



Taz

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: Jo 'Taz' West flees the land down under for a new life in Thailand. While she is expecting life to be different, she didn't count on Kaos, Zoom or Tex. She definitely didn't imagine the friendship she made with Storm to grow into more than that.

And life is good after so long.

But Australia is impossible to cleanse from her bloodstream and soon she finds herself hurtling back into the fire she'd escaped from.

It was love the first moment Anurak 'Storm' Kasemchai laid eyes on Taz. But no matter how much he wants her, Storm knows Taz is the kind of woman who will always see him as too young.

Then Taz goes missing and this one event will send Storm into a spiral, questioning their relationship. It will also force him to walk with her through a special kind of fire to get to the other side.

Can they survive what's coming?

And what will be left of their relationship once the smoke clears?

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CHAPTER ONE

Storm

I paced one way, then the next.

With thunder rolling in the distance, I peered out the window to see the outside was bright with sunlight and the sky clear of clouds. That could mean it was storming in another part of Bangkok and just hadn't reached me yet.

Still, I pulled myself together while trying to figure something out.

They'd said if I needed anything at all I should call. That if I was ever in trouble, all I had to do was pick up the phone and they'd be there.

But people had told me that before and in my times of need, they were nowhere to be found.

They'd told me they had my back and I found myself struggling to my feet after life knocked me down-repeatedly.

Alone.

I couldn't solve this alone.

As much as I'd prefer hiding behind the wall not being able to trust anyone in my life had built around my heart, I couldn't take that risk.

Holding my breath, I called.

“Hello?”

“Sawatdii khap, P.” I greeted Dax “Kaos” Forsythe.

He smiled through the camera.

I knew he felt old when I called him that. But being polite had been engrained inside me. I couldn’t help myself.

“Hey, Storm!” He greeted me. “Honey, it’s Storm.”

He paused then leaned closer to the camera.

“What’s the matter?” Kaos asked.

“Um—P, is Taz with you?”

He blinked. “With us?”

At that moment, his fiancée Zoom approached to peer over his shoulder and wave at me.

“Why would she be with us?” Zoom wanted to know.

“Well, because I haven’t seen her in three days.” I explained. “And she’s not at her place, nor is she picking up her phone. I tried tracking it, but it hasn’t pinged anywhere in that long.”

“You say she goes off grid sometimes, right? To go camping.” Kaos pointed out.

“This is different.”

Kaos and Zoom exchanged looks before Kaos returned his attention to me.

“Okay, try to worry.” He told me. “Does she have any family or friends in Thailand she could’ve gone to visit?”

I shook my head. “As far as I know she’s alone here when it comes to family. She doesn’t have many friends. I’ve checked the bar she frequents, and they haven’t seen her in almost a week.”

“Okay—you keep checking there.” Kaos told me. “I’ll get Tex to spread a wide net.”

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“Thank you.” I rubbed my lower back. “I just—I just need to know she’s okay.”

Kaos and Zoom promised they’d get on it, and I hung up.

I took a moment to simply breathe.

The weight of not knowing where she was sat on my chest like an elephant.

There were no secrets between myself and Kaos and Zoom as to how I felt about Taz. I’d loved that woman the very moment I laid eyes on her.

But I knew nothing would happen between us—she was almost forty and I wasn’t even thirty yet.

Frustrated, I grabbed my phone, helmet wallet and keys and stepped outside in the sweltering heat.

On my motorcycle, I raced to a few more places Taz would normally frequent.

No one had seen her.

One of the last places was a dessert food stand close to her house. I approached the lady who ran it and she grinned at me.

“Sawatdii khap.” I pressed my palms together in front of my face.

“Ja.” She responded.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.” She pointed out. “How is Taz?”

“I’m taking it, you haven’t seen her recently, P?”

She shook her head.

I sighed, ordered some snacks, and made my way to Taz’s place.

Since I didn’t have a key and no one was there to let me know, I parked my cycle in front of the gate, then hopped the wall into the yard. Once I was in, I jimmied the gate to open it and brought my bike in.

If she was to return with me there, I was pretty sure she’d be angry.

But right now, that was a future problem.

Inside, the house was as it usually was.

The kitchen living and dining spaces were all neat and tidy. The small room at the back she used as an office was a bit chaotic, but it was always like that when she was working a consultant project.

I knew she’d scored a major movie project and had been hard at work on that.

Her bedroom was a little different.

It didn’t seem as if anyone had broken in, but it told me wherever Taz and gone off to, she’d left in a hurry.

Her duffle bag was missing, which told me she’d left on her own.

In her reading nook, the safe was standing open—her passport was gone along with the gun she kept there.

Most of the cash was missing, but not all of it.

The gun being gone worried me the most.

I pulled out my phone and called Kaos back to tell him what I'd found.

I sat in the living room to talk with my friend and his girl, trying to brainstorm what could be happening.

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“So, that can mean a few things.” Kaos leaned back in his chair. “Wherever she went, she went voluntarily.”

“That’s one, P.” I agreed.

“Wherever she went, she expected danger—hence the missing gun.” Zoom added.

I nodded.

“Which means she could be in danger and I’m so damn useless, I can’t even figure out where she is.”

“Okay, the first thing you’re going to do is calm down.” Zoom cooed. “Because you’ll only get more muddled if you’re upset. That’s when mistakes happen.”

As a cop, I was steady.

As the man who anted her, I couldn’t help freaking out.

I always wanted to have her back, even if she didn’t want me.

I wanted to protect her, even if she was to be with someone else.

“I feel helpless, P’Zoom.” I told her. “I feel like something heavy is on my chest and every time I breathe, it crushes down more and more.”

“And we get that. But we can freak out later. Right now, our main concern is finding

Taz.” Kaos glanced off screen. “Tex is trying to get on this call. Hold on.”

“Hello, party people.” Tex greeted us. “I come with news.”

“Have you found her, P?” I asked John Keegan.

I didn’t know him as well as the others did. But Zoom and Kaos said he was good people—I trusted their judgement.

“Kind of.” Tex replied. “I ran facial recognition, and the software picked her up at the airport in Bangkok.”

“The airport?” I asked.

A picture of her, a hood over her head popped up on my screen.

I recognized the hoodie.

“Where is she going?” I demanded.

“Not sure.” Tex replied. “I lost her going through customs and no Jo West or any variations of her name or call-sign boarded a plane out of that airport.”

“She had to have gotten on a plane.” Zoom mused.

“She’s ex-special forces.” Kaos pointed out. “She could be using an alias—nothing to do with her name to hide.”

“I thought of that.” Tex spoke up. “But the software can’t pick her up after it lost her. It’s almost like she fell off the face of the planet.”

“Maybe she went to New Zealand or Australia—Fiji, Tasmania.” I rattled off. “Have you tried incoming at any of those airports?”

“Yes.” Tex sighed. “Like I said, it’s almost like she entered customs and didn’t exit.”

Exhausted from what I’d just heard, I flopped back in my seat.

“I tried dumping her phone.” Tex continued. “It’s off and the chip’s out.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think she didn’t want us to find her.” Zoom muttered.

“She doesn’t trust me.” I exhaled. “And that’s not even the part that hurts the most. What hurts the most is that she believed she’d go MIA and I wouldn’t try finding her. All this time I’ve known her, I haven’t given her a reason to mistrust me, or to think I wouldn’t have her back.”

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“I’m sure it’s not that.” Tex tried assuring me. “Maybe she’s into something and didn’t want to get you wrapped up in it.”

“I have to go.” I said and hung up abruptly.

I wasn’t sure where to go from there.

There was nothing in the house to give me a clue and nothing Tex found was remotely helpful.

I went through the house again then left, making my way back to the police station I worked from.

I’d been there a while, but hadn’t managed to make any friends. And it didn’t help that my father was one of biggest names in the art world and had made some enemies.

Each time I walked in, people whispered.

At first it hurt my feelings—but after about five years there, I simply ignored them.

They didn’t come for me anymore—one person tried—I made him regret it.

I was pretty sure each time he saw me, he hurt in places he didn’t know existed until I took him down and left him twitching on the floor.

I didn’t like fighting—but I was no one’s doormat.

Alone at my cubicle, I put my badge and gun in my desk drawer and booted up my computer. I really didn't have any cases with anything going on at that time.

I just didn't want to go home.

It was nothing but silence there.

Instead, I went through flights leaving Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Between the time I last heard from her and the time I realized something was wrong, there were no direct flights from Suvarnabhumi International Airport into Australia.

It meant, if she was going to Australia, she would have had to change flights somewhere between Thailand and Australia.

She could have gone into Singapore for a connection, or Kuala Lumpur—I sighed.

If her name wasn't on a manifest, then there really wasn't any way of tracking her.

I wasn't going to go under the impression she hadn't left on a flight. She wouldn't be sitting in airport lock up for that long without calling out. And with Taz's skills—she would have been out.

She had gotten on a plane—the only thing now was to find out which one and where to.

Getting an idea, I asked Tex for a list of the manifests of all planes leaving Bangkok that had passengers with connections to Australia. After he sent them, I printed and sat down with a marker.

“Nong.”

I looked up to see my captain and stood.

“Your new partner is here.” He explained.

“Captain, that was today?”

“Khap.” He replied. “He’s here. Follow me to my office.”

I sighed, put aside my work and followed the man to his office.

There, a man, slightly taller than me, but younger turned to face me. I knew why I was getting a cop fresh out of training. No one else trusted me and they didn’t want to work with me.

After the introductions, I walked Beam back to where I was sitting and where he would be across from me. Once we were seated, he looked around.

“Is there a reason we are placed so far from others, P?” He wanted to know.

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I sighed. “Look, I’m my father’s son and my father has done some very bad things to some very horrible people. Being my partner will taint your image. I supposed they didn’t warn you about that.”

“I don’t understand, P.” He tilted his head. “Your father’s sins aren’t yours.”

“And that’s how it should work, but it doesn’t.”

“I just want to be a good cop.” Beam told me. “All the other high school politics isn’t what

I’m here for. All I ask is that I get to prove myself.”

“I’m no one. You don’t have to prove yourself to me.”

Beam smiled. “Maybe not now. What are you working on, P?”

“A missing’s person.” I replied. “But it’s not on the books. You don’t have to help me with it.”

“Is it someone you care about?”

“Khap.” I nodded.

“Then I’ll help. What do you need?”

CHAPTERTWO

Taz

I gripped the bar above my head and pulled myself atop the moving grain. Scrambling along, I slid down between two of the cars and let myself in through one of the doors. Thankfully, I'd entered at the back, and the three people in the car, hadn't even looked up when the door clanged shut behind me.

Exhaling, I removed my backpack and fell into the first seat I came to.

I'd been travelling for a few days.

Usually, the trip would take a lot shorter time, but I couldn't travel the traditional way.

It was an hour before I exited the train, adjusted my hood over my head and draped my bag over one shoulder. I allowed myself to blend into the crowd of people trying to get out of the station. I avoided the bulk of them by taking the stairs and soon I was walking through glass doors and into the sun.

I would normally find the closest place to get a cold drink—but this trip wasn't a vacation.

I waved for a taxi, and had it take me to the house I'd be staying at. A hotel would draw unnecessary attention that I didn't need.

Using the lockbox code to gain entrance, I went through the place, checking it for anything that shouldn't be there.

The house was nice, sitting at the end of a treeline street. In any other circumstance it would have been romantic as hell.

The area was going through a drought and the leaves on the trees weren't as plentiful or as green as they should have been. The lawn in the front yard was cut but even I could see the patches of brown from the lack of water.

The flowers beneath the windows were dead, and there was a sign that warned us that current bi-laws were in place to stop people from wasting water on things such as watering the lawn.

I supposed they didn't want a bad review because of the iffy looking law and flowers.

Dumping my bag in the living room, I immediately removed my burner phone and scanned through the information someone had sent to me.

Darby was always getting himself into trouble—the serious kind of trouble. The kind of mischief even he couldn't joke his way out of.

Ever since we were kids, I was always pulling his ass out of the fire—I suppose this new mess was my fault. Maybe I should have allowed him to hit the ground a few times to smack some fucking sense into him.

This time it was serious.

This time it was serious enough for someone to send me a message telling me he was going to get himself killed.

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Sighing, and still hoping this was a prank, I called his phone again.

No matter what Darby was into, he would never go without picking up my call. I remember once I caught him in the middle of his latest flavour of the day and he stopped thrusting and answered the phone.

I thought that was funny.

The girl he was drilling—not so much.

Hanging up, I dug through my bag for my gun. After checking it, I shoved it into the back of my jeans and pulled my coat down over it. I gathered some cash before shoving the bag under the center table and exiting the house through a side door and into the garage.

After the side door opened, I hunched down in the silence, checking out the area around me. In a way, it was getting to know the space—places for escape should things go hairy.

In another way, I was trying to catch my breath before being dragged back to the dark place being Darby's friend always seemed to land me.

Being as ready as I'd ever be, I wandered, on foot, in the heat to a main street. It took a little bit of time but eventually a public buss pulled up and I climbed on. And as I usually did, made my way along the aisle before sitting in very back.

That way, I could see if I was being followed, if anyone came on after me that looked

remotely sketchy, and just because I'd always like sitting in the back of the bus.

By the time I arrived at my destination, I was starving. But Darby was already gone for nearly a week before I knew about it, then another four days had passed since I did find out. The longer I waited, the more likely I wouldn't see him alive again.

He could already be dead, and I was just rushing to find his body.

There wasn't really any time for food yet.

I entered through the backdoor and was very careful. I checked the dust on the floor for footprints or any signs of someone paying the property a visit recently.

The furniture was still covered with sheets. Spiders had taken over, stringing their nets everywhere they could.

The air in the space hadn't moved around for almost two years, and all I could smell was dust.

I didn't mean to not come back.

The plan was to go to Thailand and stay there until people in Australia stopped treating me like a leper. Once I was in Thailand for three months, I knew going back would be hard—damn near impossible.

Wandering into the garage, I braced my palms to a cabinet and pushed. It eased out of the way to expose a black bag as well as a rolled bag. I lifted them both out and dropped them on an empty table. Quickly, I worked to strap holsters to my thighs and after checking the guns, I shoved them in. I dumped extra cartridges into a small backpack but dropped one into my pocket.

That was for a quick change, should I need it.

I armed myself with a knife, by sticking it into the holster around my ankle then pulled my pantleg down over it.

Sitting in a drawer, was a map of the nearby warehouse district. It was the place my contact thought Darby was being held. Even with that information, I had to check out other possibilities first—it seemed they were right.

I spread the map on the table and sighed at the vastness of it.

The map once belonged to my father who worked in the area all his life. Sure, it was a few years old, but I could get a basic idea of layout.

A bunch of things could have changed since then—but structures, like building locations should be the same since they hadn't really done any major construction since I was a child.

I set the bags back, eased the cabinet in place and pulled my motorcycle helmet down from where I usually kept it.

Thankfully, Darby had been servicing the cycle, ensuring the engine still worked and that it remained in good condition.

I checked the front yard and the road that ran along the front of the house. Seeing it clear, I rolled the bike out, climbed on and slipped the helmet down over my head. I started the engine and sped from the yard, going left off the driveway.

I parked some ways from the warehouse and ventured in on foot. The cycle purred beautifully, but I needed to have the element of surprise.

Aside from new containers, the permanent structures hadn't changed except the cameras sitting on the outside of them. Leaning backward to remain hidden, I pulled my hood over my head, calculated the cameras blind spots and continued on my way.

I located the building Darby was being held in and let myself in through a side door.

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The space was busy.

Forklifts went back and forth, someone was screaming instructions and a dog barked from somewhere at the other side.

Hiding behind a pile of boxes, I took in what was happening.

I ensured I knew how many rooms that one broke off into and where the possible entrances and exits were. There were too many spaces to search to find Darby and it seemed impossible to narrow it down.

The fact I wasn't familiar with the group who'd taken hurt my chances as well—I didn't know how they operated, how they thought, what their organization was like.

I'd try finding information on them.

What I found wasn't much of anything.

Apparently, they slaughtered anyone they thought even thought of speaking about them to anyone outside the group.

That was a way to silence your henchmen.

Frowning, I shifted position, ensuring a wall was behind me at all times. That way, no one could sneak up on me.

Carefully, I checked other rooms. Aside from Darby's hoodie, I found no other signs

he'd been there or might be there.

It was definitely his because it had a naked lady on the back with the words my next meal written over her head.

Darby got off on inappropriate slogans on his clothing.

I left it where I found it.

The work men broke for lunch, and I fell into the crowd, walking with them as long as I could. Then, when no one was looking, I snuck off down an empty hallway. That carried me deeper into the place until I came to a door that seemed away from the others.

Though I was beginning to think Darby wasn't there anymore, I shrugged, picked the lock and let myself in.

Darby was asleep on the floor.

He was dirty.

Blood was dried into his clothes and his face looked as if they'd worked him over a few times. The only way I recognized him was by the necklace I'd given him three Christmases before.

The relief that rushed through me caused my knees to shake.

Still, I had no time to allow that bit of adrenaline to pulse through me. Instead, I knelt beside him and shook him.

"Darby." I called. "Wake up."

He groaned and tried shoving me away.

“Darby!”

I punched his shoulder—hard.

“What the fuck do you—Taz?”

Before I could answer, he dove into my chest and wrapped his arms around my neck.

“It’s good to see you too, Darby.” I told him. “But how did you manage to get yourself into this?”

“I’ll explain later.” He released me, framed my cheeks only to hug me again. “Right now, we should go.”

Agreeing with him, I stood and helped him to his feet. He wobbled for a second before steadying himself.

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“You going to be okay?” I asked, reaching for one of my guns.

“It doesn’t matter.” Darby pressed his lips into a determined line. “I can’t afford to crack until we get out of here. Right?”

I nodded.

“Then let’s get out of here first then ask me that again.”

After another nod, I extended the weapon to him.

Darby checked it like a pro then inhaled deeply, his shoulders rising almost to his ears then falling.

I led the way to the door then poked my head out.

A man was disappearing around the corner to my right. I watched until he was gone. I was just pulling myself back into the room when someone shouted.

“Shit.” I muttered.

So much for getting in and out without committing several felonies.

“Well, you’re no longer a ghost.” Darby told me.

“You think?”

I used my ass to push him back into the room then pressed my back to the side just as the door burst open.

The first guy through was met with a bullet, dead center in the chest from Darby.

The second got his neck broken when I stepped in behind him and caught him in a chokehold.

While Darby dragged the bodies further into the space, I checked the hall and glanced to him.

“Leave them alone!” I snapped. “Hall’s clear, but I don’t know if it’ll be for long. Guns aren’t exactly quiet.”

Ensuring the hall was clear again, I exited the room with Darby behind me and took off in the direction I’d come. I kept an eye on Darby, ensuring he was behind me. We made it as far as the first door before men with guns came running.

“You ready?” Darby asked.

“Not really—but I don’t have a choice. Brace yourself.”

When they rushed into the hall, I was close enough to take one guy out with a foot to his dick. When he fell, I stomp on his head.

I was fast enough to dodge a bullet and return one of my own.

Even as we went through the chaos, I kept my eyes on Darby, tossing an extra cartridge to him. He caught it, ejected the empty one and quickly reloaded.

The fight carried through the door and back into the main warehouse. A number of

men dodged behind boxes and barrels. I assumed those were the ones who thought they were working a legal job.

The ones who pulled guns at us knew differently.

A bullet grazed my left arm, but the adrenaline minimized the pain.

Finally, out the door, Darby stole one of their trucks by knocking out one of the men. I hopped into the bed of the truck and kept firing at guards who ran after us until no one was left.

Leaning over the side I shouted instructions to Darby, guiding him to my cycle. There, we wiped down the truck and left it there before speeding off on the cycle.

I took him back to the house I'd rented, hid the cycle in the garage and entered the house through the side.

Inside, I showed him where the shower was so he could wash up and while he did that, I used a delivery service to buy some clothes and a shaving kit for him.

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Since it would take about an hour, Darby was going to have to walk around in a towel but at least he'd be clean.

And alive.

"Sit." I told him once he returned.

He fell into the sofa, and I handed him the food I'd prepared while waiting.

"What the fuck?" I demanded.

Darby sighed, chewed and swallowed before placing his plate on the center table. He stretched one leg out in front of him and pointed to the Lay-Z-Boy across from him.

Though still pissed off at him, I sat.

"Do you remember Clive Harrisford?" He asked.

I nodded.

"He was murdered about a month ago." Darby explained. "The cops says it was a suicide, but I know it wasn't."

"How do you know?" I asked. "We're talking about people who are trained to differentiate between a homicide and a suicide."

"Oh, come on, Taz. We both know these people are full of shit." Darby frowned.

“And we both know they aren’t losing any sleep over someone bumping off a journalist—especially one who’s been a major pain in their asses for about five years.”

“Darby...”

“There was no suicide note.” Darby pressed. “And Clive had just saved enough money for his trip to Bora Bora. He was talking to a real estate agent to get his own house—”

“You’re saying he had plans—major plans and wouldn’t have offed himself just as he was this close to them.”

Darby nodded. “Precisely. And the last time I saw him, he was excited. Clive wouldn’t have killed himself, Taz, trust me. So, I started digging. At first it was simple things—slashed tires, someone following me around, then right before they grabbed me, they broke into my place.”

“Did you call the cops?”

Darby rolled his eyes and picked up his food again. “I don’t trust them right now. If I found out something was wrong, their trained brains could have picked it up too. They aren’t even looking.”

“What have you found?”

“I can’t—you’re already not even supposed to be here.”

“Darby.” My voice held a warning. “Don’t make me kick your—”

My phone began ringing.

That shouldn't have happened. No one had the number—hell, I didn't even know the number.

Still, I checked the face to see it was a video call from Storm.

Against my better judgement, I answered it.

“P!” Storm greeted me, worry all over his handsome face. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“How did you get this number?” I asked.

“Seriously?”

Storm then broke off into the Thai language. I wasn't fully fluent, but I knew he was yelling at me. Anger filled his brown eyes.

“Whoa! Storm” I held up a hand. “Stop.”

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“You disappear and didn’t think to even tell me what’s going on?” Storm asked.
“You took your gun, Taz. What are you doing?”

I licked my lips.

Before I could speak, Darby walked up behind me and leaned his chin to my shoulder.

I saw the change in Storm the moment he saw Darby, and I knew this was one of those moments I wished I could take back.

Darby was still not wearing any clothes.

Storm licked his lips and nodded.

“Got it,” he said.

“Storm, no.” I pleaded.

“I’m an idiot.” Storm scratched his right cheek with the nail of his thumb. “I’m such an idiot.”

“Storm, please.”

“It’s okay.” He told me. “I get it. As for how I got your number, I have a Tex now. Just so you know, I sounded the alarm to Kaos and Zoom when I thought you were in trouble. You may want to call and tell them you’re fine. It’ll go over better to call off

the hounds if they hear it from you.”

“Storm—”

But instead of speaking again, Storm hung up.

“Who was that?” Darby asked.

“Don’t talk to me right now.” I snapped. “Because if you say anything stupid, you won’t have to worry about them killing you. I’ll do it myself.”

CHAPTER THREE

Storm

Beam and I went for a run before we reported to the station. It had been about a week since I found out Taz was fine, but I still felt empty.

Was I that horrible that she couldn’t have told me she’d found someone?

Sure, I hadn’t told her how I felt about her. I knew what she would have said—that I was too young and not her type.

I figured I could have taken her running away to be with her man better if she’d just told me—closed that door.

Or just told me she was leaving and not have me running after her like some idiot thinking she was tied up in some pervert’s basement.

At the end of the run, I showered, and Beam and I returned to duty.

“You’ve been quiet since you called off the search for your friend.” Beam spoke up when we climbed into the car to go run down a lead.

“I’ve been?”

“Mm.”

“It wasn’t the ending I was expecting.” I admitted.

“But she’s safe, P. I thought you’d be happy.”

I nodded. “Yes, and I’m happy about that. It’s just a very long and one-sided story that I want to just forget.”

Beam patted my shoulder. “That feeling I’m intimately familiar with.”

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After we finished up official business, we stopped to eat at a roadside noodle hut. My phone rang and I checked it.

The first call came from Zoom.

I ignored it.

The last time she called it was to try talking me off my self-imposed ledge. But I didn't want to hear how I was supposed to hear Taz out or that there was more to the story.

At that moment in time, I was angry.

I knew I had to get over it, but I wasn't ready.

Taz didn't trust me and there was nothing I could do to change that. All I could do, was allow the pain to terraform me, then move on.

The next call was Kaos, followed by their friend Trucker and then unlisted.

That one I answered—It could be no one else but John “Tex” Keegan.

“I know you're angry.” Tex drawled. “But come on, brother.”

I sighed. “I feel like an idiot. Let me be angry for a while so my ego can heal.”

“But for how long?”

“How the hell should I know, P?” I demanded. “What did she think I was going to do? Did she think if she told me she was leaving I’d try and stop her? I’m well aware I’ll never mean anything to her other than what I am, but the least she could have done was tell me.”

“There was—”

“I know you love her, Tex.” I cleared my throat. “But she scared me. I thought she was tied up somewhere or hurt and I couldn’t get to her. When all the time she was—I don’t want to talk about it. And I’m at work right now.”

I hung up.

“You’re going to have to face her at some point.”

“Yeah.” I muttered. “If she wants to talk to me, she’s going to have to come here and do it.”

I shoved some noodles into my mouth.

Once the day was over, I went home, stopping only to get some food. Though there was groceries at house, I wasn’t in the mood to do anything but drink a beer—or three—stuff my face then get some sleep.

My friends tried calling me again, but I ignored them.

True to form, Tex tried, and I turned off my phone.

The next day, still with my phone off, I’d stopped to pick up Beam and we were heading into downtown Bangkok when Beam gasped.

“Um—P?”

“Mm?” I checked my blind spot and switched lanes.

“Did you know you were missing?”

“What?” I asked.

Beam pointed and when I looked up, I had to quickly pull to the shoulder and stop. Somehow, my face was on all the digital billboards atop the buildings in the center of the city.

Shoving from the vehicle, I stayed on the side away from the traffic and pulled out my cell. I called the only person who could have done something like that.

“Moshi Mooooosh!”

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“Jonathan Keegan!” I growled.

“Actually, my name is—”

“I know what your name is, John Keegan! But I am furious at you right now.” I snapped. “So, your name is whatever the hell I say it is! Take them down!”

“Take what down,khap?”

I knew I would have regretted teaching him Thai. He never used it unless he was messing with me. In that moment, I wanted to reach through the phone and kick his ass.

“The digital boards! What the hell?”

“You weren’t answering our calls.” Tex rationalized. “I figured that was the best way to get your attention.”

“And I told you I would speak to Taz when I’m good and ready and right now I’m not ready.” I dragged my fingers through my hair. “Now, take them down.”

Tex sighed. “If you won’t speak to Taz, at least have a conversation Zoom and Kaos.”

Frowning, I looked over at Beam who was now leaning against the car, facing me. He tilted his head, questions filling his brown eyes.

Shaking my head, I lifted my eyes to the three boards I could see from where I was now standing.

They all had my face, in bright, neon lights asking if anyone had seen this man and the number to call. Above my head were the words missing person.

“Fine, I’ll talk to Kaos.” I caved. “And only Kaos.”

The moment I said that, all the billboards kind of flickered and went back to their regular scheduled programming.

“See?” Tex asked. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“I’ve been told.”

Instead of arguing with him, I hung up and bit back the urge to whip the phone across the street. I turned to face the other side, gripped the guardrail and shouted my frustration.

“What was that all about, P?” Beam asked.

“Word of advice, don’t become friends with American special forces soldiers.” I grunted. “Especially one who uses a computer like he’s God.”

Beam stared blankly at me but nodded.

Exhaling, we climbed back into the car and went on our way.

The rest of the day was fine—slow, silent but fine and when I was finally alone, I

checked the time and gave Kaos a call, disregarding what time it might be for him. I didn't care. If he was going to inconvenience my life, I figured two could play it that way.

"Storm." Kaos cleared his throat. "Hang on, I'll put you on speaker."

"No." I shook my head. "The agreement was, I talked to you and only you."

"Okay." Kaos glanced off screen then returned his eyes to me. "I assume you're calling about Taz."

"No. I'm calling because Tex is an asshole who wouldn't stop until I called you, P." I replied. "Now what do you want?"

"It's about Taz."

I sighed heavily, but said nothing. I ensured he saw just how displeased I was with this entire conversation—this entire fucking situation.

"She's in trouble."

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“What does that have to do with me?” I asked.

“She’s your friend.”

“And she ran off to Australia without a word.” I retorted. “If she needs help, let her boyfriend help her. She can go to him or call the cops. Plus, she’s a special commando—she can handle herself. I wouldn’t worry.”

“There’s more to the story than that.” Kaos pushed. “And she’s an ex-special forces soldier there. She doesn’t have the connections like she used to and if I’m right, we could lose her.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Fly down under and give her a hand.’ Kaos replied. “I would do it, but Zoom is pregnant, and I don’t want her traveling right now.”

“And when you rush toward danger, she has your back.”

“Bingo.”

“This is short notice and getting time off lately has been hard.”

“Don’t worry about that—Tex will handle it.”

“Of course, he will.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I wanted to remain stubborn. I wanted to hold on to my anger, the excuse to not getting as hurt as I knew standing face to ace with Taz and her man would. But the same heart she'd broken, was the same heart that wanted to save her, to protect her—to keep her from harm.

“I know you're mad right now—”

“Don't.” My voice cracked.

“All I'm saying is, help her now and when you go back to Thailand with her, you can be as angry at her as you want.”

“I find it funny you think she's coming back, P.”

“What?”

“Nothing,khap.” I exhaled loudly. “Send me the information.”

“Thanks for—”

I hung up.

Though I didn't want to be doing this, I started packing a backpack, wondering how I was going to get the time to leave. And was now really the time to do something like that? I was responsible for the training of a new police officer.

What was he going to do while I was gone?

And how would that affect my reintegration to my special forces team?

An hour of pacing later, someone rang the bell at the front gate. Instead of checking

the monitor, I went outside to see who had come to visit.

Beam was standing there with a folder in one hand, and a duffle in the next.

As I hit the button to open the gate, I wondered what was happening.

“P.” He greeted me. “Sawatdii khap.”

I returned the greeting by offering him wai. “What are you doing here?”

“The captain wanted me to give you this.”

He handed me the folder and I immediately opened it.

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As I read, I arched a brow.

Apparently, there was an official letter from some Captain in the United States, asking if I could assist them in an urgent mission in Australia. The letter explained that they weren't sure how long the mission would be, but I needed my partner Kittisak "Beam" Sathiyon to accompany me.

"Sweet baby Jesus." I muttered.

"You don't have to go with me." I told Beam while leading into the house. "This is just a rescue mission."

"I want to." He shrugged. "I don't get much excitement around here. And I don't have any family or friends who would care when I'm gone away. Besides, P, you're my trainer."

I exhaled another loud breath.

"Okay, khap." I led him into one of the bedrooms. "We'll be leaving tomorrow evening, so you can use this room. Put your things there and I'll give you information to get caught up."

"Khap."

I called Kaos.

"What the hell?" I asked. "Why are we bringing Beam into this?"

“We weren’t sure what else to do.” Kaos admitted. “You can leave him at the house there to be the coordinator between you and Tex.”

“I don’t want him being friends with Tex.” I frowned. “He’s a bad influence and Beam is new.”

Kaos laughed.

“I have to go.” I told him as I heard Beam’s footsteps coming toward me. “I’ll check in when we land.”

“You okay, P?” Beam wanted to know.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Turning, I sat and stared at him, wondering if I shouldn’t just send him home. But if I did, the ruse would be over, and I would have to figure out another way of leaving with some time off.

“I don’t want to lie to you.” I began, motioning to the seat across from him. “I have some friends in some very high places and right now, one of them is in trouble. I honestly don’t know what kind of trouble, but it’s serious if—”

“They told the captain they need you.” Beam nodded.

“Khap.” I agreed. “What I’m trying to say is, this mission is not official. If you want to run, now is the time and I won’t hold it against you.”

Beam leaned back in the seating and stretched his legs out in front of him. As he stared out the window, I could hear the wheels cranking inside his head.

I took that moment to look at him as more than an annoyance, as more than just another person who would blame me for my father's cowardice.

His dark hair was simply cut.

His jawline strong.

The skin of his face was flawless aside from a scar just right of his nose.

"For a very long time, I've searched for a place to belong." Beam's voice was soft. "I wanted friends to drop their lives and protect me as I do the same for them. I wanted people who would care enough to notice when I'm not around."

"Beam I—"

"I get it." He turned his attention to me, a quiet storm simmering in his eyes. "I get it, P. We just met and we aren't friends. But you're my partner. If you're in trouble, I'm in trouble. So, I'm not running."

I stared at him wondering if this was a joke.

Still, I nodded and handed him the folder with what I knew about where Taz was currently located.

“This isn’t much.”

“Like I said,” I reiterated. “I don’t know much yet.”

“Okay—when do we leave?”

I rose. “First thing in the morning.”

CHAPTERFOUR

Taz

The rumble of an engine pulled into the front yard and Darby, and I exchanged looks. While he made no move for the door, I inhaled a breath, held it and pushed it out my mouth. I knew precisely who it was and that I was in a form of trouble I probably had never been in before.

Ensuring my gun was tucked into the back of my pants—just in case—I waited until after the sounds of slamming doors then a powerful knock.

Even though I expected it, I still must have jumped a foot in the air.

“You want me to get it?” Darby asked.

“That’s not a good idea.” I replied, pushing to my feet and straightening my clothes.

I stepped away from the chair, pulled my hair from the ponytail, shook the strands out

and retied it. I did a quick check on the food keeping warm in the oven, then wandered toward the door just as they knocked again.

When I pulled the door opened, I smiled at Storm, but he wasn't having it.

It was almost as if he didn't see me—like he was looking through me.

With his bag over one shoulder, he stepped by me into the house. The man with him offered me wai as a way of greeting.

"I'm Beam." He introduced himself, in English. "P' Storm's partner."

"Oh." I gasped. "I speak Thai. Um—Jo West."

"Taz?"

"Yes," I replied. "Um—come in."

He bowed his head to me and walked into the house.

As I closed the door, I realized no one told me he would be bringing anyone with him. A part of me was disappointed. I thought I'd be alone with him.

As I thought about it, I realized I wanted to be alone with him.

I cleared my throat and walked over to where both Beam and Storm waited for me in the hall.

I led them into the open living room, and Darby stood.

He stepped forward and extended a hand to Storm.

To my surprise, Storm ignored the gesture and walked around him to chuck his bag on the floor. Storm had never been that kind of person. He had always been polite—sometimes to a fault.

This version of him, worried me.

Beam, however, shook hands with Darby and introduced himself.

“What’s going on?” Storm asked in Thai.

I dragged my palms down the back of my pants.

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“You’ve had a long flight,” I said. “Why don’t the two of you wash up and get something to eat. Then we can talk. I cooked.”

“Honestly, Taz.” Storm glared at Darby. “Zoom and Kaos thought I needed to be here. I don’t want to be here any longer than I have to be. So, skip the pleasantries and just tell me what’s going on.”

“Um—English?” Darby asked.

Storm turned to look at him.

“I speak Thai because what I had to say to Taz was none of your business.” Storm informed him. “When it involves you, I’ll speak in a language you can understand.”

“Storm.”

He dragged his fingers through his hair then sat to pull a laptop from his bag. After he set it on the table, he leaned back to stare at me.

I could see his determination not to be in the same room as me for very long was stronger than my confusion. There was nothing I could do in that moment that would change his mind—I knew that much about him.

Though I was still not clear on his anger, I sat and began explaining to him what was going on.

“That sound simple enough.” He shrugged. “Why do I need to be here for this?”

“Because we need an investigator.” Darby added.

Storm pressed his eyes closed and tightened his jawline.

“Taz thinks like a soldier—seek and destroy.” Darby continued.

It was obvious he didn’t realize what had just happened.

“You can probably do a better job at deciphering what’s going on with this gang than I could.” I stepped in. “How they operate—you have experience in that area.”

“Beam.” Storm looked over to where Beam was standing at the window, watching the street.

“Khap?”

“It was a long flight.” Storm told him. “Get something to eat, take a shower and relax a little.”

“What are you going to be up to, P?”

“Putting the pain in my ass to work.” Storm replied.

“Tex?” Beam smiled.

Storm nodded.

“I’ll eat and before I shower, I’ll bring you a plate.” Beam told me. “You haven’t eaten since we left Bangkok.”

A smile spread Storm’s lips. It didn’t quite reach his eyes.

I knew that smile well.

It was the kind to soothe his partner so Beam wouldn't worry. It was the kind that told me there was a lot on Storm's mind, a lot that if he was to explain it all to Beam, the young cop would worry.

That smile used to be reserved for me.

"How about you eat?" Storm asked. "And when you're heading for your shower, you bring me a small plate?"

"Khap." Beam agreed.

Hanging my head for a moment, I stood and led Beam into the kitchen.

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Even as I worked to put together a plate for him, I kept looking over to where Darby now sat silently in one chair, while Storm occupied another.

He now had earbuds in, speaking and I could only guess he was having a conversation with Tex. From time-to-time Storm would laugh softly, but other than that he wasn't speaking loud enough for me to get everything he'd been saying to Tex.

"How long have you been working with Storm?" I asked.

Beam thanked me for the plate and sat at the table with a glass of water.

"Not very long." He offered me a one shoulder shrug. "Right before you disappeared, I think."

"I didn't disappear."

"Yes, P." Beam stared at me. "You did. You left without telling him—you left without a trace and to his cop's brain, you disappeared. You hurt him."

I sighed. "I don't have to tell him my location all the time. He doesn't own me."

"I think you're missing the point, P." Beam chewed. "And I don't think I've known him long enough to offer any kind of argument about this entire relationship the two of you have. This is a conversation you're going to have to have with him."

I frowned and flopped in one of the chairs.

“But a piece of advice?” Beam continued.

I arched a brow.

“Keep that man away from Storm.” Beam lifted some rice to his lips. “If you don’t, you’re going to have to bury him, and I’ll make sure P’Storm gets away with it.”

He stood, pushed the rest of his food away and walked over to where the plates were kept. I supposed he’d watched me as I prepared his.

Quickly, he shared some food for Storm, poured a glass of cold water and grabbed a fork. He carried it back to Storm and I sat and watched as Storm finished his call and looked up at Beam.

This time when he smiled, it was real with no pretences behind it.

“Khob khun, na.” He spoke the words softly.

“You’re welcome.” Beam replied. “P’Taz, could you show me where the shower is and where I’ll be sleeping tonight?”

“There is only one extra room.” I cleared my throat.

“I’ll be sleeping here.” Storm set his water down and placed the plate on his lap. “You can have the bed, Beam.”

“Are you sure, P?” Beam asked. “I mean, we can share.”

Storm nodded and dropped some food in his mouth.

“I don’t sleep much, anyway.” Storm explained. “I toss and turn more than sleep and

I'd just keep you awake. If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

I led Beam up the stairs to the last room then showed him where the bathroom was. He thanked me by offering me wai and I left him alone.

Even as I made my way back down the stairs, I had so many questions about how Strom had been since I left Thailand.

It hadn't even occurred to me he'd think I'd disappeared or had gone missing.

But the advice of not leaving Darby alone with Storm returned to my brain and I hurried back.

Storm had eaten a part of his food and put the other part aside. He was tapping away at his keyboard. Darby wasn't in the room, and I checked the kitchen and the back porch.

When I did find him, he was seated on the bottom step in the back, puffing away at a cigarette.

"I thought you quit," I said.

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“Is now really the time for you to be lecturing me about this?” Darby demanded, softly.

“It could kill you.”

“Yeah well.” He put out the first cigarette and lit another. “We’re all gonna die of something at some point. Right now, death by cigarette seems better than whatever-the-fuck is coming down the pipeline.”

“We’re not going to let you die, Darby.” I sat beside him. “Don’t be such a drama queen.”

“Are you sure about that?” He turned to look at me. “Because with the tension in the room with that man, I’m thinking if it wouldn’t be preferable to take my chances with the gang.”

“He’s angry at me.” I explained.

“Is he your man or something?”

“Or something.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Darby asked.

“We aren’t dating.” I snapped. “Okay? Shit. He is too young and I’m sure I’m not his type. He’s angry because when I left, I didn’t tell him, and he thought I went missing.”

“So, you leave here to go let some Thai man put a leash on you?”

I slapped him hard across the face.

The sound of my palm connecting with his cheek echoed around us then silence.

Nothing moved.

I held my breath for as long as I could, then exhaled loudly.

“No one, has a leash on me—ever!” I growled. “Show some fucking respect!”

Darby took a long haul from the cigarette, allowed the smoke to kind of sit inside his mouth for a bit then blew it upward over our heads.

“Yeah.” He muttered.

“Darby.”

He stuffed out what was left of the cigarette, picked up his lighter and disappeared into the house.

I thought about the way I left Thailand—I thought Darby was in trouble. And going back into Australia with a red flag telling everyone I would be back didn’t seem like the best idea.

But why hadn’t I told Storm?

If I trusted anyone, it would have been him. He’d never given me a reason not to trust him, not to assume he’d do anything other than have my back.

A deep breath told me Darby's bad habit had lingered in the air long after he'd left me. It swirled around my head thickly as if he was still beside me, puffing away.

While I wasn't a fan of the smell, I remained where I'd been seated until it was as if Storm's anger was now sitting on my chest.

Standing, I brushed my ass off with my palms and wandered back inside. The dishes Beam and Storm had used were now washed and sitting in the drainer along with the utensils and glassware.

Darby was lounging in one of the overstuffed chairs, papers strewn about him.

Storm and Beam were nowhere to be seen.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"Research Clive left behind." Darby responded.

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“Where are Beam and Storm?”

Darby pointed toward the stairs.

I didn’t go to find them.

Walking by the room Beam was using, I could hear them speaking but I didn’t stop to interrupt.

The truth was I knew I had to talk to Storm, I had to say something to him to clear the air or I’d lose him.

Closing the door behind me, I realized how badly it hurt at the thought of Storm no longer being in my life.

And why should it?

I was almost forty—in two years, I’d be forty.

Storm was barely thirty—as a matter of fact, he turned thirty weeks before I left Thailand to find Darby.

Why did I feel as if he was the sun orbiting my earth?

Sighing, I stripped down and showered, washing my hair and shaving my legs. I then dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank, trying to alleviate the heat in my body.

I then sat in the center of my bed, listening to the phone ring, waiting for Zoom to pick up.

“Hey, it’s my favourite Aussie.” Zoom beamed, rubbing her stomach.

She was about three months along, but Kaos was already hovering—especially since the doctor told her the pregnancy was putting a strain on Zoom’s body. The doctor also told them she should probably refrain from most activities.

“He won’t even touch me.” Zoom pouted as we delved into conversation.

“And he’s right.” I told her. “You have to be careful. We both know when that man gets his hands on you, he loses control.”

Zoom giggled. “Yeah...but I have to go through six more months of this. It’s just—”

“I can’t say I understand what you’re going through.” I shrugged. “But hang in there.”

“Thanks.” She stared at me through the camera. “Okay—what’s wrong?”

“Storm isn’t really talking to me.”

“Um—just silent?”

I shook my head. “He talks, but barely. He can’t stand Darby, didn’t even shake his hand. I’ve never heard him speak to anyone the way he spoke to Darby, and I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Really?” Zoom arched a brow. “Are you that blind that you don’t see what’s happening?”

Kaos entered then with a glass of something with ice-cubes in it. He blew me a kiss, kissed Zoom's forehead and told her he was heading out for groceries.

I giggled and waved at him.

"Stay out of trouble." He told Zoom around another kiss.

"I promise nothing." She teased.

When he was gone, she sipped her drink, set the glass on the side table and peered at me.

"Seriously?" She asked. "You don't know why he's angry?"

"Why don't you tell me? I'm getting a headache."

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“You disappeared.” Zoom counted off on her fingers. “Said nothing to him about where you were going. He found out that you took your gun with you and vanished at the airport so effectively, Tex’s facial rec software couldn’t even find you. Then he finally gets a hold of you and you’re in Australia with some naked guy in your place.”

I blinked.

“I mean.” Zoom picked up her drink. “How would you feel if the shoe was on the other foot?”

“What are you—” I paused. “Wait, what naked—shit.”

“Get it now?”

I rubbed my eyes.

“I get you’re not into him.” Zoom pointed out. “But he’s trying to get over you and to see you already with someone else.”

“I’m not with Darby!” I grunted. “He’s a friend. He’ll always be a friend.”

“Will Storm always be a friend?”

“I don’t want to lose him.” I sighed, exhausted.

“Can I be honest?”

“Zoom, what kind of question is that?” I asked. “Of course, you can.”

“I think he wants to be more than friends.” Zoom leaned forward to whisper. “He wants to be more than friends and he knows that can’t happen. And to see you wish someone else, kills him. But even though he’s hurting and even though he has to be around the man he thinks you’ve chosen, he showed up. He set aside his pride and his heart, and he showed up. Just remember that.”

That was the measure of a man—when he put away his pride and his feelings to be there for his woman.

I blushed.

“You’re blushing—what’d I say?”

“It’s not what you said.” I admitted. “It’s what I’m thinking.”

“Of him naked?”

That only made my cheeks burn more.

“I wasn’t until you said it.” I eyed her. “Now, I can’t stop.”

Zoom laughed. “Perfect.”

“You’re bad.” I accused, shaking my head.

“Listen, you should clear the air before the storm comes.” Zoom advised me. “You don’t want him going into a fight muddled.”

I nodded.

“Let us know if you need anything, okay?”

“I will.”

After hanging up from Zoom, I wondered if she was right.

Was Storm jealous?

I wasn't sure when it happened, but I fell asleep.

It wasn't until footsteps sounded in the hall that I sat up and looked around. The room was dark, except for bits of moonlight shining through the window since I hadn't closed the blinds.

Still, footsteps in the hall.

Climbing off the bed, I went to check. Beam and Storm were halfway down the stairs.

“You guys okay?” I asked.

“Fine.” Storm replied without looking back. “Go back to bed.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned to look up at me. His eyes were wary, and it broke my heart he was looking at me like that.

“One of Tex’s satellites picked up something.” He replied. “We’re going to check it out.”

“Wait, I’ll come with you.”

“No need.” He replied. “Someone needs to stay here with Darby. I have a backup.”

“Storm—”

“Are you going to question everything I do now?” He snapped. “He is safer here with someone with him.”

“P?” Beam asked.

“Grab the bag.” He replied.

Storm returned his attention to me and while he opened his mouth to speak, he clamped it shut, accepted the gun Beam handed him and shoved it into the back of his pants.

When I glanced around to see why he’d stopped, Darby was now standing beside him.

“Storm—” I tried.

He walked out with Beam.

I shuffled down the stairs but wasn’t fast enough. By the time I made it onto the front porch, the back of the jeep was already leaving the driveway.

What’s wrong with me?

It was almost like when it came to Storm, I was at a loss of words. It was like I was tripping over myself and the disappointment in his eyes rendered me speechless.

He set aside his pride and his heart, and he showed up.

“Taz, what—”

“Go back to bed.” I snapped.

Darby’s voice become an irritation.

“What’s going on?” He pushed.

“They’re running down a lead.” I told him without facing him. “It makes no sense we’re all sleep deprived in the morning.”

I waited until I heard his footsteps leading away from me before I moved into the kitchen. Pouring myself a whiskey shot, I knocked it back before grabbing my laptop and calling Tex. With the time zone difference, he was probably in bed, but I needed to know what he told Storm.

Tex yawned. “Come on, man. I just put my head down.”

“Where did you send Storm?”

“Where—why aren’t you with him?”

“Babysitting. He has Beam with him.”

Tex sighed.

“We picked up movement at the warehouse where they were holding Darby,” Tex said. “It’s been hard picking up any kind of information on who these people are. They’ve been staying off the grid. But there must be something computerized with them. If I can’t get them the old-fashioned way—I’ll get them with eagle eye.”

I frowned.

“Get some sleep.” Tex told me. “They’ll back—have you two spoken?”

I shook my head. “He won’t let me get anywhere near him. He hates me, Tex. I’m not used to a man wanting to take care of me. I missed the signs.”

I sighed.

“And we men don’t know how to tell you how we feel or what we’re thinking,” Tex advised. “I’m still trying to learn how to do that. Don’t be too hard on him—if he doesn’t want to stop long enough for you to talk, tackle his ass.”

I blushed.

“You two can’t keep going like this,” Tex told me. “Now, try getting some sleep. I have eyes watching over your boy. If anything happens, I’ll let you now.”

“He’s not my boy.”

“Fine, your man.”

“He’s not my man either.”

“And whose fault is that?” Tex winked at me and was gone.

I grunted, wanting to smack him.

Though I wanted to think about what Tex and Zoom had said, I focused on my phone. There was no way I could sleep after hearing what my friends had to say and knowing Storm was out there.

He could potentially be in danger and while he trusted Beam, no one could have Storm’s back like I could.

Instead of going back to bed, I paced the living room, laptop active, phone in hand.

CHAPTERFIVE

Storm

Beam and I managed to wander around the space without being caught for a while. We found information to make our lives a little easier. But in such a tight space, there was no way our search could have gone off perfectly.

When the bullets started flying, I was ready.

Keeping an eye on Beam, we fought our way through the surge of men until we were able to reach our vehicle again.

But I didn't get out unscathed.

A bullet grazed my neck and was bleeding by the time we were speeding away, Beam was pressing a part of his shirt against it.

"I'm fine." I told him.

"I know you're fine, P." He muttered. "But you're bleeding, and I don't like that. Now, keep your eyes on the road. If you feel funny, let me know and I'll drive."

"We aren't being followed." I told him. "So, that's good."

After circling a few times to make sure we weren't being followed, I parked the jeep in a back alley. We climbed over a metal fence into the backyard and entered the house that way.

Taz immediately rushed to my side.

“First aid kit?” Beam asked.

Taz ran from the room and returned just as I was removing my shirt that was now covered in blood. She pushed Beam away and set to work cleaning my wound.

Though I wanted to tell her I was fine, and I could see Beam wanted to protest, I smiled at him.

“Send the info to Tex.” I told him.

He hesitated.

“Beam?” I called, softly.

“I don’t want you leave you with—” Beam cleared his throat.

“I’m okay.” I promised. “Go.”

“Khap.” He nodded.

I focused on everything else but at Taz touching me. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth at the pain and the burn from the disinfectant but otherwise I said nothing.

“He doesn’t trust me with you.”

I frowned. “He’s my partner. He doesn’t trust anyone with me.”

“You don’t have to be strong, you know?” Taz asked. “You were shot.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know you’re angry at me.” She continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “And it took me a while to figure out why. I’m not sleeping with Darby.”

“It doesn’t matter.” My voice cracked. “At least not anymore. It took me a while to get it—to understand and to come to terms with it. But I have now—I just need a moment to exhale.”

She placed a bandage over the wound, and I stood.

“I’m going to clean up.” I told her. “When I come back, I’ll explain what I found.”

“We’re going to have to talk about this!” Taz snapped. “You can’t keep walking around as if I don’t exist.”

“What do you want from me?” I growled.

“Why are you guys yelling?” Darby hollered from the top of the stairs.

“Seriously, stay out of this!” I yelled.

“Not if you’re shouting at her.” He descended the stairs.

I clenched my fist but didn’t move.

“Keep him away from me.” I told Taz in Thai. “Keep him away from me or you’ll both regret it.”

With that, I turned on my heels and left the two of them together.

Knowing that man was alive made me angry. And even if she wasn't sleeping with him now, she had and would probably again and that drove me crazy.

I wanted to dunk my head under the shower, but I couldn't.

Sighing, I cleaned up, changed, and made my way back down the stairs. Darby was still there and every time I looked up, he was scowling at me.

I didn't care.

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“The gang that’s after you are the Blue Disciples.” I explained. “They’re new but deadly. They’re very old school—most of their shit is offline. It’s harder for them to be hacked or caught that way. From what we see, they use paper messages that they burn after it gets to the person it needs to get to. From what I can see their phones are taken at the door and turned off.”

“I wonder if Tex can turn one of them back on?” I mused.

“It’s worth a try to ask.” I agreed. “As for your friend who you believe they killed, the Blue Disciples usually don’t resort to violence unless they’re desperate. Your friend might have stuck his nose where he shouldn’t and—”

“Are you blaming him for his death?” Darby demanded.

“You’re obviously one of those hard learners.” I growled. “Speak only when spoken to.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!” Darby protested. “You’re going to let him talk to me like that?”

“Dar, sit the fuck down.” Taz snapped. “He’s not accusing Clive of anything. And it’s not like this is the first time you’ve heard that assumption.”

Darby folded his arms but fell heavily back into his chair.

“It probably won’t take them very long to figure out who hit them twice.” I continued. “We got in and took nothing. That means—”

“We should probably move.” Taz finished.

I nodded.

“In the meantime.” Beam looked away from the laptop. “We should probably get a hold of Clive’s notes. There might be something there that would tell us what Clive was into. As he was a journalist, it could be a story he was working on.”

Both Taz and I agreed.

Darby said nothing.

“Aside from the usual, was he working on anything about the Disciples?” Taz asked.

“I don’t know.” Darby muttered.

“You’re lying.” I told him simply.

When Darby moved to surge from his chair again, I lifted a booted foot to Darby’s chest and shoved him back into the chair.

“Sit your ass down.” I growled. “Get up again, and I’ll make you stay down. Now, lie to me again and I’ll leave, and you can deal with the monsters at your back on your own”

“Storm.” Taz called softly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Taz you know me better.”

I kept my glare on him.

“He told me he was working on something he couldn’t tell me about.” Darby admitted. “I didn’t ask because I knew Clive—I could ask until Armageddon he wouldn’t have told me. He takes confidentiality very seriously.”

“What about notes?” I wanted to know.

“Usually, he took them on his phone.” Darby replied. “But we didn’t find a phone—we didn’t even find his laptop or his tablet.”

“The cops didn’t get them?” I asked.

Darby scowled. “No—I have a friend on the inside check. They aren’t even looking for anything. To them, Clive killed himself.”

“It’s like they think his shit grew legs and walked off.” Taz mumbled.

“We need to get into the crime scene.” Beam was typing again.

“It’s been a while.” Darby pointed out. “There probably nothing left of anything there.”

“Let us worry about that, P.” Beam told him.

“Why do you call everyone that?” Darby asked.

“You’re older than me, are you not?” Beam paused his typing to look at Darby. “I’m in my late twenties. It seems to me you’re in your mid to late thirties or life has been extremely hard on you.”

Darby frowned. “Thirty-eight.”

“Then the proper way to address you is, P.” Beam went back to what he was doing.

“What would I call you?” Darby asked.

“Nong.” Beam seemed bored with the conversation.

I lounged in the chair and stretched my arms along the back of the sofa. In that moment, I played over what we needed to do in my head.

It didn’t take long to affirm we needed to go to the crime scene.

“P’Taz, have you gone to the crime scene yet?” I called.

She winced, cleared her throat then shook her head. “Haven’t gotten around to it.”

“Okay.” I stood. “No time like the present. Beam, stay here with him. P’Taz, you’re with me.”

Taz said nothing.

Even after I stopped to give Beam instructions and send off an email to Tex.

Even while I put the address into the GPS.

When we were finally in my rental, she shifted in her seat. I could feel the heat of her stare at me.

“What?” I asked.

“You haven’t called me P’Taz in a while.”

“I’ve been rude.” I explained. “I allowed myself to become too familiar. I’m rectifying that. You know? Kinda like hitting reset.”

“Was I complaining about you being familiar with me?”

“No—but this has nothing to do with you.” I explained. “It’s for my own peace of mind.”

She faced front again.

I could hear the deepness of the frustrated breath she inhaled then exhaled.

“Look, I was an ass.” Taz told me. “I should have told you I was leaving—even if not where I was leaving to. But this was my battle. I didn’t want to drag anyone else into it. Darby is a moron. He leaps before he thinks, and I’ve spent almost my entire life bailing him out of situations like this.”

“You’ve known him a while then, P?”

“Would you stop with the whole P?” Taz snapped. “Now, you’re just being a wanker and I—”

Maybe—but I had to start pulling back. I wasn’t paying attention and during that time I’d fallen for her.

There was no planet, no dimension, no world where I be her type, where she’d want me.

She wouldn’t, especially when she found out the things I’d wanted to do to her.

They were the kind of things a good woman would run from.

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The way she was looking at me earlier—I wasn't sure how I'd been able to control myself.

I knew then, the things I desired from Taz, and to do with Taz would destroy me if I wasn't careful.

No, this one-sided obsession I had with her wasn't healthy, and it wouldn't become healthy even if I waited until the end of the world.

The best thing to do now, was to cut my losses and try avoiding the mind-numbing pain this could lead to.

“Well, the GPS says we're here.” I pulled over and killed the engine.

Leaning forward, I didn't have to wonder where I was searching for. There were still remnants of police tape floating in the wind from the front doorknob and a massive tree in the front yard.

Searching the street, I noticed it was empty except for a single car parked ahead of us. From what I could see there were two people sitting in it.

“They're watching the house.” Taz muttered.

“I figured.” I glanced over my shoulder then checked the GPS.

“If you continue ahead.” Taz pointed out. “Make the first left, then a right into the grocery store parking lot, we can park there and double back.”

Agreeing, I started the engine and followed her directions.

As I went, I kept checking to see if we were being followed but it seemed the people there hadn't noticed us.

"They weren't cops." I told Taz.

"I know."

We made our way back, having to hop a fence to get into the backyard of the house. The grass was dead—all we walked across was dirt and tiny rocks that crunched under our feet.

Entering the house hadn't been hard, Taz removed her outer shirt, wrapped it around her right fist and slammed it into the glass of the backdoor.

I said nothing as she reached through the hole and stuck her covered hand in to open the door.

As she began searching, I made my way to the front door and peeked out. The men in the car hadn't moved.

We searched the house, being careful not to leave anything of us behind. Someone had gone through the house searching it. It hadn't been the cops because they wouldn't have been as careful as this person had been.

"What were they looking for?" I muttered. "They took all his electronics but from the way things are set out, that's just to make us think it was a robbery. Thieves aren't this careful. Look at all this jewellery."

"That's what I was thinking." Taz agreed. "And it's not like a man like Clive would

have hidden the computer or the phone. I mean, my laptop lives on my desk. Darby's lives on his bed."

At the mention of his name, I turned to face away from her.

"This doesn't make any sense." I murmured, more to myself than to her.

Using a nail, I eased a picture frame aside and arched a brow.

"P, look at this." I called.

I wasn't paying attention and didn't see when Taz moved. By the time I realized what was happening, she had me by the throat, my back against the wall with all her curves against me.

"Didn't I tell you to stop calling me that?" She demanded, her hot breath washing over my face. "I meant it."

"Why do you hate that term so much, P'Taz?" I pushed her.

She tightened her grip at my throat.

Smiling at her, I licked the air toward her.

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“One think you don’t know about me,P’Taz.” I growled softly. “Is that I like it rough. And when this is over, you’re going to be the one purring.”

I thought for sure she’d give up and release me.

Instead, she leaned her body on me, her hard nipples pressing through the soft material of her top and into my chest.

Taz kissed me then.

At first, I wasn’t sure what to do.

But as her tongue slid between my lips, I spread them for her and was rewarded with her moaning. Reaching up, I tangled my fingers in her hair and tugged her mouth away from mine, but it was too late.

I was hard and panting and on the very brink.

“This is not the place.” I pushed her away.

She stepped toward me again and leaned in for another kiss.

My body was already rebelling—that couldn’t happen.

When I didn’t allow her to kiss me, she grabbed my crotch.

She squeezed and I lost control.

Tightening my fingers in her hair, I held her head in place to keep her mouth away from mine. Turning, I pressed her into the wall.

“What did I tell you?” My voice sounded harsh to even me, but I couldn’t control it.

“What did I say to you about all of this?”

“You don’t want me?”

I released her. “I’m not having this conversation with you, P’Taz.”

Taz punched my shoulder—hard.

“Let’s find what we can find here and go.” I told her.

But even as I said that, I felt like a jerk.

But my heart couldn’t take this.

My body couldn’t take this.

I didn’t want to do things to her that she would later regret.

And when I put my mouth in the places I’d been craving, touched her in places she never imagined, she would definitely regret it.

“Storm.”

I held my breath for a moment, but couldn’t look at her.

“Storm, please.”

“I’m trying to keep this friendship.” I admitted. “Don’t make this any harder.”

Leaving the room, I wandered down the hall to Clive’s office. There wasn’t much there but an empty desk and a wall filled with framed articles, and pictures of him meeting different dignitaries and celebrities he probably hadn’t managed to piss off yet.

But the room was clean—almost too clean.

I sat in the overstuffed chair behind the desk and allowed my eyes to slowly pan the room. Deep down I felt like there was something there. And even as I tried figuring that out, I remembered the opened safe that sat behind the picture frame I’d found in the other room.

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Taz stuck her head in and held up a gun on her pinky.

“Where’d you find that?” I asked.

“It was the only thing in that safe you found.” She shrugged. “What did you find in here?”

“Look around.” I motioned. “What don’t you see?”

“This is his office, right?” She glanced around. “We know the computer and laptop and phone were taken by the killer. But why isn’t there anything else in here—like a desk lamp.”

“That’s what I missed.”

I snapped my fingers.

“Even with the ceiling light” I was already looking around. “There should be a desk lamp.”

Taz nodded. “For those times the ceiling light is entirely too bright. Why would they take the desk lamp.”

“I don’t think they did.” I stood and walked around the room.

“Then where is it?”

“When the cops were here, they probably had all the lights on, right?” I backed to the center of the space.

“Yeah, because cops think if it’s bright they won’t miss anything.” Taz seemed to be on the same wavelength. “All we have to do is wait until it’s dark to see if anything stands out.”

“Precisely.”

We had a few hours before we could truly see if our hunch was correct. I sent a message to Beam and Tex so they wouldn’t worry, then we sat beside each other to wait.

“Storm—about what I did earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I sighed. “I know that wasn’t you. It was the frustration.”

Resting my head back against the wall, I closed my eyes.

“I guess.” She whispered.

“You won’t be the first woman to angry kiss me and you probably won’t be the last.”

“That’s not why I kissed you.” Her voice cracked. “And that’s not how I thought my first kiss with you would go.”

Those words caused me to open my eyes and looked at her.

Um.” I paused, wondering if she’d said what I thought she had. “You’ve thought about kissing me?”

Taz licked her lips.

But even though she stared at me until she blushed and looked away, she said nothing to answer my question.

CHAPTERSIX

Taz

When it was finally pitch-black outside, Storm and I scoured the room until a little light shone upward from the floor behind the desk. I arched a brow.

“Storm?”

“Mm?”

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His footsteps echoed in the darkness until his strong palms found my hips. Heat surged through my body so dangerous, I had a hard time reminding myself we were supposed to be working.

I took one of his hands to let him know where I was in the dark but eased my pulsing body from his arms.

Together, we hunched down and he used the tip of something to pry up the floorboard.

It came up easy enough and when we looked in, I was surprised to find Clive had left some notebooks, a USB drive and a bullet.

What gave off the light was one of those glows in the dark strips.

“How long do you think these things last?” Storm picked up the strip and turned it over in his hand.

“As long as it can get sunlight.” I gathered the things in the hidden compartment. “Where it’s sitting, through the hole, I supposed it could get a little sun to keep it going. If we’d waited longer, we wouldn’t have found these.”

“Let’s get out of here.” Storm told me.

We made our way back the way we’d come—across the backyard and over the fence like damn burglars.

Once we were safely out of Clive's neighbourhood, we stopped to get some food and was heading toward home again when we picked up a tail.

"You see him?" Storm asked.

"Yeah." I replied. "I wonder why they're following?"

"Probably ran my tag." Storm replied.

"Any plans?"

Storm glanced back through the mirror then shifted to set the bag he had in his lap on the floor.

"We really don't have firsthand knowledge of this gang." Storm replied in a thoughtful voice. "I say we get our hands on one of them fools and ask them a few polite questions."

I smirked.

"You're the boss." I told him, slamming my foot down on the gas.

True to form, the car tailing us sped up.

I took us through traffic, zig-zagging through, forcing other cars to the side. While they honked at me, I paid that no attention, going faster and faster.

We arrived at a dirt road, and I hit the brake while twisting the steering to the left while yanking up the hand-brake with my free hand.

The jeep veered dangerously to toppling over but steadied itself. I quickly grabbed

my gun while Storm did the same.

But instead of being captured, the men following us shot themselves before we could get to them.

Storm turned away from me. Before he did, I could see the dangerous way his jaw clenched.

Resting his hands on his hips, he lifted his face to the night sky.

I let him be to gather himself while I went through the men's pockets. One of them had a phone but even I could tell we wouldn't be able to get anything off it.

It was entirely too old to be on much of a network.

The driver was Clark and the other was Thomas—according to their driver's licenses.

Leaving the scene, I put in a call to Tex.

“Clear the area.” Tex advised. “I’m sending the cops.”

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“Way ahead of you.” I replied.

“Storm?” Tex called. “You been quiet. You okay?”

“I don’t understand that kind of loyalty to people who would sell you out for a snicker bar.” Storm finally spoke. “I don’t get it.”

“People are stupid—but sometimes thinking someone is your friend blinds you.” I tried explaining. “They were young.”

“Too young to be wrapped up in any of this.” I added.

“Well, Thomas has been into the life for a while.” Tex explained. “He has a thirty-seven page rap sheet. He escaped from the Hobart Reception Center a year ago.”

“Reception Center?” Storm asked.

“It’s a maximum security prison for male and females in Tasmania.” I explained.

“Why not call it a prison?” Storm asked. “Why a reception center?”

“The name changed a while back.” I explained. “But yeah.”

“And how did he get all the way here?” Storm asked. “I’m sure someone has seen him in the time he’s escaped between then and now.”

“The man is dangerous, Storm.” Tex replied. “No one was going to turn him in for

nothing.”

“I would have turned him in for a Klondike bar.” I murmured.

Taz laughed softly.

“Okay, so what do we do with this information?” I wanted to know.

“Go through what you found.” Tex advised. “See if anything leads us to anything. Then you can give me something to work with.”

We agreed and continued home in silence, stopping to get food.

When we arrived, Darby took the groceries we bought and headed off to make dinner. We explained what we found and what happened on the way back to Beam who frowned.

“Somehow they know who we are.” Beam spoke up. “It’ll be only a matter of time before they find their way here.”

“I agree,” I said. “I have a place by the ocean. We should head there. We probably won’t be able to stay there for very long, but it’ll change things up.”

“If they know who we are, don’t you think they’ll find your assets?” Beam asked.

“Not this place.” I responded. “It’s under an alias.”

“Why?” Storm asked.

“It’s a long story.” I shrugged. “But it has something to do with Tex doing me a favour.”

“Say no more.” Storm chuckled.

“I say we eat then go through Clive’s dirty little secret.” Beam stood and went off to help Darby with dinner.”

Alone with Storm, I watched him in silence. He was once again sitting on the sofa, his arms stretched out long the back like he always postured. I preferred the floor since it felt better on my back.

His wingspan was wide and since I’d known him, his body had grown sleek and muscular.

I found myself staring at him—his full lips, dark eyes, black hair and the size of his chest. I knew what it felt like to be hugged by him.

But what side of heaven would it be to lay beside him with my head on his chest?

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“You didn’t tell Darby about what we found.” Storm lowered his voice. “Why not?”

“I’m not sure.” I replied. “I have a strange feeling in the pit of my chest, and I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t trust him?”

I shrugged. “I feel like he hasn’t told us something.”

Storm glanced toward where Darby and Beam were making food then back toward me.

How would it feel to be held by him as more than a friend, of stripping down for his eyes only?

Our eyes met and I blushed and looked away.

“Don’t do that.” Storm’s voice cracked. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“There’s no way.”

“No?” Storm asked. “It’s in your eyes.”

Silence.

The kind of silence that left my heart hammering inside my chest. It was so loud, I could hear it in my ears—or was that my mind’s way of playing a trick on me?

He lifted his arms from the sofa and rested his elbows against his thighs as he leaned forward.

Though I was embarrassed at what he would say, and because Darby and Beam were so close to us, I still couldn't get my brain to tell my body to move.

I still couldn't get my brain to tell my brain to stop him, to push him back.

"I know what you're thinking." He repeated. "And I may be young in your eyes, but I don't share."

My heart stopped, flipped and raced again.

"I don't move unless she knows and agrees there is no going back." His voice dipped lower. "You're not ready for the kind of intensity that comes with me—most women aren't—and I'm okay with that."

My thighs rubbed together as if they had minds of their own as I tried hiding my arousal from everyone—even myself.

"Then I mark her as mine." Storm looked away from me for a second. "Anyone who comes for what's mine will hurt—and I take great pleasure in teaching them that lesson."

"Storm." I panted.

"So, don't ever look at me like that again." Storm warned. "Because you have no idea what you're asking for."

By then, dinner was almost ready, and Darby claimed he could finish on his own. Beam was back at the computer, typing furiously—a little like Tex when he was on a

role.

Before I could speak, Storm rose and walked over to where Beam was working. He braced a palm to the desk while leaning over Beam's shoulder.

"That's interesting." He mused. "Did you double check that?"

"Three times, P." Beam replied. "That's accurate."

"So, who is running this gang?"

"No one knows." Beam replied, pointing to the screen. "But according to this, no one in the gang does anything without orders from that person."

"Well." Storm rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess it's time we find out."

I held my breath, closed my eyes and counted to ten.

“How are we going to do that?”

Beam’s voice sounded far away.

“See this nightclub?” Storm asked. “It’s a good place to start.”

“True—but finding out who’s a Disciple and who’s not—according to this they aren’t allowed to get tattoos, nothing that would mark them as a part of the crew.”

“You can tell.” Storm replied.

I opened my eyes then and watched the men’s interaction. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the way Storm had looked at me moments before. He’d been angry at first, then something raged through his eyes, something unfamiliar but sexy enough to force me to catch my breath.

“Look for the men with the devil on their shoulders.” Storm continued.

Beam seemed confused, but he nodded.

“You’re going to have to show them to me, P.” Beam admitted. “I don’t know what the devil looks like.”

Storm smiled kindly and patted Beam’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Beam.” He told the young cop. “As my friend Kaos often says, I got you, brother.”

Beam laughed. “I guess we’re going clubbing tonight?”

“I think we should move spaces first.” I managed. “Let things breathe tonight and tackle that tomorrow.”

“You’re probably right, P.” Beam nodded. “It would look weird for new faces to pop up so soon after their string of bad luck of late.”

“I can’t go.” Storm explained. “I have a noticeable wound. I’m sure the word has spread that I was hit.”

“So—” Beam glanced over at me then back at Storm. “P’Taz and Darby?”

Storm shook his head. “P’Taz and you.”

I winced.

Hearing him use that honorific on me still hurt more than it probably should.

“You know I don’t do clubs.” I frowned.

“Would you rather we send Darby?” Storm asked.

“Fine.” I caved.

“Dinner is ready.” Darby told us. “Fuel then manual labour.”

With dinner out of the way, I washed the dishes while the others packed. We loaded everything into the Jeep, left the cycles secure in the garage and fled through the night to Cottesloe, Swanbourne.

The home brought back bad memories—but desperate times and all that jazz.

When Darby pulled up to the gate, I leaned out the window to enter the code. The gate slid opened slowly and he eased the jeep in. I was seated in the back with Storm and while Beam and Darby climbed out to stretch their backs, I remained beside Storm.

At some point, he'd fallen asleep with his head on my shoulder. The power that sent through me, knowing he was comfortable enough to trust me with lowering his guard, aroused me.

He looked so peaceful, I touched his cheek gently, loving the roughness of his day-old beard on my palm. Sighing, I rested a hand on his shoulder and shook tenderly.

“Storm?” I whispered close to his ear. “Storm?”

“Mm?”

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“We’re here.” I told him.

Storm opened one eye before sitting up to look out the window.

“Damn—sorry.” He muttered. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep—”

“If you call me P, I will slit your throat.”

His dark eyes regarded me silently before he nodded and let himself out of the vehicle.

There were enough rooms for everyone to get one. And soon the house was quiet, me standing by the window, staring out into the yard with the dead lawn and flowers. There was never a day I wanted to come back to this place.

Eventually, I climbed into bed and fell asleep. I didn’t know how long I’d been out before someone was shaking me and calling my name.

The nightmare had crept up on me, seeped underneath my skin and took over everything. I struggled against the hands, trying my best to get away.

“You’re safe, Taz. I’m here.”

The softness of Storm’s voice soaked through the fog of my brain. When I looked up into his face and recognized him, I fell against his chest, wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my face into his throat.

“Storm.” I sobbed.

He rubbed my back.

“I’m here.” I promised her. “I’ll stay right here.”

“I’ll get her some water.” Beam’s voice came from the door.

“What’s with all the yelling?” Darby asked.

“Get out.” Storm growled.

“But if—”

“Not the time, Darby.” Storm’s voice held a warning.

I didn’t pull away from him or look up. The fear still curling through me kept my arms tight around Storm, even when he tried prying me off him so I could drink the water Beam brought me.

“Drink some water.” Storm whispered. “When you get some into you, I’ll hold you for as long as you need me to.”

Reluctantly, I did as he pleaded.

“I’m going to leave you two alone,” Beam said. “If you need me, just call.”

After drinking a little more water, I reached for Storm.

Thankfully, he kept his word.

Storm crawled into bed with me and gathered me against his side with my head on his chest.

“Want to talk about it?” Storm asked.

“Not really.” My voice cracked. “But at some point, I’ll have to tell you. I’m just not ready.”

“I can wait.” He kissed my head. “Get some sleep.”

Storm pulled the sheets up to our shoulder and held me a little tighter.

“Storm?”

“Mm?”

I paused, wondering if I really should ask what I was about to.

“Taz?”

“I-I don’t know if I should ask.”

“Hide nothing from me, Taz.” Storm warned. “That’s how we got to this place where our relationship seems precarious at best.”

“Well, could you hold me a little tighter?” I pleaded.

When he did, I didn’t feel as safe as I’d like.

“Tighter.”

“Taz, talk to me.” He pleaded, tightening his hold on me.

I sighed and snuggled into him.

“I just wanted to feel safe.” I admitted.

“Maybe I should get you Darby.”

I sat up to look down at him.

“Why do you want to break your own heart?” I demanded. “Do you want me to be with Darby so badly?”

He didn’t sit up.

Instead, he folded an arm behind his head. Seeing him like that left me breathless.

“Of course not.” He cleared his throat. “But he knows you better than I do. If he can make you better, then I’ll step out of the way and let him do that.”

“Your arms make me feel safe.” I eyed him. “So, are you going to hold me or not?”

Storm smiled and opened his arms to me.

I settled back against him, and he drew the blankets up to my shoulders.

“Shut out the world right now.” Storm told me. “We can re-enter it tomorrow.”

CHAPTERSEVEN

Taz

Early the next morning, I woke up alone.

For a moment, I laid there, still, trying to convince myself that Storm rushing to my side then holding me all night hadn’t been a dream. I would wake up through the night, feeling safe with his arms around me.

In those moments, I pretended I wasn’t an idiot and had demanded to be his.

In those moments, as I inhaled his scent and felt his strength around me, I hadn’t

ruined everything, and he wasn't calling meP.

He was smiling at me, calling me his and the warmth that sent through me was unbelievable.

Rolling to the side, I pressed my face into his pillow.

If I closed my eyes, I could imagine his hard body still there.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:08 am

The strength of his scent made me giddy.

For a bit, I inhaled it, trying to burn the smell into my memory.

But soon, reality kicked in and I had to get up, shower and change.

By the time I made it down to the others, they were eating breakfast. They all greeted me, but I said nothing until after I was able to drink a couple sips of coffee.

“Morning.” I managed. “Sorry. We all know I’m useless without my anti-murder serum.”

They laughed except Darby.

He didn’t seem impressed.

Storm rose from the table and came back with a big plate for me—eggs, sausages, toast and a few strawberries on the side.

When he set it in front of me, I was tempted to tell him that I wouldn’t be eating the strawberries unless he was feeding them to me.

Was that too much after the night we’d had?

Storm reached over to press his palm to my forehead, then my right cheek then the left side of my neck. I knew what he was doing—he was testing my body temperature.

While, usually, I would fuss, I let him worry over me.

“You feeling better?” He picked up his fork again.

“Khaa.” I nodded.

“Good.” He told me, stressing the word by flipping some hair off my forehead. “Eat.”

Darby made a frustrated sound, but I ignored it and glanced over at Beam.

“Hi.” I smiled.

He playfully bounced me with his shoulder.

“You worried me, P’Taz.” Beam admitted.

“I didn’t mean to.” I assured him. “I’m okay now.”

Beam nodded.

After food, Beam offered to wash up.

I tried finding the books and things we’d gathered but I couldn’t find them. When I asked Storm, he looked away from a phone call he’d been on and pointed toward his partner.

“I hid them.” Beam told me in a whisper. “Let me dry my hands and find them for you.”

Nodding, I ventured back to the living room and sat beside Storm. But while the sofa had plenty of space, I sat as close to him as I could.

He looked at me, finished his call and shifted sideways so he could look at me.

“What’s up?” He wanted to know. “Your cheeks has some healthy colouring.”

Smiling at him, I leaned in and kissed his cheek.

“I’m not complaining.” He tilted his head. “But what was that for?”

“For last night.” I admitted, blushing.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:08 am

“Was that a thank you kiss?”

I nodded.

“You did it wrong.” Storm’s voice cracked.

He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger to turn my head.

When I blinked and met his gaze, he tenderly eased my chin forward.

Willingly, I lifted my mouth to him and accepted his kiss.

Sighing, I melted into his chest, bracing my palms to him, and enjoying the hardness and heat of his body. The control he took of my mouth left my body trembling and every part of me stood at attention, ready for him.

But a small voice reminded me that Darby was in the back smoking and could come in at any time. Plus, Beam was somewhere in the house gathering what I’d asked for.

I accepted one final suck of Storm’s mouth then pulled back.

His kiss left me unsteady and shaking.

“I want more.” I admitted, avoiding his eyes.

“You can only get more if I’m yours, Taz.” Storm reminded me. “And I can’t be yours unless you’re sure. No pressure, okay?”

“Okay.”

I wanted to cry, to say more, but Beam returned and handed me our find.

Together, Storm and I began pouring through the books. While the information written there confused Storm, I knew immediately what it all was.

It was information that a civilian shouldn't have.

It was information having to deal with military deployment, secret locations for a special forces team—my old special forces team.

Closing my book, I reached over and snatched Storm's.

Beam glanced at us, but I took Storm's hand and led him up the stairs and into the room I'd been using. Walking to the window, I glanced down to see that Darby was still sitting on the back step. Closing the window, asked Storm to close the door before facing him.

“What's going on?” Storm asked.

“Shh.” I pressed a finger to my lips. “Keep your voice down.”

He arched a brow and sat on the side of my bed.

With my heart racing painfully inside my chest, I sat beside him and lifted the books.

“Clive shouldn't have any of this information.” I whispered.

“You know what it is?”

“What I’m saying to you can’t go beyond this room.” I advised him. “Got it?”

“Um.”

“If it comes down that Beam have to know, we tell him. Need-to-know, okay?”

“Okay.”

Clearing my throat, I checked on Darby again before returning to Storm.

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“This is classified information that Clive shouldn’t know about.” I explained. “Even if he had the information, it should have been on printed papersheavilyredacted.”

“Redacted?”

“Um—”

I kept forgetting English wasn’t his first language.

I switched to Thai.

“You know I was a part of the special forces.” I began, opened the book I was reading and turned it to show him the list of places the team had been deployed—while I was with them and after. “The Golden Frogs was my team.”

“Whoa, what?”

I nodded. “This here—coordinates that correspond to places we were deployed. Deployment that if these countries find out—Australia would have some explaining to do.”

Storm read then flipped the page.

“This?” I opened the book I was reading. “All these, dates and other teams—this right here, only three sets of people knew about this. The team, the handler and our commanding officer.”

“Where would Clive get his hands on this?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know.” I replied. “But it worries me that out of all the information Clive had on at least four different team—The Golden Frogs are the only ones highlighted, the only ones he seemed to have been digging into.”

Flipping to the back of my book, I turned it and handed it over.

“West, Jo. Golden Frog. Thirty-five-year-old female. Call sign Taz—not sure where she got the name. It doesn’t fit.” Storm paused to read. “Speciality, explosions, tactics and hostile entry...why does he have so much information on you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Blood type, O—Taz are you in danger?”

“Again.” I looked down to where Darby was now sitting, bracing backward on his palms. “I don’t know.”

In that moment, I wondered if I could trust Darby. There were notes in that book about me that no one else could know.

I wasn’t sure how long I stood there watching Darby before Storm’s large palm landed softly at my lower back.

Without thinking, I turned and leaned my face into his chest.

He caressed my hair down the back of my head until I stood back to stare into his eyes.

“I don’t know if I can trust Darby.” I admitted, knowing that secret would remain with him forever. “Some of the information in that dossier—no one would know if they weren’t in my life, personally.”

“Maybe it was another friend.”

“I know you think the world of me, Storm. But aside from the people you know, I had no other friends.”

Storm sighed. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Hang on.” I told him.

I hurried down to get Beam, ensuring he had the USB drive with him and led him back to the bedroom. After ensuring Darby was still outside, now standing by the back fence picking at a tree, we sat and explained everything to Beam.

“We keep this to ourselves.” I told him.

“What if he asks what’s in the books, P?” Beam asked. “It’s not like we can hide the fact we have them. He saw them when we arrived. Didn’t he?”

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“I have a few books like those under my bed.” Taz explained. “We just tell him they were blank.”

Beam nodded. “This sucks.”

“I agree.” Storm nodded. “Okay, he’s coming back inside.”

Beam scrambled from the bed and made his way out the door.

If Storm and I weren’t with Beam, Darby would probably just assume we were together, especially after the night before.

I hid the real books and USB drive and pulled out the books I had. I cleared the cobwebs off them then blew off the dust.

Storm coughed.

“My bad.” I rushed over to check on him. “Sorry—it’s been a while since I fancied myself a writer.”

“You’re a writer?”

“No.” I chuckled. “I wanted to be one. I was never any good at it. After about a week and two pages into the first notebook, I moved on.”

Storm chuckled as Darby all but barged into the room.

“I’m going crazy in the house.” He announced. “I’m going out.”

“You can—”

Storm caught my arm.

“Just watch your back.” Storm told him.

“Did you guys go through the books?” Darby asked.

“Yeah.” I spoke up. “I don’t know why he was hiding them. They’re fucking blank.”

I tossed one at him.

Darby flipped through it.

“That’s disappointing.” He sighed and handed it back. “He probably meant to use them but hadn’t gotten around to it.”

“Maybe.” I replied.

“I’m not taking the jeep—I’m just going to walk—after a run to the toilet.” Darby explained.

After he left the room, I frowned, wishing there was a way to follow him. But where we were located had nothing to hide ourselves. If we went after him, we’d be out in the open, and he’d see us.

“Do you have any of Tex’s trackers?” Storm asked.

“Tex’s tracker?” I asked. “Yeah—he gave me some the last time we visited.”

It took me a few seconds to realize what he was suggesting. While Darby was in the bathroom, I found his shoes and slipped one of the small trackers into the tongue of his shoe through a rip in it.

Praying it would stay, I wandered to where Beam was now sitting on the sofa, watching television. He smiled when I sat beside him.

We listened to Darby's steps down the stairs then out the door.

"We're letting him leave?" Beam asked.

Before I could answer, the screen on laptop on the center table flickered and Tex's face appeared.

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“I have been summoned.” He smirked. “Who am I watching?”

“Darby.” Beam replied.

Tex’s right eyebrow shut up.

“Um—I don’t understand.” Tex told us. “We’re tailing your boyfriend?”

Grunting I rubbed my eyes. “He’s not my boyfriend—for the millionth time.”

“Sure—why are we following him?”

“We found some information that leads us to believe he’s involved more than he’s admitted, P.” Beam replied. “It’s precaution.”

“Taz?” Tex turned his eyes to me. “What’s going on?”

“The books we found contain information that no civilian should have.” I began. “In the very back of one is info on me—some very personal—information only a friend or family member would know.”

“And he’s the only—” Tex paused. “I’ll bury him. And I’ll make sure he’s alive when I do it.”

“Not yet—let’s see how this plays out first.” I smile at Tex.

I couldn’t remember ever meeting a man like Tex.

He was friendly, loyal, beautiful to look at—but messed with his friends and he would turn into the devil if tested.

Of course, he was married.

No sane woman would come across John “Tex” Keegan and not want him.

Sighing, I leaned forward.

“Thanks, Tex.” I told him. “I mean you barely know me—”

“Barely know you?” Tex smirked. “Woman, you come with Kaos and Zoom. Like it or not, you’re a part of this family now.”

“Meaning?” I smiled.

“You’re stuck with me.” Tex laughed haughtily. “You should have read the fine print.”

Beam laughed.

I shook my head.

Storm entered the room then and greeted Tex by pressing his palms together and bowing his head. Tex winked at him before his head slid to the side of the screen and a map appeared in the center. There, an orange dot was moving at a steady pace, away from the house toward the waterfront.

“Do you know what’s in this area?” Tex asked.

“Beach.” I shrugged. “A few diners opened for the view. There is a biker bar—but

that's about it."

"Where the hell is he going?" Storm mumbled.

"Okay, how about I keep the tracker up?" Tex asked. "The rest of you can run-down any leads you find on your end. Maybe get out of the house for a little air."

I wasn't sure that was the best idea.

But it was kind of horrible keeping Storm and Beam couped up in the house because my friend is sketchy.

That hurt me beyond belief.

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Though I tried telling myself Darby wasn't dirty—that he had nothing to do with Clive's death or the shit I went through with the Golden Frogs, there was that tiny voice inside that was shouting I shouldn't trust him.

And even if I wanted to give him the benefit of a doubt, I had to look out for the lives of my people. I would not gamble with Beam's life—with Storm's life.

While I would be careful around him for now, it killed me to believe our friendship meant nothing. I'd spent my entire life with this man and now the world had conspired to show me something I probably wasn't ready for.

But that was the only worry.

Storm's anger if it turned out Darby had me burnt was another bridge I'd have to cross.

He rubbed my back, and I looked up into his eyes.

"What do you think of Tex's suggestion?" Storm wanted to know.

"Why not?" I asked. "Let's put the top down on the jeep and go out—maybe do some shopping. I need to pick up a few things. Then I treat you to lunch or something."

"Can we go to the beach P?" Beam asked. "Maybe not the same one Darby is at, but one?"

"Of course." I approved. "The two of you need to change, then we'll go."

Beam darted from the room like an excited teenager.

I couldn't help the laughter that caused in me.

Storm hunched down in front of me and took my hands in his. When his eyes met mine, I sighed and allowed him to search my gaze.

"I do want you to be my woman." Storm spoke up. "I can see the question every time you look at me. That's what I want—but that choice isn't mine. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"And I don't want you to make that decision now." Storm continued. "I want you to make it when you decide if you're coming back to Thailand or staying here."

"Stay here?"

"This is your home, Taz. I'm under no delusions what we feel or what we want goes beyond Australia."

"I didn't know I'd have to make that decision."

He smiled, sadness still in his eyes.

"The day will come." Storm continued. "I just want you to know this is totally up to you. I'll go with whatever you decide."

"But you want me to choose you."

He stood and released my hands.

“I’m going to change.

“Storm...”

“Yes.” He didn’t look back. “But like I said—don’t make a decision based on what I want. I’m not the one who must live with it after. I never want you to be disappointed or sad. And choosing me when you your heart is here—will hurt you.”

I sighed.

Storm left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Storm

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The day out did wonders for Taz's spirit.

It seemed the sea air agreed with her.

She was even smiling again.

Her hood was off, allowing the air to float through the strands of her dark hair that she hadn't cut in a while.

Usually, it was cut up to her shoulders with bangs framing her forehead. That was the look I was used to on her—but of late, her hair was down her back and her bangs were entirely too long to be called that anymore.

We ordered food and drinks—skipping booze—while she tried getting to know Beam.

It was as if we didn't have people after us and we were free to be somewhat normal for a while.

Tex checked in with us to let us know he had information and would send them to our secure email. I chose to keep that from Taz for the moment.

I needed to see her outside of beast-mode.

She needed this break.

Beam went off to find a bathroom and I took the moment to reach across to squeeze

her hand. She smiled beautifully at me then lifted her face and closed her eyes.

Her shoulders rose, almost to her ears, paused then fell.

When she looked at me again, I leaned in close.

“Can I kiss you?” I asked in Thai.”

“You don’t have to ask.”

“I do.” I replied. “I do, because I don’t know what we are. We’re in this foggy place where I know I should keep my hands off, but my body wants—”

Footsteps behind me pulled me away from her and I looked up to see Beam standing there. Instead of speaking, I placed money on the table to cover our bill and a tip, then exhaled.

“We should head back,” I said. “Tex has info for us.”

We stopped to get a small printer—Tex had warned me we would need it.

Taz didn’t question it.

All the way back, I couldn’t seem to control the pulse of my body.

She drove us back to the house and Beam set to work printing everything off.

“Darby?” Taz called.

Beam and I exchanged looks, but neither of us said anything.

While Taz moved through the house calling for Darby, I got us cold drinks to help our bodies from the outside heat and sat with Beam to put the papers and pictures together.

When I gathered the information, it might as well have been in French.

“He’s not back?” I asked a worried Taz.

“No. And I tried calling his phone but he’s not picking up.”

“You go through this information, and I’ll talk to Tex to see if the tracker is still online.” I advised her, getting up so she can take my seat.

“Yeah, the tracker has about two hours left.” Tex told me. “He’s heading in the direction of the house. But he made a stop at that club you guys still need to hit.”

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“Why would he go there?” I mumbled.

“Who knows?” Tex sighed. “And its not like you can ask him without tipping your hat.”

Grunting, I rubbed my eyes. “Send us a text when he’s on his way back to the house?”

“You got it.” Tex responded. “And Storm?”

“Mm?”

“Stay close to Taz for me.” Tex lowered his voice. “I have a feeling Darby fucked around and Taz will make him find out—get my drift?”

“Got it.”

With Tex gone, I glanced over at Taz.

She seemed enthralled with the information she was going through. Beam was sipping from his drink, watching her with questions written all over his face.

Though I moved closer to her, I waited impatiently while she went through the pictures Tex had sent. They were taken through cameras around Darby that Tex had hacked while using one of Tex’s trackers to follow him.

When she sighed and dropped them on the coffee table, I knew the answer to the

unasked questions, raging around in my head.

“Who are they?” I asked.

Taz sniffled and reached for one picture.

“This is Bull.” She cleared her throat. “He is the sniper of our The Frogs.”

She dropped the picture to the side and reached for another.

“Packo.”

Another picture.

“Sherriff.”

By now she was sobbing, her hands shaking as she spoke faster and faster.

“Enough,” I said.

“Shade.”

I took the picture from her hand and pushed her away from the table. Her chair grated across the wooden floor as the sounds of her cries echoed through the room.

Pulling her into my chest, I wrapped one arms around her, and rested the palm of the other against the back of her head.

I realized what was happening—it seemed her entire team was in on some kind of secret they’d left her out of. Not only that, I suspected the bad thing that happened to her while she was a part of that team had something to do with these specific

members.

Then to find out the man she thought had her back was in cahoots with them—I'd never seen Taz cry.

I'd never seen her broken—and this was breaking her.

Beam brought Taz's drink over and I was able to convince her to drink some. I knew she only took a sip for my benefit, not because she particularly wanted to.

"Now," I said once she'd stopped crying. "When Darby walks back in here, I know it's going to be hard to act as if nothing is happening. But you're going to have to."

"I don't want to be nice to him." Taz told me.

She rested her forehead to my pulse, and I rubbed my palms up and down her arms.

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“I want to pluck out his eyebrows, one by one until he tells me what’s going on between him and the rest of the Golden Frogs.”

“I know, sweetheart.” My voice trembled. “But the element of surprise is all we have right now.”

Taz lifted her head to meet my gaze. “You’re saying we go through with going to the club as we planned?”

I kissed her forehead. “Yes.”

“I don’t feel like going to a club.” Taz protested.

“I know that too.” I smoothed her hair from her face. “But that was the plan. So, go upstairs and put on something sexy.”

“Um—”

Her cheeks grew red.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t own anything sexy.” Taz leaned away from me. “I have to go shopping. You have to come with me.”

“Why do I have to go with you?” I frowned. “You know what you like.”

“But I don’t know what’s sexy. I’m going to need your opinion.”

It was my turn to blush.

But after we hid all we’d found and ensured we didn’t have a random piece of paper under the table or something, I instructed Beam on how to deal with Darby when he arrived, ensured he had a weapon and enough cartridges then left.

Taz drove us to a nearby mall, and we asked a few young girls where we could find stores that sold clothing for clubbing.

Other than a few of them hitting on me and Taz eyeing them like a lioness about to pounce, we found a couple of places. The one she choose looked as though red activated itself and threw up in the place.

Still, I sat in one of the change areas and waited for her to carry an armload of clothing into the changeroom.

I texted back and forth with Kaos, wondering how he handled going shopping with Zoom. The ex-soldier joked that he managed it because he knew she’d give him booty later.

At first, I wasn’t sure what booty meant. I thought it had something to do with pirates and I was curious as to where they found one of those.

Kaos sent me an eggplant emoji then a wink.

I blushed.

“How about this?”

Taz's voice caught me off-guard.

I juggled my phone, managed to catch it and set it on the chair beside me.

“Um—”

Good lord. Was a dress supposed to hug curves like that?

If she wore that to a club other men would definitely see how sexy she was. They'd look at her in ways only I should be looking at her, wanting to touch her in ways only I should touch her.

But I gathered myself, even offering her a smile.

“Damn.” I told her.

“You think?” She twisted one way to look at her body in the full-length mirror on the other side. “You don't think this is too much? I mean—my butt doesn't look right in it.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:08 am

Your ass looks perfect in it.

“Okay, let’s put that in the maybe pile and try something else.” I advised her.

She agreed and dipped back into the changeroom.

Leaning forward, I held a breath then pushed it slowly out my mouth. Seeing her like that, in clothing that showed off every wonderful thing about her frame was going to kill me.

After another two outfits, she picked an off the shoulder romper, a strapless bra and a pair of heels. Once we left there, we stopped at another store to get products for her hair and makeup.

At home, Darby was smoking in the back.

Beam was watching television.

I tried leaving Taz alone so she could shower and get dressed, but she called me into the room after about thirty minutes. She was dressed but turned her back to me.

My heart did a painful flip, then beat so fast, I could have sworn it was pounding in my ears.

The zipper to her romper was down, and I knew what that meant. With the tentative relationship we had, I knew this was a way for her to ask me to do something sexy for her.

But I wasn't sure if I was capable of that.

“Anurak?”

Taz had never used my given name before. But the sound of her Australian accent wrapped around that one word left me breathless.

Weak, I stepped forward and held her hips in my palms. I drew her gently backward into me, then gently scooped her hair over her left shoulder.

Roses was suddenly everywhere, swirling around in the air.

I inhaled deeply, softly, trying to remember how that scent smelled on her skin.

Reaching between our bodies to hold the material just below the zipper, I used the other hand to slowly slide the closure up until it was done.

“I wish I was undoing this.” I admitted, bowing my head to kiss the bare side of her neck.

“We still have a little time.” Taz's voice hitch. “If you can be careful with it.”

“Taz.”

“Take what I'm offering you, Storm.” She turned in my arms. “I'm not just giving myself to some man. I'm giving myself to you.”

I closed my eyes, desperately trying to resist.

But Taz was busy nibbling on my bottom lip even as her fingers worked on undoing my shirt.

“This is one of those times you give up, Anurak.”

“Don’t say my name like that.”

I nipped at her mouth.

“Like what? Anurak?”

By now she had my shirt opened and her warm palms pressed to my bare chest, easing the material of my shirt upward and off my shoulder.

It pooled behind me on the floor, and I tangled my finger into her hair.

I kissed her deeply, pushing her backward until her legs hit the bed and she toppled to it. Falling on top of her, I rolled her over to unzip her clothing.

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Taz faced me again and I stripped her completely then knelt over her to stare down at her curvy, tanned body.

“I-I don’t—”

Taz cupped her breasts and arched her back upward and my uncertainty faded like a puff of smoke. I wasn’t sure when I’d moved, but soon I had my mouth on her—on every bit of her I could reach.

Her forehead.

Her shoulders.

Her throat.

Her nipples.

Taz dragged her nails down my back, arching up for me and whispering my name in a way that threatened to burn me alive.

By the time I was naked and sank deeply into her, I was no longer in control.

Each position I took her in felt new and exhilarating.

Every pass of her tongue on my body, against my throat, the tender spot below my ear left me wanting more of her.

And though our bodies were fused together, I wanted—needed—to go deeper.

“Anurak.” She whispered. “Take me like I want you to.”

I sighed, wrapped my arms around her and pulled her on top of me.

“Ride me like I need you to.” I countered.

Her first orgasm took me by surprise at how powerful it was. It seemed the beautiful queen on top of me loved it when I talked to her like that, when I told her she was mine.

“Give me what I want.” I sucked against her neck. “Give me what’s mine?”

Sighing, she came again.

I gave in.

Closing my eyes, I tightened my arms around her.

“Jo.” I managed.

My entire world shattered around me then.

And while I was pretty sure I was squishing her, all I could do was hold on tight and allow my body to shake.

When we finally slumped to the bed, it was hard to breathe but I didn’t care.

“I don’t want to leave.” She admitted, cuddling into my side. “That’s not what I should do after we’ve—damn. I must sound so needy.”

Taz tried getting away, but I pulled her back to me.

“This has been a long time coming.” I told her, honestly. “I don’t regret it, do you?”

“Only if I didn’t satisfy you.” She frowned. “I mean, *kho* tod.”

“Why the apology?” I asked.

“It’s been a while for me.” Taz played with the folds of the sheet. “And I’m out of practice and you’re so much youn—”

I kissed her—deeply.

I kissed again until she moaned and rolled me over to sit astride my body.

“You satisfied me.” I met her eyes. “I would let you do it again right now just to set your mind at ease. But I’m sure Beam is probably wondering what we’re doing up here.”

Taz kissed me. “To be continued?”

I laughed softly, tapped her ass with a palm and agreed.

She scrambled off the bed and went for another shower. Soon, I heard the hairdryer going. I shook my head, smiled and got dressed. If I stayed in that bedroom, waiting for her, she’d never get dressed.

I then made my way down the stairs to flop into the seat beside Bea—who was now dressed in all black with his hair styled.

“I don’t think I have to tell you she means everything to me.” I spoke after a while.”

“No, P.” Beam replied. “I get it.”

“So, I need you to have her back like you have mine.”

“I promise.”

CHAPTERNINE

Taz

Just before entering the club, I activated one of Tex's trackers and shoved it down the inside of my bra. I wasn't taking any chances with anything. I trusted that I looked different enough from the last time anyone on my team saw me.

I hadn't really dressed up since high school and that was before I knew any of them.

The music was entirely too loud.

The girls dancing around me, trying to get Beam's attention wore their clothing too tight and the irritation I was beginning to feel at people crashing into me was supernatural.

Still, I took a deep breath, and we made our way to the bar.

While we ordered drinks, neither of us took a sip. I needed to be clear to see danger coming and I was pretty sure Beam promised Storm he'd protect me.

We moved around, from time to time hitting the dance floor but we mostly just sat at the bar, pretending to be having a conversation.

"I recognize that man." Beam whispered in my ear. "Six o'clock. Red jacket."

Taking his hand, I lead Beam away from the bar to the edge of the dance floor just as the music changed. I took a good look at the newcomer and agreed with Beam. He was one of the men in photos with my team.

I didn't know who he was, but from all I'd seen, he knew them—intimately.

While we pretended to be having fun, Beam and I worked to take in the room, to take pictures of the people we recognized and who they interacted with.

It was well after one when I was beginning to get exhausted and knew my feet would be killing me the next day before any of the Frogs showed up.

Immediately, I went into evasive maneuvers, trying to keep my identity hidden.

About twenty minutes later, I received a text from Storm.

“Head’s up, Darby said he was going for a walk. He was a little dressed up, so I followed. I lost him in traffic but I’m on my way.”

I took Beam’s arm and led him away from the floor and down a dimly lit hallway.

“You think he’s coming this way?”

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It took a few minutes, but Storm confirmed what he was thinking.

From the hall, I watched the people we were after. There was a kind of urgency to the way they moved around, almost as if they were searching for someone.

When I saw Darby in deep conversation with Packo, I knew.

They were looking for me.

Darby was out to get me.

I'd trusted him.

But I couldn't dwell on my anger—my absolute rage—in that instant.

No, I would wait until the right time.

And the time to make him hurt would come because as Zoom always told me—God don't like ugly.

When the men began heading our way, Beam and I knew we couldn't go out the way we came in. We checked the men's room but there was no way out there.

The men were shocked to see a woman in there. But I merely ignored them as Beam, and I checked the hall and exited again.

By now, Sheriff and a few of his hench men were at the mouth of the corridor, yelling

for us to stop.

Who the hell is he kidding?

I took Beam's hand and led him into the woman's room. Of course, the occupants panicked and went rushing out. I climbed up to the sink, pushed opened the window and climbed through before reaching back for Beam.

But the moment we were both out, we were dodging bullets, trying to get to a safe place until Storm could find out.

I pulled out my cell and called Tex.

"I'm tracking you." Tex assured me. "Get out of harm's way and I'll send Storm to you."

"Roger that." I answered.

But I didn't hang up.

Beam was now returning fire.

When I glanced back, it was in time to see one of Beam's bullets tearing through one man's forehead then another's chest.

Pulling my weapon from my purse, I helped.

When it was quiet, we took off running across a field that dumped us on the other side of a busy roadway. We followed the path, over a bridge then into a build up area.

We found a small diner, picked a seat in the very back with the emergency exit beside

us.

Panting, I flopped into one of the chairs.

“You good?” Tex asked.

“I’m beginning to think this has nothing to do with the gang.” I told Tex. “I think Darby and the rest of my team is out to get me and they’re using the gang as the scape goat.”

“But you were out.” Tex told me. “Storm is inbound, by the way—you were out. Why have you come back to Australia now?”

“I have no idea.” I spoke. “But I tell you one thing. I’m going to find out.”

The bell over the door jangled and both Beam and I looked up to see Storm walking through. He rushed to us, ruffled Beam’s hair then kissed my nose.

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“You two okay?” He wanted to know.

“Okay, khaa.” I replied.

Beam nodded.

After the waitress came to take our orders, I returned to the conversation I had been having with Tex.

“I have a friend cleaning out your place right now.” Tex told us. “Whatever happens, keep his name out of it. He’s technically there on business at the car show.”

“What friend?” I asked.

“Good girl.” Tex chuckled. “He’s going to make sure you can get them once everything is safe. Where did you put the books?”

“In the master bedroom, there’s a space between the headboard and the wall, right at the head of the side table.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Thanks, Tex.”

“You can’t go back there.” Tex told me. “Darby has forced your hands.”

“Maybe not.” I tried.

“He knew you were at the club.” Tex pointed out. “We’re going to work under the impression that he knew you saw him at the club. Take no chances.”

“What?” Storm asked.

I handed him the phone to talk to Tex.

While they talked, I excused myself to the bathroom. My makeup was a mess and it irritated me. I usually didn’t wear the stuff—I didn’t see the point.

Frowning, I gathered a piece of paper towel and cleaned my face as best I could. Shaking my hair out, I braided it in one large plait down the back of my head then wrapped the end around the root. It was too hot to have hair on me.

Hell, they were lucky I was keeping my damn clothes on.

Smoothing my hands over my hips, I then made my way back to the others. We set all the food in the center of the table and ate like a family—taking a little of each to try feeding the hunger. I kept checking outside, ensuring we weren’t found.

Beam paid for the food, and we caught a taxi to a strange address Tex set up.

“What’s this place?” I asked.

“Not where we’re going.” Storm lowered his voice, watching the taxi leave. “We have a couple of blocks to walk—will you be okay without shoes on?”

“I’ll be fine.” I answered.

“We don’t want a trail back to us.” Storm explained, taking my hand.

By the time we arrived at the place Tex had sent Storm, all I wanted was a shower and a bed. But even after the shower and Beam was in bed, I sat in the center of the one I would be sharing with Storm and watched him.

He peeled his shirt over his head, folded it and set it on a chair by the window. He reached down to undo his belt and I still couldn't stop staring.

His body was the definition of perfection, and I didn't ever want to stop staring at it.

Down to his boxers, he turned and caught me staring.

I blushed.

He chuckled.

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“I have to tell you what happened with the Golden Frogs.” I sighed.

The truth was, I didn’t want to.

“You don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready.” He told me, climbing in beside me with a bottle of water that he had sitting on the windowsill. “Sometimes, things need time to breathe.”

Storm wrung the cap off and offered the bottle me.

I sipped and handed it back.

“I need to tell you.” I admitted. “Full disclosure?”

Storm sat with a pillow under his lower back, resting against the headboard.

“In 2014, the rules were changed to allow women to join the special forces.” I cleared my throat, drank more of his water, and exhaled. “I was the first woman on the Golden Frogs. I mean, when I walked in you could feel the air just get sucked right out of the room. And all you had to do was look around to know they didn’t want me there.”

Storm reached up and dragged his palm down my arm.

“But I let them know I went through hell to make that team and I wasn’t going anywhere.” I lifted my chin.

“That’s my girl.”

I smiled.

“After a while, I thought they got it. But I was wrong.” I paused to allow the memories to tornado through me. “Now the rest of this—”

“In the vault.”

I nodded.

“We were deployed to Corvei.” I continued. “It’s not a country per-say. It’s this tiny strip of land between Russia and Georgia. The agreement was that it cannot be occupied by Russia or Georgia. It’s kind of like a buffer zone between the two countries. Russia thought the Georgians were trespassing in that area and there were growing mutterings of Russia doing the same. My team was deployed to investigate. We’d spent the day on patrol, and I was exhausted. I went to sleep. Late—I don’t know what time it was—they rushed into my tent, screaming, shaking the actual tent, shining bright lights into my face. I was stripped naked and brought to an area I didn’t recognize and left there.”

“It was a prank, right?”

“I thought it was at first.” I wrapped my arms around myself. “But then I realized morning was coming and they didn’t come back. I was naked, no food, no water, no shelter—it dawned on me that they left me there to die.”

Storm tried to hug me, but I stopped him.

“When they were picked up, they told our superiors that I abandoned the team.” I told Storm. “A group of people who were born on the land found me. I was sunburnt

and—”

“The scars on your shoulders?” His voice cracked.

I nodded, fighting back tears.

“It had been two days. I was half dead. Luckily, they helped me, nursed me back to health and brought me to the next team sent into the area. By then it had been three months.”

“Damn.”

“When I came home, I went through an investigation.” I cleared my throat. “They went back to the area and spoke with the people who’d found me. I was cleared—but the Golden Frogs was never the same after that. They blamed me for the prestige they’ve lost.”

“You—how do they figure that was on you?”

“I didn’t die when they tried to merc me.”

Storm reached for me then and I allowed him to wrap his arms around me.

“That’s a them problem.” Storm whispered. “This time, you have back-up. This time you have me and we’re going to make them very sorry.”

“This isn’t your fight, Storm.” I leaned back to frame his face. “I don’t want you to catch any blowback from this.”

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“I’m a big boy. You can see that, can’t you?”

I giggled.

“Mind out of gutter Tasmanian Devil.”

“You walked into that, though.” I managed.

He stroked my cheeks before placing a tender kiss on my lips.

“As Tex told me, you’re a part of this family.” Storm told me. “You’re stuck with me.”

“I don’t mind.” I admitted. “I don’t mind at all.”

“Come here.”

Storm climbed to his knees, turned my body and lowered me backward to the pillows.

“Let me take your mind off things for a bit.” He continued, peeling my clothes off. “You deserve my body right now, P.”

I smacked his arm. “Stop that.”

He crinkled his nose at me, knowing precisely what I meant.

“I think I’ve been a bad boy, Taz.” His voice was smoky, close to my face. “You

should punish me.”

My cheeks flushed even as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to accept his kiss. He was hard against me, pressing intimately through his clothes and between my thighs.

Rolling us over, I sat back and sighed.

“I want you to strip for me.” I told him, bravely.

Storm watched me for a second before climbing off the bed to stand in front of me. Slowly, he removed his clothes, baring his tanned, muscular frame for me. Every part of him was amazing and perfect and all I could do was slip to my knees in front of him.

“Jo?” His voice cracked.

“Mm?”

I fondled his balls, massaging them in a tight fist.

“What are you doing?”

“You don’t know what it’s like to have a woman go down on you?” I countered.

I licked the head, tasting him hot and tangy on my tongue.

“Of course, I do. But you don’t have to do this.” Storm implored me. “Most women don’t enjoy these things and I don’t want you to—”

I took his full length slowly down my throat while watching his face.

His eyes rolled back, and his lips parted.

I held him there for a spell then slowly pulled back.

Storm gripped my shoulders to steady himself, gasping for air.

“Do you still want me to stop?” I questioned, cheekily.

“Never.”

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Storm caught me at the back of the head and moved my mouth where he wanted it. I parted my lips and sighed happily when he pushed into my mouth again.

“Jo.” He grunted. “More.”

When he staggered away and fell on the bed, his chest rose and fell rapidly.

But I didn’t give him a break.

I wanted to show him the same pleasure he’d showed me when he buried his head between my thighs and used his tongue to make me feel things that couldn’t be normal.

But as my tongue swirled around him repeatedly, Storm caught me by the hair and pulled me off him. He rolled us over, made a space for himself between my thighs and as our eyes locked, he slammed into me.

“Anurak!” I screamed.

He pressed a large palm over my mouth.

“Shh.” He hushed me. “This sport does not require an audience, Jo. So, for each time you’re loud, I’ll find a way to make you pay.”

My body loved that idea.

It loved the carnal challenge in Storm’s voice.

“Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Good girl.”

Why did he do that?

Why did he call me a good girl?

Those two words coming from his lips alone made me come.

As my body twisted for him, pulsed to the rhythm of his hips, and shattered at his vulgarity, I knew he was it for me.

I love the way his body took on a different, sexier kind of power when he came.

Every part of him stiffened, his eyes squeezed tight, and he plunged deeper inside me than ever before.

Holding him to me, feeling him shake, knowing I did that to him caused me to come again. I sighed while kissing every part of him I could reach.

“You’re so amazing.” I whispered close to his ear.

“You make me like this.” He tossed his head back. “You make me like this, and you need to take that responsibility.”

“Okay, khaa.” I told him in Thai, biting his earlobe. “I take full responsibility for my actions—I think you should spank me.”

CHAPTER TEN

Storm

“What’s the plan, P?” Beam asked.

“I’m not sure yet.” I replied.

It wasn’t as if Taz and I had a moment to speak since we got into that bedroom.

I knew her body did some wonderful things to mine, but after I’d tasted her, it was as if I couldn’t control myself.

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Keeping my hands to myself was next to impossible, even though I knew once I go back to Thailand, I would have to let her go. Once we dealt with the demons that chased her, she would have no need to leave Australia.

Her home would be safe for her to stay.

I sighed, sipped my coffee and shifted to look at Beam.

“We have to talk it out when Taz wakes up.” I managed. “With Darby being involved in a different way now, we can’t go at it the same.”

“Because he’s her friend?”

I nodded.

“Let her get some more rest.”

Taz barely slept all night and when she was finally sleeping, I left her alone in bed to make coffee. I thought after we’d made love, she’d be able to rest—but while she told me she was exhausted, I guess the demons were a little louder than usual.

It wasn’t every day one found out that their best friend was working with the enemies to try and get them.

“I can’t imagine having a best friend who wanted to kill me.” Beam sighed. “I want to kick his ass just for that—I mean, P, I barely know Taz and already I can tell she doesn’t deserve this.”

“She doesn’t.”

“What was he thinking?” Beam asked. “He couldn’t have kept this secret forever. How did he think this would end?”

I sighed.

“P’Taz doesn’t deserve this, and he needs to pay.”

“Take some time and let’s make some breakfast.” I told him.

We worked in silence until the smell of the food brought Taz into the room. Her stomach growled loudly, making us laugh.

As we sat down to eat, I could almost see the elephant walk into the room. It was like all of us were trying to avoid it but knew sooner or later it’d be sitting on our chests.

‘I’m going to see Darby’s mother.’ Taz gave in.

“Is she really going to help you go after her kid?” I wanted to know.

“She knows Darby is a piece of shit.” Taz shoved some eggs into her mouth. “I was the only one who didn’t walk away when he showed his true colours. I thought—he’d betray everyone else, but I’d always had his back. He wouldn’t do that to me.”

“When someone tells you who they are...” Beam sighed.

“Yeah.” Taz replied sadly. “But this could give us a leg up.”

I agreed and about an hour later, the three of us braved the public transit to visit Darby’s mother. She was elderly—she had him late in her life. But there was nothing

frail about her. She was busy in her garden when we climbed from a taxi and walked toward her gate.

At first, she was confused, rising slowly to look at us.

When she saw Taz, a smile spread her lips and she greeted Taz with open arms. Once the introductions were made, she led us into the house, offered us something cold to drink with cookies, then turned serious, pale blue eyes to Taz.

“This isn’t a social call.” She told Taz. “You’ve been in Thailand for a while now—why are you back?”

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” Taz pouted.

“Stop it.” She tapped Taz’s thigh and laughed. “Of course. You’re always welcomed but your eyes—”

“I’m trying to find Darby.” Taz told her.

“What did he do now?”

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I arched a brow but resisted the urge to blurt out her son's sins.

Beam and I sat silently as Taz explained to the woman what had happened—of course, she edited it some. There was just some information she didn't need. It wouldn't have been fair to drop all that on her head.

If Taz still loved and trusted this woman, Darby just came out wrong.

The woman rubbed her eyes and sighed while flopping backward into the sofa. The colour drained from her face and Beam rushed to get her a glass of water.

"I can't believe he would do this horrible thing to you." Her voice shook. "How many times he could have been killed, left in the gutter like some dog and you jumped in, at risk to yourself to save his ass."

I asked to use her bathroom, and once she told me where it was, I took the opportunity to leave bugs in the places I could find.

After pretending to use the bathroom, I flushed, washed my hands and went back to the small sunroom we'd been using.

"He might die in this." Beam was telling her when we returned.

"He owes Taz his life." She snapped. "And Taz has the control to take it. I have no idea how he came out so wrong. I don't know where he got this idea that the way you repay kindness is with betrayal and hate. I just—I can't with him anymore."

“We’ll try and keep him alive.” Taz promised. “But he will not be walking away from this without punishment.”

“Maybe now he’ll learn to take some responsibility for the hell he drops on everyone else.” Darby’s mother whimpered. “I am so sorry, Jo.”

Sitting down, I attached a bug under the chair I was on and exhaled.

After a little while longer, the three of us left the house. We walked back toward the main road in silence, Taz seeming as if she was ready to punch something.

Getting a hold of Tex, he had us wait then jog through a busy intersection to a nearby dealership. The moment we told the lady who we were, she handed us the keys to a Range Rover, thanked us for our business and walked us to a brand-new Range Rover SUV.

That man scares me.

But I was thankful for the ride.

Our next stop was to a shady looking strip mall.

“What’s this place?” I asked.

“See that restaurant over there—in the corner beside the bagel shop?” Taz asked.

“Mm.”

“Darby spends a lot of time there.” She explained. “His father was best friends with the owner. Whenever Darby is hiding, he hides here.”

“Would he be here?” Beam asked. “I mean, no one knows him better than you. Would he be stupid enough to keep to his same routine?”

“When we’re scared, we work off instincts.” I shrugged. “It’s not a bad place to start.”

My phone rang then for a video call. Arching a brow, I answered.

“You guys planted bugs somewhere?” Tex asked.

“Um—” Taz looked over at me.

“It’s her son.” I pointed out. “And she’s furious. She’s going to call him if only to tell him he’s a wasted piece of flesh.”

“Storm’s right.” Tex spoke. “Take a listen.”

“—meaning what?” Darby’s mother demanded. “Let me ask you this. What did you do to Jo?”

“Jo?”

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“How many women name Jo do you know?” The anger in her voice was palpable.

“I didn’t do anything to Jo, Ma.”

“You’re lying.”

“Ma!”

“You’re lying. Because she was just here, and she’s pissed off.” She informed him. “After all the things she’s done for you—all the times she’s had your back and saved your pathetic life, you’re going to lure her back here so they can—what? Kill her?”

“No one is dying, Ma.”

“Is that what they told you?” The mother demanded. “Is that what they told you? Christ on a cracker, you’re stupid. They tried to kill her twice, moron! And those are the only times we know about. Listen, Taz owns your life for all those times she’s saved it. If her or her friends takes you out, consider it repayment.”

“I’m your son!” Darby shrieked. “Your blood!”

“And not one day of your miserable life did you make me not regret that fact.”

“Ma.” Darby pleaded. “Don’t say that.”

“Don’t call me that. A son of mine wouldn’t have done what you’ve done.” She sounded genuinely heartbroken. “You’re alone in the world now, Darby. On your

own because Jo West was the only person left who thought you were worth saving. Why did you do it?"

Silence.

"Speak, boy!"

"The money." Darby all but sobbed.

I looked over at Taz in time to see her heart break.

"Don't you crash on me, Jo West." I smacked her shoulder. "You kick his ass first then cry about it later. Got it."

She lifted her chin and met my eyes.

"Sir, yes sir!"

"P'Tex, do you have anyone who can keep their eyes on Darby's mother?" Beam asked.

"Good idea, Kid." Tex approved. "Working on it."

"In the meantime, we need to get our hands on Darby." I reached over to squeeze Taz's hand. "This is your world, we're just visiting."

"We can't hit the restaurant now." She cleared her throat. "Too many chances of shit going wrong and innocents getting caught in the crossfire."

"We're going to have to hit him going in or coming out." I leaned forward to get a better look.

The place was one long building, cut into different units. The restaurant was in a kind of crevice, sandwiched tightly between two other businesses.

It would be a complete shit show to go in hot.

“There is an underground that leads up into the actual restaurant.” Storm advised. “There’s a basement area too. They’ll just drive him into the underground, we’d never see him.”

“Would he sleep here?” Tex asked.

“Yeah—he knows I know all the property he owns.” She replied. “And since he can’t go home to mama—”

“This is where he’ll lay his head.” Tex nodded.

“So, we sneak in when he’s asleep.” I smirked. “Show him the same curtesy the Frogs showed you.”

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“I’m down for that.” Taz replied.

“What?” Beam and Tex chorused.

“What’s she talking about, P?” Beam asked.

“Forget it for now.” Taz answered. “Tex, let us know when you have someone—”

“I have someone.” Tex shrugged. “He’s waiting at your place to drop off your things. His name is Conroy McHellen. But you can call him Lizard.”

“These nicknames.” Beam flopped back and pulled on his seatbelt.

Taz brought us back to our new hideout and true to form, Tex’s friend was waiting for us.

Lizard was a massive mountain of a man.

Shaved head.

Brown eyes.

Dark skin.

I held my breath as he towered over me. His large palm swallowed my smaller one when he shook it and when he smiled—

There was no way a man was supposed to have that many teeth.

After introductions, we helped him carry all our things into the house. He gave the books to Storm, and we offered him something to eat while we talked.

“I’ll be sitting on Darby’s mother’s place for now.” He told us.

“I’m sorry to be taking you away from your business.” Taz spoke. “This is a mess.”

“My boss is very understanding.” Lizard grinned. “Don’t worry about anything. Just handle what you need to handle, let us get the rest.”

“Thanks.” I nodded.

“Well, it was nice meeting you folks.” Lizard stood to his full height. “Tex sent me the location to the house. I’m heading there now.”

“Wait.” Beam pushed to his feet and ran into the kitchen.

When he came back, it was an armload of things—bottles of water, juice, a large bag of potato chips and two chocolate bars.

“Snacks.” Beam told him.

I could tell by Lizard’s reaction that he wanted to decline.

“Don’t even try.” I warned him. “It would do you no good.”

Lizard laughed while Storm grabbed a bag for all the treats Beam had to offer.

When he was on his way, the rest of us showered, plotted our raid for the night then I

managed to talk Beam into a nap and Taz into lying down with me.

I knew there was no way she'd sleep.

She was too wired.

Her body was in war mode and nothing I said would calm her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Taz

Raids always put me in a mood.

Maybe it was the roughness of it, or the unknown of it—I wasn't sure. But as Storm hugged me from behind and kissed my shoulder, I knew I couldn't take this out on him.

He was trying to help.

Sighing, I turned and gave myself into the need to be comforted. I pressed my forehead to the side of his head, and melted into him as his arms embraced me, tighter and tighter until I moaned.

He always knew what my body craved, what I needed, and I knew I couldn't be an idiot and lose that. There were very few men out there who would care—who would be willing to put their comfort aside to ensure I was okay.

Storm had gone far above what a man, who didn't see himself as mine would do for me.

But this moment, as he rubbed my back gently, giving me the room to fall apart in private, this moment told me so much about Storm, so much about the maturity and the feelings he had for me.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I didn't speak. Instead, I lifted my head and kissed him, as tenderly as I could.

I hoped he could tell what I was trying to say because the words were dead in my throat.

“I feel like we’re in a place where no matter what we do, we can’t go back.” Storm sighed. “I think I need to tell you who my father is.”

I blinked.

I knew there was something about his family he hadn’t told me about. Storm was wealthy, yet he chose to work like a regular person. I always had questions about that. But it hadn’t affected our friendship.

Nodding, I allowed him to take my hand and lead me over to the chair. He sat and pulled me to his lap.

“My father was Bumrakul Kasemchai—an art genius.” Storm’s voice cracked. “My mother Taina Kasemchai was a pop star. When they met, my mother was wealthy, could take care of herself which was unheard of in those days. My father was working his way through the art world—buying and selling, precuring rare pieces for elite collectors. Life was good.”

He paused.

I touched his right cheek then cuddled into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“When I was eighteen and began paying attention to their lives, I knew something was off with my father.” He continued. “He was travelling more than usual, and it would always be under the cover of night. One day I went to school and people were whispering. When I did find out what was going on, I couldn’t stay. I had to run home.”

“What was it?”

Taz cleared his throat. “The art pieces my father had sold to a couple of my classmates’ parents were fakes. Then everything came crashing down. My mother tried taking me and running but my father’s duplicity soon caught up to us. She was coming home from a shoot, and someone ran her off the road.”

“I’m sorry. Did they catch the person?”

He nodded. “An art gallery owner who lost everything because all the pieces he had was from my father and—”

“Fake.”

“Yeah.”

I sighed. “Do you think this would make me change my mind about you? Is that why you told me all of this?”

“Partially.”

We stared into each other’s eyes.

“I told you—I’m telling you because I’ve had my eyes on you for a very long time.” Storm explained. “But I never once thought I’d have to warn you about my life because you’d never agree to be mine.”

“I still haven’t agreed to be yours.”

Storm frowned and pushed me from his lap. I turned as he breezed by me for the door, anger fully on his face and in his eyes.

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“Storm.” I called. “Wait—that was supposed to be a joke!”

He didn’t stop.

“Anurak Kasemchai!” I hollered.

He paused and turned to look at me.

“I’m talking to you!” I warned. “You told me about your father because?”

“Because people are cruel.” Storm snapped. “And if we were to get together there will be talk. They will say some hurtful things—to you, about you, about me and I wanted you to be ready for that.”

Without speaking, I walked over to him.

Slowly, I framed his cheeks and looked up into his face. The fire I felt from him jolted through me then ran up my spine. Even when he pushed some hair off my forehead and dropped a kiss there.

“I want you to be prepared.”

“How many times have you given this disclaimer?” I asked him.

“Twice.” My voice cracked. “Beam and now you. I need to make sure you’re going into this with open eyes.”

“See me here?” I asked. “I’m not running. If you want me, I’m here. But you don’t have to make that decision right now. At this very moment, I just want you to know that I’m here.”

“Taz.”

“That’s a talk for after.” I caressed his cheeks. “But I’m not going anywhere until you let me go.”

“Kiss me.”

I smiled and kissed him deeply, allowing his tongue in and moaning at the electricity it caused.

“I’d love for you to take me to bed.” I admitted. “But we have work to do. But I promise, when this is over…”

Stepping even closer, I lifted my mouth to his ear.

“You can do whatever you want to me.”

Storm trembled.

“And I do mean, en-nee-thing.”

“Let’s get this done then.” Storm told me.

“Guys, let’s go.” Beam called from somewhere in the house. “We only have so much night.”

“I feel like a mom who was making out with the dad with the kid screaming for us to

go because grandma doesn't like it when we're late."

Storm laughed.

He drove us back to the shady strip plaza.

This time we couldn't park in the lot as it was well after midnight and there shouldn't be a vehicle there. Darby would definitely get suspicious and that was the last thing we needed.

Instead, there was a strip club across the street.

Parking there, we left the car and hurried back across the street, being careful to avoid open areas and the limited view of any cameras. We entered through a backdoor where Beam picked the lock.

"Remind me to discuss this with you later." I whispered.

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“I only use this skill for good, P.” He grinned handsomely at me.

Shaking my head, we wandered carefully into the interior. When we saw a sign pointing to the underground, Beam arched a brow.

“I’ll go make sure he can’t leave.” Beam told us.

I figured there shouldn’t be anyone parked underground at that time. The plaza had long since closed and the only vehicles there should have something to do with Darby—it should only be his.

“Be careful.” Storm told him.

“Khap.”

As he disappeared into the dark, my heart grew heavy. I didn’t want him getting hurt because of me. He wasn’t even supposed to be here.

Storm tapped my ass and I exhaled and offered him a nod before we continued through the unfamiliar space.

We checked a storage room, an office that looked like a hoarder resided there and a couple of bathrooms that smelled like death.

Up some steps, we came to a dead-end to the right and a wide corridor to the left. We followed along until we came to a few rooms that were empty. Turning a corner, a shadow caught my attention. Stopping short, Storm crashed into my back as I held up

a hand.

Thankfully, Storm stopped.

After a breath, I peered around the side to find the space empty, and we continued.

The space was empty and most of it was dark except one room.

The sound of a television playing caught my attention and Storm, and I exchanged looks. I poked my head up to look in through the glass at the top of the door.

Darby was watching television, in a wire chair facing away from the door. A quick look around the room told me he was alone—but there was a door on the far side of the room where someone could be hiding.

Slinking back, I paused before whispering the layout to Storm.

He nodded, patted my shoulder and stepped to the other side of the door. I checked the room once more, before holding up three fingers to countdown the breach.

When we broke in, Darby stood up a little too fast and knocked over the chair. The sandwich he was bare fisting went flying but I didn't care.

Storm immediately rushed across the room to open the door on the other side to clear the space.

“Clear.” He announced, shoving the gun into the back of his pants.

“Sit.” I demanded.

When Darby refused, Storm gripped his shoulder and planted him forcefully on his

ass on the floor. I, on the other hand righted the chair and sat facing him.

Storm took up his position against the wall, keeping his eyes on us.

“Where to begin.” I muttered.

Darby wouldn’t meet my eyes.

I didn’t care about his guilt or pretend shame. If it was up to me, I’d shoot him and call it a day.

Our friendship meant nothing to him, so why should it mean anything to me?

My life meant nothing to him. Someone who cared of me would have been happy that I was starting over. But Darby had gone out of his way to bring me back into the path of the Golden Frogs.

Why should his life mean anything to me?

“If you’d only put my life in danger, I could have walked away.” I cleared my throat. “But now that you dragged my man and his partner into this, we have a serious problem.”

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“Your man?” Darby finally spoke. “He doesn’t even like you.”

“Look again.” Storm’s voice was like the rage of a thousand hurricanes.

Darby jumped a foot in the air and jerked to face Storm. It was almost as if he’d forgotten Storm was there.

I caught him by the neck and yanked him back to look at me.

“He’s not the one you should be afraid of.” I reminded him. “Now, I need to know everything you know.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

I smiled and pulled a silencer from my back pocket. Slowly, I screwed it unto the tip of my gun and stretched my back before leveling my eyes on my old friend.

“Is that your final answer?” I asked.

Darby said nothing.

“Bummer.”

“You won’t shoot me.” Darby announced, lifting his chin. “We’ve been friends for too—”

Before he could finish, I shot him in the top of his left foot.

He opened his mouth to scream but I lunged forward and clamped a hand over his mouth.

“Shh.” I shushed him. “This bit of foreplay requires silence.”

Darby groaned against my palm, but I couldn’t find an ounce of sympathy for him or his pain.

“You the man, right?” I asked, my voice cracking in anger. “Take your punishment like you stabbed me in the back—with your entire fucking chest. As a matter of fact—put your back into it.”

I pushed away from him, toppling him backward.

Darby immediately sat up to grab his injured foot.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” I snapped. “Why do the Frogs want me back in Australia?”

Darby wailed.

“Would you like another hole to breathe out of?” I demanded.

“Taz—he can’t talk if he bleeds to death.” Storm’s voice held a warning.

“Ask me if I give a fuck.” I glared at Darby.

“You know they were disbanded?” Darby asked.

I nodded.

“After what happened in Corvei the military couldn’t take chances on them anymore.” Darby explained. “That’s one of the reasons they didn’t want to do the whole court marshal thing with your case. The Frogs have been known to be out of hand when they’re deployed. Clive was gathering information on the different times they were accused of things—”

“What kind of things?” I asked.

“Pillaging and looting, mostly.” Darby replied around a whimper. “Then there are the rapes. There were at least twenty before you joined the team. When you joined, they knew they wouldn’t get away with any of that shit anymore. Sheriff thought they placed you on the Frogs to keep an eye on them.”

I frowned.

That wasn’t why I was on the Frogs. I was there because I scored higher than the other recruits—because I was the best at what I did, and the Frogs were considered the best.

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“Did it ever occur to all you shits for brains that I earned my spot on that team?” I asked. “Keep going.”

“I’m bleeding to death here!”

“Maybe I should clock you in the other foot—make it even.”

“Shit.” Darby tossed his hands up. “Afterward, you were pushed out, no other team wanted to work with them. They didn’t trust them. I mean after people saw your numbers, they were suspicious of the Frogs, had your back. And for a while, it was just speculation. Then Clive started nosing around.”

“Why did he suddenly care?”

“Clive always had questions about what happened to you.” Darby explained. “He accidentally found out when a few of the Frogs got a little too drunk and their lips got a little too loose. He’s been digging ever since you got on the plane to Thailand.”

“Who killed Clive?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You already saw what happens when you lie.” Storm spoke up.

I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“I don’t know.” Darby stressed. “My job was to get him to back off.”

“How did the Frogs know Clive was digging?” I asked. “Someone had to have told them.”

“I guess it was one of the people he questioned.” Darby replied. “I mean, they came to me, wanting me to talk him down. Clive and I had a conversation. He said he would shelve the story because he couldn’t get anyone to give him a statement on or off the record. Then about a month later, he was dead.”

“Why do they still have you alive?”

“I don’t know.” Darby was thoughtful. “Maybe they aren’t done with me yet.”

“You haven’t answered my first question.” I reminded him. “Why did they want me here?”

“Because they know they couldn’t touch you in the States.” Darby explained. “You have friends there. And if they touched you in Thailand, your American friends would have their asses there too. They wanted you back here because they have connections here. They say you ruined their lives.”

“Funny—they left me for dead and I ruined their lives.”

“I had nothing to do with any of that.”

“I know that, idiot!” I tapped the tip of the silencer against his forehead. “You’re a fucking civilian and you don’t have the fucking good sense the Lord gave you!”

“I didn’t want anything to do with death.” Darby sighed.

“And what precisely did you think they were going to do to me once I returned to Australian soil?” I questioned. “Throw me a party?”

“This is a mess. I was going to just take my money and go.”

“And go?” I asked. “What about your mother?”

He scoffed.

“You sold me out for money.” I scoffed. “How much did my life worth?”

Darby said nothing.

He swallowed nervously while babying his foot.

“I asked you a question.” I growled.

“Two million.” Darby jerked backward.

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“And where are the Frogs going to get that kind of money?” I asked.

“They have a job in Peppermint Cove.” Darby replied. “There’s a man—Brazilian Mafia.”

I laughed and lounged backward in the chair.

“They’re going to knock off the Brazilian Mafia?” I laughed harder. “If that’s not the dumbest shit I’ve heard in a long time—”

Silence.

“What are you going to do with me?” Darby asked.

“Well, if you haven’t bled to death by the time I figure out what I’m going to do period, I’ll decide then.”

I stood and shoved the gun into the back of my pants.

Storm produced a pair of cuffs and held them up on one finger.

“So, darling,” Storm said to Darby. “I heard you like it rough.”

Darby frowned.

“You mean you had those all along?” I asked, while securing Darby.

“Is there something you need to tell me, P’Taz?” Storm teased.

“I’m still in the room!” Darby protested.

“We’ll discuss later.” I ignored Darby

CHAPTERTWELVE

Storm

After talking her into a shower, something to eat and a nap, Taz left me alone with Beam and our prisoner to relieve Lizard. I wasn’t a fan of her wandering around Perth on her own, especially with a special forces team after her, but I had to trust her skills—her instincts.

Irritated, I sat down and put in a call to Tex, wanting him to locate what was left of the Golden Frogs. It turned out there were only five of them left in Australia. We ruled out the one they called Kiddo—he died in a house fire a year after Taz left Australia.

“That’s a fucked-up way to die, Phi.” Beam pointed out.

“Agreed.” I nodded. “Do you know where the others are right now?”

“Three of them are having a conversation at a bar called the Low Down just half an hour from you.” Tex responded. “Old habits die hard, I guess. It seems to be their watering hole because the cameras show them there at least four times a week.”

“Who’s missing from the four?” I wanted to know.

“Koala.” Tex replied. “I’m trying to track him right now, but after a banking machine

withdrawal an hour ago, he's gone dark."

"Find him Tex." I told my friend. "I don't like the idea of not knowing where he is."

"Right-o." Tex replied. "Lizard is heading to you as we speak. From what you told me about the Mafia, you're going to need the extra muscle."

"Thanks."

"Make sure he sleeps." Tex laughed. "He's a bit of an asshole when he's sleepy and hungry."

"Thanks for the heads up."

After a wink, Tex was gone.

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With my head filled with thoughts, I had Beam shower and go to bed after he'd eaten. I could tell he was exhausted, and I felt horrible.

He was in a foreign country for the first time, and he couldn't even enjoy it.

After I cleaned up, I checked in on Darby. He was fast asleep, probably knocked out from the pain meds we'd given him. Ensuring the room was secured, I exited and locked the door behind me, then began pouring over the information in the books we'd found at Clive's.

It still bothered me about the personal information Clive had on Taz.

Flipping to the very last page, I found something I hadn't seen before. And because the page was kind of stuck to the back of the book, I didn't think Taz saw it either.

"Recent break-up bad." Clive had written. "I'm not entirely sure why she was with that guy. A woman like that could do so much better, yet she chooses to waste everything she was blessed with on him. Why couldn't she have chosen me?"

Was Clive in love with Taz?

Shaking my head, I closed the book, held my breath then exhaled and opened it again.

Yes, the words were still there. Beneath it, was a picture of Taz. It was obvious she had no idea it was being taken.

"What was this guy's deal?" I muttered.

I checked the USB stick again.

It was mostly the same things.

Military information he shouldn't have had—that meant, either someone on the Golden Frogs gave it to him, or he had an insider. The thing was, as a genuine reporter, he wouldn't have written down anything about his source.

Stumped, I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes.

My phone chimed.

I thought it was Tex but it turned out to be a text message from Taz.

“Are you feeling lonely, Taz?” I teased.

“Lol. Don't tease me now when I can't do anything about it.”

“I could stop by, and we could make out in the car.” I told her.

“Anurak, behave”

“I can still hear the way you say my name as you come.” I couldn't help texting her back. “I'm glad you call my actual name in bed. It turns me on.”

The sound of an engine pulling into the driveway caught my attention. I let her know before grabbing my gun from where it was sitting and rushed to peek out the glass at the side of the door.

Lizard's large frame came into view, and I let him in.

“Don’t worry—it’s only a lizard. We’re good.”

“LOL. You two get some rest.” She replied.

How was I supposed to sleep knowing she was alone out there?

Lizard showered and with a towel wrapped around his hips, he ate then went to put his clothes in the washer.

I knew I wouldn’t be getting a wink of sleep.

My woman had no backup and until I could see her, hold her, touch her, I wasn’t closing my eyes.

To have her not worry about me, I refrained from messaging her too often. Each time I did, I told her I was either up to use the bathroom, or to check on Darby. Most of the times it wasn’t a lie.

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When morning came, I left Lizard and Beam together and drove off to surprise her with coffee and some food. I even took her to the nearby diner so she could use the bathroom and wash her face.

When she came back, Taz tackled me, wrapping her arms around my hips and burying her face into my neck.

I sighed and hugged her back, relieved that she was okay.

We went back to the house, parked a few doors down so she could eat, and we could talk. I explained to her what Tex had told me of the remnants of her old team. It seemed as though she was a little relieved the whole team wasn't out to get her.

Reaching across to her headrest, I massaged the back of her neck until she moaned and closed her eyes.

"I'm exhausted." She admitted. "I want to get this over with so I can move on with my life."

Leaning across the midsection, I kissed her shoulder, her cheek then her neck. She sighed and shifted closer to my lips.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there with you last night." Taz whispered. "I know—well I get that—shit."

"Breathe, Taz." I whispered as I dragged my lips up to her ear. "Even though I have no idea why you're apologizing."

“It just seems unfair to you that we’re in this position.” Taz shifted away from my mouth to face me. “That you’re with me and you can’t even have my body at nights.”

“I want your body all the time.” I righted myself in the seat. “But that’s besides the point.”

“Right—you know what I mean.”

“I may be a man, Taz but I’m not that kind of mind.” I shrugged. “I mean, just because I want your body all the time doesn’t mean you have to give it to me all the time. Life happens.”

“But we’re just starting to figure this out.”

She motioned from herself to me.

I caressed her cheek before easing in to place a tender kiss to her mouth.

“Yes, we’re just starting.” I confirmed. “But life still happens. It sucks, I know—but we’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

Smiling, I framed both her cheeks and leaned up to kiss her forehead.

After a silent moment, she fed me a piece of sausage from her food and we sat, staring at the house we should have been watching.

I knew this was hard on her—it was the kind of battle I wanted to fight for her.

But no matter how much it killed me—no matter how much my training mingled with

that alpha beast inside, I had to calm myself and let her handle this.

This was her way back to herself.

I didn't like it, but it was what it was.

All I could do was stand by and watch her get beat down and if she asked for my help—

“Taz?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you know when the time comes to ask for my help?”

“What do you—” She paused for a moment. “As my man, you want to fight all my battles. I understand.”

“And it kills me knowing I can't. That I have to stand back and watch you get bruised and bloodied and I can't just wave a magic wand and make it better.”

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“Don’t you know just being here like this makes it better?” Taz asked. “Sometimes I don’t need a wolf.”

“Then what?”

“My lover.”

My cheeks heated and I looked away.

“Khaa.” I giggled, reaching across to hold my hand. “When I feel as if I can’t surface for air on my own, you’ll be my first call.”

It was about an hour later while I talked Taz into getting some sleep that a black car with tinted windows circled twice. When it appeared a third time, I pushed down in the seat so they couldn’t see me from the outside.

Since Taz’s seat was leaned all the way back, they probably thought our vehicle was empty.

“My little Devil?” I shook Taz.

“Mmm?”

“We have company.”

Her eyes immediately snapped opened but she slowly stuck her head up. When I pointed out the car to her, she picked up her binoculars. I was already on the phone

with Tex running the license plate.

“Well, I think we have somethin’.” Tex was excited. “Stolen plates.”

When Tex grew excited things usually blew up or some bad guy wound up in one of his friends’ trunks.

A man exited the car, glanced both ways and darted across the street. When he looked down the street again, I quickly took a photo, zooming in as much as I could then dipped down again.

The car was empty now and that was weird to me.

“I’m sending you a picture.” I warned Tex.

“He’s heading around the back of Ma’s house.” Taz dropped the binoculars.

Before I could gather myself, she was already out of the car.

Hanging up from Tex, I called the elderly woman.

“Ma, there’s going to be a knock on your back door.” I told her. “Don’t answer it!”

“Who is this?” She asked.

“It’s Storm.”

“What’s going—”

The knock came.

“Don’t open the door! Taz and I will handle it.” I ran after Taz. “Get into the master bedroom, go in the closet and be as quiet as you can.”

Thankfully, she didn’t argue.

I supposed after years of having a son like Darby, this was normal.

Without a plan, we separated.

Taz went to the right.

I took the left.

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We found the man now hammering against the door and screaming.

“Hey, ya wuss!” Taz shouted.

The man whirled around, gun in hand and fired.

Luckily, he was a lousy aim and Taz was fast enough to get out of the way.

“Hey!” I called.

That was enough to distract him.

Taz popped out again and I used the house to shield my body. A loud boom echoed through the air followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

When I looked around, Taz was re-holstering her gun, and the intruder was lying on the ground, clutching his chest.

She stood over him.

“Who the fuck are you?” She demanded. “You’re not a Frog. Why are you here harassing little old ladies?”

“Go fuck yourself.” He panted.

I was close enough to assess what was happening and knew it wouldn’t end well for this guy.

“Classy.” Taz murmured, stepped over him and headed for the door.

It didn’t take long for his breathing to sound wet, and I knew what was happening.

“Hospital.” He panted.

“No need.” Taz didn’t turn away from the door she was knocking on.

“Your lungs are now filling up with blood.” I told him. “You can die here peacefully, or in the chaos of an ambulance.”

“Of course—I—”

He sputtered then coughed up blood.

“You’re dying.” I hunched down beside him. “Isgo fuck yourselfthe last thing you wish to say.”

But the man didn’t change his mind.

He died soon after and I went through his pockets. We found a cellphone that wasn’t password protected, a roll of cash that I guessed to be at least a thousand dollars and a piece of paper with Ma’s address on it.

“Call her,” I said to Taz who was still knocking.

While she spoke to Ma, I rolled the dead man to get to his other pockets. He had a second gun, loaded and ready.

“All this for a little old lady.” I muttered.

I put the money back into his pocket but kept everything else.

Ma let Taz into the house, and I put in a call to Tex to give him access to the phone. While he was digging around, I checked the man's pulse out of an abundance of caution, then entered the house to join them.

“What are we going to do about the dead bloke on my back porch?” Ma asked.

“You’re going to pack an overnight bag.” Taz told her. “We’ll handle the body.”

“This is all because of Darby?” She wanted to know.

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Both Taz and I nodded.

I could see her heart break again and I sighed.

While Taz tried talking her down, I went back outside where the body was. Looking around the backyard for a spell, I inched my way around the house to the front. The man's car was still parked there. Curious, I hurried over to it and looked in all the windows.

It was probably a rental—there was nothing in it to say it was lived in.

No dust, no paper, no snack wrappings—not even a pendant hanging from the mirror.

Everything was pristine.

Taking a picture of the VIN number, I made my way back to the house, checking the front porch and the other side.

By the time Taz and Ma exited the house, my brain was just a flurry of thoughts and conspiracies.

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

Taz

After we took Ma somewhere safe with one of Tex's connections, I gave in and allowed Storm to fuss over me. This was new to me—having someone who wanted to

take care of me.

My father passed away when I was young and afterward, I kind of had to grow up fast to raise myself. My mother ensured there was a roof over my head and food and clothing, but I lacked everything else.

She didn't believe I needed love—to be tucked in at nights, story times, even hugs were never a thing I was used to. I would get them, but not often enough to remember my mother ever hugging me.

“Storm?”

“Mm?”

He kept reading the label for my lotion.

“Anurak.”

He looked at me then.

“What’s the matter?” Storm asked. “You only use my name when you’re angry or when—”

My cheeks heated.

I lifted my arms to him.

“Is this your way of saying you want a hug?” He questioned.

Pouting, I nodded.

Storm smiled, set the bottle on the bedside table and climbed into the bed. He scooped me into his arms, holding me tightly with one hand while the other caressed up and down my back. After a while of pure heaven, he pressed that rubbing palm to the back of my neck and shimmied closer.

“This is new to me.” I whispered my secret.

I had never imagined telling a lover this.

That would mean opening myself up in a way that could only leave me broken.

“This?” He asked.

“Being held.”

Storm moaned and held me tighter.

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I wound up telling him about my father's death and my mother's change. He listened quietly, his only interruptions were kisses to my head and forehead.

"Somethings I think she didn't love me." I confided.

"I'm sure she loved you." Storm told me. "We all deal with our losses differently."

"But she wasn't the only one who lost something and someone the day my father died in that accident." I exhaled. "I was daddy's little girl and all of a sudden, I didn't have that anymore. And when I turned to the one person who should have consoled me—she wasn't there, and never came back."

I paused to press my face to his cheek to gather my strength before speaking again.

"And now that I'm older I see she was mourning too—but I was the child. I had never suffered a loss like that before and it was like I was drowning."

"And that's when you learned not to depend on anyone," Storm pointed out.

"Mm." I caressed a palm up his arm to his elbow and down again. "Because sooner or later they leave—they give you things you don't need, and they leave."

Stormed tipped my chin up to see my eyes.

"I'm not leaving." He promised. "Only if you tell me to."

"What if I don't tell you to?"

“Come on, Taz. I’ve been yours since the day I met you. Where would I go? Hm?”

I blushed but kissed him.

When I felt better, I released him.

Storm kissed me then relegated me to a bath before facing the others.

We all crowded around the table to eat.

None of us talked about the issues we were facing.

It could have been because Storm asked them not to. I didn’t care what the reason was—I could have used the break from the madness, and I was pretty they could too.

I allowed them that momentary peace to decompress from the hell I’d brought them into because I trusted someone.

Each time I thought of what Darby had done, the rage stormed through me like a swirling vortex.

We’d known each other almost all our lives and he would do this?

Not only had he put my life in danger—I looked over at Storm who was laughing at something Lizard said. The large man smirked and shook his head.

Beam had juice spurting out his nose.

Laughing, I handed him a piece of napkin and he tapped the liquid away but couldn’t control his laughter.

This was the life I wanted—this was the life I’d given up on ever having.

I wanted the family dinners with laughter and stories of our day—it dawned on me then that I wanted all that with Storm.

“You okay?” Lizard asked.

Offering him a smile, I nodded.

“Just a little tired.” I told him.

“You can rest once you finish eating,” Storm pressed a palm to my forehead. “I’ll bring you a cold beer.”

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“Aww.” I moaned. “Perfect. Has anyone checked on Darby and fed him?”

“I did, Phi.” Beam replied.

“Good.” I sighed.

When the house was finally quiet, Storm crawled into bed with me. I hadn’t managed to fall asleep because my brain wouldn’t shut up. He pulled me against his chest, kissed my forehead then wrapped his arms around me.

Sighing, I snuggled into his warmth as I listened to the air conditioning humming to cool the air that moved about the space.

“This will be over soon.” Storm assured me. “One way or the other, we end this.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do with Darby when it is.” I admitted.

“And you know something? You don’t have to make that decision this very moment.” Storm told me, easing back to look into my eyes. “Tonight, I want you to focus on me and turn off that brain.”

Exhausted, I nodded and closed my eyes.

Rain fell the night before—all night I was awake battling the demons storms brought to my mind. I tried my best not to wake Storm. He’d been working hard to help me get my life back.

But each time a nightmare got its hooks into me, and I jerked awake, Storm was there, holding me tighter, kissing my brows.

The next day we all sat and came up with a plan. None of us was okay with it, but we didn't have any other alternatives. Tex had gone digging but we couldn't find any known associates for the Frogs after us. Then again, they were an elite team that was brought down by their stupidity and not by some rogue terrorist cell.

They were badass on their own—just dumb as shit.

I was banking on that stupidity.

I was hoping on them underestimating Beam and Storm, and that they thought my vagina still made me weak.

“Can I go on record as to say this is a bad idea, Phi.” Beam asked for the millionth time. “You can't just walk into Arturo Fernanda's clutches, without being armed.”

“Walking in there with a gun is like declaring war.” I explained.

“And?” Beam pressed. “P' Storm, tell her she can't do this.”

Storm smiled and patted Beam's shoulder.

“She won't be alone.” He assured the young cop. “We'll be there, Tex will be on-call and Lizard will be on stand-by.”

“I don't like it, Phi.”

After patting his cheek affectionately, I picked up my bottle of water, drank what was left and placed the empty bottle back on the table. Lizard left to arrive at our

destination and find a place to set up, and I followed Beam from the house and to the jeep.

Storm stopped me and drew me into his arms.

“You call for help if you need us to come breaking in there.” He told me, his voice serious, hard. “I mean it, Taz. No heroics. The mafia is notoriously unpredictable and I’m not risking your safety.”

“Understood, Nong.”

He grunted and released me.

I thought for sure he was angry at the honourific but he smiled, kissed me and opened my door for me. Thanking him with a kiss, I climbed in and after he closed my door, Storm paused to take a breath. I watched his shoulders rise and fall as I wondered what I’d done in my miserable life to deserve him.

He hadn’t told me he loved me—not once.

But every time he touched my cheek tenderly, or stared into my eyes, or kissed me—I knew.

And while I had some very—very—strong feelings for Anurak Kasemchai, I was terrified to name them.

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No man had loved me and meant it my whole life—not one.

Why was he different?

While they drove in silence, I rested my head back and closed my eyes. A million and one things floating through my mind—this little mission we were on could go badly. But I'd spoken to Darby again and his need for pain medication forced him to tell me about the heist the Frogs were going to pull.

His wound was healing—so far, no signs of infection but that was the very least of his problems.

When we arrived at the location, Lizard alerted us to where he was.

Leaving Beam and Storm in the car, I made my way to the gate and lifted my face to the camera.

“Yes?” The harsh voice called through the speakers.

“My name is Jo West—”

There was a loud click, followed by the large gates slowly swinging open. I glanced back at Storm who still looked as if he wanted to rush forward and dragged me backward.

But I exhaled a pent-up breath, straightened my spine and stepped through.

Kaos' friend Tyr had pulled some strings to get me this meeting and I wasn't about to waste it because I was nervous.

A man in a dark suit and an earpiece met me at the door. He patted me down, his large hands tracing my sides, up between my thighs, around my waist.

Protocol, I guessed.

Once he was satisfied, he led me through a breath-taking lobby, up a winding staircase and along a corridor. We entered into a room that seemed like a waiting area where he told me to take a seat.

"Mr. Fernando will see you shortly." He advised in a brisk, accented tone. "He's just finishing up a call."

Though I didn't want to, I sat. Nervously, I crossed my legs and tried not looking around like a kid who was seeing candy for the first time. I wasn't sure how long later, but a door opened to my right, and I stood.

Arturo Fernanda was a beautiful man.

Dark eyes, dark hair, black suit and a body that would turn any girl's head.

He extended a hand to me.

"Arturo Fernanda." He introduced himself. "You can call me Turo."

"Jo West." I shook his paw and released it. "Taz."

"Tyr said you have something important to discuss with me." He led me in through large brown doors and into an office fit for a king. "He assured me you're friends."

“Yes.” I replied, accepting the seat he offered. “We met through a mutual friend.”

“Kaos.”

I nodded.

Arturo sat across from me, offered me a drink but I declined.

“I’d like to get straight down to it, if I may.” I explained. “My friends are already nervous about me being in here unarmed. I don’t want them to worry too long.”

He smiled. “Of course.”

“What if I told you I know about a hit that’s coming for you?” I asked.

He arched a carefully manicured brow. “For me?”

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“Yes.” I replied. “You really should use a bank, Turo. When you have that much cash lying around, people find out, and then you become a target.”

“A target? From whom?”

“Not until we make a deal.”

“I like the way you think.” He chuckled. “Nothing irritates me more than a weak woman. How much?”

“I don’t want money.” I leaned forward.

“You don’t?” He lounged back in his overstuffed chair. “What else could there be? I might guess and say you want my body.”

I laughed.

Honestly—I laughed out loud until I couldn’t breathe.

“You’re a good-looking man, Turo.” I admitted drying my eyes. “But I don’t want that either.”

“Well, you’d be the first. Now you’ve got my curiosity aroused. What do you want?”

“The men coming for you tried to kill me twice.” I divulged. “And I want their heads.”

A slow smile spread his full lips.

“Ahh, yes. Good-old-fashion vengeance.” He nodded. “What do you have in mind?”

“So glad you asked.” I lounged in the comfortable seating. “I could go after them but I’m only a four-man squad. You have muscles. I suggest we work together. You keep your money and I get them.”

He stared at me for a while.

“And you’d trust me to keep my word?” He asked.

“Tyr and Kaos trust you.” I explained. “If you weren’t a man of your word, they wouldn’t have called in this favour for me. And I’d make you regret it.”

Arturo stared into my eyes as if he was looking for the truth of the kind of rage I would use to burn his entire existence to the ground.

I’m not sure if he found what he was searching for, but eventually he nodded.

“I see.” He murmured.

He rose and walked over to his window to look out.

I waited impatiently as he seemed to make up his mind.

“Very well.” He turned and walked back to his chair. “We have a deal. But you have to know, Taz, I remember people when they’re good to me and mine. Understand?”

I offered him a smile.

“I get it.” I replied. “But I don’t need anything.”

“How about a very rich boyfriend?”

Blushing, I shook my head.

“He may not be very rich, Turo,” I said. “But I do have a man. And trust me, he’s everything.”

“Lucky man.”

Standing I shrugged. “He seems to think so.”

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We discussed business and after about half an hour, I was walking out the gates again to lead Beam and Storm back.

We let them in on the plan and soon we were on our way home again.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

Storm

I still didn't like Arturo.

He was looking a little too closely at Taz, staring at her ass when she walked by him, brushing a little too close to her. While I kept telling myself that my woman was gorgeous and men were going to look, I just didn't like the idea of it.

"You okay, brother?" Lizard asked, close to me.

I'd walked from the war room—as Arturo called it—to take a breather before I exploded and said something I would probably regret.

"I'm not sure." I admitted.

Lizard rested his elbows to the rail and the two of us fell into silence.

"You know." Lizard spoke up after a few minutes. "I may not know Taz for all that long, but I'm pretty sure she only has eyes for you. If our Brazilian billionaire tried anything she'd shank him for breathing."

I laughed and bowed my head for a moment.

“Am I that transparent?” I asked, glancing over at him before looking out over the water.

“Nah.” Lizard chuckled. “You’re a man in love with a woman. You look at every man who gets a little close through the side-eyes.”

“Side eyes?”

Lizard tapped my shoulder and I looked at him to find his head was turned away, but he was still looking at me through the corners of his eyes.

I laughed.

“I really have to remember that phrase.” I admitted. “I like it.”

Lizard chuckled.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I continued, “I’m usually better than this. My woman is not my pet—and I don’t own her. She can do what she wants as long as she’s true to me. But with Taz, I feel this overwhelming jealousy when a man even thinks of looking at her.”

“That’s because your feelings for her are stronger than you’ve had before.” Lizard pointed out. “This is the woman you want to pick you—and while your relationship is in a precarious position right now, you don’t want another potential mate stepping into her view. And let’s face it, Arturo Fernanda is a candidate for that.”

I frowned.

“Are you trying to cheer me up?” I asked.

“Is it working?”

“No.” I shook my head. “You suck at this.”

Lizard sighed, turned his back against the railing but kept his brown stare on my face.

“It’s a hard truth, my man.” He told me. “But still a truth. You have to trust your woman that she wants you, that what she feels for you is real and no other man—no matter how buff and rich he might be—will turn her head.”

“What if you’re starting to think he would be better for her?”

“Then you’re an idiot.” Lizard offered. “A word of friendly advice?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

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“Don’t ever let Taz hear you say that.” Lizard leaned in and lowered his voice. “The only person good enough to make that decision for her, is her. I have a feeling she’s the kind of woman who if she even thinks you’re thinking that—she’d kick your ass.”

I smiled.

“I’d let her.” I growled softly.

Lizard grinned.

“Look man, I haven’t been lucky enough to have what you have.” Lizard’s massive shoulders rose and fell. “Don’t over-think it. Just because a man is good-looking, fills out a suit like Arturo does and has more money than Midas, doesn’t mean he’s good for anyone.”

“But—”

“No.” Lizard shook his head. “Get it together,Nong.”

I laughed, knowing Beam was probably teaching Lizard Thai.

“As you wish,P.” I teased.

Lizard crinkled his nose at me and patted my shoulder.

“Let’s go back before they come looking.” Lizard encouraged.

When we entered the room, the little peace Lizard had given me began slipping away.

Arturo was leaning over Taz's shoulder.

Lizard gripped my shoulder, reminding me who I was and giving me some time to reel in my quickly fraying temper.

I cleared my throat and they turned to look at me.

"You're too close." I warned him.

Without saying another word, I sat beside Beam who was in a conversation with Tex. They both filled me in on what was happening, and I rose.

"Lizard, you're with me." I told our new friend.

"You okay?" He asked as I sped through the corridor.

"Fine." I replied.

I didn't think Lizard believed me, but he accepted my replied as we hurried up some stairs and onto the roof of the massive house.

Lifting my head, I searched the sky.

"What are you looking for?" Lizard asked.

Something glistened in the sun, and I pointed.

Tex had sent us extra firepower.

Though I was curious as to how he got those through Australian airspace, I wasn't going to ask. Everything with that man, felt as if it was better not to know.

Once the drones landed, I checked them, having a mind to ask Tex to have them stick around to help us. But they weren't the kind equipped with weapons—perhaps that was how he got them through to us.

We accepted the black duffle bags, hefted them over our shoulders and the drones took off again.

When we were in the room again, Lizard and I went through the bags and ensured Taz, Beam, Lizard and I were armed. Arturo should have his own supply.

“You okay?” Taz asked.

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I brought the end of the Glock down against my palm to fasten the cartridge.

“Fine.” I replied. “Beam, you know the plan—you should get some rest.”

“What about you,P?” He stood and yawned.

“I’ll be okay.” I replied. “Going to run through a few more things for now. I’ll wake you when we’re close to time.”

“But they might come earlier.” Beam protested. “Plus, Darby could have been lying or mistaking the time.”

“I know. But not by much.” I paused. “Set your alarm for an hour. That should give us plenty of time.”

Beam nodded and settled in the sofa in the room.

I walked away from the others after Arturo left the room and stood by the window, watching the street outside.

It was almost as if the world knew it was about to end and everything was silent. While I said nothing, I folded my arms across my chest, wondering what would happen next—wondering if the Frogs were that dumb to hit a mafia target.

Taz walked up behind me and rested a palm to my back.

I said nothing.

It was pitch black outside when the Frogs descended on the house. They took out the main security system at the front gate—or so they thought. The gates opened and we allowed them to flood the yard.

Of course, they had hired henchmen to assist them on this mission.

Taz, Beam, Lizard and I separated from the others. The plan was to take out as many of their henchmen as we could—silently.

I took my frustrations out on them, disarming them before either knocking them out or snapping a neck or two.

When my sector was clear, I hunched down in the dark, keeping an eye on the areas around me. Eventually, I wandered around the property until I came across Beam.

Sneaking up on him hadn't been the best of idea as I had to grab his gun and shove it away to avoid getting a bullet to the chest.

“P!” He whispered fiercely. “I could have shot you!”

“But you didn’t.” I reminded him.

He frowned at me in the moonlight, holstering his gun and we carried on.

At the meeting area, we were the first to arrive followed by Lizard, then Arturo.

“Where’s Taz?” I asked.

No one had an answer.

“Tex?” I called into the mouthpiece.

“Yeah, brother.”

“Find Taz.” I told him as I hurried for the door with Beam close behind. “She isn’t at the meeting spot.”

“Is he going to hack my system?” Arturo wanted to know.

I didn’t answer him.

Halfway down a massive stairway, Tex had an answer.

“She’s in a brawl at the moment.” Tex informed me. “And the others are closing in on her location. Sending it to your phone.”

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I quickly checked then took off running.

“We’ll run interference.” Lizard promised.

I didn’t slow down until I entered the courtyard in time for Taz to go sailing through the air into a concrete column and someone grabbing me around the throat from behind. Taking a second to focus on my own life, I allowed the panic to morph into anger.

Once that seed was planted, I exhaled it out my mouth, knowing I had to get free or go unconscious.

Driving my head backward into his forehead, I ignored the pain and dropped my weight downward. He must have still been stunned for he released me and staggered backward. His hands immediately went up to his face and I swung my body into a roundhouse kick to drop him.

Panting for air, I turned as Taz swung her body around her assailant, gripped him by the neck and sort of climbed him like a tree to hug her thighs around his neck.

She then dropped her body, headfirst, toward the ground sending the large man backward. He landed on his shoulder and head—kind of lurched then went still.

Taz rolled away from his body but managed to push herself, shakily to her feet. She stumbled again and slipped to one knee—paused then stood.

I was running toward her when a dark shadow peeled itself from the darkness to my

right. After a quick check to make sure it was a hostile, I stood in his way.

“Storm.” Taz called.

“Breathe!” I hollered, dodging a high kick.

I knew that fight had taken a lot out of her. If I could give her time to gather herself, I was going to do just that.

Instead of backing away, I brought both fists into the large man’s chest and followed it up with a kick to his crotch. I backed up, allowing him to fall to his knees before Superman-punching him to the side of the head.

He fell, face first, to the ground.

I was turning to check on Taz when a loud boom echoed through the air. Looking around, I realized Lizard and Beam had yet to enter the courtyard.

“Beam!” I shouted, sprinting back toward the sound.

Taz followed me.

A second boom sounded.

We rounded a corner just as Lizard fell to his knees beside Beam, calling his name.

“Come on, Kid.” He called. “I’m going to need you to stay awake.”

“Beam!” I skidded to a stop by them.

Lizard was already peeling Beam’s shirt off as it began quickly soaking in blood. My

heart fell out of my chest.

“Make sure no one else is lurking.” Taz ordered.

I glanced up as she kicked away the man’s gun then slammed her foot in his ribs before stomping on his gunshot wound.

I assumed he was the man Lizard shot for hurting Beam.

“Taz.” I barked. “Do that later. Right now, we need to give Lizard time and a buffer to take care of Beam. Got it?”

She glared at me, but I simply gripped her shoulders and spun her to face the other way.

“Go.” I barked.

Though she went off, I was sure she wasn’t pleased, but Lizard needed the time if Beam was to be okay. I took one final look at Lizard and the attentive way he took care of my partner and knew I could trust him. Just before I took off running, Lizard scooped my partner into his arms and carried him into the house.

Though I wanted to be by their sides, I knew the best way to keep them safe was to take care of the danger that would be lurking.

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It took Taz, me and Arturo and his men some time to round up what was left of the Frogs. According to Taz we'd killed all of them except Sheriff and Koala. We herded them into the front yard, tied them up like pigs being led to the slaughter and dropped them in the dirt.

We had some of Arturo's men looking over them and I hurried back inside to kneel by Beam's side.

"Arturo has his doctor inbound." Lizard explained. "But I found some pain meds here that should hold out until the doctor gets here in about half an hour. From what I can see the bullet passed through his shoulder. Thankfully, he'll sleep for now."

I nodded then sat on the side of the bed to push some hair from Beam's forehead.

"You have to be okay." I told him. "I can't lose another partner, you got that?"

I didn't expect an answer.

Sighing, I pulled the sheets up to his shoulder and stood.

"Go check on your girl." Lizard told me. "I'll stay with Beam."

Nodding, I exited the house again to find Taz sitting on the front step, watching the two men we'd captured.

I sat beside her.

“How’s Beam?” Her voice was raspy.

“Bullet passed in and out.” I explained. “He’s sleeping now—waiting for the doctor.”

“That’s good.”

Silence.

“Taz?”

“Mm?”

“What are you going to do with these two?” I asked.

In that moment, some of Arturo’s men went through the front yard with body bags over their shoulders and disappeared out the front gate.

“I don’t know.” She replied. “What I want to do to Sheriff is strip him naked and drop him off in the Outback so he can have his own version of the fucking hunger games. Koala—I want to double tap him to the chest and call it a day.”

“But you’re not going to do that.”

“The night is still young.” She growled.

Silence.

“Nothing I do to them short of death will make them leave me alone.” She murmured. “I don’t want anymore blood on my hands, Storm. But I’m in the position where I don’t think I have a choice.”

“Sure, you do.”

“Then tell me what to do.”

When she looked at me, her eyes were teary and sad, and it broke me.

Caressing her cheek, I leaned in and kissed her forehead.

“I don’t know what to do with Darby either.” She sighed.

“Darby is taken care of—Tex says there is a warrant out for his arrest.” I told him.

“Does that make the weight lighter.”

She nodded.

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“These two, we lock away and make the decision later.” I gently tapped her nose with a finger. “Once the doctor comes and check on Beam, I’ll take you guys home.”

“Me too?” Taz rested her head on my shoulder. “Take me home, Storm. Please?”

“I promise, baby.”

After hugging her for a moment, she rose and walked down to where Sheriff was. She used a foot to roll him over then hunched down by his head.

“All I wanted to do was work.” Her voice was low. “And after you and your lapdogs tried to kill me once, I walked away. I went to an entirely different country. Yet here you come. I want you dead. But I’m trying so hard to be a better person, to deserve the good I found. But I know you and this idiot over here will never stop.”

“I’ll kill you.” Sheriff barked. “No matter how long it takes. And when you’re dead, I’ll leave your body out for the critters to get it.”

Taz’s body language changed as she straightened her body to its full height. She pulled her gun from her holster and fired two shots at him.

One caught Sheriff in the chest.

The other splattered his brain matter in the dust.

“How about you, Koala?” Taz asked.

“Taz!” I called.

“No.” She frowned. “Enough is enough! I’m tired of running. I’m tired of being scared. I’m tired of not being able to focus on you and the happiness I know you can bring me. And if he comes for me again, I’ll kill him. The thing is, why wait?”

She aimed the weapon toward Koala’s head.

The man instantly started crying.

I hurried down and wrapped my arms around her from behind.

“Come on, baby.” I pleaded with her. “If he comes for you again, I’ll kill him myself.”

“Then what do I do with him?”

“We take him to the desert and leave him there.” I told her. “Show him the same curtesy, he showed you.”

Taz turned and buried her face into my neck. I managed to take the gun from her hand, ejected the cartridge and backed away from Koala, taking her with me.

“You can’t do this to me.” Koala called. “I don’t deserve this.”

“No?” I snapped, releasing Taz and stalking over to where he was in the dirt. “No? You tried to kill her! Not once—and even after she walked away, trying to find new, you came after her. So now, you face the consequences.”

“This isn’t about you.” Koala pointed out.

I growled and hunched down by his head. I shoved him over and grabbed him by the front of shirt.

“Listen very carefully.” I spat. “Jo West is mine. And so far, I’ve just been here as backup for her. But you don’t get to deal with her anymore. If you survive the outback, and stay away from her, we’ll leave you be. But you come for her again, and I will blow up your world and fuck the consequences. We clear?”

Koala didn’t answer but I dropped him, stepped over his body and took Taz’s hand.

“Lock him up.” I ordered a couple of Arturo’s men.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Storm

Before leaving Thailand, my team had me benched. They hadn’t even pretended they didn’t have a problem with me. They didn’t even try hiding it.

They claimed it was because my head hadn’t been in the game. A large part of me agreed with them. When they moved me from the elite team to investigations, I said nothing. I faced my unofficial demotion with my head up.

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The more I thought about it, the more I realized I would never get a fair shake with my name. My father had rubbed so many people the wrong way, they didn't trust me.

I knew if it came down to it, these men wouldn't have my back.

If it came down to it, I would be Taz, left naked and alone in the elements to die.

Hell, I was sure if they could get away with it, they'd kill me themselves.

After returning from Australia with Taz on my arm, I hit the ground running. Though they were giving me a few days off to get my body back used to the Thai weather and time zone, I asked to meet with my captain.

That meeting was a little later—after I faced one of the demons that had been chasing me since that day, years before, when I found out the kind of man my father was.

I stood in the massive ballroom of my father's house. It was mine now—after he ran off with people's money, there was a lot of court proceedings, selling off his assets to pay back the people he'd ripped off. While I released all the artwork he had, I held onto the house.

I wasn't sure why.

“My father liked beautiful things.” I managed after coughing. “Cars, women, art. While digging through his things I lost count on how many women he'd taken to his bed even though he'd been married to my mother. The more I found out about him, the more I realized that if my mother hadn't died when she did—she would have

killed him.”

“Why do you say that?”

Taz’s voice was soft and comforting from behind me.

“Everything my father did was wrong in every sense of the word.” I replied. “My mother was a strong woman—but at some point—”

“Enough would have been enough.”

“Mm.”

“This place obviously holds some darkness for you. The kind of darkness that hurts you.” Taz pressed a gentle palm to my back. “I guess what I’m trying to ask is, why keep it?”

“Um.” I blinked, trying to register her question. “I thought I could change the memories. Exorcize the demons by raising my family here. I thought once I got married, my wife would like a big house with an ocean view.”

“I don’t require a big house with an ocean view.”

Taz walked away from me to stare out the window on the other side.

“And our kids are not growing up here.” She added.

I laughed softly.

“What?” She wanted to know.

Shaking my head, I walked to her and pulled her into my arms.

“Our kids.” I answered.

Taz turned in my arms to look up into my face.

“You don’t want kids?” She asked.

“All of them.” I replied.

She kissed my chin.

We continued through the house until we arrived in the room my parents had used for their master. It was twice the size of any of the other rooms in the house. I had chosen the smallest room for my own—it overlooked the water and a rock outcropping that resembled a drinking elephant.

Above the space where the bed used to be, sat a framed painting. It bright colours and beautiful—if you didn’t know precisely what it was. For me, the beauty vanished when I found out.

Taz gasped. “It’s beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s fake.”

“What?” She stepped closer. “How?”

“The Return of the Prodigal Son.” I told her, moving beside her. “Out of all the paintings that were in this house, that belonged to my father, this one was the only fake. He would buy the real deals and swap them out.”

“Give the buyer the fake and keep the real.”

I nodded.

“I don’t know why this one was so special to him.” I told her. “Or why he kept it. I used to find such beauty in it—the sadness of the story. But after it was proven to be a forgery—”

I sighed and walked away.

“Anurak?”

I turned to face her. “You will have to let this go.”

“How can I? He’s still out there.”

“And no doubt living his life with the millions he’s stolen from the people here.” She pointed. “Why should you have to carry that burden? Those are his demons.”

“How?”

“You have a Tex now.” She grinned beautifully at me.

“I can’t ask him to do that, Taz.”

“Sure, you can.” She stepped forward to press her perfect breasts against my chest.

“He said it himself. You’re a part of this very elite family now. We have your back. We are slayers of demons.”

I smiled and kissed her head.

“We can decide what to do with this place later.” Taz kissed me. “Drop me home then meet with your captain.”

But I tarried—lingering in her arms and stealing her kisses until it was time to go. Once that moment came, I dropped her home.

“I’ll pack you a bag and you meet me at the vacation home.” Taz leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Deal?”

“Mm.” I moaned.

I watched her walk through the gates then turned toward one of the hardest conversations I would ever need to have.

“You don’t look any worse for wear.” The captain motioned to one of the chairs.

“Everything went well?”

I nodded. “Had a few hiccups, but we’re back,P.”

“Good.” He told me.

I could tell he had questions but since Tex had stressed the wholeclassifiedthing quite heavily, that must have stopped him.

“You wanted to speak with me?” He asked, falling into his chair.

“I want off the Arintaraj 26.”

“You haven’t thought this through,Nong.” Captain leaned forward. “People would kill to get on. You did so with ease, hard work.”

I scoffed. “P,they don’t trust me. You know it. I know it. And deep down you knew I wouldn’t be going back—you handed me a partner.”

“The partner was temporary.” Captain pointed out. “You were to show him the ropes until—”

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“P,could you show me some respect of not treating me like I’m stupid?” I sighed. “I see now what a team is supposed to be like. My team is supposed to have my back.I’m supposed to dive into situations knowing I don’t have to look back to see who’s aiming for me.”

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“And it has nothing to do with anything I did wrong.” I shook my head. “I can’t work with that fear.”

“I don’t want you off that team.” Captain told me. “Not like this.”

“Then—”

I pulled the white envelop from my pocket and set it on his desk. Using both my index fingers, I eased the letter across to him.

“You’re resigning?” He asked, eyes wide.

“I’m not staying on that team.” I stressed. “I refuse to risk my life for people who wouldn’t do the same for me. I refuse to not go home to my woman because one of them hate me so much, they prefer to look the other way and let someone take me out.”

“They wouldn’t.”

“No,P?”

Captain sighed and after staring at me for a bit, he got up and walked over to his window. He dragged his fingers through his greying hair.

I gave me him time to his thoughts.

When the silence prolonged, I stood and unclipped my badge from where it usually sat on my belt. Gently, I sent it on the desk before pulling my gun. ejecting the cartridge and setting both it and the weapon beside the badge.

“Nong.” He called to me. “What would you do if not on the team?”

“I want to start my own team.” I told him. “I want to hand pick the members.”

“And you think other cops are going to want to leave their posts to work with you?”

“You’re assuming I meant a team here,P.”

I shifted so I was fully facing him.

“Khob khun—” I cleared my throat. “Thanks for everything,P. I know having me here wasn’t easy for you. And I could stay and fight, but I have a life I want to live, and I need to focus on that good thing.”

The captain nodded.

“What about, N’Beam?”

“I made him an offer.” I replied. “Then I gave him all the time in the world to make a decision.”

“You mean I’m going to be down two cops?”

“I don’t know, P.” I shrugged. “He’s yet to give an answer.”

Heading to the door, I shoved my fingers into my pockets, but stopped to look at him over a shoulder.

“You’re going to have to clean up this house, Captain.” I gave my thoughts. “Or you’re going to keep losing cops—good ones.”

Before he could speak, I offered him wai and dipped out the door.

I stopped at my desk to pick a medallion from my drawer. It belonged to my mother, something I usually kept with me all the time. When I went to Taz, I was in a rush and left it behind.

Everything else, I left and exited the station out into the dry heat of the early day.

Stopping to pick up some beer and wine, then made my way to the beach house I’d rented for us to exhale.

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We'd invited Beam but he wanted to do a few things and would return in a few days.

Though we protested, I was secretly happy to have her alone with me—completely alone with me for the first time.

When I pulled into the yard, I waited for the gates to close behind me, parked the cycle and carried the bags inside. Taz was lounging on the pool deck, I could see the top of her head on a chair.

I took some time to shower, change into a pair of trackpants then grabbed a couple cold beers.

Pausing, I stepped out onto the deck, the sound of the waves crashing into the shore as I made my way closer and closer.

I kissed the top of her head.

“Hello, wāan-jai.”

I pressed one of the cold bottles to her cheek.

Taz gasped but giggled.

“Close your eyes!” She called.

“What?” I asked, doing as she told me. “Why?”

“Just—give me a second.” Taz replied. “Give me those bottles.”

After she took them from my hands, I poked my hands out trying to reach for her. She giggled again which wasn’t at all like Taz.

This was a different side of her—a side that was so cute, I felt myself melting.

“Wāan-jai?” I asked.

“I love it when you call mesweetheart.” Taz admitted. “All—most.”

My heart was racing with excitement now. I couldn’t imagine what she had in mind, but I was ready.

Exhaling loudly, I waited.

“Khaa.” Taz’s voice was soft. “You can open your eyes.”

Blinking, I opened my eyes.

This was definitely a side of Jo “Taz” West I’d never seen before. I knew she had a nice body, but that black swimsuit, hugging every damn curve was amazing

Her thighs were perfectly shaped and tanned from the day we’d spent on a beach in Australia after we’d dealt with Koala and Darby.

“Spin for me.” My vice cracked.

She did and I slipped to my knees. Her perfect legs sloped down where I found her feet to be in a pair of simple silver heels.

“What are you doing to me?” I questioned.

“Don’t you like it?”

Taz looked at me over a shoulder.

“Don’t—come here.”

Turning, she moved to me, slowly—her hips swaying rhythmically because of the stilettos. As she stood in front of me, I lifted her palms to my shoulders, wrapped my arms around her and grabbed her ass.

“You smell so good.” I confessed.

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“I thought you deserved something good.” She told me. “I wanted to take your mind off the last few weeks and focus on me.”

“I will always focus on you.”

“That’s not what I meant, Storm.” She stepped around me to press her body intimately against my back. “I wanted to tell you something, but I didn’t know how to.”

Shifting backward to get her body even closer to me, I sighed.

“You can tell me anything.” I managed, her body and smell taking my control.”

“I don’t know if you still want this.” Taz walked around again to sit in front of me. “After what I did to Sheriff, the anger you’ve seen in me. I just want you to know I’d never hurt you like that—ever.”

I framed her cheeks and leaned in.

“I never thought you would.” I replied. “I know why that happened.”

“Storm I—”

Taz bowed her head.

“You’ve trusted me with your life, Taz.” I pointed out to her. “There isn’t much else—”

“I love you.”

I blinked.

“Wait—what?”

“Oh, God!” Taz buried her face in her palms. “This is a dumpster fire.”

Smiling, I took her arms and gently pulled her hands away from her face.

“Say it again.” I told her.

“Why?” Taz asked. “So, I can embarrass myself again? What was I—”

I kissed her.

“Storm!”

“Say it again.” I pleaded.

“But—”

Another kiss.

“Say it again, wãan-jai.”

She stopped, slid in close until she was pressing intimately against me. Holding my breath, I allowed her to lift my head until our eyes met.

“C`h?n r?k khu?, na.” Her voice trembled.

Hugging her tightly, I kissed the side of her head.

“I love you too.” I replied, still embracing her. “I’ve loved you for a very long time. I was only waiting for you to catch up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I didn’t want to scare you.” I admitted. “I’m younger than you. And you seemed hell-bent on not letting a man close to you.”

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“But you’re not just any man.” Taz told me. “You’re the man.”

Leaning back to look into her eyes, I kissed her as deeply as I could. After unhooking the back of her swimsuit, I reached for the towel lying over the arm of her chair and spread it behind her. Slowly, I laid her back against the deck and feasted my way down her body.

I wasn’t sure how else to show her that everything about her did some marvelous things to me. No other way of showing her how desperately I wanted her, how completely I loved her.

All I could do was please her with my lips, my teeth, my tongue—my entire soul.

Taz came for me while raking her nails down my back.

She came again as the first drops of rain fell from the sky, pattering against my skin and soaking through my hair.

But instead of running inside, I turned her face down against the deck and took her from behind.

“Anurak.” She panted. “Please, deeper.”

“It’s so sexy when you say please, Wāan-jai.” I grunted.

I drove into her—over and over—wanting to imprint myself to her. I wanted to make it, so her body didn’t remember any of her past lovers.

I wanted to ruin her, for any man to come after me.

Biting into my bottom lip, I pulled out of her and rolled her over in the rain. I watched the water fall on her skin only to take her again.

This time she took a handful of my hair and pulled me roughly down to her.

Helplessly, I pulled a wet nipple between my teeth, alternating between grazing it with my teeth and licking while listening to the purring sounds she made.

“I hope that sound is only for me.” I managed. “One more time, Jo—come for me.”

As it rained harder and lightning streaked across the sky, I closed my eyes, waiting for thunder.

The moment the rumble happened, she buried her face into my throat.

This time when she came, I couldn’t control it.

I closed my eyes and allowed her body to be the weakness I always tried to hide.

This woman had me—every part of me.

EPILOGUE

Taz

A year later

“Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!”

Both Storm and I turned at the cheer!

First, I flailed then shoved both fists in the air.

“Oi! Oi! Oi!” I replied.

Dragging my suitcase after me, I darted across the space, with people staring, and hugged Zoom tightly. Kaos was laughing but yelped as I dove into his arms.

“Hey, big fella!” I greeted him when I stepped back.

Storm caught up to us and after twirling Zoom around, he hugged Kaos before they helped us with our bags to get out of the airport.

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“Where’s our baby?” I asked.

“Home with uncle Trucker, uncle Bishop and cousin Lena.” Zoom replied while we climbed into the Ranger Rover.

“That kid has a lot of love.” Storm mused.

The weather was warm, but not as hot as Thailand, but I still talked Kaos into pulling over at a snack place so we could get something cold to drink. For food, we waited until we could get to their place since Zoom had cooked.

When we arrived, Storm and I showered together and changed before we went to meet little Elizabeth Forsythe. She was beautiful and I fell in love immediately.

When she reached up and stuck a finger up my nose, all I could do was giggle and kissed her forehead.

“She’s perfect.” I whispered.

When she began fussing, Storm stood behind me and reached both around me. As he gently tapped her bum, Elizabeth forgot her crying and gurgled happily.

“She’s beautiful.” He murmured in Thai.

I turned and placed her in his arms, watching the way he protected her neck and looked down into her tiny face.

“Hi there.” Storm whispered, rocking her gently. “I’m uncle Storm. You have so many other people who love you already. I hope you don’t mind one more.”

“Of course not.” Zoom brought over a bottle and handed it to Storm.

“Um—” He glanced up at her. “Are you sure I’m the best person to feed her?”

“Why wouldn’t you be?” Zoom asked. “Here, let me show you.”

And that was it.

The moment little Elizabeth started drinking, I knew she had Storm. The peace and love to wash over his face did something to me, my entire being.

There was something so beautiful watching a man fall in love with a baby that called to every maternal part of me.

We stuck around, taking turns rocking Elizabeth, burping her then changing her. When we finally peeled ourselves away, it was to have something to eat.

“Aunty Taz! Uncle Storm!” Lena’s happy voice rang through the living room.

I grinned when she hurried over to Storm first for her hug then to me. Bishop, now Lena’s boyfriend, entered behind her, spinning the keys to her truck around a finger.

“How’s your father?” I asked her.

“He’s good—very good.” She beamed proudly. “I can tell he’s doing the work this time.”

I bumped fists with Bishop

The time ticked by and by the time night came and Kaos was rocking the baby to sleep in the house, I sat in the backyard with Zoom.

“How are you guys really doing?” Zoom asked after a sip from her drink.

I looked up at the sky, thinking about her question then nodded.

“We’re doing okay.” I replied. “Better than okay. He and Beam started their investigation business and it’s doing really well. The downside—women.”

“Staff?”

I nodded. “I know I don’t have to be jealous. But damn.”

“Every time a woman looks at Kaos cross-eyed I get that same feeling.” Zoom laughed. “I mean, I know he’s a good man. And I trust him—but it’s a knee-jerk reaction.”

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“Precisely.” I replied. “And the fact he’s younger than me—I find myself thinking of when he’s going to find someone younger—”

“Stop it.” Zoom growled. “You stop that right now. If Storm wanted a younger woman, he would have gotten a younger woman. He wants you.”

“I have a question.”

I glanced over my shoulders then leaned forward.

“Does it feel different being loved by Kaos?” I wanted to know.

“Different?”

Clearing my throat, I set my glass by my feet and inched closer.

“Yeah—like, other men has said they loved you before and it’s only now when you’re with Kaos you realize it feels different.”

Zoom nodded. “Yeah—now that I think about it. It does. When another boyfriend told me those words, it was like—this is what it’s supposed to be. We’ve been together for such and such time, he is supposed to give me these words. But when Kaos says them, it feels—it feels—”

“Right.” I completed her sentence. “Like meant to be.”

Zoom pointed at me. “That’s it! I haven’t been able to put it in words, but that’s

totally it. Is that how you feel when Storm says those words?”

I nodded.

“With him, I know he loves me.” I laughed, as tears burned my eyes. “How did I come to deserve that?”

Zoom hugged me tightly and the tears toppled down my cheeks. There was no way I could have controlled it.

Never did I thought I’d have this kind of friendship with anyone, much less a woman. And it was so strange how our worlds collided to begin with.

Footsteps behind me caught my attention and I sat up and quickly dried my eyes. We looked toward the glass doors to find Storm stepping out with a blanket in his hands.

“I’m going to check on the boyfriend and the little one.” Zoom winked at me.

As she stepped by Storm, she paused to kiss his cheek and pat his shoulder before leaving us alone.

Storm climbed in behind me in the cushioned chair and wrapped the blanket around my shoulders. I shifted forward.

Comfortable, I rested backward against his chest and kissed his cheek by craning my neck back.

“Storm?”

“Mm?”

“I’m happy.” I told him.

“You are?” He asked close to my ear. “Good—my work here is done.”

Storm nibbled against my earlobe and my body instantly perked up.

“Storm?”

“Mm?”

“Do you want kids?”

He lifted his head and paused for a moment. Finally, he had me stand, turned and sat on his lap, facing him. Once we had the blanket wrapped around me again, he drew me even closer into his chest and framed my cheeks with his warm palms.

“I thought we had this talk.” Storm spoke.

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“Kind of.” I sighed. “Let’s have it again. Kids?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t think of the answer.” I goaded him.

“Are you pregnant?”

“Maybe?”

“Don’t play with me, woman.” Storm quirked a brow.

“No.” I hung my head.

“Oh—well, my answer hasn’t changed.” Storm replied.

“Do you know when you’ll be ready?”

He smiled, his beautiful lips curling up at the corner.

Storm pressed a large palm to my ass and pressed. I was now intimately against him.

Licking my lips, I locked my eyes with his.

“We can start right now.” Storm kissed my neck.

“We’re not home.” I sighed even as I allowed my head to fall back, giving his lips

and tongue access to my throat. “We have to behave.”

“Sweetheart, I can be very discreet.” He nibbled on my pulse. “You’re the screamer.”

Catching myself, I smacked his shoulder.

Storm laughed.

“Seriously.” He exhaled.

“Yes. I know I’m a little older than when most women would think of having children, and I’d given up on that—but I want to have your children.”

Storm smiled. “I tell you what—when we get home, we’ll visit a doctor and make sure my soldiers are strong enough and your body is ready. Once we have the go ahead, we’ll start preparing.”

My cheeks flushed but the happiness his words caused me to wrap my arms tightly around his shoulders.

“Storm?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Would you mind if we practiced until then?”

He laughed, tapping my ass playfully.

“Why don’t I take you to the bedroom and I show you how much I mind?”

My nipples hardened and poked at the material of my top. I wrapped the blanket

around me to hide them as he helped me to my feet and took my hand.

Thankfully, the house was silent except for the sound of a television coming from Lena's room. I assumed Bishop was still there.

Allowing Storm to lead me to the guestroom we were using, I locked the door behind us and took his body hard and rough against it. It was almost as if I didn't know when we'd both gotten naked.

And honestly, I didn't care.

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All that made me happy was having his sexy bare against mine, my fingers sliding over his muscles, feeling his strength in each touch.

The thought of him made me hotter, forcing me to hold my breath to keep from coming so quickly.

“This won’t be the last time.” Storm told me.

It was as if he could read my mind through the connection of our bodies.

I melted.

Smiling, I whispered his name as he took my body in ways I was still getting used to. Each time the pleasure grew too much, I clamped a hand over my mouth and pressed my forehead to the wood. Arching my back, I stock the lower half of my body out in world-less permission and came for him as a reward.

“I love you.” He growled against my ear. “I love you so much.”

By the time we finally hit the bed, my body was water.

But I was greedy for his touch, the feel, taste and smell of his body.

I gave Anurak Kasemchai all of me and openly accepted his love and every part of him.

“Some would say.” I panted. “That I don’t deserve you.”

“We don’t care.”

“I know.” I kissed him tenderly. “But they’d still say it.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That I wish you were my first.” I admitted, caressing his cheeks with my thumbs.

“But know that you’re my last—you’re my all.”

“Say the words, Wāan-jai.”

For a silent forever, I stared into his eyes. I didn’t want to interrupt the truth and love I saw there, shimmering through them like waves.

“I love you, Anurak.”

He licked his lips and smiled, tears turning his eyes into an ocean.

“I love you too, Jo.” His voice cracked.

He pulled out only to drive back into me.

I gasped.

“I love you too.” Storm repeated. “Now, be a good girl and come for me.”

The End