

MIKE BRAVO OPS

2

# ROGUE

A MIKE BRAVO OPS NOVEL

EDEN FINLEY

MIKE BRAVO OPS: ROGUE

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CHAPTER ONE\_

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TRAV

## SEVEN YEARS AGO

THE HEAT SURROUNDING MY COCK IS EXACTLY WHAT I NEED. EVEN IF I'M IN a seedy bar and I don't even know this guy's name. Hell, as I push his face against the side of the tiny bathroom stall and thrust inside his tight ass, I can barely recall what we said to each other that landed us in here. It was probably some form of hello in a manly grunt and then a nod toward the back for me to follow him.

His black hair is messy around my fingers gripping it tight. He has dark stubble on his chin and flawless olive skin. He's perfect for what I'm looking for. A warm body to get me off and to get me out of this funk of overworked frustration I've been carrying around since leaving the military.

After fifteen loyal years of service as an Army Ranger and working my way up to the rank of sergeant major and squad leader, I decided to branch out on my own with a private ops firm. The jobs have been slow but steady—bottom-of-the-barrel type of work.

I'm building the beginning of what I hope will become my empire.

I haven't had any downtime. I haven't had the chance to do this in so long.

I push inside him again, and he moans so loud I'm glad no one has come in needing to piss. Then again, it's not hard to tell what we're doing in

here whether we're quiet or not. With every thrust, the whole stall shakes.

The see-through mesh tank top he's wearing is asking to be torn off his sexy body. His muscular physique makes me think military, but he's got nothing on me. Hardly anyone does. I'm six five and wide as fuck.

This guy's jeans were tight enough to make out his impressive dick print, and it was a fight to wrestle them down his thighs. He came here for one thing, the same thing I did, and while he dressed the part, I can't help picturing him as some uptight suit. The thought of a buttoned-up lawyer type or pencil pusher getting dressed up and letting loose really gets me going. And I plan to follow through on this imaginary scenario.

He says something in Spanish. I have no idea what.

"You're so tight," I murmur.

"You fuck like a god," he breathes. "I'm gonna ... holy fuck, I'm gonna come."

Untouched? Damn, that's hot.

"Do it," I growl.

His legs quake, and his whole body stiffens as he unleashes. I keep moving inside him, keep pegging his prostate, and with two more hard thrusts, I come as well, filling the condom and trying with all my strength not to collapse on the poor guy while his ass wrings me out.

I rest my forearm beside his head and blanket his back with my body. He turns his head in my direction and smiles.

My gut flips.

"I'm Dylan."

"Trav."

The door to the bathroom opens, so I pull out of *Dylan* and tie off the condom while he pulls his pants up.

"Yo," one of my recruits says.

I look up at the roof. "What? I'm kind of busy."

“Domino is here,” Alphabet says. Domino. The only way my straight best friend would haul his ass to a gay bar is— “We’ve gotta go. Job.”

*Yep.*

“There goes my chance to buy you a drink.” I lean in and kiss Dylan’s cheek.

Dylan’s smile doesn’t falter. “No need to act gentlemanly now.”

“Didn’t need to hear that, boss,” Alphabet says.

“Then fuck off. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Dylan runs his hand down my chest. “You talk like that to all your ... employees?”

“Only the special ones.”

“Aww, I’m special?” Alphabet coos.

“I’m gonna kill him,” I mutter.

Dylan pats my bicep. “You should get to work. This was fun. Maybe I’ll see you here again sometime.”

That sounds like an empty gesture, but agreeing to it would be mean when I wouldn’t be able to keep that promise. So instead, I open the stall door and gesture for him to go first.

“There you go being gentlemanly again. It’s kinda hot. See you ’round.”

I straighten myself out before walking to the sinks to ditch the condom in the trash and wash my hands. The whole time, I can feel Alphabet’s stare. “Don’t even say it.”

“Say what?” Alphabet asks innocently.

“You know exactly what.”

“He was cute.”

Dylan was more than cute, but I get the feeling Alphabet’s trying to rile me up.

I’m not going to let that happen. “Why are we getting a call so late for a job? It has to be serious for Domino to come here.”

“Carter called us in because his favorite crew has come down with food poisoning.” He cocks his head. “I wonder how that happened?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“So we’re up. This is the shipment we’ve been waiting for. Boat leaves in two hours.”

“Mexico, here we come.”



Getting a job as the muscle for a cargo company wasn’t hard. Getting the boss to trust us has been. We’ve been working for Jason Carter for six weeks—not a long time in the scheme of things—but in that time, he’s only ever had us on board for legit cargo reasons. We figure the night crew has to be handling something more. Our shifts are about thirty hours round trip, but the night shift has a turnaround of two days. We have no idea what they do with the extra eighteen hours.

Rumor has it he’s smuggling firearms. It’s our job to confirm it or find out what he’s really doing.

The job Carter hired us to do is easy. We don’t do anything but stand there with our M16s protecting the limestone from being stolen.

Because, you know, limestone is worth commandeering a bulk carrier and so easy to move.

It takes about twelve hours to get to Ensenada, and on the day shift, where we leave at midday and reach the port at night, the boat is loaded up immediately.

This time, when we arrive, we’re told to go to a nearby hotel and come back to work at midnight for the shipment of limestone that’s conveniently “on its way.”

We follow orders because it’s what Carter is paying us to do, but I’m confused. I thought for sure the nighttime crew was exporting something

else. But if I do the math, that means that the boats are always loaded at nighttime no matter which shift we're on.

The three guys with me—the entirety of the Mike Bravo company so far—and I get two rooms at the hotel under Jason Carter's account, but I spend the whole day looking out the window where I can still see the port.

“What're you thinking, boss?” Domino asks.

I turn to him and slash at my throat. If Jason Carter is the type of guy I think he is, I wouldn't put it past him to have these rooms bugged. It was his company who booked the rooms, and he might have a section of the hotel blocked off specifically for his employees.

I might be paranoid, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

“Nothin’,” I mumble.

“Girl problems?”

It takes everything in me not to snort at that. “Yeah.” Girl problems, women troubles, ball-and-chain jokes about the wife, they're all code word for “So you think someone is listening in and you can't talk?” The only time it doesn't work is when one of us is talking to Domino because he might actually have chick problems.

When I started Mike Bravo, it was because I could see the issues LGBTQ soldiers still faced even though DADT had been repealed. I served while it was still in effect, and after the change, shit was still the same. It's why I went private. I want to build a company that is LGBTQ-friendly, and I mainly plan on hiring LGBTQ team members, but there's no one else in this world I trust to have my back more than Domino. He's my right-hand man, my second-in-command.

“Let's go for a walk and find a bar to drown your sorrows,” Domino says.

“As long as we're sober to work tonight.”

“Done.”

We leave the room and knock next door, telling the others we're going to find a bar to talk about my problems with my girlfriend.

Alphabet and Kevlar both smile.

As soon as we've walked a block toward the touristy section past the cruise terminal of the port, Alphabet laughs. "No wonder you're having problems with your girlfriend when you were too busy fucking a guy last night to even call her."

"Ha. Soooo funny."

"That guy was hot," Alphabet says.

He sure was. And the entire way down here, all I could do was relive our hot and sweaty bathroom hookup. Twelve hours standing on a shipping carrier doesn't give us much else to do other than think.

I regret not telling Dylan I'd see him again, but I'm not really a *see you again* kind of guy. I never have been because being a Ranger meant I had no stability in my location. I'd be gone for months at a time. I've never settled down because I don't think it's possible while leading this kind of lifestyle.

Mike Bravo is my baby, and I'm married to the job. There's no room for "See you again" when I don't even know when I could make it back to that bar.

Plus, I'm thirty-four. Dylan looked midtwenties at most.

I can't believe I'm still thinking about him when we barely said two words to each other.

"What are these 'girl troubles'?" Kevlar asks, using air quotes and all.

"I thought taking the night shift, we'd arrive here during the day and load whatever else Carter is importing that's not limestone, endure a longer loading time, and then return in darkness. But that's not the case. We're here, wasting time, waiting on more limestone."

"But it makes sense why the night shift pays more and why he'd have his favorite guys on that run. Because instead of working constantly, you're

getting paid to fuck around,” Domino says.

“And if he is only importing limestone, that means whatever they’re smuggling in, we’ve been helping them this whole time,” I say.

“But we’ve checked our cargo,” Kevlar says. “It’s only limestone.”

“We’re missing something,” I murmur. But what? “Keep an extra eye out tonight.”

We go to a bar, have a couple of drinks but not enough to impair our abilities, and then go back to the hotel for a nap before our shift tonight.

The minute we get back to the docks, I’m on alert, watching and assessing every block of limestone being loaded onto the boat. But all I’m hired to do is stand watch. If I’m seen inspecting the merchandise, Carter’s crew might figure out we’re not just ex-military goons. We’re a team of four, but Carter has ten guys working to load everything up.

When the job is done, we’re told to go back to the hotel again and wait until midday when we’ll set sail for home, but I need to get back on that boat and figure it all out.

I’m one of those type A personalities that needs to know everything and can’t leave anything unfinished. “I’m going in.”

“That’s what he said,” Domino replies from where he lies on his bed and scrolling on his phone.

“Mature.”

“Always.”

“I have to go back to the boat. I left my cell phone somewhere and need to find it. See if my girlfriend has called.”

“I’ll go with you. It’ll give me something to do.”

“Let’s go.”

We head back toward the docks, and Domino texts the guys to keep an eye out at the hotel for any of Carter’s crew while we snoop.

By the time we reach the ship and look back, they’re both casually hanging out on the balcony and overlooking the whole area.

None of Carter's crew are around, so they're either at the hotel or on board.

Domino stops in his tracks. "The gangway's up."

"That makes it more fun."

Domino laughs. "Have fun swimming when your ass doesn't make the jump."

I stand back and rub my chin, assessing the height. "Eh, it's totally doable. What is it, maybe ten feet?"

"I think it's closer to twenty. You really think you can sneak on board without making a scene when you have to jump that high?"

"Just looking for my phone, remember?" I pull the most innocent face I can ... which isn't very innocent.

"I don't even think an Olympian could jump it."

"You underestimating me?" There are a couple of portholes toward the stern I could hold on to before propelling myself over up to the railing on deck.

I back up enough to get a decent run-up and take a few deep breaths to prepare myself.

"Please fall in the water. Please fall in the water," Domino chants.

"Not likely." I take off at a run, hit the side of the dock, and launch myself up the side of the ship.

My hand grabs onto the porthole while I use my upper-body strength to reach with my other to grip the railing up the top. Then in one swoop, I swing my right leg up and pull myself up.

I salute Domino with my middle finger and then haul my ass over the railing.

A quick check shows no one's on deck, so I make my way to the cargo hold. It's a hard decision between trying to be stealthy and acting casual. In stealth mode, I'm not likely to get caught, but there's a chance, and then there's no explaining why I'm being so cagey if I'm "looking for my



phone.” On the other hand, if I act casual, there’s more chance of being discovered and the small chance of them not believing my phone story.

When I get to the cargo hold, there are voices coming from the starboard side, so I slink down the port side and stop at the first block of limestone.

This is the closest I’ve gotten to an actual block, having only watched cranes loading them onto forklifts to drive into the cargo hold.

I run my hand over it. It’s rough and has the grainy texture limestone should have, but ... something doesn’t feel quite right with it. And it smells ... like paint?

Feeling around the block, I find a spot that’s soft, which limestone shouldn’t be. The top edge crumbles away in my hands, revealing a small hole.

Bingo.

It’s *inside* the limestone. They’ve carved out the blocks, patched them back together with spackle, and painted it to make it blend in with the different colors and shades of the natural limestone. Organic matter can be dark, and limestone can also contain iron or manganese, so the color changes and is unique with each block, and by the time we get back tonight, everything would be dry and hardened to the point no one would be able to tell the difference.

Anything could be inside. The blocks are only a few feet long and wide, so it could be weapons, but my gut tells me it’s something else. The body of any assault rifle wouldn’t fit in there, and they’re big money compared to smaller, compact guns.

Jason Carter doesn’t seem like a man to waste his time dealing in smaller profits.

I’m about to poke around further when the voices from the other side of the ship get louder.

I’m out of time.

I flatten myself against the limestone and tell myself to control my breathing. The voices grow, my heart rate kicks up, and I'm fully expecting someone from the crew to head down this row any minute. If they find me in here, I'm as good as dead.

There would be no logical explanation for my phone to be down here, and much like me, Jason Carter comes across as the paranoid type.

When the voices start to fade, I let out a relieved breath. I give myself a couple of minutes to compose myself so I can sneak back out of here.

Now comes the tricky part—getting back on dry land without using the gangway.

Domino knows it too, because as soon as I go to the stern, he's waiting for me at the end of the dock with an amused look on his face.

"Fuck it." I throw myself over the side and hold my breath as I hit the water.

I swim toward a lower pontoon and pull myself out of the water to climb up the ladder.

Domino's laughing at me when I reach the top. "Nice swim?"

"I got the job done. Whatever they're smuggling is inside the limestone."

"Inside ..."

"You know how we thought it was weird that they were exporting blocks of limestone instead of the sand?"

"But they manufacture the blocks here because it's cheaper."

"That's what they told us. They're hollowing it out and filling with ... whatever it is. I ran out of time before I could get a good look, but I don't think it can be weapons. The blocks aren't big enough."

"Well, we don't need to know what it is. We just need to know *how* he's smuggling it. So job's done."

"It is. Now all we have to do is make it back to LA without our cover being blown, and I'm not exactly working under the radar."

“Let’s go back to the hotel, where you can shower and change.”

For the rest of the afternoon and into evening, I’m paranoid about having risked it all. I don’t think anyone saw me on board, but what if they did?

I’m on edge for most of the journey home, but somewhere around the ten-hour mark, as we get closer to the Port of Los Angeles, the gut instinct that something is wrong hits full force. My military training kicks in. Something’s ... off, but I can’t put my finger on it.

There’s an eerie stillness to the night. The hairs on my arms and neck stand to attention, and my immediate thought is one of Carter’s crew is going to show their face any minute and put a bullet through my head. But then the sound of a helicopter in the distance rings in my ears, and the water around us is calm. Almost silent.

Too fucking silent.

I speak into a radio that the others and the captain of the ship have. “Guard up. Something’s not right.”

The helicopter is closer now, looking like it’s approaching us specifically.

“Who’s that?” Domino radios. “Someone to take down?”

“No. Not yet. Hold your positions until we know who it is and what they want,” I order.

The helicopter flies over our heads and then hovers above the ship with its flashlight shining into the bridge of the boat. The engines on the boat cut out, and then we drift ... right toward a wall of boats that light up and blind us.

It feels like I’m onstage at a damn concert with how many floodlights are pointed at us.

Someone, somewhere, has a megaphone. “Put your weapons down. This is the United States Coast Guard.”

I radio my guys. “Do it.” And then I take my M16 and place it on deck.

Men in black uniforms drop from the helicopter above while others start climbing up from the smaller boats below us.

“DEA. Hands up,” a voice says behind me.

Coast Guard and DEA? This must be big.

I do as the voice says.

“Get down on the ground. Hands behind your back.” The growl in the guy’s tone is kinda sexy.

I want to turn around, but I also don’t want to be shot.

Difficult choice.

“Now.”

With a sigh, I do it, laying my cheek on the rough surface of the deck. Plastic cuffs enclose my skin. The zip ties tighten against my wrists, and then I’m hauled back up to my feet by two guys either side of me.

One of them leads me, pushing me from behind, over to where my teammates are, all handcuffed and sitting against a crate in the middle of the ship. He spins me around to place me with my men, but he doesn’t even need to push me down.

No, I fall on my ass on my own when I come face-to-face with the guy arresting me. Dark hair, big brown eyes, amazing skin. The smile is missing, but it’s definitely him.

“Hey, isn’t that—” Alphabet starts.

“Yep,” I say.

It’s Dylan.

CHAPTER TWO\_

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DYLAN

## SEVEN YEARS AGO

I SHOULD GIVE MOTIVATIONAL SPEECHES. THREE WAYS TO TANK YOUR career with one botched raid.

*One: Sleep with your target.*

*Two: Find absolutely no evidence at the scene.*

*And three: Sleep with your fucking target.*

As I stare into the interrogation room behind a two-way mirror at the man who, in my own words, *fucks like a god*, I want to recoil in embarrassment and shame.

Definition of irony: Newly promoted DEA agent has sex with drug smuggler.

“He’s asking for you,” Special Agent Walker says. “He knows you by name.”

And thanks to the file I was given, I know his full name. *Travis West*.

I’m regretting giving him my name. Then he wouldn’t be able to ask for me.

I should’ve walked away the minute he pulled his amazing cock out of my ass. No names. No words needed.

“Do you know him?” Walker asks.

*Intimately.* “We met once. At a bar.” Where he made me come so hard I almost blacked out. I’m not telling my senior officer that.

“Well, he’s the only one who hasn’t lawyered up, but he’s refusing to speak to anyone but you.”

I grunt. How am I supposed to go in there and act like I haven’t had his dick inside me? Worse yet, how am I supposed to stop him from spilling our history, however brief, while I’m questioning him?

My boss will be watching.

Maybe if we’d found the drugs, my unwitting tryst with a suspect could be forgiven. But that ship was clean. How could I have been so wrong when I was convinced that Jason Carter was one of the biggest drug lords in the US with ties to Mexican cartels.

I want to tell my boss I won’t get any information from interrogating Trav, but I already know what his response will be. *You don’t know until you try.*

Then Trav glances up and smiles at his reflection in the glass, but I know he’s actually directing it at me. Like he knows I’m about to cave.

“Okay. I’m going in.” And on my way, I’m making a new rule for myself: *No more random, anonymous hookups.*

I enter the interrogation room and try to stay passive, but his sexy voice immediately throws me off kilter. Not because of the deep rumble of his tone, but because of what he says.

“Do you think you could take these off?” He lifts his hands where he’s cuffed to the table by a chain. “I’m not used to handcuffs being around *my* wrists.”

Fucker. He knows what he’s doing. Because now all I can picture is him fucking me while I’m restrained.

“Sure.” I guess I’ve decided to play good cop. Passive and friendly, but *not* flirty.

I release him, and he rubs his wrists like they’re so sore.

“You weren’t cuffed for that long.”

“I know, but I’ve seen people do that in movies.” He leans back in his seat. “So how have you been? I didn’t think I was going to see you again.”

“This isn’t a social chat. I need you to tell me everything you know.”

“Find any drugs yet?” That tiny twitch of his lips tells me he’s in on the operation. He knows what’s what.

“What makes you think we’re looking for drugs?”

“You’re the Drug Enforcement Administration. I’d hope you were looking for drugs, or I have to tell you, you might not be very good at your job.”

“But I’m sure you’re good at yours. What is your job exactly?”

“Ooh, smooth interrogation tactic there, Dylan.”

“My name is Agent Rodriguez.” My stupid voice cracks on my last name, making it basically unintelligible.

“What’s that? *Rogue*-riguez? That sounds promising.” He leans forward. “You willing to go rogue to get the answers you want?”

“*Rodriguez*. And no. I’m sure I could cut a deal for you and your friends, though ... if you cooperate. You were the muscle, right? Hired to protect the cargo without actually knowing what you were protecting?”

“Are you implying I’m a dumbass who’s unaware of my surroundings?”

Now I lean in, locking eyes with him across the table. “Are you telling me you know more than you’re letting on?”

Trav smiles. “Damn. Your interrogation skills really are on point. I’m impressed.”

“Impressed enough to tell me what you know?”

“I know lots of things. Useless trivia, mostly. Do you like trivia nights? There’s a really laid-back bar I like to go to when they have trivia. It’s called the Aqua. You ever been?”

The Aqua doesn’t do trivia nights. I should know. It’s where he fucked me out in a bathroom stall.



“Can’t say that I have.”

It’s not like the other guys in my department are unaware that I’m gay, but I like to keep my private life, well, private at work. They all know, but I don’t want them to know details—like where I frequent. I get the feeling that was Trav’s way of gauging whether I’m out or not, so I shut him down. Maybe then he won’t hint at what happened between us.

My job depends on that staying quiet.

Trav eyes me, and I get the impression he’s trying to figure out if I’m denying it for the sake of denying it or if I’m closeted.

Trav glances at his watch and then back at me. “I want to cut a deal.”

“I’ll see what the DA is willing to offer.” I go to get up when he stops me.

“No, no. I want to cut a deal with *you*.”

I frown. “With me ...”

“Yep. I’ll tell you everything I know as a favor to you. Because of our history.”

“We don’t have a history. We met *once*.”

Trav shrugs. “What can I say? It was an impressionable once.”

What is he playing at? “Tell me what you know.”

“Okay, so you need to look *inside* the limestone.”

“Inside ...”

Trav nods.

“How do you propose we do that?”

“Crack open a block. You seem to have a lot of pent-up rage. Imagine how good it would feel to ... pound it out.”

Does he have to sound so damn sexual?

“The drugs are inside the limestone,” I repeat. “Thanks.” I push back my chair.

“Wait, you’re leaving me in here?”

“You’re still under arrest for drug smuggling and a whole lot of other charges. Thanks for the ... favor.”

“So you admit I did you a favor?”

Why does this feel like a trick question? “If your information is good, then yes. You did me a favor.”

Just as he sits back with a triumphant smile, the door opens, and SA Walker enters.

He looks unimpressed with me and then turns to Trav. “You’re free to go.”

“He’s *what?*”

Trav stands. “This was fun. We should do it again sometime.”

“What was fun? Were you playing me?”

“No, he wasn’t,” Walker says. “That’s where the drugs were, but he tipped off his ATF buddies before he left Mexico. They took over the search of the ship. This is their case now.”

“Even though it’s a massive drug shipment?”

“They’ve had these guys undercover for six weeks under the impression Carter was smuggling guns.”

“I’ve been on Jason Carter’s tail for *two years*,” I argue.

“I guess I’m able to get the job done quicker than others. You win some, you lose some.” Trav salutes us. “Until next time.”

Next time? There won’t be a fucking next time.

If I ever see Travis West again, it will be too soon.

CHAPTER THREE\_

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DYLAN

NOW

AS I PULL MY UNMARKED CAR AROUND THE BACK OF A WAREHOUSE IN Wilmington near the Port of Los Angeles, I contemplate calling for backup, but the credibility of my source is not ideal. Why shouldn't I take it seriously when my CI is an addict who told me his cousin's pimp's landlord's meth dealer was making a drop today?

At least, I think that's what he told me.

Yeah, I'm not calling for backup for this.

*"Hey, I'm at an abandoned lot on a tip from someone who was so high he thought I was Jesus reincarnate."*

This is taxpayers' money at work.

I don't even know which warehouse the drop is going to be. There's two on this lot and no one in sight.

I park my car on the south side, hiding it from the entrance on the north.

In between the two abandoned spaces are old crates and rusted oil drums. If I can set myself up behind them, I can follow whichever warehouse my targets use.

I make sure the coast is clear before positioning myself on my ass in amongst all the junk. And now to play the waiting game. It's incredibly likely I could be here all night.

The sun is beginning to cast midafternoon shadows from the buildings when someone rolls up in a pimped-out Camaro. I get into a crouching position so I can move quickly if I need to. He gets out of the car, and he immediately reminds me of that old Offspring song “Pretty Fly for a White Guy.” Total gangster wannabe who can’t pull it off.

His Adidas sweats make him look like he’s from the nineties, and his white tank top that’s supposed to be tight sits loose on his slim build. The prominent hollowed cheeks and black and purple bruises on the inner side of his arms tell me all I need to know.

Number one rule of being a drug dealer, kids: Never dip into your own stash.

In a gap between the oil drums, I take some photos of him with my phone and just hope one of them is good enough quality to run through facial recognition software.

He sits on the hood of his car and scrolls through his phone, but we aren’t kept waiting long.

Another car, a bright blue Subaru BRZ with a comically large spoiler, pulls into the lot and parks next to the Camaro. The setting sun hits the car at an angle that casts shadows across the windshield so I can’t see inside.

A guy in his early twenties—at most—gets out. He looks more put together than the other guy, but they both have to be college age.

If Hale has sent me to witness a misdemeanor trade-off, I’m going to be pissed.

But there’s something about the junkie’s demeanor as the kid in designer jeans and a polo shirt approaches him, and it sets me on edge.

He becomes withdrawn and submissive, keeping his eyes down, and he shivers as the other guy gets close to him.

The tension between them is palpable even from where I’m watching.

My gut, which I’ve always trusted when it comes to my job, screams for me to interrupt them, but they haven’t even done anything yet except

exchange awkward up-nods at each other.

The preppy kid says something I can't hear, and the scrawny guy flinches before making his way to the trunk of his Camaro. He pulls out a duffle bag and reluctantly hands it over.

I snap pictures of the exchange as well as close-ups of potential felon number two, but the way the trade happens, with extreme hesitance on the junkie's part, it's obvious, even to me, that something's not right.

Words are exchanged, none of which I can make out from where I am, but if I had to guess, I'd say Camaro dude is a drug dealer for the preppy kid, only he's short on his profits. Probably because they're all in his arm.

This is going to go down one of two ways. He's in for a beating either way—a punishment—but how far it will go is up to someone higher up the food chain. Preppy's boss's boss.

I take my service weapon out of its holster, preparing for a takedown, but Preppy's faster.

The gunshot echoes around the empty warehouses, a sound I've heard so many times before. But this time, it ricochets throughout my entire body.

I recoil, hitting my side on a large crate and gritting my teeth to prevent myself from calling out in pain. I manage to stay silent, but the crate I knocked into didn't get the memo. It tips and hits a steel drum that falls with a loud crash.

My gun is drawn, and I'm on my feet in a second, but before I can get any words out, bullets fly in my direction.

I dive back behind the crates.

As soon as I hit the ground, the crate beside me splinters, and a bullet flies past my head.

"Don't shoot!" I call out. "I'm DEA." My voice comes out shakier than a rookie during his first takedown.

Silence blankets the area, but when I lift my head, another shot gets fired in my direction.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

I take out my phone to call for backup, but the kid on the ground screams out in pure agony.

When I look to see if it’s safe to help him, the assailant is gone. Or maybe hiding.

I need to get to the guy bleeding out, but if I do, I’ll be exposed, and I have no idea where the psycho with the gun is. His car is still there, and no one’s sitting in the driver’s seat.

Gun drawn, I move toward the cars and clear the small gap between them, making sure the perp isn’t lurking. He has to be close by still, but I need to help the guy who’s lying in a pool of his own blood.

I put my phone on the ground next to him and dial 9-1-1, putting it on speaker when it starts to ring so I can apply pressure to the wound. As soon as the operator answers, I give my credentials and special agent number and then start to explain.

“We have a GSW to the abdomen. He’s bleeding out fast.”

The operator asks about the victim, but movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, and then I’m staring down the barrel of a gun.

The assailant stands on the other side of the car, so I dive behind the rear door as he takes his shot.

“Fucking fucksticks.” The bullet ricochets off the perp’s vehicle but luckily misses me.

More gunshots ring out, echoing around the buildings.

I have blood on my hands, and because I released the pressure, he bleeds even more. The moans have stopped, though, so he has either passed out from the pain or is ... is ...

I have to bite back bile from rising up. I’ve seen dead bodies before, but it’s something you never get used to. Ever.

The day I get desensitized to seeing corpses is the day I need to get out of the game.

By some miracle, I hear the footsteps retreating over the heavy sound of my breaths and muffled questions by the 9-1-1 operator.

When I lift my head, the preppy kid is running toward the side of the warehouse.

I can't let him get into an easier position to take me out. He could come at me from any angle if he runs around the building and comes up beside me.

When I get up on my knee and aim my gun, I'm not shooting to kill. I need this guy alive so I can take him in and question him. What I thought was a simple drug bust with some college kids has escalated so quickly I can't even comprehend what I've stumbled on—what my CI Hale has sent me to.

He's about to round the corner when I squeeze my trigger and shoot him right in the lower leg. It might not stop him, but it will slow him down.

He retaliates with shots of his own, and I take cover again.

"Agent Rodriguez," the operator says. "Are you still there? What is happening?"

"I shot him," I grit out.

"You ... what?"

"Get someone here fast," I yell.

I frantically look all around me, trying to find where the kid has gone, but it's no use. I can't see anything from where I am.

It's moments like these that reiterate what my team is constantly telling me. *You can't save everyone.* And as I glance at the lifeless body of a kid whose only crime was making poor decisions, I realize no one is going to care about his death.

He's just another junkie to the public.

But he's a fucking human being, and I wanted to save him.

Now I'm here fighting for *my* life.

Okay, Dylan. Think.



Before I get a chance to make a move, more footsteps sound. Only they're fast and coming right toward me.

I raise my gun toward the sound, starting to doubt that I managed to shoot the kid at all. My hands tremble slightly from nerves. No matter how many dangerous situations I'm in, adrenaline always gives me the shakes.

My arms are steady, my aim is on point, and I'm one of the best on my team when it comes to gun range scores, but out here in the real world, the nerves get me every time.

The power of taking someone's life has never appealed to me, but if it comes down to them or me, I will choose me every time.

I'm trying to make the world a better place. I'm doing my bit.

But there are always bad guys out there trying to stop me, and I never let them win.

Then, it's like the world slows down as I watch someone appear around the trunk of the car. I already know it's not the preppy kid.

Arms extended, they're holding a revolver and wearing a light gray suit. "Rodriguez?" Special Agent in Charge Ken Walker says. He's the big boss now, not just my superior officer. He was promoted a couple of years ago.

I sag in relief. "Thank fuck you're here."

"I was in the neighborhood when the call was dispatched." He goes to where my phone is still connected to 9-1-1 and picks it up.

"Get down," I say. "The perp went around the side of the building. He's still armed, but he's been shot in the leg. He's young. Maybe college aged."

"You go around the outside. I'll check inside."

I don't question it. It's not normal protocol to split up, but nothing about this operation is protocol.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Walker asks.

"Tip from a CI." I get to my feet.

"Which CI?"

“Hale. He didn’t know many details, just that there was going to be a drop of some kind. Hale only told me the time and place. I expected a huge drug shipment.”

“Let’s go get this guy. Emergency responders should be here soon.”

“Should we wait for backup?”

“We don’t have time for that.”

On the contrary, I think we do. The kid has basically blocked himself in. There’s only one entrance in and out of this place. On either side of the warehouses is a large fence that I couldn’t jump, let alone someone who’s been shot. We should get SWAT and have police backup before we try to nail this guy. He’s made it clear he doesn’t give a shit that we’re law enforcement. He won’t hesitate to take either of us out.

But Walker is my boss, so I don’t question him.

“He went that way.” I point toward the front of the building. “I’m going to try the back. Hopefully he’s still expecting me to follow him.”

“I’ll take your lead on this,” Walker says.

“Really?”

“You know the situation better than I do. I trust you, Dylan.” Walker smiles.

“Did you have happy juice today or—”

“Don’t make me take it back.”

“No. No. Uh, thank you, sir. For trusting me with this. Cover me until I get into a safe position.”

“No problem.” Walker moves to the hood of the Camaro and leans over it with his gun drawn.

I crouch low and run toward the back of the building, ducking under the small, paneled windows.

When I get to the corner, I peek around but only see my car sitting there. There’s no other movement.

I glance back to Walker, but he’s gone. I lift my head. “What the fu—”

The glass pane window next to my ear shatters, and I cover my head with my arms.

When the sound of gunshots rings out, I figure Walker was right about the perp being inside. Yet, when they die down and I lift my head, it's not the kid I see through the broken shards of glass.

It's my boss.

Aiming his gun at me.

Shooting. *At me.*

“Walker, what are you—”

He fires again. I duck back down and lean against the wall. He saw me. Looked me right in the eye and took a shot. I can't ... nope ... I don't understand.

But everything does start to make sense now. How he got here so fast. Why he was adamant about breaking protocol and not waiting for backup.

Walker's in on this deal.

I wasn't supposed to be here. I shouldn't be here.

I look up at the sky and send out a silent question to my CI. *Hale, what did you do?*



By some miracle, I make it to my car without being hit, and luckily, I left it unlocked. I jump in and start the engine, thankful I faced the car outward so I don't have to reverse in this clusterfuck.

I put my foot to the floor on the gas and bowl past the two people trying to gun me down. And as I pass the open doorway to the old warehouse, they're both standing there. Together.

I don't slow down even as I get to the street and cross lanes of traffic. I almost get sideswiped by someone not paying attention, but to be fair, I'm going about twenty over the speed limit.

But that's when reality hits me. My foot eases off the gas pedal, and my heart sinks.

My boss is a dirty cop.

The sad fact is, being in law enforcement, I've witnessed my share of dirty deals. The cops who racial profile. The ones who let sex workers off with a warning in exchange for a freebie. It's disgusting.

And there's the argument that the only way to stop bad cops is by good ones speaking out, but in my experience, if you speak out against another officer, you become the enemy. *You* lose your job. Your colleagues no longer have your back.

It's a flawed system, and it's probably seen as cowardly to keep my mouth shut, but until now, I've never personally witnessed something like ... that.

Walker shot at me with intent.

The question is, who can I trust if I can't even trust my agent in charge? Who can I turn to?

Deputy administrator? Chief of staff?

In my rearview mirror, I see flashing lights, and I let out a string of curse words. Not all of them in English. But then I see them turn toward the warehouse.

There's the backup I asked 9-1-1 for. Shit. Walker has my phone.

*Okay, okay, okay*, I chant in my head. I need a plan. Somewhere to go. But first, I need to get rid of this car. It would take five seconds for Walker to find it through the GPS tracking all DEA vehicles have.

I take the next right and end up near the Pike Outlets in Long Beach. Pulling into the parking structure, I drive up the ramp to the top faster than I probably should. The tires screech under me, but when I see an available spot by the exit to a stairwell, I quickly dump the car and then run down the flight of stairs, but I pause at the door before I hit street level.

I don't know where to go or who I can trust.

My chest is heavy as I try to breathe, but there's no oxygen in here. With my heart pounding, I know I'm on the verge of a panic attack, and every instinct that says to keep moving is drowned out by the need to stay where I am. I slump against the wall of the protected stairwell because no one can see me here.

No one can get me.

They could be on my tail. They might not be.

It's not safe here, but within the confines of this stairwell, I at least know no one can see me.

But logic tells me my first priority is putting as much distance between me and where they can track me. They can track my car.

I need to keep moving.

*Come on, Dylan. One foot in front of the other. Don't stop until you're truly safe.*

I take a deep breath and open the door to the street. That's when I notice my hands. They're still covered in the junkie's blood, though it's somewhat dried already.

I cross the street from the parking garage to the outlet mall with my hands in my pockets and slip into the first restroom I come across.

It's empty, so I get to work scrubbing my hands raw. When I catch sight of my face in the mirror, I realize I'm covered in tiny cuts from the window glass.

I look like hell.

I have maybe twenty bucks in cash on me, which isn't going to change my look drastically, so when I'm done taking off an entire layer of skin, I keep my head down and head for an ATM.

I withdraw as much money as my bank allows me to, which is only two grand of the measly five I have in my savings account.

My next stop, I buy a Nike hat. And then I go into the first store I see where I can buy a burner phone. Now to get the fuck out of here.

I can't order an Uber without using my credit card, and if I paid with that, they could trace the trip and know exactly where I'm going. Which ... I don't exactly know where that is.

The back of my mind tickles with the one person I don't want to turn to. His name is like a blinking neon sign that I want to unplug.

Travis West is not an option.

Over the years, our cat-and-mouse game has only gotten worse. He loves tormenting me and driving me crazy.

That one "favor" he did for me, that turned out to not be a favor at all, has been held over my head ever since. It set off the chain of events that have had me reluctantly working with the cocky asshole.

We release a statement saying we're looking for a person in connection to a drug bust or a house raid, and he'll dump that wanted person at my doorstep. Says it's a favor. Then he asks me to arrest some tech genius for stalking and trespassing against one of his high-profile clients, or he'll ask for the official police records of someone he's been hired to investigate. He tips me off about something big going down and then somehow beats me to infiltrating the inner circle of a suspected drug trafficker. And he does it all with a damn cocky smile on his rugged face.

Every time he turns up wanting something, I know it's going to be an annoying couple of days. It's like he keeps coming back into my life to remind me he's still there. He's still the same man who turned me inside out.

It would be a successful professional relationship if he wasn't so fucking arrogant and determined to remind me that he's had me once and he'll have me again.

He treats it like a game, and while I appreciate the tips and the help, the payoff isn't always worth it.

I hate him.

Even though, all these years later, I still want him. Well, his dick, to be precise. The man it's attached to, I could take or leave. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction of giving in to him.

He's made it no secret that he wants me again. He spouts bullshit about me being the love of his life to taunt me, which is both infuriating and helpful. It's really helpful in making sure I keep that professional distance between us. It convinces me that Travis West needs to remain a one and done.

Until the next time I see him when I start to question it again. But like a vicious circle, it keeps happening.

He shows up. Lust hits me in the gut. He opens his mouth. I'm cured of it.

I order a taxi on my phone under a fake name and opt to pay cash to the driver. When my ride arrives, I slip into the back seat but keep my head low.

When the driver talks to me, I'm conversational and polite.

I could have offered him two hundred bucks—double his fare—for him to say that he never saw me if he was asked, but that would raise red flags. If I'm as nondescript as possible, the chances are he'll likely forget me anyway.

I get the driver to drop me off outside a random house, and then I'll walk to Trav's.

Only problem is, I have no idea what to say when I get there.

As I arrive at his stupid mansion that he bought a couple of years ago, I can't help the bitterness creeping in. He's taking over the world with his "security company."

I know I'm already under surveillance. Hell, I probably was since I entered his street. The gate opens up immediately before I hit the buzzer because they know me.

The number of times I've barged my way in here over the years to chew out Trav for ruining an investigation of mine is scarily high.

A man I know as Domino answers the door and lets me in. "He's in a meeting."

"This is kind of important."

Domino stares me down. He's similar in physique to Trav, a little smaller, and the dark scruff on his chin is the opposite to Trav's lighter permanent five-o'clock shadow. "You look like shit."

"Being shot at does that to a person."

His eyebrows shoot up. "I'll take you to Trav."

And here comes the moment where I have to swallow my pride and ask for help from the one man I said I would never go crawling to for information again. Because it always comes with strings.

Domino opens the door, and there stands Trav, all domineering and only hotter since he turned forty. How can someone in their forties look that mouthwatering? It should be illegal.

He's still as bulky and muscular as he was back when we met, still has the military crew cut, but there's something about him that's more distinguished than how he looked the night we met. His sleeve tattoo that makes him look like he has a robotic arm is still as mesmerizing in person as it was when he used it for leverage against that stall while he fucked me.

Over time, he's gotten a salt-and-peppery five-o'clock shadow that's so attractive.

Someone clears their throat in the room, and that's when I turn to the group of his team sitting at the large table. All their eyes are on me. Mike Bravo has grown exponentially over the years and gotten Trav the money to pay for this lavish mansion.

I'm not convinced it's all aboveboard, but anytime we've crossed paths, anytime he's been involved, he's walked away scot-free. Because of who he is or who he knows, I'm not sure. I'm constantly told not to worry about



what Travis West does or doesn't do. Kind of hard when he keeps interfering with my job, but I let it go because I'm ordered to.

"Who let you in here?" Trav barks, and I suppress a smile.

"Your guard dog," I quip. "We need to talk."

"What am I in trouble for now?"

I glare at him, and he relents. He hands off the meeting to Domino and gestures for me to walk down the hall.

When he pulls me into his office, behind the desk sitting on Trav's chair is a dog. The German shepherd's tongue is hanging out of its mouth, and it looks like it's smiling.

"Princess, out," Trav says.

The dog doesn't move.

"You ... have a dog?" I ask because Trav doesn't seem like the type of guy to have one.

"She's not mine. Princess Smooshy Face, out."

This time, the dog does obey him, and I have to laugh. "Princess Smooshy Face? *Really?*"

Trav closes the door when the dog runs out into the hall. "She belongs to Iris, and he taught her to only obey commands if you use her entire name."

"I barely know Iris, but from what I do know of him, that checks out."

Trav steps into my space. "So, why are you here? It has to be serious for you to come to me for once."

And yep. Here's the part I've been dreading the whole way here. I have spent years trying to keep my distance from Travis West.

He's obnoxious, he's cocky, he drives me crazy, and now I have to ask him for a favor.

He's going to hold this over my head for all of eternity.

I take a deep breath and blurt, "I need your help."

And then? The fucker unleashes the most Trav-like smirk I've ever seen.

*Yeah, brilliant idea coming here, Dylan.*

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CHAPTER FOUR\_

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TRAV

I MUST DO A TERRIBLE JOB OF TRYING TO CONTAIN MY EXCITEMENT BECAUSE Dylan slumps and turns to leave.

“I knew it was a mistake coming here.”

“It wasn’t.” I put my hand on the door so he can’t open it, blocking him in between my hard body and the flat surface. “Mm, what does this position remind you of?”

“You’re an ass,” he bites and then mutters, “Damn it,” like he hates that I can still get under his skin.

“From memory, that night was all about your ass.”

“It’s only been about a year since you brought that up.”

“I’ve barely seen you these last twelve months. I’m starting to think you might not actually like me.”

“I don’t.”

I lean in and whisper, “Then why haven’t you moved?”

Teasing Dylan is fun. It always has been. I know I should probably stop if I actually want him to start respecting me, but it’s been seven years since we first met, and he has hated me ever since he arrested me and I kinda, sorta, wasted his time by letting the ATF find his score and take credit for the bust.

Hey, it’s not my fault different law enforcement agencies don’t communicate. But okay, even I will admit it was a shitty move on my

behalf, but I really needed to get paid back then. The first two years for Mike Bravo had us in the red until we started getting larger contracts.

Dylan slips out from under me and takes a seat at my desk. “I’m in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” I sit opposite him.

“Well, I’m coming to you for help, so I think that says a lot.”

“Or you could be using it as an excuse to see me. I’ve missed you too.”

“Yep. Regretting this. But no. My boss tried to kill me today. Fun times.”

I ignore the twist in my gut—that protective instinct that pumps through my veins—and remain professional. “Damn. Talk about a bad workday.” Okay, professional by my standards.

Dylan scoffs. “You can say that again.”

“Go above his head. Report it.”

“Thank you so much for that simple solution,” he deadpans. “How did I not come up with that?”

I like snarky Dylan. “Sorry. Continue. He tried to kill you, and then?”

“And then I realized I didn’t know who I could turn to. If a man I respect so much could do something like this without me having a single clue of what he was capable of ... who am I supposed to trust? My teammates? What if they’re involved? It’s too hard to know. So ... I need you. To figure it out.”

I go to open my mouth when he puts his hand up to stop me.

“And I know the drill. I’ll owe you a favor because apparently our whole relationship is about owing you.”

“Hey, some men flirt by sending flowers. I send you wanted drug lords. I thought you’d like that better. You never *had* to pay me back for that. You were just nice enough to.”

“If that was flirting, it’s surprising you ever get laid.”

Yeah, I’m so not getting into my sex life with him.

“I dunno. It worked on you once upon a time, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, I also recall not exchanging any words.”

I wink. “Damn. You found my secret.”

Dylan’s lips purse. “Also, you think all those times I did you a favor was me being nice? I’ve never once been nice to you. I’ve done it reluctantly because I hate having a debt hanging over my head. How am I supposed to say no when you give me something I need and then ask for something in return?”

“Oh. I figured that was how you flirted back. No?” I cock my head.

“You’re exhausting.”

“Maybe, but I’m going to save your life. So there’s that.”

“There is that.”

I stand. “Let’s get started.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re getting you out of town first.”

“Wait, what?”

“You think your boss is going to let you walk away from this? He knows you and I have a history.”

“Barely. My whole team knows I hate you. This will be the last place they look for me.”

“First, you don’t hate me. And second, this is the most obvious place you’d run to. I have the money and resources to keep you safe, and you wouldn’t be dumb enough to hide at your family’s house.”

Dylan’s face drops. “My family. I can’t drag them into this.”

“You won’t. Think of this as your own version of witness protection. No contact to friends, family, anyone. You need to become a ghost until we nail your boss to the wall.”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Yes, you did. The minute you stepped into my house and asked me for help.”

Dylan stands. “I meant help me take him down. Not to lock me away in some tower while you do all the work.”

“Aww, that’s cute.”

Dylan grits his teeth. “What’s cute?”

“That you think I’m not going to be with you at all times. My guys can do the work. You and I are taking a vacation.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. No. *No*. I’ll go to Walker and ask him to shoot me point-blank. That has to be better than being confined with you for who knows how long.”

“There you go with that top-notch flirting again. Careful, you might fall in love with me at this rate, and we haven’t even left yet.”

“Yup. Death might be preferable.”

Why is antagonizing Dylan so much fun? I tell myself to be nicer. To *actually* flirt and show him I’m a decent guy, and yet all my caveman instincts make me the most patronizing asshole ever.

I should probably ask a therapist what that’s all about.

Should but won’t. Because if I have answers as to why I do it, I might need to stop.

“I’m going to get all my available guys on this.” I gesture for Dylan to exit, and then I take him into the war room, where Domino is still briefing the guys on a job.

They all turn to look at us entering the room.

“Change of plans,” I say. “Councilman Rowling will have to wait.”

“No Vegas?” Zeus looks like a kid who was told he can’t have any candy. You know, if candy was alcohol, strippers, and gambling.

“Councilman Rowling?” Dylan asks. “What do you want with him?”

I turn to Dylan. “Why? What do you know about Rowling?” We’ve been hired to tail him because he’s in a suspected drug ring, and our employer wants us to bring him down so he won’t be reelected. So far, all

we've discovered is he's having an affair, and that's not enough to tank a political career in this day and age. But if Dylan knows something ...

"Nothing. I just want to know what he did to get on your radar."

"What does anyone do to get on my radar?"

"I dunno. Breathe in your direction?"

"Mm, something like that." I face back to my men, Atlas, Zeus, Iris, and Saint. "Here's the deal. Seems there are some dirty agents—"

"Agent. One agent. That I know of," Dylan says.

"SAC Ken Walker tried to kill Rodriguez," I clarify. "Better?"

"Yes."

"SAC ..." Iris says.

Dylan steps up next to me. "Special agent in charge."

Iris is about to say something stupid. I've known him too long. "So, what you're saying is, Dylan's sac is causing him trouble, and you offered to help ... with his ... sac."

I turn to Dylan. "Feel free to ignore that guy. We do."

"Okay, but this Walker guy is going after your boyfriend?" Iris asks. "He must have a sac of steel."

Dylan's mouth drops, and it takes all of my energy not to smile.

"Not my boyfriend," I say.

"Definitely not," Dylan agrees.

Thanks to Domino, Kevlar, and Alphabet, the entire team knows my history with Dylan. They rib me about it whenever our work gets mixed up with Dylan's. I always fight it, which I think only encourages them, but I like to keep my real thoughts on Dylan to myself.

Out of all the men I've been with, and there have been a lot, Dylan's the only one I've been interested in past one date. Though, I can't exactly call our bathroom stall hookup a date.

Maybe it's that he has rebuffed me ever since. He challenges me. I might taunt him, and he might snark at me, but there's no doubt that we



work well together.

We've helped each other out, even if it has been reluctantly on his part.

For so long, we've done this dance, and I've been patient. I haven't saved myself for him or any of that shit, but I've all but convinced myself that we belong together because I've never met someone as fiery as Dylan Rodriguez.

"What do you need us to do?" Saint asks.

He's quickly becoming one of my favorite recruits. He's the newest, and he has some baggage, but he's here to work ... even when he's being inappropriate with Iris on my time. That's totally Iris's influence, though. I still haven't decided if letting them be together while working for me was a good or bad idea.

"I'm taking Rodriguez somewhere safe where Walker can't find him. Saint, I need you to track down all CCTV you can in the area of ..." I turn to Dylan in question.

"Oh. Uh, the abandoned warehouses on Sanford in Wilmington."

"Scan that whole area, and do it now before any of it can be tampered with."

"On it," Saint says and leaves the room to go to his tech den.

"The rest of you, I need information. I know this is generally Saint's or Ghost's area of expertise, but while Saint's busy with CCTV, I need you guys to do some digging. I need everything there is to know about Ken Walker, his associates, his family. I need everything. It would also help if we could track down his current location."

The front gate buzzes with someone's arrival.

All the guys I've called in are already here, and if it was any of my guys, they don't have to alert us. They let themselves in.

"Or maybe he'll find us," I say and turn to Dylan. "I told you they'd know you'd come to me. Stay here until I come back."

"Because you're boyfriends," Iris calls out as I walk away.

I ignore him and tell Domino to open the gate.

By the time I've gone to the front of the house, cars are pulling up the gravel driveway.

I fold my arms and tuck my hands in my armpits to stop me from wrapping my fingers around Walker's throat as soon as I see him.

There are two SUVs, full of DEA agents. They all get out, but only SAC Walker and SA Evans approach me as I wait for them by the door.

"Some big drug lords escape from prison or something?" I quip. "Need a team of bounty hunters on their ass? Not that we take on those jobs often. They're fun, but it doesn't pay well. It would have to be someone with a million-dollar bounty on their head for me to even bother."

Walker's lips pull into a tight line, and then he assesses me with calculating eyes. He might not believe my performance, but I'm fucking good at it. There's no way he would be able to tell if I'm lying or not.

"I take it from your lack of knowledge about the situation that you haven't seen Agent Rodriguez?"

I pretend to think. "Not recently." What? Two minutes ago isn't recent.

"If you do see him, call me." He takes out a card.

"He's missing?"

"Not ... quite. He's a suspect in a very heinous crime, and we need to bring him in."

I force a frown. "*He's* a suspect? As in Dylan Rodriguez? Are you sure you have the right guy? Mr. Uptight Goody Two-Shoes? *Really?*"

"We thought the same," Evans says. "But SAC Walker was there when it happened."

"Damn." I turn to Walker. "What did he do?"

"We want to handle this internally. You understand."

"Sure." I pull off a nonchalant act, even though I want to pull out a Glock and see how he likes being shot at.

“So, if you’ll just let us take a look around your property, we’ll leave you be.” Walker’s casual, pulling the ol’ *we trust you but want to make sure the bad guy isn’t doing bad things that you’re unaware of* thing. We’re in no way accusing you of anything, but really, we are.

I act confused. “You ... want to look around *my* property?”

“Yes.”

My lips on one side turn up. “Okay, now I’m thinking this whole Rodriguez line is a ruse. He’s been trying to get dirt on me for years, and this sounds really convenient to me.”

“That’s not what this is,” Walker says. “We know you’re untouchable. We really are just looking for Rodriguez.”

“You’ll forgive me for not taking your word on that. Good luck finding a judge who’ll sign a warrant to search anything I own. I’m sorry I can’t help you. If Rodriguez does show his face, which I think we all know he won’t with how much he despises me, I’ll be sure to give you a call. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.”

Walker glares at me, but Evans politely says, “Thank you for your time.”

On their way back to the car, I hear Evans say, “He’s probably right. Dylan hates that guy.”

Walker grumbles something I can’t hear, and then they’re gone, but I wouldn’t put it past them to be waiting out the front in case they think I’m lying.

And now, after having Walker show up with his team and trying to pin some crime on Dylan, it’s time for Operation Rogue to begin.

CHAPTER FIVE\_

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DYLAN

“THIS IS EXTREME,” I SAY AS TRAV OPENS THE TRUNK TO HIS RANGE ROVER and tells me to get in. “Actually, I get the impression this is more to fulfill some sort of kidnapping fantasy you have of me.”

Trav looks like he’s trying not to smile. “Not true. All of my fantasies about you are consensual. In fact, in nearly all of them, you’re begging for my cock again.”

“Please, we hooked up once. A billion years ago. For a quickie in a bathroom stall at that. Your dick is barely memorable.”

“Keep telling yourself that. Now, get in.”

I eye the trunk. It’s spacious, at least. “How long do I have to stay in there?”

“Until I’m sure we’re not being followed by the man who’s *trying to kill you*. Want me to go get a pillow? Maybe a blankie and a book to read?”

“Fuck you.” I climb in.

“You cursing me out is starting to hold less conviction. That’s the first step toward admitting you *like me*.”

Why did I turn to this jackass again?

Oh, right. Life in danger, boss is dirty, my whole world imploding before my eyes.

*This is better than dying. This is better than dying.*

Granted, not that much better, but ... better.

“Here’s a new phone you can play with. I downloaded Candy Crush for you and everything.” He hands me a brand-new iPhone—latest model.

“What about my burner phone?” I ask.

“Yeah, we’re going to need to destroy that. If they saw you go into that store and buy it, there’s a chance they could track the serial number. This one is completely untraceable. At least, they won’t be able to connect *you* with it.”

I definitely came to the right place. I take it out of my pocket and give it to him. “Wow, it’s like you’ve got experience hiding fugitives.” Wouldn’t surprise me in the least.

He throws the phone on the ground and stomps on it. “Nah. I’m just smarter than you.” Trav doesn’t let me clap back before he shuts me in the trunk.

I might owe him my life, but I still hate him. Ish.

We get on the road, and I’m jostled around so much I regret not taking the pillow and blanket option even if he was being a condescending twat.

After about twenty minutes, Trav hits a pothole, and I get flung into the air, hitting my head on the trunk partition.

“Ow,” I call out.

The phone Trav gave me starts ringing, and when I lift it, a photo of Trav and the name “Future Husband” fill the screen.

I hit Answer. “Really?”

“Is that directed at my terrible driving or what I saved my number under?”

“Both. Are you purposefully trying to hurt me?”

“Again, which thing is that directed at?”

“How much longer until you can get me out of here?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. What if CCTV captures you in the passenger seat? Maybe it’s safer if you stay back there.”

“Why are you the way that you are?” I growl.

“Fine. If you want to risk it, I guess you can pop the seat in front of you and crawl through to the back seat. But keep your head down.”

Finally.

I do as he says, and then at least I’m on comfortable leather instead of inside a moving coffin.

“Here.” Trav reaches over to his passenger seat and passes a blanket and a pillow back to me.

“You actually brought these?”

“Take a nap like a good boy. Or better yet, cover your face with the blanket.”

“You like my face,” I argue and then hate myself for it.

“I do. But this is for your protection. I promise I’ll look lovingly into your eyes as soon as we get to our destination.”

“Where is our destination?”

“I told you already. We’re going on vacation. Palm Desert, here we come, baby.”

*It’s better than being dead. It’s better than being dead.*



“We’re here, sleepyhead,” Trav says, his deep rumble somehow pulling off a soothing tone. He takes a left, and gravel crunches under the tires.

“I’m not asleep. You made me lie down the entire way.” I sit up and take in my surroundings. It’s pitch-black outside, and I can’t see much, but I can see there aren’t any dwellings in the near vicinity, just palm trees and dry land. “Uh, are we going to be camping in the desert?”

“Wasn’t planning on it, but we can if you want.” As he says this, we come to a clearing, and behind the millions of palm trees and bushes is a massive stone-and-concrete mansion.

It’s lit up from all different angles.

“Are we at a hotel?”

Trav snorts. “Welcome to my playground.”

“You own this place?”

Trav parks under a huge stone archway next to wooden doors. “Let’s say my stock jumped a few points in the last couple of years.”

“Sure. Stock. That’s where you get your money. It’s not at all by doing shady deals with criminals or by breaking the law.”

“I would never.” Trav acts offended. “My future husband is a DEA agent, and what kind of husband would I be if I broke the law and put his career in jeopardy?”

“Well, lucky for you, I most likely won’t have a career after this.”

Trav grins, and I realize my mistake before he even says it. “Aww, did we just get engaged?”

I sigh and exit the car. “Show me to *my* room.” It’s been a long couple of hours in the car, and now I really am ready for sleep.

“You want to save yourself for our wedding night. I get it. Right this way.”

We enter a large tiled foyer, but I have to blink away disbelief as all the gorgeousness and sophistication of the outside of the building is trashed by the tackiest decor I’ve ever seen.

“Is ... is that a chandelier made out of deer antlers and covered in strings of crystals?” Not to mention the zebra-print rug, mismatched furniture and colors, and the awful wall print of ... I don’t want to say blood spatter. But it looks like blood spatter.

“Don’t you love it?” Trav looks so proud of this monstrosity that I’m starting to doubt my own taste levels.

“It ... sure is a conversation piece.”

Trav permanently looks like he’s in on an inside joke that only he gets. “You have a choice of rooms, but I’d feel more comfortable if you stayed in mine.”



I give him my “unimpressed” look.

“Without me. Geez. It’s the most secure, it works on independent power to the rest of the house, and if there was ever a raid, it works as a panic room.”

Again, I find myself wondering exactly what Trav does outside of interfering with my livelihood. “Paranoid?”

“Prepared. And you’re welcome. I don’t let just anyone sleep in my bed.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

“It’s the truth. You’re the only man I’ve ever had sex with who has stepped foot in this house.”

I narrow my gaze but tell myself not to read into why that is. I’m here because I asked for his help. Not because his jokes about us being together hold any weight. Because they don’t. “That was a long time ago. I don’t think it counts anymore.”

“Really? Is this a new dating rule? You don’t have to claim the ones past so many years? And if that’s the case, how many years is it? Is it by calendar year? That would make me a virgin this year. I’m all innocent and virginal. Want to pop my cherry?”

“Smartass,” I mumble, and then his words register. “Wait, you haven’t had sex with anyone this year? It’s June.”

“I’ve been *busy*. But, hey, if you’re offering to scratch an itch—”

“I’m not going anywhere near you if you’re itchy down there.”

“Oh, well, lucky for you, that was just an expression. We might be locked up in here for a few weeks. What will we do to pass the time?” He’s relentless, but I can’t say I hate it.

And then I hate *myself* for somehow finding his ridiculousness charming.

“I have a feeling my time will be spent trying not to kill you.”

“You kill me, they kill you, and that’s a whole lot of killing that I can’t be bothered dealing with.”

“Well, you’ll be dead, so you won’t have to deal with it.”

Trav shakes his head. “Nah, even in death, I’m too stubborn to let anyone else clean up my messes.”

“Stubborn, controlling ... same thing, right?”

“Since when am I controlling?”

I huff. “Forgetting for a moment you forced me into the trunk of your car for no real reason—”

“Your safety is always my number one priority, boo.”

I ignore the stupid pet name. “You’ve been controlling every time I’ve ever met you. Starting with the moment you pushed me against a wall and fucked me.”

Trav looks up at the roof and hums. “Mm, good memories.”

“I’ve had fonder ones.” That’s a lie, but he doesn’t need to know that. God, I still think of that night, of him moving inside me, slamming into me over and over again. I’ve never been fucked out like that in my life. “What about the second time we met where you manipulated me into interrogating you for so long, I lost my case while the ATF scored my stash?”

“Okay, that was different. I needed my payday. You were ... collateral damage. Even if being interrogated by you was kinda fun.”

“Or how about anytime you’ve come to me since trading a favor for a favor?” I ask.

“I already told you, you didn’t need to repay those.”

“And like I told you every single time, I don’t like debts being hung over my head, but you’d do it anyway so you could *control* me.”

For the briefest, most split second, I swear Trav’s eyes gloss over with guilt, but that can’t be right.

The look disappears as fast as it comes, but he’s still serious when he says, “I’m going to level with you. I don’t like owing people either. That’s

why I always give you something before asking for a favor.”

That ... would make sense.

“So, how long do you think we’ll be holed up here for?” I ask, wanting to change the topic before I overanalyze every single run-in I’ve had with Travis West in the last few years.

“At least a few days. Hopefully only a couple of weeks. We’ll gather as much evidence as we can to take your boss down.”

“And what are we supposed to do in the meantime?”

Trav winks. “I have a few ideas.”

“Anything that doesn’t involve you trying to antagonize me or get me into bed?”

“Oh. Then no, I have no ideas.”

This is going to be a long few days. Staying with him a few weeks is out of the question. We won’t survive it. I might have to welcome death so I can get away from the man who loves to relentlessly get under my skin.

Ironically, running away with Trav to save my life might just kill me.

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CHAPTER SIX\_

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TRAV

I'M TRYING TO STOP. I REALLY AM. BUT DYLAN BRINGS OUT THIS SIDE OF me that makes me want to club him over the back of the head and claim him. It makes me ... an ass.

If I want Dylan to take me seriously, I need to show him that I can actually be serious. He's only ever seen that confident side of me, that armor I wear in my line of work to make sure I'm not only protecting myself but my team.

Mike Bravo is my found family. Sure, I have actual living relatives who I love and catch up with when I can, but they're all regular civilians. Mike Bravo is a brotherhood, and I will always put them first. Which means taking a while to trust someone. And while I trust Dylan, I know he doesn't return it, and trust is a two-way street.

So this is me, trying to make amends for years of hostile energy. Me taunting him, him getting frustrated with me, I'll try to make it stop.

"I'll show you to your room. Which is actually my room, but I won't be in it."

He finally unleashes a smile. "Thank you for the clarification." He pauses as we cross the threshold. "This ... is not what I was expecting."

"It's drab compared to out there, but it does in a pinch." The truth is, the headache in the rest of the house has nothing to do with me. There's a story, but even the guys on my team don't know it.

They think I fucked an interior designer, pissed him off, and that was his revenge, which is not how it happened at all, but I let them think that.

My room, which I did myself, is basic with no frills. Black bed frame, khaki blanket, sheets neat with military corners, and everything is in its place and uncluttered. I have a mini command center by the door, a stockroom full of supplies, weapons, and rations to last a month, and everything I could ever possibly need in here.

Just in case.

“Am I going to have to take my computer out of here? Confiscate your phone I gave you?”

Dylan turns to me. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you know how these things work. Someone goes into protection and then realizes they can’t see their family, their friends ... anyone they’re ... dating.” I hold my breath and wait for him to either take the bait or tell the truth.

Dylan doesn’t miss a beat. “Don’t worry. My boyfriend is away for business.”

“Oh, is this your imaginary boyfriend?”

“How would you know if he’s real or imaginary?”

“Because I know you even though you don’t want me to. If you had a boyfriend, you would’ve told me and rubbed it in my face. Every joke, every taunt, it would be rebutted with your smart tongue telling me I’m barking up someone else’s tree.”

His dark brows draw in tight. “That’s not what the saying is.”

I shrug. “Close enough.”

“You’re wrong, though.”

“Am I? What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

“Okay, no, you were right about that, but you’re wrong about knowing me.”

I rub my chin. “Well, we have nothing but time. How about we play a game?” I take the desk chair by my computer and park my ass on it.

“I’m not going to like this, am I?” Dylan sits on the edge of my bed. Can’t say I hate the sight. The opposite, actually.

“I bet you I know more about you than you do about me. And go. Tell me a random fact about me that you don’t think I would know you know.”

He rubs his temples. “What?”

“Tell me something about myself that would surprise me to find out you know about me.”

“I was right. I don’t like this game.”

“Is it because you’ve got nothing? I’ll go first. Even though I already gave you the no-boyfriend thing for free. You joined the police force after growing up in a dangerous neighborhood where the cops didn’t care what happened on your streets.”

Dylan scoffs. “I’m the son of Mexican immigrants. It’s not that hard to deduce. You’re basically cold reading me. Next, you’ll tell me my abuelita is coming to you from the grave and has a message for me.”

“How did you know? Her message is coming through loud and clear. ‘Stop being a jackass and play the game. Also, marry this man. He is big and tough and oh so sexy.’”

“Well, first of all, my grandmother is still alive. She lives in Mexico. And second of all, she would tell me not to go for the meathead gringo. Sorry.”

Even when he’s insulting me, I can’t help loving it. “I’ve noticed something. You’re still not playing the game. Does this mean I win?”

“Okay, fine. Even though you come from an upper-middle-class family, you joined the military not because you feel honor and patriotism but because you’re an adrenaline junkie who likes big guns and to blow shit up.”

His answer surprises me, and it's close to the truth but not all the way correct. "Actually, I joined the military hoping it would make me 'less gay.' And if that didn't work, I at least had Don't Ask, Don't Tell to fall back on. It was my way of hiding my true self during a time I thought I'd have no support. No one would ask, and I wouldn't tell. And *that's* when I fell in love with guns and blowing shit up."

Dylan blinks at me. "When did you come out?"

"After it was repealed. I'd been serving for thirteen years, having anonymous hookups on leave, and one day, after waking up in a seedy motel next to someone who was the opposite of my type, I thought by stepping out of that closet, I'd open a new world of possibilities. Maybe a relationship, even. All it did was make me a target in my squad. It's how Mike Bravo was formed. I wanted to make every LGBTQ soldier feel safe, even if that meant pulling them out of the military and offering them terrible pay."

He waves around, gesturing at the house. "Terrible pay, my ass."

"Yeah, well, in the beginning, it *was* terrible pay. I didn't expect Mike Bravo to grow this big in only eight years, and while the military is better now for queer people than it once was, Mike Bravo is still a safe haven for misplaced vets. We still get to do what we love, and we don't have to deal with the politics."

"I only have one question."

"Shoot." I'm prepared for anything.

"How do you get any work done? Mike Bravo sounds like the ideal environment for an orgy-fest."

Prepared for any question ... except that.

"It's against the rules," I say. "I do have one couple who work for me, but I try not to put them on the same job. Distraction can get a man killed out there."



“Are you saying I’m not a distraction to you? With all the crap you say all the time, I’d have to at least think I distract you a little bit.”

Dylan Rodriguez is the worst distraction of all, but something tells me being with him would be worth taking a bullet.

“I’m the boss,” I say. “I make the rules, so they don’t apply to me.”

“Wow. I bet your team loves you with that kind of attitude.”

“Nope. They love me because I’m a fair boss and pay them well.”

“Mm,” Dylan hums and leans back, resting his palms on the comforter. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with you being the one to pull them out of an unideal situation and give them the world. A place to be open. To be themselves.”

“That might have something to do with it, but none of my guys owe me anything. I do what I do because I love it, and I recruit men and women who want it. Well, *woman*, but we haven’t found anyone else who can put up with the guys like Angel can.”

Dylan’s lips press together. “Okay, second thing I know about you. You have a hero complex, and it’s not an attractive quality.”

“I was in the *military*. Good luck finding anyone who served who doesn’t have a hero complex. We sacrifice everything for our country. We fight for freedoms—”

“Freedoms that half the population take for granted by acting like fucksticles.”

“True, but what about the other half? There will always be people who need help. Always someone to save. To protect. And today, that person is you.”

As if all at once, the energy drains from Dylan, like he’s actually realizing the gravity of why we’re here. It’s all catching up to him and showing through his pinched expression and exhausted eyes.

I stand and approach him, taking the spot next to him. “I know everything is a mess, but I promise you, I’ll get you out of this. I’m waiting

for my guys to call with some good news, but until we can figure something out, we can stay here for as long as we like.”

Dylan’s big brown eyes meet mine. “Why can’t you be this Trav all the time? You’re actually really good at the reassuring thing, and I didn’t even ask you to be. It’s like ...”

Okay, nope, being serious is too hard. “It’s like I can read your mind? That’s a power only true soul mates have.”

“And there you go ruining it again.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it. By the time we’re married, you’ll love everything that falls from my mouth.”

“If there ever comes a day where I like your stupid comments about us getting married, being soul mates, or even being together, that will be the day I agree to marry you.”

We’re practically engaged.

CHAPTER SEVEN\_

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DYLAN

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT BEING THIS CLOSE TO TRAV, HAVING HIS domineering body practically pressed against me, that makes me want to straddle him and push him down on his bed.

The way he's promising to fix my life, to get me out of this ... I want to thank him in a really inappropriate way.

Thankfully, his phone starts ringing, and he stands. "Make yourself at home. I need to take this."

He walks out as he lifts the phone to his ear, and I know the call is about me.

Standing from the bed, I approach the bedroom door cautiously and as quietly as I can.

There have been few occasions where I've actually witnessed Trav in action. Mostly my interactions with him have been him taunting me while we exchange information or leads. But watching how he handles this call and how he reassured me just now, I can see that he actually has a serious side.

His story of joining the military to try to man up and stop being gay could be real or exaggerated, but in that moment, my heart might have lurched toward his.

Growing up in my family, with my Mexican heritage, I can understand that fear. I thought my parents would disown me, that they wouldn't accept

me, and for a while after I came out, my father didn't speak to me. Family gatherings were tense, and I hated going to them. I was convinced my parents were going to tell me to stop coming, but they never did, and I kept going because they were my family, and I held on to the hope that they'd accept me one day.

Things were strained for a few months, but then one day, my mom yelled *¡Basta ya!*—that's enough—in front of my whole family. My dad, my aunts, uncles, cousins, brother, and sister all went dead silent.

“Dylan is a good boy with good values, and that's all I need to know about him. I love him for everything that he is. And if that's gay, then I love a gay man.”

I'd tried really hard not to laugh at that, but it slipped out. And then everyone joined in.

Suddenly, with her blessing, the rest of the family fell in line. I was no longer given disapproving looks when I'd walk in the door. My aunts and uncles acknowledged my existence again. It took longer for my father to come around, and I wish I could say it's been smooth sailing since they both apologized for the way they behaved, but I can't help feeling like they're still disappointed in me.

They've accepted me for who I am, but I'm still not what they expected. And I can't help noticing they treat my brother differently than me.

Rafe's the golden boy. He went to *college*.

I joined the police force right out of high school and then the DEA a few years later. I'm out on the streets, to protect and serve. And my brother is on a construction site putting his business degree to good storage use in Mamá and Papá's basement. But he's the apple of their eye.

I'm not bitter. Not bitter at all.

Trav comes back into the room, and I can tell by the look on his face the news isn't good.

“What happened?”

“It’s your 9-1-1 call.” Trav moves over to the L-shaped desk in the corner where there are two monitors plus a laptop and takes a seat.

“What about it?”

“Saint said he’s sending it through now.” The screens come to life as he boots up his computer.

And immediately, the file pops up on the screen. Trav hits Play.

“We have a GSW to the abdomen. He’s bleeding out fast.” Hearing my own voice is always weird, but the way it comes out this time makes me realize I might not have been as in control of that situation as I thought. I was barely holding on, but I thought I had some calm, rational thoughts. Apparently not. My words are quick between my heavy breathing and swearing.

There are moments the operator asks me what’s happening, but I’m too distracted to answer. The one time I do, I must not have heard her right.

“What happened, Agent Rodriguez? Who shot—”

“I shot him.”

I blanch, and Trav hits Stop.

“Sounds to me like you admitted to shooting the dead guy.”

“What? No. I shot the other one. The one who killed that guy.”

“That’s ... not what it sounds like.”

I stumble away from him. “You don’t believe me.”

“I didn’t say that. I said that’s not what it *sounds* like.”

I rub my temples. “Play it again. All the way through. Walker turns up at one point, and I tell him what happened.”

Trav starts it from the beginning, when I notice something else the second time around.

“There are no other gunshots in the background.”

“And?”

“And, after I hit 9-1-1, there was a shootout between the perp and me. Why isn’t any of that in there? Where’d your guy get this?”

“Uh ...” Trav doesn’t answer. “He didn’t hack into the 9-1-1 database to retrieve it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Then the recording stops before Walker even shows up.

“It was altered,” I say. “While you were driving me out to the middle of nowhere in the desert, Walker’s been covering his tracks. And now ... now it looks like I killed that kid.”

Trav gets his phone out and hits a number. They must pick up immediately because he says, “How are you coming along with CCTV?”

The person on the other end answers, but I can’t hear it other than the low murmur of a voice.

“Get it to me ASAP.” He ends the call and rubs his chin in thought. “What does it say about the government when Saint was able to get a 9-1-1 call easier than CCTV?”

“If Walker is covering his tracks, he would’ve done the footage already too. What’s the plan now?”

“We gather as much intel as we can on Ken Walker.”

“That’s *it*? That phone call is fucking incriminating, and all you’re going to do is gather intel?”

“What do you want me to do? Get Saint to delete the 9-1-1 call?”

I almost let out a big fat “yes” when I stop myself. Morally, I can’t ask someone to do that for me. Even though the recording is corrupt and not a depiction of what really happened. “I want ... I just want Walker to go down.”

Trav leans back, crossing his legs at the ankle, and rests his beefy hands in his lap. “What do you propose we do? Raid his house and take him out?”

“That’s dramatic.”

“Hey, it’s an option, but I figured you’d want to do this the proper way.”

I eye him, unsure if he’s being serious or not.

“Not to mention, killing people is wrong. Obviously.” He plays with the neck of his tight black tee. “And if you take out a guy like Walker, that’ll

only bring out all his allies. Mass murder isn't my thing."

Okay, now I know he's joking. I think. His eyes glimmer, so I can't be sure.

"I don't want you to kill him. I want to know why. And who was the kid he was with? How deep does it go? Are my teammates involved? I want answers."

"And to do that, we need to look into him and his life, which means ..."

"Gathering intel," I say in a dejected tone.

"Right." Trav turns back to his computer. "I'll pull up anything my guys have dug up so far. Go grab a chair."

"From where?"

"The dining room. Or if you really want, you can sit on my lap."

Yeah, if I sit on his lap, we're not going to be intel gathering. Unless inspecting Trav's dick with my ass to see if it still feels the same after all these years counts.

I drag in an ugly-ass chair that looks like it might be comfortable but really isn't and watch as Trav shifts through boring documents about my boss. "I could've told you any of this stuff."

"You don't know what I'm looking for."

"Then what are you looking for?"

"Known affiliations, confidential informants—"

I lean forward. "How do you even have access to that kind of information?"

"Umm ... Magic?"

Fucking hell. "I know you're trying to show off and everything, but I have my own CIs who I promise to keep safe, and you're telling me you can access those files?"

"If it helps at all, we're not some two-bit organization. We get a lot of government contracts and are trusted with highly classified information. I



doubt very much a street hacker could do what we do. This might come as a shock to you, but I'm kind of a big deal."

"That doesn't fill me with any confidence. The thought of putting people in danger because they're cooperative doesn't sit right with me. I became a cop to protect people, not put them in harm's way."

"And do you really think I would put people in harm's way?"

I throw up my hands. "How am I supposed to know that? You joke about killing people and mass murder. When we met, I arrested you for being a drug runner—"

"*Alleged* drug runner, thank you very much. No charges were filed." He gives me a smug grin, but I'm less than impressed. "Dylan ..."

My gaze flies to his. He never calls me Dylan. It's always Rodriguez or Rogue-riguez because of my tongue getting tied when I arrested him.

Trav's brown eyes are the warmest I've ever seen on a guy who looks like he does. He looks approachable and easy, and I think that's what I liked most about him when we met. He was bigger and tougher, but those eyes ...

"Do you trust me?" he asks, and that's such a loaded question.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"So I know you'll choose turning to me over death. That doesn't actually give me any answer."

I don't want to answer because the truth is I can't be sure if I trust him or not. He has brought me wanted drug dealers before, and while that can fall under the category of bounty hunting, it's the way he goes about it that makes me pause.

There's something dangerous about Travis West, about how much power Mike Bravo actually has. Admitting deep down that I know he's a good guy, despite possibly doing bad things, makes the moral high ground I pride myself on feel like a fraud.

"I trust you not to get me killed. I can't say the same for the other people in my life."

“Well, that’s something,” Trav mutters.

“I just don’t like how flippant you are about the law.”

“I technically don’t break any laws. Sort of. What Mike Bravo does is a gray area, but our intentions are always on the side of good.”

“I think our definitions of good might differ.”

“Yeah, well, if it were up to me, fuckers like Walker wouldn’t get a trial. They’d get a bullet in their head. Which is fighting wrong with wrong, but when you’ve been in an actual war zone, when you’ve come face-to-face with men where the situation is kill or be killed ...” He pauses. “When you’ve seen the shit I’ve seen, you learn fast that the world is full of unimaginable evil. And nine times out of ten, the government will turn a blind eye or protect scum because it’s better for the country. So, you’re right. Our definitions of ‘good’ would be different, but where I’m sitting, sticking to the rules doesn’t automatically make you a good person. Take Walker. He’s supposed to be on the right side of the law, and today, he tried to kill you.”

I wish I could dispute that, but I really can’t.

Trav continues. “Turning a blind eye to ugly things like commanding officers harassing soldiers doesn’t make any of my old squad heroes.”

“D ... did that happen to you?” I ask, unsure if I actually want to know the answer.

“I wasn’t the only one. We all went from being unable to come out to being terrified of coming out, and we didn’t know who we could trust. I had Domino, but other than him, I was sure any of the guys on my squad would’ve done anything to me if ordered by a CO.”

“Wait, are code reds real? Like from that movie *A Few Good Men*?”

Trav cocks his head. “Were you as disappointed as I was in that title? Promise me a good time, and then show me two hours of boring legal drama.”

“I notice you didn’t answer the question.”

“Code reds were a Marine thing, but the army had something called blanket parties, and trust me, they’re not as fun as they sound. If a soldier did something wrong or pissed off a CO, you can guarantee they’d be staring down an ambush from others in their unit. But the practice was stopped before I left the military. To do something like that now would be career suicide. Like I said, the military is getting better, but like society in general, there’s a lot that could be worked on.”

“Did you ... I mean, were you ever ...”

Trav doesn’t answer, but he nods. It’s so subtle I almost miss it.

I might not like what he’s involved in now, and I might secretly love his flirtations while publicly despising them, but he’s a man who has been through a lot. That deserves respect.

I have no doubt being in the military back then would’ve been difficult for anyone, let alone a gay man. Just the thought of them hurting him makes me both incredibly protective and sympathetic toward Trav.

“Uh-oh,” he says.

“What?” I look at his computer screen to see what he’s talking about, but he laughs.

“You actually looked like you were feeling sorry for me there.” He mock gasps. “Is it already happening? Are you already falling for me?”

Ugh. “Why do you insist on ruining moments where I begin to think I’m wrong about you? Was that whole military spiel bullshit?”

He holds up his hands. “It’s completely true. But I’m not after your sympathy. Understanding, maybe. The realization that I’m not the worst person in the world.”

“You’re far from that,” I say despite myself. “But you have to quit it with the whole soul mates, flirting ... thing.”

“But it’s so fun,” he whines. Legit, whiney high-pitched voice and everything.

“Way to be an adult.”

“Adulting is overrated.”

“You’re supposed to be older than me.”

He waves me off. “Age is just a number.”

“Clearly.”

“You should get some sleep,” Trav says.

“You think I’ll be able to sleep? Are you one of those psychos who sleeps through chaos?”

“My whole life is chaos. And apparently if you don’t sleep ever, you die. So ... want me to tuck you in?”

“Fuck you.”

“I love it when you talk dirty. I prefer to call it making love, but I have to admit, asking to fuck me like that is kinda hot too.”

I groan.

“Seriously, though. Go lie down. I promise to wake you if I find anything that will help.”

I should try to get out of my head for a while. I won’t be asleep long. Only long enough to be reenergized. “Fine,” I relent.

Exhaustion claims me almost immediately, as if giving in made my body let go. I barely make it over to the bed and strip off my shirt before I fall facedown onto the pillow that smells like Trav.

“Want me to take my laptop into the living room so you can’t hear me typing?”

Before I can stop myself, I blurt, “Could you stay?”

He doesn’t even call me on it. No jokes. No teasing. Trav just smiles and says, “Of course.”

And that’s how I drift off to sleep—with his smile on my mind and his soothing voice in my ears. I don’t expect it to last, though.

But when I wake however long later, light streams in the windows, and Trav stands at the door holding a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and a mug of coffee for me.

“How long was I out?”

“You got about six hours. If you count the first two hours of you tossing and turning anyway. I finally went to sleep when you’d stopped fighting it like a toddler.” He places my breakfast on the bedside table, and that’s when I notice one of those military, one-man cots next to the bed.

“You stayed in here?”

“You asked me to stay, and I didn’t want you to wake up with me gone in case you freaked out.”

“You didn’t need to—”

“I know. But I wanted to.” His words linger in the air, and he’s looking at me without even a hint of amusement glimmering in his eyes. There’s only sympathy and support. “Eat up. I have an idea for what we can do today.”

For the first time since knowing Trav, I turn the conversation to a lighter note. I have to. For my heart’s sake. “If it’s have sex, I’m going to have to say no.”

“It’s better than sex.”

“Better than sex? Really?” What in the world could be better than sex?

“I have a new shipment of C4 to play with.”

My eyes narrow. “And where did you get this shipment of C4?”

“In a completely ... mostly legal way, sir.”

“*Mostly* legal ...”

“I promise.”

“Promising me you only kind of broke the law isn’t the same as not breaking the law. You do know that, right?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to blow shit up with me?”

“No. I just wanted to go on record to say I protest the illegalness of the C4 I’m dying to play with.”

Trav’s entire face lights up. “It’s noted. Let’s go and make things go *boom*.” He goes to his closet and pulls out a T-shirt that will be three times

too big for me, but he throws it at me anyway. “You can wear that instead of your bloodstained shirt from yesterday.”

Staying with Trav is dangerous because even the smallest gesture of lending me his shirt sends warmth to my gut. I hope his guys find dirt on Walker soon, or I can see this turning into a broken promise I made myself seven years ago.

Never have sex with Travis West ever again.

I can already feel it. We’re a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

Like some C4, apparently.

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CHAPTER EIGHT\_

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TRAV

I SET SOME MORE C4 AND ATTACH IT TO SOME OLD JUNK IN A BACK FIELD on my property. Where I usually try to teach my guys how to get away with the smallest explosion possible, I'm more liberal with Dylan.

Something tells me he's going to need the distraction from everything he's going through.

To have someone he's supposed to trust turn like that ... It has to be soul crushing. He'd be questioning everything.

All that military stuff I told him last night, I've only shared that with the guys in Mike Bravo. I don't really know why I told him. I guess I wanted him to feel like he wasn't completely alone. I know what it's like to be betrayed by people I trusted.

The only problem with sharing that shit with Dylan is it makes me edgy. I've had a long time to deal with my mental scars from the past, and I've done well at keeping them under control. I'm a big advocate for therapy, and while I consider myself over the worst of it, bringing it up will always make those memories come back. The feeling of being trapped in a nightmare of my own making—not being able to leave until my enlistment was over, not being allowed to speak out of turn without consequences—it all comes back.

After I've finished placing the C4, we retreat behind the safety partition.



“You should imagine Walker’s head for this one,” I say. It’s working for me. I’m taking each and every one of those past memories and putting them in an imaginary box and placing it right next to the explosives.

Dylan looks deep in thought as he replies, “I think I’d rather see Walker rot in prison than see his head blown up.”

“You can’t even fantasize about breaking the law?”

How Dylan has faith in our justice system is beyond me. I might have other men’s blood on my hands, but each and every one of them deserved what was coming to them. That might sound too vigilante for Dylan or go against his own code, but like I told him, I’ve seen what true evil is like.

“Fantasize, sure. There are a lot of fantasies I have that I will never play out in real life.” Dylan says this so nonchalantly that it comes across as forced indifference. He’s totally talking about fantasies about me.

“Aww, baby, all you have to do is ask and I’ll fulfill any one of those fantasies.”

Dylan scoffs. “How typical to think I was talking about *you*.”

“Hey, I wasn’t thinking that at all. I was kind of imagining maybe some Daddy role play. Want to come sit on Daddy’s knee?”

Dylan shudders. “Look, I’m not going to kink shame anyone for that, but considering I have slight daddy issues, that ... does nothing for me.”

“Hmm, noted.”

“No, not noted. This isn’t a lesson on what does it for me in bed. Only people I’m sleeping with are privileged to that information.”

“What about people you’ve already slept with? Do they count?”

“No. We hooked up. Once. A billion years ago.”

“Where, from memory, you came untouched.” I step closer to him.

He’s put his safety glasses on top of his rich dark hair, and his usually calculating eyes hold something else that looks a hell of a lot like lust. “Don’t get too cocky. I can get there with anyone. You’re not special.”

I move even closer. “*Can* you get there with just anyone, though? Or is this another one of those ‘I have a boyfriend’ situations?”

“Think I’m lying?” Dylan closes the gap between us, looking up at me with a stern poker face. Or is it genuine? I don’t actually know. “You can’t tell, can you? I thought you knew me so well?”

I lick my lips, and he mirrors the action. Our hookup was so long ago, I can’t remember what he tastes like, only what he sounds like when he comes. In fact, I don’t think we even kissed at all. As soon as we’d gone into that bathroom, I turned him and shoved his front against the bathroom stall.

I kissed his cheek and nipped at his neck. I remember that his skin is salty, but I need to know what his mouth tastes like.

“I do know you,” I say. “And I know that despite your incessant need to play by the rules, if I give you this detonator and tell you to imagine it’s me you’re blowing up, that you’ll do it.” I hold up the device for him to take.

He hesitates before taking it, and then I reach to put his safety glasses in place.

“As much as I’d like to deny it, this might be therapeutic.” He clicks the detonator, and the C4 goes off, but neither of us sees it. Our eyes are still locked on each other.

Debris shoots up into the air, and heat from the explosion blasts in our direction, but we don’t move an inch.

“Feel better?” I ask.

“Nope. I think my body was hoping for a different explosion.”

Fuck. Me.

“Is that an invitation?” I rasp.

Please say yes. Please give me this opportunity ...

Dylan’s dark brown eyes give me nothing. No invitation, no pushing away. They’re pleading with me for something, but it could be to make a

move or to spare him from this torture and to treat this like I normally would—with playful innuendo that goes one step too far so he'll back off.

Before I can decipher it or make a move, my phone blares from my pocket. “Motherfucker, this better be important.” I fish it out and hit Answer. “What?”

“Uh ... umm. Hi.” Saint sounds unsure, and okay, I find it kind of cute that he's still scared of me. It makes me take an easier tone.

“What's up?”

“I think I found a connection.”

My gaze meets Dylan's once again, but I quickly turn my back to him and stalk away, putting enough distance between us so he can't overhear. “Connection to who?”

“You're not going to believe this. He's connected to Councilman Rowling.”

“He's what?” I hiss. “We've been following that guy for over a year, and he hasn't stepped one foot wrong.” The whole reason I was sending some of my guys to Vegas was to tail him in Sin City, hoping he'd slip up, but Dylan's shit is more important than Rowling. Or I thought it was. Maybe it's all connected. “Where are Zeus, Atlas, and Iris at? Maybe they should have gone to Vegas after all.”

“I don't think that's necessary,” Saint says.

“No?”

“We were following the wrong Rowling.”

“What do you mean?”

“Rowling's son. He's Walker's godchild. So Rowling and Walker have to be close, but there's nothing directly between them. They do, however, both talk to Rowling's nineteen-year-old son a lot. That's the connection.”

“Does the kid have a record?”

“Clean. Unless there's some juvie stuff that's been sealed.”

“Look into it and get back to me.”

“On it.” There’s a beat of silence.

“Was there something else?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah, but I don’t really want to tell you. Just how vigilant are you with the don’t shoot the messenger rule? Because—”

“You’ll get in more trouble if you keep things from me, so spill it.”

“The CCTV footage is in.” Saint hesitates. “But you’re not going to like it.”

“Why not?”

“Didn’t Rodriguez say his boss showed up after the shooting started?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“He’s not on the footage at all. The only cars going into that lot—even the street—during the commotion are the yellow Camaro and the Subaru.”

I pause. “Any chance of tampering?”

“Possibly, but I’m not really trained in spotting that kind of thing.”

“Send it to Ghost to do his magic, and tell us if it’s been digitally altered, and make sure I get a copy too.”

“No problem.”

“Oh, and Saint?”

“Yeah, boss?”

“Good work.” I end the call. Saint’s still settling in with the team, and I try to give positive reinforcement where I can with my guys.

He was used to a strict regime where he had to suck it up and act tough even during the hard times. I’m not like that. Mental health is every bit as important as physical health, or that’s how you lose men. The military never understood that. Or they didn’t care.

“What’s the news?” Dylan asks behind me.

I turn. “No new developments.”

“Bullshit. You’ve got something.”

I start packing up the supplies. “And that’s between me and my men. You know, if you ever wanted to join Mike Bravo, I know someone who

can get you in.” I force a cavalier attitude and wink at him. It’s not that I don’t want to tell him, but ... well, I don’t want to tell him. I want Ghost’s word that the footage wasn’t tampered with before I go accusing him of lying because I believe him when he says Walker was there. Proving it is another issue. “I’m still waiting for the day you really do go rogue for me. Put down the badge and pick up an illegal modified automatic weapon with me. You know you want to.”

“The day I join you is the day I string my balls up to a Christmas tree.”

“As fun as that sounds, it’s the only way I’ll tell you everything you want to know about what my company is doing.”

“You shouldn’t be keeping me in the dark about this. I’m your job here. I should know what you’re doing.”

I rub my chin. “If you’re my job, and I’m supposed to be doing ... my job—”

He holds up one hand. “Stop.”

“Let’s go back to the house for some food. I’m starving.” That’s not a distraction tactic either. We’ve been out here most of the day, and if we head back now, we’ll be able to fit in a late lunch.

“Is there anything you can share with me?” Dylan asks.

“There is, but if you don’t want to hear jokes about me doing you, then you probably don’t want to hear about my dick either.”

I lock my shed with all the stuff in it and then head for the four-wheel drive that got us out to this end of the property, but I don’t make it before Dylan’s plea stops me in my tracks.

“Please. I’m completely helpless out here. I have no idea what’s going on, and—”

I turn to face him, and the pure look of doubt on his gorgeous features stabs me in the chest. “If I’m going to share information with you, you need to do the same.”

“Share what information? I don’t have anything that you wouldn’t have access to yourself.”

“Back at headquarters, you reacted when you found out we were following Councilman Rowling. Why?”

Dylan averts eye contact, but it’s only for a second. “It’s nothing. It just threw me that you were tailing him. He and Walker are really good friends. Or, they were. I don’t know what happened, but Rowling hasn’t shown his face recently.”

“That’s the news Saint gave me—that they’re close but don’t seem to be in contact.”

“Why were you following him?”

“Because someone hired us to,” I say dismissively.

“Not what I meant, and you know it.”

“You haven’t gone rogue enough for that information yet.”

“I’m standing here with you, aren’t I?”

“Out of desperation. There’s only one place I like to see that level of needy, and it’s in the bedroom.”

“What do you want from me? Want me to admit you were the best lay I’ve ever had? Fine. You’ve got it. Want me to promise you I’ll join your team? It’s not like I’ll have a career as a DEA agent after all this mess anyway. Just ... *please*.”

Damn that pleading tone.

I run a hand over my head and through my short hair. It’s times like this I hate reverting back to my military haircut because the strands aren’t long enough to grip and yank out. Then again, maybe that’s a good thing. I’d probably be bald with how much stress I have to deal with in my line of work.

But none of it comes even close to hearing Dylan beg for something I don’t want to give him.

I turn to him. “We got the CCTV footage.”

“Isn’t that good news?”

“It would be if it showed anything, but it does the opposite. There were no cameras pointing to the actual lot, and other than you, there were only two cars that entered. Your victim and the shooter. Neither of them were Walker. Forensically, he wasn’t there.”

“But he *was* there.”

“I believe you, but having no evidence of that doesn’t help us. At all.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he says to himself. “What the fuck did Hale send me to find?” His eyes suddenly widen as he lifts his gaze to mine. “Hale. My CI.”

“The guy who gave you the tip?”

For the first time since he walked into headquarters and asked me for help, Dylan looks hopeful. “He’s the key. I need to go back to LA and find him.”

Of course he wants to do that. And now I need to do everything in my power to keep him here and out of danger. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

The way Dylan glares at me, with his usual disdain and determination, I know there’s no chance he’ll let this go without a fight.

CHAPTER NINE\_

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DYLAN

SCREAMING *YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO* IS TOO IMMATURE FOR A thirty-four-year-old, right?

Trav glances away. "Don't give me that look."

"What look?"

"That defiant ... *Dylan* look. You're not going anywhere. End of story. Give me Hale's details, and my guys will go find him. The best place for you is here. With me."

He means because he can protect me from Walker, but I can't help the way my gut clenches and then bursts with butterflies as the words fall from his mouth. His sexy, deep rumble sounds claiming and bossy, but I have to ignore the need simmering along my skin and react to Trav the way I always do: unwavering and confident.

"Hale could be the answer to everything, and I'm the one who needs to find him."

"Why does it have to be you? Because you're a controlling, stubborn son of a bitch who believes if you need something done right, you have to do it yourself?"

*Exactly.* "That's not it at all. Hale trusts me. If any of your goons come after him, he'll slip away before any of them see him. People, especially those he doesn't know, make him antsy."

"You got a last name? An address I can send my guys to?"

“Are you even hearing me?”

“I’m hearing you, but I’m ignoring what you’re saying. Where does he live?”

“I can usually find him around Skid Row, but I’m telling you, Hale won’t talk to anyone who isn’t me. He has eyes and ears on the city from living on the streets, and he’s smart. He doesn’t sell his information to just anyone.”

“Well, you can’t go back to LA. It’s too risky. We could bring him to you.”

I snort. “That would not go down well. What’s your plan? Shove him in the trunk of your car?”

“No. I only do that with you.”

“You make me feel special.” The worst part is he actually does. Wow. I’ve hit a new level of pathetic.

“You’re welcome, but we can flirt later. We need to focus on Hale. What do you hope to get from him? What were his actual words when he set you up?”

“He didn’t set me up.” Shit. Did he? He *was* acting weird. Well, weirder than usual for Hale. I rub my chin. “It was a convoluted ramble about a deal going down. Someone of someone knew someone type thing. I didn’t even know if it was credible, which is why I didn’t call for backup. And then everything happened so fast.”

I can still see the junkie drop to the ground as the other kid pulled the trigger, no matter how much I try to wipe it from my memory.

After everything I’ve seen in my job, I don’t understand it. Any of it.

“If Hale didn’t make a lot of sense when he gave you the tip, what makes you think that will be any different this time?” Trav asks.

I hate that he makes a good point. If Hale knew what I was walking into, why wouldn’t he tell me the whole situation before it happened? “I dunno. Maybe because his cousin’s pimp’s landlord’s meth dealer is dead?”

“His what?”

“Told you. Convolutated.”

“Does Walker know about him?”

“He knows Hale is a CI of mine but not that I was running off a tip from him. No one knew that part.” But then I remember— “Shit. That’s not actually true. When Walker first showed up, he asked why I was there. I told him it was because of Hale. Hale’s in danger. We need to protect him and—”

“I’m not risking your life for his,” Trav says, his voice holding finality.

“You have to.”

“I don’t *have* to do anything. *But* I’ll get my guys on Hale. Maybe he’ll believe them when they say they’re there for you.”

“He won’t, but you can try. Take him a turkey sandwich on rye bread. It’s his favorite. Maybe that will be enough for him to trust them.” It won’t, but I have to hope.

Hale is our *only* hope here. Maybe he knows more than what he gave me. Maybe he has heard something since. It’s all I have to hold on to, but it’ll all go to hell if Walker gets to him first.

“Let’s get back to the house, have some food, look through the footage Saint is sending over, and we’ll go from there,” Trav says.

Go from there. Step by step. It’s how all law enforcement departments handle things. We go through the motions. We don’t solve cases by jumping to the end. Logically, I know all this. I’ve lived it for fifteen years. But I’ve never been this close to a case. Too invested. It’s too personal.

I want to end this now.

If we can’t figure out how to take Walker down, my life could become ... this. Hiding out, constantly looking over my shoulder, and being on the run. I couldn’t do it.

Things always have a way of catching up with you, especially in this day and age with constant surveillance.

If Trav fails, my life is over.

That's a whole lot of pressure to put on someone else. Even if said person is a pain in my ass a lot of the time.

Trav makes sense, and I know I need to be patient.

But patience has never been my strong suit.



When we get back to Trav's insane mansion that has no right to be called a ranch, Trav cooks us a meal while he places a laptop in front of me and hits Play on the CCTV they captured.

He's right when he says that Walker never arrives. Which means ...

"What if he was already there?" I mumble to myself.

"Huh?" Trav calls out from the kitchen.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"They say that's the first sign of madness."

"No, my first sign was coming to you for help," I yell back and then lower my voice. "This would be the second."

His muffled laughter is the only response.

The footage doesn't show much. It's a mounted camera on either the building next to the warehouses or maybe a streetlamp, and it's aimed at the entry to the parking lot where it all went down.

I rewind the video to before I arrive, thinking maybe Walker had been there watching me the whole time, but if that was the case, why didn't he show himself when I arrived and make up some excuse for me to get out of there? That scenario makes no sense. Because if he had told me he was there on a job and I wasn't needed, I would've left. He's my boss. He could have ordered me to leave.

Then again, what if I didn't and I saw everything anyway?

What if ... what if he was setting me up to take the fall from the beginning?

None of those theories are totally viable, but I can't come up with anything else right now. I need more answers before I can speculate.

"You look like you're concentrating hard over there." Trav's voice makes me jump. He brings over two bowls of pasta and sits opposite me at the small, informal dining table. I saw earlier when we got home that he has a dining table that seats about twenty people in a fancier room, but I guess this one is for when he's alone or there are only one or two guys here.

"I'm trying to figure out how we can both get what we want." I know him well enough that I can see he's itching to get out there and bring my boss down, but he's refusing. To piss me off, to protect me, I don't know, but I get the impression he's here with me instead of out there running this op because he loves getting under my skin more than he loves adrenaline.

Trav eyes me while he shovels food into his mouth. The food isn't anything special. It's dried pasta with premade sauce from a jar, but Trav takes three mouthfuls one after the other. "What do we both want?"

"I want to go find Hale."

He opens his mouth to talk again, but I cut him off.

"And you want me to stay here."

He nods. "That sounds about right. Come up with any compromises yet?"

"Nope."

"Kinda hard when they're the complete opposite things. Maybe we could drive halfway back to LA and you could look for Hale in Moreno Valley."

"Wow. That's some sound and very logical compromising there."

Trav grins. "Don't say I never give you anything."

"Have you heard anything else?"

"Nope."

“Your reluctance to share information with me is doing wonders for my trust issues.”

“I promise I haven’t heard anything, but I can call them when we’re done eating. I’ll even put it on speaker for you and everything so you can hear them say there’s no new news.”

It’ll have to do. “Thank you.”

We fall into silence as I pick at my food, but I can feel him watching me the whole time.

“Are you okay?” he eventually asks when he’s finished.

“I’m fine. Just frustrated.”

“That’s fair. Are you finished eating? You’ve been playing with it since I put it down in front of you. I’ve heard eating works better if you put food *in* your mouth. Actually, I’ve heard putting things in your mouth works better for a lot of things.”

Color me shocked, I actually huff a small laugh at that. “Sorry. I’m done. Don’t have much of an appetite.”

“An uncertain future will do that to a guy.” Trav stands and rounds the table to stop next to me, and his hand covers mine.

It’s warm, and for a really quick second, I believe that he’ll get the job done to save my ass, but then he pulls away and picks up my plate.

“I’ll clean up if you want to go shower. You can borrow some more of my clothes.”

A shower and a change of clothes sound amazing, but I run my gaze over Trav and then me. I’m no slouch in the muscle department, but Trav is about five inches taller than me and twice the width. My muscles are healthy law enforcement officer size, thank you very much. Trav is the human equivalent of an army tank.

“I might be able to wear your shirts as dresses, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure none of your pants will fit me.”

“Or I could maybe find some clothes the other guys have left here over the years.”

“Other guys ... Like hookups? No, thanks. I’d rather go naked.”

“Well, shit. I almost don’t want to tell you I meant the other Mike Bravo guys. You’d probably fit Iris’s or Zeus’s clothes, but I think we should revisit the naked idea.”

Why do images of Trav’s hot, naked body pinning me to his bed and taking me over and over want to fill my mind? There are more important things to focus on.

Like trying to get Trav to agree to letting me go find Hale to keep him safe.

The quicker I can get to Hale, the better. If Walker gets to him first, Hale’s as good as dead.

As soon as I have a shower, some downtime, and some sleep, I’ll be out of here before Trav can stop me. It’s not what we discussed. It’s not what he wants.

But Hale is my responsibility, and it’s both our lives at stake. I need to do *something*.

I stand. We come face to face, Trav slightly leaning toward me, and we’re so close I can feel his breath on my cheek.

“Uh ...” I swallow hard. “I’ll take that shower now.” I cut him off before he can say what he no doubt wants to. “Alone.”

“Damn. We’re not even going to discuss the naked thing?”

“Nope.”

Trav sighs dramatically. “I’ll go find you some clothes, then.” He puts the plates in the kitchen sink and then heads down a hall in the opposite direction to his bedroom.

I remain awkwardly where I am, taking in the god-awful, tacky furniture in here, and am silently thankful that he’s let me sleep in his bedroom. It’s the only place in this house that won’t give me a headache.

When he returns, he has some sweats, a pair of tactical pants, and a couple of muscle tees.

“Do your guys wear any clothes while you’re here? Again, I’m getting the impression your company is code word for orgies. Or pornos. God knows this place is decorated like a porn set.” I reach for the clothes, but Trav doesn’t let them go.

“For someone who’s not interested in me, you sure do want to know a lot about the orgies I may or may not have with my men.”

I shiver at the way he says *his men* because with that much sex in his tone, it’s hard to believe he hasn’t fucked each and every one of them. “Before you said it was against the rules. Now you’re saying you may or may not do it. So which is it?”

Trav cocks his head. “Is everything a test for you? I didn’t deny it twice, so therefore I must have been lying?”

“When I think the person I’m talking to is a professional liar, yes, I like to call it out.”

“The funny thing about that is I have never once lied to you. *Ever.*”

I try to read his expression, but it’s closed off. I swear his lips twitch, but I can’t be sure.

I choose not to believe he could be serious about never lying to me. “I call bullshit.”

“Guess you’ll have to learn the hard way, then.” He finally hands over the clothes properly and walks away, leaving me standing in the middle of a horribly decorated pimp’s dream.

I walk in the opposite direction toward the bedroom I slept in last night but can’t help looking back right before I get to the entryway. He’s standing in the opposite hall, watching me. Or, more specifically, my ass. And I hate how my body vibrates with need at the notion Trav might not be lying.

About anything.



Which makes my plan to leave him as soon as he's asleep tonight so much harder to carry out.

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CHAPTER TEN\_

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TRAV

WHEN I HEAR THE BEDROOM DOOR CLICK OPEN AT EARLY GODDAMN morning o'clock, I suppress my laugh. I knew he was planning on running.

He's going to do the stupidest thing anyone has ever done in the history of criminals. I realize Dylan has to play on the right side of the law because he's too dumb to survive the underbelly of America.

There are bad guys who have endless resources to find him, and he wants to run around LA looking for someone who most likely won't be able to help us.

His innate do-gooder attitude is going to get him killed.

He shuffles his way around me as silent as he can, but it's not enough. A falling feather would wake me with how light I sleep.

It's still dark out. Ideally, he'd turn around and go right back to bed, but I know him too well for that. I pretend to still be asleep because I want to see what he does, even though I'm pretty sure I already know his intention.

Dylan sneaks out of the room, and then the sound of jingling keys echoes in my ear as he picks them up. It's only for a split second before he palms them to make them quiet. The night stills, and though I can't see him, I picture him pausing to make sure he hasn't woken me. Then, when he thinks he's sure, he slips out the front door, and it clicks closed behind him.

It's cute how naïve he is to think I didn't expect this, and even cuter that he thinks I would let him walk out of an unlocked house without fail-safes

in place.

When he comes back and turns the light on, I finally let him see that I've been awake the whole time.

I sit up. "I know you're about to yell at me, but can I say that you look really hot when you're scowling."

"What did you do?" he growls.

"What did *I* do? You're trying to steal one of my cars. Which work better if they have these installed." I pull out a bunch of wires from under my pillow.

"What are they?"

"I don't even know. I reached under the steering wheel and yanked." Okay, *now* I'm lying to him. But he deserves it, the asshole. The truth is I detached the battery in all of them, but simply telling him that doesn't hold the same dramatic effect.

What can I say? I like drama when I'm being smug.

"Why can't you let me make this decision for myself?" Dylan asks.

"Because putting yourself in harm's way is a dumb decision. I am preventing you from dying of dumbassery. You're welcome."

"If you're so determined to stop me from doing dumb things, then why do you keep trying to get me into bed?"

"My future husband is vicious." I swear I see steam come out his nose. I ignore it. "Now, why don't you be a good little boy and get some more sleep, and then we'll talk about this more in the morning." And by talk, I mean continue to tell him he can't go.

"And I suddenly feel like I'm a teenager and living with my parents again."

"Just remember, you can call me Daddy anytime you like."

He flips me off and goes back to bed.

The suckiest thing about being a light sleeper is once I've been woken up, I'm awake. Especially if I've gotten a couple of hours' rest. Normally,

I'd get on my computer and check on all the jobs Mike Bravo is currently undertaking, but Dylan's here, and if he saw half the shit Mike Bravo carried out, his good law-abiding self would be mortified.

I'd get up and go work out, but I don't want to leave him alone. I could see him trying to break out the bathroom window or something. Not that he'd be able to because my bedroom is too secure. It's the only room in this lavish house that has bars on the windows and a secure locking system that runs on its own power.

It's not to keep people inside. It's to keep anyone or anything from the outside getting in.

It's one of the few places in the world where I feel safe enough to fall asleep and stay asleep when I'm on my own. The rest of the time, I have too many variables to consider before drifting off.

I've learned to function on little to no sleep, so this is nothing new for me.

I get up and make myself some coffee in the kitchen, which is across the informal living room from my bedroom. I'm still able to keep tabs on Dylan so he doesn't try to leave again, and then I sit at the small dining table while emailing my list of directives for the guys today and going over the CCTV footage again on my phone.

Saint sent it to Ghost, who is more advanced on the tech side of things than Saint, and while he says the footage seems legit, he left a note for me to check. It's hard to see what I'm supposed to be looking for when I'm on my phone, so I'll look at it on my computer after Dylan's awake.

When I've caught up with all my messages and any updates I've received overnight, I check the live security feed on my phone. Not only of the ranch but of headquarters as well.

I have a hunch that Walker might try something else off the books. It was obvious he didn't believe me about not having been in contact with Dylan, and to be fair, he'd be right. But there would be no legal way for him

to search any of my properties. No judge would sign *that* warrant. I've spent the last few years making a name for myself. Everyone who knows Travis West's name knows I'm untouchable.

Which means Walker should know that if he pisses me off or tries anything, that's only putting a bigger target on *his* back, but I'm not going to put it past him. Only time will tell us how dirty he really is.

Then again, shooting at a subordinate in broad daylight is high up on the list of signs he's not in control of his mess. Whatever Walker's involved in, it's impossible to know if it's only him, other members of Dylan's team, how deep it goes, or how my guys are going to figure it out, but they'll have to find a way.

I sent them a list of people I want checked out last night, but there are no updates for me yet. Sometimes I'm called impatient, but Walker's powerful enough to destroy Dylan and everything he has worked for, so right now, he needs to be categorized as the highest threat level. He's already tried to kill Dylan, so I have no doubt he'd do anything to protect himself.

I'm still staring at footage hours later when Dylan emerges, his dark hair messy and sexy morning scruff on his cheeks and chin.

He bypasses me for the kitchen and pours himself a coffee. I slowly sip mine while I watch the muscles in his back tighten, and I send up a silent thank-you to whichever one of my guys left that shirt here. It's tight against Dylan's olive skin and tucked into tactical pants that are just as tight.

Damn, his ass ...

I shake that thought free. Right. Protecting him. That's the job. Even if it's from himself.

He throws himself in the seat opposite me and wears that pretty scowl of his. "Happy?"

"That you're still here? Yes. Happy that you're mad with me? Also yes."

“You’re an ass.”

“What was that? You want my ass? I’d be down for that. Anytime, baby.”

“Okay, so you’re in one of those moods today. Good to know. I’ll sit here and be silent.” He drinks his coffee and sits back as if he’s won something.

“I like silence.” I shrug.

It’s a stand-off we both want to win. He stares confidently at me while I raise my eyebrow at him.

My relationship with Dylan has always been push and pull, but spending this long together in such a short period has only intensified that. I don’t help the situation by being a smartass, but we need to find some middle ground. I just don’t know how to be the one to offer an olive branch.

Dylan’s the first to relent because, well, I can play this game all day. He downs his coffee and then slams the mug down on the table. “Fine. You win. What’s the plan?”

I lift my cup to my lips and sip until the urge to smile subsides. “I’m going to get my guys to track down Hale for you.”

“What if they can’t find him?”

“Then we keep digging. Saint is finding all he can on the Rowling connection and following that lead, and I’ll get Angel and Proxy to tail him in person. I’ll send Iris and Zeus to track down Hale because those two can charm the pants off anyone and get them to do whatever they want.”

“What’s with all the stupid names? And why don’t I know yours?”

“I don’t have one.”

“More boss perks?”

“Yep. All the members of my team have a code name to protect their identities. There is no protecting mine. I am this company. I take the praise when things go right, and I wear the consequences when it doesn’t. If someone has a problem with the jobs we do, I’m the one they’ll come after,

not my guys. I will protect them with my life.” I lean forward. “Just like I’m protecting yours.”

Dylan looks contemplative for a moment before he says one simple word. “Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Okay, I came to you because I didn’t know who else I could trust. For some reason, even though I’ve known you’ve done shady stuff over the years, I knew that you would help. But ... I figured you’d get one of your guys to handle my situation. You said you are Mike Bravo. You’re important. So why are you here doing a minion’s job?”

I lean back in my seat. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“You might hate the idea, but you are one of us. You just don’t work for us. Yet.”

“This is some fucked-up recruitment thing?”

“Nope. This is a looking after an asset thing.”

Dylan frowns. “I’m ... an asset?”

How do I put this without freaking him out? “Last night when I said I’ve never lied to you, I meant it. Well, until I then did actually lie to you about the cables from the car—”

“Wait, that was a lie?”

“My point is you really need to think about every interaction we’ve ever had. Every offhanded comment. Every innuendo. Every joke about us being endgame. I. Wasn’t. Lying.” How much more obvious do I have to be?

“You mean ...” He shakes his head. “You want to sleep with me so you can brag for another seven years about having done it. Again.”

“Not at all. I like to remind you of it because it was explosive. I’d be an idiot not to want a repeat.”

“You know a good way to get someone into bed?”



“You mean other than flashing these and my winning smile?” I flex my biceps. “It worked the first time.”

“Yeah, and then you opened your mouth.”

“Nope, from memory, you liked it when I did that too. You liked it when I told you how tight you were. That I wouldn’t be able to last long.”

“Trav,” he warns.

It only makes my dick hard. Any thought of that night gets me going. “I remember it like it was yesterday. My only regret is I never got to kiss you. Not properly.”

“Maybe if you didn’t act like a jackass all the time, you would’ve had another chance at doing that.”

I lick my lips. It’s reflexive. We’re talking about kissing, and I want to kiss him so badly.

“Shame your mouth always gets you into trouble. Just when I think I see a glimpse of a real human being, you turn into a douche.”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “I don’t do that because I want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Then why do you?”

I want to open up and tell him. Put it all out there. But I haven’t let anyone get close to me the way I want to get close to Dylan. “I’ve had countless hookups before—”

“Charming.”

“Oh, please. Like you haven’t. We didn’t even exchange words before I was fucking you in a bathroom. We were both there for the same thing.”

Dylan opens his mouth, pauses, and then relents. “Fair enough. Never mind.”

“Aww, you don’t like hearing about your boo with other men?”

He points across the table at me. “That. Right there. Why do you do that?”

“Because I don’t know how to be real with you. It’s too hard to say that our hookup could very well be the most intense sexual experience of my life. The only time I’ve walked away and regretted not giving my number was when I was with you. I was convinced we were never going to see each other again. And then ...” I smile at the memory of him slapping handcuffs on me.

“Then I arrested you,” he says.

“Yep. Suddenly, I was the enemy, and you treated me like a criminal even though I was there on official business, and ever since then, you’ve pegged me as some sort of bad guy.”

“I know you’re not a bad guy,” Dylan says quietly. “I wouldn’t have come to you otherwise. But ... I can’t read you or your stupid jokes. If it really is flirting, I have to say, your game sucks.”

“Usually I’m a lot smoother, but with you, it’s different. You bring out this side of me that both wants to be with you while simultaneously pushing you away.”

“Sounds healthy. You should probably talk to someone about that.”

I should, but I won’t. “It doesn’t take a therapist to know why I do it.”

“Then why?”

I take a deep breath and force myself to do something scary. Admitting how I feel is terrifying. “I joke about being with you because I actually want it, but by fucking with you, I know you’d never go for it. It makes the rejection sting less when I’m expecting it. If you see me as a joke, there’s no way you could ever fall for me.”

Dylan whistles. “That’s fucked-up.”

“Always the response you want when you put yourself out there.” And this is exactly why I don’t do it.

Hookups and random sex are a lot less messy than trying to navigate *feelings*. It’s why I haven’t allowed myself to truly go for Dylan. It’s what has held me back for seven damn years.

Dylan pushes his seat back and stands, and at first, I don't know what he's doing. I don't think he even knows.

Then he steps toward me slowly.

I stare up at him, watching his features move from hesitant to sure and then back to skeptical again.

“What are you doing?” I want to kick myself as soon as the words leave my mouth because it's as if I can see the doubt come flooding in. I stand too, bringing us face-to-face. “Don't. Don't back down. Tell me what you wanted to do just now but couldn't.”

“Are you telling the truth?” Dylan whispers.

“I already told you. I don't lie to you.”

Then Dylan does something I've wanted forever but never thought he would give to me. He closes the gap between us and doesn't stop. Not while my breath gets caught in my throat, and not when his lips meet mine.

And damn, kissing Dylan is better than I ever could have imagined.

CHAPTER ELEVEN\_

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DYLAN

AS SOON AS MY LIPS TOUCH TRAV'S, HE TAKES CONTROL. I CAN TASTE HIS need. Not for this to go further but for it not to end.

I won't even begin to try and understand the logic behind Trav's attitude toward me. The concept of it, sure. The *I'll hurt you before you can hurt me* cliché, but that's not what this is.

This is, "I'll be an asshole to you because then you'll never like me when I really, really want you to."

It truly is fucked-up, but even I have to admit there's something romantic about it. In a roundabout Trav kind of way.

He's always calm and in control, and it drives me crazy how arrogant and carefree he can be in serious situations, but as he pulls me tight against him and moans into my mouth, it's obvious that I'm one of the few things he doesn't have control over.

Even if he's trying to overpower this too. He's the one setting the pace. His tongue is making all the moves. His cock is hard and pressed against me. But I'm the one who took this step. I'm the one who has the power to stop it. And I'm the one Trav wants. Even if he doesn't want to want me.

The way his mouth fits against mine, the way he tastes me and drinks me all in, it makes me regret not having kissed him sooner. I guarantee this would've happened sooner had I known how intoxicating Trav's mouth could be.

I should have known, though. The rest of him that night pushed all my buttons and lit me up from the inside out.

But here, now ... I'm taking back some of that power that he always manages to steal from me. He's the one who always has the upper hand between us.

But not this time.

Even though Trav is bigger than me, when I turn us and push him back against the dining table, he goes without complaint. His ass perches on the edge while I run my hands up his thighs and spread his legs for me to stand between them.

Trav cups the back of my head. It's gentle but telling. He's keeping me close, not wanting me to break away.

I reach for the fly on his pants and murmur against his lips. "You might have regretted not kissing me that night, but you know what I regret?"

Trav kisses me harder. Like that will shut me up.

I pull away completely to a whine of protest, but when I put my lips to his ear, he shudders. Especially when I say, "That I didn't get to taste all of you. That I didn't get to worship your cock with my mouth before it filled me up."

The strained noise he lets out goes straight to my dick, and my hand stalls at getting his pants open just so I can grind against him and give my cock the attention it's begging for. Need builds inside me.

Trav gets his pants undone the rest of the way while peppering soft kisses all over my skin. From my cheek to my neck to a spot along the top of my shoulder where he closes his mouth over me and sucks hard.

I throw my head back, enjoying the sensation, wanting more while also wanting to pull away and get on my knees for him.

He wraps his arms around me and grips my ass, forcing my cock to grind against his thigh harder. I could easily come like this, but our first

time was fast, and if it's going to be another seven years in between hookups, I need to make the most of it.

I also want it to last because for the first time in days, I've been able to tune out and push everything that's happened to the back of my mind.

It's the first time since meeting him that I've allowed myself to let go when it comes to Trav.

I try to pull out of his grip so I can take what I want, but he holds me tight.

"Let me suck you," I croak.

Trav's hold loosens, and then he leans back with that smug smile on his face that I know so well. Only, this time, I see it for what it is. He's not gloating. He's *happy*.

I reach for the hem of his tight shirt. "If I'm going to blow you, I should at least get to look at these muscles while I do it." I lift it, and he raises his arms so I can get it over his head.

Golden skin, hard muscles, completely smooth chest, his intricate tattoo running down his right arm ... I can't resist him. I lean forward and run my tongue over his hard nipple and then place soft kisses down the middle of his abdomen.

He places his hands on the table behind him, leaning back slightly as I keep moving down.

His pants are undone, but his cock is still tucked away behind his underwear. There's a wet patch and a hard outline in the soft material, and I close my mouth over it.

I can already taste the heady flavor, and I can't wait for the whole load.

"You know it works better if there aren't clothes in the way," Trav says.

"Shh. Don't ruin this by talking. I'm trying to savor it."

"Savor all you like, but, Dylan?"

I look up at him, and he gently runs his thumb along my lips.

“If you think you need to take your time because this might not happen again, you’re completely wrong. Once could be chalked up to being a mistake. Twice? It’s practically a habit.” He sits up properly and kisses me again. “And I plan to make this a habit.”

My weak protest dies because even though he drives me crazy and frustrates the hell out of me ... there’s always been a part of me that has known this would happen again—that has *wanted* this to happen again.

I push his chest and break my lips from his. “Lie back.”

He doesn’t. He shucks off his pants and underwear, kicking them to the floor, and then rests back on his elbows. “I want to watch.”

Guess I should bring my porno A game, which is completely different to my *get off fast* technique. Nobody wants to see the concentration line across your forehead while you’re trying to suck someone off and being mindful of your breathing, teeth placement, and avoiding lockjaw. It’s not attractive.

His cock, however ... That is a sight I could get used to. I’ve had that thing inside me, but I never got a good look. I remember how thick it felt as he moved in and out of me, but damn.

Trav is a walking six-five mass of hard lines and ridges, and he’s all proportionate—big everywhere. His cock is tall, thick, and veiny, and a drop of precum leaks from the tip. It’s so fucking sexy.

I lower my mouth to lick it off but make sure I keep eye contact.

He grunts when my tongue swipes over the head. “I need all of that mouth.”

And to show him who’s really the one in charge here, I don’t give it to him. Instead, I lightly lick down his shaft and keep going, sucking his balls into my mouth.

Usually from here, I’d at least be nice to the guy and stroke him with my free hands, but I’m not feeling nice today. I’m going to take what I want



and show Trav that he may think he owns me, but if we're going to do this, it's going to be on my terms.

He can lock me away like a princess in a tower, and I might not like it even if I understand it. I came to him for help, so I'll reluctantly follow his direction. But this? Us? He has no control over what I do.

"Dylan," he whines, and I love the sound. Not only because he's calling me by my first name and not mocking me about going rogue for once, but because there's so much need, so much want in his voice that it's actually difficult not to give him what he wants.

I reach up and run a hand down his chest, brushing over his rippling muscles. They contract under my fingertips, and his whole body trembles.

I straighten and stand, still between his legs, while he's spread out for me.

"Anyone ever tell you you're a tease?" he rasps.

"Anyone ever tell you you're impatient?" I step back and then lift my shirt over my head. "As much as I'm loving this dynamic, I figured it was unfair of me to get all the eye candy."

Trav's eyes narrow. "Why do I feel like this is a trick?"

"No trick."

"What are you going to do to me once you're naked?"

My pants go next. "I'm not going to do anything to you."

"I knew it. You're going to make me take things into my own hands, aren't you?" He grips his mouthwatering cock and strokes slowly.

"Nope." My voice cracks on the word. "As hot as that is, it's your way of trying to take back control, and I want you to get one thing straight. When we're together like this, I'm the one who calls the shots. You can blow me, fuck me, rim me, use my body, but I'm the one who gets to tell you *when*."

Trav licks his lips while he stares at my cock. "You mean ... this time?"

I smile on one side. "Maybe next time I'll let you flip me for it."

His gaze meets mine, and something breaks. I can see the moment he relents. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. I want you to stay like that, eyes locked on me, and I want you to watch while I jerk myself off.”

“Am I allowed to touch myself?”

“Nope. Or I stop.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to jerk you off? You know the only thing better than your hand is someone else’s.”

“You really suck at giving up control, don’t you?”

“No, it’s not ... well, it’s not only that. I really, really, really want to touch you.”

“If you’re a good boy, I’ll finish the blowjob I started.” I step closer and lean in. “I’ll even swallow every drop.”

“And if I can’t hold out?”

“I think not getting the blowjob is punishment enough.”

Trav’s not happy about it, but he lies back again.

I step between his legs and grip his thigh with one hand while I stroke myself with the other.

My gaze is on him, while his is on my hand that’s working me over. His jaw is set, but his eyes are full of heat. My hand has never felt so good on my cock.

Jerking off has a purpose. It gets the job done. But it’s not necessarily a sexy act. This, though, the look of pure lust on Trav’s face makes this one of the most intense sexual encounters of my life.

When my precum drops onto Trav’s thigh, his cock leaks onto his stomach. When I moan, a choked sound comes from the back of his throat. Every noise, every action, he counters with one of his own.

“You look so hot like that,” Trav says. “But I want to do that for you. I need to touch you. I need—”

“You need to stay right there, or this happens.” I slow my hand right down even though I’m dying to come. His pinched expression really does it for me. And as tempting as it is to let him take over because I’ve been dreaming of Trav’s hands on me, I’m more determined to let him know he can’t get his way all the damn time. Not with me.

If he wants me as much as he says he does, it will be a partnership. We will be equals.

“Okay, okay,” Trav relents.

“That’s better.” I go back to jerking myself off, but he deserves a reward for that.

I wrap my fingers around his long shaft, but where I’m stroking myself hard and fast, I only tease him. I’m slow and tender, just enough to make him want more but not enough to satisfy him.

The way he looks so desperate for me has me fucking my fist with abandon.

“I’m close,” I tell him.

Anticipation lights up his face, and he licks his lips again.

“If you let me mark your skin, I might even let you have a taste.”

Trav nods immediately. “Do it.”

I step closer, stroking myself harder and faster, chasing that crashing wave until it unfurls, and I come all over his stomach. My release hits his abs, his chest, and a little on his cock. Damn, he looks good covered in cum, his skin all flushed. My gaze flicks up to his face, and he’s staring down at us, watching as I continue to come all over him.

Fuck, that’s hot.

But when his eyes lift and meet mine, there’s something else there too. Something more than sex. Something I don’t want to acknowledge.

I dip my head and lick my own cum off his dick while running my fingers through the mess I left on his stomach.

Trav's eyes flutter closed as I finally take him in my mouth, but when they don't open again, I pull off.

"Keep watching me." I lift my hand to his mouth. "And open up." I suck his cock while letting him lick my fingers clean.

I've barely gotten to choke on his massive dick when his release fills my mouth. At first, there's the faint salty taste, and I think he must be close, but what starts as a trickle quickly becomes a tidal wave of cum.

When I look up again, he's flat against the dining table, breathing heavy. I lick my lips and smile because Trav looks wrecked.

I did that to him. *Me.*

"Damn," he whispers. "Your mouth was on me for two seconds."

Before I even have the chance to brag, a vibrating sound fills the space.

"Fuck," Trav hisses and grabs his phone, which is above his head next to his coffee cup from earlier. "It's Domino. I need to take this."

He jumps off the table and answers the phone, and even though I love the sight of his ass as he walks away, dread passes through me.

The outside world has already caught back up, and the worries about my future drown out the orgasmic high.

CHAPTER TWELVE\_

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TRAV

I LIFT THE PHONE TO MY EAR AS I REACH MY BEDROOM. “TALK TO ME.”

“You’re gonna want to put some clothes on for this, boss.”

Normally I’d be up his ass about spying on me, but if he knows what I’ve been doing and still called anyway, it has to be important.

“What’s happening? Wait, let me get pants on.”

“About that. You know how when Saint and Iris first got together, you overheard them having sex? Saint has one up on you now. You weren’t answering your phone, so I asked him to check the live feed from the ranch.”

I groan. “I’m never going to hear the end of this one, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Delete the footage.”

“Already done.”

“Good man.” I put him on speaker while I find some clean underwear and pants to put on. “Now, what’s up?”

“We’ve hit a dead end.”

Definitely not what I wanted to hear. “How so?”

“We vetted Dylan’s teammates. They’re all clean ... including Walker.”

“Bullshit Walker’s clean.”

“That’s my point. We can’t find anything on any of them, so we can’t tell who we could tap to be an ally here.”

“Dig deeper.”

“We are, but I’m telling you that avenue would be hard to navigate. We don’t know who we could trust. It’s too risky to get someone on the inside. You could ask Rodriguez if any of his teammates have a problem with Walker.”

“Not going to happen.” I’m not going to put that on Dylan’s shoulders. If he chooses wrong, it could be all of our lives on the line. If he chooses right and a teammate risks their life for him, he will feel responsible if it goes south.

“Why not?” Domino asks.

I’m not going to come right out and say why, of course. “Because he didn’t even know his boss was dirty. And you saw what he just did with me. I don’t exactly trust his judgment.”

“Technically, Saint saw it, but okay, you have a point. Anyone who has sex with you is obviously missing that part of their brain that makes good decisions.”

“You’re a funny fucker, aren’t you? So, where do we go from here?”

“I’ve got Iris and Zeus on that Hale guy now, but I haven’t heard from them since I sent them out at the ass crack of dawn when I got your text.”

Dylan’s voice comes from the doorway to my room. “They can’t find him, can they?”

“We don’t know that,” I say, when really, we do. My guys would update us if they had him.

Dylan chuckles. “Mmhmm. Keep ignoring my advice, then. They’re your guys and your time.”

“Domino, I gotta go,” I say.

“I bet you do. Have fun, kids. I’ll make sure to text through my updates for the rest of the day.”

“Smartass,” I mumble and hit End on the call.

“What was that about?” Dylan asks.

I rub my chin. “Hmm, to tell the truth or not ...”

“What happened to never lying to me?”

“You didn’t believe it anyway, so what’s the point? Ooh, I could tell you all the stories of how I once fought off an invasion of transforming robots from outer space. I befriended one of them because he was a good robot, but he couldn’t talk because his voice box had been damaged in battle—”

“What’s sadder, a grown-ass man in his forties admitting to having watched the *Transformer* movies or the much younger, hotter thirty-year-old being entertained by it?”

“Thirty?” I scoff. “You’re midthirties, babe. I’m pretty sure I can even see some gray hair coming through.” I step toward him and inspect his head, trying to spot them.

He swats me away. “Fuck off.”

“Hey, you’re getting better at keeping animosity out of your tone when you tell me to fuck off now. It was the orgasm, wasn’t it? There’s more where that came from. Who knows, maybe by the time I get you out of this professional mess, you might actually be able to have a conversation with me without rolling your eyes.” I gasp.

He looks like he wants to dispute that, but he doesn’t. “The orgasm did help, if I’m honest.”

“More orgasms,” I demand and try to close the gap between us.

Dylan pushes against my chest. “Nice try. We need to work.”

“It’s probably for the best. I have no doubt my guys are probably tracking the live feed of the ranch after our show.”

“What do you mean?”

I rub the back of my neck. “That was my roundabout way of letting you know we accidentally made a sex tape.” I quickly add, “It’s been deleted. But, uh, yeah, oops.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but then he slumps. “I’m not even surprised your compound is monitored that closely.”



“The cameras kind of slipped my mind the second your mouth was on mine.”

“How many guys saw it?” Dylan bites his lip.

“One. Well, and Domino. I promise you it’s gone.”

“Note to self. Don’t have sex with Trav at the ranch.”

I smile and do a dance. “Someone’s getting a repeat.”

“I take it back. Don’t have sex with Trav. Period. It turns him into the gloating show pony I’ve grown to hate.”

“Come on. You like the show pony. Even if it’s only a little. And you know this pony is hung like a hors—”

“Don’t even go there. I like that you’re helping me not get killed, but I’d prefer you spent more time focusing on that and less on trying to have sex with me.”

“Ooh, are we compromising again? What if for every lead I find on Walker, you give me an hour of sex.”

“A minute of sex.”

“It’s cute you think a minute is all that it would take.”

“You never said you had to finish,” he murmurs.

How is Dylan so fucking perfect for me? “Okay, theoretically, if I get, say, ten leads on Walker, I can have ten minutes of any part of your body? My choosing?”

“Good luck finding that many leads, though. And no rewards in this house.”

“There are no cameras in my room.” I waggle my eyebrows.

“Okay, good. I was going to say I might be out of a job, but I’m not looking to go into porn.”

“Hey, don’t shame sex workers. Porn is a hard job. A really, really *hard* job.”

Dylan hums. “A forty-one-year-old who acts his shoe size and not his age. How is it possible you’ve gotten me to have sex with you twice?”

“It’s because we’re soul—”

“If you say soul mates, I swear on my mother’s life, I’ll walk back to L.A.”

“We’re soul ... companions? Soul friends? Soul fuck buddies. Yep, that’s the one. You’re my soul fuck buddy for life. SFB, for the win.”

“I am regretting not letting Walker shoot me,” he mutters.

“Let’s get to work. I have sex minutes to earn.”

“And now you’ve made it weird.”

“There’s nothing weird about exchanging services for sex.”

“Except that it’s called prostitution.”

“Prostitution is a hard, *hard* job. Just like porn.”

Dylan sighs.

“Okay, fine. This is me, growing as an individual and stopping with the jokes. Mature, boss Trav is back.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

My stubborn, arrogant, and slightly emotionally unavailable side makes me want to keep pushing, but I’m determined to show Dylan I am more than an overgrown, immature meathead. “Let’s get to it, then.”

We sit at my computer, and I fire up the CCTV footage again.

“I already went over that,” Dylan says. “There’s nothing there.”

“I have a theory.” I find the spot where the shooter’s Subaru drives toward the entrance, but before it turns into the parking lot, I pause it. “What do you see?”

“This feels like a trick question.”

I zoom in on the passenger side and point to a lighter part of the image. “What’s that?”

Dylan leans in closer to the screen, coming into my personal space. “Light from the setting sun reflecting off the windshield?”

“It could be, but look what happened when one of my guys ran it through enhancement software.” When I put the comparison up beside the

original, the image becomes a tiny bit clearer. Not by much, but enough to make out—

“That’s a hand,” Dylan exclaims.

“Yup. My theory is Walker arrived *with* the shooter.”

Dylan stares at the screen, speechless.

“Should I add one minute to the timer?” I smile.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he says to himself.

“Well, here’s the thing. I have a hunch I know who the shooter is, but you saw this guy’s face. Do you think you could ID him if I track down a photo?”

“Definitely.”

While I search certain databases I shouldn’t have access to, I keep Dylan distracted. “I told you how Saint found the connection between Walker and Councilman Rowling, but I didn’t tell you that they still have one contact in common.” Jonathan Rowling’s driver’s license pops up on the screen. “Rowling’s son.”

Dylan stumbles back. “That’s him. That’s the guy.”

“Are you sure?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind. He’s the one.”

“And now there’s two minutes. Okay, so we have the who and the when. Now we need the why and the proof. Actually, we probably don’t even need the why, but we do need to figure out who’s involved and how deep into the DEA it goes before we can make a move on it.”

Domino might be right. I should ask Dylan if he knows which of his teammates could help, but my argument stands. I won’t put him at more risk on something that could backfire spectacularly.

“I wish there was someone on the inside I could get to, but if I can’t even trust my superior officer, who am I supposed to confide in?” Dylan’s dejected tone gets to me more than it should.

I want to fix this for him, but it's going to take time. "Domino said something similar. He ran background checks on your entire squad, and you're all clean. No offense, but I find that highly suspect. None of you have had complaints brought against you?"

Dylan gets a look in his eyes that looks a hell of a lot like guilt. And when he turns away to answer, I already know the gist of what he's going to say. "You have to understand what it's like in law enforcement."

I lean back in my seat. "I might know a thing or two about people being on 'the right side' and doing bad things."

"My first year as a beat cop." He swallows hard. "I saw another officer using excessive force." He pauses. "I told him to back off and pulled him off the assailant." Then he huffs. "Nothing happened when I reported it. Our captain pulled me into his office and lectured me about not being a team player. Gave me one free pass and said if I ever reported another officer again, it would be my last day wearing a badge."

Well, holy fuck. "That's heavy."

"It's why ..." Dylan pauses. "It's why I've never reported any of the shit I've seen since. That's why there are no marks on our records."

"Why haven't any victims come forward with complaints?"

"It's not really a thing that gets reported, you know? The kinds of people we deal with think we're the enemy anyway. It's almost like they expect us to be violent. They've also no doubt seen countless news coverage where nothing ever gets done."

"You do realize—"

"That keeping my mouth shut is part of the problem? Yes. And I have to live with that every day."

"The thing is," I say. "I understand that team mentality, I do. If you think one of your brothers in arms could turn on you at any moment, how are you expected to do your job in the field? But at the same time, not standing up against something truly immoral isn't going to fix the issue."

“You’re right. I know you’re right. But ever since that captain sat me down, I’ve made the argument in my head that by following the rules and being the good cop society needs me to be, that makes less room on the force for the bad ones. I’ve told myself for years that all we need is for a couple of us to come forward in unity and that eventually it will happen. Change will happen. But it’s like no one wants to be the first one to turn their back on their teammates. To sell them out.”

I understand what he’s saying, but it’s reasons like this why I believe the justice system is so corrupt and it doesn’t work.

“Though, in saying all this,” Dylan continues, “while I’ve seen cover-ups in the DEA, I’ve never seen any of my team do anything really heinous.”

“Except Walker.”

“Well, yeah, him shooting at me wasn’t my favorite thing about having him for a boss.”

I snort. “Hey, if you want a job, I’m just saying, I’d never shoot at you.”

“But you’d have sex with me. That brings in a whole other issue with the employer slash employee situation.”

“Mm, true. If I had to choose between having sex with you or being your boss, you can stay a DEA agent.”

“Yeah, well, to do that, we actually have to find something we can nail Walker with.”

“Right. Back to work.” I hunch back over my computer screen. “Nail Walker, and then I can nail you.”

“You’ve only got two minutes banked. I don’t know how much nailing that will get you.”

I rub my hands together. “I’m about to fix that right now.”

And hours later, when my eyes are tired and my shoulders are sore from being stuck in the one position the whole time, I’ve only built up another

seven minutes, and I have to say I might have been cheating to even get that.

We have a lead to check out Jonathan Rowling's school, where he hangs out, his friends, and have basically turned the investigation to him, but none of that will help us nab Walker, who's the one we really need to get.

Dylan disappeared a while ago to make us some food, and I never did get the chance to go buy groceries, so it'll be interesting to see what he comes up with. There's not much here apart from some frozen meals and MREs. Usually, when I know I'm heading out here, I'll pay my cleaners to stock the fridge and cupboard on their next visit, but this was unscheduled.

I push my chair backward and rub my eyes. "Okay, I give up. Come give me a nine-minute blowjob."

Dylan appears in the doorway, arms across his chest and a smile on his sexy-as-fuck lips. "Nine minutes, huh? Do you want it now or after we eat the gourmet pizza I defrosted and cooked?"

"Aww, you've been slaving away in the kitchen, providing us with food and taking care of me. Look at us, already living in domestic bliss."

"And now it's fallen to eight minutes."

"Wait, what? I haven't even touched you yet."

"Start talking about domestic bliss, I take minutes away."

"That wasn't part of the deal," I complain.

Dylan loses some of the playfulness as he says, "It's part of my deal. What we did this morning ... we probably shouldn't have done that."

"I disagree."

"Of course you do. My point is we probably shouldn't hook up, but we're going to anyway, and I think keeping lines clear is the best way to go about it."

"Okay, so let's draw lines." It's not what I want, but it's not like I can force him into being with me.

“I don’t want either of us to think this could be more than what it is,” Dylan says. “We’ve always had this push and pull, and there’s no denying it’s hot when we’re together, but jokes about it being more, about being soul mates—”

“Soul fuck buddies, thank you very much.”

“That’s not what this is.”

I fold my arms and lean back in my seat. “Can I ask what it is, then?”

“Does it need to be labeled?”

“Not labeled, no, but it would be good if I could adjust my expectations.” Because if it were up to me, I’d give him more than just orgasms.

Dylan hesitates. “I want ...” He steps closer. “I want to suck your dick for eight minutes without it meaning anything.”

That’s not what I want, but I can’t expect him to suddenly change his mind about me simply because we’ve made each other come.

I reach for my fly, unzipping it slowly and palming my growing erection. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s stress release. From all the shit I can’t control.”

“I can be that for you.” I don’t need to tell him I can be more. Even if I want to be the one he turns to when he needs help, the one who cares for him, I’m only going to give him what he’s willing to take.

I could be his everything if he let me. But I need to earn that.

Just because I’m taking this whole situation as a sign to stop with the back-and-forth, to maybe take down that wall between us that we’ve both been building, that doesn’t mean he’s in the same headspace. If I hadn’t purposefully pushed him away all these years, maybe he’d give in to this opportunity quicker. Maybe he’d believe me when I say I’m here for him no matter what.

The truth is, Dylan Rodriguez could ask me for anything, and I’d give it to him.

Dylan gets to his knees in front of me and glances up, meeting my eyes. “Think you can come in only eight minutes?”

“Only if you don’t tease me first. I need your A game.”

“Mm, that can be arranged. Set a timer.” He frees my cock from my pants while I scramble to find the stopwatch function on my phone.

And like I asked, he doesn’t hold back, and the second his lips are wrapped around me, he sucks hard. The wet heat that surrounds my dick almost has me going off after a couple of seconds, let alone minutes.

But I want to savor every damn minute he’s giving me, so I grit my teeth and breathe through my nose while the muscles in my thighs tense. I try to stave off my orgasm as long as I can, but it’s a fight of wills.

He’s determined to get me off fast, and I’m not sure I can hold out.

Especially when he glances up at me through dark lashes, his mouth the perfect O shape for my cock to dive into over and over again. His cheeks hollow out with every suck, every bob of his head.

It’s a mesmerizing sight, and focusing on that instead of coming is enough to bring me back from the edge, but not for long. Because the longer I watch, the more I fall deeper into the twisted interest I have in Dylan Rodriguez. And knowing that he’s giving himself to me, even if only in a physical way, it’s enough to set my blood on fire.

It feeds my ego and confidence. It makes me a cocky son of a bitch—even more so than usual.

For this reason, I force myself to stay calm and in control. *I will not come. I will not come.*

And even as I chant that over and over in my head, it’s the smallest thing that sets me off.

Drool dribbles out of Dylan’s mouth, and it’s as if all the nerve endings in my body zero in on the feel of it dripping down the base of my cock and lower.



The very second it lands on my sac, I can't hold back anymore, and I unleash inside his mouth.

It's ecstasy and relief all at once, disappointment that it's over but thankful to be out of my horny misery.

When I have no more cum left in my body, he pulls off my cock with a wet pop and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "How did we do?"

I don't want to tear my gaze away from him, but I have to. The timer result is surprising because it seemed like an eternity but also too fast. "Looks like I got my nine minutes after all." I show him the final time.

Dylan rises to his feet and leans over, bringing his lips close to mine. "It's okay. That last minute was for me."

I can smell sex on his breath, and as he leans in and kisses me, I can taste my cum.

A moan leaves me before pulling back. "Want me to return the favor, or —"

"Sorry. You're all out of minutes." He leaves me where I am, dick hanging out while trying to still catch my breath.

Damn him. He knows exactly how to play me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN\_

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DYLAN

I'M ALREADY THROUGH HALF A PIECE OF COLD PIZZA BY THE TIME TRAV comes out of his room fully dressed. I hadn't planned on blowing Trav then and there. I went to tell him dinner was ready, but then he was asking for lines and rules, and I didn't want to deal with it. I can't think about him and me or us while my future is unknown. Not while I have a boss who tried to kill me and a team who is no doubt being fed all the wrong information.

I want to know how Walker is spinning this to other agents. Is he telling them I'm the dirty one? Is he simultaneously saving his own ass while throwing me under the bus? He's the special agent in charge, which means he has friends in high places. One word from him, and people will believe it.

My entire career feels like a lie. It's empty. I'm supposed to be changing the world and making it a better place. Hard to do when corruption comes from those who are supposed to be doing the same.

Trav sits opposite me and takes two pieces of pizza at once, stacking them on top of each other and shoving them in his mouth. "You're thinking hard over there." His words come out all muffled.

"Yeah. Apparently, trying to use your dick as a distraction only works when I'm on said dick."

Trav chokes on his food and coughs. "Uh, well, feel free to, you know, get on it at any time. With any part of your body. Your hand, your mouth,

your—”

“Thanks for your sacrifice.”

“Just doing my job and taking one for the team. Obviously.”

“Right.” I stare at the pizza on my plate.

“Okay, what’s really going on up here?” Trav taps the side of his head.

“I was thinking about the other guys on my team, contemplating if any of them know what went down. Why Walker has them looking for me.”

“Domino asked me if you know of anyone we could trust on the inside, but it’s a risk to reach out, no matter how sure you are they can be trusted.”

“It’s like you said on the phone earlier. I didn’t even know my direct supervisor was dirty. I also slept with you. I agree my judgment needs some work.” I can’t say hearing those things didn’t sting, but hey, look where I am. I do feel stupid for not knowing about Walker. It’s embarrassing.

“Y-you heard that?”

“Yep. And it’s the truth.” I act like it doesn’t get to me, even if it does.

Trav finishes off his stacked pizza slices and leans forward. “It’s not the truth. I only said all that shit because I know my guys, and if they catch wind of anything remotely—” His mouth slams shut.

“Remotely what?”

“What I mean is, they joke about us being boyfriends all the time. I had to play it down like I’m messing with you and don’t care, otherwise the mocking would only become worse. You think I’m immature for my age? You should see the overgrown frat boys whose hair has started going gray.”

“Why do I feel like you’ve described every member of your team? You shouldn’t be called Mike Bravo, you should be Overgrown Frat Boys with Weapons.”

“I tried that. Didn’t fit on the business card.”

I smile. “And Oscar Foxtrot Bravo Whiskey is a mouthful.”

Trav’s phone goes off with an alert, but it’s not a text or phone call sound. He immediately looks at the screen, his normally stoic expression

absent as panic takes over.

“What is it?” I ask.

When he glances up at me, his eyes widen as his gaze zeroes in on my chest. “Get down.” The next second, before I can register what’s going on, he jumps out of his seat and tackles me to the floor.

We land with a hard thud, his big body on top of mine.

I’m not complaining, though I am confused. “Hey, you don’t have any sex minutes left—”

My taunt is cut off by glass exploding, the sound echoing in my ears.

“Stay down,” Trav growls. He backs off me and flips the dining table, providing a shield between us and whatever flew through that window.

“What was that?”

Trav grips me by the shirt and pulls me behind him. “Walker found us.”

Strapped underneath the dining table are an assault rifle and magazine. He rips away the duct tape and has the weapon assembled in no time flat.

“How do you know it’s Walker?” I ask. “Anyone who needs to stash weapons at his dining table surely has enemies.”

“Because the red dot was pointed to the middle of *your* chest. Not mine. They’re here for you.”

“How did they know where we—”

I’m cut off by Trav lifting his head and spraying bullets toward the window.

If it wasn’t smashed to pieces before, it is now.

Trav ducks back down. “How doesn’t matter. I need to get you out of here. I’ll hold them off. My room has a panic button on the left-hand side near my desk. Get there and lock yourself in.”

“I can help you.”

The crunch of footsteps over broken glass rings in my ears. Whoever it is has made their way inside. Trav hears it too. He lifts his head but quickly

drops down again, lifting his gun over the side of the table and shooting blindly. “Go,” he yells over the gunfire.

I don’t have a weapon on me, and I know being out here with him will distract him. The last thing I want is for both of us to get shot because we’re too busy yelling at each other, so I reluctantly leave him even though it feels wrong.

This isn’t what a teammate should do, but I also know Trav can handle himself, and if I’m out here, that’s an added distraction Trav doesn’t need.

I slink away, keeping my head low as I crawl in the direction of Trav’s room, but when I’m safely behind a god-awful tiger-print couch, I reach under it, searching. I figure if Trav has guns stashed under his dining table, he probably has them all over the place.

My hand wraps around metal. “Bingo.”

It’s not another rifle but a Glock. One like my service weapon. I check that it’s loaded and then get up onto my knees.

A quick look around the room shows Trav out of sight behind the table and a dead body on the floor. There’s a gaping hole where Trav’s Hampton-style windows used to be.

The assailant’s not in tactical gear or anything. It’s a dude in jeans, a T-shirt, and a bulletproof vest. When I think it’s over, that there was only one guy, another appears from down the hallway to Trav’s left.

Trav doesn’t see him at first, so I lift my gun and fire, but without proper time to aim, I hit the guy in the leg instead of anywhere lethal. Hey, at least I got him.

He staggers and is distracted long enough for Trav to catch up to what’s happening, but when Trav turns and fires, he’s out of ammo.

“Yeet.” He throws the empty rifle, and it hits the guy in the head.

This time, when I aim, I shoot to incapacitate, not kill—putting a bullet in each arm.

It finally makes him drop.

Trav's gaze flicks to mine. "I thought I told you to get to safety."

"I decided saving your life was more important. Though, I don't know why when you said the word 'yeet.' I should've left you to defend yourself. How old are you?"

Trav shrugs. "Felt right in the moment."

The air settles and is quiet around us.

"Think that was it?" I ask.

"Dunno, but I don't want to hang around to find out." Trav stands and moves to the guy I shot. I think he's going to take him out just like the other man lying in a pool of his own blood, but he doesn't. He kicks his weapon away and then grabs him by the ankle and drags him toward me. "Move. Get in the panic room."

This time, I do as he says, ignoring the cries of pain from the guy bleeding all over Trav's carpet as Trav brings him with us.

Once we're over the threshold, Trav hits the button, and a large metal door slides out from the wall, slamming shut.

Mechanical locks click in place.

"Now what?"

Trav doesn't answer me. He turns to the guy on the ground. "Who do you work for? Walker?"

The guy, shivering from shock, grits out, "Who?"

"You really don't want to play that game." Trav puts his foot above the bullet hole in his left arm but doesn't press down. "Who do you work for?"

"Private ..." His breathing is stilted. "Contract...or."

"Why are you here?"

He doesn't answer.

Trav shifts his weight to add more pressure to his foot, and the guy cries out in pain. I want to tell Trav to stop, but it's hard to keep my moral compass intact when this guy tried to fucking kill me.

His skin turns pasty white. "Bounty."

“Who’s the target?” Trav barks. “Me or him.”

“The better question is ...” he rasps. “Are we the only ones here?” He smiles when a loud crash sounds inside the rest of the house.

“I don’t even want to know what that was,” Trav says. “We need to get out of here. Let’s move.”

“What are we going to do about him?” I gesture to the guy on the ground.

“He can let himself out. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t fucking know. Give me a sec.” Trav walks over to his desk and kneels down, taking a panel off the side of his computer tower. He yanks out the hard drive and stands upright again. “So these guys can’t get any of my files. Now, to get out of here before they all get in the house.”

Gunfire starts up, and what sounds like bullets hitting the steel door echoes around the room.

“Sounds like they’re already in. How are we supposed to get out of here? Don’t we need to, you know, go out that way?”

“Oh, sweetie, honey. You’re cute when you’re confused, but no. That’s to keep them thinking we’re locked in here.”

I turn in a circle. “It looks to me like we are.”

Trav walks by me and pats my head. “This way.”

At the back of Trav’s walk-in closet, there’s a chest along the back wall, but when Trav moves it out of the way, a manhole just big enough for a bulky guy like him to slip through appears. There are metal steps descending into God knows where.

Trav gestures for me to go first. “Wait for me at the bottom.”

I turn backward and take my decline, landing on a cement floor in a dark hallway that brightens in fluorescent lighting as sensors pick up my movement.



We're in some kind of basement or cellar with plain white walls, exposed pipes, and the eerie feeling of being in a secret lab where they experiment on unsuspecting DEA agents.

Trav drops a duffle bag at my feet, and instead of using the steps, he slides down the railing on either side.

"Show off," I murmur. "Where are we?"

"Underground. I'm nothing if not a paranoid ex-army Ranger who has a slew of contingency plans in any given situation. In this case, I have numerous escape routes from this property alone. We can get to the garage from here."

"Where the cars won't work. Or do you forget keeping me here against my will?"

"Eh, I'll reattach the battery. Easy fix."

"Should've tried that," I mutter.

"Yeah. You should have. I was disappointed, to be honest. I was ready for a car chase."

"Well, this might be your chance. We don't know how many are out there waiting for us."

Trav leads me down the narrow corridor until we come to a wider hallway. "Don't worry. I have faith you can hold them off."

"Me?"

"Unless you wanted to drive even though you have no idea how to get off my property except for the main entrance and could get us lost. Yeah, that sounds like a plan."

"How do you expect me to hold them off?"

Trav lifts the duffle bag. "I've got everything you need right here."

We get to a single locked door, and Trav punches in a code on a keypad to open it. The garage has everything from off-road 4x4s to Trav's top-of-the-line Range Rover.

He takes a set of keys out of a lockbox. "Get in the Hummer."

I do as he says, and he hands me the bag.

“Take whichever weapon you’re comfortable with using.”

When I open it and see how many I have to choose from, it’s more than overwhelming. “As tempting as it is to go with the crossbow, I’ll take the AR-15.” I’ve at least trained with them. Though, I’ve never had to actually fire at people before.

As I put the strap attached to the rifle over my shoulder, everything becomes a bit too real. But then Trav hands me a couple of hand grenades, and it becomes too surreal.

“Ever used one of these before?” he asks.

“Sure. All the time in the DEA. We use those instead of guns, didn’t you know?”

“They’re really easy.” He demonstrates for me. “Hold the spoon—”

“The what?”

He runs his finger over the handle. “This part. Hold it tight against the grenade. When you’re ready to throw it—and *only* when you’re ready to throw it—pull the pin. It helps if you twist it as you pull it out. Then we can both pray to the god of not dying that you can throw.”

“Hey, I played baseball in high school. Was a decent pitcher.”

Trav nods. “Oh, good. Nothing like twenty years of not playing baseball to train you to throw a live explosive. That’s reassuring.”

I mumble something about it not being twenty years, but he’s too busy removing the roof off the Hummer.

“Get in the back,” he orders. “You’ll have better protection back there and won’t risk flying through the front windshield if shit goes down.”

I press my lips together. “Question. How often does ‘shit go down’ in these situations?”

Trav doesn’t answer. Instead, he gets me a helmet and puts it on my head. “To protect that pretty little head of yours.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” It’s not that I can’t do this. It’s that I don’t want to. I’m not used to this level of assault weaponry. I’ve been in positions where I’ve had to fight for my life, sure, but this is extreme.

“I don’t exactly have a GPS that will help you get out of here, and there are plenty of areas we can get stuck. Or drive into a canyon. I don’t like putting you in harm’s way either, but it’s our only choice. I’m just praying we’ll be able to lose them fast over the terrain. I only need you to hold them off while we get out of here.”

“No pressure.”

“Nah, we got this. I have faith in you.” Trav leans in and presses his lips to mine softly. “Let’s get you strapped in, and we’ll roll out before they find us down here.” He positions me so I’m secured to the I-bar in between the two back seats so I don’t fall out when I get into position. “You can sit for now. With any luck, they won’t see us sneak out, and then you won’t have to do anything.”

“Sure. Let’s hope the people sent here to kill me are blind as well as dumb.”

“How do you know they’re dumb?”

“They tried attacking you, Travis West, in his own home. You think I’m too dumb to live for wanting to find Hale? Please.”

Trav touches his chest. “I think that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me. It sounds like I’m being sarcastic, but I’m really not.”

“Like I told you. I know you better than you think I do. And I know not to get on your bad side.”

The smile that spreads across Trav’s face is delectable as it is scary. “You want to know what I’m going to do with the dead body in my house, don’t you?”

I haven’t had much time to think about that and analyze it, and if I’m honest with myself, that’s a good thing. “I’m going to go with the delusion

that you will call the proper authorities when the time comes.”

He pats my cheek. “Good boy. Plausible deniability and all that. Let’s get out of here.”

Nerves and adrenaline churn as Trav gets in the driver’s seat and the engine roars to life.

I’ve been involved in countless raids before, and this feels similar, but it’s heightened by the knowledge these guys’ target is me. This isn’t a drug dealer versus cop. This is ... okay, I don’t know who these guys are or who they work for, only that they’re chasing a bounty to take me out. If the guy bleeding out on Trav’s floor is to be believed anyway.

Though, he’d have no reason to lie about that.

One of Trav’s three garage doors opens slowly, but where I’m expecting him to drive forward and out, he puts the car in reverse.

I fly forward, bracing my hand on the seat in front of me as Trav navigates his way backward out a different door that’s now rising too.

“A little warning would’ve been nice,” I yell.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

His distraction has worked, though. Whoever’s out there is running down the ramp in front of us, not behind.

We hit the unpaved path outside, and one of the assailants takes aim with an assault rifle, but Trav’s quicker.

“Hold tight.” He pulls on the handbrake and spins this beast in the opposite direction.

The tires spin beneath us on the rough surface until we’re thrust forward as Trav punches the accelerator. We meet up with the actual driveway, and just when I begin to get my hopes up that we’ve shaken them already, headlights appear behind us, bright and blinding.

“You’re up,” Trav says. “And please don’t die. Or get shot. I’m not done with you yet.”

“Lucky this is happening now and not in a month, then.”

“It’s cute you think a month would be long enough with you,” he yells. Before I can even react to that piece of news, he continues. “Now, please get these asses off my ass. Things are about to get bumpy.”

Right. Time to channel my inner Trav and blow shit up.

I can do this. I grab hold of the I-bar above me and pull myself up, turning and putting one foot against the backrest of my seat to steady me while I raise the AR-15 and aim toward the general vicinity of the glowing headlights.

I’m glad I don’t have time to overthink about where my bullets are going because shooting without reservations about who it might kill is not how it’s done in the DEA. Even when our lives are at stake.

There might be some law enforcement officers who believe shoot now, ask questions later, but I’ve never been like that. Life has value. And right now, I need to protect my own.

I ignore the ringing in my ears as I fire my weapon, and it lets out round after round.

Trav turns off onto an old beaten path, and the dip that follows as the tires roll over holes almost makes me lose balance.

A random spray of bullets gets shot into the air as I correct myself.

“I told you it was about to get bumpy,” Trav yells.

*Thanks, asshole.*

“They still following?” he asks.

“Yep. They’re slower, though.” We’re putting some good distance between us.

“Put a hole in the ground and block them from coming any farther.”

“Huh?” We hit another bump, and I grab onto the bar to stop myself from falling.

“Throw a grenade!” he yells.

“Is that really necessary?”

“Do it.”

With a sigh, I put the safety on the rifle and let it hang by my side. My hands shake as I pull one of the grenades out of my pocket, and I can't even blame the treacherous terrain that has the heavy vehicle bouncing around all over the place. I seriously feel like I'm in a bouncy house.

The chance of me dropping this damn thing is high. At least if I accidentally kill Trav, he won't be able to mock me for it.

Okay, hold the handle thingy to the thing. Pull and twist the other thing, and—the pin comes out. Holy fuck, I'm holding something that's about to go *boom*.

I have to admit, there's some power in that, but I'm too freaked-out about blowing ourselves up to enjoy it.

I throw it as hard as I can and then spin to take my seat and prepare for the explosion.

Trav accelerates, and I look back just in time for the ground to shake and the plume of fire to shoot up into the sky.

And as terrifying as it is that I did that, it's a tiny bit thrilling as well. Not that I'd ever admit that out loud. Especially not to Trav.

"Where are they at?" Trav yells.

"I can't see because of the fire."

"That should hold them off until we lose them up here. We're about to pass the canyon. It's impossible to see in the dark. With any luck, if any of them do get around that mess, they'll get stuck up here." Trav takes a sharp left and then kills all the lights on the car.

"Didn't you say it's hard to see?"

"I know this place like the back of my hand. I could do this blindfolded."

"Please don't."

Trav locks eyes with me in the rearview mirror, and I don't have to be able to see his mouth to know he's smiling from ear to ear.

He doesn't slow down as he maneuvers the car around the unforgiving desert. Lights appear behind us, and when I turn, there's another car coming for us.

"They got around the explosion," I say.

The car is far away and headed for the canyon, but surely, they'll see it before—They don't see it.

One second the lights are getting smaller in my vision, and the next, they're gone.

"Did they just drive off a fucking cliff into a canyon?"

"It's a small canyon," Trav says. "They'll walk away. Maybe limping, but I'm sure they're alive ... probably."

I lean back in my seat, the wind whipping at my face, and I laugh even though I don't find any of this funny. "That makes me feel so much better."

Trav slows to a stop but doesn't kill the engine. He turns to face me. "Now that we've lost them, unclip and climb up front with me."

"I dunno. I kinda like this being chauffeured around thing."

All he has to do to get me to move is smile. I climb through in between the front seats, and my ass lands next to him.

"That was fun." Trav grins over at me and takes off again.

I shake my head. "You goddamn adrenaline junkies."

"Come on. You had fun too. Admit it."

"Never."

We're jostled in our seats as we pick up speed, but Trav doesn't slow down. If anything, he goes faster.

I'm thankful when we get to a boundary fence. Trav jumps out and opens a padlocked gate. When he comes back to the car and we hit the open road, the adrenaline begins to settle.

That's when I realize ... "Where are we going now?"

By the defeated look on his face, it's obvious *the* Travis West doesn't have the answer. That might be a first.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN\_

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TRAV

ONCE WE'RE OUT OF IMMEDIATE DANGER, I'M FINALLY ABLE TO GET MY bearings and take control of the larger situation at hand.

Dylan looks unsure, staring at me intently. "You have no idea where to go, do you?"

"Not true." Not *entirely*. "I have a couple of safe houses we could go to, but if someone found us at the ranch, it's safe to say they could find us there too."

Which brings me to the question of how those guys not only found us but bypassed my initial security system. There are sensors around the perimeter that are supposed to tell me when someone steps foot on my property. They must have taken them out because the only warning I got was an alert on my phone from heat signatures near the house. Then I saw the red dot aimed at Dylan's chest, and it was all over.

This wasn't some random drug-dealing kids doing a job for a higher power like Walker. They were professionals, talking about a bounty. Which can only mean one thing.

A price has been put on Dylan's head, and fuck if I'm going to let anyone get close enough to kill him. Err, again. Starting now. Those guys back there got too close.

I hit the phone icon on my steering wheel to call Domino, but Atlas is the one who picks up.

“Hey, boss. Uh, we’re kinda dealing with a situation here.”

“Is it people breaking in to put a bullet in Dylan’s head? Because that’s what I’m dealing with.”

“Oh, shit. What do you need?”

“First things first. What’s going on there?”

“Perimeter was tripped a while ago. Domino and Saint are out there now, and we have Iris and Zeus coming back from searching for that Hale guy. Who they can’t find.”

“Mm, not really surprising considering he’s homeless and can’t be tracked through an electronic trail.”

Dylan looks at me, smug expression on his face, as if to say he knew they wouldn’t have been able to find him.

“Radio Domino and Saint and tell them to be careful out there,” I order.

Atlas does as I say while we listen in. “Now, what’s happening in the desert?”

“There’s a bounty on Dylan’s head, and it must be a big price. The guys who came to take him out weren’t a ragtag team of nobodies. They knew what they were doing. On a completely different and totally unrelated note, I’m going to need a cleanup crew out at the ranch ASAP. Things got a little ... heated.”

Atlas snorts. “How many dead bodies we talking?”

“Uh ...” I glance at Dylan. “At least one. Possibly more.” I mutter the next part under my breath. “Tell them to check the canyon.”

“Are you still there?” Atlas asks. “You sound like you’re on the road.”

“We’re working out next steps. If someone came to HQ and to the ranch, I have to assume the safe houses are compromised also.”

Usually when someone needs a safe house, that person can’t be traced back to us, so having properties in Mike Bravo’s name has never been an issue. When it’s one of our own we’re protecting? Yeah, we’re screwed.

Not that Dylan's one of us, but he is by association. Our cat-and-mouse game over the years has been obvious to everyone on my team. I didn't realize it extended past that and into Dylan's world, though.

"So what's the plan?" Atlas asks.

"Uh, yeah. I kinda need to get me one of those. For now, I guess we're heading back toward LA."

Dylan shifts in his seat, and his face lights up.

"So we have backup. Not so we can find your CI," I say to him, and he slinks back down.

"Do you need more guys on Rodriguez's detail?" Atlas asks.

I purse my lips. "I haven't decided yet. More presence means more attention."

"Also means fewer chances to hook up with the dude you're supposed to be protecting." That comes from Domino somewhere in the background. He must be back from checking the perimeter.

"I suddenly wish you guys weren't on speakerphone," I say.

"Hi, Rodriguez," they sing, and I realize there are other voices mixed in there too. My guess is Iris and Zeus have arrived.

I turn to Dylan. "Ignore them."

"No, no. This is fun. You might get high on adrenaline and action and grenades exploding, but this right here? Travis West being mocked ... Is this what heaven feels like?"

My guys laugh their damn heads off.

"Maybe I should've let the wannabe assassins kill you. How about that?"

"Wait, what?" Domino's serious tone comes through the speakers on the car.

"It's why we're calling. Some guys broke in at the ranch. Tried to take us out. Now we're on the road with no real direction."

“Don’t feel like a vacation in Costa Rica, boss?” Yep, that’s definitely Iris.

“We’ll save that as a last resort. No luck on Hale?” I continue to check my surroundings. At some point, I want to pull over and put the roof back up, but not at the chance of the bad guys catching up. We have no idea how many guys were at the ranch.

“Nah,” Iris says. “No one’s seen him.”

“Where did you look? Just Skid Row, or did you go to other known homeless areas?”

“We asked around,” Zeus cuts in. “It was hard enough to find anyone to admit they knew him, let alone where he was. The few who did know him said they haven’t seen him for a couple of days.”

“That’s bullshit,” Dylan says beside me. “They would have seen him, but they don’t trust newcomers. Especially when they look like your guys. I need to be the one looking for him.”

“It’s too risky,” I point out.

“Like you said. They found us in Palm Desert. We’re not safe anywhere, and I don’t want to run from this. The longer it goes on, the longer Walker has to devise a plan to take me out.”

Fuck. He has a point.

“Is there any other news?” I ask the guys. “Any leads on where Walker’s head is at? Or hell, where Walker’s base of operation is?”

“None yet,” Domino says.

If I can’t get Dylan some answers soon, he’s going to try and do this himself, and that won’t end well for any of us.

We need strategy and recon. We can’t go into this and wing it.

Dylan turns to me, his dark eyes pleading. “I can do this. I can find Hale, and I can get him to talk. I have to hold on to the tiny bit of hope that he sent me there for a reason and not a fluke. I’m banking on him knowing more than he told me.”

That's what I'm worried about. Hale had heard about a deal going down, and he sent Dylan to watch it. Hale did his job. End of story.

But if he is holding on to some extra information, big or small—maybe he remembers more detail or maybe something insignificant is bigger than he realizes—we need to try to retrieve it.

I don't think putting Dylan out in the open is how we should handle an assassination attempt, though.

But saying no to Dylan, with his big puppy dog brown eyes pleading with me to do this for him ... Damn it.

"Fine. I'll take you to find Hale. But you will do everything I tell you to. And you won't leave my sight. And you won't—"

"Wait," Iris exclaims. "Did ... Trav just back down?"

"Aww, they're so cute together," Domino mocks.

"You're all fired," I grumble.

They ignore me.

"Way to show respect for your superior, asshats. Would you have treated your COs like this in the military?"

"I did," Iris says at the same time Domino replies, "None of our COs called us asshats."

"They didn't?" Iris asks. "Next to Iris, my unofficial name during my time in the military was asshat, dumbass—"

"We're going to be here all day if you say every insult our commanding officers ever called you," Saint says.

Dylan actually laughs, and when I look over at him, only illuminated by the lights on the dash and the moonlight above us, I've never seen someone more beautiful.

"Okay, we're out," I say. "I'll keep you posted and let you know if we run into any trouble."

"I'll keep you updated on this end," Domino says. "And now we know there's a credible threat, we'll keep an eye on all traffic past HQ. Call when

you're back in LA or if you need anything.”

The call ends.

“I hate them,” I tell Dylan. “All of them.”

“Sounds like it, but they're fun.”

“Like a hole in the head is fun.”

What I don't say is I wouldn't change them for the world.



As we drive the streets of LA and Dylan points out all the places Hale could be, something sits wrong in my gut.

I chalk it up to not wanting Dylan to be here or to put himself in danger by showing his face in places Walker or any of his hired guns might know to look for him.

The first place we try on Skid Row comes up empty, and then a few blocks away, Dylan tells me to pull over. The streets of this area are sketchy on a good day.

Close to the middle of the night, the seediness permeates the air.

I watch from the car while Dylan approaches a hooker. I've given him a ball cap and one of my jackets from a go bag I keep in my car, but it does shit all to hide who he is. Then again, I could pick his body out of a lineup in nearly complete darkness. Every chance I get to check him out, I take.

I can't hear what they're saying, but the scantily clad woman shakes her head, and when he comes back to the car, he has a frown line under the ball cap.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

“She said that she saw him, but that was two days ago, and she has no idea where he is now.” He stares out the window, scanning the area.

“So maybe they weren't lying to my guys.”

“I hope they were lying.”

“Why?”

Dylan turns to look at me. “Because if no one has seen him for a couple of days, something has happened to him. He’s a creature of habit, and he has his favorite spots. So either he knows what he was sending me to and has now gone into hiding or ...”

Shit. “Or Walker has already gotten to him.”

“Exactly. We need to find him.”

I reach over and squeeze his leg. “We’ll find him.”

I hope we find him.

The next place is a tent city in Hollywood, but as Dylan makes his way past everyone and talks to a few, it’s obvious none of them know where Hale is, and he hasn’t been here for days.

Dylan looks defeated as we head back to the car.

“Maybe it’s like you said. Maybe he’s gone into hiding. If he does know more than what he told you, he’d want to save his own ass. From you and Walker.”

“This isn’t like him, though.”

“Where to now?”

“We can try Venice. There’s another tent city there. I’ve never met up with him in that spot, but if he is hiding out or changing his routine, we need to go places he doesn’t usually go.”

The more we drive all over LA and the surrounding counties, the more I become uneasy. Dylan showing his face in too many places leads to a higher risk of him being found.

Dylan’s silent as we drive, the worry rolling off him. I wish I knew how to make it better, but outside of finding this guy, I don’t think anything will reassure him.

Hale’s not in Venice. He’s not in any shelters.

It gets to a point where I no longer think Dylan’s worried about saving his own skin but worried for his CI and friend. Law enforcement aren’t



supposed to become friends with their confidential informants, but it would be hard not to when rapport and trust is established.

My phone rings through the car speaker, and my Bluetooth automatically picks up. “What’s up?”

“Found him yet?” Domino asks.

“Nope.”

“Got a place to stay tonight? It’s getting late.”

“Also nope.”

“You can crash at any of our places,” Domino says. “I’m staying at HQ and making sure no one is out there trying to get in, but you’ve got the code to my place. Let yourself in.”

Dylan looks across at me, panic evident on his face.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. First, we need to find Hale. At this rate, we might be at it all night.”

Beside me, Dylan visibly relaxes.

“Why are you so adamant about finding him?”

“Because Dylan wants to.”

“Damn, Rodriguez’s blowjob skills must be—”

“You’re on speaker, jackass.”

“I know. Hi, *Rogue*.”

Dylan smiles. “Hey, Domino.”

“Oh, sure. To Domino, he’s all smiles and niceties,” I say dryly.

“It’s because I’m better than you, brother,” Domino says.

“Hey, Dylan, did I ever tell you how Domino got the name Domino?”

Dom cuts in. “It’s because when I take women out, they all fall for me like dominos.”

“Not true at all. He was so drunk one night on leave, he stumbled and knocked over a table. Which bumped into another one. And then another one, and then another one.”

Dylan throws his head back as he lets out a deep laugh. “You’re lucky your name wasn’t Clumsy Fuck.”

“I tried for that one, but it was vetoed,” I say.

“And now that I hate you both, I’m going to go.” Domino goes to cut off the call, when I stop him.

“Dom, don’t stay at HQ alone. Dylan and I barely escaped back there. These aren’t amateurs.”

“I can handle myself.”

“Fine. But when you die, just remember, I win.” I glance at Dylan. “We made a bet back when we were Rangers. Last man standing wins bragging rights for all eternity. Even when we come back as ghosts and haunt everyone we know.”

“I’m not going to die,” Domino says. “You’ll have a heart attack and die before me, old man. I’m out.”

He ends the call, and while I do have faith that Domino can handle himself, if Dylan hadn’t been with me, I might not have gotten off the ranch tonight. No matter how experienced, how tough, how badass someone is, no one is invincible.

“Old man?” Dylan asks.

“Domino is literally eleven months younger than me, the fucker.”

Dylan laughs again, and I could die right here and now with the memory of how happy he sounds when I know he’s far from it.

“Thank you,” Dylan says as his face slowly falls. The last couple of days, his laughter, his smiles, hell, even the postorgasmic glow he had this morning ... none of them have lasted long.

“For what?”

“For not making me give up on finding Hale yet.”

“I know this is important to you.” Even if I think it’s a waste of time and it puts him in unnecessary danger.

I drive slowly through the side streets and alleyways so Dylan can get a good look at the countless people without a home. Some I've seen around, some are new, but they all break my heart.

And then, as we turn another corner, Dylan sits up straighter and leans forward. "That's him."

"Where?" I ask.

He points. "The guy in the khaki hoodie."

"How do you know? You can't see his face."

"I've worked with him for years. I know what he looks like when he's trying to be inconspicuous."

Hale's walking with his head down, his hands in his pockets, but as if sensing he's being watched, he lifts his head and glances around the street before resuming to hide his face.

"He looks paranoid," I say.

"We need to talk to him."

I slow the car as we approach, but Hale walks faster. Then, in a quick second, he turns and makes eye contact with me. Then with Dylan. Hale takes off running.

"Fuck," Dylan hisses.

"I'm on him." I speed up to cut him off, but when we pass him, he changes direction and runs down a small foot alley in between buildings.

"Let me out. I'll chase him on foot," Dylan says.

I stop the car, and Dylan jumps out, running after Hale at lightning speed. I had no idea Dylan was so ... agile.

Damn, that's attractive.

There isn't a spot to park along this street, and people are already laying on their horns to get me to move.

"Shit." I hit the steering wheel and take off, turning into the very next street to loop the block and hopefully cut off our mark at the end of the alley.

This street is just as bad for parking, but there's less foot traffic, so I drive up onto the sidewalk and block off the alleyway.

I jump out but not before grabbing a Glock from my glove box and shoving it in my waistband in case I need it.

The alley looks empty when I round the corner, but then I see something up ahead—shadowy movement behind a dumpster.

Dylan comes running from the opposite way, but when he sees me and no one else, he holds his arms wide as if to say, *Where is he?*

I pull my gun and aim it toward the dumpster.

Dylan mouths, "Overkill," to me.

We move in at the same pace, me still aiming my gun, Dylan trying to signal to me to put it away.

Hey, this guy potentially set Dylan up. I'm not going to let him hurt him again.

Dylan leans in close to the dumpster, and with a nod from me, he pushes it out of the way. Hale darts out from behind it and runs. He doesn't get far when he sees me and my gun.

I back him up against the wall, and he puts his hands over his head. His face is unshaven. He looks maybe late twenties to early thirties, and his icy blue eyes are widened in fear.

"I didn't know what they were gonna do," he yells and then turns to Dylan. "You gotta believe me."

"Then why did you run?" Dylan asks.

"I didn't know it was you. I thought it was the same people who took Keane out. Look, the day I told you about the deal going down, he came to me. Said he was worried his supplier would be pissed because he didn't make enough bank this month. He said if anything happened to him, the person who did it is named Jonathan Rowling. I was worried Keane told them I knew about them, so I've been hiding out." Hale's shaking he's so scared, so I lower my weapon.

“We already worked that much out,” Dylan says.

I hate the dejected tone in his voice.

“You were right,” he says to me. “This was a dead end.”

“I’m sorry,” Hale says. “For sending you there and for the fallout.”

“At least now we know,” I say, but something tickles at the back of my mind, and I cock my head at Hale. “Actually, how did you know what happened to your friend? Or that Dylan has been affected by it?”

He glances between Dylan and me. “I ...”

I go to raise my gun again, when Dylan pulls on my arm and steps in front of me.

“Hale? What aren’t you telling us?”

“I was there too. There’s this spot behind the fence line to the neighboring lot. It’s a tight fit, but I wedged myself in between a storage shed and the fence where there was a hole. I was worried about Keane, but when it all went down, and I realized the second shooter was your boss, I froze in panic. I couldn’t help, and then it dawned on me that if they found out I was there, I was as good as dead.”

Dylan and I glance at each other, and I can tell we’re thinking the same thing.

Hale just became our asset.

He’s Dylan’s ticket out of this mess.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN\_

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DYLAN

“WE CAN PROTECT YOU,” TRAV SAYS.

“No offense, but they’ll be after you too. I think I’ll have better chances on my own.” Hale tries to move, but I step forward and cut him off.

“You can trust Trav.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I can get one of my guys to guard you, and then you won’t be anywhere near Dylan when they find him. Because I have no doubt that they will. They’ll also find you, Hale.” Trav’s voice is soothing and calm, all signs of his playful side gone. This is serious Trav. It’s unnerving. It’s ... kinda irresistible. And that he’s doing it to help me? Yeah, that’s damn attractive too.

Ugh. I shouldn’t have hooked up with him again.

“You’ve been lucky so far,” Trav continues. “But we found you. It’s only a matter of time before they do too. Let me protect you.”

Hale eyes us both warily. “What’s the catch?”

“When the time comes, you testify in a court of law about what you witnessed,” I say. “Put Jonathan Rowling away for life for killing your friend.”

“No fucking way. That really would be signing my own death warrant. I’m sorry, but you guys are on your own.”

“How deep does this go?” I ask.

“Considering the special agent in charge of your unit tried to kill you, I’d say pretty deep,” Trav snarks.

“Do you know anything more?” I ask Hale.

The conflict in his eyes is evident. “I’m sorry, Dylan. I respect you as a person and as a cop who’s on the right side of the law. But I can’t get involved more than I already am. It might not look like I have a lot to live for, but I do.”

*This is my life*, I want to yell, but what makes my existence more important than Hale’s? Nothing.

“I really am sorry.” Hale tries to step away, but Trav blocks him in.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he growls. “I’m not above throwing you in the trunk of my car to protect you. I did it with him.” He points in my direction.

“Let him go,” I say.

Trav turns to me. “What? He’s the answer we’ve been searching for. He can tell the truth, and then—”

“And he’s a homeless drug addict, which in the eyes of the law makes him an unreliable witness.” I glance at Hale. “Sorry.”

Hale puts up his hands. “Hey, it’s sadly the truth.”

“I can get him the help he needs,” Trav says. “Pay for rehab in a secure location—”

“Coming forward will only put his life in jeopardy, and what good will rehab do if he’s dead? I can’t ask someone to risk their life to save mine.”

A small smile tries to break free on Trav’s face.

“Well, apart from you. But you do this shit for a living.”

“Glad to know you’d pick me first for something. Even if it is dying for you.”

“Let him go,” I say again. “We’ll find another way.”

Though I’m having a lot of trouble actually believing that.

“Thank you,” Hale says and scurries off.



“You might have lost any chance you had of making Walker pay for his actions,” Trav says.

“Or I might have saved a man’s life.” I head toward the car at the end of the alleyway, and Trav follows.

“So after wanting to find Hale—find the answer—you’re going to walk away when everything you hoped for is right there in front of you? I put both of us at risk for ... *that*. I thought you were all about *doing the right thing?*”

When he puts it like that, I feel like an idiot. But at the same time, I stand by my principles. “Is it really the right thing if it means putting an innocent person at risk who was trying to do the right thing by his friend?”

“Does that mean your lecturing about me bending the law and blurring lines only applies to me and my job?”

“Hale didn’t break any laws.”

The resolve in Trav’s features starts to crack. “Okay, fine. Have morals. Though, I’m starting to suspect you just love needing to be by my side at all times. I get it.”

“And the real Trav is back.” But it doesn’t bother me as much as it used to.

After he admitted his snide comments were a way of both pushing me away while being truthful, I get the feeling he’s doing it now because I’m walking away from Hale. Trav’s pissed and trying to hide it.

“Where are we gonna go?” I ask when we get back in the car, and he takes off.

“Somewhere I don’t own. If those contractors found me at the ranch, they could find me at any of my safe houses. It’s kind of ironic that my own safe houses can’t keep *me* safe.”

“I’m guessing my place is out of the question too, then.”

“Definitely. We’ll head to Domino’s for now, and I’ll try to think of a more long-term option in the morning.”

“Long-term?”

“Well, you just let your short-term option run away. You’re stuck with me, baby.”

That doesn’t sound as bad as it did a few days ago. “Could be worse. Walker could’ve found me and killed me, so there’s that.”

“I love the way you love me.”

I sigh in exasperation, but my lips betray me as they turn up in a smile.

Trav drives toward Hollywood, and by the time he takes the turn up the narrow and winding roads of Beachwood Canyon, the sun is rising. It’s been a long time since I pulled an all-nighter.

When Trav pulls up to a modest sixties-style home on a small hill, I’m taken aback by its humbleness compared to Trav’s monstrosities.

Trav assesses my reaction. “What, this not up to your standard? Wow, a couple of nights with me, and you’ve already become accustomed to a higher standard of living. You’ll make a great househusband yet.”

“I was *actually* thinking that this is humble compared to what I was expecting.”

“Why don’t you wait until you see inside before you say that.”

“And now I’m scared to enter the house.”

“Don’t worry. Despite the decorating he did at the ranch, Domino has decent taste.” Trav gets out of the car and pulls his bag out of the back seat, but I’m still blinking at what he said to catch up to him.

He closes the back door and then waits by the hood for me.

I open my door and approach him. “Domino decorated the ranch?”

“Yes. Though, that’s not common knowledge, so if you tell any of my other guys, I’ll call Walker myself to tell him your location.”

“Why such a big secret?”

He leads me to the wide wooden front door. “If I told you that, it wouldn’t be a secret, would it? It’s just something between Domino and me. You know, bestie bro code.”

“One, you’re way too old to believe in things like *bro code*, and two, the way you say it’s something between you and Domino makes me think there is something *between you and Domino*. You and he ever ...” I move my hand in a circular motion. “You know ...”

Trav bursts out laughing so hard, he has to hunch his big body over to catch his breath. “Domino is the one straight guy on the team, and don’t get me started on how many times he’s had to defend his sexuality while working for me. Trust me when I say, after twenty years of friendship, I’ve seen the number of times guys hit on him. If he was ever inclined that way, he would’ve acted on it. He’s had plenty of chances.”

“Good to know.”

Trav raises his hand to the small keypad next to the door, but then he pauses. “If something had happened between Domino and me, what would you care?” His lips turn up. “Would you be jealous?”

“Fuck off. No.” *No*. “I just wouldn’t want ... whatever has happened between us in the last couple of days to get in *his* way. I’m selfless like that.”

Trav presses his lips together as if he’s trying not to laugh again. I get the distinct impression I’m failing at pretending sex with Trav is nothing to me.

“So selfless.” He enters a code on the keypad, and the lock disengages.

I don’t think Trav prepared me for what’s inside. The outside looks like it came straight from the sixties, but inside ... It’s all modern and minimalistic but in a way that works.

The canyon can be seen from the wide windows, and the way the sun is rising, lighting up the trees with the shadows of dawn, it’s an awe-inspiring view. There are outer stairs that lead down to a deck, an infinity pool, and a hot tub that calls to me.

“It’s a gorgeous house.”

Trav comes to stand next to me, taking in what I'm seeing. "Both of my places are offended by that."

"Please. The place you live is your base of operations. It's not a *home*. It looks like it comes fresh out of an action movie. And your 'ranch' ..." I shudder. "That disaster is a complete mystery."

"Let's go back to the jealousy thing before I spank you for dissing my aesthetic."

"I'm not jealous. Jealous would imply I actually cared about you or any of your law-breaking men."

Trav grins, and I know I've walked into his trap. He drops his bag by his feet, wraps his arms around my back, and pulls me against him. "I like it when I get under your skin."

And I hate that he can read me so easily.

The thing is, I've always wanted him, but I've never been able to read him. It's impossible to decipher his quips, his mocking and teasing, but since telling me it's a defense mechanism, I'm starting to see through the little digs.

He's taunting me. He wants me to react and deny it. Trav likes when I fight him until I can't anymore, and like when I made the first move yesterday and it threw him, I'm going to do it again.

Because if I can take back any of his control, it may put us on even footing.

When I came to Trav for help, I didn't think we'd end up here, but it's the only thing keeping me from losing my mind over what has happened.

So I press in closer. "Are you sure you want under my skin when I could be under you instead?"

The surprise in Trav's eyes lasts less than a second, and I'm unsure if I've played into his hand or thrown him off his game. He doesn't let me know.

And maybe Trav can read that on my face. “Are you sure you want under me? You could be anywhere you want.” He kisses my neck and then moves his lips up to my jawline and murmurs, “On top.” Another kiss to my skin. “Inside me.” His lips ghost across my cheek. “I could be on my knees for you.”

Damn it. I lick my lips. “All of that sounds good.”

Trav laughs, and the warmth of it sends a bolt of arousal down my spine.

“All of it?” Trav asks.

“Hey, you gave me options. I’m going to take all of them.” I drag him through the house and lead him toward the nearest surface we can get horizontal on, which happens to be a leather couch.

I push him down on his back, and he hits the couch with a thud.

“I thought you said I could be in control next time?” Trav asks.

“Hmm, technically, I think I said I’ll flip you for it.”

“Oh. Okay.” Without missing a beat, and no fight from me, he pulls me down and does some ninja maneuver by rolling at the same time, and I end up underneath him.

“Not what I meant by flip, and you know it.”

Trav pretends to think. “Do I, though?”

“You know exactly what you’re doing.” Though I can’t say I hate it.

“I told you what you could get from me—anything you want. But I didn’t say *how* you were going to get it. We need to find a bedroom.”

“If my head hits a pillow, the only thing I’m going to be doing is passing out.”

“Guess I better keep you awake the best way I know how, then. Think you can refrain from making a mess? Sheets we can wash. Couch, not so much.”

“Eh. It’s leather, but if you want to be careful, we can come in each other’s mouths, and—” I don’t even get the whole sentence out before

Trav's lips are on mine. I could easily get used to his mouth and his massive body pinning me down.

What starts as something frantic turns slow and languid. I try to squirm underneath him, but he holds strong.

And then, in a moment of softness, Trav slowly lifts up, breaking our lips apart. He stares into my gaze like he's seeing into my soul, and with a gentle hand, he swipes my hair off my forehead. I usually have it styled with product, but hair care has been low on my list of priorities the last couple of days.

Apparently, I don't have time to give a shit about my appearance. Have sex with Trav, sure. But screw my hair.

"Now, what was on that list again?" Trav asks.

Only all of the fantasies I've ever had about Trav. "The one coming to mind is you on your knees."

"Mm, that's right. Knees, hole, top, mouth."

"Those words shouldn't sound so sexy," I croak.

Trav climbs back off me and goes to his bag, pulling out lube and condoms.

"Wait," I say. "That was in the emergency go bag you grabbed from the ranch?"

"What, you don't have lube and condoms in your go bags?"

"I don't have go bags!"

"Wow, the DEA teaches you to be super unprepared, don't they?"

"You know what? I actually don't care you're insulting me. Just hurry up and get back over here."

I quickly strip off my shirt and undo my pants, but I don't get them any further when Trav comes and stands in front of me.

"Sit up." His voice is demanding and firm, and as much as I want to protest, I'm too turned on to delay this.

I sit up and lean back on the couch and watch as Trav dumps the supplies next to me and then undresses agonizingly slow. He lifts his shirt, revealing inch after inch of hard, rippling muscles and that sleeve tattoo that makes me want to run my tongue over it.

“I love the way you look at me,” Trav says.

“Can’t help it.” I reach for his tattoo, trailing my fingers over the intricate design. “Does this have any meaning, or is it because it looks cool?”

“I did it for a friend—someone I served with. This was before I was a Ranger, before I’d come out, before all the shit in the military became too much. A mission we were on went south, and our Humvee hit an IED. We all survived, but when we flipped, Jaxon’s arm somehow got crushed under the vehicle. He was sent home, discharged because he was no longer of use to the army, and when I’d gotten home on leave and visited him, he was a wreck. He was depressed because he felt he couldn’t do anything, rehab wasn’t going well, and well, I was scared he was going to become a statistic.”

“This mood just took a steep dive.”

Trav smiles. “Nah. It has a happy ending. He got a prosthetic, I got the tattoo, and I did everything I could to help turn him around and get him back on his feet.”

“Did he? Get back on his feet?”

“Yep. He went to college, got a degree, and now he’s some hotshot lawyer type. He’s gotten me out of a legal bind or two, actually.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I run my finger over his tattoo again. “So even before you started Mike Bravo, you were trying to save people.”

For the first time since meeting Trav, he looks bashful, and it makes him even more attractive.

“See, this kind of thing,” I say, “is sexy. You saving lives is hot. Not your supposed charm. Not your jokes ... You.” I move my hand to his

chest. “Your big heart.”

Trav’s cheeks even pinken, and what is happening right now? Whatever it is, I don’t want it to stop.

“You know what I find sexy?” His pants go next, and I try not to swallow my tongue at the impressive bulge in the front of his tight boxer briefs. “*All of you.*”

I can’t resist. I lean forward and press my lips to the head of his dick over the soft material.

“I thought this was supposed to be me on my knees.” Yet, Trav’s hand weaves into my hair anyway.

“It is. Soon. I just want a taste.” I *need* another taste.

“In that case ...” Trav lowers his boxer briefs, and his cock springs free.

It should be criminal for his dick to be so perfect. Actually, his whole body is sinful.

“I want this in my mouth.” I wrap my fingers around him, but then he leans over me and grabs the lube from beside me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to prep myself while you get your taste.”

“Mm, multitasking is kinda hot.”

His hand finds my hair again. “I can multitask like a boss.”

“Even when I’m doing this?” I lick along the tip of his cock and then close my mouth over him.

His thick thighs tense, and he lets out the sexiest moan I’ve ever heard. After he does that, I have no idea if he manages to prep himself. I’m too busy licking, sucking, and tasting him.

Trav’s breaths slowly get faster and shorter.

Suddenly, all plans are out the window too. I don’t care if I don’t get inside him. I want this. I could suck his cock all day.

“You fucking love that, don’t you?” Trav rumbles.

I can only hum in response.



“As much as I want to keep seeing my cock disappear between your lips, I want to give you everything you asked for.” He pulls out of my mouth.

“No, wait—”

“You’re so hot when you’re needy. But it’s my turn.” Trav sinks to his knees and pulls my pants down to my ankles.

I widen my legs and shift so my ass is closer to the edge of the couch. From this angle, I can see how good he really is at multitasking. One hand wraps around my cock, the other reaches back to prep his hole, and his mouth—holy fuck, his mouth. It closes over my dick, and he sucks so hard I lose brain cells.

Watching as his head bobs up and down over my cock, getting a view of his hand while he fingers himself, I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold on to what little control I have left.

I want to thrust into his mouth over and over again, but if I do, I know I’ll come. And I still want to experience the other things on the list. I don’t want to waste his prepped hole.

“Trav.” The desperate sound echoes around the room.

He makes eye contact as he lowers his head again, taking my cock deep until I nudge the back of his throat.

I let out a loud breath and shudder.

As if knowing how close I am to the edge, Trav slowly releases my cock and reaches for a condom. He expertly tears it open and rolls it down my cock. Then his thighs straddle my waist, and his hard cock presses against my stomach.

“You calmed down yet?” he asks.

“Could tell that was a close one, huh?”

“You were getting all twitchy. And if you think my mouth was good, just wait for my ass.” Trav reaches behind him to grip my cock and guide it toward his hole.

“Are you sure you’re prepped enough?”

“Have you seen how thick my fingers are? I’m ready.”

Everything about this man is thick. His fingers, his arms, his thighs, his cock ...

When he lowers himself, slowly taking me inch by inch, his body practically engulfs mine. I might be the one inside him, but he surrounds me.

Our eyes lock, and our focus doesn’t falter as he begins to fuck himself on my dick. The only thing keeping my control from slipping is his warm brown eyes on mine.

Trav grips the back of my neck for leverage, and he picks up his pace.

He was right. His ass is incomparable to his mouth, and his mouth was phenomenal. He’s so tight, his body so strong. My hips rise on their own, meeting his tempo in a reflexive move that steals my breath and makes shivers run down my spine. Pleasure simmers under my skin, and I’m already back to where I was, dancing on that edge between holding on and letting go.

“How are we doing with that list?” I ask.

Trav opens his mouth, breathing heavily. “You wanted me on my knees, to get inside me, on top of me, and to come in my mouth.”

“Right. Let’s do that.” I push him off me but know if he didn’t want to go, he wouldn’t.

Trav lands on his back on the couch, and I move between his legs and slam back inside him.

“I never thought ...” I pant.

“Never thought what?”

I shake my thought free. “I never thought fucking you could give me that same high as that night we met.” My hips surge forward, and I move in and out of him with ease, drawing out this feeling that is all-consuming. *Trav* is all-consuming when he’s like this.

Not mouthing off, barely being able to talk ...

Yeah, this is my favorite version of Travis West.

“Get that mouth ready,” Trav rumbles and reaches between us.

He strokes his cock hard and fast, the muscles in his neck tensing and showing off a prominent vein.

I lean down and suck on his neck, leaving a bright bruise that forms immediately when I pull back.

“Dylan ... now.” He throws his head back. “Fuck, now.”

I pull out of him and shuffle down to swallow his cock. I swat his hand away and enclose my lips over his hard shaft just in time. The first spurts of release hit my tongue, and then I take him to the root and to the back of my throat while he unloads.

He moans and grunts, and that’s almost enough to make me come too. The sounds he makes during sex alone could be enough to get me off.

While I continue to drink him down, I snap off the condom and jerk myself.

“Give it to me,” Trav says and taps my shoulder.

When I lift my head and kneel upright, I rest back on my ankles. Trav sits up and leans over me, getting right to the point. His head bobs up and down my cock, and I rest my hand on the couch for balance so I can thrust into his mouth.

He takes it all. Every bump to the roof of his mouth, my balls slapping against his chin. He doesn’t even flinch. All he does is continue those moans and sex noises that drive me closer and closer to the edge.

“Fuck!” I gasp.

Trav opens his throat and buries his head in my groin, taking every last drop as I unload in his mouth.

Even when I tell him I’m done, he takes his time, licking up my shaft and twirling his tongue over the head of my dick. Then he looks up at me with that smug smile of his, and I don’t even care.

I'm boneless as I tackle him and collapse on his big body.

I'm all warm and sated, focusing on slowing my breathing as Trav holds me close.

But as weariness sets in, so does reality. My only witness won't come forward. There's a bounty on my head. It sounds too absurd to be true, but it is.

The escapism glow is getting shorter and shorter with each orgasm.

I let out a long breath. "We're not getting me out of this mess, are we?"

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN\_

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TRAV

MY HEART BREAKS FOR DYLAN, EVEN IF MY EGO IS TAKING A HIT. I MAKE him come his brains out, and his first thought is how I'm going to fail at protecting him.

I run my hand down his sweaty back while he's slumped on top of me.

I'd make a joke and act hurt if I didn't sense his need for reassurance. "We'll figure it out. It might take some time, but I'll get you out of this." It might end with me giving him enough money to settle in a foreign country and starting over with a new identity, but that's a last resort.

Because I wouldn't be able to go with him, and then what am I supposed to do? Try to find someone else who thinks I'm unbearable? It's so hard when everyone finds me loveable.

"If you were Walker, what would your next steps be?" Dylan asks.

"Are you asking because you're curious or because you think I'm on his level and know how a corrupt asshole would think?"

Dylan lifts up to look into my eyes. "Does it matter which it is?"

"When it's coming from you, it does."

"Why?" Dylan shifts off me and sits at the other end of the couch. "Is my view of the world really that warped to you?"

I follow suit, taking the spot next to him. We're both naked, both sweaty and cum drunk, but this conversation is sobering. "It's not that it's warped. It's that you live in a world that's very black and white. There's good, and

then there's bad, and there's no in-between. My life is full of gray areas, and it doesn't help that I've seen a lot of shit done in the name of being 'right' or being 'good' that is the complete opposite. It's why I live the way I do and run my company the way I see fit. And yeah, maybe I blur the lines sometimes, and maybe not everything I do is aboveboard, but I can sleep at night because everything I do has a purpose. I try to fight for the greater good instead of only protecting myself. How many of you or your coworkers could say the same?"

Dylan hangs his head. "A couple of days ago, I would've defended each and every one of them."

"And that's exactly why I need to know why you want my opinion. Because you trust it or because you lump me in with guys like Walker?"

"I ... I do trust you. You're probably the only person I can confidently say that to. Which makes no sense because for years I've been adamant you're hiding some big dark illegal activity. I shouldn't trust you ... but I believe you when you say you've never lied to me."

I rub my cheek because I can't help the grin that takes over my face, but at the same time, he's not wrong about illegal activity. And I have the sudden urge to come clean about all of it. "I can't sit here and pretend I'm a Boy Scout and have never done something morally questionable, but I also don't think many people can say that they haven't."

Dylan goes to open his mouth, but I cut him off.

"Except you. Of course. But my point is being sent into war zones, literally being ordered to take lives by commanding officers, becoming one of those men who has to make those decisions—to allow my team to open fire on people who may or may not be there to kill us ... it does take a toll. All of my guys have blood on their hands, including me. All of them have ended lives. But we're supposed to accept it because our government asked us to. It's not killing if it's permitted. And where would I be if I didn't

follow those orders? Most likely, I'd be dead. Because out there, it's kill or be killed."

Dylan turns to me. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because even though some of my actions have been lethal and what some would consider moral sins, I'm still human, and I live with every decision I make. I carry that around with me. Which is why, when I have to make a decision that I believe only God should have the right to make, it's not taken lightly. I wanted you to know that because I need you to acknowledge that I'm not like Walker in any way. He tried to kill you to save his own ass over what looks like a drug deal gone wrong. The *only* person he's protecting is himself."

Dylan leans in and presses his mouth to mine. His tongue brushes over my lips, but then it's gone, and so is his mouth. "I know that. Deep down, I think I've always known it. You're a good man, Travis West. Your lack of shining halo doesn't change that fact."

"Good." I stand and pull on my underwear, throw Dylan his, and then clean up the discarded condom before I come back and sit next to him. "In that case, if I were Walker and had his resources, I wouldn't have sent wannabe assassins after you. I would've pinned the murder of that kid on you, turned you into one of the most wanted men in California, and let the arrest warrant and statewide manhunt deal with you."

"Damn. It's scary how quickly you came up with that."

"Scary or impressive?"

"No, no. Definitely the first one."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've been thinking it for days. I'd been waiting for a news alert until those goons turned up at the ranch. The way he went was ... an interesting choice."

"How so?"

"Well, like I said, Walker has endless resources being a DEA agent, let alone the one in charge, and he chose not to use any official channels."



Dylan isn't connecting the dots. His brow furrows.

"Meaning," I continue, "he has to be in so deep in whatever his deal is that he doesn't have another out. Or he feels he doesn't have another out. And one thing I've witnessed time and time again over the years is when a man is trapped, that's when fatal mistakes are made. We have to find his mistake or wait for him to trip up."

"How long will that take?"

I want to reassure him and say *no time at all!* But the words won't go past my lips. So I answer honestly. "I don't know."

Dylan's eyes flutter closed, the morning sun shining through the windows and lighting up his flawless bronze skin. "I'm exhausted."

"Let's get a few hours' sleep, and then I'll check in with the guys."

Hopefully, they'll have something for me I can use. I pride myself on getting shit done and in a timely manner.

I was the one Dylan thought of in a time of need. I'm the one he turned to. It gives me hope that if I do succeed in getting him off Walker's hit list, things won't go back to the way they were before.

Not that I don't enjoy our back-and-forth. Or his reluctant acceptance of my help. But now that we're actually sleeping together, it's a line I promised myself I wouldn't cross with him again unless I was ready for something real.

He says this is nothing, that I'm just a distraction, whatever, but I'm holding on to that little bit of hope that this changes *something*. That maybe our relationship is evolving into something else.

I'm not sure what, but I'd like at least the sex to continue.

I also wouldn't mind continuing to keep an eye over him either. Dylan being vulnerable feeds every natural instinct I have to protect him. And I like it.

"Come on. We've had a busy couple of days."

Dylan laughs and stretches. “You say that like being shot at—repeatedly—is a mild work inconvenience instead of what it is: attempted murder.”

“You’ll be surprised how much I’m actually shot at.”

“I dunno about that. I’ve seen you when you’re being at peak cockiness. I’m surprised you’re not shot at every day.”

“I’m eternally grateful that having a price on your head hasn’t killed your sense of humor. Come on.” I stand from the couch and pull him with me, wrapping my arm around his shoulder.

“You say that like I’m actually joking.”

I playfully slap his ass. “Get this sexy thing to bed before you make me growly.”

“And you say *that* like it’s a deterrent.”

Fuck, I love this side of Dylan.

But as I lead him to the guest room I usually stay in when I’m at Domino’s and we lie beside each other, it’s like that playful side dies.

He becomes stiff—and not the fun part of him. It’s as if his entire body is coiled tight. I understand because it’s been a rough couple of days. I wish I could take him away from it all for longer than a couple of minutes at a time.

I wrap him in my arms and lean in and kiss his forehead. “I’ve got this.”

He replies by turning his head and pressing his lips to mine softly.

“I promise,” I say. “When your life is chaotic, I’ll do anything to take you away from it.”

He buries his head in my shoulder. It takes a while for him to settle and fall asleep, but I’m a patient man.

When his breathing finally evens out, I allow myself to drift off, but my dreams are filled with different ways I can help Dylan. The lack of sleep must be getting to me, though, because I don’t think taking a penis-shaped rocket ship to another planet will work.

However, with how tired I am, I'm not going to rule it out. I'll leave space exploration as plan B.



Waking up wrapped around Dylan Rodriguez is amazing but so surreal. I want to roll over and check the time, but I also don't want to risk waking him.

If I'd known a personal mishap would be the thing to bring us together, I would've created one for him a long time ago.

I'm only half-joking.

But it's hard not to get ahead of myself. Especially when the one and only conversation we've had about us is that it's just sex.

I know how to do just sex. Hell, I've been doing that for most of my life. But the thought of everything going back to the way things were between Dylan and me doesn't sit right.

I don't want to have to hunt down wanted criminals for an excuse to talk to him anymore. I want to be able to call him or text him to let him know I'm thinking about him. That I want to see him.

And I want him to want to see me.

It's time to cut the shit and go for what I want, but first thing's first—saving his ass.

I slip out of bed, careful not to wake him, and go to Domino's kitchen. It's fully renovated but not very spacious, so I turn the coffee machine on to brew and lean against the counter to check my messages for any updates.

Everything is still the same, and our intel is still at sweet fuck all.

When running an op, I'm usually calm and in control. This anxious, desperate need to succeed is new. Sure, I always want to win, I don't want to lose any of my guys, and I want to be the best. But I've never *needed* it like this.

“What’s wrong?” Dylan’s voice startles me.

I jump and look up to see him in a pair of my sweats from my go bag rolled at the waist to fit his shorter legs and narrower hips. His chest and tight abs are on display, and if it weren’t for the concern on his gorgeous features, I’d have already forgotten the question.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Your face.”

Despite the seriousness, I smile. “Thank ... you?”

“You look like you’re worried.”

I fake confidence I don’t actually feel for once. “I’m not worried. Just planning.”

Dylan moves to the coffee machine, but before he can make himself a cup, I reach for him and pull him back against my chest. “What did you come up with?”

I should’ve realized he’d ask that. “Lots of plans. All the plans in the world. Definitely none that involve space travel and moving to another planet.”

Dylan huffs. “Great.”

“Actually, I was trying to decide whether to try to”—I raise my hands for air quotes—“‘lock you up in a tower’ again until this is all over, but I figured you wouldn’t like that. And now that we’re having sex, I need to keep you happy, or it will stop. So it was a really hard choice.”

He turns in my arms. “It was a hard choice whether or not you’d hold me captive?”

“You say that like it’s not the sexiest imagery ever. You, in chains. Me, ravishing your body ... Actually, can we play that scenario out before we do anything else?”

“No.”

“It’s because you can’t be certain I wouldn’t leave you like that, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Exactly that.”

“Noted. I’ll keep that fantasy for after your boss is no longer trying to kill you.”

“Even then, it would be a struggle to trust you to let me go after you’re finished with me.”

I lean in. “I’d release you from restraints if that’s what you mean.”

“But keep me locked up another way?” Dylan pats my chest. “That’s borderline psychopathic.”

“Fine, I’ll rephrase. I would release you from your restraints and leave the front door unlocked so you could leave whenever you want to, even though I’d want you to stay.”

“Mm, the consent of it all is sexy, but then how am I supposed to feel your *need* for me to stay? Where’s the desperation?”

I throw up my hands. “I can’t win with you.”

He closes the minuscule gap between us, pressing against me. “I’d say you’ve already won. How many orgasms in how many days?”

I wrap my arms around his back. “Mm, true. Getting you into bed is the best thing I’ve accomplished in a long time, and that’s saying something because Mike Bravo are national heroes.”

“Sure. *Heroes*. But that aside, I should point out we haven’t actually had sex in a bed. Like, ever.”

“Huh. We’re going to have to rectify that at some point.”

“At some point?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to get to this place.”

Dylan cocks his head. “Your best friend’s house?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean,” I say dryly. “I mean here. With me. Where I can do this whenever I want.” I grab his ass and squeeze.

“Oh, you mean so desperately screwed that I need to turn to you for help and then decide to use each other as a sex toy for a distraction?”

Ouch. I mean, it's true, but ouch. I'm doing a great job of convincing him to be with me. "And you say *I'm* frustrating," I mumble.

"I'm starting to see why taunting me is fun for you." Dylan goes back to the coffee machine and makes us both a cup of coffee. "What's on the agenda for today?"

I wish I had an answer for him, but I don't. "I was thinking of sending one of my guys to go buy you some clothes in your size. As much as I'd love for you to wear mine where they're falling off you"—I reach out and tug on the back of the sweats he's wearing, and they fall to his ankles—"I don't want any of my guys seeing this." My gaze roams down his tight muscles to his pert ass that's right there in front of me.

"I vote for clothes that fit me. Whosever pants you gave me yesterday are too tight—"

"No they're not. They show off your ass, so they're perfect."

"And the shirt is already stanky with man sweat."

"I like your manly smell."

Dylan pulls the pants back up and turns to glare at me.

"I'll get Atlas to go by a store today and drop some clothes off for you," I relent and immediately send off a text. "What size?"

"I can't even go shopping for my own clothes?"

"You shouldn't have been in public looking for Hale. You shouldn't be in LA at all."

"What if Atlas has poor taste?"

"He can't have worse taste than the shit I've seen you in over the years. Boring suits and plain tees. What happened to that mesh top you were wearing that night we met?"

"Pretty sure you ripped that while you were fucking me."

"Oh. Right. Ahh, memories. At least your T-shirts are always tight. That's a bonus. Ooh, I'll put that in my text to Atlas. Must bring tight-fit

tees. Only the best for my man.” I tap away at my phone. “I’m going to dress you up all pretty-like and then objectify you.”

“Is there any point in fighting you on this?”

“Yes. You won’t win, but it’s our special way of flirting.”

“I think your definition of flirting is different than the real thing.”

I shrug. “It got us here.”

Dylan slow claps. “And it only took you seven years. Flirting master. You could run a class.”

“Smartass.” But at least he’s an adorable smartass.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN\_

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DYLAN

WE MAKE COFFEE, AND THEN TRAV LEADS ME DOWN THE STEPS ON THE outside of the house to the back deck, where the high sun tells me it's early afternoon. I sit back and enjoy the warmth and the view of the canyon when something occurs to me.

I bolt upright in my chair. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday. Why?"

"Fuck. I missed Tuesday family dinner last night. My mom is going to be freaking out. If I can't make it, I always call. It's official. If I do survive the hitmen and Walker, I'm dead anyway because Mamá will kill me."

She has to be fretting like crazy, and it kills me there's nothing I can do to reassure her.

"I know you're genuinely worried, but can I please tell you how cute it is you're scared of your mother?"

"Like you aren't?"

"Please. My mom is the sweetest little thing. Whenever she worries about me, I pat her head and tell her I've got it covered."

I wish I had that kind of relationship with my mom. She might have been the first one to accept me for being gay, but she hates that I became a cop. Law enforcement have always treated us like second-class citizens, labeling us as illegals whether we're in this country legally or not. We don't have the same protections or care that white people do, and my entire

family sees me as a traitor for becoming one of them. But none of them realize I did it so I could try to change the broken system from the inside out. No matter how many times I tell them that's why I joined. They all ask how that's going for me when very little has changed. In fact, *nothing* has changed. Every dig, every mention, guilt hits me for not reporting some of the things I see and failure looms over my head, but I have to play the long game in this, and I've known that from the beginning.

Change doesn't happen with only one person, but one person's actions is a start.

Mamá keeps trying to get me to quit, and now that I've gotten into some full-on cover-up corruption shit and my life is in danger, she's going to brag about how she was right. How I was working right under one of those agents and had no idea he stands for everything I hate.

Trav leans forward to catch my attention, his tone losing the playfulness. "You've gone undercover before, haven't you? Want one of my guys to swing by your parents' place to tell them you're safe and on a case?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"It doesn't come without risk. Walker could be watching your family. He might have phone taps. He might have even approached your family or have someone following them. We'd have to be careful with what we tell them."

I lick my lips. "What if they say I've gone so deep undercover that even my regular work guys don't know and that they can't say anything to anyone? That it was sudden, and I'll be home soon."

Even if I'm not.

Trav nods. "That could work. We'd still risk one of my guys being seen and followed back to us, but I'll make sure they watch for any tails." He hits buttons on his phone and calls Domino, putting him on speaker.

"What do you need?" Domino asks.

“I need someone to go to Dylan’s parents and tell them he’s okay.”

We’re met with silence.

“A-are you sure you want to do that?” Domino asks.

“No, but I’m doing it anyway. Who’s available?”

“Atlas?”

“Not Atlas,” Trav says. “I’ve already asked him to pick up some clothes for Dylan in his size, and I don’t want him being followed when he drops them off to us later.”

“No problem. I’ll get Iris or Zeus on it. Anything else you want for *Dylan*, boss?”

“Yeah. Stop being a smartass.”

“Never going to happen.” Domino cuts the call.

“He’s a pain, but I love him,” Trav says. I must give him a look, because he clarifies, “Like a brother.”

“It’s good you have that.”

“I have that with all my employees. They are my brothers. It’s a different kind of brotherhood than with my actual family, but they’re family all the same.”

“We don’t have that in the DEA. Sure, our individual teams are close—we kind of have to be—but at the end of the day, we’re not friends. We’re not family. We’re work colleagues.” And until this moment, I didn’t see a problem with it.

“I’m starting to see how your boss could’ve been dirty without anyone knowing. It’s practically impossible to keep a secret in Mike Bravo.”

“You know what would probably help with that? Not having security cameras throughout your own house.”

Trav laughs. “True. Though, then I wouldn’t know if anyone is trying to break in to kill me, and if someone did get in and succeeded, how would my guys find my killer?”

“That’s not the brag you think it is. The question should more be, why do you have so many people trying to kill you?”

“Says the guy who literally has a price on his head. You know, you’re lucky I like taunting you and want to keep you around, or that bounty might be tempting.”

“You could never kill me. I’m your soul fuck buddy.”

Trav grins triumphantly. “Yes, I got you to say it out loud. That’s one step closer to you admitting what we really are.”

I send him a glare. “Please. We’re still the same men we always were. You’re on one side of the law, I’m on the other. We’re acquaintances and nothing else. Sex doesn’t change that.” Maybe if I say it aloud, *I’ll* believe it, because there’s no denying something has changed, and it’s not just the orgasms. I think Trav and I might be ... *friends*. Eww.

“Hmm, do you have sex with all of your acquaintances?”

“Yep,” I lie. “Lots and lots of sex with countless men. Jealous?”

“Nah. I’m not the jealous kind.” Despite his words, his jaw hardens, and I can’t help loving it.

I sip more of my coffee. “What are we going to actually do today?”

“Hours to fill with nothing to do. I have no idea.” Trav’s warm brown eyes shine and crinkle at the edges as he smiles. “Oh, actually, I do have an idea. Wait here.”

I watch him leave, but he doesn’t go back into the house. He rounds the side and disappears. I hear the car door open and shut, and then he’s back, carrying the bag of weapons he shoved at me last night in all the chaos.

He sits back at the table and pulls out an array of guns, placing them in front of him. “We’re going to play a game. My squad used to do this all the time when we were stationed overseas and bored out of our brains.”

“Russian roulette?”

Trav laughs. “Nope. We’re going to race. First one to take down and put a gun of choice back together gets to ask the other person anything, and if

they don't want to answer, they lose an item of clothing."

"I'm only wearing a pair of sweats that are three sizes too big. It will be a short game."

"Guess you'll have to answer my questions, then."

The only reason I'm contemplating taking him up on this is because there's so much about Trav and what Mike Bravo actually does that is unknown. "We can ask anything?"

"Anything."

"Deal." I take a Glock 22, the same type of gun we use in the DEA. I could empty this and put it back together in my sleep.

"Wise choice." Trav goes for a different handgun—a Baretta M9.

"You sure your thick fingers are okay to get into all the nooks and crannies on that one?"

He holds up his fingers and wiggles them. "I could show you how good they are at getting into *nooks and crannies* instead of playing this game if you like."

"Hmm, nah. I want to do this. It sounds more fun than your fingers going anywhere near my nook."

"Just for that, we're having sex right after we're done." He grumbles, "Insult my sex skills and try to get away with it."

"Oh, I wasn't planning on getting away with it." I smile over at him. While he's caught off guard with my openness, I take my opportunity to get a head start. "And go."

I've removed the magazine and ejected any live ammo in the chamber before he even starts. I take down the Glock, remove the barrel and guide rod, lay them out on the table, and then reassemble it just as fast.

When I'm done, I take my hands and put them in the air a split second before Trav does.

"Damn, Agent Rodriguez. You got skills."

"And I get a question."

Trav leans forward. “Better make it a good one.”

I mirror him, bringing our faces mere inches apart. “What is the most top-secret mission Mike Bravo has ever carried out?”

Trav’s face drops. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

I shift backward, leaning against the backrest of the chair. “Answer, big boy, or lose your pants.”

Trav stands and drops his sweats, revealing a nice bulge hiding behind boxer briefs. But my view is cut off when he sits again. “Round two. And no head start this time. Hands on the table, palms down, and *I’ll* say when to go. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No throwing me off either. I’m tempted to duct-tape your mouth closed so I can concentrate.”

“Kinky.” I place my hands where he wants them.

“I can’t tell if I like this side of you or not. I’m supposed to be the one who teases and throws you off *your* game.”

“I wouldn’t have thought a big, hard-ass like you would be so easy to rattle.” But there’s no denying it is a lot more fun on this side.

“Okay. Game face on, baby. Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Go.”

We race again, and this time, he kicks my ass.

Now all I have to worry about is the neighbors seeing if they look over the fence and find me naked. Because no matter what he asks, I’m not going to—

“On a scale of one to ten, how sexy do you find me?”

I burst out laughing. “Really? That’s the question you’re going to go with?”

“I had another one in mind, but I’m keeping it in my back pocket for now.”

“Well, seeing as I would like to keep my pants on, and I guess I have to answer truthfully, you’re a total ten ...”

His gaze narrows at the pause in my tone.

“If you have your mouth shut.”

“Lies. I’m a twelve with my mouth shut.”

Well, he isn’t *wrong*.

We go round for round, and he asks me the most mundane questions like if I’m a cat person or a dog person: cat. What my favorite color is: I don’t have one; I’m not five. And if I had the chance to have dinner with anyone living or dead but not famous, who would it be. It’s the only question I don’t have an answer to.

After I get naked, Trav finally lets me win a round. Or maybe he was too distracted by my inability to answer a simple question.

The truth is, there is no one. Sure, I could’ve said my parents so I could let them know I was okay. But the matter is, that’s not what the question meant. He asked because he wanted to know who was important to me. He was trying to ask if there has ever been anyone so special in my life.

I’ve never let anyone get close to me, because I’ve been too busy trying to prove myself. To my family, to the police force, to my DEA bosses. And for what?

Right now, I have nothing. Not even any clothes because I couldn’t answer his question.

But I do have Trav.

“You going to ask a question or what?” Trav snaps me out of my internal angst.

“Why haven’t you ever gotten married?” The question surprises both of us.

Trav’s eyebrows shoot up, but he covers it quickly and replaces it with his usual *I’m about to say something you won’t like* expression. It’s stoic yet somehow cocky at the same time. “No one has let me have explosives at the

wedding yet. It's a first-date topic. I can't waste my time if there's no C4 going off during my vows."

I snort. "That's a hard line for you, huh?"

"Yep."

"Now tell me the real reason."

Trav leans forward, putting his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers together. "You want the serious answer?"

"Well, it was a serious question. I want to know. I highly doubt it's hard for you to find someone who doesn't fawn all over the All-American soldier type." I shrug nonchalantly. "It's not my thing, but I'm sure you do fine."

"Not your thing? Want to stand up and prove that? You can't tell me you're not hard under this table."

"It's difficult to get excited when I'm paranoid about Domino's neighbors seeing my dick. So answer the question. I won it."

"Finding someone who wants me isn't the problem. Finding someone who challenges me and keeps my attention is. I thought I found it once."

"With who?" Is that a growl in my voice?

It doesn't go unnoticed.

Trav covers a smirk. "Some rando I met in a nightclub. We barely exchanged names. It was the hottest hookup in a bathroom stall I've ever had."

I preen. Reluctantly. But yep, definitely preening.

"Somewhere out there, that blond-haired, blue-eyed guy might be thinking about me too."

My face drops, and I kick him under the table. "You asshole."

"Okay. Okay. It was you."

That's better. Somewhat unbelievable, but better. "You can't tell me it was so perfect that you were imagining seeing me again afterward."

"True. I didn't think I'd see you again, though I wanted to. And then you got to me first. With handcuffs. That's when I got that ... *zing*."



“Zing?”

“The first and only time in my entire life I thought I could have met my soul mate.”

“When ... I arrested you?”

Trav nods.

“You’ve been with countless men—”

“Hey, not countless. I know my number.”

“Which is?”

“Nope. You have to win another round if you have another question.”

“Fine, we’ll table that for later, but my point is in your entire life, the only time you felt that *zing* was when I arrested you.”

“Interrogated me, actually. Sure, when I saw your face on the boat that night, I got a hunch. But the way you handled my interrogation? I was pretty much gone for you.”

I swallow hard and try to assess how serious he is.

He can tell because he leans in and whispers, “I don’t lie to you, Rogue.”

Ugh. That name.

But the way he says it, with affection, it makes me not hate it so much.

“Okay, I know you’ve already answered this, and outwardly your answer makes sense, but I still don’t get why you pushed me away or tormented me that whole time. It doesn’t make sense if you actually wanted to pursue something with me.”

“How much time do we have? Do you really want me to dig deep and find psychological reasons as to why a soldier would be scared to go for the thing he wants? Why, as you put it, I have made so many enemies that the only decent night’s sleep I can get is if I’m locked away in a panic room? Nothing in my life makes sense. Least of all fighting something real with the one person I’ve thought it could be possible with.”

When he puts it like that ... “Are you in therapy?”

Trav huffs. “I am. And my therapist is going to love that I put myself out there for once, and in return, I get asked if I’m getting professional help.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You did, and that’s okay. I’m not ashamed of my shortcomings. The military, in its own way, built me to be the person I am today, and while other people might think I’m fucked-up from how I got this way ... I wouldn’t change it. Because I see Mike Bravo doing so much good for the world, even if it means doing bad things that blur the line of the law. I know you hate that, but in my world, lines aren’t so clear-cut. A lot of them are blurred.”

“What’s your point here?” I ask.

“My point is it’s hard to have a relationship when my life and business are so chaotic. Maybe I taunted you all those years because I knew trying something with you would complicate your life. And you deserve more than that.”

“And now?”

“Now your life is more chaotic than mine.” He can’t control his smile.

“You look so cut up over that too.”

“So, so sad for you.”

“I’d believe that more if you weren’t grinning from ear to ear.”

“Do you believe in destiny?” Trav says, and it throws me so much because this big, scary tank of a man asking about destiny is a little too much.

“Don’t we need another round for that kind of question?”

“The game is bullshit, and you know it. I can beat you every day of the week and twice on Sundays. Answer the question.”

I’ve always been a firm believer in making our own destiny, but why does admitting that feel like I’m walking into a trap? “What, you think destiny made my boss dirty, convinced Hale to tell me about the drop, killed

that kid, just so you and I could be brought together and forced to spend time getting naked with each other?”

“Well, not when you put it like that. But maybe, just maybe, you found out your boss was dirty at the right time. You can’t tell me this is the first time he’s done something shady, but it is the first time you’ve witnessed it.”

“That’s statistics. Not fate or some higher power at work.”

“Then with your argument, are you saying you really couldn’t have run to any of your teammates? Why come to me? Maybe you’re the one who set this all in motion, and therefore, you’re the reason this is happening between us now.”

Hmm, nope, don’t like that theory either. “Well, at least in that scenario, I have autonomy over my life. Even if it does make me sound like I was looking for any excuse to get close to you.”

Trav holds his heart. “Aww, boo. You make me all mushy inside.”

“Why are you the way that you are?”

Trav waves his hand in a circle while bowing, and something has changed between us. Because if he’d done that gesture a week ago after I insulted him, it would have pissed me off.

Now?

Ugh. How is that irresistible?

Maybe he is right. Maybe all that wasted energy fighting my attraction to him finally got to me, and my inner self put all of this in motion.

“I think you broke me.”

Trav screws up his nose. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

I laugh. “Honestly, neither can I.”

“How did I break you?”

Instead of telling him, I stand and show him.

His warm brown gaze drops to my hard cock. “Mm, seems to me like you’re not broken at all.”

I approach him slowly, loving the way he shifts uncomfortably in his seat as the bulge in his boxer briefs grows while he can't take his eyes off my dick.

"That's not what I mean by broken." I stand in front of him and reach for my aching cock to give it a stroke. "I'm broken because I can no longer deny that you're every bit as irresistible as you think you are."

Trav leans back. "Why don't you come here and show me how you can't resist me." He pats his leg.

I throw my leg over him, wrap my hand around the back of his neck, and straddle him, suddenly no longer worried about the neighbors seeing. My priority is getting off.

"Fuck," I say as Trav wraps his beefy fist around my hard shaft.

"You know what would be awesome?" Trav rasps.

I breathe in deep and lower my forehead to his while my hips push forward. The grip Trav has on my cock is tight, and his hands are so big, it's like his fingers surround all of me. "Coming?" I grit out. "Coming would be awesome, and I don't even think it will take much to get me there."

"Coming was part of the equation. The other part was that I want you to come on my chest. Don't hold back. I want you to mark my skin and then clean it off with your tongue, and then when you're done, I want you to kiss me until all I can taste is your cum."

My ass clenches, and the muscles in my legs tighten as I fuck into his fist. This basic outdoor chair is holding us for now, but I don't even care if we break it.

That filthy mouth of his, what he's asking me to do ...

He dips his head and closes his mouth over my neck, sucking hard.

The shock and pleasure fly out of me as a groan, and I don't know how this man knows which of my buttons to push, what to say to get me to the edge, or how he can do it so damn quickly, but the next thing I know, he's milking my cock, and I'm coming all over his skin, just like he wanted.

With his free hand, he pulls me close, embracing me through my release while I shudder through the shocks of pleasure racking my body.

It takes double the time to get over the orgasm as it did for Trav to get me there, but once I've caught my breath, I don't hesitate to move down his body and lick along his insane abs, cleaning him off with my tongue and getting hit with the strong taste of sex.

Only, when I go lower and get close to the mesmerizing and hard cock straining against his boxer briefs, I keep going.

I want him in my mouth, but he doesn't let me.

Grabbing me under my arms, Trav hoists me up so I'm back to straddling him. "I only want to taste you."

He grips the back of my head and slams our lips together, exploring my mouth with his tongue.

"Uh, boss?" a voice says behind Trav.

I break my mouth from his and glance up to see one of Trav's men standing there holding bags full of shopping. I've seen him before but haven't been properly introduced.

He's almost as big as Trav physique-wise, and his hair is in a faux mohawk. He looks tough, but the pink tinge on his cheeks tells me all I need to know. He's a big, bashful giant.

"Kinda busy, Atlas." Trav doesn't even turn around.

I don't move an inch. I'm completely naked. No way am I standing up.

"Give us a minute, and we'll meet you inside," Trav says.

"Sure thing." Atlas turns on his heel and heads up the stairs leading to the house.

I lower my head onto Trav's shoulder. "How many more employees are going to see us naked?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On if you can keep your clothes on around me."

“If the last few days are any indication, that means the entire team will see it.”

“Probably.”

“I would care, but the orgasms help with that. I’ve lost all my fucks to give.”

“My plan is working, then.” Trav slaps my ass. “Up.”

I slowly climb off him and round the table to where the sweats I was wearing lie discarded on the ground. I pull them up my legs and roll them at the waist so they stay up.

Trav eyes them as he pulls up his own pants. “I almost regret sending Atlas to get you clothes of your own.”

“I don’t. Actually, no, I should see them first before making my decision.” We head back upstairs to find Atlas at Domino’s dining table with his head buried in his phone.

“Is it safe to look up yet?” he asks.

I’ve decided I like Atlas.

“It’s safe,” Trav says. “Where are the clothes?”

Atlas still doesn’t lift his head, just points to the bags on the kitchen counter.

“I’ll go try these on.” I take the bags into the bedroom Trav and I slept in and go through them all.

There are a lot of tight muscle tees like Trav asked for, tactical pants, and then there’s a plain black bag with—

I open it up.

“Oh, that motherfucker.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN\_

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TRAV

ATLAS SITS THERE WITH HIS BIG ARMS CROSSED. HE'S ONLY AN INCH OR two shorter than me, but he's bulked out like I am.

“Something up? You could have dropped the bags and left.”

“You two are worse than when I've been put on an op with Iris and Saint,” he says.

“We are not,” I argue, even though it's probably true. “How were we to know when you were going to be done with shopping?”

“Because I texted you, maybe?”

“Oh. We were, uh, yeah, kinda busy.” My attempt at hiding a smile fails.

Dylan's voice travels down the hall. “Motherfucker.”

Atlas's eyes widen, and he yells, “Trav made me do it!” Then he turns to me. “Which, by the way, was not fun. Shopping for that thing somehow got me three guys' phone numbers while I was buying it.”

“In that case, you're welcome.”

“They weren't my type.”

“None of them?”

“You know I'm particular.”

He really is. We rib him about it all the time, but the truth is, he has standards. He's not the type to go out and hook up with someone just to have sex. He's a true romantic—something rare in this day and age.



Especially in the gay community, and especially for an ex-SEAL. As soon as guys find out what Atlas did in the military, they practically turn around and offer their asses.

SEALs get all the glory. Rangers are just as hot, damn it.

Though, Atlas is one of those rare unicorn types of guys, and I really, really want him to find his soul mate. He deserves love. He's a good guy and too sweet for his own good.

"I do, and don't tell the other guys I said this, but it's admirable."

"What's admirable?"

"Waiting for the perfect man instead of a perfect hole."

"They should put that on a T-shirt." His joke is on point, but the delivery is all wrong.

"Are you sure you're okay, or are you hanging around for something else?"

"I know you've got a lot going on, and I'm guessing now isn't the time to ask for a favor."

"I can multitask. What's the favor?"

"With you busy and Domino taking over, he got a phone call yesterday ..." Atlas bites his lip, and even though he's one of the biggest guys on the team, it makes him look bashful.

"And?"

"It's for a job that I really don't want to do."

"What's the job?"

"It's so not my thing. It's undercover ..."

That shouldn't matter. Atlas is versatile on what kind of jobs we send him on. He's been undercover plenty of times before.

"I have to trust that Domino made the right choice if he tapped you for the job," I say. "Unless you think you *can't* do it."

He slumps. "I *can* do it. I just know it will turn to mockery."

"What the hell is it?"

“A bartending gig.”

That’s it? “I’m confused.”

“At a strip club.”

“Still confused but much more interested now.”

Atlas averts his eyes as he talks. “The guy who owns the strip club thinks his business partner is embezzling money. But he can’t exactly go to the cops about it because it’s a money-laundering front, and he’s under the impression we’re a PI-type security firm.”

“Ah. One of those jobs.” I glance at the hallway because I know Dylan won’t like that we’re taking on this kind of mission. And usually, I’d at least assess the situation myself before accepting it because while I like to play with the line of following the law, flat out breaking it is a no for me. But I trust Domino, and if he wasn’t sure, he would’ve called me.

I trust him to make the right decisions for my company.

“Is it the morality of it?” I ask Atlas.

“No. Just the mockery part. The bartending uniform is a thong and a bow tie.”

I laugh but try to contain it. “Hey, you know the team. If there’s anything to ever mock you about, we will.”

“True.”

“I think you’ll look cute in nothing but a thong and blushing at flirty customers. But if you don’t want to do it, I can ask Zeus or Iris to switch out on this job. You know they love showing off their bodies. Who else would look good sliding down a pole?”

“It’s a bartending position, not stripping.”

“Maybe we should try to get you promoted somehow.”

“It’s already starting. Okay, I’m out of here. When do you think you’ll be back to work properly?”

“As soon as Dylan’s safe.”

“So it could be never.” He’s joking, but it’s not far from the truth.

“Possibly. It’s interconnected with law enforcement to have this thing out quickly. We don’t know who we can trust, so we’re pretty much on our own. And if we fuck it up, it’s not as easy as Dylan taking the fall for something Walker did. Walker wants to take him out permanently, and I’m not going to let that happen.”

“You might need to consider moving him to a safer location.”

“If they found us at the ranch, they could find us anywhere. The only safe place for him is by my side.”

Atlas rubs his chin. “I dunno. The Maldives is supposed to be beautiful this time of year. And the best part is, if they do somehow set him up to take the fall—”

“No extradition. I know. I’ve already thought of that. But ...”

“But what?”

“I’m going to do everything in my power to get his life back. I know Dylan, and chilling on a beach day after day isn’t him. He’s like us. He needs the adrenaline and the chase.”

“Then I guess we only have one option,” Atlas says.

“We can’t fuck it up.”



After Atlas leaves, I figure Dylan’s still in the guest room going through his new clothes, considering I can’t find him anywhere else. I head down the hall and open the door, but I stop in my tracks as soon as I see him.

“I didn’t actually expect you to put it on.” But he did, and that makes me like him so much more. And I have to say that I didn’t think a mankini would look good on him, but fuck. His ass is on full display with pure white material separating his ass cheeks.

He looks at me over his shoulder while he flexes his glutes to make his butt dance.

And when he turns around? Damn.

“How is it that I go out of my way to try to make you look ridiculous, but you somehow pull it off?”

Atlas bought one with a harness that sits over his nipples and joins at the fabric, and the part covering his junk has slits in it so big, I can see his cock underneath the material.

“To be honest, I was expecting something a little more ... kinky?”

I mock gasp. “What kind of boy do you take me for?”

“Not a boy at all. You’re definitely a man.”

I pull him toward me. “And this man wants to unwrap his gift.”

Dylan steps out of my grasp. “Are you kidding me? It took that whole time just to figure out how to get in this thing, and now you’re going to take it off me? Nuh-uh. We’re going swimming.”

“Swimming? I don’t think that’s actual swimwear.”

“I don’t think this is any kind of ‘wear.’ But I’m in it now, and it’s funny, so I’m going to make the most of it.”

“Okay, now I’m worried that all the stress you’re under has made you snap.”

“Why? Because your joke backfired and now you have to stare at me while I’m practically naked and I won’t let you have your way with me?” He pats my cheek. “Not yet anyway.”

“You know what? I’ve never hated you more.”

“Which is funny because I’ve never had this much fun with you before. Is this what it’s like to be you?”

I narrow my gaze. “Who are you, and what have you done with the serious Dylan Rodriguez I know?”

He licks his lips and loses some of the attitude. “I’m trying this thing where I don’t think about how messed up my life is and focus on maybe the best thing to come out of my situation.”

“It’s my cock, isn’t it?”

“Nope. Though, that’s worthy of an honorable mention, but now that I don’t hate you anymore, I don’t have to pretend I don’t want to do this.” Dylan stands on the tips of his toes and presses his lips to mine. It’s soft and chaste, but when he pulls back, I see the desperation in his eyes.

I cup his face. “I get it. Let me take care of you. Go float in the pool, I’ll organize some food, and then I’ll come join you.”

Dylan lets out a loud breath. “Thank you.” He grabs a towel and leaves me alone in a room we’ve somehow turned upside down already. Clothes are everywhere, and the bed is unmade.

I was going to bring up to him that this is a temporary place to stay, and we need to figure out where to go from here, but he’s obviously exhausted. I’ll let it go for the rest of today and then figure it all out in the morning after a proper night’s sleep.

We could go back to headquarters, but there’s a chance they’re watching the place. If any of those guys who swarmed the ranch made it out, Walker will know Dylan’s with me. I have other safe houses, but they all run a risk because they can all be tied back to my name.

And even if I checked in to a hotel under an alias, they have CCTV, and Walker could flash his badge and get all kinds of access.

I push it all to the back of my mind for now.

I order comfort food to be delivered—burgers, wings, slaw, and apple pie for dessert—and then go out to the pool to watch Dylan while we wait for it to come. Our all-nighter and sleeping until noon have thrown the whole day off. The sun is already setting, but I’m technically ordering lunch.

When I walk down the outer stairs to the pool below, Dylan’s got his back to me, his arms hanging over the side of the infinity pool while he looks out at the fading sunlight hitting the trees in the canyon just right.

He looks peaceful for the first time in days, so I don’t want to ruin that for him.

The ridiculous mankini straps that wrap over his shoulders only emphasize the muscles in his back.

I'm at war with two different parts of myself—the part that wants to be with Dylan and the other part that has been pushing him away for so long.

“You think you're subtle, but you're really not.” He turns.

“You looked like you were having a moment. I didn't want to disturb you.”

“You could never disturb me.”

I already know the punchline that's coming—he probably does too—but I can't hold it back. “Because you're already disturbed?”

“Exactly, but seriously, you're kinda growing on me.”

I fist pump the air. “Yes. I'm slowly wearing you down.”

“Are you getting in here?” Dylan moves slowly through the water toward me.

“I'm waiting for the food to be delivered.”

He reaches the bottom of the steps and stands, exposing more of his golden skin. “You don't want to come in while we wait?”

“You know I do.”

“Then what's the problem?”

I level him with a look. “The problem is if I get in there now, we'll be too busy to hear the delivery guy, and I'm starving.”

“Oh, I'm starving too. Just not for food. Priorities, Travis.”

I screw up my nose. “Eww, don't call me Travis.”

“Mm, hello. Ammunition. How many times have I asked you over the years not to call me Rogue?”

“Excuse me, I have been with you for days. *Days*. And I've barely called you Rogue. I'm evolving.”

“Into a slightly tolerable human being?”

“Yep.”

“In that case, I will stop calling you Travis if you stop calling me Rogue.”

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath.

Dylan smiles. “Now, what do I have to do to get you in here? I need some more Trav magic to distract me so I don’t think about all the things I’d rather be forgetting. I need you to fill my hole before you can fill your ... mouth hole.” He frowns. “That sounded better in my head.”

I check my phone and see that the delivery time is still estimated at twenty minutes away. Not that it really matters after that. Not going to say no to being inside him no matter what food I’m waiting on. Hell, I’d die a starving man if I had to.

“All right.” I stand and strip off my shirt, loving the way Dylan’s gaze trails over my body as I take off the rest of my clothes.

I don’t move toward the water right away. I let him take me in and revel in the anticipation written clear across his face.

“Get in here already,” he says.

“Mm, I like this, though.”

“Like what? Driving me crazy with your body?”

“Nope. I’m enjoying the way you’re looking at me.”

“I’d turn around and stop if I could just to get you in here next to me, but I can’t take my eyes off you.”

“Aww, who knew you could be so sweet?”

“Objectifying you is sweet?”

I rub my chin. “Wait, I should probably be against that. Oh no, bad, Dylan. *Bad.*” I turn to my side and flex.

“You’re such a show pony.”

“Wanna go for a pony ride?”

“Get in the pool already.”

“Okay. I’ve probably teased you enough.” Yet I move slower than a turtle in mud. The cool water feels good on my skin as I step into the pool.

Dylan groans at how slow I'm going, and as soon as he can reach, he grabs my hand and pulls me in.

Water splashes everywhere, our bodies collide, and then Dylan's mouth meets mine. He tries to take it fast, thrusting his tongue past my lips with frantic need.

And as much as I'm enjoying it, I need to slow him down. "Wait, wait, wait."

"You're the one who says we're waiting on food. We can't slow down." Dylan wraps his legs around my waist and presses his erection against my stomach.

"This is about distraction, not getting off." I grip his ass and squeeze.

"Isn't the whole point of sex to come so hard you don't have the brain cells to think anymore?"

"How'd that work out for you last time, seeing as you came about an hour ago and you're already back to humping me like a dog in heat? There are moments for that kind of sex, but this isn't one of them. I'm going to make this one count." I wade through the water to the side that overlooks the canyon and tap Dylan's leg for him to stand. "Turn around."

He does it but sticks his ass out at the same time. I box him in, my hands going on either side of him and gripping onto the edge.

"Mm, what does this position remind you of?" he mocks.

"Hey, that's my line. I'm supposed to taunt you about the night we hooked up."

"Nope. That stopped as soon as we hooked up again. And then again. And again now if you'll hurry up and get to the fucking." His ass rubs against my naked cock, which is begging for me to take him up on it, but I'm determined to give Dylan what he needs and not what he thinks he wants in this moment.

"We're not going to have sex," I say.



“If you say something lame like we’re going to make love instead, I have to tell you, that’s an instant boner killer.”

“Nope. We’re not doing that either.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“You’re not going to do anything.” I press against him closer and kiss the back of his neck. “I’m going to worship your body and do things to you that will make your mind fuzz over with nothing but thoughts of me and the pleasure I’m giving you.”

He trembles in my arms.

“That’s a good start,” I whisper against his skin and then suck on his neck.

Dylan moans.

My lips move down until they reach the strap of the mankini. I bite it and drag it down his shoulder, but it’s so tight I need my hand to help.

His arm gets stuck.

“How did you get this thing on?” I complain.

“I don’t care if you have to rip it off. I just need more of your mouth on me.” He lifts his arm to reach behind him and grip the back of my head.

“Anything for you,” I murmur.

Only, when I take the fabric in my hands and try to rip it ... nothing happens. I try again. A tiny ripping sound happens, but it still doesn’t tear.

“How is this so strong?” I ask.

Dylan laughs. “I’m going to be stuck in this thing forever.”

“Nope. I am getting this off you even if it kills me.” I yank and pull on it.

Water sloshes over both of us, and poor Dylan is tossed around like a rag doll.

“You are so good at distracting me. You’re right. This is so much better than sex.”

“Shut up. I just need—” Finally, the stitching for the harness strap across his chest parts, and I’m able to get one of his arms free. The rest is easy, though I’m tempted to make him wear the bottom half for a while longer.

Dylan has other ideas and shoves it down his legs and off, letting it float to the top of the pool.

“Now can we fuck?” Dylan asks.

“Nope. As you were. Turn around and look at the pretty view while I play with you.”

“We don’t have time for playing.” Yet he does as he’s told.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll tease you so much that as soon as my phone goes off with the alert that food’s here, you’ll crumble and come.”

“Think highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“Nope. Proven track record. Hmm, let’s see if I can get you to come hands-free again.”

“You’re more than welcome to try, but without your thick cock pegging my prostate, I don’t see it happening.”

“What about one of my thick fingers?” I slide my middle finger down his crack and press it against his hole.

Dylan pushes back, opening up and accepting the small intrusion. I only go in up to the first knuckle before I pull it out and push inside him again.

“I need something bigger,” Dylan says.

“I bet you’ve said that a lot.”

“Did you just make a dick size joke while you’re fingering me?”

“Actually, I was subtly taking a dig at all your ex-boyfriends, but sure. Let’s go with joking.”

“I’m a big advocate for saying size doesn’t matter, but even if it did, you wouldn’t have any trouble beating every single guy I’ve ever been with. I’ve never been so full. So—”

I push my finger in farther and reach that spot inside him that makes his voice cut out. “You’ve never been so ... what?”

“Owned,” he breathes. “And apparently I don’t even need your dick to feel that way.”

“Then I’ve got you exactly where I want you. Because after this, when you have your life back, I will own you. All of you. Including this.” I use my free hand to wrap around his chest and rest my hand on his heart.

“My pecs?” he jokes, but his voice breaks.

I won’t push it now because he’s probably not ready to face that yet. Hell, I’ve spent the last seven years avoiding it too. But being with him again, being this close to him, I know what we are.

*Inevitable.*

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CHAPTER NINETEEN\_

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DYLAN

“TRAV,” I BEG. HE’S DRIVING ME CRAZY WITH THIS WHOLE NO-FUCKING thing. I want to yell at him to stick his dick inside me already, but no, he’s determined to hold me close while his fingers do all the work. He’s up to two now.

And I can’t say that I hate it because I don’t. It’s doing its job. I’m not thinking about Walker or my job or anything I should be focused on. Instead, my body and every nerve ending fire under Trav’s touch. Under his warm breath on my shoulder and his gentle arm across my chest.

But the thing that gets to me the most is the way he can do that while pegging my prostate with his fingers. It’s like he’s fucking me in a totally new way, and he’s right. This isn’t about getting off. He’s taking care of me, taking me away from everything, and it’s so beautiful it brings me to the point of breaking.

He’s breaking my soul and putting it back together again.

He’s putting me first.

He’s giving me everything.

And he’s one hundred percent right that when his phone goes off with an alert, my cock jerks and I come untouched. It’s not an all-consuming orgasm or an eruption of intensity. It might not rack my entire body or take my breath away, but it’s so much deeper than anything else I’ve ever

experienced before. It's not only a release. It also fills me with that warm and fuzzy feeling in my gut.

I know it's my attempt at clinging on to something, to *us*, because my life is a mess and he's giving me a small piece of freedom from it. My body is trying to tell me this is more than what I wanted it to be, but my head is still refusing to allow me to accept it.

It's looking for excuses to rationalize what we're doing when I really only need to admit that I'm here with Trav because I chose to be.

Because I want to be.

And when my muscles loosen and my ass relaxes the hold it has on Trav's fingers, he leans in and kisses my cheek, and even that feels like a permanent thing I need in my life—Trav's mouth on me. Any part of me.

"Don't drown while I grab the food," he rumbles.

I huff a laugh. "I'll try not to. I can't guarantee it, though."

I immediately miss his big body caging me in when he leaves. I turn and rest my back against the wall of the pool and watch as he climbs the steps and reveals inch by inch of his mouthwatering physique.

His ass is tight and round, and when he gets to the lounge where my towel is, he bends to pick it up. He's lucky I'm not standing behind him because I'd want to take a bite.

While he dries off, his cock tents the towel, and I make a mental note that after he gets back, I'm going to take care of him before we get to the food. That's twice now he's taken care of me without getting off himself, and like any time he'd appear and help me in a professional capacity, I don't like owing him.

My mind is giving me so many wicked images of being on my knees for Trav. Or having Trav on all fours on the floor while I eat him out and then fuck him so hard he gets carpet burn on his knees. There are so many possibilities. I don't know if we'll manage to get to all of them, but I'm going to try.

Just the idea of it has my spent cock twitching in anticipation.

All of that is squashed when Trav comes charging back through the house and outside with Domino following.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“We need to leave. And we need to leave now.” Trav turns to Domino. “Can you go to the guest room and pack all our shit while Dylan gets dressed?”

Domino spots the floating “swimsuit” and chuckles. “Sure thing, boss. Want me to, uh, bring him some clothes too?”

“No—fuck.” Trav looks at me and must be remembering I came out here dressed in his ridiculous *gift*. “Yes. Thank you.”

Domino mock salutes him while suppressing his amusement and leaves.

Suddenly, the water feels cold and unwelcoming, and I shiver. “What happened?”

“Domino found a bug at headquarters. While we were being attacked at the ranch, perimeter alarms went off at headquarters, but the guys didn’t find anything. We’re thinking someone got in, planted the bug, and left undetected.”

“How? Your place is like Fort Knox.”

“Walker hired professionals to take you out. My place is high-tech but not for someone who knows what they’re doing. Anyone could get by my security system with a passcode decoder and ninja stealth. Whoever’s listening in has heard everything Domino has said to me, and that probably includes where we are.”

“Fuck.”

I move quickly but only get about halfway across the pool when I realize I left the stupid but now ruined mankini behind. I grab that and get out of the water, where Trav engulfs me in a towel.

I dry off and wrap the towel around my waist while Trav drops his and puts on the same clothes he was wearing earlier.

We meet Domino in the bedroom, where he's still packing everything into Trav's duffle bag, and Trav gets one of the bags Atlas brought over and throws it at me.

"Use the bathroom to get changed, and then we're out of here."

"Where are we going to go?" I ask.

"I haven't figured that out yet, but we can do that on the road. They could be here any minute."

Domino smiles as he shoves more clothes into bags. "Bet you're glad you decided on code names for all of us now. I can only assume they haven't found you yet because my real name is hard to get to."

"Hey, sometimes I'm smart." Trav's gaze meets mine. "Go get dressed."

Trav is in efficient mode again, and I have to admit it's sexy watching him take charge.

I follow his orders quickly, and once I'm dressed, we rush out to the car parked out the front.

Trav turns to Domino. "Swap. You take my Range Rover back to headquarters. I'll take your Maserati."

"Oh, will you?" Domino says. "You're just ... stealing my baby from right underneath me."

"Yep. I paid for your baby, so I get to borrow her when I need it."

I frown. "If I didn't know you guys were talking about a car, I'd be very concerned."

Domino throws Trav the keys. "Bring her back in one piece."

"I'll buy you a new baby if I break her."

"Again, really not the kind of language you should be using."

They both ignore me.

Trav tips his head. "Thanks, brother."

"Where are you going?" Domino asks.

"Good question. One of the guys' houses? An empty safe house? Seedy motel where the employees always look the other way?"



“Oh, how the mighty have fallen,” I say. “I have to say, it’s only been a couple of nights, but I’ve already become accustomed to a certain style of living. And it’s money.”

Trav laughs. “Man after my own heart. I’ll think of something.”

We part ways with Domino, and I whistle as I get into the Maserati.

“Nice ride.” I run my hand over the leather interior.

“You know, you could’ve had this too. I’ve been trying to get you to work for me since we met.”

I side-eye him. “No, you’d tease me about going rogue for you and then make innuendo about being under you.”

“Not true. Sometimes I’d joke about you being on top too.”

“And you wonder why I didn’t quit my job on the spot and ask you where to sign.”

“Your reluctance was fun.”

“Give me things creepy people say for five hundred, Alex!”

Trav pulls the car out onto the street. “In all seriousness, I’d recruit you in a heartbeat.”

“To do what? Be your errand boy?”

“Hmm. You know what you’d be good at? Risk analysis. You could tell me which jobs to take and which ones to turn down.”

“You don’t want me doing that job.”

“Why not?”

“I know not everything you do is aboveboard. If I were in charge, you’d have to stop all the illegal activity.”

Trav changes lanes, punching the accelerator. “Maybe my moral compass needs an adjustment, and you could be the guy to give it to me. Or maybe if you did the job, you’d be able to see that I’m not the bad guy you think I am. When I bend the law, there’s always a reason for it.”

“Sorry, Robin Hood. Didn’t realize you broke the law for noble reasons.”

“Can I point out if I wasn’t above deceiving law enforcement, I wouldn’t be helping you hide out?”

“That’s ...” My words die because I almost say that’s a different situation, but it’s really not. I avert my gaze and stare out the window at all the traffic Trav’s passing.

“That’s too true to argue with?”

“Exactly,” I mumble.

“Like I always say, you’ll go rogue for me one day. You’re already halfway there.”

“I can tell you one thing, if I do ever go rogue for you, I’m not taking on some stupid nickname.”

“It’s cute you think you don’t already have a stupid nickname, *Rogue*. And you brought it all upon yourself.” He imitates me from the night I arrested him. “I-I’m A-agent Rogue ... riguez.”

I turn my head to face him. “Shut up. I was terrified you were going to blurt out how you fucked me in a bathroom stall. My superiors were listening in.”

“Mm, we need to go back and recreate that night.”

“The interrogation or the fucking?”

“The fucking.”

“Oh, that we can’t do. Aqua closed down.”

Trav side-eyes me like he doesn’t believe me. “Damn, really? I swear I was there not that long ago.”

“It’s been closed for three years.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“If you’re not having cheap hookups in seedy nightclubs, what have you been doing for the last three years? How do you even meet people to get off with?”

Trav looks uncomfortable as he shifts in his seat. “Do you really want to know?”

I think about that. Do I? It's his past, not his present. Should I care? I shrug. "It's not like I've been saving myself for you."

Trav reaches over and presses his finger to my mouth while keeping his eyes on the road. "Shhh. In my mind, you have been."

"I haven't really had relationships, if that helps. Well, I tried, but it's hard when you're married to your job."

"Yeah, I don't do relationships either. I live in a house where thirteen other people come and go at all hours of the day, and I can't get a decent sleep when I'm out of my comfort zone. I'm not boyfriend material."

Why is it I was the one who didn't want anything more than temporary, but hearing that Trav isn't relationship material disappoints me?

"Got nothing to say to that?" he asks.

"Makes sense. I mean, if you're working a lot."

"Huh."

"*Huh?* What's that supposed to mean?"

"Everyone else in my life tells me it's not healthy." Trav's voice goes high-pitched, imitating someone. "You should want to settle down already. You're the only one who's not married. Why don't you want to find a nice man? Wah, wah, wah."

"Who says that?"

"My mom. My siblings are all older and married with kids. My cousin, who's my age and like a brother, is engaged. I get ribbed from every direction about being lonely."

I don't know what that's like because my family still like to avoid the big bad gay conversation. "Maybe they want to see you happy. How dare they?"

"I'm happy sleeping next to my guns." Of course he is.

"You seriously sleep with your guns?"

"Well, technically, they're under my bed, but yes."

“I’m starting to see your family’s point. But speaking of beds and sleeping, have you come up with a plan for where we’re going yet?”

“How do you feel about camping?”

I mock gasp. “With the mud and the bugs and ... outside? This is worse than your seedy motel idea.”

“Seedy motel it is.”

“Oh, you did that on purpose. I’m beginning to see why you can’t hold on to a man. You use that kind of trickery on them and piss them off.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s it. My trickery is the problem. And I’m so good at it too. Look at you and me. Seven years later, and bam, you’re mine. I’m *that* talented.”

I don’t let him see how much I like being called his. “What makes you think that just because we’ve had sex a couple of times that I belong to you?”

“Did you not hear me about how talented I am? I got you to sleep with me again. Wait another seven years and we’ll be getting married.”

“Uh-huh. The man who just admitted he will never have a relationship will marry me. Sure.”

Trav leans closer to me but doesn’t take his eyes off the road. “We weren’t talking about future me just now. We were talking pre-Dylan me.” He goes back to his side of the car, and I’m left blinking at him.

Marriage is ... a lot.

He’s not actually saying he wants marriage. He can’t be. He jokes about it, sure, but there’s a big difference between joking about getting married one day and actually walking down an aisle.

Then again, he also said they weren’t really jokes. That he has never lied to me.

I’ve just learned how to deal with Trav—by giving him orgasms. I wouldn’t know how to navigate a relationship with him, let alone a marriage.

He must not be thinking about it too seriously because in the next moment, he snaps his fingers. “New idea. I know exactly where to go.”

“Should I be scared? I think I should be scared. Can it really get any worse than camping?”

“Just wait.”



Trav heads back toward the San Gabriel Mountains but doesn't go to his headquarters. At Monrovia, he pulls into a street at the foot of a hill and drives about halfway up to a closed iron gate. He hits a button, and a chipper voice answers on a speaker.

“What's up, boss?”

“Let me in, or you're fired.”

“We both know you'd never fire me.” Yet, the gate opens anyway.

The long drive leads to another gate, but this one is already open. There's a large yard and warm lights illuminating a garden patch and a stone-and-clapboard house. While it's a step down from where we have been staying, it has a charming feel to it.

Two of Trav's men come out of the house and walk down the steps to greet us. I recognize one as Iris, and the other is the new guy—the one who's with Iris. I think Trav said his name was Saint.

The German shepherd that was at headquarters a couple of days ago trails them excitedly, trying to push her way between her dads. She's so cute, dancing behind them to let her through.

We pull to a stop, and Trav gets out of the car, so I follow him.

The dog finally gets around Iris and Saint and runs right up to Trav, jumping and putting her paws on his chest and licking his face.

Girl, join the club of wanting to do that.

“Good girl,” Trav coos.

“Please don’t encourage bad behavior,” Iris says.

“Says the guy whose name means—”

“We all know what my name means.”

Trav laughs. “Princess Smooshy Face, down.”

The dog drops immediately and sits at his feet.

Saint nudges Iris. “Hey, look, she’s more obedient than you.”

“And I officially hate you both,” Iris says. “So why are you bringing the DEA agent to my house?”

“I don’t think I’m a—”

Trav puts his hand on my shoulder to stop me from talking. “You know how I caught you two hooking up behind my back and I didn’t fire either one of you or punish you for it? This is your punishment. Hey, roomies.” He’s smiling at the two guys how he usually smiles at me when he’s purposefully trying to piss me off.

Iris crosses his arms. “And why do we have the pleasure and not Domino, you know, your second-in-command?”

“Eh, I wouldn’t burden him like that. I actually like him.”

Iris flips Trav off.

“Also, we were there last night. His place is compromised now.”

“Fine,” Iris says. “Come on in.”

Inside, the house looks really ... normal. After spending the last few days with Trav and his extravagant lifestyle, as nice as it was, this feels like an actual home. Lived-in. It’s closer to my place than anywhere Trav’s taken me.

“Okay, so why did you really come here?” Iris asks and gestures for us to sit in the living room.

“Did Domino contact either of you?” Trav sits on a two-seater couch, and he almost takes up three-quarters of it.

Saint and Iris sit in the armchairs on either side of the couch, so I squeeze in next to Trav.

“Yeah, we were there when he found the bug,” Saint says. “He dragged us outside and told me what he’d found, and we tried to think of everything we’d said since the perimeter alarm tripped. He told us to go back inside and pretend to be leaving for the day, and then everyone got out of there.”

Trav nods. “The thing that I don’t understand is Walker would have heard where we were staying. Even if it was only to say we’d be at Domino’s house. The code name would only get him so far, and he has resources. He didn’t come. Why?”

Iris opens his mouth, but his boyfriend covers it with his hand.

“He was totally about to make a joke about him not coming.” Saint removes his hand.

“Aww, it’s like you know me.”

Saint ignores him. “I have a theory. If you want to hear it.”

“Of course I want to hear it,” Trav says. “There are no dumb theories.”

Iris cuts in. “The entire government is after you because of all the shit we’ve done over the years. Maybe they’re not coming after Dylan but after you. Why else would they bug your headquarters?”

Trav sighs. “Okay, I take it back. There *are* dumb theories.”

Saint bites his lip. “Well, now I don’t want to say mine.”

“Is it the same? The government won’t come after us until we’re of no use to them anymore. We have way too many government contracts to have them on our asses yet.”

“Yet?” I ask. “As in, you do expect one day to be hunted down?”

Trav avoids eye contact but puts a hand on my knee. “You were right when you said not everything we do is aboveboard, but a lot of those times? We are contracted to do it by the very government who makes the laws you so strongly defend.”

I’m beginning to understand why Trav thinks little of the law when the people making them ask him to break them.

“I don’t think it’s the government coming for you,” Saint says. “But I do think Walker’s trying to get dirt on you.”

“You think the bug was to get information on *me*?”

“He knows you’re protecting Rodriguez. If he gets information on you, he has leverage. If he used the information to find you at Domino’s house, then you’d know there was a bug or a leak and that they illegally planted a bug. This way, they can use what they gain to flush you out of hiding.”

Trav breaks into a smile. “I knew it was a good idea hiring you.”

“Oh sure, give him credit for my theory,” Iris says.

“You said the government was coming for me.” Trav leans closer to me. “He’s really pretty and lethal but not that smart.”

“Hey. I’m supersmart,” Iris complains.

Saint pats Iris’s head. “So smart.”

Iris stands. “On that note, I’ll leave you geniuses to your theories. I’m getting food.”

“Feed us,” Trav calls after him. “Domino’s eating the dinner we ordered.”

As if on cue, my stomach rumbles.

Iris turns. “Nuh-uh. If you’re staying here, you get your own food. You’re welcome to use the kitchen, the gym, and stay in our guest bed, but just ... you know ... wash the sheets before you leave.” He shudders.

“I guess that’s fair. I made you detail my Range Rover after you and Saint fucked in it.”

“Oh, you poor soul.” Iris puts his hand to his heart. “If you think simple frotting is fucking, I feel so sorry for Rodriguez.”

Saint cuts in. “And now I’m done. I don’t really like getting into sex details with my boss, so I’m, uh ...” He stands and awkwardly thumbs in the direction of the kitchen. “I’ll get you guys some food.”

Iris shakes his head. “You’re such a pushover. You’re about to become Trav’s maid.”



“At least someone appreciates me,” Trav says.

When Iris and Saint have disappeared into the kitchen, I look at Trav.

He must see the concern in my gaze because he wraps his arm around me and murmurs, “We’ll get some food, rest up, and deal with plans tomorrow.”

“Do you have a plan?” I ask and pray he does.

“If Saint’s theory is true and Walker’s digging for dirt on me to get to you, he’s either seriously underestimating me, or he’s desperate and making all the wrong moves.”

“Wrong moves?”

“Yeah. Rule number one when dealing with Mike Bravo: don’t piss off the boss.” Trav nudges me. “And definitely don’t try to hurt what’s *mine*.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY\_

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TRAV

AFTER WE FINALLY GET SOMETHING TO EAT, I DECIDE IT'S LATE ENOUGH that I try to convince Dylan to go to sleep. He's been quiet ever since I called him *mine*, and I should probably regret putting it out there like that after we agreed to keep this a casual thing while I'm working his case, but surely he feels the shift too?

Something is changing between us. It's growing and turning into something I've always wanted from Dylan but have been too afraid to chase.

Or maybe the last few days are finally catching up to us, and we're sleep-deprived, stressed, and not thinking clearly. I could be feeling something that's not really there.

But when I look at Dylan across the dining table, at his weary brown eyes that no longer stare at me in disgust but something softer, I know without a doubt my feelings for him are real.

Maybe I should do what my family has wanted me to do for years. I think it's time to settle down with someone. And I want that someone to be Dylan. But now is definitely not the time to entertain those ideas.

"You look like you're about to fall asleep," I say to him. "Why don't you go to bed. I'll be in there soon. Saint, show Dylan where we can sleep."

I like Saint. He's always one to follow orders without talking back. Dylan goes without a fight as well, so he must be even more exhausted than

I thought.

As soon as they disappear down the hallway, Iris turns to me.

“You have a plan, don’t you? That’s why you sent your boyfriend to bed.”

The usual argument that Dylan is not my boyfriend doesn’t even try to pass my lips. “Not so much a plan as much as a base to work off, thanks to Saint.”

“Okay, so what’s first?”

“We get Domino on the line.” I get my phone, placing it on the coffee table in front of us and switching it to speaker when I hit Call. As soon as it clicks over, I talk before he gets the chance. “You at home or the office?”

“Home. You find a place to stay yet?”

“Yeah,” Iris says. “Daddy has come to stay with his favorite.”

I point at him. “You’re not allowed to call me Daddy.”

“But Rodriguez can?”

Domino cuts off my retort. “Really? *Iris*? Out of all your employees, you chose to go stay with Iris?”

“He owed me a favor, and I didn’t want to put the others out. I’m considerate like that.”

Iris glares at me.

Saint returns, squeezing Iris’s shoulder affectionately as he passes to take his seat again.

I sometimes worry that bending my no-fraternization rules for them wasn’t the smart thing to do because it could put the entire team at risk while on missions, but I only have to see them together to know how bonded they are. If I told them to choose between Mike Bravo or each other, there’s no doubt in my mind I’d lose them as employees, and Iris is one of my best. Smart mouth and all. And Saint, he’s proving his worth more and more every day.

“Trav has a plan,” Iris says.

“A sort of plan. How soon can you get everyone over here?” I ask Domino.

“How urgent is it?” Domino yawns. “I can call everyone in right now.”

I check the time. It’s getting late. “No, first thing works. We should all get some rest because it might be a while before we’ll get another chance for some shut-eye once everything is in motion.”

“Done,” Domino says. “See you all at the ass crack of dawn.”

He ends the call, but Iris is having none of that rest talk.

“I can get started on logistics. What do you want to do?” He’s always eager to get into the action.

I grin. “We give them what they want.”

Saint and Iris glance at each other in confusion. “We what?” Saint asks.

“We can use their bug to our advantage. With any luck, this doesn’t go much deeper than it already is, but a special agent in charge at the DEA is already deeper than I like.” I realize the last few words of my sentence a little too late. “Iris, don’t even think about doing a ‘that’s what he said’ joke.”

Iris mimes locking his lips.

“The sac is in too deep,” Saint mutters.

“You’re a bad influence,” I say to Iris.

“I think you have that wrong. I’m an excellent influence. Saint no longer has army ass thanks to me.”

“Do I want to know what army ass is?”

Saint chuckles. “Being so uptight the stick up your ass doesn’t even fit anymore. According to Iris, I had that for years until we got together. I argue it was more the near-death experience that changed everything, but, you know, I have to pick my battles.”

“Okay, let’s all get some rest, and we’ll start bright and early in the morning.” I stand.

Princess is on her dog bed, and she lifts her head when I walk by her, so I pat her head and say good night to her.

When I get to Iris's guest bedroom, Dylan's not asleep like I was hoping. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, with dark circles under his eyes. He looks so tired, so defeated, so I do the only thing I can think to do to get him to go to sleep.

I strip down to my boxers, pull back the covers on the bed, and urge him to join me.

Dylan doesn't bother getting undressed. He just curls into my side with his head on my shoulder, and I hold him until he drifts off.

Shit is about to get real because I'm done running from Walker. It feels like he's been one step ahead this whole time. I'm used to being the predator, not the prey.

Running has been a necessity to keep Dylan safe, but now they're bugging my house and coming after me on my property. Lines have been crossed, and I will fucking end everyone involved.



I manage to get some sleep before the sound of the buzzer from Iris's front gate sounds.

As usual, the minute I'm awake, I'm on alert. Sleeping somewhere different again, I take a few seconds to get my bearings, but like I did back in my basic training days when they'd wake us up at all hours for a random training drill, I stumble out of bed and get dressed as fast as I can.

Dylan doesn't even stir, and I'm not surprised. We're both exhausted, but unlike me, Dylan isn't used to it. Hopefully, he'll be down for a while longer, and by then my guys will have come up with a useable plan.

I don't just want Walker. I want him, Rowling, Rowling's son, and hell, I'm tempted to go after the mercenaries they've hired to take Dylan out.

Forget professional respect between private op groups. Anyone who'd accept the job knowing my ranch was their target broke that first.

I hit the head and then make my way into the living room, where Ghost is already set up next to Saint, and they're both typing furiously on their keyboards.

I blink at Ghost. "How long have you been here?"

"About an hour."

"I didn't hear you." That's weird because I hear everything.

"It's cute you think I didn't know if I used the buzzer to be let in that it would wake you. Domino told us to be as quiet as possible as we arrived."

"Then who—" Before I can ask who rang the buzzer, Zeus walks through the front door.

"What's up, fuckers?"

"Dude," Ghost says. "Did you not get the message about being quiet?"

"Unfortunately, that is Zeus's definition of quiet," I point out.

"If I have to be up at dark o'clock, everyone has to be," Zeus says.

Atlas walks in behind him and slaps his shoulder. "A real team player here."

"Hey, there's no *I* in team. Therefore, if I'm suffering, everyone should be."

"I don't think that's the meaning of that phrase," Atlas says.

"Eh. Semantics," Zeus says. "So, who's the coffee bitch?"

I look at him, and he slumps.

"It's me because I said coffee bitch, isn't it?"

I clap his back. "Yep. There's no *I* in team, Zeus."

He grumbles all the way to Iris's kitchen.

"How long was I out?" I ask.

"A couple of hours," Saint says.

"How long have you been up?"

Using Ghost's words, Saint says, "It's cute you think I went to bed."

“Please tell me you came up with an amazing plan for me.”

“Not a plan, but we’ve done some digging and have some names, and I think we have a way to flush Walker out personally.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” I raise my voice. “Now, if only the coffee bitch would hurry up.”

Zeus appears with coffee.

“Okay, I was only joking because it usually takes longer to make than that. What did you put in it?”

“Don’t trust me, boss?” Zeus asks innocently.

“Nope.”

“Fair enough, but it turns out Decaf is here. He already made a pot.”

“Of course he did, but the important question is how many cups has he had?”

“He’s on his third. We will be allowed to talk to him in a couple of minutes.”

“Good. We’re all ready to get to work, then.” I take my coffee from Zeus’s hand, but then I pause with it halfway to my lips.

Zeus is watching me with a smile on his face.

“Wait.” I switch his cup out for mine.

“Really? You really don’t trust me that much?”

“I don’t know.”

He shrugs. “Eh. I got what I wanted anyway. More coffee.” He drinks the stuff in my cup before I look down and realize he was already halfway through his.

I down it like a shot because I need the caffeine and then hand him back the cup. “And now you can go get me more. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, boss.” He looks way too happy about it.

“Damn it. I’ll get it myself.”

Zeus throws himself on Iris’s couch and puts his hands behind his head triumphantly. “And that, friends, is how you get out of doing things you



don't want to do.”

“I'd tell you I hate you for being a lazy-ass, but if there's one thing I've learned over the years, the lazy ones are the ones who get shit done because they find the quickest and easiest way to do something.”

Iris enters the room at that moment, hair wet from a shower. “Who's quick and easy? Zeus? We already knew that.”

“Hey, someone has to pick up the slack after you went off the market. There are people with needs *everywhere*.”

After I get a fresh coffee, I join the others in Iris's living room, which has been set up like a command center with laptops and computers, and Ghost has even brought a whiteboard and markers so we can map it all out.

Old-school. I like it.

I sit in an available armchair. “What have we got?”

Saint stands and moves to the whiteboard. “Okay. We know how Rowling's kid is linked to Walker, but we're not sure how deep everything goes, right? There are things we need to know. Like who hired us to watch Councilman Rowling?”

“What has that got to do with anything?” I ask.

“It could be our way to trap them. If Walker thinks we have something on whoever hired us to follow Rowling, we could set it up for their bug to hear us plotting to take down Rowling and draw them to a meeting place we choose. We'll say there's going to be a payment drop or we have new information on them to hand off.”

I rub my chin. “The name they gave me was Gary Price, and he introduced himself as a campaign manager but didn't want us to know who he represented. He was probably using a fake name, because a quick search showed no political affiliations to any Gary Price.”

“That we could find, anyway,” Ghost adds. “Do you know how many Gary Prices there are in California alone?”

I continue. “He said he wanted us to tail Rowling because of some shady dealings and that there’s suspicion of him being some big drug kingpin. I didn’t ask too many questions because the money was right, and even when I went back to Price with absolutely nothing, he told me to keep following.”

Saint writes Gary Price on the board and circles it. “I say this guy is our ticket to get their attention.”

“It was over a year ago that he hired us,” I point out.

“Walker and Rowling wouldn’t know that. And even if they did, it’s not as if this Price guy has told us to stop. We were set to follow Rowling to Vegas before everything with Rodriguez went down.” Saint has a point.

“I think this can work,” I say.

“What can work?” Dylan’s voice, laced with sleep, comes from the direction of the hallway. He appears in his underwear, rubbing his eyes, which then widen when he sees a room full of people. “Uh ...”

“Babe? Might want to put some clothes on.”

“Umm, right. Okay.” He backs away back down the hall.

I’m attacked from every direction with echoes of “babe” and “ooh.”

“You’re all children,” I complain. “Let’s please get some details ironed out before Dyl—Rodriguez gets back.”

Iris walks over to Saint and takes the marker off him and then kisses his cheek.

“And no kissing on the job,” I say.

Iris turns to me, smirking. “Do those same rules apply to you and *Dylan*, boss?”

“He’s not my coworker.”

“But he is your assignment.”

“You’ll be my assignment in a minute if you don’t focus on what’s important here. Only, I won’t be *protecting* you.”

“This is important,” Iris says. “The bossman ... in ... a relationship? Does not compute.”

Annd of course Dylan walks back in at that very moment. *Way to make things awkward, Iris.*

My gaze locks on Dylan’s, who’s staring at me expectantly. My mouth opens to refute Iris, but nothing comes out. I avert my stare back to the whiteboard. “We should nail down the particulars.”

My diversion must work because Dylan takes a seat on the armrest of my single chair.

“What do we have so far?” he asks.

“The guys have come up with a way to get Walker to come to us.”

“We ... want that?” The scrunch in the middle of Dylan’s brow is adorable.

“Yep. We can’t keep running from them. It’s time to go on the offensive.” If it weren’t for trying to keep Dylan out of it, I would’ve gone the offensive route long before now, but Dylan is my priority over going in guns blazing and thinking about the consequences later.

That’s what this life is like, and the fact I’ve become so desensitized to it that it hasn’t affected me until someone I care about is involved makes me realize that way of thinking is rather outdated.

Me and my crew, we’ve taken lives. We’ve acted in the name of something bigger than us. And when we did so in the military, we were honored and revered. Now, as a private firm, we live in the shadows, and there’s a sense of darkness and evil that looms over that. The guilt it comes with could cripple the strongest of men, and I can’t deny that it gets to me more than I’d like. None of us at Mike Bravo are emotionless robots, no matter how much the military tried to drill that into us, and sometimes it gets to be a little too much.

But we all have to have our moments, let it pass, and then push through it. Because if any of us sitting in this room really stopped to think about the

actions of our pasts too hard or too long, we'd crumble into a million pieces.

Sometimes it's good to have the reminder that we're human.

And with Dylan next to me, I've never felt more of an average man than I do right now. Because I'm doing something every single other person on the planet would do for the man they lo—

“Boss?” Iris says and snaps his fingers.

I'm thankful for the literal snap back into reality. “Right. Setting a trap that will work. Let's go over ideas.”

It's a team effort, and everyone throws around possibilities. We need to pick the one that will be most successful in getting Walker to take the bait.

Dylan inches closer and leans in to the point where he's practically in my lap. “Do you really think this will work?”

“I fucking hope so.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE\_

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DYLAN

EVERYTHING IS SET. ALL OF TRAV'S MEN KNOW THEIR ROLES. DOMINO HAS gone to headquarters to help set the trap, and a few of the other guys are already camping out at our target spot. Once everything is set into motion, Walker and his men could arrive at any moment.

Trav wants this to be over with by this time tomorrow afternoon, but I can't get my hopes up.

I haven't even allowed myself to think about what will happen if today is successful or what even *successful* would mean.

Walker and the Rowling kid in cuffs is best case. Worst case ... I don't even want to think about it.

Trav wraps his arm around my shoulders while we wait for a phone call to come through. "Are you okay? You're quiet. It's unnerving."

"Hey, out of us, I am the quiet one."

"Not when you're insulting me. Which is always. So I'm making sure you're all right."

I grunt. "I'm fine."

"Is it the plan? Do you have another idea?"

I shake my head. "It's not the plan." It's what comes after. Succeed or fail.

"Dylan—"

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Iris asks.

“Nunya, so shut it,” Trav says.

“Nunya?” I ask.

“*Nunya business.*”

I can’t help it. I laugh.

Trav nudges me. “Hey, look at that. I got a laugh out of you.”

Before I can reply, Trav’s phone rings, and Domino’s name pops up on the screen.

“Time to do this,” Trav says and then answers, putting it on speaker.

“What’s up?”

“We have a new development,” Domino says.

They’re both good at keeping their tone flat, like this is any other call to them. Although, in my short experience of being this close to Trav and his guys, name-calling should have happened by now.

“You might need to come out of hiding for this one,” Domino continues.

“What’s the deal?” Trav asks.

“Price. The guy who hired us to follow Rowling for the last year.”

“I remember him.”

“He says he has proof of Walker’s involvement in everything, but he’ll only meet with you to discuss it.”

“He wants to meet face-to-face? He’s never done that before. Our contact has been through calls and texts only.”

“Price doesn’t believe we’ve got nothing on Rowling. Which, he’s correct, but we were under the impression he bought our bullshit. He wants to do a trade. The intel we’ve gathered on Rowling for the info he has on Walker.”

“Just tell me when and where. I’ll meet him. But I’m taking Rodriguez with me. I’m the only one who can protect him the way he deserves to be protected.”

Everyone is in on this call, obviously, and I know Trav is putting on a show for the people listening through the bug in Trav’s headquarters, but

my chest warms at his words all the same.

The idea that he wants to protect me himself because the only person he trusts to get the job done is him makes me feel treasured in a way I never have before.

Even if it is a lie and Trav is leaving me with his men to chase down Walker later.

For some reason, I get the impression his words are real. He doesn't want to leave me here with Saint and Iris, but he's going to because he needs to make sure himself that Walker is taken care of.

For me.

"Price said he wants to meet where the proof is," Domino says.

"What does that mean?" Trav pretends like he doesn't know.

"He wants to meet you at the abandoned warehouses, where the whole situation with Walker and Rodriguez went down. It at least proves he knows what he's talking about."

Of course "he" does. Because "he" is Mike Bravo, not Gary Price.

"When?" Trav asks.

"Tomorrow."

"What time?"

"He's being cryptic. He said 'the time it happened once before' like he's some Buddhist guru sending us on a quest."

"Midafternoon," I say, giving the information only I could know and letting everyone listening in realize I'm here too. In case it wasn't already obvious.

"Tell him we'll be there," Trav says and ends the call. Then his lips gently press against the top of my head. "It's all set."

I can't find my voice.

"By this time tomorrow, you'll be all mine," he murmurs.

"Or you'll be arrested for obstruction of justice, and then the only people I'll have protecting me are a man you've deemed as someone who



needs supervision and the overgrown manchild who fell in love with him.”

Iris, who’s sitting across from us, gasps. “I think he’s talking about us.”

Saint, from behind his computer screen, says, “Can you really blame his assessment?”

“Well, no, but it’s rude to say it to our faces.”

“To be fair, you’re listening in to a private conversation,” Trav says.

“Then go have it somewhere private,” Iris argues.

I take Trav’s hand. “He might have a point. Can we have a word?”

“They’re so going to fuck in the guest bed,” Iris says.

“Maybe we should take Princess Smooshy Face for a walk and give them some privacy.”

As if hearing her name and walk, their giant dumbass of a dog runs in from outside. Or ... tries to. There’s a glass sliding door in her way, and she runs right into it.

I expect Iris or Saint to run to her rescue, but Iris just sighs.

“She’s going to break that door one day,” Saint says.

The dog shakes off her stupor and then lifts her front paw to push against the glass. The whole door rattles, and it actually looks like she’s knocking to be let in.

“And you shouldn’t have taught her how to do that,” Saint says.

“It’s adorable!” Iris coos and goes to let her in. “Who’s a good girl?” he praises.

“Let’s escape now while they’re distracted.” I pull Trav down the hall to where we slept last night.

As soon as I close the door behind us, Trav wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me back against him.

He closes in behind me, his breath on my neck, his big body surrounding me, and I practically melt into his arms.

“I know you’re scared,” he says softly. “But if this doesn’t work, I’m still going to do everything I can to set things right.”

I turn so we're face-to-face. "That's just it. I should be scared of the outcome. I should be focused on how I'm going to go back to work once Walker is exposed. But all I can think about is being stuck here while you're out there fighting my battles, putting your life on the line for me, and ... what if you don't come back?"

Trav's warm brown eyes soften, but his lips curl. "Careful there, Rogue. It kind of sounds like you care about me."

I take a deep breath. "I do. I didn't want to, but I really fucking do. The outcome of tomorrow doesn't only affect me but *us*, and I know I said there was no *us*, and I was using you as a distraction, and maybe at the time I really did believe it, but I can't keep fighting it. It's exhausting pretending I don't have real feelings for you, and I don't want to do it anymore."

I break eye contact and lower my head, but Trav cups my cheek and forces me to keep looking at him.

"Then stop pretending," he whispers.

I surge forward and press my mouth to his. He opens for me, and my tongue says all the things that I'm not ready to say.

So long of ignoring every memory of our one night together. Years of trying to not let him get under my skin.

I'd be proud of my willpower if I wasn't kicking myself for being so stubborn.

Because being with Trav like this, there's so much need, passion, and all-consuming lust I can't deny any longer.

I break from his lips and turn in his arms, pushing my ass against the growing bulge in the front of his pants. "I want you to take me like you did the night we met."

Trav drives me forward with the force of his hips until I'm pressed against the wall and he's boxing me in. He bends at the knees the tiniest bit and rubs his cock against me. "You want it like this?"

His possessive voice turns me inside out.

“Yes,” I rasp.

“I want that too.” Trav drops his head and kisses down my neck until he reaches the collar of my shirt. “But I want to do it right this time. No clothes. I want to worship your body the way it deserves.”

I shudder and push back, grinding against him.

He tightens his strong grip on my hips. “Get undressed. Now.”

Trav steps away while I rush to get undressed. I hear him rifling through a bag for supplies, but I’m so desperate for him, I don’t wait for him to get back before I place my hands on the wall and stick my ass out, waiting for him.

“Damn,” Trav says. “I love your body.”

“Says someone who has the physique of a Greek god.”

Trav boxes me in again, his warm, naked skin on mine, and his hard cock dripping precum onto my ass cheek. “Mm, I seem to remember you saying something else about me being godlike.” His wet finger dips into my crack and trails down until it presses against my hole.

“It’s still true. You fuck like a god.” Shit. It’s like a damn floodgate has opened. I’ve been so used to holding my thoughts back, of not showing anything, that now I’ve let it all out, there’s no putting it back in.

He works his finger in, slowly, and it steals my breath.

I swallow hard. “It doesn’t matter if you’re topping me or letting me fuck you or suck you. You’re a fucking god.”

“Do you mean fucking like a sex god? Or just a god but so much that it needs the adjective to enhance the meaning?”

“Both,” I choke out as I push back to take his finger deeper.

“You’re in danger of giving me a god complex.”

“Like you don’t already have one,” I mutter, and he pushes his finger all the way inside me.

“Oh, good. Back to insulting me. I was scared for a minute there that you might start being nice, and then where would we be?”

“Sorry. I forgot. Insults turn you on. So why don’t you hurry up and fuck me, you incompetent meathead.”

“Whoa. Hey. That’s too far. I am not incompetent.”

“I noticed you’re not arguing the meathead comment, but if you want to prove how competent you are, why don’t you show me? Make me come untouched again.”

A throaty growl sounds in my ear, and Trav’s breath lands on my neck as he blankets my body with his. He’s leaning to one side so he can still stretch me, adding fingers as fast as he can while grinding against my ass cheek.

“Dylan,” Trav breathes. “I need ... I want ...”

“Tell me what you want. I’ll give it to you.”

“Kiss me. I know we didn’t do that the night we met, but I—”

I turn my head and cut off his words, kissing him deep and long.

I focus on our mouths and not the sensation in my ass. The sooner he can prep me, the sooner he’ll be inside me, filling me up and giving me exactly what I need.

“Are you ready for me?” he rumbles.

Not quite, but fuck it, I don’t care. “Do it.”

“Hang on. I gotta suit up.”

“Don’t.”

His fingers pause in my ass, and my body fights the intrusion, but I crave the sting.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“I need you, and I need you now.”

I’ll need him today. I’ll need him tomorrow. And I’ll need him to come back from this mission.

Because now that I have him, I don’t want to let him go.

With Trav’s free hand, he reaches for the lube on the ground. I watch him over my shoulder as he applies a generous amount to his cock, stroking

himself as he does it.

It makes my mouth water and my knees weak.

This whole man makes me weak. He always has. I've just been strong enough to stay away until now.

It's no surprise I can't help falling for the man who is not only willing to fight my battles for me but demands he be the one to do it.

Trav's goal this whole time has been to save me, and I don't think I've ever had anyone care that much about what happens to my life. My family has only ever wanted to save me from myself. None of my previous hookups or attempts at relationships have understood me enough to care on the same level Trav does.

And as much as I hate to admit it, as much as it hurts that I was wrong about him, being able to get to know him like this has changed everything.

I'm done running.

I'm done fighting the truth.

I'm done resisting Travis West.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO\_

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TRAV

WHEN I FINALLY SINK INSIDE DYLAN'S BODY, IT'S FAMILIAR AND NEW AT the same time. I move a lot slower than the quick fuck we had in that bathroom years ago, but I take him in the same possessive way I did back then.

He might have only been mine for a brief time, but I staked my claim then, and I haven't let go of it since. Tried to, sure. Even convinced myself Dylan would be better off without me.

But I should have known when I didn't care that the next time I saw him, he was slapping cuffs on me. I was happy to see him again when I thought I wouldn't.

If that's not love, I don't know what is. Well, maybe *not* arresting the love of your life, but that's not as fun.

Dylan gets impatient and pushes back on my cock, then lets out the loudest moan. I slap my hand over his mouth because if Iris and Saint are still in the living room, I'm sure they can hear it. It's not the embarrassment of them hearing us. I want to be the only one to hear his pleasure.

Dylan's sex noises are for me and me only.

"Think you can be quiet?" I ask.

When he nods, I remove my hand from his mouth, grip his hips, and then thrust inside him hard.

He moans again.

“Don’t make me gag you,” I warn.

He pushes back again. “I ... can’t. Fuck. It’s so good.”

I hold his hips firm so he can’t move. “Be quiet and I’ll give you what you want.”

Dylan leans forward, putting his forearm flat against the wall and resting his head on it. “Do it.”

My first thrust is slow, testing him, and then each time I move inside him, it’s faster. Harder.

The only sound to pass his lips is the harsh breath he lets out every time I pass over his prostate.

I do as he asked and take him the way I did the night we met, and if I close my eyes, I can imagine we’re back in that club, the music pumping outside the bathroom with my heart matching the beat of the bass. The smell and sounds of sex and seedy nightclub fill my senses, and it’s almost enough to send me over the edge.

“Dylan ...” My tone holds warning and need.

“I’m almost ...” He grunts. “Fuck.” He sounds like he’s struggling to get there. He’s close but not ready to fall yet.

My usual MO would be to give him a helping hand and jerk him off, but that’s not how it happened. So instead, I move a hand into his thick hair and grip to the point his scalp has to be stinging.

I lean in and say in his ear, “You promised me you’d come untouched, so give it to me.”

Dylan turns his head, and my unfocused gaze zeroes in on his deep brown eyes. “I need you to promise me something first.”

I slow my thrusts. “Anything.”

“Come back to me.” The faint words are barely heard.

“I will always come back to you,” I promise.

Then I kiss his jaw and feel it tense under my lips.



He starts to move first, fucking himself on my cock, and then when I match his rhythm, he grits his teeth as his whole body stiffens and he comes. I keep fucking him through his orgasm, his ass gripping me so tight, it only takes a few more pumps for me to empty inside him.

It hits me with such force, I have to brace my hand against the wall to hold me up and prevent me from crushing Dylan.

And when we both slowly calm down, I reluctantly pull out of him. I don't let go of him, though. I can't. Not after the promise I made him.

I lower my head and rest it in between his shoulder blades.

He allows it for a little while, but then he starts squirming. "I can feel your cum dripping out of me. I need to clean up."

"I'll help you."

He laughs. "Sure. Help." He tries to walk away, but I grab his wrist and pull him back to me.

"Let me take care of you."

Dylan closes his eyes, lets out a shuddery breath, and nods.

I grab the two towels Saint left for us last night and wrap one around Dylan's waist. "Shower's across the hall."

When I'm covered with my towel, Dylan takes my hand and pulls me with him, then watches as I get the shower ready for him.

I gesture for him to climb in the shower-bath combo, but he stays leaning against the vanity with his arms folded.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"That you'll come back. That this won't end after Walker's taken down."

My voice gets stuck in my throat because I'm not comfortable answering that in a way that sounds definite. Do I want to come back to him? Yes. Will I do everything in my power to make it happen? Also yes.

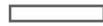
But going into a job—any job—and having the pressure of coming out the other side alive is new to me.

Other than my family, I've never had someone ask me to stay alive just so I can come back to them.

I approach him, wrapping him in my arms, and murmur into his neck, “No matter what happens, I will always want you. I will always fight to come home to you. And if you'll have me, I'll keep doing it.”

It's the closest I can get to promising him a future when I risk my life every other day. I hope it's enough.

And when he pulls my towel free from my waist and pushes me into the shower while kissing me and touching me all over my body, I know it's the closest he'll get to acceptance.



All my guys are in place. They've been camped out at the abandoned warehouses since last night, keeping an eye on everything and making sure Walker doesn't do the exact same thing we're doing—creating contingencies for if this plan becomes FUBAR.

Our plan is simple, but if it works, we'll get everything we want. Saint's on comms, watching and listening through our devices and logging it all to turn over to authorities when it's done. The only trick will be to get Walker to incriminate himself or shoot someone on video. Hopefully that's a last resort, though.

Our target is to clear Dylan's name with little to no bloodshed. Okay, maybe a little bloodshed on Walker's part, but I promised Dylan I'd try not to kill him.

We have Alphabet hiding where Hale saw the whole thing unfold between Dylan and Walker. Atlas and Zeus inside an old storage closet in one of the warehouses—and yes, closet jokes were a must. Angel and Proxy

are in the second warehouse, perched upstairs in an office that oversees the entire space, and the others are spread out over a few blocks to keep an eye on our targets as they arrive and to follow them in when they do.

I'm watching them all and hearing them through our comms devices from Iris's living room, where I'm leaving Iris behind. Much to his dismay. Iris loves action, and he's been relegated to babysitting duty. Not that Iris is the best choice to watch over Dylan. If Iris sees a chance to get in the action, he's going to jump at it. It's why I have Saint stationed here and not at headquarters. Well, that, and the bug. But mainly to make sure Iris doesn't go off plan.

I'd leave Ghost with them too, but I promised Ghost more field time, so he's going in with me.

"Ghost and I are on our way," I say into Saint's microphone that's attached to his computer.

I have my earpiece in so I can hear everything, but I'll keep it on mute until we get there. Having the constant chatter of my team in my head gets me in the zone.

"I don't know why we have to already be jammed in this closet," Zeus complains. "Atlas nearly takes up the whole damn space. I'm getting squashed in here."

"You're in there already in case they show up early. If I were them, I would," I say.

"I'm not that big," Atlas mumbles.

He is that big.

Iris takes over Saint's mic. "I would've thought you wouldn't mind being squashed up against a big, hulking man like Atlas. I could see you pulling the whole 'Oh, no, there's no room in here, and it's so hot. I'll have to take off my pants and sit in your lap.'"

"If it was anyone but Atlas, sure."

"Hey," Atlas complains.

“I love you, buddy, but I have this whole inferiority complex. If we were to ever get together, I’d have to bulk out like you, and I don’t have that kind of commitment.”

“You say this like you have any kind of commitment,” Iris snarks.

Yep. As crazy as these people are, they center me and keep me focused.

The drive at this time of day can take anywhere between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half from where we are, so we leave with plenty of time to get there first. Hopefully.

There are plans that are well-thought-out and planned to the last detail where every last variable is taken into consideration, and then there are the ones where there are too many variables, and we can only do the best with what we’ve got. That’s this job.

Walker could come with reinforcements. Well, I’m assuming he will.

My biggest worry is him not showing up at all but sending more goons like the ones he sent to my ranch. If that happens, blood will be spilled, and we will get nowhere.

But the trap should be too good for Walker to resist personally. We’re handing him Dylan on a silver platter.

“Nervous, boss?” Ghost asks beside me.

“Why do you say that?”

“Your knee won’t stop bouncing, and I’ve never seen you this way. You’re always so stoic and calm when you need to get down to business. I thought you had a switch you could flip.” He imitates a computerized voice. “Robot mode activated.”

“Well, that button’s broken today.”

“Because it’s Rodriguez? All those *he’s not my boyfriend* protests have been pretty silent lately.”

Reflexively, I want to say he’s not my boyfriend, but it doesn’t come out. That’s essentially what we agreed to be last night even if we didn’t say

the actual words. I plan to come home to him, and once he's out of this mess, I want a proper relationship with him. "He's important to me."

"Fair enough. Though, now is not the time to point out that a personal relationship could cloud your judgment in the field, right?"

"Correct."

Ghost cracks a smile.

"What about you?" I ask. "Give me a distraction. What's going on with Ghost?"

"You want a therapy session? What kind of update do you want? That my father, who disowned me when I came to the States because I was gay and could've been killed for it if I stayed in Afghanistan, is now trying to use me to get him out of there too? Or that I had a really awesome date with a guy that was completely ruined when I did a background check on him and realized every single thing he'd told me during the date was a lie? He told me he owned a ton of small businesses and was going to build the next giant conglomerate. Turns out, he works at Subway. Doesn't own a franchise or a store. He's a sandwich maker. And I wouldn't even care if he'd told me that. I don't need someone with money, and food service is a hard industry to work in. But to lie? I hate liars."

The more he talks, the more his natural accent comes through, but he's been in the States for a good fifteen years now, so it usually only happens when he's mad. And he rarely gets mad, so to see him like this ...

"Well, you've successfully distracted me, but I don't think that's a good thing. Are you okay? I thought you lived with your parents?"

"I do. Well, my mom. I live with her and my stepfather. It's funny because back in Afghanistan, my mother was considered a radical. She fought for the rights of women. But America was a huge culture shock for her when she moved, and now I'd consider her conservative. She's more conservative than my stepfather, who is also Muslim but was raised in America. He didn't even blink when my mom told him I was gay."

“Okay, so what’s the story with your birth father?”

“He’s a traditionalist, and when I came to the States and my mother came with me, he told everyone we were dead. She hated Afghanistan, hated the traditions, worried for me from when I was young because she knew I was *different*. Divorce would make him look bad, so poof, we became ghosts.”

Well, shit. “Wait, your code name—”

“It’s fitting, isn’t it? I almost laughed when you gave it to me, but I didn’t want you to change it. In a way, I connect with it because I left that whole life behind me. My faith, the majority of my family. I really am dead to them. So for him to call me ... I don’t even know how he got my number.”

Silence falls, and I don’t know what to say.

“Families can be hard.” *Way to go, Trav. So reassuring.*

I haven’t had to deal with any family drama because mine is great. Had I known how good they’d be about me being gay, I would have come out to them sooner. I took it upon myself to try to *fix* me, but when I realized it wasn’t possible and I inevitably got it off my chest, they were the ones who told me I didn’t need to be fixed.

I can only imagine what it’s like for those in families who don’t accept them. Who hide behind religion as an excuse to cut someone they’re supposed to love out of their life.

“You’re welcome,” Ghost says.

“What for?”

“Diversion tactics.” He winks at me. “You look like you’re overthinking in your head, and I’m guessing it’s not about Dylan or Walker anymore.”

“Wait, was that all bullshit?”

“I wish my life was drama-free enough to have to make up stories for you. Sadly all true, but I took one for the team and blurted that all over you.”

“You know what you need? I think you need someone older who could look after you.”

“I’d settle for someone who didn’t lie.”

“High standards you have there.”

“I’m thinking in this day and age, that is a hard ask. Instead of asking potential boyfriends if they’re seeing someone, I ask if anyone is under the *impression* they’re in a relationship with them. Apparently, that needs clarifying.”

Decaf, who’s a few blocks west of our destination, says over comms, “Possible mark heading from the port. Black SUV. Tags, Nine, Delta, Lima, Tango, Five, Six, Zero.”

I click my earpiece off mute. “Saint?”

“On it. They’re government plates. It could be Walker.”

“It could be anyone,” I say. “We’re thirty seconds out.”

“Another possible mark,” Kevlar says from the east. He reads out those tags, and Saint gets the same results.

“They could be boxing us in,” I say. “Everyone on alert. This could be it.”

Ghost pulls into the abandoned lot and turns off the engine. “Ready?”

“More than ready.” I grab my Glock 42 out of the glove compartment even though I’m assuming they’ll take it off me immediately. Same with the gun on Ghost’s hip.

But if we don’t have weapons on us, Walker will immediately be suspicious. We’re prepared for that to happen.

We get out and stand by the trunk of my Range Rover, Glock tucked in at my back and my arms folded. I lean against my car, trying to force the usual carefree and calm attitude that Ghost says I have.

Everyone on comms has gone silent, and at first, I think it’s because they’re all gearing up and getting ready for what’s about to come. But then

static fills my ear with someone's voice cutting in and out in snippets I can't hear.

Ghost and I share a look.

"Can you repeat that?" Ghost says.

Nothing comes.

"Signal jammer," we say at the same time.

"Walker's smarter than I anticipated," I say.

"What do you want to do? Abort?" Ghost asks just as a car turns into the lot.

"Too late now. Follow my lead, and act like we don't know anything."

"Knowing nothing is Zeus's specialty, not mine."

I smile. "That would be a lot funnier if he could hear it."

"I already forgot he can't. Throwing shade is only fun if you can say it to their face."

Another car arrives, followed closely by a third. The latter two block our exit while the first rolls right up opposite us.

I swallow a relieved breath when it's Walker who steps out of that car. I can't let it show that we've got everything riding on this.

"Expecting someone else?" He lifts his chin and is joined by Rowling's son, who gets out of the driver's-side door.

I act unfazed. It comes easily when this was our plan all along. "Nope."

"Figured as much. You don't think I can sense a trap when it's laid out for me that easily?"

My gaze narrows. "If you suspected it was a trap, why did you come?"

"How conceited are you? You want to know how I *knew* it was a trap?" He steps closer, and I instinctually reach behind me and grip the handle of my gun. He stops. "Because I'm the man who hired you to tail Councilman Rowling."

Okay, that was not what I was expecting. "You're ..."

"I'm Gary Price."



Fucking, fuck, fuck.

We set ourselves up.

“How—”

“When Jon’s dear father caught on to what I was doing, he wanted nothing more than to take me down. So I hired you to get dirt on my old best friend.”

Rowling has never been corrupt.

“When that didn’t work, I did something I didn’t want to do but felt I had to.”

What an asshole. “You brought your godson into it so Rowling wouldn’t turn you in. He’s protecting his son.”

“Still, I was hopeful you’d find something for me so I could get Jon out. Then he got in too deep.”

“Yeah, I’d say killing one of his dealers point-blank is getting in too deep.”

The kid in question gives me the finger and opens his mouth to talk, but Walker stops him by glaring at him.

“We’re in this because of *you*. Don’t say a word.” Walker turns back to me. “Now, where’s Dylan Rodriguez?”

“Right where you expect him to be,” I say.

“Not here.” Walker cocks his head. “That’s not him outside the fence? Or not one of the two people hiding in that building?” Walker points to the warehouse where Angel and Proxy are and then to the other where Atlas and Zeus are.

Jon Rowling is holding a device that looks like a remote control for—

A buzzing sound hits my ears, and it gets louder and louder until a drone flies over our heads.

Walker is even more prepared than I thought, which complicates things but doesn’t fuck it up completely. He’s two steps ahead of us, and I hate it when assholes get the jump on me, but not all is lost yet.

“Seems this has been a waste of both our times, then,” I say.

I don’t want to let him go, and it would be easy for me to take out each and every one of these guys and get rid of them, but where will that get me? That doesn’t clear Dylan’s name.

“Not really,” Walker says. “Not when you have most of your men here and poor Dylan is holed up in Monrovia.”

At that, my blood runs cold.

“How did you—”

“You might have found the bug my guy planted in your place, but you didn’t find the trackers on your cars, did you?”

Motherfucker.

Domino was at HQ when he found the bug, and then he came straight to me, and we took his car thinking it wouldn’t be recognized.

Walker has known where we’ve been all along.

And now he’s going after Dylan.

I go to hit the receiver in my ear when I remember the signal jammer in effect. I take out my phone, and it’s got as much reception as a fucking brick. Which also means our plan to document and record this whole interaction has hit a bump in the road.

I have state-of-the-art equipment that regular citizens don’t have access to, and we went this route to gather all the evidence in the highest-quality possible, but state of the art doesn’t mean shit if Walker’s blocking the signal.

He stands across from me, smirking, and I’m prepared to wipe it off his goddamn face with my fist.

He has us trapped with no way to contact anyone on the outside.

Dylan’s in trouble.

And we need to move to a backup plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE\_

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DYLAN

WHEN THE COMMS GO SILENT IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE GUYS SAID THE other cars were approaching, I know something's wrong.

"What happened?" I ask.

"The feed is gone." Saint checks all the cables to his computer, but he won't find anything.

Walker went in prepared.

"They're in trouble," I say.

Saint types away at his computer and then holds the earpiece of his headset. "I can't get a hold of Trav. Iris, see if you can get anyone else on the line."

"On it." Iris takes out his phone.

"What can I do?" I ask.

"Stand there and don't worry. We've got this."

So reassuring, Saint. Really.

Saint tries someone else, but the look in his eyes tells me he can't get through. I glance at Iris, and he subtly shakes his head at Saint with his phone to his ear before looking at his screen and hitting some other buttons.

"What does it mean if we can't get a hold of them?" I ask.

"Unless the news has reports of a bombing near the Port of Los Angeles, my guess would be signal jammer," Saint says.

“We’ve used those in raids before,” I point out. “And I wouldn’t put it past Walker to use company equipment.”

Saint turns to Iris. “Call the guys who were blocks away.”

This time, Iris reaches someone.

He puts his phone on speaker. “Alphabet, tell us what’s happening.”

“We don’t know. Everything went silent. I did a drive-by of the warehouses, pretending to be normal traffic, and Walker has his guys blocking the entry. When I got a few blocks away, my earpiece did this high-pitched whiney thing, and then you called my phone.”

Iris puts the phone on Saint’s desk and leans over it. “We think they’re blocking our signal, so we can’t use any of our devices.”

“So we have no idea what’s happening in there,” Alphabet says.

“What do we do?” Saint asks.

Iris leans over him and taps away at Saint’s keyboard. “We call Domino and hope to God he’s outside the reach of that signal jammer.”

“If he was outside it, wouldn’t we have heard him on the comms?” I ask.

“I think our comms are dead,” Saint says. “Is there a device that can do that? Like a magnetic pulse?”

“You know who’d be able to answer that question? Ghost. Where is he? Oh right, he wanted to do more fieldwork, so he’s right next to Trav,” Iris says.

“Where was Domino stationed in the op?” Iris asks.

“Two blocks south,” Alphabet says.

“Can you try to look for him?”

“Hang on,” Saint cuts in. “His cell is ringing.” Saint turns off his headset so the call comes through the computer speakers and mic.

Domino answers the call, but it’s all staticky, and all we can hear is. “Some ... cut ... don’t ... up?”

“Step away from the warehouses,” Saint yells. “Wherever you are, turn around.”

The call drops.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

“Quick,” Alphabet says. “Do that Find my Phone thingy Trav does when he wants to find one of us.”

“Find my Phone.” Saint scoffs. “That’s cute. Trav’s system is more complex than that.” He taps away at his computer. “Alphabet, he was at the corner of Magnolia Ave. and Anaheim Street when the call dropped out. Go find him and tell him what’s going on. We don’t have eyes or ears on them anymore.”

An alert sounds from Iris’s phone, and he rushes to the window and pulls back the curtain the tiniest bit, scanning his front yard. “But we do have company.”

“What is it?” Alphabet asks.

“Get to Domino,” Iris orders. It’s the first time I think I’ve ever heard him truly authoritative. He’s calm, but there’s an edge in his tone. “Tell him you guys are on your own. We have a situa— Oh, fuck. Get down, now!”

Iris turns and dives, and I don’t even stop to think about why. I hit the ground so fast, I almost wind myself. The sound of shattering glass rings through my ears, the smell of smoke permeates the air, and a blanket of hot fire covers me.

I cough through the smoke.

“Iris?” a panicked voice asks.

“Saint,” comes Iris’s reply.

I lift my head and realize I’m only a few feet from Iris now. He either dove far or ... I catch sight of the window behind him that’s been smashed. Fiery curtains blaze, making my skin hot and itchy. I back away as fast as I can from the window and press my back against a wall. “What was that?” I cough.

Iris and Saint's dog runs into the room, growling and barking at the flames.

"Molotov cocktail." Iris pulls himself toward me, and when Princess sees her daddy, she runs to help.

"Princess Smooshy Face, back," Iris says. "Stay."

She does as she's told, but she's still barking and doing the tappy foot things dogs do when they want something.

"Are you hurt?" I ask Iris.

"Nope. Just don't want to stand up and give them a shot at me. Saint, how are you holding up?"

"Uh, good? I think?"

I turn my head to where Saint looks terrified, hiding under his computer desk. "Are you sure about that?"

He nods but doesn't move.

"We need to get to the basement," Iris says. "They're coming in here whether or not we're ready for them."

"And you want to corner ourselves under the house?" I ask.

Iris grins at me. "Follow me and keep down."

We stick as low to the ground as we can until we reach the steps leading to a pit of darkness. Iris stands and then helps me up.

"You go. I need to make sure Saint is okay. Take Princess with you." He whistles, and the dog comes barreling around the corner. She practically knocks me down as she runs past me, and I slip on the steps, falling on my ass on the second-to-last one.

I'm thankful Iris is too busy helping Saint off the ground when I look back and they didn't see it.

They embrace quickly, and Iris cups Saint's cheek.

I don't want to break them apart, but they do know our lives are at stake, don't they?

I get back to my feet and enter the only door down here. I almost fall again when I see all the weaponry I could imagine, meticulously hung on walls like it's a showcase ...

I reach the table in the center of the room and do a spin. Every wall. Every surface. There are enough weapons and ammo to arm my entire squad at the DEA.

Iris steps into the room. "Impressive, right? Don't just stand there. Start loading up." He throws me a bulletproof vest and Saint as well, then puts a shoulder holster on with a handgun on each side and straps an automatic rifle to his back.

"What about you?" I ask and lift the bulletproof vest.

"I should've invested in more Kevlar, but you and Saint take priority."

"No, wait—"

"This isn't up for discussion. We don't have time."

As he says this, a sound echoes down the stairs, a loud thump like someone breaking in or dropping something heavy.

Iris fills his pockets with ammo, and now that Saint's suited up, he joins Iris in covering himself with as many weapons as possible.

I think back to the night Trav and I escaped his ranch and feel the similarities. Yet, Iris and Saint work as if nothing is happening. Like this is an everyday occurrence for them.

And the fact I've been in Trav's care for a short time and it's the second time this has happened, I have to say, I think this *is* a usual workday for them.

"You're gonna have to move faster," Iris singsongs at me. "I'm not going to carry your ass out to the car, and if I leave you behind, Trav will kill me. So, move." He pushes me aside and stands in front of the wall where there's a ... Is that a rocket launcher? "My baby," he murmurs.

His dog nudges his hand with her snout, and I don't have the heart to tell her I don't think he's talking about her.



“Do you really need to take that?” Saint asks.

“What do you think emergency RPG means? If this doesn’t constitute an emergency, I don’t know what does.”

“Just ... don’t blow up our house, okay?”

“I can’t make those promises. Let’s roll out.”

Shit. I still haven’t picked up a weapon. I grab the nearest one, a small P365.

“Bold choice,” Iris says. “Good to know our lives are on the line and you choose the smallest weapon I own. Then again, you’re in love with Trav, so logic doesn’t always have to make sense ... I suppose.”

“Stop teasing the man, when—” Saint stops talking suddenly.

One of the stairs creaks, like under the weight of a foot.

Iris turns, gun drawn, and says to Saint, “Get Rodriguez and Princess out of here.”

How are we supposed to get out of here when those fuckers are closing in?

Saint drags me to the two barnlike doors in the opposite direction to the stairs and unlatches it as quietly as he can.

Do Trav and all his men have escape routes in their houses? I’m not even going to think too hard about why. Well, I don’t really need to. *Exhibit A.*

Iris shoots, and the sound reverberates in my skull.

“Go, go now,” Iris shouts at us.

“Stay behind me. We’re going to be moving fast, so keep up.” Saint looks down at his heels. “Princess Smooshy Face, heel.”

He swings the door open, and I don’t look anywhere else but at his back so I can follow him. He crosses the yard quickly, his automatic rifle lifted and ready to fire if he needs to. He leads me toward the back of the property, which is confusing until a door in the rock wall opens to reveal a car.

Princess follows orders until we get to a certain point and stops in the middle of the yard. Gunfire is coming from the house, and she turns and whines, no doubt wondering where her other daddy is.

“Princess Smooshy Face, heel,” Saint says again.

I take a quick look around and realize there are a lot of places these guys could hide on this large property, and we’re out here like sitting ducks because of a stupid dog and her loyalty.

Then she looks up at us with literally puppy dog eyes, ones that say she’s worried about her dad and wants to go back, and I realize she’s not stupid at all. She’s too smart for her own good.

“Come on, pup.” I tuck my gun away and bend to pick her up.

“What are you doing?” Saint asks.

“Don’t you think standing out here waiting for a dog is a good way to get us killed? And if we abandon her in the middle of a gunfight, your boyfriend will kill us. Either way, I don’t want to die.”

The next minute, Iris appears from the weapon bunker, running and waving his arms.

I think he’s yelling something, but he’s too far away, and there’s too much gunfire ringing in my ears for me to make out what. Then I can make out a faint “Go!”

I quickly pick up the dog and run as fast as I can while carrying the sixty-pound beast, who has suddenly stopped whining and is now happily panting in my arms.

Saint and I make it to the car, and I put Princess in the back seat with me. Saint gets in the driver’s seat, the engine roars to life, and then we watch as Iris runs backward while spraying bullets everywhere in the vicinity of the shadows chasing us.

Saint laughs. “She played you.”

I glance down at the German shepherd, who’s now looking up at me with a wide smile on her face and her tongue lolling out the side of her

mouth. She probably did, but I don't even care. I praise her and pat her head, but then I'm thrust backward as Saint steps on the gas. He pulls up next to Iris, who instead of getting in the car like a normal person, jumps in through the already open window feet-first and sits on the doorframe like it's a seat.

He reaches back for the rocket launcher and bangs on the roof twice, and Saint takes off again.

Trav's people are ... frighteningly badass. And I shouldn't be surprised considering Trav is the same, but it makes me realize I don't understand their world.

I live and work in the crime industry. I thought I knew what bad guys were like. This ... whole underworld of assassin mercenaries, go bags, and running out of your home to escape people trying to kill you ... There's so much more to Trav than I ever let myself contemplate before.

And if I walk away from this with no job, no future, and no real direction, at least I'll leave with something I never had before: respect for Trav.

I've also learned to understand him on a deeper level. He likes to keep things light because if he lived with this constant darkness getting to him, there's no way he could stay sane.

As we pass the house to get to the main gate, the flames are what catch my attention. The house is still on fire, the wood paneling acting like kindling to the flames.

"I think you're going to lose your house," I say.

Two figures emerge from the front door, one limping while raising his automatic rifle at us, the other continuously firing our way. The tinging of bullets hitting metal has me jumping on top of their dog in case any breach the car.

Then, without warning, Iris launches a fucking grenade at his house. It hits the steps leading up to his porch and front door and explodes into a

fireball of debris and smoke.

The ground shudders, the explosion rattling the whole car and scaring Princess half to death.

She sits up and whines, and I pull her close.

The two assholes Iris was aiming for fly through the air like they've been shot out of a cannon and land on the ground with a hard thump. If they're not dead, they're at least seriously injured.

"I take it back," I say. "You're definitely going to lose your house."

We make it down their long driveway and out onto their street when Iris taps on the roof again. Saint pulls to a stop, and Iris climbs out, approaching two cars parked illegally near the entrance to his house. He takes out a knife and slashes their tires before moving around to the driver's-side door and knocking on Saint's window.

"You know the rules."

Saint gets out of the car. "The first time he lets me drive his car, and it's literally one hundred feet. Worst boyfriend ever."

They don't trade places quick enough for my liking, and I frantically glance around to see if anyone's about to jump out at us.

I'm about to ask them if we're going to get on the road anytime soon, but Iris's words cut me off.

"Are you sure you're okay? No PTSD or flashbacks or panic attacks going on?"

Yep. I'm going to shut my mouth and pretend I can't hear them.

"Surprisingly, no."

The smile in Saint's voice is evident, and I'm happy for him. I didn't know he had PTSD, but then again, it's not like I know much about any of Trav's men.

I fought my attraction to him for so long, I lumped all of Mike Bravo in with each other. I thought they were all meathead adrenaline junkies who

thrived on this shit. But thinking about it deeper, it would make sense that they have scars, both physically and mentally after what they do.

They get into the car, and the ride is silent as we leave the burning mess that is their house.

“So, where to now?” I ask.

Iris punches the gas. “Now we go and save Trav’s ass.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR\_

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TRAV

THE WORST PART ABOUT BEING IN CHARGE OF A GROUP OF OVERGROWN children is sometimes I become a walking contradiction when I decide my own rules don't apply to me. Do as I say, not as I do, kids. Otherwise, you end up here, doing something stupid for love that has the chance of getting other people you love killed.

When I realize Walker's plans for Dylan, I draw my weapon, advance two steps, and point it at his fucking head.

He holds up his hand. "Nuh-uh. I wouldn't do that if I were you. You have highly trained DEA agents with the strict instructions to shoot on sight if you hurt me."

Despite the urge to kill him, a voice in the back of my head tells me that if I do, it won't fix Dylan's problems.

Walker says, "If you shoot me, they'll shoot you, and then I'll have a whole lot of paperwork to do." He points to the cars behind him, the ones blocking our exit, and two men get out, using their cars as shields as they point their weapons in my direction. I recognize one of them as the man who was with Walker when they came to HQ looking for Dylan.

"Paperwork won't be a problem if you're dead." My gaze sweeps between the two men with guns and Walker while I weigh up my options.

Do the other agents even know what's happening here, or did Walker tell them Dylan's responsible for everything?

If I'm not careful, this whole debacle could go down in a hail fire of bullets. And while we outnumber them, the risk is too high for my men.

I slowly lower my gun because I need answers. "Is that how you've kept tabs on Dylan? Tell the DEA you're running an internal investigation on him after the death of a young junkie you mysteriously know nothing about but happened to be in the area it occurred?"

Walker tsks. "It's a shame what Agent Rodriguez did to that boy."

"Except you know he didn't."

"Do I? All I know is when I got here, there was a dead kid on the ground, a highly respected councilman's son hiding, and Agent Rodriguez covered in the victim's blood."

"Mm. And when did you get here exactly? All CCTV footage only shows three cars arriving and no one on foot. The logical conclusion is you came here with someone. So, which was it? The dead junkie or the godson? Because you sure as fuck weren't with Rodriguez."

"Tampering with evidence is a criminal offense, you know. I could take you all in."

"If you were going to arrest us, you would've brought more backup than those two." I nod behind him.

"I don't need backup. But to be safe, I need everyone you brought with you to come out here."

I snort. "You think it's going to be safer for you to have my team closer?"

"No weapons," Walker says.

"What makes you think they'll agree to that?"

Walker smiles. "Because if they don't, their boss, their mentor, the one who gives them money will die." He's quick to draw out a gun and point it at me. "Drop your gun."

"Why? Are you going to line us up and kill us all? How far are you willing to go to cover up your crimes? What will you do to protect Jon from



a mess you got him into?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.” He points the nozzle of his Glock toward the ground. “Drop it. Now.” He points it at Ghost. “You too.”

We do as he says because we don’t really have another choice here.

“How far have you already gone to save your own ass? Kill? Cover up a murder? Shoot at one of your own men?”

Walker’s stoic exterior begins to crack. “Tell your team to all come out here now before we light this place up. Unless you’ve trained your team to dodge bullets and you think you could get out of here alive.”

I raise my voice loud enough for all my guys to come out from their spots. I still don’t have a solid plan to get us out of this, and I’m guessing Walker’s trying to figure the same. We outnumber him. He can’t be under the impression he could take us all out without one of us retaliating.

I’ll play his game while I try to figure this out, but if I leave it too long, he might feel cornered, and that’s when shit goes wrong.

And as my team makes their way out of their hiding spots, I try to hide my triumph. Appearing alongside Proxy isn’t Angel like it should be. It’s Domino.

The cavalry has arrived.

“Weapons,” Walker says.

Everyone waits for me to give them the go-ahead before placing them in a pile with Ghost’s and mine.

If I were Walker, I’d make sure none of us are still packing. Going to a job with only one gun? That would be like going to a strip club with a single dollar bill.

Luckily, Walker makes a mistake. It’s not the first since we arrived, but it’s a catastrophic one for him. I get the feeling he’s the type of guy who’s good with planning but forgets things when shit gets real.

We’re the opposite. Sure, we plan as much as we can and have contingencies for different scenarios, but we severely underestimated

Walker, so we need to make this up on the fly.

And with Domino here, I know without a doubt that he has a contingency for our contingencies.

He comes to stand next to me.

“All of you, hands where I can see them,” Walker says.

Domino lifts his hands and mutters out the side of his mouth, “Angel, Alphabet, and Decaf are in position to take these guys out. All you have to do is give the word.”

“We’ve got everything we need,” I say. “But we need them alive.”

“Well, that’s no fun, but luckily, we covered that.”

“Want to share with the class?” Walker asks.

“Ready?” I ask low. When Domino nods, I speak up to put the others on alert. “Oh, I was just telling Domino here that I have everything I need to take you down.”

“You don’t have shit,” Walker says.

“Don’t I? Ghost, take out your phone and show him the recording.”

Ghost doesn’t miss a beat, even though he has no idea what I’m talking about.

“You might have scrambled our signal, but that doesn’t mean we couldn’t hit record when we had the chance.”

Rage inside Walker builds to the point his face turns red. He tightens his grip on his gun, and I know it’s time.

I don’t take my eyes off Walker as I say, “Now,” to Domino.

Dom casually says, “Hey, where’s Mike?”

We all hit the deck faster than any soldier could say, *Sir, yes, sir*. The good thing about having a Mike Bravo team is that we can use Mike as a code word for when shit is about to hit the fan.

Gunshots echo around the practically empty space—I can’t tell how many, but I’m thankful for the lack of burning on my skin. I’m not shot.

I reach for the gun strapped to my ankle, but by the time I've got it pointed at Walker, he's sitting on the ground, holding on to his wrist while his hand bleeds all over the place.

Angel steps out from behind the entrance of the warehouse. She really is the best at what she does.

Decaf and Alphabet have the other two at the entrance, pinned against their cars, and then there was one.

Before Jon Rowling knows what's going on, the rest of my guys pull their hidden weapons and train them on him, while Ghost is the only one to check on Walker. He immediately starts wrapping Walker's hand to stop the bleeding.

"What's the plan, boss?" Domino asks.

I hold up a finger and pull out my phone, hitting Stop on the recording app I opened the second I realized our electronics were dead. Contingencies, contingencies, contingencies. "As much as I'd like to make these fuckers disappear, I need Dylan's name cleared. Walker all but admitted his plan to pin it all on him. So we need to send this recording to Internal Affairs ... or whatever the DEA equivalent is so there's no doubt in the eyes of the law who was in the wrong."

"You trust them to actually bring justice?" Domino asks.

I scoff. "Sadly, no, but it should be enough to clear Dylan's name. That's the important thing."

"We should really call an ambulance." Domino gestures toward Walker where he's still bleeding. He looks pale too.

"Guess we need to find this jammer, then." I check my pockets.

"Why are you looking in there?" Domino asks.

"I'm being very thorough and not at all stalling. Duh."

"Oh. Right. I should check mine too."

Walker calls out through gritted teeth. "Fuck. You."

“Geez, you’d think we shot his hand off.” I step closer to him. “If you tell us where the jammer is, the sooner we can get you help. If you want it, that is. Do you know what happens to ex-law enforcement in prison?” I shudder.

The Rowling kid tries to move closer, but all the guns pointed in his direction make him hesitate. “It’s, uh, in the car. I’ll just—”

Alphabet moves in. “Take a step. I dare you.”

“We’ll get it,” I tell them. “Ghost, you go find it. I’ll watch over Walker.”

Ghost stands. “It was a through and through. He’ll be fine.”

“Shame,” I say.

Ghost gets in the car, and it doesn’t take him long to find the device. “You’re all good.” He gives us a thumbs-up.

I hit 9-1-1 on my phone to get this ball rolling.

With any luck, we’ve done enough to keep Dylan safe ... if he’s not already dead.

My hand shakes as I finish up the call with the first responders and then hit Dylan’s number for the phone I gave him. Then I hold my breath as I wait for him to answer.

He doesn’t.

It rings, and rings, and rings, and every time I hear a new one, my heart sinks deeper and deeper.

He has to be okay.

Because I don’t know what I’ll do if he isn’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE\_

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DYLAN

MY HEART IS IN MY THROAT THE CLOSER WE GET TO WILMINGTON. WE don't know what we're going to find. No matter how prepared Trav was, I get the feeling *he* was walking into a trap, not the other way around. Walker had planned for those guys to show up at Iris's house at the perfect time, and he knew I was going to be there and not at the warehouses.

I've worked with Walker for years. I should've anticipated it. I should've done ... something.

Then again, I know Trav, and if I'd protested, he would've done whatever he wanted anyway.

I just have to hope he's more competent than Walker.

It's as if I can hear his voice in my head. "Please. I'm me. You know I'm fine."

Then, when we get close, an ambulance cuts us off, lights and siren on, and I suck in a breath so sharp Princess lifts her head to give me a dirty look for disturbing her nap.

"It's fine," Iris says. "It's not— Oh, fuck." The ambulance turns into the same street we need to go. "No, no. It's still all good."

Iris pushes the gas to catch up, but as we round the corner, it's not all good. It's not fine.

The ambulance disappears into the abandoned warehouse lot, where there are already flashing red and blue lights everywhere.

I need to get to Trav, and I need to get there *now*.

Iris follows the ambulance, pulling up to the entrance, but it's obvious we won't be getting through the chaos, so he quickly reverses and parks on the street.

I jump out of the car and run toward the sea of officers and people I don't know, frantically searching for the one face I need to see.

The first face I see is not Trav's but Domino's. And then he smiles, and I catch sight of the body in front of him with their back to me. The military haircut, the wide shoulders, strong back, down to the narrow waist and delectable ass I want to make mine.

And when Domino points to me and Trav turns, his relief mimics my own.

I suddenly don't care who's around or what went down here. All I care about is that Trav's alive.

I run toward him, weaving through police, my gaze never leaving Trav's, and when I reach him, I tell myself to slow down, but my body doesn't listen.

I jump and wrap my legs around his waist, and he doesn't miss a beat. His hands are all over my ass, my arms snake around the back of his neck, and without even saying a word, our lips find each other's.

He tastes like relief and adrenaline, and I sigh into his mouth.

The kiss lasts for an eternity, and I don't give a shit that everyone is seeing and that neither of us will live it down with his team.

I. Don't. Care.

Trav's alive, I'm alive, and I'm praying all these cop cars means it's over.

Fuck, what about—

“Walker.” I wrench myself away, and Trav drops my legs.

I only barely catch my balance and save myself from landing ass-first on the hard ground.

“You kiss me and say his name?” Trav growls.

“Need to keep you on your toes somehow.” I grin.

“You’re going to be the death of me, I swear.” Yet, he can’t help smiling back.

“No. No death to either of us for a really long time.”

Trav wraps his arms around me and pulls me against him. “Or until you get sick of me and go rogue by killing me and hiding my body.”

“Or that. Though, you’re the one who actually has a ‘cleanup crew’ like you’re the CIA.” Wait ... “Holy shit. Is Mike Bravo a division of the CIA?”

Trav leans in and whispers in my ear. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

A throat clears behind us. “Agent Rodriguez?”

I practically flinch at the deep and authoritative voice. It’s an unfamiliar voice, and when I turn, there’s someone I’ve never seen before.

“I’m Gordon Scarborough. I’m from the Office of Professional Responsibility.”

Oh shit. This is it. The OPR is a part of the DEA investigation division. They’re the ones responsible for bringing corrupt DEA agents to justice. They not only have the power to fire me but to put me in prison for a very long time.

Gordon reaches out his hand for me to shake. “It’s nice to meet you.”

My gaze narrows. “O ... kay?”

“Your partner here filled me in and gave me enough on Special Agent in Charge Walker to make sure he never holds a badge or gun again. Same goes for Special Agents Evans and Fields. I’m sorry for what you’ve been through. If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate at all to reach out to me.” He hands me a card with his name and office number. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m riding with Walker to the hospital to make sure he doesn’t escape on us.”

As he walks away, I turn to Trav. “Hospital?” I ask.



He pulls that innocent face he does that drives me crazy ... usually. For some reason, I find it charming now. Ugh. He's right. There would come a day I wouldn't be able to resist him, and apparently, that day is here.

"Angel might have possibly disarmed Walker with a bullet. To the hand. *Maybe.*"

I shake my head. "Well, I do want to commend you for not putting a bullet through his head. I know that must have called on all your self-restraint."

"All of it. I have none left. Which is why ..." He grabs my ass again and pulls me to him, crushing his mouth to mine.

"Ugh. Get a room," a voice says. It has to be Iris. "This is like watching my parents make out. Not that I ever saw that happen in real life because my dad left and my mom died, but if I had parents with a healthy relationship, I assume watching them make out would gross me out like this is."

"Try watching them have sex," Saint adds.

Trav's hands leave me, but his mouth doesn't, and I think it's a safe bet to say he's flipping them off with both hands.

Trav keeps kissing me, and I let him. If it were up to me, I'd be permanently attached to his face for the next few days. At least.

When Trav finally pulls back, he stares deep into my eyes. "You're alive. I was so worried."

"Yeah, but my house isn't," Iris cuts in.

"Because you shot your rocket launcher at it," I say.

Trav doesn't flinch or take his eyes off me when he says, "I'll pay to fix it. The important thing is you saved Dylan."

"So you'll build me a brand-new house?" Iris asks.

Trav finally lifts his head. "Wait, how much house did you damage?"

"Well, when we left it, it had two possibly dead guys out front, and it was on fire. Sooooo maybe ... all of it?"

“And ... you were the one who shot your RPG toward it?” Trav rubs his chin.

“No, no. You already said you’ll fix it. No backsies! Plus, we saved the love of your life. You should give us the ranch for doing that.”

Trav rubs the back of his neck, and I avert eye contact with everyone.

We haven’t even said the L word to each other yet, even though it was implied before he left to go get Walker.

And if I’m honest with myself, I regretted not saying it to him. When I thought he was hurt or dead, I wanted nothing more than to tell him that I am in love with him. Reluctantly.

I don’t know when it happened, just that it has.

Now’s not the ideal time to say it. His team is here, Walker’s being taken into custody, there are still police everywhere, I assume waiting for everyone’s statements. But I don’t want to hold it back any longer. I thought I’d lost him.

I need to tell him. I open my mouth, but Domino steps closer.

“So, umm, now that this is all over, we need to talk.”

Shit, that sounds ominous. The L word can wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX\_

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TRAV

AFTER THE LONG-ASS NIGHT WE'VE HAD, THE LAST THING I WANT TO DO IS go all the way out to the ranch first thing in the morning. But Dom has insisted. He says the cleanup crew we usually use ran into some problems.

Whatever we're walking into, we're doing it as a team, and I'm doing it with Dylan by my side.

After everyone gave their statements to law enforcement, we all went back to HQ and passed out from the adrenaline crash that comes after a job.

Now, in true Mike Bravo fashion, we're heading out as a group to the ranch for some R and R. Only, we'll have to deal with whatever mess has been left by our cleanup crew first.

I bet it has to do with my damn carpet that dude bled all over. Blood is a bitch to get out, but they know I'm particular when it comes to the ranch. *Nothing* can be changed.

I ask Domino to drive so I can stay as close to Dylan as possible in the back seat. I have him practically squished against me, not that he's complaining too much. After last night and not knowing where he was or if he was okay, I never want to let him get more than six feet away from me at any one time.

But the closer we get to the ranch, the more I get the sense that Domino is way too eager to get there. And when he smirks at me in the rearview mirror, I know something's up.

I narrow my gaze at him. “Nothing’s wrong at the ranch, is there?”

“What gives you that impression?”

“You’re too happy about—oh fuck. No. Fucking fuck nuggets.”

Dylan shifts in my arms and looks up at me. “What is it?”

“After all these years and getting so close to the end of the bet, you did it, didn’t you? You finally managed to get someone to redecorate my place.”

“Bet?” Dylan asks as Domino turns into the ranch’s drive.

Everything so far looks usual, but the outside was never part of the wager.

“What bet?” Dylan asks again.

“I already told you I asked Domino to decorate the place, but what I didn’t tell you is that when I first walked in, I genuinely thought Domino was under the impression he’d done a good job, and I didn’t want to offend him by saying how god-awful it looked.”

Domino laughs, the asshole.

“Seriously, for two days on a team retreat out here, whenever anyone asked what was with the interior design and cracked jokes about the designer getting revenge for something I did, I was a good best friend and defended it all.”

“Until one day, I cracked.” Domino laughs some more.

“Then of course, I wanted to make a bonfire out of every piece of ugly-ass furniture and knickknack.”

Dylan perks up. “Why didn’t you? I’d be so down for that. Where can we start? The art on the wall that looks like blood spatter? No, the animal print ... everything.”

“I bet him he couldn’t last five years the way it was,” Domino says.

“Wow. That’s a bad bet. You took it?”

“No. I decided to keep it that way for all this time,” I deadpan. “Of course I took it. But the timer’s not up. I still had another year left.”

Dylan slaps my leg. “This is the secret you’ve kept from your team, isn’t it? You didn’t want to tell any of them because they’d sabotage you and move all your shit.”

“Exactly. It’s been a bet between Domino and me this whole time. And now ...”

“Now it’s time to pay up.” Domino pulls the car out front instead of heading to the underground parking lot.

Here we go.

“I’m pretty sure we didn’t discuss what would happen if half the house got destroyed during a raid,” I say as we get out of the car and head for the front door. “Shouldn’t that be a loophole or something?”

“Mm, should be, but it’s not. Remember when we made the bet and I asked that? Your exact words were ‘No one is gonna know where this place is. It’s going to be my safe house away from everything.’ And then there were rumors around town about this place, and everyone knew where it was and that Travis West, that ex-military dude who”—Domino lifts his hands for air quotes—“‘still totally does sketchy black ops shit’ owns it?”

“I have no best friend,” I mutter.

Domino turns to Dylan. “Let’s just say, it’s no wonder that merc group found you two so easily. It’s a shame they didn’t stop to think about how dead they would get from taking on the job.”

“Th-they died?” Dylan asks.

“A couple of them ...” Domino frowns at me slashing at my throat. “Uh, were injured. Casually. They’re fine now. Not dead at all. Not even a little bit.”

I facepalm so hard.

“They died because of me,” Dylan says.

I turn to him and lay my hands on his shoulders. “They died because they took on a job they weren’t prepared for. They died because Walker hired them to kill you, and if it weren’t for me, they would have succeeded.

Do you understand? It was you or them. And I know that's not going to always sit right with you. I know what happened here will always get to you on some level, but you can't dwell on the guilt, or you'll become a shell of yourself. Trust me. I've seen it. All of us in Mike Bravo have."

Dylan nods. "It's just hard to accept that this is how things are in your life. Where people are constantly after you, and their lives are expendable. Having seen it up close, I understand it now more than I ever have, but it still seems like an alternate reality to me."

"So, that's still a no to joining my team, then?"

Dylan looks at the ground, and I know his answer without him having to say it. "Well, you know how much I love the nickname Rogue, but I became a cop and then a DEA agent to be better than those on the force who use their position for power. For every Walker out there, I want there to be a Dylan Rodriguez."

I figured as much, but I didn't expect to be this disappointed by it.

Dylan steps forward and wraps his arms around my back. "But that doesn't mean that I don't want this. You and me. That hasn't changed. We can make it work."

I slap his butt. "You bet your ass we're going to make this work."

"Hurry up," Domino complains. "You're ruining my special day, and the others will be here soon. They were right behind us."

We follow Domino into the house, but with every step I take, the longer I hold my breath. Then I see it. Everything is completely different. Gone are the tacky lamps, rugs, and "retro" couches, and they're replaced with black leather, glass tables, plain white ornaments.

"You redid the whole place?" I ask.

"Think of it as a gift," Domino says. His smile is back, and my heart sinks.

"A gift for what? You're quitting, aren't you? You're leaving Mike Bravo, and this was your way of telling me."

“Hell no. I’m Mike Bravo for life. Or, you know, until I find a woman to marry and she tells me I have to stop acting like a grown-ass manchild. But it’s a gift because you lost, and I dunno how your boyfriend feels about it, but I can’t wait to have my name tattooed on your ass. Speaking of which, Tully, you can show your face now.”

The guy who tattooed my sleeve for me steps around the corner.

I shove Domino. “It wasn’t on the ass. That was never the bet.” I point to Tully. “Not on my ass.”

“You’re going to have another man’s name tattooed on your body?” Dylan asks.

“Oh no, are you so possessive of me you won’t let me do it? What a shame. Sorry, Dom. You’re my brother, and I love you like family, but the boyfriend says no.” I should’ve had a relationship sooner.

“What? When did I say no? I was asking because I think it’s funny. I’m all for it. Especially because I know how it happened.”

“And look at that. Our official relationship lasted ...” I look at my pretend watch. “Less than twenty-four hours. What good is having a boyfriend if they don’t get you out of things?”

“Saddle up, boss,” Domino says.

I pull off my shirt and go sit on the chair they have set up for me next to Tully’s tattoo machine.

“So if we’re not doing this on your ass, where is it going?” Tully asks as he puts on his gloves.

Before I can answer, the front door opens, and a loud “Holy fuck” echoes through the space.

It’s followed by murmurs of “What happened?” and “Trav’s going to make us do torture training just to get his anger out on whatever went on here. All his pretty things are gone.”

“You mean ugly things,” I call out.



They round the corner to the living room where I'm sitting, and while Domino fills them in on what's going on, I tell Tully to add Domino's name at the tip of my shoulder, running along the top of my sleeve. But then that gives me an idea.

Everyone is distracted checking out the new furnishings to notice when I tell Tully I want a second tattoo as well.

I sit back, ready and waiting for Tully to start. Any chance I get to close my eyes, I'm there, but when I sense someone watching, I open them to find Dylan staring at my chest with heat in his gaze.

Note to self: be shirtless more often.

Tully's quick with Domino's name after I tell him I trust him with font and placing. That would be risky with any other tattoo artist, but this is the genius who made my sleeve look like a bionic arm. He can handle a name ... or two.

When he's done, and I want my second tattoo, I call out to Dom. "Your name is officially on my skin."

Everyone laughs.

"Why don't you all go play with explosives or guns or—"

"I have my RPG with me," Iris says.

Damn, I should have said RPG twenty minutes ago because the room clears out immediately. Boys and their toys.

Dylan is the only one to hesitate.

"You want to go play with the rocket launcher, don't you?" I ask.

"A little."

"Go. You're the only one I trust to make sure they don't blow up my house. I already have to pay for Iris's rebuild. I'll be out there as soon as we're cleaned up in here."

Dylan kisses me on the cheek and follows after the guys.

"Now, where do you want this second tat?" Tully asks.

I point to the spot right above my left pec. "Five letters. Easy."

Tully settles in and gets to work.



Tully doesn't even flinch when the sound of exploding grenades starts going off. Thankfully. And just as he's putting on the bandage over my chest, everyone comes back inside with wide smiles.

"You're still going?" Domino asks. "I thought you finished hours ago."

"Figured I'd get something else while I had him here. You're paying him by the hour for this, aren't you?"

Domino swears. "How much do I owe?"

"Finally take me on a date?" Tully asks.

Everyone snickers.

"Sorry, but if this guy can't turn me"—Domino squeezes my shoulder—"no one can. He even has my name tattooed on him and everything. Still ..." He waves his hand in front of his junk. "Nothing."

"Worth a shot. I'll send an invoice."

Domino walks Tully to the door, and when he gets back, I stand.

"Now, was this whole thing really worth the amount of money you've spent on refurbishing my ranch and paying for my tattoos?"

Domino pretends to think about it. "Yep. Because now we're brothers for life. And when I was redecorating this place, I might have done something too." He lifts his shirtsleeve up to his shoulder, and on the circular Ranger tattoo on his upper arm that he's had since we served together is a fresh addition. The skull with wings and machine guns behind it is our unit number, and the words *Rangers for life* make up the old tattoo. But the words that make my throat dry are underneath that.

*Forever brothers: Trav and Andre.*

I bring him in for a hug and squash down the emotion in my throat with a joke. "Only you would need to get your own name tattooed on you in case

you forgot it.”

Dom laughs, but there are echoes behind us of “Domino’s real name is *Andre?*”

When I pull back, I turn to the others. “Seeing as there’s nothing actually wrong with the ranch, you’re all free to do whatever you want.”

“Who wants to play poker?” Zeus yells out.

The group all head for the games room, and Dylan goes to follow, but I grab his wrist and pull him toward me.

“I have other plans for you.”

“You sure sex won’t hurt? I can’t promise not to run my hands all over you.”

I touch my forehead to his. “As much as I love that idea, it’s not that. Now that we have a chance to breathe, I thought ... well, I dunno. Don’t couples usually have a ‘talk’ before deciding they’re it for each other and blah, blah, blah?”

“Is this where you’re going to tell me you’re more upset over me staying with the DEA than you let on earlier?”

I’m quick to shake my head. “Not at all. Would I love having you around every day and get to work with you and see you all the time? Sure. But I’m not going to ask you to give up everything you’ve wanted since you were a kid. If you want to stay an agent, fine. If you want to come work for me, I’ll welcome you with open arms and a snarky comment whenever you complain about the morals of the jobs I take on.”

“It’s good to know I have options.”

“You have all the options with me. I want to support you. And I want to show you how serious I am about us.” I carefully peel back the bandage over the tattoo on my chest. His tattoo.

There it is in blocky, rough text. R-O-G-U-E.

Dylan’s eyes widen when he sees it, and his gaze ping-pongs between the tattoo and my face. “You ... and ...”

“Aww, you’re speechless.” I cover it back up.

“I love you.”

His words hit me so hard, they send me into a state of shock where I don’t have anything to say because I can’t speak. There are no words that express how I feel for him because it’s so much bigger than *love*.

His face falls. “Did I mess everything up? I wanted to—”

The doubt in Dylan’s eyes makes me snap out of my mute shock.

I hug him and hold tight. “You didn’t mess anything up. I wasn’t expecting it, but fuck, I love you so much. I got a tattoo for you. If that doesn’t indicate love and permanence, I don’t know what does.”

“You also got a tattoo for your best friend, so ...”

“Yeah, but that was a bet. I chose to do this.” I take his hand and place it over my heart. “I choose to be with you, to give you my heart, and to love you.”

Dylan smiles. “I think I just thought of a way we can fix the whole seeing each other more often thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Let me move in with you.”

I try to contain my excitement, but it comes out as sarcasm instead. “Oh, I see. You’re using me for my real estate.”

“Well, you have gotten rid of your tacky decor here, so yeah.”

I love that he can give it back to me. “Move into HQ with me. I have my own wing, so the guys won’t bother you.”

“What about cameras?” He gives me a pointed look.

“There are none in my living quarters, I promise.”

“Deal.”

“So we’re doing it? We’re moving in together? What did I tell you about there being a day where you wouldn’t be able to resist me?”

“Yeah, yeah, you were right. I was wrong.”

I cup my ear. “I’m sorry, what? Can you please repeat that? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

Dylan sighs. “I’ve been wrong about a lot of things in my life, but nothing as big as my first assumptions about you. You’re a good man, Travis West. It just took way too long to see it.”

I run my hand down his jaw, rubbing my thumb over his cheek. “Good thing I’m not with you for your brains now, isn’t it?”

He pushes me off him. “Oh, fuck you.”

I pull him back to me. “The truth is, you didn’t see it because I didn’t let you see it, but that’s going to change. From here on out, you have all of me.”

“I guess this means I should let you call me Rogue, huh?”

I kiss the tip of his nose. “It’s cute you think I was ever going to stop.”

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ROGUE

### THREE MONTHS LATER

“HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE BACK IN THE FIELD?” COURTSSEN ASKS.

We’re both pressed against a boundary fence in an alleyway in South LA, wearing Kevlar vests, our guns at the ready, waiting for the go-ahead to bust through the gate to the suspected meth lab on the other side.

“It’s not the field that bothers me so much but being on a new team and proving my worth. Not everyone in my old squad was happy with what went down.”

“Assholes,” Courtsen says. “You brought a dirty agent to justice.”

“And accused two others in the process.”

Evans and Fields claimed they were only following orders and had no idea what was going on, so they walked away with their jobs and reputations intact, but I’m not entirely convinced. And when I said as much, the rest of the team turned on me because we’re supposed to protect our brothers in blue.

I honestly think the only reason Walker did go down was because Hale stepped up. The validity of the poor-quality voice recording Trav handed in was brought into question, but with Hale’s testimony and Jon Rowling turning on his own godfather to cut a deal, there was no way Walker was getting away with anything.

Jon's testimony did, however, open a wider investigation to everyone Walker was connected with. Jon claims it was Walker who told him to kill Keane if he was short. Walker was calling all the shots and was one of the top dogs, a huge drug lord inside a drug ring that's connected to multiple cartels. Not that the cartels knew about that, though. Allegedly. If they knew they were being pitted against each other for negotiation on price for distribution, Walker would have a whole lot of enemies coming for him. Jon's claims are being investigated as we speak, but it seems we've only begun to scratch the surface of what Walker was involved in. It's now up to the DEA to uncover it all.

It's like we're back at square one. We got one bad guy out of countless, and because I spoke out, because it was me who set off the chain of events, my teammates could no longer trust *me* all because the bad guy was one of us.

It's that kind of bullshit I joined the force to stop. In the end, our superiors decided to transfer me. My new team has been great so far, but it's taking a while to build trust because I can't get a read on any of them. Courtsen seems to be the only one who's approachable and nice, but the ones who are cold and distant are like that toward everyone, not just me.

It's still hard to get a sense of where I belong on this new team, but I'm willing to put in the work. I'm not done being a DEA agent.

"If those two are really as innocent as they claim to be, they would be happy that they didn't have any charges laid against them and got to keep their jobs. They wouldn't be pissed at the guy who pointed out they were there when their SAC was arrested, working on his side."

I shrug. "It is what it is."

"You don't need to worry about us. A few of the guys can be standoffish, but they're all professional where it counts."

That makes me think about Trav and his team. They're closer than professional. They really are the definition of brothers in arms. There's so



much trust between them, which means they're a unit.

That's what the DEA is missing—being more than friends with colleagues. Being closer than family. People can say all they want about law enforcement being like family, but when you're only family from the time you start your shift to when it's over, it's not the same.

There are so many things I want to change in the system, and while I know it's probably a pipe dream, I'm not going to give up trying.

Even if Trav keeps reminding me I can join Mike Bravo at any time. It's tempting, but I have work to do inside the DEA, and he understands that.

“Move in,” my new SAC says in our ears. Our comms have nothing on the shit Trav can get his hands on. The earpiece is bulky, and the coiled wire hanging down my neck is anything but covert. Not that I can bring that up with my superiors, though, considering Trav gets his from some weapons developer guy I refuse to ask questions about.

Courtsen takes the lead, and I follow him through the gate and into the side of the run-down single-story home. Courtsen and I take the side of the house while the others close in on the back and front.

We enter through the laundry, which has counters on each side, the one closest to the internal door shaped like an L. Our weapons are drawn, and as we call out to identify ourselves as DEA, we hear the telltale sound of gunshots from the other room.

We've barely got our feet in the door.

Courtsen and I duck behind the laundry counter, but the glass door behind us shatters from flying bullets.

I don't even know which direction they came from.

“Do they realize shooting up a meth lab is a dumb idea?” I ask.

“Clearly not.” Courtsen moves to the corner of the L-shape counter and lifts his head. “I'll cover you. Do what you need to do to incapacitate them so we don't explode. Oh, and try not to shoot the equipment.”

I chuckle. “Trav would be pissed if I came home dead today of all days.”

“What’s today?”

“We’re meeting the parents.” I shudder. “We held off as long as we could, but now it’s a free-for-all. His family and my family meeting for the first time. It’s going to be a disaster.”

“In that case, just shoot up the place. Come on, dying is an awesome excuse to get out of that.”

That’s true, but the thing is, even though today is going to be awkward, I want to take this step.

“Okay, I’m going for it,” I say.

I enter the hallway and flatten myself against the wall.

A piece of drywall gets hit with a bullet right next to my head.

Jesus.

I turn the corner and take my shot at any movement I can see. And the minute I do, I gasp and lower my weapon. The man standing next to *my boyfriend* raises his, aiming it right at me.

“Ah, fuck,” Trav mumbles and kicks the perp’s gun out of his hands. “Don’t kill a cop, dumbass. Do you know what they do to cop killers in prison? You wouldn’t last a day. Not to mention if you miss and hit anything in here, you’ll blow us to kingdom come. The place is surrounded. Give it up.”

“Hands up,” I order. “Both of you.”

They do as I say, and I quickly glance around the rest of the room and the way it’s kitted out to look like a damn science lab.

The boss’s voice echoes in my ear. “We got the perps who ran out the back. Status of the other teams?”

I hit the mic on my vest. “Have two yet to be cuffed, sir.”

“Front is clear,” Krakowski says.

Courtsen comes up behind me. “Get down on the ground. Both of you.” He takes the other guy, mainly because I beeline for Trav.

“Hi, Agent Rogue-riguez,” he taunts.

“You two know each other?” Courtsen asks while he cuffs the other guy. Once he’s securely done that, I holster my gun and slap cuffs on Trav.

“I’m his personal hell. He’s tried to arrest me countless times, but this is the closest he’s gotten in a while.”

Once. I tried to arrest him *once*.

“Get him out of here.” I nod toward Courtsen’s perp.

Courtsen radios for someone to come get him and hands him off while I stand Trav upright.

“You’re so cute with your badass bossy voice,” Trav says.

I shove him against the table, pinning his hips in place by covering his body with mine. “So this is what you meant when you got out of bed at stupid o’clock this morning to ‘go to work’?”

“Wait ...” Courtsen says. “This is the famous Trav?”

“Aww, baby, you *do* talk about me at work. I feel so validated now.”

“I hate you,” I mutter.

“No, you don’t. Though I will be telling everyone you shot at me. With bullets! I may never love again.” Trav dramatically sniffs.

“Courtsen, this is the love of my life and the biggest pain in my ass.” I turn to Trav. “You did this to get out of our family thing today, didn’t you?”

“Me? I would never. It’s not like I knew you’d be raiding this place today. You didn’t tell me.”

“And you didn’t tell me you even knew about this case. What are you doing here?”

“It has to do with the Atlas job. You know, the strip club one? They’re laundering money for their drug side hustle. I was going to give you everything you needed when I was done.”

Courtsen steps forward. “Wait, is this guy the reason you had all of those impressive arrests on your record?”

“Trust me, he never lets me live that down.” To my boyfriend, I say, “How do you need me to play this? Are we arresting you?”

“You bet your cute ass you are. Then bail me out so we can go meet our families.”

“Or, and hear me out, I could leave you in jail, and then we’ll have to cancel.” I jump up and down. “Yay, let’s do that idea.”

“Hmm, if I’m in jail, it would explain why I can’t be there. Not you. Do you really want to face them alone?”

“Hell no.”

“Then you know what to do. Ooh, am I allowed to yell and scream as you take me out and call you names?”

“No.”

Trav pouts. “You’re no fun.”

“It’s why you love me.”

Courtsen laughs. “You guys make a weird but cute couple.”

Trav shrugs. “Been called worse, I suppose. By Dylan no less.”

I shove him. “Just for that, I might lose your paperwork. Have fun in a jail cell for an extra hour.”

“You wouldn’t do that to me.”

I cock my eyebrow at him. “Wouldn’t I?”



“I can’t believe you left me in there,” Trav grumbles on our way out from getting him out of lockup. “Now I don’t have time to go home and change, and I’m going to have to meet your parents in this.” He gestures to his tactical pants and tight black T-shirt—the thing he’s almost always wearing.

“What had you planned on wearing? Also, it wasn’t my fault. I joked about it, but apparently, the name Travis West means nothing to my new team. They insisted they have you vetted before they’d release you.”

“Is that why everyone walked by my cell at one point? To check me out? Because I got the impression that Courtsen guy told everyone I was your boo.”

Yeah, that might have happened too. “Not at all.”

Trav nudges me with his hip. “I know when you lie.”

He does. Somehow.

“My parents won’t care what you’re wearing.” I don’t think. If I’m completely honest, I’ve never brought home a guy before, so this is a new experience for me.

My mom is excited to meet Trav, but my father still has that wariness about the whole gay thing. He’s accepted it, but that doesn’t mean that he likes it. And until now, I haven’t made anyone in my family deal with it because I’ve never taken anyone home and said, “This is the man I love.”

It’s ... daunting.

“Tell me the truth,” Trav says. “You’re shitting yourself, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but only because my family can be ... intense. You’re not just meeting my parents. We have my aunts, uncles, cousin.”

I snort. “You do remember I come from a Mexican family, right? Big families aren’t scary, and we’re in the same boat here. You’re also meeting my aunts, uncles ... not to mention my siblings and cousins.”

Trav takes a deep breath. “On second thought, I think I left something in my cell.”

“What?”

“My belt to hang myself with.” He turns to march back to the building where the DEA holding cells are, but I grab his arm.

“Nice try, but not gonna happen. Just think, once this is over, it’s done.”

“As in our relationship?”

I laugh. “No, the meeting the family bit. We can get through this. If we can survive all those years of me despising you, we can beat anything.”

“I’m going to remind you of that tonight when you’re asking me to supply you with so much liquor you forget today ever happened.”

“You’re on.” And as we get into my car and drive to my parents’ place in East Los Angeles, I keep telling myself I’m not going to eat my words.

Today is going to go fine. It’ll be ... fine.

When I pull into the street, it’s full of cars. “What the—”

“That’s my parents’ car,” Trav says. “And Gideon’s, my cousin. We told them four, didn’t we? We’re early.”

I have to park a block away, and when we arrive, there’s a chaotic mess of people inside the tiny home I grew up in.

And the minute we step over the threshold, our mothers descend upon us.

“You’re here early.” Trav kisses Cindy’s cheek. When he said his mom was small, I didn’t realize he only meant in comparison to him. She’s *my* height.

She smiles at her son. “I wanted to offer to help, seeing as Dylan’s mom was nice enough to host.” Cindy sets her sights on me and gives me a warm hug. “I can’t wait to embarrass Trav with all his childhood stories for you.”

“Mom,” Trav complains, and it’s the first time I’ve ever heard him sound small.

“Your mother is delightful, Travis.” Mamá practically tackles Trav. Which is funny because she *is* a small little thing. “I’m so happy to finally meet you. I’m Regina.”

Trav swallows hard.

Then my mother turns to me. “Dylan, my boy.”

“Hi, Mamá.” We hug.

“Everyone’s out the back already. Go, go, meet and mingle. I’m going to talk to Cindy a little longer.”

I take Trav’s hand to go outside, but Cindy’s voice trails after us.

“We’re planning your wedding.”

Trav’s shoulders tighten, and his jaw hardens.

Then we hear our mothers’ laughter.

“Today is going to be torture,” Trav says.

He’s right about that.

“We only have to stay a few hours.”

Trav nods. “A few hours. No more.”

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TRAV

FROM THE MINUTE WE HIT THE BACKYARD AND I LOCK EYES WITH MY cousin, I know the next few hours are going to be more torturous than I'm anticipating.

"Heard wedding bells are in the air," Gideon says from where he's seated next to his fiancée, Evah. They're by themselves at an outdoor dining table that's piled high with food. It all looks delicious, but my stomach is in knots.

I knew marriage might have been brought up today, but we've been here a total of two minutes.

"Ha ha, very funny, you dick."

Some of Dylan's relatives turn to glare at me. Crap.

I quickly take a seat next to Gideon and give him a one-armed hug. This guy is practically my brother, seeing as he's an only child and my siblings don't live in California. Plus, our moms are close.

"Ignore Gideon," Evah says. "Having recently done the whole meet the giant, intrusive family thing, if you need any pointers on surviving it, let me know."

"Going to introduce us?" Gideon glances up at Dylan, who hasn't sat down yet.

"Oh, right. Gid, Evah, this is Dylan. Dylan, Gideon and his fiancée, who is too good for him." Okay, maybe I'll eat some food after all, if for nothing

than to stop the panic clawing at my chest.

My cousin shakes hands with Dylan, who's standing over me, and I've never felt so boxed in before. Not by him. Not by anyone.

I don't even know why I'm panicking. It's not like I haven't joked with Dylan before about us getting married. But ... I dunno. It's different when there's an actual possibility of it one day.

"Ooh, wings." I grab for the chicken and take a big bite.

"They're not wings. They're—"

With one bite, my whole mouth is on fire. "Holy shit, spicy."

"Pollo al carbon. Mamá makes them with extra jalapeños."

I cough and splutter, but hey, I'm not freaking out anymore. I'm too busy trying not to die.

Dylan reaches over me for some tortilla chips. "Here. Eat these. They'll help."

I munch on them, but my mouth still feels like it's on fire.

A man who looks like an older version of Dylan and twenty pounds heavier approaches and says something to Dylan in Spanish that I don't understand. Maybe I should get Ghost to teach me what he knows if I'm going to be with Dylan.

For all I know he said, the stupid meathead is stupid.

Dylan replies in Spanish and laughs.

Okay, I'm definitely going to need to learn it.

"Papá, this is Trav."

I stand while holding back a cough and hold out my hand. "Sir," I choke out.

Dylan's dad chuckles. "I was just telling my son he should have warned you about the chicken."

"I tried," Dylan says. "But as you can see, he's used to inhaling his food." He gestures to my body.

I smile politely even though my eyes are watering. I probably look crazy. Or high. Maybe both.

“It’s great to finally meet you. But I’m going to steal my son away for a bit.”

“Go for it.” My voice still sounds like I have a mouth full of gravel.

“I’ll introduce you to my brother and sister later,” Dylan says. “Try not to die from chili poisoning in the meantime?”

“What’s safe to eat that won’t make me sweat more than doing recruitment drills in full gear?”

“Try the veggie fajitas.”

“Mm, vegetables. You sure know how to make my mouth water.”

“Trust me. They’re delicious.” He kisses my cheek before following his dad, and I can sense every pair of eyes on me.

I drop back into my seat and hang my head. “Could you pretend to be me for the next couple of hours, please?”

“Are you blushing?” Gideon asks. “It looks like you’re blushing. You. Travis West. Mr. Badass Motherfucker.”

“Shh, I don’t want any of Dylan’s family to know any of that,” I whisper. “And I’m not blushing. It’s the spicy food.”

“Damn. You really are in love with this guy, aren’t you? You’re all ... not like yourself. You’re usually in control, and nothing fazes you.”

At first, I think my cousin is actually going to be sympathetic.

“This is so awesome.” Gideon takes out his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Brix to tell him his old boss is all ... gooey and in loove.”

In a swift move, I steal his phone. Gideon is the manager of the pop star Brix left Mike Bravo to protect ... and then fall in love with. But I can’t deal with this right now.

“Hey,” Gideon complains.

“Can you please save your mockery for after today? Then you can text whoever you want, whatever you want. This gathering is like putting Dylan and me in a pressure cooker and setting it to high. I need to get through it any way I can, and you need to help me.”

Gideon squeezes my shoulder. “I can do that. For you. Because you’re like my brother. And also, you have a fire to put out. My mom just inserted herself in between Dylan and his dad.”

Shit.

Okay, time to run interference.



A few hours turns into a billion, and Dylan and I get sucked into a swirling vortex that happens to be the Rodriguez-West families. From dodging questions about what I do to getting our mothers to stop mentioning the words *wedding* or *marriage*, I’m exhausted when we finally go out to Dylan’s car at almost midnight.

I immediately lean over and drop my head onto his shoulder. “It was horrible.”

Dylan laughs. “Oh no, our families—including my dad, who I never thought would accept a man in my life—love us and want us to be happy and married! It really was horrible.”

“Is that what your dad was saying when he pulled you away?”

“His exact words were ‘Your mamá wanted me to talk to you to make sure you know that I love you and accept you and your partner, even though I told her you already knew that.’ I said I didn’t, actually, but I’m happy he’s finally come around. He admitted to me that it was hard to talk about, but Mamá pointed out it was probably even harder for me.”

“Even though today was exhausting, I’m happy you got something good out of it.”

“It’s been a long time coming, but it’s crazy to think he was under the impression I knew he supported me because he didn’t disown me ...” Dylan shakes his head.

“I can’t say I can even begin to relate because my parents were so great when I came out, but I remember similar situations in the military where the guys on my squad would think they weren’t being homophobic because they weren’t actively attacking me for my sexuality, like calling me names or taking a swing were the only actions that could be considered problematic.”

“It sucks we still crave that validation. I know that we’ve accepted ourselves, so anyone who disapproves can go get fucked, but ...”

“But it’s nice to know you’re loved. Especially by family.”

“It is.”

I reach over and place my hand on his thigh. “Then today was worth it. And I have to admit, your parents know how to put on a family shindig. Even my mom was impressed.”

“It was a good day. Marriage jokes and all.” Dylan smirks.

I take my hand back. “Don’t you start.”

“What, now that we’re actually together, marriage scares you? You’ve joked about it in the past more than any of your family did back there.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think it would ever actually happen.”

“There you go with your commitment-phobe backward thinking again. If it makes you feel any better, I’m in no hurry to get married. Or maybe I don’t want that at all, I’m not sure yet. But I do know that it’s probably a smart idea considering our career choices. We’d want our relationship recognized by the state if anything were to happen to one of us.”

I hold my heart. “That’s the most romantic proposal in the history of proposals.”

Dylan shoves me. “That wasn’t a proposal, jackass. I’m just letting you know I’m open to the idea—it would be smart, but also, no pressure.

Because when the jokes get too real, suddenly the badass isn't so badass after all. You can commit to a tattoo with my name, but not to a ring that, you know, can be *removed*."

"Yep. Going to need that drink now."

"Anywhere in mind you want to go?"

"I know the perfect place." I direct Dylan where to go, and when we pull up outside a notorious strip club, he side-eyes me.

"How ... romantic?"

"I figured we can kill two birds, one stone. I need to talk to Atlas about what happened today and about this job because he seems to be getting nowhere. *And* they serve alcohol."

"And boys in thongs."

"That too. Fun for all."

"Just remember you can look, but don't touch," Dylan orders.

"Aww, you getting possessive over me?"

"No. I don't want glitter all over my car."

"Why can't you ever tell me how much you want to own me?"

Dylan leans across the center console. "Oh, honey," he says in the most condescending way ever. "I already own you."

I smile.

Yeah, he does.

THANK YOU\_

Thank you for reading *Mike Bravo Ops: Rogue*.

Mike Bravo originally appeared in my Famous Series. If you haven't read *Pop Star* yet, you can meet Iris and Trav and a couple of familiar faces there.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR\_

Eden Finley is an Amazon bestselling author who writes steamy MM contemporary romance. As a socially awkward mess, she likes to lose herself in the written word, reading and writing for pure escapism. Her books aren't supposed to be taken too seriously, and while they sometimes touch on heavy subjects, she will always have a HEA. Because the world needs more of them.

You can follow Eden on any of the following platforms:

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