



Resolution

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Description: Raven and Miguel are still on a tough recovery case involving a rare pigeon's blood ruby worth millions of dollars. There's a very real threat hanging over their heads, and they're stuck with a client they don't exactly trust, her attorney whom they suspect is involved in the whole mess, and a man claiming to be a "friend" of the widow who looks more like an extra from a mobster movie.

They've had more action in the first few days than they ever wanted to. Opening a new recovery business shouldn't be this dangerous, but then again, unexpected rogue CIA operatives trying to murder them wasn't on the cards either. Unfortunately, only three have been caught, leaving at least one more out there, desperate to get his hands on a stolen shipment of gems.

When a moldering body turns up with Raven and Miguel's names in his pocket, things really start heating up and the bullets start to fly. Making things even more complicated— every single government alphabet agency is getting in each other's way, and trust is in short supply. Right when it seems there's no way out, old friends inadvertently give them a clue how to get out of all this mess with their hides intact.

From the mean streets of Los Angeles to the tropical paradise of Grand Cayman, join Raven and Miguel in the exciting conclusion of the Trackers series.

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Prologue

RAVEN

I woke to the sound of my phone ringing on the bedside table. When I opened my eyes, I was greeted with darkness and I frowned, rolling away from Miguel who grunted.

“Who’s calling at—”

I felt him stretch and sit up. I couldn’t help my sleepy smile as I heard him mutter.

“...fucking five o’clock in the fucking morning?”

I snorted, reaching for my phone, feeling the coolness in the air as the down comforter pulled away. Glancing at the screen, I blinked a couple of times as I tried to focus on the caller ID. I frowned and rolled back to my spot beside Miguel. “It’s Cassidy Ryan.” I quickly swiped the screen. “Cass?”

“Raven. I’m sorry to disturb you so early.”

I glanced over at Miguel as I put the call on speaker, scooting up against my pillow as he did the same. I rubbed my hand over my face to wipe away the sleepiness. “It’s...fine, Cassidy. Miguel’s here. What’s up?”

“Mike and I were scheduled midnight to eight and we’re just getting ready to leave the scene of a homicide.” He sighed. “I’m calling because we found your names

written on the back of the victim's business card...at least we think it's his business card. It's a little hard to read. From what I can tell, the name on the card matches the name on his driver's license."

I turned to look at Miguel, feeling dread coursing through me as my eyes widened.

"Who is it, Cassidy?" Miguel asked.

"Dave...Dave Reynolds," Cassidy replied. "Do you know him?"

Miguel frowned. "I'm not sure but the name sounds familiar."

My stomach turned over as I met Miguel's gaze. "It's the investigator."

"Makes sense," Cassidy said. "The card says he works for Aston, Summerfield, and Billings."

I nodded, knowing that he couldn't see me, but Miguel could. He reached for the bedside table lamp, switching it on.

"Yeah," I replied blinking at the bright light which suddenly lit up the room.

"Remind me of the details," said Cass.

"That's where Gregory Aston is a partner. He's Tawny Flores' attorney. She inherited her late husband's estate and when Aston inventoried a safe at her house and learned an expensive pigeon's blood ruby was missing, he hired us to find it."

"This ruby is the one those rogue CIA operatives were looking for...the one they threatened you two over?"

Cassidy and Mike had been brought in at the last minute to assist the ATF and FBI with the takedown of Mendez, Cassanova, and Bishop, three of the rogue operatives who'd promised Miguel and I retribution if we didn't hand over the ruby to them as soon as we found it. Though it had been almost a month since they'd been arrested and taken away by the CIA, I still felt guilty as hell about not bringing in our detective friends at the very beginning of our search, or at the very least, cluing them into the threats we'd received.

"Yeah, that's the one, Cassidy."

"Okay, and you two are still working on the recovery, right?" he asked.

"We are," Miguel said, leaning toward the phone. "I mean, we haven't been successful in finding it, obviously. We've kind of run out of leads and our assistant, Judy, who's our skip tracer, hasn't been able to find a thing even though she's running down everything she can about the rogue cell of operatives."

I nodded to Miguel before holding up the phone. "And she's pretty pissed that she shares a last name with one of the fuckers, even though Mendez is a common enough name in Southern California." I winced, realizing I was rambling as Miguel rolled his eyes at me. "Sorry, Cassidy. You said you have a dead body."

"Yes, and if Mike and I are right, that means you two might tie-in to this whole mess somehow. This guy's been dead...a while."

I could hear the disgust in our friend's voice, picturing the shudder which was probably coursing through his big frame. I glanced at Miguel with wide eyes. "We should meet you guys. Do you want us to come there?"

"Not here, Raven. We're in a dilapidated, vacant building downtown. It's not pretty and not safe," Cassidy said to my utter relief. "We've finished up at the scene and the

body is headed to the county medical examiner's office. The coroner was on the scene, and she says this guy's been dead at least a month."

I covered my face with one hand. "Oh, shit."

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“We’ll meet you somewhere else then,” Miguel said, taking the phone out of my hand. “Would that be okay?”

“Well, that’s why I was calling,” Cassidy said. “I’m hoping you two can help with our homicide investigation. Like I said, the scene is pretty gruesome. You guys really don’t want to see this body. How about we meet you for breakfast somewhere?”

I blew out a relieved breath as I glanced at the clock then back at Miguel. The very last thing I wanted to wake up to was a request to go look at a moldering body that’d been dead for weeks. “Okay, give us an hour or so. Where would you like to meet, Cassidy?”

“How about we meet at Mel’s Drive-in?”

I glanced at Miguel who nodded. “That’d be fine, Cass,” he said. “Is the one in Santa Monica okay? The one here in Hollywood isn’t as good.”

Cassidy chuckled. “That’s fine with us. Closer to our office where we’ll be heading after breakfast anyway. How about we say six-thirty?”

“That works. See you then, Cass.” I hung up and set the phone back on the bedside table, glancing at Miguel. “If Dave Reynolds is dead, I suppose it explains why he didn’t return any of my messages.”

Miguel nodded, thinning his lips. “I’d say that’s accurate.”

I inclined my head absently before I caught the scent of my own sweat. I lifted my

arm to sniff my pit. “Shit, I need a shower.”

He smiled before reaching for me and we fell back onto the bed in each other’s arms. “I love the way you smell,” he said against my lips.

My lips twitched. “Of course, you do. You fucked me last night and I smell like your come.”

He kissed me softly, holding me against his big body. I groaned as I felt his erection pressing urgently into my thigh. Kissing him back, I wanted nothing more than to give in to my body’s urges now that I had him right where I wanted him. I reluctantly pulled back from the kiss and looked into his eyes, worry suddenly rushing back as I thought of the conversation with Cassidy.

“We need to get into the shower if we’re going to meet them on time.”

He groaned, dropping his forehead and resting it against mine. “Damn...it!”

I slapped his ass before letting him go and rolling away. “Come on...up with you.” I slid to the floor, standing naked beside the bed as I held out my hand. “Come on.”

He pulled the comforter down, showing me his rampant erection as he slowly pumped it up and down. He grinned. “I am up...clearly.”

My mouth began to water but I dutifully tore my gaze away, dropping my hand, and turning to go.

“Wait. Where are you going? You can’t leave me like this,” he whined.

I grinned to myself, walking to the bathroom as I called over my shoulder, “We’re gonna be late!” I heard his grunt and words of protest as I turned on the water,

sobering as my thoughts turned to the dead investigator. His murder had to tie in to our case; I just didn't know how. But I also knew that whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

Chapter One

MIGUEL

We climbed into Raven's truck a half hour later. Thankfully, Dolly had shown up on time and we'd just had time to brew coffee and pour it into travel mugs before leaving her with Raven's nana. If nothing else, I had to admit I was becoming increasingly addicted to Raven's fancy Starbucks coffee, having spent over two decades drinking the swill Marines call coffee and then the cheap stuff, which was the only thing I'd been able to afford over the last decade. As he slid into the driver's seat beside me, I settled in and lifted the mug to take a huge sip. He started the engine and I nearly spat the "coffee" onto the dashboard, holding the cup away from my face, staring at it like it'd sprung a cobra's head, baring venomous fangs.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, swallowing the vile stuff with a grimace rather than soil Raven's truck. He glanced over at me, and I was relieved to see the devilish smile on his full lips since he'd obviously been worried after the phone call with Cassidy.

"It's coffee."

My jaw dropped open as I spluttered, trying my best to forget the taste on my tongue. "It is not! It tastes like dirt."

"It's not the usual," he said, sounding way too flippant.

I stared at his profile and the amused smile he was wearing. "I should say not. What the fuck is it?"

“Mushroom coffee.”

My eyes flew wide with horror. “Oh, God, no! How could you just replace your Starbucks with this?” I held the cup out, staring at the offending object before bringing it close and sniffing it through the tiny hole in the plastic lid. My nose wrinkled as I looked over at him. The grin on his face as he stared out the windshield while he drove was downright evil. I narrowed my eyes at his profile as a thought occurred to me. “Wait a minute. We were at Sprouts yesterday and I asked you to make sure to grab coffee while I went to the meat section. Is this what you bought?”

He turned to look at me with an inscrutable glance. “Yes, I went back and swapped it after I saw what you picked up in the meat department.”

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I frowned, thinking back before it occurred to me. “Hot dogs?”

“Hot dogs!” he said with waytoomuch emphasis. “And they weren’t even chicken,” he said, sounding way too disgusted.

I blanked my expression, remembering the conversation we’d had about hot dogs a few weeks ago. He’d been going on and on about having the guys over for a barbeque once this case was over, which had led to a discussion about the menu. When I’d suggested barbequing hamburgers and hot dogs, he’d practically thrown a fit before listing all the ingredients found in hot dogs...in great detail.

“Wait...in my defense, I wasn’t thinking about the ingredients in them, just that I sometimes liked them in place of bacon in my omelets.”

“At which point I explained to you that they’re primarily made of pig anuses and nipples.”

“They are not.”

“They are too!” His voice rose. “And then two nights ago, when we were watchingThe Incredible Dr. Pol,you almost threw up when you saw what an actual pig’s nipple looked like!”

I shuddered, remembering the horrifying show. “It was...long.”

Raven snorted. “Can wepleaseget off that subject? Just thinking about the way poor Dr. Pol’s whole arm disappeared up the sow’s ass makes me feel like I’ve just spent

an evening watching dangerous porn.”

I laughed. “You’re the one who brought it up!”

He ignored me. “But seriously,” he went on. “When we meet Cassidy and Mike, I’m going to have no appetite at all.”

I set my travel mug in the cup holder and pointed at it. “Well, that mushroom shit can just fuck right off.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You really don’t like it?”

“It tastes like Old MacDonald’s barnyard...after a rain.”

He snorted again. “It’s not that bad, and it’s incredibly good for you.”

“If you like dirt,” I shot back. “There’s a word for that.”

“What?”

“Pica. It’s where kids eat dirt just to get the minerals,” I said. “I could never understand why their mothers didn’t just give them a pill.”

“My mother used to give me Flintstones vitamins,” he said.

I turned to find him looking at me with a gleam in his eye and a smile on his lips. “As interesting as that is, it’s probably a good thing. It would have come as a great surprise to find you out in the yard, grazing on the soil.”

He barked a laugh. “The coffee’s not that bad.”

“It’s not that good! In fact, it’s horrible.” I shuddered. “Don’t drink that stuff and expect me to kiss you ever again.”

He dragged his gaze away from the road again as we stopped at a red light. “You wound me, Miguel.”

“If you weren’t driving, I would,” I muttered under my breath.

He cupped his ear, eyes dancing. “What’s that you say?”

“You heard what I said.”

“I did,” he said, giving me a sharp nod as he smiled. “You know...I could tongue kiss you right now, you smooth talker.”

“Right after I find something to wash the taste of this out of my mouth.”

“Fine. If you want to withhold your affection, I suppose I’ll have to accept it.”

I ignored him. “I’m tossing that shit in the trash when we get home. God forbid Dolly drinks any. We’d never hear the end of it.”

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He thought, frowning a little. “I don’t think Dolly drinks coffee. But if she did, drinking mushroom coffee would help her lose a few pounds. It works for weight loss.”

“You’re probably right,” I said thoughtfully. “Throwing up always makes me lose weight.”

Raven sniffed. “Fine. I’ll keep the mushroom stuff for myself and Judy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, God! Don’t tell me you’ve replaced the office coffee with that crap too?”

“Babe, you’re so dramatic!”

I watched his profile, shaking my head. “And apparently, about to be so thin.”

We arrived at Mel’s Drive-in in Santa Monica about an hour later than we’d set off from the house after fighting traffic all the way. Although I loved living in Southern California, the weekday commute seemed to be getting worse every day. At least the noise of the busy traffic and the honking of horns as inconsiderate drivers constantly swerved into our lane, was mostly blocked out by the windows in Raven’s big Dodge Ram. It was a good thing Raven held my hand and sang slightly off-key to Stevie Wonder as he drove. It was a merry sound and never failed to relax me.

I couldn’t keep my mind on his Spotify playlist as I kept running over what Cassidy had shared on the phone. Though I felt sorry for the investigator, whom I’d never met, it was more worrying that his untimely death had occurred right around the time

when we'd caught up to Cassanova, Bishop, and Mendez. Dave Reynolds, had been the victim of a homicide, but what really bothered me was the timing of the whole thing.

Raven pulled into the busy parking lot and found a slot at the back, beeping his key fob as I walked around to his side of the truck to take his hand. He smiled at me, falling into step as we walked to the front of the restaurant, seemingly unconcerned at the public display of affection. Before meeting Raven, I never would have held hands with a man in public. Whether it had something to do with my Marine Corps training, where I didn't dare hold hands with anyone, much less John, or whether it was just that I didn't like having judgy eyes on me, I couldn't really tell. But whatever it was, it didn't bother me with Raven. He was just too damned important to me to care about what other people thought.

We spotted Cassidy and Mike waving at us from a booth, and nodded at the hostess as we pointed to our friends, making our way to their table. Both men stood and held out their hands. We shook and I was surprised to see the look of exhaustion on Cassidy's face.

"How are you?" I asked as we slid into the booth and ordered coffee from the waitress.

"Me?" Cass asked. "Fine." He scrubbed both hands over his face before looking back with tired green eyes. "Just tired. The new chief has had us on nights for the last two weeks and it's been a bitch getting adjusted to it." He glanced at his partner who was much older than Cassidy and smiled before elbowing him. "The old guy likes it."

I chuckled. "You like working nights? Why?" Raven asked, dragging his gaze to the waitress and smiling at her as she set our coffee down.

"Action," Mike replied with a smile on his lips.

Before I could ask why, I realized I'd been ignoring the waitress who was hovering close. I looked up at her and smiled.

"Are we all ready to order?" she asked brightly.

"In a minute?" I asked the others. At their nods, she walked away. I opened my menu, browsing the mouthwatering selections. Breakfast had always been one of my favorite meals and I looked longingly at the Nutella French toast before glancing at Raven.

"Don't even think about it," he said with a small growl.

I snorted. "What?"

"I know you're looking at the Nutella French toast."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because you're dribbling saliva down your chin. Now, stow it, Miguel, and pick something healthy."

Cassidy choked on his coffee and we both looked across the table at him. He cleared his throat, grinning. "Jesus, it's like listening to Jarrett and Thayne."

I laughed. He was right. I turned to Raven who was holding up his menu and pointing at something on it. Leaning in, I squinted my eyes at him. "Steel cut oatmeal?" I asked, knowing I sounded horrified. I shook my head. "Uh uh. I don't even know what that is."

"It's delicious," Raven reassured me. "But if you want, you can have the organic granola and low-fat Greek yogurt."

I felt myself gag. “Again?” I whined.

“It’s full of fiber.”

“Yeah? Well, my grandma called it roughage for a good reason.”

“Since when is that a bad thing?” Raven asked, a smile on his lips.

“Oh, yeah, well tell that to my toilet bowl. I swear there’s so much fiber in there, I could knit a sweater.”

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Mike and Cassidy both burst out laughing and I turned to them with a big grin on my face. “You see what I have to put up with?”

“Unfortunately, all the talk about your toilet bowl has me rethinking biscuits and gravy with a side of large Polish sausage,” Cassidy replied, grimacing when I chuckled.

Mike dramatically slapped his menu closed. “Thanks, partner. There goes my choice of the Elvis scramble.”

“Why?” Raven asked with a grin.

“Because it has sausage too.”

Cassidy looked affronted but I could see the smile playing around his lips as well. “Lightweight.”

“Bully!” Mike called back.

I cleared my throat as I spotted the waitress coming back. We gave our orders and waited for her to leave before Mike pulled out a small, spiral notebook and pen, flipping a couple of pages before looking up. I took a big gulp of coffee and leaned forward.

“I’m guessing the reason you two look so tired isn’t all about the lack of sleep,” I said.

Cassidy sighed, setting down his coffee cup and opening his jacket as he leaned back in the booth. “Unfortunately, no. It’s because I just found a business card with the names of my friends scribbled on the back, tucked into the pocket of a long-dead homicide victim.”

“We hadn’t even met Dave Reynolds,” Raven said.

“Tell me what you know about him anyway. You were slightly cryptic when we spoke on the phone earlier.”

“Well, like I told you, I didn’t even remember the man’s name until Raven reminded me,” I said. “Neither of us ever talked to him because of the mess with those CIA fuckers.”

Cassidy frowned. “Okay.”

“Are you sure he was murdered?” Raven asked. “You said the body was pretty messed up.”

“We can definitely confirm he was murdered,” Mike said with a frown on his face. “It looks like someone put a gun in his mouth and shot him, but we can rule out suicide.”

“Don’t people shoot themselves in the mouth all the time?” Raven asked. “I see it in movies.”

Cassidy snorted, shaking his head. “Oh, yeah. I forgot you’re a detective because you watch the Lifetime movie channel.”

I shook my head.

“Did I forget to say we didn’t find a weapon at the scene?” Cass went on. “And since he had an exit wound in the back of his head the size of Texas, he couldn’t have ditched the gun before expiring. You need more brains on the inside of your head than on the outside in order to accomplish that.”

I snorted. “Sarcastic much?”

Cassidy rubbed his face again. “Sorry.” He lifted his coffee cup and saluted us.

“Gotcha. So, someone shot him in the mouth,” Raven said, looking a little pale.

“Either that or they made him do it and then took the gun with them,” Mike said. “We’ll have to see if the coroner can get any gun residue off his hands. Like we said, the body is pretty decomposed.”

“Okay, I see what you mean,” Raven said. “So, how can we help you?”

“Well, I want you to tell me everything you know about this law firm, Aston, Summerfield, and Billings as well as Greg Aston who was representing your client.” Mike referred to his notes. “You said you suspected he might be involved in the theft of your client’s ruby.”

“That’s right. Tawny Flores is the client,” I said. “We were contacted by Gregory Aston for an appointment to meet her before she hired us. He accompanied her to that first meeting at the Sagebrush Cantina in Calabasas.”

Cassidy nodded as Mike took notes.

“Let me ask you a question,” Cass began before the waitress arrived and started setting down plates of food.

I glanced down at my veggie omelet and then over at Raven's bowl of Greek yogurt before shooting him a small smile. After an eyeroll, he looked back at our two detective friends.

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“Go on, Cassidy. If we can help, we want to do that.”

Cassidy nodded, looking back at Raven as he chewed a bite of scrambled eggs. He swallowed and then continued. “Mike and I know a little bit about your situation from Sarah Connor and what happened between you and those rogue CIA operatives, Cassanova, Bishop, and Mendez before they were taken into custody that night. But we’ll need a comprehensive background on the case and how you first came into contact with him.”

“And how all this ties into our murder victim, Dave Reynolds,” Mike added.

“It’s kind of a long story, Mike,” I said.

Both detectives sent me a knowing look.

I sighed, picking up my fork. “Okay, here goes.”

We told them everything we knew as we ate. When we’d gone over everything we could and our plates were clean, Cassidy sat back.

“Wow, man, that’s quite a story,” Mike said. “So, let me ask you some questions about it.”

“Whatever you need, Mike,” Raven said.

“Okay. So, from what I understand, you and Miguel got a call from Greg Aston, Tawny Flores’ attorney, who told you that she’d been left a very valuable ruby which

had gone missing.”

“And that he said the recovery might be dangerous which is why he wanted us to carry guns,” Raven clarified.

“Right,” Mike said, referring to his notes. He looked up. “And that’s when you two saw John Sutter at the restaurant.”

“I spotted him,” I said.

“Right.”

“He ran. We chased him, but he jumped into a car and sped away,” I said.

“Okay, so you then went to your client’s house to see the safe,” Cassidy said.

“Yes, then afterward we went to talk to the guy in charge of their security where we first encountered the man we now know as John Mendez in the stairwell,” I said. “He told us that he wanted us to find the ruby and give it to him. He threatened us with a gun.”

“And gave us the burner phone with explosives in it,” Raven added.

“Got it,” Cassidy said. “And later you made contact with Rosina Cassanova at the Getty, who threatened you again.”

“Yes, and then we confirmed that Sutter had been kidnapped in Afghanistan,” I said. “We’d gone years thinking he’d been lost out there in the desert during a sandstorm but when Judy hacked into Langley, she pulled up a message sent by someone in the rogue CIA cell.”

Cassidy nodded. “Which is when you went to Mark Evans and gave him the phone that John Mendez had given you.”

“We went to Mac first. He was at the FBI with Jarrett and Thayne, and Jarrett suggested we talk to his dad, so we did,” I said. “And afterward, I went to Vonne. He showed me the letter from Daniel, the kid John Sutter had been protecting...along with his mother.”

“Which is when you two started putting the pieces together about what had happened to him,” Mike said.

I nodded. “After John found me at Vonne’s house, everything started falling into place.”

“So, you convinced him to go to the ATF with you, and that’s when you all decided to actually bring us into the picture,” Cassidy said with a frown.

Guilt flooded my insides. “I’m really sorry we didn’t bring you guys into this at the very beginning. As soon as John Mendez pulled a gun on us in the stairwell, we should have called.”

“Yeah, you should have, but that’s water under the bridge,” Cassidy said. “We understand how fast everything happened after that.” He sat back in the padded booth and picked up his coffee cup, taking a sip and wincing at the cold brew. He set it down and glanced over at Mike. “Anything else?”

Mike shut his notepad. “So, you never talked to Dave Reynolds?”

“No,” Raven said. “We meant to call him about the investigation, but it was never the right time. I did leave a message, though.”

Mike nodded. “Honestly, do you think the lawyer is involved in this somehow? Could he have stolen the ruby, or could your client be involved?”

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I shook my head. “I suspected her for a long time, but that’s something you’ll have to find out. I mean, at least talk to the cops who took the original police report from when she reported it missing. I’m sure there was one.”

The two detectives exchanged a glance before turning back to us. “Yeah, that’s where we’ll start. Her insurance company would have needed that to consider paying the claim,” Cassidy said. “We’re also going to talk to Aston now that we have some background on him and his possible involvement in this case. Is there anything else you can think of?”

“We think that the theft of the Mulberry diamond is tied into the missing ruby,” Raven said.

Cassidy frowned, thinking hard as if trying to figure out what Raven was talking about. “The Mulberry diamond? Wait. Are you talking about the case where you and Miguel first met?”

“That’s the one,” Raven said.

Cassidy looked down at his cold coffee before signaling the waitress. She started walking over, and he said, “It looks like we’re gonna need more coffee.”

“Amen,” Mike said.

Chapter Two

RAVEN

Miguel and I spent another hour at the diner recounting how we thought the Flores ruby and Mulberry diamond were connected. We told them what Sutter had shared about the smuggling operation the rogue CIA cell was involved in. And how they'd stolen a cache of jewels. They'd meant to be used to pay off warlords who wouldn't take the paper currency the U.S. government was offering in exchange for intelligence about terrorists who were operating in Afghanistan. A Pakistani broker had stolen the jewels from the cell and shipped them to the States, later claiming they'd been stolen, but he'd been murdered by Mendez in a fit of anger. It only made sense that jewels were being sold in black market auctions arranged by Rosina Cassanova's wealthy contacts.

Finally, we'd told them about the mysterious hand-delivered letters Mr. Flores had been receiving at his office, and how we suspected they were meant to scare him enough to give up the pigeon's blood ruby. They'd found that aspect of the case very interesting, not only because Mr. Flores had received several such letters, but also because Aston claimed his investigator had fingerprinted the envelopes. However, the writer must've been using gloves because there weren't any fingerprints.

They'd finished off their coffee, promising to get back to us with any developments in the case, and left with a ton of notes in Mike's pad. They'd made us promise to be careful as long as we were insistent upon continuing this recovery.

We really had no choice but to continue. We still had bills stacking up, and Aston and his client still wanted us on the case, running down the ruby. As I drove to the office, I couldn't get the thought of Dave Reynolds out of my head. I never spared much thought about my own death, but I was sure that I'd never want to be murdered in a dilapidated, vacant building so nasty that my body remained undiscovered, unburied, and decomposing on the cold, hard ground. That was just too horrifying.

In Navajo culture, the old ones believed that achindi—evil spirit—could follow a dead person into the afterlife unless several customs were followed. Some of these

existed to this very day, like washing, wrapping, and burying the body with important objects which had belonged to the person. In ancient times, warriors were buried with their horse because they would have need of it in the afterlife. I liked the idea of the washing and wrapping which was also traditional in current Muslim culture. Men prepared the bodies of other men while women did the same with women before burial.

“What do you think about retracing Dave Reynolds’ footsteps? We could learn whatever he’d found out that got him murdered. That might give us a huge lead in finding this ruby.”

I felt Miguel’s gaze burning into me. “Are you crazy?”

I turned to look at him. “No. Why?”

“Well, first...hello, he was probably murdered for what he found out, but not only that, Cassidy and Mike sure as hell wouldn’t like us trampling on their homicide.”

I hadn’t thought about Cassidy and Mike, although the idea that trying to figure out what Dave Reynolds was working on could prove dangerous had. I nodded. “You’re right.” I sighed, trying to think of where to start. “Well, since Cassidy and Mike are going to be visiting our client and her attorney to ask questions about the investigator, why don’t we do a little bit of background on Mancuso?” I pulled into our office parking lot.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Miguel said, looking over at me as I parked in our space. “We probably should have told them about him.”

“I didn’t think about the bodyguard until after we’d left. Let’s see what we can learn about him before calling them. They have a lot of leads to follow to start off with.”

He nodded. "It's not a bad idea, Raven. We can pass on whatever we find out about him. But you're right, it sounds like they're going to be busy with their homicide for the foreseeable future."

I took his hand, kissing it before smiling. He grinned back as I dropped his hand. We got out of the truck and walked upstairs to the office. Judy was sitting at her desk, and she smiled as we walked in. She tore a few pink papers off her message pad and waved them at us.

"Good morning! I have good news," she said, handing three phone messages to Miguel. "I'm pretty sure one of those is a new client."

Miguel read the messages and then smiled, turning to me. "Good news."

"We could sure use a new client. I was getting concerned."

"Feeling unloved?" Judy asked, coming around the desk. She patted me on the bicep. "Don't worry. Things will pick up and the news of your brilliance will spread, especially if you're successful at recovering the ruby."

Miguel nodded, obviously as touched as I was that she had faith in our business. "I agree. Do we have coffee?"

"I made a single cup for myself. I didn't know when you'd be in since you were stopping for breakfast," she said, walking toward the small kitchen at the back of the office. "Let me make a pot of coffee."

"Thank you and then would you do me a favor and check someone out for me?" We followed her down the hallway into the small room.

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“Sure. Who am I looking for?”

“A guy by the name of Salvatore Mancuso,” I said. “He was at our first meeting with Gregory Aston and Tawny Flores. He was carrying a concealed weapon, so you might start with gun licenses in California.”

“Also, I’d check military records,” Miguel added. “I’m pretty sure the guy has some sort of training. Call it a hunch but there was something about the way he carried himself that tells me he was former military.”

“Agreed. And look into his relationship to Tawny Flores,” I said. “She introduced him as her friend but we both got the impression they were somehow involved.”

“Involved?”

“In a relationship.”

Her mouth made a little O. “Salvatore Mancuso.”

“Right. Salvatore Mancuso, spelled just like it sounds.”

“Okay. Will do, boss,” she said, pressing the button on the coffee maker to start the drip. “That gives me somewhere to start.”

“Thanks, Judy,” I said, walking into our office and shucking my coat as Miguel followed. I took his jacket and hung it on the rack along with my own before sinking into my comfortable chair. I glanced over at him as he sat behind his desk. “Who’re

the other messages from?”

He flipped through the pink papers. “One is from a guy I’ve never heard of, one is from some kind of insurance agent, and the other one is from Vonne.” He thought for a second. “Why didn’t he just call me back on my cell?” He stood up and dug his phone out of his pocket. “Shit. I had this thing turned off. When did I do that?”

I smiled to myself. “You know when.”

He glanced over before something dawned on him. “Oh shit. I turned it off last night because I kept getting spam calls.” He picked up the message. “I bet this insurance agent is a spam call too.”

“What’s the name of the company?” I asked.

“Brown, Butterfield, and Spaulding.”

I frowned. “That’s a really big insurance company. What do you want to bet it has something to do with a recovery?”

He stood and walked over, holding the pink message out to me. “You call that one. I’ll call the other guy back.”

“Who is it?”

He read the message. “Brian Leopard.” He smirked at me. “What kind of name is that?”

I shrugged, smiling. “I have no idea but why don’t you call Vonne first? It might be important.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” He went and sat back down, powering on his phone and dialing Vonne while I stared at the paper in my hand. One of Brown, Butterfield, and Spaulding’s recovery agents had paid me a visit over the course of my career. He’d thought that by probing a recovery agent working for GMS by plying me with flattery over noon cocktails, I might accidentally tell him something about the whereabouts of the Van Gogh...any little hidey hole. Long before BBS became the insurer, GMS had held the policy for a time.

When premiums went up, the client had taken their business across the street to BBS who had the nasty practice of cutting corners wherever they could. In my case, their recovery agent was hoping that by getting me drunk, I’d point the fingers back at his client, probably so they could raise premiums once they did find it. He was mistaken. There was nothing in my life more important than my integrity, including—of course—the love of my life, the man sitting next to me.

BBS was one of the bigger companies, like the one I was working for when I met Miguel...GMS, the one who’d insured the Mulberry diamond. Now, though, I was intrigued by the little pink message I was holding and decided to call them right away. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be running into the same tool who’d been shocked when I’d successfully recovered the Van Gogh and beaten him at his own game. Though the name Tomlinson didn’t ring a bell, he could still know of me.

The thought that Tomlinson might also be working on the recovery of the ruby was entirely possible since Mrs. Flores would have had time to make her claim by now. GMS insured it but even so, our recovery contract with Aston and Mrs. Flores stated that Trackers was the recovery agency of record. GMS would have had my replacement searching for the stone, but that didn’t mean anyone else, like a recovery agent from BBS, hadn’t caught wind of the ruby. Judy had been doing a daily search for new bounties to help us build our business and bring some cash in, but as far as I knew the recovery of the ruby wasn’t on the open market. If that had been the case, Tawny Flores would have been in breach of contract, so it was something we always

monitored.

When we'd signed the contract, I'd thought about starting our search for the stone by talking to someone over there, but I deliberately hadn't done that. I'd burned some bridges by quitting and taking Judy along with me when I'd left to open Trackers with Miguel. Calling my old boss to tell him that we'd been hired by Tawny Flores to recover an item GMS had insured, would have set his hair on fire. Miguel and I both decided it would have been a really bad idea. I picked up the phone and dialed BBS as Miguel stood up and walked out of the room, taking his phone with him.

I waited for the phone to connect and asked for Tomlinson. The receptionist put me on hold for a minute before coming back to me. "I'll put you through to Mr. Tomlinson's office now."

"Thank you very much," I replied. She put me on hold again and after another thirty seconds of soft jazz in my ear the phone was picked up by a man who cleared his throat.

"Is this Mr. Mathis from the Trackers Recovery Agency?"

"Yes, this is Raven Mathis. Mr. Tomlinson?"

"Yes. Thank you for calling back so quickly. I was hoping you could help me."

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“How can I help?”

“I’d like to be on the same page, so let me ask...were you employed by Grayson, Mallory, and Simms Insurance at one time?”

“Yes, I worked for GMS as a recovery agent.”

“I thought so. And now you and your partner have your own recovery agency,” he stated.

“That’s right.” I hesitated for a moment. “I’m sorry but was there something I can help you with?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you. It’s good to verify your employment with GMS...only because we lost out on a few nice recovery fees to a rival, and it seemed each time it was the same agent who got to them first. That was you, in case you were wondering.”

I smiled to myself, doing a silent fist bump. I’d been right. The guy who’d lost out on the Van Gogh recovery had been talking to colleagues. Miguel came back into the room holding two cups of coffee, smiling at me as he put one down on my desk. I smiled back and then realized I hadn’t said anything to Mr. Tomlinson.

“I’m sorry to hear that you lost out on that, Mr. Tomlinson, but how may I help you?”

“Ah, to the point. I like that. In any case, I was wondering if I could make an appointment to come in and see you. I understand BBS might have a recovery which parallels one you’re working on.”

I frowned. A new theft maybe? So, this wasn't about trying to get to the ruby at all. I was all ears. "My partner is here, Mr. Tomlinson. I'd like to put this call on speaker, if that's okay."

"Sure."

I hit the button on the handset and leaned close. "Mr. Tomlinson, Mr. Huerta, is here."

"Hi there, Mr. Tomlinson," Miguel said. "I understand you're looking for some help with a recovery you're working on at BBS. Is that correct?"

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Huerta. Yes, I could use your help if you'd be willing to meet with me. As I was telling your partner, we're in the same business as Mr. Mathis' previous employer, GMS insurance, and we recently received a claim for a high-value piece of diamond and emerald jewelry. In any case, since it was stolen—as Mr. Mathis will tell you—the insurance company always tries to recover the insured item before listing it with the public bounty hunters who are looking for a big payout, much like the work he used to do for GMS."

Miguel rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm familiar with that practice."

"Good. In any case, I was going through similar records of stolen high-value jewelry and came across your company which is currently under contract as recovery agents for a certain pigeon's blood ruby pendant from the Benedict Flores' estate."

I rolled my eyes at Miguel. "I see."

Tomlinson cleared his throat. "In any case, may I ask...have you been successful in the recovery yet?"

I mouthed the words “in any case” at Miguel before tilting my head back in a silent laugh. I cleared my own throat, returning to business. “Uh...not so far, Mr. Tomlinson,” I said. “The recovery is proving to be troublesome. You said your company has a similar item...also stolen?”

“Yes, in any case, as I said, it’s a diamond and emerald necklace. Our client bought the necklace at a private auction, and we insured it for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars after we had it appraised. Last week, it was apparently stolen from my client’s house during what the police are calling...a routine burglary.”

“I see,” I said, feeling my eyebrows crawling up my forehead as I stared at Miguel. He just pursed his lips before breaking eye contact and leaning toward the phone.

“Mr. Tomlinson, this is Miguel Huerta. We’d be happy to talk to you in person. Would you like to come here, or shall we come to your office?”

“Either way. As you can imagine, BBS is anxious to return the necklace to its rightful owner as soon as possible.”

“We’ll come to you then,” I said. “When are you free?”

“Is this afternoon convenient?”

I checked my watch. “That would be fine. Shall we say one o’clock?”

“That’s great. In any case, let me give you the address.” He quickly rattled off the address and I wrote it down.

“We’ll see you today at one,” Miguel said into the phone.

“See you then.” He hung up, and I sat back in my chair as Miguel put both hands on

my desk and hung his head.

“In any case, what are you thinking?” I said, smirking at him.

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He lifted his head as he straightened, grinning at me. “Knock it off.” He paused as his smile faded. “I’m thinking this is the break we might have been waiting for, Raven. If this necklace turns out to be set with stones from that cache of stolen gems those CIA bastards are looking for, then we might just get somewhere on this recovery after all.”

“But he said it was stolen last week.” He knew what I meant. Bishop, Mendez, and Cassanova had been taken into custody and the CIA had probably stashed their asses in some deep, dark hole somewhere. But at least one other accomplice, Alex Filmore, was still out there, last seen in Berlin, Germany under that name. God only knew if he’d acquired an alias somewhere. As a former CIA operative, he would have extensive contacts all over. They were trained to be resourceful. For all we knew, he was already back in the U.S. trying to get to the rest of the stones.

“Are you thinking Alex Filmore had something to do with the theft?”

“Him or another accomplice. I know Sutter was debriefed at Langley about everything, but the U.S. Marshals have him stashed somewhere out of the way, don’t they?” John Sutter had requested to be put into WITSEC with Daniel and his mother Niloufar.

“Yes. From what Jarrett and Thayne’s friend, Kane Delancey says.”

“I don’t remember Sutter mentioning any details about another accomplice besides Filmore. Did I miss something?”

“He didn’t say anything to us, but I’m sure he would have mentioned it in his debrief when he was at Langley. The biggest hurdle I see is that if Sutter is in WITSEC, we’re

gonna have a hell of a time talking to him.”

“Hang on. You mentioned Kane Delancey. That’s one of the guys who works at the ATF with Thayne and Jarrett, right?” I asked.

“Right, and apparently, he has connections with the Marshals office. He’s the one who reached out to some contacts at the WITSEC division to help in their relocation. I’m pretty sure he asked them for some special consideration or something.”

“And these friends of his would do that...why?” I asked.

He smirked. “I know all these letter agencies are confusing to you—”

“I’m not confused. Don’t patronize me,” I scoffed, interrupting him. “I just meant how is it that Delancey has connections with the Marshals and WITSEC. Did he transfer from the U.S. Marshals office to the ATF? I’m just trying to connect the dots here, Miguel.”

He nodded patiently. “Delancey has a special relationship with them and a lot of friends over there because he and his family were in the WITSEC program for almost twenty years before he went to work for the ATF.”

My jaw dropped open. “Are you kidding me?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No. He witnessed the murder of his father by a member of the Irish mob, so Delancey, his mother, and sister were put in the program when he was still a young teenager.”

I couldn’t believe that. “You learned about all of this from Jarrett and Thayne, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Jarrett and I were talking about it at their house two weeks ago.”

I suddenly felt left out. “Where was I when this conversation was happening?”

“You were in the house with Thayne.”

I thought about that night, picturing the fun we’d had with good friends, the food, the banter, and laughter. When it came back to me suddenly, I grinned. “Oh...when Thayne and I were playing with the ferrets.”

He chuckled. “Their names are Wilbur and Orville, apparently because they’re crazy and fly around the house.”

I laughed and then glanced at my watch, before turning back to my computer. “Okay...if we’re going to make that appointment with Tomlinson on time, I want to do some checking. I want to see what, if anything, BBS has put up online regarding the missing diamond and emerald necklace before we go. Though Tomlinson said they’re keeping the recovery in-house, I’d like to verify that they haven’t made it widely available to bounty hunters and other recovery agents. GMS used to keep all high-value recoveries close to the vest for at least a week to give their own in-house recovery agents first crack at them.”

“Okay, though, I doubt Tomlinson was lying. He must be pretty desperate if he’s calling us. I hope we can get something useful out of this meeting.” Miguel went to his desk and sat down.

“Let’s hope.” I glanced over. “Oh, hey, what did Vonne want?”

He looked up from his phone where he was scrolling. “He didn’t answer. I left a message on his machine at home. He doesn’t answer his cell while he’s at work, but I left him a message anyway.”

I nodded. “You’re gonna be in trouble for switching off your phone last night.”

He grimaced. “Yeah, I know, dammit.” He sighed. “Anyway, I’m sure he’ll call me back as soon as he gets a chance.” He stood again and walked over, holding out his hand. “Give me the message from that Lion guy.”

“Lion?” I frowned at him as he waved a hand over my desk. I picked up the small, pink message and smirked at him. “Leopard. The guy’s name is Brian Leopard.”

He chuckled. “Lion—Leopard, same difference.” He snatched it out of my hand. “I’ll return his call. If he tells me he wants me to find his cubs or something, I’m gonna be pissed.”

I turned back to my computer, chuckling again.

Chapter Three

MIGUEL

We rode the elevator up to the twentieth floor of a gleaming marble and glass building in downtown L.A. just before one o'clock. The suites of Brown, Butterfield, and Spaulding Insurance encompassed the entire top floor. When we walked through the glass double doors and strolled up to the smiling receptionist sitting behind a curving, rose-colored, marble desk, I gave our names. We were directed to take seats in the lobby.

“By the way, who is Brian Leopard?” Raven asked while we sat waiting for Tomlinson to come out of his office.

I glanced over. “I left a message. I thought I told you that.”

“I probably wasn’t listening,” Raven said, looking slightly awkward. “Sorry. I can’t get my brain wrapped around this new development.” He waved around the expensive lobby with the smooth marble walls, Persian rug covered floors, and pricey vases of fresh flowers on glass tables. He’d just opened his mouth to say something when a man suddenly appeared.

Tomlinson was exactly the kind of man I expected. He was short and slightly bald with a comb over and horn-rimmed glasses. He wore a business suit, black wingtips, and a wide smile as he walked over and reached out a hand to shake.

“Thank you for coming this afternoon. I know you’re busy but, in any case, my boss

wants this necklace found as soon as possible,” he said as he led us back to a private, windowed office.

Raven sent me a secret smile then returned to taking in the place again. I noticed that all the recovery agents had richly appointed, private offices. Raven was probably comfortable in this setting since GMS was just the same. I’d been in a lot of insurance company offices including GMS, picking up checks for bounties I’d earned when their in-house recovery agents had failed at their jobs. But I was never greeted with anything other than curt nods and sneers as I walked into their offices. I felt a small stab of guilt. Raven had a really good job and made terrific money before deciding to leave a cushy office to go into business with me.

“We’d like to help any way we can,” I heard Raven saying. In Tomlinson’s plush office, we were waved to chairs in front of his desk. He sank into his own comfortable chair, immediately sliding a folder across the desk to us.

“Our client, Mrs. Bryant James, is the owner of the necklace and like I told you on the phone, she’s very anxious to get it back. In any case, I hope you don’t mind me picking your brains about your progress in finding the Flores ruby pendant, because I think the two recoveries might be connected.”

We suspected they were connected, but for many reasons, we couldn’t go into detail about how we knew that. For one thing, Sutter’s disappearance in a sandstorm and reappearance as a kidnapping victim was classified. We could only talk in generalities. We’d decided we had to probe Tomlinson for as much information as possible, while trying not to anger him that we didn’t have a whole lot either. We knew about the threatening letters Benedict Flores had received, and now, the murder of his attorney’s investigator but it was a bit of a balancing act.

I opened the file, holding it so that Raven could see. The first page was the BBS appraisal. It showed an enlarged picture of a massive diamond necklace with five

nearly-perfect dark green, pear-shaped emeralds resembling teardrops. There were a multitude of baguette and marquise-shaped diamonds making up the neckline of the piece. The stones were set in either platinum or white gold, meaning if the emeralds were a part of the original cache of stones Filmore was trying to find, they'd been reset prior to the auction.

In the Middle East, the gold would have been almost coppery in color, either eighteen or twenty-two karat, not the standard fourteen karat found in most jewelry manufactured in the U.S. Fine jewelry makers rarely used white gold in that region. It was considered inferior because the gold content was usually 58.5 percent, versus 75 percent in eighteen karat gold. Platinum was almost unheard of in the Middle East. The total diamond weight was listed as ten carats, with a VVS1 clarity. The emeralds had the same clarity and were sixty-five carats in total.

I whistled. "That's quite a piece," I said as Raven flipped the page. The next page of the appraisal went into greater detail about each diamond, with pictures of other similar necklaces and their relative value. They ranged in price above and below the one Tomlinson's client owned, with the most expensive being a Harry Winston showpiece, retailing for 350,000. The next page in Tomlinson's folder listed other jewelry and unset stones of every variety, most of them very large diamonds. The corresponding owners and the companies they were insured by, were typed beside each one. I recognized a couple of the owners and wasn't surprised to see that a large number of the pieces were insured by either GMS or BBS, the majority in fact.

Charlotte Mulberry and Tawny Flores were listed beside their respective missing gems. I wanted to clap at Tomlinson's diligence. The man had been doing his homework. Clearly, the rest of the fine jewelry items had to be other high-value stolen items. I wondered how many of them might be connected to the cache of stolen jewels the rogue CIA cell claimed as their own. I scanned the list again, dragging my finger slowly down the page. When I got to one name I recognized, I stopped, swallowing hard as I glanced over at Raven with wide eyes. He had a surprised

expression on his face too. Brian Leopard.

“Something interesting?” Tomlinson asked.

I cleared my throat as I tapped the page, hoping Raven would catch on. He gifted me with a minute nod in silent agreement. I instantly relaxed. My man was so perceptive. I loved him so much. “Oh, uh... I see that you’ve listed Charlotte Mulberry’s diamond here as well. We’re familiar with that recovery.” Noway was I going to give away the fact that Brian Leopard was the name which really popped out at me or that his piece had also been insured by BBS.

“Oh?” Tomlinson turned in his desk chair and started tapping keys on his keyboard. He leaned forward reading the screen before glancing back at us with pen and paper in hand. “Indeed. Would you mind telling me something about it?”

I glanced at Raven. He cleared his throat and launched into the explanation about how we’d both been pursuing the recovery prior to opening our business and how he’d been working as a recovery agent for GMS, which had insured the diamond.

Tomlinson interrupted by raising his hand as he smiled. “So, you were rivals at the time?”

We both nodded and I smiled back, hoping it didn’t look as contrived as it was. Raven continued. “We’d both come to the same conclusion that the diamond had been stolen by Lyle Trench, a petty criminal, who’d been caught on traffic cameras and identified as the thief who’d accosted Charlotte Mulberry outside her bank. He snatched the bank bag she’d been carrying and had gotten away with her diamond.”

He looked up at me from his furious scribbling, gesturing me to continue. Most likely, this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to the pencil pusher.

“Miguel and I both learned that Trench was scheduled to meet with a record producer at the Capitol Records building and we literally bumped into each other.” I glanced over at my beloved and he smiled at me before we turned back to Tomlinson. I shrugged. “The police arrested him since they knew he’d stolen the item. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the diamond on him at the time of arrest, and the LAPD couldn’t locate it anywhere in his home or possessions.”

Tomlinson’s eyes widened and he scribbled more notes. He looked up after a minute. “So, the diamond was never recovered?”

“No, we check GMS’ available online recoveries all the time. The bounty is still active.”

“And Trench? He’s not talking?”

“Lyle Trench was murdered in prison, so he won’t be talking to anyone,” I said. “At least...anymore.” I shook my head. “He never gave up the location of the diamond before his death.”

“This is very good information. Thank you,” Tomlinson said, looking almost breathless. I was sure the man had begun to sweat. “Now, I’d really like to know what you can tell me about Mr. Benedict Flores’ ruby. I know you said you haven’t been able to recover it so far, but I’d really like to know how far you’ve gotten. You see, BBS is very interested in that stone’s recovery as well. It was also insured by GMS, as I’m sure you know.”

That’s because the two companies seem to be at war in the same small pool of insanely wealthy clients. “Yes, we do.”

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Finding out who'd insured the ruby had been the first thing Judy had checked on after our meeting with Tawny Flores and Greg Aston. We knew the insurer would have had a recovery agent working on it, and as soon as we learned who the insurer was, our first thought was for Raven to sit down and have a conversation with the agent. That was, until Raven learned who they'd given the job to. As it turned out, the recovery agent assigned by GMS, had been a bitter rival of Raven's while he worked for the company. Raven said there was no way he would be willing to talk to us, and even less willing once he found out that we'd been retained by their client.

"What can you tell me about your investigation into the ruby?" Tomlinson asked.

"Well, that's taken quite a morbid turn of events, Mr. Tomlinson," Raven said.

I wanted to kiss him. He was really putting on a show for this guy who thought it was just fine to pick our brains about the two cases we were working on. Though he wasn't to know it, the list of jewelry and names he'd shown us hadn't given us anything...with the exception of Brian Leopard's name. But there was no way we were going to tell him that. I didn't even have to ask Raven to be silent about it.

I realized Tomlinson had stopped scribbling and turned fully to face us. His eyes were gleaming, filled with what I could only describe as lust. "Morbid? Oh, please tell me."

The man was practically salivating. I deliberately turned my head to look back at his closed door, deciding that this poor guy deserved a little drama in his mundane day. When I turned around, he was watching me, convinced that I held the key to everything ever known in the universe. I leaned forward, lowering my voice, sotto

voce.

“The widow Flores’ attorney was made aware that his client, Benedict Flores, had been receiving threatening letters, demanding that he give them the ruby or that he would be harmed.” I nodded for emphasis as the man across the desk seemed to vibrate in his seat. He made a small O with his mouth and leaned forward. “Whaaat?”

I nodded violently. “Yes!” I glanced back at the closed door before turning back to him with wide eyes.

“Oh...don’t worry,” he began. “No one can hear you.”

I went on.

“The notes got increasingly violent in nature and eventually, they stopped. Then—”

I let my statement hang for a few seconds as he squirmed. I shrugged and sat back. “I don’t know...well, I didn’t until Mr. Aston’s in-house investigator turned up murdered this morning.” I did my very best to show him scary eyes and when I looked over at Raven, he was doing the same scary eyes. I was so proud of him. I did a mental fist bump.

“Murdered?” Tomlinson’s eyes went even wider than they had before. “How? Why? Where?”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. “His body was found in a dilapidated, vacant building—” Checking the closed door again, I lowered my voice, leaning forward. “Right here in downtown L.A.”

“Nooo!” Tomlinson was practically vibrating.

I glanced over at Raven who was nodding before turning back to Tomlinson. His gaze ping-ponged back and forth between us.

“And the nature of the murder? What can you tell me?”

“He was shot,” Raven said.

I was glad he hadn’t mentioned hearing about Dave Reynolds’ murder from Cassidy and Mike, not that I’d expected him to. I didn’t think our friends would appreciate anyone else knowing that little fact.

“That means the investigator must have found out something nefarious,” Tomlinson said, leaning back in his chair. “Oh, do you think the person who stole the ruby killed him?” His hand flew to his mouth. He was bright red above the collar and pulled his fogged glasses off to clean the moisture from the lenses. He was really freaking out, so I figured I’d played around with him long enough. I didn’t want to give the little guy a heart attack. I glanced at Raven, whose nod was almost imperceptible.

“There’s no way to know who killed the investigator or how far along he was in his investigation,” Raven said.

Tomlinson put his glasses back on his face, wiping perspiration off his forehead as he nodded. “Of course. Of course. Well, in any case, you’ve been a lot of help today, gentlemen.”

“And you’ve been of no help at all,” I wanted to say...but that really wasn’t true. He’d inadvertently given us more help than he knew by showing us Brian Leopard’s name beside the picture of a diamond pin set in coppery yellow gold. I had no idea what the diamond’s carat weight was, but it was sizeable.

“Is there anything you want to share about your search for the diamond and emerald

necklace?" I asked.

"Me...uh...well, I haven't gotten very far." He waved his hand at the thin folder I'd put back on his desk. He was blatantly lying. There wasn't even a copy of a police report in the file.

"What about a police report?" Raven asked, picking up my thoughts.

"Oh, that." Tomlinson glanced around his immaculate office. "Now, where did I put that?" he muttered.

I followed his line of sight as it bounced from the couch against the wall, to the coffee table in front of it, to the thick rug beneath it, and then he turned back to us. He smiled, and it wasn't a nice one. Gone was any pretense that this was going to be a fact-finding mission for both of us...fucker. "Unfortunately, I think you're going to have to get a copy of that for yourself. After all, you have friends at the LAPD."

"Friends at the LAPD?" Raven asked, playing dumb.

"Well certainly," Tomlinson replied. "If you learned how GMS's investigator died, surely you have friends who gave you that information." He went from being weird to smug just like that.

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I frowned and opened my mouth to say something nasty when Raven abruptly stood up. “I think we’re finished here.”

I closed my mouth and followed suit, turning my back on the guy, and following Raven to the closed door of Tomlinson’s office.

“Yes!” Tomlinson said loudly. “In any case, you’ve been a great help.”

As I started to turn and go back to punch the guy, Raven took my elbow. I stopped and glared at him. “Leave it,” he said, frowning.

I nodded and walked out the door with my beloved at my side. We didn’t stop walking until we were standing at the elevator. I turned to Raven. “Can you believe the nerve of that fucker?”

“I should have expected it. BBS is a bitter rival of GMS and they’re not known to play fair,” Raven said. “I should have known he wasn’t going to be of any help.”

“Except for the fact that by showing us that list, he answered the burning question about who Brian Leopard is,” I said as the elevator doors slid open. We stepped into the empty car, and I pushed the button for the subterranean parking garage. I took up a lean on the back railing and gazed at Raven’s reflection in the mirrored doors as they closed. He looked thoughtful as he stared at me.

“Well, it’s probably a good thing we found out about that before you were able to reach him. I wonder what he wants.”

I smirked. “Well, he either wants to hire us to find his missing diamond pin, or kill us because he’s somehow tied into this whole mess.”

His face conveyed his worry in the mirrored doors.

“What the fuck, Miguel? That’s all we need now.”

I reached out and put both hands on his shoulders, only to have to drop them as the elevator stopped halfway down to the garage. We both turned as two men in business suits stepped inside as soon as it stopped on the tenth floor. We remained quiet as it stopped three more times, picking up other people. Most of them got out in the lobby before we were finally able to step out in the garage with a few others.

When we got into the truck, Raven turned to me. “As I was about to say, I’m scared all over again.”

I reached across the console and took his hand, staring into his beautiful eyes. “Don’t worry. Yes, this case is turning out to be a fucking scary one, but we’ll figure this all out, Raven. We just have to remain vigilant and watch our backs, that’s all.”

“Oh, is that all?”

I shook my head and let go of his hand, turning it palm up. “Give me your keys.” He handed them over without question and I used them to open the glovebox. I pulled out both our guns and passed his to him along with the holster. “We’re gonna wear these at all times.”

He nodded slowly as I handed him back the keys. He opened his belt and secured the holster at his waist. I did the same, hating the weight of the thing. Though I’d carried a gun for half of my adult life between the military and my bounty hunting career, I’d gotten used to only wearing it regularly since this fucking recovery began. Knowing

that I'd do everything in the world to protect the man at my side, however, made me push down my distaste.

Raven glanced back at me. "I guess we should get back to the office and find out why Brian Leopard is calling."

I nodded. "Yeah, Sunshine, I guess we should."

Chapter Four

RAVEN

By the time we walked into the office forty-five minutes later, I was exhausted. We'd stopped at a specialty market which always had a great salad bar and made ourselves something light and healthy to eat. Dolly had promised to have a big pan of veggie lasagna for our dinner. I'd never asked her to cook for us, but she took it upon herself to make sure Nana got at least one hot meal every day. She always made extra for us. God love the woman, but she was bad for my waistline as well as my cholesterol. Miguel and I had begun running an extra mile every morning just to combat the carb overload she'd injected into our diet.

Judy smiled at us when we walked in. She held out a hand to indicate two very colorful men sitting there, and I was immediately surprised when the older one jumped up from his chair. "This is Mr. Leopard. He's the gentleman you left a message for earlier, Miguel."

The man was flamboyant as all hell. He was on the short side, with a lion's mane of curls which appeared to have been teased within an inch of their life. He reminded me of James Brown, and I was reminded of Miguel's earlier comment of wanting to return Mr. Lion's phone call. I had to bite my lip to keep from poking him in the ribs because he'd actually been spot on.

Dressed in skin-tight, apple green, satin pants which outlined an average-sized penis, and a boldly patterned silk shirt in the same tones open all the way to his navel, he was a horror to look at. He had thick tufts of wiry, brown hair poking through the gap of his shirt, and his neck was draped with more gold chains than I could count. So many, in fact, that I was surprised he could hold his head up. Taking pride of place between both nipples was a giant jewel encrusted pendant in the shape of a letter B. The jewels appeared to be diamonds.

“Oh, God!” he exclaimed, rushing over to us. “Mr. Huerta?”

Miguel nodded. “That’s me...Mr. Leopard?”

“Yes!” He reached for Miguel’s hand with both of his, and Miguel shook.

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” he said. “This is my partner, Raven Mathis.”

I smiled at him and also got a double handshake. “Nice to meet you.” I glanced at the second man who rose daintily from his chair. He was what I would have called a club kid. Whereas Brian Leopard was easily in his mid-fifties, the younger man was barely legal. He was dressed a little less flamboyantly, but his clothing still screamed “out there.” His white, denim short-shorts could politely be described as Daisy Dukes or cutoffs. He wore a tight, pink tee which didn’t quite reach his waistband, revealing a sparkling diamond bellybutton ring.

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The twink wore a variety of rings on his hands, one on every finger, in fact. Most were jewel encrusted. His eyebrows were plucked to within an inch of their life, and even at his young age, it appeared he'd had some work done. He had overly plump lips, and I suspected he had cheek implants as well. Electrolysis ensured that he didn't have a beard, or for that matter, a single hair on his smooth face or belly. I had no doubt they were a couple.

"This is my boy, Trevor," Leopard said, turning to look at the youngster.

The boy held out a hand manicured with sparkly, pink polish, looking bored. "Trevor."

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand.

He offered it to Miguel next. "You're hot."

I wanted to laugh at the expression on Miguel's face.

"Thanks."

"Won't you please come back to our office?" I said, holding out a hand.

"Thank you!" Leopard boomed.

"Daddy," Trevor said, "you're being too loud." He sounded like he needed some sleep, had a hangover, or both.

“I’m so sorry, precious,” Leopard replied, draping an arm over the young man’s shoulder as they followed Miguel back to our office while I took up the rear. Leopard kept talking as we walked down the hall, saying something about them being out late at a club whose name was familiar to me. If there’d ever been any question that they were a gay couple, that removed all doubt.

“Sorry, I was going to ask if either of you would like some coffee or a soft drink?”

The boy scoffed but Leopard smiled sweetly. “I don’t suppose you have any Perrier? If not, I’ll take a bottled water.”

“Let me get that for you. Please...have a seat,” Miguel said, pointing to the chairs in front of our desks. He practically ran out of the room, leaving me alone with the couple. They sat in front of my desk and Leopard immediately took his boy’s hand. I sat down behind the desk and Leopard leaned forward, smiling kindly.

“First, let me ask for your forgiveness. Mr. Huerta was kind enough to call me back, but I couldn’t get out of my yoganidrasana pose fast enough. I decided the matter we need to discuss couldn’t wait for an appointment.”

I was about to ask what the hell the yogan thingy was, when Miguel walked back into the room, holding two bottles of water. He handed one to each of them before sitting down at his own desk. I noticed Leopard smile at him while Trevor stared at the label of the generic water in his hand. He sniffed in disgust and set it on my desk, before pulling his phone out of a miniscule fanny pack he wore and began scrolling. Apparently, the Walmart brand of water wasn’t his cup of tea.

“Mr. Leopard was just telling me he was sorry he missed your call,” I said to Miguel.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Miguel said. “We’ve been out all afternoon. I was about to call you back.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” Mr. Leopard rushed to apologize. “It’s just that you called while we were in yoga and well, anyway, I was in this incredibly hard pose and—”

“They don’t care about your stupid yoga, Daddy,” Trevor chided, rolling his eyes.

Mr. Leopard colored, looking embarrassed. I felt sorry for the guy. But then again, I’d never understood why so many older guys thought the only way to feel relevant was to shack up with young twinkles, showering them with money, and spoiling them rotten. I glanced over at Miguel, who had an unreadable expression on his face. I was pretty sure he was thinking the very same thing.

Mr. Leopard cleared his throat.

“I’m so sorry for just dropping in on you like this but as soon as I learned there was someone out there looking for poor Tawny’s ruby, I just had to call you.”

“Tawny Flores?” Miguel asked.

“Yes! Her husband, Benedict—oh, my poor, poor Benedict—was a dear friend of mine and when he passed away, well, you have to know, I was bereft...bereftI tell you!”

“Yes, it is sad,” Miguel said, somehow keeping a straight face.

Mr. Leopard nodded. “Terrible, just terrible. Who knew poor old Benedict had a bad heart? It just popped. I didn’t know a heart could just pop!”

Neither did I but what did I know. “So, was that why you called? To find out some information about our recovery of Tawny Flores’ ruby?”

“Oh, no! I must confess, I am intrigued by what you two gentlemen do.” He waved a

hand between us. “But I’m here because I also had a gorgeous diamond pin stolen from my house...before I could even have it reset in platinum. The diamonds are nearly flawless. But you see, those beautiful stones are set in gold which is very dark. And well, as soon as I heard that dear, sweet Tawny hired someone to get her ruby back, I knew I needed to call you the instant I had the chance.” He had his hand on his bare chest as he leaned toward me. “You can help find it, can’t you? Like you’re doing for poor, sweet Tawny?”

The guy talked so fast, it was hard to follow. He was definitely excitable. “Yes, I—”

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“Because it’s worth a lot of money...which I’m not short of, mind you...but still, to think that some fiend violated my house just like that, makes me sick to my stomach! Oh, I know my damned insurance company has someone working on the recovery, but I can truly say, the man is odious. I don’t think he could find his way out of a paper bag.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“The company is Brown, Butterfield, and Spaulding Insurance and the recovery agent is Tomlinson...Rick Tomlinson,” he said, waving at my desk. “Please feel free to write it down.”

I picked up a pen and wrote it down, though, I didn’t need to. When I glanced up again, Leopard was wrinkling his nose, looking a little sick to his stomach. “He’s a terrible man—revolting, I tell you—and I don’t think he’s doing anything to find my sweet little pin which is why I decided to come to you and ask for your help...since you’re already working on Tawny’s recovery.” He was nodding and practically bouncing in his chair. “Maybe her jewelry and my little pin were stolen by the same hooligans who broke into my house...oh, my dear little house.”

I somehow doubted the man had a sweetlittlehouse.

“Daddy...don’t get so upset,” Trevor whined, batting his eyes up at Leopard. “It’s terrible for your blood pressure.”

I hadn’t noticed until then that the boy was wearing false eyelashes.

Leopard finally went quiet as he reached for his boy's knee, patting it, while smiling adoringly at him. I was glad for the reprieve. "Thank you, love." He leaned forward and pursed his lips. Trevor got the message and put his phone in his lap as he pecked Leopard on the lips.

"How much longer are you gonna be, Daddy?"

"Almost done, precious." He looked between us before leaning forward again. "Do you think you can help me, Mr. Mathis?" He glanced at Miguel. "Mr. Huerta, I'd be ever so grateful if you could help me."

"Sure," Miguel said. "Our office manager, Judy, will have a contract drawn up to retain our services." He stood up, glancing over at me with glittering eyes before looking back at Leopard. "Raven will take down your details and that of the missing pin while I go and have her prepare that for you." He hightailed it out of the room before I could even protest...coward.

Both men turned to eye up Miguel's ass as he walked out of the room before turning back to us with stars in their eyes.

"Beautiful man," Leopard said. He waved his hand at me. "I should say that you're both gorgeous...absolutely stunning men."

"Thank you."

"Are you lovers? Tawny said you're a couple and as soon as she told me that, I knew I needed to retain your services immediately." He bounced in his chair again.

I smiled. "Yes, we are."

He clasped both hands, wringing them. "Oh, how lovely. You make a beautiful

twosome...and you work together too...lovely, just lovely.” He smiled. “I’ll refer all my friends.” He leaned forward again. “Tell me...do you recover other things? I mean, besides jewelry? I have a friend who—” Trevor let out an aggrieved moan. “Oh, yes, anyway, what do you need from me?”

He really was a very nice man. “I don’t suppose you have a picture of the missing pin, Mr. Leopard?” I asked.

“Oh, of course. Silly me.” He chuckled and then stood up, fishing his wallet out of his back pocket and passing me a picture, the same one I’d seen in Tomlinson’s file folder. He pointed at it. “As you can see, it’s in a terribly ugly setting.” He wrinkled his nose. “The gold is just so dark. I’m sure it’s not fourteen karats.” He laughed nervously, looking up at me. “I’m not even sure it’s gold to be honest.”

Miguel walked back into the room. I stood and passed him the picture as he took his seat. He looked at it before passing it back. “Nice pin.”

“Yes!” Leopard exclaimed, then glanced at Trevor who just rolled his eyes. “Sorry, precious. I just can’t wait until they find the pin. I told you I want to make it into a ring for you.”

I glanced at the kid’s hands again. Where’s he gonna put it?

“Would you please give us some details on the theft, Mr. Leopard?” I asked. “You said it was in your house?”

He sat forward. “Yes! Someone broke in and stole it!”

I scribbled notes while he talked. “Where did you keep it before it was stolen?”

He nodded. “In my jewelry box which is located in our bedroom...on my dresser. I

keep all my casual jewelry in there. I don't keep many fine jewelry items there, since as you can see, the really good stuff is with me most of the time." He lifted the mass of chains including the giant jewel encrusted B, holding them out to show me, just in case I'd missed them. "I had just made an appointment to have it reset at my favorite jeweler. In all honestly, I had nearly forgotten about the appointment which is why I hadn't even bothered to look for the pin. But when the break-in happened, I instantly went looking for it. It was gone! Hooligans!"

Trevor sighed again.

He glanced at him. "Almost done, precious." He turned back to us. "I'd taken my dear, sweet boy out for a little dancing that night." He glanced over at him and patted his knee again, smiling. "My boy loves to dance, and I just love watching him with his friends."

Miguel cleared his throat. "The break-in, sir. What can you tell us about that? Was anything else taken?"

"Yes...well, almost nothing. Like I said, I kept the pin in the box on my dresser. They seemed to want that and nothing else. Of course, if they had seen all this—" He held up the pendant again. "I know the fiends would have taken my jewelry as well. Thank God we weren't home at the time!"

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“Yes, sir,” Miguel said, patiently. “So, what else was taken?”

“Oh, I have a collection of rare books, and they took a couple of those, including one I bought the same night as the pin...oh, maybe you can find that too!”

“Of course,” I said. “Where did you buy the pin, Mr. Leopard?”

He bounced and pointed to the notepad I’d been writing on. “At a private auction. The book was a first edition Herman Melville’s Moby Dick.”

Trevor snickered. He was smiling at Leopard and shrugged. “Moby Dick. It’s funny, that’s all.”

Leopard smiled back, patting his knee indulgently. He turned back to me. “Youth is wasted on the young, don’t you agree?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it, giving up and simply smiling. I was pretty sure good old Trevor had never read a book in his life. I finally went with, “You were saying that you also lost the Melville in the burglary?”

“Yes, that and a first edition Grapes of Wrath, the one by John Steinbeck.” He nodded furiously.

I blinked, wondering if there was a different Grapes of Wrath, but I let it go, smiling as I remembered the Grapes of Wraith by Miles Stanford, the horror of literary fiction I’d reviewed as Nightcrawler. “Okay.” I went back to scribbling. “Did you keep the books in your bedroom also?”

“Yes!” He sat forward. “Is that significant?”

“Perhaps,” Miguel said. “Was anything else in the house touched?”

Leopard said, “No, and the LAPD looked all over. They searched every room.”

“So, it looks like the thieves went directly to the bedroom?”

“Well, yes. At least, that’s what the police told us.”

“We’d like to get a copy of that police report, Mr. Leopard,” I said. “Do you have a copy?”

“No, but two patrolmen came out to take the police report. I’m sure that awful Mr. Tomlinson has a copy, but I certainly don’t have one.”

“Do you have the officers’ names?” Miguel asked.

“Yes!” Leopard stood again, taking out his wallet and pulling out a card. He handed it to me, and I read the names before passing the card to Miguel. He passed it back and I wrote down the two officers’ names to give to Cassidy and Mike. They’d no doubt get us a copy of the police report. “May I make a copy of the card and the picture for our file?”

“Yes, of course.”

Miguel stood and I held them out to him. “I’ll be right back. I want to have Judy amend the contract to mention the books and just make a quick copy.”

“Of course. Of course,” Leopard said. Both men swiveled to stare at his ass as he left the room. They both turned back to me with starry eyes again. I was going to kill my

boyfriend for leaving me alone with these two. “Is there anything else?”

“One last thing. You said you got our names from Tawny Flores. You knew her husband, Benedict.”

Leopard’s eyes got sad. “Yes, Benedict and I were business partners.”

Miguel walked back into the room and returned the card and picture to Mr. Leopard as Trevor looked up from his phone and leered at my lover’s groin.

I was getting annoyed at all the ogling, so I cleared my throat. “You were telling me how you knew Tawny.”

“Yes, poor, dear sweet Tawny.”

Miguel sat back down and glanced at the couple. “How did you meet?”

“I was telling your gracious partner that I knew Tawny through her husband, my dear friend, Benedict. He and I were business partners.”

“In the casino business?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Native American. Benedict and I have...wehadthat in common. When he told me he was going to open a casino and some card rooms, he came to me because he knew I had capital of my own and the connections to help him gather other investors to finance the business. It takes a lot of money to do that, you know.”

“I’ve no doubt,” I said.

“We’re members of the same tribe and were friends for decades, so when he decided to go into gambling, he came to me. He knew I was trustworthy, so it only made good business sense.”

“You were a financial backer?” Miguel asked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Yes. Originally, we had other interested investors. But, during the project, they backed out when we got the usual pushback from the city council. I knew we could overcome their objections, but they really weren’t cut out for the risk associated with tangling with a miniscule, little city council. You see, most investors like to keep their names out of the paper, and as soon as a few reporters caught on, they were out.”

“Then how did you get the project off the ground?” I asked.

“Well, I was already invested you see. I saw the future profit in partnering with my best friend, so when Benedict asked me to front him all the money for a 51 percent stake in the business, I agreed to it. The investment was a wildly successful venture and after Benedict had returned my initial capital, the casino and card rooms became a fifty-fifty venture. I am a lot wealthier than poor, poor Benedict ever was. He and I grew up together and made our fortunes together.”

“I don’t want to be crass, but I have to ask, did you have family money, or earn it in some other fashion, Mr. Leopard?” Miguel asked.

“Oh, no, in my youth, I was the youngest hedge fund manager on Wall Street.” He chuckled and looked down at his own attire. “I know, I must look different to you now, but when I was working on Wall Street, I was the buttoned up, suit wearing, stick up my ass type.”

Trevor snickered, and Leopard turned to smile at him, patting his knee before glancing back.

“Anyway, while I worked on Wall Street, Benedict asked me to invest his capital. As I said, he trusted me. I’d been at it a long time, so I simply had more money...and your question wasn’t crass at all, Mr. Huerta. You need to know this if it’ll help you find my diamond pin.”

I nodded. “It does, thank you. So, you collect books?”

“Yes. I do. Benedict collected art and I collect books.”

“Just one more question and then I promise I’ll let you and Trevor go,” Miguel said.

Trevor abandoned his phone and turned dreamy eyes on my partner as Mr. Leopard nodded frantically.

“Anything.”

“You said you bought the book and the pin at auction. What can you tell us about that?” I asked.

He nodded furiously, back to bouncing in his seat. “I bought them both at a private auction. Benedict had recently purchased the gorgeous ruby at a private auction and said he’d also seen a number of first editions up for bid. When he told me that, I naturally asked him for an introduction to his contact so that I could attend one as

well. I'm passionate about my books, the same as he is...was, about his art, you see."

I nodded. "Thank you," I said. "Can you tell me the name of your contact for that auction?"

"Certainly. She's a beautiful woman by the name of Rosina...Rosina Cassanova...lovely woman. I don't have her number with me, but I will call you with it when I get home."

I glanced at Miguel, who met my gaze. He cleared his throat and then addressed Leopard. "That's okay. We already have her name, thank you, Mr. Leopard."

Leopard smiled. "Oh, good. Lovely woman. Italian, I think. Lovely woman."

"Well, I think that gives us somewhere to start," I said, standing up. Miguel also stood. "Let's go see if Judy has those contracts ready for you."

"Lovely," Mr. Leopard said, standing. "Come along, precious. Thank you for being so patient."

Trevor sighed and stood, turning and practically poking his ass out to make sure Miguel got the invitation, before swaying out of the room. I glanced at Miguel and then back at Mr. Leopard who was watching his boy's ass.

He turned back to us, wearing a smirk. "What can I say? He's a total charmer and he's probably cheating on me, but it doesn't matter. I tolerate his indiscretions and I shower him with gifts and money every time he gives me that beautiful ass. It works for us both."

I came around the desk and put my hand on his shoulder. "I know that's not true at all. You're a very nice man."

He covered my hand with his own. “Thank you for saying that.” He smiled at me and then Miguel. “You should come out with us some evening. We go to all the gay clubs. It’s a lot of fun.”

“We’ll do that, Mr. Leopard,” I said.

He got a teasing glint in his eye. “Of course, anytime you’d like to join us for a night of debauchery, we’d love to have you, Mr. Mathis.” He winked, and I just chuckled.

“We’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Leopard,” Miguel said gruffly before we followed our new client to the outer office.

Chapter Five

MIGUEL

I was quiet on the way home, scrolling through my phone as Raven drove. Vonne had called back asking for a forwarding address for Sutter and I'd laughed, telling him that when someone went into witness protection, the U.S. Marshals Service didn't exactly give out addresses. When he'd asked if I could get a message to him, I'd replied that, of course, I'd do that. It made me really happy that the men had reconnected once again. After all the years my two buddies had been out of contact, it was nice knowing that at least they were going to try to make an effort to keep in touch.

When Raven said he wanted to stop at Trader Joes to pick up the raw almonds he liked to munch on in bed after sex, I simply smiled. I told him I'd wait in the truck, anticipating the night to come since he'd already told me how it was going to go. It had been a very long day and frankly, I was tired. I had no other thoughts but that I wanted to check out the new Nightcrawler review he'd put up last night and relax with my man for the night. The rest of the world be damned. After he went into the store, I scrolled to the Bestreads site and smiled as I began reading his latest offering.

Book title: A Farewell to My Arms

Author: Donald Blakeley

Publisher: Self-published

Genre: Autobiographical Fiction

Review/rating by Nightcrawler: 3 stars

Synopsis:

A bright-eyed, young journalist is suddenly thrust into the horrors of war after volunteering to cover it for a local newspaper.

My review:

First, if anyone can tell Nightcrawler what a fictional autobiography is, I'd sure as hell love to know. Unless, of course, the book was written by a famous political figure. In that case, I'd venture to guess...you could fill a library with books.

Blakeley's particular offering was a bit of a surprise to me, but I kept turning the pages even when things got bloody. The author kept it interesting. You'll see why in a minute. As the title and synopsis suggest, this is the story of a naive, young man who enlists in WWI to cover the frontlines. I am breaking my own rule here, by giving you a description of the story at length, only because I think it's important in writing this review. So...spoiler warning here. If you'd just like to go and buy the book based on my generous three-star rating, stop reading here, otherwise...

Spoiler

When I opened this book, I was expecting a boring recounting of battle scenes, but my surprise came when instead of being caught up in frantic reporting, our hero instead finds comfort in a young nurse, diving into a passionate love affair. She soon convinces the young journalist to abandon his writing and start driving an ambulance to pick up the wounded.

Faced with true horrors of war for the first time, he insists on collecting body parts, carelessly tossing arms and legs into his vehicle along with dying men. Unfortunately, his decision to “rescue” the remains of men, results in an attack of extreme anxiety as he drives back to the hospital. The panicked young soldier finds it impossible to ignore the pile of limbs resting in the back of the ambulance with living soldiers, so he abruptly stops the vehicle, throws open the door, and hurls the limbs willy-nilly to the side of the road. It comes as no surprise that this act caused great shock and revulsion from the very vocal, dying men.

Now, it may seem to you that the young soldier was following a noble calling, one which begs the question of morality. Nightcrawler asks you readers to ponder that question for a moment...and try to set aside your squeamishness when you learn that the soldier, once realizing that the wounded men have witnessed his actions, kills them all. He then hastily focuses on fleeing the scene of his horrific crime.

The karmic universe must have had other plans for the young soldier, however. Just as he's intending to drive away, the ambulance is hit by a rocket, blowing off the young journalist's own arms. He slowly bleeds to death, pondering his poor choices, unable to drive away into the sunset, never to see his beloved nurse again.

Nightcrawler gives a generous three-stars to this novel even though I don't like unhappy endings. There were parts of the book which were poignant. The love affair between soldier and nurse was heartwarming, and the blood and gore expected. The fact that this “fictional autobiography” has been written by a soldier who's become an anti-hero at its conclusion with the death of...well, himself...makes this book more properly listed as a mystery.

All in all, I'm giving it a perhaps overgenerous three-star rating.

I chuckled and looked up just in time to see Raven walking out of the store. He was smiling, carrying one of the reusable shopping bags we always kept in the car, when I

saw a man step out of the shadows, his arm down by his side. I immediately went on high alert, tossing my iPad onto the driver's seat, and throwing open my door.

Three things happened at once. The man, who was now following Raven, pointed a gun at my beloved's back. Raven spotted me just as I whipped my Glock out of my holster and pointed it in my partner's direction. His expression instantly turned to one of alarm, and I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Get down!"

For once, my gorgeous man didn't hesitate and did exactly as I'd asked. He dropped to his knees just as a shot rang out. The bullet whizzed harmlessly over his head, following a trajectory which would have killed my man instantly had it made contact.

Innocent bystanders in the parking lot began screaming, scattering out of the line of fire. The attacker leveled his gun again, pointing at Raven's back. I fired, missing the center of the man's chest by several inches, only because I was running. Instead, my bullet hit him in the shoulder, jerking his arm to the side just as he fired again. The shot went wide but I charged at him. I sprinted across the asphalt toward him as he staggered, caught sight of me, and took off running, stumbling several times.

"Miguel!" Raven shouted, rising from his knees, the shopping bag forgotten as I ran toward him. "What was—"

I didn't wait for him to finish, shouting as I charged by him.

"I'm going after him! Call the police!"

"What? I—"

I didn't stop to listen as I caught the man disappearing around the corner of the grocery store as he ran from me. Sheer blood rage filled my body. Someone had tried to kill my lover, and all I wanted to do was catch him. He had a good twenty-five-

yard head start, but he was wounded. As I rounded the corner of the building thirty seconds later, I spotted a smear of blood on the white, painted brick. In the back of my mind, I knew turning a blind corner like that was nothing short of stupid. Had my Marine Corps Special Forces training been at the front of my brain as I made the decision, I would have taken more precautions.

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The second I turned the corner, the brick beside me exploded, hitting me in the face, and momentarily blinding me. I stopped, wiping at my face, trying to clear my vision when another bullet whizzed by my head. I ducked and retreated behind the bricks, dropping to my ass as I evaluated my injuries, thankful as hell when I realized I could see out of both eyes after all. I was waiting for more shots when Raven came charging up to me, instantly dropping into a squat as I heard the squeal of tires on the other side of the wall. I instinctively knew the gunman had jumped into a vehicle and was getting away.

“Miguel! Jesus! You’re hurt.” Both hands instantly went to my face as he bent to survey the damage.

“I’m fine, Raven. Let me up,” I shouted, wiggling to get off my ass, to continue after the guy.

He dropped his hands on both of my shoulders, pushing down with more force than I expected. “Sit there and don’t move, Miguel! Police are on the way.”

I peered up at him, noticing for the first time, that the lid of my right eye must have begun swelling, partially impairing my vision. My eyesight was restricted to a slit but I felt absolutely no pain. Adrenaline is a funny thing. The minute it kicks in, the human body feels bulletproof, enabling the fight or flight response in the brain. But the second it’s gone, it’s replaced by extreme exhaustion, as the body tells you to just stop, the danger is gone, it’s okay to relax.

“He’s getting away,” I said miserably, reaching up to touch my eye.

Raven grabbed my hand, glowering at me. “Don’t touch. It’s injured.” He glanced up and I followed his line of sight, spotting the bloody smear and twelve inches above that, the missing chunk of brick. Part of the wall had been blown outward from the bullet which had nearly taken out my right eye.

As the minutes ticked by, I slumped with my back against the wall, all the air going out of me like a deflating balloon.

“Fuck!” I said, hearing several approaching sirens at once.

Raven faced me, his expression devastated, filled with pain and terror. “Baby, you could have been shot. What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t think, Raven.” I shook my head. “The second you stepped out of that store, he detached himself from the wall behind you and I knew he had a gun. Thank God I’d been watching for you. If I hadn’t seen you—” My throat closed up as tears were suddenly there, blurring my already impaired vision.

Raven instantly plunked down beside me, pulling me into his arms, right before two uniformed officers ran over. They both had their guns drawn, pointed in our direction as they skidded to a stop, twenty feet away.

“Toss the weapons!” one of them shouted.

Only then did I realize my gun was in my lap, in easy reach if I wanted to shoot them. Raven was also wearing his sidearm. I nodded, slowly reaching down to take hold of the gunstock with my finger and thumb, moving it from my lap to the ground beside me. I pushed it several feet out of reach as Raven did the same. We both put up our hands, backs to the bricks.

“We’ve got a concealed carry license,” I said quietly. “We were shot at. The assailant

got away.” I pointed above me to the painted wall, not daring to break eye contact with them. They were the first to look away, glancing up before bringing their stare back down to me. “That’s his blood,” I said. “He tried to shoot my partner in the back. I was sitting in the car when I spotted him, coming up behind him. I returned fire, hitting him in the right shoulder as best I can tell.” I nodded at Raven. “That’s my partner, in case you were wondering.” Blood dripped into my eye, and I blinked it away. It was nearly swollen shut. “I think I need an ambulance.”

One of the officers looked at Raven. “A bus is on the way.” He eyed me up again. “You on the job?”

“We’re not police officers,” Raven clarified. “We’re licensed recovery agents and the guns we carry are legal.”

“Bounty hunters?” one of the officers asked, keeping us in his gunsights.

“Yes,” I replied. “And I have no other weapons. Please holster your guns. You’re giving me the shakes.”

Two other officers ran over, guns drawn, trained in our direction and retrieved our weapons. I sighed, slowly turning to Raven, where I met his eyes. “There go my plans for a nice, quiet evening in front of the television with my favorite guy.”

He tilted his head and gifted me with the ghost of a smile.

RAVEN

Two hours later, I was fuming.

Miguel had been treated by paramedics at the scene before both of us were loaded into the back of separate squad cars and driven to the Hollywood division. We’d been

locked into separate rooms which the cops had called interview rooms, but the many layers of peeling paint on the drab gray walls, the large window of two-way glass facing me, and the locked door, told me differently. They'd removed my handcuffs when they'd locked me in the box, allowing me to pace without their constriction. When I'd finally flopped down on one of two metal chairs in the room, I was mentally and physically exhausted, but most of all, pissed off.

Miguel saved my life today. The second I'd seen him jump from the truck, gun in hand—and even before I'd heard his shout—I'd known my life was in danger. When he'd ordered me to drop, I'd done it, no questions asked. Feeling a bullet whizz over my head, I'd realized someone had come up from behind me. I hadn't even seen the man as I'd emerged from the store, eager to get home to Dolly's vegetable lasagna, and my man. Somewhere in Trader Joe's parking lot, my almonds and the garlic bread I'd bought to accompany the meal, were probably still there.

Although Miguel had discharged a gun and allegedly hit someone, I was still pissed that the officers hadn't taken us at our word and instead put us in handcuffs after showing them our concealed carry licenses which we always kept in our wallets. I was even more pissed that they hadn't immediately called Cassidy and Mike, knowing they would have been here in minutes, if they'd gotten word. I knew they had procedures to follow but feeling like we'd been treated as suspects when we'd been victims made me see red.

When the door finally opened and Cassidy appeared in the doorway, I instantly felt déjà vu, reminding me of how he'd come to our rescue over the incident with Ned, all those months ago. I jumped up and ran over to him, throwing my arms around him, and hugging him tight. He felt so solid and strong as he hugged me hard. I let go and stepped back as he smiled at me, Kelly green eyes twinkling.

“Come on, let's get you out of here, Raven.”

I walked out behind him and immediately saw Miguel talking to Mike right outside the room. His right eye was covered with a gauze pad, taped up. It took great restraint on my part not to rush to his side and pull him into my arms. He obviously didn't feel the same way, closing the short distance between us and wrapping his arms around me. I buried my face in his shoulder, feeling tears close to the surface as I hugged the life out of him.

Knowing he'd been hurt and not able to be with him, had been the worst thing of all. I'd begged to be allowed to sit in the same room with him, but the officers at the scene had said it was impossible until we'd been cleared. It made sense but I'd been an emotional wreck, and I know they must have seen it. They'd left me in a lonely room, praying that the paramedic had been right, and Miguel wasn't going to lose his eye.

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“Raven,” Miguel cooed quietly, patting my back. “It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t. He’d nearly taken a bullet for me. When his hold finally loosened, I sighed, stepping back, but kept hold of his shoulders with both hands as I stared at his beautiful face. The skin under the eyepatch was red. Scabs had begun to form on the myriad of small cuts which the shards of brick had left in their wake. They covered his stubbled right cheek, nose, and half of his forehead. Blood stained his T-shirt.

“Come on and sit in the squad room, guys,” Mike said. “We have some questions.”

I turned to Mike and nodded, allowing Cassidy to rest his hand on the small of my back as he guided me to the bullpen.

“Can we get some water, Cass?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll be right back,” he said.

I watched his retreating form until I felt Miguel’s hand on my knee. He’d rolled toward me in a desk chair. I reached for his hand, curling my fingers around it. The small squeeze to my fingers made me feel just a little more grounded and thankful to be alive. I held on to him, clutching the hand I loved so much as I watched Cassidy come back with two sweating bottles of water. I thanked him and took mine, cracking the top, and drinking it down, relishing the cold even though it burned all the way down. I glanced at the clock and gasped. It was after eight.

“We need to call Dolly!” I said, looking at Miguel.

“I called her about an hour ago, Raven,” Mike said, easing himself down into a chair. “I didn’t tell her what happened, only that you two were at the police station and would be here a little while longer. She said she had no problem staying.”

“An hour ago? But, I thought you just got here.”

“We did,” Mike replied. “I called Dolly as soon as I learned you were in lock up.”

“We came as soon as we were called, Raven, I promise,” Cassidy added, dropping down into a chair across from us. Cass looked around, frowning before glancing back at us. “For what it’s worth, I gave the two patrolmen hell about how you two were treated, but the captain at this station is new to the division so Mike and I have no goodwill with him yet. For all he knows, we’re just a couple of Brentwood detectives with no standing. I think he’ll find out differently, when my captain makes a call.”

“Don’t get anyone in trouble, Cass,” Miguel said, sighing and running a hand through his hair, like he did when he was nervous, or his walls were down. I frowned and squeezed his hand tighter when he glanced over at me.

“Anyway, what’s happening?” Mike said, sounding tired.

I’d almost forgotten that our friends were working nights. I felt guilty that we’d brought more bullshit to them, cutting into what had to be their family time. One of these days, they were going to get sick of us and the trouble a call from one of us always brought with it.

Miguel and I launched into our explanation of everything that had happened that day, starting with leaving our breakfast with them that morning. We told them about going back to the office and getting the two messages, one from Tomlinson and one from Brian Leopard and how Tomlinson promised to share information with us then reneged on his promise. When we described Leopard and his boyfriend, Trevor, both

detectives laughed. The information about Mr. Leopard's missing diamond pin which he'd bought at an auction set up by Rosina Cassanova, sobered both men instantly.

"So, you think the missing diamond pin was part of this cache of jewels those rogue CIA fuckers are looking for?" Cassidy asked.

"It has to be. She invited him to the auction, and from the looks of the gold it's set in, I'm guessing it was fashioned in the Middle East," Miguel said. "I've seen jewelry from that region and the gold is very similar."

"Yeah, I've seen it too," Cassidy said, "so I know what you mean."

I always forgot Cassidy was a former Navy SEAL and had probably been on a ton of Special Forces missions in the area.

"So, this Leopard guy," Mike asked, "do you think he's legit? I ask because I find it curious that he would just seek your company out...just out of the blue like that."

I covered my face with both hands, rubbing over it before looking up. I was exhausted.

"I completely forgot to mention that Tawny Flores told Leopard about us," Miguel said. "I guess he told her that we'd been hired to find her missing ruby, so she thought we could help him too. She knows him through her dead husband, Benedict who was his partner in the casino business." He sounded as exhausted as I did.

"Actually, he was the one who financed it," I added. "Leopard made his millions on Wall Street when he became a hedge fund manager decades ago. Apparently, he and Flores grew up together, members of the same Native American tribe. Sorry, I didn't ask which one."

“That’s okay,” Cassidy said, taking notes. He looked up after he’d finished writing. “I’m going to tape the incident that happened this evening. It’ll serve as a statement for the captain here in Hollywood.” He pulled a small tape recorder out of his inside jacket pocket. We nodded as he turned it on and said, “This statement is being taken by Detectives Cassidy Ryan and Mike Williams out of Brentwood,” he reeled off the date and time. He nodded to us. “Start with your names and address.”

So, we began. Miguel explained how he’d been sitting in the truck waiting for me to come out and the ensuing events.

He voiced the fear he’d felt as soon as he saw my smiling face, and the gunman behind me. I sat there listening to the incident from his point of view and felt my heart clench in pain as he described the terror that had rushed through him at the thought of me taking a bullet to the back of my head. I dropped my chin, looking at our clasped hands as I felt the tears welling up, not wanting our friends to see them. Cassidy shut off the recorder.

“Raven?”

When I looked up, Miguel was staring at me. He squeezed my hand again. “It’s okay, Sunshine. We’re both fine. Don’t fret so.”

I nodded, sniffing as I dragged my gaze away from him and back to Cassidy and Mike. “Are we through? I gotta get him home. He was shot.”

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“It was a ricochet of exploding bricks, Raven,” Miguel said quietly. “I wasn’t shot.”

“You very well could have been killed if that asshole had better aim,” Mike growled.

“Go on. We’ll call you in the morning to fill in any blanks after we read over our notes and listen to this again,” Cassidy said. He stood abruptly, and we followed suit.

We hugged our friends goodbye. All I wanted was a bath, and I was going to make Miguel get in with me so I could simply wash off this awful day.

Chapter Six

RAVEN

I’d completely forgotten that my truck was now sitting in the LAPD impound lot and since it was considered part of an ongoing investigation into the incident at the grocery store, we couldn’t drive it home. We ended up calling an Uber and getting home well after ten. Dolly greeted us in her pajamas, robe, and curlers as soon as we walked through the door. Guilt threatened to swamp me on top of every other emotion I was feeling. Since we hadn’t called, she’d obviously taken it upon herself to plan to stay overnight. I felt awful about it.

“Oh, my God!” she cried, moving a sleeping Stanley from her lap and running toward us the moment she saw Miguel’s gauze eyepatch. “What on earth happened? All the police detective would say was that you were at the station and that you’d be home as soon as they were through with you.” She stood in front of Miguel, looking up at his poor face which was a little swollen and had begun to bruise.

“We got into a little trouble, Dolly,” Miguel replied. There was no way we were going to tell her how we’d both nearly died.

“What happened to your beautiful face?” she asked, tears filling her eyes.

I reached out and took her hand, leading her to the couch.

“We had a little trouble but I’m going to be fine,” Miguel said, following us. I pulled her down on the couch, and Miguel sat in a nearby chair, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped as he faced her.

“What happened to your eye? Will it be okay?”

Miguel nodded. “Yes. I got some brick dust in it, that’s all.”

Dolly frowned, looking him over, shook her head, and sighed loudly. “You’re not telling me the whole truth. I see bruises and cuts all over your face. You don’t get those from a little brick dust.” When Miguel opened his mouth to reply, she held up her hand, stopping his words. She turned to me. “He’s lying. Tell me what happened, Raven.”

I snorted, exchanging a glance with Miguel, watching him nod. “Fine, I’ll tell you, but I don’t want you to worry. He really is going to be fine.”

“Mm hmm...go on then...spill the whole story.”

“We were coming out of Trader Joe’s after work and someone shot at us. When Miguel went after the guy, the man shot the side of the building, missing Miguel, but hitting the bricks. Some small shards hit him in the face...like a ricochet but with bricks, not bullets.” I watched the tears well up and slide down her face now.

“The paramedics checked my eye, Dolly. There’s nothing in it. It’s just swollen,” Miguel reassured her. “I’m going to be fine, really.”

She reached out, and he took her hand. “Who shot at you two?”

I looked at Miguel as his expression saddened. “I’m not sure. We’re still working on the recovery of that ruby. You know what I’m talking about, right?”

She nodded. The night we’d gone after Rosina Cassanova, Lance Bishop, and John Mendez, ATF SAC Sarah Connor had sent members of her team to our house to guard our little family. When we’d gotten home that night, we’d told Dolly as much as we could. She was a formidable woman who was fiercely protective of my nana, acting as not only a nurse, but a friend. Miguel and I considered her to be one of the family.

“I remember, Miguel, but I thought the bad guys were behind bars.”

“Three people were taken into custody that night, but we think there’s at least one more out there.” Miguel shot me a look before glancing back at her. “We can’t be sure, but we’re going to try to arrange for someone to come and guard you and Nana until this is all over.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said. “No more police. You need to let me take her home with me. I’ll keep her safe, Miguel.” She looked over at me. “I don’t want you to worry, Raven.”

I’d worry anyway. Not only did I like knowing that Nana was in a safe, familiar place, but expecting Dolly to be on duty twenty-four hours a day wasn’t fair. I was hoping we could get Cassidy and Mike to arrange for a patrol car to park on the street outside after the incident at Trader Joe’s.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Dolly,” I said. “Nana’s familiar with the layout of our house. Trying to get a blind, old lady used to a new environment won’t be easy.”

“She is really good about staying in her recliner until I get her up for the bathroom and to bathe, Raven. She enjoys my cooking, my house is big and clean, and my next-door neighbor is a wonderful lady. If I have to run out to the store or pharmacy to pick something up for her, Claudia will stay with her. She’ll never be left alone.” She smiled. “And I think she’ll enjoy my grandchildren when they come home from school. Really, I wouldn’t suggest it if I weren’t serious.”

I nodded. I didn’t like Dolly’s neighborhood, but my nana wouldn’t be going out anyway. She’d miss her garden and her roses, but it would only be a temporary solution. I supposed it was a good idea, better than leaving them both here where I knew Alex Filmore or a hired goon could get to them. I raised an eyebrow at Miguel. “What do you think?”

“I think Dolly’s right, Raven,” Miguel said. “Anyone looking for us at home wouldn’t think to look at her place, and Cassidy and Mike might not be able to assign officers to watch the house. I know I’d feel better if I knew your nana and Dolly were safe at her place.”

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I nodded and glanced back at her, smiling. “Okay then. We’ll take you both over in the morning.” I looked down at her bunny slippers, feeling another stab of guilt. “You just figured you’d stay the night,huh?”

She grinned at me. “When the detective called, he asked if I was willing to stay over. He had no idea how long you’d be tied up at the station. Is he that tall, good-looking one, or his chubby partner?”

I chuckled. “The chubby partner,” I replied. Cassidy and Mike had joined Sarah’s guys the night we went after Cassanova and the others.

“Ah,good then. I prefer a man with a little meat on his bones. My husband has plenty of that.”

We laughed. “Mike’s married...in fact, they both are, but I’ll tell him what you said.”

“You do that. I do like a man who enjoys his food, and that man clearly doesn’t skip many meals.”

“Thanks for offering to have her at your house, Dolly,” I said. “I hope it’s only for a night or two, but we’ve already been on this recovery for more than a month. It might take more than a couple of nights.”

“I understand, dear.” She stood up, smiling. “And speaking of meals, I have a feeling the two of you haven’t eaten. I left the pan of lasagna on the stove in case you want some. Just pop a piece in the microwave and it’ll taste just like it came out of the oven.”

I smiled at her, getting to my feet as Miguel rose from the chair. “I don’t know how to thank you, Dolly.” I leaned over and pulled her into my arms, kissing her on the forehead.

“You’re always welcome, sugar.” She turned to Miguel. “I know you and Raven were out of here at the crack of dawn. You must be exhausted. Eat a meal and take your man to bed.”

Miguel and I watched her walk down the hall, until we heard her stop and open the door.

“Night, boys,” she called quietly.

“Night, Dolly.” I turned to Miguel. “Are you hungry?” I was starving but I wasn’t going to push him if he didn’t feel like eating. He looked like hell, and I knew his poor face was probably throbbing and going to look even worse in the morning.

“I could eat a horse,” he said gruffly. He threw his arm around my shoulders, steering me toward the kitchen as I fell into step at his side. Stanley ran into the kitchen, practically tripping us both as he shot in front of us, meowing. He sat in front of his empty bowls, and I grinned.

“Dolly probably already fed him but I’ll feed him again...before he dies of starvation,” I said.

“No chance of that. That cat is getting fat,” Miguel replied. “I think he weighs more than me.”

I chuckled, pulling out the cat food and taking care of the little guy while Miguel heated our meals.

We walked into the bedroom fifteen minutes later. My stomach was full, and the dishes were done. I'd stored the leftover lasagna in the fridge and all I wanted to do was take that hot bath I'd been thinking about for hours. I stripped out of my clothes and helped Miguel off with his boots and socks because he told me it hurt his head to bend over. While he took off his clothes, I ran the bath, making sure I added a sandalwood scented oil Miguel liked, along with some bubble bath. While the tub filled, I watched as he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and peeled off the tape holding the gauze bandage over his eye. Underneath, his eye was swollen half shut, the white of his eye fire engine red.

I frowned at him.

"We're going to the hospital in the morning." He'd refused the paramedic's offer to drive him to the hospital to have a doctor check his eye, saying there was no need.

He glanced over at me. "There's nothing in there. I would feel anything gritty."

I leaned over and lightly brushed my lips over his bruised cheek. "Humor me just the same."

"Okay." He pulled me into his arms, up against his body, brushing his interested cock against mine. "Right now, all I need is a strong painkiller and a hot bath. Then I'm going to slide into our bed and sleep for about a year."

I kissed him softly then, making sure to keep the pressure light. He was so bruised, I figured any kind of pressure might hurt and that was the last thing I wanted to do. When his tongue brushed over mine, a moan rose up out of me unbidden. I finally pulled back and examined him closely. "Get in the bath. I'm going to grab those painkillers and some water. Be right back."

I pulled on my underwear, cursing myself for not thinking about the painkillers

earlier, and went to the kitchen to get a cold bottle of water. I grabbed some extra strength Tylenol and Ibuprofen from the cupboard. When I got back to the bathroom, I stripped down and handed him the water and pills. He downed them, wincing a little at the cold water.

I stepped into the tub, sliding in behind my man, pulling him back against my chest. I lifted a washcloth and soaped it up with Miguel's sandalwood and citrus bodywash and then rubbed it softly over his chest. The feel of the hair under my fingers made my cock stiffen. I willed my body to behave. All my partner needed tonight was sleep. Sex could wait.

Miguel sighed. "That feels really good, Sunshine," he said quietly.

I kissed his ear. "Relax and let me take care of you." He nodded and I felt more weight against my body as he did just as I'd asked. I washed his arms and hands, massaging each finger, and then his neck, making sure that my touch was light in case he was hurting there. Little by little, I cleaned whatever areas I could reach and then asked him to lean forward so that I could get his back. I soaped it up, loving the way the muscles of his wide shoulders rippled under his beautiful skin. When I was done, I wrapped my arms around his middle and just held him as he leaned back into me, letting the steamy water do its job. When he spoke a few minutes later, I could hear the tiredness in his words.

"Lemme up, baby, or I'm gonna fall asleep right here."

I reluctantly let go, and he rose from the bath. But I was treated to a delightful view of his backside, watching the water sluice over his ass, and down his long, muscular legs. I waited for him to get out before abandoning the tub altogether.

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After we dried off, I took his hand and led him to our bed, sliding in behind him, pulling him into my arms. I sighed against the back of his hair, falling into a deep sleep moments later.

MIGUEL

When I opened my eyes in the dawning light, it took me a minute to figure out why I only had partial vision in the right one. I touched the skin under my eye and groaned, as memories of what had happened the day before came rushing in. I lay still, taking in the sounds of birds in the garden outside our bedroom window. Spring was finally here, and the nights were warm enough to sleep with a light comforter instead of the mass of blankets Raven liked to pile on the bed when it got cold. Right now, though, I was pretty sure I was overheated from the warm body plastered to my back. A wave of desire flooded through me. It felt like an eternity since I'd been inside Raven and I missed him, evidenced by my swollen cock. I reached down and wrapped my hand around it, giving myself a couple of strokes before rolling to my back.

Raven shifted in the bed, and I watched him. He was pursing his lips. His long lashes framed his closed eyes, so I took a few minutes to just stare at him. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. I thought back to the first time I'd seen him at the Capitol Records building, the day I'd gone to collect Lyle Trench and secure my bounty. Running into Raven six months ago had changed my life in ways I never would have imagined. His kindness, his fierce protective streak for anyone he loved, and his gentle or not so gentle touches when we lay entwined together in bed, were everything I could have ever wanted in a man. Raven was my whole heart.

Today was going to bring challenges. I knew we had things to do and a new recovery

contract to find Leopard's diamond pin. Now, though, I had different ideas. I leaned over and reached beneath the sheet, sliding my hand down his belly to the thatch of hair that always turned me on. I took his flaccid cock into my hand, stroking it gently so I didn't wake him. I wanted him hard and needy when he actually did open his eyes. He moaned in his sleep, wiggling in the sheets as he began to harden. I smiled. I seemed to do that a lot in his presence. Scooting down the bed, I ducked under the sheet and found my prize.

I opened my mouth and closed over the wide head, sliding it just inside where I trapped it between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. After a minute or so, he spread his legs. Groaning above me, he moved his hand just far enough to take hold of the sheet and pull it back. The fresh air was a revelation as I glanced up at him.

"Miguel," he said in a gravelly voice.

I hummed around the head, sucking him deeper, sliding down to take the shaft into my mouth. Swallowing around the head, I couldn't even take half inside but gave it my best effort. I knew I was good at this; enough guys who'd been in my bed had told me so, but there was something infinitely different about the one here now. I wanted to be the best because I loved him. Reaching for his balls, I took them in one hand while the other held his shaft.

I began to suck him in earnest as his hands landed in my hair where they always did when I sucked him off. I wanted to give him pleasure, feel him give me everything he had. Rolling his balls, I dragged a guttural sound out of him, knowing that he loved the pleasure when I squeezed him just a little. I didn't know whether it was the dominance he always craved, or the way he felt like there was no way to get away until I let go. I suspected it was a little of both.

He adored it when I held him down and fucked him hard. I'd learned months ago that he liked a little dominance in bed or out of it. The day I'd pinned his hands against a

door and fucked him up against it after nearly being shot by security guards at the Getty, was still big-time fantasy material for me. Psychologists would probably say it had something to do with escaping death and taking it out on a willing partner who was also the man I loved. I let his cock slide from my mouth as an idea came to mind.

“Miguel!” he gasped, whimpering at the loss of my mouth.

“One second, baby. Let me just—”

I reversed on the bed, throwing a leg over him, so that he was at my groin, and leaned down to take him back into my mouth.

“You have the best ideas,” he said, blowing hot air against my cock before wrapping his fingers around it, and guiding it to his mouth. In seconds, I was sucked inside, tingles shooting down my spine. There was just something so hot about sixty-nine, especially when I was on top. I loved a cock in my mouth. No messy clean up, no inequity in pleasure, just the simple act of sucking each other off, and coming down each other’s throats. I bobbed my head at his groin as I thrust into his mouth, loving the pressure of his lips around me, the suction he always managed to give me at this angle.

Doing this to him was incredibly sexy. Having it done to me was even better.

He began to thrust his hips, lifting them up off the bed as I sucked him harder. He squeezed my balls, rolling my nuts in his hand, and the tingling sensation of my rapidly approaching orgasm began in my lower back. I pushed in deep, sucked harder, and Raven reciprocated.

I heard him moan, felt his shaft swell between my lips. He was close, but so was I. I was going to empty my balls down his throat in seconds. Fucking down into his mouth, I pulled out, shoving deeper, knowing I might very well be cutting off his

oxygen but he wasn't protesting. I had no other care in the world aside from getting off with my boyfriend as heat flooded my veins, racing through me. I sucked hard, knowing how close I was, feeling the pain in my bruised cheek as his thrusting into my mouth became choppy. Forcing any thoughts of discomfort away, I heard him shout around my cock.

A second later, he was coming and as the first spray of his release shot onto my tongue, my own climax hit. I sucked and swallowed for long seconds as he did the same, emptying his balls into my mouth. Thirty seconds after his climax began, I swallowed the last of his load and felt myself relax as he let my cock slip out of his mouth.

He nuzzled his nose into my groin, taking a deep inhale of my freshly washed pubes before I felt hot breath whoosh out of him and his body relax. I lifted my head, letting his cock slide from my mouth, then rested my forehead against his inner thigh as I tried to regulate my breathing and the rapid tattoo of my heart. I rolled to my back a minute later, reversing on the bed, and pulling him into my arms.

His mouth was on mine moments later, his kisses languid, his tongue tasting of my own release. I knew he could taste me too, and there was something about knowing that which made me happier than I had a right to. I was sure there was something very primal about the way men felt when they'd sucked each other off and for a fleeting moment, I pictured cavemen going at each other. The very thought of the segue made me chuckle against his lips, and he pulled away, looking at me with glittering eyes in the early morning light filtering through the blinds.

"What's so funny?" he asked with a smile playing around his lips.

"I was just picturing cavemen doing sixty-nine," I said, laughing out loud. The stretch of facial muscles and the way I could barely see him out of my right eye, sobered me immediately, reminding me I probably resembled Frankenstein's monster this

morning. I lifted my hand, touching my cheek, and wincing.

Predictably, Raven instantly frowned and propped his head in one hand, checking me out. “Oh, baby, you poor thing. You’re so bruised and look at your eye.”

“Does it look as terrible as I think it does?” I was worried that I couldn’t work if it looked as bad as it felt. “I’ve gotta work today.”

He cocked his head to one side, furrowing his brows. He reached up and brushed featherlight fingers over my forehead. “I’m not so sure you shouldn’t take the day off, Miguel.”

I frowned. “Raven, I’ve got to work. We’ve got a new recovery.”

He eyed me critically. “Okay, I think if we covered these little scabs with some makeup and you didn’t shave, it’d be fine. You could wear dark glasses to cover the swelling in your eye, but that’s not what worries me. Your eye is really red. I mean, it’s better than yesterday, but even in this low light, I can see how red it is, Miguel.”

“It just stings a little. Look...I won’t overexert myself. I promise, Raven.”

“Why don’t we wait and see what the doctor says.”

I groaned long and loud. “Ah, come on, Raven. I don’t need to see a doctor.” The very idea of sitting in the emergency room gave me anxiety. I hated hospitals.

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“You’re seeing a doctor and that’s final, Miguel.”

I looked up at the ceiling. “Emergency rooms are always terrible.”

“We’ll go to one in a better part of town. I know not all of them are awful or as busy as the ones here in Hollywood. In fact, there’s a brand-new urgent care center in an upscale part of town which sees patients at all hours. The new insurance I got for the business covers all hospitals and urgent care centers.”

“Isn’t it sad that we have insurance that lets us go to whatever hospital we want while so many people can’t?” I asked seriously. “Where is this upscale part of L.A.?”

He ignored the first question. “Brentwood, twat. They’ll see you and I bet we can get in and out in a few hours if we go early.”

“A few hours,” I groaned.

“It’s gonna be fine, Miguel.” He sat up, taking hold of my bicep. “Now come on. Let’s get up and get dressed. Dolly is probably already awake, and I want to be able to talk to Nana and pack a suitcase with all her favorite clothes and blankets before she hears about the arrangement from Dolly.”

“Fine, we’ll get up. But urgent care really isn’t necessary, Raven.” I reached up and prodded my sore eyelid. “There’s nothing in there. I’d know.”

“I don’t care!” he said, raising his voice to me. “We’re going! I’m not letting you go blind because you want to be a stubborn asshole.” He began to get off the bed, but I

was faster. I fought my way out of the sheets, and caught his arm, pulling him up short. He stopped but didn't turn around.

"Raven...what's going on? I was only nagging a little. Giving you a hard time. I'll go get checked out, Sunshine. Don't get mad." I watched his chin drop to his chest, and I scrambled to get next to him, throwing my legs over the bed, and wrapping an arm around him. "What's wrong?"

He hesitated. "You're...I was...you could have lost your eye."

"And you could have gotten shot in the head but we're both fine, Sunshine." I reached up and pulled his head down to my shoulder, cupping his cheek as I spoke into his soft hair. "I love you. We're fine. We just know that we have to take special care of each other right now. And we will. If Alex Filmore or someone else, has marked us for death, we just have to get to them faster. I'm good, Raven. I really am. I'm trained and I can take care of you. I'll kill anyone coming after us. Be clear on that. I won't let anything happen to you. I'll kill them and I'm confident you'll do the same if my life is threatened. You've gotten pretty damned good with that firearm you carry. With Nana and Dolly safe, we won't have to worry about them either. Okay?"

He nodded, staring into my eyes. "Okay, baby. Okay."

Chapter Seven

MIGUEL

Nana took the news that she'd be staying with Dolly for a while with grace. I'd never seen a woman so confident in Raven...in whatever he did or whatever situation he found himself in. She understood that Raven hadn't made the decision to have her leave her home—the one she was familiar with—lightly. She knew some bad people

had come into her beloved grandson's life. And that the decision to move her in with Dolly wasn't only about keeping her safe, but perhaps more about making sure Raven wouldn't have to worry about her. He needed to focus on finding the person or persons who'd tried to kill us, and she got that. I loved her complete and utter trust in him, and so did Raven.

We packed up her things and followed Dolly's car all the way to Compton, helping her into Dolly's house while she ran ahead of us to let her husband know she and Raven's grandmother were here. She'd called ahead, so he was expecting us.

When we walked inside the 120 year old Craftsman style bungalow with hardwood floors and braided throw rugs, Eddie Turner immediately came over with a big, welcoming smile, and shook our hands. He was a huge man, not tall but round. He most likely topped the scales at 280 or more. When Dolly'd said something about how she liked men with meat on their bones, the offhand comment suddenly made complete sense.

"Hi there. You must be Miguel and Raven," he said in a pleasant, rumbling voice. "I'm Eddie. Welcome to our home."

"It's so nice to meet you, Eddie," Raven said, smiling widely as he took his hand. "I can't tell you what it means to me that you're opening your home to my nana."

He laughed. "We're happy to have her. Now that Dana works nights, we rarely have visitors other than the grandkids, of course. They all live here with us."

I knew that. Dolly's only daughter, Dana, was a single mother of two who worked at Good Samaritan Hospital as a registered nurse. Eddie, who was a retired bus driver for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, was responsible for dropping the kids off at school in the mornings, picking them up in the afternoons, and handling homework until Dolly and Dana got home. Dolly had been right. Their

home was beautiful, big, and filled—from what I could tell at first glance—of love.

“And you must be Angelica,” he said, bending over to place a gentle paw on the frail woman’s shoulder. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like.”

Raven’s nana looked up at him through sightless eyes and smiled, taking his big mitt in both of hers when he offered it. “Thank you, Eddie. Dolly has told me so many good things about you.”

Eddie laughed, taking her hand and wrapping it in the crook of his elbow. “You know I’ll want to hear all about what she’s said. My Dolly exaggerates so.”

Nana smiled, walking with him easily as he led her to a chair with deep cushions close to a welcoming fireplace. The room was cozy, and very clean, just as Dolly said. Hardwood floors often had dust balls on every surface, but you could eat off the wide planks of the very old wood. They were probably original to the house, just like the crown molding in the same rich, warm wood.

I adored these old Craftsman style homes, but they were few and far between in our neck of the woods. From the raised foundation with wide steps in front of the house, to the tapered wood columns that held up the covered porch, and the inside details like the hand painted mosaic tiles adorning the fireplaces, these homes were a dream come true. I couldn’t imagine living in Compton, though. The crime and murder rate had decreased over the years due to the crackdown on violent gangs like the Crips and Bloods who’d once terrorized neighborhoods like this one on L.A.’s south side, but it still wasn’t a neighborhood I wanted to live in. The warm and welcoming home Dolly offered was very nice, though, we both wanted Nana home with us as soon as we caught Filmore and whoever else he may have helping him.

I glanced over at Raven, noting that he’d turned to look at me. The shared glance between us conveyed the same message. We needed to get going. We needed to get

this recovery over and done with.

“Can I offer anyone some coffee? Breakfast?” Eddie asked, leaving Nana’s side and walking across the room. His bulk rolled fluidly side to side just a little as he walked.

“Oh, no, thank you,” Raven said. “We need to get going.” He pivoted to me, gesturing with his hand. “We have to go to urgent care to have Miguel’s eye seen to.”

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I flushed in embarrassment but reached up, removing the sunglasses I was still wearing to show Eddie my eye. I waved at it. “Work related, I assure you,” I said shyly, wanting to smack Raven on the arm.

Eddie walked closer with a little frown on his face. “Oh, what happened?”

“Long story,” I said lamely. “I got hit in the face with an exploding brick. Dolly will tell you all about it.”

Eddie’s frown turned into a warm smile as he glanced over at Dolly who stood by Nana’s chair, holding a glass of water and a tiny, plastic cup of pills for Nana’s morning medications. He looked back at us. “No doubt. I’m sure she’ll embellish the story. My girl loves to do that.”

I grinned, feeling the tightness in my cheek.

“Well, then, it really was nice to meet you,” he went on. “I promise we’ll take very good care of her.”

Raven reached out a hand and shook his again. He walked away to say goodbye to Angelica as I also shook Eddie’s hand. “We really can’t thank you enough for this.”

“It’s our pleasure.”

We were back in my old Ford F-150 five minutes later, headed out of Dolly and Eddie’s immediate neighborhood. When Raven made a right into a strip mall parking lot, I was confused until I saw the dark brown building with bistro tables and chairs in

front of it. The brightly lit, red neon sign shaped like a coffee cup with steam rising above it, made me smile.

We'd filled our travel mugs with Starbucks that Dolly must have grabbed before we left the house, but those had been emptied long ago. I guess the mushroom coffee didn't work for her either. I also knew we could probably get a muffin inside since we hadn't eaten. We had a long day ahead of us, so I just gave in, not saying a word as Raven parked my old truck in a spot right in front of the coffee shop. I glanced around the strip mall which also housed a tobacco and smoke shop, a dog groomer, and a liquor store.

We got out of the truck, making sure we locked it. We were wearing our Glocks in shoulder holsters under our jackets. We'd both decided not to leave the firearms in the glovebox when we left the truck unoccupied. In this neighborhood, car thieves were bold enough to steal a car in broad daylight, and leaving the weapons in the truck would have been stupid. I sure as hell didn't want to spend half my day in a south L.A. police station while some glowering, pissed off cop filled out paperwork for stolen firearms, and then waste more time trying to get a rental car.

As we walked past the bistro tables out front, I noticed how inviting the place was with red and orange flowers in huge terracotta pots flanking the entrance. The aromas coming from inside the coffee shop had me salivating as soon as I stepped inside. While we stood behind two other couples in line, I gazed longingly at the old-fashioned bakery case with iced cakes and muffins, trying to decide what I could get away with. Raven loved to tell me that he wanted me around for the rest of his life, which apparently meant I wasn't allowed to have sugar. The place smelled heavenly. If he told me I was limited to a bran muffin, I'd already decided to ignore that order. Besides, the iced lemon cake looked mouthwatering.

We stepped up to the bearded, black man behind the cash register and gave our orders. When he smiled at Raven and began flirting, I straightened to my full height.

The need to look as imposing as I could when Raven was being hit on didn't strike me as overkill. It was almost reflexive. My partner was a beautiful man who got looks wherever we went. I chalked it up to being something I had to deal with. He never flirted back but the very idea that someone felt free enough to smile and flirt at someone who was clearly mine, made me crazy every time.

"Miguel?" Raven snapped his fingers in front of my face, and I came out of my thoughts a split second later. I glanced over at him, spotting the smile playing around his full lips. "Are you going to order?"

"Oh, sorry." I shot the server a look and noticed him watching my mouth with great interest. "Gimme a large regular blend,uh...whatever bold you have, okay?"

"Yes, sir. That would be our American Warrior blend," the man purred.

I was annoyed. "And throw in an iced lemon cake." I glanced over at Raven who was watching me with an amused smirk. I knew he was biding his time and would give me shit about the cake as soon as we left the place. That was just his way. Raven would never embarrass me by objecting to the cake in front of the flirty barista, and for that, I was grateful. We stepped back to wait for our coffees and my cake so that another guy behind us could order. One of the two couples who'd gotten their coffees before us had taken up residence at one of the small, wrought iron bistro tables outside.

I turned back to Raven who'd moved over to the wall to examine a sturdy travel mug. He turned it over to check the price tag and then quickly put it back on the shelf. The barista called Raven's name, and we took the tall paper cups he passed over the bakery case along with a small paper bag.

"Half and half and creamer are in the carafes by the door," he said, flapping a hand in that direction. "Have a nice day." I thought the wink he gave Raven was over the top.

“Yeah, have a nice day,” I grumbled.

I handed Raven his cup and he walked over to the small hostess stand. I walked to the door, looking out at the parking lot and the street beyond.

It took me a second to register what was happening when the female half of the couple at the bistro tables started screaming. Her chair crashed to the ground as she stood and turned to run at the same time her male companion fell face forward into his pumpkin bread a second later. She took off running through the parking lot, ducking as more bullets chased her.

I dropped my coffee cup as I pulled my gun and raced out the door, taking cover behind a car, scanning the surrounds, holding my Glock with both hands, trying to find the shooter. I couldn't see anyone until an engine started with a roar, then spotted an SUV with chrome spinner rims and limousine tinted windows. It shot out from its parking space, reversing at speed, then raced by me, burning rubber out of the parking lot, and around the corner before I could even get the sights of my gun trained on it for a good shot.

I did, however, get the license plate, committing it to memory as two more black SUVs roared into the parking lot. They screeched to a halt in front of me before all four doors popped open and people scrambled out, holding weapons, wearing earpieces, and screaming at me.

“On the ground! Get on the ground!”

They rushed me as I complied, dropping to my knees right there on the asphalt, holding my gun to the side, doing exactly as I'd been commanded. Apparently, that wasn't good enough for them because a second later, one of the black suited guys rushed up behind me and kicked me face first to the asphalt before stomping on my back. I felt the breath whoosh out of me in a rush and I turned my head, scraping my

already bruised cheek against the hard surface to gasp for air, and met the toe of a boot coming at my head.

I woke up with a splitting headache. The pounding in my noggin wasn't helped by the yelling of someone standing very close.

“Did he comply?”

“I-I, yes. He complied,” another voice replied.

“Did he drop to the ground like he was told?”

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“Yes,” the flat voice said.

“Why then, did one of you shitheads think it was okay to kick him in the head...you stupid, reckless fucks!”

“Calm down, Cass,” Mike Williams said.

“Calm down?” my friend growled. “These Feds think it’s fine to kick someone when they’re down, Mike. Someone’s getting written up for this bullshit. You know it’s not right and when the special agent in charge gets here, he’s gonna know about it!”

My friend was really pissed but he and Mike were here—wherever this was—and I was safe. I blew out a relieved breath as I tried to lift my eyelids, tried to shift in the bed, but realized my body hurt all over. My head was a whole other story since a very loud mariachi band had taken up residence inside my skull. I tried to sit up but realized I couldn’t move. Someone had a tight hold on my hand. I slowly rolled my head on the pillow as I finally managed to open my eyes.

Raven was seated on a chair on my right, holding my hand, looking...ravaged. An IV was taped to the inside of my arm, and I could see that the railing on the bed had been lowered. A rhythmic beeping sound was coming from a machine I hadn’t yet spotted, and my surroundings finally sank in. I’d been hospitalized several times, but that had been because I was a Marine, not because some asshat kicked me in the head. My head throbbed. If Raven hadn’t been staring at me with haunted eyes, chewing his bottom lip, I’d no doubt go back to sleep.

“Get out of this room.” Cassidy’s growling voice was coming from my left.

“Yes, you need to leave now. I can hear you down the hallway. This is an ICU, you’re disturbing other critical patients,” an authoritative voice said.

“We need to talk to Mr. Huerta. He was an eyewitness to Rufus Modelo’s murder, and we need to confirm the identity of the shooter,” the FBI agent said.

“I don’t care. This is unacceptable. This patient is unconscious. I’m calling security now,” she said.

“He’s awake,” Raven said, his voice cracking with emotion.

“Thank God,” said Cass.

I angled my head on the pillow so I could see Cassidy but when I tried to turn my head to look back at my partner, my stomach rolled.

“Oh shit,” I managed to mutter and a second later, I felt the bed being raised. Panic began to set in just as the nurse shoved a pink kidney dish under my chin. And to top off my lovely morning, I proceeded to puke up a rather large portion of whatever fluid was in my stomach. At that moment, I was relieved that I hadn’t had a chance to take a bite of that delectable, iced lemon cake. I shut my eyes but suddenly something cool and damp was covering my forehead. When I finished throwing up, the wet washcloth was pressed to my mouth. The relief was instantaneous.

The nurse started checking my vitals as the war still raged on around me, and I answered her questions about how I was feeling.

“He’s not going to give you anything,” Mike said. “He’s got a fucking concussion.”

I did? I shook my head which turned out to be a mistake as the pounding returned. The kidney dish was moved and then replaced by a larger, rectangular basin. The

washcloth on my forehead was the only thing that felt good.

“If you have to throw up again, use the basin, sweetheart,” Raven said, leaning down to speak close to my ear. All I could do was nod as he slipped his hand back in mine.

“I’ve got a license plate,” I croaked, barely able to understand myself.

“License plate?” the guy—the FBI guy—asked. “Won’t matter. The assassin probably already dumped the car.”

Assassin?

I felt a hand on my left shoulder and glanced over to that side of the bed. Cassidy and Mike stood there, a cross between compassion and worry in both their expressions.

“What’s the number, Miguel?” Mike asked, his ever-present tiny notebook in hand. He scribbled down the number as I recited it from memory, though, the effort hurt like a bitch.

“There were spinner rims on the vehicle. Mercedes Benz SUV, black, limo tinted windows,” I said. “Really high-end car. I’d put money on the guy not dumping it,” I said directly to the FBI guy standing beside Cassidy. The man was a short, mousy looking, older guy with a bald head. He wore a twisted, corded earpiece and as soon as I gave the description, he stepped away from the bed.

Cassidy took my free hand and smiled. For the first time, I noticed one of those clip-on oxygen monitors on the middle finger, only because Cassidy’s long fingers closed over it.

“How you doing, buddy?”

“Head hurts really bad.” I felt Raven let go of my hand and then he was around the bed standing beside Cassidy and Mike. He looked terrible, with dark circles under his eyes and unbrushed hair, nothing like he’d looked when I’d seen him last, standing at the hostess stand inside the coffee shop.

“You’ve been unconscious since they brought you in here,” Raven croaked out.

I watched as his eyes got shiny. “Where am I?”

“Cedars.”

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“Cedars?” I was confused and the mariachis had returned. “Need fucking meds.”

“I’ll get those for you shortly,” said the nurse.

“Just going to the bathroom,” said Raven, squeezing my hand. “I won’t be long.”

“Okay.” I looked at Cassidy and Mike. “What happened?”

“You witnessed the murder of an FBI protected witness, Miguel,” Cassidy said, dropping my hand. He sounded disgusted. “How much do you remember?”

I narrowed my eyes because the bright lights in the room hurt. Mike walked away from the bed and a second later, the overhead lights shut off leaving the one over my bed the only illumination in the room. Moments later, he was back at his partner’s side.

“Thanks, Mike.” My whole face felt like it was on fire. I looked back at Cass. “Raven looks like shit. How long have I been here?”

“The shooting was yesterday morning.” My friend hovered over my bed, scowling. “You have a concussion.”

Yeah, someone had said that. I couldn’t remember who. “Concussion,” I repeated.

Cassidy nodded and then Raven was back, standing at his side again. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Head hurts.” I reached up to touch the wet cloth on my forehead. Underneath it, I could feel an enormous lump. “Christ.”

Cassidy frowned deeply. “What do you remember, Miguel? Anything other than the license plate. Did you get a good look at the shooter? It’s important.”

I tried to get comfortable, squirming as I tried to sit up a little more. I’d never learned how to get comfortable in a hospital bed. As the back started going up, it took me a second to realize that Cassidy was pushing a button on the bed.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“What do you remember?” Cassidy was either really worried about me or trying to find out if I knew anything other than the license plate and vehicle description.

“Uh, I was standing in the coffee shop when a girl screamed. She started running away. The guy with her started to get up but he was shot in the back of the head before he could. He fell face down into his food.” Cassidy nodded. “There were more gunshots...maybe the shooter was trying to get the girl. I had my gun out when I ran outside and then heard a car start up. When I spotted it, he drove away. Is the girl okay?”

Cassidy shook his head. “She was shot in the back as she fled her boyfriend’s side...died before the ambulance got there.”

“Who were they?” None of this was making sense to me.

“Protected witnesses,” said Mike.

“I know. But who were they? Protected from who?”

“Rufus Modelo, sicario in the Sanchez Cartel out of Guadalajara,” Cassidy said. “The FBI is being cagey but from what we’ve been able to put together, they think she was his girlfriend. It appears that she went to one of his friends to turn him into the cartel to save herself after he made contact. Mike and I think they decided to take her out along with Modelo to tie up loose ends. The poor girl wasn’t expecting to be shot in the back for her trouble.”

Mike continued the story, the way he always did when his partner stopped to take a breath. Good partners could do that and normally, I could follow the two best friends. Right now, though, my head was splitting, and it was taking a great effort.

“The FBI had him in witness protection in one of their safehouses, all set to testify against Rafael Sanchez, until he escaped through a bathroom window when he was supposed to be taking a shower three days ago. He was invisible for almost three days, hiding from the cartel, until he made himself visible by making the call to Gina.”

“And Rafael Sanchez is who now?”

“Half-brother to Oscar Castillo, the current head of the Sanchez Cartel,” Cassidy replied.

“Gina was Modelo’s girlfriend?” I asked.

“Yes, Gina Cardoza,” Cassidy said as Mike nodded. “Did you get a good look at the shooter?”

I slowly shook my head. “No. I was inside the coffee shop when he shot the guy. I ran out to try to get a look at him, but he was gone. A car started up which drew my

attention and the next thing I knew, the shooter was tearing out of the parking lot and I was memorizing the license plate. He'd barely gone when the FBI showed up. You know the rest."

"Okay," a different female voice said from the vicinity of the door. With the wall of men between me and the entrance, I couldn't see her but there was no mistaking the authority in her accented voice either. "Mr. Huerta needs to take these pills." A small black-haired nurse appeared around the foot of the bed, holding a small plastic cup. She smiled brightly when she saw me. "My patient needs his rest." She hefted the pills and shook the plastic cup in Cassidy's face. I wanted to laugh at his expression. "And he needs these pills."

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She conferred with her colleague and noted down the quantity and time of them.

“The FBI needs to leave, this patient won’t be questioned any more today.”

The FBI man opened his mouth but she held up her hand. “No. You can leave now.” He sighed, looked like he wanted to say something else, but then marched out of the room.

“I’m already breaking the rules by letting you two stay as long as you have,” she said addressing Cassidy and Mike. She turned and glanced at Raven, offering him a smile as she softened her voice. “You can stay, dear...as long as you let him rest.”

“Thank you,” Raven said, backing up along with my two detective friends, to let her get close to me.

“Hi there. I’m Sanji. It’s nice to see you with your eyes open. What a beautiful color.” She patted my hand. “How are you feeling, Mr. Huerta?”

“Like complete crap,” I said. “And really tired. I’ve got a splitting headache.”

“Yes, this will help with the pain.” She held out the cup so I could see the two pills in it. “This is Tylenol which is all I can give you with a head injury. Sorry if you were expecting something stronger.” She took hold of my wrist, turning it so she could read my name on the plastic wristband.

At the moment all I really wanted was a horse tranquilizer, but I doubted I could talk the small, brown woman into that. She looked formidable but it was the way my

partner and my two intimidating friends backed up at her orders, that confirmed who was in charge here.

“Can you tell me your full name?”

“Miguel Huerta.”

“And what day is it?” She reached for a pink pitcher, pouring water into a cup.

I furrowed my brows, regretting that immediately as it only made my head hurt worse. “Tuesday, I guess.”

“That’s right. You’ve been asleep since you were brought in by ambulance yesterday morning but that’s to be expected with a goose egg on your forehead. It’s quite a spectacular bump, if I do say so myself.” She smiled brightly. “Can you hold the cup by yourself, Mr. Huerta?”

Of course, I could. But when I reached for the cup with my right hand, the IV line pulled. I reached for it with my left and noticed how my hand shook.

“That’s okay, I’ll help,” she said kindly. She held the cup for me as I took the pills and got several swallows of water down. It was cold from the ice in the pitcher and felt completely amazing on my parched throat. She smiled contentedly and then looked back over her shoulder. “Everyone but Mr. Mathis...out of the room!” She made a shooing motion.

“We’ll be back, Miguel,” Cassidy said.

“Glad to see you’re awake,” Mike added before leaving with Cassidy at his side.

“Do you need anything?” my nurse asked.

“Just some sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll be right outside. Try to get some rest until they come to move you.”

“Move me?”

Raven took my hand as she walked toward the door. I heard it swish open and then shut, noticing for the first time, that it was a sliding glass door, not the regular kind. “You’re in intensive care, Miguel. They’ll be moving you to the med-surge floor as soon as they have a room ready.”

“ICU?” Someone said that before, didn’t they?

Raven nodded, pointing to my forehead. “Head injury, Miguel.”

I wanted to groan. “Fuck. How long do I have to stay here?” I really hated hospitals, even nice ones like Cedars-Sinai.

“Baby, you’ve been out for almost thirty-six hours. That FBI guy could have killed you when he kicked you in the head. You’d better believe he’s in big fucking trouble if Cassidy and Mike have their way.” He squeezed my hand and once again, I noted how utterly wrecked he looked.

“Sunshine. You haven’t slept,” I said.

He shook his head. “When you’re out of danger and safe in your own room, I’ll sleep on the chair. I’m told all the rooms have comfortable, reclining chairs that fold out into beds.”

“How long do I have to stay here?”

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He sighed. “They’ve ordered a CAT scan to make sure your brain isn’t bleeding, but you’ll be able to go home tomorrow if you’re cleared.” He made himself busy by straightening the blankets on my bed. I knew he was worried. He wasn’t hard to read as he kept on talking. “The doctors here are nice. I even made sure the ophthalmologist on call took a look at your eye. It turns out, you were right. There aren’t any brick fragments or splinters in those beautiful eyes. Thank God you have a thick skull.”

I smiled. “I’ll remember that for the next time an FBI agent decides to kick me in the head.”

“That man should have been arrested. I saw the whole thing and made a complaint to the agent’s boss. They did a little racial profiling, though, they’ll never admit it.”

“The FBI mistook me for one of the cartel goons.” That made sense.

“Yeah, apparently, you running out of the store, gun in hand, gave them the excuse they needed to kick you in the head. That guy is in a lot of trouble, though.”

“How do you know?”

“I called the big guns,” Raven said.

I had to think. “Lincoln and Mac?”

He nodded. “And apparently, they went to bat for you the minute I told them what happened.”

I smiled, knowing that our friends in the FBI would have done just that. My eyelids felt heavy, but I forced them to remain open as I looked at Raven. He must have been so scared. I reached up and cupped his stubbled cheek. He hadn't shaved either. "Sunshine, I gotta sleep."

I heard him sigh. "Go to sleep, Miguel. I'm gonna step out for a minute. I gotta get a salad or something. Lincoln and Mac have two agents posted outside the door. They trust these guys and they have orders not to let any other agents bother you. I'll be back in a jiffy."

I knew he probably hadn't eaten a thing. If he'd been the one lying in a hospital bed, I wouldn't leave him unprotected either. "I love you, Raven." I closed my eyes.

"I love you too, baby."

The pressure from his lips was there one second and gone the next. I fell asleep, tasting Raven on my lips.

Chapter Eight

RAVEN

Miguel had to stay in the hospital for another day, going home with a much smaller lump on his head and a black and blue right eye. The swelling had gone down in both injuries and for that, I was greatly relieved. He still had scratches not only from brick shards, but also from the asphalt where he'd landed face first after an overzealous FBI agent had kicked him in the back. He'd been told to limit his pain medication to Tylenol even though he said it didn't do anything for the aches and pains he had all over. For those, he'd been prescribed something else, also non-narcotic. I didn't know what it was, but I hoped it helped.

When we'd gotten home and I'd walked into the bathroom while he was stripping for the hot bath he was running, I gasped. Right between his shoulder blades was an almost perfectly shaped bruise.

"What the hell, Miguel?" I said, when he turned to look at me. "I didn't see that!"

"What?" He frowned at me.

I gave him a hand mirror, before gently taking hold of one elbow and turning him so his back was facing the mirror over the sink. "Look at your back. You have a gigantic boot print. You can match the tread pattern."

He lifted the mirror, peering in it. "Fucker. No wonder."

"No wonder...what?"

He lowered the mirror and held it out to me. "Hurts when I take a deep breath, so I keep them shallow."

I frowned, taking hold of both forearms. "I'm calling Lincoln. I want that bastard brought up on charges. He should join the asshole who kicked your head with a suspension of his own."

"Leave it, Raven. They didn't know I wasn't a cartel thug, and I don't want to make anything more out of this."

Why couldn't he understand that I wanted my own piece of flesh? The man I loved had been hurt...by FBI agents no less. "I don't understand you. That's police brutality. They should be punished."

"The guy who kicked me in the head is suspended pending an OPR investigation.

I've given Lincoln and Mac and their SAC, Sarah Connor, a statement. Let them take care of things. I trust them to take the right measures. Sarah Connor is not a shrinking violet. I think they were horrified that I got hurt."

"But the guy who kicked you in the back isn't suspended. What if he does it to someone else? That was racial profiling."

"Sunshine," he said, smiling sadly at me. "Racial profiling happens all the time. I'm used to it."

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“That doesn’t make it right.” I felt my eyes getting hot. “And I don’t want it for you. You’re the best man I know.” I pulled him into my arms and rested my cheek against his. “I love you.” I turned my face and kissed him behind the ear so I’d stop shaking. “It isn’t fair.”

He patted me on the back. “It’s okay, Raven. It could have been much worse. I promise I’m fine.”

“I hate it.”

I held him for a few more seconds before letting go and stepping back. His eyes were kind, beautiful, and kind. It was beyond my understanding how anyone could make a snap judgment based on the color of someone’s skin. Then again, one of the reasons I kept my hair short was because I’d seen how some of the men on the rez had been treated. One of the guys I’d gone to high school with had been beaten up in a gas station bathroom. The fuckers had cut his long hair while laughing at him. As usual, Miguel was right. There was just so much injustice in the world. “Take a hot bath while I make you a big bowl of soup.”

He flashed me a grin. “Tomato, okay?”

I nodded. “I knew you were gonna say that. One big bowl of tomato soup, coming up.”

I was just pulling our grilled cheese sandwiches and soup off the stove when Miguel walked into the kitchen half an hour later. He wore a pair of plaid sleeping pants and a black tank top. His hair was still damp, and I could smell the clean scent of soap on

him from here. I smiled at him. I loved him more than I could say. He smiled back, padding across the kitchen floor in soft moccasins which matched the ones I wore. He pulled me into his arms, and I lifted my face for a kiss. It was soft and sweet, a melding of lips, making me feel weak in the knees. I forced myself to pull back a minute later.

“Come on, baby. Your grilled cheese is gonna get cold.”

He grinned. “I thought I smelled buttery goodness. What kind of cheese is that?”

I plated up both sandwiches. “Smoky gouda.”

“The one we got from the farmer’s market?”

“The very one.” I put both plates on the table in our cozy, little kitchen nook and grabbed a pair of Fiestaware bowls, filling them with tomato, basil soup. It was the kind that came in a can, but Miguel loved it. I made sure to pair it with his favorite sandwich made with his favorite cheese. I wasn’t trying to be health conscious at the moment. I just wanted him to feel better and there’s nothing like a big bowl of comfort food for that. I watched him slide gingerly into the booth and then brought the soup over, setting it down before sliding in beside him.

He put his arm around me and pulled me close, kissing me softly before pulling away. “Do you know how much I love you, Raven?”

I smiled, letting my gaze roam all over his face. “I love you too, baby.” I flicked my fingers encouragingly at his food a couple of times and nodded. “Now, eat your dinner. You hardly ate anything in the hospital at all.”

Miguel snorted, picking up his sandwich, taking a huge bite. His eyes rolled back in his head as he chewed. “That’s because the hospital cafeteria doesn’t have smoky

gouda or canned soup made with love.”

I laughed, picking up my own sandwich and dunking it in the soup.

After the meal, Miguel went to the bedroom to search for the muscle relaxant his hospital physician had given him to layer with the pain medication he was taking. He’d been told that the combination of the non-narcotic pain relievers would work better than strictly Tylenol and Advil alone. I was finishing up the dishes when the doorbell rang. I dried my hands and walked out of the kitchen as Miguel came down the hall.

“Were you expecting anyone?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No.” We walked to the front door together, opening it to find Cassidy and Mike on the doorstep.

“Hey, what are you two doing here?” Miguel asked, shaking their hands. “Come in.”

I smiled at them as they walked in. “What’s going on, guys?”

“We wanted to talk to you if that’s okay,” Cassidy said. “Only if you’re feeling up to it, though.”

“I’m fine,” Miguel replied. “A little sore is all.”

We walked into the living room. “Sit down. I’ll make some coffee,” I said.

“Thanks, Raven.”

I padded off to the kitchen and got the coffee going before heading back into the living room. Cassidy and Mike sat on the couch, and Miguel had taken a cushioned

club chair. When he turned and smiled at me, I walked over and perched on the chair's arm, wrapping my arm around his shoulders.

“What's going on?”

“Cassidy and Mike have taken over the investigation into the shooting at Trader Joe's,” Miguel said. “They came here with follow up questions.”

“Big guns,” I said, smiling at them.

“Yeah, the captain in Hollywood isn't happy, but since our captain in Brentwood has a bigger dick, we win,” Mike said.

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I nodded, pretty sure that our two friends could walk on water. I was never so happy than the day I'd met them on a recovery job. To find out that they'd known Miguel for twenty years, had only been icing on the cake. "So how can we help? Miguel needs to go lie down." I looked down at him and he gave me a face.

"I'm fine, Raven. We have catching up to do. A hell of a lot has happened."

He reached for me, and I took his hand, nodding.

"Hopefully, this won't take long," Cassidy assured us before launching into the purpose of their visit. "When we ran ballistics on the bullet which the LAPD dug out of a tree in the Trader Joe's parking lot—"

"Tree?"

"We haven't caught you up," Cassidy said. "So, the morning after you were nearly shot, we went looking for the bullet the man shot at you."

"Okay." I'd almost forgotten the man who'd tried to kill Miguel, had originally been targeting me.

"We ran ballistics on it, and found a match in our database," Cassidy said.

"Oh, yeah?" Miguel asked.

"Yeah, it seems it's tied back to the cartel," Cassidy said.

“The cartel?” I felt sick to my stomach. I knew what was coming, but I had to be sure. “You aren’t talking about the same cartel from the coffee shop, right?”

Cassidy and Mike both nodded. “Unfortunately, that’s exactly what we’re talking about. You might recall it’s the Sanchez Cartel out of Guadalajara.”

“Oh, fuck,” Miguel said, gingerly touching the lump on his forehead.

“That’s pretty much what the FBI said when we told them about that connection to our Trader Joe’s case,” Mike said. “The bullet matched one used to kill a different protected witness.”

“Another FBI witness?”

Cassidy shook his head. “A DEA case.”

“Fuck!” Miguel and I said at the same time. His eyebrows shot up in question at me. “There’re way too many letter agencies in my life at the moment,” he said.

I frowned at him, nodding before turning my attention back to our LAPD friends. I couldn’t agree more.

“So...the FBI wants you in protective custody,” Cassidy said.

I stood up, letting go of Miguel’s hand. “No way, Cassidy. In case it escaped anyone’s attention, that didn’t work out so good for the guy at the coffee shop.”

“Raven, that wasn’t the FBI’s fault,” Mike said. “That witness voluntarily left their safehouse. Once he took his safety into his own hands, all bets were off. Far be it for me to defend the FBI, but the truth is, they really were trying to protect Rufus Modelo until he had a chance to testify against the head of the Sanchez Cartel. By escaping

their custody and calling his girlfriend, Gina Cardoza, he put his own life and hers at risk. And one of the Sanchez Cartels' bosses, will probably walk since Modelo is no longer around to testify."

I stared them both down. "Maybe he had a reason to be scared. Maybe he figured out that it wasn't safe in FBI custody."

"You think the FBI is dirty?" Cassidy asked. The frown he wore was almost comical.

I shrugged, glancing at Miguel before looking back at him. "Maybe. It's not the first time, I'm sure."

Miguel reached out a hand to me. "Come here."

I walked over and took his hand, allowing him to pull me back down to the arm of the chair as he smiled up at me. "You watch too much TV."

"That's not fair!" I would have jumped up again if he didn't have such a tight grip on my hand.

"Raven."

I dragged my death glare away from Miguel and back to Cassidy. "What?"

"Do you trust Lincoln and Mac?" he asked.

“Of course, but—”

“Then, if I told you they agreed two guys from his team will be the agents assigned to take charge of your protection, would that make you feel any better?”

I shrugged. “I guess, but I don’t understand why anyone would think Miguel is being targeted anyway. No one could have known he’d be at that coffee shop and in case it’s escaped anyone’s notice, he wasn’t the one shot by a cartel hitman. That guy had been targeting that Modelo guy, not Miguel,” I said, sure I was right about this.

“Raven?”

I looked down at Miguel. “Who says the cartel was targeting me? That guy outside Trader Joe’s had you in his sights. He tried to shoot you in the back of the head, not me.”

I opened my mouth and then shut it before turning to Mike and Cassidy. “Me? Why? I don’t have any connection to the Sanchez Cartel...or any cartel.”

“No, but we think Benedict Flores did and that makes both of you targets.” Cassidy lifted his face and sniffed the air. “I’ll tell you why after we get that coffee.” He smiled.

“Oh, shit.” I jumped up. “Be right back.” I ran into the kitchen and returned with a coffee mug for each of them. “So, tell me.”

Mike took a sip before setting it down on a coaster and leaning forward. “The fact

that you were driving Miguel's old Ford and not your own truck, probably saved both of your lives," Mike said. When I opened my mouth to say something, he held up a hand. "As you know, the Ram was towed to our impound lot. It was broken into last night. There're very few personnel on duty at night, but it's protected by a fence and cameras. On surveillance tape, a man matching the description of the shooter out in Compton, scaled an eight-foot-high fence, threw a coat over razor wire at the top so he wouldn't get all cut up, and strolled across the lot right to your truck. He looked inside, wrote something down, and then got away before anyone could stop him."

"Huh?"

"We think he was confirming the truck was yours because he seemed to be reading the VIN number off the dashboard," Cassidy said.

I flashed Miguel a look before turning back to them. "How could he check the VIN number?"

"A cartel contact working at the DMV or any number of other ways, Raven," Mike said. "We think they were looking for the Ram but if the cartel hitter had been searching for Miguel's older F-150, things at that coffee shop, might have turned out to be a win-win for the cartel. The hitter could have taken Miguel and you out at the same time as Modelo if he'd put two and two together. As it was, driving the Ford, probably saved his life."

"That's pretty thin, Cassidy," I said.

Cassidy smirked at Mike. "He thinks we woke up as detectives yesterday and don't have a combined thirty-five years of experience on the job."

"That's not what I meant," I said, knowing I probably sounded like a pouty kid.

“He didn’t mean any insult, guys,” Miguel said. “Why do you think the hitter went to the extraordinary length of looking at the Ram’s VIN number?”

“Mike’s theory, and it’s a good one, is that the cartel thinks you two are undercover FBI agents,” Cassidy replied. “By confirming that your truck was in an LAPD impound lot and not released to you by the FBI immediately, they have confirmation that their theory is maybe wrong about you being undercover.”

I felt a chill go through me as I realized the implications. “But that might mean the cartel now thinks we’re undercover LAPD cops.” My stomach was doing flip-flops.

Cassidy and Mike nodded. “That’s entirely possible and either way, that makes you targets in the FBI’s mind. Thus, the polite request that you remain in their protection.”

“That’s fucked up,” I muttered, glancing down at Miguel. “Isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “It’s reasonable, Raven. We should cooperate with the FBI if Lincoln is assigning his own guys.”

Cassidy cleared his throat and we both looked over. “Where’s your grandmother?”

“She went to stay with her nurse, Dolly. That’s why we were in Compton. We’d just dropped her off at Dolly’s house.”

Mike smiled. “Good thinking.”

I shrugged. “Well, it seemed like the best thing. With Miguel hurt, rogue CIA fuckers trying to get us to do their bidding, and now a fucking cartel hot on our trail, I’m glad we made the decision.”

“Me too,” Cassidy said.

“So, what were you saying about Benedict Flores having a connection to the Sanchez Cartel?” Miguel asked.

“We looked into your new client, Mr. Leopard, and his partnership with Benedict Flores also,” Cassidy said.

“Yeah?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

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“Yeah. When they opened their casino, Leopard wasn’t the original investor. There was a group of investors who pulled out at the last minute which is why Leopard decided to fund the casino startup himself.”

“Leopard told us that,” Miguel said. “The part about the startup, I mean. Are you saying that the Sanchez Cartel is connected to the casino?”

Cassidy and Mike nodded. “We think so, yeah. The connection is murky, but yes, we think so.” He glanced at Mike, and I could see the two detectives making a decision about what to tell us. Cassidy leaned toward us. “This is what Mike and I think.”

I nodded, desperately wanting to know what was going on.

“I’ll preface what we’re going to say with this. We think that our other case, the murder of the investigator, might have been a cartel hit also.”

“Dave Reynolds,” Miguel said.

“Right,” Cassidy replied. “We can’t confirm it because not only was no weapon found at the scene, but no bullet either. Our guys searched the entire area where the body was discovered but nada.”

“So...what makes his murder a cartel hit?” I asked.

“When we looked into Dave Reynolds, it turns out, the guy was pretty smart. He worked for Aston’s firm for many years, and when we interviewed all the other attorneys at the firm, they swore by his work. Our thinking is that he got himself

killed by the cartel because he figured things out.”

“What things?” I asked.

“We think he figured out Gregory Aston was behind the theft of the ruby you guys were hired to recover. You said there were threatening letters delivered to Mr. Flores’ office.”

“Right,” Miguel said. “Aston told us Dave Reynolds checked them for prints, but they were a dead end.”

“So, maybe Aston lied about that. Maybe Reynolds confronted him when he figured out that the letters had been faked by Aston, so Aston had the cartel kill him.”

“Shit,” I said. “But what about the theft of the ruby? Who stole it, if it was ever really stolen at all?”

“Oh, we think it was stolen,” Mike said. “We think the robbery was carried out by Salvatore Mancuso. The police investigating the theft when Tawny reported it, looked hard at him. He was their main suspect but they weren’t able to prove it.”

“Why?”

“Because Mancuso’s got some training. He’s former military. He was hired by Benedict to be his personal bodyguard, possibly with Aston’s encouragement. Think about it. It conveniently put him in Benedict’s house at all hours. The original officers could never get enough evidence, though. They also looked at Tawny.”

“Well, that would only make sense. Like we told you before, we’ve always thought she faked the robbery, stole the ruby herself,” I said.

“We’re not so sure about Tawny’s involvement,” Mike said. “It makes more sense that Aston hatched the plot to steal the ruby all by himself.”

I opened my mouth but before I could ask about why Aston would want Mancuso there at all, Miguel beat me to it.

“Why would Aston encourage Flores to hire Mancuso, assuming he was the one who stole the gem?” Miguel asked. He was so logical. His mind worked in that linear way, while mine hopped all over the place.

“The investigating officers wondered about Tawny Flores insisting that no interior cameras would be allowed in the house. And that the ones already there, be removed so no one could piggyback on them to spy on her in the buff, or whatever.”

My eyes widened. “You think Aston put Mancuso in place to seduce Tawny and get at her fortune?”

“That’s what the original investigators thought, and we think it’s a good possibility. Also, I imagine being a casino boss might come with some risk,” Cassidy said, nodding slowly. “But that’s not why.”

“Because maybe Aston and Mancuso have ties to the Sanchez Cartel,” I blurted.

“Interesting,” Mike said. “We think so too.”

“You do?”

Cassidy smiled. “We do. Not only that. We think Gregory Aston encouraged Tawny to hire you two as a ruse when he had the ruby stolen by Mancuso, to throw her off the scent. He probably figured a little start-up company like Trackers with two guys trying to get the business off the ground wasn’t a threat. But then you guys turned out

to not be the fuckups he'd hoped you'd be."

I nodded as Miguel squeezed my hand.

"We think he planned on selling the ruby to a buyer at one of Rosina Cassanova's private auctions. He fucked up, though, because he'd been told that the ruby was part of Benedict Flores' estate, passed down through generations. When he figured out that it was part of a cache of stolen gems from the Middle East, he was stuck with a ruby he couldn't sell at one of Cassanova's little auctions."

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“Sorry,” I said. “I have to interrupt. Do you think that Aston is also involved with the rogue CIA guys? That was one of our theories.”

Mike snorted, rolling his eyes at Cassidy. “Do you think our captain would hire them as detectives? They’d be better than some of the schmucks the LAPD has on the job.”

Cassidy chuckled before turning to us. “In fact, we know Aston is connected through the cartel, but we’re not sure about the rogue CIA cell.” He winced. “God, calling them a cell makes my stomach turn.”

“Mine too.”

“Still, we haven’t made that connection yet,” Mike replied. “Like Cassidy said, the connection we found is through the cartel and Mancuso.”

“Salvatore Mancuso works for the cartel,” Cassidy continued. “At least we think so.”

“How?” Miguel asked.

I nodded vigorously. I was also interested in that answer.

“Gregory Aston is the attorney of record for several low-level Sanchez Cartel thugs. He represented them in small-time busts and that means he’s on the cartel payroll.”

“Shit,” I said.

Cassidy nodded. “When Benedict Flores and Brian Leopard went into the casino

business, the original investors—the single, silent investor actually—was the Sanchez Cartel. They fronted Benedict Flores fifty million dollars for the start-up but then pulled out when the town council where they were going to build it, started making noise. The cartel didn't want anyone looking into their involvement, or more precisely, any negative headlines. Casinos always make headlines but if someone on the town council decided to stage protests, it would turn negative. And whenever these things happen, someone always looks at the investors' books."

"And the Sanchez Cartel sure as hell didn't want anyone knowing where the money for the start-up was coming from, so they pulled out," Mike said.

"That's when Brian Leopard stepped up and decided to fully fund the casino project instead," Miguel said.

"Right," Cassidy replied.

It made sense. "Do you think Brian Leopard knows Benedict's original investors were the Sanchez Cartel?"

"We don't know, but I doubt it," Cassidy said. "It could be he completely trusted Benedict. They'd been friends for years. Leopard probably thought all Benedict had to do was give the money back to the original investors, and it was a done deal. As of now, though, we don't know if Flores ever returned it."

"He didn't," I said. "At least I don't think so."

"How do you know?" Mike asked.

"Because our assistant, Judy Mendez, found an account in Benedict Flores' name with fifty million dollars in a Cayman Island bank. And come to think of it, the account was opened right around the time the casino broke ground."

Cassidy and Mike exchanged a look before turning their regard back to us.

“Well, then the cartel has been extremely patient,” Miguel said. “That’s been like five years. Why on earth would they have waited?”

“If the fifty million belongs to the cartel, why would Benedict Flores stick the cartel’s money in a trust fund in Tawny’s name? That’s super risky. He set it up so she can’t get to it until she’s thirty. That’s five years from now.” I looked back at Cassidy and Mike. “We’ve always thought that she and Mancuso were lovers and that they decided to kill her husband to get to the money sooner, but maybe it was all just a big middle finger to the cartel. But Flores had to know playing games with fifty million dollars of cartel money was a death sentence. I wonder why he didn’t just give it back.”

“If you’re right, I’d say greed played heavily into that decision,” Mike said. “After all, Benedict Flores was a casino owner, the very definition of a sick gambler.”

“A total idiot,” Miguel said. “And now, it’s out of reach because it’s in a trust fund in the Cayman Islands.”

“For the time being, anyway,” Cassidy said. “My guess is that a trust fund like that can’t be broken that easily. What do you want to bet that Aston’s desperately been working on trying to do that?”

Mike nodded. “Makes sense, and it also makes sense that he would insert Salvatore Mancuso into Tawny’s life to keep eyeballs on Benedict’s private business. Having Mancuso there, might also explain the ruby theft.”

“Right, you said you think Aston had Mancuso steal the ruby,” Miguel said. “That part doesn’t make any sense. Mancuso and Aston both work for the cartel so why would Aston take the risk of having Mancuso steal the ruby when he might tell the

cartel about it? That would put Aston's life in extreme danger."

"Since we think Aston was trying to get the cartel's fifty million back by breaking the trust, maybe allowing him to pad his own pockets with a two-million-dollar ruby was no big deal to them," Mike said. "The ruby never belonged to the cartel. Why would they care if Aston worked little side projects?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because they'd be crossing the rogue CIA cell?" I asked.

"Maybe Aston had no idea about the rogue CIA guys," Mike said. "Aston thought the ruby was part of Benedict's estate for generations. That's what he was told by Tawny and probably by Benedict Flores himself. He might have simply decided that he could sell the ruby at an auction to pad his own pockets. But then, you guys uncovered the plot with the whole rogue CIA group, and he probably found out there were other stones. Who the fuck knows what motivated him after that. In the short term anyway, he could sell the ruby for a couple of million, but then by keeping you close, also get a line on where the other stones were."

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“You think he planned on getting his hands on the whole cache of gems and selling them too?” Miguel asked, sounding flabbergasted.

“We know Aston thinks he’s smarter than anyone else,” Cassidy said. “And if he was in debt to the cartel to the tune of fifty million bucks, a bunch of untraceable stones worth a fortune would certainly help him settle that debt.”

“He’s gotta be the biggest idiot on the planet,” I said. “He’s playing Russian roulette with a cartel and rogue CIA agents. Aston either has some massive balls or he’s the biggest gambler of all.”

“Or both,” Cassidy said.

I looked down at Miguel when he sighed. He had his hand on his forehead again. “You need to get in bed, Miguel.”

Cassidy and Mike immediately stood up. “We’ve kept you guys too long, but it’s been good to talk through things. If it’s okay, we’re going to stop by your office to talk with Judy to look at that Cayman Island account she found.”

We both stood as well. “Of course, guys.” We shook hands and walked them to the door.

Mike frowned at us. “Stay put and don’t open the door to anyone until Lincoln’s guys get here.”

I sighed. “Fine. Do you know their names?”

The detectives exchanged a glance. “Rayburn and Perez, I think?” Cassidy said. He pointed at Miguel. “Keep your gun close and get some rest. You look like dog chow.”

I laughed before shutting the door and locking it up tight.

Chapter Nine

RAVEN

After Mike and Cassidy left the house, I sent Miguel to bed, making sure he was comfortable, and took my iPad along with a book, out to the living room. I needed to get out of my head. Everything Cassidy and Mike had shared with us had been fascinating. Of course, we’d done our own sharing, and were really happy we’d been able to give them some information they didn’t know.

As always, I was proud of Judy for digging up what we knew about the Cayman Islands trust fund account that Benedict Flores had set up for Tawny. As far as his partnership with our new client went, I really hoped Brian Leopard was innocent and had no hand in his partner’s death. He’d struck both Miguel and I as an honest man who’d legitimately come to us for answers. I really liked the peculiar man.

When Cassidy talked about Dave Reynolds’ murder, it made me sad all over again. If Aston really had orchestrated his death, arranging for a cartel goon to kill the investigator, then leaving his body to rot in an abandoned hellhole, I wanted to see him in jail. That kind of cruelty was a horror. I’d always thought there was something off about the guy. I wasn’t the best judge of character, but it was easy to believe Gregory Aston was dirty.

The fact that Aston had represented the cartel in past legal cases, kind of said it all to me. He reminded me of that sleazy mob lawyer who’d represented John Gotti back in the day. I wasn’t naïve. I believed that under our system of justice, everyone deserved

their day in court, even the really vile criminals, but there was something about those high-priced defense attorneys that made my skin crawl as much as their clients.

I was determined to put it all out of my head while I waited for Lincoln's guys to come over, so I opened the paperback and reacquainted myself with it so I could write a Nightcrawler review. I wasn't keeping up with the blog like I should. But maybe after all this nonsense was over and done with and we'd earned a little money for these recoveries, I could take Miguel away with Nana to Arizona like I planned. I'd see to it that she visited the medicine man, and I'd alternate between screwing my beautiful partner and reading good books. I set down the paperback after familiarizing myself with it, picked up my device, and began writing.

Book title: A Pringle in Time

Author: Jonathan Staid

Publisher: Self-published

Genre: M/M Erotic Romance/sci-fi

Review/rating by Nightcrawler:

Synopsis:

A mysterious object appears in the middle of a football field, baffling authorities with figuring out how to determine exactly what it is. The mystery is compounded by the fact that young children are attracted to it.

My review:

I have to admit that for the first time, I'm confused by what the hell I read. I mean, I

know it was a book with pages and words, and though, I'd like to leave my review there, Nightcrawler realizes that you, my loyal readers, have come to expect more from me.

This book was hard to figure out and as always, I looked at the categories and shelves where it was listed for answers. I really need to stop doing that because I consider myself a fairly intelligent person. I know that the cart doesn't come before the horse, the tail doesn't wag the dog, and that I really am faster than my shadow. I've read my share of MM Romances and even some in the sci-fi subcategory which were really good, but this book, didn't seem to fit the MM Romance category. It had no gay characters other than a professor who did a lot of talking, and by the author's own account, looked very "homosexual" in his Tom Ford suit, pink tie, and Manolo Blahnik boots.

PUHLEEZ

I suppose—and I preface this by saying I wouldn't really call it sci-fi either—that the gigantic Pringle potato chip's sudden appearance in the center of a high school football field in the midst of a homecoming game, might make it so. I guess you'd have to call that the beginning of the book. The children, parents, coaches, cheerleaders, and the players, kind of freaked out and began running from the stadium which then turned into pandemonium. Authorities were called and then suddenly young children started showing up. None of them had parents, which was unexplained. I guess you'd call that the middle of the book.

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As far as the end of the book is concerned, I couldn't tell you because that was pretty much it. It ended with kids showing up to look at the giant potato chip. They didn't look hungry...the author made a big deal of explaining that for two paragraphs on the last page. I received the paperback from the author's agent for a Nightcrawler review so when I reached the end, looking for another page and finding none, I called the agent to ask where the rest of the book was.

He hung up on me. Super bad form...agent.

But because Nightcrawler is always fair, and rather than leave a bad review, I hopped onto the bookseller's site and purchased an eBook copy to read the ending, just to make sure I had the whole thing. Sure enough, Mr. Staid ended it where I thought he had, leaving me mystified as to what I just read. Clearly, I can't recommend this drivel, minus the gay (since calling gay men "homosexuals" is just icky for me), minus the romance, and pretty much minus the sci-fi, thus the

Instead, I recommend that you go out and buy a can of Pringles.

I chuckled a little as I was posting the review and nearly jumped off the couch when I heard a knock at the front door. I set aside the iPad and moved Stanley's little head off my leg where he'd been napping against one of his favorite humans. He gave me the stink eye and moved over to another corner of the couch, curling back into a ball.

Going to answer the door, I saw three figures through the frosted glass and cursed myself for being so jumpy. I checked the ID's through the peephole, but still cautiously opened the door until I got a good look at the FBI credentials and nodded before the three tucked them away.

“Are you Mathis or Huerta?” the compact Asian woman asked. She was beautiful with straight, shiny black hair pulled back in a low bun just touching her black suit coat.

I stuck out my hand, smiling. “Raven Mathis.”

“Special Agent Kindness Rayburn.” She took my hand, giving me a confident grip as she shook.

“Come in.” I stood aside, opening the door wide, letting them into the house.

The stunning blonde woman smiled, holding out her hand. “Special Agent Beth Michaels.” She glanced over at the big man who loomed over them both.

Bald with a Hispanic appearance, he was a solid wall of muscle and the black suit he wore fitted tightly over his biceps. “This is our partner, Special Agent Carter Perez.” I took his warm hand in mine when he smiled. I liked all of them already.

“Miguel is asleep,” I said, ushering them into the living room. “He just came home from the hospital, so he’s exhausted.” I waved at the couch. “Please, have a seat.”

They all came in and sat on the big sofa side by side. Perez immediately reached over to pet Stanley. The kitten looked up at him with orange eyes and bumped his head into the large man’s hand. Perez’s smile was warm as he scratched behind the ears. I stood there, not knowing the protocol for being a protectee, so instead, I defaulted to being a good host. “Can I get anyone some coffee or a drink? We have everything.”

“No, thank you,” Michaels said.

I nodded and went to sit on the chair across from them. I was a little nervous, not knowing what to ask, but I cleared my throat and went for the obvious. “I wasn’t

expecting three of you. Cassidy Ryan said Lincoln was sending two agents.”

“Special Agents,” Rayburn said with a straight face.

I blushed. “Oh, shoot...I’m sorry.”

She grinned widely. “I’m just kidding. We aren’t married to any titles here. Please call me Kindness.” She glanced at the woman beside her.

“Beth is fine, really,” she said.

“Call me Carter, though, most people still call me Perez. I’ll answer to anything but jackass.” He smiled.

I couldn’t help but shake my head. “Raven.”

“Getting back to why there are three of us,” Kindness said, “it’s because the rest of our team is on a case out in Bakersfield. Beth and I just came from there and Perez drove. He’s not a bad chauffeur.”

“Hello,” Perez singsonged. “Marine Corps logistics officer.” He grinned at me. “They always forget how I navigate, track, and speak six languages. Procurement isn’t the only thing I’m good for.”

I had no doubt. He looked capable. “Six languages. That’s pretty amazing,” I said. “What do you speak? Spanish, French, German—”

He shook his head, holding up both hands and ticking off fingers. “I speak horrible mother-in-law Spanish, if her opinion carries any weight at all.” He smirked. “But I also speak fluent Dari, Pashtu, Farsi, broken-Arabic...and passable English.”

“That’s...super impressive. Shouldn’t you be like a spy or something?” I smiled to let him know I was kidding.

He shook his head. “Not for me. I never met a spy who wasn’t a total douche.”

I let out a guffaw of laughter before I could stop myself. In fact, I’d only met one spy that I liked but as far as I knew, Damon Thorne had retired from the CIA a long time ago. “Sorry, I just...we’re just having a problem with rogue CIA operatives, so I was just thinking how fitting your description of spies is.”

“That’s not true, Perez,” Michaels said. “Damon Thorne is a great guy.”

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“He isn’t a spy anymore,” Perez replied.

“You guys know Damon Thorne,” I said. “That’s interesting because he’s been very helpful to Miguel and I.”

They all nodded. “We’ve been thoroughly briefed by Mac McCallahan.”

“Oh, you know Mac,” I said, feeling like an idiot for not thinking about it before now. “I always forget Lincoln is your boss which means McCallahan is one of your colleagues.”

“We’re all team members, actually,” Kindness said. “Lincoln set up a team which includes four former Marines.” She held up her hand and then pointed to herself and Perez. “We’re two of the Marines. My specialty was whatever my CO needed it to be but I’m a crack shot and can take on and beat most people at hand to hand.”

“Hand to hand combat?” I asked, feeling surprised. She couldn’t weigh more than ninety-five pounds dripping wet.

Beth pointed to her. “Small but mighty, killer in the boxing ring, and never ever challenge her to a mixed-martial arts match. I’ve seen her bring a gorilla or a man to his knees and make him cry. Remember that time you took down that suspect with a sheet of single-ply toilet paper and a Tic Tac?”

I laughed. “Oh, I’m really going to like you guys.” I glanced at Beth. “I hope the questions aren’t prying.”

“It’s okay. We all have specialties, like Kindness says. I was assigned to the Crimes Against Children division before joining Lincoln’s team. I make sure our victims are treated well—in the hospital if necessary—and then placed somewhere safe. Whether that be with the U.S. Marshals and WITSEC or sent home to recover with good counseling from whatever ordeal they’ve suffered.” She spread her hands. “Kindness and I will be staying with you and your—”

“Better half,” I finished for her.

She nodded. “Better half.” She smiled before looking at Perez. “Carter is just here to meet you and make sure we got settled in.”

Carter reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, holding it out to me. “Snow wanted me to give you that. It has all our numbers on it. Put them on both of your phones. That way we’ll always be on speed dial.”

“Thank you so much.” I read the names and numbers. “Dr. Leo Reeves?”

“Leo is our profiler,” Kindness offered. “And his husband, Max Prince, is one of the other Marines we talked about. He came from the Marshals office which makes him a fantastic tracker...kind of like you, I’d guess.”

I shrugged. “It’s the business. What can I say?” I looked back down at the card. “Noah Burgess,” I read out loud.

“Computer whiz kid. Also, a former Marine,” Kindness said. “He works out of our office in the West L.A. Federal Building.”

I nodded. “Miguel and I have one of those too...computer whiz, I mean.”

“Judy Mendez, yeah, we read about her in the file,” Beth said.

I nodded. “So, you’ve all been briefed about the rogue CIA douches and the incident with the cartel hit.”

“Yes,” Kindness said. “Cassidy Ryan and Mike Williams briefed the team when Mr. Huerta was in the hospital.”

Perez stood up just as Miguel walked into the room as if on cue. He looked beat up and bed tossed with a line down his face. He’d been sleeping on his stomach again which I supposed was a good thing since it meant he actually had gotten some rest. He looked around the room, but his gaze slid to Perez, stopping there, clearly measuring him to be the biggest threat. I suspected if anyone was the threat in the room, Kindness Rayburn was probably the more likely.

“Hey,” I said, standing up and walking over to him. He must be feeling battered and sore, judging by how slowly he’d walked into the room, and probably needed another pain pill. “Come and meet the FBI agents Lincoln Snow sent over.”

“Sure,” he said, his shoulders dropping as it probably dawned on him that someone was going to be protecting us until we were no longer a threat to the Sanchez Cartel and the CIA shitheads. I knew the pain pills were making him loopy.

I made introductions as Rayburn and Michaels also stood. “Perez is only here as an escort,” I said, explaining why three agents had turned up.

“I see,” Miguel replied. “Please, have a seat.”

“I really gotta get to the office,” Perez said. “I just wanted to give you guys direct contact numbers for everyone on our team.” He pointed to the card I was still holding. “Mr. Mathis has all our cell numbers. If anything should happen, call anyone on that list immediately. Our office is in West L.A. but we’ll be available if for some reason Kindness or Beth aren’t.”

He didn't say it out loud, but I heard the message clearly. If Rayburn or Michaels went down in the line of fire while protecting us, other FBI agents would come to our rescue. I hated the very idea of being lumped into the category of a helpless, protected witness, but I knew Cassidy and Mike had been right. The FBI was going to insist on keeping us protected until the cartel was out of our lives, and the rogue CIA cell was no longer a threat.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Special Agent Perez," Miguel said, shaking the man's hand.

"You too, Mr. Huerta. Take care." A smile played around his lips. "It was nice meeting you, Raven." He reached out and I shook his warm hand. He had beautiful, kind eyes. I really liked Lincoln's people. I walked him to the door as Miguel took a seat on the same chair as before, so that he could talk to Beth and Kindness. I knew he was going to grill them about their backgrounds, but I wasn't worried. Both women seemed like capable professionals, and since the four of us would be living in close quarters for the foreseeable future, I wanted him to get to know and accept them.

After seeing Perez out, I left Miguel with the agents and headed for the kitchen to put on some more coffee. I pulled out an iced bundt coffee cake Dolly had made earlier in the week and cut some slices, piling everything onto a big tray with cups and returned to the living room.

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The women looked up at me and smiled.

“I’ll be right back with the coffee,” I said, taking the tray with me as I listened to the two agents going over their credentials with Miguel. Back in the living room with the coffee, I perched on the arm of Miguel’s chair, and he put his hand on my knee in a very sweet and claiming gesture. I was pretty sure he was getting more comfortable with the PDAs and it almost made me smile. I knew the agents would take it in stride. If they’d read the file the FBI had assembled on this case, especially since they were providing protection for two men living in the same house, they could put two and two together.

“I hope you don’t mind guarding two gay men,” Miguel said, as if reading my mind. I wanted to pinch him because his tone could have been nicer.

Both agents smiled. “No worries. Half of our team of six are gay men,” Rayburn said. “Our profiler, Dr. Leo Reeves, is married to another man on our team, Max Prince. You probably know Mac McCallahan is married to a man who works for the ATF, right?”

“That’s right,” Miguel said, smiling awkwardly. I could hear the embarrassment in his voice. “We met Mac’s husband, Nico, at Jarrett and Thayne’s house when we’d gotten together for the barbeque. Are their ferrets also gay?”

Kindness and Beth chuckled. “Not that we know of.”

“All we’re saying is that we know everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time, Mr. Huerta,” Beth said. “I promise you, we’re full-service protection, and sexual

orientation doesn't matter with us."

I watched Miguel smile and shrug.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sound defensive." He smiled at me before nodding back at the agents. He reached up to run his hand through his hair, wincing when he remembered the bump. "Well, now that I have total egg on my face, you'll have to call me Miguel," he said.

"Of course," Rayburn said.

"So, what can we tell you about what's been happening with us?" Miguel asked.

"As we were telling Raven, we were fully briefed by Cassidy Ryan and Mike Williams, and Lincoln practically made us memorize your file," Beth said. "You two have found yourselves in interesting times."

"If that's what you'd call a Mexican drug cartel and rogue CIA operatives wanting us dead, Beth," I replied.

Miguel frowned just a little.

I shrugged, waving at the two women on the couch. "They told us to call them Kindness and Beth. I suppose that makes us all friends now."

"Heavily armed friends." Kindness smiled and stood up. "We'd really like to get the lay of the place...entrances, exits, doors, windows, security alarms, etcetera."

Pleasantries dealt with, the agents were suddenly all business. I jumped up from the chair, and Miguel stood too. "Let's start with the garage," I said, taking them to the kitchen and through the door. The house had a side door from the garage to the

garden and they started going through a checklist, examining the lock and making sure to tell us both the door to the outside and the house were to be kept locked at all times.

I watched them exchange a glance. Beth took out a phone and began making notes. I was dying to know what she was writing down, but I kept on going through the house with them, showing them each room. We ended up back in the living room and Beth excused herself to make a call, walking outside in the backyard for privacy while Kindness turned to us.

“You two should go pack a suitcase,” she said.

“Why?” I was totally confused.

“Because if we stay here for even one more hour, we can’t possibly protect you.”

“What?” Miguel asked.

“Beth is calling Lincoln as we speak and in about five minutes, several heavily-armed FBI agents are going to show up here to transport us somewhere that the cartel or your CIA buddies can’t find you. I’m pretty sure the only reason they haven’t tried to come in here already are the three LAPD cruisers parked in front of your house.”

My mouth almost fell open as she smiled. “The bag, Raven? Really...you should go pack and be ready to leave in five minutes.”

I glanced at Miguel who looked a little less surprised than I was. “You heard her, Raven. Go pack that bag and I’ll box Stanley up, along with his food.”

“Okay, right away.” I snatched my tablet off the table and was about to walk by her when she held out her hand.

“Sorry, Raven, you can’t take any electronic devices which can be tracked. If you need a laptop or a phone, the FBI will give you an encrypted device.”

I handed her the iPad and then fished my phone out of my pocket, handing them over to her, a little in shock.

“Just turn off your phone and leave everything here. Now, go pack,” she said as Beth stepped back into the room.

I turned to look at the blonde woman. They were both rock solid under pressure and that was a good thing because my legs felt a little like Jell-O. “Lincoln and the rest of the team will meet us at our destination. Backup will be here in—” She consulted her watch before looking up. “Four minutes.”

“Where’s the destination?” I asked.

Beth smiled. “The destination,” she replied.

It took me several seconds before I got it. “Oh, okay.” And then, Miguel and I were moving in different directions.

Chapter Ten

MIGUEL

I didn’t know what kind of accommodations to expect from FBI protection, but a luxury two-bedroom suite at the Sheraton Universal Hotel in Universal City wasn’t it. I’d been a little surprised and had clearly been watching too much TV myself, thinking that the FBI would stick us in some dusty, cramped safehouse. The FBI convoy had arrived at the house exactly four minutes after we’d been ordered to pack up whatever we could carry. The seriousness of the situation was finally beginning to sink in.

Two black SUVs with tinted windows along with the three LAPD squad cars were sitting outside when Beth and Kindness whisked us off to the hotel and pulled into a subterranean garage, then up to a high floor. As soon as we were let into the spacious suite, I walked past the luxurious furnishings to the windows and noted the lack of other high rises in the immediate area. I let out a relieved breath. Of course, there wouldn’t be a sniper perch anywhere in the vicinity. Lincoln Snow was a smart man.

“Miguel?”

I turned to see Raven coming over. When he got to me, I reached up and squeezed the back of his neck affectionately. “Nice, right?”

He put a hand around my waist, pulling me to his side. “I didn’t expect this. I’m pretty sure this suite is bigger than Nana’s house.”

“Take your pick of the bedrooms.”

Kindness stood behind us, and I was all ears.

“Two agents from the team will rotate in shifts and be here in the suite at all times.” She looked toward the door when someone rang the bell. Beth walked over, checked the security, and answered it, letting Lincoln, Mac, Perez, and two other men into the suite. Lincoln immediately smiled when he saw us, coming over.

“Raven...Miguel,” he said, shaking our hands. “Glad you took us up on our offer.”

“Well, it really wasn’t an offer, Snow.” I smiled to take the bite out of my words. I had a splitting headache and just wanted to lie down again.

When a plaintive meow came from the cat carrier, Raven let out a tiny gasp and ran over to the cardboard box he’d put down on the floor in the foyer. I watched him open the carrier and Stanley jumped out, meowing as he ran across the floor to me. I bent to pick up the little, white furball then immediately regretted bending over when I suddenly got lightheaded. Our kitten blinked up at me with orange eyes and mewed like a baby. I couldn’t help but laugh as the fleeting dizziness ebbed and snuggled down into his fur.

“Put him down so he can explore,” Raven said. He glanced at Perez who walked over to join us. “I’m sorry but we’re going to need a fresh litter box.”

“Gotcha,” Perez replied, looking at the kitten. A little smile crossed his face as he reached out to pet Stanley, although he looked a little sheepish. “I’m afraid of mean cats, but this little guy is sweet. I’m more of a dog guy myself.”

Raven chuckled. “You’re afraid of mean cats but not killers?” he teased.

Perez smiled again. “They come with the territory. What can I say?”

I leaned down to set Stanley on the ground but swayed as my headache hit full force. Feeling suddenly nauseous, I recognized the lingering effects from the concussion and made a conscious effort not to bring up the coffee and cake I’d nibbled on back at the house. Raven’s arm was around me in an instant as he frowned at my face.

“You need to sit down while I get some pain pills. Come over here.”

We headed to a comfortable looking white sofa and I sank down onto it as the other agents came over.

“Hi there. I’m Leo,” one of the agents said, reaching for my hand. “Please, stay seated,” he said, as I started to rise. We shook hands and I realized that this had to be the doctor...Snow’s profiler, Dr. Leo Reeves.

“Max,” a second agent said, also offering his hand.

I took it, nodding. “Nice to meet you both.” Lincoln and Mac were suddenly in front of me. Raven came over, handing me a bottle of water, and some pills as he sat down on the couch, and Lincoln began talking.

“You okay?” Snow asked, frowning just a bit.

I nodded, drinking half of the water.

“Okay, I want to go over FBI protection protocols if you feel up to it,” Snow said.
“I’ll try to keep it short.”

I waved at the chairs clustered around the living area. “Have a seat, Lincoln.”

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He sat in one of the chairs near the couch. “Okay. In an abundance of caution, we’re treating this as a step up from a normal FBI protection detail. Think of it as WITSEC without all the paperwork.” He flashed me a toothy grin which looked bright in his dark face. “You’ll have two agents with you at all times. Special Agents Rayburn, Michaels, Perez, McCallahan, Prince, and Dr. Reeves will rotate in two-person shifts. You are not to leave this room.

“As far as meals, you don’t need to worry about them. They will be brought in. They’re prepared in the hotel kitchen under the supervision of agents. If you have any dietary restrictions, let us know and we’ll make sure those are followed to the letter.” He turned to the small kitchen area before looking back. “There’s a full-sized refrigerator. We’ll stock it with whatever you want and it will all be checked before it comes into the room. Are we clear on everything so far?” He waited for confirmation that we’d understood. Raven and I both nodded.

“Good. The freezer makes ice so you won’t need any from the ice maker in the hallway. If you need laundry done, an agent will take care of that.”

“That’s a lot of eyes on our food,” Raven said. When I glanced over at him, he shrugged. “It’s like the FBI is afraid that we could be poisoned.”

“It’s been known to happen, Raven,” Snow said solemnly. “That’s why we take all these precautions. The ventilation system in the hotel basement has a security detail on it. No one will be able to get to you using a chemical or biological agent.”

I just had to ask. “A lot of this sounds like what the Secret Service does when the President is being threatened.” I searched his face. “Is there an active threat, Lincoln?

I mean, something...”

“Specific?” He nodded. “There’s a contract out.”

I digested that as I heard Raven’s gasp. I glanced over at him, reaching for his hand at the same moment. He stared at me as he squeezed my hand. “It’s gonna be okay. Listen to Snow.” He nodded and turned back to Lincoln.

“Raven, we’ve learned that the Sanchez Cartel knows who you are. If they don’t already know, very soon they’ll learn you’ve been taken into FBI protective custody, but we don’t want you to worry. We’re here to protect you. Are you clear on what I’ve said so far?”

“Yes, but—”

“Let me finish and then you and Miguel can ask questions, okay?”

Raven and I nodded.

“Good. Let’s continue,” he went on. “We’re working on the threats to your safety as we speak. We know the cartel is looking for you but as far as we know, at this point, Alex Filmore and whoever else he has working with him, don’t know about your protection. But I can assure you, if the rogue CIA cell finds out about it, we’ve got that covered with the wall of protection around you. Got that?”

“Yes,” Raven said, heaving in a shaky breath. It sounded like he was about to hyperventilate. I squeezed his hand.

Snow nodded. “The cartel doesn’t do things in a sneaky way but that doesn’t mean they haven’t hired someone to do their dirty work for them. Any number of contract killers could be hunting you. We’ve covered every angle we can think of. We’re

getting help from Homeland Security and the U.S. Marshals office. We're going to do our part but that doesn't mean you don't have to do your part too."

"What does that entail, Lincoln?" I asked.

"No phone calls on the house phone," Max Prince said.

I glanced at the tall man who stood beside Dr. Reeves with his arms crossed over his chest. I remembered that Prince was a former Marine like me, and he looked the part. Short hair, wide shoulders, fit body, and a serious glint in his light eyes. He was obviously very capable, which just confirmed that Lincoln Snow had hired the right guys. They were a solid team.

"What if I want to call and check on my grandmother?" Raven asked. "She's in bad health."

"Then you'll use one of the phones we'll provide for you, Raven," Snow replied.

"What if we need something? More groceries or a refill of Miguel's medication or—"

Snow held up his hand. "Everything will be brought to you." He sighed. "Look, we know this isn't going to be easy for either of you. Sitting around and waiting for something to happen or someone to get to you is going to be hard but until we put a stop to the threats, we all have to stick together and make sure that both of you make it through this. Can I count on you to listen to these agents?"

I glanced over at Raven. He was biting his lower lip, looking upset and raw. I knew it had to be killing him not to be able to take matters into his own hands and just solve it all. I also knew I had to be strong for him. Most of all, I just wished there was something I could do to help him understand how serious the situation was, especially since all I wanted to do was sleep and hope my body healed faster. I hated being

down for the count.

“Raven,” I said, “Lincoln asked you a question. Are you going to be able to listen and follow orders because right now, Sunshine, I’m not completely sure I can do this alone,” I said. “These are our friends, and they’re going to take care of us for the foreseeable future.”

His eyes looked haunted and I knew he was scared. I’d been to war and seen horrible things. Compared to me, Raven was an innocent.

“But we have a business to run, Miguel. What are we going to do if we can’t get back to the office?”

“Raven?”

We both turned to Dr. Reeves. The man had kind eyes and when he walked around the coffee table to take the other chair close to the couch, we both paid attention.

“Listen. You have a job to do but so do we. Our job is to protect you and that’s what’s important here. You and Miguel have to be alive in order to get back to your lives. People are hunting you and...” He looked over at the rest of the agents, waving at them before turning back to us. “Me and the rest of these people know how to hunt them right back. That’s what we’re trained to do.” He pointed at Max.

“My husband came from the U.S. Marshals Service. His job was to track fugitives and bring them to justice.” He pointed to his chest. “I’m a criminal profiler and a psychologist. It’s my job to get into the heads of the worst of the worst...people who want other people dead for whatever reasons. This team is more than the FBI. If you allow us to not only protect you, but work with us in doing so, I will promise you that we’ll get you back to work alive and well as soon as we possibly can.”

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He held up his hand when Raven opened his mouth to argue. I could see it on his face but Dr. Reeves went on.

“Raven, I promise that we know what we’re doing. You and Miguel are not going to get lost in the system. We won’t let that happen. Yes, the job you were hired to do is to find the missing gems. But in a way, the work we’re doing here, will accomplish the same goal. But your recovery cases have turned into way more than finding diamonds and rubies. An insurance investigator was brutally murdered, a vicious Mexican drug cartel is involved, and former CIA operatives want you out of the way because the moment you arrested Lyle Trench, you became first a nuisance and then a target. Alex Filmore and probably others, are still out there. Do you get how dangerous things have gotten? You and Miguel need to be taken off the board so that we can put all these men behind bars.”

Raven nodded, and I could see that the kind doctor had finally gotten through. He’d made a lot of good points. “Okay, Dr. Reeves. When you put it like that, of course, I’ll cooperate.” He looked around at all the agents before glancing at me. “You need to lie down. You’re green around the gills.”

I nodded, grateful that he was always on my side. I squeezed his hand and then said to Dr. Reeves, “Thank you, Doctor. We understand and we’ll help you any way we can.”

Lincoln stood. “Okay then. Why don’t you get some rest, Miguel. We’ll meet again tonight to let you know what kind of progress we’ve made in hunting these fuckers.” He smiled, and again I was reminded how good and true all these FBI agents were.

I stood on shaky legs, and Raven got off the couch with me. “Thank you for having our backs.”

Snow stepped forward and held out a hand to me. “Get some rest, Miguel. Raven’s right. You look like you’ve been run over by a truck.”

“I feel like it,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Thanks again, Lincoln,” Raven said. “We promise to be no trouble at all for you.”

We left the room then, heading down one of the hallways to a massive bedroom at one end of the suite. The room was furnished with heavy, polished cherry wood furniture and a huge four poster bed covered by a pale yellow comforter with small light green flowers of some sort. It looked so soft and inviting, all I wanted to do was crawl under the covers and sleep for a year. Instead, Raven led me to a bench at the foot of the bed and then pulled me down on it.

I reached for him but instead, he squatted to pull off my shoes and socks, putting them aside. “Stay put,” he said, going to one of the large suitcases and pulling out my favorite plaid, flannel sleeping pants and the oversized Abba T-shirt he’d bought me for Christmas. I wore it to run practically every morning and then threw it into the washer soaked in sweat afterward. It had been washed so many times, the cotton felt like heaven when I put it on. Raven knew me so well.

“Let me help you into these,” he said, walking over.

I stood to pull off the sweatpants and grudgingly let him help me into the clothes. Before he could walk away to start the unpacking I knew he was itching to do, I wrapped him up in my arms and kissed him.

“How’s the head?” he asked, breaking the kiss and looking me over critically as he

leaned back.

I kept him in my arms and offered him a smile. “I’m good but I’m more worried about you. Are you scared?”

He shrugged, looking deeply into my eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. There’s a contract killer hunting us, we’ve been forced to flee our home after stashing my nana at her nurse’s house, and FBI agents are our new roommates. Shouldn’t I be a little scared?”

I had to concede that. They were facts. “Yeah, just a little, but Snow’s on it. With not only the FBI, but also Homeland Security, and the U.S. Marshals Service searching for our would-be killer, I think they’ve got it covered, Raven, just like Doctor Reeves said. He made a good point. All those agencies are in essence doing what we were doing. And don’t forget, the CIA is pissed as hell that Alex Filmore, an operative that they trusted, is caught up in war profiteering on a massive scale. They’re no doubt hunting him not only overseas where they have the mandate to do so, but here in the States too. They have egg on their face and they can’t have that. It makes them look like total fuckups.”

“I’d argue that the CIA is full of total fuckups already,” he said, letting me go. “Now, get in bed. You need a lot more sleep to combat your head injury and I need to get these bags unpacked before everything wrinkles. Four minutes wasn’t long enough to neatly pack everything we needed.”

I sighed, letting him go. He was right. I was fucking exhausted. I walked over to the bed, threw off the decorative pillows in the center of it, and slid between what felt like 1000-count sheets that were as soft as butter. I’d have to write a letter to Sheraton to tell them how lovely my stay was. I closed my eyes, listening to the love of my life walking around the room, putting things away, and a few minutes later, I’d drifted off, safe in the knowledge that Raven and I were protected, at least for now.

I opened my eyes sometime later and glanced at the clock, noting that several hours had passed. I was lying in a comfortable bed in the darkened hotel bedroom, but when I rolled over and reached for my better half, the other side of the bed was cold. Sitting up, I looked around for Raven. He was nowhere to be found. I threw my legs over the side of the bed and stood, swaying just a bit. Tentatively touching my forehead, I noticed most of the swelling was gone.

I blew out a long breath, knowing Raven would be relieved, and I considered playing down how fucking miserable I felt. However, my head was killing me again. I needed more meds even though I hated taking them. I'd had several concussions during my years in the Marine Corps, but I'd never had one like this. This was going to be a much different recovery, so it was probably a good thing I didn't have to work. The pain was making everything difficult and I knew that drawing a weapon to defend myself or worse, Raven, would be tricky with slowed reflexes.

I headed toward the bathroom on shaky legs just as the bedroom door opened, letting light flood into the room. I squinted instantly.

“Miguel!”

Raven rushed over and grabbed me by both biceps. “Sit down. You're not steady on your feet.”

I took a few steps to the bench where I'd been sitting before, hating the fact that my overprotective partner was right. He squatted in front of me.

“Look, baby, I know you hate thinking of yourself as an invalid but you're not. You are the strongest person I know.” He let out an exasperated sigh. “At the moment, though, you've had a traumatic brain injury which is going to take time to heal. You need to take care of yourself.”

I wanted to protest but he held on tight. “Look at me, Miguel. I’m not letting up on this.” His cobalt blue eyes were beautiful in the dim light. “Take it easy, that’s all I’m asking.”

I nodded, saying nothing.

“Did you get some rest? Do you need pills? Are you hungry?”

I smiled. “So many questions.”

He frowned. "Answer me."

I sighed. "Yes to all. Now, can I please go to the bathroom before my bladder bursts?"

"Oh!" Raven instantly straightened, stepping back.

I got to my feet and he was right there, arm around my middle, walking with me to the bathroom. Thankfully, he let me do my business alone. I was standing at the sink washing my hands, when he knocked and came in before I could reply.

"How's it going?" Raven walked over with a handful of painkillers and a cold bottle of water.

"I hate that I need those," I said, drying my hands on a soft, white towel.

"I know, but it only makes sense for the time being."

I took the pills from him and downed almost the whole bottle of water with them.
"Thanks, Sunshine."

He smiled. "It's my job to take care of you just like you took care of me when I got shot, so think nothing of it." He kissed me. The feel of his soft lips was heavenly. When we separated, he took my hand. "Come on. Kindness and Beth went out and got the most wonderful food for us. You haven't eaten much since breakfast, just a slice of cake, so I know you must be starving."

Food sounded good even with a headache. He was right. My stomach was empty. As soon as we walked out of the bedroom, the scent of garlic and something delicious hit my nostrils, making my stomach growl. We headed down the hall and Raven pointed to the suite's dining room. I looked around the place as we walked through the living room. I hadn't really taken the time to notice all the luxurious appointments until now. The suite had not only two bedrooms—one on either side of the suite—but a huge living room, an enormous wet bar with a raised marble countertop and four barstools, and a dining room as well as the small kitchen.

"Hey there, sleepy head," Beth said. "I hope you got some rest."

"I did, thank you."

Kindness walked into the room, carrying dinner plates and silverware. She smiled as soon as she saw me. "I really hope you like Thai because that's what you're getting. Raven said you would."

"Are you kidding? It's my favorite. Thank you so much." Remembering that Snow had said he'd be by the suite this evening, I had to ask. "Where's Lincoln? I thought he was coming by."

"He's come and gone," Raven said. "No update as of yet," he continued, reading my mind.

"He'll be back in the morning," Beth said. "He didn't want us to wake you up."

I nodded then took in the spread on the table. Everything from pad Thai noodles, red and yellow curry, chicken satay, garlic pepper shrimp, to pineapple fried rice, spring rolls, with deep-fried pot stickers and wontons were laid out temptingly. Just the sight of a steaming pot of Tom Yum soup made my mouth water. It was a huge amount of food. The feast looked incredible.

“Our partner Max is a total foodie and knows all the best restaurants,” Kindness said.
“This is from a place called Good Thai Kitchen.”

“Oh my God, this is amazing.” I sat down at the table as the others took seats around me. I noticed Japanese eggplant with tofu and veggies in a fragrant sauce. I glanced at Raven, knowing it was his favorite. He smiled back, piling my plate with pineapple fried rice, one of my favorites.

“Raven said you like your curry spicy,” Beth said, picking up the Styrofoam container and passing it to me.

“Oh, God, yes,” I said, taking it from her. “Everything on the table are my favorites.”

“We let Raven order,” Kindness admitted, breaking chopsticks and picking up one of the wontons.

Beth ladled some of the soup into a bowl and passed it to me as Raven filled my plate to overflowing with everything else on the table. The minute I tasted the lemongrass in the soup, I was in heaven. I watched the others eat as I devoured my food, noting that Kindness ate like there was no tomorrow.

“How do you eat like this and stay as tiny as you are?” I asked, unable to stop smiling at her.

Beth snorted. “Disgusting, isn’t it? The girl never gains a pound and she eats like this all the time.”

Kindness shrugged. “Every morning I spend two hours working out in the FBI gym and when I get off at night, I generally spend another hour or two sparring at a boxing ring near my house.”

“Every day?” Raven asked.

“Well, I gotta stay in shape, so I do what I do.”

I laughed. She said it like it was normal for everyone to train like they were an Olympic athlete. “And here I thought putting in a five-mile run and an hour at the gym was excessive.”

“I bet you don’t have an extra ounce of fat on you, Huerta,” Beth said.

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“He doesn’t.” Raven looked at me with such devotion, it took my breath away.

“I’m envious,” Beth said. “I have to work out for an hour every morning just to feel like I can eat an extra bite of pasta at lunch.” She pointed at Kindness with chopsticks. “I made the mistake of trying to keep up with Kindness at the gym one time and threw up for fifteen minutes.”

“I told you to hydrate,” Kindness replied with a grin.

“I drank three bottles of water,” Beth said, sounding incredulous. “Honestly, what kind of person kickboxes for two and a half hours? I swear I had to pinch her to make sure she wasn’t an AI generated robot.”

I laughed and so did Raven. I really liked these two women.

When we finished eating, I sat back in my chair, positive I’d put on two pounds as I patted my stomach. “That food was incredible. Thank you.”

“Our pleasure,” Kindness said. “There’s more where that came from.” She stood and reached into the pocket of her slacks, producing a credit card. “Snow gave me his FBI issued Amex. He never uses it unless we’re out of town on a case, so he figured why not make good use of it.” She sat back down with a grin on her face.

I grinned at Raven. “I’m beginning to think being protected by the FBI is going to be better than I thought.” I heard a meow and turned to see Stanley running into the room. The second I moved my chair, he hopped into my lap and stretched up to sniff my plate. “Where have you been?” I asked the kitten.

“Keeping you company at the foot of your bed,” Raven replied. “He couldn’t be parted from you for even a minute. Didn’t you see him there?”

I shook my head as I stroked his back. “I totally missed him.” Stanley took that moment to jump up on the table and dash over to a skewer of chicken satay, grab it, and jump off the table.

Kindness and Beth burst into laughter as Raven and I jumped up to catch him. I’d taken no more than ten steps before a bout of dizziness hit me like a ton of bricks. I fell to my hands and knees halfway between the dining room and the living room.

“Miguel!” Raven cried, running over to my side where I’d barely caught myself with both hands. Hitting my already bruised face on the tiled floor wouldn’t have been fun. He was squatting beside me when I looked up.

“Sorry. Got dizzy all of a sudden.”

Raven reached for me with both hands as Kindness and Beth appeared at our sides. I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me as Beth reached for one bicep and Raven the other. I struggled to my feet, half in shock that I’d fallen and because the dizziness wasn’t going away. When I was standing, Beth dropped my arm but stood close.

“You’re going back to bed right now,” Raven said, still holding onto my arm.

“I feel really stupid,” I grumbled.

“Well, you shouldn’t,” Kindness said. “You just got out of the hospital, Miguel.”

“I really hope that agent loses his job,” Beth said. “FBI agents can’t kick anyone in the head, especially with a steel-toed boot.”

“Well, he’s on administrative leave and his case is in the hands of OPR. Who knows?” Kindness added.

“Thanks, guys,” I said.

“Come on, Miguel. You need to lie down.” Raven started pulling me toward the bedroom but I resisted, stopping to turn back to the agents.

“I’m really sorry for spoiling things after you were so thoughtful to order dinner.”

“Don’t be silly,” Kindness said, smiling. “Like I said, I have Lincoln’s card so there’s plenty more where that came from.”

“Thank you, and in the future, we’ll make sure Stanley is locked in the bedroom when we eat.” I smiled at them and then let Raven take me back to the bedroom.

I let him hang onto my arm the whole way but pulled free as soon as the bedroom door was closed.

“Miguel, please let me—”

“Thanks, Sunshine, but really, I can walk all by myself. I’ve been doing it for many years now.”

I headed for the bench and sank down on it.

He came over and sat beside me. I slid him a wry look. “Will you let me call the doctor, Miguel? I think you were released too soon.”

“Baby, they did a CAT scan. I don’t have a brain bleed, just a bad concussion. I stood up from the table too fast, that’s all.”

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He stared at me with worry etched all over his face then leaned in and kissed my cheek, resting his forehead there. A minute later, he leaned back and frowned. "I hate this. I hate that you were injured. I hate the cartel and I hate Alex Filmore."

"That's a lot of hate, Raven. I notice you didn't add Gregory Aston and the guys locked up at Quantico."

He glared at me. "Don't make fun of the situation. It sucks."

I sighed. "I know, but it's only temporary and you cannot get caught up in all the bad stuff. I call you Sunshine because that's who you are and I promise you, there really will be a happy ending to this where all the bad guys get their comeuppance."

He grinned. "Comeuppance? Jesus, you really are brain damaged."

I laughed.

"Okay, up with you," he said, standing. "Let me put you in bed."

"Okay, Sunshine." I circled his waist and pulled him close, loving how his body felt pressed up against mine. The oversized Abba shirt covered my groin but still the material of both my sleeping pants and the T-shirt wasn't thick enough to disguise the feel of his cock inside his jeans. "Come to bed with me." I kissed his neck because I knew it was one of his erogenous zones.

He pulled out of my arms and smiled at me. "I'll join you later. I want to find that kitten and whatever's left of the chicken, then I'll join you, okay?" He pulled me to

the side of the bed and waited for me to get in before pulling the covers up around me, leaning down to kiss me. "I'll be back, sweetheart."

I sighed, watching him straighten and walk out the door, before closing my eyes and going back to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

RAVEN

I opened my eyes, turning my head on the pillow. Miguel was sleeping on his left side, turned away from me. It was still dark outside but a glance at the clock confirmed it was near dawn. My sleep hadn't been good, worry nagging at me while I tried to figure out how I was going forward with our responsibilities at work, now that I was being forced to navigate Miguel's convalescence and our situation. I'd called Judy after everyone except Beth and Kindness left yesterday to fill her in on everything that had transpired since we'd left the hospital.

I asked her to forward the business phones to her cell and close up the office. I wanted her home and safe. The last thing I wanted was to worry about Judy getting a visit from the cartel, so I made the reluctant decision that we wouldn't be taking on any new clients until this mess was resolved. There was no reason for the doors to be open. Until all these criminals were behind bars, we weren't going back.

I informed her that I'd be checking in on her every day, however, at least until all this shit was sorted out. Judy was completely stunned by what had been happening and I had a feeling she didn't quite believe me. I mean...Mexican drug cartels and assassins? It sounded crazy even to me.

I called her later in the evening to follow up. I wanted to make sure everything went okay at the office, but it was really just an excuse to check on her one more time.

When I got her on the phone, she'd excitedly told me that Snow and McCallahan had shown up as she was gathering files and her laptop. She was slightly worried when two big guys walked in, but when they'd flashed their credentials, she'd grabbed what she needed, including her phone and computer. They'd said if she wanted to forward the office phones to her cell, that was fine, but then politely asked if the FBI could monitor any calls she received.

She hadn't agreed to that until she spoke to me. I loved how loyal she was to Miguel and me. I knew it was a horrible inconvenience, but she seemed almost excited to be helping out law enforcement and catching bad guys. I said we trusted these men with our lives and to do whatever they asked. Honestly, I figured she might be able to help. The best thing—Judy told me—was that Lincoln had given her an encrypted laptop to work on. That way, they could monitor all the emails we got on the off chance the killer might try to pass themselves off as a new client needing an urgent recovery. It just made sense.

She was excited as hell, which just made me laugh. My own little sleuth with mad hacking skills. I said the FBI would probably try to hire her away after all this. She told me to bite myself, give Miguel a kiss for her, and then hung up on me as I laughed into the phone.

I listened to Miguel softly snoring for another minute and then carefully slid out of bed. Stanley was once again curled up at Miguel's feet after I'd found him in the living room, gnawing on the skewer of chicken he'd stolen the night before. I replaced it with a fresh bowl of his favorite cat food and after he was finished, took him off to our room where the litter box was, saying good night to the agents.

Kindness and Beth had taken an extra shift, and another fresh team would replace them this morning. I jumped into the shower and then dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, knowing I wouldn't be leaving the suite. I might as well be comfortable. I glanced at Miguel's sleeping form once more before letting myself out of the bedroom.

I smelled coffee before I got halfway down the hall. Someone else was an early riser like me. I was surprised when I found four people in the dining room, sipping coffee. Max Prince and his husband, Dr. Reeves, as well as Kindness and Beth were huddled around pictures spread out on the table. I tried to get a glimpse at all of them before Max swept them into a folder and closed it.

“Good morning,” Kindness greeted. “The coffee’s fresh. I just put on a new pot since the brains of these two don’t work until they have two cups in them every morning.” She smiled warmly at her colleagues and they returned it.

“Thanks.” I glanced at the two men. “How are you?”

Dr. Reeves smiled broadly and stepped forward to shake my hand. Prince did the same.

“Good, Mr. Mathis,” the doctor replied.

“Please call me Raven. All the misters this, and misters that, are going to get annoying.”

“Of course. That goes for Max and me too. Being called doctor all the time can get old,” he replied. “Call me Leo.”

“Thank you.” I hooked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen. “I’m gonna get that coffee. Anyone want a refill?”

“Is there ever enough coffee?” Max grumbled. It was like listening to Miguel.

I chuckled but walked into the kitchen, noticing for the first time that there was also a stove and microwave, and pulled down a mug. I filled it, happy to find half and half in the fridge. It was fully stocked, as promised. I recognized several Styrofoam

containers from our dinner the night before, crowding the space. I smiled, knowing Miguel was going to be happy with leftovers for lunch. That Tom Yum soup had been out of this world. After fixing my coffee, I took the pot to the dining room and filled the agents' cups before sliding into a chair.

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“How’s Miguel?” Kindness asked.

“Still sleeping. I know he hates being down for the count, but right now, I think sleeping is all he should do. He needs to rest his brain and just shut down.”

“It happens,” Max said. “I saw my share of concussions when I was in the military. It’ll probably take a few days. I hope that agent gets his ass handed to him.”

I nodded, noticing he had a bit of a southern drawl; I wondered where he was from. “So, what’s going on?”

“Beth and I are going to leave you in Max and Leo’s capable hands today,” Kindness said.

I nodded at both women, whom I was beginning to count as friends. We suddenly had so many in law enforcement. I knew I probably shouldn’t, but at the moment, I felt very safe.

“When Miguel is awake, we’re going to call Snow. He wants to talk with both of you about things,” Leo said.

I frowned. “What things?”

“We’re gonna wait until Snow gets here so we don’t have to explain it all twice.”

A sudden pang of uneasiness shot through me. “That sounds...ominous.”

“It’s...maybe, but don’t worry. Cassidy and Mike are also coming. They should be here in the next hour,” Max said. “For now, have some breakfast. Leo and I stopped for croissants. The box is in the kitchen.”

I patted my stomach. “I saw it. Thank you. That was nice of you but after the feast we had last night, I can’t even look at food. What I really need is a run.”

“Well, you can’t go outside to do that, but we had a treadmill brought up for y’all that you can use after we finish with Snow,” Max drawled. “It sounds like Miguel ain’t gonna be up to it, though.”

“He’s not supposed to exert himself until his head is better. He nearly passed out last night after getting up too fast to chase the cat when he stole food off the table.”

“Yeah, concussions can be a bitch, but he should be feeling a little better by now,” Leo said.

“As soon as the doctor’s office opens, I’m going to give them a call,” I said.

“You can have a virtual appointment on one of our secured laptops, but we’ve been told you’re staying put,” Max said. “At least that’s the plan for now.”

“But that might change?” I was dying from curiosity to know what Cassidy, Mike, and Snow were going to tell us when they got here.

“We’ll wait until Miguel is awake and then call Snow,” Max reiterated.

I sighed. It was clear to me that they weren’t spilling the beans about anything. I sipped my coffee in silence as the others exchanged loaded glances with each other.

“So, your cat stole food right off the table,huh?” Max asked, changing the subject. I

could see the smile playing around his lips. Very handsome man.

I nodded. “Little shit jumped right up on the table, snatched a skewer of chicken satay, and had it on the ground before anyone could do anything about it. It’s kind of a miracle he didn’t drive the skewer through his teeny tiny brain.”

Max glared at Kindness. “Why wasn’t I invited? You know I love Thai food. “Where’d you get it?”

“Good Thai Kitchen.”

“Oh, man, I love that place,” Leo groaned. He glanced at his husband. “We need to go there as soon as we get the chance.”

Max smiled at him and reached over to squeeze his bicep.

I loved how affectionate they were with each other. I got up when I heard the door opening at the other end of the suite. Setting down my coffee cup, I headed to meet Miguel halfway down the hall. He was freshly showered and dressed, looking almost normal as he walked confidently toward me. I stopped him, sliding my arms around him. When I kissed him, he tasted like toothpaste. I studied his face as he pulled back, letting out a huge sigh of relief. The swelling in his face was greatly reduced, the lump was almost gone, leaving only bruises, and his color was back.

“Oh, God.” I sighed, leaning my forehead against his.

“What is it, Sunshine?”

“You just look so much better.” I leaned back, letting my gaze roam all over his face.

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“Good genes,” he said, smiling.

I swept my gaze down his form before returning it to his face. “Are you steady on your feet? Any dizziness?”

He shook his head. “No more dizziness. I feel great this morning. I don’t even think I’m gonna need pain meds.” I breathed out another sigh of relief. “I do need one thing, though.”

“What?”

“Apotof coffee.”

I chuckled, hooking my elbow in his as he started moving down the hall. “A whole pot?”

“That’s what I said.”

We stepped into the living room and headed toward the dining room. “Max and Leo are here. Go sit with the others. I’ll grab your coffee.”

“Thanks, Raven.”

I was back at his side a minute later with a chocolate croissant and a huge mug of black coffee. He was sitting at the dining room table with the agents. I slid into the chair next to him, setting his breakfast down. He smiled at me and lifted the coffee to his mouth, drinking several gulps as the agents watched.

“You look a hell of a lot better this morning,” Kindness remarked.

“I agree. Not green around the gills anymore,” Beth added.

“I feel a lot better,” he said. “Didn’t even take any painkillers. It’s amazing what a few nights of sleep will do for a bad concussion.”

“Been there myself,” Max said.

Miguel nodded sagely, sharing the common Marine Corps bond with so many of these agents. I knew it made him feel better when he was reminded of it.

“You said something about calling Snow when Miguel woke up,” I said.

Miguel raised his eyebrows at me. “Kindness just did that.”

“He and Mac will be here with Cassidy and Mike in a few minutes,” she said, as she jumped up from the table. “I’m going to grab one of those croissants before McCallahan gets here. That giant of a man eats more than ten men combined.”

I chuckled as several of the others jumped up and headed for the kitchen. Only Leo remained in the room with us. I decided to make small talk since it was clear that no one was saying anything about whatever prompted a big meeting until everyone was in one room.

“How long have you and Max been married?”

Leo traced over the silver band he wore on his left ring finger as he smiled. “We got married in Vegas a year and a half ago.”

“Vegas? That must’ve been fun.”

“Our next-door neighbor and his boyfriend are drag queens, so they planned a bachelor party in Vegas.” He shook his head, remembering. “It would have been a total clusterfuck if the mountain lion would have eaten us.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“And then the militia showed up,” he said with a grin.

My eyes widened. “Militia?”

“It’s kind of a long story so we’ll tell you all about it the next time we get together,” Leo said with a grin. “Anyway, we exchanged our vows and...voila, here we are, old married men.”

“That’s so romantic,” I said, looking over at Miguel. “When Miguel and I are done with this crap, we’re taking a trip ourselves.”

“Oh? Where to?”

“We’re taking my nana to Arizona to see the medicine man.”

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The others came back into the room carrying plates and mugs of coffee.

“You were saying...medicine man?” Max asked.

“She was born on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. She’s in poor health, so I thought she’d do better back home on the rez, for a little while anyway. There’s nothing like traditional medicine and faith in a medicine man. I honestly believe that faith in something has healing properties all on its own.”

“I’m in total agreement,” Beth said, sipping her coffee. “When I work with kids who’ve been traumatized, I always get a feel for their belief systems and use what they tell me to decide whether what they’ve been taught is harmful or helpful.”

“How so?” Miguel asked.

“Well, for example, if a kid tells you he’s Christian or Muslim, or fill in the blank for whatever religion, but then you see scars from a cane on his back which are obviously the result of child abuse, there’s a possibility an adult was justifying the harsh behavior by using religion to punish. It happens all the time. On the other hand, lots of kids with religious faith take comfort in their belief systems. Sometimes faith is the foundation that helps heal, and sometimes that kid has lived in terror and just the mention of their faith, freaks them out.”

I nodded. “That sounds a lot like you’re working from a psychological point of view,” I said. “Which I’m sure works with kids.”

“Lincoln’s team is different,” Kindness said. She pointed at Leo. “Leo is our profiler,

right?” I nodded. “His whole job is to decipher what’s going on in a suspect’s mind. Believe me, a lot of loonies are motivated by what they call their ‘faith.’” She made air quotes.

“I get it.”

There was a knock at the hotel room door and Max went to answer it. A few seconds later, Lincoln, Mac, Perez, Cassidy, and Mike walked into the room. Cassidy immediately walked over and put a hand on Miguel’s shoulder.

“How’re you feeling, Miguel? I heard you had a dizzy spell last night.” He glanced over at Kindness and nodded before looking back down at Miguel. “Mike and I get updates,” he replied to the unasked question.

“I feel much better. No more dizziness and the bruises look worse than they feel,” Miguel said, reaching up to prod the cheekbone under his right eye. “I have a low-level headache but that’s about it.”

Cassidy patted him on the back. “Good.”

Lincoln, Mac, and our detective friends all shook hands with us as the agents cleared away cups and plates from the table.

“I’m glad to hear you’re doing better, Miguel,” Lincoln said, taking a seat at the table and putting down a laptop. “We’ve made some progress on this case, and we wanted to share it with you two.” He glanced at me and sat forward.

“Great.”

He opened the laptop and positioned the screen so everyone could see it. After tapping a few keys, a live feed popped up. I was shocked to see Judy’s smiling face

and a striking, black man with long, beaded dreadlocks sitting beside her. He grinned but Judy leaned forward as if staring into a webcam and frowned.

She gasped. “Oh, my God! Miguel! Look at your poor face.”

“Judy, it looks worse than it is,” Miguel said, soothingly.

“I should introduce these two,” Lincoln said. “For those who’ve never met Judy Mendez, Miguel and Raven’s...what’s your title, Judy?”

“Office Administrator for the Trackers Recovery Agency and friend to Miguel and Raven,” she said, sitting straighter.

“Right. Thank you, Judy,” Lincoln said. “And I’d like to introduce Special Agent Noah Burgess.”

The man on the screen waved. “Nice to meet you two. I hope you’re feeling better very soon, Miguel.”

“Thank you,” Miguel replied.

“So, the reason for this meeting and why I asked Judy and Noah to join us is because since last evening, they’ve been working together at our office at the Federal Building,” Lincoln said.

This was news to me. Judy had failed to tell me that she’d been working with the FBI. I knew about the laptop they gave her but nothing else. Personally, I was thrilled that she was involved. She did her best work behind screens. I looked up when there was another knock at the door to the hotel suite.

Lincoln said, “Be right back.” He walked out of the dining room.

I exchanged a look with Miguel who simply shrugged. As far as I knew, Lincoln's whole team along with Cassidy and Mike were here. When Lincoln returned with Damon Thorne, former CIA operative, I had to honestly admit, I wasn't surprised in the least. Miguel and I stood and shook hands with the man.

"Sorry I'm late, Lincoln." He glanced at us. "Nice to see you again." He smiled and took a seat with everyone else.

"What's going on?" I asked.

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“Raven, give Lincoln a minute to explain,” Miguel chided.

“You’re right.” I looked back at Snow. “Sorry, Lincoln, go on.” I paid attention to the two people on the screen as Noah began.

“I asked Lincoln to bring in the laptop so we could show you a live feed,” he said.

I could hear birdsong and a whirring sound as the camera—a security camera if I had to guess—slowly panned the long, red dirt road from one side to the other, showing off lush, dense jungle foliage. When the screen switched to a view looking into what appeared to be a residence, I knew whoever lived there had to be worth tons of money. The house itself was as rich as anything I’d ever seen in the movies or TV, because you couldn’t find palatial mansions built to look like old-school, tropical plantation houses on every block.

The structure was painted completely white, set back behind an enormous fountain of three white dolphins. The sculpture of dolphins shooting water through their mouths high into the air and then landing in a round pool was impressive, but the rolling lawns put the houses we’d seen in Beverly Hills to shame. What struck me most, beyond the beauty of the flowers, the bromeliads, the lush landscaping, and palm trees, was the sight of armed guard patrols. In the live feed, I counted no less than twenty patrolling the lush grounds.

“Where’s that?” Miguel said. “What are we looking at?”

“That is what multi million dollars in casino money buys you in the Cayman Islands.”

“That belongs...belonged to Benedict Flores?” Miguel asked.

“It used to,” Special Agent Burgess said.

My heart sank. “Let me take a guess.”

Miguel looked at me. “What? You think this is in the hands of the Sanchez Cartel.”

“It is now,” Judy said, minimizing the screen to a small box as she and SA Burgess came back onto the screen. I noted the small figures of guards continued moving around, confirming we were still live.

“What does that mean...now?” Miguel asked. “And how did we get this footage?”

Judy snorted and shot up a hand as Noah turned to give her a high-five.

“I hate you both,” Miguel grumbled.

“We’ve been digging into the cartel, Benedict Flores, and the fifty million dollars ever since we talked the other day,” Cassidy said. “We figured we’d start our search with Judy’s help because you guys told Mike and me that she’s the one who found the Cayman Islands account.”

“Wait. Are you saying that Flores used to own this mansion and that after he died, the head of the Sanchez Cartel just showed up and moved in?” Miguel asked.

I looked at him. “How’d you get all that?”

He nodded and pointed to his head. “Brain hurt but still functioning.”

I swatted his arm. “Brat.” I flicked a glance at Lincoln. “So, the head of the

cartel—what's his name?"

"Oscar Castillo," Lincoln replied.

"Right. So, Oscar Castillo is holed up in the Cayman Islands all by himself and surrounded by a million armed guards," I said. "Well, this just gets worse and worse."

"He's not alone," Damon Thorne said.

"Who's he with?" I asked, dreading the answer.

Max opened the folder which had been lying on the table when I first walked in this morning. He pulled out several photos, and I gasped.

"That's Gregory Aston, Brian Leopard, and Trevor, Leopard's boyfriend." I looked up. "What are they doing there with the cartel dude?"

"Oscar Castillo," Lincoln said.

"Right. What are the attorney and our clients doing with Castillo?" I asked.

"Hopefully not dying," Thorne said. "Because that would be a real shame."

Chapter Twelve

MIGUEL

“You should probably explain what you mean, Damon,” I said.

“We’ve been keeping an eye on all of these folks ever since our conversation with you and Raven,” Cassidy said. “Damon still has friends at the CIA and you know how helpful Mark Evans has been in the past.”

“We’ve had a lot of help on this case, Miguel,” Lincoln added. “We’ve been reluctant to use other federal resources as well as LAPD resources because we’ve wanted to keep the knowledge about our surveillance with this group tight, so we asked Damon.” He gestured to the folks at the table.

I frowned, glancing at Cassidy. “Well, that’s a lot to unpack. Let’s start with the LAPD. Why don’t we want to use them?”

“We all agree that there’s a leak at the LAPD,” Mike said. “But let’s start with what we’ve learned about the FBI.”

“Why?”

Noah cleared his throat and when I looked at the laptop, he’d turned to Judy. He glanced back to the camera. “You know the agent who kicked you in the head?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Kind of hard to forget,” Raven answered, reaching over to rest a hand on my

forearm.

“Judy decided to look into him.”

“I thought he was being investigated by the FBI’s Office of Professional Responsibility,” Raven said.

“He was but they’ve concluded their investigation,” Noah replied.

“And?” I asked.

“He was found to have acted with unnecessary force and he’s been put on unpaid administrative leave for a period of ninety days.”

“That’s it?” Raven practically shouted.

I covered his hand with mine, feeling the tension in him thrumming right below the surface. He relaxed at my touch.

“He had an exemplary record with the FBI prior to that incident, so they put him on leave rather than just firing him outright,” Lincoln said. “I think it’s bullshit, but sometimes that’s what happens with FBI politics, Raven.”

I looked back at the screen. “So, what did you turn up, Judy?”

“Well, I decided to do a deep dive into him after I was told what the FBI concluded and I found something that OPR either overlooked or buried,” she said excitedly.

“We’re on the fence whether OPR actually buried it or not,” Mac said, turning to us. “Normally those guys act by the book. The FBI turns to them for all internal investigations into agent conduct.” He nodded at the screen. “Tell Raven and Miguel

what you found, Judy.”

“I looked into everything I could find. On paper, the guy is squeaky clean, and he obviously passed the extensive FBI background check when he was hired because agents need high level security clearances. His wife, however, didn’t have the same scrutiny into her background.”

I frowned at Lincoln. “Don’t federal employees’ families get investigated when they’re being considered for clearances? Some of you carry a TS-SCI clearance.”

“All FBI agents do, but what you’re read in on, varies on a case-by-case basis. An agent might be cleared to receive classified information about a particular terrorist if you’re on that case, but you might not be read in on the same intel for a different case.”

“Eyes only you mean,” Raven said.

Lincoln smiled at him. “That’s right. The short answer to Miguel’s question is yes, if you’re an FBI agent, you have to pass a rigorous background check. OPR used to conduct those checks but with a recent executive order, that responsibility has been transferred to the Department of Defense’s Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, also known as DCSA.”

“You guys and your acronyms,” Raven said, rolling his eyes.

Lincoln nodded. “Regardless, they look into everything in your life, not only your financials. They go back and talk to your neighbors, your friends, your acquaintances. They look at everyone who you’re connected with now or were ever related to in your past.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. Turning to Judy, I asked, “So, what happened?”

“Roy Cabe—that’s the name of the agent—recently remarried. His first wife was investigated when Cabe was hired by the FBI but for whatever reason, the second wife never was.”

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“In our defense, there is a big backlog, what with a whole new Presidential administration coming in, and the need to clear all the political appointees because of the current transfer of agencies. That switch only aggravated the problem.”

“For fucks sake,” Raven growled. “So let me guess, Cabe’s new spouse, has some kind of ties to the cartel or something?”

“Yes,” Judy said. “Her brother is believed to be a mid-level guy in the cartel.”

“Okay, so assuming this Roy Cabe was such a good FBI agent in the past, why did he turn bad all of a sudden?” I asked.

“We think they offered him huge money to do really mundane work, and that led to more and more. You know how these things work,” Lincoln said.

I nodded.

“Eventually, that led to him leaking where a cartel witness was going to be. Whether it was through blackmail or threats, we don’t know. We do know that Roy Cabe has disappeared. No one in the agency can find him anywhere. On Friday, he and the new wife vanished.”

“They’re dead?” Raven asked.

“Well, he most certainly might be,” Mac said. “The cartel got what they needed from him and they no doubt learned of his suspension. So when he was ordered to stay home until OPR cleared him, the cartel probably did what they do best.”

Raven looked horrified and I couldn't blame him. It took some mighty big balls to disappear an FBI agent and his wife, even if the wife was related to someone in the cartel.

"I can honestly say, Cabe was in a really bad place," Lincoln said. "The minute he began working for the cartel, he knew it was only a matter of time before his ticket would be punched."

He turned back to me. "Who knows? Maybe when he saw you coming out of the store with your gun drawn, he saw it as a perfect opportunity to prove his loyalty to the FBI. He didn't know who Miguel was, just saw him as Mexican. He came up with the story about thinking he was a cartel thug and justified his actions to the FBI as having made the mistaken identity while acting with too much adrenaline during the takedown. Either way he was screwed. If the cartel didn't kill him, he'd lose his job and possibly go to jail. I could almost feel sorry for the guy if you hadn't been hurt."

I nodded. "Can you prove the money part? I mean, his bank accounts would have had to look clean when OPR investigated him, right?"

"Yes," Noah said. "And OPR did look into them. They just didn't find the Cayman Islands account that Judy was able to, because it was in the new wife's name. It was one of the things that led her—" He nodded toward Judy. "You tell it."

"I did a deep dive into the wife's finances and found a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in an account in her name. It was deposited the day Rufus Modelo escaped from the FBI's safehouse."

I sat back, stunned. "So, this FBI guy really was dirty. How does an incorruptible FBI agent suddenly decide to follow his new woman's wishes?"

"I suspect there were threats to children he shares with his first wife," Lincoln said.

“They live in Maryland and have always had a good relationship with their dad. He got along well with his ex as well.”

I looked back at the screen when Agent Burgess started speaking. “Judy and I couldn’t find anything there, no threats in email or anything else, but that doesn’t mean anything. When Rufus Modelo turned on the cartel and became a cooperating witness, he told the FBI that the cartel boss, Oscar Castillo, made all his people carry untraceable burner phones. Cabe was probably given one by his new wife. Hell, she may have even delivered the threat.”

“Great marriage,” Raven muttered.

“She probably targeted him, Raven,” Lincoln said. “That’s how these things work. She could have made him think he couldn’t live without her and once they were married, the threats were delivered and he flipped sides, becoming the FBI’s inside man for the cartel.”

“Jeez...that’s just frightening,” Raven said.

“So, going back to the LAPD,” I said to Cassidy. “Why do you think there’s a problem there also?”

“We can’t be sure,” he replied, exchanging a glance with Mike. “When we looked into the murder of Dave Reynolds, one of the first places we looked was at his friends and acquaintances.”

“It turns out one of the reasons he was a good insurance investigator was that he had a lot of friends with the LAPD. In fact, he was a cop himself until he got hurt on the job and decided to retire from the force,” said Mike.

“So, Dave Reynolds was dirty too?” I asked.

“I couldn’t find any evidence of that,” Judy was quick to add, “and believe me, I looked. What I was able to find was that he liked to go to a cop bar after work hours and drink with his buddies from the force. With friends in the LAPD, he’d be in a position to learn things that helped him with the lawyer’s cases. It could be that he opened his mouth and let slip the work he was doing for Gregory Aston. If a cop on the cartel’s payroll happened to overhear him, then it might have led to his death.”

I had to smile at that. It was clear to me that our dear, sweet Judy, had turned into quite the law enforcement junkie. She even had the lingo down to a tee. Still, I had a question. “Don’t investigators working for law firms have to maintain attorney client privilege just like the lawyers?”

“Yes,” Mike replied, “but that doesn’t mean he didn’t accidentally screw up when he had a few drinks in him. It’s been known to happen.”

“That makes sense,” I conceded. “And that information, just might have gotten him killed.”

“Sadly, yes,” Cassidy agreed.

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“So, Gregory Aston didn’t have Dave Reynolds killed after all?” Raven asked. “I really wanted to hate Aston.”

“We can’t know for sure, Raven,” Cassidy said. “But it is a possibility that he’s really and truly innocent in all of this and just a real prick in a thousand-dollar suit but there’s still a lot to hate him for...working for a cartel comes to mind. As for the rest, we’ll just have to wait and see how deep all this shit goes.”

“So, there’re most likely leaks in the LAPD and the FBI, but why do you guys think Aston, Leopard, and Trevor are down in the Cayman Islands?” I asked.

Judy cleared her throat. We all turned to look at the laptop. “Noah and I have been exploring everything we can with those guys. It seems that Trevor—his full name is Trevor Sunset Willis, by the way—has ties to the cartel through an ex-lover.”

“Sunset?” Raven snorted. “Did I hear you right? His middle name is Sunset?”

I shook my head in total agreement.

Judy grinned. “Anyway...Trevor Sunset Willis was born thirty-four years ago to hippies. He probably earned the moniker because his parents were living on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood at the time.”

“Oh, my God.” I reached up and touched my forehead because all this shit was giving me a headache. Maybe I was going to need those painkillers after all.

“Are you okay?” Judy frowned.

“Just a little bit of a headache,” I said. “Go on, Judy. What about Trevor’s ties to the cartel?”

She nodded. “He was arrested at Heathrow airport two years ago.”

“What does that have to do with the cartel?” Raven asked. “Was he smuggling drugs for them or something?”

“He was accompanying a Sanchez Cartel mule who was caught with a large amount of cocaine which was eventually tied back to the cartel. The Brits didn’t know that at the time, though. All they wanted was Trevor and the mule in jail in London. The cartel mule pled guilty to drug trafficking and is currently a guest at HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs in West London. His sentence was knocked down to five years because of the guilty plea. Trevor was let off with a lighter sentence because he was only a traveling companion. He served six months, was taken into immigration custody, sent back to the U.S., and is barred from visiting England for ten years.”

“I can’t believe it!” Raven said. “First of all, Trevor looks like he’s barely legal. I mean, when he sat there beside Brian Leopard in our office, you would have thought he was jailbait. Thirty-four is older than me. Secondly, you should have seen him. He was on his phone the entire time Leopard was talking about the recovery he wanted to hire us for, scrolling like a teenager. The only time he looked up was to call Brian ‘Daddy.’ I’m pretty sure I threw up in my mouth at least three times.”

“Well, sorry to hear about all that, but the truth is, Willis is thirty-four with a long rap sheet here in California, mostly drug and solicitation arrests,” Noah said. “When he was a kid he got into a bunch of scrapes with other Mexican kids, reportedly because someone outed him in middle school. He got kicked out by his parents, got put in the foster system, ran away multiple times, turning tricks on the streets, and eventually ended up in an overcrowded group home.”

I shook my head. “A gay, Mexican kid who had no place to go.” I looked at Cassidy and Mike. They were watching me. If it hadn’t been for the two detectives I now called friends, I could have ended up exactly like Trevor.

Judy was reading from notes or a device in her hands. “Once in the group home, Willis started getting into fights. He was seen by doctors multiple times at Good Samaritan Hospital for unexplained injuries, even a couple of broken bones, suspected rapes. You know the drill. By the time he was eighteen, he’d been arrested for prostitution and drugs, sent to juvenile hall several times.

“He was finally able to get put on probation through California’s Prop 36 which allowed low-level drug offenders to be granted probation provided they sought drug treatment and regularly checked in with their probation officer. Willis was clean for several years and then suddenly he was arrested during a DEA drug sweep outside a popular gay club. He was jailed with a lot of guys who no doubt included some connected to the cartel which dealt drugs there. Legal representation came from none other than Gregory Aston.”

“The DEA?” I asked.

“No shit,” Raven echoed my surprise. “The guy must be slipperier than a fish. He should be serving federal time.”

“He probably didn’t have any drugs on him at the time, so Aston got him off...no pun intended,” Judy said, cringing so hard I had to smile.

“True,” Lincoln said. “But it’s not too much of a stretch to believe that Aston hooked him up with the cartel to mule or at the very least travel with a mule for the cartel after that happened.”

“Wow, that’s crazy,” I said.

“To answer your earlier question, Raven, at the very least, Gregory Aston is still connected to the cartel because he’s their lawyer.”

“Right.” Raven nodded. “So, how does Brian Leopard figure into all of this and why would you think he’s in this house owned by Castillo in the Cayman Islands? I want to believe he’s an innocent in all this mess, because I didn’t get the bad guy vibe from him at all.”

“We don’t think he’s a bad guy either, Raven,” Mac replied.

I turned to look at the big man.

“We think he was lured there, perhaps by Tawny Flores.”

“She’s involved in all this after all?” Raven asked.

Noah held up both hands. “No. We don’t believe Tawny Flores or Brian Leopard have anything to do with the cartel. We think Gregory Aston went down to the Caymans to speak to the banker who’s the gatekeeper for the account with the fifty million Castillo wants back.”

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“I found a plane ticket in Gregory Aston’s name and an appointment for him to meet with a banker at the institution where the funds are being held,” Judy said.

“So...he was able to break Tawny Flores’ trust fund?” I asked.

Noah shook his head. “He’s been unable to do that. Judy and I found all the court filings and pleadings regarding the trust, and so far, nothing has gone his way. Benedict Flores was a savvy businessman. He knew what he was doing when he planted the cartel’s money in the Caymans, and it most likely got him killed for his effort.”

“So, Aston just thought he’d talk this Cayman Island banker into opening up the vault and handing him the cartel’s money?” I asked.

“He’s probably been feeling the pressure from Castillo for a long time,” Lincoln said. “Yes, he’s been the cartel’s attorney, but he also knows where some of the bodies are buried. Dave Reynolds death by a cartel bullet is proof of that, but we need more than speculation to arrest Castillo.”

“But still, it makes Aston dangerous to the man,” I replied.

Lincoln nodded. “Yes. Aston probably thought he had one last shot at staying alive, so he flew down there three days ago. That, Noah and Judy have confirmed.”

“That sounds like a Hail Mary,” I said.

“It’s probably the only shot he had,” Raven said. “If I knew I was about to get a bullet

to the back of my head or worse, to die the way Dave Reynolds did, I'd sure as hell make the trip. I'd guess he has wealth of his own, so maybe he planned on bribing the banker. Who knows?"

I nodded, then said to Lincoln, "Following that logic, do you think Aston called Tawny to come down to the Caymans by telling her that he'd gotten access to the money?"

"That's exactly what we think," he said, nodding. "She, Brian Leopard, and her boyfriend, Salvatore Mancuso, took a cartel plane to the Cayman Islands the day after Aston was to meet with the banker. Our guess is that Aston met with pushback from the banker, who was then threatened, because Castillo is sick and tired of waiting. If the banker felt like he and his family were in danger, he agreed to open the account but only to her. She'd need to come down there in person to present documents and ID."

"But they don't have court documents because Aston wasn't successful," I said to Noah and Judy.

"Right," Noah said, "but if your life is at stake, which the banker's probably is, you'd do it anyway, even with obviously false court paperwork."

"I don't get something," Raven said.

"What's that?" Cassidy asked.

"Why didn't Castillo simply threaten the banker before now? Why let this farce with Aston go on for five years?"

"I can answer that," Judy said.

Raven and I both turned back to the laptop.

“Aston has been embezzling from his law firm for years.”

“What?” I asked.

She grinned, and Noah turned to smile at her. “I hacked into the law firm’s—” She stopped and squinted into the camera. “This is all off the record, FBI guys.”

Noah laughed. Lincoln and Mac nodded. “It might have been nice to ask for that disclaimer yesterday, Judy, but go ahead. You’re good,” Lincoln said.

“I...ah...obtained banking records from Aston, Summerfield, and Billings which show that a sizeable amount of money has been disappearing from the firm’s accounts for a while now.”

“He was stealing from his own firm,” I concluded.

“Yes, and we think that money has been used by Aston to make incremental payments to the cartel to keep Oscar Castillo from killing him,” Noah replied.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Raven said.

“Actually, no, Raven, we have the records to prove it,” Noah said. “Mr. Aston has his own Cayman Islands account. Judy was able to trace withdrawals from one of the law firm’s trust accounts and equal deposits into Aston’s Cayman Island account followed by an immediate wire into a numbered Swiss bank account.”

“And you suspect the Swiss bank account belongs to the cartel?” I asked.

“Yes,” Judy said. “It’s impossible to trace without knowing the numbers, but I

currently have a program running trillions of number combinations to isolate it.”

“How much money are we talking about here?” Raven asked.

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“Eighteen million so far,” Noah said, “and I suspect the only reason the law firm hasn’t noticed the money missing from the account is because that trust account belongs to a former client of Aston’s. The client is deceased, the family has been trying to get the estate settled for almost four years. The trust account for that client is supposed to remain untouched until the estate is settled.”

“Wow,” I said, looking at Raven and glancing back at the others. “So, why hasn’t the family of the deceased simply asked for the trust account money a long time ago?”

“We think it’s because the estate is massive with over fifteen large commercial properties, several hundred residential properties, and too many bank accounts to count associated with it,” Judy said.

“That doesn’t answer the question, Judy.”

“Oh, I forgot to add the man died intestate.” She looked up. “Maybe he had Aston do the will but the beneficiaries to the estate don’t know it exists.”

“Jesus,” I spat.

“That’s what we said,” Lincoln said. “We do believe a will exists but assuming this client did all his estate planning with Aston, and the attorney saw this massive estate with property and cash, he most likely told the guy he’d set up an investment portfolio for him, requiring the law firm’s trust account.”

“To top it all off, there are several ex-wives, multiple children, and stepchildren all fighting for the money,” Judy added.

“Aston’s been doing the two-step with this estate for years then,” I said, almost mystified at how the attorney had been so blatant. “He must have known he’d eventually be caught.”

“We think so too,” Mac said, “but Aston probably has the partners convinced he can drag this probate out for years, collecting billable hours because there are so many REITs involved. That’s real estate investment trusts and bank accounts.”

“More acronyms,” Raven said, shaking his head. I smiled. “But someone’s going to figure it out soon,” Raven added. “I’m shocked that he’s been able to drag it out this long.”

“And our Financial Crimes Division will have a field day with this when the time is right,” Lincoln said. “It’ll probably mean disbarment for every one of Aston’s partners, but for now, we think Castillo is tired of waiting.”

“Aston has to have an ulcer the size of Texas with a cartel gun pointing at his head,” Mike said. “Or a knife. The cartel uses those delightful machete things.”

I nodded. “I can’t imagine robbing Peter to pay Paul for four years, knowing that he has the choice between a long federal prison sentence, or a slow death at the hands of Oscar Castillo.”

“So, you think Tawny Flores is down in the Caymans so that she can show her ID and get the fifty million released. But why is Brian Leopard there with Trevor?” I asked.

“We’ve been looking into Brian’s emails ever since we learned of his involvement,” Noah said. “We saw this on Friday morning.”

Judy and Noah’s faces disappeared from the screen, replaced by an email from Tawny to Brian.

“Hi, love. I have to fly down to the Caymans tonight and meet with my attorney to finally sign some important papers. I know you’ve been through so much with the break-in and everything. Why don’t you and Trevor pack a bag and come with me? I know you could use the time away to get out of your head for a couple of days. There’s a fantastic spa and their masseuse is to die for. We’ll eat fresh seafood, visit art galleries, and do as much shopping as you’d like. My treat, sweetie. All I have to do is make a quick stop at the bank on Thursday morning. How does that sound?

Hit me up as soon as you can. We take off from LAX at 6:05 p.m. and since we’re boarding in the new executive terminal, we get to do TSA and Customs there. We’ll be there at five p.m. sharp. My attorney is letting us use his firm’s private Gulf Stream. It’ll be fun. Kiss kiss. Love you, Tawny.”

“Then, Brian’s reply.”

“Oh, you sweet girl, how wonderful! I just read this to Trevor and he’s over the moon. We can’t wait to see you! I love it! See you then, Tawns.”

“Tawns?” Raven snorted.

“We thought the same thing,” Lincoln said, smiling. “So, that’s another reason why we’re convinced Brian Leopard is innocent in this mess.” He looked at Damon as Judy and Noah reappeared on the screen again. “Why don’t you tell Raven and Miguel the rest, Damon.”

I turned my attention to the former operative. “There’s more?”

Damon nodded, looking serious. “Do you want to show them the footage from outside the plantation house, Noah?”

“Sure. This is video feed from that camera at the gate to the estate. It was taken two

hours ago.” The screen instantly switched to a camera feed. It was the same one they’d first shown us...with the red dirt road, the lush jungle almost looking sinister now. In the distance a large SUV could clearly be seen coming up the road toward what I now knew to be the plantation house. The camera showed the road from a higher-than-average angle which meant it was probably mounted on a gate pillar.

This time the image stayed fixed on the SUV which became larger and larger the closer it got. If it was the same camera, which had been panning before, that meant it was being operated by someone. I mentally tried to count how many guards were holed up on the grounds, knowing Castillo was probably being guarded by a fuck load of heavily-armed men. If this was the base of operations for the cartel, hell, there could be a hundred sicarios in that place. It was big enough. The vehicle was black, and a single figure drove. As the Land Rover got close enough, I narrowed my eyes to see the driver’s face.

“Pause it, Noah,” Snow said.

The feed stopped and the man’s face was clear on the screen. He was only vaguely familiar to me. “Who is that?”

“You don’t recognize him?”

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I tilted my head. “Looks familiar, Thorne.”

“That’s Alex Filmore,” Damon said.

It struck me then. I’d seen the guy around the Afghan base camp several times, but until this moment, I hadn’t matched the name with the face.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” I cursed under my breath. “That’s one of the intelligence guys I’d seen on base. He’s older now...that’s Filmore?”

“Yes,” Damon replied.

I looked at Raven. “You know what this means?”

“That all this shit is connected and now we have proof?”

I shook my head sadly. “Yeah, but not only that. There are innocent people inside that den of snakes, Raven.”

“If they’re even still alive,” Raven replied, looking like he was about to cry.

I took his hand and squeezed it hard, staring into his eyes before turning back to the screen. I stared at the face I hadn’t seen in many years before dragging my gaze back to Lincoln. “What do we do now?”

Snow sighed deeply. “There’s only one thing to do.” He glanced at Mac and then Damon. “We need to end this.”

I was about to ask him what the fuck that meant when his phone suddenly rang. He swore under his breath and I watched him yank it out of an inner pocket in his jacket.

“Snow!” he barked into the phone. He listened for a whole minute as I watched his face fall. “What the hell,” he muttered. He listened. After another minute, he made a fist with his free hand and turned to Mac. They exchanged a loaded glance before Lincoln spoke again. He visibly straightened. “Yes, sir. I understand.” He checked his watch. “Tell them we’ll meet them at the Federal Building in half an hour.” He hung up and rubbed his eyes, shaking his head. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“What?” I asked.

“That was my SAC. Mac and I have been ordered back to the office to speak to his counterpart at the DEA.” He suddenly turned back to the laptop. Noah and Judy were looking up at someone who was talking to them.

“Yes, sir,” Noah said before facing the webcam. “Gotta go, guys.” He leaned toward the screen before it went black.

I glanced at Lincoln. “What just happened?”

“Apparently, the DEA has an ongoing task force looking into the cartel. They’re a pubic hair away from being able to make a case to bring down Oscar Castillo and the entire Sanchez Cartel. Mac and I have been ordered back to the office to meet with the DEA to explain why we’ve been investigating Trevor Sunset Willis. Apparently, Noah and Judy’s searches have been noticed,” he growled.

“Why?” Mac asked.

Lincoln’s teeth were grinding. “Because he’s an undercover DEA agent.”

“Trevor?” Raven asked. He sounded incredulous.

“Yes, and we might have just gotten him killed and blown their whole fucking case,” Lincoln said. “Sorry, guys, but we’ve got to go.” His phone rang again, and he swiped angrily at it. “Yes, sir?” He listened a few seconds before looking me right in the eye. “I don’t think...” He paused. “Yes, sir. They’ll be there.” He pulled the phone away from his ear. “Miguel. You and Raven are going with us. Cars will be outside in ten minutes.”

“Fuck!” I swore under my breath before looking at Raven. His eyes were as round as saucers. “I’m so sorry, Raven, but I really need some pills.”

He jumped up. “Yeah, right now.”

I watched him run out of the room before dropping my voice to a whisper. “This is fucked up, Snow. I don’t want Raven anywhere near those DEA fuckers and he’s definitely not getting dragged deeper into any of this shit.”

Lincoln nodded. “I know, and for the record, I’m sorry, Miguel. I had no idea.”

Damon began to rub his hands together. “What?” I growled.

“Take it easy, Huerta. This is exciting. No one’s going to get hurt so sac up. This is just like old times,” he said with a grin.

I was not amused in the least. “Just like old times, asshole?”

“Don’t worry, Miguel. I’ve always had your back and now, every fucking federal agency in the U.S. has Raven’s as well.”

“Whatever you say, Damon.”

My head was killing me.

Chapter Thirteen

RAVEN

Miguel and I walked into the FBI offices thirty-five minutes after Snow hung up the phone with his SAC flanked by a phalanx of armed agents. I was pissed, because I was here with my injured partner—who still desperately needed to rest and recover—and I knew we were in for more grueling hours of interrogation, when all Miguel needed was rest. Okay, I knew interrogation was probably the wrong word for it. But we’d be expected to go through the last six months of crap we’d encountered ever since Miguel had returned a call from Gregory Aston, our first big case after we’d opened Trackers.

I knew the goddamned DEA would want to know all about the Mulberry diamond recovery, John Sutter, Miguel’s time in the service, and how all that played into this mess we’d gotten ourselves into. But worst of all, Judy would probably find herself in jail for hacking into bank accounts and emails now that every federal law enforcement agency I could think of was involved. Hell, having Max Prince here with his U.S. Marshals Service background, brought those guys into it as well.

My sick grandmother was in hiding with her nurse, an unknown assassin had tried to take me out in a shopping center parking lot, and Miguel had nearly been kicked to death by an FBI agent with his head so far up the Sanchez Cartel’s ass, he couldn’t

see.

I had fumed all the way over from the hotel to the office in Westwood, and it wasn't even noon. Even though Miguel had said he was much better, I kept a close eye on him, had painkillers in my pocket, and I'd clutched his hand the whole car ride over. I was ready for the first asshole who dared to raise their voice to Miguel. We'd heard Lincoln's boss yelling when he'd called Snow, even though his phone wasn't on speaker. Let any of them try to do the same to my man. If they dared, I only hoped they'd be ready to get their faces smashed with my fist.

We walked into the office, and the conference room window blinds were drawn as we walked by it, so I couldn't see anyone inside. Snow, who was leading us into the office, stopped at the door and turned to us. "Go on inside. I'll be back shortly."

Great. So, he was abandoning us too. I glared at his back as he opened the door and peeked in, smiling at the occupants, before waving us in. Expecting the worst, I was surprised to see only Judy sitting and talking with Noah. The man with a kind smile and beaded braids was in a wheelchair. How had I not known that? No one had said. I noticed there was no laptop in the room anywhere. They both looked up when we walked in, and Noah immediately reached for a control on his chair. A whirring sounded as he drove the chair around the big table right up to us.

"Hey there," he greeted, smiling and holding out a hand. "It's so nice to meet you, Raven...Miguel." We both shook his hand and smiled back at the warm greeting. "I've ordered some lunch for the four of us. It'll be here in a minute. Why don't you have a seat?"

Judy rushed around the table, throwing herself at Miguel so fast, he had to brace himself to catch her. She hugged him hard before holding him out to arm's length. "Madre de Dios!" she cried. "Look at your poor, bruised face. It looks worse in person." She had tears in her eyes as she cupped his cheeks, before hugging him

again.

Miguel chuckled and patted her on the back. “Come on, Judy, I’m fine. I just took some pills, I’ve been sleeping for days, and I’m all in one piece...really.”

We took seats at the table and Noah returned to where he’d been near Judy. “Where is everyone?” I asked. “I expected thirty people in this room, all bombarding us with bullshit.”

Noah laughed, grinning at Judy.

“I told you, right?” she said.

He high-fived her. “Fierce. So hot.”

Miguel chuckled.

I looked at him. I was lost. “What?”

“My guess?” he asked.

I nodded at him.

“My guess is that Judy probably told Noah you’d come in here all hot under the collar. Then, you’d give everyone shit about dragging your boyfriend out of our cushy hotel room when all I needed was to rest and recuperate from a ‘brutal attack from malicious thugs,’” Miguel said, using air quotes. He grinned at the tech gods. “How close was I?”

Noah let out a belly laugh. “Pretty fucking close.” He laughed again. “She actually said you would put your fist in the face of the first person who raised their voice to

Miguel. So our SAC made an executive decision and gathered the others in his office so they could deal with all the particulars and work out a plan while we ate lunch.”

I deflated. She had been spot on. “Oh.”

Miguel looked at me and the minute he got a good look at my face, he joined in the laughter. “It’s exactly what you were going to do! You were building up a head of steam and stewing all the way over here in the scary, black cars, weren’t you?”

“YES!” I said that a little too loud, feeling totally embarrassed and sank lower into my chair.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close, kissing my head before I wiggled free.

I sat forward. “Wait, so you’re not going to jail?”

“For what?” Noah said.

“For, I don’t know, hacking or something?” I waved my hand at the empty table where the laptop should have been.

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The two exchanged a glance. “No. Man, you really do have a vivid imagination,” Noah said. “We requested the bank files for Roy Cabe from OPR and as far as the law firm’s accounts go, it turns out, Financial Crimes already had the bank statements from Mr. Billings himself.”

“Mr. Billings?” Miguel asked.

Noah smiled then turned to Judy who was blushing. “Turns out that between you, me, Noah, and these four walls, I didn’t have to hack into the law firm’s accounts. Emmerson Billings Esq.—Aston’s partner—already turned over all their bank records to the FBI’s White-Collar Crimes division which included all statements from their clients’ various trust accounts. Turns out, someone in their office had noticed money missing and they suspected Aston of embezzlement since the missing money came from the trust account of one of his cases. Billings looped the FBI in about two months ago.”

I gaped at her. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” Noah said. “While you were driving over here, Bruce Martin, the ASAC for White-Collar Crimes, walked into the office to ask why in the hell we were looking into his case.”

“White-Collar. I thought the case was with Financial Crimes?” I asked.

“Financial Crimes is part of the White-Collar Crimes division,” Noah clarified. “Anyway, I took Martin into the SAC’s office and the SAC offered him a seat on the taskforce.” He nodded at the door. “He’s in there with the rest of the chuckle club

probably catching the DEA up with our investigation.” The door opened and we all turned to see a frowning Snow.

“Hang tight. We’re gonna be a while.” He nodded and closed the door again.

I turned to Noah. “He looked grim.”

Noah sighed. “Yeah.”

“I’m confused about something,” I said.

“What?”

“Well, I thought Lincoln Snow was the Special Agent in Charge for this office? What happened?” I asked.

“Well, that changed recently. Lincoln was the SAC. But with a young family and his wife, Sarah Connor, being the SAC for the ATF here in L.A., they decided that both having jobs with long hours and endless weekends, wasn’t working. They didn’t want their daughter, Chloe, being raised by a nanny, so Lincoln volunteered to be the one to step down. He’s the ASAC now which suits him well. He leaves the office at a decent hour and unless something out of the ordinary is going on, he has weekends off. Our new SAC is Donovan Bradley and he’s great. He allows Lincoln the flexible hours he needs with the family and he still leads our team. We’re happy but most importantly, he’s happy without all the stress.”

I smiled. “That’s great.”

Noah nodded. “Yeah, and Bradley is a fair man. He rarely loses his temper, so when he raised his voice at Lincoln this morning, I was a bit surprised. I think he didn’t like being surprised by the DEA and he took it out on Snow. Lincoln’s been briefing him

with every twist and turn in the case, but as you both know, things have been moving fast. I'm pretty sure Bradley came into the office this morning, read Lincoln's daily report on his email, got the call from the DEA, and flipped out. He came in and got updates from Judy and me, and called everyone else in. Don't worry about Bradley."

"I'll reserve judgment then," I said.

"Really," Noah said. "We all get along with him. And even though Snow still runs our team, we like it, he likes it, and that's the way it should be. When we have to go out of town, Max takes point so Lincoln can stay in the office unless Bradley insists he be there. So far, that's a rare occurrence. Linc does very little field work these days, and it still works because of the way everyone on the team specializes. Having Dr. Reeves here has rounded out the team and we work very well together."

"Good," Miguel said.

I nodded in agreement and grimaced at Miguel. "I really feel stupid for overreacting. I'm sorry."

Miguel smiled at me, leaning close and bumping my shoulder. "You love me. Thanks for being my bulldog."

The door opened again, and a female agent came in carrying bags of food. She set them all down on the table, smiled, and left.

"I hope you like Chinese," Noah said. "Judy said you would."

"We made sure to order all your favorites," Judy said, passing out chopsticks and napkins as Noah began opening containers.

"This is so not what I was expecting when we got here." I handed Miguel a carton of

sweet and sour eggplant and vegetables he adored.

“Thank you.” He grabbed some fried rice and filled his plate as I scooped some kung pao tofu onto steamed rice.

We ate happily for quite a while before anyone spoke again.

“So, you guys have really been through it, Raven,” Noah said.

I nodded, swallowing the food in my mouth before replying. “Yeah, it’s been a long six months.” I glanced at Miguel, who eyed me up as he bit into an eggroll. “But I wouldn’t change a thing except being shot at by a crazed guy who was mad that we broke into his house, being shot at by an ex-con, meeting a guy with a gun in a dark stairwell, being shot at by a cartel assassin, and watching Miguel getting kicked in the head. I could go on.”

“Please don’t,” Miguel grumped.

Noah snorted.

“Seriously, though, Noah, I want these guys caught and I really don’t care who does it. What’s the deal with the DEA? The look on Lincoln and Mac’s face when they heard the DEA was involved in all this—” I pointed my chopsticks at him. “That shit was scary.”

Noah laughed. “The DEA is filled with cowboys, and they don’t work well with the FBI,” he said. He seemed to think about it for a minute. “Think of it as surfer boys versus men in black suits. Is that enough of a visual?”

“I get it. The FBI is buttoned up and the DEA boys have lesser wardrobe standards.”

Noah grinned. “It goes far beyond wardrobe. The DEA spend most of their lives undercover unless they’re part of the top brass. They’re cleared to take drugs if that’s what it takes to catch a drug kingpin, and the FBI frowns on all of that except in extreme undercover circumstances. Let’s just say that the FBI, which holds the most power of any federal agency because they operate globally, have the ear of the president, and administer justice in every law enforcement jurisdiction in the country. While the DEA has its own mandate, they are limited to drug offences and offenders, and even though they operate globally as well, they are often forced to coordinate what they do—which means justifying their methods—with the FBI. It’s just a lot of politics, I guess.”

“So, the two agencies basically hate each other,” I said.

“In a nutshell.” He nodded, his beaded braids clicking like castanets.

We paused to continue eating for a few minutes before I spoke up again, pointing to his hair. “How often do you have to have that done?”

“The hair?”

“Yeah. I mean, how often do you have to do the braids and all?”

“Mm...I can go six weeks but four weeks is better.”

“Do they have to unbraid it all and then rebraid it?”

He pursed his lips, nodding as he chewed. “Oh yeah, because they need to get to the roots.”

“Makes sense.”

“Do you have extensions?” I’d noticed the hair fell way down past his shoulders.

He nodded. “Oh, yeah.” He held up one hand showing his thumb and forefinger spread wide open. “Six or eight inches at least. My hair grows fast, but I still need extensions. My hair grows about an inch a month.”

I nodded. “Mine’s about half an inch.” I picked up a carton and pulled a wonton out, popping it in my mouth. The food was delicious.

We waited forty-five minutes after we’d cleared the food away, leaving the conference room door open to air it out while we waited for the big meeting to conclude. I made sure Miguel was doing okay and then excused myself to the breakroom to get coffee for Miguel and myself.

When I came back the entire bullpen was packed with people. There were too many

to be in the conference room. I was introduced to FBI SAC, Donovan Bradley, the DEA boss, Hope Bannister, and two of her agents. Lincoln's entire team joined us with Cassidy, Mike, and Damon. I noticed that the guy from White-Collar Crimes wasn't there. Maybe he'd decided not to join the taskforce after all. I took a seat beside Miguel, handing him a cup of coffee.

"Thank you." Miguel smiled, putting a hand on my knee as I was introduced to the newcomers.

"Nice to meet you." I nodded at the DEA boss who looked like she was in her early thirties. Her two agents had a college student look to them. The SAC, Hope Bannister, was dressed in a pantsuit, but her agents, both male, were in jeans and T-shirts. I had no doubt Noah had been right if they spent most of their time undercover as drug users, pushers, or part of a gang. They were both very young, tatted up, and one of them had a septum piercing with a mop of blue hair. A late teens image but they were probably mid-twenties. FBI SAC Bradley looked directly at me from where he stood at the head of the room with Bannister.

"Sorry for the long wait, folks," Bradley said. "Snow has fully briefed us on what's been going on. It's the failure of the FBI for not looping the DEA in on this investigation until this morning. Now they're up to speed and we've been informed they have an undercover agent connected to this case, we asked that you be brought in so we could discuss how to work together and accomplish all our goals while getting our agent back."

"As I've told SAC Bradley, we need to get Agent Willis out of that house," Bannister said. "But even more importantly, we need Oscar Castillo and his cartel brought down once and for all. The Sanchez Cartel has been on a murderous rampage for a decade or more, laying waste to whole communities and leaving hundreds of widows, children, and other family members behind. We're very close to making a case to take down the whole organization—" She turned to frown at Lincoln.

“That was until the FBI stuck their fingers in our pie.” Bradley opened his mouth to protest but she held up her hand. “We’ll work together going forward, SAC. As you said, the FBI couldn’t have known about SA Trevor Willis, and we admit that we aren’t good at sharing.” She turned back to us. “In any case, that’s where we are. We need to figure out how to insert Huerta, and how to keep him safe while he’s inside.”

Miguel sat forward. “What?”

My gaze went from him to Bradley, to Bannister. “What? Insert Miguel where? Inside what?”

Bannister sagged, shot Bradley a look, then turned back to us. “I’m sorry. I—you—probably should have been in the meeting. Let’s catch you up with what we want to do.”

“That would be good, because I don’t like it,” Lincoln said, crossing his arms.

“And as I’ve said, Snow, we’ve all heard about your misgivings, but we all agreed that we should talk to Mr. Huerta and get his thoughts on it before dismissing it out of hand.”

“Fine,” Snow said, looking at Mac. The big man looked just as pissed as Lincoln.

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“What do you want my help with?” Miguel asked.

I reached for his hand, not caring who saw. He curled his fingers around mine, squeezing them. Even the touch of his hand did little to settle my nerves.

“In short, we want you, Mr. Huerta, to allow yourself to get taken—willingly—into the Cayman Islands compound so that we can get Oscar Castillo on tape admitting to crimes.”

I felt heat rushing over my skin as my heart began racing. I felt sick inside, like someone was squeezing all the breath out of me. My ears started buzzing and I was pretty sure I was close to passing out. I snapped out of it when she started talking again. “No! Absolutely not!”

“Raven,” Miguel admonished, “let SAC Bannister finish.”

“No!” I yanked my hand out of his and stood. “He’s not going to allow himself to be taken willingly or any other way into that house so he can be killed along with the rest of them.”

“Raven, sit down,” Miguel said.

He looked hurt and sick and just so fucking...unwell. I shook my head vigorously before glaring at the rest of them. “He’s already been nearly killed...by an FBI agent no less. You’re the experts! You put your lives on the line because it’s your jobs!”

“And we have an agent in that house too, Mr. Mathis,” Bannister said coolly.

“And I’m sorry about Trevor but he’s undercover and I’ll say it again in case any of you didn’t hear me. It’s his job.”

Miguel took hold of my wrist and tugged on it. “Raven! Sit down and let the SAC finish.” He sounded angry, embarrassed, and so hurt.

I sank into my chair, feeling sick to my stomach as I turned to him. I framed his cheeks, looking into his eyes as tears filled mine. “You’re hurt and you cannot do this...not like this.”

Miguel nodded at me, then turned back to Bannister who was standing with her arms crossed over her chest, clearly not happy with my outburst. “Tell us what you’re thinking and then we’ll tell you what we think of it.” He turned back to me. “Hear them out, Raven.”

I felt my skin flush hot as my ears began to burn. I searched the face I loved for a few seconds and then took a deep breath as he took my hand, wrapping it in his warm one. “Go on,” I said to her.

She dropped her arms. “Our thoughts were that the best way to get Oscar Castillo on tape was to have Miguel taken into the house so we could get his voice on a recording device. I readily admit it’s dangerous. I won’t lie about that, but we need his confession in order to put him away and break up the Sanchez Cartel once and for all.”

“With all those guys and automatic weapons?” I asked. “No way! For all you know Agent Willis is already dead, along with Aston, Tawny Flores, and Brian Leopard. And you don’t even know the first thing about what Alex Filmore tried to do to us!”

“Yes, they do, Raven,” Lincoln said. “They’ve been fully briefed. That’s why you see your friends from the FBI, the LAPD, and even the CIA here. We’ve laid out a

timeline of events.”

I stared at him. I trusted Lincoln. He’d always been a friend but now I wasn’t so sure. To even entertain this horrifying plan, made me feel betrayed. “You’re on her side? Of course, you’re FBI!” I jumped up from my chair and fled the bullpen, hearing Miguel and the others shouting behind me. I needed air.

I jogged down the hallway and blew by the receptionist, slamming into one of the glass doors leading to the corridor outside the lobby. It pushed open slowly and I squeezed through the gap, then headed for the elevator. I stood in front of the double doors, punching the call button over and over, watching the numbers at the top as the car ascended floor by slow floor, seeming to stop on every one. I heard the double glass doors opening at the end of the corridor and then Miguel’s shout.

“Raven! Raven!”

I leaned forward and punched the button three more times. “Come on! Come on!”

“Raven! Stop being a child! Listen!”

He was walking as fast as he could, holding his head, fury written all over his face. I whirled on him. “No, they want to use you! They don’t care that you’ve been hurt! They don’t...they don’t—”

His arms came around me as he yanked me against him. To my horror, I burst into tears. “Raven...stop,” he crooned into my hair as I felt sobs rolling through me and him rubbing my back. “Shh.It’s okay, it was just a suggestion.Shh.I won’t do it.”

I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his shirt, shaking my head against his collarbone. I heard steps coming toward us and lifted my head. Cassidy and Mike were headed our way. I pulled out of Miguel’s arms as he let go. “You can’t let them

do this to Miguel, Cassidy. You and Mike have been looking out for him since he was a teenager. You know what this means? He's going to be cut off from everyone."

"It's not going to happen, Raven," Cassidy said, reaching out his hand to clasp my shoulder as he and Mike got to us. "It was the DEA's idea and that's what took us so long in SAC Bradley's office. Mike and I argued against it and so did Lincoln, Mac, and everyone else on his team. We're your friends. We all understand that it's been years since Miguel had to face an enemy on this scale and never unarmed. It's suicide. You're right, but the DEA SAC insisted on presenting her idea anyway."

I nodded, swiping at my eyes as Miguel surrounded my shoulders with his arm. He pulled me into his side; I leaned hard against him. "Okay. Okay, then." I blew out a long breath, feeling my panic beginning to subside.

Cassidy and Mike looked at Miguel as the elevator car finally arrived. The doors swished open. "Take Raven downstairs but stay in the building. It's not safe for you two out there. When you feel better, come back up and we'll talk about this some more."

"Come on, Raven." Miguel pulled me into the elevator, and I turned, noting Cassidy and Mike's grim expressions as the door closed. I reached for Miguel. As he pulled me into his arms; I hugged him tight.

"It's gonna be okay, Sunshine," he crooned into my hair. "It's gonna be okay."

I wasn't sure it was ever going to be okay.

Chapter Fourteen

MIGUEL

I had another headache. I needed fresh air and I wasn't going to get it inside the lobby of the Federal Building. Raven protested but I walked with him outside anyway. We stood in the shadow of the building, sticking close to the wall as I took in a great gulp of air. I wasn't feeling good. As delicious as the Chinese food had been, it wasn't sitting well. I found myself trying hard not to throw it all up again. Bending down, I put both hands on my knees, feeling my head spin. I needed to lie down. Raven's hand rubbed soothing circles between my shoulder blades. I straightened up shakily. My lover's eyes were haunted as he stared at me, biting his lip.

"You're not well, Miguel. You need to lie down and you sure as hell don't need this stress. You're not fully recovered."

I nodded. "Yeah."

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and tapped the Uber app. I quickly grabbed his wrist, then reached for his phone with the other hand. When he gave me a questioning look, I shook my head. "Did you forget we're in protective custody? We shouldn't even be outside the building." I whirled as I heard footsteps coming up behind us. Lincoln, Mac, Cassidy, and Mike were right there. Cassidy and Mike looked totally annoyed.

“I forgot for a minute that you don’t listen,” Cassidy muttered. “Come on, let’s get you back inside the building.”

I nodded, putting my arm around Raven and followed the others back into the lobby. Lincoln and Mac badged us inside. We went through security and were starting to walk toward the elevators when Lincoln took hold of my sleeve, bringing me to a stop. Raven was right beside me, slipping his hand into mine.

“Let’s talk a second,” he said.

“What is it now, Lincoln?” Raven asked, sounding really frustrated. “I thought you, of all people, were our friend. Can’t you see how sick he is?”

Lincoln frowned, staring at Raven with what had to be sympathy. “I am worried.” He glanced at me. “How bad is the head?”

“To be honest, I feel like I should be sleeping for a damned year, Lincoln. The headache is back with a vengeance. I don’t understand it. I felt so good this morning when I got up.”

“Probably residual concussion stuff,” Mac said, pointing to his own noggin. “I got one so bad once, it laid me low for a week. It totally kicked my ass which surprised me too. You never know about these things until you get a really bad one.”

I assessed the big former Green Beret. It was hard to believe anything could kick the man’s ass. I would have put money on Mac McCallahan being near indestructible when he was an operator. He looked like every Hollywood stereotype of a Green Beret, tall, immovable, impenetrable, crew cut and all.

I simply nodded before looking back at Lincoln. “I can’t do what she wants, Snow. Even if Raven wasn’t here...and you guys...all sticking up for me, I just don’t have it

in me. I spent years in the Special Forces, went on more Recon missions than I can tell you, but I've never felt so physically not up to what they're asking me to do."

"We know, Miguel," Lincoln said. He squeezed my shoulder. "We all know it would take a man at 100 percent to commit to something like what the DEA is suggesting, and we also know you're far below that right now. You'd have to be at full mental and physical capability for this and you're clearly not."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, Lincoln. I feel for Willis and especially for Tawny, Brian Leopard, and even Aston, if he's innocent, but I just can't right now. And to be truthful, I think anyone who agreed to that should have their head examined. SAC Bannister admitted they don't even have a plan."

"So, now you understand why we don't work well with the DEA," Mac grumbled.

Lincoln let his hand slip from my shoulder. "Like I said, Cass, Mike, Mac, and I argued against it. We need to find a way to draw Castillo out of the house, and to bring the others with him. That was plan B, but you never let her get to it after—" he flicked a glance at Raven before smiling, "your bulldog went after her."

"Which was kinda hot," Cassidy said, smirking.

I grinned. I couldn't help it. "Okay, let's go back and listen to plan B." I checked with Raven. "You good with listening? You can't do what you did. We're talking...that's it."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry." He smiled shyly at me, taking my hand in his. When he lifted it to his lips and kissed my knuckles, my knees felt weak.

"You got any of those fucking painkillers with you?"

“Yes.” We walked to the elevators as he dug for them in his pockets.

Upstairs, Raven went to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, and I downed the pills as we retook our seats. I noticed Damon was sitting alone in the conference room with the door closed, phone pressed to his ear. No one else had moved and Bannister was now sitting, scrolling through her phone looking completely bored by our return to the bullpen. I focused my attention on Lincoln’s boss, SAC Bradley, when he cleared his throat. Bannister stood facing us, finally giving us her attention, as she pocketed her phone.

“Okay, plan B,” Bradley said. “We need to get Castillo and Willis out of the house.”

“We need to get all of the possible hostages out of the house, SAC,” Lincoln said.

“Of course,” Bradley agreed, “that goes without saying.” He glanced back at us. “What are your thoughts, Raven?”

“I actually wanted to hear what my partner had to say.” I turned to him.

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“Well, we know Castillo wants the fifty million,” Raven said. “Aston brought Tawny down there to meet with the banker to get it for him. I’m guessing they haven’t met?”

“The meeting is scheduled to take place on the day after tomorrow,” Bradley said. “She’s supposed to go with Aston to the bank.”

My jaw dropped. “Why then would you float the idea of me going into Castillo’s house? Why was that plan A to begin with?”

“Plan A is off the table!” Bannister exclaimed. She shot a hateful look at Raven. “Let’s move on.”

Raven narrowed his eyes at her, and I squeezed his hand. “So, Aston and Tawny are supposed to meet with the banker,” he continued. “Why don’t you guys substitute the real banker with one of your guys? Then, he can say something like the funds can’t be accessed for a few days. It’s fifty million dollars, not five. It’s not like Castillo can verify the truth if they stall. Then you can grab Castillo when he’s coming out of the bank.”

“Assuming Castillo goes with those two. He could force Aston to go with Tawny alone,” Bradley said.

“We’ll have to give him some other incentive then,” I said.

“Like what, Mr. Huerta? The man surrounds himself with his men and barricades himself in that house for a reason,” Bannister said. Her tone was as hostile as it could be. I ignored it.

“There has to be an open line of communication to that property somewhere,” I said. “We need to find it and then put the fake banker Raven suggested on the line with him. He can tell Castillo the only way he can facilitate the withdrawal of a sum of money that sizeable is to transfer it to another account at the bank, one he personally has to open. I don’t know. You guys can figure that part out. But we have to make the return of those funds conditional upon transferring the funds to his own account. I think he wants them so bad at this point, he’ll leave that house, even if it means being surrounded by a platoon of his own sicarios.”

“That still leaves Agent Willis trapped in that house with a hundred men,” Bannister said snidely.

“You’re forgetting about Brian Leopard,” Raven said. “Or are you just thinking of him as collateral damage at this point?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” Bannister spat back.

SAC Bradley held up both hands. “Tempers are a little hot here. I think it’s safe to say we all want the best outcome.”

“The scenario Raven and Miguel came up with has merit and frankly, I think you’re greatly exaggerating the number of sicarios Castillo has at his disposal,” Lincoln said. “Raven and Miguel’s plan will split the number of men in half.”

“The FBI can send in a tac team to retrieve Leopard and Willis once Tawny Flores and Aston are out of the house with Castillo,” Mac said. “If the DEA takes care of the guards on the perimeter and grounds, a good enough FBI tac team can take care of the guards inside while preserving the life of the hostages.”

“That might work,” Bradley said thoughtfully. “What is the realistic number of guards inside the house? Obviously, there aren’t a hundred,” he said to Bannister.

“No,” she admitted. “There’s more like ten inside, twenty outside, guarding the grounds and perimeter. The DEA can take care of them. We have our own tac teams.”

“What we need is a Spec. Ops team to augment the FBI tac team with the hostage rescue,” Cassidy said. “Their training in stealth, breach, and retrieval has a proven record under fire as good or better than an FBI tac team...and they’re used to operating in an environment where there’s little to go on such as floorplans. Military tactics are a proven commodity.”

“Military? On foreign soil?” Bannister scoffed. “No way.”

“Not...active-duty military,” Cassidy said, looking at me. “We know some guys.”

“Who?” she asked skeptically.

“We’ve got a SEAL right there,” Mike said, pointing at Cass. “Recon Marine over there.” He nodded at me. I wouldn’t trust myself going in alone but with some painkillers and as part of a team, hell yeah. “And big Mac is our Green Beret.”

Max raised his hand. “Former U.S. Marshal with a Marine Corps background. Tracker and marksman.”

Kindness raised her hand. “Marine Corps. Hand-to-hand, mixed martial arts.”

Perez pointed to himself. “Marine Corps—”

Bannister held up both hands. “I get it. You’re all highly trained.”

“We have a couple of snipers at our disposal as well,” Mac said. He pointed at Lincoln. “His wife is the SAC at the ATF and can kill anything she points a weapon at. One of the guys on her team is a former Marine Corps sniper with more than

fifteen years of experience.”

The door to the conference room opened and Damon silently rejoined the group, staying off to the side as the conversation continued.

“Let’s put it this way,” Cassidy was saying. “Get us a rough layout of that house and we’ll put together a team to rescue the hostages including Trevor Willis. Satellite photos will suffice.”

“Well, if you’ve got it all covered, the DEA doesn’t need to be here at all,” Bannister said, folding her arms across her chest.

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“That’s not what he said, Bannister.” Bradley frowned at the woman. “All he’s saying is that we’re not going to leave your guy behind. Got that?”

“Got it.”

“Everyone is forgetting about Alex Filmore,” Damon said, speaking up for the first time.

I turned to look at him. “How do you think he’s involved in all of this, Damon?”

He sighed. “I’ve been wondering about that, and I think I know.”

“Well, what is it?” Lincoln asked. “And were you planning on sharing it with the taskforce?”

“I was, but I thought I’d wait until you guys finished bickering.”

“Damon...” Lincoln said.

Thorne smiled. “After all this happened, I decided to bring a big gun into the conversation.”

“A big gun? Who’d that be?” Lincoln asked, dragging his gaze around at the group before going back to Damon. “This conversation is classified as you know.”

Damon nodded. “Of course, but Mark Evans is already read into this, asyouknow.”

“Who’s that?” Bannister asked, sitting forward.

Damon ignored her as he kept on talking. “He and I have been backtracking Filmore’s movements since he turned up at Castillo’s house, looking at his emails, and his calls.”

“Who is Mark Evans?” Bannister asked, raising her voice.

“He’s the former Associate Director for Military Affairs for the CIA,” Damon said, keeping his voice cool. “He and I are in touch, and like I said, he’s already been read in on this case.”

Bannister threw up her hands. “Great...just great.”

“It’s a good thing, SAC,” Damon said. “He’ll get the satellite images of the house in real time.”

“How’s he going to do that?” Bannister asked, sounding a little less closed off than she had been.

“He’s still got friends in high places,” Damon replied. “Anyway, he and I have been looking at Alex Filmore’s calls and tracking his movements like I said.”

Bannister nodded. “Go on. What did you find out?”

“Remember Salvatore Mancuso? We haven’t talked about him here today,” Damon said.

“The guy who Tawny Flores calls a friend,” Lincoln said.

“Right,” I said, shooting Mike and Cassidy a look. “She claims he’s a family friend,

but we know Tawny's husband hired him before his death, probably at Aston's encouragement. We also speculated that he's got ties to the Sanchez Cartel and that he's probably the one who stole the pigeon's blood ruby out of Tawny Flores' safe."

"Yes. Mancuso flew down there on a cartel plane with Tawny, Brian Leopard, and Agent Willis," Damon said.

"Okay, but why did you look into him?" Raven asked.

Damon turned to Snow, who nodded. When he glanced back, he was smiling. "Lincoln asked me to do a deep dive into him because the FBI has thought from the beginning that he had something to do with the rogue CIA operatives and the missing jewels. After talking to you and Miguel, Cassidy and Mike were convinced of his involvement in Mendez, and companies plot from the very beginning."

"Really?" I asked.

Raven squeezed my hand and when I looked over, he canted his head toward Damon. "He's about to tell us."

I snorted before looking back at Damon. "Fine. What'd you find, Thorne?"

"We found that not only was Mancuso hired by Benedict Flores with Aston's encouragement, but that he did indeed have ties to Alex Filmore as well."

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“How?” SAC Bradley asked.

“Mancuso knew him from his time in the Marine Corps,” Damon said.

“No shit.” I was slightly stunned by that.

“It’s true,” Damon replied. “They both served at the joint base in Afghanistan during the time you and I were there.”

“He was there too?” Raven said. He gave me a questioning look. “But you don’t remember seeing him on base, Miguel?”

I shook my head. “Just like Filmore. When I saw his picture on the screen, I thought he looked familiar, as I said. But until I was told he was Alex Filmore, I couldn’t have known that. If Thorne says Mancuso was there at the same time as I was, I believe him. It was a huge base with thousands of personnel. He could have walked by me every day...a lot of people did, Raven...not to mention it was eleven years ago. We were both a lot younger and faces change. It would have been easy to miss him.” I gave Damon a nod. “Sorry, go on, Thorne. You were saying something about you and Mark working backward from where Filmore has been now that you’ve placed him in the Cayman Islands.”

“Yes. According to Mark, the Alex Filmore ID hasn’t shown back up on anyone’s radar since it was last used in Berlin. That was over two months ago, and though, the CIA has been searching everywhere for him, they haven’t been successful. After we saw that feed Noah and Judy found this morning, I decided it would be worth bringing Mark in.”

“And he somehow found out where Alex Filmore has been?” Bradley asked.

“He used the license plates on the Land Rover to trace him back to his hotel on Grand Cayman, not far from where Castillo’s house is. Mark learned Filmore is checked in under his newest alias, Barry Lawson. We ran Lawson’s cell phone records when he checked in and cross-checked them with Salvatore Mancuso’s phone. Those turned up nothing.”

“So, this lead is shit,” Bannister said.

“No, it just means they’re probably talking to each other on burner phones provided by the cartel,” Damon said.

“Like I said, what good is this lead if we can’t connect the two?” Bannister asked, a nasty sneer on her face.

Damon smiled at her and I noticed it wasn’t such a nice smile. “I didn’t say I couldn’t connect the two. What I said was that they were talking to each other on phones provided by the cartel. That doesn’t mean the CIA doesn’t have...unconventional ways to hear those calls. However, I won’t share that because I promise you, that technology is most definitely way beyond your security clearance or anyone else’s in this room.”

I exchanged a look with Raven, noticing how huge his eyes were. The expression made me want to laugh but I somehow managed to tamp that down. When I turned back to Damon, Bannister was now sitting mute with her arms crossed, still watching and waiting for him to go on.

“What can you tell us, Thorne?” SAC Bradley asked.

“There has been constant contact between Salvatore Mancuso and Filmore using his

real name and once that one was burned, his new alias, Barry Lawson. They've traded phone calls and text messages. They were especially busy over text. It seems that Filmore was the shooter who decided to take Raven out at Trader Joe's, and he was also the person who broke into the LAPD's impound lot to get the VIN number off Raven's truck which had been towed after the shooting."

"That means he's the cartel's hit man?" I asked.

Damon looked at me. "Yes. I'm sure he's only one of many...we are talking about a cartel here...but in this instance, yes, Filmore wanted to take Raven out that day."

I wasn't surprised in the least but judging by the look on Raven's face, he was. "Was he also the cartel hitman who took out Rufus Modelo, the snitch who very nearly testified against Castillo?" I asked Damon.

"The CIA can't verify that, but I'd guess that was someone else," Damon replied. "If he was, he didn't talk about it with Mancuso or anyone else on the phone."

"This is all well and good for the DEA's case against Castillo, but how does this help us get Special Agent Trevor Willis out of his house along with the other hostages?" SAC Bannister asked.

Lincoln raised his hand. "Before you answer that, I'd like to know—if you know—what did Mancuso and Filmore talk about?"

Damon nodded. "They traded texts about how they could get a hold of the rest of the missing jewels."

"The pigeon's blood ruby, Brian Leopard's pin, the Mulberry diamond?" Raven asked.

“Well, the ruby and pin were never discussed, but other items thought to be part of the loot stolen in Afghanistan by the rogue CIA cell were,” Damon replied.

“I understand why they might not discuss the ruby, especially if Mancuso was the one who stole it for Aston to begin with, but why wouldn’t they discuss Brian Leopard’s piece?” I asked.

Damon shook his head. “I really have no idea. Maybe they never tracked that piece down and the pin being part of the theft at Mr. Leopard’s house was simply coincidental.”

“Brian Leopard does wear a lot of jewelry,” Raven said. “He even told us the pin was the one piece worth a lot of money that’d been left at the house while he and Trevor were out clubbing.”

I nodded and eyed up Damon. “There were some rare first edition books stolen along with the diamond pin. Did Mancuso and Filmore talk about those?” I asked.

“No,” Damon said, “but I doubt Filmore would care about books, or understand their value. He doesn’t strike me as a particularly bright type who’d care about literature, valuable or not. The jewels on the other hand, he considers them belonging to him to begin with, and he’s been ruthless about trying to reacquire the gems since losing them.”

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“Who the fuck even cares about books?” Bannister stated, standing up and pacing. “I need to know how we’re going to get my agent back. Does anyone care about that?”

“Actually, yes, which is why I’d be happy if you sat back down and listened to the rest of what I have to say,” Damon said, coolly.

“Please, sit down, SAC Bannister,” Bradley said. “Let’s hear what Mr. Thorne has to say.”

“Fine.” She thumped back down in the chair. “Go on.”

“It doesn’t sound like Mancuso is currently inside the house with the rest of them,” Damon said.

“You know this how, Mr. Thorne?” SAC Bradley asked.

“Because he’s been talking to Filmore ever since he went in, giving him updates on the case and what we’ve been doing. He knows the FBI has put Raven and Miguel in protective custody. He doesn’t know where, but he was in the process of setting up a siege on your house,” Damon said, turning to look directly at us. “He knows you were moved. He figured that out about a half hour after the FBI moved you. Castillo’s men were all ready to set upon the house but he scrubbed that plan.”

“So, Filmore and Castillo are working together...I mean, it’s obvious since he’s now inside his house, but wow, that’s crazy to know they’ve been involved with this thing from the beginning,” I said.

Damon nodded. "From the outset."

"Jesus," Raven said. "And my grandmother?"

Damon grinned. "They don't know where your grandmother is. Mancuso and Filmore think she possibly went back to the reservation. We know that, because there have been sightings of some of Castillo's thugs in Arizona." He held up his hand as Raven opened his mouth to ask for further clarification. "Don't worry. They won't try to hurt anyone since they don't have the first idea where to look. They're just desperate. Castillo probably threatened his own sicarios. He's known for not caring who dies, friend or foe, if it accomplishes his—and his cartel's—goals."

I squeezed Raven's hand, checking on him as I felt the tension going out of him. I turned back to Damon. "Now what?" I looked around at the others. "Is everyone on board with what was suggested earlier?"

"Drawing Castillo, Tawny, and Aston out while the tac teams go get Special Agent Willis and Brian Leopard, you mean?" SAC Bradley asked.

"I'd—" Bannister hesitated before finally nodding. "Okay, yes, the DEA would be on board with that," she said. She exchanged a look with her two agents, then Lincoln, and Bradley. The two men nodded at her. She addressed Damon. "For what it's worth, thank you for bringing Mark Evans into this and for using whatever tech was needed to get the information you did. If we're able to save the life of Special Agent Trevor Willis, I'm going to see to it that you get a medal."

Damon snorted and shrugged. "That's nice, ma'am, but trust me, I'm retired and so is Mark. He's got medals...plenty of them, and as for me, the last thing I need is a medal for serving my country with honor."

Bradley had a slight smile on his face and seemed impressed. "If this is the way you

work, Lincoln...hell, the way all of you work, I can see why you're so effective."

Lincoln grinned. "Thank you, sir." He stood. "Okay, does anyone need a cup of coffee before we sit and figure out how we're going to do this?"

I checked with Raven as people in the room started talking. "Coffee?"

He grinned at me. "Sure thing. You sit there and let me get it."

I squeezed his hand as he stood up and brushed by several of the others. When I could finally drag my eyes away from his retreating form, Cassidy and Mike were standing in front of my chair. I rose to meet their eyes.

"We should probably get you back to the hotel so you can rest," Cassidy said.

"I'm okay...I really am. The painkillers are doing their thing and honestly, I'd rather see that Raven gets back to the hotel to rest. He's been so worried about me that I know he's not sleeping."

"That's not gonna happen without you by his side, and don't pretend you don't know that," Mike said with a grin. "You're smarter than that, Miguel."

I turned and looked at my man walking back across the room holding two cups of coffee. His brilliant smile lit up his whole face. I sighed. "I know it. I really do."

Chapter Fifteen

RAVEN

I watched Miguel drinking his coffee as he spoke to Damon, Cassidy, and Mike. I was worried about him, not knowing how far I should push him. As much as I knew

he needed more rest, I knew pressing him to go back to the hotel under FBI guard, was going to make him dig his stubborn heels in. Despite how he was feeling, he wanted to be part of what was happening, part of the team going into Oscar Castillo's house to retrieve Tawny, Trevor, Brian, and even Aston, whom I hated.

I also knew Alex Filmore was in there with Castillo's men, and he was a trained CIA operative who knew a hell of a lot of tricks of his own, possibly even torture. If Filmore knew he was close to being arrested and becoming a guest of some CIA black site hellhole the way his friends Rosina Cassanova, Lance Bishop, and John Mendez were, he was going to fight and fight hard.

As Lincoln joined them, I walked over to Miguel. He smiled as soon as he noticed me and slipped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me up against him and kissing the side of my head. I felt a brief smile there and turned to face him. "What's happening?"

"The FBI is going to put you both on our plane to Grand Cayman in about two hours," Lincoln said. "Is there anything you need from the hotel? If so, we need to go now."

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I blinked. “You’re letting us go with you?”

“Don’t you want to come?” Miguel asked, frowning at me. “Because I’d just as soon have you here where you’ll be safe until we’re ready to leave for the airport.”

I frowned, pulling away to give him my best glare. His arm dropped. “Are you serious? Of course, I want to go if you’re going...pigheaded twat!”

Mike and Cassidy chuckled as Lincoln smiled.

“I’m going, Raven. I need my passport, clothes, and pills...and I need my weapon, which in case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have. Trust me when I tell you, I’ll sleep on the plane.” He reached up and massaged his temple. “I just had no idea we were going...and so soon.”

“It’s gonna be a ten-hour flight because we have a stopover in Houston to pick up a specialized tac team made up of all former Spec. Ops soldiers and Marines,” Lincoln said, glancing at Mac who sat at a desk about twenty feet away. He had a phone receiver pressed to his ear and was writing something on a pad of paper. Lincoln nodded in his partner’s direction. “Mac has worked with their team before. He says they’re the best and that’s what we’ll need.”

I nodded, impressed. I loved that idea. “Well, I suppose if Miguel is insistent upon joining the rest of you trained Super soldiers, then being surrounded by a highly trained Special Ops team is best.”

Lincoln reached out and patted me on the shoulder. “Miguel will be fine. I already

know he has the best training the Marine Corps offers and worked Recon for years in theater. The only reason he has a concussion is because of a guy who works for the FBI. Trust me, he'll be safe surrounded by all that talent. Have a little faith."

"I do, Lincoln. I just don't have any faith in other people," I said.

"You have faith in me and Mac over there." Cassidy nodded in McCallahan's direction. "And by the way, the title of Super soldier is fine for Mac, but you can call me Super SEAL, okay?"

I chuckled and smiled at my friend. When I turned to Miguel, he had a teasing glint in his eye and a single eyebrow was raised. "What?"

"You do know that calling a Marine a 'soldier' is a massive no-no, right? Soldiers are in the Army."

I patted his arm. "Yes, doofus. You've told me a million times. Sorry. I certainly didn't mean to lump you into that category. I'll just call you Super Jarhead. How's that?"

Cassidy burst out laughing as Miguel's expression morphed. He looked like he'd just bitten into a lemon which made me laugh.

"Anyway, Mike and I will meet you at the airport," Cassidy said.

I looked at Mike. "You're going too?"

"If my partner's going, I'm going. The LAPD is just gonna have to do without my fine self for a few days."

I smiled at the older man.

“Okay, then we gotta get you to the hotel. Come on, guys,” Lincoln said.

I nodded and took Miguel’s hand as we walked out of the bullpen with Lincoln, and Damon. Stopping at the elevators, Lincoln pushed the button, and we waited in silence. We all turned when the office door opened and Mac jogged up to us. “Sorry.”

“The guys are waiting for us?”

Mac nodded. “Yeah, all twelve will be waiting. How about satellite?”

“I talked to Mark,” Damon replied. “He’ll have SAT images for us by the time we get to Houston. That should give us the positioning of any other outbuildings on the property. I’m guessing that the place isn’t only a house but also has barracks separate from the main structure, along with other guesthouses and the like. We should have as many as thirty guys and DEA is bringing another thirty. How about Jarrett?”

“He and Sarah are meeting us in Houston,” Lincoln said.

“Thayne?”

“He’s in Arizona. He wanted to come but his auntie is down there, and she asked him for help on the ranch she used to own out there. The Native American tribe that borders the land wants a long-term lease on part of it near the main road to expand their reservation’s trading post. The new owner is willing but there’s some kind of negotiation that has to go on between the tribe, private property, the state of Arizona, and the Federal government who granted them the reservation lands to begin with. They’re meeting with lawyers to help smooth things over and I guess his aunt dug up documents pertinent to the property which aren’t on file with the city. Thayne went to help things go smoothly and be supportive of his aunt and the current owner of the ranch.”

“That sounds incredibly complicated,” Miguel said as the elevator car doors opened.

“Anything pertaining to reservation lands, private property, and the Federal government is complicated, even if it’s friendly and all parties agree,” Lincoln said as we all got into the elevator, punching the button for the parking garage.

“How long will you be at the hotel?” he asked. “We should be at LAX in an hour.”

“Not long,” I said. “I just need to pack us an overnight bag and Miguel needs his medication.”

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“What medication?” Mac asked.

“Nothing with any opiates, McCallahan,” Miguel replied as we descended. “Trust me, I need to be in top form.”

“That’s good,” Lincoln said. “You’ll have four or five hours to sleep on the way to Grand Cayman and you can always catch a few winks on the plane. Do you sleep well on planes?”

“Fuck yes, unless it’s a C-130 and I’m strapped into a seat. I once spent fourteen hours staring down the muzzle of a tank...while experiencing turbulence. That was fun,” Miguel said as Mac chuckled. He lifted his massive paw and the two high-fived.

“Been there. Done that,” the big man said.

“Where the fuck were you headed?” Miguel grimaced, and I sighed. “Can’t tell me. Never mind.”

“Sorry, Sunshine.”

“I thought C-130s were for transporting military personnel...not tanks,” I said. He gave me another look. “Never mind.”

Mac laughed.

The elevator stopped and we stepped out to be met by four FBI agents in tac gear.

“This way, sirs,” one of them said, shaking Lincoln’s hand.

“Thanks, Martin.”

The six of us climbed into an SUV and I noted a second SUV following as our driver, Special Agent Martin Humphries, drove us out of the underground parking lot. Lincoln sat in the front seat and we were all in the back. We pulled out onto Olympic and almost immediately got into the far right lane where Humphries accelerated up the 405 Freeway on-ramp.

“We should be at the hotel in approximately ten minutes, sir,” Humphries said.

“Good man. Just get us there in one piece, Agent.”

“Will do, sir.”

“How long have you been on the job, Humphries?” Lincoln asked. “I don’t remember seeing you around the office until last week.”

“Just six months, sir. I graduated from the academy in November, spent a few months in Quantico, and then took a week off for bereavement, before transferring here.”

“Sorry to hear that, Humphries,” Lincoln said.

“It was my grandmother, sir. She lived in Atlanta. We were very close.”

Lincoln reached over and patted the much younger man on the shoulder. “I’m so sorry to hear that. It must be hard.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

I smiled at the conversation. I loved my own nana, so I could relate to his grief. Nana was so ill. I couldn't let her go just yet. Knowing that the time was going to come much sooner than I hoped, wasn't sitting well with me.

Humphries looked in the rearview mirror, signaled, and pulled into the next lane over, braking as a car ahead of us slowed down. I twisted to look over my shoulder and noted the other black FBI issued vehicle following close behind, keeping up. When I turned back around, Miguel was looking at me.

“What is it?”

I settled back in the seat, Mac and Damon were engaged in a conversation about who would be meeting us at the airport or some such thing. I wasn't really paying attention. I smiled at Miguel, squeezing his hand.

“Nothing, babe. Just checking to see where the other FBI vehicle is. Nothing to worry about.”

“You nervous about something?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. How's your headache?” He looked like hell with dark circles under his eyes and a wicked bruise on his forehead. I really hated that the FBI and apparently every other letter agency in the Federal government just expected him to help them catch or kill a bunch of murdering scumbags. The thought of him going into Castillo's house with all those armed guards made me sick to my stomach.

“My head is fine.” He squeezed my hand. I looked down, noting his long fingers curled around mine where our hands rested entwined on his left thigh. I promised myself that someday soon, I was going to put a ring on that hand. I lifted his hand and brought it to my lips, then kissed it as I gazed into his beautiful, dark brown eyes.

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“I love you,” I told him, thoroughly enjoying the way he smiled at me. I dropped my gaze to his lips, then leaned forward, kissing him softly. When we were suddenly wrenched apart as the car swerved without warning, I let out a gasp. Humphries instantly corrected and accelerated.

“What’s going on?” Mac asked.

“Two cars coming up fast on either side of our trail car!” SA Humphries’ raised voice made the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up. We all immediately turned to look behind us, and I recognized the problem as two black cars came into view. Humphries was right. They were accelerating at a high rate of speed, coming up aggressively alongside the trail SUV following right behind us. Humphries floored the accelerator, throwing us back in our seats. I couldn’t see the drivers of either car but the moment their windows rolled down and gun muzzles poked out, I knew we were completely fucked.

A second later, they opened fire on the FBI vehicle from both sides, peppering it with a hail of bullets, blowing out the windows. The car lurched to the side as the windshield was sprayed with blood from the inside. The poor guys didn’t stand a chance. No time to even draw their weapons.

The ill-fated car with the agents inside cut across lanes as the attack vehicle in their path fell back. It crashed into the center median and flipped, landing on its roof as other cars already swerved, brakes screeching and crashing into each other behind us.

My ears were buzzing as my heart raced. Distantly, I heard Snow screaming into the phone, calling for backup. I knew it would take time to get anyone here. We were

fucked, unless Humphries could somehow outmaneuver two smaller, faster cars.

“Where’d they come from?” I screamed. “How’d they know?”

Miguel looked at me despairingly, shaking his head. “They must’ve followed us from the Federal Building.”

I dragged my gaze away from his to Damon and Mac who sat in the row in front of us. “What do we do?”

Mac looked grim. “The only thing we can do...try and outpace them until backup arrives.” He scooted up so he could put a hand on Humphries’ shoulder as Lincoln continued to talk into the phone, rattling off our current location and the dire situation. Mac said something into Humphries ear, and I watched the man give him a vigorous nod. He said something back to Mac who squeezed his shoulder again.

“Yes, sir!”

Mac sat back. “I told him to drive as fast as he can. He’s already doing ninety. And to try and keep cars between us, whatever he does.”

“Who’s Lincoln calling?” Miguel asked.

“I’m scrambling an FBI chopper. ETA, seven minutes. Humphries is just going to have to keep well ahead of them until then,” said Lincoln tersely.

Seven minutes might just as well have been seventy minutes.

They weren’t going to make it here on time. What the fuck! Everyone probably knew the chance of a good outcome was bleak. All I could do was pray that Humphries had taken driving lessons from a NASCAR racer.

Farther back, the strobing lights of probably CHP vehicles were moving up but they were still some distance away. Humphries surprised me, the SUV must have been going well over a hundred miles an hour as he wove expertly between cars, siren, lights, and all. Sometimes I was sure the car was up on two wheels. All I could do was pray we didn't hit a snarl in traffic that slowed us down or even stopped, allowing the killers to catch up with us. Five minutes passed as my heart nearly beat out of my chest. Breathing hard, I struggled to keep from hyperventilating, a nearly Herculean feat.

I kept one hand on my window's grab bar and the other clutching Miguel's hand in a punishing death grip as we swerved back and forth across the freeway. Miraculously, Humphries was able to keep at least one car between us and certain death behind us. Only Humphries kept his eyes on the road. The rest of us were twisted in our seats, looking out the back window, catching periodic glimpses of the two cars chasing us.

When the sound of a chopper coming in fast from behind us, finally penetrated my consciousness, I felt my heart leap into my throat. I looked forward, as we passed an on-ramp and blessedly, there were six black and white cop cars barreling up it, lights flashing, sirens wailing. The cavalry had arrived.

How they were planning on stopping the cars behind us, and how the FBI chopper would aid that, I still wasn't clear on. I just knew we had help in overwhelming numbers and that the police were armed, no doubt ready, willing, and able to stand in the breach for us. I looked at Miguel as two of the units slid into the lane in front of us, while two others slid in directly behind us, forming a further barrier between the killers and us.

The two remaining units were joined by two more, taking up positions in front and in back of the two black vehicles and their occupants who'd not only murdered four FBI agents, but were also trying to kill us. The FBI chopper hovered over our car, and the revelation that they were providing the cars on the ground with all the information

they needed to catch the bastards, finally sank in. As the four cop cars surrounding the murderers slowly brought the killers to a stop, I prayed for the officers inside, hoping against all hope that they wouldn't get shot as they attempted to get the cartel hit squad to surrender.

I transferred my gaze to Miguel whose head lolled back against the headrest, now that the threat had passed. His eyes were tightly closed and all I could do was thank God that we'd quite literally escaped death by a thousand tiny projectiles. I let the fear and panic which had gripped me for nearly ten minutes bleed slowly away.

Miguel opened his eyes, looked at me, and then craned his head around to take in the scene behind us. We were now far enough away, still being escorted by the heroic LAPD, that whatever was happening back there, was no longer visible. The cop car in front of us signaled and we followed him and his companion car into the next lane and then the far right lane. We took the very first exit off the freeway and came to a stop at a light at the bottom of the off-ramp. Lincoln's hand stole across the gap between the front and passenger seat, and I watched him squeeze the back of Humphries' neck. The man turned to Lincoln and smiled.

"Well done, Martin. You alone saved our lives," Lincoln praised. "The next time I want to bet on who's going to win at Daytona, I'm entering you."

That brought a chuckle as the man reached up and scrubbed a big hand over his face.

"Seriously, though, I'm going to see to it that you get recognized for being cool under the most dreadful of circumstances. That wassomedriving, kid."

"Thank you, sir," Humphries said.

"Hear, hear!" Damon said, reaching forward and thumping him on the shoulder.

“Snow’s right, Humphries. You saved all our lives,” Mac added. “Great job.”

“That goes for me and Miguel too,” I said. “We would have been dead back there if you hadn’t kept going.”

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“Yes,” Miguel added. “Thank you for saving our lives, Humphries.”

“Thank you, sirs.” The young man preened under the well-deserved praise. The pride and relief in the new agent’s voice was palpable.

We pulled into the nearest gas station and Miguel and I waited while Lincoln and Mac got out to speak to the officers. They talked for several minutes while the two of us waited inside the car with Humphries and Damon. Lincoln pulled out his phone to make a call, eventually passing the phone over to one of the officers. He spoke for a minute before giving it back to Snow and getting into his own car.

When Lincoln and Mac finally got back into our car, Lincoln told Humphries to head back toward the hotel. I knew we’d long passed by the exit we should have taken since the chase had lasted what felt like a nightmare eternity. Lincoln turned around.

“They wanted to take us all to the station to give a statement and I had to call SAC Bradley when they were insistent.”

“And now?”

Lincoln smiled. “Now they’re going to escort us to the hotel, and from there, go with us to the airport as an added layer of security. It seems Bradley got their captain on the line, and explained that not only was the FBI taking the lead on this case, but they’d expect the LAPD’s full cooperation with the Bureau in this matter. Apparently, Donovan Bradley has a good reputation with the captain and since he’d approved Mike and Cassidy’s trip to the Caymans, he was already briefed in the urgency of the matter.”

I exchanged a look with Miguel who smiled back at me. “Do you think four cop cars is going to be enough security?” I asked Snow.

“We’ll have those guys, just to make sure we get there without being followed,” Lincoln said, pointing up. I leaned close to the window and realized the chopper was still overhead. I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Once we get to the hotel, there will be three more FBI units waiting to go with us. We should have doubled our protection as we left the Federal Building. Bradley is responsible for letting us go without an adequate escort but ultimately, I take responsibility for this mess. I should have anticipated something. Good agents with families died today.”

“You couldn’t have known, Lincoln,” Mac said, defending his friend. “Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

“Anyway...” Lincoln sighed. “There’s no way the FBI is going to let them get another shot at any of us again.”

We got to the hotel twenty minutes later and I quickly packed a bag, shoving clothes and running shoes along with our passports into a single duffel. Miguel made me put on my shoulder holster as he donned his own, before we headed out. The drive to LAX took a half hour more, but it wasn’t until I was actually seated on the nearly empty FBI plane forty minutes later that I finally breathed a sigh of relief and started to shake as the last of the adrenaline ebbed away.

Chapter Sixteen

RAVEN

I watched Miguel fall asleep in first class in the half empty FBI jet with his head resting on a neck pillow leaning up against the window of the plane. Cassidy and Mike sat with Lincoln, Mac, Damon, and a cluster of other FBI agents near the back

of the plane's cabin, in quiet discussion as we flew toward Houston to pick up the Special Ops team. DEA SAC Hope Bannister and her team were also onboard, taking up several rows in the center of the plane.

Cass and Mike had given Miguel and I a hug when we got to the airport. We hadn't had to explain a thing to them since they'd heard of our close encounter with death before we got there.

Once we were off the ground, I learned from Lincoln and Mac that one of the FBI agents in the car which had followed us on the freeway, had survived the shooting and crash, and though, injured critically, had been extracted from the crumpled vehicle. He was in surgery. I prayed again, this time for the man's recovery, grieved that the other three agents had died from their wounds. I hoped those cartel fuckers would pay for their crimes.

All of them were on their way to jail after giving up their weapons when they realized a standoff with the cops was useless. I was certain they hadn't been handled with kid gloves while being carted off. I rested my head on Miguel's shoulder soon after, praying we'd all survive in Grand Cayman to make the return trip. All I wanted was for all of this to be over.

I opened my eyes, only realizing I'd fallen asleep when I heard the screech of the plane's tires on the runway. I sat up, seeing that I'd been drooling on Miguel when I noticed a wet spot on his shirt. "Oh, shit," I said, wiping the back of my hand over my lips and cheek. Miguel's low chuckle made me look over at him. He was watching me with glittering eyes.

"I love the sounds you make when you're dreaming."

I didn't know what to say. "I-I make noises when I dream?" I hadn't remembered dreaming.

“These little snorting, whimpering sounds. It’s adorable.”

I felt an embarrassing smile spreading across my face. “Shut up.” As the cabin lights came on, I suddenly realized it was dark outside. I checked my watch. Sure enough, I’d been asleep for almost five hours.

“Hey, guys.” Lincoln appeared beside my chair out of nowhere.

“Are we in Houston?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We’ll be on the ground for less than thirty minutes, just long enough for the guys to load their gear and join us here in the cabin.”

The FBI tac team. Right. I’d almost forgotten why we were in Houston, only that Houston had been the destination.

“There’s something I wanted to share with you,” Lincoln said, looking slightly worried.

I sat up in my chair as he crouched beside the seat. “What?”

“The plan of getting Castillo out of the house with Tawny Flores and her attorney isn’t going to work.”

“Why?” Miguel asked.

“You know Damon has some way of listening in on phone conversations. He told us about it back in the office.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Well, after we all talked, he went back to listen in.”

“And?” I began feeling panicky.

“And, Damon overheard a conversation with Mancuso talking with who we can only guess is Rafael Castillo, Oscar’s half-brother, head of the cartel. He said that everyone but a handful of his sicarios who’ll be going to the bank with Flores and Aston, are staying put until they come back with the money, locked up inside the house.”

“Does that mean they know about the FBI raid on the compound?” Miguel asked.

I glanced over at him. He was frowning.

“We can’t be sure. It might just be that Rafael doesn’t want to risk Oscar’s life, but the reason for it doesn’t matter. I just wanted to let you know that when we do breach, Oscar and possibly Rafael will be inside the house.”

“How does this change things?” Miguel asked.

Lincoln stood. “It doesn’t really change anything. Whether they suspect the raid or not, we’re still going in. I just wanted you to know that if they do suspect something, they may have taken extra security measures, that’s all. We’re still going forward. We’re going to do our jobs and rescue those hostages, while putting an end to Castillo and if we’re lucky, his half-brother, Rafael, assuming he’s in the house also.”

Miguel nodded at Lincoln. “Thanks for letting us know, Snow.”

“No problem.” Lincoln walked back to his seat.

“Don’t worry, Raven. It’s better to know than not to know.”

I frowned at him. “I wish the FBI and DEA didn’t have to go through with this fucking raid at all. I naively thought it was going to be easier.”

Miguel squeezed my hand. “It never was going to be easy, Raven. That’s why we stopped in Houston to pick up the FBI’s best tac team. Trust me. We’re going to be just fine.”

I nodded, feeling a knot in my belly. Moments later, the flight attendant opened the door at the front of the plane, not far from where we sat. Boots clomped up the steps.

Jarrett and SAC Sarah Connor, were the first to get on the plane. They greeted us with smiles before moving to the rear. Next to board was the Spec. Ops tac team that I’d heard so much about. I watched them with interest as they came aboard, and wasn’t disappointed in the least.

Watching the FBI’s tac team board the plane was like spending an evening at Chippendales. They came onto the plane one by one, bowing their heads as they walked down the aisle carrying small duffels, some nodding, some smiling. All of them were perfectly intimidating in their all-black tac gear. There were quite a variety

of sizes, some tall, some on the shorter side. One had a deep scar tracking down his cheek which disappeared into a full red beard. He looked like a Viking. Most wore knives at their belts, one so massive, I was positive it had to be a prop right off the set of *Crocodile Dundee*. All of them were physically fit, evidenced by the defined muscles that were outlined through the long-sleeved, fitted, black T-shirts they wore with black cargo pants.

They took their seats in economy behind us, and I marveled at how some of them managed to fit themselves into seats not made for men their size. The Viking stood speaking with Lincoln and Mac, and I guessed he was their leader or whatever they called a man in charge of a tac team. When they were finally all seated, the plane took off again, flying into the night sky for the two-hour, forty-seven-minute flight, according to the pilot. I wondered if the pilot and co-pilot were FBI also.

We flew in a commuter jet, but this wasn't a commercial flight. I could only assume it was owned and maintained by the Bureau. We'd checked in with TSA when we'd boarded through LAX's executive terminal. The only thing I knew about it was that it catered to wealthy fliers who took private planes and thought themselves too good or too rich to mingle with the masses.

Miguel was subdued during the last leg of the journey, sitting beside me with his eyes closed, although I knew he wasn't sleeping. He's probably gearing up, figuring out how many bad guys he's going to kill once he gets in there. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Get a grip, Mathis. He doesn't need you falling apart now. He needs you to believe in him. That's your role here. As if I'd said the words out loud, he opened his eyes and turned to face me.

"Stop worrying. I can hear the gears in your brain turning a mile a minute. Once we get there, things are gonna happen fast, Raven, and you have to be prepared."

I nodded. "Yes...be prepared...okay." I bit my lower lip. "Be prepared for what

exactly?”

He smiled. “They’ll probably give you an earwig so you can listen in to whatever’s happening inside the house and if they don’t do it right off, your stubborn ass is going to bellyache until you get one.”

I opened my mouth to...what? Agree? Probably. But I shut it as he raised his hand.

“Let me finish.” He looked down at my lap where I was twisting both hands together. He reached over and took one. “Listen. There’s probably not going to be a whole lot of negotiating once we get in there. There will be shooting, lots of it. You’ll hear running and screaming, cries of pain and all that shit.” He stared at me, eyes clear, a small frown on his face.

“If we find the hostages dead or alive, someone—whoever finds them first—is gonna announce that, so the rest of us know. The whole reason we’re going in there is to find living hostages. If we don’t, well, we’ll be bringing out bodies, Raven. I don’t want you to see that, especially if it’s Tawny or even Brian Leopard. That’s gonna be hard for you to take and frankly, we have no idea what they’ve been put through. Understand?”

I swallowed hard. “You mean torture, right?”

He nodded. “Yes. I’ve seen some of that and I can tell you, it’s not a pretty sight. I don’t want you to have those memories.” He reached out and placed his palm over my heart then looked up at me. “I don’t want this gentle, kind heart to be broken. That’s the stuff of nightmares, the kind of stuff you can’t put out of your mind. I never wanted you touched by that. I don’t want you tainted by what you see.”

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“What about you, Miguel? What about what you’ll have to see?”

“It’s not about that.”

“Yes, yes, it is. You have a kind heart too. Down deep inside, you hate injustice of any kind. I know that about you.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen things, and I hate injustice, but you’re different. You’re clean and unblemished by evil,” he said. “I’m a hard man and I never wanted this for you, Raven.”

“You’re not a hard man, though. You’re a good and decent man who laughs at Nightcrawler’s reviews, who loves my nana, who always makes Dolly feel important when you compliment her cooking. You’re a man who adopted a tiny, white kitten to chase your demons away. I know you, Miguel Huerta. I don’t want any of this for you either.”

He lifted our clasped hands and kissed my knuckles before resting our hands on his thigh. He faced forward again, blowing out a long breath, and closing his eyes again as we flew ever closer to our destination.

MIGUEL

Several non-descript vehicles awaited us at the airport. We deplaned quickly, letting the FBI Spec. Ops team file out and take up positions before we descended the steps. I noticed that Sarah, Jarrett, and one of the tac team members carried sniper rifles as they disembarked. Even though I knew we had some great snipers on our team, it was

nice to note that they probably felt as close to their own weapons as I had when I was stationed in Afghanistan. It just meant that they had lots of practice with the guns.

I watched the FBI sniper with a rifle case stop beside Sarah at the bottom of the stairs. He looked her up and down, no doubt noting her short, blonde hair, slight build, and the fact that she couldn't be more than five feet tall. He nodded at the weapon she held in a zippered case.

“Sniper,huh?”

“Yep.”

“Seen combat?”

“If that's what you call heading up the ATF office in L.A., then yeah, seen plenty of combat.”

He laughed. “What you got there?”

She grinned. “Treated myself to an FN HerstalM249s PARA semi-automatic for my birthday last year.” She patted the weapon like it was a newborn.

“Damn, that's some hard-core hardware, woman.”

“You'd better believe it,” Sarah said.

“That fires 5.56 caliber NATO 200 rounds?”

“Yep.”

“Respect,” the guy said, reaching out a gloved fist which she bumped with her own.

“Okay, let’s get going,” Lincoln said, standing near the vehicles with the Viking at his side. I’d yet to learn the man’s name. Lincoln waved us over and Raven and I jogged to him. He held the back door open of one of the cars. We dived inside and he and Mac climbed into the front seat. I glanced around the tarmac one last time, noting that several of the FBI tac team were standing in a square around us, automatic rifles drawn, muzzles down, clearly providing protection until we’d all loaded up.

Once we were on the road, I leaned forward between the seats. “Where are we staging?”

“We’ve secured a warehouse about two clicks from the compound,” Mac replied. “We’ve got about five miles and we’re going fast. We’ll be there in no time.”

“Compound?” Raven asked. “I thought we were talking about a house here.”

Mac fished in his duffel, withdrawing an iPad, powering it on. “These are the SAT photos Mark Evans sent to us. We got them just before takeoff in Houston.”

Raven leaned forward to look with me.

“There’s the main house. We’ve seen men going in and out here and here.” Mac pointed to the front and back. “That’s a pool. That appears to be a gardener’s shed, too small to be anything else. That structure is big enough to be barracks, just like we thought, and those are most probably guesthouses.”

I pointed to a small structure. “What’s that?”

Mac turned the iPad to look at it. “Looks too small to be a cottage. Could be electrical or pool equipment, I guess.”

“Could be an armory,” I suggested.

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Mac nodded. "Might be. That'd be bad."

"Could be a fucking doghouse," Lincoln said, sounding irritated. Raven looked up and I could see Lincoln eyeballing him in the rearview mirror. "Armory or no armory, there's no use worrying about what we can't change."

"Lincoln's right," Mac conceded. "Just trust me...this is the best team of guys I've ever worked with. Every last one of them is a pro and they've seen it all. I would have been proud to serve with them overseas."

"Well, coming from a Green Beret, that's high praise, Mac," I said, reaching for Raven's hand as we sat back.

We formed a convoy as we drove through town. Judging by how low the cars in front and behind us were riding, I guessed our vehicles were armored. I noted the thickness of the windows and figured they were bulletproof as well. Lincoln and the FBI team weren't taking any chances with this group. The only thing to stop us from getting to where we were going, would be an IED or an RPG.

I guessed we were driving right through the middle of town for just that reason. No one could sneak out into the middle of the road to plant an IED, not with late night tourists all over the fucking place. I doubted even the cartel would be willing to fire upon us with an RPG, not as fast as we were traveling, and definitely not at all eight cars at once.

In the end, we made it to the warehouse without incident and the minute we drove through the large, double doors to park inside, they were shut behind us by other FBI

agents who'd been waiting for us. I breathed a sigh of relief as we piled out of the cars to stretch our legs. I looked around the place, noting the huge bay doors we'd driven through. On the opposite end of the building was a matching set of double doors. The cavernous space was big enough to be an airplane hangar but that didn't make sense since we were five miles from the airport. Numerous wooden crates were stacked against the walls and there were two stationery forklifts parked on one side. A small office was the only private space in the building.

The big man Raven had called a Viking came jogging over. He stopped at the huddle we'd made with Lincoln, Mac, Sarah, Damon, Cassidy, and Mike. Mac looked at us and then nodded to the large red-haired man.

"Miguel Huerta and Raven Mathis, I'd like you to meet Candy Sorensen. Candy heads up our tac team in Houston."

Candy stuck out his hand, and I shook it. "Your background is Force Recon, right, Huerta?"

"That's right."

"Good to have you with us. We have two other Recon Marines on the team."

"Look forward to meeting them," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Raven," Sorensen said, shaking his hand.

"And you, Candy."

Raven had called the man handsome in a rugged sort of a way. I hadn't given it much thought, but then again, I'd spent half my life climbing mountains with a seventy-pound pack on my back with guys like Sorensen. I much preferred the gentle doe-

eyed sort of man like my Raven to the big, burly guy standing before us. Skill was all that was required here...skill and respect. That, Sorensen had in spades. I'd seen the way his men respected him which meant he'd proven himself to them in the field. That kind of respect had to be earned, and he obviously had it.

I heard boots on the floor and turned to see SAC Bannister heading our way. She stopped before Lincoln, holding out her hand. "Look, Snow...I probably owe you an apology for the way I spoke to you back in L.A."

Lincoln shook her hand. "No need, Bannister. We're all in this together and I assure you we have no intention of leaving Special Agent Willis in that compound to rot. When we go in to get the hostages, he'll be coming out along with the others." He hesitated for a few beats before going on. "How good is he at—"

"His job?" she interrupted.

He held up a placating hand. "No, Bannister. I was going to say, how good is he under pressure?"

A chagrined expression crossed her features. "Sorry." She actually sounded more upset than angry. "I can assure you that Trevor can hold his own. He's been working undercover ever since coming to work for the DEA. When you're walking into the literal lion's den of drug dealers to make a case, hoping that some coked up motherfucker isn't going to go crazy and shoot you in the face just for shits and giggles, trust me, that takes balls of steel. Yes, in answer to your question, he's good under pressure and he's no doubt doing his job as we speak. He's done it many times."

"That kind of commitment can also wear a man out," Sorensen said. "If he's been under for a long time...well, ma'am...that wears on a man."

“Sorensen’s right,” Sarah interjected. “Twenty years ago, we had an ATF agent undercover with the Hells Angels. He was trying to make a huge illegal weapons case, but the challenges were almost debilitating. He was constantly being forced to party with them—which included drug use—so the ATF was forced to approve that conduct just to keep him safe. Trying to intervene in murder plots by vicious bikers at war with the Mongols, without coming under suspicion himself was a monumental feat.”

Sorensen nodded, looking deadly serious.

“He found himself constantly having to fend off the advances of women in the club because he had a wife and two children of his own at home. The ATF finally put a female agent under with him to act as his girlfriend. She had to go through training to be a proper ‘old lady,’ taught to wait on her fellow agent like a slave, walk two steps behind him at all times, all to keep herself safe. After two years, he was patched into the club, waiting on the final nationwide chapters to approve his inclusion, but by then, using drugs, partying, and doing whatever else he had to do just to survive with the criminal gang had taken its toll on him.” She blew out a tired breath.

“His wife and kids were estranged, he was spending no time at the office, his reports were getting fewer and farther between, and he was constantly having to fight to protect not only his life but that of his fake girlfriend. At that point, the ATF had come to the conclusion that they were losing him. When confronted with what was happening, he readily admitted he was becoming one of them.”

“What happened?” Raven asked.

“They had to close the case to keep the agents alive. They moved in and arrested everyone they could but only ended up with a handful of indictments for low-level players in the MC, nowhere near bringing in the case they’d hoped to. The agent was forced to go into hiding with his family, moving every two weeks. It destroyed his

life,” Sarah said. “Are you sure Special Agent Willis is still—”

“Yes!” Bannister said, more forcefully than she probably should have. Defensiveness was bleeding out of every pore. “Sorry.” She took a deep breath, scrubbing her hand through her hair. “If you’re asking if he’s still okay, then yes, I’m sure he is.” She let out a breath. “I’ve talked to him about this very thing. I’d been worried about him for a while, especially with his background prior to joining the department, but honestly, I know he can and is doing his job. He admitted that the pressure is intense, and that he will most likely want out when this assignment is all said and done.”

She looked around at all of us. “The last time I spoke to him...well...he promised that he’s in it until the case is done. He said he hasn’t had to go through all of this just to come up short.” She looked directly at me and Raven. “And I can promise you that he will do anything to save innocents like Tawny Flores and Brian Leopard. I have faith in him. You need to also.”

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I nodded, seeing the challenge in her eyes. “I will.”

“Me too,” Raven said.

Sorensen cleared his throat. “We should go over the plan,” he said, consulting his dive watch. “I want to figure out our approach and gear up.”

“We’re moving tonight?” I asked.

Sorensen eyed Mac and Lincoln. “No earlier than midnight for sure, but I think it’s best to wait until 0400. Even then, I’m torn. Do you think we can wait that long?”

“Sorry,” Raven said. “Why four a.m.?”

“Because that’s the time when the sicarios will be most likely to let their guard down,” Mac said. “They’ll be tired, less alert at four in the morning. The Army has studied this fact at length. Lack of sleep is associated with impaired reaction time, poor judgment, more accidents, low morale. The Army looks at sleep patterns to help soldiers cope with guard duty at the time when the body normally requires sleep. Graveyard shifts in any profession are difficult...it doesn’t matter what industry. The human body isn’t made that way. Nurses, doctors, cops, and even airline pilots have been shown to be less effective in overnight hours. More mistakes are made. Add stress into the equation, and you begin to see patterns. Trust me, Raven, it’s a thing.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

“I don’t think we can wait,” Bannister said, chewing her thumbnail.

“What do you think, Sorensen?” Lincoln asked. “Should we split the difference between midnight and 0400 then...say 0200?” He checked with Mac. “Good?”

Sorensen and Mac exchanged a glance with each other, seeming to come to a silent agreement. “We’ll set off at 0200,” Mac agreed.

“We’re here to serve,” Sorensen said. “Give us an order and we’ll follow it.”

Heavy boots rang out on the cement floor and Jarrett sauntered over. I’d seen him huddled with the Spec. Ops and DEA tac teams earlier, but now, he was all smiles and dimples, seemingly ready to join in on the discussion. He slapped Cassidy on the back and looked around at the rest of us.

“Are we gonna start plannin’ this shindig, ladies? My trigger finger’s itchy.”

Sorensen smiled at him then pointed to a table near his guys. Several cardboard rolls lay on its surface which I could only assume were maps. “Let’s go make a plan.”

I threw an arm over Raven’s shoulders. He looked at me with such a trusting expression, it made my heart skip a beat. I smiled back before turning to the rest of them.

“Sounds good. Let’s go make a plan.”

Chapter Seventeen

RAVEN

While Miguel joined the teams gathered around the table, I found a folding chair against a wall and sat down, pulling out my phone. I wasn’t a part of the raid on the compound, so it wasn’t necessary to be part of the discussion. If I had to admit, I

really didn't want to know all the details. The fact that the love of my life was going into a heavily fortified compound with an unknown number of killers, scared me to death. Knowing that there was nothing I could do to help the situation made me feel totally helpless.

I tried to get a Wi-Fi connection on my phone, thinking that I might be able to distract myself by doing a Nightcrawler review, but couldn't get a signal of any kind, even a roaming one. By the time it finally occurred to me that the FBI was probably using some sort of signal blocker to keep our location secret, I gave up. Instead, I opened the Word app on my phone, did my best to remember the latest book I'd read, and started writing.

Book title: Hairy Potter

Author: Dr. Pickens

Publisher: Self-published

Genre: Paranormal

Review/rating by Nightcrawler: 3 stars

Synopsis:

The story of an innocent young man who's unexpectedly drawn into a magical, supernatural world when he's bitten by a werewolf.

My review:

The synopsis of this book sounded benign to me, so I sat down with it prepared for a yawn fest. I should preface this by saying that I've read my fair share of paranormal

books, enjoying tales of vampires, werewolves, shifters, and other supernatural creatures. I was, however, surprised by the sexual twist in this book which was not listed as erotic romance.

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The young man in question, has just reached puberty which means he has an active fantasy life which leads to a plethora of crusty socks hidden under the bed where his mom can't find them. As a side note, I must admit, my own mother never had trouble scooping them out from under the bed with a broom, but that's a story for another time.

One night, though, the young teen in question takes a break from his masturbatory activities and decides a long walk is just what he needs to clear his head...no pun intended. So...our guy is out walking his dog in the forest—cliché, I know—when the dog suddenly goes crazy and breaks his leash. He heads for home on a run, leaving the boy in the forest to make his way home alone. Cue the scary music. When he's confronted by a monstrosously hairy, wolf-like beast he can't identify, the boy turns to run, only to find it's too late. He's bitten by the creature, feels a sudden surge of power coursing through his veins, and finally makes it home.

Yeah, yeah, I know, you may be thinking that this is the plot of every werewolf book you've ever read. And yet, it's not. The boy wakes up the next morning with hair on the palms of both hands—nowhere else, just his hands. I admit, I had to stop reading at this point to laugh. Since every boy I ever met has been told that it's wrong to choke their chicken because that kind of behavior leads to the embarrassing growth of hair on the palms of their hands, I think most males can relate. I'm going to stop here with the description of the story. If I go further, I'll spoil the ending for all of you. Let me just say this: Shaving doesn't work, and chemical hair removal products lack style. That may be the true horror of this book.

I'm happy to admit, I'm not speaking from experience.

I found the book to be engaging, and overall, a good read, if not terribly imaginative, so I'm giving it a satisfactory three-star rating. I'll say this to young men everywhere, go ahead and believe in magic even if your mothers pass old-fashioned wives' tales down to you. That's the real horror here.

I looked up from my phone as a shadow fell over me. Kindness and Beth were standing in front of me. I closed my Word app and got to my feet.

"Hey there, Raven," Kindness said with a smile. "You hungry? Thought you might want to grab a sandwich before they're all gone."

I looked past her to the group of men who'd been huddled around the table. They seemed to be finished looking at maps or whatever they'd been doing. Several coolers on wheels had appeared from somewhere and the men were grabbing what looked like sub sandwiches out of them. One of the DEA agents appeared to be tossing bags of chips to people while another passed out cans of what had to be soda.

I rubbed my belly. "Thank you. I really am starving."

The three of us fell into stride, heading over to the group gathered around the coolers. I wondered where the food had come from and then realized someone at the FBI or DEA had the foresight to pack dinners and bring them along. Miguel stood with Max, his husband, Dr. Reeves, Mike, and Cassidy who'd changed into tac gear. Miguel was holding two sandwiches and when I walked over, he handed one to me.

"Thank you for grabbing some food for me."

"It was that or you'd go hungry. If you haven't noticed, those tac team guys are huge. They wouldn't have left you a crumb."

I grinned at him. "Yeah, I noticed the muscles."

“The muscles,huh?” Miguel pinned me with a look which made me laugh.

I watched as he bent down and fished a bag of chips from the pocket of his cargo pants, holding them out to me.

“Mm...Fritos, thank you,” I said appreciatively.

“Your favorite.”

“I don’t know. I’m so hungry I could have eaten a bag of those FUNYUNS things you covet so highly.”

“Who doesn’t love FUNYUNS?” Mike commented, ripping into a small bag of them.

“Greasy rings of oniony goodness? You betcha,” Miguel said, unwrapping his sandwich as Max and the doctor laughed.

I bit into the turkey sandwich, reveling in the multitude of toppings, made just the way I liked it.

“What were you doing over there?” he asked.

“Couldn’t find a Wi-Fi signal so I was writing a review in my Word app.” I shrugged. “I’m probably going to have to rewrite it when all this shit is over. I had a hard time finding the funny.”

Miguel shot me a sympathetic smile.

“You were writing a review?” Dr. Reeves asked. “Of what?”

Miguel grinned at me before looking back at the two men. “Do you like to read,

Doctor Reeves?”

“Please, call me Leo, and yes, I love to read. Our house is full of books. When our cases keep me busy with scientific journals and I need a break from the latest breakthroughs in criminal psychology, I force myself to put it all down to pick up a book. I read for pleasure whenever I need an outlet.”

Miguel hooked a thumb at me. “Raven reviews books on Bestreads. It’s one of those book review sites.”

“Oh, yeah?” Leo asked. “I follow several blogs on there. Do you review under your own name?”

I shook my head. “No...Nightcrawler is my name on Bestreads.”

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Leo's jaw dropped open. "Are you kidding me? Nightcrawler is you?" He nudged Max. "Do you remember that review that I read to you the other night?"

Max thought for a few seconds and then grinned. "The Art of Floor?" He looked at me. "You wrote that?" He started laughing. "You have quite the sense of humor there, Raven."

I grinned, so proud that Miguel wanted to brag about my reviews with the agents. "Thank you."

"I'm never going to be able to look at you the same way again," Leo admitted, smiling. He held up his sandwich. "Every time I do, I'm going to think of The Sliders."

We all chuckled as Candy Sorensen sauntered over. He rested a hand between Miguel's shoulder blades. I watched him share a look with my man, feeling a little stab of jealousy as he paid him attention. "How do you feel about the plan? You think you're gonna be able to keep up?" He winked at Miguel. I grew more annoyed the longer his hand lingered but when Miguel shrugged, he finally let it drop.

"I think I can hold my own," Miguel replied, sounding matter-of-fact about the jab.

"I have no doubt, Recon."

I felt really out of the loop, and I was sure it showed when Max turned to me. "You gonna be okay sittin' this one out, Mathis?"

“I hate the idea, but yeah, I guess. I have no training. Hell, I never even used a gun until I met Miguel.”

“You’re good with that weapon now, Sunshine,” Miguel boasted.

I felt my face heat up. Being called by a pet name in the company of these capable professionals, felt wrong, but if that’s what Miguel wanted, I was loathe to object in front of them. “Thank you,” I said, simply. I balled up the paper from my sandwich and looked at my watch. “It’s nearly midnight. What time does everyone have to leave?”

“We’re goin’ in on foot,” Max drawled. “The hike is about two clicks. We’ll have to leave here in an hour or so.”

I nodded as I opened my bag of Fritos.

“You’ll be given an earwig so you can listen in, Raven,” Miguel said. “I really wish you could be there at my side, but you know you can’t.”

I wished he’d stop rubbing it in. I was feeling inadequate in the company of all these capable men, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to show it. “I know.”

“But there will be a live SAT feed which you’ll be able to watch on one of the Bureau’s monitors,” Leo said, pointing to a laptop set up on one of the tables where the maps were.

“That’s good.” I felt relieved to hear that even though I wouldn’t know which of the tiny dots on the screen would be the man I loved.

The five of us stood there finishing our food until Damon came over and joined us. He nodded to everyone and then turned to Candy. “Bannister is looking for you,

Sorensen.”

“Be right there.” He turned and looked at Miguel. “Don’t forget what I told you. When this is all over, I’ll be calling.”

Miguel pursed his lips. “We’ll see.”

Candy grunted a reply and then nodded, before slapping him on the back again. My irritation ramped up as he turned to Max and Leo. He stuck out his hand and they both shook. When he turned to Miguel, I watched his eyes roam over my partner’s face. “Make sure you answer when I call.”

Miguel simply nodded and then shook the hand he offered. When Candy turned to me, I reached out a hand. “Be careful out there, Sorensen.”

“Will do.” He gave a short salute and walked away.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” I asked Miguel.

“Sure thing. Let me throw that away first.” He held out his hand and it took me a second to realize he was asking for my trash. I handed it to him and watched him walk to a trash barrel.

“Don’t worry,” Leo said.

I looked at him. “About what?”

“That man loves you unconditionally, Raven. You have nothing to worry about.”

“He really does,” Max added.

“I know.” Abstractly, I knew that, but it bugged me a little to know I’d been telegraphing my feelings to everyone else.

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“Yeah, but it don’t take a genius to see how irritated you got when Sorensen had his mitts all over your man,” Max drawled.

“No, really, I wasn’t irritated,” I protested.

“Yeah, you were, but that’s okay,” Leo said, smiling. “Miguel’s focus was on you all throughout the planning.”

That was alarming. “He wasn’t paying attention to what’s supposed to happen?”

“No, he was,” Leo hedged, “but I noticed him sneaking glances in your direction every time he got the chance, that’s all.”

Miguel came back. “Okay, let’s talk,” he said and turned to the others. “I’ll see you guys in a minute.”

“Take your time, Huerta,” Max said.

I reached out my hand, shaking both of theirs. “Please be careful out there, guys...please.”

“You betcha,” Max said before walking away with Leo at his side.

We walked back to where I’d been sitting close to the wall. All around us, men were pulling on vests and body armor, checking weapons, some of them holding handguns, most of them equipped with lethal Bureau-issued automatic rifles. I really hoped Miguel would be taking one of those into that compound with him. As long as I was

going to have to sit here and pray for his safety, I didn't want to imagine what could happen to him if he wasn't armed properly.

"I suppose you want to know what my role in this is gonna be, right?"

"Yes. I can't tell you how frustrating and terrifying it is to be sitting this one out," I admitted. I laid a hand on his arm, staring into his beautiful eyes. "Since this whole thing began, we've been inseparable, Miguel. And even though I know this breach is something you've done a hundred times before, it's been more than a decade since you were on a team and you're unwell. I can't help but feel nervous."

He nodded, giving me a serious look. "And I need you not to be. I know you're scared, Raven, but I need you right here where I know you'll be safe. I'm feeling better after the painkillers and the sleep out here. I'll be going in with capable men at my side and at my back. They've all done this a million times before. But I promise to be careful. I'll be surrounded by a lot of good men who know their jobs, the most important of those being to keep each other safe."

"Are you...will you be...I don't know what I want to ask." I wanted to beg him not to go but I knew it wouldn't only be embarrassing for him, but it would be wrong. He was a Recon Marine, a fierce warrior, and he was right. He'd done this kind of thing throughout his career and each time, he'd come out of it okay. I had to trust him and make him know it. Telling a Marine you didn't have complete faith in him was dangerous. He had to feel invincible, and I couldn't let my fears cripple him and how he reacted when the time came.

"We're going in there with a partner. Sorensen is mine. You've seen the man, right? He's strong as an ox, has been on a couple of hundred missions as a Green Beret, and if you haven't noticed, he's capable of watching my back. He won't leave me behind, Raven. Of that, there shouldn't be any doubt."

I nodded vigorously. “So, what does he want to talk to you about? He said he was going to call.”

Miguel sighed, looking directly into my eyes. “He said his team is down a man and he wanted to know if I’d be interested. He wants to talk to his SAC about adding me to the team.”

“What?”

Miguel shook his head, reaching out to grab my bicep. “Don’t worry. I already told him I have no interest in that. For one thing, they’re based out of Houston, they’re FBI, and I’m committed to our business. I told him I haven’t been on a team in almost twelve years, but most importantly, I’m happy with you...right where I am.”

I nodded slowly. “But he’s going to press the matter.”

Miguel frowned. “Are you hearing me, Raven? I said I turned him down. Even if he calls, I’m going to repeat what I already told him. I am thoroughly committed to you and Trackers. I love my life. I love our home. I love Nana. And I love Stanley.” He reached out and took my chin in his hand when I turned away. “I loveyou, Raven and I’m very happy, understand?”

I sighed, feeling a little better. It was nice to know that he was committed to me, but I certainly didn’t want to limit his career prospects if an FBI tac team was a better fit. “I’m happy too, Miguel, but I don’t want you to stick out the opening of Trackers if the job he’s offering fits better.”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “Where’s this coming from,huh? I told you, I’m happy. You’re happy, right?”

I closed the space between us and drew him into my arms. He came willingly. “Of

course, I am.”

He surrounded me, hugging me tightly to him. I felt a brief kiss on my hair and then we were separating. He smiled. “Okay, I need to gear up. Come with me?”

I nodded, stepping back. He put his hand in the small of my back and I walked with him over to one of the vehicles where a tac team guy was passing out vests, body armor, and weapons.

“Thank you,” Miguel said as he took a vest marked FBI on the back. He pulled it over his head and I stepped close, helping him adjust the straps as the agent looked on. Once that was done, the man handed him several flash bang grenades. Miguel shoved them deep down into the pockets of his black tac pants. I noticed they were made of some sort of mesh fiber that gleamed. The long-sleeved shirt he wore looked the same. Only then, did I realize he’d put on body armor, probably when I had my head buried in my phone.

After taking three full clips of spare ammo and an FBI windbreaker, he was handed a large automatic weapon and two handguns. Finally, he asked for a knife and strapped it onto his belt before adding night vision goggles as well as a set of military-grade earwigs to everything else.

I asked for a set of earwigs and the agent handed them over without question.

“Thanks,” Miguel said, nodding to the man. We walked over to the group of agents gathered at the tables where the maps had been laid out. Mike and Cassidy stood there and I smiled, knowing that even though Cass would be going along with Miguel as part of the team, at least I’d have Mike by my side throughout the ordeal. Sorensen looked up from the large laptop he was working on. He nodded to both of us and then turned to a female agent.

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“Mr. Mathis, this is Special Agent Cora Cooperson. You can stay here with her throughout the operation. If you have any questions before, during, or after, she’s your man.”

She grinned. “I’m your man,” she said, playfully pointing at herself. She held out a hand, and I shook it. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Mathis.”

“Please call me Raven.”

“Cora.”

“We’d better get going, Huerta,” Sorensen said.

All the air rushed out of my lungs as I felt my heart squeeze. It was too soon. I didn’t want to let him go. Something in my expression must have touched Miguel’s heart. He immediately threw his arms around me, and I hugged him back. “Please be careful.” My words were muffled against his collarbone.

“I will. I promise. See you soon, Sunshine.”

I squeezed him hard but a few seconds later, predictably, Miguel let go. I turned to Sorensen. “You take care of him, you hear?”

“I promise, Raven.” Sorensen gave me a serious look and nodded hard, abruptly turning away from us.

I reached out and caught Miguel’s hand right before he walked away. We didn’t say

anything, just stared into each other's eyes before I finally let him go.

He walked over to join the others waiting by the vehicles. They would take the FBI and DEA teams as far as they could before dropping them in an inconspicuous place to hike the rest of the way through the jungle.

As Miguel stood beside Mac, Jarrett, Max, and the rest of my friends, I watched Sorensen pull a small box out of his tac pants. He opened it and dipped his fingers into it. After painting his face with black and green paint, he passed it to Miguel who expertly applied some to his own face.

I watched the others load up in the vehicles and as Miguel turned to look in my direction one last time, I held my breath, raised my hand, and waited for his acknowledgment. It came with a brief, private nod of his head, before he climbed into the vehicle. He and the others drove through the second set of double doors at the back of the warehouse and disappeared a minute later.

I'd never felt so terrified in my life.

Chapter Eighteen

MIGUEL

Leaving Raven behind in that cavernous warehouse made my heart hurt. It was as if all the breath had been sucked from my lungs, and I wondered how I could ever take another one, without half of it being a wish for him. I rode with Sorensen at my side, comforted by the big man's presence. Like I'd told Raven, I'd worked with other men like him for years, confident in the fact that they'd be as focused on protecting their partner's back as they were about accomplishing the mission.

The Humvees took us to a thick copse of trees and we piled out, checking our gear

one last time, before starting the hike in. We wore night vision goggles, making it easy to see our way through the steamy heat of the jungle.

By 0200, it was deep night as we reached our destination. I knew it was the compound by the thick, cinderblock walls encircling it. We'd seen the walls on the SAT images we'd studied at length, but we'd had no way of knowing how tall they were. Up close, I guessed we were looking at walls that were eight feet tall. We spread out, half of us approaching from the east and the other half from the west.

The plan was for the snipers to scale the walls first, sitting atop them to provide cover for the DEA which was entering the compound to take out perimeter guards or provide silenced cover for the agents. Once the way had been cleared for the FBI, our tac teams would move on the house itself with the goal of undertaking the hostage rescue, taking out any sicarios standing in the way. Sorensen and I were to locate Tawny Flores, Brian Leopard, Greg Aston, and Special Agent Willis. We'd get them out while a team led by Lincoln and Mac McCallahan would take Oscar Castillo prisoner. Whether they brought the cartel boss out dead or alive remained to be seen, but none of us planned to fail.

I waited with Sorensen on one side of me and McCallahan on the other, watching as Jarrett Evans did a running launch at the wall, grabbed the top with his hands and hooked his leg over the top, flattening himself out immediately. He gave the "all clear" signal, and Sarah Connor threw climbing ropes over the east wall where we were, knowing that the Spec. Ops sniper, Reese Monroe, was doing the same thing on the west wall. As soon as they were lying flat on their bellies up on top, the DEA began scaling the walls. Once they were up and over, it was our turn to make a move.

Sorensen moved to a recently vacated rope and pulled it taut, beginning to climb. The sound of boots scaling the walls and the soft thuds as men hit the dirt beyond, were the only things I could hear in the warm and humid dark night. I heard a spit from one of the sniper rifles and I knew either Jarrett or Sarah had silently taken out a

perimeter guard. As soon as Sorensen reached the top, I began to climb, grabbing his outstretched hand for the final foot. We both hopped over and dropped to the ground, as others did the same.

I should have been prepared for the first volley of gunshots as they split the night, but the scream of a man being hit by bullets brought back horrifying, if not familiar, memories of another war in a faraway place. The element of surprise was lost as the DEA's tac team began taking out the Sanchez Cartels' sicarios. In a matter of moments, the compound sounded like every firefight I'd ever been in.

"Let's go!" Sorensen yelled. We began running in an all-out sprint toward the largest structure on the property...the large, white, Colonial-style house. Twenty feet from the house, the front door suddenly crashed open and the three gunmen who came running out, firing weapons, were cut down in a matter of seconds. We stepped over their corpses and Sorensen and I flattened ourselves against the wall on either side of the door. When two more gunmen came out, we took them down with KA-BARs to the throat, relieving their gurgling corpses of their weapons in seconds. McCallahan and Snow ran up behind the two of us, guns on the ready. I looked at Sorensen and with silent nods of understanding, the two of us entered the house.

Almost immediately, we were met with a volley of gunfire, and ducked back around the heavy, wood doorframe as it splintered beside us. Sorensen and I immediately rushed back inside, laying down fire as McCallahan and Snow came in right behind us. The foyer was clear for now, so we began our search. I visually mapped the interior of the dark house, noting the wide, curving staircase leading upstairs. I signaled to the others waiting for Sorensen, Mac, and Lincoln to acknowledge me. As one, they silently nodded.

The four of us advanced, climbing the stairs as more of the FBI's Spec. Ops team members entered behind us. A sicario appeared from behind a closed door at the top of the stairs, swung his weapon in my direction, but Sorensen was faster. The man

died in a hail of bullets, toppling down the stairs in front of me as I sidestepped, seconds later. In the earbuds we heard the rest of the team calling out, “Clear!” every time they cleared a room, sometimes preceded by therat-a-tat-tatof gunfire. Outside, gunfire was ongoing as we began clearing the rooms behind closed doors one by one.

“Second floor clear,” Sorensen announced. “Proceeding up to the third.” We backtracked to the stairway, and started climbing, doing the same thing. As we approached the third door, a volley of shots punched through it, the bullets narrowly missing me as I dove out of the way. Running feet from behind the door and a second volley of shots rang out before Sorensen kicked the door open. It crashed against the wall and Sorensen went in shooting. A female screamed and my heart nearly burst out of my chest. Seconds later, the scantily clad woman came running toward me barefoot, wearing only a red, silk robe.

“Get down!” I yelled, spotting someone behind her. She dropped to the floor a split second before machine gunfire nearly took her down. She threw both hands over her head and screamed, shouting terrified curses in Spanish in a voice choked with tears. It took only moments to clear the bedroom of anyone else, and Sorensen led us out.

Several more of the team were in the hallway, checking doors, taking out whoever resisted. Judging from the volleys of automatic gunfire and the screams of dying men, it seemed like most all did. It took only a minute more to clear all the bedrooms. I turned to Sorensen.

“They’re not on this floor. Let’s backtrack.” His sharp nod had us all turning back around and running down the stairs.

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“No one else on the main level, Captain,” one of the guys told Sorensen once we got to the bottom.

“There’s a wine cellar, Cap!” one of the guys said, rushing over.

“Let’s go.”

The four of us, along with two others headed through the massive, modern kitchen which housed two stainless steel refrigerators, two dishwashers, a large Viking stove, and gleaming white marble countertops. Another one of Sorensen’s team met us at the head of a set of stairs, leading down. He was holding a thermal imaging camera in his hands and held it out to us.

“There are six people down there, Captain,” the man said.

Sorensen nodded, eyebrows raised in question at Lincoln.

“It’s gotta be the hostages, Snow.”

“That means the others have to be guards,” Lincoln said, nodding in agreement. “I sure as hell hope one of them is Oscar Castillo.” He glanced at Mac, who nodded at him.

“Let’s go get them, Linc.”

“Hold up, Mac,” I said, grabbing his massive bicep. He stopped in his tracks. “You’ve got explosives training. Make sure you check the door for boobytraps.”

Mac flashed me a wicked grin. “I’m way ahead of you, Miguel. Thanks.”

I dropped my hand and let him take the lead, right behind Sorensen while I followed as Lincoln brought up the rear. “Someone told me you were cyber before becoming Mac’s partner, Lincoln.”

He laughed quietly. “Why on earth are you bringing that up now, Miguel?”

“I just thought about it.”

“Funny time, but okay, yeah, I used to be cyber. What’s your point?”

“Nothing.” I grinned. “Just wondered if shit like this is why you left desk work.”

“Of course, it is, Miguel, because it’s much more fun taking down the bad guys with a gun than a mouse.”

I chuckled to myself as we descended the stairs one at a time. At the bottom, the room opened to a wide landing made of inlaid bricks. In front of us was a brick archway with a fancy, carved door of sturdy oak and an iron latch. Behind it, I was certain we’d find the hostages. The tac team had been all through the rest of the property. We stood aside as the agent with the thermal imaging camera walked over. He held it up, scanning the door silently. We huddled around the small screen to get a peek at who was behind the door.

One person lay on the floor. The glow coming from the figure was dim, meaning the person was either very cold...or worse yet, dying as heat leached out of their body. Three others were seated beside the person on the floor, glowing slightly brighter. Two figures paced, one near what had to be the hostages, and another near the door, only a few feet from where we were standing. He was probably listening at the door because he knew we were coming. Unless he’d somehow been tipped off and gotten

away, I could only assume Castillo was inside with the hostages. He no doubt had one of his men in there with them. Sorensen nodded at the agent and then motioned for us to walk several paces away, just around a bend in the wall, so we could have a conversation without being overheard.

“Castillo and one of his men have to be inside and it’s obvious to me that at least one of the hostages may already be dead,” Sorensen said, keeping his voice low.

I nodded, as did the others. “Chances are, Castillo is gonna kill the hostages if we breach,” I said.

“Do you see any other way of this playing out?” Lincoln remarked. “They’re going to die anyway. We don’t have a choice.”

Mac bent and pulled out a coil of det cord, handing it to Lincoln before extracting a tiny block of C-4 and a separate detonator. “I can use the det cord to blow the door, but it might not give us the surprise we want, as quick as we want. The C-4 would do the job, probably take out the sicario by the door, but with the blast, we stand the chance that it might kill or gravely wound the hostages.”

Surprisingly, Sorensen smiled. “I’ve got something better.” He bent down and pulled out two silver, cylindrical objects. They were about six by three inches and flat on one side. He handed them to Mac who was grinning as Sorensen reached into another pocket and pulled out a third.

“Mini breacher’s boots, nice,” the big man exclaimed. “I didn’t think to ask if you had access to them.”

Sorensen nodded. “Standard tactical issue. They’re packed with just enough explosive to get through a thick, wooden door and hopefully preserve life on the other side of it.”

“It’ll knock out the sicario by the door but then we’ll need to make rapid entry to take out Castillo, if he’s in there,” Lincoln added, “though, it’d be better if we can take him alive.”

“That’s what these are for,” I said, pulling out the flash bangs I had in my cargos.

“Good,” Lincoln said. “Mac, check the door for a boobytrap while Sorensen sets the breacher’s boots.”

Sorensen and Mac nodded, stepping around the wall to the door. We watched from our position with the other team members who’d come down behind us, while Mac checked for boobytraps. Sorensen peeled sticky tape off the back of the breacher’s boots, setting them on the doors. One nearest the latch and two others at the hinges, top and bottom. Once everything was in place and Mac had assured us that there’d be no secondary explosion triggered when they breached, Sorensen waved us all back into place behind the wall. Mac handed me a flash bang grenade, and I readied myself for something I hadn’t done in almost twelve years.

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“You do the honors, Miguel,” he said.

I nodded, confident in my role. Sorensen held up a hand and counted down on five fingers before pressing the detonator. The door blew outward and we ducked back behind the wall only long enough to avoid being struck by the splintering wood before Mac and I rushed forward, throwing the flashbangs into the room. I held my rifle at the ready and followed Sorensen into the room with Mac and Lincoln at my side. The sicario nearest the door was down but still moving, covered in debris, face obscured by blood. Sorensen didn't stop to ask questions before putting a bullet in the middle of the man's forehead.

Three things struck me all at once. Special Agent Trevor Willis lay on the ground, his head cradled in Brian Leopard's lap, Tawny Flores and her attorney, Gregory Aston were embracing, heads ducked over the other two, and Oscar Castillo was holding a handgun pointed directly at Sorensen's head.

I fired, not caring about taking the cartel boss alive at that moment, somehow knowing that another snake would simply rise to take the boss' place the moment he was killed. A hole opened up in the man's forehead as he fell backward, hit right between the eyes before he even got off a shot.

“Where's Alex Filmore?” I shouted.

Greg Aston pointed to the man Sorensen shot. “That's Filmore.”

I walked over to the man I'd thought was a sicario, squatting to verify his identity. Pushing up my night vision goggles, I took out my flashlight to light up his face. Sure

enough, it was Alex Filmore, and he had a brand-new bullet wound right between the eyes. I stood, turning to the others. “It’s him.”

“All clear,” Sorensen said into the coms. “All hostages safe, Castillo and Filmore are dead. We’re gonna need a medic. Willis is down.”

“Trevor,” DEA SAC Hope Bannister’s tortured voice came in our coms. “Is he alive?” Her voice trembled.

Sorensen moved forward, squatting in front of the hostages. He put two fingers on the side of agent Willis’ neck, checking for a pulse.

“Affirmative. Willis is alive but we need a medic, right now!”

Brian Leopard looked up. His face was horribly bruised, eyes almost glued shut from the swelling. Tears leaked from the sides, tracking down his face. “He’s been shot. Please help him,” he managed to say.

I squatted in front of Tawny and Greg Aston.

“Miguel? Miguel Huerta?” Tawny cried. Her white-blond hair was a mess, tangled and matted with blood. One of her pretty eyes was swollen almost closed and her cheek was distended so badly, I knew she probably had a broken cheekbone. Someone had badly beaten her. She had lacerations on her chest, and I could make out a set of finger shaped bruises on her neck as though she’d been choked. Her silk blouse was torn and bloody, exposing one side of her tattered bra and I could see more bruises there. I had a sick feeling that underneath what was left of her meager clothing, the doctors would later find evidence of rape at the hands of animals. Her dream weekend getaway with a good friend had turned into a nightmare.

“It’s me. How badly are you hurt?”

“Please get us out of here,” she whimpered.

I nodded then looked at Aston who’d also been worked over. The front of his torn dress shirt was covered in blood but most of it looked like it had come from numerous cuts and bruises on his face. He looked like he’d been attacked by a pack of dogs. “You armed, Aston?” He stared at me with haunted eyes, simply shaking his head. His lips were cracked and swollen from the beating he’d taken. His cheeks were sunken as though he’d been starved.

“Stand up,” Lincoln said, pulling out handcuffs and fastening them around his wrists, hands behind his back as the man got shakily to his feet. “You’re in some trouble.” The lawyer simply nodded, letting out a pathetic sob.

I couldn’t bring myself to feel the least bit sorry for the man who would probably be going to prison for a very long time once the FBI got finished with him. I turned when feet pounded down the stairs behind me. One of the Spec. Ops team carried a backpack with a white cross on it, and he went immediately to his knees in front of Agent Willis to render aid, tearing open the remnants of a filthy, bloody shirt. His body was covered with wounds, the worst of them, a gunshot to the belly. It was still bleeding which meant it had been recent, but other injuries, numerous dime-sized wounds—probably from a lit cigar—peppered his skin. He was white as a sheet and breathing with a hideous wet sucking sound.

Sorensen tapped me on the shoulder. “We should get these hostages out and give Joy room to work.”

“Joy?”

Sorensen pointed to the medic. “Alain Joy, our medic, but he also answers to Almond.”

Joy turned and nodded in our direction. “Get the fuck out.”

Sorensen laughed, saluted, and then walked over to Brian. “Come on, Mr. Leopard. Let’s get you out of here.”

Poor Brian looked like he’d been run over by a tractor. His head was bleeding, his curls were matted with something awful, and his face was badly bruised, like he’d been used as a punching bag. He was still weeping. “I don’t want to leave Trevor.” He looked at Joy. “Please help him,” he said. “He took the brunt of it all to protect us.”

Another set of boots rang out behind us as Bannister came into the room. She rushed over and squatted. “Trevor,” she said, sounding like she wanted to cry. I watched her put a hand on his forehead as she bent over him, speaking softly into his ear as Joy worked on him. I turned to Tawny as Sorensen helped Brian to his feet, leading him out of the room on unsteady legs.

“Come on, Mrs. Flores, let me get you out of here.”

She reached for me with shaking hands, and I took both of them in mine, pulling her easily to her feet. As she straightened, my worst fears were confirmed. She’d been stripped from the waist down and wore only torn panties. Black and blue bruises covered her legs. I shrugged out of my FBI windbreaker and tied it around her waist as Mac did the same, reversing his jacket. Between the two, she was fully covered, and Mac and I helped her walk out of the room, bending to carry her over the splintered wood from the door which had been blown to smithereens.

She cried out as we set her down again. We walked up the stairs with her where more agents were waiting with jackets to cover the top of her torn dress, and escorted her out of the house, stepping around bodies. Sorensen lingered just outside with Brian clinging to his large arm. When Brian saw Tawny, he burst into tears but allowed

himself to be pulled along after us, to a waiting Humvee.

Once she was safely inside, I turned to see Sorensen following with Brian. The man could barely stand and was sobbing as he was led out of what had to have been days of hell on earth. Sorensen helped him into the Humvee beside Tawny and then shut the door. I watched the pair gently embrace in the back seat. The vehicle drove off moments later.

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Sorensen was holding out a hand. I shook it.

“That was great work, Huerta. I really hope you take me up on my offer.”

“What offer?” Mac asked.

I noticed Lincoln walking toward us from another vehicle which was driving away. I knew he had placed the handcuffed Gregory Aston into the vehicle, which was no doubt being driven to the same hospital the others were.

“Sorensen wants me to join the team in Houston,” I told Mac.

“That’s a big deal, Miguel,” Mac said. “I know the FBI would be lucky to have you.”

“I told him the same thing,” Sorensen said. “He fits into the team and after all, wearekind of awesome.”

“What’s a big deal?” Lincoln asked as he walked up, clearly having overheard the last part of our conversation.

“Sorensen wants me to join the FBI in Houston to be on his team,” I said, shaking my head. I turned to the man. “Sorry, Candy, I can’t do it. My life and my heart are in L.A.”

The sound of a vehicle driving into the compound made us all turn at once. It was speeding in our direction.

“Speaking of your heart, here he is,” Lincoln said.

I turned in time to catch the man’s wide, white grin before looking back at the Humvee which came to a screeching halt not twenty feet from us. The passenger door popped open, and Raven practically dived out of it. The second his feet hit asphalt; he was running. I left the others, charging for him, meeting him halfway. He was in my arms a moment later, right where I needed him to be.

I never wanted to let him go.

Chapter Nineteen

RAVEN

On the flight back to the States with Miguel softly snoring on the seat beside me, I reflected on the last twenty-four hours. Listening to the firefight happening in Castillo’s plantation house had been terrifying. With rapt attention, I’d watched the tiny dots moving through the house. I hadn’t known which grouping of agents Miguel was in until they’d been told that the home had been cleared of everyone but the men they sought, leaving only the wine cellar where the hostages had to be.

After that, I kept all my attention on the agents going downstairs, huddling by what must be the entrance to the cellar, and then I’d been horrified when I’d heard them say they were looking at a thermal imaging camera showing one person lying on the ground, probably dying. If I hadn’t heard the agents planning the operation to breach the door with explosive devices, picking out Sorensen and Mac’s voices, the small fireball which lit up the screen a few minutes later, would have come as a complete shock.

I’d been holding my breath and then the “All clear,” from Sorensen was followed by the “All hostages safe, Castillo is dead.” I’d sorely wanted to scream “Where’s

Miguel? What about Miguel?” until I heard his voice asking about Alex Filmore then Sorensen again. “Alex Filmore is dead and we’re gonna need a medic. Willis is down.”

In the next few minutes, I’d realized that the man down in the wine cellar with Castillo and the hostages, was the dangerous killer we’d been chasing for months now, hopefully the final man in the rogue CIA cell of jewel thieves. I was hopeful that now that we appeared to be safe, the interviews with whatever bad guys had survived the siege on Castillo’s compound would lead to more clues. I was counting on Gregory Aston to provide us with all the details we’d need to close out the case including the location of the jewels.

Miraculously, none of the DEA or Spec. Ops FBI tac team members had been killed in the siege. Sarah, Jarrett, and the FBI sniper had been instrumental in taking out many of Castillo’s sicarios patrolling the grounds. The DEA tac team had cleaned up the rest of the trash. I’d heard—though it was still unconfirmed—that there had been more than twenty outside and another twenty inside the property. As far as I knew, all of them were dead along with Oscar Castillo. The Sanchez Cartel would most likely continue, but for now, the head of the snake may have been cut off. We still had no word on his half-brother, Rafael.

We landed in Houston almost three hours after taking off from Grand Cayman, leaving Aston under heavy guard at the George Town hospital. But also Tawny, Brian, and Trevor were there under heavy guard for their own safety. When we took off, Trevor was in surgery, fighting for his life. Miguel wasn’t optimistic he’d survive. He’d lost a lot of blood. According to Tawny, he’d been shot in the stomach after being tortured in front of them. The placement of the bullet, courtesy of Alex Filmore, had been deliberate. He’d wanted him to die slowly, suffering. I was glad the animal was dead, only sorry that this end had come quickly.

I suspected poor Tawny had been raped. Brian was a basket case, and in my opinion,

Gregory Aston deserved everything he got. I prayed Special Agent Trevor Willis would pull through.

“Are we in Houston?” Miguel asked as the plane touched down and the tires squealed on the tarmac.

I glanced over as he sucked in a deep breath, wiped his mouth, and sat up. I reached over and took his hand. “Yeah, baby. Get some sleep?” He looked so worn out and I was simply grateful he was sitting beside me looking alive and well. I’d make sure he slept when we got home but for now, I was just happy that he’d made it through the ordeal alive.

“A few winks at least,” Miguel said, smiling lazily over at me. “You?”

“No, I can’t stop replaying that final firefight in my head. Not being there to see that you were alive and unhurt with my own eyes, unable to hold you in my arms, almost drove me out of my mind.” I knew I probably shouldn’t be putting voice to my fears, but I had to.

Miguel smiled at me, lifting my hand and kissing it. “I know, Sunshine but now it’s over and done with. All the bad guys are dead. I have to go to the Federal Building tomorrow to do a thorough debrief with the FBI, but after that, I think we’re done.” I stared at him, wondering if I should ask him what was really on my mind. “Go on,” he said, smiling, “tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Do you really think it’s all over? How do we know there aren’t any more CIA guys coming after the jewels?” Something suddenly occurred to me. “What about Mancuso? He’s still out there, right?”

Miguel looked at me, eyes wide. “Hang on a minute.”

I watched him get up and walk to the back of the plane where Lincoln and the rest of the tac team were sitting. He leaned over Lincoln's seat talking to him for a few seconds. Lincoln bent and showed Miguel something. He pulled out his own phone and pressed buttons before handing Lincoln's phone back to him. When he climbed over me to get back into his window seat, he held out his phone. On it was a picture of a very dead Salvatore Mancuso. He was lying in grass which meant he'd probably been killed by the DEA outside. I breathed a sigh of relief and passed it back.

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“Good to know, but how do we know we’re safe from what’s left of the cartel?” I asked.

“In short, I’m mostly sure it’s over. Bannister confirmed that one of the guys killed outside the house was Rafael Sanchez, Oscar Castillo’s half-brother, so there’s really no one to inherit the family business. That doesn’t mean another cartel won’t just swoop in to fill the void. That’s how these bastards work, and we all know nature abhors a vacuum. I’ll know more when I talk to the FBI tomorrow. By the way, you’re a part of this, so they’ll probably want to talk to you to get your account.”

“Snow didn’t say anything to me,” I said, blinking as the lights in the cabin came on.

He nodded. “He will, though. If you failed to notice, he had kind of a lot of shit going on back in the Caymans.”

“Yeah. When do you think we’ll hear something about Trevor? I know SAC Bannister stayed at the hospital back in Grand Cayman.”

He smiled, squeezing my hand harder. “We’ll get an update on that tomorrow too and if there’s bad news, I’m sure we’ll hear something sooner, maybe while we’re on the ground in Houston.”

I nodded and looked around the cabin. The plane was still taxiing toward a jetway. Once we lined up at the gate, people behind us started moving. I sensed it when someone came up behind me, stopping next to my seat, and looked up at the face of Candy Sorensen. He smiled then looked at Miguel. “Hey,ah, the SAC of the Houston office wants to talk to you. Can you speak to him for a second?”

“Now?” Miguel asked. “Candy, I told you, I’m not gonna take the job. I appreciate the offer, though.” He gave me a look of devotion before glancing back up at the man. “Really, I’m not leaving Los Angeles.”

“Yeah, I know, which is why he wants to talk to you.” Candy held up both hands. “Please, just hear him out.”

Miguel looked at me. I swallowed hard. If he left our agency and went to work for the FBI, that’d completely suck but I didn’t say anything.

Miguel broke eye contact and looked back at Sorensen. “When? When and where am I going to have this conversation?”

“Right now, if you want. After everyone deplanes, he’ll board and talk to you for a second before you guys head back to L.A. What do you say?”

Miguel shrugged. “I guess. But it’s gonna have to be a quick conversation. I know the FBI wants their teams back in L.A. to rest up for the grueling debrief they’ll all undergo in the morning.”

“Good.” Candy Sorensen grinned widely before reaching out to shake Miguel’s hand. When he was done, he reached for mine, giving my shoulder a squeeze with the other at the same time. “You take care, Mathis.”

“You too, Sorensen.”

Candy shouldered the duffel he’d dropped on the ground and walked off the plane, ducking as he went out the door. One by one, the team walked by and reached for Miguel’s hand. While some reached for mine, others settled for patting me on the back. I understood why Miguel used to work on a team the way these guys did every day of their lives. When they were working, they operated like a well-oiled machine.

In off hours when they weren't exercising or putting themselves through a punishing run or other training, they were socializing with wives, girlfriends, children. They were a happy, cohesive group.

I wanted Miguel to be happy whatever he did, not worried about money all the time, the way he was now.

We sat in our seats until everyone exited, waiting for Houston's SAC to board the plane. In a few minutes, a barrel-chested man came on board. He looked around and seemed to spot someone he knew at the back. He motioned to him and I turned to look. Lincoln got out of his seat and came down the aisle toward us.

"SAC Snow?"

"That's me," Snow said.

The man stuck out his hand. "SAC Kevin Waters," he drawled. "I wanted to take a moment to talk to you and Mr. Huerta."

Lincoln nodded at me. "This is Miguel Huerta and his partner, Raven Mathis."

Miguel held out his hand. "Miguel Huerta, sir. Nice to meet you."

"You, too." He held out a hand to me. "Raven Mathis."

"Yes, sir. Nice to meet you," I replied, perplexed as I shook his hand. I really hoped Sorensen had conveyed Miguel's wishes about joining a Spec. Ops tac team. If he hadn't, this conversation was going to be embarrassing.

Kevin Waters smiled genuinely. "Mind if I sit? Take a load off, Snow."

Lincoln sat across the aisle from us in the empty seat, and Waters took the one in front of that, turning to look back at us.

“You probably think I’m here to make the same offer Candy already did, Miguel. Is it okay if I call you Miguel?”

“That’s fine, sir, and yes, that’s what I was thinking.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“Oh?”

“Actually...” He turned to Lincoln. “This hasn’t been announced yet, so y’all will be the first to hear, but the Spec. Ops team is movin’ from Houston to Los Angeles.”

“I didn’t know that,” Lincoln said.

“Well, it came as a bit of a surprise to me two months ago when the director made the decision. Actually, he’s had me workin’ to recruit a whole new team for Houston because in his mind—and I suppose I have to agree with him on this point—there’s more crime in L.A. than Houston... At least more of the type of crime where a team like our Spec. Ops team is best utilized. Those boys are specialists, as you witnessed firsthand over the last couple of days. Hell, they’re the closest thing the U.S. has to a military unit operatin’ domestically. Most cities have SWAT teams that are built similar, but an FBI tac team in any field office in the nation, ain’t as good as these boys are.”

“They’re very effective, yes, I have to agree,” Lincoln said. “We’ll sure be happy to have them in Los Angeles.” Lincoln glanced at Miguel before looking back at Waters. “Sir, you do realize Miguel doesn’t work for the FBI, so I’m a little confused as to why you wanted to talk to us both.”

“Candy didn’t tell you?”

Lincoln shook his head, frowning. “No.”

“Well, he told me that Mr. Huerta comes with a Marine Recon pedigree and Candy

feels he'd make an excellent replacement for one of the men who can't make the move from Texas to California."

"I honestly didn't know about the offer." Lincoln turned to me. "Does this mean you'll be joining the FBI, Miguel?" He darted a glance at me for a few seconds, obviously picking up on the fact that if Miguel did make that choice, he and I wouldn't be partners anymore.

I felt a little sick to my stomach. It felt wrong for me to be standing in Miguel's way if he really did decide to take the offer. But I wouldn't blame him if he did.

"I already turned Sorensen down, Lincoln, which is why I didn't mention it. Raven and I have a lot of friends in the Bureau and as you and McCallahan know, I appreciate all the help you've been, but Raven and I just opened Trackers. Helping out on the breach with Sorensen's team was a one-time deal, an opportunity to fill an empty spot when we went in to find and rescue the hostages."

Waters cleared his throat. "I understand your hesitation, Miguel. However, I wanted to explain just what you'd be required to do should you decide to join the FBI." Miguel no doubt opened his mouth to protest. "Please. It'll only take a minute, son."

Miguel nodded. "Okay, a minute."

"I suppose I should tell you that the man lost—the man who chose to leave the team and stay behind here in Houston—well, he was our tracker, you see. Full blooded Navajo. Lived on the reservation all his life until joinin' the Army in 2010. When Sorensen met you and learned what your specialty had been as a Recon Marine, I realized that you might be just the type of man who could take his place. Really, all you'd be doin' is cashin' a check from the U.S. government, otherwise, your job is the same as the job you do with your partner, Raven Mathis, at Trackers."

My eyebrows climbed all the way up as I exchanged a surprised glance with Miguel who looked equally as confused. Miguel frowned at Waters.

“Mr. Waters, it kind of sounds like you’ve been doing your homework on me.”

Waters smiled and nodded. “I have. I already had an idea about you. But after you killed Castillo, and I got the full rundown of how you worked side by side with Captain Sorensen on the takedown of the Sanchez Cartel headquarters, I knew—well, we both did—you’re the kind of man we need on this team.”

Miguel was silent for a few minutes. He didn’t look at me but addressed Waters directly. “SAC Waters, I appreciate that Sorensen choosing me to be his partner on this mission was intentional—a job interview—but I can’t leave my business.” He reached for my hand before saying, “Because, you see, I have a partner of my own. And I don’t think I’d be the kind of recruit you’d really want to take your man’s place, if I agreed to leave my partner behind just because it sounds like fun to collect my paycheck from Uncle Sam once again. This man is the only partner I need. Thank you for your offer but I really hope I’ve made myself clear. Oh, and by the way, please tell Sorensen I appreciate the vote of confidence. I enjoyed working with him too.”

Lincoln snorted, and Miguel and I both turned to look at him. He wasn’t looking at us. He was looking at Waters and when we turned back to the man in question, he was smiling. He nodded to Lincoln and then focused on Miguel.

“That was nice—what you said there—real nice. It’s good to know that you have a partner you put so much trust in. I admire loyalty like that. Aside from your skills in the field, it no doubt made you a superior Marine.”

“Thank you,” Miguel said.

“One last thing.”

“Okay.”

“Because you didn’t quite let me finish before you gave that heartfelt answer to my offer.”

Miguel nodded. “I’m sorry. Please, go on, sir.”

“Because I was about to sweeten my offer,” Waters said.

“You mean something other than the fact that I’d be working with men I greatly admire and getting my checks from the FBI?”

Waters actually chuckled. “Yes, that’s right. What I was goin’ to add was that I’d like to hire you both on...as a team.”

I felt my jaw drop. When I turned to look at Miguel, he was frowning at Waters.
“I’m...sorry?”

“I want to hire both you and your partner, Miguel.”

“What?” I asked.

“I want to hire you and Mr. Huerta to join the team, Mr. Mathis.”

I finally managed to snap out of it long enough to laugh. “I don’t have any kind of military training, sir.”

“Do you know how to track, son?”

“Yes.”

“Are you any good at it?”

“Yes, I’m damned good. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“Good. You’re hired,” Waters said.

“I don’t—” Miguel squeezed my hand, and I met his gaze. “What? I don’t know how to shoot or—”

“Later, Raven,” Miguel said. He dragged his gaze away from me and looked back at Waters. “SAC, thank you for the offer. We’ll talk about it and get back to you.”

He grinned and slapped both of his knees, standing up, holding out his hand to me as Snow got up too. “Good. I look forward to talkin’ with both of you about it on Monday.”

“We’re going on vacation!” I blurted, twisting around to give Miguel a pointed look. He nodded before turning back to Waters.

“We’ll be back in about ten days during which time, I promise you we’ll be discussing your offer if it’s still good until then,” Miguel said.

Waters smiled. “Actually, the team won’t be transferrin’ to the West Coast for about six weeks. Understandably, they have family obligations to wrap up, lots of packin’ to do, and homes to sell and whatnot here in Houston, so ten days is more than enough time. I’ll look forward to talkin’ to you then.” Waters shook my hand and then Miguel’s. He nodded at Lincoln. “Thank you, Snow. Sorry I kept your plane on the ground as long as I did. I’ll be talkin’ to you.”

The two men shook hands and Waters turned to leave the plane. I looked at Lincoln but before I could say anything, he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “We’d be lucky to have you, Raven. You met Noah. He doesn’t spend time in the field very often.”

“But Noah is a computer genius, Lincoln. You don’t need him in the field.” I looked ashamedly at Miguel. “Besides, I barely know how to use a gun.” Miguel squeezed my hand harder as I turned back to Lincoln. “What good would I be on a Spec. Ops team?”

“You heard the man. A good tracker is very hard to find, Raven. It has a lot more to do with instinct, and I know you have that in spades. Working with you over the last six months proved that to me, if nothing else.”

“You’re really giving us the hard sell there, Snow,” Miguel said.

He laughed. “The FBI isn’t a bad place to work. Just think it over and get back to me when you return from your vacation.” Before I could say anything else, he held out a

hand, and I shook it. Miguel shook as well. Lincoln returned to his seat.

I glanced at Miguel. “Are you seriously going to consider the offer?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know, Sunshine. But I can tell you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Waters should’ve been a recruiter for the U.S. Marine Corps.,” he muttered.

I smiled as Miguel’s eyes closed, and I relaxed back in my chair as the flight attendant closed the door to the cabin and the pilot started the engines. The offer was something I’d never expected to get. Miguel was well suited to the job but me? I was far from certain of anything at this point. My partner and I had obligations to not only our clients, but to Judy Mendez. She was the one the FBI should be recruiting.

Still, Lincoln was right. I did have talent and skills in finding things. Maybe I could be of some help to a team. I glanced over at Miguel. As much as he denied that he would even consider the offer, I could read him like a book after all these months. Working on a team again had been a heady experience and the bottom line was, I needed him to be happy. I sighed, closing my eyes for the return trip, knowing that we had time to make the decision. Right now, though, exhaustion was creeping in. I gave myself over to it only moments later.

Epilogue

MIGUEL

Phoenix, Arizona was hot in late May, but not as hot as it’d be in the summer months. As I sat in the hotel room the morning we arrived, I reflected on what had happened and the astounding offer which SAC Waters sprung on us during the stopover in

Houston. I was happy we'd been offered the chance to take our time to make any decisions about the FBI jobs. We'd gone home to sleep after calling Dolly, and Raven's nana from the airport and then gone to pick them up in Compton so Nana could sleep in her own bed. Since we had to be out of the house bright and early the next day, Dolly had offered to spend the night in our guest room. Stanley had been elated to see us both. It was a happy, exhausting homecoming.

Waking up the morning after we'd returned to L.A. and spending an entire day at the FBI going over everything that had transpired during the case from start to finish had been tiresome if not eye-opening. My head was slowly improving but the day before had added to my fatigue and the sixteen hours that followed at the Federal Building in West Los Angeles, had been in a word...grueling.

We'd learned so much about things the cartel had planned for us, all of it unpleasant. Since Castillo had been unable to get his pound of flesh from us, he'd taken his rage out on the hostages, none of which he'd planned on keeping alive after he'd gotten his fifty million dollars, money that had been frozen by the FBI at the end, as part of the wrap up to the investigation.

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Gregory Aston had been treated at the hospital and shipped back to the U.S. under heavy guard, only to undergo extensive interviews and interrogations. After all his partners and other associates at his law firm had refused to represent him in the criminal complaint the FBI was compiling, he'd been assigned a public defender. The law firm's existence was up in the air, since the FBI's White-Collar division was still going through crates of files it had confiscated from the firm with a court order. It was going to be a big case. Aston had known he was going to federal prison. When presented the evidence they'd had tying him to the murder of insurance investigator, Dave Reynolds, he'd cut a deal to plead guilty to all his dealings with the cartel just to keep from getting a death sentence.

The ruby pendant had been found locked in Castillo's safe on the property where he died, along with Brian Leopard's diamond pin, and Charlotte Mulberry's diamond. To date, no other gems had been located. If they existed at all.

FBI agent, Roy Cabe's tortured body had been found in one of the outbuildings on the property, along with his new wife's, both shot in the head.

Aston admitted that Salvatore Mancuso had arranged for Lyle Trench to be killed in jail and had stolen the gems from both Leopard's house and Tawny's husband's safe. Aston told FBI investigators that he'd been working with the rogue CIA cell all along. Our assumptions had been right on all accounts, and Aston confirmed that Tawny had been a willing dupe, hopelessly enamored with Mancuso.

She'd carried on a brief affair with the slimeball but hadn't been a part of her husband's demise. A closer look at autopsy results and a deeper investigation into the timing around his death found that surprisingly, Benedict Flores had probably done

himself in, overdosing on his own heart pills which had killed him. Perhaps after learning about the affair, he hoped his wife would be blamed. He must have known she'd never be able to get her hands on the trust funds he set up in Grand Cayman for her. Obviously, he was an angry and slightly unstable man...angry enough to kill himself in revenge.

Tawny had been beaten to within an inch of her life just for sport. Worse yet, Castillo had held a gun to her head while his sicarios had gang raped her after he'd had a first go at her. She'd recover from her physical injuries, but it remained to be seen how long it would take before she recovered from her other, more serious, emotional ones. She wasn't criminally charged by the FBI.

Brian Leopard was genuinely an innocent man in everything. During his interview with the FBI, he'd admitted to bankrolling the casino but had never realized his partner, Benedict Flores, had gotten into bed with the Sanchez Cartel. He didn't learn that the investors whom Flores had borrowed money from had been part of the cartel until he was shown documents the FBI had found in Castillo's safe—which had once been Benedict Flores' safe—along with the jewels. Brian hadn't been raped but he'd been horribly beaten as a part of Special Agent Willis' torture. The agent had been forced to watch the brutality. He'd come out of the ordeal a very different, very broken man.

Special Agent Trevor Willis had barely survived the gunshot wound from Alex Filmore and the torture meted out by Castillo's men in the days preceding Filmore's arrival at the compound. He'd gone into surgery and remained there for over seven hours. He'd had severe internal injuries, multiple broken bones in his face, limbs, and back where he'd been kicked, stomped, and beaten. Castillo had learned he was a DEA agent quite by accident when one of the youngest of his sicarios recognized him from a bust early in his career.

The sicario had died inside the house that day, and Willis had barely survived. His

recovery would be long and arduous, and it remained to be seen whether he'd ever return to active duty after suffering horribly at the hands of Alex Filmore and Castillo's men. Brian Leopard remained in Grand Cayman at his bedside. SAC Bannister stayed as long as she could, but left him in Brian's care, when she was ordered to fly home for her own debrief.

I glanced at the hotel room door when I heard the lock disengage. Raven came in, red faced and smiling as a blast of heat followed him into the room. "Hey there, good looking!" he said, coming over to me. I lifted my face as he bent down to kiss me.

"Did you meet with the medicine man?" I asked as he sat down on the bed opposite the chair where I sat.

"Yes. I left Nana and Dolly with her. They'll be out there on the rez most of the day. We'll go pick her up after nightfall. I'm pretty convinced Dolly wishes she was born Navajo."

I laughed as suddenly, the phrase he'd used struck a cord. "Her?"

"What?"

"You said her. The medicine man is a woman?"

"Oh, yeah," Raven said with a broad grin. "Women usually meet with other women. It's a cultural thing I'd completely forgotten about."

"I didn't realize that." I smiled back.

"Well, that's the way it is. What are you doing?"

"I was thinking about the wrap up of our case."

He narrowed his eyes. “That’s it?”

I shook my head slowly, knowing it was probably the perfect time to talk with him about the offer SAC Waters had made back in Houston. That was six days ago and our promise to give him an answer had a deadline. Still, something else was at the forefront of my mind. I smiled at Raven, beckoning him close. “Come here.”

He grinned. “What?” Coming over to the bed where I sat, he stood in front of me and put his hands on my shoulders. When I reached out and began unbuckling his belt, he laughed.

“You have a one-track mind, Miguel.”

“You bet I do.” It only took a few seconds to have him the way I wanted him...pants around his knees, his cock in my mouth. He wound his hands into the short strands of my hair as I took him down to the root, sucking hard.

“God,” he gasped, “I love it when you do this.”

I hummed around his dick, rolling his balls in my hand and holding onto his ass to keep him close as I sucked him off.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” he said. “Your mouth feels like heaven.”

I looked up at him, mouth stuffed with cock, smiling around it. I met his lusty gaze and redoubled my efforts when he pulled hard on my hair.

“Jesus, Miguel, you keep that up and I’m gonna blow,” he said.

I nodded, sucking harder, sliding on and off as his cock swelled in my mouth.

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“Miguel!” he shouted, a second before he gave up his load, filling my mouth. I swallowed it all down before finally letting his cock slide out of my mouth. I turned my face up to him as he bent and took my mouth in a languid kiss. I loved this man so much.

He finally broke the kiss and dropped to his knees in between mine. He reached for my belt. I stopped him, taking hold of his wrists. “No need, baby.” I grinned at him. “That was just for you.” I slid both hands around his shoulders and pulled him forward, kissing him until he stopped protesting. My stomach growled loudly, making us both laugh. I abruptly stood and hauled him to his feet as he pulled up his pants. “Come on, Sunshine. I want to get some lunch and talk about the elephant in the room. It’s time.”

“If you’re sure.” He smiled at me and pulled me into his arms, leaning forward, and kissing me again before letting go.

We ended up settling for a place I knew well. We’d eaten there twice in the four days since Raven had been driving his nana out onto reservation lands with Dolly, leaving her to meet with the medicine man—er—woman. We’d picked her up at sundown every day, and though, I was sure she couldn’t possibly have been cured of her emphysema, Angelica looked better with each passing day. Raven’s love and devotion to her had lifted her spirits but the medicine woman and whatever herbal concoctions she was giving Angelica, had helped her in numerous, obvious ways.

We ordered our food and sat down on the benches outside with it. No one else was there and under the shade, it was nice. There was a breeze coming off the desert. Spicy Tex-Mex shrimp tacos with black beans and a homemade guacamole and chips

to die for, graced our paper plates. The mint-laced iced tea Raven had ordered on the first day, was now one I ordered as well. It was incredibly good and tasted homemade as did the flour tortillas we'd watched a short Hispanic woman with a plastic hair net, mixing and pounding by hand.

The first day, I'd ordered cheese, potato, and jalapeno tamales when I'd seen the same woman working the masa by hand. There was just enough filling to balance the tamales. I already knew I'd be stopping by for a to-go order to take with us, when we finally made the drive home to Stanley, who was happily being kitten-sat by Dolly's husband, Eddie, who'd taken a shine to the little guy.

"So..." I began. "Have you given Waters' offer any more thought?" I asked, biting into a taco.

"I've thought a lot about it," Raven replied, chewing his food. "And, I think, if we could figure out a way to—" His phone rang, interrupting him. "It's Judy," he said.

"Answer it." I nodded at the phone.

He picked it up and swiped it, putting it to his ear. He listened to Judy's voice for a few seconds, then told her to hang on while he put it on speaker, since we were alone out here. He set the phone down. "You've got me and Miguel on speaker, Judy. Repeat what you just said."

"Hi, guys," she said, sounding excited. "I just got a call from a man claiming to be Special Agent in Charge Donovan Bradley. He said SAC Bradley at first, but then I realized it's the guy we met in Los Angeles the day everyone was talking about the plans to rescue Special Agent Willis and the other hostages. Guess what? He wants to hire me."

I stared at Raven, who looked as confused as I was. "Wait, Donovan Bradley with the FBI?"

“Yes!” Judy practically yelled into the phone. “That’s what I’m saying. He says they’ve got a special unit coming to Los Angeles made up of Special Forces guys. The FBI wants to hire me to work for them. Apparently, Noah told him if they didn’t hire me, I was going to bring down the entire U.S. economy with my snooping...or something like that.”

I threw back my head and laughed. “I wouldn’t put it past you, woman.”

“Anyway, he said he and someone called Sorryson or Sorrybutt said I came highly recommended. I think it’s a conspiracy. That’s what I told my husband.”

Raven and I both laughed this time. “Sorensen,” Raven said into the phone. “He was the team leader on the takedown in Grand Cayman.”

We’d told Judy the gist of what had happened down there when we’d come home, leaving out the bloody parts, but she wasn’t a stupid woman. She knew the score.

“Anyway, what did he offer you?”

“Well, he offered me a good salary, incredible benefits, dental also, and the offer to work with the two of you! What haven’t you told me, Raven...hmm?”

I looked at my love, completely at a loss for words. He simply smiled and nodded back.

“We hadn’t mentioned it before because until this very moment, we hadn’t even considered taking such an offer, but they want both Miguel and me on the team that went in to capture Castillo and Filmore. They want him because, well, that’s obvious, but they want me because of my tracking skills.”

I smiled at Raven.

“Clearly, they want you because you and Noah broke this FBI case wide open, girlie.”

She was silent for a second, and I exchanged a glance with Raven.

“Judy?”

“I’m here...just thinking. Are you going to take their offer, Raven, because if you are, and only if you are, I’ll go too.”

Raven cleared his throat as he stared at me with beautiful, trusting eyes. “Are we going to take the FBI’s offer, Miguel?”

I felt my heart melt as I stared at my gorgeous, trusting man. “What about all the time and effort you put into getting Trackers up and running, sweetheart? It’s so much work and money and if we take a government salary, it’s going to take us years to replenish your savings.”

Judy was silent as Raven stared at me. He leaned toward the phone. “Yeah, Judy. We’re going to take it. Call Bradley back and tell him that he just signed up for a package deal.”

“If you’re sure, I’ll start shutting down the office,” Judy said over the line.

“Do you want an adventure, Raven?” I asked. “Because the next venture is going to be one.”

He reached across the table and took my hand with a huge smile on his face. He nodded. “Anything with you, babe.”

I grinned at him. “Okay, Nightcrawler. Anything with you.”