



Wicked Suspicion

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Category: Romance, Thriller, Action

Description: In the treacherous world of covert operations, Special Forces Sgt. Case “Lurch” Lundquist thrives on danger. Undercover as a gunrunner, he dances on the razor’s edge, avoiding rebel forces who hunt him relentlessly. But when his mission jeopardizes a woman’s life, he breaks the rules to protect her.

Nyx Templeton is no damsel in distress—usually. But this time, she’s out of her depth. She doesn’t trust the rugged mercenary who steps in, until she recognizes him from a picture she saw years earlier. He’s her brother’s best friend. She remains quiet, knowing one wrong word could cost him everything.

Case battles to stay focused, but Nyx is a distraction. When she boldly asks him to cash in her V-card, he can’t resist. It’s not just a yes—it’s a hell, yes!

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Chapter 1

Trujillo, Puerto Jardin

South America

Special Forces Sergeant Case “Lurch” Lundquist was hunting.

He could live with the rebels after his ass, but he wouldn’t allow them to target some innocent woman who had the misfortune of eating lunch at his table yesterday. Every other seat was taken, and his glower didn’t scare her off. Bad luck for her that one of the assholes had seen her with him.

Maybe he was reading too much into it. Maybe they wouldn’t go after her. Maybe, but he wasn’t betting her safety on it.

Case tried to put thoughts of her aside. He couldn’t do anything about his attraction, not while he was working. One day. That’s all he was allowing himself. He’d find a rebel, one not in a group, and ask a few questions.

Easier said than done.

Trujillo was the largest city in the southern half of Puerto Jardin, and it sprawled. It was challenging to locate anyone, especially if they didn’t want to be found.

His team had rescued him from a hut in the rainforest, but he didn’t see any point in driving out and hiking to the area. The insurgents would have bugged out ASAP after

the raid. Then there was Captain Nguyen. The Big Dog would want to know what the hell Case thought he was doing. He didn't want to explain. As soon as he mentioned the brunette, the lecture would begin.

Maybe he needed one.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. Long, dark hair in a sassy ponytail, velvet brown eyes snapping with intelligence, nearly flawless features, and a body that inspired fantasies. But sexy as she was, it was her no-bullshit personality that made her damn near unforgettable. Sparring with her had been the most fun he'd had in longer than he could remember.

Realizing he'd drifted to a stop, Case shook his head again and resumed moving. He was stalking the area near El Taller, the mercenary hangout, and it was a sketchy part of town. It became riskier if someone—him, for instance—didn't pay attention.

The streets consisted of cracked asphalt broken up by sections of packed-down dirt. A three-story apartment building loomed ahead, the side sheared off and its remnants still strewn across the half-empty lot. People lived in the remaining half, even though it was in danger of collapse. There were worse housing situations than this in the country.

Puerto Jardin was a mess. It was home not just to an international arms dealer, but to drug lords, illegal gold miners, illegal logging, and a bunch of other things he could put the word illegal in front of.

Then there was the civil war. For the past ten years, it had been an on-again/off-again affair, drawing mercenaries from around the world. Lately, it had been on again with most of the battles taking place in the country's north. Trujillo was far away from the fighting, but it was where out-of-work mercs waited for jobs. It was where the rebel splinter group was hanging out.

The men he wanted to locate.

Case drew to a halt across the street from El Taller. The merc bar was in sad shape. The white paint on the brick exterior was flaked, the tin roof showed visible rust, and someone had spelled out the name of the bar using pallet slats nailed to the front. The E had come partially unmoored and hung crookedly. There were maybe two dozen mercenaries loitering in front.

The bar was one of his least favorite places and Case usually avoided it. He'd like to stay away now, too, but he needed to at least make a walk-through. There could be rebels inside.

The interior was dimly lit, especially after the bright sunlight outside, and Case allowed his eyes to adjust. Cigarette smoke hung like a hazy cloud over the packed room, the few small ceiling fans unable to clear it.

Threading his way through the throng, Case headed for the bar to buy a beer he had no intention of drinking. As he waited in line, he looked around. There were too many bodies to see much except a sea of camo. He knew the layout of the bar well and had a plan in mind for how to search by the time he paid for his beer.

He finished three-quarters of his grid without seeing any rebels, but as he reached the final quadrant, Case spotted one of his teammates sitting at a corner table. The mercenaries gave Oziah "Wizard" West a wide berth. The man looked like trouble.

It didn't appear as if he'd combed his long, dark hair today, his beard needed a trim, and his entire aura emitted fuck-off vibes. His attitude was one reason Oz had been assigned to work undercover for the local drug lord. Case pretended not to know him, but Oz signaled him to come over.

"Yeah?" Case asked when he reached the table.

Oz gestured toward the open seat across from him. Reluctantly, Case sat, putting his beer bottle down in front of him.

“What are you doing here, dude?” Oz asked.

Shrugging with nonchalance he didn’t feel, Case said, “Looking for friends. Why are you camped out at El Taller?”

Raising his beer bottle, Oz took a swig before he straightened, glanced around, and said quietly, “I have a check-in with Ski and Baggs.”

Oz didn’t have as many meetups as some of the team—himself, for instance—but he had to make occasional updates. “Why’d you want me to come over?”

“Because after I finished with that, I was going to look for you.”

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“Vargas sent you to find me.” Vargas was the drug lord Oz was supposedly working for.

“Got it in one.”

Case reached for his beer and took a long swig. Fuck. The last thing he needed was Vargas on top of everything else he was trying to handle. The man was smart, and he was deadly, which meant Case needed to be on his A-game when he interacted with him. At the moment, he was too distracted by a brunette fireball and doing what he could to keep her safe.

“Señor Vargas usually sends his more senior employees when he wants to bring me in for a meeting.” Senior as in men who wore suits to do their dirty work instead of camouflage and combat boots. Case had gone for a ride in Vargas’s limo with a couple of those dudes not that long ago.

“I’m more intimidating.”

Case said nothing, but he thought the men in the dark suits were more threatening. There was something about looking professional while issuing warnings that made it more visceral.

Oz’s attention drifted. “Ski and Baggs are here.”

Following his teammate’s gaze, Case spotted the two men inside the doorway. They were both over six feet tall with brown hair and dressed in the usual merc attire. That’s where the similarities ended. Ski’s hair was nearly black, and it was getting

long. Baggs was the new medic and had joined the team shortly before they'd inserted in Puerto Jardin. His hair was a lighter shade of brown, and while it was shaggy, he didn't look as disreputable as Ski did.

Pienkowski spotted them and his brows went up. After a brief exchange with Baggs, the medic went to the bar and Ski headed for the table.

"This is a surprise," he said as he took a seat, shifting the chair until most of his back faced the wall. "What are you doing here, Lurch?"

With a shrug, Case said, "I was looking for someone and ran into the Wizard instead."

"I didn't think you two were supposed to know each other."

"I called him over," Oz said. "Vargas ordered me to give him a message, and this saved me from having to hunt all over Trujillo."

Ski nodded. "The rebels still after you?"

Reaching for his beer bottle, Case said, "It's hard to say."

"Bullshit. Try again."

He took a sip and spent a few seconds deciding how to answer. Case hated liars. He tried not to lie to his teammates, but anything he said would be reported back to the captain. This might need to be one of those times where he omitted some intel.

Finally, he lowered the beer and said, "It is hard to say because I've been avoiding them." Until today, but Ski—and the Big Dog—didn't need that information. "Nothing's changed that I'm aware of, so assume they remain interested."

Baggs arrived at the table with two beers, set one in front of Ski, and took the seat on Case's side of the table. He shifted the chair, too, protecting his back. "We have a lot of unhappy mercs," the medic said. "They're bitching about their contracts expiring and no sign they'll be renewed."

"Which side? Do you know?" Case asked.

"Sounded like the government."

"That's interesting," Oz said conversationally. "I wonder if the war is taking another time out?"

Case shook his head. "I haven't heard anything to suggest that. It's more likely their off-the-books slush fund is running low."

It wasn't good news. The Puerto Jardinese government didn't scale down. Instead, they either put the screws to their own citizens, put the screws to the drug lords and other illicit operators, or stole something they could sell for big bucks. The first two options destabilized an already shaky status quo but were the most likely to occur.

"Fuck," Oz muttered. "That's all I need is to be in the middle of a war between Vargas and the government."

"Your boss wouldn't pay up?" Ski asked.

Oz scowled. "I doubt it. When he took over the cartel, he was completely ruthless. I don't think he'll meekly fall in line with any extortion effort from the capital."

They were all quiet for a moment. Case assumed everyone was envisioning the hellscape Trujillo would become if that occurred. Things had been bad enough for a few months last year, and that had been gang-on-gang warfare. Gang-on-government

had the potential to be bloodier.

“Cheer up,” Ski said. “There are still treasures in the national museum the government can steal and sell. That’s the safer path to an influx of cash.” He changed the subject. “Lurch, you have anything to report on the arms front?”

“No change. A lot of spinning my wheels.”

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Ski grunted and turned his attention to Oz. “What about you, Wiz?”

“No change on my end, either. The only new wrinkle is my message for Lurch.”

Case put down the beer bottle he’d been lifting to his lips. “What’s the message?”

Oz frowned. “Señor Vargas requests the honor of your presence—those were the words he used, the honor of your presence—on Saturday at the ruins near San Isidro. Two p.m.”

Case stiffened. “Where Vargas’s boss was assassinated last year.”

“Same,” Oz confirmed. “You’re supposed to come alone.”

“That can’t happen,” Ski immediately said. “BD will want some of the team there to back him up.”

“No one will be able to get close enough to be any help,” Oz said, leaning forward in his seat. “Arrangements have already been made to patrol the area, and if someone gets picked up, Lurch will pay for it.”

“Even if someone just gets spotted, I’ll pay for it,” Case said. “It’s better if I go alone.”

Ski shook his head, the motion emphatic. “It could be a setup to murder you. You know that, right?”

“Odds are against it. He wants me to acquire the precision-guided rifles. He’s not going to kill me and lose a potential source for the weapon.”

“You already told him you can’t get them,” Ski said. “You’re at risk.”

“I’m always at risk. It comes with the job.”

Ski’s use of profanity was creative.

Case waited until he finished. “Vargas is applying pressure to Torres to work with me. He’s the only inroad I’ve got to the boss. We can’t piss him off.”

“The Big Dog isn’t going to be happy.”

“Lucky for me, I don’t have to tell him,” Case said as he stood. “You do. Let BD know I’ll be at the meeting and I’ll check-in with someone when I return to Trujillo.”

He walked toward the exit, but Ski stopped him. “Lurch?”

Case looked over his shoulder but didn’t turn.

“Don’t get dead. Understood?”

Waving to show he heard, Case headed for the door.

Chapter 2

Nyx Templeton stared down at the paper in front of her and then back at her teammates. Ellis Vandenhoff was a wunderkind who’d gotten a doctorate in art history before turning twenty-four, but despite how book smart she was, she’d been sheltered and lacked street smarts. She even looked waifish with her pale blonde hair

and big blue eyes.

Francesca Lewis had long auburn hair and deep blue eyes. The team leader and an archivist, she was the one pulling together the data that Nyx and Ellis would act on. It was obvious that Frankie believed in this so-called decoded message as much as Ellis did.

Glancing back down, Nyx reread the words scrawled in Frankie's handwriting: Hidden high. Hidden low. Secrets deep. Ruins. San Isidro.

Random words that made a kind of sense. That's all this was. It seemed it was up to her to bring the reality check. But both women looked so excited. Nyx walked to the kitchenette, pulled a can of soda from the fridge, and sipped at it to buy herself time.

With a quiet sigh, she returned to the table.

"Well?" Ellis demanded as soon as Nyx sat down.

She hated to be the killjoy, but someone needed to be the voice of reason. "I think that while this is an interesting theory, this is only a collection of words that make sense by chance, not design."

"I believe there's a code in Mother Bonifacia Emilia's diary," Frankie said, and there was no mistaking her conviction.

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“There might be,” Nyx said slowly, “but I don’t think this is the solution.”

Ellis’s smile crashed, but Frankie merely appeared curious. “Why do you think that?”

“Because archaeologists worked those ruins for years,” Nyx said, sliding the paper back to Frankie. “If the treasure was hidden there, they would have discovered something.”

“The ruins were overgrown,” Frankie said. “The archaeological team could only explore a small portion of them before they were forced to quit.”

“The ruins were overgrown when the captain who stole the Treasure of Trujillo was looking for a place to hide it. Simply reaching the area in the 1820s would have been difficult for him and do you believe he’d want to risk getting bit or stung by something living in the vegetation? I wouldn’t. Not when there were easier places to hide it.”

“Would those places have been as effective?” Ellis asked.

“Probably,” Nyx said quietly. “And easier for the thieves to access when they wanted to recover it. Think about it. If they had to make a quick escape, how would they travel to the ruins, recover the treasure, and still get out of the country? It’s a ninety-minute-plus drive today with modern roads and cars. Back then?” She shrugged and took another sip of her soda.

“Why don’t we call Archer?” Frankie suggested.

Sure, bring their boss into it. Nyx was a contractor, and she couldn't rock the boat too hard. "Okay," she agreed.

Frankie took out her new cell phone, tapped the screen, and placed it on the table. Nyx half-expected that one day Archer would answer the phone with hello, angels, but their boss wasn't that much fun. "What can I do for you, Francesca?" he asked when he came on the line.

"Nyx and Ellis are here, too," Frankie said.

"What's necessitated a conference call?"

Frankie explained why she believed it was worth checking out the ruins and summarized Nyx's position on why it wasn't a worthwhile use of time. "Did I miss anything?" Frankie asked, looking across the table to meet her gaze.

"No," Nyx said, "I think you fairly represented my reservations."

"What do you think, Archer?" Frankie asked.

There was a long moment of silence as Archer considered the question. "I believe," he said slowly, "that Nyx is correct and there won't be anything to find there."

"Would it hurt for us to look? Maybe we'll get lucky," Ellis said.

"Yes," Frankie said with a nod. "One of us might spot something for Nyx to examine more closely."

Nyx stiffened. Ellis would be a liability at the ruins, and even Frankie would likely be a hindrance. She liked Frankie and respected her abilities, but her idea of roughing it was drinking warm bottled water. Babysitting her two teammates while looking for a

needle in a haystack was too much.

“If you think I should go,” Nyx said, “it would be better if I went alone. The terrain is too rough for Ellis or Frankie.”

Both women immediately disagreed.

“Frankie, Ellis, there’s too much to be done in Trujillo for you to leave.” Archer’s voice brought silence. “However, it wouldn’t hurt for Nyx to take a reconnaissance trip. If she sees something worth investigating further, we’ll regroup then.”

Archer was going to send her out on the off chance there was something there and that she could identify it without a lidar scan. She liked ruins. She’d taken a side trip out to visit some near Rosario as a tourist activity, but the authorities maintained those as a heritage site. She hadn’t needed to slog through the rainforest to look at them. It would be a different story at the Huarona ruins.

She was tough. Her dad and brother had made sure she could take care of herself in circumstances far beyond what most families considered normal. It didn’t matter. Nyx still didn’t want to deal with the critters that inhabited the rainforest.

“Maybe my time would be better spent helping Frankie and Ellis research,” Nyx said.

Archer immediately nipped that attempt in the bud. “Drive out tomorrow, spend the night at the inn in San Isidro, and then examine the ruins on Saturday. If you find something?—”

“I won’t.”

Archer continued without pause, “—call me and we’ll discuss.”

“And when I find nothing?”

There was amusement in Archer’s voice as he said, “Then spend another night at the inn and return early the following day. I don’t want you driving at night through the rainforest, am I clear?”

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“Clear,” Nyx said glumly.

“I still think that Ellis and I should go with Nyx,” Frankie said.

“No.” Archer’s one word in that tone meant the discussion was finished. “Francesca,” he said, “I know you mean well, but you and Ellis will distract Nyx from her job.”

“We can help Nyx with her job,” Ellis said.

Nyx braced herself, afraid Archer would say something about her teammates not being up to hiking through the rainforest, but he was smarter than that.

“Do you believe Nyx is incapable of doing her assignment without your assistance?” As far as manipulation went, it wasn’t particularly subtle, but it worked on Ellis.

“I’m sorry, Nyx,” the blonde said. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“It’s okay. None taken.”

“Is everything settled?” Archer asked. When he had acknowledgments from the three of them, he ended the call.

There was a long moment of silence before Nyx said, “I better find somewhere that rents four-wheel-drive vehicles. I don’t know how bad the roads will be once I’m off the paved highway.”

“Nyx,” Frankie said, “I don’t think you should make this trip alone no matter what

Archer said.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said with more confidence than she felt. “The archaeologists who worked there created paths and cut back the undergrowth. It won’t be that bad.”

Frankie arched one perfect brow. “Do you seriously expect me to believe you’re going to stroll to the ruins? After you argued with Archer that it was too strenuous for us?”

Nyx stiffened. She hated—hated—being accused of lying. She hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true.

“I didn’t say it would be a stroll. I said it wouldn’t be that bad.” She heard the defensiveness in her voice and suppressed a wince. Trying for a more level tone, she added, “That bad for me. I do hikes like this for fun.”

“You have a strange idea of a good time.” Frankie said, shaking her head. “You know this country is in disarray.”

Nyx nodded. Puerto Jardin was one crisis after another, but the civil war was hundreds of miles away from San Isidro and the ruins. Of course, there were still illegal mining and logging operations, not to mention drug lords, arms dealers, and mercenaries. The image of a blond man with blue eyes flashed in her memory. She’d shared a table with him for maybe twenty minutes yesterday. He should be easy to put out of her mind.

Only he wasn’t.

She remembered him at odd moments, and the urge to head back to the market and see if she could run into him again was strong. If Frankie hadn’t begun her discussion about secret codes, Nyx might have given in to the temptation. Something about him

got to her, and she didn't like it.

Frankie and Ellis were watching her and Nyx brought her mind back to the present. "It's a ninety-minute drive, maybe a little longer. I won't even need to stop for gas. It'll be fine."

Frankie nodded but continued to look unsure. "Call me when you arrive. Call me when you leave for the ruins. Call me when you return from the ruins. Call me before you leave to drive back to?—"

Belatedly, Nyx realized Frankie hadn't accused her of lying. She was worried. With a laugh, Nyx said, "I'll call, Frankie. I'll call you so much, I'll drive you crazy. Relax, okay?"

She headed out of the room. Her smile faded as soon as she closed the door to her bedroom behind her. San Isidro. From what she'd heard of the town, it was safe enough, but it was still Puerto Jardin.

Her friends would laugh over the research she'd done on the country, especially the area around Trujillo, but Nyx didn't believe in taking chances. She wanted to know what she'd be walking into.

As it stood, if either her dad or her brother discovered she'd traveled here, they'd lose their shit. And if they found out she'd eaten lunch with a merc...

Nyx felt her body heat and shook her head. Damn, maybe traveling to San Isidro wasn't a bad thing. At least it would keep her from doing something stupid, like searching for tall, blond, and sexy.

Chapter 3

The road closest to the ruins was so rutted that Case needed to hold the steering wheel with both hands. He'd have to park and hike in the rest of the way, but he was looking forward to that. At least when on foot, he wouldn't worry about his spleen being jolted out of his body. It wouldn't be much longer. The place where he planned to leave the SUV was right around the next curve.

Case eased up on the accelerator. There was a Jeep already parked there. That was unexpected. Vargas's hacienda was on the other side of the ruins. This wasn't a road he'd anticipated any of the drug lord's men would use. It was why he'd chosen it.

Pulling to a stop behind the other vehicle, Case shut off the engine and got out. A quick walk around told him the Jeep was a rental, but that was all he learned. He tried the doors.

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Locked.

He rested his hand on the hood. Cold.

The four-wheel drive had been parked here for a while. Vargas's men were watching this side of the pyramid and drove here rather than walk across the clearing, it was the only thing that made sense. He would have had his men in position hours before Case arrived.

But why a rental?

Case messaged Ski and Baggs. They wouldn't be near the ruins, but the captain had insisted someone be in the vicinity. As if he'd have a chance to send a mayday if things went to hell. Maybe they'd be close enough to hear gunfire. With a shrug, he headed toward the rendezvous point. None of Vargas's lieutenants would appreciate tardiness.

The air was heavy with humidity and the ground was thick with vegetation. It made walking difficult, but there was supposed to be a path.

It was another fifty yards or so before he found the track. There were signs someone had walked through here recently, but after spotting the Jeep, that wasn't a surprise. He moved as fast as possible until he neared the ruins.

He felt eyes on him.

Case slowed his pace, walking more cautiously and scanning the area. A man stepped

onto the path, blocking him. Two others emerged from the undergrowth and flanked him.

The first guy gestured with his weapon, and Case raised his hands over his head.

Quickly, efficiently, they searched him. They didn't miss a single weapon, or anything Case could use as a weapon, but then Vargas hired pros.

"I will escort you to the clearing," the leader said in Spanish.

It only took moments before they exited the trees. There wasn't much space clear of undergrowth. The rainforest was trying to reclaim the site and winning the battle.

The man left him in the center with an order to stay put. As if he was going anywhere. Not only did his two cohorts remain, standing menacingly on either side of him, but Case knew there were more men, concealed and waiting for him to make a wrong move.

Casually, as if he was merely curious, Case looked around the ruins. A large step pyramid to his left loomed over the small clearing. Trees and other vegetation nearly swallowed three sides. To his right was a low rock wall with carved figures decorating it. If all hell broke loose, it was the only cover he'd have. The odds of reaching it before taking a bullet were slim.

Case felt twitchy. Exposed. Surrounded. He sensed Vargas's men on every side. He eyed the stone wall again. No, he'd never make it if shooting broke out.

Low clouds gathered in the distance, suggesting it would rain soon, but for the moment, it was sunny. He wanted to be finished with this and back in his vehicle before the skies opened up.

“What are the chances we’ll be out of here before the rains come?” he asked in Spanish.

“That will be up to Señor Vargas,” the man on his left said. “He’ll arrive shortly.”

Adrenaline surged. Vargas was coming here in person. Not one of his lieutenants. This was a surprise, and it raised another question.

Why the fuck had Vargas set the meeting out here? The last time they’d talked in his office. Case was reasonably confident this wasn’t a plan to murder him. It was too elaborate, and he’d been given too much notice. It would be easy enough for someone to put a knife in his side in Trujillo.

He cooled his heels for about twenty minutes before Vargas made his appearance, coming from the direction of the stone wall. He was surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards. Case turned to face him, putting his back to the pyramid.

Julián Vargas was approaching fifty. His build was slender and wiry. He stood a few inches shorter than Case. His hair was shaggy, hitting his jawline, and wavy. There was a jagged scar on his face, so old it was a white line. His brown eyes had a coldness to them, a flatness.

“You’re punctual,” the drug lord said. “I like that.”

“I didn’t want to keep you waiting,” Case said, as if he’d known Vargas would be making a personal appearance. “Why are we meeting here and not in your office?”

“You don’t appreciate the beauty of the rainforest?”

Case shrugged. “It’s a curious choice, given what happened here last year.”

“Not so curious when one considers the message the location sends.” His facial expression never changed, but the man’s eyes became harder.

“That life is fragile, and it can end at any moment without warning.”

Vargas inclined his head. “Even violently, if a man should anger the wrong person.”

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“Understood,” Case said. The threat was loud and clear, but he didn’t believe it was the only reason they were at the ruins. He considered pushing, looked at the drug lord’s expression and thought better of it. His curiosity wasn’t worth angering the man. “What can I do for you, Señor Vargas?”

“I thought you had a pipeline to weapons. I thought you wanted to work with Señor Torres to make your fortune. Apparently, I thought wrong.”

“You aren’t wrong.”

He’d made it clear from the beginning of his association with Vargas that he’d only sell weapons to one man. Jorge Torres was an international arms dealer who had a stranglehold on the arms trade in South America, particularly in Puerto Jardin. Anyone who tried to nose in on his turf wound up dead.

Case and his team had been assigned to bring down Torres and end his arms dealing. Permanently. To put the plan in motion, he had to meet the man. That was proving to be a challenge.

“Then why does Señor Torres have no inventory?”

Case took a moment to think. This had to be about the precision-guided rifles, but he couldn’t leap to conclusions. “Señor Torres is a cautious man.”

“Explain,” the drug lord ordered.

“I met with one of his employees a few weeks ago. There’s been no word since then,

and none of his men want to talk to me.”

Vargas’s expression remained flat, but some of his intensity seemed to ease. “You’ve tried to contact him?”

“Dozens of times, Señor Vargas. Either his men aren’t passing my messages along, or Señor Torres is ignoring them.” Case shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe he decided he didn’t want to do business with me, and this is his answer.”

“No. Señor Torres wants the high-tech weapons,” Vargas said. “If there is any chance you can procure them, he’s not going to turn his back on it.”

“There’s almost no way I can get those weapons. As I told you the last time we talked, the US Army has been watching them like a hawk since they were recovered and returned.”

“You’ll get them,” Vargas said, an edge to his voice that made Case go hyperalert. “I want them and Torres cannot sell me what he does not have. You like money, and Señor Torres will pay a premium to acquire them. The man is simply being especially diligent after being betrayed by his second in command.”

Case nodded. Torres’s right-hand man had been stealing weapons from his boss and selling them for personal profit. From the intel reports, the arms dealer had gone from cautious to downright paranoid. He’d eliminated any employee whose loyalty was suspect and vetted anyone new to the nth degree.

“Señor Torres might leave me waiting for a while.”

Vargas’s expression darkened. “That’s unacceptable.”

“Señor Vargas,” Case said, careful to keep his tone conciliatory. “I can’t do more

than I currently am to expedite the relationship with Señor Torres. I've tried everything I can think of without success. You've personally contacted him, and still he's taking his time."

There was a pause before the drug lord asked, "With whom did you meet?"

"A Señor Hernandez."

"Hernandez." Vargas pursed his lips. "In his fifties? Much gray in his hair as well as his mustache and goatee?"

Case inclined his head. "And he wore an expensive suit. Designer."

"You'll hear from Señor Torres sooner rather than later," Vargas said with assurance. "Alejandro Hernandez is high up in the organization. If your initial meeting was at this level, it's merely a matter of time."

"The answer could be a refusal to work with me," he reminded the drug lord.

"It won't be." The man's attention wandered, his gaze focusing past Case's shoulder. Before he could turn to check out what was happening, Vargas met his eyes again. "I will call Señor Torres and remind him that I'm waiting. That others are waiting. That should speed things up."

Or infuriate him, but that was Vargas's problem. As long as Case didn't get caught in the middle of a pissing contest.

"No matter the profit, I might not be able to get my hands on the rifles you want," Case warned. "Supplies remain limited, and the Army hasn't issued the weapon to any of their troops yet."

Vargas's eyes narrowed. "I suggest you and your friends in the States think of a way to circumvent any issues. I want that rifle."

Case bet he did. The drug lord was at war with a rival, and reports said they were evenly matched. The precision-guided rifle would give Vargas the edge. If Oz was right, there was a skirmish with the government coming if President Cardozo decided to squeeze the drug lords and the other illegal enterprises that called Puerto Jardin home. Cardozo was savvy. It was how he'd stayed in power for so long. He might find another way to fund the mercenaries fighting in the civil war.

"I'll talk to my friends," Case said. If push came to shove, he could string Vargas along. The most important thing was getting to Torres, and if the drug lord could help?—

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A stirring among the entourage caught Case's attention. He looked past Vargas, watching them shift positions. Something was going on.

"Is there a problem?" Case asked, gesturing toward the men.

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll know in a few moments."

Vargas looked over Case's shoulder again. He turned to see what was going on behind him. Two of the drug lord's men had a tight grip on a woman wearing a tan LA Dodgers baseball cap, a long-sleeved olive shirt, and brown trail pants tucked into hiking boots. Smart rainforest attire. A third man walked behind them, carrying a small backpack, a phone, and a pistol. Confiscated from the woman?

They drew closer, and Case stiffened. What the fuck was she doing at the ruins?

The drug lord caught his slip. "Friend of yours?"

Vargas's men drew to a stop. Case glanced down at the brunette he'd shared his table with over lunch a couple of days ago. Her face was impassive. She should be scared. Didn't she realize she was in deep shit?

"More than a friend. She's my fiancée."

Chapter 4

Nyx took a long pull from her water bottle and looked around the ruins. Coming here alone was risky. More than risky. It was downright stupid. Her dad would rip her a

new one. She should have had at least one other person with her because the rainforest—any wilderness—was more dangerous without a buddy.

But what were her alternatives?

Bring Frankie and Ellis? Even using the pathway she'd been told about, the hike in from her Jeep had been rough. Nyx couldn't imagine either woman reaching the site without injuring themselves.

Hire some stranger? That was every bit as dangerous as coming alone. The Lost Treasure of Trujillo was estimated to be worth a billion dollars. She couldn't trust anyone she hired, especially if they discovered why she was here.

She'd left the inn at first light to get started before it became too hot, but it was only mid-morning and she'd already surveyed the exposed area as well as some of the less overgrown sections next to it. Without a lidar scan or a machete, there wasn't much more she could do. But she needed to be thorough or her teammates would insist on another trip.

Sliding the water back into the holder on the side of her backpack, Nyx considered her options. There was only one.

Climb the pyramid and get a view of the site from elevation.

Three sides were invisible, with the trees and other vegetation nearly swallowing the structure. The front side facing the clearing was accessible, but she couldn't be certain what erosion had done to the steps. Another risk, especially when she was here by herself. If she fell, there'd be no one to help her.

Nyx checked the sky. Not too cloudy yet, but it wouldn't stay that way. It might be the dry season, but it still rained nearly every day. She wanted to be off the pyramid

before the afternoon storm rolled in.

The top seemed impossibly high, and there was nothing to grab onto if she slipped. Hesitating, she took another look.

The pyramid had three small sections of steps with a wider platform added at strategic intervals for about one-third of the distance. Then she'd hit the big section of steps. From where she stood, they appeared steep. Instead of a capstone, the top was flat and had four long stone buildings set parallel to each other. There were probably birds or animals living there now, and even if she didn't go inside, Nyx might startle them.

She needed to reach the top to get the best view of the site.

An image of Ellis trying to scale the steps in trousers and low-heeled shoes made Nyx shudder. She couldn't—wouldn't—lie to her teammates and that meant she needed to get up there to keep them safe.

Dawdling didn't help. Nyx didn't want to be caught on top when the rains came—or on that steep section of steps. The stone would be slippery when it became wet. With a scowl, she walked to the base, decided the erosion wasn't bad enough to make the climb unsafe, and began to ascend.

By the time she was a third of the way up the last section, Nyx was glad she had a robust workout regimen. If she didn't, she'd never make it. Even with her program, she was breathing hard.

There were no railings, so she didn't pause to look around. She kept her focus on the steps in front of her, making sure her balance was steady before continuing.

The top of the pyramid was above the treetops in the area, and she had an incredible

view. Green, green, and more green as far as she could see. It didn't help her identify possible treasure burial sites because she couldn't see beneath the canopy, but the beauty made it worth the climb.

Reaching for her water bottle, she took a sip and studied her surroundings more carefully. Not quite all trees, after all. Off in the distance, Nyx saw a road and several paths leading into the ruins. Señor Alvarez, the innkeeper, had told her the people of San Isidro kept the one she'd used sort of clear of vegetation, so who maintained the other ones? And why?

Nyx was still sipping water when she spotted vehicles on the road. More than one. The traffic made her uneasy. She capped her water and stowed it. Her eyes never stopped sweeping the terrain.

That's why she spotted it. Motion on several of the paths she'd identified that led to the Huarona city. There was nothing else around here. They were coming to the site.

Her heart rate picked up. Señor Alvarez had warned her the ruins were close to the hacienda of a drug lord named Vargas. An assassination had taken place here a year ago.

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Was she jumping to conclusions? Maybe, but who else would send that many vehicles and an army of men to the ruins?

The steps were too steep to rush down, and if she moved at a safe speed, she'd be caught in the open when those men reached the city. That left her with no choice except to hide inside one of the buildings atop the pyramid.

They all had open doorways and windows, and from the pictures she'd studied when she'd researched the site, they were empty. There'd be nothing to conceal her. Her only chance of remaining unseen would be to crouch in a corner as far away from an opening as possible and stay very still.

The first building she checked contained a spider the size of a car—only a slight exaggeration—and she let it have the space. Her second choice held bones from a small animal. Hard pass. She checked where the men were on the paths. Time had run out.

Option number three was clear. Heart pounding, Nyx hunkered down in the corner and hoped they wouldn't stay long.

Hours later, her head rested on her knees and all she wanted was for everyone to leave.

The charley horse hit without warning. Nyx swallowed her gasp, but her foot kicked a stone when she straightened her legs. She went still, not even daring to rub her calf. It wasn't a surprise when a few minutes later a man appeared in the opening.

With one armed henchman on either side of her and the third pulling up the rear, they escorted her down the pyramid.

Her guards drew to a stop in front of the duo meeting in the center of the clearing. The man she assumed was the drug lord had dark, wavy hair, a crooked nose, suggesting it had been broken more than once, and a ragged scar on his right cheek. His eyes were as flat as a great white shark. Nyx barely suppressed a shudder.

The other? It was the mercenary she'd shared lunch with the other day.

"Friend of yours?"

"More than a friend. She's my fiancée," the merc said.

It took all her control not to gawk at him. An instant later, it dawned on her. He'd claimed her to keep her alive. Terror returned, hitting her like a tsunami. She tried to edge closer to the merc but was stopped. The decision was quick and easy. Nyx would back him up. How they'd pull it off remained a question. They didn't even know each other's names.

"I told you to come alone." The drug lord's voice was hard.

"I did come alone, Señor Vargas. My fiancée didn't like the order and must have arrived before me to get into position to provide backup." The merc looked down at her. "Do I have it right, Fireball?"

Nyx nodded. "One man against many didn't seem fair." Her voice sounded choked, but fear tightened her throat. "I didn't want anything to happen to you, hon."

"As if you'd be any help," Vargas said, dismissing her, and returned his attention to the mercenary. "You can't control your woman?"

Shrugging one shoulder, he said, “I’m not interested in women who can be controlled. I prefer fireballs.” The merc glanced at her again and winked.

It was meant to reassure her, but despite how relaxed he seemed, how confident, Nyx sensed his tension. They were in deep shit.

He didn’t have to protect her. He could have told Vargas the truth and not put himself at risk. Sure, she would take a bullet in the back of her skull, but that shouldn’t matter to a mercenary. She wanted to know why he’d stuck his neck out for her, but not right now. She needed to remain alert, ready to step into her role as fake fiancée when necessary.

“You allowed your woman to travel to Puerto Jardin while you’re attempting to become an arms supplier to Señor Torres? You expect me to believe that?”

Another one-shoulder shrug from the merc. “She didn’t know about the gunrunning when she decided to surprise me.”

“But she’s fine with you working as a mercenary?”

“She likes nice things. I like to give her nice things.”

Nyx pressed her lips tightly together. Not only was she stupid for coming to the ruins to protect him, she was a gold-digger, too.

“You don’t seem happy, Señorita...” Vargas paused, clearly waiting for her to supply her name.

“Templeton. Nyx Templeton.” There was no point in lying. All they needed to do was search the Jeep and find the rental agreement with her name written on it. At least she’d left her passport and ID in the hotel safe in Trujillo.

Vargas inclined his head. “What did Señor Case say that made you frown, Señorita Templeton?”

She tried to figure out what to say, but the delay caused a hardness to enter the man’s dead eyes. “I love him, not the things he buys me. I hate that he thinks all I care about is gifts.”

Vargas shifted his focus back to the merc. “Imagine all the nice things you could buy for your woman if you could provide Señor Torres with weapons.”

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“I have thought of that,” the merc said. “The problem remains. Señor Torres is taking things slowly. I’m not in a position to force his hand.”

Vargas stared at the merc. Even though it was hot and humid, Nyx felt goosebumps rise on her arms. “I think,” the drug lord said slowly, “I have a way to encourage you to work harder to establish a connection with Señor Torres and acquire the new rifle to sell to him.” His lips quirked up the tiniest amount. “You and your charming fiancée will be my houseguests until I receive the weapons.”

Chapter 5

Nyx stood in the middle of the room and watched the mercenary pull electronics from hidden locations. They’d been escorted to a suite inside the hacienda, not the small casita next to it. Maybe the guest house lacked enough security for prisoners. And that’s what they were. Prisoners.

Their cell was spectacular, with bamboo floors polished to a high sheen, a tray ceiling with recessed lights, and the area rugs, chairs, and bedding were a pristine white. They were on the second floor, and outside, she could see a thick wall with razor wire strung along the top, negating the luxury surrounding her. A shudder went through her, and she brought her gaze back to the room itself.

A glass door led to outdoor space. Nyx couldn’t call something that large a balcony. But while it theoretically would be an enjoyable location to have morning coffee, there were two men with assault rifles stationed on it, making sure they didn’t escape.

The mercenary tossed the latest eavesdropping device he found onto the bed. There

was quite a collection.

“Are there going to be repercussions for yanking this stuff?” She gestured toward the bed.

He stopped. For a moment, the merc studied her, and then said, “I think we’ll be okay. If it was a problem, someone would have come in here and stopped me.”

Nyx nodded. The circumstances meant she had to rely on him and on his judgment. A mercenary. A man whose loyalty was for sale to the highest bidder. He checked the area around the light switches, and she watched him work. Something about him made her believe she could put her trust in him, but that was probably hormones.

She was more than a little attracted to him and had been since she sat at his table at the market. Once his blue eyes had connected with hers, she’d gone warm. And now? He’d taken off the long sleeve camo shirt and the olive drab T-shirt hugged his chest. She was mesmerized by his biceps, the play of muscles in his forearms.

His dark-blond hair was shaggy, tousled, and Nyx wanted to run her fingers through it. Whether to smooth it down or muss it up more, she wasn’t sure herself. His bottom lip was fuller than the top one, tempting her to nip it. Lick it.

Forcing herself to move on, she continued to study him. He was a couple inches over six feet with broad shoulders, muscular but with a lanky build. He appeared young. His beard was noticeably sparse on his cheeks, but Nyx knew better. She’d sat at a table with him, she’d spoken with him, had seen the little lines at the corners of his eyes. If she had to guess his age, she would put him closer to thirty than twenty.

She’d also bet he used that baby face to his advantage.

Gunrunning. Damn it. She hated arms dealers. Her dad had retired from the US

Army, but her brother was still active Army, in Special Forces, and these illegal arms deals put him at greater risk. The idea of anything happening to Dylan made her feel sick.

Nyx had known blond and gorgeous was involved in either weapons or narcotics trafficking. It was disappointing anyway. Not that she was looking for a relationship. Not while she was in school. She wasn't missing out on her dreams, not like her mom had.

Sitting in one of the white chairs facing the bed, she shifted so she could keep her eyes on him as he continued his search. He'd already gone through the sitting room off the bedroom and the enormous bathroom, pulling listening devices and cameras. She'd followed him around, watching him work.

The sitting room matched the bedroom for décor, but the bathroom did not. The first two were warm, welcoming, and comfortable. The bathroom was enormous. It was elegant, with marble tile on the floor, in the shower, and surrounding the tub. It was also cold, lacking any sense of style. Why the difference?

Nyx watched the mercenary continue his search. She wanted to question him and learn more about him. Maybe he'd stepped in and saved her at the ruins, but she needed to know if, when push came to shove, she could trust him to have her back. The thoughts that came to mind had to remain unspoken. Then there were the basic questions she couldn't ask because a fiancée would already know these things about the man she was marrying.

Like his name.

He knew who she was because the drug lord had asked, but all she had was a surname and it was likely an alias.

Walking to the bed, he added more items to the collection. “I think I got everything,” he said, turning toward her.

“How sure are you?”

That one shoulder shrug she was growing accustomed to. “About ninety-five percent.”

Which meant she still couldn’t ask him any questions. The danger was too great and their situation too precarious. At least her situation was precarious. He might be in a better position since Vargas wanted something from him.

“Why the hell did you get involved with arms? Isn’t being a mercenary enough for you?”

He gave her a warning look and Nyx took a deep breath. She couldn’t go off on him, not when she needed his help to get out of this situation alive. Not when they might be monitored by the drug lord. If he found out they’d lied to him about an engagement, neither one of them might be around to see tomorrow’s sunrise.

Her chest was tight, but her tone came out moderately as she asked, “Do you think we’ll really be stuck here until you complete the arms deal?” It was more difficult to keep her expression neutral, but she made an effort in case there was a stray camera the mercenary had missed.

“I hope not.” He crossed his arms over his chest and shifted to lean his hips against a dresser. “You heard enough to guess I’m having trouble connecting with the arms dealer I need to sell to. That’s going to eat up some time. The bigger problem is getting the weapons Señor Vargas wants. They’ll be nearly impossible to get my hands on. Personally, I don’t want to be a houseguest for months.”

Her brain jumped from item to item before settling on the last one. “Months?” Nyx felt her stomach bottom out. She couldn’t be here for months. When she missed her promised check-ins, her teammates would begin to worry. That would morph into full-fledged anxiety when she didn’t show up at the hotel tomorrow as scheduled. It would only take a day or two before Frankie and Ellis would come looking for her and they’d get themselves in trouble.

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But they'd also alert Archer, who would put his own plans in motion. For all his failings, the man took care of his employees, even contractors like her. He'd launch some rescue scheme of his own.

That might make things worse, depending on who he hired.

Then there was her father. When she didn't phone home on schedule, he'd start asking questions, and with his contacts, it would only be a matter of time before he found out she was in Puerto Jardin. From there, he'd pinpoint her location in the drug lord's compound and make calls. The first one would be to Dylan who'd take leave and find some friends to come along for the rescue.

Nyx looked out the window and saw the guards with their M4s, the wall with the razor wire and more guards, and beyond that, open land. Not a tree or bush to offer cover. Even her brother and his Special Forces buddies would have a hell of a time getting in here.

Swallowing hard, she squared her shoulders and returned her gaze to the mercenary. "How many months?" Her voice came out levelly and Nyx was grateful for that.

"Relax, Fireball, it won't be that long. I'll come up with a way to get you out of here quickly."

His voice was calm and easy. Nyx wanted to believe he'd manage it, but she knew better. The balance of power was firmly on the side of the drug lord. She nodded anyway. If he'd missed a camera or microphone, she wanted to appear in complete alignment with him. To show anything else was to display a weakness that Vargas

could exploit.

“How are you supposed to negotiate with the arms dealer when Señor Vargas took your phone?” If the mercenary had his mobile, she could contact Archer. Of course, calling for help was why his phone had been confiscated.

“Señor Vargas is going to want a conversation with me. I’ll find out more then. Stop worrying.”

“Easy for you to say,” she muttered.

For a moment, he studied her, and then the mercenary straightened and crossed to her. He took her hand, and the jolt was so strong, Nyx felt as if she held a live wire. She wasn’t the only one who experienced the shock either. She saw his eyes widen.

He recovered quickly. “Come on,” he said and tugged her into motion.

Curious, Nyx allowed him to lead her into the bathroom. Once the door was closed behind them, he turned on the shower full blast. As they stood next to it, he let go of her and said softly, “I know you have no reason to trust me, but I’ll take care of you and I’m going to do everything in my power to get you out of here.”

Now she knew why they were in the bathroom. With the shower running, he must feel confident even if he had missed a mic that their conversation would go unheard.

“Why do you want to help me? I’m not rich. My parents aren’t rich. I can’t pay you anything.” She remembered his reaction to taking her hand. The attraction was strong, and it went both ways. “Anything,” she repeated with emphasis.

He shook his head, his lips turning down slightly at the corners. “I don’t expect you to pay me, not in money or anything else.”

“Why?” Nyx couldn’t help the suspicion. “Mercenaries don’t tend to be altruistic.”

Another one-shoulder shrug. “Chalk it up to wanting some good karma.”

That was bullshit, but ultimately, it didn’t matter. She was in over her head and the merc was her best chance at getting out of this mess.

“We’re safe to talk?” she asked.

“As long as we keep our voices low, yeah.” She nodded, but before she could say anything, he spoke. “What the fuck were you doing at the ruins today? Are you following me?”

“I’m not following you.”

“Don’t lie to me. I won’t tolerate it.”

“I’m not lying! I was out there at first light to hike into the ruins. You and the brute squad didn’t show up until I’d been there for hours. Believe me, if I’d known you and your friends were planning a rendezvous, I’d have bugged out earlier.”

“Which brings me back to my original question. What were you doing at the ruins?”

Nyx decided it was in her best interests to tell him. “My job. I’m working on my PhD in geoarchaeology. I was checking something out at the ruins.”

“Geoarchaeology?”

She was used to the question. “Geoarchaeology combines earth sciences like geology and geophysics to answer questions about archaeological sites.”

“Who do you work for?”

She waffled for an instant. Archer might not like her passing along the intel. Bottom line though, she needed the merc’s help. “The Paladin League.”

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The man recognized the name. She could tell by the way he went still.

The Paladin League was a small nonprofit. “How do you know about the Paladin League?” she asked, her own suspicions raised.

He hesitated, and then said, “I have friends there. Who do you work for?”

The way he asked the question made her think he already knew the answer. “My boss’s name is Archer.”

Something in the mercenary’s posture, in his demeanor, told her he recognized his name, too. She didn’t like that he knew about Archer. His part of the League was covert. Nyx decided she better focus on more important things. Like carrying out this ruse. Vargas didn’t seem like the forgive and forget type. If he found out they’d lied to him, they’d be in deep shit. “How are we supposed to play out a fake engagement when we know nothing about each other?”

“We’ll have to manage. Your name is really Nyx? You didn’t lie to Vargas, right?”

“It’s really Nyx. I guessed his men would locate the Jeep I rented, search it, and find the rental paperwork. I thought it would go worse if I didn’t tell the truth.”

The merc nodded. “You’re smart and able to think quickly. Good. We’re going to need that to pull off this charade.”

They needed a miracle to get through this, but she kept that to herself. “You know my name, but all I know is Vargas called you Señor Case.”

“I go by Charlie Case.”

Go by. He might as well say he was using the alias Charlie Case. “Do you want me to call you Charlie?”

“No.” The answer came immediately.

“Charles? Chuck? Chas? CC?” No response. Yep, Charlie was not his real name. “Do you have a nickname I could use?”

“I have a handle, but it’ll sound strange to Vargas if you use it.”

The man was annoying the hell out of her. “I have to call you something. Tell me the nickname and I’ll offer my opinion on how usable it is.”

Frowning, he said, “My buddies call me Lurch.”

“Lurch?” It was sheer dint of will that kept her voice low.

Her brother’s best friend was Lurch.

It was a Special Forces thing that everyone had a handle of some sort. Although she’d never asked, she suspected it was about security, but her brother went next level. He’d given her a nickname when they were kids—one she hated—and he used it all the time. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually called her Nyx.

Was this the same Lurch? The one her brother trusted?

She’d only seen a picture of him once. Dylan with his three buddies. Nyx recalled him enlarging the image for her, pointing at them as he gave her their handles. “This is Ollie,” he told her. “That’s Mick, and that’s my best buddy, Lurch.”

Nyx leaned closer to the mercenary. The man in the picture had a military-short haircut and no facial hair, and she did her best to see through the merc's scruff.

"I told you," he said. "You can't use my handle."

Ignoring him, Nyx tried to superimpose the face of this man over her memory of that picture. Yes, this was Dylan's best friend.

As surprise gave way to certainty, she tightened her lips. She'd talked to Dylan a couple months ago. He, Lurch, Ollie, and Mick had gone on a fishing trip, and he'd made an offhand comment about it being touch and go that Lurch would get leave.

Dylan wouldn't be friends with a merc, especially one with loose enough morals to be a gunrunner. Mere weeks ago, Lurch had been in the Army. It didn't take much to connect the dots.

She couldn't tell Lurch she knew who he was, or that she was Dylan's sister. Even with the shower running, the risk was too great. Nyx would pretend his cover story was truth even when they were alone. It was the only way to protect his mission. It was the only way to protect him.

Because this man was not a mercenary.

He was US Army Special Forces, and he was on a covert op.

Chapter 6

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She stared at him intently. Case wasn't sure he'd had an inspection this thorough since boot camp. He didn't say anything. If she needed to reassure herself, he could withstand the scrutiny. Expecting her to trust him when she knew nothing about him and when she believed he was a mercenary was a big ask.

Case took the opportunity to study her again. She was holding up remarkably well considering the situation. Too well?

Could she be working with Vargas?

He was aware that women lied easily, and he didn't know shit about her. The fact she'd joined him for lunch at the market and then turned up at the pyramid at the same time he was at the site was pretty fucking coincidental.

After a moment of thought, he dismissed it. If she were a plant, she'd be pretending to be upset—pretending to be terrified—not taking things in stride. Besides, Vargas didn't have a history of complicated schemes. He was more like see 'em, shoot 'em. Case couldn't figure out anything the drug lord had to gain from using her.

Satisfied she probably was who and what she claimed, Case drank in her appearance. She was as beautiful as he recalled. No makeup, but her skin was smooth and even, and slightly shiny, probably from sunscreen. Her face was oval, her chin tapering to a bit of a point, and her full lips tempted him to lean in for a kiss. He fought the need. Her long, dark hair was braided, the plait pulled through the opening in the back of her baseball cap, and while her brown eyes remained glued to him, her focus seemed inward.

She was about half a foot shorter than he was and fine-boned, but she wasn't fragile. If she was, Nyx never would have managed the hike from the Jeep or been able to climb to the top of the pyramid. He'd parked behind her. He was certain that rental was her vehicle, and Case knew how rough the terrain was from the road to the ruins.

If she were fragile, she'd be curled up on the bed in tears, not squaring her shoulders and meeting the situation head-on. He liked her strength.

When her attention returned to him, her wariness was gone. "Why don't I call you hon and only use Charlie when I absolutely need to do so? Does that work for you?"

He had to clear his throat. "Yeah, that works." Case had questions of his own. "You're working on your PhD?" She nodded. "That makes you what? Twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six. You joined the Army right out of high school?"

It was his turn to nod. "Is your background Polynesian or Asian?"

"My paternal grandmother was Filipina. You look Scandinavian."

"Swedish. You're from Los Angeles?"

"I live there now. We moved around when I was a kid."

"I grew up in Minneapolis."

"You look like a dude I'd see on one of the surfer beaches in California, not out on some frozen lake."

His lips quirked up. "I've heard that before. I've never tried surfing. I'm more into swimming and running."

The water spluttered, reminding him they didn't have all day to share information. "You were buying presents for your nieces and nephews on Wednesday. Do you have brothers? Sisters?"

"Two older sisters and one older brother. You?"

"Only child. How many nieces and nephews?"

"Five. Three girls and two boys. They belong to my sisters. My brother isn't married. Where did we meet? Where did we go on our first date? Where did you propose?"

The water spluttered again, and it took longer this time for the flow to return. "We'll stick as close to the truth as we can. How about we were both out at a pier near Los Angeles and you sat down on the bench where I was eating egg rolls. We started talking. Things went from there."

"Makes sense. And you proposed on the pier because that's where we met."

"Sure. As for our first date...coffee?"

She shook her head. "You took me to the Natural History Museum in LA."

"We were only going to spend a few hours there, but we hit it off." Case took a minute to think. "Yeah, we hit it off, so we ended up going out for dinner afterward. Pizza?"

"Pizza," Nyx agreed.

"I was out of the Army, but not working as a mercenary yet."

"It would be better if you were already a merc when we met. I would have wielded

my influence to talk you out of working as a soldier for hire, and if we had something serious...”

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Her voice trailed off and Case finished her sentence. “If we had something serious, and you were opposed, I would have bowed to your wishes or our relationship probably wouldn’t have survived the arguments.”

“If you were already a merc, I would either need to accept it or end things and since you didn’t tell me what you did until I was already in love with you, I had no choice. I still hope to convince you to find a real job and don’t get me started about the gunrunning.”

Her tone and expression had Case fighting a smile. “Since you were at the ruins to make sure I was okay and not for your job, we’ll leave the Paladin League out of our story, okay?”

Nyx nodded. “We’ll just say I work temp jobs while I’m earning my PhD.”

The water spit, hissed, and the flow slowed to a trickle. Time was up. Reaching in, Case turned the shower off. He’d probably gotten all the surveillance equipment, but he wished he’d had a few more minutes to warn her they needed to be cautious. They had to act on the assumption that he missed something. Their lives might depend on it.

There was one more thing he wished they’d covered. Demonstrations of affection. Nothing overt. He wasn’t thinking about kissing her in front of Vargas, but he did need to be able to touch her without Nyx flinching. Just reaching for her hand was iffy. When he’d done that to lead her into the bathroom, she’d gone rigid. If she reacted like that in front of Vargas, they were cooked.

Slowly, carefully, Case raised his hand and ran his thumb across her cheek. He'd surprised her, but Nyx didn't jerk away or display her shock in any way. He smiled and nodded, trying wordlessly to tell her she'd done well.

And then she stunned him. Nyx reached up and ran her fingers along his jaw. "The beard would look better trimmed." Without another word, she turned and left the bathroom.

One of them needed to get used to touching, and it seemed it was him.

Case flipped through the TV stations, not settling on any channel for long. He'd expected Vargas to summon him for a meeting, but it hadn't happened. Yet. It was a tactic, one meant to make him sweat. If it were only him, he wouldn't be too concerned, but his co-captive changed the equation.

As if on cue, Nyx wandered into the sitting room from the bedroom and dropped down onto the couch beside him, but not too close. "Are you okay?" he asked, switching off the TV and putting the remote on the coffee table.

She nodded. "Bored. There's nothing to do."

"You're not scared?" She should be and suspicion reared up. Either she was lying about being bored or she was lying about working for the Paladin League.

"I was, but fear only lasts for so long."

True, but it was a little quick for her to be over her trepidation and into boredom. He wished he could question her some more. Maybe there was a way to get more intel without tipping off Vargas and company. "Hiking into the rainforest alone was reckless."

Her eyes narrowed, but the reaction was slight enough to be unnoticeable unless someone was watching her closely. Like he was. He waited for her to argue with him, but she surprised him.

“I know. I considered it a calculated risk. I couldn’t let you go in without backup, hon.”

There was a saccharine note in her last sentence. Case ignored it and parsed what she’d shared. She’d considered it a calculated risk. For her job?

Stony, the teammate who used to have the role Case was in now, worked for the Paladin League and Archer. How hard would it have been for her to learn this and use it to ingratiate herself with him? She might even be a pawn, sent in by someone who wanted to infiltrate their op. Maybe she was working for someone other than Vargas. The rebels?

He hated having these suspicions. He wished he could trust Nyx to be who and what she said she was. He didn’t want to worry that his attraction to her was blinding him to truths he should be able to see.

But Case couldn’t ignore the questions.

She had the skill and toughness to hike alone into the rainforest and climb the pyramid. That didn’t mean training like some super spy or covert agent, but it suggested Nyx did more than go to the gym four days a week and doom scroll while she half-assed it on the elliptical.

If she hadn’t shown up at the open-air market three days ago while he’d been there. If she hadn’t shared his table. If she hadn’t left him practically drooling over her, he would be less suspicious. But he didn’t like the fact that she arrived at the food trailer while he was waiting for a teammate, and he definitely didn’t like her being at the

ruins at the same time as his meeting.

Yeah.

He noticed one of the guards looking at them through the window. As Case turned his head, the man glanced away.

She'd been carrying when Vargas's men found her. Not some peashooter either, but a Walther PDP F-Series pistol. That suggested some firearms knowledge. The weapon was accurate, reliable, and the F-Series was designed for people with smaller hands, like Nyx. She was dressed appropriately for the rainforest, and from what he'd seen, she brought the right supplies with her.

But someone who had training would know better than to go into the rainforest alone. Wouldn't they?

"You're frowning, honey bear."

Case's attention jerked back to Nyx. "I'm frowning because you never should have gone by yourself, no matter the circumstances. You know better than that."

"Sometimes there are no better options."

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Before he could think about that statement, Case noticed the guard was watching them through the window again. He had a guess as to why the man was so interested. Engaged couples usually didn't sit with the width of the sofa between them. Patting the empty cushion beside him, he said, "Come here, Fireball."

Her hesitation was nearly imperceptible before she slid over. Nyx stiffened momentarily when he slung an arm across her shoulders and tugged her closer to his side. As he pressed his lips into her hair, he whispered softer than soft, "Balcony guards watching."

Nyx put her hand on his thigh, just above his knee, and squeezed her acknowledgment.

There was nothing sexual about the touch, but Case almost spontaneously combusted. A fantasy invaded his mind of her running her fingers lightly up the inseam of his pants until she could cup him. Stroke him. Blood started to leave his brain and head for his cock. He struggled to rein himself in. She was already leery that he'd ask for her body as payment for his protection, and he didn't want her to believe there were any strings attached.

"How much longer do you think Señor Vargas is going to make you wait before he talks with you?"

Case struggled to focus. He was saved from sounding like an idiot when she moved her hand from his leg and linked her fingers in her lap. "I don't know. I didn't expect it to take this long, but we're on his schedule, not ours."

“I’m aware of that,” Nyx said. Her voice was serene, but there was a note of irritation beneath the calm. “I’m not sure you realize this, but I checked in at the inn in San Isidro. My things are there, and the innkeeper, Señor Alvarez, is aware that I went to the ruins. I didn’t tell him why,” she added.

Fucking great. Case knew Alvarez from the shit that had gone down last year. The man was retired from the presidential brigade, Puerto Jardin’s Special Forces. When Nyx didn’t return to the inn, the innkeeper would round up a search party to look for her, and it would no doubt include two other older gentlemen who’d retired from the brigade.

Alvarez and his friends had even breached this hacienda last year, although all hell had been breaking loose at the time. Case couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t try to get in here again to rescue Nyx. That could be a problem.

“When I meet with Señor Vargas, I’ll ask him to send someone to get your things.”

“If he makes you wait until tomorrow to talk with you?—”

“I know.” Case cut her off. “Alvarez will send out search and rescue for you at first light, but I can’t do anything about it at the moment.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and Case felt his thoughts blur. Her hand was back on his knee. Her fingers tapped lightly. Then one pointed toward the windows. Once again, a guard was monitoring them.

The last time he’d felt this fucking helpless was when he was a child. He was locked in a room that had been bugged and might still have a stray mic or camera that he didn’t find. He had peeping tom guards on the balcony, and he was protecting a woman who might be completely innocent or might have an agenda of her own. On top of that, he needed to worry about three old men launching a mission to rescue

Nyx.

What had Stony called this? Juggling hand grenades?

Yeah, Case was juggling hand grenades.

Chapter 7

Case waited for a summons to meet with Vargas.

Dinner had been wheeled into the room and cleared hours ago. He had the TV on again with the volume low. Nyx dozed beside him on the couch, and his gut churned. Case wanted to get things moving and the only way to do that was to talk to the drug lord. He could nearly hear a clock ticking in his head, counting down the minutes.

By now, the innkeeper would be worried about Nyx. The question wasn't if he would launch a rescue, the question was when. Case had a little time. Nothing could happen until morning. Alvarez would search the area by the ruins first, but when he didn't locate his missing guest, he'd start investigating.

How long did Case have?

And how long did Vargas plan to let Case sweat? That's what this delay was about. Making him anxious. It was working, too.

He glanced down at his brunette fireball. Once everything had blown up today, she'd been an asset. He hadn't needed to issue a warning or remind her they were playing roles. Despite the fact he knew firsthand she was a spitfire, Nyx had willingly followed his lead. It was unexpected, but Case appreciated it.

It was her calmness that tripped him up.

Her eyes opened, and she caught him studying her. “What time is it?” she asked, voice thick.

“Almost midnight.”

“No word on a meeting.”

It wasn’t a question, but Case answered anyway. “Nothing.”

“That makes tonight unlikely, yes?”

He nodded. “Unless he wants the element of surprise, very unlikely.”

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Stretching, she moved into a more upright sitting position. “I’m going to sleep then, okay?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” Case realized they only had the clothes on their backs. “Did you want to wear my shirt to bed?”

Her lips curved. “I have my own sweaty shirt to sleep in but thank you.”

“I meant the camo shirt.” Case pushed to his feet and held out a hand to help her up. “The T-shirt absorbed most of the perspiration.” When she was standing, he shrugged off the fatigue shirt and handed it to her. “If it doesn’t stink, you’re welcome to wear it.”

“Thanks,” Nyx said and headed to the bathroom via the bedroom.

Case stared after her. He should go to bed, too. Vargas might send for him bright and early, and he needed to be sharp to deal with the drug lord. But sleeping meant admitting there was nothing else he could do tonight. It meant there was no way to stop the innkeeper and his friends from setting things in motion. It meant there wasn’t a single thing he could do to get Nyx out of here.

It meant accepting the thing he’d always hated. Being powerless.

Instead of dwelling on that, he considered Nyx. He hardly knew her. For damn sure sharing a table and talking for about fifteen minutes wasn’t enough time to get the full measure of another person. But she hadn’t been frightened of someone she believed was a mercenary. She hadn’t asked permission. She hadn’t been timid about

it. She hadn't been apologetic either. Nyx needed to sit, so she'd made herself comfortable.

He'd tried to intimidate her into leaving. It didn't work. Maybe she'd felt safe surrounded by a market full of people, but she should have at least been a little unnerved by him. She hadn't been. Zero fear.

That complete lack of concern continued while they'd talked. She'd called him a wannabe merc and had speculated he was interested in either running guns or trafficking in narcotics. In other words, she was damn fucking savvy and good at reading people.

Today, Nyx had read the situation again, and when Case had stepped in to protect her, she hadn't hesitated for an instant before she'd picked up the ball he'd tossed and run with it. He'd lied to shield her. She'd lied to back him up, and she'd been convincing. He wasn't sure what to make of it. He wasn't sure what to make of her.

The lack of fear, the instant cooperation, the easy way she joined him in the lie, the silent agreement he was the leader. Case shook his head.

She seemed like someone who should be battling him to be in charge. It was clear she was used to calling the shots, but she had immediately allowed him to lead. She'd actually looked to him for guidance several times today. Rubbing his fingers over his chin, Case considered that for a moment. There was only one way to know for sure what she was thinking. Ask her. But the chance he'd missed a stray mic made it too dicey.

At least his team would know that his disappearance this time had nothing to do with the rebels. Oz was undercover as a low-level employee of Vargas. He'd get word to the captain.

Reaching down, Case grabbed the remote and turned off the television and then the lamps before walking into the bedroom. The shades were down. He'd pulled them as soon as it started to become dark, but the lamps on the two nightstands emitted a warm glow. He frowned. The bed was queen-size, not a king, and that meant Nyx would be much too close.

Case shook his head. Did he sleep on the side next to the door to the room or the door to the balcony? Which entry point did he need to worry about most?

The bathroom door opened, and he glanced over. She wore his camo shirt, sleeves rolled up, and while she was shorter than he was, she wasn't short enough. The shirt didn't even reach mid-thigh.

He tried not to stare, but her legs were as perfect as the rest of her. Lightly tanned with lots of tone. Yeah, she definitely didn't half-ass it on some elliptical. He wanted to ask her about running. It might be important information if they managed an escape. But a fiancé would know if his sweetheart was a runner, so Case swallowed the words.

Nyx put her clothes down on one of the chairs facing the bed and said, "Your shirt smelled better than mine." Her quirky little grin made her even more appealing. "I took a quick shower. I made sure to save enough water so you can shower, too."

"Thanks." He glanced back to the bed and decided that if Vargas sent men in, they'd use all the entrances, but the biggest number would come in through the hallway. "I'll sleep on this side," he said, pointing.

She nodded, rounded the bed, pulled back the covers, and climbed in before Case realized he was standing, watching her. Frowning, he pivoted and headed for the bathroom. She had him acting stupid. He needed to get his head screwed on straight, pronto. But damn, seeing Nyx in his shirt?—

Case cut that thought off and stripped before starting the shower. She'd saved him water, but he didn't know how much they had. If the supply hadn't completely refilled, it might run out more quickly than it had this afternoon.

Drying off, his thoughts returned to Nyx. She was a puzzle he couldn't stop thinking about. She believed he was a mercenary. They'd already established she had a poor opinion of mercs, so why did she trust him enough to go along with him? He didn't know her well enough to make a guess.

After tying the towel around his waist, he went to the sink. The top drawer held wrapped toothbrushes. The one Nyx had used was stuck inside a cup between the two sinks. After brushing, Case put his with it.

Reluctantly, he reached for his briefs and pulled them on. He'd prefer to put on fresh clothing, but Vargas hadn't provided anything to wear.

Carrying the rest of his clothes, Case left the bathroom lights on and cracked the door, allowing a dim glow to fill the bedroom. Nyx had turned off her bedside lamp, but his remained on. She'd turned away from the light, facing the windows. He tossed his pants and T-shirt on the other chair at the foot of the bed, crawled in his side, and switched off the lamp.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but the soft glow from the bathroom gave him enough illumination. If someone came into the suite, Case would be able to see them. He'd been right. The queen-sized bed put her far too close. Even hugging the edge, he could feel her body heat.

Hugging the edge. Damn, if he'd missed a camera, that would look suspicious as hell and raise questions. Case shifted closer to the center, using a fake stretch to reposition himself.

Nyx rolled to face him, narrowing the space between them. His hormones hit overload. He pushed his desire aside. “Sorry I woke you,” he said softly.

“I wasn’t asleep yet.” Her voice was every bit as quiet.

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Case turned so he could see her better. It put her even closer, but something was going on. Nyx had been at the ruins early in the morning, making it a long day for her. Why wasn't she sound asleep?

“Do you think there are still men on the balcony?” she asked.

The expression that went with the question was gone so quickly that if Case wasn't paying attention, he would have missed it. Trepidation. He studied her again, this time looking deeper, going beneath the surface. Now he saw it.

Fear.

It was buried deep, hidden behind a mask of serenity—her brave face—but she was scared. It was the same expression she'd worn earlier when she claimed to be bored.

Memories of her trailing him through their suite popped into his head. If he left the bedroom and went into the sitting area, she followed him after a minute or two. Even if he was visible in the wide archway between the two rooms. If he headed to the bathroom, Case would find her waiting for him in the bedroom when he came out.

Yeah, she wasn't calm about any of this. She had a hell of a poker face, but he was onto her now.

Reaching out, Case pushed her braid behind her shoulder. “I think men will be stationed on the balcony around the clock. We'll have guards in the hallway, too.”

“Why?” Her voice was quiet, less than a whisper and Case thought it had more to do

with her fear than any attempt at discretion. “It’s not as if we can make it past the wall surrounding the hacienda.”

“Señor Vargas is a cautious man,” he told her. “A thorough man. He doesn’t want to chance our wandering his house.”

She considered that for a moment. “If he was concerned about us, why didn’t he put us in the casita?”

She was observant. That might be something he could use depending on what kind of situation they found themselves in. “From what I’ve seen of it, the guest house would require a lot more manpower to secure. Up here, we have fewer exit points.”

“Those men...” Her voice trailed off. Nyx drew a deep breath and asked, “Those men aren’t going to enter while we sleep, are they?”

Now he knew what had her worried enough to remain awake.

“I doubt it,” Case said. He found her hands under the blankets. They were curled into fists and he ran his thumb across the knuckles of her right hand. “But on the off chance that does happen, I’ll hear it before they can open the door. I’ll stand between you and any danger. I promise.”

“I know you will.” He liked her immediate assurance, but she stayed tense. She bit her lower lip.

“What, Fireball?”

“Do you think anyone knows we’re being held prisoner?”

Case interpreted that question as will there be help coming. The answer to that was

probably no. An elderly innkeeper and his friends were one more worry on his plate, not potential rescuers. There was no reason to expect his team to risk their lives trying to get inside the compound, not when Vargas needed Case alive.

He couldn't tell her any of that, though. "If someone doesn't know already, they will early tomorrow. The innkeeper will start asking questions. I'd be surprised if he wasn't aware before noon exactly where we are and why."

Nyx had more questions. He could see it in her eyes. Case squeezed her hand. It was a warning, a reminder that someone could be listening to them. He wished they could talk. They needed a conversation that lasted longer than the water supply in the shower, but he settled for giving her hand another squeeze.

"I'll keep you safe. I promise, Nyx."

"I know you will. I trust you." Her lips curved. "Good night, hon." Leaning forward, Nyx gave him a light kiss before freeing her hands and turning on her side away from him.

Case stared at her for a moment before he settled on his back and tucked a hand behind his head. She'd kissed him because if there was a camera it would look odd if she didn't. He understood that. What he didn't understand was why every cell in his body had come alive from the brief touch of her lips against his.

Or why his chest had tightened when she'd said, I trust you.

Chapter 8

Oziah West always got the shit assignments when he infiltrated Vargas's cartel. A supposed mercenary who came and went from Puerto Jardin whenever he felt like it, there was no real opportunity to move up the hierarchy. He was used to working at

night on jobs no one else wanted. He frequently rolled back to the hacienda after midnight.

What was unusual was not being allowed inside.

The man blocking the entrance was young, maybe in his early twenties, and carrying an assault rifle on a strap across his body. The barrel was pointed at the ground now, but it wouldn't take more than a split second for him to swing it up. Oz recognized him, although he couldn't remember his name.

"I work for Señor Vargas," Oz said. "We shared third-shift guard duty a few days ago."

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The young man nodded. “I remember, but Señor Vargas has given the order. No one comes in and no one goes out.”

Interesting. Vargas was canny and cautious, but this hadn’t happened before that Oz was aware of. “Why?”

That got a shrug. “I wasn’t given reasons, only my orders.”

Of course, no one was going to question what they were told. Vargas would view it as disrespectful and handle it accordingly. “Where am I supposed to sleep?” Oz asked, changing tactics. “I live in the barracks on the estate.”

“I’m sorry,” the guard apologized. “Perhaps Trujillo?”

The kid’s voice held honest regret, but also determination. There was nothing Oz could say to change his mind. Not a big surprise, but he’d hoped. “Do you know how long the lockdown is going to last?”

Another shrug. “Check tomorrow morning when Señor Vargas and his leadership team are awake.”

Before he could ask another question, the man retreated, closing the gate behind him. Oz could have made a move, could have forced his way inside because the kid wasn’t skilled, but he also wasn’t alone. If Oz tried something that stupid, he’d be shot so many times, he’d look like Swiss cheese.

Muttering a curse, he headed back to his vehicle. He was fucking exhausted. One of

the drug lord's lieutenants had sent him to Rio Blanco as a courier first thing this morning. After he'd pulled guard duty all night. He opened the door and got behind the wheel. His ass protested. So did his legs. Driving to and from the Puerto Jardinese capital in one day was a hell of a lot of time behind the wheel especially on next to no sleep. The last thing he wanted was another ninety-minute trek to reach Trujillo.

He hadn't even been transporting anything that might help his team with their mission. Instead, he'd delivered money to another man high up in the drug lord's organization. The funds would no doubt be used for bribery, but his team hadn't been sent to stop the drug trade or clean up the Puerto Jardinese government.

Oz checked his phone. Nothing, but he hadn't expected any messages. Vargas sure as hell wasn't going to ask someone to fill him in about the lockdown. He briefly considered letting his captain know something strange was happening at the hacienda, but there wasn't enough intel to justify the risk.

He did not want to drive to Trujillo, but what other choice did he have? He sure as fuck wasn't sleeping in the car.

San Isidro. It was nearby and there was an inn there with a handful of rooms. The odds of it being full were slim. Getting the innkeeper to let him stay for the night was iffy, though. Señor Alvarez hated the narcotics trade and wasn't fond of mercenaries.

It took longer to reach the inn than Oz had estimated, but the lights were still on downstairs when he parked the car. The two-story building was rustic. Worn. It was clear effort had been made to fix things, to patch things.

He'd never been inside the place, but he knew in addition to the few rooms upstairs, there was a tavern/restaurant downstairs. That meant there'd be some tables and likely seating at the bar. Probably a kitchen off the main room. He checked the time. The bar would have closed about forty-five minutes ago, so he only had to face

Alvarez and his wife.

Maybe he should sleep in the car. Dealing with the innkeeper and his animosity was going to be a pain in the ass. He shifted, his back protested, and he reached for the handle. No fucking way was he spending the night in this tin can. He put his hand on his pocket, felt the familiar tiny bump, and rubbed it idly.

Oz walked in and stopped short. He'd expected to see Señor and Señora Alvarez cleaning up for the night. Instead, he found Alvarez and two other old men sitting at a table. They didn't see him immediately, and he took in the room. The bar was decorated with bamboo across the front and there were maybe twenty bottles of alcohol on the back counter. In front of the bar, there were stools that appeared hand carved, and round tables throughout the room. Maybe fifteen of them.

The quiet conversation ended abruptly when the men spotted him.

"You, and those like you, are not welcome here," Señor Alvarez said coldly in English.

"I'd like to rent a room for the night. I'll pay double," he tacked on, using Spanish before Alvarez could voice his refusal.

Maybe it wasn't fair. The inn was barely surviving and the extra money would help.

"No amount of money would entice me to allow one of Vargas's men to spend the night under my roof."

A ninety-minute drive loomed ahead of him unless he invoked the name of his buddy. It was a risk, but it should be small. Stony said that everyone in San Isidro believed he was a reformed gunrunner.

“Señor Alvarez,” Oz said, infusing his voice with deference, “we have a mutual friend who has stayed at the inn many times. Perhaps his good name will vouch for me.”

Alvarez’s eyes narrowed. “Who is this man?”

“Finn Rowland. I call him Stony.”

The innkeeper’s expression never changed, but the atmosphere in the room amped up. “You could have heard that name anywhere.”

“Sí, I could have, but I’ve known him for years. We were friends before he met his wife.”

“How did he meet her?” Alvarez asked.

Fuck. Oz knew the answer, but he wasn’t sure Alvarez did. Stony had claimed to be married to his woman for years before they’d had a ceremony. He decided to go with the truth. “His wife was tailing Silva, the second in command to the arms dealer, Jorge Torres. She was searching for her best friend who was missing at the same time Stony was meeting with Silva.”

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The vibe in the room changed dramatically and immediately. The old men shared a glance. The oldest of the three nodded and the other two nodded back. When Alvarez looked at him, he had a feeling the innkeeper knew who Oz really was. US Army Special Forces. Shit, hell, and damn.

“I will give you a room, but first, join us.” Alvarez gestured toward the empty chair at the round table.

Reluctantly, Oz sat down. Something was up and he wasn’t sure what it was. “What did you want to discuss with me?”

The men exchanged another glance, but it was Alvarez who spoke. “What has Vargas been up to today?”

“I don’t know. I was assigned to make a delivery in Rio Blanco this morning. I returned less than an hour ago.”

“Señor...” Alvarez let his voice trail off.

“Waters,” Oz said, using his alias. “Oz Waters.”

“Señor Waters, you should be spending the night in Vargas’s compound, not searching for a room. Why are you here and not his hacienda?”

Something in his voice had Oz sitting up straighter in his chair. This wasn’t an idle question. “What happened?”

There was a long hesitation, before Alvarez said, “I have a guest. An archaeologist. She went to the Huarona ruins this morning and hasn’t returned.”

Shit, Lurch was supposed to meet Vargas there today. Oz’s mind spun through scenarios, but what he said aloud was, “She might be injured at the site or in the rainforest.”

“Sí, that’s most likely the situation.”

“Except?”

“Except your boss has used the ruins to conduct business in the past.”

“He rarely goes there.” But he’d visited there today. If they’d found her at the ruins, would an archaeologist cause the lockdown at the hacienda? Oz didn’t know.

“Rarely does not mean never,” the oldest of the three men said.

Oz nodded. If Vargas had brought the archaeologist to the compound, the question was why? If she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, they’d simply kill her and leave her body in the rainforest for the scavengers. There was no reason to haul her to the estate and go into full lockdown.

His stomach roiled. What if she was inside the compound?

“Why are you here?” Alvarez asked. “Why are you not at Vargas’s hacienda?”

Taking a moment to weigh his options, Oz decided to go with the truth. “It’s locked down. No one is allowed in or out.”

The three old men shared another glance.

“That doesn’t mean she’s on the property,” Oz said quickly. These men had rescued Alvarez’s wife from the compound last year.

“No, of course not. You’re correct when you say she’s most likely injured. I suggested she not go to the ruins alone, but I could not stop her.”

“You would have talked her out of it if she didn’t seem capable.”

Alvarez nodded. “Sí, I would have. I believed she’d be fine.”

Oz didn’t ask why. The man had been in the presidential brigade, Puerto Jardin’s special forces. He’d be a good judge of who could and couldn’t handle the trek to the ruins. Accidents could always happen even to the savviest and most skilled outdoors person, but when Oz considered the lockdown... He let the thought trail off. Yeah, his instincts were pounding on the walls of his stomach.

“Do you know where she went in?” Oz asked.

“Sí, I gave her directions.”

“In the morning, I’ll drive out there and look for her.” It went without saying that Stony would want Oz to protect the innkeeper and that meant keeping him out of the rainforest.

“We’ll go with you,” the oldest man interjected.

“I can move faster alone.”

“Sí.” The old man nodded, but he appeared sad.

Alvarez pushed his chair back from the table. “I’ll get your key.”

As soon as he reached the second level, Oz checked out the floor. One communal bathroom without a lock. There was an occupied sign to hang on the knob and nothing else. The archaeologist’s room was secured, but the other doors opened easily. The rooms were small, clean and well-tended. He went to his room and sank down on the bed.

Before he could get his boots off, his phone vibrated. The Big Dog. Why was the captain calling him?

“Hello?”

“Hey, dude, what are you up to?”

In other circumstances, Oz might have grinned because the captain never spoke like that, but it was the team’s code for is it safe to talk? “I’m clear. What’s happening, BD?”

“Lurch is missing.”

“Shit.” He’d been afraid of that. “He didn’t check in after his meeting at the ruins?”

A short silence. “No. Ski and Baggs waited. No contact. They went out to the site and looked around but didn’t find anything there.”

The banging in Oz’s stomach became jackhammers. “BD, I’m staying at the inn in San Isidro because Vargas locked down his hacienda. I can’t get in.” The captain started to talk, but he cut him off. “I found out from Señor Alvarez that one of his guests went to the ruins today. She never returned to the inn.”

Nguyen rarely swore, not that Oz heard, but one word came loud and clear over the mobile. “Fuck.”

Chapter 9

Nyx tried to exude calmness because Lurch was pacing the suite from the sitting room to the bedroom and back again. She wanted to ask what had him on edge, but she wasn’t sure he would tell her the truth. After living with her dad and brother, she knew how protective Special Forces soldiers could be and he was in full guard-dog mode. She liked the way he moved. Graceful and athletic, but his inability to remain still made her nervous.

Breakfast had been cleared an hour ago. While she’d showered again, she was back in her grungy clothes. She didn’t feel clean, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Lurch’s route brought him back into the sitting room and she feigned interest in the television even though she had no idea what she was watching. Calm and serene was hard to pull off when she was on edge. And when she was relying on someone else.

Nyx took care of herself. She always had. Her father was out on ops for months at a time. Her mom had her hands full with four kids, three of whom had other fathers. Her sisters had been born when her mom was married to husband number one, and her brother while her mom was married to husband two.

Her family. If she didn't get out of here, her dad was going to organize a rescue, and her brother would be leading it. She didn't want anyone to die trying to free her, so she'd have to get herself out. And Lurch, too.

She hadn't thought of a way to manage that yet. The guards remained on the balcony and there was another pair in the hallway. She'd seen them when the food had been wheeled in. All of them were armed with assault rifles.

Lurch made another appearance, but before he pivoted and left again, she wanted to ask a question. Not that he'd necessarily answer it. If her brother's best friend was anything like Dylan, he'd try to protect her. If only Dill had told her more about his buddy, she might have some idea how Lurch would react.

"Hey, hon, is there something I should know about? You've been pacing pretty intensely since we finished eating."

He stopped and shook his head. "No, sorry. Señor Vargas should have asked to talk to me by now. I'm trying to come up with why, and I think better when I move."

"Maybe he's busy with something else," she suggested.

One side of his mouth quirked up. "That's on the mental list."

"Along with a dozen other items," Nyx said, trying to ignore the way that sort-of smile made her heart beat faster.

"At least that many." Lurch didn't relax, but some of the tension left his face and it made his lips soften. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to kiss him. Really kiss him, not that fake goodnight brush of lips they'd done last night.

Clearing her throat, she got to her feet and stood in front of him. "What do you need

me to do? I want to help.”

“You’re doing what I need—following orders, and not becoming overly emotional or demanding. That helps more than you realize.”

Nyx nodded. She understood more than he knew. Her dad told her all the time that emotional reactions got people killed. He’d also trained her to obey orders when the situation warranted it. Like now. Her dad would expect her to listen to Lurch, to follow his lead. And she would. If she came up with a plan to get them out of here, she’d run it by him. If he told her it wouldn’t work, she’d do more thinking.

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What she wouldn't do was go rogue.

"You're in charge," Nyx assured him, wanting him to understand she wouldn't be a bigger liability than she was already. "You're the one with experience. If we need research done, then I can take over. Grad school taught me my way around a library."

Lurch smiled and Nyx nearly sighed. It was a good thing he didn't do that often, or she'd be in big trouble.

"Thanks. I'm aware you like to call the shots."

How did he know that?

His smile broadened. "Fireball, I realized the first time we met that you were strong-willed. It's one of the things I appreciate about you."

It was Nyx's turn to smile. "As I recall, it irritated you when we met, not something you deemed a virtue."

"You're wrong," he said. "If you'd walked away when I glared, I would have forgotten about you."

Was he implying that he hadn't put her out of his mind? Or was she reading too much into it because she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him?

Lurch's hands went to her hips, and he pulled her closer. Although he seemed to be looking at her, his gaze was to his right. The balcony. One of the guards was peering

in the window. Damn, she was glad he was cognizant of what was going on around them but disappointed that his touch was for show. Nyx put her hands on his shoulders and tried for an adoring expression.

“Our relationship will never be dull, since you like issuing orders, too.” Nyx forced the teasing tone in case he’d missed a microphone, but fear had returned. Her life literally hung on the whim of a drug lord.

Maybe he saw it in her eyes. Maybe he sensed it. Lurch’s expression became serious. “I’m going to do everything in my power to get you out of here safely. I promise.”

“I know you will. I trust you.”

The words meant something to him. Nyx saw it on his face, but before she could figure out how to ask why, his lips brushed over hers, and he released her, putting distance between them. More show for their guards, not a real kiss. The disappointment surprised her.

Lurch returned to pacing and Nyx retreated to the sofa. Everything would be easier if they didn’t have to act as if eyes were on them all the time. They could get to know each other. She could ask questions about things an engaged woman would already know about her fiancé. If she didn’t need to worry about bugs and eavesdroppers, she could tell him who her brother was, and let Lurch know that she was aware he wasn’t a mercenary.

She couldn’t do any of those things.

A door opened, and Nyx stiffened, unsure if Lurch needed her to stay put or if it would better to stand with him. Before she could make a decision, a man loomed in the entrance to the sitting room, her Special Forces sergeant right behind him.

“Señorita Templeton,” the man in the dark suit and tie said, “Señor Vargas requests your presence in his office.”

Nyx stood in the most ostentatious office she’d ever seen and struggled to breathe. She was alone. Lurch was not invited, and his arguments had been shut down. Two men aiming assault rifles at him had dissuaded him from trying to tag along.

Armed guards stood to her right, one on either side of the wide entrance, and she tried not to hyperventilate. She needed to be cool. She needed to be in control. She needed to be ready to save herself and Lurch if the situation required it.

Focus. Breathe. To keep her eyes off the guards, she examined the office. The floor was marble, the walls were painted a rich charcoal gray, and white molding outlined individually illuminated artwork. Nyx assumed they were expensive, but she couldn’t identify the artists.

To her left was a black table with two chairs upholstered in gold velvet. The desk and the bookcase behind it were white and black with generous amounts of gilt, with two sconces on either side of it. There was a tray ceiling with intricate molding, and behind her on the right was a seating area. She’d only gotten a glimpse of it and didn’t want to turn around and look, but if her memory was correct, it was as wildly inappropriate for the rainforest as the rest of the office.

The top of the desk had nothing except a table lamp on it. Nyx stared at the black lampshade using it to center herself. Damn, she wished Lurch was with her. He’d know what to say, how to maneuver with the drug lord.

Before she was ready, the guards came to attention and the man from the ruins walked in, taking the seat behind the desk. He wore a suit and tie, but it did nothing to conceal the fact killing was casual for him. Nyx fisted her hands at her sides, trying to hide her nerves.

“Señorita Templeton,” he said in English, “how nice of you to join me.”

As if she had a choice. “Señor Vargas.”

He stared at her for a moment. A long, uncomfortable moment. “You work for the Paladin League.”

Shit, shit, shit. He’d investigated her. If he was aware of her ties to the Paladin League, did he know about her family, too? Calmness descended, and she cloaked herself in it. She’d do whatever it took to protect her parents, her siblings, and everyone else she loved.

“I’m a contractor, not an employee, but yes, I’ve worked for the Paladin League.” She couched it in past tense, hoping that Vargas would think she wasn’t currently working for them, but not anger him if he did know that little fact.

“Contractor?” Vargas asked with no inflection.

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Nyx felt her nerves ramp up higher. Pressing her nails into her palms, she said, “I’m still in grad school. I’m working on my PhD.” As if she couldn’t do her job for the Paladin League and go to school, but he didn’t know that. She hoped.

“What does your fiancé think?”

Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, she chanted silently, hoping that would be enough to have the name emerge smoothly as if she was accustomed to using it.

“Charlie has always been supportive of my education.” It worked. She said Charlie without any hesitations or stutters.

“I meant,” Vargas said coolly, “what does your fiancé think about the Paladin League sending you to Puerto Jardin? Does he know that’s why you’re here or does he believe you traveled solely to spend time with him?”

Her stomach bottomed out. Instinct told her not to lie about the Paladin League. “He knows,” Nyx said with a calm she didn’t feel. “He wasn’t happy when I told him.”

Something seemed to ease, although the drug lord’s expression didn’t change. “You’re headstrong.” It wasn’t a compliment.

“I’d already accepted the job before I knew where the Paladin League was sending me. It wasn’t as if I could tell them I’d changed my mind, not if I wanted to work for them in the future.”

Silence as Vargas considered her. Nyx struggled not to shift, but his calculating gaze

made her uneasy.

“Were you honestly at the ruins to watch over a mercenary who can take care of himself? You? A woman whose area of expertise is archaeology and not tactics?”

“Yes. I would never let the man I love walk into what sounded like a trap without trying to help. You might not think much of what kind of assistance I could give him, but I was damn well going to try my best if the situation warranted it.”

His stare intensified as if he were trying to peer into her soul. It took forever before he said, “Loyalty is an admirable trait. Tell me, what does your boss at the Paladin League think of you traveling to the ruins to protect a mercenary?”

Nyx drew a deep breath as the room spun around her. “He doesn’t know about Charlie. My personal life is none of his business.”

“Then why does he believe you traveled here from Trujillo?”

Another deep breath. She had to assume Vargas knew she’d checked into the inn. “I told him I wanted to examine the ruins. That there might be something there despite the archaeologists who excavated the site for years. He had no reason to doubt me.”

Shifting in his seat, Vargas locked his gaze on hers. Nyx knew soul-deep terror. If he was aware she was lying, there might not be anything she could say to save herself.

“He never questioned you?” The skepticism was unveiled.

“He’s an administrator. He knows nothing about archaeology.” Her skin felt as if it were burning, and Nyx wondered if she’d flushed. She hoped not because it would be a huge tell that she was being dishonest. She didn’t know if Archer had a degree, but he was as versed in archaeology as she was.

The drug lord studied her again even longer than he had earlier. She struggled not to squirm. His eyes were emotionless, dead. It was scary to meet his gaze head-on, but Nyx did it anyway. Too many people were at risk if she faltered.

“What does Señor Case know of the Lost Treasure of Trujillo?”

If she’d been flushed a moment ago, she’d likely gone pale now. Was he aware that she was in Puerto Jardin to find the Lost Treasure or had he brought it up for some other reason? She shrugged. The movement felt jerky and stiff. Trying for a humorous tone, she said, “Knowing Charlie, not much. He’s not interested in legends.”

“Even if his fiancée was sent to find this particular legend?”

Nyx felt her skin go ice cold in little more than a heartbeat. “The treasure has been missing since 1820. Men have searched from the day it disappeared. Charlie doesn’t believe anyone will be more successful in locating it now than they were then.”

“What do you believe?” Vargas asked. His voice offered no clue as to how she should answer.

“The treasure is likely lost forever. I’d be amazed if the location of the cache didn’t die with the captain and his first mate.”

“Yet you’re down here, looking for it.”

“I’m being paid to chase a legend. My fee will cover a nice chunk of my school costs.”

Vargas seemed to relax. “I begin to understand the attraction between you and Señor Case. You are as much a mercenary as he is, albeit in a different way.”

Nyx felt insulted but suspected the drug lord meant it as a compliment. It also suggested that Vargas had questioned if she and Lurch were a couple. At least she had put that to rest. She forced her lips to curve, but it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Her attempt at a smile faded as he continued to stare at her.

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After an eternity, he leaned back in his chair. “While I share your doubts about the Lost Treasure ever being recovered, I do believe in playing long shots on occasion. I have some documentation I’d like you to peruse. It might contain some clues as to its whereabouts. If the treasure can be found. I want it.”

Chapter 10

Nyx had been in larger private libraries. She’d been in more opulent private libraries, but this was the first one to feature a dining room table in the center. There were six chairs upholstered in pale sage linen, and the table itself was polished to a high sheen. An empty bowl sat in the center. Not just any bowl, but one that she suspected was from the late Nazca period. She couldn’t help wondering if it had been looted.

Piled on one end of the table was a stack of historical documents. Her assignment. Nyx frowned over how little care was taken with the papers.

Shaking her head, she continued her study of the room. The floor was deep brown tile, the walls and bookcases were painted white, and a picture window made the space feel brighter. There was a large painting on the wall to the left of the door. Every other available inch, from the floor to the ceiling, was filled with books and small trinkets. It also featured a ladder that rolled on a metal rail. The temptation to play on it was real and in other circumstances, she might have given in.

Other circumstances. The door to the library had a small oval window. It gave her a view of the man assigned to guard her. Only the side of his head, but the reminder was enough.

Nyx did another visual sweep. Everywhere she turned, there were nooks and crannies. A narrow credenza held a softly ticking clock and more artifacts. The shelving had drawers, lots of them, and little niches were holding more treasures. She could easily spend days simply exploring the space.

Despite how charming the library was, Nyx had exchanged one prison for another.

Besides the armed man in the hall, she occasionally saw men outside the picture window. Patrols. It figured. Vargas was hypervigilant. Guards on the wall. Guards patrolling the grounds. Guards watching her and Lurch.

Nyx's frown deepened as she thought of Lurch. Her brother's bestie was protective of her. He'd be worried about her extended absence. It was a safe bet Vargas wouldn't bother to inform him that she'd been given a job. She could only think of one idea. She went to the entrance and lightly tapped on the glass window. She knew better than to whip the door open.

When the guard turned, she signaled for him to open the door. He shook his head. Nyx repeated the gesture.

With a scowl, he indicated she should move back, and when she complied, he opened the door. "What?" the man growled in Spanish.

"Could you please get word to my fiancé that I'm working on something for Señor Vargas? He'll be concerned about my absence."

"If Señor Vargas wants him to know he'll take care of it. Get to work." The man closed the door firmly enough to discourage Nyx from a second attempt.

She walked toward the table, pulled out the chair, and sat down, but she wasn't ready to read historical documents. The guard, confident she followed orders, turned his

back to the door. Motion caught her eye. A man carrying an M4 passed by the picture window. He never glanced toward the house.

Nyx monitored the patrol, using the clock in the room. Someone passed about every three minutes and that surprised her. She would have thought Vargas was savvy enough to have his men in a less regular pattern. None of them showed any interest in the library, though. The routine gave her some assurance that she could do what she needed without being spotted from outside. A glance at the door showed her guard standing facing away from her.

After arranging the papers to make it appear as if she was working, Nyx watched for the patrol. When the man passed, she did a last glance at the door, before rushing to the drawers near the window. With the room loaded with so much stuff, there had to be something here that would help her and Lurch.

The drawer was a mess, things tossed in. There were playing cards, stacks of unused napkins, assorted tokens from a board game, and scorepads from a different game. She moved things around, digging to the bottom, but it was more of the same.

Two and a half minutes. She went back to her seat.

She waited for a few passes before she went to the next drawer. Once she was farther from the window, she'd worry less about being seen, but right next to the glass? Yeah, she was being cautious. This drawer was another mess—pencils, pens, and paper tossed in randomly. The bottom held a few felt-tip markers.

Nyx returned to the table, taking a couple pieces of paper and a pen with her.

Someone had loved books, but it didn't appear to be Señor Vargas. The room might be clean and tidy, but it had an unused feel to it. Maybe it had always been for show and not study, but the drawer full of game items suggested the library hadn't always

been neglected. If board games had regularly been played here, the large table made sense.

Shaking off her questions, she glanced back at the door. Her guard still stared out into the hall. She went to the next drawer. Stamps, envelopes in various sizes, cards, and stationery. The Puerto Jardinese postage stamps were fifteen years old.

Maybe she wasn't going to find anything useful. It wasn't as if she could write a letter to Archer asking for assistance.

The next drawer had rubber bands, paper clips, sticky notes, and binder clips. Nothing was organized. As she worked her way around the library, she found a drawer of construction paper in assorted colors, another with business cards and old planners—again, fifteen years old or older.

She was back in view of the window and returned to the table. Nyx spent time reading through a few documents, moving the two-hundred-year-old papers as carefully as possible to avoid damaging them.

When the patrol passed the window, Nyx headed across the room. The next drawer put her in full view of anyone outside and her back would be to the window.

This drawer was full of charging cables. Dozens and dozens of them. They snaked everywhere. Quickly, she pawed through the cables. Toward the back, one of them had weight. Picking up the cord, she followed it through the knots of wires. Her heart pounded faster. It was plugged into a cell phone.

A really old cell phone.

She tried to power it up. The battery was dead. It wasn't unexpected, but the stab of disappointment was real. It was a flip phone, small enough to fit in the palm of her

hand when closed. The size was good for concealment. Unfortunately, the raspberry pink color made it noticeable.

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With a start, she realized she'd been standing there too long. Sliding the drawer shut, she slipped the phone in her pocket and returned to the table. Nyx didn't manage to sit before the patrol went past the window, but he didn't glance her way. With a soft sigh, she sank into her chair and tried to think things through.

The hacienda was far enough away from San Isidro that it was unlikely there was reliable cell service. As if this mobile was even on a plan any longer. Vargas and his minions probably used satellite phones to ensure connectivity.

A phone conveniently in the room? That bothered her, but all the drawers were filled with junk. It had probably been forgotten years ago.

Nyx covered her pocket with her hand. This was the best chance she had to get a message out if she could get the mobile to charge. And if it connected to something long enough for her to send a text. A voice call was out of the question with her guard standing just outside the library.

She scanned the room again. This time she looked for an electrical outlet. The only one she saw was below the window directly opposite the door.

Maybe she should smuggle it to the suite and charge it there? Except what if they searched her before returning her to the room? They very well might, and if she got caught with it, things would go bad fast.

The phone was small and the space was crowded. She'd take her chances that her jailor wouldn't notice it when he turned to check on her. Her heart beat faster as she waited for the patrol to pass. It seemed to take forever for him to appear and even

longer to clear the window. She forced herself to count to thirty before she scurried for the outlet.

This was scarier than when she'd checked out the drawers. At least then she could claim to be looking for a pad of paper and a pen. Now? She'd be caught cold with a phone in her possession.

Nyx plugged it in and tried to position it in the most discreet location possible. The dark floor helped, but the outlet was in the white wall. It left the cord starkly exposed. If the guard noticed it and questioned her, she'd play dumb. He wouldn't believe her, but she wasn't giving up an opportunity to get an SOS out.

No matter how terrified she was.

She tried to focus on the papers. How long would it take before the phone had enough charge to light up? Would it work? Could she get a message out? What would she say to Archer?

Her hands shook and Nyx fisted them in her lap, out of view of anyone who glanced at her. She needed to get control of her fear. Emotion got people killed. Her dad had told her that many times. She had to stay calm.

Focusing on the words was impossible. The writing was swirly and faded, the paper fragile, and she was too aware of the phone. Nyx wanted to check it, to see if she could use it, but it was less than ten minutes since she'd plugged it in. If she went back and forth, it would increase her chances of getting caught. The risk was too great.

Her dad would tell her to be patient.

The door opened abruptly. "Señor Vargas wants to know if you've found anything

yet,” the guard demanded.

Nyx had to take a breath before she could speak. “Not yet. It’s difficult for me to read the old Spanish.” It wasn’t completely untrue. The state of the documents did make it hard.

The guard stood in the doorway, unmoving, and she hoped like hell that the phone didn’t beep or flash or do anything else to call attention to itself. She drew another deep breath. The precariousness of the situation left her on the verge of hyperventilating.

“Señor Vargas has guests coming tonight. You have half an hour. I suggest you apply yourself. You do not want to make excuses to el patron when he meets with you next.”

With another loud thunk, the door closed behind him and Nyx took a few minutes to calm herself. And to make sure he wasn’t returning. She waited for the patrol to pass, then slowly—carefully—made her way to the phone. It didn’t turn on.

Did it need to be charged longer or was it completely dead? Unrecoverable? She didn’t know enough about phones from this generation to have a guess.

Half an hour.

She glanced at the clock. She’d give the phone another fifteen minutes and check again.

The time crawled by. Nyx found it impossible to focus on the historical documents. This wasn’t something she was particularly interested in, not like Frankie. Still, the idea of an angry Vargas was enough to force her to read through a few pages, skimming slowly.

Fifteen minutes felt like a hundred and fifty years, but finally, it was time to check the phone. Drawing a deep, shaky breath, Nyx watched for the patrol to pass before heading to the outlet. She tried for a saunter, but her legs felt jerky.

Would the mobile turn on? If it did, would it make noise?

She better have a plan in case it did. Her heart was in her throat as she crouched to pick up the phone. With one finger on the volume, she pressed the power button. The instant she saw something light up, she pressed to take the sound to zero.

Nyx didn't make it. There was a low tone before she had it muted.

She glanced over to the door, but the guard wasn't paying attention. Maybe it had been soft enough, short enough, that he hadn't heard it. Her breath came out serrated, but adrenaline was flowing through her body like water going over Niagara Falls.

The battery level was at one. As for cell connectivity, she didn't have a single bar. She couldn't afford to wait any longer, though. Rushing back to her chair, Nyx held the phone below the table and flipped it open. There was no keyboard.

How did she send a text without a keyboard?

Chapter 11

Taking a deep breath, Nyx looked back at the phone. It connected to Wi-Fi. That solved the no bars issue, but now she had to worry someone was monitoring the devices on the network. Although, if they hadn't changed the router password in years, it seemed unlikely that anyone was paying much attention. She needed to figure out how to message, though, ASAP.

Maybe a panel on the phone slid up to reveal a keyboard?

Nothing moved and Nyx took another deep breath. People made mistakes when they gave into fear.

Her older sisters had owned phones like this one. She hadn't been allowed to touch them because she'd been too little, but she watched. What had they done?

There were letters on each number of the keypad. The number pad was the keyboard.

She pressed the menu key, found something called messaging, and selected text message. The patrol passed the window, and she shifted her gaze from her lap to the papers, watching the man from the corner of her eye. When he left her view, she checked on her guard. He remained in position, his back to the door.

Her hands shook. Feel the fear, acknowledge it, and do it anyway. That's what her dad told her. She put in Archer's number and pressed okay. The text field opened.

These old phones probably didn't have any leeway on the number of characters

allowed, so she would need to be succinct. The fact that each letter required a small pause before going to the next raised her adrenaline. Her heart pounded so loudly she couldn't hear anything except its beat. Despite this, she took her time, making sure everything was correct. There wouldn't be a second chance.

It required trial and error to discover how to make a space. Punctuation and capitalizing letters were beyond her abilities, but Archer would figure it out. She tried to switch to numbers, but couldn't make that work either, and typed it out instead.

When she was finished, she reread what she'd entered:

held hostage by drug lord vargas near san isidro me and one other need help nyx

She was well within the character limit. Archer had her location, her captor's name, and that she wasn't alone. It was a jumbled mess, not the neat, carefully punctuated messages she preferred, but it was the best she could do.

Nyx hit send.

The screen dimmed, and she saw a sliver of green for the battery. Heart in her throat, she watched the progress bar. Please go. Please go.

It seemed to sit there forever. Nyx checked on the guard again. It must be close to the time limit he'd given her.

The progress bar moved a fraction farther.

Nyx wasn't sure what had her more terrified—that the guard would open the door and catch her with the phone, or that the battery would die before the message went. Either was a distinct possibility.

Watching the mobile was stressing her out, so she tried to read one of the pages on the table. It was useless. She couldn't focus.

Her gaze went back to the phone in time to see the message go. Another surge of adrenaline pumped through her body. An instant later, the phone went dark.

Closing it, she wrapped the cord around it. She picked up the blank paper she had at the table and used it to conceal the phone from the windows. Trying for nonchalance, she walked over to return it to where she found it. Her legs felt like gelatin and her entire body shook, but she ignored everything. The phone had to disappear again. The risk was too great otherwise. She buried it the same way it had been when she'd found it.

"What are you doing?" the guard demanded.

Nyx hadn't heard the door open and started. How much had he seen? She went for an explanation that allowed plausible deniability. "I'm putting away the paper. I had it in case I needed to make notes." She held up the blank sheets so he could see them, then laid them on top of the cords, and shut the drawer. It didn't close completely.

She held her breath. Did he believe her?

For an eternity, he stared, as if weighing her words. "Señor Vargas wants you back in your room. Move." He indicated the door where he stood waiting.

Her legs still trembled, but she followed orders. She was more than ready to return to the suite. It was embarrassing, but Nyx felt safer when Lurch was nearby. Besides, he'd be climbing the walls.

The guard remained quiet, and Nyx was happy not to have to respond to questions. Her nerves were strung so tightly that it took all her attention to put one foot in front

of the other.

She needed to tell Lurch she'd sent an SOS, but how did she do that without tipping off anyone who might be eavesdropping?

Problem two, what was his response going to be? She knew how her brother would react. He'd be furious that she took a risk like that when he was around to handle it. Nyx suspected Lurch would feel the same way. He would want her to stand by passively and let him take care of everything.

She understood. He was the one with Special Forces training and experience. He was the one good enough at his job to be assigned to a covert ops unit. The lessons her dad and brother had given her were a drop in the bucket compared to Lurch's skills.

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But Nyx was the one out of the room. She was the one who found the phone. Was she supposed to let the opportunity slip away because Lurch wasn't there to send the text?

She was pretty confident about what his answer to that would be, and her chin went up.

Shit. She'd been so worried about an imaginary argument that she'd forgotten something basic. Recon the location. She should have been memorizing the route through the hacienda.

Lurch would have made note of their route when they'd been brought to the suite, but the more intel they had, the better. Nyx worked on nailing down the turns they took, and how many feet between them. It was a large hacienda.

She wondered if Lurch already had the layout of the estate. If his assignment involved Vargas, the intel reports he read before inserting would likely have included a blueprint. Since he was meeting the drug lord at the ruins, his op might be to shut down the flow of illegal narcotics. Nyx kept track of the route anyway. It was stupid to make assumptions.

The guard gestured for her to climb the stairs, and then he indicated she turn right. She knew which room was theirs. The two armed men standing on either side of it was a dead giveaway. As they neared, the men came to attention, suggesting that her escort had rank over them.

It might mean nothing, but maybe they could use that somehow.

One of them opened the door for her. When she hesitated, her watchdog shoved her inside. Nyx stumbled over the threshold.

Lurch strode toward her, but stopped abruptly, raising his hands to shoulder-height. She didn't need to glance behind her to know that someone had pointed a weapon at him. Maybe at her, too.

Without another word being spoken, the door closed, and she heard the lock turn. She was back in her prison, and her cellmate looked pissed.

Case watched Nyx flail. She steadied herself before he could reach her and he came to a stop, two assault rifles and a pistol aimed at his chest encouraging the decision. He raised his hands, showing he had no plans to attack, but they appeared wary. It wasn't a surprise. He was furious over the way she was shoved and couldn't manage a neutral expression.

He wanted to check her over, make sure she was unhurt, but he kept his eyes on the three men. They were the threat.

As soon as the door closed, Case turned his attention to Nyx. She appeared uninjured, but he went to her, gently clasping her shoulders, and asked, "Are you all right?"

Her lips wobbled as she nodded and he pulled her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her, and rocking. To his surprise, she hugged him back, holding on fiercely. It restoked his anger. Nyx was no one's pushover, and those assholes had scared her enough to leave her clinging to him. Corraling his temper, Case made soothing noises and pressed a kiss onto the top of her head. He didn't stop until her grip let up.

With one last hug, he eased her back. More calmly than he had earlier, Case asked, "Are you okay?"

“Yes. They didn’t do anything to me.” Nyx stayed in the circle of his arms, her hands resting loosely at his waist.

“Where have you been all day?”

“Señor Vargas gave me a research project.”

“Explain,” he ordered. Her lips thinned, probably over his tone, but she didn’t pull away.

“He learned that I worked for the Paladin League. Señor Vargas was aware I was assigned to search for the Lost Treasure and he was curious about what you knew. I told him you didn’t believe in chasing shadows and probably didn’t know much about the treasure.”

Case’s lips curved. Damn, he liked her. She was smart enough to convey the information he needed without giving anything away and she’d provided him with an opening to ask the question he needed answered. “Refresh my memory on this treasure.”

Her smile almost looked real. “I knew you weren’t listening when I told you about it.”

“Fireball, I always listen to you. I just don’t always retain everything you tell me. Come on, remind me about this missing treasure.”

She nodded. “In 1820, the revolutionaries were closing in on Trujillo. The Spanish viceroy packed up everything he could get his hands on—jewels, gold, artwork, and other valuables—loaded it all on an English ship with guards and sent it to Spain.”

“An English ship? My degree might be in math, but I thought England and Spain

fought wars against each other.”

Nyx caught the piece of personal intel he slipped her. He saw it in the slight change of her expression, but she didn’t comment. “You’re not wrong, but the viceroy wanted the goods out of Puerto Jardin before the country fell out of his control and the Spanish ships were full. He paid the English captain an impressive sum, had the treasure transported from Trujillo to the port, and sent soldiers to ensure the English didn’t steal anything.”

“But that didn’t work.”

Shaking her head, Nyx said, “No. The English crew killed the Spaniards and stole the treasure. They were hunted down. The crew was tortured for information and then put to death. The captain and his first mate were spared to recover the treasure, but they escaped instead. When they were recaptured in 1821, both men were executed.”

“And the treasure was never found?”

“That’s the story. People have hunted for it for two hundred years.”

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Case muttered a curse. If the Paladin League had sent someone to look for the treasure, that meant they believed it could be found. He didn't like it, and he hated that Vargas was interested. How the hell had he discovered why Nyx was down here?

"How'd Señor Vargas hear about the treasure?" he asked.

Nyx's hands tightened at his waist and then she shrugged. "I don't know, but others are looking for it. A Norwegian treasure hunter for one, although he's out of the picture now. Given that a piece from the cache went up for auction not too long ago, it's likely there are others. The present-day worth is estimated at around one billion US dollars"

His blood ran cold. If Vargas thought Nyx could get the treasure for him, he wouldn't let her go. And nothing Case did or said would change his mind.

Chapter 12

Archer sat at the desk in his command center, the second office hidden behind the bookcases in his show office. While his public space at Paladin League headquarters was all light colors, his second office suited him better. The desk was dark wood, not space-age shaped white metal, the floor was wood, not marble, and he had computers and monitors readily available.

Here, he could spread files out across his desk and work.

Only one other person knew of this office. His assistant. Ms. Pressley had come over with him from ARC, and he trusted her as much as he trusted anyone.

There were times he missed the Agency for Reconnaissance and Covert-ops. Like today. If he were still with ARC, Archer would be able to pick up the phone and request all the intel available on the mysterious Fuentes.

The limitations at the Paladin League were real, but Archer preferred his current position to his former. There were fewer life-and-death situations.

That said, it was Sunday afternoon, and he was at the office. Not his ideal way to end the weekend.

The notepad in front of him had everything he knew about the ghost who went by Fuentes. The man sought the Lost Treasure of Trujillo, but no one had seen him. None of Archer's operatives could provide an age or a description of the man's appearance. They weren't even able to pin down if he was Puerto Jardinese.

He didn't like having so little information. It didn't allow him to maneuver or to head off trouble before it could strike at his employees. Archer had three on assignment in Puerto Jardin now, and there'd already been an incident. He didn't want another.

Not when there was only one he believed could handle herself in a high-stakes situation.

Nyx Templeton. Her background and her skillset would make her an asset to his organization. Her education, though, made him question changing her status from contractor to full-time employee. Geoarchaeology was something he only needed a few times a year. She did have archaeology knowledge, but would she be happy limited to that more often than not?

With a slight shrug, he returned to his current complication. Nyx could wait.

Fuentes was an enigma, a shadow. A potential threat. Archer picked up his pen and

circled Fuentes twice.

He needed answers before the man learned about Francesca, Nyx, and Ellis.

It might be time to send in one of his operatives, someone who wasn't primarily a historian or archaeologist.

Archer considered his options, made a decision, and reached for the phone atop his desk. Bothering his assistant at home on a Sunday would earn him a reprimand when she returned to the office, but he did it anyway. When she answered, he said, "Ms. Pressley, set up a meeting with Iona Desmond for tomorrow morning, please."

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it," she said and disconnected.

Slowly, Archer returned the phone to its cradle. From the time the Paladin League purchased the brooch at auction, he'd known there would be others aware that it was part of the missing treasure. Leaving his trio in Trujillo was a risk, but he wasn't ready to recall them. Not yet. Francesca was his best archivist. Ellis his best art historian. Nyx his only geoarchaeologist.

If what was reported to have been part of the Lost Treasure was recovered, the cultural significance would be immense. The Spanish viceroy had looted the country of Puerto Jardin, taking anything of value, whether it be church artwork or indigenous figurines made from gold.

The emergency line rang. "Yes?"

"Archer, it's Frankie. Nyx never returned to the hotel. Have you heard from her?"

"No, she hasn't called."

“She should have been here hours ago,” Francesca said.

In the background, Archer heard Ellis echo her. “Hours!”

He turned to one of his computers, tapped a few commands, and waited for the screen to open. Archer zeroed in on Trujillo, Puerto Jardin. Two Paladin League phones happily pinged. He searched for the third, scrolling in and out.

He couldn’t locate it. His stomach tightened. Where was Nyx?

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Archer digitally traveled the route between Trujillo and the ruins near San Isidro, hoping to see her phone ping the system. It didn't.

A second search yielded the same results as the first.

"Archer!" Frankie all but shouted.

"What?" he asked with a calm he didn't feel.

"What do you want us to do? Should we look for Nyx?"

"No." That required a reason, or he'd have a mutiny. "If Nyx returns to the hotel and you're not there, she'll begin searching for you. All of you will be going in circles. Best to wait. Stay where you're at."

"But what if Nyx needs help?"

"I have contacts. I'll begin a search. Stay where you are," he repeated, imbuing the last sentence with all his authority, every bit of command he'd learned at ARC. Without waiting for further argument, he disconnected.

Who did he have near San Isidro?

Archer was contemplating his options when the emergency line signaled the arrival of a text message. He frowned.

He glanced at the phone, then returned his gaze for a second, longer look.

When Nyx messaged, she used complete sentences with proper grammar and punctuation. She was anal about it. What he read was a mess. Archer wanted to dismiss it as a ruse, but he didn't believe it was someone pretending to be his missing geoarchaeologist. No, it had all the hallmarks of a woman desperately trying to get word out without being caught.

Nyx was the hostage of a notoriously violent drug lord, and she wasn't alone.

Archer reached for his secure line. When his call was answered, he said, "Captain Nguyen, I have an assignment for you."

Chapter 13

Case ran Nyx through her day multiple times. Her story remained consistent, but he had a feeling she was holding something back. At least she wasn't a practiced liar. He'd dealt with enough of those to last a lifetime. Still, it irritated the shit out of him that she was lying by omission.

He scowled at her, and Nyx's chin went up. Now she was angry, too.

Good. It was only fair.

Ignoring the frisson of heat, Case mentally reviewed the report she'd given. He decided she hadn't struck a deal with Vargas to save her own ass. There'd been nothing evasive when they'd discussed her meeting with the drug lord. When had she started tiptoeing around?

The library. When he tried to pin her down about her research, that's when she'd become vague. Had she discovered something about the treasure? Was that the secret she was protecting? He wanted that to be true a little too much, but something had happened in the library that she didn't want to tell him.

Another thought occurred to him, and it punctured his anger. “Did someone put his hands on you?”

Nyx’s chin lowered, and she shook her head. “No! No one even made me feel uncomfortable. Not that way.” He must have appeared dubious because she tacked on, “I promise, hon.”

He studied her for a moment, decided she was being truthful, and relaxed a fraction. “What aren’t you telling me, Fireball?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She didn’t meet his gaze, looking everywhere except at him. Yeah, Nyx was a terrible liar.

Case felt his temper climb again and worked to rein it in. The fact she was bad at it must mean she didn’t do it very often. He needed to get the full story, though, and he didn’t want to risk an audience for this discussion.

He took her hand, half expecting her to pull free. Instead, she held on tightly. She was scared, and it wasn’t an act. “Come on,” he said, and tugged her into motion. She followed him silently.

Leading her through the bedroom and into the bathroom, Case let go of her hand, and put the shower on full blast. “Okay. Let’s try again. What aren’t you telling me?”

Stepping closer to him, Nyx said quietly, “I found an old cell phone in the library.”

With one sentence, she gave him an attitude adjustment. She wasn’t omitting details to hide the truth from him. She’d omitted details because he might not have found all the spy gear.

Case ran a hand through his hair. Damn, he was so fucking used to being lied to that

it hadn't occurred to him that this was the reason. It should have.

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“The battery was dead, but it had a charging cord. This was late in the afternoon and I didn’t have much time. I plugged it in long enough to get a little juice. I sent Archer, my boss, an SOS text.”

“How’d you get a cell signal out here? I’m guessing it wasn’t a satellite phone.”

“I didn’t get a cell signal. It connected to the hacienda’s Wi-Fi.”

Case felt a chill go through him. It took effort to keep his voice low and even. “You connected to the house Wi-Fi?”

She shook her head. “The phone did it while I wasn’t paying attention. They must not have changed the router password for at least ten or fifteen years. That’s my guesstimate on the age of the device.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you meant to connect or not. If Vargas is monitoring his home network, you were picked up.”

“Yes,” Nyx said slowly. “I never thought the phone would auto-connect, not after so many years.”

It surprised Case, too. As paranoid as Vargas was, he’d have thought the router login would change regularly. If not, then at least when the equipment was upgraded. “How long were you on the network?”

As she grimaced, the water sputtered. “I’m not sure. It took a while to type out the message and longer for it to send, so probably more than five minutes.”

“Fuck.”

“No one burst into the library or harangued me afterward. They must not have noticed, and I put the phone back where I found it.”

Taking her shoulders lightly in his hands, Case leaned forward. “Just because they’re not checking in real time, doesn’t mean someone isn’t monitoring a log after the fact. With the phone as old as you say it is, it’s going to stand out. None of the dudes working here are carrying around an antique mobile.”

She nodded. “I know. It seemed like a reasonable risk to take, Lurch.”

“Case.” She stared up at him. “When no one can overhear us, you can call me Case. That’s my first name. But only when no one can hear, okay?”

“Understood. Case.”

He liked hearing her use his name, and he had to shake off the sensation. “Is there anything else you didn’t tell me?”

“No, except—” Nyx paused.

“Come on, Nyx. We’re supposed to be working together. What else?”

Another hesitation before she said, “I can’t be completely certain the message was sent. The mobile went dead an instant after the progress bar showed complete, but I’ve never used a dumb phone before.”

That was a problem he’d think about later. “You messaged Archer, no one else?”

“Only Archer. He has an emergency number, and he required us to memorize it. I’m

not sure I know another phone number without looking it up in my contacts list.” Her small smile was self-deprecating.

The water cut out and came on again. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s everything, Case. I can probably come up with more details about the patrol if you want to ask specific questions, but I forgot to memorize the path through the house until my escort had me more than halfway back to the room. I’m sorry I missed that opportunity.”

Case found himself staggered. She was apologizing for not paying attention to the layout? “It’s okay. I can get us out of the hacienda. That’s never been a problem. The issue is the wall surrounding the estate.”

“I’ll do better,” Nyx said and there was a fierce note in her voice.

She seemed to need a response. “I know you will.”

That cleared her expression and his Fireball beamed up at him. He’d never met a woman like Nyx Templeton before. He wasn’t sure there was anyone else like her.

Befuddled, Case reached into the shower to turn off the water and fought off the urge to kiss her.

Nyx stayed on the opposite side of the sitting room from Case and tried to work up some interest in the television. She didn’t have much success since he was more enticing, especially with only a towel on.

Washing their clothes in the bathtub had been her idea, but she hadn’t considered the ramifications. Case had his towel, and she wore nothing except his fatigue shirt. Something about not wearing any panties while he was half-naked aroused her.

Something. As if he wasn't sexy has hell. As if she hadn't been attracted to him from the first instant she'd sat down at his table four days ago.

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She focused harder on the TV. Relationships were for after she was finished with school. How many times had she listened to her mom lament not getting her degree thanks to husband number one? How many times had her mom told her to do what she wanted to do in life before finding a man?

Nyx realized her gaze had traveled back to Case and sighed. He tempted her to throw aside all the caution she'd learned watching her mom deal with her exes. Watching her mom handle everything alone because Nyx's dad was off on some top-secret Special Forces mission and gone for six, eight, ten months out of the year.

Besides, even if she wanted to hook up with Case, there were issues. Like the fact he was on an op. He was her brother's best buddy. She was working for the Paladin League. And maybe the biggest nope of all, there could be cameras or mics in the room that Case hadn't found.

It would just be her luck to have her first time filmed by a drug cartel and uploaded to some porn site. Try finding a job with that hanging over your head.

"You're frowning," Case said, dragging her out of her thoughts.

"Sorry. I'm thinking too hard." And that was the truth. It was just that she was thinking about Case cashing in her V-card and not about their predicament. She changed the subject. "Do you think our clothes will be dry in the morning? Damp clothes might be worse than smelly ones."

Case shrugged. "It's too late now."

“Thanks,” she said saccharinely. “I realize that.” Immediately, she shook her head. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be bitchy. My nerves are getting frayed.”

He rose and crossed to her. Nyx found herself mesmerized, half hoping his towel stayed in place, half hoping it didn’t. Case might have a lean, runner’s build, but his shoulders were broad, and he had muscles. So many delicious muscles that she wanted to touch and stroke and kiss and— He sat next to her on the couch and rational thought left her brain. Instead, all she could think about was his tousled blond hair, serious blue eyes, and full, kissable lips.

“What has you on edge?”

“Right now? I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow. Someone will be sent to bring me back to the library and I’ll have to research historical documents again. What if I don’t find anything about the treasure? The odds are good that nothing is there. What does Señor Vargas do to us then?”

“I don’t know.” He put his arm around her, cuddling her into his side. “I’m going to do everything in my power to keep you safe, Fireball. Believe it.”

For a moment, words escaped her. All Nyx could think about was the warmth of his bare skin against her. She had to give her brain a hard kick. “I do believe it. But today we were separated. It’s likely he’ll do the same thing tomorrow. If I’m in trouble downstairs, you won’t know anything about it if you’re up here.”

He frowned. After a moment, he said, “Vargas will probably bring you in for an update before returning you to the library. Tell him you can work faster if I’m helping you.”

“Why would he believe that?”

“I can read Spanish.”

“So can his men.”

“Yeah.”

Nyx tried to think of an excuse to have Case in the library with her, but it took her full concentration to keep from reaching out and touching him. He had a light smattering of hair across his chest. She wondered how it would feel against her fingers. He also wore a silver chain that landed below his pecs with some kind of Norse-looking pendant at the end of it. No doubt he was so used to his dog tags that it felt strange to not have something on, but he couldn't wear them on a covert op. She was tempted to reach out and touch the pendant. And the skin around it.

“Tell him,” Case said slowly, “that I've helped you before and I know what sort of thing you're looking for. That I have experience with historical research.”

He also had a light line of hair that started below his navel and traveled underneath the towel tied at his waist. It fascinated her, and she curled her fingers into the palms of her hands before she did something stupid.

“Nyx?”

“Hmm?” She didn't manage to raise her gaze.

“Don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you want to untie the towel and climb on top of me.” His voice was thick and her head jerked up. His eyes were hot. “I'm willing, but if I missed a camera, I'd

rather we didn't entertain Vargas's men."

She stared at him blankly and then the words registered. Nyx felt her cheeks become scalding hot. What did she say? She'd been caught gawking at him. Her own voice was thick when she choked out, "Right. No entertainment."

Nyx tried to ease away unobtrusively, but Case squeezed her shoulder and she stayed where she was. She wasn't sure if it was because he wanted her close or he was worried about some hypothetical camera, but she didn't want distance between them either. Not yet. Even if she was completely mortified.

She better start reciting the reasons she always said no because it seemed she needed a reminder about her goals.

Chapter 14

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Nyx stood in front of Vargas's desk and tried not to think about how uncomfortable her damp clothes were. She had more important worries than a little chafing. Case wanted her to convince the drug lord to allow him to help her in the library today and who knew how the man would react to that?

Then there was the thing with the phone. If the Wi-Fi was monitored, and if they figured out she'd connected on the old mobile, Nyx might find herself in deep shit with no one to help her.

She looked around the office, trying to find something to absorb her attention, but it was the same as yesterday, right down to the two guards who stood on either side of the entrance. This time, she didn't wait long before Vargas strode into the room. He barely spared her a glance as he rounded the desk, unfastened the button at the waist of his suit coat, and took his seat. Only then did his dead eyes settle on her. "Your clothes are wet."

"I washed them last night. They were starting to smell." He spoke in Spanish, so she did as well.

Vargas studied her for a moment and then shrugged. "Enrique," he said, turning to one of the guards at the entrance. "Tell the housekeeper to bring the visitor clothing Señor Ramos purchased last year to our guests' suite."

With a nod, the man left his position.

"Perhaps there is something there that will work for you and Señor Case."

“Gracias,” Nyx said.

With a wave of his hand, Vargas said, “I do not appreciate a stench.”

Uncertain how to respond, Nyx nodded. The drug lord didn’t speak for a long moment, studying her intently. Did he know about the phone? Was he hoping she’d implicate herself somehow? She wouldn’t. She could remain quiet. Squaring her shoulders, Nyx waited.

“Did you learn anything about the treasure?” he asked.

“No, nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Something in the way he said that made Nyx’s breath catch. She nearly mentioned she was working on her degree in geoarchaeology, and that while she knew how to research, she wasn’t an expert. But she stopped herself. If she said that, she made herself expendable. “Sorry, Señor Vargas. I found nothing.”

“I had someone check the library. You didn’t accomplish much research yesterday.”

Nyx saw an opportunity, and she took it. “I was uneasy by myself and that made it hard for me to focus. I kept jumping at every noise.”

“You don’t strike me as a timid woman.”

“I’m usually not, but I’d feel safer—and have an easier time concentrating—if I had Charlie by my side.”

Those hard eyes made Nyx want to fidget, but she remained still, meeting Vargas’s

stare. It lasted a while, long enough for the guard to return and resume his post near his compatriot. Long enough for it to become difficult to swallow because of how constricted her throat was.

Vargas leaned back in his chair, the pose indolent. “You believe you’ll be able to comb through the documents faster if Señor Case is in the library with you?”

“Sí,” Nyx said while nodding. “Not only will I be able to stop jumping, but Charlie can assist me. We’ve been together long enough for him to know what’s helpful and what isn’t.” That flat stare combined with the silence made her stomach knot up. Did he realize she was trying to maneuver him? A man like Vargas wouldn’t take that well.

“Or he might be a bigger distraction than your nerves.”

“I don’t believe he will be, Señor.”

More silence. More staring. Why didn’t he just give her an answer? Nyx wasn’t good at game playing and that’s what this was.

Clearing her throat, she decided to take a small risk. “When we spoke of the treasure yesterday, you mentioned you sometimes like to play long shots. Might I ask you why this one, and why now?”

His expression never changed, but Nyx felt as if she were walking on thin ice. She could almost hear it cracking.

Vargas straightened in his chair and leaned forward. “We’ve had a Norwegian adventurer, you and your Paladin League, Señor Torres’s second in command, and now Señor Torres’s men seeking the Treasure of Trujillo. This many people looking in such a short period?” He shrugged. “Where there’s smoke and all that.”

Nyx nodded. It made sense when he put it that way. “My boss at the Paladin League believes it’s unlikely I’ll find the treasure. He merely sent me to check.”

“It seems he and I share the same thought on this quest.”

Nyx would swear Vargas’s lips turned up the slightest amount. Maybe. “It seems so,” she agreed. Except that Archer wanted these items in a museum and Vargas would sell them for his own personal gain. “My boss is playing a lottery ticket.”

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“With a billion-dollar prize.”

Nodding, she asked, “Why do you think that pile of papers would have any information about the treasure?” His gaze hardened, and she tacked on, “It might help me narrow down what to watch for as I skim through the records.”

“Those historical documents are from the right period and they belonged to my predecessor’s late grandfather, Diego Ramos. The man worked as the foreman on the archaeological dig at the Huarona ruins. Until the civil war shut down the excavation, of course.”

“Of course,” Nyx agreed with him again. “The elder Señor Ramos had an interest in Puerto Jardinese history?” She asked as if she knew nothing about the man. It wasn’t true. She’d heard stories.

“An intense interest, particularly in the legends. The Lost Treasure of Trujillo has definitely reached that status.”

“Sí, it has,” she said slowly. Nyx was much more curious about those papers sitting in the library now than she’d been five minutes ago. The library. Case wanted her to get him out of the suite and into the library. “Now that I have an idea of what I’m looking at, I’m certain the research will go faster. Will you allow my fiancé to help me?”

There was a long pause, and when Vargas spoke, he didn’t answer her question. “You will join me for lunch. Sort through the clothes the housekeeper delivers and see if you can find something to wear. Enrique, return Señorita Templeton to her room.”

Case prowled the library, looking for additional listening devices. He'd already found one mic and a camera. It wouldn't surprise him if there were more. His best guess was the bugs weren't here yesterday but had been added after Nyx asked Vargas to allow him to assist her.

The drug lord had stalled her, sent her back to the suite, and then delayed her further with lunch—a meal he hadn't been invited to. It was plenty of time for Vargas's men to wire the room. Case's gaze went to Nyx. She sat at the table, reading some kind of document. Her hair was still braided, keeping it out of her way, but she was wearing jeans, a black strapless tank top, and over that, an oversized, gauzy white shirt.

The way it fell left her shoulder bare. Case fought the urge to go to her, lean over, and press his lips to her exposed skin. He'd never gotten hot over a woman's shoulder before, but it was Nyx. Everything about her was attractive to him. Even her stubbornness.

Shaking off the desire, he refocused on his search. His number one priority had to be her safety. His op was second. Taking his Fireball to bed wasn't on his to-do list. No matter how much he wanted her.

Sleeping beside her was testing him, especially last night. Somewhere around one a.m., she'd rolled over and ended up with one of her legs on top of his thighs. By the time the early morning sunlight had drifted into the room, waking him, Nyx was snuggled against his side and he had an erection. They were both pretending it hadn't happened.

He found another camera near the window. Case wasn't pulling the spy gear, but he wanted to know where it was and how much they were dealing with.

The patrol passed by the window, matching the timing and pattern Nyx had shared with him yesterday. Case didn't like it. Vargas was too smart not to change things up.

If the goal was to lull him into a false sense of security it wasn't going to happen.

Case returned to the table, picking up the bowl sitting in the center, and checking it out. No sign of any electronics. It looked old, and there was a painting of some kind of person on the side. "This is an artifact, isn't it?"

Nyx looked up from the document she was reading. "Yes, I think its late Nazca."

"Late Nazca? When was that?"

She straightened in her chair. "About 550 to 750 AD."

He froze, then slowly, carefully, returned the bowl to the center of the table. "I didn't realize it was that old. It has a small crack."

Nyx's lips curved. "Relax, hon, I saw that yesterday. I know you didn't do it."

He wasn't easy to read. By the time he was in grade school, Case had learned to conceal, to hide, but Nyx had seen right through his mask. It left him edgy, and he resumed his search.

The library wasn't all that large, but it was stuffed with books, artifacts, and knickknacks. He could see why she'd been curious enough to go through the drawers. If she'd had more time, she likely would have searched the shelves and among the books. Case found another camera near the ladder and made the peace sign for whoever was monitoring it before moving on.

He wanted to go through the drawers and see if Nyx missed something, but with all the bugs, that wasn't happening.

There was a large vase in the final corner of the room. "How old is that?" he asked,

pointing to it.

“A few centuries older than the bowl.” She sounded distracted, and he glanced over. She was rapt over whatever she was reading.

Case returned his attention to the corner, examining it from a distance. He didn’t want to know how much a vase that old and that big cost to replace. Besides, pinning down every camera and microphone wasn’t needed.

“We have three cameras and five mics in the room,” he told her.

Nyx looked up, expression serious. “Where are they?”

He pointed them out, and she turned, studying each one.

Standing, she went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist before pressing close. Reflex had him returning the embrace. Her kiss was slow, tender, and his hands tightened. She kissed her way to near his ear. “Wide-angle lenses?” she asked, voice barely a breath.

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“Doesn’t look like it.” He spoke even softer than she had. “Cheap stuff.”

Another kiss, this one at his temple. “Blind spots are near the door, window, and partial on the table, correct?”

For a moment, he paused. She’d nailed it. Maybe a geoarchaeologist would pick up on that. “Correct. Why?”

“Just wait.” He got another lingering kiss on his lips before she turned out of his arms.

Case stared after her and then shook his head and went over to join her. Shifting a chair so that he would have a view of both the library door and the window, he took a seat. It put him close enough to Nyx to feel her body heat. “What do you want me to do?”

She picked up a pile of papers a good two inches thick and put it down in front of him. “You can start with this stack. We’re looking for references to the treasure, the revolution, the Spanish viceroy, a ship called the Bonny Martha, its crew, La Convento de Madres Fieles, and the first mother superior at that convent, Mother Bonifacia Emilia.”

“That’s quite a list.”

Nyx smiled and Case felt it in his chest. “Tell me about it. Since we don’t know what we’re looking for, we have to cast a wide net. The time frame we’re interested in is 1820 to 1821, although Señor Vargas said all the papers are from that period.”

“Two years?”

“The treasure was stolen in 1820. The crew was hunted down and arrested, but the captain and his first mate escaped and were loose for a while. They were recaptured and executed in 1821. Anything in that window could hold a clue to where they hid their prize.”

“Got it.”

She knocked over a stack of papers, sending them all over the floor. Dozens of pages. “Oh, no!” Nyx dropped to the floor to start collecting them, half crawling under the table.

Case started to help her.

“It’s okay,” she said from underneath the table. “I have it. You can stay put.”

Then he got it. She’d told him to just wait. Just wait and he’d understand why she was asking about blind spots. Now he knew. Nyx had found something she didn’t want Vargas to have. “No,” he said, getting to his feet, and using his back to block the camera that would have the best chance at picking something up. “I want to help.”

“Really, I’m fine.” She made all kinds of noise as she scooped up papers.

Case realized she was trying to conceal her actions from the microphones as well and started talking, making it harder for their eavesdroppers to home in on what she was doing. “Well, if you’re sure you don’t need any help, I’ll stay out of your way. Be careful, though. Don’t hit your head on the table, especially when you crawl out. That box apron is longer than usual.”

“I’m being careful,” Nyx said as she scooted into the open. “I think I have

everything.” She handed him a pile of papers and he took them before reaching out with his free hand to help her to her feet.

“You’re good?” he asked, wanting to know if she had what she wanted.

“Good. Let’s get back to work.”

Reading historical documents was as bad as Case feared. The ink had faded, the language was flowery, and the writing had a lot of swirls and curlicues. He’d rather deal with numbers than words any day of the week.

Nyx distracted him. What had she taken? Where had she hidden it?

He drifted from the documents to her. Even without makeup, her face was damn near flawless. The one thing keeping her from total perfection was a tiny birthmark on the left side of her chin. After another moment of consideration, Case decided it wasn’t a flaw after all. Not when it tempted him to kiss her on that spot.

It would be a quick jump from there to her lips. He dropped his gaze to the papers on the table in front of him. Fantasies about her mouth had gotten him in trouble since they’d met and he didn’t need to get hard now.

Case forced himself through a couple of pages, but it didn’t take long before he watched Nyx again. This time she caught him.

“Did you need something?”

She legit didn’t realize. “Just wondering about this research thing. You love it, huh?”

Her lips curved, and again Case felt it. “No, I don’t love it, but it’s necessary. Toughen up.” Nyx’s smile widened. “You’ll survive the boredom.”

“I don’t know. I could fall asleep, tip out of the chair, and hit my head.”

“Lucky for you that you’re so hardheaded.”

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It took an instant to realize she was teasing him. Case couldn't remember a woman ever doing that. Sure, the guys on his team gave him shit because he looked young, but women? Some flirted with him or teased him sexually, but they didn't gently rib him like Nyx was doing. Maybe he was weird, but he liked it.

"You'd think a fiancée would offer some sympathy to her betrothed."

"Sorry, hon, you volunteered to help me. No sympathy for you." Nyx pushed her braid behind her shoulder. "Señor Vargas worried you'd be a distraction. I convinced him that you wouldn't be. Let's not prove him right when he asks me for a progress report, okay?"

She said it with her smile in place, but Nyx wasn't joking any longer. She was concerned about Vargas if they didn't make a dent in these papers.

Case nodded. "Laser focused. I promise." Reaching over, he took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I can do this. We can do this."

He got back to work. This wasn't some school assignment he didn't want to do. This was about keeping his Fireball safe from a drug lord.

Chapter 15

Señor Vargas had sent a red evening dress, matching heels, and a makeup bag with her guards to the suite with instructions. She was to be ready in an hour and she was not to wear her hair in a braid. She'd gone with her usual top-of-the-head ponytail. It left most of her hair loose but also kept it out of her way. Mostly.

Nyx's hands shook as she raised the hem of her formal gown to go down the stairs. This was a scenario she hadn't thought to worry about and she had a good imagination.

The dress only had one shoulder and it fit her body closely, as if it had been tailored specifically to highlight her curves. It was elegant, but it was also sexy. Case had hated it. He'd nearly gotten himself shot trying to accompany her from the room when the guards arrived for her.

Because he'd thought the same thing she had. That she was possibly going to find herself used sexually. She didn't want to think the word rape, but it popped into her brain anyway.

She wobbled on the stairs, and one of Vargas's men caught her elbow, holding on until she regained her balance. "Gracias," she murmured, her throat too tight to manage more volume.

She didn't have a clue what was going on. Her questions—Case's demands—had gone unanswered.

They stopped in the foyer. The floor was beige and black marble, with two steps up to the entryway. Double wrought iron doors were surrounded by two windows and a half-circle window above it all, also covered with wrought iron. Nyx hadn't paid much attention to it on Saturday, but now she had nothing else to do.

Except worry.

The wait didn't last long. Vargas arrived in a tuxedo. If it weren't for his dead eyes, he might have been attractive, even with the scar on his face and the slightly crooked nose. She guessed he was close to fifty, which made him nearly twice her age. His dark, wavy hair appeared freshly trimmed, and his tux and dress shirt were pressed.

She was no expert, but the shirt studs appeared to be real gold. As he reached her, she smelled cigarettes. He must have just finished smoking.

He offered her his arm. Puzzled, Nyx took it. The gown had a court train which made walking extra difficult, especially for her. She wasn't used to dressing up. He was patient while she maneuvered the two shallow steps up to the door, and that was unexpected.

Nyx wished Case was with her, that he was the one in a tuxedo, offering her his arm. Then she'd be excited, wondering what surprise he had in store for her.

With Vargas, she didn't want any more shocks. The dress and her instructions were enough for one day. She wanted to know why they were headed to the front entry and why she was in an evening gown. One of her guards moved forward to open the door. A limo was idling in the circular drive, the fading evening sun glinting off the metal.

She needed both hands to lift the hem of the dress, and the drug lord quietly waited for her at the car. The guard who'd caught her elbow earlier remained at her side, seemingly ready to rescue her again if necessary. Nyx was flummoxed. What was happening? Why was she being treated as a guest and not a prisoner?

When she reached the limo, he gestured for her to get inside.

Her stomach knotted. Leaving the grounds without Case couldn't be good for her. But she didn't see a way to avoid it, not with Vargas, his driver, and two guards nearby. Then there were his patrols, the men on the wall, and assorted other armed gangsters. Another gesture, this one impatient, and Nyx gathered up her skirt.

She tried to be graceful, but the gown tripped her up despite her best efforts, and she fell into the car. Luckily, she landed with three-quarters of her butt on the seat and slid over to the far side. It took some effort to arrange her clothing, so it wasn't

twisted around her legs.

Vargas sat beside her, and his two men took the seat opposite them. It dawned on her then that they were dressed in tuxedos as well. Bodyguards for their boss, not prison guards for her.

The partition between the passenger compartment and the driver was raised, but Nyx felt the car rock slightly as the man got behind the wheel. In a moment, they were underway. She wanted answers, but it was hard to think clearly. She needed to be better. Her dad had taught her to contain the fear. She could handle herself.

It took time. They'd left the compound and were driving on a narrow two-lane asphalt road before she gathered enough courage to speak. "Where are we going?"

Without glancing at her, Vargas said, "Trujillo."

Which answered her question yet told her nothing. She doubted he was returning her to her hotel. Would she have a chance to escape?

As if reading her mind, the drug lord turned to her. "Before you consider doing anything foolish, I'd remind you that your fiancé remains on my property. He will feel the brunt of my anger should you do anything that displeases me."

Nyx nodded. "I understand."

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Escape was off the table, then. Case had gone out of his way to protect her, and she would do the same for him. No matter the personal cost.

They rode in silence. She kept her hands in her lap, fingers linked, and worked on compartmentalizing. Worrying wasn't going to help her, so she locked it away. It didn't want to stay buried. Acknowledge the fear—it was part of the human survival instinct—and then move past it. At least until it was safe to fall apart. Nyx needed her wits about her.

Once she felt in control, she asked, “Why are we going to Trujillo, Señor Vargas?”

His gaze settled on her. “For tonight, you will call me Julián.”

“All right,” she agreed easily as if the request didn't cause a spike of adrenaline. “Why are we going to Trujillo, Julián?”

“You're curious.” His voice was flat, giving her no hints whether he was angry.

“I don't like surprises.”

“No? Not even ones that might be fun?”

Nyx was left fighting the fear again. What was Vargas's idea of fun? “I used to search for my Christmas presents when I was a child so I knew what I was getting. I didn't even want the gifts to be a surprise.”

One side of his mouth kicked up, but she wasn't sure how to label the expression.

Sort of a smile, sort of sad. “My daughter was the same. You would have had much in common with her.”

What did that mean? Something about his demeanor had her hesitant, but Nyx asked anyway. “Would have had?”

“She died ten years ago. She would have been your age had she lived.”

Shit, she’d poked at something she should have left alone. “I’m sorry.”

Vargas nodded once. He went back to ignoring her, and she stared out the window of the limo. She still hadn’t gotten an answer as to why they were traveling to Trujillo, but after this exchange, Nyx decided to bide her time. It was at least a ninety-minute drive, and as it became darker, they’d need to go slower.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to suss out the situation. The two guards across from her seemed bored. They didn’t give her any hints. Turning her head enough to see the drug lord, Nyx studied him. His demeanor gave nothing away, but she tried to find the vibe.

Wound up. Practically vibrating with anticipation? No, that wasn’t right. At least not in the sense she was thinking. It was more like someone preparing for battle. That kind of adrenaline. It raised more questions, and Nyx put them in the order she wanted to ask them. After Vargas got over her asking about his daughter.

She was beginning to wonder if he would tell her anything, no matter how she phrased her questions. His lack of communication made her uneasy. Was he planning to auction her off tonight?

How did sex trafficking work?

Where the fuck was Oz?

Case needed out of this room. Now. Once he was free, he would find Nyx and get her off this compound. He didn't know what kind of game Vargas was playing, but if that asshole touched her—or allowed anyone else to touch her—he'd kill the motherfucker.

The stricken expression on Nyx's face as she'd been escorted from the suite tormented him. So did the fact he'd been powerless to stop the situation. If he'd pushed any harder, he would be dead, and she'd be completely alone then. Damn it to hell.

Realizing his hands were fisted, Case forced himself to relax. He wouldn't be any use to his Fireball if he didn't regain control.

Time to lock it down. Time to think.

He didn't like the hallway as an exit because he couldn't see the position of the men, and he'd never clear the door before they were on him. But he could see where the balcony guards were standing because of all the glass.

Moving deeper into the bedroom, he did a quick check. Then Case did a second, longer look because he only saw one man on duty. There'd always been a pair. Until now.

He checked the time. Shift change had been about ten minutes ago. He'd been timing the movement of the guards since he and Nyx had been imprisoned. Maybe the second dude was late. Case would give it another ten minutes.

But if the situation stayed as is, he knew how he was getting out of the room.

Because of all the windows, there was a corresponding amount of curtains. When they were open, as they were now, there were thick gathers of fabric, including a nice deep one next to the door outside. The bedroom jutted out farther than the sitting room and that gave Case cover.

Quickly, he found Nyx's backpack and put their things in it. He didn't want to drag this with him, but he couldn't take her into the rainforest in a long dress. She needed a change of clothes, and he might as well bring everything.

Stashing the pack nearby, Case settled on a chair in the sitting room that allowed him a view of the windows in both rooms. He watched the man patrol, pacing back and forth across the patio. He appeared bored. Good. It was nearly dusk. The low level of light, the layout of the suite, and the guard's lack of interest in his job would all help Case get out of here. The sightlines from the wall to the balcony even worked in his favor. Between the distance and the encroaching darkness, they were unlikely to see anything.

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Ten minutes. No second guard.

Case got into position near the door. If he'd missed a camera, he wouldn't get far, but he was taking his chance.

He reached for the lock, soundlessly opened it and waited.

Slipping outside when it was clear, he closed the door behind him and eased into the corner of the house. The instant the guard appeared, Case acted. Landing a hard fist to the man's temple, he knocked him out and dragged him into the suite.

When he had the guy trussed up and stripped of weapons, he donned the shoulder holster over his T-shirt, tugged on the baseball cap and the backpack, and slung the strap of the M4 across his shoulder. There wasn't a lot of outdoor lighting, not near the suite, and it was nearly dark. He should be able to pass as one of the mercenaries hired by Vargas.

Case went outside and patrolled like the guard while he checked out the situation. Everything remained quiet. No one was paying any attention to the balcony.

There were no stairs on this side of the house, so he climbed over the railing. Hanging on to the wrought iron he lowered himself far enough to drop onto the small patch of grass below. Staying in the shadows, Case began searching for Nyx.

Getting her over the wall and off the property? That would take a diversion, a large one, but after he had his Fireball safely at his side, he'd find Oz and have his teammate contact the Big Dog.

No matter what it took, Nyx wasn't spending one more night here.

Chapter 16

Nyx didn't know anymore when she exited the limo than she had when she'd entered it. She stood in front of a neoclassical mansion lit up brighter than a star going supernova, her arm threaded through the drug lord's, and tried to make sense of things.

The circular drive was filled with limos. There was a line behind them waiting to drop off their passengers, while the ones in front of theirs were slowly driving away. In the center of the circle, there was a fountain with a bronze statue in the style of ancient Athens. Water gently cascaded, making a pleasant, relaxing sound, but her nerves were pulled too tight to appreciate it properly.

"I'm your date?" she asked, careful to keep her tone neutral.

Voice soft, the drug lord warned, "Tonight, you are not to contradict me, argue with me, or disagree with anything I say. Am I clear?"

"Understood," Nyx said, although nothing was clear to her. Was she supposed to be some kind of gold-digging trophy girlfriend who only kissed ass? Vargas hadn't answered any of the questions she'd put to him during the drive from his hacienda to here. She was floundering as to what he wanted from her—aside from agreeableness.

She didn't like feeling uncertain, but she was in over her head and had been since she was captured. At least at the hacienda she'd been able to rely on Case. Nyx wished he was here with her now.

"Shall we?" Vargas said, indicating the entrance.

Reluctantly, Nyx moved. It wasn't only being on a date with a drug kingpin that had her off balance. She'd grown up an Army brat and now she was a grad student. Formal parties weren't part of her lifestyle. Sure, the Paladin League had fundraisers for the rich and famous, but as a contractor, she'd never been asked to attend. How was she supposed to behave?

Vargas—no, Julián. She had to start thinking of him as Julián or she'd mess up. She didn't want to face his wrath over something so easy to avoid. Julián paused while she gathered her skirt with her free hand and then they ascended the two shallow steps to the front door. His tuxedoed bodyguards trailed them.

The foyer soared two stories and a curved staircase led to the second level. Carved wood and an ornate wrought-iron railing made it a showpiece. Parquet flooring stretched as far as she could see. There was a line, and Varg—Julián steered her to the end of it. Nyx decided it must be a receiving line like at weddings, but who were they greeting? The event's hosts?

The queue was surprisingly silent. Weren't lines at parties normally social? Or were things different in this financial class?

They weren't moving quickly and Nyx looked around, trying to be subtle about it. There were quite a few bodyguards in attendance. Then she stiffened. Up ahead were members of the presidential brigade. Not only were they Puerto Jardin's special forces, but they also acted as their version of the Secret Service.

She glanced up at Varg—Julián, but he ignored her. As they neared the head of the line, Nyx stiffened.

President Cardozo and his wife.

Adrián Cardozo was one of the most corrupt leaders Puerto Jardin had ever been

cursed with and they'd had more than their fair share.

Julián tightened his arm, bringing her arm closer to his body. When he had her attention, he issued a quiet warning. "Watch your facial expression. You will be delighted tonight."

Nyx nodded and tried to appear neutral. Delighted was beyond her acting abilities. Cardozo and men like him were the reason life was hard for all except the elite in Puerto Jardin. They lined their pockets with the aid money sent by the US and left the people it should have helped to fend for themselves.

"Do better," he hissed softly.

"I'm trying," she said and worked harder at hiding her distaste. She must have succeeded because the tension in his arm eased.

They reached the head of the line.

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“President Cardozo,” Julián said as he shook the man’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“You’re looking well, Señor Vargas.”

“Gracias, as are you and your lovely wife.” Julián tightened his arm enough to bring Nyx forward a step. “I’d like you to meet my companion, Nyx Templeton. She’s come to Puerto Jardin to do research. She works for the Paladin League.”

She forced a smile as she offered her hand. The Paladin League was a very small nonprofit. Why would Varg—Julián think Cardozo would have heard of it?

“What are you researching, Señorita?” Cardozo asked.

Before Nyx could answer, Julián replied. “She’s interested in a two-hundred-year-old legend. Perhaps you and I could meet later to discuss it.”

Nyx tried to work through how much it cost to host a seated dinner for two-hundred-and-fifty guests. This world was so far removed from hers that she didn’t have a frame of reference to guess a dollar figure.

She and Vargas had been seated at a table in the ballroom. A ballroom in a private home! They hadn’t rated high enough to sit in the dining room with Cardozo, and now they were mingling out on the patio while the space was prepared for dancing.

Var—Nyx stopped. Julián. She hated thinking of the drug lord by his first name. He wasn’t her friend. He was her captor, and he’d threatened Case. But she didn’t want

to see his reaction if she slipped.

Julián chatted with the gentleman in front of them in line at the outdoor bar. While she kept tabs on what they were talking about, she was still trying to do the math for dinner. Maybe the Puerto Jardinese government paid for the meal. Or maybe it wasn't as expensive as she thought.

She knew why she was obsessing over such a stupid detail. She didn't want to think about Julián's upcoming conversation with Cardozo.

It bothered her that Julián had mentioned it in context to her and the Paladin League. He was plotting something. She just didn't know what that was.

"What would you like to drink?" Julián asked as they reached the bartender.

"Do they have limonada?" There was no way she was drinking anything alcoholic tonight.

By the time they had their glasses, people were headed back inside the mansion, and Julián indicated they should join the throng.

Nyx was tired of her brain spinning. There were so many things about tonight that she didn't understand. When she was back at the hacienda, back with Case, she'd tell him and see if he could figure it out.

An orchestra was playing something she labeled as a waltz as they reentered the ballroom. Not an octet or a nonet. An orchestra. There had to be twenty-five musicians on the dais. Quite a few couples were dancing already, and Nyx identified one of them as the president and their hostess.

She felt out of place again. The only thing about this evening that she liked so far was

that Vargas—Julián, damn it—only spoke to her when he issued orders.

They strolled the ballroom, the bodyguards in position to protect their boss. Nyx finished her drink, but before she could find somewhere to set down the glass, a waiter magically appeared and relieved her of it. The evening could have been a dream. A mansion, a party, a prime-rib dinner, an elegant evening gown, and an orchestra—who wouldn't dream of attending such an event?

Unfortunately, it was more of a nightmare.

Julián kept them moving, but he only paused for a moment here or there if someone invited them into a conversation. She imagined this was what it was like to be a remora fish attached to a great white shark.

Her feet were starting to hurt, and she didn't understand the point of this endless circling.

Then something changed. Julián became more alert. "Come along," he ordered. As if she had a choice. While he seemed to be in no hurry, Nyx knew differently. It was in the tension of his body, in the barely discernable impatience she felt rolling off him.

Any boredom she felt vanished in an instant as Julián took her outside. There were few guests on this side of the house, although it was still well lit. The farther they moved from the mansion, the more uneasy Nyx became. Where was he taking her? Why?

"Um, where are we going?" Shit, she sounded as powerless as she felt.

Julián ignored her.

They were far from the party when Nyx realized they were following a man. He was

ahead of them by a wide amount of space, but there was no mistaking what was happening. He led them to the pool pavilion. She dragged her feet until Julián glared down at her. “Do not anger me,” he warned her, voice nearly a hiss.

Nyx considered fighting him, but she was hampered by heels and a gown that restricted her movement. Julián had his bodyguards. She needed to bide her time and find an opening.

She followed him into the pool pavilion.

It wasn't empty. President Cardozo and a few members of his brigade were already there. Nyx wasn't sure if that was a good sign or if it made her situation worse.

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“Does this suit you?” Cardozo asked.

“I am at your service, Señor Presidente.” Julián inclined his head.

Cardozo didn't waste time. “The Paladin League sent Señorita Templeton to locate the Treasure of Trujillo?”

“Sí, she's been researching for days in my library.”

“Many people have researched for many decades. That means nothing.”

“Señor Cardozo,” Julián said, his voice infused with respect. “You've heard the reputation of the Paladin League. Do you believe they'd send one of their archaeologists if they didn't believe they could locate the treasure?”

Nyx remained passive by sheer dint of will. Julián was slick. He'd made a statement, calling on the League's reputation, and then resorted to a question, letting Cardozo's imagination fill in the answer the drug lord wanted him to reach. If he were confronted later, Julián could say he didn't lie and it would be true.

“I didn't realize you had any historical documents,” Cardozo said.

“I inherited them from my predecessor, who inherited them from his grandfather. Diego Ramos was well known within archaeological circles, and he always had an interest in the legends of Puerto Jardin.”

Again, Julián was letting Cardozo jump to the conclusions he wanted the man to

reach. Nyx could nearly hear the wheels turning in Cardozo's head.

"What was the most recent estimate on the treasure's worth?"

"The last evaluation I saw put the total at one billion US dollars."

Nyx saw the president's eyes light up. Cardozo was the greediest of the pigs enriching themselves at the government trough.

"You've made a deal with Señorita Templeton." Cardozo's voice was flat.

Julián shrugged one shoulder. "Her fiancé is a guest in my home."

Cardozo laughed. "Julián, I like the way you operate." He sobered. "You're coming to me because you wish to strike a second bargain."

"Sí, Señor Presidente."

"The treasure in exchange for...?"

There was a longer pause. "A little birdie told me you're negotiating a weapons deal with the United States. Perhaps you could order a large supply of the Army's M4 replacement rifle. It might be that attaining this rifle would be worth handing over the Treasure of Trujillo."

Nyx nearly gasped, but she remembered Julián wanted her quiet and subservient. She pressed her lips tighter together and struggled to maintain a placid expression. That was the same weapon that Case was supposed to get for the drug lord. Had he decided to forget that route and go in this direction instead? What did this mean for Case's safety?

“The United States has yet to issue that weapon to their own soldiers. They will not sell it to an outside interest.”

Julián sounded bored when he said, “Such a shame. The Treasure of Trujillo belongs in the National Museum of Puerto Jardin, but I’m sure there are other buyers interested in the items.”

As if Cardozo wasn’t going to sell each item and pocket the money.

Silence lingered. Neither man seemed as if he’d be the one to back down, but eventually Cardozo asked, “How many of the M4 replacements are you seeking?”

“Ten to fifteen thousand should satisfy me. For now.”

The president remained quiet, seeming to consider the request. “How close is she to locating the treasure?”

“There’s still work to do. By the time you have the weapons, I should have the treasure.”

After a moment’s consideration, the president said, “I will speak with my contact at the Department of Defense. I’ll be in touch.” Cardozo and his protection detail walked out of the pavilion, leaving Nyx alone with Julián and his bodyguards.

It took her a moment to overcome her shock. “I haven’t found anything yet that would lead to the treasure, and there’s no guarantee that I will.”

Julián shrugged.

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“You’d really trade a billion-dollar treasure for a few million dollars’ worth of arms?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Julián scolded her. “I’m taking the weapons and keeping the Treasure of Trujillo.”

Chapter 17

After hours of stress, Nyx wanted to relax on the return drive to the hacienda—at least for a few minutes. Her brain, though, continued to spin. She’d been superfluous, a completely unnecessary arm accessory, so why had Julián dragged her to Trujillo?

She wanted to ask him, but she needed to wait until he put his phone down. He’d been messaging since they got in the limo.

They’d attended strictly to see the president. Shortly afterward, the car had been brought around, and they’d left. Soft lights were on in the back of the limo. The two bodyguards sat silent and alert.

There was a pause in the texting. “I was wondering,” she began, trying to sound deferential, “why you needed me to attend your meeting tonight? I didn’t even speak to the president.”

The drug lord appeared resigned when he looked at her. “If I approached President Cardozo without you, he wouldn’t have believed any claim I made about the treasure.”

“But I didn’t say anything, and he didn’t ask for details. Why would he believe you about the Treasure of Trujillo simply because I was with you tonight? I would think he’d be just as skeptical.”

Julián tucked his phone into his tuxedo jacket. “He didn’t believe me because you were along. He’s going to do an investigation. He will learn you work for the Paladin League.”

“I could be in Trujillo for a thousand different artifacts.”

“Do you think your foundation is airtight? That there are no leaks? He’ll be able to learn exactly why you’re here. It might take him a few phone calls, but eventually he or one of his men will find the right contact.”

They had a mole at the Paladin League? Why? Who cared about a small nonprofit? She itched to phone Archer and let him know someone in his organization was betraying them, but Nyx had to save that for later. “I know I’m missing something,” she said. “The Paladin League’s presence in Trujillo—even if it is for the treasure—shouldn’t convince anyone that it will be located, especially not Cardozo. He didn’t rise to his position by trusting slim evidence.”

Julián shrugged, the motion smooth, unconcerned. “It doesn’t matter if he has doubts. He merely needs to believe there’s a chance the treasure will be found.”

Nyx considered that for a moment, then started to connect the dots. “Because he only needs to get those weapons to Puerto Jardin. Once they’re in the country, your organization—or the man Charlie is supposed to work with, Torres—can get hold of them. Security in the United States would be harder to overcome.”

“And there’s the problem of smuggling them out.”

“Why didn’t you just give Cardozo my name and leave me on the estate?”

He stared at her as if she were a failing student.

It irritated her enough to cycle through ideas. One stuck. “It makes it appear,” Nyx said slowly, “as if I’m working with you. That I’ll betray the Paladin League for whatever you’re giving me. That bolsters your claim that you’ll have the treasure because why would I risk my job if I didn’t believe we’d find the cache?”

“The perception will help overcome the holes in the story. Cardozo’s greed will do the rest.”

“You don’t like the president.” The expression on Julián’s face had her swallowing hard. She’d inadvertently poked something.

“Once, I was a member of the presidential brigade. My unit was the elite of the elite. It was the beginning of Cardozo’s presidency. We believed he was trying to clean up the corruption, and that we were helping. Then we learned the truth.”

His voice was flat, but something about it raised goosebumps on her arms. “He was using you to get rid of his opposition, anyone who might make things difficult for him.” It was a guess. The anger on the drug lord’s face told her it was accurate.

“When we began to suspect the truth, we became dangerous to him. My wife and daughter were in our car, waiting for me. I pressed the auto start as I walked toward the vehicle. It exploded. My family died. I was left with this souvenir.” Julián ran his finger across the ragged scar on his cheek. “So no, I do not like Cardozo.”

The idea was horrifying, and in Puerto Jardin, all too believable. “He doesn’t remember who you are,” Nyx said as realization hit her.

“My unit—we weren’t people to him. We were tools.”

“You could have joined the revolution to overthrow his regime.”

Julián shook his head. “The rebels won’t succeed, and I no longer champion impossible causes.”

Nyx’s hands were clenched, her stomach tight. She could feel the man’s pain over the deaths of his wife and child. Julián might never move past the grief.

“The rebels have held their own for more than ten years,” Nyx argued.

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Leaning back in his seat, the drug lord said, “The rebels were lucky enough to have supporters who were willing to bankroll mercenaries for them.”

“To match the government’s army and their mercenaries.”

The drug lord made a careless gesture with his hand. “The rebels had a large group splinter off, and Ramirez cares nothing for the cause. Only money. As more of them realize they can’t win, their army will fracture more. Next will be infighting among the insurgents. Then it will all be over.”

“You don’t like Ramirez, either.”

Julián didn’t hide his disdain. “Ramirez is trying to usurp my territory. We’ve had interactions.”

“You mean skirmishes.”

He shrugged. “We’re negotiating a truce now. If it fails...” Julián let his voice trail off, but Nyx could fill in the rest. For the sake of the people who lived in this part of the country, she’d hope they reached détente.

Case remained hidden in the shadows between the main house and the guest house. The hacienda was large, and he needed to move slowly to avoid being recaptured. Even though it had taken more time than he wanted to spend, he’d checked every room, including the drug lord’s personal suite.

Nyx wasn’t there.

She wasn't in the casita either. She wasn't on the property.

Where in the hell did Vargas take her and why? Fuck, he didn't like this. He needed to find Oz. That meant another search. A more dangerous one.

Oz said he always got the worst assignments from Vargas. What was worse than working the night shift?

Patrolling the grounds or manning the wall? Case didn't have to think about it long. Someone assigned to patrol would be bored shitless. The odds of anyone making it past the wall had to be low, which meant all they were doing was walking around. Checking the wall and checking the men patrolling the grounds was definitely high risk, but he wasn't leaving his Fireball hung out to dry, and that meant taking a few chances.

He found Oz on the south side of the hacienda. Staying hidden in the shadows close to the house, Case made a clicking sound. One of the team's signals.

Oz's hand gesture looked casual, but it told Case that his teammate had heard and would make his way over as soon as he could. It took a while.

"You're lucky you found me," Oz said, voice low. "Not only was I locked out of the compound until this morning, but my patrol is nearly over. Ten more minutes, and I'd be manning Gate Three."

"Did Vargas leave tonight?" The words came out more urgently than he'd planned.

"Yeah," Oz said, dragging out the word. "He left before sunset in a stretch limo. Why?"

"Did he have a woman with him? A sexy brunette in a red dress?"

With a smirk, the Wizard said, “Yes, he did. Your sexy brunette?” Case was trying to come up with how to answer, when Oz added, “Or do I have a shot with her?”

“Keep your hands off.”

Oz’s grin told Case he’d been played. “BD isn’t going to like this.”

Yeah, he knew that. “BD doesn’t have much ground left to stand on.”

“True that.” Oz sobered. “Is she the missing archaeologist?”

“Geoarchaeologist,” he corrected, not surprised Oz knew about her. “Why did the boss take her off the grounds?”

His teammate went quiet and sank deeper into the shadows. A guard passed by but didn’t glance in their direction. When it was safe to whisper again, Oz said, “I heard some dinner party in Trujillo. I don’t have any more details than that.”

“They’re coming back after this party, right?”

“As far as I know. Don’t ask me what time.”

Since Case had been about to do that, he went to his next question. “Any chance I can get a diversion to get her off this property?”

“BD has been waiting for you to get word to him. I’ll let him know you’re ready to move.”

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That meant it wouldn't be tonight. Probably tomorrow. Maybe even the day after. He'd need to return to the room and being a prisoner. And do something about the guard he'd tied up. It wasn't as if he could hide him indefinitely. "Oz?"

"What?"

"I have an issue. Any ideas how I can?—"

Shouting. Men moving. "Someone's approaching the gate," Oz said. "You better get back to the suite. I'm betting that's the boss. I'll get word to you when BD is ready to roll."

When he was back in the rooms, Case checked on the guard. Still out cold, trussed up behind the sofa in the sitting room. He returned to the bedroom and tucked the backpack and the assault rifle behind one of the nightstands. He was slouched on the bed, pretending to doze, when the door to the suite opened and Nyx was brought in. He sat up, but no one spoke to him. He stayed where he was until the men left.

Case crossed to Nyx, scanning her from head to toe. "Are you okay?" he asked when he reached her, his hands gently cupping her shoulders.

"I'm fine." She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on tightly.

Biding his time, Case waited until her hold lessened. "Is it okay to ask what happened?"

He felt her nod against his chest. "It's about those rifles, the same ones Julián wants

you to get for him.”

Case went still. “Julián?”

“Señor Vargas wanted me to call him by his first name.”

“Did he touch you?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing like that happened. I was only along to further his goal. The M4 replacement.”

“How did your presence help that?” He didn’t worry about bugs. The curiosity would be natural. In fact, it would be considered strange if he didn’t ask.

“We met President Cardozo at a dinner party in Trujillo. Vargas offered the man the treasure in exchange for ten to fifteen thousand of the weapons.”

Case tipped Nyx’s face up to his. “He did what?”

“I know. I was stunned.”

“I’m going to need you to tell me everything that?—”

An alarm sounded outside, stopping him mid-sentence. Case let go of Nyx and went to the windows. He didn’t know what was going on, but men were running, and in the distance, the guards were streaming out of the barracks. With weapons. This wasn’t good.

Gunfire punctuated the thought.

Case grabbed the backpack, tugged it open, and tossed her clothes at Nyx. “Hurry up

and change.” He reached for his rifle.

He expected her to go to the bathroom. Instead, Nyx turned her back to him and said, “Tug down my zipper, please.”

More gunfire. A lot more.

As soon as he had the zipper down, she stripped out of her dress and heels and dressed in her normal clothes, right down to her baseball cap in maybe a minute. “I’m ready.” Nyx reached for the pack and shrugged it on.

Damn, he liked this woman. She knew it was go time without him saying a word. “I can carry the pack.”

“No. If someone attacks, you might need to aim your weapon in a hurry. I can handle it.”

The shooting was happening near the rear of the compound. That meant they were going out on a different side. Case turned out the lights in the suite. “Follow me,” he said. He went over the railing, caught her legs as she dangled, and helped Nyx to the ground.

It was only as they moved farther along the side of the hacienda that Case got a good look at exactly what was going on. Armed men were coming over the wall.

It wasn’t his team.

He needed to get Nyx out. Now.

Chapter 18

Case put an arm around Nyx, pulling her closer, and lowered his head until his mouth was next to her ear. “Stick close to me. I want you on my heels, understand?” His voice was barely a breath of sound.

“On your heels. Understood.” Her voice was as soft as his.

With a nod of approval, he released her, and remaining in the shadows near the house, headed toward Gate Three. Oz would have been on duty there when the attack began and he’d hold his position until he received an order to leave.

He kept part of his attention on the gunfire to make sure the fighting didn’t surge in their direction and continued moving carefully. When he reached the end of the hacienda, he glanced back at Nyx. She’d followed orders and was right behind him.

Case studied the area carefully, trying to anticipate trouble. From here to the wall, they’d have no cover. He didn’t want Nyx caught in the open.

Nothing going on here.

He let his gaze go to the gate. The only person he saw was Oz, but there was a guardhouse there and his partner might be inside. Case waited a few minutes. Watching. No movement.

The gunfire increased.

Turning to Nyx, he inclined his head. When she nodded, he set off for the exit. He could feel her at his back.

They got there without anyone noticing them.

Oz had the gate partially open by the time they reached him. “Here,” he said, handing him a helmet with a night vision monocular attached. “It works.”

“Thanks.” Case donned the helmet and fastened the chin strap to keep it in position.

“Can she handle an assault rifle?”

“Yes,” Nyx said at the same time Case said, “No.”

Giving Nyx a warning stare, he said, “Just because you can handle a pistol, doesn’t mean you can shoot an assault rifle.” He turned back to Oz. “Let me have your pistol. I’ll let her use that.” Oz handed the weapon to Case. “We’ll leave your rifle, but I’ll take all your ammo.”

In seconds, he had it stashed in his pockets.

“You need to knock me out and restrain me.” Oz handed him a set of zip cuffs.

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Be careful, dude,” he said. “Those are Ramirez’s men coming over the back wall.”

Case nodded. They might have come in on one side, but Ramirez would have dudes stationed around the perimeter. Maybe even be working their way around the flanks to enter on another side since the drug lord’s men were concentrated on the initial attack.

Oz turned his back, wrists together, and Case cuffed him. “We’re lying low for a while.”

“Don’t go silent long.”

“I know.” Case used the butt of the pistol to give Oz a tap to the temple. He went down, landing in a position that didn’t look comfortable.

Case turned to Nyx. “Stay with me.”

“On your heels,” she repeated.

As soon as they were outside, Case kept them close to the wall. They had a couple hundred yards where the trees and undergrowth were cleared, but once they got through that, they’d have cover. The rainforest waited.

There was no sign of any rebels. That didn’t mean they weren’t in the trees. Watching. There was too much light from the wall to use the NVD.

He picked out where he wanted to enter the rainforest and moved. Fast. Nyx kept up with him and he stopped worrying about her falling behind.

The gunfire was shifting, signaling the rebels had made an incursion inside the compound. That added to the diversion. Vargas’s men would be focused on protecting their boss.

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They reached the trees. Case kept moving until they were deep enough that the lights on the wall didn't penetrate. Then he stopped to check on Nyx.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "Fine. What's the plan?"

"We're going to the inn in San Isidro, getting your things, and then we're going to spend some time in hiding." He waited for an argument. That wasn't what he got.

"There's a path from the Huarona ruins to the town. I drove most of the way, but I could have walked the entire distance."

"I know. I'm hoping to skirt the ruins and pick up that path without entering the clearing."

She nodded, lips pursed, and asked, "So we're staying in the rainforest until we reach San Isidro?"

"What do you think the biggest threat is right now? Walking along a road or hiking through the rainforest?" He kept his tone neutral, curious about what she'd say.

"The rainforest at night and you're the only one with an NVD. Don't forget that part."

NVD? She knew the acronym? He wouldn't have expected a PhD candidate to be familiar with the terminology or to drop it casually. "I didn't forget."

She stared at him for a moment and then shook her head. "I'm going to be glued to your back. Don't let me get eaten by a panther."

His lips curved. "Don't worry, Fireball. I'll keep you safe." He hesitated, unsure he wanted her behind him with a weapon, but she was trusting him. He handed her Oz's pistol.

"I could have handled the assault rifle."

"Maybe," he said to keep the peace. "Come on. We've stood here too long."

Speed was slow. Even with the NVD, he had to take his time. He couldn't risk either of them falling or breaking any bones. The animals and other creatures of the rainforest were a secondary concern. Most of those, given the chance, would avoid humans.

At some point, this part of the rainforest had been razed. The trees were tall, but not block-out-the-sky tall and there was other lower foliage. Woody vines snaked through the undergrowth, which meant going around them or ducking. Fallen branches littered the floor of the forest.

They were about twenty minutes in when Nyx spoke quietly. "This isn't the way to the ruins. We should be headed more northeasterly than this."

Case stopped. She recognized that in the dark? All she had to go by was the position of the moon and stars.

"I told you we were going to skirt the ruins and pick up the trail. That road where you parked the Jeep? I want to cross it a long distance from where you left the vehicle. When we're on the other side, we'll start to curve northeast."

“Why? We could hotwire the Jeep and drive away.”

“The odds of it being there are next to none. If it is there, Vargas could have men watching it. Or if it’s not guarded, it might be rigged with an explosive device. We’re not risking it.”

“It’s unlikely Vargas went to that much trouble.” Especially given what had happened to his wife and daughter.

“I promised to keep you safe. That means being extra cautious.”

“The bigger danger is at the inn. They’ll be expecting us to go there.”

Damn, he liked this woman. She thought tactically. “Señor Alvarez is retired from the presidential brigade. He and several other former brigade members keep San Isidro clean. They won’t allow Vargas or his minions to linger. Our risk is when we get near the town.”

Nyx hesitated.

“Trust me, Fireball. I’ll take care of you.”

“I do trust you.” Her chin came up. “You’re in charge. I follow your orders.”

It was stupid. Case knew it. He leaned down and kissed her, anyway. He couldn’t help himself.

Nyx didn’t like being in the rainforest at night. It held enough risks during daylight hours, but if Case thought they were safest taking this route, she had to believe him. He would have gotten intel briefings on the rebels and Vargas’s operation before inserting in Puerto Jardin.

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Along with other information.

She'd been thinking, and she was positive he—and his team—had been sent in to deal with the illegal arms trade. It was why he pretended to be a gunrunner. The man with the long hair who gave Case the NVD monocular must be a teammate working undercover for Vargas.

Case stopped, and Nyx held her breath. She didn't release a shaky sigh until he resumed walking.

The more she got to know him, the more she liked him. He was protective, and when he promised to take care of her, she believed him. It was in the deliberate way he led them through the rainforest, in the way he continually glanced back to check on her.

Relying on someone else... Nyx didn't like it. She took care of herself. She took care of others. That was the way it always was. Until now. Until Case.

It was the smart thing to do. She knew it. He was Army Special Forces, and she'd be stupid not to lean on his expertise. She didn't need to like it. She only needed to do what he told her to do when he told her to do it. The same way she'd listen to her dad. The same way she'd listen to Dylan.

But she wanted Case to think she was capable, and not a liability or a burden.

He slowed, stopped, and Nyx held her breath again. This time, they didn't immediately resume moving. She waited, then whispered, "Case?"

His voice was low, but not as soft as she'd heard it in the past. "It's okay. We're near the road. I don't want to pop out of the rainforest and discover someone waiting for us."

How likely was that? Especially given that he'd kept them away from the area where she'd parked her Jeep. But she didn't share her thoughts. He was in charge. He was being careful. Low probability didn't mean zero chance.

They crept forward, stopping short of the road, and waited some more. Case was listening, his gaze moving as he took in their surroundings, and she stayed quiet, not wanting to distract him.

Once he was convinced there was no danger, he looked back at her, gave her that familiar incline of his head, and took off. She hustled after him.

Despite her belief there was no risk, despite Case being confident it was clear and they could move, her heart pounded hard enough to deafen her. Being out in the open, without cover, terrified her.

Re-entering the rainforest on the other side was a relief. Only then did her pulse slow.

Here, the fear was different. It was dark—so dark—and since Case was wearing the NVD, she had to trust him absolutely. She trusted almost no one that much. The longer they walked, the more she realized that she did have that level of faith in him, and it had nothing to do with him being in Special Forces or that he was her brother's best friend.

It had to do with Case.

He didn't give her any reason to doubt him.

This was dangerous. She was already physically attracted to him. Trusting him could lead to a whole lot of trouble. Nyx was determined to finish her PhD before she got seriously involved with anyone. Case could make that difficult.

He was attracted right back. That wasn't ego, it was fact.

It left her on the horns of a dilemma. The smart thing to do about this affinity developing between them was to run, to put as much distance between them as possible, and avoid him going forward. And she couldn't do that.

Her life depended on sticking with him. On letting him deal with men and a situation beyond her abilities.

It really wasn't much of a decision to make. She wasn't willing to risk her life just because the heat between her and Case was getting stronger with every passing second. Nyx would have to call upon all her self-restraint. She could do it.

She'd done it before.

Lost in thought, she nearly walked into Case's back before she realized he'd stopped. Through the trees, she saw lights and realized they'd reached the inn.

They stood there for a while. She was pretty sure she knew why but asked anyway. "We're waiting for the bar to close and everyone to leave?"

He nodded and pushed the NVD off his face.

She shifted her hold on the pistol to ease the muscles in her hand. Case saw that. He reached out. "You can give it to me now," he said, voice a whisper of sound.

Nyx wanted to keep it. Just in case. What if she needed to protect herself and he

wasn't around to do it? She passed it to him, anyway.

"You didn't tuck the pistol into a pocket."

"That's dangerous." Nyx moved so she could look at his face. His expression gave nothing away. "You were testing me."

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He shrugged. “You know a hell of a lot for an archaeologist. Want to fill me in?”

There was something vaguely suspicious in his tone, but she didn’t blame him. Nyx did owe Case some information. It was important to him to get it, too, or he wouldn’t be quizzing her now. They were at risk this close to the inn and shouldn’t be talking at all.

“My dad trained me with all kinds of pistols and rifles, including assault rifles.”

“Your dad?” The question had depth to it beyond the simple two words. It seemed as if Case didn’t trust her completely.

“My dad,” Nyx affirmed. “He wanted me to be able to take care of myself. He was a chief warrant officer in the US Army before he retired. For most of my childhood, he was Special Forces, a Green Beret.”

Case looked down at her. “That explains a lot.”

Nyx wasn’t certain how to take that.

He didn’t give her a chance to form a question before he said, “Now I know why you weren’t afraid of me at the market, I guess.” He grinned.

It didn’t last long. The front door to the inn opened, and Case went hyperalert. Two men came out. They had a brief conversation, then went their separate ways. It was a long moment before he put his mouth to her ear and breathed, “Stay quiet.”

Nyx nodded. She could do that. Easily. Because Case's smile knocked all the sense right out of her brain. She was in trouble, and even her strong-willed determination might not be enough to keep her safe.

Chapter 19

Case stayed in the trees behind the inn and waited. The bar had closed about half an hour ago, but he wasn't ready to move yet. Nyx stood patiently beside him. She didn't ask questions, and she didn't chat. Before she told him about her father, he might have wondered over her forbearance. Now he wondered how much training her dad had given her.

Pushing the questions away, he returned his thoughts to the primary issue. Getting inside and retrieving Nyx's things. Señor Alvarez, the innkeeper, had been in Puerto Jardinese special forces, and last year, his wife had been taken hostage. It was a good bet he'd reinforced his security around the building.

The safest course of action was to use the front door.

He didn't like it. They'd be exposed, visible to anyone in the area who happened to be looking out their window. Vargas had employees who lived in town, and they'd report Nyx's presence to the drug lord.

He'd rather go in the back door or through a window, but he didn't want to try dismantling booby traps with a civilian beside him.

They could leave her things behind, except Case had met Alvarez. He took his guests' safety seriously. The miracle was that he hadn't already launched a mission to rescue Nyx. The man was in his seventies. His two friends who'd also been in the presidential brigade were his age or older. Stony, his former teammate, would kick Case's ass if he allowed anything to happen to the three old men.

So they'd go inside, he'd let Alvarez see Nyx was fine, they'd get her things, and he'd take her to a safe house he'd set up near here.

Front door. He grimaced. "On my heels," he reminded her in a whisper. He didn't need to see Nyx's nod to know she was with him. He could feel her at his back. Case didn't linger on the street. He went up the steps to the inn. "You need to go first." He hated that.

Another nod and she reached for the door.

The room went silent. It wasn't only Señor and Señora Alvarez cleaning up for the night. Señors Otero and Garcia were there as well. The three men had a map on the table in front of them.

Case nudged Nyx forward and closed the door behind them. He didn't like their backs exposed or anyone knowing someone had entered the inn this late at night.

Señora Alvarez headed toward them. Her expression suggested she was prepared to do battle for Nyx. "You're safe?"

"Sí," Nyx said. "My fiancé got me off the compound."

"Fiancé?" The woman stopped in her tracks. Her gaze went to Case, and she frowned. "He is a mercenary."

"It's all right, Izel," Señor Alvarez said as he stood. "This man is a friend. I met him last year while you were held at the hacienda. He works with Zofia's husband."

The relief that crossed Señora Alvarez's face spoke volumes about what she knew, but in the next moment, it was gone. "Are you hungry?" she asked Nyx. "I can warm up some stew for you."

“Gracias, Señora Alvarez, but I ate.”

“We can’t stay,” Case said. “We’re only here to get Nyx’s things and let you know she’s okay.”

“Vargas will be looking for her?” Alvarez asked.

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“Sí. It’s likely,” he added, correcting himself since he couldn’t be sure how much the drug lord cared about hanging on to Nyx. She’d been a target of opportunity to leverage against him and not a cog in his scheme.

“We plan a defense, gentlemen,” he said to his two friends.

“It might be better to tell Vargas’s men that we showed up, got her things, and left. That you don’t know where we went.” A defense meant a potential fight, and Case didn’t want to see anything happen to these old men.

“Perhaps you are right.” Alvarez turned his attention to Nyx. “Do you need another key for your room?”

“No, I have mine.” She unzipped a pocket on her right thigh and pulled it out.

Case stared for an instant. Despite everything she’d been through, his Fireball had kept track of her room key.

Alvarez cleared his throat. “Your friend, the one with the long hair, he was supposed to find her for us. He didn’t report back.”

“Until tonight, I’m not certain he was aware she was on the property.” Case had no idea what Oz knew or didn’t know, but his teammate didn’t make empty promises. “It might be better for everyone if you don’t refer to him as my friend again.”

“Sí. I understand. It’s best if you don’t linger.”

“Sí,” Case agreed. “Come on, Fireball. Let’s get your stuff.”

The room was spartan, with only a bed and a dresser, but everything was well taken care of—not a surprise given what he knew of Señor and Señora Alvarez. Nyx opened a drawer and added items to the backpack. She did a check of the space, and then zipped the pack closed.

“I’m ready.”

“Let’s say goodbye, drop off the key, and get out of here.”

Nyx nodded, slung the pack on, and went downstairs. This time, Case was on her heels. He had a moment of gratitude. Her actions, her attitude made protecting her easier than he’d expected it to be.

She handed the key to Alvarez and then pulled out some Puerto Jardinese money. “I paid you for Friday and Saturday nights, but I need to reimburse you for Sunday and tonight.”

Alvarez argued.

With a smile so sweet Case felt it in his chest, she said, “Señor, your refusal hurts my heart. I am a woman who pays her debts. I will lose sleep if I don’t cover my entire stay.”

A stubborn look settled on the innkeeper’s face, one very similar to Nyx’s expression. Fuck. Case stepped in, “She’s not kidding. Please take her money so we can leave. Vargas is busy right now, but I don’t know how long that’s going to last.”

If this didn’t work, Case was tossing her over his shoulder and hauling her out of here.

There was grumbling, but Señora Alvarez came to the rescue. She took the money and said, “Gracias.” She handed Nyx a wrapped package. “Food. For later. You are always welcome here. You and your fiancé. Now go. Vargas is not the kindest of men.”

“Gracias,” Nyx said and began an extended goodbye. Case didn’t hang around to listen to more. He headed for the door.

And as he walked outside, his Fireball was right on his heels.

Nyx sank onto a wooden chair, dropped her pack between her feet, and let Case do whatever checks he felt necessary without offering to help. He’d only turn her down anyway, and she was out of energy.

They’d made another trek through the rainforest in the dark and she suspected Case had used a roundabout path to reach this place. The sun was coming over the horizon, and he was out walking some perimeter. Keeping her secure. She appreciated his diligence.

This safe house was interesting. It might have been the beginning of some kind of tourist ecolodge, but clearly the idea had been abandoned. The good thing was the concrete structure was solidly built, and she didn’t see any cracking. That meant there was a decent chance they wouldn’t have to deal with an infestation.

Given the fresh mosquito netting surrounding the only bed, she suspected Case had done work here to make it livable. If he was calling it a safe house, it meant he had plans to use it in an emergency.

The hut was small with only room for one bed, a tiny wooden table, and two matching chairs. There were paintings on the wall, both hanging wildly askew and a back porch with fine mesh screens to keep out the bugs.

Nyx stiffened when the door opened but relaxed as soon as she ID'd Case. He wore the black T-shirt with his camo pants and was carrying an assault rifle. He shouldn't make her blood heat, not when he looked as scary as he did now. Except he was protecting her, and he'd never frightened her, not even when she thought he was a mercenary.

"We're clear?" she asked.

"Clear," he confirmed. He had the NVD pushed out of his way, but now he took off the helmet and set it on the table. His hair was flatter than usual, at least until he ran his fingers through it, returning it to the tousled blond mop she was used to. "You're okay?"

She nodded. “Just tired.”

His lips curved showing the barest hint of a smile. It made her breath catch. “From formal dining with the Puerto Jardinese president to hiking through the rainforest at night, you’ve had a hell of a day.”

“Don’t forget convincing a drug lord to let you accompany me to the library and researching historical documents. Dealing with Vargas is high stress.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time alone with him. Has he made you any offers that involve going around me?”

Voice low, fierce, Nyx stood, facing him, and said, “No, and if he had, I’d turn it down. You and I are a team and you’re the leader. My loyalty is to you. I’m trusting you with my life, Case. I’m relying on you to keep me safe in a situation my dad never prepared me for. I’m used to being in charge. I’m used to people looking to me to solve the problem. Letting you make the decisions isn’t easy for me.”

“I know, and you’re doing well, Fireball.” He clasped her hips, loosely enough for her to pull away if she wanted to, but she rested her hands at his waist instead. That got her another curve of his lips. It didn’t last long. “You can put your faith in me. I’ll kill to keep you safe if that’s what it takes. You’re my number one priority.”

Nyx wasn’t sure how to respond, but it ended up being a moot point. Case lowered his head and brushed his lips over hers, once, twice, a third time. She leaned into him, her mouth following his. The kisses were too quick. She wanted more.

Their fourth kiss gave her what she wanted. There was no more teasing. Only need. From him. From her.

She inched closer and his arms went around her, pulling her tightly against his body. Her hands ended up on his back, and she flexed her fingers in the soft knit of his T-shirt. Even through the cotton, she could feel his hard muscles, the warmth of his body.

Opening her mouth, Nyx invited him to deepen the kiss. He didn't hesitate, taking her up on the offer. Turning them, Case pressed her into the wall.

Nyx shifted, making room for him to settle between her legs. His cock was hard, and it felt so good. So right.

There was a needy, mewling sound. It took her a moment to realize it had come from her. It woke her up and reminded her that they couldn't do this. Moving her hands to his chest, she pushed lightly. "Stop."

Immediately, Case raised his head. She could almost see him shake himself out of the arousal. "Holy shit." He stepped back, breaking the embrace and crossing the room. "That got out of hand."

She nodded, but Nyx didn't have words. He'd rocked her world off its axis and she was holding on for dear life.

Chapter 20

Case finished his sandwich and wiped his hands on the napkins Señora Alvarez had provided along with the meat and bread. The bottled water he'd stashed here weeks ago was warm, and the safe house was hot enough to have perspiration forming on both their faces even this early in the morning.

This place was never meant to be a long-term hideout and was only provisioned for a couple of nights. It was an emergency stop, nothing more. If he were on his own, he could make it work longer, but Nyx was with him.

She started gathering up the garbage and wrapping it up in the paper Señora Alvarez had used for their food. Case kept his eyes on her as she stowed it in her backpack. She caught his gaze as she straightened in her seat. Her cheeks reddened, but she didn't look away.

"You've been quiet," Nyx said.

"Thinking."

"You're trying to decide what to do with me."

I know what I'd like to do with you. He didn't say that aloud, though. Even if she were willing, he couldn't afford to be distracted. It was a sure bet that once he had his hands on her, he wouldn't notice anything or anyone else until it was too late.

"I don't suppose you'd consider going back to Los Angeles?" She frowned, squared her shoulders, and sparks danced in her brown eyes. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"You knew I wouldn't abandon my teammates, so why bother asking?"

"Sometimes a long shot pays off."

"Usually they finish last."

Case ran a hand across his mouth, trying to wipe away a grin. This was a serious conversation. "Do you have any ideas?"

“Why can’t we stay here?”

“Think tactically.” He reached for his bottled water and took a sip.

She pursed her lips for a moment and then said, “There’s too much cover surrounding the structure. Someone could come up on us from any side and we would never know they were there until they made their move. With only two of us, it’s an indefensible position despite the concrete walls.”

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“What else? Beyond tactics.”

“You’re thinking of the lack of air conditioning and the fact we have no running water.”

“And once our supplies are gone, we’ll have to leave to get more.”

“You set this up as a stop-gap measure if everything went to hell.”

Case liked how quickly she put things together. “Do you have any ideas on where I take you next? And don’t suggest the hotel the Paladin League is using in Trujillo. That’s not happening.”

“I know. It puts Frankie and Ellis at risk. Those are my teammates,” Nyx explained.

He didn’t need the additional intel. Case had met both women briefly. Since he wasn’t supposed to know them, he nodded.

“What about a random hotel?” Nyx asked. “If we moved around every night, it would be hard to track us down.”

“It’s a possibility.”

“But?”

“Vargas has his tentacles everywhere in Trujillo. If he decides he wants you back badly enough to send men out to find you, a hotel isn’t going to keep us hidden long

no matter how often we switch.”

“So what are the options we haven’t already discussed?”

Case shook his head. He’d run all of them through his mind and the only one he liked was getting her back home.

“I’ll think some more,” she said, “and so will you. Something will come to us.”

He sighed but nodded. If nothing else worked, he would take her to the safe house. He could deal with the captain. Probably.

Moving to another topic, Case asked, “What were those papers you stole from Vargas’s library yesterday?”

“Why?”

Her voice was neutral, not a single note of suspicion, but he was insulted anyway. “Because it could influence whether the man sends anyone after you.”

“That’s provided he even realizes those pages are missing. I don’t think he ever looked at that stack of documents.” They had a stare down. Nyx capitulated first. “Did you bring the pages I took? You didn’t leave them, right?”

Case shook his head. “The jeans are in the bag.”

Nyx bent over. He heard the backpack’s zipper open and there were sounds of her digging around before her head reappeared over the tabletop. She held a folded wad of paper. She put it on the table and used both hands to smooth out the creases.

“I can’t believe you folded up historical documents,” Case said.

“They’re not historic. Not unless you think twenty years is notable.”

“Twenty years?”

“That’s what the date on the top of the pages said. See?” Nyx turned them so he could see the writing. There was a date and a name scrawled beneath it.

“What are twenty-year-old papers doing in with two-hundred-year-old documents? And why did you take them and not something historic?”

She slid the pile back to her side of the table. “These pages are the notes another researcher made about the documents. He summed up—well, if not everything in the stack, close to it from what I saw.”

“You trust some random researcher?”

Nyx’s lips turned up at the corners, giving her a mischievous look, something Case didn’t expect to see from her. “The researcher in question was Diego Ramos.”

She said it as if he should know who that was. “The only Ramos I know was Vargas’s predecessor as drug lord and his first name wasn’t Diego.”

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“Diego Ramos worked at the Huarona archaeological site. He was the foreman for the dig, but he was more than that. The man loved the old legends of Puerto Jardin and he studied them extensively. Apparently, that included the Lost Treasure.”

“The Huarona site. Those are the ruins near San Isidro where we got engaged.”

For a moment, she looked surprised, and then Nyx laughed. The sound caressed him and made his body come back alive after he’d worked so hard to tamp down the arousal.

“That’s the place. Anyway, Diego Ramos is well known in archaeological circles among those interested in pre-Columbian civilizations. His notes are probably more important than the documents I left behind in the library. It’s too bad he passed away years ago. He would have been a big help in the search for the treasure.”

“Do you think he was looking for it?” Case asked.

Nyx shrugged. “I can’t say for sure since I never met him.”

Case weighed what she said and scowled. “You read the notes in the library before taking them, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t going to risk setting off a firestorm without a good reason.”

“What did you find? The location of the treasure?”

Nyx shook her head. “That would be too easy.”

She was answering his questions without saying much. Case didn't like it. "Be more specific. What did you read?"

Nyx stiffened and her cheeks flushed. She looked angry, and for a minute, he thought she was going to go off, but she took a few deep breaths and her expression cleared. "I'm not lying to you." Her voice was tight. She was still pissed. "I didn't find anything concrete, but I think Señor Ramos found something. There was a change in the tenor of his notes about two-thirds of the way through. He became cagier. Less forthright."

He thought about it for a moment. "If there was nothing in his notes, why take them? Why not take some of the documents his notes are based on?"

"Because Frankie would harangue me every time we saw each other for the rest of my life if I folded two-hundred-year-old documents. Besides, I didn't know which of the papers were important or if the notable ones were even on the table. Maybe there's a second stack that Vargas would have brought in later."

"You didn't find anything in what you read." It wasn't a question.

"No, and you didn't either because you would have said something if you had." Her voice sounded more normal now, a sign she was gaining control of her emotions.

"Why take Ramos's notes?" Case asked again.

"Because I think he left hints and I need more time to comb through them."

Nyx pursed her lips briefly, provoking a fantasy about her mouth wrapped around his cock. Heat swamped him and Case couldn't find his voice. Luckily for him, she continued talking, oblivious to his thoughts.

“And because I want Frankie to look at them. She understands research at a level far beyond me. I view it as a necessary evil. She actually enjoys it.”

Now Nyx looked at him, waiting, and when he remained silent, her eyebrows went up. Case cleared his throat, searching for something to say. “We’re going to assume Vargas is coming after you. It’s the safest course of action. If he’s aware of those notes, and if he knows you took them, he’s going to want them back. You, too.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand why everyone is suddenly interested in this treasure. It’s been missing for more than two hundred years. People have searched for it from nearly the instant it disappeared. The odds of finding it now are minuscule, even if a brooch reported to be part of it went up for auction.”

“Wait. What?”

“Which part are you asking about?”

Case leaned forward. He had multiple questions. “Let’s go chronologically. What do you mean everyone is interested?”

“Not everyone, of course, but a lot of people.”

“Nyx,” he said, a clear warning in his voice. She didn’t appear intimidated.

“My teammates were in danger from a Norwegian treasure hunter a couple of weeks ago. I had to stay out of the way, up in Rosario, and Frankie and Ellis ended up being protected by Frankie’s ex. Although I guess I could say her current since they’re engaged now.”

Frankie was Captain Nguyen’s woman. “Who else?”

“Well, this is the interesting part. Someone named Jorge Torres is chasing it.”

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“Torres?” Jorge Torres, an international arms dealer, wanted the treasure? Why the fuck didn’t the Big Dog tell him this? It was a sure thing the captain was aware of it. Sometimes this need-to-know bullshit went too far.

“That’s what Frankie said. Apparently, his men are surrounding the convent where the brooch was discovered, but they haven’t made any moves.”

“That you know of.”

She nodded. “That I know of.”

His team had been on multiple missions to end Torres’s empire. It was difficult to get to him because he never left his estate. Could they use the treasure to lure Torres out?

Nyx watched him closely, and he put the idea aside. He’d have to discuss it with BD. “Two groups interested in the treasure isn’t everyone,” he pointed out.

“The Paladin League makes three. Archer, my boss, wouldn’t have sent us if he didn’t think we had a chance of finding it. There are too many other historical treasures to be saved. Something is going on.”

“You said a brooch that was part of the treasure is being auctioned off?”

“It was auctioned. Frankie filled me in. Archer didn’t inform any of us. Some friend of Frankie’s fiancé located it last year in the abbey.”

Kyle Winter. He’d been assigned to work undercover at the convent last year and was

there again on this mission.

Damn, his op was becoming more and more tangled with the treasure. That put Nyx at even greater risk.

Chapter 21

Oziah West took meandering route around Trujillo. More than once. The last thing he could afford to do was lead any of Vargas's men to the safe house. He swung through the open-air market, bought a tamale, and ate as he meandered, looking at the items for sale.

The vendors didn't approach him. Some appeared relieved when he moved along without buying anything. He was used to it.

That brought to mind a certain prissy little blonde. She'd been uneasy around him, too. At first. She'd overcome it quickly enough, though.

Yeah, quickly enough to make his trip to Los Angeles for Stony's wedding memorable. Oz patted his pocket and returned to eating.

Reaching the front entrance to the market, he leaned against the façade and finished his lunch. When he was done, he tossed his garbage in a nearby can and resumed his walking tour of the city. He needed to talk to the captain, but Oz wasn't looking forward to the conversation. The Big Dog was not going to be happy.

When he was sure his tail was clear, he angled his direction toward the house. He continued evasive maneuvers right up until he reached the place. The upper floor was painted yellow, the bottom floor pink, and the garden that passed for the front yard was a mess. It hid the front door, but he went around to the back and let himself into the kitchen.

It was reflex to glance over at the small bistro table in the corner, but the captain wasn't parked there with a cup of coffee. Oz went looking for him. He heard him before he saw him.

"I already told you getting her out of the compound wouldn't be quick or easy. Stop checking in. I'll let you know when there's anything to report."

A brief silence.

"I have two men working on it. They'll take care of it."

Oz pushed open the door to the room the team used as an office. Captain Nguyen looked over when he came in, and said, "Hang on, Archer." BD put the phone on hold without waiting for a response.

"Do you have news on the Paladin League employee Vargas is detaining?" the captain asked without preamble.

"Lurch got her out. He said they're going to lie low for a while."

"Any injury?"

"No, Lurch watched out for her. She's good."

"Take a seat," BD said, "and let me get off this call." Again, he didn't wait before tapping the screen. "Good news, Archer. Your employee is rescued. She's fine and with one of my men. He's going to keep her off the grid until the heat dies down. That's another one you owe me."

Oz took the remaining seat in the office and waited for BD to finish his conversation. After disconnecting, he slid the phone on the table that passed for a desk. The captain

studied him for a moment, and then asked, “What’s up? I know you didn’t come here just to tell me about the rescue.”

There was no point beating around the bush. “I got fired.”

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Captain Nguyen didn't react. "Do we need to worry about a hit?"

Shaking his head, Oz said, "I doubt it. I was fired for incompetence, not because they suspect me of anything."

One of BD's eyebrows went up. "Incompetence? Care to explain that one?"

"There was an attack on the compound last night. Ramirez's rebels came over the wall and made some headway before they were repelled. It turned out they had some inside help. Those men didn't live to see the dawn."

"But Vargas isn't going to have you killed?" The Big Dog sounded skeptical.

Oz looked down at the floor that had been painted an ugly redwood color. It was peeling in places, worn in others, and a general eyesore. When he had a chance to organize his thoughts, he raised his gaze. "Lurch used the attack as a diversion and escaped with the archaeologist. I was manning one of the gates away from the incursion. When he turned up, I gave him my pistol and all the ammo I had, and then he zip cuffed me and knocked me out."

BD nodded. "And Vargas's men found you out cold and trussed up."

"Yes, sir. I told them Lurch came up behind me, and by the time I saw him, it was too late." Oz's lips quirked. "I was accused of being stupid and useless before I was told to get my gear and leave."

The captain leaned back in his chair. "I'm calling this a win. Lurch and the civilian

are out of Vargas's hands, and you're unlikely to be looking at a bullet in your head. Losing eyes on the drug lord is an inconvenience, but nothing more than that."

"Yes and no," Oz said. "BD, something is going on. I don't know what, but Ramirez didn't send his men onto the estate on a whim. We know they've been after Lurch for a while. You don't think?—?"

"That doesn't make sense." Nguyen frowned. "They could grab Lurch later after he was off the compound. Why risk a war with Vargas?"

"Maybe they had a deadline and couldn't wait for Lurch to leave? Or maybe something is going on between Ramirez and Vargas that we don't know about."

"Option two is more likely, and as long as it doesn't impact our op, it doesn't matter."

"Yes, sir. What do you want me to do now?"

"KW is scheduled to make a check-in. I was going to send Rusty, but you're the better option. Be at El Taller in an hour."

Oz nodded. He'd rather be undercover and doing something, not meeting up with other teammates for reports, but it might take a while before he received a more interesting assignment. He shrugged it off. Like the captain said, at least he didn't have to worry about taking a bullet in the back of his head.

Archer shook off the annoyance. Given their history, he couldn't blame Nguyen for his attitude. And Nyx was safe—Archer's primary concern. Although he would have liked to talk to her himself and be absolutely certain.

She'd check in as soon as she was able, and hiding for a time was probably in Nyx's best interest. He frowned. The chances of the drug lord forgetting about her were

slim, and he needed to get her home. That would aggravate her, but he'd rather deal with an unhappy employee than a dead one.

Should he leave Francesca and Ellis in Puerto Jardin or extract them at the same time as Nyx? They seemed to have escaped the attention of Vargas. As long as Nyx stayed away from them, his other two operatives—employees—should be fine.

If there were any danger to Francesca, Nguyen would have already loaded her on a plane and returned her to Los Angeles. Archer's lips curved, but the amusement didn't last long. Of the three women, Nyx was by far the one he trusted the most to handle potentially dangerous situations. With her out of Trujillo, that left Francesca to watch over Ellis.

He was in his public office, the show place with the marble floor, white metal molded desk, and the small circular table with the crystal brandy decanter. Turning in his leather chair, Archer looked out the window at the city. Sending Ellis had been a risk. While she was his best art historian, she was also his youngest employee and the most naïve. Would Francesca alone be enough to keep Ellis out of harm's way?

He needed to factor that into his plans.

Losing Nyx in Puerto Jardin was bad enough, but to bring all three women home? It would derail almost any chance the Paladin League had to locate the Treasure of Trujillo.

Standing, he walked to his chess board and glanced down at the carefully aligned pieces. The problem was that he wasn't playing a game with only one opponent. There were many. Some were identified, like Jorge Torres. Others were known, but shadows like the mysterious Fuentes. Yet more were completely hidden from his view.

Archer preferred to know his adversaries. He wanted the odds in his favor, in his employees' favor, and in the Paladin League's favor. He couldn't maneuver against what he couldn't see. Or in Fuentes's case, against a whisper.

At least his operative was on her way to Puerto Jardin to track down Fuentes for him. Her plane left in twenty minutes. Some instinct honed during his time at ARC told Archer that this man was a serious threat to reach the treasure first. The idea of all that history disappearing into private collections, or worse, being destroyed for the price of the gold or the jewels hardened his resolve.

Francesca and Ellis would stay in Trujillo. Only Nyx would come home.

He turned, walked to his private office, and closed the entrance behind him. Archer picked up the phone. He needed to fill Francesca in and let her know that she wouldn't have Nyx to work with much longer.

"Francesca," Archer said easily when she answered, "I have good news."

"Nyx is okay?"

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“From all accounts, Nyx is fine. Unfortunately, given the situation, I’m going to need to bring her back to Los Angeles. Her safety is at risk if she remains in Puerto Jardin.”

There was a pause, then, “I was afraid of that. When will she return to the hotel?”

“If everything goes according to plan, she won’t. If she does, it puts you and Ellis in danger. I’d need to bring all three of you home, then.”

The silence lasted longer this time, but Archer waited. Francesca was thinking, and he didn’t want to rush her.

“Ellis and I can bring her things home with us when we’re finished here,” Francesca said at last.

“That wasn’t what you wanted to say.”

“Well,” she said, drawing the word out, “I wanted to get some presents sent home. I know you said I shouldn’t get you anything, but I saw something I know you’ll love. If you’re bringing Nyx back to LA, maybe she could give it to you.”

“A present?”

“Uh-huh. I know how much you love puzzles, and you’d enjoy working on this. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Archer frowned. Francesca knew her phone line wasn’t secure, so she hadn’t tried

messaging or emailing. Suggesting she mail it back was out of the question. It would be far too easy for someone in Puerto Jardin to intercept it and then it would disappear.

“Let me see if there’s some way for Nyx to meet you. You know how much I enjoy gifts and I’d hate to miss out on this one. Logistics can always be adjusted.”

“Thanks, Archer.”

“I’ll keep in touch.”

“Sounds good.”

He took the time to end the call properly, understanding that some of his employees cared about such things. Like Francesca. Nyx would likely have hung up before Archer did and without a single nicety. His lips curved but without any real humor.

Francesca had given him a challenging puzzle to solve, but this was no gift. How did he arrange for her to rendezvous with Nyx and keep everyone safe?

Chapter 22

Nyx felt Case’s restlessness, had felt it since she woke. Bending over, she secured the notes in the backpack, concealing them behind the lining, and zipped up the bag. A careful search would find the papers, but it was the best option she had.

With the document taken care of, she braided her hair as quickly as she could. Case was going to have them on the move again and it would be in minutes, not hours.

After tying off the braid, she visually scanned the hut, making sure they hadn’t left anything, but she and Case hadn’t been here long enough to spread out. She watched

him. He went from window to window, studying the surrounding area. Yes, they'd be leaving soon.

He came over to the table and stared at her without speaking. He was edgy, and that amped up her nervousness.

"What's wrong? What did you see?"

"Nothing, but my gut says it's time to move. How long will it take you to?"

Nyx pulled on her hat, tugged the braid through the back, stood, and put on her pack. "I'm ready."

Case's lips curved. "Damn, if I'd known this was what it was like, I would have dated a chief's daughter before now."

He called this dating? "Case, there is no one else like me." She stopped in front of him and tilted her chin up. "Bank on it." His smile broadened just a little. "Are we going?"

After putting on the helmet, he shrugged on his backpack, one he'd kept at the hut and reached for his assault rifle. "Oh, yeah, Fireball, we're leaving. Stay on my heels."

"Copy that. On your heels." It was repetitive, but Nyx understood why he gave the order each time. He wanted her to know what he expected of her. No mistakes. No confusion.

The going was rough. Case was in front of her blazing the path through the undergrowth and watching him was no hardship. Her thoughts drifted to their kiss. She'd never felt that excitement in the pit of her stomach before. The timing was

inconvenient given the situation they were in, and even if they weren't neck deep in it, he was on an op and she was in Puerto Jardin for work.

She tried appreciating the beauty of nature to take her mind off the feel of Case's hard body pressed against hers. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the leaves to the ground below, and while she'd rather not be trudging on foot, at least this time she could see where she was going which made it much better than last night.

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High humidity caused sweat to stream down her face. Nyx used the back of her arm to brush it away from her eyes and worked on keeping up with Case. If she wasn't wearing long sleeves, her arms would have scrapes and cuts from the vegetation hitting her.

A machete would be handy, except that if someone found the hut, a machete would be as good as an arrow, pointing out the direction they'd taken. They were still leaving a trail, but it was less noticeable than chopping away the undergrowth.

She was getting desperate if she was weighing the benefits versus the risks of using a machete, but damn. Case moved with an athletic grace that captured her attention. Nyx bet he'd be smooth like that in bed, too. She wanted to test the hypothesis, and that made her focus more intently on her surroundings. There were goals to achieve first.

But would going to bed with Case really jeopardize her ambitions?

It was more than an hour later when he stopped them for a water break. "Your face is flushed." He handed her a bottle. "Drink slowly."

Nodding, she took the bottle and followed orders. After a few moments of sipping, he said, "You've been awfully quiet since we entered the rainforest."

"You didn't tell me it was safe to talk."

He went still for a moment, and then slowly nodded. "I need to stop underestimating you."

Nyx lowered her bottle. “I had a ton of dos and don’ts drilled into me, but there is a lot I don’t know. Make sure you don’t overestimate me.”

Case nodded. “I’ll keep assuming you need instructions. It’s weird, though.”

“What’s weird?”

“People usually get angry when someone believes they’re clueless. You not only didn’t get mad, you told me to keep assuming you’re ignorant.” He gave her that one-shoulder shrug of his. “It’s unexpected. You’re unexpected.”

“I’m not going to lie to you or pretend I know more than I do. Why would I? We’re in a high-stakes situation, one that’s potentially life or death. I’d rather you think I’m a dumbass than inadvertently do something that gets us killed.”

His smile wasn’t just a curve of his lips. “The more time I spend with you, the more I like you.”

“Thanks.” Nyx grinned back at him. “I like you, too.”

Looking away from her, Case lifted his water bottle. Raising her own water, Nyx checked out the area ahead. From what she saw, this would be the worst stretch so far today. Hell, she’d probably end up taking fronds in her face no matter how careful he was to hold them for her. There were too many and it would slow them down too much if he tried.

“Where are we headed?” she asked.

“I’m not sure yet. Right now, I just want us as far away from the hut as we can get.”

“Do you know where we are?”

His lips curved again. “Generally? Yes.”

That made one of them. This wasn’t like last night when she had some basic knowledge of her location and the stars to navigate by. Now she didn’t know where she was in relation to any landmarks and the sun was out. If something happened to Case, she’d be in deep trouble. Without a phone or a compass, her only course of action would be to walk until she hit a river or a road.

Or the bad guys found her.

Despite the heat, Nyx shuddered. “Don’t lose me in here,” she said, voice thicker than she liked.

“On my heels, remember? I can feel you at my back. I’ll know if you’re not behind me. Trust me.”

“I do trust you,” she said without hesitation.

Instead of relaxing Case, her answer seemed to make him tense further. Nyx didn’t ask. As beautiful as the rainforest was, it was also vast and deadly. There were venomous creatures, predators, and humans who were more dangerous than the first two.

“We need to get rolling,” Case said.

Nodding, Nyx capped her water bottle. He didn’t close his bottle or make any other motion that suggested they were moving again. Something seemed to be bothering him. Maybe he was trying to come up with a way to give her bad news?

“Nyx,” Case said, meeting her gaze dead on.

She braced herself. His tone of voice was serious.

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“I want you to know that despite that kiss getting out of hand earlier, you don’t have to worry. I’m not going to force or coerce you into sex.”

That’s what he was concerned about? Nyx rushed to put him at ease. “Case, I know that. If I can trust you with my physical safety, I can trust you with my virginity.”

There was an endless length of silence.

Well, shit. She hadn’t meant to tell him that.

Case realized he was staring at Nyx, opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again. He didn’t have any idea what to say.

It took a moment for the shock to recede. As beautiful as Nyx was, she could have almost anyone she wanted. That meant she’d made a choice.

“Did something happen? Did someone try to hurt you?” That came out more fiercely than he intended, but Nyx didn’t appear uneasy with his intensity.

“No, nothing like that.” He was dubious and it must have showed on his face, because she added, “I promise.”

“Did your dad scare everyone away?”

“My dad wasn’t home often enough to be much of a deterrent. Although, he did teach me to take care of myself.”

“Then why?”

“Maybe I just didn’t meet the right guy.”

There was a note in her words that Case read as flirtatious, but he wasn’t making any assumptions. “There’s more to it than that.”

She tugged the brim of her cap down a fraction. “My reasons don’t make any sense without the history and you’re not going to want to stand here long enough to listen to all of that.”

Case nodded. “You’re right. We should be moving. You could tell me the details while we’re walking.”

“Why is it so important to you?”

Valid question. “You and I have been dancing around each other since we met. We haven’t been able to act on it because of the circumstances, but the more time we spend together, the harder it is to resist the pull.” Case looked away for a moment, before meeting her eyes again. “Do I need to know? Probably not. But your reasons are one more piece of the puzzle that makes up who you are, and you’ve had me intrigued from the beginning.”

Nyx tilted her head, considering him, and then seemed to reach a conclusion. “We’re headed in a direction that has me equally intrigued and uneasy at the same time.”

“I’m not going to?—”

She cut him off. “I know you’re not. I’m not worried about you. The pull between us is stronger than anything I’ve dealt with before. I’m worried about me.”

Without commenting, he stowed his water bottle in his pack and reached out a hand. Nyx passed him hers and he put that away as well. “We can’t stay here any longer. If you want to share your history, I’ll be listening.”

Case headed out, and Nyx was behind him within a couple of steps. It was a good ten minutes before she spoke. “The story isn’t very interesting. You’ll think it’s much ado about nothing.”

“I’m not going to judge you, Fireball. Your reasons are your reasons and they’re legit no matter what they are.” Case waited, but Nyx stayed silent. He let it linger.

It was at least another five minutes before she said, “My mom got pregnant her freshman year in college and dropped out to have my oldest sister. Her boyfriend did marry her, but he stayed in school while my mom worked to support them. They had a second baby, my other sister, a couple of years later. They’d originally agreed she would get to go to school after he graduated. Instead, they got divorced almost as soon as he received his diploma.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that, but Nyx was clearly waiting for something. “That’s rough.”

“Husband number one was always iffy on child support payments. From what my mom said, she had a really hard time keeping a roof over their heads.”

“No parental support?”

“No. Her parents pretty much disowned her when she got pregnant.”

Case ducked to avoid a woody vine. “Watch your head.”

“Husband number two was a mistake. Mom never said that in so many words, but

I'm sure she feels that way. I think she believed he would stabilize her financial situation."

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“Sounds like she was putting her two little girls first, making sure they had somewhere to live and food to eat.”

“You’re right.” Nyx sounded surprised.

“Fireball, I grew up in a situation like that. Single parent, not enough money to keep food in the apartment. There were lots of nights I went to bed hungry. Your mom was looking out for your sisters and willing to sacrifice herself for them.”

“I’m sorry you dealt with that.”

“It was a long time ago,” he said, keeping his voice cold to discourage questions. “Husband number two didn’t stick, I take it?”

“No, they were divorced before my brother was born. Mom was leery after that. Then she met my dad. He had to woo her for weeks to even get her to agree to have coffee with him.”

There was amusement in Nyx’s voice and warmth, too. “They’re still together, I take it?”

“Closing in on thirty years and going strong.”

“But?”

“But I told you. Dad was Special Forces. Mom still couldn’t go back to college because he was never home. There was always an op somewhere.”

“And now she had a fourth child.”

“Exactly, but at least she didn’t have to worry about feeding or housing us.”

Nyx went silent again and Case waited. And waited. Finally, he nudged her. “This is the history behind your why?”

Nyx’s sigh was loud enough for him to hear easily. “Mom never regretted us. She made that clear. We were loved, but she did regret never being able to get her degree. She regretted not being able to pursue the career she always dreamed of. If she told me once, she must have told me a million times to chase my goals before finding a man. My goal is to get a PhD in geoarchaeology.”

There was a downed tree ahead of them. They would need to go around it and he adjusted course. It also gave him time to think. Nyx said her mom told her to do what she wanted to do and probably told her that if she didn’t, she might not ever be able to have the future she envisioned. Case was willing to wager that the advice had started when Nyx was small, maybe even too young to be in school yet. Was it any wonder that it had taken hold as a core belief?

“There’s birth control, you know.” The sun wasn’t as bright and Case looked up to see rain clouds rolling in.

“I know. I have a contraceptive implant in my arm, just in case, but no birth control is one hundred percent effective.”

If he wore a rubber and she had the implant, the odds against pregnancy would be astronomical. Case almost said it, but stopped before it came out of his mouth. Nyx had shared personal intel with him, and trying to talk her into bed was the wrong response. Besides, they weren’t in a situation that allowed time out for a hookup.

He'd reached a decision at the hut. One his Fireball wasn't going to like. He was sending her back to Los Angeles. It was the only way to keep her safe.

Chapter 23

Nyx waited for Case to say something, but he remained quiet. She wasn't sure what she expected. It wasn't as if she went around announcing she was a virgin, but dead silence? He was the one who'd pushed for an explanation.

Maybe her reasons didn't make sense to him. He had suggested birth control would solve the situation. At least he hadn't propositioned her.

Or maybe she hadn't explained her reasons well. Her words seemed to be a pale echo of how deeply etched this was in her head. In her heart. School first, dreams, and then men. Or a man. Case. She might possibly be falling for him. Telling herself that it was too fast, that it was the situation, that he was protecting her wasn't working anymore.

She felt comfortable with Case, despite the attraction between them. Nyx tried not to rely on anyone, but she could put her faith in him. She could count on him. It was like they were a team, not just two individuals thrust into a terrible set of circumstances.

He was her brother's best friend, but somewhere along the way she'd stopped thinking of Case like that. She didn't trust him because of the connection. She didn't trust him because he was Special Forces. Nyx trusted Case because of who he was. This man was rock solid and his steadiness was one of the things she appreciated the most.

She noticed their course had angled. She raised her gaze from his ass, blinking to bring her distance vision into focus. A tree was lying on its side blocking their path. It was too close to the ground to crawl under it, and too tall for them to climb over it. At

least not easily. He was taking them around it.

“I didn’t expect you to press the mute button,” Nyx said. “At least say I’m nuts. It’s an acknowledgment that you heard me.”

“I heard every word you said, Fireball. I always listen when you talk. I’m not sure what to say, to be honest. Everything I come up with either sounds condescending or sleazy.”

“You think my reasoning is flimsy.”

Case stopped and turned to meet her gaze. “It doesn’t matter what I think. What matters is that it’s strong in your head.”

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“I wish I was done with school. I’d like you to be my first, Case.”

She didn’t realize blue eyes could burn so hot. “I’d like that, too.” His voice was thick, husky, sending shivers through her body. He leaned down and kissed her lightly, being careful not to hit her forehead with his helmet or the NVD attached to it. “The rain is coming. Let’s keep moving before it hits.”

Trailing Case as closely as she was, she wasn’t bearing the brunt of the foliage. He was. She turned her head to avoid greenery to the face and used her shoulders and arms to block what she could.

That warm gooey feeling was back, and Nyx suspected she was in big trouble with this man.

Big trouble.

“Shit.” Case tried to grab a large, frond-like thing before it could hit her. He wasn’t fast enough. Nyx lowered her head and closed her eyes, but she still got a face full of leaves. He pulled it away from her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. How does my face look?”

He studied her carefully. “You have a couple of cuts. We’ll have to take care of those on our next break. I’m sorry about that.”

Nyx waved off the apology. “You’re doing a hell of a job protecting me. One slipped. Don’t worry about it.”

Case shook his head. “It shouldn’t have happened. I let myself get distracted, and I know better than that.”

“Distracted? By what?” She looked around, trying to find what caught his interest.

He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, gently tilting her head until their gazes met. “About us. In bed. Cashing in your V-card.”

Her gulp was audible. She brought her hand up, curling her fingers around his wrist, and ran her thumb across his skin. Caressing him was as necessary as breathing. She couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to stop. She had a sudden image of him over her. Moving slowly, carefully, making sure she enjoyed it as much as he did. “It would be so good,” she whispered.

“It would be more than good. Monumental? Epic? Earthshaking?”

“All of the above?”

“Yeah, all of that and more. But Fireball? You’re not helping me regain and maintain control.”

She had to clear her throat. “Sorry.”

Case freed himself from her hand and released her chin. As she watched, he worked on reining in his desire. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s make some progress before I fall into another fantasy about us.”

It took Nyx a few moments before she could find her voice. “We could talk to keep your mind off...you know. If it’s safe.”

“We should be okay. I picked the last topic. It’s your turn.”

Nyx knew what she wanted to ask him about, but from his tone of voice earlier, she was pretty sure Case wouldn't like it. "Tell me about your childhood. About why you went to bed hungry."

He still moved fluidly, but she saw his muscles go rigid. "That's personal."

"More personal than my being a virgin?" She let the dryness of her tone convey her thoughts on that dodge.

"Yeah."

Nyx didn't push.

"My mom could be the best mom in the world. She liked to cook, and she'd make one of my favorite foods, a Greek dish called spanakopita. It's made with spinach and feta cheese and phyllo dough. Whenever I have it, I remember the best-mom times. Unfortunately, those became fewer and farther between as I got older."

"Why?"

More silence. Then, with reluctance, "My mom was a drug addict."

That wasn't the answer she expected. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Me, too. When she was clean, and had a job, life was good. We never had a lot of money, but enough for food and rent. The problem was she couldn't stay off the shit for long. She'd lie about whether she was using, but I started to be able to figure it out, anyway."

“No one tried to help you?”

He made a sound that sounded like a snort. “I got put in foster care a couple times while my mom was in rehab.”

His tone made it clear he’d hated that. She decided to avoid foster care as a discussion topic. “What about your dad?”

“I never met him. I don’t know his name. I’m not sure my mom knew who fathered me. When she needed money, she’d do some hooking. Even if her client had given her a name, it would have been fake.”

That was said without emotion as if it meant nothing to him, but Nyx knew better. Even with Case’s back to her, she could tell this had a strong impact on him. “You could do a DNA test,” she suggested quietly.

Case shook his head. “No. I don’t care enough to look for that asshole. She was seventeen when I was born. You want to bet he was an adult?”

Before she could figure out what to say, Case kept talking. “She protected me. She didn’t do drugs while she was pregnant, and she kept her clients away from wherever we were living.” Another pause. “She hid her drugs and told me over and over not to touch anything. To never be like her. She said she wanted me to do something with my life.”

“It sounds as if she loved you more than anything in the world.”

Again, Case shook his head. “No, I came in second. The drugs came first. They always did.”

“The drugs were something she was helpless to resist. She didn’t choose them over you. They controlled her. If she’d been in control, she would have chosen you every time. I know it.”

“Maybe,” he allowed.

“Definitely. I’ve had spanakopita at restaurants. That’s a ton of work. If she was cooking it for you because you enjoyed it, she loved you.”

That eased some of the tightness in Case’s body. “I used to sit in the kitchen with her while she made it. We’d talk, and she’d tell me stories and make me laugh. Those are some of my favorite memories of her.”

Memories of her. Nyx was afraid to ask the obvious. “What happened?” It was an ambiguous question if he wanted it to be.

“I was eighteen. At boot camp. She OD’d.”

“I’m sorry.” Tears welled. She reached out and squeezed his arm. “It’s hard to lose someone you love.”

Case stopped and turned to her. “Nyx, I lost her years before she died. I don’t think she was clean the entire time I was in high school.”

Reaching up, Nyx stroked her hand over his bearded cheek. “I know better, Case. Until she died, you always had hope that she would go back to rehab and maybe this time she’d win the battle against the drugs. When she died, that hope went with her.”

He looked away without answering, but he didn't have to. She knew she was right. Without waiting for an invitation, Nyx stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Case, hugging him tightly. He was a grown man, a Special Forces soldier, but she couldn't help but think of a little boy who had to learn to fend for himself.

A little boy who'd become a caretaker to his mother. A protector far too early.

Slowly, he returned the hug, holding her closely against his body, taking the comfort she offered. "I hated feeling helpless. I tried everything I could think of to get her off the shit. Nothing worked, not for long."

There was nothing Nyx could say, so she held Case tighter.

"I hated the lying," he continued, voice soft. "So much lying. Lies of omission when I was young, and when I was old enough to know when she was using, she would just outright lie to me."

"She was protecting you."

"How do you figure that?"

"She knew how much you disliked her drug use. She didn't want you to worry about her."

Case didn't answer, but his arms tightened, bringing her another fraction of an inch closer. His childhood sounded bleak. Someone else wouldn't have escaped the cycle, but he'd been strong enough to get out. He'd gone into the Army, become a Special Forces sergeant, and he was skilled enough to be assigned to covert ops. He even managed to earn a college degree.

"Your mom would be proud of you."

He went still, not even breathing for a moment. Then a partial shrug, one that was miniscule enough not to jar her head. Taking care of her. Still. Yet. Again. Always.

Nyx froze. She'd danced around the truth earlier, telling herself she was falling for him. As if pretending it wasn't a done deal meant she could reverse her emotions. She wasn't falling for Case. She was already in love with him.

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She lived in Los Angeles, and graduate programs in geoarchaeology were few and far between. She couldn't change schools. If Case was operating in South America, she'd bet he was stationed somewhere in Florida. That five-plus hour flight between their homes was brutal, and that was when he was in the country.

Assuming he was interested in more than her V-card, of course.

There was a thought. But she didn't release her hold on Case until it started to rain. A big drop splatted on her neck, and then the sky opened up.

"Come on, Fireball, let's go." He took her hand, tugging her with him.

It didn't take long before they were soaked, but Case kept them moving. Nyx knew he wanted a defensible position until the rain stopped, because the way it was coming down, he couldn't hear if someone was nearby. She didn't know how long they walked before Case released her hand and slowed down.

Way down.

If Case had antennae, they'd be out and twitching. She stuck close to him, but not so close that she'd be in his way. Her step hitched when he drew the pistol. Animal, reptile, or human?

Heavily armed men in camo gear came out of the surrounding trees. The insignia on their quasi-uniforms identified who they were.

Rebels.

Chapter 24

They were in a shabbily built hut on stilts. Case had checked out the situation through the gaps in the bamboo walls and they had guards on all sides. Not a surprise, considering he'd escaped from them before.

Nyx was scared. She could maintain an incredibly serene expression on her face, and she'd fooled him at first. Now that he knew what to watch for, the signs were obvious—the tension in her neck, shoulders, and jaw, how her gaze would sweep the area, looking for a threat, and the biggest giveaway: the way she wouldn't allow him out of her sight.

“Case?” Her voice was soft.

Crossing to her, he crouched down. “What, Fireball?”

“Why are there rebels so far south? The fighting is north of the capital. I researched before I flew down.”

He pulled the other wooden chair over to her and sat on the edge. Keeping his voice low, he said, “These aren't rebels. A couple years ago, the leaders of the rebellion expelled a group. Hector Ramirez's outlaws. Ramirez and friends decided that the civil war was a great time to earn a profit and they were willing to kill to make themselves rich. Word is their actions angered the rebel leadership.”

Her smile was more of a grimace. “Great. A group so bad that the rebels wanted them out.”

There was more he could tell her, but it would only add to her fear, and Case switched topics. “This unit has been after me for a while. They've kidnapped me twice. The first time, I escaped. They drugged me the second time, and some friends

had to get me out.” He knew what was coming next. “I don’t know what they want with me.”

“They’re not interested in the same thing Vargas wants? The M4 replacement?”

He shrugged. “It’s the most likely reason, but they never asked about them. Hell, they never even talked to me. Just kept me confined in a hut like this with guards around me.”

Nyx bit her lower lip, distracting him, and then she nodded. “Everyone wants the new rifle, right? Vargas, that arms dealer he’s trying to buy them from, and there’s some Russian man in the hotel that was talking about weapons until he realized we could hear him on the phone.”

“You understand Russian?”

“No, he was speaking Spanish. Maybe he was on the phone with the arms dealer. I don’t know. But Case, think about it. The rifles are precision-guided and capable of great accuracy even if the shooter and target are both moving. No one else has anything like them.”

“Yet.”

“Yet,” she echoed with a faint frown. “If they’re interested in money, how much would they profit if they could sell the rifle?”

He ran his hands over his face. “There’d be a huge markup, but unless they sold them to Torres, the arms dealer, he’d be on their ass. He’s one dangerous man.”

“They could sell them to Torres. Isn’t that your plan?”

Something in the way she said that made Case study her closely. He couldn't tell if her tone was meaningful or not because all he could read was her fear. "Torres isn't going to pay anything close to the open market. He has his own profit margins to maintain. They'd make more money in narcotics."

"Maybe Torres doesn't scare them," Nyx suggested.

For a moment, he stared at her, then her words resonated. "Fuck." Case got to his feet and began pacing.

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Torres had an iron grip on the weapons trade in Puerto Jardin, and he had for decades. Intel showed no one challenged him. No one. But the arms dealer might be vulnerable. He was aging, his second-in-command was dead, and Torres had eliminated the men who betrayed him by supporting his righthand man, so he was not fully staffed. If there was ever a time to test his strength, it was now.

Hector Ramirez wasn't afraid of much, and he'd been hardened by his fighting in the civil war before he'd been kicked out of the rebel army. If he could get his hands on this weapon when Torres couldn't, he might be able to muscle the older man out completely.

Maybe Torres doesn't scare them.

Maybe he didn't, although the first time Case had been grabbed, Torres hadn't been weakened. But what if Ramirez knew the arms dealer's righthand man was betraying his boss and running a side hustle? That would show vulnerability. It might be enough for Ramirez.

The most likely reason now seemed like the odds-on favorite.

Hours passed, and no one bothered with them. Just like the first time. It didn't make sense. Why go to the trouble of capturing them and then ignore them?

Nyx was still scared, but she was also getting restless. Case could read that, too. He'd learned she liked being busy, that she liked having a task or goal. He needed to keep her occupied, but the question was how? They had nothing except the clothes they wore and those were wet. Their backpacks, his helmet, and the weapons had been

confiscated.

“Fireball.” He waited until he had her attention. “Tell me something about yourself that I don’t already know.”

“A fun fact?”

“Sure, why not?”

She was quiet for a moment, her gaze focused on the wall as she thought about it. “I taught myself to knit. It’s how I relieve my anxiety when I feel overwhelmed.”

“Knit, huh? Can you make me a sweater?”

“I’ve never knit a garment, but even if I could, I wouldn’t. I’m not losing you because of the boyfriend sweater curse.”

He laughed. “What?”

Nyx nodded, looking serious. “The curse says that if you knit a sweater for a significant other, you’ll break up shortly thereafter. The prevailing wisdom in the knitting community is no sweaters until after the wedding.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask you for one after the ceremony.”

She drilled him with a hard look. “Would you even wear a sweater? I’m not about to spend months knitting something if it’s going to sit in a drawer.”

All right, he could see that. “Maybe you could make something else for me.”

“We’ll talk about it. My turn for a question.”

Case didn't like the tone of her voice. She wasn't going after a surface level piece of information, and considering her curiosity about his childhood, nothing was out of the realm of possibility. "Okay," he said, sounding more relaxed than he felt.

"Have you ever been in love? Before me, of course, honey bear."

He hesitated, but the honey bear told him she was playing her role, aware there were rebel soldiers positioned around their hut. "I thought I was," he admitted.

Nyx crossed to where he stood. She tipped her head to look up at him and asked, "What happened?"

"I found out she was married, something she forgot to tell me. Her husband was deployed at the time." Case grimaced, before adding, "None of my friends know about it." He wasn't sure why he was sharing it with Nyx, but hell, he'd already told her about his mom. This was easier to talk about than that.

Nodding, Nyx said, "She caused you to violate your code of honor. How long ago was this?"

"Long before I met you."

"I know that. I still want to know when."

It didn't matter, so Case answered. "More than three years ago."

"Good. So you're completely over her then." He couldn't read her expression.

"I barely remember what she looked like. All I can see is a sexy brunette Fireball." He wasn't lying. Nyx took over his mind, making Hannah seem like a pale ghost from the distant past. The ironic thing was that Nyx understood him better in the short

time they'd been together than Hannah had in the months he'd been involved with her.

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Case put his hands on her hips, pulling Nyx close, and kissed her. He kept it light and easy because they were in a shitload of trouble and he couldn't afford to get lost in her, but he needed the connection.

Nyx was everything he didn't believe existed. At least not for him. She was brainy and beautiful. She understood him at a core level, and he could trust her. That was a big one. He'd grown up with a mother who lied about her drug use. He'd dated women who lied to him about different things. Then there'd been Hannah, the biggest liar of them all. At least his mom had her addiction as an excuse. Hannah had none.

When Nyx leaned into him, her hands teasing his nape, Case was forced to break the embrace and step back. She could make him forget everything if he wasn't careful and he couldn't afford the lapse.

"Not now, Fireball," he said when he noticed her expression. "I can't be distracted."

"I'm sorry, I just..." she let her voice trail off.

"I know. You wanted to forget for a few minutes. It's okay. What you need to keep in mind is that our situation is more precarious now than it was when we were guests of Señor Vargas."

Nyx nodded. She walked back to her chair but stopped midway. "How are we going to sleep in this hammock tonight without ending up on the floor?"

Case grinned. "We'll be fine once we get in it, but the floor is a real possibility tomorrow morning when we try to get back out."

Despite her nerves, she returned the smile. “I’ll let you get on your feet first and you can help me out.”

“Deal. I’ll try my best not to send you to the floor when I struggle out of it.”

“Oh, bullshit.” There was a note of suppressed laughter in her voice. “You’re athletic and move with grace and an economy of motion. You’re not going to send the hammock swaying so wildly that I’m in any danger of falling out of it. Try again, hon.”

She did get him. He’d been teasing her, and expecting her to take him seriously, but she’d immediately known the truth. Damn, he enjoyed her.

The amusement faded. He wanted her safe in Los Angeles, but Case wasn’t ready to give her up. Maybe when the op was over, he could take leave and fly out to see her. He could tell her the truth then about who he really was and what he really did.

The distance between Tampa and LA was daunting. Even if she was interested, how did they manage any kind of relationship? He’d be out on other ops—she knew the score from growing up with her dad—and she’d be busy with school.

Seeing her once or twice a year wasn’t going to be enough. Not even close.

Fuck, he should have joined the Navy and become a SEAL. At least then he’d likely be stationed in San Diego and that wasn’t too far away from LA. Tampa might as well be on the other side of the world.

“You’re frowning,” Nyx said.

“Sorry. I’m thinking. Nothing you need to worry about, I promise,” he added. She knew him, but he knew her, too. She was an overthinker, which meant she worried

about scenarios that most people never considered. Anticipating trouble was tactical, and he liked that she had that skill, but it wasn't as if they could discuss a long-distance relationship while they were surrounded by men who thought they were engaged to be married.

Yelling interrupted his thoughts. Nyx tensed and he moved, putting himself between her and the door. He couldn't make out the words, but something was happening outside the hut.

He was still on guard when the door opened and two soldiers came in, both wearing camo uniforms and carrying SCARs. One man pointed at him. "You will come with us."

Case looked back at Nyx. "You'll be okay. Sit tight." He hoped she'd be okay. He didn't know what was about to happen, not to her and not to himself. It seemed a good bet that they were finally going to talk to him, that he'd learn at last what the hell was going on with the rebels' interest in him.

"Mueve tu trasero," the man said harshly.

"My ass is moving," Case said, same as the last time he'd gotten this order and headed toward the door. He did not want to risk them getting angry at him and using Nyx as a punching bag.

They led him across the center of camp. The other side had the largest hut, and he hoped that was where they were headed. It would mean that things were finally in motion.

That's where they brought him. This hut had interior walls, although they were bamboo as well. "Wait here," the man who did the talking said, and he disappeared through one of the doors, leaving Case with the quiet one.

It only took a moment before he reappeared. “This way,” he ordered, gesturing with his SCAR.

Case obeyed, and when he walked through the door, he stopped. There was a table that served as a desk and behind it sat a man. He was about thirty-five with dark, curly hair and a beard. His eyebrows were heavy over flat, brown eyes. He wore combat fatigues complete with rank insignia.

“What can I do for you, Colonel Ramirez?”

Chapter 25

Were the outlaws going to talk to Case or execute him? If they thought he could get them the new assault rifle, it would be a conversation. If they suspected he was more than who he was pretending to be— She cut that thought off. The odds were against his cover being blown.

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She worried too much—she had since she was a kid—but when her dad was away, no one else in her family worried enough. Her mom never seemed to have a plan, and that always increased Nyx's anxiety.

Case would be ready for anything. She could count on him.

She needed to prepare to take care of herself if the worst happened.

Was there anything she could use as a weapon?

The hut was all but barren. They had two chairs, a hammock, and a plastic bucket that she suspected was their latrine. There wasn't one other thing in here with them. She checked the chairs, but they felt solid and she'd have to smash one to break it. That was guaranteed to get the guards inside to find out what the noise was about. The chairs were out unless it was an emergency.

Nyx checked the hammock. The hooks were embedded deeply into the wooden support poles. To reach them, she had to go up on tiptoe. Even if she had better leverage, she didn't have enough strength in her hands to pull them out. Not without a tool.

There were gaps in the walls of the hut where the bamboo stalks didn't quite meet. She took the opportunity to look out each side. The guards surrounding the hut were on the ground because there was no decking around the structure, despite it being on stilts. It was the dry season, though, and while it still rained often, the rivers weren't flooding.

There was one staircase to the ground, and it was more ladder-like than actual stairs. There was a guard positioned at the bottom of them. When they'd been brought in, her head had been above the floor of the hut. Since she was five-foot-eight, she estimated the drop from the floor to the ground at about five feet. Maybe four and a half. The worst she could do to herself was sprain an ankle if she landed wrong.

Case said he'd escaped the first time he'd been taken captive.

The rebels would have determined how he'd done it and taken steps to prevent that from happening a second time. Nyx studied the hut again, but she couldn't figure out how he'd managed it. Of course, he would have been at a different encampment, one that had been abandoned after they'd noticed his absence.

She couldn't find any way to escape here unless the guards fell asleep in the middle of the night. But that meant sneaking into the rainforest in the dark, without an NVD. Again, that fell in the only-in-an-emergency category.

Next, she measured the length and width of the room. Eight paces to the door. Eleven paces on the long side of the hut. Nyx walked the space over and over until she had every inch of it memorized—door, windows, hammock, and chair placement. If she had to move in the dark, it could be the difference between getting out and being caught.

When she was satisfied there was nothing else she could do, she sat and started thinking. Case had said these men were kicked out of the rebel army. That meant more than looting. It meant they'd likely raped, maimed, murdered, and committed other atrocities. She couldn't remember exactly how he'd phrased it, but he'd said the two of them were safer with Vargas. That told her more than she wanted to know.

Nyx shook the thought off. Ignorance wasn't bliss. Ignorance got people killed.

Case had ordered her to sit tight, but what would he want her to do if things went to hell and he wasn't around?

Before Case, it had always been: What would Dad want me to do? She'd never even replaced Dad with Dylan, but she?—

Shit, Dylan. She'd forgotten to tell Case she was Dylan's sister.

Or was her subconscious playing deliberate tricks on her?

Everything would change between her and Case once he knew she was Pickle. She was aware of the code. Guys didn't romance their friends' sisters. And Case was principled. There'd be no more hot kisses, no more heated looks. Maybe her brain had blanked out?

She frowned as she realized she was overthinking again. The way she'd been raised, honor was more than a concept. Doing the right thing was expected of her, and even if it was difficult, she lived up to her dad's ideals. Nyx would have told Case who she was if she'd thought of it when they were free to talk.

There was nothing she could do about it now, though. The same reasons she'd kept quiet in the drug lord's hacienda applied here. It endangered them, especially Case.

It probably wasn't a good thing that he made her forget about everything except him.

Nyx shook her head. She wasn't going to waste energy worrying about their relationship or if they really had one. She'd fallen for him, but Case might want nothing more than a hookup.

It was easier to obsess about him because, if the worst happened, she didn't think she could defend herself for long if these men decided to rape and murder her.

Case waited. Ramirez called this meeting, he could start it.

The man didn't seem to be in any hurry. If he thought the stare down was going to rattle Case, Ramirez had miscalculated. Case had been through this before. More than once. It would take a hell of a lot more than a dispassionate gaze to shake him.

The main army of rebels was fighting for a cause—to oust the politicians steeped in corruption. They'd taken up arms because they felt they'd exhausted all other avenues.

Then there was Ramirez. The colonel and his men had looted towns and villages, raped women and children, murdered the people who dared defend their loved ones, and burned homes to the ground when they were done.

They hadn't joined for any noble reason. The colonel was a war profiteer, as corrupt as the politicians running Puerto Jardin. Maybe he hadn't actively taken part in the horrifying acts his men carried out, but he sure as fuck didn't rein them in.

Ramirez leaned one elbow on the chair arm, the pose one of relaxed indifference. He still didn't speak.

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Case would have attempted to outdo the colonel with the don't-give-a-shit attitude, but Nyx was in a hut on the other side of the encampment. He settled on casual, but not too laid back, and waited some more.

“You don't have questions?” Ramirez finally asked in Spanish.

“I have all kinds of questions,” Case said in the same language. He almost added a smartass remark, but remembered his Fireball and toned it down. “Am I allowed to ask them?”

“I've lost two encampments because you either escaped or were rescued from them. It took time and effort to set them up.” He sounded irritated. As if Case wanted to be kidnapped.

“By now, you would have moved the first one, anyway. It's too dangerous to remain static in Puerto Jardin.”

Ramirez's eyes hardened.

It was going to be a fine line between staying in character and keeping Nyx safe from the colonel's wrath. Vargas was easier to deal with. He was cold and deadly, but he was steady. He was able to let comments roll off his back. Up to a point. The colonel appeared to be touchy.

Like a land mine was touchy.

This staring contest lasted longer than the first one. This time, Case broke the silence.

“What can I do for you, Colonel?”

“What makes you think I want something from you?”

Case tucked his thumbs into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Indolent. Arrogant. Cocky. “Your men have kidnapped me twice. Three times, if we count today. I can’t go anywhere in Trujillo without seeing them tailing me.” They were fucking tracking him, and they both knew it. “Why waste manpower without a reason?”

“You’re a difficult man to meet with.”

“I’ve had meetings with Señor Vargas, and with a representative of Señor Torres, among others. I could have made room on my calendar for a meeting with you if it was worth my while.”

“Perhaps I prefer a private meeting, one on my turf. You never stayed long enough for me to reach the encampment.”

Case picked up the implication. “Is that why I was kidnapped twice, and drugged once? To meet with you?”

“Kidnapped isn’t the word I would use.” Ramirez frowned, but Case felt like it was for show. “Let’s say you were brought in for a conference and opted to leave before I could arrive.”

“And drugged?”

“My men were overzealous. They knew I was displeased to arrive the first time and find you already gone. They were determined I would not be disappointed again.”

Yeah, he bet the colonel's men didn't want him angered a second time. He could have asked more questions about the kidnappings, but it was curiosity, not anything he needed to know, not even in his role as Charlie Case. "I'm here now. What did you want to discuss with me, Colonel Ramirez?"

That instigated another lengthy stare, and Case swallowed his impatience. It was easier to play the game when his woman wasn't alone, guarded by men he didn't trust. He wanted to be with Nyx, to watch over her and keep her safe. Yet here he was, waiting for the dregs of humanity to get to the fucking point. He wanted to nudge him along, but Ramirez was the kind of dude who'd take out his rage on Nyx.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Case prepared to wait out this bullshit. He might be new to having the lead on an undercover op, but he was already tired of the posturing and the games to acquire even the smallest amount of leverage.

At long last, Ramirez leaned back in his chair and said, "You have weapons."

"I have access to weapons," Case corrected.

"Semantics. You are a seller of weapons."

"Sí." Case debated for a moment, before he added, "I'm hoping to sell whatever I can get my hands on to Señor Torres."

"Torres." There was a definite sneer in Ramirez's voice. "Why sell to him when there are so many others who would pay you more for the same weapons?"

"Maybe because Torres kills anyone who tries to nose in on his territory. Look what happened after he learned his second-in-command had betrayed him. I'd rather have less money and years to live, than max profit for a few days."

“Surely a man like you isn’t afraid of Torres.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? He has an army behind him. I have a few buddies who’ll make themselves scarce if Señor Torres decides to come after me.” That wasn’t the answer the colonel was expecting, but Case didn’t have to prove how big his dick was. “My plan is to establish a relationship as a supplier to Señor Torres and let him handle the sales.”

“You better rethink that plan.”

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Ramirez's voice held a threat and Case shifted, balancing his weight more evenly. Not that it would help with guards just outside the door. "What do you think my plan should be, Colonel?"

"You sell your weapons to me. I'll give you two percent more than the pittance Torres would pay you."

"Risking Torres's wrath for two percent? I don't think I'm willing to do that."

"Aren't you? Not even to keep your charming fiancée alive and breathing? Or perhaps you don't care about her wellbeing?"

Case was expecting the threat against Nyx, but it still made him freeze for a moment. "I care. I'm not tired of her yet." He wasn't sure he'd ever get tired of his Fireball. She kept him on his toes and he enjoyed that. "It's difficult to do anything about the weapons in the middle of the rainforest, especially when I don't have a phone."

"That is understood. My men will return you to Trujillo at first light tomorrow, and you can arrange for the weapons and munitions to be delivered to me."

"Your men will return me and my fiancée to Trujillo."

"No, Señor Case. Only you. Your betrothed will remain with me. That's the only leverage I have to ensure your cooperation."

Again, this wasn't unexpected, but he didn't like it. "What items are you looking for?"

“I have an inventory, but what matters the most to me is the M4 replacement rifle.”

The one weapon on everyone’s wish list. “The US Army was not happy to have that particular item stolen last year. They’ve got it locked up tight and my contacts can’t get their hands on it.”

“You better find a way to get it to me.” Ramirez’s brows came down as he leaned forward, adding emphasis to his words. “I would be most displeased if you neglected to deliver it and I would hate to take my unhappiness with you out on your betrothed. Sí, I would hate it, but I will do it. Am I clear?”

“Sí, Colonel. You’re clear. In return for the rifle, I will expect you to keep my fiancée completely safe in my absence. I want her in the same condition when I return as she is now.”

Ramirez relaxed, his lips curved, but the smile wasn’t reassuring. “She stays as is for three days. If you provide proof my weapons are on their way, she will remain safe. If you do not? Well, my men have been restless lately. They need to let off some steam.”

Case had to force the anger aside. “Three days isn’t much time.”

“It’s long enough to get the rifle en route. If you care about your woman as much as you claim, you’ll be motivated to get the job done on time.”

Nodding once, Case said, “I’ll get you the rifle.”

Chapter 26

Case returned to the hut to find Nyx already had her brave face on. Damn, he loved this woman. He could count on her to stay calm, and when he needed her to suck it

up, she did without complaining. Her strength would help a lot when he told her about Ramirez's plan.

One side of his mouth quirked up. Of course, she also might skewer him when he shared what would happen tomorrow.

Nyx remained unmoving until his escort closed the door to the hut behind him. "Are you all right?" she asked, standing and crossing to meet him. Her eyes ran over him, looking for any injury and something inside him warmed at her concern.

"I'm fine. Colonel Ramirez and I had a meeting, nothing more." He tried not to hug her, but when she stood right in front of him, Case couldn't help it. He wrapped his arms around her and brought Nyx against his body, holding on tightly. Fuck, he didn't want to leave her here, and there was no way for him to get her out.

Not alone.

He needed his team and the only way to reach them was to pretend to cooperate with Ramirez. He didn't want to think about his Fireball's reaction. He wouldn't be able to tell her what the ultimate plan was, and he'd have to count on her trusting him without all the facts.

Maybe she would.

They'd developed a connection over the past few days. She relied on him, did what he said without arguing, and he'd learned he could depend on her word. When she said something, he didn't have to look for ulterior motives.

"Talk to me, Lurch," she said, voice muffled against his shoulder. "What's going on?"

The way she said Lurch sounded like an endearment and not his handle. And he had an immediate, negative reaction. He didn't like her using it. Everyone called him Lurch. Nyx wasn't everyone.

Case froze and listened to himself. He didn't like her calling him Lurch? They had a connection? He didn't have to look for hidden motives with her? And what had he thought when he first walked into the hut? That he loved her?

Every muscle in his body went taut. They hardly knew each other.

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Except that he did know her.

They'd been in a crucible together. He'd seen Nyx in some of the worst circumstances imaginable. She was brave and strong, able to think on her feet, willing to take risks and not stand around waiting. At the same time, she understood he was in charge and she followed orders. She pulled her weight and never expected him to do everything. Despite the situation, she'd even been able to laugh with him. And give him shit. His lips curved. That might be his favorite thing of all. Her sassiness. She didn't let him get away with anything.

What a time and place to realize he might be holding his future in his arms.

"Honey bear?"

"Hang on, Fireball. I need a minute."

He might need longer than that. Hannah had been the last in a long string of women who'd lied to him. Case had given up on a forever, settling for hookups for the past three years, but now there was Nyx. She was as straightforward as anyone he'd met.

Easing her back, he studied her face. She was a mess from their trek through the rainforest and their boat ride to the encampment. Her braid had hair escaping every which way and there were the cuts she'd gotten when she'd taken a face full of foliage. His fault. He'd been too slow. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to each scrape and then ran a thumb over the smudge of dirt on her chin.

"You're beautiful," he told her.

Her full lips quirked up. “Thanks,” Nyx said dryly. “There’s no mirror here, but as grimy as I feel, I think you’re being overly complimentary.”

“Keep in mind, I’m in the same state you are.”

“True. Now are you going to fill me in or what?”

Case sighed, and reluctantly released her. “Yeah. Let’s go sit down.” Hand on the small of her back, he guided her to the chairs. “It’s the weapons,” he said when they were both seated.

“Occam’s Razor,” Nyx said, nodding. “The simplest explanation is usually right.”

“There were other options, but yeah. This was always the most likely reason they were interested in me.”

“And they want the same thing everyone else is clamoring for, right?”

“I thought you wanted me to fill you in?”

“I had time to think while I was waiting for you. There are a number of ways to get assault rifles and ammunition that don’t involve you. Since they’re laser focused on you and only you—” Nyx stopped speaking and shrugged. “It just made sense.”

Case added a couple more items to his list. Nyx was smart and she could see the big picture. While her first inclination wasn’t to assess things tactically when she did, she saw a lot of the same things he noticed. He liked that, too. Maybe it was time to stop detailing what he liked about her and just accept the truth. He’d fallen fast and hard for a brunette Fireball.

A brunette Fireball who had a couple more years left before she earned her PhD and

wasn't looking for a relationship, or a hookup, until she was finished.

Her hand rested on his knee briefly, capturing his attention. "You keep checking out on me. What's up, honey bear?"

He realized he didn't like honey bear. Honey bear wasn't real, it was part of their act, but she couldn't use his name. His reaction wasn't rational. "I'm not a fan of honey bear," Case said.

"I'll just keep trying out endearments then," Nyx said easily. "Now fess up, what's going on? There's something you're avoiding."

Taking her hands, Case leaned forward. "Colonel Ramirez wants the weapon, and he knows that I can't do anything to get it for him sitting in a hut in the middle of the rainforest without a satellite phone at my disposal."

"Is he getting you a phone?"

Case shook his head. "No. At first light tomorrow, I'll be taken to Trujillo."

Her face paled, but Nyx squared her shoulders. "You mean we'll be taken to Trujillo. Right?"

He stayed quiet.

"Right?"

"No, Fireball. You're Ramirez's leverage to make sure I don't disappear on him. He's holding you here to keep me in line."

Her mask slipped for a moment and Case saw her terror. She had a reason for it. Then

she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, it was gone. The veil back in place. He waited for her to ask if he would return. After all, she believed he was a mercenary, but she didn't. Nyx had that much faith in him. The realization warmed him.

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“Those weapons must be locked down tight,” she said, voice thick. “What’s going to happen to me when you can’t get them?”

“You’re going to be fine.” He tried to put as much assurance in his words as possible. It wasn’t as if he could announce he’d be back with his team to rescue her. Not with all the guards they had within earshot.

“I trust you,” she said quietly, but with her brave face firmly in place, he couldn’t read her.

The hammock forced her and Case into each other’s arms, but Nyx wasn’t complaining. She was scared and feeling his warmth, his strength reassured her. It wouldn’t last. In the morning, he’d be gone, and she’d have to survive in this camp alone.

It seemed darker than dark inside the hut. She could barely make out Case’s features although she was tucked against his side. She didn’t need to see him when she could picture him easily. The tousled blond hair, those sapphire blue eyes, his beard that didn’t grow in well over his cheeks. And of course, the slightly lopsided grin that made her heart trip every time he flashed it at her.

Case didn’t smile often enough.

It was too hot, too humid to sleep like this. Their skin stuck together whenever one of them tried to shift. It wasn’t as if she could even doze anyway, not as wound up as she was. Nyx took a deep breath and tried not to hyperventilate at the thought of being left behind.

Her dad hadn't trained her to be a scaredy cat.

She could take care of herself. If the fight was fair. It wouldn't be fair if push came to shove while Case was gone. She'd be on her own against any number of men, all bigger and stronger and war hardened.

"Relax, Fireball," Case said. His mouth was against her ear, his voice barely audible. "Ramirez promised your complete safety for three days."

"That doesn't seem like very long." Nyx kept her voice as quiet as his.

"It'll be enough." He paused. "All I need to do is show proof the weapons are on their way and then you'll be fine. I'll be with you."

Nyx started to nod, banged her head into Case's chin, and settled for a murmur of agreement instead. She didn't believe the part about the weapons. There was no way in hell the US Army was letting the latest, greatest high-tech rifle out into the wild, not even as part of an operation. So what did that mean for her?

A few seconds of clear-headed thought gave her the answer. Case was coming back with his team to get her out. It might take them the full three days to plan the mission. The only easy way in and out was via the river, and that was heavily guarded by the raiders.

Raiders. It made them sound less frightening than what they were. War criminals. Murderers. Rapists. Arsonists. Soulless predators.

"Three days," she said as softly as possible. "Do you trust him to keep his word?"

"He'll keep it. I told him if any harm came to you that I would sell those rifles to the fucking Russian mob before I'd let him get his hands on them. Torres doesn't seem to

scare him, but invoking Yaromir Ivanov made him think twice.”

She didn’t know who Ivanov was, but it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was that the name was enough to strike fear into Ramirez. She had questions for Case, so many questions, but she didn’t ask any of them, too aware of the enemy mere feet away. If the wrong word carried to their ears, it could be catastrophic.

Bottom line? She trusted Case. She didn’t need her questions answered.

“You know what I want to do when you’ve exchanged me for the weapons?”

“Go back home?” His voice might be quiet, but there was no mistaking the hopeful note in it.

“No. Well, eventually of course, but first I want to lock myself into a hotel room with you and cash it in.”

Case’s muscles tensed, she felt it and she also felt it when he forced himself to relax. “I thought you had two years left of school.”

“I do, but I don’t want to wait that long. I don’t want to miss my chance with you.”

He didn’t say anything.

Had she read him wrong? Nyx didn’t think so, but the silence left her anxious. “If you’re interested, of course.”

“Fireball, I am more than interested.” His lips found hers in the dark. “Are you sure I’m worth being the one?”

Nyx slid her hand over, found his, and laced their fingers. “No one else ever even

tempted me. Only you.”

He squeezed her hand. “There’s a second luxury hotel in Trujillo. I’ll take you there. You deserve the best suite in the place, but that’s a little out of my price range.”

“As if I’ll even notice the room.”

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His lips were curved as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll make sure of that. Anything in particular you're interested in trying?"

"Everything!" She barely managed to whisper that.

Case chuckled.

Nyx should be embarrassed, but she wasn't. Not with him. She could share things with him that she would never dream of telling anyone else. It should be like that. After all, she was giving him her virginity. "What do you want to do to me? Have you thought about it?"

"From the first moment you sat with me."

"And?"

"Are you trying to kill me?"

Blinking at the non sequitur, she frowned. "What?"

Moving the hand he held, Case placed it over his cock, just long enough for Nyx to feel he had an erection, and then he moved it back to his chest. "Just talking about this with you does this to me."

"Since you're already hard, answer my question. What were you fantasizing about, the first time we met?"

His voice was still quiet, but it was choked. “You used a straw to drink your limonada. All I could think about was that gorgeous mouth of yours wrapped around my cock.”

Her entire body flashed molten hot, and she found it difficult to draw a full breath. When she realized Case was tense, waiting for her response, she whispered, “Yeah, I’d like that, too. You’ll have to tell me what to do.”

“I’ll walk you through everything step by step if that’s what you want. Of course, if you feel compelled to experiment, I’m good with that, too.”

Nyx couldn’t find words.

“Anything you want, any way you want it. Think about that while I’m gone. Come up with a list, and when we’re back in Trujillo, we’ll do it all. Everything.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He kissed her to seal the vow.

Chapter 27

Case’s stomach churned. Nyx’s expression as she stood in the doorway, watching him leave, haunted him. Her brave face. It got to him. Made him want to keep her safe and secure so that she never had to wear it again. And it made him wonder how she learned to adopt that look.

There were six men on the boat with him, but no one was talking. The motor was loud, making a sputtering noise that suggested it needed maintenance, and they’d have to yell to be heard over the noise. Case didn’t want to have a conversation, anyway.

His Fireball said her dad was Special Forces. Maybe she put on her brave face whenever he left to keep him from worrying about her while he was out on an op. He could see that. Nyx took things on herself. She didn't like to rely on others, that was clear from the beginning, but she had looked to him for help. Case liked being the exception to her usual behavior.

That brought up thoughts of being her first lover, and he forcibly pushed them away. There wasn't time now to fantasize. There was only getting to the captain, arranging a rescue for Nyx, and executing it.

Reaching the safe house wasn't going to be easy. The rebels weren't about to allow him to roam free. He'd have to lose them. The evasive maneuvers he would need to perform were going to border on the ridiculous, but he couldn't risk his team by half-assing the precautions. It might get him to the captain sooner, but it would ultimately slow down the rescue if they had to move positions.

If he had his phone, he could message for a check-in somewhere.

The boat engine choked, stopped, and then resumed. Case scowled. Couldn't Ramirez spare some funds to upgrade or maintain his engines? If they ended up floating on the river, it would cut into the time he had to get Nyx to safety.

It seemed to take forever before they neared Trujillo. The port was a mix of modern and rundown. The ships moving supplies and produce were allowed to dock in the newer section. A small boat like theirs got the old part. The area where the dockside buildings were wooden posts with rusting metal roofs.

As soon as they were tied off, Case started to move and got a pistol pointed at him. He froze and raised his hands. "Your colonel wants the weapons, and he gave me three days. I need to talk to people. I need to get a new phone. I need to avoid the Russians, Vargas's men, Torres's men, and a slew of others. I don't have time to

waste.”

“Three days is plenty of time.”

“Easy for you to say. That’s not your woman imprisoned in a hut.” The man was in his forties, old enough to have a family. “How would you react if it were your wife?”

He lowered the pistol and Case clambered onto the dock. Trujillo might not be the size of Rio Blanco, the nation’s capital, but it was the largest city in the south part of Puerto Jardin and the river was the major thoroughfare from many of the small villages. The docks were teeming. As soon as he was on the pier, he used the crowd to his advantage, disappearing into the throng and making tracks away from his captors.

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There was shouting, but Case ignored it. The men weren't going to fire at him, no matter how much they might want to. Bribery might be rampant in Puerto Jardin, but innocent people being shot near the docks was not something even Ramirez could buy his men out of.

As Case began his roundabout route through the city, he considered alternatives. Showing up at the usual places was out. Ramirez's men would know about the merc bar, and since they'd been tailing him for weeks, they knew about the open-air market, as well as the other usual check-in locations.

He shoplifted a baseball cap. It brought back memories. When his mom had been high, he'd stolen food to eat. Case wasn't that kid anymore, though, and guilt had him memorizing the name and location of the vendor so he could come back later and pay for it.

He kept his eyes open, not only for the assholes after him but for one of his teammates. It would speed everything up if he could run into someone. No such luck, of course.

It was hours—hours—later when Case felt completely confident no one was on his ass, and he headed for the safe house.

The urge to rush was strong, but he needed to take his time. He needed to keep his guard up and continue to watch his surroundings. No mistakes. He wasn't letting Nyx get hurt because he made a stupid error.

Case let himself in the kitchen, tapping in the code on the electronic keypad. The

house was silent. He went room by room, but it was empty.

Fucking son of a bitch.

He was headed for the door, prepared to go out and look for his team when it registered how stupid that was. He had to avoid the usual locations, and finding a teammate by wandering around a city the size of Trujillo was idiotic. The smartest course of action was to wait.

Scowling, he searched for paper and a pen and settled at the dining room table. He might be forced to sit here, but that didn't mean he had to twiddle his thumbs. Case sketched out the encampment—the huts, the river, the location of the guards, the topography, and everything else he could remember. On a separate sheet of paper, he jotted down notes about the site.

They'd move Nyx around the camp because it made a rescue more difficult, but he still marked the hut they'd been imprisoned in.

He was sketching out some minor details when the dining-room door opened.

“What are you doing here?” Captain Nguyen asked. “Where's the Paladin League woman? Upstairs?”

“BD, I've got a problem and I need help.”

Half a day and Nyx was bored. Okay, scared, too. But at this moment, mostly bored. She had nothing to do, and with Case gone, she had no one to talk to. At least the raiders had left her alone. She'd rather grapple with the tedium than deal with them.

She'd remeasured the entire hut, making sure she had every inch of the place memorized. The chances were good that Case and his team would be coming in at

night and her familiarity with the layout could only help.

Besides, it was something to do.

The sound of boots on the ladder to her hut had Nyx jumping to her feet, heart pounding. A man opened the door and stuck his head in. “You, come with me.”

Nyx hesitated, and he pointed a pistol at her. Scowling, he gestured with the weapon.

Reluctantly, dread in every step, she complied. When she reached the ground, two men escorted her across the camp and inside a large hut. One knocked on a bamboo door and went inside another room. Quiet murmuring reached her, but she couldn’t make out the words.

When he reappeared, he gestured for her to join him. Nyx was a beat too late responding, and the dude standing beside her gave her a shove. She flailed, regained her balance, and entered the room. The door closed. She looked behind her, but the two guards stayed on the other side. She turned her attention to the man sitting behind a quasi-desk, wearing camouflage fatigues.

It must be Ramirez. He was younger than she expected. He appeared to only be in his thirties and he was handsome. Not just a little handsome, but good looking enough that he’d turn heads wherever he went. But if Julián Vargas’s eyes were as flat as a shark’s, Nyx didn’t know how to describe this man’s. They were deader, flatter, soulless. Now she understood why Case preferred Vargas to Ramirez. Julián still had some humanity.

“You must be Señor Ramirez,” she said in Spanish, and Nyx was proud that her voice remained even. She’d been afraid it might crack.

“Colonel Ramirez,” he corrected her. “And your name?”

She didn't know what Case had told him, so she didn't dare lie. "Nyx Templeton."

"Nyx? The Greek goddess of the night."

"Sí." She meant to leave it there, but his stare unnerved her. "I was born just after midnight, with lots of dark hair. My parents decided Nyx fit me better than Madison, the name they originally chose for me."

He ignored her rambling. "Do you believe your fiancé cares enough for you to do what it takes to free you?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"You have no hesitation?"

“None.”

Ramirez studied her dispassionately, but she suspected he’d long ago lost the ability to feel real emotion. At last, he said, “Señor Case ran off when they reached Trujillo. My men can’t find him.”

Nyx swallowed hard. “He wouldn’t want to expose his contacts. It’s easier for him to work without an audience.”

“You don’t believe he’s going to disappear into Trujillo and leave you behind?”

“No, Colonel Ramirez. He would never forget about me.” Nyx was able to say that with complete conviction.

There was a long silence, and Nyx nearly began to ramble again, but she pressed her lips tightly together and waited. This hut had screened windows and there were no gaps in the walls. Large ceiling fans spun lazily, offering a breeze her hut lacked. She suspected Ramirez lived here, in another room, as well as conducting business.

When he finally spoke, it was on a different topic. “Why are you in Puerto Jardin?”

How did she answer this question? What did he know? What was he guessing? How much trouble would she be in if she miscalculated? Soulless. Nyx decided to stick close to what Vargas knew. “My fiancé is down here, and I missed him, so when the Paladin League contacted me about a contract job, I jumped at the opportunity.”

“The Paladin League?”

Nyx nodded. “It’s a small nonprofit that gives grants to archaeologists to conduct excavations.”

Ramirez waved an impatient hand. “What is the Paladin League’s interest in Trujillo?”

Her heart stopped before it jumped into her throat. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what he knew. People were looking for the treasure like the dead Norwegian dude who would have killed Frankie, Señor Vargas, and the arms dealer that Case was after. Then there was the fact a brooch from the cache had been auctioned. Ramirez might very well know, or at least suspect, why she was here.

Telling the truth this time, though, could get her imprisoned longer, make her the prize and not the weapon. That couldn’t be a good thing. “I was sent to do some research,” she said, keeping her answer vague. “I’m working on my degree in geoarchaeology.”

“What were you sent to research?” The question was flat, giving her no hint which direction to go with her answer.

“I was out at the Huarona ruins, near Señor Vargas’s hacienda. There were years’ worth of excavation done there before the civil war began. Many archaeologists believe it would be worthwhile to return to the location. There are only two known sites of these people, and?—”

He straightened in his chair, his flat gaze pinning her in place. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Nyx struggled to remain composed. Struggled to hide her terror.

“Really, Señorita? You’re here for the ruins?” Ramirez turned to the credenza behind him. When he faced her again, he had a sheaf of papers in his hand.

The documents she'd hidden in the lining of her backpack. She could feel the blood drain from her face.

Ramirez laid the pages out on the desk and tapped them once with his hand. "While the notes are rather opaque, anyone familiar with the topic would recognize it. You're here for the Treasure of Trujillo. I want it. And you're going to help me find it."

Chapter 28

Nyx stared. This was like one of those classic screwball comedies her mom liked to watch. Did everyone know the Paladin League was here to look for the treasure? Did everyone think they had some inside intel that would allow them to be successful when no one else had managed it in over two hundred years?

"Colonel Ramirez," Nyx said, keeping her tone conciliatory, "Señor Vargas said something similar to me a couple of days ago. The problem is that I don't know where the treasure is hidden. Those papers are the only new information I've discovered."

Ramirez appeared skeptical. If he had clues to the treasure, he would lie to anyone who wanted to beat him to the cache. Ergo, she must be lying and maybe she even had the exact location of the riches. There was literally nothing she could say to change his mind.

"Do you have historical documents you want me to study?" Nyx asked. "That's what Señor Vargas had me do."

Silence. It felt heavy. It sucked the oxygen from her lungs, and Nyx forced herself to draw a slow, careful breath. She wished this really was one of her mom's screwball comedies where no one was ever in real danger.

Unlike now.

Nyx never scared easily, but in the past five days, she'd been in more than one terrifying situation. She didn't like it. She liked being in control of her emotions and her circumstances. Unfortunately, control was in short supply.

"You expect me to believe that the Paladin League sent you to Puerto Jardin with nothing to go on? No plan to find the treasure?" The flatness of his voice was worse than anger.

"Colonel, I'm a geoarchaeologist. I study the land to gather information about archaeological sites. I have more than two years left before I earn my PhD." Nyx hoped that made her sound like a novice playing Indiana Jones. "I was ordered to come to Puerto Jardin and await further instructions."

"You were at the Huarona ruins."

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“Because Charlie was meeting Señor Vargas there by himself and I couldn’t let my fiancé go without backup. I didn’t expect to be discovered by his men.”

She’d managed to say Charlie smoothly, but Nyx was walking a fine line between the various lies. The story needed to be consistent because there was no telling where Ramirez had spies, and that included among Vargas’s men.

“You expect me to believe that the Paladin League sent you to sit around Trujillo and wait? I’m not gullible, Señorita.” His tone had her fighting off a shiver of alarm.

“A brooch was auctioned off.” She hated to pass along that information, but it was in the past and there was nothing Ramirez could do about that item now. “It was from the treasure. My boss didn’t want to risk something else turning up without a representative onsite. It’s a nine-hour flight from the US. Anything could happen in that time.”

That sounded logical, right?

“All I hear from you is excuses.”

Nyx could feel the ice cracking beneath her feet.

“Colonel Ramirez, if I knew where the treasure was, do you think I’d still be in Puerto Jardin?” She flicked her braid behind her shoulder. The action matched her tone of voice. “I would have recovered it and gotten out of here. There are collectors who would pay a fortune on the shadow market for a single piece of such a fabled treasure.”

His expression remained flat and Nyx didn't know how her words had been received.

After a moment of silence, Ramirez asked, "What about your fiancé?"

"Charlie could catch up with me later. The most important thing would be smuggling the cache out of the country before anyone realized it had been located."

Ramirez continued to study her.

"Sentimentality has been the downfall of many. I wouldn't let my feelings for Charlie stand in the way of a life of luxury. He understands. He wants that lifestyle as much as I do. It's why he deals weapons."

Nyx tried to give off the right vibe, but it was hard to maintain it. If he'd discovered her background and how she was raised, he'd realize she just spewed the biggest load of bullshit ever. Integrity, honor, principles. Those were more than words to her.

"You have no idea where the Treasure of Trujillo is?"

"No, and the odds of finding it are nearly nonexistent."

"I want that treasure," Ramirez said.

"What's my cut?"

"You get to live. Your betrothed gets to live. That's your reward for finding it."

Oz sat at the dining room table at the safe house with half of the team. He started to give an opinion, looked between Captain Nguyen and Lurch, and decided to keep his mouth shut. He wasn't the only one who'd opted to sit this showdown out. Everyone present, even Rusty, had stopped offering their thoughts.

“Sergeant, I’m in command and the decision has been made,” BD said.

“I don’t like your plan, sir,” Lurch said, heat in his voice. “Not only is it too risky, but we also wouldn’t be going in until the last minute.”

“Duly noted, Sergeant.”

“But—”

“No. This discussion is over. Do you understand?”

There was a long silence before he grudgingly said, “Yes, sir. Understood.”

Pivoting, Lurch headed into the kitchen, and an instant later, Oz heard the door to the house close. “I’m on it,” he told BD and went after him.

Oz caught up with Lurch a couple blocks from the safe house and fell into step with him. His teammate gave him a side-eyed look but didn’t say anything. He let the silence linger a few minutes.

Lurch was normally one of the more easygoing members of the team, but right now he was wound tight. “Are you going to take my head off if I ask you a question?”

“It depends on the question.”

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“Fair enough. Why are you pissed off? You didn’t expect us to head out immediately.”

He stayed quiet, but Oz didn’t push. Lurch would talk when he was ready. It took a while.

“I don’t like the plan.”

Oz knew that. Everyone who’d been at the safe house knew it, too. “Why not?” he asked, as if he hadn’t heard the argument. He needed Lurch to start thinking and stop reacting. Sometimes asking questions got the job done.

“For one thing, I don’t think it’s going to work. For another, it requires we wait until the final day that Ramirez promised to keep Nyx safe. What if something happens to cause a delay? There’s no buffer.”

There was a small buffer, but clearly, it wasn’t enough for Lurch. It didn’t take a genius to come up with why. “Nyx will be okay,” Oz said, trying to choose his words carefully. “From everything you’ve said about her, and from the little I saw when you escaped from Vargas, she’s a strong woman. A capable woman. She can handle herself.”

“I know she can. That’s not the problem.”

They had to stop at a traffic light. The handful of people waiting with them tried to distance themselves from the two mercenaries. Oz found it humorous but considering the character of most of the mercs down here, it probably wasn’t the worst survival

strategy. Grabbing the collar of his fatigue shirt, he dropped his ponytail between it and his T-shirt. It wasn't much of a disguise, but he'd take what he had.

Once they were moving again, he asked, "What is the problem, dude?"

There was a hesitation, and then Lurch said, "What if Nyx thinks I abandoned her? What if after a day or two, she believes I'm not returning for her?"

Oz fought off the need to grin. Lurch wouldn't appreciate his amusement. "She's not going to think that."

"Why the hell wouldn't she? As time passes, she'll have to wonder if I took the easy way out."

"I only saw the two of you together for a few moments, but she trusts you." Lurch started to say something, but Oz cut him off. "Not trusts you because she has no other choice. Your Nyx has complete faith in you. It was in her eyes when she looked at you. Trust me when I tell you she knows you'd have to be dead not to come back for her."

No comment. Oz let him think about it. He was keeping a close eye on their surroundings, making sure they weren't being followed because the rebels were looking for Lurch, no doubt about it, but this section of Trujillo was lightly traveled. The building to his left was either really old or it hadn't been cleaned in decades. The first floor was painted green, the second story was beige, and the balcony was orange. It was part business, part apartment building, and there were burglar bars on all the lower floor windows.

Powerlines ran everywhere, along the street, crossing the street, and there was a pole keeping them aloft about every twenty feet. Oz suspected it had something to do with the age of the city, but it could just as easily have been cheaper to do it this way.

Then government officials could pocket the savings for their personal gain.

They went several more blocks before Lurch said, “She means something to me.”

“I know, dude, and so did almost everyone else at the house. You’re lucky BD had his own relationship while on this op or he’d have your head on a platter.”

They were growing closer to the historic district and the homes here were each painted a different color—green next to blue, next to red, next to orange. It gave the block a sense of happiness, but Oz doubted it was true. More likely people had bought whatever color of paint they could get for cheap.

“The colonel is never going to believe I have the weapons,” Lurch said, breaking the silence.

“He’ll believe for a little while.”

“The crate is different from other weapons crates.”

Oz nodded. “True, but how many people are aware of that? Those weapons haven’t been distributed yet, not even to our own troops, and while they were stolen last year, we recovered them. The only people in this area who might ID the crate work for Torres, and he’s not involved in this mess.”

“Maybe,” Lurch allowed.

“Probably,” Oz corrected. “And about it not working? The plan is to buy time to get in close without being shot at. That’s all it’s supposed to do. It has nothing to do with fooling Ramirez for long. It only needs to be plausible enough to get into his encampment.”

“Yeah.” Lurch stopped, and ran a hand through his hair, making it stand on end even more than usual. “You really think Nyx trusts me enough to know I’m coming for her no matter what?”

He needed to wait a minute to make sure his amusement wasn’t in his voice. “Lurch, there isn’t a doubt in my mind. She is one hundred percent behind you. You’re a lucky man to have a woman believe in you that much.” Oz barely paused before he said, “We’re getting close to the market. The rebels will be looking for you there.”

“Shit.” Lurch changed course.

Oz gave him a few minutes before asking, “Where are we going, anyway?”

Shaking his head, Lurch said, “Who fucking knows? I just needed to move. I couldn’t stay in that house any longer, not once I was overruled.”

“There’s a restaurant a few blocks from the convent. Why don’t we have lunch and you can tell me all about your woman.” His teammate’s tenseness had eased, and Oz clapped him on the shoulder. “Are you sending her back home when we get her out?”

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“Hell, yeah. She’s not safe down here. I’m going to have a fight on my hands.” Lurch grinned, anticipation in the expression.

Yeah, Oz thought, Lurch was a lucky man.

Chapter 29

Nyx didn’t know where Ramirez found the books he’d given her on Wednesday, but she’d spent her days and evenings studying them while she waited for Case to come back. Nerves were beginning to set in. Not because she doubted him—she believed in him wholeheartedly—but because the colonel was counting Wednesday as Day One and that meant today, Friday, was Day Three. Most people would consider Saturday Day Three.

What if he showed up a day too late?

Plotting an escape on her own was proving to be difficult. They’d moved her around from hut to hut, a different one every night. She was barely allowed outside.

The only two things she’d come up with were either to go into the rainforest or try to steal a boat. Of the two options, the river seemed like the best choice, but they kept the boats under constant guard. Or at least that’s how it appeared. It was hard to be sure when there were trees between the main camp and the water. This hut didn’t even have windows that faced that direction. She had to go up on tiptoes and crane her neck to see a sliver of river.

Of course, she was under guard, too. There were usually enough men to cover the

four sides of whatever hut she was in at the time. She would need to ditch them, get past the guards at the river, steal a boat, and take off downstream.

At night.

Night was when the caimans hunted, and they were known to attack humans. Nyx couldn't repress a shudder. Getting eaten by a member of the alligator family didn't rank high on her list of ways to die.

The river also contained the green anaconda, electric eels, and bull sharks. It made her wish she didn't know as much as she did about the local wildlife, but she never went anywhere without researching first. Like her dad always told her: know the lay of the land. Ignorance doesn't allow contingency plans.

The rainforest held even more danger. It wasn't limited to the insects, reptiles, and animals. She could get lost and wander around until she died. Nyx didn't want to go in there alone at night without a weapon, an NVD, or a compass.

She needed Case to return. If he didn't, she would have to risk an escape.

Maybe she could find a way to steal a rifle. Maybe a pistol and a knife, too. She could only hope Ramirez would give her until morning because if he didn't, she was cooked. Escape in the dark would be difficult enough. In broad daylight? Next to impossible.

A noise reached her and Nyx bent her head, focusing her attention on the book on the table in front of her. The door opened, and she glanced up, acting as if she'd been reading for hours and was just now resurfacing. Ramirez. The way he looked at her had started to become uncomfortable.

She didn't understand why. Her hair hadn't been washed in days and she'd only had

sponge baths since she'd become the raiders' guest. Nyx felt grungy and gross, and the first thing she was doing when Case had her safe was jump in the shower.

"Have you found anything?" Ramirez demanded.

"Not yet," she said and stood to face him squarely.

"Why not?"

There were many possible answers, but Nyx was certain some of them would anger him, like pointing out that a lot of what he'd given her was written fifty years after the British captain and his first mate were executed. She decided it was safest to blame herself. "Colonel, I'm reading in my second language. These books are handwritten with ornate lettering and the ink is fading, making it difficult to make out some of the words."

He crossed the room. "All I hear are excuses."

Nyx moved, trying to keep her distance from him. The leer was there, hidden behind the greed. Ramirez pulled to a stop in front of the table and glanced down at the book she had laying there. It was one where the ink was particularly faded, and the writing was over the top with flourishes.

"This is what I'm dealing with, Colonel," she said quietly, gesturing toward the ledger. "On top of the difficulty reading these historical documents, I'm also looking for a clue. Any kind of clue. Something the Spanish viceroy did in 1821, and other treasure hunters have also attempted. If there was anything to find, I believe someone would have located it already."

"You don't think the treasure exists?"

Nyx couldn't read his tone. "I think it exists. I'm just not sure any information exists to guide someone to its location."

His stare gave her goosebumps. Case, where are you?

"No," the colonel said, taking a step toward her, "something was written down. The men wouldn't trust their memories. It might be written cryptically or in some sort of code, but they would have taken the time to record its location."

"I'll keep looking," Nyx said, trying to ease away.

"Yes, you will." His brown eyes bored into her, and if she could have moved any farther away from him, she would have done it. "Your fiancé isn't back."

"Tomorrow is the third day?—"

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Ramirez cut her off. “It is not. Today is the third day. He had all day Wednesday. It counts as a day.” He took another step and Nyx had nowhere to go. Her back was at the bamboo wall. He pinched her chin between his forefinger and thumb. “My protection of you lasts until sundown. I have plans for you.”

He released her and stepped away, but Nyx couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe.

Case was in a boat with Baggs and Ski. Ski had control of the tiller arm of the outboard motor, guiding them to the rebel encampment. The river always had traffic. Many villages had no road access, and it was either hike through the rainforest or use the waterways. The busyness worked to their advantage. Mostly.

Earlier, two other boats with five teammates split between them had headed out. The timing allowed them to get into position. Of the twelve men on his team, eight were along for this trip. The other four were undercover, and the captain opted not to pull them.

It should be fine. They weren’t trying to take down the rebels, just get Nyx out.

Two teammates were assigned to go underwater and disable the enemy boats and Case didn’t envy them that job. Visibility in the river was poor with lots of mud and silt. There were branches from downed trees to contend with, too.

He still didn’t like this plan.

If it had been up to him, Case would have had the team slip in at night, find Nyx, and slip back out again. Simple. And then BD had started listing the issues with it,

including the fact that the rebels were likely moving her around the camp and they would have no idea which hut she was being kept in, and checking each one was too risky.

This idea was risky, too. Case was supposed to pretend he had a sample of the new rifle and get Ramirez to bring Nyx to the docks for an exchange. He tried to relax his hands. They'd knotted up into fists.

They were going in on Friday, a day earlier than originally planned. He didn't know if he was persuasive or if the Big Dog just got sick of listening to him, but a twenty-four-hour buffer made him feel better.

The fishing boat looked old and rode low in the water, but the motor Ski was running at the aft end had power. They could get out in a hurry if they needed to. Baggs had the bow, and Case sat in the middle with a weapons crate beside him. It held the M4, and if Ramirez checked it out before they could find Nyx, there was going to be trouble.

They were prepared for that, wearing light vests under their clothing. It wouldn't stop high-velocity rifle cartridges, but they were betting Ramirez had given orders to use pistols, not rifles. Automatic weapon fire would call attention to them, and as the colonel had complained, he'd already abandoned two camps.

They passed another small village. The huts were up on stilts, the roofs were rusting metal, and the walls were bamboo. One of the bigger homes had laundry on a line underneath the porch roof. The woman hanging it out waved as they went past and Baggs waved back. Case couldn't manage the social nicety. Nyx had to be okay. Had to be.

Leaving her behind had been hard. He was putting his faith in Ramirez's word, a man who'd already proven himself to be among the worst motherfucking assholes on

Earth. There'd been no other choice. And nothing he could do about it days later.

He shook off the thoughts and worked on focusing on now.

The rebel encampment hid in plain site by presenting the view of a typical village from the river. It was only once a person got away from the dock that they'd notice there were no women, children, or elders present. There were trees behind the riverfront huts that prevented anyone from seeing past them.

No one who showed up unannounced was getting beyond the dock area, not with the guards hanging around there.

Damn, he hoped Oz was right. That Nyx knew he was coming for her no matter what kind of hell he needed to wade through to reach her.

He needed to stop worrying about her. He needed to get his head on straight because the success of this rescue depended on him bluffing Ramirez about the weapons.

Case didn't need Baggs' signal to know they were getting close. It was more than a visual recognition. He could feel it in his bones. Using his own hand gestures, he indicated it was coming up on their left.

Ski guided them to the dock, and as soon as possible, Case jumped out. The guards pointed their SCARs at him immediately. The plan was that Ski would stay on the boat, motor idling for a quick getaway. Baggs got out and stood beside him.

"Colonel Ramirez didn't say you could bring friends with you," one of his men said in Spanish.

"He didn't say I couldn't." Case looked around. "Where's the colonel?" He didn't give a shit about Ramirez. He wanted to know where Nyx was.

The man who'd spoken to him ordered another to inform Ramirez that Case had arrived. He took a step forward, hoping to get off the dock, but the guy in charge wasn't having it. There were so many weapons pointed at him, it was like something out of Hollywood.

Case held out his hands, the gesture conciliatory. "Calm down, dude. I was eager to see the colonel, that's all."

More like he was testing the limits and discovering they were about what he'd expected. They weren't going to be allowed off this dock. Not unless Ramirez permitted it.

The colonel kept them waiting. Not long, but long enough to send a message about who held the power. He strolled toward the dock, a contingent of additional men surrounding him. He stopped far enough away that Case would never reach him if he tried to attack. Not that he was planning to do any such thing, but Ramirez thought he might.

"You have my weapons?"

Case shrugged. "I brought a crate as a gesture of good faith. We'll negotiate about the rest of the shipment."

The colonel signaled one of his men, but Case shifted, blocking his path.

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“This is how you show goodwill?”

“Sorry, Colonel, but no one goes near the rifle until I see my fiancée. I want proof she’s alive and uninjured.”

Ramirez waved his hand, an impatient gesture. “She’s fine.”

“Then you won’t mind letting me see that for myself.”

“You don’t trust my honor?” There was menace in his tone.

Case chose his words carefully. “If I didn’t trust your honor, I wouldn’t have left her behind to take care of business.”

“Then there’s no issue. I will examine the weapon.”

Case shook his head. “I will see my fiancée first.”

Rifles came up, and Case suspected there were men in the trees aiming at them, too. It didn’t matter. They couldn’t let Ramirez near the crate. Not without Nyx on the scene. Once the colonel learned it was the M4 on the boat, Case would need to grab his Fireball and get the hell out of here before they were both executed.

Chapter 30

Nyx felt the energy of the camp change. Something was happening. Her legs shook as she pushed to her feet and went to the window. Nothing she saw outside told her

anything, but none of the men were lolling around anymore. Even the dudes who guarded her hut appeared to be more alert.

Her first thought was Case. Had he come back for her?

That was only one option. There were others. Government troops could be in the area, illegal miners or loggers could have stumbled into the camp, or some random fisherman could have pulled up to the dock. The possibilities were legion.

But it could be Case.

She went to the table, dug out the papers she'd taken from Vargas, the ones written by Diego Ramos, folded them, and stowed them in a pocket. If it was Case, she didn't want to leave without them.

The door swung open, startling her. One of her guards stood there. "You," he ordered. "Come with me."

Or maybe the vibe in camp had changed because they weren't giving Case until sundown. Maybe they planned to gang rape her now and get a jump on the evening festivities. Her hesitation earned her a glare.

"Mueve tu trasero," her guard said, his voice harsh.

Nyx took a deep breath and followed orders. She cleared her expression, wanting to appear stoic. Let them guess what she was thinking. Let them guess whether she was scared. They didn't need to know. She climbed down the ladder from the hut to the ground slowly, trying to buy time, but a guard grabbed her arm and pulled her down the final step.

He didn't release her, and she stumbled as he dragged her along with him. Wherever

he was taking her, the man was in a hurry. Nyx was as tall as he was, but her legs felt rubbery and she had a difficult time keeping up with him.

After a couple of moments, she realized he was bringing her to the dock. Were they moving her to a different camp?

As they rounded the curve and cleared the trees, Nyx nearly grinned with relief. He might be wearing a baseball cap over that tousled blond hair of his, but she'd recognize him anywhere. Case. She wiped her delight off her face. Maybe it wouldn't make any difference, but she didn't want to chance her expressions giving something away that would help the raiders. Or inadvertently hinder Case.

A man stood beside him. He was the same height as Case and had a similar build, but the guy had short brown hair and tattoos, although she couldn't make out what they were from this distance. A third man sat in a boat. This one had shaggy hair that was dark, dark brown and he was big. Even though he was seated, she could tell he was tall and his shoulders were broad and muscular. Case had brought some of his team with him. Hopefully, he had more men in the area, surrounding the camp.

All three Special Forces soldiers were armed, and she was sure they had light armor on under their fatigue shirts. Not that it would stop an automatic rifle round, but at least it would protect them from a pistol shot. The problem was that in addition to handguns, all of Ramirez's men were carrying SCARs with a few AK74s tossed in to break up the monotony.

She didn't have much time to take it in before she was handed off to one of Ramirez's personal guards. He didn't treat her gently either, jerking her up to where the colonel stood.

"As you can plainly see," Ramirez said to Case, "she is unharmed. I'll look at the weapons now."

Case frowned, probably because she was being manhandled. “Not so fast.” He turned to her, his gaze intent. “How are you doing, Fireball? Are you all right?”

Nyx nodded. “I’m okay,” she said, her voice was thick, but the obvious concern for her on his face, in his tone made it clear it wasn’t an act he was putting on for Ramirez. She really meant something to him.

She needed to stop mooning over Case. This situation was precarious. She could make it more dangerous than it needed to be if she didn’t pay attention.

“She says she is fine,” Ramirez said. “I’ll have my men take the crate from your boat.”

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Shaking his head, Case said, “First we negotiate.”

“Negotiate what? The price of the weapon? How you leave with your fiancée?”

Something in the way Ramirez spoke had the hair on her nape standing on end. She’d spent enough time with the colonel over the past few days to realize he was angry. Nyx had also overheard enough to understand the man lashed out first and thought about the repercussions later. She tried to think of some way to alert Case, but she didn’t know what kind of gesture she could make so that he’d understand.

“Yes to both.”

Boats were still going by on the river, but the people steering them were moving farther away from this bank. Would someone report there were men in camo gear standing around with assault rifles? Or would they simply reach their destination and forget about it? In Puerto Jardin, it could go either way.

Ramirez’s voice was sharp, jerking her gaze from the water and back to him. “Enough of this. Felipe, Lorenzo, get the crate.”

The two men moved to follow orders but stopped when Case and his buddy brought up their pistols. Ramirez’s small army of guards responded, aiming assault rifles.

“I can kill you and take the weapons,” Ramirez said conversationally, but Nyx could see the man vibrating with fury.

“You kill me, you get one crate. A handful of the rifles. If you want more, you need

me alive.”

Nyx tensed. Case may have only brought one crate of the weapon, but Ramirez might not need more. If he sold the high-tech weapon to the Russians or the Chinese, he could make a fortune and they wouldn’t care if there were only half a dozen rifles. They’d want it to reverse engineer. She knew firsthand there was at least one Russian oligarch interested. Maybe he’d be satisfied with a few, too.

She couldn’t figure out how to convey this to Case either, and frustration welled. She didn’t want him overplaying his hand, thinking he was safe because he was the supposed conduit to the weapon. He wasn’t safe. What was on the boat might be all Ramirez needed.

“Lorenzo,” Ramirez said, “get the crate.”

Case and his friend clearly weren’t about to let the raiders get to the boat and the guns. Ramirez must have thought the same thing. Nyx saw him make a small gesture. It was almost imperceptible. An instant later, she heard the small snick of a magazine being seated in an assault rifle.

“Ca—” Nyx didn’t get to finish his name. A hand went over her mouth, choking off the sound. She didn’t fight. Instead, she let her gaze sweep the area, searching for the gunman. She found him, locked, loaded, and ready.

Shit! He had a bead on Case’s head, and that baseball cap wasn’t stopping anything.

The shooter was waiting for another signal.

Nyx tried to bite the hand over her mouth, but she still didn’t struggle. It would distract Case. He couldn’t afford to focus on her.

Where the hell was the rest of the team? Why weren't they watching out for Case and the other two?

Ramirez waggled his hand.

Noooo!

A red-haired man seemed to appear out of nowhere. Nyx hadn't seen him.

He brought up his rifle, aimed at the sniper, and fired, taking out the shooter. The man was hit, but as he went down, he squeezed the trigger. The shot was wide, missing Case.

Nyx started to relax, but before she could manage so much as a deep breath, all hell broke loose. Raiders were shooting. Men were shooting back, including Case and his friend.

And her? She was standing in the middle of a firefight.

Case wanted to get to Nyx. He wanted her behind cover. But she stood close enough to Ramirez that she wasn't under direct fire. If he went toward her, that would change.

But fuck, all it took was one ricochet, one bad shot.

A bullet hit the ground near him, and Case swallowed a curse. Nyx was okay for now. He better worry about his own ass.

Baggs took cover behind a building on the pier, but it wasn't going to stop much. The corrugated metal listed dangerously. Rusty had a stand of trees off to Case's right, and Ski moved the boat out into the river. He was within range, but the rebels weren't

bothering with him.

Case timed his movement to when his teammates were firing at the enemy, working his way toward the metal structure Baggs was using.

Keeping his eyes on Nyx, he returned fire.

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She'd crouched, trying to stay low to offer a smaller target. Damn, he wanted her at his side. He wanted her on that boat.

And he was pinned down.

The gunfire slowed and became more sporadic. They weren't out of the woods yet. Case was pretty sure the enemy was moving. Some would be trying to locate Pruitt, BD, Cordy, and Oz. The others would be taking fresh positions.

More advantageous positions.

Ski would watch the river. The rebels wouldn't be able to hop in boats upstream and come up on their backs. That was their only vulnerability from behind.

Unless they had men positioned on the other side of the river. Ski would watch for that, too.

Case tried to ease around the far side of the building. A few well-placed shots aborted the attempt. More gunfire in the distance. At least one of his teammates was returning fire.

"I can't get to her," Case said quietly to Baggs.

"I know, dude."

Yeah, he knew. They both knew. Nyx was a bargaining chip.

Almost as soon as he had that thought, one of Ramirez's personal guards went to her, grabbed her by the arm, and hauled her upright.

The good news was she had more protection. She was in the middle of the guard. That was also the bad news. She was in the middle of the guard. Unreachable.

For now.

His team would be working their way in from the rainforest. Working to reach them. A round of gunfire, closer than the previous bursts, told Case he was right. He needed to keep Nyx safe long enough for them to reach the dock area.

Case squeezed off a few rounds, making the dude trying to sneak down the ramp to the dock think twice.

How many men were in the camp?

He knew they moved around, did things during the day, including prowl around Trujillo. The rebels had multiple locations. Would they send out an SOS to their other satellites? Or would they assume they could fight off Case and a few of his mercenary friends without reinforcements?

If they did summon additional troops, how long would it take them to arrive?

Movement to his right. He fired a couple rounds in that direction.

When he could spare a glance, Case saw Nyx was gone. He took a step forward, but Baggs stopped him.

"She's okay. She's behind that hut on the left. Ramirez and a couple of his men are with her."

It was one of the clusters of huts that made the location look like a typical village.

“What if they move her?”

“They’re not risking it. Our team is closing in. They have nowhere to go.”

The gunfire was getting nearer on all sides, but Ramirez was arrogant. Would that be enough for him to play it safe? The area in front of the dock was cleared out.

“Let’s get up that ramp to the bank while they’re occupied,” Case said.

Baggs nodded.

There was a wooden walkway after they got off the ramp, but they avoided it and the noise it would make. Case headed for the hut where his teammate said Nyx was being held.

More gunfire. His team was in the encampment now and closing in fast.

The next shots were almost on top of them.

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Case signaled he was going to go around the right of the hut. Baggs nodded, but before he could implement his plan, Ramirez came around the building with Nyx. When he saw Case and Baggs, the colonel pulled Nyx in front of him. His arm went around her chest, pinning her to his body.

His pistol went to her temple.

Case kept his gaze away from Nyx. If he looked at her, he'd be distracted by her fear. She had to be terrified. He couldn't afford to lose focus.

"You will stand aside. I am going to my boat," Ramirez ordered.

Rusty appeared. After an exchange of hand signals, he and Baggs went around the hut, leaving Case to deal with the colonel.

"You're done, Colonel. Hand her over and surrender."

The sneer was all the answer Case got. He stood in place, blocking Ramirez's route to the boats. The disabled boats, but he didn't know that.

"I can shoot you and walk over your dead body."

Baggs, Rusty, Oz, and Cordy came around the building. With hand gestures, they told Case they had the situation contained. That left Ramirez to deal with.

"Not too smart," Case said. "My friends are behind you. You point that pistol at me and they're taking you out."

“How about this? If you do not get out of my way, I’ll shoot your woman.”

Case raised his brows. “You lose her as your shield, and you’re dead a split second later. That’s a promise.”

Frustration filled the man’s eyes. “If anyone makes a move against me, I will take her with me to hell. Am I understood?”

He nodded once. They couldn’t move on him from behind. It would be too easy for Ramirez to squeeze the trigger as he went down. Case couldn’t move on him from the front, and even attempting a sniper strike from a distance endangered Nyx. Same reasoning. He could squeeze off a shot as he fell.

Nyx waved her fingers, the motion capturing his attention.

When she knew he was watching, she held out all her fingers. After a moment, she closed her thumb, and then her forefinger.

Shit, she was planning something. Case didn’t know what, but he got ready.

When the final finger went down, Nyx lifted both her feet.

Ramirez was unprepared to support her entire weight. She hit the ground.

The shot was clear. Case took it.

The colonel fell.

His first inclination was to head straight to Nyx, but he kicked the pistol away from Ramirez and checked for a pulse. There was none. “Ramirez is down,” he announced.

At last, Case went to his Fireball. Kneeling in front of her, he wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly.

Chapter 31

Nyx shook too badly to even think about standing, but Case knelt beside her and he had his arms around her, his head pressed to hers. For the first time in days, she felt safe again. He held her too tightly for her to turn and hug him back, so she settled for wrapping her hand around his forearm and gripping him as if he might disappear if she didn't hang on.

“Dude, we need to get out of here.”

Case didn't move.

“Lurch, did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard.” Finally, slowly and with obvious reluctance, Case straightened. “Are you okay, Fireball? Can you walk?”

Nyx nodded. “Just help me up. My legs are rubbery right now.”

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Standing, Case held out a hand, and when she clasped it, he pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arm around her waist. She'd been right about the body armor. She could feel it as she leaned into him. Nyx blinked the world back into focus. Only two men were still around. She didn't know where the others disappeared to or what they were doing. And honestly? She didn't care.

She looked back at Case and raised her brows. Damned if he couldn't read her well enough to know exactly what she was hinting at.

"Fireball, this is Baggs and Rusty. They're friends."

More like his teammates, but she kept her mouth shut. She didn't know how many raiders were still alive and in the vicinity, and she wasn't risking Case's safety or the safety of his team now. She focused on the red-haired man. "Thanks, Rusty, for saving Case's life. I couldn't figure out how to signal him about the shooter."

"No thanks necessary, ma'am."

"Probably not, but I appreciate it anyway."

Case squeezed her waist. "You heard Baggs. We need to move. Rusty, are you riding with the Wizard, or are you on our boat?"

"I'm with the Wizard."

"Come on," Case said, urging her toward the dock.

Nyx was grateful for Case's arm around her because her legs shook. If this was the worst she experienced as the adrenaline receded, she'd take it. Case seated her on the boat and introduced her to Ski, who had the tiller. This Special Forces sergeant looked seriously scary, but luckily for her equilibrium, she was used to intense men—her dad to name just one—and he didn't rattle her.

Ski didn't waste any time pulling away from the dock and heading back upriver. She guessed they were going to Trujillo, but she didn't ask. Case settled beside her in the center of the boat and wrapped his arm around her, tucking her against him. It was usually too hot and humid for this to be comfortable, but she felt cold from the inside out. Probably another side effect of adrenaline.

She leaned into Case and rested her hand high on his thigh. The touch was possessive, but Nyx felt possessive. This man? He belonged with her. All she could do was hope that he felt the same way about her. The fact he was cuddling her in front of his teammates gave her hope.

No one spoke. Maybe because at the speed they were traveling they'd have to yell to be heard over the engine. As they neared a busier section of the river, Ski slowed the boat. They'd be able to hold a conversation now, but no one seemed chatty. Was it their aftermath? After all, they were coming down from a firefight, one where they'd taken lives.

When Case stiffened and moved her hand off his thigh, she knew snuggle time was over. She didn't wait for him to pull away. Nyx sat up and inched over on the seat. They were nearer to Trujillo than she realized.

“Are we rendezvousing with the rest of the te—your friends?”

Case shrugged. The gesture told her nothing, but she didn't press.

She stared straight ahead, which meant she had a good look at Baggs, who was sitting in the bow. He had the long sleeves of his fatigue shirt rolled up and she could ID one of his tattoos now. It was a dagger. Interesting choice. He caught her checking it out. Nyx didn't flinch. "Why a dagger?"

His lips curved. "I was eighteen and stupid."

"Are you done quizzing Baggs?" Case asked, and he sounded irritated.

"Sure." She turned to meet his gaze. "Do you have any tattoos?"

"No. They're identifying characteristics. I prefer to have as few of those as possible."

Identifying characteristics. Case's childhood had stayed with him in ways she hadn't expected.

"The fact he looks as if he's in high school is unique enough," Baggs said.

"No, he looks college-age," Nyx disagreed.

Ski snorted, and Nyx turned her head far enough to see he was amused. Not smiling, but not too far away from it.

"Did Lurch tell you how old he is?" Baggs asked.

Nyx shook her head. "We didn't discuss it."

"How old do you think he is?"

"Damn it, Baggs," Case said. "Knock it off."

Baggs ignored him. “Come on, guess.”

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She'd already estimated his age to herself shortly after they met, so she had a ready answer. "I'd say he's closer to thirty than twenty. Let's go with twenty-seven."

She watched Baggs and Case exchange glances, and her guy looked smug as hell. "She's too smart for your bullshit." Case looked over at her. "You are right on the money, by the way."

"Was he hoping I'd guess wrong?"

"Yes. Then he could give me shit about how young I look."

Nyx shook her head. "He should know you've taken crap about that for years and it doesn't faze you anymore. You just let them roll, don't you?"

"It makes them feel like they're funny."

"And since you don't care..." She let her voice trail off.

"Since I don't care, I let them have their fun."

Ski spoke up then. "Sometimes he makes fun of himself, so he enjoys it, too. How many times have you muttered about fucking genetics?"

"Too many to count."

"How old do you think I am?" Nyx asked.

“You already told me your age, remember?”

“I did?”

“Yeah, when Vargas had us locked up in the suite and you and I were quickly exchanging information.”

Memory dawned. “That’s right, when the shower was running.”

“Why don’t you make Baggs guess your age?”

Nyx tried not to laugh at the uncomfortable expression that crossed the other man’s face. Case was giving back the shit he’d taken, and she was all in for it. “Good idea. He’s the one who started the game. How old do you think I am?”

“My mom said a man should never ask a lady her age?—”

Case cut him off. “You’re not asking. She is.”

Baggs looked around, desperate for an escape. He found one. “There’s our dock. Do you see Rusty, Ski?”

“I got him.” Ski adjusted their course. “Guessing a woman’s age is easy. You just figure out how old you think she is and subtract five years. Wins their admiration every time. The Fireball, here, is twenty-one. How’d I do?”

Turning to grin at him, Nyx said, “You’ve won my complete admiration.”

Case waited until Baggs had the boat tied off before he got out and helped Nyx onto the pier. The joking around about his appearance not matching his age had gotten her past the worst of her aftermath and her legs were steadier. That didn’t mean he wasn’t

going to stay close and make sure she was okay.

His Fireball was a trouper. She looked as if she'd been through hell, but she squared her shoulders and prepared to meet the next challenge. A woman like this didn't come along every day. A smart man would do what he could to hold on to her and Case liked to think he was smart.

BD came over, flanked by Cordy. Case moved to stand behind Nyx, both hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

"How are you doing, ma'am?" the captain asked.

Nyx came to attention, or something very similar to it. "I'm okay, sir. Thank you for getting me out of the camp."

Case frowned. He hadn't heard her call anyone else sir, but BD did have an aura of command.

"You don't have to thank me. Lurch would have gone in alone if we hadn't helped."

"He would have gotten killed if he tried that."

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“Yes, he would have.” Case got a hard look. “Since we mostly like him, we decided it would be a good idea to give him the assist.”

“Whatever the reason,” Nyx said, “I appreciate your help in getting me back to Trujillo. It’s been a rough week.”

“Understatement,” Case whispered near her ear.

BD addressed him. “Make sure she calls Archer. That’s number one on your to-do list, understood? If that man phones me and asks for an update because you put it off, someone is going to be filling sandbags for at least a month. Maybe longer, depending on how irritating he is.”

Now it was Case’s turn to come to attention. “Yes, sir, first thing. Understood.”

BD turned to go, but Chief Cordell stayed. He stared at Nyx, his expression not quite puzzled, but more quizzical.

“You have a question, Cordy?” Case asked.

The chief shook his head. “She looks familiar. I was trying to come up with why.”

BD returned to where they stood, although this time he stayed back from Cordy.

“Maybe you met my dad?” Nyx suggested. “I’m told I have a strong resemblance to him. Chief Jack Templeton?”

“Looper? Loop Templeton is your dad?” It was clear Cordy knew her father.

Nyx nodded.

Cordy turned to look at the captain. “It’s a damn good thing we rescued Looper’s daughter. I wouldn’t want to face his wrath if anything happened to her. The man is a bulldog and very protective of his little girl.” The chief’s gaze bore into his. “You hear that, Lurch?”

“I heard you loud and clear.” It didn’t make a damn bit of difference either.

“Come on, Cordy,” BD said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Lurch is an adult, even if he doesn’t look old enough to vote. He can make his own decisions.”

“And deal with the consequences,” the chief said.

“That, too.”

BD left, and the chief went with him. The rest of the team followed in dribs and drabs until only he and Nyx were left on the dock. She turned to look at him. “Are you still taking me to a hotel? I’d like a shower and maybe some fresh clothes.”

“Yeah, let’s go. But the shower waits until after you talk to Archer.”

He guided her toward the street. Even dressed in camo gear and carrying, Case didn’t get much attention. Armed mercenaries were nothing new here, and if they weren’t going to gawk at him, they weren’t going to risk pissing him off by staring at Nyx.

“Fireball,” he asked quietly, “are you still thinking you want me to...” he let his voice trail off, unsure how to ask the question.

“Do I still want you to be my first? Yes. If you’re willing, after hearing about my dad.”

“I’m willing. More than.”

He had her on his left side, and Case reached out to take her hand, linking their fingers. She gave him a squeeze. Nine days. Nine days ago, she sat down at his table at the open-air market to eat her lunch and nothing had been the same since. She’d rocked his world. Now he couldn’t imagine not having her around, not?—

There was one more conversation they needed to have.

“You’re going back to LA,” he said. “It’s already arranged. Archer set it up. Saturday morning you fly up to Rio Blanco and then board a plane to Lima. You’ll spend the night in Peru and then fly home Sunday.”

Case waited for an argument, a growl of outrage, for fire to shoot from her eyes. That wasn’t what he got.

“I can’t remain here. I know.” Nyx didn’t sound happy. “Even with the colonel no longer an issue, I still have Vargas to worry about. If I stay, I endanger Frankie and Ellis.”

“I’m surprised you’re being so reasonable about this.”

“Vargas isn’t going to give up on the treasure because we escaped. In fact, he’s going to be extra pissed off about that. My presence creates all kinds of problems and not just for Frankie and Ellis. He can use me against you again, too. I won’t allow you to be in even more danger than you already are because of me. Bank on that.” She gave him a glare for good measure and practically marched down the street.

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Case tried not to grin as he kept pace with her. He loved how smart Nyx was. He loved how protective she could be, even though he didn't need protection. He loved her strength, her determination, and the way she faced adversity head on.

Okay. Cards on the table. He just plain loved her.

Chapter 32

Nyx would have liked a little downtime to recover, but that wasn't in the plan. As soon as they were clear of the docks, and Case found somewhere he considered safe, he'd handed her his phone—a new one since his other was still with Vargas—and told her to call Archer. Her boss upended the day.

He wanted her to rendezvous with Frankie. Her teammate had found something she wanted Archer to study. Or more likely one of Archer's experts. He had arranged a meeting so Nyx could carry it back with her to the States.

She told Archer to have Frankie bring her things, including her passport and ID, so she would have her own clothing and personal items. The argument was brief and Nyx had prevailed. When she mentioned the rental Jeep, Archer informed her that a San Isidro resident had turned it in on her behalf. It was a relief to cross that concern off her mental list.

Despite everything they'd covered, the call had been brief. Then Case had taken her to a store, bought them each a change of clothes, and checked them into El Hotel Embajador. Or as he referred to it, the second nicest hotel in Trujillo.

A room with one king-size bed. Her body heated just thinking about it.

That was for later, though. Now, Case was leading her on the scenic route around Trujillo to make sure they didn't have anyone tailing them. Nyx hurried to keep up with him. He was hyperalert to their surroundings and didn't want to be distracted with talking, but apparently forgot that she was half a foot shorter than he was and hadn't been for a run in nearly a week. Her legs were feeling it.

Suck it up, Nyxie. Mind over matter. Her lips curved. Her dad didn't listen to excuses, and she wasn't going to make any with Case either. She'd suck it up, and she'd keep pace with him even if it killed her muscles.

She had nothing to complain about, anyway. She wanted Frankie safe. Nyx was showered, her damp hair up in her usual ponytail, and she was dressed in clean clothing. Overall, life was good. Once they were back at the hotel, it would be better.

Case made her a promise, and he always kept his word.

They were meeting Frankie at a park near the center of the city. Case told her it was mostly concrete, but that the layout made it safe. That it would be difficult for anyone to come upon them without him noticing far in advance.

Damn, Case looked good in jeans and a black T-shirt. He'd put on a shoulder holster over the top of it, unconcerned about concealing his pistol. Well, it was Trujillo. The city was filled with mercenaries and wannabe mercs looking for work. This was where the hiring took place even though the war was happening on the other end of the country.

He was cute. More than cute, he was gorgeous. But it was cute the way he tried to tame his hair. He'd come out of the shower with it carefully combed down, but as it had dried, that tousled, every-which-way look was back.

She planned to mess it up more later. Nyx didn't think he'd mind.

The park stood out. Case slowed, but she studied the place. Triangles of red and white flowers surrounded the few trees in the area, and wide swathes of concrete came in like spokes on a wheel. She counted eight of them. In the center was a statue of someone. She couldn't tell who from this distance. Benches lined the concrete walkways, but in the midday heat, the place was nearly empty.

"I can see why you said you'd see trouble coming."

Case slowed and flashed a grin at her. "We're not going to be here more than a few minutes. The risk to your teammate increases the longer we stay."

"I know. I'll make it quick." She reached over and took his hand, lacing their fingers. "Let's stroll the rest of the way and not make a mad dash into the park."

"Mad da—oh." His cheeks reddened. "Sorry, Fireball, I didn't think. Why didn't you say something?"

Nyx ignored the question. "I see Frankie." She knew better than to point. "The woman with the sunglasses and the scarf over her hair."

"Sitting with her back to the base of the statue. I got her."

Frankie stood as they approached, a smile on her face. "Lurch! What are you doing here with Nyx?"

"You two know each other?"

"We met." Case blanked his expression, so that meant he wasn't talking. He slipped his fingers free from hers. Frankie noticed.

“Oh!” She laughed. “Does Deck know about this?”

“He knows.” Case’s voice was flat, giving nothing away.

Nyx connected the dots. She had a good guess who they were talking about, but she wanted verification. “What’s Deck’s handle?”

Case frowned and didn’t answer.

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“You mean his nickname?” Frankie asked. “His friends call him BD.”

Now Nyx laughed. “That explains how growly he was. I bet he wanted to reprimand you so badly, Case, and he couldn’t because he’d just gotten done protecting Frankie.”

“And romancing me,” Frankie chipped in. “Don’t forget that part because Deck didn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure Case had that fact in reserve on the chance he needed it.”

“Is that your real name? Case?” Frankie asked, looking up at him.

He nodded once, sharply. “Keep calling me Lurch.”

Frankie’s lips curved again. “Got it. Only Nyx is allowed to use your first name.”

His sigh was long, and it was loud. “We’re supposed to be quick, remember?”

Nyx sobered. “Archer said you had something for me to bring home?”

“Two things, actually.” Frankie turned and picked up a messenger bag. “The diary with the code is in here. I know I decoded it incorrectly. I want you to bring it to Archer and have him get someone who knows what they’re doing to look at it. There’s also another document. It records the final words of the ship’s captain before he was executed. He had a lot to say, none of which seems very important.”

“Maybe he was stalling, hoping for a last second reprieve?”

“You’re probably right, but I want Archer to have someone parse through it in case the man was trying to pass along a message to whoever was smart enough to decipher it.”

“Archer will have to call in more of his angels,” Nyx said. She smiled as she slung the strap of the bag across her body.

“I’m sorry? Angels?”

“Personal joke,” Nyx said, not wanting to take the time to explain how Archer made her think of Charlie’s Angels. “I see my duffle bag. You grabbed my passport and ID, too, right?”

Frankie nodded and reached into her purse. “Here’s everything you had in the hotel safe. Your clothes and toiletries are in the bag.”

She started to pass the duffle to Nyx, but Case intercepted it. “I got it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Because—”

“Fireball,” Case said and his tone warned her that she wasn’t going to win the argument. With a shrug, she conceded.

Nyx turned back to her teammate. Frankie’s brows were raised, and she had a shit-eating grin on her face, but she didn’t comment on the exchange. She hesitated, not

wanting to crater Frankie's mood, but she couldn't protect herself if she didn't know what was happening.

"Frankie," Nyx said, voice low, intense, "there are multiple groups interested in the treasure. The arms dealer is the tip of the iceberg. There's a drug lord named Julián Vargas who had me do research for him. He's decided he wants the treasure for himself. There was also the leader of the raiders. He's dead now, so he's not a threat, but I don't know who he told about this, and more of his men are out there. Watch your back and warn Ellis not to be so trusting. She..." Nyx hesitated, then said it. "She scares me because of how naïve she is."

"I know. She spent too much time being book-smart and didn't pick up many street smarts. I talked to Archer about replacing her, but he's reluctant."

"Because she's good. She's also in over her head down here, and we both know it. I'll talk to him when I get back to LA and report in."

Frankie nodded, but said, "You know Archer."

Yeah, Nyx knew Archer. He'd only listen if it suited his agenda. "Be careful going back to the hotel. Take a roundabout route, watch who's around you, make sure?—"

"Nyx, I know. Deck drilled it into my head. You be careful. You're not out of Puerto Jardin yet." Her gaze went to Case. "And you, Lurch, you take care of my teammate, and not just her physical wellbeing. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am. Understood."

With a nod, Frankie left, her back ramrod straight as she walked away. Nyx looked up at Case. "We better go, too."

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He nodded and inclined his head toward a different spoke off the main circle of the sidewalk. Nyx fell into step with him and linked their fingers again.

Case watched Nyx lock the messenger bag in their hotel room safe and tried to keep his expression blank. She was anxious and had donned her brave face. As much as he hated seeing it, this time it amused him. She didn't have any reason to worry. He'd go as slowly as she needed him to go, and if she changed her mind, they'd stop. Simple.

She began pacing the room, looking for something to do. "You could always close your eyes and think of England," he suggested, voice bland.

Nyx stopped, stared at him, and then smiled. "Sorry. I'm..." her voice trailed off, and she waved a hand.

"You're nervous. I can tell. Relax, Fireball. I'm not going to throw you on the bed and fall on top of you. Remember one thing. You call the shots on this one hundred percent. You tell me to slow down, I slow down. You tell me you need a minute, we take a time out. You tell me you don't want to do it after all, I stop. No arguing. Got it?"

She crossed the room to where he stood. "I trust you, Case. If I didn't, I never would have asked you to be my first."

Be her only. But Nyx wasn't ready for that discussion yet.

She was pacing again. "Okay, let's go," Case said.

“Go where?”

“Anywhere. Just out of this room so you can relax.” He started herding her toward the door, but Nyx dug in her heels.

“If we leave, we’ll have to go through all those evasive maneuvers again to return to the hotel. I don’t want to take another scenic tour of Trujillo today.”

“So what do you want to do, Fireball? Watch TV? We could rent a movie.”

“Rent a movie?”

She sounded confused and Case took her shoulders in his hands, wanting to impress upon her he meant what he said. “I want you to relax. You’re wearing your brave face, and you don’t need it. Not with me. If you want to watch a movie and fall asleep in my arms, I’m good with that. Just because you mentioned making love, doesn’t mean we have to do it.”

Nyx put her hands on his forearms. “I have an alternate suggestion. Let’s rip off the bandage.”

He needed her to spell it out without ambiguity. “What I’m hearing is you want to make love now. Do I have that right?”

“You have it right. I want you, Case. I haven’t changed my mind.”

Going up on her toes, Nyx pressed her lips to his.

Chapter 33

Nyx tried to relax. She knew Case was uptight about her nervousness, but, well she

was an overachiever and she liked to do everything well. It was difficult to be good at something she'd never done before.

Case kept their kiss slow and easy, not trying to deepen it. His hands remained chastely on her back. She appreciated his care—really, she did—it signified that she meant something to him. Since she'd fallen in love with him, she needed to know he felt something beyond lust for her.

Everything he said, everything he did since they got to their hotel room showed her that he did have feelings for her.

She ran her hands over his chest and hit his holster. "Case? Lose the pistol, okay?"

"Good idea." He stepped away from her to remove it and carefully placed it on one of the nightstands. It told her he would be the one sleeping closest to the door.

As he returned to her, Nyx admired the way he moved. Case had an athletic grace that she never got tired of watching, and as sexy as he was in camo gear, he was a hundred times sexier in jeans and a T-shirt.

He stopped in front of her, not taking her into his arms. "Are we still good?"

Honestly, if he wasn't so sweet, and she didn't love him so much, she'd scream. "Absolutely still good." She closed the gap he'd left, wound her arms around his neck, and pressed her breasts into his chest. "I need you to go faster, let the arousal take me over. You're giving me too much time to overthink."

"I want you to have time to think. I want you to have time to be sure."

"Have you ever known me to not speak my mind with you?" She waited until he shook his head. "Then trust me to be assertive now. If you do something I don't like

or if I change my mind, I will let you know it even if I have to pinch your ass to get your attention. Until that happens, overwhelm me. Let me feel how much you want me.”

“Oh, I want you, Nyx. More than I’ve ever wanted anyone in my life.” His hands went to her hips, and he tugged her tightly against him. Case hesitated. “I don’t want to scare you.”

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Nyx pulled his head down, her forehead resting against his, as she murmured, “You have never scared me, not from the first minute we met.” She pressed her lips to his again, but this time she opened her mouth, inviting him to deepen the kiss.

He did, but it was a slow brush of his tongue against hers, a nibble of her lower lip. The man was going to drive her out of her head and not in a good way. “Case, please don’t force me to be the aggressor. I don’t want that role my first time. But if you don’t pick up the pace, I’m going to toss you on the bed and fall on top of you.”

He pulled back and looked at her as if she’d grown a second nose. Then it must have registered that she was echoing something he said earlier, and Case threw his head back and laughed. “I got so lost in the fact you’re a virgin, that I forgot you’re my Fireball.”

This kiss wasn’t a slow, gentle tease. It was all fire and need and taking what he wanted while inviting her to take what she wanted, too. Nyx clung to Case, devouring him and letting him devour her. This was what she needed.

No overthinking. No control. Only Case.

Pulling his T-shirt out of his jeans, Nyx traced the hard muscles of his back. His skin was warm. Smooth. Perfect.

“Shirt. Off.” She dropped the words between kisses.

Case released her long enough to comply with her order. He flung the tee in the general direction of a chair and dove back for another deep exploration of her mouth.

His hands remained at her waist. He was still partly being oh-so-careful, but his kiss was wild.

Without the shirt in her way, Nyx ran her hands over his shoulders. She got tangled in the chain he wore and followed it with her fingers. Down from his neck, across his pecs, until she reached the pendant at the bottom. She ran her finger back and forth below the chain a few times before she worked up her courage to go lower.

There was enough distance between them that she was able to trace his navel before picking up the line of hair beneath it. The hair that disappeared into his jeans.

He caught her hand as soon as she dipped a finger beneath his waistband. “Slow down, Fireball.”

“Why?” She smiled. Nyx hoped it was seductive, but she doubted she pulled it off.

“You might be in a hurry, but I want to savor you.” He moved her hand to his chest.

“I have a lot of years to make up for and I’m leaving Trujillo tomorrow. Can’t you savor me when we’re worn out?”

That earned her another of his rare grins. “You are a handful and I love the hell out of that.” He waited until she was looking him in the eyes. “Nyx, I want you to know something.”

“What?”

“This isn’t some hookup. It’s more than that. A lot more.”

“Good. I’m making love with you because I can’t imagine anyone else being my first. It’s never been about cashing in my V-card, Case.” She wrapped her arms around his

neck again. “It’s always been about us.”

Pulling his head down to hers, Nyx kissed him with all the love she felt for him.

Case was lost.

He wanted to go slow. He wanted to make sure Nyx knew only pleasure, and he was afraid his intensity would scare her. But she kept pushing. With her words, the way she looked at him, the way she touched him, her tone of voice when she said his name. This woman? She was his home. The one person he was safe with. The one person with whom he could be completely himself.

When he was able to break the kiss, he said, “I’m taking the brakes off. If I do anything that concerns you, you damn well better speak up. Understood?”

“Understood, but Case? You’re not going to scare me. I’m not a bit of dandelion fluff.”

“I know. You’re one-hundred-and-ten percent Fireball. I fucking love how strong you are.” He kissed her before he told her he just plain fucking loved her. “You have more clothes on than me,” he complained.

“So do something about it.”

Nyx had him grinning again. He couldn’t remember ever smiling so much during a sexual encounter before, but everything was different with her. Absolutely everything.

Tugging the white polo she wore out of her khakis, Case said, “Lift your arms.” She did with a sexy little smile that made heat course through his veins. Her bra was plain, no-nonsense, exactly what he expected Nyx to choose. He didn’t need her in

sexy lingerie. She was sexy enough on her own.

He was continuing to admire the view when she reached out, unsnapped his jeans, and started working the zipper down. Case moved her hands aside. He was hard, and she was a novice. “I’ll get my jeans off. You take care of your own pants.”

His Fireball kicked out of her sneakers and then she teased him. She wiggled, she bent over as she lowered her khakis, she gave him a look that clearly dared him. Dared him to what? He didn’t know, because they were already moving faster than he planned. Her panties were cotton and nearly as plain as the bra.

“You’re behind. Move it.”

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“Yes, ma’am.” He finished unzipping his jeans and bent over to get rid of his boots. Nyx stroked his ass. His cock jerked. “Slow down,” he ordered, voice thick.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Her tone was pure bravado. If Case didn’t know her as well as he did, he might have bought it. Taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he said, “I know you. You’re nervous and trying to hide it, but I see it. Don’t play pretend with me. Be real. Be you.”

“I’m worried that if you see my nerves you’ll think it’s something you did. Or worse yet, you’ll stop and I’ll have to convince you again that I want you.”

“There’s clearly one solution.” He reached for the hooks on the back of her bra and opened it. “I’ll have to get you so worked up that you forget to be nervous.”

He swept the straps down her arms but didn’t completely free them, because he didn’t want her covering herself. “Beautiful,” he assured her and bent forward to take a nipple in his mouth. He teased it with his tongue before moving to the other. She was clutching his hair, holding him to her. Before he was finished, the bra was on the floor. Forgotten.

Walking her backward to the bed, he yanked down the covers and then kissed his way from her breasts to her bellybutton. Slowly, hoping she would be too distracted to notice, he inched her panties down. “Lift your leg,” he said softly and snuck a peek at her face.

No uneasiness. Just dazed pleasure.

“Now the other leg.” Tossing the panties aside, he kissed Nyx on the inside of her knee, teased her a little, and moved up her thigh. Slowly. A fraction of an inch at a time.

It was a victory when her strength gave out and she sat on the edge of the mattress, legs spread to give him enough room to continue his path. He took his time, teasing little gasps and moans from her, but refusing her urges to hurry up.

He finally kissed her where she wanted. “So wet, Fireball.”

“Case.”

“I know. It’s going to be so good. Trust me.”

“Do trust you.”

He tasted her, taking the time to enjoy her. She was writhing by the time he lifted his head. “You want to come on my mouth or my cock?”

“Cock,” Nyx said without hesitation.

“Get on the bed and move over so I have room.”

As she followed orders, Case shed his briefs and went over to the dresser to grab a condom. He was sheathed and ready by the time he reached the bed.

Bracing himself on one elbow, Case leaned over and studied her. Nyx’s eyes remained glazed with passion and her breathing was erratic. He kissed her, trying to tell her without words that she was special. That she was his.

Cupping her, he slipped a couple of fingers inside. Nyx was wet, and she took them easily. Case moved between her thighs, lined himself up, and entered her slowly. Watching her face every millimeter he advanced. When he was about halfway, he paused. “How are you doing, Fireball?” His voice was thick and guttural. He was hanging on by a thread.

“Good. Don’t stop.” She arched her hips, taking him deeper.

Before he realized what she was up to, Nyx did it again and he was nearly completely inside her. “Impatient,” he whispered, and since she smiled, he slid all the way home.

Case paused for what felt like an eternity but was probably only seconds. He wanted Nyx to get used to him before he asked her for more. Then he tried a light thrust. She moved with him, not perfectly, but close enough to make him swallow a groan.

Using his hand to guide her, Case helped Nyx find the rhythm. She clung to him and he stroked into her, driving her arousal to a fever pitch.

He wanted to prolong it, to make it last, but the little noises she made propelled him past the point of no return.

Letting go of her hip, he moved his hand between them and found the center of her pleasure. He stroked her, teased her, and until with a serrated moan, she arched hard into him and froze, riding out the orgasm.

Case kept moving, kept her coming until he lost the reins of self-control. Then he joined her, coming harder than he ever had before in his life.

Chapter 34

They would need to leave for the airport soon, but Nyx didn’t want to check out of

the hotel. She knew she had to go back to LA. She knew she wasn't safe here and that her presence endangered others. But she also knew once she left Case, everything would change.

It would change anyway. He had an op to complete, and even if she could remain in Trujillo, he wouldn't be able to see her.

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She took in the room. It was ordinary, just a regular hotel room with one king-size bed flanked by nightstands on either side, a small table near the window with two chairs, a long narrow built-in desk along the wall, and a flat screen television above it. It was one of the few places that she would never forget. The desk also had a vanity bench with a mirror. She sat in front of it, struggling to tame her hair.

She'd stuck it under a plastic cap when she showered, but now she had to deal with spending the night in a ponytail instead of the braid she normally slept in. Working a brush through the snarls was proving to be both painful and challenging.

And worth it.

Her lips curved. Case told her he liked her hair in its ponytail. Anything that got him all hot and bothered was a definite plus.

She heard the shower turn off. Case would be out in a few minutes and she wanted her hair issues solved before then. Nyx wore the khakis and white polo they bought yesterday. Her two flights today were relatively short, and she was saving the leggings for the flight from Lima to LAX. It was a nine-hour monster trek, and that was if there weren't any delays.

After working out the last knot, she put down her brush and looked at herself in the mirror. She didn't see anything unfamiliar, but Nyx felt as if everything had changed last night. Love. It wasn't on her to-do list for a couple more years, but the universe had other plans.

Case entered the room, dressed only in a pair of jeans and his pendant while he towel-

dried his hair. Her breath caught in her throat. Not because of how gorgeous he was—although he was more than handsome—but because of how much she loved him. Nyx didn't think she was capable of falling as fast as she had, as hard as she had. A week ago, he'd saved her at the Huarona site. Today, she couldn't imagine her life without him.

He caught her staring and his smile was smug.

"I'm curious about your pendant." Lane dodge, but whatever. "It looks Norse."

Tossing his towel on the far end of the narrow desk, he came over and crouched in front of her, holding it out so she could see it. "It is Norse. It's a bind rune for protection." Some of his good cheer slipped. "I caught my mom at the right time to tell her I enlisted. She wasn't having withdrawals, and she wasn't high, so it registered with her. Before I left, she gave me this."

Her last gift to him since his mom died while he was in boot camp. "She loved you." Case began to close down and she quickly returned to the pendant. "What's a bind rune? Do you know?"

Nodding, he explained, "It's when two or more runes are laid on top of each other to create one character. This one has a rune to ward off unfriendly forces and a second rune to create inner strength."

He pulled it over his head, and before Nyx realized what he was doing, put it around her neck. "Case, what are you?—?"

"It's a protection rune. You need it more than I do right now."

"I do not. I'll be on a plane out of here in a few hours and you'll be staying. You need it. Besides, I can't take this. It means too much to you."

With one finger, he pulled her polo far enough away from her skin to drop the pendant behind it. “You can give it back to me when I come to LA.”

“Are you coming to Los Angeles?”

“If you want me to.”

“Oh, I definitely want,” she said, resting her hands on his shoulders. “Waiting for you to cash in my V-card? That was the best decision I ever made. You were so worth the wait.”

That was the closest she could manage to telling him she loved him. It was too soon to say the actual words, but she did love him and would love him for the rest of her life even if he didn’t feel the same way about her. She kissed him, slowly, sweetly, with all the emotion she felt for him.

“Case?”

“What, Fireball?”

“Why’d you wear condoms every time we made love? You know I’m using birth control.”

He straightened and moved to lean his hips against the desk, facing her. “Because you were worried about an unplanned pregnancy and no birth control is a hundred percent effective. I figured the odds of two simultaneous failures have to be minuscule, right?”

Nyx stared at him, and if she weren’t already head-over-heels in love with him, what he just said would have done it. He listened to her. He knew she wanted to finish school. He knew, and he took care of her.

“No STDs, I promise.” He frowned. “Although you should have quizzed me about that last night before anything happened.”

Slowly, Nyx stood and moved to stand between his legs. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she kissed his chin. “You’re one of the most honorable men I know. If you had anything I needed to worry about, you would have told me. Thank you for caring about me.”

“You can’t rely on a man’s honor?—”

“I wasn’t relying on just any man’s honor. I was relying on your honor. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you wouldn’t have detailed anything I needed to be concerned about before you took me to bed.”

Case scowled and Nyx knew it was because he couldn’t disagree with her. He would have told her. He kissed her lips, lingered, but it was a sweet kiss, not a prelude to more.

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She rested her forehead against his. “I wish I didn’t have to go. I wish we could both stay here in this room and pretend the rest of the world didn’t exist.”

“Yeah, at least for a few days,” he agreed. “Although you’re already sore from last night.”

“Achy, not sore.”

“Bullshit. I was there with you, remember?” Case gave her another quick kiss. “Let me finish getting dressed. We have another hour or so before we need to head to the airport.”

Case put the breakfast cart into the hall, locked the door, and double-checked to make sure it was secure. As secure as he could make it, at least. Nyx sat at the table near the window, finishing her coffee and he took the seat opposite hers.

She reached to return her empty mug to the table, and he caught sight of his chain around her neck. He liked seeing that. He liked that she wanted him to visit her in Los Angeles when he was finished down here. Case wondered how long her invitation would last. The op had barely gotten started, and his team could easily be down here for another six or eight months or longer.

If he could explain who he was, and what he really did, she’d get it. Her dad had been Special Forces. She knew the drill. But he had to let her keep thinking he was a mercenary and a gunrunner. The danger to the op, the danger to his teammates was too great to take any chances. Torres killed people for a lot less than this.

Yeah. It was only a matter of time before she began to wonder if money and thrills were more important to him than she was.

But maybe he'd be lucky. She understood how much the necklace meant to him. Would she grasp that his giving it to her was a promise? A way to tell her he loved her without scaring the shit out of her?

Part of him didn't want her to leave. Everything would change once they were apart. She'd be back home. Maybe Nyx would decide what they had wasn't real, that she didn't want anything more to do with him. That it was circumstances and not something monumental between them. Case pushed the doubts aside.

"Do you have everything ready to go?" he asked, even though he knew she did. He'd watched her check the room to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything and the messenger bag rested against her duffle bag.

"I'm ready. When are we leaving?"

He checked the time. "We have a few more minutes." But not many.

"Case?"

"What?"

"What's your full name? Can you tell me?"

He shouldn't. "Can you keep it to yourself?"

Nyx gave him her are-you-kidding-me look and Case grinned. He'd never been much of a smiler, not even as a kid, but this woman made him happy.

“That’s right,” he said. “You were aware of the importance of keeping secrets from the time you were small.” Case debated, but he wanted her to know who he was. He still couldn’t tell her he was Army Special Forces on a covert op. He wouldn’t risk his team, not even for her. But he could give her his real name. “It’s Case Lundquist.”

“I like that better than Charlie Case. It’s a more fitting name for a Viking warrior.”

She had him fighting off the urge to grin again, and he really wasn’t a smiler. But maybe he could get used to being one. With Nyx. “You’re getting mouthy again.”

“What’s mouthy about saying you’re a Viking warrior? You’re Swedish and you are a warrior. I saw you and your friends at work in that camp yesterday.” Nyx shrugged. “But we’re not being held hostage by assholes, so I can let my sass flag fly. It’ll grow on you.”

“It already has.” But her mentioning what happened yesterday raised another question. “You’re taking the battle in stride.”

“What am I supposed to do? Mourn the deaths of men who would have raped and killed me if you hadn’t come back? Fuck them. They’re in hell where they deserve to be.”

Case nodded. “Exactly.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her, drinking her in. They hadn’t had enough time together. Not nearly enough.

“Case?”

He shook his head. She was full of questions. “What, Fireball?”

“How did you get your handle? Lurch doesn’t seem appropriate, not as athletic as you are.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. She was incredible, everything he didn’t believe existed. “You haven’t seen me dance. That’s how I earned the handle.”

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“You’re that bad, huh?” She was smiling, too.

“About ten times worse than you’re imagining.”

“I guess that explains the expression that crosses your face whenever I’ve called you Lurch.”

No, it didn’t, but he wasn’t ready to discuss that it had everything to do with her being special to him and the handle being used by everyone.

“And you don’t like hon, honey, and honey bear,” Nyx continued. “What do you think of love bug?”

There was amusement dancing in her eyes despite her serious demeanor and Case enjoyed her teasing him. “That’s another no from me,” he said.

“I’ll have to keep trying.”

The exchange got him thinking. He called her Fireball and never asked what she thought of it. What if she hated it, but was just ignoring it instead of telling him? “Since we’re discussing nicknames, are you okay with Fireball?”

Her lips curved. “I like Fireball. It’s much, much better than the other nickname I have.”

Other nickname? He suddenly felt territorial. “What other nickname?”

“The one my brother uses. Damn, I hate it. If I tell him that, though, he’ll double down and never use anything else.”

Her brother. Case could breathe again. “What does your brother call you?” She hesitated. “I promise, I will never use it. I’ll always call you Fireball.”

Nyx grimaced. “My brother calls me Pickle.”

“Pickle?” He felt like a cement truck had just hit him. Pickle wasn’t exactly a common nickname, but?—

“Pickle. When I was little, I couldn’t say Dylan, and I called him Dill. He started calling me Pickle in response.” She grinned. “As he likes to tell me, payback is a bitch.”

“Dylan? His handle wouldn’t be D-Ro, would it?”

She nodded, sobering. It was enough to make realization dawn.

“How long have you known?” he asked, and it was a struggle to keep the anger out of his voice. To her credit, she didn’t pretend to misunderstand the question.

“I recognized you in the suite at Vargas’s hacienda when you told me your nickname. Dylan showed me a picture once. He and three friends in front of some sort of light armored vehicle—Ollie, Mick, and his best buddy, Lurch.”

He knew which picture that was. The four of them had been assigned to the same Special Forces unit until Case had moved over to covert ops. Ollie, Mick, and D-Ro were still on that team. She’d known who he was. She fucking knew he was in Special Forces.

And she hadn't said a damned word.

That was when her attitude had changed, he realized. In the bathroom in Vargas's suite. Before that, she'd trusted him to a point, but not completely. After that conversation, she'd followed his orders, run things by him, and looked to him to lead.

Because she fucking knew who he was.

Pickle. He'd heard a million anecdotes about her. He hadn't believed half of what D-Ro said, but now that he knew Nyx, he realized his buddy hadn't been exaggerating. She was a handful.

How many stories had she heard about him?

He was an idiot, thinking they had a connection. Believing that she trusted him because of who he was. It had nothing to do with him. She trusted him because he was her brother's friend. Because he was Special Forces.

He was an even bigger fool for believing Nyx was different. That she wouldn't lie to him, not even by omission. He never learned.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me who you were?"

The apology on her face turned to anger. "Maybe because we were being held hostage, and you told me you couldn't be sure you got all the microphones." She stood and faced off with him. "What the fuck was I supposed to do? If you missed a bug and I say something, then your cover is destroyed, you're in danger, your team is in danger, and the op is blown to hell. So you tell me, should I have gushed, oh, thank God, you're Dylan's bestie, save me Special Forces Sergeant Lurch?"

"You could have said, hey, I'm Pickle. Did you think of that?"

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“No. How was I supposed to know Dylan talked about me?”

He shook his head. “There were opportunities to share the truth.”

“Really? When? We were either in a dangerous situation or we were busy with other things.” She glanced toward the bed. “So you tell me, when should I have told you I was Dylan’s little sister?”

Chapter 35

Case went to the safe house. He couldn’t be trusted out in the wild, not until he got his head screwed on straight. Nyx left him all kinds of messed up. Luckily, the place was empty. He settled on a green plastic chair on the back patio.

The space was cramped. If he stretched his legs out all the way, he could practically rest them against the adobe wall towering over him. It left the entire area shaded, with no chance of the sun lighting the few feet to the house. At least someone had picked up the debris that had littered the back patio.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

For a split second, Case thought it was the captain before he recognized the voice. Oz. “Dude, don’t you have something to do?”

Ignoring the hint, the Wizard came over and took the other chair. “Nah, Vargas fired me, remember?”

Scowling, Case went back to staring at the wall. The last thing he wanted was to encourage a conversation.

“Are you mooning over your woman leaving?” Oz asked, interrupting Case’s thoughts.

“No.” The word was hard, but Oz wasn’t easily deterred.

“Do you have what’s left of the rebels on your ass?”

Case shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m playing it safe, though.”

“Smart choice. They’re probably not too happy about Ramirez being taken out. If they’re still functioning as a group, you might be rebel enemy number one.”

He grunted and went back to ignoring the Wizard.

“Did your Fireball give you the old heave-ho when you took her to the airport?”

His patience cratered. “What the fuck is with all the questions? Leave me alone and go bother someone else.”

“So she did tell you to take a hike.”

“No, she did not,” Case growled before realizing he’d been baited.

“If she didn’t dump you, why are you in such a shitty mood?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Bullshit. If you didn’t want to talk, you’d walk away. It’s clear you need the advice

of someone older and wiser.”

Case gave Oz a glare. “You’re three years older.”

“Like I said, older and wiser. What happened with the Fireball?”

He put his hands on the arms of the chair, prepared to push himself up and walk away as his teammate suggested, but something stopped him. Maybe because it would be faster to get over her if he talked about it. Case was on an op. He had a pivotal role, a dangerous role, and if he fucked up, he could lose his life. Or worse, one of his teammates could lose his life. If talking about Nyx got him to focus on the job, then it was worth the discomfort.

“She lied to me.”

In his peripheral vision, Case saw Oz’s eyebrows go up. “Really? She struck me as a straight shooter. What did she lie about?”

For a moment, he hesitated, but he was committed now. “She didn’t tell me she was my buddy’s little sister.”

“Nyx isn’t exactly a common name,” the Wizard said without inflection.

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“D-Ro always called her Pickle. He never used her real name.”

“Pickle?” Oz sounded amused. “I bet she hates that.”

That’s what he commented on? But it was a reprieve from the conversation, so Case went with it. “She does. She almost didn’t tell me because she was worried I’d use it instead of Fireball.”

“I’m guessing there’s no family resemblance, but you knew her last name. Why didn’t that get you to start asking questions?”

Case grimaced. “Her mother was married three times. D-Ro was fathered by husband number two, the Fireball by husband three. Different surnames and they look nothing alike.”

“So she knew who and what you were from almost the beginning and she didn’t tell you she knew? Do I have that right?”

It felt like a trick question. Case shifted his chair to get a better look at his teammate, but Oz gave nothing away. “Yes,” he said, drawing out the word.

“You were aware the suite was bugged, correct? You would have cautioned her.”

Now he knew where Oz was headed. “I didn’t expect her to tell me who she was while we were under Vargas’s thumb. I even warned her that I might have missed a microphone when I was pulling the spy gear, but she had opportunities to tell me later after we escaped. We walked through the rainforest alone together. We were in a hut

for hours before we walked again. There were multiple chances.”

“Yeah, sounds like it. Why do you think she didn’t use any of those openings?”

He stayed quiet.

The wizard answered for him. “Why don’t we start with the fact your walk through the rainforest was at night while you were escaping from Vargas’s estate.”

Case grunted.

“Let’s add that the rebels were coming over the wall of the compound and she had no way of knowing whether any were hiding in the rainforest surrounding the area. She’s also smart enough to realize there could be enemies around and she wouldn’t know they were there because she was blindly following you.” He paused and waited, but Case remained quiet. The Wizard asked, “What about the hut?”

“You have all the fucking answers. You tell me.”

Oz scowled. “I can guess one of them. She probably slept for a while. How’d I do?”

Nodding, Case said, “She was down for a little over three hours.”

“Clearly, she could have told you after her nap.”

Closing his eyes, Case grimaced. “I was edgy when she woke up. My spidey sense was tingling, and I was going from window to window.”

“What you’re saying is you were intense and not hiding it. If you were in her position, would you have said something then?”

Reluctantly, Case admitted, “No. She would worry about distracting me, but she did talk with me after we left the hut while we were walking again.”

Oz nodded. “She should have told you then.”

Except they’d talked about why Nyx was still a virgin, about her mom’s life choices influencing her, and then they’d talked about his mother and her drug addiction. Those conversations seemed more important than her telling him she knew who and what he was. “We talked about other stuff, and then the rebels captured us.”

“And she couldn’t tell you while you two were in the encampment for the same reasons she couldn’t talk while you were Vargas’s guests. Right?”

He nodded.

“But she could have told you last night. Unless you were busy doing something else.”

Oz sounded innocent, but Case knew better. He shot his teammate a hard look. He wouldn’t let anyone—anyone—talk shit about Nyx.

“Fuck,” he muttered as the Wizard’s maneuvering became apparent.

“From what you told me, it doesn’t sound as if there was much chance, and the few times there were openings, the two of you were focused on something else.”

“Yeah.” Case drew the word out again as realization dawned. He hadn’t given Nyx the benefit of the doubt. Because of his past, he’d immediately assumed the worst of her and he’d been an ass. And he managed to piss her off. His Fireball was no one’s doormat.

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“I have one other theory for you to mull over,” Oz said.

“What’s that?”

“If she did deliberately stay quiet—and I’m not saying she did—maybe it had something to do with what was building between the two of you. As soon as you learned she was your buddy’s sister, you would have friend-zoned her. Maybe she wanted more than friendship.”

Case shook his head. He knew Nyx. She would have flat-out told him and dealt with whatever happened between them because of it. She hadn’t stayed quiet because she was a liar. It wasn’t her nature to be devious. He knew that. He knew her.

“D-Ro is going to kill me for sleeping with his sister, and I didn’t realize I was breaking the bro code.”

“Dude, you would have slept with her even if you were aware of who she was. Everyone on the team knows how you feel about her.” Oz paused. “Well, maybe not Rusty, but everyone else.”

“I never should have judged her by the other women I’ve been burned by. I reacted. I didn’t think.”

“It sounds as if you’re done being a dumb fuck,” the Wizard said.

“It looks like it.”

“Good. Now how are you going to fix it?”

Case shook his head. “She’s in the air, on her way to Lima.”

“You’re going to lose the woman you’re in love with because she’s a few hundred miles away?”

“I don’t know what hotel she’s staying at.”

“BD ordered you to have her call Archer immediately. You let her use your phone, didn’t you? Archer knows where she’s staying, right? So call him and ask where she is.”

“The captain will lose his mind if I take off for Peru in the middle of an op. If I can even get over the border and into the country.”

“If you can’t make it to a hotel in Peru without getting caught, you need to find a less challenging career. This one is over your head.”

This time, he recognized the bait and avoided it.

Oz took a different tack. “You’re too scared to go after your woman? After you killed a man to keep her safe? You’re that big a chicken shit?”

You’re too scared.

Case was scared Nyx would tell him he blew his chance with her. That she couldn’t forgive him for the things he said. “What if she tells me to go to hell?”

“You’re already in hell. Chasing after her, apologizing, telling her you love her can’t make anything worse.” When Case hesitated, Oz added, “She’s in love with you. I

could see it in the way she looked at you yesterday.”

Case headed for the house. “Tell the captain?—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll cover for you. Go fix things with your woman before she leaves for the States.”

Chapter 36

Nyx didn’t cry over men and she didn’t cry in public, but that damn Case caused her to do both. At least she’d been discreet, and it had one benefit. Her seatmates on both flights had avoided talking to her.

Pushing away from the balcony railing, Nyx went back inside her hotel suite and locked the slider behind her. Archer had gone all out. An enormous suite in one of the most expensive hotels in Lima, Peru. It was too bad she wasn’t in the mood to enjoy it. It felt like a waste of space. A waste of money.

The sky was turning to dusk, and after one last look at the view, she closed the drapes. Another hour and she’d order dinner, find something on television to keep her thoughts off Case, and go to sleep. Her flight to LAX left early in the morning, so really she only had a few hours to get through.

And a lifetime once she reached Los Angeles.

Tears welled again and Nyx blinked hard, willing them away. She looked around trying to find a distraction. But the high-end living room furniture and glass dining table didn’t do it. Where was the TV remote?

As she bent over to grab it from the oversized ottoman, the necklace fell out of her shirt and swung forward. She curled her hand around the pendant, feeling the bind

rune against her palm.

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She'd have to return this when she got home. Dylan would know where to mail it. Although asking him for an address would raise all kinds of questions from her brother, questions she didn't want to answer. The last thing she wanted was to cause a problem between Case and Dill.

Dropping the pendant back behind her polo, Nyx reached again for the remote control. She didn't even get a hand on it when there was a knock on the door. For an instant, she froze before she realized it was probably someone from housekeeping with extra towels or wanting to know what time to turn down the bed. They did things like that when someone stayed in a suite this expensive, didn't they? At least they did in the movies.

Still, after what she'd been through the past week, Nyx wasn't taking any chances. She looked out the peephole.

Case.

What was he doing here?

It was tempting to ignore the knock and leave him standing in the hallway, but her dad hadn't raised her to be a coward. Nyx took a few minutes to recenter herself and to stuff her emotions away. He might have gutted her, but she'd be damned if she let him see that.

He knocked again, and squaring her shoulders, she opened the door.

"Did you even check to see who was in the hall?" he demanded with a scowl.

Without waiting for an invitation, he walked past her and into the suite.

She'd planned on dealing with him in the corridor, so it aggravated her to be caught flatfooted. His tone also irritated her, but Nyx refused to let him know he got to her. Refused. "Yes, I looked out the peephole." Pleased with how calm she sounded, she closed the door and turned to face him.

"I barely finished knocking, and you were opening the door."

Nyx didn't mention she'd heard the first knock. He might read too much into her hesitation. And what he guessed would probably be correct. She shrugged and stayed quiet.

Why was he here?

He didn't say anything, and Nyx crossed her arms. The bind rune pressed into her through the polo. That's why he'd come. He wanted his necklace. The last gift his mom gave him.

Reaching for the chain, she pulled it over her head and held it out to him. "Here."

"You're giving me back the bind rune?"

"Of course I am."

When he made no move to take it, Nyx stepped forward and slipped it into the unbuttoned chest pocket of his fatigue shirt. Immediately, she returned to her original position. She needed the distance.

She thought he'd leave. Maybe without even a farewell since he got what he'd come for, but Case stayed put. What was he waiting for?

Case wasn't sure what he'd expected when he turned up at Nyx's hotel, but this wasn't it. He'd run scenarios and been prepared to respond to any of them. This was one he hadn't considered. Did her returning the bind rune mean she was done with him?

The metal of the pendant felt warm from her skin, searing him through the T-shirt he had on underneath the fatigue shirt. He'd prepared himself for anger or tears. What he hadn't anticipated was indifference. It cut deeper and more painfully than if she'd yelled at him or told him to go fuck himself.

Maybe the indifference was the message.

Maybe he should apologize for being an asshole and then leave. She clearly was waiting for him to go. It was in her posture, in her polite expression.

Her polite expression.

Nyx had a brave face. Was this her diplomatic face?

His Fireball took care of herself and didn't like to burden others. She'd learned to keep her emotions to herself. Earlier today, she locked down after he brushed off her first few explanations. Her first few defenses. She just let him go without interruption, and she remained silent until she boarded the plane and left him inside the terminal.

"Well, if that's all..." She let her voice trail off, but the hint was obvious. Scram!

She wasn't giving him cues, and he was an idiot for thinking she would.

"I'm sorry."

“Okay. Now—” She turned toward the door.

“I’m sorry for everything I said, everything I implied.” Case ran a hand through the top of his hair. “You hit one of my triggers and I reacted without thinking first.” She still had her mask in place. “I told you my mother was a drug addict. Living with that...” He shook his head. “The lies were constant. The lies about where she was and what she was doing. The lies about how this time rehab was going to stick. The lies to hide she was using again. I learned not to trust her. Not about anything. Promises were constantly broken. That’s why I never make a promise unless I will keep it.”

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Nyx stood, still polite, but Case felt as if she was listening to him.

“I told you about Hannah, about how she lied by omission and didn’t tell me she was married. But there was a long string of liars in between my mom and her.”

Nyx didn’t respond to that. He glanced down at the floor for a moment and studied the subtle pattern in the carpeting as he tried to figure out what to say next.

“I stopped trusting people, especially women. Then I met you and you knocked me on my ass. I didn’t trust you right away either, but as time went on, I stopped questioning the things you said. You were straightforward. You were different. You were the one woman who wouldn’t lie to me in any way. Then I found out you knew who I was almost from the start.”

She didn’t say anything, and fear hit him like a punch to the gut. Had he fucked up so badly there was no coming back from it?

Voice thick, he said, “If I’d kept my mouth shut until I could think things through, I would have realized there was almost no opportunity for you to tell me. The few times we were able to talk openly we discussed other things. But I didn’t stop to think. I reacted, and I reacted badly. I am sorry. Truly sorry. I wish—” His voice broke, and he had to clear his throat. “I wish I could go back in time and undo the way I wrecked things.”

“Why?” One word, no inflection.

Case had one last piece of ammo. “Because I love you, Nyx. I love you and I want a

lifetime with you.”

Nyx’s mask slipped momentarily, giving him a view of how badly his distrust hurt her. Then, in the blink of an eye, she had it back in place.

Closing the distance between them, Case cupped her cheek in his palm. She didn’t pull away. She didn’t slug him. He took that as a good sign. “I love you, Fireball, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I still have issues that I haven’t managed to work through. If you need me to take my ass to therapy, I’ll be on it as soon as I’m back in the States.”

“You don’t want to go to therapy.” It wasn’t a question.

“Hell, no.” Case managed a small smile, but it felt forced. “If I wanted to deal with my shit, I would have done it before now.” He sobered. “But my shit hurt you, and I don’t ever want to do that again.”

With a sigh, Nyx leaned her cheek into his palm. “You hit a trigger for me, too. You see, my sisters would accuse me of doing something, and my mom would confront me about it. She wouldn’t believe I was innocent even though I was telling the truth. I was grounded more than once for things Dylan did or things one of my sisters did to the other sister. So when you just immediately accused me of lying and wouldn’t listen—” She shrugged. “It hurt.”

The mask was gone now. Case wrapped his arms around Nyx, cuddling her to his chest. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“How can you make that promise?” Her arms went around his waist as she asked the question.

“Because now that I realize it’s a hot issue for me, I’ll know to stop and think before I

react. I have the discipline to do it, too.”

“I know you do. You’re Special Forces.”

Case held Nyx for a while, basking in the feel of her arms around him, her head on his chest. “You probably don’t know how you feel about me yet, but I’d like a chance to...” he tried to come up with the right word. “A chance to woo you.”

Some of the relaxation left her body, and Nyx leaned back to meet his gaze. “I love you, too, Case. Why else would I make love with you?”

Relief had him grinning. “Yeah, why else? I should have guessed that.”

“You should have.” Her mock scolding was ruined by her smile. “I do love you, Case. So much it’s scary.”

“I get that.” Did he ever. Finally, he could take a deep breath. “On my way to the hotel, I passed a jewelry store, and they had a window display that made me stop and go inside.” Case put Nyx away from him and reached into the pocket of his jeans. “I know it’s too soon to propose, but I thought I could make a promise instead.” He handed her a small jewelry box. “Open it.”

Nyx lifted the lid. “Oh!”

“This bind rune is for love. I’d like it if you’d wear it.”

She nodded. “Put it on for me.”

Case freed the silver chain, and after shoving the box back in his pocket, placed it around her neck. “I know we’re on opposite sides of the country—when I’m even in the US—but we’ll make it work.”

“We’ll make it work,” she agreed.

“I love you, Nyx, and I will forever. I promise.”

Epilogue

It was dark when Oz returned to the safe house. He heard voices in the makeshift office the team had on the first floor, and changed course, heading for the back patio. Sinking into the same chair he’d sat in earlier in the day, he stretched out his legs and put his hand over the right front pocket of his pants. When he felt the small bump, he rubbed his thumb over it.

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Losing his job with Vargas was a curse. It gave him too much time to think. Too much time to remember. A casual hookup shouldn't be such a big distraction.

Shouldn't be, but his thoughts kept circling back to her.

They hadn't exchanged names. He'd been in Los Angeles for Stony and Zo's wedding and had flown in the Thursday before the big day. That first night, the hotel room walls had started closing in on him and he'd gone to the bar. And he'd seen her.

The word he always used to describe her was prissy. It fit to a T. His prissy little blonde had been dressed in a black skirt and a white shirt with high heels and small gold hoop earrings. Business babe attire. Not his type, not even close, but Oz had swooped in to rescue her from some asshole who wouldn't take fuck off for an answer and the evening had progressed from there.

Oz scowled. The night had been fantastic. Unforgettable. Unfortunately, so was the next morning.

Los Angeles, California

Six Weeks Earlier

Oz's body was still on east coast time. Army east coast time. It was dark when he woke up. He knew immediately who was sprawled beside him in bed. The sexiest little blonde he'd ever spent the night with.

He started to reach for her but stopped. Maybe he didn't know her name, but he did

realize she wasn't very experienced, and that hooking up was out of character for her. As many times as they went at each other last night, she'd be sore this morning. But damn she was tempting with her hair loose and her body naked.

Lacing his hands behind his head, Oz wondered if she'd be amenable to extending their acquaintance. It was too late to take her as his plus one to Stony's wedding, but maybe it would be okay to bring her to the groom's dinner tonight. Then they could come back to the hotel and have a second night. His plane for Tampa didn't leave until Monday morning, so they could hang out on Sunday, too. If she was interested.

Oz scowled. Why was he thinking about more with her? Why wasn't he eagerly waiting for her to wake up so he could hustle her out the door?

This wasn't like him. He did one-night stands, not relationships, and a four-day hookup sounded a hell of a lot like, well if not a relationship, then at least an affair. He didn't do those either. One and done, that was his motto.

But the sex had been the best he'd ever had, and he did want seconds. Maybe thirds.

It wasn't as if anything would develop if they spent a few nights together. He was stationed in Tampa and out of the country more than he was in it. She lived in LA. After he flew back to Florida, they'd never see each other again.

He ignored the twist in his stomach. He was hungry, that's all.

Moving slowly, not wanting to disturb her, he brought his hands down and shifted to look at her. He'd had his hands and mouth all over her and it wasn't enough. Fuck, she was beautiful. Her light blonde hair, that pointed little chin, those full, kissable lips, and when her eyes were open, she had the deepest sapphire-blue irises he'd ever seen.

Remembering her mouth wrapped around his cock, as she'd looked up at him with

those eyes of hers, caused blood to rush south, and Oz swallowed a curse.

He slipped out of bed and headed for the shower. Setting the temperature to cool, he hopped in. A couple of extra nights wasn't a commitment, he decided. It didn't mean anything except having more great sex. After drying off, he tied the towel around his waist and left the bathroom.

The bed was empty.

Oz looked around, but he already knew she was gone. As illogical as it was, it pissed him off. Oz sank onto her side of the bed.

Something dug into his hip and he reached for it.

One tiny gold hoop earring.

The sound of someone laying on their horn jerked Oz back to the present. Back to Puerto Jardin and the op. Back to the grungy patio behind the safe house.

He was still pissed off about the way she ran out on him. That had to be the reason why he couldn't forget her. Oz reached into his pocket, pulled out the hoop, and ran his finger over the curved edge. He'd kept it to remind himself he wasn't cut out for more than hookups.

Carrying it everywhere couldn't mean more than that.