



# Bellamy's Command (Team KOA Charlie #1)

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**Description:** Five years ago, the world believed Octavia Reynolds had been killed during a violent raid in Colombia. Betrayed, captured, and left for dead, she survived with the help of a daring DEA agent who risked everything to save her. Forced into hiding, she's built a new life in the shadows, determined to stay dead to the world that abandoned her.

Now, that fragile peace shatters. The DEA agent who saved her is murdered, leaving behind a cryptic message that ties Octavia's past to her ex-boyfriend, Bellamy Chance.

Bellamy has spent years coming to terms with her loss, burying his grief in his work as the leader of an elite K9 unit. But when his team is sent to Colombia on a mysterious extraction mission, nothing could prepare him for what awaits.

Face to face with the woman he thought he'd never see again, Bellamy's world is turned upside down. Octavia is alive, hunted by the same man who tried to kill her five years ago—a man who won't stop until the secrets she holds are buried forever. Determined not to lose her again, Bellamy will risk everything to protect her.

As the danger closes in and the truth about the past begins to unravel, Bellamy and Octavia must confront their shared history and the undeniable bond that still lingers between them. But with the shadows lurking at every turn, they'll have to trust each other like never before to survive—and fight for a second chance at love.

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# Page 1

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Life never turned out as planned. If it did, Bellamy wouldn't be single. He wouldn't be living in Hawaii, and he'd still be a Marine Raider.

But of all those twists of fates, there was only one that needled his heart in such a way that it made him wonder what his life might have looked like if any of the roads he'd traveled had turned out differently.

Only that hadn't been his choice, but hers.

His grandma, who passed away a year before Octavia disappeared, would be telling him that he was living a new dream.

Perhaps he was. The Brotherhood Protectors had given him an incredible opportunity when the military—most of the branches—had all but turned their collective backs on him and his buddies. Well, not really. Not in the truest sense of the word, but freaking Eric Moody had found a way to ensure that Bellamy and his team would not be selected for the Joint Forces K9 Pilot Program.

Moody was an asshole and had been a damn thorn in Bellamy's side since he'd managed to get Octavia to fall for his charms. That had been one hell of a shocker.

“What on earth are you doing sitting over here by yourself with that damn sourpuss look on your ugly face?” Cooper asked, handing him a fresh beer before easing into one of the Adirondack chairs overlooking the marina.

Bellamy chose this house for a couple of reasons. First, he loved the water and being able to stare at it for hours upon hours made him ridiculously happy.

Second. He was far enough away from work that it let him trick his brain into leaving his job where it belonged.

Something he had always struggled to do.

Thirdly, he could sit on his porch, with his two dogs at his feet, and people-watch all evening long without having to interact with a single one.

That alone should be the icing on the cake.

Not to mention, the property was situated on a hill, and he had over three acres of land on which to work with his older dog, Roxy, and train his two-year-old, Tucker .

However, the real reason he'd bought the house was because it was the first place he looked at that he knew she would have loved. It had the kind of heart and soul Octavia would have wanted for a home and sometimes, late at night, he could almost feel her presence. As if her spirit wandered the halls, sprinkling her brand of sunshine on every drop of air.

It was how he dared to consider she could be gone.

The only negative was that his house became the team's party place. Not that the boys were rowdy and out of control. Those days were long gone. But if they weren't at Ohana's having a good time listening to Moana belt out a few, they were at Bellamy's kicking back. It didn't bother him that his team bombarded his personal space. They knew him better than anyone and knew not to say a single word about how he'd finally chosen to hang a few pictures. The kinds of photographs that were constant reminders of the life he thought he was going to have with Octavia.

No, they left that beast tied up in the box where it belonged.

Today, he and the boys had chartered one of Driftwood Tours' fishing boats, which was owned by Waylen and his wife, Presley. It had been a prosperous day at sea and currently, Rusty and Ethan hovered over the grill. Hopefully, they wouldn't destroy the fresh catch or burn the veggies.

"I got an interesting voice message." Bellamy saw no reason to lie to his buddy. He'd known these men for a long time and worked with them on some dangerous missions. They were as much family as Bellamy's blood relatives.

But he and Cooper had known each other the longest. They had met when they'd been scrawny, pimple-faced teenagers at prep school. They bonded over their love of cafeteria pizza and their hatred for mean girls.

"From?"

Bellamy glanced over his shoulder. There wasn't anything about his life that all three men didn't know.

Including his past with Octavia, her father, and Eric.

This was not a story he wanted to repeat more than once.

"Let's wait until we're all sitting down together before I get into it." Bellamy raised his beer and took a hearty swig. He understood that Claudius struggled to accept that his one and only daughter was dead.

Hell, so did Bellamy.

But even though Octavia went missing five years ago, Bellamy was still mortified

over the fact she'd chosen Eric. What made that even worse was that it had been her father who had introduced them and Claudius seemed to prefer his daughter dating that asshole over a decorated Marine Raider and a man she'd known most of her life.

"Sounds like I might not like this." Cooper cocked his head.

"No one will." Bellamy jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Looks like dinner's ready."

Tucker, who had been minding her own business at Bellamy's feet, lifted her head and gave a little yelp the second he mentioned the word dinner .

He chuckled, patting the dog's head. "Not you, girl. Go to the house and find your sister. Now." He pointed to the porch.

Tucker sat with her head tilted, whining. She was still considered a puppy but she was a good K9 and one of the smartest dogs he'd ever worked with.

Bellamy lowered his chin.

Tucker barked and raced off.

"That's one heck of a dog," Cooper said. "How's she getting along with the kitties?" He shook his head. "I can't believe you now have three cats."

"Tucker thinks the kittens are chew toys and Roxy still doesn't know what to think of them, but we're working on that." Bellamy stood, giving his body a good stretch. He strolled to the side of the house where he'd set up the picnic table so he and his buddies could enjoy all the yachts in the marina as well as the sailboats with their tall masts pointing toward the darkening sky. "Smells amazing." He nodded toward Rusty.

“It does, if I do say so myself.” Rusty smiled like a big kid. Bellamy had known Rusty for a little over ten years. They’d worked on a few joint missions both with K9 units and without. What always struck Bellamy about Rusty was his compassion. When he’d been nine, he’d been bit by a dog. Most kids would have blamed the dog and been terrified of animals. But not Rusty. Nope. He blamed the owner, and it was that incident that ignited his interest in dog training. They didn’t come any better than Rusty, even if he liked to pat himself on the back, which he did a fair amount.

But only when it came to the small stuff, like cooking a piece of fish.

The big stuff? Nope. Rusty didn’t take a single dose of credit. He was about as humble as anyone could be. If anyone gave him a compliment about a mission or tried to say he was a hero, he’d say something to the effect of, no, no, that wasn’t really me. I was there, but it was all so and so. I was just there to support.

Only, Rusty had saved Bellamy’s life more times than Bellamy could count.

However, Rusty—much like Bellamy—preferred animals to people. Their stories were different, but heartbreak changes a man and Rusty lost someone he’d loved in one of the most tragic ways.

“Bug off, Rusty. I did the heavy lifting.” Ethan set a large tray on the table. “All you did was add a little salt and pepper.” He wagged his finger. “I will give you kudos for bringing out the spray bottle of water because otherwise our fish might be more than a little charred around the edges.” Ethan was the kind of man who if anyone on this team needed help hiding a body, he’d show up with a shovel and wouldn’t bother asking any questions. He’d figure you had a good enough reason.

He was as loyal as any human could possibly be, but don’t ever betray that trust. It wasn’t that Ethan was a vengeful man. Or that he’d seek revenge. But he wasn’t one to hold back his thoughts and opinions. He had a razor-sharp tongue and he wasn’t

afraid to use it.

Bellamy smiled as he straddled the bench. He'd never tire of these men or nights like this. It no longer mattered the circumstances that brought them to this place; he wouldn't trade working day in and day out with these three.

They were his people.

His brothers.

His family.

Leaving the Marines and joining the Brotherhood Protectors in Hawaii had been the best decision of Bellamy's life.

He had only regret. He caught Rusty's gaze and nodded as if he knew exactly what Bellamy had been thinking .

No one wanted to share the bond of loss.

But they did, and it sucked.

Bellamy lifted his fork and dug into the fresh fish, plopping it on his tongue. "Holy crap. This actually tastes really good."

"As if I'd let you eat something that would be horrible." Rusty pointed to Cooper. "But he would, which is why we didn't let him near the grill."

Cooper tossed a green bean across the table. "I can cook."

"Not even the point." Bellamy chuckled. "You'd make something taste gross and put

it in front of me, just to see my reaction. You did it when we were kids and you'd do it again."

"Only because I love you, man." Cooper batted his lashes. "But seriously, this is almost as good as the catch of the day at Ohana's. Almost."

"Yeah, that chef is amazing. I'm shocked I haven't gained twenty pounds eating there a few nights a week." Ethan raised his glass. "To Team Koa: Charlie. If I had to, I'd die for you assholes, but let's make sure that's never on the menu."

The entire table roared with laughter.

In the Marines, Bellamy worked with some great men. People he cherished and had strong bonds with. But there was something about the makeup of this team that started before Colombia that couldn't be put into words. There was only one thing that came to mind when Bellamy thought of Rusty, Cooper, and Ethan.

Ride or die.

The dinner conversation was light and while Bellamy tried not to talk too much about work at home, discussing the K9s and their training wasn't a heavy topic. Only, Cooper kept giving him the evil eye.

Time to tell them their past might be chomping at their heels.

Taking a cold beer from the cooler, he leaned against the side of the house and stared at the moon as it appeared in the night sky. "I got an interesting call while we were fishing," he said. "Instead of paraphrasing it, I thought I'd let you hear it for yourselves." He pulled out his cell, found the message in question, and tapped the green button.



“Hi, Bellamy. It’s been a little while and I don’t have time to shoot the shit. I heard through the grapevine you took a job in Hawaii with the Brotherhood Protectors. Amazing organization. I’ve worked with them in the past and that’s why I’m calling you. I’m in a situation. The kind where I might not come out alive on the other end. If that happens, I will want you and your team to figure out why. But you won’t like it because it’s going to mean returning to Colombia. If something happens to me, you’ll be sent an envelope with sensitive information. You’ll understand it when you get to Colombia. I gotta run. Bellamy, this is important. Trust me when I say I had to do it... ”

The line crackled. A few muffled shouts that couldn’t be made out echoed in the background.

Five gunshots filled the air.

Then it went dead.

“Was that Agent David Tate?” Rusty asked with his longneck halfway to his mouth and his eyes about as wide as they could possibly be. “And do you know if he was shooting at someone? Or was it the other way around?”

“I have no idea. I just listened to this less than two hours ago,” Bellamy said. “I called my parents and texted our boss right after I heard it.”

“What I want to know is why the hell Tate is calling you. He all but accused us of blowing his undercover operation,” Ethan said. “He told Eric and his damn committee that our dogs suck. Seriously, he honestly believes we’ll help him? The man has to be delusional.”

“We did blow his cover,” Rusty said. “Though not on purpose because we had no idea he was even there.”

“I bet Eric did.” Cooper stood and strolled across the lawn. He rubbed his shoulder and stared toward the water. “And Tate only stated that our dogs were ineffective. He tried like hell not to answer those questions, but even we had to be honest and that wasn’t much fun.”

“One of the worst days of my life.” Bellamy wouldn’t put anything past Eric, but Tate was a different story. Both of Bellamy’s parents were DEA. They both worked cyber-intelligence and spent their time behind a desk, not in the field. But they were high up inside the organization, knew all the players, and had even had dinner with two different presidents.

It’s how Bellamy ended up in a private prep school and met Octavia.

Cooper had attended on a scholarship and was about the only real friend Bellamy gained from that experience outside of Octavia.

“My parents didn’t even know until after all that shit went down,” Bellamy said. He wasn’t defending Eric, or even Agent Tate. He was just stating facts.

Ethan stuck his beer out. “Your folks play by the rules. I would gather even Octavia’s father might have done that until she went missing. But Eric? When has he ever done that? The boy was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Went to flipping private schools and all.”

Bellamy sighed, catching Cooper’s gaze. He’d heard it all before, and while it wasn’t a false statement when it came to Eric, it was also the truth about him and in a roundabout way Cooper, but he wasn’t about to remind his friends of that sore subject.

Money—or lack of it—didn’t make the man.

“I always believed Claudius was a good man, even when things went sideways in Colombia. However, I worry his hands aren’t completely clean.” Bellamy raised his hand. “It has nothing to do with me and Octavia breaking up and everything to do with the way Claudius handled how messed up that mission was. Between something happening to the K9s, the town getting blown to bits, and the intel being all wrong, there are still reports of sightings of his daughter five years later, and he’s chased every single one, even though he held a memorial service for her. He told me that he tried to accept she was gone. That Eric and everyone else said it was unhealthy to keep holding out hope, but that he struggled to let her go.”

“For a long time you did as well,” Cooper said with a raised brow and that all-knowing look that reminded Bellamy he could fool only so many people.

Bellamy nodded. A thick lump formed in his throat. Octavia had a bleeding heart. It’s one of the things he loved about her. Helping communities in third world countries had always been a goal. She didn’t want to write a check; she wanted to go get her hands dirty.

And she did exactly that, although her rich daddy would have preferred she stay home.

So did Eric—even more than Claudius.

Eric thought what she did wasn’t important. Or was simply something to do to fill time until she got married and had children. As if serving him was more important.

“Tate looked into every single sighting of Octavia and found no evidence that it was her,” Bellamy said. “Eventually, I had to accept the facts.”

“I didn’t know that,” Ethan said. “So you’ve been talking with Tate behind our backs?”

Bellamy chuckled. “Not really. But my parents work for the same organization. They’ve had some contact, and my folks know that if by some miracle she’s alive, I’d want to know.”

“What did your parents have to say?” Rusty asked.

“My mom said they have no idea what Tate’s blabbing about, except he’s still doing a lot of undercover work in South America. However, they either couldn’t—or wouldn’t—give me the details, but he did recently have a meeting in Virginia,” Bellamy said. “They were concerned about why Tate would reach out to me instead of someone inside the DEA and obviously, the gunshots were a major concern. They said they’d get back to me later tonight or first thing in the morning.”

“The only connection any of us have to Tate is that damn mission that’s attached to Octavia.” Cooper turned and made his way back to the picnic table. “Claudius handpicked us.”

“Not entirely true,” Ethan said. “He picked the four of us because he’d worked with us before. Not to mention he’d known you and Bellamy since you were in middle school. But some of that team was assembled based on our recommendations. That’s part of why Eric came at us in that committee saying we didn’t know how to put together a decent K9 unit. That the men and their dogs weren’t good enough. Well-trained enough. That we picked subpar?—”

“You can stop talking. We get it,” Cooper said with a huff.

“It’s also not true,” Rusty added.

“I think we’ve got a bigger issue to deal with.” Ethan pointed to the main road. “Isn’t that Hawk’s car?”

“It sure is.” Bellamy set his beer on the table, squared his shoulders, and strolled to the driveway with his three buddies right behind him.

Hawk eased from behind the steering wheel, holding a manila envelope. “Sorry to bother you boys on your day off.” Hawk nodded. “This came as an encrypted file through Waylen’s office about the same time you forwarded us that message. He’s still trying to figure out where the hell it came from.” Hawk handed it to Bellamy. “He’s working with two of our other top cyber guys. Darius out of Colorado and Wyatt from our Yellowstone office.”

“What is it?” Bellamy fingered the edges. His pulse raced. The first few months in Hawaii had been all about getting settled, learning about the Brotherhood Protectors Organization, and working with the K9s. They’d each supported a few missions but nothing substantial. Nothing that got his blood pumping like the military had.

This felt different.

“First, I’m sorry to say that Agent David Tate is dead,” Hawk said.

Bellamy blew out a puff of air.

“Second, what’s in that envelope is a job relating to what happened to Tate. We’ve worked with him before, so this matters to us personally.” Hawk planted his hands on his hips. “Only, I don’t know exactly what the job is. There are quadrants. You are to go to that location. According to the message Tate sent, it says most of it will make sense when you get there. Also, according to a dead man, the only people you can take with you are these three goons and your dogs. That’s it. He said you have seventy-two hours to complete the mission and it’s imperative you don’t fail.”

“Crazy, out-of-the-blue question, but does this have anything to do with Octavia Reynolds?” Bellamy asked.

Hawk's brow curved. "Interesting that you went right to a woman who is presumed dead. Why?"

"Don't you find it interesting that Tate's asking us to go back to where she disappeared, after he called me with some weird cryptic message?"

"I listened to it and yeah, it's strange, but I wouldn't jump to that conclusion," Hawk said. "What came into Waylen's office is basically a location in Colombia, a bunch of bullshit obscure words that don't mean crap. All Tate said was that if this came over, it meant he was dead and an off-the-books mission was completely compromised. That something needed to be extracted and once you got there, you'd understand."

"What are we supposed to extract?" Bellamy glanced inside the envelope.

"We don't know, exactly." Hawk cocked his head. "All we know is that it will make sense when you get there."

"And you're taking the assignment?" Bellamy asked.

Hawk laughed. "I'm not. You are." He slapped Bellamy on the shoulder. "Welcome to the Brotherhood Protectors K9 Pilot Program. Don't fuck it up."

## Page 2

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O ctavia Reynolds dunked her tea bag in her hot water and squeezed a fresh lemon. She came to this tiny little café thirty miles from the village where she lived once a month on the same day like clockwork.

Some months he showed.

Other months he did not.

Over the course of the last five years, she'd learned not to stress over the times Agent Tate didn't appear from the shadows. He didn't have to come. She wasn't his problem.

But she appreciated his efforts and the reports of home.

Especially those that concerned Bellamy and her father.

More so the ones regarding Eric. It had taken her a few years to want to know and understand what Eric was doing. She'd needed the time to heal physically and emotionally.

She plopped her spoon in her beverage, twirled the bag around the metal, and squeezed out all the flavor. She couldn't get this stuff in her village. Hell, she was lucky her water purifier hadn't broken yet. Damn thing was older than dirt.

Glancing around, she watched as a few people milled about the streets. It often

amazed her how she'd taken to this life. She always knew she could live without the comforts of home. Without her daddy's money. That had never been in question.

It was living in the shadowy world of the dead that surprised her. She moved every couple of months from one remote town to the next. Always with the help of Tate. He was her lifeline. Without him, she might as well curl up under a rock and die.

Run, Octavia. Run.

The words of one of her fellow Peace Corps volunteers from five years ago echoed in her brain. She knew Andrea was safe, that she and Mark had been saved and that they had been rescued from the destruction and devastation of that attack.

That brutal annihilation of her small town. All those lives lost. And for what?

Power? Greed? To cover up lies and betrayal? To keep people quiet? To make sure the truth never saw the light of day?

But what exactly was that truth ?

Those questions still haunted her daily existence.

Tate did what he could, but he was a DEA agent working on completely different cases. In the five years she'd known him, he was almost always undercover. He risked his life to help her stay dead.

But he too wanted answers.

That raid on her village set one of his operations back a few years. He told her he had to start over. He wasn't just pissed at why the raid happened.



He was angry at the team that came in and wreaked havoc on innocent lives.

That included Bellamy and his team.

Although, over the years, Tate had eased up on them, stating they were doing their jobs. He even explained to her how they'd all but been kicked out of some K9 Pilot Program.

Freaking Eric.

How could she have been so blind?

But she couldn't prove a thing and neither could Tate. Not to mention his resources were limited and he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Like drug lords smuggling massive amounts of illegal substances into the United States.

Or missing young boys and girls. Although, that wasn't really part of his role as a DEA agent, but he always looked into them when she gave him names. Tate was good about stuff like that. It was one of the reasons she stayed dead. She needed answers and she knew it was tied to Eric and why he'd done the unspeakable.

She blew into her tea and took a long, slow sip. God, that was good. Hot, roasty, bitter, and with a slight floral taste. It was a little slice of heaven. That should hold her over for another month. She used to buy some packets and bring it back to her tiny little room, but it just didn't cut it. No. It was better to savor it when she came to town.

A nice little treat.

Like the piece of chocolate she'd get later.

And the nice hot shower she'd have at the hotel tonight. And again in the morning. It sure beat a bucket bath where she had to strain the bugs out of her bathwater with a towel so they didn't get in her hair. But some always managed to tangle up in the strands.

Mindlessly, she twisted her fingers through her braid as she scanned the crowds.

Nova.

Octavia sat up a little taller. She shifted her gaze left and right. Her heart hammered in the center of her throat as she searched the crowded market for Tate, but he was nowhere to be found.

Hide. Run and hide.

The memories bombarded her brain like a missile landing on its target with precision. She could still feel the man's fingers against her scalp as he dragged her by the hair down the street while rapid gunfire flew all around. He'd pulled her into a small hut, smacked her on the side of the head with something hard, and proceeded to beat her. To rape her. He stabbed her in the gut and then left her there to die a slow and painful death.

Octavia closed her eyes. She let the visions of her past engulf her mind. She could hear the dogs barking as if it were yesterday. She'd been so weak and in so much pain from her injuries that she could barely breathe, much less call out for help. But that damn dog was right there, sniffing. The animal should have known she was there.

And worse, she'd heard Bellamy's voice.

That sweet, low timbre, commanding his dog to find... her.

But Roxy didn't, and neither did Bellamy.

For days she lay crumpled up in that hut, hurting. Bleeding. Dying.

Until Tate found her and nursed her back to health.

It took months before she could get out of bed. Almost an entire year before her body had healed. Had she been in the States, it would have been much faster. But she was in a remote village, with doctors who learned their trade from other doctors passing through.

She was fortunate to be alive.

For the first two years, she could barely even speak of the attack, much less want to know anything about the details. But Tate continued to spoon-feed her information.

Eventually, Tate confirmed Eric's ultimate betrayal. That it was he who was behind the attack. That it was he who pushed Bellamy and his team out of the K9 Pilot Program.

But, of course, Tate had little to no proof.

All he had were the orders, which didn't make sense to him—or to her. The village was a quiet one. Granted, the country was unstable. Drug lords. Trafficking. It all existed. They were on a no-travel ban for a reason. But those insurgents weren't your run-of-the-mill in-country bad guys. No. They were armed with military grade weapons. It was a well-planned attack.

With a purpose.

“Octavia,” Nova whispered.

She blinked open her eyes and smiled weakly. “Where’s Tate?” Tears burned as she stared at Nova’s bloodshot eyes as she eased into the chair across from Octavia, placing an envelope on the table.

Nova inhaled sharply. “He’s dead. Murdered. Gun downed by...” Nova turned as she swiped at her cheeks. She was also a DEA agent. A highly skilled professional and a woman Octavia suspected no one would dare cross. Not unless you wanted to be tortured before meeting your maker .

But to Octavia, Nova had become a friend. A confidant. Many times, Nova accompanied Tate to these meetings. He constantly warned Octavia that there might come a day when Nova took over, either because he’d become too old to play this game or the unspeakable happened.

“By who?” Octavia reached across the table and took Nova’s hand. “What happened?”

“Right now, the official story is that he was killed by a low-level pusher just north of the border in Texas.” Nova squared her shoulders. “I call bullshit. While Tate’s made a lot of enemies over the years, most of them aren’t petty dealers in the States. They are people in this country. Drug cartels. Drug lords who Tate has single-handedly slowed their operations or even put an end to their reign of terror.” Nova let out a slight chuckle. “Do you know what we call Tate in the office?”

“No. I don’t.” Without Tate, Octavia had no idea what was going to happen to her. It didn’t matter that Nova knew everything. That Tate trusted Nova with his life.

Nova wasn’t always in-country and Octavia couldn’t expect her to carry on with Tate’s side project.

Much less help her remain dead.

“The Terminator.” Nova tapped her fingers on the envelope. “Tate was dedicated to his career. But it was more than that. He truly believed in what he was doing. That he was making a difference in the world. It wasn’t just a job. It was a calling.”

“I got that about him.” Octavia nodded. A few months after he’d helped her settle into a new village, he’d begun filling her in on what he’d learned about the attack. He believed she’d been part of the plan. At first, she couldn’t grasp the thought. Why would anyone want her dead? Especially someone who had proclaimed their love for her?

But the longer she stayed dead, the more she believed Eric not only wanted her out of the picture, but something else too.

“I know you and Tate were close. I’m so sorry.” Octavia forced the tears to remain at bay.

“Now is not the time for grief.” Nova laced her fingers together and leaned across the table. “Tate was prepared for something like this to happen and he left this for you.”

“What is it?”

Nova held her stare. “Your identity is at risk. We have no idea how this happened, but Eric might know you’re alive.”

“No. That can’t be.” Octavia swallowed the bitter taste that filled her mouth. It was a combination of death and fear. She’d tasted it before. It had lingered in her throat for months after the attack. It tormented her like a nightmare lurking in the dark depths of her mind. “That would be disastrous. Even my father learning I didn’t perish in that attack would have horrible ramifications. It would cause a ripple effect that would

endanger too many people.” It was those horrors that Tate had put in her head that kept her from contacting Bellamy during this last year.

“Tate wasn’t completely sure, but he’s not going to go mess with your life.”

For years, Tate focused his research on her father. It made sense. Her father loved Eric like a son. Her dad did whatever he could to help Eric with his career. At first, it was charming, especially when she became involved with Eric.

But as time passed, it began to bother her. Strangle her. Both her father and Eric had started to belittle her goals. Her desires. Her father constantly pressured her to settle down. To pick a date for the wedding. To decide.

And he certainly didn’t want her to take another volunteer stint with the Peace Corps. They fought over it.

Sort of.

Her dad agreed a short one would be fine. But a long one? He just didn’t understand. He asked her what she was running from and once again asked why she wouldn’t set a date for her wedding.

Eric had been worse. He’d gone ballistic when she informed him of her placement. He even threatened to call off the engagement. His argument had been, how could they start a life when she was living in a third world country?

Her retort?

He was always going off on missions.

That argument didn’t go over too well, and off she went to Colombia. He begged her

to come home. He told her there were things she didn't understand and that something was happening.

However, Eric quickly changed his tune and visited her often, but it was too late and she called off the wedding. It was that shift that sent her down a fact-finding mission that left her blood cold.

In moments like this, she wanted to reach out to Bellamy.

He couldn't be part of the problem. Then again, she couldn't be sure. He was good with animals. Better with them than with people. So, if his dog had failed at finding her, she had to ask why?

She also had to ask why her father had sent Bellamy and his team after the raid. Tate specifically stated that her dad picked Bellamy and his men. Only the best for his little girl.

Well, the best had failed.

"How well do you know Lemin Basker?" Nova asked.

"Not well, but he's tight with Eric. Why?"

"I'm not sure. Tate mentioned something to me about those two before he went back to the States. He said he'd read me in when he got back. Obviously, that didn't happen."

"Lemin and Eric went to high school together. Lemin made his billions in Silicon Valley. He's a bit of a thrill seeker and loves to travel. He and Eric take trips together all the time."

“I’ll look into it.” Nova tapped her finger on the envelope. “Inside here are documents and instructions. Tate wants you to go to a location. There is a map inside. You must be there by sundown tomorrow.”

“Are you coming with me?”

Nova shook her head. “I’ve been ordered back to the United States.” She took Octavia’s hand. “Your continued safety requires that you do exactly what Tate has outlined inside that envelope. Don’t stray from Tate’s plan. Don’t question it. Your life could be at stake.” Nova squeezed her hand. “We’ll see each other again. I’m sure of it. Be safe.” She stood and disappeared into the sea of people.

A guttural sob filled Octavia’s chest.

Tate was gone.

Dead.

And in a weird way, Nova might as well be now too.

As quickly as she could, she gathered the envelope, dumped it in her bag, and raced off toward her hotel, constantly glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was following her. Every person she passed was suspect. Did they look at her sideways? Could they have possibly recognized her as Octavia Reynolds?

Was anyone still really looking for her?

Her hair was longer. Much longer. It was even much lighter from being in the sun all the time. She had a scar on her face that hadn’t been there before from where her attacker had taken a knife to her cheek.



She had burns on her shoulder where he had put out a cigar on her skin.

The assault had lasted for what seemed like hours. She honestly had no idea. But it was long enough for the man to rape her. To break her bones. To destroy her resolve.

The first year after she'd been attacked, she could barely leave the confines of the home Tate had found for her to recover in. The second year, she couldn't leave the village. It had taken nearly three years for her to feel relatively safe.

And now?

She was horrified all over again.

Once inside her hotel room, she pulled out her cell. It was an old one, but it worked. She stared at it. Who would she even call?

Bellamy.

No. As much as she knew in her heart that he couldn't have had anything to do with what happened to her, he couldn't save her now .

With shaky fingers, she dumped the contents of the envelope on the bed. It wasn't much. A packet of documents maybe ten pages thick. They were typed, but Tate had written notes on the side. She knew he had because she knew his handwriting.

There was also a note.

She lifted that and with tears in her eyes, she read it.

My Dearest O.

She blinked. O. That's what he always called her and at first it made her cry. Tate couldn't have known that's what Bellamy used to call her.

She smoothed out the note and sucked in a deep breath.

If you're reading this, it means I couldn't make the meeting and Nova came in my place. It means something bad happened to me. It means I'm most likely dead.

She gasped. Her lifeline to the realities of the world outside of Colombia was gone. It was one thing to have everyone else believe she was dead. But to have no contact to a living, breathing person from her past was something else entirely. It made it all real. It made it as though all this hiding might have been done in vain.

But it also means that I have stumbled onto something big. It's not enough yet to bring down those who set all this in motion. Or to put away those who hurt you. What you have in your hands now is some information on Eric. It's only the tip of the iceberg. But again, it's not enough. Nova will most likely be reassigned. Keeping her at my side has been a battle for a few years. Why some assholes believe women aren't cut out for undercover work is beyond me, but I digress.

I've set in motion for you to be extracted from Colombia. And O, you have to leave. I fear Eric knows you're alive. I don't know how, but it could have something to do with Lemin Basker. I'm afraid that Eric is now gunning for me. That also means he could be coming for Nova and I have to keep her safe too. She'll have her own role to play in all this and trust me, it will be confusing. I only have pieces. I'm hoping in death, I can put them together. Please, don't take this lightly. The team I'm sending for you, I trust with my life. Please, O, go to the extraction point. Give them these documents. Let them help you sort this out.

I also fear for your father.

I believe he's been a pawn in Eric's play for greed and power. However, I wouldn't necessarily go running to him. Not at first. I don't know what he knows or how deep he's in this stuff. And trust me, this shit goes deep and snakes off into different paths. Tell the team to protect your dad from a distance. They will know how to do that. They are experts. They do this kind of stuff day in and day out.

Be safe. Remember everything I taught you. Trust only the team. And Nova. No one else.

Your friend, Tate.

Olivia wiped the tears away. This was not the time to grieve. Tate wouldn't want her to spend these precious moments on that. She trusted Tate. If this was what he wanted, then this was what she'd do. She stuffed the contents back into the envelope.

Racing around, she packed what few things she'd brought and bolted from the room. She checked out and headed for the closest Taxibrousse. The extraction point was twelve hours away. Traveling at night was dangerous in these parts.

But doing it during the day could be the kiss of death.

She purchased her ticket, sat on the bench with the other locals, and hugged her backpack.

It was going to be a long night.

The realization that she was going to be headed back to the States hurled into her chest. She wasn't sure she would ever see the day. Or that she wanted to.

But she did want justice.

Not just for herself. Not anymore.

For Tate.

He was a good man and he didn't deserve to die.

Bellamy glanced at the map and simultaneously swatted a bug. And not just any bug. Damn thing was half the size of his fist. He flipping hated this country. Not because he had anything against it or the people who lived here because honestly he didn't. There was nothing inherently wrong with Colombia. However, all he could think about was what happened and how he'd failed.

Tucker yelped. More like she tried to catch one of the massive insects in her mouth. Bellamy wondered if he should have brought Roxy on this mission. But Roxy was getting old. She was a good dog. But the last time they'd been in Colombia, she hadn't performed well.

Hell, that was an understatement.

Besides, he had no idea what they were looking for and Tate hadn't said much in his encrypted bullshit.

Just that Bellamy would know it when he saw it.

What on earth did that mean?

Well, Tucker could find drugs, explosives, and people. She was a damn good dog and she needed the practice. Only, he had no idea what this mission was all about and that pissed him off.

"It's hotter than balls out," Cooper said. His dog Whiskey sat at his side, waiting for a

command.

“How far are we from the treasure?” Rusty asked. His dog, Soda, stuck her nose up in the air, sniffing at something.

“About two clicks.” Bellamy pointed down the trail. He glanced over his shoulder. They had hiked eight from where the bird had landed in the middle of freaking nowhere in a country that had changed Bellamy forever. Colombia broke his heart and stole his soul.

“I wish we knew what we were walking into,” Ethan mumbled. He wasn’t complaining. That wasn’t his style. But he did tend to get moody when he was hot and dealing with mosquitoes the size of a rat’s ass.

“According to my dad, Tate was working on a drug cartel operation not far from these parts.” Bellamy tugged at Tucker’s leash. She heeled, walking right along his side. As long as she knew she was working, she’d behave. Otherwise, who knew what she might do. And that was a problem. “But they also heard grumblings of a human trafficking ring as well. It came across my mom’s desk through the Feds a while ago. Just something for her to be on the lookout for.”

“Maybe we’ve got a bunch of kids here.” Rusty slapped the side of his neck. “Jesus. These things are bigger and suck more blood than I remember.”

“If we’ve got kids being held here, we’re going to need a bigger bird,” Ethan said. “But I guess we’ll deal with one problem at a time.” He swatted his hand, smacking his shoulder. “Crap. I missed that one.”

“Waylen’s intel didn’t suggest our asset was human, much less alive.” A litany of possible things ran through Bellamy’s mind.

But there was only one thing he hoped for.

Either she was alive or he'd find clues as to what really happened to Octavia. But why did he and his team have to come to Colombia to collect it? There were SEAL teams in the area. He knew this because they were his backup. His lifeline.

They trudged forward, dogs at their sides, weapons at the ready. Only one thing made sense. Tate found something that needed the kind of care the government couldn't handle, but an organization like the Brotherhood Protectors could. Hopefully, that meant he knew something about what had happened five years ago and it was all connected .

Wishful thinking, but Bellamy had to believe in something. It was the only thing that kept him from going crazy all these years.

He felt a little bad leaving Blake back at the chopper. But she was ex-Coast Guard and she'd seen some stuff in her day. She was the wife of a fellow Brotherhood Protector and a seasoned pro. A damn good pilot too. She'd radio if she needed backup.

Or if she saw anything coming their way.

And the SEALs weren't all that far. He hoped.

"Any chance this is a training exercise?" Rusty posed it as a question, but his sarcastic chuckle meant something else.

They had been with the Brotherhood Protectors for over a year. Their training period as agents for the organization was long past. However, their dogs could always use a good exercise.

But they didn't need to be dropped in the middle of a hostile territory for that and Hawk wouldn't do that to them anyway.

Tate was dead. Whatever happened to him—whatever he was working on—both Hawk and Hank deemed it worthy of their attention. Even if they didn't, Bellamy would stick his nose in where it didn't belong. He and Tate might not see eye to eye on many things—including Claudius—but Tate was good people. A good agent.

And then there was Nova .

Bellamy had met the up-and-coming star of the DEA. The pride and joy of Tate.

Even Bellamy's parents thought she was the cat's meow, though she was a little rough around the edges, to quote his mother.

But that didn't stop his mom from trying to fix him up with Nova a few years back. Talk about strange encounters. He couldn't call it a date because he'd been cornered when he'd met his parents in Virginia while they'd been there on business. They shoved Nova in his direction with a couple of mugs of coffee and a box of doughnuts.

Things went downhill from there.

The only things they had in common were Tate and the fact that neither one of them knew how to carry a conversation.

Although, he hadn't wanted to, so he did what he did best.

Nothing.

Silence had always been his best friend outside of Cooper, Rusty, Ethan, and the dogs. Or cats. That species had grown on him now that he had a few of them running



around his house. They were cute, cuddly, and didn't take up the whole damn bed.

Octavia would find that amusing.

Except they had a horrible habit of playing at two in the morning. And they particularly liked jumping on his face .

In the distance, Bellamy spied a makeshift hut. He raised his hand, making a fist, and stopped dead in his tracks.

His men froze.

As did their K9s.

He pointed to Cooper and waved to the far side of the hut.

Cooper nodded.

Bellamy motioned to Ethan to flank to the north and Rusty to flank to the south. He'd take the structure head-on.

No more words would need to be spoken. They'd been on similar missions before. Little to no intel. Get in. Get the asset. And get the out.

This wouldn't be any different.

He crouched in the bushes twenty paces from the hut and waited for his men to be in place. This was the sweet spot with his team. They were neither complacent nor arrogant. They just were. They knew each other like they knew themselves. Perhaps better. They each had a role and no one needed to be reminded of what that was or how to do it.

They just did.

“All right, girl. Sniff. Tell me if there’s something I need to be worried about,” he whispered. Then he gave Tucker the hand signal and released her from the leash.

He watched in awe as his little pup—well, not so little at nearly one hundred pounds—lowered her body and her head, then zigzagged back and forth. All the other dogs did the same in their respective areas.

Tucker inched closer to the front of the hut, scratching and pawing at the ground.

Drugs.

Whiskey barked twice. Same with Soda and Mojo.

Person or people.

Crap.

Rusty, Ethan, and Cooper called their dogs back with a whistle. Bellamy gave a hand single to Tucker to remain right where she was.

The hut looked old, but there were fresh footprints in the wet path. They were small. Perhaps a size seven, women’s.

Interesting.

He raised his weapon. All three of his men came into view, their guns drawn while the dogs waited patiently for their next command.

Squinting through his scope, he quickly scanned the area for insurgents.

Nothing.

While his pulse raged, his breathing remained calm.

Just another day at the office.

He blinked, focusing on the blue tarp that was used for a makeshift door, when a woman suddenly burst through it, holding a rifle, pointing it right at his chest.

Tucker barked. Twice.

But remained still.

Good dog.

“Who are you?” an all-too-familiar voice rang out. It tickled his ears and prickled his memories of years past. His breath caught. His chest tightened as if someone wrapped their arms around him and squeezed with all their might.

“Jesus,” he mumbled, releasing his finger from the trigger. “Octavia?” The jungle could play tricks on a man. He knew this firsthand. But that happened after days of dehydration and an infection from a gunshot wound.

This was definitely not the case.

Nope.

He was well nourished and had a decent rest. At least what one could call sleep on the back of a military transport plane.

“No one here by that... that...” Her eyes went wide. Shock registered in her stunning

blue eyes. Her lower lip quivered.

“Put the gun down, O. We’re not here to hurt you. We came here to get you.”  
Fucking A. Of all the things Bellamy expected to extract, she was not one of them.

He’d grieved their relationship.

And then her death .

He’d learned to cope with the realization that the only woman he’d ever loved, he’d never see again. And yet there she stood, with a flipping gun pointed at his heart.

Wasn’t that ironic?

“Nope. I’m not going to do that.” She adjusted her rifle to her shoulder, cocking her head, staring him down like a rabid dog. Or maybe a dead woman. Either one was appropriate right about now. “Leave. Or I will shoot you.”

He could tell Tucker to go lick her, because the dog knew how to do that on command. Octavia loved dogs. But she had complained that he loved them more than her sometimes.

Not true.

It was just that dogs were easier to understand than women.

Besides, he was afraid she might actually be frightened and pull the trigger.

He decided lowering his weapon might be the better option. He eyed his buddies, who held their ground, but he could tell by their dropped jaws they were as shocked as he was to see the dead rise again.

“I don’t think you’re going to kill the man Tate sent to come and bring you home.” He set his weapon at his feet and raised his hands. “Now, come on. Put the gun down. You know I would never hurt you.”

“No. You’d just leave me to die.” Slowly, the fight left her furrowed brow and she lowered her gun.

He’d deal with that statement later. Now was not the time. They had to hike back to the helicopter and get back to town.

“Give me the gun.” He inched forward and took her weapon, letting out a sigh of relief. “Come on out, boys. You all remember Octavia.”

She spun in a circle, flapping her arms like a crazy person.

He swallowed. The first thing he noticed was the nasty scar on her face. Not that she wasn’t still the most beautiful woman in the world, but a primal need to beat the crap out of the person who did that surged through his body.

So many questions.

Again, not the time.

“Well, look who rose from the dead.” Cooper was the first one to speak. “Long time no see.”

“Right back at you, Coop.” Octavia planted her hands on her hips. “Ethan. Rusty.” She nodded. “Looks like the gang’s all here.” She pointed to Tucker. “I thought you boys didn’t get into the K9 Pilot Program.”

Bellamy exchanged a glance with his buddies.

“And what would you know about that?” Rusty asked with a fair amount of disgust laced in each syllable .

“I might technically be dead, but I know things.” She glared.

“So, then you know we left the military and we’re not a part of that program,” Cooper said.

“But a different one. A better one.” Ethan puffed out his chest proudly.

“And you’ve got better dogs this time. Or at least they seem to be doing what you trained them to do,” she said.

“What does that mean?” Ethan asked.

“Yeah, I’d like to know the answer to that question.” Cooper glared.

So did Bellamy, but he didn’t want to stand here all day and get into a pissing match over it. One thing he knew for sure about Octavia, when she got something in her head, she stuck with it.

One of the many reasons she’d broken up with him in the first place.

That, and Eric.

“We can get into all that once we get back to town. Or better yet, Stateside and debrief,” Bellamy said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you fellas until we have a few things straight.” She folded her arms and tapped her toe.

“Christ, you haven’t changed,” Bellamy muttered. It was no way to talk to a woman who had been dead for the last five years, and his mother would surely have his hide, but damn, she could be a stubborn chick.

“First.” She wagged her finger. “No one can know I’m in the States, much less alive.”

“We know,” all four men said. If words could express an eye roll, then they all did it.

“Especially Eric,” she said.

Bellamy balled his fist. He wasn’t a fighting man, but no one would blame him if he threw the first punch when it came to that asshole.

“Also, my father can’t know. At least not right away. Not until whoever it is you all work for now figures out if he’s in on this shit, being used, or blackmailed. And I believe now he’s most likely in the dark. But I’m not really sure. I was up half the night reading what little Tate left for me and most of it doesn’t make sense.”

Bellamy held up his hand. Not to shut her up, but the rest of his men. When she got going, you might as well let her get it off her chest or you’d never hear the end of it.

“Third. A secret protection detail has to be arranged for my dad. Tate was adamant about that.” She arched a brow.

“That’s already in place.” Bellamy let out a very long breath. “Are we done with the demands?”

“Finally. We need to call Nova Martin before we head back to the US. ”

“How do you know Agent Martin?” Cooper asked.

“Doesn’t matter.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “There are drugs inside that hut. Not a lot. No idea how they got there. I don’t believe Tate left them for me.”

“The dogs indicated drugs,” Ethan said. “I’ll check it out.” He ducked his head into the hut and two minutes later came back holding a small bag. “Looks like we got some cocaine.” He arched a brow. “We can’t leave it out here.”

“Nope. We can’t.” Bellamy let out a long breath. “Tell me, O. When was the last time you spoke to Nova? And don’t lie to me. You know how much that pisses me off.” He had a million more questions about why Octavia even knew Nova, or how long Nova knew Octavia was alive.

But he’d deal with that later.

If he said anything now, he’d for sure say the wrong thing.

“Yesterday. She’s the one who gave me the packet of intel and the directions to get here.” Octavia narrowed her stare. Never good. “But I don’t have her number. I always communicated with Tate. Only Tate. He thought it was best to keep her on the fringe. Only bringing her around in case something happened to him.”

“I’ve got her number,” Bellamy admitted. While their coffee date had been a disaster, and they never went on another, he did take her number.

Not because he was interested.

“Why do you still have her number?” Cooper cocked his head and puffed out his chest. “I’m the one who actually took her on real dates. Not coffee and doughnuts in a lobby of a federal building.”

“I’m the one who set you up.” Bellamy sighed. “And you’re the one who said it got



too hard with never being in the same place.”

“Not exactly what happened.”

Bellamy wiggled his finger. “I’m not having this conversation with you again.”

“Nova said she was headed to the States. But she didn’t know when,” Octavia said.

“We should roll.” Ethan pointed toward the path. “We’ve got all the drugs. We can call her once we get to town and she can instruct us on what she wants us to do.”

“Just one more thing before we get going.” Bellamy really shouldn’t. It wasn’t very gentlemanly, but he couldn’t resist. He turned and pointed to his K9. “Tucker. Release and lick the lady.”

“Huh. What?” Octavia blinked.

“Better brace yourself,” Cooper said, then bent over, clutched his knees, and full-on belly laughed.

Rusty and Ethan followed.

Tucker sprinted toward Octavia with her tail wagging in the air and her butt going back and forth like an out-of-control missile. It was too funny.

Bellamy grinned as Tucker skidded to a stop but not in time. She knocked Octavia on her ass. Tucker pressed her paws on Octavia’s chest and slobbered all over her face.

“Oh my God. Get this adorable mutt off me.” Even Octavia giggled. She reached up and gave the dog’s ears a good scratch.

“That’s enough, Tucker. Come.” Bellamy snagged his leash and hooked it on his dog’s collar. “Good girl. Yeah, that’s my sweet girl.” He waved his hand. “Get your stuff and let’s haul ass.”

Octavia took Rusty’s hand and did her best to wipe the mud and dirt off her clothing, but it wasn’t worth it. She was covered in it from what looked like years of hard living.

That turned a playful moment into a sucker punch to the gut.

She raced inside her little hut and grabbed her backpack.

“Give me that.” He reached for it.

“I can carry my own, thank you.” She glanced up at him with a narrowed stare.

With a shaky finger, he traced the jagged scar that went from her temple down the side of her cheek.

She winced as if it hurt, but he doubted that. It wasn’t fresh .

He scowled. “The raid?” he asked.

“Yeah. But then you should know, you were there.”

“No. Not when the village was attacked. We came in for the rescue.” He took point and his men followed a few paces behind. This was what he loved the most about working with these guys. They knew when to get in his face and when to give him space.

This was the time for the latter.

“I know. I saw Roxy,” Octavia whispered.

He snapped his head in her direction. “Excuse me?” He knew something had happened to his dog on that mission. To all the K9s. It was a miracle that they rescued two of the Peace Corps volunteers and twenty other people on that mission.

But Roxy knew Octavia and knew her well. He’d gotten her when Octavia and he were still a couple. That damn dog had been out of her mind for months after Octavia broke up with him.

“What do you mean you saw her? We spent days looking for you. And if you knew it was her, why didn’t you call her? She would have stayed with you. Or come and gotten me.”

“She sniffed right where I was and walked right on by as if she didn’t even know I was there.” Octavia swiped at her eyes. “I was too weak to call her name. I was... I was...”

Octavia wasn’t one to show too much emotion. She prided herself on being strong and fiercely independent. One of the many qualities that he loved about the woman.

For her to even show a little in a moment like this told him a lot about what she must have experienced.

“Let’s talk about this when we’re back at the hotel and you’ve had a nice long hot shower and a decent meal.”

She nodded.

“Hey.” He squeezed her shoulder. “I should have said this sooner, but I’m damn glad you’re alive.”

“That means you actually thought I was dead.” She arched a brow. “‘Cause, you know. You went on a date with Nova.”

He sighed. “I attended your memorial. I didn’t want to believe it. I fought that reality for years. Hard. But honestly, as time passed and all the so-called sightings turned out to be false, everyone told me I had to accept it. Hell, your fiancé demanded we accept it.” He arched a brow. “Nova told me the same thing.”

“She was following Tate’s orders and for the record, Eric’s not my fiancé and he’s a big fat prick.”

“That we can agree on.”

“He always hated you.” She adjusted her pack, clutching the straps with both hands. “Thought you were a worthless, no-good Marine who was going nowhere fast.”

He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Shortly after we all left the military, I went to your final resting place to bring you daisies.”

“Aw, you remembered my favorite flower.”

“I remember a lot of things.” He tapped the center of his chest. “Anyway. I was sitting there, having a good old heart-to-heart with you and Eric strolled up. Honestly, I don’t think he was there to see you. His dad had passed away the year before and he’s buried in the same cemetery.”

“I’d like to believe he grieved for me for a hot minute.”

“Not.” Bellamy was completely and utterly disgusted by Eric’s speech at her graveside, but he wouldn’t get into that. At least not right now. “Anyway. He marched right up to me and told me I wasn’t welcome. I reminded him it was a free country. He poked me in the chest and told me to leave. Though his words were much harsher.”

“And you hate it when anyone pokes you.”

“That I do.” He nodded. “But it didn’t stop there. He called me a loser. Told me I was washed up and no one wanted to work with me or my team. He shoved me. Hard. So I punched him. Right here.” He tapped his nose. “Broke it too.”

“I bet he sued you. ”

“Nope.” Bellamy jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Cooper was there. Saw the whole thing and was smart enough to get it on video. I was provoked. All I did was defend myself.” He wagged his finger. “But I was kind enough to pay for his hospital bill, just not the plastic surgery. And he’s still an ugly asshole.”

“He’s not that gross-looking.” She turned and lowered her chin. “I do have standards.”

“I’m not even going to comment on that one.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” This should be interesting. The whole conversation was entirely strange, but at the same time, completely normal. It was as if he hadn’t cried like a baby for an entire year when he finally accepted that she could be dead.

He nearly choked on that thought.

“If you knew it was me you were coming to extract, would you have taken the assignment?”

He leaned in and kissed her cheek, totally forgetting he was in the middle of nowhere Colombia and his best friends were right behind him, watching his every move. But what were they going to do, bust his balls in this moment? Doubtful. “I would have come faster.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:48 pm*

4

Bellamy leaned against the Hummer and let out a long breath. He ran his fingers through his hair. His heart hammered in his chest.

Octavia was alive.

He squeezed his eyes tight. For as long as he could remember, he prayed Octavia hadn't suffered. That she had died a quick and painless death.

Tears stung like sandpaper.

There were no words to attach to the emotions that filled his heart. To say he was grateful didn't even come close.

However, seeing the scars and burns that touched her delicate skin blackened his soul. Revenge had always been something he desired. It lurked in the back of his mind like a sickness. No matter how much he tried to put it in a box, letting others deal with it because it wasn't his job had become impossible. Tate wouldn't take his phone calls. The few times he did respond with a random text, he begged Bellamy to let it go. To let the wheels of justice turn as they were designed.

Only Bellamy knew all too well that they worked slower than dirt and wouldn't necessarily hand down what he deemed appropriate for the crime. Even his parents told him to keep his nose out of it. That if they saw something come across their desk, they would give him what they could.

But nothing came in his direction. Or what little that did wasn't enough to lead him down the path that he knew without a doubt would bring justice to the one man he knew was responsible for what happened to Octavia.

Now, it smacked him right between the eyes.

He blinked, tapping his fingers on the screen until he found Nova's contact information. It rang three times before she finally answered.

"Bellamy? Why the heck are you calling me?"

"Are you still in Colombia?" he asked, not bothering with pleasantries. His mother would be so disappointed by his abrasive tone. However, he saw no point in hiding his disturbing emotions. Not from himself, and certainly not from someone he could toss them at in the heat of the moment.

Deserving or not.

Silence on the other end. He couldn't even hear her breathing. Not even a faint intake or a whoosh as she exhaled.

He cleared his throat. "It was my team that was sent in to get her," he said, doing his best to reel back his gut-wrenching rage. "You could have fucking told me she was alive." Obviously he couldn't keep anything in check.

"We're not having that conversation. We shouldn't be talking at all."

"I don't give a crap." He glanced over his shoulder. Blake had taken Octavia inside the hotel while the rest of his team secured the building and went about finding them transport home and safe harbor for their K9s. Finding drugs had put a damper on their original plans and Hawk had made it clear that they had to do the right thing. "Do my



parents know?”

“Jesus. Of course not,” Nova said. “And before you pummel me with a bunch of questions, I had no idea you were the team Tate had in place. He didn’t give me that information. All he did was hand me a packet to give to Octavia. That should explain why he was protecting her identity.”

“But I’m sure you had an idea it would be me.”

“Not the point,” Nova said. “It wasn’t for me to say anything. I certainly didn’t want to broach that subject with her. It was hard enough asking her to run with a packet full of intel after telling her Tate had been murdered. ”

Fucking Eric. But even those documents didn’t give him a decent handle on everything. All it did was tell his mind and heart that after all these years, he’d been right. Eric had indeed been behind the attack on Octavia’s village. That he had to have been the one to mess with his team’s K9s’ ability to do what they’d been trained to do.

However, it didn’t give him the why.

Only pieces.

Conspiracy theories.

Things that now he had to prove.

Shit he should have been doing for the last five years.

“What do you know about this Lemin character?” Bellamy asked.

“He’s a new lead and Tate didn’t tell me shit,” Nova said. “But Octavia might know more. She knows Lemin.”

Bellamy didn’t like the sound of that. “When did Tate pull you into his little fold of lies?” he asked. Before he told Nova what Octavia had found, he wanted some solid answers on why he’d been left in the dark. Nova owed him that.

“A couple of months before our doughnut encounter and before you go and list a litany of reasons why you believe I should have told you, I couldn’t.”

“Bullshit. Now explain to me why Tate chose to keep Octavia hidden all these years. Why he felt the need to pull you in. And don’t you dare lie to me.”

“Seriously? Come on. I think it’s obvious why Octavia stayed dead and it wasn’t just Tate’s idea. She was as much a part of that plan as he was. Maybe more. Did you even read the documents that Tate left with her?”

“I skimmed them,” Bellamy said. He wished he had a hard time believing that Octavia hadn’t come to him with her suspicions regarding missing girls and boys in Colombia. But he’d made it difficult for them to carry on a civilized conversation after she’d gotten engaged to Eric. It was one thing for them to break up. He understood that, though he always believed they would get back together. However, for her to cozy up next to Eric Moody had left Bellamy a broken man. “Why didn’t you and Tate take her concerns to someone else? That’s not really the DEA’s thing.”

“Before the raid, Tate did. Of course, that was long before I knew anything and to be honest, Tate told me as little as he could. If anyone found out what he was doing, he would have lost his job and he didn’t want me to compromise mine,” Nova said. “He passed off what he knew to the proper authorities in Colombia. People he knew and trusted. It wasn’t until a couple of missing girls carrying drugs turned up in the United States that it became a thing. But you know how that goes. You’ve got the

DEA, Homeland, the FBI, and even ICE involved in the investigation. Lots of chest-pounding, pissing contests, and bureaucratic red fucking tape.”

Oh, Bellamy knew the drill. It was one of the reasons he didn’t follow in his parents’ footsteps. It didn’t matter how smart Bellamy proved to be. He couldn’t care less about his so-called genius IQ. While his aptitude for math, science, computers, and other things served him well, common sense generally prevailed in any given situation.

And you didn’t need to be book smart to have that.

“After Octavia’s village was blown to smithereens and he’d learned she hadn’t been found, he went nuts,” Nova said.

“Yeah. I know.” Bellamy inhaled sharply and let it out with a big swish. That phone call from Tate had been painful. He’d blamed Bellamy and his team and the really hard part about that was Bellamy blamed himself.

Still did.

“How long after the raid did he find her?” Bellamy asked, resenting the roller-coaster ride his emotions had taken him on. He prided himself on being a logical and levelheaded man.

But not today.

He went from zero to sixty and back again without batting an eyelash.

“About two weeks. And circling back to what you really want to know, he only brought me in because he needed two things. He needed someone he could trust to cover for him while he was working on figuring out all this stuff for Octavia. And

two, he wanted someone who would do exactly what he asked if something ever happened to him. I was that girl.”

“I’m sorry, Nova. I know you cared about Tate a great deal.”

“I did. He was a good man and he was doing what he could to find out who attacked Octavia, her village, and why. But it’s hard when the Colombian government made arrests. That they have stated it was a drug turf war and our government has accepted that.”

“You’ve worked with Tate for a while now and know Colombia well. Was her village used for the storage of drugs? Did they protect drug lords there? Because it doesn’t make sense that the Peace Corps would drop three volunteers there if there were even the slightest of rumors of something like that going on.”

“The whole country is unstable. Cocaine is big business,” Nova said. “However, Octavia was more concerned with missing young men and women, which we do know was connected to the push of drugs into the United States. That’s how Tate was able to pull the two things together. He told me two weeks before he died that he was onto something big. Something that wasn’t necessarily our turf but had to do with some of the drugs that were being run into our country.”

“Tate didn’t go into great detail about that in those documents. Only that he was working on the proof that Eric was behind it all.”

“Tate has never been able to connect Eric to cocaine and trust me, we’ve both tried. But when Tate headed back to the States right before he died, he was excited and paranoid about something.”

“What was the reason for his trip back?”

“He had meetings with the brass in Virginia,” Nova said. “But he took a couple of personal days after to deal with whatever lead he was chasing that had to do with Octavia and either the raid or the missing boys and girls.”

“And Tate didn’t tell you what that was all about?”

“I’m on a need-to-know basis and he didn’t believe I needed to know,” Nova said. “But he did mention Lemin Basker. However, he’s not on any radar that I can find. Sure, he’s slimy when it comes to his business dealings. But he’s not on our radar and I called a friend of mine with the FBI. They’ve looked into him for white-collar crimes. He’s paid a shit ton of fines, but that’s all I know. Swear to God.”

Bellamy wasn’t so sure if he believed that or not. In all the years he’d known and worked with Cooper, he’d never kept intel from that man. Same went for Rusty and Ethan. Knowledge was power. And in the field, they needed to have each other’s backs. If they didn’t possess the same information, someone always ended up dead. “Are you working the same cases as Tate was?”

“I’m not going to answer that question,” Nova said.

That told Bellamy she more than likely had her fingers in the pot but was choosing to keep her trap shut for a variety of reasons.

He’d like to believe her intentions were to keep Octavia safe. He might not know Nova well, but Tate had trusted her and for whatever reason, he did trust Tate.

Even in death.

And he trusted his parents, who always sung Nova’s praises, but he was going to have to call his folks sooner rather than later. He’d most likely have to lie to them about Octavia and that didn’t settle well in his gut.

“Well, if you were off the case, I’m pulling you back in,” Bellamy said.

“What does that mean?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn’t want to be angry with Nova. But he needed to be pissed at someone and Tate was dead. Seemed unfair to channel his rage at someone who couldn’t fight back .

“What happened?” Nova asked. “Is she okay?”

“She’s not the problem.” Jesus, he wanted to throttle Nova and that wasn’t a good feeling. He liked Nova. He really did. Not enough to date her, but enough to believe she might be good enough for Cooper.

And that meant something.

“When we got to the extraction location, she informed us there were a couple of bundles of cocaine. We brought them back to town. We didn’t want to leave them out there.”

“Crap,” Nova muttered. “How many bundles?”

“Two.”

“How far are you from Bogata?”

“About an hour. Octavia said you’d know the location.”

“All right. I’ll have to bring another agent with me, so when I get there, make sure our mutual friend is hidden. Her identity outside of this circle can’t be exposed. Not even to your parents,” Nova said.

“The only people you’ll see are Cooper, Ethan, and Rusty.”

“What about you? We’ll need to speak with you.”

“Nope. You’ll deal with my men.”

“Bellamy. That isn’t how this works,” Nova said. “It’s one thing for us to cover up a woman who has been officially ruled dead. But it’s something entirely different for you to pull the vanishing act.”

“Don’t care. You don’t want me saying or doing something we both might regret and I’m in one hell of a foul mood. Besides, someone needs to guard and protect Octavia. That’s me,” Bellamy said. “Cooper will send you a false mission statement with our orders for being there. We make this clean. You get their statements, we give you the drugs, we fly out of this godforsaken country in the middle of the night.”

“How are you going... never mind. I don’t want to know,” Nova said. “Be safe and give my best to our friend.”

Bellamy ended the call and eyed Cooper. He waved him over while he did his best to toss his frustration across the street.

“The perimeter’s secure. Ethan found a place for the K9s, but someone will need to stay with them until it’s time to bug out. Blake secured a private plane which is being piloted by someone through the Brotherhood Protectors. Wheels up at zero two hundred. Rusty, Blake, and I will rotate shifts,” Cooper said. “Everything’s in place.”

“Good.” Bellamy nodded. “Nova will be here in a few hours. I need you to handle her, the drugs, and whatever paperwork is necessary to load that shit off.”

Cooper arched a brow .

“Just do it. I can’t deal with her right now.”

“Whatever you say.” Cooper squeezed his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Bellamy glanced toward the sky. He remembered the crushing pain in his chest when he loaded up his team and flew out of this country five years ago—without Octavia. Without knowing what happened.

For an entire year, he’d been haunted by sleepless nights and then came the final blow.

Acceptance.

That had nearly killed Bellamy.

“I have no idea what I am,” he admitted.

“Dude, she’s vertical. Focus on that fact. Don’t get hung up on who kept that from you, including her. It’s a lot to process and I know how your brain works. It’s like a current of electricity snaking through a wire from one power source to the next, expanding and then splintering off in a million directions. Narrow it all down to the job we’ve been hired to do.”

“Only, we don’t know exactly what that is outside of protecting her from Eric and don’t go and tell me we don’t know for sure that’s who’s behind this.” Bellamy wiggled his fingers. “That man has been a thorn in my side since the day we met. He set his sights on Octavia and the second she and I called it quits—hell, before that—he was doing whatever he could to sweep her off her feet. I didn’t believe for one second he stood a chance. Boy, was I wrong.”

Cooper leaned against the Hummer, folded his arms, and stared at his feet. “You and



Octavia never lacked for loving each other. I don't believe for one second that has ever changed."

Bellamy snorted. "She was engaged to another man. To Eric fucking Moody of all people." He scanned the streets, making note of the people and cars that passed. It wasn't a huge town, but it was more populated than most, especially being so close to the capital. That was good and bad. Good because it made it easier for them to blend in.

Bad because it made it easier for the bad guys to do the same.

But he didn't do it because he was concerned for their safety. He had good men taking care of that. He did it because if he didn't, he'd lose his ever-loving mind. Cooper was right about how his brain worked. It was like an algorithm that got hung up in a never-ending loop. He couldn't afford to go through that cycle.

"Not even the point," Cooper said. "Sometimes love isn't enough. You kind of have to be in the same place for more than a month to make a relationship work. Octavia was never going to ask you to give up being a Marine Raider and you sure as hell weren't going to suggest she stop what she was doing. At least not eight years ago when the two of you decided together to take a break."

Bellamy blew out a puff of air. The only problem with that logic was that he'd always believed their breakup was temporary. He'd planned for it. He'd given her the space that he believed she needed. However, he wholeheartedly believed they would be in each other's arms again.

Until it didn't happen.

"It kills me that Eric was so quick to believe she was dead. I thought her father was going to rip out his tonsils after that stupid speech he gave at her memorial. Even

Claudius held out hope for a couple of years. My folks told me he even sent in a team from an organization similar to the Brotherhood Protectors to search for her.”

“I remember that. The Aegis Network, right?”

Bellamy nodded. “I spoke with them. The Sarich brothers. All four of them went in. Dylan, Logan, Nick, and Ramey. Good men. They are based in Orlando. They even spoke with Tate and Nova. Both of them gave the team bogus intel, which pisses me off.” He pushed from the SUV. “I don’t understand why keeping her dead in this shithole was the better option.”

“Come on. If Eric is behind this, not only does that make him a traitor to his country, but that means he tried to kill her. The question we need to ask ourselves is why? What does she know? Or what does he think she knows? And something else you need to consider is, when did she or even Tate suspect Eric?”

“That packet doesn’t give us much other than Eric spent a lot of time in this country and Tate wondered if his buddy Lemin had anything to do with it. But so much of it all can be explained away. Like when he was here, he could easily say he was visiting his fiancée. Planning a wedding.” Bellamy swallowed the bile that smacked the back of his throat. “Eric wasn’t going on special ops anymore. He hasn’t done that in a few years. His role was in the planning and execution of ops with joint forces. He worked intelligence. The only connection I see is some crossover with the DEA and Tate’s cases.”

“Tate clearly stated he thought there was a correlation between the missing young men and women that Octavia reported and some of the drug lords, which Tate did prove. And Tate did have a list of missing persons throughout the country that could be associated with a human trafficking ring.”

“Okay. But what does that have to do with Eric? None of the units he oversees had

anything to do with that. Not even his precious K9 Pilot Program.”

“Maybe not, but he did deny Tate K9 support?” Cooper wagged his finger. “Twice. We need to find out why Tate was denied.”

“That’s going to be easier said than done.” Bellamy rubbed the back of his neck. “I can ask my parents. They will look into it without asking me too many questions. But the person who would have that intel at their fingertips, besides Eric, is Claudius.”

“When was the last time you had a conversation with him?”

“A couple of months ago,” Bellamy admitted. “He calls me every so often. Usually around the holidays. Her birthday. Or anytime he’s had one or two too many and feels like reminiscing. I humor the man. It’s not like we ever had a bad relationship. His only beef with me was that I never pushed her to give up long stints of volunteer work. Eric did, which ultimately pushed her right back into a long assignment with the Peace Corps.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I spoke with Octavia right before she came here.” Bellamy had heard the strain in her voice. He’d hated himself for being giddy over the possibility that she could be done with Eric. But he had enough self-respect not to sabotage her relationship. He wasn’t that guy. “Both her dad and Eric were pushing her to stop spending months in places like this. She had no intention of doing that anytime soon. She figured she could take short-term assignments. Or help out other ways, but she wasn’t giving it up altogether.” Bellamy couldn’t believe anyone would even demand that of Octavia.

Sure, he could see having a discussion about it. Hell, they actually did. They talked about what their future looked like, but they enjoyed their careers too much. It was

one of the reasons they broke up. There was so much they each wanted to do within their careers and it was putting a strain on their relationship. They loved each other enough to let the other flourish.

Or maybe he'd been kidding himself all these years.

Bellamy glanced at his watch. "I better go check on her. Text me after you've dealt with Nova."

"That should be interesting."

"Just keep your dick in your pants." Bellamy laughed.

"I could say the same thing to you."

5

Octavia wrapped herself in a towel and stared into the mirror. With a tentative finger, she traced the scar from her temple down the side of her cheek. She could still feel the cold metal cut her skin and the warm blood trickle down her face.

It hadn't stopped her from fighting. She kicked, screamed, and dug her nails into the man's flesh. She even bit his biceps, which cost her a hard smack across the face.

Tears burned the corners of her eyes. She couldn't think about that moment without crying. At some point during the attack, her head hit a rock or something hard on the ground, and everything went fuzzy. Her memory faded in and out as if she'd lost consciousness.

Maybe she did .

But she'd never forget him tearing at her clothes.

Or how he called her horrible names in Spanish as he raped her. His accent wasn't thick, and she couldn't see him as he wore a mask.

But she knew. How could she not?

For the first year, she tried to forget. She didn't even tell Tate. But as time passed and the reality of what had truly happened sank in, she had no choice.

When her attacker was done, he kicked, spit on her, stabbed her in the stomach,

twisted the blade until she screamed, and left her to die.

Octavia sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she pushed those memories back into a corner of her mind. She no longer resented the memories. Nor did she fear them. They reminded her that what happened in the village that day was personal. It had taken her a while to believe that conclusion. Somehow, it was easier to live with when it was a random act of violence. That she'd somehow been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Not an intended target.

But the more Tate dug, the more he knew her death was part of the plan.

She ran her fingers through her wet hair and stepped out of the bathroom. She gasped as she stared at Bellamy, all six foot something of him leaning against the wall by the door with his phone in his hands. He glanced up and cocked a sexy brow.

“Jesus, you scared me.” She glanced down, making sure she was all covered up.

“Sorry about that.” He tucked his cell in his back pocket. “Did you have a nice shower?”

“It wasn’t the worst.” She lifted her clothes from the bed. “Do you mind?”

“I’ve seen you naked.” He winked. “As a matter of fact, I believe I was the first man who ever saw you naked.”

“Not the point.” She glared, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. Before the attack, she’d never been modest. But after? Well, she could barely stand to be naked in her own skin.

He pushed from the wall and closed the gap. Reaching out, he cupped her face, fanning his thumb across her scar. His gaze dropped to her shoulder, where he pressed his lips to the burns on her skin where the man had put out a cigar. “What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He cupped her chin, his lips drawn into a tight line.

She’d seen that look before. It was a combination of pure rage and powerful love all in one stare. She had never questioned Bellamy’s love. Not even when she ended their relationship.

And it was she who made the decision that it was over. It had to be. He was never going to change. Not even when their life had been altered by tragedy. She understood that about him, even if he didn’t understand that about himself. He could believe that they called it quits because they both needed time, but in reality, Bellamy struggled to make real connections with human beings.

Sure, he loved, and he loved her with his whole soul.

But he could never truly comprehend how he related to people. It was strange because he could read people better than anyone she knew. However, he couldn’t connect the dots where he was concerned. He believed all they needed was a little more time to battle on in their careers.

And maybe a little space to deal with the pains that life had thrown at them.

What he failed to understand was relationships didn’t work that way. When she tried to talk with him about their future, he was the one who put the brakes on. He told her he wouldn’t be the guy who asked her to give up her dreams. He wanted to support

her and she loved him for that.

But her dreams—at the time—included him.

Until they didn't.

“It matters to me,” he said.

She let out a long breath. She'd have to give him something. But she wasn't sure giving him the whole story would be a good idea. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. “You read what Tate put in that document. I was left for dead. That wasn't figurative. It was literal.”

“I'm going to make sure whoever did this to you pays.” He kissed her. It was soft and gentle at first. Just a brush of the lips over her mouth. Nothing to write home about. But as he wrapped his arms around her body, he deepened the kiss and she allowed herself to get lost in the moment.

Lost in the past.

Every stroke of his tongue reminded her of their time together. Of their unwavering love.

And she still loved him.

Always had and suspected she'd never stop.

She pressed her hand on the center of his chest. “Bellamy,” she whispered.

He blinked, taking a step back. He ran his thumb across her lower lip and sighed. “Put some clothes on, and then I need to ask you a few questions.” Turning, he



strolled toward the window. If one could call it that considering it was streaked with years of dirt and grime. He palmed the wall with one hand and planted the other on his hip.

As quickly as she could, she shed the towel and dressed in the clean clothes she'd purchased at the shop down the street. She could only imagine the things that ran through his mind and she certainly didn't look forward to the conversation. "You can turn around. "

He pulled the chair from the small table, turned it, and then straddled it. Bellamy had never been an easy read. He didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve. While he could be quick to anger, and he often easily forgave, he wasn't the kind of man who one could tell at a glance what he was thinking.

Not even her and she knew him better than anyone.

At least she used to.

She fluffed a pillow and curled up on the bed, which sagged in the middle. "What do you want to know?"

He twisted his body, snagging the stack of papers that Tate had left for her and thumbed through them, before tossing them back on the table. "Let's start with why Tate and Nova were the only ones who could know you were alive. And since we're on that subject, why did you stay in this country after everything that happened? There are safe houses in the United States. There are places that Tate could have taken you. You kept yourself in harm's way... for what? Why would you do that?"

"I never planned on staying here for five years, much less forcing the world to believe I was dead that long."

“But you did and it took years before your father accepted it. Do you have any idea what you’ve put him through?”

“Don’t.” She shook her head. She could only imagine the pain her father suffered believing his only child had died. And worse, not knowing what had happened to her, or that it could have possibly been at the hands of someone he once trusted. Or maybe still did.

She knew Eric was still working under her father’s charge, and she had no idea what that meant. Tate assured her that her dad’s hands were relatively clean.

Whatever that meant.

“You have no idea what it’s been like for me. What I’ve gone through and it’s been hell.” She held up her hand. “When Tate first found me, he begged me to let him take me back to the States. To a decent hospital. But I wouldn’t let him. And after I told him what I saw during the attack on the village, he agreed that it was best that I stay missing until we learned more.”

“All right. What did you see?”

God, this was the part she resented about Bellamy. He could be so damned detached about stuff it made her nuts.

“Americans.” She glared. “They tried to disguise themselves and blend in with the local drug cartel angle, but they were Americans. I could tell by their accents. By the way they carried themselves. Tate did what he could to follow up on the investigation, but the local government blamed it all on a turf war between drug lords. It was utter bullshit and Tate knew it. The DEA gave him some wiggle room because of what he was working on and the missing girls and boys that were being used as mules who were found in the US, but at the end of the day, the situation was closed

and our government walked away.”

Bellamy pointed to the papers. “That took fifteen months. Why didn’t you reach out to me?”

She cocked her head. “Seriously? You actually have to ask me that question.”

“I get I said some things I shouldn’t have about your fiancé.”

“That’s an understatement,” she muttered. “But at that time, you were still in the Marines. What were you going to do? Not to mention, you have a wicked temper when it comes to Eric. You would have gone off and done something stupid.”

“So, you believe Eric is behind this.” Bellamy arched a brow. “Why? And when did you start heading down that road? I also want to know about Lemin and what he might have to do with this.”

“I don’t know anything about Lemin other than he’s good friends with Eric. Whatever Tate learned, it’s new and he didn’t share it with me. This is the first I’m learning of it.” If she told Bellamy the truth, he was going to put his fist through a wall. If she didn’t, he would find out eventually, and he’d do something even worse. “But I do know Lemin and he’s much like Eric. As in he believes he can pretty much do whatever he wants because he has money.”

“I’ll have to do some digging on him. For now, let’s stick with what you know about Eric and his connections to the attack,” Bellamy said. He was like a dog with a bone and he wasn’t going to let this go.

She was backed into a corner and she was going to have to tell him whether she liked it or not. “Things with me and Eric were difficult when I came here.”

“I remember.” Bellamy nodded. “You mentioned he demanded you pull out and set a wedding date. You threatened to extend your stay if he didn’t stop pressuring you.” If she wasn’t mistaken, he cracked a smile. “Eric should have known you don’t take ultimatums well.”

“No. I don’t. But it wasn’t that so much that pissed me off. It was that it wasn’t even a discussion. It was that I was the little woman and I was to do as I was told.”

“He really doesn’t know you very well.”

“Neither do you.” She pursed her lips. “You thought letting me go was the answer, and it wasn’t. You ended up pushing me into the arms of another man.”

He tapped the center of his chest. “That hurt and was not my intention.”

“Well, it’s what happened. But that’s not part of this discussion.” She let out a long breath. “The first six months I was here, Eric came to visit. A lot. At first, I thought it was sweet. I thought he was trying to accept me and what I wanted to do with my life. But then it became stifling and honestly, weird. There were times I felt like he wasn’t even here to see me, even though he had no official reason for being in the country. I didn’t put it together until after the attack. But I had asked him to look into two missing young girls. He said he would. Every time I asked him about it, he told me that if he learned anything, he’d let me know. One of those girls was found murdered near the US border right before the attack. I confronted him on it and all he had to say was that the government was handling it and that he didn’t tell me because he hadn’t had the chance. But she was running drugs for a cartel and she wasn’t missing. But I don’t believe that.”

“What do you believe?”

“Tate thought they were being forced into running drugs. But his connections inside

the drug cartel have only found a couple mules. Some not even on my list. Most he hasn't been able to tie to Eric, but we know he's involved."

"Did you believe that before the attack? Or is this something that's come out of the research that you, Tate, and Nova have been doing?"

"I had suspicions before," she said. "But because I was left for dead, we have to wonder if the attack was to get me to shut up."

Abruptly, Bellamy stood, knocking over the chair. "What you're trying to tell me is that the attack on the village was more about killing you than anything else."

She nodded, sucking back a sob. "The Peace Corps had already put us on a no-travel-at-night ban, which isn't uncommon for this region. But if they suspected, or if there had been any chatter about a pissing match between drug lords, they would have pulled us so fast it would have made our heads spin. Even faster if our military had caught wind of something and Tate said there was nothing. Not a single rumor anywhere. Not back in the States and not on the ground. Add in that I know some of those men were Americans, well, you tell me what to think?"

He raked his fingers through his hair. "You told me earlier that you saw Roxy and she walked right on by."

"That's right."

"Roxy knows you and I had a shirt of yours. She had your scent." Bellamy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Someone messed with every single dog on that rescue. None of them were doing what they were trained to do. And Eric was there. He was always right there in my damn face. How did he get in-country so fast? He was there before your father."

“I can’t answer that, but we both know Eric’s funds are practically unlimited. However, why would he mess with the dogs? He loves dogs. He’d been talking about that military joint K9 Pilot Program for years.”

“I have no idea, especially when his fiancée was missing and he blamed me for not finding you.”

“You should know that when I went missing, we were no longer engaged,” she said just above a whisper. “I’d broken up with him a few months prior.”

Bellamy snapped his gaze in her direction. “Excuse me?”

“I called it off because he wanted me to be something I’m not and I wasn’t in love with him anymore.” Hell, she wasn’t sure she’d ever been in love with Eric. He’d been the polar opposite of Bellamy, and that had been exciting.

At first.

Eric wined and dined her. He bought her expensive presents. Treated her like a princess.

It’s not that Bellamy didn’t treat her well, because he did. Bellamy respected her and gave her whatever she wanted. But he never went out of his way to show her that he cared. Eric would buy her a tennis bracelet for no reason—or at least that’s how she first perceived it.

Now she knew better.

All Eric did was bribe her with gifts. As if that’s all he knew how to do .

Eric had no depth.

“According to that document over there, Tate believes Eric orchestrated the raid on the village to cover up something. But he never comes out and says human trafficking. He hints at it. He lays out a blueprint for it and gave me a name of someone who used to work for the FBI to follow up with. Someone I’ve actually met. Why are we still being so secretive about all this? Tate’s dead. He died, I believe, because of whatever he uncovered. I can’t do this alone. I might have my men and the backing of one of the best organizations I’ve ever worked for, but Jesus, Octavia, this is the big leagues.” He sat on the corner of the bed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing can be proven and Tate didn’t even know this right away because I wasn’t sure. I’m still not entirely sure.” But the more she allowed her mind to drift back to that moment, to visualize the sounds, the smells, the touch of that disgusting man.

She knew.

“Octavia.” Bellamy scooted closer, taking her hand. “I can’t help solve this problem unless you arm me with every detail, proven or not. Even a theory can help me discern through all the weeds and muck until we find the right answers and get justice.”

She closed her eyes. She couldn’t bear to look at the man she still loved with her entire being. “You asked how Eric could have gotten there so quick. Well, I believe it’s because he was already in-country.”

“Look at me,” Bellamy commanded.

She blinked.

He cupped her chin. “Why do you think that?”

“I can’t be sure. My memory of that day is clouded. I was beaten so badly. I had a

concussion, and when Tate found me, he said I was unconscious for days. He said I was close to death.”

“Not the point, O. Now tell me.”

“Eric,” she whispered and swallowed a guttural sob. “I think it was Eric.”



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:48 pm*

6

“M otherfucking asshole.” Bellamy bolted from the bed. “I’m going to kill him with my bare hands.” He heaved in a deep breath. It burned his lungs. He’d never liked Eric. That was a given. And it wasn’t just about Octavia, although that was a big part of it.

But Eric was an arrogant dick who thought his shit didn’t stink. And he was dangerous in the field. He thought only about himself.

Not his men.

And certainly not the K9s. Octavia thought he loved animals. That was a farce. He wanted that pilot program because it was something that Bellamy and her father believed in. It was a way to get in her good graces.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

“I’m guessing,” Octavia said. “I could be wrong. The man who attacked me spoke in Spanish. Wore a mask. I couldn’t make out his features and he hit me over the head first. I was seeing stars right off the bat.”

“Would you stop making excuses for that man.” Bellamy gripped the door handle, ripping it open. Without glancing over his shoulder, he stepped into the hallway and slammed the door shut. It rattled right along with his insides.

His heart pounded in his chest so hard it hurt. His blood roared through his veins, and

he couldn't see straight. He wanted to hit something. Anything.

The door squeaked open and Octavia stuck her head out. "Bellamy?—"

"I need a damn minute, O." He paced up and down the corridor. The hot, thick air clung to his pores. Visions of Eric putting his hands on her filled his brain. He tried to stop his mind from going there. From watching Eric hit, cut, and do other unspeakable things to his precious Octavia.

But he couldn't stop it. It was like a horror movie that played over and over again.

"Bellamy," Octavia's sweet voice cut through the fuzzy haze. She rested her hand on his shoulder. Her touch was warm and gentle. "Please. Come back inside the room." She held his gaze and begged with her big blue eyes. "I promise you I'm not covering for him. I'm only trying to keep you from flying off and killing him. I will tell you what I know and what I believe. But you have to keep that temper of yours in check. Can you do that?"

"I honestly don't know." He palmed her cheek. The side with the scar. For whatever reason, he felt the need to cover it up. Or maybe to shield her—or him—from the pain it represented. He inhaled sharply, filling his lungs with her sweet coconut and strawberry scent, hoping it would soothe his aching soul. "Eric's part of the reason me and the boys left the military. When I had to sit across from him during a review board about a K9 Pilot?—"

"Tate told me." She pressed her finger across his lips. "Come on. Let's finish this conversation inside the room." She tugged at his arm, dragging him across the hallway.

He followed, wishing the room had come with a mini bar, because he could use a straight shot of tequila right about now.

“When Tate found me, I couldn’t even speak of what happened. I was terrified. All he could do was find a safe place for me to heal and that wasn’t going to be in the States. Not until he had a better idea about what happened because that first six months or so, he didn’t even trust you.” She leaned against the table and folded her arms. “I told him about Roxy and because that didn’t make sense, he had to wonder who the players were.”

Bellamy shouldn’t be pissed. He’d do the same thing in Tate’s shoes. “This is all old news and not what I want to know. What I need to know.” He let out a long breath. “Why didn’t you go after Eric if he’s the one who tried to kill you?”

“It’s not that simple and you know it.” She pointed toward the bed. “If you can sit and be quiet, I’ll continue.”

He knew better than to argue. So he sat, closed his mouth, and nodded.

“While I know it was Eric who attacked me, we can’t prove anything. Trust me, Tate and I have tried to place him in that village. In Colombia. Or even anywhere in South America. But we couldn’t. Not even his family private jet came here that week. It didn’t take off until shortly after the attack.”

Bellamy opened his mouth, but she wagged her finger.

“The first year after the attack, it was all about me healing. About getting my strength back. We didn’t even discuss what happened. I couldn’t. Every time Tate brought it up, I’d curl up in a ball and freak out.”

“O, I’m so sorry.” He swallowed the thick lump that had formed in his throat. He’d seen his fair share of death and destruction. With every failed mission came nightmares. He wasn’t the kind of man who was too proud to seek out a therapist.

But he didn't discuss that with anyone other than the person he paid to listen to his troubles and occasionally Octavia .

However, there he sat, a selfish man, not comforting the woman who meant more to him than life.

He leaned in, brushing his lips over hers softly. "I wish I could have been there for you, and I promise you, I will make him pay for what he's done."

She nodded. "It took a while, but slowly, I began to open up. Tate didn't know who to trust. He didn't want to believe you or my dad could be involved, but everything was so suspicious. After the first year, he was able to weed you out of the mix. My dad's been more complicated because of how closely he's worked with Eric."

"I'm aware and unfortunately, it doesn't look good." He held up his hand. "On paper. But I know your dad. He loves you and he wouldn't go along with something like this. Not willingly. Whatever Eric has done, he's flown it so far under the radar that I'm sure your dad didn't see it coming."

"My dad pulled Eric in under his wing when we were still in high school. He had big plans for Eric, but Eric frequently disappointed my father. I do know this because I'd often hear the strain in my dad's voice. He never came out and said it, but sometimes I would hear hushed arguments between them after Eric made decisions I know my father didn't agree with."

That was news to Bellamy. "I'm going to need you to elaborate on that because I've always thought Claudius looked at Eric as if he could do no wrong."

Octavia snorted. "What my dad saw was ambition. Unfortunately, he always thought he could tame Eric's ego. And for a while, perhaps he did, especially when we first started dating."

Heat filled Bellamy's veins.

"Eric climbed the ladder quickly. He didn't have too many stains on his active duty military career or working with my dad at National Clandestine Services. He was a real go-getter. That's what my dad did like, but Eric could be really arrogant at times and he struggled to keep that in check. He pissed off a lot of people once he hit a certain level. He started taking control. Making decisions by himself where he should have sought counsel."

"I always thought the strain between your dad and Eric was caused by your death." Bellamy ran a hand over his mouth. "I didn't realize it started before and I've had many conversations with Claudius. I'm a little annoyed he didn't say anything to me." He took her hands, rubbing his thumbs gently over her soft skin.

"He wouldn't because you'd do what you always do and that's get in Eric's face."

"I probably would have," Bellamy agreed. "Eric is a greedy, self-absorbed asshole who craves power. He gets off on it. I mean, when he got to tell me and the boys we weren't good enough for the K9 Pilot Program, he was giddy with joy."

"That's because he hates you."

"Why? Outside of having a past relationship with you, I've never done anything to him."

"He always felt like he was in competition with you. Both with me and my father."

Bellamy laughed. "That's ridiculous. While I got along with your dad, he always preferred Eric."

"Not true. My dad often compared Eric to you in private. How humble you are. He'd

constantly tell Eric that your reserved personality served you well and how Eric should check his ego at the door like you often do.” Octavia rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m tired and we’re talking in circles.”

He shifted, pulling back the covers. “We only have a few hours before we hit the road. Why don’t you get some sleep.”

“Bellamy?” She glanced up with wide eyes. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“I wasn’t planning on leaving.” He pulled her close to his chest, wrapped his arm around her body, and kissed her temple. Staring at the ceiling fan, he watched it swirl above his head. “Close your eyes and try to rest.”

“I’ve missed you.” She draped her leg over his thighs.

She still fit perfectly. It was like they’d never separated. “I swear, O, you were the first thing I thought about when I woke up in the morning and the last thing before I closed my eyes. Every single day for five years.” He tilted her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “It was hard when we broke up. Even harder when I learned you were with Eric and accepted his proposal. But at least I could see you. Knew you were doing okay. These last five years were pure hell.”

She hugged him tight. “I can’t imagine what that’s been like for you. For my dad. I at least got reports about your life from Tate.”

Bellamy chuckled. “I’m a glutton for punishment. What did Tate tell you?”

She reached inside his shirt, ran her hand across his chest, and fingered his scar. “He told me about the time you got shot and spent a week in the hospital.”

“That wasn’t fun.”

“He mentioned some redhead who came to visit all the time.” She tilted her chin.  
“Who was that?”

“No one who lasted very long.” A pang of guilt tickled his heart. “No one ever lasted.”

“And why was that?”

He gazed into her deep blue eyes. Ever since he’d met Octavia, he found himself getting lost in her stare. She could captivate him with a glance. It was easy to fall in love with her and if he was being honest with himself, he’d been in love with her since middle school. “I believe that one broke up with me because there wasn’t enough room in the bed for her and I refused to make Roxy sleep somewhere else.” He batted Octavia’s nose. “But I’ve developed a love for cats, so I’ve got a few of them now too. It does get a bit crowded and you were right about me. I make connections with animals better than I do people.”

“I said that to hurt you.” A tear dripped from the corner of her eye and rolled down her sweet cheek.

He collected it with his thumb. “Why are you crying?”

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“For now, you’re going to stay with me on Big Island in Hawaii while me and my team figure out the breadcrumbs that Tate left behind.” He tucked her head back into the cradle of his shoulder and held her tight. For five years she’d been shielded from the place she’d called home. From her family and friends. It had to have been so lonely. While she’d been used to being on her own—and Octavia had been the kind of woman who could stand on her own two feet—it had to have been so isolating. He couldn’t imagine what it had been like to sit and wait for someone to bring

information, wondering if someday he might not show.

“So, that means I get the bed with all the animals and you’re getting the sofa.”

He laughed. Leave it to her to know precisely the right moment to lighten the mood. “You might change your mind after one night.”

“I might ask you to join me,” she whispered.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled her fresh scent, ignoring both her statement and the thick humid air. He wouldn’t be able to deny her anything if he tried.

It had been a long time since Octavia had been in the arms of a man. Even longer to have felt safe in them.

But this was Bellamy.

Unlike Eric, he’d never betrayed her trust, even though for a brief moment in time she’d believed he had. He’d never lied. When he couldn’t tell her something because of his job, he was upfront about that, and she understood. She lived that life with her father.

Eric made it weird. It was as if he were on some strange ego trip. The more time she spent as Eric’s fiancée, the more she realized she was meant to be arm candy. A prop to take out to show the world just how important Eric was and that made her want to wash with a Brillo pad. One of the many reasons she’d taken an extended assignment with the Peace Corps .

She’d needed time to think. Time to realign her life with her goals.

And Eric didn’t fit into her world in any shape or form.



She had to accept that she'd dated him because he was the polar opposite of Bellamy.

Eric was loud. He was extravagant. He wore his career on his sleeve and demanded respect for how he served his country.

Bellamy was quiet. He lived his life in the shadow of everyone else. He and his team never liked to be in the spotlight. They didn't want to take credit—at least publicly—for anything.

She breathed in sync with him, sucking in oxygen each time his chest rose. Her hand felt each beat of his heart. She used to dream about the day she'd see him again. But as Father Time ticked away, so did the realization that her past life was just that. As much as she had wanted to rise from the dead, Tate needed to bring down the gavel of justice.

And she desperately wanted to be part of that.

Even if that meant she'd never see those she loved again.

Snuggling in closer, she let her mind drift back to all the good memories she had of her time with Bellamy. And there were so many. More good times than bad.

Honestly, they had two big struggles .

Their passion for their careers and she could admit Bellamy was partially right about her desire to continue her work.

But his inability to see how desperate she was for stability had been what destroyed them.

"I can feel your mind spinning a mile a minute," he whispered right before his lips

landed on her forehead. It was a kind and tender kiss packed with all the caring one man could conjure. “What’s going on in that pretty little head of yours?”

“Nothing I care to share.”

“And why not?”

“You’ll think I’m crazy.” For three years, she did nothing but help out in whatever village she settled in. She did all the things she would have done as a Peace Corps volunteer. She educated women and children and not just in teaching English. She did what she could to help women in crisis. It had become her passion. Her purpose. She wanted women to know—to believe—they had choices, even when it seemed as though they didn’t.

Once she got over her fears, she helped Tate in his search for the missing boys and girls. It disturbed her that he’d collected so many names from other villages. One or two here and there every year. It wasn’t a lot, but right before he died, he told her he’d spoken to someone who was working on a bigger sex trafficking ring and wondered if this could be connected .

He never said Eric’s name, but he didn’t have to.

Eric had to be somehow connected to it. If he wasn’t orchestrating it, he was at least turning a blind eye, and that was just as bad in her book.

Bellamy rolled to his side, palming her face. “You’re a lot of things, but nuts isn’t one of them.”

“I’ve spent five years either hiding because I was afraid someone was going to come and finish what they started. Or searching for answers so I could finish them.” She stared into Bellamy’s warm light-blue eyes. They were soft and sensitive—most of

the time. Right now, they were pools of bathwater, giving her comfort and reminding her of home. “I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be held, to be cared for, and it’s making me want to do things I haven’t done in a very long time.”

In the light of the moon shining through the grimy window, she could see him arch a brow while his lips curved into a seductive smile. “How long?”

“Five years.”

His smile disappeared and was replaced with a contemplative look and narrowed eyes. He took a sharp intake of breath through his nose as he traced her scar. “I’m trying really hard not to focus on what happened to you, but it’s impossible.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not. But I still failed you when your father sent me and my team in to rescue you.” He kissed her tenderly. “You suffered because something was wrong with Roxy. With all the dogs during that search and rescue. It’s one of the reasons we weren’t accepted into the military K9 Pilot Program.”

“Tate came to believe something hinky went down with that rescue.” She cupped his face. “But I don’t want to talk about that now.” Rolling on top of him, she tore off her shirt. Needing to feel his skin against hers, she fumbled with the fabric of his, yanking it toward his head.

He tossed it across the room and reached for his cell.

“What are you doing?” Desperation laced each syllable.

“Checking to make sure no one has been trying to reach me.” He tapped his fingers on the screen. “We have to meet the team downstairs in less than two hours and we

have to be prepared for anything. Tate was concerned you were compromised. Maybe it had to do with Lemin. He does travel to this area sometimes. While no one but my organization knows we're here, we have to run with the idea it could have been leaked."

"That's such a buzzkill."

"I shouldn't even be entertaining the thought." He set his cell on the nightstand and cupped the back of her neck, drawing her closer. His lips were less than an inch from hers and his gaze tore through her system like a runaway freight train. " But I've never been able to say no to you. Not even when you showed up at my apartment and you were with him ."

She groaned. "Why did you have to bring that up?"

His fingers danced up her spine and unhooked her bra, letting the straps fall over her shoulders. His touch had always been so loving and kind. He'd never been a selfish lover. Not even when they'd been young. Her feelings and pleasures came before his own. It was the one thing that made her feel more connected to him than any other human.

But in the end, it hadn't been enough. She needed more from him if they were going to make it for the long haul. Or at least that's what she thought. Perhaps she'd been wrong.

She'd been wrong about so many other things.

"I don't know." He took the flimsy garment and flung it across the room. He ran his index finger down the center of her chest. "Trust me, he's not here with us now."

"And yet, we're talking about him."

Bellamy flipped her over on her back like she weighed nothing. His mouth came down on hers hard and fast. His tongue wrapped around hers as if it were on a mission.

Years of pain, sadness, and loneliness left her body. Everything she held so close to the cuff released from her muscles. Nothing mattered in this moment but her and Bellamy. It was more than a reconnection to her past life. To making right so many wrongs.

This was where she belonged.

Where she had always belonged.

It was bittersweet.

Because she knew it couldn't—wouldn't—last.

But she needed to feel something. To feel loved and valued.

To feel alive.

And Bellamy could give her that, even if only for a moment.

He dotted kisses on the side of her neck and down to her chest, giving each breast the attention they demanded.

Every inch of her body exploded with electricity. It was if she'd literally been dead and someone hooked her up to a machine and jolted her back to life. She was desperate to feel more. To feel all of him. She grappled with his pants, tugging at them with a feverish recklessness.

He pushed from the bed. Standing at the side, he lowered his slacks, staring at her with wild passion glowing from his light-blue eyes.

Her breath hitched as her mind flooded with every single memory of their lovemaking. Their first time, which had been the first time for both of them. Bellamy wasn't the most romantic of men, but he'd pulled out all the stops for that night, knowing how important it had been for her and she loved him for it.

Still did.

Kneeling, she ran her hands up his thighs, admiring his taut physique. He had a few more scars than she remembered, but that came with his job.

She cupped him, stroking him, squeezing as she ran her hands up and down his length.

"Slow down," he murmured.

That wasn't going to happen. She took him into her mouth, not bothering to tease. All she wanted was to taste and devour.

He pooled her hair on top of her head. He'd always enjoyed watching and he was right about one thing. He never told her no. Pretty much whatever she wanted, she got.

Except one thing.

Bellamy was always better with animals than he was with humans. Perhaps not with this part, but with everything else.

He might understand what she needed in the bedroom. He might be the most

respectful man on the planet. But he gave more of himself to his animals than he did to the people in his life. That had become painfully apparent when he got Roxy.

His muscles tightened and twitched. He tugged at her hair. “Hey,” he whispered. “Keep doing that and things will end right here. ”

She glanced up, licking her lips, still holding him in her hands.

He cocked his head. “It’s been a long time for me too.”

“How long?” A pang of jealousy filtered through her heart. She had no right. She’d been engaged to a man Bellamy hated and Bellamy had believed she was dead. He had a right to move on with his life. To love again. To have someone in his life.

“Does it matter?” Gently, he pushed back on the bed, tugging at her shorts and lowering himself to the floor.

“It does to me.”

He sighed. “A little over six months.”

“A one-night stand? Or was she a girlfriend?”

“Seriously? We’re going to have this discussion right now?” He lifted one of her legs over his shoulder and arched a brow.

She nodded, propping up on her elbows. “Humor me.”

“Kind of in between. We went out a couple of times. Not my type. She didn’t like cats.” He grabbed her other ankle. “Are we done with this? Because I have things to do.” He pressed his lips on the inside of her thigh, dangerously close to what made

her a woman.

A guttural groan escaped her lips. She couldn't form any other response if she tried .

His tongue glided across her, softly at first, and then he applied more pressure as he dove one finger inside.

She arched her back and let all the sensations engulf her mind and soul. Never in a million years did she believe she'd ever be able to let a man touch her again so intimately. But Bellamy washed all that away.

Instinctively, he knew exactly what she needed. What she desired. It made leaving this place come full circle. It had been a place she once loved. Then it became a living hell. A reminder of all her poor choices in life. Now, she'd be able to walk out of this country with her dignity back where it belonged.

And in the arms of the man she loved.

Even if it was only this one time.

The last ounce of healing.

She should feel bad for using him like this, but something told her that he needed this as much as she did.

"Oh God." An orgasm tore through her body without warning. There had been little to no buildup. It slammed into her like a deer coming out of the woods and hitting a car from nowhere. She clutched his head, gasping for air, but no oxygen filled her lungs. All she got was the thick humidity that surrounded them.

He thrust himself deep inside her, heaving them onto the bed. It wasn't rough, but the



mattress shook with the weight of their bodies. His mouth landed on hers with a wild and out-of-control kiss as she wrapped her arms and legs around his massive body, drawing him closer and grinding her hips.

Another climax ripped through her and she dug her nails into his shoulders. It was as if she'd stepped onto a roller-coaster ride. The pitches and turns taking her for the spin of her life and there was no end in sight.

Breaking off the kiss, he stared into her eyes but never slowed the rhythm of their lovemaking. His thumbs fanned across her cheeks as he thrust so deep and brought another orgasm to the surface right before his spilled out, colliding with hers, causing her vision to blur.

His movements began to slow, rocking gently as he kissed her neck, whispering sweet words in her ears. He told her how beautiful she was and how much he'd missed her. He said all the right things. He always did.

And then he rolled to the side, holding her close, his fingertips still dancing up and down her arm.

She buried her face in his shoulder and the weight of the world came crashing down.

Tate was dead.

Because of her.

She was going back to the States, yet she was still going to have to hide. And now Bellamy and his team were going to have to put their lives on the line.

Because of her.

Tears poured out of eyes. She couldn't stop them. She wanted to. She hated crying and this wasn't the time to let these emotions slip out.

And certainly not with Bellamy. He wouldn't know what to do with them.

"Hey." He cupped her chin and tilted her head. "What's this all about?"

Snagging the covers, she tried to roll away, but he grabbed her and wouldn't let her move.

"It has nothing to do with what just happened or you," she managed to choke out. "Please, just let me cry in peace."

"No," he said sternly, yanking her to his chest. "Look at me."

The Bellamy she remembered would give her space. He would get out of bed and walk away, telling her that when she was ready, he'd listen. But he'd never push and they'd never talk about it because he didn't want to actually deal with real emotion. Not unless she forced it on him, and then he'd remain quiet.

"It's nothing." She sucked in a deep breath, but it got botched and it came out more as blubbering sob than anything else.

"You're crying. It's something. Now talk to me."

"How about you just let me cry and we talk later." The tears slowed as he wiped them away. His sweet blue eyes calmed her nerves and she resented him for that. She also didn't understand because it would have been easier for her to just roll away and deal with this on her own. That had been the crux of their relationship.

Not this.

“O. I’m right here and whatever’s going on with you right now, it’s a little hard not to take personally.” He ran his thumb across her lower lip. “I don’t want to. I’m trying like hell not to make this about me, but you burst into tears right after we made love. What am I supposed to think about that?”

“I cried after our first time.”

“That’s different and now you’re doing what you’ve always accused me of doing and that’s deflecting.” He fluffed one of the pillows and let out a long breath. “I’m not letting this go.”

“Fine,” she said. “I was overwhelmed with an onslaught of what happened to me these last five years. I’m scared, Bellamy. Tate’s dead because he was trying to help me and now he’s dragged you into it. For as much as we think we know, we don’t know anything. I can’t handle anyone else dying over this. Over me.” Her eyes burned with more tears.

“Oh, sweetheart.” He leaned closer, brushing his warm tender lips over hers. “You are not the problem. No one has died because of you. What Tate did for a living was dangerous. What I did as a Marine Raider could have gotten me killed numerous times. You know that.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m not going to lie to you and tell you this will be easy. But we will be able to protect you in Hawaii. Eric won’t be able to get to you there. We’ll see him coming better than if you stayed here. We have resources that Tate didn’t. I just wish he had pulled us in sooner.” He kissed her temple. “I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

His phone vibrated. He reached across her body and lifted it from the nightstand. “Crap,” he said. “Get dressed. We gotta go.” He tossed back the sheet and leaped from the bed.

“What’s going on?” She held the covers to her chin. Her heart beat so fast it hurt.

“Cooper just texted. Seems Eric’s private jet just landed in the capital. He wasn’t supposed to be headed here, but I guess he changed his flight plan.”

“That’s not good.”

“Nope. It’s not.” He tossed a few articles of clothing on the bed. “He’s about the same distance from where our transport plane is so we need to haul ass now.”

“How the hell could he know I’m alive?” Octavia asked. “Tate and Nova were the only ones who knew and neither one would have told anyone.”

“I agree with that. Nova and Tate are both trustworthy, but a local could have recognized you. There have been reports of sightings of you for the last five years. Most have been ruled false, thanks to them. I’m also stuck on this Lemin guy. But we’ll have to figure that out later. Now come on. We’ve got to get downstairs.”

She finished getting dressed and raced toward the door. She grabbed Bellamy by the biceps as fear seized her soul. “Before we step out of this room, I need to say one thing.”

“Okay.” He held her gaze.

“I don’t regret what happened between us.”

He kissed her cheek. “Neither do I.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:48 pm*

7

Bellamy kept one car distance from Cooper and Rusty. They were vehicle one. He and Octavia were vehicle two. He glanced in the rearview. Blake and Ethan were in vehicle three. If Eric hadn't landed in-country, they would have only taken one, but if anything hinky happened, they needed to be able to separate.

Divide and conquer.

His job was to protect Octavia. Get her to the plane.

His team's role was to make sure that happened.

Tucker reluctantly sat in the back seat with her nose in the air, alert and ready. She would have preferred to sit up front and made that clear, trying to nudge Octavia out at least twice. But she could perform her duties from the back seat.

They were rolling down a road to an airfield where they had secured a plane through their connections with the Brotherhood Protectors.

Bellamy was amazed at the organization's reach, although he really shouldn't have been, considering all the men and women who comprised the elite band of brothers and sisters came from the military and various government agencies. The connections alone were mindboggling.

Tucker growled. It was low and menacing. Then she barked. Twice.

“What is it, girl?” Bellamy snagged the radio. His pup growled again, sticking her nose right up against the window. “Coop,” he said into the radio. “Something’s up.”

“Whiskey’s going nuts,” Cooper said. “I’m going to speed up a bit. Ethan and Blake, hang back some, but don’t let Bellamy and Octavia out of your sight.”

“Soda isn’t happy. Something or someone is out there,” Ethan said.

“Quiet, Tucker.” Bellamy squinted through the darkness.

Tucker hissed. She paced in the back seat, going from one side to the next. Not a good sign.

“We’ve got company,” Ethan said. “Two vehicles on our tail coming fast.”

Octavia gripped the armrests. She glanced over her shoulder. “How did Eric find us?”

“We don’t know it’s even him out there. We’re Americans traveling in the middle of the night. That would spook anyone from the police to the drug cartel.”

“Not making me feel better.”

“Wasn’t supposed to.” He probably should have lied to Octavia, but what would be the point? At any time, he expected bullets to come flying across the hood of the Hummer. If that happened, the plan was simple. His men would do their best to take out the enemy while he and Octavia sought cover until they could regroup and figure out how to get out safely. “Not to be rude or harsh, but I need you to be quiet and if or when shit starts happening, I need you to do exactly what I say. Got it?”

“Yeah. I got it.” She hugged her middle and stared straight ahead.

He'd apologize later.

Tucker pressed her front paws on the center console and snarled.

The sound of rapid fire echoed in the still night and it didn't just come from behind. Nope. It came at them from the front too.

"Bell, the turnoff for our ride is on the right. Take it," Cooper said. "Get to the plane. We'll be there right after we deal with these assholes."

"Don't make me come back for you." Bellamy dropped the radio, punched the gas, and took the corner a little too hard. The tires did their best to grip the mud covering the semi-paved road .

Tucker whined as she skidded across the back seat.

"Sorry, girl," Bellamy said before glancing over at Octavia. "You okay?"

"Peachy." Which was Octavia speak for you're in the doghouse tonight. Probably for the rest of his life, but that he expected. Having sex didn't make up for anything. She needed him to give her a connection. To help her re-center her past life and he was all too happy to give it to her in part because it helped him too.

The rapid fire of machine guns echoed in his ears, but he couldn't concern himself with that right now. He'd get Octavia on that plane. He'd wait about five seconds and then check on his men. And that wouldn't be by radio. As long as there was someone with a gun to protect O, he'd be back on the road to help Cooper and the rest of the gang. They were his brothers. And a sister. They were family. He wouldn't leave them hanging.

Blake's husband would kill him if he didn't bring her back in one piece.

They had a little munchkin back at home and that kiddo needed a mommy.

The longer he drove, the more he worried he'd taken the wrong road. The brush grew thicker. Denser. The road was all but nonexistent. It was a combination of mud and gravel. Granted, he'd been told that the airstrip was off the beaten path and used mostly by mercenaries, black ops, or groups like the Brotherhood Protectors.

The headlights flickered through the trees, showing a clearing. In the distance, he made out what appeared to be a plane.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Gunfire, while still faint, was too close for comfort.

"Coop, Rusty, Ethan, Blake, come in," Bellamy called into the radio.

"A little busy, man," Rusty's voice echoed across the airwaves. "Suspect we'll be done with these idiots in ten."

Bellamy scanned the area. Something didn't look right. He didn't expect there to be a tower. Or for things to be well lit. But he did expect the plane to be fired up and ready.

It wasn't.

Tucker agreed. She tucked her tail between her legs and a low rumble left her snout.

"Open the glove box," he said.

"Why?"



“There’s a handgun in there. I want you armed, just in case.” He slowed the Hummer as he approached the airstrip. “Coop? Anyone? Talk to me.” The lack of gunshots sounding in the night was either music to Bellamy’s ear or a death wish.

“Tying up a few loose ends,” Rusty said.

“No sign of Eric, though,” Cooper’s voice sounded through the radio. “Don’t think we have time to question these guys.”

“Are they locals?” Bellamy asked.

“Yup,” Ethan replied. “But they certainly understand us and I understood enough to know they were looking for a blond girl.”

“Fuck,” Bellamy muttered as he slammed on the brakes. “We might have a problem here.”

“What kind of problem?” Ethan asked.

Bellamy yanked his rifle from the back seat, flung open the door, and raced around the hood. “Stay behind me.” Gripping the handle of the rear door, he released Tucker, giving her the command to check for danger.

God, he hoped nothing happened to that dog.

He loved her like she was his child.

In a way, she was because it was highly unlikely he was ever having kids.

He swallowed. What a strange time to think about the fact he hadn’t used a condom. He blinked, shoving that aside. A question he’d ask Octavia later.

Among other things.

“Bell? Answer me, goddammit,” Ethan said.

Bellamy sucked in a deep breath. He lifted his rifle and put his eye to the scope. He’d answer Ethan as soon as he got a chance to check out his surroundings.

“Bell, Coop doesn’t like it when you go radio silent,” Ethan said calmly. “He’s going nuts and driving like a madman. What’s going on?”

Bellamy scanned the length of the plane. Tucker raced around the aircraft, sniffing the ground, zigzagging back and forth.

Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, except everything was pitch-black and no one was there to greet them.

The pilot should have beat them there and fired up the engines. Bellamy had spoken to Waylen minutes before they’d gotten in the Hummer. Everything had been set up right down to the new pickup hour and Waylen wouldn’t have given him the go if things weren’t in place.

He lifted his gaze and the air in his lungs flew out like a bird taking flight just as Tucker planted her butt near the stairs.

Inching closer, he lowered his weapon.

Tucker whined.

“I know, sweet girl. I know.”

A gurgling sound came from the man sprawled out halfway down the steps.

“Take this.” He shoved the rifle at Octavia. “If anyone other than my team comes down that road, you start shooting. Got it?” He held her by the shoulders.

She nodded but didn’t say a single word.

He hated it when she got this quiet. It was never a good sign. Either she was pissed as hell at him or scared to death.

Both made sense right now.

He ripped off his shirt and dropped to his knees in front of the injured pilot. “Hey, man. I’m Bellamy.” Blood trickled from the man’s mouth. His breath sounds were shallow. Bellamy did a quick assessment and found two bullet holes in his chest. But that wasn’t the worst of his problems. Those might actually be survivable. It was the stab wounds in his gut that disturbed Bellamy.

It wasn’t just any knife wound. It was jagged, and there were multiple points of entry. It reminded him of the scar on Octavia’s midsection.

That didn’t help his mood.

Bellamy did his best to put pressure on the ones he thought needed it the most.

“Hang tight. My team should be here any minute.” He snagged his radio.

The man gripped Bellamy’s shirt. “Whoever hit me was looking for the girl. I told them you and your team were at a location about five miles from here with new intel. Not sure if they believed me, but they left me for dead.”

“Bellamy? We’ve got company,” Octavia called. “Your dog’s just sitting here, staring at the headlights.”

“She knows the vehicles we came in. That’s a good sign. Don’t shoot. Not yet anyway.” He glanced over his shoulder and studied Tucker’s demeanor. He lifted the radio. “Team Charlie, please tell me that’s you.”

The headlights went off and on, signaling it was his men. “Fire up that plane,” Cooper said. “We took care of those boys, but I’m sure there will be more coming our way soon enough.”

“Our pilot’s been injured, so that’s a problem.” Bellamy let out a long breath. He could do a lot of things. Drive a boat. Race a car. But flying a plane was not one of them. He also didn’t know how to help this man, but he certainly wasn’t going to leave him behind to die.

“Blake says she can fly us out,” Ethan said just as the two Hummers slammed to a stop. “Says she can fly just about anything.”

Tucker continued to sit in her spot. The other three dogs joined her, as if they were the overwatchers. It was a proud moment for Bellamy. All the dogs did exactly what they were trained to do. Not one mistake. Not a single mishap. Nothing like what happened five years ago.

That was something.

“Help me get this man back on the plane,” Bellamy shouted. He leaned closer. “What’s your name?”

“Eddy. Eddy Baker.” He closed his eyes. “Not that I believe I’m going to make it, but there’s a full combat medic kit on board. ”

“We’ll do our best.” Bellamy lifted his upper body while Rusty took his legs. They hoisted him up the stairs and into the plane.

Blake raced past them and made her way into the cockpit. “Was there a flight plan listed anywhere?”

“Yeah,” Eddy managed. “Once you hit five thousand feet, contact Hank Patterson at the Montana branch. He’ll have everything.”

“All right. Who wants to be my copilot?” Blake turned and stared at everyone. “Bueller? Anyone?”

“I’ll do it.” Rusty made his way into the cockpit. “I don’t know much, so you’ll have to instruct me every step of the way.”

“Just do what I tell you and we’ll be fine,” Blake said.

The plane wasn’t very big. Nor was it anything special.

Ethan wrangled the dogs, getting them situated. They were not a fan of flying, but they knew the drill.

Octavia found the medical bag, opened it, and began handing Bellamy things, as if he knew what to do. They all had basic first aid training. They’d all been patched up in the field before. Hell, he could stitch up someone if he had to.

But this went well beyond his pay grade.

“It sounds like he might have a collapsed lung,” Octavia said. “We should get him to a hospital as soon as possible.”

“Once I get in the air, I’ll radio the Brotherhood Protectors,” Blake said.

“Doing it now.” Bellamy pulled out his cell. He wasn’t letting a man die on his

watch. Not when he knew his name.

It rang once.

“Bellamy. What’s wrong?” Waylen Brown asked.

“Eddy, our pilot, is mortally wounded. Blake is firing up the jet now, but we need to get him to a hospital. We need a new flight plan. Hell, we need a new evac plan, period. But if we don’t get this man medical attention soon, he’s going to die.”

“Get in the air and I’ll coordinate with Hank. Eddy’s his guy,” Waylen said.

“He doesn’t have much time. We’ve got IV fluids, but he’s lost way too much blood.” Bellamy wiped his brow. He’d lost a lot of men over the years, but it didn’t make this any easier.

“Let me see if I can find a military base in a semi-friendly location where you can touch down and take off without too many questions. Just get that plane up in the air. I’ll be in touch.” The line went dead.

The lights inside the plane came on and the engines roared to life.

Octavia focused her energy on Eddy and barked out a few orders at Bellamy and Cooper. They did whatever she told them in hopes to save this man’s life.

Rusty was busy dealing with Blake and going over the checklist while Ethan closed up the plane.

The dogs settled in a corner, cuddling up with each other.

No matter what happened, it was going to be a long flight home.

Octavia slipped from the passenger seat of Bellamy's truck. She glanced down at her blood-soaked shirt. The events of the last forty-eight hours rolled through her brain like a movie in slow motion. "Do you think Eddy's going to be all right?"

"Waylen told me he came out of surgery and, while still listed in critical condition, was holding his own. It will be touch and go for a while." Bellamy squeezed her shoulder. "What you did in that plane may have saved his life. Where did you learn to blood type in the field?"

"From one of the medical Peace Corps volunteers, but Tate taught me a lot about survival over the last five years. More than I ever thought I'd need to know while running from one third world country to the next trying to make the world a better place." She leaned against his pickup and stared at a big house on a hill overlooking a marina. "And hiding from whoever tried to kill me."

Tucker rubbed against her leg while Roxy dropped to her feet. They'd picked her up at the Brotherhood Protectors ranch on the way home.

Home.

This was where Bellamy had been living for the past year or so. This was his life now. It was a far cry from the apartments or townhouses he used to rent while he was on active duty with the Marine Raiders. He never needed much back then. A place to lay his head at night. Something big enough to share with his K9.

His best friend.

She often wondered if Cooper and the rest of the gang got jealous too.

Growing up, he'd always had a dog. When his father, Finn, had been in the field as a DEA agent, his mother worked a desk job, so one was always home with Bellamy. When Bell was ten, his dad had been shot and nearly died. It was then that Finn decided his family was more important than his career, and he took a different position with the DEA.

One that allowed him to work behind the scenes. Both Bellamy's parents had important jobs. They planned missions. They handled agents. In many cases, they were those agents' lifelines .

Tate often worked under them and spoke highly of Finn and Jade.

How she missed them.

They'd always been so kind, even when she and Bellamy had called it quits, especially his mother.

Bellamy tilted her chin with his thumb. "You've done a lot of good in your career."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"You're exhausted. It's been a long two days." He kissed her cheek. "Why don't you let me make you some food. You can take a nice long hot bath and then sleep for as long as you need."

She cocked her head. "You have a bathtub?"



He chuckled. “A big soaker one. I’ve never used it, though.”

“Yeah. I struggle to see you lounging around in something like that with bubbles and a glass of champagne.”

“Come on.” He wrapped his arm around her waist. “I’ll get you all set up. How does a nice BLT sound with some crispy French fries.”

“That sounds amazing.”

She followed him up the steps to a massive wraparound porch and into a foyer. “Holy crap. Do you own this place?” She glanced down at her feet. In the hardwood was a compass. It was like nothing she’d ever seen and it was spectacular. She couldn’t put into words how to describe it, except it looked like an authentic compass .

“I do.” He smiled proudly, pointing at the compass. “The previous owners had remodeled two years before I bought it, so I didn’t have to do a thing and that is real. So people who are directionally challenged know what is north, south, east, and west.”

“It’s so cool.” These were the kind of details that had mattered to her, but Bellamy couldn’t have cared less. Or at least he didn’t seem to give a crap about anything other than where to put the doggie beds.

“It was one of the reasons I bought the place. That and I’ve got enough land to work with the dogs.”

Just then, a very large calico cat slinked down the staircase. It lowered its body, wagged its butt, and pounced on Tucker, who yelped, scurrying across the wood floor, playing wildly with the cat, dodging left, then right, acting like a puppy, and not a well-trained service dog.

Roxy, on the other hand, scrambled into the other room and jumped on the sofa and stood there, glaring as if she'd seen a mouse and decided it was the worst thing in the world.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Roxy. The cat’s not going to hurt you.” Bellamy laughed. “Roxy doesn’t know what to do with all the cats, unless I force her into work mode. When I first introduced them, she was fine, until she realized the cats were going to live in the same space. Then she got all weird. But Roxy’s getting old. I don’t work her much these days. Hence, the reason I brought Tucker to get you.”

The cat made an interesting maneuver, trying to engage Roxy, but the dog wouldn’t have it. Instead, Roxy did a circle and curled up, letting out a grunt.

“How many cats do you have?”

“Three.” He pointed. “That big one is Hayden. He came with the house. The owners couldn’t take him, so I adopted him. The other two, Ollie and Maverick, are brother and sister. They are still kittens. I adopted them from the shelter about six months ago after I saw a story about them being abandoned. They will hide for a bit. They tend to be a little skittish with new people. But they will come out after an hour or two. Once they get to know you, they will be all cuddly.” He hoisted her bag over his shoulder, took her by the hand, and led her up the staircase.

“Who took care of them while you were gone? I mean, I can’t believe you of all people would leave your precious pets alone. That would be blasphemy.” Christ, she sounded like a bitch. She didn’t mean to. He was right; she was running on fumes.

“Presley, Waylen’s wife, comes over when I’m out of town. They live near the marina. She’s got a little one at home who loves to come over and pet the kitties.”

The way he talked about everyone he’d met here on Big Island, the men and women

with the Brotherhood Protectors, appeared different from when she'd been with him eight years ago. Or even when she'd seen him last, right before she up and died to the world.

Everything about Bellamy seemed different. He was more grounded in his surroundings and with the people in his environment outside of his team.

She wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

It was as if she had to die for him to change.

"Waylen seems like a nice guy." So far, he and Hawk had been the only people she'd met since landing in Hawaii. It made her nervous that so many people knew she was alive. Tate had set this all in motion. She trusted Tate with her life.

But he was gone.

And now she had to trust Bellamy and everyone he put in her path.

Putting her faith in him shouldn't be that big of a stretch. She loved him. Always had and probably always would.

But love wasn't enough.

Love didn't stop a person from betraying you.

She loved Eric. Or so she had thought she had at one time. But it was Eric who had destroyed her village, killing dozens of innocent people. And he'd tried to kill her, something she couldn't prove. However, she felt it deep in her soul.

"Waylen's the best. Everyone with the Brotherhood Protectors is great. I couldn't

have asked for a better place to land when I left the Marines.” He continued down a long corridor lined with rich hardwood floors which had been slightly scraped up by his dogs and cats.

She counted four bedrooms so far as she ran her fingers along the off-white walls lined with pictures of Bellamy’s parents, a few scenic shots of places he’d been, and a couple of his medals. That one surprised her because he’d always been so humble about the things he’d done and accomplished over his life. He’d never liked being in the spotlight or taking credit for anything. Whenever he’d come back from a dangerous mission where his team was given any kind of recognition for what they had done, Bellamy wanted to slink behind a rock. He’d always say he was simply doing his job and didn’t deserve anything other than his paycheck.

There were photos of him and his team with their K9s. That didn’t shock her at all, even though he’d never displayed them before.

The places he’d lived before hadn’t been a home. Not a real one anyway. He never bothered to hang anything other than a television set. He’d place a few pictures on a mantel, but that was about it.

A true bachelor pad.

She used to tease him about that and every once in a while he’d tell her to move in and he’d change .

But she never did and he never changed.

She gasped as she came to one picture near the end of the hall. It was of her and him taken while they’d been on vacation in the Adirondacks. Seven whole days of just the two of them.

Well, them and Roxy.

It had been one of her fondest memories of their relationship.

He lifted his hand and traced his fingers over the frame. "I've got a few more of us hanging around this place," he said softly. "I couldn't bring myself to even look at them for years. Once I believed I'd never see you again, this was my way of keeping you close."

"I don't know if that's insanely sweet or if it breaks my heart."

"It's a little of both, I guess." He waved his hand. "This is the master. Feel free to take it over."

"I'm not going to kick you out of your room."

He laughed. "I get lost in this place and as you saw, there are plenty of bedrooms. Take mine. You'll be more comfortable in it. That way you can use the tub anytime you want. The shower also has one of those heads that comes out from the top and a few from the sides. I barely know how to use the damn thing anyway."

"I've been taking bucket baths for the last five years, so I'm not going to turn that down." She stepped into his bedroom and her knees damn near buckled. A big king-sized bed was nestled between two windows and was positioned under a massive skylight. There were a couple of throw pillows on it and it was perfectly made with a nice dark-blue comforter.

His favorite color.

On the opposing wall was large television and a dresser underneath. To the right was a picture window with a reading chair and an ottoman. To the left was a door to the

closet and master bathroom.

She inched toward the side of the bed, her sights set on the picture frame on the nightstand. With a shaky hand, she lifted it and tears burned her eyes. “My college graduation,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder. She’d never forget that day. He’d managed to get a few days’ leave and surprised her. Bellamy could be so sweet.

He shrugged, taking the picture and setting it back down. “I never forgot about you and for the record, I never stopped trying to find out what happened.” He tossed her bag on the mattress and sat on the corner, running his fingers through his hair. “It was hard when I was still enlisted. Even though I had some resources, I didn’t have the time. Once I left, I was able to do more digging, but Tate stood in my way. It’s hard to be pissed at a man who died trying to help you. But Nova? She should have told me.” He glanced up. A layer of hurt lined his eyes. It stole her breath. He’d always been so good at masking all his emotions, except anger. “Why didn’t you want me to know? Explain that to me because I can’t understand it.”

“That’s not an easy question to answer.” She folded her arms across her midsection and stared at the sun coming through the skylight. The warmth on her face felt good after spending hours in the back of a plane with another man’s blood on her body. For years, Bellamy had been her best friend. It wasn’t until she started dating Eric that things got weird between them.

“Seems pretty simple to me.”

“It’s complicated, Bell.” She lowered her chin, catching his gaze. This was not a conversation she wanted to have.

“Well, uncomplicate it.”

She let out a long breath. “I didn’t think I could trust you. Not after seeing Roxy. Do

you have any idea what that did to me? How that made me feel? To have her sniff right next to me and?—”

“We’ve been over that.” He waved his hand dismissively like he’d done so many times before. As if her feelings didn’t matter. “Freaking Eric, or someone close to him, messed with my dog. With all those K9s. I can’t prove it and trust me, I’ve tried. But yeah, I can understand why that would initially put you on edge after what you went through. But I spoke with Tate and he knew something hinky happened. I’m sure he told you that.”

“Not the point,” she said. “If you had known, you would have done something stupid, like gone off on Eric.” She held up her hand. “Don’t sit there and tell me you wouldn’t have because we both know you’ve got a temper. But the bigger reason is we don’t even know what Eric was covering up. We still don’t. Tate could never make the drug connection. Or even tie Eric to corruption between the two governments.” She pointed to her bag. “You read the documents. All he had was the missing boys and girls and how a couple of them ended up as mules in the United States. He’s tried to connect it to a human trafficking ring, but he’s come up short. Tate didn’t want to bring you in until he had more, and I didn’t want you to know until I could come home. I was safer being dead and you know that’s the truth.” At least she hoped he believed that. Part of her was no longer sure she’d made the right decision.

“Maybe at first and I can get on board with maybe keeping me in the dark while I was still a Marine.” Bellamy jumped to his feet. “But the second I signed on with the Brotherhood Protectors, Tate should have read me in on his little side gig. The things that this organization can do that he couldn’t is... is... I’m not going to stand here and beat a dead horse. I don’t have any bubbles or anything for the tub, but I can run to the corner store and buy you some. Do you want me to do that before I make you some lunch?” He paced at the edge of the bed.

“No. I’ll make do with whatever I can find.”

He nodded. “Unfortunately, the kitty litter is in my bedroom, so please don’t close the master door. You can obviously close the bathroom. Later, I’ll move the litter box when all the cats have come out so they don’t bother you. But they will need to see me do it.” The timbre of his voice had quieted, but his demeanor hadn’t.

“It’s fine. If they sleep in here, I might like the company.”

He chuckled. “You might regret that, but the dogs will be with me.”

“Of course they will.” Part of her was disappointed by that revelation. She hated to admit it, but the idea of sleeping with Roxy again made her heart beat a little faster.

Or maybe it was the idea her owner might join her, which was odd, because he seemed to be so angry and she wasn’t sure being with him was a good idea, even if the idea of being alone was utterly terrifying.

Having sex with him didn’t make up for anything. It certainly didn’t erase all the problems they had eight years ago. All it did was remind her that she loved a man she could never have. Bellamy might have changed, but he hadn’t done that for her.

“Text me when you’re out of the tub and I’ll bring up your sandwich.” He pointed to the television. “That thing is loaded with all the streaming apps. I’m sure you can find something you’ll enjoy watching.”

“Sports?”

He smiled. “Seriously, O? It’s my bedroom. It has all the sports packages. Every single one.”



“Are the NBA playoffs going on?”

He arched a brow. “Are you saying you want to watch basketball?”

“Oddly enough, you made me a fan and I wouldn’t mind having human company to watch a game until I fall asleep.”

He palmed her cheek. “Feel free to steal any of my shirts, shorts, or sweats. You’ll swim in them, but until Blake or Presley can show up with some new clothes, those will have to do. Take your time. I’ll see you in a bit.” He strolled out of his room, not acknowledging her request, and leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Which were a jumbled mess.

Her mind was like a kaleidoscope. A mirage of images bombarding her brain and she couldn’t slow it down, make it stop, or understand any of it.

She snagged her bag and padded to the bathroom. “Holy crap.” This wasn’t just any bathroom, and she’d grown up privileged. Okay, that was an understatement. Her father was rich. Disgustingly rich. For her eighteenth birthday, he thought the appropriate gift was a Range Rover. And not just any Range Rover. But the most expensive one on the market. She’d been so embarrassed when she’d gone off to college because her father had gotten special permission for her to take her car as a freshman.

Even Bellamy hadn’t wanted to drive it and he loved cars of all kinds. But that one was a little too much for his blood. While his family hadn’t been as wealthy as hers, they sure as shit weren’t poor. His folks bought him a shiny new pickup when he turned seventeen. But it wasn’t loaded. Nor was it flashy.

Just new.

Whoever designed this master bathroom had to have been a woman. It came equipped with a massive soaking tub planted right next to a window and under a skylight. A small television jetted out off the wall. Behind it was a vanity with a well-lit mirror. The toilet was off by itself behind a barn door. The shower had heads coming from all directions and was behind a glass wall. It had a large bench and many nooks and crannies for soaps and shampoos.

Only, Bellamy had two bottles placed on one shelf .

And if she wasn't mistaken, the floors were heated and there was a heated drawer for the towels.

She yanked open the drawer and yep, freaking heated.

Good Lord.

She'd died and gone to heaven.

After turning on the water for the tub, she flipped the switch for the floors. Yeah, she was going to take advantage of that. When her father remodeled their home, she begged him for that one feature and he said no. He'd spend money on all sorts of things including heating and cooling the garage but found heating a bathroom floor to be pretentious.

Weird.

She snagged his body wash and used it to make bubbles. She didn't care that she'd smell like an Irish mountain. It would do the trick.

Digging through her bag, she found her cell and stared at it. The only person who ever called her on it was Tate or a couple of local people she'd grown to trust in the

last village she'd lived in. Charging it seemed silly at this point, but she plugged it into the wall and set it on the vanity anyway. She shed her clothes and climbed into the steamy bath and sighed. Oh, she could get used to this.

Meow. Meow.

“What do we have here?” She leaned over the side of the porcelain tub and wiggled her fingers at the cute little American shorthair cat. “Which one are you? Ollie or Maverick?” Before she could tap the little bugger on its head, it raced off, hiding under the bed, poking its head out, staring at her with inquisitive orange eyes. “You’re adorable,” she cooed. But the cat ignored her, inching out of sight.

She closed her eyes, doing her best to relax. However, it didn’t last long as the cell vibrated. It startled her and she sloshed some bathwater and bubbles over the side of the tub. Perhaps it was just the phone powering on, only it kept buzzing. Stepping from the tub, she snagged a towel and wrapped it around her body. She padded across the warm floor, enjoying how it felt on the bottom of her feet. Her heart raced as she lifted the cell into her hands.

One missed call and a voice message.

From Tate’s cell.

What the hell?

She tapped the message button and put the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Octavia, it’s Nova. I hope this message finds you safe and sound in Hawaii. Please call me back at this number. It’s secure. Thanks.”

Tears burned her eyes. Her body shook. She should call for Bellamy before she

reached out to Nova. But it was Tate's cell. It was Nova's voice. It should be fine. Who else would have it?

With a shaky finger, she tapped the screen. It rang once .

"Octavia." Nova's voice echoed over across the speaker. "Thank God. Are you okay? Did you make it to Hawaii okay?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose. Tate had always told her not to give anyone too much information, and that included him. Whenever he called, he often tested her and if she answered his questions in any way that could compromise her position or her identity, he would reprimand her. This should be no different. However, she wasn't sure how to respond. Not in this instance.

"What's going on? Where are you?" she asked.

"I just left Tate's funeral," Nova said softly. "I'm in my car headed to the airport. I've been handed a mandatory vacation because my partner was killed. I'm not happy about that because I want to work the case. Bellamy's parents suggested I take a little trip to Hawaii. They are under the assumption that he and his team will be looking into it and thought that it might be a good way for me to do some digging under the radar."

Octavia swallowed the thick thump that formed in her throat. "Do Finn and Jade know that Bellamy was in Colombia?"

"I don't know," Nova said. "They know he was on a mission recently and Finn spoke to him this morning. But they don't know about you. However, there is some chatter and my next call is to Bellamy. I don't want to show up without him knowing I'm coming. He's pissed enough at me as it is."

“He’s angry because we kept him in the dark, which I can understand.” Octavia sat on the chair in front of the vanity. “What kind of chatter?”

“A recent sighting of you,” Nova said. “I overheard your dad asking Eric about it and if that’s why he went to Colombia. Eric told him that he needed to accept that you were gone, but out of respect, he did ask around and it was nothing credible as usual.”

“What did my father say?”

“Nothing,” Nova said. “He simply turned and walked away. What could he say? Your dad hasn’t ever really accepted your death. Not even when he held a memorial service for you and went through the motions to declare it. Truth be told, he got in Bellamy’s face when Bellamy accepted it. He went as far as to tell Bellamy that he thought giving up was a cowardly thing to do.”

Octavia sucked in a deep breath. Her father was going to kill her and then hug her to death when he found out she was still vertical. What she’d done had been cruel. But she honestly felt as though she had no choice. At the time, she couldn’t be sure if her dad had anything to do with whatever Eric had been up to.

To be fair, she wasn’t sure her dad’s hands were completely clean to this day. He’d been in so tight with Eric, helping Eric for years with his career.

“Do you think my dad could be part of whatever Eric has been doing?” Octavia had asked this before of Tate and his response had always been anything was possible.

That wasn’t an answer.

“I don’t believe so,” Nova said. “At least not willingly. Your dad is a smart man and over the course of the last five years, he’s been distancing himself from Eric. They butt heads on a lot of things, but I don’t work with them in any capacity. I only know

what Tate has told me, what I've seen when I've crossed paths with Eric in the field, or when I've seen your dad on a few joint task force missions and that hasn't been many."

"What did Finn and Jade have to say about all of this?"

"Only that they don't believe Bellamy's going to let any of this go and they think having me go to Hawaii will help keep him in check and maybe help him find some answers," Nova said. "They want him to have some peace and they don't believe he's had any since the day you went missing. I couldn't say no to that. Besides, I'm being forced to take leave. Bellamy might not like it, but I'm sure he'll understand."

"When will you get here?"

"I'll be there by tomorrow," Nova said. "I better call Bellamy before I get to the airport. Take care. I'll see you soon." The line went dead.

Octavia set the phone on the vanity, shed the towel, and slinked back into the tub, thankful the water was still warm. She was going to soak until her skin shriveled and turned cold.

She had to believe she was safe in Hawaii.

In Bellamy's home.

This had to be the beginning of the end. She couldn't go on like this anymore. It was time for Eric to face the music for whatever crimes he had committed.

She touched her cheek.

Including what he'd done to her.

Bellamy leaned against the railing, raised his coffee mug to his lips, and sipped the scalding liquid. He stared at the marina down below. The tall masts of the sailboats stretched toward the rising sun.

“We’ve got Darius, Wyatt, and me working on hacking into Eric’s personal email,” Waylen Brown said. Waylen had lived on Big Island until his father had died when he’d been only seventeen years old. He’d returned for a retirement party a few years ago, reconnected with his high school sweetheart, landed a job with the Brotherhood Protectors, and now worked as one of their cyber intelligence agents. While Bellamy and his team were recruited as a K9 unit, Bellamy and his brain were often called into Waylen’s office.

One of the side effects of being a genius .

Something that Bellamy tried to often hide.

It wasn’t that he was ashamed of being smart, but growing up, it didn’t do him any favors. He was often teased. In elementary school, being pulled out of his grade and dumped in with the older kids ostracized him from both age groups. He was frequently bullied. It was then his parents decided it was best to pull him from public schools and put him in a private one. That helped some, but he became hyper-aware of how much smarter he was than the kids in his grade, especially when he was a freshman and his teachers wanted him to skip a few grades.

He refused, much to his parents and the school’s disliking.

But it brought him closer to Octavia and Cooper. The two people from his childhood who understood him and his need to be like everyone else.

“Isn’t that illegal?” Bellamy asked with a sarcastic tone. He knew the law. He also knew those working with the Brotherhood Protectors often skirted it when necessary. It’s not like he’d never done it in the name of his country. The difference between what he did and what Eric had done so many times was that Bellamy never believed he was above the law. There was always a risk and he and his team would have to assess each situation and decide if the benefits outweighed the potential problems they would face if they got caught.

His first commanding officer told him there were three rules to rule-breaking.

First: Know and understand the rule.

Second: Have a good reason for breaking the rule.

And third: Be prepared to take full responsibility for the consequences.

That final one was always the key to any mission that required him and his team to do things that his government might have to look the other way.

Waylen chuckled. “Darius’ wife had a couple of run-ins with Eric when she was with the FBI. Fenmore isn’t a fan and she’s calling in a few favors from her old office to see what she can find out.”

“I know Fenmore,” Bellamy said. “I sat in front of her review board once. She’s a fair and reasonable woman. Always approaches things with an open mind. But how is she involved with these missing persons in Colombia if she’s no longer with the FBI and now working for our organization?”



“She does some consulting with the Feds and an old colleague of hers, a woman by the name of Georgia Adams, is in charge of the missing persons cases in South America. Georgia contacted Fenmore because of her connection with us about a year ago,” Waylen said. “Fenmore had a meeting scheduled with Tate for the day after he died in Texas. Obviously, that never happened.”

“Tate had to have found something, but he didn’t leave that with us. All he did was hint that Eric was involved in human trafficking. No details. But he did drop a name. Lemin Basker. Not sure how he ties in, though.”

Waylen nodded. “We know that he came back to the States for a meeting with the brass in Virginia. Then he had some other business in Texas. I’ve got someone trying to retrace his steps. Right now, we’ve got most of it mapped out except we don’t know who it was that entered that hotel and shot him. I’ve got my software working on facial recognition. I’ve spoken to the local cops in Texas and with his superiors inside DEA, including your parents, but their list of suspects is incredibly long.”

“I spoke to my folks this morning.” Bellamy set his mug on the post and turned to face the front door. “Eric is not on that list and from what we can gather, he wasn’t in Texas. But that doesn’t mean shit. I’m damn near positive he was in Colombia when that village was attacked, even though the paper trail says he didn’t get there until hours after it was over.”

“There’s no reason for Eric to be on that suspect list. Just because the two men didn’t like each other, doesn’t mean anything.”

“I spent half the night studying the timeline of Eric’s travels. According to the DEA, he was in Virginia when Tate was killed in Texas.” Bellamy arched a brow. “But he wasn’t in the office. He came in for a meeting at eight in the morning and was out by nine. No one saw him or heard from him until the next day at four. He states he was working leads on different cases. I can’t confirm any of that as of yet.”

“Keep working on it,” Waylen said. “I’ll see what I can do with my contacts as well.”

“We do know that Eric was in Colombia when Octavia and I were shot at. And Octavia believes he was the one who tried to kill her. His plane landed in Colombia hours after the raid ended. I don’t believe for one second he was on that plane. He was already there. That flight was to cover his tracks. We prove that and we’ve got him.” He slammed his hand down on the railing, knocking over his coffee. He didn’t bother trying to catch it. Thankfully the mug didn’t shatter. “He’s responsible and I don’t care what we nail him for; I just want him to pay.”

“We need to unravel this from the beginning and that’s figuring out what he was trying to cover up by raiding that village in the first place.” Waylen rested his hand on Bellamy’s shoulder. “I get how unsettling this is for you, but you’ve got to keep your emotions in check.”

Bellamy shifted his gaze and glared. “You don’t know what he did to her. ”

“Oh, I have a good idea.” Waylen lowered his chin. “Trust me, I know this is personal. I’ve been there. My wife’s ex-husband tried to blow her up on her own boat and that wasn’t the half of what that asshole did to Presley. But I need you focused on the problem and how to solve it. You have two roles in this assignment. To protect Octavia and to help us figure out what Eric was doing so we can connect the dots. He wasn’t running drugs. If he was, Tate and Nova would have nailed him by now. They knew the players and Eric wasn’t involved.”

“But he was doing something and whatever that is, it had something to do with where Octavia was located in Colombia.” Bellamy raked his fingers through his hair. “We know there are a lot of missing youths in that area. He’s got to be part of that human trafficking ring.”

“Fenmore mentioned that her friend Georgia had three dozen cases of missing kids

across South America,” Waylen said. “They are digging further and also looking into Lemin Basker as well.”

“I read that in the document that Darius sent. I haven’t had a chance to call him yet. On my large list of things to do today.” Bellamy let out a long breath as he leaned over and lifted his empty coffee mug. “I asked my dad for Eric’s travel records for the last eight years from any joint missions with the DEA. But what I really need to do is call Claudius and get a detailed record of every mission, every trip outside of the United States, and everything Eric has ever worked on during that time frame.”

“Doing that might raise the kind of questions from Claudius that we don’t want,” Waylen said. “He waffles between believing his daughter could be dead, to thinking there’s a big chance she’s still alive. He’s also been able to give our guys the slip twice. He actually called Hank Patterson in Montana and asked why he’s being watched.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. What did Hank say?”

“Played dumb, but Claudius is smart. We’re hanging back as best we can, staying out of sight. But I fear Claudius will do something crazy.”

Bellamy nodded. “All the more reason I should call him. He’s the only one we can ask without causing major red flags within any government organization.”

“Maybe. But he could also tell Eric that we’re looking into it. That could bring Eric to our front door.”

“From what I understand from my folks and Nova, Claudius has some serious issues with Eric lately. I believe we have to take that calculated risk.”

“I don’t know Nova. Do you trust her?”

“I trust Tate and my parents and they trust her, so yeah. I do.” Bellamy nodded. “Even though I want to strangle her for not telling me Octavia was alive. ”

“You’ve got to let that go,” Waylen said. “Holding on to that anger is only going to cloud your judgment. Again, focus on solving the problem. Not what’s already been done. That will only eat you from the inside out.”

Bellamy inched closer to the big picture window. Octavia sat on the sofa with Roxy curled up at her side. Damn dog ditched him in the middle of the night and found her way into the master bedroom and slept with her.

Traitor.

But Roxy always did have an affection for Octavia, which made what happened during that rescue mission so damn hard.

He’d wanted to join them in the big bed, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. If he had, things would have happened. He wouldn’t have been able to keep his hands to himself and now that he was in his home, his emotions were all over the map.

His love for her was as strong as ever.

But that hadn’t mended his broken heart. She’d chosen to spend the rest of her life with another man. With Eric Moody of all people. It didn’t matter to him that she’d broken it off. It still happened and that hurt more than he could ever put into words.

Of course, he blamed himself for that.

There was also the conversation he couldn’t bring himself to have. Something he’d have to do as soon as Waylen and Presley left, and before Nova showed up. Walking around on eggshells wasn’t helping anything. All it did was bring up painful

memories.

Waylen was right. He needed to let the past go. What was done was done. He couldn't change what happened. None of it.

They had broken up and he hadn't fought for her. That was on him. Not her.

He had no right to be mad that she hadn't come to him after the raid. Especially not with what happened after the botched rescue attempt.

"I know," Bellamy said. "Can we agree that I need to call Claudius?"

"All right. But what are you going to do when he starts asking you why you want to know?"

"I'm going to have to give him some truths," Bellamy said. "And you and Hawk are going to have to let me do that."

"Would you tell him his daughter is alive?"

Bellamy planted his hands on his hips. Octavia glanced over her shoulder and smiled. It wasn't a big one, but at least she didn't scowl and she had a right to be mad. He'd been an asshole ever since they'd landed in Hawaii. Something he needed to apologize for.

"Not right now." Bellamy turned. "But at some point, after we have more intel, we're going to need to turn up the heat and Eric already knows she's alive. Eventually, he will probably come looking for her here. I've always believed it's better to go on the offensive than constantly play defense."

"Okay. But let's regroup after you've had a chance to talk with him and we've had a

chance to go through Eric's personal emails."

"Sounds like a solid plan." The only question in his mind now was if he was going to tell Octavia that he was going to call her father. He should, but maybe he'd wait until after he'd spoken to Claudius.

Octavia snuggled with Roxy on the sofa while Maverick tried to get comfortable on her lap, but Roxy kept trying to nudge him away with her nose. It was too cute.

Roxy had been following her around all morning. Actually, she hadn't left her side since about two in the morning when she found her way into the massive bed that Bellamy had snuck out of sometime before midnight. He had brought her a sandwich, climbed in bed, and watched television until she fell asleep.

But he'd been so distant during that time. He barely spoke, and he didn't snuggle with her, staying on his side of the bed while the dogs took up the middle.

When she woke with a start at midnight, the dogs and Bellamy were nowhere to be found. But the cats were dancing around her head. She didn't bother to go find Bellamy. Whatever had crawled up his ass, she didn't want to discuss because it probably had something to do with her.

Perhaps he regretted being with her after all.

"I'm glad the clothes fit," Presley said. "Men aren't usually very good with sizes. My husband tries to buy me clothes, and they are always two sizes too big or way too small." She laughed. "But he always gets the jewelry right."

"I appreciate you bringing them over."

"I'm really sorry about everything you've been through." Presley held up her hand. "I

don't know much. Waylen doesn't like to bring work home, so we don't talk too much about it, but he did tell me some and made it clear I'm not allowed to tell anyone. I want you to know if you need anything, I'm right down the road. Day or night."

"Thanks." Octavia didn't know what else to say and didn't really want to discuss herself or her problems. "How long have you and Waylen been married?"

"Not quite two years, but we've known each other since we were kids. He was my first love. Really, my only true love, even though I was married once before. I'd be lost without him."

Octavia glanced over her shoulder and locked gazes with Bellamy through the window. She smiled. It was hard not to remember all the good times. And there were so many. More than there were bad times, though they had shared some heartbreak. "I've known Bellamy since middle school. He was the first boy I ever kissed." She had no idea why that came flying out of her mouth.

"Waylen was my first everything." Presley leaned over and rested her hand on Octavia's leg. "You're in good hands with Bellamy and everyone at the Brotherhood Protectors."

The front door swung open and the men strolled through it.

"Come on, babe," Waylen said. "We better go. My mom loves that little one of ours, but there is only so much she can take."

Presley stood. "It was nice meeting you."

"You too." Octavia didn't dare move in fear of disrupting the delicate balance of the animals. But it didn't matter. Roxy stretched and leaped from the sofa to get a little

love from her master. She glanced up at him with excitement in her eyes while her tail wagged eagerly back and forth.

Maverick darted from Octavia's lap and raced under the sofa.

Who knew where the other two cats were.

Bellamy said his goodbyes and now they were alone in his big house once again. The silence was too deafening to bear but she couldn't move a muscle. The weight of her situation rested heavily on her shoulders. When she'd been in Colombia, every time Tate came to visit, it brought it all back. The fear of what could happen if Eric knew he'd failed at putting an end to her life. It was so paralyzing she'd spend the next few days hiding in her hut.

But then she'd go back to teaching the kids and women in the village. She loved that part of her life. It was simple and she could forget about everything that had happened.

Or perhaps it had been cowardly of her, leaving the problems of her life to Tate and Nova to deal with. But the longer she stayed in Colombia, the more they believed she'd been onto something when it came to the missing young people and the connection that had to the raid.

And Eric.

She wanted to him to pay but didn't know how to make that happen. Tate didn't think rising from the dead would do any good. Not until he had more information.

Bellamy eased onto the sofa. "Nova's meeting with Cooper and Hawk before coming out here."



“Why?”

“Hawk wants to have a chat with her about a few things regarding what she’s been working on and since Cooper knows her pretty well, he wants him there.” Bellamy shifted, turning his gaze. “We need to talk. ”

“The last time you started a conversation off like that you told me you never wanted to see me again.”

“That’s because you showed up at my place rambling on about your decision to take an extended post with the Peace Corps while waving your hand around with a massive engagement ring on your finger. What the hell did you...” He let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, O. I don’t want to fight about stuff that’s in the past and that’s not what we need to discuss.”

“Okay.” She tried to swallow, but her heart hammered in her throat, which had turned dry. She reached for her tea and took a slow sip. “Why are you so mad?”

“It’s not that I’m angry.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Though I do owe you one hell of an apology for how I’ve been behaving since we’ve stepped foot in Hawaii.” He reached out and traced her scar with his index finger. “I have no excuse for it. I’m so grateful that you’re alive. It’s hard for me to accept that you couldn’t trust me enough to reach out, but I do understand why.” He kissed her cheek. “I hate myself for taking out my frustrations for my failures on you and I’m sorry. I hope that you can forgive me.”

She wrapped her arms around his strong body and hugged him tight. “I don’t blame you for what happened. ”

“But you did blame me and Roxy for not finding you and frankly, I blame myself.” His hands danced up and down her back. “I knew something was wrong with her

when the search started. All the dogs were acting off and we couldn't figure out what was wrong. It caused a lot of problems for my team for years."

She pressed her hand against his chest. The thumping of his heart connected to her palm. "When Tate mentioned Eric could have been part of a scheme to interfere with the search, I couldn't believe it. I mean, I had called off our engagement, but why would he do that? Why wouldn't he want me found?" She covered Bellamy's mouth. "At that time, I wasn't accepting that it could have been Eric who attacked me."

Bellamy's lips drew into a tight line. "But it was and let's hope that he and I aren't ever alone in the same room, because my temper will get the better of me." He rolled his shoulders. "However, this is not what I wanted to talk to you about and only a small part of what caused my bad mood."

She cocked her head. "Now you've frightened me."

"I should have asked you this question back in Colombia." He closed his eyes for a few seconds before blinking them open. "I didn't use a condom. I have no idea if you're on birth control and the last time we didn't use protection, you ended up pregnant."

Her heart dropped to her stomach. How could she have been so reckless? How could she not even think about that? Much less remember their loss. Or what it had done to both of them.

She gasped. Instinctively, her hands covered her stomach, not her mouth.

"Crap," Bellamy said under his breath. "So, I take it that means you're not taking anything to prevent pregnancy."

"I haven't had any reason to." She jumped to her feet, nearly stepping on Ollie. Poor

kitty. She made a beeline for under the sofa. Octavia made her way around the coffee table and paced. Tears burned her eyes. She remembered like it was yesterday the day she found out she was pregnant with Bellamy's baby. She'd been thirty years old and they hadn't been in the best place in their relationship. "I can't believe neither one of us thought about that."

"It's not like I came to Colombia believing I was going to get laid."

She stopped pacing and glared. "That was crude."

He raised his hands. "Just saying I didn't bring any condoms with me and there's nothing we can do about it now except wait it out."

She snorted. "I've only gone without birth control once and we both know what happened that time." A tear dribbled down her cheek. "You didn't want to be a father back then, I'm sure that hasn't changed."

"Excuse me? I never said I didn't want to have a family." He folded his arms across his chest. "I wanted that baby."

She arched a brow. "You were not all that excited when I told you."

"I was in shock and when I suggested you move in with me, you got mad. You went off on me about not wanting me to do something out of obligation. It made no sense. Obligation had nothing to do with it. I loved you and I wanted us to be a family. But then you lost the baby and a month later told me you needed space."

"And you gave it to me in spades," she said. "You let me walk right out of your life."

"Jesus, O. Is that how you see it?" He stood, closing the gap. "We talked about getting married and having kids, but it was always in the future. I thought there were

things you wanted to do and I was willing to wait. I didn't want to be the kind of man who held you back. I didn't want you to resent me because I got the career I wanted, but you didn't."

"Same old argument and the rub is you never heard me. Never really understood me." She pointed to Roxy, who was sprawled out on the floor. She covered her nose with her paw. "You get your dog more than me."

"That's not fair and I don't believe it's true."

"But it is," Octavia said. "I wanted to marry you. Not move in with you, but you never asked."

"Because you never gave me the chance." He grabbed her hand and yanked her toward the stairs.

"What are you doing?"

"I need to show you something." He took the steps, holding on to her tightly. "Maybe I didn't handle that situation well. And you're right, I gave you too much space. But I was hurting too and you wouldn't talk to me. When I tried, you shut me down and don't tell me you didn't, because that would be a false statement." He glanced over his shoulder when he got to the top of the stairs and glared. "I even showed up at your apartment with flowers two months after we broke up. I told you that I still loved you and that I wanted us to get back together. I asked you to let me take you out to dinner. I had this whole thing planned, but you refused."

"I had something going on that night."

"Yeah, a date with Eric," he mumbled. "That killed me." He turned and tugged her toward the master as if they were running a race.

Once in his bedroom, he made a beeline for the nightstand. He yanked open the bottom drawer, shuffled through a few things, and pulled out a small box. “When you called me to tell me you were on your way to the hospital because you were having a miscarriage, I was at the jewelry store buying this.” He shoved the velvet box under her nose. “I had it with me when I came to your house. Imagine my surprise when I learned you were seeing that asshole just a couple of months after we lost our child.”

Her chest tightened. Her blood froze. So much of the year before she’d died in Colombia made sense. All of Bellamy’s anger and why he’d kept his distance. With a shaky hand, she took the box and lifted the lid. Tears poured from her eyes as she stared at a diamond engagement ring. It wasn’t flashy like the one Eric had bought her, which she had kind of hated.

No. It was perfect.

It wasn’t too big, but it sat up in a six-prong setting and shined beautifully. It was exactly what she envisioned herself wearing. She glanced between it and Bellamy.

“You should have told me,” she whispered.

“I thought it would have been in poor taste after you lost the baby. You were so distraught. And then angry. At me.”

“Because I didn’t believe you wanted the baby,” she managed to choke out.

“And I didn’t want you to think I was asking you to marry me out of anything other than my love for you, so I thought waiting a little bit might be the right thing to do.” He took the box, closed it, and put it back in the drawer. “When I learned you were with Eric, I was devastated and I almost sold the ring, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “I know I screwed up so many things. Especially during that time in our lives. I can’t go back and fix them. I’m sorry I hurt

you. I'm sorry I didn't show my excitement for the baby right away." He lifted his gaze. "I was happy."

She cupped his face. "I was too."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his forehead against her midsection. "When your father told me that you and Eric got engaged, my whole world shifted."

"What do you mean?"

"Call me crazy, but up until that point, I still believed we'd get back together. After that, I gave up hope. When I thought you were dead, I decided that marriage and family were not in the cards for me. I would remain single for the rest of my life." He tilted his head. "I have never been so confused by my emotions than I am right now. You're not dead. You're alive." He ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass, digging his fingers into her flesh. "You're not with Eric."

"That man tried to kill me." She shivered, remembering that final kick to her gut as her attacker leaned over her, speaking in Spanish, telling her she was going to die .

Bellamy pulled her to his lap, cradling her in his strong arms. "I'm not going to ever let him hurt you again." He pressed his lips over her mouth in a tender kiss. "We can't change the past, but what are we going to do if you're pregnant?"

"I have no idea," she whispered. "I'm too old to even be thinking about it."

He laughed. "You're thirty-eight. That's a far cry from too old to be a mother."

"I can't believe we're even having this conversation." She crawled off his lap and onto the bed. "Technically, I'm still dead to most of the world. Eric is hell-bent on finding me and finishing what he failed to do five years ago. It's insane that after all

these years we even let this happen.”

“I know jack shit about this stuff.” He fluffed a few pillows and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, nuzzling her head into his chest. “How long do we have to wait to find out?”

She thought about that for a hot second. She’d always struggled with birth control pills, which is why she’d gone off them years ago. But they had regulated her period. “A day after I’m considered late, but that’s kind of hard to calculate because every month is different. Sometimes I even skip a month.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m trying to remember when I had my last period. I don’t track it,” she said. “But I could probably take a test in two weeks.”

“Can I ask you a crazy question?”

“Nothing could be more insane than this conversation, so sure. Go ahead.”

“What would you do if you were pregnant?”

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She’d always wanted to have a family, especially with Bellamy.

When she’d been with Eric, they had talked about it and at first, she’d been on board. She thought they loved each other. But as time passed, she filed that thought in the back of her mind. Eric was a selfish man and when she took the extended post with the Peace Corps, she wasn’t sure about anything when it came to her relationship with Eric.

“That was an unfair question,” Bellamy said.

“No. It wasn’t. I’m just scared. Not only of that, but of everything.” She lifted her gaze. “I want answers. I want to know why all those people were murdered. Why Eric raided that village and why he thought killing me was necessary.”

“You asked him to look into those missing persons, but you also took it to the local government. Did you take that to Tate before the raid?”

“I did.” She nodded.

“Tate had a conversation with Fenmore Ford, who now works for the Brotherhood Protectors, but she used to be with the FBI. I believe that’s our connection.”

“I’m not following.”

“Fenmore took it to a friend of hers. An FBI agent by the name of Georgia Adams. She’s been working on a human trafficking ring out of South America for years. They have a code name for the person running it, but they don’t have a real identity. Darius thinks Lemin could be that person and the go-between is Eric.”

Octavia bolted to an upright position. “I’ve read through everything. How did you get that from what Tate left?”

“When I study his travels to and from Colombia, it coincides with some of the missing kids. Darius has started looking into Lemin and made even more connections. But I need more intel on what both were doing and that means I need to go to your dad.”

“You want to call my father?”



“It’s not like I haven’t spoken to him before. And he knows I can’t stand Eric. With some of the chatter that’s been going on, he won’t think twice about me reaching out.”

“I don’t know.” Octavia snagged a pillow and hugged it tight. “And now that I’m back in the States, it’s hard for me not to want to see him. But I struggle with his involvement with Eric. He played such a huge role in Eric’s career. ”

“Eric has always been power hungry. But he’s also a master manipulator and as smart as your dad is, it doesn’t mean that Eric couldn’t have played him.” Bellamy palmed her cheek. “I need to call your dad. I need information if I’m going to find out exactly what Eric was up to so I can make him pay for what he’s done so you can live your life again.” He pressed his hand against her stomach. “And so we can have a second chance. Whether or not you’re pregnant, I at least want to see if?—”

Ding-dong.

She jumped.

“That must be Nova,” Bellamy said, slipping from the bed. “I mean it, O. I think it’s obvious I never stopped caring about you.” He turned and stepped out of the bedroom.

She flopped back on the bed, still holding the pillow tight, staring at the skylight. No way could she be pregnant. That would be a complication she couldn’t deal with.

And the idea that Bellamy wanted to pick up where they had left off eight years ago was ludicrous.

Wasn’t it?

But her heart told her it wasn't.

Even if her mind told her she was flipping crazy.

“Let’s go.” Bellamy patted his leg and both Tucker and Roxy raced past him, flying up the stairs, nearly knocking him over. Hayden lazily strolled up the stairs as if he didn’t have a care in the world. No matter where the dogs landed on the bed, Hayden got her way. Whatever space he wanted, Roxy would gladly give it up, and Tucker would lose the battle.

Bellamy stood in the center of the stairs and jingled the bell, calling Ollie and Maverick. He didn’t typically force them to follow him, but tonight was one of those nights where he would close the bedroom door, locking in all the animals. He needed to do that with the cats because of the kitty litter.

And the dogs were working.

But they would have stayed with him anyway.

Well, Tucker never left his side unless he put her in the kennel. Roxy was a different story. While he continued to train her, retirement was no longer in her future. It was her present. It wasn’t that she didn’t have the skill set any longer because she did. But she wasn’t as quick. And honestly, she didn’t have the drive to perform and please like she used to.

That was okay. She was getting up there in years and she knew the second he brought home Tucker that her time as a working dog was limited. The first few months, Roxy didn’t pay Tucker any attention. As a matter of fact, she was downright mean. However, that didn’t last. Roxy was a smart dog, and she knew she could never be

replaced in his heart.

Ollie flew around the corner at the base of the stairs, skidding to a stop before leaping up the staircase toward Bellamy's legs. He laughed as she tried to climb up his jeans to get her treat.

"Not yet, you silly girl. Where is your brother?" Bellamy rang the bell a second time and a tiny little meow echoed from the top of the stairs. "All right. Let's all go to bed." He scooped up the two little kittens, tucking them under his arms.

The door at the top of the stairs squeaked open and Nova stuck her head out. "What the hell was that dinging?"

Bellamy chuckled. "Just collecting all the animals so if you open your door in the middle of the night, one of the cats doesn't get trapped in there and go nuts on you."

She reached out and ran her fingers through Maverick's soft coat. "I wouldn't mind snuggling in with one of these cuties. But I get the whole litter box thing and these two run for cover every time they see me."

"Give them one more day and they will be your best friend."

"And what about their owner?" Nova dropped her hand and lifted her gaze. "Are you going to be mad at me forever?"

"No, and I should have said I was sorry when you first showed up. Running late for a meeting is no excuse and I appreciate you being here for Octavia. It's good for her to have you around. You serve as a bridge from the last five years into the present."

"She's struggling with her decision to stay dead. Besides the hurt it's causing those she cares about, she believes it's why Tate is dead."

“It’s not her fault. Not to beat a dead horse, but you and Tate made a huge mistake by trying to do this alone.” Sometimes Bellamy didn’t know when to shut his trap. One of the many reasons the few women he’d tried to have relationships with after Octavia had told him to take a hike.

Nova leaned against the doorjamb. “While I don’t necessarily disagree with you, the situation was complicated and if you’d take five seconds to look at it from a different perspective, you might understand.” She held up her hand and lowered her chin. “I totally get your point of view. I’d be upset if I were walking in your shoes. But you need to take out the fact that you have a past history with Octavia, that she was your girlfriend, and only consider her as an informant and person who needed protection in a raid that didn’t make sense. If you can do that, you might be able to see that you probably would have done exactly the same thing.”

“Nova, you’re not telling me shit that a dozen other people haven’t tried to get me to see. Trust me, I understand the ripple effect. I get what you and Tate were trying to do and honestly, I’m tired of having the same old argument. We’re good. However, I need you to be honest with me and my team from this point forward.”

She nodded. “You should know that your parents are worried about you. So much so that they expect me to report back each night. I hate lying to them and they think you’re going to go off the deep end, especially if Eric makes his way to Hawaii.”

“I’m a little worried about that myself,” Bellamy admitted. “I was going to text you before I went to bed about one piece of information I got at the office today.”

“If it’s about Eric putting in for a couple of days off, Cooper already told me.”

Bellamy had asked Cooper about Nova twice while at the Brotherhood Protectors ranch and all he got was a couple of grunts followed by they were just friends. Bellamy wasn’t so sure about Cooper’s true feelings for Nova. Maybe they had only

gone out on a handful of dates, but anyone with eyes could see there was something brewing between those two.

Rusty and Ethan both agreed.

Even Waylen asked about it.

“Don’t give me that look,” Nova said.

Bellamy jerked his head back. The kittens in his arms had started to squirm, while Hayden rolled around on his back halfway down the hall. Both Roxy and Tucker were well aware they were working and sat tall at the top of the stairs.

Good dogs.

“And what look would that be?”

“The one where you’re halfway between judging me and trying to figure out what you don’t know. I hate it when you do that. Just come out and ask me what you want to know, although I’m sure my answer won’t be any different than your best friend’s.” She pursed her lips and cocked her head.

“Fine. Have it your way.” He adjusted his kittens before they started scratching his arms. “But I’ve got fifty bucks that the two of you end up together.”

She tossed her head back and laughed. Hard. “Right. Next thing you’re going to tell me is you’re not in love with Octavia.”

His heart dropped to his toes and then flew right to his throat. Not because he couldn’t admit it. He could and would. But he couldn’t say it to Octavia. Not yet. Too much had happened in the last few days. Not to mention, he needed to solve the

problem so she could have her life back.

Then he'd tell her exactly how he felt. Hopefully that happened before she took that damn test. His chest tightened. That did scare the crap out of him. It wasn't anything he was prepared for. "I'm not having that discussion with you," he said. "If you need anything, I'll be in the master. Either text or knock on the door."

"Master bedroom?" She pushed from the doorjamb and stared at him with wide eyes.

He laughed. "Good night, Nova. See you bright and early." He turned on his heel, both dogs following his lead. Hayden rolled, scrambled to his feet, and scurried off into the master. Once inside, he closed the door, setting the kittens down and pulling little treats for everyone from his pockets. He eyed the bed, which was empty.

Octavia had mentioned she might take another long hot bath before turning in. He was glad she was taking full advantage of his massive bathroom. However, he neglected to discuss tonight's sleeping arrangement. He wasn't about to separate the dogs. That wouldn't go over well and the cats wouldn't appreciate it either. He could leave the door open to whatever room he chose to sleep in, but that meant the cats and Roxy would be going back and forth and it was just so much easier to close the master.

And share a bed with Octavia.

He could be a gentleman and he could keep his hands to himself. If that's what she wanted. And if that was the case, he'd let Roxy sleep half the night in the bed and then change places with Tucker.

That was one nice thing about having two working dogs. Actually, Tucker would take the lion's share of the work. He'd split it three ways, having Roxy take maybe three hours in the middle of the night.

If Octavia had other things on her mind, well, there was a full box of condoms in the nightstand. But that would be her call.

“Tucker, guard.” He pointed toward the door. If he hadn’t heard rumblings about Eric wanting to take time off work and more chatter about possibly coming to Hawaii, he wouldn’t bother with the exercise.

The bathroom door opened and Octavia crossed the threshold wearing his boxers and his shirt.

He swallowed. “Hello,” he managed, unable to tear his gaze from her beautiful body. Even the animals paused what they were doing to soak in her radiance. Without giving too much thought to what he was doing, he ripped off his shirt, breezed past her, and dumped it in the dirty hamper. He snagged his toothbrush and loaded it with toothpaste. “I see you’re enjoying the heated floor.” He chuckled, wiggling his toes. “I think I’ve turned it on twice. Seems odd to have in Hawaii.” He rinsed his toothbrush under the water and went about the business of getting ready for bed, not paying too much attention to Octavia, other than her puzzled expression as she pulled back the comforter and climbed under the sheets.

“Not when your floor for the last five years has been made up of mostly dirt.” She fluffed the pillow and glared as he strolled around the foot of the bed and climbed in next to her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Do I really need to answer that?” He lifted the TV remote and found the latest game before dimming the lights. “Before you go and try to kick me out, I need both dogs in one place. We have to run on the assumption that Eric is coming. He’s a sneaky devil and I don’t trust him. For the foreseeable future, we’re in the same bedroom until this is over.”

She arched a brow. “Nova is down the hall. Some big dude by the name of Mano is



parked down the street.” She waggled her finger under his nose. “And your buddies are taking turns driving by. Not to mention you snuck out of here last night because you don’t know how to have an adult conversation.”

He pursed his lips and folded his arms across his chest. “Not true. You needed sleep and I had work to do.” While part of what she said was true, so was the fact he had piles of paperwork he needed to comb through. There were so many details Tate hadn’t left behind, and Nova had only scratched the surface.

He still didn’t have a good handle on it.

But he was closer.

All he had to do was put the pieces of the puzzle together before Eric landed in Hawaii.

He gave himself less than a week.

“Speaking of work, did you talk to my father today?” She rolled to her side, resting her cheek on the palm of her hand.

“He was in meetings all day. He texted and said he’d call me on the way to the office in the morning.” Bellamy set the remote on the coffee table. He’d been given two reports from the Brotherhood Protectors man following Claudius. Currently, her father was in his home entertaining a few buddies for a poker game. What Bellamy didn’t know was if this was a regular game or an impromptu one.

He figured that might make a difference.

“I did have a lengthy conversation with both my parents. They gave us some good intel regarding some of the things Tate was working on.” He tucked a piece of

Octavia's hair behind her ear. "We all know my folks didn't care for Eric and not because of you." He ran his hand up and down her arm, enjoying her silky skin. "Turns out, both my mom and dad were helping Tate and Nova gather anything they could to prove Eric was up to something in South America, especially after they connected your missing youths as drug runners, but no matter how much they tried, they could never bring it back to Eric. My dad mentioned having a discussion with Tate regarding human trafficking, but Tate said it was only a theory and had no evidence. My parents couldn't pull too many resources without hard evidence."

"And Tate couldn't out me as the one who had been in Eric's ear. Not after I died. There was no way to explain where he would have learned that juicy piece of information."

"Exactly." Bellamy wrapped his arms around her body. "My parents are smart. They know something is up. They didn't push me too hard, which tells me they think they know what it is. That scares me. Especially because when they mentioned you, they didn't start in on how I need to move on with my life." He pressed his finger over her lips. "Nova came at me a little bit ago, saying my parents were worried about me and they wanted reports each evening. That shouldn't strike me as odd, but in this context it does."

"Why?"

"They've always worried about my anger toward Eric and that if I were in the same room with him—alone—that my temper would get the better of me. I've struggled for years to comprehend what happened with Roxy and the other K9s. Compound that with Eric being the one to tell me and my team we weren't fit for the K9 Military Pilot program. He actually rubbed what happened that day in my face. As if your death was my fault. He pushed my buttons during the meeting and again in the hallway. Cooper and the guys had to hold me back."

“Eric enjoyed goading you.”

“I won’t disagree with that, but you know my parents better than most. They wouldn’t have Nova reporting back to them regarding my demeanor if they weren’t fishing for something. If they didn’t believe the chatter. And they wouldn’t come right out and ask me unless they were alone in their car on a secure line and that would require one of us to set it up.”

Octavia bolted to an upright position, clutching the covers to her chin and shaking her head. “They’re playing Nova. Working her for information and she’s giving it to them without even knowing it. So are you. They know I’m alive. ”

“Based on the fact they didn’t even ask me about my last mission, where it was, or anything related to Tate and Colombia, I’d say your assessment is correct.”

“This is not good.”

“It’s not bad.” He tugged her back to his chest, fiddling with the fabric of her shirt. “You rising from the dead is a play I’ve been thinking about all day. It brings the players to my territory and allows me to control the narrative and the takedown. It also strips Eric of some power. He can’t come slinking in here like a fucking snake in the dark of night.”

She shivered.

“Sorry. Me and my stupid analogies.”

“It was a good one.” She pressed her lips against his neck. They were warm. Seductive. Her tongue darted out and caressed the sensitive spot just under his earlobe.

He couldn't concentrate on anything but her when she did that. "Keep that up and I'll be reaching for those condoms tucked in the top drawer of my nightstand."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't use you like this, but I need my mind to stop this endless loop and sex is the only action I know that will do that."

He cupped her chin. "You can't use me if I'm a willing participant." He kissed her. Hard. Wild. Passionate .

As the kiss deepened, Bellamy's resolve to keep Octavia safe hardened. For years he'd lived with a painful void in his heart, thinking she was gone forever. Now that he had her back, he knew one thing was certain. He wouldn't let her slip away again.

"Promise me something," Octavia whispered against his lips as they broke apart, her eyes shimmering under the moonrays filtering from the skylight.

"Anything," he vowed, stroking a thumb over the delicate scar marring her cheek—a stark reminder of the trauma she had survived.

"Promise me you won't let Eric hurt me... or use me to gain power." Her voice was barely a whisper but her words resounded in his heart, sinking deep.

A surge of protectiveness overwhelmed him. "I'll burn the world down before letting that happen, O." His voice was fierce, leaving no room for doubt.

She nodded, pressing her body closer to his as if seeking solace. Her hand traced a path on his chest, and she glanced up at him through her lashes, an unspoken question lingering in her gaze. "Bellamy... what we have... this second chance... it's real, right?"

His heart clenched at the vulnerability in her voice.

"Yes, it's real. More real than anything I've ever known." He lifted her shirt over her head and tossed it across the room. Being with her again was literally a dream come true. He could only hope he was man enough this time not to ruin everything.

Octavia's lips curved into a small, hopeful smile at his words, and she relaxed in his arms. As Bellamy watched her, his heart hammered inside his chest, as if his love for her etched itself more deeply into his soul with every passing moment.

His fingers traced a path down her bare shoulder, awe washing over him at the privilege of having her trust again. His decision was clear; he would expose Eric's manipulation and greed, no matter the cost. As long as Octavia remained safe and unaffected.

Suddenly, Octavia's fingers danced over the tattoo on his chest, the Marine Raider insignia inked over his heart. It was a mark of his past, one that he wore with rugged pride.

"Do you ever miss it?" she asked softly, her gaze locked on the intricate design.

He hesitated for a moment before replying. "The action? The adrenaline rush? Sometimes," Bellamy admitted. There was an inherent thrill in being part of the military—in knowing that you were serving your country. But he knew all too well the toll it took on personal lives. "But not more than how much I've missed you."

Octavia's smile widened. Her touch was gentle yet firm against his skin—grounding him, assuaging any lingering doubts he had about their past and future.

There was too much at stake now—Octavia's safety, exposing Eric's malicious intentions, and dealing with whatever consequences this investigation would bring forth. But for now, he wanted to lose himself in Octavia—to cherish this second chance they had been given.

She'd always been the rhythm of his heart. The one thing that made his soul connect to the outside world. She gave his purpose in life more of a singular meaning.

But he'd been too wrapped up in what he thought—instead of what he felt—to follow what his heart knew he needed more than anything.

Not this time.

No way could he live through her walking out of his life again.

With more aggression than necessary, he yanked her boxers to her ankles and kissed his way to her core. The need to give her pleasure filled every cell in his body. It roared through his veins like a roller coaster. He tried to be gentle, but his desperation gripped his better judgment.

Her fingernails dug into his scalp, encouraging him to go deeper. Harder.

He refused to relent until her body rocked and shook with a violent orgasm.

And that's exactly what happened as she slammed her thighs against his face, arching her back and calling out his name.

It was hard not to have a moment of pride.

Kissing her taut stomach, his breath hitched. He paused for a second, splaying his hand over her midsection before reluctantly reaching for the drawer of his nightstand.

He contemplated going without. They were already waiting to find out if there were consequences to the last time. The fact that it might already be a possibility didn't give him the right to keep doing it.

A mistake was meant to be learned from and not repeated.

Only, being with Octavia could never been seen as a mistake and how could a child with her be viewed as that way too?

He shoved those thoughts right out of his head as he scooted up the bed, while she kept grabbing his hand, stopping him from opening the drawer.

“O. I need to get the protection,” he managed between ragged breaths.

She blinked. Her eyes filled with water. Visions of their painful past stared back at him. Their loss filled his heart and soul as if it hadn’t happened eight years ago but was happening now. It had crushed them both and then tore them apart.

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He kissed her temple. Her forehead. Her cheek. And finally, pressed his lips over her mouth. “I know, O. I know.” The only thing he could do now was let her know she was loved. That their baby had been loved.

And he did love her. More than anything in the world.

Kissing away a few tears that escaped her eyes, he accepted he’d give Octavia whatever she wanted. Needed. But he hadn’t the slightest clue what that was in this moment. In years past, he didn’t dare ask. He’d take a calculated risk and hope he’d made the right decision.

But he was a changed man.

He fanned her face, staring into her beautiful, loving eyes. He managed to stick his hand in the drawer and pulled out one of the condoms. “Do you want me to use this or not?” He honestly had no idea what he wanted her answer to be. He knew what it

should be.

Neither one of them were ready or equipped to deal with a family. It had less to do with the situation and more that they still needed time to heal. Time to get to know one another. Time to prove he was truly a better man. One worthy of her love.

Her eyes grew wide and hint of shock glimmered in her irises.

“We’ve already danced with fate. I can admit I don’t really understand how the female?— ”

“That’s a load of crap. You know exactly how the biology works and you know it.”

“It’s not an exact science and not the point.” He waved the foil package under her nose. “This is your call.”

“It affects you too.”

He sighed, dropping his forehead to her shoulder. If this had been anyone other than Octavia, it wouldn’t even be a discussion. He’d be putting it on so fast it would make his head spin. “It’s nuts to go without, but when it comes to you, no one has ever said I’ve done the logical thing.”

“That’s the best nonanswer I’ve ever heard.” She lifted his chin. “You should wear it.”

“Okay.” Deep down, he knew it was the right thing to do. However, a small part of him wanted to push the boundaries. He wanted to ride this wave in hopes he never crashed and burned.

But reality seeped into his bones.



He slid the condom into place and rolled to his back. If he was going to have to wear the damn thing, he was at least going to get his favorite position. Rising up, he toyed with one nipple between his thumb and forefinger, while he took the other into his mouth. He was rewarded with an arch of her back as she rolled her hips over him, accepting his length.

Gripping her thighs, he guided her, slowly at first, so as to make sure he didn't lose it before it really began. The condom should have helped, but with Octavia, nothing could have kept the passion from her body seeping over to his. The need to give her another orgasm rippled from his toes to his fingertips. He lowered his hand, rubbing his thumb across her hard nub.

She tossed her head back and moaned, jerking her hips, grinding against him in an intoxicating dance. Her hands slammed against his chest. Her muscles tightened. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

He exploded with force inside her, his fingers digging into her thighs. His breath stuck in his lungs like a caged animal. He couldn't swallow, much less speak.

But he didn't need to.

All he needed was Octavia.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest, letting out a long sigh, kissing her temple. "My sweet O," he whispered.

She snuggled in next to him as he pulled the covers up over their bodies. The moon and the stars shined bright in the dark sky. The irony of the broken condom wasn't lost on him, but he'd wait until fresh light to bring that up.

For now, he'd relish in holding her in his arms. Engulfed by their shared warmth and

unspoken promises, oblivious to the storm that was sure to come his way in the light of day.

Bellamy squinted. His hands shook. He squeezed his cell. Un-fucking-believable. Deep down he knew this would happen. “Nova?” He glanced over his shoulder. “Get out here, now.”

“What’s going on?” Octavia lifted her gaze from the book she’d been reading. It had been a quiet morning. They’d woken up early. Long before the sun rose. She’d managed to talk him into a morning soak in his bathtub. It wasn’t half-bad. Of course, she was naked and one thing led to another.

Always a good way to start the day.

He took a second look at the text. He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell her about the news he’d learned yet or not. He’d vowed to be honest. She deserved that, but he also now needed to adjust his plan.

The front door squeaked open. “I was literally on my way.” Nova waved her phone. “What do you want to do?”

“Take a walk with me.” He pushed to a standing position. A million and one things raced through his brain. One of those thoughts was that Claudius Reynolds had played him and he fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

Octavia bolted to her feet. She gripped his forearms. “Nope. You promised me you wouldn’t keep me in the dark. Now tell me, what the hell is going on?”

“I need to speak with Nova about...” About what? Brotherhood Protectors business? DEA Business? FBI stuff? If he lied or made up some bullshit story, Octavia would be all over his ass.

The truth wouldn't be much better.

He ran a hand over his mouth. “You're going to find out in fifteen minutes anyway.” He sighed. “Let's go inside.”

“No, Bellamy,” Nova pleaded. “That's a mistake. We need to get her away from here before he arrives.”

“It doesn't matter.” Bellamy opened the door. “He went to great lengths to fly to Hawaii without anyone knowing so he could chat with me. And probably her too.”

“Who are we talking about?” Octavia dug her fingers into his flesh, pausing in the foyer over the compass. Usually, he'd enjoy that .

But not at this moment. Instead, it reminded him that he was about to come face-to-face with someone who could potentially want to wring his neck.

And he'd have a good reason to do so.

“I need more caffeine.” He released her grip, sidestepped both her and Nova, and made a beeline for the kitchen.

“One of you better start talking.” Octavia held his hand, scurrying along at his side. “I'm the one someone wants to kill.”

“I'm going to sit outside and wait for the yelling to stop,” Nova said.

He didn't blame her for the sentiment. Raising his cell, he shot her a text to make sure she had her weapon and to be ready, just in case they had other company as well, but as soon as Claudius arrived, they were to switch places. He would deal with him, and Nova would stay inside with Octavia.

At least at first.

He also sent a text to the team, including Hawk. He copied Logan and Ramey Sarich, two men from the Aegis Network. The same two men who were responsible for getting Claudius to Hawaii under the radar.

They all should have notified him sooner.

But Logan and Ramey had no idea Octavia was alive and Claudius hadn't mentioned that he believed she was on Big Island until they landed .

And his team hadn't known about Claudius until he'd landed in Hawaii and Logan decided he should let Hawk know.

If he hadn't done that, Bellamy would have been blindsided.

Not that this was much better.

He tucked his phone in his back pocket, snagged a mug, set it under the machine, and hit the tallest coffee setting. Turning, he leaned against the counter and stared into a pair of intense, angry eyes. If looks could kill, he'd be six feet under. He sucked in a deep breath through his nose and let it out with a big swish through his teeth. "Your father is on his way here."

"Excuse me?" Her voice hit a new high and it wasn't pleasant. It was more like nails slowly making their way across a chalkboard.

He rubbed his ear. “Remember that other organization he hired a couple of years ago to look for you?”

She nodded.

“He used them to transport him here without anyone the wiser, including me.” Bellamy raked his fingers through his hair. “Only Logan, a man I’ve crossed paths with once or twice, thought he should give me a heads-up.” Bellamy wagged his finger. “Your dad knows I’m up to something and he asked Logan and his brother point-blank if they knew anything about you. Or a mission I was on in Colombia. To make matters worse, my mother called your dad early this morning. There are too many loose ends and that means Eric is only one step behind.”

Octavia slumped in one of the stools and cupped her face. “Your mom has always had a soft spot for my dad.”

“My mom wanted to know what he thought about the chatter regarding you and if I had mentioned it.” Bellamy was shocked that’s what she got hung up on, but for now, he’d run with it. “My mom has always admired your father’s ability as a single parent, especially through those teenage years.”

“According to my dad, I wasn’t a difficult kid; he just didn’t understand me.” She sighed. “I suppose I never made that easy.”

“You could be stubborn when you set your mind to something.” The coffee maker gurgled out the last drop of the bitter brew. He twisted, lifting the mug to his lips, taking a small sip, careful not to burn his mouth.

“I always wanted to make him proud. And my mom. I’ve thought about her so much over these last five years. I was only fifteen when she died.”

“She was incredibly proud of you,” Bellamy said. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have much time, so I will get right to the heart of things. I need you to let me have some time alone with your dad before we reunite you.”

She sat up taller. “You’re going to let me show myself?”

He nodded. “I see no point in you remaining dead to him.” He took another slow draw of the hot liquid before setting it on the counter and moving to the other side of the island. He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I was going to chat with Hawk and Waylen this morning about this, but I think you staying hidden isn’t a good idea anymore.”

“Wait. What? You want me to tell the world I’m alive?”

“And that you’re here in Hawaii. With me.” He traced her lower lip. “I want to bring Eric here and I want to do it on my terms. Not his. You have to trust me and this organization. We can protect you and we will take Eric down.”

“But you don’t even know what?—”

He hushed her with a kiss. “We know enough. Besides, I’ll find out faster once he’s on my turf. He already knows it was me and my team in Colombia. He knows it was us who pulled you out of there. I’m sure that’s pissed him off, but he’s also an arrogant asshole. He loves to flex his muscles and rub dirt in other people’s faces. He’d like nothing more than to tell me all the ways he’s better than me and by doing so, he’ll show his hand. ”

“You sound pretty confident of yourself.”

“Nothing happens in a vacuum.” He arched a brow. “Not of me alone. But of my team and this organization.” His phone vibrated. He yanked it from his back pocket

and read the text from Nova. “Your father made the turn by the marina. Promise me you’ll stay out of sight until?—”

“I swear I’ll do this your way on one condition.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“When the time comes to haul in Eric, you’ll let me knee him in the balls.”

“That I might be able to get on board with.” He kissed her cheek and hightailed it back to the front of the house, passing Nova in the middle of the family room. “Stay hidden until you get the signal.”

“Understood.” Nova nodded.

Bellamy pushed open the door and jogged down the front steps.

A dark SUV skidded to a stop in his driveway. The driver’s side door flung open and Claudius charged toward him, taking massive strides. His eyes were narrowed and his jaw clenched tight. Deep wrinkles were etched in his skin from years of worry. “Where the hell is she, Bellamy? Where’s my daughter and don’t you dare lie to me.”

Bellamy expected Claudius to come in hot, but not this hot. “Let’s calm down and take a seat.” He raised his hands and stepped between Claudius and the porch .

“Do not patronize me, young man.” Claudius tried to maneuver closer to the house, but Bellamy stretched out his arms. “And don’t put your hands on me. I have half a mind to put my fist through your nose.”

“I understand you’re upset.”



“You don’t understand shit.” Claudius narrowed his stare. Fire flew from his eyes like darts being hurled across a barroom toward their target. His chest puffed out as he sucked in a hearty breath.

“Oh, I get it,” Bellamy said. “Imagine what it was like for me when I was sent to some location with a cryptic message by Tate hours after he was murdered, only to find Octavia.” He dared to chuckle. “With a loaded shotgun aimed right at my heart.”

“We should both be grateful she didn’t pull the trigger. Eric had her—hell, both of us—all turned around.” Claudius pointed toward the house. His facial features drooped, as if he’d given up all his fight. “Is she inside? Is she okay?”

“Can we sit and talk for a few minutes?” His pulse eased a little, but not much. “I think we can both agree that lives are at stake and perhaps we should fill each other in on some things.”

“I’ve spent years wondering what I’d say to her. Sometimes it’s all anger and frustration. Mostly, all I want to do is hug her. Tell her how sorry I am and how much I love her. ”

“Her story isn’t mine to tell.” Bellamy rubbed the back of his neck. “But I’ll be honest. I struggled with all that too.” Over the years, he and Claudius had an interesting relationship. It had its up and downs, especially when it came to Octavia. However, one thing Bellamy could always say about Claudius was that he never held back his opinions. He was sharp-witted and if he didn’t like the path you were headed down, he’d let you know it.

Slowly, Claudius climbed the porch steps. He peered in the window. “Nice place you have here.”

“Thanks. I told myself I bought it because it gave me enough land to work with the

dogs and also a view of the water, but that's not what clinched it for me."

"Nope. I imagine not." Claudius eased into one of the chairs and stretched out his legs. "It reminds me of all the houses for sale that Octavia would pull up on that app." He laughed, shaking his head. "She started doing that her senior year of high school. She'd show me places much like this one and tell me that one day, the two of you would live there and give me grandbabies. Back then, I'd tell her to slow down. Go to college. Live a little."

Bellamy coughed. He pounded his chest. "That was a long time ago."

"You and my little girl have loved each other since you were teenagers. I thought you'd last forever, but you took to being a Marine Raider like a fish takes to water."

"I did and Octavia loved her volunteer work. Unfortunately, I misjudged what she had intended there and I let her slip right through my fingers, pushing her into the arms of that asshole." Bellamy decided he might as well lead them right down the path of no return.

"I might have helped with that one." Claudius sighed.

"I wouldn't go that far."

Claudius tilted his head. "Because you're a gentleman and he's a prick. All he ever wanted was my job. He's pretty close to getting it too."

Bellamy sat across from Claudius. "What do you mean?"

"He's doing his best to make me look like I'm losing my touch. That I'm making poor decisions. He's undermining me at every turn. I swear, he's even sabotaged missions I'm in charge of. I have some evidence, but it's not enough to take him

down.” Claudius lifted his chin. “I thought about going to your folks because of how close they were with Tate, but their reach is limited. That’s when I went to the Aegis Network.”

“We work with them a lot. There is no chest-pounding between us and them,” Bellamy said. “I’m a little surprised they never reached out.”

“I asked them not to and I’m regretting that decision,” Claudius said. “I couldn’t believe Roxy, or any of those dogs, had botched that rescue. But I was so distraught and Eric showed me the video from Colombia.”

“The dogs didn’t perform. That’s true.”

“Not just that of the K9s. He showed me the one of you coming at him. It didn’t make you look good.”

“No, sir. It did not.” Bellamy remembered the altercation well. Every last detail and not because that video had haunted his career, but because that footage lacked perspective. “However, that video failed to capture what happened before.”

Claudius nodded. “Cooper, Ethan, and Rusty all testified on your behalf regarding how Eric egged you on. But it was their word against his and his team, plus a video of you hurling fists at Eric.” He wagged his finger. “Not the first time, or the last time, you did that.”

“He deserved it each and every time. I will not apologize.”

“Yeah. You made that clear during your hearing,” Claudius said. “I’m sorry that I put faith in Eric. That I trusted him when I should have been listening to you. But you didn’t make it easy.”

“I’m sure we can both agree that’s all behind us now.”

Claudius ran a hand across his unshaven face. “By the time you sat in front of us for the military K9 Pilot Program, I knew Eric was up to no good. I didn’t know the extent. I had no idea about missing people in South America. However, he was after my job and he was doing anything and everything to get it. But I couldn’t voice my concerns. All I could do was slowly distance myself. But I want you to know, I voted yes for your team.”

Interesting. They had gotten two yeses and five nos. Bellamy had always assumed Claudius had been one of the ones against. “Thank you for that, sir.”

“It was the least I could do, even though I was mad as hell at you for accepting she was dead.” He lowered his chin. “Obviously, she’s not.”

“For the record, I forced my brain to believe that, but my heart and soul never did,” Bellamy admitted. “Sir. I need to know what you have on Eric because he’s coming for her and if I’m going to not only protect her, but end this, I have to know everything.”

Claudius leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He stared intently at Bellamy. “He’s not just coming for her. Not anymore. When he returned from South America, something shifted. He’s always been a vehement man and incredibly high-strung. Did you know that when Octavia disappeared, they weren’t engaged anymore?”

“I didn’t learn that until after I found her,” Bellamy said. “Why did he speak at her memorial service if they weren’t together anymore?” He didn’t know why he asked the question, other than his heart demanded it.

“He wasn’t scheduled to. I didn’t ask him to. But I did open it up to anyone who

wanted to.” Claudius sighed. “I appreciated your words more than you could ever know.”

“Eric didn’t.” Bellamy laughed.

“I’m a proud man. I don’t like being made a fool of,” Claudius said, waving his finger at his vehicle. “I don’t have proof he raided that village. What I do have are all his official missions. Everything he was in charge of under me for the last fifteen years. Every task force, case, joint mission. Everything both in and out of this country. Nothing has been redacted, so I could lose my?—”

“No one but me, my boss, Hawk, and our computer experts will need to look at it,” Bellamy said. “We don’t want you to put your career on the line.”

“It already is.” Claudius arched a brow. “Although, I have proof he forged paperwork that I supposedly turned in. It makes me look incompetent and on more than one occasion, Eric has covered for me.” Claudius raised his hands and made air quotes.

“Why didn’t you call him out on it?”

“By the time I knew what he was doing, I had decided the possibility that Octavia was alive was greater than she was dead. I decided me ruffling Eric’s feathers would only cause more trouble. I wanted to watch him. Study his movements. Find out what the hell he’s been up to all these years. The only way to do that was to play his game. In the process, he believes I’m concerned about my memory. That I might have health issues. It’s all bullshit.”

“I’m glad that’s the case, because I had heard that.”

“I’ve gone as far as to see a private doctor and I even confided in Eric about it a year ago. He keeps hounding me and I put him off, hoping to find something substantial

about what I thought was strictly a power grab. Something that will put him behind bars, not just give him a slap on the wrist.”

Bellamy stood and stared down at the marina. “My boss believes that what Tate and Octavia stumbled onto with human trafficking is more than a strong theory. So do I. There are some big gaping holes in it and the biggest one is why try to kill O?” He turned and faced Claudius. “When I sit down and think all this through, Eric could have been her knight in shining armor. He could have come in and saved her, especially if he messed with the rescue dogs. He could have made himself look like a damn hero.” Bellamy held up his hand. “Octavia doesn’t know anything. If she did, she would have ended this a long time ago. All she did was bring a few missing persons to his feet and he didn’t do anything with it.”

“Okay, but if Eric is involved in that ring and his ex-fiancée—whom he wanted back desperately—was asking questions, that would be enough to set him off.” Claudius arched a brow. “Especially since she kept telling him they were over. At least that is the message she gave me. It doesn’t matter if he swooped in and saved the day; she wouldn’t have taken him back. The Peace Corps informed me that right before the raid, she’d signed a one-year extended contract. I have a feeling that part of the reason she did that was because she wanted to know what really happened with those missing young people and she was done with Eric. That was her way of driving that point home.”

“She didn’t believe those kids ran those drugs willingly.” Bellamy rubbed the back of his neck. “I still don’t think he had to try to kill her to deal with the situation. Seems over the top. But that brings me to a tough subject I want to discuss before you go inside.”

“What’s that?”

“Please do yourself and her a favor and don’t focus on the physical scars.” Bellamy

pursed his lips. Heat flared through his veins, racing toward his fingertips. Every time he thought about what Eric had done, Bellamy knew he was capable of the unthinkable. It was a humbling thought. One he needed to constantly shuffle into the darkest recesses of his brain.

Claudius jumped to his feet. “How bad is it? And don’t you dare sugarcoat it.”

Bellamy touched his cheek. “She has a scar on her face and some burns on her neck, shoulder, and arm. There are some other ones, but those are the ones you’ll see.” He swallowed. “She was in a third world country. I’m sure a plastic surgeon could fix them up, but for right now, she doesn’t like to have attention brought to them.”

“She’s never enjoyed being the center of attention, especially if it has to do with her looks.” Claudius nodded. “Where is she?”

“When I came out, she was in the kitchen.” Bellamy pointed to the door. “Why don’t you go inside. Mind if I collect the information you brought and start going through it while you and O catch up?”

“That’s an interesting way of putting things,” Claudius said. “There’s a computer in the back seat. The passcode is 895276. The files you want are in a folder labeled Operation Hellboy.”

Bellamy arched a brow. That operation meant nothing to him and he suspected it was a code name anyway. “Is it encrypted?”

“I took it off when I landed.” Claudius jerked his thumb over his shoulder as he stood. “Anything else I should know? ”

“She’s scared.”

“Of me?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but she doesn’t know who she can trust.” Bellamy raised his hand. “She questioned my loyalty because of what happened during the rescue and?—”

“She’s worried about how close I was to Eric,” Claudius finished Bellamy’s statement. “I guess I can’t blame her for that. He played me for a fool and I’m not sure I can forgive myself for it.”

“He played us all.” Bellamy swallowed the bile that kicked up from his gut. “Unfortunately, she’s the one who paid the ultimate price. Something we both need to be sensitive to.”

“Fair enough.”

Bellamy stood there and watched as Claudius disappeared into his home. Part of him wanted to race inside and stand by Octavia, but this was a reunion he needed to give some time and space to. He owed that to both of them.

And maybe to himself.



12

Octavia's heart beat so fast and loud in her chest it rattled her teeth. She set her coffee mug on the counter in fear she might drop it when she heard the front door slam shut.

"I believe that's my cue to leave." Nova squeezed her shoulder. "I'm going to head outside." She scurried through the kitchen, leaving Octavia alone.

A deep, familiar voice echoed through the hallway.

Her father.

God, how she'd missed him over the years.

His warm embrace. His kind words. His wisdom. Even when he'd made her crazy with his judgments about her life, he'd always been her rock. Her biggest supporter.

She knew without a shadow of a doubt that her father loved her with all that he was. He'd been a great dad, especially after the loss of her mother. He'd stepped up to the plate, making sure she had more than she needed. He might not have understood her need to change the world her way, but early on in her career, he certainly tried.

However, Eric had changed all that.

Changed her father.

He'd tried to change her.

Her dad strolled into the kitchen. He stood tall and he hadn't aged a single bit. He paused about ten feet away. His smile faded as his gaze glanced over her scars. The sparkle in his eyes that he'd always graced her with dimmed. His eyes narrowed.

"Hi, Daddy," she managed with a thick lump in her throat.

"Oh, sweetheart." He opened his arms and charged at her, scooping her up like he used to do when she'd been a small girl. He hugged her so tight she could barely breathe. "My darling Octavia," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

She rested her head on his strong shoulder, doing her best to hold back the tears. She'd cried so much in the last week. More than she had in the last two years. Right after the attack, she could barely manage to think about anything, much less revenge. But these last couple of years, rage had been her fuel. It had been the one thing that had kept her going .

However, she, Tate, and Nova could never find the missing pieces to put the necessary nails in Eric's coffin.

"I'm sorry too, Dad."

He cupped her face. "You, my dear, have nothing to apologize for." He took a step back, holding on to her forearms. "I'm going to kill that little prick for what he's done to you and for making you believe that the only way to deal with this was for you to think you needed to be dead to the only people who ever really loved you."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know." He smiled. "I just handed Bellamy some documents that should help him

figure all this out.” He sighed, climbing up on one of the stools. “Tate and Nova never should have tried to do this alone, but I do get why they did and I don’t want to discuss all the reasons why you, or anyone, didn’t trust me. Or even Bellamy. That’s all water under the bridge.”

“I believe Eric is part of—if not running—a human trafficking ring. Bellamy agrees.”

“That would honestly explain some of the missions that Eric has used his K9 program for,” her dad said. “Or some of the trips he’s taken. While some were necessary, many were not. How he got the oversight committee to sign off on some are beyond me.”

Her father used to never talk to her about his job. Nor did Eric. There was always the matter of national security, and she understood that, so she never questioned it. She grew up with a certain level of secrecy. There was a lot of can’t talk about that around the dinner table.

Even Bellamy used that language, but he had a different way of handling it. He never brushed it under the rug, treating her as though she were an interloper in his life. No. He’d be more apologetic about it, wishing he could share more of what happened while he was away. It often bothered him that he couldn’t.

But not Eric. He treated her as though she was the little woman who shouldn’t worry her pretty little head.

Her father hadn’t taken that attitude. It was more like Bellamy, until Eric had taken a larger role in her life.

There had been a slight shift after she told her father she wasn’t sure about marrying Eric. However, there had been a distance between them that she didn’t understand.

“Can I ask you something without you getting mad?” she asked, sitting next to her dad. She’d dreamed about this day for years. It wasn’t how she thought it would go. When she played it out in her head, her father was always filled with frustration and anger at her for her deception.

“I’m not sure I could possibly be angry with you right now. I’m just so damned happy to see you.” He took her hand and squeezed.

“When I called off my engagement, you asked me to come home. You begged me not to stay in Colombia. I thought that was because you were upset over the breakup. Were you?”

Her dad lowered his chin. “No, and why would I be upset over that question?”

“Because Eric was your golden boy. He was your pet project for so long. It felt like I had disappointed you even more so when Bellamy never pulled the trigger in asking me to marry him.”

“I certainly backed the wrong pony.” Her dad shook his head, leaning back and folding his massive arms across his impressive chest.

She and Bellamy had been friends long before they had become a couple. But she’d had a crush on him from the moment they’d met and her father knew that. He enjoyed teasing her about it. She remembered their first date and how her father stood at the front door, flexing his muscles. Bellamy had been terrified. He’d been so scared he even suggested they go back to being friends.

“We both did,” she admitted. “But that really doesn’t answer my question.”

“To be honest, I never thought you and Eric would get together at first. And when you did, I believed it would be exactly what Bellamy needed to get that boy to

propose. ”

A vision of the engagement ring that Bellamy had shown her flashed before her eyes.

“But that didn’t happen and at the time, Eric was coming up the ranks. He was respected. He was being groomed to take over my position.” Her dad ran his hand over his mouth. “I started seeing things in Eric I didn’t like just before he proposed and it got worse when you took that assignment.”

“But you were pushing me to set a date.”

“That’s what you thought I was doing?” He sighed. “Perhaps my delivery wasn’t the best. All I wanted you to do was think about your decision to marry him. Maybe I said the wrong things. I’m sorry. When you called it off, I thought you should come home because you had nothing to run from anymore.” He tapped his fingers on the counter. “And Bellamy was Stateside at the time.” He shrugged.

“Jesus, Dad. Why didn’t you come out and say that?”

“Because you would have told me that ship had sailed and I couldn’t come out and tell you that I thought something hinky was going on with Eric. You hate it when I meddle. You dig your heels into the ground and do the opposite.”

“That’s true. I do.”

“When that raid happened on your village, I’m the one who put together that rescue team.” He pounded his chest. “Eric was pissed. He didn’t want Bellamy and his team anywhere near it. He tried to go over my head, but I demanded it. I will never forgive myself for blaming that boy for not finding you. It wasn’t his fault.”

“I was there. It was hard not to blame Bellamy,” she said softly. “It’s why I wouldn’t

let Tate go to him for help.”

“Bellamy would never let his own personal feelings get in the way of any job. Never. He’s not that man. Besides, he still loves you. That’s obvious.”

Love was a strong word. Bellamy held on to the past. She wouldn’t deny that. But he thought she had died. He allowed himself to believe that. And he blamed himself for it. His love for her was stapled in his soul from years ago.

It had nothing to do with today.

“That was a long time ago.”

Her father ran his finger over the counter until it touched the side of her arm. “No, sweetheart. And don’t tell me you don’t still love him. You never stopped. It’s one of the reasons Eric hates him so much. I watched that play out. It worried me. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy and I didn’t see that happening with Eric. When I asked you to set a wedding date, I was hoping you’d see that he wasn’t the man for you. I made a huge mistake and should have just said that.”

“Now all we have to do is figure out why Eric needed to kill me,” she muttered .

“We might have a better picture into why Eric attacked the village and why he’s unraveling now.” Bellamy came strolling into the kitchen carrying a laptop. He set it on the counter, tapping the screen. “Sorry to interrupt, but I have a couple of things that connect some dots.”

“What are they, son?” her dad asked.

“First, I got a message from Darius Ford at our Colorado office. He was able to hack into Eric’s personal email.” Bellamy handed his cell to her dad. “He’s been pulling

off emails from Eric and Lemin Basker for over fifteen years.”

“That’s not surprising. Eric invested in Lemin’s tech company when it was a startup and made a killing with it,” Octavia said.

“Eric tried to get me to invest, but I did some research and also met Lemin,” her father said. “He’s a sketchy kind of dude.”

“I agree,” Octavia said. “He’s an arrogant asshole and he’s not well-liked. But he’s brilliant when it comes to technology.”

“His company has been fined a dozen times.” Bellamy pointed to his phone. “But his shady business dealings aren’t the issue. Read that summary that my buddy sent over.”

Octavia leaned over her father’s shoulder.

“Lemin Baskin has taken ten trips to South America in the past year. Some of those trips coincide with trips that Eric has taken. All match when Georgia Adams and my wife, Fenmore, have reports of missing young persons. Attached are email exchanges between Eric and Lemin regarding product bought and sold to various clients in the United States and other countries. Everything in the emails is in code, but I’ve been studying that code and so far, it appears that the products are human and they are being sold to slimy rich people. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. I still have more deciphering to do.” Octavia lifted her gaze. “I don’t know much about this stuff, but I’m sure they could explain this away.”

“Not necessarily,” Bellamy said, turning the computer. “But what your father brought me was Eric’s work travels. Right now, I can put him in the vicinity of nine missing youths while he was using his K9 Pilot Program on other missions.” He lifted his gaze. “On those missions, something happened where one of the handlers went dark

for period of time. They are all explained away. Nothing too out of the ordinary. All minor red flags for a new program. And all fixed early on in that first year. But I'd bet if we dig through all a little more thoroughly, we'll find years of human trafficking, all covered up between official joint missions, personal trips taken, and whatever Lemin has been up to with his tech company holdings in other countries."

"Jesus." Octavia let out a long breath. "When Tate first mentioned human trafficking, I didn't think it could be this extensive."

"Oh, it appears to be massive and it's being funded by Lemin. Hell, based on what I've read so far, I think he started it," Bellamy said. "I can't tell if he brought it to Eric or if Eric found out and wanted in on the action."

"All right under my damn nose," her father said under his breath.

"You're not the only one." Bellamy nodded.

"But that still doesn't explain why he tried to kill my little girl."

"The drug lords." Octavia leaned back.

"What are you getting at?" Bellamy held her stare.

"They run the country. If he was snatching young boys and girls, he'd have to pay a price to the cartels. Using those youths as mules would be one way to do that." She sighed. "But when I didn't accept Eric's answer and took things to Tate and threatened to bring in my dad, or even Bellamy in, I'm sure that didn't go over well."

"I'm sure it didn't." Her dad nodded. "He always thought of Bellamy as a threat."

"I can see why he might view me that way when it came to Octavia, but not for



anything else. I wasn't after his job." Bellamy leaned against the counter. "I was happy as a Marine Raider. I wanted nothing to do with National Clandestine Services, even when you tried to recruit me."

"Doesn't matter, son," her dad said. "You were always the measuring stick and Eric didn't measure up. Add in Tate bringing the missing persons case to the Feds, well, that put a damper on the cartel's drug imports to the United States. I'm sure that had to piss them off. Tate was right keeping a tight lid on this. Drew things out and made it harder on him and Nova, but if he'd brought us in, I hate to think what Eric might have done."

Octavia hugged herself and shivered but this wasn't the time to be that scared victim anymore. "What's the plan?"

Bellamy closed the laptop and inched closer. He wrapped his arms around her waist. "For starters, we're all going to the ranch. I need to sit down with my team and I don't want to be worried about you, your dad, or Nova back here. Plus, I promised you that I'd keep you informed."

"Thank you." She rested her arms on his shoulders.

"There's a lot more information we need to comb through. I need to call Fenmore and her FBI friend. I also want both of your blessings to bring my parents in on this," Bellamy said.

"You've got mine," her father said.

"I won't argue with you on that point." She held Bellamy's gaze, ignoring her father's stare as she leaned into Bellamy's strong embrace.

"Good." Bellamy pressed his lips against her temple. "There's a lot of coordinating.

A lot of information and research left to be done. And then I'm going to want you to do something that isn't going to be easy."

"I don't think I'm going to like this," her father said with a terse tone.

"Trust me. I hate it, but it's the only way to end it." Bellamy cupped her face and gazed into her eyes with such love and admiration. "Are you going to be up for it?"

"This is what the last five years have been all about and I'm tired of hiding." She nodded. "I'm ready."

Bellamy ran his thumb across her cheek. It was soft and tender.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father crack a smile.

"No matter what happens or how this goes down, I won't let him lay a finger on you ever again," Bellamy said.

"You've got two days to put this in motion," her father said. "When he asked for time off, I was able to push him into joint task force mission planning. I used my failing health as an excuse. He thinks I went to see a specialist, but I'm sure he is scrambling and working on his own plan." Her father tapped his fingers over the computer. "Once he figures out I came here, he's going to know she's here too."

"Perhaps we should leak that intel." Bellamy brushed his lips across her mouth. It wasn't a long kiss or a passionate one, but it packed a punch.

"I'll leave you two alone for a moment and go tell Nova we're headed to the ranch." Her father stood, squeezed her shoulder, kissed her forehead, and strolled out of the kitchen.

Bellamy pulled her close. "If I can keep you away from Eric, I will," he whispered. "But you might have to face him."

She glanced up. "I want to be a part of it. I want to be there and watch him go down. Can you understand how important that is to me?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I don't like it. But I'm not going to try to talk you out of it or take that away from you."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Why couldn't you have been like this when we were together? Why did it take me dying for you to change?"

He jerked his head back. His eyes grew wide and were filled with hurt, misunderstanding, and confusion. He let out a long breath, tucking a few stray strands of her hair behind her ear. "I don't know what to say to that. I've always tried to give you what you wanted. What you needed. I don't think this is any different."

"But it is." She palmed his cheek. It wasn't that she resented his words or his actions. She didn't. She valued everything he'd ever done for her, including giving her space when she needed it most. Except he'd misread that during the worst time in her life and she struggled to move past it. The ring in his nightstand, while it did show how much he loved her, it also proved he hadn't understood what she needed from him in the moment. Not back then. "I'm sorry if it feels like I'm dwelling on the past. It's just that it's hard to accept how in tune you are with me right now, but you weren't when I found out I was pregnant or when I lost the baby. And it's not just those two instances. There were things that happened before that. We would talk about our future and you'd always leave me hanging."

He wiped her tears away with a kiss. "I don't have many regrets in life, but that is one that has haunted me for years. I'm sorry, O. I know it's just words and I can't go back and change how I reacted. I wish I could." He dropped his forehead to hers. "I loved

you so much. All I ever wanted was for you to have everything you desired. I watched how my dad treated my mom and her career. How he always encouraged her. Supported her. I wanted to have a relationship like they have. But you were right. I didn't know how to express myself to people back then. This will sound like an excuse, but you knew what things were like for me as a kid. How I struggled to have interpersonal relationships. Even my psych eval for the military had something to say about that."

"I know. And you used it to keep people at a distance because you were always afraid of being ostracized. But I never did that to you and you still allowed it to affect our relationship." She swallowed a sob. "You've changed and I can't help but be hurt by the fact that I had to die for that to happen."

"It wasn't you dying that changed me." He held her gaze so intently it took her breath away. "Seeing you charge out of that hut in Colombia is what did that. I was given a second chance. I know I behaved like an ass and it took me a few days to get my head on straight. But I knew if I didn't start doing things differently, I'd lose you again and I can't let that happen." He lifted her off the stool and planted her butt on the counter, easing between her legs. Tilting her chin with his thumb and forefinger, he kissed her tenderly. It was so soft and gentle that she could barely feel his lips glide across her mouth. "I love you, O. I've never stopped. It's always been you. Ever since you strolled into my homeroom in sixth grade, I've been in love with you."

She smiled at the memory. He'd been sitting next to Cooper. Those two were like two peas in a pod. They did everything together. They were glued at the hip. "You made Cooper move so I could sit next to you."

"He was pissed." Bellamy laughed, arching a brow. "Are you going to continue to deflect, or are you going to respond to what I just told you?"

She glanced toward the hallway. "My father and Nova are standing at the front door,

trying not to stare at us.”

“Do you really think I give a crap?” He cupped the back of her neck and kissed her. Hard. It was the kind of kiss that belonged in private.

But she didn’t stop him. Being in his arms again was something she’d dreamed about. It was like coming home. She pulled back. “Yes. I do still love you,” she whispered. “However, I need time. We can’t just pick up where we left off and we do need to deal with Eric.”

Bellamy groaned. Or maybe it was a growl. “We will have all the time in the world once we deal with that asshole,” he mumbled. “However, the one thing I won’t give you this time is space. I will not make the same mistake twice. I love you and I want you in my life. Permanently. That ring upstairs belongs to you. Put it on your finger when you’re ready.”

“What the heck?” She glared. “You can’t be serious right now. Besides that being the worst proposal on the planet, there’s too much going on right now and we don’t even know?—”

“Don’t finish that statement because we do know each other and if you want a better proposal, I’ll give you one when this over. I can do that.” He smiled like a little kid on Christmas morning. “But I’m serious. I’m not letting you walk out of my life again. Not without a fight.”

Her heart dropped to her toes. He wasn’t messing around. Of course, Bellamy would never joke about getting married. She opened and shut her mouth three times but couldn’t form any words.

“We love each other and we belong together. I know it. And deep down, so do you,” he said. “We’ll talk about this again after we put Eric behind bars.”

She pressed her hand against his chest. “We need time.” She kissed his cheek. “But not space. That’s all I can say to that right now.”

“That’s enough for me in this moment.”

“I hate to break up the party, but we’ve got to get going,” her father called from the foyer.

Bellamy lifted her off the counter, took her hand, and guided her through the house. “I need to collect the dogs.” He jogged down the steps and headed toward the side of the house.

“I’ll wait in the car,” Nova said. “I need to check in with the office.”

Her father looped his arm around her shoulders. “So, you and Bellamy?”

“I’m not having this conversation with you, Daddy.”

“And why not?” Her dad chuckled. “He’s a good man and I’m sorry that I was eavesdropping, but it was kind of hard not to hear that conversation. Although some of it was muffled. But I got the important parts,” he said as they strolled down the path toward Bellamy’s truck.

“That’s rude,” she muttered. Heat rose to her cheeks. Thank God Bellamy didn’t bring up the possibility of her being pregnant. “It’s hard to think about a future with Bellamy when I don’t even know what my life will look like after we deal with this mess.” She stared at the bright-blue sky. “I have no clue what to do with my life now.”

“Let me ask you a question.” Her father leaned against the truck. “If you had never gotten involved with Eric and gone to Colombia, if you had stayed with Bellamy,

what do you think your life would be like now?”

“That’s an unfair question and you know it.” She rested her hand on her midsection.

“Not really,” her father said. “Because if you had married Bellamy, this is where you would have landed.”

“No, Daddy. It’s not.” She shook her head. “You’re not taking into account all the ripple effects of taking out the events that happened. Bellamy and his team could have landed in that military K9 Pilot Program instead of the team that Eric picked. So many things could have been different.”

“You’re missing my point, baby girl.” He rested a firm hand on her shoulder. “You would have followed his career wherever it took him. I understand that you still would have done your volunteer work, but that wouldn’t have changed the fact that you would have been with a man in the military. A man who had to go wherever the Marines sent him and you were on board with that.” He cupped her chin. “What do you want?”

“To see Eric pay for his crimes.”

Her dad lifted his index finger and traced her scar. He scowled. A combination of sorrow and rage filled his gaze. “We all want that, sweetheart. And he will pay. Both Bellamy and I will make sure of that. But when this is over, you have to have some thoughts on what happens next.”

“To be honest, I’ve never allowed myself to think about it. I’ve been living alone with little to no contact with the outside world for so long that I’ve even stopped dreaming about coming back to the States. It was too painful. Now that I’m here and it’s real, it’s overwhelming. I’m scared. I don’t know how to function anymore.”

“From where I stand, you’re functioning just fine.” He lowered his chin. “You’ve survived under the worst of conditions. I couldn’t be prouder of you. I only wish I could have helped you.”

She smiled. “Knowing you never gave up means the world to me.” She let out a long breath. “It hurts that Bellamy did.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” her dad said. “He tried to accept that you were gone. He tried to live his life.” Her father waved his hand toward the house. “But look at what he’s done. It’s like he built himself a shrine for you. He’s surrounded himself with everything you’ve ever wanted. This house? It’s what you always dreamed of living in. Even the animals.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “You used to beg me every birthday and Christmas to bring you home a kitten. When your mother was alive, I couldn’t, because she was allergic. After she passed, you stopped asking for a couple of years, and then you went away to college. I didn’t want to deal with a cat when you were gone.”

She had to admit that her father could be right.

“What you need to remember is that we didn’t know what happened. For five years we had no answers. You knew you were alive, but we didn’t. That’s a hard place to be.”

“I’m sorry I put you through that.”

“I know.” Her father nodded. “And we understand why. No one is blaming you for what happened or for the decisions you made. Not under the circumstances you were put in. However, I want you to put yourself in Bellamy’s shoes for five minutes. Think about how you might feel if the tables were turned and it was he who was missing for five years.” He arched a brow. “You love him. He loves you. I don’t see the problem here.”



“I’m scared history will repeat itself.”

Dogs barked in the background.

She glanced over her shoulder. “I can see how he’s changed. I’ve changed too. I worry that maybe our love is steeped too deep in the past and has nothing to do with the present or the future. ”

“There’s only one way to find that out, baby girl, and that’s to take a chance. When this is over, stay in Hawaii for a few months. Take the time to get to know him again and figure out what’s next for you. If you don’t, you’ll regret it.”

“I know you’re right,” she whispered. “I do love him. I always have. I don’t know why I’m holding on to this.”

“I do,” her father said. “But you’re not going to like it if I tell you why.”

She cocked her head. “I’m listening.”

“You don’t like admitting when you make mistakes. It’s easier for you to blame Bellamy.” Her father held up his hand. “And he did screw up. He knows it. We’ve talked at length about his failure when it comes to how he let you slip away. But you played a part in that too.” Her dad arched a brow. “You played a dangerous game with Bellamy.”

“I did not.” She glared.

“When Eric started giving you attention, you enjoyed it. Perhaps a little too much. Your expectations of Bellamy changed. You knew what his shortcomings were because you’d known him since middle school. You accepted that about him. But somewhere along the way, you decided that what endeared you about Bellamy was

all of a sudden a bad thing. He was ready to marry you, and you knew that. But because he wasn't big on grand gestures, and Eric was, you decided that you wanted that. But you never told Bellamy. You left him in the dark. He took that as you needed space, but again, you never corrected him until it was too late."

She opened her mouth but slammed it shut.

Her father was right. Eric swooped in and showered her with gifts. He constantly told her that if he were her man, he'd be doing all the things that Bellamy wasn't.

And when they first started dating, that's exactly what he did.

Eric found her weak spot and exploited it.

"The worst part about all of this is Bellamy and I weren't kids. We were thirty years old when we broke up."

"I know." Her father nodded. "Bellamy once told me that the last two years you were together, you spent more time apart because of his deployments and your volunteer work that it was hard to communicate and that you fell into this weird universe where you didn't discuss the big things."

"He brings them up now," she said just as Roxy came barreling around the corner. She plopped at Octavia's feet.

Tucker was on a leash, walking close to Bellamy's side, in work mode.

"I've missed you, Daddy." She rested her head on his shoulder. "I want to spend time with you too."

"After we deal with Eric, I'll take some time off work." He kissed her temple like he

used to do when she'd been a little girl. "I'll come back to Hawaii. We'll spend time here."

"I think you want me and Bellamy back together more than anyone."

Her dad laughed. "I've always wanted him to be part of the family."

Octavia had no idea what her future held. Going back to the Peace Corps wasn't something she even contemplated anymore. She knew that part of her life was over. But what was next? Could she settle into a life with Bellamy in Hawaii? Could she be happy here?

Did she even know what happiness felt and looked like anymore?

Once again, her father was right. The only way to find out was to take a chance.

The last forty-eight hours had been grueling, to say the least. Mission planning had always been one of Bellamy's favorite parts about his job. He thrived in that environment as much as in the execution phase. His father always told him it was because it got the blood pumping to his brain, the one muscle in his body that he often ignored. Or neglected.

But this time, Bellamy struggled to sit still during the team meeting. His leg rattled and he found himself getting out of his chair and pacing instead of focusing on the task at hand.

Everything about this mission was personal.

Eric had taken years from Octavia's life.

And from Bellamy's.

Not to mention the scumbag was kidnapping young boys and girls and selling them to the highest bidder as if their lives didn't matter.

At least they had proof of that now, thanks to Darius, Wyatt, Waylen, Fenmore, and Agent Georgia Adams' hard work. They had pieced together years of human trafficking that Lemin had been financing and Eric had orchestrated.

Eric had used his position in the military to find the youths. Lemin and Eric used their money and power to transport the young men and women to various countries, selling

them on the black market. Many were sold into sex slavery.

A couple had been traded to a few drug lords in Colombia. Those had been the ones Octavia had reported. The drug dealer had been pissed off because it brought attention to his business. Bellamy had come to understand that Eric had a deal with this one cartel that he'd occasionally give them a mule so they could transport drugs into the United States. This kept the cartel off Eric's back and allowed him to continue his side gig. However, when Octavia got the families to file missing persons reports with the local governments, things got tough on Eric.

Bellamy believed that was one of the reasons he attacked the village. To make a statement to the cartel. And to deal with Octavia, who had inadvertently threatened his business .

All of it had been disturbing especially since it had been going on for the better part of fifteen years.

He leaned against the fence at the Brotherhood Protectors ranch and watched the dogs run around and play. One of his favorite pastimes. It was nice to see them outside of work mode. It helped Bellamy clear out the cobwebs and refocus his mind. He needed his brain working at maximum capacity. That meant he had to stop giving Eric power over his emotions.

"There you are," Cooper said as he strolled across the pathway. Rusty and Ethan following. "Everyone was wondering where you went."

"I needed a minute." Bellamy ran his fingers through his hair. He was in desperate need of a haircut. He scratched at his beard, which also needed a trim. "Reading how many young people have been reported missing over the years and how Eric has gotten away with so many things isn't sitting right with me."

“He’s a real piece of work,” Rusty said. “I’ve seen a lot in my day, and even had to deal with traitors.” He cringed. “But Eric is next level.”

“He has no moral compass.” Ethan leaned against one of the posts. “No regard for human life.”

“I’m looking forward to taking him down,” Cooper said. “It will be one of the best things we’ve ever done. And I’m not saying that because of what he did to us personally. But because he’s just a shit of a human being.”

“It will take every ounce of energy I have not to kill that man.” Bellamy balled his fists. “Selling human beings is gross. And what he did to Octavia? A woman he supposedly loved? He’s despicable.” Bellamy choked on the thought. He’d spent the better part of five years trying to regret all the mistakes he’d made. Now it was impossible.

He should have fought harder. If only he’d been a better man, then Octavia would have never had to suffer. “When I came outside, Claudius was about to make the call to his assistant and make sure his whereabouts were leaked to Eric. Did he do that?”

“Yes,” Cooper said. “Corbin River from the Yellowstone branch has eyes on Eric and Lemin. He’ll let us know when they are on the move. It shouldn’t be too long before Eric heads this way.”

“He better bring Lemin with him,” Bellamy said under his breath. “We need to take them both down at the same time.”

“Agent Georgia Adams is on her way here.” Cooper leaned over and plucked a blade of grass, fiddling with it between his fingers. “Nova and Waylen will meet with her when she lands.”

“Did Nova get settled into her rental okay?” Bellamy asked. He hadn’t told her to leave but understood why she wanted her own space.

“It’s a nice little place,” Cooper said. “Your place was starting to feel crowded.”

“Or maybe she just wanted some time alone with you.” Rusty gave Cooper a punch in the biceps.

“Knock that shit off,” Cooper said. “It’s not like that.”

“Crash and burn, did you?” Ethan laughed.

“Screw you,” Cooper muttered.

Bellamy welcomed the lighthearted reprieve. Because they had decided not to announce to the world that Octavia was alive, he knew that Eric wouldn’t wait too long before jumping on a plane and flying to Hawaii. He would need to handle this situation with Octavia before that happened.

The intel Claudius passed on to his assistant was that he had come to Hawaii because he’d heard through certain underground sources that Bellamy and his team had gone to Colombia. That they had found Octavia and brought her back to Hawaii. And that his intel had been right on the money. Now he was working on how to deal with the fallout from why she’d been hiding for five years.

That should be enough to make Eric jump.

“Here comes your girlfriend.” Cooper pointed toward the main building .

Bellamy smiled. His chest puffed out with pride. While the last two days had been hard between all the fact-finding and planning, the nights with Octavia had been what

held him together. Holding her in his arms. Making love to her. Waking up with her. It was the only thing that made sense in his world.

“You’re not even going to deny it,” Rusty said.

“He’s got it so bad that even his dogs are jealous.” Cooper shook his head.

“You’re the one who’s jealous.” Ethan chuckled.

“Hey, babe.” Bellamy ignored them all. He took her into his arms and kissed her sweet lips. “How ya doing?”

“I’ve got some news.” She rested her arm around his waist. “Bowie sent me out here to tell you that Corbin called. Lemin and Eric are on the move. Eric’s private jet is being gassed up and a flight plan has been filed. I bet you can guess where they are headed.”

Bellamy glanced at his watch. It was a little after five in the evening. A direct flight from DC would be a little over eleven hours. Eric wasn’t stupid. He’d need to do recon before planning an attack. He wouldn’t move in on them tonight. Not unless something weird went down. But he’d be ready no matter what.

“Did Corbin say if anyone else was with them?” Cooper asked. “I can’t believe the two of them would come to us alone.”

She shook her head. “Corbin said he’d call once they got to the airport. But he did mention that Eric made a phone call to a guy by the name of Tommy Campria.”

“Crap,” Bellamy said.

“Isn’t he working for some security organization in California now?” Rusty asked.



“I thought he was a mercenary,” Cooper said. “But whoever he’s working for these days, it’s bad news. He left the military with so many blemishes on his record I’m shocked he never got court-martialed.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised he’s working with Eric,” Bellamy said. “But we need to be prepared for some serious gunpower coming our way.” He pulled Octavia closer. “This won’t be a confrontation. He’ll come at us in the shadows and try to take Octavia.”

“My father wants to announce I’m alive.” She glanced up, catching his gaze. Sucker punched him every time. “He’s inside Waylen’s office right now, pacing, yelling, flapping his arms. I guess he knows about this Tommy guy too.”

“Oh, he knows Tommy and your dad is one of the reasons Tommy left the military with his tail between his legs.” Bellamy nodded. “Because I promised to keep you in the loop and this does affect you, I need to know how you feel about this. We have enough proof to have Eric and Lemin arrested for the human trafficking ring. We can turn all that over to the Feds and let them deal with it when they land. What we don’t have is the proof that Eric was the one behind the attack on your village.” Bellamy traced the scar on her face. “Or what he did to you. If you want him to be held accountable for that, we need to continue with this plan and let him slink in here like the snake that he is. But that means you’re bait. It means we’re putting you in danger. If we announce you’re alive, he can’t come at you. There will be too much press. Too many people surrounding you to do that. There would be too much heat on him if he tried.”

“I want him to pay for everything,” she said with a strong voice. So strong and confident it brought a curve to the corners of his mouth. This was the Octavia he loved so much. The one who stood up for herself and others.

But it also scared him because so many things could go wrong with this plan.

“If we turn it all over now, it goes to court and he could be found not guilty. If we play this game his way, he’s arrogant enough to admit what he did to me. I want to hear him say it. I need that,” she said.

Bellamy inhaled sharply. As much as he hated putting her in harm’s way, he wanted that too. And it wasn’t just for her. He needed it for himself. “All right. It’s settled. We’ll let him case out my place and we’ll set the trap.” He closed his eyes for a brief moment before blinking them open. “Let’s go. We’ve got some work to do. Eric might be a patient man, but something tells me he’s not going to wait too long to come for you.”

“How can you eat and be so calm?” Octavia pushed her plate across the table. She glanced out at the marina. The tall masts of the sailboat swayed in the wind. The silent clanking of the sheets against the metal echoed over the chatter of the people in the restaurant. Birds gathered on the docks. A family stood near the water while a little boy leaned over and happily tossed some bait, hoping to see large fish swarm to the surface.

“Trust me, I’m not calm.” He brought her plate closer. “You didn’t eat breakfast and you barely touched your lunch.” He lifted half of her clam roll. “Your body needs fuel whether you feel like eating or not.”

“My stomach is all twisted as if I just got off one of those rides that spins until you vomit.” She grabbed her sandwich and took a bite. One thing she remembered from all those years with Bellamy was when not to argue with the man.

This was one of those times.

As soon as she swallowed, her gut pitched and rolled. She covered her mouth and belched. “Jesus, I really don’t feel that great.”

“It’s just nerves.” He squeezed her thigh.

Roxy shifted under her seat. Damn dog had been like a piece of gum tangled in her hair for the last two days.

Tucker whined at Bellamy's feet.

They both knew something was developing.

"Don't patronize me," she said.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to." He wiped his mouth with his napkin, leaned back, and pressed his finger against his ear. "Yeah. I heard that."

She leaned closer. "What's going on?"

He held up his index finger. "How many?" He nodded. "And where are our friends?" Bellamy's eyes narrowed. "Shit. Who's got eyes on him?" he asked. "Okay. Copy that." He lifted his hand, waving to the waitress. "Can we get our check, please?"

"Will you freaking talk to me?" Octavia folded her arms and tapped her foot against the floor. She glared at Bellamy, mentally tossing daggers directly into the center of his chest .

"Once we're outside." He dared to try to kiss her cheek.

She jerked her head. "I have absolutely no patience."

He took the bill, glanced at it, and handed the waitress a wad of cash. "Keep the change." He stood, taking Octavia by the hand and tugging her through the sea of tables. Once outside, he wrapped his arm around her waist. It would take them about fifteen minutes to walk up the road to his house and considering his turtle pace, he wasn't in a hurry to get there.

"I didn't want to talk too much inside there in case we missed one of Eric's men." Bellamy glanced over his shoulder. "We can't be too careful."

“Okay.” She swallowed her beating heart and stared straight ahead. She didn’t dare look at anyone or shift her gaze. “Who was talking to you in your ear, and what did they say?”

“It was Coop and he informed me that my house is surrounded and Eric has entered the building.”

“So, we’re walking into an ambush.” She flattened her hand on her stomach. Her breath caught in her throat liked a caged animal trying to escape but there was no way out.

“I know it feels that way but it’s the other way around.” Bellamy took her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “We followed his decoy back to the airport earlier. We are acting as though we believe he left Big Island. Coop and the guys will methodically take out Eric’s men while we’re getting him to talk.”

“Unless he kills us the second we come into sight.”

“Eric’s a lot of things, but he’s not stupid. He can’t just leave us for dead. There would be too many questions. He’s got to take you and make my death look like an?—”

“Can we not talk about that, please?” She shivered. They had gone over this plan a million times. She was confident that if she pushed the right buttons, Eric would more than enjoy letting Bellamy know what he’d done to her five years ago.

What scared her more than anything was how Bellamy might react.

“As long as you understand that we do have the upper hand in this situation.” He released her hand and reached behind his back. Then he bent over and fiddled with his pant leg.

Her heart pounded in her chest as it pulsed blood through her body. Images of the attack assaulted her mind. They came fast and furious. She couldn't slow them down or focus on any single one. They flew by her as if she were sitting on a high-speed train.

"It's hard to believe that when you're letting him break into your home. "

"Quinn is on a roof two houses up on your right. He's our overwatch. The rest of his team, Bowie, Flint, and Carter, have taken other positions while Waylen, Kian, Lane, and Raider are working with my men to deal with the assholes that Eric brought. Nova and Agent Adams are less than a mile away. With all the listening devices we've put in my house, they will be able to hear everything. They will move in to make the arrest at precisely the right time. We've gone over every worst-case scenario aspect of this op. I'll die before I let anything happen to you."

"That's exactly what I don't want you or any of your friends to do," she whispered, holding back a sob as memories of the raid once again flooded her brain like a bad horror flick. "I've seen too much death and the last thing I want is to be responsible for anyone else dying."

"I need you to stop worrying about that and focus on the plan." He ran his hand up and down her spine. "I get you're scared. But understand this is exactly the kind of thing we have trained for our entire careers. It's not our first rodeo."

That didn't make her feel any better. However, she kept that thought to herself. The last thing Bellamy needed was for her to go off the rails. Besides, this was what Tate had been working toward. She owed it to him to see this through.

She squared her shoulders, sucked in a deep breath, and pushed all the negative thoughts and her fears into a tiny little box in the corner of her brain.

“Team Koa: Charlie. Can I have an update?” Bellamy paused for a moment. He stood silent for what seemed like an eternity. “Okay. I’m going dark.” He took his comms piece out of his ear and tucked it in his pocket. He looped his arm around her shoulders. “I’ve been given the go. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” She paused, grabbing Bellamy by the biceps. “No matter what happens tonight, I want you to know that what happened between us, our breakup, it wasn’t all your fault. I’m as much to blame in our failure to communicate.”

He tilted her chin and kissed her tenderly. “Do you love me?”

“Very much.”

“That’s all that matters.”

It was rare that Bellamy had to run an op without comms. But this was no ordinary mission.

It was personal.

This was the op that would forever change his life.

Slowly, he stepped onto his porch and tried to act like this was a typical night out with his girl. Only the news that Tommy had slipped into a vehicle and driven off to parts unknown had certainly rattled his nerves.

He should have given Octavia that juicy piece of intel, but she was already frazzled. Waylen had called on his old buddy, Mano, the private investigator, to follow Tommy. Mano might not be part of the Brotherhood Protectors, but they used his services occasionally. If they trusted him to get the job done, then so did Bellamy.

He gripped the handle of his front door and turned.

If all had gone according to plan, all of Eric's men except Lemin had been handled. Eric had come with a team of six. From what Bellamy could gather, all of them had some covert operations training. That made his team's job harder.

But the Brotherhood Protectors were the best.

Now, all he and Octavia had to do was make sure Eric talked before he learned his team could no longer communicate.

Normally, he'd be the gentleman that his mother raised and allow Octavia to enter the home before he did, but not with knowing Eric sat in his family room with a gun in his lap.

Eric had taken out the main security camera before entering the house. But he missed the tiny cameras that Bellamy had installed earlier .

"That was a nice evening," he said, pretending he hadn't seen Eric out of the corner of his eye.

The only problem was that Lemin hadn't shown up on the cameras the last time he checked. He knew Lemin was in his home because Rusty had seen him enter the building, and no one saw him exit.

Of course, Tommy was the bigger problem. In the military, Tommy had a habit of going rogue. He wasn't the kind of man who followed orders.

Bellamy had been reprimanded a time or two for going against a direct command, but Bellamy only did so when he believed his men were in danger and there was no way they could accomplish their mission without massive loss of life.



Tommy broke ranks for no other reason than he was an arrogant asshole. He had no regard for his fellow man. Nor did he respect the uniform he once wore or his country. Tommy cared about power. When it didn't come to him, he tried to take it.

Bellamy didn't believe for one second that Tommy was going against Eric. No. Whatever Tommy was up to, it was part of Eric's plan and that meant Bellamy and his team had missed something.

"I'm sure you enjoyed getting out and about and not having to hide anymore," Bellamy added as a shadow slinked across the top of the stairs.

Lemin .

Shit. That gave Bellamy two potential blind spots. He shifted so that Octavia would have her back to the wall as much as possible.

A deep clearing of a man's throat echoed in the air.

For good measure, he whipped his head around at the sound. He reached for his weapon.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Eric stood, pointing his gun at Bellamy's heart.

The man had already destroyed it once. Bellamy would be damned if he let Eric do it again.

Much less kill him.

"Surprised to see me?" Eric smiled.

"Not entirely." Bellamy held his weapon at his side.

Octavia gripped his hips, leaning over his shoulder but keeping out of the line of fire.

“You’re not welcome here,” Bellamy said. “I’m only going to ask you nicely to leave once.”

“I’ll gladly leave, but my fiancée is coming with me.” Eric took one step forward.

“I’m not your fiancée,” Octavia said with a strong voice. “I’m nothing to you.”

“That’s not what the world believes,” Eric said. “I grieved hard for you. I was heartbroken over your death. I still am and let people know all the time how much I miss you.”

“You don’t have a heart,” she muttered.

“If he does, it’s made of stone.” Bellamy shifted his stance. “I should have known you didn’t leave the island when you came poking around.” Well, crap.

Backup.

And Bellamy had no way of communicating that thought to his team. Though, they were smart. They probably already figured out that Eric had a second team either already on the island somewhere.

Or they had just landed and Tommy was about to bring them in.

Bellamy was going to have to speed things up. He couldn’t give Tommy that much time.

But he needed to give Octavia the time she needed to get Eric to admit what he’d done.

Bellamy owed her that.

“You’ve never been very good at your job.” Eric jerked his head. “Put that gun down and kick it over. If you try anything funny, I won’t hesitate to kill you. I know enough about this island to know that murders happen. You’ve also made a few enemies in your day. Shit happens.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Bellamy said. “My team and the organization I work for all know Octavia is alive. They know she’s here. They will come gunning for you.”

Eric laughed. Hard. “Once again, Bell you?—”

Bellamy set his weapon on the ground and kicked it across the floor. “Don’t call me that. Only people who are my friends or family can call me by that name and you are neither.” He had never enjoyed his name being shortened. His mom started it when he’d been a small boy and it continued on with family and eventually classmates who sometimes called him Bell Pepper. He absolutely hated that one. He often corrected people, especially guys like Eric. But as he aged, the nickname grew on him and when his team or Octavia used it, he found it endearing.

“Whatever.” Eric shrugged. “Like always, you fucked up. The moment you pulled her from Colombia, you should have announced to the world she was alive. Had you done that, you would have tied my hands.”

Octavia curled her fingers around his biceps with a death grip as she inched out from behind his back.

Eric had opened the door and now it was time to let her start talking.

Bellamy took one step back, putting himself between Eric and the foyer. He needed

to see the stairs while also having a line of vision on the front and back door.

However, if all had gone exactly according to plan—which almost never happened—Rusty and Cooper should be upstairs and Ethan should be on the back porch.

Quinn had the overwatch from down the street. Quinn was a damn good shot. If by chance this op went sideways and Eric waltzed out the front door, he wasn't getting too far.

Flint and Lane should be taking their positions near the detached garage and Bowie and Waylen should have the rear.

Everyone else should still be at their post.

But nothing ever went according to plan.

And he had no idea where Tommy was and what kind of team or firepower he'd be bringing to this party.

15

O ctavia stared into the eyes of the man who had beaten her.

Raped her.

Left her for dead.

If there had ever been any lingering doubts that it had been Eric...

They were all gone now.

Bile bubbled up from deep in her gut and smacked the back of her throat. The fact that Eric was in Bellamy's home made her stomach churn. This place had become her sanctuary. She loved every room. Every detail. And she wanted to spend the next few months here getting to know Bellamy again.

Her dream of a second chance hung in the breeze like a kite about to slip from a child's fingertips. She wasn't about to let go. Not this time .

She only hoped Eric hadn't ruined that like he'd ruined so many things.

Eric was a vile human being who belonged in prison for the rest of his life, and she desperately wanted to be the woman to put him there.

Her heart rattled like a volcano about to spew fire and lava. It was time for her to get Eric to confess. She was sure that Bellamy could have done it.

However, she wanted the honors. She needed it. Not just for herself.

But for Tate.

“How long have you known I was alive?” She held Eric’s gaze. Fire scorched her fingertips. It flew across her skin. She wanted to lunge across the room, grab his neck, and strangle him until he was one breath from death.

“That’s what you want to ask me?” Eric shook his head. “I don’t have time for your stupid questions. Now, unless you want me to shoot Bellamy right here in front of you, let’s go.”

“If you want me to go without a fight, I want to know a few things first.” Octavia folded her arms across her chest. Her heart thumped like a scared rabbit. She almost wished she were back in her small village in Colombia where she could hide from the cruelties this man had created in her world.

“You were always such a stubborn woman.” Eric smiled that weird grin he had when he thought he was being cheeky. “If you must know, I suspected a few years ago, but only got confirmation six months ago.”

“And so you decided you needed to finish what you failed to do when you raided her village,” Bellamy said, going way off script.

She turned and stared at him with wide eyes, but his gaze never wavered from Eric. The problem with Bellamy trying to extract the necessary information from Eric was that Bellamy tended to go for the jugular. Octavia thought it was better to lead Eric down the road slowly. Let him bask in the glory of what he’d done.

Not get into a pissing contest because while Eric hated Bellamy and would hurt him in the worst way, it wouldn’t be telling him what he’d done. But by how he’d won

her heart.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Eric inched closer, waving his weapon. “I’m bored with this conversation. It’s time to go.”

Octavia’s heart sank. “What’s going to happen to Bellamy when we leave?”

Eric shrugged. “Nothing for you to be concerned about.”

“Tell me, or I’m not going.” She cocked a brow.

“To be honest, I’m not exactly sure,” Eric said. “I didn’t want to be privy to that detail, so I hired someone to deal with our friend. ”

“Interesting,” Bellamy said. “If you really think you can have me killed and make it look like a random murder, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought you were.”

“You’re the fool.” Eric pointed his gun toward the stairs and Lemin came charging down them.

Bellamy whipped around, but Lemin tackled him to the ground. Bellamy swung, landing a punch in Lemin’s face. Blood spewed from a crack on Lemin’s lip. The two men wrestled on the ground.

Octavia gasped when Eric grabbed her by the hair. She flapped her arms, but he wrapped his free one around her, hugging her close. “I wouldn’t fight me,” he whispered.

“Get your fucking dirty hands off her,” Bellamy managed.

Eric pressed the cold metal against her temple.

Bellamy gave up his fight and Lemin yanked him to a standing position.

This was not how this was supposed to go down. What happened to their upper hand? What happened to the plan?

“You’re never going to get away with this,” she mumbled. “My father will come for you.”

“Your dad is an old man who lost his touch.” Eric laughed. “No one is going to believe him. Everyone thinks he’s literally losing his mind and I’ll continue to drive that point home when I return to Virginia and he babbles on about you being alive, but you’re nowhere to be found.”

“Even if you could do that, you’ll still end up in prison,” she said. “We know all about what you and Lemin have been doing.”

“You might suspect, but you don’t know shit.” He ran the butt of the gun down the side of her cheek.

Her body went stone-cold. Every fiber of her being remembered each kick. Each punch. Each stab of his assault.

She wasn’t going down without a fight. Not this time.

A red light flashed through the side window. It tapped against the picture on the far wall near the fireplace.

Then disappeared.

Finally, some good news because Bellamy couldn’t stand there a second longer and watch that asshole manhandle the woman he loved.



“We have proof of your human trafficking ring,” Octavia said, doing her best to get them back on track with the script they had practiced.

One that Bellamy had tossed out the window the second Lemin tackled him to the ground.

“You might think you have something, but I’ll be able to explain it all away. I’m not worried.” Eric dared to smile.

Bellamy couldn’t wait to wipe the smug grin off his face.

“We don’t have time for this,” Lemin said. “Tommy will be back in eight minutes. We need to be out of here in five.”

Hopefully, that light in the window meant that his team had neutralized Tommy and whatever band of misfits he had brought.

“Can you explain away why you had to attack that village?” Bellamy hoped Octavia would be able to forgive him for what he was about to do. “Or why you had to rape a woman you claimed to love before you tried to kill her? Did you think that would make you a man?”

Octavia’s lips parted. She stared at him with fire in her eyes. It had been important to her for Eric to admit what he’d done, and Bellamy understood why. He hated himself for taking that away from her. However, if he didn’t end this now, he risked the shit hitting the fan.

Eric heaved in a deep breath. His nostrils flared like a raging bull.

“Did you get some weird, sick enjoyment out of leaving her while she still had breath in her lungs? You had to have known she knew it was you who tortured her, or are

you that stupid?” Bellamy said .

Octavia opened her mouth, but Bellamy blinked. Twice.

A signal for her to keep her mouth shut.

“And here you’re telling me of all the mistakes I’ve made. Damn, leaving her alive was a big one. Do you not know or understand the kind of woman she is? No flipping way was she going to let you get away with that. Just because it took her a few years to put it all together and have Tate reach out to me to come collect?—”

“What are you talking about?” Eric snapped. “You had no idea she was alive. Tate was too close-lipped for that.”

“That’s what you think.” Bellamy lifted his chin. “I knew before you waltzed into Tate’s hotel and shot him. Who do you think Tate was talking to on the phone when you pulled the fucking trigger?”

“You’re bluffing,” Eric said.

“I have a recording of it.” Bellamy arched a brow. Time to fudge the truth a little. “Tate knew you were coming. He asked me to record the conversation, so I did. I have your voice and the gunshots. I was on a transport plane the next day to collect Octavia. The least you can do now is own up to what you did.”

“Is that what you want?” Eric asked. “A fucking confession from me?”

“I don’t want one,” Bellamy admitted .

“But I do,” Octavia said. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Fine.” Eric narrowed his stare. “I was the one who orchestrated the raid. I was the one who attacked you. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes,” Octavia said softly.

Bellamy held his breath. If the team didn’t come flying through the door by the time he counted to ten, he’d have to start improvising.

Again.

Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five.

Crap. Where the hell was everyone?

It was now or never.

He held Octavia’s stare, as if to apologize for what he was about to do. He knew what would happen. He only hoped it would be him.

And not her.

Octavia stood there, frozen. She’d seen that look in Bellamy’s eyes before. It was a combination of an apology and a call to action.

Bellamy cocked his arm and jabbed Lemin in the gut with his elbow.

Lemin dropped to his knees.

“What the hell?” Eric mumbled.

Bellamy kicked Lemin in the face and went for the gun he had strapped to his ankle .

Eric held her tighter and shifted his weapon, pointing it directly at Bellamy.

“No,” she shouted, grabbing Eric’s arm.

Bang!

“Goddammit.” Bellamy’s arm jerked. Blood trickled from his biceps, onto his T-shirt, and down his sleeve.

Oh God. Bellamy wrestled with Lemin, fighting over the gun in Bellamy’s hand.

Eric reached for her.

She went for his weapon.

He backhanded her across the face. She fell sideways, her body slamming into the coffee table.

“You fucking bitch.” Eric grabbed her by the hair, yanking her to a standing position.

The taste of blood filled her mouth. Her vision blurred, but she could see Eric’s weapon as he waved it about. His eyes were wild with rage. She fisted his shirt, holding it tightly, and kneed him right where it counted.

He groaned, doubling over.

Taking advantage of the situation, she snatched the gun from his hand.

He grabbed her ankles, and she toppled over backward, landing on the floor on her ass.

Eric hovered over her. A menacing grin appeared on his face. "I'm going to finish what I started right now."

He reached behind his back .

She swallowed. Aimed. And pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Eric's eyes went wide. He clutched his chest. Blood oozed between his fingertips. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He collapsed to the floor, rolling to his back. His chest rose up and down twice.

And then nothing.

Bang!

Bang!

"Bellamy!" Scrambling to all fours, she tried to stand. A strong hand came down on her shoulder. "It's okay. I'm okay." Bellamy dropped to the floor. "It's over."

"You're shot," she cried. "Eric shot you."

"It's a flesh wound," he said calmly, rolling up his sleeve. "Might need a stitch or two, but outside of that, it's nothing." He took a moment and pressed his finger against the side of Eric's neck.

"Is he... is he..."

Bellamy nodded.

She covered her face and a guttural sob filled her throat.

“Come here.” Bellamy wrapped his arms around her body. “He can’t ever hurt you again.”

The front door flew open.

The sound of boots hitting the floorboards from the kitchen echoed in her ears. More stomping of feet came barreling down the steps .

“What happened?” Nova asked.

“I was about to ask the same thing,” Ethan said.

“You all are a little late to the party.” Bellamy’s loving hands continued to roam up and down her back.

“We’ve been a little busy out there,” Cooper said. “You know, having your back and taking out two teams.”

“You couldn’t bring him in alive, could you?” a woman said. “We talked about this, Bellamy.”

Octavia glanced up, wiping the tears away. She recognized the woman as Agent Georgia Adams. “It was me,” she said softly. “I shot him.”

“Oh, well, that’s different.” Georgia planted her hands on her hips and sighed. “We did hear everything and I am sorry we couldn’t get in sooner. Unfortunately, they had a second team that didn’t go down as easily.”

Bellamy lifted his shirt and dabbed her cheek.

She winced.

“I think we should have you checked out by a doctor.” He kissed her temple. “He clocked you good.”

Her stomach pitched and rolled. What little she’d eaten slowly made its way from her tummy to her throat. “I’m going to be sick.” She jumped to her feet, raced past the half a dozen people standing in Bellamy’s family room, and stumbled out the front door. She barely managed the porch steps and dropped to her knees before coughing and gagging.

“Maybe she has a concussion,” Cooper said. “I’ll check with Emory on how far out an ambulance is.”

“Thanks.” Bellamy was at her side in seconds. He brushed her hair behind her shoulders and ran his hand across her neck. “Deep breaths, babe. Deep, slow breaths.”

“I wanted him to pay for what he did, but he was going to?—”

“Shhh,” Bellamy whispered. “It was him or us. You did what any normal human being would do in that situation.”

“Did I?”

He sat back on the steps, pulling her onto his lap. “Yes,” he said strongly. “It’s not easy to deal with taking a life. I know that better than anyone. But please don’t ever forget what he did to you. Or the fact that he left you for dead and given the chance, he would have killed us both.”

“I know that.” She crumpled into his loving arms. “This is really over, isn’t it? I’m

free to come back and live my life however I see fit.”

“You are.” He tilted her chin with his thumb. “I love you, O.”

“I love you too, Bell... Pepper.”

He shook his head and laughed. “Now I’m sure you have a concussion. ”

“I do feel lightheaded and I have a killer headache.” Only, she wasn’t so sure that’s what had made her sick.



16

Bellamy paced in the waiting room of the emergency department. His biceps throbbed. He freaking hated stitches.

But he hated being kicked out of Octavia's exam room even more.

"Would you relax?" Ethan said.

"Seriously, you're making me nuts with all that stomping." Rusty leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "The only reason the doctor asked you to leave was because you were being an overbearing asshole."

"I was not, and you weren't even there," Bellamy muttered.

"Doesn't matter. We know you." Cooper slapped him on the back and handed him a water. "Besides, I'm sure she's fine. Even if she does have a concussion, it's minor."

"Even I agree with him," Claudius said from the small table and chairs by the big doors into the ER. He sat there quietly playing solitaire.

That wasn't where Bellamy's mind had wandered. The doctor had mentioned doing a blood test could give a false negative because it might be too early, but he was happy to perform one. However, Octavia was adamant that she wanted to wait a week.

Bellamy wanted her to do it now, and that's when the discussion took a turn for the worse, and the doctor asked Bellamy to step outside.

That was an hour ago.

“I just hate hospitals.” Bellamy twisted the cap off the water and chugged. “I appreciate you guys coming and hanging, but there’s no reason for you to stay.”

Claudius glanced up. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I didn’t mean you,” Bellamy said.

“Are you telling the rest of us to leave?” Ethan lowered his chin. “Because that’s just not cool.”

Bellamy chuckled. “I’m giving you the option.”

“We’ll wait until the doctor comes and gets you.” Rusty nodded. “You know the rule, we don’t leave a man down.”

“Ride or die,” Cooper said.

Bellamy tapped his chest. These were his brothers. His family.

But Octavia was his heart. His soul .

“What if I needed help with a big romantic grand gesture?” Bellamy sat in the chair across from Claudius. For years, he kept things at a snail’s pace regarding Octavia. He figured he had the rest of his life.

However, that’s not how things turned out.

He couldn’t make the same mistake twice.

But what he was thinking was crazy. It was moving at lightning speed.

Perhaps that's exactly what they needed.

Claudius glanced up over his cards and cocked his head. His lips curved into a smile.

As if he knew what Bellamy had planned.

"Excuse me?" Cooper pulled up a chair and straddled it. "What do you mean by that?"

"Yeah. I'd like an explanation." Rusty pushed from the wall. "Since when are you a hopeless romantic?"

"I'm not," Bellamy said. "But I'm not screwing this up again." He glanced up. "Are you assholes in or out?"

"Oh, we're in," all three men said at once.

"Good. I'll shoot you a text with what I want you to do. Now get out of here," he said.

"That's it?" Cooper asked. "You're going to make us walk out that door and wait for instructions."

Bellamy nodded and pointed toward the door .

His three brothers-in-arms strolled toward the exit without saying another word.

He'd be lost without those men in his life.

“So, want to fill me in?” Claudius set the cards on the table, leaned back, and folded his arms across his chest.

“I should have done this years ago.” Bellamy raked a hand through his hair. “She’s probably going to say no. Or maybe not right now. Because this is going so freaking fast I can’t think straight. But I love her. I always have and I want to marry her.”

“Are you trying to be a gentleman and ask for her hand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, it’s about bloody time.” Claudius gave him a little punch in the shoulder. “She’s not going to say no.”

“I wish I was that confident.”

The main doors to the exam rooms swished open and the doctor strolled through.

It was time to start the rest of his life.

“Are you sure?” Octavia hugged her father. “You know Bellamy has plenty of room. You don’t have to go stay at a hotel.”

“I know, baby girl.” He kissed her cheek. “But I do need to be on that flight tomorrow morning with Agent Adams. There’s a lot of work to be done back at the office. The fallout from what Eric has done will require my presence, and I can’t put it off.” He held her by the forearms. “Besides, you and Bellamy have something important to discuss.” He arched a brow. “You are going to tell him, aren’t you?”

“Eventually,” she managed.

He lowered his chin. “It would be best if you told him now. This isn’t the kind of thing that should wait.”

“I know, but a lot has happened and I haven’t even processed any of it. I need time.”

“The only time you need is alone time with Bellamy, which is why I’m leaving. I’ll be back as soon as I can wrap things up in a nice bow, and I’ll be sure to stay for a couple of weeks.”

Octavia sighed. “I understand, but I’ll miss you.”

“Oh, I’ll miss you too, sweetheart.” He kissed her forehead. “I’ll call you as soon as I get to Virginia.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“Right back at you.”

She watched her father stroll down the driveway toward his SUV. He stopped at the driver’s door and waved before climbing in and driving off.

The front door squeaked open. Tucker and Roxy appeared at her side. Roxy plopped at her feet and Tucker sat by the steps and sighed.

Bellamy looped his arm around her shoulders. “How are you holding up?”

She glanced at the night sky. It was approaching the midnight hour. She yawned. “I honestly have no idea.” She wrapped her arms around her middle. “I’m a little scared to go back inside.”

“Come on, I have a little surprise for you.” He took her by the hand and guided her

into the house.

Holding her breath, she glanced toward the family room and gasped. “Oh my,” she whispered. “How did you manage to get this place cleaned up?”

“Cooper, Ethan, and Rusty came over and did it.” He waved his hand. “They couldn’t get all the blood out of the rug, so I told them to toss it. I kind of want to get a new sofa now because of all that went down, but I don’t think you can tell anything happened here.”

She swallowed, trying to push the ugly memories from her mind.

Bellamy wrapped his arm around her and held her close. “It will take some time for you to forget.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.” She glanced up. “I took the name of a therapist from the doctor at the ER. I plan on calling in the morning.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” He palmed her cheek. “You most likely will have nightmares.”

“I’ve had those for five years,” she whispered. “But I suspect the ones I’ve been having will be gone.”

“I don’t mean to keep bringing this up, but they could be replaced by what you experienced here tonight.” He brushed his mouth over her lips. “And if you want, we can still go to a hotel. I don’t mind. There’s one not far from here that will take the dogs. My cats will be okay for the night.”

“No.” She shook her head. “This is your home and if I’m going to stay in Hawaii for a few weeks, or even months, this is where I want to be.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me.” He smiled. “I have another surprise.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“But I am.” He tugged her toward the stairs. The dogs dashed past them.

She laughed. “I bet those buggers are ready for some sleep.”

“They’re very confused about why they were at the ranch all day and my cats are all hiding. They’ve never been out of my house, so going over to Waylen and Presley’s for the day might have traumatized them.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing we’re not leaving for the night.”

“All I want is for you to be happy and comfortable.”

He was making it so hard for her to keep her news to herself. She couldn’t believe it when the doctor had come back in to tell her the results of the blood test.

She’d even asked him if it was possible he had the wrong patient.

But sure enough, it was true.

She was pregnant.

She wanted to tell Bellamy. She really did. But she’d miscarried her first child so soon after finding out that she didn’t want to go through that again.

But if she didn’t tell him, and she lost the baby, he’d not only be sad and hurt, but he’d be mad.

And rightfully so.

This was their new beginning. Their fresh start.

A second chance to do everything differently.

He pushed open the bedroom door. “I had some help from the guys.”

“Oh my God.” She covered her mouth. Both nightstands had a bouquet of daisies. So did the dresser. On the center of the bed was a tray of chocolate-covered strawberries. “You asked your buddies to do this?”

“They have been busting my chops all night, especially Cooper, reminding me of how I asked you to prom and how lame that was.”

Tears burned her eyes. “It wasn’t lame at all. It’s who you are.” She turned. “I’m not sure who this man is.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the engagement ring. “The man who doesn’t want to ever risk losing you again.” He took her hand and placed the ring on her finger. “I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much.”

“This is crazy.”

“No. What was crazy was me letting you go eight years ago. I’ve been a miserable bastard ever since.”

She held up the ring and wiggled her fingers. “It fits.”

“If you don’t like it, we can get a?—”



She cupped his mouth. “I love it and I love you.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It is.”

He scooped her up in his arms and twirled her around.

Both dogs barked as if they were in agreement.

“Put me down,” she said. “I have a couple of things to say.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.” He set her on the bed, pushing the dogs to the side, and sat next to her. “What’s on your mind?”

“First, I don’t want to race off to the chapel, so no quickie wedding.”

“I can be somewhat patient, but what about if you’re pregnant?” He tucked her hair behind her ears. “Won’t you want to get married before you start showing?”

This was going to get interesting real fast and she was going to have fun with it. For the first time in five years, her life was her own. “I don’t care if I waddle down the aisle like a penguin. I want to take my time planning my wedding. It’s the only one I will ever have.”

“Good to know.”

“Do you care?”

“About what?”

“If I’m all fat and can’t see my toes when we get married?”

He tilted her chin with his thumb. “You’d be pregnant, not fat. Big difference.”

“Not what I asked.”

“No. I wouldn’t care, but we don’t even know yet because someone wouldn’t take a blood test.”

She bit down on her lower lip.

He jerked his head back. “Jesus, O. You took the test.”

“Sorry, but you were being so weird about it and the guys were right out in the hallway and that’s another thing. I don’t want anyone to know until we get past the point where I could miscarry.”

“Wait. What? You already have the results.” He jumped from the bed, but must have miscalculated his footing, because he landed on the floor with a thud. “Jeez, that hurt.”

She slid to the floor. “Are you okay?”

“Oh. I’m fine. Just a bruised ego and tailbone.” He stared into her eyes. “A baby?”

She nodded.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

Roxy jumped off the bed and rested her head in Octavia’s lap.

“Hear that, Roxy? I’m gonna be a...” He blinked. His jaw dropped open.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m going to be a father. To a human,” he whispered. “I think I need a drink.”

“Just remember you can’t toss commands around at a child like you do the dogs. It doesn’t work that way.” She laughed, resting her head on his shoulder and snuggling closer.

She’d waited five long years to come home.

Being in Bellamy’s arms was where she belonged and she would never leave them again.

Was that a growl?

Cooper Harris bolted upright, instinctively reaching for his gun stashed inside the nightstand drawer before tossing aside the covers and swinging his feet off the edge of the bed. He glanced at Whiskey, wondering if he'd imagined the raspy sound when the dog simply lifted her head, staring at him as if he'd lost his mind before lowering it to rest on her paws, again. Body lax. Nothing to suggest there was any form of threat looming nearby.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, rocking to his feet as placed his Sig on the table. Ever since he'd returned from Columbia with his best friend, Bellamy Chance, and the rest of his team — since freaking Octavia Reynolds had been miraculously resurrected from the dead — Coop had been on edge. Strung tight, if he was being honest. The fact he'd run into Nova Martin, DEA agent and the one woman who'd always managed to get under his skin, hadn't helped calm his nerves any. Not when just being in her presence had gotten his heart pumping. Had his chest constricting around every breath.

He'd tried to push his feelings aside. To remind himself they'd never gotten the chance to be serious. More random texts interspersed with a string of first dates that had always gotten interrupted by one of them getting called off to work. Either him with one of the U.S. Coast Guard's Tactical Law Enforcement units. Or her back to Bogotá in what seemed like one undercover assignment after another. And not routine stuff. Special Agent Nova Martin was hardcore in every aspect of the word, generally mixing with cartel and mafia assholes. The kind who wouldn't think twice about offing a Drug Enforcement Agent.

But despite his efforts — all the time and distance between them — his damn heart hadn't gotten the memo. Had spent every second — other than when they'd been getting shot at — tripping over itself inside his chest. As if it didn't quite fit and was banging against his ribs in an attempt to regain some semblance of equilibrium. Even now, just picturing her— replaying the raspy way she said his name — made it hard to breathe.

Crazy.

That's what he was. Especially when Nova hadn't given him any indication she wanted to see if they might actually have a chance at a relationship. A possibility now that he'd retired from the Coast Guard and moved to the Big Island with the other three members of his team to run the new K9 program for the Brotherhood Protectors.

Which, of course, she hadn't. She'd just lost her partner, Special Agent David Tate, and all because of a rogue operation. One that could end up biting Nova in the ass now that her boss had learned that she'd been covering for Tate for years. Had been secretly investigating right alongside him. A truth even Tate hadn't been aware of. The fact she'd headed straight for Hawai'i instead of going home to Seattle...

It was another rogue mission in the making because Cooper knew, without a doubt, that she wouldn't stay on the sidelines. Use the mandatory leave she'd been forced to take to mourn the loss of a man who'd been so much more than a colleague and a mentor.

Tate had been family. The closest thing she'd had to a father.

Cooper was definitely crazy. Because with his team in the thick of an investigation, the last thing he needed was to spend each night agonizing over a woman who had every intention of heading right back to Columbia once Tate's killer was either dead or behind bars.

He glanced at his phone, wondering how she was fairing in that rental Bellamy had arranged for her — if he should call and double check in case trouble had already followed them back — when a low rattle carried in from the living room. What sounded like someone trying to open his front door. Having Whiskey cock her head in that direction then stand, the hackles along her back already raised was all the proof Cooper needed that he hadn't imagined that growl. What could have been an engine.

Whiskey moved in beside him as he snagged his Sig and headed for his bedroom door, listening for a few moments before cracking it open — scanning his surroundings. Deep shadows filled the room, only a hint of moonlight shining through the windows.

He took a step out, signaling for Whiskey to stay on his right as he cleared the hallway off to his left then side-stepped over to the couch. Crickets and frogs chirped in the distance as the haunting call of a nighthawk echoed through the air.

Cooper whistled, following Whiskey when she headed straight for the front door. She didn't bark, waiting patiently while he cleared the kitchen then stopped off to one side of the room, chancing a quick peek out the top window. Not that he'd expected to see anyone, but wishful thinking...

After a short countdown, he had that door propped open — was sweeping the porch with his weapon as he darted out, Whiskey hugging his leg. He cleared the front yard, then headed for the driveway, checking his truck before turning.

A lone scuff cut through the chorus of chirps. Not loud. More the kind of muffled noise he expected someone with skills to make. And he knew, if he hadn't been actively listening for it, he never would have heard it.

That had him laser-focused — moving with purpose around the corner of his cottage and down one side. Finding the gate closed, but not fully latched only spurred him on.

Whiskey scented the air as Cooper eased the gate open, smiling when the hinges didn't squeak.

Three quick steps and they were through, leaving the gate ajar to avoid any chance of it making a sound when they'd already lucked out once. Whiskey inched in front, pressing against his leg as she stared at the back corner a moment before a muffled scrape lit the air followed by a hushed curse.

Cooper checked behind him, then took off. Not quite running but not walking, either. Just fast enough he was confident whoever was on his lanai wouldn't have a chance to hoof it to the rear fence before he was on them. Not with Whiskey backing him up.

They hit the corner moving in sync, his gun leading the way — Whiskey still hugging his leg. He paused long enough to get a bead on the tango's location before popping out, keeping Whiskey contained. While he would have loved to have let the dog take lead, he wouldn't chance an interaction until he knew what he was facing. If maybe his teammates, Russell "Rusty" Callahan and Ethan Foster, were playing a prank on him in an effort to work off some of their pent-up tension. All that adrenaline from the impromptu op to Columbia that had nowhere else to go because Bellamy and Octavia were still in trouble. Would undoubtedly be facing more threats.

A shadowed figure stood outside his bedroom window, what looked like a weapon holstered on their left side. Cooper shifted to get a better sight line, keeping Whiskey close, when the figure inhaled then spun, that weapon now aimed at his chest.

He held his ground, whistling to Whiskey when the perp cursed and lowered their gun, shuffling over until half their face was visible in the moonlight.

"Christ, Cooper, stand down. It's just me."

Cooper clenched his jaw, telling Whiskey to stay as he took a step forward, all the while scanning his surroundings. "Nova?"

“If you have to ask, then we have a bigger problem.”

He shook his head, lowering his weapon. “Damn. Do you know how close I came to firing? Or sending Whiskey over? What the hell are you doing out here?”

Nova shrugged, seeming oblivious to the fact he’d nearly shot her as she holstered her weapon then leaned against the wall, a sexy smile curving her lips. “I was seeing if you were asleep, yet.”

“By sneaking around my back yard at...” He checked his watch. “One A.M.? Do you have an aversion to simply knocking on the door?”

“It’s a bit late to just show up and knock.”

“But the perfect time to stalk?”

“I wasn’t stalking. I was investigating.” She gave him a once-over. “Where’s your shirt?”

“On the floor where I tossed it when I went to bed.” He stabbed his fingers through his hair. “Did something happen with the rental? Is someone tailing you? Should I ring Bellamy?”

“Whoa, slow down, slugger. Do all ex-military guys jump to the worst-case scenarios first or just you?”

“We just left Columbia amidst a gunfight, there’re likely tangos on our tail, and we’re expecting Eric freaking Moody to show up with his entourage of highly trained assholes any day now. I’m being practical.”

“Practical. Paranoid. Kinda the same thing for you Spec Op boys. And no, no one’s tailing me and for god’s sake, don’t call Bellamy. Or Rusty or Ethan or that Hawk



guy you all work for.”

“So, it is the rental, then. Did they kick you out for busting someone’s balls? Or was there a baby crying all night in the next suite?”

Nova snagged her bottom lip, worrying it for a few moments as she shifted on her feet. One of the rare occasions he’d ever seen her falter. “The rental was fine, it’s just... The longer I sat there, staring at the walls, the more I thought about Tate, and...”

Was her chin quivering? It was hard to tell in the filtered moonlight, with only half of her face really visible.

He took a step closer. “Hey, are you okay?”

Her chin was definitely quivering. And despite the shadows and muted light, her eyes glistened. Nova swallowed, looking as if she might puke before she closed her eyes and stood there. Every muscle tensed. Hands fisted at her side.

Shit.

Two steps and he’d closed the distance by half — was ignoring that voice inside his head that warned him she might just as soon kick his ass than allow him to comfort her. Another two and he had her by the shoulders — was able to tug her against him. Nova stiffened for a few moments. As if she couldn’t decide if she wanted to hold him or drop him on his ass, just like he’d been thinking, before she choked out a rough breath then wrapped her arms around him. Her head hit his shoulder, a raspy sob muffled against his chest.

Cooper sighed, holding her close as she fought to gather some control, a series of shuddering breaths feathering across his skin. He lifted one hand and cupped the back of her neck, toying with the soft curls at her nape until she relaxed, leaning more of

her weight against him.

He smiled, dropping a chaste kiss on the top of her head before he eased back, tucking some of her fiery auburn hair behind her ears. “Better?”

She snorted, cringing when he brushed at the tears drying on one cheek. “Not really.”

“Nova. Sweetheart, cut yourself some slack. Have you given yourself even a moment to grieve Tate’s death? Because I’m betting you’ve been going mach five with your hair on fire ever since he was killed.”

“I can’t afford to grieve. Not with his killer still out there.”

“Right. Better just to shove it all down, instead. Let it simmer and boil until it explodes.”

Nova tilted her head to the side. “I guess I have my answer, and it’s just you who jumps to all the worst-case scenarios, first. ”

“Or, I’ve seen enough buddies box it up to know it rarely ends well.”

Nova clenched her jaw then closed her eyes, looking as if she might fall apart, again.

He palmed her cheek, waiting until she looked up at him. “Nova?—”

She kissed him.

No preamble, no hesitation. Just her tiptoeing up then slanting her lips over his. Burning away any doubt he’d had that she wasn’t interested.

Cooper yanked her against him, ravaging her mouth as he fisted all that silky soft hair. Using it to anchor her to him as he backed them up until they hit the side of his

house. Her gorgeous green eyes widened before she let her head fall against the wood, and he took the opportunity to kiss and lick his way down her neck — bite at her pulse point thrashing wildly beneath her skin.

“God, Coop.”

He grinned against her flesh, reclaiming her mouth until Whiskey nudged his leg, breaking the sexual atmosphere with a loud yip. He glanced down at the dog, chest heaving. His fingers still locked in Nova’s hair. Every thought focused on how quickly he could shuck his pajama pants and get inside her when Nova smoothed her hand along his jaw, biting her lower lip as a shiver shook through her.

Cooper cursed inwardly, using every trick he’d learned in the service to pull himself back. Unlock his fingers from her hair. It took him a few tries, but he managed to ease his hand free, lowering it to her chin.

He held firm, leaning in when she frowned — looked as if she was back to considering dropping him on his ass. “Sweetheart...”

She swallowed, half-coughing when it obviously didn’t go down right, before glaring up at him. “If this is you telling me you’re not interested...”

“Not interested?” He pressed against her, nipping at her neck, again, when she groaned. “Does it feel like I’m not interested?”

He clenched his jaw when she rubbed against him, nearly blasting the bit of clarity he’d clawed back into a million pieces. “Trust me, there’s nothing I want more than to lift you up and pound into you until neither one of us has the strength to stand.”

“That’s a plan I can get behind?—”

“Except where you’re raw. Vulnerable. And as much as I want this — want you —

I'm not the kind of man who takes advantage of a situation." He placed his finger over her lips when she opened her mouth. "And yeah, it would be. So, here's what we're going to do..."

He trailed his finger down her neck, along her shoulder then across the side of her breast. "We grab your suitcase and take it inside, because you did bring all your stuff with you, right?"

Nova gave him a guarded nod.

He smiled. "Right, so we bring it inside and get you settled here, with me, instead of at that sterile rental. Then, we snuggle in my bed where I promise to hold you until the sun comes up. No sex. Just the two of us together."

Nova stared up at him. "I'm going to stay here with you and we're just going to sleep?"

"For now, while we're neck deep in this op. But mark my words..." He shifted until his mouth was an inch from hers, their breath mixing in the cool night air. "Once we wrap this up, all bets are off. Because I plan on picking up right here with you strung tight. Desperate for me to finally make a move."

He brushed his lips across hers. "Well, sweetheart? You in?"

She braced her weight against the wall, glancing at Whiskey then back to him. "Whiskey will let us know if there's a threat, right?"

"No one will get past her. Or me. Promise."

"Is making out off limits, or..."

Cooper chuckled then claimed her mouth, tracing every inch before finally easing

away — nuzzling his nose against hers. “Definitely allowed. In fact, it’s highly encouraged, but...”

“No sex until this investigation is over.” She laughed. “I knew you were trouble the second I met you.”

“Is that your version of yes?”

“Yeah. But...” She snagged his hair and dragged him back to her. “I plan on pushing the limits as far as I can, so... buckle up. You’re in for one hell of a ride.”

Cooper’s Command