



Fierce Paxton (The Stiletto PI)

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Description: My name is Paxton Lee, an educated forty-two-year-old widow. But don't let my age fool you. I can give any twenty-five-year-old a run for her money. I have one weakness... stiletto heels.

The Red Reign PI Agency is my baby and I take pride in our successes. We're batting a 1000, but here's the rub. Lately, the most irritating Black Ops Commander, has been sticking his nose where it doesn't belong.

I was one of three women who completed Army Ranger Training and deployed with the 75th Ranger Regiment in Iraq. All modesty aside, I am one badass Ranger. You should see the fruit salad on my left breast. I spent 165 days under fire so, if you're wondering, I can measure 'GUNS' with the best of them and yet, this delusional man insists I need his protection.

It's time to set him straight.

My name is Jared Bates. I'm a divorced, forty-eight-year-old man in a thirty-year-old body that women salivate over. No boast. Well, maybe just a bit. If ya got it, flaunt it, is my credo, not that I pay much attention to that. Yeah, I've chased a lot of booty. Have had my fair share of it, too. Got lucky on many occasions. Then, there are the ones that have stayed just out of reach, like the boss of the Red Kitties agency. Now, she just triggers the devil inside me.

Anyway, I'm in charge of a covert Black Ops group called, The Cobras. We operate under our own flag and only take the jobs that fit our standards— legal and moral, even though the two aren't synonymous. Trying to bring down one of the five Mafia families in the U.S. is next to impossible. You cut off the head of one capo di tutti capi and two new ones grow back. These families have histories that go back to the sixteenth century. The Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Ndrangheta of Calabria and the Camorra of Naples. Ancient, all of them, with an almost inhuman ability to survive.

So, now the Kitties of the Red Reign PI Agency are nosing in on our territory and interfering. Things are getting dangerous, especially since that sassy Mrs. Lee refuses to back down.

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Chapter One

“Get your big-ass body off me, Commander Bates!” Paxton Lee hissed like a hognose snake. She struggled to breathe under the sheer weight of the black ops commander who had pressed her flat to the ground. Her anger sprouted from the Cobras arrival minutes after they started their surveillance.

In response to her expletive-laced outburst, he clamped a meaty paw over her mouth and growled into her ear, “Keep quiet or you’ll get us both killed.”

If she could’ve uttered a word, she would have succinctly informed him that she wasn’t an imbecile and knew exactly what she was doing— until he butted in. She was becoming exceedingly annoyed that he and his team continuously pitched up where they weren’t wanted or needed. This was the third surveillance job of the Red Reign PI team with which they had interfered.

“Fuck,” Jared Bates cursed and glowered at the squirming woman under him.

“For the love of god, woman, bite me again and you’ll reap the consequences,” he growled. To her, the sound of his voice snapped like the bark of a feral dog and yet, it had been hissed through barely moving lips.

Although Paxton couldn't see much in the darkness, she was transfixed by the fullness of his lips enough to wonder what they might feel like. That thought quickly metastasized into an almost uncontrollable urge. If that wasn’t bad enough, feeling his hard, muscled frame pressed against her only ramped up the voltage. Her now unhinged libido responded like a five-alarm fire with a white-hot flash of heat to her

loins.

An untimely response considering they were on a job to establish if the kidnapped daughter of Senator Wilson was being held in the house they were watching.

He shifted slightly. To her mortification, his hips settled snugly between her thighs. Paxton didn't appreciate being held down and silenced in such an intimate manner—however much unintended.

“Gahh!” She desperately tried to get a word out from behind his hand before she embarrassed herself.

“Behave. If you weren't where you shouldn't be, this wouldn't have been necessary.” He stilled her squirming body by pressing himself down harder. Her eyes widened when she felt a hard ridge pressing against her stomach.

That had better be your gun, you asshole!

She forced her body to remain still as a raw grunt escaped his lips. It seemed he was just as annoyed with his body's reaction as she was with hers.

Of course, the horny devil on her shoulder urged Paxton to throttle up her power to show the oaf she wasn't intimidated by his size and sexual allure.

Sexual allure? Where the devil did that come from?

The thought shook Paxton out of her carnal thoughts. She glanced at his face. He was holding her down with his body, his one hand pressed over her mouth while he gazed through a pair of night vision goggles. She relaxed and waited.

“Get ready, Cobras. We move in ten,” Jared barked through a headset as he lifted his

weight ever so slightly off her.

“Oomph!” He grunted at the unexpected twist of the shapely woman under him that resulted in her knee grazing his cock. He growled furiously as she rolled away into a crouching position.

“Keep your paws off me, Bates. My team is exactly where we’re supposed to be, so why don’t you just hit the road?” Paxton sneered under her breath.

“Not only do I outrank you, Miss Lee, I’m also here acting on official orders. You have no idea what you’ve stumbled onto. You and your kitties either play by my rules or piss off.”

“Kitties? Kick his fucking ass, Paxton!” The disembodied voice of Jordan Sutton, her best friend and second in command, spoke into her earpiece.

“No, squeeze the shit out of his nut sack, the fucking dick!” Kezlin Bates snapped, the newest member on Paxton’s team— and, ironically, who happened to be Jared’s younger sister. She was the only one who would dare speak like that about the commander.

“Heads up. There’s movement inside the gate,” Knox Clark, the lookout on the Red Reign Team, warned.

“Get down and shut the fuck up,” Jared barked as the voice of his lookout, Cruz Powers, warned of an approaching vehicle. Paxton and Jared hit the ground simultaneously and wouldn’t you know it, his mammoth body was on top of her again.

“I’m beginning to think you just can’t help yourself,” Paxton snapped irritably. “Get the fuck off me, Bates,” she ordered.

His warning grunt quieted her. Why he had the sudden need to protect her, Jared hadn't a clue. Every time there was a slight indication of danger, he acted instinctively.

Yeah, maybe that's it. Being aroused by her curvaceous silhouette was part of the male DNA but that didn't mean he intended to act on it.

"Be quiet," he snapped and cursed to himself as a raw seam of lust broke open in his voice.

Paxton was speechless for the first time in her life as she listened to the unchecked eroticism in his gruff tone. It didn't sit well with her to be struck mute. Not at all. She resented that he, of all people, was the one who stole her usual snarky remarks that were always at the ready.

Is he reading my playbook? Is that where all these carnal thoughts came from? Because of the dark tones in his voice?

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“Would the two of you like a room?”

“Maybe we should postpone this mission until you both figure out what the sexual score is you’ve got going on over there.”

The voices of Jordan and Brock Carter, Jared’s second in command, cackled over their earpieces.

“Shut up,” Paxton and Jared replied in unison, both highly annoyed that the sexual tension between them had been noticed by their respective teams.

“Silence! Down,” Jared ordered but didn’t move from the protective hunch over Paxton. He pushed the night vision goggles back over his eyes. “Tanner, report the body positions on the heat scanner. Can you identify if there’s a child in the house?”

“I detect four large bodies on the ground floor— sleeping from their positions. Based on the size of a fifth signal from the top floor, it’s definitely a small child,” Tanner’s hushed voice echoed in Jared’s ear.

“We’re not waiting for that warrant. There’s enough here for reasonable cause. Holding a child against his or her will is a crime. With the arrival of the three who just pitched up, their guard is down. We need to move now if we want to extract the little girl with the minimum amount of disturbance.”

“How the devil do you know about her?” Paxton snapped.

Jared didn’t respond. He was furious at Senator Wilson for tasking civilians in a case

that involved a criminal mob. Jared knew Paxton and her team were in danger. It was serendipitous that he had arrived in time to keep them from going in half-cocked to extract the girl.

“Alpha and Bravo teams, we move on my Go. Brock and Tanner, move left. Cruz you’re with me to the right. In, one, two... GO,” Jared ordered.

The next moment, Paxton felt the heat of his body disappear. She squinted to watch as they descended on the house.

“How the hell is it that they always pitch up at the last minute on our gigs?” she muttered. Her voice vibrated with anger. “Knox. Report.”

“They’re a bunch of assholes, but Christ, can they move like ghosts,” Knox said in awe. “Shit, they’re already bringing out cuffed people.”

“Really? They just moved two minutes ago,” Kezlin said. “Goddammit, we missed out on some action again,” she complained loudly.

“You know very well we aren’t here to extract, Kezlin, just to find and report,” Paxton said.

“Doesn’t mean I don’t yearn for some serious ass-kicking,” Kezlin lamented.

“You can come out now, kitties,” Cruz Powers called from the other side of the shrubs from where they were surveilling.

“I’m tired of hearing you call us kitties,” Knox growled in his ear.

“Impressive, kitten,” Cruz drawled, not having heard her approach from the side. “What, no quick riposte? You’re slipping, kitty,” he taunted. “Oh, no, you don’t,” he

said, catching the stiletto boot she aimed toward his crotch. He wiggled his eyebrows at her and with a yank, pulled the other foot from under her. She hit the ground with a loud grunt. “Next time you attack me, little kitten, I’ll take it as an invitation to fuck you. Don’t say you weren’t warned.”

“In your fucking dreams, asshole and even then I’ll tear your nut sack off with my bare hands and stuff it up your chauvinistic ass!” Knox responded angrily as she dusted herself off and stomped away with his rumbling laughter chasing after her.

“Enough, you two. This is a serious matter. Leave your personal shit for later,” Paxton snapped. The two of them had been at loggerheads from their first meeting three months ago. She tapped Cruz on his shoulder as she walked past him. “I’d swallow that laugh if I were you. She doesn’t make idle threats,”

The heels of her Jimmy Choo ankle boots clipped out every angry step in the direction of the house. Her target—the self-righteous commander ordering everyone around.

She regarded him through hooded eyes. Just looking at him caused her breathing to become labored. There was much to be said for a charismatic man she found herself struggling to ignore. Standing over six feet, he dwarfed her. His eyes narrowed as he watched her approach. His wide, sensual mouth relaxed as their eyes met. The tip of her tongue flicked over her lips as she visualized what it would feel like to be kissed by him. She shuddered at the thought of his strong arms, wrapped around her, holding her against his hard torso. The thought evoked a ripple of excitement inside her throbbing loins.

Good lord, Paxton! Focus!

His amused expression refreshed her ire as she stopped in front of him. No doubt he already knew how his hot body affected her. He probably had the pick of any amount

of booty he wanted.

“We need to talk, Bates.” The sharp edge to her voice cut through the air as she neared the Cobra team members gathered on the front porch of the mansion. The vellus hair on the nape of her neck bristled as she noticed the mocking gesture of his raised eyebrows along with the smug amusement that glinted in his eyes. He was about to learn she wasn’t a woman to be toyed with.

Dammit! Why do I only now notice his eyes are the color of honey?She blinked to hide her fascination with the different shades of gold enhanced by the porch light reflected in them. Warm and oh, so addictive— just like melted chocolate.Get a grip, Paxton. You’re pissed at him and it’s utterly inappropriate to be drowning in those mesmerizing orbs!

“If it’s about anything other than securing the perimeter, it’ll have to wait.” His eyes darkened as she pursed her lips. “The successful recovery of the little girl takes priority, Miss Lee. Cruz verified that some of the kidnappers we expected to be here, aren’t in the house. We need to stay vigilant.”

“How would you know who should be present?” She glanced at the impressive mansion. They’d acted immediately upon knowing that a six-year-old girl was inside and followed the transmitter hidden in her bracelet. Paxton had no idea who it belonged to but it made her wonder why someone, who was obviously wealthy, would kidnap a senator’s daughter.

Jared’s attention was drawn to Brock walking toward them with a little girl clinging to his neck, crying. He looked incapable of calming her down. He cast a distraught look at Jared who took the three risers of the staircase in one languid stretch.

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“Come here, little cherub,” he cooed. The little girl reacted immediately to his deep, soothing voice, all but lunging into his arms. “There now, you’re safe, Courtney. We’re taking you home.”

“To mommy and daddy?” she said in a teary voice.

“Yes. They’re waiting for you.” He moved her to his side and dug a handkerchief out of his pocket. “But we can’t let them see all these tears, now can we?”

Courtney shook her head as he gently dabbed her cheeks. She smiled tremulously at the man Paxton’s Red Reign team had been referring to as the big bad wolf.

Well, that frightening characterization just didn’t fit the ease he displayed with the little porcelain treasure. Paxton was confused at the stirring of emotions inside her as she watched this hulk of a man succumb to the innocent charms of a six-year-old. It was obvious he was smitten with the child. Neither did it fit the devil-may-care picture she had conjured of him over the past couple of months. It completely shattered that vision and replaced every thought and feeling she had about him.

She couldn’t help but reach out and brush the girl’s cheeks as Jared joined her.

“Hi, Courtney, I’m Paxton. You are such a brave little girl... oh!” she gasped as Courtney flung herself into her arms. She buried her face in Paxton’s hair with her arms wrapped in a stranglehold around her neck.

“You smell nice,” she said in a voice washed with sadness.

Jared studied Paxton as she looked at him. She didn't understand the feeling of loss mixed with warmth surging through her. It didn't make sense. She was already the mother of an eighteen-year-old daughter. Maybe it was just that—the loss of being needed paired with the childish passion Courtney displayed. Her only daughter, Lucy, was a free and precocious creature. She hadn't needed any emotional comfort from Paxton for years.

“Brock, keep the Red Reign team out of the house. I don't want this case to go sideways because of their presence, so make sure we act within the boundaries of the search warrant. Secure the perimeter. Detain every person of interest on the premises and take them in for questioning. Set up a covert surveillance team. Anyone new arrives, I want them detained and brought in.” Jared's piercing gaze silenced the objection about to burst from Paxton's lips at the audacity to take charge of her team. “Miss Lee and I will take the little girl home to her parents and join you at HQ later.”

He firmly grasped her elbow and guided her to a black Humvee. Usually, it wouldn't have stopped Paxton from ripping into him for manhandling her but since she was carrying a precious little bundle, she curbed the desire to act out.

“The next one referring to my team as kitties is going to regret it.” Her voice cut through the silence as Jared closed the door behind him.

He cast an amused look her way. Her eyes sparkled with anger as she noticed the broad smile illuminated by his white teeth.

“Zip it, commander. I find your holier-than-thou attitude and overwrought mannerisms offensive.”

Paxton clamped her mouth shut from further lambasting the annoying man as Courtney turned with wide eyes to watch them. She'd already been through an ordeal and didn't need to witness two grown-ups sniping at each other in a power struggle.

No, I'll save my wrath for when we're alone. Jared Bates has interfered for the last time with a Red Reign PI team assignment.

"You surprise me, Miss Lee."

"It's Mrs. Lee." Paxton winced at the petulant tone in her voice. She sounded like a sulking teenager for heaven's sake.

Jared glanced at her sharply. "You married?"

His eyes scanned her face in the ambient light from the instrument cluster. A vision appeared that had been fixed in his memory since the first time he'd come face to face with her. Drop-dead gorgeous and wicked-smart— attributes that were a natural aphrodisiac to Jared. Her forest-green eyes glinted under his scrutiny as she freed a banded tuft of hair from her dark, red mane. His enraptured gaze dropped to her full breasts that rose and fell with each breath. An errant pulse careened into his loins and jerked him out of the exquisite reverie.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to pry."

"No, it's fine. I'm a widow and prefer the title Mrs."

She shifted in her seat as he eased the Humvee into a bay marked, Bates. It was obvious she had no desire to elaborate. Jared compartmentalized her reaction for later.

They had dropped Courtney off and were now at the Cobra stronghold. Paxton had lived in San Francisco her entire life and owned a beach property on 25th Avenue in Sea Cliff but because she hadn't been paying attention, she had no idea where they were. She looked around. Apart from the parking bays there was nothing but shrubs and trees. "Where are we?"

“At Cobra Headquarters at Seal Rocks Beach,” he said as he cut the engine and turned to her. “I expected you to rip into me the moment we were alone,” he offered with a smile.

Paxton shot back a look of irritation.

“I have to admit, I was looking forward to a joust with you.”

“One thing you’ll soon learn about me, Bates, is that I’m anything but predictable.” For some unknown reason, Paxton couldn’t summon forth her earlier anger. Perhaps because she couldn’t get the picture of him being protective and caring out of her mind. “Your headquarters is a bush camp?” she quipped. “I don’t see a building of any kind.”

Jared chuckled. “It’s more of a fortress behind that privy hedge.” He shrugged. “And it’s where I live.”

Paxton raised her eyebrows. “Ah, so you’re one of those.”

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“One of whom?”

“Someone who can’t separate personal from professional. It’s an unhealthy lifestyle, Commander Bates.”

“Call me Jared.”

“I know what your name is,” she said as she opened the car door. “But since we’re never going to be friends, I’ll stick to the more formal, Commander Bates.”

He caught her arm and slowly drew her closer in a move that made her skin erupt with goosebumps.

“You can’t fool me, Mrs. Lee.”

“I’m stating a fact. Now, please let go.” Her ears pricked up at the sound of her own breathlessness. It was so unlike her. She bristled at the seductive brush of his thumb in the crease of her elbow.

“We might never be friends, Paxton, but one thing I can promise you.” He leaned closer until she could feel his warm breath caress her face. He took note of the tip of her tongue that gently painted a satin sheen upon her lips. The smile was no more than a twitch of his lips as he locked his gaze onto hers, paralyzing her mind with the wicked intent she read there. “You are going to submit to me. Soon.”

With those words, he pressed a lingering kiss on her mouth. She was still trying to wrap her mind around what he’d said when he was gone, leaving her to consider the

effects of their briefly shared intimacy.

He readily confused her by shapeshifting from the stern commander to a forceful alpha male. She was startled to find him suddenly appear out of nowhere, staring unsmiling at her as he opened the car door. He had never looked more intimidating and powerful as he did at that moment.

“Shall we?”

She blinked and swung her legs sideways, needing the moment to gather her frayed composure. It was a first for Paxton Lee; to be caught out, unaware, for the second time, by the same man in one night.

She avoided his eyes as she slid from the seat, slapping his hand away as he tried to assist her. If she’d known where to go, she’d have stomped off to prove to him how unaffected she was by his unwanted attention.

Yeah, right. Keep telling yourself that.

“This way.”

It annoyed the living daylights out of Paxton that Jared seemed unaffected by the kiss as she followed him down a pathway through the thicket. She objected to her own reaction as she locked onto the sight of the flexing musculature of his glutes. She had never been one to get wild-eyed over a chauvinistic brute like him, but somehow her libido didn’t agree, especially since he sparked it to life with a kiss.

Enough. This ends now. I’m acting like a schoolgirl with a crush on a teacher!

“Oh my, how beautiful.” Paxton said in awe as the double storied mansion, painted against the backdrop of the dark ocean, came into view. It was illuminated by

nautically themed path lights and downlight sconces all around the house. A Mediterranean vacation home on the western outskirts of the Bay Area. She wanted to see the garden in daylight since the little of it that was visible caught her breath. “Who would’ve thought there could be a house here?”

“I like my privacy which is why there’s no driveway to the house, apart from a secret entrance only my family is privy to.” Her eyes gleamed as she ascended the wide staircase that led to a patio. “The stronghold is this way,” he rasped in a thick voice upon the sight of her buttocks gently swaying to the rhythm of every step. His eyes roamed over her shapely legs and back up over her curvaceous hips and full breasts that strained against the blouse she wore.

“How you manage to run in those spikes is beyond me.”

“I could ask the same about you and your big hulk,” she mumbled irritably as she descended the stairs and planted her fists on her hips when he didn’t move. “Well? Are we gonna stand out here until dawn?”

She all but fainted when he tapped a finger against her lips. “You’re way too sassy for your own good, Mrs. Lee. It’s going to be a pleasure to make you beg.”

His words in the Humvee just before he’d kissed her suddenly registered for the first time. “You are going to submit to me.” She stood agape, finally realizing what the submissive inside her already knew. He’s a Dom! No-no-no-no!

He smiled broadly at her expression but didn’t stay to savor it as he led the way around the house through another thicketed path. Paxton forced herself to focus as she watched him key in a code to open a door behind a thick curtain of ivy.

“Impressive,” she said as she followed him down a flight of stairs, furious with herself for letting her guard down and not recognizing the Dom in him before now.

He had gotten an early jump on her. She was incensed by being caught out by someone who was vastly more tuned in than he led her to believe. He had long ago figured out that she was submissive.

Checkmate.

No shit, Sherlock! He'd glommed onto that fact long ago. It all clicked now. She realized as much when she recalled his actions and threats earlier.

Now, the submissive in her screamed for release to yield to the man, who, without a doubt, was all in one— a powerful Dom and black ops commander.

Chapter Two

“What the fuck do you know? You're nothing but a brainless meathead.”

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“Do you ever use a sentence without cursing?”

“You’re an asshole, Tanner Hogan.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“There’s no way in hell that’s ever gonna happen!”

“Wanna bet?”

“What the devil is going on here?” Jared’s voice boomed over the cacophony of voices bombarding them from the steel and glass operation center they just entered.

The six other figures stood silently and turned to look at them. None of them spoke up to explain their turbulent behavior. Paxton’s team made no secret of their annoyance with the Cobras. It was obvious. They were just like their leader—overloaded with testosterone and braggadocio. It was a dangerous mix of male ego and chemistry that got many killed in action.

“Well, I’ll have you know that—”

Kezlin swallowed her words at the piercing glance from Jared. It was well-known that she was a maverick but knew better than to try to one-up her older brother.

“I expect you to act like professionals. This bickering is going to stop right now. If you want to rip into each other, do it on your own time.” He glared at all six of them.

“I want an after-action report, Brock.”

The stern reproach in his voice had an immediate effect on everyone, which didn't come as a surprise to Paxton. The operation always came first and the commander of the Cobras never relaxed until he had confirmation that everything had gone according to plan.

“Marco Boneiro, the Don of the family and his eldest son, Luca, have disappeared. Someone must have tipped them off that the house had been hit. We have the two younger sons secured in the interrogation room. Apart from two soldiers who managed to escape, everyone who was on the premises is locked up under guard at Cobra House.”

“Cobra House?” Paxton looked at Jared. She was having difficulty wrapping her head around Brock's report. It seemed there was more at stake than she'd originally been told.

“We have a couple of secure locations across the city,” he said as he input a keystroke that transformed the massive flat screen monitor in front of him. The wall flickered to life as it lit up an array of several windows with various overhead views of the mansion they'd just raided. “It's very quiet there. Is our team still on site?”

“Yeah. They're in surveillance mode. We're hoping that those who escaped will return if they believe it's safe,” Cruz said as he slumped in the chair behind a massive, glass panel. He wiped a hand over the surface and the smooth desktop morphed into what looked like the cockpit of a spacecraft.

“Jesus!” Jordan gushed as she looked on transfixed by the impressive display. She glanced at Paxton with shining eyes. When it came to computer technology, Jordan was a geek.

“You’ve got to get me one of these!”

“Sure, hon. A done deal if our benefactors were the National Security Agency,” Paxton said, in a dry voice.

Jared, entertained by the brief exchange, didn’t take the bait. The days of subcontracting for any of the intelligence agencies were long gone. Getting a top security clearance was as rare as hen’s teeth. Very few people were able to withstand a thorough vetting to be allowed to operate at such a high level. Having influential contacts to pull strings to open locked doors was always useful. That the Cobras were even considered was a badge of honor. They offered their services where it was needed and only accepted jobs from the government that adhered to their moral code of conduct. The days they acted on command whether they agreed with what was required of them were over. Their fees weren’t cheap but with a hundred percent success rate, everyone who was anyone knew there were no negotiating terms. It was take it or leave it. Now, they were on President Anderson’s speed dial, attending to many covert ops under his orders, with the understanding that should they be caught, they would be on their own. So far, the operations had been for noble causes. Jared hadn’t needed to refuse any assignment. He trusted it would never come to that either. They had been working with the FBI and U.S. Treasury agents over the past five years to try and dismantle The Commission of the American Mafia. It had been an easy decision at the time to join forces with them since Jared had a personal reason to see Marco Boneiro locked up for good.

The Red Reign PI Agency had unknowingly stepped on part of their surveillance and stake outs over the past three months as some of their cases coincided with leads they had been following. Their presence at the Boneiro property came at the worst possible time and threatened the entire covert operation into the Boneiro family being exposed. Years of work potentially flushed down the drain.

Now, they would have to regroup and change tactics.

“How’s the little girl?” Brock might have been all butter fingers with Courtney after the raid but his concern for her welfare was genuine.

“Courtney is very happy to be back home. For a six-year-old she’s very resilient.” Paxton frowned. “I hope Senator Wilson and his wife take my advice and get her into therapy. It might only have been two days since she was kidnapped but it must have been harrowing to be locked in a room in a strange house filled with what she referred to as bullies.”

“Brock, Tanner, let’s go. It’s time to get those bastards to talk. I want Marco Boneiro.” Jared’s jaw turned rigid. “Kidnapping an innocent child isn’t the Mafia’s usual modus operandi, especially to blackmail a senator in changing his vote on the new rough diamond importation bill. I smell a rat.”

“Hold on. The Mafia? What do they have to do with Courtney’s kidnapping?” Paxton held up her hand as Jared glanced at her. “Don’t bother telling me it’s classified. Senator Wilson appointed us to track his daughter. The least you can do is tell us what hornet’s nest we stumbled into.”

The sound of her toe tapping impatiently drew his eyes to her small feet.

“For that matter, Commander Bates, just what were you doing there in the first place? It was our job but from Wilson’s reaction to seeing you when we dropped off his daughter, he seemed relieved to discover that you were there.” She frowned. “Now that I think about it, he didn’t seem surprised at all. Just what the fuck is going on?”

“Of course Wilson was relieved to see me. He knew of our involvement in a case that would place us on hand to immediately extract his daughter. You weren’t tasked with that; only to track where she was.” Jared looked at Cruz. “Make sure the recovery of Wilson’s daughter stays out of the media. If Boneiro doesn’t know his sons have fucked up, this might be our best chance at keeping our surveillance of him under

wraps.” He gestured toward a door at the front of the room. “There’s a kitchen through there with a stacked fridge. Help yourself to something to eat.”

“Where are you going?” Paxton blew up and stomped after him. “Jared Bates, get back here. I’m talking to— don’t you dare close that door. You creepy bastard!” She slammed her fist against the steel door sliding closed behind him. She spun around to pin Cruz with a piercing look.

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“Open it, Cruz.”

He cast a sideward glance at her. “No can do, Boss Kitty. I respond only to one commander and he’s not here.”

“Open the damn door. NOW!”

“You’re a scary woman, Mrs. Lee but I’ve been on the business end of Jared’s anger. I’d much rather face you than open that door.”

“The next time you call any of us kitty again, I’m going to split your tongue with my Karambit,” Knox growled in Cruz’s ear. “Got it?”

Cruz spun his chair around, forcing Knox to jump back. Her eyes spat fire. Cruz smiled as he looked her up and down.

“Ah, so you’re into knives. Care for some Show and Tell?”

“Get fucking stuffed, Powers.” Knox spun around and started toward the kitchen.

“I’m gonna put a dollar into a jar every time you curse and—”

Knox pivoted around. “And what? If you think I’m scared of your puny muscles, you’ve got a surprise coming.”

She snorted and with her nose in the air, continued to the kitchen. “And you can fucking starve. I’m not making you anything to eat.”

Paxton paced in front of the wall of monitors, glancing at it now and then, still irritated at Jared for walking out on her. She looked at Cruz who was running a facial recognition program through traffic, ATM, and public CCTV cams in search of Marco and Luca Boneiro.

“Who are you working for?”

Cruz peeked at her, noticing they were alone, since Jordan and Kezlin had joined Knox in the kitchen. She waved him away at the look crossing his face.

“I get the message. You’re not telling me.”

“What I can tell you is that we’re not here to humiliate you. Do you have any idea who Marco Boneiro is?”

“No. The only information we got from Senator Wilson was about the transmitter in Courtney’s bracelet. We followed its signal to that house. He made us believe it was only to secure and confirm her location and that he’d have an extraction team standing by. But from Jared’s reaction, it wasn’t you.” Paxton frowned as she searched her memory. The name Boneiro sounded familiar. “We always do an in-depth due diligence before we take a job. But because they were in such a state of duress...”

“I get it but believe me, if you had decided to breach that house alone, you could’ve been killed or worse, captured and sold as sex slaves.”

“With all due respect, Cruz, we’re not rookies. We know how to fight and protect ourselves. We don’t get captured.”

“Marco Boneiro is the Don of one of the five Mafia families in the US. He’s known for being brutal when dealing with anyone who opposes him— a quality that has been

inculcated in his soldiers.” Cruz smiled briefly. “Believe me, you wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Are you talking about the Boneiro crime family that has direct links to the SicilianLa Cosa Nostra?” Paxton had gone pale as she finally made the connection. She’d read about the barbarous acts and outright slaughter of enemies by the feared Mafia kingpin. It irked her that she hadn’t made the connection when his name came up.

“The one and only.”

“Did Senator Wilson know Boneiro was behind the kidnapping?”

“Look, Paxton, I’d rather you ask Jared these questions.”

“Did he, Cruz?”

“He did. He also knows we’re watching them.” He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Speak to Jared if you want to know more. He wouldn’t have brought all of you here if he hadn’t been concerned for your safety. Ask him. He’s not an unreasonable man.” Cruz smirked. “Well, not too much, anyway.”

“I’ve been trying to get him to talk since you interfered with our job.” Paxton sat down next to Cruz. “If there’s one character trait Bates has shown, it isn’t being reasonable.” She gestured to the monitors. “What’re you doing? How can I help?”

“It’s not my place to get you involved in this, Paxton.”

“We’re already involved. Senator Wilson put us in this situation and I’ll be damned if I become a target for some crime lord out for revenge.”

“Jared isn’t gonna like this.”

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“I’ll handle your commander. Are you looking for Marco and Luca Boneiro, the ones who escaped?”

“That’s what Jared is trying to establish.”

Paxton leaned forward to stare at the various images flashing on the different monitors. To the right, the photos of the two in question were prominently displayed. Marco portrayed the barbarian he was, whereas his eldest son, Luca, had movie star looks.

“From just his appearance, it’s hard to believe Luca Boneiro has a criminal background.”

“Which is exactly why it’s so easy for him to manipulate people. He changed his name twenty-three years ago to Drake Baxter when he officially joined the mob ranks as a young twenty-year-old soldier. He is now the underboss of the Boneiro Mafia group. We came across the information on the dark web. To the community, he’s a successful property developer who aims to make the world a greener environment. Baxter Eco Development LLC is global and worth billions. Not many people know he’s the feared Mafia Boss’ son.”

“All a front, of course. The company is also used for money laundering?”

Cruz glanced at her. “You’re a quick study.”

Paxton smiled indulgently. “It would be a mistake to underestimate the Red Reign women. Don’t let our stilettos fool you. We didn’t get to be one of the most sought-

after private investigation agencies on the West Coast because we're females. We kick ass because we're intelligent and competent."

"Maybe so but correct me if I'm wrong. There are only the four of you, right?"

"Because we deal in specialized cases that many agencies won't accept. Customers that require highly skilled operators who excel at thinking outside the box, uncovering information through surveilling, computer hacking, and other creative endeavors, call on us. We're not interested in chasing cheating spouses or runaways, except if there appears to be a twist. We accept cases where lives are in danger or could potentially end in disasters affecting many others. Our main function is surveillance, information gathering, tracing, and finding. Recovery in most cases is handled by relevant authorities."

"Very noble, Miss. Lee. Your own words define why you're not capable of standing up to Boneiro."

Paxton shot a glance over her shoulder as Jared's deep voice spoke from behind.

"Where did you come from?" She looked at the door he'd disappeared through earlier. It was in her line of vision but she didn't see him return.

"Just because I allowed you access into this stronghold, doesn't mean I'm going to divulge all of our secrets." He leaned against the wall as he studied her. "You completed your mission and returned Senator Wilson's daughter to him. It's over and this..." he nodded toward the monitors, "is not your concern."

"You and Senator Wilson made it my concern." Her voice was taut and edgy. She'd had it with his pretentious attitude. Her eyes widened as she watched him remove a pair of padded leather gloves. "You're torturing those men, aren't you?"

“I think I’m going to see if the kitties in the kitchen need help with those snacks.” Cruz subtly retreated and left Jared to deal with Paxton. It was a battle he would relish observing from a safe distance, having never seen a woman like her go toe-to-toe with Jared. It was just the prelude to a first round. It was all that he would witness before getting the nod to leave.

Jared waited until Cruz left before he responded. “We don’t torture. We extract information. We are bound by the Geneva Convention but there are times when enhanced methods are employed to obtain intel. We only cross that boundary where National Security is at stake.” He claimed Cruz’s empty chair and swiveled around to face Paxton.

“We’re not a PI agency. We deal with hardcore white-collar criminals and murderers. Giving them a pat on the back and asking nicely for information doesn’t work. This particular case is about more than a kidnapping, although, I have to admit, I’m impressed with how quickly you discovered their location.”

“Thank you, Commander,” she replied with a subtle nod. “I’m well aware of what it is you do. What I don’t understand is how you arrived just minutes after we did. Why don’t you share some intelligence? Who are you working for?”

Paxton never minced her words. Jared suppressed a smile as her folded arms displaced an amply endowed pair of breasts that swelled out of the triangular opening of her unbuttoned blouse. For a woman of petite stature, she was all business. There was nothing superfluous about her. Nothing was wasted. She was as mentally fit as she was physically. A complete athlete and as badass a species as ever there was. He appreciated that... more than he should.

He studied her intently to decide if he should follow his gut instinct. He was rarely wrong about people. His respect wasn’t a cheap commodity. It had to be earned. Due to the nature of the cases they undertook, he didn’t trust easily— and never with any

information revealing their operations. It was key to remaining invisible and staying alive. But then, there was the rare occasion when the rules could be bent. It was with Paxton Lee that he was willing to play the odds. He hoped his judgement wasn't going to come back to bite him in the ass.

That she didn't prod him further but instead waited patiently, counted heavily in her favor. She was a woman with unimpeachable credentials. That much he already knew from the thorough background check Cruz had done on her and the other members of the Red Reign PI group.

"Who we work for is not important. What is important is that your presence, tonight, compromised our mission. We've been on Marco Boneiro's tail for the past five years, waiting for him to slip up, giving us a solid, legal reason to apprehend and charge him with a crime severe enough to put him away. A man like him with all of his extensive political contacts, you only get one chance. We can't afford to slip up. If we don't have an airtight case, he and all his operatives are going to walk free."

Jared stretched out his legs and watched her flinch when his calves rubbed on either side of hers. The boss kitty was not as unaffected by his closeness as she'd like him to believe.

"It seems his eager youngest son, Stefano, fucked up by taking Courtney to the family home. It's a location that hasn't been on our radar since the property isn't registered to any of the entities the Boneiros are associated with. In their eagerness, they slipped up and we managed to trace them there."

He didn't divulge that they had stumbled across the Red Reign's assignment to find the Wilson girl due to the fact that they'd been keeping an eye on the senator, himself. She only needed to know enough to make her understand the danger she was in.

“Somehow, I get the impression you’re not happy with the outcome of what happened tonight.” Paxton did her best to keep her feet in place and not move them. Her skin tingled where their legs touched, sending a sizzling tremor all over her body. It hampered her concentration on what he was saying.

Why the devil is he affecting me like this? It’s not the first time I’ve been in his presence.

Maybe it’s because it’s the first time he’s going all Dom on you?

The echo of her inner debate did little to calm her nerves. Handling a forceful black ops commander was one thing and so far she’d held her ground. The Dom factor had caught her off guard, especially since the submissive inside her was drawn to him like a magnet on steroids. In all the years she’d been in a BDSM lifestyle, it was the first time a Dominant affected her like this. Her late husband had never achieved such a strong reaction.

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“Roping him in for a kidnapping isn’t what we’re after and since, according to one of the soldiers we captured, he’s been out of the country for the past two weeks, we can’t pin it on him.”

“How sure are you that they're telling the truth?”

“We’re not. Cruz will follow up on it. Besides, I’m not convinced that Marco Boneiro was even involved with the kidnapping. It’s not his style. If he wanted to force the senator to his will, he would’ve taken a more direct approach.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think his sons acted on their own— maybe to impress him with their innovative action to find a solution to a problem while he was away.”

“But it backfired when you were forced to intervene to extract Courtney.”

“Exactly.”

“And now Boneiro will know you’re onto him, which means he’s going to be extra cautious.” Her fingers thrummed out a repetitive beat of the thoughts locked in her head.

“He’ll know someone is on to them but not who. That’s not what I’m worried about.”

Paxton sucked in a heavy breath, not bothering to hide her frustration with him.

“Christ, Jared, do I have to drag everything out of you? Talking to you is like trying to reel in a god damn sailfish!”

“Hmm... I like the sound of my name on your lips, little kitten.”

There he goes again. Switching to Dom mode.

It didn't matter that she bristled indignantly; the struggle to not give in to the lure of his dulcet-toned voice that reached deep inside her to tease out the submissive, was overwhelming.

Not now, for heaven's sake! This is business. Life and death, even. Crawl back into your cage and stay the hell there... at least for now.

She quickly compartmentalized the battle inside her mind. However professional she was, she was nonetheless concerned about how she would react if she had to face Jared outside of the stronghold.

“I suggest you concentrate on the matter at hand. I'm not one of your bimbos who swoons when you flutter your eyes.”

Why the devil did I have to make him laugh?

The wail inside her came from watching him bark out a laugh. It rumbled from deep inside his chest to burst to the surface in a smooth, yet seductive melody that toggled her heartstrings. As if that wasn't enough, his entire appearance changed. He had that impetuous look and feel about him. So damn huggable. Paxton was hard pressed not to lunge forward and squeeze the crap out of him.

“It's the first time I've been accused of that.” Without missing a beat, he piled on the visual candy by recruiting the sub musculature groups of his chest wall, flexing first

the left side and then the right, effortlessly while watching her reaction the entire time. His extraordinary control sent paroxysms of lust stabbing into her throbbing loins. Paxton was clinging desperately to a quickly fraying thread of sanity. She clenched hard against the intrusion that began to pull her under. This motherfucker was tearing away at her armor. It was going to be death by a thousand cuts.

Pull yourself together, woman.

“It’s usually my pecs that have the ladies spreading their legs.”

Paxton couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

Jared made a pact with himself then and there to make her laugh more often. Her uninhibited cries of delight struck a chord of emotion inside him that had remained locked away for longer than he could remember. Her laughter had keyed open a feeling of happiness that had been lost for quite some time.

“Good lord, commander. I never pictured you as cheesy,” she said in a breathless chuckle. “How revealing. It’s written all over your face.” She cleared her throat and forced her mind back to the subject of her concern. “So? Are you going to tell me what you’re worried about?”

“You and your team.”

Her back went ramrod straight. “We can take care of ourselves.”

“I don’t dispute that— at least under normal circumstances, but you’ve never had to deal with the Mafia before, Paxton. Believe me, being on their radar is the last place you want to be.”

“You’re saying they’ll be coming after us? Why? Our intent was to trace Courtney to

that house, which we did. How are they to know we were involved?”

“They make it their business to know everything.” Jared ran a hand through his hair and exhaled slowly. “Part of our investigation into the Boneiro Mob is to find the moles and informants in the government, federal intelligence agencies and state and local police forces. These, and other players, such as powerful local, state, and federal politicians, judges, business contacts, double agents and those who are casual acquaintances like restaurateurs, casino owners and the rest of the demimonde are on their payroll. Many of these characters have double lives. Outwardly, they appear as legitimate business entrepreneurs but they all swim in the same toxic swamp. The mob cannot operate in a vacuum. Money and favors are the common denominator by which their loyalty is bought with bribes and kickbacks. Everyone has a price. It’s seen as business as usual. If someone becomes an obstacle to a business venture, they can just vanish. Jimmy Hoffa, who was head of the powerful Teamsters union, pissed someone off in the mob. His body was never found. Some think he was buried under tons of freeway concrete somewhere in Chicago.”

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“Are you saying Senator Wilson told someone about our involvement and that might be how Boneiro found out?”

His expression turned brooding. “Not necessarily, but people talk and we have no way of knowing how much Courtney’s nanny knows. House staff are soft targets for the Mafia.”

“So, that’s why you’ve been worming your way into our cases lately.” She frowned. “It doesn’t make sense. The other cases involved Capital Bank and the California Times News Agency, unless... you believe the Mafia has a stake in them.”

“Some of your cases coincided with leads we were following up and was part of our surveillance. That your team was there at the time was pure coincidence— in part at least.”

“Partly?”

“We’re good at what we do because we have very sophisticated equipment. We knew the moment you arrived at certain locations and had to intervene to ensure our case wasn’t compromised. We also had to keep you out of danger.

I see.” She studied his face for clues. “So, in a roundabout way, you pitched up every time to protect us.”

“That’s a fair assessment.”

“You do realize how insulting that is, Bates.” Paxton was vexed that she wasn’t

coming across as sounding assertive enough because the feminine pleasure at being protected also awakened a prickling sensation of being wanted. It was a foreign feeling since she hadn't surrendered to any emotional connection for the past ten years. Perhaps it was a sign that she was ready to change, to give in to the natural submissive inside her.

“That never was my intention but things escalated to the point where I had no other option.”

“In other words, you didn't trust us, so you decided to unilaterally step in and play the White Knight?”

“Your words, not mine.”

“Well, let me clue you in, Bates. We're all ex-military with multiple tours in shitholes. Ever heard the motto, *Sua Sponte*— of their own accord? How about this one— Rangers lead the way. I was one of three women who completed Ranger Training and deployed with the 75th Ranger Regiment in Iraq. Our role was direct action, Special Reconnaissance and Counter Terrorism. Look me up— oh, wait, you already did that, right? I'm jump-qualified and have the coveted Ranger Tab. I also have the Combat Action Badge with two stars.” She took a calming breath. “All of us have seen our fair share of action. I don't need to be saved by you or any other man. I'd measure up just fine with any of your swinging dicks.”

“Oh, I don't doubt that for a moment, Mrs. Lee. Be that as it may, you have never faced an enemy the likes of the American/Sicilian Mafia. They're at the top of the food chain as ambush predators. It's an art form with them. They've had five-hundred years to perfect it.” He held up his hand as she began to interject. “It's not up for debate. I'm not going to stand by and watch any of you die.”

He crossed a leg. The rhythmic tapping of a silent arpeggio on his thigh drew her

eyes downward.

Look up! Dammit Paxton. You're staring at the man's crotch! Look up!

"Don't wake the primal beast with those hungry emerald eyes, little kitten," he warned darkly. "Because once unleashed, he's going to devour every inch of you, whether you're ready or not."

"Is that a promise, Bates?"

He watched as she dipped her head to massage the pad of a thumb, back and forth, across the pulpy sheen of her upper lip.

"Well... is it?"

His breath collapsed inside his chest as her eyes locked onto his. He was impressed with her but she made a mistake— one that confirmed what he'd already known. She was unconsciously looking for a Dom capable of dominating the submissive inside her she'd kept locked away.

Well, Mrs. Lee, challenge accepted. You just woke the beast.

"No, little kitten... it's a fact."

Chapter Three

The doorbell chimes softly echoed through the house. Paxton ignored it as she swirled her hand to generate more bubbles in the warm bath. She sighed as it rang again. Whoever was on the other end was quickly becoming obnoxious..

"Someone's too dumb to get the message," she mumbled as she stripped out of the

black cargo pants and shirt, adamant to relax and allow the warm water to calm her mind. With one foot poised over the water, she glared toward the hallway at the uninterrupted ring sounding throughout the house. Whoever it was, was about to get an earful.

“Dammit! I’m coming,” she yelled as she wrapped a towel around her. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, I’m coming!” She marched down the hallway and descended the stairs like a woman possessed.

“Stop ringing the f.u.c.k.i.n.g. bell,” she snapped as she unlocked the door to yank it open. Immediately stunned at the image of the intruder, she slammed it on the big boot now wedged in the doorway.

“You’re not a very hospitable person, are you?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Paxton could hear the quiver in her voice. She was rooted to the spot as she stared at the last person she’d expected on her doorstep... especially at this time of night. Her mental acuity was nearing meltdown when her eyes brushed over the muscled physique. It was the first time she saw him attired in something other than combat gear.

And he looks good enough to eat!

The snug jeans hugged his muscled thighs like they were tailored to fit. She swallowed hard. Her eyes devoured the rippling muscles of his arms and chest straining against a white cotton shirt. The contrast to his tanned skin was striking. As usual he leaned lazily against the doorframe.

Once again in Jared Bates' presence, Paxton was speechless.

"You disappeared with your team so quickly we didn't have the opportunity to discuss the safety of you and your team."

"Because there's nothing to discuss." She glanced at the large clock against the wall in the double volume entrance hall. "Most certainly not at eleven o'clock at night."

"I disagree."

"Look, Bates, it's late. I'm tired and all I want to do is take a bath and go to bed." She took a step back and grabbed hold of the door. "You're welcome to come and see me at the office in the morning. I wish you goodnight."

With that she pushed the door closed. She failed again. This time, his muscled body was in the way as he stepped inside, forcing her to retreat as he closed the door behind him.

"I didn't invite you in and I want you to leave."

She kept retreating as he walked toward her.

“Not until I say what I came here for.”

“Leave, Jared Bates. Now!” She gasped as he lunged at her but she managed to avoid his grasping hands... only to feel the rush of cool air along her back. “You... you... give me back my towel!”

She was all hands as she attempted to cover her nakedness from his roaming eyes. The gleam in his gaze ridiculed her effort. With a backward shuffle into the lounge, she ducked behind a large wingback chair.

“Give me my towel!”

“Are you going to listen to me?”

The stubborn tilt of her chin was answer enough. Jared flung the towel over his shoulder with abandon and began to relish the predicament she found herself in.

“Do you ever stand up straight?” she muttered cantankerously. “I assure you my walls aren’t about to fall over.” She held out a hand as he sauntered closer and circled the chair in the opposite direction of his approach. “Stay away from me.”

“Surely you know this entire situation is a blatant challenge, kitten?” A smile flashed across his face. “And I promise you, I’m all for it.”

Paxton stamped her foot and planted her fists on her hips. “You’re a dickhead! I want you to... oh!” she gasped as his eyes dropped to her jiggling breasts. In her ire, she’d forgotten she was naked. She covered her breasts and crossed her legs in an attempt to preserve some modicum of modesty.

“Fine. Since you refuse to leave, I will. I’m going back upstairs to take my bath, which is most probably cold by now. Be gone by the time I return, Commander Bates!”

She pivoted on her heel, dragged in a deep breath, and marched out of the room. Her face flushed with heat but at the same time she reveled in the sound of a raw groan following each step, all too aware that she was blatantly flaunting her naked buttocks in his face. Her ears pricked as she heard the tread of his footsteps behind her. The damn man was following her!

Paxton took the stairs two at a time, aware of the pounding of his boots that were too close for comfort. She made it to the bathroom door with a feeling of victory.

“Oomph!” Her breath puffed from her lips as he was suddenly there, pressing her against the wall, his hardness unyielding and hot. Her entire body flashed over with goosebumps. “What are you doing?” She licked her lips as the warmth of his breath teased her temple.

“If you thought for one second I would say no to your sexy ass swaying in blatant invitation, you have a lot to learn about me.”

“You took my towel! There was no fucking invitation!” she managed to croak. She was inundated with an explosion of sensations that travelled through her frame from everywhere his body touched hers. It was an experience she had never felt before. One or two at a time, yes, but nothing like this. It was disorienting. “What... hmm... are you doing?”

Paxton trembled under the feathery touch of his palms brushing down her side and over her hip while he placed butterfly kisses along her shoulder. She had never known how powerful a tender touch could be.

“Experiencing the feel of you.”

His words sucked the air out of the room. She closed her eyes under his spell.

Good lord, can the man be any more desirable than right now?

She silently bemoaned her fate as her resistance gradually crumbled. With those words aiding the tender and reverent way in which he traced her curves, he reached that part of her she'd been yearning for a man to do since Rex's death. He infiltrated her soul with a promise of intimacy and understanding that surpassed any expectation she'd ever had.

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She shivered as his lips found the sweet spot behind her ear.

“Identifying your needs.”

Ah, shit, no fair!

His hands curved around her shoulders.

“Appreciating your strength.”

Too much. How the devil am I going to resist him?

“Admiring your will.”

“Oh, good lord,” she moaned as he nibbled on her ear.

“Cherishing your mind.”

Mind? What fucking mind? I’m a floating cadaver!

Every word he spoke in those euphonious tones was like melted chocolate to a sweet tooth. Decadent, so hot, and so damn delicious, it awakened a profound craving she was in awe of.

“Understanding your fears.”

“Stop... this is too—”

“And little kitten, soon I’ll be treasuring your submission.”

“How did you know... I mean... mmm,” she moaned as he sucked her earlobe into his warm mouth.

Paxton trembled at the opulent layer of proliferating desire that swathed itself around the nerve endings in her loins. She was rocked by the heat that pierced through her core.

“Come, kitten... it’s time for your bath.”

She was too caught up in his spell to defy him.

“What are you... hey!” she sputtered as he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. He flashed a white toothy smile at her.

“We need to work on your vocabulary, Mrs. Lee. I’m not a fan of, “what are you” questions.”

“Y-you’re not?” she said lamely as he placed her on her feet beside the tub and tested the water. It didn’t even register that she had become docile and lost the earlier fire with which she’d spat at him.

“Still warm.” His voice dropped an octave lower as his gaze circumnavigated the topography of her naked feminine landscape. Paxton had never felt as desirable and wanted as she did watching the heat flare in his gaze. All thought of modesty had fled from her mind the moment he’d pressed his body against her in the hallway.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Paxton.” His voice echoed with raw lust as he took her hand. “In you go.”

He waited until she sat down in the tub filled with jasmine scented bubbles before he opened the hot water tap. She watched silently as she slid lower against the back of the tub. The intimacy of this point in time wasn't lost on her. It was moments like these that she'd been yearning for since her husband, Rex, had been killed in combat deployment in Afghanistan ten years ago. Not because the men she'd started to date over the past five years hadn't been romantic but she had chosen not to allow feelings of emotional intimacy to develop.

The way Jared looked at her shattered any attempt at keeping him at bay before she even thought of trying.

Good lord, this isn't good, Paxton. He's getting inside your mind and that's a big taboo. Get your head out of the clouds!

"Thanks, that'll do." She sat upright and reached for the large loofah at the edge of the tub as he cut off the stream of water. "If you insist on talking, please wait for me downstairs. Get something to drink. I won't be long." She held her body stiff and avoided his eyes, aware that her voice sounded sharp. She needed to regain her composure but with his towering, and oh so temptingly delicious body shrinking the bathroom, she'd never achieve such a feat.

A plume of her breath billowed out against his cheek as he leaned forward for the liquid soap.

"You need to relax. Rushing through a luxurious bath just to talk to me is counterproductive."

"What are you—" The frown he cast at her cut short the question. The same one she'd already asked too many times to count!

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Damn Paxton, no wonder the man questions your vocabulary.

“I see no reason why we can’t do both simultaneously.”

Paxton was struck mute by the mellifluous tone that flowed through the room to soothe her frazzled mind. First the sound and now the tactile sensations overwhelmed her as he began to massage the soapy foam into her arm.

Paxton peered at him from beneath the sooty fan of her eyelashes as his silent exhale filtered through the room— a clear signal of the deliberate effort he was making to remain untouched. If not for the sound of that single breath dissolving into the steaming haze curling upward from the warm water, she might have thought she’d imagined it since his expression remained impassive.

The firm, soothing circular motions with which he massaged her arms from palm to shoulder soon eased the tension from her muscles. She closed her eyes and gave over to his touch. It was easier to fight his presence in darkness than watching his biceps ripple as he worked the tautness from her body. If she was honest with herself, it was more to hide the effect his concern had on her. She cherished the feeling of warmth it evoked inside her chest. It was the first time in years that a man managed to elicit a reaction from her with his closeness; to melt the iciness around her heart. Jared Bates made her yearn for an emotional connection she couldn’t afford to give into.

Rex had taught her that she had a natural desire to submit to a strong Dom. With him she had the freedom to relax and not feel the need to make decisions. She had given her unconditional trust to him as her Dom long before they got married. Her heart ached in memory of how tenderly he took care of her... how the thought of him

flogging her excited her. Pleasure with pain... he'd known it was her Achilles heel... and knew how to offer her the domination she needed to fully embrace the woman she was inside.

“Oh! You can't... what are you doing?” Paxton's eyes popped open under the scorching intensity of his gaze that had darkened to the color of topaz.

“I believe in cleanliness... all over.” Like a maestro communicating pianissimo to a student, Jared caressed the rounded contours of her milky-white breasts, then tugged gently at the pink nipples to massage their tautness. “Of course, being cleansed means to be rinsed as well.” She shuddered when he sucked a nub between his lips and snacked upon it with delicate flicks of his tongue.

“Oh god, that feels so... mmm,” she moaned as his touch rippled her equivoise, sending flashes of heat to bloom through her core. With a staggered breath she succumbed to the brush of his fingers trailing over her stomach.

He nibbled on the succulent delicacies, trailing kisses upon the slope of her swollen breasts to assuage his ravenous lust. He savored the song of her melodious cries that stirred the lusty beast inside him.

She was soaring on a tumultuous wave that had too quickly become the epitome of desire she was struggling to contain. Paxton couldn't recall that she'd ever lusted for a man to possess her with as much fervor as she did at this moment.

How is it possible that he has the ability to unleash such carnal lust inside me? I hardly know the man!

She tried to listen to the reasons flashing through her mind why she should tell him to stop but they quickly dissolved when a raw groan crawling from his chest swept over her. She reached up to trace the ropey cords of his shoulders. Her desperate moan

followed the sharp nip of his teeth around a nipple that sparked an unexpected wave of heat to flush her loins.

“Jared, you can’t... not now. What am I saying? Stop . . . oh!”

Paxton felt Jared’s hand explored further down her stomach to roam the heart-shaped space between her thighs. She was past resistance. His mouth controlled her, stoking the ache deep inside. She was faltering and he knew it.

Oh, my god!

She all but swooned as his hands fueled the inferno inside her. She reveled in the feel of his skin under her hands as she explored his chest and back. She breathed in his smell— all delicious male. It homed in on her libido and turned her inside out. She tilted her head for a taste with a lingering kiss against his shoulder. Pleasure fluttered inside her as his hoarse groan encapsulated her mind.

She ground her hips against his teasing hand. It was impossible to keep still. Her body reacted in a way she’d never known it could. Her pussy throbbed with greedy spasms that turned her breath to gasps.

“Yes, little one... relax and let me take care of you,” he praised her uncontrolled response.

Jared brushed his finger over her clit— a butterfly caress that enticed a hiss from her lips.

More! I want more!

She bit her lips to keep from shouting out the demand. She was still desperately trying to hold onto the last of her resistance.

They were moving too fast. Not too long ago they were still at loggerheads and now, here she was... gasping for breath and dying for his touch.

Paxton was melting from the way he savaged her mouth and the caress of his probing fingers.

“Aah... Jared,” she moaned into his mouth as he brushed his finger over her swollen labia.

“I love how responsive you are, little one.”

Her pussy clenched against the intrusion. Her breath stalled in her throat as he teased open the silky folds to explore her clitoris with the lightest of caresses.

“Yesss...” Her moan meshed with his growl in a melody of desire as his finger inched deeper. Her body throbbed in unison with his sliding finger inside her, electrifying her as he explored the heat within.

She'd never felt so alive.

“Jared, don't...”

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“Don’t what?” His voice deepened, a demand in itself not to be denied.

“Stop. Don’t stop.” She surprised him with a husky, yet demanding whisper.

All thought evaporated from her mind as he drew back to stare at her, searching and measuring her arousal. Even with him on his knees beside the tub, she felt dwarfed by this massive man— and intimidated. Hugely so. It was more than his size; it was the way he bore himself with calm self-possession. He oozed confidence and as always in his presence, she became aware of the underlying danger he exuded.

How the devil didn’t I realize he was a Dominant earlier.

It was all there. In every movement, every look and in the silent power that assailed her when she experienced his essence that cocooned her... every time.

Without me realizing it! What the hell? Is this man a magician?

“Au contraire, Mrs. Lee... I believe you are quite clean.” His wicked smile sent a fresh wave of heat rushing into her loins. His voice lowered as he leaned closer, holding her eyes captive. “When the time is right, my little dove, I won’t stop... even if you beg me to.”

Paxton was enthralled by the sudden roughness in his tone. His arousal was apparent in the flexing of his muscled frame. He might be denying her at this moment but it soothed her mind that he was just as filled with lust as she was.

She clamped her lips together to keep back the words threatening to tumble out.

She'd be damned if she begged him to have sex with her. It was unsettling that he was the one who used common sense and slammed on the brakes on a potentially disastrous alliance.

"I... ahem... you're right." She sat upright and pushed him back in one move. She buried her face in the loofah. Her voice croaked from behind it, "I'd like to get out, now. Please wait for me downstairs. I won't be long."

"Of course." He brushed a feathery kiss against her temple. His voice darkened. "I'll go, but only because I need to get my lust under control."

The loofah fell from her hands but he was already walking out of the door. A silly smile curved her lips. It was enlightening how powerful it made her feel to hear such a forceful man admit he was as intoxicated by her as she was him.

"Get a grip, Paxton. You're looking for trouble with a man like Jared Bates."

Sex with him would be explosive, yes, but there was no doubt in her mind that it would destroy her ability to keep her heart intact. He was more than gorgeous. He was beautiful, inside, and out—the kind of man who could easily fill the emptiness inside her heart.

She would always remember her love for Rex. He would be in her heart until the end of time, but over the years since his death it had become difficult to remember what those feelings felt like.

Besides... she was lonely.

She pressed her thighs together, suddenly desperate to keep her sexual excitement contained. Never had she felt such a charged chemical attraction and impetuous passion for any other man.

It was frightening, but it excited the hell out of her.

Chapter Four

“Your suggestion is ludicrous, Commander. I refuse to allow one man to chase me out of my home and left on the run.”

Paxton was exasperated. The carelessly tossed mugs on the counter to show her displeasure were negated as she measured out a precise amount of cocoa into the frothy milk. Her hot chocolate was legendary and a favorite amongst friends and family. Her team referred to it as the holy trinity when she made it at their offices in Oyster Point.

Jared was enamored by the sway of her ample breasts as she shaved dark chocolate against a grater. To say she was piqued was an understatement.

“Besides, we already have another job lined up. And let me just say I’d rather slit my wrists than renege on a commitment I made to my client.”

“You and your team will be on the Boneiro Mob’s radar, Paxton. Believe me, you need to lie low.” He hesitated as he shot her a piercing look. “Or is it more important to make money than keeping your friends safe?”

She turned on him with eyes flashing and breasts heaving, causing a surge of hot blood to push into the bulbous head of his cock.

At the age of forty-eight, it was invigorating to feel the sudden spike of testosterone energize his loins. He felt like a priapic eighteen-year-old.

“Don't you dare insult me, Bates. Money doesn't mean shit compared to their lives. I value my friends and would go to the stake to protect them. I'm insulted you think

that little of me.”

Jared was surprised as much as he was delighted to notice the flash of disappointment in the depth of her eyes.

“That was not my intention. I apologize for the poor choice of words.” He pushed away from the counter to move closer. Paxton backed off and jutted her chin out to glare at him. Her willingness to close quarters with an opponent drew him to her like a moth to a flame.

The gentle brush of his fingers against her chin surprised and at once, unsettled her. Here she was, expecting him to browbeat her until he did the exact opposite.

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“You misunderstand me. It’s never my intention to insult you but rather provoke critical thought. One way or another, you need to understand the danger you’re in, including your team. Boneiro is going to be on the back foot, especially if his son’s fuckup becomes known to the other Commission leaders. As a full-blooded Sicilian, he’ll want vengeance for losing face.”

“Yes, by the actions of his own sons. It certainly wasn’t my doing.”

“He won’t see it that way. Believe me, he’ll be out for blood to redeem himself with The Commission. We live in the shadows, Paxton. They won’t find us or know we were involved but you and your team are a different story and so too, are his sons. He’ll make sure those idiots pay for their stupidity.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Paxton was visibly rattled. “He might be a cruel mobster but I can’t believe for one moment he’s that barbaric to kill his own flesh and blood to save his skin.”

“You’d be wrong.”

Paxton was startled. She studied the brooding expression on Jared’s face. It wasn’t the first time since they’d met that she had the feeling he was hiding something behind a suave exterior.

She suspected the complexity that made up the man was a consequence of pain, hardship, and betrayal. She deduced that he was tangled up with the Boneiro Mafia in more ways than he was willing to admit.

And I'm going to find out how.

"Meaning?" she pressed him when he didn't elaborate on the abrupt response.

"Meaning that Marco Boneiro is a sociopath, Paxton. The only person who matters is himself. He wouldn't hesitate to eliminate anyone who endangered his place in the crime world."

"You seem to know him well. I still find it hard to believe he would murder his own children."

"Believe it when I tell you."

"You're serious!" Paxton had seen enough in the tours she did in Afghanistan where honor killings were a cultural phenomenon. She'd always understood it for what it was—familicide. Generally in communities both men and women committed it. As a result, both genders were victims of honor killings. Not surprisingly there were different standards for the two. The U.S., however, didn't recognize honor killings as a form of domestic violence, which predominantly occurred in Muslim culture. The idea of a parent killing his own child was biblical and abhorrent and went beyond any of Paxton's beliefs.

"I googled Boneiro when I got home. It mentions his three sons and a daughter, who, I believe, is married and lives in Greece."

"It happened at a time when he was conspiring to become a made man in the ranks of the Mafia, thirty-five years ago. Long before he became one of the most feared mobsters on U.S. soil."

"A made man?"

Jared's expression turned dark. There appeared a faraway look in his eyes giving her the impression that he had drifted off somewhere. From the dark expression on his face, it wasn't pleasant thoughts milling through his mind.

"It's what they call someone who is a fully initiated member of the American Mafia. For that to happen he has to be Italian or of Italian descent and sponsored by another 'made man' or by one of the five leaders. Then, the person to be inducted has to take the oath of omertà, the mafia's code of silence." He blinked as he glanced at her. "It's the only way to hold the rank of soldier in the Mafia hierarchy. For Boneiro it was a no-brainer. He wanted the exalted title as one of The Commission heads from early on."

"Good lord, it sounds like politics-as-usual. I've heard of The Commission before."

"The governing body of the American Mafia. The only way to ever rise through the ranks of the Mob from soldier to caporegime, consigliere, underboss, and boss, is to become a 'made man'."

"And to achieve that, Boneiro had to do what? Pay a price for entry?"

"Boneiro had a love child with his high school sweetheart when he was eighteen. At the time, he was a petty criminal on the streets of Los Angeles. This is how he was noticed and eventually recruited by the mobster, Paul Castellano. He blossomed under his tutelage. But his ambition didn't end there. Greed to have the same power as the leader of the Castellano family turned him into a traitor. He sided with John Gotti in an assassination attempt on Castellano three years later in the hope he'd be made a caporegime. That didn't happen until years later and only after he became a 'made man'."

"Years after, meaning?"

“Ten years.”

“This love child... I assume it's not his eldest son, Luca?”

“No.” Jared picked up the spoon and stirred the bubbling chocolate mixture on the stove. “Luca was born five years after the first.”

“To a different mother?”

The spoon thrummed against the copper pot as he whipped the hot chocolate faster. What she'd thought to be a touch of OCD was in fact growing agitation.

“No. Marco married his high school sweetheart while she was pregnant. They're still married, for that matter.”

“I assume it's the love child who is dead?”

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“He was thirteen when he died. He grew up in a home where being a Mafioso was a way of life but he hated it. He opposed his father and rebelled against his strict rules. He was whipped every day from when he was eight years old for being unyielding. He refused to become a junior street crime leader for the mob. So much so, he ratted their crimes out to the police more than once. It resulted in Gotti getting locked up for the murder of a senator who refused to be bribed and threatened to expose them for money laundering. His son witnessed the killing and saw it as an opportunity to force Marco to walk away from the mob. It backfired. Marco was furious. It destroyed his hopes for one day sitting on The Commission. He tried to force his son to retract his statement during the court case. When he refused, he took him out to sea and dumped him overboard in the shark infested area of Maui County, Hawaii. Since he was the star witness of the state, the case against Gotti was dropped. As a token of his appreciation, Gotti personally sponsored Boneiro as a ‘made man’ and appointed him caporegime of the Bay Area.” Jared calmly poured the hot chocolate into the mugs and watched with a closed expression as Paxton added a swirl of thick cream and a sprinkle of chocolate dust on top.

“His son was never seen again.”

“I can’t believe a father could be that cruel.” Her voice cracked with shock. A shudder rocked her at the thought of being thrown into shark-infested waters.

Her daughter, Lucy, was a rebel and there were days during her teenage years that Paxton had felt like strangling her but she could never hurt her. In fact, she had never received a hiding in her life.

“How do you know the story so well? I couldn’t find anything on the web.”

“We’ve been chasing Boneiro for years. He might have been able to destroy all the evidence that existed of his first born but then, there’s the dark web— a source of a lot of information. Cruz knows where to look.”

Jared took a first sip of the hot chocolate. An appreciative groan crawled from his throat. “Delicious.”

“Thank you.” Paxton retrieved a bright red tin from the cupboard and removed the lid. “Almond biscotti?” she offered as she bit into one.

“Home-made?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “I don’t cook much because it’s no fun making a meal for one but I love to bake.”

Jared savored a piece of the biscuit as he looked at her thoughtfully. “Where’s your daughter?”

“How did you... never mind. I forgot Cruz dug up everything about us.” She paused to sip her hot chocolate. “Lucy is a freshman at Harvard. She lives on campus.” She smiled sadly. “I haven’t seen her in seven months and I miss her like crazy. She’s involved in several extracurricular activities that keep her on campus. She loves every minute of it.”

“Sounds very self-motivated. What’s she studying?”

“Neurobiology. She’d always been fascinated by the nervous system. I am so proud of her for getting a scholarship to attend Harvard. It was a promise she made to her father— to study hard and be the best she could be. When she was accepted, it was the happiest day of her life— the culmination of a promise she never forgot— even though he’d been dead ten years.”

She offered him a slight smile. “But I can’t help but worry. There’s more violence in the world today, people acting badly and... I don’t doubt for a minute what you say is true. If Boneiro finds out about the Red Reign Agency, he could ultimately trace her whereabouts.”

“I have twin sons at Harvard. I’ll ask them to keep an eye out for her while putting a discreet security detail on her. Don’t worry, little one, I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“I can’t expect you to but I’d be a fool to say no. Lucy’s safety is of the utmost importance to me.” She sighed heavily. It was useless to keep fighting him. As much as she needed her daughter to be safe, she cared too much for the three women on her team not to have the same for them. “Very well, Commander. I take your point.” She crossed her arms and stared at him. “I’m listening. Exactly what do you propose to keep my team safe?”

Jared surprised her once again. There was no outward display of an ego being inflated by her concession. He seemed to have the patience of a saint which irked Paxton— a thing from which she, herself, suffered a paucity of.

She pursed her lips together at the revelatory spark in his eyes.

I’m on to you, Commander.

Paxton wasn’t a novice when it came to the games Doms played. She was tuned in to his attempts to lure her into the web he was weaving around her. He might push every button of her starved body but he’d learn quickly enough that she wasn’t ready to surrender and let him have his way with her.

Yeah... keep telling yourself that.

Shut up!

A warm flush bloomed across her cheeks at the taunting words in her mind. She stepped back to ratchet down the speed at which she usually acted.

Something told her that Jared was worth the wait. It had been a long time since she'd embraced the excitement of being chased and aroused. Rex had always kept their relationship fresh and exciting. Maybe that was why she couldn't bring herself to move on and find another man.

Until he appeared... the gentle riddle of a man who wore the title of black ops commander.

I might play hard to get now, Jared Bates, but mark my words. The day I allow you to catch me is when your days as an available Dom are over. I have no intention of sharing you... ever.

Now that's more like it, girl!

"Pack a bag and phone your team to do the same. I'll tell Brock to pick them up. We'll discuss it at the FBI safehouse in Park Merced once everyone is there." He held up a hand as she opened her mouth to protest. "We need to get you out of sight before they find out who you are. Make up your mind, Paxton. Either you're committed to us protecting you or you're not."

Feeling like a schoolgirl being admonished by a headmaster, she about-faced and marched off to pack.

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Paxton Lee knew when to retreat... for now at least. But if he thought that gave him the key to controlling her, he was in for a shock.

Chapter Five

“I want to know what’s going on, Luca. Find your brothers. My nose tells me something’s rotten. I’m not setting foot in San Francisco until I know what’s going on.”

Marco Boneiro paced behind a copper clad bay window of a beach mansion in Bonthe, a coastal town located on Sherbro Island in the southern Province of Sierra Leone. It bordered the Sherbro River estuary, a hidden refuge tucked away from prying eyes.

“I’ll make the call in the study,” Luca’s voice cracked with irritation. He was sick and tired of covering for his idiot brothers.

Marco waved him off as he followed the slow passage of a fishing trawler in the distance. Sierra Leone was one of his favorite indulgences. Here, he could relax without the constant threat of discovery. It also offered several business opportunities for expanding his wealth.

The exalted Mafia Don lived large—a fact magnified by his international real estate holdings. That being said, these particular locations were also used to help facilitate the various criminal enterprises of the Boneiro Family, tax evasion being just one facet of a labyrinthian conglomerate. The properties were registered to various shell companies, which made finding him nearly impossible. It was also the reason he’d

never been caught for all his illicit business dealings.

This new venture would be no different. The Boneiro Mafia had recently expanded into diamond smuggling. Marco was after one of the biggest stones to cement his business acumen of yet another branch of criminal activities controlled by The Commission. It was time he got the accolades and title he deserved. Marco Boneiro aimed to become the Chairman of the National Commission. Once he held that revered position, he would bring back and enforce the one-man rule to become the capo di tutti capi—the boss of all bosses—of the Cosa Nostra. Lucky Luciano, the father of modern organized crime in the United States, abolished the old Mustache Pete system years ago in an effort to reduce gang wars while he cleverly maintained his own power over all the families. Now, it was Marco's goal to reverse it. He might not be able to bring back the exalted title of capo di tutti capi but the power he'd wield would set him high above his enemies. He would be the boss of all bosses.

The time for voting for a new chairman was near. He needed to clinch this deal to ensure an undisputed win. Dealing with his idiot sons was a distraction he couldn't afford.

"I can't get hold of either of them but I did manage to talk to a neighbor in Pacific Palisades."

Marco turned to watch his eldest son walk toward him. A deep frown pulled Luca's eyebrows into a straight line. His body seethed with anger and frustration. Alarm bells blared in Marco's mind. Luca never showed emotion which made him one of the most lethal assassins there was. For him to do so now was worrying.

"What made you call him? They're not supposed to be at the family home. They were told to clear out the warehouses to make space for our new coffee shipments arriving next month."

“What did you expect, Boss? Giving the carte blanche was bound to turn into a disaster.”

Marco grunted. None of his children called him father. In his mind, it levelled the playing field among his followers— knowing that he didn’t favor his own sons above any of them.

“What happened?”

“They obviously didn’t want their style cramped and stayed at the house. The neighbor said he saw them playing ball with a little girl in the backyard.”

“What little girl? I’m going to fucking castrate them,” Marco exploded. He cursed as a thought crossed his mind. “Senator Wilson. It has to be his daughter. It was all over CNN that she’d been kidnapped four days ago.”

Luca stared at him questioningly. “You mentioned him in passing at dinner before we left. Do you think they kidnapped her to force him to scrap the rough diamond importation bill we discussed?”

“What else? It’s the only thing that makes sense. If they fuck up my chances at being voted in as Chairman, I’m done with them.”

Marco was livid. One of the reasons he’d been able to keep his coffee and wine imports secure and operating just inside the boundaries of the law was because he had the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in his pocket. He knew which strings to pull when it came to getting his way.

The new bill that had been presented to the cabinet to amend the importation act on rough diamonds created a huge problem for Marco. It couldn’t have come at a worse time since he had recently embarked on diamond trading as a legitimate way to

increase the capital liquidity of the Mafia to fund their illegitimate businesses. The two aspects of the regulations around rough diamond importation would restrict the ease with which he could bring rough diamonds and maybe blood diamonds into the U.S.

His main focus for obtaining rough diamonds was from Sierra Leone. It was one of the countries the new act would remove from the approved list as a participant in the Kimberley Process and not subjected to further U.S. restrictions. This was all due to the heavy diamond smuggling originating in that country.

Secondly, where to date, importing diamonds had been unconditionally duty free, the intention was to implement hefty import and duty taxes to the rate of 8% of the value of the goods. That would seriously impact Marco's profit. One way or the other, he needed to convince the cabinet to scrap the new amendment on the bill.

His halfwit sons just exacerbated the problem. Now it would cost him millions to convince them all to vote against implementing the changed legislation.

"You might be right. According to our neighbor, there was a group of friends who joined them. They'd been anything but quiet. He said there was a hushed disruption after nine o'clock at night, two days ago."

"What the fuck is a hushed disruption?"

"All the lights went on and there were a couple of, what he described as surprised shouts, but it all quieted down in less than a couple of minutes. He didn't bother to go and check since everything went back to normal and the lights were turned off." Luca shrugged with a grim expression. "The next morning, everyone was gone. He assumed they'd left."

"Which means those assholes took their soldiers to the house as well. How fucking

stupid could they be!” Marco looked at Luca. “Have you tried to contact any of them? Antonio or Dante?”

“I did. They’re not picking up. I didn’t want to leave a message in case they’d been caught.”

“Which is what you believe happened?” Marco pointed at the large wall-mounted television. “Check CNN. If Wilson’s daughter had been found, they’ll report it.”

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“Since it happened two days ago, chances are it won’t be newsworthy anymore,” Luca muttered. He switched on the television and scrolled to the correct channel. They watched for five minutes but no mention was made of the Senator or his daughter.

“Who are you calling?” Marco was quickly losing his temper. If Rocco and Stefano cost him the Chairmanship, there would be hell to pay.

“I dated a CNN investigative political reporter, Sheena Muller, a couple of years ago. We’ve been keeping in touch. If Wilson’s daughter was found, she’d know.”

Marco kept pacing as he listened to the conversation. He slashed his hand through the air to indicate that Luca must cut short the chit chat. He was itching to get back home, especially since he’d been able to clinch the deal with the corrupt bank manager of Freebank in Sierra Leone. The thirteenth largest diamond ever to be found had been in safekeeping there since its discovery in 2017 by a Christian pastor in the Kono district.

The government had been holding onto it ever since with the hope to sell it at the top of the market. Their greed would become the Boneiro family’s good fortune once he supplied a fake diamond to replace the real one.

“No reports on the return of the senator’s daughter anywhere. He’s keeping a low profile since she was kidnapped.”

“It can’t be a coincidence. Rocco and Stefano must be involved.” Marco’s gaze drifted out to the horizon. “Maybe I’m being overcautious but the fact that you can’t

get hold of anyone is very concerning.”

“I agree, but my hands are tied for as long as we’re here. I should go back home so I can check all their popular hangouts.” Luca noticed the way his father’s shoulders tensed. It had taken hard work to get the mighty boss of the Boneiro Mafia to acknowledge that he was a competent underboss— a bigger effort at the time to be appointed as such. It infuriated him that Marco still mistrusted his capabilities.

“We’ll both leave.” Having made his decision, Marco strode toward the staircase. “Make sure the pilot is ready to take off in an hour. I want to be home by tomorrow.” He hesitated as he looked at Luca over his shoulder. “On second thought, have him file a flight plan to include Acapulco. I’ll join your mother there until you find out what the fuck those imbeciles have done. I can do with a short vacation and spoil Isabella while I’m at it.”

Jared watched Brock and Tanner interrogating Rocco Boneiro through the one-way mirror. It had been two days since they’d taken in the two brothers for questioning. Jared didn’t like the drawn-out process. Although they were given extra judicial powers in extracting information, the Cobras attempted to keep within the boundaries of the law so that the FBI would have an airtight case with which to bring relevant charges. As it happened, they weren’t any closer to finding out where Marco Boneiro was hiding.

Gone was the quirky smile that readily flashed across the thirty-five-year old’s face the first time Jared had stepped through the steel door. He was more resilient than he looked at first glance but once in the hot seat, every man had his breaking point. A couple of cuffs against his chin hadn’t done the trick, he’d continued to taunt the much larger man with a dry chuckle.

“They’re stronger than I thought.”

“Yeah, I suppose it’s the family name that gives them the extra courage.” Cruz joined him in front of the mirror. “At least Adam managed to crack one of the soldiers.”

“He did?” Jared asked without taking his eyes from the scene in front of him. Brock had shifted tactics. From personal experience, Jared knew that playing good cop bad cop elicited better results.

“Antonio Garcia gave up the names of the two soldiers who escaped. I’ve got the team doing background checks on them.”

“What about facial recognition? I don’t want Boneiro alerted of his sons’ detainment.” Jared leaned his shoulder against the wall. “I don’t think they’d take the chance of going to any of the known hideouts. They know they’re being watched.”

“They left their cell phones behind in the rush to escape but that doesn't mean they can’t find a way to contact them.”

“Yeah, but on the other hand, if Boneiro had been alerted to their capture, the Mob’s high-powered attorney would already have been breaking down the FBI’s doors.”

“We checked the cell phones. There’s nothing of note we can use since we have to be careful to not trigger suspicion. I’m already running their pictures I could find through traffic cams as well as the available public CCTV footage out there. If they make one wrong move, I’ll find them.”

“Good. Keep at it.” Jared straightened and headed to the door. “I think it’s time for another friendly chat with our hardheaded guests.”

“Don’t forget this.” Cruz flung a balaclava at him. To ever be recognized would jeopardize future operations and put their families in harm’s way.

To bring dangerous criminals to justice sometimes felt like shoveling shit against the tide. One had to be either crazy or an indefatigable crusader to stay in the fight. An America devoid of organized crime would always be a pipe dream.

“You look like shit, Boneiro,” Jared said as he walked into the interrogation room. He studied the younger man with an amused grin. His left eye was swollen, and he bore a couple of bruises. All in all he didn’t look worse for the wear. He slumped in the steel chair under a blinding fluorescent light.

“I fucking told you I’m not Boneiro.” Rocco blinked furiously as he cautiously kept watch of the large man circling him.

“You’re wasting our time.” Jared sat down in the steel chair next to Brock. Tanner had left upon his arrival. “Besides, your continued denial of your birthright hardly matters. It’s not you I want.”

“So let me the fuck go!”

“Tell me what I want to know and you can walk away” Jared laughed at the deflated expression on Rocco’s face. “It’s the way of the world, Boneiro. You, of all people, know that nothing in life is free.”

“I’m not an idiot. You already know something.” Rocco growled as he stared at Jared. “You’re the kind of man that would scare the piss out of the average Joe. Stefano must’ve squealed the moment you walked into the room. What did my idiot brother tell you?”

“That your parents are on vacation.” Jared crossed his legs. “What I want to know is where they are. I want a signed affidavit that confirms Marco Boneiro ordered the kidnapping. While you’re at it, where’s your big brother Luca?”

“You’re delusional if you think I’m gonna tell you anything.” Rocco squared his shoulders. “You’re not getting shit out of me, so why waste more time? We both know you’re not gonna kill us. You got us on kidnapping, so do your fucking job and hand us over to the authorities.” His eyes narrowed as Jared remained impassive. He smirked. “Ah, you don’t intend to do that, do you? I see. You’ve got nothing on my father. You think if one of us rats him out, you’ll get your grubby hands on him. Good luck trying to pin the kidnapping on anyone else but Stefano and me. It was our operation, our masterplan... wait a minute.” He leaned forward. “That’s not it either. Locking him up for kidnapping isn’t going to keep him behind bars for long, if at all.” He cracked out a laugh. It bounced off the steel walls to mock Jared. “Yeah, you bastard. Most people underestimate my intelligence. I’m not stupid. You shouldn’t have shown your hand because no matter what you do to us, Marco Boneiro will be onto you now. One thing about him is that family means everything to him. When he finds out we’ve been caught, he’ll move heaven and hell to free us.”

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Jared's smirk was derisive. "If you believe that you don't know your father at all. Don't be surprised if he leaves you to rot."

"Fuck you." Rocco straightened. "Let us fucking go!"

Jared studied him at length. He slapped his hands on his thighs as he got up and walked to the door.

"He's right. I'm tired of his whining little brother. Take them to the middle of Golden Gate Bridge, in the dead of night, and throw them off. The two-hundred-and-fifty-foot drop will be like hitting concrete. They'll be human chum for the great whites that venture in from the Farallon."

"You wouldn't dare. Marco Boneiro will hunt you down if you kill us, you bastard!"

Jared ignored him as he walked out and joined Cruz in the observation room next door. His expression was grim as he watched Brock continue to taunt Rocco.

"Care to tell us what's going on in your head, Commander?" Brock grumbled as he walked into the room moments later with Tanner on his heels.

"I'm curious myself," Cruz interjected. "We're not torturers, Jared. No more enhanced interrogations. Those days are long gone and as you are well aware, those techniques never yielded actionable intel."

"That's not what he intends," Brock surmised as he studied Jared intensely. "But letting them go feels somewhat counter-productive, Commander."

“But strategic.” Tanner tapped a finger against his lips. As a specialist in Psyops, he quickly caught onto Jared’s intention.

“Right. Persuade, change, influence. The two of you are in sync. How about letting the slowpokes of the group in as well?” Cruz slouched in the chair. He crossed his arms as he looked between the two men.

“You’ve had no luck finding the escaped men,” Jared said. “These two aren’t going to tell us where Boneiro is. Even if they do, we have nothing concrete to charge him with or to link him to the kidnapping. My gut tells me Marco and Luca Boneiro don’t even know about it.”

“I agree. These two are going to stick to their guns that they were acting of their own accord,” Tanner interjected. “The only association Marco Boneiro has to them is that he’s their father and at a stretch, whatever we can add, will be circumstantial. Locking him up is counterproductive. He’s going to walk.”

“Marco Boneiro will find out about his sons’ capture— if he hasn’t already. That means he’ll be in a defensive posture.” Cruz frowned. “I’m not sure I get it.”

“We’ve run out of time. It’s been forty-eight hours. We either need to let them go or hand them over to the Feds. I would’ve preferred otherwise. Hoping Boneiro doesn’t know about it yet is dangerously naive.” Jared watched the man pacing in the interrogation room through the mirrored glass. “Letting them go will send a message that’s going to confuse Boneiro.”

“Which means he’ll go into hiding. How does that benefit us?” Brock said.

“If there’s one thing about Boneiro we’ve learned over the years, it’s that he hates not knowing.” Tanner stared at Jared. “The Commander is baiting the hook in the hope that Boneiro makes a mistake in an attempt to figure out our strategy.”

“Boneiro isn’t going to expose himself, Jared. He’s too clever for that. It’s how he stayed out of jail for all these years.” Brock confirmed what they already knew.

“It’s the only play we have at the moment.” Jared’s gaze remained glued on Rocco.

“But letting them go? Wouldn’t it be better to lock them up, thereby weakening their hierarchy by taking out two of their consiglieres?” Cruz sat forward as he looked between the men.

“Boneiro runs a well-oiled operation. He’ll have someone fill their positions immediately. No, we have to throw a wrench in the works. Boneiro won’t know if he can trust his sons once he finds out they’ve been interrogated. He’ll wonder whether they made a deal with us to stay out of jail,” Jared said as he straightened with a grim smile when Cruz and Brock snapped their fingers.

“Fuck yes! You’re right. It’s the perfect way to sow discord in the family. Wondering and questioning every move or decision they make.” Cruz jumped up and rubbed his hands together. “So, can we throw them off the bridge for real?”

Everyone laughed at his eagerness.

“Why not. Blindfold them and make them believe you’re on the way to the Golden Gate bridge. Fuck with their minds. Let them have a taste of feeling helpless and vulnerable like they made little Courtney feel.” Jared smirked. “Then dump them from the low bridge at Lake Merced Park.” Jared pulled out his phone as it vibrated in his pocket.

“Adam? Did you manage to extract any intel?”

“Nothing further, Commander.”

“We’re letting them go. You’ve got four in lockup, right?”

“Yeah. I think it’s a waste of time to keep them any longer. They don’t know anything of value.”

“Hand them over to the FBI as suspects for the kidnapping of Senator Wilson’s daughter. Let them deal with it. They’ll be too scared of Marco Boneiro to point fingers at his sons so be sure to keep the involvement of Rocco and Stefano Boneiro quiet.”

“Will do.” Adam hesitated briefly. “There’s a little matter of Mrs. Lee and her team, Boss.”

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Jared tensed. The darkened voice presaged bad news.

“I’m listening.”

“The covert security team just reported that they left the safehouse thirty minutes ago. Paxton and Knox are travelling on Route 80 toward the Oakland Bay Bridge while Jordan and Kezlin went to their offices in Oyster Point.”

“Tell the team to stay on them. Let me know their destination.”

“Frank tried to stop Paxton but she... er, well, she gave him a message for you.”

“Why am I not surprised? Well, spit it out,” Jared snapped irritably. She was sorely testing his patience.

“She told him to inform his commander that her team had voted to continue with their case. That she has full confidence in their ability to stay under Boneiro’s radar, especially since they were stuck with the Cobras as bodyguards who she had no doubt would be on their heels the entire time.”

“That does it. It’s time that kitty’s sharp claws get clipped.”

Chapter Six

The decision to leave the military had been an easy one after Rex’s death. At the time, Paxton didn’t know what to do or in which direction to go. The pain and loss had been too raw to concentrate on anything other than staying strong and being there

for Lucy. Eight years old at the time, it had been a massive blow for a little girl who had adored her father. Without him, she had become lost. It would take years to heal.

Jordan followed Paxton's example after she had been wounded during a raid on a Taliban camp in Afghanistan. After eight years on active duty cheating death in a combat zone, the writing was on the wall. It was time to get out. She would resign her commission and be given an honorable discharge. She wanted a normal life, with all that it had to offer— to fall in love, get married and have a family.

Together, they had explored the possibilities of their future. Because of their military background, it had been a natural evolutionary decision to become private detectives— a profession where they could utilize their skills without the intensity of combat. Knox had joined them a year later and then Kezlin, two years ago.

For Paxton, being a private detective was as exciting as it was unpredictable. She found every job challenging, rewarding and some, a bit dangerous. The best part was the adventure and diversity that every case offered. Searching and finding the evidence to successfully complete a case was highly satisfying. The most rewarding aspect was going undercover to find the evidence and get the break they needed to crack a case.

“So, the action movie star, Bastian Conti's wife, Hannah, is our new client.” Knox eased the Jeep to a stop at a red light.

“I guess their marriage isn't all what it's claimed to be. It's common knowledge that he owns several properties all over California. Their main home is in Pacific Palisades and their vacation home is in Santa Monica. Where he keeps the others is a closely guarded secret.”

“So, what is Hannah Conti's problem with the other two that she needs us to look into?”

“She only found out about them by chance recently although Bastian had purchased them years ago. She suspects that he set up a mistress in one of them but has no idea why he bought the other one. It’s been vacant for years.”

“Did she question him about it?” Knox pulled away as the light turned green.

“No, she wants confirmation of the affair first and intel on the second.”

“I assume attending a shindig in celebration of his latest movie on the roof of the Marriott Marquis Hotel is to see if one of his followers might be the assumed mistress?”

Paxton nodded. “Hannah Conti specifically went out of town to create an opportunity. I also want to find out which corporate connections, if any, he might have.”

Knox looked hard at Paxton. “You already have a theory?”

“I went through the intel Jordan gathered last night. Bastian has many alliances with high-powered business owners and bank CEO’s, not to mention the odd politician.”

“Yeah, but remember, other than being a movie star, he’s also a very savvy businessman. He still has a hand in commercial property development, even though his company, Bay Developers, is run by a friend named Jason Burrows.”

“Granted, but doesn’t it seem odd that the two acquired houses are both registered in Hannah Conti’s name and that she’s completely ignorant of it?”

“There is that.” Knox’s expression turned pensive.

“There’s something shady about it. For all we know, he used them as part of a shell company transaction. Have you been able to find out anything from the previous

owners about the sale agreements?”

“Not yet. There hasn’t been time to dig deeper, especially since we’ve been holed up in a safehouse. Jordan is absolutely ropeable that she doesn’t have access to her computer equipment.”

Paxton smiled at her. “I know it’s frustrating but I had hoped you, of all people, would understand the necessity of giving in to Jared Bates’ insistence to keep us safe.”

“Believe me, we do but that doesn’t mean we have to like it.” Knox parked the car in the underground garage of the Marriott Marquis Hotel. “To be honest, it’s a relief. Jordan and I did some digging on the dark web into the Boneiro crime family. Marco and Luca Boneiro are ruthless. They’re the most feared by friend and foe out of the five Mafia families.” She smiled. “I can’t imagine the Commander is going to be happy when he finds out we flew the coop today.”

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“He already knows. I’m sure you’ve noticed the tails we had all the way here.”

“The innocuous black Range Rover with dark tint that has been following us parked in the corner over there? Or the grey BMW out in the street? Yeah, I saw them.”

“Which means we have backup should something go wrong,” Paxton said. “Besides, we were committed to Hannah before all of this happened. It would be unprofessional to drop her in light of yet unconfirmed danger.”

“And we are undercover.” Knox tossed the blonde hair and fluttered her eyelashes. “I’ll eat this wig if anyone recognizes me.”

“Ditto. The face masks will also help to keep our identities hidden.” Paxton hooked the black three-layered mask over her ears and turned her head sideways.

“As long as you don’t color those gorgeous red tresses black.”

“Lord no. I’d look like Morticia Addams.” She opened the door. “Well, let’s get the show on the road. Do you have the invites?”

Knox patted the black clutch bag as she locked the Jeep. “Got ’em. Jordan did a stellar job. No one will know they’re fake.”

“Keep your cell phone in your hand. Take as many photos as you can, then export them to Jordan. She’ll run background checks to see if any of the guests have a deeper association with Bastian Conti outside of Hollywood.” Paxton critically studied her reflection in the full-length mirror of the elevator. “I’m getting too old to

wear mini dresses. Either that or I need to exercise more.”

“You’re still a sexy bitch, honey. Just as much as you were ten years ago.” Knox stood next to her. She stared at their reflection. “No one would be able to tell you’re seven years older than me.” She smiled as her eyes ran over the chic, black cocktail dresses they both wore. “With those sexy legs of yours, you’d be able to wear a short dress for another ten years.” She flexed her calves and grinned. “We’re going to rock this party with these killer heels.”

“Just remember, they’re the only weapons we have to defend ourselves should something go wrong.”

“We’ll be fine. Even with stilettos, no one will be able to catch us.” Knox turned to watch the numbers above the elevator doors. “Almost there. Run our strategy past me again, please.”

“I’m Beverly Palmer, the newly appointed casting director for Luther Spielman Productions. I’m the protege of the acclaimed casting director, April Webster, but have decided to branch out on my own. I’ve already achieved success casting blockbuster action movies, *Rage*, *Last Day in the Sun* and the thriller, *Waterfear*.”

“Beverly Palmer isn’t an assumed persona, Paxton. Aren’t you taking a chance that she’ll be here in person?” Knox looked concerned.

“No, she’s currently scouting locations in Australia.” Paxton looked at herself in the mirror. “Hopefully, I can pull it off. At least Kezlin managed to turn me into a very close replica of her.” She smiled at Knox. “Don’t worry. Jordan assured me that none of the actors she cast over the last ten years will be attending this party. Let’s hope none of her friends are here either. Besides, I have no intention of socializing or introducing myself around. We’re not here to enjoy ourselves. We’re doing surveillance and gathering intel. That’s it. I want to be out of here within an hour.”

“Before lunch is served? Now that is just downright cruel.”

Paxton laughed. Knox was an unabashed gourmand. “How do you stay so thin with all the junk you eat is beyond me.” She cast a sharp look at her. “Remember, Knox, you’re Savvy Tallon, my assistant. Eager to please, a bit ditsy and as chirpy as a Nightingale.”

“Jordan couldn’t come up with a better name, could she?” Knox mumbled as they stepped out of the elevator into a large open reception area.

A stern-looking man watched them approach where he was intercepting all arrivals. He flashed them a brief smile. “Good morning, ladies. Invitations, please.”

“Oh! Of course, how silly of me,” Knox purred as she suddenly became all fingers, fumbling her clutch bag like a seasoned actress. “Here you go. This is Beverly Palmer and I’m her assistant, Savvy Tallon,” she said with a toothy smile. She looked around, eagerly. “Is he here yet? Bastian, I mean? I can’t wait to finally meet him.” She prodded Paxton in the side. “Thanks so much for bringing me, Miss Palmer. This has to be the most exciting day of my career to date!”

“Yes, yes. Just don’t pester everyone with your eagerness, please,” Paxton admonished. She shook her head and looked haughtily at the man. “Well? Is there anything else?”

“My apologies, Miss Palmer.” He stepped aside and gestured politely. “Please enjoy the festivities.”

Knox was all smiles as they began to mingle, keeping her phone at the ready to discreetly snap pictures.

“Good grief. I never thought I’d ever be around so many celebs.” Knox stopped in

her tracks as she stared at Dawn Hunt, an acclaimed actress who had received many Emmys over the years.

“Did I ever tell you that movies are my secret pleasure?”

“No, but I gathered as much since you always watch one on your phone during stake outs.”

“I have one rule. Either read the book or see the movie but never both.”

“Hmm, I’m the opposite. I prefer to soak up the novel first, then compare the characters and plot all the while bemoaning the casting errors.”

“Not me. I watch movies for the pure joy of getting sucked into the story on the crest of a cinematic wave until the climax. I absolutely never watch movies twice.”

“Really?” Paxton looked around and snapped a couple of pictures. “Since we’re in the midst of a premiere party, I hope you at least watched *The Day of Fear*.”

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“I did and I have to admit, even though I’m not a big fan of his other work, Bastian Conti bested himself in this flick. At least this one had an intriguing plot.” She prodded Paxton. “There he is— like the tabloids states, always surrounded by women.”

“Hmm, one in particular seems to be glued to his side.”

“I don’t recognize her as an actress.” Knox took a picture and sent it off to Jordan before she made a quick call. “Hey, girl, I just sent you a photo of Bastian with four women. Please identify the brunette in the blue dress.”

They accepted champagne from a passing waiter.

“It’s Mia Kunz, a Swiss model who immigrated to the U.S. eighteen months ago,” Jordan said moments later.

“Anything about her and Bastian in the tabloids?”

Paxton stared at the way the young woman ran her hands over the older man’s chest as she listened to the conversation over the speaker phone.

“Nothing, except a couple of photos at other gala events where she seems to always be loitering in the background wherever he is.”

“Got it. Thanks, girlfriend. Keep digging into her background. Let us know if anyone jumps out at you or if you find something of interest.” Knox ended the call with her eyes on their target.

“I’m going to start joining conversations to see if I can separate celebs from business associates,” Paxton said. “See if you can wrangle an introduction to the man of the moment. It would be interesting to gauge Miss Kunz’s reaction to some unexpected competition.”

“Now you’re talking.” She smiled broadly as she brazenly plumped up her breasts and squared her shoulders. “And here I thought I wasn’t going to have any fun today.”

Paxton didn’t respond. She was already zeroing in on groups that were awkwardly out of place with all the glitz and glamor.

“Refill, Miss?”

“Yes, thanks. Isn’t that lovely.” She picked out a glass of Rosé and took a sip as she started to circle the Olympic size pool that glistened in the sun. Her ears pricked up as she listened to the various topics under discussion. They were mainly focused on views of the premiere everyone had watched earlier. Some discussed preferred vacation spots and then there was the odd conversation about the dire state of the COVID-19 pandemic that was crippling the world. She was quite taken with the variety of fashion face masks the women wore and that everyone seemed to practice social distancing.

“It's how business works in the real world.”

The certainty of the statement drew Paxton’s attention. She paused at an iron lace railing to remain within earshot while stealing furtive glances of the participants. There was a middle-aged man who stood head and shoulders above the wiry one who had just spoken. It was the way he carried himself that made her suspect he was an outsider— a businessman. His portly frame was swathed in the sartorial splendor of Savile Row linen. A small, familiar looking woman orbited the two men looking to

enter into the conversation.

“Isn’t that a little oversimplified, Mr. Paul?” Paxton’s attention moved to the voice asking the question. Her memory sparked as she recognized her.

Well, well, what do we have here. Fancy seeing Thea Sutro here.

She was the founder and CEO of a well-known sex toy company. Thea had earned a reputation in the business world as an activist and leader for the Equal Rights Act. She was known to challenge venture capitalists in regard to their insular policies aimed at boosting the bottom line of large conglomerates rather than offering the much-needed funding to entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Paxton snapped an image and sent it to Jordan with a message to phone her once she identified Mr. Paul. She was particularly interested in information on the distinguished gentleman she’d been watching.

Paxton’s ears perked up to the yet unidentified man’s deep voice. The tone was drenched in ridicule, indicating his dislike for Mr. Paul as he sided with Thea. Rival opinions weren’t uncommon at events like these but overt disrespect was rare.

“Mrs. Sutro is right. With the volatility created in the world as a result of the pandemic, businesses have to ask themselves if they’re benefitting the consumer or exploiting them, especially in relation to the example they’re setting for our youth. For what is real business acumen other than making wise decisions that keep the shareholder happy while at the same time producing something of value instead of just making money. My father always compared the glorification of unbridled greed and speculation to that of Icarus who became so intoxicated by flight that he flew too close to the golden Sun and melted the wax from his wings. He was a wise man who taught me from an early age that unrestrained greed is the product of an arrogant and self-destructive mind.”

Mr. Paul bristled visibly under the cleverly disguised insult, which Paxton surmised was by a man who had achieved success with his integrity and morals still intact.

Mr. Paul squared his shoulders. “Maybe you missed the point,” he said, sharply. “We buy stock in the health insurance industry, Big Pharma and privately run prisons. They’re all tied together. Incarceration is big business. Two-point-two million adults are behind bars. In California alone, it costs about \$81k a year per inmate. More than half of that goes to security and healthcare. Add in food stocks and other collateral services and you have a goose that keeps laying golden eggs.”

Paxton’s phone vibrated. She walked back to the iron rail before she answered.

“You’re rubbing elbows with the elite of the business world, Paxton,” Jordan said. “The thin man is Jack Paul, who dabbles in a little of everything. I’m surprised you didn’t recognize him. He’s the CEO of Allmart, the biggest domestic retail operation.”

“So that’s why he looked familiar. What about the thickset man?”

“Thomas Serra, born 1957, is a hedge fund manager, philanthropist, environmentalist, liberal activist, and fundraiser.”

“Hold on,” Paxton racked her brain as the penny dropped. “If memory serves, he’s the founder and former managing partner of Faradon Capital, right?”

“Correct. He also co-founded First California Bank, which became State Beneficiary Bank, an Oakland-based community development bank.”

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“Hmm, now what interest would a man of his stature have in the latest action movie?” Paxton began to connect the dots.

“From the information I gathered, Faradon manages \$20 billion in unearned income from high net worth individuals, institutional investors, college endowments, foundations and on and on.”

“So Bastian Conti might be one of the individuals whose stock portfolio he manages.”

“It’s possible. Serra retired from Faradon Capital in 2012 but he still owns a stake in the company and personally looks after long-standing portfolios.”

“Ah, I remember,” Paxton said as she turned to look at the man dressed in Italian finery. “He switched his focus to politics and the environment.”

“Yep. He launched TrueGen America, a nonprofit organization that supports progressive positions on climate change, immigration, health care, and education.”

“He made the news recently didn’t he? If I recall, California Governor George Newman appointed Serra to chair a task force focused on the state’s economic recovery during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.”

“Spot on. A position that hasn’t won him favors with his peers.”

“Why do you say that?” It was difficult to divide her attention between the discussion of the group and Jordan, so Paxton turned her back on them to look out over the city.

“It’s a position that would gain him huge favor on the Left. If he can successfully chair the task force to full economic recovery, it would increase his chances of running for the Whitehouse in 2024.”

“Thanks, Jordan. Keep digging into these two and perhaps add Thea Sutro to the mix. From what I can see, they’re the only individuals not directly associated with the entertainment industry.”

“I think Mrs. Sutro would disagree. She’s upfront and personally involved... maybe not with the business end of the film industry itself but with those that inhabit it.”

Paxton laughed as she ended the call. She glanced over to where Knox was having an animated discussion with Bastian Conti. She was always surprised at how effortlessly Knox could switch from being a serious investigator to playing a role completely opposite her nature. The expression on Mia Kunz’s face was enough evidence that Knox’s portrayal of a ditsy starstruck fan was close to perfection.

Bastian also seemed transfixed by Knox, if his indiscreet groping of her buttocks was anything to go by. He nuzzled her throat at which she threw back her head and laughed. The sensually inflected sound carried all the way to Paxton. She glanced back at Paul, Sutro and Serra, who had been joined by the director of the movie. The earlier animosity between the two had disappeared and with it, Paxton’s interest in hanging around.

She had the information she was after. It was time to leave before Knox ended up in a cat fight with the Swiss model. She dialed Knox’s number.

“Let’s go. Now.”

It was easier said than done, since it took Knox a good five minutes to convince Bastian that he didn’t need to accompany her to the ladies’ restroom.

“Took your own sweet time,” Paxton muttered as the elevator carried them to the lower level parking garage.

“That man is worse than an octopus.” She shuddered visibly as she unlocked the car. “I think we can confirm that Bastian Conti’s mistress is the beautiful Mia Kunz. She was ready to go nine rounds when you called.” She glanced at Paxton. “Don’t for one second believe it’s because I’m irresistible. From what I overheard, he loves variety, especially when his lovely wife isn’t around.”

“And I found a few people of interest who could potentially have something to do with the house standing empty.” Paxton frowned as Knox reversed out of the parking bay. “I wonder if I shouldn’t tell Jared about them. Serra has money and is involved in politics. I don’t want our paths to cross again if it’s someone they’ve already got on their radar.”

“Before you told us what they’re involved in, I would’ve opposed such a decision but I have to agree with you. I’m over living a life of danger like we did in Afghanistan. I love being a PI and to kick ass on the odd occasion but I value my life too much to become a target of the Mafia or some unscrupulous businessmen out to gain power.”

“Yeah, we all feel like that.”

With the decision made, she took out her phone and dialed Jared’s number.

“Mrs. Lee.”

It was her surname, spat out officiously that took her breath away, especially in light of the intimacy they’d shared just two days ago. On the other hand, she hadn’t seen or heard from him since he’d moved them into the safehouse. She wondered if his visit at the time hadn’t been a tactic to get her to agree to accepting their offer to guard her team. It didn’t matter though, she conceded. They were in danger and he offered

protection. That had to be it. And all things considered, maybe it was a good idea to keep their relationship purely professional.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m at the safehouse, Mrs. Lee. The question is; where are you?”

Paxton regretted the message she’d left. He probably viewed it as a challenge, which if she was honest with herself, had been exactly that. She had been irked that he’d ignored her for two days. It was a complete contradiction in behavior to the assertive, strong, and independent woman she’d become over the years. She had no idea how to counter his magnetism.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes... or no, let’s meet at my offices in Oyster Point in thirty.” She quickly changed her mind, deciding it was necessary to rope in the wayward submissive that was all too eager to please the Dom in him— at least insofar as their personal relationship was concerned. He might be a powerful Dom but she was a successful private investigator, an ex-army ranger for Chrissakes! She refused to allow him to intimidate her outside of a potential sexual relationship.

“I want you back at the Parkmerced, Paxton.”

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“Thirty minutes, Commander Bates. My offices.”

Paxton ended the call, ignoring the big eyes Knox made at her when her cell phone started ringing seconds later. She stared at Jared’s name for long moments and then rejected the call before stuffing the phone in her small clutch bag. She shrugged at Knox’s questioning look.

“I know he’s looking out for our safety but it’s time the mighty commander realizes I’m not going to jump at his every beck and call.”

Chapter Seven

The world slowed to a crawl as Paxton walked into her office to the sight of Jared standing in front of the bay window. His hands were clasped behind his back as he stared out across the waterfront.

She knew he must’ve heard the clicks of her heels hitting the wood floor as she entered and yet, he didn’t move or acknowledge her arrival. She squared her shoulders as she walked around the massive table. It was disconcerting that he had the ability to upset her equilibrium by just his presence alone. If the stoic countenance of a back turned to her meant anything, it was that he was displeased with her treatment of him.

She smirked. She was sassy by nature. It was the one thing that Rex had loved about her. As a submissive, it managed to get her into trouble more times than she cared to remember. It had always landed her the most delightful punishments that made her soar as much as it confirmed her need to be dominated.

Jared Bates was used to being in command. It was obvious her rebellious behavior earlier had sparked his anger. She secretly hoped it might speed up his imminent domination over her— something his confident posture made her crave with every fiber in her being.

She squared her shoulders.

Business first, Paxton. Concentrate on what's important... then later... who knows...

"I didn't expect you to get here this quickly. Thank you for coming."

Jared pivoted. The clash of their eyes felt like battle lines being drawn. Paxton suppressed the excitement surging through her. The dark flash in his gaze warned her that he wouldn't bow to her manipulation. She waved him to one of the visitor chairs. He just watched her silently.

"Very well." She cleared her throat as she settled back in the chair. "I asked you here to discuss the case we're working on."

"Proceed."

"Our client is Hannah Conti, the wife of the actor Bastian Conti." She briefly summarized the job.

"Which directly contravened my request that you remain at the safehouse instead of exposing yourself at a party."

His gaze travelled over the black, strappy dress to settle on the rounded symmetry of her breasts. The way she was dressed did little to disabuse him of the truth of who she really was— a once, very capable, badass army ranger.

“I don’t like the black hair.”

“Oh! I forgot to remove the wig,” she mumbled, pulling it off to reveal ropey tufts of her auburn mane.

“At least you used a proper disguise.”

Paxton shifted under his direct stare. “We’re not idiots, Jared. We always protect our true identities during a case.”

“Am I to assume that you believe there’s more to this case than you originally had thought?”

“Maybe. I have reason to believe it could involve connections with politics and financial corporations. We thought it would be an easy surveillance and intel gathering job but since there were people at the party that could potentially be involved, I decided to be cautious; in case it's people that might be part of your investigation."

“I assume you have names?” His one eyebrow crawled higher.

“Jack Paul.”

“I know who he is but he’s not a person of interest in our case. Who else?” He parked the name for further investigation later.

“Thomas Serra?”

“Hmm.” The cryptic response confirmed that the politician was someone they were investigating. “He was at the party?”

“Yes, the two of them and Thea Sutro seemed to know one another well, although it was obvious that Serra and Mrs. Sutro didn’t like Paul’s business principles.”

“And that’s it?”

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“Hannah Conti believes her husband bought one of the properties for his mistress although he denies he’s having an affair. From intel Jordan managed to gather, combined with the way she reacted to Knox flirting with Bastian, the Swiss model, Mia Kunz is involved with him.” She tapped her fingers on the desk. “Although I doubt she has any association with the Mob.”

“Looks can be deceiving. The Mafia is known to rope in anyone if it means they could reap the benefit.”

“Maybe, but her attention was centered on Bastian. She hardly took notice of anyone else the entire time we were there.”

"And?"

"And what? I didn't want us to be banging heads together, again, should our paths happen to cross during surveillance."

"In other words, after all that’s been said and done, you're going to continue putting your lives in danger?"

A discontented sigh fell from her lips as she fought off the urge to speak her mind.

“You need to understand that we made a commitment to Hannah Conti. She insisted on paying our full fee upfront. It goes against my professional ethics to drop her now.” She leaned forward. “Jordan told me she has information about the properties in question. Based on what we find, our job might be over. As easy as that.”

"And if it's not?"

"Well... if we need to dig further, we will ensure to wear disguises whenever we're out in the open. We know how to blend in with the masses, Commander. You worry for nothing."

"No, Paxton, you're playing with fire. I warned you of the danger and yet you persist in ignoring me." He regarded her with a closed expression. He smirked as he came to a decision. "I can't afford to be distracted, but you're not giving me a choice. I'm going to put Brock in charge of our operation so I can give my complete attention to this case."

"Now you're being ridiculous. I can assure you that I...wedon't need you to babysit us."

Jared wasn't bothered by the cold look she shot at him. He crossed his arms, offering a piercing glare in return.

"I have no intention of babysitting you, but rather join your team temporarily. And furthermore, it's not up for debate. I'm getting involved whether you like it or not. And here's the deal— if you withhold anything from me, anything at all, I will have you removed. "

"You'll what?" She glared furiously at him. "This is my business. You have no jurisdiction to remove me!"

He didn't budge. "Exclude me from any decisions, feedback or progress reports or worse, go on surveillance or stake outs without me and your wings will be clipped quicker than you can blink... at least until Boneiro and his mob are behind bars."

"I suppose you believe in fairytales, Commander Bates. You will never clip my

wings." She blasted him with a derisive glower as she stood up.

He prowled closer until they stood toe-to-toe. She could feel the heat of his body as he leaned in. His chest brushed against her breasts, stealing her breath as she felt her nipples growing hard but she refused to step back.

Like hell would he know how the formidable expression on his face affected her... how she envisioned what it would be like to be under his full sexual domination. She exhaled slowly. The penny dropped.

Without him saying a word, she acknowledged that in front of her now, stood the powerful Dom. The one who excited her without even the slightest touch, confusing her with how effortlessly the switch to full Dom mode happened. His gaze flashed as he watched her tongue flick over her lips.

"Won't I, Paxton?" he responded to her earlier dare. "Why don't I prove to you that I will and that you'll give in without a fight?"

"No thank you. What you can do is leave so my team and I can examine Jordan's intel."

"Not yet." His voice lowered. "You've been challenging me for weeks and we both know what it is you're aiming for."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He smiled indulgently but the glint of disappointment in his eyes scolded her for the blatant lie. She shivered as he traced her jaw with the gentlest touch.

"You're hungry to be dominated, little one. It's there in every sassy remark, in the way your eyes beg me to take the reins you're so desperate to relinquish."

“What reins,” she managed to murmur as she leaned her cheek into his touch. His heart missed a beat at the show of unconscious submission.

“You live in a world where you have to be in control all the time. Your combat history as an army ranger is intertwined with your DNA. You have to be strong to lead your team. You crave the sweet relief to let go of all of this. To allow someone else to take charge so you can relax and enjoy the ride.” His eyes followed the path of his finger as he discovered the fullness of her bottom lip. “At a guess, I’d say you haven’t fully submitted to a Dom since your husband passed away.”

Her eyes lifted to his. “How did you know we lived a BDSM Lifestyle?”

“I knew your husband, Paxton. I was in Afghanistan on a covert mission when he was killed.”

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She stiffened but no matter how hard she tried; she couldn't get her feet to follow the instruction from her brain to step away from him.

“Why have you never told me this?”

“It wasn't of consequence.”

“Rex would never have discussed intimate details of our marriage with anyone.” She sounded out of breath as she battled to compute that the only two men who had ever managed to tap into the submissive inside her, had known each other.

“He didn't but I saw you at a BDSM club in Los Angeles a couple of years before his death.”

“It was a special treat for our wedding anniversary. It was the first time I set foot inside a club.” She swallowed hard as his finger continued to explore her face.

“I've been a Dominant for more years than I can remember, my pet. You sent out a plea, a vibration of yearning that crawled from the depth of your soul to trigger the lust in my Dom's heart.” He leaned closer to brush his lips over hers. “This is me telling you that you will submit to me, Paxton... and soon.”

Her tongue trailed a glistening track over her lips as he drew back. “I'll never be forced into submission, Jared.”

“I have no intention of forcing you into anything, little one. I'm a Dom, a master in the craft to not impose dominance but to win submission. That, my pet, is the most

prized subjugation any dominant could ask for.”

“I... er,” she blinked as she met his magnetic gaze, “I think we should concentrate on work.” She finally managed to uproot her feet to take a step back. “Besides, I see you as the kind of Dom who likes impact scenes. I’m not into pain.”

Well, not since Rex at any rate. He didn’t need to know that thoughts of submitting to his flogger had been keeping her awake at night.

“Hmm, that remains to be seen. However, it’s irrelevant in the scope of what we’re discussing. Submission isn’t about pain, Paxton, which I’m sure Rex taught you.” He ran his fingers through her hair and watched the silky strands fall to her shoulders. “You should know what’s important to any man dominating a sub, Paxton. We are all after the same thing.”

“Which is?”

“For a sub to train her mind and body to surrender all control to a Dom who wants to do nothing other than give her what she needs; to care for and protect her.”

“And that’s what you want— to care for and protect me?”

“Ah, my pet, my aim is to satisfy every one of your cravings so well that you’ll hunger for more... every day for as long as I feed your desires for my domination.” The grin that slanted across his lips was wicked and filled with decadent promises of intended debauchery. “If you want to continue the cat and mouse game, I’m all in but let me warn you, Paxton. When I catch you, be sure I’m the Dom you want because once I have you, you won’t have enough breath to use a safeword, let alone stop me from exploring the depths of your submission.”

His eyes flashed. “Now, Paxton... kiss me.”

The mellow tones of his voice reached all the way inside her to shake loose the recalcitrant submissive. She was still debating whether to give in to the pleasure he offered to control her when she pressed her body against his. Her arms slid over his chest to lock behind his neck; she reveled in the feel of rippling muscles under her fingertips.

“What kind of a kiss, Commander?” She breathed against his lips as she pressed against him. “One like this or—”

He fisted a tuft of hair and pulled her head back. “One thing I don’t tolerate in a sub is teasing, unless instructed. I told you to kiss me. You’ve been in the lifestyle long enough to know what kind of kiss a Dom is after.” His eyes narrowed. “Or should I put you through a refresher course first?”

“That won’t be necessary.” She pressed her open mouth against his. There was no slow build-up as Paxton went in for the kill with a kiss that was passionately demanding. She needed to reach that elusive part that kept him alert and aware—which instinct warned her was what closed his heart from emotion. She was greedy. If, and at this point it was a very big if, they took the chemistry that drew them together further, she wanted it all— body, heart, and soul.

Who are you trying to fool, Paxton? You know you want him.

The emotional submissive inside her had acknowledged that fact long ago. It didn’t mean she would ignore the warning bells blaring inside her head and jump feet first into what he offered. Jared Bates was more Dom than Rex had ever been. Paxton didn’t know if she would survive the emotional rollercoaster that a relationship with the powerful Dom would unleash inside her.

She knew herself well enough to realize that a relationship with him would develop into much more than sexual submission. Falling in love with Jared... she feared might

change the woman she'd become since her husband's death. Paxton had only loved one man in her life— Rex. She'd promised at his graveside she would always hold him in her heart.

She feared that a man like Jared might have the power to make her forget that promise.

Jared was pensive as he drove back to the Cobras' headquarters. He knew how cruel Marco Boneiro was more than anyone else. His own team had no idea how far back his history went with the bastard. It was a memory that he had banned from his mind for many years, forcing himself to forget and build a life worth living. He had succeeded until he'd made the decision to resign from the CIA and start his own covert agency. He soon realized that living in a world that excluded the Mafia didn't exist. He'd witnessed too many times how they manipulated and corrupted good people for their own gain.

He had blacked out his life up to the age of fifteen. That was when Jared Bates was born. He would forever be grateful for Willow and George Bates for taking a chance on the lost teenager when they adopted him. It was their integrity and passion for life that had made him the man he was today. George was a military man and it had been a no-brainer for Jared to follow in his footsteps. As a young man he'd been fascinated by reports of SEAL Team 6. They specialized in counter terrorism, special reconnaissance, hostage rescue and close protection missions, established during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979. It was what had driven him to train as a Navy SEAL. Within two years of qualifying he was classed as one of the best in the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, known as NSWDG, more commonly referred to as DEVGRU. At the age of twenty-eight Jared was appointed as the Commander of the Black Squadron, specializing in intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance. Two years later he was recruited by the CIA to head up a black ops group. This was the validation he'd been waiting for. It was a rite of passage.

He readily accepted the position since his marriage of four years had unraveled from being away from home so often. Marrying Bella had been a mistake. He was twenty-six at the time, tired and vulnerable after a brutal tour in Iraq. He'd given into the lure of a normal life. Unfortunately for both of them, he'd made the decision for the wrong reasons. Love wasn't in the equation. He was unprepared to sacrifice his career, even when she informed him she was pregnant with twins.

"Now, I regret all the years I missed out on my sons' lives." His raw voice echoed in the Hummer.

He might have made the decision to join the CIA for the right reasons but with it came the same challenges. As a black ops commander, he was under pressure all the time which led to him and Bella pulling further apart. She had drowned her loneliness in alcohol in the years he was in the Navy. The divorce didn't come as a surprise but Jared wasn't prepared to leave his boys in the hands of a woman who was alcoholic. He'd been given full custody which Bella hadn't opposed. As soon as the case had been finalized, she disappeared, cutting herself off from her ten-year-old sons without as much as a goodbye. To this day, she hadn't bothered to make contact with them again.

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The demands of being a single father had been the reason Jared needed to get out of the CIA. He'd tried to offer his boys a degree of normalcy. Jared prayed the time he'd spent raising them had been successful in achieving that. Now, at the age of twenty-two, his sons knew there was nothing Jared wouldn't do for them.

“And now, there's Paxton Lee.” He listened to his voice. His lips twitched. At first, he'd fought the attraction he had toward her but the more their paths crossed, the more he'd allowed his heart to open to the possibility of finally having found the kind of woman he'd been searching for his entire life.

She was strong, independent, and wicked smart. She personified everything he admired in a woman. There was no denying the sexual chemistry that flowed between them. He'd had a couple of Dom/sub relationships over the years but none of them had been long term. There had always been something amiss. Paxton Lee filled that hollow.

He had deliberately played at being a chauvinistic asshole, goading her to test her response—to establish if she was a strong enough submissive for the kind of Dom he was. He loved her sassiness; how much it warmed his heart that she challenged him intellectually as well as physically.

As a Dom he was drawn to a strong woman who exuded confidence—not only in her career but also in her personal life as well as in herself as a submissive. Paxton had proven that she had the strength he needed in a submissive—one who acknowledged her own needs. Paxton needed a Dom strong enough to dominate her.

Jared had felt the submissive inside her reach out to him. He fully embraced it,

accepting that he was the one to offer her the release she craved. He had already admitted that he wanted her in his life... in more ways than just her role as a submissive partner. Jared was after more than her body. He wanted it all— her body, heart, and soul.

Being her Dom had become like a mantra in his mind lately, albeit crowded by the danger she was in. She might be highly trained in combat as an army ranger but since he'd already committed— albeit one-sided as yet— to become her Dom, her safety was of the utmost importance to him. Jared would protect her with his life if it came to that.

“She has no idea what Boneiro is capable of. I’ll be damned if he destroys my one chance at love and happiness.”

Chapter Eight

The hills and valleys were a patchwork of bright green, variegated by the shadows of passing clouds. Some were shallower than others, but most had steep paths that took you to one side of their summit and then down to the next valley below. There was every hue from new spring grass to deep, emerald forest. There wasn't much to threaten a hiker in these woods, except perhaps the occasional mountain lion.

The rustic cabin dotted the grassy hills of the lower slopes of San Bruno Mountain. Luca downshifted to speed up the incline of the nonexistent driveway. He drove around the house to park out of sight.

He glanced around as he cut the engine. All was quiet. No cars, no movement— just the rustle of an inbound zephyr through the treetops. In the distance, a crenulation of mountains, softened by the virescence of an arboreal blanket, receded under an atmospheric haze.

“I hope I didn’t come all this way for fucking nothing,” he muttered as he got out of the silver Audi Q10.

Luca was acting on a hunch that he’d find his brothers and their soldiers at the hidden cabin not too far from Ridge Trail. Marco had chosen this location for a secret hideout since it was situated close to Brisbane, a small community situated twenty miles south of San Francisco— where no one would think to search for them. Marco had donated a substantial sum of money to Jackson Killings, the California Secretary for Natural Resources at the time, to obtain ownership for the parcel of land. It was perfect. Disguised on the outside to resemble a revetment to house firefighting equipment and well away from the beaten track of hiking trails, it was invisible unless stumbled on by sheer luck.

The pebbles around the cabin crunched under his soles as he walked toward the front door. Marco didn’t believe in doing anything half-hearted— not even a place that was purpose-built for a hideout. It sprouted from his love for everything luxurious, which was depicted in the two-storied home he’d built there.

Luca pushed against the door, which easily swung open into a large, airy entrance hall. The fact that it wasn’t locked confirmed someone was in residence. For a moment he didn’t move as he soaked in the relaxing ambience of the interior.

The floor was a herringbone parquet with a blend of deep browns. The walls were sandstone and added to the warm interior of the house. Twirling branches of ironwood made up the banisters, tamed by a carpenter's hand, was the focal point. Its aqueous grain flowed gracefully in waves of woodland hues. Under the lamp-shine, it was nature's art.

Luca was reminded once again of the intricacies that made up the DNA of his father. No one in the crime world would believe he had a love for art and nature. It was a contradiction to the brutality he was known for.

He turned his head and listened. A muted rustle coming from the grand entry drew his attention, urging him to withdraw a semi-automatic from his waistband as he moved deeper into the cabin. His steps were muted as he walked under the arch created by the staircases on either side of the room. A lesson he had learned under his father's tutelage was never to be complacent. Always be prepared for the unexpected. If the situation demanded it, shoot to kill.

Unlike his younger brothers, Luca wasn't trigger happy but he had no intention of getting shot by his jackass siblings. Whoever was here must've heard his SUV drive up, which gave them ample time to prepare an ambush.

His nose quivered in disgust as he entered the living area. It was a cluttered mess with various pieces of clothes strewn over the sofas and chairs. He didn't need any further clues that this uber-chaos was the work of Stefano, his youngest brother. The empty bottles of beer and partially drunken glasses of hard liquor that were littered everywhere was proof enough.

"Get your asses out here, you fucking imbeciles," he bellowed.

"Luca? Hell, brother, you shoulda called out sooner. I nearly shot your fucking ass," Stefano said as he appeared from a room down the hallway.

Luca holstered his gun. Anger flowed through his body like deathly poison as he watched Rocco and Stefano approach. The purple bruises covering their faces told a tale without words. The volcano inside him threatened to erupt. He had been right. They had kidnapped Senator Wilson's daughter. What sparked his rage was knowing they'd been caught.

"You better start talking, Stefano."

"Hey, bro! How about a hug first?" Stefano hedged with a wary look in his eyes.

They knew firsthand how volatile their brother could become when angered.

Stefano's words were like a red rag to a bull. Luca's face bloomed crimson.

"I don't have time for your fucking games," he snarled as his hands clenched into fists. His jaw locked as he nodded toward the sofa. "Sit the fuck down before you pass out, you idiot."

Rocco's left eye was so badly swollen that he couldn't see out of it. Stefano nursed a set of cracked ribs and swollen fingers. "Before you get your boxers all in a twist, big brother, just listen to us," Rocco tried to reason with him. The fury that exploded in Luca's eyes at his audacity to ridicule the Underboss of the Boneiro Mafia made him wince. He held up his hand apologetically. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it but you already judged and found us guilty without knowing what happened."

"Yeah! Rocco is right." Stefano gestured at his bruised face. "You should be thanking us instead of bludgeoning us with your scorn. We're fuckin' heroes but I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise that these bruises are the only medals of honor we'll get for our trouble."

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“Bludgeoning? That’s a big word coming from you, Stefano. Whose company have you been keeping recently?” Luca taunted him as he sat down in a chair opposite from them.

“I’m fuckin’ sick and tired of how you’re always humiliating us, Luca. We’re not stupid.” Rocco shifted under Luca’s regard. “We might use unorthodox methods at times but you fuckin’ know that everything we do; we do for the family.”

“We are as educated as you and yes, I know fucking big words. Just because I’m a free spirit who likes to have fun in between doesn’t mean I’m any less committed to our cause than you.” Stefano groaned as he leaned forward. Pain slashed across his face. “Fuck, I think I’ve got broken ribs too.” He gnashed on his teeth. “Fucking bastard!”

“And therein lies the crux of my anger, Stefano. Based on the fact that both of you look like you were punching bags for more than a couple of fists, it’s not difficult to make an educated guess what happened.” One eyebrow crawled higher. “Well? I’m waiting.”

Stefano squirmed under Luca’s sharp glare. He glanced at Rocco. He had a feeling that Luca already knew what they had done but reveled in making them suffer. In some ways he was worse than Marco Boneiro. Their father hardly showed his emotions except when in the presence of their mother, Isabella. He doted on her and he openly showed his love for her. Luca, on the other hand, was devoid of emotion. Stefano often wondered if he was born that way since he couldn’t recall ever seeing him laugh or show any signs of enjoyment.

Luca had little time for his two younger brothers. It had been like that as far back as Stefano could remember. At times, he believed that Luca hated them, or at the very least, resented them for ever being born.

“This is bullshit.” Rocco jumped up, pushed open the sliding door and stood staring out over the rolling hills to give himself a moment to calm down. He and Stefano always had to fight to be acknowledged in the Boneiro Family. It was past time their efforts were appreciated. He snapped at his older brother. “At least we tried to do something. We didn’t fuck off to Sierra Leone like you did. You know as well as I do that we can’t afford that rough diamond importation bill to be passed. Our entire business would crumble.”

“Exactly,” Stefano interjected. “We had no idea when you and the Boss were planning on returning. We had to do something.”

“Hmm.” Luca linked his fingers together over his stomach. He looked between them. “And you did what?”

“Get off your high horse, Luca. You already know what we did.” Rocco walked to the bar in the corner. He was agitated as he poured a stiff bourbon. Everyone feared Marco Boneiro but the two brothers dreaded Luca. To them, he represented the devil incarnate— always had, since they were kids. He was Marco’s right hand man, his confidant and the only one in the Mob who had the Don’s approval to fix a problem in the Family.

“You kidnapped Senator Wilson’s daughter.”

“Fuckin’ right we did,” Stefano boasted. “We had Wilson in the bag!”

“Which is why you were detained and beaten and are now hiding here, you fucking geniuses.”

Rocco bristled at the humiliating remark. “Everything went according to plan.” He hammered the neat Jack Daniels and poured another. “We have no fucking idea how those bastards found out we had her or how they tracked her to our house.”

“Marco’s house, which means the one place he and mom had always called home is now on every Fed’s shit list. What the fuck were you thinking?” He gestured toward their faces. “Who tuned you up? I find it hard to believe the SFPD or the Feds did this to you. We would’ve known if they were onto us.”

“We don’t know. They wore balaclavas when they interrogated us. We were kept in steel-walled rooms for two days and when they couldn’t get anything out of us, they dumped us off the bridge in Lake Merced Park.” Rocco took a sip of his drink. “We then made our way here.”

“And the others?”

Rocco and Stefano looked at each other.

“What others?” Stefano winced as Luca shot a searing glance at him. “We don’t know. There are no reports that Wilson’s daughter has been found. Dante and Enzo managed to escape. They’re probably holed up at the Pier 70 warehouses.”

“Which means four of them were captured.” Luca shook his head in disgust. “You totally fucked up. Kidnapping is not our MO. You know that. Marco had already put a plan into play. Now, everything is fucked up thanks to both of you. Un-fucking believable!”

“Oh yeah? Whose fucking fault is that? You never tell us anything.” Rocco glared at Luca. “You and the Boss treat us like shit! We’re family for fuck’s sake! Shouldn’t that give us priority over the rest of the crew? To at least know what is going on?”

Luca got up to join Rocco at the bar. He stared at Rocco as he poured himself a drink.

“Why the sudden desire to have inside information on how the Don’s mind works, brother? The two of you are caporegimes of your own regions. The Don has rarely shot down any of your suggestions. Neither he nor I have ever interfered. What made you think you had the right to interfere in something that’s outside of your jurisdiction... or demand information that’s got nothing to do with you.” Luca tilted his head back to drain the glass. He reveled in the warmth as the liquor burned down his throat. “If there’s one thing Marco would never be accused of, it’s nepotism.”

“Says the big Underboss... who is Marco’s oldest son!” Stefano teamed. He walked to the patio where he lit a cigarette. He glared at Luca over his shoulder. “How’s that for nepotism, big brother?”

Luca didn’t bother to respond to the accusation. His brothers knew it was unfounded. He’d been voted in unanimously as the Underboss when the position became available. There had been no doubt in anyone’s mind that he was the perfect man for the job. The entire mob, including the members of the other four Mafia Families in the U.S., regarded him as Marco’s successor. There were those in the family who looked to him for advice.

“You wish me to believe they pummeled you black and blue and you didn’t give them shit?” Luca returned to the matter at hand.

Rocco shot a scornful look at him. “What they did to us pales in comparison to what you did when you... how did you word it again... prepared us as capos.” He went outside to join Stefano. Luca watched them but didn’t follow. “I got the impression it’s not us they’re after. They want the Boss... and you.”

“Yeah, they wanted him in custody but I told the bastard you and he had been on vacation for the past two weeks so they had fuckall.” Stefano glared at Luca. “Why

else would they have let us go?”

“Yes, little brother, tell me. It’s a question I’ve been asking myself. They caught you with the little girl which proved that you were involved in her kidnapping. Why didn’t they charge you? Then dump you at a lake?”

Rocco and Stefano looked quizzically at Luca. They’d thought themselves lucky to be let go. Now, they had to wonder why.

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“Did they plant trackers on you?” Luca’s gaze sharpened as his eyes studied every cut and bruise.

“No fucking way,” Stefano snapped. “We might have been out now and then but definitely not long enough for them to do that.” He glanced at Rocco. “Right?”

Rocco didn’t respond. He stared at Luca. “What are you thinking?”

“You fucked up. That’s what I’m thinking. And now, you’re gonna fix it. Other than Dante and Enzo, who else was at the house when it was raided?”

“Antonio, Flavio, Andrea, and Luigi.” Rocco squirmed uncomfortably. “We believe they’re in the FBI’s custody.”

“You believe or you know?” Luca snapped.

“We know. I contacted our informant and he confirmed they were charged with the kidnapping.”

Luca didn’t respond for long moments. His expression darkened as the anger began to boil from afresh.

“Lucky for you. This scenario might be your get-out-of-jail card.”

“What do you want us to do,” Stefano asked. He’d been itching to get off the mountain. Hiding out in the bush was okay for a day or two but he was going stir-crazy. He needed to be back in the city.

“Deal with those four in custody. We can’t afford to have them arraigned in court on kidnapping charges. The Feds will offer them a plea bargain if they talk.

“You wish us to break them out of jail?” Rocco pushed his hands in his pockets.

“I thought you were clever? Get hold of our attorney, you fuckwit and fix this mess or you will carry the consequences.”

The message was clear. Failure wasn’t an option. Murder, if needed, was.

“Hey, Angelo, isn’t this fun?” The voice of the young eight-year-old Luca teemed over the powerful thrum of a powerboat flying across the water.

Angelo glanced at his little brother. He forced a smile as he reached out to ruffle his dark hair. If only he knew this weekend trip to Hawaii and a deep-sea boat excursion for the two boys had nothing to do with fun. He had fucked up and his father was out to teach him a lesson.

“Yeah, little bro, it is.” He wrapped his arm around Luca’s thin shoulders as he cuddled against his side.

“Dad, are we gonna go surfing once we go back to shore?”

Marco Boneiro grunted but didn’t respond. Luca wasn’t put off as his chatter continued nonstop until the boat rocked to a stop. He sat up and looked around. His face fell.

“Why did we stop? There’s nothing here. How far are we from Hawaii now, Angelo?”

“Not too far.” The expression on Angelo’s thirteen-year old face was one of

resignation. He already knew what his punishment was going to be. They were hundreds of miles from land. It wouldn't be the first time that his father tested his strength by dumping him in the ocean. It was all about survival. Something Angelo had learned from a very young age. He had been rebelling against becoming part of the crime world his father reveled in. He refused to give in. It had all come to this. He was supposed to be in court in the morning as the key witness to the brutal death of Senator Barton since he'd been there when John Gotti had plunged the knife into his heart. He was also the one who had ratted him out to the police. Marco wanted him to retract his testimony. He refused, which is what had brought them here.

He looked around with the fear he'd been doing his best to contain rising to the surface. Geography was his best subject at school. He knew exactly where they were— Maui County in Hawaii. Reality set in for the first time since Marco had forced him onto the boat. This wasn't a test of his endurance or to keep him away from court.

This was his execution.

It was the last thought flashing through his mind when his father picked him up and threw him overboard... into the shark infested water where more people were killed than he cared to remember.

He stared at his father, shaken by the blatant hatred he saw there as he leaned forward and spat through thin lips, "Let's see how clever you are this time, you little bastard." His eyes narrowed. "If you're lucky enough to survive, don't come home. You are no longer a son of mine."

"Dad? Why did you throw Angelo in the water?" Luca stared wide-eyed at his brother treading water a short distance from the boat. He didn't understand what was happening or why Angelo didn't try to get back onto the boat. "Take my hand, Angelo! I'll help... owww!" he screamed as Marco slapped him against the back of

the head with such force, he fell to the floor.

“Leave him be. He is exactly where he’s meant to be.”

“But Dad—”

“Quiet!”

Luca bore upright and peered over the side of the boat as Marco started the engine. His eyes widened as he realized his father intended to leave his beloved brother behind.

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“No! Angelo! Swim to the boat! Come quickly, please!” His screams were muted as the powerful engine burst to life. Luca jumped up, hysterical, as he pointed at a dorsal fin cutting through the water.

“No, Dad! Help him! There’s a shark! Help... no!”

Luca’s cries continued as the boat sped off. He persisted to plead with Marco to save his brother. To turn back... all to no avail. He fell to his knees between the seats, horrified at the vision of the number of shark fins he’d seen approaching his defenseless brother who’d paid no attention to them. Instead he’d watched the boat disappear.

“Angelo! Angelo!”

Luca started as the sound of his voice ripped him from the nightmare— the same one he’d been having for the past thirty-five years. He stared through the window at the hills. The silver shafts of moonlight cast its pitch-black shadows across the landscape. He closed his eyes as the sound of his brother’s voice echoed in his mind— like it always did after the dream. Accusing, sad, and empty. It was always the same.

"Why did you let me die, Luca? How could you let him kill me?"

The horror of the nightmare rippled through Luca. The trauma of witnessing his father leave his brother to be killed in such a brutal way had forever destroyed the innocent young boy inside him. At the young age of eight, he became an empty shell. He was reminded of that day every morning when he looked in the mirror and saw the sadness reflected in his eyes. He carried an impenetrable sorrow that had robbed

him of the ability to feel compassion.

It took him years to realize why Marco had taken him along that day. It had been the first lesson he'd been taught about the world of the Mafia. Oppose him and he wouldn't hesitate to end your life— no matter who or what you were to him. It was also the day the chatterbox, carefree, and smiling young boy ceased to exist. He molded himself into a replica of his father, except he was colder and as impassive as a rock.

He had felt sorry for his brother Rocco when he was born ten months after Angelo's death and even more for Stefano, eight years after that. To him, they were nothing other than young soldiers to be trained like he had been, to serve the American Mafia.

Pawns on a chessboard of whom Marco Boneiro was the master.

Chapter Nine

"I love you to bits, Kezlin but that asshat is cramping our style." Knox crossed her legs as she sat down at the boardroom table at the Red Reign PI Agency's offices.

"You're telling me! Total asshole." She snorted irritably. "Luckily, he's not my real brother."

Paxton smiled at Kezlin's response. She lambasted anyone who dared refer to him as such. To her, he was her brother, period. Her parents adopted him as a fifteen-year-old teenager before she was born. They all knew she adored Jared.

"Funny how I'm not your real brother when you don't get your way, squirt."

Kezlin wasn't at all perturbed at being caught red-handed. She peeked at Jared over her shoulder. "At least you acknowledge you're an asshole," she said.

“And you’re wasting my time,” he muttered as he sat down next to her. He looked at Paxton sitting at the head of the table. “I’m all ears, Mrs. Lee.”

Paxton raised her eyebrows. “You wormed your way into my team, Bates. In the future, make sure you arrive on time for our meetings. I don’t appreciate my time being wasted.”

He suppressed a smile. It was a thirty-minute drive to Oyster Bay with no traffic. During rush hour in the morning, over an hour. Something she must know since she didn’t live too far from him.

“Of course. My apologies. Next time, I’ll be sure to have the chopper on standby. At least that way I’ll be on time after being informed of a meeting ten minutes ahead of time.”

She crossed her arms. Her eyes flashed as she stared him down.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Commander Bates, but weren’t you the one who emphatically told me you were now on my team and would be working the case with us?” She straightened as he nodded. “To me, that means you follow the same rules as the rest of my girls. We have set working hours, daily feedback meetings and training sessions, all of which Jordan assured me she discussed with you yesterday.”

“You are correct. I’ve been tardy and I apologize.”

Paxton’s fixed glare issued a warning. The disingenuous tone of his voice triggered her anger. If there was one thing she abhorred, it was being mocked. Jared Bates did a poor job of hiding it.

“Don’t patronize me, Bates. If you insist on being part of the Red Reign PI team, it would be wise to remember that I’m your boss. Either you respect that or you leave.”

He held up his hands. “Accepted. It won’t happen again. I’m one-hundred-percent on board from this moment on.”

“Jordan, let’s start, please.”

“If you insist, although I have to admit watching the electric tête-à-tête between the two of you is much more interesting than—” she laughed at the killing stare Paxton shot at her. “Right. Let’s begin with the different properties Bastian Conti owns.” She flicked her finger over the iPad she held in her hand. Images of four houses appeared on the large monitor against the wall. “Top left is the family home in Pacific Palisades.” She looked at Paxton. “The interesting fact is that it’s a couple of blocks away from the house where Courtney Wilson was found.”

“That in itself is a coincidence. Many celebrities live in that suburb. It’s the elite place to be in San Francisco.”

“Top right is the family holiday home in Santa Monica where they spend one weekend of every month as well as a couple of weeks during summer holidays when they’re not vacationing abroad.” She gestured to the two-story house at the bottom left. “That’s the one Hannah Conti believes Bastian set up for his lover.”

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“That’s Blackpoint Beach at The Sea Ranch further up the coast,” Jared said as he studied the picture.

“How do you know?” Knox leaned forward to stare at him.

“Because he owns a beach house there,” Kezlin interjected.

“I managed to obtain copies of the deed. It’s like Hannah said. The property was registered in her name. Bastian must’ve forged her signature since she’s registered as the sole owner.” Jordan pointed at the last photo. “Now that mansion is in Malibu Colony Beach in Los Angeles. Hannah is also registered as the sole owner of the property.”

“That’s a damn expensive house to stand empty for the past couple of years,” Paxton said thoughtfully. “Do you have any current satellite images of these two properties?”

“I hacked into the live big brother eye overhead. Check this out.” Jordan opened the app on her iPad and with a flick of her wrist a satellite image appeared on the monitor. “I recorded this yesterday afternoon.” She zoomed in on a silver sports car pulling into the driveway of the house at The Sea Ranch. “It’s our Swiss model, Mia Kunz,” she said, smugly. “I think we can safely say that Mrs. Conti’s suspicions have been confirmed. That woman is definitely Bastian’s lover.” She fast-forwarded until a black SUV arrived at the house. The passenger— Bastian Conti. “He didn’t leave until eight this morning.”

“What about the one in Malibu Colony?” Jared leaned his elbows on the desk as he studied the satellite image Jordan pulled up. He seemed tense but his expression

didn't change.

"There seems to be a full-time gardener and two housekeepers who live on the property. As you can see, it's furnished and well cared for." Jordan looked at the monitor. "I'm trying to hack into the system..." She glanced at Jared. "Which you didn't hear me just say," she said with a frown.

His lips curved into a ghost of a smile. He seemed distracted. "You won't get past their firewall. I suggest you phone Cruz and ask him to help you get into NASA's real time system. He knows all the backdoors into every satellite and storage system they operate."

Jordan's eyes lit up at the prospect of getting her hands-on Cruz's spaceship-like console. "I'll do that." She looked at Paxton. "If it's okay with you."

"Of course. The quicker we get some answers, the sooner Hannah Conti can find out why her husband linked her name to a house like that or the one in Sea Ranch." Paxton paged through the documentation containing all the intel Jordan had been able to gather on the Conti couple.

"My gut instinct tells me there's more to the house in Malibu Beach," Knox mused. "He had to have bought it with a purpose in mind. We need to find out what that was."

"If we can get into NASA's stored imagery, we might be able to pull up historical recordings. They usually store up to twelve months' worth. If there was anyone at that house during that time, Cruz and Jordan should be able to find it," Jared said.

"Good. Jordan, get hold of Cruz asap." Jordan eagerly jumped up. "Before you go, is Miss Kunz still in the house at The Sea Ranch?" Paxton asked.

Jordan's fingers raced over her iPad as she typed in a command. "Yes, the car is still there. Let me zoom in to the pool area... ah, yes. She's sunbathing." She gestured to the monitor. "I'll leave the links open so you can keep track of her movements. Kezlin knows how to operate the system." She waved as she exited the room. "See you later."

Jared got up and stretched lazily. "What do you want me to do, Mrs. Lee?"

"You and I are going to your beach house. Don't you think it's the neighborly thing to do to introduce ourselves to a new tenant?"

"It's a two-hour drive, Paxton."

"Did I imagine that black Sikorsky S-97 chopper in the hangar above The Cobra's operation bunker, Commander Bates?"

"You didn't. I'll check with Brock if it's been returned. The FBI's Hostage Rescue Team used it. But Tanner could use some additional hours of pilot training."

"Well, let's help him add some hours to his logbooks, Commander. What better way to bone up on the flight controls than a quickie up the coast? I hear that thing has some serious grunt. I just happen to have my flight suit in the trunk of my car. What're we doing standing around jaw-waggin'? Let's boot."

Bates looked at his watch. There were eight hours until the sun was a hand's breadth above the horizon.

"When was the last time you hot-roped out of a chopper, Mrs. Lee? He cocked his head and smiled at her. "Bring your tactical kit. I'm guessing you could use a refresher course. Let's log this as an air-assault training mission."

“Not that I’m not up for it but do we really want to draw that much attention to our arrival?”

He laughed at her expression. “You need to learn when I’m pulling your leg, Mrs. Lee. I’ll pilot and we’ll land at a private airfield. I’m ready. Let’s do it.” He didn’t wait for an answer and strode out of the boardroom.

“I’ll meet you at your house. That way I can go straight home once we return,” Paxton called after him.

He reappeared in the doorway. “Let’s go, Paxton. We’re burning daylight. If you insist on driving your own car, I’ll follow you.”

Paxton thought better than to snap back at him. She had accepted his protection. He’d set up a security team who had invaded their offices and kept guard all day long. It was senseless to keep balking against being protected.

“Knox, I want you and Kezlin to dig deeper into Mia Kunz. I want to know everything about her. Start at her birth and work your way forward. I want the names of every person, family, friends, enemies in her past and present life.”

“Is it really necessary to go that far? She’s a model. If you ask me, she’s sleeping with him to break into acting.” Kezlin looked at the monitor. “Or she’s after his money. Take your pick.”

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“Just do it, Kezlin. I have a feeling there’s more to her than meets the eye.” She got up and walked towards Jared. “We’ll probably be back late, so I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Make that a couple of days from now.”

Paxton frowned at Jared. “This is a quick trip for one purpose, Bates. We’ll be back today.”

“I don’t get much time to go out to Sea Ranch. I intend to make the most of this trip. Besides, I’ve got a communications room set up there, so we can keep in contact and have your daily meeting via satellite. Besides, if you really wish to find out more about Mia Kunz, what better way than to befriend her? She might open up to you.”

“I hardly think so, Bates.”

“Then think about this. She lives almost three hours from where the action is. Doesn’t it make you wonder why Bastian bought her a house so far from where he lives? Why is he hiding her in a small community where his presence would stick out like dog’s balls? She must be lonely. I’m sure she’d be more than happy for some female companionship.”

“I hate to agree with him, Paxton, but he has a point,” Knox said in a quiet voice. “We can dig as deep as we want but making a personal connection with her would be an invaluable source of information.”

“Alright, you made your point. Let’s hit it. I just gotta make a pitstop to pack a bag.”

Jared stepped back and waved Paxton through the door.

She bestowed a Mona Lisa smile on him. Inside, she wasn't as confident about the trip. Living with Jared Bates in his house, just the two of them...

She banned all thoughts from her mind as she marched to her SUV. They were both grown-ups— hard-assed military professionals. He might be twice her size but she'd kick his ass if need be.

But you won't.

"You're right, I won't," she muttered to herself as she got into the car. They were sexually attracted to each other. The submissive inside her yearned for his domination. If this was the opportunity to explore that possibility further... then so be it.

She had always chased her dreams and desires. She'd found it with Rex years ago. He had been gone for a long time. It was time to reach out and take what Jared Bates offered.

Paxton glanced in the rearview mirror. The black Hummer followed a couple of yards behind her.

"You already admitted you want him, Paxton. You're cutting off your nose to spite your face by playing hard to get." She listened to her voice echoing back at her. "It's time to take the plunge... but this relationship will be on my terms. If what I want isn't what he's after, then this trip will be the ideal opportunity to set the record straight."

"Are you ever going to tell me why you're investigating Marco Boneiro?" Paxton glanced at Jared as he started the Toyota Land Cruiser. They had landed at a private

airfield just outside of Sea Ranch five minutes ago. The flight had mostly been spent in polite conversation getting to know each other although she was aware that he probably already knew everything about her. She, on the other hand, was left frustrated since he didn't offer much information about himself.

"I already told you that we're trying to find intel that would enable us to put the five Mafia leaders behind bars."

"Yes, but I also know that the American Mafia isn't active in drug smuggling and sex workers like they were in the eighties. They're concentrating on legal activities to fund their illegal business. From what I could find, it seems that the FBI now focuses more on homeland security and less on organized crime since the September 11 attacks. No, Bates, there's more to it than what you're letting on."

Jared glanced sideways at her. He should've known she wouldn't let go until her curiosity was satisfied.

"You're right, to an extent. In the twenty-first century, the Mafia has gotten a lot smarter about gaming the system. Their criminality extends to and includes murder, gambling, tax fraud schemes, loan sharking, extortion, stock manipulation schemes, infiltration of legitimate businesses, corruption of public officials, and labor racketeering. The majority of their activities are confined to Chicago and the Northeast but with Boneiro here their presence has gained momentum in California over the past thirty years. The Chinese Triads, Mexican drug cartels and the Russian Mafia have invaded their territory for many years but they are still the dominant criminal organization overall."

"Is that why they're not interested in pushing drugs and sex trafficking anymore?"

"They're after bigger, faster returns. The Mafia has been regrouping from the RICO Act turmoil during 1990. In exchange for assurance of being protected under the U.S.

Federal Witness Protection Program, dozens of mobsters testified and provided information that led to the imprisonment of hundreds of mobsters. We're expecting a possible resurgence. They're tapping the country dry, Paxton. The FBI estimates that the Mafia earns over a hundred billion dollars a year— all tax free. They've gotten clever over the years and are outsourcing many of their work to motorcycle gangs and other criminal syndicates.”

“And that’s how they avoid getting on the FBI’s radar and not be prosecuted?”

Jared nodded.

“Okay, I get it but you’re gunning for Boneiro specifically. Why?”

“You're not going to let it go, are you?”

“Nope. I’m curious by nature, so c’mon, Bates. Spill it.”

“It’s highly classified intel, Paxton. As a professional, I’m sure you can understand why I can’t disclose any of it to a civilian.”

“And here I thought our relationship had been moving forward.” Her look seared him with reproach. “I’m slightly insulted.”

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“Trying to manipulate me isn’t going to work.” He cut the engine.

Paxton looked around, surprised to see they had reached their destination.

“But I trust you, which is why I will tell you this... purely so you realize just how dangerous Boneiro is. He has an agenda that none of his peers in The Commission are aware of. It’s a case of National Security. I need you to promise me that you will not talk about this... not to anyone.”

“It sounds serious,” She studied him intently. “I won’t divulge anything you tell me, Jared. My word is my honor.”

“The Cobras are more than a black ops group. We’re also an extra judicial subgroup in the NSA.”

Paxton blinked. “So, that’s why you can act outside of the rule of law.”

“Yes, but we strive not to. It’s only under the most extreme circumstances that we... how shall I say . . . operate outside the legal limitations of the law.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Go on.”

“Six months ago the NSA received a dossier from the FBI. It was handed to them by MI6.”

“MI6? What British dossier could possibly impact the U.S.?”

“The Italian Ambassador to the U.S., Alberto Casanuevo, handed it to a MI6 agent during a visit to London. It contained information he couldn’t personally hand over to the FBI without serious repercussions to his standing in the Italian community if he leaked it, but MI6 could.”

“I see,” Paxton mused. “I suppose the dossier had something to incriminate Boneiro.”

“It’s a detailed assassination plan on the United States President.”

“What? Then why is he still walking around free?”

“Because there is nothing concrete to link him to it directly. The President, his family and his cabinet are under 24/7 protection not only by the Secret Service but also by elite Special Op teams from Quantico’s Hostage Rescue Team. We can’t afford having Boneiro getting wind of our knowledge of his plan.”

“What could he possibly achieve by killing President Anderson?”

“He might be trying to reenact the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Conspiracy theories claimed that the mafia was involved because of the enmity created when JFK and his brother Robert campaigned to end the influence the mob had on the Teamsters labor union.”

“What reason does Boneiro have?”

“President Anderson is heading up a campaign to put a stop to tax evasion through the gambling sector which is predominantly run by mobsters— particularly in the Los Angeles region. As many as eighty-five percent of casinos are owned and run by the Mafia. It’s their main source of money laundering and tax evasion.”

“Wouldn’t an assassination then implicate the Mafia?”

“Remember what I said earlier about them outsourcing work. Boneiro is too clever by half to be directly involved. He’ll have an airtight alibi.”

“Which is why you’re on his back 24/7?”

“Yeah, but he’s as slippery as an eel, which is why we lost him when he disappeared a couple of weeks ago. For years, we’ve been grooming an original old-world player to infiltrate his mob in the guise of a consigliere. This guy’s a who’s who in the mob. He wanted out and this was the only exit for him.”

“I don’t suppose it’s easy to infiltrate their ranks.”

“It’s not.” Jared opened the door. “Let’s get inside. I phoned ahead, so I imagine my housekeeper would’ve had time to dust, vacuum and stock us up with some groceries.”

“It’s a beautiful house,” Paxton turned in a circle as they stepped inside the house minutes later. “The view is spectacular.”

“That’s the beauty of Sea Ranch. The house was designed to have ocean views from almost every room.”

Paxton drifted from room to room, appreciating the open, dramatic interiors with vaulted ceilings, Italian tile fireplaces, and expansive, two-story windows that enhanced the ocean views in every direction. She was in awe of the large kitchen with a center island, double oven, two cast iron sinks and Italian marble countertops. She could envision herself in the romantic master bedroom and ensuite bath with its glass ceiling, spa tub, and separate shower. Not to mention imagining an intimate scene with the owner of the house in front of the cozy fireplace during winter.

“This is what a family home should be like,” she said as she returned downstairs to

join Jared on the patio.

“It’s where I come to get away. Here, I can relax and immerse myself in nature. It has that much of an effect on me.” He smiled sardonically. “Don’t be surprised if you meet a totally different man in the morning.”

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“Well... now that’s an intriguing prospect.”

Chapter Ten

“If I had property on this place, I would permanently live here. It’s so tranquil.” Paxton briefly closed her eyes and breathed in the salt air as they walked along a bluff in the direction of Bastian’s house.

Jared gazed out over the turquoise ocean. It floated in the void free of gravity. He loved the sea, respected its power. He understood its beauty and its dangers. From when he was little, he’d been fascinated by the eternal crash and hiss of waves upon a rocky shore; their curling fingers brushing each stone with a gentle caress of an inbound tide. He watched as the sun shined off the rippling water, its golden light warped in the twisted, glass-like flags. No description could truly capture its mysterious majesty, yet only a few words expressed its beauty.

The ocean had been his savior once, many years ago.

“One day I’ll move here permanently.”

Paxton glanced at him. “Let me guess... after Marco Boneiro is behind bars.”

Jared smiled. “You’re starting to know me well.”

“I’m a quick study, Commander Bates.”

“I suppose it’s time to slip into our roles as a loving married couple,” he said as his

fingers folded around her hand in a warm clasp.

“Do modern couples still hold hands?” She was doing her best to keep her poise. The last thing she’d expected when he took her hand was the spark of electricity that caused a shudder to race throughout her body.

“I’m old school. I’ll hold the hand of the woman I love until my dying breath.”

She laughed but swallowed her mirth as she realized he was serious. “That sounds a little cheesy, even for you, Bates.”

“I guess I’m old-fashioned insofar as romance is concerned.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

He looked at her. “Why is that?”

“Come on, Jared.” She flicked her finger up and down to indicate his body. “Look at you. You have the kind of body women drool over and you’re not too bad to look at either. I bet you have women lining up to go down on you.”

“Can’t say I noticed.” His expression turned broody.

“Hmm... workaholic, I suppose. No time for relaxation and playing hide the salami with a willing sexual partner.”

“I have sex quite often, Miss Nosy, but I limit it to the BDSM club I belong to.”

“In other words, you have no interest in a lasting, loving relationship with a woman outside of the club?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What happened to your wife? I mean, you mentioned twins but not... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t pry.”

“You do jump from one extreme to the other, don’t you?”

“What’d you expect? You weren’t exactly forthcoming with your personal life on the flight over.” She inched her chin higher as she returned his direct stare. “Besides, you made it blatantly clear that you and I are going to have a relationship so I believe it’s my right to ask you as many questions as needed to get clarity on just who and what you are.”

“A Dom/sub relationship requires that you trust your Dom to know what it is your body needs as well as caring for you and protecting you. It doesn’t mean I’m going to spill my guts for you.”

Paxton laughed. “Talk about extremes.” She stopped and stared at him. “A relationship, Jared. That’s what I’m interested in. Yes, I concede it will have an element of BDSM but I want the whole enchilada. Falling in love and holding hands until our dying breath— to use your words. I’m not interested in a half-assed, one dimensional Dom/sub agreement. That kind of life is not in my DNA. Take it or leave it, Jared, but it’s not negotiable.”

She pulled her hand free and started walking again. She hissed as his hot breath suddenly teased her neck. His hard arm encircled her waist as she stumbled. A shiver raced up her spine as he ran his fingers through her hair while his lips found all the sensitive spots on her silky skin. Every passionate touch was a promise of wicked delight. With a gentle hand around her throat, he pulled her against his warm body.

“You have my answer, Mrs. Lee.” The next moment he was gone. She spun around to

watch him pick up the picnic basket he'd dropped. Their eyes met. "I hope you're ready for me, Paxton. Believe me when I say the road ahead is going to be bumpy."

"I expect it to be." Her voice was soft, entreating and filled with wonder. He chuckled at the confusion he read in her eyes.

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He'd surprised her yet again. The last thing she'd expected was his ready acceptance of her ultimatum.

He tucked her against his side and started walking. Paxton had the uncomfortable feeling that she'd been sidelined. The damn man had played her like a fiddle. She felt like the bait which had been caught in his trap—hook, line, and sinker.

“That was low, Bates.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about, Lee.”

“Of course you don't,” she mumbled as they broke through the thicket. “It seems Miss Kunz loves the sun. She's still at the poolside,” she said as the house they'd been heading for came into view.

“I've seen her in a bikini shot in a sports magazine. A tan like that takes long hours in the sun.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as he kissed her. “I much prefer your natural skin color, little one,” he said. The kiss ended much too soon for Paxton's liking. His lips were quickly becoming addictive.

His smile widened as he caught the gaze of a beautiful young woman on the pool lounge. “Morning, neighbor,” he called as he guided Paxton up the short flight of stairs. “I apologize for the intrusion but the moment we heard there was a new tenant we just had to pop over to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

“You're not intruding,” Mia said as she leaned forward to proffer a hand. “I'm Mia Kunz,” she purred to Jared. Her eyes slid to Paxton minus the courtesy.

A little devil on Paxton's shoulder urged her on. She stuck out her hand. "Hi, I'm Poppy Simms and this is my husband, William."

Mia was forced to shake her hand, which she did with a limp clasp. Paxton bit back a smile. She'd seen how Mia caressed Jared's palm before she'd relaxed her grip.

"Poppy? Is that a nickname?" Mia asked as she got up, arranging her lithe form into a seductive pose with one hand low on her hip and the other caressing her thigh. All aimed at drawing Jared's eyes to her charms on display in a skimpy white bikini.

"No," Paxton shrugged. "My mother was a nature lover. Poppies were her favorite flower." She leaned closer and whispered, "Although my dad told me she actually gave me the name because I was conceived in a poppy field."

"How quaint." The smile on Mia's face was forced at best but her eyes turned sparkly as she looked at Jared. "William on the other hand is such a strong name." She licked her lips as she moved her hips to and fro.

Paxton was hard pressed not to roll her eyes at the obvious attempt to seduce Jared. It said much about the Swiss model's character. Maybe her instincts were wrong and she was nothing more than an opportunistic young woman.

"Family name," Jared said shortly. He lifted the basket. "We brought lunch... that is if you'd like to share it with us?"

"How neighborly of you." She gestured toward the luxurious garden set. "I'd love to have lunch with you. Shall we?"

Paxton smirked as she watched her preceding them, hips swaying elaborately; she tossed her hair with every step she took. Miss Mia Kunz was a siren on a pair of never-ending legs. No wonder Bastian Conti offered her a home where he could visit

her at his heart's content. She peeked at Jared. His eyes were glued on her tight ass and swaying hips. No surprise there! He wouldn't be a hot-blooded man if he didn't appreciate the view.

"Careful not to trip over your tongue, Bates," she said under her breath.

"Beauty should be appreciated but that doesn't mean I'm ready to pounce on her. She's young enough to be my daughter." His gaze glimmered with appreciation as he looked her over. She was pure seduction in a strapless sundress. "You, on the other hand—"

"Is there a problem?" Mia watched them with interest.

"No problem. My wife just scolded me because I forgot a corkscrew." Jared placed the basket on the table and smiled ruefully. "I tend to be a little distracted at times."

"Well, no need to be concerned Mrs. Simms. I'll fetch one from the kitchen." She stopped a couple of steps away. "Shall I get glasses and plates as well?"

"No need. Those I remembered." She returned Jared's smile with a sensual wink before she disappeared.

"What was that? An invitation to join her in the kitchen for a quickie?" Paxton opened the basket and started to unpack it. "Could the woman be more obvious?"

"Do I detect a spark of jealousy, Mrs. Lee?"

Paxton snorted but took care to avoid his eyes. "Dream on. I'm not the jealous type. I'm just wondering what her agenda is with Bastian if she's so eager to spark your interest."

“I do believe it’s only my libido she’s interested in setting alight.”

“I’d have to concur with you on that.”

“Here we go,” Mia said in a chirpy voice as she returned seconds later. “Please, sit down.”

Jared opened the bottle of wine before he took a seat next to Paxton. His hand landed on her thigh like it was the most natural thing to do— all pretense of course but it felt so intimate and possessive that Paxton basked in the warm feeling wrapping around her mind.

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Jared and Paxton kept the conversation light while they enjoyed a meal of chicken salad, ciabatta, and crisp white wine.

“Mia Kunz. Hmm, I can’t place the name but I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve seen you somewhere.” Jared stared at her with a speculative gleam in his eyes.

“If you read sports magazines, you might have—”

“Ah, now I remember. You were center page a couple of months ago, right?” His eyes brightened considerably which brought a gleam to Mia’s face. She pushed her breasts forward.

“I’m honored that you remembered, William.”

“How could I not. You, wet and lying on your back in the shallow waves... it’s the kind of vision old men like me jerk off to.” He placed a quick kiss on Paxton’s cheek.

“Sorry, hon, but it’s the truth.” He smiled. “Not that I’d ever cheat on you, my love.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Fifteen years,” Paxton said although Mia had posed the question to Jared. She made a point of ignoring Paxton the entire time. Her focus had been on him throughout the meal.

Mia fluttered her eyelashes. “And you never strayed, William?”

“Well, my little pet and I play with other partners now and then but my heart will

always belong to her.”

Paxton glared at him for that little tidbit of information but bit back a sharp retort as she caught Mia’s excitement.

“Are you in an alternative lifestyle?” Her voice had turned husky. Paxton frowned. The entire dynamic of the conversation suddenly shifted.

Jared shrugged but Paxton noticed the subtle switch from the enamored older man he was enacting to Dom immediately. It was fascinating to watch. She wanted to growl at Mia as she realized she had witnessed it too.

“We are. I firmly believe it’s what keeps our sex life fresh.” He tapped Paxton on the nose. “My subbie knows exactly what I need and how to feed my interest.”

“And you, Mia? Are you originally from California?” Paxton deliberately steered the conversation to safer waters. She shot a warning look at Jared to drop the subject. Why he had steered in the direction of BDSM in the first place wasn’t clear.

“I’m originally from Switzerland. I immigrated to the U.S. eighteen months ago. It’s given my career the boost I needed. I’ve been offered a movie deal recently.” Mia shifted in the chair, ensuring that she rubbed her ankle against Jared’s.

Paxton was irked at how deliberate she was; unconcerned that she witnessed the attempt at seducing Poppy’s husband.

“You seem awfully young,” Paxton quipped as she stroked a hand through her hair. “Sometimes I miss my youth.”

“I’m older than I look.” Mia leaned back against the chair. “I just turned twenty-seven. Old enough to know what I want and how to get what I need.” Her eyes

glimmered in blatant invitation as she stroked a finger over Jared's hand resting on the table. "And I'm not scared to go after it either."

"We better get going, honey." Paxton got up to restack the dirty dishes and empty containers in the basket. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mia. I hope we'll see each other again before we head back to the city."

"I'm sure we will," she said, smiling at Jared. Mia Kunz had just kicked the door open for a rendezvous amoureux.

"Enjoy the sun." Jared picked up the basket and then followed Paxton down the stairs. He tucked her under his arm as they made their way back to his house.

"Well, that was rather interesting. I think I misjudged her. She is just a model looking for a man with the deepest pockets."

"Hmm, maybe a daddy Dom... amongst other things."

Paxton looked at him wide-eyed. "A daddy Dom? Why do you say that?"

"I've been around a number of subs who are attracted to older Doms. They prefer the Daddy/sub lifestyle. I suspect she's that way inclined but I have a feeling there's more to her interest than just seducing me to be her daddy."

"Meaning?"

"I noticed some subtle nuances in her actions. The expression on her face, the way her eyes flashed and reacted to certain words. Behind that beautiful exterior is a very sharp mind. I'm guessing that modelling is a cover."

"Now that I think back, her responses to the general topics we discussed were

intelligent and immediate. Damn, you're right. I doubted my instincts for nothing." She sped up. "Let's get home. Our teams might have found something in her background that could shed some light on exactly who and what Mia Kunz is."

"Miss Mia Kunz appears to have been born a feeble two years ago."

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“In other words, it’s a fake identity,” Paxton responded to Jordan’s announcement. She settled into a chair in Jared’s study. They were on a Skype call with her team and Cruz who was using the large television monitor fixed against the wall.

“I did some digging. Mia Kunz is in fact none other than Olivia Lopez, born to Colombia-born Gabriela Rojas,” Cruz said as he sent a file to the cloud. “All the intel is in there but I’ll give you the lowdown quickly.”

“Gabriela Rojas? You’re not serious?” Paxton stared at the picture of the woman that appeared on the screen. “You’re talking about the Queen of Cocaine— the Black Widow, who rose to the top of the infamous Medellin Cartel, right?”

“The one and only.” Cruz tapped on his tablet. “She escaped an abusive mother at a young age— turned to a life of crime and prostitution soon after. She was key in pushing cocaine throughout the States, specifically, New York, Miami and Los Angeles.”

“This puts everything into an entirely different perspective,” Paxton mused. “She is one of the most notoriously known female crime figures in the U.S.”

“Ruthless too,” Jordan interjected. “By the 1970’s, she was in charge of a massive narcotics ring. Some compared her to Pablo Escobar.”

“She was clever and avoided prosecution for years, even though the DEA and ATF had linked her to dozens of murders,” Knox said as she paged through a file.

“Yup. Her reputation was well known.” Kezlin took a sip of water and continued,

“She became a multi-billionaire. The nickname, "Godmother," was added to her repertoire of monikers.”

“She was caught if I remember correctly,” Jared said.

“Yeah, her luck finally ran out in 1985. DEA agents caught up with her at her family home in Irvine, California.”

“Hold on. The articles I’ve read about her said she had four sons, three of whom were murdered in Colombia after being deported following prison sentences in the United States.”

“It’s not common knowledge. She never publicly admitted her daughter’s existence,” Jordan said.

“She was caught in 1985 and returned to Colombia after being released in 2004. If Mia, or Olivia rather, told the truth about her age, she must have been conceived while Gabriela was in jail.” Paxton did the math from the information she read in the file Cruz had sent over.

Jordan did a quick search on her iPad. “Yeah, here it is. Her birth record indicates she was born on August 6th, 1992— doesn’t list who the father is.”

“Olivia was given up for adoption the day after her birth. Unfortunately for her, Matias Lopez was associated with the Colombian crime world. His wife couldn’t have children and he was only too happy to take responsibility for her. It seems like he’s taken over where Gabriela Rojas had left off and is now the biggest drug lord in the States.” Cruz tapped his fingers on the desk in thought. “Makes me wonder if the Godmother didn’t personally select him.”

“Or, he might be Olivia’s real father,” Jordan mused. She looked at Paxton and Jared.

“It seems Matias Lopez was a regular visitor throughout her prison time.”

“Right.” Cruz took the iPad from her. “It seems Mrs. Rojas had many privileges while in prison— conjugal visits being one of them. Simple. Bribe the guards to give them privacy.”

“Now, the big question is, what exactly do Olivia and Matias Lopez want with Bastian Conti?”

“From the footage we managed to hack into, I’d guess sex trafficking.” Jordan sent another file to the cloud. “I’ve included a link to the footage so you can check yourself. Over the past year, there were monthly parties at the property Bastian Conti owns in Malibu Colony Beach, which isn’t unusual, except for the attendees. Scores of young women, including girls and boys as young as ten to fifteen years of age arrive there on the Friday evening. These parties lasted over the weekend. I assume they are all sex slaves since they only leave the mansion on the Monday morning... under guard and from the look of them, exhausted.”

“Cruz, send me a list of all the attendees at those parties. Check if any of them have links to The Commission’s leaders or their families.” Jared’s expression had turned thunderous. “Get hold of Conti’s financial records. Attendance to a party like that would come at an astronomical cost. Dig as deep as you have to. I want confirmation that there is a link between Conti and Lopez. This has to be stopped.”

“Will do, Commander.”

They ended the Skype call. Paxton looked at Jared. He stood in front of the window, lost in thought.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I know why our neighbor tried her best to seduce me.”

“I’m listening.”

“She weighed me up as a potential customer for their parties.” He looked at her.
“Perhaps I should give her what she’s after.”

Chapter Eleven

The thought of Jared exposing himself to danger haunted Paxton throughout the afternoon. He was a Navy SEAL Commander with a CV a mile long. He didn’t need anyone to worry about him but no matter, she couldn’t help being concerned.

He was taking her to dinner at the St. Orres Inn up in Gualala, eight miles north of The Sea Ranch. His instructions were a prelude that tonight was going to be the first step towards their relationship.

“Wear a nice dress, little one... and no panties.”

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She hadn't responded. It wasn't a foreign concept. Most Doms loved the idea of their sub being naked in some form in public—to please them or to test a sub's obedience. It gave that added spice to the moment to be touched intimately in the midst of a packed restaurant, which usually happened every time.

Her makeup finished, she brushed her hair until it shone and fell to her shoulders in a silky curtain. Her eyes moved with critical censure over the reflection in the mirror.

Paxton had opted to wear a deep green maxi dress that was light, airy and perfect for the hot weather. She slipped on silver sandals to complete the look.

“Well, let's see what Commander Bates has up his sleeve tonight.”

At the very least, she hoped his order indicated that he was going to take their relationship in the direction he'd been hinting at for the past week. She was ripe for sex. If he didn't make a move tonight, she'd have to find a willing partner to take care of her needs.

“A woman can only be that patient,” she mumbled as she descended the stairs to join Jared waiting for her in the living room. His eyes roamed over her as she walked in.

With black jeans and white shirt, he looked like a model from a magazine. The dark glimmer in his eyes was one of male appreciation.

“You look beautiful, Paxton. Come here.”

With those two words the atmosphere became charged with anticipation. He oozed of

domination that invited her to give in to him. She didn't hesitate and walked towards him. The sensual effect of touch thrilled through her as he took her hand. She stared at him, reveling in the heat in his fingers tracing her chin.

"Our journey begins tonight, little one." His voice combed over her. The warmth of his breath teased her lips. "If you're not ready, tell me now."

"I'm ready."

"Are you?" He drew back and studied her intently. "Ready enough to sign a Dom/sub agreement with me?"

Paxton stiffened. "If that's all you want, then the answer is no. I told you what I'm after, Jared."

"Make no mistake, Paxton, I am after the full package but insofar as the Dom/sub side of such a relationship is concerned, we will do it by the book. I don't want any expectations shattered for either of us. You need to know exactly what I want from you. I have certain rules, which aren't negotiable."

"Very well, I understand. I'll sign an agreement then."

"You've been in the lifestyle for years. Don't ever compare me to previous Doms and least of all, your husband. We will build our own future and—"

"I'm going to stop you right there." She placed her fingers against his lips. "Rex has been dead for many years, Jared. I moved on but you must know that he was the only man I ever loved. He will always have a special place in my heart. I'm not looking to reenact the life I had with him. I want a new life, new challenges— a Dom who can take care of my needs and make me fly." She hesitated briefly. "Mostly, I want to fall in love again. I don't want to grow old alone." Her eyes didn't waver. "Are you ready

for all that... Sir?"

The word had never had such an impact on him, especially since he'd not instructed her on how to address him during scenes.

"You please me, my pet."

The mellifluous tone of his voice resonated deep inside her, wrapping around that part of her that had been yearning to be desired and loved.

"Yes, Paxton, I'm ready and looking forward to a journey of discovery with you."

His hands trailed over her back to knead her buttocks.

"What is this?" His fingers found the lacy edge of her thong disappearing between her cheeks.

"Shit," she mumbled. She'd forgotten his instruction when she got dressed. "Force of habit, I'm afraid."

"Hmm." His fingers tightened as he squeezed until her breath hissed painfully from her lips. "A habit that's unfortunate... for you, at least."

"I apologize, Sir. I'll remove them now." She watched him warily.

"Please do." He released her to sit on the sofa. His eyes glimmered as she hesitated. "Well? We don't have all night and I don't want to be late for dinner, sub. I have other activities planned for tonight." One eyebrow crawled higher, adding to the devilish glint in his gaze.

Paxton knew Doms well enough not to provoke the devil in them by delaying further.

She quickly reached under her dress to wriggle out of the lime green lace thong. She threw it at him as he held out his hand.

“Beautiful color. I might give them back upon our return to appreciate the full effect of what I assume is a matching bra underneath?”

“Of course.” It was her second weakness after stilettos— sensual, feminine lingerie.

He patted his legs. “Come.”

“You want me to sit on your lap?”

“Upside down with your ass pushed up, yes.” He smiled at the expression of disbelief on her face. “Really, my pet? Do I need to spell it out? You know how this works. There are always repercussions for disobedience.” He sat back. “I understand your hesitation, since we haven’t discussed your limit list or your pain threshold.”

“Thank you, Sir. I learned since I’ve been alone not to dive headfirst into any situation.”

“It doesn’t mean you’ve been absolved from the punishment you deserve.” He sat back. “Let me see. You’re not into heavy impact tools but love the sting of a flogger... or a spanking. You appreciate a medium level of pain and soar in the wake of edging.” The smile that followed her surprised look was nothing short of Cheshire like. “Am I close?”

“Too close for comfort,” she muttered.

“Get over here, sub. You’re wasting time. Not to mention begging for an additional five slaps.”

She was draped across his lap in the blink of an eye. He steadied her with a firm hand on the small of her back as he pushed her forward. She pressed her palms on the floor as the position forced her on her toes. It was precarious at best but it warned her that he had the control.

A shiver followed in the wake of his hand pushing her dress up and over her back to bare her buttocks to his gaze.

“Cute little butt, my pet.” He caressed the rounded curve of her cheeks. “Perfect size for my palm.”

Crack! Crack!

“Shit!” she gasped as his hand connected in two searing slaps.

“Tonight is more than a dinner date, Paxton.”

Crack! Crack!

“I’m also going to see how willing you are to submit to me.”

Crack! Crack!

“Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate a certain level of sass and brattiness but...”

Crack! Crack!

“I want to see if you know when you’ve pushed me too far.”

Crack! Crack!

“Like you, my pet... I have boundaries as well.”

Crack! Crack!

“Holy crap! That hurts,” she wailed. Every slap had increased in intensity. Her cheeks

were on fire. She gasped as he brushed his hand over her sensitized skin. The action caused the burning heat to flow deeper to settle in a throbbing demand in her loins.

“I love the red glow of your skin, my pet. It’s a color I could become addicted to.” His chuckle brushed over the frayed edges of her mind. “Almost makes me wish you’d disobey me on a daily basis.”

“Thanks for the warning, Sir.” Her tone cracked icily.

“Of course, as a sub, you know you have the control. Always remember that, Paxton. No matter where we are or what we’re doing. In lieu of that, I need you to tell me your safeword.” He continued the circling caress of his palm over her stinging behind. “Something you’ll always remember, even during a very intense scene.”

“I... ehmmmm.” She jerked as his fingers did a brief foray down the crack of her ass to tease the opening of her pussy. “How about... Stilettos.”

“Stilettos it is. Let’s see if you can remember it, shall we?”

“We really don’t need to at the—”

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

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“Owww... fucking hell!” she screamed as he continued to wallop her ass, each strike a little harder than the precious one. There was no hesitation, no break in the rhythm.

“Stilettos!” she finally managed to gasp so softly that she wondered how he heard her.

“Good girl,” he said as he soothed her inflamed skin with tender brushes of his palm.

Paxton found herself basking in the praise, which was surprising, since her mind was filled with the after effect of the searing pain scorching her behind.

He helped her to straighten.

“Gaawd, that hurts,” she moaned as her buttocks met the harshness of his jeans.

“Perfect reminder throughout our meal never to defy me, little one, and to remember, when I give you an instruction not to forget to follow it.” He smiled as he traced his fingers over her cheeks. “No tears... not that I’m surprised. You’re a strong woman.”

“That doesn’t mean my ass isn’t on fire and I could very easily burst into tears at a moment’s notice,” she said in a surly tone.

“Up you get. My instruction of no panties was given for a specific reason.” He pushed her off his lap but kept her standing between his legs with his hands on her hips. He wriggled his eyebrows. Paxton didn’t trust the devilish glint in his eyes. “I have a gift for you.” He pushed up the flowing hem of the long maxi dress. “Hold onto that, my pet.”

“What are you doing?”

“I told you, I have something for you and I need access to your pussy. Spread your legs, little one.”

“Jared, what?”

His eyes caught hers. She simmered at his obvious enjoyment at her predicament.

“I told you that I’m going to test your level of submission tonight, Paxton.”

“While at the restaurant?”

“I can’t think of a better place.”

Paxton realized it would be a waste of time to debate the issue with him but she had to try.

“In a public place?”

“Best place to work on a sub’s submission. Spread your legs... now.”

Paxton steadied herself with her hands on his shoulders as she shuffled her feet apart. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out... she frowned. A pair of black panties.

“Those are boy-style panties. I have to say, Sir, mine goes much better with my dress”

He chuckled as he patted his fingers against her labia before teasing her opening with an errant finger. She bit her lips as shards of heat pierced through her core when he

flicked his thumb over her clit.

“Hmm, just look at that. Already so hot and wet. It seems you liked your punishment a little too much, my pet.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Sir. I assure you; I don’t appreciate having to sit on my sore ass throughout dinner.”

“I don’t suppose you do but then, I’ll enjoy every flash of pain over your face when you shift in your chair.”

“Of course you would.”

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as he teasingly swirled his finger deep inside her.

“I thought you were in a hurry... mmm, our reservation, remember?”

“Indeed,” he chuckled.

She sighed in relief but felt empty when he withdrew his fingers.

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He picked up the black panties he'd dropped on the sofa. He held it open for her to step into.

"I still prefer to wear my own thong."

"No need to worry, little one. These are brand new. Now, stop wasting time."

Paxton gnashed her teeth as she stepped into the panties. He tugged them over her hips until they fitted snugly.

"No. Hell no!" She seared him with a damning look.

"Yes, my pet... hell yes." He got up and took her hand, forcing her to follow him outside. He held open the door of the Hummer. "Your carriage awaits, my lady."

"Very funny," she snapped, hissing as she plonked down in the seat. Pain seared her mind. She'd forgotten about her sensitive behind. The evening she'd looked forward to suddenly took on a new meaning. She'd be suffering through dinner wearing freaking clit-vibrating panties! And not just the usual kind that only stimulated her clit. No, the damn man had to have special ones designed with a J-shaped vibrator that he inserted inside her pussy as well. It rubbed against her G-spot, for heaven's sake! She didn't want to think about the torture he intended once they arrived at the restaurant.

Jared chuckled at the furious glare she shot in his direction as he started the engine and pulled away.

“You’re gonna pay for this, Bates.”

“You should know better than to challenge a Dom in that tone, Paxton.” His smile widened. “Forget about them now and let’s enjoy dinner. Who knows, I might not do anything with the remote in my pocket.”

“Remote?”

“Of course. You didn’t think I’d make you wear vibrating panties just for the fun of it, did you?.”

“I don’t think I want to go to dinner with you anymore.”

“Paxton, I told you the intention with this dinner. Remember, my pet, as my submissive, your body belongs to me. I decide what it needs when. Do you agree?”

Paxton stubbornly clamped her lips together. She envisioned garroting this asshole until he passed out.

“I’m waiting, sub.”

“Yes.”

“Paxton,” he warned darkly.

“Yes, I agree, SIR.”

She jerked as the panties started to vibrate against her clit and thud inside her pussy. Gently and teasingly, sending a wave of heat rushing into her loins.

“Brattiness will always be rewarded accordingly, sub. Try to remember that.”

“I’m sorry. Please switch it off!”

The vibrating stopped. Paxton dragged in a breath of relief. The essence of her arousal felt sticky between her thighs.

“I sincerely trust you have a small towel in your pocket, Sir. I refuse to leave that restaurant with a soaked dress sticking to my butt.”

Jared laughed as her palm cracked against his thigh.

“It’s not funny.”

“On the contrary, my pet, the delectable bouquet of your arousal fills me with utmost pleasure. You should be reassured that you’ll not be the only one suffering through dinner.”

He caught her hand as she withdrew it from his thigh. He pressed it against his leg. “Keep it there. I like your touch.”

He kept the conversation light the rest of the trip. He even managed to make her laugh and forget about the precariousness that her defiance had landed her in.

Chapter Twelve

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The trip to the restaurant was a pleasant drive with the sun setting over the horizon. The brilliant tangerine orb sank lower in the sky until it hugged the horizon, painting the sky in magnificent hues of fiery red and crimson. The sky had changed from a cornflower blue to a subtle purple by the time Jared cut the engine and got out.

She watched him walk around the front of the SUV to open her door. She was relieved that he plucked her out of the Hummer.

He tilted her chin for a brief kiss. “Smile, little one.”

“While wearing these panties? No, Sir. You’ll have to be satisfied with my grim face— ahhh, damn,” she gasped as the panties started to vibrate.

“Stop! You can’t possibly expect me to... please Sir, stop,” she pleaded. It had been so long since she’d been dominated and deliberately aroused that she was on the brink of a climax. It wouldn’t take much more to push her over.

Jared fisted a tuft of hair, forcing her onto her toes. She grasped his shoulders and stared into his eyes.

“Keep it up, sub. But know this, your sassiness begs for punishment. It’s up to you how long and often I switch it on.”

“I understand, just please switch it off!”

“There’s one rule you should know is at the top of every Dom’s list. Care to tell me what that is, sub?”

“I’m not allowed to come. Stop, I beg you!” Paxton pressed her thighs together, desperate to stave off the orgasm that had her on the edge. She clawed at his shoulders as she buried her face against his throat. Her guttural moans were a melody of desperation that ended in a, “Oh, thank god,” as he flicked off the switch on the remote. She calmed down under the circles he drew on her back.

“Ready?”

Paxton took a deep breath, forcing her wobbly legs to react to the order from her brain. He wrapped his arm around her waist to guide her inside.

“Welcome back, Commander,” Guy Martin, the owner of the restaurant greeted them at the door.

“A visit here wouldn’t be complete without a meal,” Jared said.

“Your table is ready. Please, follow me.” He showed them to a secluded spot with a view of the ocean.

Thank the Lord for small favors! At least she’d be spared the embarrassment of the other diners witnessing her distress. She glanced around as she sipped on a glass of wine. The ambience managed to calm her frazzled senses. She always believed Rex had tapped into the core of her submission but it didn’t compare to the effect Jared’s domination had on her.

Jared watched her over the rim of his glass. “Relax, Paxton. Enjoy the dinner.”

“Easy for you to say. I’d like to see how relaxed you would be wearing a vibrating cock ring during dinner.”

Jared chuckled. His thumb drew lazy circles across her palm.

“Tell me more about yourself. Where did you grow up?”

Paxton was surprised at the sudden change in subject. She had expected to spend the entire night balancing on a tightrope with her boundaries being tested. Instead, he once again scored a touchdown by swapping tactics

“Why? I’m sure you ran a complete background check on me already.”

“Indulge me, anyway.”

Paxton couldn’t resist taking a bite of the warm bread roll. “I grew up in Phoenix. We farmed heirloom tomatoes, lemon cucumbers, pumpkins, and green chiles. My mother passed away five years ago.” Her sad smile tugged at Jared’s heartstrings. “My father took her death very hard. He buried himself in grueling work ever since. He’s still farming. I know he’s very lonely. With the devastation of COVID, he’s taking a huge knock as he mainly supplies restaurants.”

“Your appetizers,” Guy appeared with steaming plates of mussels in lemon garlic-butter sauce with crispy bread. “Enjoy.”

“It smells divine.” Paxton leaned over to inhale the aroma of the dish. They ate in companionable silence. “That was so flavorful,” she said as she pushed the plate back. Her eyes caught his devilish look. She jerked as the vibrations against her clit shuddered through her.

“Remember the rule, little one.”

If looks could kill, the one she shot at him just turned Jared into ash in his chair.

“You’ve been doing well but let’s not become too complacent.”

Paxton gritted her teeth as Jared cranked up the vibration.

“I fucking hate you.”

Her outburst had no effect. He leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on the table.

Paxton forced her body to relax as she tried to ignore the constant vibrations. Her body was strung tight from the sexual pressure threatening to boil over. Her clit had become sensitive as the rubbery vibrator thrummed against it. The way he played with the settings triggered unexpurgated pleasure to surge through her. She struggled with the rogue waves pushing her to the edge only to recede as he turned it lower. He was playing her lust like a maestro, developing the crescendo in layers. If he didn't stop soon, she would tumble over the edge... whether or not he allowed her to.

It was a relief when their main course arrived. She relaxed in the chair as Jared switched the vibrator off. Paxton ate slowly, stretching the inevitable out as long as she could. The knowing look in his eyes told her he was onto her.

“So, what about you? Where did you grow up?”

His expression turned impassive, sending a clear message that it wasn't a topic for discussion.

“Come now, Jared. Fair is fair. Apart from what you do now and that you're Kezlin's adopted brother, I know next to nothing about you.”

“Does my past matter that much? You've come to know the man I am now, as I sit here. My past... I don't talk about it. It's not a pretty tale and I prefer it stays buried.”

“Very well but you’re not getting off the hook that easy.” Paxton kept pushing with a dual purpose in mind. Firstly, to avoid him reaching into his pocket and switching on the hated vibrator and secondly, she truly wanted to know more about him. “You were adopted. How old were you?”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

She smiled brightly. His sigh of defeat trailed to the ceiling like mist dissolving over the ocean.

“Fifteen. I was in a bad place when the Bates couple adopted me. I owe them my life. If they hadn’t taken me in... I’d probably have been locked up for life or turned into a thug.” He shrugged. “When they had Kezlin two years later, it was over. I stopped fighting their strict rules. She became the bright light in my life. I was bowled over by her sweet smile and how she seemed to need me close— even as a baby. I’m the man I am today because of them. They turned my life around. I’ll be forever in their debt for that.”

“I’m sure they don’t see it like that.”

“They don’t but to me they will always be my saviors.”

Paxton jumped as the vibrators suddenly cranked to life, this time at a much higher setting. To steady herself, she clutched the edge of the table. Her breathing stuttered as the vibration ratcheted up her arousal.

“Too much! Please.”

“Paxton, look at me.”

With glowing cheeks, she dragged in a couple of deep breaths in reaction to him

changing the setting again.

“Why am I doing this, Paxton?”

“To test the level of my submission.”

“What do you think I’ve established so far, little one?”

“That you’re an asshole,” she muttered through thin lips as she closed her eyes and bit her lips. Pricks of heat teased her loins, preparing her for the ultimate pleasure that hovered so damn close.

“Stop biting your lip and look at me. C’mon, you’ve been a sub long enough to know what you’re supposed to do. Breathe through it.

“Don’t think I’m fucking trying? Ohhmm.”

Jared cut short his mirth at her incinerating scowl. Her moan ceased when the vibrations stopped.

“Are you ready for dessert?” Guy once again arrived like a phantom. Paxton was relieved that at least Jared hadn’t exposed her suffering to him.

“No,” she puffed breathlessly. “No dessert, thank you.”

“You might as well, love. I’m going to have a piece of cheesecake. It is absolutely out of this world.”

“No. I want to go home. Now.” She exhaled slowly as his eyes narrowed. “Please,” she said in a chilled voice.

“It would be an injustice to the chef if we left without dessert.”

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“Take away,” she snapped. She shifted her gaze to Guy. “May we order take away?”

“Give us a minute, would you?”

“Of course.” Guy left with amusement at the undercurrent of powerplay between the couple.

“Fuucck,” Paxton moaned as Jared immediately switched on the vibrators to their strongest setting. “Damn you! Stop that.”

“I love dessert. If you’re adamant to order take away, you’ll have to give me a reason to wait for mine.”

“You...” she heaved in a deep breath. Her nails cut into her palms. “You can eat it off my body.”

“Hmm... so you intend to feed me the cheesecake then?”

“Yes!” Paxton shuddered. It was becoming harder, near impossible really, to keep the climax back. The panties were completely soaked as the essence of her lust flowed freely from her loins. She sighed as the vibrations eased a little.

“I’ll spread it... hmmm... over my body and you can lick it off.”

“Where?”

“Where?” She all but sneered at him.

“Where exactly will you spread my cheesecake?”

Jared increased the setting. She lifted off the chair. The words crawled huskily past her lips, “On my stomach and my breasts.”

“I’m not sure that’s enough reason to wait for—”

“Okay, on my pussy as well!” She slammed her fist on the table as she glowered at him.

“Well, you should’ve led with that, my pet.” He smiled as he switched off the vibrator.

Paxton struggled to bring her breathing under control as he calmly called Guy over and ordered two pieces of cheesecake to go.

“I will get you for this, Bates. Mark my words,” she panted furiously as soon as he left.

Jared’s hand disappeared into his pocket again and Paxton caught his hand. “Don’t you dare!” She closed her eyes briefly. He was still in Dom mode and she knew better than to push his boundaries.

“Please. I’m on the verge of a climax. If you switch it on again....”

“Since you’re asking so nicely.” He smiled as her eyes flashed. “I agree. It’s enough... for now. I’m very proud of you, little one. You did very well.”

Armed with the cheesecake, Jared offered his hand to Paxton. “Come, love, it’s time to go. Dessert is waiting.”

Paxton sat looking at him with wide eyes, too scared to move. Just the thought of the pressure of the vibrator inside her and on her clit as she walked, filled her with dread. She'd never survive the embarrassment if she climaxed on her way out of the restaurant.

"Jared, I can't move."

He leaned down and kissed her gently on her lips. "I'll take care of you, love. Come, take this and I'll carry you to the car." He pressed the cheesecake containers in her hands and picked her up.

She was past protesting, rather accepted what he offered as she leaned into his warm body. The other diners smiled indulgently at the romantic picture of the man carrying his love out of the restaurant.

Paxton was never as relieved to settle in a car seat as she was when he put her down.

He tapped her on the nose. "Buckle up," he said as he closed the door. He had barely driven off when the vibrators sparked to life. Hard and thrumming ruthlessly against the swollen, aroused nub.

"You bastard! I fucking hate you," she squealed as she clutched the seat. Her back arched as the intensity of the vibrations catapulted her right to the edge.

"Come at will, Paxton." He was enamored by the crimson bloom flushing her cheeks.

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“Fffuccck!” Her desperate wail echoed in the confines of the Hummer as she swooned from a climax that left her clutching at his thigh.

“Do you have any idea how hot it is watching you lose yourself like that, my pet?” Jared’s voice was raw with lust as he battled to concentrate on the road rather than watching her arch and twitch next to him. He thumbed up the speed when her body relaxed.

“Oh-god-oh-god!”

Jared reveled in the control of being a dominant. It wasn’t only the variety of sex, which in itself was about more than finding a physical and emotional release. It was a mechanism to establish power through control and manipulation of the sub's body and mind. That in itself was a profound elevation of seduction. For a Dom it was a delicate combination of power and seduction. The delineation between the two was so fine, it was nearly seamless.

Her nails dug into his thigh as he kept alternating the setting of the vibrators, forcing multiple climaxes to ripple through her. Her hoarse cries washed over him in tumultuous waves of ecstasy, drowning him in the way she embraced the unbridled lust he kept feeding.

He switched off the vibrator as he turned into The Sea Ranch, to allow her time to calm down. She was trembling and weak when he picked her up and carried her to his bedroom.

“There now, love. You did so well,” he purred as he undressed her with care and

pushed her back against the pillows. “Relax, little one. I’ll take care of you.”

Her breathing was still laborious as she watched him disappear into the bathroom.

“Oh lord, that feels good,” she purred as he returned with a warm cloth, running it all over her body.

“Don’t move. I’m going to get some water. I don’t want you to dehydrate.”

“I think it might be a little late,” she laughed. “I never knew I could climax so hard or nonstop.” She stared after him as he left.

Paxton was still overwhelmed by the eagerness she felt starting on this new journey. She hardly knew him; about him even less, yet she couldn’t dampen the excitement that shuddered through her hungry heart.

Jared had unlocked her need to be loved. It was a key that opened a book of old beliefs. Since they’d left San Francisco he’d shown her another side. He was compassionate, caring, and loving with an engaging, wolfish smile that made her toes curl. She had no resistance against him.

Since Rex’s death, she’d blithely refused to surrender her heart to the men she’d dated. Jared caused those old emotions inside her heart to waver. She had loved deeply. She hadn’t thought it possible to find love like that again.

She acknowledged that something more physiologically profound wove them together than just the surge of natural opiates dumped into her bloodstream.

“That’s why I’m gravitating toward him. Sexual chemistry... it’s created an inexplicable bond between us.”

She listened to the husky notes of her voice as she snuggled into the pillow.

Without her realizing, Jared had captured her spirit— in a very short time span. With that, he'd disabused her beliefs about the rules and regulations she had steadfastly followed since she'd started dating again five years ago.

"It's time to let go. Concentrate on the here and now, Paxton."

She sighed in acceptance. She didn't need to hold back anymore. They were on the same page. He wanted the same things she did. What was important now was the intensity of the feelings that he awakened in her.

Her eyes fluttered closed. By the time Jared returned, she was fast asleep.

He smiled as he brushed back her hair.

"Sleep, love. The multiple climaxes clearly took its toll on you."

Chapter Thirteen

Jared took a sip of the hot latte as he opened the sliding doors of the communications room. His gaze drifted to the sun blooming on the horizon; golden petals stretching outwards into the rich blue of the ocean. The sound of the waves was a drumbeat that echoed his heart, the breeze reducing the tension from his mind. A flight of seagulls arced above, masters of the salty updrafts. Sunrise was his favorite time of day; a time when he could relax and reflect.

The buzz of a Skype call interrupted his appreciation of nature. He sat down behind his desk and hit the button to accept the call.

"We got a hit on your assumed identities, Commander," Cruz said the moment they

connected.

“You know the sun has barely peered over the horizon, right, Cruz?”

“I also know you’re already on your second cup of java, so what’s the problem?”

Jared conceded with a smirk. “Let me guess. Olivia Lopez?”

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“Nope, Daddy-dear did the checking.”

“Matias Lopez?”

“The one and only. He was especially interested in William Simms’ financial status, not to mention his interest in regularly visiting several brothels in Nevada.”

“I don’t recall that being part of the profile we created.”

“I added it once I found a connection between Matias Lopez and Bastian Conti. From what you said yesterday, I had a hunch that Olivia’s interest in you was about more than sexual attraction.”

“I’m listening.” Jared was impressed that Cruz had taken the initiative based on a hunch— which was in line with his own.

“Conti is the child of Matias Lopez’s stepsister. She was fifteen years old when he was born. Back then, having a child at her age was a cardinal sin. The baby was shipped off to Mexico. He grew up on the streets. Since he’s a pretty boy, he got picked up by a movie scout for a small role in an action film at the age of eighteen. The rest is history. He was a hit and immigrated to the U.S. two years later.”

“How did he manage to worm his way back into the Lopez family?” Jared finished his latte.

“How, I can’t say but I found photos on the dark web of them together ten years ago, around the time he got his first Emmy award.”

“So, Lopez probably kept tabs on Conti over the years. A movie star with known contacts to various financial moguls, politicians and fellow celebrities must be a well of possibilities to a drug lord.”

“Not to mention a very lucrative sex trade.”

“I wonder if Lopez is aware of the affair between his daughter and step-nephew?”

“She might be Lopez’ inside mole, for lack of a better reference.” Cruz appeared pensive as he scrolled through his iPad. “Her arrival on the scene coincided with her return from a two-year stint in Europe.”

“What was she doing there?” Jared straightened.

“I have no idea. Not yet anyway but it’s possible that Conti doesn’t know she’s Lopez’s daughter. She’s never been seen publicly with Lopez. It’s the one thing about him. He keeps his personal life out of the limelight. I can’t find any pictures of his wife or his stepsister.”

“Apart from the photos of Lopez and Conti, have you found anything connecting them to the sex parties and slaves they use?”

“I sure have but they’re clever. The payments and financial transactions are done through offshore accounts in... ahh, there’s the connection... Switzerland and the Caymans. That must be what Olivia had been doing during the two years abroad—setting up the business accounts.”

“I need confirmation, Cruz. Dig deeper.”

“Yes! Got the fucking bastard!” Cruz pumped a fist in reaction to a ping on his system. His eyes glowed as he stared at Jared. “It seems the esteemed Mafia leaders

are regular guests at the parties in Colony Beach.”

“That’s the kind of intel I was after.” Jared’s fingers tapped on the desk. “Except it’s not enough to put them behind bars for too long.”

“True, but Lopez and Conti aren’t the only two financially benefitting from the profits made at those sex parties,” Cruz said with a grim expression.

“Spit it out.”

“Isabella Boneiro has a Swiss account. Deposits made into that account coincide with each party but the proportion is bigger than the other two.”

Jared’s jaw locked as he stared at the photo of the still beautiful dark-haired woman on the screen. “That doesn’t compute with the intel we have on her. I find it hard to believe she’s funding or is linked to the illegal sex trade.”

“I agree. It’s quite possible that Marco opened the account in her name. I’ll reach out to my contacts over there. I should have an answer in a week or so.” Cruz leaned back in his chair. “What are you gonna do?”

“I’m going to play along with Olivia Lopez. If I can get an invitation to the next party, we’ll be able to expose everyone associated with it. We’ll close down a sex and pedophile ring and if we’re lucky, we might get Boneiro as a bonus.” Jared frowned in thought. “The Mafia hadn’t been involved in sex slavery for centuries. Why would Boneiro take the chance of getting caught and kicked out of The Commission?”

“Good question, Commander.”

“Work that angle. I’m impressed with the intel, Cruz. Keep me informed on anything else you find.”

“Will do. When can we expect you back?”

“The plan was to return tomorrow but it’ll depend on the progress I make with Olivia Lopez.”

“Right. See you then.”

Jared signed off. A movement in the doorway caught his attention. The sight of the shirt he'd worn the previous night folded around Paxton's body represented itself in the throb of his cock.

“So, you're going ahead with your hair brain scheme to seduce Olivia Lopez?”

Jared swore the temperature in the room dropped from the chill in her voice. He didn't respond immediately, too taken with Paxton's just-awakened sleepy-eyed look. She looked endearing with her naked legs and small feet crossed. He cleared his throat and dragged his attention back to her face.

“Getting on the inside of their circle is the perfect way to expose their entire operation, Paxton. Hannah Conti's suspicion might have been about needing confirmation that her husband is cheating on her but it's also opened a whole new can of worms.” He got up and approached her. “And, no, I have no intention of seducing Olivia Lopez. I'll play a role to convince her I'm the perfect candidate to fill their deep pockets with my deprived desires for sex on the sly.”

“And if she offers herself as part of the deal?”

He cupped her cheeks. “How about a morning kiss before we continue?”

“No.” She pushed at his chest. “I've got morning breath!”

“Hmm... I don't mind since it's what I'm after... your taste.”

He brushed his finger over her bottom lip, tenderly at first, and then harder with a rough intensity that robbed her of any thought.

“So invitingly sensual,” he murmured as he nibbled on their pulpy fullness. “May I, Paxton?”

“May you what?” she managed to croak; her mind was drenched with the rush of sensations overwhelming her.

“Kiss you.”

She blinked, caught in the promise of all kinds of delight. “Yes, please.”

He was anything but gentle. The demanding caress represented the man he was, hard and possessive. His tongue sought entrance into her mouth, turning her inside out from the first sweep with a kiss packed with lustful promise and unchecked hunger. The saturated color of her sensual groan crawled out between their meshed lips.

“I could become addicted to your taste, little one.”

“Would that be a bad thing?”

He smiled as he traced her lips with his thumb. “I believe the question should rather be whether you’re ready to have me underfoot all the time.”

Paxton leaned back in his arms to stare at him. “I don’t follow.”

“We both agree on what we’re after insofar as a future together is concerned. I for one, don’t need weeks or months to know I want you by my side, Paxton. Not only for the odd date or getting together to scene but to live together.”

Her eyes widened. She had been the one to set the conditions of their relationship but she hadn't expected it to move so fast.

"We hardly know each other, Jared. Isn't it too soon to take such a step?"

"Neither of us are youngsters, love. We don't need to do the dance of pretense and discovery. I am who and what I am. It's all I have to offer. I'm too old to change."

"I don't want you to change, Jared. The man you are, however chauvinistic at times, is what attracted me."

"Last night gave you a taste of the kind of Dom I am. There are times I'm gentle but expect rough and wild domination. As a man, I'm committed to opening my heart to you. If we're not on the same page, I need to know."

Paxton considered her response carefully. She hadn't expected Jared to be this honest and demanding but she'd be lying if she didn't admit it filled her with hope. Hope for a future of togetherness, of mutual respect and understanding of each other's needs. A normal relationship had many challenges. Add a BDSM lifestyle to the mix and it was ramped up exponentially. Without trust and confidence a relationship like that would be doomed. The question she'd asked herself was whether he triggered both within her. The answer had been a resounding yes.

"Offering one's heart and soul to another isn't an easy decision, Jared. We have a long way to go before we get to that stage but I do know that I trust you. As a Dom, to care for and protect me. To know what my body needs and to push my boundaries to reach a level of release I crave. I don't mind rough and wild, as long as you respect my boundaries. Although I am a submissive, it will always be mine to offer or to take away. Not because I'm weak but because I find joy and fulfillment from submitting. I offer it to you, Jared, not out of weakness but with pride and strength." She traced his lips. "As a man, you excite me. I admire your strength, intelligence and the way you

care for those close to you.” She went on her toes to kiss him tenderly. “In short, the answer is yes. We are on the same page. I’m committed to opening my heart to you.”

“That fills me with joy, little one.” He kissed her tenderly. “This is the start of our journey together.” He smoothed her hair from her face. “There’s power in offering your heart. I’ll accept it gladly with the knowledge that it doesn’t give me rights but demands responsibilities. I know I have no right to your love, no right to your time, but I’ll be honored with the moments we’ll share. I will always do what is best for you, and not seek fulfillment of my own desires at an expense to your wellbeing. Each person is responsible for their own happiness but I can’t wait to be part of seeking my own with you.”

“I never realized you had the soul of a poet, Jared.” She leaned closer. “Your words mean more to me than you can imagine. I avoided serious relationships for ten years and ended up living a lonely life since Rex’s death. I suppose I found comfort in the familiarity of being alone but the older I get; I concede that human beings were born to love. What you said resonates inside me and confirms that I’m ready to walk the path with you.”

“It might be a rocky one at best but I’m confident we’ll find happiness in each other.” He tapped her on the nose. “Now, Mrs. Lee. Are you gonna feed me? I’m starving.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Especially since I never got to enjoy my dessert last night.”

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The melodic timber of Paxton's laugh resonated deep inside him. He loved watching her mirth. It wasn't just the throaty sound. Her expression, the way her face lit up, and the way her eyes filled with joy, was like a hug to his soul, like she'd kept it within her just for him. To allow him a peek into the emotions that made her the woman she was.

"Unfortunately, you're hooking up with a health nut, Commander Bates. No cheesecake for breakfast, I'm afraid. Come, I'm not cooking alone. You want breakfast, you're gonna help prepare it."

Jared wasn't much of a cook but it was an invitation he had no intention of saying no to.

Paxton watched Jared jogging away in the direction of Bastian Conti's house. She agreed that the best way to crack open the case was to use Mia Kunz but she didn't like him setting himself up as a potential target. The combination of danger presented itself in the merging of the mafia and one of the cruelest drug lords in the States. If he was caught... she didn't want to think about what could happen. She walked to the operations room as soon as he disappeared.

"Hi boss," Kezlin said as soon as they appeared on the screen. "Still enjoying the view?"

"It's gorgeous here." She leaned forward. "Are you ladies alone?"

"Not if you count the team hovering all over the offices and the irritating Brock Carter following us around like a bloodhound," Jordan said with a chill in her voice.

Her hand flailed in the air. “But for the moment, we’re alone in here, yes.”

“Good. I overheard a discussion between Cruz and Jared this morning.”

“Damn, the asshole stole my thunder,” Jordan complained.

“So, you know Boneiro is involved in the scheme and that Conti is family of Lopez.”

“Yep, Jordan filled us in,” Knox said.

“Good. I need you to find out when the next party is.”

“Already working on it,” Knox said. “What’s the plan?”

“The fact that Lopez did a background check on Jared means they’re definitely going to push him to join their depraved ring of sex parties. We’re going to be his backup.”

“Not to shun the opportunity for some action fieldwork, Paxton, but do you think that’s wise?” Jordan stared at her. “The Cobras are a black ops group. There’s no way Jared’s team will let him go in there without backup.”

“I don’t care. We’re going.”

“Hold on.” Kezlin leaned forward as she studied Paxton on the screen. “What exactly is going on here? You and Jared have been at loggerheads from day one. Where does the sudden desire to protect him come from?”

Paxton sighed. “I might as well tell you since you’ll soon find out anyway.” She hesitated briefly as she looked between the women. “Jared and I have decided to get involved.”

“Holy shit!” Kezlin jumped up. “You and my brother? How the hell did that happen?” She stabbed a finger in Paxton’s direction. “He seduced you, didn’t he? I’m gonna cut off his nuts.”

“Calm down, Kezlin. Your brother didn’t have to do any seducing. I might have been fighting the attraction in the beginning but decided I’m too old to play hard-to-get. He’s the kind of man and Dom I’ve been searching for. I believe we stand a chance of building a future together.”

“Well, since you put it that way.” Kezlin smiled broadly. “I couldn’t be happier. Just think, my sister-in-law will be my boss.”

“Whoa there, Kezlin. Marriage isn’t on the table.” Paxton frowned, realizing that the prospect of having him as a husband didn’t fill her with dread. Perhaps because when she thought of a future with him, it encapsulated the whole package. Love, marriage, and a happy-ever-after life.

“Hmm... methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Jordan lilted. “I suppose congratulations are in order but let me offer a word of caution, Paxton. Commander Bates isn’t going to be happy with you endangering yourself to keep him safe.”

“I’m with Jordan on this. Jared will be insulted that you have such little faith in his abilities to set up a successful raid on the Malibu sex house.” Kezlin sat back down. “Seriously, Paxton, you should rethink your strategy.”

Paxton considered their advice. She’d come to know him well enough to know they were right but protecting those she cared for was second nature.

“I’ll give it some thought. In the meantime, I’m going to send you a text, Knox. I want you to order a special watch for Jared.”

Knox straightened. “You’re gonna give him a gift with a tracker? Shit, you’ve fallen hard, Paxton.”

“A word of caution, Paxton. Jared is gonna be pissed if he finds out you’ve put a tracker on him. He’s not a weakling. Quite the opposite. He can take care of himself.”

“I’m well aware of that, Kezlin.” She looked among the three women. “But that’s not what I want Knox to do. I just want a specific watch as a gift... something special to... well, you know...”

“Right,” their voices echoed in a choir.

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Kezlin looked at her searchingly, not all too sure if Paxton was being honest or if she indeed intended a tracker watch. She had never lied to Jared. To do so now didn't sit well with her.

“Kez, I've opened my heart to him, but it's much too soon to talk about love. All I know is that I just found the one man I believe can make me happy as much as I'm going to aspire to do the same for him. I'm not going to fuck it up.”

Jared jogged easily along the pathway. His usual morning run was at a fast pace, ramping up his heart rate to get his blood pumping. Fitness discipline was drilled into him during BUDS training. He had enough power in his thighs to sprint up a mountain without breaking a sweat. Today, it was all about putting on a show. Every footfall was measured, every movement practiced to recruit the muscles to show off his physique.

At first pass, he'd waved at Olivia as he'd jogged past the house, aware of how her gaze had devoured his body. When he returned an hour later, she was leaning on the balustrade as he approached.

“Morning, William,” she called out, striking a seductive pose with one hip pushed forward. He slowed as he neared, smiling as she quickly trotted down the patio stairs to intercept him, should he decide not to stop. Her eyes scoured his shoulders and chest that glistened with sweat. “I love a man who takes care of his body.”

“And I love a woman who does too.” He leered at her long legs and bare midriff above the tiny shorts and cami top she wore.

She gestured to the garden set. “How about joining me for a cold drink? I’ve got some freshly made lemonade.”

“If there’s ice in it, I’m in.”

He sat down, watching her with an expression of admiration as she poured two glasses. Every movement was deliberate, intended to entice the animal in him to stir to life. Jared wouldn’t be a red-blooded man if the sight of her round breasts and curvy hips didn’t heat his blood. A vision of Paxton wearing his shirt flashed through his mind. His cock stirred. His smile widened. Here he was, with a young, firm woman offering herself on a platter and all he could think of was the woman waiting for him at home.

It was a sign that he had made the right choice. Paxton Lee was the woman he’d been searching for.

“Do you live here permanently, William, or is The Sea Ranch your getaway home?”

“We live in San Francisco but love visiting here over weekends whenever time permits.”

“What do you do? I don’t recall you mentioning it yesterday.”

“I dabble in the markets.” At least it wasn’t an outright lie. Jared had learned the trick of trading from his father who, after his military career, had owned an investment company. He’d made a lot of money which was what had made the Cobras possible. Bates Investments still existed with Jared playing only a consulting role. He didn’t live a life of luxury by choice but appreciated the good things that money could buy.

“An entrepreneur, I see.”

“I like working for myself.” He winked at her suggestively. “It gives me the opportunity to indulge in... more exciting endeavors.”

“I’m intrigued.” She leaned closer and brushed her hand along his arm. “Tell me more.”

He glanced in the direction of the thicket, like he was checking if they were alone. “A man has certain needs.” He smirked. “You know what I mean?”

“I think I do. You love your wife but you need a little added... shall we say, spice to your life?”

“Exactly.” He took a sip of his drink. “I travel quite often for work.” He shrugged. “But I don’t need the complication of women with expectations.”

Olivia’s eyes lit up. “You use prostitutes?”

“Escorts. A man has to protect his crown jewels, you know.” He laughed boisterously. “There are many houses of ill repute to service men like me.”

“You’re not worried Poppy will find out?”

“My wife is sweet and trusts me impeccably. I’ve never given her reason to suspect me. Besides, I take care of all her needs... very well, I might add.”

“Would you be interested in a very exclusive party?” She traced seductive circles with her nails over his palm. “The kind where the menu is unlimited, catering for every desire and need... across all age groups.”

“You know of one? How do I get an invite?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll be able to get you a special invite.” She lifted his hand to her lips and licked his fingers, her eyes caught his. “If you ask nicely, I’ll add myself to the menu.” She locked her lips around his middle finger, fellating it gently. She breathed her hot breath over his wet finger as she released it. “But I have to warn you. The attendance fee is astronomical.”

“This party... is it a one-off? It sounds like something I’d like to buy into on a regular basis.”

“Once a month for an entire weekend. You decide how long you wish to stay and you’ll be billed accordingly. Of course, if you have specific needs, the price will be higher.”

“Money isn’t a problem.” He leaned forward with his expression eager. “I have to admit, I’ve always wanted to be someone’s Daddy... a girl much younger than me... maybe even... you know?” He eyed her suggestively.

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“Oh, indeed I do but not to worry. Like I said earlier, the menu caters for all ages... not just the guests but also what you have to choose from.”

“When?” His eagerness made her laugh. She squeezed his hand.

“I hope you have a big appetite, William. I look forward to spending some time with you at the party as well.” She fluttered her eyelids. “I’d love to be your little girl.”

“Now that’s an offer I’d be happy to accept.” He glanced at his Fitbit. “I better get going before Poppy comes looking for me.”

She followed him down the patio stairs, watching him do a couple of stretches.

“I’ll email you the invitation and details to the party.”

“I’ve got a personal email.” He winked at her. “Can’t afford Poppy to stumble upon my habits, now, can I?” He gave her the address. “You never said when the party is. If it’s soon, I’ll have to clear my schedule.”

“Next weekend.”

“Perfect. I already have a trip planned.” His voice drifted back to her as he took off. “I’ll be waiting for your email, little girl.”

Her delighted giggle chased after him. He grimaced. To each his own, he always said. Playing Daddy to a woman who could easily be his own daughter held no appeal to him.

It was time to head back to San Francisco to strategize and put a foolproof plan in place.

Chapter Fourteen

“Why do we always have to be at his beck and call?” Bastian Conti seethed as he turned into the underground parking garage of the Shutters on the Beach hotel in Santa Monica.

“Stupid question. Boneiro is the one out of the five mafia families you don’t say no to.” Matias Lopez was irritated. He didn’t appreciate having to leave Chicago for an hour meeting, but it didn’t matter. Boneiro couldn’t have cared less. He’d insisted on a face-to-face meeting.

“That’s bullshit.” Bastian cut the engine. He looked sideways at his uncle. “You’re a kingpin. No one dares oppose you. What, is he better than you?”

“You sound like a surly child. Drop it, Bastian.” Matias opened the door. “Let’s get this over with. I want to be home tonight.”

The hotel was tucked away in a crescent-shaped cove with cottages spread out along the beach. The woman at the reception area directed them to the beach house suite. They followed her directions past the Olympic-size swimming pool. Every time Boneiro set up a meeting it was at a different location, never in public. Matias angrily swung the door open, not waiting for Boneiro and walked inside. The garish luxury of the billionaire suite didn’t disappoint.

“Right on time.”

“Aren’t we always?” Matias bristled as he reluctantly offered a hand to which Boneiro snubbed.

“Join me on the patio. I ordered a light lunch. We can talk while we eat.”

Bastian recoiled under Boneiro’s intimidating glare. The knives were already out.

He nodded at his personal security guard who frisked the two men and dropped their weapons in a wicker basket next to the door. He stood behind Boneiro watching the two guests with a stoic expression

“No need to sulk. You should know better than to bring your pieces. This is a business meeting. No need to pack heat.”

Bastian wasn’t comfortable with no protection in the presence of the man known to cut down those who opposed him without thought or regret. How he’d managed to get away with it in the light of the fact that the American Mafia limited killings to their own group he had no idea. He hated feeling powerless but did his best not to show his fear.

“I’ve heard rumors that there are problems with some of the sex workers,” Boneiro said around a mouthful of smoked salmon.

“Who told—”

“What I want to know is why I heard this from the grapevine and not from you, Lopez.”

Boneiro paid no attention to the two men as he continued to eat his meal.

“It’s no big deal. We’ve resolved the issue,” Bastian rumbled as he shoveled a piece of fish and asparagus tips into his mouth. They had hoped to find the two sex workers before Boneiro caught wind of it. How the guards managed to let them escape during transport from the previous sex party in Chicago, he had no idea.

“No. Big. Deal?” The question sucked the air out of the room. Bastian visibly wilted as Boneiro stabbed a fork into his plate.

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“Losing two of our highest assets is no big deal? What are you? A fucking idiot? You have no clue, ya fucking genius.” His cold gaze moved to Lopez. “Slave 21 and 62 have been booked and paid for every hour of the weekend. Exactly how are you going to pacify the members who have paid top dollar for their talents?”

“Slaves 30 and 122 have been in training for the past two weeks. They can only improve with time. So far, the feedback from clients has been satisfactory.” Lopez knew his answer wasn’t acceptable. His shoulders sagged under Boneiro’s harsh glare.

“Satisfactory? How long do you think we’ll fucking last with satisfactory results, Lopez? I’ve invested millions in this project over the past four years. Not just in financing the parties but in providing funds for the purchasing and upkeep of the houses we use in the different states. Obtaining upmarket sex slaves comes at a price.” Boneiro hit the roof. “I hate losing money. My accountant is calculating the cost of slaves 21 and 62, from purchase price to projected income over their expected lifespan in our employ. You have two choices. You either eliminate them or you refund my money.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous,” Lopez exploded. “Don’t you think we’ve done everything possible to find those two? We’ve scoured every fucking street and place where they could hole up. They disappeared.”

Boneiro frowned. “How is that possible? There’s no way they can remove the bracelets with the tracking chips.”

Lopez steeled himself to deliver the bad news. “We realized that some of the tracking

chips are defective.”

“Let me guess. You only realized that after they escaped. Fucking brilliant. How many others?”

“Six but they’ve all been replaced,” Lopez assured him quickly.

“Once again, you’ve displayed to me your capacity for incompetence. You should’ve checked those chips every fucking day.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve already—”

“What did you just say? Don’t worry? Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to? How would you like to choke on having your balls shoved down your throat? I’m just one red cunt hair from having you castrated. You understand me?” His hand slashed through the air. “Your inability to find those whores present us with a problem, don’t you agree?” Boneiro continued eating.

“What does it matter?” Bastian sneered. “We’ll ensure that the customers are happy with the whores they’ll get this weekend. We don’t need those sluts to keep stirring trouble among the rest.”

“Nor do we need them flapping their gums to the FBI about our operation, Conti. You forget that apart from yourself there are numerous, prominent men who could be exposed. If you don’t fucking realize that you’re even dumber than I thought.”

“Don’t insult me.” Bastian simmered.

“Shut the fuck up, Bastian,” Lopez finally snapped. It served no purpose to further enrage Boneiro. The bottom line was that his men had fucked up when the women escaped during transportation from the sex party in Chicago. He had to find a way to

pacify the irate man. Over the years he'd learned that to Boneiro, there was only one person who mattered— himself. The fact that, to date, they had been running a seamless operation was irrelevant. You were only as good as your last job. Now, in the wake of losing two of their most sought-after whores, they looked like amateurs. Boneiro was only interested in one thing and that was the bottom line. The bigger it was, the more power he amassed.

Lopez cast a warning look at Bastian. He was a brilliant actor but also a hothead. It had been a mistake to bring him today.

His gaze slipped to the younger man. Why he'd forced his way into the crime syndicate business years ago was still a mystery but Matias had indulged him. He'd offered an influx of financial liquidity which had resulted in enhancing his own coffers. It also gave him an added position of strength and fear not to be opposed by smaller crime lords.

Now, he wondered once again what his intentions were... and how the mighty Marco Boneiro wasn't aware of what was happening right under his nose.

"You're right, Luca. We can't afford them to rat us out to the Feds. I didn't want to but if they're still on the loose when I return to Chicago, I'll personally activate the nano explosives in the bracelets."

"No, Uncle Matias! Think of the money we'll lose!"

"Shut up," Lopez sneered. Greed had always been Bastian's biggest problem. Lopez was more concerned about seeing the sun rise every day than being the reason a host of ministers, presidents, politicians, and royalty from various countries were eventually exposed as sexual predators. Marco Boneiro was cruel but Luca Boneiro wouldn't hesitate to end his life if the role he played in the sex ring was ever discovered.

“Why wait, Lopez? Do it now,” Luca said.

“I don’t have the access codes with me. Don’t worry, Luca, I’ll Skype you so you can witness their execution once I get home.”

“You do that.” Luca finished his meal. He sipped on his wine as he stared out to sea.

Luca had branched out twenty years ago, infiltrating several crime syndicates with one goal in mind— to become more powerful than Marco Boneiro. His father had been too focused on gaining favor with the leaders of The Commission to notice. Where Marco wanted ultimate power over the American Mafia, Luca was after more. He would become the most feared man in the crime world as he rose to power when he took over The Commission. One man, one way, across the board. Mafia crime, drug, and sex syndicates... all would come to kiss his hand. It had come to him in the early mornings after the usual nightmare of Angelo’s execution. Marco Boneiro didn’t deserve the power he had. Killing his own son to gain favor of the Mafia kingpin at the time had been a mistake— one Luca would never forgive. It was time to kick Marco Boneiro to the curb and he was the one to do it.

Marco Boneiro was ruthless. His effort to mold his second son into a mirror of himself had been successful if only in appearance. Unknown to everyone was that Luca never recovered from the horrific death of his brother, Angelo. The metastasizing anger that had blackened his soul over the years had never abated. To watch his mother suffer and mourn the death of her eldest son had only added to the putrescent hatred for the psychopath who refused to be called father.

Luca firmly believed that Marco denied the existence of his own flesh and blood. To him, they were nothing but pawns on a chessboard— expendable in his quest for attaining total power.

The sex and pedophile ring had to remain secret until the time was ripe... then, Luca

would play his trump card and sink Marco for good. He'd either be killed in the raid Luca would initiate or end up in a federal prison for the rest of his life. Alone... without the support of his sons or his wife, Isabella. Luca had set Marco up perfectly. The account the money for the parties and sex trade was deposited in was under his mother's name. Everything pointed to Marco. She would never forgive him for that. Believing that he'd involved her in his shady dealings, setting her up to take the fall if the sex ring was exposed.

Matias Lopez and Bastian Conti weren't going to fuck up his plans. His eyes glowed as he looked at the two men.

“This is the only time I will excuse a fuckup from you. If you wish to continue our partnership, you better get your shit in one sock, Lopez. I won't accept failure.”

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“I promise you; it won’t happen again.” Lopez pushed back from the table. “We have a full house booking for this weekend’s party in Malibu.” He grimaced. “I had to decline three of our top customers due to The Commission leaders insisting to be included at the last minute.”

“Drop the attitude. You were told to keep five spots open for every party. If they don’t attend, you have more than enough time to find customers.” Luca dished up a generous portion of marble strawberry cheesecake. “Don’t forget, it’s their influence that brought scores of high-level government officials to the parties. We have both benefited from having them in our pockets because of that.”

“You’re right but a little consideration from them isn’t too much to ask for. We’ve been running a professional operation. Cancelling a client at the last minute—”

“I don’t have patience for your bullshit, Lopez. Make it happen. Comp them a couple of whores on the house for a night. Be sure they’re pre-booked for the next party. Next time, don’t bore me with this crap again.” Luca finished his dessert in silence. He was only forty-three but he had more business acumen than men twenty years his senior. He thought out of the box and had the best ideas when he hit the ground running. Factor in an insatiable determination to succeed and there was no limit to his conquests.

“Fill me in on the new members. There were a couple of names on the list I didn’t recognize.” Luca pushed back his plate.

“We did the necessary background checks. They fit in perfectly. Frank Messer is the owner of the global clothing range, Fashion Link. He has a score of celebrities who

wear the ranges specifically designed for marketing purposes. Bastian has met him before,” Lopez responded in a sour tone.

“Yeah, he loves whores. The kinkier the better.” Bastian mumbled with a mouthful of cheesecake.

“William Simms is an investment banker. He has his own company here in San Francisco with branches all over the States,” Lopez continued. “He travels extensively and is a regular and very popular visitor at high class brothels everywhere— very deep pockets.” Lopez smiled wryly. “He’ll be a favorite with the whores. He’s in his forties and has that muscular bad boy look about him.”

“Good. We need some younger bodies at the parties.” Luca’s eyes turned speculative. “It’s time to replenish our pool of whores.”

“Any type you’re specifically interested in?”

“We have a shortage of women in their thirties and early forties. I found a couple who would fit the bill perfectly.” Luca handed a folder to Lopez. “They’re going to need a certain level of coercion.”

“Money?” Lopez paged through the file. “These women aren’t in the business, are they?” He looked at Luca. “I’m assuming they pissed you off?”

“Let’s just say they stuck their noses in where they shouldn’t have.”

“Wouldn’t the disappearance of the entire Red Reign PI Agency team spark some suspicion?” Lopez asked as he read the intel and stared at the picture of an auburn-haired woman. “I wouldn’t mind fucking this one myself.”

“You can fuck her at your heart’s content once you have her under lockup.”

“This address... I’ve seen it before,” Lopez mused out loud.

“It’s an FBI safehouse. I put the word out to my informants across the federal agencies. It seems someone knows the Boneiro family well enough to know the Red Reign team could potentially become targets. Unfortunately for them, my contacts are top level agents. They confirmed the four women are in residence as we speak.”

“Are they under FBI protection?” Bastian asked.

“No. Unfortunately it’s the one thing they couldn’t supply— who their protectors are.”

“It doesn’t matter. We know how to pluck women off the streets.” Lopez closed the file.

“As long as it’s done without drawing attention. Make it happen soon. I want to test them at this weekend’s party.” Luca’s eyes gleamed with greed. “They’ll be in demand, so make sure they stay fit and healthy.” He snickered. “Once you have them, I might forget your fuckup with the other two.”

“Consider it done.” Lopez closed the file and drained his glass. “Anything else?”

“Don’t forget to Skype me for the execution.”

Lopez didn’t respond. He kicked Bastian’s chair which spurred him to get up and follow outside.

Luca smirked as he watched them walk around the front of the beach house. Conti was an idiot but Lopez carried weight in the crime world. He needed to keep the bit in Lopez’s mouth as a reminder of who held the power in their relationship.

His thoughts drifted to his brothers. It wasn't the first time he had to step in to assuage Marco's anger at his younger sons. He'd treated them like idiots their entire lives so it wasn't any wonder they acted the part so well. Luca happened to know that it was exactly that—an act. Behind the clownish facade lay two very sharp minds. It was time to rein them in to use them to his advantage. They could play an integral role when the time came to step into Marco's shoes.

The first thing he had to work on was their impulsive behavior. They needed more responsibility to make them feel important... and beholden to their older brother.

His informant in the FBI had supplied him with the name of the PI company Senator Wilson had used to trace his daughter. It was because of their involvement that Rocco and Stefano had been caught. Marco wanted a message sent to the senators and government officials never to oppose a member of the Boneiro family. He wanted to use the women of The Red Reign PI Agency to get it across.

Their disappearance would lead directly to Senator Wilson's front door for ignoring an instruction from one of the Boneiro family members. His conscience would become so burdensome that he'd be more than willing to accept Marco's bribe to vote to scrap S-52, the rough diamond importation bill in exchange for their release.

Except, Luca had no intention of letting them go. It would be the first crack in Marco Boneiro's formidable hold over the leaders of The Commission.

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“Until Luca Boneiro comes to the rescue, you won’t see it coming, father dear. I’m going to dethrone you by a thousand cuts. And the day I finally do, you will know why.” His eyes glazed over.

“Vengeance, you bastard. For Angelo.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Why don’t you just go back to The Sea Ranch and fuck your little girl, Jared Bates? You sure as hell don’t pay attention to anything I’m saying.”

“Because you’re ranting like a jealous wife, which we both know you’re not. Let’s just drop it, Paxton. We need to crack open this sex ring.”

“With no guarantee that you’ll be able to put any of the Mafia behind bars,” she tried to reason with him.

“Maybe not, but you saw the number of young kids they had turned into sex slaves. I can’t live with that on my conscience. I want to catch the bastards.” He cupped her face but she slapped his hands away.

“We can find another solution. We know the date and location of the next party. We can raid it then. You don’t need to play the sacrificial lamb.”

“You know as well as I do how many things can go wrong in a raid like that. The wrong timing and it could blow up in our faces. We might lose the one chance we have to get all of those kids and women out, not to mention any others that might be

trapped.” He tipped her chin higher with his thumb. “I love that you’re concerned for my safety, little one, but I have my entire team as back up, as well as the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team.”

“And the Red Reign team.”

“No. You are going to stay put.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Bates. You might be my Dom and by my choice, sexually dominate me but on this, I don’t need your permission.”

“I wouldn’t think twice about locking all four of you in the stronghold until it’s over, Paxton.” He pinched her chin between his fingers to keep her gaze locked on him. “You will not put your life in danger because of me. I’m the one responsible to protect you, not the other way round.”

“It’s time you understood woke culture, Bates. Sexism and its ancillary misogynistic behaviors are dead. Some of the world’s most notorious practitioners have had their careers ended, are behind bars or, better yet, are dead.” Her eyes glowed like emeralds. “If we’re going to be together, you need to stop living in the past. You’re my future and I’m gonna make damn sure you don’t fuck that up.”

She spun away and stormed out of the kitchen where they’d been preparing breakfast. His voice chased after her but she ignored him.

Jared had dropped her at the safehouse late afternoon the previous day upon their return to San Francisco. That was what had pissed her off— that he had joined the Cobras directly afterwards at their stronghold to strategize without including her team. Whether he liked it or not, they were part of the operation. He would learn soon enough that she was a woman to be reckoned with.

“You’re in for a very rude awakening if you think I’m backing off, Jared Bates,” she huffed as she put on running shoes. She needed to get back into her exercise routine. With anger dumping adrenaline into her veins, it was the perfect time to start running without a tail shadowing her. She needed time alone to clear her mind and sort through her emotions for Jared that seemed to have taken over every thought since their return. His attitude was absurd. She wasn’t some starry-eyed teenager. Yes, she’d been caught unaware by the depth of her feelings for him but she had to find a balance. She couldn’t afford to let a budding love rule her life— especially not during the situation they now found themselves in that could very easily end in a life or death scenario.

The skills she’d honed during the tours in Afghanistan aided her in evading the security team stationed at strategic places around the house. “A couple of miles should help to clear my mind,” she mumbled as she cleared the trees further down the street. Her runners danced off the asphalt as she set a fast pace. She timed her strides with the steady rhythmic beat of the music flowing through the wireless earbuds. It didn’t take long for a slight breeze to make her feel rejuvenated. Sunlight tinted the sky various shades of orange. After ten sets of HIIT routines, Paxton stopped to catch her breath and stretch. A feeling of being watched crawled up her spine. She looked around surreptitiously, expecting to see a couple of Jared’s security team lurking about but there was no one. She had taken the route around Lake Merced. It was still early but there were already signs of rush hour traffic.

“Must be my imagination.” She finished the stretches and took off again, this time sticking close to the shoreline of the lake. It offered a more challenging route with the unevenness of the ground.

Her mind was filled with visions of the small children they’d seen on the footage of a previous party at the Malibu residence. Her heart contracted at the thought of despair they must feel, the pain and degradation— the times they weren’t drugged into submission. At the moment, kidnapping stories were a regular theme of the 24-hour

news cycle. Thousands of men, women and children were getting lured into sexual exploitation, forced labor and slavery through the use of force, coercion, abduction, and fraud. It was so commonplace that the public had become numbed by it. Parents were slow to realize that giving a child too much freedom was tantamount to being an accomplice in their disappearance as each one became a potential target of Transnational Organized Crime— human traffickers. Parents of the missing were paralyzed with fear about their child having been sold as either sex slaves to pedophile rings or forced into child labor.

She glanced over her shoulder at the sound of a speeding vehicle.

“What the fuck?” she exclaimed at the sight of a blue unmarked van approaching her at a high rate of speed. Situational awareness kicked in with a dose of adrenaline. She was about to be run over. Paxton bolted towards an exercise park where there would be people.

“Aww,” her scream was nothing more than a muted sigh as pain suddenly exploded in her head; the blow coming out of nowhere. Her legs gave in as she struggled to stay alert. In the split second of looking back, a figure had jumped from behind a clump of trees.

Crack!

A fist slammed into the side of her head. A flash of light, then purple dots populated her vision. Paxton’s brain bounced back and forth inside her skull as she dropped onto her knees. Before she could recover, she was cold cocked with a leather sap.

“That was easy.” A man’s voice echoed inside her tormented brain. It was the leer on his face— then it faded into black as she gave in to the void of unconsciousness.

Out for a run and then she was gone; knocked out, hooded, and thrown into the back

of the van without anyone the wiser. They chose the spot well, made sure the trees hid them from view of the passing cars. No one saw a thing. It was over in less than a minute.

Goddammit, my head hurts!

Paxton reached up to touch the source of the sharp pain— a possibly fractured malar bone. She had been brutally sucker punched on the right side of her face then smashed on the back of the head with a leather billy club. It was a professional hit meant to incapacitate the victim. Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to move. The sensation was like trying to walk through three feet of mud. She was being sucked down. Nausea made her want to retch. The more she squeezed her mind for details, the more intense the pain became.

Cold metal protruded against the dorsal scapular nerve endings in her back, pinging outposts of spinal ganglia, causing her to jerk uncontrollably. She had been cuffed with zip cord. The coarse weave of a burlap sack scratched at her face. Unable to brace against the physics of kinetic force, her body rolled and banged against the metallic interior of a cargo van with each turn and rut. Jump cuts of her abduction flashed in microsecond bursts inside her mind. Paxton was being transported like chattel.

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How the hell did I allow this to happen? I fucking know better. Stay calm, Paxton. You know how to get out of situations like this. Just don't act too soon.

To help focus her mind, she listened to her breathing. The rumble of male voices penetrated.

Focus, Paxton. Put the pain behind you. Concentrate on what's important.

She strained against the zip ties cuffing her wrists together. How to get out of this? She gnashed her teeth as pain slashed through her brain.

Think Paxton! Don't fuck this up or you're gonna end up as a sex slave!

Her hands trembled as she unobtrusively as possible pulled off the hood. She turned her head to gauge the strength of the two men in the front.

Two mistakes—tying her hands in front of her and they hadn't fettered her. She sneered at their mistake at underestimating her because she was a woman. Now, with an advantage, she moved silently.

My iWatch! They didn't take it off.

It was specifically designed to look like a normal Fitbit so no one would view it as anything more. Paxton had one made for each of The Red Reign team members in case of an emergency. With her hands tied, she couldn't activate the distress signal. Moving unseen in the dim light, she pressed the watch against her chin to unlock the screen. It took four attempts before she managed to find the exact pressure to send a

distress call.

She had no idea how long she had been out or how far they were from the safehouse but she prayed that her team, and hopefully, the Cobras, would find her before the signal was lost.

Her attention moved to the two men. They appeared scruffy but clean and sounded educated as she listened to them discussing the past weekend's football match. She frowned. They didn't fit the usual kidnapper look.

She went cold all over as Jared's words came back to haunt her.

"They make it their business to know everything, Paxton."

Her luck had finally run out. Instinct warned her this wasn't a random kidnapping. These bastards worked for Boneiro.

But how did they find me? We're in an FBI witness protection safehouse for fuck's sake!

Paxton squeezed her eyes shut as she bit back the annoyed groan threatening to crawl to the surface. She had played right into their hands. Jared had told her part of their investigation was to find corrupt government officials. Some mole with knowledge of the details of the release of Senator Wilson's daughter was, without a doubt, the informant.

I am so fucked.

Boneiro was out to clean up his son's mess. The timing of her abduction was too close to the sex party to be coincidental. He didn't want her dead. He wanted her to pay for daring to interfere in Mafia business. She might very well be a fresh face to

be added to the menu.

She scoffed in her mind. You're in for a surprise if you think I'll go along merrily.

Sounds of traffic wafted through the open windows. A church bell chimed in the distance. The van rocked as they crossed what Paxton believed to be railway tracks. She used the opportunity to roll over against the back of the seats. Lifting her head, she peeked through the passenger window as they drove past the Flowerland Floral Shop.

We're at Woodland Memorial Park. Now's my chance.

Paxton didn't hesitate. In one smooth movement she went onto her knees and hunched low behind the seats. The van rocked to a halt. She straightened and struck. She delivered a sideward blow to the driver's nose, to disorientate him while dealing with the bigger danger, the burly man in the passenger seat. The thug cried out at the excruciating pain of broken cartilage and blood splotching his shirt. He hunched over as he covered his nose, tears temporarily blinding him. The van spluttered and died as he removed his foot from the clutch pedal.

"What the fuck... agh!" The second blow Paxton delivered was a sharp downward strike with the side of her hands, hitting the vagus nerve of the big man in the passenger seat. He was visibly dizzy but it hadn't been hard enough to render him unconscious. Maneuvering herself between the seats combined with the pain splitting her head, limited the strength of her blows. A second double fisted blow against his chin offered the desired effect. He slumped against the door.

"You fucking bitch!" the driver hissed as he tried to clear his mind of the pain. Paxton didn't wait to test his theory as she shuffled to the back door.

"Open, you motherfucker," she shouted as she kicked it for the third time. This time

the lock gave in and the doors slammed open. She was out and running in a flash. The driver was incapacitated with blood pouring from a broken nose. He wouldn't be able to catch her. There were times that retreat was a safer option. Paxton had no intention of staying and tempting fate, especially if they were seasoned criminals who packed firepower.

"Fuuck!" she cried as a hand jerked her head back and forced her to her knees almost immediately. The ass was stronger than she'd thought. She snapped her leg out in a sharp backward kick. "Fuck you, asshole," she sneered as her foot connected with his knee. His leg gave way but the hold on her hair tightened.

"I'm going to fucking cut you, you whore!" he snapped against her ear.

Paxton delivered a swift shot with her elbow directly to his solar plexus at a slight upward angle, knocking the wind out of him. He reared back, gasping for breath as she got to her feet.

"I've just about had enough of this shit." She stood poised with legs braced apart and shifted her body weight from the ball of one foot to the other. She forced her breathing under control. The flying back kick wasn't executed to perfection because of her tied hands but the satisfaction of watching his feet lift off the ground as her heel connected with his chin made up for it. He flew through the air to land on his back inside the van. "Now that's what I call a perfect aim." If she could, Paxton would've dusted off her hands as a sign of satisfaction.

The man in the passenger seat hadn't moved. There had been no traffic throughout the intense struggle. She understood why as she quickly scanned the surroundings. They were in the cemetery.

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A search of the van offered a couple of zip ties but with her hands bound, she couldn't get the men tied up. They were too heavy to shift around. She checked her watch. Surely her team was close.

"No way would Jared let them come on their own. Be prepared for his wrath when they get here, Paxton," she muttered as she started walking toward the main road. She barely covered two yards when the screeching of tires drew her attention. The sight of Jared's black Hummer was the best thing she'd ever seen, followed closely by Jordan's red Jeep.

Jared was by her side in seconds. His jaw locked as his eyes did a thorough investigation of her body.

"Are you hurt?" His guttural voice deepened as he cut loose the zip ties and noticed the reddened skin of her wrists. His touch was gentle as he massaged her hands.

"No," she smirked as she glanced over her shoulder at the van. "But I can't say the same about those bastards."

"I hope you fucked them up good, Boss." Kezlin touched the laceration on her cheek.

"Sure as hell did."

"I'm gonna check on them," Kezlin said as she walked to the van with Jordan and Knox hovering at Paxton's side in concern.

"Thank you for getting here so quickly." Paxton glanced at Jared, who hadn't said

another word but his gaze remained glued on her.

“Thank Jordan for acting immediately when your distress signal came through,” he said.

His head snapped up at a shrill cry coming from the van.

“Kezlin!” he shouted as he sprinted after the van pulling away with a screech of tires. “Fuck!” He came running back. “Get in the Hummer,” he said as he approached but Paxton was already opening the door with Jordan and Knox running to the Jeep.

By the time they took the corner where the van had disappeared, there was no sign of it. Jared slammed his fist on the steering wheel as he looked in all directions. His glacial eyes flashed at Paxton. “Can you lock onto her location?”

“Only from a laptop or iPad. Give me your phone,” she said and held out her hand. “I must’ve lost mine when they took me.”

“It’s linked to the Bluetooth,” he said as he handed it to her.

Paxton quickly dialed Jordan’s number. Her spirit sank as her grim voice echoed through the interior of the Hummer, “I already checked, Paxton. Kezlin left her watch back at the house and her phone is here with us in the Jeep. I’m sorry, there’s no way to track her.”

Paxton went cold. She managed to escape the claws of the Mob but because of her hardheadedness and neglect, she’d put one of her girls in danger. Worse... she’d put Jared’s sister in the hands of Boneiro.

“I’m sorry, Jared,” she said in a defeated voice.

He didn't respond but continued to scour the surrounding roads for any sign of the blue van.

"We're wasting time. We're not going to find her like this. Cruz would have more luck scouring the traffic cams and public CCTV footage of the area." Jared's voice was hollow with concern, which made Paxton feel worse. She laid her hand on his arm.

"We'll find her. Jared. I won't stop looking until we do."

She cringed as he shrugged off her hand. His voice was harsh with concern as he phoned Cruz and instructed him to start searching for the van. He didn't look at her, nor said another word.

He cut the engine but didn't get out.

"Jared, I'm sorry but—"

"But what, Paxton? Nothing you say is going to change the fact that my sister is now in the hands of Marco Boneiro. All because of your selfish need to prove to the world what a badass you are."

"I needed time to—"

"I don't give a fuck what you needed, Paxton. All that matters now is to find Kezlin. For your sake, she had better not be hurt."

Paxton watched him get out of the Hummer and disappear from view. She had fucked up big time and in the process, endangered one of the few people in her life she truly cared for. And if that wasn't bad enough, she might have lost the only chance she'd ever have at finding love again. She had realized as much in those moments of

coming to in the van. She wasn't the kind of person who trusted easily— opening her heart even less. She did both in a matter of weeks with Jared. He was it for her. There wouldn't be another.

Jared was a hard man. He'd never forgive her if his little sister got hurt.

“Don't beat yourself up, Paxton. We're all at fault, Jared included. You weren't the only one there. We should've paid attention and never have allowed Kezlin to approach that van by herself.”

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“No, Jordan. I’m the one to blame. I made sure the security detail didn’t know I left the house. If not for that...”

She swallowed back the lump forming in her throat as she fought off the tears blurring her vision. Her future had looked bright and promising this morning. Within a matter of hours, she single-handedly destroyed her chance at happiness.

Chapter Sixteen

“Open this hatch, Brock.”

“Haven’t you caused enough trouble for one day, Paxton? Stay away from Jared. He doesn’t want to see you.” Brock blocked the exit from the stronghold with widespread legs and arms folded across his chest. He wasn’t intimidated by her.

His words shook her. Cruz had managed to find the van on traffic cam footage. Jared and his team had raced to the underground parking garage where it had last been seen. When they got there, the van was deserted. The kidnappers must have escaped in another vehicle. Cruz and Jordan were still searching but couldn’t find a trace of them anywhere. Jared had returned even more emotionally shut down, ignoring Paxton. She’d fucked up badly but it hurt that he possibly hated her now.

“Did he say that?”

“I know him better than anyone. Believe me, you’re better off keeping your distance from him.”

“That may be, Brock but if Jared doesn’t want to see me, he can damn well tell me himself.”

Brock wasn’t moved as he stared her down. Paxton exhaled slowly. She had to talk to Jared to repair the damage to their relationship before it escalated any further. It wasn’t in her nature to cower in a situation like this. She had badly misjudged his counsel and ended up endangering the life of his sister. Now it was up to her to let him know how much she regretted her impulsive behavior that morning.

“Look, Brock. I understand you love and protect each other but I need to make things right.” She looked at him with pleading eyes. Now wasn’t the time to be hard-assed. She had to penetrate that hard-headed mind of his if she wanted out of the bunker to get to Jared. “I made a mistake which I regret. My negligence caused one of my team to be taken. I can’t forgive myself for it, nor do I expect Jared or any of you to, either.” She placed her hand on his arm. “Please understand, Brock. Jared has come to mean something to me. I—”

“Define something.”

“I care for him.” Her tongue trailed over her dry lips. “In truth, I believe I’ve fallen in love with him. I’ve already committed to be his sub. He’s hurting, Brock. Please, I have to be there for him.”

“Very well, but I’m warning you, Paxton. Hurt him and you will have all of us to deal with.”

She nodded, too taken by the way the men cared for each other to utter another word. Brock opened the hatch. He leaned in and said in a deep voice. “The security detail will take you to his house. Do not attempt to lose them again, Paxton.”

“Don’t worry, I learned my lesson.”

She tried to keep her mind blank as she walked. To wrack her brain on what to say when he opened the door served no purpose. Her heart had to do the talking. Instinct told her it was the only way she'd be able to break through the wall he'd built around his heart since Kezlin had been taken. That is, if he didn't first slam the door in her face.

She stopped on the porch and stared at the door. Suddenly, the courage with which she'd shown Brock, disappeared. Fear that nothing she could say would sway Jared's mindset, paralyzed her.

"You're not going to achieve anything by staring at the door, Paxton."

She rang the doorbell and waited with her heart in her throat. When he opened the door, nothing could've stopped her from flinging herself into his arms. The haunted look in his eyes tore at her heart, knowing she had put it there.

"Don't send me away... please."

His arms tightened briefly around her before he released her and stepped back. "How did you get past Brock?"

"I appealed to his empathy."

"I'll have to send him a memo to ignore your feminine pleas in the future."

Paxton didn't react to the veiled insult. She took his hand. "Jared, I need to—"

"Come inside, Paxton. I'm not having this conversation on my doorstep." He gestured to her to enter. She followed him down a flight of stairs into a palatial living area that took her breath away. Not offering the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of his home, he continued out onto the deck overlooking the ocean.

Paxton stood next to him, listening to the distant rumble of waves crashing to shore. A white line of residual seafoam glowed phosphorescent under the moonlight.

“I owe you an apology.”

His gravelly voice drew her gaze to him. He watched her with sadness in his eyes.

“No, Jared, you were right. I am to blame. I can’t begin to—”

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“I’m more to blame than you, little one. She’s my sister. I vowed to protect her the day she was born. Today, I failed her.”

“Because you were concerned about me! Don’t you dare play the martyr, Jared. If I hadn’t slipped past the security detail, none of this would’ve happened.”

He shook his head as he took her hands in his. “It was wrong to put the blame on you. I fucked up, Paxton. It’s the one thing I never allow: one team member investigating a scene by themselves. I saw her walking to the van. I should’ve stopped her.”

“Instead you were worried about my wrists,” she whispered. “No matter how you justify your actions, Jared. It’ll always come back to me... I am the common denominator in every scenario.” She squeezed his hands. “We will find her. Kezlin is like you. Strong, determined and unbreakable.”

“I know the cruelty of Marco Boneiro, Paxton. We will only find her if and when he’s ready. I fear by then it might be too late to...” He closed his eyes. “Now that I know he’s involved in sex slavery... I shudder to think where she is at the moment. Helpless and drugged out of her mind.”

“How did they know where to find us?”

“It’s an FBI safehouse. I’m guessing they have a top-level agent on their payroll.” His eyes darkened. “Or worse, someone in the NSA. There were only a handful of people who knew about the arrangement to place you there. I’ll find the motherfucker who ratted out your location, make no mistake about that, but first I have to concentrate on Kezlin.”

“The party is two days from now, my love. We’ll find her then. I know we will.”

“My love?” His body was strung taut as he stared at her.

Paxton smiled wryly at the unintended slip. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Jared. I know it’s quick but I’m a forty-two-year-old woman. I know my mind and my heart. You have taken up residence inside them. For the first time in years I feel whole again.”

“God, Paxton. I can’t afford to let my mind stray from Kezlin... not now.” He rested his forehead against hers. “Hold onto that thought a little longer until I can respond with the care and honesty you deserve.”

“We have all the time in the world, Jared.” She went onto her toes to kiss him. “Let me take care of you tonight. Please, let’s lose ourselves in each other for a couple of hours. I need you to give me the strength to keep fighting the despair threatening to bury me for losing Kezlin.”

Jared wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer, burying his face in her fragrant hair.

“Tonight might not be the best night, love. I’m too tightly strung... I’m afraid I’ll lose control to the beast inside me and hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid of any part of you. We’re in this together. In a very short period of time, you’ve become my rock. Let me be there for you, too, my love. In any way you need me tonight.”

“I hope you won’t regret this in the morning, little one,” he whispered against her ear as he carried her upstairs to his bedroom.

The moon transformed the blackness with its silvery disk hung against the dark sky. Paxton was enchanted by the light that filtered inside to bathe the room in a luminescent glow.

A shard of heat pierced her loins as she watched Jared take off his shirt. Impulsively, she reached out to trace the rippling strength of his stomach. The usual moss-green color of her eyes turned darker, like the forest before sunset, as his breathing increased.

It was a warm night and his body was covered in a nacreous sheen of moisture. The silver beam of moonlight played over the landscape of his powerful physique.

Their eyes met, intensifying their excitement in the dimness of the room. Paxton wriggled out of the cotton sundress and let it flutter to the floor. She could sense the heat in his eyes as they travelled over her body clad only in a pair of black satin panties. His eyes lifted to greet her with the fullness of his darkening topaz-colored gaze.

Jared stood rigid, paralyzed with a feeling of being winded, struggling to breathe. Through parted lips he drew a breath. She was a Venus of perfection, her skin already glistening with sensual excitement as she slipped off her panties.

Her breasts raised and fell under the moonbeams dancing over the rose-colored tips. Naked, comfortable, and without false modesty, she watched as his eyes roamed over the sleek lines of her stomach to the roundness of her hips.

Paxton released a heated breath as she drank in the sight of the veins in his cock swelling with pulses of blood, tumefying his shaft firmly. She tilted her head, leaving him mesmerized by the dark red tresses shimmering and cascading in lustrous waves over her shoulders.

Paxton got onto her knees and walked to the edge of the bed. Her tongue flicked out to sensually lick the viscous drops from the turgid mushroom shaped cockhead.

“Paxton.” The warning fell to her ears in a strangled voice. She looked up; his nebulous gaze held hers captive. A warning; not to chase her away but to be wary of being completely devoured.

She ignored him, brushing her hands over his thighs as she urged him to lie down on the bed. He, the powerful Dom, conceded like a willing lamb.

“Let me take care of you, my love,” she whispered as she kneaded the strong ropey muscles of his legs. She straddled him, leaving a trail of titillating nibbles up his chest to gently trace the rigid line of his jaw and ended with a feathered brush over his lips.

He caught her arms before she could kiss him. His voice was harsh, strained from the arousal that throbbed in his loins.

“Don’t prod the beast, little one. For your own good— tread lightly. My emotions are too scattered to stay in control tonight.”

“I need the beast tonight, Jared. Don’t keep him on a leash,” she said, smiling as she touched his face to gently trace the line of his jaw.

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Paxton was in awe of the emotions guiding every action and how her heart rate accelerated at the promise of what his taut body promised. It was a perfect marriage to what her body needed.

“Kiss me. Please, Sir,” she whispered against his lips.

Their lips fitted perfectly, like they were shaped to mold together. She moved gently against him, exulting in the contrast of their bodies. Jared wrapped his fist around a tuft of hair at Paxton’s nape, growling into a kiss at her whimpered pleasure when he deepened it.

One touch and it was over. Jared had known it would be like this with her. He hadn’t been able to resist her from the first day. He felt electricity spark all over his body. From this point on it would be all lust— intense and intoxicating. Like always, it was his release, his escape, and his drug as he deliberately banned all emotions from his mind. He shuddered at the thrill of the primal need to copulate— to finally claim her as his; to mark her with every touch and thrust.

“Paxton, heed my warning. Take it—”

“I need you, Jared, beast or not, to possess me more than I’ve ever wanted in my entire life,” she pleaded in a voice raw with lust. Her breasts, with nipples swollen taut, surged against his chest.

He gripped her arms to force her back. His eyes glowed in the bluish tint of the night as he stared at her. The warning glimmer seared her with devilish intent.

“Remember I warned you, little one.”

“You talk too much, Bates,” she said in a voice filled with a lusty tenor.

She gasped as his hands curled around her hips. “Take my cock, sub. Impale yourself fully,” he instructed bluntly, the dark growl creating a delightful shiver to chase the excitement down her spine as she got into position. “On second thought... I want to watch the tantalizing shape of your ass as you fuck me. Turn around; I want your back toward me.” The feverish lust that replaced the warmth in his voice was undeniable.

Jared did his best to fight the vicious claws of desire clamping around his loins as he watched her follow his instructions. The raw passion driving her was unmistakable in the taut lines of her back as she straddled him, carefully positioning his cock at her entrance. She moaned as she carefully pushed down at the feeling of his hardness stretching her open.

“Fuuucck!” she cried as Jared pushed her down with one hard movement that impaled her to the hilt.

“Holy shit,” Paxton gasped, digging her nails into his knees, realizing that the beast inside Jared was now in control.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Remember, I warned you, sub. Now, you’ve awakened the devil and he’s hungry to be fed.” He reached into the bedside drawer. “Lean forward and pull your ass cheeks open. I intend to play rough and dirty,” he ordered in a thick voice. The heart-shaped form of her hips catapulted his lust to surge with a throbbing demand through his veins. “More. I want your ass open for my pleasure, Paxton.”

She acted on instinct, too blinded by desire to deny him.

“Jared!” she whimpered at the unexpectedness of something hard and cold prodding her back entrance. “Fucking hell,” she moaned.

He was deaf to her hoarse cries as he began to plunge a black onyx dildo into her ass. He watched through half-lidded eyes the rhythmic plunges in and out of her narrow opening.

“Tonight I’m taking it all. I want more than just your submission, my pet. I aim to fuck you into kingdom come,” he growled. His iron control threatened to snap from the pleasure caused by friction of the glass plug against his cock through the thin membrane.

“It hurts but good lord, it feels good,” Paxton moaned, concerned about the dissociation in his voice. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her but sensed that he was creating a distance between— as he became uncaring, devoid of any emotion, driven by nothing other than lust.

She was surprised as he became gentle, the strokes inside her ass turned teasing. “Gaawd,” she fisted her hand around the duvet as he ended the next thrust by pushing it all the way inside her.

“There,” he growled, laughing as she screamed as the sound of two hard slaps on her ass cracked through the room. His hand fisted around a clump of hair as he sat up and pulled her against his chest. The beast inside him purred at her painful gasp as he squeezed her breast. His voice cracked ominously in the night. “You wanted the beast, sub, and now he’s demanding to be fed. Don’t piss him off by failing to offer what you promised.”

He released her hair as he laid back against the bed, his fingers cutting into her hips. He was overcome by the war raging inside him between the beast fighting to take control, like always making him forget about all restraints and taking what he was

after— forgetfulness.

The only time his mind could turn blank with no past to hound him. There was only him... and his lust, losing himself in the allure of a woman's body.

“Get on with it... or he will take control.” The darkness in his voice warned Paxton he was on the edge. She started to rock and undulate her hips.

“No, not like a timid little mouse, sub. You wanted to fuck me, but I'm the one who will dictate how you do it. Straighten your back, clasp your hands behind your neck and then ride me. I want a proper hard and wild ride.” He hesitated... his voice lowered. “A whore's fuck is what I'm after.”

Jared noticed her back going ramrod straight as she quieted. He waited, ignoring the beast that clawed at him to force her to comply. The Dom inside him needing to feel and connect for the first time in years, won the battle. He had opened his heart to her as a man. Now was the time to do the same as a Dom. It was the most important moment in their relationship. The turning point to prove he'd chosen wisely, that she had the strength as a sub to soothe the animal inside him, to oppose him when he pushed too hard. He had been searching for the one woman who could make him forget his past, who could teach him the importance of a tender touch. Not to fuck blindly but to force him to feel as well and allowing himself to love and be loved. His breath caught in his throat as she lifted herself off his cock. She sat back on her legs between his thighs as she watched him through lowered eyelashes.

Fear gnawed at Paxton that if she didn't choose her words wisely, it could be the end of the path they had embarked on. She winced at the hard glint in his eyes.

It was either do as he said or leave.

The moonlight caught the shimmer of her luxurious hair as she shook her head. “I'm

not leaving.” Her voice sounded tremulous in the silence. “You’re my Dom, the man I chose to offer my sexual submission. It’s a position of honor, not only for me as your submissive but also for you as my dominant. The effort has to come from both sides. It’s the only way we’ll survive, Jared. I’ve been excited meeting your beast and feeding its hunger but the one thing I refuse to do is to submit to it to soothe the anger and emptiness raging inside you.”

She brushed her hands over his legs. “When the time is right and you trust me, I hope you’ll share with me what it is that drives the beast to shut down your ability to feel.” She smiled wryly. “I love a hard and rough fuck... at the right time and more importantly, for the right reasons. Using the beast as an excuse to absolve yourself for your inability to connect when you’re with a woman hasn’t helped you find a solution. It definitely isn’t going to with me either.”

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His eyes glowed in the moonlight, a warning that she should heed what she was saying.

“I’m here to stay, Jared, but unless you allow me to help you find your way past the block in your soul, we’re doomed before we even begin.”

Paxton knew she had to get through to him. She had no intention of becoming a pawn to beastly sex.

“I’m not one of the subs you use for temporary relief. It’s time to conquer the beast. Don’t let the past define you, Jared. Whatever it is, let it go. You said we have to open our hearts. We both did, gladly. Now, I’m asking you... open your soul and let me in.”

“If there’s one thing I hate, it’s being psychoanalyzed,” he sneered.

“I’m selfish and demand all of you in this relationship, Jared. Your body, heart, and soul. You... the man you are outside of this bedroom. The one I fell in love with. In bed, or during a scene, it’s of the utmost importance that we connect on both an emotional and physical level, otherwise everything will fall apart in difficult times.”

Jared didn’t respond. She had seen past the facade and found the scared boy who used anger to keep his heart intact, like he had with Bella, throughout their marriage, except with her, he’d used indifference to keep her from discovering the fear inside him.

Paxton was it. She’d crawled into his heart from the first time he’d seen her. He’d

tried at first to ignore it— and failed. He loved her, with a depth of emotion that scared him. He needed her— to love him for the man he could be and to save him from the man he had become. He was humbled as he looked into her eyes. She had offered all of herself; her strength and gentleness, and the unconditional love that shined brightly.

“I am here for you, Jared. Together we can slay your demons.” The touch of her lips stole his breath away as they caressed the hard plates of his stomach. “A powerful Dom and his loving submissive.”

Jared closed his eyes with a sigh. She had shifted the dynamics. She was now his strength. The need to let go overwhelmed him. He relaxed under her tender touch. For the first time in over thirty years, hope filled him. The only people he’d allowed in his heart had been his two sons. Bella had given him a reason to be human but she couldn’t remove the armor. That had been his failure. He should never have married her. She hadn’t been strong enough for him.

Paxton had seen through all the layers and found the lonely man inside. With her, he might be able to forget and live the rest of his life in happiness.

She traced the lines on his forehead. “No more thoughts, my love. From this moment on, it’s only you and me in this room.”

“I’m all yours, little one... for now, you can play.”

Heat exploded inside his veins with every brush of her lips against his skin as she left a trail of kisses over his chest.

“Christ.” His jaw locked at the sensations rippling through him. She brushed her palms over the ropey musculature of his arms as she kissed him teasingly along his jaw.

“We all deserve to find peace— to be spoiled and loved,” she purred as she looked at him with tearful eyes, filled with understanding... and love.

“You have turned my life upside down in more ways than I care to admit from the first day we met,” he said with a revered tone in his voice. “Your words, your touch... are food for my soul. Your voice intoxicates me. You amaze me, love.”

With a gentle finger he traced her face, forcefully holding her gaze as he drowned in the pools of her eyes. He stared at her with an intensity that shimmered, begging for release.

“Enough talking. It’s time to explore these wondrous feelings you’ve triggered inside me. I’ve been waiting for a woman like you to come into my life who had the strength to slay the beast inside me. With you by my side I’m ready to start enjoying the pleasures and challenges life has to offer.”

Jared kissed the curve of her shoulder. Her back arched as he gently tugged on her nipples. He shifted to push her onto her back.

“You have lulled the beast to sleep. For tonight there’ll be no more darkening of my soul,” he murmured against her stomach as he left hot, wet kisses downward.

“Oh, god,” Paxton moaned as he flicked his tongue over her clitoris.

Jared was quickly losing himself in her. She was a natural sensualist. Her vibrant nature teased, promised, and tormented him. He was drawn by the strength and control she exerted over herself.

He was drunk with her. For her, he wanted to change, to forget the past that taught him not to care, to find pleasure only in himself. He wanted more from a woman— from her— than just sexual indulgence. He wanted to open himself and offer her

tenderness and passion.

She thrashed as he spanned his hands around her buttocks.

“Easy, my pet,” he said with a kiss on her clit.

Instead of calming her, it had the opposite effect. Sparks of fire lit her up at the touch. She cupped his head to hold him in place, orbiting her hips against his mouth.

“Fuck, Paxton,” he moaned against her swollen lips. He tickled the slit with the tip of his tongue. She spread her legs wider, releasing rapid puffs of breath.

“You’re a sensual witch. An enticing combination of wantonness and desire,” he growled against her pussy, his mind consumed by her aroma.

“Aah, Jared, that feels so good,” she murmured.

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“You’re like a fever in my veins, little one. And what better way to assuage my need than with your fragrant scent?”

He licked the length of her slit once, twice, and then pushed his tongue deep inside. Her back arched in a bow as he lapped at the silken folds.

“You taste so good,” he growled as he sucked and licked her generous offering.

“I’m gonna come,” she cried as he continued to torment her flesh.

“I love your flavor, my pet. So decadent and... mine. You taste like mine, Paxton.”

She moaned as he doubled his efforts. Her hips twitched as he flicked his tongue over the swollen tip of her clit. Paxton gasped, in awe of the way Jared cherished her. Her passion spiked with every tongue lash of her fiery loins.

“Hmm, beautiful.” He sucked deeply; every action aimed at pushing her higher, closer to the edge.

Jared’s body was rigid with the effort to stay in control, to keep the beast captive in the darkness of his soul. For the first time in years, he wanted to feel, to savor the sensations her zealous responses triggered.

“Sir, I need your strength inside me. Take me, now.”

Jared growled her name in warning as she wrapped her hand around his turgid length.

“Now, Jared. Take me,” she demanded. Paxton tilted her hips against his hardness as she wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Yess,” she moaned as he plunged inside her. He exulted in the tremors that shook her body the deeper he went.

“Oh, god, I love this feeling,” she gasped as she yielded and submitted to his power. For the first time she truly savored the exquisite feeling of being possessed. “Hmmm,” a carnal growl slipped from her lips. She’d forgotten about the butt plug until now. Her mind was immersed by the radiant sensations the friction caused.

Jared’s face was drawn in a mask of pleasure as he rocked into her with a smooth, easy rhythm. He ignored her pleas for more as he reached down to gently remove the butt plug.

“I see my little subbie loves double penetration,” he teased at her protesting moan.

A wave of ecstasy rippled through her as he plunged deeply. Rapture exploded in Paxton’s veins with her raw cries slamming against the walls. She was adrift in a sea of passion that reshaped her— molded her to his expert touch.

Jared’s movements turned feverish as his pleasure increased. He bucked wildly into her hot sheath, pounding to lose himself in that undeniable bliss she offered. He grunted in masculine triumph as searing heat sparked at the back of his cock. Another hard thrust and he ejaculated inside her, filling her with heat as his primal roar echoed through the room.

In those final moments, he became the demanding beast— roughly staking a claim; hungry for her soul, branding her as his.

Jared slumped on top of her. Their laborious breathing married in the atmosphere—

the night drifting around them in easy background sounds. He stared into her face, illuminated by the silvery beams of the moon.

“I was wrong earlier,” she tilted with a tender smile.

“About what?”

“I haven’t fallen in love with you. I love you, Jared Bates. With a passion that scares me. With a need that surpasses anything I have ever experienced in my life.” She traced his lips, her eyes aglow with emotion. “I love you... just...you.”

It was a vow that rocked Jared to the depth of his soul. Her fingers on his lips stopped the words tumbling to the surface.

“No, my love. Not now. Tell me when you’re ready... then I’ll know I’ve found my destiny.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Let’s keep this operation tight and controlled. Our main goal is to free the women and children.”

“What about Boneiro?” Brock asked.

Jared looked at his team. “It’s possible that he might escape— if he’s even going to be there tonight.” He held up his hand to quiet the protest coming from all three at once. “It’s a chance we have to take. He’s not the primary focus of this operation. To close the sex ring down, we have to take Lopez and Conti into custody. With the intel and documentation we have linking Boneiro to them, we’ll have enough to indict him as a co-conspirator..”

“Then let’s get this show on the road.” Brock glanced at the four women sitting on the other side of the boardroom table. Surprisingly, they hadn’t said a word during the entire briefing. “What about the red kitties?”

“You’re walking on thin ice, Carter.” Jordan glared at him. “It’s well past time you wiped red kitties from your vocabulary... or I’ll do it for you.”

“You can try.”

“Enough,” Jared cut short the brinkmanship. He looked at Paxton. He didn’t trust her sudden passive demeanor. He’d come to know her well enough over the past couple of months. She was up to something. “I need your team to stay put and man the command center, Paxton.” His voice deepened. “Can I depend on you to guard our backs and be our eyes and ears?”

Her left eye spasmed as she nodded. It was the sign he’d been looking for. That involuntary action of her eyelid when she was about to lie... or bend the truth in her favor.

“Whatever you need.” She returned his stare unblinking. “As long as we agree on a code word to warn us when things get pear-shaped.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong,” Tanner interjected. “We’ve got every aspect and scenario covered. Our teams are made up of professionals, Mrs. Lee, and with the Hostage Rescue Team assisting us, we’ve got it under control.” He smiled to ease the bite of his words. “You’ll add the best value by controlling the drones from here, confirming positions using the heat sensors, and reporting anything unforeseen.”

“Tanner is right. Do I have your word that you’ll stay put, Paxton?” Jared said.

She shifted in the chair. “We’ll make sure we have our eyes on you the entire time, Commander.”

There was no mistaking the chill factor in the room dropped with her words. It didn’t

slip his attention that she avoided offering the promise he was after. He checked his watch. There wasn't time to ease his concern about Paxton's intent.

"I need to get dressed. Kit up and wait for me at the chopper. Give FBI Agent Brown the go ahead. ETA at the house in Malibu is two hours and counting. Everyone moves on my Go order. Is that understood?"

"Hooah, Commander!"

"Walk with me, Paxton." He didn't wait to see if she followed his instruction as he headed to his house and upstairs to his bedroom. He didn't need to— her essence invaded his mind whenever she was near.

"I don't like you going into that house alone, Jared." Paxton pulled her legs under her as she sat down on the wingback chair in front of the window. Her eyes moved over his body as he got dressed.

"I'm a Navy SEAL, love. I'm trained to handle any situation— the unexpected included." He finished knotting a silver tie around his neck. He cherished the feeling of warmth in his heart at her concern. "We're all wearing micro comms. You'll hear every word I say and with Cruz having hacked into the CCTV cameras at the house, you'll be able to watch me the entire time."

"You're looking very debonair and attractive." Her eyes moved over his broad shoulders in the black tuxedo made to fit his muscled frame. "It's a pity I'm not the lucky woman on your arm tonight."

"Hold that thought, love. When this is over, I'll take you dancing."

"Wearing that?"

“Hell yes. I like the way your eyes glimmer at me.” He took her hand as she got up.
“What’s this?”

“A gift... to make sure you remember your sub is waiting for you and to remind you not to take unnecessary chances tonight.”

“You shouldn’t have but it’s exactly the kind of watch I’d buy for myself.” He kissed her tenderly. “I have to admit, it’s nice to be spoiled... especially by you.”

“Get used to it, honey. Ask Lucy... it’s what I do for those I love.” She took the Rolex Submariner from him and fitted it on his wrist. “It’s the perfect accompaniment to complete your suave look.”

“I have to go.” He brushed her hair back and stared at her for long moments. “You are so much more than I deserve to have in my life, Paxton.”

“I’m a normal—”

“You’re anything but. You are beautiful inside and out. With Bella, my first wife... I destroyed her spirit with my impassiveness. I didn’t love her and should never have married her. With you... I’m different. You’re different. Last night proved to me... I believe you will be my savior, love. The one to finally destroy the fear inside me.”

“What fear? Why have you closed yourself from those around you? I know you care for your team but even with them, there’s a part of you that remains reserved.”

“Maybe I’ll have the courage to talk about it one day. For now, it’ll have to wait.” He tapped her on the nose. “I know you’re up to something but I beg you to behave. I can’t afford to worry about your safety and get the women and children out of those monsters’ hands.”

“Like you, I’ve been trained to take care of myself. Don’t worry about me, honey. Go. I’ve got your back.”

His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

She smiled brightly. “Your words, Commander. Your eyes and ears, remember?”

She walked with him to the hangar where the Cobras and her team were waiting.

“Just look at that... the Commander cleans up nicely.”

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Jared brushed off the taunting whistles from his men as they approached.

“Let’s go.” With a final look at Paxton, he got into the helicopter.

The three women watched as the sleek black chopper hovered for a couple of moments before it pitched forward and sped off.

“Jordan, you’re in the command center. I have to go tart up for the party. Knox, did you arrange with our contact to pick us up on the beach in front of my house?”

“Yes, the chopper is already warmed up and ready.”

“Let’s go. You can phone him during the drive. Pickup on the beach in front of my house in twenty minutes.”

“Are you sure about this, Paxton?” Knox followed her to the parking area. “It’s bad enough that Kezlin is potentially drugged and in the hands of those bastards. We don’t want you to end up a victim as well.”

“They caught Kezlin and me unaware once. It won’t happen again. Besides, Jared, along with his teams and the hostage rescue squads on standby, will be on guard already by the time I get there. As long as Jordan links up my comms to his and the teams on site, I’ll be fine.” She stopped next to her SUV. “I’m responsible for her being taken, Knox. I’m the one to make it right. I owe it to her... and to Jared. Our future happiness depends on it.”

Exotic, with heavy black kohl eyes, electric blue eyeshadow, false lashes and bright

red lips, the blonde woman entered the large ballroom in a red sequin gown. The distinct clicking sounds of sharp silver stiletto heels as they echoed their presence on the hard marble floor captivated and resonated with many of the guests in close proximity. She walked with confidence; her stride aimed to obtain just the perfect swing of her curved hips.

“I don’t recall seeing you at a party before.”

The deep voice forced her to stop. She brushed the bangs out of her eyes with an elegant hand. The downlights flashed on the diamante artfully decorating the long tips of her red painted nails.

“It’s my first.” She lifted blue eyes to the dark-haired man circling her.

“Your name.”

The way he demanded a response revealed that he was one of the men who held power in the house.

“Leila Hudson.”

“The name isn’t on our guest list.” He took a threatening step closer. “And I would’ve known if you were a menu item.”

Her eyes roamed nonchalantly over his broad shoulders and tall frame. “Thea Sutro assured me she cleared it with the warden. I received confirmation that my payment was received yesterday.” She pushed one hip forward in a seductive pose, not bothering to hide her amusement at his suspicious expression. “I was more than happy to spend money with the expectation of finding a scrumptious morsel on the menu.” Her eyes trailed over his body and back up to wink at him. “However, I wouldn’t mind an appetizer— but only if you’re available.”

“You’re very forward, Miss Hudson.” He folded his arms over his chest.

“I’m not shy to go after what I want, Mr....” She let the words hang with an expectant look on her face.

“Call me Luca.”

“Luca... such a dynamic name,” she purred as she walked closer. A pointed nail followed the crisp line of his black evening jacket. “I’m interested to see if the same strength flows through every part of your muscled body.” She leaned in to lick his cheek. “I’ll even pay for your time.”

His laugh rumbled from deep in his chest. She winced as he caught her hand in a tight grip. “You can’t afford me, Miss Hudson.” He pressed his lips against her palm, stabbing his tongue suggestively in the hollow of her hand. “I might have time later. In the meantime, have something to drink but keep that pussy of yours dry until I come for you. I won’t play second fiddle.” His fist tightened painfully around her hand. “Defy me and pain will be your only pleasure for days to come.”

She nursed her hand as she watched him walk away.

“Jesus, Paxton... stay away from that bastard.” Knox’s voice echoed in her ear. She didn’t respond. For the moment, communication to her comms was one way and blocked out from the rest of the teams. Jared had to concentrate on issuing the GO order at the perfect time. He couldn’t be distracted knowing she’d found a way to infiltrate the party. The idea had been sound and had come to her when she’d seen the bootlegged footage of Thea Sutro attending several parties. Sutro had readily agreed to assist the Red Reign team in exchange for immunity once the entire sex-and-pedophile ring was exposed. It didn’t really bother Paxton whether the FBI would honor the agreement she’d made. Sutro deserved everything coming her way.

Paxton was more rattled than she cared to admit. She had heard about the brutality of Marco Boneiro but it seemed his son followed his example.

“So, William, did you see anyone you liked?”

Paxton went cold at the familiar purr of Mia Kuntz’s voice behind her.

Fuck. He can’t see me here. She moved cautiously to the stand behind a large pillar. Although her disguise was sound, she wasn’t prepared to take the chance that he might recognize her.

“There is a blonde girl that caught my fancy.”

Paxton could detect the suppressed anger in his voice. He clearly had the privilege of a private screening of the menu. She detected the couple moving into her peripheral vision. It forced her to edge further around the pillar.

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“I hope you’re not in a hurry.” Mia pressed her breasts against Jared’s side as she stared at him with hungry eyes.

Paxton felt her anger boil as she watched Jared mold his hand around her buttocks.

“It depends if there’s someone to take care of my growing hunger, little girl.”

“Oh yes,” she beamed at him. “I know just how to satisfy your needs... Daddy.”

“Oh, lord help me,” Paxton mumbled. Her eyes bore holes into the lithe woman’s back. She snorted angrily as Mia pulled Jared’s head down to lock lips with him. Before she gave in to the desire to claim what was hers, she strutted with the same seductive sway toward the hallway where she’d seen various men disappear.

“He’s playing a role and so are you,” she reminded herself sotto voce. She needed to find Kezlin before one of these bastards chose her as his meal. Jordan had confirmed that she had been among the sex slaves that had arrived not too long ago. From what she’d said, Kezlin appeared to be heavily drugged and had been led inside between two men holding her upright.

Paxton tapped her ear once to activate the comms with Jordan and Knox.

“Jordan, you identified Kezlin via the drone satellite upon arrival outside the house. Were you able to follow where they took Kezlin with the heat sensors from there?”

“I tried. The sensor picked up too many at the time to know for sure but there was only one signal with three bodies moving to the top floor. It did appear that they

turned into the left wing. There are five rooms on that side. Hold on, let me check the current body count on that floor.”

Paxton kept walking with a confident stride. To anyone watching her, it would appear like she knew where she was heading. She hesitated as her eyes caught two men at the end of one hallway.

“Well, look who's here,” she murmured as she recognized Thomas Serra, the same man who'd first alerted her to a business association to Bastian Conti. Now she realized it was a very specific type of association the two had. Serra must be a regular customer at these parties. She alerted Jordan about his presence as she took the two flights of stairs. She'd leave him to Jared and his team. For now, her focus was to find Kezlin.

“Hurry up, Jordan. I'm at the top floor,” she said looking up and down the hallways. All the doors were closed with no one in sight. “I passed a couple of people on the way here but this floor is empty. Something tells me it's reserved for the VIPs.”

“Like the bastards of The Commission,” Knox sneered.

“You could be right,” Jordan said. “From the heat sensors, there seem to be two bodies, one in each of the first two rooms on the left of that hallway. Start walking, Paxton, so I can check if we're heading in the same direction.”

Paxton headed to the left.

“Got you. Okay, the first door on your right only has one heat sensor. That's your first check.”

“Keep an eye on the stairs, Jordan. If I'm caught snooping, the entire raid will be bust. Jared will have my ass if that happens.”

“He’s gonna have your ass for being there, period.”

“Yeah, there is that possibility.” Paxton leaned against the first door to her right. She glanced over her shoulder as she pushed it open and quickly slipped inside. “Oh, god, she’s a baby.”

She struggled to control the anger boiling inside her at the sight of the young girl cowering on the bed. She stared at Paxton with wide eyes. Her gaze was too sharp to have been drugged but the chain cuffed to one ankle told its own story.

“Hi there, little one. What’s your name?” Paxton’s voice was filled with warmth as she approached the bed. She stopped as the dark-haired girl shuffled back against the headboard. “It’s okay, I’m not here to...” She swallowed hard. “I’m here to help you.”

“Help me?” She clasped her hands together on her lap. The long locks of her hair fell over her shoulders as she shook her head. “No one can help me... any of us. We belong to them.” Her voice sounded bitter. “I know the kind of help you’re offering.” A lone tear trickled over her cheek. “All of you are the same. You think that I... that I want this. That I should be thankful to be looked after! Just get it over with. I won’t even fight you.” She bit her lip. “Except if you want me to. Most of you do, so I—”

“Stop.” Paxton found it difficult to keep the tears at bay seeing the torment in the young girl’s eyes. “I’m not one of them. I’m going to get you out of here... all of you.” She walked closer. The little girl couldn’t be a day older than twelve. “What’s your name?”

“They call me Chloe.” She lowered her head. “But my real name is Evelyn.”

Paxton sat on the bed and checked the cuff around her ankle. The skin was already turning red.

“I need you to stop struggling, Evelyn. If you keep pulling on the chain, the cuff is going to cut your skin and you’ll bleed.” Paxton looked around but there was nothing she could use to try and pry open the lock. “I’m going to check the other rooms but I will be back, I promise.”

Evelyn didn’t respond but watched with a resigned expression as she left. It was evident she didn’t believe she’d see Paxton again.

“Brock just confirmed the arrival of the five Commission leaders, Paxton. You better hustle. If the top floor is for VIPs, you’re running out of time.” Jordan’s voice was brittle with concern.

The next room produced a young boy. She judged him to be about fifteen. He was big for his age and muscled, which probably had been the allure to his abductors. He stared at her with a vacant look as she opened the door. Paxton imagined he was a fighter who refused to give in and had to be drugged into submission for the party. She didn’t bother to talk with him. He was too high to resist, let alone be of assistance in any way.

“Hurry the fuck up. Paxton. There are bodies heading up the stairs.” Jordan’s voice sounded stern in her ear.

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She rushed to the last door in the corner and slipped inside.

“Kezlin!” Paxton rushed to the bed where Kezlin was cuffed. Her head rolled listlessly to one side.

“About fucking time,” she said in a thick voice.

“Kez? I thought you were drugged?” Paxton looked around, frantically searching for something to pick the lock on the cuff. Wearing the tight dress limited which tools she could bring with her.

“I am but fooled them in believing the dose they gave me left me comatose. I suppose they didn’t want me completely out of it, so the guards decided not to give me another shot. Another hour or so and I’ll be back to my usual self.”

Paxton checked her eyes. She returned her look with an almost clear gaze. “I can fight my way out, Paxton. Just get me the fuck loose!”

“Jordan, it’s time. Link my comms up to the rest.”

“You’re good to go,” she said seconds later.

“Jared, if you can hear me, I found Kezlin.”

“Fuck.” Paxton winced as his angry voice grated in her ear.

“Something wrong, Daddy?”

Paxton stopped her search at the sound of a husky voice in the background.

“Apologies for interrupting your fun, Commander,” she snapped. It was one thing to acknowledge he was role-playing but quite another to think what he was doing at the moment that caused Mia Kuntz to sound all hot and bothered. “I’m with Kezlin. She’s at the top floor, last room to the left of the stairs. It’s time for your meal from the menu... in case you forgot that’s why you’re here. Tell her you choose Chloe and get here quickly. There are people heading up the stairs.”

“Paxton, hide! I don’t know where the fuck he came from but there’s a heat source heading your way.” Jordan’s strangled warning came urgently.

“Someone is coming,” she said to Kezlin. “I’m going to hide in the—”

“What are you doing here?”

Paxton went cold at the familiar voice cracking through the air. She plastered a smile on her lips before she turned to face Luca Boneiro. He stood inside the door watching her suspiciously.

“I’m inspecting the menu but so far I’m not impressed with what I see.” She cast a glance at Kezlin with her lips curled into a smirk. “I suppose the promise of what you offered earlier has trumped my desire for the usual morsel I’m after.”

“This floor is off limits.” He glowered at her. “The rules are explained to every new member upon arrival. Somehow I doubt you paid attention... or perhaps you’re not who you claim to be.” He was in front of her before she realized he’d moved. He caught her left wrist in a painful grip. “You’re not wearing the guest bracelet everyone receives upon entry.” He pushed his face into hers. “Who the fuck are you and how did you get inside?”

“I arrived late.” Paxton planted a forced look of fear on her face. Her voice turned breathless. “You’re hurting me. Let go.”

“You don’t know what hurt means, whore, but you soon will.” Luca turned his head sideways at the raised voices and shouts drifting through the closed door.

Paxton had blocked the sounds in her ear after Jared’s voice snapped the order, “GO!” to concentrate on holding Luca’s attention. She had to give Jared time to get to them.

“You fucking bitch,” Luca sneered. He growled as she blocked the hit he swung at her head, twisted in his hold, and rammed her elbow straight into his gut. He grunted but sidestepped the knee intended for his groin.

“Ah, I love a good fight, especially with a slut in a red dress,” he snarled. His hand fisted her hair. An angry growl crawled from his lips as she twisted loose and left him standing with the blonde wig in his hand. His eyes narrowed in recognition as she shook her auburn tresses loose. “Well, well. How quaint. Thank you, Mrs. Lee, for saving me money to have you eliminated. Since you’re here, I’ll just do it myself.”

Paxton was an expert in hand-to-hand combat but Luca learned to fight on the streets of San Francisco at a young age. The combination of street fighting and martial arts were lethal.

She couldn’t carry a gun without it being noticed under the tight dress but had strapped a knife to her thigh. If he thought he had the upper hand because he was bigger than her, he had a surprise coming.

“You’re welcome to try,” she scoffed as she unsheathed the ivory handled knife.

He smiled as he watched her hunch into a crouch. “Who would’ve thought I’d

indulge in some additional sport tonight?” He circled her, completely at ease as he kept his eyes on her. “I have to admit, I was impressed by your CV, Mrs. Lee, but you made a mistake interfering in my business. You might be an ex-army ranger but this is the big league and you’re a small fish trying to swim among the sharks. What makes you think you stand a chance?”

“She can kick your ass with one hand behind her back, you fucking bastard,” Kezlin interjected.

Luca didn’t take his eyes from Paxton as he responded to her taunt. “Be patient, slut. I’ll attend to you soon. Suffice it to say, once I’m done, so will you be.” He snorted. “At least for the balance of the weekend.”

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Paxton remained calm and alert. In that frozen second between standoff and fighting she noticed his eyes flash. Years of combat had taught her to keep her expression unreadable—no fear, no invitational smirk. She waited. She was banking on him to misjudge her capabilities. Many did. He started to circle her, she followed, preparing for his first strike. Her knife gleamed in the downlights. She knew if he struck, it would be with the intent to kill.

“Let’s dance, bitch,” he growled as he lunged.

Paxton dodged to the side in one fluid move as he snapped out a fist. The blow intended for her jaw grazed her ear. It was hard enough to disorient her. She swiveled on her heel and slashed out with the knife. She smirked in satisfaction as she felt the blade connect.

His menacing eyes were a blazing red as he swiveled around. “I’m going to enjoy cutting you up with your own blade, bitch.”

Luca charged into her balled fists. His neck thrashed backward as her hands collided with his cheekbone. He stumbled, tripping over a small bench as he rubbed his cheek. She’d taken him by surprise, which spiked his anger higher. For moments there was stillness on both sides. If hatred was visible the air would have glowed scarlet. He moved fast and landed a blow that connected with her shoulder. The hit was so hard, she lost her grip on the knife as she fell back against the wall. He closed in on her immediately, landing another forceful blow to the side of her face. Her head jerked back. She tasted that familiar copper tang in her mouth. The room swirled but she forced her body to react.

“Bastard,” Paxton sneered as she twisted her hip and flexed her knee up between his legs.

“You fucking cunt!” His raw cry of pain chased him as he stumbled back, bending over as he concentrated to breathe through the pain throbbing in his groin.

Paxton picked up her knife as she blinked the blurriness from her eyes as this time she circled him. He might be fast, but she was more focused, not staring in his eyes, but at his chest, the center point for all attacks. Whichever part of his body he was going to use, she would be ready. He wouldn’t catch her unawares again. This time, he came with a leg. She sidestepped and with a quick jab, stabbed him just above the knee.

“Jesus!” he screamed.

Paxton followed up and was on him in a second. Each blow was precise, an exhale of breath with each one.

Breathe. Remember the deep breath... the added strength behind each blow. The voice of her trainer echoed in her mind.

Her fist landed in his gut, cutting off his oxygen flow. With each decisive and strategically placed blow his strength faded, aided by the cuts she added in between. He started to get slower, she got faster, penetrating his defenses as she hammered at all his vulnerable spots.

“You’re gonna die, you fucking whore,” he roared as he charged, slamming a fist in her stomach, and knocking the knife from her hand with a brutal fist. He’d managed to center all his fury in one surge of power. He locked her in a stranglehold before she could recover.

“Let her go.”

The warning came from the door, the voice low and deadly. Paxton caught Jared’s gaze. The murdering glint in its depths was unmistakable.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“You forgot so quickly, Luc?”

Luca’s body turned to stone. Only one person had ever called him Luc. He stared at the man standing at the door; his body was relaxed, his arms hung loosely by his side. He appeared calm but his golden eyes glowed ominously. The recognition staggered Luca.

“You... it can’t be! You’re dead! I watched... it can’t be.” Luca stammered in disbelief as his mind struggled to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

“And yet... here I am. This is your last warning.” Jared took a step closer but stopped as Paxton gasped under the increased pressure of the arm locked around her throat.

“Let her go... brother.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Angelo? Is it really you?”

Paxton was as stunned as Luca, since Jared had told her the gory tale of how Marco Boneiro had killed his oldest son. However, when Luca’s hold around her throat relaxed for a split second, she used the opportunity to headbutt him with a vicious blow to his nose.

He howled in pain as he clawed at the bleeding appendage. Jared took her hand and hauled her away from his grasp. Paxton balked at being pushed behind him as he took a protective stance in front of her.

“Don’t piss me off any further, Paxton. Stay where you are.”

The fury in his voice was enough to check the warrior in her.

“Marco made the biggest mistake that will now cost him everything thirty-five-years on. Care to tell me what that was? Let’s see how well he trained you, brother dear.”

“He should have waited to make sure you died.” Luca was visibly struggling with the turn of events. “I can’t believe you survived. I’ve had the same nightmare for years... watching those three sharks circling you.” His eyes glowed as he studied Jared. “How? How did you survive?”

“Does it matter?”

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“It does to me, since that was the day I became...” Luca heaved in a deep breath. “I need to know.”

“There’s truth in the belief that man’s best friend is the bottlenose dolphin.” Jared shrugged but his gaze remained sharp. “A large pod arrived as the boat moved away. Half of them swam in circles around me while the others attacked the three sharks. No one was more surprised than me when they succeeded.” He smirked. “I started swimming in the direction of the island. They stayed with me until a fishing trawler plucked me out of the water two hours later. I never would’ve made it to shore.”

“God, I can’t believe it.” Luca’s mind had become sluggish. He couldn’t comprehend that his beloved brother had survived the cruelty of their father. Least of all that their first meeting was under circumstances that had them on opposite sides of the law.

Shouts outside the door drew their attention.

“It would give me immense pleasure to put a couple of caps in your fat ass. Go ahead, punk. Give me a reason.” Brock’s deep voice floated toward them.

Paxton swiveled as the door opened, drawing back her fist in preparation to deliver a killing blow. She pulled back just in time as she recognized Tanner.

“Whoa, I’m on your side,” he grunted as he looked around. His gaze darkened as he noticed Kezlin cuffed to the bed. “Need help, Commander?”

“Sitrep, Tanner,” Jared said in a clipped voice.

“There’s no sign of Conti or Matias and Olivia Lopez. Cruz is doing a headcount and comparing it to the list of arrivals we have. If we can’t prove they were here, Hannah Conti is going to have to explain why a party with underaged girls and pedophiles was hosted on her property. Three members of The Commission are in custody but this goon spawn’s father, Marco, and Diego Rossi aren’t among them.”

“Jordan confirmed all five Commission leaders arrived earlier,” Paxton said. She glared at Luca.

“Don’t ask me how but the bastards managed to get away,” Brock said as he joined them.

“Of course they did,” Jared rumbled darkly. “Get those cuffs off my sister, Tanner.”

“Sister?” Luca started. He was surprised at the bitterness he felt eating him. He had missed his brother for thirty-five years, while he found a new family.

“I can walk,” Kezlin protested when Tanner plucked her up from the bed.

“I’m sure you can but I’m carrying you downstairs, anyway.” Tanner ignored her struggles, tightening his hold on her as he walked toward the door.

Jared took her hand in passing. His eyes glinted angrily as he noticed the bruises on her arms and legs. It was clear that she had given them hell. “Are you okay, Kez?”

“Yeah. I’m okay. These bunch of Marys are rank amateurs. Fucking clueless. Besides, I knew you and Paxton would get to me in time.”

His eyes glowed at the thought of what could’ve happened if they hadn’t found a way to be on the inside. “Make sure she gets a full medical, Tanner.”

“Will do.”

Jared’s eyes returned to Luca who watched him with a storm brewing in his eyes.

“So, you got yourself a new family.”

Jared was amused at the hurt look in Luca’s eyes. “C’mon, Luca. You might’ve mourned the death of your big brother as a child but from what I’ve seen over the years, it didn’t prevent you from turning into a mirror image of Marco Boneiro.”

“Does she know?” Luca took a step closer. “Your little sis,” he sneered. “Does she know you’re the spawn of a Mafia Don?” He cackled a laugh. “Ah, I see she doesn’t. You might be called Commander and serve the supposed greater good but one thing you can’t change is your DNA.” He leaned closer and spat with malevolence, “The blood running through your veins is the same as mine. That will never change. You are no better than me. Deep down, your heart is just as black as mine. You are and always will be... Angelo Boneiro.”

“I’m nothing like you, Luca.”

“Ugh.” The right cross was thrown with explosive power, crushing Luca’s already damaged nose like a fault, and knocking him unconscious. Luca might be his brother but he was going to pay for the crimes that littered his path— and he was going to hand Jared the one man he was after— the one who deserved his wrath.

His own father, Marco Boneiro.

He watched dispassionately as they carried the limp body of his brother from the room. His gaze was hijacked by another pair of eyes.

“You’re wearing colored contacts.” He knew he was stating the obvious but he

needed time to bury the emotions that had surged to the surface the moment he'd come face-to-face with Luca.

“Part of the disguise.” She picked up the blonde wig Luca had flung to the floor.

“Along with this.”

“What are you doing here, Paxton?”

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“Do you need to ask?” Her voice was soft and cajoling but she didn’t cower in the face of the gale storm gathering in Jared’s eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was fight with him. There was a vulnerability in his eyes that he was doing his best to hide from her. “It was my fault that Kezlin was taken, Jared. I always fix my own mistakes and I protect those I care for. I had to be the one to find her. You had the harder task. If not for your presence and guidance, this entire operation wouldn’t have gone as smoothly as it did.” Her hand flailed in the air. “Because of the Cobras all these women and children have a second chance. Yes, they might spend years in therapy trying to deal with their PTSD but at least they can return to their homes and live a full life.”

“Your flattery is out of place under the circumstances, Paxton. We played a small role. The operation was much bigger than just us.” He sighed as he ran his hand through his hair. “I understand what drove you but your interference has jeopardized what we aimed to achieve.” He sighed heavily. “Everyone on this team knows that all it takes is one misstep for the whole thing to blow up in our faces. Every raid is planned down to the smallest detail and timed to the minute. Your presence forced me to have to improvise at a very critical moment.” His gaze was reproachful as he walked past her. “Because of that Conti, Lopez, Marco Boneiro and Diego Rossi managed to escape.”

“Jared, you have to understand... Jared!” she called after him but he ignored her.

She’d fucked up. Jared finally had a chance to put Marco Boneiro behind bars. Because of her eagerness to prove her competence and insistence to be the one to save Kezlin, she’d foiled that opportunity.

Worst of all... she'd put Jared's life in danger. Luca Boneiro now knew his brother was alive. It was only a matter of time before Marco found out, too. She tapped the comms in her ear to switch it off as she went searching for Evelyn. The little girl flung her arms around her neck, sobbing uncontrollably.

"You kept your promise."

"I did. It's over, Evelyn. Soon, you'll be back home with your family."

"If they'd want me back." Her eyes lowered in shame. "I'm dirty now. They might hate me for what I've done."

Paxton squeezed her tightly. "No, you didn't do anything wrong. You had no choice and I promise you; your family will understand. Have faith. Everything will be fine." She handed her over to the hostage rescue team once she calmed down.

"God, I still can't believe Jared is Marco Boneiro's oldest son," Knox said as she joined her outside the house. She tapped her ear to disconnect her comms. "Damn, I don't know how these guys do it. All the voices are driving me nuts." She looked at Paxton. "Did you know about Jared?"

"Jared told me the story of how Angelo Boneiro had supposedly died but not that it was him." Her eyes landed on the tall figure standing with FBI Agent Brown. Even from a distance, she could read his body language. He was angry. She couldn't blame him. "Thinking back, it should've dawned on me that he knew the story too well. Especially since we couldn't find any intel about the existence of an older son."

"You had no reason to suspect anything. I can't imagine how something like that must've haunted him over the years. I guess that explains his stoicism."

"Yeah... and now that Luca Boneiro knows, he's right back where he left off."

Knox stared at Jared. “What do you mean?”

“He was at the mercy of a monster as a thirteen-year-old child. Marco might not know his son Angelo is still alive but he will soon. I shudder to think what he would do to keep that from becoming public knowledge.”

Boneiro hideout cabin, Ridge Trail, Brisbane...

Marco Boneiro was furious. He loved Isabella and kept his indulgences to a limit. It was the first time in over a year that he'd decided to enjoy the debauchery at the Malibu Colony Beach party— mainly because the other four leaders of The Commission were going to be there. A show of camaraderie, so to speak— and in doing so, he almost got caught.

Lucky for them, Matias Lopez had the foresight to ensure there was an underground escape tunnel where they had managed to hide, along with him, his daughter Olivia and Conti until they were assured they could escape further down the beach without being detected. If not for the fact that Olivia had come to warn them in the study at the time of the raid which alerted them to the FBI's invasion on the CCTV footage, they wouldn't have had the opportunity to escape.

Rossi and Marco's arrival at the mountain cabin coincided with the early morning sun that suffused the horizon in an aura of saturated mandarin.

“How is it possible that our FBI informants were unaware of the raid on the Malibu Colony Beach party?” Marco was highly agitated as he switched on the lights upon walking inside.

“Could your sons being detained a couple of weeks ago have something to do with that? Perhaps they compromised our informants in an attempt to strike a deal for their release,” Diego Rossi's voice crackled with an air of intuition.

Marco turned red-faced. “My sons know better than to compromise the family. They’d never throw their own father under the bus, no matter what situation they were in.”

“How sure are you about that, Boneiro? This isn’t the first raid on our operations since their release. There are just too many coincidences.” Rossi scowled “And now three of our associates are in jail.”

“Costa will get them out. I called him on the way over. Like many others, they were at the house as guests. To try to prove they intended to indulge in any of the entertainment would be extremely difficult.” Marco poured a stiff drink and threw it back.

“And Luca? Did they get him?” Rossi’s voice cracked through the air.

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to get hold of him.”

“It’s a total goat fuck, Boneiro.”

“Stating the obvious isn’t going to solve the problem.” He started pacing again. “Who and what are the Cobras? I heard this name bandied about as we made our way into the tunnel at the Malibu house.”

“If we can get hold of any of our informants, we might find out. In the meantime, we’re flying blind.” Rossi downed his drink. “I’m not hiding out in this shithole. I hate the mountains. We managed to escape. Even if they saw us arrive, they would have had to have caught us in flagrante delicto. They have fuckall. We were there for a dinner party. No money changed hands for any ‘favors’ and besides, even if they bring us in for questioning, they have nothing substantial to charge us with. I’m going home.” He got up and glared at Marco. “I suggest you get hold of those idiot sons of yours, Boneiro. If they were behind what happened tonight or are in some way

responsible for the raids on our tobacco and liquor warehouses, they'll be up to their necks in shit."

"Leave my sons to me. If they waxed mea culpa, I'll personally make them castrati."

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It took an hour and many phone calls for Marco to find Rocco and Stefano. They were told to meet him at the mountain cabin. It was ten in the morning and he was dead tired from no sleep..

“It’s about fucking time,” he grated as the encrypted sat phone he used for sensitive matters rang. It was the Commission’s attorney who had been issued with a similar phone since it was important to keep their conversations from being tapped.

“Talk to me, Flavio.”

“The arraignment is at noon. There’s nothing to be concerned about. The charges won’t stick, especially since they had just arrived when the raid happened. They were mingling and having drinks in the ballroom. No money was exchanged to indicate they intended to make use of the sex slaves. As far as their defense is concerned, they were invited by their favorite celebrity for a party.”

“So, Bastian Conti is going to take the rap?” Boneiro sat down. He leaned his head against the backrest of the sofa.

“That had always been the intention. Matias Lopez made sure that everything will point to him as the mastermind behind the sex ring, although Lopez, his daughter and Conti managed to avoid getting caught.”

“I know. It’s because of them that Rossi and I got away. And Luca?”

“Luca was taken in but he apparently escaped enroute the FBI holding cell.”

“How did he manage that?”

“I overheard the discussion when I arrived at court earlier. It seems Luca’s bodyguard evaded capture and followed the FBI vehicle he was transported in. He rammed it off the road and shot the two agents. It was in an area with no traffic cams, so no one knows where they disappeared to.”

“Good. Keep me updated. Oh, and Flavio, you know what to do if anything goes wrong. No one is going to cop a plea in exchange for immunity. Is that clear?”

“Don’t worry, sir. We’ve got friends in the district attorney’s office.”

“Do you know who the Cobras are?”

“Never heard of them.”

“See what you can find out. They were the ones in charge of the raid. It must be an FBI or CIA covert ops group. I want them identified and neutralized, Flavio. No one fucks with The Commission.”

“On it.”

Marco ended the call. His fingers tightened on the Glock on the seat beside him. He had heard the door opening— a sound so faint it would normally be indiscernible but in the surrounding silence, one could hear a pin drop.

“Relax, Boss. It’s only me.”

“I heard you escaped. Not that I’m surprised.”

Luca didn’t respond but poured himself a stiff whisky and threw it back. He poured

again.

“You look like shit. I didn’t think there was a man born who could get the best of you.” Marco studied his bloodied face.

“He didn’t live to tell the tale.”

“Now that’s how a Boneiro takes care of business.” Marco straightened. “What the fuck happened? How did they find out about the party?”

“It seems the Red Reign PI Agency has a connection with the covert group who managed the raid. The one Lopez captured is the sister of their commander. I can only assume she had a micro tracking chip of some kind that led them to Malibu Colony Beach.”

“You’re slipping, Luca. That’s the first thing you should’ve checked.”

“Her captors were instructed to and confirmed they did. I assume it’s an implant. She had nothing on her person, I personally made sure of that when she arrived at the house.”

“Who is the commander?”

Luca’s expression turned glacial as he stared at Marco.

“I didn’t see him.”

“I want to know who the bastard is. Flavio is already looking into it. When he identifies the Cobras, we’ll sort out this so-called commander and then, Luca, you will make sure he never becomes a problem again.” Marco’s voice cracked with anger. “In the meantime, instruct our pilot to get the private plane ready. We’ll have

to lie low until this fuckup quiets down.” He got up and started pacing. “I told your brothers to meet us here. Get hold of them and tell them to pick up Isabella enroute. We’re going to Sierra Leone. I’m not leaving those two shitheads here. Since they were detained, there have been one too many fuckups happening.”

“You believe they sang to the Feds?”

“For the sake of their manhood, they better not have.” Marco headed to the stairs.

“Make it happen, Luca. I’m taking a nap.”

“Of course...father,” Luca said in a malevolent voice as Marco walked upstairs and disappeared. For the first time since he had watched him throw Angelo overboard, Luca showed emotion.

Hatred.

Chapter Nineteen

Paxton was restless. It had been two weeks since the raid in Malibu. She hadn’t seen Jared since, although he had been phoning her every day to ensure that she was safe. At least that gave her some comfort that he wasn’t through with her. The Cobras had gone hunting for the Boneiros but had had no luck. She could hear the frustration in his voice when they spoke. They just vanished and so had Conti, Matias, and Olivia Lopez.

“And Luca escaping after the raid exacerbated everything,” she said sotto voce. Her voice was hollow in the silence.

Although he hadn’t blamed her again for botching the operation, she continued to feel guilty— not for going to find Kezlin, but because she hadn’t informed Jared of her intentions. He would’ve balked at the idea anyway but in the end, she was sure he would’ve conceded, albeit with a ton of conditions. The way she’d gone about it had

caught him unprepared. He had given a hasty GO order because she had been in danger. That was the bottom line. No matter how much she'd love to absolve herself, in the end, she had been at fault.

Armed with a cup of coffee and a chocolate chip muffin, she settled in a chaise lounge on her patio. It was heaven to be back home—to have the freedom to roam about in shorts and braless—just to have some alone time.

It hadn't come easy but in the end Jared had agreed that they could return to their homes, provided each of them had a Cobra security team guarding them 24/7. At least they stayed out of sight and didn't limit her freedom like they had at the safehouse. She had become used to seeing the black SUV in her rearview mirror when she went to the shops or the Red Reign offices every day. After she'd almost been kidnapped which eventually resulted in Kezlin being taken, it was a relief to have her team under guard.

If she was going to be honest with herself, she had to appreciate their presence. A woman was vulnerable against the more powerful male attacker no matter how capable she was in defending herself.

“I miss him.”

Paxton listened to the words floating back at her. It was true. She needed to see him, to feel his touch but most of all, it was time to move forward, to embrace the connection they had and to continue the journey they had embarked on. The trip to The Sea Ranch had been the turning point in their relationship. In a very short period of time, he had become important to her. She missed feeling his presence, the warm brush of his hand as she walked past him as if he couldn't help making physical contact with her. He was in every picture she envisioned of her future.

“I'm so worried about Jared.”

Her concern wasn't as much for his own safety as it was for his emotional state. She couldn't get the vulnerable look she'd seen in his eyes out of her mind. He had taken a leap of faith by opening his heart to her. She was worried that remembering what Marco had done to him and where his roots sprouted from, might have pushed him right back into the black hole that had consumed him for so long— that darkness that had prevented him from being whole, from loving and being loved the way he deserved to be.

“Do you have one of those for me?”

Paxton froze. Joy exploded inside her as she jumped up from the lounge.

“You're here!” The initial pleasure at hearing his voice was dampened by the black void in his eyes. It was as if he willed her to keep her distance.

“We were wasting time and resources that are needed elsewhere. They managed to elude us.” His locked jaw added to the grim look on his face. “But they'll resurface. Marco Boneiro is power hungry. He won't stay holed up underground for long.”

“Jared—”

“I don't want to talk about it,” he cut her short, preempting what she was about to say.

“Have you ever talked about it?”

The brooding look on his face was answer enough.

“Don't you think it's time you do?”

“Drop it, Paxton. I didn't come here to be psychoanalyzed.”

Her back straightened at the curt reply. “Why did you come here?”

He blinked and in that moment, she saw it. A silent appeal reaching out to her. The hard exterior he presented to the world was a facade for the pain when in fact he was a lonely and desperate man.

Paxton inhaled slowly. She had to give him time to come to terms with finally facing his brother, and that his friends and she now knew all about his past. She would never have believed a man like Jared could be frightened, but he was. It was there in his eyes—the worry that maybe her feelings had changed, that she saw him now for who he truly was... a Boneiro. He was holding on by a thread, fearing the consequences of the revelation, that the shield he’d built around his heart would disintegrate and let the pain tumble out.

“I know you love latte but the best I can offer is an espresso.” She held up the half-eaten muffin. “And homemade muffins.”

Paxton didn’t wait for his response but briskly walked toward the kitchen, aware that he was following her. He didn’t say a word as she prepared the coffee.

“I’ve missed you.”

His deep voice resonated inside her, wrapped around her heart with a warmth his presence always offered. She briefly closed her eyes before she turned.

“I fucked up, Jared.”

“Yes, you did but that’s in the past.” His expression didn’t change. “If there’s one thing I learned at a very young age, it’s to let go of what you can’t change and concentrate on the things that are important— those that strengthen the foundations of happiness and success. My past blocked me from opening my heart for too long and allowing love to form. You pushed me over that final hurdle, Paxton.” He swallowed hard; overcome with an emotion she couldn’t identify.

“Did it change how you feel about me?” His voice dropped low, filled with uncertainty. Paxton yearned to hold him close to reassure him but she checked herself, realizing that this moment was crucial in their relationship. He had to make the first move but she knew he wouldn’t do so until the doubts in his mind had been cleared.

“Did what change my feelings? That you’re the boy whose father brutally threw him to the sharks? That same father none other than a Mafia Kingpin of The Commission? That you were born a Boneiro?”

Jared’s gaze remained glued to her while he munched on the muffin she’d handed him.

“It shook me to hear it. Yes, Jared, all of that matters but the only reason it does is because it made you the man you are today. A strong, intelligent man with integrity and a moral compass. A man who would fight with and protect his team. A brother who would give his life for his sister. A lover who revels in giving more pleasure than he takes for himself. A Dom who has such control over me that it leaves me breathless and yearning for more. A man I’m honored to know. A man... with whom I fell in love without consciously realizing it... and yes, I still love you, Jared Bates. Just you. Whatever your birth name was, it doesn’t matter.”

They met in the middle of the kitchen, both reaching for the other simultaneously. He dragged her against him and hugged her so tight, she struggled to breathe. She didn’t complain but held onto him with her heart in her throat. That he had forgiven her meant more than she realized it would.

“I don’t deserve you, love, but I’m going to spend the rest of my life making you happy.” His lips caught hers in a tender kiss.

His promise filled her with joy. He had yet to say the words but she knew he loved her. She had felt it since that day at The Sea Ranch with every look and touch. The realization dawned to rid her of the disjunction of fear and belief that she’d lost him which had plagued her mind for weeks.

Jared deepened the kiss as he amped up the passionate demand. He meant to overwhelm her and he did... leaving her a complete mess.

“I’d love nothing more than to make love to you right here, perched at the edge of the counter but I need to take a shower,” he said against her throat. “We’ve been on the road for three days straight, I must stink like a skunk.”

Paxton laughed at the expression on his face as she wrinkled her nose in pretend disgust.

“Your kiss managed to distract me but now that you’re standing way over there...” She brushed her fingers over his cheek. “I can wait another ten minutes, my love. Go, take a shower. I’ll heat up some lasagna for you.”

“Hmm. What gave me away? My growling stomach or the way I gobbled down that muffin?”

“Both. Now go. Take your espresso with. I’ll bring a tray up to the room.”

Jared took a sip of the coffee. He planted a hard kiss on her lips. “I could get used to being spoiled like this.”

“It’s a done deal... as long as you return the favor.”

Paxton watched him until he disappeared from view at the top of the stairs. She hummed a merry tune as she placed the leftover lasagna she’d made for dinner in the oven. Her heart was overrun with love and joy.

“I’ll always love you, Rex,” she whispered with her eyes closed and her hand resting over her heart. “But it’s time for me to be happy again. He’s so different from you but I know I made the right choice. You always told me I’m a hard ass when it comes to love— that I don’t trust easily and don’t give my love without a fight. He swept in and changed all of that. He showed me it’s okay to take a leap of faith. You also told me that when I love, I do so with passion. You unleashed it in me first... now he managed to tap into so much more. I’m not just in love with him. I love him with a depth that is difficult to comprehend. Thank you, Rex, for teaching me to trust in my instincts. It’s what has brought me to this point. I’m ready to let go and live a happy life with another man... with Jared Bates.”

Paxton always had little talks with Rex in her mind. He had been a part of her life for so long that she’d needed to hold onto his wealth of knowledge about her as a person

to survive after his death. He'd become her coping mechanism over the years. Now it was over. This had been the last conversation she'd have with him. She knew he was happy for her.

She could finally close the chapter of their life together and move into the future.

“And you better hustle with Jared’s food, Paxton. You’re gathering wool and the poor man is starving.”

She toasted four slices of ciabatta and dished up a large helping of salad along with the lasagna.

“That should ease his hunger,” she muttered as she ascended the stairs. She stopped in the door of her bedroom. “Poor man must be exhausted.”

She placed the tray on the dressing table before approaching the bed. Jared was lying on his back. Naked, with the sheet covering one leg— fast asleep. Undressing quickly, she slipped in beside him.

“Hmm,” his moan brushed over her as he turned on his side and pulled her into his arms.

Paxton wrapped her arm around him as she cuddled closer, reveling in the heat of his body. It didn’t take long for his even breathing under her cheek to lull her into sleep.

“NO!”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:35 am

Paxton was jerked awake by the hoarse shout next to her. She switched on the bedside lamp.

“Jared?” She touched his arm tentatively as he sat up in bed, his face pale with his eyes locked on the wall. “Honey, you had a nightmare.”

He blinked a couple of times to clear his head before he looked at her. “The same one I’ve had on and off for the past thirty-five years. Always the same... the sight of the shark fins drawing closer and closer and the boat disappearing over the horizon.”

His voice sounded hollow in the quiet night. He had barely slept three hours and still looked tired.

“Go back to—”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget the feeling of rejection that overcame me as I watched Marco turn that boat around and left me to die.” He ran his hand over his eyes before he settled on his back. “The captain of the fishing trawler that rescued me believed my story that I’d fallen overboard off a freighter originating from China. I had to convince him that I was the victim of child labor. There was no way I was going back to my father, Paxton. No fucking way.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said in a quiet voice, understanding that he needed to expunge the memories from his mind.

“I told the story that I was an orphan, born from an Italian couple during an extended vacation in Beijing. Youngsters who weren't ready to be parents. He believed that I

was born to a system that left me easy prey to human trafficking. I had nothing and no one to go back to. I spent fourteen months on that boat building up my strength but I knew it wasn't how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. The next time we docked in New York, I took liberty and never came back." He sighed heavily. "There were times over the next eight months that I regretted the decision. Life on the streets in the Big Apple for a fourteen-year-old boy... let's just say it toughened me a hell of a lot more than Marco Boneiro ever did. Not once during all that time did I think to go back home. I missed my mother and brother but it wasn't an option. Not for as long as Marco Boneiro was alive. I met George Bates when he returned home from a tour. I tried to rob him but he saw me coming a mile away. He, and his wife, Willow, worked with street kids, trying to turn as many of them away from crime as possible. I resisted them... for months, but George refused to give up. After they adopted me, he told me I reminded him of himself as a teenager. Strong, independent, and willful. They couldn't have children... at least not at that stage. Long story short, they wore me down and instead of leaving me on the streets to turn into a thug, they offered me an out. I resisted at first. George was a military man and struck me as stern and inscrutable. I was wrong. Stern, yes but understanding-- the best father any kid could ask for."

He smiled in the dark. "If not for them..." He looked at her. "I might have Boneiro blood in my veins but I am a Bates in every other way."

"I can attest to that."

"Come here, my love. I need to feel your heat against me."

Paxton snuggled against him. He stared into her eyes.

"I love you, Paxton Lee, so much that it scares me."

Her smile was beatific. "Never be scared of the depth of your love for me, Jared."

Embrace it, like I did mine for you. Let our love be the guide to our future, the light we need during times when we're apart and darkness threatens to overwhelm you."

"I wasted two weeks chasing shadows that I should've spent with you. I realized that you might've thought my anger at the time of the raid was aimed at you for being there. It wasn't. It was fear, my love. The moment I realized you were in Luca's hands... I can't begin to tell you what thoughts went through my mind." He traced a finger over her eyebrows. "And that is exactly why I couldn't afford to have you there. The operation didn't matter at that point. All that did, was to get to you, no matter if it meant the entire operation went bust."

"I was wrong not to tell you, I realize that now but nothing you could've said if I had, would've changed my mind."

"But I would've adjusted the plan accordingly, Paxton. That is what you need to realize. I trust in your abilities, don't ever doubt that I do. Overconfidence and impulsiveness are a dangerous mix. The Cobras are classed as one of the best black ops teams there is and that's because we never go into a major operation blind or without backup. You learned not to become involved with dangerous and ruthless men as an army ranger. Dealing with syndicates and the mafia outside of war countries is no different. I know you never intended to take cases involving hard crime but don't ever forget your training and what you're good at." His gaze remained steadfast. "I don't want to interfere in how you run the Red Reign PI Agency but you have to make a choice. Either stick to what you've been doing to date or expand to include an operational team."

"You're right." She frowned as she pondered his words. "To be honest, we started the agency because we were tired of being in danger. And as exciting as the adrenaline rush was, it taught me one thing."

"Which is?"

“I don’t want to change what we do. I prefer the intrigue and challenging aspects of private investigation. That’s what we all enjoy. Digging deep to get the intel we need. Uncovering the truth piece by piece. We’ve all had our share of hand-to-hand combat and being shot at. And you’re right. Impulsiveness is my biggest weakness and I have to work on that. I need to remember I’m not a macho army ranger anymore, that I have to consider everyone around me, especially if we ever become involved in a raid again. Just the thought of where Kezlin could’ve ended up if we hadn’t found her... I don’t want that for any of my team, Jared. I love them like family. I need to ensure they are safe at all times. The job has to be what I promised them when we started. There will always be a level of unforeseen danger but nothing hardcore. I aim to keep it that way.”

“Then I’m glad.” He placed lingering kisses along her jaw. “Now... about that meal you promised...”

“Oh! I’ll go heat it up... ahhh, I see it’s a different hunger you wish to feed,” she purred as he pulled her under him and settled between her thighs. The hardness of his arousal teased the wetness of the slit.

“I love an intelligent woman,” he said in her ear as he pushed the blunt tip of his cock inside her hot pussy. “Especially one who doesn’t require instructions.” His eyes glowed as he thrust once—hard.

“Oh lord,” she gasped as he settled hilt deep inside her. Her eyes shone with unbound passion as she gazed into his eyes. “And I love a man who knows just what I need.”

“I aim to please, my pet. Now, my little recalcitrant and bratty sub, don’t move. If you do, we go back to sleep. Got it?”

“Of course... Sir!”

“Good. I’m not done talking.”

Paxton stared at him in disbelief. “You want to talk more? Now?” She was struggling to comprehend that he wanted to slam on brakes at such a crucial point. Didn’t the man know how desperate she was for sex? He’d given her a taste of heaven and then disappeared for two weeks. Now, her body was in desperation mode, especially since lust wrapped itself snugly around the nerve endings in her loins causing shards of heat to spike through her core.

“Well, I actually only have one question to ask.” He traced a lazy line over the curve of her breasts, ending with a teasing flick of her nipples. “Hmm... beautiful,” he said, watching them bud into tight little stones.

“Jared,” she hissed. It was rather difficult not to orbit her hips against him. Her throbbing clit demanded release, which increased with every flick of his finger over her nipples. It felt like there was a direct connect between her breasts and clitoris. A devilish glint shone in her eyes as she clenched and released her inner muscles around his hard shaft deep inside her.

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He frowned at her as his breath stuttered in his chest. "I told you not to move."

"I didn't," she said with a cheeky grin, "but you didn't say anything about those muscles."

"Hmm... well, they better start behaving too. This is a serious matter."

Paxton released her breath in an elaborate exhale. She threw caution to the wind and wound her arms around his neck.

"Shoot. I'm all ears."

"I know we've only known each other for three or four months. I'm also cognizant of the fact that our relationship is very new and we're still getting to know each other. Part of our commitment was to open our hearts... which we have. I'm still in awe of how quickly our love has bloomed. I'm usually a patient man; my past forced me to be but in this, I refuse to waste time. I want more than a commitment of love from you, Paxton. I'm not asking for a date in a couple of months but I need your answer now."

He took a deep breath. His eyes glimmered like liquid gold.

"I got married once for the wrong reasons. I never believed I would ever want to again but now there's you. I want nothing more than to call you my wife. Paxton Lee, will you be that for me? Marry me and be my wife... in the future sometime?"

Paxton stared at him with teary eyes. It was as if the heat of his love cloaked her heart

through sheer will.

“I was in the same boat as you, Jared. I had a happy life with Rex and I never thought I’d ever find a love like that again... and then you came into my life. You bowled me over. I’m still shaken at how fast I fell for you but one thing I don’t doubt for a second, is that I do love you, deeply and with all of my heart. You are so much more than I ever expected. For one, I didn’t think of marriage at first but now...”

She stroked his jaw. “You, Jared Bates, are the hero I didn’t see coming. My knight in shining armor. Yes, Jared, I will marry you... sometime in the future.”

“That makes me a very happy man, little one. Now... how about we commence with this feast you’ve prepared for us?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Paxton soon became lost in his raw passion that was in such contrast to the gentle touch of his hands and the promise of unbound pleasure in his eyes. He was a man of such contradictions. A powerful Dom who at times was the most generous and tender lover... a switch that suited the moment to perfection.

The world fell away as they indulged in the unbound lust fed by the instant chemistry that had drawn them together from first glance.

Afterward, their breathing laborious, he pulled her into his arms and cuddled her against his chest, cherishing her essence that flowed unfettered into him.

“I think I’m going to demand many midnight snacks from now on,” he rasped as he kissed her slowly.

The caress of his lips wrapped her in a cocoon of warmth, reigniting the passion and need that was bred many months ago.

“I daresay, I might just be the same way inclined,” she lilted with a sleepy smile.

It took a long time for their breathing to return to normal. Paxton was drifting off to sleep when his deep voice whispered in her ear.

“On the other hand... I’ve never been a fan of the word sometime. How about we put a definite date to that future marriage?”

“Now you’re talking my language, Commander!”

The End