



# Her Elite Assets

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Thriller, Action

**Description:** Meet the women of Elite Metal, Ghosts, and Elements:

Sachi “Copper” James and Addison “Arsenic” Leeds come from two very different backgrounds, but these women are the best at what they do. This collection features two tales about Copper and one about Addison. Get ready for a wild and dangerous ride.

## Pure Copper

Copper is a chameleon and thrives on being someone else. Her mission? Identify the rat who sold her team bad intel. The only problem? Gabriel Danvers.

## Target: Tungsten

A Ghost for years, Bradley “Tungsten” Peck wants back in Copper’s life. His mission? Protect her and win back her trust. The only problem? Their past is hunting them and may cost them everything.

## Asset: Arsenic

For more than a decade, Arsenic has worked in the shadows. Her mission? Get the last piece of intel they need to nail their nemesis. The only problem? Sam Reese, the loose cannon her brother despises and the only man crazy enough to help her.

Three tales of action, adventure, love, passion, and a second chance to fix the past.

**Total Pages (Source):** 98

# Page 1

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Pure Copper

Pure Copper

Former Marine specialist, Sachi “Copper” James is a chameleon. She thrives on being someone else. Her mission? Identify the rat who sold her team bad intel.

Gabriel Danvers, ex-CIA analyst, is a master of disseminating the details. He wants to enjoy a normal life, retired from the game. His mission? Teach classes.

When Gabriel becomes the target of Copper’s investigation, he re-enters a world of danger and deception—all to claim the passion of the one woman who’s haunted him for years.

Prologue

Two years ago

Interspersing flipping through the business week magazine with the occasional glance at his phone, Gabriel Danvers maintained the appearance of a bored executive. Snapping photos of the people in the waiting room was as simple as frowning at a make-believe email and firing off a response. Smartphones made his job far too simple.

The elevator dinged in the hallway. From his position, he had an excellent vantage of the comings and goings at the main reception desk. Turning a page, he was treated to a set of long, gorgeous legs striding up the hallway. The black heels didn’t quite do

the muscles on her legs justice, but they certainly made them stand out in stark relief.

Lifting his phone as though it just buzzed to tell him he had a message, he let his gaze follow the black stocking clad legs—he caught the barest peek of lace topping the stocking in the split of her skirt—to the barely-there dress hugging her every curve. The sheath left little to the imagination, and the crisscross jacket at the top gave the impression of arms wrapped around her to cup her breasts.

Drizzling on the job isn't acceptable. His libido utterly ignored the reprimand. The face above the breasts, though, was a work of art. Perfectly pale pink lips, high cheekbones, a sweet chin, and a hint of a dimple at the corner of her mouth. When his gaze locked with her hazel eyes, she winked as though telling him she knew exactly what he was thinking.

Fuck. Me. She was right. Dropping his attention to his phone, he angled it to carefully snap a photo, but she'd already turned away from him and leaned against the receptionist's desk. The faint lift of her leg gave him another lacy glimpse of her black stockings. Two other men who waited in the same room for their appointments made no pretense of not staring at her.

When the receptionist ushered her back immediately, a security guard met her at the door to escort her up. His attention landed on her breasts, then her ass as she sashayed past him. Gabriel wanted to swear. Whoever she was, no way she'd come to talk business—unless it was of the pleasurable kind.

If ever a woman cried out sex walking, it was her. Checking his watch, he glanced at his magazine. Already ten minutes late for the appointment, Jackson Jennings kept him cooling his heels. The corporate financial officer for Transcom International sent in a tip to the CIA regarding some suspect transactions with Russian oil interests. Since he'd worked the Russia house for years, and the tip involved an old, open case file of his, they'd sent Gabriel to question the man.

An hour later, neither Jennings nor the sexpot had made an appearance. Tossing the magazine aside, Gabriel headed for the receptionist and tapped her desk. Everyone else who'd been in the waiting room to see someone within Transcom had gone back. Everyone except Gabriel.

“Mr. Danvers, I'm sorry. Mr. Jennings isn't picking up. If you'll give me a moment, I'll go check on him for you?”

He nodded, choosing to remain at her desk where he faced the door heading into the corporate offices. Maybe Miss Fuck Me Sideways in the Stockings would reappear. Odd, the body and her movement stood out, but not her gorgeous face. He needed to get a photo and her number. Though he was alone, he made no overt attempt to get into the receptionist's computer. Instead, he used an app on his phone to start a clone of her hard drive then tapped the icon to upload via satellite—designed for short packet bursts, the application would keep sending every time it had a connection until all the data had been sent. He could rip through the info later.

A woman's blood-curdling shriek echoed from the hallway. Reacting, Gabriel jerked the door open and raced down the corridor before completing the thought. Other suits stuck their heads out of their doors while two security guards raced in from an adjoining hall. The woman's screams escalated in volume and pitch. He and the guards arrived at the office door of one Jackson Jennings at the same time.

The receptionist held her hand over her mouth and had gone violently pale. Jennings was in his office all right—seated in his chair, arms relaxed, with his head turned at an unnatural angle.

The one lead he'd finally found was dead.

Six months later...

Gabriel finished his inspection and typed the last three sentences into his report. His final assignment for the company—really—ended with a full assessment of their intelligence desk located in the consulate desk in Nigeria. Favors to the company didn't come cheap, and he had a class to teach back in the states. Agent Gabriel Danvers would be one hundred percent retired, and Professor Danvers would take his place.

Classes four days a week, with football on Sundays in front of a big screen television and a six-pack of cold beer. He couldn't wait to be bored. The intelligence desk seemed to be in decent shape, though he had a few recommendations to sharpen their observation capability. The archaic monitoring system in place only offered rotating views of the various entrances and front hall of the consulate. Based on the timing, he could be in and out of the building and still not be caught on tape.

Not a good set up.

Pushing away from the desk, he stood. He grabbed his coffee cup as the camera panned the entrance lobby of the consulate, framing two people entering. A redhead strolled in, dressed in work boots, jeans, a tank top, and an open khaki shirt. She looked like something straight out of an advertisement for a safari magazine. It wasn't the outfit that captured his attention, but something else... Before he could put his finger on what, however, the monitor switched to another view.

Setting the coffee cup down, he keyed in his access code and requested the view switch back to the lobby. He caught the tail end of her. No way it wasn't the same sashaying hips. The outfit was different. Hell, the hair was different, but he recognized the walk. She wasn't alone this time. A mountain of a man strode at her side, tall, imposing, and exuding an aura of menace over the grainy standard digital feeds.

He's bad news.

Fingers flying over the keys, Gabriel tried to switch the angle of the cameras, then settled for activating the camera in front of them. The twist time took way too long and afforded him only a brief profile.

She looked completely different, but he'd bet money it was Sex on a Stick Walking from Miami. What the hell is she doing in Nigeria? And what is she doing with that guy?

Leaving the desk, he headed downstairs. He wanted to waylay the pair for a couple of questions. By the time he reached the consul hall, however, they were gone and the Marines on duty had the door blockaded.

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Flipping open his ID, he nodded to the men. "I'm Danvers, CIA. I need to see the consul."

Neither Marine budged. "He's unavailable at this time."

Unavailable? Gabriel frowned, but he didn't try to shove his way past them. Marines assigned to consulate and embassy duty were trained and restrained, but he didn't doubt they would put him down. One-on-one, he had a chance, but there were two of them.

"Fine, can you alert him that we may have a security threat in the building? A man and a woman who were admitted a couple of minutes ago."

"We're addressing the security threat, sir. Please step back, and return to your station."

Neither Marine gave an inch. Swearing, Gabriel headed to the intelligence desk and placed a call to Washington. By the time he cleared the switchboard and got authorization, somebody could have firebombed the consulate. Making a mental note to add the experience to his report, he spent his time on hold pulling up the video surveillance. He wanted copies this time, since he'd never managed to capture a photo of the woman in Miami.

After discovering Jennings' body, they did a person-by-person search on the floor, which extended to later encompass the entire building. She'd been conspicuously absent. When he'd requested the security tapes for the elevators and lobby entrance, he found they'd been scrubbed.

Copying the first entrance video of the consulate, he downloaded it to a thumb drive. The second video of the consul hall was gone before he could pull it up. When he returned to the first video, it was gone as well.

Swallowing another oath, he pulled the thumb drive. He had some proof, and he didn't plan on having this one scrubbed. More convinced than ever, he took his authorization and evidence to the consulate commander's office, and with a Marine escort, headed in to see the consul.

The ambassador in question greeted their entrance with a dour expression and denied knowledge of the presence of the two, even with the photo Gabriel produced as evidence. No one had seen them, they hadn't been there. The diplomat lied through his teeth, but without any other proof, Gabriel had nothing on him.

By the time he boarded a plane for the U.S., he considered trashing the thumb drive. Whoever she was, she was good. She had to be in the business, how else did one explain her access and disappearances?

Not my monkey. Not my circus. He closed his hand around the drive and tucked it away for safekeeping. His life of lies and putting lives on the line was over. Agent Danvers was retired, and she was just one more mystery he could put to bed as unsolved.

Still...curiosity followed him home. If he started a file and did a little research, who would be the wiser?

## Chapter 1

A hushed shuffle-step on the carpet sent adrenaline surging through her system. Rolling over, Sachi James extracted the gun from beneath her pillow, flipped the safety off, and had it pointed at the door before her sleepy-mind fully processed what



she'd heard. The odor of sour garbage, sweat, and grease assaulted her nose. The sensory information triggered relief, and she flipped the safety on, even as a mountain-sized shadow filled the bedroom door.

Smothering a yawn, she lowered the gun and pointed at the bathroom. "Your shit's under the sink. Take a shower, and we can talk in the morning." A glance at the digital clock said it was three a.m. Groaning, she rolled onto her back and set the gun on the nightstand between herself and the bathroom. Merc didn't always crash with her, but the weapon lay where they could both reach it. He was awake, which meant she could sleep. He never let her stay on the side of the bed closest to the door anyway, no matter where they slept.

Sleep tugged at her, but she curved an arm under the pillow and snuggled to it as though it were a person. Preferably the same person whose shirt she currently wore. Nothing smelled like Brad anymore, his scent erased as if he hadn't existed. Scrubbing a hand over her face, she shoved the melancholy thoughts back into the mental vault and slammed the door.

Without enough liquor, she had no intention to sort through the agony of those memories. Better not to think about them at all. She had a place—Elite Metal—and a home—a house on their compound—and her family—or what she could call one—with the guys. It was enough.

The urge to punch herself began to wash away the oblivion of sleep she desperately craved. Water sputtered, then began to flow in the bathroom. The shower had been turned on. If Merc showered, he planned on staying. End of watch for me... Her body and mind, too programmed from years of training and shit situations, obeyed the signal, and she burrowed deeper to the pillows.

A half hour later, the bed dipped and Merc stretched out next to her. He didn't bother with the covers. Gone were the sour odors of refuse, replaced by the plain, simple

scent of friend, brother—home. Her last thoughts before sleep reclaimed her were of safety and security.

Sachi “Copper” James signed off and slept.

Snapping awake before the alarm went off, she rolled off the bed and onto her feet. She tucked the blankets on her side in and tight as a matter of course. Merc’s eyes were open, but he didn’t say anything. Smart man. She didn’t talk before a shower and a cup of coffee, unless a sergeant at inspection demanded an answer. The coffee maker in the kitchen hissed the sound of nirvana. Padding into the bathroom, she stripped off Brad’s shirt. After hanging it on the door, she turned on the water and stepped into the frigid shower.

The icy cold water beat the sleep out of her. By the time the hot water warmed her skin, she was ready to shampoo and scrub. Showering never took her longer than ten minutes—and only that long if she needed to shave. After rinsing off, she killed the water and grabbed a towel. She spent another ten minutes brushing her teeth, running a brush through her damp hair, and inspecting her face. Far from vain, she made sure no distinguishing marks appeared or set her apart. Blending in required either standing out as unforgettable or being utterly unremarkable. Blessed by genetics, she was a mutt and could enhance or downplay her skin tone, eye shape, and bone structure with a handful of cosmetics and attitude.

It worked for her.

Satisfied, she found clean clothes in the closet as well as the black trash bag with Merc’s filthy things stowed away for safekeeping. Pulling on sweats and a t-shirt, she stuffed her feet into running shoes before carrying the bag with her out of the bathroom. Unsurprisingly, Merc wasn’t in bed and the scent of eggs, bacon, and toast drifted on a wave of fresh coffee.

Pausing in the laundry room, she upended his things into the washer, dumped in some soap and turned on the machine. The gag-me smell was only slightly better than the Nigerian river they'd had to swim for three clicks to dodge a search party once. In the kitchen, Merc stood at the stove and flipped bacon on the griddle. Scrambled eggs were piled in the center of a plate nearby.

The coffee pot hadn't been touched, but two mugs were waiting. The man cooked before he had coffee. Damn, if he wasn't a fine Marine. After pouring both mugs, she slid his toward him and caught the toast as it popped up. She fired those over, and he didn't glance at her as he caught them and dropped them on the plate.

Dry for her. She reloaded the toaster and then tipped up the mug to drink about half of the scalding coffee, black. It peeled off the last dregs of sleep and her stomach lining at the same time.

Better. "Morning."

He grunted. John "Mercury" Thrace was 6'3" of pure, rock-hard muscle, the biohazard tattoo on the back of his head a warning to everyone. Too bad she tended to ignore warning labels, since they were for people too stupid to live. His back rippled when he flipped the bacon. Most wouldn't see the brilliant mind locked behind his mule-headed stubbornness. Since he was her best friend, brother, and one of only a handful of men she ever trusted to have her back, she ignored his grunt and drank the rest of her coffee.

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After pouring cup number two, she found humanity agreeable again. Pacing over to the window, she pulled open the blinds and studied the compound. She'd memorized the layout on her first day at the property. By the end of the week, she'd mapped three exit strategies.

A black masked figure stood a dozen yards away with a set of binoculars in his hand. Raising her coffee cup for a drink, she gave the masked figure the finger before snapping the blinds closed again. Fucking Ghosts creeped her out. She never saw their faces, only their thuggish ski masks, yet they were always around.

Always.

They'd been in her place, too. At least twice, she'd woken to the sound of movement in the house—hence the gun. Chrome said they could trust the bastards, and she trusted her commanding officer, but that didn't give the fuckers the right to be in her quarters.

A plate slid across the table toward her. "Eat."

"Me Tarzan, you Marine. Eat." She stuck her tongue at him, and his stern face gave way to the barest hint of a smile.

"You bitch. Me hungry. Shut up."

Laughter wormed its way through her sour mood, and she tucked into the food. Meals could come few and far between in the field, so they didn't waste precious seconds on chatter. After they'd finished, she took care of the dishes while Merc drank his

coffee.

“Up for a run?” Ten miles might take the edge off, and Merc’s presence usually dissuaded her thuggy escorts from trying to follow her.

“Later.” He drummed his fingers on the table. Like her, he’d been kidnapped back into the fold. At least she’d managed to break the finger of one of the Ghosts who’d grabbed her—right before they pumped her full of an anesthetic and knocked her ass out. Ice blue eyes focused on her. “What’s wrong?”

She drained her second cup of coffee. “Not a damn thing.”

“Yeah, you can show that face—or whichever face you want—to everyone else, sweetheart. But I know you, I fucking know you.” Quiet, raw words uttered in a tone which commanded attention.

Rolling her eyes, she let her shoulders relax and her expression soften. Leaning toward him, she blinked with precise slowness, once for every two beats of a man’s heart. “But, you complete me...” At his narrowed gaze, she coughed and straightened. “Okay, yeah, that doesn’t work. I think I just threw up in my mouth.”

“That’s what you get.” A smirk curved the side of his face still able to hold an expression.

Too early for bullshit and games. “Here’s the thing. You’re toxic. I’m wasted—or at least, I would be wasted if I went for that kind of thing. Together, we’re Toxic Waste. Kind of like peanut butter and jelly, only with a hell of a lot more kick.” They had been, ever since the first time he’d dragged her off a bully at their foster home. A kid had spit in her face. Since he’d been twice her size, she hadn’t slowed down. She’d actually broken her hand hitting the other boy, then kept pounding and flailing until he went down. John was four years older and about fifty pounds heavier than she’d

been at the time. He'd dragged her off the kid and set her on her feet. When the other boy tried to hit her, John had bloodied the only part of his face she hadn't bruised.

They'd been family ever since. John looked after her, she looked after him. They'd been lucky. In a system that fucked everyone, they'd somehow managed to stay in the same homes. At least until the day he left for MIT.

Bastard.

By her seventeenth birthday, she'd had enough and joined the Marines with her foster mother's blessing. Two years in, and they'd been assigned to the same team. Funny how their lives worked out. That was then—"Too bad I can't carry a tune. We could be our own band."

"You don't have to carry a tune. There's karaoke in hell."

Not snickering, she retrieved the coffee pot and refilled their cups. She'd done without it before. One was good enough, two an indulgence, but three cups in the morning? Yeah, she was living the fucking life. "Yeah, karaoke and fruity drinks with little umbrellas in them." Life on a beach with absolutely nothing to do? "I think it's time to go straight. I don't want to go to that hell."

Hell was for other people. She'd visited when an explosion consumed Brad and the rest of their team in a fireball. She had the fucking t-shirt burned onto her soul.

"There's a hell you want to go see? Do they give guided tours?" He shook his head. "Besides the ones we've already seen, of course."

"Eh, we're a hard sell. Maybe we need to get laid, because this is pathetic." She gave him a speculative look. "You're sexy. You got dark and brooding down. I'm not too bad, I know how to bring it. Why aren't we getting laid again?"

"Besides the fact I look like Frankenstein's monster?" He motioned to the scars on his face that she never seemed to see. "We're different from them, the sheep we're supposed to herd and protect. And they know it. Even you, Copper, as lovely as you are. We're off. We're wrong. Or maybe that's just me. Maybe they're all a bunch of pussies who're afraid if they get too close to you, they'll find me under their bed like the devils they feared as children." He laughed. "Make no mistake, I will be there."

John took a long drink of his coffee and laughed again, the sentiment wry, but the sound like crushed glass. "So, I guess it's my fault you're not getting laid. Sorry to clam jam, but there it is."

"Okay, now I'm depressed. The percentage of men willing to stand up to you and survive the experience is pitifully low." The corners of her mouth turned up. "Unless I find you a chick. Oh. I could find you a woman. You still like women right? I can totally go for finding you a guy, even test drive him if you like? Cause, seriously, I need to get laid. The fucking guy at the gas station is starting to look good."

He raised a brow. "Never thought about it. Maybe I wouldn't break another man, but I doubt it. And I can't get past the kissing. I could suck a dick though. Life'd be a helluva lot easier if I could just suck my own. Then I'd be too busy to cock block your action."

She laughed. "If you boys could suck your dicks, we wouldn't have any wars to fight."

"You got that right. In fact, I think half the world would come to a complete stop." He snickered. "See what I did there. Come." He nudged her.

Smirking, she shook her head. "Not a total stop. You'd come, then work on coming again. Because first step, suck your dick. Second step, multiple orgasms. When you master that, well, you'd own the world."

## Page 4

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"Suck a dick, save the world." He nodded. "Tried that line on my high school girlfriend. Didn't go so well."

This time, she let the laughter out. The feeling dislodged the plug stuck in her soul. "I need to go run," she told him. "No idea when the next mission is coming, but since Chrome and Steele are too busy fucking their brides to bother me, I'm going to get out of here."

"Meet me later at Bone Daddy's." The invitation slash order was totally him. It was also a good sign. He wasn't heading back to the street. Since she didn't think he talked to anyone but her, she was game to put on her pretty face for him.

"Gonna buy me a drink?"

"Maybe."

"Not going to scare off any potential dicks I might get to suck?"

"No promises."

"Asshole."

He smirked. Stretching, she stood and then crossed over to the sink and rinsed out her mug. He followed suit, and they put the chairs back. The house was so clean and neat, it was hard to tell who lived there. Then again, what did she need with personal items?



She had exactly five, and they were always with her—except for Brad’s shirt. When she’d been kidnapped, it had been her only regret. It showed up in her place waiting for her. Someone had found the hole in the wall she’d been living in and brought it, nothing else.

The dog tags under her shirt seemed to burn. One of hers and one of Merc’s. He wore both, too. Against regs, but it was their one rebellion—well, her second. She had been sleeping with Brad—if only it had been just sex.

Oh. For fuck’s sake, stop dwelling. She needed to weld the memory door shut. Merc was already out when she grabbed her phone. They were supposed to carry them everywhere, always be reachable.

It rang as she put her hand on the front door. Chrome’s number flashed on the screen followed by a text.

You have a mission. My office. Ten minutes.

Well, so much for the run. Merc was outside, phone in hand. His expression had gone neutral. Hopefully, the mission involved killing the bastards who’d killed their team. She’d sleep with a goat if that was what it took.

Behind Merc at ten yards, one of the Ghosts stood staring right at them. She shook her head.

Creepy mother fuckers.

Chrome waited for her in his office, and he wasn’t alone. Cobalt and Plat played hold up the wall, arms folded. An electronic board featured three unfamiliar faces and one—“Jackson Jennings, age 43, CFO for Transcom International.” And dead as a doornail.

“Good memory.”

“It is what is, sir.” Standing ceremony didn’t bother her. Chrome was her C.O. He got to hear sir from her mouth. Jennings had been a target, and she’d executed him. Not a whole lot needed to remember facts. “No identification on the other three.”

“No problem.” He tossed her a thumb drive. “Everything you need to know is on there. I need you wheels up in an hour. Cobalt will ride shotgun with you, and Plat’s going to play your eye in the sky.”

“Yes, sir.” When he was ready to tell her exactly what he needed, he would. The thumb drive was warm in her palm.

“We have information on these three. All had appointments with Jackson Jennings scheduled the day he died. New information suggests Jennings was only a mule—a set up—for Red Wolf. They sacrificed him to get their intel off our radar.”

No softening the blow. Someone baited a hook to get them off mission. They’d taken it. She had taken it.

“Gather all the intel on each of them. Meet them. Do what you do. Narrow the list—pinpoint the guy, extract him, and bring him in for questioning.”

“Time table?”

“Wrap it in a week. I want to know which of these assholes played a game with us.”

“I’m going with.” Merc said, the only three words he’d spoken since he’d entered the room. Chrome spared him a look.

“Can you handle it?”

Can he handle it? Copper blinked and met Chrome's gaze as he flicked a look from her to Merc then back again. Chrome never questioned their ability to back each other, unless he thought... "We're not fucking." Then, because she'd interrupted, she tacked on, "Sir." Even if they had been fucking—no, one didn't fuck a brother—she could've still done her damn job. She had when she and Brad were together, yet Chrome never questioned her then.

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Merc said nothing, but ‘fuck you’ radiated off him in quiet waves.

“Fine. This will be close quarters work. You will have to give Copper space.” Space meant backup wouldn’t be immediate. She’d be on her own, and a few minutes could be the difference between living and dying. Not a problem. If she really needed them to drag her ass out of the fire, it would have gone too far to shit. “Bring this fucker back.”

This fucker who’d screwed them. Cost them the team. Cost them Brad. “Yes, sir.”

Their first stop was Los Angeles. It was barely lunchtime when she and Cobalt were wheels down. Plat and Merc traveled separately. They would blend into the shadows, so she’d only see their faces if shit went south. During the flight, Cobalt entertained himself with some vicious rounds of solitaire while she read up on her targets. All three were in the same area—relatively speaking—former government employees. One for the Department of Defense, one for the Joint Chiefs of Special Intelligence and one an analyst for the CIA.

Spooks. She fucking hated spooks. They breezed in and out of military units and usually created a shit storm with their James Bond tactics. Then they breezed back out again for their martini shaken, not stirred. A businessman, a budding politician, and a college professor—the dossiers read like cosmic jokes. She could use the same routine on the first two, but the third taught international diplomacy and used to work for the CIA.

A shell game.

Who held the information they needed?

Brendan Coyle

Former Assistant D.O.D. Office of Special Operations

Current: Logistics Director, Cooper-Townsend International

Coyle was a busy man, too busy to take any appointments and far too busy to accept any calls. Patient, Copper waited to see where he would go for dinner. At a little after seven in the evening, he left his office in a Bugatti—way above his pay grade—and drove straight to a club in North Hollywood. A roped off door and a well-dressed thug, sporting two side arms, discouraged the average person from seeking entry.

A Google search told her the place was a local hotspot and the hours didn't begin until after sundown. Why was Mr. Coyle hanging out in a hip nightspot? Leaving Cobalt to keep watch, she went shopping. It took her thirty minutes to find the items she needed.

“What's the plan?” Cobalt asked once she slid back into the van.

Toeing off her shoes, she stripped down to her bra and panties, then turned to give him her back. “Wire me. We'll get clones of his devices.”

It took only ten minutes to get the equipment in place. One upside of their new operation—bottomless funds and all the latest toys, like the patch he overlaid against her spine. The electronics inside of it would work as a wireless amplifier. All she had to do was get close, then they could download and clone what they needed.

Once Cobalt finished, she slid on a dress and tucked her feet into four-inch heels. Application of cosmetics gave her smokier eyes and fuller lips. A judiciously applied

comb tucked her hair into an exotic twist but left her neck bare and vulnerable. The plunging neckline on the dress gave the barest peek of her bra, and because men loved the idea, she slid the panties off and stuffed them into the stack with her clothes. Since they didn't go with the outfit, she slid off her dog tags and eased them into the pocket of her jeans.

"I'd do you," Cobalt said, by way of approval.

"You couldn't handle me." She relaxed her smirk. Playing the dilettante, she was only at the club to get laid. Not a hard role to occupy.

"They're lining up to get inside. Got a plan to get past the doorman?" No doubt echoed in his question, only genuine curiosity.

"The way every other hot woman gets in—the perks of having boobs and vagina." The corner of her mouth curved. She pressed a hand to Cobalt's chest, then sighed. "Do you think you can play bodyguard? Act big, mean, and stupid, so they can look and not touch?"

His snort reverberated with humor.

Trailing her nails down his sternum, she settled into her flirtatious role. "I'm going to tease and tease, but I don't want to have to break my nails."

"Got it." He shook his head and slid his earbud into place. "We're a go. Walking sex violation about to take flight."

She didn't roll her eyes or open the door to the van. Cobalt took care of all the heavy lifting. From the van, they transferred to a black Lincoln. The expensive car would support her right to be there. Cobalt drove around the block, then arrived at the front of the club. He stepped out, handed the keys to the valet, and opened her door.

Strutting after him toward the main entrance, she utterly ignored the line. Every step sank her deeper into the role. The club was about to be blessed by her presence. At the door, the bouncer gave her a long look. Undeterred, she did a slow pirouette so he could assess everything she had to offer.

Cobalt loomed behind her like a wall of iron. His cool, summer blond looks blended right in with the California crowd. A guy at the front of the line took a step toward her, hand out stretched as though he planned to take her arm. Probably, he wanted to pretend he was either with her or bitch her out for cutting, however she paid him no mind, and he never touched her.

With judicious application of pressure, Cobalt had the guy down, arm wrenched behind his back. “Behave, pussy boy. She’s not for you.” Whatever else he said was lost in the roar of the crowd, but the would-be assailant paled.

Backing into the bouncer, she let out a breathless titter of laughter. Obediently, the man wrapped an arm around her, his hand sliding right over her hip and then up to her breasts. The subtle pat down proved invasive, but she let him get his feel.

“I’m Kiki,” she told him. “You have great hands.”

His gaze was on her boobs, and he smiled. “You go on inside, Kiki, and come back to see me. I’d be happy to let you in anytime.”

With that, she and Cobalt were in the club. Music pulsed and pounded in time with the lights. From the dance floor in the center where bodies writhed together to the various darkened tables where more than one woman seemed to be without her top—or anything else, for that matter—she got an eyeful of why the club was so hot and popular.

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Sex could sell anything. Letting her body sway and roll with the music, she began to scout the club. Her target was there, but the challenge lay in finding him amongst the pleasure-seeking masses. Twenty minutes of wandering hands and dances later, she located Coyle at a corner table with a voluptuous redhead. Half-drunk, he was laughing and playing with the woman.

The best way to approach a target was organically. If that meant dancing and waiting, she would dance and wait. Cobalt paced her progress, and like other personal security present in the club, no one took any notice of him. In a black suit coat over a black t-shirt and jeans, the man defined hiding in plain sight.

When the voluptuous redhead went to the restroom, Copper followed. Touching up her lipstick, she let her gaze wander over the redhead. The girl grinned and laughed. By the time they walked out of the bathroom, they were arm in arm, giggling like two of the oldest friends. She let the redhead tug her over to Coyle's table. When he gave her a suspicious look, the redhead suggested some fun and planted one on Copper.

Kissing a woman wasn't the worst thing she'd ever done. Thirty minutes of making out with her later, and Copper sat in Coyle's lap, her back to his chest. They all had a great time. A nod from Cobalt told her they'd gotten what they wanted. With Coyle's card tucked between her breasts, she bid farewell to her would-be lovers and strolled out again.

Once she returned to the van, she stripped out of her gear and released her hair.

"Need any help?" Cobalt's playful, leering offer amused her.



“I’ve got ten fingers. I’m good.”

His laughter grounded her. Copper had work to do. “Let’s head to Tahoe tonight, so we can check on Gerald Barrow.” The budding congressman would need a slightly different approach, but she could slide herself onto his schedule as an appointment with a phone call and some tech work from home base.

Obligingly, Cobalt drove while she changed. They stopped for food on the way. Somewhere in the darkness, Plat and Merc had their backs. She studied the cloned information from Coyle’s phone. She had access to his email, his phone contacts, call log, calendar, and a couple of proprietary apps for accessing his company’s firewall.

Bless smartphones. They make my work so much easier...

## Chapter 2

With eighty students piled into their seats, it would be hard for most professors to keep track of who was who. The sign-in sheet always began a rotation in a different part of the hall. Everyone signed in, and if their name wasn’t on the sheet—depending on when he passed it around—they didn’t get credit for attending International Relations in Business.

Unfortunately for his students, Gabriel Danvers never forgot a face. He knew which students had their friends sit in, or when one of the guys switched his jacket and moved surreptitiously to the other side of the room to sign in for a missing classmate. He damn well noticed when a woman entered the class who didn’t belong.

Three rows back from the front, her feet propped on the back of another chair, hair in a ponytail, and looking about twenty with her cosmetic free face, his lecture hall had an invader. Phone in hand, she typed swiftly with her thumbs while he lectured on the pros and cons of the environmental restrictions on European Union business

contracts, prosperity, and how those factors influenced American businesses in the region.

Though he let his gaze wander over the class, making eye contact with the students as he paced back and forth, his awareness of her never diminished. Keeping track of her from the corner of his eye whenever he glanced away told him three things.

She wasn't one of his usual students or shills—she'd not even bothered to sign the sheet.

She took copious notes, but she also snapped pictures.

She wanted something from him.

Call it instinct or a sixth sense, but he'd always had a way of looking at scattered facts and identifying a pattern. Her attention was on him, not the material, and her focus belied her casual attitude. She watched without looking, and the weight of her attention proved a provocative allure to his senses.

He looked forward to discovering whatever she wanted. His body stirred, and he ignored the bolt of lust. No idea who she is. Besides, fucking students is not on the syllabus. The thought came out of nowhere, and he coughed once to clear his throat. The corner of her pale pink decorated mouth curved upward. Amusement gleamed in her pale, pale green eyes.

The little vixen knew exactly what she was doing to him. Pausing at the desk, he leaned against it and stretched his legs. Two could play that game, he kept the lecture going as he braced his legs. The urge to ease his stiffening cock to one side grew more profound, but he focused on her. Memorizing her face.

He was damn good with faces.

The deep tan of her skin reminded him of a sweet, creamy coffee. Enticing image aside, she had a perfectly balanced and asymmetrical face, but he couldn't place her origins. Not easily. A faint tilt to her eyes, high cheekbones, and a deliciously sensuous mouth...

"So, here's your assignment," he said, finishing his lecture and dragging his attention away from the siren summoning him in the third row. Ignoring the groans, he used his thumb to point at the board behind him. "Six companies are listed there. Three are European Union based, three are U.S. based. Using the lecture and your materials, not only do you need to identify which is which, I also want you to identify who is in violation of those restrictions, and what are possible ramifications for the upcoming Conference on International Commerce."

The groans increased in volume, and he smiled. They really should learn he didn't mention items, places, or events if they weren't important.

"Any questions?" Oddly, no hands went up. His gaze collided with the goddess in the third row, and she made no attempt to disguise her continued amusement. Another minute dragged on, and the class didn't ask any questions, so he clapped his hands together. "I'll see you next week. Don't forget my office hours if you have questions."

Would she stay? Or would she go?

Swinging around the desk, he gathered his notes and the papers the class handed in at the beginning. He knew he annoyed them by requiring print copies rather than digital submissions. The horror of figuring out how to use control-P on their computers must have been a challenge.

Warm vanilla sugar teased his nose. She stayed. Glancing up from the papers, he found her standing just three feet away, directly across the desk. How sturdy was the

construction of the desk? It wouldn't take him any time at all to clear it.

Student. Red. Fucking. Light. Intellect versus instinct. She looked young, almost fresh-scrubbed innocence, but her eyes weren't innocent. They harbored far too much hidden emotion, as though she'd seen hell and survived. Locking gazes, he considered all the things he wanted to say.

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He reconsidered and kept it professional. “Auditing?”

Her laughter, low and throaty—sounding a lot like warm bourbon on an icy cold evening—rolled from her. “No, I just wanted to check out the hot teacher.” She winked, then pivoted and strolled out of his wet dreams...

Strolled?

More like sauntered. Checking his desire, he focused on the way her hips swayed in those skin-tight denim jeans. He knew that walk. Had been hunting for it for two years...

“Hey,” he called, shoving the papers into his backpack and zipping it closed. He crossed the room in four strides to catch her. She didn’t slow down, but since he had her in his sights for the first time since Nigeria, no way did he plan on letting her walk away.

What was she doing in his classroom?

“Hey,” he said again. Catching her elbow, he redirected her into another empty lecture hall then closed the door to block the noise. “Where are you running off to?”

Lips pursed, she gave the closed door a glance. “I wasn’t running anywhere.” If her looks hadn’t already captivated him, the hot buttered rum quality of her voice would have taken him hostage. His cock stiffened as his libido bucked his control.

His body didn’t give a damn whether she was a student or not.

Definitely not a student. She didn't hold herself as a subordinate or as a student would, seeking his approval. He'd had a few come on to him in the past, their sloppy, over-the-top attempts were porn quality, and he didn't screw kids. Miss Walking Sex on a Stick was definitely a woman. "Good," he said, remembering he actually needed to talk. "How do you feel about coffee?"

"Well, I'd never kick it out of bed." She folded her arms, which tightened her sweater over her breasts—a handful each. His obsession with her tits aside, he didn't miss the tension in her shoulders or the way she braced her feet.

She's ready for a fight, if it comes to that. Probably didn't help that he loomed over her. Taking a step back, he leaned against the door. No, he wasn't demanding, but he didn't want her running away again either.

Curiosity flared in her eyes. Oh, had he intrigued her?

"Good to know." He needed to jumpstart the blood flow back to his brain. "I know a great place on the other side of campus. It's quiet. Let me buy you a cup?"

Surprise rippled across the surface of her eyes. "Do you often invite students out for coffee?" Was that a note of disappointment creeping into her voice?

"Not at all. But you're not a student."

"You sound certain." Her chin lifted. If he were a betting man, he'd peg it as another move to distract him. The action revealed the slender column of her throat and added to the air of vulnerability around her.

Keeping his gaze on her eyes, he trusted his instincts. Nothing about her was as it appeared. Well, other than the fact she was fucking gorgeous and intrigued him on every level. "You wanted to check out the hot teacher. How about taking a closer

look?” He dropped the backpack and took a step toward her.

Eyebrows raised, she met him step for step until they were breast to chest. He kept his hands to himself, though they itched follow the shape of those lovely hips. Maintaining a fist hold grip on his restraint, he took a deep breath of her heady vanilla scent. He’d never been a fan of sweets.

She could make him a convert.

With two fingers, she walked her hand up his chest. Every touch acted like flame on the ropes securing his control, fraying it. The urge to strip her naked and sink his cock into her became a driving imperative.

Five minutes into their interaction and he wanted to fuck? Definitely a new record. She’s got secrets. The woman had been in Miami when Jennings died, and later he’d seen her at the consulate in Nigeria. Was he her next target?

There are worse ways to go...

Temptation trumped caution. He swooped his head down, pausing just above her lips. Before he could ask the question, she rose on her tiptoes to meet him. Slanting his mouth over hers, he snaked an arm around her back and dragged her in. The wicked taste of her left him drunk and desperate for more. When she fisted his hair and met the sweep of his tongue with her own, he stopped trying to talk himself out of wanting her.

Savoring the way her tongue tangled with his in a hot, open-mouthed kiss, he ran his hands over her hips, cupped her ass, then hauled her closer. Gliding beneath the fabric of her shirt, he explored the hot skin of her back.

A distant—too distant—part of his mind cheered at the lack of weapons. No blade.

No gun. Just a hot, willing, soft woman. Then her teeth grazed his lower lip. The sting drew blood, and he pulled back.

Her dilated pupils were far from the remote, watchful tease they'd been earlier. "What the hell are you doing?" Despite the question, or maybe because of it, she had his shirt and jacket fisted in her hands. His shirt hung open. He hadn't been alone in the frisking.

"I'm getting ready to fuck you. What are you doing?" Some rational part of his mind stood aside, appalled. He'd been brought up to respect women. To take her out on a date, wine her, get to know her, and then maybe pursue some heavy petting. Three dates, according to his father. No less than three before he touched anything under a woman's clothes.

The room was private and the cameras were outside, not in the lecture halls. He didn't even know her name. What the hell was he doing?

Stroking her tongue over her lower lip, she studied him. He had the distinct impression she took his full measure, weighing him against some impossible scale. Stroking her nails from his chest to his navel, she whispered. "Considering your offer."



## Page 8

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The tension cording his spine relaxed. “My name is Gabriel.”

“I know your name, Professor.” She circled one of his nipples, then leaned in, and the whisper of her breath was his only warning before the gentle bite of her teeth. The electric contact pulsed a high-speed connection to his cock.

Tangling his fingers in her hair, he found the band confining the mass into a ponytail and tugged it free. Flicking the band across the room, he stroked through the wild profusion of curls and waves. He’d thought it red in Nigeria, and it had been sleeker in Miami, but it poured over his hands like wild coppery fire. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

Tipping her head back, she surveyed him from beneath lowered lashes. “What do you want it to be?”

The truth would be nice, but if he started down the interrogator path, their very promising encounter would not end well. Catching the hem of her sweater, he gave a tug, and she lifted her arms obediently. He dragged the sweater up, then used it to pin her arms, effectively locking them behind her. “I want it to be your name.”

At the maneuver, the sleepy desire in her eyes sharpened. Well, hello, kitten...Teeth and claws. God, he had a hard-on for her that wouldn’t quit. Taking his life in his hands, he slanted his mouth over hers and took the next kiss. She opened to him, allowing the thrust of his tongue.

She tasted sweeter than the vanilla of her scent—decadent, rich, and altogether hedonistic. Another nip, then she sucked on his tongue, and he damn near came in his

pants. One moment he had control, the next she had him slammed against the door, face first, with her forearm against the back of his neck. He'd never been into being thrown around by a woman, but when she proved herself more than capable, it simply turned him on more.

The soft sound of her chuckle teased his ear, then she nibbled a kiss against his earlobe. With a breathy murmur, she said, "Games are fun, Professor, but you want to touch, yes?"

No need to lie. "Hell yes."

"So do I." As if to prove her point, she slid her hands down his front to stroke his cock through his slacks. He hardened obligingly. At this rate, he wouldn't have any blood left to get oxygen to his brain, and he didn't think it was a bad thing. Her breasts rubbed against his back, the twin hardened points of her nipples a provocative invitation. "Don't try to bind me again, and I won't break you in two, sound good?"

More than good, but he still wanted. "What's your name?" He found the lock on the door and turned it. The rear entrance was only accessible by key, and no other classes were scheduled for a couple of hours.

"Pushy." Not a complaint, based on the way her hand fisted him, the hard strokes definitely a threat to whether he'd get to sink into her before he came. Catching her hand with his, he twisted around and traded places. He wanted to see her breasts.

"A name for a kiss?" he challenged. "Or a caress?" Then in a repeat of her earlier move, he covered her breast and massaged it through the bra. Her peaked nipple responded beautifully to his touch. The black bra was utterly functional and completely lacking in lace. It also covered her breast, hiding it from view.

Unhooking a woman's bra was a skill he'd mastered in high school. Who knew how

much of a Godsend it would be at this moment? She shed the bra and stood glorious, and...scarred. A cluster of three puckered marks formed a near perfect triangle over her right breast. Tracing the marks, he followed a fainter mark tucked along the curve of her breast—knife injury.

Even as he catalogued the injuries, he explored the expanse of soft flesh. Cupping her breast, he rolled his thumb back and forth over the hardened tip of her nipple. Her breathing grew shallower, and dragging his gaze up, he zeroed in on her damp mouth before meeting her gaze. Her shudder seemed to ripple over his spine, and when she went for his belt, he didn't argue.

They shed their shoes, and he abandoned her breasts long enough to undo her jeans. His cock jutted toward her, like a compass seeking true north. She wasted no time wrapping a hot hand over him, and he hissed out a breath when she gave him a long stroke, then another.

Shackling her wrist, he eased her hand off of him, then dragged her close by the waistband. Dropping to his knees, he pressed a kiss to her belly, then peeled those jeans downward. The copper hair gleaming on her head matched the sweet curls his actions revealed, and he grinned. A stupid thing to enjoy a natural hair color, but he wanted every real part of her.

"Name," he reminded her, then pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh as he pushed the jeans to the floor. She lifted her foot to step out of them, and he swung her leg onto his shoulder. Bracing her ass in his hands, he set her to the wall and stroked his tongue along the seam of her pussy. The flavor burst over his tongue, sweeter than her scent and thousand times more addictive.

"Name," he repeated, nibbling kisses as he went. He circled her clit with his tongue, and she fisted his hair. The force urged him closer. Refusing her demand, he whispered a breath across the swollen bud and teased the edges. "Name."

“Oh,” she growled, and the throaty sound had his balls tightening. “Fuck it, call me Ginger.” Her leg tightened against him, the pressure an exquisite reminder.

“Hmm.” He nosed her clit lightly, then stroked away from it with another kiss. “Gilligan’s Island. Cute.” The Professor and Ginger? “Not MaryAnn?”

The more he teased, the harder her breaths came. She was right on the edge.

“I can make it feel better,” he told her, teasing a finger against her entrance. His cock was so stiff, and his balls ached. He wanted to make it better for both of them. Looking up the gorgeous length of her, he met her troubled gaze and consternated frown.

“You’re really pissing me off.” Frustration writhed in those words.

No risk, no reward. “How much is your name worth to you?” He pushed the finger in, and her muscles tightened. She was so cut, everywhere. A perfect specimen of feminine grace, beauty, and strength...he didn’t know her. Yet. “All I want is your name, sweetheart, then we don’t have to say another word.”

If he lasted that long, he qualified for sainthood.

She pressed her head to the door, rested her weight against his shoulders and his hand. The simple act of trust encouraged him, and he added a second finger to the first. Her mouth opened, and her eyelids dropped. Passion suffused her face, and she said, “Copper.” Blowing out a breath, she squirmed against his hand, and he smiled. “Call me Copper.”

“Hello, Copper.” Delighting in the victory, he made good on his promise and locked his mouth around her clit, sucking the hard little bundle of nerves, even as he stroked it with his tongue. The force of her orgasm was a sight to behold. The sweet scent of

her arousal filled his nostrils. The taste of her on his tongue was like a drug. He wanted more. Her face, her expression undid him. No moans or soft cries teased his ears. She came with almost absolute silence. Profound relief relaxed the tension in her expression, her head arched back and her neck extended. He could almost see the pulse beating in her throat, the wild cadence more than a match for his own. She softened, grew more radiant, and he felt like for the all the world, he was worshiping at her feet.

God, what a place to be.

Easing his fingers from her, he set her legs down gently. Once he was sure her feet were braced, he tugged his slacks closer. Retrieving a condom from his wallet, he suited up and then surged upward.

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Lifting her, he kept her to the wall, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, giving him all the angle he needed. Guiding his tip to her entrance, he waited till those soft green eyes opened to stare at him before nudging inside.

Hot. Slick. Tight as hell. What was left of his control began to shred. “You taste magnificent, Copper.”

Digging her nails into his shoulder, she shuddered. “You feel fucking wonderful.”

“I don’t have it in me to be gentle anymore,” he warned. Sweat trickled down his back. His body wanted one thing, and his mind was in full agreement. He wanted to drive himself into her until he came, yet he wanted her with him.

Fire burned through the dreamy look in her eyes. “You don’t have to be gentle. Trust me, I don’t break.” She flexed her legs against him, driving him in to the hilt with a move that left them both gasping. “Give me...all you’ve got.”

Permission to slip his leash received, he slammed his mouth down on hers and delved his tongue into her mouth in time with his hips. Liquid heat poured down his spine as the delicious friction increased the need throbbing through him. She met him thrust for thrust. She fisted his hair and raked her nails down his back.

His balls tightened, and he jerked, trying to bump her clit with every furious slap of his flesh into hers. Muscles clamping down on him, she came with another silent tempest. She stiffened as her orgasm rocked over her, and he followed, the relief as blistering and wild as the swift build up.

Clinging together, they rode the storm and he buried his face against her damp throat. The taste of her on his lips, and the feel of her body milking him—Pure, perfect, Copper.

He had to know everything about her.

### Chapter 3

Parked on the deck of the coffee shop, she had a spectacular view of the lake below. A coffee cup appeared in the periphery of her vision. Cobalt set the cup down and slid into the chair opposite her. Glancing at him over the screen of the laptop, she gauged his mood had decreased in temperature from pissed to irritated. She'd gone off grid and script in the lecture hall. By the time she'd extricated herself from Gabriel, found her clothes, and headed out—Cobalt had been on the way in. Having sex to get information they really needed wasn't a first for her. Sex with Gabriel, however, hadn't been about the mission.

The frost in Cobalt's attitude warmed to a simmering temper in the van, and she'd ignored him all the way to the coffee shop. Pulling up her programs, she checked the download she'd made from Gabriel's phone. The encryption was over the top.

They'd attended a fundraiser the night before, and she'd scored the information on their second target, Gerald Barrow, an assistant turned would-be congressman. Pulling up the first two side by side, she began to skim their contacts, recent phone calls, and general day-to-day schedules.

A corporate officer, a budding politician, and a professor. It was like the lead in to a bad joke. Her body hummed at the thought of Gabriel—professor, potential target. Reconciling the man's sexiness and vibrant intelligence with possible betrayal and treasonous acts didn't work for her.

And if I fucked the enemy...She didn't make rash decisions or impulsive choices. The man's personality had sucked her in from the moment she walked into his classroom. She'd settled in a lower seat, figuring he'd never notice her in the sea of students, but he'd focused on her.

Her.

Seen her. More, he'd let her know he'd seen her. No one saw her, not unless she really wanted them to. So, what did his attention say about her?

"What do we have?" Cobalt asked, apparently ready to play nice in the sandbox again.

"A lot of bullshit." She chose a different encryption program to try and crack the code on Gabriel's info. The fact he had such tight security compared to their other two targets threw up a red flag.

Or it simply means he worked for the CIA. They have a lot of analysts. He has to have an understanding of how vulnerable encapsulating your life on a smartphone was. If Chrome hadn't ordered her to use a phone, she wouldn't own one at all.

The decryption continued to fail. Three programs down and two to go, if she couldn't crack the encryption, she'd have to find a secure server to upload the info so the Ant could take a crack at it.

He'd be all over this shit. Copper was decent, but no expert. She knew what programs worked. Brad had been like that—if she or anyone on the team needed anything, he could find it. She used to tease him he could find someone selling ice cream in Hell...

Rubbing at the ache in her chest, she took a long drink of coffee. "Gerald Barrow is clean." Relatively speaking.



“You sure?” His question irked her.

Meeting Cobalt’s gaze, she raised her eyebrows. “Is there a reason I shouldn’t be?”

“You go off book, disappear for an hour, don’t respond, then don’t tell me where you went...”

“I told you, I was making nice with the professor. I got the information, didn’t I?” Why the fuck was she defending herself? Because I have something to hide. “Barrow, on the other hand, does have something to hide, but not anything to do with national security.”

She opened the private photos on Barrow’s cloud, swung the laptop around, and nudged it over to Cobalt.

“So, he has secrets.” Cobalt shrugged. “What if someone is blackmailing him?”

“Okay, if you had someone on the special intelligence desk of the Joint Chiefs, would you let them walk away from that source to run for congress?” They had the deck to themselves. Inside, a couple of teenagers ran the register and made coffee, looking more bored with their existence than anything else.

“Point.”

“Besides,” Copper said, turning the computer around. “His financials are clean, and his bank account is kind of pathetic. So far, I’m not turning up foreign accounts, and I’m assuming Poppy’s ‘sources’ would have found hidden financial assets, even in the Cayman Islands.”

Money trails,ugh.Her least favorite thing to hunt. Let her pick up information or get them access, no problem. Pull a bank heist? She could do that, too. What would Brad have done?

Sleep with a sheep to get the info they needed, then delivered it with a five course meal. The man could make a picnic in a desert. She missed him. He’d understood how her mind worked, never relented when he wanted something, and walked her through the steps to get what he wanted out of her—until shewantedto give him what he wanted. Kind of like answering the professor’s question about her name.Stop.

“Go away.” Merc announced his arrival with three syllables, all of them directed at Cobalt. “Plat’s checking in with Chrome. Go talk to them, and give them an update.”

“Well, I know when I’m not wanted.” His easy grin said no hard feelings, and he left her to Merc. The teens inside had noticed Merc’s arrival. Their wide eyes and faint pallor suggested they weren’t familiar with the real, hard side of life.

The de-encryption program dinged, and she switched screens. They’d cracked the first layer of encryption on the phone. She had all the contact phone numbers, but no names. The possibility of spending hours waiting on the computer gnawed on her

patience. Turning it over to Ant was the right thing to do—except I don't want to give Gabriel to Ant until I'm sure he's...Until she was sure he was what? Clean? Guilty? Out of her system?

“Most likely target?”

“No idea. I know who isn't, but not who is.” Not discounting the encryption, but being security conscious didn't make a person bad.

“Coyle's dirty. He likes buying women and girls.” Merc stretched his legs out in front of him. “What about Barrow?”

“He likes dancing in women's underwear and seducing men while wearing a dress.” The photos on his phone could make his bid for government office go down in flames before it began. Still, the images didn't look photoshopped. Those she would ship back to Ant and Poppy. If they were a bait and switch, they could find out.

Merc paused. “Weird.”

“But not criminal. So far, all of these guys appear well over the age of consent. He has a type, too.” He liked that touch of gray around the temples.

“The professor?”

“Smart. Intelligent. No obvious vices.” Besides being able to fuck like a champion and giving her the best orgasm she'd had in a year. It had been a long, hard dry spell, yet he'd melted the chill right off her. Before they'd dressed, he'd talked her into meeting him after classes the next day. If she were still here, she'd go...Really?

Was she seriously planning to meet the guy? Only if the mission parameter required she do so. Of course, if she couldn't break his encryption—

“Sachi.” Merc’s voice penetrated her internal argument. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Having a cup of coffee.” She smirked and raised her cup as though toasting.

He said nothing, the thousand-mile stare in his eyes raiding her defenses and seeing right to the core of her insecurities. Lying to Merc never worked, unless he let her get away with it. Most of the time, he didn’t push. Apparently, this wasn’t going to be one of those times.

She had two options. Play stupid and keep right on doing what she was doing, or concede the battle without firing a shot and confess. Neither sat well with her, so she took another sip of coffee and met his bland stare for stare.

“We need to identify the leak. Chrome’s right. You have a gift for ferreting information.”

“Thank you.” Hey, a compliment was a compliment.

“You also don’t get snowed by other’s bullshit.”

Two for two.

“Except once.” Well, two out of three wasn’t bad.

“Don’t say it.” Bringing up her decision to have an affair with Brad was Merc’s right. He’d told her it wasn’t a good idea at the time, and part of her understood it. Didn’t matter—in the end, Brad was still dead, and her only regret had been losing him, not having been with him.

“I wouldn’t, but you’re not giving me a fucking choice.” His glare spoke volumes.

“I’m not some Dr. Phil asshole. I don’t give a rat’s ass about who you fuck or don’t fuck, unless it fucks with your head.”

She hadn’t slept with anyone in a year. A year. Who she slept with, or the fact that she didn’t sleep with anyone, was no one’s business. Right up until you let a target corner you and drop your clothes like some cheap two dollar whore.

Except—nothing about that moment in the classroom had been cheap or tawdry. Hotter than hell. Primal. Not cheap.

“You played suck face with the chick at the bar...”

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She blinked. “What?”

“Huh.” He leaned away, his gaze narrowing. “So not them. That leaves the professor...”

Retrenching after his bait and switch with the target, she grabbed her phone when it rang. Hating phones and finding the interruption a welcome reprieve, she frowned at the number on the screen. Not her team. When the hell had she given the professor her cell information?

Touching a finger to her lips, she asked for and received immediate silence. Hitting answer, she put the phone to her ear. “Hello.”

“Hello, gorgeous. I’m a little disappointed you met someone else for coffee.”

Surprise jerked through her, and it took all of her training to stay planted in the chair. She swept a look around the coffee shop, then the parking lot, and the part of the lake trail she could see from her perch without turning her head. “I’m sorry, who is this?”

Masculine laughter rich with humor drifted over the phone. Her pussy went damp, and her abdominals clenched. “Damn, Copper. If I was so bad you’ve forgotten me in a couple of hours, why don’t you make our lunch date a dinner one instead, so I can do better?”

Amused in spite of herself, she took a sip of her coffee to keep from smiling. “I’m a big believer in first impressions counting.” And he had made a hell of a first impression.

Currently, her body was very interested in seconds.

“Funny, I agree with you. Have dinner with me.”

“No.” She took another drink.

“Fine, I’ll have dinner with you.” Easy charm rolled in those syllables, and she actually had to bite the inside of her lip to not laugh.

“Still a no,” she managed. Across the table, Merc had gone predator silent, and his stare drilled into her. No way should she be having this conversation in front of him.

“Dessert?”

The woman who’d played with Gabriel in the lecture hall would have chuckled. Copper refused. “Do you have an issue with the word no?”

“Only when it conflicts with my being able to see you again.” Gabriel sighed. “Tell you what—I’m at the coffee shop on Grand. It’s next to the university. Afterward, I’m going home to take a shower, then having dinner at Andrew’s. It’s a steakhouse at Fifth and Prospect. I’ll be there by seven.”

“Sounds like you have a busy day planned.”

“You’re a cruel and unusual woman,” he said, his voice pitching lower.

Time to change the subject. “How did you get my number?”

“Come to dinner. Hell, just show up, and I’ll make sure you come.” The provocative promise twisted her insides into a knot of tension and lust. Dammit. “See you tonight.”

He ended the call before she could turn him down again. Staring at the phone, she frowned. She still stared at it when it vibrated with a text message. The restaurant address, and beneath that, a pin code followed by the note: In case you want to verify the phone information you acquired.

The code was a key, a decryption key. Setting the phone down, she blew out a slow, thoughtful breath.

“How much trouble are you in?” Merc’s quiet question echoed the one ringing alarm bells in her mind.

The problem was, “I don’t know.”

All the way to the parking lot of Andrew’s Steakhouse, Copper said she wasn’t going inside. Standing at the edge of the lot near the trees, she eyed the door. The decryption key unlocked a lot of the information on the professor’s phone—names, contacts, phone numbers, and his calendar. Not his email, though she had his log in. The fifth and final decryption program continued to work on the info, and she’d told the guys she was turning in for the night.

Lied to them. Lied to Merc.

Well, the lie was true from a certain point of view. She hadn’t come to the restaurant for the mission. No, she’d shown up to sort out the conflicted response she’d developed for the target.

Located in a lodge-style building, the restaurant had a lot of windows—plenty of opportunities for her to sight her target without going inside. Binoculars in hand, however, she considered the building and whether she should get back in the car and go.



“Since when did you become a chicken?” Gunnery Sergeant Bradley Peck murmured in her ear.

“I’m not in the habit of trading sex for information,” she snapped. A half-lie at best. She’d done it before, when they’d needed the info, and she’d do it again. If fucking the right guy saved a life and prevented her team from walking into a trap...

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“Sach,” he whispered, the air at her back warmer as he settled in behind her. He slid his hands down to rest on her hips, then tugged her to rest against his chest. “He’s a target, I’m your lover. I do know the difference.”

“So, it doesn’t bother you?” It bothered the fuck out of her. She and Tungsten should never have happened. It was against regs, against the best interests of the team, and the greatest threat her heart had ever experienced. Standing thirty feet away from a target and hesitating proved she was right about how wrong they were.

“The idea of that son of a bitch putting his hands on you?” A growl threaded the cool tones of his words. “Makes me want to break every bone in his body, but that’s not the job.”

Shuddering, she leaned against him and closed her eyes. “It feels like betrayal.” She and Brad dodged labels for their relationship more adroitly than mortar fire, but she’d have to be stupid to not recognize they were in one. When not on assignment, they were in each other’s beds. They ate together, trained together, and played together. Together.

A sigh, then his arms tightened and his hand fisted her hair. Turning her to face him, he brushed his mouth over hers in a whisper of a kiss. “Do you want that guy?”

“Not even a little.”

“If we had any other chance at getting the info we need, do you think we would approach it this way?”

Studying him in the dark, the truth rang with stark clarity inside of her. “No.”

“Then it’s the job. He has something we want. You can get it from him. It’s not betrayal, Sach...” Then his voice lowered, and she felt more than heard the words. “Do the job. Then come back tome.”

Ownership. The feeling of being branded on the inside, of belonging, and of being wanted cascaded over the twisting conflict eating her alive. “I can’t promise to be as understanding if you have to bait a trap to get a woman into your bed.”

A flash of the smile in the dark. “Want a suggestion?”

Amused, she pushed aside the needy woman who wanted to crawl into his lap and stay there forever. “Whatcha got?”

“How much info can you get without ever letting the bastard dip his wick?” He stroked her cheek. “Fuck with his mind, Copper. Make him give you everything while you give up nothing.” His touch vanished, and he faded into the darkness. The advice reverberated through her. Seducing without giving in had become something of a gift. She didn’t fuck another man if she didn’t have to—loyal to the team, loyal to her country, she’d also wanted to stay loyal to Brad.

Then he’d died.

Another shudder jolted through her, and she focused on the restaurant once more. Ice skated over the surface of her skin as though the memory of Brad’s touch, his scent, and his whispers of encouragement were only a breath away instead of a distant memory you will never know again.

“I don’t need to be here,” she said aloud, needing to hear the words as much as say them.

“Then why are you?” Gabriel’s voice crashed against her, and she pivoted. How the fuck had he snuck up on her? Heart slamming against her ribs, she faced her one time lover—one time, Copper. Once and final. The stern echo of internal orders had zero effect on the heat unfurling in her middle or the way her nipples went taut and her panties damp.

Red Wolf. Miami. Jennings. Not even listing the reasons why lusting for Gabriel was a bad idea diminished the need threading through her blood.

“I’m not.” She kept her voice cool. Professional. Distant. Yeah, right. Have you ever noticed you shut down when you don’t want me to get close? Locking all the doors just makes me want to batter through them, Sachi. Brad’s playful, seductive taunt echoed in her mind, and she slammed the door to all her regrets and remembrances closed.

“No?” Gabriel wore a nice shirt, suit jacket, and slacks sans tie. With the top two buttons undone, revealing a glimpse of the hot, masculine flesh beneath, she couldn’t stop the itch on her palms. The dress casual suit only emphasized his sex appeal, a pretty package for the hard, corded lean muscles beneath. The man may not be built like a tank, but he had a lethal intensity about him. Closing the distance between them, he brushed a knuckle down her cheek. “Well, if I’m fantasizing, I have to give myself props for realistic integrity. You’re as gorgeous as I remember.”

“Realistic integrity?” The words popped out before she could swallow her curiosity. “Do you make a habit of verifying whether or not your wet dreams and fantasies have integrity?”

“I like to verify my facts.” He curved his finger, then trailed his touch to her other cheek. A part of her wanted to tip her chin, see if he’d continue the caress to her throat. The rest of her seemed to crouch, waiting for the attack. The man was too close—yet, she wanted him closer.

Chuckling, she raised her eyebrows. “What facts are you trying to verify currently?”

He’d showered since their earlier encounter. The scent of soap and hint of aftershave added a bite to his appeal. Did he like hot showers? Was he the kind of guy who shaved while the spray pounded against his skin? The walls of her pussy flexed, and she ached to run her fingers over his jaw. Was it as smooth as it looked?

“If pursuing you is a dream or a trap.” The blunt answer shocked her, but he didn’t allow her time to process it before his mouth slanted over hers. Scorching familiarity awoke in the kiss as his tongue swiped across her lips seeking access, a demand and a request bound in one sensuous act. Rising on her tiptoes, she parted her lips to let their tongues tangle together.

The pressure of his hand in her hair, the way he fisted and tugged the strands, added a hint of pain to the pleasure—fierce, demanding, and giving. The desire to be closer to him invaded every part of her. Flattening her palms to his chest, she became aware of his racing heart, which matched hers pound for pound in its frenetic cadence.

When she wrapped her arms around his neck, he dropped his grip to her ass, then lifted her. The rub of his very stiff erection against her belly ignited a fresh wave of lust, and she peeled her mouth away from his.

“No.” She forced the syllable out on a harsh exhale, and he went completely still against her. Wrapped around him, she was aware of every breath, every tense muscle, and the promising weight of his cock fit snugly against her sex. If not for their damn clothes, he could be inside her already. Target.

Body and mind were not in agreement, and her heart thudded with the descant pulse of their violent tug of war.

“No?” he asked, the whisper of his breath tickling her lips. The ragged quality of his

breathing bolstered her.

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“No,” she repeated, and forced her fingers to unclench from his neck and hair. Not feeling the rejection at all, she kept her tone flat and monotone.

“That’s what I thought you said.” The growl of want matched her raging desire, but he slid her down his length until her feet touched the ground. The man had a thing for picking her up, yet he didn’t act like she was dead weight. Cataloging the behavior along with all the other sexy things he did—kiss, touch, breath—she held her hands away from him, but his were still firmly attached to her ass.

Professional. Seduce without fucking. She could totally do this. Besides, she had questions. Like, why did he give her the pin code to his encryption? He had to know she’d stolen his info. So why help her? How had he gotten her phone number for a cell she hadn’t had all that long, and never used unless it to touch base with her team?

Probably the same way he knew you stole his info, dumbass. Ignoring the sarcastic inner chide, she waited a beat for him to let go of her ass. He squeezed once, then held his hands up, palms forward.

Sliding back a half-step, she appreciated his mirrored move. His hair, disheveled from her fingers, added a roguish touch to his already deceptively good-looking appearance.

A snort escaped before she could stop it. They were facing each other in a parking lot, hands up as though they each had a gun. The corner of his mouth kicked higher in a grin. Laughter followed her snort, and although she tried to smooth over her expression, the chuckles kept coming. When he began to laugh, she paused. The warm baritone of his laughter proved as provocative as his touch and as seductive as

his kisses.

“I can’t think clearly when you look at me like that.” His accusation lacked heat.

“Like what?” Curiosity killed the cat. Apparently, it would be the death of her, too.

“So utterly fuckable.” The combination of raw desire and soft tones sent a stroke through her pussy.

Locking her thighs together, she curled her fingers into her palms and lowered her arms. Surrender wasn’t her thing. Of course, it isn’t surrender if I’m the one ripping his clothes off. And enough of that. “Well, we’ve already been there and done that.”

“Yes.” He dropped his hands and slid them into his pockets. The move drew her gaze to his cock. The slacks did little to disguise how firm or thick it had grown. “Of course, the first time could have been a fluke.”

Resisting the urge to lick her lips, she schooled her features to not reveal anything she didn’t want him to know. Survival was a powerful mechanism. “Fluke?”

“In a classroom, against the wall? It was hot, and I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy the hell out of it, but I want to take my time. I want to lick my way across your body and taste you as you come...again. Make sure I didn’t imagine how fucking wonderful you are. Of course, that’s just to start.” He took a step toward her, and her muscles locked. Fight or flight had been beaten out of her in basic. When combat threatened, most people ran the other way. Not out of cowardice, but for survival, the most basic instinct. The Marines trained her to be more—to walk, run even, into the fire, then lead the charge.

He closed the gap, and she held the line. Fleeing wasn’t in her nature. “Sounds like you’ve been thinking about it a lot.”



Carefully, he asked, “Haven’t you?”

“Nope.” Liar. “I tend to live in the moment. It was a nice moment. Moment’s over.”

“Damn.” He shook his head and chuckled. “Harsh.” Despite the declaration, fresh interest seemed to be reflected in his gaze. With her back to the restaurant, she had a good view of his face under the parking lot floodlights, even though they were on the edge of the lot and far from the building itself.

“You can take it,” she told him, as much to confirm her supposition as to tease him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I can.” Then he added, “I’m glad you took me up on my invitation.”

“How do you know I did?”

“Because you’re here with me.” As though stating the obvious weren’t enough, he added. “You kissed me.”

“You started it,” had to be the worst line she’d ever said out loud. Not to mention, she couldn’t recall who reached for who. Shaking her head, she scanned the area around them. Better to be aware, since she’d been focused wholly on him since his arrival, and an entire damn division could have moved in while she got all hot and bothered.

“Have dinner with me, Copper.”

“No.” Automatic. Kneejerk. A restaurant had too many accesses and vantage points, not to mention surveillance. Thankfully, they’d fucked in a camera-free room at the college. The last thing she needed was to ask Ant to scrub an inopportune sex tape off the Internet. Fuck up once, shame on her. Fuck up twice, well—most people didn’t get that opportunity.

“No to dinner? Or just no to dinner here?”

The insight said a lot for his powers of observation. Uneasiness slid through her. Gabriel’s awareness could be another strike against him. “Why do you want to have dinner?”

“Because I want to spend time with you.” Direct, no hesitation, no pause. “I also want you naked and beneath me again. Or on top, if you prefer, or on your hands and knees. I’m not picky.”

Desire pricked her reserve. How the hell she could go hot and tight at the same time her body softened? It made no damn sense. Like a magician, his words conjured images of them tangling together, and who needed words for that?

“Naked’s not happening in the restaurant.” Which was as far from no as she could get.

“True. Then where do you want to get naked?”

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Anywhere. “I have to go.” Running? Was she seriously running? Her feet rooted to the ground.

“Don’t.” He didn’t need to stop her, since she wasn’t moving. “I have a confession.”

Her racing pulse quieted, and the desire clouding her brain cleared. Instinct, self-preservation, and the very violent need to punish the people who’d taken Brad away from her brought the clarity she needed. “What’s that?”

“I know you cloned my phone today,” he said, confirming her earlier concern. “I also know you’re not who you pretend to be.”

She wasn’t pretending anything at the moment. If he was guilty, she’d take him out. No, I have to take him to Chrome. Orders are orders. Taller than her, and with a distinctive amount of muscle mass, he’d go down if she wanted to take him. His weight was on his right leg. If she swept it...

“Who says I’m pretending to be anything?” His longer reach meant she needed to go closer quarters. A throat punch and a second to his groin, and he’d go down.

A shrug, then a sigh. “I also know you were in Miami...”

Warning bells went off in her head. If she got him down, she could get him in a choke hold and put him out.

“...and Nigeria...”

One of those things wasn't like the other.

"...I've been looking for you for two years."

Abort. Nigeria had nothing to do with Red Wolf. The consul there had been making promises to some of the local leaders in exchange for investment opportunities. The diplomat's actions had compromised other ops, and they'd paid him a courtesy call to clean up his act. They'd let him know that if a second visit was required, he'd never see them coming. Calculating the risk, she kept her body language loose and her position ready. "Two years is a long time. You must not be good at looking."

His laughter burst the tension, and he inclined his head. "I'm damned good at looking. I've never not tracked a lead down. You're better at hiding than anyone I've ever known."

Since she hadn't been hiding back then, simply doing her job, she ignored the backhanded compliment.

"So the question is, gorgeous, why did you show up in my classroom?"

"I was thinking about going back to school." The lie flowed smoothly. He'd noticed a lot, but either he was damn good at his role, or he had no skin in their game. Which is it?

"No, you're not." He shook his head. "Whatever it is, you don't plan on telling me. I hope fucking me wasn't part of the play. If it was...well, at least I had a smile on my face." Then all the fun drained from his expression, and his gaze locked on hers. "Are you here to kill me, Copper?"

Chapter 4

From the moment his former section chief called, Gabriel had wanted to hang the phone up and pretend his life at the CIA had never happened. In his ideal world, he was never a field agent or analyst. He'd never tracked arms shipments, pinpointed terrorist cell leadership for assassination, and his reports had never been used to send others to their deaths.

No, in his ideal world, he'd be the professor in his lecture hall, exactly as he was when Copper walked through the door. He'd be free to pursue her full tilt and peel back the prickly layers of defense from the goddess so he could claim her. Hell, even if he turned out to be her target—what?The alert on his phone about the download had flashed at him like a taunt after she'd disappeared. One moment she'd been in his arms, the next she'd dragged on her clothes. He'd asked her out, but she left and hadn't returned.

Tracing the cell phone which copied his had been child's play. When she answered his call, he'd planned on hanging up and tracking the phone itself. Instead, what had he done? Asked her out again.

Pathetic.

But she showed at the restaurant, even if her body language and position said observation, not engagement.

"So?" he asked when she said nothing immediately. Her expression was almost impossible to read. A mask settled over her face, hiding her emotions from him. Emotions he knew she felt, because no one could manufacture the flash-fire passion she erupted with when he kissed her. "Are you here to kill me?"

Was he the target? His section chief said they'd had a lot of chatter recently. Chatter, which suggested an old case file of his had gone active. The Jennings file. The leads there had been cold since the man died. Now here she was, the same woman he'd

seen in Jennings' office.

“No.” The mask slipped, a hint of confusion drawing her brows together before she licked her lips. The flash of pink tongue threatened his restraint. From the moment he'd put his hands on her again, all he could think about was stripping her naked and fucking her right there.

In a parking lot.

Some of his strengths in analysis were his shrewd mind and his ability to divorce fact from emotion. None of those strengths seemed to matter where she was concerned.

“You sound certain.” Not remotely shocked by his question, though. Another nail in the coffin of normal. A woman he met in the civilian world would have been rightfully upset or horrified by his question. They would have come up with a dozen stories—or better, retreated from him as though he were some kind of madman.

Copper? No, she didn't seem upset or shocked. If anything, she appeared intrigued. “I am certain.”

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“Why are you still here?” If they weren’t going to have dinner, and she’d already turned down the public bang—since when did he go for sex in public, anyway? With her, I’d have sex anywhere. His cock ached as though reminding him of their predicament.

“I’m trying to answer that question myself.” The throaty rawness beneath her words dragged at him, pulling him to her. He’d be lying if he didn’t admit her confession pleased him.

“I’m not alone drowning in this sea of lust?” Pushing her might be a mistake and could blow up in his face, but he wanted to push her. Wanted to dig behind the shield she’d barricaded herself behind. He wanted in.

“Not drowning.” A hint of a smirk, and her chin raised. Not much of a tell, but while she might be cornered, he didn’t think she’d ever let anyone see how cornered she truly felt. “I know how to swim.”

“All injuries to my ego aside,” he said, and her half-snort of laughter rewarded him. “You’re here. I’m here. Whatever the hell is going on between us is addictive as hell.”

“Addictions are bad for you.” She relaxed, some of the stiffness easing from her shoulders. Instead of her arms loose and her fingers half curled into fists, she folded her arms. The faint cant to her head suggested curiosity. “Addicts make poor decisions because all they see is the next fix.”

Appreciating the distinction, he nodded. “Considering all I am thinking about is how

to get you naked again, I can sympathize.” Her response? She rolled her eyes. The banal action gave him his first glimpse beyond the icy façade, and he grinned. “Want a suggestion?”

The wariness returned. He’d once had an alley cat he used to feed that did the exact same thing. The creature would take the food, but wouldn’t come near him. Over the course of several months, he even managed to lure the beast in a window out of the bad weather to eat, but the cat never wanted to be touched. One day, the cat fell in his window, beaten to hell and missing half an ear. He’d risked the scratches to get it to the vet. The cat survived, still didn’t let him pet him, but he slept in Gabriel’s apartment, and when Gabriel left DC, the cat had come with him.

Copper was like that cat—wary and defensive against the world. Trusting his instincts, and not remotely interested in spending months trying to get closer if she would bolt the moment he did, he considered his options.

“What suggestion?” Guarded. So damn guarded.

“Come have coffee with me. We’ll stay public. No sex. Coffee and conversation.” When her eyes narrowed, he said, “Or you can come back to my place, and we can be in private. Still have coffee and conversation, but no sex unless you want to pin me to a wall again.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. What the hell did a person go through to become that controlled?

“I don’t care which. Well, I care—but more than that, I want the chance. Have coffee with me, Copper.” He still didn’t think it was her name, though it definitely suited her. He had her fingerprints, lifted from the door in the lecture hall after she’d pulled her disappearing act. If he ran them...he might have to act on anything he discovered. Willful ignorance benefited him, especially when his instincts said to protect



her.Fucking instincts.

“You’re insane.” Not a refusal. “You just asked me if I was here to kill you, and now you want me to go out for coffee.”

“Or in for coffee,” he reminded her of his secondary offer. “You’re not here to kill me. So what’s the harm?”

“It’s a bad idea.” Still, not an outright rejection of his offer.

“Maybe,” he agreed. It could be a horrible idea. His section chief wanted him to come in, to let the Agency protect him while they sorted out the intel. The last place he wanted to be was locked away in a cage, even if it came with a thousand thread count sheets and room service. Maybe he was like his cat, too. “We won’t know till we try it. I’m a big boy, and I know how to swim, too.”

“I thought you were drowning.” Another faint hint of a smile, then her eyebrows lifted. “Or was that just a line to see if I’d go down on your cock?”

His dick protested the constriction of his slacks. The image of thrusting into her mouth sent a bolt of lust to his balls. She’d make a eunuch out of him at this rate. They were too fucking tight for this kind of play. “I won’t say no, but I offered coffee.”

Lips pursed, she blew out a breath. “You’re weird.”

Before he could respond to her taunt, her cell phone rang. The light notes jingled once. Twice. When she made no move to answer it, he raised his brows. “Do you need to take that call?”

“Call?” She frowned. “Oh.” Glaring, she dug her phone out of her back pocket and

stared at it. “Fuck. Don’t say a word.”

Too curious to argue, he mimed zipping his lips as she answered.

“Copper.” The single identifier, no actual greeting or pleasantries. Military? “Yes.” Her gaze cut to him briefly. Making no pretense of ignoring her, he studied the tiny lines tightening at the corners of her eyes. She angled from him, pacing three steps away, so she faced the parking lot.

Without a doubt, she remained aware of him, though she scanned the lot, the restaurant, then the area behind them with each pass. Nothing escaped her gaze. Who are you, Copper?

“Sir?” She grimaced and shot a sidelong look in his direction. “No. Sir.”

Folding his arms, he raised his eyebrows, but she simply shook her head.

“I’ll take care of it.” Her tone betrayed no emotion, but her knuckles whitened.

Take care of it? Or take care of him? She hadn’t been armed earlier, but the loose shirt she wore over the jeans told him she could definitely be packing this evening. The call ended, and she pivoted to face him.

“So,” he kept his tone neutral and his posture relaxed. He had weight on her, but she’d spun him into the wall with precision and force. The careful control she exhibited right now screamed training. The more layers he peeled back, the more he wanted. Never thought of myself as a masochist. “What’s the verdict?”

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“I have to go.” She was already walking away.

Jogging, he caught her and took her arm. The speed with which she pulled away, dropped, and swept his legs almost caught him off guard. Almost. Too much training went into the provocative swing of her hips. He hooked his arm around her even as she took out his legs. He went down, but he twisted to take the brunt of her fall. With an elbow jab to his midsection, she broke his hold and rolled to her feet. Not willing to let her go that quickly, he caught her ankle and jerked.

What followed were a series of blows which threatened to emasculate him. He blocked most, and took two. One set his teeth rattling, but he got his arms around her and managed to dodge the head butt to the face. Locking his legs around hers and keeping her arms pinned, he had to cant his head to the side to avoid the jaw-cracking slam of her head to his shoulder. The bruising force hurt.

When she stopped struggling, he didn’t trust her cooperation. “I want to offer you a deal,” he said instead. “A follow up to my earlier suggestion.”

“Apparently, I’m listening.” Anger burst like firecrackers in the handful of syllables. Oh, he’d pissed her off. A kernel of joy settled in the pit of his stomach. If she’d stayed cold and divorced from the situation, he’d have worried she might kill him after the takedown. While she still might, anger gave him a crack in the door—something he could wedge open.

“I’m going to let you go. I don’t want to hurt you, but I also don’t want you to walk away.”

“Boo hoo for you.” Snark. He could handle snark.

“Don’t be pissy, Copper.” He took a chance and nuzzled her earlobe. A shudder shook her, and he forgot about the fact they sprawled on the grass at the edge of a parking lot or that people dined a few dozen yards away. He forgot about the cars and the rocks digging into his spine. She responded to him. Another piece of information to catalog. Whatever she was into or wasn’t—whatever the hell she had going on—what happened between them was between them. “Seriously,” he said, forcing himself to release her earlobe. “I like you.”

Then, putting his life in her hands, he let her go. She didn’t waste time. She went from being quiescent against him to straddling his chest with a gun pointed at his chin. Her expression was full of cold fury. “You have a really fucked up way of showing it.”

“Do I?” He put his hands on her hips. “I had you, fair and square. I let you go.”

“You do realize I could blow your head off, and no one would know, right?” Irritation discolored her words. More tone, more—her, and less the cool operator.

“I do. I’m also trusting you don’t want to.” Since she hadn’t objected to him touching her, he rubbed his palms along her thighs. The gun didn’t move. “Have coffee with me. Let’s do this right.”

“I can’t.” Not didn’t want to, but can’t.

“All right. Maybe later?”

“I won’t be here later. You need to forget about me, Gabriel.”

He stilled at the use of his name. She made it sound like a caress. He’d pay money to

have her say it again. “Not possible. I haven’t forgotten you once in two years, and then I only saw you walk through a room. How the hell do you expect me to do it now?”

With a sigh, she said, “Because if you don’t, it’s going to get ugly for you. I’m bad news, got it?”

“I dealt in bad news, sweetheart. You are anything but bad.” In fact, she was...amazing. And I apparently need my head examined.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Most men aren’t this stubborn.” It seemed she agreed with his conscience.

“I’m not most men.” Sitting, he nudged her back to straddle his waist, then further until her ass rested on his thighs. The gun lowered a fraction, but he left it alone. If she’d planned on killing him, he’d already be dead. Adrenaline surged through his system. He’d forgotten how exhilarating it was to be in the field. His current state, however, had nothing to do with being in the field. “I want to help you.”

He did?

“You do?”

She sounded nearly as skeptical as he felt, but he hadn’t been lying. “I do.” Then, because what the hell else did he have to lose? “I’m pretty sure you’re Special Forces of some kind, and I’m getting the feeling you’re on the job. I spent a lot of years doing what you’re doing. Assets in the field are amazing. I have something you want, or you wouldn’t have been here in the first place.”

After re-engaging the safety, she stood and robbed him of the soft sensation of her ass on his lap. She stowed the gun in her waistband. He’d been right, the shirt hid it

neatly. When she extended her hand, he accepted it, but only for the contact. He was perfectly capable of getting to his own feet.

Still holding her hand, he tugged her to him. “My suggestion is you use me.”

“You really are insane.”

“Certifiable.” He grinned. “But only for you.”

“Well, I’m really sorry,” she said, glancing down to where he held her hand.

“Why?”

The blow slammed into the back of his head, and he pitched forward. She caught him, and a distant part of his mind heard irritation in her voice. “Dammit, Merc. You didn’t have to hit him so hard.”

She cared.

A gravelly voice answered. “He’ll live.”

Then blackness swallowed him whole.

Consciousness returned with agonizing and brutal slowness. Coughing, he tried to clear the dryness from his throat and forced his eyes to open. A mistake. The light cut through his skull like a blowtorch. Squeezing them shut, he fought to inhale through his nose and out through his mouth. Matching his breathing to the four count of his heart rate let him push past the illness swamping him.

Focus.

Control.

Breathe.

When he opened his eyes a second time and forced his chin up to survey his surroundings, he identified blank walls, a table, two chairs, and a camera in the corner. Nothing—and no one else. His arms were secured at his sides, wrists bound with individual threads of rope wrapped around each finger then secured to the chair legs.

Effective. No way to dislocate a thumb and slip free unless he wanted to dislocate all of his fingers. A second cough, and he didn’t taste any blood. The pounding in his brain, however, wouldn’t cease no matter what breathing tricks he tried.

The door opened, and a dark figure entered. A water bottle was set on the table, lid secured. Whether to taunt or because his interrogator wanted a drink, who knew? Gabriel didn't struggle, sneer, or otherwise respond.

Was this—what did she call his assailant? Merc? As in Mercenary? Dressed in unrelieved black and wearing a ski mask, his captor's only visible feature were eyes and the color remained indistinct in the shadows.

“Name?”

Really? Even with his head threatening to split open, he wasn't fooled. They knew exactly who he was. Why else would he be here, unless—? Had they been after Copper? The moments surrounding the thunderbolt slamming into his skull were a little blurry. She'd offered him her hand, and he'd gotten to his feet.

Then she'd...

“Name,” Mr. Monosyllable demanded.

Gabriel smiled. “My name is Inigo Montoya, and you are an asshole.”

The masked figure stiffened, then sighed. “Mr. Danvers, this doesn't have to be unpleasant.”

“Shocking, considering I'm nursing a concussion. You're lucky I haven't vomited all over you.” Then, because his skull didn't like him talking, he said, “But keep asking me questions. That can change.” Where the hell was Copper?

He tested each rope. They hadn't quite cut off his circulation, but his fingers weren't moving. Wiggling his toes, he took inventory. They'd lashed his ankles, too. Fuckers didn't take any chances. Smart.



Irritating, but smart.

“I’ll take my chances.” Was that a note of amusement? “You’re Gabriel Danvers, Professor.”

“No, asshole. I told you, I’m Inigo Montoya.” His right eye twitched. The light acted like a blade, stabbing over and over. Pain could be controlled, and he’d had extensive anti-interrogation training. If he could get the pulses in his head to keep time with his heart rate, he could breathe through the worst of it. “Where’s Copper?”

The man unscrewed the water bottle then took a drink. Setting the bottle down, he left the cap off. So, it was there to taunt. Good to know.

Gabriel ignored the drink.

“You worked for the CIA.”

“Nope, I was hired by Vizzini to kidnap a princess.” Sometimes he cracked himself up. “Don’t suppose you’ve seen her? Sexy as sin? Red gold hair, dark skin, legs that don’t quit?”

“What do you know about Red Wolf?”

“Not much. How much caffeine does it have in it? Last I checked, Red Bull was the thing.” Red Wolf—terrorists. Highly specialized. Urban legend. Facts ticked through his brain. He’d had a file on them a few years before, but it went nowhere. After he submitted a request for more resources to set on the trail, he’d been reassigned. South American shithole number one, followed quickly by shithole number two.

A shoe scuffing the floor behind him warned him a moment before a gun pressed to the back of his skull. “Jackson Jennings. Why were you meeting with him?”

They were going to pull the trigger or not. Meeting the gaze of the man across from him, he said, “I have no students named Jackson Jennings. If this is about cheating, I think you’ve taken it a little far. Where is Copper?”

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Cool steel dug into the back of his head, applying pressure to what had to be the lump where he'd been struck. A blinding wash of pain slashed his vision in half. With his limited resources, Gabriel focused on breathing. Were they interrogating Copper as well?

Or was she in this with them? She'd said something about Merc—he couldn't quite make out the words. They'd faded. Concentrating on her, he remembered the way her skin felt under his fingers. Hot, silky, and alive. The strength in her legs when she'd wrapped them around him, and how fucking sweet it had been to sink into her.

Fingers snapped in front of his eyes. Ignoring the interruption, he let the sweet memory of her demanding kisses brush aside the pain. Fiery and tempestuous, she'd dug her fingers into his shoulders. Her nails hadn't been sharp or especially long, but she'd left a few marks. Some women were fragile, beautiful for their exquisite delicacy. Others were athletic, strong, and supple—a perfect invitation to enjoy. Still others were harder, tougher to crack, and jaded from a life of difficult choices.

Copper defied all of those categories. Tough, sexy, and tremendously strong, but beneath the defenses and masks, she possessed a stunning vulnerability. Like a mirage in the desert, he'd glimpsed it a couple of times—during her orgasm, and then when she'd been frustrated with him at the restaurant.

Little surprised her—

Pain whipped across his face, and he tasted blood. Rolling his jaw, he spared a look at the man looming over him. Menace rolled off him in waves. The one across the table wanted answers. This guy? He wanted a pound of flesh.

“What?” The word snapped out, and his jaw throbbed. The new pain replaced the sickening thud in his head and helped to clear his thoughts.

“Stop playing games, Mr. Danvers. Answer the questions, and you might walk out of here.”

“Might is a pretty tensile promise, and since you haven’t answered mine, here’s a reply. Go fuck yourself.” Bravado wasn’t hard to manufacture. Training taught him cooperation would only get him so far. If a person didn’t feel the pain or could transmute the pain into something else, he could make it through.

Besides, in a world where information was currency, he planned to hold onto every dime of his. The questions were rephrased, repeated, and relentless. Despite the threat of abuse, however, they didn’t do much more than open-handed slaps and one punch when he retreated into his memories of Copper.

He lost track of time, but not of the number of questions. The two men in the room were both masked, both lacking anything distinctive. They’d finished their water bottles and left him nothing. Blood lingered in his mouth, but he ignored the metallic flavor.

They weren’t getting what they wanted. At one lull in the questioning, the two men looked at each other. Whatever passed between them translated into silent communication—they’d worked together before. Observation told him only so much. Their voices were masculine, nondescript, and he couldn’t pinpoint an accent for either one. They said nothing more than was absolutely necessary, however.

Because he was still breathing, he said, “Do you want to answer my questions yet?”

Both men paused to stare at him. The tension ratcheted, the silence taut. A door opened behind him, and Gabriel listened. No footsteps—or so quiet as to make no

noise—and a cool hand pressed against his neck. Angling his head, he tried to get a look, but the fingers on his neck tightened and forced his head forward.

Fingers. Not gloves.

Warm, strong—and definitely not male.

Was Copper really in on this with these guys? Was this her assignment? Had he been set up?

A needle pricked his neck, and he swore. The coolness spread, then began to warm as it assaulted his muscles. A narcotic—muscle relaxer? Truth serum? The world fuzzed around the edges. “Fuck.” He swore. Anesthetic.

The hand on his neck relaxed, and he tipped his head back. Copper’s face swam into his vision, only it wasn’t her. It was her eyes. She wore a mask like the other two. Her voice was low when she said, “I’m sorry. You’re not going to remember this, but I am sorry.”

The hell he wouldn’t remember. He hadn’t for—blackness.

## Chapter 5

“Ant broke the last of the decryptions an hour ago.” Chrome’s voice sounded tinny on the cell’s speakerphone. “He’s retired, but the Agency reached out to him recently, as far as we can tell. He doesn’t work for them directly, not anymore. Elena confirmed with her contacts. Let him go, concentrate on Coyle. He’s made plans to head to Las Vegas for some conference.”

“Fun.” She hated what they’d done to Gabriel. Hours of questioning, yet he hadn’t cracked, not once. He had, however, asked about her. Several times. Merc’s irritation

batted at her like a cat playing with a ball.

“It’s on International Commerce.” Chrome was still talking, so she focused on the orders. “Lots of out of town guests and businesses. We’re putting together a list based on their confirmations.”

Rubbing the back of her neck, she couldn’t get the disappointment in Gabriel’s gaze out of her mind. Recognition sparked in them when he’d tipped his head back, recognition and regret. Compartmentalizing was what she did, but he wouldn’t stay in the box.

“Coyle’s the primary target, but Danvers isn’t off the hook yet. We’ll maintain the electronic surveillance on him. Plat, you stick with him, too.”

Platinum spared her a look, then nodded. “Got it.” The bare minimum of words needed to acknowledge an order.

“Merc, you keep up with Cobalt and Copper. Copper, you take Cobalt with you into the conference.” Was that a note of worry or a vote of no confidence after the clusterfuck that had been her interaction with Gabriel?

She didn’t like it. Cobalt was too damn pretty and big. He’d stick out in a place like that. Of course, that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. If he had everyone’s attention, they’d ignore her. “Yes, sir.” They could make it work.

“Bring this home.” Chrome disconnected on the order. They hadn’t been in the guest cabin long enough to do more than sleep and interrogate Gabriel. Breaking down their equipment, they worked with silent efficiency. They’d have the van packed and leave it with Plat.

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Separate tickets and flights would take them to Vegas. Airport security had more cameras than most locations, so she'd need a different look for the flight. Her gear would go with Merc. Weapons could be procured on the ground. Plat would take care of the rest of the equipment.

In the room she'd occupied, she studied her wigs, makeup, and kit. A business conference required a different kind of persona than a hot club, a classroom, or a fundraiser. Depending on her goal, she could change her features enough that Gabriel wouldn't recognize her again.

A pang struck her at the thought. He'd suffered enough abuse already for having had the misfortune of being on the receiving end of their investigation. The door thumped open quietly and closed gently.

"You should tell Chrome to let you back off this assignment."

She'd expected the advice. Expected a lot sooner—from the moment he'd shown up and clocked Gabriel. The quiet thrust of his fury had been a tangible thing. Only her stepping between them had kept Merc from killing the man. She should have recognized he would follow her when she'd taken off to meet Gabriel. She should have recognized Merc wouldn't involve himself until he thought she was in trouble. He hadn't, not when Gabriel pinned her or when he'd let her go. Merc even kept his distance when she had her gun in Gabriel's face—it was when she'd let him go.

"You're compromised, Copper."

"I can do the job." Their investigation pointed them away from Gabriel, granting

relief she refused to acknowledge. Black hair—if she darkened her hair, she could take advantage of her skin tone and use cosmetics to enhance the faint tilt to her eyes. Asian blended well into an international conference on commerce. Racial stereotyping might be grounded in bigotry and racism on some levels, but it also proved beneficial when she didn't want anyone to know who she was.

She could keep the Kiki persona in her back pocket if necessary to get close to Coyle again. It would work.

“I didn't say you couldn't, but you don't fucking have to eviscerate yourself to do it.” If any other member of their team suggested she needed to step back, she'd beat the shit out of them. Merc saying it hurt, but she knew why he broached the subject.

She'd scared him.

“I've got this,” she said. The key to blending and to lying was the same—believing the lie. It didn't matter if she couldn't put Gabriel in his place and shut the damn door. If she could make a twenty-mile hike through hostile territory with a broken bone and her gear and get the mission done, she could do this. “Trust me, John.”

“Don't hide from me.” Anger soaked his words. “Don't play games. You want to fuck him, and it compromises you.”

Not responding, she continued setting out the items she'd need. If she got into character now, she could leave Copper's detritus behind. Damaged, tarnished Copper. Her ravaged heart was too fucking soft—Who am I kidding? Copper could get the job done. It hadn't been Copper who fucked up.

It was Sachi.

Merc's sigh said volumes. He didn't sigh. He didn't show disappointment. Hell, he



expected disappointment like most people expected to breathe. “You already did.”

“It’s done.” She used a brush to smooth her hair, then began to braid it tight to her skull. Once she tamed the wild mass, she’d slip the black wig into place. “Done and buried.”

“Sachi...” He put a hand on her shoulder. “What do you want me to do about him?”

Clearing her throat, she ignored the surge of emotion. The part she had to play didn’t feel all these crazy things. “Nothing.”

“You realize he’s got training. Nothing we did broke him in there. The only times I saw real emotion were when he asked about you.” No, she didn’t want to hear this, but Merc continued anyway. “He’s a spook. Spooks are trained to turn assets. You play people, but you canbeplayed.”

Shaking off his hand, she finished the last braid and slipped a pin in to hold it. Fixing her wig, she met John’s gaze in the mirror. The scarred half of his face a testament to the hell he’d been through, the hell he continued to use to isolate himself. She could lash out, try to push him away. He’d done the same to her over the years. But John, like her, wasn’t going anywhere.

“He didn’t play me.” Saying it didn’t make it so. “But he did recognize me.”

Merc’s mouth tightened.

“He saw me in Miami.” Clearing her throat, she adjusted the wig and checked her appearance. “And he saw us in Nigeria.”

“Yet, hedidn’tplay you?” The healthy dose of skepticism in his voice splashed her like ice water. “Weren’t you the one who told me that a lie built on the truth was the

best con? He showed you some of his cards, and you dropped your clothes.”

Bullshit. He didn't play her.

“Let me ask you this—what did he tell you after you fucked him?” The question burned. “If he didn't play you, what did you get out of it?”

Clenching her fist, she glared at him. “Not a goddamned thing. Are you happy now?”

“No,” Merc said, meeting her glare without flinching. “Did you give him anything?”

“No. Do I look stupid? You know what? Don't answer that. I fucked him. Maybe he did try to play me, but I didn't give him anything.” Thanks to the drug cocktail they'd given him, he wouldn't remember their interrogation.

Shaking his head, Merc looked disappointed. Again.

“What?”

“You gave him your name.”

No, she'd given him Copper's name...then Sachi stopped. Sachi had protected herself, Copper had nearly fucked it all up. Pissed, she pivoted to face the mirror. Sachi needed to get her ass in the box along with Brad and Gabriel, then they could all get shut away.

Fucking box was crowded and wouldn't close. Closing her eyes, she walked her emotions back one at a time until they fit. “I've got this,” she said with anger-fueled confidence. “I've got this.”

Six hours later, Copper followed Cobalt through the lobby of the Sunset Royale. Sandwiched on the strip between the Bellagio, Excalibur, and MGM Grand, the Sunset Royale most often got overlooked by the movies and television shows. Frankly, the casinos all looked the same to Copper. Muted, even lighting over bright, shiny machines and zero windows—why offer windows? No one needed to know about the passage of time or temperature outside.

Throughout the flight, she and Cobalt studied the layout of the casino using both the online maps and the blueprints Ant emailed them. Designed to be a maze, casinos wanted people in, not out. Dressed in what had to be a three-thousand-dollar suit, Cobalt exuded an air of wealth and privilege so at odds with his normal personality, he had her half-convinced.

She stayed two steps and to his left behind him. Dressed in a blend of oriental silk

blouse and a simple black skirt, she was his secretary slash assistant slash hot arm candy. The maneuver allowed her to keep her head angled down slightly, and she faded behind him. They checked into their rooms, then made their way to the conference level. Ant had set up a beautiful cover. Cobalt was Miles Henderson, a businessman from a Japanese Consortium. Since the Japanese prided themselves on secrecy and honor in business, again working for them made perfect sense. If someone decided to dig, they wouldn't find much.

Snapping his ID into place, Cobalt made a point of clipping hers on for her. Meeting her gaze over the rim of his unneeded glasses, he murmured, "Business or pleasure first?"

She still had the lead. Neither Cobalt nor Plat had said a word to her about what went on between her and Merc. They also hadn't asked her any personal questions about the professor, either. "Make new friends."

Brendan Coyle had already checked into the hotel. The conference didn't officially begin until the next day, but an early arrivals mixer was already in full swing. Cobalt trailed his fingers along her collarbone after he made sure her ID badge was straight then touched a single finger to her cheek. Anyone watching them would have seen intimacy, not the faint tapping of a single message in Morse code.

Got your back.

Catching his hand, she returned the message against his palm. Nodding, he took her elbow and led her through the throng to the escalators. On the second floor, they entered a ballroom. Drinks flowed freely, and a decadent buffet occupied a full stretch of one wall. Tables filled the center with room for guests to mingle—and were they ever mingling.

Two hundred people had to be packed into the room. The noise level blotted out the

sounds of whatever music they had piped in. She caught a hint of it here or there. Accents—the sheer multitude vied with the number of languages being spoken.

Pausing in the entryway, Cobalt settled into his role. He surveyed the room as though deciding which group to join the way others picked out what outfit to wear. Checking her watch, she angled it so it could snap pictures and turned on the recorder. They would stream a series of still frames over the next ten minutes. Ant and the others could sort through the faces and the names.

A man hurried over to them, hand extended in greeting. “Mr. Henderson, we’re so glad you could join us.”

With a dash of southern charm, Cobalt did the grip and grin well. Their erstwhile host did his job and drew them through the throng, introducing them to one group then another. Some of the names and faces tickled her memory, but she couldn’t place them. Two hours in, her feet hurt from the heels she’d been forced to wear for the function, and she nursed frustration.

Coyle was nowhere to be found.

Leaning against the bar, Cobalt kept an arm around her. The sexual byplay enhanced her cover and discouraged others from interrupting them. “How do you want to deal with it?”

“I’ll check his room.” She resisted the urge to drum her nails. The asshole was probably in bed with a woman. Not everyone came to the mixers. Tomorrow would be telling, but she had zero interest in listening to a lot of debate on the value or devalue of the dollar. She fought to protect the freedoms of people who loved this shit. Fighting for them was a hell of a lot preferable to talking with them.

“My nine o’clock.” Cobalt made a show of swirling his drink, melting the ice more.

They'd both had to imbibe, but they'd watered it down as much as possible. "Where do I know him from?"

Leaning into him, she pressed a hand to his chest and angled her head so she could take a look without being obvious. A dusky man with dark brown hair and an ill-fitting suit sat arguing with an older man. "Brown or gray?" Though, arguably, both looked familiar.

"Brown," Cobalt said, tossing back the drink and setting the empty glass on the bar. "I know him. Can't place him. Yet." He kept his arm loose, but spread his fingers against her back and made a show of nuzzling her ear. "I'm thinking Ukraine."

They'd had a couple of missions in the Ukraine, but the only people she'd seen were all six foot under. She should know, as she'd put them there. Cobalt had been on Steele's team, so maybe he'd seen him elsewhere.

"Do you want to go make friends with them while I check on our weasel?"

"Do I have to, Mom?" The half-grin in his words gave rise to the playful retort. Funny, she'd never thought of the guys as having a sense of humor. They didn't play with her that often, not even Merc.

Brad had always played with her. "Keep it up, and I'll send you to bed without supper."

Cobalt snorted. "If you came with me to bed, that wouldn't be punishment."

"If you hit on me again, you might learn otherwise." But they were playing at lovers and smiling felt a whole lot better than scowling.

"You know, I'd almost want to take you up on that tonight." He tapped a question

against her spine. Going after Coyle now or later?

“Now,” she said, then gave it a pause. He nodded once, and she added, “Why don’t I go up first and you can follow?”

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“Sounds like a plan.” He gave her ass a pat as she claimed her clutch bag or what amounted to a joke of a purse. Leaving him to check on the face he recognized, she headed out of the mixer. They’d given them enough time to get photos of everyone in the room, so she shut the watch off and stripped the cool metal from her wrist. Shoving it into the clutch purse, she made her way to the escalator and down to the first floor.

Whoever designed these places really wanted folks to stay inside. The elevators were accessible, but only if one passed through a portion of the casino. The narrow path between the reception desk and the slot machines guaranteed customers would have a chance to be tempted.

Merc wasn’t anywhere to be seen, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t in the hotel. His scars made him stand out, so he had become an expert at blending in. The cell phone buzzed as she reached the elevator. Hitting the up arrow, she tugged the phone out.

Plat’s message had her stomach bottoming out.

Danvers slipped his leash.

The second sent a chill up her spine.

Ant spotted him on a commuter flight roster to Vegas.

The time stamp on the messages irked her. They’d come in more than two hours before, right around the time she and Cobalt had entered the mixer. What the hell good was a phone if it didn’t deliver the messages?



Texting back an acknowledgement, she stepped into the elevator as the doors whooshed open. A flight time would have been nice. Where was Gabriel going?

The conference? They could adjust for his arrival. Her?

Her pulse and respiration increased, but she ignored the physiological response. Getting laid should have satisfied that particular need. Hitting Coyle's floor number, she hit send on the message. An arm stopped the elevator doors from closing. They peeled open again to reveal Gabriel. He stepped inside and hit a floor button. Most people entering an elevator took the empty side and turned to face the door.

Gabriel did neither.

She focused her gaze straight ahead. The part she played didn't know him.

"Hello, Copper." His warm voice poured over her, and she flicked a look at him, modulating her surprise to perplexed.

Then, because her voice could give her away, she settled for Japanese and said, "I don't speak English."

His slow smile had a devastating effect on her equilibrium. Her pulse leapt and her breathing deepened. This close, she couldn't miss the rich scent of him filling her lungs. "It's a good thing I speak Japanese, then."

The response floored her.

When the elevator arrived at Coyle's floor, she had a choice—push past Gabriel or stay put. If she left, he'd know she needed something on that floor. If she stayed, she risked tipping her hand.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, holding onto her cover by the skin of her teeth. Submerging herself had never been an issue, but Gabriel was there—and he’d recognized her. How the hell was that possible? Her mind refused to wrap around the possibility.

“After you,” Gabriel said, then followed her out of the elevator. Exactly what she didn’t want him to do. He looked good. The white shirt and faded jeans look worked for him. A business casual that was all masculine. She kept her pace even as she walked down the hall toward Coyle’s room.

She had twenty rooms to make her decision. Gabriel kept pace. Ten rooms from her destination, a scream split the air. A woman stumbled out of a room down the hall wearing a towel and nothing else. Blood speckled her hands, and she whipped her head around to stare at them.

Then opened her mouth and screamed.

Copper stilled, but Gabriel hurried past her. Like a white knight, he tried to catch the woman as she fell. Her bloodied handprints fixed to his shirt as she kept screaming. Joining them, Copper glanced into the room.

Well, she knew why Coyle hadn’t shown up at the mixer. He lay on the floor of the hotel room with his throat slashed. Blood was everywhere. More rooms opened and people stepped out. Elevators dinged downed the hallway. Still walking, Copper left the room, Gabriel, and the screaming woman behind. At the stairwell, she let herself in with her room key then slipped off her shoes and jogged up two flights of stairs. Most people would go down, and she could hear the doors below opening.

On the second flight up, she heard the door below her opening and she went completely still. Gabriel’s soft curse drifted up to her. Would he go down or come up?

Most people would go down, but so far, he hadn't done a damn thing most people would do.

“Sir!” a voice called, and Gabriel swore again. The door closed, and he hadn't come inside.

Exhaling a relieved breath, she went up another two flights before letting herself out of the stairwell. Shoes on once more, she walked to the elevators and called one. Time to change and report in.

Coyle was dead, and she wasn't any closer to their leak—except Gabriel was in Las Vegas. All the way to her room, she debated her next step. The obvious one—the one she needed to do because if he was the guilty party, she couldn't let him escape.

Copper had to see Gabriel again.

See him and trap him.

### Chapter 6

By the time the LVPD had finished asking him to repeat his statement a few dozen times, Gabriel returned to the Sunset Royale in search of his quarry. He stopped in the gift shop long enough to drop a twenty on four ibuprofen and a bottle of water for his screaming headache. Whatever cocktail they'd injected him with wore off after a couple of hours.

They'd dumped him in his apartment, which was only slightly better than a ditch somewhere. A series of phone messages had waited for him—most from his section chief, and two from agents he'd worked with previously. The amount of heat focusing in his direction meant it was time to take a step back and reevaluate.

What the hell was he doing in Las Vegas? He'd had the conference on his schedule. It would be great research for his advanced students. He also still had a lot of contacts in international commerce. Most of his long-term covers had been in mergers, acquisitions, along with imports and exports.

He wasn't here for any of them.

Copper, whoever the hell she was, was in trouble. Downing the ibuprofen with the water, he studied the throngs of people coming and going. Despite the hundreds of cameras everywhere, Vegas was a great place to disappear. If he hadn't seen the Asian beauty coming down the escalator earlier and crossing the lobby floor for the elevators, he would never have recognized her.

But he'd memorized that walk. He knew it better than he knew his name. Obsession was an ugly word, but at some point, he might have to admit his fascination with Copper bordered on obsession. His phone rang, and he tugged it out of his pocket. Only one person had his burner cell number, since he'd ditched his other phone at home. No way had they let him go without observation. If it had been him, he would have tagged the equipment, the clothes, and even his body, then let him go to see where he went.

He'd gone through airport security twice. Most of the x-ray machines scrambled body taggers. He'd left his gear at home and bought new clothes on the way. "Danvers."

"I dropped a bag for you at the desk," Art Sorenson told him. The rat king of San Juan had been in a spot of trouble during a bad deal with Russian Bratva. He'd given Gabriel info, and Gabriel relocated him. Fortunately, Reno was in driving distance to Vegas. "You owe me."

"Really? I'm thinking that's one less that you owe me." He didn't wait for a response and hung up. Stripping the battery from the burner, he dumped the phone parts in two different trash cans. As promised, a suitcase waited for him at the check in desk.

Clothes. Cash. Fresh ID. And weapons. Art provided a little bit of everything. Just because Gabriel hadn't been in the field in a few years didn't mean he was helpless. Whether Copper was in trouble or was trouble remained to be seen, but he planned to be prepared this time.

No more masked men getting the drop on him. Plus, he had handcuffs. If he had to, he'd tie her to a damn bed and handcuff her for good measure. One way or the other, he wanted answers, and he'd get them.

The door to his room was open.

Pulling the .45 from the side pocket of the suitcase, he checked the magazine and used the case to shove the door inward. Copper sat in the middle of the second queen-sized bed, farthest from the door.

Somehow, he wasn't remotely surprised. Pushing the case to the side, he closed the door and flipped the security lock. Then he nudged the bathroom door open to check inside. Saying nothing, she watched him with too-quiet eyes as he verified the bathroom and closets were empty. He didn't have a balcony, but he was only on the third floor. If he had to go out the window, the fall would break something, but it wouldn't kill him.

Like him, she had a gun with her. But hers lay on the bed next to her, and she made no move to reach for it. She'd ditched the black wig and funky cosmetics—even the weird contacts changing her eye color. Once more, she was the coppery-haired goddess he'd held in his arms, fresh-faced, without a trace of cosmetics. Only her eyes betrayed her youth. The quiet storm in them beckoned him like a siren.

Fuck him if he wasn't willing to risk the rocks to reach her.

Engaging the safety on the gun, he set it aside and sat down on the bed opposite her. "Hey."

"Hey." Her posture straightened. "I didn't expect to see you in Las Vegas."

"I'm sure you didn't expect a lot of things." Like him remembering his interrogation or shaking off their drugs. Counter-intelligence training prepared him for a lot of sick eventualities.

"I'll give you that," she said. "You need to go home."

"No." Was that the only reason she'd come to his room?

“You checked in under your name.”

“I have no reason to hide who I am.” He tried to gauge her reactions, but she played everything so close. Her expression didn’t change, but her eyes—they kept giving him little insights. Whatever had her unsettled reflected in her troubled eyes. “Why do you want me to hide, Copper?”

“Because I told you, it’s not safe around me. You’re a professor, Gabriel.” The sigh at the end of his name tugged at him, but he stayed right where he was. He didn’t want to miss a nuance of her expression.

“Professors can’t go to Vegas?”

She blinked, the corner of her mouth kicked higher, but she smothered the smile before it escaped. “You’re not just a professor.”

“No,” he said slowly. Fine, he had to give a little to get a little. “You’re not just a gorgeous woman who wandered my way by accident.”

“I won’t answer that.”

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“It wasn’t a question, beautiful.” Clasp ing his hands together, he leaned forward elbows on his knees. “Truce?”

“We’re not at war.”

“The lump on my head says otherwise, sweetheart. So does the crap you tried to shoot me full of to wipe my short-term memory.” Not even a flicker of her eyelid. Damn, she was good, but she did cut her gaze away briefly, then back.

“Three questions.” The offer went beyond what expected. “Personal. Not professional.” And it came with conditions.

“Believe it or not, I prefer personal questions to professional.” He’d walked away from the seedier aspect of the life of a company man, never knowing who he could trust, always measuring the agenda of a politically inclined section chief against the needs of the mission. Dealing in the currency of blood left him with very little in savings for humanity. “Three questions. How do I know your answers are truthful?”

“Because I won’t answer if I have to lie.”

“Fair.” He considered the offer. “I want to add one other caveat to our deal.”

She swiped that too-pink tongue over her upper lip, and the bolt of it went straight to his cock. Shutting off his libido was impossible around her. He didn’t even want to try. “I’m listening.”

“You stay here tonight.” He pointed to his room. “All night. No disappearing acts, no



having someone knock me out. You and me, no one else.”

Pursing her lips, she didn't dismiss his offer out of hand. With exaggerated slowness, she uncurled her legs and stood. “I'm going for my phone.” Putting words to action, she slipped the cell phone from her back pocket. Three taps later, she fired off a text message. The whooshing noise was a dead giveaway. Still as a statue, she stared at her phone.

He waited. If she said no, would she retreat from the truth offer? Better question, if she said no, would he be willing to let her out the door? Not knowing the answer to the second made him damn uncomfortable.

The phone vibrated, the humming noise splitting the silence. Her expression didn't change at the message she'd received, yet she relaxed. The stiffness in her shoulders eased, and the corners of her eyes softened. With her finger at the top of the phone, she depressed it and held it down until the phone powered off. Turning it to face him, she said, “I'll stay.”

Relief unspooled the tension in his gut. She placed the phone on the hotel room desk. He retrieved his own and turned it off, then set it next to hers. With a glance at her gun, she raised her eyebrow.

“Field strip,” he suggested. Without hesitation, she nodded. They turned almost in synchronous motion, and in silence, broke the guns down, unloading them and setting the pieces neatly on the desk.

If he'd had any lingering doubts about her military training, he didn't now. He finished only a few seconds behind her, and she smiled. The expression cut through his headache in a way the ibuprofen hadn't managed.

Keeping his tongue in his head, he forced himself not to drool and asked a cool,

“What?”

“I win.” Two simple words, laden with humor.

“Didn’t realize it was a race.”

She shrugged. “Everything in life is a competition. If you can’t be the best, why bother?”

“That breaks the world down into two types of people.”

“Yep.” She nodded and circled the table. “Winners and everyone else.”

Not tacking on the word loser didn’t mean she wasn’t thinking it. “Strip.”

“Excuse me?” No offense discolored her words, but she did plant a hand on her hip.

“Strip.” Having her compliant didn’t mean she wasn’t still executing some plan. The only way to assure himself of full honesty was to make sure they had nothing to hide. Undoing the buttons on his shirt, he nodded to hers. “Nothing to hide behind. No deceptions.”

“I see you didn’t add no sex to that list.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He pulled his shirt off and dropped it over the television. They certainly wouldn’t need it and since TVs were a great place to hide cameras, he wanted to make sure they really did have their privacy. He’d swept the room earlier, but it didn’t hurt to be cautious. “There will definitely be sex. I haven’t had near enough time with you—or positions.”

Pupil dilation said a lot about physiological response and both of hers grew fuller at

his declaration. He hadn't been wrong in that room or when her friend clocked him.

She cared. It meant something. He wasn't sure what yet, but it did, and he could work with the part of her willing to invest in him. If he could win her trust, then he could help her and maybe get her out of whatever situation had dropped her into the life she was leading.

When she made no move to strip, he eyed her and waited. Some situations called for pushing, others called for patience. Copper needed both. The level of control she exerted over herself impressed the hell out of him. He could try to bully her, but if she dug in her heels—no, she wouldn't go for it. Tonight required patience. He'd pushed outside the restaurant and made some headway until "Merc" knocked his ass out.

"I don't get you," she said finally, and tugged her shirt over her head. The t-shirt landed on the television next to his. Simple, gray-colored, and completely nondescript, but he liked the image of it next to his shirt. As she had in the classroom, she wore a simple black bra. Without an ounce of modesty, she unhooked it and slid free of the lingerie.

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“Good.” He preferred to be an enigma, especially if it provoked her into trying to solve him. Enjoying the view of her breasts, he smiled at the peaked points of her nipples. Yeah, she had her tells. The whole interaction had him hard as a stone, and all they were doing was stripping and talking.

What the fuck was he going to do when she let him touch her again?

Toeing off his shoes, he reached for his belt and undid it. She mirrored him, step for step until they were both nude. His cock jutted up, full and thick. His balls were tight while he admired the lean length of her.

“Thank God I didn’t imagine you,” he said aloud. She really was quite perfect. And, having been on the receiving end of her strikes and sweeps, as capable as her musculature promised.

She chuckled, and he jerked his gaze upward. Zeroing in on her face, he drank in her smile. “You’re crazy.”

“So you’ve said.” He made a twirling motion with his finger. “Let me see all of you.”

“You first.” There it was. The push back. He’d expected it. Spreading his arms wide, he complied with the request and trusted her to not clock him in the back of the skull.

Facing her again, he raised his eyebrows. With a shake of her head, she mirrored his pose and spread her arms out from her body, fingers splayed, and turned in a slow circle. The ripple of muscle as she moved beckoned him. So fluid and graceful—“It’s a butterfly.” A hint of blue and green graced one cheek of her ass, and he dropped to

a crouch to get a better look at it. She held still and glanced over her shoulder. The colors were stunning against the deep tan of her skin, almost jewel toned.

“Yeah.” She sounded almost sheepish, and he caught the rueful smile on her face. Open, honest emotion, and it punched him square in the gut.

“May I?” He held his palm toward it as though to touch, but hovered just over the skin. At her nod, he traced the line of the butterfly. It had the shape and the design of a monarch, but the coloring was so unusual. He’d never seen one in blues and greens. “It’s really very pretty.” Did it have some meaning to her? Was she the butterfly?

Or was she the caterpillar who longed to shed her existence to become a butterfly?

“I lost a bet.” The admission caught him off guard. Still stroking the wings, he admired the supple strength and beauty in the line of her back. The muscle tension eased as he traced a line up to her lower back and down again. Everything about this woman was lovely, even the mystery she presented to him. “It was a stupid bet to take, but I did and then I lost. So he picked out a butterfly for me, and I’ve had it on my ass ever since.”

He. A man picked out the butterfly. A man had claimed ownership, and his gut twisted. “First question,” he said, ignoring the tightness in his throat. He couldn’t keep his fucking hands off of her. “Are you with anyone?”

The muscles in her ass clenched, and he settled his hands on her hips as he stood. Closing the distance between them, he soaked up the feeling of her back against his chest. No manufactured perfumes harshened the air around her. He wanted to get drunk off her sweet, wild vanilla sugar scent.

“No.” The whisper carried a note of such finality, it made his heart hurt. “I’m not.” Anymore. She didn’t use the word, didn’t even attempt to, yet he heard it

anyway.

Trusting his instincts, he slid his arms around her and pulled her against him. Holding her, he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Can’t change the past.” The flip response couldn’t disguise the emotion clogging her words.

“No, you can’t. Doesn’t mean the past doesn’t hurt us or shape us.” Hell, he knew how much it could affect a person. His past ate away at his soul. All the good acts he could do wouldn’t give back the lives lost to his work. “So I’m sorry.”

“How do you do that?” Instead of pulling away, she sank back against him and let him hold her. The violent urge to cuddle her had him reaffirming his patience stance. Whatever the hell happened to her—where the fuck were the people who should be taking care of her? Family? Loved ones?

“Do what, sweetheart? You need to be more specific.”

“This,” she glided her touch along his arm, then covered his hands where they rested against her abdomen. “How the hell do you see me?”

“I don’t know.” He’d promised her truth. “All I know is I saw you two years ago, and I wanted to see you again. Maybe it was the smoking hot legs or the fuck me walking you were doing—or maybe it was that playful look you shot in my direction. I wanted to know you.” She hadn’t asked, but she still deserved to know. “I looked for you for a long time. When I saw you in Nigeria, it hit me all over again, but I couldn’t get close. If I hadn’t saved some security footage, I wouldn’t have been able to see you walk over and over again.”

Laughter shivered through her, and she turned her head. Following her focus, he met

her gaze in the mirror. He loved how she looked in his arms, the deep tan of her skin a contrast to his paleness. He really did need to get out in the sun more, but after years of tropical assignments, he found he liked the indoors. No insects. No sunburn. No threat of dehydration or starvation.

“You know, that sounds kind of stalkery.” But humor warmed the depths of her hazel eyes.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. I wanted a name to go with the face and the walk, but couldn’t find it. Figured I had to give up when I took the teaching post, and then you walked into my classroom.”

“We said we were keeping it personal.”

He slid a hand down to dip between her thighs. She was damp and soft. Her lips parted at the caress. “Trust me,” he told her. “We’re definitely keeping it personal. What happened in that classroom and in the one next door had nothing to do with business. Not to me.” Unless... “Was it professional for you, Copper?”

Not once did her gaze cut away from his, so he held fast and let his finger drift along her slit. The slow petting gesture offered both satisfaction and torture. He wanted days with her, not mere hours. He wanted to spend time discovering what she responded to, what she craved, and what would send her over the edge.

“I want to tell you yes, so bad.” The admission cost her, and he respected the blunt honesty. “Because it should have been.”

“It’s okay,” he told her, finding her clit with his forefinger and stroking the hard nub. Her knees gave, and he held her up, gazes locked together as he continued to caress. The muscles of her ass went taut against him, and her breathing grew shallower. Increasing the pressure, he squeezed her clit and her mouth opened wider. The

muscles along her throat contracted, and he could see the strain of holding back her cries as she began to pump her hips to meet the strokes of his fingers.



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“Gabriel.” Harsh and needy, she asked with a few syllables, and he turned her to face the mirror fully and settled on the bed with her in his lap. With her legs spread and straddling his knees, he had the perfect view of her pussy and the right angle to give her exactly what she asked for.

Sliding one hand up to her breast, he caught a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. A pinch of pressure as he increased the speed of his hand on her clit and she came, a low half-formed note bursting from her throat. Raw emotion spread across her face, and her smile devastated his senses. The sheer beauty in the silent orgasm stole his breath. Her cheeks flushed. The ruddy color spread down her chest and gave her an almost rosy hue beneath the deep tan. Her eyes gleamed. He could have eased off the pressure, but he increased the stroke of his fingers until her back arched. When she cried out this time, he heard her gasp.

Satisfaction flooded him, and his cock ached, but he ignored its demands. Copper’s eyes drifted to half-closed, and she shuddered, wide open and vulnerable in his arms. She’d given him the fucking sun and the stars in her reaction.

“Definitely personal,” she whispered, and he nuzzled a kiss to her temple, petting her down.

“I know,” he said. God, did he ever know.

### Chapter 7

Still trying to catch her breath, Copper sagged against Gabriel. His hand against her pussy was the most erotic thing she’d seen in a long time. The view hardly compared

to the heat he continued to stroke through her. Her inner muscles clenched at the emptiness, and she was very aware of his cock pressed against her ass. Instead of angling for entry though, he simply stroked and soothed her.

Covering his hand with hers, she concentrated on reclaiming some control. Gabriel peeled it away from her, layer by layer, until she wanted to give it to him. Fuck wanting, I did give it to him. Whether she could ever admit it aloud or not didn't matter. Actions spoke far louder than words. Twice now, she'd let her feelings for this man seduce her.

Feelings.

What. The. Fuck.

"Easy." He murmured the word and rubbed his cheek against hers gently. The bruises from his interrogation darkened the skin below one eye. Bruises weren't supposed to be sexy. "I'm not going to hurt you, remember?"

"I'm not afraid of you." She'd told some really big damn lies in the past, but nothing compared to that whopper. Gabriel Danvers scared the hell out of her.

"I didn't say you were." Her erstwhile white knight was also a gentleman for letting the big stinking pile she tried to shovel go. "I said easy. You're getting tense. You're safe here. No one is getting to you without going through me."

Believing him proved far simpler than she cared to admit. She didn't want him to be between her and danger, however. The people she was after didn't play games. Killing? Well, Red Wolf had killed plenty. They'd paid a steep price in blood. She didn't want his blood on her hands either.

"Nothing professional," she reminded him, shifting her thoughts away from the dark

and treacherous path.

“Trust me, my mind is not on work at the moment.” The teasing words accompanied his fingers dancing over her body. “Look at you. I love that look on your face.”

Raising her eyebrows, she glanced up from his hands to study herself in the mirror. She didn’t see anything special. She’d seen the same face for three decades now—the woman who could vanish in a crowd. The woman no one could pin down to an ethnicity. She’d listed three different ones during school, usually picking whichever one suited her mood, and no one ever questioned her choices. Her lips were moist, and her eyelashes dipped with her eyelids half down.

The stubble on his cheek left hers a little flushed where he’d rubbed against her. She enjoyed the rasping sensation of it, the raw reality. The intensity in his gaze, however, captivated her. “What do you see?” Yes, she’d just wasted a question, but she didn’t give a damn.

“I see you.” He smiled, and her bruised heart squeezed in her chest. “I see intelligence in those hazel eyes. A crafty, clever, and vividly brilliant intelligence. There’s a softness in those lips, one that doesn’t come out and is well hidden, but when you smile...like that.” He grinned as her mouth seemed to move in reaction to his words. “It takes my breath away. I want to do everything I can to bring that smile out. Then there’s your chin. It’s a very stubborn chin.”

Laughter bubbled out of her before she could swallow it away. “How the hell can a chin be stubborn?”

“You lift it—see, there you go. You raise it when you’re irritated or considering a move. It’s not quite a tell, but you don’t like to be challenged. So, when you think I’m going to, you raise your chin. It’s telling me you’re ready, that you can handle whatever bullshit life throws at you, because you’re above it.”

Shock piled atop shock. Why wasn't he furious with her? So what did you get out of him? Merc's words drifted through her. Did it ever occur to you he played you?

"Where did you go?" Gabriel frowned, and his hands drifted to rest on her thighs. The need to turn around and fill herself up on his cock warred with the need to answer his question. She'd come here to get information. Instead, they were playing at sex again. How the hell did he keep turning her inside out?

No, why am I letting him do it? She wasn't an idiot. She wanted to participate, or she wouldn't still be in the room. The text she'd sent Cobalt had been straightforward. She was going dark to work Gabriel over, she'd check in with him in the morning. The plan made sense—then.

"Copper."

"Don't do that." She eased forward on his lap, and at her resistance, he let her go. Rising, she wanted distance between them.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't talk to me like you know me." She pivoted to face him. "You don't know me."

"I know I don't." The easy agreement deflated her argument. "I don't know you, Copper. I want to know you. Do you think it was easy to accept you were working with people who knocked me out? Kidnapped me? Interrogated me? Worse, that you were the one who injected me?"

Every indictment was true, so... "Why do you still want to know me?"

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“Because,” he said, rising to close the distance between them. She didn’t retreat from his approach or resist when he settled his hands on her shoulders. “You fascinate me.”

“Fascination with fire is great until you get burned.” Nothing about their situation was sane or safe. “We said nothing professional.”

“I’m still in the personal zone. You wanted to know why I was talking to you like I know you. Hell, why I tried to take you out for coffee and dinner. Dating you comes with obstacles. I’m good with obstacles. Sooner or later, you’re going to say yes to me, and we can try this the normal way.”

Normal? What the hell was normal?

“And it’s my turn for a question, because by my reckoning, you’ve asked several.”

Irritation crawled through her because he was right. God, the man knocked her off her game. It was disheartening...Maybe I am compromised.Only the bitter rejection of the accusation she’d experienced before didn’t choke her this time. “You’re due. You keep putting up with me.”

When he glanced at the bed then at her, she nodded. He guided her over to the bed and yanked the covers back. The sheets were cool against her skin, but she needed the bracing. The orgasm had done wonders to loosen her up, but she didn’t want to relax. It would be too easy to say to hell with everything and just crawl atop him to let their bodies communicate.

Rolling onto his side, he faced her, head propped on his hand. “Why did you come to my room?”

Because you speak Japanese. Quelling the flip answer, she considered the question. Because I want to know if you’re someone I can trust. Pathetic. Because I can’t get you out of my head. More pathetic. Because you seem when no one else does. None of those answers slipped past her lips. Telling him she refused to answer the question because it bordered on the professional would tip her hand—and it wouldn’t be entirely true.

Brendan Coyle was dead. Her efforts should involve investigating his murder. But I’m not a cop. She’d already reported it to the others, and they’d follow up the investigation. With Coyle dead and Barrow out of the running, Gabriel was the last suspect. By all rights, she should bag him and take him back to Chrome.

Those were her orders.

“What I wouldn’t give to be in that head of yours,” Gabriel murmured. She still hadn’t answered him, and the reality of their situation settled like a dead weight in her stomach. She’d promised him tonight, but in the morning, she had to proceed with the extraction.

“I don’t know why I came. The simplest answer is I wanted to see you again, but it’s not that simple.”

“Fair enough.” He cupped her cheek. “Was that really so very hard to say?”

“Yes, it was. That’s three questions.”

He laughed, then swooped in to kiss her. Instead of being a hot, soul searing exploration of her mouth, it was a fast, scorching brush punctuated by humor.

“You’re a tough nut, Copper. Give me a few more? The rules still apply.”

Wrinkling her nose, she slid her hand to his nape and stroked the ends of his hair. The faint discoloration on his shoulder—she’d given him that mark when she slammed her head into him in the parking lot. She’d never been one to mark her territory, but recognizing his toughness gave her a certain erotic satisfaction. “Are you playing me, Gabriel?”

“Personally or professionally?”

“Just answer. Either. Both.”

“We go professional this gets difficult for both of us.” The warning alone should have been enough to deter her.

“I know.” The question plagued her. She couldn’t tell. If she was truly compromised, she’d scratch herself from the assignment and tell Merc to decide. Her gut hated the idea. She trusted Merc with her life, but she didn’t think he’d have the same kind of care for Gabriel’s. “I have to know. Is this a game? A con? Are you playing me?”

“If I said no, it would be a little lie.” The blow cut off her oxygen. “I don’t want to play you. I don’t want to play anyone. I got out of the game for a damn good reason...”

“But?”

“But you walked into my classroom.”

Copper frowned. “I brought it to your door.”

“You did. I’m okay with it to a point, even if I have no fucking clue what you have

going on.” They were both being so damned careful. Tension corded his shoulders and biceps. What he lacked for in mass, he more than made up for in his lean cut. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Probably as much as you aren’t telling me.” The corner of his mouth curved. “Hazard of the game.” With two fingers he traced the line of her collarbone to the cluster of scars above her breast. Hostile fire when they secured trouble spots in Kandahar. Following their path with her gaze, she waited for the inevitable question.

He didn’t ask.

From there he went to the long, pink line along the side of her breast. Knife fight in Croatia. Across her abdomen then to her hip, where pebbling left the skin rough and marked—when he arrived at those he frowned. “Gravel?”



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“Yes.” No harm in answering the question. Not when she’d been thrown clear from an overturning vehicle and skidded along the hard gravel road. The bloodied hip had been the least of her worries that day.

“On your back.” Distracted or not, an order was an order.

She raised her brows, and he grinned. Unrepentant charm warmed his smile.

“Please.”

Better. Rolling onto her back, she lay still as he continued to explore. A graze wound from a mission they were never on that never existed. Melted skin in two places from burns. Most faded into her skin tone, hard to see unless someone spent a lot of time looking. She’d been fortunate.

The worst of her injuries had always been on the inside.

When he went down her leg, she flattened her right foot to the sheets. His level of interest meant he might want to go for her feet. If he did, she’d distract him. The tattoo on the bottom of her foot represented her recommitment to the team. The process of having it inked there hurt like a bitch, but she chose pain over simplicity.

They were her team, and while she couldn’t get away with plastering a wall-size tattoo on her back and still blend in, she could show them they were always with her. Where she walked, the team went—so why am I staying here?

At her thigh, he stopped and his gaze burned her with the intensity of his stare.

“What?”

He rubbed his thumb over the two-inch long hilt mark buried into her skin. It fell just inside her thigh, the closest the rebel soldier in Tanzania had come to trying to rape her. Pride at the depth of the wound she'd taken filled her. He'd missed her femoral artery—barely. Stupid fucker thought the knife in her leg would keep her down.

“Five years ago in Tanzania, a mission I was on went sideways.”

“Gabriel, we're not talking professionally...”

“Be quiet.” The order accompanied by the light squeeze of his hand irked her, but she firmed her lips. “It's why I left field work. A group of insurgents from Rwanda and Burundi came over the border in a prolonged battle. They swept through a group of missionaries.”

Ice formed at the base of her spine, and she withdrew. He really didn't have to give her any other details. She'd been on the team sent to clean up the mess. Chrome, Merc, Tungsten, her—they'd airdropped in with three days of gear and hiked to the position. Half the missionaries were being held by Rwandan forces and the other half in Burundi. The fighters thought it was fun to use the men and women as human shields—when they weren't raping the women. Ugly situation, and no way to cleanly extract the prisoners.

They'd gone in quiet, eliminating the opposition one at a time, clearing the way. Once they had a window in their perimeter, they were going to pull the civilians out. The problem with civilians was the panic they experienced when mortar and gunfire exploded around them. Copper had been leading them out when one of the women began screaming, alerting a half dozen guards to their position.

She'd taken the first three with clean shots, but ended up in a scuffle with the last

three. Broken legs are hard to fight on, and the battle had been intense. Thankfully, some of the men in the group of captives she'd been leading proved more than capable to the task...

"I wanted to kill that son of a bitch," he said, the quiet ferocity in his voice layered with violence. "I saw the blade go into the Marine and watched her go down. I hadn't even realized you were a woman until that precise moment. Then you—" He'd been the CIA's man on the ground, the man who'd gotten word out about the missionaries and aid workers being taken. His intel had been key to the success of their mission. She'd never known his name, but they'd all agreed in the debrief. Without his information, they'd have lost a lot more people on the off-book mission. The one that never happened.

She'd never been there. "Wrapped my legs around his neck and snapped it like a twig." The blade hurt more, and she'd had to leave it in. Brad had swept her up, one arm around her to keep her on her feet as they hobbled out.

"I'll be damned." He pressed a kiss to the scar, the brush of his lips so tender they seemed to go deeper to press gently on her soul. Surging up, he rested in the cradle of her legs, breast to chest and blanketed her in a comfort she rarely ever experienced. "I wanted to say thank you, but you were all gone. No record of the mission. Black ops." Understanding kindled in his eyes. "You're a Marine."

Was. Would always be, even if the government stripped it all away, shuffling them aside like debris to be swept beneath a rug. Rubbing her hand along his chest to his shoulder, she met his gaze. "I won't answer that."

"I'm not asking. I get it." His expression softened. "Can you tell me this much—are you in trouble?"

Always. "No." Though the threat he presented was far different from any she'd

engaged before. Falling in love with the enemy was not in her plans—Falling in love? Gabriel worked his way into her heart, stealing away a piece of it, and she wasn't entirely sure how to get it back.

“You’re lying,” he said with a sigh, then rested his forehead against hers. “I know, you said wouldn’t answer it.” If he planned to finish all conversations with the answers he already knew, they might survive this.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” she told him, gliding her hands up his back. Despite their conversation, his erection hadn’t diminished one iota. The heavy weight of his cock rested against her sex as though seeking entrance, and she was more than willing to play. “We only have a few hours left.”

His nostrils flared, and his eyes darkened. “You’re going to be gone in the morning, aren’t you?”

“I agreed to tonight.” The spoken reminder served as much a reminder for her as it was for him. Their shared experiences aside, he had the position, the knowledge, and the intelligence to pull off the double cross for Red Wolf. “I can’t promise you anything more.” Couldn’t even promise to save him from the team.

He might not deserve to be saved. Her team had not deserved to die. They went into firefights all the time. She knew the score. They’d known the score, but they’d trusted their orders. Trusted their intelligence.

They’d been burned.

When he fisted her hair and tugged lightly, she lifted her chin and bared her throat. The vulnerability of the position wasn’t lost on her. He could slit her throat. Smother her. Pin her down and snap her neck.

“If you plan on leaving me,” he said, the fierce note in his voice sparking a fresh wave of languorous heat. It burned in her belly, and she tightened her thighs against his hips. “I want you to remember every moment, because I will find you. I refuse to let you go without a fight.”

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“I don’t belong to you.” She whispered the words. Despite the certainty in her tone, her confidence wavered. She’d only ever belonged to one man. Did she still belong to him? He’d died. Died and left her alone. Old pain, aching and familiar, dampened her lust, and she shook her head. “I don’t, Gabriel. I won’t.”

“You can run,” he told her. “But I’ll be right behind you. It took me two years to find you, five to realize who you really were. I’ve seen you now, Copper. You won’t shake me so easily.”

Threats should never turn her on, but she met his fierce kiss with a demand of her own. No more words. She was done with talking. He wanted her to say something, to offer her surrender, to give him everything, but it wasn’t hers to give. When the explosion ripped Brad out of her life, it had detonated an emotional IED and she’d never found all the pieces.

What few she’d been able to cobble together belonged to the team. Tomorrow, she might have to kill Gabriel. It would shred what little part of her remained. That was tomorrow. If tonight was all they really had, then she’d take it. Live today. Die tomorrow.

Hadn’t that always been her motto?

## Chapter 8

When the next morning came, she forced herself out of his bed. The weight of his gaze followed her while she dressed, put her gun back together and turned on her phone. Thankfully, Gabriel made no issue of her leaving.

He kept his silence until she was at the door. “This isn’t goodbye.” The absolute certainty in his statement gave her pause. Glancing back, she found him sitting on the edge of the bed, his blue-eyed gaze intent where it rested on her. “I will find you.”

“I heard you last night.” Her body hummed at the memory.

“You don’t want to believe me.”

Quite the opposite, but she refused to give him the insight. It had taken every ounce of her will to leave his bed. Wearing Copper’s armor, she made the decision. Choosing between him and her team wasn’t the difficulty. Accepting she couldn’t have both? That hurt.

“Thank you for last night, Gabriel.” Then, because she couldn’t leave well enough alone, “You should go back to your school. Go back to teaching.”

“I’ll see you later,” was his only response.

Shaking her head, she let herself out and followed the corridor to the elevator. Texting Cobalt that she was on the move, she waited for his acknowledgement, then texted Plat.

Do you have him in your sights?

He didn’t ask her whom she meant. He texted back a simple, Yes.

At the elevator, she hit the up button. Is he following me?

One beat.

Two beats.

No.

Disappointment curled through her. Was he giving her lead time, or had he been lying? The ride to the room she split with Cobalt gave her time to get her recalcitrant emotions under control. She was in work mode by the time she made it to their room. Cobalt opened the door without her using her key.

His gaze went past her to scan the hallway. “All clear?”

“Plat has him.” She dropped her bag on a chair and removed her gun to sit it on the table. “I need to shower, then I’ll change. Fill me in on the schedule.”

Cobalt leaned against the bathroom door while she turned on the water. When he said nothing, she glanced at him and raised her brows. “Did you find out anything about the men you recognized?”

“Arms dealers from France. Ant’s identified a lot of the guests. More arms dealers, drug smugglers, and human traffickers in one place than we’ve ever seen.” Grim news.

“What about Red Wolf?” She made short work of her clothes and left them in a pile before stepping under the water. The icy chill was replaced by swiftly warming hotel shower water. Not enough bracing to cool her already overheated flesh.

“Your guy is the only lead we have left.” He made it sound like an apology. While she appreciated the sympathy, she didn’t want it. “Coyle was a hit. A very professional one. The room was wiped down. Even the prostitute he was with didn’t hear anything. She’s not lying. I got a chance to watch the interrogation tapes.”

Copper didn’t have to ask how. They needed the information, so they’d found a way. “No leads on who?”



“No, but I have a theory.” Cobalt folded his arms. “I think he was expendable, and Red Wolf eliminated him.”

The hot water did nothing for the chill in her veins. Gabriel had been in the building. Just because she ran into him downstairs didn't mean he hadn't had time to eliminate Coyle before finding her in the lobby. It would also explain why he'd followed her and continued to play the game.

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She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself, then cut a look at Cobalt. “What does Chrome want us to do?”

Prepared for the order to take Gabriel down, she reached for a brush. Wet hair would braid faster.

“Something else is going on with all those people in this building at the same time. Chrome wants to know what it is. So, you’re still on point...”

She met Cobalt’s cautious gaze via the mirror. “But?”

“You’re off Danvers.”

Corporals didn’t question the orders of a Staff Sergeant. Chrome said she was off, so she was off. Ignoring the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, she slammed the lid on the box of her emotions and nodded. “Good plan. Once I get changed, I’ll go over the info you’ve already gathered. We can split them up and see what we can see.”

A hint of relief crossed his eyes, but he nodded. “Sounds good. Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“I’ll get us food. We’ll need it.”

After he left her to use the phone, she braced her hands on the counter and bowed her head. Done. She was off Danvers. He wasn’t her problem or her decision anymore. Let

the fucking chips fall where they may.

They spent the first day of the conference circling the sharks. Armed with Ant's info, they eliminated a third of the guests as attending for their stated reason of international commerce. Their targets, however, held a lot of side meetings. Clever, really, negotiating illegal trade, terrorist deals, and arms sales under the auspices of international commerce. They qualified, didn't they?

Cobalt's French arms dealer liked poker, and he liked Copper's boobs. They used that to their advantage. Gabriel remained in residence, however, like a hunter on the edge of her periphery. He always seemed to be there. Plat had him, or Merc, sometimes both. She didn't know and refused to focus on that aspect.

During one game, the French arms dealer invited her and Cobalt to his room for a little play. Gabriel had been close enough to overhear, and the dark look he'd sent her way warned of danger. Defiance surged through her. She had a fucking job to do, and he needed to deal. Rising from Cobalt's lap, she'd slipped over to sit on the Frenchman's.

It took no time at all to copy his phone. Limited data availability within the conference areas meant she'd have to head out to get it uploaded, but they made a point of gathering all the data they could. Elsewhere in the building, Merc would get into their rooms, search their things, and get a feel for who was traveling with who. Chrome had a bad feeling about the situation.

It was enough for them.

Copper didn't care for some of the negotiations she caught on the periphery. Worse, Gabriel moved in and around the crowd like he belonged. When she engaged a Saudi businessman in conversation, Gabriel joined. Excusing herself to tackle a Sicilian mafia boss, he again crowded her space. Language skills didn't defeat him, either. So

far, she'd learned he spoke Japanese, Italian, French, Greek, and Farsi.

Apparently the only language he didn't speak was fuck off.

"I need to talk to you," he said after she breezed from one meeting hall to the next. In and around all the 'conference' panels, meetings were taking place. She'd already pinpointed two arms sales and at least one white slavery trading meeting set for after the conference. The information would go directly to Chrome.

"I do not speak English," she told him in Japanese.

"We did this already," he reminded her, his Japanese flawless. The man needed to have something wrong with him. Perhaps his bulldog persistence was his flaw.

Cobalt stood as she angled her path to intercept him. He cut his gaze toward the hallway and showed her three fingers. Backup was on its way. Nodding her understanding, she left the conference area and headed for a hallway leading to catering—apparently.

"You can keep running. I told you, I'm only going to continue following." At the first curve, she turned the corner. Merc slammed his shoulder into Gabriel's chest and sent him back two feet. Hesitating a half step, she glanced back in time to see Gabriel rebound as his furious gaze collided with Merc's. Plat stepped into the hallway behind him.

Her heart ached.

Orders were orders—but, dammit.

"Don't hurt him, Merc. If you can help it." Whether her oldest friend heard or not, she had no idea. Blowing out a breath, she continued on her way. They needed to

close the books on this mission, bring it home, and bury it.

Let's just hope I'm not burying Gabriel, too.

Dammit, she shouldn't be this invested. Shutting that shit down, because it was the only way to do her job, she worked on divorcing those feelings. Maybe she'd go somewhere and become a nun for a while after the case. Better, a grade school teacher. How hard could the life of an elementary school teacher be?

Focused on all the people she could become, she ignored the aching woman walking away from a man she could quite possibly love.

Gabriel exhaled around the bruise on his chest. The man hit like a professional linebacker. Behind the tank blocking his path, Copper missed a single step, then kept walking. She'd led him right out of the conference and into a faceoff with—he studied the man in front of him. Scars coated the left side of his face, leaving it twisted and emotionless. The unsettling effect only enhanced the distinctly unfriendly look on the right side of his face.

Copper's accomplice in Nigeria. This is the man she's with? She'd said she wasn't with anyone, but the menace rolling off this guy had nothing to do with business. The feeling of being watched and movement behind him increased. So his interrogators were both here.

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Flexing his hands, he considered his options. They'd chosen the narrowest part of the hallway, away from the access doors. The noise level from the conference section was greatly diminished and chances were sound wouldn't carry. He had a gun, but once he pulled it, he'd have to be efficient and leave without getting caught on the five hundred or so cameras everywhere else in the building.

"Easy or hard, Danvers?" Cold challenge in the gravelly voice. Merc.

"Considering you already sucker punched me once in the back of the head, we'll go with hard." Anger stiffened his stance. Despite the scars and hostility, the man moved with purpose. He would not go down easily. Gabriel could only imagine the other man behind him was equally well trained. "You could go easier on yourself," he offered. "Walk away, leave Copper to me, and don't bother her again."

No emotion flashed in the cool dead eyes staring at him. The scant seconds let Gabriel spot the fire extinguisher, blunt force and blinding opportunity all rolled into one. Copper proved to him she was dangerous, and while he'd been expecting the fight with her, he'd also trusted she didn't want to hurt him.

Merc? This guy would inflict damage.

"Time's up." Despite his size, Merc moved fast. The fist coming at his head couldn't be avoided, so Gabriel got his arm raised to block the blow. Pain burst in his forearm, then spread out like numbness. A hit slammed into him from behind. He split his knuckles driving his fist into Merc's scarred face and barely avoided another punch to the side of his head.

They were going for speed and takedown. His specialty was avoidance and swift strikes. Merc's was apparently power and decimation. Two arms locked around his shoulders, and he jammed his forearm up to break the chokehold. Using the man's grip for leverage, he aimed a kick at Merc's head. A door slammed in the hallway, and they halted.

Footsteps shuffled toward them and not one of them breathed. The steps moved away. Before they could resume, a cell phone rang and the arms around him tightened with threat. "Stay."

Merc's angry slash of an expression grew more dour as he took one step back and pulled out his phone. "What?"

A camera with a red light blinked at Gabriel, and he stared at it.

"No, he chose the hard way." A pause, then Merc held the phone toward him. "Let him go. Chrome wants to speak to him."

Chrome? Copper? What was with the fascination with metal? Wiping the blood from his lip, Gabriel stepped away from his captor and eyed the six-foot plus blond with eyes as cold as Merc's. Copper really needed new friends.

"This is Gabriel Danvers," he said into the phone. "Who the fuck is this?"

"This is the man who can order them to put a bullet in your head, Mr. Danvers." Nothing kind lived in the hard tone on the other end of the phone. He didn't have to check, but when he did, it didn't surprise Gabriel to find two weapons pointed at him. They had the advantage now.

Likely had it all along.

“I’m listening,” he told the mysterious Chrome.

“Then listen carefully. If you lie to me, it will be the last lie you tell.” He didn’t wait for Gabriel to acknowledge his threat. “Why are you in Las Vegas?”

“I’d planned to attend this conference regardless.” He’d even mentioned it to his class. “The other reason I’m here is classified and likely above your pay grade.”

“Then read me in.”

Impossible. He didn’t know the man, his credentials, or why he should trust him. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to shoot me,” he said. “I’m not in the habit of sharing classified data with strangers, especially not strangers running black ops missions within the U.S.”

“Mr. Danvers, according to your file, you walked away from the company because you disagreed with their tactics and dissemination of intel.” No way he had his file. “You walked away, but now you’re involved again. Read me in, or we’re taking you out.”

“If you plan to shoot me regardless, why the game?”

Silence met the question. “Because Copper doesn’t want you dead. She thinks you can be an asset. Prove her right.”

If she really thought that, why wasn’t she here? Either they were handing him a line of bullshit, or his sexy little Marine was still following orders, whether she was active duty or not. Every Jarhead he’d ever met was hardcore, in or out of the uniform.

“An old case file of mine became active. I wanted to check it out. Nothing more. Nothing less.”



“So you’re not there for her or to set her up?” The guarded question carried a great deal of weight. Did they really care? Or did they want to use her as leverage?

The scarred man stared at him with deadly intensity. If looks could kill, Gabriel expected he would be six feet under. “She’s none of your fucking business.” He told the asshole on the phone.

“Interesting. Give the phone back to Merc.”

He held the phone out and waited. Merc accepted the device. The other man’s gun never wavered. The icy cone of quiet around his second, unnamed assailant proved more unnerving than scar face’s taciturn stare.

“Got it,” Merc said, then hung the phone up. “Lucky day for you, Mr. Danvers. Plat is going to escort you from this building. He’s going to put you in a car and take you somewhere to sit this out. Cooperate, and you’ll get there in one piece.”

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“And if I don’t cooperate?” No way in hell was he leaving Copper behind. The damn conference was packed with terrorists, gun runners, and white slavers—one of whom practically salivated over her. “I’m not leaving her alone in there.”

“She’s not alone,” Merc told him, then slammed him into the wall. “You get the right to exert authority when she gives it. Until then, you have a little more shut the fuck up and cooperate. She wanted you alive, but you can live with a few broken bones.”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on in there?” He could fight. They’d already said they didn’t want to kill him, though they didn’t promise they wouldn’t. If it were just him and Merc, he’d take that risk. But cool and steady continued to keep the gun pointed at him with an almost bored air.

“I know you following her is going to fuck things up for her.” They didn’t try to restrain him, but they weren’t letting him go either. “Cooperate. If you care as much as you’re pretending, do this for her.”

Fine, he would cooperate for as long as necessary to get free of them. With exaggerated care, he motioned to Merc to lead the way. Sooner or later, they’d have to hide the guns unless they—Merc detoured straight to a service elevator. Fuck.

Gabriel concentrated on measuring his opportunities. Folding his arms, he tapped his foot while they waited for the elevator to open. “You know, if you were less ugly and he spoke more, you two could be twins.”

The one half of Merc’s face which still worked quirked up. “Keep talking, laughing boy.”

Boy? Hardly. “So while you two are ‘escorting’ me from the building, who has her back?”

“To quote you,” icy, tall, and silent commented. “None of your fucking business.” The doors slid open, and they shoved him inside.

So they didn’t bait well, but they were protective. Good to know. Leaning against the wall, he studied them. The bio-hazard tattoo on the back of Merc’s skull was pretty damn distinctive.

“To make it perfectly clear,” he said. “The first opportunity I have, I will find her again. You can bring on the full Marine court press, but I’m not backing off.”

Neither man responded.

“If anything happens to her because of this bullshit. I’ll kill you both.”

Still no response.

Calm under fire and pressure—or they didn’t really count him as a threat. He almost preferred the latter. Few people looked over their shoulder for someone they could bully. Though their guns were hidden, Gabriel didn’t doubt they weren’t pointed right at him. They traveled in silence through the lobby and out the main doors. Vegas was always crowded, even in summer.

America’s sin-filled playground. Bypassing the valet, Merc led them toward the parking garage. His phone rang fifteen steps into the structure, and both men looked at him.

“I’m going for the phone.” When neither stopped him, he pulled it out and checked the number. He didn’t recognize it. Since he was on a burner, he answered it anyway.

“Gabriel Michael Danvers, age thirty-five. Recruited out of college to work for the CIA. Gifted with languages, infiltration, and diplomacy, you spent six years working in the field and another eight as an analyst. You left the Agency after faulty intel resulted in the miss of a terrorist leader in Uzbekistan, but the strike still killed five Marines and three civilian families.” Chrome recited classified materials as though he were reading them. “Four years ago, you issued a warning on Red Wolf, began chasing leads, but every time you got close, the lead went up in smoke.”

Saying nothing, Gabriel continued to follow the two men to the van. Whoever the fuck Chrome was, he was connected.

“Your section chief wanted you to let it go, yet you kept a file going—including one on a mysterious woman seen at two separate events you believed related to Red Wolf.”

His heart slammed against his ribs. Really. Fucking. Connected.

“You were ordered to let it go, but you continued off books, and when you were pushed out of the Agency, you were investigating an op in Russia that resulted in nearly a dozen men dying.”

“Guess you can read yourself in.”

“You’re not there on any assignment from the company, Mr. Danvers. So why are you there?”

Because people died due to faulty intel, and he still didn’t know who set the whole fucking thing up. At a dark blue van, the men stopped, and the first one opened the sliding door. “Men died because I got something wrong, because intel crossed my desk and showed vetted and proved. Because sources we trusted screwed us. I can tell you the fuck up came from a hundred different directions, but those don’t matter. I’m

here because I fix what I break.”

“Good to—” His next words were lost in a boom of noise which split the air around them. The sound reverberated through the garage, and he pivoted, facing the casino he’d just left as the men next to him started forward. The wave hit after the sound, and he went from being on his feet to flying backward.

Glass shattered on the surrounding cars and alarms screamed to life. Smoke bellowed from the building, then another boom shook the structure.

Copper!

## Chapter 9

Cobalt waited for her at the entrance to the private bar they’d set up for the conference. Dressed in his three-thousand-dollar suit, dark hair falling rakishly over one eye, she had to admit he looked damn good. His expression was open, friendly, and he wore an easy smile. He extended a hand to her as she sauntered up. When her palm glided over his, he drew her close and dipped his head as though planning a kiss. “All good?”

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“They have him.” She hated the need for the action, hated more leaving him behind to be shut out. “Plat will get him locked down. Merc’s still got our backs.” That was the plan, anyway. After the evidence Merc turned up in the rooms, they wanted to follow all the leads. The balls on the people using the conference for their own blow-the-world-to-shit bazaar made her physically ill.

“Good.” He squeezed her hand. “We need to go meet with Mr. In Love with Your Tits over there. I think he’s planning a threesome, or maybe he just wants you to suck his cock.”

“Probably. Too bad for him, I bite.” She clicked her teeth together. Cobalt winced, then winked.

“I’m going to make him work for it,” he assured her. “You up for being sold?”

“Why not? I’ve got no other plans for tonight.” No Gabriel to slink off and see. No Gabriel to feel pounding into her while he demanded she give him every ounce of her desire. Her nipples tightened at the thought of him. A chill settled at the base of her spine, cold fingers walking across her nerves.

The number of terrorists, dealers, pushers, and pedophiles in the room was astounding. Members of Russian Bratvas, Columbian cartels, domestic mafia, and more—the whole thing defied all conventions. So, why here? Why was Coyle dead?

“Cobalt?” She dropped the act, the pieces of the puzzle jangling around in her brain.

“Yeah?” The flip tone drained from his voice. He glanced around them, and she knew

he scanned the room.

“We’re missing something.” She shifted her position, leaning into him so she could study the targets. Nearly every single one they’d identified were present in the bar.

All of them.

Every. One.

“Ideas?” Maybe she and Cobalt hadn’t been assigned to the same team, but they had experience working in dangerous situations. Always trust the man at your back. If you can’t trust him, he shouldn’t be there. Glancing from slimy criminal to bastard terrorist to puss-sucking ooze of a human being, she frowned. What were they missing?

Conference on International Commerce.

Foreigners.

Domestics.

“Where’s Red Wolf?” The moment she asked the question, she stiffened. A knife in the dark was as effective as a bullet, especially if it wasn’t clear who held the blade. “The only link to them we had—the only two—were Coyle and Danvers.”

“You think Danvers is clean.” Not a question.

She shrugged, then scanned the room again. What was out of place? Something about the whole set up was off. If Coyle was Red Wolf’s tool, and they dispensed with him before a meeting like this, the question remained, why? “My gut says he’s not dirty. He may not be innocent, but he isn’t dirty.” Her gut or her vagina? One was not as

good a judge of character as the other, but she wanted to believe in Gabriel.

It had been a long time since she'd wanted to believe in anything.

"Huh." Cobalt grunted and shifted to stand immediately behind her. Wrapping his arms around her midsection, he pressed his lips to her ear. "These people do have one thing in common where Red Wolf is concerned."

"They're all scum?" This close, she barely had to move her mouth to whisper.

"They're competitors in all the same—" The rest of his sentence was lost in a dazzling brightness flooding her vision. Blinded, she turned her face away. One moment, she faced the room, and in the next, a wave of heat slammed into her and she flew backwards.

Her head slammed into Cobalt's chest. Roaring filled her ears, and she tasted blood. Then a harsh sucking sound evacuated the silence, and screams ripped through the air. Dust ballooned and sparks exploded from damaged light fixtures. A woman stumbled from the direction of the conference room, blood trailing from where her right arm used to be.

Copper tried to sit up. Adrenaline surged through her veins. She had to sit up, they needed to move—to get the civilians out of the way. Twisting slowly, she tapped Cobalt and then stopped. He lay behind her. He'd cushioned her landing, and his chest had been what she hit her head against.

Blood trickled from his nose, and his head turned at the wrong angle. Coughing, she tasted a fresh wave of blood and forced herself over. She touched her fingers to his neck. "Breathe," she tried to say the word. "Be breathing."

Brilliance fried her retinas again, and the force of a second explosion slammed into



her back. She threw herself down atop him, covering his head when the ceiling gave, and then the floor crumbled and hell swallowed them both.

Gabriel's heart was in his throat. The force of the blast had sent them crashing into the van. Glass flying at high velocity had sliced his shirt and face. Blood filled his mouth, and his head screamed. He touched two fingers to his forehead, and they came away bloody. Car alarms klaxoned all around him, and he fought his way to his feet. A hand gripped his arm and yanked him upward.

Exchanging a look with Merc, he felt a sudden kinship for the wickedly scarred man. "She's in there," he said. "I'm going back."

"Yes." No denial. No rejection. The other man made it to his feet.

"Go," he yelled. "Calling backup."

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No one had to tell him twice. Gabriel ran, and Merc was right next to him. The street looked like a warzone. Wounded struggled to their feet, and the dead lay in pools of their own blood. The lucky ones. More body parts were strewn around, and the front face of the hotel was a gaping, debris-strewn hole. Papers, cash, coins, and detritus floated down amidst the ash and crumbling stonework. Metal girders were twisted, melted in some places.

Copper had been on the second floor, at the epicenter of the destruction. Agony ripped through his chest and squeezed off his oxygen. Refusing the evidence in front of his eyes, he kept running. The closer they drew, the more hell rained down. A fire burst up like Satan's breath, igniting a gas line and shooting skyward. Merc dodged the twisted metal, and they circled to where the lobby had been. Sirens howled in the distance, and survivors were stumbling out, leaning on each other when possible.

Both men looked up to where the ceiling had been and up... "Three, maybe four floors." Terror pitted his gut.

"She's not dead," Merc said, then stared at the pile of debris. Large chunks of ceiling and stone were stacked atop each other. Overhead, a vicious crack resounded and fresh screams echoed as a huge slab of cement slid down to crash into the secondary hole.

Bellows of dust exploded upward.

Tugging a utility knife from his pocket, Gabriel sliced off the sleeve of his shirt. Ignoring the blood, he wrapped it around the lower half of his face. It helped cut down the dust inhalation. Next to him, Merc did the same thing. They shared a look,

and as one, they headed into hell.

First responders were pouring in and ordered them out, but neither he nor Merc listened. They attacked the stacked debris and started pulling away what they could. Ten minutes in, the blond joined them.

“I have a signal,” he said. He motioned them from the stack and pointed toward the rear. Following him, they climbed over the debris and headed deeper into the burning casino. Fires still cropped up, and the media was everywhere. Cops, firemen, and first aid workers, along with dazed looking hotel staff, continued the evacuation. Bomb Squad and SWAT passed them, but they didn’t stop. Where the blond told them to dig, they dug.

“You sure, Plat?” Merc asked, even as he worked to loosen the debris.

“Signal’s right below us. Their GPS chips are still active.” Those were the last words they spoke. Gabriel concentrated on lifting cement blocks. Some had shattered into pieces, others were slabs.

A ton of building had come down on them. The sharp edges sliced into his fingers. He wrapped cloth around his palms and kept going. A crew of construction workers appeared, and they brought equipment. Plat and Merc wasted no time co-opting the men into helping them.

Minutes bled into hours and day segued into night. Huge power lamps were brought in and rescue efforts increased as aid poured in. Men appeared that Merc recognized, and they began to tunnel beside the debris, going at an angle from where he worked.

One of them was called Chrome. Beyond a nod, they didn’t say much else. Everyone focused on getting to the survivors.

There had to be survivors. A shout went up from another crew and a woman was pulled from beneath the mass. They all froze, and everyone watched—the woman was blonde and wore a hotel uniform.

Not Copper.

The digging resumed.

Exhaustion wore at him, but he ignored it. Ignored everything. A hard hand on his shoulder jerked him up and water was pressed into his bloody grasp. He stared at the man offering it, then nodded and drank. Another hour trickled away, and more bodies were located in the debris. Dogs were brought in. No one bothered them, him and his silent band of men working tirelessly to dislodge the rubble.

“Here!” Plat shouted. The silent, ruthless energy surged as they abandoned their stacks to converge on his position. Using a wedge and braces to keep the ceiling above them in place, they opened the debris to reveal a pocket below. Shifting the lights, they went silent as they searched the pocket. A phone chirped below amidst the rubble.

The dust moved, and they zeroed in on a hand moving in the debris. Merc dropped into the hole, and Gabriel pushed off right behind him. They landed away from the hand and then began to clear the smaller rubble.

Black hair.

Blood.

“Copper,” Merc said, his low, gravelly voice brutal. “You better fucking answer me.”

Gabriel was on his hands and knees, wiping away more pebbles, and he tugged the

black hair, and the wig came away. Tossing it, he located her head and ran his fingers lightly over her skull.

“Don’t move her,” Plat said as he lowered into the hole along with a pair of bright orange backboards. More followed. “Don’t move either of them.”

More words than he’d heard the man speak. Come on, where is her breathing? He got the hair away from her face, then he and Merc leaned in closer. Extending his palm before her lips, he waited.

Breath.

“She’s breathing,” he yelled. “Move it.”

"Open your fucking eyes," Merc snarled. Gabriel wanted to slug him—then she did. The gray dust shifted slightly as her eyelids fluttered.

“We’re moving.” Plat was beside him, and then he was there. Gabriel shifted over, making room for him and continuing to shed the debris off of her. She was wedged just below a huge concrete slab. A metal piling had caught the top of it. Another inch in either direction, and it would have landed on her directly. He dug out her legs.

“Status report,” Chrome snapped, as he too dropped into the pit. The man was covered in filth and dirt like the rest of them, but he commanded attention.

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“Respiration and pulse are both thready,” Plat answered. “She’s alive. We need to get this backboard in place and secure her neck before we turn her.”

Blood ran down her leg, and beneath her bare leg lay another. “She’s on top of someone.”

No swearing. No words. The men moved with such brutal efficiency. The backboard strapped into place, her neck secured with a thick white collar. Above, two paramedics were on standby, and Chrome had a radio in his hand. “Land the fucking helicopter on the street if you have to. She’s getting airlifted as soon as we get her out of this hole.” He released the button and said, “Get her out and find Cobalt. Now.”

Grim anger decorated every syllable, and the men responded by working harder. Hell, Gabriel responded. When they were ready, he helped flip her. Her eyes opened again, and Merc let out a harsh breath.

“John...” she whispered, and Merc covered her hand with his.

“I’m right here. Stay awake.”

“Cobalt’s dead.” The whispered words came out ragged, and Gabriel turned a light on the man they’d uncovered beneath her. He’d been the guy hanging all over her the night before. His head was canted in the wrong direction. Broken neck.

“Don’t leave him behind.” Copper’s voice broke, and something inside of Gabriel shifted. Raw, empty pain. “Don’t leave him.”

“We have him,” Chrome said, then he glanced at Gabriel. “We need to have never been here. We’ll take our people.”

Understanding burned in his chest. He wanted to go with her, but they needed cover. “I’ll take care of it.” He had some pull.

Chrome nodded once and moved out.

Dismissed, Gabriel transferred his gaze to Merc. Copper barely moved, but she held onto Merc’s bloodied hands with her own torn and damaged ones. That should be him, —not scarface, but she hadn’t reached for Gabriel. “Take care of her.”

Merc nodded, and Gabriel headed for the ropes. He looped one around his waist, and started to climb. The men at the top hauled him out. On the surface, he glanced down at her. The dazed, pained look on her face rocked him. So vulnerable, and he had to leave her to the men lifting her. They had her. She was alive.

That mattered.

Outside, a circus of television cameras and lights awaited him. Stripping the makeshift mask off, he went out to distract the hungry masses. A man in an FBI coat met him, and he said, “Gabriel Danvers. CIA. Get your director and mine on the phone.”

Every word cost him, and he was violently aware of the sound of a helicopter as it landed, then took off minutes later, carrying her away.

They needed to have never been there.

Gabriel would erase the trail.

## Chapter 10

One week later...

Copper hated hospitals. She didn't give a flying fuck that they'd moved her to a private wing of the compound, or that the nurses and doctors treating her were all highly specialized and trusted operatives. Plat checked on her. Merc parked next to her bed, and he'd been there every time she passed out or woke up. Chrome came to see her—she'd tried to debrief, and after getting out the pertinent details, he'd ordered her to shut up and rest.

The worst was when she woke up and one of the Ghosts lurked in the room. She'd seen the same masked figure four times. Always just inside the room, standing nearby the shadows. Fucking pain drugs kept muddying the waters, so by the time she could focus, they were always gone.

Cobalt was dead.

The reality of it struck her every time she woke. Sometimes, she could go a whole thirty seconds before the reminder hit. Hours she'd spent curled up next to him. She'd woken in the dark, his head tucked against her breast. She'd tried to crawl, to move and free up the air for him. Pain blacked her out repeatedly, but she'd fought through it.

The world detonating around her opened up an old wound. Brad had died in a similar explosion. Her team decimated. Merc had dragged her out of that hell, and he'd been there when she'd opened her eyes. It was Russia all over again, and she wanted to scream. Maybe she had. They'd injected her with something, and the world shut off.

Only, it hadn't, not really. She floated through the hell. Drifting from one island of memory to another on a current of disappointment, failure, and grief. Washing up on



one island, Brad dragged her out of the water. His skin was so warm under her fingers. He cradled her hand in both of his.

“You have to stop this.” The order jerked her out of the well of self-pity. “Time to wake up. Can you open your eyes? Just let me see you’re still in there.”

“Stop bossing me around.” God, he was dead and he gave her orders. Damn thing was, she wanted to follow them. Wanted to dig her nails into his hand, feel him grip her hair, and then tell her everything would be all right.

“You can do this, Sachi,” he whispered. So close, she could almost feel his breath on her cheek. “Listen to me. I know you think this is the drugs and the pain. I know you’re hurting, but you’re out of that hole, babe. You’re out. I need you to be okay.”

“You’re dead,” she said. For the longest moment... “When I woke up in that hole, I thought it was you.” The tears fell, and she hated herself for them. She hadn’t cried in a long time, didn’t want to cry. “I thought we were—I thought I’d found you again.” Wanted to find him. “I miss you.”

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When silence greeted her declaration, she fought to get her eyes open. The room was empty, and another tear slid down her cheek. She hated this, hated feeling the loss all over again. Cobalt shouldn't have died. Brad shouldn't have. Nor should Zinc and Uranium.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw them again. Alive. Worried. Working. Waiting. The sorrow in them. They were too far away, and she couldn't get to them.

They were never supposed to leave a man behind.

Why had he left her?

Waking again, after another hideous journey down the it's a shitty world merry go round, she pushed the blankets off. She had to get out of the bed, out of the hospital. They needed answers and—

“Get your ass back in that bed.” Merc stood in the open doorway, glaring.

“I hate this bed.” She didn't whine or complain, and made it to sitting upright. They'd had to do surgery, repair some organ damage, but she'd managed not to break a single bone. Go figure. “I want to go to the funeral.” Cobalt deserved a flag, an honor guard, and she should be there.

“When you can stand, fine.” He hadn't moved from the doorway. “Until then, your ass stays in that bed.”

He only got this angry with her when she'd scared him. Gripping the edge of the bed,

she glanced at him. “If I can’t get up, I can’t go find Gabriel.”

She hadn’t let herself think about him. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized how much she’d wanted to do exactly that. Merc mentioned Gabriel had been there, in the hole. How he’d bled right alongside them to get to her and Cobalt. No hesitation. Chrome mentioned it briefly, ending his statement with “Danvers came through.” Despite all the coverage the disaster in Las Vegas earned on the news, they weren’t involved, and no mention of any of them had been made.

Reports cited everything from a gas leak to a possible bomb. Homeland Security wasn’t releasing details. Ant said he thought it was more targeted—a drone strike. It would explain the flash. The aircraft hit the building for the first explosion, and its fuel tanks detonated for the second. A theory, but one Merc and Plat both agreed with. The death toll was over two hundred, and the numbers climbed each day. The wounded? More than a thousand, and they didn’t think all of those had been accounted for yet.

“You don’t need to find him.” John pointed a finger at her. “Stay in the fucking bed, or I’ll handcuff you to it.” He crossed the room and nailed her with a long stare. “You tried to die on me.”

“Not on purpose.”

“Don’t do it again.”

“I’ll do my best.” Then, because she loved him too, she added, “Asshole.”

“When you can actually stand long enough to look me in the eye and say that, fine.” He almost smiled. “Until then, you stay put. Besides, you have an assignment anyway.”

Her head ached. She'd kill for a shower, and she wanted out of the damn r—"What the hell?" They wouldn't let her out of bed, but she had an assignment? She shouldn't bitch. She was alive, and they still had a job to do. But her heart wasn't in it, not right now. "What is it?"

"They're bringing in a consultant. Chrome cleared him, so did Steele. He's your assignment. You're going to be laid up, and you're the best with intelligence anyway. So you will debrief him, bring him up to speed, and put him to work."

Irked. Vexed. Pissed. The words were too weak for the anger seething in her. "Why?"

"Because you need eyes and ears on the ground you can trust and instincts nearly as sharp as yours." Merc shrugged and nodded to the door. "That said, if you decide he's a no, just say the word. I'll bounce his ass out of here for you."

With that, he opened the door to reveal Gabriel waiting. A fading bruise decorated his cheek, and his knuckles were raw and scabbed. She drank in the sight of him, cataloging every injury. His gaze swept her from head to toe with similar intensity, and his mouth tightened.

"You forgot to mention the head wound."

"No," Merc said. "I didn't forget anything. Remember what I said, Copper." Then he faced off with Gabriel. "Danvers, I will be watching."

"So you said. So Chrome said. So did the big bastard at the gate." The faint smile in his voice warmed her. The man was fearless.

Or insane.

"John," she said, wanting to end this before they decided to let their testosterone sort

it out. “It’s okay.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Merc said to Gabriel. “She needs to rest.”

“On that we agree.” She could almost hear the smirk in his words, and her heart thudded a little harder. Merc really needed to move. She wanted to see Gabriel, make sure he really was okay. “Trust me, the only place I plan on letting her go is to the bathroom, and then only if she asks nicely.”

“Good.”

Wonderful. Now she had two of them.

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Merc glanced back at her, and she saw the question in his eyes. Was she sure she wanted this? Did she really want Gabriel?

For the first time, the answer was crystal clear.

“Yes.” She mouthed the word, and Merc nodded, then stepped to the side so Gabriel could enter. He didn’t waste time on Merc and crossed the room to her. “Hi...”

“Don’t hi me,” he said with his characteristic smile and nearly no bite to the words. With exquisite gentleness, he lifted her legs and eased her back into the bed. Instead of covering her, however, he skated his touch lightly down her legs and checked each one. Moving to her hands, he lifted those and inspected the damage. They’d taken off her idiot mittens and left the palms lightly wrapped. His looked worse in places than hers.

“What are you doing here?” Here being the compound in Texas. The location wasn’t exactly available on Google, and they had security measures in place to discourage even the most casual of droppers by.

Seated on the edge of the bed, he met her gaze. He really did look ragged—wonderful, but ragged. The shadows beneath his eyes were swollen, and the whites were bloodshot.

“And why aren’t you sleeping?”

His answer? “A building fell on you.”

“I was there.”

“No,” he said. “You were under it. We were up top, and I couldn’t get to you. I have never felt so fucking helpless in my life.”

Yeah. She knew helpless. “Cobalt saved my life.”

“I know.” He touched a finger to her bruised cheek. The unbearably light touch drifted against her skin like a feather. “I’m sorry.” Not much else to say. Another body for them to bury. Another brother to bid farewell.

As nice as his touch and his nearness were, none of it explained his presence. “Why are you here? In Texas?”

“Seems like I have a useful skill set,” he said, quirking a half smile. “And your friend John gave me a reference.”

John had?

“Look, I don’t have to stay. If you and him have a thing...”

“Me and Merc?” Copper snorted. “Yeah, he’s like my brother-best friend-Marine-team-family, all rolled into one. We bleed for each other, but he’s not my lover or my boyfriend, no matter what he may have implied.”

Relief shone in Gabriel’s eyes, and he grinned. “He just let me know he knew about a lot of untraceable poisons. Most of them would kill me, but if I hurt you...he had some that did more unpleasant things.”

“He must like you.” At his skeptical look, she said, “He warned you. If he didn’t like you, you’d just be dead, no warning required.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He threaded his fingers with hers.

“Sowhyare you here?”

“I’m here for you. I’m here because I can’t get you out of my head. I’m here because the worst hours of my life were after a building fell on you, followed by watching all of them take you away.” He shook his head, the emotion darkening his voice. “I’m here because I can love you, and I plan to prove it to you, if you’ll let me.”

Pretty words, except... “Gabriel, you don’t even know me.”

“Maybe not.” He didn’t argue with her. “Iwantto know you. You could be my puzzle for fifty years, and I don’t think I’d get tired of trying to solve you. You’re a complicated woman. Stubborn. Strong. Determined. Smart. God, you’re smart. I see that in how you respond to things, to adapt—to survive.”

Closing her eyes, she let her head sink into the pillow.

“If you’re tired, this can wait...”

“No.” She squeezed his hand. “Don’t go. I am tired, but when I said you don’t know me? You don’t know all the things I’ve done. The places I’ve been. The people I’ve lost.” Hell, a casino fell on her head. The attack had been against the little terrorist bazaar they’d stumbled across, but it didn’t matter. They’d be feeling the collateral loss for years yet.

And they were still no closer to Red Fucking Wolf.

“Let me tell you how this is going to go,” Gabriel began. “You’re going to recover. I’ll be here every day, and you can tell me what you’re ready to tell me personally. Your call. Professionally, if you can work with me, you’re going to brief me on all



the angles, and I'll be your hands, legs, eyes, and ears until you're out of here."

Her heart squeezed. "And after?"

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“I’m thinking partner, but I’m pretty damn picky and you’re pretty damn prickly, so we’ll work that out as we go.”

“Why?” She had to know. “You’ll have to give up the teaching job, move here, and live with us. We’re not going to stop.” Not until every damn part of Red Wolf was dismantled, dead, and buried. Maybe not even then.

Bad guys were out there, and bad guys needed to be stopped.

“Because I love you.” The declaration caught her off guard, and she curled her fingers into her palms to try and stop the shaking. “I’m thirty-five years old. I’ve been around the block a time or two. I know what hell looks like, and I know what life without you looks like. A woman like you comes along once in a lifetime. I meant it when I said I’d find you. I’m here until you tell me to get the fuck out, and then only if I can’t change your mind.”

Impossible. Incurrible. Incredible. “I’m really messed up.”

“It’s okay. You’re you, and I got into this business to help people.” He ran his knuckles down her cheek. “I’m here for you, whatever you need. I love you. Let me in. Let me stay.”

Everything about him, his gaze, his manner—his voice. He meant every word. Her gut screamed at her to trust him. Merc liked him. Chrome let him stay.

What did she want?

“You scare me.” Honesty hurt. He’d been honest with her, so she’d be honest with him. “I lost someone I loved. I lost my team too, but I lost someone I trusted with my heart. He took a lot of it with him.”

Gabriel didn’t move.

“What’s left is a pretty shattered piece of glass. I’m kind of callous at times, and it’s a lot easier for me to be anyone else but me.” A lump stuck in her throat, and she scowled. Tears sucked. “I hate big emotional displays, and I’m not cuddly. You stay—I’m probably going to be a real bitch to you.”

“This is different from how you’ve been since we met in what way?” The bland question stymied her tears, and she stared at him. He raised his eyebrows, and a smile curved his lips slowly. “I like all the broken bits, Copper. You don’t need to be anyone you don’t want to be, not as long as you’re with me. When you’re ready to let me in, I’ll be here. I love you.”

Nothing she did kept him in a box, and no sooner did she think she had a handle on that, then he changed the rules. Longing twisted inside of her. She wanted to reach out and take what he offered. To grab on and never let go.

Sniffing once, she swiped away a tear. “Rule number one? Copper doesn’t cry, so if you see tears...”

His smile grew. “They never happened.”

“Rule number two? Copper’s a damn good Marine, and she follows orders. If Chrome says jump, my ass will be in the air. I will drop everything and go.”

“Jarheads as a rule are pretty damn stubborn where rules and regulations are concerned. I can live with that.”

“Rule number three...” She fought the lump again, then swallowed around it. “My friends call me Copper, but my name is Sachi. And I really want you to stay.”

He swiped away one of the tears with his thumb. “Hi, Sachi.”

The broken bits and pieces of her heart squeezed together. She hadn’t been her in a long time, but she could do this. She could be Sachi for him, because she wanted to be Sachi. She could let go of the past, because she had a future. It was time. Goodbye, Brad. “Hi, Gabriel.”

Everything else— Well, that was the next mission.

Target: Tungsten

Target: Tungsten

After Operation Phoenix went to hell, Gunnery Sergeant Bradley Peck woke to a world that believed him dead, while the woman he loved had no idea he survived. Ordered to remain “buried,” he joined his fellow “survivors” to uncover what went wrong and who betrayed them all. Determined to clear Copper’s name, he’s not prepared to have her within arm’s reach and not be able to touch her. He learns the true definition of suffering when he has to watch Copper fall in love with someone else.

Thriving as they develop their work and personal relationship, Copper and Gabriel are not prepared for the revelation that not only is Brad alive, he’s been there the whole time. Copper battles her anger and hurt, leaving her with zero interest in her next assignment. But their teams aren’t the only one who’ve found out he survived. An old enemy put a bounty on Brad’s head, and Copper is the best suited to help him disappear.

Gabriel joins them on the mission, since he's unwilling to let Copper face her ex-lover alone. Brad wants Copper back, but Gabriel is not stepping aside. Even if Tungsten can earn her forgiveness, can these two men find a common ground in the woman they both love? Orders are orders, but when danger comes gunning, Target: Tungsten may cost them all.

## Prologue

## Today

The black-garbed, anonymous soldiers who picked them up and dragged them back to the team moved forward. Three stood next to Poppy, the other four were beside Titanium.

How the fuck is he even alive?

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“It’s time,” Titanium announced.

One by one, the Ghosts removed their hoods—revealing face after familiar face.

Silence.

As if a nuke obliterated all thought in the room, everyone stood frozen. Waiting to wake up. Maybe waiting for the shock to sink in.

Zinc, Tungsten, Tin, Nickel, Thallium, Lithium, and Uranium were alive. Everyone who had “died” in Russia stood side-by-side. Everyone but Gold.

Tungsten stared at Copper. Their eyes locked before he slid his gray-green gaze to Gabriel, then back to her.

Gabriel palmed Copper’s shoulder, the weight of his fingers grounding her as the world seemed to slip sideways. Merc moved in front of her a half step. Brad? Her mind couldn’t process the data she’d received. Brad. Alive.

Alive.

Brad isn’t dead.

No. He died. When she’d stood inside the casino and an explosion tore it apart, silence accompanied the roar. A silence so profound, it threatened to swallow her. She remembered the first time the world swallowed her. When it spit her back out, Brad and so many others were dead. The second time, she’d woken beneath rubble and

debris atop Cobalt—alone in the dark with a dead man.

No fire accompanied the second detonation, but the silence exploded all around her. Merc shifted more, breaking her line of sight, then the sound rushed in, flooding her. She couldn't breathe.

She couldn't be there.

I can't do this.

Chrome's voice pulled the pin on the grenade. "What. The. Fuck..."

Jerking her shoulder away from Gabriel's touch, she turned on her heel and walked away. Someone called her name, maybe Gabriel. Maybe Merc. Maybe the dead men. Who knew? She kept walking. A hand landed on her arm, but she twisted free.

They grabbed her again, but she slammed her foot down on the instep and then her elbow against the face of whoever it was. She couldn't see anything. Didn't hear anything. Didn't care.

She had to go.

As soon as she hit daylight outside the hanger, she turned to her Triumph. One minute walking, the next, she all but ran. Her heart hammered like bullets fired from a modified Remington 700.

Somehow, the engine started, and she burned rubber accelerating.

The dead man suddenly blocked her escape. She swerved to avoid him, then continued through the gate and to the main road.

The world swallowed her again. It had to have.

A year ago

The door to her crummy apartment had a single lock. She could have added more, but who gave a fuck? If one of the drug dealers on the first floor tried to get in her place for a piece of her ass, she'd hand him his. A part of her hoped someone would break in—if nothing else, it would give her something to do.

Hell, she left the key over the doorframe on purpose. Everything she owned worth keeping was in her backpack. Her dog tags, gun, a couple of treasured, dog-eared photographs, and Brad's t-shirt. It had long since stopped smelling like him, but when she put it on, she could almost remember his scent.

After unlocking the door, she let herself inside. She bumped it closed again and turned the tumbler. The apartment came furnished with a broken sofa, a ratty chair, and a mattress she'd thrown out the first day. When Uncle Sam kicked her to the curb, they'd tried to cushion the blow with a hefty bank account and a new name. She barely remembered the name and only used the account to buy herself a brand-new mattress. Considering some of the places she'd slept in the past few years, the new mattress was a true luxury.

As she carried a single plastic bag into the kitchen, she paused after three steps. Something was off about the room. She scanned the sagging sofa, the scarred coffee table, and the ratty chair. They were unremarkable pieces of furniture in an unremarkable room—the walls off-white, more dirt than paint, and the carpet a dingy brown.

Carpet. Her gaze riveted to the depressions in the carpet where the furniture rested. She could see the spaces made by the chair.



The chair had moved.

Her world narrowed to a singular focus. She swung her backpack around, releasing the bottom pouch where her .45 rested. Three seconds passed—from the slide opening to the gun's grip being in her hand. The veneer of don't give a shit powered away under the surge of adrenaline. Months of wandering through a half-life hadn't eroded her skills, but it had her attention span. She should have booby-trapped the door.

The windows were closed, and she had a full view of the living room and kitchen. Whoever was in her apartment waited for her in the bedroom. Thumbing the safety off, she made her way down the hall and pushed the door open with her foot.

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One mattress on the floor, bed coverings—such as they were—tightly made. A single lamp, also stationed on the floor, sat precisely where it should be. The blinds were closed.

So is the bathroom door.

Nothing waited for her behind the bedroom door, and the sliding door of the closet gaped wide open. Her lack of clothing or accessories—what the hell did she need them for in the bullshit job she currently occupied?—meant it was also clear.

They were in the bathroom.

Sighting the door, she tossed her backpack on the bed and made a half-yawn, half-groan of a noise, as though she'd walked into the room per normal.

The door stayed closed.

Instinct had her look her up in time to see the black masked figure drop.

Fuck.

He'd been above, braced on the corner of the wall. The bastard struck hard. He locked his grip around her right arm, over-extending her elbow. The nerves went numb in her fingers, and the gun fell.

Slamming her free hand into the figure's face, she heard a faint crack and a grunt. Then he caught her left and locked her arms, one over the other. Fuck Red Wolf or

whomever this bastard worked with—she wasn't going down without a fight, not even if dying meant seeing Brad again.

She let herself go limp, and he lunged forward trying hold her up. Sliding her leg between his, she hooked his knee and jerked him off his feet. They went down in a tangle of limbs. In a pure wrestling match, he outweighed her. So she used leverage to keep tumbling and tucked her knees to her stomach and shoved at him. Flipping him, she regained the use of one arm. Fingers locked together, she jabbed for an eye then his throat. He blocked the first and missed the second.

Taking advantage of the choking sound he made, she dug her fingers into the pressure point of his wrist until he released her right arm. Tumbling back, she struck out with a foot and caught him in the solar plexus. Instead of going down, he wrenched her ankle and flipped her just as she closed her hand around the gun grip.

A sting burned the side of her neck, and she swore. The paralytic poured into her system. Some distant, active part of her brain recognized the drug—she'd been trained to resist them for years—but it powered through her as though fed by her adrenaline. Her fingers refused to cooperate. Her legs buckled. Her vision wavered.

Fuck.

Sorry, Merc...I'll wait for you on the flipside.

Maybe Brad would be there.

The non-existent padding in the carpet didn't do a damn thing for her knees when they slammed into it. The world wobbled, tilting, and she fell forward. Damn, she was going to break her nose. The odd little thought hissed through her brain. The figure caught her, his arm across her chest.

“What the fuck? I told you to let me do this...” The deep voice sounded oddly familiar. Impossible, really. But then, she could hear what she wanted to at this point, couldn’t she?

“You aren’t supposed to play with her. Just bag her.”

Bag her.

Bagged. Tagged. Finished.

A black hood cut out her vision, and the drug sucked her under.

## Chapter 1

Today

The moment Titanium walked into the room, Brad “Tungsten” Peck realized the time had finally come. After a hellish eternity spent waiting, investigating, and watching, they were going to reveal the cosmic irony of their existence to the family. Varying degrees of shock and disbelief transformed the faces of every one of his former teammates, but he cared less about their response than he did hers—Sachi, his girl.

Earlier laughter vanished under the weight of suspicion and confusion. She asked solid questions, but she’d always thought three or four steps ahead of the team. Half the time, he’d simply enjoyed letting her dazzle him with her eerily accurate suppositions. The other half? The other half, she’d worried him with how deep into a character she could sink.

When the moment came, he was one of the last to tug off his mask. Years of agonizing frustration drawn to a rather abrupt, inglorious end—his girl had chosen another man, and all he’d been able to do was watch.

From the moment her gaze collided with his, a jolt went through his system. Titanium had fucked this up by dropping the bomb on them in one violent burst. The commander had been in the heart of the explosion—it had shredded his body, and so he didn't quite understand—the blast wave itself inflicted damage as well. Insidious damage, hidden beneath the surface. Damage that didn't quite heal.

Copper's face blanked as the wave struck her. Merc suddenly thrust himself into view—fucking John “Mercury” Thrace. He owned a piece of Copper's heart. The man had always been there, between them. Brad had her body, Merc her heart... At least until she'd shared another shard of it with professor fucking Gabriel Danvers.

She's going to run. The instinct he'd trusted all of his life whispered her next move in his ear. Copper didn't quite run, but she turned on her heel and marched out of the hangar as conversation erupted like shrapnel in the devastating aftermath.

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He had to stop her. He hadn't waited all this time to not get to talk to her. Merc suddenly blocked his path.

"Move, John." He kept his voice low, level. Mercury loved her, maybe in a different way from Brad, maybe more—maybe he could let her go. Brad was done with letting it go, though. His brothers had already cock-blocked him once, John wasn't going to do it now.

"What the fuck, Brad?" The gravel in his voice dragged his name over hard rocks. The ruin of his face—hell, he hadn't been pretty before, but the fire and chemical burns were worse. Brad had seen him after, even watched Copper beat the shit out of him. He hadn't forgotten. "How the hell do you do this to her?"

Fair question. Wrong person asking. "I'll answer to her. I owe her. Get the fuck out of my way." Gabriel was already past the hangar's bay door, and Copper was out of sight. Not waiting for John's response, Brad cut around him and strode for the door. Someone called his name, but he ignored them.

Did he need to talk to them? At some point, yes. Confessions made. Apologies given. What the fuck ever. Nothing mattered if he didn't talk to her first. Gabriel was on the ground—blood dripped from his nose, and he wore a stunned expression. Swiveling his gaze, Brad saw her going for her bike. He stepped out in front of her, but she swerved around him and kept going.

No. Fucking. Way.

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a phone and flipped it to the app he

never turned off. Her tracker showed a strong signal. Satisfied he could follow, he turned and found himself face to face with Gabriel Danvers. The man who went to sleep next to her every night. The man who'd taken his place. Taken what was his. Brad could pull his gun and put a bullet right between the other man's frosty blue eyes to eradicate the obstacle.

Sachi would never forgive him if he killed her lover. She might never forgive him anyway. If he killed Gabriel, however, he might as well turn the gun on himself before Sachi did it.

His girl was a stone-cold killer when crossed. She would defend into death what was hers.

So would he.

Gabriel wiped the blood from his lip, then said, "So, you're the guy."

"I was." He clenched the phone tighter. "Now I'm the ghost." Still talking to the wrong person. He wanted to swear. The one he wanted to talk to, needed to have a conversation with, continued to get farther and farther away. Merc stood in the doorway to the hangar, his gaze on the two of them—guarding her guy, are we?

Ignoring them both, he headed for his bike. He switched apps long enough to open the side garage where his Bandit waited. The 1995 wasn't a looker, nor was it his favorite kind of bike—but what it had was a 1200 cc engine and the ability to go from zero to eighty in a few seconds. He needed speed.

Copper hadn't worn a helmet, and she hadn't been firing on all cylinders when she tore out of the compound. If he had to fucking pluck her off her bike and wreck hers, he would. Aware of his audience, he pulled on his black helmet before he set the phone in the holster in front where he could see the display still ticking her increasing

distance.

Son of a bitch. She wasn't paying attention to her speed as she tore away from him. Firing up the bike, he hit the gate control and accelerated with a scream of rubber against the concrete. Gabriel hadn't remained rooted to the spot. Instead, a black car slid out of its parking space and followed him.

Well, he'd give the bastard credit. He might have let Copper go, but he wasn't letting Brad go after her alone. Good luck, man. Not giving the car time to keep up with him, he increased his speed and leaned into the bike. She rode a Triumph—a nice, powerful bike with good speed and an excellent safety rating. When they'd brought it in and retrofitted it, he'd taken it for two test rides to make sure the brakes and handling were in perfect balance.

He knew her. He knew her bike.

His was a metric fuckton faster.

She was almost to US-80. Was she heading to Bone Daddy's? Dallas proper? The airport? Accelerating, he split his attention between her tracker and the road. The compound was hell and gone from major traffic, but a tractor trailer could still kill him at his current speed. The black car trailing him kept pace though, once they hit the highway, Gabriel would be at a disadvantage.

On US-80, she angled north and west. Where are you going? He concentrated on the road, on gaining ground. When he hit one hundred on the speedometer, he was in the zone. The highway ramp blurred past him, and he used the bike's size to zip in and around the cars, using the shoulder if he had to.

The gap between him and his target narrowed as she left US-80 on a northern trajectory.



Lake Ray Hubbard.

Water. She was heading to water, or at least, somewhere remote. He took a different exit, trusting his instinct. It came from the same place that told him she'd run before she did it. There were plenty of places along the lake where she could park, walk, hike, run—whatever she wanted to do. But at this angle, she'd hit the first one she came to, and he knew exactly where that was. If he timed it right, he could get there ahead of her.

Be waiting when she got off the bike.

Fifteen minutes later, he watched her pull off the road. The Triumph wobbled a little before she dropped the kickstand to park the bike. The southern ridge sat on some pretty overgrown land, being one of the few areas not developed for lake front property because it was marshy as hell.

Her hair was a wild profusion of curls and tangles, and her eyes were puffy, red, and bruised. Whether from her tears or the lack of a helmet, it didn't matter. The rawness crushed him. Worse, her shutdown seemed to have narrowed her focus. Either she didn't see him standing there, or she was ignoring him.

Lack of attention could get her killed. Anger zipped through his grief. She did not fucking get to let herself be killed. He'd already gone through hell when she'd let a building fall on herself.

“Sachi.” His voice sounded sharper than he'd intended. She jerked as though struck. Raw fury kindled in those sad, mad eyes of hers, and he strode toward her.

“No.” The word came out low and choked. She turned for the bike and he ran, slamming into her with a tackle that took her off her feet. If he had to fucking pin her, he would.

She flailed, but her reaction time was off and the blow, which might have crushed his nose, slammed into his shoulder. Her knuckle cracked, and he knew he'd feel the bruise. Feeling bruises was all right though. It meant he was alive. Pinning her arms, he tried to keep her to the ground, but she slammed her knee into his thigh. Another miss.

Thank God.

Even with the cup he was wearing, she'd have slammed his nuts into his solar plexus.

"Fuck me, Sachi. Snap out of it." The order had the desired effect. Her struggle ceased, and she glared up at him.

Her chest heaved with her harsh, shallow breaths. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, sweetheart," he growled, whether more pissed at her or himself, he had no idea. "I'm alive. Need proof?"

Then, because she was there, he slammed his mouth down on hers and satisfied an aching need he'd been nursing for more than two years.

Easing back on the punishing force of his lips crushing hers, he savored the first taste of her he'd had in too long. The tightness of her jaw eased when he nibbled a path across her lower lip. Still gripping her wrists, he was aware of the moment her struggle ceased. Raising his head, he stared into the dazed eyes—the hazel color nearly drowned out by her dilated pupils.

"You died," she whispered. The harshness of the accusation was muted under the brutal pain underscoring her words. Sachi could be anyone, and she never let anyone inside the real her. Over the years, he'd seen glimpses, stolen moments—and this was another one.

"I'm not dead." He needed her to believe him, to hear him, and to punch through the

chokehold shock held over her. Adjusting his position, he blanketed her and made a place for his hips between her thighs.

Her lips parted on a gasp as he swooped down to take another taste, slipping his tongue inside to savor her. He knew what aroused her, what drove her higher, and Sachi liked to be kissed—kissing was personal. When her thighs locked on his hips and she sucked on his tongue, he groaned.

The urge to strip her bare and be with her right there warred with the reality of their location and the three-year chasm filled with jagged rocks between them. Drawing out her lower lip, he broke the kiss. Puzzlement creased the dazed expression on her face, then she blinked.

Their moment shattered with the next. The violent bleakness in her lost expression vanished, her eyes narrowed as she unclenched her palms. “Let me go.”

“Not a chance,” he told her, very aware she would bolt the moment he did. “Not until you’ve heard me out.”

Closing her eyes, she sucked in a noisy breath—noisy for her, anyway. The level of control she maintained over herself stunned lesser men. Being in the front row, a witness to her composure rebuilding and reasserting itself, left him aching. But he needed her together. He needed that sharp mind of hers focused on him, so she could hear the whole story. Then... Well, who knew what the fuck would happen then?

The pallor beneath her deep tan coloring began to ease, and the wild beat of her pulse began to slow. Her breathing grew easier, more controlled. Between one blink and the next, Copper reasserted herself. “Well, I always knew that when I cracked, it wouldn’t be pretty.”

“You didn’t crack.” He stroked his thumb along the inside of her wrist—half to

reassure himself she was still there and half to keep monitoring her pulse. “You had a hell of a shock.”

“I’m seeing dead people. I call that cracked. Or maybe schizophrenic. Hell, I feel dead people touching me.”

“Sachi...”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’ll get there. But to get there, I have to accept that not only are you not dead—you played dead for three years.” She fired the last two words like bullets, and they struck his soul. “I’d have to accept you let me drift alone and in the wind. You let me grieve. You let me suffer. Yeah, to accept that you’re alive, I have to accept that you fucked my world over. I’m not sure I’m ready to hate you yet.”

He wasn’t sure he was ready for the hate, either. “I didn’t want to...”

With a near inaudible crack, she cut her gaze to him and glared. “Not wanting to do something and doing it are not mutually exclusive. You taught me that.”

Yes. Yes he had. “Do you want to have the answers to your questions or...?”

“What I want is the last three years back. What I want is to not have been left in the dark. I would have waited. One word, and I would have waited. I did wait. Waited to die...and then I let you go.”

“And you fell in love with another man.” No, he hadn’t forgotten that part.

“Let me go, Brad.” Her request was low and throaty. “I need to call Gabriel.”

“He’ll survive a while longer.” The man had followed him, but Brad lost him on 80.

If he figured out the chip, he'd have already arrived. "I don't want to talk about him." Not when he finally had her to himself. Not yet.

"Let. Go. Of. Me." She pushed the words out through gritted teeth, and her shocky pupils shrunk. The heat in her glare scorched him before the shutters closed and she went unreadable. Trusting she was back with him, he released her wrists, and with great reluctance, rose from pinning her.

Once on his feet, he extended a hand to her. She ignored the offer, choosing to stand on her own. After dusting off her jeans, she tried to finger comb the tangles from her hair. He didn't miss her fisting a handful or the hard yank she gave herself. Pain reminded a body it was alive.

Not running away, she rubbed her wrists. They'd likely bruise. Another regret to weigh down the pile he already carried. At least she was thinking again. Acting, not reacting. She retrieved her phone from her back pocket then hit a contact on the front. Phone against her ear, she met his gaze. Questions flared beneath the seemingly placid surface.

"I'm all right," she said after a moment. "I needed to think." She went quiet, listening. "He's here." Another moment of silence. Was Gabriel asking where she was? "Near Lake Ray Hubbard—no...I don't know." Pulling her gaze from his, she gave him her back and walked toward the lake edge.

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At least she still trusted him at her back—or maybe she didn't give a damn one way or the other. In this case, he'd take the former over the latter.

"I don't know," she repeated.

Shadowing her, he made no pretense of not listening. If Gabriel wanted to intrude on his time, fine. He wasn't disappearing again to make it easier for any of them. His gut tightened. Understanding her anger, her pain, even her rejection didn't make swallowing any of it possible.

"Yes." Another single syllable and she turned, glancing at him. "I don't know what he wants to say..."

"I want to talk to you." Grasping her invitation, he narrowed the gap. "I want to make sure you're all right."

A small frown tugged her brows together, then she said, "Seriously?" Was that to him or Gabriel? "Fine." She held the phone out. "He wants to talk to you."

Rolling his eyes, Brad took the phone. "You're not the one I want to talk to," he told the man.

"Maybe so, but I'm about twenty-five meters to your south, and I have a rifle. I also know how to use it."

Brad shifted his position and turned. Sure enough, the faintest glint of metal appeared in the distance. Huh. "Your point?"

“She needs to hear whatever you have to say. I can accept that. Touch her again without her permission, and I’ll put a hole in your heart.”Calm. Cool. Detached.

“I already have one, but thanks for the offer.” He disconnected the call then turned to face her. Keeping her phone for the time being, he blew out a breath. “Are you ready to listen?”

“I have no idea. He just asked me the same question.” Shaking her head slowly, she sighed, and her expression grew weary. “I don’t get this. How do you play dead for three years? How the fuck do you not only play dead when I’m hell and gone, but keep playing dead while I’m right there...son ofbitch.”There was that temper he remembered so well. Her eyes blazed. “It was you. You really were there—in the hospital bay when I woke up.”

He nodded once.

“Those nights I kept feeling like someone was in my place?”

Another nod.

She strode toward him, and her fist slammed into his chest. He took the blow, not moving even from the punishing, bruising force of the strike. “Asshole. You were stalking me. Watching me. Youknewthe kind of pain I was in.”

“No,” he said slowly. “Suspected. Wanted to make it better. Wanted to tell you.”

“Thenwhydidn’t you?”

“Because the first time I tried, they threw my ass in a cell, left me there for weeks, and I couldn’t do anything to protect you from in there.” Anger thrummed through him every time he remembered staring at the stone walls. Titanium came to visit



every day.

“They’d have to have killed me to stop me from telling you.”

“You’re right. I fucked up. But if the whole team sits on you, it’s really fucking hard to get back up. If I didn’t cooperate, they threatened to cut you off and leave you out there—on the off chance you were the leak.” The information rocked her. Her eyebrows rose, and her mouth compressed into a thin line. “They made me a deal, one I had to accept if I wanted to be able to watch your back. We used our resources to vet the teams, to check, to trace information, and we kept tracking it. When your locations were compromised we retrieved all of you...”

The corner of her mouth kicked into a half-grin. “Did I break your nose?”

He rubbed his face. “Yes.”

“Good.” She nodded. “Continue.”

He smirked, humor punching through the blackness. His girl was such a bitch when she wanted to be. The urge to kiss the grin on her lips until she was gasping flooded through him. The fact that her guy had a gun trained on him and would be a witness just made it hotter. Sobering, he slid her phone into his pocket, then folded his arms. “Long story short, I have no idea how Titanium’s people got us out from Operation Phoenix. I woke up in a private hospital about ten weeks after the fact. I’d been in a coma.”

The smile on her pretty mouth faded. “How bad?”

A shrug. “Who knows? I’m a not fucking a doctor. I kill people, I don’t heal them. I could barely open my eyes. Sit up? Not really possible. Thought I was losing my sight. First thing I asked for was you. I faded in and out. Took another month before I

could remember a full day. Then they took me to see Titanium. He was a wreck, but the men guarding us had orders. No calls. No leaving. No reaching out. He told me I'd understand."No.He'd never really fucking understood. But he'd been a Marine—then a dead Marine.

As if reading his mind, she said, "I take it you didn't?"

"No." He shook his head. God, he was so fucking tired. Tired of the lies. Tired of the waiting. "Longer story short, we were betrayed with Operation Phoenix. Titanium's team knew something could be up, we didn't. They didn't know if we were the ones who sold them out. First I had to prove I was clean—then I had to prove you were."

Shock rippled across her expression. "Why the fuck would I sell anyone out?" No outrage, just a cold, angry demand.

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“You couldn’t. You aren’t built that way.” He knew that. He’d always known. “You are loyal down to your DNA. God only knows why—not like life cut you any breaks for it. Even if I didn’t believe it where I was concerned.” A brief spark of hurt erupted from beneath the ice in her expression, and he tried to not give it too much value. “John was there. You’d cut off your arm before you set him up.”

“So that doesn’t explain letting me think you’re dead. That doesn’t explain why, when Uncle Sam cut us loose, you didn’t at least—your stuff. That’s why it was gone from the apartment.”

Weariness settled on him, and he nodded. “Titanium had some team acquire all of our personal items. They wiped us out, let the government call us dead. Reportedly, the explosion didn’t leave much, what pieces they could identify and DNA type, they used to validate their idea we’re dead. For all intents and purposes, Gunnery Sergeant Bradley Peck died that day. Even when I woke up, I was still dead.”

When she said nothing, he continued, “So we worked. We got you guys in. We kept an eye on you, investigated—quietly. Backed your plays. Monitored movements. Who you called, who you didn’t. The mission you went on—the bad intel. It was a test.”

“Fuck you, Brad.”

“It wasn’t my fucking test.” He tried not to snarl, but to hell with it. “Copper, I’ve been on your side. I knew it wasn’t you, but I had to have proof for them. For Titanium. My gut wasn’t enough.”

“Me damn near dying in a blown out casino—did that prove it to them? Or maybe Cobalt’s blood on my hands? Did that do it?” Pissed. Yeah, she should be pissed off.

“Yes and no.” What she’d given them was another piece of the puzzle.

“You know, I don’t need this shit.” She shook her head. “I don’t need to hear you had to find proof I didn’t fuck everyone over. I don’t give a good goddamn if Titanium believes me or not.”

“No, I know you don’t. But, the simple fact is, Red Wolf is still out there, and he’s getting our information. He knows who Steele and Chrome are—he came damn close to having their new identities. Yours was out there in the wind. We can disappear again, but they aren’t going to stop hunting you.”

“Harder to hunt dead men, I suppose.” No forgiveness. No softening of the line.

“You’re not going to give an inch, are you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It cut out my heart to lose you. I don’t have a lot of inches left to give. I barely have a centimeter.” For a split second, her eyes shimmered.

“Fuck me, don’t cry.” He could take her yelling. He could take her icy silence. He could take her putting a gun to his head, but not her tears.

“I shed a lot of tears for you. Did you hear those while you snooped around after me in the dark?”

No. But the knowledge drove a dagger into his belly. “You slept in my shirt.” He’d seen her do it, found her in it. Seen it hanging in her bathroom. When they’d collected her from the fleabag apartment building, he’d been torn between fury and

relief. “You lived like a pauper. Why the fuck did you do that?” He’d left her the bulk of his inheritance—Titanium swore to him she’d get it, even under her new identity. When they pulled her out, they’d done some fast tracking to put her money in a numbered account.

“What does it matter where I lived?” She shrugged, ignoring his comment about the shirt. Scrubbing her hands against her face, she said, “I can’t—I don’t get this. It isn’t jelling for me. You had plenty of chances to tell me...and, yeah, they threw you in a box when you tried. When did you try?”

Three times. The first time—in the days after he’d finally been able to walk without crutches. The second—the first night she’d been in the compound. The third time—the third time when she’d been in the hospital. He’d gone in there without his mask, and Tin found him. Covered for him. But they’d all known, and after that, they hadn’t left him alone.

Afterward, she wasn’t alone either.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re right. I should have taken the bullet and dragged you out of the safety net. At least then you would have known the truth.”

Impatience slashed through her smile. Still, it was a smile. “Don’t do that.”

Quirking his brows, he leaned toward her. “Don’t do what?”

“Don’t make a joke.”

“Even it brings out your smile?” He’d missed her smile. “You don’t do it enough, you know. He helps. I see you do it more with him. You joke. You laugh a little, but never enough.”

The corners of her mouth curved, ever so slightly. “I haven’t had a lot to smile about, you know?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I do know.”

The mask dropped over her features, and her lips flattened. “I hate this.”

“Not in love with the situation myself, sweetheart.” Giving into temptation, he slid his hand over her cheek and brushed his thumb against the smoothness of her skin. “I haven’t had a day’s peace since I woke up in hell. I haven’t stopped for a minute wanting to be with you again.”

She didn’t pull away. “I’m with Gabriel.”

“I know.” He’d had a front row seat to her falling for another man, for her making room for him. “But you didn’t bring him in. Chrome did that. John did that.”

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Her eyes widened a fraction. He'd played his ace in the hole, the one card he still had on his side. "What?"

"If they hadn't brought him in for you, would you have gone back for him?" He had to know the answer. The only thing to fear was failure to complete the mission, and he had only one mission—get his girl back.

"Gabriel and I don't need your permission."

"Nice evasion." Pleasure unfolded inside him for the first time in an eternity.

She swallowed once, then pulled her face away, and he let his hand drop. "Gabriel and I are together. He gets me. Hell, I think he gets you. Maybe. I don't know."

Since her lover had a gun pointed at Brad, Gabriel definitely got him. They wanted the same woman. Would do anything for her. Risk anything. "Maybe so. You still haven't answered my question."

"What do you want to hear?" Sachi defense mechanism number one came into play.

It answered the question for him. Yes, she and Gabriel were together, but if the guys hadn't brought him in, she wouldn't have gone back for him. Not yet, anyway. He had a chance. A small one, maybe. But his girl was still in play. Better pull the trigger, man.

He kept those thoughts to himself, however, and said, "Hearing the sound of your voice, talking to you, being close to you? It's almost enough." Almost. "I never

stopped loving you, Sachi. It kills me that you didn't know I was alive. I can never apologize for it enough. But I will find a way." A promise. An oath. He'd always believed she couldn't love more than Merc. Merc had her heart, while Brad had everything else, and he'd been willing to settle for that. Gabriel proved him wrong. If she could care about Gabriel, then she could—maybe, she even loved Brad, too. So, he could take his lumps. "I'm sorry."

"It's not enough." She withdrew and held up her hands as she backed toward her bike. Brad stayed where he was. Her focus might be dented, but she was back and in control.

One thing hadn't changed. He still knew how to get what he wanted. Letting her go right then was the right thing to do. Her jeans pulled tight across her ass as she straddled her bike.

"I'll see you soon," he promised her.

She stiffened at the words, then turned the ignition on the bike and peeled out of their spot. Pivoting, he faced the glinting rifle in the distance and pulled her phone from his pocket. Dialing the most recent number, he waited for Gabriel to answer before he said, "Game on."

## Chapter 2

The ride back to base cleared her head. Well, arguably, it left her head more fucked than it had been before, but she wasn't really keeping score. Parking the bike, she avoided the main hangar and went straight for Chrome's office. Odd how empty and alien their compound felt. In the last year, she'd made the mistake of making it home.

Chrome leaned against his desk with a drink in his hand when she pushed the door open. His gaze landed on her, and she didn't bother with her jaunty salute or good



Marine greeting. Anger, confusion, grief, rage, and a thousand other emotions vied for her attention, and it took everything she had to keep them bottled. “Did you know?”

His eyes narrowed, and he frowned. “Did I know?”

“Did you know he was alive?” Not them. Just him. She could only deal with so much at the moment, and Brad floated right to the top. “I don’t think you would do that to me, sir. You’ve never been that kind of commander. But I need to hear it from you—did you know he was alive? Did you know what they were doing? Did you know he was here this whole past year?”

Setting his drink down, he straightened, and his expression went from frown to foreboding. “No. I would never have kept that a secret from you. Not ever.” Ice frosted his every word. She’d insulted the fuck out of him, but she didn’t care. “Even if it meant my life, I’d have told you he was here. I didn’t know.” Maybe his anger was for them. The chilled rage echoed to the dark place inside her.

“Thank you, sir.” Hearing it didn’t make her feel better, not even a little. But if this cluster fuck taught her anything, it was that she wasn’t sure whom she could trust.

“Copper...”

No, she didn’t want his pity. “I need a mission, sir. An assignment.” Yes. Be somewhere else. Be someone else. “Send me somewhere, send me fucking anywhere.” Anywhere that wasn’t the dream turned nightmare she’d woken up in.

“Fuck no.” He shook his head. “Not when you’re like this. You need to get a handle on this shit, Copper.”

“No shit to handle, sir. I can do my fucking job.” It was the only thing she could do.

Copper got crap done. She didn't lose her mind because a ghost she'd spent years wishing to have back suddenly appeared—only he wasn't a ghost. He was very much alive. Her body went tight and guilt vied with anger. She'd given up on him. Let him go.

She hadn't waited.

Hands closed on her shoulders and shook her once. She focused on the commander's stern gaze. "No, you have shit to handle. I am not sending you out there to get yourself killed, I don't care who came back from the dead. I have your back. You want to take leave, take it. But no missions..."

Fine. She'd do her own fucking mission.

"If you try, I will tie you up and throw your ass in a cell. Am I clear?" Not a threat. A promise.

"I already have too many men, sir, and I'm really not your type."

A faint smile creased his lips, and he hugged her. The affection zapped her with a fresh shock.

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“No, you’re not, but you are my Marine,” he told her, the ice in his tone thawing. “I have your back. I mean it. If you and Gabriel want to get the fuck out of here, I’ll take care of it.”

Gabriel. God, she needed to talk to him and say...what?

“Thank you.” She extracted herself from the uncomfortable hug. Not because she didn’t appreciate the caring, but because if she stayed any longer she’d begin to crumble. “Sir.”

“I’m not going to ask if you’re all right.” Chrome’s voice remained even—and then the door swung inward and Titanium stood there with his dog. Copper stared at him, violently aware he couldn’t see her.

It was probably a good thing for the commander that she didn’t have a gun. She’d be tempted to shoot him.

“Excuse me.”

“Copper...” Titanium said.

“So much the fuck no. I don’t want to hear what you have to say, sir.” She turned sideways and squeezed out past him. Striding down the hallway, she saw Silver and Poppy. The normally even and reserved secretary wore a devastated frown. Yeah, she’d known. Silver put himself between Copper and Poppy, but Copper merely shook her head. She only had so much room for hate. Poppy was a civilian, dragged into the op.

Outside, she headed for Merc's place. Her feet knew where she was going before her mind fully acknowledged the destination. Weird to think he even used his house—thankfully, it was right next door to hers. The front door opened before she made it all the way up the walk.

Merc's doc, Hazel, met her with a hug. The embrace wasn't all that out there for the doctor, but Copper had a hard time returning the affection. She needed to stay focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

"Go on inside. He's in the living room. I'll leave you two alone." She let herself out and closed the door without comment.

Merc was standing by the time Copper stepped into the living room. She had no idea what to say. Her words all died unspoken. All she'd ever wanted was to have Brad back—and now he was back, but all she could focus on was the deceit. Worse—Gabriel needed her too, and what should she say to him? Sorry, my ex is alive? The thoughts fed one on the other, like a snake swallowing his tail. She couldn't break free of the vicious cycle.

Without saying a damn thing, John opened his arms, and she stopped pretending. She stopped trying to be strong. She fled into them, crashing to his chest, and the tears slicking her face were hot and burning.

"When you can talk, you just tell me which one of those fuckers you want dead," John said. Then he held her and let her weep.

She was well and truly drunk when John let Gabriel inside. The bourbon was all but gone, and she'd started on the scotch. Beer was her preferred alcohol, but liquor was quicker. The numbing effect staved off the worst of the rawness in her soul.

"How is she?" Gabriel's voice drifted over her.

“She’ll survive.” John didn’t sound nearly as drunk as she felt. Then again, he hadn’t been in a competition. “You got this?”

“Yeah,” Gabriel said, circling into her field of vision. A bruise marred his cheek, and she frowned. With care, she traced the blemish and frowned.

“Who hit you?” Her tongue didn’t quite cooperate, but he seemed to get the gist.

“I ran into an elbow.” Was he amused? He found the strangest things funny. His eyes were soft, warm, and full of concern. For her. She got that look from him. He saw right through her masks.

An elbow? “My elbow hurt earlier,” she murmured, then licked her lips. “Then I had more bourbon. Doesn’t hurt anymore.” If only the rawness inside was as easy to soothe.

Gabriel chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you truly drunk.”

“Nope.” Yep, she’d slurred the word. Didn’t matter, he seemed to understand her. He spoke as many languages as she did. More, maybe. The only one he didn’t understand was go away, and she rather liked that about him. “I don’t like being drunk.” Except today. Today, she did.

“I’m going to pick you up and take you home now,” he told her. “Don’t pull anything tricky?”

John was still there, watching, waiting. Did he want her to go? Hazel probably wanted John back now. Sachi only got to borrow him from time to time. “Don’t have a home. It’s all going away again.”

Frowning, Gabriel tugged the glass from her nerveless fingers, then set it aside. “You

will always have a home, Sachi.”

“Not always.” She stared at him. “You stayed though.”

“I did.” He drew his finger along her cheek, then tucked her hair behind an ear. “Tomorrow you’re going to hate yourself for spilling your guts, so let’s save any drunken confessions until you’re sober.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond to that before he picked her up. She was more than capable of walking, but she liked when Gabriel played the take care of her card.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she settled her head to his shoulder. She closed her eyes rather than watching the room move while he walked. John let them out, and the night air was cool against her face. Gabriel’s heart thumped beneath her ear. Lulled by the sound, she stroked her fingers against his neck.

Inside the house, he didn’t bother with lights and carried her all the way to their bedroom. Ours. With efficiency, he set her on her feet, then stripped her clothing all the way down to her boots. She landed on the edge of the bed with a thump as he tugged the boots from her feet.

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“Homes don’t always stay,” she said, sobering from the numbed bliss.

“No?” He set her boots aside, gathered her clothes, and dropped them in the laundry hamper. Too much of a Marine for a mess, she wouldn’t rest until they were all dealt with, and Gabriel knew her well.

“No, I grew up in foster care.” Saying it aloud carried no onus or specter for her. It simply was. “My mother was a drug addict. I was born addicted to crack.”

Gabriel returned to the bed and nudged her toward the top. Pulling the blankets back, he urged her under them. “Sachi...”

“Don’t. I won’t regret talking drunk. Some of these things, I don’t ever consider telling you because...I don’t know. It’s not me anymore. Those places, the homes. Foster parents. Siblings. John is steady. I’ve had John a long time, he’s—he’s my family.”

Not saying a word, Gabriel stripped, then slid into the bed next to her. He tugged out the gun from beneath the pillow—checked it, then slid it onto the nightstand next to his side of the bed. Probably better he had the gun tonight, anyway. When he wrapped his arms around her, she settled against his chest.

“I got bounced from home to home, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad. The best part was when I enlisted. Because even if the military moved me, I belonged wherever I went.” Belonging had been important. “Until I didn’t. It went away.”

“Operation Phoenix?”

She'd told him, the whole of the op, how it went wrong—who they'd lost, and what it had cost them. Gabriel signed on to help the team to help her. He needed to know what he was getting into. "One mission. It all went to hell. They died, and my home was gone. I didn't see John for months—and Brad was dead."

With deliberate patience, Gabriel combed his fingers through her hair. The light stroke of his fingertips against her scalp combined with the unknotting of her hair soothed her.

"They took my home away. Discharged me, sent me off, and I didn't know what to do or who to be. Then, apparently, Brad and the other Ghosts dragged me here." The irony wasn't lost on her. What would she have given to have pulled the mask off his face that day? To have seen him? To know? "And they didn't say a word to any of us." If Chrome hadn't known, and she and Merc hadn't—she was pretty sure none of the team knew.

"Did he tell you why?"

"Yes, and he kissed me."

"I know, sweetheart," he said, pressing his lips to her hair. "He's alive, and it's really fucking with you."

"I should be happy." Why wasn't she? "I should be relieved."

"Why should you be anything?" The question resonated with her.

"Because I love him." Loved? Love? Love was right—she loved him before. She still did. "Gabriel, I'm not..."

"Shh," he said, pressing his fingers to her lips. "It's okay if you love him. He's a



really big part of you, and he's been here...he's been here the whole time. I knew that when I said I would stay."

Fear slunk in under the liquor. "You're not going now...if you go now, I go with you."

"I don't doubt it, sweetheart. I'm not going anywhere. You couldn't lose me in Vegas, and you're not losing me here." The words reassured. "You, however, are going to drink some water and go to sleep. Tomorrow, we'll work out what we're going to do."

Shifting, she rolled over and straddled him, gazing into his eyes. "I'm sorry I hit you." It had been Gabriel trying to stop her.

"I know better than to get between you and your bike." The corner of his mouth twitched upward. "I also know you have a mean left hook. I'll take the elbow anytime."

Laughter bubbled up inside of her, and she cradled his face in her hands. "You're a lunatic."

"Only for you." He sat forward, brushing his nose to hers. "I have your back. It's going to suck, and I have no idea what fresh surprise is waiting for us tomorrow, but you are not alone. Not this time, and nobody's taking anything away from you. Clear?"

The stern tone, the crisp orders, and the utter confidence steadied her wavering soul. "Crystal."

"Good." Then he kissed her. When his tongue sought entrance, she let him in and lost herself in his touch.

One week later

Running with Copper was a lot like running a marathon. She didn't quit, not even when sweat slicked her skin and her hair was sopping. It didn't matter how hot—or cold, for that matter— or if the sun was shining or if it was raining. Gabriel joked once he'd been in good shape when he met her. Staying with her, however, had increased his fitness. She ran ten miles every day she wasn't on a mission, even if she was hungover.

At the top of their loop, she slowed, and he dropped his pace to match hers. They matched, though not intentionally, in t-shirts, sweatpants, and running shoes. He preferred it when she wore shorts, she had a fantastic set of legs. When she slowed further, walking instead of running, he frowned. "What's up?"

"Have you seen Brad this week?" Since the day the bomb dropped, she hadn't mentioned the subject. She focused on training, running, avoiding any of the team, and having sex—lots of sex. Gabriel didn't complain about any of it, except he'd waited her out. Waited for her to bring the man up again. From the day she'd confessed her initial loss, he'd been very aware of her lingering love.

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“No,” he said, focusing on his breathing to bring his respiration down. “I’ve kept my eye out. To be blunt, I haven’t seen any of them.”

Hands on her hips, she kept a fast walk going. Her pants came in short bursting gasps. “Me neither.”

Since she finally opened the door, he asked, “Are you watching for him?”

“Yes.” Another facet of Copper he loved. She had the best poker face on the planet, told lies so smoothly when needed, he never questioned her belief in the lies. With him? And likely with John, too, she possessed the harshest sense of honesty. No sugar-coating, no apologies. “Not entirely sure why I’m watching. Or what I want. If I want to make sure I’m not seeing him again, or if I’m terrified I won’t.”

Talking to the woman he loved about the man she loved was a kick in the crotch, but he pressed on past his discomfort. It might be difficult for him, but she was in hell. He would willingly suffer rather than leave her there alone. She stopped walking and lifted her leg, catching her foot in her hand and stretching her thigh.

“I hear you,” he said, choosing his next words carefully. “I’m watching to make sure whatever he does next, you agree with. If you don’t, and he oversteps—then I’ll take care of it.”

Pausing, Copper raised her eyebrows. “You sounded pretty damn butch right there.”

“I may be educated and pretty modern where you’re concerned, I can live with your lover being alive. I can even live with you dealing with your feelings where he’s

concerned.” No matter what it cost him. If he’d lost Copper and moved on only to find out she was alive? He couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the concept. Either way... “I will not now, nor ever, allow anyone to abuse you.”

“Brad wouldn’t.” Her frown and her tone said otherwise, but calling her on her bullshit was a card he played only when absolutely necessary. “At least, not intentionally.” She’d filled him in on Brad’s explanation for their ‘playing dead,’ and he knew she still struggled with the information. What Gabriel hadn’t shared with her was the challenge Brad issued that day at the lake.

Not much of a game if he wasn’t going to even show—or was it? Because she was worried. “We can ask, sweetheart.” If the others didn’t want to give answers, well, he and Sachi also knew how to get them. Especially since they knew what to look for where Brad was concerned. All she really needed was a plan, something to navigate through the swamp of emotion.

Stretching one leg, then the other, she sighed. “You know what I need is a plan, but a plan requires a goal or a destination. I’m flying blind on this one.”

Smiling faintly at her verbalizing his thoughts, he said, “Are you really flying blind, or are you trying to protect my feelings?”

A pause. “I told you I love him. Granted, I was drunk when I said it, but it’s still true. If I’m trying to protect your feelings, I would be kind of sucking at it, wouldn’t I?”

Laughing once, he nodded. “Very true.”

“You haven’t asked me.”

“Asked you if you love me too?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah.” She’d never said the words. Not once in all the months since saying she wanted him to stay. He’d told her, but she’d never responded in kind.

“I don’t need to ask.” During his tenure as a CIA field agent and later as an analyst, his superiors questioned the calls he made in his files. They couldn’t see the rationale based on the evidence presented. Gabriel trusted his gut. He was damn good at reading people, reading situations, and disseminating information. He couldn’t always draw the lines from A to B to C, but he could navigate even through murky waters.

“Really?” Surprise filtered through her expression.

“Really.” Catching her chin in his fingers, he leaned over and brushed his lips to hers. “You wanted me to stay, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You come home to me from every mission, don’t you?”

The corner of her mouth tilted. “Yes.”

“You let me in, didn’t you?”

A sigh. “Yes.”

“That’s all I need, sweetheart. That, and for you to be happy.” Something she wasn’t at the moment. “See, I have faith in all the things you don’t say.”

Her nose wrinkled, and she gave him a shove. Chuckling, he swooped in and dragged her closer. “I’m all hot and sweaty.”

“So am I.” Swinging her around, he began to sway, and she rested her hands on his chest.

“What are we dancing to?”

“Whatever the hell we want to dance to. You need more dancing in your life—more dancing, more laughter, and more smiling.” Keeping her moving, he zeroed in on her troubled eyes. “The problem you’re facing right now is who are you, and you aren’t sure what you’re supposed to be. You asked me once who I wanted you to be...”

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“And you said you wanted me to be me.” She moistened her lips. “When he died—or when I thought he was dead—God, I hate that. I don’t even know what to call it.”

“He was dead for you, babe. You saw the explosion, survived it...came back here...went through the debriefing.” Which had to have been hell. “Then they told you he was dead. The reports said he was dead. They buried them. For all intents and purposes, he was dead.” Sliding his hand to her chest, he paused over her heart. “You grieved.”

“I left a piece of myself there,” she whispered. “In Russia, a huge section of who I was...I thought it died with him, so I buried me, too. I don’t know how to be her, because she’s not in me anymore. So how do I reconcile who I was with who I am?”

Before he could answer, his phone rang. Brad never returned hers, and she’d skipped getting another. Chrome hadn’t insisted she’d need a phone, since he refused to send her on missions, and Gabriel was grateful for it. Digging his phone out, he flipped it over.

Speak of the devil...He showed her Chrome’s name on the screen, and she sighed, the raw emotion draining in favor of her game face. Resisting the urge to curse, he hit answer and handed her the phone. Her work was much a part of who she was as her sense of humor and her loyalty.

“Copper, I need you to come in, and you should bring Gabriel with you.” Chrome’s voice was clear at Gabriel’s distance.

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you do,” Chrome’s voice dropped a note. “Understand, you can say no.”

“Sir?” She frowned, and Gabriel’s gut sank. Whatever it was, it had to do with Brad.

“Like I said, to be clear, you can say no. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” The call disconnected, and she met Gabriel’s gaze, her eyes troubled beneath her otherwise professional veneer. “You sure you still want to stay in this with me?”

“Not even a question.” He sealed his promise with a kiss. “You ready to do this?”

Nuzzling him once more, she nodded. “Remember, no grab-ass in front of the guys.”

He laughed. “We may revisit that condition later.”

“Deal.”

Falling into step together, they retraced their path at a run. Whatever the hell was up, Gabriel wasn’t letting her go on any mission without him. He didn’t give a flying damn what they had for her to do—until she was more settled and more comfortable with the wild shift in her life, he was in. All the way in.

### Chapter 3

“The fuck you say.” Tungsten stared at Titanium. No way in hell did he want to leave immediately. He’d been back at base for all of fifteen minutes when Poppy informed him Titanium wanted him in his office. Five minutes after he returned from seeing Copper at the lake, he’d been deployed on a critical information retrieval. He’d done his fucking job and earned ten stitches for his trouble.



“Someday, you will understand that I rarely say what I don’t mean.” Patient tone aside, Titanium’s aggrieved expression gave Tungsten some satisfaction. “Someone knows you’re alive, and they are combing the net for information on you right now. They’ve instigated a dozen searches and advertised a rather hefty bounty for you on the dark net. Ant has done an admirable job of shutting them down, but they keep listing it. We haven’t quite pinpointed the source...”

“I’ve been dead for three years. Let them look. Nothing ties me here.” He wanted a shower and a chance to see Copper. Telling her he was alive, then falling off the map was not what he had in mind. Then again, Titanium never seemed to give a damn about what Brad wanted. “So, if that’s all...”

The commander’s hand slammed against the desktop. “That is not all. You may think you’re off the map, and we’ve kept you legally dead for all intents and purposes, but someone is looking. And that someone knows a great deal about you.”

Apprehension fisted his spine. “Such as?” Gunnery Sergeant Bradley Peck was dead and buried, mourned with perfunctory regularity by a mother who used to visit him at boarding school and college with the same sense of obligation. His father certainly couldn’t be bothered to pull away from his latest mistress to bother, and he had no siblings. The only people who gave a damn if he was alive or dead were all on the teams, so what the hell could they look for? Targeting his mother would do them no good, and they had to know that. Hell, he hadn’t seen his mother in five years when he ‘died.’ So whomever they looked for couldn’t threaten them, unless...

“Such as a former lover you took great pains to make sure wasn’t noticed by brass or written up for consorting on the team. A former lover whom you designated your heir.”

Violence threaded through his veins. “Sachi is safe. She’s here.” With John on one side, Gabriel on the other, and Brad to watch her back, no one was touching her.

“Sachi isn’t dead though.” Titanium was relentless. “They have a picture, a name, and they’re looking. We’re tracking them, so we’ll deal with it. Until then, you’re going to ground and so is she. We don’t need them sending up the wrong flags to the wrong people.”

“So, we stay in the compound...”

“You have your orders.” Titanium rose and Annie came immediately to his side. The faint thud of his legs reverberated through the wooden floor of his office. The legs matched his name, and they didn’t tread lightly.

“Fine. You want me to go under, I’ll go under, but not without telling her this time. No more lies.”

“Oh, we’re telling her right now.” Titanium led the way, leaving him with no choice but to follow. The bastard irritated the shit out of him, but he always traded on solid intelligence and proved right more often than wrong. If the commander hadn’t been blown half to hell, Brad would be tempted to throat punch him. As it was, he still considered it.

The conference room held Chrome, Copper, and Gabriel. His arrival with Titanium made five. Zeroing in on her, he took inventory. A faint sheen of sweat coated her face, and her white t-shirt clung to her breasts, clearly highlighting the sports bra beneath. The frightening pallor and hollow eyes had been replaced by a healthier glow and a warier expression. Satisfied she was in one piece, he quirked a grin and drank in her presence.

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A flick of her gaze to the side didn't dissuade him, though he glanced at Gabriel, and his smile widened. The man didn't look like a Marine, though he'd proven to be highly capable and an asset with his experience as a field agent and analyst. The cool assessing look in his eyes was a reminder of Brad's earlier challenge.

"We have an issue," Titanium began as he dropped a file folder on the table. "The information on the mission is here along with your destination, temporary IDs, and the locations for a couple of fallback safe houses to be used as needed."

No one reached for the folder. Copper folded her arms, ice frosting in her eyes when she glared at Titanium.

Gabriel slung an arm around her, then glanced at Chrome. "What's the issue?"

"Tungsten's identity may have been compromised. Someone's looking for him, and they are doing detailed searches."

"I thought he was dead," Copper replied to Chrome. The dynamic amused Brad. She might be pissed at him, but apparently, she was even more pissed at Titanium. He could work with that. "What are they going to find?"

"It's the nature of the searches, Copper," Chrome said, interrupting whatever Titanium had been about to say. "They are using specific details about him, his life, and who he was before. Ant's having trouble knocking them all out because the parameters keep changing."

"Parameters of his previous life?" Gabriel studied him. "Likes, dislikes,

relationships?”

Give the man a beer. He caught the thread fast. Copper frowned. “I don’t exist anymore either.”

“True.” Chrome tossed a grainy photo down on the table. The resolution was absolute shit, but Brad recognized it immediately. Based on Copper’s frown, so did she. It had been taken on their first ‘vacation,’ when the two of them escaped to the Caribbean to snorkel far away from fields of fire and orders. She was a lot younger, and her hair was a different color. The profile shot, however, flattered her, and the white bikini bottoms only emphasized her graceful curves and complimented her dark skin tone. “This is the problem. They have a photo of you, which means, if they have any decent tech, they will keep searching until they find a match. We’ve scrubbed your ID five ways from Sunday, but it won’t matter a fuck if they find even a link.”

“Is it Red Wolf?” Cool anger threaded through her question.

The terrorist was still out there—the man who’d cost them all, who’d lured them into a trap and fucked their worlds up.

“Don’t know. Doesn’t matter if it is or not. We know he’s looked for us. We know he was close to compromising our new IDs; it’s why we changed them. Sachi James is in an unmarked grave.” Chrome tapped the photograph with his finger. “Whoever this is seems fixated on Tungsten, and by extension, you.”

“For the time being,” Titanium intervened, “we’re relocating the two of you, while we track the problem. Copper, you excel at making people disappear, you blend better than anyone—your record is impeccable. Securing the two of you together is easier than doing so at separate locations, and you can help make him disappear.”

“Three of us,” Gabriel stated, his tone uncompromising.

“Why hide at all? Send me out there. I’ll find out who it is, then we neutralize the issue. Done deal.” Fearless and unflinching, she wanted vengeance.

“No.” Brad heard the echo of Chrome and Gabriel past his own voice as they all three denied her request.

“You and I had this discussion,” Chrome told her. “We can handle all three of you going. The question is, can you? You don’t have to do this. You can say no. We’ll explore other options.”

“This is the best option.” Titanium’s impatience filtered through his words. “They don’t have to like each other, they just have to go deep and stay there. We’ll take care of the rest.”

“Yes, we will. I’ll decide what the best option is.” Chrome pivoted and faced Titanium. “My team. My fucking rules.”

Fresh violence perfumed the air. While Titanium couldn’t glare, his expression hardened, and Annie thumped her tail as she leaned into her master’s leg. Chrome hadn’t so much as acknowledged Brad’s presence since he’d walked in the room. Folding his arms, Brad shook his head. Across the table, Copper had done the same thing. The mirroring made him smile.

Gabriel glanced at him, then Copper, and said, “Do you have any idea who it might be?”

“I know as much as you do at this point.” He had no reason to keep any information from them. Not anymore. Chrome and Titanium had taken their disagreement down a notch and were arguing in a near silent whisper. “You don’t have to do it, Sachi. I can take care of myself, and you’re safe here at the compound.”

“Well, thanks for your permission. I can’t tell you how much it means to me.” The scorch in her gaze shouldn’t have turned him on, but fuck, he hadn’t been able to talk to her forever. Just watching her breathe left his cock hard and aching. With another glance at their commanders, she reached over and snagged the folder. Flipping through it, she studied the information.

“You’re welcome.” He just wanted to rile her. The cool dismissive look was hot, but her furious gaze was hotter. “It doesn’t matter, we have the resources. It won’t take us long to pinpoint the source, then we can take it out. Problem solved, and we can get back to more interesting matters.”

At first, she kept her gaze on the folder, but he knew she wasn’t reading. Her eyes barely flickered. When she glanced at him again, her nostrils flared. “Or you can disappear again, since it seems to be what you’re good at.” Yep. He’d pissed her off.

“I’m sorry I disappeared this time, babe. They were waiting for me when I came in, and you were talking to Chrome when I had to get on the plane.” Which reminded him... Pulling her phone from his pocket, he slid it across the table. “I’d have called, except I had your phone.”

“It’s done,” Titanium said, and Chrome blew out a breath. The two pivoted to face the rest. “Pack your bags. You’re wheels up in thirty minutes. We’ll contact you when we’ve secured the package, and you’re safe to return.” Not waiting for their agreement, he left with his golden retriever at his side.

“And a fuck you very much was had by all.” Brad shook his head. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

“Copper?” Chrome continued to ignore him. “Say the word.”

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The room quieted, and Brad wasn't the only one staring at her—waiting for her response. She tapped her finger against the folder. "One question, sir."

Chrome nodded. "Hit me."

"Is this for real? Not some elaborate ruse to get me out of the way? Is the threat genuine?"

"As far as we can tell, yes." Chrome nodded. "Ant vetted it. Alayna is at the hospital with Steele going over the intel right now. They can handle it." He'd anticipated her unasked question. Brad shared her sentiment. Why wasn't he handling it, or her? If the source was after me, I'd recognize the threat before they do. "You are not having the information because you're not going rogue to take out the target and potentially expose yourself. They're kicking over a lot of rocks. You go dark, you take Gabriel and the knucklehead, and you stay out of sight."

"That's the mission?"

"Such as it is."

Copper glanced at Gabriel. "You okay with this?"

"I've got your back, sweetheart."

"We have her back," Brad corrected.

"Oh, shut up," Copper snapped at him, and thumped her fist on the folder. "I'll do it,

sir. It's for the team. I won't let you down."

No. She'd rather lose an arm than disappoint Chrome. She was a damn good Marine. Once upon a time, she'd given that same loyalty to him. Brad would win it back if it killed him.

And, hey, if it did? Well, at least she'd be off the hook.

Chrome nodded, then focused on him for the first time since he'd come into the room. "You bring her back in one piece. We mourned you once. I won't mourn her."

"Sir." Brad met his gaze, unflinching. "Yes, sir."

He strode out of the room, and finally, it was just the three of them. Brad studied the pair in front of him as they stood. "So, who gets the window seat?" When Gabriel rolled his eyes, Brad added, "Sachi sits in the middle."

Brad waited till they hit a cruising altitude to stand and make his way to the bar. The nice part of a private plane—it came with a bar, a fully stocked galley, and comfortable seating. Hell, it even had a bedroom. He glanced at the far side of the plane, where Copper parked herself once onboard. Gabriel took the seat nearest her, and then they'd sat in uncomfortable silence as the plane taxied the runway and completed takeoff.

"Drink?" he asked, since he was already standing and pouring a scotch for himself. Not drinking on the job was to be expected. At this point, however, he wasn't on the job, and he needed a drink. His shoulder ached, the stitches itched, and he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in years. Something about waking from a coma meant he didn't like going to sleep anymore.

Not for long, anyway.



“I’ll take what you’re having.” Gabriel’s not so subtle dig amused him, and Brad chuckled. Not that he didn’t deserve the remark, since the other man already had what Brad had been having, or more importantly, who. He poured the second scotch and carried it over. The ache in his right leg was always worse in the air or too deep on a dive. Equalizing pressure meant the knee and hip joints protested.

Sachi said nothing, so he paused next to them and studied her. “Not going to say a word?”

With deliberate slowness, she flicked a look at him. She waited a beat, then tilted her head back and closed her eyes.

Stubborn woman. God, he loved her. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pen shaped device and flicked the power to on. “We have electronic scrambling for about two minutes, then they’ll compensate.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows, but Sachi didn’t move—her eyes still closed. “So what’s your plan? I know you have one.”

Yes, he did. Before he could explain, Gabriel rose, phone in hand and walked over to one of the consoles. Interested, Brad tracked his movements. He plugged the phone in, then said, “We’re good, you can kill the interference. They’ll see you sitting over there and us over here. Not talking.”

“What about the drinks?” Though Brad had to admit, he might be a touch impressed.

“There are empty glasses next to both seats, remember?” The man faced him, arms folded.

Not finding the observation wrong, Brad tossed back a mouthful of the scotch and turned off the jammer. Since Gabriel moved, Brad dropped into his seat. Sachi

opened her eyes and shook her head. “Plan?”

“As soon as we touch down, we’ll pick up our tail and make contact.”

Gabriel walked over and Sachi rose, waited for him to slide into her seat and then she settled in his lap. Touché. Draining his scotch, he pulled out his phone and flipped it over. “I have all the files here, at least as much information as they’ve put together so far. Tin owed me a favor, so he took care of getting me the info they were given. I haven’t had a chance to review it all yet, but we need to go through it thoroughly.”

“No ideas on who could be hunting for you? Ex-lover? Ex-wife? Ex-one night stand?” The coolness in her voice was a dead giveaway, but he met her gaze evenly.

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“You were my only lover for five years, Sachi. I’ve never been married.”

“So for the last three years you’ve been celibate?” Was that skepticism in her voice?

“Unless a job needed it done,” he replied. “Just like you, until him.”

“We have a lot of discussion here, but with the limited timeframe, I suggest we push past the emotional IEDs and get straight to the heart of the matter. What are we doing when we land? The directions I have are for a safe house outside of Billings.”

“Billings?” Sachi made a face. “They must really want us off the map.”

“We’ll pick up whomever they assigned to be our tail, bring them up to speed on what we’re doing so they’ll be on board.” He was pretty certain who they’d send to cover them. Brad knew he’d be on board with ending this issue as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

“And if they don’t go along with it?” Gabriel had his phone and skimmed the information on the screen without looking at either of them.

“He will.” Sachi and Brad spoke at the same time, and for a split-second, she grinned at him. The smile vanished, but for that one second, he’d enjoyed the way her eyes lit with humor.

Gabriel glanced from Brad to Sachi, then back again. Another point to the spook—he didn’t miss much. “You’re both assuming it will be John.”

“You really think John would stay behind?” She blew out a breath. “He was gone before we boarded, which means he probably went ahead on a different route. If anyone targeting Brad really knew me, they’d know John would protect me.” She frowned. “How the hell did they get that picture?”

“I don’t know. We were there seven years ago. That’s a lot of water under the bridge and a lot of hunting on their part.” The photo was the one piece of evidence that made him uneasy. To track where he and Sachi had gone was one thing, but they’d taken that vacation under different identities—specifically to avoid notice by their superiors. While on leave, they had to file where they were going and be available for recall. They’d put in for leave separately and both named the Caribbean, but different parts. Tropical beach vacations for Marines on Elite Recon weren’t that unusual and didn’t muster much notice.

In retrospect, Chrome had likely known they were hooking up and just didn’t give a damn as long as they did their jobs. When it came to the work, they were both focused and disciplined. More than once, Brad had sent Sachi off to seduce a target, and only once had he had to sit and listen to her go through with it. At the end of the day, it had been a job. She used the assets on hand to accomplish the needed tasks—in that case, her body—and he’d had the rest of her. Or at least, as much as she’d been willing to give.

If the target had been a woman, he or one of the guys had done the same damn things. Though, at one point, he’d noticed it became his task less and less, and they—like him—avoided putting Copper in that position if it could be helped. So yeah, they’d known. Still...At the time of the photograph, they’d escaped to explore the depth of their feelings, and he’d fallen in love with her on that island. Head fucking over heels, so was that photo a message?

“You’re bleeding.” The low pitch of her voice drew him to the present.

“What?”

“You’re bleeding,” she said, gesturing to his shoulder. Sparing his shirt a glance, he found blood spreading against the fabric. He shrugged, ignoring the sting.

“Probably pulled a stitch. I’ve had worse. It’ll get better.” What he needed was another drink. The photo was a clue—because Brad hadn’t taken any photos on that trip. They were both too careful about not keeping memento shots around, because they never knew when the next mission would come in. He had exactly one picture of Sachi, and it was a private photo taken in their apartment. So, who’d taken the one on the beach?

Rising, he paced over to the bar.

“If you pulled a stitch, you’re going to get blood on everything. Take your shirt off.” The order rolled over him, and he paused to face her.

“You want me out of my clothes, babe, all you have to do is ask.”

With a roll of her eyes, she slid off Gabriel’s lap and went to one of the front compartments. First aid kit, he surmised while stripping his shirt. Gabriel sat forward, elbows on his knees, still scrolling through the photographed info on Brad’s phone. The shirt stuck to the blood, and he felt another stitch give as he tugged the shirt off. Another wound to add to the myriad of scars he’d accumulated through the years.

Unflinching, Sachi pointed him to a chair. Her expression didn’t change, but he felt the stroke of her gaze. She studied him with the same kind of hunger he experienced every time he looked at her. Or she seemed to be memorizing the grillwork crisscrossing his left, lower side.

“Phoenix,” he told her, not making her ask. “I got thrown into one of the trucks.”

Turning slightly, he showed her the emblem buried into his flesh near his back. Saying nothing, she touched the sigil with her fingertips and traced it. Above the mark was a fat, puckered scar. When she reached it, he added, “Rebar punctured my lung. Most of these were closed and healing by the time I woke up.”

The light stroke of her nails brushed the edge of his scapula. “This is new.” The words were faintly accusatory, and he resisted the urge the shrug. The last gesture pulled a stitch, not that he felt an ounce of pain. She had her hands on him.

“Knife.” It was a long, clean slice, but the blade had bitten a bit too deep.

“These are shitty stitches.” Pain accompanied the bliss of her exploring the length of the wound—“Jesus, Brad, did you use a stapler?”

“It was handy. Tin did the rest on the evac. Just clean it up or tape it. It’ll heal.” Even expecting it, the sharp sting of her slap relaxed the ache in his soul.

“Shut up. Sit down.” Crisp orders he was more than happy to follow. She snapped on a pair of surgical gloves then began to clean the slice. It wasn’t pleasant, but she kept touching him. He’d endure any amount of torture—even her dealing with his scratch—to have her hands on him again.

“Where did you attend college, Peck?” Gabriel’s voice intruded on his moment, so Brad slanted a sideways look at the spook.

Knowing eyes met his, and he gave him a half-smile. “You don’t already have a dossier on me? I’m impressed.” Not getting a rise out of him, Brad inclined his head slightly. “Princeton.”

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“Okay, these ‘searches’ and ‘inquiries’ are using all post-college information. They begin with where you did Basic.”

Copper echoed him when he said, “Pendleton.”

“Right. Then the next leap is to the invasion of Afghanistan.” Brad had gone to the ‘stan plenty of times. It was probably his first deployment. “The next is Iraq, then Liberia. Each one, I’m presuming, was a mission. The search strings are using some fairly specific data. It doesn’t get personal until the beach photo. Then the search strings include data about Sachi. All very nonspecific, unless you know—”

At the sudden silence, Sachi paused on a stitch. She glanced at Gabriel, and Brad shifted to focus on him. “What?”

“When did you get the butterfly, sweetheart?”

“Six months before Phoenix.”

“Three—three and half years ago.”

Her answer overlapped his, but they added simultaneously, “Why?”

“She’s a real looker, favors a red dress or sometimes black. Be wary of this widow. Despite the blue butterfly on her ass, she has a wasp’s sting and survives more explosions than a cockroach. This witch doesn’t die when you drop a building on her.”

Ice poured into Brad's veins. That wasn't remotely general. "They do know who she is."

"Yeah. I want the rest of the searches." Gabriel's brisk, business-like tone belied the quiet fury burning in his eyes. For the first time, Brad got a look at the weapon beneath the genial professor guise.

His respect went up a notch. "We've got this," he told him, feeling the need to offer some assurance. "We won't let anything happen to her."

"No," Gabriel agreed. "We won't."

"Witch with the wasp's sting standing right here." She jabbed him with the needle, and Brad grimaced. "More than capable of taking care of myself."

"Be gentle. Wounded man here."

She snorted.

"And I'm not worried about you taking care of yourself," he said. It was the first lie he'd told. He'd worried about her not taking care of herself a lot, especially after he'd seen the rat-infested building she'd been living in for the two years she was off Elite Recon. Frankly, he'd seen Gabriel looking after her, and he was here. Even if she tried to go off the reservation, she wasn't going far.

"Moving on," Gabriel said with a hint of force, and Brad swallowed another grin.

Yep, keep her on target, but she's still touching me.

"Who else knows about your tattoo?" The question was solid. She hadn't advertised it, to Brad's recollection. "You don't like distinctive marks people can remember or



see. It's why you have the Elite Metal tattoo on your foot."

Brad hadn't forgotten. Unlike their brothers, she didn't go for body art. Not because she didn't like it, but because people remembered ink. She'd gone through a damned painful sole of her foot tattoo, but few if any would see the bottom of her foot, so it didn't stand out. "I know it's there. The guys on the team. John, for sure. He's the one who picked it out." After she'd lost a bet. Brad had overseen the tattoo, because he wasn't letting just anyone with a needle on her ass, but John picked the butterfly for her. "Anyone she's slept with."

The needle jabbed him again.

"Though if you dig that needle in any harder, I'm going to be worried about me. Short, shallow pulls, you're not attaching skin to my bones."

Another snort, then a half-laugh, and he went still. Her snicker was a gift in and of itself, but a laugh? From the corner of his eye, he caught Gabriel's stillness and the way he stared at Sachi.

Yep. Ball was in Brad's court. Come on, Spook. Learn the rules of the game.

## Chapter 4

By the time they landed in Billings, they had a plan. They'd use the safe house while Gabriel exercised his contacts and sources to deepen the search. Though Brad and Sachi insisted John would be tailing their excursion, they didn't see him at the airport. No sooner did they deplane with their bags than the private plane refueled and left.

With a rental car, they drove out of the city into the deserted outskirts. The cold had Sachi bundling into a heavy coat, and rather than argue about who would sit where, she'd climbed into the backseat and stared out the window. Left with Brad in the

front passenger seat, Gabriel glanced at her periodically in the rearview mirror. Since stitching Brad's wound, she'd been oddly silent.

Two hours later, they checked the drive of the lodge house. It was in the middle of nowhere—more than ten miles from their closest neighbor. A heavy snowfall had painted the landscape white, leaving only the pine trees for a touch of color.

She and Brad slipped out of the car as soon as it stopped. Pausing with his hand on the keys, Gabriel split his attention between the two. Whether they realized it or not, they moved with the same purpose. Both scanned the area, a wariness instilled from years in the field. The mirroring postures, the baiting, even the way they watched when they believed the other wasn't looking.

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“I’ll sweep the house,” Sachi told them, pulling a gun from the pocket holster tucked under her shirt at the small of her back.

After shutting off the car, Gabriel stepped out and eyed Brad. Interestingly, he didn’t follow Sachi, but continued to survey the area around them. She got the same way, hyper vigilant, unable to relax. To be blunt, most of the team had the same issue. He’d familiarized himself with a good bit of their history, both from files and from the stories that occasionally slipped out. They didn’t talk about their missions, not the way others did about their activities—but now and then, an anecdote escaped and pointed him in the right direction to learn more.

“You seem to be taking all of this rather well,” Brad said, his voice pitched low so it wouldn’t carry.

“Am I?” Trusting Brad’s watchfulness to alert him, Gabriel circled to the trunk and opened it. He retrieved his go bag and Sachi’s, leaving Brad to get his own. Meeting the other man’s gaze, he raised his eyebrows.

“She’s worth fighting for.” After his earlier game on challenge, Brad’s statement was hardly news.

“Yes, she is.” Then, because not addressing his earlier challenge was pointless, Gabriel studied him. “She’s also her own person. She chose me to be here. To be with her. Until the day she tells me to take a hike, I’m not going anywhere. If she doesn’t want you around, she and I can take care of that, too. You’re here because she still cares. I’m here because she wanted me to stay.”

“Fair enough.” The easygoing jovial façade the Marine had been sporting since Titanium dropped the bomb on them vanished. “I’m here because I love her, and I want her back. If that means you’re part of the package, I have no issues with that. You’re here—you’re right—because she cares. If she didn’t, or if you were bad for her, you’d already be dead.”

It seemed they had more in common than he’d originally surmised. “Then, for the time being, this isn’t about who shares her bed or her heart, but about keeping her alive.”

“It’s always been about keeping her alive.” Brad retrieved his go bag. “Isn’t that right, John?”

“Tell you what, fairy boys,” John’s gravel voice came out of the dark. “I don’t give a fuck which of you are in her bed, but I will put a bullet in both of you if you keep standing here comparing your dicks while she’s in there alone.”

Even expecting John to put on an appearance, the rock-on-rock grind of his voice in the dark with absolutely no sign of him was an eerie thing.

“There’s two of us and one of you, now.” Brad sounded almost cheerful.

A slide lock echoed through the quiet evening.

Bumping his fist to Gabriel’s shoulder, Brad jerked his chin toward the lodge. “Let’s go see what she’s found, and whether or not we’re going to spend the next few hours in uncomfortable silence while she plots the many ways she could eviscerate me.”

He set out ahead of him. Gabriel watched him go, then called, “We can do that aloud if it makes you feel better.”

“Hey, Inigo Montoya.” John’s voice stopped him before he took another step. “Be careful. I’ve never fully trusted him with her.”

“You’d take a bullet for him.” It wasn’t a question. He’d seen Merc with the team. He protected them all, trusted them on the shadiest of operations.

“Trust him with my life? No problem. Trust him with hers?” There was the rub. The lie didn’t sit well with John any more than it did with Gabriel. “He abandoned her once.”

“She’s not alone this time, and we’re not going anywhere.” No reply came to his statement, which he supposed was approval enough. Ahead, the lights came on inside the lodge windows one-by-one. Brad was right about one thing—not talking to each other wasn’t helping. So, time to dig the information out of both of them, and then the three of them could see what was left after. Trusting John could still hear him, he said, “Unless you hear gunfire, steer clear of the lodge tonight.”

“Ten-four.” It was a whisper on the wind, and Gabriel chuckled. John really wasn’t so bad when one got to know him, but damn if he didn’t do creepier than fuck better than any CIA agent Gabriel ever met.

Himself included.

After a sweep of the lodge and deeming it secure, she found the generator and got it turned on, then dialed up the heat in the building. By the time Brad entered, she had the wood stacked in the fireplace and teased a flame to life in the kindling beneath. Sparing him a look, she frowned at the lack of Gabriel either ahead of or just behind him.

“He’s out there talking to Merc.” Brad pointed with his thumb. “What room are we sleeping in?”

“Gabriel and I are sleeping in here.” She motioned to the living room.

“Fine.” Brad dropped his bag. “Then I’ll be sleeping here, too.”

Before she could respond, Gabriel entered and closed the door with a thump. Like her, both men left their boots by the door. “He’s right. He should sleep in here. Everyone together for the time being.” Dropping their bags on the sofa, he crossed the room. The intensity in his blue eyes arrested her attention. “We also need to talk.”

What the hell had they discussed out there?

“Fine, we’ll brainstorm on the possible source, see what information we can put together. The faster we resolve this—”

“No, Sachi.” The two simple words punched through her defenses, and she considered how to shore them up.

“We discussed this,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. Instead of giving them privacy, Brad joined them in front of the fire, but Gabriel wasn’t looking at him. No, the full weight of his focus was on her.

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“Yes, we did.” He sounded almost regretful, but the firmness in his tone didn’t waver. “I’m willing to do whatever you need, and I have no problems with you taking lead on this. What I have problem with is you pretending it’s not messing you up. That his being here isn’t messing with you.”

“We need to talk about us,” Brad said.

Raising her palms, one for each man, she frowned. “Excuse me? In what world are the two of you suddenly on the same side?”

“We have a lot in common.” Gabriel answered before Brad, and oddly enough, Brad seemed to be waiting for him to finish. “We both love you. I know you want to lock yourself into the mission. You want to focus on anything that isn’t this situation. If it wasn’t hurting you on some level, game on.”

A low sigh escaped Brad, and he scrubbed a hand over his face. “Your spook is right. It is hurting you. I am hurting you.”

“So, we’re going to turn off the super soldiers for the night. We’re in a secure location, and we’ve got backup if we need it, so we’ll have plenty of warning. Tonight? Tungsten and Copper are going to stand down so Brad, Sachi, and I can talk about this.”

“I don’t have time for this emotional psychotherapy. Would I pass a psych test? Probably not. Do I give a damn right now? No. We have one mission—”

“Actually...” The quiet command in Brad’s tone sent a shiver through her. He

outranked her, but more, he'd owned a part of her for so long, she didn't know how not to listen to him when he spoke like that. "We don't have a mission. Our orders were to stand down. I don't agree with those orders long term, but for tonight? For the next twenty-four hours? We're off-duty."

No. If she went off-duty, then she would have to face three years of gut wrenching loss, deceit, and a broken heart she'd put back together with duct tape and baling wire. The last thing she wanted to do was be a victim. The ugliness of the word rolled over her, and her heart slammed in her ears. She was no one's fucking victim, and they'd made her one. It was the one part she refused to play. Spots flickered across her vision. Her chest tightened.

One moment she was standing, the next she was in a chair with her head down. A hand wrapped around her nape, and Gabriel's scent flooded her nostrils. Another hand held her arm, two fingers on her wrist over her pulse.

"Breathe." The order carried a weight her too-rapid heart rate and shallow respiration tried to obey.

"C'mon, sweetheart." Gabriel's coaxing tone nudged what the order hadn't. "Breathe. In deep, then out again."

One shallow breath followed another, and she closed her eyes. Inhaling deeper helped. The wavery sick feeling began to pass.

"You took a really big fucking chance." Gabriel's voice changed, deepening to a lower, lethal growl.

"She was already considering every way out of the discussion. You spent the last year with her—tell me I'm wrong." The challenge went unanswered as Gabriel massaged the back of her neck, and Brad continued to rub the inside of her wrist. Finally, Brad



added, “She goes deep when she goes into a role. Sometimes too deep. Like a diver who comes up too fast from the ocean floor, she doesn’t respond well to being forced out of the part she’s cast for herself.”

“Thanks for the tip.” The dry sarcasm belied Gabriel’s statement. “That’s why I was going to ease her into it. You can box her in without slamming a door in her face.” A beat, then he said, “Of course, I forgot. You’re all about the purge and burn.”

“When they know how to swim, you don’t ease them into the water—you throw them in. The shock works.” Steely confidence imbued every word. “She’s an expert. Coddling her—as much as I like doing it—isn’t how you get through Copper to Sachi. Copper’s a weapon, honed, trained, and deadly. Sachi’s a little softer. If you really want to have this conversation, then we need her, not Copper.”

The warmth of Gabriel’s massage eased the locked muscles in her neck. The steady stroke of Brad’s thumb sent shivers along her spine, but her pulse slowed. She grounded herself between the conflicting offers of comfort.

“Next time, I won’t invite you to the party.” Gabriel’s steady patience seemed to have found a fraying point.

“I don’t need an invitation. I belong here. You’re the interloper.” And so, apparently, had Brad’s.

“Shut up.” She raised her head and met Brad’s hard stare. Somehow, she was in Gabriel’s lap, and Brad knelt in front of her. The close quarters with both of them left her hyperaware. “I’m not a fucking toy to be tugged apart. Gabriel belongs here, Brad. He’s not the interloper. By my reckoning, that’s the part you cast yourself into.”

“You say potato, I say po-tah-toe.” His smirk unclenched something in her gut.

“That’s your Princeton education speaking, buddy. We don’t sprechen blue blood here.” Her lame attempt at humor helped.

“I went to Yale,” Gabriel admitted, his breath warm on her ear. “So maybe we do speak a little blue blood.”

“Wow.” She pursed her lips. At Brad’s quirked eyebrow, she pointed a finger at him. “Princeton.” Jerked her thumb toward Gabriel. “Yale.” Then she tapped her chest. “G.E.D. Never felt like the bottom of the barrel before. Thanks for that.” But still...It cracked her up, and she chuckled. After the first harsh sound escaped, she laughed harder. The unforgiving slash of Brad’s mouth curved into a smile, and Gabriel gave her neck an affectionate squeeze.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous all of this is?” She couldn’t stop giggling once it started.

“It’s not ridiculous.” Gabriel slid an arm around her middle and rested his free hand against her hip.

“Gabriel, Brad’s alive.” The words came out like bullets, fired on the pants of her breathing. “He’s alive. And I didn’t wait for you—” The last she said to Brad, forcing herself to meet and hold his gaze. “I didn’t. I was—for a long time, I was—but then I said goodbye, and I picked him because he picked me. And I’m not sorry I chose him.” The cloud of guilt clogging her lungs threatened to make her sick. “I’m sorry I didn’t wait for you—but I’m not, all at the same time. I feel like someone took my life and screwed it sideways...kind of like what they did when I was born, only I don’t remember that hell. I remember this one. I don’t want to hurt anyone, and I want to kill you at the same time.”

All of a sudden, she wanted up and out of their arms—away from both of them. Tugging her hand from Brad’s grasp, she pushed past him to pull away from Gabriel.

On her feet, she strode to the fire to put some distance between them.

“Babe—” Brad began, but she raised her hand.

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“Don’t babe me, don’t sweetheart—don’t either of you try to talk me down.” The cramp in her gut seemed to expand and assault every muscle. “I hate myself right now.” She looked past them, ignoring the mirroring concern grooving their faces. “I hate that I love you both, and I hate that some fucking terrorist and people I was supposed to trust seemed to have conspired to rob me of who I am. I’m nobody’s victim.”

God, she hated that word. Civilians were victims of circumstances. Civilians were victims of criminals and terrorists. She was a goddamn United States Marine. She walked into hell with no expectations, and she faced hell without blinking an eye. Except—they’d taken that from her, too. Kicked her to the curb, and on the curb she’d stayed, until... Titanium sent Brad to bring her in. New facts, slightly different, but there they were.

Facing the men she loved should be a cakewalk, except they were already inside the perimeter and had taken out most of the guards. It was her versus them.

“Fine. You two want to talk about this? Let’s talk about this.” She folded her arms, because the urge to go to both of them left her muscles trembling.

“We do want to talk,” Gabriel said. They’d both risen when she walked away and faced her. Odd how, side-by-side, they reminded her of each other in some ways. They didn’t look alike—in fact, Gabriel was fairer than Brad and had kinder eyes. Brad had seen hell, just like her, and beneath his cool façade lay a hurricane force. Gabriel wore her down with relentless persistence, but Brad battered through any obstacle. Yet, they stood with the same readiness, and they watched her with similarly assessing gazes.

Too bad they weren't playing chess. She might actually prefer the mental exercise versus ripping her soul open.

"But we need rules for the conversation." Gabriel's statement reminded her of Vegas. They'd had rules then, too. "Rule number one, honesty. Don't hold back because you think one of us doesn't want to hear something, and neither will we."

Seemed fair. She nodded. Brad took a moment longer, but then he said, "Fine. Rule number two, John is outside of this lodge and this conversation. It's between the three of us, not the four of us."

For his part, Gabriel frowned briefly before nodding. "I agree with that one. John's unequivocally on your side. If it were a fight, we wouldn't be able to keep him out of it. This isn't a battle, at least not that kind."

What would John say? "Whatever. Fine. Fuck it. He doesn't need to be here. I know he has my back."

"Rule number three, we stay here. No mission, no falling into old parts—nothing else until this is resolved between the two of you." Gabriel cleared his throat.

"Three." Brad said before she could, and surprise filtered through her. "There's three of us here, so we settle this between the three of us. And we're locked in until it's done."

Insane. They were both certifiable. "It's cold outside anyway." John had better have packed his thermals, or she'd kick his ass. Tomorrow. He's a big boy; he knows how to take care of himself. She just had to trust he'd gotten over the self-flagellation part of his existence. If he hurt too bad, he couldn't help them. He'd never fail an assignment.

“Sachi?” Brad gave her a pointed look.

“What?”

“You didn’t actually agree to the rule.”

Really? Torn between irritation and amusement, she said, “Fine, I agree. Rule number four, if I say I don’t know, you don’t get to use emotional mumbo jumbo.” She pointed at Gabriel, then swung her finger to Brad. “And you don’t get to try and order me to answer. I don’t know all the answers. I’ve never been in this situation before, so I don’t know means I don’t fucking know.”

“I think that technically falls under the category of honesty.” Gabriel grinned, and the slow upward tilt of his mouth softened some of her anger. “But I accept the term.”

“Agreed. I don’t suppose rule number five can be we do this naked?” Always going for the easy laugh, Brad raked her with a scorching look which only amped up her tension.

To her surprise, Gabriel actually seemed to consider it. What the hell had they talked about outside? “No,” she answered for him. “It’s too fucking cold in here.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” Brad grinned.

Chuckling, Gabriel said, “I can, because now I kind of want to see her argue naked. She’s not as good at it as she thinks.”

“Really?” Brad mused. “She must be nicer to you than she ever was with me. She liked holding out and making me work for it.”

“Or maybe I’m just better.”

Losing her effort not to laugh, she shook her head. “We’re nuts.”

“Yes,” Brad agreed. “Isn’t it glorious?”

“Glorious?” Skepticism ruffled Gabriel’s tone. “More like pathological.”

“Whatever.” Mood soaring, Brad didn’t seem remotely put off by their attitudes. Then again, could she blame him? Logic told her, whether it had been his choice or not, he’d lost her the same day she’d lost him. The only difference was he’d known where she was—and she’d thought him dead.

It was the little things that mattered. Humor sobering, she relaxed a fraction. They had a plan. Maybe it wasn’t the sanest plan, but it was still a plan.

After agreeing to the rules, they divided their efforts to make the lodge living room comfortable. Neither man would settle without doing a perimeter sweep, so while they split the effort between them, she took the time to make coffee. Someone had stocked the cupboards with dry goods but nothing perishable. She’d eaten worse plenty of times, and power bars would fill the hole.

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Weird how well they all worked together. Even the tension seemed to dial down some. When they convened in the lodge's living room, the fire and heater had both managed to peel away the frosty chill in the air. Settling on the rug in front of the fire, they formed a triangle, and while the thought held appeal, she doubted either man would go for it.

Frowning, she cradled her coffee mug in her hands. "Where do we start?" Then registering the question, she pinned Brad with a look. "If you say naked, I'll punch you."

"Hey, one of the rules is honesty, and I honestly like you naked." The charm, the ease with which his smile still eased the ragged knots in her soul, fascinated her.

"I think we both agree on liking you naked. That said, let's start at the beginning." Clever, calm Gabriel keeping them focused on the target. "I think we start with what we want."

"What we want?" What does he mean? "Before? Since?"

"I mean, what do we want to accomplish. Since it's my idea, I'll say it—I want you happy," he told her. "Not settling, not coping, not playing a part. I want you really happy. I want you to know you always have a home that isn't a place or something that can be taken away from you. I don't want you running away on a mission to play a part because you hate who and where you are."

The last words cut. Not because she didn't believe him, but because his assessment was accurate. Hadn't she just asked Chrome for a mission? Any mission to get out of



having to deal with the dream turned nightmare?

“What about you? What do you want for you?” She licked her lips.

“I just want to be a part of that life.” He made it sound so simple. “I want to be a part of what makes up your home. I want to be there when you come home, go with you on the missions...I want you.”

Simple. Elegant. God, if only their lives were that easy...

Brad stretched his arm, the slow careful motion reminding her of his stitches. “I’m not so philanthropic. I want you, period. I don’t care how or with who.” The last part came out a growl. “I don’t even mind the spook. He actually cares about you. Not the team, not the mission, not saving the rest of the fucking world, just you. It’s the only reason I didn’t kill him when they brought him in for you.”

“You’re too kind.” Snark aside, Gabriel and Brad stared at each other like two predators sizing their opposition.

“I am too kind. I couldn’t do anything more than watch her blend you into her life. Fucking you? That didn’t bother me.” Despite the flippancy, she didn’t hear a shred of truth in the last sentence.

“That’s a lie.” Gabriel called him on it before she could. “Rule number one, no bullshit. It bothered you because you weren’t there, you were outside watching. So, voyeurism isn’t totally your thing.”

“Fine, it bothered me.” Canting his head, Brad glanced at her. “Voyeurism is fine if she knows I’m watching. If she knows it could and will be my hands, my lips, and my cock giving her the same pleasure. But you didn’t know.”

“No, I didn’t.” The guilt of betrayal soured on her tongue. “Every single fucking time you watched me, you could have told me. Instead, you didn’t.”

“I wanted to tell you. I can never give you the time back. I can never open the door so you can see the world the way it was for me. If you think for a moment of that torture I endured—three years of separation, watching you from afar, only able to help you if you were truly in danger—and not able to touch you? No. I’ve been in hell, babe. I’ve been in hell since I woke up. Every minute of every day has been spent with one goal.” His intensity was like a wall of heat rolling over her. “Every fucking second has been about being right here with you. Hell, you being pissed? You yelling at me? Want to take a shot? Knock the shit out of me? Do it. It will be better than having my guts ripped out watching you move on without me.”

Sachi curled her hand into a fist, digging her nails into her palm to hide the quaking his declaration caused. Gabriel seemed no less affected, his troubled frown one of almost empathy.

“I waited, I watched, I sucked it up—so I could be here.” As though he’d run out of words, he simply stopped and blew out a breath.

Aching for him, she squeezed her fists harder. She’d found John again, and then later she’d found Gabriel. “Were you in Vegas?”

He shook his head, hell in his eyes. “No. Titanium sent me to motherfucking Russia. I didn’t even know you’d gotten a mission until the day of the explosion. I’d been back at base maybe two hours when the call came in. Chrome and Steele left, leading the others on base at the time. Some of the Ghosts went separately. Tin was on site. He did what he could. He was the one who called and said they’d found you.”

The strangest thing happened. Gabriel reached over and clasped Brad’s shoulder. “We got her out, and I had to watch them disappear with her.” Kinship sparked, brief

but very real. “I didn’t know at that point if I’d ever see her again. I hear you...”

“Thanks. Anyway, there you have it. We got screwed, Sachi. We all did. We can blame Titanium. I know I do. We can blame Red Wolf, because he’s sure as shit guilty. You can blame me, because no matter how hard I fought, I still let you down. I can’t take it back. I can’t make it go away. I can only be here, right now—willing and able to be with you, even share you—if you’ll have me.”

Silence stretched taut between them after the erotic offer, and Sachi made no mistake, it had been an offer. How would that even work between the three of them? And Gabriel?

“Have you two ever done a ménage before?” Apparently it was a night for Gabriel to stun her. She drained her coffee and suddenly wished it was something harder. Like liquor.

Or maybe just some good, old-fashioned moonshine.

“Yes,” she answered, and her voice hoarsened. “Usually with other women.”

Brad’s expression softened. “I didn’t trust other guys with you. Women, you were more likely to say yes about.”

Heat swept through her at the tenderness in his eyes. “You never asked me about other guys.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he said. “Never found one good enough for you. I didn’t this time...you did.”

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“I think this calls for some alcohol.” Gabriel rose. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll find something for all of us.”

When he walked out of the room, she started to get to her feet, but Brad caught her arm. “Give him a minute, babe. He’s wrestling with being all right with what I just proposed, and what you just said you might be interested in.”

“I did not...” She trailed off at his raised eyebrows.

“It turned you on, and I’d dare say he noticed it every bit as much as I did.” When he slid his hand along her arm, goosebumps rippled over her skin. “You still want me, and that’s enough right now. If he’s not okay with it...we figure something out.”

“Why the hell are you being so reasonable?” The struggle inside her was not reasonable. She wanted him, and admitting it cost her. She wanted both of them. She would not walk away from Gabriel, not for Brad, and she didn’t know if she could walk away from Brad for Gabriel.

He tugged her back to her position on the floor, then leaned close. “Because killing him isn’t an option.” When she opened her mouth, he pressed his finger to her lips. “Honesty. Rule number one. He has what’s mine. You are mine, Sachi. Never mistake my reasonable attitude for anything else. I want you back. But you’re his too. You gave yourself to him. I can hate the situation that brought us to this point, but I don’t hate you, and I don’t hate him. So, if the only way I get back what is mine is to share you, then you can be ours.”

Her lips tingled under the brush of his finger, and the tightness in her belly unfurled

until she ached. Lust didn't give a damn about her heart. Her body simply knew what she was being offered, and the rest of her wanted to grasp onto it. "What if he can't?" "What if I can't?"

"Patience, babe." Brad smiled. "We have time. I've waited three years. I can wait three more if that's what it takes."

How the hell was that fair to him? God, how the hell was this fair to any of them? Brad slid his hand to her cheek, and she closed her eyes, savoring the contact. It had been so damn long.

"Sachi, believe me when I tell you, if we want this to happen. We're going to damn well make it happen."

"It has to be all three of us," she said, firming her resolve. "I won't hurt him, Brad. He doesn't deserve that."

"I know, babe." But the smile in his voice told her he already had a plan. How could she have forgotten? What Brad wanted, Brad got.

## Chapter 5

Possessing patience and exercising patience were two incredibly different skills. One promised payoff, but the other frustrated the hell out of Brad. Rather than approach the subject opening their relationship further, Gabriel opted to discuss past missions, the Ghosts' directives—not something Brad wanted to discuss with Gabriel specifically, but he was done lying to Sachi.

They drank. They talked. They shared anecdotes, and the gulf between the three widened. Sachi withdrew from Brad's touch the moment Gabriel re-entered the room, and the flash of guilt in her eyes pained him so much, Brad kept his hands to himself.

Whereas on the plane, she'd been in Gabriel's lap or holding his hand, she kept her distance from both of them.

He wasn't the only one who noticed. By the time they'd killed the first bottle, they were farther apart than they'd been when they'd begun the discussion. When Sachi fell asleep curled up in a chair, Gabriel draped a blanket over her, then stroked her hair off her face. The sensation of witnessing an intensely intimate moment didn't sit well with him.

Resentment found a foothold and flooded his bloodstream. Rather than ripping Gabriel away from her, Brad grabbed the second bottle of scotch and strode out of the room. Pausing long enough to dig out the tin of cigars and a lighter he'd stowed in his go bag, he headed outdoors. The house had warmed steadily through the evening, so at least he knew Sachi would be warm.

Outside, he welcomed the frigid chill. It had been a fucking pipe dream to think he could coax her into bed in one evening, much less talk Gabriel into participating. But, fuck it all, he'd been waiting forever for the right to simply touch her, and he'd gotten to.

One all too brief touch when she'd let him comfort her after Gabriel walked out of the room. He lit the cigar and puffed on it, then took a long pull of scotch. The door opened behind him, and Gabriel stepped out.

"Hard when things don't go the way you planned them, isn't it?" Quiet, unassuming, and dead on target.

Brad glanced at the other man, eyes narrowed. "Nothing has gone according to plan in three years, why should tonight be any different?"

"Because you—like Sachi—play a part very well." With slow, deliberate steps,

Gabriel crossed to the porch railing and leaned against it. “I did my homework on you, Peck. You skated through your childhood and teenage years on your father’s money and your charm. You went college and pretty much fucked off for the first two years, barely scraping the GPA together to stay in the school, even with your father’s money. Something changed in your junior year. You got serious. Your grades came up, and you even managed to graduate a full semester ahead of schedule before you became a Marine.”

Hearing his life distilled down to basic facts was never a pleasant experience. Saying nothing, Brad took another long drink.

“You did well. Surprisingly well for a boy with a silver spoon in his mouth. You qualified for Elite Recon by the time you were in your mid-twenties, then you fell off the map. Your career redacted down to a couple of lines here or there. But you know what’s fascinating about redacted mission files?”

“No, but I’m almost certain you’re about to tell me.” He had no idea what game the other man had in mind, but he paid attention.

“The psychological evaluations of the teams aren’t redacted. They are classified, and you need clearance to see them, but they’re still there in the right folders to be accessed by someone who knows what to look for.” Despite the bland expression, Gabriel stared at him steadily.

“Your point?”

“You are a man used to using your charms to disarm others and get what you want, and you’re really good at it. Frighteningly good.”

“I’ll take compliments all day, Gabe.” The skill had saved his hide and his team on multiple occasions. Downing another mouthful of scotch, he controlled the need to

lash out. He needed Gabriel as an ally, and if that meant enduring his analytical mind, so be it.

“You tried to play her, and you have been playing her since the day Titanium dropped the grenade in the hangar.” The accusation landed like a steel gauntlet on the ground between them. “You didn’t want your existence to be revealed to her—not that way. You wanted to control when she learned you’d survived. I believe you that you wanted to tell her right away. I even believe you were prevented, but as time went on—it grew more difficult to pull back the veil on the deception. So, you let opportunity after opportunity slide until the decision was taken out of your hands.”



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Again. The decision was taken away from me, again. Brad put the bottle down on the railing. He didn't need the temptation to smash it for a weapon. Hell, he didn't need the weapon. He took another long puff on the cigar.

“From the moment that happened, you've been trying to reassert control by pushing her buttons, by using what you know about her to get her to open up. Every little action, every word—it's all geared towards getting her to respond, and it's working. Here's where you and I have a problem. I don't trust you. I don't trust that what you're doing is about her and not you. Sex is another manipulator. You're aligning yourself with me, so she's on the opposite side, and you're planting the ideas, tossing them out there like the three of us could have—what? A night? An open relationship? Something longer term?”

Gabriel verged very close along the truth. “That's why you changed the subject when you came back with the drinks.” It wasn't a question.

“I changed the subject because she isn't ready. She's at war with herself—at war with her own feelings. All sex would have done is complicate an already complicated situation.”

“Says the man fucking her every night.” His anger slipped its leash.

“That burns you, doesn't it?” It wasn't a taunt. “It burns you that you are on the outside, and all you can think about is getting back inside where you can control everything.”

Fuck this. “I know what makes her happy.” He resisted the urge to chomp down on

the cigar and focused on keeping his breathing easier. “I’ve known her for years. I know how she thinks. How she reacts. What she needs.”

“You did, I agree.” Gabriel folded his arms. “Before you died. She isn’t the same person anymore. You know, it took me a while to see it—to see what John always sees in her—but once I saw it, I couldn’t unsee it. John’s scars are on the outside, and he uses them as a barricade against the world. Sachi’s are on the inside, but they are every bit as deep and disfiguring. She uses her role-playing to keep the world from seeing how vulnerable she feels she is. So, no, what she needs is to heal. What she needs is for us to put her first, even when she doesn’t know or want us to do it. You aren’t doing that—”

“The fuck I’m not.” Fury ignited his adrenaline and sloughed off some of the alcohol. “Tell you what, Professor, you analyze whatever you want. I know my girl. I would take a bullet for her, no hesitation. Cut off an arm, if I needed to. You’re right, she is the walking wounded, yet a year with you hasn’t fixed it.”

“No, and your arrival only derailed what progress she’d made.” The hint of regret and disappointment in his tone stilled Brad’s ire. “Take a good long look at her, Brad. Ask yourself this question—if the best thing in the world for her was you staying dead, would you have ever let them tell her you were alive?”

Nothing he said would change the man’s mind. If Gabriel kept the door closed, Brad would only tear Sachi apart by forcing his way in.

“I can’t walk away again,” he said, embracing a reality he did not want to face. Fuck it, he wasn’t some pansy ass boy. If push came to shove, he’d fucking man up and deal with it. “If she wants me gone, all she has to do is say the words. I’ll go. Until the moment she does, I’m in this to stay. But you don’t trust me, so it doesn’t really matter what I say.”

“Actions,” Gabriel said quietly, “speak far louder than words. You want to take control so you can mitigate the damage, and I get it. You want it to be easier for you to take back your position, at least partially. Maybe even long enough to shove me out.” He shrugged. “Maybe you’re thinking sharing her long-term really will work. I don’t know.”

“Could you?” Brad turned the tables and gestured to Gabriel with his cigar. “Could you share her?”

“I already do.” The answer shocked the shit out of him. “I have from the moment I met her. There’s been a ghost in our bed every single night. The only difference now is the ghost has a form and a voice and can inflict even more harm if he isn’t careful.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer you’re getting, Peck.” Gabriel glanced at the house. “I’m going to turn in. She shouldn’t be alone.”

Brad waited until he was at the door to the house to turn away and face the dark night around them. “For what it’s worth, Danvers, I do trust you.” He hadn’t planned to admit it. “No game, no working the charm. You’ve done everything you said you would from the day you arrived. You’ve always put her first. While I may think you’re a fucking cockblocking bastard at the moment, I also get why.” Pride was important. Pride. Strength. Determination.

But all of it was fucking empty without her.

He kicked his pride to the curb. “So you can make me jump through whatever hoops you need. I can handle it.”

Silence, then the door handle turned and the hinges squeaked as it opened. “Duly

noted.” The door closed, but maybe—just maybe—he’d found another route in. A longer, heavily land mined route, but a route nonetheless.

What the hell did he have to lose, anyway? Tipping the bottle up, he took a long pull of the scotch. Maybe with enough of it in him, he could sleep in the same room with the two of them and not ache to hold her.

Yeah, and maybe peacock-tailed monkeys will fly out of my ass. I’m in the same room with her, she sees me. It’s enough. For right now, it has to be enough.

He definitely needed more to drink.

The air was filled with dust, and it clogged her lungs. She tried to keep her breathing shallow, but the pressure on her chest—fuck, it hurt. A crossbeam touched her, an inch short of crushing her completely. Darkness filled with debris and the harsh sound of her breathing. The foundation beneath her held some heat. She fought the urge to twist to see what was there, because she knew. Still, she fought to twist and turn anyway. She had to know for certain. She’d heard the crunch of bone before hell swallowed them. She’d seen the blood...but if even a micro-chance existed, she had to know.

The concrete scraped her skin, and the coppery scent of blood added to the stink of sweat, dirt, and God knew what else. Agonizingly slow, she twisted. Though her eyes were open, nothing moved across her field of vision. The endless pitch of black held not even a trace of light.

Her leg screamed as pain raced like a river of fire along her nervous system, and she gasped in a mouthful of dust. Choking on it, she finally turned over and saw the deck of the ship below in the Russian harbor. From her vantage, she had both the loading dock and deck covered. The teams had moved—Titanium’s was on board. Tungsten was a flicker in her vision as he checked one of the containers.

“Look alive, folks.” Tungsten’s voice came across her earpiece. “Target spotted and rolling in.” The rumble of a diesel engine cut through the morning quiet. The moment elongated. Her finger trembled over the trigger, her heart slamming like a metal drum in her ears.

She’d been here. She knew what came next. A warning to get out, to extract and abort the mission died unspoken as her jaw refused to work. The scene played out—the SUVs, the tanker truck, the order to take out the escort but leave the asset alive.

“Copper,” Steele whispered in her earpiece.

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“Sir.”Don’t do it! It’s a trap!

“Clear the field. Don’t hit the target.”

Fuck me! LISTEN! Don’t do it. It’s a trap!“Don’t hit the target, sir? Do not. Confirm?”

“Confirm.”

Don’t fire. Don’t start.

Her finger slid over the trigger.Don’t clear the field, don’t let them know the trap worked...

She fired. One. Uranium.No!Two. Zinc.Dammit!Three. Tungsten.No!Four. Gabriel turned...no.

He wasn’t there.

He wasn’t there.

The mantra repeating in her brain cut off when the world exploded. Heat ballooned out and crashed over her. She flew backwards and slammed into the man behind her. He hit the wall—bone crunched and blood soaked her. So much blood.

Twisting, she stared through the haze of red, muddy light into Gabriel’s lifeless eyes, then the ground swallowed her, rocks falling and slamming into each other. She

couldn't breathe. Flesh beneath her fingers remained chilled, but she found his jawline, then the column of throat and pressed her fingers to where the pulse should be. Hellish red filled her vision, and Brad stared up at her. "You pulled the trigger..." His face morphed, and Gabriel's lifeless eyes robbed her of speech. "You pulled the trigger."

Merc ripped away one of the rocks, his ruined face right in front of her. "You don't get to die, Sachi," he ordered. "You hear me? You pulled the fucking trigger. You killed them all. You don't get to die." He hauled her up by her arm, until she was face-to-face. "You get to rot in hell, but you don't get to die." Then she fell, and the building collapsed, and she was pinned.

Nothing remained but dust and blood and the sound of her own breathing...

Hands shackled her wrists and weight pinned her down. She fought her way through the murk, struggling to be free. Twisting, she slammed her head forward. Fresh pain stabbed through her skull, and the figure pinning her grunted. "Sachi!"

No, don't make a sound. Don't let them know they got to her. If they wanted to torture her... The weight on her chest shifted, and her struggle renewed. The binding on her wrists relaxed, and she struck with fists against shoulders—no, a back. Arms tightened around her.

"Sachi, it's okay. Wake up." The coaxing softness in the black arrested her. Blinking—she fought to wake, but a hazy orange-red light filled the room. Flickering flames, log walls, wooden floor—Gabriel. She shuddered and stopped hitting him, locking her arms around him and holding on tight. Across the room, sitting up from his bedroll, was Brad and his expression was pained and worried.

Brad is alive.

Memory and reality slammed together. Pulling her gaze from him, she slid her palms against Gabriel's chest. The man holding her eased back a little to meet her gaze.

"I dreamed again," she whispered. Even the vapors of her earlier drunk were utterly gone. The numbed feeling she'd achieved had let her find oblivion, then plummeted her into madness. Sweat slicked her arms and soaked her hair. Despite the fire and the layers of clothing, dampness soaked her skin.

"I know. You're safe." Steady. Gabriel was always so steady. Even when faced with the reality she might have to kill him, nothing rocked him. The only time she'd glimpsed real fear had been a half-elusive tangential memory when the team pulled her out of the building. The haunted look in his eyes when he'd met her gaze. They never discussed the moment, or how he was gone moments later. She understood the why, he'd gone to cover their exit and to make sure no one remembered the team had been there.

He'd done it without hesitation, even knowing they were taking her and he might never see her again. Would you have gone back for him? Brad's question shimmied loose from the cloud buzzing in her mind. She'd refused to answer him earlier—not because she hadn't wanted to answer, but because she hadn't known. The nightmare jarred her, and she trembled.

Fisting Gabriel's shirt, she stared at the bruise on his face and said, "I'm sorry."

"Shh, nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart. It's not our first rodeo." The reminder of the few times she'd woken with a silent scream and how he'd been there, shaking her out of the nightmare dragging her back into hell, grounded her. Except, it was the first time it had happened since Brad was alive, and...she never told Gabriel the content of her dreams.

"Yes, there is." She grabbed her courage and her balls, and stopped running from the



fear clawing her alive. “Brad asked if I would have gotten you after the hotel blew up—if I’d have contacted you and brought you into this life.” This close, she couldn’t miss the minute change in Gabriel’s expression. His eyes tightened, and his mouth compressed. Brad aggravated him, and he had every right to the aggravation. “And I didn’t know then if I would have, but I don’t think I would have gone back for you. I would have wanted to—I would have wanted you, to see you, to hold you, to be with you—but I wouldn’t have done it.”

She did not turn her head. She didn’t want to know what Brad’s thoughts on the subject were because, fuck him, as much as she still loved him, she did love Gabriel, too.

“I wouldn’t have done it. Not because I didn’t care, but because I love you, and I can’t be responsible for your death, too.”

Rather than pull away, Gabriel’s arms squeezed her tighter. His narrowed eyes softened, and he leaned in to brush a kiss to her forehead. “Sweetheart, you aren’t responsible for anyone’s death.”

“I fired the shot.” Dammit, he didn’t understand. Digging her fingers into his shirt, she tugged on the fabric. “Don’t you see? I was the reason Cobalt was in that damn room. I fired the shot. The one that got them all killed.”

Gabriel pressed a finger to her lips, and his expression grew grave. “Stop. Brad—come here.”

Suddenly Brad was there on the floor at their side.

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“Look at him,” Gabriel continued. “He’s right here, he didn’t die. You didn’t fire a shot that killed him.”

For three years, they’d ‘played’ dead and hunted for what cost them. She was that reason, and she didn’t look at him. Having him back...it was a Pandora’s box. “I fired the shot...”

“You followed orders.” Brad’s voice cut through the tension. “Sachi, I was there. I heard Steele’s orders. He told you to take out the escorts and to leave the asset. You didn’t detonate those bombs. You didn’t fire the missile.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting to get her wild heart under control and her breathing steadier. A hand slid along her nape then closed over her neck. Gabriel’s arms were still around her.

“You didn’t kill me, babe.” Brad’s voice went hoarse. “I did that when I let them keep me in play-dead mode. I swear to you, you didn’t kill me. If anyone’s guilty of that, it’s me.”

A tear pressed past her squeezed shut eyelids.

“Keep talking to her.” Gabriel’s quiet confidence beckoned to her.

“Is she even fucking hearing us?” Brad’s question held raw anger and a hint of desperation.

“Yes.” Calmer, Gabriel stabilized the rockiness in her soul. “She just needs to know

we're here—and in this case, that means you.”

“How often does this happen to her?” The fingers on her nape began to massage, the pressure testing the locked muscles. Darkness held death. The weight of the building. The rapidly cooling body...

“You watched her all the time, and you don't know?” Surprise, not judgment. So weird to hear them talking about her, while she was so distant. Like sitting behind a sniper's scope and staring down at the empty deck and loading dock below. Away from the action, away from the detonation... her finger on the trigger.

A long silence, then Gabriel sighed. “More often than I think she realizes. Some nights, I can get her back to sleep before it all registers. Other nights... she's silent, Brad. She doesn't scream, she doesn't wail, she just makes this low sound and then goes blank. I keep waiting for her to discuss it the next day, but she doesn't. So fucking talk to her. She needs you.” The last words gave her heart a vicious twist.

“I don't know about that.” Brad's lips were near her ear. “You hear him, Sach? He doesn't think you need him.” Something dark, lonely, and a little bit sad inhabited his tone. “But do you know what I see? You've got a death grip on him, and there's terror in your voice when you talk about losing him. I also heard you say you love him... and you know what, babe? I heard the truth in those words, the raw, naked truth.”

“Loving someone isn't enough.” Blowing out a breath, she opened her eyes. Running away didn't help anyone. Brad slid behind her, and Gabriel stayed right where he was. “Not when you tear them apart.”

“I don't know.” Gabriel's thumbs worked the base of her spine, the sensations warring with Brad's fingers on the back of her neck. “The only one getting torn apart here, is you. I'm fine. Brad's fine.”

“Brad’s more than fine.” Laughter eased the sadness in his voice. “I’m here with my best girl and her guy. I get to be a part of the equation.”

Yes, he was a part of the equation. “You died.” Equal parts accusation and cry for help.

“I did.” No games. No laughter. “If I could change nothing about the last few years save one thing—letting you believe I was dead would be it. You should never have felt that way. You shouldn’t feel that way now. Fuck it all, Sachi. Fuck Steele. Fuck Titanium. Fuck the fucking U.S. of A. This is me. I’m here, I’m alive, and I will do any goddamn thing necessary to make this right for you.”

The words penetrated the shell around her, and she met Gabriel’s gaze. “He didn’t fuck Chrome.”

“No,” Gabriel agreed with her. “He didn’t, but Chrome really isn’t his type.”

“Mine either. He threatened to tie me up and toss me in a cell if I did anything stupid. He’s kinky like that.”

A rumble at her back sounded suspiciously like Brad laughing. The corner of Gabriel’s mouth kicked up. “Do you like to be tied up?”

“Like it?” She considered the question. “Not really. People tie you up to interrogate you or force you to do something.” Logic and reason told her that. Sandwiched between the two men, they had her completely surrounded and caged. “Having you guys cage me isn’t so bad. Not really my kink though.”

One by one the muscles in her neck seemed to unlock. Gabriel canted his head to the side. “You’re coming back to us now, aren’t you?”

The shock of waking, like being plunged into icy water, began to pass as she soaked in their heat. “I freaked out.”

“Not so bad as that.” Gabriel loosened his hold a fraction, and Brad pressed in against her back. With a finger, Gabriel traced her cheek and brushed away the evidence of tears. “Copper doesn’t cry.”

“No,” Brad agreed, his lips teasingly close to her ear. “She doesn’t.”

“Sachi does.” Saying the words lifted some of the dead weight off her chest, allowing the claustrophobic pressure smothering her to lighten. “She doesn’t like to admit it, but she does. Cold showers help. Drinking helps more. Copper can’t feel that way. Copper has to do the job.”

“Copper’s good for work,” Brad said quietly. “Do you remember what I told you about doing the job? How you can come close to the edge, but you didn’t have to go through with it?”

Yes. She remembered. “You said I was always your girl.”

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“I did.” He nipped her earlobe, then tickled the soft skin with his tongue. “You’re not justmygirl.”

Surprise eddied over the ebbing shock. “What?”

Switching to her free ear, Brad nibbled a second kiss. “Are you paying attention?” The tickling sensation pricked to a single point of pain when he bit her earlobe gently. Then he laved the spot he’d hurt.

“Yes.” A shiver worked along her spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

“You’reGabriel’sgirl, too.” The nuzzling sensation slid through her. Gabriel’s fingers on her cheek kept her gaze fixed on him. She didn’t miss the way the firelight flared in his eyes. His attention shifted from her to Brad. “Yeah, he has a real hard time trusting me right now. I don’t blame him. You’re having a hard time with it, too.”

Yes, she was.

“Our girl?” Question, not statement. Gabriel raised his eyebrows at Brad.

“Ours.” Brad agreed.

“Duly noted.” Something passed between the two, something she couldn’t decipher, and she stole a look at Brad, but his expression was enigmatic.

“Sachi.” Gabriel pulled her attention to him. “Lean back against Brad, then stay very still.”

Surprise kindled in her belly and ignited a fierce wave of desire. She loved it when Gabriel got bossy. Brad helped her shift more securely into his lap, then Gabriel caught her face in his hands and kissed her. Nothing tentative lived in the way his mouth closed on hers, or how his tongue traced the seam of her lips until she parted them to welcome his sensual invasion.

Her breathing shallowed as he tasted her, slowly. The devastating combination of Brad holding her while Gabriel kissed her swamped the unease and terror, drowning them in a comforting pleasure. The tingling in her middle spread, and her nipples tightened. Gabriel drew out her lower lip, scraping his teeth over it lightly when he broke the kiss.

Tipsy on the promised hedonism in the contact, she gazed at his retreating face longingly. Sex was a tool and a power play, but not the way Gabriel touched her or kissed her. He always made her feel treasured and safe, gave so much more than he took. “Come here.” He beckoned with a curl of his finger, and she scooted from Brad’s lap to his. Instead of straddling his lap, Gabriel turned her and settled her bottom snugly against the strain of his erection. The fabric between them kept it a tease. Wrapping his arms around her, Gabriel cradled her against his chest, and she found Brad watching them with an unreadable expression. Cupping her breast, Gabriel massaged her slowly, never quite touching the tautened nipple. Exquisite torture, and she rode the rising wave. Brad settled his hands on his thighs, watching both of them without moving or saying a word.

“Tell me something?” Gabriel’s whisper teased her ear, and like Brad before him, he traced the whorls with his tongue, eliciting another shudder from her. The sensations were piling one atop the other, washing away the ragged tension from the half-remembered dream.

An image of Gabriel’s empty eyes staring up at her flashed across her mind, and she tensed. With a stroke of his thumb, Gabriel traced her nipple through the shirt.

Electricity sizzled through her system, and the image vanished.

“Are you with us right now, sweetheart?” The question accompanied a pinch as he teased the nipple, cutting off the blood supply, then releasing it to allow pleasure to join with the sharpness of the pain.

“If you’re trying to seduce me,” she whispered, fighting the ragged nature of her breathing to get the words out. “I’m pretty much a sure thing.”

Brad’s lips quirked into a small grin, and affection gentled his expression. Still, he stayed where he was as Gabriel covered both of her breasts with his hands and continued to torment her through the fabric. Every touch grounded her more in reality. Reality where they were both alive, they were safe—and with her. Hunger stormed through her, and the need to feel his skin under her hands. She wanted to touch and torment and tease too, dammit.

Putting thought to action, she ran her hands over his thighs, but Gabriel bit down on the side of her neck, a hint of pain. Then he said, “No. Brad take her hands.”

Surprise filtered through Brad’s eyes, yet he didn’t hesitate to take her hands in his. Calloused, firm, and strong, they were easily a third again and then some larger than hers.

“No touching for you,” Gabriel said, and something erotic unlocked in her. He was definitely feeling bossy. “Tonight, you let us do the touching.”

She zeroed in on the wordus, and Brad’s chin came up, his gaze sharpening.

“Yes,” Gabriel told him. “Kiss her, let her feel how alive you are.”

Instead of leaping to action, Brad frowned. Trapped in Gabriel’s arms while his hands



continued their teasing, she couldn't move.

"You sure?" The hoarse question threatened to undo her. It held everything inside it she felt—need, disbelief, and the all too-rare hope.

"I am now," Gabriel said slowly. "Kiss her, man. She wants you, and she needs you."

"Us," Brad corrected, and Sachi groaned. The connection between the two men seemed to be deepening right before her eyes. She didn't understand what shifted or changed, but her thighs clamped together. Her pussy ached, clenching around emptiness, and her breasts seemed to hold all the pleasure. Every time she got a fix on Gabriel's caresses, he pinched or adjusted the force he used, and it sent another shock through her. Her clit throbbed at the idea of Brad kissing her while Gabriel touched her, but Gabriel kept her still, and Brad's hands tightened on hers.

For the barest moment, she felt the slickness of moisture where his palms glided over hers. Understanding fisted her heart. Brad was afraid. Her big, badass Marine was afraid to touch her. Even after everything that happened on the side of the road, and how his mouth had devastated hers with a wild kiss—he was afraid.

His dark eyes held hell in them, and she licked her lips. "It's okay," she told him. "We're in this together." The last remnants of terror slipped away. Brad was alive, and he was with them. They were in this together—the three of them. When he closed the distance between them, Sachi dug her nails into Brad's hands, and he took the pain without comment. His mouth hovered devastating close to hers, and when his lips brushed across her open mouth, Gabriel sucked her earlobe between his teeth and desire roared through her.

Together...

### Chapter 6

Electricity buzzed through his mind at Gabriel's suggestion. Instead of lunging forward, however, Brad froze. Three excruciatingly long years of waiting culminating in one single moment of absolute generosity. He didn't know how to react.

"It's okay." Sachi's voice hummed with possibility. Her green eyes softened, the pupils so swollen as to engulf the color. Gabriel continued to massage her breasts, and her pulse beat rapidly beneath Brad's fingertips. She curled her hands into his, her nails biting into his palms. "We're in this together."

For a split-second, Brad glanced at Gabriel. The man had all but told him he didn't trust him earlier, and yet here he was, offering him this gift? They were both offering him a gift. Grateful beyond words, he closed the distance and covered her mouth with his. Despite her tremendous strength and skill, Sachi was still smaller than him—her athletic frame powerful and sturdy, yet she seemed infinitely fragile.

Unlike the kiss on the side of the road, no violence hummed through him. She opened to him, her tongue seeking entrance to his mouth. He wasn't sure who was dominating who at the moment, and frankly, he didn't give a fuck. Between him and Gabriel, they dwarfed her, and yet her tongue coaxed his, twining and stroking, licking and tasting.

The rasp of fabric told him Gabriel continued to caress and tease her, but Brad wanted her naked. He wanted to admire, kiss, and stroke every inch of her beautiful body. Needed to recommit himself, learn what changes time had wrought, and remind himself how lovely she was. Breaking the kiss, he lifted her hands until her arms

stretched over her head.

Behind her, Gabriel grinned and abandoned her breasts. He stroked his hands along her sides and then up her arms. Only when his hands touched Brad's did he nod. Capturing her arms for him, Gabriel murmured. "We're going to go slow." Whether to Sachi or to him, Brad didn't care. He listened to the other man. Once upon a time, he'd have gutted another for telling him what to do where Sachi was concerned—but Gabriel had been right about a lot.

Their girl had changed, and she needed them both. Brad needed her, and by extension, Gabriel. "Slow is fine," he agreed with him, skimming his hands down to her waist and tugging her shirt upward.

Faint scars marred her soft skin, a crisscross here, a knife slice there. She treated them all, fading them with lotions and creams. He remembered the hours she would spend on it when not training. No distinguishing marks save for the tattoo on her ass and the one on the bottom of her right foot.

He'd get to both. Tugging her shirt upward, Gabriel caught the hem and used it to bind her wrists. Stealing a glance at her face, Brad wanted to drown in her desire-laden eyes.

"I think," Gabriel teased, his tone low and amused, "she doesn't mind being bound with careful hands."

Sachi groaned, arching her hips, then settling against Gabriel's lap. She ground her ass against his erection and drained the humor from his expression. "I think she's aching at the moment, and you two are torturing me."

Canting his head, Brad absorbed the byplay. With his teeth, Gabriel grazed the skin along her arm, and goosebumps raced across her flesh. Fascinated, Brad followed the

path of them to her breasts, where her nipples had tautened to twin points. She'd never had large breasts, but her gentle curves were a mouthwatering addition to her perfect shape. Solid, shapely hips swelling around a flat, ripped abdominal. No, his girl wasn't soft.

He traced a finger around her belly button, then followed the faint line of the scar across her right abdomen. Dipping his head, he repeated the gesture with his tongue on his way to her breasts. With a reverence belying the hunger gnawing him alive to strip her pants down and sink into her, he laved one nipple, then the other. Alternating tiny nips with slow sucks, he sought to retrace what she enjoyed, what made her squirm and the moment he heard her breath catch.

Glancing up, he found Gabriel had turned her head and kissed her. The motion of the other man's mouth on hers as he seemed intent on devouring every little soft sound she made went straight to his cock. He hadn't lied to them when he said he enjoyed watching. That Sachi knew he was here, that he could flick her nipples and suck on them as she squirmed and her thighs widened—that he could almost taste the scent of her arousal—had him hard as a stone.

Whether Gabriel intended to let him sink his cock in her pussy or her mouth or maybe her ass—God, he'd always loved her ass—Brad rubbed his cheeks between her breasts before catching a nipple again. The hard clamp of his lips drew on the distended tip, and her hips arched. He sucked until he felt the tip engorge more fully, the blood flooding to fill the space and heightening her sensitivity.

Exploring her sides with his fingers, he changed caresses; he didn't want her getting too used to any one touch. At the top of her jeans, he loosened the fastening, and with reluctance, abandoned her breast to meet their twin gazes staring at him. The firelight left their faces ruddy and flushed with desire.

Sliding a finger beneath the band of her jeans, he teased along low enough to find the

hem of her panties. “Thank you,” he said, surprised at how rough his voice was.

“I’ve missed you.” The hoarse whisper filled him with the need to hold her. “So much.”

“I love you, baby. I swear to you, I will never leave you again.” Even if they never allowed him into her—their—bed again. He wouldn’t go. He would be the Ghost who followed her, protected her, and kept them safe. It would be enough to know she was happy.

Gabriel tugged her shirt free and tossed it to the side. Tapping Brad’s hand, Gabriel motioned for him to move, and then he finished undoing her jeans, and Sachi braced herself to lift her hips. Taking his cue from the other man, Brad took the hem of her jeans as Gabriel pushed down the waist. They stripped the denim away, then she was splayed in front of him, her thighs braced open by Gabriel’s hands.

They really made a lovely picture, her dark against Gabriel’s more golden looks. Night and day, chocolate and sugar, and lust nearly choked him. How fucking weird was it that Gabriel belonged exactly where he was—in the middle of their reunion. He’d thought him an interloper, a thief...yet he was neither.

“Beautiful,” Brad whispered, more aroused by the image they created. He slanted his mouth across hers and coaxed her into a kiss. Sachi’s arms came around him, and her fingers threaded through his hair. Her breasts smashed against his chest, and he groaned at the wonderful, warm weight of her.

Behind her, Gabriel continued to caress her, his hands moving down to her ass, and Brad surrendered it to him as he lifted Sachi toward him. She went to her knees. At the tug of her hands to his shirt, he realized she wanted his clothes off, so he sucked on her tongue and let her do whatever the hell she wanted.

Damn near blind with the need to touch her, he slipped his hand down to the juncture of her thighs and drew one finger along the seam of her labia. Dampness welcomed him, and he groaned. She was soaking wet. Gathering some of the moisture, he stroked over her swollen clit. Her muscles stiffened at the electric touch, and he released her mouth so he could watch the pleasure play out over her face.

The bud seemed to swell under each pass of his finger. He ached to plunge a finger into her pussy, but the next thing going inside of her would not be his hand. Her impatient tugs had his shirt open, and he shed it with a wince as the stitches pulled on his shoulder.

“Careful,” Gabriel said. Leaning past her and with a light hand, he braced Brad’s shoulder. “Let’s not open that up again.”

His breathing turning shallow, Brad nodded. The last thing he gave a fuck about was his injury, not when a naked Sachi rode his hand. He’d forgotten how silent she was when he pleased her. Getting her to scream took a great deal of effort, but then so did fucking her. Keeping her focused only on the pleasure, Gabriel nodded, then ran his hands down her back.

“As much as I’m dying to fuck her right now,” Gabriel admitted, the tight note in his voice giving an air of truth to every word. “You first.”

The permission freed him from supplicant to partner. Catching Sachi’s chin, he tugged her gaze up to meet his. “When was the last time you had someone in your ass?”

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Anticipation filled her eyes, and her lips curved. “Three years.” Heat scorched a path of possession through him. No, she hadn’t given that part of herself to Gabriel, and while he might have wished she had to let them play tonight, he was also profoundly grateful.

“Later,” he promised her, then met Gabriel’s gaze. The other man nodded his head, even as Sachi reached for Brad’s jeans. “Be careful, babe. I don’t think I have it in me to be gentle.”

“Since when have I ever needed gentle?” The challenge in her voice stoked him higher, and when she loosened his jeans and allowed his cock to spring free, they both groaned. The desire to lift her onto him and just thrust home trembled in every muscle, but as much as he wanted to take over, own her, and possess her—he had no intention of excluding Gabriel from this gift.

Fisting her hair, he kissed her hard until she shook from the force of it, and then said, “Turn around and take care of your guy over there.”

Surprise rippled over Gabriel’s face. Maybe he wasn’t used to sharing, maybe it hadn’t occurred to him, but Brad wanted the investment of all of them in this.

“She needs us both,” he reminded him, and Sachi’s wild grin ripped open the tomb Brad had kept his heart inside. It beat for her, and her joy was his. The moment she twisted and turned until she faced Gabriel, Brad let himself enjoy the line of her ass and the small of her back. He found the butterfly he adored and kissed it gently.

A hiss of breath dragged his attention up, and he followed the line of her back to see

Sachi's lips close over the tip of Gabriel's cock. Holy fuck, that's hot. Blood rushed south, and he made a mental note to play with the rest of her later. Gabriel's hand fisted her hair, and he thrust against her mouth.

Her impatience with Brad's hesitation had her wiggling her ass at him. He laughed, the sound shattering another barrier inside of him. Rising to his knees, he pushed his jeans down. He didn't have time to get naked. Bracing her hips, he fisted his cock. She'd always had an IUD before, and he didn't have a condom.

With a half growl, he pressed a hand against the small of her back, and she dipped and her ass raised. "Condoms?" He pushed the word out, because he wanted to thrust into her pussy so bad, he could taste it.

Gabriel let out a low sound of protest, then tossed the foil wrapped packet to him. Wasting no time, he ripped it open, sheathed his cock, then lined it up against her damp, hot sex, and eased into her pussy. He wanted to take his time, wanted to savor the sensation, but the fisting clamp of her sheath sucked his will and he thrust into her, balls deep, and his body seemed to go rigid.

His groan mingled with theirs, and the mutual sounds of pleasure only heightened the experience. Home, really home, for the first time since he'd lost her, he let go, giving in to the unrestrained need bursting within him. She met his thrust with a push of her hips. Everything heightened—her breathing, Gabriel's harsh little pants, and the explosive sound of his own breathing. He ground into her pussy, finding his rhythm by varying his thrusts, first shallow and then deeper.

Sweat slicked his body, and his spine went molten. Every stroke brought him closer, and he ached to fill her over and over again. Controlling her motions, and helping her stay upright, Gabriel's roar rocked through him. He watched as the man came, and Sachi lapped him up. Brad's balls tightened at the utter eroticism of the release. Only when she released Gabriel's cock, did Brad slide his hand beneath her.



Finding her clit, he went to work on pulling her orgasm from her as his body fought to find his own release. She arched her back, grinding against him with every thrust, and then she came with a silent grace. Her head tilted back, and the muscles along her sides tensed with her strain.

Losing his rhythm as violent trembling seized him, he came with a rush. Sachi collapsed beneath him, and he fell forward. Gabriel caught his arm, bracing him. Shudders rolled over him as his cock jerked, eager to empty himself into her, condom or no condom. Even Gabriel's arm holding his felt right, and slowly, he settled onto her left side, and Gabriel released him to crawl over to her right. She lay between them, trembling from her orgasm, and Brad stroked the damp hair from her face. Across her, he stared at the other man, and Gabriel gave him a small smile before kissing her lightly.

"I love you," she whispered, then turned to include Brad in the declaration. "I love you, too."

Exhaustion twined with euphoria, and he drew a finger down her cheek. He had no words. Thank God, she'd never needed them. She captured his hand against her face, and held fast to Gabriel with the other. With a soft sigh, she closed her eyes, and her even breathing betrayed sleep.

She took his breath away, every damn day. Gabriel dragged a blanket up, and Brad dealt with the condom and kicked off his jeans. Then he stared at the other man.

"Sleep," Gabriel told him. "Right here with us."

All I needed to hear. They could work out any other issues tomorrow. For now, he was home. He turned toward Sachi, kept his hand on her, and buried his face against the back of her neck. For the first time in years, he didn't fight sleep or worry about hell awaiting him.

The sun barely created an outline against the windows of the lodge when she woke. Buried beneath a heavy blanket, her head pillowed on an arm, Sachi went from sleeping to awake with a jerk. Every muscle in her body was sore, and the weight of a cock against her ass reminded her of the men she slept with—only one was missing. Pushing upward, she glanced behind to find Brad's eyes opening slowly, a yawn splitting his jaw, but where Gabriel should have been was only cool blanket.

Panic skittered along her spine, and she froze—the sound of running water punctured through the cloud, and she exhaled a deep breath. When Gabriel invited Brad to join them, she thought her heart would stop. Then she thought her heart would explode from the tenderness they'd shown and the care they'd taken with each other, not to mention with her.

Brad's arm around her middle tightened a fraction, and she pushed the hair from her eyes to find him watching her. The wariness in his gaze reminded her of the thin ice they all traveled in this situation. Gabriel would never have agreed just for her, of that much she was certain. He'd given up a lot for her—his teaching position, his normal life, and his freedom from the game. Jumping right into the deep end to be with her again had him cutting ties with his life as he'd known it, albeit briefly, to return to one more like his time with the CIA.

"We still okay?" His sleep-roughened voice, stubbly cheeks, and rumpled hair made for a powerful combination.

Heart squeezing at his question, she smiled slowly. "Yes, we're more than okay." The past...sucked. "You know, as much as I hate everything that happened—losing the team, losing you—I'm oddly grateful that it let me find Gabriel." Saying the words aloud crystalized the conflicting feelings in her heart. Leaning down, she nuzzled the corner of Brad's mouth. "But I am glad you're alive. I meant it when I said I missed you."

His hand slid around her nape and squeezed gently. He took control of the kiss, and it was slow and devastating to her senses, but it held all of his feelings and tugged at her own. A hello, a welcome, and a sweet reunion all rolled into one. When she pulled back, he let her go with a tender smile. His whole expression gentled. “I’m grateful for him, too. Heseesyou.”

An odd feeling inched through her soul, and she slid her leg between his. One of the things she’d missed most about Brad were these moments, the quiet ones away from the team, away from the missions, when the two of them could be honest—when he stopped playing games or pushing her buttons.

Competition was good, it kept them both on the edge and at peak performance. The power plays were simply fun, and he was so damn good at seducing her, even when she was determined to resist. But holding him, having him talk to her without artifice or agenda? “He’s pretty amazing,” she said. “I don’t know what the hell I did to deserve him, but I will never give him up.”

“Nor should you.” Brad stroked her skin, then cupped her cheek. “I owe him. Even watching you both these last several months, I had no idea how much I owed him.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” Gabriel’s quiet voice joined their moment, and Sachi glanced over to find him walking into the room wearing only his pants. His barefoot, bare-chested, and damp-haired appearance revved her system. His eyes softened when he looked at her, and relief swamped her. For a split second, she’d worried he regretted his decision. “It is my pleasure and my privilege to look after her.”

Brad chuckled. “You’re making me look lazy, man.”

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“Hard not to do when faced with my exceptional work ethic and charm.” The utterly deadpan delivery cracked Sachi up. Laughing, she sprawled against the blankets, savoring the warmth of the fire and the comfort of having both men there. It had been an agonizing night, but the weight on her chest—the inability to breathe, even the dense shackle around her heart...all of it seemed lightened, if not gone.

“Apparently.” Brad seemed less impressed with Gabriel’s wit, though good humor echoed beneath his dry tone. “Is there still hot water?”

“Yup.” Gabriel detoured to the kitchen. “And hot coffee.”

“Dibs.” Brad said, and she raised her eyebrows at him.

With a rakish grin and a wink, he tugged her upright and nipped her lower lip before stealing a kiss. “You like cold showers. I hate them.”

“Ditto!” Gabriel called, and she rolled her eyes.

“Pussies.”

Brad slid a hand down her body and cupped her sex, and she hissed in a breath. With an acquisitive look in his eyes, he asked, “How sore?”

“Oh, not even.” Which was a little bit of a lie, but the hell if she’d admit to it. Not when she had both of them here and the chance to indulge her hedonistic heart out. The freedom in that thought, however, gave her pause, and she smiled.

“Hmm,” Brad said slowly, his expression turning thoughtful. “I may have to see what we have so we can start getting your ass ready again. I haven’t forgotten how fucking fantastic you feel.”

Her heart did a little flip flop in her chest, and her breathing caught in her throat. Her pussy contracted at the thought. No, she hadn’t indulged in a single bout of anal since losing him, which meant it would be a lot like...

Brad’s grin grew. “Oh yeah, virgin ass. Next to yours, it’s my second favorite. When it is yours...” He paused when Gabriel reentered the room and met the other man’s gaze. “We’re still good?”

Something wordless passed between them, but try as she might, Sachi couldn’t decipher the message.

Taking a sip of his coffee first, Gabriel then nodded. “Go take a shower. We have lots of time for play and logistics and rules.”

She groaned, and Brad quirked an eyebrow at her. “What? Heloves his rules.”

“Said the pot calling the kettle black.” Brad slapped her thigh lightly, then pulled the blanket over her for warmth. “I like rules, too.”

“Breaking them, you mean.”

Brad strode from the room and laughed. “That, too.”

His whistling as he walked away made her smile. Once alone, she glanced at Gabriel and held out her hand. Without hesitation, he took a seat on the pallet with her, and she climbed into his lap. When he passed her his coffee, she took a sip and met his gaze. Gathering all of her courage, she asked the question she knew he would answer

with honesty. “Are you really okay with him? With you and I becoming—an us?”

His sober expression worried her, except she knew he thought through his responses, chose his words carefully, and never said what he didn’t mean. “I thought I would hate him. A part of me still does...not him directly, but that he hurt you. That through inaction, he let you be hurt. But I feel for the guy, too. He’s a player, and a skilled one—but he genuinely loves you. I’ve never seen a man look as lost or as desperate as I’ve seen him be the last couple of days. Last night, I saw it click in him. You. Me. Him.”

She held her breath.

“Until I invited him, I didn’t know I would...but it was right.” The air whooshed out of her lungs, and Gabriel gave her a soft, gentle kiss. “I don’t know how it works long term. I don’t know if he and I won’t end up wanting to kill each other. But I want you happy, and he’s another part of you. He owns that, and it’s his. I have a part of you, and I own it, and it’s mine.”

Hope swelled in her chest.

“You own us, sweetheart, body and soul. Maybe I don’t speak for him, but if we can make it work, I’m going to do my damndest.”

“I love you so much,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him, and he rewarded her by embracing her tightly. “I should have told you a thousand times. I love you.” She didn’t deserve him, but fuck the universe, she was keeping them both.

“I know you do,” he whispered against her ear. “I’m a really smart guy. I even speak hardass.”

Laughter rippled through her.

“I’m also a guy who knows what it is to miss you. Go see him in the shower. Rock his world.” The offer shook her, and she pulled back.

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. I plan to rock yours myself later.” He kissed her, the stamp of possession searing to her soul. “But you two need to get to know each other again. Just remember when he shoves his cock into you, mine will be there later. From the sound of his plans...you’ll have both of us soon enough.” He stood, helping her up and balancing his coffee at the same time.

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Biting her lip, Sachi felt a sudden shyness the like of which she'd never experienced. She asked, "Gabriel? Did you like restraining me last night?"

"Maybe." The corner of his mouth kicked up.

Pressing her hand to his chest, she rose on her tiptoes and brushed a kiss to his jaw. "You can tie me up anytime you want to see if you really like it." Because Gabriel would never hurt her, never take what she didn't give him, never betray her. The certainty of him fixed in her soul.

His slow smile grew. "Duly noted."

Anticipation raced over her as she hurried through the lodge to where she could hear the running water. Opening the door, she let herself inside, then leaned against it. Brad pulled the curtain back, soap on his hair and face.

His grin grew wide at the sight of her, and she murmured, "I hope you don't mind splitting the hot water."

When he crooked his finger, she danced into the shower. Good things only happened once in a while, but she was determined to embrace them all. His hot, soapy kiss left her laughing, and when he pinned her to the wall, she forgot how to think at all.

## Chapter 7

Brad surprised him on numerous levels. After their shower, Sachi and Brad returned to the living room of the lodge with flushed, relaxed expressions, and Sachi curled



right into Gabriel's lap. They all took turns making food, talking, and Gabriel found a growing number of items he and the other man had in common. The continued lack of assumption on Brad's part helped to settle Gabriel's reservations. He made suggestions and expressed his interest, but he didn't push.

More amusing to Gabriel, chess wasn't Brad's game. Sachi wanted to run. After her emotional night, the sudden need to run—even in subzero weather—hadn't surprised him. Sachi exerted control over her body when she felt the world spinning without her. She could maintain her form. Giving her some time—and space—Gabriel asked Merc to shadow Sachi on her run while he and Brad finished their game. He hadn't mentioned going over the intel—not because he didn't trust Merc, but quite the opposite. John was one hundred percent on Sachi's side, if he thought she needed to know, he wouldn't hold it back.

“What my sources have been able to decipher so far is the person hunting you is a woman.” He'd gotten that update while they were in the shower, and he'd checked in with Chrome on a minor fishing expedition. As far as Sachi's unit commander was concerned, the fishing expedition continued along with fresh shots of Sachi. These were from Vegas, and in nearly all of them, Cobalt had his back to the camera. Between the graininess and quality, Gabriel suspected the source wanted to make it look like the man with her was Brad.

Fingers on a rook, Brad's relaxed expression erased and his eyes narrowed. The draining away of anything friendly in those eyes might have given a lesser man pause. “When the hell did you have time to reach out to your sources?”

Not smiling, Gabriel shrugged. “From the moment the promise of a threat against you included her.”

The moment elongated, then his suspicion abated, and Brad moved the rook forward two spaces. Blowing out a breath, he shook his head. “Of course you have, sorry. For

a split second there...”

“You had to wonder if I was the one gaslighting you, so you’d go the fuck away?” The accusation wouldn’t have surprised Gabriel, after all, he certainly possessed the skills and the contacts to create a smokescreen.

“Except you won’t do that to her. You won’t risk her.” No question or doubt marred the statement. “And I don’t think you’re going to risk me.”

Smiling faintly, Gabriel used his bishop to take Brad’s rook and put his king in check. “Check.”

“I hate this fucking game,” Brad murmured, studying the board. “So, woman is behind the search. Did they say why they think it’s a woman?”

“Linguistics. Syntax. A visceral hatred for Sachi.” The last worried him some, except his girl was more than capable of kicking the shit out of men twice her size. A woman would be more in her weight class, and unless they got the drop on her...

Scratching his chin, Brad mused. “Men don’t usually hate her. Want to control her? Push her down? Overwhelm? Yeah, I’ve seen a lot of asshats try that shit with her. They don’t hate her.”

“Hard to hate the grail.” They shared a grin.

“She is that.” He’d never have put it in those terms, but the word fit. Hadn’t he been obsessed with her for years before finally finding her? Hell, he was still obsessed with her in many ways—obsessed with her happiness, obsessed with keeping the road clear so she could be herself—at least obsession had a name in love. Brad considered his options for getting out of check, of which there were only two. If he took the first, he’d be in checkmate in three moves, if he took the second, it would take six.

Gabriel was patient.

“So, female.” The other man tapped the desk. “Still doesn’t give us a lot to work with...”

“Have you pissed off that many women over the years?” He couldn’t resist the dig, not when the open shot was waiting to be taken.

“My fair share...” The flip response trailed off, and Brad’s hand froze on his queen. “Wait, they’re focusing on finding Sachi now, not me?”

“They’re still looking for you, but that shot on the beach keeps coming up, and other shots of her in Vegas. According to Chrome, Ant is hot on this asshole’s trail, but they are good enough to keep burying themselves, although it’s taking a lot of resources to keep burying them.” A serious problem if her image linked to the Las Vegas destruction kept cropping into the searches. Homeland hadn’t resolved the open case, and so far, he’d managed to misdirect any inquiries into her survival and extraction. Elite Metal was never there and couldn’t be linked. “If it were Red Wolf, he wouldn’t be narrowing his focus like this.”

The terrorist had been behind the trap that sabotaged Operation Phoenix and essentially destroyed their careers and lives. They still hunted him, and sooner or later, they would get him. It wasn’t a matter of if, only a matter of when.

“No,” Brad agreed, then took out Gabriel’s knight using the queen. So he’d taken option two. Five more moves to checkmate. “Red Wolf wants our guts on the deck, all shiny and splayed so we can watch ourselves die.” He sounded almost gleeful about it. “Since we fucking want the same, I get it. The beach...” The reference seemed to jar Brad. “What if that’s the clue?”

Gabriel’s gut didn’t disagree. “They want to lure you or her back to that beach. Either

to visit the memories...”

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“...or walk into their trap.” Pushing away from the table, Brad rubbed his arm. The stitches in his shoulder had to be itching. Sachi had checked the bandaging and her handiwork on the new stitches after their shower. Prowling through the lodge to the windows, he studied the white painted landscape beyond. Sachi had been gone for an hour, but Merc was with her.

She was fine.

“If you’re thinking we go, check it out, and trip the trap,” Gabriel mused aloud, “I’ve been considering the same thing.”

“Could be a wild goose chase.” Brad’s tone betrayed no emotion.

“Yes.”

“Could be a mistake. We’ve walked into traps before, thinking we knew what the op was.”

Gabriel nodded. He’d considered that possibility as well. “Yes.”

“Whatever we do, she has to be in the middle of it.” Folding his arms, Brad seemed to retreat into himself. The transformation, so similar to Sachi’s submergence into a role, gave Gabriel further insight into the other man. Who’d taught whom that trick?

“She is the best suited to be herself, and if we can lure out the asshole behind this little distraction and deal with it, we’re all free to go home.” Free to get back to work.

“Free to hunt Red Wolf.” Something cold rolled through those words. Hatred was too weak a word. Brad pivoted and faced him, wearing a smile completely at odds with his words. “Or we get a tan and more frustration.”

“Feels right.” He couldn’t tell him why, or even point to the evidence and say whom they wanted was on that beach in the Caribbean. The more he turned the idea over in his head, the more it seemed right.

“You win in five moves,” Brad said, grabbing his jacket, then tossing Gabriel his. “Talk to me while I smoke. I need to think this through.”

“Which part? The beach, or putting Sachi out there?”

The other man paused and frowned. “How the fuck do you do that?”

“Do what?” Rising, he pulled on his coat and kept his expression bland. It drove Sachi nuts, too. But the likeness between the two, the shared habits, the careful phrasing, and the deflections—Brad and Sachi were two sides of the same coin. No wonder they were combustible together.

Scowling, Brad jerked open the door and let in a whoosh of icy air. “Anticipating my reactions and what the fuck I’m thinking. It’s annoying.”

He was good at his job, and it turned out to have a huge payoff in his life. “Maybe you’re an open book.” Outside, he leaned against the railing and stared down the trail Sachi had jogged off on earlier. Snow up to their asses, yet she went running. God, he loved her.

“Maybe you’re an asshole.” Brad made it sound like a compliment.

“Could be. Stop trying to change the subject. If we want this settled before she’s

back, we discuss it now.” He’d never lie to her, never hold her back, and he trusted her abilities, but he refused to risk her on a fool’s errand. He and Brad had to be on the exact same page before they involved her.

“Not changing the subject, just not liking the idea. A bulletproof vest on a beach is impossible. While she’s the best person for the job, all it takes is a sniper with a rifle and it’s game over.” On that, they agreed. “Rather just fucking handle it myself.”

“That’s nice. You handled shit by yourself for three years. You can go back to that, but if you do? Don’t come looking for her again.” The line in the sand—or snow, as it were—was nonnegotiable.

The lighter in his hand flared as Brad touched the flame to the end of his cigar. He puffed twice, sucking the heat into the tobacco and stared at Gabriel. “That sounded like a threat.”

“It’s a fact. Sachi and I have rules. We don’t lie. We don’t leave each other out. We accept each other for exactly who we are. She will have missions. She’ll do them. I’ll back her on site or by waiting for her...but we don’t lie. We don’t leave anyone behind. You can do things your way, run solo, play the Ghost. If that’s what you want, you can do it. I’m not kidding, however, I will fight you returning, and I will win.” No games. No playing. “I opened the door to you. I’m good with you being here. I’m not good with you fucking her over again.” Ever. In any existence. “We’re on the same page with this, or we’re done before we take another step.”

Another puff of the cigar, then Brad nodded slowly. Ice frosted in his eyes, but he gave a tight smile. “Good to know where we stand. I’ve spent three years being a Ghost, whether I liked it or not. Risking her is not something I’m comfortable with—a fact Titanium used whenever they sent her on missions, they made sure I was somewhere else.”

Which explained his absence in Vegas. “She is who she is. No one puts her in a cage—not Chrome, not Titanium, not us. Deal?”

Blowing a stream of smoke toward the overhang on the porch, Brad nodded. “Deal, though you may have to call me on it from time to time.”

“No problem.” Gabriel studied the landscape, then checked his watch. What the fuck was taking her normal forty-five to sixty minute run so long?

“Ten minutes, then we go look for her.” Brad’s turn to read my mind.

“Agreed.”

Then they stared at the trail and waited.



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“Both of them?” John stared at her as if she’d sprouted two heads. Even the disfiguring scars couldn’t disguise the question in his expression.

“Yes, both.” She talked between pants. They’d set off slow in the cold to warm up their muscles, but by the second mile, they’d upped their speed. They were angling uphill, through snow and at altitude. Yes, her heart hammered so hard, she could hear it thrumming in her ears. Legs burning, face chilled, and heart racing—God, it was good to be alive.

His continued silence, however, nibbled at her on the ascent, and when they reached a point where the hill leveled out, she dropped from the run to a walk. A stitch burrowed into her side, and she bent at the waist, gasping for deeper breaths of the icy air. Apparently, she needed to do more high-level training. The lower oxygen content was getting to her.

“Spit it out,” she ground between harsh inhales.

Like her, John’s breathing was labored, but he didn’t seem anymore winded than her. Instead of replying, he shrugged and scanned the area around them. Silence wasn’t what she wanted from this conversation. After several long, very pregnant seconds, he said, “Walk it off, then we’ll run down.”

Sachi stopped moving and pivoted to face him. “John...what the fuck?”

“Apparently, you have two guys for that Sach. You don’t need my opinion.” Him holding out on her? Since when?

“In twenty years, you’ve never butted the fuck out of my business if you had a real concern. So either you don’t think there’s any issue, or something is rubbing you the wrong way and you don’t want to piss me off. Which is it?” Since when had John ever edited his thoughts with her?

“You’re too close.” While he continued to scan the area around them, she studied him. Rarely would she leave herself so exposed, but John missed little and she didn’t want to be Copper at the moment. That reality rocked her, and she frowned. “Too close to both of them to see it rationally.”

“So, tell me what you see.”

“No.”

Excuse me? Jaw tightening, she slammed her fist into his bicep. The blow hurt her chilled fingers more than it moved him, and he gave her a bland look. “Fuck your no. What the hell do you mean, no?”

The right corner of his mouth kicked a fraction higher. “No means—not doing it. You and the professor have something good. If you want to fuck it up by bringing that ass hat into it, my opinion isn’t going to change anything.”

“Brad’s made mistakes.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Didn’t say you were.” Yeah, but it was what he didn’t say that left her stunned. With a half-growl, half sigh, John paced a path around the snow-packed clearing, then stomped back to her. “Brad gets inside your head and fucks you up. You do stupid

shit for him, make commitments, and when he was gone—it fucked you up worse. He lied, Sachi. Plain and simple. He let everyone think he was dead. You don't do that to family."

No. She'd never do that to John, and he'd never have done it to her. Even for the two years they were apart, she'd known he was out there. "He has his reasons."

"Not good ones." Rock solid in his position, he didn't budge. Dropping his chin, he met her gaze. "Are they?"

"No. They aren't." Conceding the point, she braced her hands on her thighs and bent at the waist. Stretching her legs bought her time.

"I don't fuck him, so maybe I don't get it. You let someone you care about think you're dead...you don't get the right to screw up what they have."

"You like Gabriel." He'd never admit it.

"Don't hate him."

She bit back a small smile.

"You love him, that's what matters." His response didn't surprise her.

"I love Brad, too." His loss was still an open wound inside of her, one she'd thought had healed over with scar tissue. Maybe it had, at least until that morning in the hangar when Titanium ripped it open with the k-bar of their survival.

"Loved." Who was he correcting? Her or himself?

"You're pissed. I get that."

“Good.” He bumped her chin with a light fist. “You need a knock in the head. The professor’s not so smart if he’s letting Brad get to you. Thought he’d do better. He sees you. You told me that.”

She had, because Gabriel saw her in a way no one else had, and she suspected no one else would. Nothing she said or did pushed him away. He didn’t run from the darker parts of her, the parts even she didn’t understand. How many months had she been having those nightmares? How many nights had he coaxed her from the darkness? “He knows me, but he also loves me. Sometimes, one gets in the way of the other.” Gabriel accepted Brad, so maybe he saw something, too. Needing both left her a little twisted inside, but if she could have them, if she didn’t make them both miserable... “John?”

He scowled. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Lean on him because he was her rock? Need her brother as much as ever, even now?

“Don’t John me.”

She laughed. “John, I can’t change the last three years. Neither can Brad. I figured out I don’t want to, either.”

Suspicion sharpened in his gaze.

“I wouldn’t have Gabriel.” Reaching for the sky, she stretched, then settled on her feet. “We’re fucked up, you and me. I’m used to life kicking me in the teeth. This is really new to me, getting what I wanted so much...and I don’t want to screw it up. I need you to be okay with it.”

The low gravelly grunt of discontent jarred loose some of her unease. “You’re fucking perfect, they should be grateful you show them the time of day. But if I gotta pick, I vote for the professor.”

“I don’t want to choose between them.” She didn’t and she wouldn’t. In some ways, she’d made her choice. Gabriel allowed Brad to be a part of them, Gabriel let him in, and she embraced the choice because Gabriel saw what she needed. If she’d had to choose...

“I suppose this means I have to keep his sorry ass alive.” John shook his head at her.

“Two men?”

“I’m a demanding woman, what can I say?”

“Greedy bitch.” But he said with a hint of a smile. “Fine. I’ll keep the jackass alive. But one fucking step out of line...”

Closing the distance between them, she gave him a hug. “Yeah, yeah. They’ll never see you coming.”

“Damn straight. And cut the mushy shit.” Still, his smile didn’t diminish. “Next thing you know, you’ll be talking baby crap.”

A shudder went through her, and she punched him. “Asshole.”

“Bitch.”

All was right with her world. Well, mostly right. They still had to find out who the fuck was targeting Brad, deal with it, and then kill Red Wolf. Then she could concentrate on the happily ever after shit.

Copper sucked in a deep breath of the thin air and glanced at the icy silence around them. Mountaintops were kind of creepy when they were this still, and it made her neck itch. Merc scratched the back of his head. “Are we done with our Oprah hour, or do you need me to talk you out of this idea?”

“No, we’re good.” The bruises on her heart still stung, maybe they always would. She’d taken Brad back into her bed, thrilled to be held by him and to hold him in return. The night before with Gabriel had left her shaken to her core, open, raw, and vulnerable to both men. But I haven’t forgiven him...The realization didn’t sit easily with her soul.

“Sachi?” John’s hand closed on her shoulder, and she leaned into his grip.

“I’m okay.” A lie. But if she said it enough, she could make it true. If she couldn’t forgive Brad, it wouldn’t matter how well he and Gabriel got along or how much she wanted it to work.

For once, John let her bullshit slide. “Just give me the word.”

“Let’s run.” They were miles from the lodge, and the run back would clear her head. Side-by-side, they began their descent, and the burn in her muscles took over. Copper turned the situation over in her head. Examine it from all sides, put herself in Brad’s shoes. What if she’d been the one presumed dead? What if she’d woken in the hospital with Titanium and his people?

John grunted as they continued their zig-zag downhill dash.

Would she have followed orders? Would she have let them think her gone? What if they’d locked her up?

No. They’d have had to put a bullet in her. Brad had made a tactical decision—a bad one, one Copper might never forgive. Goddammit, I want him back. Maybe Sachi could...so, the real question was, could she carve away the part of herself holding back? Or would it cut her last tie to being who she was?

Who are you? Sachi? Copper? Gabriel’s girl? Tungsten’s widow? Brad’s lover?

“Fucked up is what I am,” she declared to the cold.

“Preaching to the choir,” John replied, and she laughed. Yep, definitely preaching to the choir. “You’re running like a girl.”

“It’s the boobs,” she shouted. Inspired, she pushed herself, and he caught her easily, but she didn’t care. Running pumped adrenaline, flooded her body with endorphins, and reminded her she was still very much alive. Might take her fifty years to figure her shit out, but until then, she was all in.

They met Gabriel and Brad on their descent following their trail in the snow. They hadn’t made much effort to hide their path, but having them out looking for her filled one of the hollow places inside her. Their grim expressions relaxed as she approached, but the guarded look in their eyes set off warning bells. “You figured something out, didn’t you?”



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“We need to talk. We need Copper and,” Gabriel said with a glance at John, “we’re going to need your help.”

Grounding herself, she packed away the emotional baggage and nodded. “Let’s do it.” Playtime was over.

Dammit.

### Chapter 8

Tammany Bay, Tortola

Brad adjusted his position. Like John, he was lashed to a tree about a dozen yards off the warm sands in the thick of the palm trees. Unless someone looked directly up from the base of the tree, no one would spot them. Below, Copper strolled from her chair to the edge of the water. Unlike the commercial beaches on the other side of the island, this one was harder to get to. The rutted road to reach the campground twenty meters away was difficult to traverse and lacked the amenities of the five star, beachfront hotels.

It had been perfect to escape with Sachi, and they had enjoyed five fantastic days—splitting their time in the water snorkeling, on the beach talking, and in the tent wrapped around each other. Running his tongue over his teeth, he shifted the scope to check the other sniper positions he and John scouted the night before. They’d chosen their tree because it gave them the best line of sight on the two best positions.

Gabriel sat in a chair rented from one of the local restaurants, a newspaper open and

his attention seemingly on it. Though he was armed, he was a good three meters from Copper's position. Too fucking far when all that stood between her and a bullet was a scrap of fabric making up her bikini bottom. Stretching her arms, she showed off the line of her back. The streaks of red in her coppery hair glinted under the sun.

Hating every part of the settling in to wait and see, Brad murmured, "All clear on the eastern portion of the bay."

"All clear west." Though they were close enough to talk without the mikes, John hadn't said a word to him since Gabriel outlined the plan in Montana. Though he'd objected, Copper called Chrome and alerted the commander to their plan. He hadn't seen strategic value in the op, but he also hadn't discounted Gabriel's gut. Brad got the feeling okaying their op had more to do with sticking it to Titanium than the other man admitted, but it gave them the go-ahead.

A go-ahead Titanium sent him an order to disregard, so Brad left his phone in Montana. Like John and Sachi, he had a tracer tagged under his skin. Titanium damn well knew where he was. Scanning the tree line, he checked for telltale signs of the rest of his team. Tin and Nickel were the most likely candidates, if they weren't assigned elsewhere. Like Copper, Nickel got noticed in all the right ways, and half the job of disarming the enemy was giving them something else to see.

"You know," he said, keeping his voice pitched low since Merc could hear him, "You and I used to be friends."

Merc grunted.

John was too important to Sachi for Brad to ignore his anger. He was also too dangerous to worry about if he really wanted Brad out of Sachi's life. With only a handful of visitors on the beach, those present enjoyed a relative amount of privacy. Gabriel seemed certain whomever they were looking for was a woman. The only

other women on the beach were islanders—and one was the owner of the closest restaurant and close to sixty-five years old. Not likely candidates.

He tried again. “For what it’s worth, man, I’m sorry you didn’t know we were alive.”

“Watch her back and save your ass kissing for later.” John’s gravelly response didn’t offer friendship or forgiveness.

“Trust me, I’m not letting her out of my sight.” He checked her position in the water, she’d dove into the warmth of the ocean and swam out a couple of meters, then rolled onto her back. The droplets sliding across her chest glittered under the sunlight. Why the hell couldn’t he have brought Gabriel and Sachi here to spend more time together rather than baiting a trap? He had memories here, good memories—he didn’t need some psychotic bitch with an agenda messing with those.

They’d make memories on another trip... A weird feeling coasted along his spine. A chill of apprehension tangled indelibly twined with another emotion, one that tasted suspiciously like hope. The three of them would make more memories, Brad promised silently. Three. Weird and yet right. Focus. Movement in the water near Sachi had him squinting.

“Gabriel, we’ve got something approaching Sachi at her seven o’clock.”

“I see him.”

After a fast check of the other sniper positions told him they were clear, Brad targeted the man rising out of the water. Tall, blond, tan, and fit—but not built. He waded closer to her and his mouth moved, but without ears on Sachi, he couldn’t hear what he said.

She rolled over in the water and faced the man, yet she stayed out of his line of

sight. Good girl. The guy blanched and then gave her a nervous smile before wading away.

Merc chuckled. "Pussy."

His grin arrested when Sachi spun in the water, and her expression changed. Retargeting, he found Gabriel surrounded by three men. "Who the fuck are they?"

"Sidearms." Merc stated. "They aren't alone."

Sachi abandoned her wading and strode for the shore. On his feet, Gabriel had said nothing and his com wasn't open. Fuck, stay or go?

Another figure cut across the sand toward the men. Like them, his black shirt and jeans stood out on the sliver of sand. Sachi was almost to the beach when Gabriel struck the man nearest to him. An elbow to the face sent him down, and he caught the second with a sharp punch. The third lunged forward, and Brad made the decision. He fired. Merc's shot took out the fourth, and Copper hit the fifth guy at a run. Racing, she leaped, slammed both of her knees into his chest and took control of his gun arm in one smooth, coordinated move.

Three seconds from strike to having him down. Once he determined she had her guy contained, he switched his attention back to Gabriel. The spook was smooth. His two were out, but plunks of sand exploded around him and then raced across the open stretch toward Copper. Both dodged.

"Sniper. Water." Merc warned. Angling his sights toward the water, Brad scowled. Two men were firing from over thirty meters. The rifles they carried had a longer range, but he trusted his angle, and he targeted the gun first. It exploded on the guy, and the second went down in a spray as his face vanished.

“Clear?” he asked Merc. Before he could answer, bullets slammed into their tree and shredded the leaves around them. The rapid thwacks sent bark and other debris flying. Switching his rifle, Brad cut his secure cord with a k-bar and slid down the tree below the fire line.

Merc hit the ground right behind him.

“That’s not a rifle.” Screams from the beach punctuated the continued fire and a motor tore through the water. Slinging the rifle onto his back and freeing his sidearm, Brad sprinted for the beach. Gabriel and Copper were exposed where all hell broke loose. A shadow at his back, Merc moved with the same purpose. Three years hadn’t dampened their ability to work in concert, and they shared the same goal.

A detonation boomed through the morning, silencing the screams, and a wall of heat billowed from the beach. Ignoring the danger, Brad raced inward. He’d lost her to one explosion before, no fucking way was he letting it happen again.

Rising out of the water, Sachi stared at the smoking remains of the restaurant. Flaming debris continued to flutter downward. Dead men littered the beach. Fortunately, most of the civilians had taken off into the trees at the first sound of gunfire. She’d barely had time to process the grenades before she and Gabriel had headed for the water together to escape the fireball.

Where the fuck was Gabriel? Spinning, she scanned the forms on the beach, then the water around her. The two dead men floated a few meters out, drifting further thanks to the tug of the tide. A motor...she’d heard a motor—and then she spotted the boat skimming the waves. A light skiff, it had come all the way in, and it raced out of the cove at speed.

A white shirt reflected the sunlight—Gabriel. Fuck me. The skiff angled toward a boat further out. The light craft crashed up, riding the wave and over it. Too small for long travel, they’d either used it to skirt the island or...yes, it was definitely heading for

the boat.

The swim would take time, but she could do it. The men on those boats had weapons, so when she got there, she'd arm herself.

"Copper." Brad splashed into the water and looped an arm around her waist. "We have to evac, now."

Shoving him away, she glared. "Gabriel is on that boat."

"And we're going to go get him," Brad told her, hauling her toward shore. "First, we need to clear the area, now." The order resonated. In the field, Brad outranked her. Abandoning Gabriel flew in the face of everything she believed. Not waiting for her response, Brad got her to the beach and then hauled her with him as he sprinted for the tree line. Merc was a heartbeat behind.

"I have their transmitters."

The underbrush stabbed at her bare feet. Merc moved to her side as they ran, and both men slammed sharper branches and foliage away. Two clicks to their vehicle, then Copper slid into the back and ripped open her bag. Dragging her clothes on over her damp skin wasn't comfortable.

Brad started the engine and held his hand out to Merc before he could climb in the passenger seat. "Phone."

Not questioning him, Merc slapped it in his hand, and the jeep lurched forward as Brad accelerated. The trees whipped past, but she had her boots on and a knife strapped to her leg, then another to her arm and a third in the sheath at her waistband.

The phone rang on the speaker setting, and Poppy's voice was a tad breathless when

she answered. “Code in.”

“Tungsten. Five-Delta-Sierra.”

“Confirm, Tungsten. Five-Delta-Sierra. Code word?”

The jeep bounced over a nasty divot, and Copper braced herself as she slid the forty-five into a holster. Merc held a hand toward her, and she pulled a fresh clip from the bag at her feet to pass to him.

“Copper. Confirm.”

Brad’s code word was her name? Some other time, she might decide whether she was tickled or irritated.

“Confirmed. What’s going on?”

“Activate Gabriel’s tracker. I don’t have the code to do it from here. We’re on Tortola. He’s been taken by persons unknown aboard a yacht...”

“Mike Alpha Charlie One One Delta Bravo Lima,” Merc supplied. “Eighty-footer, Argentinian flag.”

“Activating Gabriel’s tracker and sending info to your phone. Tin’s team just landed on the island. They are on their way. Titanium orders you to stand down and let the team take point.”

“With all due respect, fuck that. They could be weighing anchor right now. We’re not leaving him.” The grit and absolute certitude in Tungsten’s voice steadied her. The chaos of worry bled away, and she focused. Eighty-foot yacht. Seven men dispatched to bring Brad in, but they’d taken Gabriel instead. “Have them activate our trackers



and retrieve, but we'll be on the yacht. Tungsten out."

They broke from the tree line, and their tires squealed on the passing blacktop.

"You don't have Gabriel's tracker I.D.?" Off the rutted road, the vehicle moved even faster, and she could afford the question.

"They never let me have his." Tungsten gave her a toothy grin, one equal parts amused and furious. "Too worried I'd track him down and slit his throat."

"Plan?" Merc had one arm braced on the dashboard. Their green and tans blended well with the natural landscape around them, but stood out in the crystal clear water. Didn't matter, they could do this. They'd gone up against worse odds in far more terrible places. At least the water is warm here.

"Small local harbor, two minutes," Tungsten said. "Grab a boat and angle out. Make sure they aren't moving, then hit the water and take the yacht. We clear deck-by-deck. Merc, you get the control room and upper deck. If it moves and it isn't ours, eliminate it. Copper and I are going for Gabriel."

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Hang on, babe. She flexed her hands on the crossbar. He'd been a field agent. He had skills.

"Room-by-room clear, Copper. We can't afford to be ambushed when we don't know their numbers." The orders rippled over her, and she nodded. One thing she did damn well was a mission. If his captors had hurt him... Copper closed her eyes, counted to three, and let it go. The emotion drained away. Insert, assess, assault.

Capturing her gaze in a quick glance via the rearview mirror, she saw Tungsten's eyes held a promise. "We'll get him back."

Yes, we will.

Sure enough, the yacht weighed anchor and moved into deeper water away from the destruction on the beach. The speedboat they acquired allowed them to skim the waves and trail the boat. It took some maneuvering, but the yacht pressed on past the cruise ships and more. They were definitely heading away from Tortola waters. Copper's gaze remained fixed on the boat, her whole body one long line of tension.

Merc took over driving the boat while Brad got their gear together. His shoulder protested the exertions, and he ignored the pain. He'd bleed out before he let someone in his family down again. When the yacht slowed and parked, Merc angled them away, as though they were a group on their way out, and they dropped anchor a mile out. Open water everywhere. Fun.

"We don't have equipment to go deep, so we're going to snorkel it." They did have those. Breathers at ready, weapons wrapped in waterproof gear and secured, Brad

studied the distance. A mile long swim would leave them all somewhat fatigued.

“Three points of entry,” Copper said, as though reading his mind. Then again, she probably had, since she knew how he thought.

“Rally on the deck, move together.” They were better in pairs, but once they cleared the deck, Merc could hold it. Pausing, he ran his knuckles down Copper’s cheek. “We’re getting him back.”

“I’m holding you to that.” No anger. No emotion. Just focus.

“Do.”

Without another word, they tumbled into the water. Tin’s group would be backing them soon enough. If they followed the trackers, they’d be there by the time the deck was cleared and they were below. Soon enough to save their asses if necessary, or clean up the mess. Either worked.

Slicing through the ocean, he concentrated on keeping his breathing even. Copper extended herself at first, pulling away from him and Merc. She’d always been a better swimmer, but her hindbrain seemed at war with her tactical mind. When she slowed her pace, conserving her energy, Brad relaxed a fraction. Copper was too professional to lose her shit, but after witnessing the dream and hearing Gabriel’s assessment, he worried about her.

Worry later. Mission now. Training shuttled his personal thoughts to the side, but instead of going quiet, they continued to whisper all the things that could go wrong. Once upon a time, he could go into these missions with clarity of purpose and faith in the team around him.

He didn’t doubt Merc or Copper’s skills, not even a little. He worried about Copper’s

state of mind. He worried about the risk to her personally if she let emotion take over where her training would normally dictate. He worried if they were too late, it would destroy them both.

We won't be. Being late wasn't an option. At the yacht, they surfaced one at a time. Merc went up first, and Brad followed him. The stitches on his back complained about the salt water and the pulling. He ignored both. Copper tread water, her gun pointing upward. If they were spotted, the shooters would have to come to the side to get a clear shot, and she'd take them out.

On the deck, he went fore while Merc went aft. Three guards down later, and he covered Copper coming up the side while Merc headed toward the control room. With Copper on his six, they went below decks. The quieter they took out the opposition, the better.

A six and a half foot behemoth appeared in front of him, and the man let out a shout. Seizing his wrist, Brad drove it upward then used a knife to slide right between his ribs. The warning, however, had already been given. Copper emptied three shots into the man racing down the hall toward them. An alarm went off, the klaxon blaring overhead, and below them, the rumble of the engines engaging accompanied the haul of the anchor.

Fuck.

Descending to the next deck, it became a free-for-all. How many fucking guards did the ship have? They dropped the twelfth—since he'd been keeping count—when the engines and alarm both ceased at the same time. Merc had secured the bridge.

A shout from below echoed up the last set of stairs in the aft, and Brad held up two fingers as he checked for resistance. Copper went still next to him, her gaze facing the way they'd come. A second shout accompanied a sizzling, staticky sound. She

stiffened at each echo.

“Where is he?” A woman’s voice drifted out to them. English wasn’t her primary language, and a distinctly Ukrainian accent emphasized her words. “I saw his bitch on the beach, so I know he was with her. Where is he? Turn him over to me, and the pain stops.”

A pause, then Gabriel said, “Really? That’s all you got? Tickling me to death?” The sizzling sound began again, and Gabriel let out another shout.

Copper cut a look to Brad. Yeah, they were going. With two fingers, he gestured her to the other staircase, then pointed to himself and the aft stairs where they stood. She understood and moved on swift, silent feet toward the fore descent stairs. He gave her five seconds to get into position, then began his descent.

The stairs emptied into a long, open hallway. Copper appeared a second after him on the opposite end. Tracking the sound, they cleared each room, checking them. Computer terminals occupied one. An office another. The third he came to was open, and Copper pressed to the other side of the door.

Inside, Gabriel was strapped to a chair with electrodes hooked to his chest. Brad counted two guards besides the woman they’d heard talking earlier. He held up three fingers to Copper.

She shook her head. Five fingers.

Who the fuck was the cunt in the other room? She had some heavy ass firepower, personnel, and a wealthy fucking boat. Meeting the question in Copper’s gaze, he nodded. One heartbeat. Two. They went on three. In the room, he took the guard at the immediate right of the door. One hard fist to his temporal bone, and the man dropped. A blade flew from Copper’s hand and lodged into the device sending

electricity into Gabriel. It shorted, then stopped.

She shot the man holding it.

The fight was swift and brutal. Neither of them waited. Copper broke one man's knee, even as another tried to grab her in a headlock. A sickening wrench preceded his scream. She slipped low and slammed her head into the second man's groin. Swinging up, she was behind him. One shot to his kidney and the second to the back of his head with the gun.

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Brad had his own issues. He took a fist right to his stitches before he slammed the butt of his gun into his assailant's face. Bone crunched and blood sprayed, but the bastard didn't get back up.

Pivoting, he and Copper pointed their guns as one toward the woman holding a knife to Gabriel's throat. Dark eyes glared at him, her attention full of fury. Thick, black hair framed a completely unremarkable face. "You bastard, I knew you were alive. I knew it." Holding Gabriel's hair in her fist, she'd jerked his head back to keep his throat exposed to the razor sharp edge of her blade.

Brad searched his memory. The accent, the looks—none of it registered. "You can play this two ways, zhinka, let him go and we'll talk, or keep the knife right there and I'll put a bullet between your eyes."

Upper lip curling, the bitch scowled. "Drop your guns, or I'll kill him."

"Not gonna happen."

The blade pressed closer, and a thin ribbon of blood trickled down Gabriel's neck. "Then you shoot her." She jerked her chin at Copper. "If the man means so much to you, shoot her, and I will give him to you."

Brad paused as though considering the offer. "You want me to shoot her for him? I think you overestimate his value."

A hiss of sound escaped her lips, but Copper didn't move, didn't twitch, didn't react. "He must mean something, or you wouldn't come for him..."

“Seriously, zhinka?” Brad gave her a crooked smile, the one most women seemed to swoon for, and winked. “I don’t even know who you are. I’m here because I like the boat.”

The snarl on her face gave him pause as did the pure rage glittering in her eyes. “You don’t remember me?”

“No, bitch, he might not. But I do,” Copper interceded. She jerked her gaze to the woman. “You’re the stupid FSB agent we seduced to get access to your files.”

“Really?” The moment Copper said the words, recognition struck Brad. It had been years ago—the mission before the beach visit, ironically. They’d been looking for someone feeding weapons into one of the African conflicts, arms dealing with a side of espionage. Their leads took them to an FSB agent.

He’d never have put the face to the op. The woman had been a means to an end. It had been one of the first times he’d had to involve Copper in a seduction. He’d hated every minute of the woman putting her hands on what was his, so no wonder he’d forgotten her. A paper pusher, but with her access, they’d gotten what they needed.

“Of course you don’t remember me, but I remember you. I remember what you cost me. So, shoot her, or I’ll kill him. Either way, you lose one of them today.” Triumph echoed in her tone. She’d put him in a check position. Brad met Gabriel’s eyes. Cool defiance and...trust shone in them. Gabriel trusted him to not shoot Copper. The trust staggered him where the woman’s hate did not.

The blade continued to press into Gabriel’s throat, and the blood flowed faster. Any closer and she’d sever his jugular, and nothing they did would save him. Not acceptable. Swinging the gun, he targeted Copper. Gabriel’s captor let out a little hiss of triumph.



“Sorry, babe,” he told her. She didn’t move, didn’t even look in his direction when he pulled the trigger.

“Yes!” The woman crowed with a cruel laugh. The motion pulled the blade from Gabriel’s throat, and Copper fired. A small hole appeared in the center of her forehead, a shocked expression replacing her malicious glee. She fell in slow motion. As a single unit, Copper and Tungsten closed in on Gabriel. Copper checked his throat, and pressed her hand over the bloody wound while Tungsten sliced the tape holding him.

Above them, the steady beat of helicopter blades echoed through the bulkhead. Together they stripped the electrodes off Gabriel’s chest and hauled him to his feet. Bracing him between them, they headed for the stairs...and home.

## Chapter 9

Ten hours later...

The Ghosts had descended in force. Tin and Nickel met them on the stairs with medical supplies. Fortunately, the shallow cut on Gabriel’s throat was the least of his injuries. The electric shock torture had done a bit of a number, but Copper remained a fixture at his side, her expression unreadable.

Letting the team do another sweep and clear, Brad kept watch over Copper and Gabriel. Blood trickled from the tip of her ear, but she’d waved off medical care while they tended Gabriel. The professor put up with it long enough to stand, but when his legs would have buckled, Brad caught him. Leaving the team to do their job, he helped Gabriel up the stairs with Copper in attendance.

Ghosts or not, she remained armed and watchful. The team cleansed the boat, dealt with the bodies, and dumped the computers before they pulled out. Brad and Copper

were silent sentinels. Until they were off the boat and home, Brad knew he wouldn't relax, and he doubted Copper would either. When they'd finally boarded the jet with the team, Zinc had paused at Copper's side and murmured something in her ear before cutting down the aisle to join Merc. The two men exchanged a wary handshake.

Weird. In the last three years, the Ghosts had been the only team Brad had been allowed, and he'd never felt further away from them. Gabriel had been given the bedroom, the medic wanted him off his feet. Electroshock could have some nasty side effects, and until they got him home to the docs, they weren't taking chances. Copper didn't leave his side.

After takeoff, Tin dropped into the chair next to him. "Titanium's got a hard on for kicking your ass," he murmured low, but then held up a thumb drive. "Here's your get out of jail free card."

"What the fuck is it?"

A slow predatory grin slid across his dark face. "Locations for two of Red Wolf's estates. Whoever that bitch was, she was in bed with Red Wolf and apparently running from him. Use it, shut the commander up, and get your chick back."

"Thanks, brother."

Tin bumped his shoulder, then hit his feet and returned to where Nickel stared out a window. Turning the thumb drive over in his hand, Brad blew out a breath. Yeah, the information was valuable. He shared Tin's need to stab Red Wolf in the kidneys repeatedly with a spoon...but he had a more important mission at the moment.

Two bottles of water in hand for an excuse, Brad nudged the door to the bedroom open. They'd be back in Dallas soon enough. Gabriel lay propped against some

pillows, a sallow color beneath his tan. Copper was sitting like a rigid statue at the edge of the bed, her gaze on Gabriel like a hawk.

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“Thank God,” Gabriel muttered, the relief in his voice pulling Brad farther in. “Get in here.” Shoving at the bed, the man tried to sit up straighter, but his fatigued, over-stimulated muscles collapsed before he made it an inch.

After closing the door, Brad circled the bed and gave him his arm, then got him to where he could sit up.

“Ignore me,” Gabriel gritted out between his teeth. “Get her and put her between us.”

Not having to be told twice, Brad dropped the bottles and retrieved Copper. She was stiff, her muscles so rigid and chilled, he half forgot their swim and the fight before it. Post mission ops, they’d always avoided touching each other—at least while the team was around. But they had the bedroom, and Gabriel was right. Copper needed them.

“He needs rest,” she argued when Brad all but deposited her right next to Gabriel then boxed her on the other side.

“Shut up.” He echoed Gabriel, or maybe the other man echoed him. Wrapping his arms around her, he adjusted to help Gabriel get his arm around her too. She shuddered once, then muscle-by-muscle, seemed to unwind.

“There she is,” Gabriel murmured. “No more shock for you. Come on, put Copper away and give us our Sachi back.”

Our. The word stuck in his throat. He was still a part of them. When their gazes locked, Gabriel raised his brows. “Really only up to talking one of you down at the moment. Help me get her back, then we can talk you down in the morning.”

A stupid grin crossed his face, and Brad nodded slowly. “You got it, Professor.”

“Oh, and Brad? You ever a point a gun at her again, and I will fucking kill you.”

Sachi laughed, the broken sound a little jagged, but more human. “I knew he wouldn’t hit me...”

“Nah.” The tension in his gut eased. He was home. Fuck it all, three years of purgatory, but he was finally home. “We didn’t get around to discussing the rules, but trust me, not shooting Sachi is at the top of my list.”

Another weak chuckle slipped free, and Brad raised a hand to stroke her tangled hair. She needed a shower. For that matter, so did he.

“Okay, rule number one—off mission, Copper goes in the box.” Gabriel said. “We get to take care of you. Deal?”

Brad liked that rule.

Sachi blinked slowly, then slanted a look at him. “Tungsten, too.”

“Done.” No hesitation. Tungsten spent three years busting his balls to get back to Copper. They worked damn well together, but Brad wanted Sachi.

“Rule number two.” Sachi moistened her lips. “You get a new codename if you’re going to run ops with us.”

“Brass,” Brad agreed. “For both his balls—which clank—and the fact that Copper, Tungsten, and Brass is a killer alloy.”

“I like that,” she whispered.

“Fine. Rule number three...” Gabriel grimaced.

“...is Gabriel gets rest right now,” Brad finished for him. “We’ve got a lot to do later, and we can work all this out.”

“Fine.” The other man actually agreed. “Keep an eye on her. She promised to let me tie her up. I plan to hold her to it.”

“Oh, really?” Intrigued, he slanted a look at Sachi, and she chuckled.

“What the hell? We only live once, right?”

Damn straight. Oorah.

“Oh, and Brad?” Sachi’s voice dropped, but she had her head tucked against his chest, so he ignored the warning signal. “Don’t think this means I won’t kick your ass if you ever leave us again.”

Taking a page from Gabriel’s book, he grinned. “Duly noted.”

Asset: Arsenic

Asset: Arsenic

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:36 am*

Arsenic is playing a dangerous game, but one with hefty payout—Red Wolf’s head on a platter.

For more than a decade, she’s worked in the shadows. From soft physical protection assignments for young royals to information gathering from hardened criminals to living a double, sometimes triple life in order to get the job done, Addison “Arsenic” Leeds gives her loyalty to one man—her brother. In her world, the ends always justify the means, so when they need to ferret out the last double agent within the Elite Metal ranks, she accepts the assignment to be recruited to his cause, to play double and turn the double.

For months, she’s ventured down the route. When her target finally trusts her with a key piece of information, she goes rogue, knowing full well that when she descends down the rabbit hole, it will take a Mad Hatter to pull her out. A job she entrusts to the only other man who can lay claim to her heart—Sam Reese, the loose cannon her brother despises, and the only man as crazy as she is. Whether he accepts her invitation or not, that’s a gamble.

### Prologue

Arsenic didn’t slow down as she walked through the facility, spending two bullets for every man who got in her way. Nothing would be allowed to impede her progress to the computer room. Ricky had been showing his setup off earlier, so convinced he only needed an old fashioned key lock to keep the hackers out. Two bullets into the lock dispensed with his myth. Inside, Uranium and his so-called partner stared at her, shock etched into their faces.

“Good evening, boys. Thank you for all of your assistance.” These were the last words either man would ever hear. Two bullets for Uranium, followed by two more for his compatriot, Ricky. The fucking mole in the state department was nothing but a damn cog in the wheel, but he’d held Uranium’s leash, and for that, he had to go. After checking the loader in her Glock 17, she stepped over their downed bodies and retrieved the thumb drive from the computer.

It held all the information she needed to get to The Right Dishonorable Robert Carlisle, Earl of Bonneville—Red Wolf. Ricky spent an hour gloating over his invitation into the inner circle—all he had to do was deliver the information on that thumb drive.

Information men would kill for, and—as she glanced at the still warm corpses on the floor—men would die for. Elsewhere in the compound, an alarm began to blast. Her absence had been noticed.

Opening her clutch, she removed the lighter. Giving the bottom a twist, she flipped open the top then tossed it onto the bodies before exiting. She walked confidently, her pistol at her side. Most men, when they saw a woman in a pretty dress, never looked in her hands. In fact, it was the last place they looked.

At the end of the hallway, she opened the door to the patio and stepped outside. An explosion rocked the building. Guards standing at the stone railing overlooking the tropical gardens raced toward it. Girls, half-dressed, screamed as they raced away.

Arsenic kept walking, it was very much time for her to exit stage left. Another spate of gunfire echoed behind her, then a very Russian voice yelled, “Prival!”

Pivoting, she turned and blinked her eyes at the nervous guard pointing a gun at her. “I’m sorry, luv. I don’t speak Ruskie.”



Her nonplussed response had the desired effect; he lowered his gun a fraction. Her bullet hit him in the gut, and when he stumbled and dropped, her second went right between the eyes. “Cheers.”

The three more guards that entered the courtyard she took out conservatively—one bullet apiece. A second explosion, courtesy of the cleaning supplies she’d blended together before going to find Uranium and his cohort, ripped through the side of the compound.

More shouts ahead of her. Ricky’s security might not be well trained, but he certainly had a lot of them. Damn inconvenient of the bastard. Sliding her hand into her purse, she pulled out the cigarettes. Taking one between her lips, she tugged the filter free then tossed the slim explosive as the first lot made it to the top of the steps.

The grenade cleared the path for her, and she picked her way past the pile, then down the long set of stone steps to the beach. It took another two cigarettes for her to make it to the sand. Pausing at the edge, she wrapped the thumb drive in the case, pulling it tight to seal it. It was watertight, and it would need to be if she had to swim. Next, she taped it between her breasts.

Checking the load on her gun, she frowned. Only three bullets left. She was rapidly running out of options. A figure appeared above her and leapt down, catching her about the waist and sending her flying. They tumbled together before she made it to her feet. Her heels sinking into the sand had her off balance. The scar-faced bastard surged to his feet right behind her. Despite his monstrous size, he moved lightly. Great, she’d found the damn bodyguard.

Avoiding his blows, she tucked and rolled, then slammed her foot into the back of his knee. He went down with a roar, but caught her leg and flung her. She tumbled, then rolled over and landed on all fours. Her gun, however, wasn’t so lucky. It landed in the sand between them.

She could handle herself in basic hand-to-hand combat, but hand-to-bloody-mountain didn't appeal. Kicking off her heels, she fit her palms into them and began the dance. The heels worked like blunt blades, cutting and slicing where she managed to score.

Roaring like a wounded bull, he got his arms around her and squeezed. All the air went out of her lungs. Slamming her shoes into his neck, it took three firm jabs until one finally penetrated his thick neck.

Instead of dropping her, he slammed her into the beach. Anyone who thought sand was soft had never been thrown into it by a bear or a man with the strength of an ox. His next blow caught her in the shoulder and damn near dislocated her arm. Rolling onto her knees, she slammed her foot into his crotch.

Staggered, he kept coming.

A second blow, and he yowled like a wounded animal, but he didn't slow. Grasping her purse, she fumbled for the cigarettes, one left—popping the filter off, she hit him in the balls one more time then threw the cigarette at him. Scrabbling on hands and knees, she rushed to her feet and raced away from him. The explosion sent her flying, and she hit the surf.

Ears ringing, body bruised, she lay face down as the surf washed over her. Some distant part of her brain knew not to breathe, then reality surfaced with her, and she shoved upward. Above, the compound burned, belching huge, black clouds of smoke.

A helicopter circled and then dove in rapid descent right for the beach. She'd been spotted.

"Bugger all." She fought to stand. If they took her out now, then she would go out on her feet. The helicopter didn't quite land, but hovered right above the sand. The wind from the rotors staggered her, then the door opened.

“Well, come on then, you stupid git.”

God help her, the one bastard she'd wanted to get the message had. Not hesitating, she ran for the copter.

## Chapter 1

36 hours earlier...

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:36 am*

At a little after 6:30 PM local time, Addison “Arsenic” Leeds stepped out of the little bistro where she’d popped in for a coffee and a sandwich. She knew the image she presented from the cocktail dress down to her £400 shoes. Though not born into the peerage, she could carry herself as well as any lady, thanks to training in etiquette and protocol. Her ride waited for her, leaning against a motorcycle, a smirk on his ugly mug. With a jerk of his head toward the bike, he said, “Get on.”

He didn’t wait for her agreement, merely straddled the monstrous machine and gave her a smug look. She was hardly dressed to be riding such equipment, but never let it be said odd would stop her. Walking across the cobblestones with care, she refused to make a single misstep. She loosened the chain strap of her clutch then slung it across her body so her hands were free. Then she mounted the bike, uncaring that it bared her legs nearly to her crotch. Setting her heeled feet onto the footrests, she slid her arms around her mark’s waist and leaned into him. He put a hand over hers on his abdomen, then twisted and caught her mouth in a kiss so full of tongue, she barely felt his lips. Nipping him, she tried not to draw blood since she was supposed to be playful.

“Don’t mess up my lipstick. It’s bad enough you’re making me ride this beast.”

He laughed, then ran a hand along her thigh. “That’s not the only beast you’ll be riding tonight.”

She would not roll her eyes, nor would she curl her lip in absolute disgust at how he referred to himself. For his information, he was less a beast and more a true prick. Instead, she merely smiled, then dropped one hand to his cock and gave him a good hard squeeze. His hiss of pained breath pulled a smile from her. “Can’t wait.”

After this next meeting, she wouldn't have to. She could put a bullet in his brain and put a period to the end of this ugly chapter in Elite's history. It'd taken her months to get him to this point. Months of allowing him to coax her into turning rogue against her own team, as if she would ever turn against her brother. Not that anyone understood her relationship with Kryptonite. In fact, Uranium griped repeatedly about him since he discovered the Elements' involvement in the first place.

Arsenic didn't let it stop her; her brother needed this mission accomplished. So, she would take care of it. He was a thinker and a code cracker—he looked at patterns and understood them. He just didn't get people, or how dirty she sometimes had to get in order to get a mission done. She knew it all, and she'd been trained by the best.

Before the best turned on her and slammed the knife in her brother's back.

“Problem?”

Santos “Uranium” Radomirov was still staring at her, so she gave him a bored look.

“Only that we're still sitting here.” No sense in concentrating on what had happened before. It was done. Uranium nodded, then his motorbike came to life with a rumble. She secured herself once more against his back and held on as he accelerated out of the parking lot. It was late, it was dark, and the streets were slick with rainfall. Nothing she wore was going to keep her skin on her body if he decided to show off.

Bloody fantastic.

Thankfully, he didn't seem intent on killing them both. Instead of heading deeper into the city as she'd expected, he turned the bike onto an old access road for a defunct community airport. The humid air and breeze from the ride would likely do a number on her hair. She had a hairband tucked away in her clutch. She and Uranium were supposed to be vacationing on a little island in Bermuda, when in reality, they were

wasting time somewhere in Florida. He'd left her at the hotel at dawn, with only a note that said he would pick her up later. After hours of staring at the cheap paint on the wall, she'd made a tactical decision and did him a similar favor by leaving him a note to find.

It didn't do him any harm; he'd located her well enough. He continued on the route, turning into the airport, then turned onto an adjunct road following a road toward an old hanger. The lack of lights, security, and anything resembling denied access told her this old airport wasn't really in use anymore. Which made it the perfect location to bring in low-flying planes.

Perfect. She wouldn't have to worry about getting her shoes muddy.

He pulled up outside the hanger, then waited for her to dismount before silencing the bike and parking it. Once off, he stripped the jacket, then dumped it across the seat. Uranium was a big man, a retired Marine—already dead, according to the US government—and he had the scars and marks to prove it. Half of his face had been disfigured. A member of the Elite Recon teams, he'd been in on all of the disasters that occurred to them, but what they hadn't realized for the longest time was that the enemy had also turned him.

Turned, not before the disaster in Russia, but afterward. Unfortunately, Titanium's methods hadn't gone over well, not that anyone asked Arsenic for her opinion. It only mattered that Uranium began negotiations, then sold them out. He turned over intel about his own team, risking the lives of Copper, Zinc, and Nickel, to name a few.

Once he took her to the man pulling his strings, he would cost no one again—except the price of a bullet.

“If this is your idea of a date, it sucks. Just thought I should tell you.”

“It’s a really good thing I love your British accent, babe,” Uranium said as he sidled up to her then slapped a hand to her ass. Once he had a grip, he dragged her to him for another brutal, sloppy kiss. “Makes me hot when you talk to me like that.”

Linoleum made the man hot. She didn’t take it personally. The ease of his libido helped her do her job. Inside the hanger, he led her to a plane.

Bollocks. He intended for them to fly out without any gear. All she had in her clutch was some lipstick, a lighter, half a pack of cigarettes, and a single credit card. All useful enough, but the card was the most important. It was utterly untraceable—not even by her team or her brother.

The card remained from a cache dating back to her MI6 days, and one she’d brought for a specific purpose. Prior to leaving on their trip, she’d sent a message, and as long as that message was received, the credit card would become her lifeline.

“Surprise, babe. Hop on board.” He gave her ass another smack, and she added it to the long list of infractions she personally wanted to break his bones over. The fucktrumpet had this thing for inflicting pain, and she’d convinced him she enjoyed it. Was her own damn fault—men were so much more malleable via sex than any other method that she’d ever discovered.

Once on board, she found the private jet to be modest yet comfortable. They must’ve had a pilot, though she never saw any sign of him, courtesy of the cockpit hatch remaining closed. Once Uranium joined her, the door sealed and the plane began to taxi out of the hanger.

Choosing a seat away from him, Arsenic crossed one leg over the other, then looked across the aisle to where he glared at her. “Should I ask? I wouldn’t want to be overdressed wherever we’re going.”

“You don’t have to be dressed at all, babe,” he said, and his smile grew even more devious. “In fact, you can’t be dressed at all. They won’t allow anything you have on you to go with you.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt and stood. “You should tell the pilot to stop, then.”

Uranium stood abruptly, frowning. “What’s up?”

“These are expensive shoes. This frock cost a good deal more. The purse?” She held up her clutch. “A limited edition. Not giving up any of it to meet some bloke you think is special. So, open the door and let me off. You can go enjoy your romp without me.”



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His expression went from stunned to angry. “Sit down, hot stuff. You’re going whether you like it or not, at this point. Besides, they’re ready to meet you, and they liked everything you’ve done so far. They agree with me that you are an asset. Not to mention, I get a bonus for bringing you in.” He snaked his hands over to catch her and pull her closer to him. Settling her into the seat next to him before snapping the seatbelt into place, he swiveled in his seat so that their legs could touch as he ran his hands over her thighs.

Handsy bastard. She slapped them off of her.

“I told you the dress was expensive, as are the shoes. Currently, I’m unhappy with you, therefore there will be no more touching.”

Growling, he grabbed her wrist, but she caught his thumb, then bent it backwards, even as she planted one of her stiletto heels right against his crotch. “I’m sorry, did I misspeak? I said no to the touching. You can look, but you cannot touch. If you continue to make me cross, I’ll shove my thumbs into your eyes so you can’t look either.” She applied a judicious amount of pressure to her stiletto, and Uranium’s breath caught in his throat. Finally, he relaxed his hands, releasing her before leaning away.

She recognized surrender when she saw it, so she relaxed the pressure but kept her foot where it was as the plane took off. The look on his face was far too priceless otherwise, and it did him good to remember she wasn’t just a piece of ass.

“So, what were you saying about them being excited to meet me?”

The flight took less than two hours. Deplaning on a private airstrip, she studied her surroundings with a bored air. No customs, immigration, or health officials met them. Sand drifted across the darkened tarmac, and a microdot of a hangar sat across the field. A salt breeze caressed her cheeks. The lights on the plane were off, as were they in the small office, and if they'd had runway lights when the plane landed, those were off now as well.

Cayman Islands or thereabouts.

A private car pulled up. Uranium strutted ahead of her, then slid into the back. He was a right proper plonker, that one. The driver made it to the back door in time for her to join the uncouth idiot.

He had his cell phone to his ear when she sat. "We're here and on our way to the house."

Arsenic kept her attention on the window as the driver pulled out of the airport. If they were in the Cayman Islands, it must be one of the smaller islands. The winding road the driver followed passed no residences or businesses. Just an endless line of tropical trees and moonlit beach.

"Ricky's excited to meet you." Her companion stretched his legs in front of him and drummed his fingers against her thigh.

"Is he, now?" Affecting boredom took little effort. Being pawed regularly by the man next to her grew old the first day she'd allowed him to seduce her.

"Yes, and do me a favor, babe? Play the haughty Brit bitch for him."

"As you wish," she agreed before she caught his fingers and pried them off her leg. "Are you to play the thuggish prick?"

“Perfect,” he said with a laugh. He rubbed his hands together. “I didn’t think he’d go for it, but it looks like they’re desperate. Every damn thing we’ve done to shoot those idiots down hasn’t worked.”

“You know, it fascinates me how you refer to them as idiots.” He wanted her to be a bitch, she decided to embrace the role. “Aren’t you one of the idiots?”

His mirth fled, and she could almost feel the tension roll off of him. “That was before the Lord High Titanium decided to involve us in his personal fucking vendetta.”

“His vendetta? I thought he was part of your precious Marines.” Though she held the military in esteem, every good barrel had a bad apple.

“Whatever.” Uranium sagged in the seat. “He used us to wage his vendetta. We catch the hell for it, and what does he do? Makes us fucking disappear. Then we’re dead, his Ghosts, sent to do his bidding...no, fuck him. Fuck him, and fuck his precious little band of merry fuckheads. I had a life, a real one, before he screwed me over. I’ll have a life again. You’re going to be a part of it, won’t you?”

“I don’t know, am I?” The drive seemed to take forever. The airstrip must be on one side of the island, and wherever they were going on the other.

“You know you are,” he said, grasping at her hand. “Truth be told, you’re the best damn thing that happened to me since everything went to hell.”

Pity. “Then perhaps you can be less mysterious about our host and why we’re here.”

“After you meet him. He’s a bit of a dick, and he wants to get a look at you before he signs off on reading you in.”

“I’m not fucking him.”

“No, you’re not.” A possessive growl slid into his voice. “That’s my cunt, and I don’t share.”

“Brilliant.”

Lights appeared in the distance. Automatic gates swung inward, and armed guards circled the vehicle once—checking beneath it with a mirror. Four guards on the gates. She spotted two more off the drive, as they proceeded. For every guard she spotted in the dark, likely there were two more she couldn’t see.

Whatever else this Ricky-bloke was, his paranoia ranked high. Midnight flights, dark islands, lights off, and heavy guards. His invitation got her in the door, but getting out might prove a tad difficult.

The inside of the villa surprised her. Based on Uranium’s reactions on their way in, she expected to find their host alone and waiting for them with his nefarious plans. So far, for all his so-called subtleness, Uranium had proven to be more of a cartoon villain than anything else. However, a dinner party in full swing awaited them. Where did all these people come from? And how did he keep the island so dark?

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A short squat-looking man with graying hair and heavy jowls greeted them at the door. His topcoat and tails suggested a formal evening. He didn't shake Uranium's hand, and he curled his upper lip as he shook his head. Though he didn't seem to approve of Uranium's choice of dress—a dark blue T-shirt, cargo pants, and combat boots—the look he gave her was full of possibilities.

When she extended her hand, he accepted, graciously lifting it to his lips where he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. The affectation wasn't lost on her, nor was his obvious discomfort at performing it. “Enchanté, Miss—?”

Goodness, his French is atrocious. “You can call me Arsenic.” So much for stripping me. Uranium lied. What a shock.

“Can I be your old lace?” He laughed at his less than amusing joke.

What a ridiculous line. “Only if you want one of us to die before the weekend is over.”

His hawkish gaze sharpened, but he smiled. “You were right, Santos. I do like her. Are you going to work well with us, Miss Arsenic?” He studied her, his sycophantic expression at odds with his harsh eyes.

“Anything is possible, Mr...?”

“All in good time, lovely lady.” He extended a hand to touch her cheek. Being pawed seemed to go hand-in-hand with this assignment. “For now, you will call me Ricky. I think I may call you Lucy—I haven't decided yet. We have all weekend to get to

learn each other's quirks. I can't wait to get to know you better, beautiful."

"Fantastic." All weekend. She could hardly stand the excitement.

"Elsie," he called in an imperious, American voice. Ricky had a northeastern accent—Massachusetts, if she had to guess. A nubile young woman, dressed in what might conservatively be referred to as a Halloween costume of a maid's outfit, approached. Everything about her outfit had been designed to show off her assets, from her long legs to her heavily endowed chest.

"Take our lovely guests upstairs. They're in the Green Room. Santos, you need to change. Our other guests don't need to see you like that. As for you, my dear..." Their host focused on her again, and he was still holding her hand. "You look stunning, but I'm sure you would like to freshen up after your flight."

He didn't wait for their responses before releasing her and vanishing back into the crowd. The last place Arsenic wanted to go was upstairs. She'd much rather join the party, see who was present. Not to mention, a crowded gathering seemed unusual for a private meeting focused on criminal activity.

The thunderous expression on Uranium's face, however, told her she needed to go with him. He hadn't been expecting this party either. Elsie curtsied to her, an utterly inappropriate greeting for someone not of the peerage, but Arsenic let it go. Apparently, their host played at a proper British dinner party, and she was going to be one of the main attractions. Lovely.

Once they arrived at the Green Room, Uranium slammed the door open, cutting off their escort. Elsie fidgeted nervously in the doorway until Arsenic waved her out. No sense leaving an innocent in the crossfire.

Walking to the mirror, she examined the damage to her hair from the earlier

motorcycle ride, not to mention a couple of hours on the plane.

“Is something wrong?” she asked

“This was supposed to be a private introductory meeting. What the hell is going on down there?” The scarred half of his face, twisted permanently into a grimace, matched the fury on the other half of his face when his mouth turned downward.

“A party, from the looks of it—though where they all came from, who knows,” she said. She misunderstood his meaning deliberately. When he turned his dark gaze on her, she relented. “Social occasions, which allow all the guests to mingle and for business to take place under the guise of small talk. If you know how to behave, you can get a great deal accomplished over a glass of champagne.”

At least, it could get accomplished in some circles of society, although it seemed highly doubtful that this was one of those occasions. Playing along for now might net her more information.

“I hate this bullshit. I hate getting dressed up. I’ve never been very good at tying a fucking tie.” Despite the growl in his voice, his complaint came across more childish than as a real objection. “And he brings them in the same way we did—one plane, his vehicles—either boat or car. No one else gets to the island.”

Interesting. “Just get dressed. I’ll make sure you look proper.” She took up a brush and began to smooth out her hair’s disarray. Over the course of the last several months, she’d allowed her hair to grow until it fell to the middle of her back.

One genetic blessing she’d always enjoyed was swift growing hair. She could cut it completely off, then have the length back to where it currently was within months. She knew women who would kill for that ability. As far as she was concerned, it was merely a problem to be dealt with on long assignments. Behind her, Uranium stripped

out of his clothes, revealing his heavily scarred and tattooed body. He had taken a lot of damage when Operation Phoenix went sour in Russia. An explosion had embedded shrapnel in over 32% of his body mass, the majority of which was along his back and left side, all the way down to his knee. But he'd survived it. At the time, they'd all celebrated only losing one of the Marines to the vicious attack.

As it turned out, they probably should've lost more.

"Socks, then shirt, and finally slacks. Make sure everything is tucked in neat and all buttoned up. Add the cummerbund last, then I'll take care of your tie, and you can add the coat."

Considering it appeared to be a dinner party, she went ahead and styled her hair by twisting it up and rolling it into a neat chignon.

"You never told me how you know all this crap. You know what to say, and when to say it. And you don't look like you just took a ride on a motorcycle or a flight, not even in that dress."

"Thank you for noticing." She accepted the compliment without giving him the explanation he craved. One of the reasons he was attracted to her was because she didn't give him answers. Occasionally, he believed she dispensed a great secret when she gave him a drip or a drab. For the most part, his attraction to her seemed based almost wholly on her accent. What was it with Americans and a British accent?

"We can't keep our host waiting." She turned away from the mirror. She wore very little in the way of cosmetics, fortunately for her. Although she had scars of her own, the dress had been cut and designed specifically to cover them. It was revealing without being obscene, and just wealthy enough to get away with an appearance at an event like this.



Her hemline might be a little high, but considering the state of his maids, she doubted very much their host was going to object.

The git in front of her, however, looked absolutely ridiculous in his outfit. Joining him, she fixed his tie but had to resist the urge to apply enough pressure to strangle him. The old adage that all men look good in a tuxedo was wasted on this one. It hadn't been tailored to him, though it did fit his large frame. Frankly, the ill-fit wasn't due to his size, or even his scars. It was the way he carried himself. Uranium had never gotten past the bull in a china shop mannerisms of his low-class upbringing. The Marines might've made him a more efficient killer, but they certainly hadn't polished away the rough edges.

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She smoothed down his lapels. “There we go. You look quite smart.”

“Meaning I looked stupid before?” He scowled at her.

“Smart as in dashing.” She lied effortlessly, then dusted off his shoulders before miming brushing away some imaginary lint from his sleeves. “Quite presentable.”

“Smart and presentable.” He seemed to be trying to mimic her intonations. “You look hot.”

She managed to turn her back and not roll her eyes. At the end of this, she would’ve mastered the ability to keep a straight face in any conversation. Collecting her clutch, she headed for the door, and unlike most gentlemen, Uranium didn’t even try to make it there before she did to open door for her. Fortunately for him, she was quite liberated. Once she had the door open, she glanced back.

Still standing next to the dresser, he fidgeted uncomfortably, then tugged at his collar. “I hate this shit.”

“You don’t have to enjoy it to get business done. Half the fun of this kind of dance is pretending to be someone you’re not. So, don’t be you tonight. Simply be a man who expects to be waited on, to be entertained, and remember all these people are here just for you.”

He grunted. “Keep an eye out. It could be dangerous.”

Was that a note of concern in his voice? He didn’t need to be going soft on her now.

“I’m always on my guard, haven’t you noticed?”

“I mean these are really dangerous people. You think you know what dangerous looks like, but Ricky surrounds himself with powerful—” He didn’t finish the statement. Instead, he simply shrugged. “Just stick with me. We’ll get this shit done.”

He strode out ahead of her and down the hall without waiting. Shaking her head, Arsenic closed the door before she followed. Downstairs, they found the party in full swing. The champagne flowed and the canapés were making their circuits.

What looked like a dinner party on the surface turned out to be nothing of the sort. A proper dinner party would’ve involved sitting to eat, hors d’oeuvres were reserved for evenings sans the serving a proper meal.

Footmen managed the serving and the wine. Yet, maids lined the room as well. It seemed like a mockery of fine events. As though someone had seen something in a film once about a high dinner party at an estate, then tried to mimic it with their own special touches.

Really quite vulgar. Pasting on her most pleasant smile, Arsenic encouraged Uranium into the crowd. Time to identify all the players.

Hitoshi Tesoro. A member of the chapter of the Japanese Yakuza.

Abdel Nazneen. A well-known terrorist with ties to ISIL.

Philippe Le’champes-Salogne. Former French intelligence, turned traitor after being caught selling weapons from a military base in Afghanistan.

These are all arms dealers.

Too many arms dealers.

She smiled and greeted, shook hands, and created her mental notes. Nearly a full third of the party were arms dealers of some kind—some small, some medium, and at least one large, that she knew of.

Manuel Ortega, however, didn't do business outside of revolutionaries. He had a code that didn't involve selling to criminals. Shockingly enough, of all those present, Arsenic actually admired him. He had the power and the influence to stay out of the legal crosshairs of multiple countries, yet he quietly funded the sincerest of resistance efforts.

He stuck out in this place like a vicar in a brothel. Gravitating toward him, she kept an eye on Uranium as he weaved through the crowd, looking for a drink. Their host was nowhere to be seen.

Ortega gave her a pleasant smile and inclined his head. Unlike their host, he didn't bother to try and kiss her hand. "Good evening, Señora."

"Señora?" She held up her left hand, bare of any ornamentation. "Not quite."

For a split-second, Ortega's smile went from purely polite and cool business to amused with a hint of sheepishness. "Lo siento, señorita. This type of party is not my forte."

"Well, needs must," she told him, not bothering to disguise her gracious acceptance of his apology. "It does seem to be quite the gathering. And very festive."

Ortega shrugged. "It's an option. Give a pig a bath, dress it in finery, and serve it wine. It is still a pig."

She couldn't have said it better, nor quite as colorfully.

“Despite having met probably the most fascinating guest in attendance, please excuse me.Venga.” He gave the last curt order to the two men with him. Ortega diverted across the room, and though she sipped her champagne, touching it to her lips periodically in the mimicry of taking a drink, she watched Ortega leave.

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What was going on that an honorable thug like that didn't want to be present?

Uranium appeared at her elbow. "Fucking bastard's about to open an auction. On our information."

Our information? Suppressing a yawn, Arsenic turned her attention on him. "Well, hopefully he'll get a good deal of money for us."

"You don't understand. Come on." He took her hand and drew her through the crowd. They left the main ballroom, then followed the stairs down to a rather bland utilitarian hallway. A guard stood at the foot of the steps, but he didn't impede their progress. Halfway down the hall, Uranium knocked on a door—a rather ordinary door, without any kind of electronic security that she could identify. It also had an old-fashioned key lock.

The door opened, and their host beamed at them. "Come on in. Watch this." He pivoted, as excited as a schoolboy. A wall of monitors greeted her, presenting images from across the party. The equipment was performing facial recognition, but that wasn't what their host wanted to show them. Instead, he held up a thumb drive.

"Everything we need to know about the big man's right hand man."

The big man's right hand man? Does that mean...

"I thought we were meeting fucking Red Wolf tonight." Uranium scowled. "You swore you were arranging a face-to-face with him, and he was going to give me my money personally. Son of a bitch owes me."

“Temper, temper. I warned you this could take time. He knows your value, that’s all that matters. And, this?” He held up the thumb drive again. “This is our ticket. His organization has taken a lot of hits over the last month, and a good deal of the network is down. Those men upstairs are all ready to move up and take our operation to stage two.”

Translation: Uranium’s handler wanted to take over Red Wolf’s operation, to supplant the damaged organization weakened by their attacks.

Unacceptable.

She would, however, be taking the thumb drive.

“And whoever’s on that is going to do this for us?” Uranium sounded skeptical.

“Guaranteed. This guy? He controls everything. He’s the final gatekeeper. We take him out, and Red Wolf is truly screwed.” Ricky chortled. “I have to say, it’s been kind of a pleasure watching them flounder. We auction this off to the highest bidder, and we let them take him out. At that point, Red Wolf has no choice. He’ll need us. I simply move our pieces into place and take him in a bloodless coup. After that, it’s all ours.”

As plans went, his sounded about as solid as construction of a house of cards. Removing Red Wolf only to let his sick and twisted business fall into the hands of another? No. They weren’t cleaning out Red Wolf’s corruption only to let this scum fill the vacuum.

While she was doing this mission for her brother, it was also for her parents.

With a smile, she strolled around the room. The monitors told her a lot about the villa, the compounds, and the security. “I’m bored, gentlemen. Entertain me.” She

needed time in that room, time to determine her best methods of assassination and extraction.

As for the thumb drive? It would be hers—even if she had to pry it out of their cold, dead fingers.

## Chapter 2

The morning her message arrived, Sam Reese had still been drunk. So drunk, in fact, he was still nursing a whiskey when his phone buzzed, announcing the arrival of an email. Only one email on his phone had ever been programmed to buzz and alert him to new arrivals. A personal email, which remained devoid of contact in the years since he'd set up the account. It didn't even receive spam. Peering blearily at the phone, Sam keyed in his code to unlock it, then opened the email. Shifting the phone back and forth didn't help. His drunken vision didn't allow for a lot of clarity. Which meant, though he was absolutely pissed at the moment, he had to make some coffee and sober his happy ass up.

Setting the phone down, he stared at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. His hair hung long and straggly to his shoulders, he sported a bit of a beard, while his eyes were bloodshot.

He lifted an arm and sniffed at his pit. While a sopping wreck, he didn't stink. Shoving away from the bar, he stood, wavered a moment, then staggered around to the back, dropping the bottle of whiskey in the trash on his way. Pity, it had been a damn fine bottle of whiskey. It took him a good five minutes to sort out the coffee maker, and while it brewed, he stuck his nose in the bag of coffee beans and sucked in a deep breath. The scent helped to clear his nasal passages of whiskey, but he couldn't get the taste off his breath.

Next, he drained three glasses of water while waiting for the coffee to brew. Setting



another cup in to brew, he drank the first without bothering to wait for it to cool. He was drunk enough that the pain would actually help.

By the time he hit the third cup of coffee and had another glass of water, he really needed to take a leak, but his vision cleared. Retrieving his phone, he opened it again, then read the message.

She hadn't written him for years. Ignored his existence. Then, when she finally did reach out, she sent him a message in a fucking code.

I'm going to kill her.

Fresh cup of coffee in hand, Sam carried his phone and the coffee up the stairs to the flat he kept above the bar. His life in Costa Rica didn't require much. A bed, a pot to piss in, and of course, all the whiskey a man could drink. It didn't matter how far he went across the globe or how much alcohol he poured down his gullet, the demons he carried with him wouldn't be silenced. But he could mute their shrill intrusion enough to deal with his day. He took another long swallow of coffee as he walked into the bathroom. Setting the phone down, he stared at the message, then began working out the code in the back of his head. He wasn't quite sober enough for code cracking, but at least she hadn't sent him a bloody crossword puzzle. She used to love doing that to him. He hated the damn things, but she could write one up in short order. Then, not only did he have to solve the damn puzzle, he'd still have to decode the answer afterward.

Clever little minx figured any number of ways to encode her messages—having a brother for a code cracker inspired her. Particularly when she wanted to keep whatever she was saying to him a secret from everyone else.

Bladder empty, he turned on the shower and stepped under the icy spray. The bracing cold helped clear away more of the fog, and instead of moving away from the frigid

spray, he stayed, hoping it would assuage the fires of rage fanning to life as his reality reasserted itself. He really did prefer the world through a haze of alcohol.

She was in trouble. Running alone. Needed backup. Possible extraction.

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You owe me.

The rest of the message involved how to find her. A single mention—credit card. They'd used a similar tactic when she had to go into deep cover while infiltrating the Argentinian ministry. After the Falkland Islands, they kept a close eye on Argentina. Not that they expected them to act up again, but the British government wouldn't tolerate any further embarrassment on the part of their ambassadors or Argentina's.

Coffee and ice water did the trick, sobering him enough to understand what she needed from him. Dialing up the warmer water, he washed. His pores practically leaked whiskey at this point, having pickled himself fairly solid for the last three years.

Three years. Fuck me.

The last time Addison Leeds walked into his life had been pure happenstance. She'd walked into a bar in Thailand, of all places. He'd gone to the ends of the earth, and who should walk in but a goddess with a grudge.

Their gazes met across the crowded room. A host of memories swamped him at first sight. Memories of long nights wrapped in her arms, of training missions spent in the freezing cold, of her warm smile and sweet laugh, which disguised her clever and dangerous mind.

She'd been nineteen the first time he met her. Sweet, enthusiastic, and eager to please—a babe in the woods to a shark like him. Recruited out of Uni specifically for her appearance and family history with the agency, she was perfect for background

security. Many of the young royals were preparing to head off to school. It was best to have security around them they wouldn't notice... nor would anyone else.

Addison had been ideal. He wasn't supposed to get involved with the recruits. It not only flew in the face of all the rules, but she'd been an innocent. A baby. A lady. She possessed station, class, and blood so blue, it put azure to shame. In every way, he didn't have any right to pursue his interest, and he managed to keep his distance until her twenty-first birthday.

The memories of their early years together had sacked him as he stared at her. His heart had thumped like the tail of a hunting hound ready to run. Setting his whiskey glass down, he'd stood. After everything that had happened, he hadn't ever believed he would see her again. Frankly, she wouldn't want to see him. His actions had been dictated by his care for her, because she didn't deserve to lose another family member to politics or bad decisions.

His only great regret had been his inability to tell her before he went after her brother.

Yet, there she'd been, appearing as if to taunt him with a future he'd sacrificed. A blessed dream for a swine like him. Even as he stepped out of the shower in the present, his memories of that night charged out of their drunken sealed vault to take center stage.

After wrapping a towel around his waist, he wiped off the steamed mirror and stared at the two bullet wound scars just to the left of his heart. He liked to think she'd missed on purpose. After all, she put two in his chest, then left him bleeding on the floor before walking away without saying a word.

Still, she cared enough not to put a bullet in my head. It was what he'd trained her to do. Never leave a survivor.

Efficient. Ruthless. Effective.

She needed his help. Sam looked at himself in the mirror, then shook his head. Of course, he would help. He'd cut off his bloody arm, if she asked it of him. Maybe she figured out he was alive and decided to finish the job. Though, if that were the case, she'd have shown up in his bar downstairs and repeated their Thailand experience.

She didn't play games. If she sent a message in a code only he knew, then she needed him.

MI6 burned her. What the hell was she into that she needed his help, of all people? Turning the water on in the sink, he picked up his razor. Whatever it was she needed, he would give it to her, but first, he needed a shave and a haircut. Then he needed to track her credit card.

Half a day later, he stared at the screen, which listed her credit card stay in Florida. She used it twice, at a hotel, then a restaurant. Then nothing. Rising, he paced back and forth in front of the computer. The point of the card was it was untraceable by anyone at the agency—a gambit they had run under the table as a back up, and an easy way to track her without betraying her allegiances. If she was searched, they would only turn up a credit card with nothing particularly special about it. Not even the microchip inside of it. Chip cards were all the rage now, so it would draw even less attention.

Twelve hours since she'd last used the card. She wanted him to follow? Did that mean Florida?

Returning to the computer, he used his backdoor access to his old administration codes at MI6. How do you know you're really a spy? When you spy on your own agency. Of course, he was less of a spy and more of a hammer. When they wanted something done skillfully and quietly, they sent Addison. She was a scalpel. When

they wanted it removed and eradicated from existence, they sent Sam.

He pulled up the satellite footage for the region and studied it, backtracking to the last timestamp of her credit card use.

There she was, exiting a little bistro wearing a killer dress and a pair of heels. He couldn't really see her face, thanks to bad resolution, but he'd know those legs anywhere.

She walked across a cobblestone lot, then climbed onto the back of a motorcycle with a man Sam didn't recognize and already wanted to kill. Her transportation required changing the input and access so he could track the motorcycle. It took longer, the better part of an hour, for the computer to spit out the traffic cameras along their route. The US wasn't helpful, in that they didn't use CCTV everywhere, not like in Britain. But what they did use was enough, if one was clever enough and could access that such footage.

The walking dead man had taken her to an airport. They boarded a private plane. Sam managed to increase the resolution enough to pull up the tail number of the Gulfstream. Then he began a search on it.

The planes registry was out of the Cayman Islands. Very useful, as Britain still had sway there. The last filed log had the plane landing on one of the private isles, one registered to a member of the peerage.

A quick search identified the peerage as false, since the last member had died in the 70s. Which meant someone had usurped that family's name and put it to their own use.

Sam scowled as he stood. After tracking her as far as the island, he found his hands tied. There was no satellite footage or public access to the island's security. Either he

waited for her next contact or card use, or he went ahead to the island and extracted her from whatever nonsense she had become involved in.

She could probably take another shot at him, or he could paddle her ass.

Both possibilities had potential. Stone cold sober and nursing a vicious headache, he paced and ran the possibilities. She wouldn't have sent that message if she didn't want him to come. She wouldn't have sent the message if she hadn't thought she'd need him to come. After grabbing his phone, he called Henry. He needed transportation, including a helicopter, weapons, and a map.

His girl needed a ride.

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Less than twenty-four hours after receiving her message, Sam disembarked from a plane on Little Cayman. Old contacts had come through for him, providing the IDs and permits necessary for landing privileges. Another contact supplied him with the use of a tour helicopter. Not his favorite, but it would provide him with a legitimate cover. He also had the weapons he needed to act as a one-man army. He tracked her as far as a villa on the other side of the private island. Flying off the coast, he kept his distance and used binoculars. He was able to identify her on a balcony, with the dead man's hands on her ass again.

She seemed all right, so he monitored the situation.

He left only when he needed to refuel, then returned. For the next ten hours, he watched and waited. The villa seemed to be hopping with a private party spilling out of the building at all hours. Getting in wouldn't be difficult.

Though he considered infiltrating the party and joining her, he nixed the idea for now. Her escape might be better facilitated with him on the outside. He received no further messages in his private email box, nor did he pick up any activity on her credit card. He'd seen her once, but no evidence of her leaving. So, he maintained his vigil. Twice, he was warned off for drifting too close to the island's airspace, but he played the part of aspiring tour guide trying to learn it all, much to the amusement of the private security.

Unfortunately, that private island was secure, much like a fortress. Though it had a small landing strip and a couple of roads, the only real structure was the villa—a private escape or the perfect prison. No local law enforcement lived on the island, and only a security force maintained it.



After a break to refuel, he returned to his vigil just in time to see an explosion of light and smoke detonate near the cliff stairs. The huge plume of smoke that went up in the detonation carried out, even across the water.

Must be his cue. Angling the helicopter, he headed in the direction of the beach. She was going to need a fast escape or someone to save her. He arrived just in time to see her to go flying as a man twice her size attacked her. Aggravating as the sight was, his girl held her own, right down to sticking her expensive shoes into the guy's neck. Sam winced, as he wasn't sure who he felt more sympathy for in that fight. Grasping the controls with his knees he reached for a sniper rifle, then angled so he could take a shot.

He'd just gotten into position when another explosion took out her attacker. Messy, but effective. She'd been running, but the force of the detonation flung her into the surf. Above her, more security guards poured onto the damaged stairs.

Lowering the rifle, he grasped the controls and took the helicopter down to hover over the beach. Flinging open the door, he glanced over and said, "Well, come on then, you stupid git."

Her smile fisted around his heart. It was both fierce and beautiful. It also didn't have a shred of gratitude in it. She ran barefoot toward him, then raised her gun and fired once. Fortunately, not at him this time. She hopped inside. Keeping the door open and one foot on the tail, she continued to fire. "Ammo."

With one hand holding them steady, he ripped open his bag, then identified the slide loader by touch. Passing it over, she wasted no time slotting it into her Glock 17 before she returned to firing.

"You want to get us out of here?"

“I can, but you seem to be having a good time, and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Just fly the fucking helicopter.”

“As my lady wishes.” He turned the helicopter away, heading for open water. As soon as they cleared the beach, she closed the door and leaned back in the seat. Panting, bruised, and soaking wet, she was still the best-looking woman he’d ever seen.

“Just get me to an airport. I’ll take it from there.”

Sam said nothing. She wanted to go to an airport? Great, he knew just the place. Then, he and his girl were going to have a nice long chat.

“Hello, Addison, how are you? I haven’t seen you since you shot me.”

“I’m still armed. You want to keep making smart remarks?”

Sam considered the threat level, then remembered she could fly a helicopter. Ah, what the hell. “Danger’s my middle name, sweetheart.”

He waited for the sound of the chamber being reloaded. When he didn’t, he glanced over to find her staring at him. “How are you even still alive?”

“I’m a bad penny, Addy. I always turn up.”

### Chapter 3

He’d come. Some part of her had known the moment she sent the message. It was a gamble, but one she would win. Sam Reese was thirty-eight, Caucasian, had black hair, brown eyes, a square jaw, and an Australian mother—though he’d been raised in

Kent—who just happened to be a former assassin for MI6...and the only man she loved, outside of her brother.

He was also the only man she'd ever tried to kill and left alive.

“You look like hell.” Those were the first words she cared to say, considering the manic grin he wore and the atmosphere of glee rolling off of him as he flew them across the open water.

“You look hot, as always. A gun always fit you well.” All sarcasm aside, a gun had never fit her well. She'd become extremely proficient. Trained. And she treated the weapon like an extension of her own arm—one she wished she'd never picked up in the first place.

“Bollocks.”

He laughed, and the warmth of his masculine chuckle rolled over her. No, she refused to give into the sensation of having missed him. That barge sailed many years before and needed to continue downriver.

“How much resistance should I expect when we get to the airport?” There he was. All business. She spared a glance over her shoulder at the armory he carried around with them. He'd come prepared for business.

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“No idea. The person they were guarding is dead, as is his closest associate. Most of the guests were running for cover, and I eliminated more than half of the security force. They’re going to be too busy cleaning up the mess to come after me.” She hoped. She preferred to deal in absolutes, but a scorched-earth policy required razing the entire villa, and she hadn’t the time to set charges everywhere.

“Excellent. Have a Gulfstream waiting for us. We’ll be on board in twenty minutes.”

Oh, hell no. “Just get me to the airport, I’ll take care of everything from there.”

“No can do, m’lady. You’re coming with me.”

As a reminder, she pointed the Glock at him. “The name is Addison or Ms. Leeds, to you.”

“I thought it was Lady Addison, or m’lady.” It wasn’t a question, but she hadn’t been Lady Addison in too long to remember or care. The family’s peerage had gone up in smoke, along with their parents. She’d run away to MI6 while Clark went off to save the world. Yet, they managed to end up in the same place. It really didn’t matter anymore.

“I’m not joking with you, Sam. I have a job to do. I appreciate your assistance in extracting me. Consider this a partial payment on the debt you owe me.”

“Only a payment? Are we doing this in installments now? I thought the two bullets you put in me were payment enough.”

An edge of hostility scored his words, but Addison ignored it. He deserved the bullets and more. She should've put a round into his head. At the time, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Seeing him on the ground bleeding—it had to have been enough. Friend, mentor, and lover at one point, he remained the only man she'd ever fallen in love with. The one man she actually imagined herself marrying, if he'd ever gotten around to asking.

“The debt's paid when I say it's paid.” She kept her tone as even as possible. No need to open the old wounds any further than they already had been. Plus, she was still on the clock.

“Your negotiating skills need work,” he said, even as he brought the helicopter lower. Fortunately, no one appeared to be waiting for them at the airport.

“I don't negotiate.”

They touched down, and he began securing the helicopter, even as she reached for the door. He caught her arm, pushing the gun wielding hand down and away. “I'm not a terrorist, Addy, and you contacted me. What are you into?”

Before she could answer, shouts reached them from outside and a bullet whizzed through the open front glass of the helicopter and into the back.

“New plan,” he said, even as he released her, then reach for a gun of his own. “We'll talk about it on the plane.”

She had no choice at this point. She needed to go with him because a vehicle loaded with men and weaponry sped toward them. They weren't on the private island anymore, so whomever these guys were, they'd reacted lightning fast or they got a phone call.

She and Sam moved together like a well-oiled machine. She knew, without a doubt, he wouldn't let her go down. He had her back. They both took out the front tires on the Jeep, and as it spun out of control and began to flip, men spilled out, hitting the ground and rolling. Not waiting to see if they got back up, she followed Sam as he led the way toward a Gulfstream. The engines on it were already running, so either they were stealing someone's plane, or Sam had really moved up in the world.

He pivoted, catching her arm to urge her up the steps first. How chivalrous. She let him take the heat while she ducked inside. He joined her, then pulled the doors closed before he hurried up into the cockpit. A man wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt, a five o'clock shadow, and aviator glasses sat in the co-pilot's seat.

She dropped into a seat behind them. "Who's this?"

"He's not here," Sam said as he settled into the pilot's seat. "Ignore him."

Ignore him? "So, we're hijacking his plane now?"

"If he were here, it would be hijacking. Since he isn't, why don't we steal it?" he said with a grin. "Fun, right?"

No, it wasn't fun. Even if the corner of her mouth twitched at his amusement. Some of their targets were back on their feet.

"We should go now. Preferably before they take out one of the engines." She didn't have to tell him twice, he had the headset on to contact the tower and was already taxiing the plane toward the runway. Unfortunately, the people shooting at them were in the way, but they had to move or run the risk of being hit. He wasn't slowing down. She didn't even hear confirmation of his permission to take off before the plane hit max acceleration, and they began lifting.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the seat and waited. She'd never been terrifically fond of flying. For the most part, having some metal between her and the ground as they were flung miles into the air didn't do it for her. She had flown with Sam before and knew he was an expert pilot. She'd also seen him dead stick land a large aircraft before, when he had no other choice.

Also not on the list of experiences she ever wanted to repeat.

Five minutes after takeoff, Sam said something into the headset then pulled it off. "Where are we going?"

"The States."

Wasn't really her planned destination, not when her target was in England. She needed to track down the Earl of Bonneville, so she could have a really long conversation with the right dishonorable Robert Carlisle.

"Try that again," he said

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Turning, she met his gaze and calmly repeated, “The States.”

“Well, there’s fifty of them. Some are a great deal farther away than others. Talk to me, Addy. Where are we going? And what are we doing? Or better, who are we killing?”

She couldn’t involve Sam any more than she already had. For one, her brother would have her hide. Clark did not like outsiders. He liked Sam even less, and he had every reason in the world to not want her anywhere near him.

“Sam, I don’t have time for this.” Besides, they had an audience, whether Sam said the guy was there or not.

“Then make time, sweetbabes. We’ve got at least ten hours of fuel. So, tell me now, where we going?”

Ten hours? “London.”

That got him. He leaned away and blew out a breath. “We’re not landing in London, but I know a couple places where we could probably touchdown in France and then take the ferry over.”

She didn’t question that. It wouldn’t be good for either one of them—burned agents—to walk through CCTV-laden immigration area, where they’d have to meet with customs and health officials. They’d likely spend the next few years in holding cells.



“You asked. “

“Oh, I did, and I’ll get you there. Don’t you worry about that.” As the plane leveled off, she stared out at the clouds. Should she call Clark now? Or did she wait?

Despite his orders to deal with Uranium and to close off that avenue, she knew the ultimate goal was as it had always been—Red Wolf. Over the last several months, she’d had to grow more and more distant from their team. Setting herself apart. Making herself accessible to being turned. She’d picked more than her fair share of fights and behaved in a manner she wasn’t terribly proud of.

“Set a course for St. John’s International in Newfoundland. We’ll refuel there, then on to Iceland. We’ll pick up another flight there to get us into France. From there, we’ll take a ferry over. We can be in Dover by tomorrow. Then the train to London. Where to, after that?”

The swiftness with which Sam adjusted his plans to accommodate her should have surprised her. Yet, hadn’t she been counting on that very ability when she sent the message? Hadn’t she bargained on the concept that Sam would never tell her no, despite the insanity of the plan she came up with? He was a master of making crazy plans work.

She studied Sunglasses in his bright floral Hawaiian shirt. He’d not acknowledged her presence or said a word since she’d come on board. If not for the rise and fall of his chest and the occasional shift of his hands on the controls, she’d have thought he was a mannequin. “We’ll discuss that later. I don’t suppose this flying bus has a shower on it, does it?”

“Sure does. Even has a bed.” He leered at her, half in jest and half—she suspected—quite serious.

“I just climbed out of another man’s bed this morning. I think you want me to take a shower before you take a crack at it.” With that, she released the seatbelt, stood, then walked away. Sam didn’t say a word, and she hadn’t looked at him when she said it. It was cruel, but effective for keeping him distant. Already, she was questioning her own decisions and choices, and she had been with him less than an hour. Her feet hurt, the bruises on her legs began to hurt, and she had a headache. Not to mention, she smelled like salt, sand, blood, and smoke.

But only half of her mission was complete. Uranium was down, and he would never get back up again. Even if she died on this quest, she’d removed the last of the internal threats from the Elite group. In that, at least, Titanium and the others were safe. Now, she just needed to bring Clark the last piece of the puzzle—give him the last snippet he needed to close the noose around Red Wolf’s neck, then they could snap the head off for good.

She didn’t worry about clothes as she made her way through the cabin. It boasted a comfortable sitting area and the private bedroom, as he’d promised. There was also a shower. Stripping off the dress, she dropped it on the floor to better inspect her injuries. Before securing the gun and setting it to the side, she switched on the water. The shower provided plenty of hot water, and there were complementary soaps already stored. She scrubbed herself raw, leaving her skin red and aching. She wanted to remove all traces of her trip. All traces of having whored herself out to accomplish her mission. She’d only been able to keep Uranium at arm’s length for so long before his interest began to wane, which meant she had to take that final step into the full honey trap.

Placing her hands on the walls, she closed her eyes and began to count. With each number, she let one element of her mission fall away.

Her code name was Arsenic, and she was deadly. She worked swiftly, efficiently, and to fatal purpose. Everything she had done was in the name of the mission, and

everything she used—including her body—was simply a way to get it done.

None of that touched her. None of it touched Addison. Rinsing the soap from her hair, she opened her eyes and found Sam staring at her, his expression intent.

“Who’s flying the plane?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up a notch. “No one.”

That was comforting. “Have you forgotten the concept of privacy?” Turning her back on him, she ducked her head under the water again then began to condition her hair. After this trip, she was cutting it all off. Managing such a mass had become annoying.

“Came to make sure you’re okay.” The quiet comment sent an unwanted thrill along her spine. “And to make sure the bastard who had his hands on you is actually dead. If he’s not, I’m turning the plane around to finish the job.”

This time she couldn’t stop the smile. Fortunately, she still had her back to him, so he couldn’t see it. “He’s quite dead. Two bullets to the chest, and one to the head.”

“Damn.”

“Don’t be a caveman, Samuel. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Oh, it suits you just fine. I told you I don’t care who ends up touching you on any mission, as long as they’re dead when it’s over.” Harsh, cold, and serious. “If you say he’s dead, I’ll believe you.”

“Wonderful.” She turned, leaning her head back into the spray to rinse the conditioner out. “You can go now. I would much rather you be at the controls than standing there ogling me.”

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“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.” Though there was a catch in his voice as he said it.

“Yes, and you had permission then. I don’t recall issuing you an invitation this time.” Nor would she ever issue such an invitation. Not again.

“I got your invitation, sweetbabes,” he said. The door opened to the shower stall, forcing her to open her eyes. “I got your invitation when you sent the email. So, no matter what you’re doing or what you’re into, I’m here. It’s you and me. We’ll take care of it. I’ll make sure your mission gets completed. Then, you and I are going to have a talk.”

“A talk? At ten paces?”

He didn’t answer her, merely took hold of her jaw, then with the slightest pressure, opened her mouth before he closed his lips on hers. She shouldn’t have responded. It shouldn’t have even made her feel anything. But suddenly, every nerve ending in her came alive. He sought entrance with his tongue, the swipe of it along hers a demand for attention.

Bracing her wet hands to his chest, she gripped him closer. He dragged her from beneath the water and pushed her against the wall before continuing his slow sensual assault of her mouth.

When he finally let her up for air, she could barely catch her breath, but he wore a Cheshire’s grin. “Yes, m’lady. I received my invitation, and I wanted to RSVP.” He touched a finger to her lips once before withdrawing from the bathroom entirely.

Addison ducked back underneath the water, shivering—not from the cold, but from the contact. She ran a hand over her chest and realized the tape was gone, as was the thumb drive.

“You son of a bitch.”

## Chapter 4

Holding the tape covered thumb drive in his hand, Sam made it all the way to the cockpit and sealed the door before she realized what his goal had been. Having spied it secured to her body—damn, what a body—he’d taken his chances. It was totally worth it for the kiss. It was even more worth it to discover she was nowhere near as immune to him as she wanted to pretend.

The hammer of her fist striking the cockpit door reverberated through the metal. Henry lowered his sunglasses and slanted a look toward him. Sam waved his attention back to the controls.

“Sorry, no one home,” he replied. He pulled out his laptop and inserted the thumb drive. The sooner he figured out what Addy had gotten herself caught up in, the sooner he could get the problem solved, and they could get on to more important matters. Them.

“Open this damn door, Sam.” Her emphasis on his name flatlined. Oh, he’d definitely touched a nerve.

“Promise not to shoot me?” he asked, not moving from the seat. The laptop booted, and he located the thumb drive easily enough. It demanded an encryption key to access, and his machine fired up a warning. The thumb drive had a security protocol. His encrypted laptop launched a code to box the thumb drive’s malicious program. They were beginning to either rewrite his hard drive or send a transmission.

Fortunately, his machine wasn't on a network, and the Wi-Fi was completely turned off. No such luck for them.

"No."

"Sorry, then, luv, on that side you stay. Make yourself comfortable. Get yourself something to eat. We've got a few hours of flight left."

"You son of a bitch," she swore. Her fist slammed against the door again. Perhaps she needed a drink.

"Your favorite bottle of wine is chilling in the fridge. How about a glass or three? It might help take the edge off."

"I hate you." Three little words spoken in anger shouldn't hurt as much as these did. He let it go, however, because he knew she was frustrated and he was the source of her frustration.

Served her right. When she asked for his help, she got all of it, not just the cherry-picked pieces she chose. Once his machine completed securing of the compromised thumb drive, he initiated a decryption program to let him get at the files. It took an hour, but he finally freed one file and began to read.

"Well, I'll be a monkey with donkey balls." The Earl of Bonneville had gotten himself into a spot of trouble. More than that, it looked like he might be profiteering off terrorist activities all across the globe.

Reading deeper, however, Sam's blood began to run cold. Red Wolf. He hated that fucking name. He knew exactly who that bastard was—same bastard who'd sent Addy running in the direction of MI6 in the first place. When she had first been approached, she turned them down. A short while later, her parents died.

Correction—her parents had been murdered. The only evidence they managed to gather pointed to an international terrorist financier named Red Wolf. Why he wanted her parents dead, or what it had to do with Red Wolf's business, remained undetermined. It was one of the few open case files from his days at MI6. The case hadn't been assigned to him, but he had taken it on himself—all in the effort to ease the pain of one very cool and controlled young woman.

He dug deeper. The Earl of Bonneville was deep in the weeds on this one. Every shred of evidence on this thumb drive would guarantee him no less than several life terms imprisonment. They might even revive him after shooting him to kill him twice.

If he wasn't already on someone's hit list.

Sam leaned back in the pilot's seat and rubbed the spot between his eyes. Addy wasn't the only one who was tired. He hadn't slept since he'd gotten her message. He hadn't had a drink, either.

At the moment, he wasn't sure which lack was worse. Taking a deep breath, he centered himself. He had to divorce from all emotion and put on his professional hat. Whatever else came out of this trip, he knew exactly what Addy was looking for. According to this file, the Earl of Bonneville was a close personal friend of Red Wolf, in addition to being in bed with him.

One of the notes speculated that the Earl might actually be Red Wolf himself. The ages didn't line up, nor did the timeline, but Sam would have to do more research to verify that theory. Either way, it was the closest to Red Wolf he'd ever come, and it might actually be the closest she'd ever come.

Decision made, he scanned the rest of the files before shutting the laptop and setting it down. He glanced at his watch and then at the controls. They had another hour or

so in the air. Hopefully, Addy was taking advantage of the time to sleep. He could hardly get off the plane without going past her, and she was dangerous, even without the gun. He needed time to formulate the best plan. Addy might be the most professional agent he'd ever worked with, but even she had her weak spots.

Clark was one.



Red Wolf was the other.

He'd already stampeded over one, so he didn't dare risk the second. One thought was to track down his lordship, string him up, and interrogate him. Once he had pried all the information out of him he needed, Sam could put a bullet in the back of his head. Problem solved.

Only, it wouldn't solve the problem. Addy was too much like him, and if somebody had taken out his parents, they'd be damn sure to find him as the one who pulled the trigger. It wouldn't matter who did it for him, if he was denied that right...

No, he couldn't do that to her. Neither could he let her walk into that kind of a fight blind. When emotion got involved, it dulled reaction time and led to more danger. She was obviously working on her own, otherwise why else would she have reached out to him? Cut off from MI6's resources—but that didn't mean she was cut off entirely, not any more than he was. Though he hadn't been burned, he'd told them to take their job and shove it up their ass. Within six months of his leaving, he'd also sent back three of their hired-out assassins in body bags. They'd gotten the message. If they left him alone, he would leave them alone.

Now he was going to take Addy right into the lion's den. They'd be in the heart of Britain. MI6 would have a field day with them, if they caught them.

We just don't let them catch us. We don't let them catch us, and we go snatch us an Earl. After scanning the controls, he glanced over at Henry reading a book. The other man could fly the plane in his sleep, whether he was present or not. Leaning back, he closed his eyes.

The best they could hope for was the Earl was out of London and on his estate. Been a good long time since he gone on a shoot.

Pheasant.

Venison.

Nobleman.

Sounded about right.

One hour from Newfoundland, he unlocked the door. Addy sat in one of the seats, her head back and eyes closed, but she lifted the gun and pointed it in his direction. Slowly, she sat up straighter and stared at him.

“You should have just said it was about Red Wolf, luv. I’d have done all of this for free.”

“You are doing it for free. Did you actually think I would pay you?”

Sam smiled. At least the gun went down a notch, though she was pointing it straight at his dick. “You still should’ve told me.”

“Why? So you could lock me out again? Or maybe you wanted another shot at Clark.”

Sam sighed. “We will be having that conversation, as well. For the time being, however, I’m in. I’ll help you track down the Earl of Bonneville. We’re stopping for a short hop in Newfoundland, we’ll get fuel, then head to Iceland. As soon as we’re ready to board in Iceland for our next flight, we can do some research on where his lordship happens to be right now.”

“There’s no guarantee he is anything other than another smokescreen.” The faintest hint of defeat in her voice had his spine stiffening. Nobody bested his Addy. No one, not even him.

“There’s a bloody lot in there that says he is. Either way, we’ll ask the Earl himself. If his lordship doesn’t want to share, I will convince him.”

“They’ll put a warrant out for you.”

“Makes no difference to me. MI6 knows better than to mess in my business. I’ve already taught them that lesson.” He hadn’t killed an Earl before, but he certainly had taken out plenty of other notable individuals. They knew exactly whom they were dealing with.

“I can’t ask you to do that, Sam. I can’t read you in.”

“Don’t care. You didn’t ask, and I’m going. You just try to lose me, sweetbabes.” He curled his fingers in invitation. “Come up and have a seat. You can take a look at the file as I finish getting us ready for landing.”

“You opened it?” She slipped out of her seatbelt, then stood. It was the first time he noticed what she was wearing. When he picked her up, she’d been in a cocktail dress, now she wore one of his shirts over a pair of shorts that she’d belted. The oversized clothing should look absolutely ridiculous, yet somehow, she made it seem smart. Her feet were still bare, but then he doubted he had any shoes back there that would fit her.

“Course I opened it. I wanted to know what the bloody hell was going on and why you’re out in the cold by yourself. Speaking of which, where the bloody hell is your brother?”

She raised a finger. “Already told you, not reading you in. Don’t bring up Clark again.”

“I didn’t damn well bring him up, you did.”

Damn Nancy boy. Oh, let’s talk to Clark, the vaunted doctor. This specialist. He’s going to save the world. Oh, it doesn’t matter if he’s got a gift for cracking codes, that’s not what he wants to do. He’s going to make something of himself. I’ll do all the dirty work, and he’ll save all the lives.

Addy had a case of hero worship where her younger brother was concerned. Sam had never resented someone’s relatives before, yet Clark had a hold on her that no one could shake. The hold she didn’t even acknowledge informed every choice she made, including the one that ended up getting her burned.

“Fine, I won’t bring up Clark again, and neither will you. Deal?”

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Accepting her concession without grinning like an idiot took effort. “Smashing. Don’t want to talk about that bloke anyway.”

She followed him back into the cockpit, and he dropped to his seat. She slid into the seat behind him, and then he handed her the laptop. “Don’t worry about the tracer they put on the thumb drive. That computers encrypted, and it’s designed to box up malware and keep it secure.”

“Well, don’t you have all the toys. Since when do you own a private plane?”

He shrugged. “Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies.”

“Were you really on the take?”

He dared a glance over at her, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her gaze was fixed on the screen of his computer with the mouse hovering over the files. But she hadn’t opened them yet.

“Would you believe me if I told you the truth, luv?”

She moistened her lips, then raised her chin and met his gaze head-on. “If you tell me, I’ll believe that it’s true.”

Having her quote his own words back burrowed right through the emotional barrier he’d placed to keep himself divorced from the situation. His soul ached with the great big gaping emptiness her loss created. “I never took a bloody dime in my life that wasn’t owed to me by the British government and secured via a paycheck. And I

didn't burn you."

"I didn't ask about the last," she said with a sigh, then double-clicked the file. "I know exactly who burned me."

So did he. He'd killed him.

## Chapter 5

Their arrival in Newfoundland was utterly uneventful. Their second stop in Iceland, even less so. In addition to his papers, Sam also had papers for her. Papers he didn't explain, nor did she inquire after. At this point, very little Sam could do would surprise her. Once they cleared customs, they made their way to the commercial side of the airport.

She almost wanted to ask him what would happen to his plane, but since he took care of everything else, she assumed he had a plan for that as well. Using her credit card, they purchased their tickets to a small airport well outside of Paris. From there, they could drive to the coast and take the ferry. Currently, their IDs listed them as British subjects, which meant they wouldn't get held up too much when they arrived back from a "day" spent in the French countryside.

It was late, and she was exhausted, but they still had an hour to wait before they could board their flight to France. Sam took her to a small restaurant in the airport, and bought food. Though she wasn't hungry, she made herself eat anyway. In the back of her mind, she was playing over the information she'd obtained about the Earl of Bonneville. In the meanwhile, Sam settled himself in and began doing his own research.

She considered reaching out to Clark. If nothing else, just sending him a quick encrypted message to let him know she was okay. But a message would only invite

more fire and scrutiny. The team was good. If they knew where to begin looking, it wouldn't take them long to begin unraveling the threads. As long as they had no idea where she was, she was a needle in a very large haystack.

She'd left her hair down, brushed it fully out, and used it to help disguise her face. A baseball cap added to the effect, with her choice of clothes leaning toward a touristy bohemian vibe. Sam offered to buy her more, but she only purchased sandals. Only problem with airport security, they couldn't take any weapons through. They were going at this unarmed.

Their flight to France was quiet and only four hours in length. They sat in first class, but unlike the other passengers, she didn't bother to put her seat back. Sam chose the aisle seat while she sat nearer the window. Throughout the flight, Sam's hand was less than an inch from hers. But she didn't touch him, and he didn't reach for her.

Deplaning in France, she told the custom's officials the story of honeymooners who'd lost all their luggage, but had the most wonderful time and were eager to get back to Britain.

The amused man waved them through. Sam gave her a little beaming look the whole time she was talking. She was only attempting to play a part, but understood right off the bat his smile had less to do with the role they were playing and more to do with the story she was weaving.

In fact, as they walked away, he leaned over and stole a kiss. She allowed it, reminding herself once more they were undercover. When he took her hand, she didn't fight it, merely interlaced their fingers together and kept right on walking. They hired a car, then drove down to the ferry. It'd been years since she traveled over the channel to Dover, but she was actually looking forward to it. The channel was choppy, the wind brisk, and the skies gray. Damn, it was good to be home. She'd almost forgotten how much she loved the English coastline, the dampness, and the

chill in the air. For far too many years now, she'd spent her time in hotter and hotter places. A lot of people might enjoy the sun, but she wasn't one of them.

A jacket dropped over her shoulders as Sam came to join her.

"How long has it been?"

"You know exactly how long it's been." Since the night he'd tried to kill Clark. She'd left and hadn't come back. The same night she'd been burned, finding out too late they'd also sent Sam to kill her brother.

"I suspected, but I wasn't sure."

"Are you sorry they didn't give you me?"

She could almost feel the weight of his stare, but she didn't turn away from the sea.

"Am I sorry they didn't send me to kill you?" He actually sounded offended. "Yes, I'm sorry they didn't give me that job. I'm sorry, because you wouldn't have had to take out the two sons of a bitch they did send."

She took off the baseball cap then ran her fingers through her hair. The breeze kept jerking at the long strands, and the weight of it pulled her head.

"I could've ended up shooting you instead."



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“Well, don’t feel too bad about it. You did end up shooting me, so it worked out.” Once again, he used humor to deflect, but she wanted to ask the question. She wanted to ask him about Clark, but she had already said she didn’t want to talk about him. For anyone else, she wouldn’t be doing this. This was for her brother.

“How long has it been for you?”

“Roughly the same time.” That surprised her; she hadn’t realized that he left right after she did.

“I want to ask why, but it’s none of my damn business.”

“You can ask anything you want, Addy. Don’t you know that yet? Quite the obedient dog. Sit, Sam. Stay, Sam. Go, Sam. Hunt, Sam. I do it all.” What began as a flippant remark took on a distinct note of sadness at the end.

Shaking her head, she reached over and laid her hand on top of his. “You’re not a dog, Sam. You never were.”

“M’lady, are you trying to comfort me?”

She removed her hand. “No, I was being factual. You’re not a dog. Dogs are loyal.” She regretted what she’d said the moment the words left her mouth, but deep inside, she couldn’t deny the anger continued to simmer. Anger at him for taking the assignment to kill her brother. Anger at herself for not finishing Sam off when she had the chance. Even more anger, because she was still in this damn situation. At Red Wolf, who had eluded them for years, and continued to be one step—sometimes a

dozen steps—ahead. Bugger all, it didn't make any sense. And yet, here she was again, with Sam. Not because he butted in or intruded. Not because she'd called him, but because she needed him. "I'm sorry."

A pause. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard what I said."

"It's very breezy out here, I might've missed it. Would you care to repeat that for me, please?"

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made a comment about loyalty."

"You could've just started with and ended with the I'm sorry. You know, in all the years I've known you, you've never apologized. Not once. Not for anything."

She sniffed and raised her chin. "That's because I'm never wrong. Until now."

He laughed, then slid an arm around her, the action so familiar and yet so alien in the same breath that she froze. "Take it easy, Addy. Whether you choose to believe me now or never, I've always been on your side. I am sorry that they didn't give me the assignment. You shouldn't have had to be alone when you found out they were turning on you. You shouldn't have been alone when that bastard Brixton made hay off of your career. I should have seen what was coming..." Though he didn't move away, his voice trailed off, and she realized that he'd ventured dangerously close to the topic she'd forbidden.

"You mean when they sent you after Clark." He said nothing. "I know I said don't talk about him, but we're about to go do something dangerous or stupid or both. And you showed up. You didn't have to, you're right. I sent the message. So, tell me."

She gripped the railing as tight as she could, even as Sam stepped in closer, his arm around her shoulders a warm and steadying presence.

“They brought me in and gave me a file.” His voice lost all emotion, retreating to that cool, distant place he went when he was talking about business. “It was very specific. It listed a series of crimes and activities, as well as dates and travel plans. All hotspots, all dangerous. Then they handed me a second file, one detailing compromised ops and attributed agency losses to a single person. The way the two files had been written, it made it look like the pair were lovers.”

Her stomach rolled at the very idea.

“If I’d paid more attention when you told me about Clark’s latest venture, I might’ve caught it sooner. As it was, I took the job because that was the job.” He didn’t have to add any more explanation. How many jobs had she done where she had simply been following orders? Compartmentalization was quite literally the rule of thumb within the agency. Their singular uniting goal was the protection of United Kingdom. Nothing else mattered.

“When I arrived at the cottage, I didn’t recognize the location. It wasn’t one I’d ever been to with you.”

No, Clark had stayed in a residence owned by their mother’s family. He preferred it, said it was quieter and gave him time to think. None of their neighbors hosted shoots, so he could take his breaks from trying to save the world, gather his thoughts, work on his puzzles and relax.

“The moment I walked in the door, I recognized his medical bag. And I knew what they’d sent me to do.”

White-knuckled, she forced herself to stand still, not to react emotionally. She had to

handle this. Even if they discussed the near assassination of her brother. She'd asked for his explanation, and by God, she would hear his every word.

“Which also told me the other target was you. They'd given me the assignment specifically to get me out of the way and to make sure you were alone when they came for you.”

A jerk went through her. She twisted to look up at him. “You think they did that on purpose?”

The bland look he returned spoke volumes. “Only an idiot would send an assassin after an assassin's girlfriend when that assassin is there.”

“They're even more of an idiot when the assassin's girlfriend—thank you for that title—can take care of herself.”

“Touché.” He blew out a breath and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “So, I knew I had to make a call. I could back out and leave Clark there, but they would've sent someone else almost immediately. I knew they were watching. They had to make sure that I was occupied, and the only way to do that would be to monitor my activities, which means they had to see what I was doing.”

Which had to have made it even harder on him. If they were watching, then they were ready to walk in with their guns blazing. She knew without a shadow of doubt Sam would've gotten out. Clark probably wouldn't have. Not then.

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“I’ve killed enough people in my life to know exactly how to hurt one. I think I know the body nearly as well as a doctor does. I know how to sink a knife in to cause semi-paralysis and shock sufficient to take a victim down. If it had been my op, the minute I left is when I would’ve gone for you. Which meant, if you were still alive, and of that I was certain, then you had to be right behind me. You would know they’d have tried to take your brother out, too.”

Shock and awe filled her. He described exactly what happened. They had come for her within an hour of his departure. They’d actually caught her in the shower. Fortunately, as he said, he was an assassin. There wasn’t a room in his place that didn’t have a weapon in it.

“So, working on the theory you were right behind me, I knew exactly how much damage I could do to ward them off and give them this false sense that everything was fine. Then I had to get the hell out of there before you showed up.”

Only he hadn’t left. An accident on the thruway had held her up. “You stay... You stayed to make sure he didn’t die.”

“If you say so.”

“Sam, don’t do that. If you’re going to tell it to me, tell me all of it.” Bile burned in the back of her throat, and her stomach churned.

“Yes, I stayed. I hit him from behind, two deep knife wounds. No vital organs were pierced, but he lost enough blood and was shocked enough that it took him down. I used a light chokehold to make sure he went unconscious. I wanted them to see him

fall.” Even with the change in perspective, the description left her raw.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply in through her nose and out through her mouth.

“You waited. You waited to see my car pull in.”

He said nothing, but when she stole a look at him, he nodded.

“Of all the times for you to be late. I was just about to call for the ambulance when I saw your headlights. I removed the towels I’d been using to stanch the wounds and took them with me. I was just double checking that I hadn’t left anything out of place when you made it through the door.”

“And I tried to kill you.”

“Have I ever mentioned how fortunate I feel that, on those rare occasions when you’re a lousy shot, and it seems to have something to do with me?”

She laughed. “I wasn’t looking at you, I only saw Clark, and my mind refused to believe that person whose face I saw was you. But there you were, on the security camera, coming and going. I thought you’d stayed so long because you were trying to find something.”

“Find what?”

Addy shrugged. “I have no idea. My next thought was to get Clark the hell out of there. We would have to go dark and deep. That’s when I got the idea to fake his death. I didn’t want them coming after him again. They already knew I was out there.”

“They’d almost managed to clean up most of your mess before I got back.” Oh, when he got back to his place. She’d left two bodies there.

“But you knew I was alive.”

He nodded. “I also knew that it could only be one of three people who decided to burn you. I made it my business to find out which of the three it was. I took care of it.”

Brixton had been killed in a car wreck less than a month after Clark’s ‘fatal’ accident. “That was you?”

“At your service.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I spent the last several years telling myself it was better if you stayed away. Telling myself, if you really wanted to know, you would figure it out. Then, three years ago—”

Her heart sank. “Thailand.”

“Yes, and we’ll be in dock soon. But tell me about Thailand. Did you specifically come there to shoot me or...?”

No, she hadn’t gone to Thailand to shoot him. “I was there on an entirely different job. Then I saw you. I saw you sitting there at the bar, and a part of me was happy. The rest of me was gleeful, because I would finally be able to shoot the son of the bitch who betrayed me and tried to kill my brother. But after I fired those two shots, I couldn’t finish it. I didn’t really want you dead. That goes against all my training, so I left.”

Did she owe him another apology?

“Well, I suppose this bodes well for our future relations.”

Future relations? Her puzzlement must’ve shown, because Sam began to smile.

“Oh, you’ll get there. When you do, let me know. At least I know my life is safe in your hands when I piss you off.”

## Chapter 6

Sam never imagined returning the England with Addy at his side. In fact, he never thought to return anywhere with her. More, he couldn’t believe she’d allowed him to explain what happened. It didn’t make his actions any less unforgivable, nor did it change the fact that he had indeed shoved a knife in her brother’s back, not once but twice. He could make all the excuses he wanted. He could state the obvious, that he was following orders. That he had then defied the same orders to prevent her brother’s death, but he hadn’t made it go away. He hadn’t protected her when he was standing in that office reading those files. He got along to get along, and he’d done his damn job.

Letting her down, failing her? That was the most unforgiveable act of all. His hand trembled faintly, but he ignored it. He might have felt like he’d poured himself into a bottle, but he’d never stopped working out or hydrating himself—in case she ever needed him.



Thank God.

“It looks like the Earl isn’t in London, he’s at his estate in Lincolnshire.” Addy slid back into the vehicle. As soon as she closed the passenger door, Sam pulled out into traffic. Anyone who had ever dealt with London traffic understood, it was eat or be eaten. The congestion charge to drive in the city had gone up since the last time he’d been home, but he paid it gladly.

“You want to drive there now? Or do you want a place to sleep for the night?” Personally, he wanted out of London—too much CCTV coverage, and though she looked vastly different thanks to age and the way she carried herself, it wasn’t enough to prevent facial recognition from identifying her if they ran a sweep. He wanted her somewhere safe, where he could at least protect her the right way this time.

“We’re exhausted.” It was sweet that she included him in that assessment. “But we’re not safe in London. Let’s at least get out of the city. We can find a way station or one of the American hotels and stay there.”

The American hotels offered a number of amenities, and at times, denser populations. The more guests, the easier it would be to disappear among them.

“Agreed.” From memory, he followed the route to get out of the city. He’d lived in London for many years, owned a motor, and for a time, even had a bike. Most of the time, it had been faster to get in and around the city via the bike rather than the motor, but he always liked to be prepared. He still owned a flat, though he sublet it in large part to make it clear to MI6 he had no intentions of returning.

Addy said very little, her attention on the scenery as they drove. A part of him wondered what she saw when she looked outside. London was a city for the ages. For more than a thousand years, there'd been a London, the old establishment alongside the new. In parts of the city, one could even find the scorch marks from the Great Fire. In others, damage from the Blitz. And still others, like the Tower, buildings erected by William the Conqueror and those who followed him.

Sam had something of a love-hate relationship with the city. It was home; therefore, he would always adore it. It was the place where he'd first met Addy, so he would treasure those memories. It was also the place everything went horribly awry. Every day, it seemed to grow more crowded, the tourists more dense, the pollution worse. Rising costs, coupled by shrinking size—he loved London, but he couldn't imagine himself ever living there again.

Unless Addy wanted to. He'd live anywhere for her. Good God, he was such a sad sack. Then again, he had plenty of years to meet someone else if he was going to, but no woman ever touched him the way she did. In fact, even when he tried to flirt, he found the exercise tedious and perfunctory. He wanted no one else. There had always been and always would be Addy.

“You're very grim.” The soft observation dragged him away from his thoughts.

“It's a very grim day.” It had begun to drizzle, not enough for a real rain, but plenty to be annoying on the windshield. The cold would come soon enough, and the damp would be everywhere. He'd spent too many years in Costa Rica. At this point, he enjoyed the warmer climate, the lush foliage, and even more, the wide-open space. The country was quieter than America, poorer too, but he got by. Sometimes, he did more than get by.

“You've been quiet since we got off the ferry.”

“Well, I’ve pretty much said all I had to say,” he lied, because he could say more. He could beg. He could plead. He could throw himself down and grovel. He would do none of those things, however. If Addy wanted him around, as he had already told her, all she need do was ask.

“If you say so. Maybe it’s just because I’m tired. I wish this was home.” In direct contradiction to what he had just been thinking, but he recognized it. The hardest place to see was the place you weren’t allowed to go. What a person always longed for was what they didn’t have. Though, even when he had Addy, that longing hadn’t gone away. Whether she was on assignment or he was, what he looked forward to most was when they were in the same place.

“If you want to return, we can make that happen,” he said.

“You weren’t kidding earlier, were you?” Interest and intrigue filled her expression. “You really will do anything I ask.”

It wasn’t a question. “Well, as you’ve got the gist of it, I see no need to explain.”

“Sam, it was a long time ago, and there’s been a lot of water under that bridge.”

“The bridge could’ve washed away, Addy, and I’d still try to rebuild the bloody thing. If you want to detonate it, I’d blow it up and rebuild it again. Until I got it right.” He couldn’t blame her if his feelings made her uncomfortable. Unlike some, she wasn’t overly demonstrative. She didn’t throw herself at a man, nor did she feel the need to show off for one. If anything, it was one of the reasons seduction ops drove him crazy. She had to act so completely out of character. Yet, it was that same act which also prevented such operations from driving his jealousy. She wasn’t remotely interested in those other men, even when she played her part to perfection. By not being herself.

Lady Addison? She'd belonged to him.

"I can't come back here. Not yet, anyway. The job isn't done."

"Then for the sake of argument, if the job was done—what then? What would you do? What will you do?"

"Take a vacation. Spend a few weeks off the grid, without worry or concern that I'm needed somewhere. No more babysitting, that's for damn sure." She shook her head, but the level of disgust in her tone intrigued him.

"Been doing a lot of that lately, have you?"

"None of your business. Though, admittedly, I have grown quite weary of playing a part that I did not get to script."

In that, he was in perfect agreement. "Then change the script to suit your purposes." At the risk of endangering this detente they had discovered between them, he pressed his advantage. "Or is it that you handed your leash to someone else?"

"Nobody holds my leash, Sam. MI6 didn't hold it. They earned it, by earning my loyalty. Then they threw it away, severing that bond forever." The question was, had the tie between her and him also been forever severed? She didn't take him down that road, though, nor answer his unasked question. Instead, she continued to stare out the window, her expression one of quiet longing.

"And who calls the shots, who's holding your feet to the fire? Who's making the decisions for you?"

"What you really want to know is who has my loyalty," she stated matter-of-factly. "And you're asking because you're curious, but also so you'll know who you have to

kill to set me free.”

“Perhaps. Though assassination would be my last choice. I can always buy them off. If that fails, blackmail is often effective.”

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She laughed, the musical sound of her chuckle filling the interior of the motor. “You will never change, will you?”

“Why should I? The greatest crime I ever committed cost me the only thing I cared about. I have no reason to change... or do I?”

“No, you don’t. Even were you to win back that which you held most valuable, would not that value diminish if it demanded you change?”

“Would you care to bastardize Shakespeare a little more, m’lady?” Her snort was all the answer he needed. Traffic began to thin as they left the city behind. The motorway expanded, allowing them to accelerate.

“Just saying, you have to be you. The same way I have to be me. Sometimes, I forget who I used to be, who I wanted to be. There is only what I’ve become.”

That answer troubled him more than her earlier one. “Do you truly believe you weren’t being yourself? When we were together?”

The time it took her to answer the question disturbed him. She sighed and shook her head. “Sometimes, I think that was the only time I was me. Remember, our relationship was forbidden. For two years, I wanted to catch your eye, but you were so professional. You always kept me at arm’s length. Even when you insisted that I practice my seduction technique over and over again. It never seemed to move you.”

“That’s because the seduction technique wasn’t yours. It was the role you played. You have never had to play a part to get my interest. You had that from the day I met

you.” He hadn’t meant to tell her that part, and he scowled at her. The smug smile she wore told him exactly what she’d been doing. She lulled him, played him like a fiddle, until she’d gotten the answer she wanted to hear.

“So, pray tell then, sir, why did you hold out for so long? Why did you wait until that assignment in Tokyo? Why there?”

“Because I was tired of waiting. I told myself you were too young at first, then I told myself I was your training officer. Then I told myself I didn’t want you to stay.” All true, but her silence cut at him. “I wanted you to have a real life, Addy. MI6 takes everything from you, will bleed you dry until you have given everything you have. Look at us now. We’re exactly where I didn’t want us to be. But by your twenty-first birthday and the Tokyo assignment, it had become clear.” Everything had become clear.

“I would never leave. I loved the work I did. I loved protecting our country. I loved being the person they could send in to get what they needed, and often achieve a goal without bloodshed. I like averting disasters before they occurred. When diplomacy failed, it was my job to make sure the long-term ramifications were negated. Who wouldn’t love that job?” She startled him, because she placed a hand on his leg. So far, he had allowed her to control their touching, at least since he’d stolen the few kisses he wanted on the plane. “I liked working with you. You always seemed to anticipate, you knew what I needed before I knew I needed it. I never had an ounce of fear when I walked into one of those ops, because I knew you were out there. I knew you would get me out.” She squeezed his leg. “It’s why I sent you the message, Sam, because even after everything that happened, and even though I was as angry as I was, both after what happened with Clark and in Thailand—I knew you’d come for me.”

Pride flooded him, pride and pleasure. “Well, I’m here now. What more would you have of me, m’lady?”

“I would have you stop saying m’lady.”

So prim in her reprimanding.

“As you wish, Addy.” He grinned. “Though m’lady does keep me at more of an emotional distance and might serve you better in the long run.”

“Only if my plan in the long run is to leave you behind.”

It wasn’t? He said nothing, not daring to challenge that hope.

“Sam, I can’t read you in. I’d like too, but it’s not my place. And maybe when this is done, after we bag the Earl, I might have to go for a bit. But it won’t be goodbye.”

He kept his grip firm on the steering wheel.

“If you’re willing, I will find you again. Without the gun this time.”

“I don’t mind the gun,” he told her quickly. “I’ll bring my own, if you’d like.”

“There’s a motel up this way.” She pointed to a sign.

It was a decent enough establishment, and it would do. “One room or two?”

“Two, only as long as it has an adjoining door.”

He could work with that. He accelerated. The sooner they got to the motel, the sooner they could make this reunion official.

“Sam?”



“Yes, Addy?” He barely caught himself from saying m’lady again.

“You are going to follow me, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.” Now that he had her back, he didn’t care where she went. She was not getting away from him again.

“Clark’s going to love this.”

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“I’ll let your brother stab me a few times. That should ease the sting.”

### Chapter 7

Addison removed her baseball cap as Sam let her into the room. The registry service surprised her. He’d booked the room via mobile, then simply used his phone to open the electronic lock. “You think they understand how very hackable that is?”

“Possibly,” he said, checking the lot once before closing the door. “At the moment, I care less about that than keeping your profile low.”

It didn’t escape her notice he didn’t mention his profile. Then again, he likely had a backup plan for his backup plan. The unnecessary protectiveness on his part, however, was appreciated. “You’re sweet.”

“Take it back,” he said with a scowl. “Sweet is for uncles and metrosexual life partners you have no intention of fucking.”

“Language,” she said, almost automatically. “You know I prefer a more expert tongue when it comes to these matters.”

She didn’t make it another step before his arms came around her and pulled her back to his chest. The warmth and strength of his frame closing in had her shutting her eyes.

“At the risk of spoiling what could quite possibly be the beginning of a lovely evening...” She spoke in a soft yet deliberate fashion. “I was not merely poking at

you on the plane in order to get a reaction.”

“I know,” he murmured, then pressed his lips to her hair. “That doesn’t matter.”

It should. She’d set a trap, seduced a man, then executed him.

“Addison.” He seemed to encompass the whole of her in the way he said her name.

“Was it necessary to complete the mission?”

“Yes.” Unreservedly so.

“Then it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters to me at the moment is you. If you want to shower, then turn in without expectation, so be it.”

“And if I want something else?” How far would he allow her to push him on this subject?

“Then understand, once I have you back, m’lady, I will never release you again. I bungled the first effort, and I accept my culpability.” He turned her, and she studied the sober intensity in his gaze. “I’ve drowned myself in a bottle since then. Alcohol has been my only solace, and all it managed to do was dull the need, never erase it. My bed, my rules, my woman. No leaving. Not again.”

“Does this mean you intend to turn into a caveman again?” It had happened only once in their previous relationship, a turning point. That night in Tokyo—a night she had been sent to seduce an attaché to an Ambassador. They were certain he traded in secrets—not deliberately, but through pillow talk.

The bastard had turned out to possess some unsavory predilections. He’d actually drugged her. A critical error on her part, one that nearly ended with her beaten half to death, a fate she hadn’t suffered because Sam arrived and dispensed with the attaché.

They ended his selling of secrets with brutal efficiency.

“Yes,” he said, not smiling nor softening it with any hint of humor. “I love you, Lady Addison Leeds. I will not be parted from you again, not willingly. So, if you want your freedom, then don’t miss the next time you decide to shoot me.”

Her brother would have a full litter of kittens over this particular reunion.

“I’m afraid I’m going to disappoint my brother terribly,” she admitted. They were the right words, because Sam’s whole demeanor changed, and the sun came out from behind the storm clouds in his eyes. “I’ve missed you, Sam. The hardest part of it all was thinking you had truly betrayed me. I refused to allow anyone else to ever get that close. Never again.”

Relief eased the last of the tension from his expression. He lifted her, as though she were made of the finest spun glass. “Never, I swear on my life. No one will pit me against you. Ever. I’ll take them all out.”

“With one exception...” She refused to harp on the point any longer, and when he opened his mouth as though to agree or refute her statement, she pressed her finger to his lips. “I trust you. I trust you to keep your word to me. It is enough.”

His grin stole her breath before his lips took hers in slow and almost tender possession. She allowed it, reveling in the contact as he settled her on the bed, but only for a moment.

She glided her fingers into the thick darkness of his hair, fisting it lightly. When he broke the kiss to study her, a question in his eyes, she smiled.

“Do be a dear and remember, I’m not that fragile, and I’ve missed you terribly. I need to feel you—to remember what it is to be with you and only you.”

“As m’lady commands.” He was never going to stop saying it. The social class distinction between them may have kept him at an emotional distance, but that had always been his issue, not hers.

“You silly bugger,” she said with a smile, then nipped his lower lip gently. Every moment spent with his arms around her soothed the jagged edges of her soul. “How ever did I manage without you?” Years of being strong, of fighting for the causes of others, of fighting for her brother—she’d put their needs, their wars, and their victories ahead of her own.

What other victory could she have but Clark’s life back? At least, that was what she believed until she reached out to Sam.

“God only knows. I’ve barely muddled by. Made some money, though,” he admitted. “About all I did manage.” Even as he spoke, he freed the belt from around her waist, then began to unbutton her borrowed shirt. “I must say, you look brilliant in my clothes. I think you should wear those or nothing at all.”

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Her snort may have been inelegant, but his grin made the sound all the more worth it. Once he had the shirt open, he walked his fingers along her torso. He seemed intent on studying her, memorizing every mole. Then he grazed his fingers along the scar at her throat.

“What is this?” The flare of anger in his eyes belied the control in his voice.

She could soften the blow, perhaps even sugarcoat where it came from, but it would be a disservice to him. “A memento from the night MI6 decided to burn me. They thought to slit my throat in the shower.” Had they been a tad quicker, or she even a moment more distracted, and it might have been her body he found in his flat.

The tension in his expression became quite severe. “I didn’t realize how close to the mark they came.”

“No worries. I returned his blade to him in spades. I apologize about the arterial spray on your Munoz.” The artist had always been a favorite of his.

“Considering the source, I think it may have made the piece invaluable.” Then he dipped his head and pressed his lips to the scar. Tenderness showered her through the light action. Her nipples tightened, but he made no move to touch her anywhere else. Instead, he began to strip her with perfect efficiency, his gaze assessing as he inspected her.

The scars on her right shoulder held him riveted. Two perfectly placed bullet wounds. Those she’d incurred on the way out of rescuing Titanium and his men in Russia. A guard had been unconscious—not dead—and he’d shot her as she pulled one of the

men out. It had hurt like the dickens, but she'd managed.

"Well?" he demanded, his gaze fierce.

"They're the remnants of bullet wounds." Playing obtuse did not come naturally to her, but she enjoyed the hint of amusement in his irritation.

"I bloody well know what the scars are from. I want to know who gave them to you and if—"

"Oh, good grief." She smacked his shoulder. "I'm lying here nude, and you're obsessing over some old scars? Have my breasts truly lost their fascination for you? Or my legs? Once upon a time, you swore you couldn't get enough of my pussy."

The distraction worked. He zeroed in on her mouth. "Say that again."

"Beg pardon?" Since he wanted to delay the inevitable, she contented herself with running her foot along the back of his leg.

"Pussy. Say it again."

"How do you make it sound so very dirty when you say it?" The tease pulled a smile from him. "A pussy is a fine thing, I've often enjoyed your attention on mine."

His whole chest rumbled. "Again."

"Are you mocking me, peasant?" The last barb struck its mark, and he glided his hand along her body as he shifted to lay on his side. His hand cupped her sex, with the heel of his palm pressed firmly against her clit. Electricity surged through her at the intimate contact, the ache in her womb a demand.

It had been so long since she'd even anticipated such a simple touch, much less the act.

"I'll mock you if I choose, m'lady. My bed. My rules."

"The hotel's bed, Samuel." She arched her eyebrows, then let her legs spread farther as she arched her hips. If he didn't want to move, she'd pleasure herself on his hand.

"Mine." No mistaking the firmness of his claim or the way his fingers curled against her to tease her entrance, even as he gave into her demand and began to massage her clit. Brilliant pinpoints of tension began to radiate outward, then he dipped his mouth to catch one nipple between his teeth, and she cried out.

The anticipation of him alone made her so sensitive. "Very well, if it gets you moving then," she managed to strain out. "Yours."

He froze, then raised his head slowly to meet her gaze. "Don't toy with me, Addy." All pretense lifted. The man gazing at her exposed a raw and vulnerable side of himself she'd seen far too rarely and remembered even less.

Pushing his hand away, she rolled over and straddled him. He went to his back, his hands resting on her hips as she began to unbutton his shirt. "I'm not toying with you. I love you." There, she'd said it. "I've loved you for nearly as long as I've known you. I loved you when I hated you."

Spreading his shirt wide, she smoothed her hands over the planes of his chest. Fit, and sturdy. He complemented her, big and broad where she was slighter of stature and leaner. More, he delighted her with the way his gaze tracked her every movement. Sometimes, she swore he read minds. Hers, at least.

"You have your share of scars." She traced the long, jagged mark stretching from his



pec to his abdomen. Then over the two bullet wound scars to the left of his heart.  
“Scars I gave you.”

He covered her hand with his. “Scars we gave each other.”

“You don’t get to excuse my actions if you don’t allow me to excuse your own.”

“Then we won’t excuse them.” He cupped her breasts, his thumbs tracing a light circle around her nipples. “We’ll learn from them. For example, when we fight, we’re unarmed.”

The corners of her mouth curved. “And when we have sex?”

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“We table our fights until we’re mutually satisfied—but guns on the side table.”

“I am satisfied with this arrangement.”

He flipped her, the action so smooth she went from being astride him to below with his body firmly settled between her thighs. “You’re not satisfied yet. But I promise, when I’m done, you will be.”

“For tonight, at least.” She dared him with the verbal challenge.

Slanting his mouth over hers, he answered the challenge with a hot, open-mouthed kiss that demanded all of her attention. His hands seemed to be everywhere. He teased her nipples, even as he ground his hips against her sex. The press of his erection was a torment, trapped behind the fabric of his slacks. Digging her nails in, she wrestled for control only long enough to free the snap on his trousers, then the zipper.

He abandoned her a brief moment, shrugging off his clothing. Rising on her elbows, she enjoyed the view of compact muscles shifting with his movement. He’d added a touch of weight to his waist, the ripped abdominals having softened.

Somehow, it made him all the more real—all the more hers.

“I’ve missed you.” Though she’d already confessed to the longing, she wanted him to know again. No more barriers between them. No more emotional demilitarized zones.

He pressed a finger to her lips. “No more, Addy. My heart can’t take anymore. I’ve

waited for this moment far too long.”

The tension cording her spine relaxed, and she raised her hands to him, curling her fingers in invitation. He sheathed his cock in a condom, not wasting any time, and for that, she was grateful.

She didn’t need foreplay or teasing. They’d had years to amp their anticipation. Crawling up the bed from the foot, he pressed a kiss to her knee, then to the inside of her thigh—then to her sex. His tongue stabbed inside of her, and she closed her eyes. He didn’t linger, though he spent a moment to trace her clit in a slow, sensuous swirl before grazing his teeth across the bundle of nerves.

Shocks arced along her spine, and she let out a soft moan. The sound escaped her before she could silence it. Another slow suck, one that had her vision dimming and her body tensing, coiled on the edge, and he pulled away to kiss a path along her belly to her breasts. Every glide of his skin against hers sizzled her senses.

His lips finally brushed hers, the taste of her still on his tongue as he eased into her. The agonizing slowness of his thrust made her crazy. She longed to feel him sink to the hilt, to fill her with abandon, then to drive into her with force. But not even her groans or the encouragement of her hands on his ass hurried him along.

Inch by glorious inch, he slid into her. His tongue teased her with a thrust of its own, as though he sought to distract her from the agony of his torture.

Frustrated and anxious, she shifted her grip to his shoulders, then wrapped her legs around him. His head lifted as though he sensed what came next, but she twisted and flipped until it was his turn to be on his back.

“Demanding wench.” The growl stroked her, a caress she felt all the way to her pussy, and she lifted her chin.

“I want to ride,” she told him, even as she arched her hips, then plunged onto him with the force she’d craved. His hiss of pleasure encouraged her. His hands came to her thighs, and when she rode up this time, he helped bring her down.

“As m’lady wishes. Ride me to your heart’s content.” It shattered her, the ease of his surrender to her. She wanted to give her all to him.

In no time, they found their rhythm, and she pleased herself riding his cock as he thrust deep within. His stamina drove her mad, but her orgasm was so close. When he pressed two fingers to her clit and gave the barest of twists, she lost all sense of balance. Her control turned to ephemera, the world brilliant as ecstasy swamped her.

Thank God for Sam. He took over, controlling her ride. With every glorious glide of friction, he sent her higher and higher. His orgasm stormed him, and with a shout of pleasure, he surged upward, wrapped her in his arms, and drowned her in his kiss.

When they finally collapsed, she trembled. The soft caress of his hand along her back quieted the blissful quivering still shaking her from the inside out.

“Better?” A veiled challenge lay within the solitary inquiry.

“Some,” she admitted, accepting the offer. “I think we can do better.”

“Agreed.” He gave her hip a light tap as he rolled free, and she ached for the loss of him. “On your knees, m’lady. I have work to do.”

For once, she didn’t argue.

## Chapter 8

Sam paced the room in a slow circle, the target of his ire sitting silent and quivering

in the chair.

“You’re having far too much fun with this,” Addy criticized from where she sat on the opposite side of the room. Dressed in a tailored morning suit, one leg crossed over the other, she looked perfectly rested and quite ready for the tea she had sitting before her.

“Well, looks can be deceiving, my dear,” he assured her. “I grew quite bored with this entertainment several hours ago.” With that, he turned to look again at the Earl of Bonnevill. Robert Carlisle had ceased offering him money, then resorted to threats. When both proved unsuccessful, he’d settled on begging.

“I don’t know what you want from me.” The man’s voice rose half an octave. “You have the wrong person.”

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“I think he’s lying.” A sip of her tea followed Addy’s quiet suggestion. “It’s the crack in the voice that gives it away.”

“Oh, I just thought it was because he opened his mouth.” Sam agreed with her though. The Earl had done nothing but lie to them from the moment they’d arrived.

He lied about his associations when they introduced themselves as emissaries from Red Wolf, yet he’d dismissed his staff. He lied when they revealed whom they were, and offered them swift payment to remove themselves from his property. Oddly, he continued to lie, even now. They simply hadn’t found the right button to push, as Addy would describe it. “The only question I have is, what secret is our good friend Red Wolf holding over him that he’s willing to die to protect?”

He didn’t quite face the Earl, but he didn’t miss the way the man’s face paled at the question.

“I couldn’t begin to tell you, but I believe I know what crimes the Earl has been hiding here on the estate.” She tapped the spacebar of the Earl’s private laptop. She’d located the device during a walking tour of the estate, while Sam dealt with the first round of questions. “He has some very naughty photographs on here.”

“Naughty?” Evincing a puerile interest in porn never hurt.

“I’m sorry, darling. I truly don’t think these naughty photographs are for you. These naughty photographs really aren’t suitable for anyone. Tell me, Lord Robert, are you familiar with the child pornography laws of Great Britain?”

Pivoting, Sam faced the Earl. The man's face had completely blanched. "Those aren't my photographs."

"The security passcode on the file would negate such an assertion. I'm afraid that possession, coupled with location, coupled with your title, would make for quite the juicy scandal."

How far did the little vixen plan to take the issue? Sam wasn't quite sure, but he was more than willing to play along. "I'm sure The Mirror or The Sun would have a field day. They do so love lurid details."

"They aren't mine. I object to the character assassination you two seem intent upon performing."

"I'm afraid you'd have to have a character in order for it to be assassinated." Sam closed the distance between them slowly. "As an expert in assassination, I'm very familiar with that."

The distinct odor of urine filled the room, and he shook his head. It was almost too easy. Whoever this fool was, and whatever he was to Red Wolf... how they had allowed such a liability to run loose did not bode well for the future of that organization. What a true pity that would be.

"And now he's gone and soiled himself," Addy said with a hint of disgust. She turned the laptop around. On the screen was a spreadsheet. "Tell me, Lord Robert, are the deposits for human trafficking? Drugs? Payoffs? Have you been selling your vote in the House of Lords? Or have you simply been using your position to gain leverage over the peerage?" No game or artifice marred her questions. In these accusations, she was perfectly serious.

The Earl cleared his throat. "I should seek the advice of legal counsel." The man had

just pissed himself, but thought he had the right to legal counsel.

“Your Lordship, I feel it’s my duty to inform you that you are currently tied to a chair, with a gun literally pressed against the side of your head.” He set the gun there to emphasize the point. “By two former operatives disavowed by MI6. We literally have nothing to lose. You have everything at stake. Tell me again about how you need legal representation?”

“Fine, I will tell you anything you wish to know.”

“Who is Red Wolf?” Addy wasted no time.

The Earl’s expression crumbled. “I can tell you anything but that. Anything, name it, and it’s yours.”

Rising, Addy dusted off her skirt, then lifted the laptop. “Samuel, dearest?” She said as she crossed the room heading for the stairs. Sam paced behind the Earl, thoroughly enjoying this part of the performance.

“Yes, m’lady?”

“I desire a confession and the truth. Would you care to do that while I put together a tea for us?”

“I’d be delighted to, my dear.”

She blew him a kiss, then disappeared upstairs. Pulling the slide out of the gun, Sam returned to standing before the Earl. He set aside the gun, then removed his jacket and folded it. Then he began rolling up his sleeves.

“What are you doing?” Somehow, Sam suspected that the Earl had finally gotten a



glimpse at a very ugly future.

“What m’lady wishes, m’lady gets.” Sam told him. “Last chance to come out of this with your face still intact. Trust me, your lordship, I will make sure you have one or two teeth they can identify.”

It took losing three, for the Earl to finally crack. Sam was impressed; he thought he’d give after one. Of course, the first two had only been his incisors. Perhaps he should have started with the molars. Mouth bleeding, pissed shorts, and unconscious, the Earl slumped in the chair. Sam washed his hands, then adjusted his short shirtsleeves and pulled his jacket on before climbing the stairs to join Addy. She sat in the sunshine, staring out across an empty garden. The manor house was old, had been in the Earl’s family for many generations.

“Did you get it?” No hint of doubt marred her question, she knew he wouldn’t have joined her if he didn’t have something to say. Depositing a kiss on the corner of her mouth first, he then took a seat. She poured him a cup of tea, though at this point, he could’ve gone for something slightly stronger. “He claims to be Red Wolf.”

Addy stilled. “He’s too young. And he doesn’t match the physical description at all.”

“He swears he is, swears he has proof. It’s located in a secure box in Switzerland.”

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Leaning back in the chair, Addy drummed her nails against the tabletop. He gave her a moment to process while he took a sip of the tea. Frankly, she could've taken a month, simply being near her left him content. During the last three days, he had rediscovered perfection in his life. Even torturing had taken on a whole new level for him. It was a task to be completed, enjoyed only for the interactions he had with her while she was present, then dispensed with quickly.

“I have to call Clark.”

He rather expected the result. “I’ll leave you to it,” he said as he began to rise, but she reached out a hand to stay him.

“No, you should be here for this. At least until I have to go back.”

That part he could live without, but she'd accepted he was not going to simply let her disappear. Yet, she had her own code, and it was one he respected. Nodding, he resumed his seat, then waited as she retrieved a phone from her purse. It was a new burner they'd picked up on their way to the Earl's estate. She stared at the device for a long moment before she finally dialed the number.

Once again, he wished he could tell what was going on inside her head. Was she worried about telling her brother about Red Wolf? Or about him?

Twenty-four hours after leaving the Earl, Sam walked with Addison through the terminal of the private airport just outside of Zürich. Henry refueled the plane and flew it to France to meet them. Not once had she asked him where he managed the funds for private plane, or who Henry was. She seemed content not to know, and if

so, then he was equally content not to tell her.

They changed on the flight, Addy having picked up a few more items on their way to the airport. She'd chosen slacks for this venture rather than a skirt or dress. She was every inch the professional, cool and almost untouchable. Yet, there was a hint of nervousness to her actions, one barely perceptible and probably only noticeable by someone who knew her as well as he did. It was in the way she twisted her fingers together, and how she continued to stare at him when she thought he wasn't looking.

"It's going to be fine," he assured her. Clark's reaction notwithstanding, Sam refused to let anything get between them. He couldn't eliminate her brother, he could only go after her brother's animosity. Frankly, Sam had earned the latter, so he would take the time necessary to make it right.

At the end of the concourse, three figures appeared, one woman and two men. Addison increased her speed, and a subtle change rippled over her demeanor. She straightened her shoulders, then her chin lifted, and her expression grew more remote. She'd reassumed the part she'd been playing. The part dictated to her by whatever job they were on.

Yes, the sooner they ended this, the better. If Addison wanted to play the part, it was one thing. But if she was held to a deal or some other commitment, then she was putting herself through a hell not of her own volition. Unacceptable on every level to him.

"Ms. Leeds," the woman greeted her. "And friend." Interestingly enough, the woman kept her attention on Addison, while the two men watched him.

"I thought we agreed you could call me Addison, Sachi."

"For the time being, let's go with Copper. We're on the job." Copper possessed a

brusque, businesslike tone. Despite her slight size, she wore the look of a woman hardened to the ways of the world. Spit and polish might have put a sheen on it, but it didn't hide the steel beneath.

"For the time being, I would prefer not to be called Arsenic in public, thank you very much." Addison's tone went a little snooty, even for her. It was all Sam could do not to laugh. "Brad, Gabriel, this is Samuel Reese, an old and trusted friend of mine."

Fierce possessiveness unfurled within him at the word trusted. He extended his hand first to the man called Brad, who watched him like a predator, sizing him up for the battle. The one called Gabriel accepted the handshake when Brad made no move to take it.

"Gabriel Danvers," the man said. "I'm very familiar with your work, Mr. Reese. Equally familiar with how you exited your last position, shall we say."

"All good to know, chap. Someone should know how it all ran down." He would neither accept the challenge nor rise to the bait. He was there for Addison, and that was it.

He took in Brad once more, but the other man simply shook his head. "This is too exposed. Let's get the hell out of the airport."

"Temper, temper," Copper said, but she also studied Sam, and she must've found something to her liking, because she nodded. She touched two fingers to her ear. "We're good, bringing them in now."

Bringing them in? Addison said nothing, merely took his hand as they walked. She knew these three, and while her body language didn't say trust, it did say confident. He could work with confident.

With their three escorts, they took a car from the airport to a private house rather than a hotel. It was a little château tucked into the side of the mountain just on the outskirts of Zürich.

As soon as they arrived, the three who brought them disappeared, leaving him and Addison to enter alone.

“What are the chances that we’re walking into an ambush?” She might be working for these people, but he didn’t know them nor how many he might have to eliminate, should the need arise.

“We’re not walking into a physical ambush, but Clark’s on site. Everyone else is making themselves scarce because they’re not certain whether or not I turned.”

“They’re also not certain about whether or not you should be sharing private business with a total stranger.”

And there he was, the vaunted brother. The man who would end their relationship if given his druthers.

“Clark.”

“Sam.” He didn’t even bother to disguise his disgust under a thin veneer of civility.

“I know I should’ve checked in, but I had my reasons. You should know by now that when I go dark, there’s always a reason for it.” Addison put her hands on her hips, then stared at her brother. Clark finally dragged his attention away from Sam to look at her. Almost immediately, there was a softening to the harsh expression on his face, and Sam recognized relief when he saw it.

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“There’s going dark, then there’s disappearing off the face of the Earth. You’ve been distant for months.” Clark spit the words out, and they carried no small amount of concern layered with hurt. “Then you take off with Uranium and leave no word of your destination. You left everything, including your tracker.”

“You knew that might be part of the deal. He had to think he turned me, and if we were stealing away somewhere, why would we take our trackers with us?”

Clark sighed and shook his head. “You two better come up.” He made it one step before he turned and pointed a finger at Sam. “If you even think about sticking another knife in my back, I’ll have you shot where you stand.”

“Fair enough.” Sam had no quarrel with her brother. Not yet, anyway. “Just a note, though? Keep talking to your sister that way, and you’ll be picking your teeth up off the ground.”

“Sam,” Addison reprimanded him. She turned on her brother. “Stop. I mean it, Clark. Just stop.”

She followed it up by closing the distance between her and her brother to embrace him. It was a tentative display, one they both acted out so awkwardly, it was almost painful to watch. Sam turned his gaze away, allowing them a moment of privacy. From the corner of his eye, however, he watched Clark’s arms tighten as did Addison’s. They exchanged a few quiet words, then Clark reared back and stared at her.

“Are you nuts?”

“Manners.” She shook her head. “Sometimes, I wonder how we were raised in the same household.”

“I must’ve gotten all the brains, while you were learning all the manners.”

Sam gave him a moment to self-correct, because if he didn’t soften that particular statement, he was going to take offense.

Addison waved it off with dismissal. “Enough. I already explained why Sam did what he did. He tried to save your life. I’ve hated him long enough, and I’m with him now. I will finish this with you. We will make sure it is done, and I have not ever, nor will I ever abandon you, but please don’t make me choose.”

A certainty thrummed through Samuel, a certainty he couldn’t deny. For the first time—ever—he’d edged out her brother in her loyalties.

“Go on, give us a moment.”

She hesitated, looking from her brother to Sam, then back again. Her concern wasn’t for his reaction, but her brother’s. Sam promised to make peace, and he would. Clark gave her no such assurances.

“I’ll be inside.”

“We’ll be along directly,” Sam assured her.

The moment they were alone, Clark eyed him. “Give me one good reason not to shoot you.”

“It would make her sad.” It was the only reason he needed to do nothing.

Glaring, the other man swore. “If you ever hurt her—”

“I’d shoot myself first.”

“Good.” They shared a long look, until finally Clark nodded. “You better come up then. She wants you read in.”

Sam didn’t smile. “One more thing before we go?”

“What?” He really didn’t sound in the mood.

“Don’t talk to her that way again, am I clear?” He didn’t need to specify, her brother and him understood each other. Liking was a long way off, but Addison was their bridge.

“Does she know?” Her brother raised his eyebrows, his expression challenging.

“She knows everything.”

“Bollocks.”

What was he getting at? “Your point?”

Lifting his phone, Clark read, “The next Ian Fleming is...”

“Shut it.” He scowled. Apparently, her brother had done his homework. Good for him.



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“So, I have something on you.” He smiled.

“What do you want?” If her brother wanted to hold Sam’s work as an author over him, he could live with that as blackmail.

“For you to sweat.”

Was that all? “Not that you hold a grudge or anything.”

“You know I think you’re insane?”

“You know I think you’re a prig?”

“As long as we’re clear.”

Sam agreed. “Then let’s not keep her waiting.”

“After you.” Clark motioned for him to precede him. “You’ll understand why I don’t want you at my back.”

“Lots of ways to kill people, Superman.” He reminded him as he headed inside. “Lots of ways.”

“Are you sure we can’t shoot him, Addison?” Clark called.

“Quite sure,” she replied.

Sam would drink to that.

Hours later, Sam stood on the balcony overlooking the valley. He had a bourbon in one hand and cigar in the other.

“You planning to smoke that?” Addison leaned against the railing, a jacket pulled on over her turtleneck shirt. She was so buttoned up, he couldn’t wait to strip her naked later. The very idea pulled a reluctant smile from him.

“Your brother is not a field op.”

“He didn’t used to be, no, but we’ve had to make many changes over the years. Adapt or die.” The answer seemed too simple, too pat. “And you didn’t answer my question. Are you planning on smoking that?”

“No, because I plan to kiss you shortly, and your brother is clever.” He set the cigar down on the stone railing next to her. “But he’s not subtle.”

Addy chuckled, a light sound, and the first real laugh he’d heard out of her since they’d turned over the thumb drive and other files collected from the Earl to her team.

“He doesn’t like that you’re here, but he won’t fight us.”

She summed up her sibling relationship so neatly in that statement.

“Too much effort?” Maybe he pushed his luck, bagging on her brother.

“Be nice, darling. I may not shoot to kill you, but a leg wound still hurts.” Apparently, yes, he was pushing his luck.

The others hadn’t ceased watching him since he arrived. Whether they used cameras

or the tail who'd made his presence known, Sam could practically feel them boring holes through him. They didn't know what to make of him, and he preferred their wariness. Slipping an arm around her, he drew her close before he pressed his lips to her ear. "Why don't you let me take the target out for you? You don't have to endanger your brother at all."

"You're not here to be our pet assassin," she chided, but she rested her hand against his chest. "This is about more than me or you—more than about Clark. We all have a stake in this, and the final play... Clark calls it."

"You can pet this assassin anytime you like, luv." Her smile made the tease worth it. "I'm not leaving."

"So, you said you would follow no matter where I went." Those gorgeous eyes locked on his.

"Still true."

"It could take a while. It's already taken years to be as close as we are."

"What are a few years between lovers?" He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. "I have one condition."

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“Only one?” Her skepticism was on point.

“One, for now.” He grinned, proud of her. “But I reserve the right to renegotiate if any of these bloody Yanks get out of hand.”

“Acceptable. Name the condition.”

“If Clark dives down this rabbit hole, you don’t go in after him without me.” A doctor leading a team of criminals, former military, and spies—the world really had gone to hell. He might as well get in the handbasket.

“I believe that might possibly be the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.” She gave him a considering look. “And the most unselfish.”

“Don’t you paint me with that brush, m’lady. If I’m to ask for your hand in marriage, Little Lord Fauntleroy in there needs to be alive for me to do it. Call my participation an investment in our future.”

Addy’s laughter pealed out of her like bells ringing. “Would you at least do me the courtesy of asking me first?”

“Right after we make sure your brother survives this latest venture. I didn’t save his life all those years ago to watch him toss it overboard.”

Turning into him, Addy slid her arms around his neck. “I love you, too.”

“I know.” The knowledge gave him super powers.

She tucked her head against his shoulder, and he let the perfection of the moment wash over him. “What did Clark mean when he said you had to be a fan of Ian Fleming? I thought you didn’t like those movies?”

Then again, if her brother didn’t make it, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. “I’ll read you in. Give me six months.”

“Six months?” Disbelief populated those two syllables.

“It’s need to know, and in six months, you’ll need to know.” Especially since they’d optioned one of his books to turn into a movie, and he’d have to go to the premiere. “Trust me?”

“Yes.” No hesitation at all. It was the only question that mattered. Everything else they could take care of themselves.

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