blanket slips, exposing her full round breasts. Phone call forgotten, my cock springs to attention. My fingers circle her nipples until they form stiff peaks, and when she moans in her sleep, I lean over to capture her mouth.

“Captain,” Benson shouts from my lap.

“Shit!” I push the phone up to my ear. “What?”

Her eyes snap open. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, go back to sleep,” I encourage. “I’ll go out to the living room.”

She rubs the sleep from her eyes, sits up against the headboard, and places her hand on my arm. “Don’t go.”

I press my lips against hers, completely ignoring the irate voice on the other end of the line.

“Rivers!” Benson yells. “Fucking answer me dammit.”

Aurora giggles. “Sounds urgent. You better get that.”

“This better be good, Benson,” I threaten.

“We found an Oleg Sorokin,” he says, exasperated. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you.”

“Who’s Oleg Sorokin?”

“What did you say?” Aurora asks, her voice shaky.

I put Benson on speaker. “Repeat that Benson, I have Aurora with me. You’re on speaker.”

“Aurora’s with you? It’s zero-two hundred.” Benson pauses. “Fuck it, not my business. Anyway, Russia was a gold mine of information. We caught up to someone in the Sorokin family who was more than happy to give up Oleg’s location after thirty minutes of...interrogation.”

“That’s Dmitri’s number two!” Aurora shouts and scrambles out of bed, throwing on clothes. “Where is he?”

“Uh... Rivers?” Benson asks.

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“Give me a second.” I hit the mute button and finish getting dressed. “Babe, Benson doesn’t know about your extracurricular activities, and if we don’t want your dad to find out, I need you to keep quiet.”

She steps up on her toes and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll go take Lykos out and round up the guys.”

As soon as she walks out of the bedroom, I return my attention to Benson. “Aurora’s gone,” I say. “Now where’s Oleg?”

“The general’s daughter, man?” Benson laughs. “I wouldn’t want to be you when he finds out.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “So help me God Benson... Where the fuck is Oleg?”

“Fine, fine... Your relationship, your problems,” he teases. “Turns out they own a couple of warehouses down in Norfolk, Virginia, around Capes Shipping Yard. That explains how they were able to ship people out undetected so easily. They have access to water and the airstrip at Norfolk Private Airport.”

“Is Dmitri Krukov there too?” I growl.

He sighs. “That we don’t know. The guy is a ghost. No one has been willing to give him up. My best guess is wherever Dmitri is, Oleg isn’t far behind.”

“We’re moving out,” I say. “And Benson, thank you.”

“We’ll keep digging, just in case.”

“Roger that.”

I disconnect the call and head into the living room, where Aurora has everyone assembled.

“Aurora said Benson’s team found the fuckers,” Thomas growls.

I shake my head. “Possibly, not confirmed. Definitely can’t pinpoint Dmitri Krukov, but intel on Oleg Sorokin is solid.”

Aurora snorts. “If Benson has Oleg’s location, Dmitri is there too. Dmitri doesn’t go anywhere without him, and Oleg can’t take a piss without Dmitri holding his dick.”

Carver laughs. “He seriously holds his dick for him?”

Aurora rolls her eyes. “No, Einstein. I mean, Dmitri doesn’t trust Oleg at all even though he’s his right-hand man. During my brief time there, it was easy to see the decimation in ranks. Oleg wants Dmitri’s power. He’s tired of being second.”

“Aurora, Lykos, Carver, Hudson with me,” I order. “Thomas and Bennett, I want you two following in the van. Hopefully, we end this tonight.”

“Oorah!” they shout.

Aurora interlocks her fingers with mine. “Thank you.”

I kiss her temple and follow my men out the door.

Time to send this nightmare to hell, where it belongs.

CHAPTER 26

AURORA

“Were they really under our noses all this time?” Hudson asks.

Lykos' head lies next to my thigh, and I pet him in an attempt to calm my nerves. However, it doesn't seem to be working because my leg continues to bounce of its own accord. Lykos pushes his upper body into my lap, and his weight settles me. I rub my face in his fur and lock my arms around him.

“I don't know,” Jaxson answers. “You know what they say, hide in plain sight.”

We arrive a couple hours later at the coordinates Benson sent. As soon as Thomas and Bennett are parked, we gather behind the vehicles. Thomas opens the trunk, and they start strapping on their weapons, looking like they're preparing for war.

Which, in a sense, I guess they are.

Thomas slips a helmet over his head, and it has a weird pair of goggles on the front. He adjusts the straps and presses a couple of buttons on the side, pulling the lenses in front of his eyes. He glances in our direction and then over to the buildings across from us. “Heat signature working. Nothing in this building.”

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“Keep looking,” Jaxson commands.

Thomas’ head swivels, focusing on different buildings before he turns to another one.

“Nothing there either. Might need to go further down.”

“Let’s move out,” Jaxson orders, and I move into step with him.

Waves lap against the docks, the sound annoying and soothing at the same time, and I shiver as we move further into the darkness. Nothing seems to be moving other than the water. Even the lights don’t sway with the breeze. It’s as if an eerie stillness has fallen over this portion of Virginia in an attempt to cover all its dirty secrets.

We walk tirelessly, stopping to check every building when Thomas’ fist shoots up in the air. Everyone halts their steps and waits with bated breath. Thomas moves closer while we all move into the shadows of the neighboring structure. He jogs back to our location a moment later.

“I counted at least ten inside,” Thomas reports. “I can’t see too far into the building to know if there are more.”

“Dmitri Krukov and Oleg Sorokin are the primary targets,” Jaxson reminds them.

“Kill any threat, but remember, there could also be innocent civilians inside.”

“Oorah,” they say quietly.

Jaxson grabs my elbow and spins me around. “You’re staying here.”

I cross my arms. “The hell I am,” I snap. “We had a deal.”

Jaxson sighs and rests his forehead against mine. “I know, and I promise you’ll get your shot,” he says. “But we have no idea what we’re walking into. We have more training than you. I can’t do my job if I’m worried about you getting hurt. Let us make sure we’re in the right place and we have them. Then I’ll come back for you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He kisses me quickly. “Stay here with Lykos.”

I watch for any sign of movement and check my phone constantly for any updates from any of the men. I don’t want to risk texting them and putting them in danger, so I continue to wait. Lykos must sense my agitation because he starts nudging me with his snout. I pet his back to distract me from the pit of dread in my stomach.

Fuck it. I’m not waiting anymore.

“I have to go in there.”

I spin on my heel but am sent spiraling to the concrete with a violent yank at my scalp. Breath whooshes from my lungs, and black spots circle my vision. I struggle to stay conscious, but when I hear Lykos growl and see his blurry form sail over me, my world snaps back into focus.

“Get the fuck off of me!” the Russian bellows.

Dmitri!

Lykos thrashes his head from side to side, Dmitri’s arm locked in his jaw. I grab one of my knives from the sheath strapped to my leg, ready to call Lykos back to heel,

and Dmitri fumbles with his gun and aims it at Lykos. I don't hesitate. I throw my knife, hitting him directly in the wrist holding the gun. It drops to the ground with a thud.

"You fucking bitch!" Dmitri screams, cradling his arm. "You'll wish you were dead by the time I'm finished with you."

"Zw—"

The door slams open and ricochets off the metal siding.

Jaxson storms out, weapon drawn. He swivels his head around, taking in the scene.

I'm on one knee with another knife to throw. Lykos' teeth are barred, ready for my command, and there's a shrieking Russian with a blade sticking out of his wrist. I can't stop the laugh that bubbles up and escapes.

"I leave you alone for ten minutes," Jaxson mumbles, marching past me.

"Settle," I say to Lykos, and stroke his fur. "We're okay. The bad man didn't hurt us."

"You cu?—"

Jaxson throat punches Dmitri, cutting him off. Dmitri sinks to the ground where Jaxson's knee conveniently connects to his nose, knocking him out.

"That's no way to speak to a woman," Jaxson chastises before looking at me. "Do you want your knife back?"

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“I’ll wait until he’s awake,” I say. “It’ll be more fun yanking it out.”

Jaxson grins. “Evil. I love it.” He bends over, lifts Dmitri to throw him over his shoulder, and heads toward the door.

I follow closely behind. “Did you get Oleg?”

“Yep,” Jaxson answers. “Already have him tied up.”

We walk through a dimly lit hallway and make a few more turns until we come to a huge open room with a circular stage in the middle. Metal chains are fastened to one set of concrete hooks on the wooden floor, and spotlights beam down on Oleg, who’s on his knees with his arms chained behind his back. Another set of chains lay empty.

“What the hell is this place?” Carver asks, disgusted.

“The platform.” My eyes roll into the back of my head, and my legs give out. Someone yells my name, but I’m too far gone into my nightmare to know who.

Dmitri slams inside of me. I scream, but all it does is spur him on. He bites my breast so hard as he smiles sadistically, and his teeth are tinged with blood.

“You’re my new favorite pet,” he grunts.

I close my eyes and pray for it to be over soon. At least when I’m lying on a cold, damp concrete floor, I’m alone. My head snaps to the side from the force of Dmitri’s blow.

“Open your fucking eyes, and watch your master destroy your cunt, or your fate will be much worse,” he threatens.

Refusing to do as he demands, I bite my tongue. How much worse can it possibly get? I’ve already lost count of how many times he and Oleg have taken turns violating me.

Dmitri digs his fingers into my hips, and with one last thrust, he empties himself in me. I groan in pain as he slips out, and I roll to my side just in time to throw up the bile that worked its way up my throat. He twists my hair in his hands, lifts me off his desk, and throws me to the ground.

“Tsk, ts.” Dmitri scowls. “I thought you were learning, pet, but you're still defiant. A problem that will soon be rectified. Oleg!” he summons.

Oleg barrels through the door, his eyes filling with lust at the sight of me trembling and naked on the carpet. “Yeah, boss?”

“Take my pet, and hose her off,” he orders. “Tonight, she goes to the platform. Invite everyone.”

Oleg raises his brow. “Everyone?”

“Everyone,” Dmitri confirms.

“Aurora! Baby, come back to me,” Jaxson yells from somewhere in the distance. “Please, wake up.”

Something hard and warm covers my body. I reach out absently and feel something soft under my fingertips. I slowly open my eyes, letting my surroundings come back into focus. Jaxson holds me in his arms, rocking me as Lykos bumps me with his

snout to let me know he's here too.

Sadistic laughter fills the room. I try push out of Jaxson's lap, but he holds me tight. "You fainted. I don't want you to get hurt," he says quietly, for only me to hear.

"I'm okay now," I promise.

Jaxson helps me stand, only releasing me when he knows I'm capable of staying upright on my own. Shackled to the platform are Oleg and Dmitri. The rest of Jaxson's team are standing guard over them, watching me with a mixture of expressions ranging from sorrow to anger.

"Pet," Dmitri sneers. "I remember the last time we were together in this room. Wonderful memories, yes?"

Carver nails him in the face with the butt of his gun. "Oops."

Dmitri's head jerks to the side, and he spits out a pool of blood as he glares at me with a sinister smile.

Fuck you!

I refuse to let him or any of the pieces of shit under his regime see me fall apart again.

"For you perhaps." I flash my teeth. "Tonight, I think it's time I made new memories."

I'm not a victim! I'm a fucking survivor, and now, I'll become his worst nightmare.

CHAPTER 27

JAXSON

“You knowwhat I’m gonna ask you to do,” Aurora says sweetly.

Bennett and Thomas don’t think twice and begin to shred the clothes off of Oleg and Dmitri with their knives. I watch Aurora out of the corner of my eye, amazed at how fucking strong she truly is. There’s a fire burning deep within those emerald irises, and I know hell is about to be unleashed. I love having a front-row seat to her torturing these sad fucking excuses for human beings, but I want a piece of these assholes, too.

Hudson joins me. “Wonder what she’ll come up with this time?”

“I’m sure it’ll be interesting,” I muse.

Aurora whispers something in Lykos’ ear before approaching the platform. Whatever she said didn’t soothe the animal because his hackles are raised, and his growls intensify the closer she gets to the men in chains.

“Jaxson,” Aurora calls. “Can you come help me?”

“Got to go.” I rub my hands together methodically. “Duty calls.” I step onto the stage.

Aurora smirks. “I thought you could keep Oleg company so he doesn’t get lonely.”

I crack my knuckles. “Any special requests?”

She taps her chin. “I’ll leave that up to you.” She whistles and calls Lykos to her side, petting him until he settles down. “You’re such a good boy,” she coos. “Don’t worry, you’ll get your pickle.”

Lykos sits down and thumps his tail enthusiastically against the wood floor while the rest of us groan.

“What?” she asks innocently.

“Nothing, baby.” I kiss her temple. “Which one do you want?”

Without hesitation, she responds, “Dmitri.”

“No offense, Rivers,” Bennett says with a chuckle. “I’d rather be Oleg in this situation.”

“Me too,” Hudson echoes.

“Same,” Carver and Thomas say in unison.

I tend to agree with them. Even though we’ve used torture to extract information from our enemies for the good of our country, it’s not been used like this before. Not that I have any qualms about it. In fact, I’m more than happy to dole out some justice without Uncle Sam peering over my shoulder and telling me I’ve taken things too far. Aurora is uninhibited. It’s like watching an artist approach a blank canvas, the end result unknown.

“My pet won’t be able to do anything to me,” Dmitri rants. “She has to hide behind you heathens. What a shame, I would’ve liked one last go at her tight pu?—”

In a quick, fluid motion, Aurora flings her wrist and lets one of her knives fly. It embeds in the top of Dmitri's thigh, close to his dick. He wails and shouts obscenities in Russian.

"That's not very nice," Bennett chastises. "We really don't like it when assholes call our sister a whore."

"She doesn't have any siblings!" Dmitri yells.

I rush forward and wrap my hand around his neck, cutting off his air supply. "How the fuck do you know if she has siblings or not, you worthless piece of shit?" I squeeze harder. "You have no idea who the fuck you grabbed."

Aurora's fingers brush my arm. "Jaxson," she says soothingly. "I kinda want to kill him." She pulls the knife from Dmitri's thigh and stabs him in the other one, sneering at the prick. "That's for pissing off my man."

I release him with a shove, and he gasps for breath. I stomp over to Oleg and pound my frustrations out on him. Unlike Dmitri, Oleg's mouth is taped shut so I don't have to hear anything but muffled screams. Dmitri's sadistic laughter stops my physical assault on Oleg who sags as I slam home my fist into his right temple, knocking him out.

"What's so fucking funny?" I growl.

"You... You... You...still don't know, do you?" he wheezes. "Fucking morons."

Aurora rips the blade from his leg and holds the point under his chin. "Know what?"

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“I’m dead anyway,” he sneers. “I’m not telling you shit,pet.”

“We’ll see about that.” Aurora whistles. “Zwickel!”

A flash of fur bursts past me and lunges for Dmitri’s dick. The sound of flesh tearing has me gagging. Seeing the aftermath of Lykos’ destruction is totally different than witnessing it firsthand. Blood splatters across the floor, hitting Oleg.

“S-S-Stop, please stop!” Dmitri begs before passing out.

“Lykos, heel,” Aurora commands. Lykos unwillingly drops his favorite chew toy and bounds back to her, licking his lips. “I told you, you’d get your pickle. Mommy’s sorry it was so small. Maybe we’ll get you another one.” Her eyes flicker to Oleg, who came to at the sound of chaos, and he violently shakes his head.

Both of his eyes are almost swollen shut, and his nose is definitely broken. I march over to him and twist his nose, relishing his screams behind the tape. I rip the tape off and point my gun at his forehead. “You’re gonna die tonight,” I warn. “How you go is up to you. Personally, I’d love to draw this out and get a little more payback for my woman over there, but as you can see, she’s more than capable of doling out her own brand of justice. You can either tell me what your boss meant or I’ll let Aurora and Lykos have their fun with you too.”

Aurora sidles up beside me, and I wrap my arm around her waist.

Oleg gulps. “Dmitri isn’t the boss.”

Aurora's spine goes rigid. "What do you mean? All my intel pointed to the Krukov family and Dmitri Krukov specifically."

"F-F-False trail," he sputters.

I go to choke him again, but Aurora stops me. "Who's the fucking leader then?" I yell.

"I don't know," he cries. Aurora snaps her fingers, and Lykos trots over. "No... no... wait. I don't know because I wasn't told. Dmitri was worried I would try to overthrow him. There's someone else at the head of the family, pulling the strings. I swear I don't know!" he screams.

Not needing to hear any more, I pull the trigger, putting a bullet in his head.

Aurora looks up at me. "Do you think it's true?"

"Only one person here who knows, and he's unconscious and bleeding out." I tug my hair.

"Hudson," Aurora hollers. "Do you have any adrenaline on you?"

Hudson rushes over, vile in his hand. "You know what to do."

Aurora winks, uncaps the syringe, and plunges it into the wound on Dmitri's thigh. A few moments later, he jolts awake. His head jerks around, and his eyes widen when he sees Oleg with a bullet in his forehead.

"What don't we know, asshole?" I demand.

"The Bratva is c-c-changing," he gurgles. "Men aren't the only ones in charge

anymore.”

“Uh... Jaxson,” Hudson interrupts. “Remember when you asked me if someone could bleed out from having their dick cut off?”

“Yeah,” I respond.

“This is one of those times,” Hudson points out.

“Fuck,” Aurora mumbles. “I wanted more time with this son of a bitch. I need everyone to get behind me, now. Jaxson, grab Lykos.”

She lifts the gun from my waistband and moves quickly behind Dmitri, and we scramble to follow like good soldiers. “Fire in the hole!” she shouts.

Carver snickers. “I taught her that.”

Aurora shoves the barrel of the gun up his ass and pulls the trigger.

The bullet hits the wall at the same time Dmitri slumps forward. Our mouths hang open in shock, and I turn my icy glare on Carver before stalking toward him.

“Whoa,” he says, holding up his hands. “I didn’t teach her that.”

Aurora inserts herself between us and tries to hand back my shit-stained gun.

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I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You shoved that up his ass, Aurora.”

She glances at the weapon before grinning up at me. “We’ll clean it up, and it’ll be good as new.”

“No, babe,” I groan. “I’ll never look at my gun the same now.”

“I’ll buy you a new one,” she promises.

Hudson spins around. “How’d you know the bullet would come out of his body?”

“I didn’t,” she says nonchalantly. “I guessed.”

Carver howls. “Damn, sis. You give literal meaning to shoving something up someone’s ass.”

“Don’t you forget it,” she sasses as Carver covers his ass and backs away.

We still have no fucking clue who is calling the shots.

“Bennett, Hudson, and Carver, you start clean up,” I order. “Thomas and I are going to do a sweep to make sure there’s no one else in here.”

Aurora glances at me. “You didn’t already do that?”

“We did,” Thomas interjects. “Killed all the guards, but there’s a lot of locked cell doors.”

“The keys are probably in his office or his pants.”

Thomas raises his brow. “How do you know?”

“This is where I was held.” She scrunches her nose. “At least, this is a location I remember.”

I check Dmitri’s pants and come up empty. “His keys aren’t here. Can you remember where his office is?” She nods. “Let’s go. The sooner we check the rooms, the faster we can get out of here. Hudson, give me your gun.”

Hudson grins, holding it out for me. “What’s wrong with yours?”

“Everyone’s a fucking comedian today,” I mutter under my breath, taking it from him.

We leave the three of them to start cleaning up the bodies while I, Aurora, and Thomas make our way down a series of hallways until we come to Dmitri’s office. Busting through the door, Aurora stumbles for a moment but catches herself before marching over to his desk and ripping open the top drawer.

She holds up a set of keys. “Got ‘em.”

Turning back the way we came, she leads us down another series of twists and turns, revealing cell doors. She unlocks them; each one is empty. I don’t know if we should be relieved or worried. I text Benson to let him know that Oleg and Dmitri have been sent on a permanent vacation, but we have no idea if any luggage was taken. He responds right away that he and his team will stay vigilant and keep their eyes open and ears to the ground.

“This is the last room,” Thomas announces. “We cleared the rest that were unlocked.”

Aurora's hand trembles as she places the key in the lock but doesn't turn it. "I-I-I don't know if I can."

I spin her around and pull her into my chest. "What is it?" I rub my hands up and down her back.

"That's the room... Where... Senator Briggs," she sobs.

I look over her head at Thomas. "You don't have to go in. Thomas and I ca?—"

"No!" she cries. "They don't get to win. No fucking more, Jaxson. They don't get to have any more power over me. Ihaveto do this. I'm not weak anymore."

"You were never weak, baby." I sway with her in my arms. "Take your time. Whatever you need for as long as you need."

"Aurora," Thomas speaks up, and she turns to look at him. "You took back all your power, there's not a single one of us who ever thought or would ever think you're weak. No one could ever survive what you, or any other person like you did, and be weak. We're Marines, and sure we're tough, but honey, you're the fucking strongest person out of all of us, and don't you ever doubt that. It takes so much more to be a survivor. You took back your life, and you made all those fuckers your bitches."

Thomas opens his arms, and Aurora runs into his embrace. Thomas is a man of little words, but when he speaks, he makes it count. He said exactly what Aurora needed to hear.

Aurora juts out her chin. “Fuck ‘em. Open the door, Thomas.”

That’s my girl.

CHAPTER 28

AURORA

“Fuck!” Thomas roars.

Jaxson and I step through the doorway behind Thomas, and the scene inside is enough to sour anyone’s stomach. Hanging from a St. Andrew’s cross is a very malnourished girl with cuts and bruises all over her body. Her head hangs forward, chin resting on her chest. I can’t tell if she’s breathing since she is completely still.

I rush forward and stick my hand in front of her face, breathing a sigh of relief when I feel a puff of air leave her lips. My relief is short-lived when I tilt my head and gaze at her battered face.

“Omigod!” I holler. “Help me get her down. She’s alive.” A set of keys hang on the wall behind the cross. I point at them. “Keys!”

Thomas springs into action and yanks them off the wall. He unlocks the handcuffs at the girl’s ankles first. Jaxson moves to support her body, but Thomas hands him the keys instead. Jaxson gets the cuffs off of her, and Thomas cradles her body into his. I search the room and find a blanket to wrap around her.

I finally get a good look at the girl, and my heart sinks. “Lace,” I whisper.

“What?” Jaxson asks.

“It’s Lace,” I say louder. “I thought she was dead. All this time... I thought... I thought she was dead. She was here.”

Enough! You didn’t know, and everyone was looking for Dmitri. You found her, and she needs you to be strong.

Lace’s breaths come out shallow, and her skin is a sickly gray color. “She needs a hospital,” Thomas growls.

“Let’s go,” Jaxson says, grabbing my hand.

The others are just finishing the cleanup project as we enter the main room. Carver grins as we approach, but the grin is quickly replaced by a scowl. His forehead scrunches, and his eyes blaze with anger. “Who the hell is that?”

“Lace,” I say. “Hudson, help.”

Hudson jogs over to take Lace into his arms, but Thomas snaps at him. “I’ve got her! She needs a fucking hospital.” Hudson holds up his hands.

“Bennett and Carver, go get the vehicles,” Jaxson instructs. “Double time!”

“Roger that!” they both call over their shoulders.

Ten minutes later, the vehicles pull up outside the warehouse. Thomas doesn’t want to release Lace, but he can’t get inside holding her.

“Thomas, dammit!” I yell. “We don’t have time for this. Give her to Hudson, and get your ass inside. He’ll give her back to you once you’re settled.”

Thomas doesn’t speak but does listen to what I say. Once we’re all loaded up, Jaxson heads toward the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth. I raise my brow when he glances at me.

“Your dad has connections there,” he explains. “Fewer questions, and we can get her moved to Quantico more easily.”

I reach over and lace my fingers with his. “Hurry, Jaxson.”

The vehicle accelerates as we fly down the road. Thankfully, it's still early morning, so there isn't any traffic on the roads for us to dodge. The ER bay comes into view, and Jaxson parks right next to an ambulance and lays on the horn. Multiple staff members come running.

I roll down the window. “We need a gurney!”

Two of the nurses turn around and run back inside, while the other nurse and a doctor approach the vehicle. I hop out and open the rear car door, and Thomas holds Lace tightly.

The nurse tries to reach for her, and Thomas snaps, “You can’t have her.”

“Thomas, you have to let them take her,” I say. He stares straight ahead as if he can’t hear me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:01 am

“Thomas, brother, hand her over!” Jaxson hollers from the front seat.

I rub his arm, trying to comfort him. “Let the doctors and nurses help her, Thomas,” I coax. “She’ll die if you don’t.”

He turns his head, and I see the torture in his eyes. His cheeks are wet with tears, yet he hasn’t made a sound. “We were too late.”

I know that pain.

“No, I think we found her in time,” I reassure him as Hudson comes around to the passenger side. “Give her to Hudson, and he’ll make sure she’s okay.”

Hudson nods. “I got her, brother.”

Thomas slides her into Hudson’s arms as if she is the most delicate piece of China. Hudson lifts Lace, places her on the gurney, and jogs with the nurses and doctors through the doors. Thomas shakes off his stupor and charges after them.

“I’m going to follow,” I tell Jaxson. “You go park, find Carver and Bennett, and meet me inside.”

“Okay,” he says.

I spot Hudson as I enter the bay. “What’s happening?”

He grips my elbow and leads me around the corner. Lowering his voice, he says,

“She doesn’t have any family, right?” I shake my head. “I didn’t think so. The hospital doesn’t know that. I told them she was your sister. As far as anyone here knows, she’s Lace Parks. They shouldn’t be able to put it together that you’re General Parks’ daughter, so I think we’re safe there.”

Damn! At least someone’s using their fucking brain tonight. My dad can’t know what I’ve been up to, and there will be so many questions if he finds out I’m here right now.

“Shit,” I huff. “Good thinking.”

“I’ll have Jaxson fill your dad in,” Hudson says with a smirk. “He’ll just have to leave out some of the details.”

I laugh. “Better him than me. Where’s Thomas?”

“Right here.” Thomas appears out of thin air. “The doctors wouldn’t let me back with her.”

I pat his chest. “Lace is a fighter. She’ll be okay.”

“Sir, excuse me! You can’t bring him in here,” a nurse shouts from behind us.

I whirl around in time for Lykos to bump into my legs. Dropping to my knees, I wrap my arms around him. “He’s my service dog.”

The nurse places her hands on her hips. “He needs to be on a leash and have his vest on.”

“My apologies, ma’am.” Carver flashes a mega-watt smile at her. “Lykos here was so distraught being away from his owner, he got away from me. He should be calm

now.” He waves the leash. “I’ll put it on.”

Jaxson and Bennett cough to hide their laughter.

The nurse flushes. “O-o-kay, see that you do.” She spins on her heel and returns to her station.

I hook Lykos’ leash to his collar so we won’t get kicked out and walk over to the waiting room before plopping down into the chair with Lykos at my feet. Jaxson and the rest of the guys sit next to me. Carver makes several coffee runs while we wait for news, but the mood is somber. Jaxson makes a call to my dad, but I’m too tired to focus on the conversation.

“I told your dad we finally got Oleg and Dmitri,” he whispers. “To say he was ecstatic would be an understatement. I think he was a little disappointed he wasn’t there, though. I told him I sent you a picture of the girl we found, and you immediately recognized her as Lace. I told him you drove down here to check on her.”

My brows furrow. “Where did he think I was all night if you guys were out killing Dmitri and Oleg? I told him I was hanging out with you.”

He grins. “I told him you passed out on my couch watching Netflix.”

I lean over and press my lips to his. “Thank you.”

“You never have to thank me, baby.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder, and I lay my head on his chest. “Try to rest.”

Holding Lace’s hand in mine, I listen to the beeping sounds of the machines. The smell of antiseptic and disinfectant invades my nostrils, bringing back memories of

the times I spent in the hospital. Dad had her moved to Quantico so we'd be closer to him, and everyone could rest more comfortably. I had him take Lykos home so he wouldn't be cooped up in the hospital with me all day and night because I refuse to leave Lace's side. The last thing I want is for her to wake up scared and have no idea what's going on.

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Soft moans distract me from my inner thoughts. I gently squeeze Lace's fingers, hoping this time she wakes up and it's not another false alarm. A few moments later, I sag in relief when her eyelids flutter open.

Lace looks around in confusion before her face lights up with recognition. "A-A-Aurora," she croaks.

"Don't talk yet." I lift a straw up to her lips. "Small sips," I encourage. She drinks slowly. "You've been unconscious for two days."

"Where am I?" Her voice sounds a little stronger.

"Quantico, at the hospital on base," I explain. "I have somethi?—"

Knock. Knock.

Dr. Sheppard enters, followed by April, her nurse. "Oh good, you're awake." She saunters over to the side of the bed while April begins to take her vitals. "I'm Dr. Sheppard, and that's April, your nurse for the day," she introduces. "Do you know where you are?" Lace nods. "Do you mind if Aurora stays while we speak?"

"She can stay," Lace replies.

"How old are you?" Dr. Sheppard asks.

"Eighteen," she says shyly.

Dr. Sheppard lets out a breath of relief. “Good, I don’t have to alert child protective services.”

Dr. Sheppard goes over her injuries, which I already knew about from watching the nurses care for her. Lace has over two hundred lacerations, a broken wrist, and, like me, had to receive stitches to repair vaginal and anal tearing. A few tears slide down Lace’s cheeks, but she doesn’t make a sound. Dr. Sheppard asks if she has any questions.

“What happens next?” Lace asks quietly. Dr. Sheppard lifts her brow and glances in my direction.

“Next, you focus on healing, and when Dr. Sheppard says you’re well enough to be discharged, you’re coming home with me,” I announce, my tone leaving no room for argument.

“Okay,” she whispers.

Dr. Sheppard excuses herself to go check on other patients. Once she’s gone, Lace begins to shake uncontrollably. She breaks down sobbing, and like Willow did for me, I kick off my shoes, climb into the bed, and hold her in my arms.

“I got you,” I whisper. “You’re safe.”

“They’ll come for me a-a-again,” she hiccups. “You were already taken once. I can’t... I... Wait, how are you here?”

I explain how I was shipped off to Ukraine, and my dad sent his Alpha Special Ops team to locate me. “From what I understand, they were able to rescue quite a few victims who were sent overseas.”

“Wow,” she says in awe. “You’re so lucky to have a dad who cares about you.”

“I am,” I agree. “I’m so sorry, Lace. I had no idea you were alive. I would’ve looked harder, tried harder to get you back.”

“It’s not your fault,” she assures me. “I brought trouble to your doorstep. When I saw Oleg tase you, I felt so helpless. I never saw you after we got back to headquarters and only heard whispers that Dmitri had a new favorite pet.”

I shiver. “We never have to worry about him or Oleg again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say, they took a permanent vacation,” I say cryptically. “And where they went, there’s no return flights.”

Lace’s eyes bulge as she deciphers my meaning. “I hope they suffered.”

“They did, Lace,” I confirm.

CHAPTER 29

JAXSON

“Dowe have any idea who the head of the Krukov family is?” General Parks’ asks.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:01 am

It's been five days since we rescued Lace, and she's pretty skittish around us but coming around. None of us can blame her after everything she's been through. Thomas is stomping around the general's office like a caged animal. He's been standing guard outside of Lace's hospital room since the night we brought her in. The only reason he's here, is because General Parks wanted to speak to all of us early this morning.

"Not a clue," I answer. "Has Benson had any luck?"

General Parks shakes his head. "Negative. There also haven't been any more rescues. It's as if everything went dark when Dmitri was killed."

"He could've been fucking lying," Thomas grunts.

"Why though?" Carver asks.

"Look around, genius," Thomas fumes. "We're sitting here holding our dicks still discussing this asshole, and he's dead and buried. No other missing people have been reported or recovered."

"Watch yourself, Thomas," I warn.

Thomas hangs his head. "Sorry, Sir."

"No apology needed," General Parks says. "I wish I could blow it off, but until we know for sure, I have a duty to my daughter and every victim out there who has or is suffering from the Krukov family. I need to make sure they're safe."

“Oorah!” we say in unison.

“Tell me again what Dmitri said right before he died?” he asks.

We’ve been over this a hundred times, but I’ll keep going over it if it leads us to the head of the snake. I want to fucking sever it, once and for all.

“The Bratva is changing, and it’s not only men who are in charge anymore,” Hudson recites.

General Parks rubs his forehead. “It seems far-fetched for the Russians.”

“How so?” I ask, curious.

Bennett speaks up. “The Bratva, like any mafia organization, is very archaic. It’s hard to believe that anyone besides a man is at the helm.”

“Back to square one then?” Carver huffs.

“I’ll have Benson do some more digging in Russia,” General Parks says.

“Sir, maybe Benson’s team can grab someone associated with the Bratva and see if they’ll give up anything with a little persuasion.”

General Parks leans back in his chair. “Good idea. I’ll get in touch with him this afternoon.”

“When will Lace be released from the hospital?” Bennett asks the general.

“Today or tomorrow,” he says with a smile.

The general has been spending a lot of time at the hospital getting to know Lace. He plans for her to continue her recovery here. He's already taken her under his wing, treating her like a daughter. Lace is still trying to get used to people being there for her and not taking anything in return. It will take time, but with Aurora, she'll get there.

Thomas perks up. "Do you have everything you need for her arrival, Sir?"

The general laughs. "Yes, between Aurora, Willow, and Vera, Lace will have everything she needs and should be quite comfortable. My biggest worry was Lykos."

No one needed to worry, though, because just like he did with Aurora, Lykos calmed Lace down and made another friend for life. Lykos jumped up on her bed like he belonged and would settle her when she started to have a panic attack.

"Speaking of Lykos." I stand. "I'll go outside and bring him in."

"Are you taking him back up to the hospital?" General Parks asks.

"I'll feed and water him first, then we'll head out," I say.

"Tell Aurora and Lace I'll bring up dinner so they don't have to eat the nasty hospital food."

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“I heard Lace tell Aurora that Italian’s her favorite,” Thomas interjects.

“Italian it is.” The general rubs his hands together. “Any suggestions?”

I leave them arguing about which Italian restaurant has the best garlic bread and pasta and head to the backyard.

I hope Benson’s team can uncover the mystery of the Krukov family.

CHAPTER 30

AURORA

“You’re being discharged today,” Dr. Sheppard announces.

The last five days have been rough on Lace, but she’s been a trooper. Lykos has been a huge help, and I make a mental note to get him a T-bone steak for everything he’s done the last couple of months. The guys have been patient with Lace, just as they were with me.

Thomas has made it his personal mission to become her personal bodyguard. He hovers from a distance so as not to overwhelm her, and I see her relax when he’s around. We’re alone for now, waiting for the guys to descend on us at any given moment. They were summoned this morning to talk to my dad about Dmitri’s cryptic message about the Bratva.

“Seriously?” Lace asks nervously.

“It’ll be great,” I say excitedly. “You’re going home with me and Lykos.”

Her face lights up, and I know I have her convinced. “When do I bust out?”

Dr. Sheppard laughs. “I’ll start the paperwork now. I’d say you’ll be good to go in the next hour or so.”

“I’ll text my dad and let him know, so he can pick us up.” I grab my cell out of my purse.

Normally, I would’ve driven myself, but I slept over at Jaxson’s. He dropped me off on the way to my dad’s because we were up all night ‘gaming’ with the guys. Yes, I’m a grown-ass adult, but we haven’t exactly had a chance to tell my dad that we’re dating... or whatever it is we are.

Me: Lace’s getting released in about an hour.

I know it’ll be a while before Dad responds since he’s in a debriefing with his team. I’m about to text Jaxson to let him know what’s going on but decide not to disturb him. I know my dad will announce it once he checks his phone. He knows how close the guys are to Lace, and they’ll want to stick around to welcome her home.

I brought some clothes with me that I bought for Lace. Since she has a cast and is still weak, I help her into the bathroom and assist her with showering. When April arrives with the discharge papers and wheelchair, I’m braiding Lace’s hair.

“Your chariot has arrived,” April announces dramatically.

Lace giggles and slides into the chair. “Do I really have to use a wheelchair?”

“Hospital policy,” April says. “Once we hit the exit, you can stand.”

“Deal,” Lace says.

My cell pings, and I dig around my purse for it while April gathers the stuffed animals the guys have bought Lace and puts them in a plastic bag for us.

Vera: Your dad is still in his meeting. They asked me to get you

Me: Lace is being discharged now

Vera: I’m on my way. Be there in five.

Me: Okay. Thanks

As we get in the elevator, I tell Lace, “Dad got held up. My stepmom is picking us up.”

“Great,” she says excitedly. “I can’t wait to see Lykos.”

“He’ll be happy to see you, too.”

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April leads us out of the hospital and puts the brakes on the chair so Lace can get up safely. I slip my phone into the waistband of my leggings since I don't have any pockets, that way I don't have to keep searching for it in my purse. Vera's SUV pulls up, and I open the door to help Lace get in before scrambling beside her.

"Thanks for coming to get us," I say as Vera's driver edges away from the curb and turns out of the hospital parking lot. "Vera, this is Lace."

Vera turns around slowly, a dark sinister smile on her face. "Yes, Lace and I are very well acquainted. Aren't we Lace?"

My eyes bulge, and my mouth drops open in shock.

Lace screams at me. "No... no... no... I'm not going back."

"How the hell do you know, Lace?" I ask Vera. My head swings to Lace. "How do you know my stepmother?"

"I didn't know this was your stepmom. No one ever said who she married." The color drains from Lace's face. Her voice is quiet and shaky when she confesses, "She's my aunt."

"It's true, my niece has lived quite a sheltered life," Vera taunts.

Wait, what? Her niece? How the fuck is that possible?

My mind spins out of control, and my thoughts jumble as I try to put the pieces

together. After what feels like forever but is actually only a few seconds, things start to fall into place.

Fucking Vera?

I flinch as if I've been slapped. "How could you do this to me?"

Piece after piece clicks as my mind continues to spiral. It all makes sense now. How Lace was able to find my email and contact me, and then how quickly the Russians were able to find us when I was trying to help her get somewhere safe.

This morning in the shower, did Lace have the Krukov tattoo on her arm? How did I not pay attention to that? Because you thought she was your friend. You had no reason to doubt her.

I raise my hand instinctively and rub the back of my neck, Lace's eyes following my movement.

Her traitorous orbs brim with tears. "I swear I didn't want to, Aurora. Please believe me," she begs. "I was forced into this. I had no choice."

I continue to stare at her in disbelief, unable to form any words.

"Quiet, you little whore," Vera spews and points a gun at us. "Give me your purse, Aurora." I toss my purse at her head and smirk when it smacks against her face. "You won't be smiling for long." She fumbles through my bag before tossing it onto the floorboard. "Where's your cell?"

"It should be in there."

"You have three seconds to give me your cell, or I put a bullet in your new friend's

head,” she threatens.

I snort. “You could. At this point, I really don’t fucking care either way. To be honest, I don’t think you’re that fucking stupid. We’re not off the base yet, psycho. Besides, I don’t have pockets... Where the fuck am I going to put it?”

Vera reaches over the seat and pistol-whips me. Stars dance in my vision, and blood trickles out of my nose. “Don’t fucking play with me. Lift up your shirt.”

I bite back a retort, as I lift my shirt. Watching me in the rearview mirror, her driver licks his lips.

Lace speaks up. “Y-y-you left it on my hospital bed.”

Why is she trying to help now after all she did? Don’t question it. Go with it.

I snap my fingers. “That’s right, I set it down after I sent my dad the text and helped Lace get ready.”

Vera seems appeased and turns around as we drive through the military base gates. I yank my cell out, thankful it’s on silent, send an SOS, and then shove the device deep between the seat cushions.

I blow out a breath and glare at Lace, daring her to reveal my secret. She discretely shakes her head. Once we’re a mile from the base, Vera trains her weapon back on us.

“I see the wheels in your head spinning, Aurora,” she taunts.

“Vera, what’s going on?”

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“Oh, what the hell?” she says giddily. “It’s not like you’ll be around much longer to tell anyone. My name isn’t Vera Simpson like your father thought when he met me.”

“Bullshit,” I scoff. “You never would’ve gotten past his background checks.”

Vera cackles. “My dear, do you really think the United States government is the only one who has access to make people disappear and new ones appear out of thin air?” I gasp and shake my head in denial, fearing the words I know she’s about to say. “My given name is Vera Krukov,” she says, her Russian accent slipping through. “My father, Petrov Krukov, had no sons. I was his only heir, and after he was killed, my uncles shipped me to the States with a new identity. I was tasked with setting up our pipelines and commandeering new merchandise to sell. I was lucky enough to catch the eye of a general with access to ports, which is exactly what I needed.”

“You fucking bitch!” I yell.

“Manners, dear,” she chastises. “That’s no way to speak to your mother.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss. “You’re not my mother, you never were.”

She ignores me. “I found out you were digging around, trying to find out information about the missing women, and you stumbled upon the name Krukov and knew I had to intervene. It was easy to plant my niece as a decoy. I already had your work email so I had her reach out, and the rest is history. She messed up though, didn’t you Lace?” Lace shrinks into the leather seats. “She was supposed to lead you to us that day, but instead, she got into your car and let you drive in the opposite direction. Her father wasn’t too happy with her after that, and punishments were harsh.”

“I wanted to be free!” Lace cries.

Vera narrows her eyes. “You’ll never be free. We’ve already sold you. You’re no longer of any use to us.”

I’m going to enjoy killing this bitch.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Her eyes narrow. “We’re not going back to Norfolk, if that’s what you’re thinking. I know all about Rivers and his team destroying my headquarters there. Fortunately for me, they don’t know about the rest of them.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Listening devices,” she says nonchalantly. “After I realized your father found you and my merchandise started disappearing, I had to act.”

She doesn’t know what we’ve been doing in our spare time though. Thank God, Jaxson hasn’t told my dad.

“Why Vera?” I ask. “Why do all this?”

“Money, you stupid fool.” She stares dead in my eyes. “Money and power. Soon, I’ll return to Russia and take my rightful place as head of the family.”

“What are you going to do with us?”

“I’ve got an auction set up for tonight.”

Lace trembles beside me, and on autopilot, I wrap my arm around her. “My dad will

figure it out.”

“No, he won't,” she sing-songs. “I’ve been nothing but a loving, doting stepmother to you. I’ll be devastated when I arrive home from my weekend spa trip and find you’ve vanished again with Lace. It won’t be hard to plant the seed of doubt in his head that Lace is in the Krukov family. In fact, my men are already working on the paper trail.”

This bitch is delusional, but even I have to admit, her plan is just fucking crazy enough to work. I hope my distress call gets through.

CHAPTER 31

JAXSON

Ping.Ping. Ping

Lykos just came inside from running around in the yard. I pour his kibble into his food bowl and refill his water as my phone continues going off. I smile when I see Aurora’s name on the front of my screen, but my heart quits beating as I open my texts.

Aurora: Winchester

Aurora: Winchester

I switch to my Maps app and see that her location services have been activated. I watch the dot move further away from the base before my brain comes back online and starts functioning. Lykos must sense my change in mood because his head snaps up from his bowl, and his fur stands on end. I sprint toward the general’s office with Lykos on my heels. Laughter reaches me through the door, but it dies when I burst in and they see my expression.

“Rivers, what’s wrong?” Carver asks, rising to his feet.

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“Aurora. We have to roll out,” I order.

“Stop,” General Parks commands. “Rivers, what the fuck is going on?”

“Aurora sent an SOS, Sir,” I explain. “She sent me a text with the word Winchester.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” He paces around his desk. “She’s on the base. She’s safe here.”

“General, she turned on her location services,” I explain. “Aurora isn’t on the base anymore.”

“Fuck!” he yells as he opens his closet door and begins tossing guns and ammo at all of us. “Suit up.”

“Oorah!” we holler.

The general grabs his phone and keys off the entry table as we rush out and start piling into vehicles. Lykos jumps in the back of mine, along with Hudson.

“Son of a bitch,” General Parks mutters as we turn out of his driveway. “Aurora sent me a text an hour ago. Lace’s being released this morning. Hudson, call over to the hospital and find out if anyone knows anything.”

I glance in the rearview mirror, and Hudson’s expression mirrors mine.

“Dr. Sheppard, please,” Hudson says into his phone. “Hello, Dr. Sheppard, this is Ben

Hudson. Can you keep Lace a little longer? Something ca—" He pauses. "Yes... Of course... I see... Thank you..." He disconnects the call before punching the seat. "Shit!"

"Talk to me, Hudson," I say.

"Lace was discharged," he explains. "Aurora was with her, and they both got into an SUV. She isn't sure who picked them up."

I slam my fist into the steering wheel. "Fuck... Fuck... Fuck!"

"Enough!" General Parks roars. "Tell me what you're thinking."

My mind spins as questions assault me.

Is Lace behind all this? How does she tie in? There's no way she faked those injuries.

I hit a button on the steering wheel. "Call Bennett."

Bennett answers immediately, his voice emanating from the speakers. "Rivers?"

"Get me any information on Lace Krukov."

"The fuck you say?" Thomas growls.

"Lace was discharged from the hospital," I rush to explain. "Both she and Aurora got into an SUV and are missing. It's pretty coincidental that this chick happened to be the only one in that building the other night—the same chick who was with Aurora the night she was taken."

"I'll kill the bitch," Carver promises.

“Get in line,” I say.

“Aurora’s resourceful, man,” Carver says. “She killed the Senator and that Potts guy with no is?—”

“What. Did. You. Say?” General Parks enunciates each word.

“Why didn’t you tell me I was on speaker?” Carver screeches.

“Fucking idiot,” I mumble. “Bennett, get me that information.” I disconnect the call.

The general’s face is turning a deep shade of purple. “You better start talking now, Rivers.”

“Um... Well, Sir,” I begin. “When we started to train Aurora self-defense... Remember I mentioned that she was really good at knife throwing and deadly with a pistol?”

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“Go on.”

“Turns out, she was taking that knowledge and storing it, Sir.” I pause. “I got a phone call one night, asking for help. She sent an address, and we left to get her, having no idea what we were walking into. Aurora was in Richmond the night of the fundraiser dinner, the same one you and Vera were at. She stalked the senator and followed him to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town.”

“Why would she do that?”

“He bought her, Sir.”

General Parks stiffens. He sits without moving for several moments, and just as I’m about to ask if he’s okay, the general balls up his fist and starts pummeling the dashboard until his knuckles are bloody. “That goddamn son of a bitch!” he yells over and over with every punch he lands. Eventually, he tires out, although my dashboard needs replaced. “Carver said the Senator and Potts?”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it, General. Aurora has a kill list.”

“How many, Rivers?”

“Five total,” I admit. “She’s killed three.”

We sit in silence for ten minutes. I glance over at the general every few minutes to make sure he’s still with us and look back at Hudson who simply shrugs and pets Lykos as if we didn’t break Aurora’s trust.

“What I don’t understand is why she called you after she killed the senator. No one would’ve known her secret.”

“According to her, we never went over how to dispose of a dead body in our training,” I deadpan.

General Parks chuckles, and it turns into a full-blown belly laugh. “Sounds like my daughter.”

Since he’s laughing, I decide I might as well go all in. “The team decided it was in Aurora’s best interest for us to help, not only to keep her safe but also to make sure she didn’t get caught. We were already going after traffickers, so the punishment fits the crime,” I justify. “It was personal for Aurora; I couldn’t tell her no.”

“I wish she would’ve told me herself,” he says sadly. “I’d do anything for her, including hunting down the monsters who terrorized her. Obviously, you and your team feel the same.”

“I’m in love with your daughter,” I blurt.

Hudson cackles from the backseat. “Smooth, brother, smooth.”

I flip him off. “I mean, Aurora and I have been seeing each other... Wait... well...No, I love he?—”

General Parks places his hand on my shoulder. “You’re the reason my daughter has a smile on her face again and doesn’t jump at every noise she hears. You keep doing that, and you and I will never have an issue.”

“Roger that.”

Ring. Ring.

“Rivers, you were right,” Bennett announces when I answer.

I sit up straighter behind the wheel. “What did you find out?”

“Lace Krukov, daughter of Dmitri Krukov, next in line for the Bratva throne, so to speak. The night we killed Dmitri was her initiation ceremony into the Bratva. There’s even a marriage contract signed by Dmitri for her to marry Vladimir Pavlov next month.”

“Vladimir Pavlov?” I ask. “Isn’t he th?—”

“Largest arms dealer in Russia, yeah he is,” Bennett finishes.

“She fucking played us,” I growl.

“Something doesn’t seem right,” Thomas pipes in. “This information is a little too convenient, isn’t it?”

“How do you figure?” Hudson asks.

“We searched for these assholes for over six months with no leads on who Dmitri was or how to find him, and now all of a sudden, all this information is falling at our feet?” Thomas points out. “Doesn’t make sense.”

When he puts it that way, it really fucking doesn’t. Is someone setting Lace up to take the fall?

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“We’ll keep an open mind,” General Parks commands. “If it turns out Lace is the one behind all this, I have no qualms with Aurora killing her.”

“No shit,” Carver says shocked. “I thought you were gonna kill us when you found out she went with us to kill Dmitri and Oleg.”

General Parks’ head snaps in my direction.

“Dammit, Carver,” I bite out. “Keep your fucking mouth shut.”

“How was I supposed to know you didn’t tell him tha?—”

I hang up on him.

“Something you forgot to mention, Rivers?” General Parks asks, his brow cocked.

I spend another ten minutes giving the general the cliff notes version of how Aurora killed Dmitri while I killed Oleg. I only leave out one detail because I’m not about to explain ‘fire in the hole’.

My phone pings, and I glance at the screen to see the red dot hovering in one location. “I think they’ve finally stopped moving. They’re at the Port of Baltimore.” I forward the location to Bennett and hit the accelerator. We’re only fifteen miles behind them.

Turning into the docks, we park our vehicles out of sight behind some storage containers. Everyone makes sure their guns are loaded, and we grab extra magazines.

Carver straps his knives to his thigh with a scowl on his face. “Aurora doesn’t have her duffel bag.”

“Duffel bag?” General Parks asks, perplexed.

“It’s got all her goodies in it for her extracurricular activities,” Carver explains. I smack the back of his head. “Ouch, what was that for?”

Dumbass!

I raise my brow at him. “Carry extra.”

Carver grins. “We do have Lykos, I guess.” He scratches the top of Lykos head.

“We go in hot,” General Parks orders. “Shoot to kill. We take Lace alive since we still don’t know if this is a setup or not, and I won’t have the blood of an innocent girl on my hands.”

“Oorah,” we say in unison.

Slowly, we ease our way toward Aurora’s cell. There’s a dark blue SUV parked in front of a warehouse with two guards on the ground and one on the roof. They’re heavily armed and looking for threats.

“Bennett, take the guy on the roof,” I order. “As soon as Bennett makes the shot, Thomas and Carver, take out the two on the ground.”

“You want to make that much noise?” the general asks.

“I’m hoping if we cause enough of a distraction out here, Aurora can do some damage inside,” I admit.

“Is she really that good?” he asks hopefully.

“Better than you can imagine,” I say with pride.

“Then let’s give her a distraction.”

“Roger that.” I signal to Bennett to move forward.

Bennett’s shot rings out, echoing through the sky, and the man on the roof drops. The other two spin around, hunting for the source of the gunfire, only to meet their own death as Carver and Thomas fire at the same time, hitting each of them in the chest. Four more men run out the door and start shooting wildly. We return fire, ending the fight before it even begins.

“Lykos, guard,” I command. Lykos’ ears perk up, and he moves in front of us, taking a defensive position. “Track Aurora.”

Lykos whines briefly and sniffs the air. He takes off in a sprint for the entrance, and we chase after him. He barks and paws at the door until I open it, and he takes off again.

I hear Aurora yell, “Zwickel!”

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The command is followed by the familiar sounds of the Wolamute's jaws snapping and screams of someone in pain.

After walking in on Aurora killing the senator, I thought I'd seen it all, that there wasn't anything else that could possibly shock me. I was wrong. Lykos' jaw is clamped down on some guy's dick, and even though the guy is either passed out or dead, he has no intention of letting go. Lace is on a stage like the one from the other warehouse, chained down like an animal.

The main attraction is Aurora and Vera fighting in the middle of the room. Aurora sweeps her leg and knocks Vera down before jumping on top of her. Aurora rains blow after blow down on her face. Vera screams and yanks Aurora by her hair and rolls them over, gaining the upper hand.

Guess our distraction worked.

"Girl fight," Carver says gleefully.

"Why's she pissed at Vera?" Bennett asks. "What's she even doing here?"

"You Russian bitch," Aurora shouts as she dodges a punch. "My dad won't get a chance to end you because I'm going to fucking kill you."

"That's right, daughter. I fooled everyone. Vera Krukov doesn't exist anymore, only Vera Parks, loving mother and wife." Vera laughs maniacally and rakes her nails down Aurora's face. "Your dad is never gonna find out. My men probably already killed him and the others."

Aurora roars and bucks Vera off her. Both get to their feet, and Aurora charges, landing a kick to Vera's gut, causing her to double over. Aurora quickly brings her knee up, and the distinct sound of a bone breaking knocks us out of our trance.

"Lykos, heel!" I call. He drops his chew toy but doesn't listen. His hackles are still raised as he watches his owner still battling an enemy. The Wolamute barks and starts snapping at Vera.

Aurora doesn't need Lykos' help and yells, "Down." He backs off, but he stays alert, his teeth barred.

General Parks pushes between the two women, and before he can even speak, Vera cries and points at Aurora. "Victor, Aurora's gone insa?—"

General Parks aims his Springfield XDM at Vera and empties the clip into her body. The last bullet he puts between her eyes. "No one fucks with my daughter." He hangs his head and turns to face Aurora. "I'm so sorry, baby girl. I didn't know... I would've protected you. Please, forgive me."

Aurora throws herself into his arms and sobs. "It's okay, Daddy. It's okay."

"It's not, but I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you," he vows and kisses her cheek. "I think someone else is anxious to see you."

I spin her around and grip the back of her neck. I crash my mouth to hers in a searing, claiming kiss for everyone to see.

"Get a room!" Carver yells. "Told you I didn't want to see that shit anymore."

I break the kiss. "Can't leave you alone for five minutes."

“They started it,” she sasses.

I cock my brow. “And we get to clean it up?”

She winks. “I didn’t shoot anyone this time. That was all you!”

“Keys!” Thomas yells from the platform where Lace is chained.

Aurora leans over Vera’s dead body and digs in her pockets for the requested keys before tossing them to Thomas.

“Friend or foe?” Carver asks, pointing his gun at a shaking Lace. Thomas pushes her behind him.

Aurora places her hand on the barrel of his pistol and pushes down. “A little bit of both. This isn’t the time or the place, but she’s coming home with me.”

“You sure about that?” I cross my arms.

She stares into my eyes. “Do you trust me, Jaxson?”

“With every breath in my body.”

CHAPTER 32

AURORA

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:01 am

“Are you sure you want to stay here tonight?”

We dropped my dad and Lace off before heading to Jaxson’s apartment. My dad assured me that he would be fine with Lace alone, plus Lykos is there. I think he wanted the chance to question her about the Krukov family without an audience. I’ll get my answers from her tomorrow, but tonight, I want to be along with Jaxson.

“I’m sure,” I reply as he unlocks the door.

“Hungry?”

“I could eat. Pizza?”

He punches a few buttons on his cell. “It should be here in an hour.”

Suddenly feeling very shy, I move closer to the couch and sit on the edge. I had a whole big speech planned, but now my mouth is as dry as the Sahara Desert. I fidget with my fingers, trying to unjumble the mess inside my head. Jaxson sits beside me and places my hands in his, running his thumbs across the knuckles.

“I love you!”

So much for decorum, idiot. You probably scared him off.

Jaxson’s gray eyes darken as he stares into mine. Time stands still as I wait for a response from him. I don’t have to wait long. He pushes off the couch and picks me up. I wrap my legs around him, smashing my mouth to his. Our tongues duel as he

hauls me toward his bedroom.

He sets me down on the bed and cups my face. “I fucking love you.”

My heart soars at hearing him say the words. “Jaxson, I need you.”

To show him I’m ready to take our relationship to the next level, I pull my shirt over my head, revealing my black lace pushup bra, and slip out of my leggings, showing off my matching thong.

“Bed, now,” he commands, his voice strained.

Lying down on the bed, I feel his gaze boring into me. I raise my eyes and see a smoldering fire igniting within his stormy gray eyes. My breasts grow heavy with need, and my center tightens in anticipation.

Jaxson tugs his shirt over his head and removes his pants and boxer briefs. My mouth waters at the delicious sight before me.

How did I get so lucky?

Jaxson kisses my feet and works his way slowly up my body. His feather-light touches have me panting and squirming beneath him. He nibbles and sucks on my neck, forcing a moan to escape my lips.

“You’re in charge, Aurora,” he reminds me before taking my mouth. His kiss is demanding but gentle. It’s one that claims someone’s soul, tying us together.

He trails his fingers down the side of my breast, and I groan in protest when he doesn’t touch me where I need him to. He smirks and continues to toy with me, pulling down the cups of my bra to release them. Jaxson’s tongue swirls around my

nipple until it pebbles. He moves to the next one, giving it the same attention. I'm so lost in the sensation, I jerk when his finger brushes across my clit.

"Oh shit," I say.

That's the only warning I get before Jaxson goes wild. His mouth encircles around my nipple, sucking hard as he pumps two fingers inside of me. My back arches off the bed as he continues his onslaught. He curls one finger, hitting that ball of nerves deep inside, and I see stars. I scream and shatter around him.

He pulls his fingers free and brings them to his mouth, licking them clean. "Delicious."

Two can play at that game.

I flip him over, straddling his hips. I lean over and fuse my mouth to his, tasting myself on his tongue. I sit back on his waist and reach behind my back to unclasp my bra before tossing it to the floor. His hands cup my tits, and he kneads them while rolling my nipples between his forefingers and thumbs. I grind myself down on him, enticing a groan from his lips.

"Condom," I croak.

He reaches over into his nightstand and grabs one. I take it from him and rip the foil package open. I move down his legs, slipping off my thong, and pump his shaft several times before sliding the condom over him. I position myself over the head of his cock and rub myself with him. Jaxson's jaw is clenched as if he's in pain, but he makes no move to rush me.

I slowly sink down until I've taken every last inch of him. Jaxson is thick and long, so it takes me a minute to adjust to his size. I slowly rock my hips while Jaxson

squeezes my thighs. After a moment, the pressure starts to build again. I bounce up a little and back down, squeezing my Kegel muscles as I do.

“Fuck, Aurora,” he grits. “Again.”

I repeat the movement again and swirl my hips as I do. Jaxson grips my hips and pushes up, meeting my rhythm. “I’m so close,” I purr. He licks his thumb and rubs circles around my clit.

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My body starts to tense, and Jaxson must realize I'm close to coming because he speeds up his thrusts. He sits up, and I'm forced to wrap my arms and legs around him or fall off. He stands from the bed abruptly and moves across the room. He presses my back against the wall and looks deep into my eyes.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Perfect."

"Hold on."

That's the only warning I get before he slams into me. I throw my head back and scream in ecstasy as he hammers inside me. Jaxson maneuvers his hand between us and flicks my clit, and I spasm around his cock. He thrusts one final time, and his body shudders around me.

Jaxson carries me back to the bed and lays me down gently. "I'll be right back." He returns a moment later, condom gone and a washrag in his hand. He starts cleaning me up despite my protests.

He kisses me softly on the lips, but then a knock at his front door has him scrambling for his jeans. "Fuck, I forgot about the food."

I giggle as I watch him struggle to pull his pants up. He races out the door, and I grab his t-shirt off the floor and tug it over my head. I enter the living room as he shuts the door. My mouth waters as the smell of pizza hits me.

Jaxson grabs some paper plates and beers while I turn on the television. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I respond.

“Why the word Winchester?” he asks, curiously. “Does your dad own a lot of those guns or something?”

I laugh. “No. It’s from my favorite TV show.”

“A television show, seriously?”

“Yep,” I say, popping the p. “Supernatural.”

“Never seen it.”

I gasp and grab my chest. “I don’t think we can be together, Jaxson Rivers.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Dean Winchester is fucking hot, and Baby, his 1967 Chevy Impala...” I moan. “The things I would do to that man and car.”

Jaxson growls and tackles me to the couch, pizza forgotten. “I think I’m enough man for you, baby. As for the car, we’ll see about that.” He slips his finger into my core. “The only name I want to hear from your lips like that is mine.”

And it is... three more times.

CHAPTER 33

JAXSON

“I still can’t believe General Parks is okay with this,” Carver says, disbelieving.

Carver and I are putting the finishing touches on my surprise for Aurora. I add the bows while Carver secures the knots in the ribbons, and we step back to admire our handy work.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” I counter.

“I’m just saying, she could do better.”

I flip him off. “They should be here any minute.”

“Calm down,” he says. “Everything’s ready.”

I pace back and forth, rolling my shoulders to release the tension. My palms are sweaty, and my heart is beating so fast I swear it’s going to explode out of my chest.

Car doors slam, and Aurora’s laughter filters through the windows.

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“What are we doing here?” I hear her ask.

“You’ll see,” Bennett answers.

Bennett and Hudson were tasked with bringing Aurora here tonight, while Thomas stayed behind with General Parks to question Lace more about the Krukov family and the locations they have set up around the world. Those locations are being filtered to the FBI, CIA, and other agencies worldwide to recoup the victims we couldn’t recover.

The door flings open, and Aurora saunters through. Those mesmerizing emerald eyes search me out. She runs and jumps into my arms, fusing her mouth with mine. She grinds down on my dick, and we both moan.

Someone clears their throat, killing the moment. Aurora glares over her shoulder at Carver who holds up his hands. “Wasn’t me. Although I told you assholes to fucking quit doing that in front of me.”

“I have a surprise for you,” I whisper in her ear.

She shivers. “What kind of surprise?”

“Some men give their women chocolate and flowers,” I explain. “I prefer sacrifices.”

I place my hand in the middle of her back and lead her into the main room where Cal Jameson and Patrick Tyson are wrapped like birthday presents hanging from hooks. I put a bow on top of both of their heads, and Carver tied ribbons around both of their

middles. Cal and Patrick's eyes widened in surprise at seeing her. They protest through their gags, but no one steps forward to remove them. Their words are pointless.

Aurora doubles over laughing. "Omigod, this is the best," she wheezes. It takes her a few minutes to regain her composure. She wipes away a few tears that escaped. "This is the best gift ever."

"I'm not done yet." I wink.

She bounces on her feet and claps her hands. "Did someone bring my duffel bag?" she asks. "Damn, I would've brought Lykos if I thought he was going to get a chew toy."

"Next time," I promise.

Hudson hands her the duffel bag, and she takes out her favorite pistol.

Carver smirks. "I can't wait to see what she does this time."

Aurora aims and fires until her clip is empty. She drops her gun into her bag and zips it back up. "All done!"

We stare at her in shock.

"That's it?" Carver rants. "All that work, and you just shoot them?"

Aurora shrugs. "They're dead, aren't they?"

Carver kicks a rock like a child. "Wasn't what I was expecting."

She walks over and hugs him. “Next time, we’ll do something real exciting, I promise. Maybe something in the grenade family.”

Carver’s face lights up. “Hell, yeah!”

I haul her toward my chest. “No... No way. Absolutely not.”

She bats her eyelashes at me and sticks out her lower lip. “Please,” she begs.

Fuck me!

“Fine,” I give in.

“Yes!” Carver high-fives her.

“Let’s go,” Bennett calls. “More to see.”

We follow him and Hudson outside and around the back of the warehouse where I stashed her other present the day before.

Aurora crosses her arms and raises her brow. “What’s this?”

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I grip the tarp and yank it off, revealing a pristine 1967 Chevy Impala. Aurora gasps and covers her mouth. I drop to one knee and open up the tiny blue box holding a two-carat princess-cut diamond surrounded with emeralds that match her eyes.

“Aurora, you’re so fucking strong. I’m in awe of you every day. I want to wake up to your beautiful smiling face every morning and fall asleep to your smart, sexy ass every night. I love you more than anything in this world and would do anything for you. Will you marry me?”

Tears flow down her cheeks as I wait for her response. I swallow and hold my breath.

“Put him out of his misery,” Bennett hollers.

“I think he’s gonna pass out,” Hudson adds.

“Shut up, assholes,” Aurora sasses and drops to her knees in front of me. “A million times, yes.”

I wrap her in my arms and drag her into my lap. I slip the ring on her finger where it will stay for the rest of our lives.

“I fucking love you.” I crash my mouth to hers.

After a few passionate moments, we stand and brush ourselves off while everyone takes a moment to congratulate us.

Carver holds out his hand. “Congratulations, fucker. You hurt her, and I’ll kill you.”

“Ditto,” Hudson and Bennett say together.

“You realize that she could probably kill me before any of you get to me, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Carver whistles. “Good luck, man. Sleep with one eye open.”

Aurora elbows him in the gut, and he doubles over. “You better sleep with one eye open.”

He gives her puppy eyes. “But I’m your favorite brother.”

“You’re my most annoying brother.”

“I resent that!”

I drape my arm over her shoulder. “Ready to go home?”

“Keys, please,” she says excitedly.

I hand her the keys, and she rushes to the driver’s side. As she slides in behind the wheel, she yells, “Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Bennett asks, confused.

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I’m gonna have fun finding out.”

I climb in the passenger seat and hold on for dear life as Aurora cranks the engine and peels out.

There will never be a dull moment with her.

EPILOGUE

Aurora

“You look beautiful.” Willow dabs her eyes.

The last six months have been eventful, to say the least. First, we had to deal with Vera’s disappearance. Bennett made it appear as if Vera was unfaithful during her marriage to my father, and he doctored divorce papers and has Vera living with her lover in another country.

Next, we had to deal with Lace. Her situation was more complicated than any of us could even imagine, but it’s not my story to tell. I’ve forgiven her for the part she played in my abduction, and so has my father. I understand better than anyone the pain and suffering that she went through. The guys aren’t as forgiving as I am, though. They put up with her presence and are semi-friendly to her, but they don’t go out of their way to make her feel welcome. Thomas watches her closely as if it’s his personal mission to make sure she’s no longer a threat.

Today, I marry the man who brought me back from the edge of despair. Jaxson gave me the tools I needed to find the strength to fight back. He never let me give up and was there, encouraging me every step of the way.

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I touch up my lipstick. “Do you think Jaxson’ll like it?”

Willow helped me pick out a whimsical mermaid sweetheart neckline with an ivory tulle lace gown and a satin rose underlay. It accents my curves with the hip-hugging skirt. My hair is braided into a chignon twist with wisps outlining my face.

I didn’t know what to do with the tattoo on my neck. I overcame what it symbolized, but I didn’t want the reminder of what I went through. Jaxson suggested I cover it if it bothered me, even though he reminds me daily how strong I am. In the end, I decided to have it covered and use Lykos' pawprint since he is also a huge part of my recovery.

Willow chuckles. “We’ll be lucky if you make it through the ceremony without him tossing you over his shoulder like a caveman and running toward the nearest bedroom.”

Lykos is our ring bearer. We custom-ordered a tux for him, and Lace sewed a pillow to his jacket for the rings. He’s strutting around like he’s more important than the bride and groom at the moment. He bumps me with his nose, sensing my nerves, and I scratch his snout. “I’m okay,” I whisper.

The music begins, and there’s a knock on the door. Dad pokes his head in. “Ladies, it’s time.”

Willow is my maid of honor, and Lace is my bridesmaid. Jaxson has all of his men standing up with him, except Carver who wanted to officiate, so we’re an uneven wedding party, but none of that matters. Dad holds out his arm, and I loop mine

through it.

He kisses my cheek. “Your mother would be so proud of you. I love you, baby girl.”

“Love you, Daddy.” I take a deep breath as we walk toward my future husband.

I blink back tears as I recite my vows to Jaxson. Willow blows her nose loudly as Jaxson confesses his love for me.

“Do you promise to put up with all your sister’s brothers for the rest of your life?” Carver asks, and the groomsmen snicker.

Jaxson glares at him. “I do.”

“Do you promise to always love, honor, and cherish her, or risk the rest of us kicking your sorry ass?”

Jaxson’s face turns red. “Carver, I swear to God.” Carver raises his brow. “Yes, I fucking promise.”

“By the power bestowed upon me by the great state of Virginia, I pronounce you beauty and the beast!” Carver hollers. “Kiss her, asshole.”

Laughter erupts around us, but all I focus on is the storm brewing in Jaxson’s eyes. He wraps his arms around my waist and dips me, smashing his mouth to mine. I don’t know how long our mouths stay fused together, but someone threatens to hose us off so Jaxson sets me upright.

“I love you, Aurora.”

“I love you, until forever.”

National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888

Suicide Prevention (988 Lifeline) - 988