



Chain Reaction (Lantern Beach Blackout: Detonation #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When an explosion rocks Lantern Beach, authorities scramble into action. Was the WWII relic that washed ashore merely bad luck—or something far more sinister?

Dr. Raven Newton, a forensic archaeologist, is called to investigate the bomb that killed one person. With her specialized knowledge of military artifacts, she's the perfect person for the job—until she discovers who else is on the case.

Former Navy SEAL Jake Laudner never forgot his whirlwind romance with Raven. Once assigned as her protector during a high-risk overseas mission, Jake broke his cardinal rule: Never get emotionally involved. Now working for elite security firm Blackout, Jake is stunned to find himself face-to-face with the woman who still haunts his dreams.

As the investigation intensifies, so does the tension between Raven and Jake. Raven insists their previous relationship was nothing but adrenaline and proximity. Jake knows differently—and he's determined to prove it.

With a killer targeting Raven and time running out, she needs protection whether she wants it or not. And Jake won't fail her twice, even if it costs him everything.

Total Pages (Source): 49

CHAPTER 1

Eleanor Clark walked down the seashore, the early morning sun casting pastel hues through the air as the ocean crescendoed then receded beside her. The late April day was the perfect temperature—not warm enough to be hot, but not cold enough for a jacket. Her sweatshirt and jeans felt just right.

This was one of her favorite months on Lantern Beach. The tourists hadn't begun to descend and wouldn't for another month or so. Life on the shore was quiet, and the empty beaches gave her more opportunities to treasure hunt—her favorite hobby.

She paused on her walk and stared at an object partially buried in the sand near her feet. Using her hands, she swept away the gritty grains from the top.

Her pulse quickened when she saw the faded gray paint.

Then she dug out the edges until the shape of the object materialized. It appeared to be metal, probably three feet long and eight inches in diameter. It was shaped like a missile.

Normally she found shells and occasionally some beach glass. Her best treasure up until this moment was a red antique perfume bottle that had been perfectly weathered by the waves and sand.

She'd never found something like this before.

She was nearly certain this was a wartime relic.

Had it come from an old shipwreck? Or had a plane dropped it from the sky?

A grin curled her lips.

Eleanor shouldn't be surprised that this had washed up. Last night's storm had been a doozy. It was one of the reasons she'd come out early this morning to beachcomb. Those kinds of weather systems usually churned up the best treasures.

She glanced up and down the shore.

No one else was walking the beach this morning. But the last thing she wanted was for someone else to find this and claim it as their own.

No, Eleanor had found this first, and it was hers. She was going to be the talk of her beachcomber club.

As determination—and excitement—hardened inside her, she stared at the object another moment.

How heavy could it be?

She circled it and observed the fins on the back that made it look like a mini torpedo.

A torpedo? She nearly laughed at herself.

How crazy was that thought?

This was a treasure of the sea.

She bent down and tested the object's weight by lifting the narrow end. Her sixty-six-year-old body didn't flex the way it used to. But she could handle this.

The object was heavy but not as hefty as she'd thought it might be.

She stepped closer and straddled the relic. Then she reached for the center, wrapped her arms around the middle, and lifted.

With a heave, she hugged the object to her chest and tried to catch her breath.

It wouldn't be an easy walk back to her beach house. But thankfully, she just needed to make it over the wooden walkway crossing the sand dune. Then she'd be home.

She took a laborious step through the thick sand. Then another. The added weight slowed her progress as her feet sank with every pace forward.

People here said this beach was full of sugar sand because of the consistency of the grains. Eleanor got a workout each time she came out here. But the effort was worth it—especially on days like today.

Finally, though her lungs and limbs screamed in protest, she made it inside her house. She slowly hefted her find onto her kitchen table.

Then she stared at it and grinned.

The task had felt monumental, but she'd done it.

Her friends at the Sunrise Beachcomber Club would be so jealous. She could only imagine their reactions.

She grabbed her cell phone from her back pocket and snapped a picture. Then she opened the Facebook page for her group and typed, "The early bird gets the worm! Look what I found this morning. Anybody have any idea what this is? No identifying marks, FYI."

As she hit Post, she grinned again. She couldn't wait to hear what her friends had to say.

She set her phone on the kitchen bar and walked past it to get some coffee while she waited for the responses to begin pouring in. She would be the talk of the group today.

The small moments like this were what she lived for.

Her breathing finally returned to normal after her impromptu workout. She fixed herself a cup of coffee in her favorite mug—one that read “World’s Best Wife.” Her husband had given it to her a month before he died. Using the mug always filled her with a bittersweet sadness.

She watched the steam rise before circling the mug with her fingers and taking a sip.

Today would be a good day. She could feel it in her bones.

It had taken her a long time to find her new normal as a widow. But she'd finally found her groove.

Carl, her husband, had been gone for five years. The two of them had purchased this small oceanfront home ten years ago after she'd bought a three-million-dollar winning lottery ticket. They'd immediately quit their jobs, bought this place, and moved here.

It had always been their dream to live in an oceanfront cottage, and that lottery ticket had allowed them the opportunity.

Life hadn't been as easy as Eleanor had thought it would be after winning so much money.

She frowned. No, if anything, life had become more complicated as people came out of the woodwork wanting some of their windfall.

But at least she had beachcombing to help her relax. Hobbies and friends kept her active and entertained.

Dings began sounding on Eleanor's phone, and more excitement coursed through her. Holding her coffee with one hand, she grabbed her phone with the other. Then she sat at the table, her new treasure in front of her.

She clicked on the post and read the first response.

"That's an unexploded WWII ordnance. You need to stay far away. Please tell me you didn't bring it inside!"

Her eyes widened. What? That couldn't be right. And would something this old still be dangerous?

Certainly, Donald757 was overreacting.

Then she read the next comment. "You need to call the authorities so the bomb squad can come out. Get away from it. Now!"

Her lips parted. Another outrageous theory? What was wrong with these people?

Maybe they'd been watching too many of those World War II documentaries.

But the comments kept furiously coming.

Eighty percent of them were the same—warning of danger.

One commenter offered to buy it.

Only three comments shared her amazement of what she'd found.

Eleanor frowned as her gaze drifted to the object. Could this really be dangerous after so many years submerged in the ocean?

Besides, didn't mini torpedoes have an expiration date?

Some of her joy began to fade as apprehension set in.

Maybe she should call 911. What could it hurt?

But, first, she'd take the thing back outside. She'd carried it all the way across the beach, and nothing had happened. Certainly, she could take it a few more feet.

She didn't want anything to happen to her beach house—all her treasures were stored inside these walls. She had an entire bookshelf full of shells and bottles and even a couple of old buoys she'd found.

Without wasting any more time, Eleanor set down her coffee and her phone and carefully lifted the object, holding it the same way she did before.

Then she turned and headed toward the door. But after taking two steps, her foot caught on the table leg, making her stumble and lose her balance.

Eleanor reached out to steady herself with one hand.

Lost her grip on the ordnance.

The metal object tilted. Slid out of her hand. Then it hit the floor.

Nose down.

CHAPTER 2

Raven Newton pulled her car to a stop behind two police vehicles at the end of a gravel lane only feet from the beach along the Atlantic Ocean on Lantern Beach.

Nestled off the coast of North Carolina, Lantern Beach was a slender barrier island accessible only by ferry. Its isolation was part of its charm. The narrow strip of land sat embraced by the vast Atlantic on one side and the sheltered sound on the other, a sanctuary of undulating sand dunes crowned with swaying sea oats.

The island earned its evocative name generations ago when a desperate lighthouse keeper, unable to light the tower's beacon during a storm, placed lanterns along the shoreline to guide ships away from the treacherous waters known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic.

Originally established as a humble fishing community in the late 1800s, the island remained relatively undiscovered until tourists began arriving in the 1970s, forever altering its character while somehow preserving its soul.

The heart of Lantern Beach pulsed in its quaint downtown, where a weathered wooden boardwalk stretched along the oceanfront, lined with locally owned shops, nostalgic arcades, and ice cream parlors perfuming the salt air with sweet temptations.

A substantial pier jutted into the ocean, topped with a beloved sandwich shop where locals and visitors alike gathered to watch the waves crash below. Instead of towering hotels, the island was dotted with vacation cottages and a handful of bed-and-

breakfasts, their pastel exteriors weathered by sea and sun.

A lighthouse stood sentinel at the island's edge, a silent guardian surrounded by gnarled live oaks that had bent and twisted under decades of coastal winds, creating an otherworldly canopy over the sandy paths leading to its base.

Raven had only been here once before, but she knew life on Lantern Beach moved according to nature's rhythms rather than the insistent pace of the mainland. Locals collected their mail from PO boxes rather than home delivery, exchanged news at the local market, and conducted business with a relaxed efficiency that frustrated newcomers.

The island's temperament could shift as quickly as its weather—warm sunshine giving way to cooling evening breezes, placid waters transforming into angry swells during approaching storms. Sandy lanes and gravel roads connected the community, sometimes becoming impassable during the height of tourist season as visitors flooded the two-lane main artery with cars.

Yet despite these occasional inconveniences, Lantern Beach maintained its reputation as a peaceful haven where serious crime was unknown for thirty years—at least until recently.

The strong sense of community among year-round residents created a protective embrace around the island, where everyone seemed to know everyone, their histories intertwined like tangled fishing line.

Local lore whispered of buried treasure and maritime mysteries, stories shared around bonfires that sparked imagination while the Atlantic's constant rhythm provided a timeless soundtrack to this coastal sanctuary, where the boundary between past and present seemed as fluid as the tides themselves.

Raven wished she was here to enjoy this place.

Instead, she stepped outside and stared at the carnage in front of her.

A beautiful beach house had once stood at this location, mere steps from the beach. Now, the home had been reduced to shambles. Only a few posts and beams remained standing—or leaning or sagging—and burned embers scattered the sandy ground and dune.

The fact only one person had died in the explosion was a near miracle. Thankfully, the two houses on either side had been unoccupied. Otherwise, this could have been even more of a tragedy. Their windows had been blown out and the sides of the houses charred.

Raven knew about tragedy firsthand, and she didn't wish the feelings on anyone.

"You must be Dr. Newton," a voice said beside her.

She turned to see an attractive woman in her mid-thirties approaching from a police vehicle. The officer had blonde hair pulled into a low bun and wore a police uniform. Her name badge read Chief Chambers.

Raven extended her hand. "I am. But you can call me Raven. It's nice to meet you, Chief Chambers."

"Please, call me Cassidy. Thank you so much for coming. You were highly recommended for this job by one of my colleagues in DC."

"Whatever I can do to help." Raven turned back to what had once been a house. "This is heartbreaking."

Cassidy turned toward the scene also. “You’re right. It really is. The woman, Eleanor Clark, had just posted online this morning about her beachcombing find. People began to warn her that the object was dangerous. But it was already too late.”

Raven frowned. “I’m sorry to hear that, especially when something like this could have been prevented. I guess the woman didn’t realize what exactly she was dealing with.”

“No, she didn’t. Eleanor was a nice woman. She and her husband moved to Lantern Beach after winning the lottery a decade ago. They mostly kept to themselves, but they did like to play Bingo down at the local Ruritan Club on occasion.”

Raven stored that fact away as her gaze traveled beyond the house to the ocean on the other side of the dune. “Have these types of devices been found on your shores before?”

Cassidy shook her head. “No, we do occasionally have things that wash ashore—a whole shipping container of Doritos once.”

Raven raised her eyebrows. “No kidding? That sounds fun.”

She let out a quick laugh. “That was before my time. But, yes, I’ve heard stories. This island is full of history—including pirates and rumors of buried treasure.”

“That must attract tourists to the area.”

“It does. Some of the old-timers like to tell stories about World War II when U-boats were off the shore,” Cassidy continued. “Residents had to turn off all the lights on the island so the enemy didn’t know anyone was here. I’m so thankful we’re not living in that time in history anymore. I imagine it was terrifying.”

“Agreed.” Raven paused, her gaze traveling back to the remains of the house. “I’d love to get closer if it’s safe.”

Cassidy nodded. “The scene has been cleared by the fire chief. I’ve already called the State Bureau of Investigation. They’re on standby if we need their help—which we might, depending on what we uncover.”

“Hopefully, this was just a tragic accident.”

“I can’t imagine it would be anything else . . .” Cassidy paused. “Though the fact that Eleanor won the lottery could potentially make her a target.”

“Did anyone stand to inherit her money upon her death?” Raven was only here to investigate the bomb, but it couldn’t hurt to get more information.

“We’re looking into that, but she apparently has a son up in Virginia and two grandchildren. She also has one sister who’s still living, and her late husband’s brother is in California. I’ll be looking into their backgrounds, just to be thorough, and maybe even questioning a few people. You know what they say—love and money can motivate people to do some pretty awful things.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true.”

Cassidy nodded at Raven’s black designer heels. “You’ll need to be careful in the rubble.”

Raven let out a laugh. “Don’t worry—I brought different shoes. I had a meeting this morning in DC with the US Head of Antiquities, and I left right after it was over.”

Cassidy released what appeared to be a breath of relief.

Sometimes people assumed Raven got her job because of her looks and connections instead of merit. She loved proving them wrong. She had to time and time again.

She paused another moment. She'd been at scenes like this more than she'd like to admit.

Not scenes exactly like this.

But Raven was one of the leading experts in historical artifacts in the US.

Her official job title was historical authentication specialist for the International Cultural Heritage Protection Agency (ICHPA), a United Nations-adjacent organization. She authenticated artifacts for museums, governments, and private collectors. She also investigated potentially looted or illegally obtained artifacts, provided expertise on historical weapons, and consulted with bomb disposal teams when historical explosives were found.

Her specific expertise was in warfare artifacts from the twentieth century, particularly WWII through the Cold War era. She was often called to examine unexploded ordnances found at construction sites, beaches, or in private collections.

On occasion, the FBI or Interpol contracted her services when dealing with cases involving historical weapons.

She'd traveled extensively for her career and had some significant risks associated with her job. Breaking her ankle while searching a bomb site wasn't one of them.

Raven changed into some thick-soled boots then walked to the site. She needed to find any leftover traces of the bomb so she could piece together what might have happened. She'd asked Cassidy to leave everything in place.

Sometimes the placement of debris told an investigator a lot about what had happened.

As the chief talked to another officer on the scene, Raven stepped carefully through the debris. Her heart panged at the reality of the loss.

She knew loss all too well.

Her own mother had been killed in Syria when a terrorist planted a car bomb under her father's vehicle—her father who was a US ambassador in the middle of negotiating a contested peace deal. Her mom had climbed inside instead and . . .

Raven's throat burned.

Thirteen years had passed since then, but sometimes the pain still felt so fresh . . .

As she stepped toward ground zero, she paused and closed her eyes. Took in a deep breath.

Waves crashed in the background. Seagulls swooped overhead.

Sounds that should be peaceful.

Certainly, Eleanor Clark had appreciated them.

Until she died in an explosion.

Raven's lips pulled down in a frown.

She opened her eyes again and continued to walk through the destruction. Somehow, a couch cushion had survived as well as several pots and part of a headboard. Broken

dishes lay at her feet with clothes strewn around. But mostly she saw splintered wood and melted decking.

She heard another vehicle pull onto the scene behind her, but she didn't turn to look. Officials would be coming and going all day—probably all week, for that matter.

A scene like this didn't get investigated in a day.

As Raven searched the area, she squinted as something between the boards caught her eye.

Squatting down, she moved some rubble aside.

A photo underneath had survived the blast.

As the image came into view, her breath caught.

It was a picture of the US Embassy in Syria. Raven knew the place well—she'd lived there at one time.

But why in the world would Eleanor Clark have this photo in her house?

Jake Laudner pulled to a stop at the scene of the blast. He'd already been here this morning, but he wanted another look.

Chief Chambers had called and asked him for his opinion on what had happened.

As a former explosives expert for the Navy, this was his area of expertise. He now worked for a private security group called Blackout. Almost everyone at the company was former military special forces.

He'd only started three months ago, and he was enjoying the job so far. Except for . . .

His throat tightened.

He didn't want to think about those issues now. Didn't want to think about how he and his new colleagues—the ones hired with him—weren't all seeing eye to eye. How he was nearly certain one of them couldn't be trusted.

Right now, however, Jake needed to focus on the disastrous scene before him.

He climbed from his truck and stared at the massacred beach house. Part of the sand dune that had once stood in front of the house was missing, along with the walkover leading from the home's deck to the ocean.

His jaw twitched with compassion. This should never have happened. Senseless tragedies could sometimes be the hardest.

Jake turned and surveyed the people on the scene.

Cassidy stood near her car talking to Officer Leggott. They appeared to be deep in conversation, so Jake decided not to interrupt them.

A woman with long, black hair pulled into a ponytail caught his attention. She squatted in the debris as she studied something on the ground.

Jake watched the woman, something about her vaguely familiar. She must be an investigator. Had the state sent someone? Jake thought Cassidy had said the local PD would handle this scene first.

He'd ask her about it later.

Since the chief was occupied, Jake decided to walk the scene again.

He stepped onto the collapsed structure, wooden boards creaking and moaning under his feet. The ruins still smelled of smoke.

He glanced at the rubble and frowned. The medical examiner had been by this morning collecting any remains left of Eleanor.

The poor woman.

Certainly, she'd never envisioned this happening.

Jake wanted to figure out what exactly had caused this. An old ordnance that hadn't detonated for decades? Or was there more to this story?

As he stepped farther onto the scene, a new sound caught his ear.

He paused as he listened, tension crawling through his muscles.

Was that what he thought it was?

Muscles still rigid, he followed the sound, each step cautious. He needed confirmation before he became the boy who cried wolf.

Because he thought he'd heard a ticking sound—as in a ticking time bomb.

Except, in real life, bombs didn't usually tick . . . unless the creator wanted to use the sound to draw attention or be dramatic.

As the noise became louder, Jake used his foot to move aside some boards.

That was when he saw it.

A bomb.

With glaring red numbers displaying a countdown.

In twelve seconds, this beast was going to blow—taking down anyone and anything nearby.

He raised his head and yelled, “Everybody, get back! Now!”

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CHAPTER 3

Jake ran toward the woman. She'd just started to rise after he yelled.

But she wasn't moving fast enough.

Without thinking, he grabbed her by the waist.

Lifted her in the air.

Ran toward the sand dune.

Behind it.

Then he pushed her to the ground and covered her with his own body.

An explosion sounded. Heat scorched his back. Singed his hair.

Debris flew, raining fire around them.

Then came the thick, dark smoke.

The blast had been quick.

He prayed Cassidy and Officer Leggott had taken cover also, that they'd heeded his warning in time.

Finally, when fragments stopped raining around them, he lifted his head.

Through the opening in the sand dune, he spotted Cassidy and Officer Leggott rise from behind the police cruiser.

Thank God, they were okay.

Jake gave them a thumbs-up to indicate he and this other woman were also safe.

Then he glanced at the woman beneath him, startling as he realized he'd been right. There was something familiar about her.

She looked like someone he'd known a long time ago.

The woman lifted her head high enough to wipe some sand from her cheek. As she did, the scent of her shampoo hit him—vanilla and almond. The familiar aroma sent his mind reeling back in time.

Was that . . . ? No, it couldn't be.

Jake quickly righted his thoughts, concentrating on the problem at hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," the woman murmured, her voice hoarse. "Thank you."

He rolled off her, certain his eyes were deceiving him into seeing things he shouldn't.

But as the woman's eyes met his, recognition filled her gaze.

His heart pounded like a drumline in his ears. He wasn't seeing things after all, was he?

Raven Newton stared at him. “Jake?”

“Raven.”

She rolled over and sat up, the gratitude in her gaze turning to suspicion. “What are . . . what in the world are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you.” He tried to keep the offense from his voice but was unsuccessful. That wasn’t the greeting he’d expected after saving her life. However, considering the way things had ended between them, he shouldn’t be surprised.

Her eyes narrowed. “Chief Chambers called me to help with this case.”

Raven was one of the leading experts in historical artifacts, including bombs. But he’d had no idea she’d be called in for this investigation.

Honestly, this wasn’t the right time for this conversation. Not considering the fact that a second bomb had just gone off—and this one definitely wasn’t an accident.

Without another word, Jake stood, brushed more sand off, and then offered his hand to help Raven up.

She stared at his outstretched arm as if contemplating whether or not to accept his offer. Finally, her fingers touched his. But the suspicion and distrust remained in her gaze.

Jake tried to ignore the rush of electricity where their skin met.

Rekindling things—or feeling any type of attraction, for that matter—with Raven Newton was the last thing he wanted.

He was never supposed to see her again. Yet here she was, looking more beautiful than ever, even with her scowl.

Almost as if in sync, they both turned to face the bomb site. Cassidy was already on the phone, probably calling this in to the fire department. Small flames burned in the center of the remains, and several pieces of debris flared with mini-fires around them.

It reminded him of a war zone—and he'd seen plenty of those in his time as a bomb tech for the Navy.

Raven frowned as she stared at the scene. "It doesn't matter why we're here. The fact is, we're both working this case, and we're both professionals. We should make the best of it."

"Agreed."

A moment passed, and then Raven cleared her throat. "So, what just happened?"

"I'm not sure," Jake said. "But that second bomb wasn't here this morning. Someone must have come back and planted the device since I was here earlier. They wanted to send a message."

Raven frowned as she continued staring at the house. "Message received. Loud and clear."

Raven's heart raced—and it wasn't just because of the picture she'd seen or the bomb that had nearly killed her.

It was because she was never supposed to see Jake Laudner again.

He'd broken her heart ten years ago. She'd recovered and years later had tried to

insert herself into the dating pool—which oftentimes felt more like a cesspool.

There was one guy she was considering giving another chance. Kingston McLaughlin.

He was a former military guy who was now a financial advisor in DC. The man dressed in expensive suits, was smart, and his teeth were incredibly white and straight.

They'd gone out a few times, and they were supposed to go out again when she got home.

However, she still hadn't met anyone she was truly interested in—not like she'd been with Jake. But at least she was trying to put herself out there again.

Last she'd heard, Jake was still working in the Middle East as an EOD—an explosive ordnance disposal expert. She'd assumed he'd be career military, living overseas without anyone back in the States to tie him down. He was the type to be married to his job.

Just like her dad. And Raven had vowed never to date someone like her dad.

Yet she'd fallen for him. Big mistake.

Jake definitely wasn't supposed to be in Lantern Beach.

But right now, she needed to focus. She'd been called in to offer her expertise on bombs—not her expertise on Jake Laudner.

Cassidy and Officer Leggott paused in front of them. The chief's eyes were wide with concern as her gaze swept over them. “Are you okay?”

Raven wiped more stray sand from her clothes and face, not liking the gritty feeling of the grains against her skin. “I’m fine.”

Her voice trembled as she said the words. That reaction, however, was a result of Jake, not the bomb. She prided herself on always being composed.

“Jake?” Cassidy stared at him.

“I’m glad I got here when I did. I heard a ticking sound and found the bomb twelve seconds before it exploded.”

Cassidy’s gaze darkened. “That wasn’t there earlier. We checked this whole area multiple times.”

“I know,” Jake said. “Has the scene been left unmanned?”

“I asked Officer Leggott about it.” She nodded toward the uniformed officer with her.

“We had a changeover in shifts about three hours ago,” Leggott informed them. “There was about fifteen minutes when no officers were here.”

“Could someone have rigged the bomb in that amount of time?” Cassidy asked.

Jake shrugged then nodded. “It’s possible. This person would have had to just been waiting for the right opportunity.”

“Maybe this isn’t about that lottery money . . .” Cassidy muttered. “Not after this stunt.”

Raven was inclined to agree—though that angle should still be investigated.

“And who actually uses a ticking bomb?” Cassidy’s forehead wrinkled in confusion as the wind whipped pieces of hair from her bun. Soot and ash covered one of her cheeks, and some type of grass clung to her shoulder.

Raven could only imagine what she herself looked like right now.

“Someone who wants us to know what they’re up to.” Jake scowled as he said the words.

Raven repressed another shiver.

She hated how shaken she felt right now.

Cassidy stared at the new debris around them. “At first, I thought this was a careless accident—or a plot to get an early inheritance. But someone wants to let us know there’s more to this. That second bomb was meant to send a message.”

“Or maybe it was meant to destroy any evidence left behind after the first explosion.” Raven’s blood chilled at the thought.

“Either way, we need to find out more information before someone decides to detonate another bomb.” Jake shifted on the sand, his hands on his hips as he stared at Cassidy. “What do you want me to do?”

Raven pulled her gaze away from him. He’d always been so handsome in that strong, silent way. Only he really wasn’t that silent once you got to know him. In fact, he’d been a great conversationalist. He was well-rounded, able to talk about anything from his job to classical music.

He’d surprised her in so many ways. In the end, not all of those ways were good.

She cleared her throat and tried to bring her thoughts back into focus. Jake had asked a question. What do you want me to do?

“I’d like you to check out the remains of the bomb so we can pinpoint exactly what kind it was,” Cassidy said. “And hopefully trace it to whoever made it.”

“A lot of bombers have a signature way of developing the explosives,” Jake explained. “I wish I’d seen the device earlier so I could have gotten a better look.”

“I’m just glad you saw it when you did.” Cassidy frowned, her jaw hardening. “This could have been an entirely different story. We might not be standing here right now.”

“Could this have been two separate incidents with two separate perps?” Raven asked. “Could someone be capitalizing on the earlier bomb by leaving another explosive in the same spot to send a message?”

Cassidy rubbed her neck and sighed. “At this point, it’s anyone’s guess.”

Raven hadn’t expected her to have an answer. They would need to investigate more first.

“I need to see the remnants of the original bomb,” Raven said.

Cassidy drew in a slow breath. “I’ll show you what we’ve found so far. In the meantime, Jake, see what you can find out here—without putting yourself in danger, of course. Firefighters are on the way.”

At her words, sirens filled the air.

“By the way, I never officially introduced the two of you,” Cassidy said, squinting as

if she suspected they may have a history.

“We’ve met before,” Raven said.

“A long time ago,” Jake paused only for a moment before continuing. “I’ll do a sweep of the area. We need to make sure no other bombs are present.”

With one last glance at Jake, Raven followed Cassidy back toward the vehicles parked near ground zero. One of the police cars had a shattered window. Ashy remains littered the tops. Debris lay scattered everywhere around them.

Raven was still shaken to the bone . . . for more than one reason.

CHAPTER 4

As Jake worked the scene and talked to firefighters, he knew he needed to put Raven out of his mind. He had other things to concentrate on—like the safety of those around him and figuring out who might have done this.

Yet he still couldn't believe Raven was here. In Lantern Beach. His gaze kept wanting to seek her out.

He lifted a prayer, asking for focus.

Someone had planted a bomb at the site where another bomb had already exploded.

Jake had seen a lot of things in his career but never that. He'd originally assumed this had all been a tragic accident.

But now that didn't seem to be the case.

The earlier situation could have turned out so much differently, as could have the situation this afternoon.

Someone was playing with fire, and he didn't like it.

And why Lantern Beach of all places? It was such a peaceful little island.

It was also where the Blackout headquarters was located. Was someone sending them a message? Or was Jake reading too much into this?

Maybe there was no connection at all. It was too soon to know. He needed to keep investigating first.

He needed to search for blast effects—shrapnel patterns, which could determine the type of explosive used. He'd look for burn marks and shockwave damage. He would need to swab for nitrate, ammonium, and other explosive compounds.

Then he'd search for wires, batteries, blasting caps, and remote triggers—on top of explosive casing.

As he knelt down to examine some of the rubble, the hairs on his neck suddenly rose.

He stood at full height, his body stiffening as he glanced around.

He knew this feeling.

Someone was watching him.

Since Cassidy, Fire Chief Holland, Officer Leggott, and Raven were behind him, he focused instead on the dunes in the distance—dunes with sea oats waving in the breeze.

He saw no one.

Slowly, he scanned the neighboring houses. This home had been raised high on stilts to protect it from flood waters. The other houses looked much the same, covered in weathered cedar siding with pitched roofs and multiple decks and balconies all facing the water.

Thankfully, it wasn't tourist season yet, so no one had occupied the surrounding residences.

One of the houses had a swimming pool and deck along with a small shed to keep pool toys. Now, the area was littered with charred pieces of wood and black shingles.

Nothing caught his eye.

He surveyed the horizon where the ocean met the sky, searching for any boats.

Nothing.

There was still no sign of whatever had caused his guard to go up.

Jake shifted his gaze back to the dunes.

That was when he saw him.

Someone crouched in the sea oats thirty feet away.

He hadn't been imagining things. Someone had been watching him from afar.

"Hey!" Jake started toward the man.

He needed to talk to this guy. To see what he was doing. Why he was attempting to hide. To find out what he might have to do with this bomb.

If the man were innocent, he wouldn't need to run. But if he was guilty . . .

As if to answer Jake's silent question, the guy took off.

As Raven sketched out the bomb site, she thought about that picture she'd found before the explosion.

Now it had been destroyed.

But she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Should she tell Cassidy or Jake?

She nibbled on her bottom lip.

Part of her thought she should. But she only had theories.

Maybe she would do some investigating on her own first. If her prying turned up anything, she'd tell both Cassidy and Jake about her find.

Until then, she'd keep this quiet.

A shout sounded, and she straightened.

The next instant, Jake sprinted toward the ocean.

What in the world was he doing?

Then a figure rose from the sea oats. A man wearing sand-colored camouflage.

He fled from the scene.

Raven sucked in a breath. Was Jake trying to catch this guy?

Cassidy jogged past her, headed toward the sand dunes.

Officer Leggott and the fire chief weren't far behind.

Raven placed her sketch pad on the ground and followed, scrambling to keep up.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she waited to see what would happen.

As she waited to see if Jake was okay.

Not that she really cared. But she wasn't apathetic either. She didn't want anything to happen to the man she'd once been in love with.

The memory caused emotion to burn in her throat—memories and emotions she'd tried to bury. Now wasn't the time to reminisce.

Now was the time to focus.

As they reached the shore, Raven had a better view of the beach.

The man in camouflage darted down the shoreline, his legs pumping.

Jake was fast, but the guy had a head start. Raven wasn't sure if Jake could catch him.

Just how far would this man run?

Knowing Jake, he'd keep going until his body gave out—which Raven couldn't see happening. He'd always been strong and athletic, not to mention determined.

She sucked in a breath when she saw the man stop and turn.

Cassidy paused, her arm darting out to stop Raven from going any farther. Fire Chief Holland and Officer Leggott stopped also.

Was the man about to pull a gun and fire?

Instead, he only stared.

“What is that guy doing?” Cassidy murmured, her gaze fixed on the scene in front of them.

Raven quickly soaked in the guy’s features. Square face. Broad nose. Ruddy complexion.

She’d never seen him before.

But the look on his face was determined—and dangerous.

Raven’s breath caught as she waited to see what would happen next.

CHAPTER 5

Jake watched as the man stared at him.

Was he giving up?

That sounded too easy.

Apprehension jostled inside him.

Jake kept charging forward, determined not to lose any time.

The man—Jake didn't recognize him—turned and began to sprint away again.

This guy could run all he wanted. Jake wouldn't give up, especially since he was certain this guy had answers about the bombing.

Answers Jake needed.

His legs burned as his feet dug into the sand. But he kept moving forward.

Sweat covered his face, and his lungs felt tight.

But he didn't slow down.

He watched as the man reached into his pocket and withdrew something. Held it in his fist.

Jake realized exactly what the mystery object was.

A grenade.

The next instant, the man pulled the pin from the grenade.

Then he lobbed it into the air, aiming it directly at Jake.

Raven sucked in a breath.

That man had a grenade—and he'd tossed it at Jake.

“No . . .” Cassidy muttered beside her.

Raven froze in horror.

As Jake dove toward the safety of the sand dune, the grenade landed mere feet away from him.

Then an explosion filled the air.

Sand sprayed, the grains sharp projectiles that felt like needles against her skin.

Raven's breath caught until she could hardly breathe.

She blinked, trying to see what had happened. Where was Jake? But the sand remained suspended in the air, not allowing her a clear view.

Cassidy, Chief Holland, and Officer Leggott ran toward the scene. Raven was only a few steps behind.

Her pencil skirt and blue knit top weren't ideal for running. But she had to know if Jake was okay.

Finally, the cloud of sand cleared from the air, falling to the ground as if in defeat.

As it did, Raven realized the man Jake chased had disappeared.

But where?

As she scanned her surroundings, she spotted someone dashing over a sand dune farther down the beach. Then, over the roar of the ocean, Raven heard an engine.

The man must have left a vehicle there, and now he was getting away!

Her gaze darted back to the beach. To the area where Jake had sought cover.

A second later, he rose from behind the sand dune, his body hunched over as he coughed.

He was alive!

She released the breath she was holding.

That could have been so much worse.

What exactly had she gotten herself into by coming here? She'd thought this would be a simple consultation where she would identify the remains of a World War II bomb and then be on her way to her next assignment.

But now it seemed so much more was involved.

She drew in another breath before darting across the sand. Cassidy was already headed that way.

What would Jake say? If Raven were honest with herself, she'd admit she wanted to see him up close with her own eyes and make sure he was truly okay.

Just because it was what any decent human being would do.

Not because she still cared about him.

Raven no longer had feelings for the man.

When Jake had shattered her heart, all that affection had vanished . . . never to return again.

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CHAPTER 6

Jake coughed to clear his lungs before standing and blinking away the sand in his eyes. His ears rang from the blast.

Thankfully, the only shrapnel the grenade had sent flying was sand.

He glanced at where the grenade had landed fifteen feet away from him.

A crater with an eight-foot radius and five-foot depth had formed in the sand from the detonation.

His throat tightened. If he'd been any closer . . . he might not be alive right now.

He blinked more gritty sand out of his eyes and peered beyond the crater. The man was gone.

That guy had come prepared. He'd planned the perfect getaway if things went south.

Jake's gut tightened at the realization.

Had that man been the one to plant the second bomb?

Jake needed to find out who he was. Even if Jake wasn't on this case officially, he'd make it his goal to find answers. The man had almost killed him, after all.

"Are you okay?" Cassidy paused in front of him, narrowing her eyes as she studied

him.

Meanwhile, Officer Leggott skirted the detonation site, going after the man.

In Jake's gut, he knew the officer wouldn't catch the perpetrator. There was too much distance between them.

"Yeah." Jake frowned, not liking the fact that guy had gotten the upper hand. "I'm fine."

But his voice made it clear he wasn't fine. Well, physically he was—other than the ringing in his ears.

Now he was just angry the man had gotten away.

"What happened?" Cassidy stood with her hands on her hips and her body tense as she stared at him.

He could only assume she'd already radioed for backup.

Jake glanced at the people gathered around, his gaze lingering on Raven. If he wasn't mistaken, concern filled her eyes.

Don't think too much of it, Laudner. Raven is simply compassionate.

"I saw a guy watching us from the dunes, and I knew he was up to something," he explained, determined to keep on point. "When I went to confront him, he ran. I assume you saw the rest of it."

"Did you recognize the man?" Cassidy squinted against the late afternoon sun as she turned toward Jake.

“Never seen him before,” Jake said. “And I didn’t get a good look at him. He was too far away, but if I had to guess, he was in his early thirties, just under six feet tall, with light brown hair and an athletic build.”

Cassidy nodded slowly. “I called my other officers, and they’re going to keep their eyes open for him. I wish I could say I think they will find him, but I don’t. The guy knew what he was doing.”

Jake agreed. That fact made him even more uncomfortable.

Who exactly was behind today’s events?

Someone was playing a deadly game, and he didn’t like it.

Because the next time this guy struck, there might be more collateral damage in the form of more human lives.

Raven was glad Jake was okay. But she didn’t like this situation.

Right now, all she wanted was to get back to the site of the detonation so she could examine everything. But she knew the wreckage still needed to cool off after the last explosion.

She thought her trip to Lantern Beach would be quick—one night at the most.

Now she wasn’t so sure. She wouldn’t leave until she found some answers.

Leggott returned from his chase, winded as he shook his head.

He hadn’t caught the guy. No one had really thought he would.

The five of them began to walk back toward the house.

Raven only wished Jake wasn't here to complicate things.

Why was he here? Sure, he was an explosives expert. But why, of all people, had he been called in? Certainly, there were other explosive experts who were closer and just as experienced.

She had more questions, but she probably wouldn't ask any of them. The more distance she could keep between her and Jake, the better.

She trudged through the sand, listening to the conversations around her. Cassidy was talking to Fire Chief Holland about getting some equipment out here to fill in that hole before someone fell in. Jake, Leggott, and Raven followed close behind.

As they all headed back toward the blast site, an out-of-place sound caught Raven's ear.

She paused. Heard it again.

It sounded like . . . a phone ringing.

But it wasn't her cell, nor did it sound as if it came from anyone in the group in front of her either.

"You guys," Raven called. "Do you hear that? Is that one of your phones?"

Everyone paused, listened, and then shook their heads.

Jake's hands went to his hips as his eyes narrowed. "My ears are still ringing, but I hear it too."

As if on autopilot, Jake walked toward the sound.

Raven hurried to catch up with him, curious about the noise since no one else was on the beach except them.

She paused as they neared the dunes.

“This is where that guy was hiding when I saw him.” Jake pointed to the sea oats on the sand dune.

Raven’s heart beat harder as theories tried to materialize in her mind. But she didn’t want to latch onto any of them. Not yet. Not until she had more information.

Jake walked between the brush then leaned down. Pulling a glove from his pocket, he used it to pick up an object in the sand.

A cell phone.

Her throat went dry. Had that guy accidentally dropped his phone when he’d fled? Could they be that lucky? Maybe the device would give them the evidence they needed to track him down.

She watched as Jake hit the screen.

Words appeared as if a text message had been left open.

But when Jake grunted, Raven realized it wasn’t good news—like a break in the case might be.

“Well?” Cassidy asked.

Jake turned the screen toward them.

Raven's blood went cold as she read the message.

You're too late.

CHAPTER 7

Back at the scene, Jake and Cassidy chatted. He kept one eye on the police chief while also watching everything around him—including Raven, who wandered near the dunes.

He would be more prepared next time if that guy made another appearance.

The man had been there for a reason, and Jake needed to figure out what. He didn't think the guy's presence was just to leave a message on the phone for them to find.

"I don't like this," Jake said. "Something is going on here."

Cassidy's jaw remained hard along with her expression. "I agree. At first, I thought this was just an unfortunate tragedy at best or a means for someone to steal Eleanor's money at worst. Now it's becoming clear there's more to this story. I want to know what."

Jake's muscles felt stony as he asked, "You calling the feds in?"

"Given these new developments, most likely," Cassidy said. "But I wanted to bring Dr. Newton in first so I could see what we're working with. I also thought it was a good idea if you came."

"Too bad I don't have my K-9 yet." He was about to begin training a new bomb-sniffing dog. His last K-9 had retired and gone to live with a team member who'd recently retired from the military.

“With tourist season starting in another month, I feel confident everyone is going to want this wrapped up as soon as possible,” Cassidy continued. “Nothing drives away tourists quicker than danger.”

“I can imagine.”

Cassidy’s phone buzzed, and she glanced at it. “It’s the NCSBI. I’ve got to take this, and I’ve got to make a few more calls also.”

As the police chief stepped away, Jake remained planted in the driveway between the remains of the house and the line of vehicles parked along the gravel lane. His gaze found Raven again.

He watched as she studied debris in the sand.

She was just as beautiful as ever. Slender and five foot seven, with black hair that came down her back in large, wavy curls. Her eyes were blue and her skin milky.

Raven Newton was still one of the most beautiful women Jake had ever met. When they’d been together, he’d felt like the luckiest man in the whole world. Because not only was Raven beautiful, but she was also smart and kind. He’d felt like a better person when they were together.

Then everything between them had ended. As quickly as they’d fallen in love, they’d split equally as fast.

A knot formed in his chest.

Would Raven ever understand why they couldn’t be together? Would she ever forgive him?

Jake never thought he'd see her again. He'd tried to put her out of his mind. After all, they were both busy with their own lives and careers. He hadn't thought they'd run into each other.

But now Raven was in Lantern Beach, of all places. As much as he tried to forget about the pain of their breakup, he might have to face it head-on instead.

“So what do you think?”

Jake snapped from his thoughts and turned to see Cassidy had paused near him.

Had she been talking to him? How long had he been lost in his own thoughts?

She raised her eyebrows. “Sorry to interrupt. Your mind on something else?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” he murmured.

Get your head back in the game, Laudner.

Lives are depending on it.

Raven knelt in the sand by the dune and studied an object nestled in between strands of sea oats. It didn't appear anyone had seen this earlier when they'd searched the beach. Or perhaps this had been blown here during the second blast.

It didn't matter either way. She was just glad she'd spotted it.

She took a pen from her pocket and gently turned the object over.

As she did, her breath caught.

Just as she'd suspected, this was a piece of the original bomb.

This was what she'd been looking for. This could be a key find in their investigation. While much of the bomb had clearly been destroyed upon detonation, this piece was nearly intact, probably five by eight inches.

If she could study this more, it would tell her a lot about the ordnance Eleanor had found. Raven could examine the paint, the metal, the barely perceptible symbol located on one edge.

Together, that would give her some answers—about how old the ordnance was. Where it was from. If it had really washed ashore during a recent storm. Or if someone had planted it for Eleanor to discover.

Finding this was like hitting the jackpot.

Shadows appeared beside her, and she looked up. Cassidy and Jake stood there.

“Did you have some luck?” Cassidy asked.

Leaving the evidence in the sand, Raven rose. “It’s a piece of the original bomb. I’d like to take it with me to study it more thoroughly.”

Cassidy nodded quickly. “Whatever you need.”

“I’ll need an evidence bag and a glove—to preserve any potential fingerprints.”

“I’ll get them for you,” Jake said before striding toward Officer Leggott, who stood near his squad car.

Cassidy turned toward her, questions lingering in her gaze. “You really think you can

find some answers from that?”

“There’s an excellent chance I can,” Raven said. “That remnant will tell us a lot about what happened this morning. As far as what happened since I arrived . . . Jake will be your guy for that.”

Cassidy crossed her arms. “We desperately need some answers. I thought this was a one-time event. Now I’m beginning to fear whoever is behind this may not be done.”

Raven didn’t like the thought of that. Instead of dwelling on it, she decided to focus on the facts. “Any luck finding the guy who threw that grenade?”

A frown played across her lips. “We’re still looking for him. It’s a small island, and if he tries to leave by ferry, there’s a good chance we’ll find him.”

But Raven knew the truth. Though most people left the island by ferry—there were no bridges leading to Lantern Beach —there was still a possibility someone could leave by a private boat.

Whoever was behind the bombing was clearly smart and motivated. He had a good grasp of technology and probably a decent amount of financing behind him. After all, he’d either used an actual relic or a decent imitation of one—and not just anyone could purchase or create something like that. He would have to know his way around a bomb as well.

Someone like that would be smart enough to get off this island in the most inconspicuous way. Or try to blend in somehow.

This case was far from simple and far from being over.

Raven turned back to the police chief, her thoughts still racing. “Listen, I originally

planned on leaving tomorrow. But I'd like to stay longer if that's okay with you."

"Of course," Cassidy said. "I can use all the help I can get. The state is sending someone out tomorrow, and I have a feeling the FBI will be called in also."

Jake joined them holding a bag and glove.

Raven carefully picked up the evidence and slid it into the bag. She couldn't wait to dive into this and find some answers.

"If I'm done here, I'd like to go back to my rental so I can begin to check this out." Cassidy had provided a rental house where Raven could stay while she was in town.

There was one inn on the island, but it was fully booked by a church renting it for a retreat.

Raven wasn't complaining. She preferred the privacy of a rental house over an inn any day.

"That's fine with me," Cassidy said.

Jake's shoulders seemed to widen as if he were bracing himself before he said, "I'd like to escort you there."

"That won't be necessary." Raven's words came out too quickly.

"Respectfully, I insist." Jake kept his voice monotone, almost as if trying to keep any emotions out. "We don't know what's going on here or who this guy is who was watching. Until we have more answers, we need to operate under the assumption that this man is dangerous and that he might not be done yet."

A chill raked through Raven. Jake was right. She knew he was.

Any arguments died on her lips.

“I have to agree with him,” Cassidy said. “In fact, given the stakes, I’d like Jake to work with you.”

“What?” Raven’s voice came out as a squeak.

Cassidy offered an affirmative nod. “It’s true. The feds won’t hire Jake for this, but I’m not opposed to asking Ty for some favors. I don’t like what I see going on here, and I don’t want anything happening to someone I’ve asked to come in as a consultant.”

Raven nodded. “I understand.”

“I’ll follow you in my own vehicle and check out your place to make sure it’s okay.” Jake stared at her, his expression not leaving any room for argument.

Despite his logic, Raven still hesitated. Why did it have to be Jake?

Couldn’t Officer Leggott escort her instead?

But if she suggested that, she’d only look petty. As far as Cassidy knew, Raven and Jake didn’t have a turbulent history. Raven didn’t want to do or say anything to put her professional persona in peril.

“That’s fine,” she finally said.

But Raven was lying.

Being around Jake made her feel anything but fine.

For the sake of everyone here, Raven would power through her hard feelings and do the job she'd been hired to complete.

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CHAPTER 8

Jake put his truck into Park behind Raven's white Lexus when they reached her rental.

When he strode toward her, she lowered her window.

“Wait here while I check your place out.” His words weren't a suggestion.

She stared at him as if she wanted to argue.

Fire flashed in her blue eyes—a look that had always gotten to him.

There had been part of him that had loved to get her riled up.

Finally, she nodded. “The code to get inside is 71840.”

He glanced at the small cottage perched on stilts.

It was located on the ocean and probably only twelve hundred square feet. It had seafoam-colored siding and a deck that stretched around the entirety of the place. Plus, there was what almost looked like a watch tower, or maybe a widow's walk, on one side—a place visitors could climb up for a better view of the ocean.

Jake bounded up the steps, punched in the code.

Within minutes he'd cleared the place and started back to her. “You should be fine to

go inside.”

“Thank you.” Raven’s voice sounded strained as she said the words.

He had no doubt that being here had taken a toll on her—first with the bombing, then seeing him after all these years.

She always tried to be so strong.

At one time, Jake wanted to think he could be strong for her. But those days had passed.

He hated to see the strain in her eyes. The worry.

And the tension between them . . .

He fought the urge to smooth things over. He got the sense Raven didn’t want to talk about anything personal, and he couldn’t blame her. In some ways, he didn’t want to either. In other ways, it would be nice to clear the air.

However, it had already been a long day.

Raven opened the car door and stepped out, her long, dark hair blowing in the breeze as the sun continued to sink lower in the sky.

Oftentimes, the sunsets in Lantern Beach were gorgeous. But tonight’s dusk held only muted grays with not even a hint of pink on the horizon.

Jake watched as Raven walked to the back of her car, popped the trunk, and grabbed a slender black bag. She held a backpack and the evidence in her other hand as she turned toward him.

All the words Jake wanted to say remained inside him—the best place they could be.

Maybe sometime while she was here, he'd speak them aloud. He'd try to explain.

He touched the chain around his neck—the chain with the gold ring at the end.

Would Raven understand if he told her everything?

He wasn't sure. But he knew now wasn't the time.

Jake cleared his throat, trying to remain focused. "If you need anything, call me. I won't be comfortable until that guy is found and questioned, at the very least."

"I can do that." Raven swallowed hard as if she'd forced the words out. "I'll need your contact info, of course."

The two of them exchanged numbers.

Then Jake tore his gaze away from her and nodded at his truck. "I'll head out then."

"Thanks for the escort."

He hesitated again.

Jake would rather be here and keep an eye on her. But he knew Raven would never go for that. Besides, even offering felt like overstepping.

At least he'd only be ten minutes away if she needed him.

Instead of arguing the point, he climbed into his black Dodge Ram and pulled away. He'd return to the scene and continue his own investigation.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him.

Life had a funny way of coming at him full circle sometimes. That was what it felt like now.

Except this full circle didn't exactly feel welcome.

Raven sat at the dining room table, the bomb fragment in front of her, a notebook on one side and her laptop on the other.

She'd brought everything with her she might need to examine this, and she'd laid out her equipment on the kitchen counter behind her. Though she could send this sample to the lab, the results could take days. There were tests she could conduct here to give preliminary results—which was exactly what they needed right now.

A genuine historical bomb would have metal compositions and impurities consistent with past manufacturing methods, corrosion patterns that developed naturally over decades, and explosive residues that showed signs of long-term degradation rather than fresh compounds.

Additionally, paint and coatings would match historical records. If the bomb had been in the ocean for decades, the salt and soil deposits would match expected environmental exposure, and the paint would have faded gradually rather than showing signs of artificial aging methods.

However, if the bomb were a modern fake, the metal alloy might be too pure or contain elements not used in historical manufacturing, and its corrosion might show inconsistencies or unnatural patterns under microscopic analysis.

The explosive residue might contain modern compounds instead of degraded historical explosives, indicating it was recently armed or tampered with. Likewise,

paint, coatings, or engravings that contained synthetic pigments or machine-cut precision beyond historical capabilities would be immediate red flags.

By piecing together these findings, she could determine whether the bomb was a genuine relic of the past or an elaborate forgery meant to deceive investigators. If the evidence overwhelmingly pointed to modern materials, artificial weathering, and recent explosive compounds, it would suggest someone deliberately constructed a fake to look old. On the other hand, if every test aligned with historical expectations, she may have found a true artifact with a deadly story waiting to be uncovered.

She couldn't wait to dig in and find some answers.

And the remnant was fascinating.

But working with Jake . . . it hadn't been on her agenda.

He'd broken her heart when, after a whirlwind romance, he'd left.

She'd thought what they had was love. Instead, it was just adrenaline and fading feelings—their romance hadn't been based on anything solid.

She'd thought she'd found her storybook romance. Instead, she'd found the harsh reality of heartbreak.

She'd never put herself through that again.

No, Jake was off limits. She had to remind herself of that fact and protect her heart at all costs.

CHAPTER 9

When Jake pulled back up at the scene, Ty Chambers, Cassidy's husband and one of Blackout's leaders, was on site.

Ty, a former Navy SEAL and one of the most outstanding men Jake knew, gave him a nod.

"What a day, huh?" Ty started.

Jake let out a small laugh. "You can say that again."

"I'm glad you're here. I didn't anticipate having to assign you to a case here on Lantern Beach, but they could really use your expertise right now."

"Happy to serve however I can."

They began walking the area.

"Have you seen anything of interest yet?" Ty asked. "Cassidy said you've already examined the site."

"Whoever is behind this is sophisticated," Jake told him. "And I believe they're playing games with us. It's the only reason I can think of that they'd add the ticking sound to the bomb. Also, this person was watching, almost like he wanted to see the fruit of his labor."

Ty grimaced. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Believe me, I don’t either.” He paused. “I’m going to keep examining things here.”

“Let me know if you need anything. In the meantime, I’ll stay out of your way.”

As Jake wandered the scene searching for more evidence, his mind drifted back in time to the day he first met Raven.

He’d been assigned to rescue and then protect her—an ambassador’s daughter. The ambassador himself had a target on his back, and he was afraid those opposing him would make good on their threats.

From the moment Jake had laid eyes on Raven, her beauty captivated him. He’d known that protecting her would be a difficult assignment—difficult because he would need to keep his professional boundaries in place.

She was, however, an adult. She’d been twenty-one at the time—and he’d been twenty-six. Her mom had been killed three years earlier in a car bombing.

Though they’d kept things professional between them, neither had been able to deny their attraction. He’d craved spending time with her. He’d known he would give his life to protect her.

The feelings had been there. They just hadn’t acted on them.

Until his assignment was up.

He just needed to escort Raven back to the States.

So he had. And as soon as they stepped foot on US soil and his job was over, they’d

had a whirlwind romance.

The two of them hadn't been able to resist their feelings for each other.

They'd spent five blissful days falling in love.

Then he'd had to go back. His assignment had been over, and they needed him back in Iraq.

They'd parted with promises of staying in touch.

But Jake hadn't been able to fulfill his promise.

Would Raven ever understand why?

His throat tightened. Probably not—and he really couldn't blame her.

He glanced down at the rubble beneath him and paused.

What was that?

He moved a metal box aside and saw a partially burned picture beneath it. After pulling on a glove, he picked it up.

A picture of the US Embassy in Syria.

The place where Raven's dad had been stationed.

The place he'd met Raven all those years ago.

Why would this picture be here? Unless . . .

His breath caught.

He grabbed his phone to call Raven. She needed to be on guard.

But the phone didn't ring.

It didn't even go to voicemail.

What? The bad feeling in his gut continued to swell.

If she wasn't answering, then Jake needed to go back to her place. He needed to see her with his own eyes. Talk face-to-face.

Wasting no more time, he jogged to his truck and took off.

Raven stared at the evidence in front of her.

If this bomb was made to look like an old bomb, then someone's reasons for doing so would have to be criminal.

She needed to call Jake.

No, Raven corrected herself. She needed to call Cassidy . Why would she call Jake over the police chief? Cassidy was in charge of this investigation.

She practically rolled her eyes at herself.

But just as she grabbed her phone, a sound caught her ear.

She glanced at the window, where the evening hung dark with an almost inky black.

The muscles in her back tightened.

What was that? The noise was slight, and if it hadn't been so quiet in the house, Raven probably wouldn't have noticed it.

A small tremble began in her hands as she stood.

This could be nothing. The wind blowing a branch against the siding. A loose shingle even.

But given everything going on, it would be prudent to check the noise out and know for sure.

She didn't have a gun. But even if she did, she wasn't about to go check this out on her own. Not after everything that had happened.

She spotted a butcher block on the kitchen counter and quickly grabbed the largest knife she could find.

The noise sounded again. It came from the other side of the house.

Her heart pounded harder in her ears.

Then she grabbed her phone. She stared at the screen, wondering if she should call 911.

But what if this turned out to be nothing? Then she'd just look paranoid. That wasn't what she wanted either.

Women in her profession already had a disadvantage. She didn't want that reality to be true, but it was. If she acted like a scared little schoolgirl, that would only cause

her to lose some of the respect she'd been trying so hard to establish.

In many ways, it was still a man's world.

She shoved her phone back in her pocket and then turned toward the hallway and glanced at the front door.

A shade was pulled over the glass on the top half of the door. But a light was on outside, and a shadow moved beyond the window.

A silhouette.

Raven realized what the sound was—the door handle jiggling.

Someone was trying to get inside.

That did it. She'd call 911 after all.

As she grabbed her phone and dialed, she realized the call wasn't going through.

She squinted. Tried again.

Nothing.

What was going on? She hit Jake's number next.

That call didn't go through either.

The door handle twisted again. This time it was louder. Whoever was there wasn't trying to be stealthy anymore.

She was running out of time.

Raven stashed her cell phone in her pocket and clutched the knife with both hands.

She realized with sickening clarity that she was on her own right now.

CHAPTER 10

Raven continued to stare at the door.

The shadow had disappeared.

The sounds had stopped.

But why? Had the person outside decided this wasn't the best way to breach the house? Had he moved onto another door or maybe a window?

Her pulse pounded harder.

She glanced around, not knowing where to search next.

Keep listening, she told herself. Gather evidence then act.

She forced herself to move, to slip into the shadows. All while keeping the knife held in front of her.

Then she waited to see whatever this person would do next.

Her pulse pounded out of control.

The minutes seemed to crawl by.

She pulled the phone from her pocket and tried to call Cassidy again.

Still, the call wouldn't go through.

Could the timing be any worse? Was cell service out over the entire island?

It didn't matter. Dwelling on those details wouldn't help her now.

Instead, she continued to listen.

Maybe this guy had left. Maybe he'd been someone who simply came to the wrong house. Or maybe someone working maintenance for the rental company wanted to drop off something and then realized the place was occupied.

Raven wanted the justification to make her feel better. But she knew none of her theories were most likely true.

She tried not to think. Just to listen.

How much time had passed since she'd last heard anything? At least five minutes, right?

Then another terrible thought hit her.

What if the person outside decided not to try to come inside? What if he decided to . . . detonate a bomb instead?

This time she couldn't stop the panic racing through her.

If that were the case, then she needed to get out of here.

But leaving the safe confines of the house presented challenges of its own.

Raven pressed her eyes closed. Lord, what am I supposed to do?

Then she saw it again.

The shadow in front of the door.

The man was back, she realized.

Her lungs tightened with fear.

What would his next move be?

Jake pounded on Raven's door.

He had no idea why his calls weren't going through. But worry continued to grow inside him.

Something was wrong. He felt certain of it.

But there was no answer, which only heightened his concerns.

He pounded again. "Raven? Are you there? It's Jake. I need to talk to you."

He drew back, his hands on his hips as he waited.

He'd give her a couple of minutes. If she still didn't answer, he wasn't opposed to breaking this door down. After all, Raven's car was still out front. She should be here.

He grabbed his gun from the holster and turned, ready to kick the door open.

Before he could, it opened.

Raven stood there staring at him, her eyes wide.

She appeared frightened but otherwise okay.

His gaze traveled to the butcher knife in her hands.

His throat went dry. He was missing something here. “Raven? What’s wrong?”

“Someone tried to get in,” she rushed.

“Just now?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Stay inside. Only open the door for me.”

Still gripping his gun, Jake walked around the rest of the house, searching for any signs someone was there.

He saw no one. The guy must have heard Jake pull up and fled.

Just to be safe, he checked beneath the structure as well to make sure no surprises had been left.

He found nothing.

Confident Raven was safe, he headed back upstairs. As soon as he stepped onto the deck, she opened the door as if she’d been anxiously waiting for him.

Without invitation, Jake stepped inside, closed the door, and locked it behind him.

Raven didn't argue.

He paused in front of her, raking his gaze over her to make sure she was okay.

He saw no injuries. Relief washed through him.

His gaze went to the knife again. "I'm going to take this, okay?"

He didn't think Raven would purposefully act out with it. But sometimes when fear and adrenaline kicked in, people did things out of character.

He reached for it, gently placing his fingers around hers.

Raven nodded as if she'd heard him, but her grip didn't loosen.

Jake gently pried her fingers away, then he placed the knife on the table beside them.

Turning back to her, his gaze locked with hers. "Tell me what happened."

"I was at the table when I heard a noise." Her voice sounded raspy, and her words came out quickly. "Then I heard more noises. Someone was trying to break in. Then there was silence. Then there was you. Was it you? Were you trying to break in?"

Some of the fear left her voice, replaced with accusation.

He didn't take it personally. If she needed to use anger to calm her fears, he would take the brunt of it.

"No, I wasn't trying to break in." Jake opened the door again and examined it.

His eyes narrowed when he saw scratches around the keypad—scratches that made it appear as if someone had tried to pry it off.

Someone had been trying to break in. Raven hadn't been imagining things—not that she was the type to do so.

The tension across his back pulled tighter.

Jake didn't like this. He didn't like this at all.

CHAPTER 11

Raven hated to admit it, but she was glad Jake was here. For a moment, she felt safe again.

She'd always known Jake would never let anyone hurt her—not physically, at least.

Her heart was a different story.

She swallowed back her emotions and vowed to keep her thoughts focused on anything but Jake. Thinking about her heartache wouldn't get her anywhere. It would only take her back in time—the last place she wanted to be.

Jake closed the door behind him and locked it again. Then he turned to her and put his hand on her back. “I think you should sit down. You're looking a little shaky.”

Now that he mentioned it, Raven was feeling shaky. The feeling was because of everything that had happened—not because Jake was touching her. But she couldn't deny the heat burning her skin where his fingers met her lower back.

She let him lead her to the kitchen table. He didn't drop his hand until she was seated.

Instantly, she missed his touch.

Not good. Not good at all.

“I tried to call you.” Jake stared at her, concern—and maybe some

standoffishness—in his gaze.

“I tried to call you too. My call wouldn’t go through.”

Jake’s jaw tightened. “Most likely a signal jammer.”

Raven blinked. She hadn’t even considered that possibility.

“But if someone is using a signal jammer . . .” She couldn’t finish the statement.

She knew the truth was that if someone had used a signal jammer, it was because they didn’t want her to make any emergency calls.

And the reason someone would do that? They’d planned on doing something terribly tragic to her.

Her throat went dry.

She didn’t dare speak the words aloud. Certainly, Jake already knew the truth also.

“I need to tell Cassidy what happened.” Jake pulled out his phone and stared at the screen. “It looks like whoever was using that signal jammer turned it off.”

“That’s . . . good news?” Raven struggled to find the right response.

“I guess you could look at it like that.”

Raven waited as he made the call.

Jake kept the conversation short. When he got off the phone, he turned back to her. “She’s going to have her guys canvas the area for anyone suspicious. You didn’t hear

anything else? See anything?"

Raven shook her head. "No, it was quiet in the house—until I heard someone trying to get in. But I didn't hear a car pull up or footsteps or anything else like that. I did see a shadow at the door, though."

Jake grunted. "I see. But why would someone want to break in?"

As soon as he asked the question, Raven knew the answer.

She swallowed hard as her gaze crept up to meet his. "Because I have something they want."

"What would that be?" Jake held her gaze.

"The fragment of the bomb relic I brought here. Maybe someone wanted to get it from me before the truth is exposed."

Jake took a moment to process Raven's words.

"What exactly did you discover?" His heart pounded harder as he waited for her answer.

"This bomb that was found on the beach by Eleanor . . . it wasn't a relic. It was new, and it was made to look like a relic by someone very skilled. The paint isn't historical, and the aging process was artificial. Plus, I examined the metal under my microscope, and the alloy is too pure. Those elements weren't used in manufacturing at that time."

Jake leaned back and let out a deep breath. He knew Raven was brilliant. But listening to her now just proved that.

Beautiful. Intelligent. Kind.

She was the total package. He'd always known that.

His thoughts continued to churn. "That guy who was watching us on the beach . . . maybe he didn't want this to be discovered. Maybe he was coming back to the scene to search for any evidence."

"That makes sense to me. I believe someone made a new bomb to look like an old one, and they wanted someone to do exactly what Eleanor had done—to think it was simply a great beach find, to bring it home."

"But why? Just for fun?" Jake asked. "Just to see what would happen?"

"You and I both know there's more to it than that."

He definitely agreed. "Someone's trying to make a statement."

"That's my best guess. I just don't know why." She paused. "Maybe we should give this bomb fragment to Cassidy for safekeeping. It's not going to be secure with me."

"And you having it in your possession puts you in danger." His thoughts continued to race. "Maybe it's a terrorist who wants to disrupt the American way of life. Something like this will put fear in the average everyday citizen who is just going about their day."

"It's a definite possibility." She paused, a question flashing in her eyes. "You never told me why you came back here."

His gaze darkened at the memory. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out the photo, and slid it across the table toward her. "I found this at the site of the

explosion.”

Her face went white—but she didn’t look totally surprised either. What wasn’t she telling him?

“Raven?”

She swallowed hard and looked up at him. “I saw that earlier—right before the second bomb went off. I assumed it had been destroyed.”

“A metal box landed on top of it. It’s probably the only reason it didn’t burn up.” He narrowed his eyes. “Why didn’t you mention it?”

Raven shook her head. “I . . . I really don’t know. I was frightened, I suppose. Wondering if I was reading too much into this. Then everything happened . . .” Her gaze drew up to meet his. “Do you think Eleanor had some kind of connection to me?”

He didn’t have to think long about his answer. “I have a hard time believing that. I think the person who left the second bomb at the scene may have also left this photo.”

“How would this person know I’d be investigating?”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe he wanted to lure you here.”

“But why?”

“I have no idea.”

“Then that’s what we need to figure out.” Raven paused and traced her finger through the air as if mentally calculating something.

He hid a smile.

Raven always did that when she was deep in thought, and he didn't even think she realized it. He found it adorable—like the air was her whiteboard as she mentally tried to visualize something.

“I am the leading expert in historical artifacts and weaponry on the East Coast—some people say in the US. I suppose it won't be a stretch to assume I'd be called.”

“I agree.”

She paused from doing her mental calculations and sighed. “There's clearly more to this story than we initially thought. We have to figure out what's going on here before someone else is hurt.”

We , Jake realized. That was the word Raven had used.

Good choice. It seemed clear right now that the two of them needed to work together if they wanted to find answers.

That would be another challenge within itself.

CHAPTER 12

A awkward silence fell between them, and Raven searched for something to say.

Finally, Jake cleared his throat. “Have you eaten anything since you got here, Raven?”

Forgetting to eat was one of many of her bad habits. Did he remember that? She had no reason to think he would.

“No, I haven’t,” she told him.

“You need to eat to keep your energy up.”

She shrugged. “I’ll grab something later.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Did you bring any groceries?”

Good point.

Begrudgingly, she answered, “No.”

His gaze darkened. “It’s not safe for you to go out. Let me order something.”

Jake was making a big fuss out of nothing. “You don’t have to do that. Besides, they probably don’t even have any food delivery here on the island, except for maybe pizza.”

“You’d be surprised. There’s actually a woman here who takes odd jobs. She talked to a couple of restaurants about doing meal delivery for them, and they agreed.”

There went that argument.

Raven shrugged. “Now that you mention it, I suppose I’m kind of hungry.”

“I’d suggest the grilled cheese with peaches from The Crazy Chefette.”

He was just full of ideas, wasn’t he? But were they good ideas?

“Grilled cheese and peaches?” she repeated. “That doesn’t sound very appetizing.”

“Believe me, it’s delicious. You might want to order two. One for later.”

He sounded very convincing. “If you insist, then I’ll try it. But I only need one.”

He grinned as if triumphant. “Fair enough. I’ll make the order for you now.”

Raven watched as he grabbed his phone and called in the order.

Then he turned back to her, and she waited for more awkwardness to set in. Instead, she realized she had more questions for him. Questions about him that felt safer than any questions he might ask her.

“Do you live on Lantern Beach now?” she asked him.

His expression sobered. “I do. I’ve been here about three months. I got out of the military, and Cassidy’s husband, Ty Chambers, recruited me to work for him at Blackout.”

“What exactly are you doing for Blackout?”

“It’s a growing organization. I was hired with four other guys. We’ve all worked on various bomb squads or as explosive experts. We’re on hand when Ty needs us for that. But we take other assignments also. Private security and the like.”

“Sounds like the perfect position for you.”

He offered a half shrug. “I have to say I’m in a pretty good place right now.”

Raven couldn’t help but think there was more to the story. She wanted to ask but didn’t.

Asking would be too personal.

“I’m glad you found a life you’re happy with.” Raven’s throat ached as she said the words.

It wasn’t because she didn’t mean them. She didn’t wish any harm to Jake. In fact, she thought she’d forgiven him. But being around him now made her question if that were true.

As he shifted in his seat, she knew what conversation was coming.

It was a conversation she wasn’t prepared to have.

“Look, Raven—” Jake started.

She held up a hand, cutting him off before he went too far. “I don’t want to talk about what happened.”

“But—”

“I really don’t. Especially not when I have so many other things on my mind.”

Jake stared at her, his eyes crinkled at the edges.

She knew he wanted to talk to her about their past. About what had happened between them. About how he’d never called.

But she had to protect her own emotions, as hard as that could be sometimes.

Instead, she cleared her throat and said, “Let’s just put the past behind us and see what we can do to work together while I’m in town.”

He gave her that stare, his eyes swirling abysses of emotion, until he finally said, “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

It was what she wanted. Logically speaking, at least.

But emotionally it was an entirely different story.

Jake would be lying if he said he wasn’t disappointed that Raven had issued a cease and desist on their conversation. They needed to clear the air. Needed to talk about what had happened between them.

He knew Raven was still hurting. So was he.

Pretending like the issues between them didn’t exist wouldn’t make any of this easier. But he couldn’t convince Raven of that, especially if she didn’t want to listen.

For now, he’d stay quiet and respect the boundaries she’d put in place.

Before he could think of anything else to say, the sound of digitized music playing outside hit his ears. “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain” to be exact.

Numerous people had asked Serena Lavinia not to play music on her ice cream truck late at night. But she never listened.

Serena even went as far as to blame the truck—which was named Elsa, after its original owner—for playing the music randomly on its own.

Jake had a hard time believing her until Cassidy backed up the claim.

A knot formed between Raven’s eyes. “What is that?”

“It’s your food,” he explained.

She squinted. “The delivery driver plays music?”

“She drives an ice cream truck, and she works as a part-time reporter. Before you came in, she was actually at the site of the blast for an article.”

“Interesting . . .” was all Raven could seem to mutter.

“I’ll grab your food.” Jake rose, ready to be away from Raven a moment so he could compose himself.

Raven had always had that effect on him, and he didn’t foresee that changing anytime soon.

He stepped outside, the kid-inspired music louder as he opened the door.

Before walking toward the ice cream truck, he glanced around.

He didn't see anyone—but he'd still need to be careful, especially until they had more answers.

He hurried toward the truck. As he approached, Serena rolled her window down and stuck her arm out, a brown bag in hand. "One delivery for a Mr. Jake Laudner."

"Thanks, Serena."

She grinned and raised her chin. "No problem. I aim to please. You want some ice cream while I'm here? Two for one deal."

"Buy one get one?"

"No, I deliver food and sell dessert. What more could you ask for?"

A smile started to curl part of Jake's lip. The woman was quite the salesperson and a real fixture here on Lantern Beach.

Then he realized that some ice cream actually sounded pretty good.

"I'll take a Nutty Buddy." He stared at the product chart on the side of the vehicle.

"And give me a . . ."

Bomb pop? That seemed like it would be in poor taste considering these circumstances.

What would Raven like?

"Drumstick ice cream cone," he finally said.

Memories of the two of them getting ice cream together in New York during their

five days together filled his thoughts.

Memories of her laughter. Of the light in Raven's gaze. Of the affection in her expression.

Memories that would never be recreated.

His heart thudded with disappointment.

However, he did remember that Raven had loved vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup and nuts.

Maybe she'd also like a drumstick.

"Coming right up." Serena disappeared into the back before reappearing with the ice cream.

Jake handed her cash for the ice cream, plus a tip. Then he headed back inside.

He'd probably been too impulsive. He wasn't sure if Raven still liked ice cream. Even if she did, the fact he remembered that she liked vanilla ice cream with chocolate and nuts and was bringing it to her now could be taken the wrong way.

He briefly thought about sticking the ice cream in a trash can as he passed it outside.

But he changed his mind.

He wouldn't make a big deal of it, and hopefully Raven wouldn't either.

However, this entire situation felt entirely more complicated than it should.

CHAPTER 13

Raven's stomach grumbled when she smelled the sandwich as Jake brought it inside. He set the bag on the table in front of her.

That was when she noticed he held something else also.

"Is that ice cream?" That was when she remembered the delivery driver drove an ice cream truck.

Instead of offering an explanation, Jake walked to the freezer and placed two items inside.

But not before she realized what he'd bought.

One of them was a Drumstick ice cream cone. Her favorite.

Coincidence? Or did he still remember that?

What was he trying to do? Dig up the past even though she'd asked him not to? To remind her that he'd once fooled her into thinking they had something special when all along she'd been disposable to him?

Irritation flashed inside her. She'd fallen for him once before but never again. She was no longer that naive girl. But she had a feeling Jake was even more calculated now than when she'd fallen for him.

Men like Jake only perfected the challenge of making women fall for them just so they could break their hearts.

With multiple avenues available, there was no excuse for him not to have contacted her. Even if it was to break up with her. He could've at least respected her that much. But he hadn't. And she'd do well to remember that fact.

Raven tried to shove the thoughts aside and put on a neutral expression.

But she wasn't sure she was succeeding.

To distract herself, she pulled out the sandwich wrapped in brown paper. Jake had also ordered french fries. She set them on the table between them.

He'd ordered Raven food but nothing for himself. He had to be hungry too, right?

She might be irritated with him, but she didn't want to see him go hungry. Nor did she want to give him anything to hold against her.

She split the sandwich, gooey cheese stretching between the two triangles. Slivers of peaches protruded between the melted goodness.

This would be an interesting meal.

"Have some." She extended her arm.

Jake started to argue, but Raven shook her head.

"I won't be able to eat all this anyway, and I'd hate to see it go to waste," she insisted. "Plus, you need to tell me how much I owe you."

“It’s not a big?—”

“And before you say it’s not a big deal, I insist. I like to pay my own way.” Raven’s words came out harsher than she’d intended, but it was too late to take them back.

He stared at her before swallowing hard. “Understood.”

He took the half sandwich she offered and grabbed a napkin, placing it on top.

Then Raven took her first bite.

The mix of the savory cheese with the sweet peaches was surprisingly tasty.

“What do you think?” Jake watched her curiously.

Raven hated to admit that the sandwich was good, but she wouldn’t lie. “I didn’t think I’d like this. I was very skeptical. But I can see myself craving this combination again.”

“Right?” Light filled his eyes as if he’d forgotten about the troubles between them.

The easygoing moment between them only lasted a few seconds. Then Jake said, “I think I should sleep on the couch here tonight.”

Any good vibes Raven had felt disappeared like sunshine in a hurricane.

Jake had known staying here overnight wouldn’t be a pleasant subject when he brought it up. But he’d done so anyway.

His words were true—it wasn’t safe for Raven to stay here alone, not until they knew what was happening.

Just as he'd thought, Raven quickly insisted, "I'll be fine."

"Someone was watching us at the site of the explosion, set off a second bomb, left a picture of the Syrian embassy where you once lived, and then someone tried to break into your house. I don't think you can say with affirmative confidence that you'll be safe."

"I can call you if something happens."

"Unless somebody uses a signal jammer again." Jake gave her a pointed look. "Then you'll be here without any backup."

Raven's lips parted as if she wanted to say more, to think of a reasonable objection.

Then she closed her mouth again.

"If you'd feel more comfortable, I could take you to the Blackout headquarters," he offered instead. "We have guest bedrooms there, and you would be safe."

Raven remained silent before finally saying, "I'd rather stay here."

He nodded. "I promise, I won't be in your way. I'd just like to be close in case something happens." Jake locked gazes with her, refusing to look away.

She narrowed her eyes and let out a little breath. "If you insist on staying, then you can. But for the record, I didn't ask you to do this."

"Noted."

"And I don't want you to think I'm being rude. But when I finish eating, I'd really like to escape to my room."

“Just pretend like I’m not here.” Maybe it was for the best, Jake rationalized. Maybe they could both use some time apart.

CHAPTER 14

Raven awoke early, just as she always did. She enjoyed mornings to herself—having time to drink some coffee and center herself before things got too crazy.

The fact Jake was sleeping in her living room made her linger in bed longer. After they'd eaten their ice cream last night, she'd told him there were two spare bedrooms. He'd insisted on taking the couch, had said it was the best place to keep an eye on things.

Then he'd grabbed some extra pillows and blankets and made himself comfortable.

Cassidy had also stopped by to pick up the bomb remnant so she could keep it at the station. Raven had run her initial testing on it. The rest would be done at a lab.

She felt better knowing the evidence was safe.

Though Raven really wanted to get some coffee and go about her normal routine, Jake had thrown all that off. If she allowed, he could send her emotions into another tailspin.

Just pretend I'm not here.

Yeah, right.

She still couldn't believe they'd run into each other again. This wasn't supposed to happen. She wanted to put that part of her life behind her. But it appeared she'd have

no such luck.

Finally, after lying in bed entirely too long, she decided to get dressed.

She hopped in the shower and then threw on some black jeans and a white top—an outfit that was professional yet functional.

With a touch of hesitation, she opened her door and stepped out.

It was only 7:30, so there was a chance Jake could still be asleep. However, back when she'd known him, he'd never been much of a sleeper either. Maybe things had changed.

When she walked into the living room, Jake was sitting on the couch with a steaming mug of coffee in front of him and a book on his lap.

She paused and squinted. That was a Bible, wasn't it?

Back when they'd been together, he'd said he was a believer, but he hadn't gone to church consistently or ever even talked about his faith or the Bible.

Raven's faith had always been the most important thing to her, and she'd known there was an imbalance between the two of them.

However, she'd still allowed herself to get swept up in the moment.

Now she knew without a doubt that faith was the most important thing she could have in common with the person she fell in love with. In the time that had passed since they'd last seen each other, she'd matured.

And, apparently, so had Jake.

Jake glanced up at her, and a slow smile spread across his face.

Her heart pounded harder.

Why did he have to be so handsome? Just the sight of him made her throat go dry. And when she smelled that sandalwood and citrus cologne . . . she forgot everything else.

That wasn't a good thing . . .

She pulled herself together and nodded. "Good morning."

"I made some coffee if you'd like some."

"That sounds great. I'm just glad there was some coffee here." Raven hadn't been sure how stocked the kitchen might be, and she hadn't had time to go to the store, as Jake had pointed out last night.

"I had one of my colleagues bring some by along with cream and sugar. I was operating under the assumption you still made your coffee that way. If not, I apologize."

Something about his thoughtfulness made her nearly stumble over an imaginary log on the floor. "You remember."

She couldn't hide the shock from her voice.

"Of course, I remember." His voice dipped low.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she turned away before he saw it.

“I also had him bring by some muffins,” Jake continued. “I figured you might want something to eat.”

Carbs . . . they’d always been her weakness. And not the healthy kind of muffins either. No, she preferred the kind made with bleached flour and filled with sugar and other tasty—but highly processed—ingredients.

“Sounds good,” she finally said. “Now that you mention it, I am a little hungry.”

She hurried into the kitchen, grateful for the chance to be away from Jake.

But as she started pouring her coffee, she felt his presence in the room.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw him leaning against the door, watching her.

Her breath hitched.

Would the two of them be forced to make small talk? Could there be anything worse?

Then he said, “I have an update for you.”

Suddenly, everything else was forgotten.

Jake waited for Raven to get her coffee and then to grab a blueberry muffin—he’d known that was the one she’d pick.

Then he sat across from her at the kitchen table.

“Cassidy called this morning,” he started.

Her eyes widened. “And? Did they find out who did this?”

He shook his head, hating to disappoint her with the news. “No, unfortunately they didn’t catch the guy. However, another ordnance washed ashore on Emerald Isle—another coastal community south of here in North Carolina.”

“What?” Raven sat up straighter, her coffee and food seemingly forgotten.

Jake offered a curt nod. “Thankfully, this time someone didn’t take the ordnance home with them. They simply reported it to the local authorities.”

“And?”

“The local police chief asked me to come down and check it out.”

“I’m going also.”

Raven’s statement didn’t surprise him. In fact, if she hadn’t insisted Jake would have been shocked. “That’s fine. I’ll need to make sure it’s safe first, of course.”

A spark returned to her gaze. “Do they think it looks like a World War II relic?”

“From everything I’ve been told, it looks very similar to the one found yesterday.”

Raven nodded quickly. “So it could be a modern-day replica.”

“That’s a distinct possibility.” He nodded toward her muffin. “As soon as you finish your breakfast then we can head out.”

She grabbed it. “I can take it with me. We don’t have any time to waste.”

He glanced at his watch. “It’s about a three-and-a-half-hour drive—it’ll be a little longer because of the ferry, of course. So go ahead and finish. Since you’re already

dressed, we can leave afterward. I'll need to swing by Blackout headquarters first to clean myself up and grab some equipment anyway."

"You want me to wait here while you do that?" Raven asked. "It might save some time."

"No, I'd feel better if we stayed together."

She shrugged. "Okay then. I'll be fast."

Relief washed through him when she didn't put up an argument. The situation was already complicated enough.

Five minutes later, Raven was ready to go. She'd gulped down the rest of her muffin and coffee.

It was impressive, really. Jake knew she was anxious to check out this new ordnance.

So was he.

They stepped outside into a balmy seventy-degree day. The sun shone brightly in the cloudless sky, seagulls swooped overhead, and the ocean crashed on the other side of the dune.

In other circumstances, Jake would want to slow down and enjoy this weather.

Not today.

Instead, Jake glanced around, not wanting to take any chances.

He didn't see anything.

Still, he wanted to be cautious.

He led Raven downstairs toward his truck.

But just as he reached it, a car squealed to a stop in front of the driveway.

The window came down, and a masked man with a gun appeared . . . aiming his weapon right at them.

CHAPTER 15

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Raven saw the man.

Saw the vehicle.

Saw the gun and realized exactly what was happening.

“Get down!” Jake shouted.

Before she could react, he threw her onto the ground behind his truck.

Just like yesterday when they’d discovered the bomb, he used his own body to shield hers.

Popping sounds filled the air.

Bullets flew toward them, shattering glass and splintering wood.

A smoky, acidic scent lingered around them, along with the charge of electricity.

The next minute, the car squealed away.

Raven’s heart continued to pound in her chest and ears, to pulsate throughout her body.

What had just happened?

“Are you okay?” Jake asked as he crouched on top of her.

Her elbow ached, and her knee might have a bruise. But all things considered, she was doing just fine. “I’m good.”

“I need to see if I can get this guy’s plates.” Jake stood and withdrew his gun. “Stay there!”

Then he sprinted toward the street.

Raven turned over and took a deep, shaky breath. She had to pull herself together.

Ignoring the ache throughout her body, she rose.

She would really feel this one tomorrow. Unfortunately, unlike yesterday, she hadn’t landed on the sand but on the gravel driveway.

Grimacing, she glanced at the street.

Jake stood in the middle of the lane. He’d paused from his sprint and stared at the fleeing vehicle.

He’d be lucky if he could get the plate number. The gunman had been too fast.

A few minutes later, Jake strode back toward her. His gaze swept over her, concern in those mesmerizing green eyes of his. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Thanks to you.” Raven had to give credit where credit was due. If Jake hadn’t been with her, she would have just stood there.

No doubt she would have been shot. A lump formed in her throat.

She looked him over also. “How about you?”

“No injuries.” But his voice sounded steely as he said the words.

He grabbed his phone and put it to his ear to call the incident in.

Raven had hoped since the relic was no longer at her place that whoever had tried to break in last night would leave her alone.

But that didn’t appear to be the case.

Someone still wanted to either send her a message or to harm her.

Based on those bullets, she assumed it was the latter of those two options.

A shiver rippled through her at the thought.

Jake’s entire body felt tight. How could that have happened? Why were these people being so bold and determined?

He still wasn’t exactly sure. There was more here to uncover than he’d originally assumed.

He finished telling Cassidy what had happened, and she promised to send someone out. But he’d only been able to see that the car was a black Chevy Malibu along with the first three letters of the license plate. That wouldn’t do him very much good.

More than anything, he hated that Raven had been caught in the crosshairs.

He shoved the phone back in his pocket and turned to face her.

She leaned against the beach house, her arms crossed and a frown tugging at her lips. She looked up at him, more questions in her gaze. “Are we going to wait here for Cassidy? I’m assuming she’ll want a statement from us.”

“That’s correct. We couldn’t go anywhere if we wanted to anyway.”

Her brows scrunched together. “Why do you say that?”

He nodded at his truck and then her own car. “Someone didn’t want us to leave.”

Raven’s eyes widened as she took a closer look at the vehicles.

Not only had the windows been shattered by the bullets, but the tires on both of their vehicles had been slashed—most likely sometime during the night.

Her face turned paler, and Jake could only imagine what she was thinking.

Someone was determined to get them to back off from this case—and this person wasn’t above murdering them to ensure that happened.

CHAPTER 16

Raven's heart continued racing even as they talked to Cassidy. Her pulse probably wouldn't slow down anytime soon. Her adrenaline was pumping too hard after that near-death experience.

"We put a BOLO out on the island," Cassidy said as they stood in the driveway of Raven's rental. "However, we have no leads on that man from yesterday either."

Raven noticed as they talked that Jake constantly glanced around, on the lookout for any more trouble. She appreciated his tenacity.

Cassidy turned toward Raven and frowned. "What I can't figure out is why you're being targeted."

Raven jerked her head toward Cassidy. "Come again?"

"Someone tried to break into your rental," Cassidy said. "Then they tried to shoot you this morning. There's got to be a reason they're coming after you specifically."

"I don't know what that reason could be." Her voice quivered.

"That's my point exactly." Cassidy narrowed her eyes in thought. "Do they not want you to discover something about these bombs? Do they want to silence you before you can do that?"

Raven rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled. "I don't know what to say."

“Or . . .” Jake paused and glanced at Raven. Then he turned back to Cassidy. “Or there’s a chance someone knew Raven would be called in to work a case like this and set up the situation to get her here.”

Cassidy squinted. “Why do you think that?”

They told her about the photograph they’d found and explained that they’d planned on telling her today.

“But why would they target you?”

Raven blew out a breath. “My father is an ambassador. He’s made some enemies. I’m not sure that’s why—or even if Jake’s theory is correct. But it’s a possibility worth exploring.”

“I agree.” Cassidy nodded. “It is. We’ll figure it out. But I understand if you don’t want to stay here on the island. Things are getting more dangerous by the moment.”

Raven knew where the police chief was going with that statement. Raven wasn’t a trained officer of the law. She didn’t know much about defending herself or protecting others either. Being here could make her a liability.

All she really knew was how to properly identify relics from the past.

For a moment, the irony hit her. She could identify historic remnants—but what about the remnants from her own past? Remnants like Jake?

Why couldn’t she analyze those things with equal accuracy?

Jake shifted beside her. “Is there anything else you need from us?”

Cassidy let out a breath and slid the pad of paper where she'd jotted notes back into her pocket. "I think I have everything I need. Do you want me to call someone to fix your tires and windshields?"

"That would be great," Jake said. "In the meantime, someone from Blackout is going to pick us up and take us back to headquarters."

"Sounds like you have your plan all worked out then." Cassidy glanced at Raven. "Are you going with him to see the ordnance?"

Raven nodded. "Yes, I am."

"I figured as much," Cassidy said. "But please, be careful. I have no idea who, or what, we are up against right now, and that fact bothers me. It should bother all of us."

A few minutes later, Atlas Manning arrived to pick up Jake and Raven.

Out of everyone in the group that had started at Blackout with Jake, Atlas was the one Jake trusted the most.

Atlas was brooding with a killer sense of humor. Always a hit with the women. He was from Montana and loved line dancing.

Maverick Adams was the toughest computer genius Jake had ever met. He knew his way around electronics and tech better than anyone, and the Washington, DC, transplant seemed like the boy next door.

Hudson Roberts was all muscle and brawn. But beneath that tough exterior, he was also smart with great instincts. He hailed from Upper Michigan, where he'd been an avid ice hockey player before joining the military.

Kyle Harrell of Nashville, Tennessee, was Mr. All American. He'd actually played football for the Navy. From the day they'd met, Jake had thought the man should be a diplomat.

Unfortunately, he felt certain one of them couldn't be trusted.

There were small things that added to his suspicions.

Like when they were in training together, someone had gone through his things. He had a certain way of arranging his clothes and his toiletries. They'd been disturbed.

He'd found a handwritten note someone had dropped saying "Meet me at seven at our place." He'd tried to figure out what that place was so he could investigate, but he'd had no luck.

Jake's gut told him that one of them was up to something. He just didn't know who that person was yet.

"Atlas, this is Raven," Jake started. "Raven, Atlas."

They said hello to each other.

Atlas didn't know about his history with Raven—and he wanted to keep it that way. The fewer people who knew his business, the better.

"Sounds like you've had some excitement." Atlas gripped the wheel as they headed down the road.

"You could say that." Jake told him a little about the situation.

Atlas let out a whistle. "Didn't expect something like this on little ol' Lantern

Beach.”

“None of us did,” Jake said. “I’m surprised you haven’t been called in to help also.”

Atlas had been a CIA operative with specialized training in psychological warfare.

“Colton has me working another case.” He didn’t offer any more details.

Colton Locke led Blackout along with Ty. The two seemed to make a good team.

Jake watched Raven’s reaction as they pulled up to the gate of the Blackout headquarters. Her eyes widened with surprise. The place was impressive. Even Jake had been shocked when he’d first arrived.

A three-story building stood at the center of the property, looking more like a stately beachside hotel. Two wings stretched from the main lobby. Dormers were built onto the roof, gray siding covered the walls, and a large covered porch welcomed people who arrived.

Inside, there was a gym, cafeteria, apartments, and offices. The lobby had a fireplace. The apartments were small but comfortable and ample, some larger than others.

On the property, there was an obstacle training course, a shooting range, and a couple of other outbuildings. Woods ran along the south side of the land and the Pamlico Sound stretched to the west.

Jake parked and turned to Raven. “In other circumstances, I’d show you around.”

“I understand.” She glanced at the main building again. “Maybe another time.”

For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to have an opportunity at another

time. He knew that probably wouldn't happen.

But, for some reason, the thought had him a little too intrigued.

Right now, they had business to take care of. That was what he needed to focus on.

CHAPTER 17

Jake escorted Raven inside. As soon as she stepped into the building, the rest of his team members met them.

From what she understood, they'd been about to head out for a training exercise.

Instead, they delayed their departure and stayed with her a moment while Jake went to get changed.

The team was interesting, to say the least.

Atlas had been a surprise with his dark, wavy hair and broad build. Jake seemed to trust him, based on the comradery she'd observed on the drive here.

But there was definitely tension in the group—tension she didn't understand.

“Welcome to Blackout,” one of the men—Hudson, she believed his name was—said as he spread his arms around to display the place.

“You and Jake working together?” Another man, Kyle, stared at her in curiosity. The man had a bit of a Captain America vibe with his sparkling teeth and strong jaw.

“That's right. I work for the International Cultural Heritage Protection Agency.”

Kyle's eyebrows rose. “Impressive.”

“I enjoy what I do.” Raven decided to change the subject rather than have these guys ask her more questions. “So . . . have you guys known Jake long?”

“Only three months,” Maverick said. He had wild, curly hair and a wide grin.

“I was under the assumption you were brought in together.”

Hudson, the linebacker of the group, shook his head. “No, we were brought in separately. We’ve only gotten to know each other since we arrived.”

“Does your group have a fearless leader?” she continued, determined to find out more.

“Jake, of course.” Kyle said the words casually, but she sensed underlying tension in his tone.

Jake stepped back into the room wearing fresh clothes.

Raven noticed the tension instantly deepened.

Was Jake the cause of the tension? Was it because he was their leader and they had to be on their best behavior when he was around? Or was there something more to this?

She had no idea.

“All right.” Jake nodded at the door. “We need to get out of here.”

Raven said goodbye to the group then followed Jake outside. She didn’t say much until they were in the black Tahoe and had started down the road.

“So those guys are your colleagues, huh?” The question sounded lame, but she didn’t

know how else to start.

“That’s right.” Jake didn’t offer any more information.

“I take it you all don’t get along.”

The conversation was admittedly uncomfortable, but at least they weren’t talking about their own history, so that was a win.

“Working with other people isn’t always the easiest task,” Jake finally said. “In my profession you have to be a team player since your life depends on those around you. It’s difficult when that trust is broken and you don’t feel like you can depend on them.”

Jake offered no other information.

That was fair enough. He didn’t owe her an explanation.

But she was curious.

There was so much she didn’t know about Jake.

If she were honest with herself, she’d admit she wished she knew those answers.

Jake’s mind rushed.

Raven had noticed the tension between him and his colleagues. Of course, she had. She’d been observant when he’d known her before, and that clearly hadn’t changed.

But he wasn’t ready to dive into any of those details with her.

It all came down to the fact that it was sometimes hard to know who to trust.

He drove to the southern end of the island and got in line for the ferry. His plan had been to be on the first boat out of here this morning, but that hadn't worked out.

Thankfully, another car ferry had just pulled in, so they were loaded fairly quickly.

This was island life.

Jake hadn't thought initially he'd like living in a place like this. But he was starting to really enjoy it. When danger wasn't following him, this place was peaceful.

His favorite thing to do was to sit outside in the mornings and watch the sun rise over the Pamlico Sound behind the Blackout headquarters.

It was a good way to center his life.

He touched the object hanging at the end of his necklace.

A wedding ring.

Ever since Danielle had died, his perspective on life had changed. He'd realized just how precarious every day could be.

He'd also realized that there was more to this life than just living and dying.

On one particularly rough day, he'd decided to open his Bible.

Since then, he hadn't stopped reading it. First thing every morning, he started with reading the Bible and prayer. His life was different because of it. He had more peace, more perspective—a new lease on life and a reason to live.

“I’m going to get out and look at the water.” Raven’s voice pulled him from his thoughts.

He glanced at her, his mind returning to the moment.

She paused and startled, misreading his surprise. “Unless you don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Jake had already thought about the safety precautions he should take while on the ferry. He’d been keeping his eyes open, looking for anyone suspicious.

He hadn’t seen the mystery car again—the one with the shooter. No doubt that guy was too smart to bring the same car aboard this ferry. However, that didn’t mean the man didn’t have a new vehicle. That he wasn’t here watching them.

In fact, there was a good chance he was.

The person behind these acts was clearly desperate and determined. When he hadn’t been able to break in last night, he’d shown up this morning to make a statement.

“I need to be out there with you,” Jake told her.

He didn’t miss the frown that flickered across Raven’s lips. She’d probably been hoping for a moment alone.

He couldn’t blame her for that.

But keeping her safe was his top priority.

It didn’t matter if Raven hated him. It only mattered that she stayed alive.

CHAPTER 18

As Jake stood beside her, Raven leaned against the railing and looked out over the water. Seagulls swooped around them, diving with the breeze. Families with children wandered about also, enjoying the trip from Lantern Beach to the mainland. Dolphins swam in the wake behind the boat.

If only she could enjoy everything.

Instead, the hair on her neck rose.

She turned and scanned her surroundings, not liking the bad feeling brewing inside her.

But she didn't see anyone acting strangely—only passengers enjoying the day.

Perhaps the feeling wasn't an omen of something bad about to happen.

Maybe the hairs on her neck had risen as well as her apprehension because Jake was beside her. She wasn't sure that was a good thing, however.

A memory of her time with Jake hit her.

Once while in Syria, she'd decided to go into town on an errand. The threats against her father had seemed to fade, and she needed to get a few things. Plus, she'd been anxious to get away from the consulate. She was going stir crazy staying inside all the time and had even called herself a prisoner. Her dad was trying to get her back to the

States, but he hadn't been able to secure a flight yet.

Jake had escorted her into town, and they'd paused on a bridge over the Barada River. As people bustled around her, she'd leaned on the railing and looked out over it.

The moment had started peacefully. Lovely, really. She and Jake had talked about all the places they'd like to travel to one day.

Then everything changed.

She hadn't even realized one of her father's enemies had been creeping closer to her.

But Jake had.

In the blink of an eye, he'd knocked the man out. Then he'd grabbed Raven and started running, desperate to get her to safety.

More men had been waiting in the shadows.

Jake had taken all the hits for her. He'd gotten her back to the consulate safely.

In all, he'd taken down four assailants.

The situation had been precarious and scary.

But Raven had never felt as attracted to someone as she had at that moment.

Maybe that had been her problem. She'd developed a fantasy-like crush on Jake and had elevated him to hero status.

Their relationship couldn't sustain itself fueled by only adrenaline.

That was what it had been, right?

All emotion and no substance?

But if that truly was the case, why was she so aware of him standing beside her now?

"How's your dad doing?"

Jake's voice pulled Raven from her thoughts. She put those memories aside, knowing it was better if she didn't dwell on them anyway.

She glanced at him, noting how he had his back turned toward the water and his gaze studied everyone around them instead.

"Working hard like always." Raven tried to keep the edge out of her voice, but she wasn't successful.

Certainly, Jake had heard the bitterness there. He knew all about her daddy issues. He'd been there to witness some of them.

"How about your family?" she asked, desperate to change the subject.

He shrugged. "I don't talk to them very often. They're doing their own thing."

She knew all about his family also. He'd opened up to her about how hard his dad had been on him. About the pressure the man had put on Jake to follow in his footsteps. He'd been a Navy commander.

Thankfully, there was another man who'd taken Jake under his wing. She couldn't

remember his name now. She only remembered that this person had helped Jake navigate things his own father had blown off.

Family life was rarely simple, no matter how things looked on the surface.

She and Jake both knew that firsthand.

Just then, the hairs on her neck rose again.

She turned to look behind her. Scanned the other passengers.

Then she looked up.

That was when she saw him.

A man in a ballcap and sunglasses. Standing on the observation deck above them, looking down over the crowd.

Though she couldn't see his eyes, Raven was certain he was watching her . . . and that he was trouble.

Jake noticed the man at the same time as Raven.

He needed to find out why that guy was watching them.

His muscles turned to steel as he told Raven, "Get in the car, lock the doors, and wait for me there."

She might not appreciate him bossing her around, but all he cared about was keeping her safe.

With a quick nod, she scrambled back toward the SUV.

When she was safely inside, Jake strode between the vehicles and people on the ferry, took the steps two at a time to the observation deck.

Before reaching the top, a family of five turned the corner and piled onto the narrow stairway, heading down.

Jake tried to patiently wait for them to pass. He didn't want to alarm the children.

But by the time the stairs were clear and he reached the top level, the man was gone.

Blood rushed through Jake's veins.

He quickened his steps until he reached the spot where the man had been standing.

It was empty, as he'd known it would be.

Where could the man have gone?

That's when he spotted another narrow stairwell in the back.

Jake rushed down the steps, following them back to the main level where the cars were parked.

Had the man hidden behind a car or truck? Retreated back inside whatever vehicle he had driven aboard?

Just what would this guy's next move be?

Jake flexed his fingers before curling them into fists. He wished he could draw his

gun. But he couldn't. Not with so many innocent bystanders lingering close.

He would only do so if the man forced his hand.

Right now, he needed to figure out where this guy had gone.

He scanned everyone around him again. The man was nowhere to be seen.

But he had to be somewhere onboard.

Jake headed toward the front of the boat, where a crowd had gathered to look at the water.

If he was trying to lose someone, he'd head toward the crowd in order to blend in.

As he walked past each vehicle, he searched the area around it, making sure this guy wasn't crouching and waiting to attack.

As he reached the last car, he paused and glanced at the group gathered at the bow.

That was when Jake saw him.

The man had changed his hat and sunglasses, almost as if he'd been prepared for this very moment.

Which didn't surprise Jake one bit.

"Hey!" Jake yelled.

The man took off into a run.

The passengers nearby gasped. Some of them yelled as the man shoved them aside. Most looked confused.

Jake charged toward the man.

The guy paused at a railing, trapped between it and a nearby car.

Jake had him now.

Satisfaction washed through him.

He couldn't wait to get some answers from this guy.

But when Jake was only a few feet away, the man turned.

He hurdled the railing.

Then he jumped overboard.

CHAPTER 19

Jake ran to the rail and peered over the edge as gasps and screams sounded around him.

The blue water was choppy today and murky.

The man was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably dived deep.

A crew member ran over. "What just happened?"

"A man jumped over," Jake told him.

"Man overboard!" The crew member sprang into action, grabbing the radio at his belt and calling in the incident. Then he turned back to Jake, "Do you see him?"

"He hasn't surfaced yet." Jake kept an eye on the water.

More crew members stepped in to enact the emergency protocols.

All passengers were instructed to return to their vehicles as the captain stopped the ferry's forward momentum.

Jake stayed where he was. "I need to talk to the captain. I work private security, and there are things he needs to know."

The crew member stared at him as if weighing his words. Then he motioned for Jake

to follow. He led Jake to the wheelhouse, and Jake explained to the captain what was happening.

The captain, a man in his thirties with a long, coarse beard, frowned. “We still have to bring in the Coast Guard to look for him.”

Jake understood the logistics of what had happened and nodded. “I don’t think you’ll find him. He wanted off this boat for a reason.”

“You think he plans to swim all the way back to shore? It’s probably a couple of miles.”

“Either swim back to shore, or he has someone in a boat waiting for him within swimming distance. He could have climbed up on a sandbar to wait.”

This waterway was thick with shifting shoals, which made it difficult to navigate. Sandbars were abundant.

The captain clucked his tongue before shaking his head. “I’ve seen a lot of things, but this is a first.”

“So what happens next? Do we have to wait until he’s located?” Jake didn’t want to waste any more time.

They needed to get to Emerald Isle so he could investigate that other bomb.

“I need to make some calls. But if we don’t find him soon, we’ll need to get out of the way and let the Coast Guard do their job. The man’s car will still be onboard. Authorities might be able to ID him from that.”

“Good point.” Jake turned and glanced around. “How many vehicles are aboard?”

“Twenty-six.”

“We should look and see which ones are empty.”

The captain nodded. “My guys will help you.”

Jake would do that. But first he needed to check on Raven.

Raven glanced up as Jake approached. She was anxious to get out of this vehicle and figure out what was going on.

Except she partly knew what was going on. She’d had a decent view from inside the SUV. She’d seen the man jump into the water. She knew rescue procedures were underway.

Jake opened the SUV door and leaned inside.

Against Raven’s will, her breath caught at his presence.

But she pushed that feeling aside. She was stronger than her emotions, and she would stay focused.

“Are you okay?” Jake stared at her with what appeared to be genuine concern in his gaze.

She nodded. “Just shaken, as are a lot of people on this ferry.”

His expression remained grim and serious. “We’re going to look for this guy’s car. I thought you might want to help.”

Surprise washed through her. “I’d love to.”

She climbed out of the SUV and felt the breeze wash over her, a welcome relief from the stuffy confines of the vehicle. Even though it wasn't that hot outside, with no air circulation it had felt warmer than she liked.

Or maybe it was being around Jake that caused her to feel this way.

No . . . it was definitely being inside the vehicle.

Jake paused in front of her, locking gazes with her. "Stay close to me, okay? We think this guy was acting alone, but we don't know that for certain yet."

Raven repressed a shudder as they began to walk between the vehicles. Crew members also searched.

The rest of the passengers were in their vehicles, many watching everything with wide, curious eyes.

One vehicle caught her eye—a dark-colored sedan.

It appeared empty.

"Jake." Raven nodded toward the suspect vehicle. "No one is inside this one."

He pushed himself in front of her, his guard up. "Stay back."

She didn't argue.

Considering the fact that bombs were involved in this investigation, Jake wanted to be certain things were clear before they set off any kind of chain reaction.

The captain strode toward them. He must have left his first mate in the pilothouse.

He nodded at the car. “Is this it?”

“It appears empty,” Jake said.

The captain started to open one of the doors.

“Wait!” Jake yelled.

The captain froze, his fingers on the handle.

“I need to check it out first.” Jake gave him a look, not wanting to speak the words aloud in case any nearby passengers might hear.

Realization washed over the captain’s features, and he nodded.

The last thing they wanted were mass casualties caused by an explosion on a boat like this. They couldn’t take any chances.

Jake carefully lay on his back and crawled under the car. The space was a tight fit. But he needed to make sure no explosives were hidden there.

He searched the undercarriage for anything suspicious.

Then he slid back out and gave the captain a nod. “I didn’t see anything. We should be okay to look inside.”

The captain opened one door and Jake the other, and they began to search the vehicle.

Then Jake found something on the floorboard. A paper.

No, not a paper.

A photograph.

His gut twisted.

He almost didn't want to show Raven. But he couldn't keep it from her either. She deserved the truth.

Jake slowly turned the photo toward her.

When she saw it, her eyes widened, and she gasped.

It was a picture of her.

CHAPTER 20

Thirty minutes later, the Coast Guard arrived and cleared the ferry to continue. They would take over the search for the missing passenger.

During the rest of the boat ride, Raven couldn't get the photo out of her mind.

Why did that man have her picture? It seemed to prove that the snapshot from Syria also hadn't been a coincidence.

Had someone known she'd be called in to investigate this? Had this person lured her here for a reason?

Raven had no idea. But she didn't like the thought of it.

She and Jake had already talked about it, but they'd reached no conclusions. They'd decided they would tell Cassidy, however. She needed to be in the loop about this.

They finally arrived on the mainland. The rest of the trip would be on land.

During the drive, Raven needed something to occupy her thoughts. She pulled up the Facebook post Eleanor had made and studied the photo of the ordnance, along with all the comments people had posted.

It was unlikely she'd find something here, but it was worth a try.

She scrolled through the comments, taking care not to skip over any.

By the time they arrived in Emerald Isle, she still hadn't found anything of note.

But she wasn't ready to give up. Not yet.

The sleepy beach town looked much like those of the Outer Banks she'd driven through to get to Lantern Beach, only not as developed. Beach cottages lined the sandy roads and only a few stores and restaurants had been erected.

Jake pulled to a stop in a public parking area. Numerous sheriff cruisers were already on site as well as a news van.

As soon as they climbed out of the Tahoe, a man from the sheriff's office approached them. He introduced himself as Sheriff Myron Williams.

"You must be Jake and Raven. We've been waiting for you." The sheriff nodded toward the beach and the police tape surrounding it. "We've cordoned off the entire area for about a three-hundred-foot radius."

"Smart thinking," Jake said.

"We're waiting for a K-9 to get out here to see if this is truly an explosive or not. Unfortunately, the nearest one is in Raleigh, and they're still a couple of hours out. There was a big incident downtown this morning that has everyone tied up."

"That's unfortunate," Jake muttered.

"We're using a lot of manpower to keep this area safe," the sheriff continued. "We'll do it for as long as we need to. But we'd like to wrap this up, especially if it ends up being nothing."

"Understood." Jake offered a curt nod.

“Very well,” Sheriff Williams said. “Follow me.”

He raised the yellow police tape, and they ducked underneath, headed toward the beach.

Anticipation rippled inside Raven as she wondered what they’d find.

Just ahead, nestled close to the dune, she spotted another bomb, one that looked very similar to the one in the picture Eleanor had posted online.

Raven’s throat tightened.

They paused beside it.

As soon as they did, she heard the sound.

A ticking noise.

Jake heard it too because he yelled, “Everybody, get back!”

Then he grabbed her and started to run.

Jake paused at the police line and surveyed the area.

Everyone had gotten away from the device, just as he’d directed.

But they couldn’t just stand there and wait to see if the device exploded.

He knew what he had to do.

He turned to face the sheriff. “I’d like to check out the bomb myself.”

Sheriff Williams grimaced. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I have my bomb suit. I know what I’m doing.”

The sheriff still hesitated, his lips pulled downward and caution in his gaze.

“Jake is one of the leading bomb experts in the country,” Raven assured him.

“There’s no one better you could have check this out.”

Her words seemed to convince the sheriff.

He stepped back and nodded. “I’m going to have to trust you on this. We normally wouldn’t have a private citizen do something like this.”

“I promise that I can handle this.”

Sheriff Williams nodded. “Be careful.”

He headed toward the SUV to get the suit, Raven with him.

Raven grabbed his arm, and he turned to face her.

“Please, be careful.”

The concern in her gaze touched him—but it wouldn’t deter him. “I will be.”

The corners of her lips flickered down in a frown. “That suit won’t protect you—not if the bomb is big enough.”

Her words were true. But the suit was better than nothing.

He locked gazes with her. “I’ll be okay.”

Despite his words, her frown deepened.

Without talking more, Jake walked with the sheriff back to his SUV and reviewed his plan. Then he suited up.

He prayed this went well.

With one more glance at Raven—who looked apprehensive with her arms crossed over her chest and a frown on her face—he started across the sand.

Sweat trickled from his forehead. If he didn’t feel any fear right now, then something would be wrong. He had to harness his fear to keep him sharp.

Finally, he reached the ordnance and knelt beside it.

From inside his suit, he still heard the ticking.

Usually, ordnances like these didn’t contain a ticking bomb—only explosives.

However, Raven had said the ordnance Eleanor had found was only made to look old. But a new bomb had been inside.

What would he discover here?

Jake swallowed hard.

He was about to find out.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:58 am

CHAPTER 21

Raven watched, barely breathing as Jake paced toward the bomb.

She really wished he wouldn't do this. Wished the sheriff's office had access to a robot to check the bomb.

She knew that suit would offer Jake little protection in the event of a powerful blast.

But she'd also known she couldn't change his mind.

Her lungs froze as he knelt beside the bomb. Slowly, he reached for the device to better inspect it.

"You said he's an expert at this, right?" Sheriff Williams asked beside her.

Raven nodded, trying to keep the emotion from her voice. "He's the best."

She meant the words. Whatever Jake set his mind to, he excelled at it, whether it was protecting her or dismantling a bomb.

She'd always admired that quality about him.

Just then, a new thought hit her.

Not just a thought. A terrifying possibility.

Quickly, she glanced over her shoulder. Scanned the crowd.

It was mostly first responders, a news crew, and a few onlookers.

What if the perpetrator was here? What if he was watching right now—maybe even delighting in this moment?

Or worse. What if he had a remote detonator?

Tension crept up her spine, and she continued searching for anyone suspicious.

No one caught her eye. But her lungs didn't loosen.

What had happened to the man from the ferry? What had he wanted from them? Where had he gone after he jumped overboard?

She didn't have those answers.

The ticking noise kept replaying in her mind. Every time she closed her eyes, she could hear the countdown. Could imagine a deadly explosion. Could feel the heat from it. Smell the smoke.

She didn't want a replay of yesterday.

She pressed her eyes closed. Please, Lord. Protect Jake. Watch over him.

When she opened her eyes, she turned back to the scene. Jake had opened a compartment on the back of the device.

Like the bomb on Lantern Beach, this one definitely wasn't a relic. Someone had recreated the device to look like an historical artifact when it wasn't. Ordnances from

that time period wouldn't have a compartment like that.

As Jake reached inside, Raven held her breath. What was in there? Was this a trap?

This would be the true moment of reckoning . . . but she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

Maybe she should have had that conversation with him earlier.

Because what if they never had another opportunity?

Jake held his breath as he opened the compartment.

The ticking continued, and he fully expected to see another digital countdown inside the device.

He was right.

Red numbers stared back at him.

Numbers that proclaimed he only had forty-two seconds to get this dismantled.

His heart pounded harder in his chest as he stared at it.

Then he squinted.

Something didn't look right. There were no wires or explosives.

Carefully, he reached for the glowing numbers.

When he lifted the timer device, he realized another cell phone had been stashed

inside the cannister.

Was this some kind of new bomb tactic where someone used a cell phone? He tried to keep up-to-date with all the latest methods. He'd never heard about this one.

Cautiously, he hit the screen, praying his action didn't trigger some type of accelerated countdown.

Instead, the screen changed.

The numbers disappeared.

Jake held his breath as he wondered exactly what would happen next.

A message spread across the screen.

A message eerily similar to the one he'd found on the cell phone in Lantern Beach.

Except this one read, " Boom. The countdown is on. "

CHAPTER 22

Raven could hardly breathe as she waited to see what would happen.

Everyone around her seemed to hold their breath too.

Jake took something from inside the ordnance. Examined it.

Examined it more.

Then he lowered whatever had been in his hands.

The next moment, he pulled off his helmet and called, "It's safe!"

Raven slumped with relief.

But if it was safe, then what had Jake pulled from the ordnance? Curiosity pounded inside her.

"That's the best news I've heard all day." Sheriff Williams wiped his brow using a cloth from his pocket.

When he lifted the police line, Raven slipped under it without invitation. But no one tried to stop her.

She hurried toward Jake. When she reached him, she expected to see relief on his features. Instead, his eyes were narrow with concern and his lips pressed in a thin

line.

He held a phone toward her and the sheriff, showing them the message.

The blood drained from Raven's face as she read the words.

Boom. The countdown is on.

She began to rub her neck as tension pulled taut. "Someone is taunting us. Wanting to let us know they have the upper hand."

Jake's jaw tightened. "Whatever's going on here, this is just the beginning. I won't be surprised if more of these things pop up along the coast."

Raven couldn't argue with his assessment.

"So, we can clear the scene?" Sheriff Williams glanced back and forth from Jake to Raven then back to Jake. "Let people back onto the beach?"

Jake nodded. "You can. But I'd like to take this device with us so we can study it."

"I'll need to make a few phone calls concerning chain of custody. But I'll see if I can make that happen for you."

"That would be great," Raven said. "I'd like to study this bomb and compare it against the samples of the one that exploded in Lantern Beach. Maybe if I can track down the paint manufacturer, we can figure out who's creating these. Once we know that, then we can figure out the why."

"I'm all in favor of that plan," Sheriff Williams said.

So was Raven. Because she didn't like where she thought this was going.

And the sooner they could stop the person behind this, the better.

Once they'd confirmed the bomb wasn't active, a flurry of activity erupted.

The first thing Jake did was to get out of his PPE, better known as a bomb suit.

He gave his official statement to law enforcement, and Raven promised to keep Sheriff Williams in the loop on her findings.

He and Raven could now officially head back to Lantern Beach.

It had been a long day. The sun was beginning to sink in the sky, casting hues of pink.

But when he glanced over at Raven as they stood outside the SUV, he noticed she still looked concerned. Her brow was furrowed and her lips slightly downturned.

When they had a moment alone, he turned toward her. "What's on your mind?"

"I don't know." She rubbed her arms and frowned. "I don't want to overreact."

"You can tell me whatever you're thinking. I won't think you're overreacting."

Raven's cheeks flushed, and she looked away. When she turned back toward Jake, the concern in her eyes appeared even deeper.

"Why would someone do this?" she asked. "That's what I can't stop thinking about."

"Because they're playing some kind of game."

She shook her head, her gaze tempestuous. “I think there’s more to it than that.”

Jake crossed his arms and leaned against the back of the SUV as he waited for her to continue. “Go on.”

“I feel like someone knew you and I would end up down here examining this bomb, just like we ended up on Lantern Beach looking at the one there.”

“Okay . . .”

“But this one wasn’t a bomb at all. If someone really wanted to do damage here, they missed their opportunity.”

He squinted as he considered her words. “So, you’re saying this isn’t about the bomb itself, but rather it’s about you? Or me?”

“I’m not sure about that exactly,” she murmured, rubbing her arms. “Could be about both of us.”

“So what exactly are you thinking?” Jake rubbed a hand over his face.

She turned to him, her eyes wrinkled at the edges. “I feel like someone did this as a distraction.”

His breath caught. “You mean they’re planning something else, and they wanted to get the two of us away from whatever it is?”

She nodded grimly. “Exactly. I think someone wanted to draw us away from Lantern Beach for a specific reason.”

Jake’s pulse beat harder, and he grabbed his phone. “I think you’re right. I need to

call Ty and warn him.”

He prayed that they weren’t too late.

CHAPTER 23

Raven waited by the SUV as Jake held the phone to his ear, trying to reach someone on Lantern Beach. Sheriff Williams also lingered nearby, answering questions and waiting to talk to them.

None of Jake's calls were going through, however.

After several minutes, Jake sighed and jammed his phone back into his pocket, clearly unhappy.

Raven stepped toward him. "You've tried calling everyone? I don't like this."

"I don't either." He raked a hand through his hair. "Something's going on. The fact I can't get in touch with anyone says a lot."

"I agree. What are we going to do?"

"We've got to get back. Now." As soon as he said the words, Jake withdrew his keys from his pocket.

Sheriff Williams stepped toward them. He'd clearly heard the last part of their conversation at least. "What about the bomb and chain of custody? I can't release it to you yet."

"We'll get back with you on that," Jake said. "Right now, we need to go."

He nodded. “I understand. Keep me apprised of the situation, if you don’t mind. Whatever’s going on, I don’t know if our little town is connected to it or not. But I want to make sure I can keep the people here safe.”

“Absolutely. We’ll be in touch.” Then Jake nodded toward Raven.

A moment later, they climbed into the SUV and took off down the road.

Raven’s thoughts continued to race. “Do you think it’s a signal jammer? Is there one that could cover the whole island?”

“That would be unlikely. At most, a really powerful one could cover a one-mile radius—enough to knock out Blackout headquarters.” He twisted his neck. “Actually, all the phone calls I’ve made have been localized to one area.”

“Even Cassidy?”

He shrugged. “There’s a good chance she’s at Blackout.”

Her breath caught. “So maybe everyone who’s close to the Blackout headquarters could be impacted?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. If Cassidy’s there, that would explain why we can’t reach her either.”

Raven’s thoughts continued to race. “Do you have the number of anyone else on the island?”

“Yes, actually, I do.” He used a voice command on his Bluetooth to call Jack Wilson.

“Who’s Jack Wilson?” Raven asked.

“He’s the pastor at the church I attend. It’s not far from Blackout Headquarters.”

Raven tried not to show her surprise—or her delight that Jake attended church now. But she was glad to know he’d moved forward in his faith.

Pastor Wilson answered a moment later. “Jake . . . wasn’t expecting to hear from you. You going to challenge me to another game of pickleball?”

“Not today,” Jake said. “Unfortunately, I’m calling about something more serious.”

The pastor’s voice sobered. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t get in touch with anyone at Blackout. You heard about anything going on?”

“Everything is fine as far as I know,” Pastor Wilson said. “Why?”

Jake explained the situation.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” he said. “But you’re right, something doesn’t sound right, does it?”

Apprehension thrummed inside Raven.

Whatever was going on here, she didn’t like it.

Jake rushed back toward Lantern Beach, wishing he didn’t have to deal with the ferry system again. It would only make this trip take longer.

But that was where he and Raven now were.

On the ferry. Riding back to Lantern Beach.

He'd insisted to Raven that they stay in the SUV this time—just in case anyone was watching or planning something.

They were safer in there than they'd be out in the open.

But just sitting in the car was driving him crazy and showing his impatience. Raven had busied herself looking at something on her computer and jotting down notes—brainstorms, she'd said.

He gave her space.

But that left him with his own thoughts.

Traveling to and from the island was never something that should be rushed. It should be enjoyed. That was what Atlas had told him once. Some kind of poetic side emerged from the man on occasion.

Jake was sure all the women loved it. If the situation wasn't so serious right now, he might roll his eyes.

Instead, he continued trying to reach his teammates.

No one had picked up.

The bad feeling in his gut only grew stronger.

He'd even tried to reach Cassidy again, but she still hadn't answered. He'd tried the police station, and the person who'd answered told him she was on a call.

He hated feeling helpless.

It brought back too many bad memories. Memories of his time in the service—one mission in particular.

He stared out the window as his mind traveled back in time.

His team had gone in to diffuse a possible bomb in a compound where they believed a terrorist leader was hiding out. Jake had been the leader, so he'd remained on the periphery while his guys had gone in.

They'd all communicated via their comms.

But halfway through the mission, they lost all contact.

Jake had feared the worst.

After several minutes, he'd decided to go in himself.

He had to know if his guys were okay.

He reached them just in time to see one of them cross a tripwire.

The building had gone up in flames.

He'd lost three of his best guys that day. Two others had been seriously injured.

And Jake had never seen it coming.

It should have been him.

Shortly after that he'd been reassigned and directed to rescue the ambassador's daughter.

Raven.

She'd been abducted by a group of terrorists with a fetish for bombs.

But Jake had been hired. He'd tracked her down. Rescued her.

Protected her as her abductors had been captured and arrested.

His time with her had changed him.

Until everything had been turned upside down.

He ran a hand over his face.

Would Raven ever understand why he did what he'd done?

He frowned.

He wasn't sure.

Few things in life scared him—but Raven not understanding his reason for not being in touch caused enough fear that he kept the truth to himself.

CHAPTER 24

Raven saw the tension on Jake's face as they sat in the SUV traveling across the water by ferry.

He was worried—as he should be.

Something highly suspicious was going on.

The stakes were high.

Plus . . . she knew about what had happened back in Iraq. She knew about the teammates he'd lost.

He'd taken it hard. Really hard.

One evening while he'd been protecting her, he'd opened up about the situation. He'd told her what had happened and explained how much their deaths had impacted him.

Raven's heart had gone out to Jake, and she'd tried to assure him it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have known.

But he was clearly haunted by the tragedy.

As she glanced at him now, compassion pounded inside her. He always tried to take care of those around him. She knew he'd give up his life to do so.

But the emotional burden of being protector was enough to break someone.

Against her better judgment, she reached over and placed a hand on his forearm.

He'd protected her, putting himself in harm's way in order to save her life twice since she'd been in Lantern Beach. The least she could do was to try and offer something to him, though she wasn't sure her comfort would be accepted.

She licked her lips before saying, "I'm sorry, Jake."

His muscles loosened ever so slightly beneath her touch, and he seemed to snap out of his doldrums. "I appreciate that."

She pulled her hand away from him and settled back in her seat. "You know what one of my favorite memories of you is?"

He turned to her, surprise flashing in his gaze. "I have no idea."

"Do you remember when we were in New York City and we'd walked to Central Park?"

"I do." His expression tensed again, as if he didn't know where she was going with this.

Did he fear she might lash into him about something he'd done wrong?

"We found that little boy near the zoo area," Raven continued. "He was probably seven or eight, and he was on the spectrum. He was terrified because he couldn't find his parents."

The lines on his face softened some. "I remember."

“You were so good with him.” She meant every word she told him now. “You got down to his level. You told him everything was going to be okay and that you wouldn’t leave him until he found his parents. You calmed him down, and you kept your word.”

He shrugged as if his actions weren’t a big deal. “Anyone would have done the same.”

“No, you’re wrong. Not anyone would have done that. You went above and beyond. You always go above and beyond. That was the moment when I first knew—” Raven stopped herself, realizing what she was about to say.

He stared at her, all his attention suddenly focused on her. “You knew what?”

That I loved you. But Raven couldn’t say those words. She couldn’t let herself go there with him.

She cleared her throat, trying to rein in her emotions. “It’s when I knew you were a good guy. That you looked out for others and helped make the world a better place. Anyone would be honored to call you a friend or colleague.”

His gaze searched hers, something deep and enticing there. Something she wanted to dive into.

Raven forced herself to maintain eye contact, knowing if she looked away that she’d appear weak. Yet at the same time, she feared he might see the truth in her gaze.

“Thank you, Raven.” His voice sounded soft and serious—but sincere.

“I mean it, Jake. Those guys at Blackout are lucky to have you on their side.”

Then she looked away before she said something she might regret.

The situation was already precarious. She didn't need to put her heart in danger also.

Jake's pulse pounded in his ears as he drove off the ferry onto Lantern Beach and back to Blackout.

The bad feeling still brewed in his gut, growing stronger by the moment.

The one good thing that had come out of this situation was his conversation with Raven. Her words had surprised him. Had made him feel better.

Maybe she didn't hate him.

This wasn't the time to address those questions, however.

Fifteen minutes later, he spotted the Blackout headquarters ahead.

Various emergency response vehicles were parked on the other side of the gate. Everyone around the vehicles seemed to have an urgency in their steps.

Something was definitely wrong.

He pulled to the gate and put down his window to address the guard. "What did I miss?"

"It's been chaos. Our security systems were disabled and all communications cut off."

A pounding began at Jake's temples. "I need to get in there."

“Go right ahead.” The guard hit a button, and the gate opened.

Jake sped inside.

“You think this is connected?” Tension tinged Raven’s voice.

“I think there’s a good chance that’s the case.”

He pulled to a stop in a space near the lodge and turned toward Raven. “Stay here for now—until I know what’s going on.”

She opened her mouth as if to argue, but then she shut it again and nodded. “Will do.”

Waiting in the SUV seemed safer than having her outside, where she could be exposed. Jake had no idea what was going on or what the threat level was.

He only knew something was majorly wrong, and he didn’t like it.

His gaze searched everyone on the sidewalk until he spotted Ty talking to a group of guys there.

“Ty!” Jake jogged toward him.

Ty paused, resting his hands on his hips as he turned away from the group. Once he spotted Jake, Ty turned back toward the group around him. “You know what to do. Go!”

The rest of the guys dispersed just as he reached Ty.

Jake paused. “What did I miss?”

Ty's expression remained stony. "We're trying to figure out what happened. Our systems went down, and all communications were silenced . . ."

Jake's throat tightened. "Is there an active threat?"

"Not that I can tell," Ty said. "I'm not sure what someone is trying to prove."

"No more bombs?"

"Not that we know of. But now that you're here, we could use your help searching the grounds for anything suspicious."

"Raven is with me."

"You want to take her with you?"

Did he want to? No. Jake wanted to keep her as far as possible from harm.

But her insight could be invaluable.

"I'm sure she'd be more than happy to assist." Jake forced the words out.

"Perfect."

"Is Cassidy here?" Jake asked. "I was trying to reach her."

"She is. She's inside helping coordinate things."

Relief washed through him. "Good. I just needed to know she's okay."

Ty handed him a radio. "This is the only way we can communicate right now."

“Got it.” Jake clipped it to his belt.

“We’ve been searching inside the building,” Ty continued. “If you could search the perimeter, that would be huge.”

“I’m on it.” Jake turned to head back to the SUV, not wanting to waste any more time.

CHAPTER 25

More than anything, Raven had wanted to step in and help. So she was thankful Jake had included her.

Side by side, they began to walk the perimeter of the property, looking for anything that could signal trouble. They'd been assigned the forested area on the north end of the property.

The maritime forest around them was a dense patchwork of live oaks and loblolly pines silhouetted against the starlit sky. Their gnarled branches, sculpted by decades of sea winds, formed a protective canopy overhead.

A slight chill hung in the air, carrying the complex perfume of the coastal woodland—salt-tinged breeze mingling with the sweet fragrance of flowering wax myrtles and the earthy aroma of decomposing leaves on the forest floor.

Moonlight filtered through the twisted limbs, casting lace-like shadows that danced with each gentle gust. The distant rhythm of waves breaking on the shore provided a constant backdrop to the forest's own nocturnal symphony: the soft hooting of barred owls, the rustle of small creatures navigating the underbrush, and the occasional splash from the nearby salt marsh.

Spanish moss swayed like ghostly curtains in the breeze, and their footsteps released the peppery scent of crushed pine needles. In clearings, the pale yellow-green glow of fireflies punctuated the darkness, drifting like embers among the shadowy trunks.

Thankfully, Raven and Jake had flashlights with them.

The trip to Emerald Isle had taken nine hours of their day—nine hours that someone had wanted them to be away from here.

Just what was someone plotting and why?

It made no sense to her.

Not yet at least.

She shone her light along the fence. So far, they'd found nothing.

"I don't like this," Jake muttered.

"I don't either. The stakes are too high. And I don't understand what someone wants to accomplish or why that man had a picture of me or why a picture from Syria was found at another scene."

"You're clearly a link here—I just don't know why." Jake continued to walk slowly, carefully. "Is there anyone you've upset lately? Someone who might want revenge?"

"Who might want this kind of revenge? It would be over the top. The only people I've made mad lately are a couple of collectors who couldn't believe they'd purchased forged artifacts and one of my bosses who thought I was vying for his job."

"You're right. That doesn't seem like enough motivation." He frowned and paused. "What about your dad?"

Raven's eyebrows flew up. "You think someone did this as a means of targeting my

father?”

He shrugged. “It’s a theory.”

She frowned, wanting to deny his words. But instead, she thought it through, just in case Jake had a point. “Honestly, I haven’t talked to my father in a while. If he’s gotten himself into trouble again, I wouldn’t know about it.”

He cast her a look. “Maybe you should call him later.”

An imaginary rock suddenly pressed against Raven’s chest, but she nodded. “Maybe I should. For now, let’s keep looking.”

She could only deal with one problem at a time.

She took another step and heard a click. What was that?

Jake turned toward her, his eyes wide. “Stop! Don’t move.”

He knelt on the ground and shone his light by her feet.

What was he doing? Had he lost his mind?

“Raven, I need you to listen to me.” Jake’s voice contained a slight tremble. “You just stepped on a pressure plate. If you step off it, the IED below you will explode.”

Jake couldn’t believe this was happening.

A bomb had been hidden under the pile of leaves where Raven had stepped.

Sweat already poured down her forehead and neck.

“Are you sure?” Her voice trembled.

“I’m positive. But it’s going to be okay. I’ll figure out a way to get you out of this.”

Considering the bomb was half buried underground, it would be difficult. He wouldn’t be able to access the device to deactivate it. An ache formed in his chest at the thought.

He’d figure out something. He had no other choice.

First, he rose to his feet and used his radio to apprise Ty and Colton of the situation.

“Jake . . .” Raven’s voice still trembled as she stared at him with wide eyes.

He put his radio back on his belt, determined to be strong for her. “Yes?”

She swallowed hard, her breathing shallow. “I’m scared.”

Compassion panged inside him. No, it was more than compassion.

It was grief.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he told her. “You can be scared and brave.”

She nodded and drew in a deep but shaky breath. “You’ve always had a way of calming me down.”

“Good. I want you to stay calm.”

“I don’t even know how you do it exactly.” Her voice sounded thin. “But you do.”

Somewhere in there, Jake thought there was a compliment. But he couldn't take time to revel in it now.

If Raven was being targeted, there was no way the person behind this could have known she'd be the one to step on this device.

Had this just been bad luck?

Jake would figure that out later. But bad luck was the only thing that made sense.

Right now, he had to keep her alive.

"What are you going to do?" Raven's voice still quivered.

He peered up at her. "I'm still working on a plan. I just need you to stay still."

Her gaze met his, and she didn't bother to hide her fear. "I'm afraid I'm going to accidentally step off and kill us both."

His throat tightened. What he wouldn't do to trade places with her. To take away this anxiety.

Instead, he kept his steady gaze on her. "You're not going to do that. You're smart and reasonable."

Raven slowly pressed her eyes closed and nodded, each motion terse. "Fear causes people to do things out of character."

"You're right. But I have total confidence you can handle this." He meant the words.

She could handle this.

So could he.

He would figure out how to get Raven out of this situation if it was the last thing he did.

CHAPTER 26

Sweat dripped down Raven's back.

Jake had made her feel better. Her words had been true. He'd always had the ability to somehow lift her spirit.

But she wasn't sure how he'd get her out of this situation. She knew how bombs worked. She knew the reality of this moment.

Disarming the device beneath her foot would be nearly impossible.

Footsteps sounded behind her, but she didn't dare move. She was afraid to even breathe.

Two men appeared, pausing in front of her.

"Raven, I'm Ty," the lean but muscular man with dark hair started. "You met my wife, Cassidy. This is Colton."

Colton was taller and broader with short, dark hair and a square jaw.

Colton calmly asked, "You doing okay?"

"I'd be better if I was standing on a beach contemplating how to relax." She tried to keep her voice light.

“We’re going to get you off this,” Ty said. “We just need to figure out how to do it safely.”

“Safely is my preferred method.” Her voice sounded thin to her own ears.

Ty turned to Jake. “What are your ideas?”

Jake frowned and glanced toward her feet. “There are a couple of options. I could do a controlled flooding. If the device is mechanical and not electronic then it could jam the systems.”

“But we won’t know if it’s mechanical or electronic until we see it,” Colton pointed out.

“Exactly.” Jake rubbed his jaw.

“What are your other ideas?” Ty asked.

“I could try to jam the trigger mechanism. But I’d need to be able to see the bomb better in order to do that, which will be a problem.”

“That leaves us with weight displacement.” Colton’s expression tightened.

“We find something with the same weight as Raven, and we switch them out,” Jake spelled out. “Then we get far away from the bomb. Quickly.”

“That sounds precarious,” Ty said.

“The whole situation is precarious.” Jake raked a hand through his hair.

Raven pressed her eyes closed.

Of all the ways she'd seen herself potentially dying one day, this wasn't one of them.

But any way she looked at this, the situation was too dangerous for comfort.

Jake hated that Raven was in this situation. But all he could do was safely get her out of it.

He wished he could touch her or hold her or do something to offer comfort.

But any of those things could set the bomb off, so they were off-limits.

He had to focus on the tangible—replacing her weight on the bomb with something of equal weight.

“How much do you weigh, Raven?” Jake asked. “I wouldn't ask unless I had to.”

She rattled off the number.

Jake turned to the guys around him. “What can we get to place on top of this that would weigh the same?”

They threw out some ideas before settling on some weights they used for working out. Each were approximately twenty pounds.

“Then that's what we'll do,” Jake said. “Ty and Colton, can you go get them?”

The men scrambled away without a word.

As they did, Jake turned back to Raven. Perspiration slid down her temples to her neck. Her skin still looked pale. Wisps of hair clung to her face.

“We’ll get you out of this soon,” he told her. “I just need you to stay focused.”

She nodded.

“You’re doing great,” he reassured her.

“Glad to hear that.” Her voice had turned almost gravelly.

“A friend of mine was in a similar situation as this once before, you know.”

She narrowed her gaze with surprise—and maybe skepticism. “Was he?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, it was a colleague of mine. We called him ‘Jittery Jim,’ and he found himself in your shoes—standing on a pressure plate in an abandoned factory.”

“Jittery Jim?” She raised her eyebrows. “Keep going. Now I’m intrigued.”

The story came easily. “While the bomb squad was figuring out how to disarm it, I kept him distracted by challenging him to increasingly ridiculous balancing contests.”

“Balancing tests while he was standing on a bomb?” She cast him a look.

Jake shrugged. “I told him if he could stand on one foot for thirty seconds, I’d buy him a steak dinner.”

“Is that right?” She tilted her head skeptically.

“Then I told him if he could do the flamingo pose for an entire minute, I’d buy him a weekend in Vegas. Eventually, it escalated to: If he could do an impression of a T-Rex with those tiny arms while humming the national anthem, I’d do his paperwork

for a month.”

“And did he?”

“He did—while literally standing on what could be his death. The other techs were horrified but also couldn’t help but laugh.”

A knowing look remained in her eyes. “So what happened? Did he survive?”

“After three hours, we discovered it wasn’t a pressure plate he was standing on after all—just a rusty metal disc. Jim had been performing an impromptu circus act for nothing.”

“That’s terrible. And I don’t believe a word of it.”

“What? Why would I make this up?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . .”

“It wasn’t all bad news. Later, we had a talent show on base. Jim performed his T-Rex National Anthem routine, which became his signature party trick. It’s how he eventually found his wife. Now they’re married with four children.”

“It’s a good thing I can’t move right now. Because if I could, I might give you a good shake, Jake Laudner.” Despite her exaggerated anger, she chuckled.

Just the thing he wanted.

He had to keep her distracted.

CHAPTER 27

Raven generally considered herself strong. But right now she felt lightheaded, like she might pass out.

She knew doing so would kill everyone around her.

That only made the pressure weighing on her shoulders heavier.

She wanted desperately to grab hold of Jake so she could stay steady. But she knew better than to do that. Any shift in her weight could be disastrous.

How much longer would it take until they got back here with those weights?

Not only that, but now that night had fallen, it had turned cold outside. Even adding a jacket over her shoulders could trigger this bomb. They couldn't risk that. She'd have to deal with the chills she felt.

How long had she been standing here already? It felt like hours. Yet she had a feeling it had probably been less than an hour.

She was grateful Jake had distracted her with his stories. They'd really helped.

In the time since Ty and Colton had left, two fire trucks had arrived on scene. They remained on standby a safe distance away.

Two police cruisers had also pulled up.

She wasn't certain if their presence made her feel better or worse.

A shout sounded behind her, but she resisted the urge to turn toward it.

A few seconds later, she saw Colton and Ty walking toward them. They both carried weights.

They paused in front of her.

"This should be almost an exact match." Ty nodded with confidence.

Jake nodded, trying to hide the tension across his face—Raven was certain of it.

But he wasn't successful. Raven could read the anxiety on his expression.

"We'll need to make sure we're quick and precise when we do this," Jake instructed, his voice steady and calm. "When I pull Raven off, those weights need to go right on top. Then we all need to get away from this site as quickly as possible. There's a good chance the weights will shift and everything will go up in flames."

Raven's throat felt even drier at the thought.

One wrong move, and she'd be dead.

Jake appeared in front of her, his gaze locking with hers. "You can do this."

She appreciated his confidence, though she wasn't sure she believed him.

She didn't doubt his abilities. But anyone in this situation had to know how dicey it was.

“You guys get behind Raven with the weights,” Jake said. “Raven, I’ll be in front of you. On the count of three, I want you to grab onto me. At the same time, you guys put the weights on top of this explosive. Got it?”

Everyone murmured, “Okay.”

A new tremble captured Raven. As much as she wanted to get off of this bomb, right now it felt safer to stay in place. At least she knew while she was on top of it, if she didn’t move, she’d stay alive.

But she couldn’t stay on this all night. She had to move.

She prayed to God for strength to get through this.

This had to work. That was all Jake could keep thinking to himself.

He’d do this for anyone in this situation—not just Raven. He’d been in similar circumstances before, especially when he’d worked in the Middle East.

There had been literal minefields there that his team had navigated.

He would have taken a bullet—or a blast—for any of them.

In fact, he preferred that to the alternative.

Jake drew in a deep breath before nodding to Ty and Colton. Then he held his hands out to Raven.

She stared at them, apprehension simmering in her gaze.

“You can do this.” He locked gazes with her again. Gave her a nod.

She nodded back, the motion stiff and uncertain.

Then he started his countdown. “Three. Two . . . one.”

He grabbed Raven and pulled her, praying even more fervently than ever that this plan would work.

CHAPTER 28

Everything happened fast, so fast Raven could hardly comprehend what was going on.

Jake said one .

He grabbed her.

She grabbed him.

Threw her over his shoulder.

Took off in a run.

Shouts sounded behind her.

She imagined Jake's colleagues putting those weights on top of the bomb.

She held her breath.

Would their plan work?

Or would that bomb go off?

Everything still felt uncertain—and the feeling unnerved her.

Jake continued to run, her body bouncing against his.

More shouts sounded.

She waited for the detonation. For the blast of heat. For the pain.

But she didn't hear it. Didn't feel it.

Finally, Jake stopped. Took her off his shoulder. Set her down behind a tree.

Their gazes met.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Raven nodded.

His gaze lingered on her another moment. Then he looked over her shoulder. At the site of the bomb.

Two seconds later, fire filled the air.

Jake knelt in front of Raven, trying to shield her from any debris that might fly this way. He thought he'd gotten far enough that she'd be safe, but he needed to be certain.

When the flames died, he raised his head. Raven was still okay.

Praise God!

He glanced at the site. The blast had knocked out part of the fence, and several trees were on fire.

Now he had to make sure the rest of his colleagues were unharmed as well.

“Stay here,” he told Raven.

He needed to check on everyone.

He started toward the area, burning debris still around him. The tranquil rhythm of the maritime forest had been shattered. Where ancient live oaks stood moments before, now a smoking crater had torn through the forest floor, surrounded by splintered trunks and shredded foliage.

The air, once perfumed with wax myrtle and pine, now stung with acrid smoke and the sharp tang of chemicals. Birds had fled in panicked flight, their alarmed calls piercing the sudden, eerie silence that followed the blast.

Moonlight illuminated a grotesque new landscape—twisted metal fragments embedded in tree bark, Spanish moss smoldering on broken branches, and a fine dust of pulverized soil settling on the disturbed undergrowth.

The fire truck pulled closer and began to hose down any remaining flames.

He glanced in the direction his friends had fled.

They rose from the ground.

The blast had blown them off their feet.

But they appeared to be relatively unscathed.

Jake released the breath he'd been holding.

That situation could have turned out so much worse.

He'd been determined to find answers about this before.

But now that determination solidified even more.

Had someone at Blackout done this? Otherwise, how had this person gotten into their headquarters? The grounds were heavily guarded.

He didn't want to believe one of his colleagues could be working with the bad guy. Could have sold their soul and their loyalties for a cash payout.

But it was a possibility, and he'd be foolish not to consider it.

Right now, he needed to get back to Raven and start picking up the pieces after what had happened.

CHAPTER 29

Everything that happened after the bomb went off felt like a blur to Raven.

Medics had examined her for any injuries. She'd given a statement to Cassidy. Jake had been on patrol, watching for more danger, checking for any more bombs.

The important thing was no one was hurt. Things could have turned out so much differently.

She couldn't stop thanking God for that.

Finally, she and Jake were cleared to leave the site. She lingered near the Tahoe, waiting for Jake to come back outside.

She thought for sure he'd ask her to stay at Blackout tonight, but to her surprise he hadn't.

Instead, he stepped outside, an overnight bag slung over his shoulder.

He met her at the Tahoe and tossed it in the back.

"No way am I letting you stay alone, not after everything that's happened. I'm sleeping on your couch again." He didn't sound apologetic in the slightest.

Part of her wanted to argue out of principle. But she didn't.

Because another part of her was truly terrified and hated the thought of staying alone right now.

She needed someone to have her back.

Jake had stepped up to the plate, so she wouldn't argue with that answered prayer.

She was curious, however, if he knew anything more than she did.

She waited until they were back in his SUV before she asked any questions. "What are you thinking? Is there something I need to know?"

His jaw tightened, and she knew there was more to the story. She wasn't sure exactly what he might tell her.

Finally, with his gaze still on the road and his hands firmly gripping the steering wheel, he said, "They messed with our communications. Blocked our calls. Someone breached the Blackout headquarters. Planted a live IED on our campus . . ."

"You think someone affiliated with Blackout may be responsible?" Her throat burned as the question left her lips.

"It's the only thing that makes sense." Jake scowled.

"What are you guys going to do about it? I'm assuming you've talked to one of your superiors about this."

"I have mentioned my concerns to Ty and Colton. We don't want to let on that we suspect anything yet. We need to somehow try to figure out how to draw this person out."

Raven's thoughts continued to race. "You think this person is the same one who left the ordnances on the beach?"

He shrugged. "I can't say for sure without any type of evidence. But Blackout has hired some of the best of the best."

"You're a bomb tech," she reminded him. "Who knows bombs better than you?"

A frown tugged at his lips, and she knew he was having a thought.

"Blackout just hired me and the four guys you met earlier. All of us know bombs pretty well."

Alarm raced through her. Had she correctly read between the lines? "You think someone on your team could be responsible?"

"I don't want to believe that. But I'd be a fool not to examine every possibility."

"Have any of them given you any reason to doubt them?" Raven asked.

Jake's jaw twitched. When he didn't answer right away, she decided not to press. He had a lot to think through right now.

So did she.

She leaned back in her seat as they headed down the road. She didn't like the thought of someone being on the inside. She couldn't imagine what it might feel like for Jake to be in his position of having to question people who were supposed to have his back.

They still had a lot more answers to uncover. But time felt as if it was running out. It

was almost as if another bomb ticked in the background. Armed and ready to take them all out.

Jake checked out Raven's house, just to make sure it was safe and there were no hidden surprises.

Everything appeared clear.

He ushered her inside and locked the door behind them. He couldn't afford to let down his guard. Trouble could show up again at any moment, and he needed to be prepared if it did.

Raven had watched him from the doorway as he worked.

She looked exhausted as she stood there. She had been through a lot today.

He paused in front of her. "You should be good. Everything's secure."

"Great." Raven nodded with relief. "I need to take a shower. I feel gross. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable."

Jake nodded. But he knew he wouldn't be making himself comfortable in this situation. Not until the person behind this was found.

A buzz sounded, and he reached for his phone.

Then he realized the sound had come from the kitchen.

It was Raven's phone. She'd left it on the counter.

As he glanced at it, a text message that had popped up on her screen caught his

attention.

He hadn't meant to read it.

But it was too late.

The message had been from someone named Kingston.

I can't wait to see you again. I can't stop thinking about you. Come back into town soon. Please.

Jake's heart pounded in his throat.

So Raven was seeing someone?

He shouldn't be surprised.

Maybe it wasn't surprise he felt. It was more like devastation.

No, that wasn't the right word either.

He had no right to be upset about Raven seeing someone else. He'd blown his chance with her.

But he couldn't stop thinking about all his regrets.

CHAPTER 30

Raven showered, then threw on some sweatpants and her favorite sweatshirt. She craved comfort. If she had a chocolate cake right now, she'd eat a huge slice. Maybe even the whole cake.

So it was a good thing there was no cake here.

Though it was late, her mind raced too much for her to sleep. She had more things to investigate.

She grabbed her laptop and headed back into the living room, where she found Jake sitting on the couch looking at his phone. He'd changed into some black sweats and a white T-shirt.

Her throat went dry at the sight of him. She forced herself to look away, to not dwell on the fact he was still the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

Jake stood when she walked in the room.

"At ease," she joked, trying to break the tension she felt inside her.

He cracked a half-hearted smile.

The light moment was nice in the shadow of all the heavy things they were dealing with.

He nodded to a plate on the coffee table. "I made you a sandwich. You need to eat."

She glanced at the sandwich, cut neatly into two triangles. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

"Thank you." She grabbed it, realizing she was hungry. "Did I miss anything?"

Raven lowered herself into an oversized chair near him and crossed her legs. She placed her laptop on the table beside her, ready to grab when she was ready to do some research.

"Not that I've heard."

She nodded, expecting that would be the answer. Then she took a bite of her turkey on wheat. "This is good. Thank you again."

"Of course."

She didn't want to admit it, but it felt good to have someone watching out for her. She'd been on her own for a long time, used to doing things for herself. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to have someone paying attention to her.

She ate a few more bites before grabbing her laptop. Something had been nagging her, something she wanted to check out more.

"What are you doing?" Jake narrowed his eyes in curiosity as he watched her.

"I need to do more research."

"I see."

She stole another glance at him. Was it just her imagination or was he acting funny? He almost seemed wistful.

But why?

As her computer screen lit, all the text messages she'd missed earlier popped up at the top corner of her screen.

She saw one from Kingston.

Her gaze darted across the room to the kitchen counter where she'd left her cell phone.

Had Jake somehow seen that message? Was that why he seemed distant?

No, that thought was ridiculous. Even if Jake had seen the text, he wasn't the type to be jealous.

He'd made his feelings toward her very clear ten years ago when he'd ghosted her.

But why did Raven feel as if he had something on his mind he wasn't telling her?

Jake wanted to get the message he'd seen on Raven's phone out of his mind. But every method he tried to use to stop thinking about it didn't work.

He didn't know why, but he'd had the impression she wasn't seeing anyone. The fact that she might have a man in her life bothered him entirely more than it should.

Jake had his chance with her, and he'd blown it. He hadn't expected her to wait around.

He hadn't waited around, after all. He'd gotten married. He couldn't have a double standard.

Yet, if he were honest with himself, he'd admit he'd love nothing more than to have a second chance with her.

The events of the past two days had proven that.

But today, when he thought that Raven might die . . . that had cemented his remorse.

That was just another reason why he was glad she'd sat in the chair instead of beside him on the couch. On the couch . . . she would have been too close. It might have been too tempting to reach out to her, to let one of her curls brush his fingertips.

Striking up an old flame in the middle of this situation was a terrible idea.

Plus, Raven was out of reach.

Even if she wasn't dating someone, would she ever truly understand Jake's reasons for leaving? For not being in touch? He wasn't sure.

"You don't trust everyone at Blackout, do you?"

Raven's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

Jake blinked, unsure if he'd heard her correctly. "Come again?"

"I noticed some tension between you and your teammates."

Of course , she did. She'd also probably noticed Jake hadn't responded to her question earlier. The truth was, he did have a reason to doubt his teammates.

He shrugged. “You know how it is when you have to work closely with people. It’s challenging.”

“In your line of work, you have to trust each other.” She shifted and narrowed her gaze, not backing down. “So what’s going on?”

She’d really cut right to the heart of the matter, hadn’t she?

Jake could avoid her question and pretend she was misinterpreting things.

Or he could use her as a sounding board.

He swallowed hard as he tried to decide what to do.

“I’ve been thinking more about what happened today. I’m now convinced this was an inside job,” he admitted, surprising himself by saying the words aloud. He’d had his suspicions before, but he didn’t see any other alternatives at this point.

“I’m sorry to hear that. That has to be difficult.” Raven paused. “Do you have any idea who might be responsible?”

He shook his head. “Not really. I only have suspicions.” He paused. “I know some of the best EOD techs around. There are only a few people I can think of who might be capable of making the kind of bombs we’ve seen since you’ve arrived here on Lantern Beach.”

“And it’s one of your colleagues, isn’t it? One of the guys who came in with you?” She sounded breathless as she asked the question.

He somberly nodded. “That’s right. It could be any of them, really. They each might have their reasons.”

“Even Atlas? You two seem close.”

Her words caused an unseen weight to press on his shoulders. “Out of everyone, I’m closest to him. But also out of everyone, he’s the most likely one who could have left that bomb today at the headquarters.”

“Wow.” She blinked. “That’s a lot.”

“Yes, it is.”

She continued to study his face, compassion in her gaze. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m trying to figure that out.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure you’ll make the right decision.” Her words sounded confident and sure.

His gaze caught hers. The truth was Jake didn’t always make the right decisions.

He hadn’t with her.

Was this the time to tell her the truth?

He licked his lips, unsure even how to start. Unsure how she’d react. Unsure about . . . everything, really.

But before any words left his mouth, Raven stood. “Listen, maybe we should get some sleep. Maybe we’ll see things with fresh eyes in the morning.”

“Smart thinking.” His voice sounded hoarse in his own ears.

Her gaze lingered on him, almost as if she'd sensed he was about to address what had happened in the past and wanted to avoid it. "Good night, Jake."

"Good night, Raven."

Maybe seeing her again wouldn't bring healing like Jake had hoped.

Maybe it would only bring more hurt.

CHAPTER 31

Jake looked as if he had already showered, dressed, and been awake for hours when Raven headed to the kitchen the next morning.

She wasn't sure how he did that, but she was impressed and wished she had the same skill.

Instead, she felt like a mess with her hair pulled back in a sloppy bun, still wearing her sweats from the night before. She'd replaced her sweatshirt with her favorite T-shirt—one she'd purchased while on a work trip to London last year.

Truthfully, she'd hoped she might avoid Jake a little longer. Last night, she'd sensed he wanted to talk about what had happened between them. She'd almost let him.

Then she'd changed her mind. Maybe the reaction had been out of fear. She wasn't sure.

She'd panicked and feigned an excuse about going to bed.

"Morning," Jake murmured, standing with a cup of coffee in his hands.

Just like last night, he seemed more aloof, though she had no idea why.

"Morning." Then her gaze hit the kitchen table.

The ordnance from Emerald Isle sat on top.

“A deputy brought it by early this morning.” Jake followed her gaze. “I was awake, so I accepted the delivery.”

“That’s great news. I can’t wait to examine it more closely.”

“I thought you’d be happy to see that.”

She nodded at the coffee. “You make enough for me?”

“Of course. I’ve been called many things but not stupid.”

She let out a laugh, glad to see some of his humor had returned. He’d seemed so serious since they’d run into each other again. Back when they’d first met, they’d had great banter—something she’d loved.

Something she’d missed, if she were honest with herself.

She poured herself a cup, added the fixings, and then turned to the bomb. “Any other updates besides this one?”

“Not really.”

“What about the bomb at Blackout? Were you able to find any remains? I mean, I know that you personally weren’t able to, but . . .”

“They’ve uncovered a few things, and I’m having Atlas look at it. I’ll probably try to swing by later today so I can see it also.”

“Smart thinking.” She sat down by the bomb and leaned closer to examine the paint and metal. “Just looking at it with the naked eye, this looks a lot like the one Eleanor found. But I could only see one side of the device in the photo.”

“So the same person left it, just as we suspected.” Jake shifted toward her, still leaning against the wall with his cup of coffee in hand. “Apparently, this person has decided to make a hobby out of recreating bomb relics and leaving them on shores where people could think they washed up.”

“Sounds like a sick hobby, doesn’t it?” She raised her eyebrows and stole a glance at him.

He gave her a knowing look. “I agree.”

She squinted as she studied the device more closely. Something new caught her eye, something she hadn’t seen in the photo or in the remnant she’d found.

Jake stepped closer. “What is it?”

She grabbed a pen and pointed to an etching close to the tailfin on the ordnance. “Check this out.”

Jake leaned toward it for a better look. “What is that?”

“It almost looks like some kind of insignia.”

His eyes widened. “Do you think the person who left this was bold enough to mark their work with an insignia?”

She shrugged. “That’s what it seems like to me.”

“You ever seen that design before?”

“I sure haven’t.”

He grabbed his phone and took a photo of it. “Then we need to see what we can find.”

Finding that insignia gave Jake and Raven a fresh lead in their investigation.

Jake didn’t recognize the symbol either. The mark looked like a square with a circle of Ss fanning out in the center.

Maybe they could trace this. Even as the thought raced through his head, he knew the person—or people—behind this were probably too smart to leave something that would be traceable.

So why had someone left something so traceable? Especially on the bomb in Emerald Isle, which hadn’t had explosives inside?

Maybe these people wanted to send a message.

Or maybe they wanted to be found. They wanted credit for their work.

There were so many details Jake needed to make sense of.

He mentally ran through what had happened so far.

Eleanor had found the first explosive. It had detonated inside her house, killing her.

Then someone had planted another bomb in the rubble of Eleanor’s home, which had also exploded.

While investigating that scene, someone had been watching from the brush and had run after being spotted.

Shortly after, Jake had found the phone in the sea oats with a message on it : You're too late.

That night, someone had tried to break into Raven's house.

Another ordnance had been found in Emerald Isle along with a message: Boom. The countdown is on.

Someone had also followed him and Raven onto the ferry and jumped into the water, not to be found—not that Jake had heard, at least.

Then there was the picture from Syria found at the first crime scene. And the picture of Raven found in the vehicle of the guy on the ferry.

Finally, there had been the pressure-sensitive bomb at the Blackout headquarters.

Jake was having a hard time making sense of how all this fit together.

Maybe if the picture from Syria and the picture of Raven hadn't been found, things would make more sense.

Because he didn't believe someone was doing this only to target Raven. After all, they couldn't have known she'd step on that pressure sensitive bomb at the Blackout headquarters.

While someone might have been able to guess that Raven would be called in to help with this, that hadn't been a guarantee either.

Jake's temples began to throb. The pieces just weren't falling into place, and he didn't like it.

If he wanted to keep her safe, then he needed answers—and answers still seemed far away.

For now, he'd run this symbol past a few colleagues and see what popped up.

CHAPTER 32

Raven glanced at Jake as they both sat at the kitchen table with laptops and phones in front of them. They were researching as they finished their coffee.

“Anything on that insignia yet?” she asked him.

He frowned and shook his head as he stared at his laptop. “No, I’m still looking into it.”

“Nothing on my end either. I’ve asked some of my colleagues if they’ve ever seen anything similar. I wonder if maybe the person who created this bomb replicated something with historical significance. But no one has been able to confirm anything for me yet.”

Jake leaned back and sighed before taking another sip of coffee. “The whole situation is strange.”

She twisted her head wearily. “You can say that again.”

Raven needed a break from researching the insignia. She’d searched through so many images that her eyes were beginning to cross.

Instead, she decided to look at Eleanor’s Facebook post again, as well as the Facebook group for Eleanor’s beachcombers club.

The beachcombers club had been very chatty this week with the news of what had

happened. Everyone seemed especially cautious right now. Many were curious to know if anything else would wash up in this area.

Raven was also curious. Next time, it might not even be a bomb. It could be something else equally as dangerous.

Until they knew more, they needed to be ready for anything.

She paused by one comment someone had left on Eleanor's original photo.

She hadn't seen this one before. It had been left only four hours ago.

Her eyes narrowed as she read the words: You should have known better than to bring that home. It's like you wanted to be collateral damage.

"Hey, Jake . . . check this out." Raven moved her laptop closer so he could see the screen. Then she pointed to the comment. "What's your take on that?"

He let out a grunt as he read it. "It sounds suspicious."

"I agree. It's almost like this guy is goading us."

Out of curiosity, Raven clicked on the profile picture of the man who'd commented. She wanted to know more about him.

His name appeared. Thomas Logan. He was from New York. Former military.

"That's interesting." She used her mouse to point out his past career.

Jake leaned closer, the scent of his aftershave teasing her. The sandalwood and citrus cologne had always been her favorite.

She forced her thoughts to focus and cleared her throat. “I wonder if this guy still lives in New York?”

“I have a contact who might be able to help us figure that out.”

“That would be amazing.”

Jake grabbed his phone. “Let me see what I can do.”

Twenty minutes later, Jake and Raven had their answer.

“Get this.” Jake turned to Raven, unable to contain the excitement in his voice. “Thomas Logan still lives in New York. But my friend was able to ping this guy’s cell phone.”

Raven’s eyes widened. “And?”

“It turns out he’s in Lantern Beach right now.”

Her eyes widened even more. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not. He’s staying in a rental.”

“Do you have an address?”

“My friend is sending it now.” This could be the lead they’d been waiting for.

As if in response, a phone buzzed—but it wasn’t his, he realized.

It was Raven’s. She glanced at the screen, her gaze flickered, then she clicked off it.

Had the message been from Kingston?

Some of Jake's excitement dimmed.

It's none of your business , he reminded himself. She's not yours, and she never will be.

He had to move past this jealousy he felt—jealousy he had no right to feel.

Another ding sounded. It was his phone this time.

An address appeared on his screen.

This guy was staying only a few blocks away from Raven.

Jake stood. "I want to go talk to this guy. He may not be guilty of leaving that bomb. But that comment he made on Eleanor's Facebook post definitely makes it sound as if he knows more than your average Joe."

"Not only that, but the fact he's here in Lantern Beach? That can't be a coincidence." Raven stood also, excitement bubbling in her voice. "I'm going with you."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." Jake hated thinking about putting her in harm's way again. The thought of it made tension weave through his muscles.

Her gaze locked on him. "You don't have to take me with you. But I'm going to be there one way or another."

He heard the determination in her voice and knew she wasn't bluffing. She wouldn't sit back idly as if she didn't have a stake in this.

“Fine,” Jake told her. “But I’m leaving in five minutes.”

She gave him a confident nod. “I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER 33

Raven's heart throbbed in her ears as they pulled to a stop in front of a small beach house that looked similar to the one where she was staying. This one wasn't located on the ocean, but four houses back instead, right off the main highway cutting through the center of the island.

A maroon-colored sedan was parked in the driveway, indicating someone was there.

The place looked unassuming, not like the type of place that housed a terrorist.

If Thomas was a terrorist.

It was still unclear what his connection to all this might be—if he even had a connection. But that Facebook post did make it sound as if he knew something. The fact he'd posted it so long after the accident happened made it sound as if he'd wanted someone to find him and ask questions.

Or this could be a setup.

They climbed from the SUV, and Jake turned toward her. "Stay behind me."

"You won't get any arguments from me."

She wasn't even sarcastic as she said the words. She wasn't a soldier or the soldier type, and she knew that. Being in the line of fire wasn't her forte.

They climbed the steps to the front door of the stilted house. Just like Raven's place, a deck ran along the perimeter of this place with stairways on each side.

Jake headed to the front door and knocked.

No one answered.

He knocked again.

Again, there was no answer, and Raven sensed Jake's growing agitation as his movements became faster, jerkier.

"Maybe you should announce yourself," Raven suggested.

"It might scare him away." He moved from the door and peered through the closest window, squinting as he did.

"Anything?" Raven asked.

"This guy's definitely home, he just doesn't want to answer."

"Let me see." Raven started to look.

Then a noise came from the other side of the house.

A door slamming.

She and Jake looked at each other, and Raven blurted, "He's running."

Jake sprinted down the stairs, taking the steps by twos. He had to catch this guy.

Just as he reached the driveway, he spotted the man, who was already halfway to the street.

“Stop!” Jake yelled. “We just want to talk.”

The man didn’t slow down. Of course.

Thomas Logan clearly didn’t want to be caught.

Jake pushed himself harder, but this guy was fast—he was running as if his life depended on it.

As the man reached the highway, he paused and glanced behind him, probably to see how close Jake was.

Jake knew what was going to happen a split second before it did.

He watched it all as if in slow motion.

Thomas stepping into the road.

A car coming.

Brakes squealing.

Thomas trying to dive out of the way.

But it was too late.

He was already directly in front of the car.

The vehicle smashed into him, and he flew into the air before landing on the road with a sickening thud.

CHAPTER 34

An ambulance had arrived on the scene about five minutes after the accident, along with Cassidy and another officer. As soon as the paramedics had gotten a look at Thomas, they'd known he needed more help than what they could offer in Lantern Beach.

He was now on his way to Raleigh, the closest hospital with a trauma center.

Raven watched as the medivac helicopter carried the man away. Sand stirred in the air, and her hair whipped around under the influence of the copter's blades.

As the aircraft disappeared on the horizon, she frowned.

Who was this guy? And what was he up to?

The chances anyone would actually get any information out of him were iffy. His injuries had been severe—fractured ribs, a broken femur, and a head injury. Possible internal bleeding.

But there was one other way they might get some information . . .

Before Raven could ask Cassidy the question, Jake beat her to it. "Can we take a look inside the rental where this guy was staying? And inside his car?"

They'd already given her their statements.

Cassidy pressed her lips together in thought before finally saying, “I’ll need to take a look first, just in case. Then I can give you an answer.”

That sounded fair to Raven.

She and Jake waited on the driveway while Cassidy and Officer Dillinger went inside. But as Raven stood there, her mind raced with possibilities. What if they found another bomb?

She prayed that wasn’t the case.

Jake crossed his arms, his gaze still scanning everything around them. “Not exactly how I thought this would go.”

She scanned the houses in the distance also but saw nothing suspect. “Me either. That guy was desperate not to talk to us.”

“Yes, he was—which indicates he’s guilty of something.”

“The question is, what?”

They stood in silence, letting the question hang between them.

Finally, Cassidy stepped from the house and gave them a nod. “You can take a look. Just don’t touch anything.”

“What about pictures?” Raven asked. “Can I take some?”

“That should be fine as long as you’re discreet, which I trust you will be.”

“We will.” Jake gave an affirmative nod. “Did you see anything of interest?”

“I did.” Cassidy’s expression remained stoic. “No bombs—thank goodness. But I’d like you to take a look at everything before I give you my thoughts.”

Raven’s pulse pounded harder.

Now she really couldn’t wait to get inside.

Maybe some answers waited there.

Jake stepped inside the house first, Raven behind him.

He scanned the interior, which looked much like most of the beach houses around here.

Yellow-tinted wood paneling covered the walls. Nautical decorations were scattered about. A well-worn navy-blue couch and matching chair were arranged around the TV.

Jake walked into the kitchen first. Cassidy had said they couldn’t touch anything, and he wanted to honor that. This room wasn’t where information would most likely be found, but he wanted to be thorough.

“Anything in the fridge of interest?” He glanced back at Cassidy, who’d come inside with them.

She shook her head. “Just milk, orange juice, and eggs.”

He gave her a nod before striding into the living room and surveying that area. There didn’t appear to be any personal possessions in here, only some Outer Banks advertising magazines, a TV remote, and a candle.

Jake continued down the hallway, Raven behind him, until he reached the primary bedroom.

If this guy was keeping anything in this cottage, Jake assumed it would be in this room.

He and Raven stepped inside.

Various items were spread on the blue comforter stretched across the bed—notebooks, papers, drawings.

Jake paced toward them and leaned forward for a better look.

“Thomas Logan is definitely connected,” Raven murmured as she peered at the items.

“Yes, he is.”

It appeared Thomas had been studying something. He’d printed bomb schematics. There were photos of historical ordnances. A notebook where the word Sigma was scribbled.

Jake pointed at the word and looked at Cassidy. “This mean anything to you?”

She shook her head. “Unfortunately, no. But I plan on looking into it.”

“Smart idea.”

“You should also know we found his phone,” Cassidy said. “We’re trying to unlock it now.”

Raven’s eyes brightened. “That could prove to be a fountain of information.”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” Cassidy said.

Raven pulled out her own phone and began to carefully take photos of the items so they could study them more later.

Jake frowned as he glanced at the man’s things one more time.

Just who was this guy, and what had he been up to?

CHAPTER 35

By the time everything wrapped up at Thomas's house, it was past lunchtime.

The last thing Raven wanted to do was to take the time to eat. But her stomach was grumbling.

She and Jake stopped by The Crazy Chefette and found a table. The place had a cheerful yellow exterior with pink shutters. The sign above the front featured a cartoonish image of a woman in a lab coat with a beaker in one hand and spatula in the other, and the lettering underneath read "Mad food created by a crazy lady."

The interior had an old-time diner feel, and sixties music played—"Turn! Turn! Turn!" by The Byrds right now.

But it was the smell that got to her the most. French fries, grilled meats, freshly baked bread.

Her stomach rumbled again.

Raven knew exactly what to order: a grilled cheese with peaches. Jake had been right—she was now addicted. When she eventually left this island, she was going to crave this sandwich.

Once the waitress had taken their orders, Raven turned to Jake, a moment of awkwardness shifting between them.

It wasn't because they were uncomfortable per se. But tension had been building between them, and they both knew it.

They wouldn't be able to avoid talking forever.

Jake finally cleared his throat. "Any leads as far as Sigma?"

She shook her head as she swirled her straw in her water. "No, nothing solid. None of my contacts have heard of them."

"Mine either."

"So where does this leave us?"

He let out a long breath. "We'll keep looking. We'll find some answers. I know we will."

She appreciated the confidence in his voice. She prayed he was correct—and she prayed those answers came quickly.

As he shifted, his necklace caught her eye. She'd seen it before but had never seen the pendant on it. He kept the jewelry tucked into his shirt.

But this time, the chain swung like a pendulum.

On the end was . . . a wedding ring.

A wedding ring?

Shock coursed through her.

She must have made a face because Jake quickly tucked the necklace back into his shirt.

But her thoughts still raced. Had he been married?

She wasn't sure why the thought surprised her so much. She almost felt off-balance.

Her heart pounded faster.

“What was that?” Raven’s voice was scratchier than she would like as she asked the question.

Jake swallowed hard before saying, “A wedding ring.”

“Your wedding ring?” she clarified. “Or your grandmothers? Is it an heirloom?”

“It was mine.”

“I didn’t realize . . .” Raven had no idea Jake had gotten married. She’d assumed he was the type to avoid any type of commitment.

In her mind, she’d thought that was why he’d left her.

But now, she knew it wasn’t. He simply hadn’t wanted to be committed to her.

An ache crushed her heart.

She hadn’t expected this, and now she didn’t even know what to say.

“My wife died,” Jake explained, his voice low and gravelly.

Raven's heart lurched into her throat. Another surprise, one that softened her hurt, morphing it into compassion. At least temporarily.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she murmured.

He only nodded slowly, an emotional storm raging in his gaze.

Thankfully, their food was delivered just then.

Good. Raven would need some time to process that information, and eating was just the distraction she needed.

After they finished eating, Jake headed back to Blackout.

The rest of his meal with Raven had felt awkward, to say the least.

He'd waited for her to ask questions about his marriage, but she didn't. Instead, she'd talked about anything but his wedding ring. The weather. Her favorite ice cream. Sports even.

He couldn't blame her. But he didn't want to push either, especially not while they were in public.

The conversations they needed to have should be private.

He wanted an update on what had happened yesterday, but today's events had delayed that.

He could have called or texted Ty or Colton also, but he'd rather have those conversations face-to-face.

He was bringing Raven with him.

She was obviously a target, though he still didn't know why. Until he did, and until he knew she was safe, he didn't want to let her out of his sight.

Of course, Raven had her own say in the matter. She could refuse. But thankfully, she hadn't yet.

They arrived at Blackout, and Jake paused after he climbed out of the SUV.

He stared in the distance at the site of the bomb explosion.

A temporary fence had been constructed, and Blackout operatives stood guard, rotating shifts every few hours.

The area around the explosion was charred.

A crater stood where the grass used to grow.

Some nearby trees had been blown away. Others were left burnt, standing like blackened skeletons.

His chest tightened at the memories.

He was thankful everything had turned out okay. But the outcome could have been so much different.

He continually praised God for the fact everyone had gotten through the situation unscathed.

“Are you okay?”

Raven's voice pulled Jake from his thoughts, and he glanced at her.

She stood beside him on the sidewalk, quietly waiting for him to process the scene.

He nodded slowly as he said, "Just reflecting on everything that's happened."

"It's been crazy, hasn't it?" She followed his gaze.

"That would be an understatement."

"Yes, it would be."

Jake appreciated how she didn't try to downplay it. Even though Raven had grown up around affluence, she'd always been down to earth. He'd always appreciated that quality about her.

When he'd first received the assignment to guard her, he'd been apprehensive. Resistant even. He hadn't wanted to guard the snooty college-aged daughter of a US ambassador.

He'd been totally wrong in his assumptions, however.

Nothing about Raven was snobbish.

She'd surprised him over and over again.

"Do you want to check it out?" Raven asked.

Jake snapped from his thoughts and nodded toward headquarters. "I want to get some updates first. Let's get inside."

The two of them headed to Ty's office.

When they arrived, his door was open, and he sat at his desk, talking on the phone with someone. As soon as he spotted them, he ended the call.

He sat up straight in his chair as he addressed them. "You guys doing okay? I know yesterday was rough. I heard today wasn't much better."

"We're fine." Jake paused in front of his desk, Raven beside him. "What's going on here?"

Ty's expression looked tight with exhaustion. "We're investigating. We've talked to everyone here under the guise of asking if they saw anything regarding the bomb. But we're also looking for any signs of deception."

"Do you have any idea who did this or what their motives might be?" Jake asked.

Ty ran a hand over his face before turning back to them. "At first we thought maybe they wanted to send a message. To let us know we weren't untouchable."

"But you don't think so anymore?" Raven asked.

"Maybe that was part of it." Ty paused and glanced at Raven as if trying to figure out if he could trust her or not. Finally, he said, "But the truth of the matter is that our communication systems were breached during the attack."

Jake's eyes widened at the revelation. "What?"

Ty nodded, his gaze somber. "It's true. We're unsure of the extent of what information was taken. But we believe our contacts were accessed as well as information on some classified missions we participated in."

Jake had the impression Ty didn't want to say anything more specific in front of Raven. He understood that. Some matters were classified.

Jake crossed his arms. "What is going on? Why would someone want that information?"

"That's what we need to figure out."

CHAPTER 36

Raven considered going with Jake back to the bomb site. But her specialty was historical artifacts, so she knew she wouldn't be much help. Instead, she stayed at the headquarters.

There was something she needed to do anyway, and this would be the perfect opportunity.

Ty had given her permission to use an extra office at Blackout. He showed her which hallway to use to get to the exit door in case she needed him for some reason.

As she sat at the empty desk with the white walls around her, she pulled out her phone, set it on top of the metal desk, and stared at it.

She knew what she needed to do—she just didn't want to.

She hadn't talked to her dad in nine months. Even at Christmas, he hadn't texted her to say happy holidays. But she hadn't texted him either, so she supposed it went both ways.

He'd called her the next day instead.

Since he'd gotten remarried to a woman with a large family, he'd changed. He'd told Raven he'd gotten caught up with his new family's Christmas celebration and had forgotten to call.

He'd been apologetic. But his action had spoken volumes.

Her dad wanted to put the tragedy of Raven's mom's death behind him—and that included putting Raven behind him. He'd started fresh and didn't want reminders of his pain. At least, that was her perception.

Raven had spent Christmas alone. Part of that was her own choosing. Friends had invited her over. She even had some distant relatives she could have called.

But she'd chosen to stay alone in her hurt.

Not to feel sorry for herself. But to try and heal.

Her throat tightened at the memories.

She stared at her cell phone. As the saying went, she needed to bite the bullet.

She drew a deep breath before dialing his number. It was just past ten in Syria, but her father didn't usually go to bed until eleven. At least, that was the way he had been.

As the phone started to ring, her doubt that he would answer grew.

But after the fourth ring, someone picked up.

She held her breath as she waited to hear the voice on the other end. "Raven?"

"Hi, Dad." Her voice almost sounded flat, which wasn't what she intended. Yet there was no way she could sound warm toward him either.

"What a surprise."

She crossed an arm over her chest, her body tense as she gripped the phone. “Am I catching you at a bad time?”

“I just got back from dinner. What’s going on? Or are you calling just to catch up?”

Her life would look a lot different if she and her father had a relationship where she just called to catch up.

“I actually have a question for you.” She told him about the situation—about the bombs made to look like historical relics. About the picture of the Syrian embassy.

He made affirming sounds here and there, letting her know he was listening.

But as soon as she mentioned the word Sigma, he went quiet.

He knew something, Raven realized. Her pulse quickened.

She waited for him to share.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” he finally said.

Frustration welled in her. “You know something, don’t you? Dad, I really need to know?—”

“All I know is that it sounds like you’re in a bad situation.” His words sounded quiet and rushed. “You need to be very careful.”

“Who are these guys? Are they coming after me specifically?”

“I can’t tell you that. But you need to stay out of this.”

“Dad . . . if you know something, you need to tell me.”

Someone called to him in the background. “I have to go. But, please, listen to me. Get as far away from this situation as you can. Please.”

Before they could talk anymore, the line went dead.

Raven stared at the phone a moment and frowned.

What wasn’t he telling her?

Was the reason he was being quiet a matter of national security? Or was there another motive?

Had her dad gotten caught up in something he shouldn’t have? Was Raven now a target because of it?

Colton walked with Jake to the bomb site. Jake had wanted a moment alone with his superior to talk through things, so he jumped on the opportunity.

Though Ty had shared some while Raven was there, Jake knew his colleagues would share more without her present.

“So, Ty says there are no leads,” Jake started.

Colton’s jaw twitched. “Not really.”

Jake kept his steps steady. “I assume you checked the security footage?”

“We did. We didn’t see anything. But, of course, the area where the bomb was left isn’t covered by the cameras.”

“Convenient . . . almost like somebody knew that.” The words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

His gaze darkened. “Exactly. I’m certain that area was covered by the security feed when we set it up.”

Jake’s thoughts continued to race. “How serious is this information that was stolen?”

“We’re still trying to get to the bottom of that.” Colton’s steely gaze remained hard.

They reached the site, and Jake stared at the spot where the bomb had ignited.

Flashbacks of yesterday hit him, and a quiver rippled through his muscles.

He couldn’t let his emotions get the best of him. Right now, he needed to concentrate on finding answers, not on reliving what could have been a disaster.

“I know you know this already,” Jake started. “But the person who’s doing this is talented, very skilled, and highly experienced with explosives.”

“If that’s true, we can narrow our suspects down to the men who came in with you.”

Jake frowned. “My thoughts exactly.”

“You know those guys probably better than most of us since you trained together,” Colton paused and turned toward him. “Do you think any of them are capable of doing this?”

Jake’s jaw tightened. The last thing he wanted to do was to throw one of his colleagues under the bus. But he also didn’t want to put everyone at Blackout in danger by keeping his mouth shut out of misplaced loyalty.

Computer genius Maverick had the skills to hack into any system.

Hudson “the Muscle” Roberts was aggressive enough to enact a daring plan.

Kyle was so slick no one would notice what he was doing.

But there was only one man Jake could see pulling this off on his own—someone who had all those skills.

He drew in a slow breath before saying, “I hate to say it, but Atlas has all the skills to do this. However, I don’t think it’s in his character.”

“Or he could be a great actor.” Colton gave him a sideways glance.

Jake wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. Colton was right. Some of the best operatives had also mastered the art of deceit.

“So what are you going to do?” Jake studied Colton’s face, curious what he would do with that information.

“I’m not going to accuse anyone yet,” Colton said. “I’m going to keep my eye on those guys, though. I’ll have some of my most trusted colleagues do the same. We can’t let something like this happen again. Next time, we might not be so lucky.”

Jake could only nod. Colton was right.

The more this escalated, the greater the chances were that someone Jake cared about would be hurt . . . or worse.

That they could die.

CHAPTER 37

When Raven finished her phone call, she headed to the lobby to wait for Jake.

However, she couldn't get the conversation with her father out of her head.

What did he know? Who were they up against right now?

Sigma . . . should that name be familiar to her?

Maybe. But she didn't know how or why.

All the questions only served to frustrate her.

As she stood near a massive fireplace in the main room, she heard people talking. She looked up in time to see a couple of Jake's teammates coming down the stairs. Atlas and Maverick if she remembered correctly.

They nodded hello before pausing near her.

She remembered how Jake said he wasn't sure if he could trust them. The tidbit put her on edge. She needed to play it cool right now and not let on to that fact.

"You okay after yesterday's fiasco?" Atlas asked. "That was a pretty rough situation."

"You can say that again. I'm still a little shaky but incredibly grateful to be alive."

She smiled slightly.

“That’s a good way to look at it.” Atlas cast her a compassionate look. “To be grateful for life is to recognize that even in struggle we can find gifts and blessings.”

“Ignore him.” Maverick rolled his eyes. “He should have been a poet or the leading man in Hollywood.”

Raven couldn’t help but smile.

Maverick quickly sobered as he turned back to her. “We’ve been trying to get to the bottom of what happened.”

Raven had to wonder just how much he knew. Did Maverick have any idea that information had been stolen? That someone here could be a traitor?

“The timing couldn’t be worse,” Maverick continued. “Did you see those waves today?”

“That’s because there’s a storm brewing offshore,” Atlas reminded him with the shake of his head. He turned back to Raven. “This guy loves surfing more than breathing.”

“Technically, I really love breathing also.” Maverick shrugged. “What can I say? My lungs like air.”

Despite herself, she found herself smiling. These guys were likable.

But were they trustworthy?

Before they could talk anymore, Jake stepped back inside.

Raven's heart gave an involuntary squeeze when she spotted him.

That reaction is not a good idea , she silently scolded herself. In fact, it's a bad, bad idea.

She tried to read his expression. "Everything good?"

He nodded. "All things considered." He glanced at his colleagues. "Any updates with you guys today?"

They both shook their heads.

"We've been busy," Atlas said. "But no answers yet."

"That's what I thought," Jake said.

Raven turned back to him. "So what's next?"

"We're free to leave." He nodded to Atlas and Maverick. "We'll be in touch."

With a wave, they started toward the door.

But Raven knew the last thing she wanted was to go back to her house and twiddle her thumbs. There had to be more they could do to find answers.

Just as they climbed inside Jake's Tahoe, her phone rang.

She glanced at the screen. "It's Cassidy. I'll put her on speaker."

A moment later, Cassidy's voice came through—although she sounded staticky, like they had a bad connection. "Raven, is Jake there with you?"

“He is.”

“Perfect. I want to talk to you both. I just got a lead. I’m headed out now to check things out, but I thought you might want to join me.”

“Name the place,” Jake said.

“It’s an old seafood-processing plant here on the island. Someone called and said they saw a car there that fit the description of the one the man drove who opened fire on you. I’m on my way now. If you get there first, don’t go inside until I arrive.”

“Understood,” Raven said.

They headed down the road.

Raven couldn’t wait to see what they found there.

Jake pulled to a stop in front of an old, rusty warehouse located waterside on the sound and surrounded by nothing but marsh grass. Several broken windows lined one side, jagged pieces of glass promising trouble.

At one time, this had probably been a thriving business.

No more.

It looked like no one had used this place in at least a decade.

Yet the smell of fish still permeated the air.

“We beat Cassidy here.” Raven scanned the area. “I don’t see her car—any cars, for that matter.”

He frowned. He'd fully expected her to be here.

"Should we call her?" Raven asked.

"Let's give her a few minutes," Jake said. "I'm sure she'll be here soon."

Raven sucked in a breath, grabbed his arm, and pointed. "Do you see that?"

He leaned closer.

Movement caught his eyes. A man headed toward the water.

He was going to get away—before Cassidy arrived. Jake couldn't let that happen.

"Wait here." Before Raven could argue, he grabbed his gun and took off after the man.

But as soon as he stepped out of the Tahoe, the man spotted him. He took off in a run.

In thirty seconds flat, the man made it through the marsh, jumped on a small fishing boat, and cranked the motor.

Jake fired a warning shot in the air.

The man glanced back as the boat began to glide through the water.

Jake was almost there—yet so far away at the same time.

Just as he reached the water, the boat cranked into a higher gear and began moving more swiftly.

Jake considered lunging into the water and trying to swim toward the man. But Jake knew it would be no use. The guy was too far away.

Instead, he stared after the man, trying to memorize his details. Tall with dark hair and a square face. He wore a trucker hat and jean jacket. Unfortunately, the hat blocked most of his features.

But Jake was nearly certain he'd never seen the man before. He headed back to the warehouse.

What had that guy been doing inside the building?

Even though Cassidy wasn't here yet, he decided to step inside.

They needed answers—and they needed them now.

CHAPTER 38

From the passenger seat of the Tahoe, Raven watched as the man pulled away on the boat. Watched as Jake fisted his hands in frustration. Watched as he turned.

And headed toward the fish warehouse.

She glanced around.

Why wasn't Cassidy here yet? Raven couldn't think of a reason she wouldn't be.

Her tension grew as the minutes ticked past.

Finally, Raven decided to call Cassidy. As soon as she dialed, she heard the static on the line. She had a feeling some parts of the island didn't get great cell service. Maybe this was one of them.

When the call connected, Raven jumped right in with her question. "Cassidy, it's Raven. Are you almost here?"

"Almost where?" The words sounded broken, and the connection kept cutting in and out.

Had Cassidy lost her mind? No . . . there was something else going on here.

"Raven?" Cassidy repeated. "What's going on?"

This was a setup, Raven realized. Cassidy hadn't made that call, had she?

Someone else had lured them here—and lured them here for a very specific reason.

“You need to get to—” Before Raven could finish, the line went dead.

Knowing she had no time to waste, she opened the door.

Jake had told her to stay in the Tahoe. But she couldn't let him get hurt. She needed to warn him!

She could call, but if someone was inside waiting for him, the sound of his phone would only alert someone that Jake was there. It could put him in danger.

She couldn't let that happen.

Ignoring the tremble raking through her arms, she started toward the warehouse.

Cautiously, she approached the door.

It was unlatched.

She nudged it, listened for any creaks.

Nothing.

Then she grabbed the handle and tugged it open just enough to slip inside.

The interior of the building smelled putrid—like rotting fish guts and decaying wood.

The scent nearly made her turn around.

But she needed to warn Jake.

However, it was so dark inside that she wondered how she'd find him.

From what she'd seen when the door had been open, most of this place was one, big open room. Various tables with sinks and buckets had been set up in rows. Hooks hung from the ceiling. Small windows covered with corrugated, teal-colored plastic bathed the space with an otherworldly glow.

In the back, there appeared to be offices and maybe some kind of storage area.

The whole building creaked, metal rubbing eerily on metal as the breeze blew against it. Each sound made her muscles tighten until they felt as if they might snap.

Raven didn't see Jake in the main warehouse. He must be in the back offices.

She drew in a hesitant breath before nodding with decision.

Then she started that way.

She had to warn him that he might be in danger.

As her steps quickened, she prayed she was doing the right thing.

Jake stepped into the back, gripping his gun.

What had that man been up to?

He'd searched the other part of the building but hadn't seen anything.

And where was Cassidy? He couldn't believe she wasn't here yet. Something must

have held her up.

He continued searching, desperate to find any clues.

As he shone his light on the floor, he squinted.

It appeared something had been dragged on the floor back this way.

A body?

Jake didn't like the thought of it. But given everything that had happened, it was a possibility.

He stepped more deeply into the darkness, back toward the offices.

He continued following the drag marks until he stopped in front of another door.

He stared at it a moment before pulling it open.

Darkness stared back.

Had the man been in here? Doing what?

Was this where they stored their bombs?

He didn't like that thought.

He stepped inside, his muscles taut with tension.

But when he shone his light around, he saw nothing. No windows. Just some old metal shelves and . . .

He stepped closer.

A temperature gauge.

This was an old walk-in freezer, wasn't it?

Why had the tracks led here?

His pulse quickened.

He turned to continue searching the place.

But a blinking red light above the doorway caught his eye.

Before he could examine it, Raven stepped toward him.

Their gazes caught.

She gasped. "Jake? Oh, you scared?—"

The blinking light turned solid above her.

His heart jerked into his throat. "No!"

He grabbed her and pulled her toward him just as an explosion sounded and debris began to fall.

CHAPTER 39

Raven sucked in a breath, unsure what had just happened.

One minute, she'd been looking at Jake.

Then he'd grabbed her. Pulled her into a room. Slammed the door.

An explosion rocked the world around them. Shook the walls.

Smoke filled the air, along with a blast of heat.

The building shuddered as if with pain.

However, it didn't collapse.

They were safe, she realized.

But where were they?

As if reading her thoughts, a light popped on.

"You okay?" Jake held up his cell phone to see her.

She nodded. "Yes, thanks to you. I was trying to find you."

"Someone left tracks on the floor, hoping we'd follow them here."

His words only confirmed her theory. “Cassidy wasn’t the one who called and lured us out here. Someone used a deepfake to copy her voice.”

“What?” Outrage stretched through his voice. Then he ran a hand over his face and shook his head. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Someone wanted us to come out here so they could trap us.”

“Trap us? They weren’t trying to kill us?” That was what it seemed like to Raven, at least.

“I don’t think so. If these people wanted us dead, the bomb would have been larger and placed differently. This one was rigged to take out the support beam. It was just a large enough explosive to trap us in here.”

Raven’s eyes widened as she realized the truth of his words.

They were now trapped.

But for how long?

She glanced at Jake again. “You think that explosion was loud enough that someone will come?”

Jake pulled himself to his feet. Raven knew by his expression that it wasn’t good news.

“It’s hard to say,” he murmured. “This place is remote.”

She glanced around at the metal walls and old shelving. “Where are we?”

“An old walk-in freezer,” he muttered.

“What?”

He walked to the door and tugged it.

But it was either locked solid, or the debris outside blocked them in. Either way, he couldn't get it open.

“We need to find a way out of here.” Raven rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled despite the moderate temperatures. “I don't like this.”

“Hopefully someone will look for us soon,” he murmured. “Because, otherwise, we're stuck in here.”

Jake wished Raven had never followed him. That she'd never tried to help.

Even worse, he must have dropped his gun when he'd grabbed Raven. Now he didn't even have that.

His jaw tightened at the thought.

It was one thing if he was in this situation.

But it was a whole different story if she was in danger with him.

They'd both already felt all around the room, searching for a way out.

For a latch or some failsafe way to escape.

There were none.

They'd tried their cells.

The thick metal walls blocked any signal.

They were going to be stuck inside here a while.

Thankfully, the weather was temperate today, otherwise this place would be a sauna.

“How did you figure out it wasn’t Cassidy who called?” Jake turned to Raven as she paused in the center of the space.

“I called her, and she sounded clueless. She had no idea what I was talking about. Then the line went dead. That’s when I realized what had happened. I’ve heard about people using these deepfakes to pretend to be other people on the phone. I just never thought I’d come face-to-face—or ear to ear—with the scheme.”

He let out a disbelieving chuckle. “I wasn’t expecting that. Technology can be our best friend or our worst enemy.”

“You can say that again.” Raven turned toward him, concern on her face. “Will we run out of air in here?”

Jake had hoped she wouldn’t think about that. But he couldn’t lie to her either.

He needed to frame this in the best way possible.

He stared her in the eye as he said, “Someone will find us in time.”

Raven’s lips pulled into a tight line. “In other words, yes—the air supply in here is limited.”

Jake gave her a stiff, almost apologetic nod. “Yes, unfortunately, it is. I’m sorry, Raven. But we’ll get out of here. We have to.”

CHAPTER 40

Raven tried the door again, knowing her efforts were futile.

But she felt better knowing she was doing something . Standing around and waiting for someone to find them would only make her anxiety worse.

When it didn't budge again, she let out an exasperated grunt and pounded her fist against the metal in frustration.

"Hey." Jake gently gripped her arm. "Maybe you should sit down a minute and take it easy."

That was the last thing she wanted. She needed to do something . "Too much is on the line for me to take it easy."

"I understand where you're coming from. But pacing won't help."

If Jake was saying those words, then he probably had a point.

Raven knew if he could think of a way to get them out of here, then they'd be out.

Maybe sitting back and reevaluating was a decent idea after all. The breather might be good for both of them.

She walked toward the wall, leaned against it, and slid down.

Jake lowered himself beside her.

A moment of silence passed as they both seemed to try to comprehend what had happened.

Then the flashbacks started to hit her.

Flashbacks of when her father's enemy had grabbed her. Locked her in a dark cellar for two days.

Jake had been hired to find her. To rescue her. Then to guard her.

Ever since then, dark places had terrified her.

Being locked in dark places terrified her even more.

Panic began to capture her muscles until an earthquake rumbled in her chest.

"Hey." Jake's voice sounded soothing, as if he were reading her thoughts, her fears. "It's going to be okay."

But it was too late.

Her mind had traveled back in time.

She remembered the hopelessness she'd felt. She'd been certain no one would ever find her. She'd known she was going to die down there without ever fulfilling any of her dreams.

Her life had changed when her mother was murdered.

Then it had changed again after her abduction.

But Jake had changed all of that.

He'd made her feel hope again.

Until all of that crashed down also.

She'd been left with so many questions as she tried to pick up the pieces. She'd done therapy and eventually poured herself into her schooling then her career.

She'd done everything she could to forget her pain.

"This isn't going to be a replay of what happened last time," Jake murmured. "I promise."

The next instant, his arm was around her, and he pulled her close.

Raven nestled into him, suddenly forgetting their past. At least, forgetting the bad things in their past.

"I've got you," Jake whispered.

His words thawed something inside her that had been frozen for a long, long time.

She'd craved feeling Jake's arms around her again. But she'd never thought it was a possibility.

Right now, she didn't care about their past. She only cared that he was here now.

Had they been given a second chance? Or maybe even the opportunity for closure?

She wasn't sure.

All she knew right now were her feelings, her desires.

Her need for connection.

Her heart pounding in her ears, Raven glanced up at Jake.

Her throat went dry at the sight of him here in the shadows of the confined space.

He was the only man she'd ever loved.

He'd hurt her, but suddenly that didn't matter anymore.

Without thinking, she reached up and pressed her lips to his.

Jake's heart pounded in his ears as Raven's lips pressed against his.

Instantly, he relaxed as their bodies pressed closer. As her familiar scent filled him.

As his heart stammered out of control.

He wanted nothing more than to dive into the moment and embrace it.

But a voice nagged in the back of his mind—one he couldn't ignore.

As much as he wanted to kiss her back . . . he couldn't.

Not right now. Not like this.

This situation had rendered Raven too vulnerable. She wasn't thinking clearly.

He wanted nothing more than this . . . but he didn't want Raven to have any regret.

He forced himself to pull away. "Raven . . ."

Raven stared back at him, her eyes wide with confusion. "What? I . . ."

Instantly, rejection washed over her features, and she withdrew. Even in the dark, he could see the embarrassment on her face.

Had he just made a colossal mistake by pulling away?

His heart told him no.

"I'd love nothing more than to kiss you." His voice came out hoarse with emotion. "But can we please talk first? We just need to have a conversation."

Raven looked away, pressing her eyes closed as regret captured her features. "I'm not sure what else there could be to say. You broke my heart."

"It's more complicated than that. I just want the chance to explain. Please."

She rubbed her neck. "I guess if we're going to die in here, then I might as well die knowing what happened."

"First of all, we're not going to die in here. Secondly, it would mean everything to me if you'd just listen."

She pressed her lips together, her expression strained even in the dim light. Finally, she nodded. "That sounds fair."

Jake swallowed hard before beginning. "The truth is that when I left you in New

York to go back to my job, I had every intention of calling you. Of seeing you whenever I could. Of the two of us planning a future together.”

Raven’s gaze remained skeptical. “Go on.”

“When I was at the airport waiting to catch my flight, I ran into an old friend. Danielle.”

Surprise captured Raven’s expression, but she said nothing. She only waited.

“Danielle and I had dated in high school, and I hadn’t seen her in years,” Jake said. “I never thought I’d see her again. She was a wonderful person, but I couldn’t see us spending our future together.”

“Why not?”

“We were too different. We wanted different things. I guess it’s true what they say—when you know, you know. And I knew my future wasn’t with her.” When he and Raven had been together, he’d known also—known that he wanted to be with her forever.

Those plans had been interrupted. Detoured. Ruined.

“So what happened?” Raven stared at him, caution in her gaze.

“We talked a while longer.” Jake looked at the ground as memories filled him. “She told me she only had six months left to live.”

“What?” Surprise lit her voice.

“I know it sounds crazy and dramatic. But it’s true. She’d been diagnosed with a very

aggressive kind of brain cancer. The only reason she'd come to New York was because she had a bucket list, and she was crossing things off. She had a friend with her who confirmed everything she said. She wasn't the type to do things for attention."

He paused and drew in a breath.

This was a lot. And he never talked about what had happened.

Never.

Raven stared at him now, and he couldn't read her expression.

"Should I keep going?" he asked.

Raven finally nodded. "Yes, I want to know all of it."

CHAPTER 41

Raven was cautious as she listened to the rest of Jake's story.

He was right; the explanation did sound crazy and dramatic.

If she didn't know Jake better, she might think he was lying.

But he'd never shown himself to be a liar.

"Danielle asked if she could call me later, and I said yes. I wasn't going to tell a dying woman she couldn't. When I got back to Norfolk, she called. She had the craziest request." Jake's voice remained edged with an unreadable emotion. Regret? Tension? Grief?

She wasn't sure.

Raven's heart pounded in her ears as she waited with anticipation of where he was going with this.

"She said I was the only man she'd ever loved and all she'd wanted to do was to get married. She wanted to know what that was like and she didn't want to die single." Jake paused. "Then she asked me if I'd marry her."

Raven's eyes grew wider. "Really?"

"Really. I know how it sounds. I was going to tell her no. In fact, I didn't answer her

right away. I told her I needed to think. Then I ended the call. You were all I could think about. I didn't want to be with Danielle. I wanted to be with you .”

She shifted on the floor. “So what happened?”

“Her best friend called me not long afterward and talked to me about what Danielle had said. She mentioned that Danielle always talked about me, always said how I was the one who got away. Talked about how she regretted our breakup and how different her life would be now if we'd stayed together.”

Her eyes widened. “So you did it? You married her?”

“I did. I couldn't seem to say no. We actually got married the following week at her parents' house.” He swallowed hard. “She died four months later.”

Raven shook her head, trying to comprehend what he'd just told her. “I don't even know what to say.”

“I know it's a lot, and I know it seems unbelievable.” He pulled his necklace from beneath his shirt and looked at the attached ring. “I regret hurting you. I knew I was blowing my chances with the most wonderful woman I'd ever met. But I didn't want Danielle to die alone.”

“It sounds like she had friends and family, that she wouldn't have died alone.”

“I . . . I owed her father one,” he said after a moment of hesitation. “When my dad kicked me out of the house at sixteen, Danielle's dad took me in. He helped me find my way in the world. I wouldn't be where I am if it hadn't been for him.”

Raven didn't say anything. But she remembered Jake talking about the man. Jake had felt a real sense of gratitude toward him.

“I promised if I could ever repay him, I would. So I did.” His voice cracked.

She continued to review what he said, reality trying to sink in. Of all the stories she’d conjured in her mind, this wasn’t one of them.

“After she died, why didn’t you come find me?”

“I didn’t think you’d ever forgive me.”

Would she have forgiven him back then? Raven wasn’t sure.

But more importantly, Raven knew she should forgive him now. That it was her duty, an act that would be beneficial to not just him but for herself as well.

Unfortunately, what she should do and what she did weren’t always the same.

Jake stared at Raven, waiting for however she would respond.

Finally, she cleared her throat. “Jake . . . I know you well enough to know you always want to do the noble thing. While I can’t say I approve of what you did, I guess I do understand it.”

Relief wanted to wash through him, but he didn’t let it. Not yet.

She had more to say.

“I just . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I was so hurt when you ghosted me. It made me doubt every man I met afterward. I mean, if you’d let me down like that and you seemed like such a good guy, then all these other guys I met . . . who was to say they wouldn’t do the same?”

A pang ached in his heart, and he grabbed her hand. “I’m so sorry, Raven. Maybe it was cowardly of me not to call you. Honestly, I’d never expected to be in that position. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I guess you didn’t.” Raven’s eyebrows flickered up as if she was still trying to comprehend everything. Her mouth opened then closed as she contemplated her response.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he murmured.

“No, I want to.” She licked her lips. “I want to be mad. But the truth? I talk about having faith, but faith is only words until it’s put into action.”

“What are you getting at?” He really had no idea.

“It says in the Bible that all things work for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose,” she continued, her voice low with thought. “And I suppose if I truly do trust God, I have to believe that even moments like these will ultimately work for my good.”

A burst of joy spread in Jake—but then he drew it back, trying not to read too much into her words.

They still had more to talk about before they made any big decisions.

“Can I ask you a question?” Jake ventured.

“Okay.” Raven blinked up at him.

“Who is Kingston?”

“Kingston?” She paused then chuckled. “He’s someone I met on a dating app. I’ve been out with him a few times at my friend’s insistence.”

“Is he someone you care about?”

She shook her head. “No. Not really. I mean, out of all the possible dates I met online, he seemed like the best option. But I still didn’t feel that connection with him I was looking for. The connection I felt with you.”

Jake tried to hold back his hope. “So when he’s been texting you . . .”

“It’s simply because he’s persistent, not because I’m also interested.”

“You don’t know how happy that makes me.”

Their gazes met.

More than anything, he wanted to kiss her. To make up for lost time. To see if he still had a chance.

He started to lean toward Raven again. All he could hear was his heart pounding in his ears. His skin even felt electrified.

Especially when he saw the look in Raven’s eyes.

She wanted this just as much as he did.

He reached for her. Pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Licked his lips.

Just as he closed his eyes, movement sounded outside the door.

Someone was here, he realized.

He straightened, his senses going on alert.

But was it someone here to help? Or to harm them?

CHAPTER 42

Raven held her breath as she watched, as she waited.

“Stay back,” Jake said as he strode toward the doorway.

Who was here? Raven wondered. Had Cassidy arrived to help? Or had the person who’d trapped them here come back to finish what he’d started?

As the door rattled, Jake visibly bristled.

Raven swallowed hard, mentally trying to prepare herself for whatever might happen.

As the door opened, Jake looked as if he might charge the person on the other side.

Before he could, something zapped in the air.

Raven gasped as Jake went stiff.

Then his entire body seemed to vibrate.

He was being tasered, she realized.

By the masked man on the other side of the door.

She started toward him, wanting to help.

But before she could do anything, Jake collapsed on the floor.

She froze, her heart pounding out of control as panic tried to capture her.

His eyes went to her, sending her some type of silent message.

Run!

With her adrenaline pumping, Raven turned toward the masked man at the door.

His eyes were fixated on her as he rumbled, “You’re coming with me.”

“No!” Raven stepped back.

But before she could escape, the man grabbed her and jerked her from the walk-in freezer.

“Ouch!” She tried to snatch her arm away. “You don’t have to squeeze so hard. Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

She continued to struggle against him, but it was no use. He was bigger and stronger.

Raven glanced at Jake again, desperately wishing she could help him.

He still lay on the floor, muscles twitching. But his eyes followed them.

Distress stained his gaze.

This was killing him.

Maybe that was the point. Maybe the person behind this wanted Jake to suffer.

But why? Was this someone's personal vendetta?

As they reached the door leading from the building, the man lifted her and sprinted toward the outside.

Raven could hardly breathe.

What was happening right now?

Just as they stepped outside, an explosion sounded.

And the entire warehouse went up in flames.

With Jake inside.

"No!" she yelled.

But all she could feel was the incredible ache inside her chest.

CHAPTER 43

Raven jerked her eyes open as she swayed back and forth.

Swayed back and forth? Her head swam as she fought to make her gaze come into focus.

Her mouth felt dry and her tongue thick.

What she wouldn't do for some water.

But water was the least of her problems at the moment.

Everything—including her thoughts—were blurred.

Then all at once, memories hit her. With jarring accuracy, she remembered being trapped in that walk-in freezer. The man opening the door. Tasting Jake. Then grabbing her.

Then . . .

She didn't want to finish the thought.

The warehouse had exploded with Jake inside.

A cry caught in her throat, and tears pressed at her eyes.

No, that couldn't have happened.

But she'd seen it with her own eyes. There was no way Jake had been able to survive that.

Shortly after, she'd been injected with something.

Then everything had gone black.

Now she was here.

She blinked a few more times until her surroundings came into focus.

But seeing where she was didn't help clear up her confusion.

She appeared to be tied to a post of some sort in a dark room.

She tugged at her arms, knowing they were tied behind her. She tried anyway.

She guessed zip ties bound her wrists.

She didn't see any way she would get out of these, despite the ache in her arms at the uncomfortable position.

Had these people taken her to another cabin? Or cottage?

She didn't think so. Something felt different.

Then she remembered the swaying motion.

Was the feeling because of the drugs she'd been given? Were they still wearing off?

They probably were still wearing off. But she didn't think that was what caused her confusion.

This room really was jostling back and forth.

Raven sucked in a breath. She was on a boat, she realized.

She closed her eyes a minute, listening for any sounds to give her more clues.

That was when footsteps sounded above her. Lots of footsteps.

If she wasn't mistaken, these weren't the footsteps of a crew hurrying back and forth. No, the motions felt more leisurely.

She forced her eyes back open and gazed around the room again.

Gleaming stainless-steel pipes ran alongside meticulously labeled control panels, while enormous marine diesel engines dominated the space. The room was surprisingly clean, with polished floors and dim lighting that illuminated an array of generators, water makers, air conditioning systems, and stabilizers.

She was in the engine room of some type of large boat—most likely used for entertaining—and she'd been tied up below deck.

She craned her neck to see what might be behind her.

That was when her eyes widened.

Because what was behind her was unmistakably . . . a bomb.

Jake felt the blast.

Felt the heat.

Heard the explosion.

He felt his body jostling—flying through the air as a ball of fire surrounded him.

He was certain this would be the last thing that ever happened to him.

Then he'd hit the ground.

At least, that was what he thought.

He moaned as pain captured his body.

He blinked as he tried to comprehend what had happened.

The all too familiar smell of smoke and something burning surrounded him.

He moaned again as he tried to move.

That was when he realized where he was.

In the walk-in freezer.

Except it had been blown . . . somewhere.

However, the thick walls had kept him safe from the blast.

But he had to get out of here.

He tried to move his arm. It took several seconds until he was actually able to.

Then he heard a new sound.

Were those . . . sirens?

Someone must have heard the blast and called 911.

He had to get out of here.

He glanced around and saw that the door to the freezer had fallen open.

Slowly, he began to crawl toward the exit.

This would have to work until he regained all his movement.

By the time he reached the door, he nearly collapsed onto the grass outside.

He was alive.

He was free.

But where was Raven?

He glanced around. Just as he thought, she was gone.

But where?

Using all his strength he pulled himself to his feet.

Just as he staggered forward, two police cars and a fire truck pulled onto the scene, followed by two other vehicles.

A few seconds later, Ty, Colton, and Cassidy met him.

Cassidy reached him first, urgency stretching through her gaze. “Are you okay?”

Jake nodded, still dazed but okay. “I’m fine, but Raven is gone. I don’t know how much time has passed exactly, but she could be anywhere by now.”

“What just happened?” Ty asked.

Jake told them the story.

“You should be seen by a paramedic,” Cassidy said.

“Don’t worry about me,” he insisted. “We’ve got to find Raven.”

“Do you think she’s still on the island?” Ty asked.

Jake offered a stiff shrug. “It’s anyone’s guess at this point.”

Cassidy glanced back at her officers as they searched the rubble. “Maybe we’ll find a clue.”

“I doubt there will be any.” Jake scowled. “Someone lured us out here in order to do this. They had it planned from the beginning.”

Ty shifted. “It sounds personal.”

“I have a feeling it is personal.” Jake paused, trying to maintain control of his emotions. “We’ve got to find her.”

“We’re going to do everything we can to do just that,” Colton assured him. “We just

need to figure out where to start.”

CHAPTER 44

Raven jerked her arms again, trying to get them free. There was no use. She wasn't going to get out of this on her own.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed. In one way it felt like hours, and in another way like mere seconds.

But she'd heard more footsteps overhead. She was nearly certain music was being played also.

Could she be on a yacht? Were the wealthy being entertained overhead while she was being held captive down here?

That was her best guess.

The question was: How long did these people plan on leaving her down here? When she did see them again, exactly what did they plan on doing with her? What exactly was their end game?

Fear raked through her. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Her mind raced through everything as she waited.

Something had been bugging her, something she hadn't been able to put her finger on.

But she still wasn't sure what that was.

It had something to do with those Ss.

And the word Sigma.

And the fact that her dad had seemed to recognize something about it.

She closed her eyes. As she did, a moment from the time she'd been held in captivity years ago flashed back into her mind.

She remembered one of her father's enemies coming into the dungeon where she was being kept. It had been dark, and she hadn't been able to make out his features as he'd paced in front of her. Yet even in the darkness, she knew he was different from the rest of the men she'd encountered. He was more poised.

And she'd felt a fear down to her bones as he'd told her what he was going to do to her when he returned later that evening.

It had been worse than she'd imagined.

As he'd knelt in front of her, taunting her, she dared to open her eyes. She stared directly into his chest. A pin on his lapel caught her eye.

Ss.

That was where she'd seen that symbol before.

But Jake had arrived a few hours later and rescued her.

That man had never been found, nor had she ever been told exactly who he was. A

million times she wished she'd thought to look more closely at his face. But she hadn't.

So someone who hated her father was in on this. They'd targeted Raven as a means of targeting him.

Could it be the same man? He was the mastermind behind this, wasn't he?

But why go through all this trouble? Why not just shoot her? Or do something more certain than these games they'd been playing.

Unless maybe their purpose was twofold.

Maybe these people had another goal, but if in the process they could also harm Raven, then that would be a win-win.

But who else could be behind this?

It had to be someone who knew her—at least a little. There were too many details that seemed familiar.

Just then, more footsteps sounded. But these didn't come from above. These sounded as if they came from down the hallway.

Then the door to the engine room opened.

Raven gaped at the person who stepped inside.

"I want to talk to the guys who came in with me." Jake took a step toward his SUV. "I think one of them is in on this."

Ty grabbed his arm, stopping him in his tracks. “We talked about this. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Outrage rushed through him. “You could have a mole within Blackout. That person could know where Raven is. That fact changes everything.”

“We know how hard this is,” Colton told him. “But we have to be patient if we want to smoke this person out.”

“Waiting isn’t going to help me find Raven.” Jake couldn’t keep the irritation from his voice.

“I get that,” Ty said. “I really do. And if we need to interrogate everyone here, we will.”

“We don’t have any time to waste.” Jake raked a hand through his hair, feeling the ash there. He probably looked like death warmed over. But that was the least of his concerns right now.

He only cared about Raven.

“She’s getting farther and farther away with every second that passes.”

Ty’s hand came down on his shoulder. “I know. Take a deep breath. You just survived an explosion meant to kill you.”

Jake did the opposite and blew out all the air in his lungs.

He usually wasn’t one to overreact. He was known for keeping a cool head.

But not right now.

Right now, apprehension rumbled inside him with no end in sight.

Cassidy took a phone call and stepped away.

Something about the conversation caught his attention.

Did this have something to do with Raven?

A moment later, she shoved her phone back into her pocket and turned to them, a new excitement in her gaze. “That was Jimmy James down at the marina.”

Jimmy James was the dockmaster. The man was rough around the edges but an overall good guy.

“I asked him to tell me if he ever sees anything suspicious,” Cassidy continued. “He told me a yacht docked at the harbor for a few hours. Some important political figure was onboard.”

“Was this person announcing who he was or something?” Ty asked.

“No, Jimmy James overheard two of the team members talking about him. It’s Senator Rollins.”

“Senator Rollins?” Colton’s eyes widened. “He’s the chairman of the armed services committee.”

“Yes—and a good person to target,” Ty added.

“Yes, and two guys just pulled up in a car and went aboard with an extra-large piece of luggage before taking off suddenly.”

“Wait . . . you think Raven was in that luggage?” Jake asked.

Cassidy nodded. “I do.”

“Then we need to get to that boat.”

CHAPTER 45

“ Kingston?” Raven stared at him. “You’re the one who’s been behind this?”

The man looked just as handsome as ever with his thick, dark hair and fit build.

But his eyes looked different from when she’d last seen him.

Gone was the spark of interest. In its place was a darkness.

He moved toward her. “Raven. Beautiful Raven. I’m sorry things had to go this way.”

“I don’t understand.” Raven shook her head as she tried to put the facts together.

“You just got to know me because of this?”

Kingston paced forward and paused in front of her. That was when she noticed he was wearing a tux. Why in the world was he wearing a tux?

He continued to stare at her, a cocky expression on his face. “I had to think of some way to keep tabs on you. That dating site seemed to be the easiest. You weren’t as charmed by me as I’d hoped, however.”

If he was behind this, then he had some of the answers she needed. “Who is Sigma, and what do you guys want?”

His gaze burned into her. “The question is: Who are you working for, Raven Newton?”

Her forehead creased. “Who am I . . . ? You know who I work for. ICHPA.”

“We know that’s just a cover. You’re not working for the government. You’re working with the enemy.”

Her head continued to spin. He wasn’t making any sense. “What enemy would that be that I’m working for?”

He scowled, some of his humor disappearing. “You know good and well who you’re working for. People who are trying to destroy this country.”

Raven’s eyebrows shot up. “You think I’m working for terrorists?”

His gaze darkened. “Stop playing games. It’s unbecoming.”

“Wait . . . if you think I’m working for people who want to destroy America, then who are you working for?”

“I’m a government operative.” He narrowed his eyes as if annoyed. “But I think you already know that.”

Raven’s thoughts continued to race. “You’re saying the US government has been trying to kill me?”

He shrugged, still acting annoyed. “If you’re going to die anyway, I guess I can tell you this much. Sigma is a black ops group hired to take down enemies of the state.”

Her mind raced. “But I’m not an enemy of the state. Where are you even getting that information?”

He did a half eye roll. “Stop playing dumb. You’re way too smart for that.”

“I’m not playing dumb, Kingston.” She tugged harder against her binds.

Of all the things she’d expected him to say, that wasn’t it. Why would he think she was a terrorist?

The pieces continued to click together in her mind.

She continued to stare at him.

He believed his words, she realized. He really thought she was an enemy and he was the noble one.

She would need to proceed very carefully.

She cleared her throat before asking, “So you think I’m secretly trying to destroy the United States?”

“That’s right,” he said. “You and your father.”

“Because of that, you lured me here to Lantern Beach by planting that fake bomb, and you did all this just so you could eventually abduct and kill me? Why didn’t you just kill me while I was up in DC? Why all the theatrics?”

“We needed to make sure to send the right message.”

“And what’s that?”

“That evil people won’t get away with their evil deeds.”

There was clearly a misunderstanding here. “But I’m not evil.”

He cast her a look.

She wasn't going to change his mind, was she?

"And what do you plan on doing with me now?" Her throat ached as she asked the question. "You said kill me but . . . I'm tied up."

"The bomb behind you is set to detonate in thirty minutes. That will give me enough time to get off this boat and get out of here, all while sending a powerful message."

Her breath caught at the implications of his words. "Who else is on board?"

A smile curled his lip. "That's not important."

Yet Raven knew it was. This boat had been chosen for a reason. Were more supposed enemies of the state on board? It seemed like a possibility.

Then another thought startled her.

Kingston wasn't the man who'd gotten her from the walk-in freezer.

That had been someone else.

She had a feeling there was a whole network of people just like Kingston . . . people who thought they were working for the government.

But in truth, they were working for the enemy.

The Coast Guard and marine police had been called.

But there was no way Jake would stay on Lantern Beach and not do everything

within his power to help Raven. He could recover from any of his injuries later. His aches and pains would still be there.

Colton had already secured a Zodiac boat.

Now he, Ty, and Colton were on board and heading across the water.

The Coast Guard was twenty minutes out.

Jake hoped they could make it to the yacht sooner.

He kept his gaze focused on the horizon as he searched for the boat Jimmy James had told them about.

The three of them had already talked about their plan and what they'd do if they arrived at the boat before the Coast Guard. Jake personally thought his team would have more of an advantage in that situation. There was less of a chance someone would see them approaching in the Zodiac. When the Coast Guard arrived, it would be obvious, and that could make somebody panic.

"There it is!" Jake saw the boat in the distance.

"Perfect." Ty angled the boat toward the large vessel.

As they got closer, he saw a smaller boat beside the bigger one.

"What's that about?" he muttered.

"I'm not sure," Colton said, holding his binoculars. "But there are only two people aboard—two men."

“You recognize them?” Jake asked.

“No.”

“Can I see?”

Colton handed him the binoculars.

“One of them is the man from the ferry,” Jake said. “I don’t recognize the other one. But I don’t see Raven.”

“I don’t think she’s on that boat,” Colton said. “Unless she’s lying down, and I doubt there’s room on that boat for that.”

“So there’s a good chance she’s still on board the yacht?” Jake’s heart thumped in his ears as he waited for his answer.

“I’d say so,” Ty said. “Let’s find out. We’ll let the Coast Guard catch those guys.” Ty picked up his radio to give the authorities the update.

CHAPTER 46

Raven twisted around the pole to see the bomb better.

The device was a compact arrangement of wires connecting a digital timer display to several cylindrical packages wrapped in what looked like modeling clay. A small antenna suggested remote detonation capability as a backup.

The bomb's placement was strategic—close to the fuel lines that ran through the center of the vessel, where an explosion would cause catastrophic damage and likely sink the yacht within minutes.

The device wasn't created to look like an historical remnant.

No, this one just looked big and dangerous.

While she knew a lot about identifying bombs, she knew next to nothing about disarming them. Even if she did, there was no way she could do anything. Not being tied up as she was.

The timer on the bomb said she only had six minutes before detonation.

Six minutes . . .

Then all the innocent—she assumed they were innocent, at least—people on board would be killed.

She pressed her eyes closed, fervently lifting up prayers.

There was nothing else she could do at this point.

Her wrists were rubbed raw. She'd tried to psych herself out and break a thumb in order to get her hands free.

But everything she'd tried hadn't worked and had only served to give her cuts and bruises on her already sore wrists.

She felt along the pole and froze.

There was a small ridge where the metal had been welded together. It wasn't large, but it might be sharp enough to break through the plastic zip ties holding her wrists in place.

She leaned forward, trying to angle her body up slightly so she could better reach the ridge.

Then she began to saw the plastic back and forth.

She prayed this worked—because it was her only hope.

Jake and his colleagues boarded the yacht.

Guests dressed in designer clothing and drinking fancy drinks milled about, enjoying cocktail hour while cheerful island music played.

When Jake, Ty, and Colton stood, not keeping their presence hidden, those around them gasped and drew back in fear.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Jake explained. “We’re looking for this woman.”

He showed them a picture of Raven he’d found online.

But everyone shook their head as if confused.

“Your captain isn’t responding to our messages,” Jake said. “Any idea why?”

“He’s right up there—” one of the men pointed to the bridge.

But it was empty.

“What’s going on?” Senator Rollins stepped forward.

“We believe a woman was abducted and brought to this boat,” Ty said. “We also believe you all could be in danger.”

The man’s eyes widened as he seemed to comprehend his words. “What can we do?”

“We need to search the boat,” Ty said. “There’s no time to waste.”

The man offered a definitive nod. “Go ahead. We can help.”

Jake rushed below deck, figuring that was the most likely place these people would keep Raven.

As soon as he reached the lowest deck, someone dashed from a doorway into the hallway.

Relief flushed through him as the figure came into focus. “Raven?”

Her eyes widened when she saw him. “Jake?”

They ran to each other and hugged.

But Raven quickly pulled away. “We don’t have much time. There’s a bomb. It’s going to go off in about four minutes. We need to get everyone off this boat.”

He stiffened. “There’s no time for that. Before everyone’s off, the bomb will detonate.”

“Then what do we do?” Raven’s words came out fast.

“Where is it?”

“This way!” She darted into the engine room.

Jake drew in a breath when he saw the device.

Three minutes and fifty-six seconds.

It wasn’t much time to disarm the device.

But he had no choice.

He turned to Raven. “The rest of the guys are upstairs. Go tell them what’s going on.”

Raven nodded quickly, breathlessly.

She paused as if she wanted to say more. Instead, she rushed away.

They had no time to waste.

Jake dashed toward the bomb and knelt on the floor beside it.

He had to defuse this device before innocent people died.

CHAPTER 47

Sweat poured down Jake's face as he stared at the wires.

The bomb wasn't super complicated. But he was all too aware that one wrong move could mean certain death for everyone on board.

He didn't want to be responsible for ending the lives of innocent people.

Besides, Raven had just come back into his life.

He couldn't let things end this way.

Jake knelt before the panel, sweat still pouring down his forehead despite the cool air around him. His fingers, once steady in the Afghan desert, trembled slightly as he pried open the access panel beneath the navigation console.

The bomb was crude but effective—C-4 with a digital timer counting down from 3:16. Memories flooded back: the smell of dust and fear, the weight of his EOD suit, the silent prayers before each wire cut.

But today, there was no suit.

He ignored the sounds above him. Focus was everything. He'd learned that in Fallujah when he disarmed an IED with seventeen seconds to spare.

The yacht rocked on the water. He wondered how many people were

aboard—twelve? Twenty? Each one depending on his skills.

His mind cataloged the bomb's components with mechanical precision. Primary charge, secondary trigger, failsafe mechanism.

Jake reached into his pocket for the multi-tool he still carried everywhere, a habit his therapist called “residual hypervigilance.” She'd never understood that it wasn't paranoia if the threats were real.

With 2:46 remaining, Jake identified the sequence. Red to yellow, then the blue junction.

His breath steadied as the world narrowed to just his hands and the bomb. This was when he felt most alive, most himself—in that space between heartbeats where there was only the puzzle and its solution.

The irony wasn't lost on him: that the thing that broke him in the desert might save him now.

With surgical precision, he separated the first wire.

A bead of sweat fell from his brow onto the timer's display, but the countdown continued.

One wire down, three to go. He'd done this before. He could do it again. He had to.

The second wire required a steadier hand. Jake inhaled deeply, holding his breath as he clipped the yellow connector.

The timer flickered momentarily . . . then it continued its relentless countdown—now at 1:53.

The blue wire junction was tricky—connected to what appeared to be a secondary trigger. If he cut it directly, the failsafe would activate.

Instead, he carefully stripped back the insulation and bridged the circuit with a paper clip from his pocket before severing the connection.

The timer continued: 0:58.

His hands moved with deliberate certainty, muscle memory taking over as he disabled the mercury switch with a gentle touch. The final wire—red—lay exposed.

In his experience, it was never the red wire in real life . . . except when it was.

Jake closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, said a silent prayer, and made the cut.

The timer froze at 0:22.

For three heartbeats, nothing happened.

Jake remained perfectly still, waiting for the click that would mean he'd failed.

Then the display went dark.

He exhaled then carefully disconnected the detonator from the explosive.

When he was done, he sat back on his heels, suddenly aware of how badly his knees ached against the hard deck and how thoroughly his shirt had soaked through with sweat.

Someone stepped into the room behind him.

“It’s clear,” he announced, his voice hoarse.

“Good job.” Ty. That was Ty’s voice.

Jake didn’t have to turn to confirm.

Instead, he was already mentally cataloging the bomb components, noting distinctive elements that might identify the maker.

Some habits never died. Neither, thanks to those habits, had anyone on this yacht.

Raven rushed downstairs, breathless as she did so.

Time had to almost be up.

How was Jake doing?

She trusted his skills completely. But she also knew how precarious this situation was.

As she stepped back into the engine room, she saw Jake rise, stretching his stiff body.

Her gaze jerked to the bomb.

The numbers were dark.

He’d done it!

As he turned and spotted her, his shoulders relaxed.

She rushed toward him and threw her arms around him.

He squeezed her back.

“I knew you could do it,” she whispered.

He didn’t say anything. He only held her more tightly.

Applause broke out behind them.

Because of the bomb, she assumed.

Not because of her and Jake.

But as she pulled away and looked behind her at Colton and Ty, she wasn’t 100 percent sure.

But the important thing right now was that they’d done it.

People were safe.

Now they just needed to catch Kingston and his cohorts.

CHAPTER 48

Jake and Raven headed back to Blackout.

It had been a long day, to say the least. The sun was now setting, a strange peacefulness to the pastel hues stretching across the sky.

But at least, it was over. The worst of it—hopefully.

The Coast Guard had boarded the yacht and taken over the scene.

The marine police, in the meantime, had picked up Kingston and his colleague. They'd been arrested, but they weren't talking yet.

Paramedics had insisted on checking out Jake after the explosion. He had some cuts and bruises, but he would be okay. They checked out Raven also, but she was fine.

The senator had thanked them for saving his life. Jake felt certain there was a connection between Sigma and Rollins, but that truth hadn't come out yet.

The FBI was talking to the man now.

For a moment, Jake and Raven were free to do their own thing, although Jake was sure there would be more questions.

As they stood outside on the oversized porch, enjoying the mild weather, Ty stepped out and strode toward them.

His gaze appeared purposeful as if he had an update. “I just got off the phone with one of my FBI contacts. They’ve taken over the investigation. Kingston and his colleague still aren’t talking.”

That was disappointing but not necessarily a surprise.

“They did say one thing,” Ty said. “Kingston said his superiors will get him out of this, and then we’d all understand.”

“He said something like that to me also.” Raven narrowed her gaze with the memories. “I think he and his colleagues truly believe they’re working black ops for the government and that we’re the bad guys.”

“Why would they think that?” Ty furrowed his brow.

“Someone who hired them wanted these guys to think that, to think they’re doing something noble. Some kind of CIA-like operations yet here on US soil.”

“We still have no idea who might have hired them?” Jake asked.

Ty shook his head. “Not that I’ve heard.”

Jake still had to wonder if one of his colleagues was involved. But he’d honor what he’d told Ty and Colton he’d do. He’d wait to smoke out anyone involved.

“Any updates on this Thomas Logan guy?” Raven asked. “The one who ran out in front of the car?”

“I checked earlier today, and he’s still in ICU. However, we did a deeper dive into his past. It turns out he has a background with the CIA.”

“What?” Jake squinted. “So whose side is this guy on?”

“That’s what’s still uncertain,” Ty said. “Even the government seems uncertain about the truth. My theory is that he came here to keep an eye on these bombs. Then things went south. We’ll see if he regains consciousness or not. It may be the only way we find out answers about him, however.”

“This is obviously a complex situation,” Jake said, thinking about all of the unanswered questions they still faced. “And what about the second bomb that was planted at Eleanor’s house? I’m still trying to figure out why that was there also.”

“I think these people wanted to send a message, to let us know that no one was safe,” Raven said. “And they wanted to keep us on our toes. That guy was lingering nearby so he could watch it all play out.”

Jake only grunted in response.

“My other question is: Why Raven?” Ty turned toward her. “It seems as if you were targeted. I’m assuming the leader of this organization told his new hires you were an enemy of the state.”

“I assume that also.” She swallowed hard. “But I’m afraid it might have something to do with my father. When I was abducted in Syria . . . one of the men who was the mastermind behind the operation came into the room where I was being kept. I had a flashback of that moment.”

“And?” Jake squeezed her shoulder, sensing the tension in her.

“This guy wore a pin with that insignia on it—the circle of Ss. I’d forgotten about it. I blocked the memory out, I suppose. But it came back to me earlier.”

“Did you ask your dad about it?” Ty asked.

“I did, but he went quiet. I don’t know what he knows, but he’s not talking.” Raven shrugged apologetically. “I will ask again, however. I want to find out the truth about this just as much—if not more—than anyone.”

Just as she said the words, a chopping sound came from above them.

Her hair began to swirl around her as she looked up.

A helicopter was about to land on the property.

“You expecting someone?” Jake shouted over the sound of the aircraft.

“Nope.” Ty continued to watch, his phone already in hand as he called this in.

If an enemy was landing, they needed to be prepared.

A moment later, two men in military uniforms stepped out, followed by another man wearing a suit.

Raven’s lips parted as she muttered, “Dad?”

Raven couldn’t believe her eyes.

Why was her father here? She hardly knew what to say or do.

Or how to react.

Escorted by the two military guards, her dad headed toward them.

Her father paused in front of them, nodded at Ty and Jake, then turned to Raven.

His eyes softened when he saw her. “My beautiful daughter.”

Against her will, her heart warmed. “Dad.”

After a moment of hesitation, she reached for him. He reached for her. They hugged, though the action felt awkward and stiffer than it should.

Still, the familiar feel of his arms embracing her swept her mind back in time to the happy days of her childhood—days before everything had changed. Days before her mom had been killed and her dad had grown distant.

After a few seconds, they pulled away.

Raven instantly missed the embrace—missed the ideal of what she thought in her mind should be the relationship between a father and daughter.

“Sorry to stop by unannounced.” Her dad’s expression turned more professional.

“How did you know I was here?” Raven’s thoughts turned from their relationship, and she tried to connect the dots.

“I can find out almost anything I need to know.”

Raven couldn’t argue with his words. Her father had all the connections he could ever need.

Her father glanced at her, his gaze now heavy. “Can we talk?”

“Jake and Ty have been with me this whole time,” Raven said. “I wouldn’t be alive

right now if it weren't for them. You can speak in front of them."

His expression remained tense, but he nodded. "That's what I thought. I was shaken up after you mentioned the insignia you found. I thought everyone associated with the group had been killed."

"Who is Sigma?" Raven asked. She could hardly breathe as she waited.

Maybe this was their chance to find out some answers.

Her father's expression softened. "They're a group of men whose sole purpose is to destroy the United States. They have ties to Syria. I found out about them and tried to put an end to them. That was when they went after your mother . . . then you."

Regret filled his features, and his eyes sagged with sadness.

"Their name was never mentioned before." Raven would have remembered. Every conversation her dad seemed to have back then had been political.

The sadness disappeared from his gaze as her dad popped back into professional mode. "Everything about them was top secret. My superiors didn't want word to get out about this group. Honestly, we thought special forces had successfully destroyed the organization."

"But now they're back . . ." Jake murmured.

His eyes darkened again. "It sounds as if they are. Can you tell me what you know?"

They updated him on what had happened.

His expression grew grimmer with every detail.

“I believe Sigma is hiring people under the guise of being a secret government organization, and they’re convincing these people they’re doing classified work,” Dad said. “The person leading this group is persuasive and makes these people believe they’re targeting enemies of the state. The leader most likely told his men that all of you were secretly working for terrorists. They had no idea you were actually on the right side of the law.”

“So these men could have good motives. They may not know exactly what they’re doing.” Ty sighed as if burdened by the thought.

“Exactly,” her dad said. “They could be doing work similar to what your men do. They believe they’ve been hired to stop deadly plots or bring down dangerous people. In truth, it’s all lies.”

“These guys seem especially dangerous then,” Jake said. “Especially if they believe they’re doing the right thing. What’s their end goal?”

“My opinion? To destroy everyone’s peace of mind. To destroy the economy. To strike fear into the hearts of everyday people.” Her father grimaced. “I believe they knew these bombs would draw Raven here. The fact you’re here, Jake, is probably like a bonus to them. They knew by targeting Raven that I’d feel a gut punch.”

“Because you’re also a target?”

“Because of the peace deal I was able to strike in the Middle East, they hate me. I represent everything they despise.”

Raven didn’t like the sound of that. The group could create the perfect storm, mixing alliances and blurring the line between right and wrong.

“It sounds like we have a lot to talk about,” she finally said.

“Yes, we do.”

“Maybe you should get some rest first,” Ty suggested. “Why don’t I take you to a room for the night? You can stay here.”

“That sounds great.” He turned to Raven. “We can talk more later.”

She didn’t hesitate before nodding. “I would like that.”

A smile began to curl his lip. “Then I look forward to it.”

A moment later, Ty escorted her father and his attaché into the lodge, leaving just her and Jake.

CHAPTER 49

Jake watched the men walk away, his thoughts still reeling.

It was nighttime now. Darkness had fallen, and crickets chirped in the distance.

The moment almost felt . . . peaceful.

Was peace really possible? And, if so, how long would the feeling last?

Raven turned to him, her gaze looking as torn as he felt. “That was unexpected.”

His shoulders softened as he realized the effect this must be having on her. “You okay?”

She didn’t have to think about her response. “I am. Surprised, but okay. My dad and I . . . we need some resolution.”

“I know he’s made some mistakes, but he really does love you. That was clear when he hired me to find you. I could see how devastated he was that you’d been taken.” Jake meant those words. The man had been beside himself and willing to move mountains to ensure his daughter was found.

Raven seemed to believe him as she nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “Relationships are just complicated, aren’t they?”

“They sure are.” Was she hinting that their relationship had also been complicated?

Because it had been. The road bringing them to this point had been broken.

However, if there was hope for Raven and her father, was there also hope for Jake and Raven?

He stared at her. Beautiful, smart Raven.

The woman he'd always loved.

The woman who might just love him also.

Had the emotion of the moment propelled them into each other's arms? Or was there more to it as Jake hoped?

He swallowed hard, trying to sort his thoughts. They had so many things to talk about right now—and their relationship wasn't at the top of this list.

Not when lives were on the line.

"I have a feeling this isn't the end of this," Jake finally said.

"I agree." Raven frowned and rubbed her neck. She lowered her voice as she asked, "Did you figure out if one of your teammates might be in on this?"

His jaw flexed at the thought. "Not yet. We're going to keep our eyes on them."

"Smart thinking."

A moment of silence passed.

This was the time, he realized. This was the moment when he and Raven needed to have a heart-to-heart talk.

He prayed the conversation went well.

Raven licked her lips, knowing she and Jake needed to talk.

She hated the awkwardness between them and knew they might as well get this conversation over with.

“Hey, listen. I—” she started.

“I really want you to know—” Jake began at the same time.

They both laughed.

Jake’s gaze softened. “You can go first.”

Raven drew in a deep breath as she gathered her thoughts. There was so much she wanted to say. To ask him about. To get off her chest.

Where did she even start?

Finally, she found the courage to say, “I’m sorry, Jake. Sorry for all these years I haven’t forgiven you.”

“I’m the one who needs to apologize. I’m sorry for hurting you, Raven. Everything got derailed. And while I don’t regret my time with Danielle, I always felt like I was cheating her. She never had my whole heart like you did.”

“She had to know what she was getting herself into when she made that request to you.”

“I think she did. But I also don’t think she regretted it. When you’re faced with death, sometimes you behave in ways you don’t think you will.”

“Is that what we did? Is that what we’re doing?” Raven licked her lips. “Have all of these life-threatening situations made us feel things we wouldn’t have otherwise?”

Jake stepped closer, emotion pooling in his gaze. “I don’t think so. We’ve had a lot of years to think this through.”

“Yes, we have.” A soft grin slowly stretched across her lips. “I don’t want to walk away from this without . . .”

“Without what?” Jake’s voice caught as if he couldn’t breathe.

“Without knowing if we can make things work between us.”

He let out a long breath. “You don’t know how happy that makes me.”

Raven’s heart thundered in her chest as Jake’s words hung in the air between them. Ten years of hard feelings dissolved like morning mist under the warmth of truth.

Her fingers trembled as she reached up to touch his face, tracing the new lines at the corners of his eyes, evidence of the years that had been stolen from them.

“All this time,” she whispered, her voice catching on the words.

Jake’s hand covered hers, pressing her palm against his cheek as if to convince himself she was real. When he leaned down, Raven met him halfway.

His lips met hers, achingly gentle at first. The kiss felt like a question asked and answered in the same breath.

Then something broke loose inside her—a dam of emotion held back for too long.

Raven’s arms wound around his neck as the kiss deepened, tasting of promises and

second chances. Jake pulled her closer, one hand splayed across the small of her back and the other cradling her head.

They parted only when breathing became necessary. Yet their foreheads still touched as if they were both unwilling to create even that small distance between them.

Raven felt the rapid rise and fall of Jake's chest against hers, his heartbeat matching her own frantic rhythm. The familiar scent of him—sandalwood and citrus—flooded her senses, bringing back a thousand memories she'd tried and failed to bury.

His eyes, that impossible shade of green she'd never found replicated in nature, searched hers with a vulnerability that made her throat tight.

“Ten years,” he murmured, his thumb brushing across her lower lip as if memorizing its shape. “I’m not wasting another minute.”

Nothing made her happier than hearing those words.

Maybe—just maybe—their crazy journey had always been for them to reconnect at this very moment. Maybe they'd grown into the people they were meant to be in their years apart.

And maybe this was the second chance they'd both been praying for.

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Coming next: Pressure Point.