



CHASING FORTUNE

A STEALTH OPS NOVEL

BRITTNEY SAHIN

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By: Brittney Sahin

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To our heroes that may also suffer from PTSD ...

Thank you for your service.

Please don't ever give up. We will be here for you as you have been for us.

ALSO BY BRITTNEY SAHIN

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Finding Justice - Bravo Two, Owen
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Stealth Ops Family Tree

Where Else To Find Me

CHAPTER ONE

CASSIS, FRANCE

DARKNESS HADN'T STOLEN DAYLIGHT YET, BUT TWILIGHT WAS SLOWLY CREEPING IN, DIFFUSING THE sky with a soft pinkish hue—the perfect time to make her move.

A thrill darted up Rory's spine, adrenaline fueling her addiction to this life.

Excitement unfurled inside her with each movement up, her headlamp guiding her way.

Rory grabbed a tri-cam from one of the gear loops on her harness and wedged it into the narrow slice of a pocket crack in the jagged cliff. She clipped her rope to the carabiner, which was attached to her harness, and continued to ascend the limestone, her body nearly flush with the rock wall. Trad climbing was more than a physical challenge. It was a mental game akin to chess, requiring the skill and patience to determine where to secure an array of removable protection in cracks and fissures without the aid of preplaced bolts. One wrong move, one miscalculation, and she'd plummet down the rock face. The turquoise sea wouldn't pillow her fall, not with the rocky terrain there.

"I'm closing in on the top," she announced as her ultra-sticky rubber outsoles gripped the rock.

She inched higher and higher, then reached for the next hold and clung to the wall.

"Roger," her partner answered over comms, who had her on belay. "Be careful."

"Always." Of course, this was one of her most challenging jobs yet, but she'd never failed before, and she refused to fail tonight.

Her heartbeat wasn't steady, but it was never steady in a moment like this. The rush accelerated her up.

The muscles in her calves trembled as Rory balanced the toes of her shoes on a narrow ledge, her chest flattened to the rough rock wall while she prepared herself to make the last push.

From her viewpoint earlier on her boat during recon, the estate appeared well-fortified. The exterior mimicked the look of Château de Cassis, an ancient property in France that housed guests who could afford the top-price luxury experience. But instead of happy couples enjoying a summer vacation in August, the walls of the property above housed a dangerous criminal.

She was risking her life as she dared climb to his fortress, which sat a mile away from the Provençal charm of Cassis. The Mediterranean fishing village, where pastel-colored buildings lined the walkways, was also home to beautiful inlets that cut into the shore and boats snuggled inside the ports.

Tonight, cloaked in all black, Rory's hood covered the brown wig she wore pulled back into a ponytail to hide her light blonde, Alabama sun-kissed locks. A black hockey mask would disguise her face once she was up top. Dark brown contact lenses also shielded the true color of her hazel eyes.

She breathed a sigh of relief, one mingled with triumph, when pulling herself up the last ledge to the top. "I'm here. At the mark," she announced to her partner, who was still unaware of Rory's real name even after years of working together.

Her target was a lonely umbrella pine in front of the eight-foot-tall concrete wall that ran along the cliff ledge as far as her eyes could see. She anchored a piece of gear and detached the thick, ocean-blue rope from her harness. Rory secured the rope and wrapped it around the pine.

"Off belay."

"Belay off," her partner answered. "Drone is up. You're all clear to climb over," he added a moment later after the small drone, barely visible in the night sky, had buzzed over her shoulder.

"Roger." She removed the rest of her gear and set it at the base of the tree, then secured the

grappling hook from her backpack. This wasn't her first rodeo. She'd done these types of jobs plenty of times, but for some reason, a bolt of nerves shot through, sending a tiny shiver down her spine.

Pull it together. Rory leaned back, tossed the grappling hook over the wall, and waited for it to catch, then gave the rope a few yanks to ensure it would hold. With a quick prayer and a deep breath, she hoisted herself up and planted her feet against the wall. Instinct kicked in as she coordinated quick hand-over-hand movements on the rope with steady steps up the wall.

She clutched the top, using her forearms to pull her weight up. One leg over, she straddled the wall and scoped out the property.

A massive swimming pool surrounded by lush gardens lay at the center of the backyard. There were also two towers flanking the sides of the property. The main house was off in the distance.

"No guards," her partner said, confirming what she already knew, as she reached for the hockey mask clipped to her side and positioned it to conceal her face.

"They're here," she said under her breath. "Somewhere." She swung her other leg over the wall, then eased herself down before letting go.

Landing in a crouched position, she told him, "I'm in."

"You've got this," his deep voice cut into her ear.

He'd insisted on doing the job himself, but of the two of them, she was the better climber, and also faster in case she had to—

"Shit," she hissed, suddenly basked in artificial light. Rory lifted her foot and spotted a small black circular object on the ground. She'd tripped a sensor.

That was a first. She was never usually so clumsy. Was she losing her edge?

She wasn't a covert operative, but she had skills. Of course, she didn't usually go up against former spec ops guys like the man who owned the property. Not that she expected to come face-to-face with anyone tonight. Normally she got in and out without anyone knowing she'd been there.

A frenzy of French words sailed in the air before, "Stop! Don't move!" was yelled in English.

She wouldn't be able to retreat the same way she'd arrived, leaving only one choice. Run.

There was a gated entrance a hundred feet beyond the pool. It'd be easy enough to scale, and it'd been her backup exit plan in case shit went sideways.

She pumped her arms, her blood pounding in her ears. The energy from the chase, the hunt, guided her. It helped her navigate the property as she ran from God knew how many people behind her. She didn't have time to turn back and count.

No gunshots. Good sign.

Run faster, damn it. A few branches from a row of olive trees smacked her in the face, slowing her for a second as she neared the pool. Minutes ago, the water had glittered beneath the moonlight. Now, spotlights flooded everything in sight around the Olympic-sized pool.

"Get out of here," Rory panted out the warning to her partner, who no doubt could hear the shouts and her labored breathing. "If I'm going down, I don't want you going down with me." She'd just finished uttering the words when something stung her skin and jolted her like a shockwave.

Rory clamped down on her back teeth as she fell to her knees, then onto her chest, her palms landing on pavers.

A taser?

It couldn't have been turned on too high, but still—it'd hurt like a motherfuc—

Hands wrapped around both her ankles and yanked, and she released a dreadful shriek as her body scraped across the unforgiving stone.

No, no, no.

In one fast movement, she was flipped onto her back. She panted hard, thoughts of what the hell had gone wrong flying through her mind. Rory rolled her head to the side, catching sight of the pool while pinpricks of light like tiny stars flickered in and out of view.

She blinked a few times, adjusting her vision when a memory came to mind. A memory of another swimming pool. Well, more like the image of a man with a stunning smile emerging from the water.

Chris Hunter. Former Navy SEAL. And a handsome flirt.

She'd met Chris at a friend's house back home in Alabama in June. And when he'd stood before her, dripping wet and much too close for comfort, she'd had what felt like an out-of-body experience.

He probably hadn't noticed how off guard he'd caught her with those blue eyes of his, laced with flecks of green. But that gorgeous man had taken her breath away. She'd hid it well given they had an audience, and looking back, apparently too well. He never did look her up after they'd hung out that night, brief as it was. He couldn't exactly make a move with her brother and friends there, but she'd hoped he would have asked A.J. for her number and called. A hot and fun weekend for whenever she was back in the country, perhaps.

Of course, she wasn't exactly that reachable. Maybe he had called.

Her brain must have gotten scrambled by the taser because her thoughts right now weren't about her family and how heartbroken they'd be if she were to die tonight, but rather on a man she'd met one summer night who hadn't called her for a date.

One summer night. Wasn't that the title of a romance novel? It sounded like the kind of books her friend Savanna always tried to get her to read, promising they would change her skeptical opinion on love.

Rory's stomach hurt at the thought of her friend. Savanna had suffered a devastating loss when her Navy SEAL husband had been killed in action. No, her friend couldn't handle any more grief.

I can't die, damn it. Rory looked to the person standing over her, and she blinked just as the bastard tasered her again.

Darkness enveloped her, and when she woke up, with no idea how much time had passed, her vision was blurry.

Her body ached.

The room was cold.

She'd been hungover a few times. Blacked out once from a bit too much celebrating after a major victory. But nothing compared to waking up after electricity fried your body.

"Getting tasered was not on my to-do list tonight," she sputtered, a lame attempt at being a smart-ass and not letting some asshole get the best of her.

Rory tried to move her hands. Her feet. But she was strapped to a chair.

The mere act of moving her eyeballs to view her surroundings hurt like hell, but her vision was beginning to clear. Concrete floors, walls, and a ceiling low enough to give the room a suffocating vibe. *Great, a torture chamber.*

She glimpsed her brown wig on the floor by her bare feet. Her hockey mask lay upside down next to it.

She stared in a daze at the pink color on her toenails. Pink toenails seemed glaringly out of place in a room where she was about to be tortured and killed.

A paw of a hand grabbed hold of her chin, forcing her to look up. His other hand yanked at her blonde hair, pulling the pins free to allow her locks to fall.

The sound of a round being chambered in a firearm had her eying another man to her left. On her right, a guy held a camera.

“Let her go.” A deep voice boomed from somewhere in the room. The words bounced off the walls like a dark, terrifying echo.

Her body tensed. A shudder of fear blanketed her at the sound of that deep, husky tone.

It was him, wasn't it?

The voice belonged to the owner of the estate, Carter Dominick. Ex-spook. Former Delta guy who'd gone rogue. He was also an all-around asshole and criminal from what she'd heard.

Footsteps neared, and the men around her fell back.

Dark shoes appeared, but the dangling light hanging just in front of her obscured her view of his face.

Black dress pants encased long legs. A white dress shirt was tucked into his pants. Sleeves rolled to the elbows to expose ink she couldn't try and analyze at the moment. And why would it matter?

“I had contemplated waiting a bit longer to grab you and see how good you really are firsthand. I got impatient, though.” He stepped closer, the light from the single bulb now behind him, revealing his face. His identity. “And it was me that brought you here.”

“What?” Had she been set up? No, her partner would never. Maybe the guy who provided the details of the location? But she'd gone through a middleman, and no one would know it was her who'd been hunting for this property since it was off-the-grid, or why she'd been seeking it. “I don't understand.” She deepened the tone of her voice to hide any hints of her Southern accent to prevent him from discovering anything personal about her.

No names in her work. No real names ever. Not even for her partner.

She did whatever she could to protect her family from this life.

Carter brought a hand to his black beard, which was closely trimmed to his angular jaw. Late thirties. His eyes hardened from years in the service, probably long before he went astray from the CIA. His broad shoulders pinned back as he stood tall before her. “My men weren't supposed to be so rough. I apologize.”

“Apologize?” she asked in disbelief.

“I've been waiting to come face-to-face with you. You're worth a fortune, you know.” His voice was cold and deep. Commanding. “Especially to one man in particular.”

Rory froze at Carter's statement, and a slice of panic cut through her as she kept her attention riveted to his dark eyes.

Was this it? Was this how it ended?

In a surprising move that had her swallowing hard, he came closer and knelt before her. His dark hair was a touch spiky. His skin golden from living near the beach, no doubt. When he placed a hand on her knee, she followed his touch but reined in her fear and kept her breathing slow and even.

“Why do you want me? Are you delivering me to *him*?” She forgot to hide her Southern accent this time. “Doesn't seem like your style from what I've heard about you, but I never thought you'd get in league with a man like him, either.” She was showing some of her cards. Letting him know she knew who he worked for, but what did it matter anymore? If Carter had made the effort to lure her to his home, surely he planned to offer her to his boss, the man pulling the strings for so many.

“I highly doubt you know much about me.” His statement slid under her skin and struck her in the heart. The words imbued with sadness, but why?

She dragged her gaze back up to his dark eyes and found emptiness—loneliness in his irises. Not the eerie, lust-filled look other assholes had given her, and this wasn't her first time being tied up, either. Although maybe it ought to be her last. Her family and friends were right. It was time to settle down.

No one back home had the slightest clue what Rory did when she was off traveling the globe. But she'd need to survive the night if she intended to heed Savanna's advice and become a tree. Or maybe she'd said Rory needed to plant roots. They'd both been tipsy on champagne at the time, and Rory was too out of it at the moment to remember exactly.

"But no, I don't work for that man. It was simply how I lured you here. I knew you wouldn't be able to resist that tasty morsel." A smile on his lips faded fast. "I don't work for anyone."

Could she believe him? Probably not. "Why?" She kept her head high, hoping to stamp out any fear in her tone.

"I doubt you came alone, am I right?" he asked, ignoring her. "Should I go look for your friend? The person whom you entrusted with your life to prevent you from falling to an ugly death?"

"I came alone," she lied, flinching as his free hand went to her ear. He removed her comm and tightened his fist around the little device.

Carter pushed back upright and handed it to one of the men in the room who materialized as if on cue before disappearing back into the shadows.

"Why am I here?" Rory repeated, this time with more oomph and through gritted teeth.

"Because I need your help," he tossed back casually.

"I would never help you," she rushed out.

"You think I would just let you go?" His body was ramrod straight, but his arms remained casual and relaxed at his sides. "Many would offer up their firstborn to get their hands on you, especially to turn you over to the one man that—"

"I'm not that—" she interrupted, only to have him quickly cut her off.

"You are that . . ." Carter let his words trail, and his chest lifted and fell with a deep breath. His Texas roots clung to his tone, and he made no attempt to hide his accent as she had.

"Then what do you want from me?" she whispered, hating the touch of weakness that now seeped through her tone.

"You should quit before you die." His words were blunt and still rang with a hint of coldness despite his odd request. "If *he*, or anyone for that matter, discovered your identity, you and your entire family would be killed as retribution. You must know this." His hands dipped into his pockets. "Someone will find out who you are. They will get to you as I have done tonight."

"Why do you care? You're a criminal."

"Life is all about perception." He tipped his head to the side, his expressive eyes softening. "But we can help each other."

"I don't need your help."

"Doesn't look that way from where I'm standing." Carter paused. "Before he gets to you, you'd be wise to quit. Do something different. Something no one would suspect of you. Because he will find you. Come for you. And kill everyone you love. That is a promise."

And like the crack of a whip to her back, which she'd also experienced before, his words cut into her, brandishing a mark. "So, you brought me here to save me?" she asked, not buying this for one minute. "You trying to earn your way into heaven? Reclaim your soul?"

"No one can save my soul, and no, I'm not that nice." He let go of a deep breath, his chest falling with the exhale. "If you choose to continue this dangerous life, that's your death wish. I can only offer my suggestion. But I do need your help."

"And if I don't help you?" Her chin lifted in challenge.

"Then perhaps I'll give you to the man who wants you even more than I do." Carter was a dangerous, shadowy criminal, but looking into his eyes, part of her believed he wouldn't kill her.

She gulped, digesting her reality. Analyzing the situation. The truth of the here and now. Chills dashed up her spine, which was damp with sweat beneath her hoodie.

She squeezed her eyes closed, the memory of Chris, a man she barely knew, springing back to mind for some reason.

She could use that former special operator for a save right about now.

I'm not ready to die. But if she made it out of this alive, would she be able to turn her back on everything she'd worked so hard to achieve?

How many times had she tried to walk away only to come back?

Her mission whispered to her at night.

It pulled.

It pleaded.

It urged her back when she had tried to walk away out of fear.

Rory's heart beat wildly, and she slowly opened her eyes and lifted her chin to peer at Carter towering before her like an impenetrable wall she'd need to scale to get to her freedom.

One more swallow, and then she asked in as confident a voice as possible, "What is it that you want me to do?"

CHAPTER TWO

SANTA ANA, EL SALVADOR - SIX WEEKS LATER

“DOING GOD’S WORK TODAY, BROTHERS. TAKING A MAN LIKE HIM OFF THE STREETS,” A.J. SAID OVER comms from his position as he swept the exterior perimeter, taking out any tangos attempting to flee the compound.

“Damn straight.” Chris continued to move down the hall inside the home, then stepped over the body of an enemy he’d taken out with his Sig Sauer 9mm ten seconds after entry. “First floor secure.”

Echo Five set a hand on Chris’s shoulder, and Chris stopped at the base of the staircase. “Preparing to check the second level,” Finn alerted the team.

Chris and Finn went upstairs, their khaki-colored boots moving almost soundlessly on the wood floors as they stealthily ascended. The team had practiced their infil plan several times before spinning up for the mission today, so while they’d anticipated every next step, they just didn’t know how many enemy targets would be waiting for them.

They hadn’t been able to put a drone overhead for thermal imaging given the clear, sunny skies.

“The HVT is secure.” Echo One delivered the good news over comms after Chris and Finn cleared five of the six rooms upstairs. No one had been inside. “What’s your vantage point, Bravo Four? Am I clear to move to the exfil site with the package?” he asked Liam, who was the sniper on overwatch for the op. They didn’t normally conduct missions at 1500 hours, but CIA intel gave them a two-hour window to make their move.

The CIA had sat on intel about their target’s location and activities for almost two months but were only giving Chris and his men hours to procure him. During daylight, of all freaking times.

Today’s high-value target was the particular kind of evil that always made Chris regret orders he be returned alive. Chris preferred a slow, painful death for predators like Alvin Santiago, a human trafficker.

Generally speaking, to take down a bad guy, you had to think like one. Which could be tough, especially regarding a fucker like Santiago.

“This is Bravo Four,” Liam said, his Australian accent hidden by the blip of static that cut over the line. “I’m clearing a path for you now. Give me thirty seconds.”

The pop of gunfire sounded in the air. The sting of bullets outside gave Chris and Finn the cover they needed for a surprise entry into the last room in case any bad guys were waiting on the other side of the steel door.

Steel? Chris turned the knob. “Deadbolt.” He looked back at Finn, who motioned to the floor below them.

“I’ll grab a key off the guard downstairs. Whatever is in this room must be important. Or whoever,” Finn said in a low voice before starting down the hall.

Chris brought his back flat to the wall and gripped his firearm in a ready position as he waited for Finn’s return. Eyes on the staircase, the only access point to the second level.

“Your path is now clear,” Liam told Wyatt.

“East side is all good, too,” Roman, Echo Four, announced.

“You’re good to exfil. No incoming outside the compound,” A.J. added.

“Echo Three. Five. What’s your status?” Wyatt asked a moment later.

“This is Three. One door to check. Made of steel and locked, so we’re thinking we need to take a look. Be out soon.”

“Roger that,” Wyatt responded, a bit breathy as if running in tow with the HVT. “TOC, come in, en route to the exfil site with the package.”

“Roger,” Harper answered. She served as their off-site support for the op and was waiting in one of two Tahoe SUVs a mile away from Santiago’s compound. “Intel said there wouldn’t be any hostages at the compound, but—”

“We’re doing a thorough check,” Roman reported.

The CIA director had supplied the identity of their target package through their new liaison, Natasha Pierson, a CIA officer who also happened to be Wyatt’s wife. The U.S. government couldn’t get clearance to operate, which was why Chris and his team were sent in.

His people worked off-the-books ops for a handful of higher-ups who reported directly to the Commander in Chief.

To the world, the guys had retired from the Navy and were now employed by a private civilian-military contracting company, Scott & Scott Securities.

Chris hadn’t kept count of how many ops they’d handled over the years, but they never seemed to have much downtime. The majority of their ops were outside of the country. However, there were occasions when they’d operated on U.S. soil due to the fact it was a big no-no for the CIA and other military branches to do so.

The Scott & Scott alias used by Bravo and Echo Teams provided Uncle Sam a layer of protection to hide the fact they were running ops directly for POTUS and thereby circumventing Congress. Plus, their company pretty much funded their missions, so the taxpayers didn’t have to.

Saving the world on their dime, and the guys wouldn’t have it any other way.

Like today, taking down a human trafficker. And it’d felt fucking good to grab the bastard.

At the sound of footsteps heading his direction, Chris readied his gun but eased the tension in his arms when he saw it was Finn returning with the key chain.

“Got it,” Finn mouthed.

Chris stepped aside to let Finn check each key, but he remained on alert, weapon drawn and aimed toward the staircase at the end of the hall.

Wyatt, Liam, and Roman may have been the best snipers on the Teams, but Chris could still drop a guy with pinpoint accuracy. They were all artists with their guns. And handy with knives.

“Jackpot,” Finn whispered a moment later, then he reached for his rifle and opened the door with his free hand.

Both Chris and Finn quickly jerked back at the unbelievable sight before them.

Snakes.

Cobras, vipers, and other venomous snakes writhed and slithered over and around each other. There were even some perched on top of what looked like pet furniture for cats. The sounds of hissing and the clacking of rattler tails emanating from the room were chilling.

“Shit,” Chris whispered, “it’s like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* . . .”

“When Indie lowered himself into the Well of Souls,” Finn finished for him.

“Why’d it have to be snakes?” Finn and Chris simultaneously muttered Harrison Ford’s famous line from the movie.

A couple of vipers approached, tongues darting out, prompting Finn to slam the door shut.

“I think he just . . .” Finn faced Chris with wide eyes. “Did that snake just eat the other snake?”

Chris shook off the disgusting feeling crawling across his skin, regrouped, and looked back to the staircase, ensuring they were alone. “Well, we can confirm there are no people in the final room,” Chris informed the others.

“Do I even want to know?” Wyatt asked.

“Echo Two, we got a really nice present up here for you as a welcome back to operating,” Finn remarked.

“Ah, hell no, I ain’t coming up there,” A.J. answered.

“Snakes,” Chris said in astonishment, chills erupting over his spine beneath his clothes yet again. “A room full of freaking snakes.”

* * *

THE BLACK CHEVY TAHOE TORE DOWN THE DIRT ROAD AS THE TEAMS MOVED TO GET AWAY FROM Santiago’s compound—away from those damn serpents.

“Who the hell owns a room full of snakes?” A.J. visibly cringed, sitting next to Chris in the back of the SUV.

“At least you don’t have to live the rest of your life with that image.” Chris grimaced. “But remember that guy who smuggled baby king cobras into the U.S. hiding them inside potato chip cans?” Chris tossed out a random memory he’d read in the news. “It was a few years ago.”

“No way,” Finn said from behind the wheel. Wyatt was riding shotgun. The rest of the team were in the second Tahoe behind them with the “package.”

“Can’t bullshit a bullshitter, brother,” A.J. said with a laugh, and Chris pulled out his cell phone, powered it on, and googled the story. “Well, shit,” A.J. said when scrolling through the article on Chris’s phone a moment later.

“I should have wagered on that,” Finn added. The guys would bet on just about anything.

“That’s wrong on so many levels.” A.J. handed Chris his phone, and Chris stuck it back in his side cargo pocket and secured a better grip on the rifle on his lap for a just-in-case moment.

With his free hand, Chris rolled down his window, but dirt from the tires kicking up hit his face and had him sputtering and coughing. Bad idea. He powered the window back up and shifted in his seat, thoughts drifting to the dog he’d recently rescued, only to have to give him up.

“Why the long face?” A.J. asked a beat later. “The mission was a success. And we didn’t get shot or—”

“Bitten by a snake,” Finn pointed out.

“So, why do you look like your dog died?” Wyatt chimed in.

“He didn’t die, but I had him for less than two days. I didn’t even have a chance to name him before the owner decided she wanted him back.” Maybe it was better he hadn’t given him a name. The loss would hurt even more.

“That dog wasn’t meant to be.” Wyatt glimpsed back, shifting his aviator sunglasses up to briefly catch his eyes. “We’ll get another canine for the team. And then you can have your shot at begging Rory to train him.”

“Because we all know your ulterior motives.” Chris could practically hear the smile in Finn’s voice.

Rory McAdams. Just thinking about her had his pulse racing. He hadn’t been able to get her out of his head, and according to A.J., that was supposed to mean something.

The first and only time he’d come face-to-face with Rory had been back in June.

A.J. had corralled Echo Team and Bravo Two to join him in Alabama to scare the piss out of his sister’s fiancé for a bachelor party and do a little recon on the groom-to-be, to see if he was good

enough for Ella. The result: the guy sucked. And the wedding never happened.

But that night had other perks, like meeting Rory.

He'd hopped out of A.J.'s brother's pool to find a stunning blonde with an incredible smile and the most amazing legs he'd ever seen standing next to A.J.

He thought back to that night as he'd done many times since then. His body tensing with anticipation at the idea of seeing her again.

A.J.'s sister's fiancé had challenged Chris to a race that night—riding mowers. A first for him. *Does he seriously want to race lawnmowers?* he remembered asking, a grin easing onto his lips. *No cow tipping? Wrangling bulls or something?*

Is that what you Northern boys think we do down here? Rory's hand had dipped to her outer thigh and slowly worked up to the line of her cutoff jean shorts. Well, that's what he remembered happening, but he may have been wrong.

What makes you think I'm a Northerner? he couldn't help but challenge, moving in closer to her. The smell of the nearby honeysuckle fading away with her scent intoxicating his senses.

I detect a Boston accent you appear to be working hard to disguise. Rory's eyes had traced over the lines of his washboard abdomen. He wasn't naturally blessed with muscles like some of the guys on Bravo and Echo Teams. He'd been tall and lanky until he was sixteen when he'd made the decision he wanted to be a SEAL, and he'd worked his ass off ever since to earn the body he had. And every day, he had to keep at it, too. Nothing good in life came easy. And he had a feeling Rory would also be a challenge.

Am I up for that kind of challenge, though? Falling in love? He wasn't so sure if he had it in him like the rest of the guys to marry and have a family, but he also hated avoiding something, or in this case, someone, out of fear of failure.

His parents' marriage failed miserably, but not all great loves were doomed, he supposed.

And since he'd replayed the night he and Rory met over and over again in his head, unable to get her off his mind, well, that must be a sign that he should take a chance. See if Rory felt something, too.

Chris had had every intention of visiting Fourth of July weekend, but then he got called up to operate.

But there'd been a definite spark with Rory that night. A fierce, intense attraction.

A hot wave of *je ne sais quoi* had spilled between them so hard he still felt that sting in his chest three months later.

And when he'd learned Rory had given up her adventurous life to settle down in Louisiana and begin K9 training, well, he'd hatched a plan to head down there and ask for help. Unfortunately, his plan had gone to hell when his new rescue had been taken back by his owner a little over two weeks ago.

"Rory would be a kick-ass trainer," A.J. said, interrupting Chris's wandering thoughts. "But . . ."

"But do you expect her to not only work with this new dog but also play babysitter during training when we have to spin up?" Wyatt asked. "She's gonna love that."

"I don't want to bust your balls or your hopes and dreams, but I know Rory, and she ain't gonna come to Virginia. I mean, she hasn't officially opened the doors to her training business since she has to update all her old licenses and coursework," A.J. said, but he didn't bust anything of Chris's. He didn't give up that easily, and A.J. knew that.

"Chris won't know until he asks," Finn commented, catching Chris's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Ana and Rory are friends, aren't they? They get along, right?" Chris turned his attention back to A.J. "I mean, while you two lovebirds are building your place in Alabama, you're living just outside

D.C., so there'd be another familiar face other than your ugly mug.”

“Speaking of Ana,” A.J. began, squeezing the back of his neck, “there is something I should probably tell you guys now that I am back and operating again.”

“Oh, shit.” Wyatt twisted around in his seat to glimpse at A.J., the look on his face indicating he was preparing for bad news. A.J. had only returned from his physician-mandated three months off a day before this op. After one too many concussions, A.J. had finally seen a doctor and had been forced to take some time off. Chris had seen what head injuries could do—he'd witnessed some of the best men taken down from blasts on the battlefield back in Iraq, and the last thing he'd wanted was for something to happen to one of his best friends on an op. He wouldn't be able to handle that. So, he was relieved to learn A.J.'s scans came back just last week with the all-clear to operate again, starting today, the first of October.

A.J. held one palm in the air in surrender, the other maintaining a grip on his gun. “I did a thing. Like a big thing. And maybe don't kill me, but I saved you from wearing monkey suits, so—”

“I told you. You owe me a hundo,” Finn said, eyes on Wyatt before his focus turned back to the “road” they were on.

Chris scoffed. He'd wear the suit if it meant standing by one of his best friends on his wedding day. “The months you spent bouncing around the world—you were on a honeymoon, huh? You pulled an Asher and Jessica and got married without telling anyone.”

Bravo Three and Jessica had dropped the news at Wyatt's wedding in late July that they'd eloped, and Chris had been pretty sure Jessica's brother, Luke, who happened to be Bravo One, almost suffered from heart failure.

“Better than Liam and Emily's rendition of *Ross and Rachel get drunk-married in Vegas*, I guess,” Finn joked.

“Who are Ross and Rachel?” Wyatt removed his ball cap and scratched his head, obviously confused.

“How'd your parents take it?” Chris asked when Finn didn't answer. Wyatt righted his hat back in place, missing the *Friends* reference Finn had made about Liam's Vegas wedding to Emily.

Chris fidgeted with his own hat and repositioned it, so the bill was at the back of his head. His normal go-to was his Red Sox hat, but on an op like this, personal details of any kind were not allowed. Every precaution was taken to prevent the scums of the earth from learning anything about them.

There are three of us left unmarried, Chris realized. *Seven guys down. When did that happen?* Echo Team had been dubbed FSG, the “Forever Single Guys,” by Jessica, but then Wyatt fell in love with a CIA officer and A.J. with a Fed. Everyone knew Roman was spoken for, even if Roman didn't admit it. So, that left Finn and Chris to hold the single torch.

“We told them two weeks ago. The day after you called me about your rescue dog, actually.” A.J. grimaced with an apology for Chris's dog loss. “They want to throw us a proper wedding, of course, but damn, neither Ana nor I want that. But uh, can y'all help me break it to the others later?”

“You mean you want protection from all the wives who will want to whack you over the head?” Chris reached for his phone, vibrating in his side pocket.

Only the wives of Bravo Team and Echo One and Two were aware of what the guys really did for work.

Chris would never forget the day he was recruited back in January of 2013.

At the time, he'd been stationed in Virginia. Even though Boston wasn't all that far away, he hadn't seen his dad in two years, so during a rare weekend off, he'd made the trip. His dad had flaked

on him and gone out of town at the last minute, no surprise there. With nothing else to do, he'd hit up a local bar, a hidden gem near Fenway Park, and he almost couldn't believe it when he bumped into one of his favorite Red Sox players. Literally bumped into him, spilling beer in his lap.

Before Chris had a chance to order a new drink for the guy, he'd spotted Luke Scott striding his way, the crowd peeling back as if sensing there was something special about the man. And there was. Luke Scott was a legend in the SEALs. Chris had also heard chatter Luke had up and left the Navy, and not due to an injury either. So, seeing Luke beckon him outside was more unexpected than spilling a beer on David Ortiz.

After a quick apology and a round of beers for Big Papi and his friends, Chris made his way outside to talk with Luke and the woman with him. His *sister*. Also unanticipated.

The ground had been covered in freshly fallen snow, and snowflakes continued to drift, swirling around in the wind while Luke and his sister made him an offer he'd never seen coming.

A chance to be part of a new team, one they felt Chris was perfect for, for reasons they didn't explain, even when he'd asked. But how could he say no to working directly for the Commander in Chief?

He never did get a chance to go back and chat up the Sox player, but Luke's sister, Jessica, who co-ran the teams, made it up to him later that year. She scored him World Series tickets, a once-in-a-lifetime event he'd only dreamed of attending as a kid growing up in South Boston.

But wow, time had flown by since his recruitment.

"You gonna keep staring at your phone or answer it?" A.J.'s words had Chris blinking and quickly bringing his phone to his ear.

Right. "Hey, tell me you have good news," Chris answered.

"I will as long as you're not off on some beach soaking in rays while I'm out here training new recruits," his former OIC, Edwards, responded, his throat raspy as if he'd been laying it on thick to the recruits at BUD/S.

"Definitely not on a beach," Chris replied with a smile. "But I'm betting you are, and you're actually loving every minute of chewing everyone out."

Edwards barked out a laugh. "Nah, I'd rather be out there kicking down doors."

"You're the hotshot West Point grad who went the officer route," Chris reminded him.

"The wife gave me no choice, what can I say," Edwards said on a sigh. "But anyway, you still looking for a canine for your security team?"

Chris sat taller. "Hell yeah."

"I got word there's a Belgian Malinois who needs a home. He'd been brought in to work with the Teams, and well . . ."

"What?" Chris brought the phone closer to his ear.

"They say this one might be untrainable." Becoming a canine for the Navy was about as difficult as a man joining the SEALs. "He's not bad-tempered, he's just not exactly motivated, but I thought if anyone—"

"I'll take him." *Finally, some good news.* "What's his name?"

"Bear," Edwards answered, and Chris's mouth rounded in surprise.

"Bear," Chris repeated, and A.J.'s brows shot up.

The guys had given Chris a hard time since he'd gone face-to-face with a polar bear up in the Norwegian archipelago, choosing to risk capture by the Russians rather than shoot the animal. This had to be fate.

"I'm heading back to the States today. Is Bear in Virginia or California?"

“Little Creek. I’ll let the guys know you’re on your way. Check ya later,” Edwards said before ending the call.

Chris tucked his phone back into his pocket and slapped a hand to his thigh. “We’re getting a dog. And he already has some training with a SEAL Team, so—”

“And why don’t they want him?” Wyatt looked back at him.

Chris lifted his shoulders and tightened his eyes. “They said he’s untrainable.”

Wyatt shook his head, a smile easing onto his lips. “Sounds about right,” he said just as a pop-pop struck the side of the Tahoe.

Chris gripped his rifle and tossed a look out the window to see an SUV charging for them. “We’ve got company.”

“Incoming on my side, too,” A.J. added.

“Guess the bad guys want their leader back.” Finn reached for the radio to connect with the rest of the team in the second SUV.

“I thought we nailed everyone at the compound,” Wyatt said, annoyance in his tone. “How’d they find us?” He tossed another look back at Chris. “You let someone get the drop on you and plant a tracking device?”

“Real funny, brother.” Chris scoffed.

“Man, I really, really hate human traffickers.” A.J. turned toward the back as if this was just another day. And for them, it was. “RPG?”

Chris smiled and nodded. “RPG.”

CHAPTER THREE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA - ONE WEEK LATER

“ELLA CALLED LAST NIGHT,” RORY CASUALLY TOSSED OUT TO HER BROTHER.

Jesse’s long, jean-clad legs were bent at the knees, and his cowboy boots, which had seen better days, were getting her new tile floors dirty as he worked beneath the kitchen sink, fiddling around with a pipe.

“She was asking about you,” she went on, knowing their childhood friend Ella was why he’d invaded her new place and had kept himself busy since the moment he arrived. “Ignore me all you want, but it won’t change reality.”

Rory grabbed a slice of bread from the bag in front of the bread box and popped it into the toaster. She didn’t use the bread box, but it was the perfect place to hide a handgun. Her brother knew about the gun. As well as the three others hidden around her house, placed strategically for easy access. What he didn’t know was the reason she needed four firearms. And she had no plans to divulge the all too real threats looming over her.

Jesse lifted his head to eye her for a moment. “Toast? At two in the afternoon?” He chuckled before swapping his wrench for another tool. “Didn’t you just eat a couple of those brownies your neighbor brought over?” he grumbled. “Don’t like that guy, by the way. Either he had something in his eye, or all that winking was meant as flirting.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t eat the brownies?” She peeked at the glass dish of homemade brownies. “I thought it was sweet. I’m pretty sure no guy has baked for me.”

“Still don’t like him,” Jesse added in a low voice.

“You don’t like anyone.”

“That’s not true.” He ducked back under to fidget with the pipes as if he knew what he was doing. And total disclosure, he didn’t.

“So, about Ella.”

Whack. He hit his head. She swore that man probably needed to see a neurotrauma specialist considering all the times he’d banged his head against the nearest object whenever the subject of Ella came up during the last few months.

Ella was supposed to marry a banker named Brian, a guy she’d met on a girls’ night out in Mobile. Rory had been somewhere abroad that night, but even when Ella had described Brian on their regular weekly chats, her tone had been lackluster at best.

Rory hadn’t even met the guy until the night of Brian’s bachelor party, which was Rory’s fault because of her travels, but he’d been stiff and uptight. Not the kind of passionate lover Ella deserved.

She had always assumed Ella would wind up with Jesse. Rory used to catch Ella drawing hearts on her notebooks during class in middle school, scrawling J.M. in red ink at the center. Jesse McAdams. But then Jesse went off to the Army right after high school, and his calls and letters to everyone had been few and far between. Rory was pretty sure Ella had given up on the idea of Jesse making a move, even after he’d returned from the Army, but Brian clearly wasn’t the man for Ella. And given all it took were a few words from Jesse the night before her ceremony to stop the wedding, said it all.

“Can we not talk about her?” He eased his head back out from under the sink. If only he would ease it from out of his stubborn ass.

“Ella went on a blind date last night. Is that why you’re here? Why you took off from Bama and

just had to have a vacation down here with me?" she went on, knowing she was irritating him the way sisters were supposed to. "You ruined her wedding."

Jesse stood, set the tool down on the counter, and folded his arms over his chest. "I didn't ruin her wedding. What she does is—"

"Don't you dare say it's none of your business. You're the one who stood up at the dress rehearsal dinner the night before she was supposed to walk down the aisle and said she shouldn't marry Brian." She poked a finger at his chest.

His chin jutted forward slightly. He'd shaved his beard, which was a look she wasn't used to on him. Jesse's light blue eyes softened when he replied, "You didn't like him. No one did. I did her a favor. I didn't want to see a good friend of mine marrying some asshole."

"You showed up on what would have been the day of the wedding after A.J. blew up your phone with messages to let you know Ella called it off. You and Ella shared a dance. Shared a moment. But why in blazes did you not make a move after that? She's in love with you, ya idiot. And we both know you feel the same, so why has it been crickets since? Why did my best friend go on a blind date?"

"You roll your eyes anymore they'll get stuck," he said, repeating what their mom used to snap out to them growing up.

"I just can't with you, Jesse. I don't know what happened in . . ." *Iraq*. When his eyes met hers, the harsh glare of pain there, she abruptly turned, unable to handle seeing him hurting and knowing she may have been the cause. "Ella shouldn't have married Brian, you're right." *She should be marrying you*. "And if you felt she needed some space after their breakup, well, it's officially been long enough."

Rory retrieved her bread and busied herself with applying butter and grape jelly. She bit down, brushing away the crumbs that scattered onto her plain cream-colored tee tucked into dark skinny jeans.

"Ella and I . . ." His voice was thick with—*shit*, regret.

Rory faced him and said, "You're going on thirty-seven." *Stop poking the bear*. But she loved that bear, and she didn't want to give up on him.

"And you're fixin' to be thirty-four in December, so what," he snapped back, still growly.

Her shoulders slumped, feeling too deflated to continue. He was more stubborn than her, which was saying a lot. "So, why are you here out of the blue, then?"

Relief filled his gaze as if grateful for the subject change. "A buddy of mine from the service is on leave here, and I plan on meeting up with him later today."

She finished her toast in two more quick bites, still hungry despite the large lunch she'd cooked for the two of them earlier.

"How about we talk about the fact you're back in the U.S.? And well, are you staying this time? Is this real? Why didn't you move home instead? You can train dogs anywhere."

"I am staying for . . ." Could she say the words "for good" and actually mean them? Would she settle down this time?

She thought back to her time with Carter Dominick seven weeks ago. His words of warning burned through her mind and had her shivering. Rory had never tried to fool herself and downplay the dangers surrounding her work. She'd always known the risks, but they had been worth it as long as no one discovered her. Carter capturing her changed everything.

"I have all the coursework and training. You know how great I am with animals. This is a perfect fit for me."

"I know that, which is why you should have kept at it after college." He maneuvered around her

and went for the stack of mail like he'd spotted something of interest. "Tell me you're not going to this?"

He picked up the invitation and flapped it in the air like the paper had wings and would fly. Far. Far. Away.

Yeah, she should have tossed the invite the second she received it yesterday. Her mom had been sending all her mail to her new place since Rory didn't want anyone outside her close friends and family knowing where she lived quite yet. But instead of tossing the invite, she left it on her counter to stare at every time she walked by.

"You're cordially invited to attend Andrew Cutter's Treasure Extravaganza on Friday, October fifteenth, twenty twenty-one," Jesse read the headline of the invite in a fake haughty voice.

Was it really already October 2021? Time had flown by ever since she'd escaped that shitty hellhole of a year, 2020. She'd never believed so many things could go wrong in one single year. Thank God for 2021, even with her run-in with Carter Dominick, it was still a far better year.

"Of course, I'm not going. It's too last minute and all the way in D.C. I just moved here a month ago. If I want to get any clients, I can't go and take off to some party out of town." Her body felt a little limp and relaxed despite the fact he was flicking his finger at the invitation.

"This is a pretty big honor, huh?" he went on, pushing her buttons. Getting back at her. Testing her. Seeing if she'd take the bait. Go back to the life if her old flame asked her. Only Jesse had no idea that life wasn't remotely close to the one she'd been living the last five years. "Andrew has gotta be pretty rich after this discovery."

Her ex didn't do what he did for the money. It was about the adventure. The rush of discovery. They'd professionally parted ways years ago, and it was even longer since they'd been a couple. Andrew had been the one to pull her into his world, though, a world she hadn't known existed before him.

"His last discovery," she said while snatching the invitation to the gala honoring Andrew for his latest find, "earned him one hundred million."

Jesse's mouth dropped open.

"Yeah, and you used to make fun of treasure hunting." She'd begun seeking different types of treasures over the years, which was one reason why she and Andrew had gone separate ways.

Rory set the invite back on her stack of mail and went into the living room, drawing the blinds open to let in some light. The house she was renting was on the outskirts of the city, not that she couldn't afford to be downtown, but she preferred to be away from crowds. She liked her space. Plus, she needed the property for her new business.

Jesse joined her and was about to sit on the latte-colored couch at the center of the room but stopped himself, acting as though their mom would holler to get his dirty self off the furniture.

The down-feather blend was expensive and probably wouldn't have been her go-to, and she could only imagine having kids on it, but she didn't have to do the shopping, so she wouldn't complain.

Jesse plucked the material of his shirt between his fingers. "Be right back."

She nodded and leaned against one of the three beams that served as a type of divider between the hallway that led to the foyer.

Thanks to her family and friends in Alabama, her home had been unpacked and designed within the first two weeks of moving in a month ago. An entire crew had shown up to help her out. One of those people happened to be Ella's mom, a decorator. And she was the one to thank for not just the couch, but the entire French country farmhouse theme of the home.

Rory had opened her mouth to protest the Provençal look given she'd essentially been forced into

retirement in France. But seeing Deb's eyes light up with enthusiasm when showing her the design plans, how could she say no?

According to Deb, the combination of distressed woodwork, mixed patterns for the pillows and curtains, and touches of corn yellow and pops of jubilant orange were perfect for the space. Her favorite piece had been a rustic-looking, powder-blue sideboard, a piece of furniture that seemingly had no purpose to Rory aside from another place to hide a gun.

She observed it in the foyer, unable to catch her eyes in the mirror hanging above the sideboard from the angle at which she stood. And what would she see if she had stolen a look at her reflection? A glimpse of fear in her eyes—the same look she witnessed anytime she eyed the mirror after a shower. The fear of the unknown. A fear of failing at this new life.

Rory shook her head and pivoted to view the coffee table in front of the couch. Her brother had handmade it, but he promised it only looked like water buffalo horn.

“You should have stuck with training after college like you had planned instead of running off with Andrew.” And Jesse hadn't wasted a second resuming the conversation once he returned.

“Life is what we make it.” For some inexplicable reason, she was feeling a bit mellow. Also, still hungry. She set a hand to her stomach. “I have had a hell of a life, but”—she began with a slump of her shoulders she wished she'd been able to hide—“I'm ready to start the next chapter.”

“But why here? Why not in Bama?”

Because I don't know if I'm safe to be around yet.

“Ten years, you've been chasing adventures. I'm just having a hard time believing you'll actually stay this time. We've all heard it before. Plus, if you were really going to stay, wouldn't you have bought this place instead of renting it?”

Shit. He had her there. This was her third attempt at settling down in the last several years. Every other time, she'd taken off into the sunset on a yacht, or boarded a jet and flown away. *This time will be different. What choice do I have?* She just hated turning her back on work that still needed to be done.

She needed to keep her feet planted to the ground like a hundred-year-old oak, though. She'd like to think she'd be able to do it. Only time would tell.

“I have no choice this time.” She regretted the words the moment her brother's gaze intensified. How the heck did she allow that thought to slip past the carefully crafted defenses she'd spent years creating?

“What's going on? Something happen?”

The sound of a car door shutting outside drew her to the front of the house to see who was outside on her property. Her closest neighbor was five acres away, and he was the one who'd shown up with baked goods that her brother had all but accused her of gorging on before her toast.

“Hey, wait.” Jesse caught up with her, and she turned to face him before she could glimpse who was heading toward her door. “Tell me what you meant.”

She raked a hand through her blonde hair, wishing she could take back those words because her brother wouldn't back down now. “Things got dicey on my last job. I understand now it's safer to step away from that life.” She nearly clamped a hand over her mouth at her admission. *What the hell?*

His golden skin blanched, and he clenched his hands into fists. Her brother was a born fighter, which had been both helpful and harmful to him over the years. And based on his locked jaw, he appeared ready to throw down with whoever had placed her in danger.

Me. I put myself in danger. “I'm fine, I promise.” The words came out more laid-back than she'd meant them. But if Carter Dominick's word could be believed, she'd hopefully be fine.

“Rory.” Jesse tipped his head to the side as a knock, followed by the chime of the doorbell, saved her from continuing the conversation.

“I’ll make you a deal. As soon as you open up and talk about Ella, I’ll talk about my past,” she proposed, hoping that’d shut up her brother.

He brushed past her to the hall in a hurry. Mission success. “Let me get the door. You can’t be too careful.”

She had a security system, but it was constantly going off for the stupidest things since her brother had been staying with her—like his two a.m. snack cravings for toast—yeah, they were definitely related.

Jesse cracked the door, but not wide enough for her to see who was outside. “Whoa, man, what are you doing here?” When he opened the door wider, Rory stumbled back a step at the piercing blue eyes that greeted her.

Chris Hunter.

Wow.

So, after three months, he finally sought her out.

Then again, she was actually in one place and “sought-able.” *Totally not a word*, her mom’s voice popped into her head. Rory rolled her eyes. Their mom may have retired from teaching elementary school, but she hadn’t eased up on either of her own kids when it came to proper grammar.

“Hi.” Her eyebrows must have been hovering at the top of her forehead right now. Chris would be able to see her surprise. And why shouldn’t she be surprised? No warning from Ella’s brother, A.J., about his visit. She’d be calling A.J. to give him a good old Southern earful later.

She’d already given A.J. one when she found out he went and eloped with Ana. Their small hometown had been up in arms about it. Robbed of two weddings since Ella had called off her wedding the night before she was to walk down the aisle three months ago. Granted, she did the right thing since Brian was the wrong man for her.

“Hi,” Chris returned. He had on a navy-blue ball cap. Backward. Why was that always so sexy on a guy? His tan forearms became more pronounced as his hands dove into the pockets of his dark-denim jeans, which were matched with dark sneakers. A short-sleeved, light blue Under Armour cotton shirt clung to his frame. Broad shoulders. Chiseled jaw. He was about the same height as her brother. Probably six-two.

He reminded her of another Chris, but as far as Rory was concerned, he was better looking than the actor Chris Evans. But she understood why Ella’s niece, McKenna, had referred to him as Captain America. Did he have the “Ass of America,” too? Rory didn’t have a chance to check out his backside the one time they’d met at the end of June, but it looked like today she would have the opportunity.

But wait. Why are you here? She’d swear her brain was in some type of strange fog. She felt disconnected, kind of . . . light-headed, woozy. Maybe she had a sinus infection? She hated those.

“What are you doing here?” Jesse asked, voicing her thoughts and stepping to the side to allow Chris entrance.

“I was hoping for a word with Rory.” Chris’s question was directed toward her, not so much asking permission from her brother.

Jesse looked back at her, then toward Chris again. He was probably giving Chris the “can I trust him alone with my sister?” look she knew too well.

“I’ve gotta meet up with my friend anyway. I’ll fix the sink later.” Jesse eyed Rory, checking for the okay to leave her even though he knew full well if Chris worked with A.J., he was solid. But her

overprotective brother couldn't help himself. And if he only knew what she'd really been doing for the last few years, he'd have a heart attack. Everyone in her small town would have taken a collective gasp and fainted.

"Thanks." She waited for Jesse to head out the front door. Being alone with someone who was practically a stranger should have made her uneasy, but it didn't. She felt warm and tingly and—was it hot in there?

She tugged at the cotton material of her shirt and turned away from him to lower the A/C.

"Sorry to show up like this," Chris said from behind while she went a bit overzealous stabbing the controls to blast the air-conditioning to arctic temps.

"No apology needed. So what can . . ." Rory whirled to face Chris and stopped mid-sentence. Apparently, this man had never heard the notion of "personal space" because he was all up in hers. Lordy, he was so close she could barely breathe, yet somehow his cologne managed to further muddle her brain.

She lifted her nose, finding and cataloging his scent like a K9.

Sexy. Vibrant and virile. The manliest aroma she'd ever breathed in, and she came from a place of Southern cowboys, so that was saying a lot.

Hints of mint, touches of oak and cedar.

Wow, did he smell good. And look incredible.

Maybe there would be some perks to returning home.

But what if someone discovered her identity, her name? Where she lived?

No relationships. Not anytime soon. Be careful. Cautious. Keep your distance if you don't want to hurt anyone until you know you're in the clear, the memory of Carter's parting warning a sharp stab to the chest. That strange relaxed feeling she'd been experiencing disappeared, and in its place, nervousness filled the void.

Chris may have been a former Navy SEAL, and still gallivanting around the world for his security company, but she didn't want to endanger him because of the risks she'd taken. It wouldn't be fair.

"You okay?" he asked as he removed his Red Sox hat and clutched it to his outer leg.

Her back pressed to the hall wall alongside the sideboard, and she did her best not to focus on his eyes. Eyes she was fairly confident could reach inside of her and touch her soul. Light her on fire.

She'd been with passionate lovers in her life, mostly foreign men, but there was something different about this man. Something she couldn't quite understand or place her finger on.

Meaningless, no-strings-attached sex was all she'd be able to offer and—*what am I thinking?*

A smirk cut across his full lips like he'd heard her thoughts. His beard was trimmed close to his face but still thick. His hair a light brown, borderline dirty blond, and shorter on the sides. Not quite spiky but like he'd pulled at the strands to make some stand up on the top.

His nose was straight. Distinguished. Those blue, with a touch of green, eyes were set perfectly apart on an angular face. Strong jaw with a mouth that would look brilliant placed on the arch of her throat. Kissing her.

Okay, it's been waaaayyyy too long since I've had sex. That is what is wrong with me.

And yet, the strange mix of nerves and a euphoric state had her imagination continuing to run wild as he stood a few inches before her, observing her with an amused smile and those gorgeous, confident eyes.

The immediate attraction she'd felt the first time they met was present. Sharp. Fierce. And it felt far too good.

"I need your help." His eyes lowered to her mouth as if he were cataloging her looks the same as

she had his, but then he turned away.

It was the reprieve she needed to find her breath. To pull herself together.

The fabric of his tee cinched in the middle as he drew a hand to the top of his head for a brief moment.

“You need my help?”

He lowered his hand, but she’d stepped too close so that when he turned back around, their bodies collided.

He quickly snatched her arm as if worried she might lose her balance.

But no.

Feet planted to the ground.

That was the plan, right?

No going anywhere.

No temptation. No thrill-chasing.

But wouldn’t this man be a thrill? An adventure? She felt that deep in her bones, among other places.

“I want you to take me on as a client. A.J. said you’re going to start a business training animals, and well, we got a Belgian Malinois for the company, and we could use your help.” His eyes journeyed to his hand secured around her bicep, then suddenly widened with the realization he’d been holding on to her and let go. He set his ball cap back on, this time the bill facing her way.

“A rescue?”

“Yeah, sort of.” He scratched his jaw, unease in his expressive blue eyes.

“What do you mean?” What was he hiding from her?

He slapped his palms together in prayer position between them as if prepared to plead his case. One eye closed, head slightly tilted. She’d seen that look on her brother. “What?” she asked, dragging the word out.

“He was going to be a Team dog, but well, he wasn’t exactly motivated to train, so he got the boot. Dubbed untrainable, but I just love a challenge, don’t you?” His innocent smile stretched, and it had an immediate effect on her.

“I do love a challenge.” She hadn’t even been able to hide that bit of truth, even though she knew working with this man after only just returning Stateside was a bad idea.

“So, you’ll do it?” His brows lifted with excitement.

“No,” she quickly responded and started for the kitchen.

She was still hungry for some crazy reason, but there was a sink that needed fixing, and maybe she ought to tap into her brother’s avoidance tactics by tinkering with the thing herself.

Maybe the gorgeous former Teamguy would disappear if she did.

His blue eyes wouldn’t be there when she looked back.

The spine-tingling sensation would be a distant memory, too.

“Why not?” he asked.

Rory crouched in front of the sink and stared into the open cabinet, then snatched the wrench, one of the only tools she recognized, and dipped under to do . . . something with the pipes.

She twisted the wrench, but with every twist, her stomach turned, too.

“What are you doing?” Chris asked, a husky tone in his voice as if he were hiding a laugh.

“Fixing the sink. What does it look like?” she asked, leaning back just as the connection loosened and water sprayed her in the face. *Of course.*

She smacked her head on the cupboard ceiling as she quickly sat up, then shifted around to her

knees and backed up. Water shot every which way.

Chris was at her side in a second, and his hand brushed over her forearm as he took control and twisted the pipe with his bare hand and effectively stopped what was looking like a wet T-shirt contest.

“Shit. Sorry,” she apologized. “I don’t know what I’m doing.” She went to stand, but they bumped heads when they both attempted to rise at the same time.

He clutched her elbows, helping her upright. “Sorry,” he said, his Adam’s apple noticeably moving as he swallowed. “You okay?”

“Oh, I’m used to getting wet.” Her cheeks heated, stained with embarrassment. “Not like wet-wet. I mean, like ocean-wet. I dive.” She stumbled through her words. Never a problem in the past for her. *What is wrong with me today?* “Haven’t been wet in a while, though. Not wet from sex, I mean. Well, actually, that’s been a long time, too.”

Chris’s mouth pinched tight. An infectious smile crossed his lips.

“Wait, I didn’t . . .” She closed her eyes for a second. “This does not happen to me. I don’t yammer and flounder around when I talk.”

“Normally, it’s me doing that, so I don’t mind being the calm and collected one at the moment.” He angled his head and brushed a wet strand of her hair away from where it clung to her cheek.

“You were a treasure hunter, right? So, you used to dive a lot, I imagine.”

Their shirts were drenched, clinging to their bodies and leaving little to the imagination. The front of his tee showed strong chest muscles and very defined abs. His nipples poked through the fabric. *God did not take any shortcuts with you, did He?* “I haven’t done the whole searching for sunken pirate ships or lost galleons thing—whatever you want to call it—in years.” Okay, at least that part was true. *But please don’t ask me what I have been doing for the last few years. I might tell you.*

He reached for a dish towel and handed it to her. She patted her damp face and offered it to him, but he just shook his head and leaned his back against the counter.

The window looking out onto the backyard where Jesse had chopped wood earlier like a lumberjack caught her eye.

For a brief second, the image of Chris out there wielding the ax, his shirtless torso golden and glistening with sweat, flitted to mind.

“What is wrong with you?” she muttered, then turned while sucking in a deep breath. “That was supposed to be an internal question directed at myself, by the way.”

“Well, since you did ask it out loud, I’d love to answer.” His hand went over her shoulder, but she couldn’t turn around, afraid she’d spew more insanity.

She’d climbed Mount Washington.

Swam in the Temple of Doom in Mexico.

Crossed the Sahara.

Faced modern-day pirates and other criminals.

Survived a one-on-one with Carter Dominick.

And now she was acting like a nervous fool. What had coming back home to “settle down and start a new life” done to her?

Who was this person? She’d been just fine five minutes ago. Five minutes before Captain America came into her house looking all swoony and now dripping wet.

Seriously, though, even when he’d been in only his swim trunks the first time she met Chris, she’d managed to keep her cool.

“You’re always wet when I see you,” she mumbled.

In a gentle but quick movement, Chris reached for her wrist and pulled her closer. “Why ‘no’?”

Oh. That. “I just moved here, and I’m assuming you want me to go to—wait, where do you live?”

“Renting a house in Virginia. Not far from D.C., though. Most of the guys live in the area. And hey, Ana and A.J. have a place nearby since Ana’s teaching a course at Quantico in January. So, you won’t be alone with me.”

Now she was the one smiling. “Alone with you? Did you expect me to move in with you? Like a ‘full-on live with you while I help train your dog’ kind of thing?”

A touch of red colored his cheeks just above his beard. So, he got embarrassed, too. They were in the same boat. She just didn’t want to sink. Been there and done that in both the literal and metaphorical sense.

“I can’t move in with you.” She scanned the kitchen, searching for a reason for the strange state she was in. Her stomach churned as if she hadn’t eaten in years. Something wasn’t right. *Am I going to be sick? That would be just great.*

“You don’t need to move in with me, but it’d be better if you did, so you could keep me in line with the, uh, training.”

They were both still in wet shirts, and when his gaze dipped lower, she tried to recall what kind of bra she had on. Sheer? Thick? Any padding?

Yeah, this was not going to work. She’d fall for both dog and owner before she was through. Surely.

No, she and relationships were a bad mix under normal circumstances, but it could prove deadly in this case. And based on the way he was eying her, he wanted her. It’d been obvious in Alabama that night, and it was clear as day now.

“His name is Bear. He’s a little over a year old.” He let go of her, reached for his phone, and pulled up a photo of the dog. One look and Rory knew she’d never be able to refuse.

Bear had a mahogany tone to his coat. His eyes were brown and almond-shaped. A flat forehead with a small groove at the front. His little triangle ears stuck up, and his head was cocked to the side in an adorable way. Bear’s hair was a little longer around his neck, creating a slight mane-like effect, and his lips were black and thin. He was solid and firm. Also . . . perfect.

Her heart ached as she looked at him. *Untrainable, huh?* “You’re playing unfair.”

“If I can’t persuade you to come, maybe he can.” Chris placed his phone back into his jeans pocket. “He needs you. I’m doing all the wrong things already.”

She pressed her back to the counter and set her palms on the granite on each side of her, hoping the sudden nausea would dissipate. What did her new neighbor put in the brownies? Did they go bad? *I get a bad batch? Or was it my toast?* “Like what?” she asked around the lump forming in her throat. *Do not puke on this man.*

“For starters, he’s been sleeping in my bed the past five nights I’ve had him.”

“That’s like a huge no-no in training.”

“He’s so cute, though. How can I tell him no?”

He had her there. He was cute. But still. “What else have you done?” At least he was distracting her from the dazed and confused feeling that’d begun sweeping over her like a tidal wave, leaving her weak-kneed and feeling as though she were seasick, which was something that never happened, thank God.

“Home-cooking. Steak and rice. Oh, and I keep giving him rewards even though he didn’t do anything to earn them. And I had no idea what kind of leash to get, so I bought like ten different ones, but Bear doesn’t like any, so he just doesn’t wear one.”

“All this in five days? You broke that many rules?” Her hand hit her chest and dipped beneath the wet V of her damp shirt. “Do you want him to work with you or just be your buddy? He’s totally the alpha in your relationship already.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “You’re accusing me of not being an alpha?”

She gulped when he stepped back, and she raked her gaze over his delicious body. She highly doubted he’d be anything other than alpha in the bedroom, that was for sure. His personality was playful and fun, but oh, there were layers. Many layers. And she’d want to peel them back, which would be dangerous.

Also, maybe peel off his shirt. Check out his ass without the jeans on. See those hard ridges of his muscles. And maybe his hard . . .

Another thought interrupted her guilty-pleasure ones. “You did all of that on purpose, didn’t you? Just to prove how badly you need me.”

“I do need you.” The side of his mouth twitched before he pulled his brows inward.

Maybe she needed him, too. She’d be safe with an operator, right? Not that she had wanted anyone to protect her before, but after her encounter with Carter Dominick, it might not be a bad idea.

But it wouldn’t be fair to jeopardize Chris’s safety without him knowing what he was getting himself into with her.

“If I do this, if I take your dog on as my first client, there’s something you need to know about me.” Her body shuddered as a strange warmth spilled inside of her.

“What is it, Rosemary?”

So, he knew her given name. No one called her that except her mom when she was in trouble or in church.

“There are, um, some people that will want to kill me if they find out who and where I am. I don’t want to endanger you.” *Did I just admit that?*

He angled his head as if he hadn’t heard her right. Maybe she could backpedal. Get out of this insane conversation. “Who would want you dead and . . .” He removed his hat at the bomb she’d dropped.

His soft, expressive eyes hardened with concern. Operator mode. A switch had been flipped. A clear and present danger evident. And like her former military brother, she knew that look.

He saw a problem he needed to fix.

But this was her mess.

And there was only one way out of it.

Hide, hope, and put her old life behind her.

He’d been there for no more than fifteen minutes, and now he knew her secret.

But her forearm tightened over her stomach, and her body became damp. Chills coated her skin. “Oh, no.” Her eyes fell to the homemade chocolate brownies on the counter. “I’m high,” she said before gasping. *Why the hell did it take me so long to realize?* She’d only tried edibles once and vowed never to go near them again. “I-I can’t get high.”

“Huh?”

She pointed to the dish of brownies on the counter by the bread box. “My neighbor came over and said he made me a homemade recipe of brownies. He winked when he said they were extra special, but I thought he was flirting. I didn’t understand he was letting me know they were laced with something.”

“You’re pale.” He went for her forearm, pulling her closer. “You sick?”

She nodded. But that explained her irrational behavior. And why she’d stumbled through her

words and became delirious with desire. Oh, and the munchies. “I don’t do well when I’m high,” she whispered. “Someone insisted I eat edibles in Costa Rica once, but instead of being chill, I turned into a chatterbox and puked for hours. I don’t know if it’s an allergy thing, but—” She flung her hand to her mouth, realizing this gorgeous man was going to see her throw up all the “special” brownies in about two seconds. “Be back!” She pulled away and took off.

Please make it in time.

She darted up the stairs, clutching her stomach with one hand and mouth with the other.

Two doors down on the right was her bedroom. *Make it. Make it.*

A second later, she slammed the door shut behind her and hugged the toilet in shame.

A few minutes after her stomach was empty, she heard from behind, “Hey, I know you might feel awkward, but let me help you.”

She was too out of it to even tell him no. Had he picked the lock to get in? She could’ve sworn she’d locked it. A damp hand towel pressed to her cheeks, then her forehead from where she clung to the porcelain toilet for dear life.

He must have been on his knees. Hovering over or behind her.

Chris wrapped his strong arms around her, then stood with her in his arms.

She clutched the towel he’d used on her skin to her mouth, her eyes wide with humiliation, but she was too exhausted to protest.

Only a beautiful warmth and concern was in his gaze as he carried her into her bedroom.

“I got you, Rosemary. Don’t you worry.”

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRIS STOOD IN THE KITCHEN AND EYED THE DISH OF BROWNIES ON THE COUNTER, HIS NOSTRILS flaring. Who in the hell gave someone baked goods laced with drugs as a *Welcome to the neighborhood* gift? Grabbing the dish angrily, he dumped the brownies in the trash, set the glass dish in her sink, and reached to turn on the faucet. No water. *Right.*

He cupped his mouth, trying to wrap his head around the unexpected turn of events. He'd come to hire Rory for a job, and now it looked like she needed him even more.

People want to kill her. Did her brother know this?

He crouched and went beneath the sink. His dad had run his own plumbing business in Boston, so Chris knew his way around pipes.

His mind blew through a half dozen scenarios where Rory could've gotten herself into trouble over the years while treasure hunting. She said she didn't hunt for lost treasure anymore, but what had she been doing? And why'd she suddenly decide to leave that life to train dogs?

He'd be needing answers, but he'd give her time to recover from the brownies.

After he fixed the sink, he cleaned up and went out to his rental Dodge Ram to call Harper in privacy.

"She say yes?" Harper answered after picking up.

He slung his forearm over the wheel and pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand, eyes closing. "I don't know." *She issued a warning and then threw up.*

Harper chuckled. "Go that well, huh?"

He lifted his chin at the sound of something falling to the floor in the background. "You got company?"

"I'm at Emily's helping put together the party for the newlyweds. Who, by the way, are going to kill us later," she answered. "Liam just dropped some expensive vase, and he's cursing like a sailor."

Liam and Emily lived in D.C. with their two children. Emily had given Chris an earful about ensuring he made it back to the surprise post-wedding party she was throwing for A.J. and Ana since the couple had only recently revealed that they'd eloped over the summer.

"Better an expensive vase than his baby." He sat upright and eyed Rory's two-story brick house. He didn't like the idea she was in the middle of nowhere, and yet, her neighbor, who couldn't be very close given Chris didn't spy any houses nearby, had managed to show up at her door and drop off drugged baked goods.

Maybe he ought to do a trace on the brownies. Make sure they didn't contain anything other than pot. Also, run a background check on the neighbor. On second thought, maybe he should include everyone within a five-mile radius. Yeah, that'd be a good idea.

“You’re going to make it back in time for the little shindig tomorrow night, right? I’m sure A.J. and Ana would love it if Rory came with you.”

“Is A.J.’s family coming this weekend?” A.J. had a huge Southern family, but Ana’s parents died when she was sixteen, and she had no other living relatives. Chris related more to Ana than A.J. even though his parents were both alive.

“Nah, they’re planning their own thing. Probably a huge town event.” She paused. “Hold on. Elaina wants to FaceTime.”

“Hey! How are you and Bear doing?” he asked once Elaina’s face filled the screen.

She backed up a little and circled an arm around his new dog. “I’m spoiling him rotten,” Elaina announced with a big smile. “I’m going to miss him when you take him back home.”

His smirk stretched, momentarily forgetting about his worries with Liam’s daughter onscreen. She was such a great kid. She emanated the presence and wisdom of an old soul. Wise was putting it mildly. The girl was more than just Einstein-smart. She was also eerily prophetic. “You’ll be able to visit him anytime. Plus, when he can’t come on a job with us—”

“He’ll stay with me!” Elaina hugged Bear, and Chris laughed when the goofy canine nuzzled her face with his nose. And if Elaina had a good feeling about him, then Chris knew Bear was the right dog for the teams.

“How’s Rory?” Liam crouched into view of the screen behind Elaina and rubbed Bear’s head.

“She’s good,” he forced out, remaining vague.

“Yeah, well, don’t lay the charm on too thick. We need her. This dog,” Liam said in a soft voice as if speaking to his baby, Jackson, instead of Bear, “really needs proper training, and we can’t do it.”

“I know. I know.” *And we also need to help Rory.*

“Uncle Chris,” Elaina said when Liam’s wife called him away, and he left the screen, “I think she needs you just as much as you need her.” She winked after her cryptic words. “See you both tomorrow!” She handed the phone back to Harper and left him sitting in the truck, attempting to shake off the chills flying up his spine.

“So, why are you really calling?” Harper asked while staring at a bright orange spool of ribbon in her hand, a scowl on her lips as if she’d rather be breaking into an unhackable database, or well, jamming out to music on the roof of their office building in New York like she did whenever she needed to take a moment. Harper wasn’t a fan of being crafty, and Chris was fairly certain Emily hadn’t been either until she’d become a mom to Elaina.

Chris shifted uncomfortably on the leather. “Can you do a little digging on Rory for me?”

“Like a background check to make sure we can trust her?” She scoffed. “You’re kidding, right?”

He patted the air. “Don’t let them hear you, and no, not a background check. I need to know what Rory has been up to since college.” He felt all kinds of wrong asking Harper for help, but he figured Rory wouldn’t have spilled such ominous news were it not for the brownies she’d eaten. And he had no doubt she’d be a steel trap from now on. He and the guys were typically closemouthed about their lives, so he couldn’t blame her.

“I’m not looking her up.” Harper set the ribbon down and walked out of Liam’s living room.

“She might be in trouble. But don’t say anything to A.J. or the others until I know more.” He knew Harper wouldn’t help him without a damn good reason. “Please.”

“And what gave you the idea she’s in trouble?” Her tone was a few notes softer this time.

“Because she told me if anyone found out her identity, she’d be killed.” He tensed at the thought. Every muscle locking tight. “Then, she puked. So, that’s all I know.”

“She threw up?” Harper was quiet for a moment, giving him a confused look. And when he didn’t

elaborate, she added, "This is unexpected."

"But is it?" He reached for the door handle. "Our lives are never ordinary." The last thing he wanted to hear was that the woman he'd been obsessing over for three months was in trouble, her life in danger.

"I'll see what I can find out, but if A.J. doesn't know this—"

"He just started operating again. And we're celebrating his marriage this weekend. Let's not rush to worry him until we know more. Okay?" Chris pleaded, hoping he was making the right decision.

"And what are you planning to do next?"

"Get her to come to Virginia with me so that she can train Bear, and so I can keep an eye on her."

"I figured you'd say that." Harper held the phone in front of her face to find his eyes. "I, um, heard what Elaina said to you."

His stomach squeezed at the memory. *She needs you just as much as you need her.* "Yeah, so I think that's enough to make you realize that—"

"She's in danger," Harper finished for him with a nod. "Okay. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks." He ended the call and scrolled through his contacts for Rory's brother's number. Jesse had given him his digits at the bachelor party back in June.

As soon as A.J. had seen Chris's reaction at the sight of Rory, he'd warned Chris that Jesse wasn't someone to mess with. He was protective and a fighter like Bravo Three, using his fists instead of his mouth to handle situations. Although Asher was a bit tamer now that he was married with kids. Well, as long as no one threatened those he loved.

Here goes.

After two rings, Jesse picked up.

"You piss off my sis?" Jesse asked straight away, and Chris wasn't sure if it'd been a joke or not.

"No, but she's not feeling well," Chris answered. "Apparently, her new neighbor laced those brownies he gave her with drugs. I'm guessing you didn't have any since you seem to be fine. I'm about to pay the guy a visit, but I figured you should know and that you might want to come with."

Jesse was stone-cold quiet for a moment before replying in a deep voice, "Be right there."

* * *

"YOU DIDN'T KILL HIM, DID YOU?" RORY CLUTCHED A CUP OF CHAMOMILE TEA, HER KNEES PINNED TO her chest as she sat on the couch in her living room.

Some color had returned to her cheeks since she'd woken up and taken a shower, but he hated she was also wearing a soft shade of embarrassment. She didn't need to feel bad about throwing up, but if she was a touch crimson from her admission about the danger she was in, well, *that* was a conversation she wouldn't be able to avoid.

"No, I didn't kill him." Jesse stood with crossed arms alongside Chris. "I just let him know the dangers of ever coming near you again."

"We're also not sure if living out here by yourself is such a great idea," Chris said and winced when Rory's eyes tightened as she set her tea down on a coaster.

"Oh, really?" she challenged. Chris was smart enough to know that was the equivalent of Jessica or Harper responding to a question with the words "I'm fine." It meant trouble.

Jesse and Chris exchanged a quick look before Chris focused back on Rory's hazel eyes.

"You boys better believe I am perfectly capable of handling myself." It'd been three hours since

she'd thrown up, but whatever impact those brownies had on her when Chris had first shown up appeared gone. There was a beautiful fierceness and confidence in her eyes and the curve of her lips. "Especially you, Jesse. You made sure I was strong enough to take care of myself, didn't you?"

"Knowing a few self-defense moves and how to shoot a gun doesn't mean—"

"I'm fine," Rory cut off her brother and rose. She'd tied her hair back in a ponytail after her shower. Her skin was clean of makeup, only anger adding a natural blush to her cheeks. "And I'm sorry, Chris, but I can't train your dog."

Chris had filled Jesse in about Bear and his request for Rory to move to Virginia for a few weeks, preferably longer, while she'd still been asleep after they'd returned from their little chat with her idiot neighbor.

Jesse wasn't a fan of Rory living alone in this house, he'd been against the idea from day one, but he didn't seem too keen on the idea of her temporarily bunking with Chris and his dog, either.

Chris wondered how much of their earlier conversation Rory remembered. Did she recall admitting she was potentially in danger just before growing sick?

Rory folded her arms across her chest. She'd changed into a white, long-sleeved shirt and black leggings that went to her calves.

He hadn't focused on the shape of her long legs because he'd been too worried about her, plus her brother was in the room, but he couldn't seem to *not* notice the curve of her ass in those stretchy black things.

But when he swung his gaze toward Jesse, Jesse was glowering at him as if he noticed Chris checking her out, and shit, he needed her brother on his side.

"Aren't you supposed to be having dinner with your service buddy?" Rory's gaze volleyed back and forth between the two of them. "And Ella mentioned the other night y'all are throwing a post-wedding party for A.J. and Ana, so maybe you ought to head back, so you don't miss it."

"There's time." Chris wasn't ready to leave. Not without her. Not with her safety on the line. It wasn't in his DNA to turn his back on a woman in need, even if the woman was strong and stubborn.

"And if I leave, who's going to keep you from taking candy from a stranger next?" Jesse prompted. Chris bit his lip and tried not to laugh. Jesse was exercising his right as a protective big brother to act like a jerk, which would probably earn anyone else a slap on the face.

"Real funny." She uncrossed her arms and waved him away. "Go. If you're really here to visit with your friend and not because you ran away from Ella, then I don't want you to be late."

Jesse's mouth opened before he clamped his jaw tight.

Ah, the guy still hadn't made a move on A.J.'s sister, had he?

"Go," Rory said again. "I'll take care of him next."

Jesse faced Chris, brows pulled together. A warning in his eyes to keep Rory safe, as well as not to hurt her. Message received.

"I won't be late." Jesse grabbed his truck keys and left.

Silence filled the room, so Chris tucked his hands into his back pockets and waited for Rory to make the next move, to see exactly how she planned to "take care of him."

"What do you like to eat? Got anything frozen I can whip up?" he asked when her mouth remained stubbornly closed, her eyes on the wood floors beneath her bright red toenails.

"I doubt I can eat anything right now."

He walked past her and headed for the large kitchen, which was similar in style to the living room. Bright white cabinets and backsplash. The décor was made up of soft blues and hints of yellow and orange, livening up the place. His mom would have loved a place like this. Maybe she would

have stayed with his dad if he'd been able to give her everything she'd wanted. He grimaced at the thought and shook it free from his mind. "I fixed your sink while you were sleeping."

"Thank you, but I'm horribly embarrassed about what happened earlier." She entered the kitchen and set a palm onto the granite kitchen island at the center of the space. "Also, I'm sticking to my answer of no about the job."

He opened the freezer and searched for something to make. He sorely lacked culinary skills. "Ravioli?" he asked when retrieving a bag. "And your first answer was no," he added casually, "but your second was yes."

"I didn't say yes." Her lovely eyes pinned to his when he faced her. But her walls were back up, the ones the brownies had inadvertently lowered when he'd first arrived.

"Did you forget what you told me just before you got sick?"

"I must have." She looked away.

"Sure," he said with a smile, and his words had her hazel eyes landing back on him.

"Did you tell Jesse?" She lifted her hand from the island and took a step his way.

He set the bag of goat cheese ravioli on the counter and maneuvered around the island to stand in front of her.

"A.J.?" she asked, nerves or fear probably the cause of that line between her brow.

So, her brother and A.J. didn't know. He figured as much.

"No, I didn't tell them." *Just Harper.*

Her shoulders relaxed. "Whatever I said to you, can you forget it?"

"And what was it that you said to me?" His hand splayed atop the island, and he leaned in closer to her. His eyes dropped to her mouth, and he had no control over the dirty thoughts that zipped through his mind as he studied her lips, rounded and poised to speak, the words hanging there. But she didn't seem in the mood to share.

"You're going to be a problem, aren't you?" she whispered as his attention moved back to her eyes, the pupils now back to normal. He hadn't spent much time around people on drugs, but he probably should have noticed her pupils had nearly eclipsed the hazel color earlier.

"If wanting to help you makes me a problem, then I guess so," he answered as honestly as possible.

"I thought you came here because you needed *my* help."

He lifted one shoulder. The smell of coconut soap struck him now that they were so close. "Looks like we both need each other," he said, remembering Elaina's words. Or were they a warning? He wasn't so sure.

Her tongue skirted the line between her lips, a tantalizing sight to see. Maybe she'd be the one causing him trouble, not the other way around.

"Come to Virginia with me," he said, his voice low and deep. A request that probably came across like a command to her. But it was fear for her safety, along with the desire to get to know her more, that had deepened his tone.

She started to turn away, but he circled a hand around her waist, and she halted. A twist of her head and lift of her chin brought her eyes back to his.

"Don't answer me now. I don't need to be back until tomorrow. That gives me tonight."

"Tonight to change my mind?" she asked with amusement in her tone.

He angled his head, maintaining his light grip on her.

"And if I still say no by the end of the night, will you accept my answer and go back home? Never mention what I said to you earlier to anyone?"

“I get that you’re trying to protect your family and friends. And I believe that the threats to your life and theirs are real and not to be taken lightly,” he began, keeping his voice steady, “but why not let someone protect you?”

Indecision warred in the lines of her face. “And that person . . . you think it should be you?”

“It doesn’t have to be.” He wanted it to be, but if she’d open up to her brother, or A.J.—well, as long as someone he trusted helped her, that was all that mattered. He wouldn’t be selfish and insist on claiming that spot, considering he was practically a stranger. “But I’d like to be that guy.” He brought the back of his free hand to her cheek, and she leaned into his touch.

“Because you need me, too,” Rory whispered, eyes dropping closed.

He swallowed and nodded, even though she couldn’t see his answer. But he realized he did need her, and Elaina was right for reasons he didn’t understand yet.

“For Bear, I mean,” she corrected and opened her lids.

“For Bear,” he answered, his voice hoarse with unexpected emotion. “I’ll totally screw up his training without you.”

“And if I tell you not to let him sleep in your bed, you’ll listen to me?”

Could he be a total ass and ask her to sleep in his bed instead? No, it was best not to let his dick do the talking. “I’ll do whatever you tell me,” he promised and released her.

Her lip pulled at the side, catching between her teeth. “I don’t know, but I’ll give you dinner to try and win me over.”

“Just dinner?” He smiled.

“You need more time than that?” she challenged.

God, he liked this woman. “No, ma’am.” He continued to grin like an idiot. “Dinner’s more than enough time.”

“What are you doing?” she asked when he placed the ravioli back in the freezer.

“Finding something that takes a lot longer to cook.”

The soft sound of her chuckle had him tossing a look back at her from over his shoulder.

She had both elbows on the island, her chin situated on one palm as she observed him. And oh, she was checking out his ass.

Her cheeks blossomed pink when she lifted her eyes to discover he’d caught her.

“McKenna was right.” She wet her lips.

“A.J.’s niece?” he asked for clarification, then released the door to the fridge and faced her, and she nodded. “About what?”

“Nothing.” A lazy smile met her lips as she stood upright, pulled her hair free from the ponytail, and shook her locks, allowing her wavy blonde hair to brush the tops of her breasts. Her hair color was two shades of blonde—a bit lighter on the bottom and more golden-hued on top.

Her nose was straight. Lips full. Her summer tan still clung to her skin. She reminded him a little of that Australian actress, Teresa-something, that he liked in the movie *Hacksaw Ridge*. That World War II film had been hard to watch, but Chris always pushed himself outside of his comfort zone. That was who he was. The kind of man he tried to be. But combat movies . . . watching those had him waking up in a cold sweat with his gun in hand, no idea when or how he grabbed hold of it from under the bed.

He was proud to be military, and he loved his life, but serving in the Iraq War was different than what he did now, and for some reason, movies had a weird way of triggering him.

Nobody on Bravo or Echo knew that about him. And they never would. He’d made a name for himself as being the carefree, fun guy. And he was that guy. Most of the time. He just did his best to

hide the other side when necessary.

But he had to face his fears, like he was now, by seeking Rory out to see if the connection he thought he'd felt in Alabama, even though it scared him, was real.

"You okay?" Rory was standing before him, eyes narrowed. When did she get there?

And was he really just standing in front of the fridge with the door open? He didn't remember opening it back up again. He'd been taking in her beauty and—

"Hey." Her palm went to his cheek. Her touch was soft.

"Sorry, dazed out."

"That happen often?"

"Only under stress." Never during the stress of an op, which was ironic, but also fortunate.

Her mouth softened, the hard line loosening. "Do I stress you out?"

You being in danger does. "No, my thoughts got away from me." He forced the knot down his throat as she stepped back, her hand leaving his face. "I'm solid." He smiled. "So, dinner. Dinner. What can I make for dinner?"

CHAPTER FIVE

“SO, HE WOKE UP WITH TWO FRONT TEETH MISSING AND HIS PANTS AROUND HIS ANKLES, BUT—”

“But he had the gold,” Chris guessed the ending to Rory’s story, his stomach muscles tight and almost sore from laughing so much.

Rory’s eyes narrowed and locked on to the neck of his beer as he brought the rim to his mouth. “But yeah, he had the gold,” she repeated. Her laugh was husky yet feminine. Sexy as hell, and it had his body heating.

Liquid at the edges of her eyes from laughing so hard for the last twenty minutes appeared while they’d swapped stories. The last one about the drunken treasure hunter and wannabe pirate had taken the cake.

“And after that, he changed his name to Jack Sparrow,” she added while reaching for her ice water. “I kid you not.”

“And you hung out with this character?” He set his bottle down without having taken a sip, too mesmerized by her eyes, by the way her lips always curled up a tiny bit on the left side whenever she was on the verge of laughing hard.

They’d finished the dinner he’d thrown together, a not-so-gourmet meal of spaghetti and meatballs, and then moved out to her back deck, which overlooked lush green grass that would take a hell of a mower to cut. Probably two acres between where they sat and the bank of trees lining the property.

The outdoor living space was roomy and comfortable. A few farmhouse-style lanterns hung from the wood beams of the overhang, and Rory had lit the votives inside the glass even though the sun hadn’t quite set. A soft glow filled the area, which was kind of romantic. Not that he was a romantic guy, but it was nice. They’d both wordlessly ignored the wicker two-seater couch, choosing to sit at a small four-person square table at the center of the deck. As much as he would have liked to be next to her, he enjoyed being able to look into her eyes.

Rory had changed into jeans and a white scoop-neck tank top while he’d made a mess in the kitchen cooking, but since the temperature had dipped to sixty-five, she’d grabbed a soft blue, open-front sweater for outside. Her hair was back up and in a messy but sexy bun at the top of her head. She was stunning. Absolutely freaking beautiful.

He’d swapped his shirt earlier for a clean one after the sink disaster, pairing a long-sleeved black one with his dark jeans.

“Twilight. My favorite time of day.” Rory’s eyes faced the denim-blue sky streaked with light pink. “It’s usually when I climb.”

“You climb? Like mountains?” He wasn’t sure why this surprised him so much, given she had

clearly led an adventurous life.

“Climbing helped me get over my fear of heights. Getting bitten by a snake, however, did nothing to dispel my fear of snakes.” She faced him, her words so casual it took him a moment to decide whether or not she was kidding.

Images of the snake-infested room from his last op came to mind, and he tried hard not to cringe. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that part about the snake because then I’ll really worry about what you’ve been up to. But I have to ask, isn’t climbing so close to nightfall dangerous?”

“I lead a dangerous life,” she said with a shrug, her eyes twinkling, “what can I say?”

He squinted, purposefully appearing as though he was trying to get a read on her. “Correction. You *did* lead a dangerous life. You’re not anymore, right?”

Rory lifted her fingers and massaged her forehead. “Right.” She lowered her hand to her lap and placed her other hand on the table.

He wanted to reach out. Gently lay his palm on top of her hand. But they were still in that “barely know each other” phase. Although, didn’t carrying her to bed after she vomited mean they’d skipped over at least one of those awkward getting-to-know-you phases?

“Why treasure hunting? It seems like such a leap from the canine training you’d planned to do after graduating college.”

She’d provided him a rundown of her life over dinner, one he assumed he could pull up on a LinkedIn profile. Bullet points of accomplishments and skills but lacking intimate details. Basically, she was like him and the guys when it came to sharing their life with anyone outside their inner circle. But he found himself wanting to be in her circle, and for her to be in his.

“Why the Navy?” She turned the tables on him instead of answering. And yup, that would have been a standard avoidance tactic he would have used. “And why’d you leave the Navy?” Her follow-up question came fast on the heels of her first, probably intended to surprise him, hoping he’d answer without hesitation—also, more proof of how clever she was.

Rory was a fascinating woman. But damn, even though he wanted to let her in—the first woman in his entire life he’d felt the compelling need to do that with—he couldn’t tell her the truth, and that had his stomach turning. An internal tug-of-war, and now he knew how the married guys on the teams must have felt when they’d struggled with how to be honest with the women they loved while trying to maintain their oath and duty to the country.

“You’re playing hardball, huh?” He gripped the chair arms and pinned his back to the seat, carefully assessing her. “I bet you’ve tried to get info out of A.J., so you already know I can’t answer your second question.” Chris took the only possible route. He didn’t want to lie, so the next best thing was to fess up that the truth wasn’t something he’d be able to deliver.

He angled his head, continuing to study the soft sweep of her cheekbones, which were more evident with her hair up. And the set of her luscious lips in a straight line that he wanted to part with his tongue.

She plucked a stray hair away from her face and wet her lips, answering his comment by silently studying him.

“There was a *someone*, wasn’t there?” he found himself asking when she’d yet to talk. It wasn’t fair that he was asking her to peel back layers when he wasn’t doing it himself, but the curious kid still lived inside of him, and that part of him would always want answers. He wanted to discover the truth that made Rosemary McAdams who she was today. “There’s always a *someone*,” he added, his stomach growing tight when the pain he thought he’d put behind him years ago clamored to emerge. That gut-wrenching, gnawing feeling he always tried to convince himself was just hunger pains. But

he was full right now, and he couldn't write it off as anything other than his past reaching for him.

"Was there a *someone* for you? A someone who made you want to join the Navy? Or maybe influenced why you left?" She scooted closer to the small square table, and her knees bumped into his. Rather than flinch or shy away from the accidental touch, she stayed in place and met his gaze with equal intensity. Her eyes held his and remained focused under his rapt attention.

He quietly nodded, unable to divulge much more about his "departure" from the Navy since he was technically still operating off-the-books.

Rory peered down at the distressed wood of the tabletop and lifted her right hand to her ear, using her thumb and forefinger to smooth over the small, pink pearl earring, as if checking that it was still in place. "I guess you could say there was a *someone* for me." Her words sounded more like deference for a past friend than a loved one, but . . .

"A someone you loved?" *Why'd I ask that? It's not my business.*

She lifted her eyes to his. "Andrew could only ever love his job."

"Andrew." He allowed the name to sit in his mind, processing.

"I met him in Cosenza. My archaeology professor approached me with a request two years after I graduated and had just finished all my coursework for canine training. He asked if I was available to go on a dig with him in Italy."

"The gold supposedly buried along with King Alaric, the guy who sacked Rome?"

Her eyes widened at his words. "How'd you—"

"I'm a Roman history buff. Not sure why, but it was one of the only subjects that interested me in history class back in high school. I saw something on the news a few years back that the Italians think they have a location for the treasure. Like a billion or more in value."

"Yeah, but before then, my professor thought he knew where it was and had funding from a big firm to go and excavate. He quit his job, and he approached me, asking if I'd go to Italy for six months with him before I officially began training dogs."

"Why you?" Did the professor have a thing for her? Was the professor Andrew? If so, he didn't like the guy already.

"I loved archeology, but the expense of grad school and then the reality of trying to make a career out of it was . . . daunting. But I was his best student and always fascinated with his stories about the hidden treasure. We met a couple of times a week at a coffee shop. I bought him a caramel macchiato in exchange for tales of treasure. So, I thought, what the hell, why not have an adventure for six months."

"But you never came back," Chris said, noting the touch of sadness filling her eyes.

"My professor never did find the treasure, but I met Andrew on that trip. He convinced me to take a job with him, to put all my research skills I'd learned as a history major to good use." She rose from the table, walked to the three steps leading to the grass, and sat on the top one.

Chris followed her, leaving his beer on the table. He'd stopped at one since Rory had looked at it with a grimace. She was still recovering from the brownies, but she'd said his dinner had helped ease the dull ache in her stomach, so that was good.

Rory's hands rested on either side of her, gripping the step, and as he positioned himself to sit next to her, his palm accidentally brushed along the top of her hand. As they both glanced down at the contact, Chris couldn't help but notice how small and dainty she looked compared to him.

"Treasure hunting is ninety percent research. It's not all diving and scaling cliffs or rappelling into caves. And then when you do find a location, there's a ton of work. Ground-penetrating radar, sonar software, infrared tech, drones . . . it's complex."

“You miss it,” he said, observing what could only be equated to as loss or mourning in her eyes when she chanced a look at him.

“Yes and no. Being in the Atlantic Ocean, swimming inside a wreck, knowing at any minute it could cave in on you—it’s an experience, that’s for sure. Seeing the twisted and broken pieces, the medley of steel and pipes. The swirl of silt on the ocean floor. It’s like being on another planet down there.” Her hands moved into the air as she spoke with excitement. “Or when you’re in a secret cave, and you know if someone else shows up, you might have to run, fight, or shoot, and not necessarily in that order, your pulse will throb like crazy.”

“So, you’re an adrenaline junkie.” He understood that. Hell, he was the same way. “Were you more like *Indiana Jones* or the dude in *Romancing the Stone*?” He hoped to lighten the mood since a sudden darkness hovered over her, and he wanted to go back to laughing until his stomach hurt. He didn’t want to see pain in her eyes.

She chuckled. “You saw *Romancing the Stone*?”

“Of course.” He lifted his chin to prompt an answer. “So?”

“Neither. More like Kate Hudson in *Fool’s Gold*, and not because her character was a diver, but because she was with a guy obsessed with finding treasure.” She shook her head. “But I got out five years ago.” Her gaze moved back to the open field of grass stretched out before them. There was plenty of land for her to set up a training center. “I don’t miss Andrew, and although I do miss treasure hunting, I’d never go back to that life. I left for a reason.”

So, what had she been doing during the last five years that would have people wanting her dead? “But you won’t tell me the reason?”

“Oh, that one is easy.” Her pinky finger touched his, most likely on accident, but the slight touch had him wanting more. “I was strongly opposed to keeping what I felt wasn’t mine to keep. And I had issues with artifacts winding up in museums where they didn’t belong, either.”

Ah. Explained why there were no artifacts displayed around her house.

“There’s a huge black market for antiquities, and the demand is high,” she continued. “Treasure hunters are all basically outlaws.”

“With a little bit of pirate thrown in,” he teased. “But I guess that makes sense. So, what you’re saying is that you’re a good person.” He smiled. “Not a criminal I should be worried about.”

“I did my fair share of things that would . . .” She let her voice trail off. “But um, Andrew will be in D.C. a week from tonight,” she quickly said. “He’s presenting some artifacts from his latest find. A Spanish galleon. He invited me, but I wasn’t planning to go.”

“But you’re thinking about it now since you’ll be so close? You know, staying with me and Bear in Virginia.”

“Nice try.” She peered at him with a grin.

“Wait, are you referring to Andrew Cutter? *The Andrew Cutter*, the one I’ve seen on TV?” The Brad Pitt look-alike, the *Ocean’s Eleven*, total badass version of Brad Pitt.

She nodded. “I know what you’re thinking. He’s in his late forties, but I promise I don’t have father issues or something. He just got me wrapped up in the excitement and allure of treasure hunting, and we dated on and off while working together, but then I realized that life wasn’t for me, so I walked away.”

That five-year gap between then and now was what he still had to figure out. And clearly, she was vague as shit unless high, so he wasn’t sure how he’d pull the truth out of her. But he had no choice but to do whatever it’d take to keep her safe. No way would he be able to walk away from her with a possible target on her head, not when he only finally found a woman that made him . . .

He blinked a few times, pushing his thoughts away for the time being. “But training is the life for you now?”

“That was the life I was supposed to have had if my professor hadn’t sought me out.” She brought her palms to her jeaned thighs and smoothed them up and down.

“But is it the life you want?” As much as he wanted her to train Bear, it’d crush him to have a courageous and adventurous woman like her do something that wasn’t in her heart. He was all about pursuing what made you happy, and he was a living, breathing example of that. Operating and the teams were everything to him.

“Yes.” But the word came out strained, and the tight draw of her lips before she rose from the step was a red flag.

“Why New Orleans? Why set up shop here?” he pushed, knowing he now had no choice but to dive into the part of the evening he’d been avoiding. Unraveling the mystery that was Rosemary McAdams wasn’t going to happen in one night. But one night was all he had to convince her to work with Bear. If Chris could manage that, he’d be able to keep her safe.

“I love the culture. The history. The food. Location. Basically everything.”

Well, that was a rehearsed line if he ever heard one, one she probably offered those who asked, but he didn’t want to be on the receiving end of generic answers, not when it came to her.

Rory tucked her hands into the deep pockets of her sweater, eyes cast to the ceiling fan that wasn’t on.

“And it’s far enough away from your family to keep them safe but close enough for you to see them when you want?” The bubble of bliss they’d been floating in had officially popped.

“Chris.” Her warning shot was fired with enough flare it nearly knocked him back a step.

Rory’s hazel gaze met his face, full of that same fire, and he held both palms in the air. “How are you feeling? Stomach okay? Head?”

“Way to change the subject,” she said as if now out of steam.

“Thought that’s what you wanted, but we will have to talk about the proverbial elephant in the room sooner or later. Preferably sooner.” Who wanted her dead, and why? Chris’s life, the nature of his work, was usually the biggest secret in the room, but it seemed he had some competition.

“I know what you’re thinking.” She removed her hands from her pockets.

“You do, do ya?” he asked with a casual smile playing across his lips, a second chance to try and squash the heavy with a little light before the darkness of the truth clouded their evening again.

“My life is complicated, but being in Louisiana, well, I was hoping to uncomplicate things.” She put a hand to the hollow of her throat, and his eyes followed the path of her fingers as they trailed down to the curve of her tank top.

“If I were to bring Bear to New Orleans to train, would you consider it then?” He wasn’t sure how he’d swing that, and Elaina would be devastated, but he didn’t want to screw up Rory’s life. He also didn’t want her getting hurt, so he had to find a way to protect her somehow.

She frowned. “You can’t do that. You and I both know that.”

“But if I could?”

“I won’t let you.” She set her lips in that now-familiar tight, stubborn line.

“I hunt bad guys for a living, you know.” He carefully considered his next words. “I’d do anything and everything to keep you safe.”

“I don’t doubt you would, but it’s not your job to protect me.”

“And whose job is it?”

“Mine, and the four firearms inside my house.”

Four? His brows rose in surprise. *Well, okay.*

“And my black belt in karate has me covered.” She stepped around the table and moved closer to him, a challenging lift of her chin.

“I need you,” he managed out. “Bear does, too. If you don’t need protecting, then please let me hire you. Think about how badly I’ll screw up without you.” Time for a new plan. It was clear he wouldn’t win her over by suffocating her with ideas of keeping her safe. “Plus, you haven’t had experience in a decade. I imagine if you can advertise the fact you trained a Belgian Malinois for a SEAL Team, that might look good to future clients.”

“You work for a security company now,” she shot back, but there was curiosity in her eyes.

“Tomato, tomahto.”

Rory gave him her back, and his eyes moved to the set of Adirondack chairs down by the firepit.

“You think you can lay off the charm while I’m there? No flirting. No sexy looks like you were giving me tonight?”

“I was not giving sexy—” He cut himself off when she faced him with the most adorable twist of her lips and cute tightening of her eyes. “I can do whatever you need me to do if it means you’ll work with Bear.” *And let me help you.*

“And if I stay at your house in Virginia, it’ll only be to make sure you don’t let Bear sleep with you. No late-night drinks while wearing lingerie.”

“I promise not to wear lingerie.” He set a hand to his heart.

“Be serious.”

“I am. Lingerie chafes. No worries. I won’t wear it.”

She closed the last bit of space between them and looked up to meet his gaze since she was about six to eight inches shorter than him. “One condition. One rule if I go.”

“Anything,” he mouthed, eager and grateful it hadn’t taken too much convincing to lure her to Virginia in hopes of saving her life.

She arched a brow and offered her hand, and he observed her long, slender fingers and started to reach for her when she whispered, “No falling for me.”

CHAPTER SIX

WASHINGTON, D.C.

“I JUST NEED A MINUTE. YOU GO ON AHEAD,” RORY SAID TO CHRIS AS THEY STOOD AT THE FRONT door of his friend Liam’s home. “Gotta make a quick call.”

Chris hadn’t wanted to risk getting chewed out by his buddies’ wives for being late to Ana and A.J.’s surprise party, so they’d driven directly there after landing at D.C.’s National Airport. Rory’s bags were still in the back of Chris’s black Jeep Rubicon since there’d been no time after the flight to stop by his rental in Virginia.

She’d done a quick change in the bathroom at the airport, switching from jeans to a soft cotton, navy-blue sleeveless wrap dress that fell just below her knees, layering a short denim jacket over it. Gray ankle boots and a long silver pendant in the shape of a compass completed the look.

Chris had homed right in on the compass when she’d exited the bathroom, a smile playing on his lips. *You look beautiful*, he’d said before sweeping his focus to her eyes. He hadn’t changed, opting to stay in khaki pants, a black, long-sleeved button-down shirt, and black boots that looked more combat than casual. *You smell good, too*, he’d added when reaching for her bag at her side.

“You sure you want to come in alone? I can wait for you.” He glanced around at the charming neighborhood situated within the beating heart of the nation. Based on the number of cars lining the street, Rory assumed the house was packed.

Chris had said everyone would be at the party from his company except Luke Scott. He had his second baby last month, and he and his wife were back home in New York City.

Rory had spent most of the flight peppering Chris with questions about his coworkers, hoping it’d distract him from asking her questions about herself. Even though A.J. had filled her in over the years about the group of men and women he worked with, the way Chris’s eyes lit up as he chatted about the guys warmed her heart.

“I may come from a small town, but my home was always bustling with people. Never a minute alone. I can manage.” She reached for his forearm and offered him a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m happy you’re here. I really am.” Heavens, the man was handsome. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone, and she followed the line of his tan throat up to where his hand stroked his closely trimmed beard.

Rory let go of his arm and swiped a hand through her wavy locks. She’d decided to leave her hair down for the party. “I am, too.” And she was. Truly. She was also terrified that he’d get hurt.

“Glad your brother didn’t try to kill me when I told him I was bringing you home with me.”

She smiled at the memory of how that conversation went down last night. Jesse had called A.J. to get his stamp of approval, and he’d also threatened bodily harm to Chris if anything happened to her.

“Meet you inside,” she promised before grabbing her phone from her small shoulder bag. He nodded and hesitantly turned away, the lines of his body tense as he moved. She was certain his apprehension was due to what she’d inadvertently let slip while under the influence of those brownies yesterday. And now he was a man on a mission. She could tell he wasn’t a person to let something so alarming go. She’d have to try and distract the hell out of him in hopes he’d move on.

Carter Dominick was already one too many people who knew about her. She’d been so careful and cautious over the years—changing her appearance for each job. No one had gotten the drop on her until Carter. But he wasn’t your run-of-the-mill criminal. His military and CIA background made him a more formidable threat, and she should have known better than to risk going anywhere near him.

The fact she'd taken the bait was proof enough it was time for her to step aside, even though the fight wasn't over—and would the fight ever be over?

Rory rotated her neck and tried to loosen the tension before dialing A.J.'s sister.

"Hey, it's me," she said when Ella picked up on the third ring. Rory walked back down the front steps and closer to the street since she could hear the partygoers in the backyard. She didn't want anyone to be able to listen in on her conversation with Ella. "I'm here. About to see your brother and Ana."

"I gotta say, I wasn't sure if you'd back out at the last minute," Ella said. "I'm proud of you."

"I don't always run." *I'm trying not to do that anymore. Feet on the ground. Plant some roots.*

"You're a free spirit. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But you'd like to see me settle down? Find a nice guy? Get married and have kids?" Rory's parents would be sorely disappointed if they found out she wasn't sure if she was the marry-and-have-kids type of woman.

"I just want you to be happy." Ella paused. "Are you planning on going to that gala honoring Andrew on Friday since you're nearby?"

Rory tried to keep as few secrets from her best friend as possible since most of her life was already one gigantic secret, but she kind of regretted telling Ella about Andrew's invitation. "Why would I go to the gala?"

"You haven't seen him in years. He calls. You don't answer. He emails. You delete them. Do you think he wants you back?"

Rory stiffened at the question. At the possibility. Getting back together with Andrew was the last thing Rory wanted. They were two different pieces that belonged to two entirely different puzzles. They didn't fit, and they never would. No, if she were to fall in love, the kind of love their friend Savanna had with her husband before he died, well, it would be with someone who was her perfect fit.

"Just so we're clear," Ella said before Rory spoke up, "I am team Chris all the way. I'll never be team Andrew."

"So, your question was a test." *You and Jesse belong with each other. Y'all use the same trickery on me.*

"Andrew didn't make you happy, but maybe it'd be good for you to see him again. Close that door once and for all and make sure he knows it's never going to open again." Ella's voice was soft and yet rang with a hint of authority. A sassy and stubborn Hawkins woman, and Rory loved her for it.

"Why are you team Chris?" she asked instead, eyes moving back to the house when music commenced playing in the backyard. Turning to face the street again, Rory stared at Chris's Jeep.

Am I really going to stay with that man for weeks? Months? Proper training for a military working dog took months.

"I have never heard you chatter on about any guy, let alone one you barely know like you've talked about Chris since meeting him. You were practically swooning after that party in June. And, girl, when it comes to you and men, the guys do the swooning, you're always the swoon-ee. But when you called to fill me in on his surprise visit yesterday, I could hear the catch in your voice. The excitement. The *desire*," she added, dragging out the word dramatically, purposely exaggerating her Southern twang.

"I'd be an idiot not to want hot, wild sex with that man. Against the wall. In the shower. All over the freaking place. I mean, have you seen him?" Rory asked, then flinched at the sound of a door shutting behind her. Just her luck. *When I turn around, Chris is gonna be there. Because why*

wouldn't he walk out right now?

"You deserve some hot sex, but—"

"One second," Rory said softly and pivoted to follow the noise.

"Forgot the wedding gift in the car," Chris said, standing on the front stoop. "Um." He pointed to his Jeep, clearly not sure what to do at the moment. His cheeks were still a healthy tan for October, but a touch of red had worked its way from the base of his throat up to his face.

Well, this is perfect. I warn the guy not to fall for me, and then he overhears I want to bang him.

Her magic-brownie experience aside, she didn't normally blush or get flustered over a guy, but if there were a moment for it to happen, it'd be now.

Chris smiled as he strolled past her to the Jeep. Rory shut her eyes and contemplated how to wriggle herself out of this situation. She didn't need Chris thinking it'd be safe to resume with the charm and flirting because of what she'd said to Ella.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said a few seconds later, prompting her to open her eyes as he walked by her and toward the house again.

"No worries."

He shot her a crooked smile that made it clear he was going to be trouble, then hurried up the steps and disappeared into the house.

"Oh my God, he heard me," she confessed to Ella the second he was gone, feeling like they were back in high school and not the thirtysomething-year-old women they were today.

"And how'd that go?" Ella snickered. "You check for a bulge in his pants?"

"Ella," she chided, fighting a smile.

"Hey, maybe he's the adventure you've always been searching for. Love can be a thrill, too, you know. All depends if you find the right man."

Speaking of right men . . . "Jesse make it home okay?"

"Yeah, we bumped into each other in town. He said a few words, then rushed away as if I have the plague. Basically, his standard MO since the Fourth of July."

"I'm sorry." She grimaced. What the hell was wrong with her brother?

"Hey, it's not like I canceled my wedding for him, right?" Ella tossed out sarcastically.

"Jesse is just . . ." What could Rory even say? She didn't have the answers.

"Let's not worry about me right now. Let's focus on your love life."

No, no. I do not have a love life. Nor do I want one. No hot shower sex for me. And yet, her mind went straight to the image. Chris pinning her arms over her head against the tile, water trailing down both their bodies as he dipped down and took a nipple in his mouth.

"Rory, um."

Uh-oh. Here it comes. She shook herself free of the delicious shower-sex scene.

"A.J. said Chris hasn't always had an easy life, and he's . . . yeah, he's a fun-loving guy, but there's more to him and . . . just be careful. Don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"Oh." Her hand went to her hip as she absorbed the warning. "I already gave Chris the heads-up. Told him not to fall for me." Although she hadn't said, "We can't have no-strings sex," either. She probably should add that amendment, even though sex was healthy. Liberating. Enjoyable. But if it'd lead to him falling in love with her, she'd have to forget shower sex. Any kind of sex with him at all.

"You didn't." Ella lightly laughed. "Oh, God. You did. What am I going to do with you, girl?"

"I don't know. Shit, animals are easier than people."

"Ain't that the truth." Ella tsked. "Don't you have somewhere to be right now? You're stalling."

“I know, I know. But there are a ton of Teamguys and their wives inside.”

“You’ve never been intimidated by anyone in your life. Why start now?”

Because I’m nervous. Which was strange and disconcerting because she didn’t get nervous.

“Hey, when you see my brother, can you whack him on the head once for me?”

“Thought you already did that when he laid the news on you in Bama he and Ana eloped.” Rory started for the house, her nerves a soft echo still cocooning her.

“I did, but he could use a second bop on the head. Our poor parents got robbed of two summer weddings.”

“That first one wasn’t your fault. Nor the second.”

“Yeah, well, I was the idiot who almost married the wrong man all because . . .” Ella’s deep breath floated over the line, creating a crackle. “You better go. Love you, girl. Talk later.” She ended the call, leaving Rory with no reason to procrastinate any longer.

She stowed her phone and walked slowly up the steps and into the house, prepared to face the music. But she wasn’t prepared for the sight that met her eyes once she was in the foyer. It stopped her in her tracks and sent her heart climbing into her throat. Maybe Ella was right. Maybe a guy could give her all the feels—the intense ones she craved and thought were only achievable through her work.

Chris was on the living room floor playfully wrestling with Bear, while a pretty young girl stood by, clapping and watching the matchup. Another dog, a Siberian Husky, watched the action, his tail wagging with excitement, but surprisingly, he wasn’t jumping in.

Chris was breaking so many training rules.

But damn, her pulse was soaring at the sight of him rolling around with his dog.

She set her purse to the side of the couch as she walked in and positioned her hands on her hips, doing her best to give Chris a stern look when he lifted his head and caught her watching him.

“What?” A stupidly sexy grin crossed his lips as he pushed upright onto all fours and Bear immediately set his paws on his back in a dominant position. “This against the rules, too?”

“Afraid so,” she admitted just before Bear twisted around at the sound of her voice, then dropped down to charge her way. She caught his paws in the air, and leaned in, letting him kiss her on the cheek with his nose.

“He loves you already,” Chris said when she leaned down and Bear “bear-hugged” her, bringing her to her knees.

“Just like *you’ll* love her.” The girl with long, dark hair smiled brightly, observing them.

Huh? Rory remained on her knees, scratching Bear behind the ears while she sweetly informed him in a low voice that he’d better lap up all the fun and games while he could because they were going to get down to business soon.

Then, eager for attention too, the Husky ran over, and both dogs practically knocked her down, but Chris came in for the save. He reached for her hand and helped her to her feet. “They’re overzealous,” Rory commented.

“They just know a good thing when they see one.” Chris set a hand to the girl’s shoulder after releasing his hold of Rory. She looked about eleven, Ella’s niece’s age. “This is Elaina, Liam and Emily’s daughter. She took care of Bear while I was in New Orleans.”

Elaina stuck her hand out at the introduction. “Nice to meet you. My mom died. And my dad is a super-genius who doesn’t have much time for me. I was kidnapped. Twice. So, Liam and Emily adopted me. I love it here. And I love all these people like you will, too.” She shook Rory’s hand, effectively leaving her speechless as well as spellbound.

Chris innocently shrugged. "A.J. and Ana beat us here. They're out back. Come on."

Elaina reached for her hand again, this time clasping hold like they were old friends. The sincere gesture had Rory's chest tightening.

"Can I help you with Bear when I'm not in school?" Elaina asked as they made their way to the kitchen, the two dogs excitedly trailing behind them.

"Absolutely." Rory eyed Chris from over her shoulder, and he smiled his thanks.

"I have faith in Bear. He'll be fine. Once Uncle Chris stops doing all the wrong things with him," Elaina said, cupping in a laugh with her free hand.

Rory loved this kid already. "I'll definitely need your help keeping him in line," she teased, referring to Chris, not Bear.

"Oh, there are my parents!" Elaina pointed to Liam—tall, blond, and handsome. And looking every bit the proud dad as he cradled his son in the crook of his arm. His wife, Emily, had just popped a strawberry in Liam's mouth, followed by a quick kiss as they stood in front of the kitchen table, which was covered in appetizers and desserts.

"Oh, hi! You must be Rory." Emily faced her and dried her hands on a dish towel before closing the space between them. "Everyone is outside. I just came in to feed Jackson."

"And Liam, from the looks of it," Chris joked as Emily shook Rory's hand.

Emily took her son from Liam, and Rory smiled at the cute little guy. "He looks just like—"

"My husband, I know. We're in trouble when he's older," Emily said with a bright, friendly smile.

"Liam. Nice to meet you." His Australian accent was soft but noticeable.

"My dad looks like Thor, right? Well, Thor with short hair." Elaina leaned into Liam's side, pride in her eyes. "He's as strong as him, too."

"He likes to think so," Emily said with a chuckle. "I'll catch up with you soon. Just heading to my room to nurse." She set a quick hand to Rory's shoulder, a welcome-to-the-family kind of pat, then walked past her.

"I'm glad you're able to help out with Bear." Liam scratched his jaw with his free hand, an arm slung around Elaina. "Thank you."

"Of course." Rory smiled, stealing a look at Chris, who was kneeling to pet Bear again.

"A.J. and Ana are outside." Liam motioned toward the door leading to the backyard. "I'm sure A.J.'s excited to see you." As soon as Chris stood, Bear bounced up and down like a puppy. Rory just shook her head and followed them out back.

What did I get myself into?

"Owen." Rory spotted him behind the grill alongside a second one, where the President's son flipped steaks. She'd nearly forgotten that "small" detail that Knox Bennett's dad was President of the United States.

"Right, forgot you met Owen when he flew Ana to Alabama for Ella's wedding. Well, the wedding that didn't happen," Chris replied.

"And uh, no Secret Service with Knox being here?" she asked when Knox caught their eyes and started their way.

Rory scanned the crowded backyard as Knox approached. She saw quite a few familiar faces, but there were a lot more she didn't recognize. A.J. and Ana were talking to another couple, their backs to her. There were outdoor games like cornhole set up on one side, and pop-up tables with food on the other.

"Knox's wife is Secret Service, but she's not his detail," Chris explained when Liam and Elaina disappeared into the thick of the yard swimming with people.

"I'm not a fan of being followed around." Knox flashed a big smile and reached for Rory's hand. "Part of the deal was that I wouldn't have a detail."

"Deal?" Rory arched a brow, searching for meaning in his words, but when Knox and Chris exchanged a quick look, she realized she wouldn't get an explanation.

"That's my wife, Adriana." Knox motioned to a pretty brunette talking to a couple at the patio table. Rory remembered Wyatt from Alabama, and she assumed the blonde leaning into him was his wife, Natasha.

"I'm going to try hard to keep all the names straight." Rory folded the sleeves of her denim jacket up, her skin growing warm even though it was probably only sixty degrees out.

"Our man Chris can help you." Knox winked and patted Chris on the back, then reached for a ball and tossed it, and both dogs went flying through the yard.

"The Husky is Ollie. Owen and Samantha's dog." Chris waved to Owen.

Rory wished her jacket pockets were deep enough to actually use. She wasn't sure what to do with her hands. Pinned to her sides felt too stiff and awkward. But folded arms might come across as guarded. She wasn't normally like this. She always knew how to act, what to do.

Chris set a hand to her back, and her body surprisingly relaxed at the touch. "Come on, let's get you to A.J., a more familiar face."

"Thanks." Last night at dinner, she'd opened up a little. A small window. Gave him a hint of the woman she was. Ultimately, her fears of the unknown, her worries about someone getting hurt, had her closing up. But right now, all it took was his strong hand on the small of her back to want her to open up again.

A.J. had turned to the side, and his face lit up at the sight of her on approach. Ana took his beer, and A.J. opened his arms for a hug, lifting her off the ground, par for the course with him. He was just as much a brother to Rory as Jesse, which was why Jesse trusted A.J.'s judgment about her coming to Virginia with Chris. Plus, he knew A.J. would keep an eye on her.

"Ana." Rory hugged her next. From what Ella had told Rory, Ana already fit in with the Hawkins family. She was excited one of her best friends had gotten hitched, and to such a strong woman. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you," Ana said with a smile as A.J. fist-bumped Chris.

"I see you secured the package." A.J. winked, accepting his beer from Ana while Rory held back an eye-roll.

"Just barely." Chris gave her one of his adorably sexy smiles that had her face feeling way too warm. Was she blushing again?

Fortunately, she was saved by a diversion in the form of a beautiful woman extending a bottle of beer her way. She was about Rory's height. Dark, wavy hair fell past her shoulders, and she had a show-stopper smile. Her gray T-shirt, paired with skinny jeans, exclaimed: *I eat cake because it's somebody's birthday somewhere!* Rory chuckled and knew, in that instant, she was going to like this woman.

"I'm Harper. Beer okay?" she asked.

"It's perfect." Rory gratefully accepted the drink, then spent the next twenty minutes going through all the official introductions. Putting all the names to faces had her feeling more at ease.

Being around so many people also had her missing her Southern roots and small town. This night made her realize how much she'd given up traveling the world. She'd never really thought about everything she left behind since she was always so busy chasing the next new thing.

"They'll grow on you." Ana gently nudged Rory in the side an hour later. "Especially that one."

She lifted her beer in the direction where Chris and Harper laughed about something while playing cornhole against Roman and Wyatt.

Harper had a hand on Chris's chest, and she leaned forward, a forearm to her stomach as she doubled over with laughter.

"Don't worry. Nothing is going on between them." Ana discreetly pointed to Roman on the other side of the game. "One of these days, the sparks between Harper and Roman will cause a full-on explosion. We're all just counting down until it happens."

"Oh, I wasn't, um." *Jealous. No. Not possible. I don't do jealous. But shit, I was nervous earlier, which was weird.* But jealous? No, that was one shade of color she didn't wear. Not for anyone.

"According to A.J., there was quite the explosion between Asher and Jessica, too. And now they're married," Ana went on, eyes set on the couple with their twins asleep in the double-stroller by the patio table. Asher moved them back and forth, maintaining the motion to keep them asleep, while Jessica rested her head on his shoulder. Rory could only imagine how much work twins would be.

The backyard overflowed with so much love and happiness. Every which way Rory looked, she was pleasantly hit in the face with it.

These people were a family. A big, military family, even though they were all retired. It was nice.

"I'm really glad you're here," Ana added. "And now I have an idea." She whispered something into her ear, and Rory laughed.

"Oh, hell yes," Rory said with a nod of excitement and quickly followed Ana over to the "DJ" who happened to be Finn tonight. Ana said A.J. was usually their resident DJ for parties, which wasn't too surprising, but Finn wouldn't let him work the music since the party was in honor of A.J. and Ana's wedding. The "DJ booth" was Finn's iPhone and a big speaker on a table by the snacks.

Ana gave Finn instructions, and once he'd queued up the song, she grabbed his hand and pulled him along behind her.

"A.J.'s bride has a request," Finn called out when the familiar tunes of Blanco Brown's *The Git Up* began to play. Rory recalled A.J. had the DJ play this song at what would have been Ella's wedding on the Fourth of July, and he'd taught Ana to two-step to the tunes.

"Ana wants all of us guys to two-step for her as a wedding gift," Finn said, which produced several groans and a few "hell nos" from some of the guys, but the wives weren't having it.

Jessica forced Asher to stand even though he was shaking his head with prayer hands, begging not to. But when Jessica pressed up on her toes and put her mouth to his ear, Asher's eyes widened, and he nodded in agreement.

Probably promised him hot sex, Rory thought with a laugh.

A.J. stood in the middle of the line of nine guys—Luke being the only one missing from his company. Chris was on A.J.'s right, and Rory stood in a row with the women on the other side, about three feet in front of them, not wanting to miss this sight.

Elaina came up next to her, and Rory smiled. "This will be good," Elaina said with enthusiasm.

Bear and Ollie ran up and down in the middle of the open space, howling with excitement.

"Come on!" Ana urged.

Finn clapped his hands together, and A.J. stepped forward and spun a finger in the air, motioning for the guys to follow his moves.

Wyatt and Asher hung their heads, reluctant to follow the command. But Knox took it down like a champ, which inspired a little competition in Chris to finally join in, and he began busting his moves.

"Oh, this is heaven." Rory laughed, watching all of the guys dancing. Even Asher and Wyatt went

so far as hooking their thumbs in their belt loops while shaking their hips.

Chris's eyes gleamed as he looked straight at her, but he continued to copy A.J.'s movements. Her heart was beating wildly, and her skin grew hot at the effect watching him dance had on her.

"A gift for all of us women," Emily said before stepping forward to dance with her husband. The rest of the wives joined in and danced with their loved ones.

Elaina began dancing with Bear, which was an adorable sight.

"What do you think?" Chris asked, a bit breathless. "Will you dance with me?" He held one palm over his chest. "I give you my promise that I won't fall for you." He smiled. "Tonight," he softly added under his breath.

Rory glanced over to see A.J. now at the "DJ booth" when George Strait's *Troubadour* played next.

"Okay," she agreed, seconds before Chris surprised her by sweeping her arms up over his shoulders, then setting his hands on her hips.

She inhaled sharply at his bold move, doing her best to breathe evenly. To just live in the moment, something she never usually tried to resist doing. Heck, she was all about living in the moment. That was her *modus operandi* until Carter Dominick forced her to change. To return to being the woman she left behind ten years ago in Alabama.

Chris had her chuckling when he began mouthing the lyrics, his chin lifted, eyes on the sky.

"I'm not a country music fan, but A.J.'s forced me to listen over the years," he said a minute later, stepping closer.

"And it's growing on you, huh?" She wet her lips at the realization his gaze was now glued to her mouth.

"The South is definitely growing on me. More ways than one."

"No charm. No flirting. Remember?" she reminded him of her rules. *And no sex.* She had to find a way to discreetly add that one.

"Got it. No lingerie, either." He quickly spun her around, and her palms flew to his chest, his heart beating hard and fast beneath her touch. Eyes fixed back on hers. "And I'll do my best to keep my word."

To not fall for me? Heat traveled over her skin, rolling like a wave that had her nipples tightening beneath the sheer bra. *But damn it, what if I fall for you?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

“AND THIS COMPLETES THE TOUR.” CHRIS ENTERED HIS ROOM WITH OPEN PALMS AS IF PROUDLY showcasing a bedroom on an HGTV reality show, except this was more like the flop before the flip.

Or something like that, Rory thought with a smile as she maneuvered around him to take it all in. All of it being a bed and dresser that belonged to the nineties. “These from your childhood?” She smoothed a hand over the scuffed-up cherrywood of the tall dresser, then set her eyes on the sad-looking bed.

So, so sad. Not even a headboard.

“Saved the best for last?” The room was as lacking in both furniture and personality as the rest of his ranch home. “It could use Deb’s touch, that’s for sure.”

Although no headboard meant less noise during sex. And she couldn’t believe her brain just went there. Rory nearly threw a hand to her forehead like Elaine on *Seinfeld*, when George or Jerry said something crazy. Her parents still watched reruns like it was their job.

I can’t even blame the brownies for that insane thought. How about residual effects? Delayed reaction?

“Got them on Craigslist.” He sat on the bed, his palms on either side of him. “Not the mattress. That’s new,” he added, then glared at her. “What’s that narrow-eyed look ya got going for ya all about?”

“What?” She blinked, her focus moving to an open door, which probably led to his en suite. “Not even a lamp. Got a thing against light?”

He pointed to the ceiling fan over his bed. The light fixture in the center of the faux palm leaf blades was yellowed with age. “I only sleep in here.” He shifted his hands to the tops of his thighs. “And by Deb, you mean A.J.’s mom? Did she decorate your place?”

Rory returned to the dresser and leaned her back to it since it was only a few inches shorter than she was. “Yup, although I think you could’ve used her help more than me, which is saying a lot since I have zero decorator bones in my body.”

“Well, in my opinion, there are a lot more important bones to have in your body.” His blue eyes that she swore always had a natural twinkle in them, shot to her face. He cleared his throat. “But I, uh, don’t need much.”

“When did you rent the home? Or maybe why? For Bear?”

Bear must have heard his name because he came trotting into the room, moving like he owned the place, then jumped onto the bed and curled up next to Chris before setting his head on top of his crossed paws.

How stinking cute is that?

“I rented it back in August after I made up my mind to find a canine. And since I hoped you’d come here and train him, I made sure to get a place with a few bedrooms.”

So, he’d been planning her arrival since August? “Well, at least you picked a place with a great backyard.” She moved to the bed to pet Bear. “You think you’ll stay in Virginia long-term?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see. I haven’t had a permanent residence in years. Most of the guys on Echo . . .” He stopped himself and smiled. “I mean, most of my buddies who aren’t married sort of drift around wherever the wind takes them. A.J. was like that before Ana.”

Maybe she and Chris weren’t so different. She’d been on the move for years with only a P.O. box attached to her name. When she arrived in New Orleans a little over a month ago, she didn’t have much aside from clothes, so A.J.’s mom came in for the save.

“You think about living in D.C. since most of your friends are there? Or maybe New York? That’s where the headquarters for Scott and Scott is, right?”

“Neither New York nor D.C. are really my style. People are too high-strung in both places.”

“What about Boston, where you’re from?”

Chris stood, and his lips formed a tight line. Was there a secret or bad memory he didn’t want to share? “I think the South might be calling my name,” he said with a big smile, his mood switching as fast as a Southern summer storm moved in and out.

“Hey now, no flirting, remember?” She meant it more as a joke, but when he closed the space between them, her body responded to his proximity immediately. Her limbs went lax and swoony, while certain other parts grew tense with anticipation.

“That wasn’t flirting, but I’d be happy to offer you an example,” he said in a husky voice.

Chris dipped his head and drew closer. So close she was actually holding her breath as he stared into her eyes with fierce intensity. This moment was definitely going to be etched into her memory. He opened his mouth a fraction like a delectable tease.

“Give me one more night.” His lips were as close to hers as they could be without touching. “Let Bear sleep in my bed one more night,” he whispered seductively before inching back with a tiny smirk on his face.

Oh, well played.

She caught sight of Bear as he lifted his head and peered at her with his big puppy dog eyes. Two against one. Not fair.

“Fine,” she conceded, her body like butter after that moment. “One more night.” She turned away from the both of them, desperately needing some air.

Chris followed behind her, flicking off the ceiling light as they strode from the bedroom.

“Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we’ll start.” She spun around in the hallway to make sure he was listening to her orders, and nearly bumped into the man. They were way too close to each other. “Maybe with leashes,” she added, then whirled back around and retreated to the living room.

When she chanced a look back, he was leaning against a wood column. One foot propped up behind him. A casual look on his face.

“I should probably swing by the grocery store in the morning,” she said, shifting her focus to the kitchen. “I imagine your place is also empty of food.”

“I have a healthy appetite, so that’s one thing you don’t need to worry about. The kitchen is fully stocked.” He grinned. “I was only gone for two days this time.”

“How long are you normally gone?” Her eyes journeyed back his way, a sinking feeling in her stomach when his statement reminded her of a conversation she’d had with Savanna back home. That conversation had gone in a different direction than the one she’d had earlier with Ella.

“About that.”

Oh, she hated those two words. “Yeah?”

“I should have mentioned this yesterday, but the thing about my job is that I never know when I’ll get called away. I could be gone for a day, a week . . . I never know.”

This conversation she could handle. “It will be a challenge since you’re Bear’s handler, but yeah, I knew what I was getting into when I signed up for this.”

“Right. You’re A.J.’s friend,” he said with a nod, his bent knee relaxing, foot meeting the floor again as he shoved off the column.

“I’m also a friend of Savanna’s,” Rory reminded him. She took a moment to gauge his reaction. She had no clue how he might respond to her talking about the wife of his coworker he’d tragically lost. “I didn’t know Savanna all that well before Marcus passed, but I see her almost every time I visit Birmingham, and we’ve grown closer over the years.” Her throat was tight with emotion, and the prospect of opening old wounds had her drawing in an uneasy breath.

Marcus’s death had been particularly brutal on A.J. since they’d been close friends, and of course, on Savanna. At the time, Marcus was the only married guy at Scott & Scott. Rory knew little else except that Asher had replaced Marcus.

“Does she know you’re here?” He swiped a hand over his head, a look of concern on his face.

“She knows, yes. But she’s as tight-lipped as A.J. about your work, so don’t worry, she didn’t spill whatever secrets y’all might have.”

“Six years in November, that’s how long Marcus has been gone. It’s hard to believe.”

She rolled her lips inward as tension crackled between them. A strong need pulled and tugged at her. It was as if someone else was in control of her body, urging her closer to Chris. “Savanna’s worried you could—”

“Die,” he finished for her. The word rolled harshly off his tongue, his tone heavy with the grief of his loss. A loss for so many. “That alone is a pretty good reason not to fall for me. My job is dangerous.” His spine went stiff. “But I could also get hit by a bus tomorrow. When it’s your time, it’s your time.”

Rory had always lived that way until Carter Dominick had served as a reminder her lifestyle could also get the people she cared about killed. She’d always been so cautious, but her ill-fated encounter with him had proven that the only way to keep her family safe was to turn her back on what she’d been doing.

Chris eased closer and placed his thumb to her jaw. He slowly traced along her chin, sweeping his thumb from earlobe to earlobe.

She swallowed and did her best to remain still and not lean into his touch. “Savanna just doesn’t want to see me get hurt.” *On the other hand, Ella wants to make sure I don’t hurt you.*

Chris tilted his head and brought his palm to her cheek. “Shouldn’t be a problem if neither of us falls, right?”

“True.” His palm was rough and warm, and it felt so good.

“I imagine you’ve broken a few hearts. Considering you felt the need to warn me against falling for you.” He slipped his hand from her cheek to thread his fingers through her hair as his hooded gaze burned into her. Rory tipped her head back and allowed herself to savor his attention for a few moments.

“I’m not sure I’m the feet-planted-to-the-ground kind of girl,” she said. *Did that even make sense?*

His brows dipped inward, and a serious expression flashed across his face. He leaned in close

and whispered, “And what’s wrong with flying?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“CAN’T WE TRAIN HIM WITHOUT A LEASH?” CHRIS GRIMACED, EYING ALL THE LEASHES RORY HAD SET out. “Poor guy loves to be free.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Rory held a tab leash while they stood in his backyard, Bear sitting obediently at her side, watching them with curiosity. Somehow in the last two hours, Rory had already managed to get Bear to sit, speak, and do a bunch of other things using the Dutch commands he’d learned in the Navy before being booted. “Yeah, you have to be toying with me since you must know a thing or two about canines, or you wouldn’t have been so eager to have one join your company.”

He closed one eye, deciding whether to fess up that he actually knew a hell of a lot more than he’d let on. In fact, he’d been holding out on everyone, even his team. He’d worked with K-9s quite frequently with his SEAL Team before joining Scott & Scott. He hadn’t been a handler, but he’d always bonded with the animals and made sure to learn everything he needed to ensure their dog remained safe on ops.

He wanted Rory’s help, though. Someone with the proper training, and also, he’d wanted her around. Period.

He was fairly certain Bear wasn’t untrainable—he just hadn’t had the proper motivation back in Little Creek.

And it was looking like Rory was just the kind of motivation Bear needed to join the teams.

Rory took sexy to a whole new level in her jeans, cowgirl boots, and light denim button-down shirt open with a fitted white tank beneath. And whenever she spoke with that gorgeous Southern accent, he wanted to heel like Bear or follow whatever other orders she doled out.

Last night had been amazing with her, too. Dancing at the party. Even line dancing and two-stepping, something he’d never thought he’d do, had been perfect somehow. Watching her interact with his friends. His dog. And then when they were finally alone at his place, it’d taken all of his restraint not to dip in for a kiss.

She’d straight-up ordered him not to fall for her the day she agreed to train Bear. He could tell she was a heartbreaker, and at the time, he brushed aside her warning, hoping she hadn’t really meant it. But after what amounted to only two days, he had the distinct feeling he would most definitely suffer that fall she’d warned him against.

“Admit it,” she said in an accusatory tone.

“I might know a little,” he finally gave in.

“Can I ask you something?” She traced the lines of her silhouette, distracting the hell out of him before her hands settled on her hips.

“Anything.”

She shot him the cutest of scowls. “You’re staring.”

“I can’t help it,” he admitted while he knelt next to Bear and ran his hands along the dog’s sleek flanks, petting him. Chris needed a little interference, some distraction, to prevent himself from getting into trouble and flirting. Breaking another one of her rules. “So, what was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Did you honestly expect me to be here for only a few weeks? It normally takes months to turn a dog into a military working canine. Bear has had a head start. You, however, are going to need significantly more training as his handler. So, what was your plan? First step, get me here. Second step, trap me?”

He did like the idea of trapping her, but more so pinned beneath his body while she called out his name in sweet ecstasy.

“Staring again,” she said, a laugh in her tone, though.

“I know you weren’t planning on staying long,” he said, hating there would be any type of expiration date on their time together.

She huffed out a breath. “I’ll get you both started, but we’ll need to find someone local who can take over after. I can’t possibly stay here for four months.”

“Why not?” He smoothed his hand down Bear’s back and looked up at her. It was worth a try, right?

“Because I need to get my business going in New Orleans, and—”

“I’ll double the pay.” He stood to face her. “Triple.”

“It’s not about money,” she said, her tone softer this time.

“It’s about me, right? That’s too long to be around me.”

“Why would you think that?”

He shook his head. “I, uh, never mind.”

She turned toward the house in what he viewed as silent reflection. Maybe still considering his comment.

“Don’t make a decision now. If it makes you feel better, I’ll have some people on standby who can help out if you need to leave.”

Rory slowly faced him, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“But please, give us a chance.” He dropped down in front of Bear and gently held on to the sides of his head. “I mean, how can you resist this face?” When Chris twisted his neck back to catch her eyes again, a smile touched her lips.

“There’s going to be a lot to do. Teaching him how to sniff out explosives and people. Then there are the takedowns. You also have to build a rapport. A bond.”

Chris kept one hand on Bear, softly stroking his mane. “You’re more worried about whether I’ll be obedient than him, huh?”

“Maybe.” She smiled. “More like yes.”

He returned his attention to Bear. “But we’ve got this, right, buddy?” Chris reached for his paw and shook it. “We can show her you’ve got what it takes to be a Teamguy.”

“Dog,” Rory corrected, and he swiveled his head to peer at her again, the sun still beating down, making her mass of blonde hair golden and shimmery. “Right. Team dog.” But then a depressing thought occurred to him. With a heavy sigh, he let go of Bear and stood. “I just don’t know if I can send him in to clear houses or check for explosives and risk something happening to him. Look at how innocent he is.”

“How often did dogs save you guys in Iraq? Afghanistan? How many lives were saved because of our hero dogs?”

Chris sealed his eyes closed, a memory ripping through his mind. “Jupiter was an awesome dog. He went into a house,” he said around a swallow and opened his eyes, “and he never came out.”

“I’m sorry.” She stepped closer and set a hand to his shoulder, a soft, comforting look in her hazel irises. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

“It takes a special kind of animal to be a CAD.”

“Combat assault dog,” she said with a nod.

“It’s hard to stomach the idea of putting Bear’s life on the line, though. I mean, the guys I work with, we rush into danger, never knowing if we’ll make it back out, but we knowingly signed up for that, but the dogs—”

“The competition for SEAL canines is almost as fierce as going through BUD/S from what I’ve heard, so I assume those dogs wanted to be on the Teams, or they would have purposefully failed out. So, in a way, they signed up, too.”

She was trying to make him feel better, but she was also right about the canine selection for the Teams. “I’ve always wanted a dog. They’re loyal. They don’t abandon you. Maybe the only animal that loves you more than themselves.” He let go of a deep breath, and it felt like a bunch of pent-up shit went with it. “I mean, my friends are loyal. Of course. And . . .”

“Trust me, I get it.” Rory peered at Bear. “There’s a reason I love animals and am fiercely protective of them. I worked at a rescue shelter every summer while in high school in Birmingham. Some of the animals . . . broke my heart. But every time a Belgian Malinois was brought in, and that was a rare instance, well, I’d swear my heart sang around them.” Rory crouched to observe Bear.

Could this woman get any better? *Damn.*

“Belgian Malinois are great. Medium-sized build. Slender and athletic.” Bear tipped his snout toward her face as he lay with paws crossed in the grassy area. “Intelligent and alert. Protective. Some say these dogs are the secret weapon at the White House. I guess y’all would know, given Knox’s dad.”

Chris knelt alongside her again, resting his forearms on his jeaned thighs. “You know, I heard Cairo’s handler fed Cairo steak and let him sleep in his bed, too. And Cairo was brought on the bin Laden raid,” he deflected, hoping to shift the conversation away from the subject of POTUS or what Chris and the guys may or may not know about what went on at the White House. “I even think Cairo was more laid-back than most dogs. Sweet disposition when he didn’t have to tear up an enemy. So, I’m betting you’re like Cairo,” he said, changing his voice as if talking to a baby, and Bear released a happy yelp of pleasure.

“Maybe one of these days.” Rory snatched a tennis ball, rose, and tossed it, sending Bear to his feet and shooting across the field as the ball arced and bounced. “But first, you need to establish your relationship as his handler. The pack leader always sleeps on higher ground.”

“Be the alpha.” Chris folded his arms and watched Bear trotting back toward them. Bear set the ball down, his pink tongue lolling out of his mouth with what looked like a grin on his face.

“Roughhousing and tug-of-war teach Bear it’s okay to challenge your authority. Fun, even,” she said before throwing the ball again. “I think you both might need the four P’s: praise, patience, practice, and prevention.”

“I do love a little praise.” He side-eyed her and winked, and she swatted his arm.

Chris was well aware of the four P’s. And everything he’d done wrong with Bear before showing up to request her help in New Orleans. She’d called him on his act straight up—an attempt to lure her

into coming by making it appear he wasn't capable of handling Bear without her.

"Results should happen within seven to nine seconds of a verbal command, or hand signal, or he won't be able to connect the dots."

"I think you've used that tactic on me," he joked, then grabbed the ball Bear returned and threw it, far enough to send it beyond the fence. He watched with surprise as Bear bounded right over without much effort.

"Anyway," she said, teasing the word out through glossy lips.

"I know Bear can do this, and so can I." Chris added a confident nod. "Those who want something the most get it done."

"And that's you, huh?"

"From my experience, the most successful people in life are those who take ownership of their choices and their actions. They accept responsibility for the consequences, whatever they might be, without placing blame. The SEALs have a saying, 'Do today what others won't so you can achieve tomorrow what others can't.'" He lifted his shoulders as he delivered the words Bravo and Echo Teams lived by every day. "That's what most of us Teamguys believe, at least."

"And what do you believe?" she whispered, eyes set on his, locked in the moment. The sun was shining, the blades of grass were bright green, and an orchestra of crickets chirped somewhere in the woods out back. The universe was absolutely freaking perfect right now.

"'He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.'" He swallowed at the sight of her dragging a hand down the center of her chest, her fingers dipping to her cleavage.

"You just quote Nietzsche?" Her question had him pulling his focus back where it belonged.

"Do I look like a guy who quotes Nietzsche?" His brows rose, then he accepted the ball from Bear and threw it again.

"You don't have to do that," she said softly. "Pretend to be less intelligent than you are," she went on. "I don't know why you do it, but—"

"I'm just a kid from Southie," he cut her off. "Only a high school diploma to my name. Graduate of the School of Hard Knocks."

"Chris." Her eyes locked on his, and the look on her face had his heart racing. A commanding, take-no-prisoners expression that said she wasn't going to take any more of his bullshit, which he was used to serving. Nope, she wasn't letting him get away with it.

"How about this one—'Sometimes people don't want to hear the truth because they don't want their illusions destroyed,'" he tossed out another Nietzsche, then dragged in a breath, preparing to deliver one more for good measure before this woman peeled back every damn layer he'd constructed over the years to keep himself safe. "'There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth.'" That quote had always resonated with him. Chris wasn't so sure his surfaces could be defined as beautiful, but he knew there was a terrible fucking depth beneath it all, beneath what made him the way he was today.

When Chris's back was to her, she reached for his bicep. "You can talk to me. You can be you when you're with me. I'd prefer to see the real you, to be honest. I mean, I love fun-loving Chris, but I'm interested in the man behind all of that." There was an achy plea to her tone that nearly had him spinning around to kiss that ache away.

But he hung his head instead. "I was failing school before I was sixteen. Not because I'm an idiot, but because I didn't care."

"What made you start caring?" she asked instead of pressing him to open up about why he'd not given a damn.

He looked back at her from over his shoulder. “That might be a story for another time.” He let go of a deep breath, allowing the memories of the past to float with it before pivoting to catch her eyes. “I read a lot while in the Navy. Studied people who had interesting lives. Tried to be the person I always should have been instead of the person I’d let myself become.”

She frowned, but it didn’t appear to come from a place of pity. “So, why the act now?”

“Sometimes I slip into a role because it’s just easier,” he confessed. At least that’s what a therapist had told him during his mandated session after Marcus’s death. “Every team needs some comic relief. Finn and I are usually up for that challenge. It works.”

“And is Finn putting on an act, too?”

He thought about his buddy and the struggles he’d gone through in his own life. “Maybe. But we are funny. I mean . . .” He was on the verge of making light of his behavior again, but then he tensed. Wow, did it happen so often he didn’t realize he was even doing it anymore? And here Rory was, seeing right through him.

Bear trotted up and angled his head back and forth between them, waiting for one of them to throw the ball.

“Nothing wrong with humor.” She tossed the ball for Bear. “I just think you’re a really great guy. A funny, compassionate, *and* smart guy, and I’d like to get to know all of you, not just the person you let people see. The one you seem more comfortable sharing.”

“Why does it matter? You set the conditions of this arrangement, and your rules were pretty clear.”

Rory’s gaze dropped to Bear when he returned, the lines of her body drawing tight. Had that thought dawned on her, too? If she prodded, he might push back?

She reached for Bear’s collar and clipped him into his lead, and Bear stared at Rory with keen eyes, then looked to Chris. The dog was perceptive. He sensed the tension.

Chris opened his mouth to say more, but he refrained at the sight of Roman’s Ford F-150 pulling into the driveway. Finn and Roman hopped out of the truck and started their way, moving with quick steps. They had to be there for work.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt,” Finn began on approach. “Can we have a minute?” He jerked his thumb toward the truck.

Chris turned back to Rory. “Sorry, um, be right back.”

“No problem. I’ll work on a few more commands with Bear. He needs a break soon, anyway.” She waved to Roman and Finn, then Chris hurried toward the truck where the guys had gone back to wait for him.

“How’s it going?” Roman asked in a low voice.

Chris motioned for the guys to follow him into the detached garage at the side of the house for privacy. “It’s going okay. What’s up, though? Why the glum looks?”

Finn removed his sunglasses and hung them on the neckline of his black tee. “Remember Snake Guy?”

“Of course.” That was barely a week ago. And he didn’t need the reminder of all those freaking snakes—that image would haunt him for a lifetime.

“Santiago was being transferred to a CIA black site in Maryland when the vehicle was ambushed yesterday,” Roman said. “He’s in the wind. Maybe an inside job. Everyone is looking for him, but since this was our capture, we’re thinking we might need to follow up. Provide an assist.”

“Shit.” Chris swiped a hand over his short hair, processing the news. “Santiago’s people grabbed him? How? I thought we took care of them all.”

“We’re not sure. Working on getting names. The officers in the vehicle survived, and they said they heard someone speaking French. Guys were all pro. Wearing face masks.”

“Whoever took him left the CIA officers alive?” Good news, but surprising. “Doesn’t sound like the work of his human-trafficking buddies, then. Maybe one of his prior associates wanted to get to him before he could talk while in custody,” Chris suggested just as Bear came charging his way, leash dragging on the ground. Chris turned to see Rory standing at the opening of the garage, lips parted.

How long had she been there? How much had she heard?

“Sorry. He got excited and took off. Stronger than I expected.” Rory grimaced in apology and went for Bear’s leash. “But, um, human trafficker? Those are the gigs y’all work? Not what I expected for a security company.” She tilted her head. “Are y’all really spooks?” She circled a finger in the air, pointing to Chris. “You’re CIA, aren’t you? Your company is an alias.”

“No, no, no.” Finn shook his head, his mouth tight. Brows pinched inward.

“Just because this fool looks like that character Jack Ryan does not mean—”

“You guys and the Jack Ryan stuff, I swear,” Finn said with a teasing voice, cutting off Chris. “Ignore him,” he went on. “But to answer . . . that would be a hell no to the CIA question. You can capitalize the N and the O on that one, too.”

Rory tossed a casual smile at Finn and Roman. Chris nearly forgot what they’d been talking about at the sight of her glossy lips spreading open to reveal perfect, white teeth.

“Harper and Jessica were CIA, but now they’re on the good side with us.” And Finn just dug that hole a little deeper.

“Oh?” Rory crouched alongside Bear, checking his collar. “Is there a bad side?”

“Ah, with the CIA, it can be very hit or miss. Some are good.”

“Some are bad,” Finn finished for Chris.

“You see,” Chris began while holding both arms straight out, palms together, fingers pointed toward Rory once she was back on her feet, “they walk a line, those spooks. A very fine line.”

“You’re babbling,” Roman commented, his tone deep. “The both of you.”

“Anyway, we should go,” Finn said with a nod, and his gaze shifted to Chris. “But if we gotta do the thing, well, we’ll let you know when and where.” Finn patted Bear’s head, then waved goodbye, and Roman simply nodded before they started for the truck.

“Uh, how much did you overhear?”

“Oh, probably as much as you heard when I was talking to Ella last night on the phone outside Liam’s house.”

“So nothing.” He smiled.

“Right.” She lightly shook her head. “Absolutely nothing.” Rory commanded Bear to stand and follow her, even though she still had the leash. When she and Bear reached the opening of the garage, she halted and turned to look back at where he stood dumbfounded. “But what was his name? The guy you were talking about?”

“Whose name?” And this time, he had no choice but to play dumb.

“The guy with the thing.”

“Hmm.” He scratched his chin, taking his time to answer. “He was just a bad guy from El Salvador. His name isn’t worth mentioning, I promise.”

She dropped her gaze to the ground, and a sudden spark of recognition came over her face. A spark he didn’t expect to witness, because why would she have any idea about a guy like Santiago? The only people familiar with a dirtbag like him were criminals and the men and women who worked to take them down.

“I just remembered something. A call I have to make.” Rory jerked a thumb toward the house, then handed him the leash. “How about you two work on those Dutch commands for a bit before y’all take a break for lunch? And remember, no treats or praise unless it’s deserved.”

“Got it.” He worked a hand over the back of his neck, uneasy about her darting off. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” She smiled, and he didn’t know her well enough to decipher if it was fake or not, but she walked away before he had a chance to say more.

He knelt to Bear’s eye level. “I think she’s not telling us something. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right, Chris,” Chris spoke in a kid-like voice as if Bear had said the words.

“Women,” Chris muttered. He directed two fingers to his own eyes before pointing them Bear’s way. “But I got you, Bear. You and me, buddy.” Bear’s lips curved as if the dog was legit smiling a goofy grin. “You’re my kind of dog.” He stood and patted Bear on the head. “And hey, maybe you can sneak into my bed later,” he added with a whisper, “just don’t tell Boss Lady about that.”

CHAPTER NINE

“WHY HAVEN’T I SEEN THIS MOVIE BEFORE?” RORY’S EYES REMAINED GLUED TO THE SCREEN. ONE hand in the popcorn bowl, the other wrapped around Bear on the couch in the living room. “It’s riveting. And has my stomach in knots.” She finally tore her eyes away from the TV to look at her phone, which was perched upright on the coffee table in front of her.

Ella’s face came into view. They’d been chatting for the last twenty minutes over FaceTime while Ella sewed, and Rory watched the movie. “Because you couldn’t handle war movies when Jesse was in the Army. They made you nervous,” Ella mumbled, a pin clenched between her teeth. In her spare time, Ella designed clothes, and she was working on her latest creation—a dress for Rory on the off chance she decided to go to the gala on Friday.

It didn’t make much sense to go back to a world she’d left behind, even if it was the research she’d provided Andrew before they parted ways that most likely enabled him to find the Spanish vessel he was being honored for discovering. And knowing Andrew, he wanted her there for the same reason he’d been reaching out over the years. To get her back on his team.

Rory reached for the remote and paused the scene in the middle of a gunfight. She placed the bowl of half-eaten popcorn on the table next to her phone. The only décor in the room was the surround sound speakers positioned in the corners—not even a lamp or a lonely candlestick on the coffee table. He’d taken minimalistic to an all-new level.

“He looks like Liam, though,” Ella casually commented after removing the pin from between her teeth. “Right?”

The movie *12 Strong* was based on a true story, and the leading star was Chris Hemsworth. “Yeah, he does remind me of Liam. Liam’s daughter refers to her dad as Thor, though, which is cute.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. God of Thunder,” Ella said, imitating Liam’s Australian accent. “But anyway, tonight is night four of being with Chris in Virginia. How’s it going so far?”

Where do I begin? Training both Bear and Chris for hours upon hours each day, while doing her best not to get weak-kneed from his disarming smiles, was tough enough. But the evenings they spent together sharing conversation over dinner, watching TV while Bear snoozed on his dog bed next to the couch . . . there were too many words and yet not enough to answer Ella’s question.

And why did he have to keep finding reasons to take off his shirt while they trained? It was October, damn it. Those shirt-taking-off moments were too much for her heart to handle. And, well, other parts of her.

The man was trying to torture her.

Soon enough, she’d be the one sneaking into his bedroom at night after hours instead of Bear.

As much as she’d wanted to get to know the Chris behind the Chris—and she still did—she

quickly realized the man would see that as an open door to ask her questions, too. To probe and inquire about her backstory. Unless the danger from her past actually found her, she couldn't talk about the last five years of her life. So, she'd do her best to let him open up when or if he was ready.

But he was right. She needed to stick to the rules. *Her* rules—training only, no falling for each other. Because the more he did let her in, the more she was going to care. To possibly fall. And wouldn't falling be risky?

"Rory?" Ella waved a hand in front of her phone screen.

"Oh, sorry."

"That good?" Ella smiled. "Or that bad?"

"We've fallen into a decent routine. Working in the morning, having lunch, then running some drills in the afternoon. Then dinner." She swallowed, thinking back to the previous night. "He went out with Finn last night. A bar. They invited me, but I opted to stay with Bear and turn in early."

"Why do I hear a hint of jealousy in your tone? Worried he'd meet someone at the bar?" Ella probed.

"Of course not." At her adamantly spoken denial, Bear lifted his head and nudged her with his snout. This dog. She swore if he could talk, he'd have called her a liar. "I'm not," she mouthed to him, then stroked his head and scratched behind his ear, and he relaxed his head on her lap.

"Where is Chris now?"

"I don't know. He said he had somewhere to be, and he didn't seem interested in telling me." *Secret work stuff.* "Do you have any idea what your brother actually does? Are you really buying the whole private security thing?"

Ella sat on the chair in her living room and shook her head. "I honestly don't want to know. It'll get my insides all twisted up if I think about it. I can't handle the worrying. Marcus worked with A.J. and the guys, and he . . ."

Didn't come home. Which meant it could happen to A.J. *To Chris.* And when Rory had overheard Chris's conversation with Roman and Finn in the garage on Sunday, when they'd been discussing a human trafficker in El Salvador, her heart had taken a rapid dive. Deep, deep down. No twin tanks to breathe beneath the surface. Almost feeling as though she'd suffered the bends—decompression sickness.

What were the odds Roman and Finn had been referring to Santiago? That Chris's company had been chosen to grab him two months after she'd been on the man's property in the summer?

Why would a team of private security guys end up taking down an international criminal like Santiago? Unless . . .

Did Chris lie to her? Was he really doing the CIA's bidding?

"I lost you again." Ella's words pulled Rory out of her head. "Deep in thought?"

"Yeah, sorry." She pinned her back to the leather couch. It was a bit lumpy and not all that comfortable. Part of her wanted to phone A.J.'s mom to rescue this house—one FaceTime with Deb, and she'd get herself on the next plane. Give it a little love and turn it into the warm and cozy home she knew it had the potential to be.

"So, what attracts you the most to Chris? Physically speaking. I know he's an animal-lover and funny, but if you were the type of woman to have a wish list of physical attributes in a guy, and no worries, I know you're not—but what would they be?"

"Why are you asking this?" Rory looked behind her to ensure Chris hadn't come home. She didn't need another repeat of him overhearing how hot she thought he was.

Ideas of their bodies pressed together, sans clothes, crossed her mind not only during those shirt-

coming-off moments but far too often since she'd been in Virginia. And the mere thought of that man's piercing blue eyes on her body was enough to get her hot and bothered, even now.

"I need to live vicariously through you. So, come on. Spill." Ella propped her chin in her palm, holding the phone out far enough so Rory could see her.

Rory peeked at Bear, who was back asleep and softly snoring. "I'm a woman. He's a man. A hot, gorgeous man. That's it. And normally, I'd see no problem with two consenting adults enjoying each other's bodies."

"But this time isn't normal?"

Rory sucked in her bottom lip, not sure what to admit. Or what she was even feeling. "When his hand brushes against mine. Or our bodies accidentally touch. When he tosses unexpected Nietzsche quotes my way." She closed her eyes and thought back to earlier that day. They'd gone for Bear's leash at the same time, and his hand wound up covering hers. They'd turned to look at each other, and she'd been frozen in the moment. Such a small moment that shouldn't have had her stomach banding tight, but it did. "I'm just horny," she lied through her teeth, knowing full well her best friend would know that, but she wasn't prepared to verbalize her thoughts just yet. "And like you said, I don't want to hurt the guy by having casual sex when that's all I can offer."

"Remind me why that's all you have to offer?" Ella's hand left her chin, and she stood. She was giving Rory her signature sixth-grade-teacher stare, the one used to get her students to confess to their sins. Clearly, it worked because Rory felt like a twelve-year-old again wanting to spill the truth.

But her truth was dangerous, and she'd never let anything happen to her best friend, which meant her secrets were hers to keep.

"Ella," she started, but then flinched at the sound of the back door shutting. "He's home," she whispered. "Talk to you tomorrow."

Rory twisted around to see Chris entering the living room after tossing his keys on the counter that served as a partial divider between the two rooms. The man looked downright delectable in dark denim and a button-down, white collared shirt. Sleeves to the elbows to show his corded forearms. A thick black watch on his left wrist.

Her eyes went to the pink, ribbed tank top she was wearing. A few pieces of popcorn clung to it, but she'd remembered to leave on her bra. Bonus points for her.

She quickly cleaned herself up and carefully shifted Bear's head off her lap so she could stand.

Chris's gaze slowly moved from her bare feet up and over her pink and black plaid cotton pajama pants before working his eyes to her face. "Those are new."

She had only three pairs of casual cotton pajamas, and she'd need to rotate between them. She couldn't exactly strut around in sexy numbers, not that she owned many.

He smiled, then his focus whipped to the TV screen, and his body tensed.

Shit. She hurried for the remote as if he'd caught her watching porn instead of a war movie, and fumbled with it, accidentally hitting play. A loud explosion erupted from the TV, which had Bear hopping off the couch in alarm. "Sorry," she rushed out, finally turning off the TV.

After she calmed Bear down and urged him back on the couch, she looked up to see Chris still frozen in place, jaw clenched beneath his trimmed beard.

"Chris." Rory moved to stand before him and gingerly set a hand on his forearm. She was witnessing one of his layers. Trauma. "Are you okay?"

Chris's gaze was still transfixed, dazed, and his eyes had morphed from their clear blue to a darker version muddied with green.

When she repeated his name, it was like snapping him out of a trance. He blinked and peered at

her with a focus so intense it took her breath away. The lines at the corners of his eyes and the sides of his mouth, lines she attributed to laughter, suddenly looked deeper, as if etched by pain instead.

“Sorry.” Chris swallowed hard and shook his body a little like trying to break free from a spell.

He brushed past her, sat next to Bear and pulled him close, then rasped, “You like war movies?”

“Not normally.” She crossed her arms, carefully observing him as he reached for a handful of popcorn. He was attempting to come across as cool and casual, but based on the rigid lines of his body, he was far from it.

“Where were you?” she asked, her tone soft. “With your buddies? Doing the thing?” She hoped to lighten the mood. But also, she was curious about Santiago. Had he been detained again? Was he still on the streets?

“Nah, no things,” he said with a wink. That was forced, too. He was struggling to use his typical go-to of humor. Not a good sign. “I was visiting a friend.”

“A friend?” She’d never been jealous when she and Andrew were together, and he always had women throwing themselves at him, so surely that twinge in her stomach was related to concern for Chris and nothing else.

“Yeah, a friend.” His mouth tightened. “I think I’m gonna get some sleep. You wore me out today,” he commented, attempting to be playful but failing once again. He said goodnight to Bear, then started for the hall. “You can finish the movie.” He turned back to catch her gaze. “It’s okay.” He knocked at the wood pillar near him and nodded. “Well, goodnight.”

“Chris?” She wasn’t prepared for him to leave. Not yet. “Um, what’s your favorite movie? Maybe we can watch it together tomorrow night.” She didn’t want to go to bed without first seeing his handsome smile.

He propped a palm to that column, the blue of his eyes now the color of the sky at the start of an Alabama summer storm when they landed on her. “*Pursuit of Happyness.*”

“If you’re a Will Smith fan, I would have assumed *Bad Boys.*”

And there it was. That smile of his that always made her stomach flip. Now that she’d seen the fake one, they were easy to tell apart. The real one came from deep within and had his lips crooking up just a touch on the right side.

“Well, *Bad Boys* is ranked right up there with *Independence Day*, but I like true stories, and the fact the guy in that movie refused to quit resonates with me. He did whatever necessary to succeed.”

She thought back to his comments about the Navy yesterday. The SEAL motto he still lived by. Nietzsche quotes. A man of layers.

“That scene with the father and son sleeping in the bathroom at the subway station, though,” he said, setting his hand to his heart, “gets me every time.” He opened his palm to the room. “And since I don’t need much . . .” He let his words float into the air unfinished, then cleared his throat. “Got my dog, my Jeep, and this place.”

“Sounds like a country song,” she said while easing closer to him. Was she the one deflecting with humor now, damn it?

The gap disappeared between them, and when he brought a hand to her shoulder, his touch had her nearly surrendering to the desire she felt when around him.

“You don’t like the idea of superfluous possessions while others are out there without even the bare minimum,” she whispered upon realization. And oh, God, it would happen. If he showed her the real Chris like she wanted, she’d fall so hard for this man.

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying what you earn,” he began, and she slipped her hand to his chest, the beat of his heart spiking at her touch. “But I already have almost everything I want in life,

and I don't need material things to make me happy.”

“Almost everything?”

He gazed down at her with hooded eyes—a twist of uncomfortable pain present in his expression. “I should go to bed,” he said abruptly. “Sweet dreams, Rory.” He surprised her by setting a kiss to her forehead before releasing her and walking away.

“Goodnight,” she called out, then waited for his door to shut before she managed to get her feet to move again.

Rory cleaned up her mess, grabbed her phone, and took Bear to his new bed, and then she started for her guest room. As she passed by Chris's room, the faint sound of the shower running stopped her in her tracks.

Hand braced against the wall, a wave of lust coursed through her as she imagined his naked body beneath the spray of the showerhead, his hands soaping up the planes of his chest and working down to—

That's just wrong. Stop, she scolded.

She hated Chris was alone while something was clearly bothering him.

Was she allowed to help? Did it make her a hypocrite to try and unravel him when she had her walls up? Heavily fortified?

But what if his truths had her own breaking free and tearing her walls to the ground?

And . . . she tensed—what if one of them got hurt because of it?

There was no way she'd survive weeks with this man, let alone months, without their new friendship evolving into something more.

Her roots were far from planted, but maybe Chris was right. Maybe she'd always be the kind of woman to fly.

She just didn't want her life choices to get anyone else killed.

Been there. Done that.

And she couldn't risk it happening again.

CHAPTER TEN

RORY'S HEART WAS ABOUT TO JUMP OUT OF HER CHEST AS SHE HURRIED TOWARD CHRIS'S BEDROOM later that night. Unable to sleep after his unsettling reaction to the war movie, she'd been tossing and turning when a loud thud startled her into action. Had Bear snuck into Chris's room again and fallen off the bed?

The door was completely shut, which she knew he would never do in case Bear wanted to break the rules and sneak in.

What sounded like an anguished moan came from the other side of the door. "Chris?" She knocked and shook the handle. Locked.

Shit. She ran to the bathroom in the hall and retrieved a bobby pin from her cosmetics bag. It took less than two seconds to pick and breach the lock, after which she dropped the pin and turned the handle, anxious to ensure he was okay.

As the door eased open, light from the hall spilled into the room. The last thing she expected was to see Chris on the floor next to his bed, sitting upright, gun aimed directly at her. His eyes were expressionless. Vacant.

Her hands shot to the air in alarm. "It's me. Rory."

Taking slow, cautious steps, she moved closer, but Chris didn't budge. He was panting hard—arms rigidly extended, gun still aimed at her. Most likely disoriented.

She made her move anyway, slipping close and crouching alongside him.

"I'm going to take your gun from you," she said in a gentle tone. When her fingers wrapped over his wrist, he finally loosened his hold of the gun.

His eyes fell closed.

His breathing became shallow.

A moment later, he unleashed a barely audible "fuck."

Once she disarmed him, she brought a hand beneath his arm and guided him to sit on the bed. "I got you." She repeated the words he'd spoken last Friday when he'd carried her to her room after a humiliating bout of throwing up brownies.

Elbows on his thighs, Chris lowered his head to his palms. "I'm so damn sorry. I thought I locked the door just in case." The words were muffled as she sat next to him.

"You were worried you might fall and grab your gun, so you locked the door?" she asked in surprise. "And you did lock the door," she noted when he sat upright and stole a look her way. "I picked it. Sorry, I was worried."

Still nothing from him other than embarrassment, which was obvious even in the dim light as he sat there clad only in black boxer briefs, every muscle in his body tight as a bowstring.

“Does this happen often?” Her brother experienced the same kind of falling-out-of-bed-and-grabbing-his-gun moments after Iraq, too. Jesse just refused to use the letters PTSD, though, when referring to himself.

“Not often,” he said, eyes back on the floor beneath their feet. “I thought I was in Iraq. I’m so sorry. The dream was more like a memory. A fucking shitty memory.”

More layers. More painful layers.

“You don’t need to apologize.” She brought her free hand to his cheek, urging him to look her way. “Never apologize.”

His brows gathered inward as he studied her, and he nodded after a brief moment. “I visited my friend Jamel tonight. He’s in an assisted living facility.” He paused as if taking a second to decide if he ought to continue. “He lives about forty-five minutes from here, so I try and see him when I can, but it’s hard. He doesn’t always remember me. Got a TBI in Iraq.” His voice was scratchy. Raw with emotion. “There was a blast about twelve years ago. Took down a lot of good men. No one died, but the other scars . . . some wish they had died, and well, I try to do what I can to remind them that they’re still Teamguys, and we don’t quit when it gets hard.” He tensed and swallowed. “And I’ll remind them of that every damn day if I have to. Whatever it takes.”

Tears filled her eyes as he spoke.

Such powerful and strong words.

A wrenching pain in her abdomen had her forearm banding across her midsection to try and ease the hurt filling her body as she absorbed Chris’s emotions.

“Seeing him, is that why you had that dream?” she asked softly, but there was more, wasn’t there? The movie. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” It was his hand now guiding her face back his way when she started to turn. “I just try to avoid any reminders of Iraq or Afghanistan.” He released his hold of her and stood, then went for his gun and slid it beneath the bed. “I need to start putting this in my lock box, especially if Elaina comes around. Just hate the time it adds if I actually did need to go for my gun in a crunch.”

She immediately rose, worried he would shut her out before he really let her in.

“I know, it seems strange that I’m totally fine operating, hunting down bad guys, but a movie or a visit with a friend can screw up my head.” He started for the doorway as if needing to escape, but then spun and faced her, the light from the hall a halo surrounding him. His hands sat at the cut of muscle just above his waistband, right where the V began its descent to . . . God, what was wrong with her? “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to stay at my house anymore since I’m messed up. Now that you’re, um, actually seeing some of what’s beneath the funny guy.”

Three steps closed the space between them. “I don’t think you’re messed up at all,” she hurried out. “And I do want to see you. All of you.” *Even if I’m scared for reasons you don’t know yet.*

He dragged a palm down his throat. “I need water.”

She gave him a second, then followed him to the kitchen, blinking against the bright fluorescent lights.

Chris stood at the fridge, his back to her, one arm slung over the door as he chugged a bottle of water. His muscles were flexed, and she forced herself to look away. Under the circumstances, after what had just happened, it was wrong to be ogling him, right?

He shut the door, tossed the bottle into the recycling bin, and brought his back to the counter. If he moved too much, she was fairly certain the slit at the front of his boxers would reveal what was beneath.

“No ink.” Her gaze followed the lines of his body all the way up to his face.

“I hate needles, and although I’m a guy who clearly likes to face my fears—you know, still operating despite being messed up . . . and no worries, I’m levelheaded and fine when downrange, but uh.” He was rambling. Still trying to shake off that dream, she supposed. “But needles, I just don’t like ’em.”

She padded farther into the kitchen, eating up the space between them.

“Everyone I know has a reason why they joined. My brother. A.J. What was your reason? Who was your someone?” she asked, thinking back to their conversation Friday night on her patio in New Orleans. He never did answer her then, and maybe now wasn’t the time to ask, but the question had tumbled free. She was fascinated by the man who was much more than what he let on.

Chris stole a look at Bear’s bed, and Rory followed his focus to see Bear yawning. “The ‘someone’ was my mom. She was my reason.” His voice was tense when he spoke. And Rory had a feeling he wasn’t about to deliver a happy story.

More layers.

Slowly peeling.

Painfully beat by beat.

And she was there for it. For him.

His hands cupped the counter at his sides, fingertips disappearing under the ledge.

She stopped inches away from him, so drawn to him whenever they were close to each other. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I won’t push.”

He brought his eyes to her face, his mouth a white slash across his tan skin. “And if I want to?” Surprise filled his tone. Surprised he wanted to share?

He didn’t set his hands on her hips like she wanted him to. He kept them gripped to the counter, but she saw restraint in his posture. The way he was working hard to prevent himself from either reaching for her or running.

“Tell me.” The words were almost a breathless whisper.

“My mom is the reason why I ran away at sixteen. Well, her and my dad’s drinking.” One hand released his death grip on the counter to squeeze the bridge of his nose. The loss of eye contact was almost too much to handle, and the weight of his words had her knees weak. “I took my dad’s truck and just drove and drove. I got all the way to Virginia Beach. The sun wasn’t even out yet, but I saw these guys on the beach in teams carrying big, fat logs over their heads. I breached the private property and hid, watching the men get chewed out by their instructors from a distance.”

BUD/S?

He lowered his hand and pinned her with a determined look, eyes now the color of the Mediterranean, then brushed his palm along his sternum before placing it on the counter again.

She drew in a quick breath, entranced by his story, as she waited for him to continue.

“An officer caught me, and man did the guy have Popeye arms,” he said with a forced smile. “Clearly ate his spinach.”

“You’re doing it again,” she reminded him. “Using jokes to hide your emotions.”

It was second nature for him, and it broke her heart.

She resisted the urge to reach out and pull this man in for a hug because, in her heart, she knew this very moment was probably the emotional equivalent of a hundred kisses in terms of line-crossing.

And it was then that his gaze fell to her lips as if he wanted to ease his pain by devouring her. “The officer asked how the hell I got onto the property, and I told him I was stealthy. He shocked the hell out of me because I was expecting him to haul me down to the station or something, but instead, he told me to join when I hit eighteen. So that day, I made up my mind to be a SEAL. Then I drove

back home, got my ass chewed out for stealing my dad's truck, and set out to become a Teamguy from that day forward. Joined the Navy the second I graduated high school."

That's why you started caring about school at sixteen. "And you never looked back."

"Well, at least not until now," he said, his tone a touch jagged, maybe from years of emotional scars. "But you don't need to hear all this." His thumb went to her lower lip, tugging it down slightly, and she eased up on her toes on instinct. The need to feel his mouth was destroying her sense of control.

"I do want to hear. Please, tell me."

His hand moved back to that counter he found so comforting.

"You've probably heard this kind of story before. The guy from the other side of the tracks falls for the rich girl from the Cape. Well, that was my parents. My dad took over the plumbing business from my grandfather. My mom met him at a bar, and they fell in love. She said it didn't matter that Dad didn't have much, or that her parents refused to take part in our lives after she married him."

Rory had indeed heard variations of this story before. They rarely ended well. And she hated that Chris's past held a version of one.

He peered out the window that overlooked where they trained Bear earlier, the sky pitch-black since it was two in the morning. "Turns out, living in a triple-decker—a three-story home in Southie—wasn't enough for her. I lost count of how many times she left us and went back to her parents' home in the Cape. I'll never forget the first time. Two days before my tenth birthday. Maybe she forgot it was coming up. Maybe she didn't care."

And there it was.

So very much of what made him Chris Hunter.

She wasn't Freud, but she had to believe part of why Chris didn't want many material possessions was on account of his mom. He didn't want a woman to love him because of what he owned or could buy. His mom needed money more than she needed Chris, and Rory had no idea how to even process that thought.

"It destroyed my dad each time she left. He'd drink too much while waiting for her to come back." He visibly swallowed. "It was a vicious cycle of her coming in and out of our lives, and because he loved her so much, he let her do it. But she took pieces of his heart every time she ran off, to the point he didn't have anything left to give, not even to me." He abruptly turned and set his palms to the counter.

His heart had been broken by one of the most important women in a man's life.

Rory cupped her mouth and swallowed back the tears. She knew Chris wouldn't want her to cry about what he'd just had the courage to reveal. It hadn't taken her more than a few days of spending time with him to figure that out, either.

"The last time she left, she never came back. I was sixteen and decided fuck it—I'm leaving, too." He lifted his hands and slowly faced her, a battle of emotions crossing his face. "I've never regretted it because it brought me to my decision to join the Navy."

Her hand skated up his arm to his strong bicep, the cut of his muscles hard beneath her fingertips.

"My mom has a new family. It's why she never came back. Why she asked my dad for a divorce," he quickly added, his attention shifting to her hand on his arm.

"I thought you were an only child." She narrowed her eyes, trying to get a read on a man who'd spent years trying to hide behind the mask of a warrior—and he was a warrior—but he was so much more than that. He was a saint. A good man with a heart of gold. The real fortune, the greatest catch, would be having someone like him in her life. His mom missed out.

“I am an only child. She might have another son, but I don’t know him. I doubt he knows I even exist.” And yet, his words were laced with regret. “I have all the family I need. The guys I work with now, the family I made while on the Teams in the Navy. I’m solid.” He set a hand over hers and removed her touch.

Would Chris allow himself to fall in love and have a family even if he wanted to? Would he be able to look past his mom’s abandonment of her family, her son?

“I should let you get some sleep.” He gently smoothed the back of his hand over her cheek. “Sorry again about the gun.”

She shook her head. “I told you not to apologize.”

“Are you sure you feel safe sleeping here with me, especially after what I told you?”

“More than safe.” She smiled up at him. “And just so you know, I have a gun in a lock box under my bed, too.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Okay, don’t go sneaking up on you at night. Got it.” He attempted casual and charming, but she knew he had to be emotionally spent. The effort it took for him to smile said it all.

Chris cleared his throat and jerked his thumb toward the hallway. “We should sleep. Not together, I mean.” He closed his eyes for a quick second. “Early morning and all.”

“Right,” she said and started to turn, but at the feel of his hand on her waist, she halted.

He slowly drew her closer until their bodies collided, her chest flush with his.

Their proximity meant he could feel her nipples hardening to peaks because she’d removed her bra when getting ready for bed all those sleepless hours ago.

And he was still only wearing boxers, which meant if he got hard, she’d feel his arousal as well.

“Rosemary.” Her name floated on a sigh as he cupped the back of her neck with his free hand, and the slight pressure he applied had her chin tilting up in response. It was a possessive hold—intimate and fueled with desire, one from which she never wanted to walk away. One she couldn’t possibly walk away from right now even if her life depended on it.

She stared up at him, breathless, speechless as his eyes claimed hers. A crackle of electricity sparked between them, the pull drawing her closer and up onto her toes.

He slowly lowered his mouth near hers.

So.

So.

Close.

She felt the warmth of his breath on her lips. Felt his indecision despite the way he held her as though she were his, and his forever.

When his lips brushed across hers and his hot mouth feathered over her cheek, she fisted the material of his boxers at his thighs with both hands. A yearning like she’d never known grabbed hold of her when he delivered what she so desperately needed. She had no idea she’d been that desperate until he kissed her, until he made love to her mouth with his lips and his tongue.

Her hands slid up along the sides of his torso, fingers roaming over his flesh as she pressed her body against his, getting as close as possible without actually wrapping her legs around him—though she wanted to.

Chris’s hand remained at the nape of her neck as he continued to kiss her, fusing them in a moment of passion.

Seconds later, he eased away and opened his eyes, yet kept a steady hold of her. They studied each other while their labored breathing returned to normal.

How would she find words to explain the raw emotions pouring through her, emotions still rocking her to her core from the kiss they shared?

Maybe words weren't necessary.

“Technically speaking, I don't think you mentioned no kissing in your rules.” He released his hold of her, but she remained glued in place, close as possible to this man.

He was using humor to avoid the heavy, of course. But maybe she would be okay with that this time. Because she needed to try and wrap her head around the entire night—from him opening up to her all the way to that incredible kiss.

“If that's what it feels like to have your feet planted to the ground, to have roots, well . . .”

Tilting his head, he reached up and gently tucked her hair behind her ears, then cupped her jaw and gave her a smile. A real one this time. “No, that was called flying.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RORY WASN'T THE TYPE TO SWOON—HADN'T BEEN FOR AS LONG AS SHE COULD REMEMBER. IN GRADE school, when she and Ella would play MASH to predict their futures, Rory always switched the “Husband” category for “Places to Travel” instead. As an adult, she'd never been swept off her feet, never had a kiss sear her soul and leave her light-headed and weak in the knees, never, well, *swooned*. Until twelve hours ago. Until Chris flipped her world, leaving her breathless in its wake.

She couldn't stop thinking about that spine-tingling, body-trembling kiss. Not even Bear—her freaking job!—could fully distract her. Her mind kept veering back to Chris's confessions, how he'd torn some of his walls down and let her in, how he'd kissed her like he was starved for her, how she wanted him to kiss her more but was also terrified for him to kiss her more. After their lips had parted in the kitchen, Chris walked her to her bedroom as if they'd been on a first date and wanted to make sure she got home safely. When he leaned against the interior doorframe of the guest room, studying her, possibly waiting for her to make the next move, he looked like a nervous teen who'd just asked a girl to prom and was still waiting on an answer. It was adorable.

But then a dozen reasons why she shouldn't initiate a repeat of the greatest kiss of her life pounded through her head with relentless force. Damn, she hated herself for allowing those reasons to infiltrate her thoughts. But she had to think things through, needed to get a handle on the situation before they could share any more two a.m. kisses. Or any-time-of-the-day kisses, for that matter.

She wished more than anything she could have invited him to take her in his arms again. Pin her to the guest bed. Use his mouth to roam, suck, and kiss every inch of her skin.

But instead, she'd whispered goodnight, and they'd gone to their beds alone. Because he still didn't know the truth about her and her past. And she didn't think they could move forward while such a dark cloud was hanging over her head. But after Chris had opened up to her, after the kiss they shared . . . how could she not explore whatever this amazing thing was between them?

She had a past.

He had one, too.

Based on what she already knew, his past was probably as dangerous as hers. Danger that could very well come back to haunt him. Rory was all too familiar with that scenario.

But Chris wasn't just any man. And if anyone could handle what she had to share, it'd be him. However, the man already carried a heavy burden. Was it fair that she be the one to add more?

“Good boy. *Braaf!*” Rory praised Bear in both English and Dutch when he successfully located the cache of weapons they'd hidden on the property. She gave him his treat, then instructed him to search again in Dutch, “*Revier.*”

Whoever had dubbed Bear untrainable either had the wrong dog in mind or didn't know what they

were talking about. He was amazing, and Chris had been right—Bear was indeed like Cairo, the dog from the bin Laden raid. She'd read up on Cairo and confirmed Chris's guess. He was more laid-back and compassionate than other MWDs, but he'd been a warrior when necessary. Bear was the same. A chill dog with a huge heart, and he was quickly responding to both her and Chris. It did help that he'd already had a month of training with the Navy before coming to her, but yeah, he was about as perfect as possible in her eyes.

She'd miss Bear when she left.

Bear zeroed in on the next target, hidden explosive materials, within thirty seconds, and he began to whimper, his tail shaking like a rattlesnake, ears pointing to the sky as he sat down, posture erect.

Rory went over to him, gave him a treat, and ran her hands along his flanks. "*Braaf!*" She peered over at Chris off in the distance, standing on his driveway, waiting for A.J. to pull up with Elaina in tow. Today, he was wearing a faded Red Sox shirt and an equally worn Sox hat. She loved that effortlessly sexy look. It worked for him.

Chris tossed a wave, a smirk on his handsome face when he caught her ogling. She waved back and continued to stare. Unable to pull her focus away.

A.J. had called earlier to seek permission for him and Elaina to visit Bear. Seeing as how Bear was in training, he'd said they didn't want to disrupt his lessons, which was actually quite thoughtful, but not necessary. It might even be a good training experience.

Besides, Rory was looking forward to seeing Elaina. The girl had made quite the impression on her at the party last Saturday, and Emily and Liam were lucky to have such an amazing daughter. Chris clearly adored her as well.

Chris reached for the sunglasses hooked to his shirt and put them on, his gaze appearing to shift to Bear, but with his eyes now shielded, she couldn't be certain.

He hadn't said a word about what happened last night. No mention at all. Not over their scrambled egg breakfast. Their turkey and cheese sandwich lunch. And certainly not while training.

They'd traded jokes here and there. Casual conversation. A couple of pirate references were thrown her way. But basically, he'd gone with the same standard operating procedure from the previous days. Only an outsider with keen observational skills would have picked up on the slightest hint of a difference between today and yesterday.

The way he stared at her just a little bit longer from across the table while they ate.

The extra color she knew was in her cheeks that wouldn't normally be there whenever he was close to her. Close enough for her body to react, to respond. A desperate craving for his touch.

Rory snapped her focus back to Bear, who was standing with alert ears, signaling to her the location of his next find. How long had he been patiently waiting while she'd been mesmerized by his handler?

She approached Bear and praised him, then offered him his treat. But when he spotted A.J.'s truck rolling up and heard the gravel crunch beneath the tires, Bear shot toward the driveway.

And yup, they still had a few things to work on. Like when he'd taken off for the garage on Sunday, and Rory had overheard the guys talking.

Rory started for the driveway when Chris helped Elaina climb out of the passenger side. "Bear!" she called out, and Bear continued to whip through the grass like a bolt of lightning, eager to get to her. They had a special bond, too.

"Hey, stranger." A.J. strode toward Rory with his signature smile and swagger, wearing his cowboy boots, faded denim and button-down plaid shirt. No hat today. "How's it going?" He reached out and hooked an arm around Rory once she was closer.

Chris crouched in front of Bear and Elaina on the gravel driveway, but his focus was set Rory's way.

"We're making a lot of progress. Bear is far from untrainable," Rory explained.

"Just took the right people," A.J. responded when he let go of her and tucked his hands into his back pockets. "You mind giving Rory and me a few minutes?" He set his eyes on Chris, who glanced back and forth between them as he slowly stood.

"Sure thing." Chris motioned for Elaina to follow him. "Want to help run a few drills?" he asked her.

"Absolutely!" Elaina slapped her hands together. "School felt like it'd never end today since I knew I'd be coming to see my cuddly Bear!" Elaina faced Rory and smiled. "Uncle A.J. said we might be able to eat here, too?"

"Of course. I'm making shepherd's pie tonight. I have plenty." Rory smiled, but she was nervous given A.J. wanted some one-on-one time.

"Yay!" Elaina reached for Bear and stroked his head. "Oh, and do you think we could go trick-or-treating together with Bear for Halloween? I know I'm getting older, but I still like to go. Will you two come with me?"

How could she say no to that? And Halloween was only a few weeks away. She'd still be there. "I'd love to."

"That'd be fun," Chris agreed with an easy smile, and then he and Elaina left.

Rory looked to A.J., mentally trying to prepare herself for whatever he wanted to talk to her about.

A.J. leaned his back against his truck and folded his arms. With sunglasses on, she couldn't get a read on his thoughts. "Jesse called me last night."

Oh, shit. Rory kicked at the gravel with the tip of her brown cowgirl boot. Today, she'd tucked her skinny jeans into the top of her boots and matched them with a white button-down collared shirt, the top few buttons open to show a pale pink tank beneath. "He checking on me?"

"Of course." A.J. smiled. "But he also told me something which has me worried." A line cut across his forehead. "He said your last job might have put you in danger, and he's concerned that danger might still be following you. But he said you were vague, which isn't surprising, so he was hoping you'd talk to me."

Damn you, Jesse. From the sounds of it, Chris must not have told A.J. what she'd blabbed to him while high from the brownies. But she was sure it was only a matter of time until Chris spilled the details to A.J. Surely, they had a code of sorts. "Jesse is exaggerating." *And I barely told him anything.*

A.J. pushed away from the truck and strode closer. She saw the worried look on her face reflected in his sunglasses as he reached for her cowgirl hat and tipped it up to peer into her eyes. Not fair. She didn't have sunglasses on as a layer of protection against his scrutinizing stare. "It must have been a pretty big deal if he asked me to do some digging. Use my government contacts to try and find out what you've really been up to for the last few years."

Her shoulders slouched with relief. He wouldn't find anything—she'd been a ghost. The last records he'd be able to pull were from when she was still working with wreckage vessels five years ago. "Okay." She started to turn, preferring to go distract herself with confused feelings about Chris Hunter than face an inquisition from A.J. Hawkins.

"Rory, you know you can trust me. If you're in danger . . ." He removed his sunglasses, showing his brows pulled tight. A stern big-brother look on his face.

"I'm safe. I'm also living in the home of a Navy SEAL. I'll be fine. He can protect me."

"I know that, but I don't like the idea you might need protecting." He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. Concern continued to pour out of this man.

She'd never forget the time one of the linebackers from their high school football team got a little handsy at a senior party. She'd only been a freshman, but A.J. had been there, and he'd done some damage to the guy. She didn't want to imagine what her brother, who was prone to fighting, would have done had he been there that night. A.J. had more restraint. The kid might've died if Jesse had gotten his hands on him. Fortunately, the Army helped tame her brother some, thank God for that.

Over the last ten years, she'd gotten used to defending herself. Plus, she had martial arts skills and four guns to aid in that protection. But she wouldn't deny the fact she did feel safer with Chris down the hall.

And yet, last night, he worried she'd feel threatened given his nightmare.

I have to tell Chris. Even if no one were to discover her past, or came for her, she still owed Chris the truth if she wanted a shot at something more with him. She knew that much in her heart. He deserved all of her, not just the bits and pieces she felt were safe to share. But how the hell would she start that conversation, and would he turn on his operator-mode switch and want to solve all of her problems? He had too much to worry about already.

"I'm fine," she insisted and removed A.J.'s hand from her shoulder. "I'm not that fourteen-year-old girl anymore."

"You'll always be family." His hands went to his back pockets once again. "Just promise me you'll let me know if—"

"I'm not Supergirl. If I need help, I'll ask."

He scrunched his brow, continuing to observe her. "Jesse also mentioned Andrew Cutter would be in town this weekend, and he sent you an invitation for some fancy event on Friday."

"For the love of God, I'm gonna whack my brother in the head the next time I see him." She huffed out a breath, removed her hat, and slapped it against her outer thigh. "He's always up in my business."

"Aren't you up in his, too?" A.J. challenged, a smile sneaking onto his lips.

The man thought he was so smart. Well, for such a smart guy, why'd it take A.J. years to see the tension between Ella and Jesse? The kind of tension that usually ended with people getting naked.

"Why are you asking about Andrew?" She positioned her hat back on and peered over to see Chris and Elaina running with Bear.

And if that wasn't a sight to see, she didn't know what was.

Elaina's long hair flew behind her, and she was smiling with arms spread open, catching the wind as she ran. Chris was acting as though he couldn't keep up. Pumping his arms but moving slower, pretending to be fatigued so Elaina would beat him in whatever race they were partaking in.

Bear would obviously be the winner, but when he looked back to see Elaina, even he slowed a little to let her catch up. *Awwwww*

"You going to have kids?" she asked.

"We were talking about Cutter." A.J. wasn't going to let her off the hook so easily. "I think Jesse is worried he might offer you another gig."

She crossed her arms and faced him. "I would never take another job with Andrew. Plus, I'm committed to Bear right now." Bear, not Chris. But in her heart, she already knew that was a lie. Today, at least, she was committed to them both. "He probably invited me because it was my research that most likely enabled him to find that ship in the first place."

"Wait, really? And you don't get a cut?" he asked in surprise.

“Don’t want one.”

He considered her words in silence, then asked, “So, you’re not going to the event?” He arched a brow. “Ella said you might go.”

Damn you, too, Ella Mae, she thought with affection. “She thinks I need to officially close some metaphorical door on my relationship with Andrew.” She waved a dismissive hand between them. “The invite was for four people. Hey, if I do go, you and Ana should come with me.”

“Fair warning, I have specific instructions from your brother to punch Andrew if I see him.” He held a palm in the air. “There’s a best friend code I’m obligated to follow, so you see, I’ll have no choice.” He placed his shades back on. “But it looks like you are thinking about going.”

“And why don’t you like Andrew? Same reason as Jesse? Because y’all think he stole me from Bama and put me in danger?”

And his sunglasses were back off again. “You have scars on your back from being whipped because the man got y’all abducted and beaten on a gig after only your first year working with him.” His scowl grew.

And you helped Jesse exact revenge on those men. “That wasn’t Andrew’s fault. Freaking real pirates still exist. What can I say? Comes with the territory. And it was his million-dollar promise to them that got us free.” She shrugged as if it was no big deal.

“I have other reasons I don’t want you to go. Well, one reason.” A.J.’s tone was softer this time, but still chilly enough to cause frostbite.

“What?” She set her hands to her hips and studied him, even though she wanted to return to watching the race out back.

“Chris likes you. I’m sure that’s obvious to you. But Chris doesn’t let himself like a woman. Not the way he likes you, I mean.” His mouth pinched tight as if torn about revealing more. Worried he’d betray Chris or something.

“And you think I’ll hurt him?” She blew out a shallow breath of unease. “Ella already warned me not to do that.”

“The thing is,” he said while pinching the skin at his throat, clearly uncomfortable, “I’m not sure how Chris would handle a woman he cares for leaving him again.”

Again.

Her stomach dropped.

Her heart squeezed.

She closed her eyes and took a moment. “He told me about his mom.”

“He did?” A.J. asked abruptly, surprise in his tone.

“And about his PTSD.”

“His what?”

She blinked her eyes open at the realization she’d just betrayed Chris. *No, no, no.* How did A.J. not know that? “Ignore that, but um, yeah, he told me the story behind why he joined the Navy.”

A.J. dropped his attention to the ground, his jaw tight beneath his beard. “So, you know that he’s never put himself out there before, too afraid to allow himself to fall in love because a woman might leave him the way his mom did. I mean, he hasn’t said this specifically, but it’s obvious.”

Chills erupted across her skin, and she pulled down her rolled-up sleeves in search of warmth. “Why am I different?” She knew the answer. She’d felt it in their kiss last night. An undeniable connection between them from the moment they met that went way beyond the physical, and no amount of trying to sell herself on the idea that what she felt was only lust would work.

“You really need to ask me that? You’re a kick-ass woman.” He allowed a brief smile to sit on his

lips before his gaze journeyed back to Chris, Bear, and Elaina. They were setting up an obstacle course, and Chris had a big, fat tire over his head. His biceps flexed as he carried it.

“I don’t want to hurt him,” she said softly.

“But, you’re afraid you will?” He faced her, shades concealing his eyes again.

“I won’t take off for a gig.” *I can’t. I don’t have a choice.*

“But?”

“But there are no guarantees in life. Just because I don’t want to hurt him doesn’t mean it won’t happen anyway.” She frowned. “The timing right now isn’t great, though. So, I should probably keep my distance.” *Until I figure out how to open up about my past.*

A.J. reached for her wrist and gently pulled her around to face him when she’d started to pivot away. “That’s not what I want,” A.J. said with a shake of the head. “I didn’t say that.”

“He’s one of your best friends. And you rely on him having a clear head when you’re working a job. You’re just looking out for him. It’s okay.”

A.J. angled his head. “And I’ll always look out for you, too. You know that, right?”

She nodded, emotion choking her up. “Why’d y’all recruit him to join your company?” she asked when her attention moved back to Chris navigating the obstacle course with Bear and Elaina.

“Ain’t it obvious?” He pointed to Chris as he went to his knees, and Elaina wrapped her arms over his shoulders. Chris hoisted her up as he stood, carrying her on his back as he completed the obstacle course. “In the field, you need to know someone will have your back. In a split-second decision, you gotta know they’ll have the team’s best interest at heart.” He glimpsed at her from over his shoulder. “But Chris also has everyone’s back when we’re not operating. He’s the guy making sure everyone is solid. Eating. Happy. Never alone.” He fully faced her. “What’s this about PTSD?”

“I don’t think it’s my place to say,” she whispered. “But he’s strong like you said. Caring and compassionate.” She chanced a look at her friend, not sure if he’d let this go. “I’m going to go join them, but thanks for the talk.” She started for the backyard, but A.J. called out her name, and she halted. When she turned, she found him on her heels.

“Rory, Ella might be right,” A.J. began, his voice soft. “Sometimes, you gotta shut one door if you want to open another one, especially if you’re looking to open the *right* one.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHRIS STOPPED IN HIS TRACKS, EYES WIDE WHEN HE ENTERED THE KITCHEN. A COUNTRY MUSIC SONG was blasting from the radio while Rory belted out the words, using a spatula as her microphone. Bear was on his hind legs hopping and howling along as Rory swayed her hips side to side, then threw her free hand into the air and hollered out what sounded like the song *Born Here Live Here Die Here*.

She grinned but just kept on singing when Chris spotted her. No, she wasn't the least bit shy or embarrassed he'd caught her during her performance. "Luke Bryan," she tossed out with another smile as Bear came running to his side, urging him to join the fun.

"Okay, boy." *Why not?* He grabbed another spatula and stood before Rory, doing his best to follow along with the words, and though he was only mouthing them, he was completely butchering the song, but it had Rory laughing, which was well worth this moment.

"You always put on a show while you prepare dinner?" he asked when Rory set the spatula back into the pan of meat sauce she was cooking for a spaghetti dinner, which made the Italian part of him happy. His Italian background had come from his mom's side, and it was about all he was grateful he'd inherited from her.

"I dance and cook when one of my favorite guys is singing." She stirred the sauce, and Bear trotted over to his new water bowl. Rory had found the upside-down cowboy hat bowl online and had it overnighted her first day in town.

"Favorite guys, huh?" He dipped a finger into the sauce, half-expecting she'd swat his hand like his grandmother on his dad's side always did when he was a kid and tried to sneak a taste of her cooking. "Delicious."

"Special recipe." Rory pointed to a spice bottle on the counter labeled "Special Shit" and smiled.

Chris barked out a laugh. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the counter by the stove, wanting a better look at her. "So, what other guys do you like? Kenny Chesney? Blake Shelton?" He called up to mind some of A.J.'s favorites. "Chris Stapleton?"

Rory set the spatula down and shifted to face him, now only inches away. Those inches felt like miles when he wished there was no distance at all.

"All of the above. What kind of music do you like?" She reached up and placed a hand to his chest. "This is a make-or-break moment, just so you know. No pressure." The laughter canceled out the serious expression on her face and in her hazel eyes.

"Oh?" His heartbeat ramped up the moment she touched him.

The last two days had been tough. He was unsure what to do or say about the conversation they'd had in the middle of the night Tuesday. He'd never opened up to anyone, so he was in new territory with zero clue how to act. And, of course, there was the kiss. The kiss that obliterated all other

kisses. The kiss that made him wonder if maybe he wouldn't be forever single.

But Chris still couldn't believe he'd pointed a gun at her. He mentally cringed at the memory. And although he liked having a weapon within reach beneath his bed, he'd locked it up. He couldn't take the chance of another incident.

It'd been easier to get through the day yesterday with A.J. and Elaina over, but they were on their own tonight.

And those outfits she wore while training would be his undoing.

She'd had her cowgirl boots and hat on again today like yesterday while they'd been working with Bear, who was making excellent progress.

At some point, they'd have to breach the topic of the kiss. He was waiting for her to do it first. Give her some space. Let her process what had happened. Decide if his baggage was too much to handle.

But watching her dancing and singing in his kitchen, jamming to country music with Bear, didn't make the wait all that easy on him.

"So, you should remember that I grew up in Boston when EDM was popular, so that's still in my blood. You know, the DJs of the nineties. Paul Oakenfold, Danny Tenaglia, John Digweed, a little Frankie Knuckles, or Carl Cox. Paul van Dyk, Bad Boy Bill, Daft Punk, Armin van—"

"It's not like you had that list prepared or anything?" Her lip momentarily caught between her teeth, and he blinked a few times at the seductive look she was shooting him, trying to remember what they'd been talking about.

She removed her hand from his heart as he lifted his palms in an exaggerated fashion. "What can I say? My side hustle used to be spinning for college parties while I was still in high school."

"You, a DJ? Does A.J. know you could steal his thunder? I heard he loves to DJ parties."

"Nah, I let him have his fun."

"Of course you do." She broke the spaghetti strands in half and put them into the pot of boiling water. "You still listen to electronic dance music?"

"Sometimes. But I haven't actually touched a turntable in years." He grabbed the dishes from the cabinet and began setting the small four-person table. "Are you only into country music?"

"I like a variety of music, but maybe I'll have to look up some of those names you mentioned and give them a try."

"Well, country's starting to grow on me," he tossed out over his shoulder.

"Right," she said, dragging the word out the same way A.J. always did.

He turned around to find her only inches away yet again. This time, those inches felt like seconds to another kiss. Time and distance became all mixed up in his head when he thought of her mouth sealed to his.

She wet her lips, eyes dipping briefly to his mouth, before curving at the edges.

"I love this song," they both said at the same time when the song had switched over to Jason Derulo, *Savage Love*.

"Jinx," he added with a wink, then turned to catch his breath.

He maneuvered around to wash his hands in the sink, a distraction so he wouldn't grab her. Pin her to his body. Kiss her like she'd never been kissed before for a second time. And he wasn't overly confident or cocky in thinking that. Their kiss the other night was a kiss like he'd never experienced, and the dreamy look on Rory's face when they broke apart told him she'd felt the same way.

He pinned his back to the counter and crossed his arms once again while the dinner cooked, trying to untangle his emotions, figure out what he was feeling. He wasn't sure how long he'd been at it, but

when the timer went off, his mouth stretched into a yawn.

“Am I that boring?” She hip-checked him before draining the pasta. “You already took a nap, so you can’t be that tired.”

“I didn’t nap. And you could never bore me.” He probably said those statements in the wrong order.

“You were passed out on the couch with Bear earlier. Ball cap covering your face, and he was snoring on your lap.” Her eyes moved from the pasta to his face—such beautiful eyes.

“Oh, that.” He pressed his lips together, brows drawn in a playful manner. “Nah, I was just doing some thinking. You didn’t wear us out so much during training that I passed out.”

“Ha, sure,” she said while serving the food, and he set two beers on the table.

They sat at the table and fell into easy conversation, getting to know each other a bit more. Rory made him laugh with stories of growing up in Alabama surrounded by the five Hawkins siblings, and he shared some of his BUD/S experiences. But she never delved too deep and only briefly mentioned her years of treasure hunting, which had him a little disappointed. Although, he supposed that just because he’d opened up to her didn’t mean she had to do the same.

“So,” he said between bites of spaghetti, which was really damn good, “what do you like to do for fun when you’re not working with animals, finding treasure, or dancing while cooking?”

“I haven’t had much time to do anything, to be honest.” She pushed the spaghetti around on her plate but didn’t take a bite. “Before I moved back to the U.S., I was always on the go. Focused on work.” Her mouth tightened as if regretting her choice of words.

What kind of work?

Rory looked up from twirling the strands of her spaghetti with her fork and spoon. “Adventure, artifacts, and animals. Four P’s in training and three A’s in my life.”

But who’d want to kill you? That’s what he’d been dying to find out, but if he pressed on that hot-topic issue, would she run? Would she leave him before he got a chance to see what was even happening between them? “Sounds like you’ve had a great life.”

Her focus fell back to her half-eaten food. “It was great, but it’s definitely gotten more interesting in the last week.”

He lifted his head and smiled. “You don’t say?”

“There’s a guy. A funny, kind, incredible guy that has certainly made an impression on me, that’s for sure.”

“There’s a brilliant, compassionate, and amazing woman I know, too. And she’s most definitely rocked my world,” he confessed in response, but when her broad smile dissolved, his stomach clenched.

The air in the room shifted. He could practically feel the weight of it bearing down on him, the precursor to a conversation that could only end badly. His body had gone from relaxed to tense and on edge faster than his thoughts could catch up to the sudden change in atmosphere.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

And boom went the dynamite. *Damn.* But as long as she didn’t announce their kiss had been a bad idea and could never happen again, he could handle almost anything she threw his way. Well, maybe.

Her eyes focused on her plate as she moved her hand from the bottle she held, reached into her pocket, and produced a small piece of folded yellow paper. She was nervous, and brownies aside, the woman didn’t seem to get all that nervous.

Chris sat taller in his chair across from her, his pulse picking up as he waited for her to speak.

She set the paper on the table beneath her palm, and he took a moment to steel his own nerves.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what you told me Tuesday night.”

He gulped. “Which part?”

She glanced at the living room, which was open to the kitchen, her eyes positioned on the TV screen, and it suddenly dawned on him. PTSD. Did she think he’d hurt someone? Hurt himself?

His stomach clenched once again at the idea, and he did his best to keep his hands alongside his plate on the table, to not push away and stand. To not run away from this conversation.

“There’s a name and a number on this paper, and I know this isn’t my place, and you can tell me to fuck off if you want, but I care about you,” she said, her voice not quite as calm and even as normal, or maybe his heart was beating so loud in his ears he wasn’t hearing right. “Riley Logan specializes in PTSD therapy for veterans, and she’s in the D.C. area.” She kept her hand on top of the paper, but it was now close enough he could shift his fingers slightly and set a palm to both the paper and her hand. “Her husband was in the Marines, and now he works private security. Maybe you’ve heard of him? Ben Logan.”

Chris positioned his eyes on her face, doing his best to make it through the conversation without saying something offensive or rude. But he’d had experience with people trying to push their particular brand of therapy on him, and he didn’t have any need for talking about his problems.

The first woman to press was after his mom left for a second time when he was in middle school. Then again, the high school counselor when he was sixteen. The last time? Mandated therapy when Marcus died.

But his problems were different.

He was upset that Jamel didn’t always remember him.

That Andy lost his eyesight.

And Xavier wouldn’t walk again with the legs he was born with.

. . . And more and more of his brothers from the Iraq War that still suffered.

He was just fucking fine. He hadn’t lost a limb. Or his vision. Or his mind. But his buddies, well, he couldn’t fix what happened to them. He couldn’t make things right no matter how much he tried, no matter how much money he donated.

So no, a shrink wouldn’t be able to give Jamel back his memories. Or Xavier his legs.

His body tensed, and his hand began to tremble on the table. *Fuck, fuck.* He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“I thought it might be fate that I stumbled upon her name because she’s from another small town outside Birmingham. I even read a crazy story about a serial killer striking her town, and Riley nearly died. So, she knows what it’s like to have PTSD. And I just thought maybe you could talk to her. Not now. But sometime.”

He was biting down so hard on his back teeth that his jaw began to ache. He didn’t want to explode on her. She obviously cared, the way he knew Jessica and Harper cared about him and would push if they were to discover what was going on inside his head.

Chris slowly brought his hands to his lap. “I know of Riley,” he finally spoke. “And I know Ben.” He waited for his pulse to slow before going on. Rory continued staring at him, but there was trepidation in her eyes, in the way she held her body. “Ben works with Emily’s brother, Jake.”

“Liam’s Emily?” Her brows lifted in surprise, and he nodded. “Small world.”

“But this isn’t fate. This isn’t some ‘it’s meant to be’ scenario indicating I should talk to Riley. I’m sorry.” He stood and grabbed his dish, went to the sink, and set it inside before bringing his hands to the counter while hanging his head. He had to get a handle on his emotions. “I appreciate your concern,” he added at the sound of her standing. “But I’m okay. I promise.” He forced himself to face

her. "I'm the last person you need to worry about." He reached for her plate and busied himself with loading the dishwasher, hoping she'd let this topic go.

Rory came alongside him and began cleaning up without another word and thank God for that.

"Tomorrow is that thing, right?" he asked after they finished the dishes.

"Oh." Now she was the one who looked uncomfortable, which wasn't what he'd been going for.

"Yeah, the thing for Andrew Cutter. Is tomorrow already Friday?"

A package from A.J.'s sister, Ella, had been delivered earlier. When Rory had lifted the red dress from the box, her face blanched. Was the dress for tomorrow? Chris remembered A.J. saying his sister toyed around with clothing design, and if she'd been the one to make that dress, well, the woman had talent.

"I might go. Or I might not. I have no idea." She went to the dinner table and dropped back into her chair.

He started to say something, but his phone began vibrating in his pocket.

"Not going to answer?" she asked while noting him simply staring at the phone once it was in his palm.

"Don't recognize the number." It was a Massachusetts area code, but any number of his friends from back home would've already been programmed into his phone. After a moment, the icon indicating he'd received a voicemail popped up. Chris hesitantly lifted the phone to his ear to listen, leaning his back against the counter, a dish towel still tossed over his shoulder.

"Hello, it's Carol. I know it's been a long time, but we need to talk. It's rather urgent. Your father gave me your number, but he doesn't know your address. Can you please call me tonight? I know this is out of the blue, but it really is important." A voice he barely recognized, one he hadn't heard in over twenty years, rattled off a phone number twice.

Chris lowered the phone in a daze, feeling as though all the blood had drained from his face.

"Hey, you okay?" Rory was on her feet and standing before him, a confused look on her face.

"I have to go." He shoved his phone in his pocket, threw the dish towel on the counter, then grabbed his keys and took off out the door before she could protest his departure.

The cool night air slapped him in the face but didn't shake him out of his stupor.

He started up his Jeep, cranked up the rock music on the radio, then gripped the steering wheel but stared out the front window, unable to drive. To move.

Twenty years without a word from his mom. Twenty fucking years.

Why now?

Why'd his dad give her his number?

He needed to get drunk. To get hammered and forget tonight happened. To erase that woman's voice from his mind.

Call you. You think I'd call you? He tightened his hold of the wheel, preparing to leave when he spied Rory's shadow in the living room from behind the partially closed blinds, and his chest fell. His breathing slowed. And some of his anger began to loosen from his body.

He closed his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath, then let it go. Four breaths in and four out, he reminded himself. A tactic he was taught in the Navy in the event a sailor began to panic.

He didn't normally panic. But this was . . .

"I'm not Dad," he said aloud, his voice low and deep. *I don't need to get wasted because of Mom.* He forced his eyes open and shut off the radio. He shook his head and turned off the Jeep.

It took him a few minutes, but he finally made his way back inside. "I'm sorry," he said the second he saw Rory sitting on the couch with Bear.

She turned to look at him, relief in her eyes he hadn't left.

After locking up, Chris set his keys aside, then came into the living room and dropped onto the couch with Bear between them. Petting Bear helped calm his nerves, and looking into Rory's eyes eased his tension, too.

"I'm not okay," he confessed, his throat tight. "But I can't talk about it right now."

She worried her lip between her teeth, then focused on the TV. "How about your favorite movie, then?" She peered back his way.

"I think I'm more up for *Bad Boys* tonight."

She nodded and rose. "Then I'll make the popcorn." When she started past him, he reached for her wrist, stopping her.

"Thank you," he whispered, and her smile was enough to help relieve some of the pain that roared back to life with an unexpected voicemail. Pain he thought he'd let go of years ago. One call from his mom had proven he wasn't as pieced together as he'd thought.

He had *Bad Boys II* ready to go when she returned, but instead of sitting on the other side of Bear, he shifted the sleeping dog so Rory could be right next to him.

She rested her head on his shoulder and stayed like that until the closing credits rolled.

Watching a movie in silence with her at his side had been comforting. Perfect. And a much better, more responsible choice than getting drunk.

"I haven't seen that movie in ages," she said while standing and stretching her back. Her eyes moved to Bear, still snoozing on the couch. "Maybe you should sleep with Bear tonight," she added, her tone soft.

"Isn't that breaking the rules?"

Her long lashes lifted, and the most magnificent hazel eyes stole his breath. "We both know you were always going to break the rules."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A FLASH OF RED CAUGHT CHRIS'S EYE AS HE REACHED TO OPEN THE DOUBLE DOORS OF THE LAUNDRY closet in the hall, preparing to grab a towel out of the dryer. He was fairly certain the color he'd spotted out of his peripheral vision was wrapped around Rory's body. The dress Ella sent her?

He silently closed the doors, the towel now forgotten, and moved into the open doorway of Rory's room.

Bear was lying on the floor, chin resting atop his front paws, watching Rory as she stood in front of a narrow full-length mirror propped against the wall.

Chris leaned against the doorjamb and savored the view, quietly waiting for her to notice him as she smoothed her hands along the silhouette of her body.

The material was Ferrari red and hugged every inch of her back and hips like a second skin. His gaze followed the length of the dress down to the tight curve of her ass before drifting to her toned calf muscles, accentuated by a pair of strappy gold shoes.

Damn, he was speechless.

When he looked up, he found Rory's eyes set on him in the reflection of the mirror. "When did you get that mirror?"

"That's your first comment?" She slowly turned to face him, brows lifted. Her blonde hair flowed down her back in soft waves, and some of the strands were pinned to the sides, revealing the sweep of her high cheekbones and beautiful hazel eyes.

Bear looked up briefly as Chris entered the room but quickly dismissed him and curled into a new position with a satisfied groan.

"I was going to go with hot damn, but I thought I'd ease into that."

"Well, thank you." She smiled, her glossy red lips revealing straight white teeth. "And I picked the mirror up at Target while you were on your run with Bear an hour ago."

Ah, the run. Now he remembered why he was in the hall—to grab a towel from the dryer before hitting the shower.

"And why are you in your boxers?" Her eyes cruised slowly over his six-pack before landing on his black Calvin Klein boxer briefs. "Didn't take you for a Calvin Klein type."

"I was in a similar pair the other night," he reminded her.

"Yeah, I, um, wasn't focused on your boxers that night."

"And here you are unable to rip your focus free." He smirked. The soft blush on her cheeks was everything to him at that moment.

Now that he had a better view, Chris let his eyes journey over every inch of her in that dress.

His gaze dipped down to the deep V of the dress that showcased her cleavage and accentuated her

breasts, which he'd venture to guess were a perfect C cup.

And when she shifted her right leg, he nearly swallowed his tongue at the sight—a slit that ran from the hem of the dress to her mid-thigh parted to reveal the smooth, honey-toned skin of her killer legs.

“Who’s staring now?”

“Guilty.” The smile fell from his lips when he realized why Rory was currently wearing the red dress Ella had sent her. It was Friday evening. Did that mean she was going to Cutter’s event tonight? Why hadn’t she told him? She’d had all day while they trained to mention it.

“Were you about to shower?” She looked down and fidgeted with the top of the dress as if worried she was showing too much. But all that managed to accomplish was make him zero in on her cleavage again.

“Yeah. I was just about to hop in when I noticed I didn’t have any towels.”

Rory stepped around Bear and stopped a foot shy of Chris. “I thought SEALs were all about the details,” she challenged with a smile. “At least that’s what A.J. told me. He said, ‘the devil is in the details,’ which I took to mean the small things that are overlooked can cause big problems. So, you not having your towels stocked and ready . . .”

He folded his arms across his chest, doing his best not to reach for her like he wanted. “I’m not used to having a roommate, and a certain blonde keeps swiping all my towels.”

“Well, do you want that blonde to be dirty?”

Oh, there were so many ways he could respond to that. The woman was teasing him. Distracting him from the fact she was in that dress preparing to leave.

His heart sank a little at the thought.

“I didn’t make up my mind until I was buying treats for Bear at Target and walked by the mirror and saw my reflection.” She closed her eyes, her dark eyeshadow and long lashes on display. “A.J. said I ought to close one door before opening another. And even Elaina thinks I should attend, so . . . I’m going to Andrew’s gala tonight.”

“Oh.” He went to stick his hands in his pockets, feeling uneasy, but forgot he was only wearing boxers.

“Come with me?” She kept her eyes closed as if nervous for his response.

For a moment, Chris lost all sense, couldn’t speak, couldn’t blink, too shocked at her request because he’d been so sure she was leaving him. When her words finally registered, his body relaxed enough to draw in a much-needed breath, and his heart swelled with emotion.

“You see,” she began, opening her eyes, “I had this plan.” She released a shaky breath and closed the remaining space between them. Her hand went to his chest, and his muscles twitched at her soft touch. “My plan was to avoid feeling anything more than friendship for you.” She looked up, and what he saw reflected in her eyes made his pulse quicken. There was no mistaking her desire.

Without hesitation, he placed his hands on her hips as she held him prisoner with her gaze.

“I did give a lot of thought to the advantages of us having carefree sex, though. But then I realized . . . if we were to have sex, no matter how casual, I might end up falling for you.”

Fuck. His body tensed once again. It coiled tight—his physical desire on the verge of eclipsing all rational thought. But maybe screw rational right now.

“The problem is my plan failed miserably. I already feel something for you. I didn’t even need to sleep with you for it to happen.” Her lips rolled inward at her admission, and she drew them into a tight line, one he wanted to part with his tongue. “But I don’t want to hurt you, Christopher Hunter,” she said, her voice soft. “And I’m so scared you’ll get hurt because of me.” Her eyes grew glossy as

if she might cry. “My past is . . . well, let’s just say being around me might be hazardous to your health.”

“The nature of my work makes me dangerous to be around, too,” he reminded her of that bit of uncomfortable truth.

“There’s another kind of danger to consider. And the pain it inflicts can be as damaging as a physical injury. You’re well aware of what heartache can do to a person because of your mom,” she whispered, her glossy eyes captivating him. Her words and her tender heart had his knees almost buckling.

He slid his hands up her frame and gently gripped her upper arms. “Look at me,” he commanded when her focus took a detour to study her hand on his pec. “You don’t need to worry about me. I can handle what life throws at me. That’s who I am. But it took me less than a week to know I want this. I want you.” He brought his thumb to her collarbone and swept small circles there. “You’re worth it, Rosemary. You’re worth the risk, don’t you know that?”

She sniffled and inched her face closer to his.

The instant his mouth took possession of hers, Rory threw her arms over his shoulders and urged him to deepen the kiss.

Their kiss the other night had sent him flying. This one had him every bit as light-headed. Whatever was going through him, making him feel like he was soaring, was more than desire.

At the sound of Bear whining, Chris pulled away and let him out of the room.

“You should lock the door.” Rory smiled. “I bet he can figure out how to open it.”

Chris raised a brow and twisted the lock. “You teach him to use a bobby pin to break in, too?”

“Not yet,” she added with a laugh as she began to unzip the side of her dress.

“You sure about this?” He set his hands to his hips, waiting for her to make the next move. This was not what he’d been expecting before his shower.

Rory nodded and let the dress fall. No hesitation.

The pool of red fabric surrounding her feet left her dressed in only heels and red lacy panties. When she inhaled a deep breath, her gorgeous tits lifted, and he bit down on his lip to keep from biting down on her peaked nipples. To take in everything about this moment, about *her*, before he reached out.

“No bra?” he asked, his voice hoarse with desire. “Were you planning on driving me crazy tonight?”

“Built-in bra in the dress, so I didn’t need one.” She stood before him, beautiful and confident, as he moved with slow, steady steps toward her.

“You’re amazing.” His eyes devoured her exposed flesh, planning out which path his tongue would take first, but then . . .

“What happened there? Appendix removed?” He closed the space and set a hand to the three-inch scar off to the side of her belly button, dragging his thumb over the slightly raised pinkish-white mark.

When she didn’t respond, he lifted his eyes and found hers sealed tight. “No, that’s a scar from before.”

“Before . . . as in the dangerous work you used to do?” he asked as she slowly turned, and he stumbled back in horrified shock.

More scars.

Much older. Significantly lighter. Faded with time. But he knew exactly what he was looking at.

Fuck.

“You were whipped?” He set a hand to his mouth, growing shocked. Dizzy. All the lust coursing

through his body gone and replaced with an overwhelming desire to throttle the sick son of a bitch who did this to her.

“This is why my dress isn’t backless, why I wear a tee over my bikini top when I go for a swim, but, Chris, please, I don’t want these to cut into our moment.” A gentle plea caressed her tone, and the painful sound in her voice coupled with the sight of her scars tipped him over the edge and made him want to commit murder—kill a guy, any fucking guy connected to what happened.

She twisted to face him before he could latch on to another angry thought, one that resulted in someone dying and calling Finn to help get rid of the body.

“Don’t let these scars come between us. I need this. I need you.” She inched closer, a hand going to his chest as he tried to regain focus. Remember where he was. Switch kill mode off. But his body was tight and on the brink of—

Rory kissed him, breaking his murderous train of thought. He didn’t kiss her back, his lips not yet ready to comply, his body still seething with anger.

But she got to him. She got through to him. His mouth finally relaxed, and when her tongue skirted the lines of his lips and met his, the only thoughts left in his head were his feelings for her.

He grabbed on to her hips and urged her legs around his waist before they fell onto the bed.

Being careful not to hurt her, he shifted to support his body over hers, then leaned down and trailed kisses from her belly button up to her breasts.

Rory ran her fingers through his hair, then clawed at his back as he teased her nipple with his mouth, alternating between gentle nips and long swipes with his tongue.

He covered her breasts with wet kisses, then moved up the column of her throat, savoring the salty-sweet taste of her skin before retaking her mouth.

Her moans and whimpers drove him crazy, and when she shimmied her hips to grind against him, he almost lost control.

His cock was so damn hard, practically on the verge of springing free from his boxers and taking over the situation.

Rory’s nails gently scraped along the ridges of his biceps when he lowered his mouth to her shoulder with a tender kiss before working his way down her body.

He paused at the scar on her abdomen, wishing he could kiss away that it happened, then she set her hands to his shoulders as a plea to forget. He’d never forget, but for now, he’d do as she asked. Be in the moment.

As he drew closer to the red lace, she brought her hands to his hair and fisted the short strands, moaning obscenely as he teased his tongue along the edges of her panty line. She bucked her hips, arching into him, urging him to do her bidding.

“I want your mouth on my pussy,” she pleaded, and he loved that confidence so fucking much.

“Say that again. What do you want me to do?” He looked up to catch her eyes, which had darkened with lust.

“Your. Mouth. On. Me,” she said around breathy moans, each word punctuated with longing every time he slipped a finger beneath the edge of her panties along the seam of her sex.

“Oh, you mean this?” He placed his mouth on her lace-covered pussy, dragging his tongue up and applying the slightest bit of pressure.

Her body twitched in response as if struck by a jolt of lightning. “I swear to God, Chris, if you don’t finish getting me naked, we’re going to have problems.”

He shifted back on his knees and peeled her panties to her thighs. God, she was beautiful. So perfect. Chris inhaled a deep breath, taking in her sweet scent before leaning in and finally tasting her

with a flick of his tongue.

“Yes!” she cried out. So focused on the mission at hand—making this stunning woman come undone with his mouth—the sound of Bear barking in the hall was barely a blip on his radar. Chris was determined to make her scream. Let go. Give her everything he had.

His mouth fluttered softly over her clit. His tongue strummed her sensitive flesh.

“You are so freaking . . . just . . . holy . . .” A string of curses tore from her mouth as he peeked up, tongue still on her, to find her gripping the bedspread with both hands, her back arched off the bed as she screamed out his name.

She trembled against his mouth, coming hard. Her thighs clenched and squeezed around the sides of his head.

When she started to relax, he kissed her inner thighs, then trailed his lips up her abdomen and back to her breasts.

“You’re talented, Mr. Hunter,” she said in a lazy, sexy, hungover-from-an-orgasm kind of voice. “So, so talented.”

He swirled his tongue around her nipple, feeling it harden even more between his teeth. He was going to bust a load any second. He needed to be inside of her. To feel her tighten around his cock.

“Stand.” She leaned up on her elbows and found his eyes. “Remove your boxers.”

He eased off her, rose, and followed her command.

She sat on the edge of the bed, tossed her panties, but kept her heels on, then stood and set her palms to his chest, backing him to the wall. Lowering to her knees, she circled a hand around the base of his shaft, and he muttered out a curse. And when she brought her mouth to his crown, he nearly choked.

His hands went to her hair, and pins fell out as he destroyed whatever she’d done to it. He could barely see straight as he lowered his gaze to watch Rory going down on him, her lips wrapped around his cock, his cock sliding in and out of her mouth in slow movements.

Yup, not how he thought tonight was going to play out. And damn, he still hadn’t showered after his run, but . . . she didn’t seem to care. She was moaning around his hard length as if enjoying this as much as he was.

He lost himself in her. And she had him so deep, Bear’s whining and barking, the doorbell ringing, were merely blips on his consciousness.

“Who the heck is here?” she asked, but then quickly took all of him in her hot mouth again. And the only thing he was capable of at that moment was relishing the ecstasy that was Rory as he bit down on his back teeth, on the brink of coming undone.

“They’ll go away,” he said, gently gathering her hair again, guiding her head as she sucked.

His quads tightened, his vision blurred, and he came harder than he’d ever come in his life. “Fucking hell,” he breathed out, finally coming back to reality. And now he understood why the French referred to an orgasm as *la petite mort*, the little death.

“This is real, right? I didn’t dream this?” Rory asked after she rose and set her hands on his chest, her eyes glittering with passion.

“We could do it again if you need more convincing,” he teased, touching his forehead to hers.

Bear’s frustrated barks broke through their sex-fog, and it was clear that whoever was ringing the doorbell had no intention of letting up or leaving.

“Maybe we should get that?” She pulled back to catch his eyes. “Clothes first?”

He grinned and set a soft kiss to her lips, then openly gawked as she bent to pick up her panties and dress from the floor. He angled his head, taking in her gorgeous, naked body. “Fuck the door. I

need to be inside you,” he rasped as she faced him.

“Come with me to the event?” Her eyes tightened on him. “I promise I’ll fantasize all night about what you’ll do to me afterward, or maybe during if we can find a coat closet.” She winked.

He pulled her against him, about to speak when a knock on the bedroom door startled the both of them. That couldn’t be Bear.

“You alive in there? I used my emergency key when you wouldn’t open up.”

Shit. It was Harper. And if she was there, did that mean he’d have to spin up? No, no, no. Tonight was . . .

“Be right out,” Chris announced. “Sorry.”

“We’ll be in the kitchen,” Harper said.

“I’ll be thinking up a ridiculous amount of naughty things between now and later that we can do together.” Rory pressed up on her toes and kissed him.

“Will you tell me about the scars first?”

Her chest visibly dropped with the weight of his question, but she lifted her chin to find his eyes, and she nodded.

“Okay.” Chris ducked into his room and quickly pulled on a pair of sweatpants, then headed for the kitchen to find Harper and Roman there waiting. “Are you here because we got the go-ahead to track down Santiago?” he cut straight to the point. *Please, say no.*

It’d been five days since Roman and Finn had shown up at his house on Sunday to alert him that Santiago had escaped CIA custody.

“Probably Sunday. We *may* get the go-ahead to hunt down Santiago since it looks like he’s no longer Stateside,” Harper explained. “But that’s not why we’re here.”

“Oh?” He blinked in surprise.

Harper stared at him, looking as confused as he now felt. “You invited us to dinner.”

“I did?” He looked to the ceiling, searching for a memory as to when the hell he’d done that.

Harper extended her phone to show a text he’d supposedly sent requesting both she and Roman to be at Chris’s house for dinner at six sharp.

Chris smirked in surprise and looked up at the both of them. “I didn’t send that.”

Harper peered at Roman, who had an equally puzzled look on his face.

Roman shifted uncomfortably from where he stood, his back to the counter, unease cutting across his face. He was in black jeans, black boots, and a black shirt. His normal clothes, not dressed up.

Harper, on the other hand, had swapped out her typical fun tees and jeans for a pink, long-sleeved V-neck dress that hugged her body and stopped above her knees. The woman even had on heels. What was going on?

“Rory texted me to dress up,” Harper said as if reading his thoughts. “She said we were meeting here before going somewhere else. It was all very cloak and dagger, even for me.” Harper’s long, dark hair was wavy and partially clipped at the back of her head. This wasn’t a look Chris was used to seeing unless she needed to go undercover. “Did I really put on a dress for nothing?”

The way Roman was attempting to discreetly check out Harper . . . maybe not for nothing.

“I bet I know what happened,” Chris said as a thought struck him.

Harper folded her arms. “I’m all ears.”

“Gwen’s babysitting Elaina and Jackson right now so Liam and Emily can go on a date.” Chris stroked his beard. “I think they’re playing a game on us.” *And trying to set us up on a double date.*

Rory entered the kitchen, once again wearing her red dress, and Chris forgot all about Santiago and spinning up.

Rory. She was all he wanted to think about.

He wanted her. And he'd be damned if he'd let anyone or anything ruin their night together. But first, he had to survive an evening with her ex, which could prove to be a little awkward. And then not lose his mind with worry when she laid whatever news she had on him about her past.

"You okay?" Rory was waving a hand in front of his face, snapping him out of his stupor.

Her blonde hair was in loose waves over her shoulders. And she'd reapplied her lipstick since he pretty much smeared it off with his lips.

"We were set up," Harper chimed in and turned toward the cabinet. "Got any wine open?"

"What?" Rory smiled.

"We all got played," Chris explained. "Gwen, Wyatt's twenty-one-year-old daughter, is a tech whiz. Former hacker." Maybe *still* a hacker. "Put her and Elaina together, and well, this happens. Looks like they hacked our phones and sent texts."

"Oh." Her red lips rounded, eyes following Harper's movements as she searched for wine glasses. "Elaina didn't want me to go alone to the event, so . . ."

"What'd Elaina say to you?" Roman asked.

Rory frowned. "This is going to sound crazy, but—"

"If you're about to tell me Elaina just knew about the event tonight, it won't be crazy." Chris did his best to keep his eyes on Rory's face and not all the places his mouth had pressed and sucked ten minutes ago. Shit, he'd get hard standing in front of Harper and Roman if he didn't get himself in check.

"When Elaina was here the other day, she told me that I should go to the party on Friday. She said I needed to go, and it might seem hard and tough, but it had to be done. But she didn't want me going alone." Rory wrapped a hand around the back of her neck beneath her long, blonde hair. "I was pretty caught off guard, and she changed the subject seconds later, so I kind of let it go."

"Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match," Chris teased in a singsong voice.

"A double date at my ex's event." Rory surprised him with a smile. "I mean, why not?" She shrugged, going with the flow.

Roman cocked his head. "And why would we go?"

"Because you don't want to disappoint Elaina." Harper faced Roman, eyes moving over his outfit. "You'll need to change." Harper switched her focus to Chris. "Got a second suit?"

"I think I can scrounge one up," Chris answered, and Roman said something low and grumbly beneath his breath.

"I'll help you look." Harper jerked a thumb toward Chris's bedroom as if he didn't remember the location but also sending him a silent signal that said they needed to talk alone.

Chris gently squeezed Rory's arm, and she smiled before he and Harper went to the hall.

And he still needed that towel. He grabbed one out of the dryer and found Harper going through his closet when he entered his room. "What's up?" he asked as she turned to face him holding a black suit, dress shirt, and tie.

"Just so you know, I didn't find out anything about Rory. No red flags, but not really much else in the last five years, which, well, maybe is a red flag in itself," she said softly so she couldn't be overheard.

Rory's past. The danger she could be in. He'd nearly let those thoughts slip from his mind. Rory's kiss, her tongue, had obliterated everything that had been in his head in the last twenty minutes.

"But you should also know that A.J. is aware there could be a problem in Rory's past."

"How do you know?" And why didn't A.J. say anything?

“A.J. asked me to do some digging this week, too.” Her eyes widened a fraction. “Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him you already had me looking, but I guess Rory said something to her brother that set off a couple of alarms, and he told A.J.”

“Okay, thanks for letting me know. And, I, uh, promise I’ll talk to A.J. I won’t leave this secret on your shoulders.” After seeing Rory’s scars, he was worried her past was worse than he’d anticipated, though.

“I know.” Harper lightly tapped his chest and went for the door, carrying the suit with her. “I still can’t believe Elaina set us up. And that kid’s abilities to predict the future—getting kind of crazy.”

“Tell me about it,” he said while opening the door to see Rory starting their way.

“Find something?” Rory asked.

“He’s gonna hate this, but at least it’s all black. His favorite color.” Harper smiled, then walked past Rory to deliver the suit to Roman.

“Rory?” Chris set a palm to the interior doorframe.

She stood in front of him, and he pushed a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “Yeah?”

“It was my mom,” he said, his voice low. “She left me a voicemail last night. She’s why I lost my cool and stormed out of the house.” His stomach grew tight. Pain he didn’t want to experience resurfaced at the memory of hearing his mom’s voice. Carol. She’d said Carol, not Mom. “I don’t want to talk about it, but I wanted to be honest with you.”

She peered to the floor for one small second before finding his eyes again. “And tonight,” she whispered, “I promise I’ll finally be honest with you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHRIS TIGHTENED THE KNOT OF HIS BLACK TIE AS HE SCANNED THE ROOM, FEELING NAKED WITHOUT A sidearm. Both he and Roman had ditched their black suit jackets as soon as they cleared security, peeling them off at the same time as if on cue, which had Harper poking fun at them for what she called their “synchronized striptease.”

Now, thirty minutes into the evening—thirty minutes that felt like thirty days—Chris still hadn’t spent any time with Rory. Much to his annoyance, she’d been immediately pulled into one conversation after another by people who recognized her. But the main guest of the evening, Andrew Cutter, was nowhere to be seen yet.

Cutter’s treasure may have been the evening’s main event, but to Chris, Rory was the highlight of his night.

Chris kept eyes on Rory, who glanced over at him every few minutes, an apologetic look on her face as she was whisked this way and that. He smiled back each time, not wanting her to feel guilty, and occupied himself by scrutinizing his surroundings as though he were on an official op.

The gala was being held in a ballroom on the fifth floor of a prestigious hotel in Georgetown, and the décor was a throwback to another era when Spain was busy colonizing the world. Well, that was his assumption based on the treasures from Cutter’s recovery of an 18th-century Spanish vessel and the gold description placards attached to the glass display cases placed around the room.

Red and gold, the colors of the Spanish flag, made up the theme. From table coverings and drapes to the gold vases that held elaborate arrangements of red carnations—the national flower of Spain. Even the hors d’oeuvres offered by the catering staff circulating the room were Spanish tapas.

Chris walked along the perimeter of the room, unable to stop himself from sweeping his gaze left and right. Discreetly checking out people. No obvious bulges beneath men’s jackets at the back or hips indicating they were concealing firearms.

Two security guards manned the only entrance to the room, which led to the hall and elevators. One guard stood by the terrace doors, which were open to allow the fresh night air into the ballroom. The guards all had short hair making it easy to see that there were no coiled wires attached to earpieces. Not even weapons from what he could tell. Not much in the way of security from Chris’s viewpoint, especially for an event like this.

Bad guys could easily infil the ballroom and steal the treasure if they wanted to. Fast-rope onto the terrace. Storm the room from the elevators. Break the glass exhibit cases with a spring-loaded window punch tool. Then rappel off the building to get to the street within seconds for an escape. Or maybe lock everyone in the room, steal the guards’ uniforms, and walk right out the front door. Disable the cams in the hallways, all with the touch of a few buttons on a laptop. It’d be an easy in

and out.

And that made him uncomfortable.

The room was too vulnerable to intrusion.

He couldn't seem to flip off operator mode even if he wanted to, he realized.

I'm overreacting. Rich people have lavish events all the time. I don't hear about masked men terrorizing their parties. But after seeing Rory's scars, it was hard to relax. *Who did that to her? Why?*

He slowed in front of the four-member band at the far corner of the room where no one was dancing even though there was a designated place for it. Chris nodded at the sax player in appreciation of his performance, and the man tipped his head in thanks.

Then he faced the large room again and began navigating around the people, exhibits, and tables to get to the outdoor bar on the terrace.

The only way he'd relax was to have another drink. He was looking forward to being alone with Rory, and he tried to tell himself his nerves had nothing to do with the fact her ex was in attendance, her scars, or that there was still a potential threat endangering her life—one not even Harper's cyber skills could discover.

The crisp air greeted him as he stepped out onto the expansive terrace, and he dragged in a breath, allowing it to fill his lungs. To take off some of the edge, to try and not swim in a sea of worry about what Rory was hiding. Maybe her idea of danger was different than his, and the threat was more like a gold-toothed, drunken Jack Sparrow impersonator like in the story she'd told him in Louisiana.

And maybe Elaina only wanted the four of them at the event tonight because she was playing matchmaker and not because she foresaw trouble.

But no, Rory has scars. She's been whipped. He gulped. The fresh air no longer alleviated any of the stress he was feeling.

Chris swiped a palm down his face, trying to get a grip—for tonight, at least. He bypassed Roman and Harper chatting at the bar to get a view of the sky. No helos in sight. Nobody scaling the stone building, which would be an easy task for a decent climber.

Busy waterfront restaurants were down below. Couples meandering along the cobblestone paths by the C&O Canal and Potomac River. Too many places for a sniper to hide. Too many vantage points. He'd need to keep Rory away from the terrace.

Aside from grocery shopping and a Target run, this was their first time away from his property. But he couldn't be like this every time he and Rory went out in public. She'd caught him on their flight from New Orleans to D.C. last Saturday, scoping out every single person on the plane as a potential threat. He'd been discreet, too.

Rory would hate his overprotectiveness and overthinking about her safety. But he had to remind himself of the significant shift in their relationship that had happened earlier in the day. She'd opened the door for something real to happen between them. And he didn't want to screw things up by pushing her away because of his incessant worrying.

Chris went to the U-shaped bar but stuck to the far left side to keep an eye on the view down below. "You guys find it stifling and too uptight in there?" he asked Roman and Harper.

Harper turned toward him with her tumbler in hand. "Yeah, it's a bit eighteenth century for me, including how the men behave toward women."

"Someone say something to you?" Roman's dark brow cocked in question.

"Just chauvinistic shit, and I didn't want to make a scene, so I literally had to bite my tongue." Harper moved to stand alongside Chris and gripped the railing, looking down at the hotel pool. "I

wouldn't mind taking a dip down there. Just get this uncomfortable dress off and dive in."

Chris fixed his attention on the rectangular swimming pool one floor below, surrounded by imported palm trees and cabanas.

Harper kept her eyes trained on the slow ripple of water, but when Chris veered his focus to Roman, the poor guy looked all worked up. He was staring right at Harper as if picturing her doing exactly that—removing her dress, diving into the water. Yeah, the man had it bad. And the way his jaw clenched beneath his dark shadow of a new beard he was growing, it was the closest Chris had seen Roman on the brink of losing his restraint.

This was Elaina's plan, he told himself, so he didn't let his mind dip back into unfriendly waters, the kind that were filled with bad guys and guns. And enemies of the State. "It's October, by the way. Water has to be cold."

"A place that charges eight hundred bucks a night for a fifth-floor suite better have a heated pool." Harper turned back toward the bar, her eyes taking a slow journey over Roman before reconnecting with Chris's face.

"Yeah, that's insane." Chris grimaced at the price tag. "Uber, it is. Not that I'd leave Bear alone overnight anyway."

Harper lifted her chin toward the open glass doors that led to the ballroom where Rory stood talking animatedly to a couple. "You think someone will convince her to go back to the treasure hunting life?"

"That's not what she's been—" Chris let go of his words, forgetting Roman wasn't aware Chris had asked Harper to look into Rory's background. "No, I don't think anyone will talk her into going back."

"Not even her Brad Pitt look-alike ex?" Harper sipped more of her bourbon, then ordered another round for the three of them before draining her glass.

"No, I don't think Cutter can convince her." And Chris was confident Rory's ex-boyfriend would never stand between him and Rory either, especially not after the intimate time they shared earlier.

Just thinking about her body writhing beneath him two hours ago had his blood heating. His body tightening with need.

But he couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that something would ruin the evening. That nagging feeling had been a constant presence since his mom walked out of his life when he was sixteen. It warped and changed over time, but it was always there. And it had kept him alive in Iraq. Kept him guarded against anyone getting the drop on him. Protected him from enemies of all kinds. And hell, it had kept him from falling in love.

He would not let it stop him from being with Rory. *Get out of my head, Mom*. But her voicemail crept into his mind nevertheless, and he realized that was yet another reason he was so on edge tonight.

He tossed back the bourbon handed to him in one swallow and set the glass down a bit too angrily, drawing Harper's attention.

"You okay there?" she asked him.

"Another, please," he ordered even as the alcohol burned in his chest from the last drink. "Fine," he forced out casually.

"This is different for us. Attending a formal event without being undercover," Roman came in for the save. The distraction. "I'm not standing here scoping out who I might need to shoot later," he casually added, causing a woman nearby to audibly gasp. "Kidding." Roman winked her way but coming from a guy who didn't wink unless there was something in his eye, it only appeared more

sinister.

The irony was Roman had no idea there could indeed be a threat tonight. Rory surrounded by so many people was just asking for trouble. And it was the people Rory knew from her old life that worried him the most. What if one of them was out to harm her? What if one of them had already hurt her? Caused the scars? No, she wouldn't have come if that were the case, right?

"Speak for yourself, I still might want to shoot someone," Harper said once the woman left the bar area. "If that woman who was cackling earlier starts talking to me about her castle slash mansion again, I might lose it." Harper shook her head. "I mean, who says, and I quote, castle-mansion? Who brags like that?"

"Rich people, apparently." Chris shrugged, trying to fight off the fear that clutched and grabbed and told him something was wrong. Multiple *somethings*.

We would have made love if Harper and Roman hadn't barged in. I'm not afraid of intimacy, he scolded himself as if responding to some inner Freud in his head. *Fuck, maybe I am nuts?*

"I know a few billionaires, and they're not all bad." Roman's words drew both Harper's and Chris's eyes as they waited for him to explain. "What?" A dark brow lifted in question.

"Billionaires? Plural. Who have you been rolling with, and why don't we know about them?" Chris asked. "What secrets have you been keeping hidden?"

"Forget I said anything." Roman pointed to the ballroom. "I'm going to do a lap. You know, check the perimeter. Habits, what can I say?"

"I already did, but a second set of eyes would be good," Chris replied, and Roman nodded and left the terrace.

Chris set his elbows on the bar, noticing a brunette on the other side angling her head, smiling at him. He ignored her and focused back on Harper.

"Kind of strange the guest of honor isn't here yet," Harper said, eyes still following Roman in the ballroom until he escaped their line of sight. Something in her gaze, akin to worry, had him wanting to ask *her* if everything was okay, but she continued before he had a chance to ask. "I may not know this Cutter guy, but I already don't like him. Maybe it's the cutout images of him around the room standing in front of treasure that rub me the wrong way. I don't know." She clinked glasses with him when the bartender set fresh drinks before them with heavier pours this time.

Chris couldn't seem to shake his hate for Cutter, either. The idea that Cutter had once tasted Rory's lips, felt her body pressed to his, had years of memories with her, made him a little, well, jealous.

He had a lot more to offer than Chris could, in his mind, at least, but—*stop. Rory's not Mom. She won't choose money over love. She doesn't even care about that stuff.*

Harper set a hand to his forearm, and he grew angry at himself for going down the rabbit hole of self-recrimination. "What's up? I lost you there for a minute." Her tone was soft and comforting.

"You close with your family?" He looked at her before taking a sip.

"As close as I can be without disclosing the truth about our work," she replied. "Why? Family problems?"

It was Harper and Jessica's job to know pretty much everything about their backgrounds. He'd had to complete a psych eval before joining Echo Team. No risks could be taken if they were to work on missions for the President. Chris had passed with flying colors because he was a stable guy, but he'd also learned how to withhold information if he were captured by an enemy, so he knew how to trick a machine and a shrink. He'd also picked up a few tips on how to drive a psychiatrist nuts by watching *Good Will Hunting*. Matt Damon's character had been from Southie like Chris, and aside

from Chris not being quite the genius like Damon's character, Chris still related to the man.

"Lost you again." Harper squeezed his arm. "And Rory's on approach."

Chris's eyes darted straight to Rory striding his way as if she were gliding on air. Red satin fanned out, revealing more of her long legs as she moved toward them.

"I'm so sorry." Rory frowned as she neared them. "Every time I tried to get to you, someone pulled me away. Literally." She pointed to her arm as if she were sore from being grabbed. "Y'all feel like taking a look at the treasure? I can show you a few things."

He didn't give a damn about the treasure, but he'd love nothing more than to hear Rory talk about it. See her face light up. Hear the inflections in her voice while she talked about one of her other passions aside from animals. Plus, he had a feeling she was a bit on edge like him tonight, too. Maybe because he'd seen her scars. Or because her ex was there. Or hell, because she was nervous about sharing her secrets tonight.

"Sure." Harper hooked her arm with Chris's, urging him to move since he was stuck in place gawking at Rory.

Rory smiled brightly, and they went back inside and reconnected with Roman, who'd taken a moment to sample a few tapas.

"So," Rory began, turning toward the first glass case closest to the terrace. "This piece is the first find that helped Andrew realize what he'd stumbled upon."

Inside the case was a bronze cannon with dolphins on the side. It'd been cleaned and polished, but the age and wear from being beneath the ocean were evident.

"I looked for this galleon for years," Rory said softly. "Most of the research he used to finally locate the ship came from me."

"Wait, what? No finder's fee, then?" Harper asked in surprise.

"I don't care about that. Just glad all of these amazing pieces aren't sitting at the bottom of the ocean," she answered, and a beautiful kindness crossed her face. "But those cannons were how Andrew realized he'd found one of the Spanish galleons that had gone down during the War of Spanish Succession in the early seventeen hundreds."

"Weren't the rights to the ship disputed?" Roman asked, and of course, he'd know that. He knew everything.

Rory nodded. "Andrew found the ship, but it was Spanish in origin, so Spain tried to claim it. And then, since the wreckage was off the coast of Colombia, the Colombians wanted ownership. A three-way fight. But Andrew didn't have any interest in keeping what he found, so both countries came to a deal and offered him a wreckage fee of one hundred mill, and the artifacts were donated to museums."

"And the gold and silver?" Chris asked.

"Spain and Colombia are probably still fighting over that," Rory explained.

And Rory's research led to that? *Wow.*

"I can relate to the tug-of-war. My father's side is from Spain. My mom's family is Brazilian." A smile formed on Roman's lips. "And my grandparents fought over what language should be my native tongue before I was even born. Spanish or Portuguese."

"What'd your parents do?" Rory asked.

"My parents moved to Florida, and I grew up speaking English," Roman replied with a light laugh.

Chris took a moment to process the fact Roman had just opened up about his background, and then he set a hand to Echo Four's shoulder. "Bet you went ahead and taught yourself both Spanish and

Portuguese anyway, right?"

Harper smiled. "Of course, he did."

"Looks like the organizers of the party chose Spain." Chris motioned toward the décor, and Rory nodded in agreement.

"So." Roman cleared his throat as if still shaking off the surprise he'd shared something about himself so candidly. "How'd Cutter salvage treasure?"

"He used a robot submarine with a dive range of up to four miles, same kind of tech used to locate downed aircraft in the ocean." Rory's eyes were bright and expressive as she continued to explain more about the wreckage while they followed her to the next exhibit.

"And you participated in dives for treasure back in the day?" Harper looked down at a sword sheathed by a metal scabbard, the brass-finished hilt and corded grip, on display in the next case.

How much was everything in the room worth? Would anyone risk a little armed robbery tonight? Chris blinked a few times and pinned his eyes back to Rory.

"Yeah, but, as much as I enjoyed my work, the end result always bothered me," Rory shared. "Think about it. The Spanish basically pillaged the lands in Colombia to pay for their wars in Europe. All those artifacts they took three hundred years ago didn't belong to them, and the items I found over the years certainly didn't belong to me just because I found them."

"I like you," Harper said abruptly. "A lot." She grinned and leaned toward Chris. "Don't lose her," she whispered.

I don't plan on it.

"Rory McAdams," a deep voice rumbled from behind. The voice probably belonged to Andrew Cutter.

Rory turned toward the man now standing before them wearing an expensive-looking tux. He reminded Chris of the dashing version of Brad Pitt in *Ocean's Eleven*. A thief. And maybe Cutter was, too. His green eyes gleamed as he took in the sight of Rory, but there was something dark and sinister there.

"Hi, Andrew," Rory said softly.

Cutter stepped closer and pulled her in for a possessive hug, setting his chin on her shoulder, which made Chris's skin crawl.

Hello again, nagging feeling. There it was in the form of a polished suit and his one-hundred-million-dollar Brad Pitt smile.

Rory met Chris's gaze from over Cutter's shoulder, and he'd swear he caught an apology in her eyes.

When Rory was able to disentangle herself from Cutter's clutches, he kept a tight hold of her hands, leaned back, and made no attempt to hide the sleazy way he was devouring the sight of her, his focus lingering on her breasts. "Stunning. A vision. All the gold in the world couldn't compare to your beauty." Cutter's fake smile broadened.

Oh, for fuck's sake. "Hi, I'm Chris Hunter." Chris had at least four inches on the guy, so he made an obvious show of bending down when he offered his hand. Was that an asshole move? Yeah. But even though Rory was every bit her own woman, he felt the need to protect her like a shield from whatever slimy bullshit the man was preparing to toss her way.

"Are you friends with my Rory?" Cutter asked, tightening his grip on Chris's hand.

My? Chris swallowed the anger rolling up, on the verge of exiting by way of his tongue. He set his arm back to his side, doing his best not to coil his fingers into his palm and clench his hand. *Be the better man.*

“This is Harper and Roman,” Rory quickly said, sidling close to Chris and placing a hand on his bicep, as if worried he was about to lose his cool. It was also a statement to Cutter. She was with Chris.

“A pleasure,” Harper said, her tone sugary sweet, the one she used when she was forcing herself to do something she didn’t like.

“Congratulations on your latest discovery.” Roman maintained his typical even tone, but when Cutter dropped his eyes to Harper’s cleavage, Roman edged one step forward in defense mode. He was making his own statement. Roman may have been the quiet type, but he was also the type you didn’t fuck with. Tall and strong, an imposing force that a person with any sense would know to back away from because it’d be a fight you’d lose.

But Cutter didn’t back down—not the least bit intimidated by either Chris or Roman. The guy was a world-class idiot. And he had to have been to lose Rory.

“You work together?” Cutter’s hands slipped into his pockets, but before anyone could answer, a woman appeared behind Cutter and whispered into his ear. Cutter turned toward her after listening to whatever she’d said, then nodded. “Sorry about that.” He brought his palms out of his pockets and steepled them together, resting the tips of his fingers beneath his chin. “I have to go talk to someone. Rather urgently. But I’m so glad you’re here.” He brought a hand to Rory’s shoulder. “I didn’t think you’d be able to resist showing up. But I had planned on finding you either way.”

The word *why* seemed to hang on the tip of Rory’s tongue, but rather than ask, her mouth tightened into a line.

“Be back soon.” Cutter’s attention moved from Chris to Harper and, lastly, to Roman.

“That was awkward,” Rory said once Cutter was gone. “Sorry about him. He’s a bit—”

“Of an ass?” Harper finished for her casually.

“I guess I overlooked that while we worked together.” Rory peered toward the band. “You all feel like dancing?” Her tone had switched to light and carefree as if she were trying to shove away the weight of the world.

Roman peered toward the band. “No one is dancing.”

“Someone has to start, right?” Rory reached for Chris’s hand, and when she set her palm inside of his, he released a sigh as his entire body relaxed.

As she led him by the hand to the dance floor, thoughts of everything else, including his mom, Cutter, and lurking threats, were gone from his mind. When she framed her body to dance, lifted her chin to hold his eyes, and his hands settled on her hips . . . he was lost. Lost in her and the moment.

A woman was singing with the band now, but he was unable to pull his gaze away from Rory.

“A rendition of a Whitney Houston song,” Rory said softly. “I like it. A.J.’s mom was a huge fan of hers and would always push Ella and me to sing Whitney’s songs whenever we did karaoke nights together.”

He could picture Rory as a cute kid. Instead of a spatula, a microphone in hand, belting out Whitney’s songs. The image of a young Rory had him swallowing down a lump of emotion.

For the first time in his life, he could envision himself with a daughter. A girl with blonde hair. With Rory’s killer eyes and smile. Her big, compassionate heart. Rolling on green grass with Bear.

“What are you thinking about?” Rory tipped her head to the side as she brought herself closer to him.

“You,” he admitted. “Us.” *A family. A future.* One week together, and he was dreaming of a future. Was that crazy?

“Like us having sex tonight?” she asked, her voice so low he had to read her lips over the music.

To have a kid, you need to have sex, so . . . Shit, his thoughts were insane. But this woman made him feel all kinds of incredible, and maybe his thoughts were okay. Even justified. Normal.

“I think we have eyes on us,” she said a moment later when he’d yet to respond. Rory wet her lips and eased even closer.

“They’re jealous,” he rasped, “that I’m dancing with you.”

The sexual tension between them was palpable. Chris felt as though they were surrounded by an invisible bubble keeping the rest of the world from entering their atmosphere. His thoughts were consumed by her. What it would be like to kiss every part of her for much longer than he’d done earlier. To make love to her.

He stepped back, reached for her hand, and twirled her. She laughed as he quickly pulled her against him, her hands landing on his biceps, her chest rising and falling with deep breaths.

Chris shifted his hands to caress her back while Rory skated her hands up and down his arms, fingertips biting into the crisp white fabric of his shirt every now and then.

Her eyes said it all.

Those naughty thoughts she’d promised him earlier were in her head, weren’t they?

And certainly in his head, too.

“Mind if I interrupt?”

Chris stole a look at the man off to their right. The last thing he wanted to do was turn her over to her ex-boyfriend. The last damn thing.

“Sorry, I’m taken,” Rory said, her tone deep and resolute, never removing her eyes from Chris.

His pulse, his everything, was flying as they continued to dance.

He was falling. So. Damn. Hard.

“How long have we been dancing?” she asked a few songs later, but he’d lost all concept of time.

“No idea,” he returned without checking his black Breitling watch, one of the only expensive things he owned aside from his Jeep.

“I, um”—she teasingly bit into her lip—“need to go to the ladies’ room. Come with me?”

He nodded, still holding on to her hand, but then Cutter stepped in their path just outside the ballroom and near the set of elevators. Cutter was cockblocking their kiss.

“We need to talk.” Cutter ignored Chris and pinned Rory with a determined look. “Please.”

Rory peered at Chris from over her shoulder, their hands still clasped. She needed to close the door on this man, and so, he nodded when he realized she was searching for his opinion. “I’ll wait here.”

“I’d prefer to talk in private,” Cutter said, stepping in front of Chris like a challenge.

There were two ways out of the hotel. The elevators near where Chris stood, and the stairwell off to his left.

Like hell would he take any chances letting Rory out of his sight. Maybe Cutter wasn’t her enemy, but on the off chance a bad guy did show up, he wouldn’t let someone grab Rory and take her down the stairwell or via the elevator. He’d seen shit go wrong too many times in the past.

“I’ll be staying here.” Chris folded his arms, remaining in the hall a few paces from the two elevators.

“Are you kidding me?” Cutter scoffed.

Rory released Chris’s hand and set her palm to Cutter’s back. “If you want to talk, we’ll do it on the terrace. Otherwise, I have plans.”

Cutter’s eyes honed in on Chris, another challenge there. Good fucking luck with that. “Be seeing you.” Cutter jerked his chin, the threat clear in his words. He turned and went for Rory’s arm, but she

eased out of his reach.

Chris pulled his phone out of his pocket as he watched Rory and Cutter re-enter the ballroom. He quickly dialed Roman, not sure where he and Harper were at the moment.

“What’s up?” Roman answered on the second ring.

“What’s your grid?” he asked, his brain sliding into operator mode.

“Terrace. What’s the situation?” Roman asked.

“You have eyes on Rory and Cutter?”

“I do now,” Roman said, his tone deep.

“I just need eyes on them. Make sure nothing goes sideways,” Chris requested, knowing Roman would understand every possible meaning of his words. Bad guys, Cutter—they might even go hand in hand.

“Roger,” Roman confirmed and ended the call. Chris stowed his phone and braced a hand against the striped wallpaper in the hall as he waited for what felt like hours for her to return when it was only minutes according to his watch.

Rory sidestepped a woman with a serving tray who had exited the ballroom at the same time, and Chris ate up the remaining space to get to her.

“Everything okay?” he asked, reaching for her.

Her confident shoulders displayed the slightest drop that most people wouldn’t notice, but he’d been trained to pick up on every detail in any given situation.

“He just wants me back.” Her eyes widened a fraction. “Not like that. I mean, he wants me to work for him. A special project he’s struggling with, and he thinks only I can help.”

They moved off to the side of the elevators when two couples exited, their curious eyes traveling to where Chris and Rory stood.

“Like all the research you did to help him find the treasure in that ballroom that he took credit for?” Chris asked, not even caring if the nosy couples heard since Cutter, in his mind, was a fake. Taking credit for the work Rory had put into that discovery was all the proof he needed.

“Good researchers who can also dive, shoot, and fight are hard to find.” She set a palm to his cheek.

“What’d you tell him?” His nerves stretched like live wires on the verge of crossing. He hated the doubt trying to infiltrate, the seeds his mom planted long ago—he didn’t want them to take root and grow. Not with Rory. Not this time. No, this time, he wanted to let his heart guide him and not let his past stand in his way.

“Do you really need to ask me that?” Disappointment clouded her beautiful eyes, and he hated that he’d put it there.

“No,” he said with regret. “I’m sorry.” He peered back into the open doorway leading to the crowded ballroom. “You still need to go to the ladies’ room?” Or had Cutter blown their moment? Or did he screw it up? *Shit.*

She circled her hand around the material of his tie and pulled. “If you don’t kiss me, I might not survive the night.” Her long lashes lifted to reveal a swirl of green and brown finding his face.

Hand in hand, they walked to the hall off to the left that held the service elevator.

They were alone for the moment with only fluorescent bulbs overhead and burgundy carpet beneath their feet.

Rory backed up against the wall and beckoned him closer. “You sure?” he asked, his tone a bit rough. She reached for his tie, pulling him closer, so he’d take that as a yes.

He dipped in.

Touched her lips softly with his.

Applied a little pressure, wanting slow and sweet.

But when she reached around and squeezed his ass, slow and sweet was shot to hell. He pulled back to take a deep breath, and the saucy look in her eyes while she licked her full lips amped up his arousal. *My God, you're perfect. And delicious. And sexy.*

With a growl, he took her mouth harder. Rory moaned and rocked herself against his cock, clearly not worried about anyone catching them, and that turned him on even more.

He lifted his hands from the wall to hold her face—to cradle her cheeks in his palms as he eased his tongue to part her lips.

He wasn't sure if a person could replace bad memories with good ones. And he doubted anything would erase the horror and tragedy he'd seen in his life, but this woman was comfort and love, and everything good in this world all rolled into one.

And he couldn't get enough of her.

Their tongues dueled in perfect harmony. No fight for control. Just a kiss founded in insatiable want and need.

He skimmed one hand down the length of her body before curving around her hip and to her ass as he reciprocated her squeeze with one of his own.

His shaft pushed and pressed, and she rolled her hips in response.

This woman.

Fuck.

When Chris palmed her ass with both hands, Rory lifted one leg to wrap herself around him, but the sound of material ripping made her freeze and drop her leg back to the floor.

"I forgot for a second where we were." She peeked at the rip in her dress. The slit now traveled nearly all the way to her panties.

So did I. "Can we get out of here?"

"Yes, please." But then she sucked on his bottom lip and ran her short nails over his chest, driving him out of his mind.

"I'd get a room here, but we can't leave Bear alone." He was impatient. Anxious. But she was worth the wait. So, so worth it.

"And you'd hate to waste eight hundred bucks on a hotel room," she said when pulling back, a smile on her lips.

"Being with you—it'd never be a waste."

"But Bear," they said at the same time, then stole one more kiss. Then another.

He pulled her to his side and looped an arm around her waist as she clutched the material of her dress to shield her legs, and they started for the elevators in a hurry.

"Oh, good," Harper said on approach with Roman. "We were thinking of getting out of here." Harper jerked a thumb over her shoulder toward the ballroom. "Do you need to say goodbye to anyone?"

"No," Rory said softly. "I already said my goodbyes."

To Cutter. Chris peered at the "**Out of Order**" sign on the brass door of the second elevator. That sign hadn't been there before. It was then he realized that the nagging feeling he'd had all night completely slipped his mind with Rory's kiss.

But that sign . . . Rory's unknown past and scars filled his focus, and concern broke through the flood of desire that drove them to the elevators to leave. "We should take the stairs."

"What? Why?" Rory blinked in surprise. "Because one elevator is broken? I am sure the other is

fine.” She clutched the material of her dress together, drawing his eyes. Reminding him she’d have a difficult time walking, let alone going down the stairs, without her dress splitting even more to reveal her panties to Harper and Roman.

When Chris lifted his focus, he found Roman silently observing him. “You think something is wrong?”

I’m being irrational, he told himself as Rory pressed the call button for the elevator.

“You seem tense,” Rory announced when Chris didn’t answer Roman. “You need to relax.”

Right. Chris dragged a hand down the column of his throat.

“I plan on helping you relax tonight,” she said into his ear, and he did his best not to visibly show his desire to his friends standing in front of them.

When the elevator door slid to the left, Chris stepped inside. He looked around, taking in the space. The mirrored wall had him catching his reflection. They’d forgotten their suit jackets, and honestly, he didn’t even care. He wanted to get out of this place and fast.

Rory met his eyes in the mirror as Harper pressed the button for the lobby. Her tongue swept between the seam of her lips. Oh, the woman loved teasing him. And later tonight, that mouth of hers . . .

He had to look away, or he’d grow hard and be unable to hide it. He shifted around as the door closed. His eyes dipped to the floor, and he crouched to reach for a small screw he’d spotted. He held on to the thing, and that nagging feeling returned.

“What’s wrong?” Harper caught his eyes as he rose, still holding the screw.

“Something is—” Chris cut himself off when the elevator came to a jarring stop.

“Shit, we’re stuck, aren’t we?” Rory shook her head as if angry at herself for insisting the elevator over the stairs.

“I think it’s more than that,” Chris said when his eyes traveled to the silver square at the ceiling that began to slide to the left. He went for his gun, but it wasn’t fucking there. They’d come unarmed.

“What’s going on?” Rory asked as Chris pulled her tight to his side at the sight of a hose dropping through the ceiling overhead, but instead of water, out spewed a horrible noxious gas.

“Cover your mouth,” Chris urged as he cupped a hand to his mouth and hit the emergency call button.

Roman went to the door of the elevator as if he’d be able to pry the thing open with his bare hands. They weren’t thinking straight. Smoke filled the space too fast.

Chris brought Rory into his arms, bringing her face to his chest.

Helpless. He felt helpless.

Roman turned back toward them and pulled Harper into his arms as well. His eyes connected with Chris’s, and that nagging, gut-wrenching feeling Chris wished he hadn’t ignored was the last thing he thought about before they fell to their knees and passed out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHRIS WOKE UP TO THE ODD BUT FAMILIAR FEELING OF PINS AND NEEDLES IN HIS LEGS. THE TINGLING in his limbs felt as though he'd slept wrong, cutting off proper blood flow, and now his nerves were waking up again. But it was more than that. His head was too heavy to lift, his mind too foggy to figure out what kind of bullshit dream he'd had this time. Thank God he'd locked away his gun.

He attempted to bring his hand to the back of his neck to help right his head, but his arms wouldn't budge.

"Chris."

Was that . . . Roman?

The last place he remembered being was in the hotel ballroom in Georgetown. No, he'd been on his way out of the hotel with Rory.

Shit. The elevator. The smoke. Gas?

"We were drugged." Roman's voice was raspy. Like he'd swallowed cotton balls.

Chris tried to lift his head again, which felt like a twenty-pound bowling ball strapped atop his shoulders. *What the hell is going on?*

"They're gone, brother. They're fucking gone."

The words Chris never wanted to hear had him using every ounce of power in his body to look up to see Roman sitting across from him, his hands strung above his head, cuffed to a rod on the wall.

Chris slowly looked left, then right. They were in a small storage room. Maybe only eight by eight feet in size. The space was empty except for him, Roman, and the bulb overhead.

"No," Chris sputtered around a cough. "No, no, no." Tears burned his eyes when reality slapped him in the face.

Rory and Harper. They weren't there.

There was a grim darkness in Roman's gaze. In his tone. Regret and fear rolled together. And maybe Chris was still coming to, but it was unmistakable.

Harper was their person. Their everything on Echo Team. And although Roman had yet to admit it, she meant even more to him.

And Rory . . .

His body trembled as he contemplated all the possibilities as to what happened to her. He should have listened to his gut. He'd felt something was wrong, but he'd written it off as stemming from his own personal issues.

He thought back to Rory's scars and what she said in New Orleans. *There are, um, some people that will want to kill me if they find out who and where I am.*

Was that why they were taken? Her past? Or was it his job that had endangered them? "Where are

we?”

Roman's eyes tightened on him. “Feels like a boat.”

How in the hell did they get from D.C. to a boat? Were they on the Potomac?

“You think this was Santiago's doing? Or is this about Rory?” Roman blinked as if searching for memories. Trying to latch on to how the fuck this happened. “I don't see how Santiago would make the connection to us, but he's on the loose, and we're the ones who grabbed him.”

“I don't think Santiago's behind this.” *Rory. They were after her, but why? Who?* “We need to find them. They could be in trouble.” *Or worse.* He tried to jerk away from the wall he was pressed against, but his hands were linked together and connected to something behind his back. “Our legs are free.” Stupid mistake on their captors' part.

Roman leaned forward, the veins in his throat and sides of his temples on display as he tried to break the rod free from the wall, using the weight of his body.

“The door,” Chris said, eyes moving to the lock. “We won't be able to get out.” Surely it was deadbolted.

“We get our hands free from the wall, and then when someone comes in, we make our move.” Roman's voice was steadier now, but Chris still heard the pain flowing through his tone. The fear of never seeing Harper again.

“What if they're not on the boat?” No, he couldn't think about that possibility. They had to be there. Safe and okay. If he and Roman were alive, the women had to be alive, too. No other options were acceptable.

Chris bent his knees, arched his back, and shifted forward, doing his best to create tension between the cuffs and whatever they were attached to. His body was completely spent. Weak from whatever drugs had been pumped into him, but he had to do this. Rory's and Harper's lives depended on the damn metal breaking free from the wall.

His dress shoes slid against the hard floor, and he fell onto his ass in failure.

“Try again,” Roman urged, and Chris nodded.

“Of course,” he said before trying to fall forward while tightening his biceps and triceps to add pressure to the movement.

He met Roman's eyes, and they both hissed at the same time for what they hoped would be their last effort.

A snap sounded, and a pipe or rod, whatever it was, detached from the wall and had Chris's chest practically falling onto his lap. He tried to stand, but his legs were still rubber.

Roman was off the wall as well. Since his hands had been raised over his head, he lowered the broken metal rod, which was about six inches in diameter and about two feet long, in front of him, twisted his hands to the side, and the rod slid to the floor.

Roman fell to his knees, moving closer to Chris to help him get his hands and the pipe under his body and then on top of his lap.

They were still cuffed, but they were a step in the right direction.

Could he get his legs to work yet, though?

When they heard a key in the lock, Roman mouthed, “Valencia,” to Chris. Chris nodded and shifted the pipe out of sight and brought his linked hands behind his back.

Valencia was code for a move they'd performed in Spain three years ago, named after the city they'd been in for the operation.

Roman raised his hands above his head and closed his eyes.

Chris kept his head hung and listened and waited.

The door opened, then shut. The sound of a key going into a lock followed.

Two booted feet stepped between where Roman and Chris sat.

The man slowly crouched to observe Roman, his back to Chris. Chris willed his legs to move, then quickly jerked back and tossed his legs over the man's shoulders and crossed his ankles around the man's neck, taking him by surprise.

Roman lurched forward and knocked the man off to the side while Chris pulled his legs back so Roman could pin him beneath his body. Roman circled both cuffed hands around the man's throat. "Where are the two women?"

Chris searched the man's pockets while Roman held him down, then found the handcuff keys. He removed his cuffs, then knelt alongside Roman and freed him as well. "Where are they?" Chris asked this time.

The man's brown eyes bulged as Roman continued to strangle him. "One of the guest staterooms," he said when Roman loosened his hold. "Aft cabin."

The man's hair was light blond. Pulled back into a ponytail. Tan skin. No visible tattoos on his forearms. And his accent sounded a bit New York City-ish. American?

"Are they alive?" Roman leaned closer to the man, and Chris grabbed the key chain from the man's raincoat pocket. "Did you touch them?"

The man shook his head no.

"Who are you? Who do you work for?" Chris sputtered, and Roman shifted his weight off him and started to stand, but shit, the guy went for a knife that Roman and Chris would've normally noticed had they not been recently drugged and unconscious.

The guy went for Roman, but Roman deflected and lifted both hands to hold the guy's wrists to prevent being stabbed.

Chris looked down at his tie. He worked the knot loose, then flung the material around the man's neck and pulled. The man gasped for air and finally let go of the knife to go for the black material around his throat.

Chris quickly put the man to sleep, then Roman braced against the wall to stand and extended a hand to Chris to help him to his feet since they'd been mostly operating from their knees.

Chris handed Roman the key chain, then checked the body for weapons. "Nothing else," he said while Roman tested out some of the keys.

Chris's phone, watch, and wallet had been taken. Roman's pockets were empty as well.

"Got it," Roman announced upon finding the key to their freedom, and he slowly opened the door, holding the knife in his other hand.

They were a few feet from the entrance to the galley. The galley wasn't too big, but given the boat had a storage room and multiple staterooms, he had to assume they were on a superyacht. At least eighty feet in length.

They ducked back into the hall when a man entered the galley and opened the refrigerator. A sidearm strapped to his side and one to his leg.

Roman held a fist up, indicating to Chris to hold position while he made first approach. With slow steps, Roman crept behind the man and tightened his forearm around his neck. He backed up to the wall with the man in a chokehold and quickly rendered him unconscious.

Roman pointed to the storage room, and Chris helped him drag the body to the other man.

They took two sidearms off the guy, then locked the storage room and quickly moved to find Rory and Harper.

"Starboard or port side?" Roman looked back at Chris when they reached two halls on the other

side of the galley. “Or do we split up?” Two halls and two mirror cabins to check. Both beneath what would be the aft deck above their heads.

“Split up,” Chris said, keeping his voice soft, and he started for the port side, but then halted at the sight of the cabin door opening. “Roman,” he alerted, letting him know they had movement.

Roman came up on his left, and they both extended their weapons, preparing to shoot if necessary.

“Shit, guys.” Harper’s eyes widened, and she lowered the *two* Glocks she had aimed at them. “I could have shot you.”

“You’re okay,” Roman rasped.

“I woke up asleep on a bed next to Rory, and I took out the guard who was in front of our door watching us.” She handed one gun to Roman and opened the door wider. Chris nearly collapsed at the sight of Rory asleep on the bed. “She’s still asleep. I couldn’t get her to wake up.”

“She doesn’t do well on drugs,” Chris said while stowing his weapon and moving past Harper to give her and Roman a moment.

“Rory.” He smoothed a thumb over her cheek, his heartbeat trampling his chest with relief.

But they were still on a boat, who knew where, and he had to get her to safety. It wasn’t over yet.

Rory’s arms were across her chest, and she looked almost peaceful. But when his gaze skirted down the length of her, he realized her underwear was exposed because the slit in her dress had ripped. God help him, he hoped that’d been accidental, and they hadn’t . . .

His shoulders dropped at the memory of Rory attempting to wrap her leg around his hip while they had kissed, and the slit tearing.

“There’s a red bag by the bed.” Harper motioned to a small drawstring bag. “I checked it for weapons, but it’s a travel bag. Basic essentials in there. A couple tees and a few pairs of cotton shorts. Even a toothbrush and toothpaste. Stuff for one woman as if they’d planned only to grab Rory originally. Or me, I suppose. But that’s doubtful. I guess the bad guy cares about hygiene. Go figure.”

“We weren’t their original target,” Roman said in a low voice, stealing a glimpse into the room from the hall. “Why do I feel like you two know something I don’t?”

Because we do, Chris thought guiltily.

Harper exchanged a quick look with Chris. “We’ll catch you up after we get out of here,” she said apologetically, but that wasn’t her burden to carry. Chris had withheld the concerns about Rory, and that was on him. “Regardless,” Harper began, setting the bag on the bed by Rory and unzipping it, “I’m glad they decided to take us, too. I can’t imagine if she’d been taken alone.”

Chris was going to lose his mind as he sorted through the theories and potential shitty what-ifs that could have gone down if Rory had gone to the gala by herself.

He raced a hand over his head, his pulse still flying, and this wasn’t the type of flying he enjoyed. This kind stemmed from a place of fear.

“I’ll change her. Change myself, too.” Harper’s pupils were still enlarged from the drugs, likely how his and Roman’s were as well. “I’d prefer not to fight in this dress.”

That was probably a good idea. “Would you wait down here while we handle whoever else is out there? I don’t want you two caught in the fray.” He’d feel a lot better if he and Roman cleared the boat while Harper watched over Rory.

“Of course. Be safe,” she said, peering Roman’s way next. “The both of you.”

Roman set a palm to the open door as if trying to work through a battlefield of emotions, and then he nodded and tipped his head. “Shit, I have a visual. Someone just came down the steps and turned toward the galley.”

“Probably checking where the two guards disappeared to.” Chris stole one last look at Rory.

“We’re going to get you two out of here,” he added even though Rory couldn’t hear his promise.
“Wherever here is . . .”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RORY'S EYELIDS FLUTTERED AGAINST SHARDS OF BRIGHT LIGHT THAT MAY AS WELL HAVE BEEN BROKEN glass for how much they hurt. She snapped her eyes shut, blocking out the pain only to be startled by a loud noise, which jolted her into awareness and had her noticing she was bobbing back and forth.

It felt like a repeat of the time she was eight, and her brother had spun her around one too many times on the tire swing in their backyard, and she'd thrown up her lunch—yeah, that was how she was feeling right now.

“What’s going on?” Her throat was scratchy, her voice almost unrecognizable. Hoarse.

Chills swept over her clammy skin, and her teeth began to chatter. *Where am I?*

“Come on. You need to wake up.” Warm hands firmly cupped her face as the voice urged Rory to open her eyes.

“Too confused. Woozy,” she mumbled with numb lips. It was as if she were coming off anesthesia only much worse. Waking up from surgery after she'd been stabbed in the abdomen in Cartagena three years ago had nothing on this.

“The yacht is sinking. We’re taking on water.” Relief shot through her when she suddenly recognized Chris’s voice.

Yacht? No, that can't be right. She had to get her eyes to stay open. For him, she'd do it. “Wh-what?”

“I gotta move you again. Can't stay here any longer.” His tone was deep, insistent.

Again?

She combed the area overhead as he lifted her from a soft surface, and she glimpsed down to see she'd been on a couch beneath an overhang with a too-bright spotlight.

When she turned her head as if in slow motion, she saw the sheets of rain surrounding the vessel.

Chris clutched her tightly as they walked by the wraparound gangways leading to the fore-deck of the yacht, and it was then Rory felt the intensity of the rain. It struck them hard, but he never lost his hold of her.

“You’ll be okay.” Chris’s words pulled her focus to his face, and she blinked, trying to keep her eyes open in the rain.

“We found the emergency boat. It’s got a motor, but the water is choppy. I don’t know if we’ll make it to the island.” Was that Harper?

Rory twisted her neck to follow the voice and saw Harper in a bright yellow rain jacket, hood covering her dark hair.

Emergency boat? “Where are we?”

“We’re in the Caribbean,” Chris said quickly as if that weren’t shocking news. “Somewhere off

the coast of Puerto Rico according to the radar.”

“Puerto Rico? We were just in D.C.” Rory finally managed to wrap her hands around the back of Chris’s neck as he sidestepped a body.

Wait, a body? There was a man lying on his side, unmoving in the downpour, but was he dead?

She strained her eyes, trying to make out the tattoo circling his neck. A green serpent.

A jagged scar shaped like the number seven, next to his right eye, had a memory trying to surface, but it never materialized.

“D.C. was yesterday.” Another voice. Roman?

Oh . . . the elevator. It hadn’t been smoke. Gas! We were knocked out. But, no. Oh, God. Her thoughts were sluggish. Drugs had to be in her system and still affecting her, but she was starting to put two and two together.

They’d been gassed and taken out of the hotel, hadn’t they?

We shouldn’t have gotten into that elevator. This is my fault.

“The yacht is going down. This piece of garbage they probably chartered is worthless, which is why I’m guessing the owners have on board a top-notch emergency boat,” Roman yelled out over the thunder, which rolled overhead like bowling pins scattering after a strike.

Standing strong against the wind and rain pounding them, Chris glimpsed down at her. “We gotta get off. No choice. I got you, I promise.”

She nodded, giving him her trust. “I think I can walk now.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said, and he slowly set her down but held on to her hip, waiting to see if she had her balance.

“Gotta get to the stern.” He looped an arm around her back as they made their way to the lower deck to get to the back of the yacht to disembark.

“What about whoever took us? Anyone alive?” Rory tossed a look over her shoulder and nearly slipped and lost her balance, but Chris stopped her from falling.

“They’re all dead now.” Chris tipped his chin, signaling to the dark sky, the cracks of lightning in the distance. “The emergency boat won’t have a chance of making it to shore if we don’t get the hell off this yacht right now. We’re anchored not too far from an island.”

“You help Roman. I’ve got her.” Harper motioned for Chris to get a move on, and he looked to Rory for permission.

“Go,” Rory mouthed.

Harper helped Rory into an oversized raincoat, then offered her a life jacket. “These won’t do much good if we wind up in these waters, but better than nothing, I suppose.”

Rory clutched Harper’s forearms when the boat suddenly pitched and nearly sent them careening into the wall.

“You good?” Harper asked, and it was all so strange. Rory was usually the calm and collected one. The fighter who ensured everyone else was solid.

Her head was spinning while her body swayed softly side to side with the force of the waves striking the yacht like God himself had dipped his hand down and was swirling the sea around.

She wasn’t sure the time of day given the storm-darkened sky, but she’d venture to guess it was evening.

Damn drugs or whatever they gave me.

“It’s a six-seater,” she overheard Roman saying when Harper helped Rory get to the lowest deck. “And it has an Intex trolling motor.” If the boat was similar to those Rory had used in the past, it

would auto-inflate using carbon dioxide or nitrogen. “Should give us a better shot at getting to shore.”

“Let’s hope so.” Chris stole a look at Rory and reached for her. “Roman’s going to get in the boat first, and we’ll help you both in next.” Chris gave Rory’s arm a gentle squeeze. Why didn’t the guys have on life jackets or vests?

Based on the rickety-looking yacht, and given it couldn’t endure the storm, it clearly wasn’t up to code.

“We’ve got this, okay?” Chris held her eyes as the rain tapped at her hood. “We focus on what we can control.”

Roman reached through the rounded opening of the canopy he’d already attached to the bright yellow lifeboat, securing his hands around Rory’s hips and helped her board. The canopy would shield them from the harsh environment, which was a plus. And most emergency lifeboats were equipped with water, food, oars, a knife, and a flare gun.

Rory scooted to the other side of the boat and hugged her legs to her chest as Roman helped Harper on board. Chris came on next, and Roman pushed off, the hum of the motor barely audible over the cracks of thunder.

She couldn’t stop shivering as shock tore through her. And it was only then she was coherent enough to realize she and Harper were no longer in their evening wear.

Before she could put her thoughts together to ask about her clothes, Chris distracted her by opening a small silver package. He unfolded the emergency blanket, which looked like a piece of aluminum foil. These blankets had saved her ass from freezing to death on multiple occasions in the past. “Thank you,” she whispered as he covered her, teeth still clicking as she shared the blanket with Harper.

“We’ll be okay.” Harper’s warm tone was almost comforting.

Rory glimpsed at Roman. His gaze was fixed out of the canopy entrance as he navigated the trolling motor. The oars wouldn’t do much good right now, but the last thing she saw from aboard the yacht was land—assuming she hadn’t been hallucinating.

“We’re not far.” Chris held a GPS device in his palm and pointed to a small island. “I was one of the best trackers on my SEAL Team. We’ve got this.” He reached beneath the emergency blanket and squeezed Rory’s leg with his free hand, trying to reassure her despite the hellish conditions.

“He wasn’t nicknamed The Hunter while in the Navy just because of his last name,” Roman commented, and had Rory not been so nervous, she would’ve smiled.

“Did you manage to grab anything of use off the vessel before I woke up?” *And how the hell did y’all escape?*

“A few cell phones, but they’re not working right now. No signal. Maybe when we reach the island, we’ll have better luck. The radio was shot to hell,” Chris explained. “I didn’t have time to search for our belongings, though.”

“And how’d you escape?” She peered around at everyone, still shocked at what went down while she’d been Sleeping Beauty.

“Roman and I regained consciousness around the same time.” Chris’s eyes fell closed for a brief moment, and he expelled a deep breath. “You and Harper weren’t with us. I thought . . .”

She pulled her arm free from the blanket and reached for his cheek as a reminder whatever he thought hadn’t happened. She was there and alive thanks to him.

“We overtook one of the guards,” Chris went on. “Used my tie to put him to sleep.”

That tie . . .

She’d had plans for that tie last night, plans that involved sharing her life, her past, her everything

with him before they lost themselves in each other for the rest of the night where that tie would've had a starring role. Yeah, they would have most likely made love before she'd spilled her truth, unable to resist their desire any longer than absolutely necessary.

Now it was too late. And it was her fault.

She'd jeopardized his life. Roman's and Harper's lives as well. All because she hadn't come clean, foolishly thought that remaining silent would keep those she loved and cared about safe.

"Harper took out her guard before we got to you two," Roman added, "but she couldn't wake you up."

"The two men we knocked out and locked up in the storage room were freed before we could get back to them. They put up a fight." Chris didn't describe what happened next, and she imagined he didn't want to elaborate on how he killed those men. "Shit went sideways when the storm hit. We made it to the bridge, and between the huge waves and an issue with the battery, the bilge pump stopped working, and the hull took on water. We were on the verge of going into Davy Jones' Locker."

She raised a brow, and he smirked. A joke even now.

"What? Sailors use some pirate lingo, too." He gently placed her arm back beneath the blanket. "But, um, we had no choice but to take everyone out even though we would have preferred to keep a few alive for questioning."

"Would've had a hard time bringing one on board this boat, though. Surely they'd have been a problem," Roman pointed out.

"I understand," Rory said with a nod, letting them know she wasn't judging their life-or-death decisions. "Anything distinguishable about them?"

She thought back to the snake tattoo of the man lying on the deck of the yacht, who she now realized was most likely dead. The inkling of recognition hung around in her mind, but it was still too wispy to make the connection.

"First guy spoke English. No accent," Chris said. "And the other five guys, no clue other than I'm pretty sure all continents were represented in our abduction aside from Antarctica."

"What he's saying," Harper went on as they rocked with the waves, the engine fighting against the current, "is we overheard several languages spoken, and nothing stood out that would help us identify anything about them. The phones are disposable. Not helpful in determining info. Not even a wallet or ID card on any guy. They probably had their passports locked in a safe box or something."

"Shit. I just . . ." Guilt. Waves like the ones crashing their little boat hit her with relentless force. "What island are we near?" She needed a distraction. Needed hope.

"Mona, which looks to be about forty-five miles from mainland Puerto Rico." Chris tucked the GPS into a dry pocket of the boat.

"Mona?" Better than a deserted island, but their hope of using one of those cell phones was now gone.

"Have you been there before?" Chris peered at her, soaking wet in his white dress shirt. His tie was gone. Shoes still on, unlike her.

She still had to ask about the clothing situation, but . . . "Yeah, and Mona Island can be a paradise if you're looking for an exotic vacation without potable water or cell service."

"Fuck, okay." Chris shook his head.

"It's also not for the faint of heart. Uninhabited aside from one ranger." She considered her time there. It'd been the summer, and chartered excursions from Puerto Rico were regular. But they wouldn't allow visitors to the island at a time like this. "With the storm, I don't think many, if any,

will be visiting the island. It's hard enough to travel there on a sunny day."

Chris stared quietly at her as if contemplating her response and probably wondering why she'd been to the island in the past. They needed to make it to safety before she unraveled her memories and pieced together why this was all her fault. Besides, her thoughts were still diluted and unfocused from whatever shit her abductors had injected into her veins.

She would regroup once the symptoms from the drugs wore off, then figure out what in the hell happened and how to save them.

"What else do you know about the island?" Chris asked a moment later. "We should all be prepared. What kind of animals?"

Rory thought back to when she'd tracked an antiquities smuggler to Mona. Her first and only time there. "No venomous snakes, but some boas. Goats and pigs. Iguanas. Nothing particularly dangerous. The place is a safe haven for sea turtles and seabirds. But there are a lot of poisonous plants. Not many navigational signs, so it's easy to get lost. And depending on where we land, it might be a good idea to head for the caves. There's fresh water accessible in some."

"Caves? Okay, that could be good," Harper said with a nod, sounding optimistic when everything felt as though it were falling apart as their little boat moved with the waves. A tiny toothpick in the sea.

"Okay, yeah, I've heard of this place. I remember now," Roman spoke up. "Twenty or so miles of tunnels. Mona Island is actually home to one of the largest coastal caverns in the world. Right?"

Rory stared at him in surprise. "Yeah," she returned softly.

"I was kind of hoping we were done with caves for the year after Budapest," Chris said in a low tone, and Rory had no idea what he was talking about. "Long story," he casually tossed out as if their world wasn't rocking. Literally. "Anything else we should know?"

Rory swallowed the lump in her throat and let go of a deep breath. "If there is anyone there on a weekend during a storm, well, they won't be friendly."

"Meaning?" Roman twisted back to look her way, his dark eyes pinning her with a curious gaze.

"Smugglers. Traffickers." Rory lifted her shoulders, the blanket moving with her. "Modern-day pirates."

* * *

LITTLE DRUMMING SOUNDS HAD RORY OPENING HER EYES. THE RAIN WAS COMING DOWN HARDER ON the canopy top, but . . .

She shifted upright, realizing she'd dozed off. They weren't on the water anymore.

Shit, she'd nearly forgotten—they'd made it to shore and slept overnight in the lifeboat.

Land, I'm on land. She peered around to see Harper asleep, her head resting on Roman's chest, his arm draped around her body. A second emergency blanket was on their lower half.

But where was Chris?

Rory shifted to her knees and unzipped the canopy to peer outside.

No sign of him.

Once she stepped out of the safety of the shelter, she was greeted by a dark bluish-purple sky and the sight of Chris standing near a line of trees, his back to her. He was probably trying to get his bearings.

The guys had pulled the boat far enough up on the white sand to prevent any chance of drifting

back into the ocean while they'd slept, and thank God for the canopy that protected them from the rain, but they wouldn't be able to stay in there forever.

Rory zipped the opening closed again, careful not to wake Harper or Roman, tightened her hood against the rain, and walked across the wet sand toward Chris.

He turned and spotted her, then met her halfway and pulled her into his arms as if it'd been weeks since he'd seen her.

She pointed to the wooded area twenty feet away for cover since he didn't have a rain jacket and gasped in surprise when he hoisted her into his arms.

"You don't have shoes. Don't want you getting hurt."

She wanted to protest, but he was stubborn. So, she looped her arms over his shoulders, clasped her hands behind his neck, and let him help her, knowing it'd make him feel better.

Whoever had taken them captive must have tossed her heels for some reason. But whatever happened to the red dress Ella made for her? And oh, Ella, she'd be a mess when she learned Rory was gone.

Chris made his way to the trees Rory had pointed out and gently set her down on a soft bed of fallen leaves, then leaned his back against the bark and encircled her waist with his arms, pulling her close.

The canopy of branches and leaves overhead provided some cover from the rain, but a few drops still trickled through, providing a gentle rhythm to the chaos of the past twenty-four hours.

She dropped her gaze to take in the sight of her new ensemble—a rain jacket over a pale blue tee, paired with black drawstring shorts that were a bit too short. She searched her memory for who'd changed her but came up empty. Harper was wearing a replica of Rory's outfit, except her shirt was light pink.

"Harper," he said as if reading her thoughts. "We found some clothes in a bag on the yacht. And by yacht, I mean rust bucket. There was some stuff thrown together. Two shirts, two pairs of shorts, and a toothbrush and toothpaste."

"And how'd you know I was thinking that?"

"I figured once the shock wore off, you'd wonder, and I didn't want you to think some asshole had put his hands on you."

But someone's hands had been on all of them. And more than once. The four of them were taken from that hotel without raising any alarms.

She looked down at her feet. "They didn't pack me any flip-flops, huh?"

"Unfortunately not."

"I think I know one of those men on the yacht," she told him when a memory of the inked man crowded her mind again. "But I can't remember how, or who he was."

"Shit, Rory, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for everything."

"What do you have to be sorry about? This is all my fault. I'm sure we were taken because of me."

"We don't know that for sure. I told you my work is dangerous." But he was just being nice—not wanting her to accept blame.

"We were at an event connected to me," she pointed out. "And it can't be a coincidence we woke up on a yacht in the Caribbean off the coast of an uninhabited island that I've been to, either. Plus, a bag of women's clothes conveniently on board? Sounds like they planned to just grab me, and y'all got pulled along for the ride."

"Regardless, I'm sorry." He lifted one hand to sweep his thumb over her cheek. "I should've

pushed harder to get you to open up. I let my own problems get in the way.” His tone was husky with regret, and his words were going to shred her. “And the scars . . .”

“Don’t you dare try and take the blame. I won’t have it.” She slid her hands up his wet shirt and set them on his chest. “I’m stubborn, and I was worried the more you knew, the more danger you’d be in.” She fought back the tears that threatened. “I’d planned to tell you after the gala. I promise.” *I was too late.* “I had hoped they’d never find me.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

There was so much to say, but they needed to focus on their survival, so she avoided his eyes and changed the subject. “Bear,” she whispered. “He’s all alone.”

“Someone will realize we’re gone and go to my house. I already thought of that.”

Rory found his eyes again, knowing he wasn’t going to let her off the hook so easily. She wouldn’t have if she were him. But she hoped he’d trust her. Give her a chance to explain everything. Maybe when they weren’t stranded on an island in the middle of a storm that Mother Earth was sending their way to remind them of the power she wielded.

“Elaina knew you needed us with you last night. It wasn’t a double-date matchmaker situation like I had hoped. She just knew.” He paused. More guilt in his eyes. In the rigid lines of his body. “I ignored my instincts last night. I had a bad feeling the moment we stepped into that ballroom, and I—”

“Don’t.” She shook her head, and his palm cupped her cheek. “I can’t handle you doubting yourself.”

A quiet moment passed before he whispered, “And I can’t begin to imagine what would have happened if we hadn’t been taken, too. And I don’t know why they’d want to take . . .”

. . . *You.* He left off that part of his statement, but she heard it just the same, a whisper in the wind. Because they were there for her.

“When the rain stops and we get somewhere safe, I’ll tell you everything.” She sniffled.

“Okay,” he said softly, and she looked left, then right, trying to place their location, but all she saw were trees and shrubs.

“Do you know what part of the island we’re on?”

He grimaced. Bad news? “The opposite side of where the ranger is supposed to be according to the GPS.”

“Of course.” She smoothed a thumb over the buttons of his shirt. The fabric molded to his body, outlining every ridge and muscle. “Thank you for saving us.”

His lips crooked into a smile. “It was a team effort.”

And of course, he wouldn’t be a showboat and take credit.

“Rory, I, um . . .”

“I know.” No words were needed. She felt the same for him—a deep connection that went beyond desire, relieved they were both alive and okay. They could get through this together.

He cupped her face, his hands sliding beneath where the plastic of the hood covered her ears. In the space of a heartbeat, he captured her lips, and it was as if he had breathed new life back into her.

One hand remained on her face as his other hand moved beneath her jacket and shirt, then up to palm her breast. He smoothed her nipple between his thumb and finger, a reminder of the pleasure they’d shared before everything went sideways last night.

A burst of heated desire flooded her body, warming her chilled skin.

She groaned against his mouth, shocked she was still standing after yesterday. Surprised she was kissing him, wanting him to devour her, despite all they’d been through in the last twenty-four hours.

But they hadn’t gone down with the boat.

They survived.

And it dawned on her that there was only one way forward—one way to truly move on.

She had to finish what she'd started before Carter had stopped her in her tracks.

It'd be the only way to keep her family and friends safe. The only way she'd be able to live her life without constantly looking over her shoulder for a shadow.

She had to come up with a plan to take down the man she'd been after for years.

A legendary figure no one had seen.

But he was real.

And it was time for the legend to fall.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CLOUDS HAD YET TO PART, BUT THE RAIN HAD STOPPED, SO THEY BEGAN THEIR TREK TOWARD THE ranger station, planning to stop at one of the caves on the way for water and rest. It was probably a little past noon on Sunday, not that any of them knew for sure.

Did her parents know she was missing? Jesse? Ella? Surely, A.J. and his coworkers were trying to track them down.

Rory's stomach contracted when hunger pains struck her, and she banded an arm over her abdomen, hoping it wouldn't draw Chris's attention. The small amount of food that had been on the lifeboat was barely enough for one person to survive on for a day, but both Chris and Roman had forced Harper and Rory to eat the granola bars that morning. Literally forced. The guys wouldn't take no for an answer despite protests to share. Rory had secretly hidden half of her bar in the drawstring bag on Chris's back and had every intention of forcing him to eat later.

But still, she was famished. All the calorie-burning walking wasn't helping either.

Thankfully, Roman and Chris had created makeshift shoes for Rory and Harper out of supplies from the emergency boat. The terrain was rocky and full of holes with spiny branches, cacti, and biting insects at every turn. But she wasn't about to let Chris carry her for miles.

Chris was on Rory's left, carefully watching over her as they walked. Not that he'd admit it. He was probably worried she'd roll her eyes at his overprotectiveness given how she'd expressed her ability to protect herself with karate skills and four firearms.

But honestly, after he'd saved her from those goons on the boat and kept her from drowning, she was more than happy to have this man keep an eye on her. To steer her away from the potential dangers that lurked on this island.

For the last hour, they'd been traveling along the edge of the plateau, the top part of the island, with a view of the Atlantic and the coral reefs down below. The water was clear as Bombay Sapphire gin and the same azure blue of the bottle it came in.

Now that the sun was out, the rock walls were probably dry. If it became necessary for them to descend rapidly, there'd be less chance of slipping.

The cliffs were maybe twenty feet high. Scalable without a rope. And every so often, sand dotted the base of the cliffs. Not enough space for sunbathing, which meant they probably wouldn't encounter any guests they could holler out to for help.

The three disposable phones had been totally worthless without a signal, and the batteries had died in two of them anyway. So, their best hope would be the ranger or visitors arriving for an adventure now that the storm was gone.

"We call these 'tourist trees' back home in Florida," Roman spoke up for the first time in a while

and set a hand to the bark of a gumbo-limbo tree.

“Because of the red peeling bark that looks like a sunburn?” Harper asked, keeping pace with Roman when he began walking again.

“Yeah.” Roman smiled Harper’s way. Even from Rory’s vantage point as she walked behind them, she noticed Roman’s gaze lingering on Harper.

“What?” Harper asked him, scurrying to keep pace with his rapid steps in her homemade shoes. “I still have raccoon eyes, don’t I?” she asked teasingly. “I thought we cleaned all our makeup off this morning.”

“You look perfect.” Roman smiled at her before returning his focus straight ahead but came to an abrupt stop a moment later. “Guess we’re going to need to change directions and head inland a bit.”

Rory followed his line of sight and spotted a cactus forest. Yeah, she wasn’t eager to come out of there looking like a porcupine.

“At least we’ve made progress.” Chris wiped his brow and scanned the terrain. It had to be at least eighty degrees, and with less than two water bottles left, they’d be needing fresh water by dinner.

So far, they’d only encountered two feral cats, one pig, and a goat that had nipped Harper in the ass and produced a hearty laugh from Roman.

“We’ll need to hunt,” Rory said once they’d chosen a new path and were on their way again.

With what? But she kept that to herself. Maybe they knew how to make weapons out of—sticks? Was that part of SEAL training?

“I’m not shooting an animal with a pistol,” Chris spoke up.

Right. She nearly forgot the guys had grabbed weapons from the yacht before they disembarked, and yeah, she was on board with Chris’s decision. A pistol to an animal made her cringe.

“Maybe we’ll make a spear and fish. That sounds manly,” Chris added as they navigated the ground littered with leaves, dangerously hiding rocks beneath them.

The sounds of wildlife became more prominent upon leaving the perimeter of the island. A few yellow butterflies crossed Rory’s path, followed by a green iguana. She gave the little guy passage before moving forward.

“Chris won’t hunt,” Roman announced, and no surprise there given Chris’s love for animals. How could she forget? “I’ll probably have to do it.”

Chris walked in stride with Rory, and Roman and Harper were now a few feet ahead of them. “I feel like we’re on an episode of that show *Naked and Afraid*. You know, alone on a deserted island, having to find food, water, and shelter. Craft shoes out of whatever we can find. Just need the naked part and—”

“And you know what Wyatt would say right now if he were here.” Roman stole a look back at Chris.

“You probably jinxed us,” Harper singsonged, not turning back.

“Oh, sure. You think we’ll wind up naked? How would that happen?” Chris went on, and this time Harper did look back and swatted the air as if she were hitting his arm.

“Who knew my words could be so powerful,” Chris joked, catching Rory’s eyes, and she smiled.

“Says the guy who quotes Nietzsche,” Rory joined in on the humor because why not?

“He does what?” Roman blurted out, clearly shocked.

“Not just a pretty boy from Boston,” Chris replied in a smug voice. But Rory knew Chris was so much more than his movie-star looks now that she’d gotten to know him. He’d opened up to her, and if only she’d done the same, maybe they wouldn’t be stranded on this island. “Got a few tricks up my

sleeve.”

“Never doubted ya, brother.” Roman slowed at the sound of rushing water.

“A waterfall?” Rory spoke her thoughts aloud as they continued to what was indeed a waterfall.

The jump was probably only twenty feet, but at the base of the waterfall was a serene pool of blue water surrounded by greenery. It was tantalizing. And although it was quite warm out, the water would probably be chilly.

“Here’s our chance to be naked without the afraid part.” Chris pointed to the water. “And maybe my words do carry power.”

Rory briefly allowed herself to conjure up images of her and Chris. Alone and swimming in the water. Sharing a kiss. Bodies tangled. Making love by the spray of the waterfall. It was a nice distraction from their reality.

“We don’t have time to turn this day into a vacation.” Harper lifted her chin, motioning to get a move on. As much as Rory would have loved to stall a little before dropping some serious truth bombs on them, Harper was right. They didn’t have time.

Rory turned toward Chris, whose focus went from her face straight to her chest.

She looked down to see her nipples on display again. What was she supposed to do, though? She’d pass out from heat exhaustion if she wore that rain jacket while they continued hiking.

Harper must have felt the same because she’d wrapped hers around her waist. They were in the same nipple-showing boat.

“When I chose what to wear to the gala, I had no idea we’d be gassed, kidnapped, drugged, tossed on a yacht in the middle of the Atlantic where we had to jump ship and make our way to this no-man’s-land of an island. So, you’ll have to do your best to tuck away your naughty thoughts right now, boys. They’re just boobs. And I am too hot and sweaty to wear the jacket.” Harper flicked her wrist in the universal signal for “drop the subject.”

Rory forced a laugh instead of allowing herself to drown in a sea of guilt for the laundry list of insanity Harper had mentioned.

When she peered at Chris, he was focused on her face and staring at her mouth with that intense gleam in his eyes like he needed to steal another kiss. Then suck her nipple like he’d done Friday night before his mouth had traveled down to her center and stolen her breath by giving her the most intense orgasm of her life, which she assumed would be knocked down to second best once he buried himself inside her.

Chris finally acknowledged Harper’s casual boob comment by rolling his eyes, then started moving again.

Rory kept her focus on the ground, making sure she didn’t step on an iguana or trip over a boa. The snakes on the island might not be venomous, but she still wasn’t a fan. The last time she came face-to-face with one, she’d been bitten. It hadn’t been venomous either, but it had suffered death by way of a machete. The guys had cooked it for dinner later after her bite had been treated, but she didn’t have the stomach to eat it. “Hate snakes,” she said under her breath. *Even if I’ve saved some before. Eek.*

“Finn and I opened a door to a room full of snakes not too long ago. I’m surprised I didn’t have nightmares after that,” Chris said, and his words pushed her heart into her throat.

El Salvador. Santiago. That wretched man was still on the loose, and was he connected to what happened to them?

“What’s something else you can’t stand? I mean, aside from snakes and, um, needles,” Rory asked, trying to distract herself from the pain she felt from her makeshift shoes.

Chris had given her his dress socks, but overall, the padding wasn't enough to deal with the rough terrain.

He'd first tried to give her his shoes, too, but they were too big. But no way would she let Chris know she was in a little pain because he'd scoop her into his arms and carry her without a second thought. She already felt bad that he was wearing shoes without socks—the blisters would suck.

"Wet socks," both Chris and Roman blurted at the same time, which was basically the last comment she had expected to hear.

Wet socks. And now Rory understood why they'd both insisted on setting their socks and shoes out to dry for a bit before they started walking earlier.

"Great minds, brother," Chris said to Roman.

"Okay, please tell us, why wet socks?" *Of all things you could have picked.*

"BUD/S," Roman noted as if that was reason enough.

Chris slowed his pace, eyes moving to Rory's feet. "One sec. Are you in pain?" He stopped and knelt to examine her feet. "Shit, you're in pain, aren't you?" His hand raced from her calf muscle down, and his touch had her remembering his hands roaming her body the other night. She couldn't seem to stop her naughty thoughts, but since they'd been walking all day without any sign of imminent danger, well, why the hell not let herself fantasize?

Chris made a few adjustments and added some more padding with leaves, and Roman did the same for Harper.

"You could have told us," Roman said in a grumpy-sounding voice. "You don't need to act tough."

"Roger that," Harper shot back in a feisty tone, her hands continuing to brace his shoulders for balance as Roman fixed her shoes.

"Thank you," Rory said softly when Chris rose to stand before her, their eyes meeting in what felt like the perfect-kiss moment, but they had company, so he cleared his throat and turned away.

"So, wet socks," Harper said once they were walking again.

"Squishy," Chris tossed out.

"Soggy," Roman added.

"And annoying as hell," Chris continued. "We were always wet at BUD/S. And wearing wet socks while running drills was a damn nightmare, so we'll walk a mile out of our way to this day if it means avoiding water and getting our boots and socks wet."

"You're not serious?" Rory asked, and Roman looked back and nodded it was true.

"Well, I learn something new every day about you boys. And so many things make sense now." Harper's tone was light and cheerful, despite the gravity of their situation.

"About those pirates you mentioned," Chris began a few minutes later, "were you being serious?"

Rory thought back to her research on Mona Island. "Back in the day, pirates used to hide on the island to repair their ships, re-energize, and used the site to attack and plunder Spanish galleons." She lifted her foot to step over a thick, fallen tree, and Chris extended his hand to help ensure she didn't trip. *So chivalrous.* He tipped his head and gave her a bow as if he'd heard her thoughts. "The infamous Captain Kidd was hired to hunt pirates and wound up becoming one himself. He was here once as well." She sorted through her mental notes. "With the rough seas, high swells, and strong current, a lot of ships crashed into the cliffs when they traveled through Mona Passage, and pirates took advantage."

"But this was in the past, right?" Chris asked.

"Smugglers still use this island. Trafficking everything from antiquities to drugs and guns."

"Smugglers." Chris's thoughts were wandering, his curiosity piqued with that bit of knowledge,

she could tell.

“An uninhabited island makes it the perfect location to transfer products.” This would have been the perfect opening for her to explain why in the heck they’d been kidnapped, but didn’t they need to be sitting for that? Maybe nourished, too?

“I don’t know why you sound so surprised by this,” Harper commented, her words most likely meant for Chris. “With everything you’ve seen in your work . . .”

“True,” Chris answered, shooting a quick look at Rory. Curiosity burning in his eyes.

“You think your people can find us? Track us?” Rory asked a few minutes later.

“Absolutely,” Harper remarked with zero doubt in her voice. “Jessica will track us down. Find out who took us out of the hotel.”

And why? She was waiting for the why. “How do you think the men got us out of the hotel?” Rory had run through a few ideas in her head, but she was curious to hear what they thought.

“My guess is the smoke set off the fire alarms. The bad guys came dressed as firefighters and carried us right out to an ambulance, and then they put us in a fake ambo and took off without anyone being the wiser,” Harper quickly explained. “Jessica will look at all the surveillance footage from in and near the hotel to put eyes on us and the vehicle that took us.” She slowed to walk in stride with Rory, whacking a branch out of her path in the process. “And Asher happens to be a hell of a tracker. We’re in good hands. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, but here? Is anyone that good?” she countered, not wanting to be a pessimist, but they were on an uninhabited island with no cell reception.

“We find the unfindable,” Chris said, an easy confidence in his tone.

It felt like years since Chris had told her about his mom’s voicemail. There’d been no time to discuss how he was feeling about it. And she assumed it was the last thing on his mind now, but at some point, maybe when they were safe and off the island, he’d share more.

“It’s what we do, kind of like what you used to do, right?” Chris’s question interrupted her thoughts.

“I, uh, suppose.” She gulped. “But I guess I’m not too worried.” And that was the truth. They all had the necessary skill sets that, when combined, would make one hell of a team. “I’m so sorry I pulled you all into my mess.”

“Still don’t know if this is because of you,” Chris reminded her, but nope, that ship of disbelief that this wasn’t about her had sailed.

Rory attempted a smile when Chris glimpsed at her. “How long have you been working for the Agency?”

“Good one,” Harper said without missing a beat. “Finn and Roman told me you think we’re with The Company, but we’re not. I was once upon a time ago, but we’re not with the CIA.”

“The CIA likes to color outside the lines,” Chris said in an easy tone, “but we’re more of an abstract, ‘throw your paint on the canvas, and see what happens’ kind of team.”

“Your Pollack-to-a-Picasso analogy makes me wonder if you still have some of the drugs they pumped into us coursing through your system.” Harper squinted at Chris like she thought he was nuts.

Rory stopped and set a hand to a tree to rest for a moment, even though they’d taken a tiny break back by the waterfall. Hunger pain was crushing her energy level. “You don’t actually think I believe you’re only private military contractors, do you?” she asked after Chris handed her one of the two water bottles. She took a conservative sip and gave it back to him. “You all went after Santiago in El Salvador. Santiago’s a smuggler. The Agency received the tip on his location in August. Why’d the CIA sit on the intel for nearly two months? And what I’m really curious about is why they sent you?”

Chris looked to Roman. And Roman looked to Harper. Dominoes of shock falling one by one.

Chris and Roman were aware she'd overheard some of their conversation in the garage last Sunday, but they'd find out soon enough how much more she actually knew about men like Santiago.

"And how do you know this?" Roman's dark eyes remained steady and focused on hers until she shifted her focus back to Chris.

"Because I'm the one who tipped off the CIA. Tied up all the intel needed to take him down with a neat little bow." Rory held a palm up before questions were hurtled her way. "But I promise, I'll get into that later."

Chris blinked a few times, surprise crossing his face. "I, um." He pinched at the skin of his throat, searching for words, maybe.

"Is this going to be a 'you won't tell us what you know unless we fess up to what we know' kind of thing?" Harper asked, a frown on her face that Rory hoped was more curiosity than disapproval.

"No, I wouldn't do that." But it'd be nice to know the truth about them.

Chris stepped in front of Rory, eyebrows pinched with concern. "Those guys on that boat, they work with Santiago? Is that what you're thinking?"

"I don't know, to be honest," she said, her shoulders falling. "But there's so much to . . ." Rory closed her eyes when the memory that'd been taunting her finally formed into a full-on picture in her mind.

The dead man with the snake tattoo . . . she remembered why he looked familiar.

But no, that didn't make sense.

"The guy on the yacht," she whispered upon opening her eyes, "he's the man who paid off the guys who kidnapped Andrew and me nine years ago."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THANKS TO THE LIGHTER CHRIS HAD GRABBED FROM THE YACHT BEFORE DISEMBARKING, THEY WERE able to relax by a fire after cooking. They'd eaten the grouper and flounder Chris and Roman had managed to catch with an improvised spear. They were close to the coast, though, so they'd be putting the fire out soon to prevent any new assholes catching sight of their location with the sun beginning to dip from sight.

But now that they'd eaten, it was time to peel back her layers.

Show her cards.

Explain what she'd so unceremoniously dropped on them earlier. Elaborate on what they'd patiently allowed to hang in the air until she was ready to talk.

Rory stood in front of the fire and turned her back to the others. She let go of a deep breath, then lifted the hem of her shirt to reveal her back.

"Rory." Chris's voice sounded choked with pain as if he hadn't already seen the scars Friday night. He lightly, almost reverently, skated his fingers over the welts.

"There's no doubt in my mind this is about me." A thick knot formed in her throat. "Those modern-day pirates I mentioned, well, they kidnapped Andrew and me nine years ago. They wanted the coordinates for a treasure we'd planned to salvage in the Caribbean. The whip tore my skin pretty badly, and, um, as you can see, the wounds didn't heal properly." She relaxed at the feel of Chris's hand still on her back. "Andrew offered them a million dollars to let us go, and the man who brought the money . . . I'm almost positive he's at the bottom of the ocean on that yacht right now." She lowered her shirt and faced Chris but found his eyes glossy as if on the verge of shedding tears at the sight of her back.

He'd had that look in his eyes Friday, but she'd forced a distraction by way of a kiss and then an orgasm.

"The men who did that to you," Chris spoke around a hard swallow, "are they dead?"

The soft look of compassion on his face instantly transformed to one of sheer fury. The same fury she'd tried to break through in his bedroom in Virginia.

"Yeah, they've been handled. Jesse rounded up some of his friends after I told him what happened, including A.J. This was before A.J. joined Scott and Scott. They took off for a week, and when they came back, Jesse told me I'd never have to worry about those men again."

Chris set his hands on his hips, his gaze moving to the fire dancing in the gentle breeze. A touch of relief at some justice flashed in his eyes.

"And what do you remember about the man from the yacht you recognized?" Harper sat on top of her rain jacket with her legs stretched out alongside the fire. Her hair hung in messy strands around

her face, same as Rory's.

Roman had his back to a nearby "tourist tree"—arms folded over his chest, eyes on the flames. Quiet since they'd finished eating.

"I don't know his name. I just remember the jagged scar in the shape of a seven by his right eye and the tattoo on his neck. A green serpent. And you know how I feel about snakes, so it was hard to forget. But I'm fairly certain it was him. I just don't know why he would have abducted us Friday." Having been connected to Cutter, it made no sense. "He helped negotiate the rescue and paid the pirates a million in cash from Andrew's bank account to get us free. We still had to give up the location of the sunken ship, but we knew if we didn't also buy our way out of there, they would have killed us."

"Back then, did Cutter say who the man was? A friend? Colleague?" Harper inquired. "And did anyone notice him at the party on Friday night? I don't remember him or anyone from the yacht, for that matter."

Chris and Roman both shook their heads to Harper's last question, then focused back on Rory, waiting for her answer.

"No, I don't remember him from the gala, but when I asked Andrew about that guy nine years ago, he told me not to worry about him. And that was the last time I ever saw him. But if Andrew trusted him with his bank account and a million dollars, he must have been important to him."

"Cutter wanted you at that event. He said he would have reached out to you even if you didn't come. What was the special project he needed your expertise with, the job you refused?" Chris asked, his voice gravelly. Anger still evident in his tone.

Rory thought back to Friday. "He didn't tell me. Just said it was the biggest find of his lifetime, and he needed me on the job because I was the best."

"And when you said no to his job offer, did he push back?" Harper stood and folded her arms across her chest, moving closer to Roman, but she kept her focus on Rory.

"He was insistent, but I said goodbye and went to find Chris right after." *Then we made out and got gassed in the elevator. I mean, because why wouldn't that happen to me?*

"Someone went to a hell of a lot of work to take us. The elevators. Smoke and gas."

"Requires a lot of prep to nab someone who never RSVP'd to the event. Cutter didn't know you were gonna show until you were there," Chris finished Roman's line of thought. "Maybe someone planned to kidnap several people for ransom."

Why are you still trying to let me off the hook?

"The fact Rory recognized that guy on the yacht and that he's connected to Cutter can't be a coincidence," Harper countered their argument. "You both know that."

"Plus, I did RSVP. I called on Wednesday, the day Elaina said I should go, figuring I'd cancel at the last minute if I had to, but I wanted to mark myself as attending in case I decided to show up." *Why the hell did I do that?*

"Cutter seemed surprised to see you, though." Chris folded his arms. "But it could have been an act. And fuck, he wanted you alone in that hall. If I hadn't been right there, he might have taken just you."

"There was only one toothbrush in that travel bag." *One person. That was the original plan, right?* Andrew was ambitious, but kidnapping? "Andrew wouldn't force me to help him on a job. And also, why would he take you all?" She chewed on her lip for a moment in thought. "Shit, he asked if we worked together, but we never responded. Maybe he just assumed . . ."

Cutter worked with people from all over the world. And Chris said he'd heard multiple languages

spoken on the yacht, which would make sense if Andrew employed those men. *Could Andrew have done this?*

“Then maybe it is Cutter, and he decided to take all of us at the last minute to distract from the fact he was only planning on taking you, throw people off his scent, so to speak,” Roman spoke up.

“If it’s Andrew who wants me, I guess that’s better than the alternative. I can deal with my ex. He’s not as scary as”—she looked to Chris—“as someone else who wants me dead.”

Chris’s eyes narrowed on her, and she’d swear she nearly saw his pulse throbbing at the side of his neck in anticipation of what she was about to say.

Or maybe it was her pulse racing.

She clenched her hands into knots at her sides and edged closer to the fire to dispel the sudden chills on her skin.

“What happened five years ago?” Chris’s tone was so low it could skirt the equatorial line.

Rory glimpsed over at Harper, who stood rigidly beside Roman, and Harper gave her a slight nod of encouragement. A woman-to-woman “it’s okay” in her eyes.

“While working with Andrew, I discovered that the black market for antiquities was much bigger than I thought. The number of artifacts smuggled and sold, and not just by criminals, but by powerful organizations as well, is staggering.” She looked at Chris again. His jaw was set in a hard line as he observed her, but his eyes were a warm and consoling contrast. “You dealt with ISIS while in the military, maybe even now, and well, even terrorist groups like ISIS traffic art and other relics as one avenue to help fund their operations. Tens of millions of dollars in revenue a year.”

Chris’s blue eyes widened at her mention of ISIS, clearly not what he’d been expecting to hear.

“I hated it, hated seeing priceless artifacts sold on the black market to a bunch of rich dicks willing to pay top dollar regardless of the fact they were supporting terrorists.” Rory set a hand to her stomach and took a steadying breath. “I know this because I ran into some treasure hunters who were hired to raid and plunder for criminals and other groups. Andrew told me to let it go, but I was pissed. And well,” she continued, drawing her hands together in front of her, “I left Andrew’s team and started my own crew, and we used my research skills to hunt down the illegal sales. I couldn’t stop ISIS, but I could steal back what they sold and return the artifacts to their original owners.”

“Red Robin Hood.” Roman’s words had Rory releasing an involuntary gasp. “That was you?”

“I always wore different red wigs, so I guess that’s where the nickname came from.” Better than being dubbed a thief, she supposed. “I, um, broke into their homes and took back what didn’t belong to them.”

Chris swiped a hand over his head, then gripped the back of his neck and looked at the ground.

“But you stopped doing that. It was only two or so years before Red Robin Hood—I mean you—changed gears, am I right?” Roman asked, and how he knew so much was beyond her.

“Yeah, I stumbled upon something that I couldn’t unsee when I was on a job in Peru.” She closed her eyes, remembering the moment she walked onto that man’s compound and had heard the cries. Pitiful, heartbreaking cries. “Animals,” she said, nearly under her breath. “I was there to recover artifacts that belonged to the people of Syria. And I discovered the guy who’d purchased them was a wildlife trafficker. He smuggled animals. And seeing all those beautiful animals, some on the verge of extinction, on his property as he prepared to sell and transfer them across the ocean—I’ve never been able to erase the image from my mind. I felt so powerless. I couldn’t save them.”

Chris’s eyes were closed now, most likely absorbing what she’d just revealed. He may not have said it out loud, but Rory instinctively knew that Chris considered the life of an animal sacred. He would understand the horror and pain she’d experienced that night three years ago.

“Wildlife smuggling is one of the most profitable forms of transnational organized crime in the world. Ten to twenty-five billion a year in profits. The highly coveted trade routes alone are worth a fortune,” Roman threw out a fact she knew well. “Risk is low. Profit margins are high. Little chance of getting caught. And going after these smugglers, well, the attempts are underfunded, and many smugglers end up with a fine and a slap on the wrist.”

“And yet, these people are destroying biodiversity. Essentially ruining the balance of the planet. And so many animals die before ever making it to their destination.” Rory’s voice trembled, and her vision blurred with unshed tears. “Some are killed long before the journey and used for parts.”

“The snakes at Santiago’s home,” Chris began, “he was going to smuggle them out of the country?”

Rory nodded.

“Are you telling us you’ve been hunting wildlife smugglers for the last three years?” Chris stared at Rory, brows lifting.

“Someone has to do it. There’s a lot of money and resources out there to go against the other types of smugglers, but animals . . . the planet . . .” she explained, choking up a little. “I once heard someone say we can’t fight twenty-first-century crimes with twentieth-century tools. So, I came up with my own plan to hunt traffickers—see how they liked being the prey instead of the predator.” Chills continued to coat her skin, and she eased her body so close to the flames she nearly burned herself.

Harper walked around the fire to get closer to her, drawing Rory’s attention. “What exactly do you do? How do you find them?”

“I took the methods I learned to hunt treasure and applied them to hunting smugglers. A lot of research is involved. I sneak onto their property one or two times, depending on the situation, to get what I need. I’m gone before they know I’m there. Afterward, I give the evidence to an agency or group who can take them down.”

Chris had his back to her now, his hands once again situated on the nape of his neck.

Rory peeked at Roman, who remained unchanged. His back against the tree. Arms still crossed.

“I’ve worked with only a handful of people in the last several years, and I did my best to protect my identity. The work I did was risky. And I was okay with the risks I was taking but didn’t want my choices falling back onto my family. But early on, I discovered someone known as The Italian.”

“The Italian?” Roman pushed away from the tree, and Chris spun around.

“You were hunting *him*?” Harper asked, eyes wide with shock.

“Yeah, you’re familiar, then?” Rory shivered at the shocked looks on their faces.

“No one has been able to confirm his real identity,” Chris finally spoke. “A legend in the world of smuggling. Basically, an overlord of illegal trade routes.”

Roman stroked his jaw as he looked to the ground, the first real reaction Rory had seen from him since she began opening up. Now they knew the real danger of being around her.

“When I first started, I stumbled upon a woman targeting the same smuggler as me in Cartagena. She also saved my life.” Rory lifted the hem of her shirt to show the scar from her knife wound, and Chris briefly squeezed his eyes closed, his jaw locking tight. She waited for Chris’s gaze to find hers again before she continued, “Jolie and I formed a partnership and quickly discovered one person was connected to dozens upon dozens of smugglers and trade routes. Smugglers on the Dark Web referred to him as The Italian. We had a list of twenty-five targets to start with.”

“You went after all twenty-five names?” Chris asked, eyes wide with surprise.

“I only managed to get to fifteen names from the list in the last three years, plus another smuggler

connected to The Italian I found more recently.”

“Fifteen?” Chris’s mouth rounded in continued shock. “I’m out of words to express my awe.”

If only she had gotten to them all. “It wasn’t easy, especially after Jolie died six months into our collaboration. Well, technically, she disappeared, but I’m certain The Italian had Jolie killed.” Rory’s stomach knotted, anger hurtling through her at the loss. So much of Rory’s mission was owed to Jolie.

Chris gave her a reassuring nod, which helped her find the strength to get through this conversation. To relive past pains. The wins and losses.

“I had to continue with the mission, though. No way could I stop. There were so many names. I did my best to dismantle and disrupt The Italian’s trade routes by going through the list of smugglers I believed were all tied to him. But I always knew The Italian himself needed to be taken down to achieve any kind of lasting change. Cut the head off the snake, figuratively speaking.”

“Santiago,” Harper whispered. “Did The Italian orchestrate the ambush of the CIA’s transport? If so, why? To rescue Santiago or to get rid of him before he could talk?”

“But the guys who took Santiago spoke French.” Roman seemed to be reminding Harper of intel they already knew. “I mean, that doesn’t rule out that the men who took Santiago don’t work for The Italian, though.”

“Santiago has ties to The Italian,” Rory said a second later. “You probably knew Santiago as a human trafficker, but he dealt with animals as well. Snakes. Macaws. But it was elephants that led me to him in the first place. Ivory is often sold to fund armed groups in Africa, like the Lord’s Resistance Army. The price they can demand for tusks once they’re outside African markets is exorbitant. Santiago sold the tusks in Latin America and the U.S., but he was using The Italian’s Atlantic Ocean network to transport them to El Salvador.”

“I read a story about this very thing,” Chris spoke up. “*National Geographic* hid GPS trackers in the tusks to follow the smuggling supply chain.”

“I applied similar tactics to identify the starting and ending points of various trade routes, and I used that information as evidence to help take the smugglers down. Often when I broke into someone’s compound for the first time, it was to plant a tracking device.” A dull, achy pain struck her as she thought about the fight she’d given up.

“So, after you breached Santiago’s compound, what happened?” Harper asked, her voice soft.

“I was played by someone. I fell for their bait. I walked right into his trap in France.”

“France?” Chris’s brows drew inward as if he were considering a possible connection between the French-speaking men who’d freed Santiago and whoever had lured her into a trap.

“The man bested me,” Rory went on, not sure what to think about why Carter Dominick would ever free Santiago. “I was led to believe he used one of The Italian’s networks, so I was there to find evidence, but I wound up tasered and tied up in a room.” She thought back to that night, lying on the ground by the pool, completely incapacitated. Looking up at the night sky, thinking *This is it, I’m gonna die tonight*, and then the image of a man with a stunning smile appeared in her mind. Chris Hunter. And here he was now like they’d come full circle. It was all so unbelievable.

Chris’s anger flared up again. “Tasered?”

“He’s the reason I gave up my mission. In no uncertain terms, he pointed out I was putting my family in grave danger. He said if he was able to find and catch me, it was only a matter of time before The Italian would, too.”

“What’d he want?” Chris stepped forward, placing a hand under her chin, directing her eyes to meet his.

“He wanted me to help him. Said he’d let me go if I agreed. And as much as it pained me, I had no

choice. But honestly, after three years, my time was probably running out. It was bound to happen. I can't imagine the consequences if someone else had caught me."

"That's why you had no choice but to settle down." Chris shifted out of her reach, a solemn look on his face. "So, who is this guy, and what did he want with you?"

"Carter Dominick." Rory let go of a deep breath. "He wanted my help finding the man responsible for killing his wife."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“CARTER DOMINICK?” HARPER BLINKED, A LOOK OF DISBELIEF ON HER FACE. “CIA CARTER Dominick? The one who left the Agency about two and a half years ago and went rogue? That Carter?”

“I was wondering if you’d know of him.” Rory sat in front of the fire using her folded-up rain jacket for a cushion on the rocky ground. Her skin was pink and glowing from sitting so close to the flames.

Chris peered at Roman, trying to get a read on him. What’d he know about Carter? Anything? Who the hell was their adversary?

Andrew Cutter? The Italian? Or this Carter guy?

Fuck, he hoped “all of the above” wasn’t the answer to this multiple-choice question.

“We worked an op together maybe seven years ago in Costa Rica.” Harper squeezed her eyes closed as though mentally doing the math. She’d most likely worked a ridiculous number of ops between then and now. “Took down a smuggling ring together, actually.”

Smuggling? That can’t be coincidental. “We were worried the ambush of Santiago’s transport might have been an inside job because the officers escorting him were left unharmed. But after hearing this, do you think Carter could be our guy?” Chris was familiar with the name, but not because Carter was CIA. He tried to catch hold of a memory that wasn’t quite forming clearly. “Maybe Carter had a CIA contact who gave him the transport information.”

“I don’t know what kind of criminal activity Carter has been involved with since he left the Agency,” Harper responded, “but I can’t imagine why he’d be interested in a smuggler like Santiago.”

“Personal tragedy often changes people. Maybe losing his wife turned him into someone else.” Chris’s tone grew dark at the idea of what Carter had gone through.

“Carter was Delta Force before joining the Agency,” Harper said.

Delta Force. Now Chris remembered the particulars about Carter.

It wasn’t every day a former Delta guy turned CIA, disappeared, and was then pegged as having gone rogue.

“After his wife was murdered,” Harper continued, “he went off-the-grid. Rumors are he became a criminal himself, but I can’t be certain. Carter’s wife’s family was wealthy, though. Picture the Kennedys but with more money,” she added. “I think Carter’s wife hoped her husband would be POTUS someday.”

“Thinking that ship has sailed,” Chris said and kept his eyes on Rory. “How’d his wife die?”

“Home invasion. She was savagely murdered.” Harper paused for a moment as if paying her respects. “Police and Feds brushed it off as a burglary. There’d been a string of similar break-ins

around D.C. in the previous months, but Carter refused to believe it.”

A multitude of emotions flooded Chris when he thought back to waking up on the yacht yesterday with no idea if Rory was still alive. If he’d been Carter, what would he have done if he’d come home to find his wife brutally murdered?

He suddenly had a sour taste in his mouth and felt like he was about to lose the fish he’d eaten.

“And why would Carter think you could help him find her killer?” Harper asked. “You’re clearly a kick-ass tracker, but . . .?”

“He showed me a photo of someone he believed I could identify, and the reason he thought I’d know him is that Carter had another photo, one of the same man with me near the Washington Monument.”

And now, maybe Chris needed to sit. But instead, he set his palm to a nearby tree and braced himself for whatever else Rory was about to lay on them.

“I assume the timeframe was around his wife’s murder,” Harper commented.

“Carter was light on details about the photos, but the picture with me in it had to have been from when I was in D.C. having lunch with my friend about two and a half years ago.”

“Maybe Carter pulled CCTV footage outside his house and found your friend, and then he canvassed all the surveillance cameras in the area looking for more sightings of the guy,” Harper suggested. “I assume he checked immediately after her death because I doubt those tapes would still exist now.”

“But it took him two and a half years to approach Rory?” Chris asked. “That doesn’t add up.”

Rory nodded. “I asked him why he waited so long after her death to reach out if he’d had the images so long, but he didn’t answer. I was just glad he wasn’t going to kill me.”

Chris winced at her words. Thank God Carter hadn’t . . . He couldn’t allow that thought to marinate, or he’d blow a fuse. “So, uh, this guy was a friend? How do you know him?” *And why would Carter think a friend of yours killed his wife?*

“Well, we worked together. He was part of Andrew’s crew. And when I left Andrew’s team to chase down antiquities buyers, Danny decided to join me.”

When you were known as Red Robin Hood. Chris arched a brow, waiting. Nervous anticipation coiled inside of him.

“We worked together on and off for two years before I chose my new mission. Danny went back to solely focusing on treasure hunting with Andrew.” She let go of a deep breath. “Danny was in D.C., and he learned I was also in town, so we had lunch to catch up. As to how or why Carter believed Danny killed his wife, I have no idea.”

“Did Danny know you were giving up antiquities to chase wildlife smugglers?” Chris asked, but he assumed the answer would be no.

“Andrew and Danny were the only two people outside my small group I worked with who knew I was going after antiquities buyers. But when I changed missions and started hunting down wildlife traffickers, I kept my work a secret, even from them, for their own protection,” Rory explained.

“Andrew was okay with you leaving him to hunt criminals? Or for Danny to help you do it?” Harper probed.

“Andrew was worried about me,” Rory quickly replied, “but he knew once I made up my mind, there was no stopping me. I have a feeling he pushed Danny into helping to keep an eye on me.”

“And when you gave up antiquities—what’d Andrew say?” Harper asked next, and thank God for her, Chris was still rolling around in a sea of shock.

“I didn’t give him a reason to argue. I said I planned to travel the world. Take a break from

everything. And then I avoided his calls and emails, worried he'd catch me in a lie. Andrew never stopped reaching out, though."

"Hmm." Harper frowned, and Chris could practically see the wheels turning in her head. She was suspicious of something or someone, and he assumed it was Andrew "The Asshole" Cutter.

"But um, back to Carter," Rory continued. "He tracked me down when he couldn't find Danny. And the reason he couldn't find him is that Danny died on a dive in the Caribbean a few months after we had lunch in D.C."

What? That was yet another unexpected twist, among many. "Yeah, that sounds . . . suspect."

"Given everything that has gone down this weekend, yeah, I can see that now," Rory admitted.

"So how did Carter find you?" Harper peered at Rory. "Facial recognition software, maybe? Probably still had contacts at the CIA."

Rory smoothed her hands up and down the sides of her arms. "I guess so, and that's how Carter stumbled upon who I really was and what I was doing. His men tracked me to El Salvador in August. They watched me break into Santiago's compound."

And his mind was blown. He'd known that fact already, but just, wow.

"Then why not grab you there?" Harper asked what Chris was thinking, but he hadn't been able to get his voice to work.

"Once Carter put two and two together, that I was the person taking down smugglers, he decided instead of kidnapping me, he'd draw me straight to him," she explained. "Since it was clear The Italian was my target, about two weeks after I was at Santiago's compound, Carter lured me to his home in France by acting as though he was smuggling pangolins on one of The Italian's trade networks."

"How'd he do all of this?" Chris asked now that he was able to speak. Rory was far too smart to fall into an easy trap, so now he was curious to what lengths Carter had gone.

"When it comes to wildlife trafficking, a lot of the transactions are done online. Supply chain messages go through different social media outlets that are hard to track. The illicit shipments are then sent through cargo ships or on private cargo planes, along specific trade routes to the buyers in a particular area." Rory was in full genius mode right now. "Think about a toll road. You have to pay to drive on that road. Same concept in international smuggling. You pay a fee of sorts to move illegal goods or people on trade routes governed by different transnational criminal groups, or in the case of The Italian, one person."

"So, Carter made you believe he was going to traffic pangolins on one of the commonly known routes The Italian ran?" Roman asked, quickly interpreting Rory's words.

"Exactly." Rory nodded. "Carter set up the sale of pangolins on the black market online. Pangolins are one of the world's most trafficked mammals right now. A multimillion-dollar supply chain runs across Africa and Asia, and these criminals are destroying the species, so I've been monitoring the situation."

"Unfortunately, Interpol is having a hell of a time stopping them," Roman noted. "Only a tenth or so of pangolins trafficked are intercepted."

"Pangolins, brother? You know about those, too?" Chris would have laughed if the subject wasn't so heart-shatteringly horrible.

"Going after these people, it's like searching for a needle in a haystack if you don't know what you're looking for, which is why it was helpful I'd had someone early on to get me on the right path," Rory explained. "When I discovered a large order had been placed online to be sent out of Douala International Airport, I followed the trail, and it led me to Carter Dominick. It took several contacts to

find his property, but I shouldn't have been so arrogant. I found him too quickly. A man like Carter was only found because he wanted to be found. He doesn't actually live in the lavish home he lured me to. It was a ruse."

Fuck if he was impressed, though. And admittedly, this was all a little over his head. He was used to taking down smugglers, but not identifying and tracking their whereabouts in the first place.

"Well, consider my mind blown." Harper clapped twice. "Could have used you at the Agency, woman. And don't beat yourself up about Carter's trap. He was trained by the Farm to do shit like that, and you are self-made."

"So, uh, when you got to Carter's home, and he asked you to help him identify and find Danny, and you told him he'd died, what'd he do?" Chris whispered, his nerves still pretty shot.

"I have no idea what led Carter to believe that Danny was the murderer since he refused to tell me, but I told him Danny would never have done such a thing. And with Danny dead, what could Carter do? Bring him back to life and question the guy? So, Carter got pissed, gave me a warning about The Italian, and sent me on my way after a day. I highly doubt he gave up his pursuit for justice, though."

Chris didn't even know how to begin processing everything Rory had just divulged, but he could understand her reluctance to share her story with anyone. He'd always thought he lived life on the edge, but this woman had taken enormous risks pitting herself against the likes of pirates and smugglers. All without a team of trained covert operatives and the weight of the United States government backing her. She'd gone after bad guys because it was the right thing to do.

Her love for animals, her experience . . . chasing wildlife smugglers, it made sense in an odd sort of way. But would she truly be satisfied training canines after the life she'd led?

"So, are you upset that you're in this mess because of me?" Rory's voice was unsteady as though she were nervous about what they all thought of her. But he knew Harper, and he could tell she now saw Rory in a new light. Someone who could hang with their team, no problem.

And she could, couldn't she?

"We might be able to take down some major bad guys with your help if you'll let us, so we should be thanking you." Harper stood and started poking the wood in their firepit with a stick. They'd need to douse the flames soon. Better to be safe than sorry. The fire would be great to signal for help, but it could also draw unwanted eyes.

"You want to go after The Italian? I mean, it's obvious to me that's the only way I'll ever be safe, more importantly, my family, but I wasn't so sure if you'd—"

"We'll do whatever it takes to ensure your safety, and taking down a criminal is a byproduct of that," Roman said, speaking for Chris since his emotions had him all tangled up.

Proud and fearful at the same time. It was a lot to wrap his head around.

"Hey, guys," Roman said a moment later with his back turned, eyes on the ocean. "We've got company."

Chris abruptly went to his side to follow his gaze. A red and white, commercial-grade fishing trawler that looked to be about an eighty-footer was anchored off in the distance, not too far away. They weren't more than twenty-five feet above sea level in their current spot. The rock wall was easily scalable, plus there was a small area of sand at the base for a starting-off point. "They must have come out after the storm cleared. You think they could be our ride out? Save us the rest of the trek trying to get to the ranger. They're fishermen, so we should be good."

"No, it doesn't make sense for them to be here." Rory stood alongside Chris, taking in the view. "No one anchors alongside these cliffs. Too dangerous for fishermen, even for that kind of vessel."

“You’re sure?” Chris peeked at her, and she nodded.

“They’re not here for fish. All that equipment is most likely a cover,” Rory went on.

“Pirates?” Chris asked a question that sounded absolutely absurd, but after the weekend they’d had, why not?

“Just as bad.” Rory’s mouth pinched tight. “Smugglers.” She spat the word out like she’d tasted something rotten. “Probably taking advantage of the storm, knowing the waters wouldn’t be as busy out here today. I’d venture to say they’re here to rendezvous with another vessel. *Or* they’re here for us.”

“Let’s not be sitting ducks, then.” Chris turned to see Roman and Harper putting out the fire.

“Let’s move out.” Roman reached for the sidearm he’d taken from a guard on the yacht, and Harper had a weapon in hand as well.

“Go ahead. We’ll be right behind you.” Chris needed one second with Rory before they left.

Chris retrieved the second pistol he had on him and handed it to her once Roman and Harper started for the trail. “You should be armed. They could have already sent men after us.”

She took the gun and checked the mag like a pro.

Sexy as fuck.

Life was short, and tomorrow wasn’t promised, so Chris leaned in and stole a kiss. When her lips softened against his with a moan, his heartbeat soared, and he got a little light-headed. He knew she’d been worried about sharing her truths, letting down her walls, but he needed to reassure her that it didn’t change a damn thing between them.

“You’re incredible,” he whispered after a much too short kiss. A small smile formed on her lips, but when she began to pull away, her eyes darted off to his side, and she flinched.

Her hands slowly went up, still clutching the gun.

Chris lowered his head, disgusted with himself for losing focus. He now had two choices: go for his gun, or slowly turn to see who the hell was behind him. Option one could get Rory killed. Option two, possibly both of them. But he couldn’t take the chance. So, he turned to face whoever was there and shield Rory with his body.

Not even two feet behind him were five men. Five *armed* men.

Harper and Roman will come for us, he told himself. They’d get out of this mess. They had to.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Rory whisper, and he hated that she was blaming herself.

He should never have built a fire, not even for food. Never allowed his guard to drop. It was his job to always be aware and ready, and this was on him. Not her.

“Guns. Hand them over. Or you get a bullet to the head,” the man second from the left of the line of five said.

“The Trott brothers.” Rory’s identification took him by surprise as she handed over her weapon, and Chris begrudgingly did the same.

“Do we know you?” the dark-haired guy in the middle of the pack asked. Probably the leader. The alpha of the group. Maybe the captain of that fishing trawler. Judging by the accent and the flag inked on his forearm, he was Brazilian.

“No, you don’t know me,” Rory said, now standing alongside Chris, hands still above her head. Why didn’t she remain behind him, damn it? “But I’m familiar with your work. Guns, weapons, treasure. You steal and deal in it all.”

The fact Rory had ever gone near this kind of trash had him wanting to step forward and deck all five of them, take the risk of bringing fists to a gunfight. If they laid a hand on her, what choice would he have?

“Kneel so my men can bind your hands behind your backs,” the man standing alongside the leader said. Was he Trott brother number two? Similar bone structure, same long, dark hair pulled into a ponytail, and green eyes. Hell, maybe they were twins. Ugly and uglier.

Where were Harper and Roman? Did they have eyes on their location, waiting to make their move for a rescue?

He did his best not to scan the area in case the men weren't also dumb and dumber.

Chris put a knee to the hard ground, and Rory followed suit.

Two men rounded them and swept Chris and Rory's hands behind their backs.

He calculated his odds. He was good at hand-to-hand, but there were way too many firearms on the opposing side. And the odds were not in his favor tonight.

The leader crouched before Rory and held his iPhone in front of her face, showcasing an image of her on the screen. “You're worth a pretty penny, Rory McAdams. I happened to be in the area when I got the call to track you down. See if you were here and alive. Thanks for the fire, couldn't have found you without it.” He winked at her, then turned to peer at Chris, the sky growing darker now that it was approaching Rory's favorite time of day, twilight.

“We've got two more, boss,” a voice said over a radio clipped to the leader's waist. He stood upright and swapped his phone for his radio.

“Looks like we got all four of you. They weren't sure how many of you survived.” Those words were a knife to Chris's heart.

But they got away while at sea yesterday, and they could do it again.

“Take them to the ship,” the leader announced over his radio. “We're right behind you.”

“They were a bit feisty, boss. I know they're supposed to remain unharmed, but they were carrying weapons when we surprised them, and I had to punch the woman. And the man lost his mind, and I had to stick him with my knife like he was a rabid dog to try and put him down.”

Chris lunged forward at the words, unable to stop himself, but he was met with a hard punch to his right jaw, and when Rory began to resist, he stilled—terrified someone would set a hand on her.

“Okay, okay,” Chris hesitantly conceded. “Just don't touch her.”

* * *

CHRIS BIT DOWN ON HIS BACK TEETH, HIS HEART SLOWING BEAT BY BEAT AS HE PROCESSED THE REALITY of their situation. The four of them were in a room full of crates below deck on the fishing trawler. The crates probably carried items the Trott brothers planned to smuggle, or products they'd recently received. Who knew, and Chris didn't care. They just had to find a way off the vessel.

“I'm so sorry.” Rory sat on the cool floor next to Chris. The situation was all too familiar with the one yesterday. Hands bound to the wall behind their backs. This time, their feet were cuffed and anchored to the floor in front of them.

Motherfuckers.

Two overhead bulbs filled the room with enough light so they could see each other. Harper and Roman were on the other side of the space, about four feet away.

“It's not your fault,” Roman said with a shake of the head. Blood stained his shirt, but he'd been stitched up and covered with a bandage beneath his dress shirt. The captain's wife, who also happened to be the crew's nurse, had taken care of him. Roman said she did a clean job and had given him antibiotics. Apparently, he was worth more alive than dead.

“We shouldn’t have let someone get the drop on us. We let our guards down, thinking we were alone because of the storm,” Harper said in agreement with Roman. “And Roman shouldn’t have gone all caveman on the asshole who hit me.” She nudged Roman in his good side with her elbow.

A bruise was already forming beneath Harper’s eye, and Chris knew Roman would have torn apart the man who hit her if he hadn’t been outnumbered.

Ten armed men against the four of them, and normally Chris would choose his people as the winners regardless of the numbers, but with two women they cared about potentially caught in the crossfire . . .

“I was distracting you with my story, and we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me. Please, let me feel shitty for a few minutes, and then I promise you can attempt to throw more kind words my way after,” Rory said with a plea to her voice.

“Then let us feel shitty, too,” Harper challenged.

Rory’s story. Yeah, that was more than a story—it was a book of revelations. And her scars. He’d need to ask A.J. about the pirates who’d whipped her. But first, they had to find a way off that damn ship before whoever had put a bounty on their heads arrived.

Rory had racked up a lot of enemies, but he had to assume The Italian was behind their abduction.

“You shouldn’t have attacked that guy for hitting me,” Harper said again, but this time, her soft words were meant only for Roman.

Chris peered at Rory, trying to give them as much privacy as possible.

Rory had her eyes positioned on the stack of crates off to their left. “Probably guns or drugs in there.”

“And who has a connection to the Trott brothers?” he asked her.

“That’s the thing, no one I know. I doubt Andrew knows them. And I don’t know of any connection between them and The Italian, either. And as for Santiago”—she shrugged—“well, your guess is as good as mine.”

“They were speaking Portuguese with each other.” Roman joined the conversation, his tone eerily dark. The man was out for blood.

“We’re in the middle of a melting pot of who-done-it for bad guys,” Rory said, and Chris could tell she was trying to make a joke to ease the gravity of the situation. It was one reason he and the guys also cracked jokes. It helped. Somehow, it just helped.

“And how do you know of the Trott brothers?” Chris was thankful they hadn’t known of her, but well, hell, now they did.

“They’re a middleman distributor for bad guys looking to sell on the black market. Although, I’ve heard these guys take more pleasure in pitting buyers against each other in order to walk away with as much money as possible. But middlemen are a dime a dozen, which was why I used to go after the buyers instead. But that was before I focused on wildlife smuggling. I should have done more. Taken them out.” She was beating herself up again.

“You’re one woman,” he reminded her. “What you’ve done is beyond me. I can’t wrap my head around it, to be honest.” And he really couldn’t. She was basically a superhero.

“You know how many bad guys out there we wish we could have stopped, but they weren’t our mission?” Harper made a valid point. “We do what we can.”

Rory set her head on his shoulder, and from his vantage point, it appeared she closed her eyes. He lifted his chin and watched as Harper mimicked her move. Head to Roman’s shoulder, eyes closing.

They were all physically and emotionally spent.

After walking all day, then having to make their way down to the fishing trawler, they were out of

energy. Plus, Roman had been stabbed. Mostly a superficial wound from what Roman said, but Chris wasn't sure if he was just trying to make the women feel better.

What day is it? Chris thought as he closed his eyes, feeling like he might doze off, too. *Sunday. Right.* A week ago, Rory had started training Bear. *How is Bear?* He missed the boy already. He missed the life he and Rory had shared, even if only for a week, before chaos had cut in. He knew Bear would be in good hands, though. Most likely with Emily and Elaina.

"Chris," Rory said softly a few minutes later.

"Yeah?" He opened his eyes to see her looking up at him.

"Did I make a mistake? Should I have never left Alabama ten years ago?" The indecision and worry in her tone were heartbreaking. "This guy I was dating in college broke up with me near the end of our senior year because I wouldn't move to California with him after we graduated. He said I would never amount to anything other than a simple, small-town girl. I'd never leave Bama. And I think, well, I think part of me ran off to Italy because of him. To prove something. I couldn't get his words out of my head." A tear trickled down her cheek, and he hated that his wrists were bound, unable to comfort her. She sniffled and closed her eyes, another tear escaping. "But there's nothing wrong with being from a small town, and it took me a decade to realize that."

"You did a lot of good in those ten years." *Even though it was risky. Could have gotten yourself killed.* "Living in a small town, loving that kind of life doesn't mean you can't spread your wings and explore the world. You can do both. Just like you can have a family as well as a career."

"Not sure if what I was doing was a career since my actions were sort of illegal, and I wasn't getting paid." Her lids parted, her eyes glossy.

"A family and a mission, then," he corrected. "And it took me twenty years and meeting you," he began, emotion catching in his throat, "to realize I want both." He lowered his mouth closer to hers, nervous that his admission might scare her away. He was putting his heart on the line, but she was worth it. And he didn't doubt they would find a way to break free, but she needed to know how he felt. He *needed* to say the words.

"Chris?" she whispered, eyes on his. "Make me fly?"

His chest tightened, and he dipped down for the only touch they could manage right now.

She kissed him back, soft sweeps of her tongue twining with his, a few of her tears landing on his cheeks as their lips locked together.

He wasn't sure if anyone or anything could have pulled them apart at the moment.

Until someone physically separated them.

He'd heard them coming. Boots on the ground. He'd ignored them. Because fuck them.

It took the guy shoving at Chris's chest to get him to move his lips from Rory's.

"It's my lucky day," the leader, who Rory said was Johnny Trott, announced. "Someone just offered me more money for you fools." He snickered, revealing a gold tooth. "Told you, sweetheart, you're worth a fortune."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“THAT DOESN’T SOUND GOOD. WHAT’D HE SAY?” RORY LOOKED TO CHRIS FOR THE TRANSLATION AS they stood on the main deck of the fishing trawler that was most certainly not used for catching fish. No, the only thing fishy about this boat was the Trott brothers, and the only thing they trawled for was trouble. If the Trott brothers wanted to convince the coast guard they were legit, they could have at least made an attempt. *Amateur hour.*

“Portuguese isn’t my strong suit,” Chris said into Rory’s ear as they watched Roman and Johnny talking a few feet away. Roman had pressed the captain, and from the sounds of it, the conversation was quite heated. If Roman’s hands had been free, he surely would have been waving them about for emphasis. Or using them to punch the guy out.

By the time Johnny Trott had herded them up to the deck, night had fallen. The storm clouds were long gone, the water calmer, and the ink-black sky was covered in a blanket of sparkling stars. Their predicament aside, it really was rather romantic.

Rory was flanked by Chris on her left and Harper on her right, their hands still tied behind their backs. But for some reason, Rory couldn’t muster even an ounce of panic. She was, however, still feeling an immense amount of regret for getting Chris, Roman, and Harper into this situation, and if any of them were injured—or worse—she would never forgive herself.

“Roman’s trying to get information out of him before we’re traded to someone else.” Rory stole a glimpse at Harper to see she was barely moving her mouth as she spoke. “At least, that’s what I think they’re saying. My Portuguese is also subpar.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Rory whispered, nearly smiling, which was crazy at a time like this. “You look like a rookie ventriloquist.”

“I’m not really sure.” Harper lightly laughed as if this was all truly unbelievable. “Oh, that’s not good,” she said a moment later as Roman lurched toward Johnny, clearly angry about something.

Chris sprang into action but was quickly stopped as four crewmen charged him. It went against character for them to stand by and not fight, but hands bound behind their backs and surrounded by a bunch of criminals didn’t make for a fair fight.

Rory winced when one of the men clocked Chris in the jaw and then shoved him to the deck floor.

“Stop!” Rory cried out, knowing her protests would probably do nothing but draw attention. Yep, she and Harper now had their own personal goon squad surrounding them. Nice to know they were considered a threat, at least.

A few seconds later, both Chris and Roman were pinned to the deck, facedown and immobilized, but it’d taken five men to do it. *I repeat, amateur hour.*

“What was said that pissed them off?” Rory whispered to Harper.

“No idea.” Harper chanced one step, but she was stopped by Trott’s idiot brother, Fred, who blocked her path.

He leaned in and wiggled his tongue lewdly, then cupped Harper’s cheek while his eyes journeyed over the tee tightly molded to her chest. Rory hissed angrily when the asshole lifted a hand and palmed Harper’s breast. Roman caught what was going on and yelled something in Portuguese, his body radiating fury.

But Harper seemed unaffected. Rory watched with veiled amusement as Harper calmly rolled her eyes, waited for a beat while Fred had his little laugh, then reared back and spat in his face. Rory stifled a laugh at the shocked look on Fred’s face, which quickly disappeared as he wiped the back of his free hand over his cheek. He hissed out a few sentences in Portuguese before switching to English and ending his rant with, “Bitch.”

Harper lifted her chin and stared Fred in the eyes. “I can undress myself, you asshole.”

“Wait, what?” Rory’s heart stuttered at Harper’s statement.

“Naked plank walks,” Harper clarified.

“Are you sure? You admitted your Portuguese was subpar. Maybe he said . . . Shit, I got nothing.” Rory had found herself in a lot of sketchy situations but never naked ones.

The deck lights shone down on them like fucking spotlights. These pigs wanted a show? No, Rory liked pigs. These men were sick bastards.

“Just because you’re leaving us, doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun first.” Johnny faced Rory and Harper, sweeping aside a strand of long black hair that had escaped his ponytail. “The man who paid me a premium insisted I don’t harm you. That was the only stipulation. Sounds like he’s given me some free rein there.”

“Unharm’d,” Chris seethed. It killed her to watch both Chris and Roman, two strong warriors, fighting against their shackles and powerless to get to her and Harper. “If you fucking touch them, I promise I’ll cut your eyes out, do you hear me?” he roared.

“That’s not the only thing we’ll be cutting.” Roman’s voice dripped with malice.

Johnny stroked his beard, which was long and scraggly, the grimy strands twisted to a point at the bottom. “Just upholding a long-lived tradition and having some good old-fashioned fun.”

“Great, another idiot who thinks he’s Jack Sparrow.” Rory sighed. “I’m pretty sure there’s no such thing as naked plank walks in the pirate handbook, Johnny.” Were these guys for real? *Don’t get too cocky. It’s never gone well for you in the past.*

“There’s not? Well, shiver me timbers, it should have been a thing, don’t you think?” Johnny grinned, showing that one gold tooth again, and hell, the man did look the part of a pirate. “Now, take your clothes off and get moving. Your new owner can damn well pick you up on the shore.”

“There are sharks out there,” Harper said, eyes set on Roman in panic. Her calm and collected self had apparently fallen overboard. “If his wound bleeds—”

“This is a joke, right?” Rory spoke loudly and made sure to inject plenty of disbelief in her tone. Johnny waved a finger in the air, motioning for them to strip.

“These two shouldn’t have pissed me off,” Johnny said, his accent coming through slightly as he peered at Roman and Chris. “Payback is sweet. And since I am under orders not to harm any of you, this will make my vengeful heart feel better.” He clasped his hands over his chest.

“You have no idea what vengeance is.” Rory felt Roman’s promise for revenge deep in her bones.

He and Chris would be back for these men and their boat. The Trotts would wind up at the bottom of the ocean. Someone, someday, would discover the sunken fishing trawler and wonder about the story of the boat and crew. Wonder how it went down and why.

“Time to get naked, girls,” Fred declared, punctuating his words with a loud clap. “Undress.”

“You idiot, our hands are tied behind our backs.” Harper was gonna deck the guy the second her hands were free, Rory was sure of it. She was desperate to connect her knuckles with the asshole’s jaw, too.

She opened her mouth, prepared to argue, but Johnny clutched his stomach and began grinning. “Oh God, you all actually believed me!” He spoke a few words in Portuguese that had his crew breaking into laughter, then raised his palms in the air. “I was kidding. Relax. You don’t need to undress. It was funny, yes?”

Son of a bitch.

Rory had been pretty sure these Neanderthals were joking around, but she still sighed with relief because you never knew what thugs like these guys would do one minute to the next.

“It was especially funny to see you two boys so pissed off on behalf of your women. If I let you up, you promise not to bite?” Johnny crouched in front of Chris and Roman, and Rory was worried one of them might actually snarl. If Bear were there, he’d use that strong jaw of his to bite the hell out of this man. Bear didn’t need training to know good from evil.

When Chris nodded, the men moved off him and allowed him up.

Rory hurried toward him, thankful the idiots standing near didn’t stop her.

She pressed her face to Chris’s chest, wishing her hands were free to loop around him for a hug.

“I got you,” he said, his chin resting atop her head. “I promise.”

Roman slowly stood once the other men parted, allowing him to make his way to Harper.

“Don’t say it,” Chris warned Harper in a low, but teasing voice, once they were all standing together. “I know, I know. I almost jinxed us.”

The episode of Naked and Afraid. Right. Close call. And in any other circumstance, seeing Chris naked clutching a leaf (a big, damn leaf) over his crotch would have been hilarious. But no, she couldn’t allow that image to simmer in her mind with Johnny Freaking Trott and his brother standing there looking so smug.

“Who hired you?” Chris shifted to stand in front of Rory, blocking her from the captain.

“The first time?” Johnny smiled. “Or do you want to know who is buying your freedom now?”

The sounds of helicopter blades chopping the air had everyone’s attention turning to the sky as it flew closer, then circled the boat and remained hovering overhead.

“The team who outbid your first buyer is here now.” Johnny looked back to Chris as the wind from the blades kicked Rory’s hair around and across her face.

Team? Rory’s heart leaped at the idea that maybe, just maybe, Chris’s coworkers had found them. Maybe they were the buyer.

Two thick, black ropes fell from the bird, but no one exited the helo.

And if it wasn’t Chris’s people in the helicopter above them, would they be better off making a run for the water and diving? The current would be rough, even on a calm night, but she was a diving expert, and Chris and Roman were Navy SEALs. Surely, they could make it.

But shit, their hands were still bound behind their backs. “Can you untie us first?” she asked, because hell, it was worth a shot.

“Afraid not. Your buyer would prefer you stay bound.” Johnny’s words stole Rory’s hope that the good guys were there for the rescue. “Weigh anchor,” he ordered after a crew member had handed him a laptop. “We’ve been paid. They’re no longer our problem.”

“What are we doing? What’s the plan?” Rory softly asked Chris.

Chris met Rory’s eyes, a look of anger there.

They'd survived the yacht and hiked across the island, only to be retaken. And now, they were being handed off. Yeah, she was frustrated, too.

Chris was also probably a little embarrassed that the Trott brothers managed to punk him and Roman. But they weren't used to dealing with smugglers and pirates at sea like she had grown accustomed to over the years.

And at this point, she wasn't so sure which would be worse. Naked and afraid, or blindly going with whoever was in that chopper.

Rory looked up to see two men cloaked in all black fast-roping down onto the ship from the helicopter. They landed in front of them, weapons drawn. Roman and Chris were tall and strong, but these two men were WWE-huge in size.

"Boss is worried you'll fight back if we try to get you onto our bird," the one said, his accent most likely Texan.

"And who is your boss?" Chris stepped in front of Rory and faced the men like a shield, and Roman did the same for Harper.

The Texan tipped his head to peer around Chris for a better look at Rory, most likely confirming her identity the way Johnny Trott had back on the island. "We have permission to immobilize you if need be, but Boss would prefer us not to do that," he said instead. "Although, if you try anything, anything at all, we'll stick you with enough ketamine to put down an elephant. Understood?"

"Who's your boss?" Chris repeated, his tone deep and fierce.

"I believe you know him already," the Texan responded, looking directly at Rory. "Carter Dominick."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“DON’T FUC—”

Rory flinched when the door slammed in Chris’s face, cutting off his protests.

“It’s not necessary to separate us,” she said softly to one of Carter’s guards. She was beyond exhausted, but she was also emotionally spent, so it was pointless to try to put up a fight.

Maybe they would have had better luck naked and afraid, swimming with sharks, or taking on the Trott brothers. But their new residence was a considerable upgrade from Mona Island even though they were now dealing with Carter Dominick.

After arriving at the tropical estate, their blindfolds and bindings were removed, and they were escorted down a long marble hallway by three guards. Their questions went unanswered as one by one, first Harper, then Roman, and finally, Chris were dropped off into separate bedrooms.

“Boss says you’re to remain separated until he speaks with you, miss.” The man grabbed her by the elbow while Chris pounded against the door inside his locked room, the sound of his anguish tearing her heart into shreds.

“I’ll be okay, Chris,” she called out. “Everything will be okay.”

“Come on,” he urged, forcing her to walk away.

“Where are we?” Rory asked for the fifth time since the Texan and his crew had lifted them on board the chopper, and for the fifth time, she received no answer.

“Judging by how long we were in that helo, I’m gonna say we landed in Puerto Rico,” she remarked. She knew her geography and was damn proud of it.

Carter had probably rented this estate, as he’d done in France, for the sole purpose of carrying out his plans. Whatever his plans were this time. God, she could only imagine.

She needed Chris. His warmth. His strength.

I can do this. She reminded herself that she’d been mostly on her own for years. She was equipped to handle whatever they threw at her.

She shook her thoughts free when they stopped outside a room at the far end of the hallway on the opposite side of the extensive home—ten rooms away from Chris if her counting was right.

“This is the second largest room here.” The man released his hold on her elbow and nudged her inside, leaving the two other men in the hall.

The first thing she saw was a spectacular panoramic view of the ocean. Next was the vaulted ceiling with wooden beams that came together at the center of the room and made the space feel enormous. But the king-sized bed draped in luxurious, cream-colored linens stole the show and had her conjuring up naughty thoughts about her and Chris. Even more naughty thoughts followed when she caught sight of the en suite. A glass partition served as the wall, making it fully visible from the

bedroom. Multiple showerheads placed at various angles on an azure-blue tile wall looked like a dream come true.

“Boss had one of the women who works here go shopping for you all earlier. Clothes are in the closet and dresser.” He checked his watch. “It’s ten after ten. A late meal, but Boss is expecting you at dinner. Shower and change. You have twenty minutes.”

Rory went to the windows and set her hands on the glass, checking the thickness. She was on the main level, and there was an infinity pool illuminated practically right outside her room.

As if reading her thoughts, the man said, “The windows don’t open, and good luck trying to break them.”

By the time she turned, the door was closed, and he was gone.

Trying to escape would be a wasted effort anyway, so she went to the en suite, flicked on the light, and peered into the mirror alongside the tiled shower wall.

She was a total mess. Just the thought of trying to drag a brush through her matted hair made Rory wince. And when was the last time she’d shaved her legs? Dark circles under her eyes stood out dramatically against her pale skin. And her shirt, well, it was covered in dirt and grass stains, but her “look at me!” nipples still stood at attention. And when she gathered a whiff of herself—*gross*.

She examined her feet after discarding her makeshift shoes and Chris’s socks. Not too bad. Chris had done a good job. Only a few sores and cuts.

Once she’d removed her clothes, Rory gave the rest of her body a once-over and was relieved to see just a couple of insect bites and, thankfully, no rashes. As expected, there were bruises along her arms and legs. And she looked rather gaunt, her stomach slightly hollowed like she hadn’t eaten in weeks instead of only a couple of days. The fish hadn’t been enough, or the granola bar that morning, to satiate her appetite.

She nearly cried with joy when she stepped into the shower and was embraced by warm water cascading over her body from various showerheads. A built-in shelf contained a selection of tropical-scented shampoos and conditioners, body wash, and even a razor.

The place would be paradise if she were there for a vacation. Why couldn’t Chris share the room with her? Memories of his warm mouth on her lips and skin, his hands caressing every inch of her, felt like forever ago and filled her mind as she washed the filth from her skin. Thinking about him rather than their current situation eased some of the tension from her body.

She turned off the shower a few minutes later, wrapped herself in a thick fluffy towel, and went in search of something to wear.

The walk-in closet was filled with designer labels she’d never buy, given the outlandish price tags attached to them, in an assortment of sizes. It did ease her mind Carter didn’t know her hip-to-waist ratio. That’d be even creepier.

She grabbed a pair of folded black jeans from one of the cubed shelves between the hanging clothes, then pulled a soft, white tank top from a hanger. The luxurious feel of the cotton meant it probably cost a hundred bucks, and a quick look at the price tag confirmed it, which was insane. If the personal shopper had forgotten to include underwear, she might have to rethink the white tank. *Please, let there be bras. And new panties would be great.*

Rory opened the teak dresser, which sat opposite the king-sized bed near the en suite entrance. “Score.” She secured a pair of panties and a bra in her size, then went to the vanity.

The woman who’d shopped had really gone all out. Makeup. A hairdryer and brush. Even an electric toothbrush.

Did Carter think she was moving in?

She'd resembled a homeless person for the last two days and, while she had no intention of trying to look sexy for Carter, was it crazy that she wanted to look cute for Chris? Assuming she was allowed to see him tonight.

And what if Carter doesn't let me see him?

At precisely 10:30, the door opened. Instead of the Texan, it was a man she recognized from Carter's estate back in France. He'd been one of the men standing guard in what she'd thought was Carter's torture chamber. But this guy hadn't spoken to her. Or touched her. So, hopefully, he wasn't as bad as the asshole who'd tasered her that night.

"You ready?" Although the man had just barged in without knocking, he was respectful and kept his gaze to the floor for a moment before looking up. But he didn't check her out. No lingering looks. And apparently, he wasn't worried she'd try to make a run for it because he stepped casually into the hall, hands in the pockets of his black slacks. His dark gaze remained steadily fixed on her face, waiting for her to exit. "You have everything you need?"

"My friends," she said softly, joining him in the hall. "I need them."

"We'll see." He closed the door behind her, and they began walking.

Rory raced her hand along Chris's door as they passed his room. She hesitated, wanting to stop and say something. But the man reached for her wrist and gave it a quick tug while shaking his head at her.

"We shouldn't make Mr. Dominick wait." He released her and motioned for her to continue walking.

Reluctantly, Rory did as she was told because she needed answers.

"Where are we?" she asked after they'd passed a few more doors. Maybe this guy would finally tell her.

"You're in Puerto Rico."

"Yeah, but where?"

He stepped to the side and opened a door to the garden area. "Mayagüez."

She thanked him with a nod for delivering an answer, then walked past him after he indicated for her to do so with a sweep of his arm. "Not coming?" she asked, looking back to find him standing in the doorway.

He pointed to the center of the yard. "He's waiting for you."

From where she stood, the garden appeared to be one huge space containing a number of smaller enclaves—gardens within the garden, so to speak. The walkway was lined with green hedges all evenly trimmed to stand about four feet high, and she assumed the path led to an outdoor dining area.

She knew she was getting close when the mouthwatering aroma of food wafted her way. The intoxicating smells of spices and roasted meats had her stomach growling in anticipation and her feet moving faster in her new strappy sandals.

She rounded a corner and stilled at the sight of Carter sitting at a beautifully crafted teak dining table that seated eight.

He was alone.

Intimidatingly alone.

His dark eyes lifted from their focus on the table, which was covered end to end with a variety of different foods, and he speared Rory with a look that gave nothing away. She did find it telling that his shoulders seemed to relax, though. Was Carter relieved to see she'd arrived unharmed?

He pushed away from the table, stood, and took two steps toward her. Not quite close enough for her to reach out and smack him, because hell she wanted to. But one fast move on his part and he

could easily have her in a chokehold.

“Sit. Eat. You must be hungry.” The tone of his voice conveyed it wasn’t an invitation.

Without waiting for her to respond, he returned to his seat and slowly placed a red linen napkin on his lap. She had to admit the man was as smooth as he was dangerous. Wearing all black, his dress shirt and pants, he was a force that had all of her senses on alert.

Even though she’d only had to spend one night at Carter’s place in France two months ago, she remembered every detail about the man.

His beard had grown thicker since then, and his eyes somehow colder and more terrifying. The anger he’d unleashed when she’d told him the lead for his wife’s killer was a dead end still haunted his expression. Rory would never forget Carter’s rage at the news that Danny, the man he believed had killed his wife, was dead. Hell, it was unfolding before her eyes now—passionately intense anger.

“You’re still standing,” he said without looking up from his plate of delicious-smelling food. Had they roasted a pig out there? Seared the seafood beneath the heat of his burning stare?

Too bad she hated pork, which was basically a Southern sin, but she blamed the book *Charlotte’s Web* for her anti-pork position. And also, her love of animals had been born from reading that children’s book when she was younger, along with spending so much time at A.J.’s family’s ranch growing up.

Rory blinked and whipped her focus to the present. Head out of Alabama and back in Puerto Rico.

As if on cue, her brain became aware of her surroundings. The hum of insects, the soothing lull of the ocean, and if she wasn’t mistaken, Jesse Cook playing a sensual Flamenco guitar solo floated through the air. She tracked the sound to speakers hidden in two nearby bushes that had pops of red flowers on them. The music was low, so soft it was as if it were background music in a movie.

“My friends. I want them here. I refuse to eat without them.” She crossed the gray stone pavers and stood behind the chair he wanted her to assume.

When he remained quiet, only nodding toward the chair, she finally relented and sat.

But no food. No way would she fill her stomach when Chris and the others were starving.

“*Mofongo*.” He pointed to a dish in front of her. “Deep-fried plantains with garlic and crabmeat. Plus, empanadas and many other things to choose from. All excellent.”

“And I said I wouldn’t eat unless my friends do.” She gripped the smooth wood of the chair arms, holding her ground.

It was still fairly warm out for October, but the sky was clear, and stars glittered across the dark canvas overhead.

Carter cut into his food and slowly brought a bite to his mouth—torturing her. Fucker. “Eat,” he said after swallowing whatever delicious morsel he’d waved in her face.

“Not until my friends are free. I won’t back down.” But her eyes fell to the food, and her traitor of a stomach growled loudly. And just to make sure she got the message, punchy pangs commenced inside her abdomen. Geez, was that what pregnant women went through when the baby kicked?

“I didn’t take you and your friends from D.C. if that’s what you’re waiting to ask me,” he stated casually as if discussing traffic.

“Who did, then? Who found out about me, about what I was doing?” She set her forearms on the table, palms going flat on either side of the plate. Fingertips curling in as she tried to ignore the flood of aromas hitting her nose. *Don’t take a deep breath.*

“The Italian probably knows who you are, and it was one of his teams who was sent after you. He

never does anything himself.”

The worst possible answer.

The absolute worst.

“How?” She squeezed her eyes closed and processed Carter’s news that The Italian knew her identity. She’d given up a mission that was dear to her in order to avoid him and keep her family out of danger, and he’d found her anyway.

“Look at me.” A gentle command slid across the table, but she found an unforgiving stare when she peered at him.

Or no, maybe it was apologetic.

He set his napkin to the side of his plate, rose, and slowly unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up both sleeves. “I didn’t betray you. I know that’s what you must be thinking.”

“How could I not?” She was adrift in a sea of *what the hells* as she tried to map out possibilities.

And each thought kept colliding with another, creating one hot mess of theories and problems her overstressed and overtired brain couldn’t process at the moment.

“If it wasn’t you, one of your men betrayed you. Betrayed *me*.” She set her hands back on the chair arms and tightened her grip, trying to stay grounded. But fuck roots.

She’d officially been uprooted.

“No one on my team would dare double-cross me. And before you suggest it, if anyone on my staff secretly worked for The Italian, they’d tell him where *I* lived, and he’d come for *me*. Because I’m going to assume he doesn’t like me, either.”

Rory stood and set her hands on the table, leaned forward, and commenced panic breathing. “My family. If he knows of me, he might use them to get to me.”

Carter rounded the table, and she spied his dark shoes out of the corner of her eyes. He was close enough to touch her, but she prayed he wouldn’t. He surprised her by setting a gentle hand on her forearm, and she lifted her gaze to his dark eyes. “I sent a team to watch over you and your family as soon as I learned you could be in danger.”

“You did?” she whispered as if she’d lost her voice. “If you knew I was in danger and where I was, why didn’t you tell me?”

He unhandled her and directed his gaze to the ocean, the distant sounds of the waves beyond the stone walls competing with the soft Spanish notes.

“How long have you known? Back in France? Is that why you warned me to stop going after him? You knew he’d discovered my identity?”

“If I’d had any idea back then The Italian was connected to everything, I would have told you,” he growled in a low voice as he whirled around to face her. Anger flared in his eyes. Not angry with her, though. No, she knew that look. He was angry at himself.

“What do you mean? What aren’t you telling me?”

“You know the irony in all of this,” Carter said with a fake smile, “is that my men watched you enter Santiago’s compound, and I had no idea you were walking into the home of my wife’s murderer. We could’ve grabbed him then if only I knew.”

“What?” She sank back down to her chair, lost now more than ever. “I-I don’t understand. I thought—”

“The Italian hired Santiago and his men to murder my wife.”

It took her a second for the shock to wear off before she said softly, “I see you gave up on the idea Danny killed her.”

“No,” he quickly responded. “Danny Fitzpatrick had plastic surgery not long after my wife died,

which is why I didn't get any more hits on him with facial recognition software aside from the one lunch with you. He became a ghost after that, but he's alive. I didn't know any of this until a week ago."

He delivered the news so fast she barely had time to handle the blows that came with it.

No, that couldn't be right. Danny was a good guy. A friend. There had to be an explanation. The blood rushed from her face. Her heart stammered. "No, Andrew said he died in a diving accident."

"Convenient, wouldn't you say?" Carter tossed out a bit of snark with his words.

If her judgment was wrong about Danny . . . then what did that mean about Andrew?

"Danny was ordered to do recon and surveillance of my home. He was also one of the men in my house with Santiago the night Rebecca died." Carter held up a hand when she opened her mouth to speak. And despite the many questions that flashed through her mind—like how he even knew any of this—she shut up and let him continue. "They fucked with the CCTV footage that night as well as the previous day, removing some sections. I saved all the footage I'd obtained from the city for the week of her death, and even though I knew pieces were missing, I periodically reviewed it. Because I knew in my bones that those assholes had to have slipped up somehow. I was blinded by rage for so long that it wasn't until I was poring over all of the footage again this summer that I noticed what I'd missed. The reflection in the window of a car parked across the street from my house of Danny exiting my home the day before my wife was killed. That's the closest thing to solid proof I could get."

He really had grown obsessed, hadn't he?

She was also still having a hard time believing a friend she'd trusted with her "Red Robin Hood" identity could be a killer, could work for the likes of Santiago.

"How . . . I . . ." And speechless was more than just an expression.

"It took time to pull a clean image from the reflection and get rid of the pixelation, but once I did, I ran his photo through a special program to try and isolate where else he'd been around the time of her death. Thank God I saved all of that footage from back then."

Thank God you're obsessive? Yeah, she supposed.

"And that's how I discovered he'd been with you in D.C. It should never have taken me years. I owe Rebecca better than that," he added in a solemn tone. Rory allowed his sadness to sit between them for a few moments. Letting him grieve. Blame himself if he needed to.

"And that's what prompted you to search for me, which then led to your men seeing me enter Santiago's compound. But at the time, you had no idea Santiago was involved in Rebecca's murder. So, when I told you in France Danny had died during a dive while working for Andrew, you thought you'd reached a dead end," she clarified, more so for herself, finally putting it all together.

"Yes, but if you hadn't mentioned Danny also worked for Cutter, I wouldn't have checked into Cutter's possible involvement with The Italian, and I may not have started tracking your movements last week."

"So, Danny worked for both Santiago and Andrew Cutter," she mumbled, still trying to come to grips with this shocking new revelation. But did that also mean Danny worked for The Italian? And did Andrew as well? "I'm guessing if you know all of this, it's because Santiago told you. You ambushed the CIA's transport?"

Her head was spinning. Fate, how could she not believe in such a concept?

Carter's hands disappeared into his slacks pockets, and he circled the table but stood behind his chair instead of sitting.

He nodded. "Aside from a connection between Danny and Andrew Cutter, what else led you to

believe I was in immediate danger?" she pressed. "And did you use me as bait to draw out The Italian? Is my family bait right now?" She stood again. "What's really going on?"

His chest rose and fell with a deep breath, and he steadied his gaze on hers. "I think a chain reaction of events may have begun when Santiago was taken into CIA custody, and it picked up speed after I grabbed him from the CIA."

Chain reaction? What? "I don't understand how Santiago being taken by you could jeopardize my safety and lead to my friends and me being taken last Friday. Even if Danny mentioned my name to Santiago at some point, he had no idea what I had been up to for the last three years. Besides, I breached Santiago's compound long after Danny faked his death. Santiago wouldn't know I was the one taking down smugglers."

Carter set a hand to his jaw and slid his palm down the column of his throat. "Actually, it seems that Santiago and The Italian may have known about you for quite some time."

"What makes you say that?"

"During my interrogation of Santiago last weekend, I forced him to give me access to every file and photo he had saved online in the cloud. One of the images stood out in particular—a photo of two women sitting outside a café, dated almost three years ago. I was fairly certain the woman with the short brown wig and red sunglasses was you. But the other woman . . ."

If Santiago has a photo of me in my disguise with another woman, that woman has to be Jolie. "She was my partner," Rory interrupted. "Well, eventually, she became my partner."

"No," Carter answered, a wave of emotions flicking across his face, "that woman was my wife."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RORY FELT LIKE SHE'D JUST BEEN IN A HEAD-ON COLLISION. CARTER LEVELED HER WITH A STEADY GAZE as she grabbed on to the arms of the chair and willed her head to stop spinning, her heart to slow down.

She drew in a deep breath. "Wife?"

He leaned over her shoulder and set his phone in front of her.

Rory examined the photo of a woman with long black hair and thick dark glasses sitting next to her at an outdoor café and was overcome with a rush of sadness.

Real names were never used in her line of work, so she'd nicknamed her partner, the woman in the photo, Jolie. Her disguise had reminded Rory of Angelina Jolie from the movies *SALT* and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*.

Ugh, and Brad Pitt was in that second movie. And now she was reminded of her ex who looked like the actor. And damn, Andrew was still a potential problem, wasn't he?

Jolie was Rory's first partner when she officially began going after traffickers. Hell, Jolie was the driving force who'd set her on the mission that had consumed her life for the last three years—targeting The Italian. And after Jolie went missing, Rory had vowed to finish what they had started.

She'd assumed Jolie was dead. The business of taking down smugglers was like swimming with sharks—tricky and unpredictable, and disaster was only one mistake away. But she wasn't prepared to hear her former partner was Carter's wife. *Jolie is Rebecca Dominick?*

Carter reached down and swiped to another photo. A blonde woman with pretty green eyes, who looked a bit more like Charlize Theron than Angelina Jolie, was now on display. But Rebecca had the same bone structure and full lips as the image of her alias, Jolie.

"Where was this photo taken?" he asked, disbelief shredding his tone.

"Cartagena, Colombia," Rory answered softly.

"Explain," he issued the quick command.

Rory's stomach clenched, and tears formed in her eyes as the depth of Carter's loss and the measure of his despair fully sank in. He had lost his wife due to her conviction that even if she were the only person in the fight, she would do her damndest to bring down as many smugglers as possible.

"I was new to dealing with wildlife smugglers. They were much more dangerous than antiquities buyers, which I quickly learned." Every once in a while, the scar at her side still hurt like a fresh wound, and it acted as a reminder of what she'd been through. "I'd been in Colombia once before to plant a tracking device in a shipping crate to identify the smuggler's trade route's ending point. On my second trip to Cartagena, I was there to collect additional evidence so that I could turn everything

over to the authorities.”

“And what happened?”

“Your wife, well, that’s how we met, and she saved my life,” she announced, letting him take a moment for that news to sink in before continuing her explanation. “A guard grabbed me on my way out. Managed to stab me, but I got away—thanks to your wife. She said she’d been on her way to a meeting with Benicio Josef, the man I was after, when she saw me running not far from the compound. She almost hit me with her car. When she realized the severity of my injury, she took me to the hospital instead of going to her meeting. She was in disguise, as was I. Somehow, my wig stayed on. And we both were too afraid to share our real identities.”

“What in the hell was she doing meeting with a dangerous smuggler?” Carter ran his fingers through his dark locks.

“She said she was sick of corrupt politicians and lack of progress in Washington, so she wanted to take action herself. She’d been tracking the man for a while because he trafficked people as well as animals. On the pretense of being a potential buyer, she’d arranged a meeting hoping to get inside information. After I left the hospital, we met at a café before we both had to leave town, and she professed fate had put me in her path that day, believing had she actually gone to the meeting, she would have wound up dead.”

“I don’t know what to say. Rebecca was aware of my role at the Agency, the kind of men I dealt with. How frustrated I was that so many traffickers were getting away with what they were doing and how powerless I always felt.” He cupped his jaw and looked toward the sky as if blaming himself for inspiring his wife’s crusade.

“She never told me about you,” Rory confessed. “I’m sorry. But I guess she was just trying to help.”

Carter faced her again, his eyes dark and fierce. He kept his gaze on her for a long moment, then grabbed his phone, pocketed it, and returned to the head of the table. “One of Santiago’s men had been tracking her. Maybe they followed her because of me. Or she’d been poking around. Asking too many questions in D.C.” He grimaced with an apology as if sorry his wife was the reason The Italian discovered Rory.

“Rebecca and I began to work together after Colombia. All virtually. We exchanged information over the phone and via emails. Too risky to meet in person. About six months after we first met in Colombia, she disappeared. No answer on her burner. No response to emails. I tried to find her, but I didn’t know anything personal about her. I was terrified our work had gotten her killed. So, I fought like hell to bring down who I believed was responsible. The Italian.” Rory’s nerves were shot to hell, but she needed to hang on. To remain strong. “It never occurred to me when you asked for my help tracking down your wife’s killer, that Jolie was actually Rebecca. But maybe The Italian never learned my identity back then since I was in disguise, and that’s why I was never . . .” She swallowed. “Killed.” *Like her.* “Maybe The Italian only recently found out about me.”

“Or you were both followed from that point on, and The Italian kept you alive for some other reason,” he quickly countered.

His eyes fell to the ground.

Full circle. We are connected. How crazy is this?

“Your targets,” Carter began, his tone rough, “how’d you acquire them?”

“Rebecca had a contact in Intelligence who’d given her a list of twenty-five smugglers. The man in Cartagena was one of many who she planned to go after. When we started going through their files online, checking the Dark Web for commonalities, we discovered they all might work for one man.

The Italian.”

“Twenty-five? Twenty-fucking-five.” Carter’s shoulders collapsed, shock crossing his face. Rory wondered if Jesse, or Ella, would react the same way when they learned what Rory had really been up to during the last several years. “Those twenty-five names were open cases. Well, they were *my* open cases. The CIA didn’t believe they warranted resources or funding—too small of fish to be considered high-value targets—so they were all technically closed. But it pissed me off that none were deemed HVTs, so I kept copies of their files at home, coming back to them whenever I had the chance.” He cursed under his breath, his gaze cutting back to the ocean. “I was her contact without knowing it, wasn’t I? I never thought she’d go through my work files.”

Carter was back on his feet, hands in his pockets as if trying to keep from punching something.

“So, you were after The Italian when you were still at the Agency?” she asked after giving him a minute to cool down.

“No, The Italian wasn’t on my radar when I was there. I hadn’t even heard of him back then. I clearly missed whatever connection you two found amongst all those smugglers the Agency deemed not important enough to go after.”

But Rebecca had to have been onto something big, even though she hadn’t realized at the time. Because why would she have been followed to Colombia on her trip where she met Rory in the first place?

“Where did Rebecca get the name of the smuggler you were both there for three years ago in Cartagena? And you, for that matter? How’d you find him? I had no open cases from that city.”

“While at the hospital, I told her I’d found a connection between Benicio Josef and a smuggler I happened upon by accident in Peru. Animals and animal parts were being shipped from Peru to Cartagena and then on to Asia. When I planted the tracking device in Josef’s compound, I found evidence tying him to wildlife trafficking between Colombia and Africa as well. I sent all of my evidence to the necessary agencies. I just figured she removed him from her list after that, so I didn’t push for more information.”

“Well, he wasn’t on my list,” Carter reiterated. “But you managed to confirm the link between Josef and The Italian?”

“Rebecca and I realized his connection while studying the list, but I had already sent the evidence to Interpol and the DEA. Josef was also smuggling drugs stitched up *inside* animals.” She cringed. “He had his hands in everything, though.” *Scum of the earth.*

“My wife must have found Josef as a target another way, and her research landed her on The Italian’s radar. I guess I don’t understand why The Italian waited so long to go after her. Or you, if he knew about you, too.”

“Based on the photos you now have, Santiago could have killed us both in Cartagena instead of taking our photos. Removed our disguises and learned our identities on the spot. I have no idea. And since those photos were of us outside a café, he had to have been following us for days.” *And that’s creepy and stalker-like.* “I assume Santiago didn’t give up any identifying details about The Italian to you, but did you kill him?”

“He’s still alive. Not in this house, but I won’t let him die so quickly. He needs to suffer. And I might have more questions. But after my little chat with him, Santiago grew to fear me more than The Italian, a man he’s never met in person. Trust me when I say if he knew The Italian’s name or location, I would now know it, too.” The night was warm, but a chill ran up her spine at Carter’s words, and she had a feeling he could more than give The Italian a run for his money. Vengeance was a powerful motivator.

Images of waterboarding, tooth extraction, and digging-your-own-grave kind of torture tactics popped to mind. Knowing Carter and his anger, he'd probably done much worse to Santiago.

"Santiago confessed to me after I took him from the CIA that he was hired to follow my wife, and then six months later, he was paid by The Italian to kill her. And, of course, he used The Italian's trade routes from time to time," Carter continued a few seconds later, the moody music in the background accompanying their conversation like an Oscar-winning score to a movie. "Santiago did mention Danny faked his death and changed his identity after Rebecca was killed."

The words *Rebecca was killed* seemed to echo in the still air. Carter took a deep breath, placed his hands on his hips, and silently turned toward the ocean.

It was still so hard to believe how she and Carter were connected, and yet, back in August, neither had realized it at the time.

"Why only him?" Danny was always high-strung and a little anxious. Maybe he'd been worried he'd get caught for murder?

"Santiago said Danny had lunch with someone in D.C. shortly after Rebecca died, and he was pissed about it. Clearly, that someone was you. The Italian told Danny to either change his face and fake his death, or he'd see to it his death would be real."

"And I'm guessing Santiago didn't mention my name or confirm The Italian actually knows my real identity?" *He was paid to follow Rebecca, not me*, she reminded herself. But here she was, so the threat to her safety was real.

"I asked Santiago to identify you from the photos taken in Colombia, and he couldn't. He didn't know your name, and he wasn't assigned to look into anyone other than Rebecca after Cartagena."

"Then how can you be so certain The Italian knows I'm the one who was helping Rebecca pursue the smugglers who used his trade routes?"

"I think the fact you almost drowned in the ocean on Saturday is convincing enough, don't you?" he asked, unexpected sarcasm in his tone. Maybe she deserved that.

"Danny knew me." *He's why you think The Italian must also know about me.* "And Danny's also connected to Andrew, who's my ex-boyfriend and ex-boss, so . . ." *Andrew's in the middle of this all. He has to be.* "How'd you even know to go after Santiago in the first place since you didn't know his involvement until he confessed?" She held a palm in the air, deciding to find her backbone and stand up to him for a moment. "You know what? Scratch that. I want my friends down here now. They should hear all of this." She added as much edge to her tone as possible. She'd fallen into the trap of empathy because of Rebecca, but she was still Carter's captive, and she needed to remember Carter was dangerous. "They can help. Harper was CIA, and she knows you."

He sat once again and set his palms on the table, fingertips curling in. "I know. I saw her go to the event with you Friday night."

"You were there?" . . . And there went her backbone. Her spine curved, and he probably noticed, which she hated. *What the actual fuck?*

"Across the street in my limo," he said far too casually, and her anger startled her shoulders back. "Why do you think your friends were taken, too?"

From the sounds of it, he didn't know the answer to that question. And she only had theories.

"My friends, I want them here," she gritted out the reminder, carrying her eyes to his to find that confidence inside her again. To go against a man like The Italian, like Carter, you had to hold your ground, or they'd walk all over you. She'd learned those lessons over the years, dealing with mostly men every day in her line of work.

"You're persistent," he said before his eyes darted off to her right, and she turned at the familiar

sound of paws hitting the ground coming up behind her.

An Alaskan Malamute charged him, but then Carter issued a command, and the dog immediately heeled. Carter sat at the head of the table, and the dog sat upright next to him.

“You brought your dog with you?” That was . . . surprising.

“Dallas comes everywhere with me.”

“Dallas as in Texas?” she asked while reaching out, offering her hand to see if Dallas would come to her.

Dallas looked to Carter, and he nodded his okay. Dallas hurried in frenzied excitement for Rory, and she turned in her chair to pet him.

“How old is he?” she asked when he never answered her other question. She leaned over the chair arm to scratch his belly when he flipped to his back.

For a second, Dallas’s presence had her relaxing. Her anger nearly drifted free.

“Two,” he responded in a low voice.

Ohh. “Rebecca said she loved dogs but was allergic to them,” Rory said at the memory, and maybe she knew a few personal details about her.

He called Dallas back to his side, then stuck a hand in the air and made a come-hither motion. She had no idea who saw that since they were surrounded by six-foot walls made of shrubs, bushes, and flowers. “My people are retrieving your friends.”

“Thank you.” She bit down on her back teeth, trying to resist talking until Chris was with her, but . . . “Why didn’t you warn me? Give me a heads-up that The Italian may have known my real identity? Or hell, stopped the men from taking me Friday night if you were right outside the hotel?”

Bait.

Hook. Line. Sinker.

She’d fallen for his trap in France, too.

“My men followed your abductors to Puerto Rico, where they chartered a yacht,” he answered. Well, sort of answered her. “But my team lost track of you when the storm hit. I didn’t expect it would sink. For a bit there, I thought you died at sea.”

“So, I was bait,” she confirmed, doing her best to hold on to her anger and not focus on the fact that Jolie—*Rebecca*—had been his wife, and he was grieving. Or that he’d also been in the fight against smugglers before leaving the Agency to pursue his vengeance, thereby becoming the kind of man Rebecca would most likely hate.

“I heard it play out on my scanner. There was a bounty for your retrieval, the Trott brothers—those lowlife smugglers—were near the island, and they announced Sunday evening they found you.”

Another quick explanation without an apology.

“We could have died, you know.” But that was like telling him the earth revolved around the sun. An obvious fact.

His jaw tightened, but he surprised her with an, “I’m sorry.”

She studied him, deciding if his words were genuine. “A little late for that.”

“You put yourself in this situation by going after The Italian. He was never your problem, and yet, you barged in and made it happen.”

You have got to be kidding. “And your wife? Do you blame her? She’s the one who took the twenty-five names from your files. She put me on this path to begin with. It all circles back to her.” Not that Rory blamed Rebecca, but who was Carter to decide what Rory could or couldn’t do? “And you can’t pulverize steel with your teeth, so stop trying,” she tossed out flippantly at the sight of his jaw moving as if he were grinding down on his molars. “Why bother to save us from the Trott

brothers?” If she was going to keep pushing, why not go for gold? “You could have waited for them to sell us to whoever offered the bounty. Keep using me as bait to lead you to The Italian.”

He reached for his wineglass. And the jerk had the nerve to slowly swirl the wine and take a sip. But she was beginning to see through his façade. The longer he was around her, the thinner it became. And she could tell it pissed him off. He was used to playing the role of a vicious man who didn't give a shit, but he cared. He cared so much he was prepared to burn down the world in the name of revenge. “That storm was a variable I hadn't considered. I was lucky to have heard the bounty over the scanner, and I wasn't about to risk something else going sideways. But I should never have let you be taken from D.C. to begin with, I'm sorry.”

She released a shaky exhale, but his apology wasn't enough. Not yet. He'd risked their lives to try and bait The Italian. “You only need me to survive to use me as a bargaining tool. *That's* why you came for us.”

“God, you remind me so much of my wife. Stubborn. Headstrong. Won't take no for an answer.”

“So, you're complimenting me now?”

A slight smile had his lips lifting at the edges. He set his wine down and leaned back in his seat. His smile slowly transformed into quiet resignation. “My men are working on tracking down the team that first offered the bounty to the Trott brothers. We should have them detained by tomorrow.”

And deflection. Maybe she knew a thing about that, too. “You believe Andrew Cutter also works for The Italian given Andrew's connection to Danny, and Danny's connection to Santiago, right?”

Those dark eyes peering at her held secrets, ones he probably wanted to remain buried. She'd been that way until she met Chris and unexpectedly found herself wanting to share her life with him. Only, she'd been terrified her life would endanger him. *And now, here we are.*

“It wouldn't be the first time treasure hunters have worked with smugglers. They're out on salvage vessels in the ocean. It's a convenient place to move everything from guns to animals in crates and containers labeled as artifacts or salvage equipment. Most smugglers don't give them a choice. Help and take a cut or die.”

“I knew some men were hired by organizations to plunder and steal artifacts for ISIS and such, so I guess it makes sense they also use salvage vessels as a means to smuggle.” She'd spent years making bold life-and-death choices, always trusting her gut—how'd she get everything so wrong now? “I never saw Andrew meet with anyone suspicious, though. Not that I remember, at least. And his ship was huge. I didn't have access to every square inch of it.”

“I did some digging. Twelve years ago, Cutter was broke. No investors. No one to back his pursuits. And then, a year later, Cutter was suddenly in charge of a multimillion-dollar ship with all the equipment he'd ever need.” He opened his palms to the sky.

“You think he made a deal with a smuggler?” Rory's stomach dropped.

“The Italian didn't exist back then, but there were plenty of other criminals who may have offered Cutter a ship loaded with equipment for treasure hunting in exchange for smuggling goods for them. They probably also required a hefty cut of any treasure he did find.”

“That's speculation. A legitimate investor may have—”

“And legitimate businessmen record their investments.” He stroked Dallas's head now, eyes remaining on Rory. “When I learned you were near D.C., and with Cutter being there, too, and the connection he had to Danny, I tasked my men to watch you and your family.”

Ohh. “There was a man on that yacht who I recognized. Well, not at the time because I was drugged, but it came to me later. He had a scar that resembled the number seven next to his eye, and a tattoo of a green mamba coiled around his neck. He'd worked with Andrew in the past.”

Carter sat taller at the news, lifting his hand from Dallas. “You mean Jensen Fitzpatrick, *Danny’s* cousin?” His hand became a fist on the table. “He was with Danny and Santiago the night they killed my wife.”

Shivers rolled over her spine at the thought of Danny and Jensen brutally murdering Rebecca. All because she had wanted to make a difference.

Her world went from spinning to collapsing in on itself. “Well, he’s dead. At the bottom of the ocean on that yacht.”

His eyes flashed with anger. Anger that his revenge had been taken from him.

Rory still couldn’t wrap her head around the fact The Italian may have known about her but didn’t make a move before now.

“Aside from falling for my trap in France, did you only stick to that list my wife gave you? The list of twenty-five?” he asked a moment later, his anger seemingly under control.

“My main focus was that list because I wanted to finish it to honor the work Rebecca and I had started, but I’ve kept an eye on the illicit trade of elephant ivory and pangolin—as you clearly knew.” She still hated that Carter had duped her. “There was a huge sale of ivory made this summer. The transaction was between a seller in Africa and a buyer in El Salvador. I couldn’t just ignore it. And when I learned Alvin Santiago was illegally importing the ivory by using a trade network known to be controlled by The Italian, I deviated from the list and went after him. How could I not? I mean, it fit my mission perfectly. I’d planned to get back to hunting those on the list of twenty-five after I sent the CIA the intel on Santiago, but then *you* distracted me with pangolins.”

“My path never crossed with Santiago’s before last week. Not that I know of, at least. But somehow, Rebecca’s did.” His brows snapped together, anger crossing his hard features. “Santiago’s abduction must be the trigger that set the events of this weekend into motion.” He stood and braced the back of his head with one hand, working through his thoughts.

“Rory!” The sound of Chris’s voice calling out her name threw her thoughts about Santiago out to sea.

She jumped to her feet, nearly knocking the chair over as Chris rushed toward her.

Chris circled his arms around her back, and she threw her arms over his shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Were there tears pricking her eyes?

“She won’t eat without your presence.” Carter’s words had Chris easing away from Rory to look at him.

A moment later, Harper and Roman appeared side by side at the entrance of the eating area, a guard behind them.

“Brooks,” Carter acknowledged Harper in a firm voice.

Rory wasn’t the only one who’d had access to a shower and a change of clothes. The three of them all had jeans on and a variation of colors for tees.

“Dominick,” Harper said through barely parted lips, then looked at Rory as if confirming Carter hadn’t hurt her.

Before Harper could respond, Chris left Rory’s side, walked straight up to Carter, and clocked him clean across the jaw.

And she was fairly certain Carter let him do it because she’d caught Carter motioning for Dallas to remain seated out of the corner of her eye. To not attack Chris.

“That was for allowing your men to taser her in France.” Chris rounded his fist, prepared to strike again, but Rory hurried to his side and placed a firm hand to his shoulder, urging him to back down.

He twisted to look at her, and his intense expression relaxed immediately. He slowly lowered his fist and stepped back from Carter.

Carter swiped a hand over his jaw before his gaze journeyed between the three of them. “I guess it’s time we lay all the cards on the table.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHRIS REMAINED ROOTED IN PLACE. RIGID AND TENSE. EVERY MUSCLE IN HIS BODY WAS GRIDLOCKED like five o'clock traffic on I-95 in Boston as Carter spoke. As he explained the series of events that led to their captivity under his custody.

And yup, captivity being one of the key takeaways for Chris as Carter unraveled information. The last thing Chris wanted was to be locked up again. From the assholes on the yacht to the go-fuck-themselves Trott brothers, he was ready for freedom.

Granted, his room was like a suite in a luxury hotel that included a fully stocked closet of random menswear. It was a massive upgrade from the other locations they'd found themselves in over the last two days, but he wasn't in control, and he hated losing control.

Punching Carter hadn't come close to appeasing his anger.

Rory's scars.

The scum of the earth whose vile and atrocious dealings had given Rory cause to go after them in the first place.

The danger she was in now.

All of it.

Blood-boiling anger.

Rory's beautiful hazel eyes swept over him like a hot caress on his skin, and some of his anger loosened a fraction. A small, one-tenth-of-a-hundredth kind of fraction.

"We're all connected, which I know sounds crazy, but we are," Rory said after Carter unraveled the shocking news Rory's first partner, Jolie, had been Carter's wife, Rebecca—the partner Rory had spoken about at the campfire.

Did that mean Rory's list of twenty-five smugglers originally came from Carter? Did Rebecca steal classified intelligence her husband assumed his wife would never look at? He'd been a new officer, only a few years in, from what Chris knew. But that would have been a rookie mistake on Carter's part to allow that to happen.

And damn, come to think of it, what were the chances both Rory and Rebecca had really been going after the same target back in Cartagena in the first place? He'd meant to ask that back on the island by the campfire, but his thoughts had been whirling around. Looked like this was part two of the dizzy ride of information.

"Sit, please." Rory motioned to the table since Chris was the only one still standing during Carter's quick bullet point-like confession of "holy shit" moments as to what had gone down in the last three years.

He hesitantly circled the table to sit alongside her. The aroma of the food on the table had his

mouth watering on instinct. His hunger pains pissed him off because he didn't want to have an appetite after hearing Carter speak.

The only thing Chris liked about the man was his dog.

He had to find a way to contact his people. Let Bravo and the rest of Echo know what was going on. He'd mapped out the property in his line of sight on the way from his room to the outside dining area and counted the guards. But he'd been blindfolded from the moment the helo picked them up at sea until they'd arrived at the estate, which made providing his people with a location difficult.

Somewhere in the western half of Puerto Rico was his best guess.

"How are you feeling?" Rory asked Roman, breaking the eerie silence that no one else seemed tempted to cut through. Chris, on the other hand, was inclined to use a big-ass knife to cut through it. Or hell, maybe he'd leave it heavy and thick to lose sight of the prick at the head of the table.

"The men took him to our in-house medic as you demanded," Carter said before Roman could answer. "He's fine. I saw to it."

Rory looked to Roman for confirmation, and he nodded and mouthed, "I'm good."

"Eat," Carter said a moment later. "Don't be stubborn. You're all starving. I didn't poison the food."

Chris was inconveniently out of throttling range of the man. Rory was a buffer between them, which only made his palms itchy with the desire to strike him again.

Chris reached for the wine, swirled it in the glass once to decide whether he was seconds away from getting drugged for the second time in a weekend, then brought it close to his mouth. *Nope, can't do it.* He set the glass back down and side-eyed Rory sitting erect and tense next to him. *But shit.* "Let me test the food, then you should eat," Chris announced, realizing Rory and Harper had to be starving.

Chris hesitantly cut into the full plate of food in front of him and took a bite, which was basically cheesy deliciousness. He chased it down with water, then waited for a reaction.

Carter watched Chris, then Rory lifted her fork, and Harper followed suit.

"You saved us because you need us. Why?" Roman spoke up.

"I need Rory. I'm undecided about the rest of you." Carter's attention shot to Chris as if expecting a challenge, and yeah, he'd be getting one.

Chris dropped his fork and slowly stood once again, the legs of the chair scraping across the stone pavers.

"I won't help you without my team." Rory's statement surprised the hell out of Chris and had him looking down at her before he could throw daggers at the man by way of his words.

Team? He liked the way that sounded. The team part. Not so much the helping Carter part. "You want to help this man? Again?" She wasn't obliged to do what Carter wanted. Chris could get her out of this place. He'd find a way.

She set a hand to his arm and gently tugged, urging him to sit. "The Italian most likely knows who I am. If we don't take him down, I may never be safe. My life and, more importantly, the lives of everyone in my family depend on it. And"—Rory closed her eyes for a contemplative second—"for Rebecca. We take The Italian down for her. She was trying to do good, same as me." Her eyes glistened as she peered at Chris, and damn, his heart was going to break.

"You're not willing to let your family be bait, though, right?" Chris asked.

Rory had given up her mission in order to protect her family. He knew she would never compromise them in any way.

"No, which is why we need to send people I trust to keep an eye on them," she began, "but since The Italian has probably known about me for years and has yet to make a move, I don't know what to

think.”

“As much as you want to hate me,” Carter began in a calm voice, “you also know you need to work with me.”

“It’s not that I *want* to hate you, I *do* hate you, fairly fucking easily.” Chris finally sat again.

“I need to reach out to my people.” Harper peered at Carter, her eyes set on him in a pretty awesome stare-down moment, one Chris hoped she’d win.

But Carter shook his head. “Not until we have a deal.”

“I don’t make deals with the devil,” Chris responded and reached for his food again if only to encourage Rory to fill her stomach.

“It’s a good thing I’m not him,” Carter countered in a low, steady voice.

“And what would Rebecca say to what you’ve done? The man you’ve become?” Harper asked, and Carter’s eyes immediately fell to his plate.

“Rebecca’s dead. She can’t say anything.” Carter looked to the sky, then returned his focus to the table after drawing in a deep pull of air and slowly letting it go.

“How about you fill in the blanks that I am sure you left out of your brief explanation. Start from the beginning,” Harper demanded. She was doing what she did best—searching for clarity, looking at all the angles. Chris was grateful she was more levelheaded than he was right now.

“When my wife died, I had always assumed I was the true target of the so-called home invasion, given my job with the Agency. I mostly dealt with smugglers of all kinds while at the CIA. I figured one of them, probably a high-value target I’d been working to take down, had discovered my identity. Maybe they killed Rebecca as a warning to me. Faked the burglary since there had been a string of them in D.C. to hide the fact they were also searching the house for my files,” he explained, his tone void of emotion now, and Chris was certain he was working hard to make it that way. But his memories had to be ripping him apart.

Chris hated the guy, but to learn your wife was murdered, then to blame your chosen career as the cause . . . It was something his teammates also feared, a reason they’d tried to avoid falling in love over the years. And now only three of them were still single.

Well, am I single? When he looked at Rory, he sure as hell didn’t feel that way.

“All of this time, even when Santiago admitted to the Agency two weeks ago that he murdered an officer’s wife—he just didn’t yet specify *whose* wife—I still believed Rebecca died because of me.” This time, Carter couldn’t prevent the emotion from grabbing hold of his voice. And for two hot seconds, Chris felt sorry for the guy.

“So, you did ambush the CIA’s transport?” Chris asked since Carter had excluded that pretty important detail in his “briefing” after Chris had punched him.

“My old colleague was one of the men tasked to interrogate Santiago after he was retrieved from El Salvador two weeks ago. Santiago offered to give up the person who hired him to kill the wife of a CIA officer two and a half years ago, but only if he could return home instead of winding up in a CIA black site.”

“Let me guess, the Agency wouldn’t deal,” Harper said, and she knew a thing or two about the CIA since she’d been an officer before joining the teams.

Carter looked at Harper and nodded solemnly. “No, but my friend put two and two together that it was my wife Santiago was talking about. He supplied me with the transport details so I could get my hands on Santiago before he got locked up. He’d been a friend of Rebecca’s as well, and he wanted the son of a bitch to pay.”

Chris blinked at the news. He’d known Carter had Rory followed, she’d told him as much. Rory

had been inside the same compound in El Salvador before Chris and his men had grabbed Santiago. And the room with the slithering snakes came back to mind.

And maybe he knew that, but he was pretty sure he hadn't processed it until this moment, hearing the words from Carter.

It was hard to imagine this incredible woman had gone into Santiago's home by herself. Chris had been with his team. Liam inspired safety being on overwatch on the long gun. Finn had been right at his six every step of the way. Wyatt and Roman and the others had been in his ear. *He'd* had backup. Rory didn't.

His pulse raced with terror just imagining the scene of Rory slipping into that compound. The million things that could have gone wrong.

It didn't, though, he reminded himself. *But what if K-9 training isn't enough for her? What if she goes back to hunting bad guys?* Instead of a knife wound in Cartagena, the next blow could be fatal.

Rory lived on the edge, and what if she . . . *leaves me?*

No. No, no, no. He wouldn't do this. He wouldn't pigeonhole Rory into the damn boxes in his head his mom created when she left. That was his mom's baggage, not his.

Fuck that. If Rory needed to make a difference in the world the way he was trying to do, he'd be there for her. Support her. And he'd fight like hell to make sure she made it home alive the way he did with his brothers on the teams every day.

Chris's focus swiveled back to Carter to hear what else he had to say, pulling his mind out of the *what-if* gutter.

"When I took Santiago into custody, as you now know, I discovered he had photos of Rebecca and Rory in disguises in Cartagena. Obviously, I recognized my wife, and since I'd already met Rory, I realized it was her, too. Santiago told me Rebecca was the original target, and The Italian paid him to have her killed and to search my home," Carter repeated what he'd said when Chris first came down but threw in a few more details. "*I* may have been on Santiago's radar before I left the Agency even if he wasn't on mine, but after talking with Rory, it looks like Santiago told me the truth about Rebecca. That she was the target, not me. Although, I have to be on The Italian's shit list now that I grabbed Santiago."

"We think Santiago's capture may be what triggered this recent series of events, especially since he was chosen to follow Rebecca three years ago and subsequently kill her," Rory said, side-eying Chris.

We? He never wanted there to be a "we" when it came to her and Carter. Okay, maybe he was letting some alpha-male thing come into play, but he was certain it was mostly because he didn't trust Carter around Rory.

"What else do you know about The Italian?" Harper asked Carter.

"All correspondence was done by way of untraceable phone numbers and email addresses. Payments through offshore accounts that dry up after the transactions are made. All other leads I have looked into since I learned about Santiago are dead ends," Carter answered.

"I might be able to help. Jessica, too," Harper said with confidence. "We should start by looking into your wife's contacts. She may have gotten the list of twenty-five from you, but she had to be ruffling feathers somewhere to turn a smuggler onto her before she even met Rory in Colombia."

"I'm still not sure we can trust you," Chris announced. "You could be lying about everything."

"Sleep on it. I think that's enough for tonight, anyway." When Carter rose, three armed guards entered the dining area, and his dog hopped to all fours.

“Wait.” Rory stood, snagging Carter’s attention.

“I don’t want to sleep alone. If you want to discuss plans tomorrow, you let us stick together tonight.” Rory’s words came out strong and determined.

“That’s reasonable.” Carter faced one of his guards. “Two rooms instead of four. They can pick who they choose to sleep with tonight. But doors remain locked.”

“And I want proof my family is safe when I wake up in the morning,” Rory rushed out. “Or you and your plans can go to hell.”

“Fine.” Carter left without another word, and Rory dropped down in her seat.

“I’m so sorry,” Rory said, eyes sweeping around the table before landing on Chris last.

Chris reached for her hand beneath the table. “This isn’t on you.”

It was hard to believe they were at some lavish estate in Puerto Rico, when yesterday (was it really yesterday?) they’d been disembarking a sinking yacht, facing possible death. And shit, there were the nearly naked plank walks, too, that had happened today.

He needed sleep.

And more than anything, he needed Rory safe in his arms.

“Are we really considering working with him?” Roman asked, an echo of Chris’s comment. “I don’t trust him.”

“This isn’t just about me,” Rory spoke up. “Can you imagine what it would mean if we can take The Italian down?” She closed her eyes. “This would be a win for so many. Lives, human and animal, saved.”

“And when someone else tries to assume the throne? Take over?” Chris softly challenged.

Rory swept her thumb over the top of his hand that clasped hers. She dragged her gaze up to his face. “Does that stop you from taking out bad guys? Do you let a terrorist go because why bother? Two more will be in his place tomorrow.”

Damn, she had him there. He selfishly wanted The Italian gone because he was a threat to Rory’s safety, but she was right. Taking him down would save a lot of lives. And if Chris had to go after whoever filled The Italian’s shoes, so be it.

But one thing he couldn’t handle was not doing everything in his power to keep Rory safe. Even if that meant working with an enemy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“AND WE’RE LOCKED UP AGAIN.” CHRIS SET A PALM TO THE BEDROOM DOOR, HEAVED OUT AN exasperated sigh, then turned to face the room.

Harper had offered to bunk with Rory, but no way would Chris let Rory out of his sight. So, Harper and Roman were now in a suite two doors down, maybe sharing a bed. But knowing Roman, he’d sleep on the floor even though his knife wound had to be sore and uncomfortable. The man was freakishly brilliant, but an idiot when it came to the woman he cared about.

Rory peeled off her sexy white tank top and flung it to one of the two armchairs by the wall alongside the door, then removed her strappy silver sandals.

Like a magnet, his eyes flew to the scar near her belly button, a reminder of the dangerous life she once lived and was now thrown back into.

“Are you going to look at me with pity every time I take off my shirt?” Rory’s words stole his focus straight up to her face, and he replayed her question in his head to ensure he’d heard her correctly.

Chris reached her in three quick strides and circled one arm around her waist while his other hand gently guided her chin up. Looking into her eyes so she would fully grasp his sincerity, he said, “Pity is the last thing on my mind. Anger toward the bastard who hurt you, yes, but never pity. After everything I’ve seen you go through, you’re one of the strongest people I’ve met in my life. The most amazing, kind, and compassionate woman, too.” His hand traveled to her cheek, and when he smoothed his palm over her skin, she leaned into his touch.

“You’re amazing and strong, too, you know,” she whispered, nuzzling her face against his hand and closing her eyes as if relishing in their closeness.

“I’m not so tough. I’m the one who fell out of bed and pulled a gun on you just last week.” It’d only been a handful of days plus one kidnapping and nearly naked plank walk ago, but shit, he was never going to forget that.

Her lids parted to reveal hazel eyes intently focused on him. “You’re human. You’ve been through so much, and I admire the hell out of you.” Rory mirrored his gesture, lifting a palm and caressing his cheek.

And you still want me to get therapy? He couldn’t voice the question quite yet. But maybe she was right. Maybe after all of this, he needed to man up and face his demons.

Demons of his own making because he was so terrified a woman would abandon him like his mom had. But hell, maybe he was equally as petrified he’d do the running. That he’d be like his mom, and in a way, he had become like her, hadn’t he? He’d never settled down. Never stayed in a relationship, not even before he was on Echo Team. And he’d never fallen in love. Mostly because he

hadn't allowed it.

But Rory . . . she was different. She deserved someone without his mother's baggage haunting him. Someone who didn't grab their gun while sleeping because they were triggered by a movie.

"You've been my rock in all of this. You know that, right? I can't imagine how I would have faced all of this without you," she said softly. He lowered his arm and lightly smoothed his hand along the soft skin of her shoulder. "Tonight was harder than dealing with the Trott brothers or those painful shoes."

I knew those shoes were hurting her feet, damn it. "Everything you learned from Carter . . . tonight was heavy. I can't begin to imagine how you're feeling."

Rory wet her lips, her eyes dipping to his mouth. She surprised him by leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "I'm feeling both lost and found." The slight crook of her mouth into a part frown, part smile, did make her appear a bit lost and unsure. "Knowing the truth is eye-opening, but I'm still so confused about everything." She reached out and took his hand from her waist and laced their fingers together.

"I've got you, I promise," he murmured and set a kiss to her lips.

"Thank you." She smiled and stepped back, giving him the opportunity to drink her in. How had he gotten so lucky? "And that goes both ways. I've got you, too." She ran her hand down the column of her throat, skimming over the soft skin of her breasts, continuing to her abdomen.

The sight of her breasts rising, her creamy skin looking as though it might spill over the top of her white lacy bra when she drew in a deep breath reminded him of Friday when they were safe and sound in Virginia. That night he'd circled his tongue around each rosebud nipple.

"We're going to get through this," she said, interrupting his thoughts of how responsive her body was to his touch, how easily he was able to throw her over the edge into bliss. "You know, I miss Bear already." She removed the rest of her clothes, undressing in front of him to change into pajamas as if they were a normal couple going through the motions of getting ready for bed. He had no clothes in that room, so he stripped down to boxers. "And I miss what we had in Virginia."

"We still have it." He approached and stopped behind where she stood in front of the vanity mirror in a thin, pale-pink nightgown that fell to her mid-thighs. He set a kiss to her shoulder and met her eyes in the mirror. "And I miss Bear, too."

"I *so* hate myself for being tired right now," she said after a soft groan of regret. "Emotionally and physically drained."

"Yeah, we should sleep." *We can't have sex for the first time here, under Carter's roof.* He swallowed. *Probably not.* That didn't stop him from eying her nipples straining against the silk fabric or keep him from sliding his hand up her thigh as she brought her back flush to his chest.

An achy need had his cock hard and tense against her, but no, they couldn't, not now . . .

"Let's get you to bed," he forced out before he allowed his hand to move any higher and slip beneath her panties because there would be no going back at that point.

She let out a soft sigh of pained surrender. They both wanted each other. Needed each other. But the wait would be worth it.

They climbed into the bed a few minutes later, and he wrapped his arms around her, tucking her frame tight to his body, feeling a semblance of normality despite their situation.

Their first time in a bed together, and they were doing so under the "protection" of a criminal. Life was . . . strange, sometimes. Okay, in his life, a lot of the time.

He had no idea when he dozed off because having her warm body in his arms had been bliss, but when he opened his eyes, morning was on the verge of arriving. It was the time of day when, during

an operation, he and the boys had to make a quick infil and an even quicker exfil out of fear of daylight giving away their presence. The sun was about thirty minutes away from rising.

It took Chris a moment to remember where he was and why he was there.

At some point during the night, Rory wound up on her stomach with the covers shoved to the bottom of the bed. It looked like they both preferred to be cool.

Her hands were now on each side of the pillow, and her face turned to the side. The material of her nightgown had shifted all the way up to show off her panties and perfect ass. Even though the room was still mostly dark, he didn't need much light to make out the silhouette of her beautiful body.

And damn if he was growing hard being so close to her. He'd been exhausted last night. Shipwrecked on a nearly deserted island and facing smugglers slash pirates before being "rescued" by Carter's men had done a number on them. They'd needed a good night's sleep, and now that they'd had one, all he wanted to do was hold her. Touch her. Be near her. But he didn't want to wake her.

He rolled to his back and propped one arm beneath his head, doing his best to be a good boy, but his cock was at attention and poking through the hole in his black boxer briefs. He adjusted himself and kept his gaze on Rory, wondering what life would be like with her. He could see them together in the future. And she wouldn't run. She wasn't his mom.

My mom. He'd nearly forgotten about her voicemail last Thursday. It shouldn't have been in his head even now, and her transgressions shouldn't have been in his thoughts at the table last night, but she kept infiltrating his mind, and he hated it.

"Please tell me we're in your room in Virginia and not in Carter's house," Rory said, eyes still closed, but she shifted a palm to his pectoral muscle.

He brought a hand over hers and united their fingers. "Unfortunately, we're not at my home."

She kept her eyes closed and whispered, "Lie to me?"

He moved to his side, holding her hand while slowly skirting his other palm up the small of her back. The scars were too faded with age to feel rough beneath his fingers, but he'd never forget they were there. He'd forever be able to trace their lines and regret she'd gone through that awful experience.

"We're on my bed back in Virginia. I bought a new one. Much more comfortable since you'll be sleeping with me every night," he said, his tone low and deep.

"Every night, huh?" Her words came out like a soft purr filled with desire and the promise of sex.

He cupped her bottom, then slid a finger beneath the panty line to find her center. She arched her back in response, allowing him greater access to dip inside. To stroke her sensitive flesh.

"Keep lying to me," she urged. Her Southern accent was sweet and feminine, but when her tone dipped to a husky rasp, an extra shot of desire coursed through him. Chris eased his body closer to hers, his cock thick against her leg.

He released her hand to prop up his head with two pillows so he could watch her come undone with his hand on her wet pussy.

"It wasn't a lie when I said we'll be sleeping together every night from here on out," he murmured. Her eyelids slowly parted to peer at him. For a moment, he wondered if she was still not quite awake. But when her mouth rounded with a quiet gasp as he nudged her legs farther apart with his hand and peeled her panties down to her thighs, dragging his knuckles over her ass, there was no mistaking Rory was wide awake and drunk with pleasure.

She remained on her stomach as he touched her, as he witnessed her gorgeous face tighten with every movement of his fingers beneath the curve of her ass as he accessed her clit.

"We'll have breakfast. Followed by sex. And then maybe more food. And more sex," he kept up

with the beautiful lie he wished was reality. “And then we’ll train Bear. He’ll probably steal another one of my shoes and dart over the obstacle course with it hanging from his mouth like a tease.” His hand slowed as he envisioned the day. As he thought of their life together.

Rory shifted to her side, and he repositioned his hand and swept small circles over her sex, teasing her.

She reached for his face and traced his jawline with her thumb. “You know you’re amazing, right?”

He responded by thrusting two fingers deep inside her, and she bucked against the palm of his hand and rubbed harder, adding friction, chasing her own release.

She was close.

Really fucking close.

When she came, she drew her lip between her teeth as she stifled a cry. He worked his hand beneath her nightgown, over her abdomen, and up to feel the swell of her breast in his palm. “You’re the amazing one,” he remarked. “And so much more.” He wanted to give her every part of him—every piece he’d ever held back in the past. He wanted to share it all with her.

She leaned forward and joined their lips in a hot kiss, one that had him actually believing they were safe and back in Virginia.

“The door,” she said against his mouth a moment later. “Someone is coming in.”

Shit, he’d been too swept up in the moment to hear the sounds, but she was right.

He eased away from her, grabbed the bedspread, and tossed it on top of them to cover up, and just in time since the door opened a second later.

“Good. You’re up. I need your help,” Carter said, wearing only black sweatpants. His hair still messy from sleep.

“What’s wrong?” Chris dropped his feet to the floor but kept the cover over his lap.

“Unless you want my men to shoot your friends, you need to come with me. They’re preparing to breach the property.”

What? Chris hopped out of bed and snatched his jeans off the floor. He turned to Rory and leaned down over her. “Stay here.” He didn’t need her getting caught in the crossfire.

“Be safe,” she whispered before he left the room, and one of Carter’s men remained outside the bedroom door.

“I don’t know how they found us,” Carter said as he motioned for Chris to follow him down the hall and toward the garden, “but they did.”

Chris hadn’t doubted his people would find them. He just didn’t expect them there so fast. “I’m more surprised you knew they were on the verge of breaching.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve got us surrounded.” Carter stopped in front of the patio door and faced him. “If any of my men get hurt—”

“You should’ve listened when we asked to reach out to my people last night,” Chris interrupted, setting a hand to Carter’s chest. “Let’s be clear. If something happens to *my* men, I’ll end you here and now. You got me?”

Carter inched his face closer. “I guess there *is* something we have in common. We care about our people.”

Chris tipped his head to the side, reminding him of the fact they were out of time. They were approaching daylight, which meant his teammates would be moving in any second if they weren’t already on the grounds.

“Go.” Carter opened the door and stepped back.

Chris hurried through the door with palms up so that his people didn't mistake him for a bad guy. "It's Echo Three," he called out as he started for the perimeter of the estate, which was surrounded by a tall, stone wall. Easily scalable for his men. "I'm going to the gate," he announced.

Nothing.

Shit, where were they?

They wouldn't HALO in. No chopper in sight for a fast-rope approach.

"Hunter?" A voice called out as Chris neared the guarded gate where two of Carter's men were waiting with rifles. From what Chris could tell, the voice belonged to Luke.

Only Luke would call Chris by his nickname from the SEALs, which also happened to be his last name. But shit, Luke? He and Eva had just had their son last month. He should have been home with his family.

Chris flicked his wrist, motioning for Carter's men to lower their weapons. "Skywalker, it's me," he returned with Luke's old call sign from the Navy to let Luke know for sure it was him. "I'm opening up to let you in."

One of the men unlocked the gate, removed a secondary barrier that blocked the doors, then stepped back as the gates electronically swung inward.

Chris set his hands on his hips as he impatiently waited for the doors to part, his heart in his throat. Nervous at how close his people had come to dealing with Carter's private militia that was most likely hidden around the rest of the property waiting for the breach.

Luke, Asher, and A.J. were the first of his teammates he spotted. They were in the dark green camo they used for their jungle ops. Green and black face paint. Rifles in hand and sidearms strapped to their thighs. Prepared for battle. This was the first time Chris had ever been on the other side. Witnessed firsthand what it'd be like to see his team from the other point of view.

Luke allowed his sling to catch his rifle, and he moved with hesitant steps through the gate, eyes swinging from left to right. "Rory, Roman, Harper?"

Chris met Luke halfway and jerked a thumb toward the home behind him. No time for hugs or a thank-you because he had no idea of Carter's next moves. "I need a piece." He reached out, eyes connecting with A.J. in the process as Luke handed over his 9mm. "Stay here. Do not fire, though, or these fuckers will fire back. I'd guess they have rifles pointed at us right now." Chris switched his focus to Asher, then to A.J. "One sec."

His heartbeat thundered with every step he took. Louder and more intense as he walked back through the garden and to where Carter stood near the entrance of the home, a phone to his ear.

Chris immediately lifted his arm and pointed the 9mm at Carter's head. "No more locking us up, understood?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“A.J.!” RORY HURRIED OUTSIDE TOWARD A.J., SUNLIGHT CUTTING THROUGH THE HAZE OF THE EARLY morning hour. “You’re here.” *Oh my God, they found us!*

A.J. encircled her with his big, strong arms and hugged her tight. That familiar feeling of Alabama’s small-town comfort filled her with A.J. there. “You okay? You hurt? Anyone?”

“I’m okay. And no, I didn’t get hurt. Roman did, but he’s okay.” She eased out of his arms and released a grateful breath. “I can’t believe you found us or that you’re here.”

And also, the man looked intimidating. As did all of his friends crowding the backyard.

They’d come prepared for battle—military fatigues, black and green face paint, camo ball caps on, and weapons strapped to their bodies.

A.J. tipped his head, gaze pointed about twenty feet away from where Chris stood alongside Wyatt and Luke as they faced Carter. A heated exchange, but no guns were drawn.

It was Rory’s first time officially meeting Luke Scott, the team leader, since he hadn’t been at the party at Liam’s home last week. Luke was tall, broad-shouldered with a deep voice, and came across as a total badass. Basically, like all of the guys at Chris’s company.

“My family, are they okay?” They were why she’d left the life, and she couldn’t handle anything happening to them.

A.J. returned his focus to her, a tight grit to his jawline. “We’ve got everyone covered. We weren’t sure if the abduction was connected to you, or my people somehow.”

Kind of both. It was complicated.

“We put security on all of our families, including yours. My brother is also helping out back home to keep Jesse from searching for you himself.”

A.J.’s brother was the sheriff in their hometown in Alabama, but she wasn’t sure if even Beckett could keep Jesse in line. He was stubbornly overprotective. “Chris knows about the scars on my back as well as what you and Jesse did nine years ago.” She shut her eyes. “I had to tell him. I thought you should have a heads-up because I have a feeling he’ll bring it up.”

“Don’t apologize. I have no regrets about what I did.” He set a hand to her shoulder, and she opened her eyes and took a steadying breath.

“Does Ella know I was taken?” Rory needed to talk to her. Let her best friend know she was safe. Not to worry. But she wasn’t prepared to explain the choices she’d made over the last three years that had basically come back to haunt her. At least, not quite yet.

“Jesse was afraid to tell her. He didn’t let your parents know, either.”

A sigh of relief slipped free. “Good call.” She didn’t know if Ella or her parents would be able to handle the news. She’d rather face them once the main threat was gone. “Carter said he has men in

Alabama watching over my family, too.” *If he wasn’t lying, that is.* But now that A.J. and the others had arrived, Carter wouldn’t need to provide proof her family was okay.

A.J.’s brows tightened in confusion, and she quickly explained what Carter had told her about pretty much everything. Well, the abridged version. She didn’t have time to get into too many details right now.

“Where’s Bear?”

“He’s with Jessica about a mile away waiting for us to let her know if it’s safe to approach,” A.J. replied, his tone a bit hollow as if trying to shake off the shock of what she’d told him. “We weren’t sure if we’d need Bear’s super sniffer nose to find y’all. I’m not sure how much training he’s got so far, but we didn’t want to leave anyone behind who might help. Not even Bear.”

“And how’d you find us?” She glanced at the rest of his team standing not too far away deep in conversation with Harper and Roman, who were probably filling them in on some of the “highlights” of the weekend as well.

Holy cow, Knox Bennett, the son of the President of the United States, is here. It was, well, a bit strange and surreal. Every moment since Friday had been crazy, though.

“Elaina insisted she had to see Bear bright and early Saturday morning. She was actually beside herself with worry, so Liam and I took her over to Chris’s place when neither of you picked up our calls. When no one answered the door—and with Bear barking up a storm—we realized something was wrong. And then we discovered Roman and Harper were also MIA.” He shook his head as though it was his fault he hadn’t known they’d been kidnapped. “Jessica used our facial recognition software to track y’all down. She realized some men dressed as firefighters had taken y’all out of the hotel Friday night.”

Rory still couldn’t quite wrap her head around how they found them at Carter’s estate in Puerto Rico of all places, but it was damn impressive. “I’m so sorry about all of this. I never thought . . . I mean, I did think it was possible, but, damn it.”

“You’re safe now. All of you. That’s what matters.”

But we’re not. Not with The Italian out there.

“Looks like they’re done arguing.” A.J. pointed to Chris heading their way.

“What’s going on?” Rory asked Chris. “What’d you talk about?”

Chris was still shirtless, wearing only the jeans he had on from dinner last night and no shoes. He’d left the room in a hurry, not even ten minutes ago. It all happened so fast. And thankfully, not a single shot had been fired.

“Carter has no choice but to let us go. He doesn’t want a war, and he wasn’t counting on my people showing up,” Chris quickly explained.

“So, we’re not going to work with him?” And why did that have her feeling panicky?

“I didn’t say that, but you don’t want to stay here, right?” Chris’s brows tightened.

“I, um.” She turned, eyes falling to the lush grass beneath her sandals. Chills scattered over her skin. Chris’s hand on her shoulder urged her to turn back around, but she couldn’t face him. Not until she figured out what to say.

“You think we should stay?” His warm breath feathered over her shoulder. She’d quickly changed into jeans and a tank top before one of Carter’s men had retrieved her from her room.

“I think it’s best if we stay here.” There, she said it. She turned and set a palm to his face and let go of a deep, shaky breath. “I trust him, well, I’m trying to, which I know sounds strange. But I think we’ve been brought here together for a reason, and so, we should stay together.”

Chris squeezed the back of his neck, moving out of her reach, and she allowed her hand to fall to

her side. “He’s going to want to use you as bait. Correction, he’s going to want to use you as bait *again*.”

“And he could have let the Trott brothers pass us off to The Italian, but he decided to rescue us instead. Not take the chance.” Her stomach twisted, nerves starting to get the best of her. “I don’t deserve your trust in my choices given we’re in this mess because I didn’t open up to you sooner, but I’m going to ask for it anyway.”

Chris studied her for a few seconds. Brows drawn. Conflict in his blue eyes. Then his shoulders sloped the tiniest of a fraction, and he stepped back and turned away. “Carter,” he called out.

Carter headed toward Chris, two of his men cautiously following behind.

“Rory wants to give this a chance, but it’ll be up to my team whether they’re joining us or not,” Chris said, his tone rough and gritty. And it must have taken all of his strength to say those words.

Joining us? So, Chris was with her regardless . . .

Carter peered at Rory, and she saw the look of thanks in his dark eyes. “Good.” He pointed in the direction of the dining area where they’d sat last night. “My staff will serve breakfast. You all eat while I make a few calls. We’ll meet afterward, and then we’ll talk.”

“My people will be present at our meeting,” Luke said, coming up next to Chris, standing tall, a dominating force.

“Fine. We’ll be sure to grab extra chairs.” Carter’s tone was casual, almost joking, which took Rory by surprise. Humor and this man would be a good combo if he tried it a bit more often.

“We don’t want to eat your breakfast,” Finn remarked, and Rory turned to see him coming up alongside Luke. “I’d prefer not to get poisoned.”

“It’s safe,” Rory said softly. Well, it had been last night.

“Eat. Don’t eat. I don’t care.” Carter turned, then tossed a look back over his shoulder toward where they stood. “Was it your men?”

“Our men?” Chris asked.

Carter offered his profile and tucked his hands into his sweatpants pockets. He was also shirtless like Chris, his ink on display. “Was it your men who retrieved Alvin Santiago in El Salvador, the man who Rory offered up to the CIA?”

Luke stepped forward, a hand in the air. “How the hell—”

“Santiago. He told me the men who took him weren’t CIA or typical military. I was just curious.” Carter shrugged.

“You know,” Rory began, turning into Chris’s arms once Carter had left, “part of me wishes we could go back to telling lies like we did this morning in bed,” she whispered, the weight of the world and their problems feeling a bit too heavy right now.

Chris gently held her biceps. “We’ll get through this, and we’ll get a million more moments after this to share, and none of them will have to be lies.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

RORY KNELT ON THE GRAY STONE PAVERS AND WRAPPED HER ARMS AROUND BEAR. SHE'D GROWN attached to him after their week together. When she leaned back to find Bear's eyes, he ran his tongue up her cheek, leaving a trail of slobber behind.

"Got her nice and good, didn't ya, boy?" Chris crouched and scratched Bear behind the ears, and Bear loved every second of the attention.

Jessica had arrived with Bear only a minute or two ago. Once the decision was made that it was safe, her husband had picked her up where she'd been waiting a mile away.

"Still can't believe they *all* showed up." Rory peeked at Chris as they both rose. He'd changed into a new pair of darker denim jeans and a black, short-sleeved shirt he'd grabbed from the original guest room he'd been locked up in. And he had on his Red Sox ball cap A.J. had given him, the bill facing backward.

A.J. said he'd grabbed it from Chris's house in case Bear would need to try and track Chris's scent.

"Of course, we all came," A.J. said, catching her by surprise since she hadn't realized he was behind her. "We weren't about to lose anyone else."

Rory reached for a mug on the table in the outdoor dining area, the very spot where she'd learned Jolie was Rebecca, and poured herself a cup of java, not sharing their concerns about poison.

A.J. scrutinized her coffee with narrowed eyes as if toying with the idea of stealing her cup and tossing it or possibly drinking it himself. "How'd you sleep?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but then realized the question was for Roman, who was now at her six.

"Harper wouldn't let me sleep on the floor, so I slept horribly." Yeah, Roman's words made absolutely no sense unless . . .

Ohhhh. Was sleeping next to Harper hard because she made him hard? And did she really just think those thoughts? Rory took a big gulp of coffee, desperate for her brain to wake up. She'd taken a five-minute shower and changed into jeans and a white, short-sleeved tee before joining everyone for a breakfast no one had any intention of eating.

Chris had stolen a few minutes of that shower to "relax" her, which had resulted in her brain becoming mush. And maybe she'd purposefully stripped out of her clothes and let her hips sway with extra emphasis while padding to the shower in front of him.

She'd looked over her shoulder to find him tossing his clothes like they were on fire, then heading for her with decisive steps. He'd dropped to his knees on the tiled floor in front of her, parted her thighs with his strong hands, and then proceeded to relax her with his tongue.

Her shower had been mostly spent having an incredible orgasm while bucking wildly against his mouth beneath the spray.

She owed him some relaxation time later, too.

Maybe they were insane for having those kinds of moments given everything that had gone down, *or* maybe they were the perfect amount of crazy for each other.

They both loved thrills and action. And shouldn't intense, dramatic moments in life be interspersed with love and passion?

Chills raced over her skin and made her shiver as she remembered watching the water sluice down his muscular frame while his tongue slid up and down her seam this morning. Chris must've read her thoughts because when she looked his way, the smirk on his face said it all. *Dirty, dirty boy.* "We need to focus," she mouthed to him, assuming his thoughts were where hers had gone.

"Yes, ma'am," Chris mouthed right back, then wet his lips, making her body flare with desire once again.

What you deserve is payback. At some point, when she finally got her mouth around him, she'd be merciless.

Chris maneuvered his way between where Roman and A.J. stood and poured himself a cup of coffee. Rory chuckled as the rest of the team fell in line, obviously deciding their need for coffee was worth taking the chance of being poisoned.

Chris stood off to the side of the table near Rory and set a hand to the small of her back, his large palm dangerously close to curving over her ass. "Bad guys. How can I think of bad guys when all I can think about is kissing your sweet—"

"We're crazy," she whispered, cutting him off.

"For each other, yeah." He peeked at her and smiled. "Too cheesy?"

"Maybe a little bit." But if he was cheesy, so was she because she'd thought the same thing seconds ago.

Rory pulled her focus from Chris when Finn approached them. "This home is a little too 'say hello to my little friend,' don't you think?" he asked in an accent, making a laughable impression of Al Pacino.

Rory viewed the three-story home, where two armed guards looked down at them from a second-floor balcony. The main difference between this home and the one in the movie was the pool was on the other side of the house instead of directly below the balcony. "Yeah, total *Scarface* vibe, for sure."

Finn grinned and looked to Chris. "She's a keeper. And speaking of houses, what gives? Didn't Carter leave the Agency? How is he pulling this off?" he asked, sweeping his hand toward the estate.

"Well, first of all, it's probably rented," Rory answered for Chris. "But according to Harper, he and his wife inherited money, and they're 'Kennedy rich,' which would make this just another Tuesday for him," she said, using her fingers for the air quotes.

Finn scratched the back of his head as if a stretch of unease had suddenly filled him, a contrast to the playful moment just before. "I'm, uh, really sorry it took us so long to get to you." Humor to concern in a blink of an eye. These guys had switches they were able to flip so quickly. She supposed she could relate given her line of work before she'd changed gears to train canines.

And wow, her transition to training had resulted in her being with one of the men who helped take down Alvin Santiago. What would have happened had she not said yes to training Bear? Would the bad guys have found her in New Orleans? She would have been all alone in this, and as bad as she felt for getting Chris and the others involved, it appeared they were together for a reason, and

somehow, Elaina had known that needed to happen.

“It’s only Monday, and we’re a long way from D.C. I’d say you found us incredibly fast,” Rory exclaimed when Chris had yet to speak. He was probably beating himself up that they were grabbed twice that weekend. Technically three times if she included Carter. But it was insane for Chris to berate himself for any of it.

“And this genius, well, she’s the reason we found you,” Finn said after clearing his throat, pointing to Jessica heading their way.

Jessica smiled and pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head, her blonde hair framing her face. She looked part CIA, part mom of twins, standing in jeans and a long-sleeved, white shirt. A faded stain on her shirt pocket as if spit-up had been strategically placed by her twins in the spot one too many times. “There are some surveillance photos I’d like to show you two before Carter comes out here.”

“Of course,” Rory replied and followed Jessica away from the dining area.

“These are from the hotel security cams.” Jessica handed her phone to Rory. “Recognize anyone?” Chris looked on as Rory slowly swiped through the images.

“She looks familiar.” Rory paused on a brunette and showed the photo to Jessica.

“She led us to the island, actually,” Jessica replied.

“There weren’t any women on the yacht, though,” Chris noted. “But I remember that woman having a word with Cutter while we were talking to him at the gala.”

“She was also seen in the driver’s seat of an ambulance, the one that the three fake firefighters loaded you all into Friday night,” Jessica explained. So, Harper’s theory had been correct. “Then, with my facial recognition software, I located her here yesterday on the island, and we hopped the first flight down once we made sure our families were protected. That woman and two men chartered a boat yesterday afternoon. But then we overheard an interesting conversation from a fisherman at the port about two ‘hot women’ and two ‘studs’ that had been shipwrecked, who his boss sold for a fortune.”

Yeah, that wasn’t a real fisherman.

“We pushed for information,” Jessica went on, “and we got Carter’s name as the buyer. After, we did some digging and finally found your location early this morning.”

Impressive. “And more proof Andrew’s involved.”

“Cutter’s on a salvage vessel thirty minutes from the coast searching for some new treasure find,” Jessica said. “He also arrived yesterday. We haven’t made contact because we learned of your whereabouts, and you guys were the priority.”

Andrew’s that close? She swiped through a few more photos before landing on the guy with the green mamba neck tattoo and a scar resembling a seven near his eye. “That’s Jensen Fitzpatrick.” She showed Jessica the image. “He was on the yacht, and now he’s dead. But his cousin, Danny, we need to find him.” She quickly explained Danny’s involvement, along with Jensen’s, while she checked the rest of Jessica’s photos.

“I’ll see what I can pull up on him. Thankfully, we’re not in a *Mission Impossible* film where people can just buy themselves a whole new face. Plastic surgery might fool some facial recognition software programs, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve,” Jessica said with a grin. “Carter was probably working with old tech from the Agency when he ran Danny’s face.”

Rory was relieved to hear that, but why would a private security company have better software than the CIA? She opted not to push that topic right now, especially since it sounded as though Jessica might be close to finding the answers they needed. “Carter has people looking for the crew originally

set to pick us up from the Trott brothers last night. He thinks his people will find them today. I assume that's the crew who chartered a boat yesterday and led you down here."

"We can have our guys help," Chris noted, probably not trusting Carter to handle it alone.

Rory turned to see Carter striding toward them down the stone path from the house. His dog, Dallas, trotted at his side. Carter was in a different look today. Khaki linen pants and a blue linen button-down shirt. Brown loafers for shoes. Maybe his mood would also be a reflection of his casual, beachy outfit.

Bear spotted Dallas, and he started for him with excitement, but Dallas deferred to his master for orders. *I need more time with Bear, so it would seem. He didn't check with Chris or me.* They were a far cry away from the months of training it'd typically take to turn him into a military working dog, but he was a talented and intelligent animal.

Carter issued a command, surprisingly giving Dallas permission to run off and play with Bear.

The two dogs jumped toward each other in excitement as if they knew each other all of their lives, and one of Carter's men followed them and tossed a ball into the air out in the grassy open space beyond the dining area.

Asher strode toward Jessica and set a hand to her back. "We're going to sweep the property." His gaze went to Carter, his jaw noticeably clenching. "You can fill us in after." Asher corralled a few of the guys: Liam, Owen, Knox, and Finn, and they all fanned out.

Rory needed to chat with Liam later to check on Elaina. She assumed he'd called her to let her know everyone was safe, though. A.J. had called Jesse for her since she wasn't ready to fess up to her brother about the truth yet.

Carter stopped a few feet away from Rory and motioned them toward the dining area. "Shall we?"

Rory hesitantly nodded and headed for the table. She sat between A.J. and Chris, opposite of Harper, Roman, and Jessica. Wyatt and Luke remained standing a few feet away from the head of the table, where Carter took a seat like last night.

"Where would you like me to begin?" Carter asked, sending the question Luke's way as if realizing he was the man in charge.

Luke folded his muscular arms across his chest. "From the beginning."

Carter poured himself a cup of coffee, his eyes moving to Rory, which she interpreted as a request she start.

Gee, thanks. She looked toward Luke and slowly peeled back the story, layer by layer. Carter added a few details here and there, but he must have assumed there'd be a better chance that Luke would sign on to help if their account of what happened came mostly from her.

"You put Rory's life on the line. My people's lives," Luke said when Rory and Carter finished sharing. "How do I know you won't do it again? How can I trust you?"

Carter stood and faced Luke. "Do you have a wife?"

Rory checked Luke's hands. He must have taken off his ring for operations, which was smart. Luke didn't respond, which didn't surprise her.

"Assuming you're married," Carter began with a lift of his chin, "don't tell me you wouldn't do anything and everything in your power to bring her killers to justice."

"I don't put innocent lives in danger," Luke seethed, his blue eyes focused intently on Carter. "I'd cross most any line to save her, but if she were already gone, I wouldn't do the same merely for the sake of revenge."

"You say that now, but I hope to hell you never have to find out that you may be lying to yourself."

Carter angled his head, waiting for Luke to challenge his words, but Luke took two steps back as if he didn't trust himself not to reach out and strangle the guy.

There was a power play going on between the two men, and Rory could feel it. She'd wager a guess everyone at the table felt it.

"If my team agrees, we play by our rules, not yours," Luke said after meeting Chris's eyes for a brief moment. "Understood?"

"Fine." Carter gripped the back of his chair and peered at Jessica, then Harper.

"If anyone can find The Italian's whereabouts, and figure out who he is, it's these ladies," A.J. joined the conversation, speaking for the first time.

Maybe A.J. was right. If Rory had Jessica and Harper's help, along with whatever information Carter had on The Italian, they could finally take the bastard down. And she could stop looking over her shoulder and live her life. The new life she now realized she desperately wanted with Chris.

"We'll center our focus on your wife," Jessica began. "And, Rory, if you could provide us with everything you have on The Italian, and give us that list of twenty-five, that would be helpful."

"Of course." Rory thought back to her conversation with A.J. last week in Virginia. That open door A.J. had said she needed to shut hadn't been about Cutter at all, had it? It was about The Italian—she just didn't know it at the time.

"My men should find the second crew sent after Rory soon," Carter spoke up. "I doubt they'll know The Italian's identity, though."

"And Andrew Cutter, are we picking him up as well?" Jessica asked.

"I think we should talk about that first," Carter said. "He might help as—"

"Bait? I doubt we could use him to draw out The Italian. The Italian hasn't tried to find Santiago, right? Why would he care about Cutter?" Chris challenged.

"I haven't tried to draw out The Italian using Santiago, but he may have come for Santiago if he'd known about the CIA's transport like I did," Carter said, eyes on Chris. "But—"

"No, I know what you're thinking, and fuck no." Chris was on his feet, and fast, standing directly in front of Carter, and one of Carter's men was quick to approach, which had Wyatt blocking the guard. When Carter's man set a hand to his strapped piece, Wyatt casually removed his sunglasses and angled his head, eying the man in challenge.

"You think The Italian will come for Rory," Luke clarified Chris's concerns.

"He also wants me," Carter said. "I'm sure you'd be fine using me as bait." His dark brown, nearly coal-colored eyes focused on Chris, most likely attempting to read him.

"Let's wait on picking up anyone for now. Cutter or his people," Luke spoke up, a firm note of authority in his tone. "We need a plan first. Now that everyone is safe, I say we wait and watch their moves."

"That probably makes the most sense," Chris said in agreement, his shoulders relaxing a bit as he took a step away from Carter.

"But are we really going to work together?" Wyatt asked once Carter's guard backed down.

"What are everyone's thoughts? This has to be a unanimous decision." Luke looked to Chris, and Chris turned to peer at Rory.

"I'm in," Harper said.

"Me, too," Roman agreed.

"You know how I feel about human traffickers," A.J. began, "I'm in."

"The rest of the team will agree," Jessica said with a nod, which had Rory letting go of a deep breath.

“The Italian has to have a private army. He’d need a lot of paid guns to defend his trade routes, prevent them from being used without his permission.” Carter returned to his seat when it appeared they’d be working together. “We’ll need as many people as possible if we’re going to go against him.”

“I think I know who might be able to help us. That is if The Italian is really even Italian.” Roman’s words had everyone turning to look at him.

“Who?” Chris asked, an inkling of surprise wrapped around the word.

“Emilia Calibrisi. She’s the billionaire League leader of Italy,” Roman explained.

And The League, weren’t they basically rich vigilantes? Rory had heard of them while in Europe, but she’d assumed they were about as real as Batman or Oliver Queen. Then again, she had been dubbed Red Robin Hood and treated like an elusive myth.

“The League.” The disparaging way Luke said the name hinted that he had personal, possibly negative, feelings regarding the group. But it also sounded as though he believed them to be real. “I know of The League, and my wife’s brother, Harrison, had dealings with them in Ireland.”

“With Sebastian Renaud?” Carter arched a brow, and Luke nodded. “I was tracking a human-trafficking ring in Europe connected to South America several years ago, and by the time I got there, well, Renaud had killed all the men in charge and rescued the women.”

Finn and Asher had returned a few seconds ago from making their rounds, and Finn asked, “So, does that make him a good guy or a bad one?”

“Someone who kidnaps and trades women like cattle is bad in my book, and anyone who stops that from happening is good.” A.J. had a pretty black-and-white view on the matter, and honestly, Rory was with A.J. on this one. She’d seen what these men had done with her own eyes, and they deserved to burn in hell.

“The League doesn’t sound all that different from us, then,” Finn commented, seemingly in agreement with A.J.’s assessment of Sebastian Renaud.

“You can trust The League,” Roman said, no hints of indecision in his voice. “I’ve worked with Emilia before. She saved my life. She got stabbed as a result, too.”

“That happen before you were with us?” Luke asked.

“Remember that trip I took to Barcelona five years ago to attend my cousin’s wedding?” Roman asked, his hand wrapping around the back of his neck, unease crossing his face. “I met Emilia at the wedding, and well, things sort of went sideways that night.” He visibly swallowed. “But we’ve been friends ever since. I promise, she’s solid.”

“So, like A.J. said, it sounds like The League does what we do, just without . . .” Finn suddenly dropped his words. He’d been moving his gaze around the table as he talked, but when he spied Carter, Finn froze, as though just now remembering the man was present.

Well, now Rory was curious for him to finish his statement. *Without what?*

“Call her,” Luke instructed. “But I still want to do my own research and reach out to my brother-in-law and get his opinion on what he knows about Sebastian as well.”

“We can get a jumpstart on the research,” Jessica said.

“Working with two potential enemies to take down a bad guy,” Chris started, eyes set on Carter before turning to view Rory, “but, I’m in.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“CAN WE GO AS PIRATES FOR HALLOWEEN?” ELAINA ASKED OVER FACETIME. RORY WAS SILENT FOR A beat, having forgotten she’d promised to go trick-or-treating with Elaina.

Liam, who was sitting beside Rory on the couch in the second-floor living room, side-eyed her. He didn’t appear to know what to say, either. It was October 18th, so they might make it back in time, right?

When an image of the idiot Trott brothers came to mind, Rory pushed away thoughts of those pirate wannabes and smiled. “Pirates, huh? Hopefully, we’ll be back in time.” She didn’t want to break Elaina’s heart.

“Oh, you’ll be back,” Elaina responded with certainty, a bright smile on her adorable face. Did she know something? Maybe she did. It had happened before, so Rory wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out to be true. “But, Miss Rory, don’t let him go to the airport,” she added before quickly switching her focus to Bear, who had just jumped on top of Rory’s lap, almost knocking the phone out of her hand.

Yeah, he needed more training. But he was so cute, especially his love for Elaina.

“Bear!” Elaina hugged herself with her free arm as if clutching Bear, and Rory shifted Liam’s phone out of reach of Bear’s tongue before he slobbered all over it.

“Don’t let *who* go to the airport? What airport?” Rory asked, trying to make sense of the message Elaina had casually tossed out to her. *Shit*. Someone was beeping in. “Liam, you’ve got a call.” She handed him his phone back, and Bear jumped off the couch and to the floor.

“Thanks. Elaina, sweetheart, I have to take this. I’ll call you back.” Liam looked to Rory and lowered the phone. “It’s a contact of mine, former MI6. She may know something about The Italian.”

“Oh, good.” She said goodbye to Elaina, then stood. Liam remained on the couch, and Bear fetched a chewed-up shoe he’d been carrying around and went to town on it.

Rory was pretty sure Chris had whispered a command to Bear to infil Carter’s room and have at his shoes. And if that were the case, she wasn’t sure if she should be scolding Chris or laughing with him.

“I’m gonna go to the room and wash up.” She motioned to the door, and Liam nodded.

The team had been working nonstop since the morning, poring over everything Carter had on The Italian, and Rory had pulled up her encrypted files online for Jessica and Harper.

The two women were doing something “spy-like” in Rory’s eyes, and it was pretty cool to watch them work. Cyber skills had never been Rory’s strong suit. She was used to researching archives for treasure hunting, but Andrew had taught her a bit here and there as to how to apply some of her skills online. Ugh, Andrew. She didn’t want to think about him or thank him for anything he taught her if he

was connected to The Italian.

Harper and Jessica had been in the middle of attempting to pose as smugglers in need of a trade route on the Dark Web—setting bait for The Italian—when Elaina called. Liam took the call, and he and Rory went upstairs so they could talk to her out of earshot of the team.

Chris had taken that chance to shower. Apparently, researching smugglers all day made him feel physically dirty, not just mentally. She knew that firsthand.

It was already seven at night, and although Carter's men had located the yacht chartered by the brunette who'd been the ambulance driver Friday night, they'd stuck to the decision to wait and watch. Track their movements, including only keeping an eye on Andrew for now, even though she had a million questions for her ex.

Rory quickly walked to the suite she and Chris shared and found the door unlocked. She slipped inside but instantly shut the door behind her at the sight of Chris standing naked in the shower. "Um, what if it wasn't me who just walked in on you?"

Chris really did have the "Ass of America"—his glutes were firm and quite possibly carved from steel. *Holy hell*. At least he had the blinds pulled so no one outside got a view of that body. She was greedy and didn't want to share.

He slowly turned beneath the water and eyed her through the glass wall. "I have a thing against locks lately, go figure." As he washed the soap out of his hair, Rory's eyes followed the bubbles trailing down his body, all the way to his cock, which seemed to be acknowledging her presence.

She blinked, forgetting why she'd returned to the room. Seeing Chris standing there in all his naked glory, his muscles and body a thing of beauty, had her inhaling sharply. That Nietzsche quote he'd said to her last week, something about darkness beneath pretty surfaces, well, that didn't apply to him. No, Chris's kindness and big heart were even more beautiful than his exterior—which was saying something.

And wow, did she want him. She had no idea if or when they'd be alone again with so much work to do, but . . .

She quickly turned and locked the door. "And I have a thing against someone walking in on me while I have sex, so I win. Door is being locked." She removed her sandals and turned to face him.

He'd finished rinsing his hair and was now looking at her. She brought her hands to the hem of her shirt and skimmed them slowly over the material before taking hold and peeling it over her head.

Chris walked out from beneath the showerheads and set his hands to the glass, eyes riveted to her. Steam danced across the glass, and he swiped it away to clear his view. "Are you sure?"

She unsnapped the bra that was a bit too snug—and not her usual brand—then flung it over her shoulder. "I'm very sure," she responded under her breath as her heartbeat challenged her vocal cords.

Music would help drown out her moans as well as ease her mind about where she was and why. She wanted to be in the moment without any distractions, so she went to the radio by the bed and searched for a station.

Country station? Score. And the Chris Stapleton song *Starting Over* was freaking perfect in her mind.

She turned her focus back to Chris, who remained waiting. Watching.

Her teeth skirted the line of her lower lip as she made her way his direction. But her skinny jeans were on the snug side, and she wasn't exactly ballerina-graceful trying to get them off. So, what started as a striptease as she traced her hands down her breasts and lowered her zipper, ended up being a combination of awkward tugs and wobbles that nearly had her face-planting on the floor. And

that gorgeous man smirked at her near mishap. She saw the little lift at the corner of his mouth after he swiped more of the steam from the glass, clearly enjoying her baby giraffe impression.

Real smooth. But the beautiful smile on his face was so worth it.

Down to her pink panties, she hooked her thumbs at the sides and slowly pushed them to her thighs, then to her ankles, and stepped out of them.

Standing on the opposite side of the glass, she matched the placement of his hands with hers and positioned her naked body against the barrier between them.

“You’re torturing me,” he accused, his lust-filled eyes raking over her exposed flesh as her breath began fogging up the glass.

“That’s the point,” she teased back, adding more pressure to her chest. The sound of his accompanying groan had her heart beating erratically. Excitement and need burned inside her, and desire propelled her body toward his.

She did her best to take slow and seductive steps—well, as seductive as possible, to get to her man. And he was hers in every conceivable way. Fate brought them together for a reason.

Chris turned to face her, hands knotted at his sides as his gaze began a lazy journey starting at her bare feet and climbing upward.

He paused at the scar she’d gotten in Colombia and swallowed hard, then moved on to linger on her breasts before wandering up to her face. Her nipples tingled in anticipation of his rough fingers pinching and pulling them.

Passion and love burned in his gaze when their eyes met.

This wasn’t going to be just sex. She knew there would be nothing casual about it. Felt that truth in every molecule of her body.

One step. One small movement and Chris’s hand banded around her hip and drew her to him.

She swept her palms up the ridges of his abdomen, to his pecs and over his broad shoulders, and clasped them behind his neck, her eyes locked with his the entire time.

He moved their bodies beneath the water like they were slow dancing and pushed her back against the cool tiled wall as he crushed his mouth over hers with fervor. She felt his hunger for her in every sweep and stroke of his tongue.

Slipping her hands free, Rory dragged her fingertips down his muscular back before curving her hands around his mouthwatering ass.

Hands on the wall over her shoulders, Chris leaned closer. His hard length against her stomach a sensual contrast to the softness of the water gliding down their skin. Whispers and moans of pleasure echoed off the walls and surrounded them as they stood beneath the warm spray.

Rory arched her back, desperate for his touch, and he lowered a hand from the wall to palm her breast and lightly pinch her nipple.

His other hand took a tortuous journey down her silhouette before shifting between their bodies to cup her sex.

Water droplets rained onto her upturned face while she allowed herself to melt into the pleasure of his hands. Chris kissed the drops from her mouth before his tongue parted her lips and twined with hers, all the while moving the pad of his thumb over and around her sensitive skin.

His cock was heavy against her as their bodies remained pinned together, his lips stealing her breath while water drummed down over them.

“Chris!” When she cried out against his mouth, he reached for her thighs and urged her legs around him, lifting and then holding her against the wall.

Her legs wrapped tight around his hips, and she moved her sex up and down his length, anxious to

feel his cock inside her. Right now. No waiting. She needed this.

Chris braced a hand to the wall while the other remained tightly cupped to her ass. He angled his head and brought his mouth close to hers. "I need to go see if Carter stocked the nightstands," he let out on a sigh, distressed he would have to leave her, dismayed he may not find what he needed.

"I have an IUD."

"IED?" He blinked, humor lighting his eyes.

"Only you would say that." She nipped his lip. "Birth control. We don't have to use anything if you don't want to. I'm safe."

"I am, too." He pressed his mouth to hers for a sweet but intense kiss. "You sure?"

She draped her arms over his shoulders, keeping her ankles hooked around his body, her back flat to the wall for support. "I'm sure, but if you're not ready to do that, I—"

"I'm more than fucking ready," he rasped, the water making his lashes inky black, his blue-green eyes shining beneath the shower.

Beautiful inside and out.

Her hair was a wet mess, and she probably had eyeliner streaking down her face, but she didn't care.

She needed this moment with him more than any thrill she'd chased on any of her adventures around the world.

"I have no more secrets. Nothing else between us," she whispered. "I just want you. This."

His brows sagged at her words, and he closed his eyes.

Ohh. Her legs nearly fell to the ground at that painful expression on his face. "I have one more secret," he confessed.

Her stomach knotted, and every muscle in her body grew tight with dread. And her legs finally did fall, rooting her feet to the ground.

"I work for the President," he admitted, his tone deep. "I'm still technically active duty, but I work off-the-record without Congress knowing." He finally parted his lids, but she saw relief in his stunning eyes. "And I'm breaking the oath I made to my Commander in Chief never to reveal that information to anyone other than my wife."

He stood still, the water pouring over the both of them. She was part speechless and part broken-hearted. She'd pushed a man who was faithful and loyal to his country and team to share a secret that wasn't hers to hear.

She brought her hands to his cheeks, holding his face in her palms. Eyes set to his. Love in her heart. "Do you regret telling me?"

"Do you regret knowing?" he was quick to ask, a touch of nerves striking his voice.

She shook her head, emotion building even more intensely inside of her.

"I don't want any secrets between us, either. So no, I don't regret telling you."

She brought her hands to his bicep and held on to him. "Thank you." She wet her lips, taking in some of the shower water into her mouth in the process. "Will you make love to me now?"

Lifting her in one fast movement like he was carrying her over the threshold, he walked into the bedroom, leaving a trail of water behind them, and gently set her on the middle of the bed. She stared up at the man she never knew she wanted or needed but could now never imagine living without, and a smile spread across her lips. Chris carefully lowered himself over her, his biceps flexing as he braced himself above her. He dipped in, eyes on hers, a tender moment crossing between them, and then he kissed her.

It was a kiss like no other.

Swoon-worthy.

And when he broke the kiss, she felt as if he'd taken a part of her with him. And Rory knew with certainty she'd gladly give this man anything he wanted.

Chris positioned the tip of his cock against her opening, and when she gave him a nod, he pushed inside.

When he filled her, she swore she grew wings.

She could fly.

Feel everything.

She was awake and whole.

Tears crept out of the corners of her eyes as so much raw and intense emotion poured out of her with every thrust of his hips.

"You okay?" he asked, bringing his mouth close to hers again, a sweet kindness in his question and in his eyes.

"I think I've been chasing this moment my whole life. Chasing a feeling like this. And here you are just giving it to me," she rasped around more happy tears.

He closed his mouth over hers, tenderly kissing her and moving in a slow but incredible rhythm. When he lifted his head, lips off hers, he whispered, "I think I've been chasing it, too. I just didn't know until I met you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SOFT, SINFUL SWEEPS OF HIS TONGUE HAD RORY WRITHING ON THE BED. HER THIGHS WERE POSITIONED on each side of Chris's head, legs draped over his shoulders, as he went down on her. Pricks of almost painful need and intensity built inside her while he drove her freaking wild with his mouth. Her ass was nearly hanging off the edge of the bed as he knelt on the floor before her, worshipping her with his tongue.

They'd made love earlier in the evening, and it'd been more incredible than anything she'd ever experienced in her life.

And then they had to face reality and work. Talk smuggling. Traffickers. Avoid a few calls from her brother (yeah, maybe she had some avoidance issues like Jesse).

But when midnight approached, Chris whispered into her ear he needed to steal her for a few minutes. Bear was left under the supervision of A.J. and Liam in the living room while Chris whisked Rory back to their suite.

As it turned out, he didn't steal her time. He stole her breath. As well as her heart.

No, he didn't steal my heart. Wrong word. She'd given it to him. Freely and unconditionally.

And now, after he'd kissed every inch of her heated skin, devoting more time and attention to her scars, he tortured her in the most amazing way with his mouth.

"I want you everywhere. In every position." She gripped the bedspread at her sides, her fingers curling into the fabric as she resisted coming too soon.

Chris released his mouth and stood, and she nearly cried in protest but then remembered she'd requested sex.

He offered her his hand, which she gladly took, and gently pulled her to her feet. "So gorgeous," he whispered.

Rory let out a surprised laugh when he gripped her hand and lightly pushed her away only to lift her arm above her head and guide her into a twirl. She laughed again when he used the momentum to spin her to his chest.

"You've got some moves, mister," she teased as she ran her short nails down his washboard abs.

He growled and lightly cupped her jaw, then shifted closer to ease his tongue into her mouth, giving her a taste of her pussy. "Ride me," he commanded, then returned to the bed and positioned himself with his back to the headboard. She followed the sailor's orders and climbed on to straddle him.

Alpha in the bedroom. Yes, please.

"I have an idea," she purred. *Purred?* This man was turning her into a sex kitten. She flipped around so her back was to him. With a coy look over her shoulder, she set her hands to his thighs and

positioned herself at the head of his cock.

“Fuuuuck,” he hissed as she sank onto him, giving him a perfect view of her ass. His fingertips bit into her hips as she leaned forward and moved up and down, providing him a ride with a view.

Chris glided his hands up her sides and around to cup her breasts before pinching her nipples between his fingers. The tight press of his chest to her back, his broad shoulders and strong arms surrounding her like she was a precious gift, was more sensual than she could have imagined.

Oh my God, this man. He kept pushing her to the edge only to back off. She was going to scream in frustration, not giving a damn about who might hear her. And then he slid one hand down from her breasts to her wet center and used his thumb on her clit as she rode him.

Rory closed her eyes, her orgasm on the verge of cresting, her body tightening and clenching. And when Chris pinched her nipple again, she screamed out his name in climax, and he came with her.

When he set a kiss to her shoulder, she looked back and gave him her mouth.

“I want shower sex next,” she whispered, and he grinned.

And before she knew it, he was pounding her against the shower wall, threatening the integrity of the glass as he took her hard and fast.

And then they were in the closet for who knew what reason. Expensive clothing fell to the floor, padding her hands and knees as he drove into her from behind, one hand gripping her hip, the other pressing down on her back.

It was hot. He was hot. *This is hot.* Her brain was mush because the only word in her head was *hot.*

Stamina, the man had an incredible amount.

She was breathing hard once they landed back onto the bed. Sweaty and spent. Her body like rubber.

Chris nudged her legs farther open. “Not done with you quite yet.” He dragged his palms up the inside of her legs before he found her sore sex. “Fucking incredible.” He lowered himself down her body, setting his mouth to her sensitive skin, finishing what he’d started when they’d run away to their room for a “quick break” that had turned into thirty minutes of ecstasy. Or maybe an hour.

She’d lost track of time as they made love all over the room like they were sex-starved maniacs.

She palmed her breasts and squeezed the flesh as she watched him. “I was planning to go down on you, and you keep distracting me.”

He lifted his mouth from her center, eyes meeting hers. “You dissatisfied?” he asked, a smile in his hooded gaze.

She reached for his head and gripped his hair, directing him back to her sex. “You’re always so funny,” she teased, then moaned when he dragged his tongue along her seam, licking and sucking.

“You’ve officially ruined my vibrator for me, in case you were wondering. And I’ll never be able to take a shower again without thinking of that amazing thing you did to me in there.”

“Mmm.” He lifted his mouth again, that devious and naughty spark in his eyes. “Must have liked it since you told me to do it two more times.” He playfully waggled his brows. “And I’m sure I can find a better use for your vibrator. Maybe a back massager. You won’t need it for down here, I promise.”

“Oh, really?” she mused, releasing his hair. Her fingers trailed down the center of her body, and her palm splayed over her abdomen. “And when you’re traveling for one of those operations for the President, what am I supposed to do? Read a book?”

“Okay, maybe then,” he compromised, one eye closed. “But think of me?”

“I’ll rename it Little Chris in your honor,” she giggled, bringing a hand to cover her mouth. He dropped his forehead to her thigh as if distraught to hear the words “little” and “Chris” in the same

sentence. And his dramatics had her laughing again. “You know, so I can keep you with me all the time.”

“*All the time?*” He lifted his head, a smirk playing across his lips. “How would you get anything done if you’re constantly m—”

“Seriously, though, who do you think I’ve been fantasizing about when I touch myself since we met back in June?”

He planted a kiss to her hip and worked his lips higher up her body, inching his mouth over her skin, then he cupped a hand over her sex once his face was level with hers. “Let me guess, me?”

“Well, close. Captain America.” She chuckled, and he pinched her nipple.

“I—” Chris let go of his words at the rap on their door.

“Hey, you guys alive in there? The lights are on, so I know you’re not sleeping.” It was A.J. At least he was already too late to cockblock them.

“You need us?” Chris called out.

“Nah, I just thought it’d be fun to knock on your door at zero one hundred,” A.J. said, his voice husky as if either tired or fighting back a laugh.

So, it had been an hour. Oops.

“What’s up?” Chris grumbled.

“We have news.”

A.J.’s announcement startled them both and had Chris quickly searching for his sweatpants.

“Meet us back in the living room on the second floor in five,” A.J. said, then added, “That, uh, enough time?”

Definitely not. Rory wasn’t shy, but she felt her cheeks growing warm at the thought that A.J., who was like a brother to her, knew exactly what she and Chris had been doing.

“That’s fine. Thanks.” Chris set his hands to his hips and eyed Rory. “I guess we let time get away from us. Surprised Bear didn’t beat down the door.”

“Probably asleep on Liam’s lap. They’ve bonded.” Rory stood and stretched, her body tight in some places and Jell-O in others. “I’m gonna wash the smell of sex off me before I go upstairs to find out what new bomb they’ve discovered.” From the moment she arrived at Carter’s place, it’d been one blast after another, so she had to assume something big was about to explode.

Chris rounded the bed once his sweats were on and nuzzled her ear. “Well, you smell damn good to me.” He kissed her cheek, then started for the door.

She waited for him to leave, then rinsed off in the shower before dressing in gray cotton drawstring shorts and a tank top with a built-in bra, one that was probably made for working out. Whoever shopped had been thorough.

When Rory entered the second-floor living room, she found Chris, Roman, Jessica, and Harper in what looked to be a deep discussion at a table in one corner of the room. Liam sat on the couch, legs stretched out, boots on the coffee table, and Bear snoozing beside him. Rory had to smile at the way Bear’s head lay in Liam’s lap, and his paws twitched. The pup was probably dreaming about taking down bad guys. Liam looked as if he were about to doze off, too. His hand rested on the keyboard of a laptop sitting next to him on the couch.

“Where’s everyone? Shouldn’t they be here for the news?” Rory crossed the room to join Chris.

“We’ll update them soon. We wanted to talk to you first,” Harper said, and yup, a bomb was going to drop. She felt the vibrations beneath her feet. “Sit.”

Chris pulled out the chair for her, and the five of them squeezed in at the four-person table.

Harper turned the laptop so Chris and Rory could share the view of the screen—a map of the

world with lines crisscrossing every which way.

“Is this that thing you were talking about back on Mona Island?” Chris asked her. “That the trafficking network is like a series of toll roads, and trying to find a smuggler is like trying to find a needle in a haystack?”

Rory was so tired that the lines appeared to be moving on the screen. She rubbed her eyes and blinked, but no help. “Are those lines really moving, or did Carter actually slip something into the food, and I’m tripping?” Yeah, she didn’t need another brownie-like experience.

“No, you’re not high,” Chris confirmed, then quickly looked at Harper. “We’re not, right?”

“No.” Harper cracked a small smile, then went back into intelligence mode. “The Italian took the bait. That cover story we established for a previous job—weapons smugglers—worked like a charm. An hour ago, we managed to secure the safe transport of our weapons on one of The Italian’s trade routes. We had less than a minute to hack his server while he processed our payment, and we were only able to download about a quarter of his information before we had to get out, but we still got a lot.”

“Oh my God, are you serious?” Rory stared in surprise, looking back and forth between the two women. “How is it that no one has managed to do this before?”

“We couldn’t have done it alone. We had to call Wyatt’s daughter for an assist,” Jessica admitted.

Wyatt’s daughter? Right, Chris said she was a genius hacker. Wow.

“No one else has the three best cyber minds in the world working for them,” Roman said, his dark gaze pinned on Harper.

“Dealing with smugglers is like chasing your tail. You go round and round, and the merry-go-round never stops. But that doesn’t mean we won’t stop fighting the good fight.”

Rory turned to see A.J. now in the room, and his comment had Liam startling awake. Liam ran a hand down his face and yawned before he and A.J. joined the table, standing off to the side. Bear turned in a few circles to find a new comfortable position and went back to sleep.

“So, what does this mean?” Rory’s focus returned to the two brilliant women before her. “Can we find his location? Arrange a meeting?”

Rory had tried something similar on the Dark Web in the past, but she wasn’t nearly as tech-savvy, and The Italian never took the bait. She also didn’t have a cover story that looked like the real deal as an assist. Of course, The Italian probably would’ve used *her* as bait, the way Carter had turned the tables on her in France. And she still had no idea why The Italian didn’t seem to want her before now, especially because in the world of bad guys and smugglers, everyone believed she was worth a fortune to The Italian.

“We haven’t been able to isolate his location. Not yet, at least. Look here.” Harper pointed at a few of the lines on the screen. “Those moving lines aren’t his trade routes, they’re where his IP addresses have once been, or where he presently has them pinging to lead people to believe it’s his current location,” Harper explained. “But we scored big by getting a list of The Italian’s trade routes.”

Jessica tapped a few keys and moved the cursor, and a new map appeared, this time with a string of steady lines. Lines that connected various locations all over the globe. “We uploaded his trade routes to this map so we could have a better look.”

“But we stumbled upon some inconsistencies between your list of twenty-five smugglers and these trade routes,” Harper said, her voice low.

“What is it?” Rory asked, and Chris reached for her hand as she waited for the bomb to drop. The metaphorical other shoe to fall. And this shoe would be far too big for Bear to drag around.

“First of all, you successfully helped take down seventeen guys in total. Fifteen from the list, plus Santiago and Josef. That is insanely impressive,” Jessica began, and why did Rory feel like she was being prepped with a compliment before the bad news? “But the remaining ten names, aside from one who died of natural causes, and another who was killed by a jaguar—guess an animal he illegally captured got some payback . . . well, those remaining eight names on the list aren’t connected to The Italian.”

Shoe. Officially. Dropped. “That can’t be right.” Rory heard Chris mutter *hell* and suddenly realized she was squeezing the life out of his hand.

“We cross-referenced every trade route he runs, and from what we can tell, they’re all separately controlled by small criminal groups or individuals. No big players. No connection between them, either.”

“What about the research Rebecca and I did tying those names to The Italian?” She’d handed all the proof over to Jessica and Harper. Was it bullshit?

“The proof you pulled together online linking the names is now gone,” Harper announced, and Rory squeezed Chris’s hand even tighter.

“What about the other smugglers, the ones I successfully went after? Santiago admitted to working with The Italian.” She wanted to stand. To pace. But she tried to pull herself together and remain seated.

“The Italian controls the fifteen trade routes linked to the smugglers on your list that you helped take down. Plus, the routes of the two men you chanced upon who weren’t on your list, Josef and Santiago,” Harper said with a nod.

“There’s a but, right?” A.J. asked, stealing Rory’s thoughts. “Always a but.”

“From the information we gathered, The Italian didn’t garner control of those routes until *after* you took down those fifteen smugglers,” Jessica announced in a soft voice as if hoping to weaken the blow. “But according to the intel we pulled from The Italian’s server, the routes Josef and Santiago used were under his control long before you went after them.”

“I need you to spell this out for me because what I think you’re suggesting is that I helped The Italian take out his competition, and he took control when I was done,” Rory cut straight to the point, her voice trembling as she stood, releasing Chris’s hand in the process.

“Rory,” A.J. whispered, and although Chris stood with her, she couldn’t take her eyes off Jessica.

“It’s possible while Rebecca was being shadowed in Colombia, you popped up on The Italian’s radar. You said she missed a meeting with Josef to save your life just outside his compound. Maybe The Italian later made the connection you were the one to take down Josef, and he—”

“You saying this asshole tried to turn lemons into lemonade?” A.J. interrupted Roman, and Rory stepped back, her chair sliding on the wood floor.

Her chest tightened, and she was struggling to find her breath.

Was this a panic attack?

Before she knew it, Bear was at her side. Tail wagging. Eyes on her. Concern in his gaze and prepared to comfort her.

She set a hand to Bear’s head and did her best to find her breath.

“I hope I’m tired and misinterpreting this, but if not, does that mean what I think it means?” Liam asked, speaking up for the first time, his Aussie accent floating through his words. “Are we saying Rebecca set up Rory? Did Rebecca work for The Italian?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“NO. DON’T YOU DARE TRY TO PAINT MY WIFE OUT TO BE SOMEONE SHE WASN’T,” CARTER ROARED. Chris pivoted to find him standing in the double door entrance to the living room, hands fisted at his sides, a murderous look on his face. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Bear abruptly spun around to face Carter and growled menacingly as he stood to block the man’s path. When he peeled back his lips and showed his teeth, Rory whispered a command. Bear hesitantly heeled, but he remained on guard. Ears pointed, eyes on Carter. Chris was on the same page as Bear, but he didn’t think Rory would appreciate him growling and baring his teeth at the man.

“We don’t know anything for certain.” Chris lifted his hand as if his palm might act like a shield and block Carter’s rage.

“I get it, man. I do,” A.J. said, surprising Chris by speaking up. “People thought my wife was a traitor. Well, before she was my wife. And so, I get what it feels like to have someone you care about —”

“Is she dead?” Carter interrupted, then paused for effect. “No, I didn’t think so. So no, you can’t possibly understand.”

A tiny warning growl escaped Bear again—a *don’t you think about it* sound.

Rory stroked Bear’s head. “I don’t believe Rebecca set me up. There has to be another explanation. She would never do that.”

Chris was impressed at how well Rory was able to maintain a calm and reassuring tone.

Carter’s eyes dipped to Bear, who wasn’t quite calm yet based on his low snarl. “What do we know?”

Jessica removed her black frames and massaged the bridge of her nose, then placed her glasses back on. She was buying herself time. He’d seen her do that about a hundred times over the years. Or more like she was giving everyone a chance to mentally brace themselves.

“If I understand correctly, the list consisted of twenty-five names that were in your open case files. And the CIA denied you permission to pursue them, correct?” Jessica began, and Carter nodded. “At the time, neither Josef nor Santiago were on your radar. From what we have gathered through our contacts at the CIA, MI6, and at Interpol as well as the transcripts they’ve shared, there’s one common denominator—no mention of The Italian in any of their interviews with the apprehended smugglers. Not even Santiago or Josef provided The Italian’s name. Santiago only mentioned him to *you*.”

That’s right. The CIA didn’t make the deal with Santiago.

“What we do know is that somehow Rebecca gained access to your list and then gave the list to Rory. She also told Rory she strongly believed all of the targets were connected to one person. But

you never said as much to Rebecca, did you? You didn't know your wife had the list. So, why would she have come to that conclusion?" Harper asked and slowly rose, setting her hands to the table, eyes on Carter. "One possibility is that three years ago when Rebecca went to meet with Josef for whatever reason, she happened upon Rory and subsequently told The Italian about Rory and her mission. The other possibility is that Rebecca was aware of Rory and her mission before Rory even went to Cartagena, and it wasn't fate or chance that brought them together."

Chris turned to check for Carter's reaction. In his mind, the second option sounded more realistic to him.

"No." Carter took one step, which prompted Bear to lift his chin and growl yet again.

Good boy.

"A.J., would you mind taking him out of here for now?" Rory asked, noticing Bear was in no mood to play games with any potential threats. He may not have had much training with Rory and Chris, but his instincts were on point. "I'd prefer he not rip off Carter's arm. He still needs training."

"Come on, boy." A.J. whistled to Bear. When Rory released him with a command, Bear tossed one fierce look Carter's way before following A.J. out of the room.

"Rory, you said it wasn't until your second time in Cartagena that you met Rebecca, right?" Jessica asked while Carter went to the window that overlooked the pool and set a palm to the glass. "What exactly did she say to you? Any way she could have been waiting for you there? When you arrived in Colombia, how long did you wait before going to the compound that second time?"

With Carter's focus elsewhere, Chris allowed himself to ease up on his guarded stance and listen closely to Jessica. He assumed Jessica's last question was meant to establish a timeline to determine whether Rebecca managed to meet up with Rory outside Josef's home by chance, or whether the entire incident was arranged on purpose. And if so, how the hell did Rebecca do that?

Rory's gaze darted to Chris, her hands clenched at her sides. Like Carter, she didn't want to believe Rebecca had played her. But something sure as hell didn't add up.

"I arrived in Colombia a week prior to do recon. Check for patterns in Josef's schedule. Find the best time to make my move. I did the same with the antiquities buyers, too. Every morning, like clockwork, Josef went for a forty-five-minute jog. Five guards surrounded him like he was the president of his country. So, I chose to make my move while he ran on my seventh day in Cartagena."

"Did you ask Rebecca about her meeting? Why was she there if Josef wasn't home?" Chris asked, a few unfortunate alarms sounding off in his head.

"Rebecca said it was fate she arrived early to help me. She seemed nervous, though. I mean, she was in disguise like me . . . wig and sunglasses, but I could tell that she was scared. I just assumed it was due to her first time going after a smuggler, and when she saw that I'd been stabbed, she realized the same could've happened to her." Rory carried her focus to Carter, her eyes apologetic, but Carter didn't turn.

The ruthless man was a grieving widower right now. And Chris refused to place himself in Carter's shoes because he couldn't contemplate for one second the idea of losing Rory.

"I snuck out of the hospital the next day, as soon as I was able to walk. The nurses had removed my wig before surgery, and I didn't want to chance being identified, so on my second day in the hospital, I called the number Rebecca had given me when she dropped me off. Then I slipped out of my room, disguise back on, and Rebecca drove the getaway car." Rory paused for a breath. "Rebecca brought me back to my hotel but asked to meet up for lunch the next day before I left. Even though I wanted to get out of the city as soon as possible, I was curious to meet another woman like me."

Carter slowly faced the room. "I know what you all must think, but my wife would never do this.

She had political aspirations. Senate in ten years. President after that.” His gaze fell to the floor. “My wife would never consort with a criminal. Do his bidding. What you’re trying to tell me doesn’t make any sense.”

“And you were as shocked as I was to learn she was hunting smugglers,” Rory pointed out, which couldn’t be easy for her since she clearly wanted to believe Rebecca was innocent. “People can surprise us. Do things that don’t make sense.”

Rory certainly surprised the hell out of Chris but in the best possible way.

“Maybe The Italian, or one of his associates, manipulated your wife somehow. Forced her to look into your files. He targeted her because of your job. Blackmail, maybe?” Roman spoke up.

“You stuck to that list, aside from when Carter lured you to France. You stayed the course,” Harper said to Rory after allowing Roman’s comment to stick. “It’s possible The Italian learned of your plan to go after Josef in Cartagena and took the opportunity to make a plan of his own. Let’s just assume The Italian was blackmailing Rebecca. He forced her to steal intel from Carter and then drew up the list of twenty-five smugglers that were on the CIA’s radar. He then instructed her to pass the list on to Rory. Not only as a distraction but to help him build his network out of low-level smuggling rings, which would never be the wiser.”

“And then Rory deviated from the list,” Chris said as understanding dawned on him. “But it took the CIA two months to send us after Santiago. The Italian may not have known it was Rory who helped take down Santiago since Rory had already retired by the time he was picked up.”

“If The Italian knew about Rory all this time because he was using her, why let her live after she stopped chasing the targets?” Carter challenged, his eyes pinned to Chris as he took one step in his direction.

“It wasn’t until Carter ambushed the CIA’s transport and took Santiago that The Italian went after Rory,” Jessica announced.

“Looks to me like *you’re* the one who knows The Italian,” Carter said, standing too close to Rory for Chris’s liking.

“Or at least someone close to Rory has been watching out for her, keeping her alive.” Chris’s stomach dropped like the very first time he was about to jump from a plane during training.

“Danny? Could it be him?” Rory brought a hand up and massaged her forehead with her fingertips as if all the shitty news had given her a migraine. “We hunted antiquities smugglers together. He knew my methods.”

“What if he kept an eye on you after you thought you’d parted ways?” Chris proposed and hated that his words might cause her additional pain. “What if he learned you went to Cartagena, and he told Santiago or Cutter that you stumbled upon something you shouldn’t have?”

Now *that* made the most sense to him. Not fate or some cosmic interference.

“Danny and Andrew might be criminals, but I know they cared about me.” Rory’s lip trembled as she spoke. “Maybe they cut a deal with The Italian to keep me alive as long as I didn’t go after any more of his smugglers.” Her eyes widened a fraction as if a thought had struck her. “That’s why Andrew was insistent upon talking to me at the ball. He wanted to save me. Maybe he arranged for his people to take us. To keep us safe from The Italian. But, oh God, we killed them.”

Chris kept his mouth closed, knowing there was no damn way Andrew was a hero in this scenario. *Hell, no.*

“Or Andrew was ordered to go after you. Rory, don’t forget, Carter has footage of Danny exiting his house the day before Rebecca was murdered, as well as Santiago’s confession,” Harper whispered the truth Chris also believed.

“I’d go to the ends of the earth to save you,” Chris declared fiercely, unable to keep the emotion from his tone, “but do you really think Andrew would do the same? If he was working for The Italian, would he choose you over himself?”

Rory’s hand fell from her forehead. “How many people have lied to me? Used and manipulated me? How could I be so stupid?”

Chris immediately reached for her and gripped on to her arms. “Hey, this isn’t your fault. What you were up against—”

“Where are you going?” The sound of Liam’s raised voice had Chris turning to see Carter heading for the doors.

Carter tossed a look back over his shoulder. “I’m going to talk to Santiago again.”

“Then I’ll go with you,” Liam said, on the move already.

“I still don’t think Rebecca meant to—”

“Neither do I, and I’ll prove it,” Carter interrupted Rory before striding out of the room like a man on a mission, a man ready to torture a guy.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“HE’S IN DENIAL,” A.J. SAID WHILE STRETCHING HIS LEGS OUT IN FRONT OF HIM.

“I hate to be on Carter’s side, but you were in denial when it came to Ana,” Chris reminded A.J. as they sat in Carter’s Gulfstream G450 Tuesday morning at 0500.

Carter’s private jet was pretty swanky. A 14-seater divided into five sections: cockpit, forward cabin, mid cabin, aft cabin, and galley. And, of course, a lavatory. No bedroom, but there were comfy leather reclining club chairs, and the couch that stretched the length of the forward cabin folded out into a bed. It was definitely cozier than some of the jets he’d been in, that was for sure.

Roman’s contact at The League had phoned him seconds after Carter had left the room to talk to (more like torture) Santiago. Santiago was at a site two miles from Carter’s rental property. Emilia had requested Roman’s presence in Sicily for an in-person meeting, and Luke had decided Echo Team and Rory should head out.

Jessica had plugged Jensen Fitzpatrick’s face into their facial recognition software program to track his whereabouts in the last two weeks before he died, in hopes of maybe discovering Danny with him at some point.

Danny seemed to be at the center of everything, given his ties to both Cutter and Santiago. If they could question Danny, they might finally get to the truth about The Italian.

Emilia chased down a few possible leads on the “new Danny” Jessica had provided her, and she believed The League had a beat on where Danny Fitzpatrick was currently hiding. Sebastian Renaud, one of the leaders in Ireland, was currently en route to that location.

“Ana was innocent. I’m not so sure about Rebecca, but I’d prefer not to speak ill of the dead.” A.J. shifted the brim of his ball cap to hood his eyes, then folded his arms across his chest.

“You think Carter will kill Santiago during their chat today? Or that he’ll get anything new out of him?” Chris asked.

“Liam and Asher went with him. If anyone can get Santiago to talk, it’s them,” A.J. casually replied. “If they come back empty, that means Santiago doesn’t know anything else.”

“I hate we won’t be there when Bravo and Carter’s people pick up Cutter later today.” He turned his focus to where Rory sat across from Harper, a table and laptop between them in the forward cabin.

Rory had been beating herself up the last several hours about the target list. The way Chris saw it, she’d taken down assholes who needed to be taken down. It wasn’t like she’d gone after innocent people. But to find out The Italian may have pulled her strings, well, yeah, all the more reason he wanted that fucker deader than dead.

She had way too much on her shoulders. To top it off, she was spooked about a cryptic message

Elaina had tossed out over the phone last night but hadn't fully explained. Rory was worried that Elaina's warning, *Don't let him go to the airport*, referred to Chris, and if he flew to Italy with her, something terrible would happen to him.

Yeah, no way in this lifetime or any other would she travel to Italy to meet with some vigilantes without him. And he refused to leave Rory behind, too. Not that he didn't trust Bravo Team and Bear to look out for her, but Carter . . . he just couldn't get a read on that man.

He'd lost his wife. Blamed himself for her death. And now, it was looking like his wife might have worked with the enemy. The guy had to be losing his mind, and Chris was slowly coming around to feeling more sorry for him than hating him.

Carter stood by and watched while we were taken on Friday, he reminded himself, deciding he needed a kick in the ass about his opinion on the man.

"How are you not sleeping right now after expending all your energy doing whatever it was y'all were up to before Harper and Jessica dropped the mother of all hammers on us with that news?" A.J. readjusted the brim of his beat-up hat, the American flag still bright and colorful, though, like a testament of hope.

"Expending all my energy, huh?" Chris asked in a low voice, stealing another glimpse of Harper and Rory, both of whom appeared fully awake and caffeinated. Rory lifted her eyes and sent him a tight-lipped smile, and damn if his heart didn't skip a beat.

She was wearing jeans and a soft gray shirt with sneakers. Chris had accidentally matched his outfit with hers, and Finn hadn't wasted a second before calling attention to that fact once they were in Carter's limo and headed for the airport.

Chris peered at Wyatt and Finn sitting in the first row behind the cockpit, already asleep in their club chairs. Roman was MIA. Maybe hitting the head, aka taking a piss.

"Who says I 'expended' my anything?" Chris's air quotes were useless since the hat still hid A.J.'s eyes.

"Come on, brother. You fell for that woman back in Bama. And then you spent all of last week alone with her at your place. Throw in a deserted island and some fancy suite in sexy Puerto Rico, and ya got yourself a recipe for"—A.J. twisted his neck and lifted the brim of his hat to find Chris's eyes—"expending a lot of energy."

"And are you okay with there being an 'us'?"

"Sorry to let you down, brother, but I'm taken," A.J. said solemnly.

Chris smacked A.J.'s bicep. "Asshole." Then he pitched his voice low to keep from being overheard. "Obviously, I'm talking about Rory and me. You warned me about Jesse back in Alabama, and I . . ."

"You wouldn't have been bunking with Rory last week if I didn't approve," A.J. returned and pulled his cap back down, arms going across his chest. He had on his cowboy boots, jeans, and a plain black tee—his go-to look.

"And Jesse, will he be solid?" Chris wasn't used to worrying about the opinion of family members of a woman he dated, not that he really ever dated all that much. Before Rory, no one had made him want to take a chance on anything long-term. He was fine with sticking his neck out when bullets were flying, but he'd never considered putting his heart out there until Rory.

"Jesse's bark is bigger than his bite." A.J.'s lips flipped into a grin. "Well, sometimes."

And what was that supposed to mean?

"Speaking of Jesse, did you two really take out those pirates nine years ago? The ones who attacked Rory and gave her those scars?"

A.J. lifted his hat and found Chris's eyes again. "Damn straight. It was a good thing we went, too. Saved three women they kidnapped from a yacht." He positioned his ball cap to shield his eyes again.

"Back in New Orleans, Rory sort of mentioned she was in danger, but she begged me to drop it. I should have said something to you," he confessed.

"Jesse told me something to that effect, so when I learned those people got the drop on y'all at the gala, I for sure beat myself up about it. But if you're looking to apologize, you keeping Rory alive is more than enough for me. I mean, Jesse would kill you if that woman got a scratch on her while in your company, though."

Chris looked over to see Roman now sitting next to Rory across from Harper. "Roman got stabbed. Thank God it wasn't bad, but he lost it when that asshole punched Harper."

"I know," A.J. replied. "He used my phone and scheduled a visit with the Trott brothers for next week. I guess he's assuming we'll be done with The Italian by then, and he's looking for a little payback."

"You better add my name to that job." He moved his focus to Rory as she pulled her hair into a messy bun atop her head. *Beautiful*. And he'd make this right. He'd get payback, too. For every asshole who ever hurt her.

"Back to the whole, Jesse-approving-of-your-relationship thing," A.J. began, "he won't stop your wedding the way he did Ella's." A.J. flicked the bill of his hat with his index finger, pushing it up so he could see Chris.

Maybe just leave it up? Chris smiled.

"I mean, I'm not saying you're planning on marrying her, but you know what I mean."

Marriage? Chris looked at Rory, her gaze focused on whatever Harper was pointing at on the screen. "You know what I used to think about marriage when it came to my own life."

"But I reckon that's changed in the last week or so, huh?"

"Yeah, I reckon so," Chris said, imitating A.J.'s Southern drawl.

Rory still had her Southern drawl as well, maybe not as pronounced as A.J.'s, but that bit of her heritage wrapped delicately around her syllables, fighting to stay with her even though she'd been running around the world for a decade.

"But really," Chris said, sitting taller, "now I know how you felt when you met Ana for the first time, and you couldn't even look at another woman the same again. It's a crazy feeling, and it took me by surprise. And then to discover we both have a passion for animals, and she's—"

"Hunting smugglers," A.J. finished for him. "Man, Jesse's gonna lose his damn mind when she tells him the truth. I'm thinking she's avoiding that conversation, worried he'll go full-blown big brother on her. Chew her out."

"What would you do if it was Ella?"

"Strap her down," he said with a laugh. "Never let her out of my sight."

"Yeah, well, you don't do that with Ana," Chris reminded him. "And I don't see myself ever wanting to tie Rory down." No, that woman was born to fly.

A.J. winked. "Right answer, brother." He slapped a hand over his heart. "That was a test."

"Of course." Chris rolled his tired eyes, then swiped a palm down his face. "Hey, remember those fortune cookies we had in our takeout, the night we were staking out Ana back in D.C.? You remember what the fortune said?"

"The one I made up?"

"No, mine." Chris grimaced. "I saved that little piece of paper and had it in my wallet. Those sons of bitches on the yacht took everything of mine. That fortune is probably at the bottom of the

ocean right now. But I memorized it. *You will chase fortune but win a heart.*”

“Why’d you keep it?”

“I don’t know, but it’s turning out to be pretty damn accurate.” Chris’s gaze drifted back to Rory and their eyes connected. “Only, I’m thinking *fortune* and *heart* are one and the same.” *Rory’s the fortune. She’s everything.* And he was pretty sure he was also finding love.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SICILY, ITALY

“BILLIONAIRES AND THEIR CASTLES,” CHRIS COMMENTED AS RORY WATCHED HIM TAKE IN THE VIEW OF the Calibrisi mansion after the guards had opened the electronic gates and allowed them access to the property.

Thankfully, they’d barely passed any other vehicles on the narrow, windy road up the hill they’d traveled to reach Emilia’s home. The rental van Wyatt drove was almost wider than the road itself, and there had been some hold-your-breath moments when they rounded a few particularly tight curves.

They followed the circular driveway around a water feature to what could only be described as a mansion on steroids. Ancient Rome and dashes of the Italian Renaissance could be seen in the facets of the stone estate that sat high, high up on a hill overlooking the sea.

“Decent view of Mount Etna off in the distance,” Finn said as they rolled to a stop.

“We’re far enough away that if Etna blows, she’ll probably just dump ash on the pool,” Roman tossed out.

“And you’re assuming they have a pool, huh?” A.J. asked while swinging the door open to exit the passenger side of the van.

Chris exited next and held a hand out to help Rory. “Thanks.” The word floated in the air and was almost too quiet for him to hear.

Her nerves were as mangled as a shipwreck that had sat at the bottom of the Atlantic for three hundred years. The idea she’d been manipulated was a hard pill to swallow.

“Are we going to stand here and make a wish, or are we gonna go inside?” A.J. called out, seemingly unimpressed with the massive fountain. He jerked his thumb toward the double doors of the home when no one moved.

“Turrets. The place has turrets.” Finn closed one eye as if the sun was bothering him, even though it had already set—probably the spotlights because, of course, spotlights. Given the length of their flight and the travel time from the airport to the mansion, it’d be a late dinner. Maybe no dinner at all. “I bet she has a lair or Batcave.”

“It’s like we’re on the set of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and I’m probably aging myself with that comment,” A.J. said with a shake of his head.

“I’d be more comfortable with going onto the show *Naked and Afraid*.” Chris lifted the bag he and Rory shared, and they started toward the front steps, which were offset by pillars.

“We were almost on that show,” Harper reminded him. “Did we tell you boys about the naked plank walks?”

Harper’s words stopped Finn in his tracks, and he quickly glanced at her, eyebrows raised and mouth hanging open. If Rory wasn’t so tense about the revelation she’d possibly been manipulated, she’d probably join in on the joking.

“We’ll catch you up on the details later,” Harper casually tossed out.

“Tease,” Finn said with a laugh.

When they were all standing in front of the enormous double doors, through which a full-sized elephant could fit, Roman rang the bell.

Rory was half-expecting to hear Dobermans scrambling and barking, or Batman’s butler, Alfred, to open up, but instead, she was pretty sure they were now face-to-face with the billionaire League

leader of Italy herself.

“Emilia,” Roman greeted her, his tone tender as she reached to take both of his hands before setting a kiss to first one cheek and then the other.

And wow, I'm underdressed. Rory peeked at her own wardrobe. The same loose gray tee, jeans, and sneakers she was wearing when they'd left Carter's estate. Whereas Emilia was in fitted black skinny jeans, a black sleeveless turtleneck, and had paired the ensemble with tall, pointed-toe black heels. Her red lipstick was bold and made her look fierce, and it was the defining statement to the entire look. All black and then bam! Red lips.

Her features were exquisitely feminine, super sexy, and from what Rory had heard, the woman was also a superhero. Every man's dream, but no one on Echo appeared to be gawking.

When Chris set a hand to her back, Rory leaned a bit closer to him. He felt like home to her now, and it didn't seem to matter whether they were in Virginia or Italy. The man made her feel safe and comfortable, which was saying a lot, given the insanity of the last few days.

“So nice to meet you all.” Emilia extended a hand to Wyatt next as though sensing he was Echo's leader, then went through the motions of introductions. “You must be Harper.” Emilia reached for Harper's palm and smiled, her white teeth showing between those bright red lips. “Roman never stops talking about you. It's so nice to finally meet you.”

“I don't talk about you,” Roman rushed out, gaze set on Harper.

“Sure you don't.” Finn patted Roman twice on the shoulder to emphasize he thought Roman was full of shit.

Roman cleared his throat and swiped a hand up and down the back of his head.

“And I heard you're Red Robin Hood.” Emilia saved Roman's golden tanned skin from completely turning beet red by directing her attention to Rory. “I've been tracking you for quite some time.” Emilia's eyes lit up when she sandwiched Rory's hands between her palms. “I knew when you stopped going after antiquities dealers that it had to be for a good reason.”

“Sorry,” Roman apologized, eyes on Rory. “I had to fill her in.”

Rory smiled, and now it was her turn to be embarrassed. *She's been tracking me?*

“No worries.” The League now knew about her, and she hadn't decided her opinion on the group of vigilantes yet. Could she trust them with her secret?

“Come on, please, follow me to Papa's study.” While they traveled through a foyer and down a wide hallway, Chris held on to Rory's hand as if worried she'd get lost. “My father died, but this is the room where I still feel him the most,” she said upon entering the space. “Probably because his cigar smoke still clings to the walls.”

Forget Batman. I'm in Belle's library in the Beast's castle. Wall-to-wall books. Not even a window. Just books everywhere. “Savanna would love this place,” she whispered her thoughts aloud, and A.J. peered her way, a sad smile of understanding on his face since he and Savanna's husband were close friends before he was killed in action.

Emilia motioned to the leather couches in the center of the room, but no one moved to sit. The guys remained crowded near the entrance of the door.

“I appreciate you having us,” Wyatt began, stepping forward, “but if you don't mind, I'd like to take two of my guys and sweep the property. Get a lay of the land. Can't be too careful.”

“Of course.” Emilia nodded. “One of my men can escort you and show you the grounds, and if the rest of you would like to be shown to your rooms to freshen up, we can have dinner afterward out on the terrace. Sebastian Renaud and Sean McGregor should be here soon. They've been busy questioning Danny at one of our local sites, but he refuses to talk to anyone but Rory.”

Did The League have dedicated torture sites? "I'd like to talk to Danny myself, anyway," Rory said.

"I didn't know Sean was also coming," Roman noted a moment later, clearly recognizing the name.

"Sebastian thought it'd be good training for him. Adam piloted a helicopter he rented from Cosenza to here, but Sean is protective of his twin, so Adam will be staying at the hangar." Rory was surprised that Emilia's accent wasn't very thick, but then again, Roman had mentioned on their ride up the steep, windy road to get to the home that Emilia had studied at Oxford for a few years and had even lived in Vegas at one point. "Not that anything will go wrong, but Adam's sticking more to the sidelines when it comes to League business."

Training? A twin? League business?

"Shall we?" Emilia motioned toward one of her guards now standing at the door, and Wyatt, Finn, and A.J. followed him out.

Emilia guided the rest of them farther into the mansion, stopping when they reached twin staircases, so grand Rory felt like she was on the set of *Titanic*. Only, if she'd been Rose, well, in the movie, Rory would've made room for Chris on that damn door floating in the ocean. She'd never let Chris sacrifice himself for her.

"Separate rooms?" Emilia asked once they'd made it to the third level, Emilia's heels clicking on hardwoods as they walked past door after door.

"Rory and I will be staying together," Chris answered without hesitation.

"Um, separate rooms for us," Harper said a second later, motioning between herself and Roman. "We work together. Roman and I aren't . . ." And yet, she didn't finish that thought.

Emilia paused outside one of the rooms and pinned Harper with a thoughtful look. "Sure."

Yeah, Emilia wasn't buying the Harper-and-Roman-are-only-friends routine, either.

After Roman and Harper had been shown to their rooms, Chris and Rory went into one of the larger suites.

"I know you're here because of unfortunate circumstances," Emilia started, "but there's no reason not to enjoy yourself while you're here."

"Thank you," Rory said as Chris went to the window and looked out. The blinds were up, and red, velvet drapes hung at the sides. "We appreciate everything you're doing for us."

"Of course. Is thirty minutes enough time to get ready?" Emilia checked her watch. "Sebastian and Sean should be here within the hour."

"That'd be perfect. Thank you so much."

Emilia started to turn, then set a hand to the inside of the door. "Just so you know, The Italian doesn't have a ground base in Europe, and most certainly not in Italy. The League would know. Almost all criminal activity is governed by a group known as The Alliance, an organization my people are working tirelessly to take down."

"Is it possible The Italian still operates trade routes to Europe, though?" Rory asked, and Emilia's brows pinched as if in thought.

"To the ports, I suppose. There are too many to keep track of, unfortunately. But if The Italian is a real person and not a legend, he most likely operates on the ocean, never coming onto land."

The ocean? Is he . . .? No, she pushed the thoughts away. They were far too uncomfortable to digest. "Why do you say that?"

"Because if he'd been in the habit of coming to my shores, I would've handled him already," she responded in a cool, self-assured tone that had Rory liking her that much more. "See you at dinner."

“She’s intense,” Chris said after Emilia had shut the door.

“This whole thing is intense. And also, did you notice that she doesn’t seem convinced that—”

“The Italian is real?” He faced her, hands dipping into his pockets.

“What if I got this wrong? *Again?*” She couldn’t fathom that. But she had to be honest with herself.

“Is this about the list?”

“Isn’t everything about that damn list?” she whispered, her shoulders collapsing. “Sorry, I’m frustrated.”

His lips tipped into a crooked smile. “You have every right to be. And we’ve barely spoken since we left Puerto Rico.”

She’d been in the middle of unzipping their travel bag but stopped and stood upright to find his worried eyes on her. “I’m just so pissed I was probably taken advantage of, but I’m also someone who hates harping on the past. No Monday morning quarterbacking. Trying my best not to beat myself up, at least.”

He closed the space between them and curved a hand around her waist. “What you did is incredible. I don’t care who provided the list and why. I won’t let anyone, especially The Italian, make you think your work was insignificant. You took down a lot of bad men.”

Emotion unfolded inside her body, the pain and anger she’d done her best to suppress now fighting its way to the surface.

Chris stepped back and removed his shirt, his muscles flexing in the process, then unbuckled his belt and popped the top button of his jeans. Needing to feel his skin beneath her hands, Rory stepped closer and laid her palms on his taut abdomen. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Is it working?” He lifted his brows.

“I guess I could think of one way to relieve some of this tension I’m feeling, to take out my frustrations about everything in a more therapeutic way.”

“I am all about using sex as therapy. I mean, if that’s the kind of therapy you were talking about last week,” he said with an adorable playboy smile, “then I would’ve reacted differently.” He spun her around so her back was to the window. “I would be willing to have multiple sessions with you every day.”

“Multiple, huh?” she murmured as she raked her short nails down his torso.

She unzipped his fly and shoved down his jeans, allowing them to fall to his ankles.

He stealthily maneuvered her top and bra off in seconds. Shoes and jeans next. Panties a distant memory over his shoulder.

“Are we really going to have sex here? In Sicily? My naked body pinned to the glass overlooking the water beneath the dark sky?”

“I’m thinking yes, given the current state of our nakedness.” When his breath hit the shell of her ear, her sex clenched, and chills coated her body.

He flipped her around, so her breasts were to the glass, his naked body tight to her back. He set her palms to the window and brought his chin to rest over her shoulder as they took in the view of the sea down below.

His hands skated between the glass and her body to cup her breasts in his large, rough palms. Rory bit her lower lip as desire grabbed hold, her need for him to thrust and pump inside her overshadowing any fear or worry in her mind.

With their bodies connected, her problems would fade away.

She turned her cheek to offer her mouth, and he met her lips with a gentleness that grew into something more intense and promising.

And before she knew it, he'd spun her back around and had their bodies united.

They were making love.

Against the window overlooking the water.

In the same country that brought her to her first adventure ten years ago.

I've come full circle somehow, haven't I?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“SO, HERE WAS THIS GUY WHO’D SPILLED A COCKTAIL ON ME AND WAS CLUMSILY TRYING TO DAB THE vodka off my chest with a bar napkin . . . and I thought”—Emilia paused for dramatic flair—“do I break his arm or just throw a drink in his face? When suddenly, from out of nowhere, this assassin appears behind me on the patio. The guy thought he was a ninja, I swear. Had two swords and some insane mask.” She flicked a dismissive hand in the air. “I swear some of these men were born to be stunt doubles in movies instead.”

Rory smiled, the scene Emilia had just painted vividly unfolding in her mind as they all sat on the massive terrace. Two glass doors led out to the terrace from each side of the sprawling space, and there were still plenty of empty seats at the long, rectangular table, even with the eight of them outside. Potted Cypress trees lined the walls of the home.

She’d been at Emilia’s place for less than an hour, but she already knew they’d been right to seek out Emilia’s help. Besides, she was a total badass, too.

“So, Clumsy Guy drops the napkin and transitions into what I can only define as beast mode. He shifts me away from the guy and shields *me* like I was some damsel in distress.” Emilia chuckled and refilled her glass with wine as if the idea she needed saving was preposterous.

“*You* were Clumsy Guy?” Finn asked Roman, laughter bubbling in his tone.

Based on what Rory now knew about Roman, clumsy was far from an accurate descriptor of the man. Quiet, intense, intelligent, and strongly protective? Yes. Clumsy? Not so much.

Rory sipped her wine and side-eyed Harper off to her left, whose gaze was set on Roman and Emilia across from them. Rory couldn’t help but wonder if Harper was trying to figure out if Roman had a history with Emilia beyond friendship.

“I quickly learned Roman was no klutz. He took down that assassin with his bare hands. He grabbed a knife from the bar and stabbed him in the eye. I stood by silently impressed, waiting to see if he’d need my help while all the wedding guests screamed and ran in horror,” Emilia went on. Chris stroked his beard, his focus mostly set on Roman, probably wondering whether Emilia was mistaking Roman for someone else.

“Then five more guys dropped down from ropes like we were in a bad action film, and I had to step in.” Emilia took a casual sip of red wine, then stood to reveal a jagged scar on her side. “This beauty is from a corkscrew one of the guys managed to jab me with that night.”

“She’s being humble. She took that stabbing for me. Saved my life. I had my back turned fighting someone else, and she blocked his path with her body.” Roman finally broke his silence and joined in on Emilia’s story.

Emilia glimpsed Roman as she sat back down, and Rory stared at her in astonishment. “It was a

night I'll never forget. I mean, I'm sure I could've handled the six guys, but all except one of my guards were on a smoke break outside the building—the timing had to have been planned by the assailants—and it was nice to have Roman help out.”

“Wow.” Rory took a conservative sip of her wine, not wanting to get tipsy since more League members were en route, and especially since she'd be questioning her old friend, a friend who set her up from the sounds of it.

Chris rested his hand on Rory's thigh, and thoughts of where that hand had been thirty minutes ago filled her mind. Spreading her folds to plunge his thick cock inside her . . .

“I must confess and plead guilty to the ‘clumsy cocktail’ routine.” Finn held his palms in the air in apology. “I might have taught Roman that little trick to help him with the ladies since he's a genius in just about everything except for the art of picking up women.” Finn quickly cleared his throat like he'd said too much, especially in the presence of women.

Roman glared at Finn, then glimpsed Harper with a worried look on his face. He'd slept with Emilia, hadn't he?

Forget ninjas, Rory was fascinated by the telenovela unfolding before her very eyes.

Emilia reached for her phone on the table. “I think we need some music.” She made a few swipes on her iPhone, and music began to drift through the air from the outdoor speakers positioned on the terrace.

Not even thirty seconds into the song, Harper pushed back from the table and stood. “I'm gonna go grab some more wine.” She tipped her head toward the house, and Rory couldn't help but notice Roman's gaze fly to her. The clench of his jaw beneath his dark shadow of a beard was obvious. Not anger, maybe pain.

“Oh, sit. I can—”

“No, really, I'm, you know, picky about red wine. Some give me a headache,” Harper rushed out, cutting Emilia off, then started for the house, not wasting any time.

Roman rose, eyes following Harper, but Rory shook her head.

“I'll help her. I have the same headache issue,” Rory lied, thinking Roman was quite possibly the reason for Harper's quick departure. Or maybe his past with Emilia?

Roman nodded hesitantly, then eased back into his seat.

Chris turned and captured Rory's wrist. “You want me to come with you?”

“I won't get lost.” She glanced around at the table of Navy SEALs looking stiff and not nearly as relaxed as Emilia. They'd also barely touched their wine, and Rory was certain Harper had taken just the one sip. The guys were in operation mode minus the fatigues and painted faces. “Don't worry.”

Rory hurried toward the house, doing her best not to be too obvious, but she'd bonded with Harper and wanted to make sure she was okay.

Once inside, Rory spotted Harper with her palms on the marble counter in the butler's pantry just outside the kitchen.

Harper stole a look from over her shoulder at Rory.

“You okay?”

“Of course,” Harper insisted. But her eyes were glossy, weren't they?

No woman was ever “okay” when they were fighting back tears.

“That song,” Harper began, “just has some memories connected to it. I needed a second. I'm sorry.”

Rory didn't recognize the song, but music had always been a powerful vehicle for calling up both painful and amazing memories for her. She understood what Harper might be experiencing. “I didn't

mean to bother you. I guess I wanted to make sure you were okay about . . . um.”

Harper swiped a fallen tear from her cheek and shook her head as though demanding herself to push away whatever had bothered her. “Emilia? No, I’m not jealous. Why would I be?”

I didn’t say that but . . . “No, of course not. You have no reason to be jealous. You’re freaking awesome. I just know it’d be awkward if I met someone that Chris might have”—she swallowed—“slept with. Like it was probably weird for him to meet Cutter.”

“Roman would never admit to having slept with her, anyway. Ask Roman to discuss thermodynamics or his disbelief in paranormal activity, and he’s your guy. But talk about his past? His feelings?” She pursed her lips, her mouth a tight line. “Let’s just say he doesn’t talk about himself. Him opening up about his grandparents at that gala was an anomaly.” She smoothed her hands over her long-sleeved black shirt she’d matched with dark skinny jeans and brown boots.

Tonight, Rory and Harper were the ones who’d accidentally dressed alike. Only Rory was in a white shirt with black boots.

“Besides, nothing is going on between Roman and me now.”

“Now?” Rory couldn’t help but pick up on that one word.

Harper released a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Roman and I . . . it didn’t work. We tried.” Pain slipped through her tone as she opened her eyes. “But the team doesn’t know, and I don’t want things to be awkward, so I’ve tried really damn hard to act as normal as possible around everyone. I’d rather they not know. Okay?”

Ohh. And wow, she hadn’t seen that coming. She’d noticed the flirting and the stolen looks between the two, so Harper and Roman were either amazing actors, or they still had intense feelings for each other. Feelings they were unable to deny, especially if all it took was a song to trigger a reaction like that one. “I won’t breathe a word,” she answered, a hand to her heart.

Harper nodded, forced a smile, then sidestepped her and headed back outside.

“You forgot the wine.” She turned to find Harper already gone. Rory shook off her surprise, knowing she’d need to keep Harper’s secret from Chris. It wasn’t her secret to share.

Rory had just started for the door to the terrace when she stopped at the sight of Chris inside the hall, a fist to the wall, his head bowed, and a phone to his ear.

“What is it?” she asked softly, preparing for bad news based on his body language.

“I’ll call you back when I know.” He paused for a few seconds. “Yeah, if your connection is spotty, I’ll shoot you a text. Okay. See you when you get here,” Chris said in a low voice, his tone gritty. He lifted his head and slowly faced Rory. “Jessica and everyone, well, they’re on their way here. Carter and some of his men, too, but in another plane since we took his jet.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Why? What’d they find out?”

Chris held a phone tight in his palm at his side as she cut the space between them down to a foot. “Carter and the guys got Santiago to tell them more. And he said there is one man who can identify The Italian. That there was only one man who was the go-between guy for Santiago and The Italian.”

“Andrew,” she murmured, already knowing that truth in her core—so deep she’d ignored it. He’d been her mentor, her teacher, her boyfriend, and now he was her enemy.

“I have to show you something. I’d rather not, but Jessica needs confirmation.” Chris’s face conveyed a mess of emotions that filled Rory with dread.

“What?” she whispered, feeling the blood drain from her face as she took in Chris’s haunted expression.

“Jessica found some images that had supposedly been deleted from cyberspace, but I guess nothing is ever really gone.” He opened the phone someone on the team must’ve given him, and he

went to the text messages. “She thinks Rebecca had an affair with Cutter, and then he blackmailed her. The man’s face is blurred in the photos, so we need to see if you can, um, tell if it’s him.”

Rory cupped a hand to her mouth as she viewed photos of a man and woman in bed. He was naked and on top of her, and looking closer at the woman’s face, it was clear that it was Rebecca.

And now she knew why Chris looked like he’d been hit by a truck.

Having to ask this of her was killing him. Hoping she could identify a man with whom she’d had a relationship by showing her photos of that man having sex with another woman.

A quick swipe through five images had her hurriedly handing the phone back to him. “Yeah, that’s Andrew.”

Chris’s lips drew tight as he brought his eyes back to hers with what appeared to be much difficulty. Rory felt guilty for putting him through this.

He wanted to kill Andrew for ever having known her, didn’t he? For putting Rory in danger. For sleeping with her when he was deep into criminal activity.

“But why is everyone rushing here? I thought they were going to pick up Andrew and his team for questioning?” she sputtered at the memory. “If Andrew knows The Italian’s identity, we need to get back to Puerto Rico ASAP instead of them coming here.”

“Cutter wasn’t on the ship. Maybe he was in Puerto Rico at some point, but he left. He only wanted people to think he was aboard his vessel.”

“What?” *No, that can’t be right.*

“My team went to apprehend him and discovered some other guy who had an uncanny resemblance to Brad Pitt. Hell, for a second, Liam thought it was Brad.”

“If he tricked us, then . . . where is he?”

He pocketed the phone and motioned to the terrace door. “Jessica thinks Andrew is headed for—”

“Me,” she finished at the chilling realization. “He’s on his way here.”

“Or already here. We need to tell the others.” Chris stepped through the open terrace door, Rory following behind, but they both stilled at the sight of a man barging onto the terrace through the opposite door.

Dark-haired, tall, and muscular, the man was dressed in black slacks and a black dress shirt, the top two buttons undone. Everything about him screamed *dangerous* and *fierce*. Especially the brutal manner with which he held another guy by the scruff of the neck and forced him to move forward. With one quick movement, he abruptly released the man with a shove.

“Tell them what you know.” His voice was deep and highlighted with an Irish brogue. When there was no response, he crouched alongside the guy who was now on all fours looking like the loser in an MMA fight. “Not going to talk?” With a swift yank, he grabbed the guy off the ground and forced him to his feet, then tossed a quick look toward Rory. “One second,” he said casually while drawing a knife from his pocket.

“Meet Sebastian Renaud.” Emilia introduced the Irish League leader as she approached where Sebastian had backed the man up to the ledge of the terrace. That’d be a long drop over the edge.

Danny? Is that really you? Rory tried to get a better look at him, but Chris kept her clasped to his side and away from the action.

There were subtle differences in Danny’s facial features—he’d had a nose job for sure, and the angle of his chin was sharper. He was dressed in khaki pants and a polo shirt instead of his usual raggedy jeans and T-shirt, and his blond hair was now brown. He’d also shaved his beard.

But yeah, that was Danny. No doubt in her mind.

Rory pressed up on her toes and whispered in Chris’s ear, “We need to tell your team that Andrew

might be on his way.” *Or is already here.*

He reached for Rory’s hand, and they hurried toward the table where his teammates stood, captivated by the scene playing out before them starring Sebastian and Danny.

Chris quickly spoke to Wyatt, who then motioned to Finn and the two men immediately made their way back into the estate.

Okay, bases covered. Good.

Now she could focus on the issue at hand—Danny, faced with the intimidating presence and intense wrath of Sebastian Renaud, who was clutching the front of his polo shirt and bending him backward over the terrace wall. When Sebastian leaned in and pressed a knife to Danny’s throat, Rory was sure Danny must have been close to pissing his pants. “Tell. Them. Now.” Sebastian’s tone was low. Not a roar and definitely not a whisper. It was the perfect amount of *talk or die* to scare someone to pieces.

Hell, I’m scared of you.

Chris hooked a protective arm around Rory’s side, but she had to wonder who he was protecting her from. The billionaire vigilante who clearly didn’t need a Bat-suit and a voice changer to make his point? Or Danny, who looked so incapacitated that Rory could probably take him down alone?

A.J. and Harper moved closer to where Rory and Chris stood, but Roman and Emilia now flanked Sebastian and Danny.

“Where’s Sean?” Emilia set a hand to Sebastian’s back, and based on her nonchalant manner, one would think this was an everyday occurrence for Emilia.

Still maintaining his grip on Danny, Sebastian peered back at Emilia before his gaze swiveled over to Rory and the others. After giving them an unexpected but polite nod, he fixed his eyes back on his target, a man Rory had once trusted with her life. “Talk. She’s here like you wanted. Don’t make me break my promise to my wife not to kill again.”

Again? Rory shuddered at the intensity of the moment. She’d been in sticky situations before, but this felt different. There was an element of finality that she’d not felt until now.

“Let me up, and I’ll talk,” Danny shouted, finally breaking his silence.

Sebastian set Danny back to his feet. He rolled his shoulders and adjusted the cuffs of his black pressed shirt. Intimidating wasn’t even a strong enough word for that man.

“Rory?” Danny’s right eye was swollen from what looked like one too many elbows in the face, probably by Sebastian. “That really you?”

“More like are you really Danny?” she countered, doing her best not to let her emotions and the fact he’d betrayed her get to her.

Before Danny could answer, the terrace door flung open again, which had Roman pulling a gun out from beneath his shirt. *Do they all have guns? Does Chris?* She lifted her hand to Chris’s back and found the bulk there.

“Relax,” Emilia said, folding her arms over her chest. “That’s Sean McGregor.”

So, what were the qualifications for joining The League aside from having lots of money? Rory peered back and forth between Sean, Sebastian, and Emilia. *Hot?*

“I’ve seen billionaires on the news, and none of them look like this,” Harper commented to Rory, doing that ventriloquist thing with her lips again, and also, reading Rory’s thoughts. “And he has a twin who flies helos?”

“Right?” Rory whispered out of the corner of her mouth as Chris hugged Rory closer to him. Chris was her guy, though. And to her, no one could compare.

Sean, the tall, handsome blond counterpart to Sebastian’s dark good looks, stowed his phone in

his pocket, then removed his black jacket and tossed it onto a chair arm at the dining table. “Nice to meet you all. Sorry about the circumstances, but we’re happy to help.” Sean’s Irish brogue lilted through the air as his eyes traveled around the terrace, landing on Emilia last with a slight tip of the head in hello. “He talk yet?” he asked Sebastian.

“No.” Sebastian clenched his hands into fists at his sides as though preparing to wage battle on Danny’s face again. “I despise smugglers. And I have no problem treating you the way you’ve been treating innocent people for years. Understood?”

“We found your guy in a hotel in Cosenza,” Sean said to Rory.

Cosenza? Rory almost fell to her knees, knowing in her heart what that meant. And in her head, this was confirmation that Andrew was guilty as sin. She didn’t even need the photos of him and Rebecca to prove it.

She’d been blind. So blind to everything.

“Cosenza,” she quietly murmured the name of the city. “That’s where we met on that dig with Andrew,” she managed to say next. Her words were for Danny, but she felt the others’ attention shift from Danny to her, searching for meaning. “He wanted us here in Italy, didn’t he?”

Danny opened his mouth, but instead of speaking, he wiped what appeared to be a trickle of blood from his lip. And wow, Sebastian hadn’t taken any shortcuts during his “talk” with Danny before coming there. Did Sebastian beat him up while his driver drove?

No, don’t feel guilty for Danny. He lied. Used you.

“Cutter knew it’d only be a matter of time before you and Carter put it all together. Before you discovered his greatest secret of all.” Danny touched his mouth again, blood smearing his fingers.

“That Andrew *is* The Italian.” The truth poured out hot and fast, and her stomach squeezed at the horrible ugliness that had been staring her in the face, and she had missed it before now.

Had some subconscious part of her always known that ugly truth?

“You’re bait. Cutter wanted us to find you, right?” Chris hissed at the realization they’d been set up.

Danny took one bold step that had both Sebastian and Emilia extending an arm to block his path. He focused on Rory and whispered, “I’d say I’m more like a Trojan horse.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“HE SET US UP. SET ME UP—*AGAIN*.” RORY MATCHED CHRIS’S FIRM STANCE AS THEY STUDIED DANNY. Her voice may have sounded calm and collected, but Chris knew she was a volcano about to erupt on the inside.

“Cutter must be on his way here,” Wyatt said, now back on the terrace and standing on the other side of Chris. “We have no idea how many men we’re going to be dealing with, but—”

“I have a full arsenal and plenty of counter weapons for whatever these assholes might bring our way,” Emilia interrupted Wyatt. “But I have never needed many men on site. I only have eight guards here tonight. No one has ever dared try to infiltrate my home.”

“Eight should be enough with us here,” Wyatt said with a confident nod. “The two turrets, can we set up overwatch?”

“Absolutely,” Emilia quickly responded.

“And I’ll call in reinforcements, see if we can get more help before Cutter’s men arrive,” Sean spoke up.

“Can you take these men to the weapons room and inform my guards of the situation?” Emilia asked Sean, and he nodded.

“The first thing Cutter’s men will do is block the roads,” Wyatt pointed out.

“And my men will blow them out of their way,” Emilia quickly replied, her words bold and confident. And they *needed* confidence right now.

Wyatt and the rest of Echo Team, along with Harper, followed Sean inside, but Chris had no plans on leaving Rory. He knew she wouldn’t walk away from Danny without answers. And she was probably the only one who’d be able to get them, too.

“Cutter won’t be coming here,” Danny declared. “The Italian never does anything himself.”

Chris noticed a slight smirk cross Danny’s face and wondered if it was because he thought Cutter had outsmarted them or vice versa.

“Cutter’s got a lock on your location, am I right?” Chris reached into his cargo pants pocket and produced a knife with a 6-inch stainless steel blade. “We didn’t find a tracker on you, so that means it’s *in* you.” Once Emilia had forced Danny’s black polo shirt off and flung it over her shoulder, Chris handed her his knife.

“Where is it?” Sebastian hissed, now the only one holding Danny down. Chris assumed Sean’s previous spot and bent Danny’s arm back—yeah, he may have loved that shriek a little too much when he applied pressure.

“Removing the tracker won’t save you.” Danny issued a chilling reminder that the tracker had served its purpose, and Cutter knew exactly where they were.

Rory strode closer, her steps confident. As Chris observed her align herself next to Emilia, he saw the moment her energy rekindled. The gleam in her eyes told him she had a plan. “But if it’s the kind of tracker I’m thinking, it can help us find Cutter.”

Seeing her in op mode was sexy as hell.

“What kind of tracker?” Sebastian asked as Danny began to squirm in their grip, which resulted in another elbow to the jaw and Danny spitting out blood.

“The kind I used to map out trade routes for smuggling. We can backward trace the signal to where it was planted before he sent Danny to that hotel. I guarantee that’s where Cutter’s waiting,” Rory said. Emilia shot her a look that read, *impressive*.

Cutter. Chris couldn’t help but notice she’d stopped referring to him as Andrew, and he felt some satisfaction in that.

“She’s right. Cutter won’t risk coming to a fortified estate himself,” Chris said in agreement.

“If Cutter’s people haven’t already made the connection that Danny is at the home of a League leader,” Sebastian began in a deep voice, “they’ll soon realize they’re at a disadvantage, even with a surprise attack.”

Chris tightened his grip on Danny, eliciting a low growl from the man.

“Cutter won’t back down.” Danny shook his head. “He’ll send wave after wave of men until he gets what he wants.”

“And what he wants is Rory,” Chris confirmed. Damn if the lump in his throat didn’t keep getting bigger.

“He still loves you in his own weird way.” Love, that four-letter word out of Danny’s mouth only further pissed Chris off and had him squeezing Danny’s arm harder, drawing out a sharp cry of pain.

“Then we give Cutter what he wants.” Rory’s statement shocked Chris into easing up on his grip even though Danny now felt like a wild horse trying to buck for control.

Sebastian grabbed Danny by the neck and twisted his right arm behind his back, effectively calming him down a bit. Danny had a lot of fight in him, that was for sure.

But wait, what was Rory suggesting they do?

“We pull the original location from the tracker, and we bring the fight to Cutter,” Rory explained quickly as though she’d just noticed the *hell-no* look in Chris’s eyes.

“You’re too late. You gave Cutter way too much time. His men, no doubt, are already advancing on us. Give or take a few minutes because of this freaking hilltop in the sky we’re on,” Danny casually said, and Sebastian tossed another elbow for good measure.

Chris liked Sebastian more with every elbow jab he threw.

“Where’s the tracker?” Emilia slowly dragged the flat part of the blade along Danny’s flesh. “We can play a game of *Operation*, or I’ll cut until I find it.”

Chris had to admire the woman’s fortitude because one thing was clear—Emilia would make good on any and all threats.

“If this prick isn’t lying,” Chris began, “and we do have a shit-ton of Cutter’s men on their way, they’ll probably try to infil and take out your weapons and security rooms. Then light infantry forces will probably advance to our rear and bypass frontline strongpoints.”

Chris and his team avoided infiltrating an enemy who sat on high ground as much as possible, but they’d had to do it from time to time. Thank God they were the ones on high ground.

Sebastian maintained his grip on Danny but looked behind him toward the trees skirting the sea in the distance. “I don’t see any vantage points for a sniper to get a clean shot off at us, but we should still move inside.”

"I agree," Chris said, hating that Rory was out in the open like this.

Sebastian and Chris held Danny by the arms and dragged him inside, following behind Rory and Emilia.

"Let's move to the study. The walls behind the bookshelves are reinforced with steel. My grandfather had it designed during World War Two as sort of one big safe room," Emilia explained, and now that windowless room made a lot more sense.

Once inside the study, Sebastian and Chris shoved Danny to his knees a few feet away from the center of the room near the sitting area.

Chris turned to Emilia. "What are the home's weak points?"

"Not many," Emilia responded before listing a few potential problems.

"If we give them little time to react and reinforce their line, we should be able to hold them off, even if they do send in waves of people," he told her, not sure how much war experience she had, even though she was an elite fighter. "Maybe we put together some fire teams."

"We need to get this GPS tracker out of Danny, though," Rory spoke up, taking one step toward Danny. "I don't think it's a coincidence Sebastian found Danny in Cosenza. It's where Cutter and I first met a decade ago when searching for Alaric's gold. He wants to end this where it all started."

Where *they* started, and damn, Chris wanted to gut Cutter.

The way Danny's lips twitched, and his one good eye looked to the ground, was confirmation enough for Chris that Rory's assessment was correct. "We can get a hold of Jessica and Luke and have their flight redirected to Cutter's location," Chris suggested. "They're over the Atlantic right now. Plus, Carter's plane can redirect and switch paths as well."

"Cutter won't be expecting that move," Rory said with a nod. "But I don't want to guess at Cutter's exact whereabouts, even if he is in Cosenza." She swiveled her focus back to Danny on his knees. "With Harper's help, we can get his exact location because I'm not so sure we can trust Danny to tell us that information even if he does talk."

Emilia dropped one knee and brought Chris's knife to Danny's throat this time. "So, we need the tracker. Where is it? I'm not going to ask you again." Her tone dropped bone-chillingly low.

Chris hooked an arm around Rory's waist when Danny hesitantly pointed to his back shoulder blade as the location for the tracker.

"Good boy," Emilia said, patting his cheek in a condescending manner.

Sebastian strode to the bar cart and grabbed a bottle of vodka. He removed the top and crouched before Danny. "For the pain. Don't want you passing out on us when we have more intel we need from you."

"Help us," Rory urged, stepping forward, and Chris went right along with her. "Tell me what you know."

Danny chugged a few sips as Emilia maneuvered to stand behind him. Her attention fixed on the spot Danny had pointed out. A deep breath later, he said, "Cutter blindfolded me and dropped me off at that hotel. I don't know where he was before then, but it wasn't far. The drive took maybe five minutes."

So, Rory was right. Cosenza. Chris produced his phone from his pocket and sent out a text and email to Jessica and Luke, not sure which would get to them quicker since they were on the plane with spotty internet service.

"Why didn't he trust you?" Sebastian asked Danny as Chris put away his phone. "Worried we'd torture it out of you?"

"Because," Danny said after another swallow of vodka, "regardless of what it looks like, I do

care about Rory.”

“You have a stellar way of showing it,” Emilia flippantly tossed out.

Sebastian removed his belt and folded it in half, grabbed the bottle from Danny, then offered him the belt with a lift of his chin, indicating he should bite into it before Emilia cut into his skin.

Danny clamped down on the black leather and hissed as Emilia worked at his back with purposeful movements, clearly not concerned about Danny’s comfort. Good for her.

“Got it,” Emilia said after a few minutes of not-so-gentle digging. Danny’s chest and shoulders collapsed, and he held a hand up for the bottle, begging for more.

Sebastian squatted in front of him as Danny spit out the belt. “You really are lucky I gave up killing people.” He handed him the bottle, then rose, and Emilia offered Sebastian the small, bloody device that was still blinking a steady green light.

“Can you get that to Harper?” Rory asked Sebastian. “She’ll know what to do.”

Sebastian nodded, then left, and Emilia gave Chris back his knife after swiping the blood onto her pant leg.

“If you want to patch him up so he doesn’t bleed all over my floors, that is fine with me. There is a medical kit in Papa’s desk. Third drawer on the right,” Emilia said, starting for the door as well. “I need to speak to my men and prepare.”

“Can you also make sure Wyatt gets in touch with Jessica and Luke Scott?” Chris asked. “Make sure they change their flight to Cosenza.” Chris checked the phone he’d borrowed from Wyatt after stowing his knife. No messages yet.

“Of course.” Emilia opened the door that Sebastian had just closed. “I’ll be back. Good luck with him.”

When Chris turned to the room, he found Rory standing with her arms folded across her chest, eyeing Danny. He was a pitiful sight sitting there on his ass, legs stretched out, the bottle at his lips.

“Tell me what else you know. If you really do care about me, in your own sick way, then tell me. Please,” Rory begged, her tone tender. It must have been hard for her to keep a lid on her anger and not yell at the bastard. Chris wanted to holler until his throat was hoarse and his lungs hurt.

“I never did like my cousin, you know.” A smile ghosted Danny’s lips. “Kind of glad the fucker is dead, to be honest.” He rested the bottle on the floor next to him. “Eleven years ago, Andrew met the man my cousin and I worked for. Our boss was a criminal who made most of his money in smuggled goods. Mainly artifacts and other valuables. Andrew asked him to invest in his salvage business, and they struck a deal. I was assigned to keep an eye on Andrew to ensure he held up his end of the bargain.”

Chris went to the desk and grabbed the medical kit, undecided if he’d use it or not.

“Andrew wasn’t having much luck finding treasure, not until he met you in Italy.” Danny took another long swallow.

Good, get drunk, maybe you’ll talk more.

“You became his lucky charm. You helped him turn things around, locate treasure, but at that point, he was already in deep with the smugglers, and he’d developed a taste for the money they were making. Money that came much easier than years of research and diving for treasure.” Danny coughed and winced. Between Sebastian working him over and Emilia digging for gold in his shoulder, Danny must have been hurting pretty badly, but Chris couldn’t muster up an ounce of sympathy for the guy.

Chris hesitantly went over and knelt behind him to clean the wound and apply a bandage. He didn’t need him passing out before his confession, a confession Chris didn’t think even a priest would be able to forgive.

Rory's gaze slid Chris's way, and she nodded a thank-you. He assumed it was for keeping Danny awake and talking. But this man had once been her friend, so he wasn't quite sure.

Rory knelt in front of Danny. "With all the treasure he'd discovered, why keep smuggling?" Rory asked, but Chris knew the answer to that one. Greed and power.

"Andrew didn't want to give up either life. Thanks to your help and talent for finding treasure, he became a celebrity within a few years. He used treasure hunting as a cover for his other activities." Danny stopped to take a breath, or maybe to bite down on his back teeth, as Chris applied the antibiotic cream using gloves and gauze. "But he was sick of giving a cut to my boss, his investor, so he had the guy killed. Cutter took over, in a sense. Offered to keep Jensen and me on instead of killing us, too."

Rory was quiet as if stealing a moment to process the news. "Is that when he became The Italian?"

Danny shook his head. "No, when you decided to leave him, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop you, but he figured you'd always come back, so he assigned me to watch over you while you stole back antiquities. Like I said, he loves you. And you weren't interfering in his work by going after antiquities buyers, so he didn't care. Plus, before you left, you handed him your research for future treasure finds that had him set up for years."

Chris taped the bandage on, removed his gloves, then stood. "But when she went after smugglers . . .?"

Danny peered up at Chris. "I saw Rory's reaction in Peru when she discovered the wildlife smuggling ring, and even though she told me she was quitting, I knew she wouldn't let that go. So, I followed her. When she stumbled upon one of the men who smuggled on Andrew's established trade routes, I knew Andrew wouldn't be able to sit back and just let her continue." He looked over at Rory. "I was the one who gave him the idea to divert your attention with something that would also work in his favor. You know . . . two birds and one stone."

"The list," Rory said under her breath.

"After he took over my boss's operation, Andrew had the opportunity to blackmail a lot of people. And he took advantage of it. Kept them on standby for when he needed them. Rebecca Dominick was one of those people," he explained.

Chris discarded the gauze and gloves, returned the med kit to the desk, then hurried back to Rory's side in case the bastard found the strength to make a move.

"Andrew had used compromising photos of him and Rebecca to blackmail her. Forced her to dig through her husband's files for names. He knew Carter worked smuggling cases for the CIA. Once again, Andrew lucked out when Rebecca discovered that list. And then he ordered her to hand the list to you."

Rory's skin blanched a little, the color draining, and yet, she managed to remain composed. She was more pulled together than he was. He wanted revenge for what Cutter put her through.

"When I followed you to Colombia the *second* time, I knew your patterns well enough to realize you were waiting to make your move on Josef. That you'd probably go into his compound when he was out for his daily jog." Danny tried to shrug but growled from the pain. "I alerted Andrew, then sent Rebecca to wait outside on day five. But you didn't show. Nothing on day six. Finally, day seven, you breached Josef's home."

Holy shit. Chris's fingers curled inward. So, Cutter could've stopped Rory from taking down one of his men but opted for the alternative at Danny's insistence.

"Did Rebecca know what she was doing?" Rory asked, her voice raspy. "Did she know she was

setting me up?"

Danny reached back to where the tracker had been removed. "She had no choice in the matter. Andrew threatened he'd go public with photos of them in bed together."

Son of a bitch. Their blackmail theory had been right. Carter was going to lose his shit. Chris knew he would if he were in Carter's shoes.

"I'm sorry." Danny's apology was borderline offensive in Chris's mind. "This whole thing was just to get you off Andrew's back and keep you safe. To keep him from throwing you in some hole and locking you up forever, too in love with you to kill you. You and I had become friends, and I couldn't see a woman like you in a cage."

How the hell was Chris supposed to feel about that? In a way, Danny had saved her. But he still wanted to rip off that bandage and reinsert his blade into the wound and watch him squirm. "You still let this happen. You didn't warn her. You could've saved Rory. Instead, you set her on this course and got Rebecca killed. You were there when Rebecca died."

"Andrew forced me to go with Jensen. To make sure Santiago went through with Rebecca's murder. *I didn't kill her.*"

"You didn't stop him," Rory said with a shaky voice and stood upright.

"But I did try to warn you after that." Danny closed his one good eye for a brief moment. "He didn't tell me why Rebecca had to die, so I was worried Andrew might come after you next, especially when I learned you were also in D.C."

"Then why didn't you tell me that day?" she asked.

"I spotted Jensen watching us while we had lunch. I excused myself to the men's room, and he told me if I opened my mouth, you'd die. If I didn't talk, you were safe. My cousin was a sick, twisted human. He *wanted* to help Santiago kill Rebecca."

Disgust and horror crossed Rory's face.

"And that's why Cutter made you change your identity," Chris said at the realization.

"Andrew never anticipated the fake nemesis he gave you—named after the country where you first met—would develop into someone so many wound up fearing. You turned into his good luck charm again."

The Italian. It was a fucking sham. A distraction designed for Rory. One from which Cutter heavily profited.

"Santiago," she whispered. "I was safe until him. I kept at the list even after Rebecca died, more motivated than ever. I was safe until he was taken, wasn't I?"

"At first, Andrew didn't know that it was you who targeted Santiago since you'd quit. But when Carter took him from the CIA, Andrew got spooked. He was going to come after you if you didn't show up at his event to tie up loose ends. He was worried his enemies and competitors would find out the truth," he explained. "Cutter has at least a hundred combat-ready men who believe The Italian is some frightening boogeyman when really, he's just a greedy treasure hunter taking advantage of smugglers' stupidity." He cleared his throat. "But those men enforce the trade routes if anyone tries to pass without paying a fee first."

And they're supposedly on their way here now.

"Andrew thought you gave up the life of hunting traffickers because you got bored." Danny diverted his focus back to Rory. "He didn't make the connection between you and Carter until Carter saved you from the Trott brothers. And then Andrew realized he'd have to use me as bait—the one with a connection to you both—to find where you were hiding."

Chris reached for Rory's arm, about to speak up, but the door flung open.

“Harper found Cutter’s location,” Roman alerted them, his tone level despite the grave news Chris knew Roman was about to drop. “But it’s started. Danny didn’t lie. We’re under attack from all sides.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

RORY'S HEAD WAS SPINNING AS SHE REPLAYED DANNY'S CONFESSION IN HER HEAD WHILE SHE AND Chris followed Roman down the hall. *The Italian was invented for me.* It was un-freaking-believable, and she was certain she had more reason to want to kill an ex-boyfriend than most did.

Rory flinched at the booming noises surrounding them as if they were inside a movie theater with surround sound, but this was real. It sounded like they were in the midst of a war.

Was that enemy fire or return fire? She had no clue. Machine guns, from the sounds of it, but she wasn't an expert.

Grenades or explosions of some kind going off outside, too.

Roman had secured Danny in the study, locking him up, and then handed Rory a Glock for protection since Chris was already armed. Roman remained in front of them, holding a rifle with an attached suppressor, as they navigated the halls.

A few of Cutter's men had managed to breach one of the weaker points and made their way inside the home.

The security systems had crashed, and the surveillance cameras were down. After Harper found Cutter's location, Roman brought her to the command center to work on kicking the hacker out to get their systems up and running.

Roman stuck a fist in the air, and Chris pulled Rory tight to his side, bringing their backs flat to the wall. She supposed that was the signal for them to stop and wait.

Roman peeked around the corner, and Chris set a hand to his shoulder, checked left, then tapped his shoulder twice.

They began moving again but only for a moment before a man went flying into the foyer by the double staircases.

Chris shielded Rory with his body, but she stole a glimpse of Sebastian striding with assured steps toward the guy. He lifted the man by the shirt and brought an elbow to his face. "My wife may not want me killing anyone, but that doesn't mean this won't hurt," he seethed.

"I have no problem killing him." Roman stepped forward and shot the man twice in the chest, startling Rory as the guy collapsed motionless on the floor. "Maybe call your wife and get permission?"

"Or ask forgiveness after?" Chris chimed in, and Rory had no clue if they were kidding or serious.

Sebastian tipped his head to the side, his mouth tight, as though he were considering their suggestions. Roman pulled a piece from the back of his pants and tossed it to Sebastian.

"Yeah, okay," Sebastian reluctantly replied.

And if Sebastian could do that kind of damage with only his hands, what would he do with a gun?

“Come on. I’ll take you to Harper.” Sebastian angled his head for them to follow his lead. “Harper thinks you two should meet with the rest of your team in Cosenza,” he added as they walked. “My brother-in-law will fly you there in the chopper.”

Rory didn’t bother to ask how they’d get to the helicopter. Based on how The League leaders appeared to operate, they would have a plan.

A masked enemy circled to stand before them, and Sebastian quickly popped off two precise headshots.

“Like riding a bike,” Chris commented, and Sebastian stole a look back at him, clearly not on the up and up with SEAL humor during battle. The League must’ve operated differently.

Rory stepped over the body with the help of Chris holding her hand. “Do you need our help, though? Should we stay?” She didn’t want to abandon ship, as the saying went.

“I’m not opposed to getting you out of here,” Chris replied, “but I don’t want you in some cowboy showdown with Cutter.”

Yeah, she saw that coming from a mile away.

“This floor is still secure,” Sebastian told them, then glimpsed back at Rory. “Carter Dominick believes you should be there, too. Cutter wants *you*.”

Chris stopped walking. “What, to draw his fire? Fuck that.”

“I need to do this,” Rory insisted and set a hand to Chris’s chest, feeling his heart pounding fast beneath her palm. “He’s been manipulating me for five years.” *Probably even longer*. “I have to face that son of a bitch myself. And if Carter chooses to kill him in the name of revenge, I’ll stand by his side while he does it.”

And she meant every word.

There could be no justice for what Cutter had done.

No justice other than death.

“You’re okay with murder?” Sebastian steadied his eyes on her. “Have you taken the life of an unarmed man? Because I have. It changes you. And it’s a hard thing to come back from, so you better be sure that’s what you want.” He swiveled his gaze to Chris as if saying, *don’t let her do it*, then started forward once again.

Rory let his words simmer as they made their way to Harper’s location in the command center, where she was guarded by Finn and one of Emilia’s men.

“I just got the security cameras up and kicked the hacker out of the system. We’re no longer blind,” Harper said, and Finn alerted his team over the radio to the enemy locations he now saw on the cameras.

“How many guys have y’all taken out so far?” Rory asked in shock, setting her focus on the ten or so screens showing various camera angles. A multitude of bad guys lying on the ground.

“Thirty or so,” Finn answered, and Rory blinked in surprise. “There are probably double that number left.”

“Do you want to go to Cosenza?” Harper turned in the chair to view Rory. “Do you want to be there when that prick goes down?”

“Yes,” Rory said with absolute certainty, and she thought back to the view from her room. She closed her eyes and mapped out a plan. “Does Emilia have a climbing rope? I think we could rappel down the sides of the hilltop. Choose a starting point that overlooks the water.” She set her attention on Chris. “How are your climbing skills? Rappelling is pretty straightforward.”

Chris’s lips tipped into a surprising smile. “I can handle it.”

She checked her clothes. “But we should change to better blend in with the setting.” Her eyes moved back to Harper. “Once we reach the ground, what are your thoughts as to how we’ll get to Adam’s chopper?”

Harper handed Chris a small GPS device, which must have had Cutter’s location on it. “Emilia has a motor yacht docked down below. Since it’s dark out, we’ll kill the dock lights, and you should be able to get there unnoticed.”

“Can either of you drive a yacht?” Sebastian asked.

“I can,” Rory and Chris replied at the same time.

“We’ve got men in position. They’ll draw enemy fire while you two escape,” Sebastian added. “Once you’re on the yacht, you’ll head to the nearest port. Adam is on standby. The helo is twenty minutes from here. One kilometer from the port you’ll dock at.”

“I’ll set you two up with everything you need once we get to our exfil spot,” Roman said. “You should take some extra ammo and my rifle.”

Sebastian turned for the door, then looked back at them. “I need to go back out there, but if anything happens to Adam—”

“It won’t,” Chris cut him off and nodded, then Sebastian focused on Rory. “Good luck,” he added before leaving.

Rory’s heart thundered in her ears as she waited for a response. “So, we’re good with the plan?”

“I have faith in you,” Chris said, his voice soft. “If this is what you want, then I’ve got your back.”

Before she could find the words, Roman pointed out, “If you’re gonna go, you better do it now. There’s a lull in gunfire out there. I think they’re regrouping.”

“Probably didn’t know what they were getting themselves into,” Emilia’s guard said, his Italian accent thick.

“We’ve got you covered.” Finn surprised Rory by pulling her in for a hug, then Harper stood and did the same.

“This isn’t goodbye,” Chris said as if the hugs made him nervous. “What’s our ETA on Bravo?”

“They’ll get in a few hours after you do, so you’ll need to wait for them.” Rory knew Harper’s answer wasn’t what Chris wanted to hear, but she couldn’t make their jets go any faster.

“We’ll do some recon and try and confirm Cutter’s location while we wait.” He motioned for Rory to follow him. “Let’s go.”

Finn and the guard stuck with Harper, and Roman provided extra cover for Rory and Chris as they made their way down the hall to change and prep for their exit.

“You and me,” Rory said while stopping a few minutes later to view Chris, setting a palm to his cheek, “we’re a team.”

A small smile pulled at his lips as he set his palm over hers. “We are.” He leaned in for what she refused to believe was a goodbye kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

COSENZA, ITALY

RORY EYED LUKE AND CHRIS TALKING TO THEIR TEAMMATES. THEIR BACKS WERE TO HER, ATTENTION set on Cutter's location off in the distance. They were preparing to infiltrate the site that was a few hundred meters away. It was on the outskirts of Cosenza, which was to their north. Villa Vecchia, the large public park, was not too far to their west.

A clash of ancient and modern surrounded them. Ruins—fragments of ancient walls, some that looked to be at least six feet high—were scattered all around the area. And in their midst, as though they'd been carefully placed there by a giant who was building a toy city, were two windowless concrete structures. The two-story buildings were their target. Cutter's location.

The thermal imaging software that Jessica had brought suggested twelve people were inside the two structures, in addition to the four armed guards patrolling the property. A fence topped with razor wire closed off the space, which was about the size of two football fields.

Rory had a feeling the site was also used for smuggling given their location near a major highway and proximity to the sea. And based on the other heat signatures, there were animals inside. That only enraged Rory even more. This would also be a rescue mission.

Chris had changed into full combat wear, courtesy of Knox when Bravo Team arrived twenty minutes ago, and he was now decked out in all the garb she assumed he'd wear if out fighting the Taliban. Rory had changed again as well on the yacht before they'd met up with Adam.

Chris and Rory had been spotted as they had descended the hilltop by way of rope back in Sicily, but then a sniper (probably Wyatt) took out whoever had started firing at them. Chris had nearly lost his mind when bullets had flown a few inches by Rory's head.

But they'd made it, so thank God for that.

Rory turned to see Adam McGregor striding toward her. He must not have been Sean's identical twin since he had dark hair and a few other noticeably different features. But he was tall and broad-shouldered and carried himself with the same self-assured stride as his brother. Instead of wearing a suit like Sean, Adam was in sweatpants and a white tee that revealed what looked like Celtic ink on the inside of his forearm.

Hands in his pockets, Adam's gaze was directed over Rory's shoulder to where Carter stood talking to his team. A smaller group than he would have liked to bring, but they'd been short on time, and flying overseas at the last minute posed its own problems.

"Any word from your brother or Sebastian?" she asked Adam.

"This gobshite," Adam began while tipping his head in the direction of Cutter's hideout, "keeps sending people to Emilia's home. They fall back for an hour or so, regroup, then come again. Good news is we're taking out a lot of bad guys in one night."

What time is it, anyway? She'd lost track of time.

"The world will be better for it." Adam gave her a closed-mouth smile. "My brother is new to all of this, and I guess I am, too, but Sebastian and Emilia . . . they're pros." Adam's brogue was much thicker than Sebastian's.

"And may I ask why you're in this, um, League?" Maybe it wasn't her place to ask, but she was curious, especially after what she'd witnessed Sebastian and the others do back at Emilia's estate in Sicily.

"A large faction known as The Alliance controls almost all criminal activity on this side of the

world, perhaps a bit on yours as well. We've been dealing with them and trying to take them down for quite some time."

"Yeah, but there's a deeper reason why, right?" She folded her arms, a gentle breeze floating across her skin, chilling her body when her nerves had already done such a bang-up job of setting her on edge to begin with. And for someone who didn't usually get nervous, she'd been swimming in a boatload of it lately.

Adam produced his phone and pulled up a photo to show her. "Then I guess you could say I do it for them."

Rory peered at a stunning strawberry blonde with a dark-haired baby cradled in her arms. "Beautiful family."

"Anna and Braden. They're my 'why.' Make the world safer for them. Kids change everything. Make you paranoid and more cautious than you ever thought you'd be," Adam explained while pocketing his phone. "I have money, and I guess being part of The League, I have some power, but none of it really protects them as much as I want it to. You could be driving down the street and get sideswiped by a truck. You can't protect your loved ones from everything."

"But you try," Rory said. "As hard as humanly possible," she added as she viewed Chris, knowing he'd spent years doing his best to protect and serve. Thinking back to his Nietzsche quotes, she was fairly certain she understood Chris's "why."

"I promised Sebastian you wouldn't die," Chris said on approach, eyes connecting with Adam. "Maybe sit this operation out?"

Adam held his palms up and nodded. "I'm a hell of a fighter, but I use my fists instead of guns. I'll stay on the sidelines." He reached for Rory's shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Be safe out there." Adam smiled, then left at the sight of Luke and Carter heading toward them.

"My people are ready to move in," Carter announced once he'd met up with Rory and Chris. He was now in black pants, boots, and a black, long-sleeved top. A ball cap on backward like Luke and Chris, and it was a different look than she'd grown accustomed to on Carter.

"We're up against a lot of unknowns." Luke drew his hands to his hips. "And I know you're anxious to make your move, but we need to secure the perimeter before we breach."

"We have one of the world's two best snipers here with us," Chris said, and now Rory knew he was referring to Liam since Wyatt, their other sniper, was taking care of business at Emilia's place. "Liam will head to high ground and take out the four guards on patrol. Then Asher, our best breacher, will get us through the gates."

"We all need to be on comms and in each other's ears, so we don't accidentally kill one another," Luke said to Carter, still not sounding all that happy about working with him. Apparently, since there were only sixteen enemy tangos in total, he felt Bravo Team and Chris were enough to handle the job, but Carter refused to sit out.

Rory spotted Jessica walking toward them with Bear at her side. She had a few items of Cutter's she'd grabbed from his salvage vessel off the coast of Puerto Rico in case Bear needed to test out his search skills and find the prick.

I had sex with that man. Trusted him. She was going to puke.

She had to focus on Chris. The man in her life she knew she'd be able to trust no matter what. She vowed never to let the bad taste left in her mouth by Cutter's betrayal ruin the future she wanted with Chris.

This ends now.

She stroked Bear on the head, happy to see him again. He'd slobbered all over her and Chris as

soon as he saw them. Rory knew Bear wasn't even close to being operation-ready, but she did trust his super sniffer.

"Owen's handing our wireless comms to your guys now," Jessica said to Carter, who followed her gaze to where Owen and Carter's men were together, prepping.

Luke gave a command over his comm and sent Liam, Knox, and Asher into position. Asher strode their way before moving to his post, though. He gave his wife a long, lingering kiss—not giving a damn about onlookers—then hurried off.

Well, that was hot.

"Rory, you'll stay back with Jessica," Luke instructed.

What? No! "I need to be there. I have to be included." She wouldn't back down. "And if there are animals in there, I can help."

"And we have no idea if we're going up against tigers or puppy dogs," Luke reminded her.

"Based on the heat signatures, we're dealing with animals much smaller than lions," Rory remarked.

"If we need to use someone to draw out Cutter, you can use me," Carter offered.

"He won't be satisfied with only you," Rory said with a shake of her head. "He's still in love with me in his weird, stalker-like way." *He's been watching me for years*, she thought in revulsion. *Hide me in a hole to keep like a pet?* "I'm trained in martial arts and weapons. I've infiltrated seventeen compounds in the last three years. And then before that—"

"She can handle it." Jessica set a hand on Luke's arm. "Give her a comm and a gun." She looked at Rory. "And a vest."

"Jessica," Luke admonished. He may have been team leader, but the only person Rory truly needed to convince was Chris. If he were on her side, then surely, Luke would come around.

"One second." Chris tipped his head, motioning for her to follow him.

"Please don't ask me to stand down," Rory said when he grasped her hands in his. "I need to be in there."

"Do you really want to take the kill shot?" Chris looked down at the grass beneath his boots. "Sebastian may be right."

"I don't need to kill him myself, but I do need to face him. That door, or window, whatever I thought I needed to shut . . ." How could she articulate what she was feeling?

"Okay," he said with a nod, not forcing her to find the words, and that meant more than she could possibly express to him. His faith and trust in her spoke volumes.

"Thank you." She flung her arms around him for a tight hug. "This is poor timing to tell you, and I promise I'm not saying it because I'm worried I'll die, but you should know I'm really, really falling for you," she said around happy tears. *More than just falling. I fell.*

He brought both palms to her cheeks and swiped the few stray tears that escaped her eyes, and he returned her smile. "I know this isn't a goodbye thing. And I fell for you, too." He kissed her, surprising her by slipping his tongue into her mouth in a more erotic kiss than she'd anticipated. "Now," he said when their lips parted, their mouths still drawn close like magnets, "let's go take this fucker down."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“DELTA TWO, DO YOU COPY?”

A.J. reserved Delta One for his wife, but I'd love nothing more than for you to become Delta Two. Chris recalled his words to Rory just before Asher breached the compound, and all hell broke loose. Fortunately, that “hell” was of their making, and it was raining down on Cutter’s men.

Knowing Rory was in the compound with Bear at her side had him checking on her every few seconds, even though she was in visual range, only twenty feet ahead of him alongside the exterior of building one.

“This is Delta Two. That’s a good copy. *Again.*”

“Just checking,” Chris replied with the same response he’d used thirty seconds ago, and the thirty seconds before that. He was fairly certain he’d never been so on edge during an operation.

A crackling sound had Chris setting his focus on a small speaker positioned next to a floodlight at the corner of the building. The light was broken, but a little static could be heard coming from the square speaker.

“I didn’t expect you to come.” The words flowed out of the speaker now, interspersed by more static. “This is a surprise.”

Cutter?

Rory halted and flinched at the sound of Cutter’s voice, and Chris watched as she tracked the voice to the speaker.

“I can’t see you since someone cut off my cameras, but it’s you, right? It’s my Rory. I had planned on bringing you back to the city where it all started for us, but you found me yourself,” Cutter went on, sounding more creepy stalker than corrupt smuggler right about now. His tone was deep and eerie and disturbingly calm. Cutter was the kind of crazy that Chris knew could transform into a psychopathic killer within a blink of an eye, though.

Cue dramatic music here. Chris closed the space between him and Rory, then set a hand to her shoulder to let her know he was with her. He didn’t want any more space between them from now on.

Thankfully, they had Liam on overwatch, and he’d cut down any enemies before Chris even knew there was a threat. They were safe with him out there. Plus, Asher and the others had the perimeter secure from all possible entry points. No one would be getting out. Carter and his men wanted to be the first to clear the building, though, and Luke hesitantly agreed.

“We had a great life. Five years of adventures,” Cutter went on. “Five years of fucking.”

Chris’s stomach grew sick at Cutter’s words. It was bad enough Chris had seen those photos of Cutter and Rebecca, naked in bed together. But to have to ask Rory to identify the scumbag’s naked body . . . he did not need to draw up any thoughts of Cutter with Rory.

Rory looked back, and even in the dim lighting, he knew there was an apology in her eyes.

“Building one secure,” Carter announced a few seconds later.

“I found the animals,” one of Carter’s men spoke up. “Asiatic black bear cubs. Ten of them in cages.”

Yeah, that was also fucking horrible to picture.

“Where the hell is our target?” Carter rasped.

“Given his monologuing, I’m checking the security room,” one of Carter’s men said.

Cutter’s performance had stopped, though. What did that mean?

“Continue to hold your positions, Delta Two and Echo Three,” Luke instructed. “Wait to proceed until we know both buildings are clear. If the target isn’t inside one of those buildings, he has to be nearby.”

“We’ve got a tunnel!” Carter yelled. “I think he’s already outside the gate. Don’t let him get away!”

That’s what Chris was worried about, damn it. Cutter was distracting them with his creepy talk.

And they hadn’t had time to do a thorough sweep of the area prior to the time-sensitive mission before the sun came up. But the property was smack in the middle of ancient ruins, and now Chris knew why. Cutter had an escape plan if needed. The tunnel had probably existed for hundreds and hundreds of years. But where was the exit?

“We’re on it,” Luke responded in a level tone.

“Second building is secure. All enemies are down,” another one of Carter’s men said. “No more tangos in sight.”

Chris relaxed at his words, but they still needed to find Cutter. “He can’t be far if he was able to talk over the speaker from outside the fence.” Or maybe he’d been talking over the speaker before he’d entered the tunnel, and he lost the signal once he went underground. *Fuck*. “We gotta get you out of here. Too much high ground around us.”

“I’ve got you in my sights,” Liam reminded them he had their backs. “And my guess is he’s on the north side. It’s like a maze over there. The walls are high in some areas, and he might know I can’t put eyes on him in every spot.”

Carter emerged from building one, and Rory signaled Bear to move. The rest of the team fanned out to search the property outside the fenced area, focusing on the north side.

“Alpha One. Hold back. Let my people handle this,” Luke instructed Carter, and it felt so damn odd to have Carter included with a call sign on this op.

Was he still their enemy? Or had he only led the world to believe he was a villain in order to exact justice for his wife?

Chris didn’t have time to think about that now, though.

“I think we might need to send Bear into those ruins,” Liam said from somewhere on the hilltop, flat on his belly behind his long gun, watching them.

Bear? Sort of ironic given the actual bears on site.

“I don’t know.” Once outside the fence, Rory stopped and looked to Chris, then to Bear.

Chris set his rifle aside and crouched before Bear. “You got this, boy. Right?” He scratched Bear behind his ears. “He can track him. I know he can do it. He was meant to do this, be a Team dog. What you said to me in Virginia, well, you were right.” That felt like forever ago, but it was fresh on his mind.

“Okay.” Rory knelt next to him and clipped a small tracker to Bear’s collar, then she reached into her pocket for one of Cutter’s handkerchiefs she’d selected for the just-in-case moment that was about

to happen.

Rory let Bear get a good scent, then she issued the command, and Bear hurried off without a second thought.

Born for this.

She retrieved the small black GPS device from the pocket of her vest the team had given her to track Bear.

Chris and Rory rounded the fence and kept their heads low as they followed Bear's signal on their GPS device as he disappeared into the ruins, the zigzag of crumbling walls.

"Bravo Four, what's on the other side of the ruins?" Chris asked.

"The river," Liam answered. "I assume that's his escape plan."

Luke diverted a few of his men to head along the sides of the ruins to get in place near the river.

Carter and his men hung back a few feet, closely following behind him and Rory.

Rory provided Bear's movements as she and Chris followed the little blinking light of Bear's tracker, every left and right turn Bear quickly made as he traversed the maze-like ruins.

"We're moving in," Chris said, his heartbeat fast and furious.

Carter was at his six, and he felt oddly comforted by his presence.

Bear's roar traveled loud into the air as he barked continuously.

"He found his target. Cutter's still inside the walls, then," Chris told his team, but then the barking abruptly stopped.

"He's immobilized." Cutter's voice shattered the air and echoed off the walls. "I had a feeling you'd have an animal with you, Rory. He's been tranquilized. He was about to rip out my throat," he continued. "I had no choice but to knock him out. If you don't want me to put a bullet in him next, then I want to talk to you. I know you're close. I can feel it. But only you, Rory."

"You're out of options!" Chris called out to the sick prick, and if the man hurt his dog, so help him. He'd go *John Wick* on his ass. "Nowhere left to run! It's over."

Carter advanced on Chris's left, and Chris wasn't sure if he could stop a man focused on revenge. Carter might just walk into a trap and get himself killed because one thing Chris knew for certain about Andrew Cutter—he was a master at setting traps. He'd tricked a genius like Rory for years, which was no easy feat. Granted, he'd been her mentor and probably taught her all the tricks in the book, so he knew her moves before she even made them. Plus, he'd had Danny and Rebecca doing his bidding and steering her along a path he'd designed.

Chris's blood boiled as he considered it all. He needed to get his team closer and position Cutter somewhere in Liam's line of sight, where the walls weren't as high.

"I'll go. I'm not letting Bear die." Rory faced Chris. "Please. He won't hurt me. Danny said he's obsessed with me, remember? Still in love with me. He could've killed me at any point over the years, and he didn't."

"Absolutely not." Chris allowed his sling to catch his rifle as he grasped her forearms, terrified she'd run toward danger. "I've also heard of crazy-ass people killing those they love so no one else can have them."

"We don't have time for your argument," Carter said, starting to walk past them, but Chris whirled around and grabbed him by the arm. "I don't want your dog to get hurt, either, but we're not trading a human life for an animal."

"That dog put his life on the line for us tonight." Rory's voice broke, and Chris felt like someone had grabbed hold of his heart and squeezed. "He's worth saving."

"I know that. Believe me," Chris began, "but I can't lose you. Please don't walk away from me."

And fucking A, this isn't my mom messing with me. No, no, no. Not my issues talking, he told himself. This was about saving the life of the woman he wanted to . . . marry. Yeah, he wanted to marry her. And he planned on doing it.

“The man from the gala. Is that you out there? Are you with her?” Cutter called out. “You should know Rory always runs away. Runs from everyone and everything.” Cutter was trying to taunt him, the son of a bitch. And they had to be close if they could hear him so clearly.

“What’s your status, Bravo Four?” Chris quickly asked Liam, ignoring Cutter. “Eyes on the target yet?”

“He stepped into my view for only a second, then ducked away,” Liam responded. “Two right turns and hang a left, and you’ll find him.”

“Roger that.” Chris looked at Carter. “You heard Bravo Four. He’s in position. We don’t need to advance. Let him take the shot.”

“And you heard him, too. He doesn’t have a clear one yet.” Carter started to walk, and Chris grabbed hold of his vest and yanked him backward.

“Stand down,” Chris hissed the order, then checked behind him to see more of Carter’s men coming. “You’re way outnumbered!” Chris yelled out to Cutter. “Give up or get a bullet to the head.”

“He’s getting a bullet to the head from me, regardless,” Carter insisted.

“Don’t be an—” Chris dropped his words and let go of Carter at the sight of blonde hair flashing out of the corner of his eye.

Rory.

She was running.

“No!” He shoved Carter against the wall and started after Rory, hoping to catch up with her before she traded herself for Bear.

Just as he was about to round the last turn, Chris pinned his back to the wall when he heard Cutter’s voice.

“You ran from your home in Alabama. Ran off with me until you got bored and left to chase down antiquities buyers. And then you gave that up, too. You trade in one thing for another. Never satisfied. Always running.” Chris realized Rory was now face-to-face with Cutter.

Chris stole a look to see her hands up, the muzzle of a gun aimed her way. Then he focused back to see Carter and his men on approach. He held a gloved palm up, signaling for them to stop. He would not let them get Rory shot.

He loved that stubborn, headstrong woman. And he hadn’t used the words out loud or even to himself before this moment, terrified it was too soon, but now . . .

“Nothing ever satisfies you, does it? But for some crazy reason, I thought you’d make a full circle and run back to me one of these days,” Cutter went on. “Does the man you’re with, the one who looked like he wanted to kill me at the gala, know you’ll run from him, too?”

Chris went stiff at his words, and he bit down on his back teeth. Cutter needed to die. Now.

“Let me check to make sure Bear is breathing,” Rory demanded, and knowing her, she wouldn’t wait for Cutter’s permission.

“You got a clear shot yet?” Chris whispered, hoping Liam could hear him. He aimed his rifle on Carter as a warning not to dare round that wall and go for Cutter.

Carter’s nostrils flared as he observed Chris, but he remained still, probably knowing if he made a move, Rory might get hit.

“I have Rory in my sights,” Liam told him. “Cutter’s head keeps moving out of view, though.”

“I can draw his fire and put him in the open for Liam to shoot,” Carter said in a low voice so

Cutter couldn't hear him, practically mouthing the words.

"Wait," Chris whispered, still not lowering his rifle.

"You see, he's breathing. And now you're my ticket out of here. Step over him," Cutter commanded, and what the hell was he planning? Some hostage situation?

"No," Rory shot back. "Tell me the truth first. I don't believe Rebecca would willingly do what Danny said she did."

Carter flinched at Rory's statement and took one step too close, nearly setting his chest to Chris's rifle, and Chris didn't give a damn five armed men stood behind Carter. No one was getting past Chris until Rory was out of danger.

"You know what makes me sleep well at night," Cutter began, "knowing an uptight woman who wanted to be First Lady died believing she had an affair with me. She died without knowing the truth."

Chris lowered his weapon and set both palms to Carter's chest when the man attempted to move forward out of rage. "Please," Chris begged. "Do you want Rory to die by this fucker's hands like your wife? Please, help me save her," he added in a low voice, and Carter closed his eyes but slowly relented and backed up.

"What do you mean?" Rory asked.

"My celebrity status had women dropping their panties for me. Married women, too. I'd wine and dine wives of CIA officers and DEA agents. Tell them some fun stories, get them drunk, and the next thing I knew, I had an in to their husband's organization. The women had no choice but to feed me intel or risk their husbands finding out."

The sick fuck. Chris reached for his rifle again and listened closely, hoping Rory would be able to draw Cutter into the open.

"It didn't work with Rebecca. She was too in love with her husband. I spiked her drink. Had my guys take photos staged to look like we'd had sex. I'm not a rapist. Gotta draw the line somewhere." He laughed a little, and Carter snapped his hands into fists.

Chris wished more than anything he could let Carter loose on the bastard, but he had to get Rory out of there first—a woman who put her life on the line for Bear. For truth and justice.

"You're disgusting," Rory said.

"Maybe. Or maybe I got so good at my job, well, *jobs* that I lost sight of what's important. And you surprised me by deviating from that list I forced Rebecca to give you."

"Why'd you kill her if she did what you asked?" Rory pressed.

"She outlived her usefulness," Cutter responded as if he knew Carter might be listening, and he was enjoying whatever pain he was causing Rebecca's husband. "She was on the verge of sacrificing her political ambitions, even her own life, to tell you the truth."

"She did sacrifice her life," Rory said in a soft, sad tone.

"That was her choice, just like it was your choice to keep running. And when you stopped hunting those men on the list, I thought you were going to search me out. Finally come back to me. But you chose someone else, didn't you?"

Rory didn't have much time. If Cutter believed Rory loved someone else, he'd snap. Because his love for her was sick and twisted.

She was going to have to act. Give an award-winning performance to try and place Cutter in Liam's line of sight.

"You know me," Rory began, "and you know I could never settle down with someone like him." She was quiet for a painful heartbeat.

Chris seized a deep breath, but he kicked the demons his mother left behind right out of his head.

“I can’t be tied down, you’re right. I have to open my wings and fly,” Rory said before screaming, “Now!”

“Taking the shot,” Liam alerted over comms. Chris twisted to the side and started around the corner just as Cutter took a bullet to the chest.

“And I’m not your lucky charm, you sick bastard!” Rory cried out. She turned to see Chris and nearly tripped over a sleeping Bear. She must have jumped over him when she’d yelled “now” to push Cutter into view.

Chris clutched her tight to his body, setting his chin at the top of her head, tears of relief in his eyes as he held on to her.

Rory flinched in his arms at the sounds of gunfire, at Carter ensuring the job was done by putting two bullets in Cutter’s head. “I got you,” Chris promised, a comforting line they’d shared between each other several times recently, “and you’re really, really damn brave.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“WE’RE GOING TO BE BUSY FOR A FEW WEEKS.” JESSICA’S FOCUS WAS ON HER LAPTOP, WHERE Harper’s image was displayed on the screen as they chatted via web call. Harper was still with the rest of Echo Team in Sicily. They’d managed to take down over eighty of Cutter’s men, and the good guys didn’t suffer any casualties. It was a miracle. A testament to both Echo Team and The League.

“Why will you be busy?” Rory asked, peering at Jessica as she stood before the laptop perched on the hood of Jessica’s rental Jeep.

“Because we’ve inherited all of The Italian’s, well, *Cutter’s* criminal contacts. Every smuggler and supplier he’s dealt with since he began operating, even before he created The Italian’s identity,” Harper explained.

“We’ll help out.” Emilia appeared on the screen beside Harper. “And if we need a hand taking down The Alliance, I might call you up.” She smiled. “It’s a good thing I’m rich, or I’d have to send you a bill for all the damages to my place,” she surprised Rory with a joke.

“My brother okay?” Rory recognized the voice with the Irish lilt as Sean.

Harper angled the laptop screen to showcase Sebastian and Sean standing behind where she sat, and Rory stepped aside to show proof of life. Adam was nearby talking to Carter about something. “He’s in one piece,” Rory commented with a grateful smile.

“Good,” Sebastian said with a nod. “And nice work, I heard what you did out there. Brave.”

“Thank you.” She still felt horrible for running from Chris, leaving him there . . . her gut had told her Cutter wouldn’t kill her. But when she was face-to-face with him, she saw the crazy in his eyes, and she realized her gut might have been wrong. The only thing to do at that point was lie to Cutter—because there’s no reasoning with crazy—then leap over Bear in hopes of putting Cutter into Liam’s line of sight.

She might not have taken the chance if one of the two best snipers in the world hadn’t had Cutter scoped.

Rory thanked everyone again, then waved goodbye and went to find Bear, who was still snoozing in the back of one of the SUVs. Carter’s men were in the process of carefully transporting the bear cubs out of the compound, and Bravo Team worked on collecting the bodies of Cutter and his men.

It’d been a bloodbath, but Sebastian and Chris were right. Even if it had been self-defense, if she had been the one to kill Cutter, that moment would most likely have stayed with her for far too long, and she didn’t need that man crowding her life in any way, shape, or form ever again.

Chris was standing outside the open tailgate of the SUV, stroking Bear’s head as he slept, but stopped as Rory approached and pulled her into his arms. “What you did back there was amazing. Incredible.”

“And a little stupid?” she admitted.

He closed one eye as if contemplating her words. “Not the word I’d use when describing you. Not at all.” He set a soft, tender kiss to her mouth.

Never in a million years as she’d scaled that cliff in France back in August, would she have imagined two months later she’d be here, the starting point of her journey ten years ago. But now she had a new journey, one that began with the man pinning her to his side.

“You think it’s really here?”

“What are you talking about?” Rory looked up to see Chris gazing off in the distance, taking in the city that was beautifully lit up and sprawled before them from their high vantage point. She couldn’t make out his eyes or the expression on his face since their only source of light was from the surrounding vehicles, but then she realized what he was referring to. It hadn’t even been two weeks since that conversation, though it felt like two years ago. “Alaric’s gold.” She set her eyes on the city to share the view. “I don’t know, but”—she turned to him and lifted her chin—“the only kind of treasure I’m interested in is the kind you can’t see.”

He tipped his head to the side, waiting for her to explain.

“Love,” she whispered and waited for a beat to let the meaning sink in. “I need you to know that what Cutter said back there about me always running, well, there is some truth to that.”

Chris needed to understand the truth from her. His mom had abandoned him, and the last thing Rory wanted was him worrying she’d do the same.

“Maybe I was running in the beginning. But as time went on, my world grew. I discovered so many obstacles and challenges I needed to face. And each time I conquered one, I wanted to move on to another, to keep pushing myself to learn and grow.” Her lip went between her teeth for a moment, searching for the right words. “The difference now is that whatever I decide to do with my life, I want to do it *with* you. I know we just started seeing each other, if that’s what you can call being kidnapped and all that happened after that, but—”

“I love you, too.” He palmed her cheek. “I mean, if that’s what you were getting at.” His lips twitched into a smile that even in the dim lighting, she was able to witness. “And I don’t need a fence and a house and, well, maybe I do need a fence until Bear is trained, and come to think of it, a house for him, too . . . but what I’m saying in a rambly way is that I won’t ever try to keep you tied down. I’ll support whatever you decide to do, but I’d love to be in your life while you do it.”

She looped her arms over his shoulders and pressed her body to his. “The perfect kind of crazy for each other.” Her lips met his in a hot kiss, and then she murmured, “I love you, Echo Three.”

“Mmm, I would totally say I love you, Delta Two, but I knew a Delta Two back in the Navy, and he was a dick,” he said with a laugh, and she chuckled, too. “I love you, Rosemary.” His mouth covered hers, and a warmth filled her body.

They continued kissing, not caring who might see until a throat clear and an, “Excuse me.”

“Yes?” Rory asked as Chris set his forehead to hers, not releasing her from his embrace. Neither wanted to leave the moment.

“I just wanted to thank you and say I’m sorry.”

Rory and Chris pivoted to see Carter there. He had a hand extended to Rory. She peered at his offer, then shook his hand, and Chris followed suit.

“I’m not the man everyone thinks I am.” Carter exhaled a deep breath of the crisp October air. “I created that man to get to the truth. To fight for justice.” He stroked his short beard. “In hindsight, the way I went about it and my tactics may not have been the most appropriate, and I’m sorry for putting you in danger, Rory.”

Chris set a hand to her back. "I forgive you. Rebecca would, too," she offered Carter the words she knew he needed to hear.

Carter dropped his eyes to the ground as if not so sure about that.

"What will you do next?" Chris asked.

"Maybe help clean up the mess Cutter made. But I don't exactly have a place at the Agency anymore." He lifted his eyes, his tone somber. "I'm not really that guy, anyway."

"I have contacts with some security companies. Wyatt's wife's brother, Gray Chandler, started a business after he got out of the Army. I could connect you to him."

"I'm familiar with Gray," Carter responded. "Not so sure I'm cut out to have a boss again, but I'll think about it." His attention moved back to Rory. "That list might have been given to you by Cutter, but they were men I always wished I could go after. You did a lot of good." His lips curled into a slight smile. "There are about eight more names, though." He turned to the side, prepared to leave. "Maybe I'll finish what you started. Bad guys are bad guys, right? Hate to leave an open case." He tipped his head and started to walk away.

"Wait," she called out when the thought struck her. "What will happen to Danny? I know how you feel about him, and I'm angry, too, but—"

"There are other forms of punishment than death," Carter said, his tone calm. "I'll handle Danny and Santiago."

Santiago, right. "Goodbye, Carter."

"See you around." Carter smiled, then strode away, and Rory had a feeling they would be seeing him again.

"Well, what do you say we get on a plane and go home?" Chris asked, facing her.

"Home?"

"I mean, my home is your home if you want it to be." The deep timbre of his voice sent a thrill through her entire body.

"Oh," she said while bringing her mouth closer to his, "I want it to be. I also want that more comfortable bed you mentioned buying."

"That I can do, and anything else. Anything you want, it's yours."

She smiled, emotion pouring through her as happy tears hit her eyes. "I'm pretty damn confident I have everything I need."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA - FOUR DAYS LATER

RORY ROLLED HER HEAD TO THE SIDE TO VIEW THE GORGEOUS AND NAKED MAN IN BED NEXT TO HER. “How’d your people take the news that I know the truth about Scott and Scott?”

“They asked when I was going to propose, now that you’re in our secret little club,” he said with a laugh. “You’ll have to meet with the President and sign a promise you won’t share what you know if that’s okay?”

“Like, go to the White House?” Rory asked in surprise.

“I mean, he has other places. Camp David, if you prefer.”

When she swatted his bare chest, he captured her wrist and stealthily pulled her on top of him.

“Ready for round two, are we?” She shimmied on his lap, and his cock, lying thick against his thigh, began to wake again. One slight move and he might slide right into her as she straddled him.

“I’m always ready for you.” He brought one hand behind his head as he stroked her hair with his other. “Love your blonde hair,” he murmured.

She sat upright, and his hand dropped as she braced her palms against his wall of muscles while moving her ass around in slow circles to tease him.

“Oh, you know I’ll flip you over and have my way with you if you keep that up,” he rasped, eyes nearly twinkling as he observed her. One hand went to her breast, and he teased her nipple. The rough texture of his slightly calloused palm only heightened the pleasure she felt with his hand on her.

“Bear’s taken over as our alarm clock, I see,” she said, looking toward the closed door where he howled and scratched on the other side.

“And we haven’t done any training since we’ve been back,” he reminded her. They’d decided to go easy on Bear since he bravely risked his life for them only to get a tranquilizer dart to the neck by Cutter. Thinking of that moment would be a mood killer, though.

“We’ll start next week. He’s been through a lot.” She focused back on Chris. “We should get dressed and take him out. Round two after breakfast?”

Chris set his hands to her hips and shifted upright, then combed his fingers through her hair. The motion was so relaxing she closed her eyes and hummed her appreciation until he stopped and gently held her head between his hands. “You’re avoiding your brother. After you make that call, my cock is all yours.”

She playfully rolled her eyes. “I’m not using sex to avoid talking to Jesse and Ella.”

“Liar,” he said, then gently swatted her ass as she eased off him. And now she was even more turned on and prepared to put off the video call she had scheduled with her brother and best friend.

“I’m nervous to talk to them. Not sure what they’ll think about my past, and we both know Jesse lost his mind when he learned I’d been taken.” He’d booked a flight to D.C., but Rory had insisted he cancel and come for the Halloween party instead since it was coming up soon anyway. Elaina had pushed her dad to throw a party this year, and everyone knew Liam couldn’t say no to his daughter.

Rory wished Savanna could come for a visit, too, but unfortunately, she wasn’t able to make it. Now that Rory knew the truth about Chris’s work, she understood why Savanna had expressed her concern about Rory and Chris getting together.

“They’ll be scared and proud. Like I am.”

“You’re scared?” she asked while pulling on her yoga pants. “One second, Bear,” she called out, so he’d stop howling at them to get a move on.

Chris rounded the foot of their *new* bed, which he'd wasted no time in purchasing—it even had a headboard—and closed in on her.

He'd chosen to go commando beneath his sweatpants, and Rory couldn't resist tracing the lines of his torso before positioning her hands on his muscular arms.

Since she'd yet to put on a top, his eyes immediately focused on her tits. Rory rolled her lips between her teeth to keep from laughing when, after a few silent moments, he blinked and tore his eyes to her face. "I'm scared because I'm about to ask you something, and I can't believe I'm going to do it."

Her heartbeat kicked up at his words.

"Roman wants to go have a little chat with the Trott brothers, and I'd like to join him. And I wanted to know if you wanted to come with us."

She stepped back out of his arms. "Wow." She took her time, acting as though she had to think about his invitation. Suspense-building at its finest. A little hem and haw. "Thank you for the offer, and it means the world to me that you asked, but I'm good. I'll let you boys go have your payback."

Chris's shoulders dropped with immediate relief, and she almost felt bad she'd taken that long to answer. "There are so many reasons I love you, but damn, woman. You really are amazing. I mean, I knew the second you were singing into that spatula in the kitchen that you were the one I was going to marry."

"Oh, really? That was the moment?" She grinned, then lifted her chin to look at him and slowly traced the seam of her lips with her tongue. "Well, mine was after our first kiss. I just knew I was falling in love with you."

She was worried she'd said something wrong when he closed his eyes and set his forehead to hers. "Next Friday, the twenty-ninth, I have an appointment with Doctor Riley Logan."

"The veteran's therapist I recommended?" She pulled her forehead away from his in surprise but found his eyes still closed.

"I think it's time I work through my shit. If I can't man up and do it, those out there who have far worse PTSD than me may not, and I want to do it for them. Remind my buddies at the VA and others that it's okay to get help. It's not weak." The look in his eyes when he opened them just about did her in, but she held back her tears. "And, of course, I'm doing it for us."

He was such an amazing human being. So freaking good. And he was her guy. "I'd like to meet your friends, the ones you visit. And I was thinking maybe I could also train service dogs to help veterans."

"You would?" His gorgeous eyes widened.

Bear howled, and Rory was certain that was a *yes* from him on her idea, and both she and Chris chuckled at the same time. "I would."

He stepped back, took a deep breath, then rubbed the emotion from his eyes.

"And if you're going to be brave, I guess I have no more excuses. I need to talk to my family. Tell them everything."

She wasn't about to press Chris about his mom, though. When he was ready to reach out, *if* he wanted to, she'd let him decide.

Chris pulled her in for a hug and set a quick kiss to her lips before Bear anxiously scratched the door. "We're coming, boy."

They finished getting dressed, then let Bear outside, sipping their coffee, standing side by side in the morning light. Her heart couldn't be fuller. And she knew there were so many more adventures awaiting her with this man in her life.

“HOW’D THEY TAKE IT?” HARPER ASKED.

Rory held the phone out to view her on FaceTime. Rory felt like she’d known all of Chris’s teammates for years instead of just a few weeks, and she had a feeling Harper was going to be a close friend. “Ella almost fainted. No, that was Jesse.” She smiled. “They’ll need time to process, but I was also just happy to force them to be in the same room together, to be honest.”

“Oh? Your brother still have his head up his ass?” Harper asked from her hotel room.

Rory wasn’t even sure where Harper was right now. She and the guys had been bouncing all over the place, taking down bad guys the last several days, cleaning up Cutter’s mess.

“Yeah, Jesse’s head is so far up there, he can’t see.” Rory sipped her second cup of coffee that morning while she watched Chris and Bear outside running the obstacle course. They weren’t training, just having fun. And it made her heart so happy to see. “You’ll be back for the Halloween party, right? I know Chris is going to meet up with Roman soon, but you’ll meet Jesse at the party. He’s coming to visit.” *Maybe A.J. can wrangle Ella to come up, too.* A little Halloween blind date.

“I wouldn’t miss it. Elaina is pretty excited, so no matter what, we’ll all be there.”

“And, um, how is Roman?” Rory took a chance to poke around when she probably ought to mind her business.

“Roman is Roman,” Harper said as if that were supposed to explain everything.

And you’re you. Rory shifted the blinds to try and see what Chris was now staring at and why Bear barked. “One second.” Rory lowered the phone and went to the living room to look out the window to see if someone was on the driveway.

There was a small red Kia parked, and a man standing in front of the Jeep, eyes set Chris’s way. Well, maybe not a man. More like a teenager. Or a young twentysomething-year-old.

“Can I call you back?”

“Of course. I have to run, anyway. Bad guys to catch.”

“Stay safe!” Rory ended the call and flung her phone onto the couch, then went for the side door and exited. She shielded her eyes from the near-noon light hitting her face as she walked to see who was there. “Can I help you?” she called out since Chris remained glued in place out in the backyard. And that wasn’t like Chris.

At the sight of Rory, Bear began to run her way.

The guy turned toward Rory. “Hi,” he said. His light blond hair was close-cut, and he was tall but lean. Not much muscle on him. Nice blue eyes and handsome features. Hell, he reminded her of a young Chris.

Oh.

Ohhhh shit.

“Is that Chris Hunter?” He tipped his head toward where Chris stood with hands drawn to his hips like he was seeing a ghost.

Chris knew, didn’t he? He knew he was his brother.

Was that why his mom had called before they’d been taken, and why she’d continued to call? Since both of their phones were now at the bottom of the ocean, the first order of business upon returning Stateside, along with buying a new bed, was to purchase new phones. As soon as Chris had powered his up, he was inundated with notifications of missed calls and voicemails.

“Yeah, that’s him. And you are?” Rory reached out to pet Bear as she asked for confirmation.

Bear surprised her by waiting for permission to approach the stranger, and she'd given it.

She stole a glimpse at Chris, who was now heading their way.

"I'm Elijah." The guy stepped around Bear. "Are you his wife?" He offered his hand.

"No." *One of these days.*

"Can we help you?" Chris strode closer, removed his ball cap, and set it against his chest.

Elijah pulled his hand free from Rory's and twisted nervously to face Chris. A good ten feet of space separated the two men. Brothers, she was sure of it. And her stomach knotted at whatever both of them must have been feeling.

"You're not an easy man to find." Elijah gripped the nape of his neck and squeezed. "I just learned about you." His throat moved as he swallowed anxiously. "I found some photos of you, and when I pressed Mom for the truth, I got angry and left home a few weeks ago. Decided to come find you."

And yup, that was why Chris's mom had been calling. She knew her sons would meet at some point.

Chris remained motionless. Shocked?

"Did you know about me all this time? Or were you as clueless as I was?" Elijah asked, his voice cracking.

Chris slowly lowered his hat to his side, looked to Rory for a moment before he focused back on his brother. And she knew this part was going to be hard for Elijah to hear and for Chris to say.

"You knew." Elijah stumbled back in his sneakers a few steps. "You just didn't care." He dragged a palm down his face.

"Wait, I, um." Chris stretched his free hand out, but the words must still have been hard to come by.

"I need to catch my flight anyway." Elijah turned to the side, tossed one last look at Chris, then took off. Actually, he ran like he was hightailing it from a robbery.

"Shit. I just fucked that up." Chris came alongside Rory as his brother backed out of the driveway in a hurry, Bear barking at the dust kicking into the air from the gravel.

"You were shocked. It's not your . . ." Rory closed her eyes and set a hand to her stomach at the memory of words that hadn't made sense at the time. "We've gotta go!" She hurried into the house and grabbed the Jeep keys before Chris could ask questions. "I'll drive."

"What?" Chris stared at her in confusion, but Bear didn't waste any time and hopped into the Jeep.

"Get in," she hollered while strapping herself in with the seat belt. Once Chris joined them, she quickly reversed out of the driveway. "Elaina said, 'Don't let him go to the airport,'" she reminded him, hoping to catch up with Elijah, following in the direction he'd gone. "I think she meant your brother." Chills coasted over her skin.

Chris didn't question her. Or call her insane. He knew Elaina better than Rory. "There," he said once they neared the highway. "I see the Kia on the ramp about to merge."

Rory gently switched lanes even though they were in a hurry, not wanting to send Bear flying.

"He's only ten cars—" Chris abruptly let go of his words.

It all happened as if in slow motion.

Rory's heart beating loudly with each frame of action as it unfolded before her eyes.

The 18-wheeler switching lanes.

Elijah in his blind spot.

The little red Kia flying sideways at seventy miles an hour on the small bridge.

Rory pumped the brakes and pulled onto the shoulder of the road just before they reached the

bridge. She and Chris watched in horror as the Kia slammed against the guardrail, bounced off, and hit another car.

The Kia flipped up and over, careening off the bridge.

“No!” Chris screamed, his hand outstretched as if he could freeze the scene and stop the action.

He reached into the glove compartment in one fast move and grabbed some metal tool, then opened the door and began sprinting alongside the stopped traffic.

Rory searched for her phone to call 911, but shit, she’d left it on the couch. “Come on, Bear!” She exited the passenger side, so they didn’t get hit, then they raced after Chris. “Call an ambulance!” she hollered to the stopped cars while pumping her arms, and Bear sped ahead of her to close the gap between him and Chris.

Without hesitation, Chris stepped up onto the guardrail, swung his arms in front of him, and dove off the bridge and into the river that had to be about twenty feet below.

Bear remained by the guardrail barking when Rory got to him. She glimpsed over the side to see the top of the red car disappearing from sight. No sign of Chris.

“Stay here,” she commanded Bear, then stood on the railing.

“What are you doing?” someone shouted behind her, but she ignored the man and dove in, making sure to dive off to the side of the vehicle instead of down on top of it.

The cold, late October water smacked her body like she’d been spanked all over, but she shook off the chill and the sting and opened her eyes, trying to see in the murky water.

But damn it, it was cloudy, and how the hell would Chris find Elijah?

She felt around, trying to find the car. To find Chris.

No, no, no.

Nothing.

They’ll be okay, she tried to convince herself as she ran out of air, knowing she would need to come up for oxygen soon.

Adam McGregor’s words from Italy came back to mind as she pushed to the surface. *You could be driving down the street and get sideswiped by a truck. You can’t protect your loved ones from everything.*

She broke the top of the water and seized a breath, and the familiar, high-pitched howl overhead had her turning to see Bear barking frantically, his paws on the railing. He was trying to let her know something, so she looked off in the distance to see Chris swimming, pulling Elijah as he neared the embankment twenty feet away from her.

Oh, God. She swam their way as fast as she could get her legs and arms to move, pulling out her best Michael Phelps butterfly technique.

When she reached the small bit of ground by the river, Elijah was flat on his back as Chris gave him CPR. “Rory,” Chris yelled in surprise at the sight of her, and clearly, he had no idea she’d come in after him.

She moved to the other side of Elijah, preparing to help Chris when Elijah began to cough up water, and they rolled him to his side. His head was bleeding in a few spots, and Chris tore off his shirt and wrapped it around Elijah’s skull.

The wail of sirens in the distance was the best sound she’d heard in her life. More heroes like Chris were on their way.

“You okay?” Chris asked when helping Elijah sit up. “Your neck? Back? Legs?”

Elijah looked shocked. Stunned.

He was lucky.

Really, really lucky.

“How’d you . . .?” Elijah mumbled something else, clutching his ribs in agony, but Rory couldn’t make out his words.

Chris pulled Elijah to his side to support him while they waited for the first responders to reach them.

Once they’d all been lifted to the road, Bear rushed to their sides, barking up a storm. “It’s okay,” she told Bear as she watched Elijah get loaded into the ambulance.

“Hey, you okay?” Chris turned back to peer at Rory from where he stood outside the ambulance doors.

“Yeah, are you?” she cried.

Chris looked back to the stretcher, then to Rory again.

“Go with him,” she urged, reading his thoughts. “Bear and I will meet you at the hospital.”

“And who are you?” the medic asked Chris and offered his hand to help Chris into the back.

“I’m his brother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“SHE’LL BE HERE SOON.” CHRIS CHECKED THE TIME ON HIS WATERPROOF WATCH, THE NEW ONE RORY had purchased him since his Breitling was at the bottom of the ocean.

Making that phone call to his mom a few hours ago had been one of the hardest things Chris had ever done. Never mind the fact he hadn’t spoken to her in years, but having to inform her that the son she chose over him had been in a serious accident and was in the hospital had been a bit surreal. Thank God Rory had been at his side.

His mom was in New York City at the time, so she hopped on the next train to D.C.

Rory held his hand as they sat in the waiting room at the hospital. “Are we staying until she gets here?”

“I don’t want to leave Elijah alone even though he refuses to talk to me.” Chris’s stomach churned at the words. He’d messed up. He should never have let Elijah get into that car and drive away, and he’d just watched him go. Watched that little red car zip off, and if Rory hadn’t remembered Elaina’s warning, Elijah would most likely be dead. Drowned. “I don’t want to face her, either.”

“Maybe you need to?”

Face my demons. Yeah, maybe. He was going to therapy next Friday, and surely his therapist would encourage him to come to his own decision about when to seek his mom out and have some closure.

He tightened his hold on Rory’s hand and closed his eyes, doing his best to slow his rapidly beating pulse even though it’d been five hours since the accident. Five hours of sitting around at the hospital.

Ana had brought them clothes since they’d been wet, and Chris shirtless. Ana had emphasized the dry socks, which meant Harper had told Ana or A.J. about what Chris and Roman had shared back on Mona Island.

Ana also picked up Bear in the parking lot outside the hospital for them once they’d arrived around noon. A.J. and most of the team were still abroad dealing with the smugglers, and Chris was supposed to rendezvous with Roman to handle the Trott brothers, but maybe he’d let Roman handle the Trotts. Chris’s brother needed him even if he wasn’t ready to admit it yet. So, Chris wouldn’t walk away. He wouldn’t abandon Elijah the way their mother had abandoned Chris. He should have sought Elijah out a long time ago. But . . . he’d been scared. And angry.

“You call Elaina?” he asked her.

“Yeah, she, um, said everything happened the way it was supposed to.” Rory looked at him with wide eyes.

Chris peered at her. “I don’t know how to dissect that, and maybe I won’t.”

“I’m right there with you. When Emily learned about Elaina’s prophecy of sorts that saved the day, well . . . she was shell-shocked even though she knows how special Elaina is.” Rory smoothed her other thumb over the tops of their linked hands.

“Chris Hunter?”

Chris stood at the sight of the nurse standing in the doorway to the waiting room. He barely remembered the accident or jumping into the water.

The window punch tool had broken the glass, and he’d used the knife attachment to cut the seat belt. It’d been difficult to see under the water, but the car hadn’t been fully submerged by the time he’d made the jump. If he’d gone in even thirty seconds later, he probably wouldn’t have found Elijah. He was lucky to have only broken two ribs and suffered some bad lacerations. The doctors had said it was a miracle.

“Chris,” Rory whispered when he’d yet to answer the nurse, and she was on her feet next to him.

“Oh, yeah, right. That’s me.” He stepped forward. “Something wrong?”

“No, your brother wants to see you.”

“He does?” he asked in surprise, and the nurse smiled and nodded.

“Whenever you’re ready, you can go see him. Room one-eleven.”

Once the nurse left, Chris turned to Rory inside the empty waiting room.

Rory motioned to the speaker in the corner of the room, and her eyes grew glossy at the lyrics now playing when a new song came onto the radio. “Jason Mraz, *I won’t give up*,” she told him since it was obvious he didn’t recognize it, but he knew why she was pointing it out to him.

Chris wouldn’t give up. He’d fight like hell to keep his brother in his life. And, of course, he’d never give up on Rory, on what they had together.

He brought his mouth to hers in a soft kiss, then she directed him to go, but he shook his head. “Not without you.” He clasped their palms, and they went down the hall in search of room 111.

Elijah had an IV in his arm and was sitting upright in the bed, eyes cast out the window that ironically had a view of that damn river his car had gone into earlier.

“Your mom should be here soon,” Chris said.

“She’s your mom, too.” Elijah swiveled his head, which was patched up in some places. “Thank you for saving me. I knew you were a SEAL, but I guess your diving skills came in handy today.”

“How’d you know I was a SEAL?” He took one tentative step closer, maintaining hold of his lifeline—Rory.

“Mom told me. Your dad sends her pictures every year—those are the ones I found. One was of you in your dress blues. And one of you after you finished BUD/S.” He closed his eyes. “She kept them in a shoebox in her closet.”

For a moment, he’d thought his mom had cared. But no, his photos were with her shoes. Probably her overpriced heels.

“Dad was remodeling their closet and asked me to move everything out, and I dropped the box. The photos fell all over the floor. She said she left you when you were sixteen when she found out she was pregnant with me.”

Elijah’s dad was a real estate mogul from what Chris had read online. Plumber’s wife to millionaire in the blink of an eye.

Chris had also looked Elijah up on Facebook one drunken night two years ago, which was how he’d recognized him earlier, and why he’d stood stupidly in shock with Elijah on his driveway.

“I’m sorry she left you because of me. I see why you must hate me and don’t want to know me.” Elijah’s eyes parted to reveal tears.

He really is a young me. A pre-Navy me. That also meant they both took after their mom, and he wasn't so sure how he felt about that.

"I don't blame you or hate you," Chris said in a low, but steady tone.

Rory let go of his hand as if urging him to go closer to the bed, and he followed her instructions.

"It wasn't your fault. It was hers," Chris let him know.

"She lost her mind when I told her I was going to find you. Meet you. She was already mad I wanted to join the military, and then seeing you in your uniform only made me more eager, which upset her," he quickly rattled off, but he looked lucid. Probably not too many pain meds being pumped into his bloodstream.

"I guess that's why she was calling me," Chris said, hating the touch of disappointment in his tone. *She didn't care to talk to me.* "I'm sorry I didn't reach out. I was hurt. Angry. And I joined the Navy and never looked back. But I should have reached out, at least when you turned eighteen. You deserved to know the truth."

"I deserved to know I had a brother, but that's on her, not you. I'm sorry I got upset earlier."

Chris tucked his hands into his back pockets, not sure what to do or say. "What branch do you want to join?" he asked instead.

Elijah smiled. "After that badassery I saw from you today, I gotta be a SEAL."

"A Teamguy, huh?" Chris tried not to get choked up staring at a younger version of himself lying in that bed. So many things he would have said to a twenty-year-old him. So many lessons he now knew he could pass on to him. "Training is tough, Elijah. Like really fuc . . ." He dropped the swear word, forgetting he was twenty for a moment and not ten.

"Oh, you can call me Eli. And I am good with hard."

Chris glimpsed back at Rory, who had tears in her eyes, then focused on his brother. "I can help you prepare if you'd like?"

"Are you serious?" Eli set his hands alongside him and sat taller, then winced from the pain of his quick movement.

"SEALs have a saying, 'Do today what others won't, so you can achieve tomorrow what others can't.' You think that's you? Can you be that guy?" He tipped his head, searching Eli's eyes for an answer.

"I can," Eli said with a firm nod.

"Well, since you missed your flight, why don't you stick around for a bit? There's a Halloween party coming up, and I can introduce you to a whole room of Teamguys who can give you some tips on BUD/S."

"I don't know what to say." A few tears rolled down Eli's cheeks.

"Say no."

Chris's head dropped at the sound of his mom's voice behind him. Her sharp words and presence had his chest tightening.

"Mom," Eli whispered, and Chris slowly turned, his heart racing faster than when on any operation.

Chris lifted his head and connected his eyes with the woman that looked far too similar to the mom he remembered before she'd left him. Had she aged at all?

Golden blonde hair that went to her shoulders. Blue eyes sharp on Eli, avoiding eye contact with Chris. Heels and her red pantsuit.

"Chris," his mom acknowledged him in a curt tone, finally sweeping her gaze from Eli to him. She nodded, then sidestepped him to go to the only son she seemed to care about. Her actions, her

everything, were a knife to the heart he didn't deserve and hell, he didn't need to put up with.

"You should go," Eli said. "And, Mom, I'm talking to you."

Chris reached for Rory's hand and backed up to the wall near the door and away from Eli's bed, needing space between him and his mom.

"I'm not leaving you." She scoffed and faced the room, searching for help from Chris and Rory on the matter, which was insane.

Rory surprised Chris when she released his hand and strode confidently toward his mom. "You lost out big," she began. "The man your son became is the most amazing, incredible, and kind person I've met. And I can't begin to express how sorry I feel for *you* that you didn't want to be in his life for the last twenty years. It's your loss. Not his." She folded her arms and tipped her chin as if waiting for Chris's mom to dare say a word to the contrary. Chris stared speechless as she faced off with the first woman who broke his heart, finding himself in total awe of the woman who'd mended it.

Rory turned back toward Chris, her face flushed but looking satisfied with herself. This woman was everything to him, and he was overcome by emotion. "Marry me," he said under his breath, unable to stop the question from flying out of his mouth.

Probably the worst possible time.

The worst possible place.

But . . .

"I regret nothing that's happened in my life," he said as he moved toward her, ignoring his mom, only able to focus on the love of his life that stole his breath and made him feel like life was worth living to the fullest. "It all brought me to you." He was choking up as Rory stared at him with a shocked look on her face—whether it was a good shock or a bad one, he wasn't so sure.

He reached for her hand and pulled her out of the room and away from his mom, needing privacy for what he was about to do. But he had to do it. He had to do it right the hell now. Life was short, and tomorrow you could get hit by a truck, so yeah . . . maybe it was insane, but—

"A perfect kind of crazy for each other," she said, tearing up when he dropped to one knee.

"You're my adventure. My thrill." He smiled, his eyes watering, too. "The woman who makes me feel like I can fly."

Rory knelt before him, so they were on the same level because that's who they were, a team. Equals. They may have only been together for a short time, but he loved her so damn much that time didn't matter. Not at all. He knew she was the one. His only. His fortune.

She pressed her lips to his in a tender but searing kiss, then whispered, "Hell yes."

EPILOGUE

CHRIS HOPPED OUT OF HIS JEEP RUBICON AND REMOVED HIS SUNGLASSES, BLINKING IN SURPRISE AT the sight before him in the parking lot at his doctor's office. Today was his first appointment with Riley Logan, the therapist who specialized in veteran PTSD therapy. What he hadn't expected was to see the rest of Echo Team standing in the parking lot.

"What's going on?" He'd fessed up to the guys about some of his struggles earlier in the week after they'd returned from the Caribbean but hadn't mentioned his appointment. Chris had opted to hang back with his brother while they'd helped take down smugglers, including the Trott brothers.

Eli had chosen to stay at a hotel, but he'd come to the house every day. He couldn't start working out until his ribs healed, but he was good with animals and participated in Bear's training while they got to know each other. Their mom had returned home, and Chris wasn't sure if he'd make the effort to reach out to her. Though she'd emailed and called to apologize after the hospital, he needed time. *Maybe twenty more years.*

A.J. flicked the brim of his khaki cowboy hat and stepped forward, Wyatt alongside him. Roman and Finn flanked their sides a few seconds later.

Shit, are we getting spun up? Elaina would be disappointed. Trick-or-treating was Sunday, and the Halloween party was tonight at Liam's house. The wives all said they had a surprise, too. Chris was slightly petrified about what they defined as a surprise, to be honest.

"No rolling solo, brother." A.J. set a hand to Chris's shoulder.

"Huh?" So, they were operating?

"We're here to support you," Wyatt explained, removing his sunglasses. "If you're going to see this doc, well, we'll see her, too. We have appointments after you. One by one, we're going in."

"What?" Chris asked in shock. Was he dreaming? No, this couldn't be real. They were punking him. "You got Roman to agree to talk?" He scoffed. *No way.*

"We want to support you," Finn spoke up, his eyes connecting with Chris. "And I'm sure we've all got some shit we could work through." Finn used humor to hide his feelings just like Chris had done before Rory, so maybe he could use someone to talk to. But Chris never expected this. "Plus, I heard through the grapevine this doc is hot."

"Married to a Marine," Roman said with a shake of the head. "Off-limits."

Finn grimaced. "Shit, my bad."

Chris folded his arms, still working on wrapping his head around what was going on.

"Bravo was going to come, but we couldn't swing ten back-to-back appointments," Wyatt added. "But this is important," he said while narrowing his eyes. "Lost too many guys in the silent war that many fight once they're back home, and I just . . ." Wyatt was getting emotional. He reached his hand

out, and the guys stood in a circle and all touched fists.

“Together,” Roman said. “We got you.”

And damn, are my eyes watery?

“Hooyah,” they said at the same time, the light shining down on them like a spotlight. One of hope, one that these guys and Rory brought into his life.

* * *

CHRIS BANGED ON LIAM’S EN SUITE BATHROOM DOOR AT HIS D.C. HOME. “COME OUT. LET ME SEE.”

“They can’t be bloody serious. I’m not opening the door,” Liam called out.

Chris went to the mirror over the dresser in the bedroom and looked at his Halloween costume. The so-called *surprise* the women had promised all the guys.

“What are we, cowboys from the YMCA song?” Chris fidgeted with the black cowboy hat and checked the buttons on his vest.

“They’ve been watching too much of that *Yellowstone* show,” Asher said after entering the bedroom and closing the door behind him. Asher had given Jessica a hell of a time about the outfit.

Supposedly, the two-step dance they’d all performed a few weeks ago at A.J. and Ana’s surprise wedding party had given the women the idea for the costumes. They’d had Elaina deliver the request since Elaina had the guys wrapped around her finger.

Cowboys. All ten of them were supposed to be in a cowboy get-up. The pirate idea Elaina had requested went out the window when she’d overheard about the idiot Trott brothers Roman had the pleasure of “taking care of” five days ago.

Of course, to A.J., this wasn’t much of a stretch from his typical ensemble. He’d actually provided the majority of the guys some of his clothes for the costumes. He wouldn’t share his hats, though. Apparently, they were sacred.

“Are we doing this?” Asher grunted. His faded denim jeans and boots were on, but he’d yet to change out of a plain black tee or put on a hat.

“I can’t come out of this bathroom,” Liam said in protest.

“It can’t be that bad,” Chris replied. “I mean, I look pretty good,” he added with a laugh. “And my future wife wants this as much as your wives want this.”

Wife. Damn. I’m doing it. Marrying Rory. They had yet to set a wedding date, but he’d snuck to the jewelry store and planned on giving her a little treat instead of a trick tonight, one in the form of a diamond.

His first therapy session with Dr. Logan earlier that day had gone surprisingly better than he anticipated, and he couldn’t wait to tell Rory some other interesting tidbits he’d learned from the doctor about how small the world actually was. And it really was.

Doctor Riley Logan’s husband, Ben, worked in private security with Jake Summers, Emily’s brother. And Liam reminded Chris earlier that Ben and Jake, as well as some of their colleagues, actually went after smugglers now. And the icing on the cake was Gia, the wife of their New York City acquaintance, Cade King, also worked with Ben and their team on occasion to help stop human trafficking. So yeah, a small, connected world.

Rory liked to say everything had come full circle, and damn, how could he not agree? Maybe Rory might even want to work with Ben Logan and his crew from time to time if she felt the urge to take down some bad guys.

Rory said she was happy with training canines, but he wanted to make sure she knew he'd never stop her from spreading her wings.

"Come out," Asher urged and banged on the door. When it finally opened, Liam stepped out, his head hanging down and his hat about to fall off.

"Oh man, you got the chaps. I mean," Asher said around a deep, throaty laugh, "at least you have jeans under there, and we're not staring at your schlong."

"My dick?" Liam looked up and cracked a smile. He shook his head and went over to observe himself in the mirror. He had on the same hat, vest, and boots as Chris, but the chaps . . . probably a special request by his wife. "Where's Luke? He better be in this get-up, too."

"Believe it or not, he's out there and dressed up." Asher jerked a thumb toward the hall. There was a knock at the door, and Chris opened up to let A.J. inside. "Why do I feel like this is all your fault?"

A.J. tipped his head back and belly laughed at the sight of the guys. "I gotta be honest, I think you'll find it worth it when you head out to the backyard and see the women waiting for us."

"Is Jessica in a naughty cowgirl outfit?" Asher raised a brow, excitement in his tone, and when A.J. nodded, Asher peeled off his tee and put on his western shirt in a hurry, ready to go see his wife.

Another knock on the door. Finn.

"Seriously, guys, I think I need to get married. I'm jealous. Not gonna lie," Finn said straight away.

"You saw them?" Liam asked, attempting to peek into the hall as if he could catch a glimpse of his wife out there.

"I did. They're outside dancing. Cowgirl boots and hats. Jean skirts even though it's a bit chilly. And well, they're your wives, so I won't describe the rest of their, uh . . ." Finn looked to the ceiling as if suddenly pretending he hadn't noticed the hot women outside.

"Roman see Harper yet?" A.J. asked Finn. "Maybe something will finally happen."

"If nothing happened on a deserted island or in that luxurious prison resort of Carter's," Chris said, "I'm not feeling too optimistic. But I'm gonna go out there. You fools take your time. Looks like I have a date with a cowgirl."

"Oh," A.J. said while catching his arm, "Jesse is here. His outfit is real, so I wouldn't joke about it being a costume."

"Shit, thanks for the warning." *I would have.* "He see Ella yet?" Another couple that Chris had no idea when or if they'd ever get together.

"I don't know, but they'll probably kill me when they realize Rory and I set them up," A.J. said.

"Be right behind you," Asher called out as he finished getting ready, and Chris and the others went outside where everyone was gathered.

Chris slowed at the sight of his gorgeous fiancée talking to Harper off to the side of the yard. Chris smirked when he noticed Harper's tee beneath her open jean jacket, which she must have designed because it read in red letters: **I survived Mona Island, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.**

Harper may have been chatting with Rory, but she kept tossing looks Roman's way.

Roman was already dressed in costume, and he was talking to Bravo One. And yup, both men had actually done it. They were in their outfits. Wyatt's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Gwen, was also dressed in a cowgirl outfit, and she was helping Luke and Eva take care of their baby, Easton, and their daughter, Lara.

"You know who that is? I mean, stupid question. She's here, so of course, you know."

Chris turned to see his brother standing next to him. It would take some time for Eli's ribs to heal,

but he was tougher than he looked, and he didn't let on he'd been hurt last week. The bruises on his face and cuts were already healing, too. Most hidden by his suede cowboy hat that was a little too big on him.

"Yeah, that's Gwen," he told Eli, then pointed to Wyatt talking to Natasha across the yard. "And that's her dad. Echo One."

"Oh." Eli immediately looked away from Gwen. "Yeah, I'm gonna go, uh, get a water to, um, cool off."

Chris stifled a laugh, then started for Rory but was stopped by Elaina and Bear. "You look so handsome, Uncle Chris. I mean, I still think you should go as Captain America on Sunday when we trick-or-treat. We'll get extra candy because everyone will think you're a real Avenger." She grinned. "But I do have to say, you"—she opened her palms—"are all the real heroes."

Chris crouched before her, and Bear howled. "You think so, huh?"

"I do." Elaina closed her eyes and lifted her chin to the night sky. "One of these days, I'm going to save people, too. I just know it."

Yeah, he felt that in his bones. "You will. And you're already a hero." His words had her lids parting. "You saved my brother." He poked her belly button in her cute pink and brown cowgirl get-up. "You gave me a chance to get to know him. I don't know how to thank you." He tipped the brim of his hat to better see her.

"No thanks needed! Heroes do what is right because, well, it's right." She turned when Liam called out for her. "Save a dance for me," she said while looking from Bear and then to Chris, "the both of you!" She darted off.

Yeah, she was special. And he wanted a daughter, too.

Did Rory want kids? He needed to introduce Rory to his dad. His dad had made a lot of mistakes, but he'd like for him to meet the love of his life.

As he pushed upright, Rory came into his line of sight. Long, gorgeous legs in a jean skirt. Brown boots. A denim jacket over a tank top. Her khaki cowgirl hat on. She had to be a bit cold, but they'd been fortunate it was still in the fifties.

"Hey, cowboy."

"You always wanted to marry a cowboy, huh?" Chris teased while Rory looped her arms around his neck.

"No, plenty of cowboys where I came from," she whispered. "But no one like you."

"No one?" He arched a brow, his arms hooked around her waist.

"Nope. Not a one." She wet her lips. "Traveled all over the world, and no one like you anywhere else, either."

"You're one of a kind, too." He dipped his hand into his vest pocket in search of the ring box, then stepped back and held out two fists. "Trick-or-treat?"

"Ohhh." She closed one eye. "I do love a good trick, especially that one you do in the shower, but I'll go with treat."

"Yeah, um." Okay, now he was growing hard picturing their naked bodies beneath the water as they made love in a naughty, filthy, and absolutely amazing and hot way. *Focus*. He blinked, and his eyes dipped to the curve of her tank top as he continued imagining them having sex. "Okay, so we're going to need to do that later. But first." He opened the ring box to reveal the white gold infinity diamond band with a princess cut stone set at the top. "I'm sorry I didn't have this before. Still want to marry this guy?"

She swallowed, tears shimmering in her eyes. "Absolutely," she said as he slid the ring on her

finger. "Infinity. It's perfect." She pressed up in her boots and kissed him. "Love you so much more than a ring, though, you know that, right?"

My issues. My mom. Right.

"I know," he replied, and his answer was one hundred percent the truth. He trusted her with his heart and with his future. "Can I ask you something?" He returned the empty box to his pocket.

"Of course."

"You think someday you'll make me a father?" He'd never wanted to be one, given his childhood, but then he'd had no idea he'd meet Rory.

Her brows pulled together, and her eyes lifted to his. He released a shaky breath right before she leaned closer and murmured, "Now that's an adventure I think I could get behind."

"A little dangerous," he warned. "And messy." He thought about the diaper changes. "Probably scary. Lots of pulse-racing kind of moments."

"But totally worth it," they said at the same time and smiled.

He pressed his lips to hers, lifted her off the ground, and spun her around.

"Now, how about we get this show on the road, what do you say?" she asked when he set her back down. "DJ for us. Show these boys you've been holding out on them with your spin skills. You think you remember?"

"Pssh. Do I remember?" He cracked his knuckles and tsked. "Of course."

She quickly took him by the hand, and they hurried across the yard, slowing for a second when they spotted Jesse and Ella talking, beers in hand, standing awkwardly like they hadn't known each other their entire lives and were actually on a blind date.

Ella caught Chris's eyes, and she patted Jesse on the shoulder twice before striding toward him and Rory. "Hey there, you two." Ella hugged Chris, then spied the diamond on Rory's finger. "Well, damn. Nice job."

He smiled. "Glad you could make it." Chris glimpsed Jesse now chatting with A.J. and Ana.

"Of course. I love a good Halloween party." Ella tipped her head to the house. "You, missy . . . I know what you and A.J. did," she added a few seconds later.

Ah. The "blind date" setup.

"Hate me?" Rory asked.

"Never, but Jesse will probably give you hell." Ella squeezed her forearm. "We'll catch up later. Congrats again, though," she said as Ana motioned for her to come over.

"Yeah, looks like we have two couples we need to get together," Chris said, eyes moving back to Harper and Roman talking.

"I agree." Rory pointed to a table covered with a red cloth. "But first, I need my DJ."

"What's that?" Chris scrunched his forehead, curious. He recognized the familiar shape beneath the cloth, but . . . really?

"Okay, everyone!" Rory called out, hands cupping her mouth. "My fiancé is going to drop some beats. Introducing DJ Hunter!"

And, oh shit. Chris blinked in surprise when she pulled a sheet from a table to reveal his favorite turntables, Technics. Plus, a Pioneer mixer and accompanying headphones.

He went behind the table and thumbed through the crate of vinyl. *The woman got me vinyl.*

Yeah, he loved this woman.

Holy shit. A kid at Christmas right now.

Chris grabbed hold of her cheeks and kissed her as everyone began clapping and whistling, asking for more of a show. So, he tipped her back and set his mouth to her lips like that famous V-J Day kiss

in Times Square.

“Mmm. More of that later?” Rory asked against his lips when he set her upright, and he grinned, insanely happy.

“That’s a promise,” he responded, then she patted his ass, encouraging him to get a move on and start spinning.

He viewed the sleek tables. It’d been decades, but hopefully, it would be like riding a bike.

Chris removed his hat, put on the Pioneer headphones, and searched the vinyl his amazing fiancée had purchased.

He slid the David Guetta track out of the sleeve and set it on the first table, then positioned the needle onto the vinyl. Once the second record was in place, he worked the knobs of the mixer as it all came back to him.

“You were holding out on us, huh?” Roman asked thirty minutes later when Chris was mixing a song with The Chainsmokers’ *Call You Mine*.

He lowered his headphones to his neck. “More than a pretty face,” he teased, repeating what he’d said to him back on Mona Island.

“Never doubted you, brother,” Roman returned the same words. He started to walk away, but Chris caught his arm.

“Hey, you’re okay, right?” He wanted Roman to find happiness like him, and he was concerned happiness was staring Roman right in the face, but he wasn’t making a move.

Roman peered Harper’s way as if reading Chris’s thoughts. “I’m trying to be,” he mouthed over the music, then left, clearly not in the mood to discuss his love life or lack thereof.

“Marrying my sister, and you didn’t ask for permission?” Jesse asked, catching Chris off guard. He turned to see Rory’s brother at his six. “You realize that’s grounds for termination in the South.”

Termination, huh? Chris let the beats play on their own to face Jesse. “Shit, I’m sorry.” He stepped around the improvised DJ booth. “It was spontaneous, and I—”

“I’m just giving you a hard time.” Jesse adjusted his brown cowboy hat. “My sister loves spontaneity, so it was probably perfect. But you’ll need to come back to Bama for a little grilling.”

“Like cooking?” he asked with a smile, knowing damn well what he meant.

“Not giving him a hard time, are you?” Rory came up and looped her arm with Chris’s.

“Would I do that?” Jesse winked, leaned in and kissed his sister’s cheek, then left and started chatting with Owen and Knox.

“We’re ready!” Emily called out, pulling everyone’s focus her way as she stood by Ana.

“You know what they want.” Rory hugged him and squeezed his ass with both hands, and he laughed. “You got the record, didn’t you?”

Rory nodded with excited eyes. “Of course. These ladies want a show, what can I say?” She playfully shrugged, and Chris pinched her ass right back for that.

“*The Git Up* by Blanco Brown it is, then.” Chris set up the record, and A.J. went to the center of the grass.

“You boys know what to do,” A.J. yelled over the music, twirling a finger in the air, motioning to break it down.

Chris started for the line of guys but then turned to see Rory gently tugging him the other direction. “Come with me.”

“No dancing?” he asked in surprise as they stealthily maneuvered toward the gate.

“No, that was a distraction,” she said once along the side of the home, and she set her hands to Chris’s chest. Her lips curved into a delicious tease of a smile before she wet her lips and whispered,

“I’ll be needing that trick now.”

MORE STEALTH OPS + CROSSOVER INFORMATION

Want more of the Stealth Ops team? Harper and Roman's story, *Chasing Shadows*, releases 3/25/21. Harper and Roman will also guest star in *The Final Hour*, which releases 1/7/21! Stay up-to-date on releases by heading over to Brittneysahin.com.

Keep up-to-date with the latest bonus scenes by visiting my [website](http://brittneysahin.com/bonus-content) - brittneysahin.com/bonus-content.

* * *

Crossover Information

I brought a lot of my characters from other worlds together in this book! Learn more:

The Dublin Nights Series:

Sebastian Renaud (*The Real Deal*), Adam McGregor (*On the Edge*), Emilia Calibrisi & Sean McGregor (*The Final Hour* - 1/7/21)

Bama Series: (launches in 2021)

The new BAMA series launches in 2021 starting with Jesse and Ella! Title and release information will first be revealed in my newsletter and in my Facebook groups: [Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#) / [Brittney's Book Babes](#).

New Military Security Series: (title pending) - launching in 2021

Carter Dominick will **either** join the cast of this new series, which stars Gray Chandler (Wyatt's wife's brother), and Gwen (Wyatt's daughter), **or** he'll get his own series.

The Hidden Truths Series:

Dr. Riley Logan - *The Final Goodbye*

Becoming Us Series: (brief mention in epilogue)

Cade and Gia King - *My Every Breath*

Continue for a special note from me, as well as a reading guide, music playlist, and Stealth Ops Family Tree!

SPECIAL NOTE

This book holds a special place in my heart, as there are many veterans, as well as first responders, that struggle with PTSD. Our heroes defend our freedoms and keep us safe, and I want them to know we are there for them as well.

Many of my service friends shared their personal stories with me so that I was able to accurately represent many real problems our veterans and first responders face today. Our hope is that these invisible wounds do not go untreated. We want our heroes to know we love and support them.

To learn more visit: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

Interested in learning how to help? There are a number of organizations, such as the [Boot Campaign](#), which is one of the ones I support, that are actively engaged in helping support our veterans.

Thank you again for reading this story. It was an emotional one for me to write, but I also believe it's an important one to share.

Stay safe and healthy,
-Brittney

READING GUIDE

Get the latest news from my newsletter/[website](#) and/or [Brittney's Book Babes](#) / the [Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#) / [Dublin Nights Spoiler Room](#).

A [Stealth Ops World Guide](#) is available on my website, which features more information about the team, character muses, and SEAL lingo.

[Stealth Ops Timeline](#)
[Reading Guide](#)
[Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board](#)

* * *

Stealth Ops Series: Bravo Team

[Finding His Mark](#) - Book 1 - Luke & Eva
[Finding Justice](#) - Book 2 - Owen & Samantha
[Finding the Fight](#) - Book 3 - Asher & Jessica
[Finding Her Chance](#) - Book 4 - Liam & Emily
[Finding the Way Back](#) - Book 5 - Knox & Adriana

Stealth Ops Series: Echo Team

[Chasing the Knight](#) - Book 6 - Wyatt & Natasha
[Chasing Daylight](#) - Book 7 - A.J. & Ana
[Chasing Fortune](#) - Book 8 - Chris & Rory
[Chasing Shadows](#) - Book 9 - Harper & Roman (3/25/21)
Book 10 - Finn (2021)

Becoming Us: *connection to the Stealth Ops Series (books take place between the prologue and chapter 1 of Finding His Mark)*

Someone Like You - A former Navy SEAL. A father. And off-limits. (Noah Dalton)

My Every Breath - A sizzling and suspenseful romance. Businessman Cade King has fallen for the wrong woman. She's the daughter of a hitman - and he's the target.

Dublin Nights

On the Edge - Travel to Dublin and get swept up in this romantic suspense starring an Irish businessman by day...and fighter by night.

On the Line - novella

The Real Deal - This mysterious billionaire businessman has finally met his match.

The Inside Man - Cole McGregor & Alessia Romano

The Final Hour - Sean and Emilia (1/7/21)

Stand-alone (with a connection to *On the Edge*):

The Story of Us— Sports columnist Maggie Lane has 1 rule: never fall for a player. One mistaken kiss with Italian soccer star Marco Valenti changes everything...

Hidden Truths

The Safe Bet – Begin the series with the Man-of-Steel lookalike Michael Maddox.

Beyond the Chase - Fall for the sexy Irishman, Aiden O'Connor, in this romantic suspense.

The Hard Truth – Read Connor Matthews' story in this second-chance romantic suspense novel.

Surviving the Fall – Jake Summers loses the last 12 years of his life in this action-packed romantic thriller.

The Final Goodbye - Friends-to-lovers romantic mystery

PLAYLIST

Troubadour - George Strait

The Git Up - Blanco Brown

Born Here Live Here Die Here - Luke Bryan

Underdog - Alicia Keys

Savage Love - Jason Derulo, Jawsh 685

Chapters - Brett Young & Gavin degree

Happy Anywhere feat Gwen Stefani - Blake Shelton

Drinking Alone - Carrie Underwood

Higher Love - Kygo, Whitney Houston

Break Things - Kylie Morgan

Starting Over - Chris Stapleton

Speechless - Dan + Shay

I Won't Give Up - Jason Mraz

Call You Mine - The Chainsmokers

[Spotify Playlist](#) - Chasing Fortune

STEALTH OPS FAMILY TREE

Luke and Eva Scott (daughter: Lara, son: Easton)

- Sister: Jessica (Scott) Hayes

Owen and Samantha York (son: Matthew), (Dog: Ollie)

Jessica and Asher Hayes (Twins: Juliana and Arabella)

Liam and Emily Evans (Daughter: Elaina, Son: Jackson)

Knox and Adriana Bennett (no children yet)

- President Isaiah Bennett (Knox's dad)

Wyatt and Natasha Pierson (Wyatt's daughter: Gwen)

- Admiral Chandler (Natasha's father)
- Gray Chandler (Natasha's brother)

A.J. and Ana Hawkins (no children yet)

- Beckett, Shep, Caleb, Ella (A.J.'s siblings)
- Niece: McKenna

Chris Hunter and Rory McAdams (engaged)

- Dog: Bear

Not yet married (as of A.J.'s book):

Harper, Roman, Finn

In loving memory of Bravo Three:

Marcus Vasquez (His widow: Savanna Vasquez)

* * *

Stealth Ops Team Members

Team leaders: Luke & Jessica Scott / Intelligence team member (joined in 2019): Harper Brooks

Bravo Team:

Bravo One - Luke

Bravo Two - Owen

Bravo Three - Asher

Bravo Four - Liam

Bravo Five - Knox (Charlie "Knox" Bennett)

Echo Team:

Echo One - Wyatt

Echo Two - A.J. (Alexander James)

Echo Three - Chris

Echo Four - Roman

Echo Five - Finn (Dalton "Finn" Finnegan)

WHERE ELSE TO FIND ME

Thank you for reading Chris and Rory's story. If you don't mind taking a minute to leave a short [review](#), I would greatly appreciate it. Reviews are incredibly helpful to keeping the series going. Thank you!

www.brittneysahin.com

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FB Reader Group - [Brittney's Book Babes](#)

/ [Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#)

[Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board](#)