



ProtectHER

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Description: To his enemies, Maxim Gunnar is the Devil. But to Evie Walsh, he's the angel that protects her.

One decision can alter the course of your life. Nine out of ten times for the better, but I'm number ten. One decision spun my life on a path I would never have expected, leading me to walk away from everything and everyone, including Evie, the one girl who'd forever hold my heart. I chose a path toward discipline, structure, and accountability as my penance for my selfish actions.

Now, I'm the Devil that looms in the dark. I serve my country by protecting others. I'm the best the CIA has, a face with no name and a man without a future. And I'm certainly not a good man anymore. I live for the rush I feel when I watch the life leave my victims' eyes.

The last thing I ever expected was to come face to face with my past. When Evie becomes a pawn in a CIA sting operation led by her brother—my best friend—she ends up in the hospital. But they've messed with the wrong man. I vow to suck the life out of anyone involved in sending the message to the CIA through her. No one will be left standing when I'm done.

One question remains: how will she react when she finds out I'm still alive and I'm the only one that can keep her safe?

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Chapter One

Russia, My Old Friend

It wasthree in the morning when I arrived in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The last time I'd been here was ten years ago after meeting Mila. She was a ballerina with the Bolshoi, whose cousin was an operative with the SVR. I was not fond of the city then, and I'm not too fond of it now. Too many bad memories overshadow the good, and I've tried to forget the night that took Mila's life. She was collateral damage in an intelligence war she had no business being a part of—She was supposed to be an assignment, but in the end, I developed genuine feelings for her. As I pass the Astoriya hotel, I can't stop remembering our nights there. I'd believed I cared for her more than I did the job and could walk away from the CIA any time I wanted. And back then, I wanted her more than the job—or at least I thought I did.

I'd been a member of SEAL Team One for over five years when my best friend recruited me.Come work for me,he said,be a part of something bigger than the both of us. It will be like old times, the two of us together, taking names and kicking ass.Sawyer was the closest thing to family I had, and my arrogance and loyalty made me say yes. In my mind, I envisioned myself as the next James Bond, and trust me; I had no qualms about killing. It was like breathing for me. Instinctual.

The partially lit sidewalk smelled of humidity, and the concrete was still wet from an early rain. Footsteps echoed behind me as I reached into my raincoat to retrieve the nine from my shoulder holster. My finger releases the thumb break as my hand wraps around the barrel. Just as I'm about to turn and draw on the person behind me, a car door opens, exposing a pair of long toned legs. A brunette exits the waiting car as I

continue to walk past. Without giving them the time of day, I start to lower my gun but hesitate when I hear the female voice.

“Alexei is that you?” the brunette calls out.

Hearing her say my undercover name brings me to a stop. I ease the gun back into its holster and turn to find Alina, an old friend of Mila’s. She’s standing next to a gentleman with his arm wrapped around her waist. Behind them is a man, the footsteps I’d heard earlier, holding a gun with a suppressor in his hand as it rests by his side. He raises the gun and fires two bullets, one penetrating Alina and the next on the man with her. I lunge for cover behind the concrete stairs that lead up to an apartment building entrance and wait, pistol ready. The footsteps keep coming; the arrogance of the shooter tells me without a doubt that the man is an SVR agent.

The footsteps slow the closer they come to the stairs that block me. I raise my gun as the man stops in front of me, gun pointed at my head. I pull the trigger before my assailant has the opportunity to fire his, the bullet flies, landing square in the center of his forehead, and he drops to the ground. It’s safe to say the Russians know I’m here.

Pulling my victim’s trench coat aside, I retrieve his wallet before I take off running down the sidewalk. I know it’s only a matter of time before lights come on and anyone can get a look at me. I reach for the keys in my pocket as I turn the corner three blocks from the incident and enter the safe house. I toss the wallet I retrieved from the dead man on the table and hang my coat on the hook by the door. I hear the sirens zoom past my building enroute to the triple homicide. Though I know the news tomorrow will only report the death of the ballerina and her gentleman friend.

Boris Ivan Badenov, the I.D. confirms. I’m positive it’s a cover name, and it will do no good to dig deeper, but I’ll reach out to Sawyer and let him do the leg work in case something comes from it. I knew I’d never get in and out under the radar, but I had hoped I’d have more time before the SVR got wind of my visit to St. Petersburg. I’m

positive they think they've got the upper hand, but they don't know I've prepared for all contingencies, even the possibility of this one.

When the Agency hired me, some thought I would be expendable if something like this happened. But little did they know I'd be their most valuable killer. Like a rabid dog lusting with a thirst for blood, I couldn't get enough of the adrenaline rush that came from watching life fade out of the terrified eyes of my conquest.

No one knew the ins and outs of the inner workings of the SVR better than I did, thanks to Mila. She'd been my lover and unknowingly my connection to her cousin Slava, an intelligence agency member. In the short time we were together, I garnered more intel from her cousin than any agent before me. Slava was arrogant, a narcissist. He had a big mouth, making me invaluable to the CIA, and himself expendable to the SVR.

I knew that the Russians had no clue why I was here, just that I was. Before they could figure it out, I'd be gone. Brian Johnson, also known as Vladimir Podovsky, was a double agent I'd followed from Moscow to St. Petersburg. I was in Russia to send a message that the United States would not tolerate the arrogance of the Kremlin. I had it all planned out. I'd invite Brian to meet me in Red Square on April 22nd under the pretense that I was here to give him important information about the Kremlin. Then I'd shoot him between the eyes and let his body fall in front of Lenin's tomb. Killing a double agent on Lenin's birthday in front of his tomb sent a very distinct message—We know what you are doing, and we will not tolerate it. Though the minute he left Moscow for St. Petersburg, I had to implement a backup plan, and now here we both are. Two separate missions, with only one outcome—his death but not before I figure out why he was in a city he should have never been.

My personal phone vibrates on the coffee table, and I walk over and pick it up, looking at the caller I.D. Her Brother flashes on the screen, the words impossible to link back to Sawyer if it ever fell into the wrong hands because no one knew who she

or her brother was. Only I would understand the connection.

Picking it up, I answer. “Why are you calling me on my cell instead of the burner?”

“Because this is personal, and I need you back in Reston as soon as possible.” There was an urgency to his tone that bothered me.

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll fill you in when you get back. How much longer will you be?”

“I’m not sure, a few more days possibly.”

“Well, speed it up and see me the minute you’re home.”

“Damn it, if this is important, you need to fill me in now.”

Sawyer took a deep breath and then replied. “I’m still working on some information, but I’ll have it by the time you get back. Just expedite what you’re doing and come home.”

I followed Vladimir around for two days until he finally met with his Russian handler on the third day. The two met in an abandoned warehouse on the edge of town along the Neva River. The windows had been painted over in black, limiting the view inside. Finding an old metal door ajar, I snuck in, quietly moving behind the pallets of what appeared to be automotive parts ready for export. I watched as the older man handed Vladimir an envelope. “This is the information you are to provide to your U.S. idiots. They’ll be searching for something that doesn’t exist, and by the time they figure it out, you’ll have the information we need about the new weapon.”

“Da. I won’t let you down, Serge.”

Vladimir, or should I say Brian's, accent was very distinctive here in his motherland, but back on U.S. soil, you didn't hear the slightest bit of it. I waited for him to leave before stepping out from behind the crate. The suppressor masked the sound of the bullet as it left my gun. Yet the scream from the middle-aged man as the shot landed in his leg was not. He dropped to the ground and reached for his firearm. As he raised his arm, I fired a second time. The bullet passed through his forearm, causing him to drop his weapon. I walked toward the man as he lay on the ground.

"Who are you?" the injured man snarled.

"Doesn't matter. What matters is the information you are going to tell me."

The man spat at my feet. "Never."

"We'll see," I said as I raised my pant leg and removed the knife strapped to my ankle from the sheath. "What was in the envelope?" I demanded as I knelt on his uninjured arm.

Again, the man spat at me as he stared at my face. I straddled his body, ensuring he'd have no use of his arms before jamming my blade into his eye socket and extracting his eye. His screams of unbearable pain were music to my ears as they echoed through the building signaling the sweet sound of victory.

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“What was in the envelope?” I asked once again and waited for a response. After a few seconds and no response from the still whimpering man, I reached for his head and grabbed his left ear. “Maybe you’re having a hard time hearing me. Here let me see if this helps.” Tugging at the piece of flesh, I sliced at it with my blade, removing his complete ear. Once again, his wails of agony surrounded me. “Well, shit, that might make it harder for you to hear me.” I laughed as the sounds of his anguish stoked the fire within me to a new level. “One last time, what was in the envelope?”

“Nothing,” the elder attempted to snarl back, but his voice failed him, and his response sounded something like, “You. Get. Nothing. from me.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “I guess I’ll have to live with that. It’s a shame you won’t be able to.” Lifting my Glock, I pulled the trigger, placing a slug between his eyes, and a feeling of triumph warmed me as I watched the life leave his body. I reached into his mouth and sliced out his tongue before taking his thumb. Then I cut a piece of plastic from one of the pallets, and carefully rolled the Russian body parts in it and placed them in my coat pocket. I’m coming for you, Vladimir.

Chapter Two

You Can Run, But You Can’t Hide

Streetlights lined the sidewalk that led to Vladimir’s building. It hadn’t taken me long to find him after leaving the warehouse. His MO had always been the same, booze and women. The Golden Dolls was around the corner from the building he had been staying in; my money was on finding him there.

Neon lights lit the interior of the building, and it took my eyes a few moments to adjust. Women twirled on poles surrounding the large round bar in the middle of the room. Stairs leading to a second level caught my attention as a leggy redhead climbed one step at a time, wearing a glowing neon blue thong. Her arm reached for the gentleman behind her as he bent to pick up something off the floor. When he raised and reached for her hand, I knew it was Vladimir. I watched as he followed her to the top of the stairs. The dancer's hand brushed over the gold medal rail lining the edge as a barrier between the balcony on the second floor and the bar below. When they reached a covered entry, the redhead pushed the curtains to the side and waited for him to step through before closing the fabric behind them. I waited several minutes before making my way up the same staircase, stopping outside the private hallway. My hand parted the drapes, giving me enough space to see what was behind them. Several curtain-covered rooms lined the walking path, but only one was closed. The other entrances remained open, indicating which room was currently in use.

Quietly, I snuck through the material-lined entrance and headed to the closed room. Moving the curtain just enough to peek inside, I saw the redhead had her ass backed against Vlad's groin as he sat in a round upholstered chair. Slowly she gyrated her ass against him to the music. His head dropped back, and he closed his eyes. His arms lay on the armrests until she reached behind her, taking his wrists in her hand. Raising his hands, she placed them on her breasts firmly, until he began squeezing her mounds. The harder he pinched at her nipples, the faster her hips moved. Then his hands clawed into her tits as he growled out several curse words and then his arms fell to the side.

The stripper's movements began to slow, signaling she'd done what he'd paid for. "I get you a towel to clean with," she told him and turned toward me. Quickly I stepped into an unoccupied room beside them and watched as she walked to the other end of the hall. I knew I had only moments before she would return. Drawing my suppressed rage, I pushed the curtain aside and stepped in. Vladimir turned his head to see who had entered the room. Upon seeing it was not the redhead, he quickly sprung from the

chair, lunging for the sports coat on the floor beside him. Before he could reach it, I fired off two shots, one hitting him in the chest. The other hit him in the neck. Satisfied that the two bullets were life-ending, I placed the gun in its holster and searched his coat for an envelope. Bingo, gripping it in my hand, I extracted the cellophane-wrapped body parts I'd taken earlier and tossed them on the floor beside him. Quickly, I walked through the closed hallway, making my way toward the stairs. I'd almost reached the top landing when I heard the first scream. Without hesitation, I sat at one of the tables on my left. A half-dressed brunette continued to dance atop the round table as if not hearing the screams that filled the top floor of the building. I waited and watched as two men dressed in black came running up the stairs. As they passed by me, I stood and slowly made my way down to the entrance.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I made it out onto the busy street. Not because I feared getting caught, but because I loved the rush it gave me when I took an underserving life. The Navy taught me to be a killer, and I started to enjoy it somewhere along the way. I'd become a monster, at least that's what I called myself. As I strode away from the Golden Dolls, I recalled the incidents in my life that led to me becoming the skilled killer I am now.

Chapter Three

Where It All Started

Seventeen years earlier

I had my whole life mapped out and planned to go to Harvard, where my best friend Sawyer was enrolled. His sister Evie was the love of my life, even if we were nothing more than friends. I wanted to claim her as mine, but as my best friend's sister, anything more than a friendship was out of the question.

The two of them couldn't be more different if they tried. Sawyer was outgoing, and

Evie was quiet and shy. However, both were extremely intelligent, so it made sense that when Sawyer breezed into Harvard Evie would eventually follow once she graduated a year later. I, on the other hand, had to work for my acceptance. It wasn't because I lacked intelligence; I lacked the drive to focus on anything other than sports. Cross Country and Lacrosse were more important to me than books. My agility and passion for sports solidified my acceptance to the elite school.

A month before I was heading off to Massachusetts, my parents suggested taking a family trip to Florida. My little brother wanted to do Disney for his birthday. I had no desire to go, but I agreed to appease them. The night before we were supposed to leave, Sawyer and I went to a party at the fraternity house he'd pledged and drank too much. I fell asleep on the couch and woke to my phone ringing the following morning.

"Max, where are you?" my mother questioned frantically. "I've been calling for the last thirty minutes."

I looked at my watch and hung my head. "I'm sorry, I just woke up."

"We will miss our flight if we don't leave soon. Is your bag packed already?"

"Yeah. It's on my bed. Let me wake up Sawyer and get a ride home."

I heard my father yelling in the background. Tell him to meet us at the airport, and we'll bring his luggage. "Did you hear your father, Max?"

"Yeah, I heard him."

My mother yelled at my brother Steven to get a move on and then spoke to me. "We're going to head out now. I'll bring your ticket, and we'll meet at curbside check-in. See you soon, honey. Love you."

I hung up the phone and went in search of my best friend. I found him passed out, Miranda Lynn lying naked on top of him. “Dude!” I yelled. When he didn’t stir, I yelled his name louder as I walked into the room. He opened one eye.

“What the hell?” Sawyer responded, his voice sounding huskier than usual.

“Get your ass up. I need a ride to the airport, or I’ll miss my flight, and I’ll never hear the end of it from my parents.” I stood there with my arms crossed and waited. The room was silent for a moment, and I heard Sawyer’s snore. “GET YOUR ASS UP!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, startling Miranda Lynn, who rolled off my friend at the sound of my voice and fell to the floor. If I weren’t so irritated, I would have enjoyed the sight of her bare breasts as she stood up and quickly covered herself with a pillow. “Sawyer, get up, damn it. I have to go.” I ran my fingers through my hair and blew out a breath.

“Fine, I’m up.” He reached for his jeans, tugged them over his legs and then stood to zip them. “Sorry, man, I didn’t mean to fall back asleep,” he said as he brushed past me, pulling his keys from his pocket.

I remembered thinking that day, that the big guy in the sky must’ve been looking out for me. Every stoplight was green, and we made it to the airport in twenty minutes when it usually would have taken us thirty-five.

“I don’t see your parents.” My buddy looked at the curb as we slowly crept up on the American Airlines drop-off.

“Me neither. It’s okay; they should be here soon. Just drop me off, and I’ll wait.”

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“Are you sure you don’t want me to swing around again and give them a few more minutes? I’d pull over and wait, but the cops won’t let me.”

“Nope, I’m good,” I said as he pulled the car to the curb, and I opened the door. “Thanks for the lift, and sorry about dragging you away from Miranda Lynn,” I lied. I wasn’t sorry. I hated that girl, and she was toxic to my friend. Like a cobra being charmed by the pungi. He made stupid decisions when she was around because her pussy entranced his dick, causing Sawyer to do things he typically wouldn’t do when he was thinking straight.

I looked at my watch one more time as Sawyer drove away. Our flight would be boarding in forty-five minutes, and I wondered where my family was. I waited another five minutes, then I tried calling my mom, but she didn’t answer. I rang my dad, but still, no one answered. I paced along the curb for another ten minutes, constantly calling my mom and dad’s phone, but neither picked up. I started to panic when I looked at my watch again. There was no way we could make the flight if they didn’t arrive in the next few moments.

Walking over to the two skycaps, I interrupted their conversation. “Excuse me. I’m supposed to meet my parents here for a flight to Florida. I’ve been waiting for a bit, and they haven’t shown up. Can you check and see if they’ve checked in already? They have my ticket.”

“What’s the last name?” he inquired.

“Gunnar,” I replied.

I watched as he tapped on a keyboard and then shook his head. “Nope, not checked in yet.”

Running my hands through my hair, I began to pace again. I started to redial my mom’s phone when I heard a car horn honk. I turned, expecting to see my parents, but it was Sawyer. He rolled the window down as I walked toward him. “Get in the car; your parents aren’t coming.”

Opening the passenger side door, I slid into the seat. “What do you mean my parents aren’t coming?”

“Hold on,” my best friend replied as he turned his head to look out his window and pulled into the line of cars slowly moving toward their destination to drop their passengers off. “When I left here, I stopped to grab a coffee. I was just pulling up to the drive-through window when my mom called and told me I needed to pick you up and take you to Reston General, and they’d meet us there.”

I had a sick feeling in my stomach when he said Reston General, and I couldn’t help but clench my fists several times as I stared at Sawyer. “That’s it? That’s all you know?”

Sawyer turned to look at me briefly. “That’s it, man. I swear.”

Everything around me moved in slow motion as we made the fifteen-minute drive from the airport to the hospital. Sawyer pulled into a parking space, and I didn’t even wait for him to stop the car before I opened my door and darted out, running toward the entrance to the emergency room. I could see Mr. and Mrs. Wyatt talking to a police officer through the glass double doors. When they opened, I sprinted through the lobby and down the hall to the waiting area. Mrs. Wyatt stepped away from the officer and her husband and wrapped me in her arms.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I held her tight. She’d given me one last squeeze and then pulled away, taking my hand, and leading me to a row of chairs against the wall where Evie sat, just a few feet away from Mr. Wyatt and the officer. Away from prying ears and interruptions.

The Wyatts were like a second set of parents to me. Our families had known each other since I started kindergarten, and that’s where I met Sawyer. “I’m not going to lie to you, Max. It’s not good.”

“Just tell me straight, please.”

Sawyer’s mom patted my hand, placing it in her lap. “We got a call from the police department asking us to pick you up and bring you to the hospital. Your mom was conscious for most of the ambulance ride, so she filled the officer in on what happened.”

“What happened?” I asked as Sawyer took the seat next to me, desperately looking for information just as I was.

“As you know, you were all running late for the airport. Your mom said your dad was driving too fast and yelling at your brother to stop kicking the back of his seat. He took his eyes off the road for one minute and sped through a red light. A delivery truck struck the car on your father’s side, causing the vehicle to flip several times.”

I shook my head in disbelief as the tears began to soak my cheeks. “How bad is it?” When Mrs. Wyatts’ hand started patting my back, I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to believe it until I heard her say it.

“Your father and brother were killed instantly.”

“No,” I cried out, shaking my head before bending over, placing it in my hands, and

breaking down. The tears fell hard and fast. While I'd been joking about getting green lights on the way to the airport, a single red one had destroyed my family. My brother Steven was the product of an anniversary vacation to Paris. He'd just turned six a week ago, which was why my parents planned this trip—a Disney vacation to celebrate his birthday and my leaving for college.

“Max?” Mrs. Wyatt spoke. “Talk to me. I know how awful this is.”

I raised my head, glaring at her. “Do you? Your family is all intact while mine is in ruins.”

“Don't speak to my mom like that,” Sawyer snapped at me. “She's trying to be here for you.”

I should have kept my mouth shut, but for some ungodly reason, I couldn't. “Well, she should stop, and this is all your fault.”

“My fault,” Sawyer spat back at me.

“Yeah. Yours. If you hadn't convinced me to go out last night, I'd have been home, and there would have been no reason they'd be rushing to the airport.”

“Me, convince you,” Sawyer snarled. “It was your idea in the first place—another chance to show off how fabulous Maxim Gunnar is. You're the irresponsible one, and you knew you had enough to drink but were too arrogant to stop when they challenged you to that third beer bong.”

“Boys!” Mrs. Wyatt snapped. “Stop it, both of you. This is a hard time for Max.”

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I was about to spew more angry words at the two of them when a man wearing light blue scrubs walked toward us. When he stopped in front of Mrs. Wyatt, the police officer and Mr. Wyatt joined us. “Are you the Gunnar family?”

“I am.” I stood quickly, jamming my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

“We’re the Wyatts,” Sawyer’s mother spoke. “We’re Max’s guardians until his mother is better.”

Guardians? What was she talking about? When did this all happen? “How is my mother?”

“Please have a seat,” the doctor requested.

Everyone sat down but me. I couldn’t sit; I needed answers. “I’m not sitting. Just tell me how my mom is. Please.”

“Your mother is in recovery and has a long way to go to be in the clear. But, if she makes it, you should know that she has suffered severe damage to her spinal cord, causing paralysis.”

“How bad?” I asked.

The doctor closed his eyes briefly, and when they opened, he spoke. “I’m sorry, Max, your mother has no feeling from the neck down.”

“No. God, no,” I said as knees buckled and fell to the ground, landing on my ass.

Drawing my knees to me, I began to sob. Right there, in the middle of the walkway, I lost it.

Chapter Four

The Beginning Of The End

I've lived at the hospital for three weeks as my mother remained in an induced coma in the critical care unit. The third week, the swelling in her brain started to subside. Each day the doctors began to wean her off the breathing machine little by little, and yesterday the doctor decided it was time to take her off completely and wake her up, satisfied that mom could breathe independently. Though mom remained in the ICU, I felt relieved that it appeared she would be okay.

"Max." The physician on duty placed his hand on my shoulder as we stood in the hallway and began to speak. "Your mother is not in the clear yet, but this is the start of the recovery process. If she continues to improve, we'll move her to a rehabilitation unit and get her prepared to go home eventually. But you're going to need round-the-clock care for her."

I nodded, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to give her the attention she needed. "She won't be coming home," I acknowledged the man before me. "With the help of Mrs. Wyatt, I've arranged a place for her at Harmony House in Massachusetts. They've agreed to take her in when she is ready."

"Good, I've heard excellent things about their facility. They're one of the best places for taking care of patients with spinal cord injuries as severe as your mothers. You have my number if you need anything while you're away, and I'll do my best to answer any questions."

I extended my hand, and he reciprocated. "Thank you for everything, doc."

Entering my mom's room, I sat in the chair beside her bed. She remained asleep, and I welcomed the quiet. It gave me time to prepare for the news I had to share with her.

My eyes fluttered open at the feel of a warm palm resting upon my shoulder. "Evie?" I questioned. "What are you doing here?" Her honey brown eyes said so much as she glanced into my tired, bloodshot ones.

"I wanted to see if you needed anything. It's been weeks since I've seen you, and mom said you've been coming home late and leaving early, so I've been worried about you."

Damn. I'd been avoiding Evie. After the accident, I'd laid my fears upon her ears and then succumbed to the love and compassion she'd given me. I'd promised myself I'd never let that happen again, but I was weak and gave in two weeks ago. I lost all control when she held me, giving me the strength to make a life-altering decision. One that would change the years of planning my future and weaken my resolve to keep her at a distance. The warmth of her body against mine as she held and comforted me clouded my judgement, and I gave into my pent-up obsession to claim her and claim her is just what I did. Desire. Lust. Fear. Combined, I stripped the clothes from her body and she took mine. We stood naked in front of each other admiring each other's bodies.

When I couldn't stand it anymore, I tossed her on my bed, sheathed myself, and took control. Evie allowed me to use her body that night in any way I needed. With no regard for her needs, I took what I wanted. Fast, furious, and demanding, I insisted on fulfilling my desire as a way to ignore everything that was going on in my life. I climaxed and then rolled off her to dispose of the condom. When I returned, she said nothing. Her arms wrapped around me, and I fell asleep. When I woke in the morning and realized what I'd done, I stealthily removed myself from her grasp, dressed, and disappeared.

How was I going to explain all of that now? What happened wasn't the same as when we were teenagers experimenting with raging hormones and a desire to be together. After that night, I lied and told her it meant nothing. We were just two kids exploring each other's bodies to learn what we liked and wanted, I told her. I could never admit that I'd had feelings for her. I'd broken her heart and mine, but I told myself it was the right thing. If Sawyer ever found out, he'd kill me. She was the kind of girl you'd love forever, and though I denied her my emotions, it didn't keep me from threatening every boy that looked twice at her. I couldn't lie to her again, so I decided avoiding her was best.

Reaching up, I removed her hand from my shoulder. "I'm good, Evie, I've just had a lot going on with my mom, and I need to focus my energy on her."

The beautiful and compassionate young woman in front of me smiled. But the adoration in her eyes when she arrived was replaced with disappointment. "I understand, Max. Just know I'm here if you need anything. Anything at all."

"I know, but I'm leaving next week. I should have never let what happened between us happen; we shouldn't have. I need to be here for mom for the next few days. I promise I'll say goodbye before I leave."

"Understood," Evie acknowledged. "I guess I'll be going then." Her eyes drifted between mine, looking for something I made sure she'd never find. She bit her bottom lip and then turned to leave the room.

I sat staring off into the vast nothing of the room, my hand rubbing my chest. I'd been an ass once again. Even though I knew it was for the best, it didn't make me feel any better.

"Maxim." My name was barely a whisper from my mom's lips.

I turned my head to find her eyes adjusting to the bright light in the room. I quickly reached for the remote attached to her bed and clicked off the overhead light, leaving just the light on behind her and by the entrance to the door. Then I pushed the red button to call the nurse. “I’m here, Mom.” Standing, I took her hand in mine. “I’m here, Mom,” I said once again.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried.

“Mom, you have nothing to be sorry about.” I waved my hands in the air. “All this is my fault. If I’d have been home on time. If I had been more responsible. You all wouldn’t have had to rush to the airport, and Dad and Steven would still be alive, and you wouldn’t be lying in that bed paralyzed.” I broke down and began to sob uncontrollably.

I felt my mom’s fingers move in mine as she shook her head. “Not your fault,” she whispered, causing me to strain to hear her words. A moment later, the nurse walked in. “She moved her fingers,” I said excitedly.

“Don’t get excited, Max. That doesn’t change anything about her paralysis. Sometimes patients have use of a portion of their hands but not their arms. I’ll get the doctor so he can assess your mother’s status.”

“How can you say I’m not to blame?” I shook my head, not understanding why mom wasn’t seeing it as clearly as I was.

“Because you are not.”

“But it was, Mom. My fault, that is. If I had been home. If I wasn’t so irresponsible. If...” My words were cut off when the doctor entered the room.

“That’s a lot of if’s, son,” Dr. Ralston said. “If your mother had the energy, I’m sure she would tell you that no one could have foreseen the actions that caused the tragedy to your family. You can’t blame yourself.”

I looked back to mom. She gently nodded and I knew she was acknowledging what the doctor had said.

“It’s good to see you awake, Meriam. Your boy has been here by your side for weeks, so I’m positive he’d like me to stop talking and get to my examination.”

I patiently waited as Dr. Ralston poked mom, asking her if she felt anything at all. With each shake of her head, my hopes that they had all been wrong about her paralysis were decimated.

Later that evening, as I sat next to mom’s bedside watching the television, mom was finally able to speak a bit more normal. Even in her weak state, she was able to form more complete sentences and hold somewhat of a conversation.

“It would be best if you focused on getting yourself to college and not on me. You can’t let this accident change the plans you’ve had for yourself.”

I had not yet regained control of my emotions. Her simple words had me bawling all over again. I wiped the back of my arm across my nose. “It has changed things, Mom. I’m not going to college; I’ve enlisted and joined the Navy.” She opened her mouth to speak, but I quickly cut her off this time. “Nothing you can say will change my mind. I’ve skated through life being irresponsible, doing what I wanted without caring how it affected others. Now I’m going to learn to be responsible. I’ve got a goal, make it through boot camp and get accepted into BUDS. I’m going to make you proud of me, Mom.”

“Oh, Max, I’m already proud of the man you’ve become. Never doubt that.”

“Then I guess it’s time for me to be proud of myself. Until that happens, I will only bring grief to those around me.”

Chapter Five

Coming Home Is Never Easy

Present Day

The reminders of my past still filled my mind as I boarded a plane headed back to the U.S. They say it's better to leave the past where it belongs—in the past. I've been able to do that over the last seventeen years, so why now had I chosen to recall that moment in time? I couldn't help but feel uneasy about what I'd find once I arrived home. The oddity of Sawyer's call and his secretiveness about why he called left me perplexed. In all the years Sawyer has been my handler, he has never been cryptic. Whatever was going on, I sensed it would be an off-the-book op. I raised the sleeve of my shirt and glanced at my watch. Another hour until we touched down in Amsterdam and another three hours before the next flight took off. That gave me plenty of time to connect with Sawyer and get some color on what I should expect once I land.

It was just before one CEST in the afternoon, when I boarded the Air France eight and a half hour flight from Amsterdam back to the U.S. Sawyer was MIA, and I was beginning to worry. I wasn't fond of the idle time being on a plane forced me to endure. These are the times when I long for the comforts of home. But I'd been blessed these last five years with rarely having any downtime. One assignment always led to another, keeping me occupied with planning another mission.

"Excuse me, sir." The flight attendant's voice pulled me back to the here and now. She was stunning—full, supple pink lips that every man dreams of having wrapped around his dick. At first glance, I thought her eyes were grey, but as I looked deeper into them, they were a pale shade of green. Her high cheekbones gave her an elegant beauty look, the kind of woman I'd typically want to drive myself deep inside and pound until she was screaming my name. But not today. Instead, I couldn't keep my

thoughts straight. I had a letter in my carryon above that Sawyer instructed me not to open and an uncertainty of what I would find at home.

“Sir, what can I get for you?” she questioned.

“Double vodka, please. No ice, just the bottles, and a glass.”

“Very good, sir,” she announced as she turned to face the person sitting across the aisle from me but stopped just short of facing the other passenger and turned to me again. “Are you alright, sir? You look a little disheveled.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking.” Satisfied with my response, she continued to make her way through first-class, gathering orders from the other passengers. A few minutes later, she appeared at my side again, handing me a glass with no ice and two small bottles of vodka. Twisting the caps off, I emptied the contents of both containers. I stared at the clear liquid as I swirled it around before raising it to my lips and swallowing half the liquid before setting the glass back down on the tray table. I had just over three hours before we landed in Washington. Closing my eyes briefly, I took a deep breath, hoping to quiet my mind by focusing on my breathing. Several minutes later, I began to relax. Reaching for the glass I drank the remainder of the vodka. The small screen in front of me played a James Bond movie. I always found these films comical. They’d rethink the filming if the writers only knew how ludicrous the storyline was from real life.

When the Captain announced we’d be landing in thirty minutes at Dulles Airport, I glanced at my watch again. It was almost seven a.m., right on time. I exited the plane and scanned the mass of people meandering around. It was a habit I’d never break. Danger lurks everywhere. Walking through the airport, I spotted a couple with their two boys, one wearing Mickey Mouse ears, as they exited the walkway and into the concourse, and immediately I recalled the past again. This time I not only grieved the loss of my dad and brother, but I also mourned the loss of my mom, who died a year

ago from pneumonia. I reached for my phone and dialed Sawyer's number. It rang several times and then rolled to voicemail. "Why the hell aren't you picking up? Call me."

I made my way to the area set up for private car service. In a black suit stood an elderly white-haired man holding a sign that said, James Bond. Stopping just a few feet shy of him, I spoke. "I'm Mr. Bond."

"Clever." The older gentleman, whose name tag read Gene, shook his head before he spoke. "Not the most original name I've ever had to write on my board, young man. I pick up at least three James Bonds weekly from this airport."

I turned and followed behind him. "So, what is the cleverest name you've had to write on your board?" I inquired.

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“John J. Jingleheimer,” he laughed.

“As in the children’s song?”

“The very same, less the Schmidt. When I told him he was the first nursery rhyme I’d ever picked up, he pulled out his wallet and showed me his I.D., and sure as shit, his name was John Jacob Jingleheimer.”

“No, Schmidt.” I said, laughing.

“You’re quite the wisecracker, young man.” He laughed as he pushed the button, and the trunk of the Lincoln town car opened.

Handing Gene my bag, I made my way to the passenger side of the car and slid into the back seat. I waited as he placed the suitcase in the compartment and closed the lid. Once he was behind the wheel, he glanced into the rearview mirror and asked, “Where to, Mr. Bond?”

I chuckled briefly. “We both know I’m not Mr. Bond, so why don’t you just call me Max.”

“Very well. Where to, Max?”

“Laughlin Lane and Norbeck Drive,” I replied.

“It would be easier if you gave me the actual street address,” Gene laughed.

“Oh, trust me, just head to Laughlin Lane. I’m sure you’ll know my house when we get there.”

I watched in the mirror as the aging driver rolled his eyes. “If you say so.” Then he placed the car in drive and sped away from the airport.

Normally, I’d keep to myself during the ride, but there was something about Gene that I liked. During the fifteen-minute ride to my home I learned that he had a wife, two grown sons, and seven grandchildren. I called Sawyer again, but he did not pick up. I was starting to get angry, because worry went out the door two voice messages ago. I hated being in the dark, which isn’t how he and I operated.

Gene whistled from the front seat. “You weren’t kidding when you said I’d know. Since there is only one house out here, surrounded by a block and metal iron fence, this must be the place. Are you sure you’re not James Bond?” he laughed.

“Pretty sure my last name isn’t Bond. Last time I checked.” Funny thing, technically I am James Bond, just not in name.

The car stopped at the ornate metal entrance, and I punched a code into my phone, and the gates swung open. Once we had cleared the fence, the access closed behind us. The car moved slowly up the drive, stopping in front of the large red brick structure with a bright red door surrounded by white paned windows.

Gene and I exited the vehicle at the same time. He opened the trunk, retrieved my suitcase, handed it to me, and extended his other hand. “You’re an interesting man, Max. It’s been my pleasure to drive you.”

“Thank you, Gene,” I replied while shaking his hand. “Maybe our paths will cross once again, and next time I won’t use the name Bond. Perhaps I’ll be Mr. McDonald,” I laughed.

“Right, but I hardly classify this as a farm. See you around.” Gene smiled at me, climbed in his car, and drove away.

Chapter Six

My Past And Present Collide

When I entered, the house was partially dark, I placed my keys on the credenza and walked toward the kitchen with my suitcase in tow. A few steps from my destination, I heard someone set a glass on the counter, stopping me in my tracks.

“No need to grab your gun; it’s just me.”

The sound of Sawyer’s voice pissed me off. I’d been trying to reach him for over a day now, and he couldn’t reply with a simple I’m at your house. As I walked into the kitchen, he grabbed two beers from the refrigerator, handing me one.

“You couldn’t answer your phone or send a simple text to me where you were, motherfucker?” I said as I took the bottle from his hand. “Why the fuck are you sitting in the dark, in my kitchen with the alarm set on my home?”

Sawyer dropped his head, refusing to make eye contact with me. “Because I fucked up big time, and I need you to have my back and help me clean it up before anyone else gets hurt.” He raised his head, now looking me straight in the eyes, and I could see the despair radiating in them.

I set my bottle on the counter and pulled the barstool across from him. “Of course, you know I’ve always got your back. Just tell me what the hell happened.”

“Several months ago, I introduced Evie to Lucas Miller. He’s a collection analyst at the Agency.”

“You son of a bitch. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I know, I know. Evie was my plus one at a dinner function. She met Lucas, and they hit it off instantly. We’d suspected for some time that he might be trading secrets, and I thought if he and Evie started seeing each other, he might slip up and share information with her without Evie knowing what it was.”

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I sat there listening in horror, clenching my fists and my jaw. I was so pissed; I wouldn't have been surprised if I had shattered a few teeth from the pressure.

"Max, I see how pissed you are, and I get it, I fucked up, but that isn't the worst of it."

I pushed away from the counter, walking toward the double doors, knowing that I needed some distance from my best friend before I did something I would regret. "Sawyer, it took me a year to instill the fear of God into her ex. Enough so that he agreed to divorce her. I did that so she'd be free to live a good life. A happy life, free of that cheater, and now she has another toxic person in her life because of you."

"I think you should sit down, buddy, because you're not going to like what I still have to tell you."

"Fucking just say it, Sawyer, and you better pray I still let you breathe when you're done telling the story because I'm not liking this feeling I'm getting from you."

"Well," he swallowed, "Lucas isn't in her life any longer, and he's not in anyone's life anymore." He snickered. And I gave him a dirty look. "Ok, maybe that wasn't as humorous as I intended. Last week he provided us with information about a double agent."

"Brian, I mean Vladimir?" I questioned.

"Yes."

“They knew why I was there?”

“I’m assuming so.”

“Son of a bitch. I assumed they had no idea, just that I was there. They sent someone after me the first night I arrived.”

“Lucas was murdered the same day you took out Vladimir and his handler.”

Sawyer stood and walked over to me. Shoving his hands in his pockets, I knew that wasn’t the bad news when he looked at me. I felt it in the pit of my gut.

“That’s when I called and told you to get home quickly. I knew I needed you to help me figure out who was involved. I thought the worst was over until two days ago when I got a call from Reston General.” Sawyer closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, I saw tears welling in them. “An ambulance brought Evie in. Someone worked her over and gave her a message to give to me. When the staff asked her if there was anyone they should call, she gave them my name and number. When I arrived, the police were there.”

Instinctively my hand balled into a fist, and I swung with all my might. I had no remorse when it collided with my best friend’s jaw knocking him to the ground. Sawyer lay there, his hand massaging his face. “I deserved that.”

“No. The only reason you’re still breathing is that you’re what’s left of my family.” I extended a hand, helping him off the floor. “Tell me right now, how bad is she hurt? How much do the police know, and who the fuck did it?”

“She has a concussion. Got a pretty good shiner out of it, a broken right arm, and they tried to kill her by choking her. She’s a bit banged up, but it could have been much worse.” Sawyer rubbed the back of his neck as he continued. “She refused to talk to

the cops. They're not happy and have been trying to get me to convince her to make a statement. It doesn't matter how many times I tell them she won't; they don't want to drop it."

"What a clusterfuck. The cops are not going to go away. You're going to have to figure that one out on your own. Now tell me what the message was."

Sawyer opened the glass door, walked outside, and sat on one of the chaise lounges. "I think I have an idea who was involved, but that's what I need your help to find out."

Running my hands through my hair, I raised my head to the sky and closed my eyes. "Where is Evie now?"

"Upstairs in one of your spare rooms."

"Upstairs, what the fuck are you thinking bringing her to my house? You and a select few at the Agency know I'm alive, and everyone else thinks I'm dead—died in the line of duty. Your family and our friends attended my funeral. Why would you do something so foolish as to bring her here?"

"Because your house is the safest place I know, and no one would think to look for her here. Besides, brother, you're in love with her, which means you'll give up your life to protect hers."

"Why would you say that?" I narrowed my eyes and stared at my friend.

"Because the night of your funeral, Evie was distraught; she drank too much and told me everything that happened between you two. When you were kids and when your father and brother died. Your death almost destroyed her. That's when she jumped into marrying Richard. He was a distraction and a way to get over your death, and

you went to great lengths to get him out of her life. Didn't you think I would find that very odd?"

I walked back to the glass door and reached for the handle. As I stepped into the house, I turned and called back at Sawyer, "I can't believe you've known all these years and never once said anything to me. This discussion isn't over. I'm going to get out of these clothes and shower. Is Evie awake? I'd prefer not to run into her up there."

"I doubt it. When the hospital discharged her, they gave her pain medication to help her sleep. Plus, I put her in a room as far away from yours as possible. Though I'm not sure how long we'll be able to pull off hiding you. I told her this was a friend's house when she asked."

"You're a prick for putting me in this predicament. You better be here when I get done," I said as I closed the door.

My hair was still wet when I slicked it back and slid on a pair of jeans and a Henley. I padded down the hall barefoot to the last door on the right, the only door closed, indicating that it must have been the room Evie occupied.

Slowly I twisted the handle and opened the door a crack. The room was primarily dark; a small stream of light from the gap in the curtains gave a light glow to the room. Evie's light brown and gold highlighted hair lay strewn across the pillow as she slept, and my heart ached when I imagined how much worse the situation could have been.

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Taking a seat in the clawfoot chair on the opposite side of the bed, I fantasized about how I would destroy whoever had their hands in assaulting her. Did I want to do it quickly? No, maybe I'd draw it out, inflicting as much pain as possible until they begged me to end their lives and save them from the agony.

A whimper came from the bed as the sleeping body began to stir. I quickly stood and crossed the room. As I reached for the door, her voice stopped me.

"Where is my brother?"

Without turning around, I lowered my voice. "I'll get him for you." My hand was twisting the knob when she spoke again.

"Stop. Turn around."

I pulled the door open and stepped out without saying a word or looking her way. I was almost several steps into the hallway when Evie called out louder.

"Maxim, don't go."

Hearing her say my name stopped me in my tracks. Should I go back? Keep walking? I was torn between the two and wasn't sure what to do. Slowly moving backward, I stopped just outside the door and waited.

"I'm not crazy, Max. I know it's you," she declared loudly. But then her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "I just don't know how it's possible."

Chapter Seven

A Word From Evie

There was no way I hallucinated him. I'd know the slope of his broad shoulders. The way he wore his jeans tight, caressing his ass like a second skin. How his thighs filled out his pant legs. But most of all, it didn't matter that he tried to disguise his voice. I'd know it anywhere because I've dreamed of hearing him tell me he loved me since we were kids.

What I couldn't figure out was how he was here. Alive, in the flesh, when I attended his funeral ten years ago. I held his mother's hand as we uncontrollably sobbed as they lowered his coffin into the ground. I tried to move and cried out from the pain I still felt. Like a knife was cutting through me, causing my eyes to tear up. From my good eye, I saw a shadow move in the doorway, and then he appeared. He was real.

"I knew it was you." Unable to control the amount of emotion I felt, I began to sob. Max was by my bedside in five long strides, dropping to his knees, his hand reaching for my face as his thumb brushed away the tears that fell. I turned my head until my lips touched the inside of his palm, and I kissed it. "How? I don't understand. I can't believe it's you. Oh my God, Max, it's really you."

"It's me. I'm here." His deep voice settled me, no one has ever been able to do that but him.

"But how?" I questioned.

"It's a long story and one I'll share with you, but please tell me what you need right now."

"I could use a pain pill and something to eat."

Max stood, turned on the bedside light, grabbed several pillows from the other side of the bed, and propped them against the headboard. “Do you need help sitting back?”

“I got it.” I nodded and gently slid against the bed’s attached antique wooden panel. “Thank you.”

He’d aged some, and he’d become more handsome than he was at eighteen. A faint scar marred his cheek, and he’d garnered a few wrinkles around his eyes. Even still, he still took my breath away.

“I’ll be right back; just sit still.” He smiled and leaned over, placing a gentle kiss on my temple. I watched his receding backside as it left the room. When he was no longer in eyesight, I closed my eyes and sighed. What has my Max been doing for the last ten years?

Chapter Eight

The Message

Sawyer was still sitting outside when I entered the kitchen. It had been months since I’d been in my own home. Sawyer watched over my place in my absence, so I had no idea what there was for food, but surely he’d gone shopping before he brought Evie here.

Opening and closing cabinets, I searched for something I could warm up from a can or box, but what was in the cupboard had been there since the last time I’d been home. I wouldn’t feel comfortable feeding it to Evie. I pulled open the refrigerator door and looked at its contents: milk, salad mix, lunch meat, and limited condiments. Pulling out the lunch meat, I smelled it to make sure it was still good. I slathered mayo on two slices of bread and applied a couple of layers of roast beef. The glass door to the patio opened as I poured the milk into a cup.

“She knows,” I said. “She woke up and saw me walking out the bedroom door, and I tried to pretend I was someone else, but she saw right through it.”

“Well,” Sawyer smiled, “better to pull the band aid off quickly, I say.”

I held out the plate of food. “This is what you intend on feeding your sister?”

“It’s fresh. It’s edible food, why not.”

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“It’s processed meat, not food.” I shoved the sandwich closer to him. “Take this upstairs to the patient while I make you a list of items to get from the store.”

“Why do I have to go to the store? You’re the one who doesn’t like the food we have, which is perfectly consumable.”

I raised a brow and glared at Sawyer. “And you wonder why you are still single. If this is what you feed your female companions, it’s a miracle any of them stick around for a second date.”

“They stick around for what’s in my pants, not my culinary skills,” Sawyer huffed, reaching for the plate and then disappearing from the kitchen.

I pulled open a drawer, pulled out a scratch pad and pencil, and started a list.

Arnica cream and Vitamin K

Spinach, Broccoli, and Cauliflower

Salmon, Chicken, and Eggs

Blueberries and Strawberries

Milk, Almonds, and Walnuts

I had just finished the list when Sawyer walked back into the kitchen with an empty plate. “She’s asking me questions about you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her she needed to get her answers from you.”

I snatched the paper off the counter and handed it to my friend. “Here, go shopping for this.” I watched as he wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. She needs healthy food.”

Sawyer retrieved his keys from his pocket. “Don’t you think quick and easy would be better? Maybe some frozen dinners or something?”

“Quick isn’t better. That shit is loaded with preservatives, and based on the size of your waistline, I’d say you’ve been preserving for a long time,” I laughed. “Just get the healthy food you should be feeding your sister while she recovers, please.”

“She asked for an ice pack,” he mumbled as he left the room.

I grabbed the pack from the freezer and headed toward the stairs.

When I walked into the room, Evie lay on her back, asleep. The top corner of her lip was split. There were black, blue, and purple bruises surrounding her partially swollen eye and her neck from the fingers of her assailant. Seeing these marks only infuriated me once more. As much as I wanted to let her sleep, I needed to get some answers. The sooner I found the asshole or holes that did this to her, the sooner I could get back to my life and away from the temptation she brought.

Gently, I shook her shoulder and whispered her name. “Vee, here’s the ice pack you asked for.”

Her tiny hand retrieved the ice pack from mine and winced as she placed it on her left shoulder. “Does it hurt, or is it too cold?”

“Both,” she whimpered.

“I’m sorry beautiful, but there’s not much I can do about it. If I could, I would. You just have to tough it out for twenty minutes.”

Evie groaned but didn’t say a word. I sat on the bed beside her and reached for her hand. I felt her fingers’ warmth and the cast’s cold plaster that encased the rest of her arm. The feeling of wanting to exact revenge was an emotion I knew and could rationalize, but the need to console her was foreign to me. As much as I needed to wrap her in my arms and protect her from the evils that loom, there was a reason I died all those years ago—I couldn’t have her and still be ruthless.

“I need you to tell me what happened and who did this to you.”

“I’ve never seen them before. I’d gone to Lucas’s house to see him. He hadn’t returned my calls or texts for a couple of days.” Her chest rose and fell with the deep breaths she took. “It was late, probably around eleven o’clock. When I pulled up, his car was in the driveway, and there was a light on in the house, so I used my key and let myself in. I figured if he’d been ignoring me so far, he wouldn’t answer the door if I rang the bell, and I wasn’t allowing him to ghost me any longer. I wanted answers.”

Evie lowered the ice pack from her shoulder, but when she saw me look down at my watch and narrow my eyes, she knew she’d better put it back on. As she replaced the cold package, I laughed. Evie stuck her tongue out at me, and I knew she hadn’t found it as humorous as I did.

“Anyway,” she said. “The house was eerily quiet when I stepped in. The light came from a room at the end of the narrow hall. The living room was dark as I crossed it. I’d made it partially through when a man came barreling at me, tackling me to the ground. The back of my head hit the hardwood floor, and his left fist connected with my eye, not once but twice. I rolled to my stomach and tried to crawl away, but he

grabbed me by the hair. My scalp was on fire when he gripped it tightly and slammed the side of my face on the floor.”

Hearing her describe the attack set my blood on fire. I wanted to suck the air from his lungs and rip out his heart. Clenching my jaw, I closed my eyes briefly to regain my composure. When I was confident I could control my anger and speak in a calm voice, I asked her to continue.

“The pain was so intense I could barely move. That’s when he yanked me up by my arm and slammed me into the bookcase. One of the books came tumbling down from above. The next thing I knew, he had the book in his hand and struck me with it. That knocked me to the ground, and I felt his hands around my throat, and he was squeezing. I was crying, trying to beg for my life. But he didn’t care at all. This is it; you’re going to die tonight, I told myself. There was no way I would walk out of that house alive. He was going to kill me and probably would have if another man hadn’t yelled at him.”

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Where was the other guy, and what was he doing while his counterpart assaulted a young woman in the other room? I asked myself that question several times, trying to figure out what Lucas was hiding from these men. I would need access to Lucas's house, but first, I needed my woman to finish her story. Shit, I'm referring to her as my woman. I need my heart to stop convincing my brain that she belongs to me. It can never happen. "What happened next?" I asked, getting my head to focus on something else.

Evie reached for my hand and raised my wrist closer to her face. Seeing the time on my watch, she removed the ice pack. "The other man kneeled beside me and clasped my face in his hand, turning it so our eyes met. Give your brother a message for me, he said. I thought it was weird that he knew my brother, and I wondered if that is why he stopped the other guy from killing me."

I stood from her bed and balled my hand into fists, allowing one to connect with the wall beside the bed. The drywall cracked from the power of my knuckles colliding with it. When I looked at my hand, I saw the blood, and I flexed my fingers to ensure I hadn't broken anything. Rubbing my hand, I walked to the window and looked out across the yard at the lake. The water rippled from the light wind that came from the west. Satisfied I had my emotions in check, I turned and faced my best friend's sister. "I need you to think hard and give me any information you can about their facial features, voice structures, anything that might help me figure out who they were."

Evie closed her eyes, was silent for several minutes, and then spoke. "The man that attacked me was about five foot ten, maybe six feet. It was kinda dark so I'm not a hundred percent sure. He was extremely muscular, that I know because of his broad shoulders and how powerful he was. I can't recall anything more about his body other

than he had bright reddish-orange hair.” She thought a moment longer, biting at her lower lip. “Oh, when he spoke, I noticed he had an accent, but honestly, I couldn’t tell you from where. If I had to guess, maybe Austria or Czech, somewhere in that area.”

I watched her body shiver, so I pulled the covers up tighter around her body. “I’m not cold. Just recalling that night sort of scares me all over again.” I brushed her bangs off her forehead. She smiled at me. “The other man who stopped the first man from killing me was shorter, maybe five foot eight, over two hundred pounds, definitely overweight, not muscular. His face was long and narrow, but I remember his forehead most. High, with a scar from the edge of his hairline to his temple and one on his left cheek. He had light brown hair and deep brown eyes, and his voice was deep, and I am almost positive it may have been Russian.”

I listened as she continued to describe a few more facial features and the tattoos she had seen. On the side of his neck was a tattoo of an eight-pointed star with dots between each point. On the other side were a hammer and sickle. I had an idea of where to start looking for the men in question, but the message would solidify where I’d start looking first. I was proud of Evie for being able to recall so many facts about her assailants. It was obvious Sawyer had trained her over the years.

“Tell your brother the gray man won’t get lucky again. If he knows what’s best for him and you, he’ll tear up the letter he received and stop looking into Smoke and Fire. It is none of his concern. None of it made sense to me, but when I told Sawyer, I saw the recognition in his eyes, even though he said he had no idea. He lied to me, Max.”

Chapter Nine

The Truth Comes Out

I'd done so well controlling my anger until now, and I couldn't let Evie see me lose it again. Without saying a word, I stormed out of the room, down the stairs, and through the French doors. I didn't stop until I reached the water's edge. Going for one of the Adirondack chairs, I lifted it off the ground and swung it into the lake. I get why Sawyer lied to his sister, but he lied to me. Not once had he mentioned Smoke and Fire to me, yet I knew in my gut that he also used me. He was using me now. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and dialed Sawyer, but it immediately went to voicemail. "You son of a bitch better get your ass back here and tell me what kind of fucking mess you've got me involved in." Without hesitation, I reached for another chair and began to swing it, but stopped mid-motion when I heard her voice.

"Hey, what's going on?"

Setting the Adirondack back on the ground, I turned to face her. She continued to walk toward me. The closer she got: my heart started beating faster. Her doe eyes were wide, her brows raised, and her lips parted. She was scared, and it was my fault. When Evie reached me, she pushed her arms beneath mine and around my waist hugging me. I just stood there, arms slack at my side. Did I just stand here? Should I embrace her back? Raising my arms, I cupped her small frame to mine, holding her tight. "It's nothing for you to worry about," I told her as I kissed the top of her head. She remained quiet in my arms for a moment and then pulled away. I was surprised by the emptiness I felt as Evie put distance between us. Even bruised and battered, she was beautiful and strong. I admired this in her.

"I want to believe you, Max, but the fact that the last ten years of your life have been a lie, I'm not sure I can. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Sawyer won't tell me, so why don't you. Help me understand why everyone in my family but my brother thought you were dead."

"It's complicated," I told her, hoping it would appease her, but I should have known better. Evie Wyatt always needed answers. Even as a kid, she demanded to

understand every aspect of what was happening to wrap her mind around the situation and come up with her own conclusion.

“Just tell me. I’ll determine if it’s complicated or if you’re a coward who couldn’t let go of the past and chose to live without us—your family.”

“The only easy day was yesterday,” I whispered to myself. Something I learned as a SEAL. Every day brought a new challenge more significant than the last. Yesterday things were slightly tricky, but today they’ve gotten more complicated, and once I tell her, things will get even more challenging. “You should sit,” I suggest, reaching for her hand as she lowered herself into one of the chairs.

“Sawyer recruited me from the SEALs, and I’m an agent for the CIA. I had to die. It was the only way to keep you safe—everyone safe.”

“That makes no sense.” Evie shook her head.

“If I’m dead, no one expects me to come home to visit, write, or make calls. I’ve got no attachments to anyone, and no one would ever know you existed in my life. I didn’t worry about mom so much; she was at Harmony House, but I couldn’t keep reading the letters you kept writing to me. I ached to be with you with each one I read, but I had to be all in all the time as a SEAL. There was no room for anyone. So you see I had to die.”

Evie took in a sharp breath and raised her hand to her chest. “I thought you were done with me once you left, and you never returned a letter, and my heart shattered because I felt the emotions I had were one-sided.”

I dropped to one knee beside her chair and took her hand in mine. “They were never one-sided, Vee. I was in love with you and too afraid to tell you because I’d lost Steven and my dad. And Mom, no one knew what her future held for her. I couldn’t

put anyone through the agony if something should happen to me when I was deployed and didn't come back. So I kept myself from writing. I hoped you'd move on, or at least I had hoped you would."

Evie's glance turned cold. "Yet you wrote your mother up until your death."

"She was my mom. She didn't need from me what you did. Plus, she was struggling with her health, and I had to know what was happening with her. As sad as it is to say, the doctors told me every day that she took a breath would be a blessing. She'd gotten sick a couple of times, and they didn't think she'd make it, but she did. The relief and disappointment I felt were horrible, and I hated myself even more for having those feelings."

The tiny pale hand in mine pulled away. "I held your mom at your funeral. Your death took an emotional toll on her, and she couldn't let go of the fact that you were no longer here. Her reason for living was gone; she gave up and didn't fight when she got pneumonia last year."

Evie struggled to get out of the chair. Its reclined angle with her arm casted made it hard for her to get up. She'd said her peace but needed to finish hearing me out. I stood, collected her in my arms, lifted her from the chair, and set her on her feet. But I didn't let go of her. Not until I finished explaining.

"You don't know how much it eased my soul to see you comfort my mom. I knew she was in good hands with you. But seeing you walk down the aisle with Richard made me want to rise from the dead. But I couldn't. If I loved you back, you'd always be a target for someone to use to get to me. What I do for the CIA requires me to be a loner. No attachments, not even a pet."

Evie raised her hand and slapped my face. "You were there? At the funeral, at my wedding?" she screamed. "I married Richard because I lost you. I married a cheater

who annihilated my heart when he divorced me. I wasn't good enough for you, and apparently, I wasn't good enough for him."

Tears began to stream down her face. I closed my eyes briefly and rubbed my chest. "There hasn't been a momentous occasion in your life that I wasn't there, Vee. And, when I found out Richard was cheating on you, I gave him an ultimatum, divorce you or die. I never meant for you to feel unwanted."

Evie's fists slammed into my chest repeatedly. "I hate you."

I grasped her hands and held them to me. "No, you don't. You love me as much as I do you, but we can never be together. Your injuries are because of your brother's actions, and I'm barely holding it together. If something happened to you because of me, I'd scorch this earth with a vengeance." Gently, I placed my hands on her cheeks. "But, I promise you, I'm going to find the men who did this and make them pay." When our eyes met, I saw the hunger she tried to hide. I kissed Vee tenderly, until she knew just how wanted she was. I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't control my desire for her any longer.

Chapter Ten

Something Stinks, and It's Not Fish

Sawyer returned later that evening with the few groceries I had sent him out nine hours earlier to get. He said nothing as he placed the bags on the counter and began to unload them.

"It's been nine hours since you left, I tried to call you, and it went to voicemail. Where the hell have you been?"

My best friend acted like everything was normal, placing items from the bags into the refrigerator. "I got a call and had to go to the office. Why are you mad?"

"I'm mad because your asinine decision put your sister in danger, and it seems you have a secret you are not sharing with me."

Sawyer stopped midway as he reached into the plastic bag to retrieve the container of spinach. His brows drew together, and he tilted his head. "What are you talking about? I've got no secrets." Then he turned his back to me and placed the vegetable in the drawer at the bottom of the icebox as if it were a typical day.

I waited until he turned to retrieve another item from the bag making sure we'd be face to face. "If that's the case, tell me what Smoke and Fire is, and don't say you have no idea because I'm calling bullshit on that." I saw the recognition in his eyes when I said Smoke and Fire. He knew what it was, and there would be no hiding it from me. I wasn't going to let it go.

Sawyer continued to unload items into the refrigerator until the bags were empty. Once the door was closed, he motioned for me to follow him. Once we were alone outside, I asked the question again. “What’s Smoke and Fire?”

“It’s a nerve gas called HCNGB, a blended combination of Sarin gas and Zyklon B. Mixing both those chemicals together makes the concoction extremely dangerous. Once inhaled, it can kill a person who weighs 150 pounds in less than two minutes. It’s clear, odorless, and tasteless. So, it can be released, and no one will know it exists until people start dropping like flies. As fast as it’s released into the air, it disappears. Only an autopsy would confirm what killed the person.”

“Why not tell me, Sawyer? You sent me to Russia under the guise of killing a double agent, but my mission clearly had a dual purpose.”

“The envelope you brought me, Max, had the date and time of the transportation of the sample gas. Once tested and successful, the Russians will start mass production, and I need to stop that transport and get my hands on that canister.”

I stepped closer to my best friend and pressed my finger into his chest. “Yet, you chose not to tell me. You sent me after something that could have gotten me killed, and you didn’t fucking tell me.” Turning my back on Sawyer, I began to walk away; stopping a few feet closer to the door, I looked over my shoulder. “Find someone else to clean up your mess. I’ll protect Evie because she didn’t deserve to be collateral damage, and you can bet your life, I’m going to find the two men who did that to her, and I’m going to kill them. You’re on your own with Smoke and Fire. Ask someone in the chemical division to help you.”

Grabbing the keys off the wall, I headed to the garage and fired up the Benz. The sun was setting as I made my way to Lucas’s house. I knew there had to be evidence that the police missed. After all, they were investigating a B and E call. The only people who knew Lucas was dead were Sawyer and the CIA, and they weren’t sharing

information about that until they could complete their investigation. For all the cops knew, Lucas was away on business, and Evie interrupted a break-in. Sawyer had said that Uber records showed Lucas had been picked up several days earlier and dropped off at the airport, explaining why his car was parked in his driveway. The agency had already erased the signs of his murder to ensure the men in blue wouldn't interfere in their active investigation.

I parked several houses down and made my way to the back of the home to ensure no one would see me enter. Evie mentioned that one of the men came from the back of the house, so I headed in that direction. I passed two bedrooms and a bathroom before coming to the last door. It was the only room down the hallway with a closed, locked door. Optimistic that my predecessor had done the same thing, I picked the lock to gain entry. Inside nothing seemed out of place. A few cabinet drawers were ajar, only solidifying that the Russian had already looked at the contents. But, based on his tattoos, I was positive he was a mobster, not an agent; he wouldn't have looked for anything other than the obvious.

A walk-in closet door sat ajar, so I decided to start there. Pulling the door open, I found an empty closet except for a few boxes on a shelf. Searching through them delivered nothing of substance: a college diploma and some old photos. I was about to close the box and write it off as nothing when I noticed one of the photos was of a young woman hanging a framed diploma on the wall next to the closet. What caught my eye was the fact that the closet door was open, but it wasn't a shallow closet. The photo showed that it went further in, which told me this closet was hiding something.

Lucas had mounted a tie rack against the back wall. At first glance, one wouldn't give it the time of day, but what caught my eye was every hook had a tie on it but one. The average person would assume that the missing tie was one being worn. But I wasn't an average person. It can't be that simple, can it? I pulled at the hook, and nothing happened. I rubbed the top of my forehead and then decided to push on it. Sure enough, the hook wasn't a hook but a pin. When you pushed it, the metal pin slid into

the wall and caused an unlocking sound. I moved to the back wall, sliding it open like a door. When I stepped into the small room, a light automatically came on, and my eyes went wide at what lay before me.

The actual back wall was covered in photos and sticky notes. A banner across the top read Smoke and Fire. There was a photo of a man meeting with the two men Evie described. The mystery man wore a dark suit and a fedora. It was hard to get a good glimpse of him because the hat had shaded his face, and it was dark outside. Next were single shots of the two men; their names written at the bottom of the photo. The heavy-set man was named Konstantin Sorokin, and the man with the reddish-orange hair was Vladislav Popov, both members of the Bravata. Another photo showed the two men standing outside a building with a neon sign that read Nepovino veniye. The last picture was of Sawyer meeting with the man in the fedora. I removed the push pin and studied the photo closer. What are you doing, Sawyer? Who is this person that you are with, and what is your involvement in all of this?

I retrieved the four photos and put everything back in place. Looking at my watch, I knew I was running out of time before the nightclub closed. Nepovino veniye was a local hangout in DC for the Bravata, and it would be there if I had any chance of finding either of the two men I needed to locate.

I pulled up to the curb, parking under a burned-out streetlight. I didn't have to wait long until I saw the man I'd come to find. He'd stumbled out of the nightclub with a young woman tucked into his side. I watched as they walked thirty feet, both laughing. They stopped beside a dark grey Cadillac. Leaning in, he stole a kiss before opening the door for her.

The car pulled away from the curb and headed north. I waited a few moments before I did the same. The vehicle swerved between the lines as it drove down the street. Drunk and oblivious to me following him. Fucking idiot is making this too easy for me. The Cadillac pulled into a driveway five miles from the club. The two walked to

the front door, and the young lady fished for her keys in her purse. Once inside, they moved slowly through the house. A light turned on in every room they entered, followed by a piece of her clothing falling to the floor. I watched from the shadows as the young woman stood in the living room wearing only a thong. She dropped to her knees in front of Konstantin. Both arms rested on top of the couch cushions as he enjoyed the pleasure he was receiving. Silently, I opened the door on the side of the home, turning off the light as I entered, ensuring no one would see me. I moved slowly through each room until I stood behind them. The woman's lips wrapped around Konstantin's dick as she slid them up and down his shaft. When her eyes raised to look at him, she spotted me and let the Russian's cock fall from between her lips as she screamed. Without hesitation, I placed a bullet between her eyes as Konstantin lunged from the couch.

The Russian's body stiffened at the sight of the silenced gun. "Pull your pants up, don't make a sound, or I'll pull the trigger and kill you." I moved slowly around the couch and sat in one of the chairs, waiting for the soon-to-be dead man to stuff his junk in his briefs and zip his pants. "Now, move very slowly and sit on the couch. If you move in a way I don't like, I'll shoot you in the head."

The overweight man moved slowly and took his place on the couch but not before looking down to see the naked woman on the floor in a puddle of blood. "I need answers from you. Truthful ones. If I think you are lying I'm going to kill you, but not quickly. No, I'm going to do it nice and slow so you agonize from the pain. And when you think it's about to be over, I'll let you suffer a little longer. Then once you're dead, I'm going to kill everyone in your family as penance for your lies. Do you understand?" I waited for a response and then continued. Pulling the picture from the breast pocket of my jacket, I asked, "Where can I find this man?"

"I've no idea," he replied.

I lowered the gun and fired a shot, striking him in his thigh. "I'm going to ask you

one more time, and I better receive an answer, or the next one lands dead center between your legs.”

“I do not know where he is now, but tomorrow you can find him at his daughter's dance recital. Seven p.m. Music City Hall.”

“See, that wasn’t hard at all, was it.” I didn’t wait for a reply before I asked the following question. “Who sent you to send a message to Sawyer Wyatt through his sister? I’d think very hard before you answer this one because I’d hate for them to start calling you Konstantina.”

“He’s the CIA guy, right. So, that makes you the grey man, no?”

“It does, so you know I can make this quick and easy or slow and painful. The choice is yours.”

The blood from the man's leg had saturated the couch cushion even though he attempted to control the bleeding with pressure from his hand. “All I know is someone came into the club and asked if we wanted to earn a hundred grand to ransack a house, find the girl, and send a message through her to her brother.”

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“Describe him, and maybe I’ll spare your life.”

“I can’t, he wore glasses, and the club was dark. He mainly talked to Vladislav. But, he was American, that I know.”

“One last thing. I need you to call Vladislav. Tell him you need him immediately to come to this address.” I waited for him to pull his phone from his pocket, and then in my best Russian accent, I said, “Ya ponimayu po russki.”

“You speak Russian?”

“Da,so I will know if you try to betray me, and I will kill you instantly and then go after your wife and kid.”

With the phone on speaker, I listened as Vladislav picked up the phone, and Konstantin told him precisely what I said to tell him. Now all I had to do was wait.

When the Russian disconnected the phone, he asked, “I live now? I did as you wanted.”

Without remorse or hesitation, I pulled the trigger and smiled as his brains exited the back of his skull. “You shouldn’t have hurt my girl.” Then I laughed aloud.

Chapter Eleven

It’s Your Time To Die

I waited as the black sedan pulled into the drive and the car door opened. A tall, lanky man with red hair exited, and I knew it was Vladislav. I hid in the dark as he walked through the door. "Konstantin?" he called as he entered the home. Without hearing an answer, he called out again and moved further into the house. When he entered the living room and saw his friend, he immediately drew his gun and started to proceed cautiously.

I watched from the dining room as he walked down the hall, stepping into each room and assessing the risk before moving on to the next. When he finally entered the living room again, he bent down and retrieved Konstantin's wallet. It just goes to show there's no honor amongst thieves. Taking the cash from his friend's wallet, he stuffed it into his pocket, tossing the empty billfold on the floor and turned to leave.

"I wouldn't move another step if I were you," I said as I pulled the slide on my revolver and loaded a round into the chamber. The sound filled the room, and Vladislav stopped in his tracks, turning to face the direction of the sound.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the man who's going to suck the life out of you if you don't answer my questions the way I want." Lightly shaking my gun, I directed Vlad to sit across from me in the dining room. "Tell me who hired you to assault the Wyatt woman."

"Don't know him. He said his name is Johnson, and he was paying very well in cash for a simple job. He said to mess up a house, so it looked like someone wanted something. Then he said to find the girl and handed me a picture. Said her brother worked for the CIA, and he wanted a message sent. Why you want to know this?"

"Describe the man."

"Very hard to say for sure; it was dark."

Sitting across from the man who hurt Evie was hard enough. I wanted to lunge across the table and rip his heart out of his chest. But I needed to know who hired him, or I'd be no closer to knowing if Evie was still in danger. "You better give me a description, or you are no use to me, and you're going to find yourself next to your friend over there."

"He was average, maybe five foot ten. He wore black-rimmed glasses and spoke with an East Coast accent. I think his hair was brown, but I'm not certain he wore a hat. That's all I got. You all look alike." Vlad laughed for a moment. "Oh yeah, there is one more thing. He had a small scar on his chin. Now, that's all I got."

I nodded and thought about how much I wanted to make this man suffer. With my revolver still pointed at him, I pulled the trigger and put a bullet in his shoulder. He called out in pain and stood, reaching for the small of his back. He was going for his gun, and I had to decide. Shoot him again with a non-fatal shot or go big and end his life. As much as I wanted him to pay, I didn't have time to play around. Squeezing one more round off, I lodged the firing brass into the side of his neck, dropping him to the ground. Then I stood up, walked over to him, and spat on his chest. "The girl, the one you hurt. She is my girl. You never had a chance of walking out of here alive." I knew he'd be dead in less than a minute, so I didn't worry that he'd live to describe me to the cops when they showed up, after I made an anonymous call to the precinct. Even though the two douchebags didn't deserve a funeral, the young woman did. Unfortunately, she was my collateral damage in this fucked up situation.

As I drove back to my house, something wasn't adding up in the story. Why ransack Lucas's home? According to Sawyer, he was dead, and the house would have already been a mess if the cops answered a B and E call. Plus, Evie never mentioned that the house was in disarray. My girl said Konstantin came from the hallway, and the only thing down the hallway were bedrooms and an office. That would mean that the Russian had to have been in the office looking for something or in the bathroom when Evie arrived. Had they just gotten there, or were they waiting for her? Someone

was lying. Sawyer had told me that the agency found Lucas dead. He'd described the cover-up saying that the cops would think Lucas was away on business and none the wiser of his death.

I pulled down my driveway and into the garage. I put the car in park, killed the ignition, and then reached for the photo of Sawyer and the man in the hat. The man in the hat was short, possibly five foot five because Sawyer was close to six feet. So, the man in the hat in the picture and the man that showed up at the club were two different people. I was more confused than ever now.

The lights were off in the house when I entered. I knew Sawyer had gone because he texted earlier to say he had to run to the office to pick up some paperwork but would be back. Looking at my watch, he should have returned by now, but he was nowhere in sight. Pulling out my phone, I dialed his number. It rang several times, and then he picked up. "Hey, where are you?"

"I'm running late because I got some more information on Smoke and Fire, and I wanted to dig into it further before I returned. Sorry man, I lost track of time, and I'm not going to make it back tonight."

"That's fine. I'm here, and I'll stay with Evie. I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

I climbed the stairs two at a time; the events of the evening left me feeling a little uneasy, and I needed to know that Evie was safe. The partially cracked door to her room afforded me a clear shot into where she lay. The television light filled the room, but she was sound asleep. Feeling confident that everything was okay, I decided to shower and change clothes.

The hot water started to ease away some of the pain that has stayed with me over the years. Between broken bones, gunshots, and few knife wounds there were days my body felt like it was a hundred years old. But the skin reddening hot water felt great at

the end of the day. I stood under the water until it finally turned cold. Twisting the handle,

I stepped out of the shower, and grabbed two towels off the rack. One I wrapped around my waist, and the other I used to dry my hair.

I stood staring at myself in the mirror and admired the body I saw. I'd be thirty-five this year, even though I didn't feel it right now. I was proud of the eight-pack I saw, even though a sizeable four-inch scar was the first thing you noticed. The round, puckered scar on my pec wasn't as quickly seen but was still a constant reminder of Jalalabad and the shit show that went down during a targeted extract. If I turned around, you'd see several other scarred circles and a few knife wounds. I guess you could say I was lucky to still be alive.

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When is it time to call it quits? I hadn't given much thought to it until now. My job had never been personal. I just did what I was told. Killing bad guys is what I did, and I cleaned up the mess others left behind. But now, this job has become personal. Evie was personal. I slid my black sweats over my naked body and didn't bother with a shirt. I made my way down the hall for one more glance at Evie to ease my soul, but this time when I peeked in, she was awake and looking out the window. "Evie," I called out, startling her. She turned in my direction with her hand over her heart.

"Oh my God, you scared the crap out of me. Give a girl some warning next time. Like knock or something."

"You were asleep earlier when I checked on you. I just wanted to be sure you were okay before I turned in."

"I'm just a little on edge. I dreamt someone had broken into the house and was standing over my bed holding a knife. It startled me awake, and I got out of bed to look out the window. I wanted confirmation that nothing was out of place. You know, to make myself feel safe and all. Then you walked in and well."

I walked further into the room and placed my arms around Evie. As I pulled her close, she shuttered in my arms. "I'm sorry I frightened you." I kissed the top of her head. "You're safe in my house. I've got state-of-the-art security, and no one would think to look here for you."

Evie pulled away enough to look up at me. The swelling had gone down around her eye. "I see their faces at night in my dreams—the two men, that is. The ones that did this to me, and I wonder if there will ever be a day I won't." Tears fell from her eyes.

“I don’t want to live in fear.”

This time when I pulled her tight, her arms wrapped around my back, and the sensation of her touch caused a reaction in my body I hadn’t felt for a long time. I quickly released Evie. I couldn’t risk being unable to control my body, more precisely, parts that had a mind of their own. Taking her by the hand, I led her back to her bed. Evie climbed under her covers without hesitation, and I sat next to her. “You don’t have to worry about those men. They will never hurt you again, that I’m positive of.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I wouldn’t make a promise to you I couldn’t keep,” I reassured her.

“You killed them didn’t you? You didn’t say it outright when you talked about your line of work, but I’m not stupid. If someone wants to hurt you, it’s because you hurt someone else. Am I right?”

I hadn’t wanted to have this conversation. Hell, I had never planned to come face to face with her again. But I did and maybe being honest with her, she’ll not want anything to do with me after this is over. “Yes.” I nodded. “I kill people for the government.”

I could tell Evie was thinking about how she felt about my proclamation. After a few seconds she spoke. “Will you stay with me? I’m not sure I can get back to bed if I’m alone. Just till I fall asleep again.”

I wanted to say hell no, but her honey brown eyes burned straight into my heart. I could see the desperation in them as she waited for my answer. Those eyes pleaded with me to give her a yes. “Just till you fall asleep.”

Chapter Twelve

Truth or Consequences

I woke to a snoring angel beside me. I hadn't planned to fall asleep before she did, but I did. The last thing I remember was Hugh Jackman wearing a red jacket and a black top hat singing about the greatest show. Musicals just aren't my thing. But for Evie, I'd do anything she asked. Tossing the blanket I'd covered myself with to the side, I climbed out of bed before she woke and realized I'd spent the whole night with her. Every time I looked into her eyes I saw what she didn't want me to see. The feelings she still had. Feelings for me, even after all these years. The worst part, I still loved her. I never stopped.

The aroma of coffee brewing filled the kitchen. As I stood there waiting for it to finish so I could grab a mug, I realized that I couldn't remember the last time I'd woken up in the morning without a care in the world. Lying next to Evie must have soothed the demons that haunt me. Something no other woman could do—not even Mila.

With my mug of caffeine in hand, I headed outside for some fresh air. There were so many unanswered questions, pieces to a puzzle that didn't line up, and the shit of it was, my gut told me Sawyer still wasn't being straight with me. I couldn't just come out and ask him my questions; I needed evidence to support my suspicions, which required access to his office and files. Something I knew wouldn't come easy.

"Whatcha doing out here?" Evie's gentle voice asked.

"Just enjoying a little quiet time to myself," I replied. She was wearing a white cotton robe, the belt loosely tied around her waist, allowing me a glance at her soft silky skin. My eyes lowered from her chest to her bare feet and then back to her lips. The smirk on her face told me she'd worn the robe this way on purpose.

“You know Max, you didn’t have to jump out of bed just to get away from me. I saw the look on your face as you ran your hand through your hair, panicked that I might wake up and see you in bed with me.” Evie raised a brow, and the corner of her lip turned up. “You didn’t know I was awake, did you?”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I said nothing. She was a hundred percent right. I panicked, I didn’t want her to read more into the situation than there was.

“Look, Max, I know if this hadn’t happened to me, you’d still be dead as far as I knew.” She lowered her eyes to the ground and took a deep breath. “But,” she smiled, “I know now, and I’m not sure how you will just be able to walk out of my life and ignore me again.”

When I reached for her hand, she eagerly placed hers in mine. A hopeful look filled her eyes, and then I spoke the words I knew would destroy her.

“My beautiful girl, if my life were anything other than what it is, I’d gladly pick up where we left off seventeen years ago. But as I told you several days ago, I can’t have you, and you can’t be a part of my life.” I hung my head and closed my eyes. “I just can’t risk it,” I whispered.

Evie placed her hand on the side of my face and cupped my chin, giving it a nudge until I looked up at her. She lowered herself onto my lap and brushed my hair from my forehead. When she had my attention, she kissed my lips tenderly. “I don’t care what you do. I know you think you’re a monster for the things you’ve done. But to me, you’re my Max. You’d never let anything happen to me. You’re my protector, and one day, I promise you, you’re going to change your mind, and I hope it doesn’t take long because a girl can’t wait forever.”

I wanted to tell her to wait. I wanted her to be mine, but we don’t always get what we want. I made a choice all those years ago, and now I must stand by that decision, even

though I want to give in. It was time for an atmosphere change. Standing, I carried Evie into my house and placed her on the counter in the kitchen. “I’ll make you breakfast; what do you want.”

“You’re a pain in my ass, Max. I’m not hungry.” She held out her arms so I could help her down, and she left the room without saying another word.

Chapter Thirteen

No Fucking Way

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It wastime to get back to business. The faster I figured out what the hell was going on, the faster I could get out of town and away from the temptation that resided in my home.

It was mid-morning, and I hadn't heard from Sawyer yet. Reaching for my phone, I sent off a quick text.

Max:Where are you? We need to talk.

Sawyer:I had to fly to Amsterdam to investigate a message I received from an asset.

Max:I need an office and a computer. Can I use your office?

Sawyer:Help yourself. I'll let Ginny know you'll be coming by today.

Max:Thanks man.

Once I was dressed, I stuck my head in Evie's door to tell her I'd be gone for a little bit and to call me if she needed anything. All I got as a response was a quick nod of her head. I stood there staring at her for a second, but she wouldn't acknowledge my presence.

Before walking out the door, I set the alarm on the house, and once my Benz cleared the gate, I activated the sensors around the perimeter.

Thirty minutes later, I pulled into the underground garage of the CIA building and parked my car in a visitor's spot. When I exited on the third floor, Ginny stood from

her desk. “You must be Max. Sawyer did an excellent job at describing you.”

Ginny was easily in her fifties. Her jet-black hair was pulled tight into a bun, and she wore patent leather flats and a black skirt that ended mid-calf. Time hadn’t been good to her. Dry skin, yellow teeth, and the wrinkles above her lips gave away her smoking habit. “Thank you. I shouldn’t be long; I have to research a few things, and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

Sawyer's computer was on when I sat behind his desk. Why would his laptop be on if he was out of town? Just another item that wasn’t adding up. It took a little bit to get logged in under my name, but once I was in, I quickly searched for known acquaintances of Konstantin and Vladislav. Only one name appeared on both of their bios, Rostropovich Zarkhov.

As I waited for the database to search Rostropovich, I took the opportunity to dig around in Sawyer's office. As I suspected, the drawers on his desk were locked. But that never stopped me from gaining access to something I needed. It took me a few minutes to unlock the drawer on the right, but as I pulled it open, I saw the envelope I’d handed him when I returned from Russia. The envelope lay partially under a few loose papers. As I unfolded the note, I began to read.

The smoke will be heavy at the firehouse around nine on Wednesday, August 5th. Wear your helmet and call ahead. The recruits are waiting for their new assignments, and the green extinguisher is the one you want.

The fifth was today. If Sawyer was telling the truth, the exchange was going down in less than eight hours. Folding the note back up, I placed it back in the envelope and tucked it back under the paper.

I printed off two copies of the information I’d obtained on Rostropovich. One I tucked in my pocket, and the other I left on Sawyer's desk with a sticky note. “This

could be one of your problems. I'm going to look into him tonight."

Not wanting to leave Evie alone too long, I signed off the laptop and shut the door behind me. I stopped at Ginny's desk to say goodbye. "I'm done now. I left something for Sawyer on his desk. Do you know when he'll be back from Amsterdam?"

Ginny gave me a weary look. "Sawyer's not in Amsterdam. He went to follow up on a lead he got this morning here locally."

"Thank you, Ginny. I must have misunderstood him. It was noisy where I was this morning. Have a nice day."

This is the second time something my best friend told me was a lie. Something was going on that he didn't want me to know about. I intended to call him on his shit when my phone rang, and the caller ID read Her. "Hey, beautiful, I'm on my way back. Do you need me to pick something up for you?"

"Max, I think someone is in the house. I heard noises and got out of bed. When I got to the top of the stairs, I thought I saw a shadow, but it disappeared. I'm scared."

My heart began to pound uncontrollably in my chest. "Evie, go into my room and go into my bathroom. A floor-to-ceiling mirror is next to the closet, and a keypad is inside the closet door. Punch in 358719, and the mirror will pop open. Go inside and push the green button. That will close the mirror door. I'll hold on while you do that."

I heard the beeping of the keypad and then a swoosh sound and a long beep. "Okay, Max, I'm in your safe room."

"Good girl. The glass is bulletproof, but I don't think anyone will know you are in there. Put your phone on silence, and I'll call you when I am on the grounds." I

waited a few seconds and said, “You’re safe; don’t forget it.”

Instead of coming through the drive, I went through the trees and along the water's edge. I was using the brush as a cover to enter my house through the garage. There was no sign of anyone on the bottom floor. Step by step, I eased my way up the stairs. Sounds of a commotion came from the room at the end of the hall—the room Evie occupied.

My chest constricted as I moved closer. Had she decided to come out from the safe room? I heard a male voice as I reached for the door to push it open. “She’s not here.” The Russian accent was very distinct. “She has to be. It was confirmed.” Another voice spoke—this one from a much older man. “Da, but she is not here now. We should go.”

Without giving it another thought, I pushed the door open, pistol aimed at the two men. Both lunged at me, catching me off guard. I hadn’t expected them to be so bold, and I underestimated them, which almost cost me my life. Taking cover on the opposite side of the bed, I fired a shot and struck the young Russian in the chest, dropping him to the ground. But the older one fired simultaneously, hitting me in the leg as he lunged for the door. I ran after him dragging my injured leg along, hitting the stairs, and losing footage. I tumbled from top to bottom, firing one last shot at the man as he dashed out the front door and missed.

Chapter Fourteen

The Jig Is Up

“Oh my God, Max,” Evie exclaimed as she ran down the stairs.

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“Calm down, Evie; I’m fine.” She helped me off the floor and down the hall to the bathroom. “I need you to go upstairs and grab me some gauze and tape. There is a black bag under the sink. It looks like a shaving bag. Bring it to me, please.”

Evie moved as fast as she possibly could to retrieve the items I asked her to get for me. When she returned, she handed me the bag and sat on the floor beside me. “What can I do to help?”

“If I pass out, call 911,” I said with a straight face. I hadn’t expected the terrified look on Evie’s face when I said it. “I’m only kidding, Evie. I will not pass out, I promise you. I’ve had to suture myself before, and it was a clean hit; the bullet went straight through.”

As she watched me push the needle under my skin and up through the wound with forceps, her face began to turn ashen. When I ran the fish-like hook through the other side of the bleeding bullet hole, Evie’s hand went to her mouth as she sprinted toward the bathroom. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her when I heard the retch followed by what sounded like water draining from a pan into the toilet. “You alright in there?” I called out.

“I’m fine,” echoed back to me, followed by the sound of a sink turning on.

When Evie returned, I had finished my sutures and was ready to cover the wound with gauze. Her tiny hands took the dressing from mine, and she began to wrap it around my thigh several times. “There, all done,” she said emphatically as if she’d just performed open heart surgery.

Leaning in, I brushed my lips against her neck and felt her shiver from that simple touch. I couldn't control the emotions I'd denied myself when I heard the tiny moan leave her lips. My tongue brushed along her neck, she tasted like heaven, and I knew I would pay for what I did next. Without hesitation, I claimed Evie's mouth, devouring every breath she expelled, each groan she mewed until there was nothing left. I was riding high on seventeen years of desire and didn't want to let go. That was until I heard her whisper my name when our mouths parted. The passion that laced the mention of my name told me I'd made a mistake. I was leading Evie down a path I knew I wouldn't follow through on, and I couldn't do that to her.

"We can't. This is wrong," I said as I pulled away, placing a sizeable distance between our bodies. "I shouldn't have kissed you that way, and it won't happen again." I stood, reaching out my hand to help her off the ground.

We were both standing when Evie spoke. "Go to hell, Max."

I'd spent the rest of the afternoon trying to decipher the message on the note, and I'd come up against so many roadblocks. It wasn't until I started digging into Rostropovich's file that things clicked into place. The Russian owned a long list of restaurants and bars in the Arlington area. One called the Firehouse was on the list of assets. I dialed the restaurant number, and a recording came on advising patrons that the business was closed indefinitely and to try one of the other restaurants owned by the establishment.

The note from Sawyer's desk read the smoke will be heavy at the firehouse around nine on the fifth. Did this mean someone was going to torch the place? One thing was sure; the only way to get answers would require me to be present at nine.

The restaurant was fifteen minutes from my home. My leg was throbbing with pain as I got behind the wheel. I closed my eyes and reminded myself that pain could only control me if I let it. It was time to push the pain aside and focus on the end goal. It

was ten to nine when I turned onto Baker Street. Halfway down the road was an old fire station renovated into a restaurant. I continued past it and parked along the curb in front of a Starbucks. I sat at the window with my coffee, watching for anything that looked out of place across the road. Everything seemed ordinary until five after nine. A delivery van pulled up and parked in front of the firehouse. Two men got out and retrieved several fire extinguishers from the back of the truck: three red and one green. Once inside, there were no signs of movement until ten minutes later. A black Suburban pulled up, and three men exited. One of them had a fedora on, just as the man in the picture had been wearing.

I couldn't wait any longer; I needed to be inside. I utilized the fire escape outside the building that led to a door on the top floor. Easing my way up, I gained access and found a spot that gave me a chance to see all the parties. I watched as the money exchanged hands, and the man in the hat took possession of the green fire extinguisher. I attempted to move closer, but my leg gave out as I tried to stand, and I couldn't mask the sound of my knee colliding with the metal rail. Five heads turned in my direction. I knew I'd be able to shoot my way out of the building if necessary. But, I hadn't prepared for the face of the man wearing the fedora. Sawyer!

No plan survives first contact with the enemy. I now knew what that meant.

Chapter Fifteen

Friend Or Traitor

It all made sense now—the stranger in my home who bypassed my security system. The SVR knew that I was in St. Petersburg and all the lies. Sawyer was involved; he was a traitor to our friendship and the United States. How could that be?

Two of the men below drew their guns and ran toward the stairs that led to the second floor. A bullet blew past my head as I stood, went to the open door, and ran for the

fire escape. I was opening my car door when Sawyer and the other two men exited from the building behind me. Looking in my rearview mirror as I drove off, I saw two of the men firing at me but not Sawyer—he just stood there and watched it all happen.

I stormed through my front door calling Evie's name out as I ran up the stairs. Not hearing any response from her made me move faster. The pain from my wound was excruciating, but lives were at stake here, and I couldn't think of myself. No, it was all about protecting Evie and getting to the bottom of this mess. Not seeing Evie in her room at first glance scared me until I heard her voice singing the chorus to "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails. What. The. Fuck. Busting through the bathroom door, Evie jumped at the sound of the door slamming against the wall.

"What the hell, Max?" she yelled as the water rained down on her. "Ever think of knocking first?"

I stood there, taking in the beauty of her body. She'd filled out nicely since we were kids. It was apparent by how her clothes fit her, but seeing her naked, I could appreciate the perfection of her supple breasts, toned abs, and muscled legs. But, it was her bare pussy that was my undoing. My dick rose to a full erection under my jeans. I was entranced; I couldn't think. I just stood there ogling her body.

"Excuse me, Max," Evie muttered as she reached around me to grab the towel off the rack. "Honestly, a little privacy would be nice."

Once she'd covered her body, my brain began to function again. "Clothes, get dressed ASAP. We don't have time to waste, and we need to get out of here now, or we're both going to be dead."

Evie opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. "Don't ask; I'll tell you in the car; just get dressed now."

Once we were in the car, I started explaining how I'd gone to investigate and found Sawyer there with the enemy and how they came after me.

"That can't be, Max," Evie said. "He's not a traitor, and he would never do anything to hurt you."

"I know what I saw, and I can't start working on figuring this out until I get you somewhere safe where no one would ever think to look for either of us. But first, we need to get rid of my car." I pulled into the parking lot of Union Station in D.C., searching for an older model vehicle. Two minutes later, Evie and I were headed south in a 1970s pickup truck. We drove to Annapolis for an hour and a half and turned down a gravel road.

"Where are we going, Max?"

I pointed through the trees further down the road. "Beyond all that green is a house that sits on the Chesapeake. It's mine; no one knows it exists, not even your brother. I bought it five years ago because I wanted somewhere I could go where no one would bother me, and I could unplug if needed."

"And your mansion in Reston wasn't sufficient?" Evie laughed.

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“Your brother knew I had it, and from time to time, I’d visit. But I wanted something simple and quiet. I wanted somewhere no one could find me, not even your brother, and this place is it.”

Evie exited the truck and walked toward the front door of the ranch style home. She was thirty feet from the front steps when I called out to her. “I wouldn’t take another step if I was you.”

She halted in her tracks and turned to face me. “Why? You got land mines in the ground?”

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “Worse, Mildred.” Evie narrowed her brows and pursed her lips, waiting for me to respond further. “Mildred is the eighty-three-year-old lady that rents my house. If you step one foot closer, the dog will bark, and then she will come out of the house and ask a thousand questions I’d prefer not to answer. Just follow me.”

Taking Evie's hand, I tugged her toward the sidewalk leading to the back of the house and then down the gangway to the water's edge, where my boat was docked. Seeing the forty-two-foot Hatters yacht anchored at the end, Evie halted, tugging her hand from mine.

“And that,” she pointed, “is inconspicuous. I think someone will notice that huge thing down there and ask questions.”

Grasping her hand, we made our way further down the gangway. “People think it belongs to Mildred’s son.”

“Wait, I’m confused. Who is Mildred's son?”

“Me, of course. Phil Rudd.” I stepped aboard, and Evie followed me. I spent ten minutes showing her around and how to work everything. Once I was confident she would be fine, I broke the news. “I’m going to leave you here for a few days. I’ve got to head back to DC and figure out what’s happening. But before I leave, I’ll ensure you have everything you need.”

Half an hour later, I returned with a week's worth of groceries and two burner phones. Handing one to Evie, I laid the groundwork. “Call me every three hours. If I don’t hear from you, I will think something is wrong, do you understand?” She nodded her head. “I don’t expect you to call once you’ve gone to bed, but I’ll expect to hear from you first thing in the morning.”

“I got it, Max. I’m not a stupid child,” Evie pouted.

“I know you’re not.” I turned and grabbed the keys for the truck. “I’ll be back, and we’ll talk about that song you were singing in the shower when I get back.”

I dumped the stolen truck in a parking lot at the dock next to an old Oldsmobile I’d gotten for Mildred last year when hers broke. Before I left, I stopped by the house and told her that I had a friend staying on the boat and that she didn’t need to worry about her. She’d given me a kiss on the cheek and told me to be safe.

When I got to DC, I parked at the station, jumped on the Silver Line Metro, and headed to CIA headquarters. Once inside, I headed to Sawyer's office. Unfortunately, Ginny informed me that Sawyer had decided to work from home for the day. Thanking his secretary for her time, I decided it was time to pay my best friend a visit.

Sawyer never saw me coming. I’d snuck in through an upstairs bedroom window and

stealthily made my way down the stairs. He'd been sitting at his dining room table working on his laptop and had his phone to his ear. His head turned to face me when he heard the slide of my gun forcing a bullet into the chamber.

"I'll call you back, Peter," Sawyer said and then disconnected. "I expected you to pay me a visit."

"You have a lot of explaining to do, friend, and don't you lie to me. I already know you've done plenty of it already. One, you forgot to tell me the whole reason I was in Russia. Two, you never went to Amsterdam, and last but not least, it appears you're working with the Russian, Mr. Fedora hat man."

"It's not what it appears, Max. Just put the gun down, and we can talk. We've been friends since we were five. Do you think I'd honestly put you in danger and not tell you? Or that I'd sell out my country to work with the Russians?"

I took a step back but didn't lower my gun. Pulling out a chair, I took a seat but kept my nine focused on his head. "Get to talking, Sawyer."

"I sent you after Vladimir, but I didn't tell you that Sergei, the older Russian you killed, worked for us, and I didn't anticipate you would kill him. The letter you got from him had the information on the exchange point, but what he told Vladimir was a lie, and he led him to believe they were sending the Americans on a wild goose chase. Your mission was to retrieve the letter from Vladimir and send the message that we knew he was a double agent. You fucked that one up good, and I had to pivot in a new direction."

I listened as Sawyer explained that the original man in the fedora was another agent he'd brought up to speed to assist with the interception of the HCNGB gas. When Lucas turned up dead, he knew something was wrong, so he needed me to focus on Evie while he got to the bottom of what was happening. The Amsterdam lie was

necessary because he had to meet with the agent in the fedora, and once he did, it was evident that he was working with the other side, so he had to kill him and then take his place at the exchange.

“I’d never have been there at the warehouse if I hadn’t killed my other agent. I promise you that. I never once fired a shot at you, and I couldn’t. You’re my oldest and dearest friend,” Sawyer explained. “If you still don’t believe me, then kill me now.”

I wanted to believe my friend with every fiber of my being. “Where is the gas now?”

“In the right hands at headquarters. Where is my sister? I went to your house, and all her belongings were there but no sign of her.”

I wasn’t ready to let on where I had stashed Evie. The place in Annapolis needed to remain a secret. “She’s safe. You asked me to protect her, and I will. When I decide it’s safe, I’ll bring her to you.” Lowering my gun, I stared into my best friend’s eyes. There would be no mistaking the seriousness of my following statement. “I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, Sawyer. So here is what you will do to solidify your loyalty to me. You have twenty-four hours to deliver the two men with you at the drop to the marina in Edgewater. There is a boat docked in slip six. I’ll be on that boat.”

As I got on the Silver Line, my burner rang. “Hey beautiful, you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, you?”

“Good. I’ll see you soon. Oh, Evie.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re the reason I stay alive.” I sang the words to her, knowing she’d pick up on their reference.

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“You’re never going to let me live it down, are you?”

“Not a chance Evie, not a chance. And beautiful, we’ll both be naked the next time you sing it.”

Chapter Sixteen

Let’s Go Fishing

Sawyer showed up at the marina with several hours to spare. The three of them walked onto the boat I’d rented. “Sit,” I told the two Russians. Sawyer tied their hands and their feet together. This was the moment of truth. Sawyer would show me his loyalty by doing precisely what I’d ask of him tonight. Once I was confident the two were incapacitated, I went to the helm and put the boat in motion. I took us from the Marina to the South River, into the Chesapeake, and then to the North Atlantic.

I turned the engine to the boat off, and Sawyer asked, “So now what?”

“Now, I get the answers I need, or we do some fishing with Russian chum.”

Making my way into the salon, I pulled up a chair and turned it around, straddling it as I sat in front of the two Russians. “Sawyer, take the little guy onto the deck and strap him to the chair.”

My best friend retrieved the gun from the small of his back. Then he cut the rope around the legs of one of the assholes and ushered him to the deck. Making eye contact with the remaining man in front of me, I spoke. “I’m going to ask you a few

questions, and you will answer them. If you don't answer them or I don't like your answer, I will go outside and cut your friend's hands off and use them for fishing bait."

One by one, I removed two hands and two feet from the man strapped to the chair on the deck. Hooking them to a line, I tossed them into the water and locked the pole in place. I put the boat in drive, slowly the appendages drug in the water, enticing the blacktips into a feeding frenzy. At the first tug of the pole, it cut the line. "Sawyer," I called from above. "Cut him loose and toss him overboard." Without hesitation, several sharks fought over the Russian remains. Killing the engine, I made my way downstairs.

"You're next," I said to the remaining man, sitting wide-eyed at what he'd just watched. "Last chance to tell me who hired you. Was it the man standing on the deck?"

"No," the Russian spoke. "It was another American man, and he paid Konstantin and Vlad to rough up a girl and offered Mikhail and me some money to protect him when he went to a warehouse to pick up something. Only he never showed back up." The Russian pointed his finger at Sawyer. "That man showed up instead and told us he came in the other man's place."

"Now, that is the answer I wanted to hear." I smiled as I spoke.

"You will let me go then?"

"No, I won't be letting you go then." I pulled the knife from inside my jacket and stabbed it directly into his heart. Falling forward, the man landed on the ground. Reaching beneath his arms, I drug him out onto the deck. Pouring the remaining blood from the bucket that held the hands and feet of his partner into the water, I waited for the blacktips to surface. Sawyer helped me toss the body over the side

when several fins began swimming in a circle.

“Max,” Sawyer spoke. “You’re one sick motherfucker.”

I couldn’t help but grin at my best friend. “It’s good he cleared your name before I killed him, or I’d have left you to swim back to land.” Tossing a clean bucket at Sawyer, who stood there looking at me in disbelief, I said, “Get some water and help me wash the evidence off this boat.”

“You’d have tossed me overboard?” Sawyer asked.

“In a heartbeat, if I thought you betrayed me.”

Chapter Seventeen

A New Beginning

The lightson my yacht were on when I got back, even though it was two in the morning. I’d expected Evie to be asleep, so I was shocked when it wasn’t dark. I looked everywhere on the top deck but couldn’t find her. Deciding that she must be in one of the two bedrooms, I moved to the lower level. As I suspected, one of the doors was open, signifying I’d found her, so I piqued my head inside.

Evie was dressed in one of my t-shirts, reading a book she’d pulled off my bookshelf. “Oh my God, Max.” She jumped off the bed when she saw me, my shirt falling just enough to cover her private parts. “I couldn’t get through to you. I was scared something had happened. You told me to call you, so I expected you to answer, and you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t answer when you called. The cellular service was almost nonexistent, which I hadn’t expected when I told you to contact me so much.”

Evie stepped a little closer to me and wrinkled her nose. “You stink, Max. Have you not bathed in three days?”

“I was headed to the bathroom but wanted to check on you first. Let me wash the stench off, and we can chat about what happens next when I get out.”

“I want to fuck you like an animal,” I sang as I turned to exit the room. I heard the whooshing sound as the book flew through the air and hit me on the back of the head. Smack. Rubbing my skull, I laughed. “Ouch. That was uncalled for,” I called back to her as I walked toward the other room.

The sea water, blood, and sweat filled my clothes, the smell stronger than it was the prior days. I tolerated it long enough to get home, but now I just wanted it off my body. Hell, I’d burn my clothes if I had to. I barely fit in the shower. It was the only downside to this boat. Everything else was perfect. By the time I bumped my elbow the second time on the wall, I’d finally removed the putrid smell I’d been living with. Stepping out of the shower, I opened the bathroom door to find Evie lying sideways on my bed, waiting for me to come out. I hadn’t expected her to be there, so I stood in front of her, naked with my junk swinging in the wind. “Excuse me, did I miss the party invite to my room?”

“Nope,” Evie responded. “I just thought I’d give you the same surprise you gave me.”

I turned, reaching into a drawer to retrieve a pair of boxers, giving her a look at my glorious ass. “I want to feel you from the inside.” I couldn’t help myself. I had to sing it as I slid the black cotton up my legs and over my hips.

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“Are you ever going to stop reminding me of that day?”

I chuckled. “Are you going to ever explain to me why you were singing that song in the first place? It’s a little hardcore for a girl like you.”

“A girl like me?” Evie asked, sitting straight up on my bed now.

“Yeah, I see you more as an “I’ll Make Love to You” by Boyz II Men kind of girl. Sorry, woman.”

Evie stood from the bed, walked the few steps it took to get in my face and pushed her finger into my wet chest. “I’ll have you know there is a lot about me you’ve missed over the last ten years you chose to push me out of your life.”

“If I didn’t push you out, you may not have been here to give me shit right now. I told you, the risk was too great; someone might have come after you. I couldn’t take that chance, and I wasn’t willing to play with your life or your future that way.”

Evie's eyes met mine. The gold in her brown irises was more prevalent than before. “You saidwas. The riskwastoo great. Not the risk IS too great. Please tell me you’ve changed your mind.”

Tugging her to me, I felt the warmth of her body against mine. It felt like home. “I’ve had a lot of time to think lately—more time than I would have liked if I am being honest. I’ve fantasized about what could have been between you and me. I’ve realized I deprived the two of us of our happy ending.”

Evie ran her hand through my hair, causing every nerve ending in my body to light up. Then her head started to wobble back and forth like a bobblehead. “Or, maybe I would have ended up hating you, and we’d be divorced. Or, maybe you’d have driven me crazy, and I would be praying for someone to kill me.”

Stepping back, I pushed her with one hand, causing her to fall off balance, landing on her back on the bed. Hovering over the top of her, my mouth crashed into hers. Taking what I wanted. No mercy. No surrender. She was going to be mine tonight. My hand ran from her hip to her breast, finding just what it was looking for. A taught peak waiting to be pinched.

Evie’s hands pressed against my chest, pushing. I broke the kiss, looking at her face in question. “Before this goes any further,” she said. “Did you kill my brother? That would be a deal breaker for me.”

Rolling to my side, I pulled her body on top of mine. “No, I didn’t kill Sawyer. He wasn’t a traitor after all.”

“Oh, Max, I think I’m going to love making you pay for not having faith in him. Maybe I’ll glide my pussy over your erection without letting you feel me from the inside.” Evie slid her center up my length before sliding back down again. I needed to be inside her soon.

“So, my little dirty girl. Tell me how much you want my cock.”

“So, bad.” Her voice trembled with excitement.

Sliding my boxers down my legs I asked, “What is it you want me to do to you?”

“Fuck me. Hard.” Evie panted. “Take me to the edge and let me explode all over your dick.”

I moaned at the visions that were going through my mind. I let my fingers brush over her underwear and then I ripped the thong from her body. “Your pussy is mine, only mine.”

“Yes. God yes,” she whimpered as I slid my length into her already drenched pussy. “Oh my God.” Evie panted harder with each thrust inside of her.

“Tell me you want me to fill your pussy with my seed,” I growled.

“Fill me, Max. I wanna feel you come inside me. Give me that cum,” she said as she moaned in pleasure. “Don’t stop Max, fuck my pussy till I can’t take it anymore.”

Her words excited me beyond my expectations. Evie Wyatt was a dirty girl and she liked it rough. I pounded her cunt hard and fast. Taking what I wanted without mercy.

“Yes, yes, oh my fucking God.” she exclaimed as she road on the high of her orgasm. Reaching down between us I started rubbing her clit. Her body stiffened from my touch. Her legs were straight as a board as she squeezed my cock with her core. “MAX!!!!”

I felt her body convulse underneath me. I’d taken her to the top of the volcano and pushed her over the edge. I couldn’t control my own pleasure anymore. Exploding, I filled her with my seed.

Epilogue

Three years later

I sat on the covered patio of our log home and watched the snow fall with a cup of coffee in my hand and watched as our two boys played in the snow down below. Two years ago, I moved Evie and our sons to Locati. You’re probably wondering where

the hell Locati is. Well, I'm not sure you can get any closer to heaven than there. I wouldn't call it a town, because the actual town is over forty-five miles away. Yep, there is no one around for miles and miles. It's just us out here on our parcel on top of the mountain. Just the way I like it.

Imagine my surprise three years ago when Evie told me she was pregnant. Fear like I'd never felt before crippled me. I'd just given in to attempting to have a relationship with the one woman who'd always owned my heart, and still deal with the constant concern for her safety. And now I had nine months to figure out how on earth I was going to keep two humans safe. I'd never be able to survive it if anyone got to me through them.

When I told Evie my idea, she thought I was crazy. Living off the grid wasn't her idea of normalcy, but she graciously agreed if it meant she didn't have to live with a security team 24/7. So, I went to work finding us the perfect property. Locati, Montana it was. I found fifty-six acres on the top of a mountain. I had the builder clear a ten-mile radius around our home which made it very easy to see anything or anyone coming our way. Not to mention we were at the top of a mountain made of nothing but rock and trees. Paranoid you say. Yes, I concur. I had enemies, far and wide.

It took over a year to build our dream home. Finding the right contractor who'd honor our privacy was key. I let Vee decorate the inside while I handled everything on the outside. Our cabin was made of strong timber and bulletproof windows. Nothing was penetrating our home. And, because the security system on my home in Virginia wasn't as foolproof as I had thought, I upgraded our system to use biometrics. To hell with passcodes and keypads.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:43 am

When we were ready to make the move, Evie needed a four-wheel drive instead of her little car. Let's just say she was less than pleased when I showed up with her new Range Rover. From the outside it looked like any other vehicle of its kind, but what the average eye couldn't see was the bulletproof windows, doors, and tires. The switch that allowed you to electrify the door handles and the ability to create a smoke screen. However, it was the yellow yield sign that read "Precious Cargo on Board" that got me out of the doghouse on that one.

"Max," Vee called up from the playground below. "Come join us. Alex wants his daddy."

Yes, my first born was named Alex, short for Alexei which was my undercover name back then. Vee thought it would be funny and she wasn't budging no matter how many times I put my foot down. "If I have to live off the grid in a secluded area then you can humor me and let me have the name Alex." She had a point.

"Coming beautiful." I set my coffee mug on the table beside me and walked to the end of the patio where the stairs led to the ground level. When I reached the bottom, Alex jumped off his swing and came running for me. Scooping him up in my arms, I kissed his wind-blown cheek. "Having fun little man?" I asked.

"Snow angel, Daddy. Can we?"

Setting him down beside me, we both laid on the ground and moved our arms and legs in and out. Standing up I looked back at our creations. Where my masterpiece looked like a snow angel, Alex's was just a hot mess. Vee had him wrapped up in so many layers before putting on his snowsuit that he reminded me of little Randy

Parker in A Christmas Story. His angel looked like a blob.

“What a beautiful snow angel,” Evie told Alex. He clenched his teeth together and opened his lips wide. This was Alex’s way of smiling big but to be honest, it looked nothing like a smile.

“Andy play more, Mom?” Alex asked.

“Not today, son. How about we go in and get some hot chocolate and warm up?”

“Chocolate!” Alex exclaimed. “Yay,” and he took off running toward the door to the house.

Evie walked behind Alex, with Andy on her hip. My heart was full. Twenty years ago, I lost my brother and dad. Sixteen years ago, I lost my mom. Never had I ever thought I’d have a wife and kids. I knew I was destined to end my life alone. I fought my feelings for Evie with everything I had in me. But sometimes, your destiny has been waiting for you your whole life. You just need to reach out and take a chance.

“Hey, wait up for me,” I called as I ran to catch up to my family. My life. My future.

...THE END