

THE
BROKEN ONE

A **FALCON FALLS SECURITY** NOVEL

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRITTNEY SAHIN

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EMKO MEDIA

The Broken One

By: Brittney Sahin

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For those who have ever felt a little broken ...

Don't give up.

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The Broken One - Jesse & Ella Mae

Stealth Ops: Bravo Team

Finding His Mark - Bravo One, Luke

Finding Justice - Bravo Two, Owen

Finding the Fight - Bravo Three, Asher

Finding Her Chance - Bravo Four, Liam

Finding the Way Back - Bravo Five, Knox

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Chasing the Knight - Echo One, Wyatt

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Chasing Fortune - Echo Three, Chris

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Becoming Us

Someone Like You

My Every Breath

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On the Edge

On the Line

The Real Deal

The Inside Man

The Final Hour

Hidden Truths

The Safe Bet

Beyond the Chase

The Hard Truth

Surviving the Fall

The Final Goodbye

Contemporary Romance

The Story of Us

PROLOGUE



NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK – THREE YEARS AGO

“WOULD YOU STOP ACTING LIKE YOU’VE GOT A BURR IN YOUR saddle?” Ella tipped her head, pointing her big blue eyes at Jesse. “We flipped a coin. Not my fault you called heads and lost. Better luck tomorrow.” She slapped him on the back and sent him a playful wink.

Ella. Ella. Ella. What was he going to do with her? Sure as hell not put her over his knee and swat her ass the way she’d just whacked his back.

“Did you really have to pick a Broadway show earlier and now this place?” Jesse released a heavy breath, trying to wrap his head around the fact he’d sat through the Cher Show tonight, and now they were in a nightclub.

“You had a nice nap during that show, if I recall. You should be awake enough to dance with me tonight.” Ella’s bright red lips parted to show her white teeth, one front tooth a tiny bit bigger than the other. An “imperfection,” as she liked to call it, but to him, she was perfection, currently wrapped in a tight dress.

Sharing a room with his best friend’s little sister would *not* be perfect or ideal though. The swanky hotel that was a few blocks from Rockefeller Center had been completely booked when he tried to get his own room at the last minute, and since this was *supposed* to be his sister and Ella’s girls’ trip, there’d been no need for two rooms in their original reservation.

But his sister, Rory, developed a stomach bug at the last minute, and she insisted Ella still go on the trip. And in Rory’s place, Jesse had been selected (more like coerced) to fill her shoes. And well, he didn’t wear heels or Prada. And he also

had a dick, which meant sleeping in the same room with Ella was going to be a problem. Thankfully, when they'd checked into the hotel to get dressed for the show earlier, there'd been a room available with two beds. Otherwise, he'd be sleeping on the floor.

He thought back to when she'd walked out of the bathroom in her outfit for the evening and did a little twirl. She'd called the one-shoulder dress she'd designed "New York candy apple red."

More like "siren" red, drawing the eyes of everyone with a pulse that night. And damn, did her dress have to have a bow at the waist? With Christmas next week, he'd thought a dozen times how much he'd like to unwrap her.

But he wasn't just any man. At least, he wasn't the man she thought he was.

And she wasn't just any woman. She was a Hawkins. His best friend's sister. Plus, she had three other brothers.

"Did you say dance?" Jesse finally reacted once he'd let her words sink in.

"I reckon I did." Ella shrugged and flicked her light blonde hair to her back as she set both hands on the bar-top counter, looking left and right for anyone available to serve them.

Her bare shoulder brushed against him as she leaned his way a bit, and he half wondered if she might place two fingers in her mouth and whistle for a bartender the way she'd done for a taxi earlier.

"Whiskey neat. Two. Not too expensive. But none of that cheap shit either," Ella ordered once she'd garnered the attention of one of the bartenders who had a Jim Morrison look going for him along with a handlebar mustache.

The man eyed Jesse with raised eyebrows, but Jesse lifted his chin in a silent request to “do what the lady says.”

The bartender grabbed a bottle of Woodford Reserve and poured two fingers of the whiskey, then slid the drinks across the dark wood counter.

“Cheers.” Ella clinked her glass with his and threw back the amber liquid as if she were taking a shot.

“Well, I guess I’m adding, ‘Keep Ella from drinking too much’ to my list of responsibilities tonight.” Jesse shook his head and took a small sip, deciding he ought to stay as sober as possible to keep an eye on the firecracker.

Hell, it was the real reason he’d booked the last-minute flight to accompany her to New York for the weekend. Rory knew damn well he wouldn’t want Ella going to the big city alone.

According to Rory, no one else was available to go with Ella. Yeah, he’d called bullshit from a mile away, and he was pretty sure he and Ella were being set up. Everyone in town, aside perhaps from the Hawkins brothers, had been rooting for them to get together for as long as he could remember.

Ella positioned her back to the bar, her gaze cutting to the dance floor, which wasn’t all that crowded since, by Manhattan standards, it was early at only twenty-three hundred hours. Or, eleven o’clock in civilian-speak. He doubted anyone there had to rise before the sun came up to tend to a farm or horses on a ranch like back home.

“Was New York City your idea, or Rory’s?” he found himself asking.

“Why? Do you think I’m trying to pull a Reese Witherspoon in *Sweet Home Alabama*? Leave Bama to pursue

fashion design?” She twisted her neck to steal a look at him, and his stomach squeezed at the idea of Ella moving to New York and leaving her students behind. She was a damn good designer, but so far, it’d only been a hobby. “I just wanted to see New York at Christmas. Christmas movies are my absolute favorite. And nothing feels more Christmas-y than this city.” She smiled. “Well, that’s what I thought before coming here.”

“And now?” He cocked a brow, curious.

“Our home is definitely more Christmas-y. I haven’t seen a single caroler since we arrived. Have you?” She grinned, her smile meeting her eyes.

“Not a one,” he returned with a smile of his own.

“Well.” She slapped her hands together like she was about to rally in her big family for supper. “I’m going out there.” She pointed as if “there” could have been somewhere other than the dance floor by the DJ booth. “Sure I can’t entice you to join me?”

She could entice him to do a lot of things, but dancing wasn’t one of them. Sure, they’d slow danced a few times here and there over the years. And two-stepped back home. But throw his arms up and act like a raver? Nah, he didn’t think so.

“I’ll be over there.” He pointed to the random Romanesque column off to the side of the dance area. “I don’t even know why that’s there. Not attached to the ceiling.” He shook his head. “Only in New York.”

“Aesthetic over function.” Ella patted his chest twice. “Loosen up. And if you change your mind, well, you know where to find me.” She turned to walk away, and he found himself circling her wrist, pulling her back to him.

Her eyes fell to where he held on to her. “You know I don’t tolerate assholes bothering you, no matter where we are.” And that was code for, if a man touched her on the dance floor, he’d join her for only one reason, and it wouldn’t be to dance.

Ella worked her gaze up his chest, over the pressed black button-down she’d insisted he wore with black slacks tonight, then her attention settled on the hard line of his mouth for a brief moment. “Well, you know I love to watch that ice hockey nonsense just for the brawls. Don’t tempt me.” She wet her lips, rolling her tongue along the bottom one in dramatic fashion to clearly fuck with him.

Not a great idea when he’d love nothing more than to do just that. *And it can’t happen.*

The strap on Ella’s shoulder started to slip, and he let go of her wrist and righted it in place.

He knew if he looked into her clear-as-an-Alabama-blue-sky-day eyes even for a split second, that it didn’t matter how shitty the lighting was in that club, she’d be able to read him. He’d done his best to be as unreadable as possible over the years when it came to how he felt about her, how he *really* felt about her—and for some reason, at that moment, his mask had slipped free.

“I’ll just be ... over there,” she whispered, seeming to sense something was off with him, and she didn’t quite know what to make of it.

“Okay.” He mentally ticked off a few seconds, waiting enough time for her to have turned and walked away before looking up.

He spotted her at the center of the dance floor as she began moving side to side, about as unsure how to dance to the

electronic music as he'd be if he were out there. She was country through and through, but in that red dress, gold heels, with her wavy blonde hair framing her face and her makeup dark and sparkly ... he'd never guess she was from a small town or that this was her first trip to New York.

He was tempted to go rescue her. Take her to a bar a little more like one they'd find back home or in Birmingham near their small town. But wasn't the point of her trip to get away, experience somewhere else?

Jesse crossed the room to lean against the useless column and dug into his pocket for his work phone. No new messages. That was good. He swapped it for his personal one and sent out a quick message to his sister.

Jesse: *How's that "stomach ache" ... feeling better yet?*

Rory: *You might have the wrong number. Who is this?*

Jesse: *Your brother.*

Rory: *Which brother? The annoying one?*

Jesse: *The only one, smartass.*

Jesse: *You suck, you know. You faked being sick. Now that I'm here, you ready to fess up?*

He watched the three little bubbles appear, then vanish. Then appear again. He rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen the tension pulsing through his veins at hyper-speed, and checked on Ella.

She was moving her hips a bit more sensually now. And he was fairly certain she'd be drawing attention from the single guys any second. He clocked at least three men who had her in their sights. They were watching. Waiting to strike.

Unfortunately for them, he'd be there to strike back.

Rory: *Ella texted me, you know. Said she took you to a show and you're now at a club. I bet you're skulking in the shadows like some creeper. All grumpy and growly about being in some swanky club.*

Jesse: *You don't sound sick.*

Rory: *You don't know how I sound. (cough, cough). Very sick.*

Jesse: *Thought it was your stomach?*

He added an eye-rolling emoji.

Rory: *So, you are in the shadows, aren't you? And what happens when some jerk hits on her? You going to ride on in and save the day? Steal a horse from a city officer?*

Jesse: *Why are you such a pain in my ass?*

Rory: *Little sister job description. Didn't you read the fine print? I could have sworn I gave you a manual decades ago.*

Jesse pulled his focus from his phone to set his eyes on Ella, ensuring she was still at a safe distance from the opposite gender.

Jesse: *You gotta stop setting us up. I know that's what you think this weekend is ... but it's not happening. This isn't a Christmas romance movie. There will never be an Ella and I. Or ... Ella and me. Aw shit, I suck at grammar, but you know what I mean.*

Rory sent him a few laughing emojis with tears coming from their eyes.

Rory: *I know she's a Hawkins. And she's got 4 big brothers. And yes, you're best friends with one of them, but, Jesse—when has anyone or anything ever stopped you from going after what you want?*

Jesse: *I didn't text you for a lecture. I messaged to give you one. And an order: BACK. OFF. I can't be with Ella. PERIOD.*

Rory: *Can't?*

And damn, why did he let that little word slip through the cracks, knowing his sister would want to spend hours unpacking the meaning.

Rory: *Well, I suggest you remove your head from your ass and make a move. And yes, I am yelling at you with my thickest Southern drawl via text possible to make sure you get the message.*

Jesse: *Yeah, I hear it.*

At least she wasn't pressing on the whole "can't" comment.

Rory: *Enjoy yourself. Stop texting me and go dance. Goodnight. Feelin' too sick to talk.*

Jesse grunted in irritation and pocketed his phone and watched Ella dance, her wrists now linked over her head as she continued to give him a heart attack.

And heaven help the man that was two seconds away from making a move on Ella.

Don't do it. Don't do it. He didn't want to have to break any arms in front of Ella on her weekend getaway. *And shit.* The guy set both hands on Ella's waist, attempting to pull her flush to his body.

Ella's palms landed on the man's chest, but Jesse was already on the move. She began to shove, which awakened the beast inside him.

Jesse snatched the back of the man's neck and squeezed. He clamped down on his back teeth as he reminded himself there were witnesses. He didn't need to end up on someone's Instagram story. *Crazy guy breaks man's neck at New York City club.* Yeah, that wouldn't go over well with his boss.

"It's okay. You can let him go." Ella held up her hand, urging Jesse to back down.

Her soft voice had Jesse's body relaxing somewhat, but he didn't release the harsh hold of the man.

"He's harmless. Let him go," Ella pleaded, which had Jesse freeing the prick, and the dumbass backed off.

"That was a little overboard, don't you think?" He couldn't see her eye roll with the flickering lights crossing her face, but he knew one was there.

"He shouldn't have touched you." He adjusted the collar of his shirt, checking for any other potential threats, and the men around them seemed to sense *he* was the threat. Good.

But he'd still prefer to get her off the damn dance floor, so he reached for her arm and guided her to the column where he'd previously stood.

Ella set her back to it and crossed her arms. "You know, you looked all Joe-like watching me dance."

"Define 'Joe-like.'" He lifted a brow and leaned in closer, setting a hand on the column over her head.

"The show, *You*. The main character, Joe, goes all stalker-y on a woman in season one. Obsessively watching her."

"You're calling me a stalker? And also, obsessive?"

"Well, in this case, I knew you were there, but as for obsessive? Only in your goal to protect your best friend's

sister from anyone with a pulse. Or a dick.”

He almost choked on that last word she’d spit out that still seemed to cling to the hot air.

Ella lifted her eyes to the industrial ceiling as if seeking out the exposed air ducts there, but there was something in that quick dodge that had him curious what she was really thinking. She wasn’t embarrassed for dropping the D-word on him. No, she didn’t get embarrassed. So, what was it?

“You love to bust my balls, same as Rory.”

She smiled, bringing her gaze back to his face. “It’s not hard to do.”

“Mmhm.” He pushed away from the column and took a step back because when his attention snagged on her bright red lips, *his* dick was now the only problem in the room. And he’d swear Ella somehow knew because she studied him like he’d done something sinful and would be needing forgiveness in spades.

Forgiveness? That’s something I might need, but I don’t deserve.

“You okay? I feel like I lost you for a second.”

“You never lost me,” he murmured. “You’ll always have me.”

“What?” She stepped forward, a hand going to his bicep. “I didn’t hear you.”

His gaze slowly worked to her red nails on the sleeve of his dress shirt. “Nothing.” He pulled his eyes away from her hand, catching sight of the prick who’d grabbed hold of Ella on the dance floor now standing at the bar. “Damn it.”

“What?”

“The bastard just slipped something into that woman’s drink.” Jesse cursed under his breath.

“How’d you see that?”

“I notice things,” he casually said as if that’d make perfect sense to her.

“Well, I guess I need to re-examine who I view as harmless.”

That was for damn sure. And he was glad he had come to New York. “Looks like he’s heading to the men’s room.” Jesse calculated his next steps. Playing them out in his mind down to every move. “I need about thirty seconds alone with him.”

Ella released her hold of his arm. “What are you going to do? I thought you gave up bar brawls years ago. No more fighting. We can call the police. I was joking about the ice hockey fighting thing.”

“A fight suggests competition. There won’t be any of that. In thirty seconds, head to the bar and tell that woman and the bartender about her drink and that they’ll find the man unconscious in the bathroom. *They* can call the police.”

“Jesse.” Ella grabbed hold of his arm and squeezed. A request to back down? When he met her eyes, she let go of a shaky breath and relented. “Okay.”

He nodded as she released him, then he moved with quick steps toward the restroom.

The man was alone at the urinal, and Jesse didn’t waste any time. As soon as the guy zipped his pants and turned, Jesse clocked him clean across the jaw, then shoved him against the wall.

“What the—”

The man's words died as Jesse spun him around and yanked with enough force to break his arm, and he groaned and hissed as Jesse smashed his face against the cement wall. "You're lucky I don't cut your hand off and use it to choke you, so I reckon you shut up and listen."

Jesse did his best to remain calm and steady. In control of the situation. This wasn't his first rodeo, nor was it his first time dealing with a man who'd crossed him when it came to Ella.

"When you wake up, you'll be in police custody. But if you ever touch another woman again, or if you ever drug another woman again ... you better believe I will kill you. I'll be taking a photo of you when it's lights out. And a picture of your ID." He spun the man around and sent an elbow to his jaw. "Do. You. Understand. Me?"

The man nodded, clearly in shock. Probably some privileged jerk who'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and thought it was okay to take advantage of women. That it was his natural-born right.

Agitated at the thought, Jesse followed through with his promise and hit him a few more times, making his movements as efficient as possible.

After the man had slumped to the ground against the wall, Jesse snapped a photo of his face and dug into his pocket for his ID.

Once back outside the restroom, he stopped a man from trying to enter the room and muttered, "Out of order," before passing him to get to Ella.

She spotted him as soon as he came into view and hurried his way. "You all right?" The pad of her thumb swept over his

cheek. “Um. A little blood there.” This gorgeous woman seemed relatively unfazed, swiping her finger along the side of her dress.

She’d grown up on a ranch with a bunch of cowboys. She wasn’t quite as fragile as he may have made her out to be in his mind.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Jesse held on to her arm as they cut through the club, then they retrieved their jackets before making their way outside.

Ella bundled herself up in her cashmere peacoat, and Jesse shrugged on his knee-length black wool coat. “Did that really happen?” she asked, spinning around and nearly colliding with him on the sidewalk.

“Which part?” He shoved his hands in his coat pockets as he observed her.

Ella freed her long hair from beneath the collar of her coat, letting it fall like a bed of silk, the color nearly blending in with the goldish-tan jacket. “All of it. Did you really just take down a guy in the bathroom like that?”

“Does that bother you?” He took her arm, guiding her away from the foot traffic and closer to the building off to his right.

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind slugging that man myself for what he’d planned to do to that woman. So no, it doesn’t bother me. But tonight felt a bit different than back home when you used to hit a man for grabbing my ass at the bar.”

There’d been quite a few men he’d knocked out over the years. The faces were a blur. “We are in New York. I guess this deserved a different approach,” he joked, but in reality, he

wasn't the same man he was back then. Although, he'd done his best to act in character whenever he was home.

“Well, um. How about we go search out that ‘New York at Christmas’ feeling I was craving?” She tipped her chin in the direction of Rockefeller Center, which was within walking distance.

“That sounds much better.” He smiled, then set his hand on the small of her back—he had no idea why—as they walked.

Golden angels with trumpets pointed toward the heavens lined their path once they neared the massive Christmas tree, the ice-skating rink not far away.

Ella seemed to take all of it in, her gaze swinging left and right. The lights around them shone down on her as though she were an angel leading the way to something better—something he never thought he could have.

And I can't have it, he quickly reminded himself before he let New York Christmas magic wrap him up in some kind of freakish spell, causing him to do something he'd forever regret.

They stopped walking when they reached their destination, and she set her eyes on one of the most famous trees around the world.

He stood alongside her and removed his hand from her back.

“Rory planned this, didn't she?” Ella whispered a few minutes later. “Her birthday was recently, so I thought she meant this to be a Christmas-slash-birthday celebration weekend, but the stomach bug is fake, isn't it?”

“I'm thinking so,” he answered honestly, and she turned to face him, her cheeks becoming rosier the longer they stayed

out in the cold.

“Why does she keep trying to set us up?” When he didn’t reply, because what would he say, she went on, “Rory’s my best friend. She knows you’ve rejected me on a few occasions, so I don’t know why she keeps pressing the idea we’ll end up together. You don’t see me that way.” Her tone was soft, a little sad. And it broke his heart.

“Reject you? When did I ...” He cupped his jaw, trying to sort through the past, searching through blurry memories. He’d worked hard to forget a lot of shit, including all the pain and suffering he’d witnessed in the war. “You talking about the kiss, and well, the other thing?” *Your virginity.*

She nodded, her eyes moving to his hand still settled on his jaw.

His week’s worth of facial scruff was scratchy beneath his palm, and he let his hand drop to his side as he waited for her to explain her definition of rejection. Because he didn’t see it that way. Not really. “That wasn’t rejection,” he finally spoke his thoughts, feeling the need to defend himself.

“I asked you to be my first kiss. You said no.”

He grimaced at her words. “Ella, I hardly call that rejection. I mean,” he said while holding a hand up between them, “you were fifteen, and I was eighteen. I was about to join the Army, and you were also drunk on Beckett’s secret stash of Tennessee moonshine. What’d you expect me to say? Me saying no was the right thing to do. That’s not rejection.”

Beckett was Ella’s oldest brother, now the sheriff of their small hometown, Walkins Glen. He hadn’t always been the grumpy “good boy” he was now. Beckett used to raise hell back in his day. Just like himself, he supposed.

“It sure felt like rejection to me.” Ella shrugged. “And by the way, I was drunk because you were enlisting.”

As he processed her admission, a strange, achy sensation filled his gut, then he muttered, “You were still too young. And also, a Hawkins.”

“Is that how you’ll always see me? A Hawkins?”

No, in his eyes, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. With the biggest heart on the planet. He saw her as so much more than he could possibly put into words, and yeah, maybe she was far too special and too sweet for him ... but that still wasn’t what held him back.

This wasn’t some fairy tale where he was only mistaken as the villain, and the princess would somehow turn Jesse back into the prince she deserved.

“Ella,” was all he managed to get out.

“Okay, what about when I was in college, then? And I asked you to take my virginity? I was of age. That was rejection.”

Jesse took a step back and gripped the nape of his neck, pushing the collar of his coat down to squeeze and work at the sudden tension there. “Tequila. Still a Hawkins.” *And well, Iraq.* “So no, that doesn’t qualify as rejection, and any man that would have said yes to you while you’d been shooting tequila should be dragged behind one of your daddy’s horses for a good mile. Maybe more.”

“I didn’t have much tequila that night.” She pursed her lips and a contemplative expression crossed her face.

He looked around at the couples passing by for a moment before returning his attention to her. “Regardless, there were a

lot of reasons for me to behave, but it wasn't that I didn't want you. That I rejected you."

Fuck. Was that the first time in his life he admitted to this woman he had wanted her? Was that the first time he'd let the words slip free from his normally locked lips?

She was quiet for a moment, probably absorbing his confession the way a priest did before absolving someone of their sins.

"But also ... Iraq," he admitted. "I'd just come home after a bad deployment."

She angled her head, continuing to try and get a read on him. "Is there such a thing as a good deployment?"

He swallowed. "The ones where everyone comes home alive, yes."

"Oh." She lifted her gaze skyward at his heavy words.

"Listen, I really can't stand here and have a conversation about this. I don't want to know who gave you your first kiss. Or who took your ..." He cleared his throat, unable to work the words free, which had her eyes back on his face. "But I don't need you thinking I rejected you in the past because I didn't want you. That's the furthest thing from the truth." And there he went again with the truth.

Was it the Christmas tree? The magic of New York at the holidays he'd seen in movies growing up? What in the hell had him opening up now at thirty-five when he'd never been able to say jack shit to Ella since she turned eighteen and he'd taken notice of her as a woman? And if he was being honest with himself, more like when she was seventeen. When he'd noticed her long runner's legs were also fit for the runway.

“Okay.” Her soft voice floated into the crisp December air. “I think I’d like to go back to the hotel. I’m tired.” She faked a smile, one lacking her teeth. “I didn’t have a nap like you did.”

“Ella,” he called out after her since she’d barely finished her words before starting to walk away.

He’d messed up. Somehow ruined her night. And he’d be getting an earful from his sister via text in the morning. But more importantly, he hated seeing Ella sad.

“Ella,” he said again once catching up with her. When she spun around to face him, she had tears in her eyes and didn’t that make him feel like an asshole.

“It’s the cold air making them water.” She swiped at her cheeks, but the little break in her voice gave her away.

“Don’t be sad. Why are you sad?” He reached for her palm, finding it cold, so he placed it between his hands to try and warm her up. They hadn’t thought of packing gloves for the trip.

“It’s nothing. Please.” The plea in her tone had him letting go of a deep breath, and he released her hand and nodded.

They walked in an almost painful silence back to their hotel, which was only a few blocks away. He doubted she’d be able to walk much farther in those heels too. Not that he wouldn’t have carried her if she’d asked, but based on her change in mood from sassy at the club to “just lost her dog,” he doubted she’d let him.

Once in their room, Jesse tossed his coat onto the chair on top of hers as she rushed into the bathroom and shut the door.
Are we in a fight?

He went to the window and drew open the floor-to-ceiling silver drapes, revealing the sight of the Christmas tree at

Rockefeller Center. He pushed one hand into his pocket while working the top few buttons of his shirt free with the other hand.

“Are you sure it’s okay if I sleep in here?” he asked once he heard the bathroom door open a few minutes later.

“There are two beds,” she said from behind, but he’d yet to turn. “Plus, we established you’re not interested and that Rory keeps wasting her time.”

“We established that, huh?” He slowly faced her, lifting his other hand from his pocket.

He stilled at the sight of Ella standing in front of one of the beds in an oversized black tee that said “Cowgirls Do It Better” in pink print. The shirt went to her mid-thighs, showing off her long, golden tan legs. Her toenails were red to match her fingernails. But she’d scrubbed the makeup from her face, so her lips were no longer red.

“I think you’re missing something.” *A bra, for one.* Just because her shirt was black didn’t mean he didn’t notice her nipples.

She folded her arms. “And what’s that?”

“A pair of pants.” He forced his gaze to remain eye level, so he didn’t check her out again, then he undid the last few buttons of his shirt and removed it.

He lost eye contact with Ella when her focus slid to his chest and stayed there. “I’ve seen you shirtless on the ranch a million times, I, um.”

And he’d seen her legs in her Daisy Duke shorts and cowgirl boots too. But yeah, it was different because they were alone in a hotel room in Christmas-y New York.

“You sure you didn’t pack an adult onesie? Or maybe some fleece pants with cute puppy dogs wearing Santa hats on them?” He needed to ignore the way her eyes seemed to eat up his body or how they now settled on the buckle of his belt as if she wanted to remove it herself and fall to her knees before him.

“No, I hate being hot at night. I like sleeping in barely anything, jacking up the A/C, and then getting cozy under the covers. That a problem?”

“Barely anything. Is this barely anything?” Damn, his cock was moving again. “Or is this more than normal?” He freed the buckle and undid the top button of his pants, unsure why he continued to undress in front of this woman. But like she said, she’d seen him in his drawers when he’d strip and jump into the lake back in the day, so this *shouldn’t* be a big deal.

“A tank top and panties. Or maybe just the panties. Tank tops tend to get all twisted in my sleep.”

Jesse swiveled his focus to the lamp between the two beds. He had to look at something other than her, and to forget the picture she’d painted that would permanently be etched in his mind. “So, you’re doing me a favor by wearing a tee, huh?”

“Why, you’d see me as someone other than A.J.’s sister if you saw my tits?”

Sassy Ella was back, and he’d take that over sad Ella. But did she have to go *there*? “Ella,” he rasped in a warning. Or was the warning for himself? Abort and back away. Go walk around the city all night instead of sharing a room with her.

He forced his gaze back to her, then blinked in surprise to see her tossing her tee onto the bed. “Go ahead. Reject me again,” she whispered, standing boldly in only a red thong, and

Jesse nearly cracked his back teeth as he clenched, resisting the urge to erase the space between them and take her into his arms. “For a third time. And I barely had anything to drink. I’m way over age. And you’ve been out of the Army for a few years. So, what excuse will you come up with this time to try and hide the fact you really just don’t want me?”

Jesse’s gaze remained riveted to her full breasts that lifted when she inhaled sharply as if her nerves were catching up to her boldness. He turned to the side and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. Every part of him wanted to take her. To make her his. To forget all the reasons why he knew he couldn’t be with her.

“What if it’s for one night? Only one night. And we don’t tell anyone what happens. Instead of what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, this’ll be what happens in New York, stays in New York.” He could feel Ella closing in on him. Her body heat nearing his fire-hot skin. “I won’t tell Rory. Savanna. Any of my friends. Or family.”

“Why do you want to do this? Won’t it ... complicate things?” He closed his eyes and held his temples with his thumb and forefinger, trying to find a way to say no to the temptation standing just behind him. Because how could it not complicate things?

“Jesse, I’ve wanted you since as far back as I can remember. I’ve always wanted you, and you have to know that.” Any bit of sass was now buried beneath her soft voice.

I want you too. I’ll always want you. But I can’t have you. “Then tonight would be a mistake,” he said while slowly turning at the feel of her hand on his arm. And he used every ounce of restraint he had to keep his eyes on her face. To not set his hands on her hips and work them around to her ass and squeeze. “Because I can’t be the man you need.” He shook his

head, worried she was about to protest. “You deserve to be with someone whole, Ella Mae. And I’m about as broken as they come. Far too many pieces for me to ask you to try and help put me back together.”

When her eyes narrowed, he realized he’d said too much. Shit, did he just give her hope?

“But, Ella,” he said around a swallow, “the last thing in the world I want is to reject you tonight. Because I do want you. I want to throw you on the bed and fuck the ever-loving daylights out of you. And then do it again and again and again.” His cock strained in his pants at the image he’d laid out for them both to absorb. “The last thing you need to be thinking is that I *want* to reject you. But saying no is something I need to do. It’d be wrong of me to give you false hope. I’d be an asshole.”

He was pretty sure Ella’s mouth had fallen open sometime between his “again and again” comment. She stared at him, still a bit startled at his confession.

“Then be an asshole. Don’t say no. Not tonight. I don’t want to be a good girl. The trusty and reliable Ella Mae that does no wrong,” she murmured. “I want to be bad.”

Jesse set both hands on her arms and lightly gripped.

“We won’t kiss. Anywhere. Not even, you know, down there.” She looked down between them, eyeing his pants before her gaze moved to her thong. “Nothing intimate. I think that’ll help make it less ... hopeful.”

Less hopeful? God, she was killing him. And he hated himself for keeping secrets from her, for not sharing the whole truth as to why he needed to steer clear from her. But it was for her own good. He’d tell himself that at least.

“I don’t have condoms.” *Shit. Did I just say that?*

“I do.”

Jesse’s grip on her arms went a fraction tighter. “Were you planning to hook up with someone this weekend?”

“I may have hoped that you ...” She let her words trail off as if worried he might change his mind as she stood nearly naked before him, her body practically flush with his. Did she think there was any universe in which he’d be able to reject her right now?

“We don’t tell anyone. Rory won’t ever leave us alone if she knows.”

Ella kept her chin lifted, eyes on him as she nodded, her lip catching ever so slightly between her teeth. Nerves now on display that seventeen years after she’d first asked him to kiss her, they were about to have sex.

“I can’t be with you,” he reiterated. “I don’t want you to try and fix me. To think I can be ... fixed,” he added, stumbling through his words, feeling as though he might drown in those blue eyes of hers. “You have to promise me you’ll move on.” He didn’t want to think about that. To imagine her with any other man. But it was time she let go. Her. Rory. Everyone. They had to let go. “Please.”

Ella closed her eyes, took a breath, but nodded.

“I have to hear you say it. I need to look into your eyes when you do.” He had to make sure this night wouldn’t break her. Hurt her. He knew it’d fucking break him, but what difference would it make? He was already so fucked.

Her lids slowly parted, and her blue eyes held his. “I promise. I’ll move on.”

He released her arms and stepped back, allowing himself to finally take in the sight of her. To soak in every moment of this night since it'd be their one and only. And he hoped he wasn't making a mistake when it came to her heart. Deep down, he couldn't shake the fact he was, but if he were being honest with himself, he wasn't exactly thinking clearly.

His eyes journeyed from her red toenails and up her legs and to her full, round tits before meeting her eyes. "You're beautiful."

She reached out and set a palm on his pec. "So are you. You know, in a manly, rugged way, of course." A nervous smile played across her lips.

Not being able to kiss her mouth or bury his face between her thighs was going to be torture, but maybe she was right. Maybe that'd make it harder for this to be a "one night only" situation. He'd always known if he ever set his mouth on hers, he'd be a goner. No turning back. The demons he carried wouldn't release their hold of him, but he'd be damned if he'd let them rope her into his own personal hell too.

Ella reached for his zipper and guided it down, then shifted his pants out of the way to expose his black boxer briefs. He was rock hard and ready.

"No kissing, but can I touch you?" he asked through gritted teeth, doing his best not to let his restraint snap and toss her onto the bed and bury his cock deep inside her.

"Yes, please," she said with a tiny nod.

He hooked his fingers at the thin strip of fabric on her hips and pushed down her panties. Setting a palm to her pussy, he hissed when her arousal coated his fingers as he slid them through her folds.

She bucked against his hand, nearly falling into him. He brought one hand to her breast and rolled her peaked nipple between his fingers while playing with her wet folds.

“Jesse,” she cried. When he plunged two fingers inside her, she began panting and rubbing against the heel of his hand to create more friction.

This goddess saying his name was going to provoke the beast to wake. To take her. Ravish her. Fuck her hard and from every angle.

“Don’t,” he demanded. “Don’t say my name,” he growled out in warning and squeezed her tit, which was more than a handful, even for his big hand.

“Why?” She looked straight into his eyes as he continued to pleasure her, and he loved every second of her breathy moans. But those seductive sounds were also dangerous to his control.

Releasing her breast, he slid his hand around and up her back to fist a handful of her hair and lightly pulled. “Because I will tear you apart, darlin’, and I’d prefer to be gentle with you.”

“Oh.” Her mouth remained poised and rounded. A little stunned by his words. And maybe on the brink of orgasm from his touch. Either way, it was damn difficult not to stick his tongue between her lips and fuck her mouth too. “What if I want you to, uh, tear me apart?” she asked, pressing her body tight to his.

He pulled her hair a bit harder, letting her know she was playing with fire right now. “Maybe later. We have the night, right? It doesn’t have to be the one time.”

Another soft “oh” fell from her lips as she squeezed her thighs together, trapping his hand there. “I might come if you don’t stop. And I want it to happen with you inside me.” She met his eyes. “Please.”

When he released her hair and pulled his hand from her tight pussy, she stepped around her discarded thong and climbed onto the bed. At the sight of her on all fours, ass in the air for him, Jesse nearly swallowed his tongue.

“Condoms are in the side zipper in my suitcase,” she directed him, then swung her gaze around to find him staring at her ass. “What? I’ve been working on my dump truck.”

“Dump truck?” he asked, momentarily distracted from his mission by her turn of phrase.

“I think that’s what the twentysomethings call it. It’s not near Kardashian levels, but I’ve been hitting my glutes a lot at the gym.”

“I don’t know anything about the Kardashians,” he said while securing a condom, “but I’d say your ass is, well, perfect.” His dick throbbed as he rolled it on, images of said ass in every position imaginable rushing through his mind.

“As much as I love the view, I want to look at you while we ...” *Don’t say make love. This isn’t supposed to be intimate, you asshole.*

She nodded, then flipped to her back. He climbed on top of her, remaining upright. Was he really going to have sex with his best friend’s little sister?

Would A.J. kill him if he ever found out?

Ella’s eyes drifted up the length of his body while making a come-hither motion with her finger as her other hand palmed her breast. *Yeah, I’m done. Just put a bullet in me and call it a*

day, because how in the hell would *he* be able to move on after tonight?

He lowered himself to his forearms and positioned his tip at her soaked center. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” she responded without hesitation, then reached for the nape of his neck, drawing him closer to her. Too close. Their mouths nearly brushed.

“Ella.” Her name served as the final warning. The chance to wave the white flag. But he doubted either one of them would be able to cut out and surrender. To walk away from this moment, regardless of the consequences once daylight hit.

“Jesse,” she said with a lift of her brows, knowing she was on thin ice in terms of his control now.

“You really do want to be a bad girl tonight, don’t you?”

Ella planted her lip between her teeth as he nudged the head of his cock in just an inch, and his balls tightened at the touch. “Mm. As long as you whisper, *good girl*, at some point tonight, I’ll be as bad as you want me to be.”

“You *are* a good girl.” He knew that wasn’t what she meant, but damn did he hate that he was about to plow into a genuinely good girl, risking making her even half as broken as him. But he was already an inch deep inside her, and there was no turning back.

He thrust into her in one hard movement, and her hips and ass lifted off the bed as she joined him, her pelvic bone hitting his. “Ohhh,” she hissed, her eyes locked with his.

He’d never felt anything like this. She was a perfect fit, taking all of him. Moving with him.

Jesse shifted his weight to one forearm so he could reach for her hip and slide his hand to her ass, keeping her tight against his body as he started fucking her in earnest.

“I’m going to come. I-I’m sorry. I can’t wait,” she moaned a few minutes later.

“Waiting on you, darlin’. I can come any-fucking-time being inside you. You feel so good.”

Ella’s gaze tightened on him, and she began shuddering beneath him. Her body arched as she lifted her back from the bed and rocked into her orgasm, grinding her pussy against him into climax. And when she whispered his name at the height of ecstasy, it was all it took for him to thrust one last time and come hard.

He rolled off to her side after they both came down from what had felt like walking through Heaven’s gates, and he was tempted to reach for her hand and lock their fingers together.

But that’d be intimate, so he set his hands on top of his chest to try and find his breath. “How many condoms did you pack?” In his hurry to grab one, he hadn’t noticed. He shifted to his side to look at her, and he couldn’t help but palm her breast when she mirrored his move to lie on her side facing him.

“Three more.” She ran her tongue along the seam of her mouth, and damn, was he desperate to kiss her.

“That may not be enough.” He leaned forward and set his lips to her shoulder that’d been bare in that dress earlier. “Maybe instead of one night, we have one weekend?” What was he doing? Saying? But how in the hell would he make it through tomorrow night without touching her?

No, they could go back to being friends again when they were home in Bama on Sunday, right?

“Yes,” she said, and he did his best not to notice the gloss to her eyes, worried she was on the verge of tears from whatever emotions had stirred inside her during sex. If she felt anything like he did, then yeah ...

He forced himself to get up and rid himself of the condom. “Flip to your stomach,” he ordered while joining her back on the bed.

“Why?” But she followed his request.

“I can’t kiss your mouth. Or your pussy. But I plan on trailing my lips along the curve of your spine and down.”

“Oh.” Was this her new favorite word tonight?

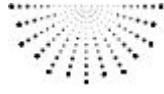
“And if I cry out your name while you kiss my body, what then?” Sassy Ella was back, and he saw it in her shimmering blue eyes when she looked back at him from over her shoulder.

“You know exactly what, darlin’,” he promised, arching a brow.

He lifted her arms over her head and linked her wrists, then shifted her mass of hair to set his mouth to the few freckles on the back of her right shoulder.

“Well then,” Ella said softly. “Jesse. Jesse. Jess—”

CHAPTER ONE



WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA – PRESENT DAY

JESSE DROPPED TO ONE KNEE, PIVOTED, AND DREW HIS GLOCK 19 in one smooth motion, locking the intruder in his sights. But he quickly let go of a heavy breath at the realization he knew the man now standing in his workshop.

Jesse bowed his head and slowly lowered the gun, preferring if it were someone actually trying to get the drop on him instead.

“Good to see you haven’t lost your touch.”

After pushing himself up from the dirty, sawdust-covered concrete floor, he secured the 9mm in the holster hidden beneath his tee at his back. “Turn around and leave. I don’t want to see whatever’s in that envelope you’re holding,” Jesse brusquely said. “Tell Suzette and the kids hello and wish them a happy New Year for me.”

Adjusting the bandana back in place over his mouth, Jesse turned to the slab of reclaimed pine he’d been sanding. A three-foot-wide and one-foot-tall drum-shaped coffee table. Mid-century style. That’d been his client’s request months ago, and he’d been too busy with his new gig to finish the job on time.

“You think I came all the way down here to let you give me the brush-off?” Thatcher shut off the radio, a signal he had no intention of leaving, not that Jesse truly believed his former boss would listen to him, anyway. “Nice work.” Thatcher casually strolled to the other side of the workbench where the slab of wood was anchored. Jesse had been sanding the surface using the old-school method. It was arduous and unnecessary. But it helped him work through some of the tension that

tended to spiral up his arms and work into his chest. “You have a Black and Decker right here, and you’re using a piece of sandpaper?”

Jesse lowered the bandana from his mouth, his eyes cutting to the envelope in Thatcher’s hand.

Thatcher smoothed his free palm along the rough, unfinished part of the tabletop. The faint hint of cigar smoke, expensive and definitely Cuban, clung to his lightweight black Polo jacket.

It was a brisk forty-five degrees outside that morning, and despite the chill, Jesse had left the double doors to his workshop open for fresh air. He only had on a black tee and jeans, but the shirt was already sticking to his frame from working up a sweat as he’d sanded his way through his list of problems. One by one.

Not that sanding fixed the problems.

But it prevented him from suffocating from the enormity of them.

One particular problem? Ella Mae Hawkins and her recent desire to speed date her way through Birmingham.

The number of potential suitors he’d wanted to break in half back in October, when she’d gone on date after date, had been one too many. He’d refrained. Some-damn-how.

Ella had put a pause on dating when one of their best friends, Savanna, had found herself in trouble back then, but he couldn’t help but wonder when she’d start up again.

He *may* have hacked into her account like a psychopath and done background checks on every guy she’d “matched” with during her bout of insanity this past fall. Her last “date” happened to be the same night Savanna’s life got flipped

upside down. The same night he had to kill a man inside Savanna's house to keep her safe.

And then, during that very same week, he'd had no choice but to take more lives. It'd been in self-defense and to protect Savanna, but Ella had still given him an earful about it.

Yeah, that whole situation was another reason he'd sanded the hell out of the slab of wood like the pine had done him wrong.

"How long are you going to be silent and act like I'm not here? You're burning a hole through that piece of wood like you've got Superman's heat vision."

"Better the wood than you, then, right?" Jesse glanced out the open double doors to check the driveway for a black Suburban or the like, complete with a brooding guard wearing dark sunglasses standing beside the vehicle.

"I heard you're working again. Not the same kind of work, but your kill count has gone up since I saw you last." Thatcher's comment had Jesse facing him.

Did his heartbeat quicken at the fact Thatcher knew this information? Not really.

And was he surprised that Thatcher knew Jesse had recently joined a security firm? Nope.

Or was he shocked by the fact Thatcher even knew the firm existed since there was zero online footprint? Hardly.

This was Thatcher. Thatcher knew everything. It was his job to know everything.

"I thought you didn't want to operate anymore." Thatcher set down the envelope and knuckled the wood with both hands. He pushed down a little as though checking the strength

of the wood under the pressure of his fists. “I heard what happened to Marcus’s widow, Savanna Vasquez. She’s why you got back in, right? She’s why you joined that motley crew.”

“Motley?” A hearty laugh fell from Jesse’s lips at the image he’d painted. Motley wasn’t exactly a term used to define a team of Army veterans, all highly skilled operators that were also excellent intelligence gatherers.

“One of your bosses is a rogue CIA operator.” He paused. “Carter Dominick’s trouble. Not the kind of trouble you want to deal with,” he went on.

Yes, Carter had gone rogue from the Agency, but he’d had good reason from what Jesse had learned. Like his wife being butchered, and he’d wanted to find the real killers.

“And as for your other boss ... Gray Chandler’s the polar opposite of Carter. Then there’s the fact that his sister is CIA, and their dad is the Secretary of Defense.” Another pause. Longer this time. “I’d love to know how Carter and Gray partnered, but they shouldn’t be your team leaders. That job should be mine.”

“I was never part of a team. I was a one-man show. You gave me orders. I executed them. Alone.” *Usually, at least.* “What I’ll be doing with them is the kind of thing I can be proud of—unlike what I did for you.” A gnawing sensation gathered in his stomach like acid roiling around as memories of working for Thatcher surged to mind.

He’d given almost five years to Thatcher. Five years too many. And for what? More buried secrets than he cared to think about, secrets he could never unearth. God, every time he looked Ella in the eyes, he felt like he deserved a bullet to

the back of the head. Her pure heart would turn to dust if she knew all the things he'd done.

“So, your family knows you're part of this—what's it called—Falcon Falls Security? Are your parents aware of the bodies you've piled up since you started working with this ‘not-so’ motley crew?”

And now Thatcher was just fucking with him.

Thatcher lifted his fists from the wood and brushed them along the front of his jacket, leaving a bit of dust residue there.

“You really miss being in the Army? Working with a team? I didn't see that coming. But fine. No more solo runs if you're back with me. You can partner up. Fuck, you can have a ménage or a quadruple or a whatever. But I want you back.”

“No,” Jesse answered with zero hesitation.

“This,” Thatcher said while pointing to the tools hanging on the wall off to his left, “was only supposed to be a cover story. When I heard you'd turned furniture making into a full-time gig after leaving me, I gave you a year until you'd come back. You lasted longer, I'll give you that. But not by much.”

Jesse looked to the wall of tools hanging in perfect order the way his father had taught him. God forbid he'd ever misplaced a tool or put one back in the wrong place growing up.

The hammers were lined up in a row. The screwdrivers all sorted and placed in order by size. And so on.

There was balance and symmetry. Harmony there, when on the inside he felt anything but.

Jesse swiped the pad of his thumb along the edge of the pine slab, his eyes slowly working over the wood, wondering

what it'd been used for before it found its way to his workshop. A granddaddy's rocking chair? A baby's bookshelf? A coffee table to prop your feet up on after a long day at work?

He didn't always know the "past life" of the wood he made into furniture, but he refused to use anything other than recycled material. He wanted to "save" the wood from being tossed. To reshape it. Carve it. Give something trashed or forgotten a new life. A second chance to be useful or beautiful again.

"I like doing this, by the way." *But I need more. I also need to be useful.* In that regard, Thatcher was right. When his friend Savanna had been attacked in her home right in front of him in October, it reminded him he did have skills that could be, well, repurposed for a greater good. Maybe one day, he'd be able to look Ella in the eyes again without feeling like he deserved that bullet.

"We didn't spend a fortune training you, far more than the Army ever did, by the way, just for you to go work with Carter and Gray." Thatcher rounded the workbench and reached into his pocket, producing a business card. "If you're back, you're back with us. Your assignment is in there." He tilted his head toward the 8x11 envelope and set the card on top of it.

Thatcher's order caused the blood to drain from Jesse's face, but only for a moment. That short-lived fear was quickly replaced with a white-hot rage that burned through his entire body. "You agreed to let me walk if I gave you one more year. And I actually gave you eighteen months."

"You gave me those extra six months because Ella Hawkins got engaged," Thatcher said smugly, a self-satisfied

gleam in his eyes. Jesse had never shared that with the man, but Thatcher knew everything, so.

After his weekend with Ella in New York City, Jesse had resolved to walk away from Thatcher and his job. To turn his cover story into his real story and learn to be the kind of man Ella deserved. But Thatcher made him give one more year of his life as a trade for getting “out” without complications.

And over the course of that year, Ella had moved on, just as Jesse had instructed her to do. She’d announced her engagement exactly one year after their New York Christmas, which was two days before Jesse had planned to walk away from Thatcher.

“You’re why she didn’t walk down that aisle, I suspect?”

“I thought you knew everything,” Jesse grumbled, hating Thatcher speaking her name. Ella was innocent and sweet, and Thatcher was, at best, a necessary evil. “The night before her wedding, I told her I couldn’t watch her marry that dipshit,” he slowly confessed because as much as Thatcher’s presence pissed him off, the man had been like a second father.

“And you quit on me when she canceled the wedding. Eighteen months ago.”

“I would have quit regardless, and you know damn well why,” he hissed.

“What happened that day wasn’t our fault, but ...”

But what? The words remained lodged in Jesse’s head though.

“Why aren’t you and Ella together?” he asked, throwing Jesse a curveball. “Because you know a woman like her deserves someone—”

“Better?”

“Different.” Thatcher paused. “Safer.”

“Stop with the mind games.” Jesse stepped forward, his hand going to Thatcher’s chest. This man was no longer his boss. Screw the chain of command and Thatcher’s former E-9 status in the Air Force. “I know what you’re doing. You taught me this fuckery. How to get inside your enemy’s head without ever lifting a finger.” Head games could be even more tortuous than physical pain. He knew that all too well.

“You slept with Ella in New York three years ago. That’s why you wanted out in the first place, right?”

Why was he fishing for more information? What did it matter to him? And how in the hell did he know that?

“Does she know you strangled the life from a man not even a week before that romantic New York getaway? The hands you used to touch her took the life of another.”

Jesse sucked in a sharp breath, his palm swiftly clamping on to Thatcher’s throat. They were at eye level, both six foot one. Thatcher kept his gaze locked with Jesse’s and didn’t flinch while Jesse contemplated actually squeezing.

“Does she know your kill count?” Thatcher whispered as Jesse tightened his grip a hair more. “Your kill count *after* you were no longer a Ranger, I mean.”

“Fuck. You.” Jesse released his hold and retreated three steps before lifting his palms in the air as a signal for Thatcher to get-the-fuck-out. “You need to go before my number goes up by one.”

The smile that lit Thatcher’s face wasn’t cold or calculating, nor was it menacing. It was the smile a father gave

a son after he'd done something to make him proud—a smile his own father had never once given him.

Over the years, Thatcher hadn't hidden the fact that he admired Jesse's passion, his fierce and loyal devotion to those he loved. So pressing Jesse's "Ella buttons" must have been his way of trying to get Jesse to snap. Thatcher was actively trying to provoke the beast inside Jesse, the beast he'd been working to rid himself of since the day Ella canceled her wedding.

Thatcher was also aware that no matter how hard he pushed, Jesse would never actually hurt him.

"You need to leave before my sister sees you here and sics her dog on you. Bear will smell a threat the moment he sets his eyes on you."

Jesse's sister, Rory, and her husband, Chris, were staying with him for the holidays. But Chris had left an hour ago to meet up with A.J.—one of Ella's four brothers—and Griffin, at the outdoor shooting range at the Hawkins Ranch. Jesse now wished he'd accepted Chris's invite to join them.

Griffin Andrews was one of his teammates at Falcon Falls Security as well as Savanna's fiancé. He'd met Griffin in October right after Savanna was attacked in her home, the night Jesse had no choice but to take a man's life before her eyes.

The team, now known as Falcon Falls Security, had been called in to help, and Griffin, a former Army Delta guy, had protected Savanna during the hunt to bring down her attackers. Jesse hadn't been sure if Savanna would ever love again after losing her husband in 2015, but Griffin managed to sweep her off her feet.

He was happy for Savanna, and although he hadn't worked with Griffin very long at the firm, he was a solid and upstanding guy. Griffin had his stamp of approval.

"Jesse, I need you back." Thatcher's voice grew deeper. "At least for one more case, and if you want to work with this Falcon Falls, then so be it." Thatcher tilted his head, studying him. The man looked like a slightly younger version of Harrison Ford and could have been his stand-in or stunt double. Hell, even though Thatcher was in his mid-sixties, Jesse didn't doubt he was capable of doing stunt work. "It hurts that you came back, and it wasn't with me, but I'll forgive you if you work this one last job."

"It'll never be one last job. You'll keep coming back. I know you. You won't give up if I say yes."

"You're the best we've ever had. Will probably ever have." His compliment only made Jesse feel more like a piece of shit because he didn't want to be the best in the way that made Thatcher proud. He only wanted to be the best version of himself for Ella, and the man he used to be would never be that for her.

"Take a few days. Think about it." He lifted his arm, pushed his sleeve up, and checked his watch. "I have a plane to catch. I'll be back Stateside the day after New Year's. You have until then, but I have a hunch you'll call me before my plane even leaves Alabama."

"And if I don't open that envelope?" Jesse folded his arms across his chest, trying to remain strong. To not cave to Thatcher.

"You will."

"What makes you so sure?"

Thatcher set a finger on top of the business card, his head swiveling toward the reclaimed pine. “Because you can’t help yourself. You’re curious. You like to ... fix things.”

Jesse kicked the toe of his work boot against the dusty floor. “Take the file with you. I’ll burn it. I said I’m done, and I’m done.”

Thatcher shook his head. “And if I told you what’s in that file is linked to the last assignment you took?” He paused, allowing Jesse a second to absorb the news. “Are you so stubborn you’re willing to put Ella’s life in danger?”

Jesse squinted as though the sunlight was in his face instead of to his back. “What?” His eyes went to the damn envelope, and his pulse climbed with every millisecond he waited for Thatcher to elaborate.

Thatcher maneuvered around Jesse, ignoring his question. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again real soon.”

Jesse swallowed the lump down his throat as he turned and watched Thatcher toss a goodbye wave over his shoulder on his way out the double doors.

Damn it. Thatcher would do anything to try and lure him back into the fold. But could he take a chance that his former boss was merely full of shit, letting him think Ella was in danger unless he returned for this one last job? And of all the assignments for this new one to possibly connect to.

Jesse removed his black ball cap and set it down, then clawed at his unruly hair while staring at the envelope. He wouldn’t put it past Thatcher to lie just to rope him back. Play those mind games.

But he also couldn’t light up the envelope like he’d contemplated doing a minute ago without knowing the mark to

determine if it was a legit target. And somehow a risk to Ella.

Jesse picked up the envelope, and it trembled in his hand as he broke the seal. A manilla folder was inside, and when he scanned the contents, his breath hitched, and his entire body went cold.

An overwhelming feeling of dread swelled within him. Death knocking on his door, there to collect his soul and take him back to his old life.

Jesse shut the folder and set it on the table before eyeing his newly plastered wall by the perfectly placed tools. Without thinking, he stalked toward the wall, rounded his fist, and began punching. Burying his fist into the plaster, he tore at the sheetrock.

His vision grew blurry as he lost control. As he lost his damn mind.

“Jesse McAdams, what in God’s name did that wall ever do to you?”

Jesse went still at the sound of Ella’s voice behind him.

Working to catch his breath, he eyed the damaged wall, then slowly turned to face her. To explain away the insanity. “I thought there was an animal trapped in here.”

“An animal is why you look madder than a wet hen?” Ella lifted her chin, taking him in from bottom to top. Boots. Jeaned legs. Ripped black tee. Messy hair. And when her eyes finally reached his face, she appeared bewildered. Most likely by the angry look on his face, the hard clench of his jaw, and a whole lot of crazy in his blue eyes.

“It was ... noisy. Bothering me.”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” she drew out, calling him on his shit, folding her arms in the “don’t cross me, mister” stance she used on her grade school students.

She moved closer to him as if assuming his dumbass excuses would continue, but now she was too close. He could see the scattering of freckles across the bridge of her makeup-free nose. Smell her perfume that reminded him of summertime and lazy beach days they spent on the Gulf when they were teenagers. Well, he’d been a teen back then, and she’d been a preteen, he supposed.

Her gaze remained steady on him. She’d been pissed at him for some time now, and he knew, in part, it had to do with the fact he continued to honor their New York deal to “forget” the ten times they’d had sex that weekend three years ago.

Had he actually forgotten? No.

He replayed the nights they’d spent together in vivid detail while working his hand over his cock almost every night since then.

But he’d never brought it up to her, and anytime she’d dared to broach the subject before *or* after her engagement to Banker Boy Brian, he’d shut her down within seconds like a grade A asshole.

If he talked about it with her, his control would snap. If she so much as mentioned any of the things they’d done to each other that weekend, he’d unleash his inner beast, and it’d be to fuck, not fight.

Ella deserved better. That weekend in New York should have never happened. He should have waited until he became the kind of man who could look her in the eyes without guilt staining his vision, making him see red.

Always red. Everyone he knew was a die-hard Bama fan. But that Roll Tide crimson red held a different meaning for him.

“Does your wall-hittin’ have anything to do with that SUV with tinted windows that I saw leave before I pulled in?” She unfolded her arms and waved a hand like a magician doing a trick. “It felt very cloak-and-dagger. You have a new job for Falcon? One you’re not happy about?”

Shit, if he lied and said yes, and Ella mentioned a job to Griffin, Griffin would be clueless. “A guy I used to work with offered me a job. I told him I’m with Falcon now.”

“Oh.”

Oh. Such an insignificant little sound. But it would live in Jesse’s memory as the sound Ella had whispered, whimpered, and even screamed out during the many times they’d had sex that weekend.

Now in a bit of a daze, Jesse stared at her full lips, still rounded as if she were about to utter another *Oh*, and felt a pang of loss.

Was it his fate to always be alone? To be a crotchety seventy-year-old sitting on his porch with a shotgun across his lap, daring anyone to breach his property so he could shoot them. Would he be *that* guy? Hell, would he live long enough to be that guy?

“You worked together in the Army?”

He didn’t want to lie, so he made a hard subject change. “Have you talked to Natasha yet?” He was usually a bit more skilled in the art of the dodge, but he wasn’t thinking clearly at the moment.

“Talked to her on my way here. Natasha and baby Emory should be getting discharged from the hospital later today.”

Natasha was Gray’s CIA sister. And Natasha’s husband, Wyatt, was a SEAL who worked alongside A.J.

A.J. also had a child now, and the last three months since he’d been born had flown by.

Jesse wouldn’t be surprised if Savanna and Griffin had a little one soon.

Griffin was the only engaged one on their immediate five-man and one-woman team at Falcon Falls. But surely that’d change eventually. Two of his teammates, Jack London and Sydney Archer were divorced. And Sydney was a mother to a teenage son. But he doubted they’d stay single forever. Same with his team leader, Gray Chandler, or his other teammate, Oliver Lucas.

Jesse had a feeling Carter would stay single forever after losing his wife, though, *but* then again ... he’d thought the same about Savanna.

“Did you also hit your head against that wall when you were hammering it with your fists?” Ella snapped her fingers before his face, startling him back to the fact she was standing there and had probably been talking.

“Your yammerin’ always does have me fallin’ asleep.”

“I wasn’t talking, smartass.” She rolled her eyes. Standard for Ella, and she turned her saucy self toward the table. “But I am a little surprised Wyatt drove Natasha down here for the Christmas Eve party so close to the baby’s due date, which was supposed to be next week. They’re lucky her water didn’t break on the way home.”

“That woman worked all the way up until Christmas Eve, so it seems like stubbornness is in her DNA. Like someone else I know.” He shot her a quick grin, and she swatted the air in his direction.

“But,” she began, “I suppose Natasha had good reason. Celebrating Savanna and Griffin’s engagement wasn’t just a joyous occasion for everyone, it was also their goodbye to Marcus. Granted, it wasn’t their first farewell, but it was probably the most touching, in light of the circumstances.”

Savanna’s late husband, Marcus, and Ella’s brother, A.J., had been college best friends at Bama. Served together in the Navy, then worked clandestine ops for the President that Jesse wasn’t supposed to know about. And sadly, Marcus was killed by terrorists during one of those ops.

Jesse knew A.J. and the others had said their goodbyes more than once since Marcus had died, particularly after the terrorists responsible were finally killed. But with Savanna planning to remarry, the team had felt it appropriate to say another one.

“True,” he finally spoke up.

“Natasha said Gray’s going to stay in D.C. until New Year’s. And Sydney’s in D.C. with her son for the holidays. Does that mean we have you until then?”

“I don’t know.” His plans now hinged on the call he’d regrettably be making to Thatcher as soon as Ella left.

“So.” She hooked her thumbs in the front pockets of her jeans as her gaze darted to the folder.

Shit.

He quickly sidestepped her and casually reached for it, tucking it back inside the envelope. “Just the job offer.” He

faked a smile, one she'd read as another load of bullshit.

He set the envelope on another workbench by the battered wall, laying the business card facedown by it.

Ella shot him a puzzled look before returning her focus to his current project. She smoothed her palm along the top of the slab of wood he'd been sanding before Thatcher had arrived and dropped a bomb on him.

"How do you do that?" he found himself muttering.

"Do what?"

"Look at something broken and see beauty. Already see the finished product. This rough slab of wood isn't ugly in your eyes," he commented while rounding the workbench to stand opposite her, and she peered up at him.

"How do you know I see this as beautiful right now?" she asked, her tone softer than it had been lately. Less saucy and more sweet.

"I can see it in your eyes." *Because of how you look at me. Look at my dark soul and somehow still see ...*

Ella's throat visibly moved with a swallow. He'd made her uncomfortable. He'd shown a sliver of "something more," which he'd worked hard not to do until he was sure he could actually give her "something more," something other than a meaningless four-letter word. Hope.

"You did hit your head, didn't you?" Ella's blue eyes tightened on him as she whipped her high ponytail to her back, then quickly shifted her gaze to the envelope.

"What are you doing here so early?" he said as nonchalantly as possible before coughing into his fist while

leaning his back against the other workbench, concealing the envelope.

“I’m here to pick up Rory. We’re heading to Savanna’s café. We’ll be baking up a storm for the New Year’s Eve party.” Ella unexpectedly frowned. “Why are *you* here? Everyone is at the ranch. A.J., Chris, Griffin and—”

“I know. I wasn’t in the mood.”

“Not in the mood to shoot? Just in the mood to destroy your new wall.” Her eyes moved to the open doors. “Or did you know that, um, old friend of yours was going to show up?”

She didn’t believe his story. He didn’t exactly blame her.

“That was an unanticipated visit,” he offered her the truth.

“Okay, Mr. Mysterious. Unexpected visit from a guy in a government-looking vehicle two days before New Year’s Eve with a job offer from a friend that may or may not have served with you in the Army.” She laid the sass on thick that time and added another eye roll for good measure before turning toward the open doors, presumably to escape his “den of lies.” Jesse couldn’t help but grin because that was definitely something Ella would say.

Without thinking, he swiftly reached out and snatched her wrist. He wasn’t ready to lose sight of her crystal blue eyes.

He needed to be reminded there was light at the end of the dark tunnel he’d been walking through for years. And that light was her.

But he felt like he was in one of those weird dreams where he could barely move. Where time stood still, and he was stuck in place, only able to watch her from afar, worried he’d never make it out and to her.

She jerked free of his touch, shaking her head. And he deserved that.

“My mom wants me to invite you to dinner tonight. I almost, um, forgot to ask,” she noted, a hint of hesitation in her voice as if part of her hoped he’d say yes. And the other part of her screamed, *Don’t come*. “Everyone will be there.”

“That include my parents?” He shifted to the side and thought about the envelope sitting on the workbench.

“No, your mom said they have other plans.”

Good. The last person he needed to deal with tonight was his old man. “I may not be able to make it.”

“Oh.”

Damn that “oh” when it conveyed sadness instead of pleasure.

He grabbed his hat from the tabletop and positioned it on his head, brim facing backward.

“You need a haircut.” She tipped her chin.

“I need a lot of things,” he glibly said, turning his back to her to lay his hands on the pine that wouldn’t be touched again until he finished what he hoped would truly be his last job with Thatcher.

When he caught sight of movement from over his shoulder, his heart leaped from his chest as he moved into action.

“Ella, damn it!” He cursed again as she pinned the envelope behind her back. “You’re thirty-five, not five. Don’t —”

“Fuck with you?” she challenged, eyebrows raised.

Jesse didn't move a muscle as he stared her down. *Do not tempt me, darlin', or I just might put you on all fours and take you right here.*

“What? You don't like it when I say ‘fuck’? You sure didn't mind it while we were having sex that weekend.”

Ella's sentence drifted off at the sound of an excited canine's yip. She pressed up on her toes and peered over Jesse's shoulder, lifting her chin to put eyes there.

“Jesse,” Rory hissed. “I flippin' knew it. I knew you two had to have done something.”

Jesse looked back to see his pissed-off sister standing in the doorway, her Belgian Malinois obediently at her side.

Rory kept her eyes laser-focused on him. “I suppose you have some explaining to do. And you better talk fast before I give Bear orders to attack.”

CHAPTER TWO



ELLA BREATHED IN THE RICH AROMA OF ESPRESSO AND delicious pastries as she and Rory stepped inside Savanna's café, located in an old Birmingham neighborhood. The bell attached to the top of the door still jangled as Rory grabbed Ella's elbow and dragged her to a high-top table. She shoved her onto a stool and pulled another one close, plopping down in dramatic fashion.

“Well, we're here now. No more stalling, spill the beans,” Rory ordered.

Ella glanced over to see Savanna moving from behind the counter to make her way over, eyes wide with curiosity as well as confusion at their abrupt entrance. Rory had barked a hasty *Hi* to Savanna and waved her over but hadn't given Ella a chance to say a word, much less catch her breath. She was obviously itching to cut straight to the bombshell news she'd overheard at Jesse's workshop.

Ella hadn't wanted to “spill the beans” to one best friend and not the other, so on their thirty-minute ride into Birmingham, they'd sat in awkward silence while listening to Taylor Swift's “Taylor Version” of the *Red* album.

Savanna lifted her brows, her attention ping-ponging back and forth between the two of them as she slid onto her own

stool. Looked like they wouldn't be baking anytime soon.

Savanna had pushed back her normal opening hours so the three of them could bake treats for their New Year's Eve party without the interruption of customers striding in to buy coffee or a croissant. It was a good thing, too, since she preferred no one else get an earful about her wild weekend with Jesse in New York.

A weekend of sex that had alternated between spicy and sweet. A weekend during which his hands had touched every inch of her body, and he'd worshipped her skin like the finest silk beneath his rough palms.

She'd done her best to mute the warnings in her head and ignore the squeezing pain in her heart during those thirty-six hours with that man. But the moment they'd stepped foot on the plane to head home to Alabama, and his entire mood had changed, she'd known she was screwed six ways from Sunday.

"What's going on?" Savanna whispered while placing her elbows on the table and leaning in.

Ella was glad Rory had made her sit down first because her legs didn't feel all that steady. She might buckle from the weight of her emotions that the ten-minute version of Taylor's "All Too Well" song seemed to drum up inside her on the drive.

Ironically, she felt more stable face-to-face with the problem himself than when she was away from him. Jesse stirred frustration inside her when he was nearby, and anger was easier to manage than sadness. And whenever she looked at the man, her blood boiled.

But when they were apart ...

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

Feeling somewhat recovered, Ella stood and walked over to the bookshelf that held romance novels Savanna's regulars were welcome to borrow and board games customers played while sipping their coffees and eating desserts.

She thumbed the spines of Savanna's favorite books. Ella had always been more of a murder mystery girl. Give her a good crime show podcast or serial killer documentary. How many times had she read Stephen King's *The Shining*?

Sometimes she swore she wanted to murder that man. Well, maybe just punch Jesse, but her hand would hurt more than his face. That bladed jawline would damage her fist.

Ella kept her back to her friends, not prepared to face them when she revealed the details of what she'd been hiding for three years. "I slept with Jesse," she whispered.

Ella hadn't given Rory a chance to work up steam to lecture Jesse back at his workshop. Or to hit him.

She'd quickly turned on her heel and left, and Rory had trailed after her, cursing her brother under her breath.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that," Savanna was the first to respond since this was news to her and not Rory. "After the Christmas Eve party? You two danced. Did it happen then? Is Jesse finally coming to his senses?"

"God, no. I wouldn't let that man touch me now. Screw him. I hate him." Yeah, they danced the other night, but it was only because she'd asked one of Jesse's new teammates at Falcon, Jack London, to dance. And Jesse, being a serious pain in her ass, didn't like it when another man touched her.

"Oh-kay." Confusion dripped through Savanna's tone. Her romance-loving heart had been rooting for Ella and Jesse for

years. Even after Savanna lost her husband, Marcus, to terrorists, her love for all things romance never waned. The woman loved love, and Ella couldn't have been happier that her friend had found it again with Griffin.

“Teacups. Candy corn,” Ella began, speaking to the bookshelf, “overly sweet-smelling perfume. Fake smiles. The Jetsons. And oh yeah, Jesse McAdams.” She worked up the nerve to turn and face her friends, catching a whiff of the espresso she desperately needed. “That’s my list of things I hate. Although, I think Jesse ranks above teacups.”

Savanna rolled her lips inward as if torn between smiling and frowning at her comment. “The Jetsons? And what did candy corn ever do to offend you?”

“I mean, I’m still hung up on the teacups,” Rory said with a laugh, and hell, at least Rory’s murderous mood toward her brother had fizzled a little. “So, you hate some weird things, and I get why my brother is on your list,” she added a moment later in a more serious tone. “But when did you two sleep together? Was it just one time? Do I need to kill him? Should he be on my list? And I’m not talking about my own hate list. Sounds like he deserves to be on my hit list.”

Rory probably did have a hit list. Not that she would ever kill anyone. But she’d racked up quite a number of enemies over the years during her treasure-hunting escapades that included tangoing with pirates and wildlife traffickers.

Ella removed her jean jacket and draped it over the stool to buy herself some time. “New York.”

“The trip I set you two up on? You mean my plan worked?” Rory was mid fist pump before realization hit, and her elated expression turned into a wince as she slowly sat

again. “Obviously, not the way I’d wanted from the sounds of it.”

Stomach bug, my ass. Ella had known that Rory, being the schemer that she was, had planned that entire thing. She’d done her best to throw them together a few times before then, and since then, but every attempt had resulted in failure.

“We made a deal not to tell anyone. But yeah, it happened then. And *only* then,” Ella admitted, wanting to cross her arms, feeling a bit defensive.

“Wow, okay. And here I thought you two had never even kissed,” Savanna said softly, blinking a few times.

“Uhm, actually, we haven’t kissed.” Ella squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the reactions to come flying. But the café was eerily quiet. She hesitantly opened one eye to see Savanna and Rory sitting there like statues.

A full minute passed in complete silence while Ella stared at the ceiling. Finally, Savanna spoke, “You pulled a *Pretty Woman*?” She quickly followed up with, “Before you think I’m calling you a prostitute—”

“I thought it’d make things easier if we didn’t kiss on the mouth or”—Ella gulped—“anywhere intimate. It was my idea.”

“Oy.” Rory closed her eyes. “We’re talking about my brother. Not a visual I want burned onto my retinas.”

“Well, I didn’t let him, you know, do that, so.” Ella was stumbling through the conversation she must have had in her head a million times. She always knew she’d eventually tell her best friends what’d happened, but for some insane reason, she’d convinced herself she would share the truth after she and Jesse were finally together.

Not going to happen. Not ever.

“So, you had sex. Like a drunken-oops thing? One time?” Rory asked, drumming her fingers on the table as if deciding whether she would, at the very least, punch her brother if he’d “taken advantage” of a woman under the influence.

“We weren’t drunk. And it was maybe ten times that weekend.”

“Ten?” Rory’s eyes flashed open. “And not since?”

Ella shook her head. “No. It was part of the deal. And he made me promise to move on after that.”

“Okay, first of all,” Savanna started, “this deal you and Jesse made to not tell anyone, you do realize that doesn’t apply to best friends and spouses, right? You, of all people, who send me at least five TikTok videos a day, should know that. I think you’ve even sent me a TikTok saying those exact words. So, you could have told us. You didn’t need to carry this weight by yourself.”

“And secondly,” Rory said as if knowing Savanna’s next line of thought, “pretty sure neither of you moved on.”

“I got engaged a year later,” Ella reminded her, but Rory’s eye roll said it all. Her engagement to Brian the banker had been real, but at the same time, utter bullshit.

Even if Jesse hadn’t stood up at the dress rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding and stormed off, Ella knew in her heart she wouldn’t have been able to go through with it anyway. And when Jesse had learned she’d called off the wedding, he’d come back to town and danced with her on her would-be wedding day.

“But Jesse still didn’t ...” Ella unleashed her hair from her ponytail only to fix it again. “Every time he’s shown me a

shred of hope, he immediately yanks it away. It makes me crazy. And it's why every other day I feel like ... like I'm losing my mind." She drew in a ragged breath and freed it, hoping to get rid of her negative energy along with it. "He keeps breaking my heart. Smashing it into pieces as if he wants me to be damn near as broken as he claims to be," she said, tears welling in her eyes as she sank onto the stool again.

Her friends reached across the table, each taking one of Ella's hands between their own. Savanna's touch was gentle, like a mother comforting her child, while Rory's grasp was firm and tight. Ella figured she was probably imagining her hand around Jesse's neck.

"I'm so sorry, and sorry you felt you couldn't share this with us. I can't imagine how difficult the last three years have been for you," Savanna softly said.

"Have you tried talking to him about what happened in New York?" Rory asked, still keeping a firm grip on Ella's hand. "Or was that part of the deal? Not talk about it with each other either?"

"Part of the deal. Not that I didn't try to talk to him, but he refused to acknowledge it ever happened," Ella whispered, worried her tears would escape. And Jesse didn't deserve her tears.

"He won't be with you, but he doesn't want you with anyone else." Rory released her, leaned back, and tousled her hair. "Now that's a selfish prick if I've ever met one. He is now officially on both my hate list and my hit list." She let go of her long locks. "That bastard." She jumped up as if she were on her way to raise hell.

"Don't," Ella pleaded. "He's not worth it."

Rory stilled. “I don’t understand him or how he could hurt you like this. He should never have touched you knowing ...”

“It’s my fault. I asked him to. I, um, pretty much threw myself at him.” Ella’s cheeks heated with embarrassment. “The rules were all my idea. Sex. As well as the deal to not talk about it afterward or to tell anyone. All my ideas. It sounds pathetic when I say it, but I wanted him so much. And I know it was a mistake. A horrible mistake, because what if I can’t ever move on? I tried and failed.”

“Jesse shouldn’t have said yes,” Rory quickly replied. “He knew how you felt. He knew that no deal or pact, or whatever you want to call it, would change that. For either of you.”

“All I know is that I’m thirty-five, and I’ve spent most of my life in love with a man who I can’t be with, and somehow, somehow, I have to get over him.” She sniffled. “I really do hate him, even though ...” *I still love him.*

The lyrics to Maroon 5’s “Beautiful Mistakes” popped into her head as she thought back to that weekend. To the way he peered into her eyes and made her feel ... well, absolutely everything. It’d been indescribable. And sadly, unforgettable.

“Sweetie, I—” Savanna let go of her words when someone tapped on the glass of the front door. “We’re closed,” she called out.

Ella looked up to see a handsome man in a suit standing there, his head tilted and a determined look on his face despite Savanna’s announcement. “I’m here to see Ella Hawkins. It’s important.”

“Who are you? I need identification.” Rory strode to the door but remained inside the café, her hands planted on her hips.

Ella stepped closer to see who in the world was looking for her and why.

The man pressed his ID against the glass as his brown eyes cut to her. “I’m from Rochella. We saw your Instagram account, and we’re interested in making you an offer.” Wow, a British accent to boot.

And wait. “Rochella-Rochella?” The name on the ID suddenly hit her. He was Henry Rochella. *The* flipping Henry Rochella was in Birmingham looking for her? Billionaire fashion moguls didn’t search her out.

“Instagram account?” Rory seemed to be more hung up on the fact Ella had yet another secret. Yeah, she had a social media presence that she preferred no one in her small town knew about. She didn’t want anyone there following her or seeing her daily silly posts and stories. She was still a teacher, after all.

Rory held her arm out to stop Ella from opening the door. “Hang on and let me google this guy first.” She pulled her phone from her pocket, and within thirty seconds, she announced, “Googled Henry’s name and matched it with his photo online to confirm his identity. He checks out. Want me to let him in?”

“Um.” This was an unexpected turn of events. “Okay.”

Rory unlocked the door, and the *billionaire* walked in and smiled, his white teeth perfect. His tailored suit was probably worth more than her monthly salary. A lot more. The sharp red power tie was attached to a strong neck. Clean-shaven, but the man didn’t need to wear a beard to pull off hot. He was, as Savanna would call him, “romance-novel material.”

“Coffee? Espresso?” Savanna offered him.

“Espresso. Thank you,” Henry answered with a polite smile, and Ella motioned toward one of the four-person tables. “I’ll stand if that’s okay.” He dipped his hand into his breast pocket, produced a business card, and offered it to Ella while Rory went behind the counter to help Savanna.

Her curiosity was piqued, and as Ella eyed the famous logo on the card now in her hand, she had to admit, she was downright stunned. “You want to make me an offer?”

Henry nodded. “Are you familiar with my company?”

“I’m pretty sure everyone is, even down here in Bama,” Ella drawled, feeling a bit insulted he’d think she hadn’t heard of Rochella. Makeup. Clothes. Shoes. Magazines. Rochella did it all.

As a matter of fact, Ella had grown up hoarding their magazines, along with Cosmo and all the other popular ones back then. Every month, after her mother finished flipping through them, she’d hand them off to Ella. And she’d cut out her favorite fashion pieces and place them on the “inspiration board” hanging on her bedroom wall. And she saved all the articles about travel for Rory since she was the adventurous one.

And now, the son of the famous Elizabeth Rochella, who’d graced the cover of the magazine many times herself from what Ella remembered, was standing before her.

“Your company has its,” Ella finally spoke aloud, her gaze drifting to his strong hand stroking his jaw, “big hands in a lot of jars.” *Big hands, Ella?* She felt the blush working over her face.

Henry’s lips twitched, revealing a hint of a crooked smile.

“Your mother was an inspiration to me growing up. A role model,” Ella told him.

“Really? Well, that makes my presence here ... even more special.”

Ella folded her arms, fighting her nerves. “You could have contacted me through Instagram. So, why are you here?”

“My mum grew up in the South, but maybe you already know that.” He paused for confirmation.

Ella nodded because she did, and maybe it'd been one reason she'd connected so much with Elizabeth Rochella.

“My mum moved abroad after marrying my British father. She remained a fan of all things Southern, and well, my parents are retiring in June on her birthday, and my father, sister, and I have decided to surprise Mum with a special project.”

“A project,” Ella said under her breath, still clueless as to what that had to do with her.

“We're calling it, *Hidden Gems of the South*. It'll be an event that takes place in Charleston, where she was born. My sister and I are personally picking out these gems since this is for our mum.” He opened his palm toward her. “We're looking for Southern women who possess an excellent eye for fashion as well as have a certain look my mother would love.”

“I'm sorry, what?” Ella hugged her arms tighter across her chest.

He smiled, less crooked and more dashing this time. She figured Henry to be about forty, but his skin was as smooth as that of a twenty-year-old.

“I stumbled upon your Instagram account last week. Your designs are outstanding. Your posts are witty. Hashtags hilarious.” He stepped forward and cupped the air as if cradling her cheek. “And your face, my love, is rather iconic.”

Love? How very British.

“You’re a blonde Audrey Hepburn with the body of Marilyn Monroe. My mum would love you. And your day job is a teacher.” His smile stretched, showing a dimple. “You are perfect.”

Never in a million years would she compare herself to Audrey Hepburn, the epitome of style and grace. And Marilyn Monroe? No freaking way. “Wait, you like my designs?” That important comment nearly slipped past her. “I was just posting those for fun. I have like fifty-nine followers.”

He removed his phone from his pocket and held it before her. “Make that sixty now.” His gaze cut over her shoulder where Savanna and Rory were most likely on approach with the espressos. “You’re a hidden gem.” He stowed his phone and accepted the espresso from Savanna.

“I’m still confused.” *And maybe a bit dizzy.*

Henry took a sip of the espresso and tipped a nod of approval to Savanna. “My team will need you for the months leading up to the event. We’d like to have you design and showcase some of your own pieces. You’ll be working side by side with our people in Paris in preparation for the fashion show and Mum’s party. You’ll not only wear the designs in Charleston for the party, but they’ll be featured in our magazine and on our lifestyle blogs and such. You’ll also be on the cover of Mum’s final magazine in June along with the other five gems.”

The cover. With Elizabeth Rochella. Did her heart just stop?

“Paris?” Ella sputtered, not sure if she actually heard anything he’d said correctly.

Henry casually nodded as if this were no big deal. “We’ll need you there next week. The other five gems we selected will be arriving then as well.”

“I’m just ...” Ella turned to look at her best friends, who stared at her with equally stunned expressions. *This isn’t real, is it?*

“We’d pay you for your time and designs, of course,” he commented. “Would you like me to give you the amount in private or?”

“You can talk in front of them,” she said softly while facing him again.

“Three hundred K. But we’d own your designs. Sell them worldwide. With possibilities to buy more down the road.”

“Three hundred *thousand* dollars?” Ella almost choked on her words.

“Are you serious?” It was Rory who spoke Ella’s thoughts for her.

“I can’t leave my students. I just switched to teaching third grade this year,” Ella said, suddenly remembering she had a life in Alabama. She couldn’t pause her life for some fantasy. “We’re halfway through the year, and my principal and students wouldn’t want me to leave.”

“I think they’d understand. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance,” Savanna surprised her by saying.

“Smart woman,” Henry commented. “Don’t say no.” He pointed to the card she’d forgotten was clutched in her other hand. “I’m staying in town one more night. But you have until New Year’s to say yes.”

“The playground.” Ella swallowed. “The school needs a new one, and it’s over thirty grand. And the iPads are old.” She ran through a list of all the things she could buy for her school that lacked the budget to do so.

“You’d spend your money at your place of employment?” he asked, sounding as shocked about that as she was at his offer. “You really are a hidden gem.” He offered his hand, and she tucked the business card in her pocket to accept it.

“I’m not saying yes,” she said while his big, warm hand enveloped hers. “Just maybe.”

“Stay an extra day,” Savanna blurted. “Come to the New Year’s Eve party. It’s at the Hawkins Ranch in Walkins Glen. Thirty minutes from here.”

Henry searched Ella’s gaze for her permission since she was a Hawkins. “You’re welcome to come. I’ll, um, give you my answer then.”

“A ranch, huh? Do I need to wear a cowboy hat?” He lifted a brow, his eyes raking over her again, this time almost suggestively.

“You’re fine just the way you are,” Ella rasped, not wanting to come across as flirty, but she was still stunned.

“Seven o’clock,” Savanna offered. “She’ll see you then.”

He pulled his hand back and tipped his head. “Have a good day, ladies. And it was a pleasure to meet you, Ella Mae.”

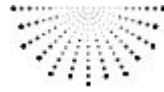
At the sound of her middle name rolling from his British tongue, she nearly melted.

But then a twinge of guilt that had no right to be there cut through her. Because pretty much only her brothers or Jesse called her Ella Mae, and not all of the time, but when Jesse did it ...

I'm not Jesse's. He's not mine.

And five or six months in Paris felt like not just the chance of a lifetime, but her opportunity to finally move on from Jesse.

CHAPTER THREE



“I THOUGHT I’D FIND YOU OUT HERE. GOING FOR A RIDE SO close to supper?”

Ella finished saddling up Lady, her Appaloosa mare, before turning toward her mother. “I need some alone time to think.”

Deb Hawkins stood just inside the stables, and even though Ella knew supper was most likely already in the oven, her mom was still wearing the gingham apron Ella had made for her in eighth grade. “It’s Paris, sweetheart. *Rochella*.” She gestured for her to come closer, like she was ten and not over thirty. “Do I want you to fly halfway across the world and live in France until June? No. But how can you turn down that opportunity? This is your dream.”

Ella shook her head and removed her cowgirl hat, setting it against her thigh. “Fashion is my hobby. Not my dream.”

“Call it what you want, but you kept that Instagram blog, or whatever it’s called, a secret from us. You started posting your designs for the world to see for a reason. You wanted to be seen. And, baby girl, this is your chance to be seen by more than fifty-nine people.”

“Sixty,” Ella said, smiling at the memory of Henry’s words and his charm.

Lady slowly walked alongside Ella and nudged her with her muzzle as if to say, *I'll miss you. Don't go.*

Ella faced her mare. Lady had been a birthday gift from her father a few years ago. She'd already had the name, and Ella hadn't wanted to change it, even if it wasn't all that original. But she was her "Lady" now. "I should get to riding, or I'll be late for supper."

"Just tell me something." Her mom stepped forward and secured a hand around Ella's jean-jacket-covered arm. "Are you hesitating because you think Jesse will finally get his head out of his rear end and kiss you if you stay?"

"Tell me how you really feel," Ella said with a laugh, more so to hide the pain that threatened to creep into her tone. "I think that ship has sailed, Mom. He's never gonna come around."

"You know, I still have all of your diaries from middle school and high school. I found them under your bed forever and a day ago and put them in a box." She gently squeezed Ella's arm before letting go. "I didn't read them, but I can imagine there was only one name scrawled inside. Well, maybe his and Patrick Swayze's." She gave her a gentle smile.

Add pity to the list of things Ella hated, especially when it came from her tough-as-nails mother. Her brothers all said Ella was the toughest in the family. Hardly. Especially where Jesse was concerned.

"You can't exactly throw a stone anywhere in this town without hitting someone who thinks you two should be married. Or that it should have been Jesse's ring on your finger instead of Brian's," her mom went on. "I don't think that ship has sailed, sweetheart. I just think Jesse is moving slower than what even us Southerners would define as slow." She frowned

this time. “He refused to watch you marry Brian. The look on his face when he stormed out of the rehearsal dinner said volumes.”

“Maybe. But he didn’t beg me not to walk down that aisle.”

“Same difference.” Her mom tightened the knot at the back of the apron as Ella continued to stroke Lady’s shoulder. Her stunning mare was white with dark spots that flowed over the length of her body, known as the leopard pattern. Ella would miss her while in Paris, but she was certain even Lady would understand her reasons for going. Lady knew when Ella was feeling sad. Or just a whole lot of hurt.

“I think you should go to Paris. Give Jesse some time to miss you.”

“The man has had more than half his life to miss me. Fourteen years in the Army, and even when he left the military and returned home, he was always coming and going.” She wasn’t sure where he disappeared to from time to time, but he always came back. And then, coincidence maybe, Jesse’s weird disappearance acts stopped the day Ella called off the wedding.

Of course, recently, he’d surprised everyone by joining Falcon Falls Security, which was headquartered in Pennsylvania.

From what A.J. had told Ella about the security firm’s leaders, Carter and Gray, they’d found themselves in a hilarious rock-paper-scissors argument at one of A.J.’s teammates’ weddings that fall. They’d both wanted to recruit the Army veteran, Oliver Lucas, and their tug-of-war over the man led to Carter and Gray combining forces to create Falcon Falls.

According to Savanna, since Jesse didn't exactly open up about any-freaking-thing, Falcon also had "secret" sites around the globe courtesy of their boss, Carter Dominick. Carter was the only man Ella had met that gave off an even more mysterious vibe than Jesse.

"Jesse didn't have an easy life growing up," her mom abruptly announced. "And you know his dad basically forced him into the Army at eighteen."

There was something in her mom's eyes that said she knew more than she was letting on. "What is it?" Ella lowered her hand from Lady and closed the bit of space between her and her mom. "Rory would have said something if ... well, if there was something to say." She gulped, searching her brain for childhood memories that would've been a red flag for this "not an easy life" Jesse might have experienced.

"I've known Jesse since he was born, and his mom is my best friend. Best friends tell each other everything."

"So I've been told," Ella said under her breath, recalling the mini-lecture from Rory and Savanna that morning before Henry Rochella had shown up with a too-good-to-be-true offer.

Her mom palmed Ella's cheek. "Not every family is as perfect as they let everyone think. And in this social media age, I think everyone now has the capability of photoshopping all the bad stuff out to make things picture-perfect."

What was that supposed to mean? What cryptic insanity was this? What happened to Jesse? "Mom, tell me."

"Not my secret to share. Just don't be so fast to judge Jesse is all I'm saying." She pulled her hand away and turned, and Ella followed her mom's gaze to see Jesse striding toward the

stables. “Well, looks like someone else wants to have a talk with you. Does he know about Paris?”

“Not yet.” Her shoulders fell at the idea of being alone with him for the second time today. She wasn’t sure if she had the energy to be mad at him.

Also, what in Sam Hill had her mom been talking about?

“Supper is in thirty. Your ride better be short.” Her mom waved to Jesse as she exited the stables.

“Ma’am,” Jesse said with a respectful tip of his head, removing his cowboy hat in the process.

He’d cleaned up since that morning. His slightly wild dark blond hair, more brown than blond except in the summer, was pushed back away from his face with gel. He had on a button-up jean shirt with black denim jeans and his dark cowboy boots. When Jesse’s eyes locked on to Ella’s face, he repositioned his black hat.

“I assume you decided to come to dinner,” she said, placing her left foot in the stirrup and mounting her horse with ease, deciding she’d rather get in some riding than talk to Jesse right now.

With the reins held loosely, she rested her hands atop the horn of the saddle and gave Jesse a look that conveyed in no uncertain terms that the conversation was over before it’d even begun.

“Can you wait? I need to talk to you.” He looked up at her from his stance next to Lady’s head and began to reach out, but Lady, as if sensing Ella’s irritation, pulled her muzzle away with a snort.

Good girl.

Ella snapped her eyes shut. Jesse had whispered *good girl* to her during their spicier encounters that weekend in New York. His hot voice had flowed over the shell of her ear every time she'd obeyed his command not to orgasm until he'd given her permission.

Yeah, she needed to find that inner fireball and fast before she floundered in a pool of drool at the memories of his hot naked body on top of hers.

“Ella, this is important.” Jesse’s growly voice stole her attention from the past.

“I have something important to share too. But you can hear the news at supper with everyone else.” At that moment, she had two choices. Go to Paris until June or stay in Alabama and pine for a man who’d never commit. So, she’d accept Henry’s offer and somehow make the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity work with her teaching job.

“What news? Tell me now.” There was desperation in his voice, and it was only then that she noticed something was off. More off than normal too. He looked ... scared. That wasn’t a look she was used to seeing him wear.

He approached her mare again, and Ella was grateful the stables were empty of any of the ranch hands right now. Or her brothers.

A.J. was somewhere on the property with his wife and baby. And Rory and her husband, Chris, were there. Savanna and Griffin. Her brothers Caleb, Shep, and Beckett were moseying around somewhere too. Then there was Beckett’s daughter, McKenna. They had a full house today.

“We’ll talk after my ride. Not here,” Ella decided, then let Lady know she was ready to ride, and Lady swiftly

maneuvered around their roadblock, Jesse.

“Wait. Don’t go,” Jesse hollered, but she didn’t bother to look back.

Move forward. Keep going forward.

Once on a trail and far enough away from the stables, she had Lady pick up her speed a little. At the sound of hoofs behind her, she tossed a quick look back to see Jesse on one of their Arabian horses. Of course, Jesse was barebacking it. No saddle. Jesse had the skills to ride like that, but it’d quickly fatigue both him and the horse. Right now, she cared a lot more about the horse than the jerk riding him.

“What do you think, Lady? Do we stop and see what that jackass wants?” At least her anger was back. Her preferred mood when dealing with said jackass.

Ella slowed and had Lady quickly turn and stop in her tracks to face Jesse closing in on them. “You act like I’m in danger. I grew up around cowboys. I know how to ride,” she said once he closed the gap. “I’m safe.”

“No, you’re not safe,” he damn near barked out, and why did she get the feeling he wasn’t talking about riding right now.

He got off his horse and offered her a hand to dismount. She stared at him, her thoughts swirling in the chilly breeze.

“It’s nippy out here.” She rolled that word around in her mouth a time or two, avoiding the six-foot-one tower of frustration waiting for her. “Nippy. Ha. You know, I just now realized why people say that when it’s cold outside,” she tossed out while peering down at her open jean jacket, finding her nipples standing at attention and quite noticeable behind the lace bra and top. *Great.*

“Ella, please.” There was that sense of urgency in his tone again.

“Did Rory tell you about Paris?” Ella sputtered. “Did she tell you about Henry?” That had to be why he was acting like a lunatic. Maybe Rory had an angry encounter with her brother, and it accidentally slipped out?

“Paris?” Jesse slowly pulled his hand back, removed his hat, and clutched it to his chest as if he’d just learned someone had unexpectedly died, a solemn look crossing his face. Until that look transformed into one of anger. “Who the hell is Henry?”

Ella let go of a deep exhalation, patted Lady’s neck, and swung her right leg over the saddle to step down. But when Jesse’s hands landed on her hips to assist her, she went still. “Please don’t touch me,” she said softly. Her anger had suddenly morphed into uncertainty, and she hated that it made her sound weak.

Jesse released her and waited for her to face him. “I need to know what you’re talking about now. Not at supper.”

“I’ve been offered an opportunity of a lifetime to go to Paris. A fashion, um, thing.” God, with his heated gaze crushing her under its fierce intensity, she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to get through this. While she rambled off the details Henry had told her that morning, Jesse slowly narrowed the space between them to mere inches, then drew his hand in the air as if he were tracing the contour of her cheek without actually touching her.

He stared at her for another long, quiet moment. “You can’t go.”

“I’m sorry. I think I just hallucinated.” She also thought she might be channeling Reese Witherspoon as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, so she kept on going. “You don’t have any say about what I do, Jesse McAdams. And I don’t recall asking for your permission.”

His lips twitched, and he leaned forward, hat still at his chest as he angled his head, holding her eyes. “You. Are. Not. Going,” he said darkly, his voice thick with intent. The “do not cross me” kind, which would most definitely be dangerous for anyone else. She considered him harmless. Well, aside from crumpling her heart like a piece of trash.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you of all people ought to know you lost the right to even offer your input into my life a long time ago.” *Keep your shit together. Don’t let him see your tears. He’s not worth it.*

“As of today,” he continued, his ice-blue eyes trained on her face, “I’m in charge of your safety. Every move you make will be subject to my approval. And you’re sure as hell not going to Paris. End of story.”

“Why not throw a ‘fuck’ in there for added emphasis?” she rasped, anger once again swapping seats with her sadness. “How about I try it?” She snatched his hat and shifted it away from his chest so she could walk her fingers up his wall of muscle, then settled her palm over his heart. It was beating fast and erratically. “You’re not in charge of me in any aspect. You don’t get to tell me what to do. And I *am* going to Paris. End of *fucking* story.”

“Ella Mae,” he said through clenched teeth as he reached out and cupped her chin, “you don’t have any idea what I’m capable of, and you don’t want to find out.”

Chills chased over her spine from what felt like a threat, which was the last thing she'd ever expect from the man who kept trying to protect her from everything but that broken heart.

"Don't test me," he growled out.

"Or what?" she snapped, pulling her hand back, but he was quicker. The palm that'd cupped her chin now grasped her wrist. "And why do you always have to be such a dick?"

"Why do you have to be so damn mouthy?" he shot back, then his forehead relaxed a little as if he'd lost sight of why they'd been talking. "There are no measures I won't take in the name of keeping you safe. So, if I have to tie you up myself and hide you somewhere to stop you from going to Paris, so be it."

Normally, Ella would have laughed off the kidnapped-by-Jesse thing. It sounded like a plot from one of Savanna's mafia romance novels.

But she knew he wasn't kidding around, and she didn't think it was Paris that had him spooked. He'd looked haunted before she'd revealed that. Hell, ever since ... "Who was that at your place this morning? And try the truth this time."

"The less you know, the better." He unhandled her and shook his head, apparently snapping free of some weird spell. It was like he'd been possessed by some dark force and was suddenly Jesse again.

Though, what did her trip to Paris have to do with anything?

"Tell me what's going on, damn it," she demanded. But when he remained silent, she turned and started for Lady. Ella hadn't taken more than two steps before he hooked her waist

to stop her, causing her to trip on a rock. She went sailing, along with the hat on her head and Jesse's hat in her hand.

How Jesse wound up sliding *under* her and cushioning her fall, she had no idea. How was it possible for a human being to be that fast? But she was now straddling him, their hats lost to the grass somewhere nearby, and her heart pounding.

Ella sat up, hands to his chest, but she could feel his cock pressed against his jeans and ... it was in the right spot to make her rational thoughts fly out the window.

Jesse leaned up on his forearms, but she neither scrambled off him nor removed her hands from his chest.

“I hate you, you know that, right?”

Jesse sat up a little more, which only positioned her in an even more compromising position, his hard length thick against her center. The urge to grind on him was strong.

“I know you do, and you should,” Jesse said, his tone carrying a hint of remorse. He gently brushed a strand of blonde hair away from her face, the delicate touch such a contrast to the savage mood he'd been in moments ago. “But you're just going to have to hate me even more because over my dead body are you going to Paris.”

* * *

“SIS, THIS IS ...”

Ella chewed on her thumbnail as her brother Beckett, known to all as the grumpy sheriff, scrolled through her Instagram account. He was the oldest of the siblings, as in over the big four-oh, and for some reason, she'd been the most nervous about his opinion.

“It’s like a four-alarm fire,” her brother Shep, one of only two firefighters in their small town, shot out.

Jesse hadn’t spoken a word to her since their little tussle in the field, where he’d issued insane commands like they were playing a game of *guess how big of a dick Jesse can be*. It was crazy that she’d found herself aroused by his out-of-nowhere caveman attitude on the matter of Paris. Hell, she’d wanted to grind against the bulge in his jeans.

It had been twenty or so minutes since supper finished, and after he’d cleaned his plate, Jesse had gone outside, where he was currently pacing with his phone to his ear.

“What in the blazes are you talking about?” Rory swatted Shep on the back of the head like he was her brother too. “There’s nothing four-alarm about this. Not that I know what that means, but don’t overreact.”

“Ella’s photos are online for any creeper, catfisher, or crazy person to see,” Shep returned. When Ella glanced over at A.J., who was holding on to his son and rocking him in his big teddy bear arms, it was clear that the same thoughts were going through his head too.

Beckett’s unfinished sentence still dangled in the air, and it had Ella wondering if he was worried she’d be a bad influence on her niece. His daughter, McKenna, was thirteen years old and thought Ella hung the moon.

“Y’all are acting like I posted nudes or half-naked photos there,” Ella exclaimed, eyeing Beckett and her other brother, Caleb, who were the only two sitting at the kitchen island.

The remaining guests were in the living room, and from the sounds of it, her father was playing his harmonica. So, at the moment, Ella was alone with her big brothers and her best

friend. Hopefully, Rory could help her knock some sense into these overbearing men.

“Pictures aren’t always about how much skin is showing,” Shep pointed out, and what did that even mean?

Caleb snatched the phone from Beckett and smirked. Well, a smile was a good sign, she supposed. “Bama Babe for a hashtag, huh?”

“Did you see the one below that? Save a horse, ride a cowboy?” Beckett grumbled.

“That’s totally a common phrase,” Ella sputtered, her cheeks heating at the words she’d typed coming from her brother’s mouth.

Beckett, who was still in his sheriff’s uniform, pushed away from the kitchen island and stood. Gun at his side. “Paris, huh?”

“You do realize I didn’t plan to ask permission from anyone here, right?” Ella sought Rory’s gaze for support, but Rory was busy taking A.J.’s son from his arms. Mommy fever. Maybe she and Chris would start trying soon. And then Jesse would be an uncle.

Oy. Jesse. Not the man I want to be thinking about now. Ella stole another look out the window, but Jesse was no longer in sight.

“What’s Jesse think about this? He didn’t say a word at dinner.” Since Rory had the baby secure in her arms, A.J. set his back to one of the counters and folded his arms, positioning his attention squarely on Ella.

Marcus Alexander was barely three months old. A.J. and Ana had asked Savanna if it was okay to name their firstborn after her late husband, knowing she’d already decided it might

be tough for her to choose the name if or when she and Griffin had a child. She'd happily agreed to the name.

A.J. called him "Mac" for short, and Mac was adorable with a full head of brown hair despite the fact his mom was a redhead. He had the brightest green eyes Ella had ever seen. Little cherub cheeks.

Ella would hate missing the next six months of his life, especially since Ana and A.J. would be living in Bama all of next year. A former FBI agent, Ana now taught courses at Quantico, but she was taking the next year off to spend with their son.

But how many times will I get this chance to design clothes for Rochella? To go to Paris and work alongside the greats? Just the one.

"Why would I care what Jesse thinks?" Ella finally answered A.J. "You guys will meet Henry Rochella at the New Year's Eve party. Hopefully, that will ease your Paris-worries." Ella made prayer hands. "Just please don't scare him. No interrogations."

Shep and A.J. exchanged a quick look that said it all. They had every intention of giving the billionaire the third degree.

Ella turned in search of Rory for an assist, but damn her, the traitor had left her alone with her brothers. Now it was four to one. Yeah, with baby Marcus in her arms, Rory's brain had turned to mush.

Before A.J. had a chance to toss back a response that'd most likely piss Ella off, the kitchen door swung open, and Jesse was there with his gaze sharp on Ella. That fierce intensity set in his blue eyes had her gulping.

“A.J.,” Jesse began, even though he’d yet to rip his focus from Ella, “I need to talk to you. Now.”

CHAPTER FOUR



JESSE TOSSED HIS STETSON INSIDE HIS GRAY DODGE RAM AND shut the door before turning to face A.J. on the driveway. He took a deep breath and willed his voice to remain steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his body after ending his third call of the day with Thatcher. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Had he accepted the job? Yes and no. He told Thatcher he’d handle the problem but that he’d be acting independently from the Agency. No longer would he take kill orders without participating in the intelligence-gathering process. Not that Thatcher had the target package put together for him anyway. The only information he currently had was the target’s name and motivation.

This had been the first time Thatcher had ever come to Jesse without the mark’s location. And Jesse would need Falcon’s help.

“I gathered as much.” A.J. set his back to the side of his truck and folded his arms. They’d been best friends for as long as Jesse could remember, but would that friendship come to a crashing end tonight? “This have anything to do with Ella and Paris?”

Jesse stood before him, leaving enough space between them so that if A.J. came at him swinging, he'd have a chance to duck. *Or maybe I let him hit me?*

Thankfully, they were too far from the main house for anyone to hear. And they were a good few hundred yards away from the ranch hands' bunkhouse too.

Jesse swept his gaze left and right, searching for anyone outside, but from the looks of it, they were alone. "She can't go to Paris. But that's not what I have to tell you."

"Can't, huh?" A.J.'s question was steeped in suspicion. The man could sense this was more than Jesse being possessive of Ella.

"You know that big secret you've been keeping from everyone? That you didn't really retire as a SEAL, and you run clandestine ops for POTUS?" Jesse let go of an uneasy breath, and A.J. straightened, his body going ramrod straight now. This was the first time Jesse confessed he knew the secret A.J. hadn't revealed. "I've kept a secret myself."

A.J. took a slow step forward, his eyes pinned to Jesse's face. Clearly stunned Jesse knew his secret and most likely nervous about whatever Jesse was about to share.

"From the time I got out of the Army up until July of last year, well, I worked for the CIA." God, this was not how he planned to spill this news to his best friend. Actually, he'd never anticipated telling A.J. his secret, like he assumed A.J. hadn't planned on telling him his. "But not in the typical sense. I wasn't an agent or an officer."

"I'm sorry?" A.J. tilted his head, a confused look on his face, like Jesse had just spoken Klingon or something. "You're

going to have to spell this out for me. Because I'm sure I didn't hear you right."

Jesse massaged the knot lodged between his neck and shoulder. "The CIA only used me for specific assignments. That's why I'd come and go from here." The words he was avoiding were stuck in his throat. Because, in all honesty, he felt sick whenever he stopped to think about who he'd been. What he'd done.

"Were you working with DO or SAD?" A.J. sputtered the acronyms for the two elite clandestine arms within the Agency—Directorate of Operations and the Special Activities Division.

"Neither. Well, I guess you could say I was sort of part of SAD. But I wasn't with Ground Branch."

Ground Branch consisted of former special operators that handled sensitive operations and protective services for the Agency. The tragedy in Benghazi? Ground Branch boots had been on the ground that day.

The truth of it was, Jesse was more like a CIA ghost. A few top-secret clearance levels above the others in that division.

A.J. closed the space between them and set a hand to Jesse's chest as realization hit. "All that stuff Savanna was talking about the day you fought off those men in her place back in October. How you killed that guy in a heartbeat. She said you had moves like *John Wick*. I know you're a good fighter, but I thought she was exaggerating." A.J. dropped his hand from Jesse's chest and took a step back. "You're a fucking hitman? An assassin?"

Jesse cursed under his breath, hating the way those words sounded coming from his best friend, especially when they were drenched in disappointment. “Surely you know the CIA has people like ...” *Me*. “I’m not that guy anymore. Like I said, I quit last year. I was in for a little less than five years.”

“Five years of *contract* killing is still five years of killing,” A.J. said in a low, steady tone. “I don’t understand why. How.” The look in his eyes damn near shredded Jesse.

His best friend served as a mirror right about now. The expression cutting across his face was exactly how Jesse felt whenever he eyed his own reflection. Unworthy of ... Ella. Extremely un-fucking-worthy of that woman with a pure heart.

It’s not like A.J. didn’t take out the trash in his line of work. He cut down enemies as well. But Jesse’s sole purpose had been to end a life, and he doubted A.J.’s missions were centered around a kill shot. Or coming up with creative ways to disguise a murder as an accidental death and so on.

“It’s not like I was killing politicians or helping with regime changes, if that’s what you think I did. Not saying that doesn’t happen, but I only accepted certain jobs.”

“Accepted certain ...” A.J. dropped his words, clearly unable to stomach the conversation. “I have to take lives in my line of work, but your one-and-only objective was to ...” Another unfinished line of thought he seemed unable to work through.

“I’m not proud of it. But when the CIA recruited me, I was in a really bad place. And they made me feel like—”

“Like you were needed? That you could make a difference?” A.J.’s tone was laced with sarcasm. “Assassin,” he whispered in disbelief and turned his gaze toward the

bunkhouse. Surprised he, a Tier One operator, had read Jesse so wrong. “Fuck, Jesse. Why are you telling me now?”

Jesse expected to be punched in the face any second, and he’d let his best friend (a friendship probably about to end) pummel him to his heart’s content. “My old boss paid me a visit today. Demanded I take one last job. I initially thought it was just because he heard I was working with Falcon, and that’s why he wanted me back. But then I opened the target package he left behind.”

A.J. swiveled his way in the space of a heartbeat. “Target package,” he practically breathed out. “All this time, I thought you were making furniture, but you’ve been killing people.” His hands converted to fists at his sides, his jaw set in an angry line. “Who’s the target? What does the spook want you to do?”

Jesse lifted his gaze to the cloudless evening sky streaked with purple and dark blue, the stars not visible yet even though the sun had set. The property was lit up well enough to see the foreboding expression on A.J.’s face. Jesse needed to suck it up and get on with it. There were no words to make the next bit of truth any easier to hear, and Jesse owed it to his friend to look him in the eyes when he broke the news.

“Tell me,” A.J. barked.

“Almost eighteen months ago, I was sent to Sofia. The Bulgarians asked our government to handle a problem for them. They’d learned a Serbian there with diplomatic immunity was running a criminal enterprise. In return for the Agency’s help, they offered the CIA some intelligence they’d stumbled upon about a terrorist they knew the U.S. was trying to track down. Tit for tat kind of thing. Happens all the time with the Agency,” Jesse quickly explained, dreading the moment when he reached the part that’d have A.J.’s head

exploding. And punching him the way Jesse had torn apart the wall in his workshop earlier.

“What went wrong?” A.J. asked, obviously aware there was yet another shoe to drop.

Jesse scratched his jaw, the scruff he'd let grow for weeks rough beneath his palm. “The hit went down a week before Ella was to marry Brian. I may have been a little off my game. Distracted,” he admitted, not for the first time, though he'd never said the words aloud. “I hit my target as planned, but what I didn't know until this morning because I quit after that day is that he didn't die.” Jesse's heart thudded furiously. “The day of the hit, his men had rushed him away. His people must have bypassed normal medical help and taken him off the grid. Most likely in a coma.”

“Let me guess, he woke up,” A.J. grumbled.

“I don't know when or for sure what happened, but it'd stand to reason that's why he'd lain low. He'd been, well, asleep.”

“Get to the part that's going to make me lose my mind,” A.J. gritted out.

Jesse dragged his palm over his cheek a few times, thinking back to the day of the shooting. He'd been perched behind his rifle, waiting to take the shot, and all he could think about was Ella and her future husband. “When I shot my mark, another shot rang out, killing the man's wife. There was a second shooter.”

“Please don't tell me that this conversation is going to somehow connect to my fucking sister.” A.J. lunged toward Jesse, an angry, menacing look pointed his way.

Just get this over with. “The Bulgarians used us to take this guy out, and for whatever reason, they wanted the wife dead, too, but they knew the Agency would refuse that hit,” Jesse explained what Thatcher had told him. “But they had a second shooter there at the same time. Most likely to make it look like I killed them both. Of course, they denied this when the CIA pressed.”

Jesse had watched that woman take a bullet to the head. Maybe the Bulgarians figured she was guilty by association, but from the little info he was given, she hadn't been involved in her husband's crimes. That wasn't for Jesse to decide, and he'd never take the life of a woman. Especially not a mother, which she was.

Whether Ella had walked down that aisle with Brian or not, Jesse had decided he was done after that day. He couldn't do the job anymore. The bullet that killed that woman may not have been his, but he still felt responsible somehow.

“Last week, the Bulgarians advised the Agency they had a leak, and some of their files had been hacked *six* months ago. Specifically, the files surrounding my mark, Zoran Mestrović. As well as the details of the deal made with the Agency.”

“I assume your name wasn't in the Bulgarians' file or the fact that there'd been a second shooter responsible for the wife's death?” A.J. took a small step back, his hands going to his hips as he seemed to try and work through the problem.

“No, my identity was never revealed. But if Zoran is the one responsible for the hack, then he'll most likely think whoever shot him also killed his wife based on their file.”

A.J. grunted. “Why do I get the feeling there's more?”

“The reason Bulgarian Intelligence finally informed the CIA about any of this is that Zoran showed his face on CCTV footage two weeks ago in Bulgaria. Shortly afterward, two Bulgarian agents who’d been assigned to gather intel on Zoran before the hit last year were brutally murdered.” Jesse paused, wishing he didn’t have to share the next part. “Based on the report, the agents’ wives were killed first. Zoran wanted the men to watch their wives murdered as payback.”

“Fuck.” A.J. grimaced. “Would those agents have known of your identity if he interrogated them beforehand?”

“No. Definitely not. I’m not sure if Zoran’s capable of IDing me, but I’d rather get to him and finish the job instead of waiting around to find out. Zoran’s had that file for six months, and he only just took out those men.” He paused. “Zoran’s patient and barbaric. One of the agents only got married sixteen days ago. It’s like this asshole waited until both agents were married so he could—”

“Go Hammurabi’s Code on them? An eye for an eye,” A.J. growled out in shock.

Jesse dipped his chin to his chest, letting go of a deep breath as he waited for A.J. to understand what this meant. Everyone in town knew how deeply Jesse cared about Ella Hawkins, and if Zoran ever IDed Jesse, it’d take the bastard all of five minutes to choose his target for payback.

A.J. abruptly snatched hold of Jesse’s shirt with one hand and pulled his other arm back, ready to strike. “You shouldn’t have kept this from me. You put my family in danger. My sister. Maybe your father is—”

“Right about me?” Jesse lifted his gaze. “I’m trouble.”

A.J.'s face muscles went lax, but he didn't lower his arm. His hand remained clenched in a fist in preparation as he stared into Jesse's eyes.

"Why do you think I've done my best to stay away from your sister all these years?" Jesse rasped, his voice shaking. "I was broken before I joined the CIA, and then I became dangerous because of the Agency." He closed his eyes and swallowed. "But I need to find this guy and finish the job before he has a chance to get to Ella. I promise you, I won't let anything happen to her. And there's still the possibility he's yet to ID me." That felt like a lie. In Jesse's gut, he knew this son of a bitch had already secured his name or would soon. But he'd be damned if he'd let Ella die because of his sins.

Jesse opened his eyes when the punch never came. A.J. had released him and was now tearing his hands through his hair. "You won't be handling a damn thing. She's my sister. I'll talk to POTUS. My people will take care of the situation. You've done enough." He started to walk away, but Jesse hurried to catch up with him, matching his angry strides.

"I have to do this. This is my mess. My problem. Not yours and—"

"You made it my problem when you fell for my damn sister!" A.J. whirled around and fisted Jesse's shirt with both hands this time. "I will kill you with my bare hands if something happens to Ella. Do you understand me? You might be like blood to me. But I will fuckin' kill you."

"You won't have to kill me," Jesse returned in a low voice. "I'll do it my—"

"What in God's name is going on out here?" Jesse spotted his sister hurrying their way and Ella not far behind her.

A.J. focused back on Jesse. “We need to talk to Chris and Griffin. Fill them in,” was all he said before shoving at Jesse’s chest when he deserved a hell of a lot more than that. “What have you told Ella?”

Jesse shook his head. “I only told her she can’t go to Paris.”

“Don’t say anything,” he hissed. “Not yet.” A.J. turned and blew past Rory, then paused near his sister for one second before continuing toward the house.

Jesse bowed his head and tried to figure out how he was going to convince A.J. he had to back off and let Jesse and Falcon handle this.

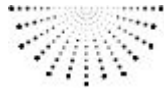
And Jesse would personally plant the final blow into Zoran’s skull.

Rory stopped before him a second later. “I reckon that was about a lot more than Paris.”

Paris. How would they convince Ella to turn down her dream opportunity because he’d been a hitman once upon a time ago?

And unlike A.J., he knew Ella would swing, and that woman sure as hell wouldn’t miss.

CHAPTER FIVE



“I DON’T THINK RORY IS IN DANGER,” JESSE TOLD HIS brother-in-law, Chris, who stood opposite him between A.J. and Griffin outside by the stables. “But there are no guarantees.” He thought back to what Thatcher shared about the target on the phone earlier. “The two Bulgarian agents that were killed had siblings. Parents. One agent had a son. So far, Zoran has only targeted the men and their wives.”

“But we can’t assume your parents or Rory are safe just because of that,” Griffin commented. “As far as I’m concerned, we should consider this entire town painted with a bullseye, especially with you here.”

Jesse’s stomach tightened at Griffin’s clipped words and the heavy punch they delivered. Griffin had to be worried about his fiancée as well. Savanna was one of Ella’s best friends, and she’d been to hell and back more than once. The last thing Jesse wanted was for her to get caught up in anything else. Not ever again. And for damn sure not because of him.

“The Agency doesn’t believe he’ll come after anyone else. Just myself and whoever I ...” *Care about.* “But I don’t plan on staying here much longer. I need to track down Zoran.”

Before Jesse had joined Falcon, he'd never had a hand in putting together the target packages. Neither in the Army nor with the CIA. Tell him who to kill and where to find the mark, and he'd design the best method for the hit.

Everyone on the Falcon Falls team had a specialty, skill-wise, but the entire team was involved in every aspect of an operation, especially the prep work. And because of that, Jesse would hopefully be able to use those skills to locate Zoran himself. Well, with the help of his team.

“Natasha’s on maternity leave, so she won’t be able to help us at the Agency. But we can reach out to the director,” A.J. offered. “We, um, have a direct line of communication with the head of the CIA. We can trust him.”

This was news to Jesse. But he wasn’t all that surprised, considering A.J.’s team had been working covert jobs for the President for years. And for that very reason, Jesse was sure their intel regarding those operations came from so high up the chain it could have been God himself for all he knew. Well, at the very least, a level or two above Thatcher.

“I can’t guarantee the President will assign us to be the boots on the ground for this problem,” Chris commented. “We’re a few men down on my team, Echo. Babies and all. Plus, we’re still training new recruits for Charlie Team.” He looked at his watch. “And as of one hour ago, Bravo Team boarded a flight to ...” He paused and eyed Jesse and Griffin since they weren’t in the “need to know” on whatever clandestine op Bravo was about to take part in. “Somewhere overseas.”

“Falcon can handle Zoran,” A.J. quickly said. “But as for Ella—”

“Ella’s not staying here,” Jesse snapped, worried that A.J. was going to pull rank as Ella’s brother and insist on personally providing her protection.

“If she’s a mark, she paints as much of a bullseye on the town as does Jesse,” Griffin pointed out. “We need to talk to Carter, Gray, and the others. Get them working leads on this fucker as of yesterday. They should come here.”

“Make the call.” Jesse didn’t want to wait for A.J.’s opinion on the matter. They were losing time. And for all they knew, Zoran had a marksman watching them as they spoke.

Griffin nodded, phone to his ear already, and strode away to most likely make the call to one of their team leaders.

Chris stepped closer to Jesse, his expression darkening as it had when he’d first learned the news about Jesse’s previous line of work twenty minutes ago. “Do you really think Zoran intentionally waited for the Bulgarian agent to get hitched before he murdered him and his wife? Is Zoran that much of a patient psychopath that he’d wait it out?”

Jesse lifted his shoulders, not really sure what to say. It was speculation. But based on Zoran’s profile, it checked out.

“I find it hard to believe all we have to do is keep you single to prevent this guy from coming after you. That he’ll wait *that* long,” A.J. hissed.

“Based on Zoran’s history, he takes revenge seriously. And in the past, he waited months, even years, to exact retribution.” Jesse frowned. “I’m obviously not suggesting we wait around months or years for him to come after me. Or that we should consider Ella or anyone else safe because I’m single.”

“We’ll see what the rest of Falcon thinks.” A.J. motioned to Chris to head back toward the house. “But if you believe for

one minute you're going to take Ella anywhere with you," he added, stabbing his index finger Jesse's way, "that's not happening."

Jesse watched Chris and A.J. walk away, then lifted his chin and stared at the dark sky, trying to wrap his head around how this had all happened.

At the sound of footsteps approaching, he closed his eyes and let go of a deep breath, wondering who was going to give him the third degree this time.

"I need to know what's going on. No bullshitting me, Jesse." It was Ella coming in for the lecture. Well, for answers. "I need to know why my brother looked so spooked when he walked by me just now."

Not yet prepared to look her in the eyes, Jesse slowly raked a hand through his hair.

Hell, he'd struggled to get the words out when he confessed to A.J., and that hadn't gone very well. How was Ella going to react when he spit out that he'd been a hitman for the CIA?

A.J. hadn't wanted him to say anything yet, but the truth had to come out.

Rip the Band-Aid off. Make it quick. "You're in danger because of me," he said as fast as possible. "Well, most likely. Because of my old job." He swallowed. "Someone might target you to hurt me."

"I ..."

Jesse forced his focus to her face. Backlit by the nearby stable lights, Ella was surrounded by an ethereal glow, and her blonde hair appeared to float around her delicate heart-shaped face. She looked like an angel.

“I don’t understand. You’ve been out of the Army for a while.” She shook her head and took a small step closer, nearly within arm’s reach. “Why would someone use me to hurt you?”

“No, not because of the Army.” He did his best to keep his gaze steady with hers. “I, um, worked for the CIA after the Army. Taking assignments here and there over the years, but I’m out now.”

“CIA?” she whispered.

Could he leave out the hitman part? For now, maybe.

She looked toward the stables. “Are you for real?”

“I was forbidden to tell anyone. I’m sorry.” The excuse was legit, but it felt lame coming from his mouth.

“Okay, so a case you once worked for the CIA now has me in danger?” She spoke as if she were talking through her thoughts to truly comprehend them.

“The target of one of my old cases will most likely be coming for me. His wife died, but he managed to survive. And the CIA believes he’ll procure my identity and target you as payback.”

That had Ella’s attention, and she quickly took two steps away from him. “You killed this man’s wife?”

His stomach banded tight at the distance she placed between them. “No, but he thinks I did.”

“Why?” Her brows drew together as she waited for answers he wasn’t sure he knew how to provide.

“Because I was the one who shot him, and she was walking right alongside him. But there was a second shooter there to take her out, which wasn’t part of the plan. I took a

clean shot. Only hit the guy. We couldn't track down who killed her though."

One deep breath later, she murmured, "You were sent to kill him. Like a ..."

He nodded, saving her from having to say the word out loud.

She took another step back, and it may as well have been a mile.

"So the man didn't die, but his wife did. And he'll want me dead because of it," Ella repeated as if trying to grasp the situation. "Why would the CIA think he'd pick me to target? We're not together."

Jesse looked up at the sky and searched for the moon, his breath floating in the chilled night air. "If this man does send someone to our town, there's only one name people around here will say if asked who they think I ..." His chest tightened, and he set a hand there. "He may not know my identity yet. Maybe never will. But he's begun taking out those responsible for the shooting that day. *And* killing their wives as retribution." He found her eyes again, discovering she was now a good six feet away. Too far for him to read her expression, but based on the distance, she didn't want to be close to him. Probably ever again. He'd feared that if Ella knew the truth, she wouldn't want anything to do with him. It appeared his fears were justified.

But he didn't have time to dissect how that made him feel. Not with her in danger.

"I can't take the chance he won't learn my name and come for you. I'll do my best to find him first. Falcon will help. We'll also have access to your brother's connections. We

won't let anything happen to you." His heart squeezed a bit tighter, but he ignored the gripping feeling in his chest and allowed his hand to fall like dead weight to his side.

"What does this mean for me? You're not suggesting I put my life on hold because some madman out there may or may not come for us, are you?" she asked in a soft, almost tepid voice, which wasn't the norm for her. "You can't ask me to give up Paris because of your past. I—I won't. Not without proof that this person knows your name. Knows *my* name." She pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead.

"Ella." He had no clue what he'd say next, but he was afraid she was on the verge of taking off like she'd done on the horse earlier.

She lowered her hand and shook her head. "I'm going to Paris. My brother can assign someone from his security firm to protect me. But I'm not turning my back on this opportunity because someone *maybe* knows your name and will *maybe* come for me." And there was that stubborn sass. She held both hands up. "Plus, I shouldn't be here if there is a *maybe* chance I'm a danger to everyone around me. My niece and nephew. My students. Parents. All the more reason for me to go to Paris."

"I don't think you understand. Me *not* helping you isn't up for discussion." Regardless of what A.J. had said.

The idea of her running around Paris with one security guard was insane. Ella could hate him, but she wouldn't die for him. And he'd put his foot down in that regard. He'd overrule her stubbornness, right along with A.J.'s

"I'm not waiting around in some safe house for some psychopath to *maybe* come find me." She folded her arms over her chest.

“You can’t stay here, you’re right. But Paris is out of the question.”

Ella’s fluid movements toward him caught him by surprise, but he resisted snatching her wrists when she lifted both fists and set them to his chest as if prepared to strike, but as with her brother, the punches didn’t come. She just set them there, her stubborn jawline strained as she clearly struggled to deal with her emotions.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry doesn’t come close to cutting it.” She sniffled and looked up at him, her hands still clenched against his chest while his arms hung awkwardly at his sides. He did his best not to hold her, to try and console her, because he knew that’d be the last thing she’d want. “You were a hitman for the CIA. And if anyone I care about dies because of what you did, I’ll kill you myself.”

“I know,” he said, and damn did the woman sound just like A.J.

Unable to stop himself, he reached up and gripped her elbows.

“You can’t keep me from going to Paris, Jesse.” Ella pulled free of his touch and dragged the backs of her hands across her cheeks. He’d expected punches, not tears. And he would have rather been hit than see her cry. “I won’t live in fear for weeks or months,” she said around a sniffle. “Or however long it takes this guy to maybe put two and two together that you shot him.”

“I might know a way to get you out of this mess, but I still don’t want you off in Europe with a psycho on the loose,” Jesse said when the thought struck him. “I’ll marry someone.

Fake marry, I mean. Within the next week,” he added, talking through the idea. “Someone with operational experience who’s willing to be bait to lure this guy out on our own timetable.”

For a moment, he contemplated asking Sydney from his firm, but she had a teenage son, and he wouldn’t want to jeopardize the boy’s life, so no, Sydney was off-limits.

“You can’t marry some random woman. No one will believe it.” Ella’s eyes thinned as her focus lowered to the ground, and heaven help him, he knew what this sassy and stubborn woman was about to say, and—

“No, absolutely not,” he rejected her before she had a chance to utter the insanity he knew was coming.

“Like you said, if this guy sent someone here to snoop around, they’d quickly discover that the whole of Walkins Glen thinks you and I should ... be together.” A touch of sorrow clung to her words, but it was the proposal he knew was coming that was enough to slap the breath from him. “And not to state the obvious, but if this guy has already started going after those he believes responsible for his wife’s death, he’ll assume word has gotten out to the ‘shooter’ that he’s coming for him too.” She tossed out air quotes while talking.

But shit, he hadn’t been thinking clearly, and she was right, putting a dent in his fake marriage plan. Whether Zoran had his name yet or not, Zoran would expect Jesse to know the shooter from that day would be on the man’s hit list. And Zoran would recognize the fake wedding as an attempt to bait him.

“That’s why the marriage needs to be real. Well, believable. He won’t be able to resist coming after me whether

he suspects you married me only to draw him out or not. Because he'll easily be able to confirm—”

“How I feel about you if he asks around town,” he finished for her, his voice breaking this time. The knot of emotion thick in his throat as he admitted the truth.

“The wedding idea was yours,” she sputtered a bit defensively. “He'll still want to kill me to hurt you no matter what. I'm just suggesting a solution that will still draw him out regardless of whether he buys into the wedding or not. The nuptials would be the, uh, icing on the wedding cake, so to speak.”

“It's an insane solution.”

She shook her head. “Everyone in town will buy into it. You learned I was going to Paris, and that was why you proposed, and we decided to have a quick wedding.” She twirled her hand in the air. “Your people can fix the government records to make the marriage look real, right? So, if he does some digging, he'll see the marriage license.”

When Jesse reached for her, she didn't back away this time as he expected. Without thinking, he took hold of her forearm and gently pulled her closer.

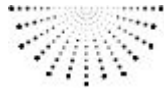
Her hand landed on his bicep as his other palm splayed across her back. Now nearly flush against his frame, her breathing picked up as she stared into his eyes.

He wanted her close enough to hear the resounding *no* he was about to hiss in her ear. No way would he fake marry her to draw out a criminal. She was a school teacher, not an operative. He would never let her do this.

Jesse tipped her chin up with his free hand, a silent demand for her eyes to meet his, and in a low, gravelly tone,

he said, "I'm not marrying you to make you bait." He leaned closer so that their mouths practically touched, and repeating her earlier pronouncement, he added, "End of *fucking* story."

CHAPTER SIX



“NEVER IN ALL MY YEARS OF RUNNING A FASHION EMPIRE HAVE I seen such a stunning wedding dress.” Henry Rochella’s deep voice and British accent had Ella shivering, but more than that, his praise filled her with pride.

She turned to see her guest with his hands in his pockets, staring admiringly at the gown. The gown she’d never intended to wear for her wedding with Brian because, in her heart, this dress had only ever been meant for one man.

Ella raced her fingers along the train of the dress she’d designed years ago. “Thank you for making the last-minute drive out to the ranch tonight.”

She and Henry were inside the small design studio her father had built not far from the main house. With shaky hands, she removed her jean jacket and tossed it onto a nearby stool. Her nerves were shredded at the fact she was going behind Jesse’s back to try and force his hand into fake marrying her. Also, the prospect of Henry changing his mind and un-inviting her to Paris once he’d seen her designs in person might have had her on edge a bit too.

“This dress alone was worth the drive.” Henry’s gaze left the wedding gown to meet her eyes. “But you said you have something you’d like to tell me. Are you giving me an early

answer?” He’d changed from his impeccably tailored suit and into jeans, a white polo, and a black leather jacket. Both looks worked for him.

“I’m getting married on New Year’s Eve,” she announced, a little breathless. “It was going to be a surprise wedding. Well, it’ll still be a surprise to pretty much everyone.” Dear lord, Jesse was going to kill her for this, but ...

Ugh, that might not have been the best choice of words given his previous line of work.

“I thought it was important you know I’m getting married, and well, my husband would want to come with me to Paris if I were to accept,” she said, her voice firm as she fought the tremble in her limbs.

A fleeting look of disappointment crossed Henry’s handsome face, but he quickly recovered with a charming smile. “Congratulations.” Then, with raised eyebrows, he gestured to the wedding gown.

“Oh, I’m not wearing that,” Ella sputtered.

Henry *Rochella* was in her design studio in a town that was barely a blip on the map. *My studio*. But that wasn’t why her heart was pounding like she was a barrel racer in the thick of it. It was Jesse’s insane words an hour ago that kept flying around her head that had her on the mother of all edges. The highest of cliffs.

“You can’t possibly be serious. *Not wear this dress?*” Henry moved around her and ran his hand over the princess ball gown hanging from a hook on the wall, admiring it.

Delicate silver leaves and sequined flower petals covered the sheer corset top. The shimmery silk tulle skirt was chic and a combination of both milky white and light blush. It had to be

the most beautifully romantic thing Ella had ever designed, closely tied with the gown she'd made for Rory's wedding.

But no, Ella wouldn't be saying a fake *I do* to Jesse before her family and friends in a gown that was meant for a *real* ceremony.

"I didn't make it for me." Ella shrugged when he faced her. "Or for anyone, really. Just made it."

"That dress shouldn't be worn by anyone other than you, love." Henry's eyes journeyed over her body as if picturing her wearing it. Not in a predatory way, but in a way she assumed a man with an eye for fashion would do. Not that there were any guys in her small town who knew anything about couture. They wore jeans. Plaid. Cowboy boots. Tees. "I certainly wasn't expecting a surprise small-town wedding or this dress. But if you're saying yes to Paris, then I implore you to wear this gown. The springtime wedding edition for our magazine is already put together, but we can upload some images to our website. Other social media outlets. This has to be seen."

"What?" How many more times would she be surprised tonight?

It'd been the textbook definition of a long day ... and now at nine o'clock at night, she was meeting with Henry and telling him she was getting married.

"This dress was not only meant to be worn, it was meant to be seen by millions of *Rochella's* readers." Henry flashed her a quick smile. "So, is it an official yes that you'll be one of my Southern gems?" He moved closer to her, and she inhaled his expensive cologne. Was this how "rich" smelled? And why did she prefer Jesse's more manly, rugged scent to expensive?

Jesse. The bane of my existence. And my future fake husband, whether ya like it or not.

“It’s a yes,” Ella whispered, her voice not in commission for a hot second. “But please don’t tell anyone about the wedding. We really do want to wait until New Year’s Eve for everyone to find out.” *And prevent a possible psychopath from showing up sooner than we’re prepared.*

“Who the hell are you?” Jesse’s voice could have melted metal.

Ella tensed, and she didn’t have to turn and face Jesse to know that the sight of her alone with another man, especially a stranger, had triggered his possessive instincts. The sound of his cowboy boots thundering across the wood floor made that perfectly clear.

Rory was right. Jesse couldn’t commit to Ella, but he also didn’t want anyone else to have her.

“Are you the fiancé?” Henry turned with a smile and extended a hand, obviously unaware that her “fiancé” was a dangerous man.

When Ella finally put eyes on Jesse, his jaw was so tight he could probably cut diamonds with his teeth. This was the man she’d seen stalk her way on the dance floor in that New York City nightclub when a guy had touched her without her consent. He was a man who could kill, possibly without remorse.

Her body grew cold at the idea. *Had* he ever done more than just punch one of the guys who used to grab her ass at the bars?

And why did she feel guilty for wondering?

“This is Henry Rochella. I just told him about our surprise wedding,” Ella finally said, clearing the horrible thoughts from her head. “I also mentioned you’d be coming to Paris with me,” Ella quickly added, hoping Jesse would keep his trap shut and not embarrass her in front of Henry.

She wouldn’t put it past him to do something like take her over his knee for disobeying him in moving forward with the marriage idea after he’d rejected it.

“You said yes,” Jesse said slowly, fire in his eyes that she’d gone against his orders. Not only had she committed to Paris, but she’d announced their fake wedding—the fake wedding plan he refused to go along with an hour ago.

“I did.” Ella sidestepped Henry, who’d lowered his hand, sensing Jesse had no intention of a formal hello. Or any kind of hello, for that matter.

“Looks like you might need some time alone.” Henry switched his focus back to Ella. “I’ll see you at the party, and well, the wedding.” He tipped his head and nodded at Jesse on his way out. Ella couldn’t blame him for not wanting to tango with a man who looked like a bull about to charge.

And maybe she didn’t want to be alone with Jesse either.

Once the door clicked shut, Jesse drew his hands to his hips, but his eyes quickly cut to the gown. And she swore his anger and bluster faltered. His brows dipped, and an expression that looked a lot like despair took over his handsome features. He was a different kind of handsome than Henry. Henry had a polished look. Even the cleft in Henry’s chin gave off a sophisticated, billionaire vibe.

But Jesse ... Jesse was rugged-handsome. Dangerous-handsome. Panty-soaking handsome.

He hadn't had a haircut in forever, but the longer hair worked for him. And if she had to choose only one celebrity to compare Jesse to, even though in her head he was an original, it'd be to a bearded Liam Hemsworth. Similar body type, face shape, and bone structure. But Jesse still had a bit more of the "grr factor," as she called it.

"We're not getting married." The grit in his tone was like an invisible hand guiding her toward him. She was prepared to rebut, but when his startling blue eyes pinned her with a harsh look, she remained quietly captured in the moment.

There was something about the way he stared at her as she stood in front of the wedding dress that had her wanting to cry instead of fight.

She took an uneasy step back, worried she'd do something crazy. Punch him *or* beg him for their first kiss. "I'm going to Paris, so if you want to keep me safe there, you are *fake* marrying me, and we're dealing with this psychopath on *my* schedule," she said, finding her voice again. "I want to be as far away from my family and friends as possible to keep them out of this too. And with any luck, we'll draw the asshole out within a few weeks, and then we'll get *fake* divorced." She started to turn, but he grabbed hold of her arm, halting her.

His chest heaved with harsh breaths as he examined her like he might toss her over his shoulder and carry out his earlier promise to tie her up in a room to keep her safe.

Ella sighed. "I'm going to tell my mom. And she's going to have a hard time believing this." She thought back to her conversation with her mom in the stables not too long ago. "But I don't want her to know the real reason we need to marry. She'll worry, and I'd rather her just ..."

“No, Ella Mae. I don’t know if I need to give you an answer in every language I know, but this isn’t happening.”

She set her eyes on the hand wrapped around her arm, but he didn’t take the hint and let her go. “You can fake marry another woman, but that won’t remove the target from my head, remember?” she softly reminded him, hoping to win him over with honey rather than vinegar. “Besides, no one will believe that you’re in love with her. That she’s ‘the one.’ Just like no one really believed that I ...”—she lowered her eyes to the wood floors—“with Brian.”

She thought he’d release her after that, but he kept hold of her as if he’d never let go. “I already told you I won’t use you as bait.”

Ella faked a laugh. “At this point, if he knows your name, then he most likely knows mine. If he truly wants revenge, I’m not actually bait. I’m the target.” She lifted her head but couldn’t find it in her to look him in the eyes. “Is that why you stayed away from me? Why you felt you could only give me the weekend in New York?” she asked softly. “You’re a danger to me?”

He was quiet for a moment before answering, “Mostly. But ...”

That unfinished line of thought was going to screw with her, and she knew he’d leave his words hanging in the air just out of reach. Like always.

“And I didn’t think you could ever forgive me once you learned the truth. I have a lot of blood on my hands. And I’m still ... broken.”

Ella swallowed the lump of emotion lodged in her throat and lifted her chin, surprised that he’d opened up to her. It was

a small sliver of an opening, but it was more than he usually gave.

His confession also had him pulling his hand free and taking two steps away, his attention snagging on the dress once again. “Was that what you were going to wear for Brian?” His voice was hoarse, like his words were stuck in the muck, and he had to pull and pull to get them out.

“No, I made this long before I met him,” she said. “I bought something off the rack to wear for him.” She stood alongside Jesse and stared at the dress, and a weird quiet filled the room.

She forced herself to look away from the dress, worried she might cry, and his hand slipped to her hip, and he guided her in his direction.

“Ella, I—”

“Jesse McAdams and Ella Mae!” Her mother’s voice boomed through the room, cutting off Jesse’s words. He dropped his hand from Ella’s hip. “A wedding.” Her mom strode across the room, panic-stricken. “Henry Rochella just knocked on my door to congratulate me and to ask if we needed anything for the *New Year’s Eve* wedding.” Her mom’s hands banded tight across her chest as she looked back and forth between the two of them. “After I picked my jaw up from the floor and wiped my drool, because well, he’s rather dashing, I had to recover from shock and act like I knew what in the blazes he was talking about.”

“I can explain.” Ella stepped forward. *But how? How do I explain?*

“Is that why A.J. looked like he was going to deck you earlier?” her mom asked Jesse. “You told him you two were

getting married.” She shifted her attention back to Ella, and before Jesse could summon a lie, she said, “I don’t understand.”

Right. Our conversation in the stables doesn’t add up now.

“After dinner, Jesse proposed. And since I said yes to Rochella, and I’m leaving for Paris after New Year’s, *and* with everyone already going to be here for New Year’s Eve, we thought, why not? Let’s just do it. Beckett can officiate.”

Her mom’s gaze journeyed over Jesse as if she couldn’t decide whether to cry or hug him. “Are you telling me you finally got your head together because of Paris?”

“I ...” Jesse looked at Ella, and she held her breath because it was now or never. He could either say yes, making it official that he agreed to her plan of becoming his fake wife in order to lure out the psycho, or he could say no. In which case, her mom would badger him with questions and want to know what the hell was going on. And Ella knew that was the last thing Jesse wanted. “I, um.” He pinched the bridge of his nose for a quick moment before turning to Ella’s mom. “I have to ask your husband for Ella’s hand first. If he says yes, then yes, consider my head firmly removed from my ass, ma’am.”

Jesse must have noticed she was two seconds from collapsing because he secured a hand around Ella’s arm and pulled her tight against him.

Husband and wife.

Fake husband and wife.

But only because someone wants me dead.

The tears streaming down her mother’s face might as well be the death of Ella. She’d be breaking her mom’s heart soon enough.

Her mom gathered her in her arms for a quick hug, then grabbed hold of Jesse. “I have a lot to do. And we have no time to do it.” She swiped away her tears with the backs of her hands.

“Please don’t tell anyone outside the immediate family,” Ella quickly told her. “We want it to be a surprise.”

“Well, you know I love a good surprise party, but a surprise wedding? Even better.” She slapped her hands together, and Ella could see the wheels turning so fast in her mother’s mind she was afraid her head might fly off. And then her attention moved to the wedding gown. “Oh, Ella, you’re going to be the most beautiful bride the world has ever seen.”

Great. Now how could she *not* wear that dress?

“A wedding. Paris. This is a bit crazy,” her mom tossed out in a breathy voice.

“Tell me about it,” Jesse said under his breath.

As soon as her mom bustled from the studio muttering decorating plans, Jesse faced her. He let go of a deep sigh as he stroked his jaw, a contemplative expression crossing his face. “A.J. is gonna hit me when we tell him the plan. And my team at Falcon may not approve.”

“Good thing it’s my life and not theirs.” Ella shrugged, trying to pull off nonchalant when she was anything but.

“We’ll need extra security at the party in case word gets out ahead of time. I don’t think we have anything to worry about, but I’m not taking chances.” Jesse blinked a few times as though trying to figure out how he’d gotten strong-armed into this crazy plan. Ella had to admit that if her mom hadn’t burst in all aflutter with hearts and tears in her eyes, Jesse might not have given in. “There is one thing we’ll need to take

care of before our, um, fake wedding.” He rolled his tongue over the seam of his lips, his eyes moving to her mouth. “The kiss after we say our *I do* won’t be fake. And I’ll be damned if the one thing Brian’s had that I haven’t happens for the first time in front of an audience.”

Her.

Heart.

Stopped.

Ella placed a hand to her chest when her heart jump-started and began to beat a mile a minute. Not because of what he said, but how he’d said it. His voice was rough and deep, and she was back in that hotel room three years ago, his mouth against her ear ordering her not to come until he gave his permission. She shuddered, chills covering every inch of her body.

“What?” she mouthed, a bit lightheaded.

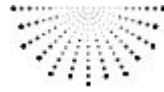
“Brian. He’s had your mouth,” Jesse said darkly, slowly drawing his gaze back to her eyes. “I don’t like that.”

“But Brian—”

Jesse slowly shook his head in warning. “I don’t want to hear his name,” he cut her off, his eyes darkening to match the timbre of his voice. “He’s lucky he never made it to my hit list because if he’d ever hurt you, he’d be long dead.” He closed the space between them. “Just remember that about me,” he rasped. “Remember what kind of man you’re fake marrying. Remind yourself of who I am.” He brought his face closer to hers, and her heartbeat was out of control. “We’re playing pretend, Ella Mae, but there’s nothing fake about who I am. And who I will always be. A danger to you.” He paused and took a step backward as if not ready to claim her mouth yet.

“Now, excuse me while I go get punched by three of your brothers after I ask your father for your hand in marriage.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



“LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT,” RORY SAID WHILE PLOPPING down on Jesse’s living room couch next to Ella. “You and my brother, the man you’ve dreamed of marrying for years but now hate with a passion, are getting fake married. Sure, why not? What could possibly go wrong?”

“Sounds like the plot to a romance novel,” Savanna chimed in, sitting opposite Ella and Rory in the leather armchair by the fireplace.

Jesse had decided it’d be best for Ella to stay with him, and so, she’d spent the night there. Rory and her husband, Chris, were staying at Jesse’s too, which helped ease Ella’s nerves. But sleep had been off the table after the day she’d had, and she’d tossed and turned all night.

And the next day, she and Jesse were getting married. How could this be her reality?

Ella peered at Savanna, who seemed uncharacteristically anxious. She’d crossed her legs, no doubt in an attempt to look casual, but her foot on the floor tapped nonstop while her other leg swung back and forth. “Is this the first time you’ve been at Jesse’s since ...”

“Since men stormed the property hunting me down, and Griffin saved me by shooting a man in the face while we fled

for our lives?” Savanna noticeably gulped and nodded. “Yeah, first time back. I’m okay, though. I promise. Just as long as we don’t have a repeat of that horror show. I don’t want anyone after *you*.”

“The three of us make a ... well, pair doesn’t work. A triple?” Rory said with a little laugh, trying to break the tension in the room as they remained parked inside while the guys secured the property. Whatever that meant. “We should get some sort of special tattoo. The hunted ones.” She pointed to the inside of her wrist, sliding her long-sleeve up. “Put it right there. What do you think?”

“You still win the award for the craziest life story amongst the three of us, is what I think,” Ella responded. “The craziest thing I’ll probably ever do is fake marry your brother. But there’s still a chance no one will come looking for me if he doesn’t know or ever learn Jesse’s identity. We can only hope, right?”

Rory slid her sleeve back in place, a forlorn expression replacing the smile she’d plastered on her face, one Ella guessed was a vain attempt to make the situation less brutal.

“The rest of Griffin’s team will be here later today. Between them, A.J. and his teammates, and well, the CIA ... I think we have strength in numbers to keep you safe. They’ll find the threat. It’s what they do,” Savanna said, her leg no longer bouncing up and down as she gazed out the window where her future husband stood outside talking to Jesse.

Ella was surprised Jesse wasn’t sporting a black eye by now. While A.J. had vehemently rejected the fake marriage idea, same as Jesse had originally, in the end, he’d given up. Ella wasn’t dubbed the most stubborn in her family for nothing.

But when A.J. briefed his brothers about the plan, it'd been Ella's older brother Beckett who'd snapped and lunged at the groom. Fortunately, the other guys jumped in and held him back. And that was all *after* Jesse asked her father for her hand in marriage. From what Ella heard, her dad straight-up broke down in tears and said yes.

When she learned he'd been praying for her and Jesse to walk down the aisle someday, Ella had nearly thrown up from guilt. But it was best her parents were kept in the dark about certain details. They didn't need to know that Jesse had been an assassin for the CIA. The less they knew, the safer they'd be.

It was going to be positively painful for Beckett to officiate the wedding, but he had the power to do so, and it'd make things easier to have someone "in the know" performing the ceremony since it was all one big sham.

"Will your parents be suspicious that we have security roaming the property tomorrow?" Rory asked a moment later, shaking Ella's thoughts free. "Carter's men will be armed. Everyone who knows the situation will be packing."

"A.J. coughed up a believable answer for our parents. Said it's for our celebrity guest, Rochella. Though Henry has his own security, just not as many as I would have assumed," Ella explained.

"I didn't see any sign of a bodyguard when he came to the café." From the corner of her eye, she noticed Savanna's gaze immediately fall to her lap.

"What?" Ella whispered.

Savanna slowly worked her attention to Ella. "Griffin has concerns that Rochella's offer might be a bit too perfectly

timed. Like he's helping someone draw you out and away from here."

Ella shook her head. "There's no way a fashion mogul is taking orders from a criminal. Griffin's paranoid."

"Regardless, you know they'll take a look into the offer. And Henry Rochella's family and company," Savanna said. "At least Falcon will be with you in Paris."

"I'm sorry I'm the reason Griffin has to leave you," Ella apologized, deciding to let go of the Rochella-as-a-bad-guy conversation. It didn't sit well with her.

"You're not. Jesse is. And well, maybe it's not his fault either." Savanna clutched the chair arms. "Maybe his job was a necessary evil, and ..."

"No, we're not cutting my brother any slack." Rory stood and rounded the handmade coffee table that Jesse had crafted from reclaimed something or other. Always recycled. Repurposed. "Ella has to sleep under the same roof as him until they leave. But Chris and I won't be a barrier for y'all in Paris, which sucks. I hate that you have to live alone with him pretending to be married for an unknown amount of time. Sitting and waiting for someone to come after you." Rory ran her hands along her arms as if chilled. "Makes me ill."

Ella couldn't exactly ask Henry for a two-bedroom flat in Paris. Jesse would just have to sleep on the couch in their living room. Ella was still so shaken by everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours—Rochella's incredible offer, temporarily moving to Paris, and as of that morning, her request for a sabbatical approved by her principal—that she'd nearly forgotten the fact she and Jesse would be "playing house" in one of the most romantic cities in the world.

Henry had phoned an hour ago, right after they'd finished breakfast and Jesse had left, to let her know they were giving "the newlyweds" a few days for a honeymoon in Paris before she needed to join the other "gems" for work. Ella had considered refusing, but she was worried that'd be a red flag. Plus, that gave them some time to dig a bit deeper into the situation surrounding the man who might come after her for revenge.

"I wish Beckett had given Jesse a shiner," Rory said while looking outside where her brother stood next to Griffin, a cell phone held out between them and most likely talking to someone on their team over speakerphone.

A.J. and the others were nowhere in sight, so they must have still been prepping the property for war or whatever. Maybe setting booby traps. It'd been too dark to "arm the perimeter" last night, so Chris and Jesse had taken turns staying awake.

"I'm sorry your brother has put you in potential danger too," Ella said. "I hate that you have to sit around and wait for what might happen as well."

Rory waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Chris and I are going back home soon, so I'll be surrounded by a bunch of overprotective SEALs in Virginia. I'll be fine. I'm not taking a break from work. If someone wants to come for me, they'll get a bullet in the head. Or a bite in the ass from Bear."

Yeah, Bear would sound off if there were any intruders as well. Ella nearly forgot they had the protection of a specially trained SEAL K-9. Trained by Rory herself too.

"We have an hour before we have to head to your parents' place and help out with the preparations for this last-minute wedding. I doubt your mom slept at all last night, ironing out

the wedding details,” Rory commented when they’d all remained quiet for a minute or so.

“I don’t think I can help plan.” Thinking about the dress she’d be wearing tomorrow already had her heart breaking into a dozen pieces. “I can’t pick out flowers or whatever I need to do for my fake wedding. It was bad enough Jesse and I had to fill out the marriage license this morning in front of my parents. I think Mom was a little suspicious and maybe trying to call our bluff.”

The license would be filed with the county, as was required, but Jesse’s people would alter the records online instead of making it official. *Hack* was more the correct term, she supposed.

“Y’all don’t need my help anyway,” Ella went on. “Mom will be fine. She lives for this stuff, and we just had your wedding to Chris this summer. And after organizing my almost-wedding last year, Mom is practically a wedding planning pro.”

The wedding with Brian. Ugh. Her stomach turned at the memory. And thinking of him only reminded her of a lie she’d told her best friends.

“You going to be okay? Like okay-okay, I mean?” Savanna tipped her head, her gaze switching from Ella to the window, Jesse and Griffin no longer in sight. “Physically, I know the guys won’t let anything happen to you. But emotionally, Jesse has already put you through the wringer.”

Now it’ll be a wedding wringer.

Ella stared at the fireplace in the living room, her eyes clinging to the flames as she considered Savanna’s words. “I’m tough. You know that.”

Savanna rose and stood beside Rory, both watching her with worried expressions.

“I have to tell you ... something,” Ella blurted out as her face grew hot. “I haven’t had sex since Jesse,” she revealed the only other secret she’d kept hidden from her best friends and stood. “Not even with Brian.”

“Wait, what? You’re telling us you never did the hanky panky,” Rory began, talking with her hands, “with the man you were engaged to? I mean, y’all went to a tropical island together. I—I don’t understand.”

Ella covered her face with her palm and released an uneasy breath. “He wanted to. Trust me, he did. And no matter how much I tried to get over Jesse by dating Brian and even accepting his proposal, I—I just couldn’t give myself to Brian like that. Not after Jesse. I had hoped, after the wedding, I’d finally accept it was truly over with Jesse.” Tears welled in her eyes at the admission. It sounded absolutely insane when she said it out loud. And it’d been a major problem between them. “Probably why Brian pressed for a quick engagement. And when I still wouldn’t sleep with him even after I’d said yes to his proposal, he lost his mind.”

“Wow,” Savanna said, her mouth hanging open. “Why’d you tell us you two did sleep together?”

“So you wouldn’t think I was crazy, which clearly, I am.” Ella let her hand fall away from her face, which had to be beet red. “Brian was a dick, so I don’t feel all that bad, even if maybe I should. Because I knew in my heart, I was using him to try and move on from Jesse, and my plan failed.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have said yes to Brian, you’re right. But he was a jerk, so I just can’t feel sorry for him.” Rory circled the coffee table and reached for Ella’s hand. “But it’s

also kind of a big deal that you couldn't bring yourself to be with another man after Jesse," she added in a soft tone as if worried someone would come inside the house and overhear them.

"Maybe you should tell Jesse? I know we're not supposed to feel sorry for him because, well, *hitman*. But think about it ... if Jesse wasn't in love with you, there wouldn't be a crazy criminal possibly coming after you." Savanna grimaced when Rory looked back at her, and although Ella couldn't see, she had a good idea what kind of look was on Rory's face. "That didn't come out the way I meant."

"That doesn't mean Jesse loves me," Ella quickly said. "He just knows what the town thinks about us and what they'd say if someone came digging around for information. They've been rooting for us forever." *My dad cried. Oh, God.*

"Well, I'm just saying, Jesse must assume you and Brian slept together, and that can't be easy on him," Savanna said.

Ella's romance-book-loving friend was most likely trying to unpack this situation and find meaning in it. She thought about Jesse's kissing remark, still unsure when the man planned to follow through on that. *Kiss Jesse?* There went her stomach again. Butterflies this time, and he didn't deserve that from her.

Savanna was right though. Jesse did hate the fact Brian had kissed her, but maybe it was some weird alpha thing. Brian had something he didn't, and it was less the fact that he—

"Why should we make anything easy on my brother?" Rory remarked, cutting off Ella's thoughts. "He told Ella to move on. In fact, he insisted on it. She tried so desperately that she almost married a man she didn't love just to stop the hurt of being in love with a man who refused her." Now Rory was

analyzing the situation, but she nailed it on the head. “Brian’s Jesse’s fault.” She *tsked*. “Fuck my brother. He deserves to assume Brian ...” She let go of her words at the sound of the door from the kitchen opening.

Ella cleared her throat and backed up at the sight of Jesse and Griffin entering the room, Bear trotting between them. She nearly fell onto the couch when her thighs butted against it, forgetting it was behind her.

“Speak of the devil.” Rory shifted her focus to her brother and whipped her arms across her chest. She’d gone head-to-head with pirates and smugglers in the past, so why not a hitman?

Hitman. Ella’s gaze quickly cruised over the length of said “hitman,” taking in the sight of him in his black military boots, jeans, plaid shirt, and black ball cap on his head. He certainly looked like a badass operator instead of a cowboy, not that Jesse had ever looked or acted like the cowboys on her family’s ranch. But right now, he looked lethal, and it wasn’t his clothes. It was the look in his eyes. That hard, bladed jawline covered in a few weeks’ worth of growth.

But how was *her* Jesse an assassin?

When he was a Ranger, she never considered him a killer. When he took down that man inside Savanna’s home in October, it was in self-defense and to protect Savanna. The word “killer” never entered her mind then, much less “assassin.” But she googled the definition last night—a person who commits a *targeted murder*.

Murderer. Damn it. That word stung.

“You three okay?” Griffin interrupted her chaotic thoughts as well as the awkward staredown Ella had barely been aware

was going on between her and Jesse.

Griffin strode across the room and pulled Savanna against his side. Whenever they were in a room together, it was rare for them not to be touching. They were magnetic. And Ella was so happy for her best friend.

Murderer, she thought again. Terrorists murdered Savanna's husband in 2015. Those men were real murderers. *Jesse's not a murderer*. She tried to convince herself she wasn't about to marry a killer in that sense of the word. *Fake marry, Ella. It's fake*.

"We're as good as can be expected," Savanna answered when no one else piped up.

Ella turned to focus on the happy couple and away from the man she wanted to punch for a number of reasons. If she looked at him any longer, she'd stare at his mouth and wonder when he planned to follow through with that promise he made last night and kiss her before their fake wedding.

"Carter, Jack, and Oliver are en route to D.C. They're stopping there to pick up Sydney and Gray," Griffin announced. "They should all be here by seventeen hundred hours."

"I hate that Gray and Sydney have to leave on my account. Gray has a newborn niece, and Sydney has a son. That's gotta be hard, especially since tomorrow is New Year's Eve." *And wait, what? This isn't my fault*. Ella's shoulders dropped. That didn't make her *not* feel bad though.

"They understand it's part of the job, always being on call," Griffin said when Jesse remained silent.

Ella looked over at Jesse as he took a knee to pet Bear, who had been glued to his side for some reason. Did he sense

the alpha in the room?

Of course, according to Savanna, Griffin was very much an alpha in the bedroom.

And when Ella thought back to New York City, well, Jesse was ...

Let go of that thought.

But how could she? She'd never slept with another man because of that weekend. He'd ruined every other man in her eyes.

"I want to know more about the person who wants me dead," Ella found herself blurting. Bear suddenly howled, as though he understood what she'd said, and the idea of her "dead" made him sad.

Jesse's jaw clenched at her words, and his eyes fell to Bear. After a moment, he lifted his hand from the dog's head and stood, and Bear went directly to Rory.

"We can go into that more when my team is here," Jesse finally answered, turning at the sound of the door from the kitchen opening again. Ella's throat tightened at the sight of the gun tucked at the back of his jeans, not even holstered. Just casually there as if it were part of his body.

Realizing his shirt had caught behind the grip of the gun, Jesse adjusted the material to conceal his weapon again.

She'd seen Jesse shoot before. Well, at the range. But the gun had a whole new meaning now.

"We can find another way," was the first thing from Beckett's mouth when he walked into the room with A.J. at his side.

Chris and her other brothers must've still been out on the property. Did Shep and Caleb know how to "secure the perimeter," as A.J. had called it? At this point, she had no freaking idea how much her brothers knew about any of this stuff.

"It's not too late to back down," Beckett went on, sidestepping Jesse, his eyes lingering on him as he moved past. Oh, the anger was still there. At the highest of levels.

"He's right," Jesse said in a low voice while peering at A.J. "We can protect you instead of putting you right in the line of fire."

"Call off this bullshit wedding. Please." Beckett strode past Rory and Bear to get to his sister.

Savanna nudged Griffin in the side before taking his hand and leading him from the room, followed by Rory and Bear.

Her two brothers and Jesse didn't budge. Well, they didn't leave the room, at least.

"Jesse thinks this fucker will wait until he's married for his revenge, so why rush this? Why get married at all?" Beckett hissed. "I get that he won't wait forever, and his patience will eventually run out. And I understand you don't want to live in fear and protective custody until then since the man can easily figure out you're still who ..." He let go of a breath. "But—"

"But why wait? If we can draw him out sooner, then there's one less bad guy in the world we have to worry about, right?" Ella pointed out, working through the same thoughts that had led her to the marriage decision last night.

One less bad guy in the world. That'd been Jesse's job, hadn't it been? To take out those bad guys. But that didn't

alleviate the achy pain in both her stomach and her chest when she thought of the man she'd always loved as a contract killer.

“We can't even confirm this guy knows Jesse was on the long gun that day taking the shot,” A.J. drawled.

Ella quickly circled the table so she could put all three guys in her view. Jesse's back was to the room, eyes on the fire, though, so she could only see the hard lines of his back moving as he took in what appeared to be deep breaths.

A.J. swiveled his American flag ball cap backward and folded his arms. “The CIA didn't provide the Bulgarians with Jesse's identity. So if anyone at Bulgarian Intelligence knows and passed that intel along to our bad guy, that means someone from Bulgarian Intelligence had eyes on Jesse the day of the hit last year to identify him. The traitor just left out the major detail to Zoran that Jesse didn't kill his wife. But in my opinion, that's the only way Zoran did or will find out. There's almost always an insider helping out.”

A.J. was a conspiracy theorist, and Ella wasn't so sure what he was talking about. *Sofia. The Bulgarians. Zoran.* She didn't know the details yet, but A.J. was pretty damn smart, and she'd be inclined to believe him without question.

“And what do you think?” Ella asked, assuming Jesse would know she was speaking to him, and he slowly turned and faced her.

“My old boss at the Agency is following leads, but he thinks we ought to assume Zoran will or already has learned my name. He still wants me to go back to work for him, though. I was never undercover on jobs, so my identity being known is more of an inconvenience in his eyes.” Jesse was quiet for a moment. “Pretty sure that's my old boss's main objective. To get me back.”

“Back?” Ella hadn’t meant to gasp, but yeah, it happened.

“I’m not going back. I’m with Falcon now,” Jesse quickly said. “But that didn’t stop my old boss from throwing out your name to try and put the fear of God in me to ensure I handle this hit personally.”

“If anyone’s going to put the fear of God in you, it’s—”

A.J. slapped a hand against Beckett’s chest, cutting him off, as well as stopping him from taking another step toward Jesse.

“So, you see, the wedding’s not necessary,” Beckett said instead of trying to take a swing at Jesse. “Because Falcon can stop this guy before he learns Jesse’s name. Hell, Falcon can stop him even if he already knows Jesse was the shooter that day. And we’ll keep you safe in the meantime just in case.”

Ella peered at Jesse again to get a read on him. His face was blank. So she looked to A.J. for answers. “Do you think you can find him *before* he finds you?” she asked. “*If* he hasn’t already, that is.”

“We have a lot of resources at our disposal. But we should assume the worst, and that’s that Zoran already knows Jesse’s *and* your name,” A.J. said solemnly.

“How can you be okay with allowing our sister to go to Paris and lure out a cold-blooded killer?” Beckett’s anger was now directed toward A.J.

“Marriage or not. Paris or not. If the bastard knows Jesse shot him, then Ella’s his target no matter what,” A.J. reminded Beckett, sounding almost like he was on Ella’s side, which was both surprising and a change from how he’d first reacted to the idea last night.

“I can’t watch another fight,” Ella whispered, moving between Beckett and A.J. with outstretched hands. “I can’t deal with this right now. We all need to be on the same side.” She released a shaky breath. “I didn’t sleep last night. I’m gonna go lie down.”

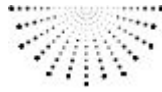
“I’m so sorry, Ella,” Jesse said in a low tone, taking her by surprise. His gaze swiveled to A.J. and then to Beckett before moving back to her. “I’m sorry you have to marry a man like me,” he added, his voice cracking as he started to leave.

“Fake,” she called out, feeling just as broken as he’d sounded. “It’s only fake,” she whispered. He looked at her from over his shoulder, his mouth a tight line, and that small nod from him had her legs buckling.

There had never been, and she doubted there would ever be, anything truly fake about how she felt about that man. So much for going to Paris to get over him.

She was now going as Ella Mae McAdams.

CHAPTER EIGHT



JESSE STROKED HIS JAW AND LOOKED DOWN THE HALL TOWARD the guest room where Ella had been holed up since the showdown that morning in his living room.

She'd refused to join them for the lunch Savanna had prepared, and thirty minutes ago, A.J. was forced to call through the door to let her know Jesse's teammates had arrived. Not greeting Jesse's teammates, even for a minute, wasn't like Ella at all. Southern hospitality ran in her blood.

To be fair, she had every right to want some time to herself. And she really didn't need to hear any details about the case, which might only further upset her. Hell, he was struggling to focus on what his two team leaders had said during the last few minutes, too busy wondering if Ella was lying in bed crying.

Jesse wanted to knock down the door, pull her into his arms, and take away all the misery and pain he'd caused her. All he'd ever wanted for that woman was happiness. And to be free from harm. But he couldn't provide either of those things for her. At least, he never thought he could.

One thing was for certain, he was now the reason she was not only unhappy but also why her life was in danger.

“Ella needs time. And space,” A.J. said as if reading Jesse’s thoughts, and Jesse was glad he was the only Hawkins brother there right now. A.J. had insisted on sitting in with the Falcon team as well as having a say in any plans involving his sister.

Beckett was at work, but he’d taken his daughter with him. He was on edge, and of course, paranoid about someone coming after the people connected to Jesse or Ella.

And Chris was with Rory and A.J.’s wife and son at the Hawkins Ranch to keep an eye on them.

“I could try and talk to her again,” Savanna offered, stepping away from the kitchen counter and free from Griffin’s arms.

“Thank you,” Jesse said, managing to clear his messy thoughts for a moment to answer her. Savanna sent him a polite smile he didn’t deserve before heading toward the hall.

“You two knew, right?” A.J. jerked a thumb between where Carter and Gray sat at the kitchen table, working side by side once Savanna was gone. “You knew Jesse was a hitman before he joined y’all.”

Carter and Gray exchanged a quick look, and Carter nodded, his eyes moving to where Jesse stood with his back to the wall by the door.

A.J. shook his head but didn’t utter a word as he went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. The look of disgust on his face made his thoughts on the matter clear enough.

“Well, the rest of us didn’t know, but I figured there had to be something special about him,” Jack London, their resident comedian on the team, chimed in. “Or maybe weird is the right

word.” He made a show of cringing. “Spooks. They’re not my favorite people.”

Not only did Jack look like Ryan Reynolds, but he had the same wit and style of humor as the actor. He’d been in the Army Special Forces, same as Gray, and the two men had been best friends growing up.

After his time in the Army, Jack was part of Ground Branch with the CIA before leaving to work with Gray, but he hadn’t been an assassin like Jesse. He’d been sent on ops to protect CIA officers in the field.

“Hey, my sister is still one of those spooks,” Gray reminded Jack.

“Ah, she’s different.” Jack sipped the sweet tea Savanna had made earlier, sitting across from Sydney and Oliver, who were busy working on their laptops at the kitchen island.

“Don’t forget Carter was once with the Agency,” Sydney pointed out, sweeping her blonde hair into a high ponytail before focusing back on her laptop.

“He had the good sense to leave them.” Oliver looked at Sydney, their latest recruit, and shot her a crooked smile, but she was already focused on her screen.

Well, they didn’t recruit her so much as she managed to track down their secret bunker in the mountains of Pennsylvania and demand a job. She’d been connected to the case involving Savanna, and she’d decided she wanted a career change. A pretty big one. She left her family’s multi-billion-dollar defense company to hunt bad guys with Falcon.

“I think we need to focus on the wife,” Carter suddenly said, drawing Jesse’s attention. “Someone wanted her dead for a reason, and not just because she was Zoran’s wife. And they

didn't want it to look like there was a second shooter or that she'd been specifically targeted."

It wasn't shocking Carter had put forth that hypothesis since his own wife had been the real target of a "home invasion gone wrong" years ago.

"If someone wanted it to appear as though you took both shots, the second shooter couldn't have been positioned too far away from you," Carter said, leaning back in his chair, eyes set on Jesse.

"I didn't have time to sweep the area for the second shooter. I had to get out of there before Zoran's security pinned me down," Jesse said, feeling the need to explain why he hadn't searched for the hidden sniper.

"That also means the second shooter may have seen you, even if you didn't see him," Oliver noted.

"Or *her*," Sydney said.

Jesse peered at Sydney, wondering how many people she'd taken out over the years when she'd served in the Army prior to joining her father's business.

Sydney had proved rather lethal with the bow and arrow, not exactly a method used in Iraq, so there was ... that.

"Or there was someone from Bulgarian Intelligence out there that day to put eyes on you," Carter added, which had been an idea Jesse and A.J. had floated that morning. A potential traitor who may have or might eventually leak Jesse's name to Zoran.

"I needed a clean line of sight to take the shot, so my face wasn't masked for the hit," Jesse told his team, revealing why he had concerns Zoran might be able to discover his identity.

“I think we need to look at the hit from another angle as Carter’s suggesting.” A.J. circled the table and stood alongside Jesse, fiddling with the cap of his water bottle.

“We may be dealing with someone out there who doesn’t want the truth coming out about a second shooter or the fact they most likely tipped off Zoran.” Jack shifted on his stool and faced A.J. “Two problems to tackle: whoever sent the second shooter for the wife and Zoran’s revenge.”

More danger for Ella. Jesse turned to the wall and set his balled hands against it, trying not to drive both fists through it in front of his team.

“I’m surprised your boss didn’t raise that point,” Gray said, a subtle hint that maybe Thatcher wasn’t to be trusted.

“Thatcher wants me back, not dead.” Jesse shook his head. “I trust him.”

“Sometimes, we give our trust to the wrong people. People we’d never think would betray us,” A.J. said, and Jesse whirled to face his friend, feeling a bit gutted by the comment. A.J. held up a hand. “That wasn’t a dig at you, Jesse.”

“If Thatcher didn’t bring up a second threat, it’s because he doesn’t believe there to be one,” Jesse added, turning away from his best friend to focus on his new bosses.

“Well, I’m not ruling out the idea of two potential problems.” Carter’s penetrating dark eyes landed on Jesse. The man was a shrewd motherfucker, and not a big fan of the Agency. He was likely wondering which side Jesse’s loyalties lay—Thatcher or Falcon—but there was no question in Jesse’s mind that he was done with the Agency.

“What about Zoran’s son, Nikola? He’s only ten. We should have eyes on him. With Zoran back from the dead, or

you know, out of hiding, it stands to reason he'll want to be with his son." As the only parent on the team, Jesse wasn't surprised it was Sydney to raise that point. "He was pulled from his boarding school when his parents were shot, and he's been living with his godparent, Zoran's brother."

Gray looked at Sydney, his gaze always a bit more intense whenever he watched her. "I suspect the CIA or Bulgarian Intelligence already has eyes on the son and uncle, but we should as well."

Sydney focused on her screen. "They're in Hallstatt, a small town in Austria."

"Was the uncle involved in the family business with Zoran before the hit?" Jesse asked. "I've never been all that privy to the details about my marks. I just handled the, uh, elimination."

"Zoran's brother moved to Hallstatt once he became guardian," Sydney began, "but he may have been given orders to lie low and protect Zoran's son until further notice. I would assume he had to be somewhat involved in the operation."

"Usually, criminal enterprises like that are family-oriented," Carter said. "So, we'll check it out. But from what I can tell, he wasn't Zoran's right-hand man, and that person is rumored to be running things in Zoran's absence from a new location. We're working to find him as well."

"I doubt Zoran would risk going to his brother's place for his son until he's handled his mission of revenge," Jack said. "He has to know he'd be walking into a trap if he went for his son now."

"True, but I'll send some of my guys who are already in Europe to Hallstatt just in case," Carter agreed. "And where

are we at with the background check into the Rochella family?”

Jesse focused on Griffin when he began sharing his research into the Rochellas. His thoughts momentarily drifted back to Ella’s studio, remembering the way Henry Rochella had looked at Ella yesterday.

He had a feeling if Ella hadn’t announced she was getting married, the billionaire planned to hit on her in Paris. *Doesn’t mean he still won’t*, he reminded himself, which meant he needed to keep an eye on that man for more than one reason.

“So, no red flags?” Jesse asked upon a sigh after Griffin had finished his report on the Rochellas.

“I need more time to say for sure, but it doesn’t look that way,” Griffin responded with a firm nod, then Griffin’s attention shifted to Savanna on approach from the hallway.

“Jesse, can I steal you for a moment?” Savanna crooked her finger and angled her head, beckoning him to join her.

Knowing she’d been with Ella and now needed to talk to him had his heartbeat ramping up as he walked through the open doorway to meet her where she hung back in the hall. “She okay?”

Savanna looked toward the guest room. “I think you should go in there. She’s, um, not okay.”

Jesse hung his head and brought his hands to his hips. “Does she want me to?”

“You should go in there regardless.” When Savanna placed her hand on his chest, he looked up and nodded.

“Okay.” He waited for Savanna to leave, then walked past the room Chris and Rory had been staying in and to the last

bedroom in the hall, opposite the master.

He hadn't slept at all last night. How could he with everything going on? But also, knowing Ella was just a few steps across the hall had him pacing the length of his room. He'd braced his hands on the frame of the bedroom door, fighting the urge to go to her last night.

Jesse tested the knob to see if it was unlocked, then slowly opened the door. Ella was in bed beneath the plush white comforter, but her iPad was propped up next to her. He hadn't anticipated she'd be watching a movie.

Leaning against the doorframe, he folded his arms and studied her as she ignored him for at least a good sixty seconds, knowing damn well he was there. "Shouldn't you be picking out flowers or bridesmaid dresses or something? Selling the idea of a real wedding to your mom before she gets suspicious?"

Ella paused her movie and sat up, clutching the comforter to her chest. Had she changed into something too revealing?

He remembered the nightshirt she'd had back in New York before she'd tossed it to give him an eyeful of her luscious breasts. And if she was wearing anything remotely similar now, he was screwed.

A.J.'s in the kitchen, he chanted to himself to keep from going in, hauling her into his arms, and doing all the wicked things that were currently working through his mind.

"Why would I care about a bogus wedding?" She brushed her fingers through her sexy bed-head hair with one hand while maintaining a death grip on the comforter with the other.

"The wedding was your idea, darling. We can call it off. So long as you tell your parents after I get the hell out of Dodge,

so your dad doesn't take his shotgun to me."

He'd hoped for a smile, but instead, the frown damn near devastated him. It wasn't the best idea, but he decided to go inside and shut the door behind him.

"Don't call me darling," was the response she'd gone for instead of acknowledging the rest of his comment. Maybe she was okay with her dad using his shotgun on Jesse. "Don't call me anything, in fact. I don't know you, and maybe you don't know the real me either."

Jesse scoffed. "Bullshit. And you know it." He rounded the queen-sized bed and stood off to the side, keeping his eyes steady on her, noticing the way the comforter kept rising and falling in time with her deep breaths. "I know everything about you."

"Well, I'm trying to learn more about you." Her gaze flicked to the iPad. "You're not exactly an open book, and I expect you'll keep your trap shut. Like always."

"What are you talking about?" He set a hand to the bed for support and leaned over her, side-eyeing her as he did so to see what she was watching.

She remained nearly ramrod straight on the bed beneath him, her head falling back to the pillow with him so close.

And then she gently shoved at his chest. "Too close for comfort, buddy."

Buddy, huh? He pushed himself upright and stepped away from the bed.

"I googled assassin movies. I've been alternating between Denzel and Keanu flicks. Denzel counts out the seconds he'll need to take a life before he kills someone in the movie I just watched. You did that back at the club in New York before you

knocked that guy out in the bathroom, didn't you?" She was rambling and talking too fast for him to follow it all. "Keanu's character wasn't CIA, but still ... assassin, so."

"Movies aren't reality. Not my reality, at least," he spoke up once it was clear she wasn't finishing her sentence. "I'm not like the guys in either of those films."

"Have you seen them? How do you know?" she quickly remarked.

"Of course I've seen them. And no, I'm not like them." *Okay, maybe a little more like Denzel's character, sure. But Keanu's? No.*

"Why'd you join? Why'd you leave the Army to work for the CIA as a hitman?"

He stared into her beautiful blue eyes, and his chest hurt so damn much. "You don't want to know why."

"Meaning, you won't tell me." She shook her head. "Then tell me when you officially left the CIA." Her brow creased as she waited for a response, and he knew his answer would only create more questions.

"July of last year," he admitted.

"What day?"

Shit. He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead for a moment before finding her eyes again. "July fifth. That was the day I left."

Ella looked over at her iPad for whatever reason before returning her attention to him. "Keanu's character left for love. But then she died. And well, someone killed his dog, and he started killing again. Are you going to start killing again? Because of me? Are you going to become an assassin again?"

He sat next to her, unable to stop himself, but he refrained from reaching for her. “I told you I’m never going back to the Agency, but what I do with Falcon now ... may result in the loss of life. I can’t make promises I won’t kill again.” He had every intention of killing Zoran and anyone else who posed a threat to Ella. “You need to stop watching these movies. They’re messing with your head.”

“The only one messing with my head is you.” Her words and the sadness in her tone had him reaching for her hand on instinct, but she pulled her palm free of his touch.

The sudden movement caused the comforter to slip down, revealing a skimpy white tank top so sheer that he could make out her breasts perfectly.

All thoughts of movies and assassins fled from Jesse’s mind, and he was now solely focused on his desire to set her on his lap, rip that flimsy material from her body with his bare hands, and fucking worship her breasts.

Was she wearing panties? She’d told him at the hotel in New York that her normal bedroom attire was a tank top and panties. Or just the panties.

He dropped a hand over his crotch and hoped she didn’t notice the erection pushing against his jeans. *Fuck.*

“Cover yourself up,” he said in a deep, commanding tone. His mind was still playing out the next seconds. And this time, it wasn’t to hurt someone. No, he was calculating what he would do to this woman. How long it would take for him to make her scream his name. To finally be able to devour her pussy like he’d wanted to three years ago and make her come with only his tongue.

“Does it make you uncomfortable seeing me like this?” Her silky tone and the provocative way she spoke had his balls tightening, and he pressed down on his cock with the heel of his hand, trying to control himself.

Jesse slowly slid his gaze from her tits to her full mouth and then to her eyes. “You know what you’re doing to me, Ella Mae,” he gritted out harshly.

“Then let’s get that kiss out of the way. It’s meaningless to me, but if you want our first kiss to happen in private before our *last* one in public tomorrow, then so be it.”

Oh, this woman. She was evil right now. Tempting. But the little vixen had every right to torture him. And hell if he didn’t find himself getting off on her attitude. He’d need to relieve his tension, so he didn’t punch a wall after this.

But damn that mouth. *Such a naughty girl*. He could see it wrapped around his cock. See her on her knees with his fists in her hair while she took every inch of him.

“Kiss me. Get it over with.” She was using anger to hide her nerves, and he knew it.

“If a kiss is so meaningless, why wouldn’t you let me do it in New York?” He gave his aching cock one firm squeeze over the material of his pants, and he didn’t bother to hide what he was doing.

Her eyes latched on to the movement, and the tip of her tongue peeked out from between her lush lips.

“Why didn’t you let me spread your legs and swipe my tongue along your p—”

“I hate you,” she bit out, equal amounts of lust and loathing burning brightly behind those blue eyes.

“I know you do, darlin’.”

“No more calling me darling,” she snapped. “Just kiss me and get it over with. I—I don’t want to make this a big deal.” She jerked a thumb toward the iPad. “And I have important things to do. Like learn more about you.”

“Kissing you *will* be a big deal. There’s no way around that, *darlin’*.”

“Oof.” She shoved at his chest, and he captured both wrists with one hand, trapping her in his hold. He peeled the comforter down farther to confirm his guess.

“Red lace panties.” He eyed the strip of fabric between her legs, his breathing quickening.

“You know I hate being hot.” Ella struggled to pull free of his hold, but he cocked his head and stared at this wild, passionate woman.

He’d just begun to slide his finger up along the inside of her silky thigh when the bedroom door burst open.

“Oops, sorry!” Deb Hawkins had impeccable timing.

Ella quickly drew the comforter up to her chin, and Jesse stood, pocketed his hands, and faced his future *fake* mother-in-law.

“I’m so sorry. Why didn’t they tell me you two were ... in here together?” Ella’s mom swiped both hands over her blushing cheeks, looking slightly scandalized. Jesse bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. “But why do you look more like your dog died and you wanna kill someone than, well, you know?”

She directed her such-a-bad-timing comment toward Jesse, and he did his best not to glance at Ella for her reaction to her

mother's words.

"We're good," he forced out, teeth clamped as he tried to will away his erection.

"Are you sure?" Deb's gaze moved to Ella for confirmation.

"Absolutely," Ella forced out.

"Well." Deb clapped. "Then get up and prove to me this wedding isn't a sham and that you actually want to walk down that aisle tomorrow. I need your help, sweetie."

"A sham?" Ella coughed. "Of course it's not."

Jesse turned to the side to peer at Ella, and he could tell she was working hard not to shoot him a menacing look.

"Also, why does your kitchen look like a T-O-C?"

"A T-O-C?" Jesse blinked in confusion.

"TOCK?" Deb strung the letters together this time and spoke the acronym. "Tactical operations center? Or something like that? That's what they call it in those military movies, right?" Deb's hands went to her hips, and the last woman in the world, second to Ella, he wanted to piss off was this particular Hawkins.

"Oh, um." Jesse smiled. "My team took a new security job. They came down here so they can work around the, uh, wedding. It was unexpected."

"Suuuure." Deb closed one eye and cocked her head. "What's really going on? I'm Southern. Not slow."

"Nothing, Mom." Ella shooed her away with her free hand. "Mind if I get dressed before I go with you? I don't think my

future husband would like me to walk around in front of his teammates in a tank top and underwear.”

No, no, her future husband would definitely not like her walking around like that. Too many single men out there. It was bad enough any man other than him had set his eyes or hands on Ella in the last three years.

Anytime he thought about Brian having sex with Ella, he'd had to patch another hole in one of his walls. But it was that or shoot Brian.

“I think you two should wait to”—Deb took her two index fingers and linked them together—“do the sex thing until your wedding night. I'm assuming you two have already done it before, but you know, maybe wait for the next time.”

“*Mom.*” Ella cupped her free hand to her cheek, her face heating up.

“Just think about it. It's only one more night.” Deb shrugged. “Now, get dressed. I need your help. Lots more to do and no time to do it. Skedaddle, Jesse. If you stay in here while she gets changed, I have a feeling those clothes will come back off.” She twirled her finger in the air. “Now, you look less like a killer and more like a lovesick puppy.”

Oh, dear God.

If Deb only knew just how right on the money she was.

Jesse plastered a smile on his face that he hoped conveyed “perfect son-in-law” when she came closer and hooked her arm with his and tugged him toward the door.

Jesse stole one last look at Ella, wishing he could stay with her and finish what they almost started. But Deb was right for reasons she didn't know.

He'd already screwed with Ella's heart three years ago, and Zoran was proof of the fact it might never be safe for him and Ella to be together. For real, at least.

And hell, maybe Ella really did hate him. Maybe she wouldn't give him another chance even if he dropped to his knees and begged.

CHAPTER NINE



JESSE SMILED AS HE HELD THE FRAMED PHOTO, TAKEN AT RORY and Chris’s wedding that summer, of him with his arm around his beaming sister. Rory had made a beautiful bride, radiant in a dress Ella had handmade for her. It’d been a toss-up that day who’d been the most teary-eyed: Rory, her badass SEAL husband, or their mother. Jesse had done his best not to stare at Ella, the maid of honor, while Rory and Chris had exchanged vows, wondering if he and Ella would be doing the same one day.

And now we’re having a fake wedding. He returned the photo to the mantel where his sister had insisted it be displayed, alongside another wedding photo in a matching silver frame. That one was of the wedding party, minus the bride and groom, and he knew Rory purposefully chose that one because it seemed to prominently feature the stunning maid of honor in her pale yellow flowy dress.

The photo also captured the fact that Jesse’s attention was focused on Ella and not the photographer. Another reason his sister surely set the picture there.

“Griffin and Savanna just rolled up in his truck,” Jack called out, joining Jesse in the living room, and Jesse tore his focus away from the photo and over to his teammate.

He hadn't quite figured Jack out, but he had a feeling there was a lot more beneath the surface than the jokes and wisecracks. Shortly after Jesse had met Chris, Rory clued him in that Chris buried a lot of his trauma and pain behind humor.

Jesse wasn't sure if that was also Jack's deal, but he knew when it came to operating, Jack flipped some type of mental switch and transitioned into a man you didn't want to fuck with—exactly how Jesse preferred the men he fought alongside to be.

“Ella not with them?” He hadn't seen her since she left for the ranch six hours ago.

“No, Griffin texted a few minutes ago that Chris and Rory are bringing Ella back here with them.” Jack's focus went over Jesse's shoulder to the mantel as if he knew what had been on Jesse's mind.

Jesse checked his watch. It was zero one hundred hours. Technically, New Year's Eve and his wedding day.

The team had decided they'd be leaving for Paris on New Year's Day instead of waiting until the second. The less time they spent in Walkins Glen, the better for everyone there.

“How long were you married?” Jesse asked him. “If you don't mind my asking.”

“Too long. And not long enough, I suppose.” Jack palmed his bearded jaw. “Jill wanted me to leave the Army. I tried my hand at civilian life, but it didn't suit me.”

“That's why you joined Ground Branch for the CIA?”

“Yeah, I think I did that more so because the admiral wanted someone watching over his daughter.” Jack smiled. “You've met the admiral. He's rather overprotective when it comes to Natasha. Plus, I've known her since we were kids.

Almost as long as you've known Ella. I'm sure if Ella had been out in Algeria or wherever chasing terrorists, you'd have had her six." He shrugged when Jesse remained quiet.

What could Jesse say though? The idea of Ella having a dangerous job made him nauseous. It was bad enough his sister had been a globe-trotting adventure-seeker, always getting herself into some kind of predicament.

A while back, when he learned Rory had been whipped and tortured by pirates, he and A.J. had sought out and "handled" the men who'd hurt her. Six-feet-under kind of handled. A.J. hadn't had an issue with killing those men, so maybe, just maybe, he didn't truly hate Jesse for the work he'd done for the Agency. Although, A.J. probably hated him right now for potentially having put his sister in danger, as he should.

"I'm happy with what I do now. Working for Gray. Hell, even Carter. I guess those two are the yin to the other's yang. Or whatever. You know what I mean. They balance each other."

"Carter's the devil you don't want to dance with," Jesse said based on what little he knew of his mysterious boss. "And I wouldn't go so far as to call Gray some type of saint, but he's about as schoolboy as they come."

"Don't let Gray fool you. He's not quite as buttoned-up as everyone might think." Jack arched a brow and looked behind him as if checking for his best friend to ensure Gray didn't hear whatever he might say next. "You know, the day his helo crashed years ago, he was declared dead for about thirty seconds. Gray said the place he went to after that wasn't exactly sunshine and rainbows."

“What do you mean?” Jesse asked under his breath. “Gray thinks he went to Hell? I’m guessing that was the morphine they were pumping through him while they tried to save part of his leg.” *Unsuccessfully.*

“I don’t know, brother. I just know Gray says he wasn’t greeted at the pearly white gates, and he said after the shit he’d done in his life, he hadn’t been surprised. But he was given another chance, and he was going to do his best to earn his way off Hell’s waiting list.”

Huh. That conversation took an unexpected turn. “And you think people can find redemption?”

“Fuck, I hope so. Or aren’t we all going to Hell?” Jack held his palms in the air. “I know I’ve got front-row seats to that inferno if not.” He pointed to Jesse. “And you, my friend, were a contract killer. I feel like God’s probably not your greatest fan.” He winked, switching back to humor, and yeah, Jesse was right. Jack was a lot like Chris. Jesse had struck a nerve during the conversation, and Jack felt the need to joke his way free of whatever emotions pushed to the surface as a result.

“They’re here,” Sydney called out from the kitchen.

*Thank—*Jesse lifted his eyes to the ceiling—*God ...?*

He and Jack were headed for the kitchen when they heard Gray blurt, “Wait, what? Are you serious?”

“What’d we miss?” Jack settled on a stool at the island opposite where Oliver and Sydney worked.

Carter, who appeared to be much less shocked than Gray, stood from the table. Jesse was still clueless as to what in the hell he’d missed.

“Griffin wants to bring Savanna to Paris,” Gray muttered, his grumpy tone making it obvious he considered the idea utter bullshit.

“I need to be on this op with you guys,” Griffin explained, he and Savanna by the door. “And if I leave her here under someone else’s protection, I’ll be worried and distracted the entire time.”

Savanna leaned into Griffin as he positioned his arm tight around her waist, and Jesse stared at the couple, trying to wrap his head around the news.

“If there’s any chance someone might come after Savanna because of all this, you know that’s a risk I won’t take.” Griffin’s voice dropped a few octaves in warning. He put eyes on Carter since it was clear Gray planned to reject the idea.

Carter was quiet for a moment as all eyes in the kitchen seemed to point his way, and Gray appeared to wait to find out if the man he was partnered with would side with him or not. Carter’s dark gaze moved to Jesse, and he studied him for a moment. “Jesse’s the one with the kill orders from the Agency, and you said he should be the one to take out Zoran when we find him,” he said in a steady tone, his focus switching to Gray, repeating what Gray had noted a few hours ago. That it was Jesse’s job to kill Zoran. “But Jesse won’t leave Ella with just anyone when he has to operate either.”

“I’ll watch Ella and Savanna,” Griffin said in a deep, commanding tone. Zero fucks about the chain of command at the moment with the woman he loved thrown in the mix. “Yes, we’ll have Carter’s other guys overseas joining the team for an assist, but you know I’ll never let anything happen to Savanna or Ella.”

Shit, Griffin was right. Jesse was the one who had to take out Zoran, but he hadn't thought through who'd watch over Ella while he operated. "I trust all of you here. It doesn't have to be you," he told Griffin. "There's no reason to bring Savanna over there and place her in harm's way."

Savanna stepped forward from Griffin's embrace. "I think it'd be a good idea for Ella to have me there. This isn't going to be easy on her. And this kind of danger is no longer foreign to me. I can help Ella get through this. Those of us connected to you, no offense, aren't truly safe anywhere until the threat has been handled, right?"

Jesse tore his fingers through his hair, hating the idea of yet another woman he cared about caught up in the middle of his greatest nightmare.

If only he hadn't extended his employment with Thatcher after Ella announced her engagement to Brian two years ago. No, what he should have done was fought for her. Gone to her and told her to cancel the wedding and marry him instead.

Of course, someone else from his past could've easily popped up to hunt him now instead of Zoran. The "Wheel of Fortune" of bad guys Jesse had encountered in his time would forever spin and be a problem. *But Zoran was the only one I left alive.*

"Ella rejected the plan, but I'm stubborn like her, and she realizes I won't back down," Savanna added. "So, I strong-armed her into agreeing just like she made you agree to fake marry her."

Jesse lifted his gaze to see the headstrong woman back in Griffin's arms. "What about the café?"

“If Griffin wants her to come, then she comes,” Carter said without checking with Gray first. So much for the 50-50 partnership thing. But everyone on the team knew it was a bit more weighted in favor of Carter given his bags of billions he seemed to have hidden around the globe to fund their ops, among other things.

“Thank you.” Savanna went to Carter and hugged him, and Carter went still, leaving his arms stiff and unmoving as she squeezed the devil who didn’t appear to know how to hug. She moved to Gray next, hugging him before the man had a chance to reject her puppy dog eyes or warm embrace.

“Okay, okay. Enough hugging other men,” Griffin said in a teasing voice, but knowing that man, it wasn’t entirely a joke.

Savanna rolled her eyes and playfully swatted Griffin on the ass, which had growly Griff nearly spanking her right back from the looks of it, but he seemed to refrain, given the audience.

Yeah, they were going to head back to their place and have sex, that was for sure.

And he hated how envious he felt right about now, especially when Ella walked through the door a minute later with Chris and Rory. Bear trotted in as well, squeezed between his “parents,” and plopped down on the dog bed Jesse kept in a corner of the kitchen, along with a water bowl for when Bear visited.

“Well, Deb Hawkins wore me out. I’m just as tuckered as Bear,” Rory said lightly.

“Y’all learn anything new while we were being bossed around by your new wedding planner? Aka your future mother-in-law?” Chris shot Jesse a lopsided smile.

“We’re still working to locate Zoran’s right-hand man,” Jack spoke up for the first time since the Savanna-coming-to-Paris conversation had begun.

“We filled Ella in on what we know so far about the case in between the wedding details while we were at the ranch,” Chris let Jesse know, and Jesse wasn’t sure how he felt about Ella knowing everything.

Ella pinned Jesse with a hard look, and it was the first time she’d made eye contact with him since entering the far-too-crowded kitchen. And Ella’s mom was right. It did look like a command center, but they weren’t in a tent in Baghdad and wearing uniforms.

“Um. Can I steal my brother for a second?” Rory abruptly stepped forward, grabbed hold of Jesse’s arm, and marched him down the hall toward his bedroom as if she were their mom about to ground him for one of the many times he’d misbehaved as a kid.

“What’s up?” he tossed out once they were alone in his room with the door closed behind them.

Rory sank onto his king-sized bed. “You know what’s up.”

Jesse set his back to the French door that led out back to a private patio while eyeing his sister. “I really don’t. There are a lot of things that could be up. Spell it out for me.”

“Ella’s not doing well,” she announced. “She was barely keeping it together at the ranch earlier during the wedding preparations. And it’s not because she’s worried about this Zeus guy.”

“Zoran,” he quickly responded instead of sharing how Rory’s words really made him feel. Guilty, then add some

more guilt. Topped with another Everest-sized pile of fucking guilt.

“Whatever. He sounds like a mythical creature. Anyway.” Rory waved her hand in the air as if Zoran was the least of their problems.

He had to remember his sweet sister didn’t scare so easily. She had faced off with the worst of the worst and came out victorious, so Jesse knew she didn’t need to be coddled. Basically, his sister was a badass. *Lara Croft* in the flesh.

“The point is, Ella has been dreaming about her wedding day since she was a kid. And *you* were who she always wanted to marry. Certainly not Brian.” Rory stood and came before him, angling her head. “And now her family and the whole town is going to watch you two say vows, and it’s not going to be real.” Her shoulders fell. “She won’t admit how much that’s screwing with her head, and I know it was her idea, but I’m just ...”

Jesse heaved out a deep breath and looked to the ceiling, wanting to admit to his sister just how much this was screwing with his head as well. “What do you want me to do? Marry her for real?”

“Yes,” Rory said in a firm voice, and Jesse dropped his focus to her face when she closed in on him.

“You’re crazy.” He tried to sidestep her, but she remained a stubborn blockade, and he grunted in irritation.

“You love her. She loves you. Once you kill this Zoltar guy —”

“*Zoran.*”

Rory rolled her eyes. “Just take this motherfucker out, and then you two can live happily ever after. Make babies.”

“You don’t get it. There could easily be another Zoltar.” And now she had him saying the wrong name. “Rory.”

“Jesse,” she snapped with extra flair. “There’s always going to be a reason. Chris’s work is dangerous. I know what’s at stake if someone were to identify him. Your job with Falcon could jeopardize a future wife too. But you can’t live in fear of the unknown. Always waiting for something bad to happen.” She was quiet for a moment. “Worrying about what hasn’t happened yet is anxiety.”

“So, maybe I’ve got anxiety,” he hissed in frustration, then turned and opened the door to escape her since she wouldn’t move, but, of course, she followed him out to the patio.

He linked his hands behind his head and stared at the thundering sky overhead, unwilling to let himself think for even a second that he could actually do as Rory suggested.

“Why’d you join the Agency in the first place? Why choose the CIA over Ella?”

Jesse stopped in his tracks but only managed out, “I need to do a perimeter sweep.” He removed his gun from the back of his pants that’d been hidden beneath his shirt, and when he turned to see Rory, her eyes were glued to the weapon.

“Why? Tell me that, and I’ll leave you alone,” she pleaded.

He slid the muzzle of the gun alongside the outer part of his jeans. “Why does it matter? All that matters is that I did it. And you know what depression is? Focusing on a past you can’t change and letting it hurt your present.”

He started to turn, but her next words were like a hammer to the head. “It’s because of Dad. Right? It’s because of him.”

Jesse hung his head and swallowed. At the feel of her hand, he peered over his shoulder at her off to his right. “Like

I said, I need to check the property.”

“I remember,” she cried, catching him by surprise. “I buried those memories. I hid them in a dark place in my mind, but I’ve been seeing Chris’s therapist, the one helping him with his post-traumatic stress, and all those memories ... they came back to me.” Her voice broke, and he knew if he looked at his sister, he’d break too.

“I’m sorry you remember,” he whispered. “I had hoped you never would.”

CHAPTER TEN



ELLA PULLED ON HER NIGHTSHIRT AND PEERED AT HER reflection in the mirror above the dresser in Jesse's guest room. Yesterday, he'd declared she was going to stay with him—for her own safety, of course. He'd acted like they were evacuating a disaster zone, forcing her to stuff clothes into a bag as fast as possible, so she'd just grabbed things without much thought. But of all the nightshirts, what were the chances she'd pick up this one?

“Cowgirls Do It Better” written in pink cursive on the front of a black tee. It was the very same shirt she'd had on that first night in New York three years ago. Well, it hadn't been on long before she'd boldly chucked it.

A shiver ran down her spine at the memory of the hungry look in his eyes when she'd stood before him in nothing but her red panties that night.

Did he still remember her curves? Her body's response to his touch? She knew he remembered the fact she'd told him she usually slept in only a tank top and underwear.

Ella lifted her shirt and eyed the red panties. The lust in Jesse's eyes when he saw them earlier that day had her thighs squeezing together. Maybe the passion they'd had in New

York had never burned out? Maybe he still felt the same way? His body, at least, seemed to respond to hers.

When he'd caught up to her on horseback yesterday, and they'd taken a tumble in the field, it didn't take but a second for his dick to get hard after she fell on top of him. And when she'd asked him to kiss her, right before her mom showed up, he'd been stiff, unable to hide his erection.

Ella slipped a hand under the hem of her panties and found her sex soaked. Just thinking about that infuriating man managed to turn her on.

How many times had she gone out of her way to avoid him over the past three years, not always because of anger, but because the sexual tension was so great she'd worried she'd lose her control? And after every one of those encounters, she'd needed to get herself off or risk losing her ever-loving mind.

Even now, thinking about him had her crooking a finger over her sensitive spot, watching herself in the mirror and wishing it was his hand touching her. She drummed up one of her many fantasies, a particular favorite that began with angry-sex and quickly turned into a full-on passionate inferno.

“What am I doing?” She pulled her hand from her panties and straightened her nightshirt. *I'm losing my mind.*

She grabbed a pair of sweats and decided to face Jesse. *Maybe get the kiss over with?* The idea of his mouth touching hers had her heart beating faster as she opened the bedroom door.

Muffled voices trickled out from the kitchen down the hall, but the door to Jesse's bedroom across from hers was closed,

so she hoped he was in his room and not working with his team.

They both ought to get some shut-eye since it was now two in the morning, and they were getting hitched later that day. But she doubted he was able to sleep, same as her, though their reasons for being wide-awake and wired were most likely very different.

After lightly tapping on the door and getting no response, she turned the knob and found it unlocked. Letting go of a long exhale, she quietly entered the room. The bed was still made, and a glance out the open French door showed he was outside on his private patio, his back to her as he stood beyond the overhang in the rain.

He looked drenched, and he had to be freezing. It was barely forty degrees out. What in the hell was he thinking? Was he losing his mind like she was?

Ella quickly shut the door and locked it to prevent them from being interrupted, then walked with slow, steady steps across the room. Chills spread over her arms as she neared the open door and was hit by the cold, along with a few raindrops that blew in with the wind.

“Jesse,” she whispered. She barely heard her own voice over the sound of her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

His shoulders fell, indicating he was aware of her presence. But when he pivoted to face her, she startled at the sight of him—soaking wet and miserable. He moved onto the patio for cover, and the small porch light illuminated his face in more detail.

“What are you ...” His words faded into the cold air as his gaze roamed over her nightshirt. “Did you wear that to fuck

with me?” he growled. “Not that you don’t have every right to screw with my head, but—”

“I didn’t plan to fuck you.” Ella blinked. “*With* you,” she quickly amended as she massaged away the goose bumps from her arms. “Can you come inside? It’s cold with the door open, and you’re going to freeze to death out there.”

“I’ve been in much worse conditions,” he said, not moving an inch, still a good six feet away as his eyes slowly moved up to her face.

It wasn’t raining all that hard now, but the damage was already done, and his shirt was molded to his muscular frame. Threading both hands through his wet locks, he slicked the hair away from his face, and she stilled at the way those blue eyes beheld hers.

“So, you remember this shirt?” she asked, tugging at the hemline. “This time, I wore pants.”

“I can see that,” Jesse answered as he cocked his head. “And obviously, I remember. Did you think I’d be able to forget any details from that weekend?”

She set her palms on the frame of the door, surrendering to the cold because the searing look in his eyes warmed her enough to keep her teeth from chattering. “Well, considering you haven’t talked about it in three years, I wasn’t so sure.”

“We had a deal.” His tone was low and cutting, but knowing Jesse, his anger wasn’t directed at her. It reflected an internal struggle, an “it’s not you, it’s me” thing.

“Um.” She’d come into his room intending to talk about something, right? Aside from just the kiss. But with this man dripping wet and watching her like he was about to pounce, she’d lost hold of all thoughts that didn’t result in him

stripping free from those wet clothes and using her body to warm them both beneath his covers.

“What is it?” Jesse took two hesitant steps across the patio, bringing him just within arm’s reach.

Would he react if she extended some type of olive branch? Let him know this wasn’t easy on either of them, but they’d have to make it work somehow?

“I knew you wouldn’t ask A.J. or anyone to be your groomsmen,” Ella sputtered, remembering why else she’d gone to his room. “But my mom took care of it. She basically told A.J. he’s your best man. And she chose Chris and Griffin as the groomsmen.” Her stomach still squeezed from the jumble of hellish feelings that’d been trapped inside her all evening while her mom dragged her every which way to plan the wedding. “Rory, Ana, and Savanna will be at my side.” She gulped when he took another slow step. “McKenna is kind of old to be a flower girl, but she volunteered even though Beckett originally said no. And, um, Ana thought it’d be cute for baby Marcus to carry the pillow with rings and—”

“Rings,” Jesse said with a wince, obviously having forgotten that slight detail. “I’ll need to drive into the city and find some.”

“Oh.”

And why did he frown at her “oh?”

“Did A.J. refuse to be the best man?” he asked a moment later. Ella couldn’t help but notice that he’d said “the best man” rather than “my best man,” which, once again, drove home the point that this wedding wasn’t real. But then why the sad look?

“No, but I mean, you know how he feels about this whole situation. As it is, our mom is already suspicious, so if he said no to being in the wedding, Mom would, well, you know, know this is fake.”

“Right.” Jesse scratched his neck, his gaze lost to the pavers beneath his boots.

“Would you please come inside and get out of those wet clothes?” she pleaded.

Surprisingly, he followed her request, so she cleared the way for him to enter and shut the door. He stood before her for a few seconds, quietly studying her, then removed his boots and headed for the en suite.

He didn't bother to shut the door as he stripped, and she didn't exactly look away.

His taut back muscles flexed as he peeled off his shirt, and his strong legs appeared more muscular once his jeans were gone. He'd dimmed the lights in the bathroom, but there was enough light for her to work with—enough to provide the perfect view of strong glutes in black boxer briefs.

And then he disappeared into the closet that connected to the en suite, returning a moment later wearing a white tee and gray cotton shorts.

She resisted palming her red-hot cheeks and wondered if he noticed she hadn't moved a single muscle during her own private Magic Mike show (minus the dancing).

“You change with the door open to screw with me?” she asked, unable to bite her tongue.

Jesse stilled in the doorway between his bathroom and bedroom and lifted both palms over his head to rest at the top of the doorframe, scrutinizing her.

In that position, the short sleeves of his tee were stretched to capacity by his biceps. She nervously waited for him to say something. Or *do* something. But his “grr factor” was front and center, and that damn alpha man was staring at her like he might actually toss her over his shoulder and swat her ass in the process.

She squeezed her thighs together, and Jesse’s focus lowered between her legs as if he’d noticed.

“Maybe we should just have our first kiss at the wedding. At least something will be real. You know, since it’ll be our first *and* last,” she decided at that moment because she was now far too nervous to have this man’s lips touch her anywhere but in public. No, if he kissed her in private, when they were alone, she’d beg him to kiss every inch of her body. And she had too much self-respect to beg him not to reject her again. Plus, if she’d learned anything from that weekend in New York, sex without commitment from Jesse hurt far too much.

“Last, huh?” He pushed back a little from the door without letting his arms fall, but his forearms and biceps flexed.

Why did that have her swallowing? She’d seen his muscles before. She’d seen him naked. Memorized the sexy V. The soft smattering of chest hair. His hard pectoral muscles. The strong quads that’d trapped her thighs so she couldn’t squirm while he made her come.

“Last,” she said again, hating that her lower lip was trembling.

He dropped his arms and walked into the bedroom, dragging his hands through his wet hair again. Those gray shorts left little to the imagination, especially after he wiped his wet palms on them. *Oh, and there—there it is.* She could

pretty much make out every detail of his dick, and it was ... hard.

He'd have to guess how wet she was, though, because she had no intention of letting him find out.

Jesse closed the space between them and reached around to gently tug her braid before she had a chance to realize what he was doing. The man really was fast.

He was also tall. Ella was five-six, which wasn't short, but Jesse towered over her. He tugged her braid a bit harder to urge her chin up so her eyes would find his.

"You will kiss me before the wedding. Privately."

"You can't make me," she challenged, hating her body for betraying her right now. Nipples? Harder than she'd known possible. Her sex? Hello, Niagara Falls. No need to visit there after all.

Jesse dipped in closer, drawing his face a hair's breadth away from hers. Their eyes remained locked as he rasped, "Oh, I won't have to make you."

"No? How so?" Her traitorous voice barely squeaked out the words, letting him know the effect he was having on her. *Every* part of her.

"There's one thing you and I have never lacked, despite every other issue ... and that's chemistry, darling." His last sentiment floated on a breath, and that breath was like a preview of the kiss to come. "You want it as much as I do." Another light pull of her braid had her mouth practically touching his, and she wasn't sure why she was fighting so desperately to resist. "Go to bed, Ella."

"What?" she gasped, the intoxicating moment shattering when he released her braid and stepped back, taking her by

surprise.

He tipped his head to the side and stared at her. “I need you to go, because I won’t be able to stop at just kissing you. Not with you in that shirt. In my bedroom. With those fuck-me lips poised and wet.”

Oh, God.

You’re right.

If he kissed her, she’d lose her sanity and control within the space of a heartbeat.

“So, no before-the-wedding kiss, then?”

Jesse closed his eyes as if he couldn’t handle the sight of her. Well, judging by the erection in his shorts, he was struggling to not go savage mode and throw her on the bed.

“Jury is out now. I don’t know.”

“You changed your mind fast,” she whispered, now strangely disappointed.

“Go, please. Before I do a lot more than kiss you. And I don’t have condoms, so the pregnancy won’t be fake like the marriage,” he murmured darkly, lifting his lids to show his blue eyes almost hazy from the intensity of whatever he was feeling and thinking.

“Oh.”

Jesse shook his head. “Please don’t use that sound around me.” He didn’t elaborate why, but he added, “Go get yourself off. I know you need to.”

“Excuse me?” She smoothed her palms up and down her arms at his words, another insane comment coming from him that had her heart fixed in her throat.

“Go. I need to do the same before I ...” Head angled. Eyes working over her body.

Holy shit. She was going to combust.

“Jesse,” she softly said, forgetting what his name from her mouth had done to him back in New York.

Before she had a chance to react, Jesse cupped her chin, and his piercing eyes cut straight through her as he hissed, “Ask me for it.” He angled his head, bringing his mouth close to hers. “Ask me,” he growled out, already forgetting his command for her to leave.

She was breathing hard and fast, utterly confused, but “Kiss me” still left her lips, and his mouth crushed hers with such intensity she had to walk backward to not lose her balance. But he moved right along with her, keeping her upright with a hand to her back.

He held her flush to his body, imprisoning her in his embrace. His other palm slipped from chin to cheek as his tongue pushed open her lips, and she gave in without hesitation.

The prior rigidity in her body vanished, and she wilted as he kissed her.

Kissed her hard. Then softly.

Tongue. No tongue.

Slow and sensual.

Were they floating? Were her feet on the ground?

Her head was in the clouds, that’s all she knew as she grew disoriented from the erotic sweep of his tongue in her mouth, alternating with the light pull of her lower lip gently between his teeth.

Her eyes were closed, and yet, she could see clearly. Every moment they'd spent together skipped through her mind in HD. With his lips on hers, it was as if she were walking through their lives together frame by frame.

Memories of their weekend in New York poured through her mind. And those memories remained tight and focused before her.

The horse-drawn-carriage ride in the snow that Saturday when he'd laced their fingers together beneath the blanket and held both her hands and eyes had been ... intimate. Even if that word was supposed to have been stripped from their vocabulary that weekend.

And when they'd finally stumbled upon carolers, and Ella had joined them in singing *Silent Night*, with the smell of gingerbread and cinnamon in the air from a nearby street vendor, Jesse had watched her as if she were his everything.

Ella returned to the present with Jesse, choosing to skip over the last three years that'd nearly broken her.

She'd rather focus on how his hand slid farther down her back and to her ass as he kissed her.

But as if sensing she was "back," he lifted his mouth from hers, and her hand went to her heart at the loss of his lips and hands on her body.

She wanted to catch hold of those memories again, knowing they were better than the sad and lonely feelings that would settle into the pit of her stomach any moment when reality took over.

"Go," he said without opening his eyes, and he walked two steps back. "This will be a shotgun wedding if you don't leave here in the next ten seconds, Ella Mae." His tone hovered

somewhere between angry and explosive with desire. “You. Need. To. Go.”

She stared at him, not sure what to do. She didn’t want to leave, but he kept breaking her heart. Giving her hope only to steal it back in the last three years. And if she gave in to him again, she’d never recover when he took that hope away one more time.

“Goodnight,” she whispered, hating her decision. But she’d hate herself more for staying.

Eyes still closed, he softly returned, “Goodnight.”

She started for the door and set her hand on the knob when a stupid thought hit her that managed to escape her lips. “Why don’t you have condoms?” *What the hell am I saying?* “I—I thought a man like you would be prepared for anything.”

“Why would I ...”

“How many women have you been with since New York?” she asked before he found his voice to finish his words. “I—I need to know.”

She felt him closing in on her but couldn’t turn around to meet his gaze. She cursed herself for asking the question because she knew. His silence said it all, and she held back the tears that threatened to fall. Had she actually thought that he hadn’t been with another woman since her? That she’d been his last, same as he’d been for her?

“You were engaged,” he quietly said, her eyes welling up again at the finality in his tone.

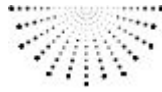
“I know,” she replied, setting her forehead against the smooth wood of the door. “But that engagement was your fault.”

“I’m ... sorry.”

Her chest tightened as she struggled to find her breath. An overwhelming sense of sadness washed over her as a single tear made its way down her cheek.

After that kiss, the kiss she now regretted because it’d been one of the most amazing kisses and moments in her life, maybe he really did belong at the top of her hate list. She’d need to convince herself he belonged there so she wouldn’t slip up and cling to the possibility of hope that there would ever be a real “them” someday.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



JESSE EYED THE RING BOXES ON HIS DRESSER AND STRUGGLED to breathe as thoughts of what might go wrong in Paris began to suffocate him. That feeling of uncertainty and helplessness was too similar to how he'd felt every day in Iraq. Even now, long after he'd witnessed brothers-in-arms lose limbs, die in battle, and even take their own lives, the ghosts of that damn war still haunted him. The country's involvement may have ended, but the battles at home were still raging.

How many times had he been on the verge of losing himself, giving in to the darkness, giving up the fight to keep his head above the pit of quicksand that threatened to pull him under?

How many times did I think about ...? But whenever he felt that pull, an image of Ella materialized as a lifeline and dragged him out. Hell, she'd been his saving grace before, during, and after his time in the Army.

His heart climbed into his throat at the idea of her becoming collateral damage because of his life choices. Because of his mistake that day in Bulgaria with Zoran.

Jesse let his dark thoughts go when the image of Ella standing next to that wedding dress in her studio planted roots in his head, saving him yet again.

The wedding.

Three more hours until the party, until their marriage.

He hadn't talked to Ella since she left his room after their kiss fifteen hours ago. She and Savanna, under Griffin's watchful eye, had gone back to Ella's house so she could pack for Paris, and then there were the wedding preparations to see to. Every time she'd crossed paths with Jesse, she'd either cut her attention to the floor or the sky, anything to avoid eye contact.

It was probably best if they stayed away from each other until the "wedding" anyway. He wasn't sure what to say to her after he'd nearly ravaged her like a wild animal following that kiss.

That kiss.

A kiss that he didn't know how to describe. How does one put into words the way a kiss like that felt other than it was the closest to Heaven he'd probably ever get.

Because he was trouble, wasn't he? At least, that was his dad's opinion of him growing up.

Screwup. A fuckup. That's all he is. All he'll ever be. Memories of his dad's scathing words latched hold of his thoughts. *Those* roots had been allowed to grow for too fucking long.

Jesse had struggled to see himself differently, even with all the praise he'd received from his commanders in the Army as a Ranger. The chest candy and the accolades. None of it had erased the feeling he'd kept locked inside that there was something wrong with him. But he was trying to shake the thoughts now.

And apparently, Rory was only now ... remembering.

She's seeing a therapist? He was all for people getting help, but he really did wish his sister hadn't opened Pandora's box, revealing the parts of their childhood she'd previously blocked. Not that their father had treated her as anything other than the apple of his eye.

"Not sure if I'll ever deserve you," Jesse whispered as he focused back on the open ring box that held Ella's engagement ring and wedding band. *But God, do I want you.* "Need you," he added under his breath, shocked to find tears in his eyes when he looked up at himself in the mirror.

When he'd gone into Birmingham a few hours ago for the rings and a haircut, Jack had insisted on having his six. Not that Jesse felt he needed protection, but Jack had hopped into his truck like a stubborn dog that refused to leave his side. Then Jack asked the million-dollar question on their drive back home. *Why aren't you and Ella together for real?*

Jesse had peddled some bullshit response, worried if he told Jack the truth, he might hot-foot it straight to Carter and Gray and demand Jesse be booted from the team. But being an operator was the only thing he seemed to be good at. That was why Thatcher wanted him back, wasn't it?

And how fucked up is it that I'm not a screwup when it comes to killing? Well, aside from Zoran. I didn't handle business then, and now Ella might be in danger.

"Jesse? We have news."

Carter's voice outside his door had him shutting the ring boxes and shaking his head, trying to pull himself together. "Coming."

Once in the kitchen, he was surprised to see Rory talking to Sydney, some kind of electronic device he didn't recognize

in Rory's palm.

The rest of his team were absent aside from Carter and Sydney, most likely preparing security measures at the Hawkins Ranch for the party.

"What's going on?" Jesse circled the kitchen island to move closer to his sister, and she pivoted his way.

"We managed to locate Zoran's right-hand man, Aleksa Stanković, who's been running the criminal enterprise in Zoran's absence," Carter explained.

Jesse gritted his teeth for a minute. Cut the head off a snake only to have another one pop up. *Sounds about right, damn it.* "Where is he? Do you think he may know Zoran's whereabouts? In communication with him?" he rattled off his thoughts.

Rory handed whatever she was holding to Sydney and faced him. He still didn't know why his sister was part of this conversation, and he was getting the feeling he didn't want to know.

He'd only recently learned Rory and Carter had sort of worked together during her adventurous days. It was still mind-blowing to think his sister had been single-handedly taking down wildlife traffickers when he, as well as everyone else, thought that she was merely chasing treasure in the deep blue sea.

"No answers to any of those questions yet aside from the location," Carter responded. "Aleksa's at a compound in Tirana, Albania."

"I'm assuming Aleksa left Bulgaria as soon as Zoran was shot. Protect himself and keep the illegal operations going." Sydney tucked her blonde hair behind her ears.

“Aleksa didn’t have a post at the embassy like Zoran, right?” Jesse asked her.

Sydney quickly checked something on her laptop. “No, Aleksa has no known connections to the embassy.” She focused back on Jesse. “And as far as we can tell, he was an associate of Zoran’s in Serbia before Zoran took the post of minister counselor for the Serbian Embassy in Bulgaria. They used the cover of their legitimate business holdings to conceal their illegal activities for decades.”

“Things started to get more intense in the last few years. Bodies started piling up. The Bulgarians could no longer ignore what was going on,” Carter explained.

From what little Jesse had been told by Thatcher, Zoran’s temper when dealing with his enemies often resulted in their remains being hard to identify. He couldn’t begin to imagine ...

Ella. Fuck. No, he wouldn’t let that prick near her. No matter what.

Jesse did his best to pull his thoughts from that dangerously dark place in his mind to focus on how to get to Zoran before he got to them. “Why wouldn’t the Bulgarians just revoke Zoran’s diplomatic immunity?” he asked a few heartbeats later, his head back in the game. “Kick him out of the country?”

Carter folded his arms and gave him a contemplative look. He’d been an officer with the CIA, so he knew more about the nitty-gritty inner workings of the Agency than Jesse. Jesse’s job description was basically: point and shoot. Don’t miss.

“Truth?” Carter began. “They either tried to flip Zoran to spy on Serbia in exchange for continued immunity, and he

rejected them. *Or* the Serbians didn't want Zoran back once he lost his status, and they agreed to look the other way if Zoran were to go missing or die."

"So, the Bulgarians cut a deal with the CIA instead and kept their hands clean," Sydney commented, her gaze flicking to Carter briefly.

"Except the Bulgarians did get blood on their hands. Killed the wife." An image of Zoran's wife taking a shot to the head that day flashed to mind and had Jesse setting a hand to his stomach. "We, um, still don't know why they wanted her dead."

Carter's dark eyes thinned, his thoughts most likely spinning fast. He'd been a Delta operator like Griffin prior to the CIA, so he had a lot of skills to help out, for which Jesse was grateful. "We'll figure it out. And we'll hopefully learn more after we infil Aleksa's compound."

Jesse looked at his sister, nearly forgetting Rory was still in the room since she'd been strangely quiet during the back-and-forth discussion. "This plan of yours to go after Aleksa doesn't include my sister, does it?" He was worried Rory might have volunteered herself, and like hell would he allow that. Rory's history of infiltrating properties and compounds belonging to the likes of wildlife traffickers, among other unsavory criminals, without being detected was impressive. "Yes, Rory was *apparently* the best at getting in and out of criminals' homes undetected in the past to track their smuggling operations, but she's—"

"I'm not doing it," Rory said, shutting down his fears, thank God. "I'm teaching Sydney what I did and how to get inside undetected and plant a few devices."

Jesse held his chest at the news. He couldn't handle anyone else being in the line of fire. Especially not his sister literally walking into the home of a bad guy. *Hell no.*

"Your sister is rather remarkable, I will say," Sydney commented, nodding at Rory with a smile. "Too bad she's training canines and not on our team."

"Don't give her any ideas." Jesse was happy his sister was training canines not only for the military but to help veterans with post-traumatic stress. She was needed in that line of work. Too many veterans were struggling, and they needed people out there like Rory who could help, who cared.

"Chris is on your side on this, don't worry," Rory said as if maybe she'd already pitched the idea to assist Falcon on the operation.

"Good," Jesse bit out, moving his gaze back to his team leader. "What do we do?"

"You're going to have to skip the first night of your honeymoon. I'd like to take my jet and leave as soon as the party ends. We'll stop by Tirana on our way to Paris. It'd be safer to keep Ella and Savanna on the jet at a secure terminal while we're there though."

"I doubt we have time to arrange help getting us in and out of the Albanian airport armed," Jesse said.

"No, I don't think I can swing that. We're solid for our arrival in Paris though," Carter confirmed. "But yeah, it'd take me too long to set up a contact at the Albanian terminal." He paused. "I'll have to pull some guys from my place in Macedonia."

Since when do we have guys in Macedonia? Carter had more boots on the ground throughout the world at his beck and

call than Jesse had realized.

“I’ll split the guys into a few teams. Sending some to Austria to keep an eye on Zoran’s brother. And a few of the guys can check out the property in Tirana ahead of time and then bring us weapons in case we need to go in and help Sydney.” Carter checked his watch. “Six-hour time difference. Direct flight since we’re taking my jet. We should arrive at about twenty-two or twenty-three hundred hours, Albanian time.”

“Infil the property around zero one or two hundred hours?” Sydney suggested, and Carter nodded. “And still be in Paris in time to catch the sunrise.”

“And you’re certain this plan to get Sydney in and out will work?” Jesse didn’t want to insult his sister, but had she really been *that* good at infils? *Alive to tell the tales*, he supposed.

“My plan will work,” Rory answered confidently. “The number of times I’ve done this is—”

“One too many,” Jesse interrupted, his stomach turning. “But if you trust the plan and feel comfortable going in,” he said to Sydney this time, “then okay.”

“Griffin will stay at the airport with Ella and Savanna. Or it can be you. Flip a coin,” Carter told him, and the idea of leaving Ella alone already made him nuts. But they’d be in a secure airport and on a jet. About as safe as can be, he hoped.

“We’re not just planting listening devices. We’re setting up security cameras around his property as well,” Sydney said. “We’ll have eyes and ears if Zoran shows up.”

“And I’m leaving two of my guys there as well in case Aleksa goes on the move,” Carter added.

Ella and Savanna taking a pit stop with them for an op in Tirana, and his sister was helping to prep for that mission ...
What in the hell is going on?

“We’ve got it covered. Don’t worry. At least we have a lead,” Sydney said with a small smile, sensing Jesse’s obvious hesitation. “But you have a wedding to prepare for, so I assume you should head to the ranch soon.”

Rory’s eyes connected with Jesse’s a moment later, and he tipped his head to the side, requesting a quick word.

“Give me a second.” Rory followed him from the kitchen and into the living room.

He set a hand on the mantel above the fireplace and bowed his head. “About last night.”

“You don’t need to say anything. I shouldn’t have pressed. And God knows the number of secrets I stacked up over the years, so I’m not one to talk.” Rory’s tone was a bit higher-pitched, like she was working hard to cover her real emotions. “And I know you’ve done your best to keep your interactions with Dad to a minimum since you joined the Army, and that doesn’t change the past, but Mom says he’s redeemed himself, so maybe you can ...” She was struggling to get through this as much as he was to hear it.

“Then I can be redeemed too?” He slowly faced her, his body locked tight. “You do realize that if Dad had ever hit you or laid a hand on Mom like he did to me, I would have killed him. You know that, right? The first life I would have taken would have been his.” He set a hand to his chest when his heart squeezed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you from their arguing, but—”

“Jesse,” she whispered, tears springing in her eyes as she closed in on him and set both hands over his shoulders. “He owes you a lot more than an apology. Mom, too, I suppose, for not leaving him. But *you* don’t owe him your forgiveness even if Mom says he’s changed.” She released a shaky exhale. “I pressed Mom about the past after I recently remembered, and yes, she said Dad redeemed himself through therapy and work at the church, and she admitted he’s tried to talk to you over the years, but that doesn’t mean—”

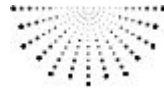
“If you and Mom are okay, then I’m okay. It’s forgotten,” he said with a tense voice, doing his best not to have a fucking breakdown in front of his sister on his wedding day, no less.

Rory may have remembered her past, but there were parts of *his* past neither she nor their mom had ever witnessed. And like hell would Jesse tell them. He was also damn sure his old man hadn’t fessed up during his penance or whatever his dad wanted to call it.

“All I want to do is forget. Him. You crying. Their fighting. The people I watched die and couldn’t save in Iraq. The people who’ve died *at home* because of the war.” He tensed. “The men I’ve killed. The man I’ve become and quite possibly will always be.” He removed her hands from his shoulders and sidestepped her, needing air. “I just want to forget. Absolutely everything.”

Just not Ella. Not the woman who’d kept him from being swallowed whole in that godforsaken quicksand.

CHAPTER TWELVE



ELLA PEERED AT HER REFLECTION IN THE FULL-LENGTH mirror, feeling like a Disney princess in her wedding gown. The delicate silver leaves and sequined flower petals overlaying the sheer corset top added a sexy elegance while the pale blush color of the silk tulle skirt whispered *romance*. “Well, can’t back out now. Everyone at this New Year’s Eve party officially knows about the wedding.”

“Would you back out if you could?” her sister-in-law, Ana, asked. The two of them were alone in Ella’s childhood bedroom at the moment. Savanna and Rory had stepped out to make sure Griffin and Chris remembered how to knot their ties.

“No, I guess I wouldn’t.” Ella hiccupped, the champagne suddenly hitting her. *Maybe I drank that a little too fast?* “Dad’ll be walking me down the aisle and giving me away, all the while believing I’m actually marrying Jesse. But it’s ... fake.” Ella turned to view the diaries she’d dug from the box her mom gave her an hour ago. She picked up a small pink one with a ballerina on the top, the lock broken from age. She opened it and ran her fingers over the writing on the first page as if it were a dedication to a book.

Ella Mae Hawkins will marry Jesse Edward McAdams. She couldn't help but smile as she read over the words that had been written in her best cursive—a skill her teacher had insisted would be required in the “real world.”

E.M.H. + J.E.M. = LOVE, she read the next page. Their initials inside a big red heart.

Jesse's mom had planned to name him Jesse James and have him go by J.J. Her brother had been born before Jesse, and he was Alexander James. Since their parents were best friends, they thought it'd be fun to have an A.J. and J.J. grow up together and hopefully become best friends like them.

But his mom decided naming her son after an outlaw might not be the best idea, so she'd gone with her father's first name for Jesse's middle.

“Jem,” she whispered. “And now I'm a Rochella *gem*. Weird, huh?” Ella casually shrugged off the emotions that had her shivering and showed Ana the diary.

“Are you sure today is fake?” Ana asked as Ella tossed the little pink book on her bed. “I mean, Jesse didn't fight you all that hard on this.” She pushed her beautiful red hair to her back and continued talking, gesturing with her hands as if working through her thoughts. “I know your reasons for the wedding. But based on what I've seen of Jesse, it seems to me he'd be more inclined to lock you up and hide you somewhere until he can handle the threat.”

Ella would have laughed if she weren't so damn nervous. “He knows I won't let him do that.”

Ana smirked. “Jesse, your friend, would respect your wishes. Jesse, the hitman ... not so much. Seems to me he'd

go full-on caveman and whisk you away without giving a damn. At least from the way A.J.'s described his behavior.”

Jesse, the caveman?

“A.J. still can't believe he never put two and two together about Jesse. Probably a Tier One guy ego thing.” Ana made light of the “truth” about Jesse with a small chuckle.

Holding the skirt of her long, pale pink bridesmaid dress to the side, Ana carefully stepped closer to Ella. “You're not filing the marriage license with the county, but you're exchanging vows before God and family. The ceremony seems kind of real to me.” She wrapped a hand over Ella's bare shoulder. “Paperwork can always be filed. But I think Jesse wants this. And I think you do too.” She pointed to the diary on the bed with her free hand. “Always have.”

Ella closed her eyes, fighting the desire to cry. Her mascara might have been waterproof, but she doubted the rest of her face would survive the waterfall.

“Jesse would never risk my life. If he's saying vows tonight, it's because he's decided he can best protect me this way. Work the case with me under his protection at the same time. Two birds. One stone.” She sniffled, the tears imminent, damn it. “Tonight won't be real for him, and no matter what I think or feel, I can't let it be real for me either,” she added, opening her eyes at the knock on her bedroom door.

“It's your favorite brother.” A.J. opened the door a moment later, his son cradled in his arms. “Mac's awake and wanting you.”

“You'd better not spit up on my dress, little man,” Ana said while taking Marcus from his arms. “I'll give you two some time alone. Need to feed him before the ceremony

anyway.” She glanced back at Ella, the look in her eyes still communicating the message, *It’s real. You know it, and so does Jesse.*

But it can’t be. And did this corset get tighter all of a sudden? Ella set both hands to her abdomen as she struggled to find her breath once Ana was gone, and she was alone with her “favorite” brother. Though, to be fair, they were the closest of all the siblings. The fact that her brother and Jesse had been best friends since they were kids hadn’t helped things between her and Jesse. Back when they were growing up or now.

But despite Jesse’s recent revelation, Ella knew her brother wouldn’t allow it to affect their friendship. Once the threat to Ella’s safety was eliminated, everything would go back to normal, right?

“You remember that conversation you and I had in here shortly before you were supposed to marry that dumbass, Brian?” A.J. fiddled with the knot of his navy tie beneath his suit jacket.

“Let me.” Ella gently pushed his hand away and undid the mess he’d made with the knot. “And yeah, I do,” she softly admitted, trying to fight the stubborn tears attempting to break free.

“I realized Jesse was the one that day,” he said after clearing his throat and stepping back once she’d fixed his tie. He ran his palm over the silk and smoothed the material flat against his white shirt. “Broken or not, Jesse’s the one.”

“Broken?” she whispered, remembering Jesse had said the same to her a few times now.

“To be clear, I’m still mad at him that you’re in danger, but I don’t know if I can blame him for only doing his job, nor can

I hate him for falling in love with you.”

So, you do forgive him. Good. Regardless of what might happen between her and Jesse, she couldn't handle a permanent fallout between him and A.J.

A.J. lifted his chin, his eyes going to the ceiling. Was he going to cry? She'd be done if he did, that was for sure. “Jesse tried to protect you by staying away from you all these years. Even if it broke his heart and yours, he was trying to keep you safe.”

So, you're on the same page as Ana? Ella wasn't sure what to expect, but she was shivering, anxious, and in need of more champagne. “What are you trying to say?”

“I think you two should be together. For real. After the mission is complete, and you're no longer a target for some psychopath and his revenge plot, nothing would make me happier than to see my best friend and sister together.” He sighed a ragged breath, emotion choking up her tough-as-nails brother. “You have my blessing is all I'm saying.”

“I, um.” Ella worked her lip between her teeth, a few tears escaping. “I'm not sure if it's me you should be telling this to.” *More like Jesse.* “But maybe don't say anything to him until I know if ... well, if there's even a chance for us.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “Because Jesse did more than break my heart. I think he broke me too. He broke so much of me,” she cried. “And I'm just not sure if he can help me put the pieces back together.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“DID YOU PREPARE YOUR OWN VOWS?” BECKETT ASKED, stone-faced as usual, but his raised brows were a clear indication that he still wasn’t on board with this sham of a wedding. His attention skated from Jesse to Ella, where they stood inside the white gazebo in the backyard at her parents’ ranch. The structure had been transformed into a luminous fairy-tale palace with hundreds of tiny white Christmas lights and flowers in varying shades of blush. The temperature had dropped significantly after dark, and if she weren’t such a hot mess on the inside, she’d be freezing in her sleeveless wedding gown.

Vows? Beckett was asking for ... what? Am I going to faint?

Ella chanced a look at the crowd seated in white chairs outside the gazebo surrounded by portable heaters. Her parents were in the front row on the bride’s side. Jesse’s family in the front on the other side. Delighted whispers of *aww* and *ooh* floated through the air. Handkerchiefs were out, blotting tears.

And Ella could barely look at the man standing across from her, the man she was fake marrying, without Ana’s words coming to mind. *Vows before God and family made it real.*

People were going to think she was about to pull a “runaway bride” in a minute if she kept looking everywhere but at the groom.

She shot a nervous glance toward A.J., Chris, and Griffin, all handsome if not slightly uncomfortable in their suits, standing off to Jesse’s side. Then she peered over at Rory, Savanna, and Ana at her right. *Vows?* All eyes were on her, waiting for her to speak. *What was I thinking?* She was going to be sick.

Maybe it wasn’t too late? She could go into hiding instead. Let Jesse track down this Zoran-whatever-his-name-was. Forget the vows. Forget this whole fake wedding op. Forget Paris.

Ella’s hands felt like ice, and her body trembled as anxiety began to overwhelm her.

“I can go first.” Jesse’s deep voice rang out clear and confident.

Ella dragged in a breath and lifted her gaze to see his blue eyes pinned to her face.

He’d somehow managed to find time for a trim—the sides of his blond, nearly brown hair, were now neat and tight, and the top had been left slightly longer and gelled. He looked like a cover model for a Rochella magazine.

This isn’t real. No, not real.

Jesse reached out and took her trembling hands between his big, warm palms.

Oh, God. What would he say? How great of an actor was he? She supposed she was about to find out.

Jesse gently squeezed her hands. “I’ve always known you were the one, Ella Mae. There’s never been anyone but you,” he said slowly. “You were with me in Iraq even though you didn’t know it. I had your picture with me. Always. Yours was the first face I looked at when I woke and the last face I saw before going to sleep.”

Her stomach fluttered, and her chest grew tight as she listened to his performance. Why was he doing this to her? Why not just stick to the traditional vows?

Unless ... he wasn’t acting?

The tears that threatened to spill from her eyes weren’t for show, that was for sure.

“You’ve always had my heart,” he continued, turning his attention to the engagement ring on her finger.

Jesse had passed it along to Rory to give to Ella an hour ago. He’d chosen the heart-shaped diamond when he bought their wedding bands, but for some reason hadn’t been able to present it to her himself.

Maybe because in the years since New York, her knee-jerk reaction when it came to that man was to push him away out of fear he’d just keep hurting her. Maybe he’d become as scared of rejection as she was, especially now that he’d shared his dark past?

“My heart has been with you whether I was overseas or at home,” Jesse went on, his voice full of emotion. “It’s always been with you. I’ve always loved you, and I always will. No matter what.” Those last three words made her heart ache. Was the “no matter what” his way of letting her know there’d always be some sort of roadblock preventing them from being together?

She'd quickly latched on to a thread of hope as he spoke his vows, but with those three little words, he'd crushed that hope beneath his boot.

"I, Jesse Edward McAdams, promise to protect and love you until death do us part." She wasn't sure if it was the surrounding lights shining on them that made his eyes look glossy or if this strong man was on the verge of tears.

Ella felt Beckett's gaze on her, so she glanced at him for a moment before turning her attention toward Jesse.

This handsome, dangerous man standing there in his dashing tux, staring back at her, took her breath away. She was so incredibly in love with him that it physically hurt on a level she couldn't explain, let alone comprehend.

"Ella," Beckett prompted when she'd yet to open her mouth. The words were stuck somewhere in the hellish limbo she felt trapped in at the moment—the fine line between the truth of how she felt and the lie of what this moment was supposed to be. "I can tell you what to say if you need me to."

"I can do this," Ella whispered, her insides churning at the way Jesse watched her. "I mean, I have my own vows," she clarified.

Jesse squeezed her hands again and gave her a slight nod. *I've got you*, he mouthed.

You have me now, but what about later? A few tears cut down her cheeks as her emotions nearly swallowed her whole. "I'm standing before the man I've loved from the moment I learned that feeling could extend beyond family." This was too hard. She couldn't say everything she truly felt without breaking down in front of everyone. She'd have to cut this

short. “You’ve always had my heart. I gave it to you long ago. And no matter what, you’ll have it until the day I die.”

Jesse clenched his jaw as if the idea of her dying before him had him hanging on by a thread. But he’d also understood the meaning of her *no matter what*, too—she was sure of it.

Beckett resumed the ceremony, and she repeated the traditional vows as prompted, but everything up to the moment he told them to kiss was a blur.

“Kiss your wife,” someone called out to hoots of laughter among the guests when neither Jesse nor Ella made a move after Beckett proclaimed them husband and wife.

The one and only time they’d kissed had nearly destroyed her with its intensity. They’d need to take this one down several notches and definitely with no tongue. Hopefully, Jesse was on the same page as her.

Her “husband” slowly stepped forward, placed a firm hand on her back, and pulled her body flush to his. She told herself to breathe before she passed out from lack of oxygen when he tipped her chin up with his index finger and looked into her eyes. A silent thought seemed to pass between them ... *What did we just do?*

Ella closed her eyes and waited for his kiss. The moment their lips touched, she arched her back and leaned into his embrace, unable to stop it from happening.

The kiss was slow and sensual, seeping into every fiber of her being and had her feeling far too much. She set her hands to his chest, willing herself to push a little to let him know to stop, that it was unbearable to kiss him any longer and not fall apart ...

But instead, she found herself sliding her hands up the hard planes of muscle to cup the back of his neck, drawing him closer.

It was Jesse who broke the kiss, and the look in his eyes before he dropped his focus to the floor nearly gutted her.

Regret?

But exactly which part of all of this did he regret?

* * *

“JUST LEAVE ME ALONE. PLEASE.” ELLA HURRIED DOWN ONE of the horse trails and away from the party as quickly as possible, freezing even though she’d swapped her beautiful wedding gown for a simple, ankle-length, white satin dress with long sleeves after her first dance with Jesse.

“Ella Mae, damn it. Would you stop running from me!” Jesse called out, catching up to her with quick strides even though he didn’t need to run to close the distance between them. “It’s not safe to be roaming the ranch right now. You’re acting crazy.”

“I’ve been roaming this property since I was a kid,” she yelled without looking back to check how close he was. The tree line was on approach, and she wasn’t *that* out of her mind to go into the woods at night, so she’d have to stop and face him soon. “And you have security here. I’m fine.”

“We don’t have enough people to manage the perimeter of the entire ranch. Now stop right now, or—”

“Or what?” She stopped and abruptly swiveled around, her labored breathing and quick movements warming her up at

least. Her frustration with this man dialed up her temperature a few degrees as well.

Jesse halted six or so feet away, hands in the air as though trying to calm a startled horse from bolting. “It’s too dangerous for you to be away from the team.” His gaze darted to the woods just behind her, then he swept his attention around them, obviously checking for something. Or someone. “You need to go back to the well-lit party.”

“Well-armed, you mean.”

“You’ll also freeze to death out here.” He removed his jacket and started her way, but her gaze immediately went to the weapon holstered at his hip.

“You wore a gun to our wedding?” She wasn’t sure why she was so shocked. There was a bad guy who might know her name, after all.

“Of course I did. Now put this on, and let’s go.” He draped the jacket over her shoulders, and she gave in to its warmth even though she wanted to be stubborn and protest. The smell that was uniquely Jesse, along with his cologne, dominated her senses when she took in a deep breath.

“And I’m not the crazy one, by the way,” she said. “*You* certainly looked borderline insane when I danced with Henry though.”

“You should have said no when he asked,” Jesse barked out.

“Say no to the man who is giving me a dream opportunity?” She arched a brow in challenge. “Thanks, but I can’t. My fake husband doesn’t want me enough for himself but also doesn’t like to share.”

“You and that sassy mouth. Do you have any idea how close I came to ...” He let the threat go. “My patience when it comes to you around other men isn’t something I suggest you test.” His clipped tone rang out like a shot in the air since they were a good distance away from the sounds of music and voices at the party.

Pissed at him for overselling his lovey-dovey performance all evening, she said, “Surprised Brian’s still alive, then. You said in my studio you would’ve killed him if he’d hurt me, but maybe you would’ve used any old excuse to do it.”

Jesse inched closer and brought his mouth to her ear as if worried the owls or night critters would overhear. “You’re right,” he seethed. “Would you like to know how many times Brian came close to dying?” He cupped her arm over the jacket. “But I didn’t want to hurt you by killing him, so he’s still breathing.”

“You’re not a cold-blooded killer.” She didn’t buy whatever story he was trying to sell. Another attempt to push her away, more like it. “I didn’t love Brian, and you know that. Didn’t wish death upon him either.”

He released her and stepped back but remained quiet.

“So, thank you for not killing him,” she added in case she was wrong, and Jesse hadn’t been bluffing about wanting to murder Brian. “Rory would hate to visit her brother in jail. And I would—”

“You’d what?” he cut her off, his anger at her for “putting herself in danger” by taking off still evident. If it weren’t for the nearby lights along the trail, she’d be unable to see his broody expression.

“Forget it,” she bit out. “I’m the one who’s supposed to be angry. There was a reason I took off.” He’d distracted her with his alpha behavior, and she hated that it turned her on. “You have been screwing with my head all night. All flipping night. That’s why I needed to leave. To have a second alone before I clocked you clean across the jaw.”

“How exactly have I been screwing with your head, darling?” He scoffed as if she were the crazy one. His focus kept moving around, clearly nervous about them being so far from the party out in the dark.

Ella looked toward the woods, her shoulders dropping. “We shouldn’t be here,” she caved when the rational side of her brain took over. “But you’re why I’m acting *irrationally*. Not level-headed.” He went to her side and reached for her elbow, but she shifted from his reach. “The vows. The songs you selected. The way you’ve been putting on a show for the last two hours in front of the guests.” Tears welled in her eyes, and she knew she needed to get the cowboy boots she’d swapped her heels for to move, but she was stuck in place. Irrational again. “Are you a hitman or an actor? Because you seem to have talents I’ve been unaware of my entire life.”

Those sweet and kind vows had been a knife to her heart. And then Chase Rice’s “Eyes on You,” followed by Brett Young’s “In Case You Didn’t Know” for his song choices for their first *two* dances just twisted the blade even deeper.

“I hate you for this,” she cried.

Jesse’s mouth fell open, and his attention swung back to her. “*This?*” He held up his left hand and pointed at the wedding ring. “*This* was your idea. I sure as hell didn’t want to do it. If I had my way, you’d be locked up somewhere safe.”

He waved a hand toward the woods. “Not out in the open in danger. Not going to Paris as my wife.”

“Fake wife,” she rasped the reminder, more for herself than for him. “And you and I both know I’m in danger whether we’re married or not, but if this ‘wedding’ lures the bastard out sooner rather than later, then we can part ways that much faster, which seems to be your preference.”

She threw a hand in the air and stomped closer, his jacket almost falling from her shoulders. Here they were, out in the darkness, him in his tux and her in a fitted white dress parading around as Mr. and Mrs. McAdams. And she was seconds away from losing her mind.

She slapped a palm to his chest, surprised to find his heartbeat out of control. “You’re the one always running from me. You ran off to the Army. Then you kept re-enlisting. Then you ran to the CIA. And now Falcon. Always going every which way but to me.” Tears glided down her cheeks. “And the only crazy thing about me is that I keep thinking things will change. That you’ll finally stop running. Or, at least, you’ll run toward me for once.”

She sniffled, and Jesse surprised her by swiping the pads of his thumbs beneath her eyes, his head angled, studying her.

“You’re perfectly okay with having sex with me, but is that it? Is that all you’ll ever allow to happen?”

Jesse’s mouth set in a tight, grim line. Maybe that was the blow that finally woke him up.

“You really do hate me, don’t you?” His voice was low, almost inaudible.

She squeezed her eyes closed, hating that she was fighting with him on their wedding day, regardless if it wasn’t real.

“Maybe I don’t hate you,” she confessed, her shoulders falling in defeat. If only she could hang on to her anger and truly hate him, it’d help her move on. “But I don’t think I can trust you not to hurt me again.”

He was quiet for a moment, the wind rustling through the trees the only sound around them. Ella breathed in the cold night air and sighed. When Jesse’s hand slid along her hip beneath his jacket, she opened her eyes.

“Stop. *This* is why I am so angry, Jesse. The hot and cold behavior.”

“Seems to me that’s the only way you and I know how to be when we’re around each other. We’re either angry or aroused. And anger more often than not leads to arousal.” Well, hell, that’s exactly what she’d been thinking for years. “We need to meet in the middle, don’t you think?”

“Define middle.” She tipped her head to the side, waiting for him to reveal more.

“I’m not sure if ‘happy’ is quite the middle, but it’s a place I’d sure like to be.” He looked to the ground for a moment. “With you.”

Happy?

He worked his attention back to her face, and she sealed her eyes closed.

“Ella, look at me, please,” he said, softer this time. “I know you’re mad. And tonight was ... hard. I’m sorry. I’m sorry you’re in this situation.” His pause had her opening her eyes. “But I wasn’t acting.”

She shook her head, anger fighting its way back into her heart at his words, which was most likely not what he’d

expected to happen. “Don’t you dare give me hope, Jesse McAdams. Don’t you dare.”

She shoved his hand from her hip, and he backed up a step. “Ella Mae.”

“Don’t Ella Mae me. Don’t say anything.” She swiped the backs of her hands over her cheeks, trying to remove the traitorous tears. “And don’t tell me there really was a photo you kept of me in Iraq. Or that you gave me this”—she lifted her hand to show the heart-shaped diamond ring—“because I’ve always had your heart even when you were gone.” She turned toward the woods and palmed her forehead, her body shaking. “Maybe it won’t be tomorrow. Or the day after. But the day will come when you cut and run. It’s as inevitable as death.” She was close to her breaking point, her heart teetering perilously on the edge of despair, and she didn’t want him to witness that. “Happy is a place you’ll only steal from me.”

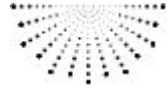
When he remained quiet, she slowly turned to face him, finding he’d closed the distance yet again.

“You wrecked me. Destroyed me long before tonight. And now I have this chance to go to Paris and finally get you out of my head, and we’re going as husband and wife. God hates me. He must really hate me.” Her voice gave out, and her knees nearly did as well.

“I don’t know what to say,” he whispered.

She squeezed that frustrating lump down her throat. “Maybe that’s because there’s nothing left to say. Maybe we’re both broken, and we can only ever exist together in that world of anger. Or the one of lust.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



IN THE AIR – THREE HOURS LATER

“I KNOW YOU’RE NOT OKAY, BUT ... ARE YOU OKAY?” Savanna softly asked from her seat next to Jesse on Carter’s private jet. “You and I are friends too, don’t forget that.”

Jesse gripped the chair arms, tipped his head back against the leather headrest, and closed his eyes. He was worn out. He’d barely slept since Thatcher appeared in his workshop a few days ago, and now it was zero one hundred hours, and he was on his way to Tirana as a “married” man. He was anything but okay.

“You should be with Ella,” he replied without opening his eyes. If he were to look at Savanna right now, she’d see a whole lot more than she bargained for. She was a woman whose every action came from her heart, and he knew she’d want to console him. But this mess was his own making, and Ella was on this plane jetting toward God-knew-what because of him. He hadn’t earned an ounce of sympathy from Savanna or anyone.

“I’m where I need to be right now.” Savanna’s Southern accent made her words sound much sweeter than he deserved, and he’d be an ass for ignoring her efforts to comfort him.

He opened his eyes when she gave his arm a light squeeze. And the first thing his eyes latched on to was Ella, more precisely her back. She was sitting across from Sydney at the back of the jet near the bedroom, which was currently unoccupied since everyone aboard had turned down the opportunity to get some private shut-eye.

Jesse knew one way he’d like to make use of that bedroom on his wedding night, real or not, but he had to get his head

back on straight and not lose himself to temptation.

Anger or lust?

Look what giving in to lust had cost him in New York—another piece of his soul. He'd not only hurt Ella by giving her a weekend of nothing more than sex, but he'd made her angry. They'd swung from one end of the lust-anger spectrum to the other in no time. Same as always.

Trying to get comfortable, which should have been easy on the fancy jet, Jesse crossed one black work boot over his knee and held his ankle. He'd changed from his tux before heading to the airport, but Ella still had on her thin, white silk gown and cowgirl boots.

"I appreciate your support," he finally said, then shut his mouth, fighting the impulse to tell Savanna he didn't need her and wanted to be left alone.

In all honesty, he *did* need her. And he didn't want to be alone.

"I messed up. Pretty damn badly." Jesse's voice nearly broke like Savanna's famous brownie brittle that cracked apart in his palm with the slightest touch. That was also how his heart felt right about now.

"Messed up how?"

Jesse rolled his head to the side to view Savanna. "Well, there's a lot I've messed up over the years, I suppose. But at this present moment, I was referring to when I slipped and told Ella I loved her for the first time in front of everyone, and she thinks it was an act." He reached into his back pocket for his wallet and set it on his thigh. "And she doesn't believe I carry her picture around with me." His palm rested atop the worn

leather as he thought about the *three* photos he had of Ella inside.

She'd sent the first photo along with a letter during his initial deployment to Iraq at the start of the war. It was a stunning profile shot of her at nineteen, standing in a field of sunflowers, wearing her cowgirl hat. That was the most worn out of the three in his wallet since he'd had it for sixteen years.

The second picture he'd taken himself around ten or so years ago at a holiday party back home. Ella had been belly laughing at something A.J. had said, and she looked so carefree and happy that Jesse couldn't help but capture the candid moment. He loved to see her smile, to see her perfectly imperfect front teeth catch her lip too.

But that last one, he thought with a sigh, was of them together on their last day in New York. They'd gone into an arcade and acted like ten-year-olds playing games, and then they'd slid into a photo booth and made goofy faces. He'd insisted on keeping the copy of the three images that their five bucks had earned them. Best money he'd spent that weekend. That and the second pack of condoms they'd needed.

"She doesn't know what to think," Savanna said after a pause as if realizing Jesse needed a moment to collect his thoughts. "Ella, um, told me about the fight earlier. Well, she told me that she yelled at you. She feels bad about it. Regret might not be the exact word she used, but I swear that woman gives me whiplash when it comes to you. Most likely because she's as hot and cold toward you as you seem to be toward her."

Anger and arousal ... the only two emotions he and Ella were capable of when they were together. Her words. The last words she'd spoken to him before walking back to the party,

alone. Jesse was unable to shake them from his head or the idea that she didn't think that "middle place"—happiness—was possible for them.

Because I'm a screwup, aren't I? Those deep, ugly and familiar roots constricted around him like he was stuck inside a Venus flytrap.

"Ella may worry your vows were only part of the show, but maybe that's not such a bad thing."

"No?" He shot her a puzzled look.

"Because it gives you a chance to tell her how you feel again. And this time without an audience. Maybe after you've earned back her trust, she'll believe you too."

How was he supposed to earn her trust back when he wasn't so sure he could trust himself not to mess up again?

"Do you think I can change?" he found himself asking Savanna.

She patted his hand. "Honestly, it doesn't matter what I think. It only matters if *you* believe it's possible." She pointed to the bedroom. "Why don't you two talk?"

"I don't think she wants to be alone with me. Or hear what I have to say, for that matter."

"She does, even if she won't admit it." Savanna lifted her palm. "Plus, I have a feeling if you two go in that room, maybe you'll—"

"Savanna," he chided, then lowered his voice. "In your romance books, what would happen if two people, one of whom hates the other, were alone in that room?" *I've officially lost it. Romance novels?*

Though it might be nice to be a fictional character for a day. According to Savanna, “real romance” required that the good guys win and there was always a happily-ever ... something or other.

“Well,” she said, turning in her seat to fully face him, “she, the heroine, doesn’t actually hate him. She’s hurt. But more than that, she’s scared and frustrated.”

Her words were jabs to his head and heart.

“And the guy, the hero, is misunderstood. He’s kept secrets from her for years. But everything he did was because he didn’t believe he deserved this woman. So, in trying not to break her heart by staying away from her, he wound up doing exactly that.” Savanna’s eyes shifted to her fiancé. Was she remembering their own story? Their journey to find each other?

“And then what?” Jesse could guess how this story ended, but he needed to hear it. To believe real life, *his* life, could imitate art.

“The guy realizes that not being with her is far worse than anything else, and he finds a way to win her back, whatever the cost.” She paused. “Throw in some miscommunication. A fight or two to add some angst. And, well, you know, to ramp up the sexual tension.”

We have the angst and tension down pat.

“And then poof. All is right in the world. They’d get married or have a baby. Probably both.” Savanna’s cheeks grew pink as she whispered the last part.

Well, we’re kind of married already. And the thought of Ella carrying his child ...

“That bedroom has magical powers, by the way.” Savanna tipped her chin in that direction.

“I don’t want to know what you and Griffin did in the bedroom on your last trip together.” Well, it was less a trip and more to take down the bad guys hunting Savanna. “You’re like my sister, and it’s bad enough I have to know Rory’s trying to make a baby with a SEAL.”

“Would it be better if he was Army?” Savanna asked teasingly. There was a bit of a Navy–Army rivalry between the guys. Okay, “a bit” was an understatement.

“Maybe, but just barely.” He peered Ella’s way, seeing that she had moved to a different seat. Still by the bedroom but facing him now.

“Pretty sure that’s how A.J. feels about you, and he doesn’t even know that you and his sister ...” Her words trailed off, and she audibly swallowed, likely realizing she wasn’t supposed to know that he and Ella had slept together.

“It’s okay,” he said while returning his focus to Savanna. “I figured if Rory knows, you know what happened in New York too.”

“If New York’s not a prequel for your story, then I don’t know what is.” Savanna, the optimist with the big heart, patted her thighs, then stood. “Well, I’ll let you mull over your plans. But I wouldn’t wait too long. Once we arrive in Albania, you’ll be gearing up to operate.”

Right. Griffin won the coin toss, so he’d be staying on the jet in the terminal with Ella and Savanna, and Jesse couldn’t help but wonder if Griffin had somehow rigged the flip.

Griffin was as determined and stubborn about Savanna’s safety as Jesse was about Ella’s.

Savanna laughed when Jesse mock-saluted her as if saying “aye, aye, captain,” then made her way to Griffin, who met her in the aisle and roped her into his big arms.

Griffin rested his chin atop Savanna’s head and sent Jesse a look that said—*What she said, do it.*

Jesse uncrossed his ankle from over his knee and pocketed his wallet. Maybe he could try and get some rack time?

But as soon as his lids sealed out the light, all he could think about was taking his “wife” into the bedroom and making love to her on their wedding night. And no rules this time.

He’d kiss that sweet, sassy mouth before sinking to his knees to lift the skirt of her dress and pepper kisses across the exposed skin of her stomach. Then he’d use his teeth to slide her panties down those beautifully tanned legs, kiss his way back up, and devour her like the starved man he was. Memories of that weekend in New York started flipping through his mind, each one kicking up his heart rate another notch. The way she moaned when he played with her nipples. The sight of her reddened ass cheeks in his firm grip as he took her from behind. How those perfect tits of hers bounced as she rode him like it was her damn job. She was so fucking sexy, insatiable, perfect. And he wanted all of that again, now.

He needed to stop his thoughts before he shot his load right there, but when he opened his eyes and peered at Ella’s beautiful face, he knew he wouldn’t survive the rest of the flight without releasing his tension. More importantly, he wouldn’t be able to operate without relief first.

As much as he’d love to pull her into that bedroom, it wouldn’t be right to mess with her mind like that. No, he had

to be certain he was capable of change and that it was possible for them to reach “the middle” of that spectrum, happiness.

Jesse did a quick headcount to make sure no one had gone to catch some shut-eye during his chat with Savanna, and once he verified everyone was in the cabin, he started down the aisle only to find himself stopping just short of Ella’s seat.

As if sensing Jesse’s presence, Ella opened her eyes, and he hoped she’d see the apology in his gaze. So many *sorrys* for so many reasons hung on the tip of his tongue.

But if he stood there any longer, he’d lose his moral compass and drag her into his arms. Carry her into the bedroom and rip the side seam of that white dress to expose her thighs and see if she had white panties beneath it.

“You okay?” Ella whispered, snapping him free from yet another fantasy.

“Bathroom,” he mumbled, knowing there was another restroom near the cockpit, but the one attached to the bedroom had a shower and would decrease the chances of someone hearing him jacking off. Not how he pictured his wedding night with Ella, not that he’d spent much time over the years picturing it. In fact, he never thought it’d happen. And certainly not because she was in danger.

“Ohh ... kay.” She knew what that “oh” did to him, damn it. The way she licked her lips before rounding her mouth and releasing the sound made his dick twitch in anticipation of her dropping to her knees, sliding his hard length between her lips, and sucking him dry.

Either the twitch of his dick was noticeable even behind the thick material of his khakis, or her thoughts were in line with his because her gaze fell straight to his crotch. And at

that, he knotted his hands at his sides to keep from doing something crazy.

Forcing himself to look away from her, he went into the bedroom to get himself off. In the bathroom of Carter's jet. Good God, what was wrong with him?

Jesse eyed the bed, knowing he wouldn't take Ella for the first time in three years on Carter's plane, even if she were to walk into the room and strip down to her panties like she'd done before.

He looked away from the bed, feeling a bit ... hopeless, then went into the connecting bathroom. The shower was larger than he'd expected but definitely not big enough for two people, though he'd be willing to test it out with Ella. They'd made good use of their shower in New York, and that thought alone took his cock from partially to painfully hard.

"Fuck it," he said, undoing his pants just enough to free himself.

He braced a hand against the door and began stroking his length, not giving a damn that he was thirty thousand feet in the air with his teammates only two doors away.

This woman made his blood pressure go through the fucking roof when she was around him.

The number of times he'd had to cut and run in her presence to "handle" himself so that he didn't toss her over his shoulder and throw her onto his bed in the last three years had been one too many.

Letting out a groan, he swiped his thumb across the head of his cock, using the bead of precum as he slid his hand from root to tip, all the while wondering what it would feel like to

have Ella's pouty lips wrapped around him instead and realizing it would likely never happen.

"Ella." He murmured her name a few more times, unable to stop himself.

He let his head fall to the door in frustration. How could he not have committed to her after they'd slept together? How had he let her go, told her to live her life, watched her almost marry another man when all he'd ever wanted was *her*?

A moment later, he went completely still at the realization he wasn't alone in the bedroom.

He shifted his painfully hard cock back into his pants and zipped up before bringing his ear to the door to listen closer.

Did Savanna and Griffin not know he was back there? They didn't do a headcount first and check like he'd done?

Soft murmurs, the sounds of sex, were just audible enough for him to hear but too faint for anyone in the cabin outside the bedroom to most likely make out.

But he didn't hear a male's voice ... *Ella*?

His heart went into overdrive as he opened the door inward and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Ella on the bed, the skirt of her dress bunched around her waist. But what had him almost swallowing his tongue was the sight of her thrumming her clit, panties pushed down her thighs, with her gaze locked on him.

She didn't blink, didn't stop, just captured his attention with her rounded mouth and breathy moans.

Jesse stood in place, bringing his hands to the top of the doorframe, not sure if he was hallucinating as he watched this goddess in white silk on the small bed touching herself.

“Don’t stop,” he commanded when she’d slowed her movements, her eyes fluttering from his demand.

She sat up taller, keeping her hand over her smooth center, and he was just cocky enough to think that she’d gone bare for him. With her back to the headboard, she pinned her knees together to hide the view between her legs. “I came to talk to you, and then I heard you ...”

“You heard me?” He remained glued to the doorway, knowing if he moved a muscle, he’d either climb on that bed and pry her knees apart or shatter the illusion.

It was the first time in three years he’d seen her like this, and he’d be damned if he left this room without seeing more.

Screw his morals and rational thought.

“I heard you,” she said again, her eyes wandering to his unbuttoned pants. “And I guess I don’t have much restraint when it comes to you.” She cocked her head. “Anger or arousal, right? No in-between.”

He cleared his throat because, really, what could he say to that?

“I never stood a chance though. You know what you do to me.” She slid her finger along her seam, showing him how wet she was and holy hell.

He clamped down on his back teeth, still not believing this was real.

“You know how many times I’ve had to disappear from a room you’re in to go touch myself?” she whispered, slipping that finger into her pussy and letting out a moan.

“Same. Fucking same,” was all he could manage.

She quietly eyed him before saying in a sultry voice, “It’s always hate-sex that gets me off because I’m always so fucking mad at you that ...” She added a second finger and closed her eyes in pleasure.

He unglued his hands from the doorframe at her breathy confession and stepped into the room, allowing the bathroom door to shut behind him. A quick check of the lock on the bedroom door confirmed she’d been a good girl, and they were safe from interruption.

“You ever have hate-sex between us in your head? Or is that just me?” Ella didn’t miss a beat. She kept talking and touching herself, her free hand now pinching her nipple through the material of her dress, and he was growing more lightheaded by the second.

He palmed his dick over his pants, on the verge of losing his load if she kept this up. “I don’t have hate-anything with you,” he admitted. “But do I think about you when I come? Every fucking time.” Her hands stilled at his confession, the only movement the rise and fall of her chest as she processed his words. “Did I say you could stop, darling?”

Her body shivered before following his command, and as he closed the remaining distance to the foot of the bed, she asked while parting her lids, “Did you finish in the bathroom?”

“Does it look like I finished?” he asked as he lowered the zipper of his pants and gripped his aching dick, an obvious wet spot on his boxers from her little show.

Ella kept her eyes on his hand now stroking his cock as she circled the pad of her thumb over her clit. “I don’t want you touching me. I—I can’t handle that. I’m still mad at you, but I need to come.”

“What do you need from me?” He did his best to keep his voice even as she met his gaze, though he was anything but.

“Just watch me. Stay right there and watch me.”

He let go of a heavy breath, his balls tightening to the point of pain at her request.

“You sure?” he asked, uncertain if he’d be able to just stand there and watch her come without finding relief, but if it was what she needed ...

Ella nodded and slid those two fingers deeper inside her tight channel. “This doesn’t change—”

“I know,” he finished for her, doing his best not to scoop her into his arms and ravish her.

Her hand went still for a moment as she tipped her chin like a directive. “Actually, what I want is to watch you getting off from watching *me* touch myself.”

She’s trying to kill me.

But who was he to deny her request?

He kept the front of his legs pressed against the foot of the bed as he lowered the waistband of his boxers beneath his balls, wanting to be as close as possible without losing the beautiful view, and a little gasp fell from her lips as he worked his hand over his cock.

“Tell me about this *angry* sex.” He refused to use the word hate when it came to making love to this woman. She’d admitted she didn’t hate him so much as not trust him at the wedding, but deep in his gut, he knew it was most likely both.

“Well, um.”

He continued to fist his cock, waiting for her to reveal her dirty thoughts, ones he knew would live in his head forever, just like this moment between them.

“We’d be arguing like we always do, and then the next thing I know, you’d be tearing my clothes from my body. You’d press me against the glass door in your bedroom and pin my arms overhead and take me hard. So fucking hard,” she said around a whimper as if on the verge of coming.

“I need my mouth on you, Ella,” he rasped, his tone downright dark. “I want you coming on my tongue instead of your hand.” He stared deep into her eyes, praying to God she changed her mind and gave in to his request. “Say yes. Give me the fucking word. Please.”

A small nod followed her deep exhalation, and that was all he needed to release his hard length and go to her.

He leaned over the bed and grabbed hold of her thighs, swiftly pulling her to the edge of the bed, and a squeak of surprise escaped her.

Falling to his knees, he peeled her panties all the way off, hooked her legs over his shoulders, and brought his mouth over her sex, breathing in her delicious scent.

Jesse’s stomach muscles banded tight in anticipation as he tried to slow himself down, wanting to live in this moment for as long as possible. He slowly trailed his lips over the smooth skin between her legs, rolling his tongue over her sensitive clit.

“Ohhh,” she cried out, and that single word snapped the last threads of his control. He plunged two fingers inside her pussy, and her back arched off the bed in pleasure. The sound

of his name falling from her lips again and again had his dick leaking even more, and he let out a groan.

At the feel of her hands in his hair, clawing at his head with her short nails as he licked and sucked, he added more pressure to her clit, sensing she not only could handle it, but she wanted it.

“Oh my God,” she said, beginning to ramble. “I—I can’t ... this is ... oh my God.”

He wanted to slide his other hand up to palm her breast, but he was too consumed worshipping her sex to do much else.

“Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” she pleaded far too soon because he didn’t want to be done with her yet.

But at her request, he added a third finger, thrusting in and out in time with the movement of his tongue. Her breathing became ragged, and he flicked his gaze up for a moment to see the rise and fall of her breasts. She was close, he could tell, and when she began clenching around him, he couldn’t help but rumble out, “Come for me, Ella.”

Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a moan, and her entire body convulsed as she came. She was so fucking beautiful as she rode out her orgasm that he couldn’t get himself to back away. So sexy. So everything.

So ... mine.

“Jesse, I—I can’t take anymore. Please. It’s so good it hurts.” Ella gently shoved at his shoulders, and he finally relented, lifting his head in surrender.

His gaze fell to the pink flesh between her thighs, also slightly red from his facial hair that’d scraped her skin. He

wanted to set the crown of his cock inside her and stare at their two bodies connected.

“You should also ... you know.”

Now you're shy?

Her cheeks flushed as she pulled her legs from his shoulders to sit upright. Once on his feet, she waved a hand in the air as if there was any question as to what she meant.

“And you should leave,” he growled out. “Because I want you, Ella Mae. More than you can possibly know.” He was certain she understood his confession went beyond sex. “And I won’t have our next time be on this plane with everyone out there.”

“Our next time?” There was a slight challenge to her tone as if the intense desire of the past few minutes was waning, and she started remembering her anger. Back to anger, bye-bye, lust.

He was about to tuck his length back into his pants to go take care of himself in the bathroom, but she caught him off guard by shaking her head.

“Touch yourself,” she murmured, her eyes lifting to his face. “I want to watch.” A small swallow followed. “I need to see you come undone for me.”

Well, damn.

“But you’re right. *If* we ... again ... it shouldn’t be here.”

Jesse slowly nodded, standing at the end of the bed, surprised by the fact Ella shifted the skirt of her dress to provide him that incredible view while he began to glide his hand up and down.

Oh, she'd see him come undone, but he bit back the burning desire to come on her tits and mark her as his.

Next time, maybe.

If.

This wasn't fiction. He wasn't some character in Savanna's romance novels—this was real life.

But that didn't mean Savanna wasn't right, and if he could get his head on straight, maybe he'd find a way to win back Ella's trust or die trying.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



PARIS, FRANCE

JESSE STEADIED HIS FOCUS OUT THE SMALL WINDOW ON THE plane, the “city of love” in the distance as they neared Charles de Gaulle Airport at zero seven hundred hours local time.

The last twenty-four hours or so hadn’t exactly been a blur, but he’d swear he’d blinked, and now they were about to land in France, the operation in Albania a quick and distant memory.

If only every op in Jesse’s lifetime had gone as butter-smooth as the one in Tirana. His sister’s genius plan had been executed flawlessly by Sydney. She’d snuck in and out without detection, and it was another reminder to Jesse that both his sister and Sydney were badasses.

Hopefully, now that they had the listening devices and cameras planted, the team would gather new intelligence to learn more about what in the hell was really going on, and with any luck, get a lead on Zoran’s whereabouts.

We’re good. Everything worked out, Jesse told himself in an attempt to shake the feeling that things were almost *too* good. He’d been convinced someone would open fire at the wedding or take aim when he and Ella had had their talk near the woods. His anxiety-driven thoughts had also come to the conclusion that his team would need to breach the property in Albania to assist Sydney.

Always assuming the worst meant Jesse had multiple solutions mapped out in his mind ahead of time for when that inevitable shoe dropped—because it always did. Statistically speaking, a streak of perfectly executed missions as a Ranger undoubtedly ended, often with the loss of life. Why would his

new work with Falcon be any different? But he sure as hell hoped it would be.

Jesse turned his attention to Ella sitting across from him and found her watching him instead of the city of Paris unfolding below like one of those pop-up Christmas cards.

“I know you’re not happy about Paris,” she began, “but thank you for letting me come here anyway.”

Jesse clutched the chair arms before he did one of two things: hauled Ella onto his lap or opened the emergency door and jumped without a chute. Because what in God’s name was he thinking in taking Ella to Paris to draw out a madman?

Despite his normal method of anticipating the worst and planning for it, he’d refused to even contemplate any worst-case scenarios that ended in Ella’s death. That was where he drew the line when it came to overthinking.

“Are you really thanking me?” he asked as she fidgeted with the heart-shaped diamond ring and plain white gold band on her finger.

He wasn’t sure what had possessed him to buy the engagement ring when he’d only gone for bands, but when he saw the heart-shaped diamond, he’d been unable to stop himself.

“You could’ve easily locked me away. But you listened to what I wanted, and for that, yes, I’m thanking you,” she murmured softly, her breathy tone strikingly similar to the one she’d used in the jet bedroom twenty-four hours ago.

And had *that* really happened? For a minute, he’d thought it’d been a dream. That he’d hit his head and made the entire erotic scene up during his jerk-off session. But their time together in New York had proven that Ella was anything but

shy when it came to sex, and her sexual appetite matched his own.

Ella's sexual appetite ... The idea of her unleashing her passionate side with Brian, or hell, *any* man, made him unbelievably jealous. It was painful to acknowledge that she'd most likely had more than one lover in the three years since he'd screwed up and stuck to the "what happens in New York, stays in New York" deal.

He mulled over Ella's words again. Her unexpected thank-you. He deserved a sarcastic, *Thanks for putting me in danger, you dickhead, not thank you for taking me to Paris.*

Maybe I should have locked you up instead and spent that time making up for my three-year mistake. The first lick he'd taken of her pussy had driven him wild, and he'd had to rein himself in, especially on board a flight with his teammates. After tasting her, he only wanted more. But after those mind-numbing twenty minutes together, Ella had made it clear her expectations where he was concerned hadn't changed.

Just before he'd left the room, she'd whispered, *"You're still you. I'm still me. Neither of us have changed. This was about ... releasing tension. I still don't know if I can trust you not to hurt me."*

"Are you going to say anything or just sit there looking all broody?" Sassy Ella was back, and that more familiar tone pulled him free of his thoughts.

"What do you want me to say?" He opened his palms. "You're in this mess because of me. There's a target on your head because eighteen months ago, I failed to complete my op successfully. So, yes, this is my fault. I let myself get distracted, and now there's a psychopath out there looking for revenge because of it when he should be dead."

Ella's mouth opened, and she stopped fiddling with the rings. "Wow. Okay." She unbuckled even though the plane was descending. "You really think that's why we're here?" Once on her feet, she set her hand to the ceiling for balance. "*That's* why we're in this mess? Your head must still be firmly in your ass, and I can't believe for a minute, I'd been hopeful that you had removed it."

Jesse flinched at her stinging words and sharp tone laced with frustration, then said, "My head has only ever been in my ..."*When it comes to you.*

Her eyebrows dipped, and he felt more fighting words coming for him. "You *chose* to become a contract killer. You chose taking lives over a life with me." Her tone was more heartbroken than angry, even though it was clear to him she preferred not to expose the sadness. "Your decision to become a hitman is why we're here. Not because you left someone alive." She leaned forward a bit and added, "You screwed up."

Jesse shut his eyes, unable to look at her as he considered whether or not to defend his job, something he'd never had to do before. But this was Ella, and he needed her to understand. "Someone had to do what I did," he began calmly. "My job was a necessary evil. Things aren't always black and white with the Agency. They're notorious for living in the gray. When diplomacy and military force fails, people like me are sent in to handle matters. The third option."

She tipped her head as if not quite buying what he was selling. "Is that always the case?"

Zoran. No, she was right about him. "Sometimes the Agency changes the narrative to suit their needs. Zoran was well outside that gray area. We probably shouldn't have gone. *I* shouldn't have gone. Bad guy or not."

“And now we’re paying the price because of it.”

“I’m sorry.” *I’m sorry for a lot more than that though.*

“Sorry for what, Jesse? Taking the job in the first place or sorry that you missed your mark?” she challenged.

His shoulders sagged under the weight of remorse and the growing distance he felt forming between them once again. He couldn’t change his past, his time with the CIA, and if he were honest with himself, he wouldn’t want to either. Yes, his time in the Army had taken him away from Ella, but he’d been serving his country, which was something he couldn’t regret. Would she ever be able to separate the two—his service and their time apart? “You should sit.”

“I ...”

“Sit with Savanna,” he suggested, removing his seat belt. “I’ll walk you there. Don’t want you falling.”

She didn’t fight his offer to help, which was a relief, and she allowed him to hold on to her arms from behind for support as they walked down the aisle toward the front of the cabin.

Savanna looked back and forth between the two of them before gesturing for Ella to sit opposite her and Griffin since there were only two seats per row.

Once Ella was buckled, Jesse shot her one last look, finding she’d tucked her lip between her teeth as if still searching for what to say.

“We’ll be landing soon.” He turned to leave but stilled when she reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

Jesse stared at Ella’s delicate hand, waiting for her to speak.

“When?” she softly asked.

He angled his head. “When what?”

“When were you sent to deal with Zoran? What day?” Her tone had softened a touch now.

Jesse dropped his focus to his boots, but he caught Griffin shifting in his seat, obviously uncomfortable about where this conversation was headed. “June of last year.” He kept it vague, worried she’d put two and two together.

She remained quiet for a moment. “Had you ever failed before that day?”

And yup, she knows. “No.” He took his time working his gaze up her jeaned legs, over her soft pink sweater, and finally to her face.

She gently lifted her palm from his arm, releasing him at that bit of truth. That the man he’d been sent to kill lived because Jesse had been distracted by her impending wedding.

Yes, he should have turned down the job from Thatcher. But in all honesty, maybe he’d taken it because he was so out of his mind about the wedding that he’d wanted to ... kill. *And how fucked up in the head am I for that?*

Ella turned her attention to the window, signaling that the conversation was over. He started for the aisle again, catching an apologetic look from Griffin.

“Over here.” Jack motioned to the empty seat next to him a few rows back. “You okay, man?” he asked once Jesse had strapped in next to him, Ella still in his line of sight since she was facing his way.

“I’m ... as to be expected,” Jesse found himself confessing before drawing his attention to the window. “A strange

twenty-four hours.”

“I don’t know,” Jack began, “I’d say it’s been a rather decent trip so far.”

It sounded like they were casually discussing the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower. Not referring to how Sydney had successfully infiltrated a criminal’s compound.

“Too perfect. Well, operationally speaking,” Jesse shared his thoughts. “Don’t you feel like—”

“Something bad is about to happen?” Jack finished for him. “Yeah, but that’s because statistically speaking, it usually does.”

“Exactly.” He wished he and Jack weren’t on the same page about this. He’d rather attribute the sinking feeling in his gut to anxiety.

“Speaking of bad shit happening ...” Jack tapped a knuckle on the window. “That’s not a good sign.”

Jesse leaned closer to the window to observe the sea of flashing lights near the runway strip where they were preparing to land.

“Any hope they’re not here for us?” Jack pitched optimistically even as he gave Jesse a look that said, *And there’s the other shoe.*

Fucking statistics.

“Not a chance they knew we were coming unless someone from the CIA tipped them off,” Carter said when the wheels hit the ground, but he waited to stand until the jet was taxiing at a slower pace. “The only people who are aware we’d be arriving in Paris today are Gray’s dad, the CIA director, and Jesse’s old boss.”

“What about your contact here helping us unload our weapons without notice? They knew we were coming,” Jesse reminded him, and Carter adamantly shook his head as if that were a non-starter.

“Well, no way my dad or the CIA director tipped off the French.” Gray stood and looked out the window at the police cars closing in on the plane.

“You still trust Thatcher?” Carter gruffly tossed out, looking at Jesse as Jesse unbuckled and stood.

Jesse’s gaze cut to Ella, standing alongside Savanna, looks of concern on their faces about the unknown looming before them. The threat at the moment came with a badge.

“Why in the hell would Thatcher alert the authorities we’re here unless ...” Jesse turned his attention to Carter again, remembering his discussion with Thatcher back at the workshop.

At the time, Jesse had been suspicious about Thatcher’s questions regarding Falcon Falls and his interest in Carter. He wouldn’t put it past his old boss to use Jesse’s access to Carter as a means to grab him. After all, Carter was still a rogue CIA officer. But wouldn’t it have been easier to grab him in Alabama than having the French intercept them at the airport?

“I don’t know how or why they’re here,” Carter said under his breath. “But my alias won’t survive their scrutiny.” He shook his head, eyes out the window closest to him. “Not with *her* here.”

“Her who?” Gray asked, standing beside Carter.

There appeared to be more than one female among the agents and police officers that circled the plane once it had made a complete stop.

“An MI6 officer who happens to hate me with a passion.” Carter moved away from the window and removed the 9mm from the holster at his side.

“Which officer hates you?” Jack asked. “The hot one in the red coat?” And why didn’t he sound all that worried?

“Shit, the DGSE is also here,” Jesse said at the realization.

“That’s France’s equivalent to the CIA or MI6,” Griffin deciphered for Savanna and Ella.

They’d most likely be going into DGSE custody when the officers found rifles, grenades, and RPGs on board. The team hadn’t exactly planned to declare the weapons at customs.

“Must be the one in the red coat,” Oliver piped up when Carter had yet to speak. “What’d you do to piss her off? An op you worked together go sideways? Or is it the wrath of a woman scorned, and she woke up in bed naked and alone?” Carter glared at Oliver, which didn’t seem to faze the man. “Both it is, then,” Oliver added with a smile, clearly not too concerned about their precarious situation, same as Jack.

But based on Griffin’s and Carter’s tight jawlines, they were thinking the same thing as Jesse. *We’re screwed.*

“What do we do?” Savanna asked, setting her hands on Griffin’s chest.

“Gray needs to call his old man before we get off this plane so we don’t wind up in a French prison,” Griffin answered as his gaze swerved to Gray heading toward the cockpit.

Hopefully, Gray’s father would be their saving grace as the Secretary of Defense with a direct line to POTUS. Maybe that was why Jack wasn’t worried. He’d worked with Gray a lot

longer, and it was possible they'd been in jams before and been bailed out by Gray's dad.

"I need to call Thatcher before we go into their custody as well," Jesse said, hating to think the man he'd trusted had set them up for some reason.

"Looks like we don't have time." Sydney pointed to the officers approaching the plane, weapons drawn. "They're not waiting for us. They clearly know we won't shoot them. Otherwise, they'd never come at us like this."

Carter looked toward Gray and the pilot talking just outside the cockpit before Gray jerked his thumb toward the cabin door. "Open it." As the pilot began unlatching the door, Gray turned his attention to the rest of the team. "Everyone unarmed? We don't want to give them any more reasons to detain us, or worse."

Just as Jesse reached to remove the Glock at his back, armed officers streamed in through the open door, forcing him to raise his hands in surrender instead.

"The women. Take them," the first officer to enter quickly barked in English, and Jesse's heart skipped a few beats. "*Allons-y. Maintenant,*" she added. *Let's go. Now.*

"Hell no," Griffin roared when a man outfitted in all black grabbed Savanna's arm, but Gray swiftly blocked Griffin's attempt to stop the officer from taking the woman he loved. "Move, or I will fucking move you," he hissed, hands planted firmly on Gray's chest.

"You attack those men, and you'll never see her," Gray said in a low voice, quickly swinging his focus Jesse's way as if sensing his control was also on the brink of snapping too.

Ella now stood with her arms pinned behind her back, being nudged forward by one of the officers, and it took every ounce of Jesse's control to not do something stupid when she threw him a panicked look.

Jesse quickly maneuvered to the officer who appeared to be in charge. "Where she goes," Jesse began in a low, raspy tone while angling his head, "I go."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



UNDISCLOSED LOCATION

FOURTEEN HOURS HAD PASSED SINCE JESSE HAD BEEN TASERED that morning outside the plane on the tarmac. *Fourteen fucking hours since the asshole-in-charge refused to let Jesse go with Ella.* She'd tried to reach for him while agents pulled her away, eyes glassy with tears, and he'd lost control. He'd wound up on the ground next to Griffin, who'd been taken down moments before when the French ripped Savanna from his arms as well.

They'd both been incapacitated for what felt like for-fucking-ever, unable to move after the barbed darts ripped through the back of their shirts and punctured skin while delivering a high-voltage payload. He'd gritted his teeth and ridden out the painful sensations that traveled through his limbs at supersonic speed while he watched Ella, Savanna, and Sydney escorted into a blacked-out government SUV. That moment had been a special kind of torture, and it had nothing to do with the brain-scrambling taser.

"They're with the DGSE. They're fine," Jack said as if reading Jesse's thoughts, stopping his pacing long enough to peer over to where Jesse sat on the floor, back to the wall. "We'll get to them soon."

It was twenty hundred hours, and Jesse, Jack, Oliver, and Griffin were still stuck together in the tiny room they'd been shoved into immediately after being hustled from the vehicle used to transport them from the airport. There hadn't been a lot of stop-and-go traffic during the journey that he estimated was a good forty-five minutes, which told Jesse they were outside the city limits. But the hoods yanked over their heads had

made it impossible to know for sure. He wouldn't be all that surprised if they were at a DGSE interrogation site instead of their headquarters.

“The women are somewhere in this house. I think it's a house, at least,” Jack added.

“Feels house-like,” Oliver remarked, and Jesse peered around the room, having already memorized every square inch of the small space.

Boarded-up windows. Floral wallpaper yellowed with age and peeling in spots. Horizontal ticks next to one of the doors with what looked like dates next to them. All signs indicated this had once been a child's room.

There was an attached bathroom with only a toilet to take a piss in and a freestanding sink to wash their hands.

No furniture, so the guys had spent most of the day sitting on the dirty shag carpet with their backs to the wall.

“Well, it's house-like, aside from the steel door in here, of course,” Oliver said, his gaze cutting to the boards on the windows the guys had tried to remove at one point earlier in the day. “Would you stop pacing? And maybe stop bouncing the ball against the wall?” he asked Jack.

The only thing that'd been in the room was a ratty tennis ball, which Griffin had decided was there to fuck with them since Jack had bounced it against the wall all day.

As much as Jesse felt the need to pace right alongside Jack, he knew he'd wind up testing out how his fist would fare in a matchup with the wall if he did.

“I think better when I'm moving.” Jack threw the ball, but Griffin sprang to his feet and caught it in his hands before it could bounce against the ratty wallpaper. He let out an irritated

growl, and Jack held up his hands in surrender. “Fine, Hulk. You can have it.”

Griffin held the ball tight in his fist and sat again, his shoulders sagging with relief that the bounce-bouncing had ceased. He was as on edge as Jesse with Savanna taken from him.

“We know why they’re holding Carter in a separate room.” With nothing to do now, Jack folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “The woman in red wants him.” He seemed to be the most level-headed of the four men at the moment. Maybe it was an act, or maybe he was really that confident that Gray’s connections would get them out of this mess.

But why would Thatcher put me here in the first place? They hadn’t done too much theorizing aloud, assuming they were being watched and listened to, though Jesse didn’t see a camera.

“They knew who we were before we landed. They seemed to be expecting the women to be on board with us too. And the way they whisked Gray away like he was a prince and deserved special treatment seemed intentional as well,” Oliver noted. “Defense Secretary for a dad with POTUS connections. Guess Gray ranks as royalty among our motley crew.”

Motley? Jesse couldn’t help but think back to Thatcher’s words in the workshop the other day. It was January second now, and how many days ago had that been? It was a blur, and the tasing wasn’t the reason for his muddled thoughts.

“We haven’t been questioned. They’re not telling us jack shit—no offense, Jack. Something doesn’t add up,” Oliver said, pulling Jesse’s focus back to the conversation.

“None taken, and that’s because they don’t give a shit about us. Carter’s probably the target,” Jack quickly replied. “Maybe another tit for tat went down without us knowing.”

“Like your old boss offering Carter to the hot MI6 officer in exchange for something?” Oliver suggested. “Something more important than our case?”

Jesse’s heart nearly trampled his rib cage at Oliver’s words. “You think Thatcher used my old case to draw me out just to get Carter overseas and offer him to MI6?” He’d forgotten they were probably being listened to, but he assumed at this point, the French were aware of Thatcher. How could they not be?

“Your unit at the Agency was the third option, right?” Jack looked at Jesse as Jesse slowly stood.

“You overheard me?” Jesse asked, forgetting the topic for a moment.

“We overheard the two of you *both* times,” Oliver tossed out, and Jesse heard the smile in his tone. “Seems like you guys are either fighting or f—” He cut himself off, wisely choosing not to finish that sentence.

Great, are Ella and I that readable? Jesse set his hands on his hips, realizing he’d lost sight of the issue at hand. “What were you saying again about the third option?”

“You were the *pis aller*—the last resort. Doing what others wouldn’t was pretty much your job description,” Jack said, pausing for a moment until Jesse met his gaze. “It’s not a stretch to think that your former boss would do whatever necessary, like dangling Ella as bait, to meet his endgame.”

“And we’re caught in the crosshairs,” Oliver said. “Or part of some bigger plan we have yet to be read in on.”

Both were possibilities, but neither was an acceptable reason in Jesse's mind.

Before Jesse could say more, the door clicked and swung open. Behind an armed guard stood Carter and Gray, but they remained in the hall.

Griffin and Oliver joined Jesse and Jack on their feet.

"You're free to go," the guard stated as if that was just fucking that.

"Wait, what?" Jack broke the silence first as the four of them filtered from the room, and when Jesse looked left and right, he was able to confirm they were on the first floor of a house. Nails and empty picture hooks were still on the wall from when a family had once lived there.

"Where's Ella, the others?" Jesse looked to Gray and Carter for answers, not prepared to move another foot without them.

"They were released not too long ago." The guard's vague answer had Jesse wanting to slap an actual number from him, but he resisted. With the women gone, they needed to get on the move.

"Who picked them up? Where are they?" Griffin beat Jesse to the questions.

"That billionaire, Rochella, picked them up." At least he'd given them a real answer this time, but Jesse wasn't sure what to make of the news.

"What in the hell is going on?" Jesse murmured as a man with a receding hairline and thick, black-framed glasses that sat too low on his nose approached them.

The suited Frenchman motioned for the guys to follow him, and they walked past a kitchen toward the foyer by the front door. “You’ll find all of your belongings from Mr. Dominick’s plane packed into the three trunks of the Suburbans outside.”

“*All?*” Jack leaned closer to the suited guy as if he were speaking Urdu instead.

“Well, pretty much everything. Your weapons and clothes are there,” the man said, tone rushed and insistent.

“I’m sorry, what? You’re just sending us on our merry little way with our RPGs and blacked-out rifles in *your* city?” Jack opened his palm, swiping it through the air. “No interrogations. No cavity searches.” He waved his hand again, making the shoo-gesture. “Just off ya go.”

Jesse was either still stunned from having been tased, or just shocked by the news that Ella was somewhere in the city of love with the charming billionaire and possibly in danger without him to have her six, that he remained quiet.

“*Oui*, we’re letting you go.” The Frenchman copied Jack’s shoo-motion, then he opened the front door and stepped back.

Jack peered at Gray, then over at Jesse, shooting him an incredulous, *Are you kidding me* look.

Same page, brother. Same page. But at this point, all that mattered to Jesse was getting to Ella. And they’d need Henry Rochella’s address and phone number ASAP. Also, Jesse’s cell phone better be in one of those SUVs so he could call and confirm she was okay.

“You called your father while they had you, right?” Oliver asked Gray once they stepped outside the home to discover the three SUVs lined up, trunks already open, as promised.

They only had the front lights of the one-story house to work with out there, but it was enough to see their gear in the trunks.

“They wouldn’t let me call him,” Gray grumbled. “They kept me holed up alone. No idea why.”

“You didn’t need to call him for help,” the Frenchman, obviously aware of who Gray’s father was, spoke up. “Out of respect for your father and his relationship to your president, you were kept in a nicer holding room.” He checked his watch like he had to be somewhere important ten minutes ago, which gave Jesse heart palpitations.

A bad sign. He was about to demand answers when Griffin bit out, “So, this really is about Carter, isn’t it?”

“And yet, Mr. Dominick’s going free.” The cryptic bullshit from the man was going to earn him a punch to the face but Jesse couldn’t afford to get locked back up when Ella was out in the city, and Zoran possibly coming for her.

“We need to step on it,” Jesse hissed, his gut guiding him in the only direction he knew to go. The worst-case scenario. Which was that Ella and the others were in danger.

He felt it in his fucking bones, and the Frenchman’s rushed words and glances at his watch were signs that he was right.

The Frenchman tossed Carter a few sets of keys, and Griffin surprised Jesse by lunging toward the guy as if he’d just drawn the same conclusion as Jesse.

Griffin was able to grab a fistful of the guy’s shirt before Gray and Jack reined him in and stopped him from pummeling the man. “If something happens to them—”

“We gotta go,” Gray urged, at which Griffin hesitantly released his hold on the man.

“Your interests and ours align. We appreciate the listening devices and cameras you installed at Aleksa Stanković’s estate, but we’ll be handling Aleksa from here on. You have something more critical to help us out with,” the Frenchman said while brushing his hands down his now ruffled shirt. “*Au revoir*. We wish you the best of luck on your mission.” His tone was suddenly somber, and Jesse had the feeling that something crucial was being left out or lost in translation—maybe both—despite the fact they were speaking English, not French.

“We need to gear up before we get to Henry’s. This forced pit stop was to separate us from the women,” Carter said, confirming Jesse’s fears.

But if Thatcher had made the DGSE and MI6 aware of why Jesse and his team were really in Paris, why the dramatics? Why not just let Jesse and his team carry out the job they’d set out to do as planned?

Carter handed Jesse one of the disposable phones they’d brought. “See if they pick up. I have Rochella’s address, it’s less than five minutes away.”

“Wait, what? Five minutes away?” Jesse went still at the news. “We’re that close to his place?”

“Exactly,” was all Carter said, and Jesse got the message. Something was seriously off about this whole damn thing.

“Give me a phone too. I need to talk to Savanna.” Griffin dug into the bag without waiting as Jesse brought the phone to his ear.

“She’s not answering,” Jesse said after three attempts. “Nothing for you either?”

Griffin shook his head and called again. “Nothing.”

This was that shoe dropping. Ella and Savanna were in danger. They were with Sydney, but ...

“Sydney’s not answering either,” Gray told them, and Jesse was surprised Gray hadn’t been tasered as well when Sydney was pulled away from them that morning. Jesse had noticed that the man had a soft spot for her, and assumed it was from their time together years ago at West Point.

“You think someone at DGSE is feeding Zoran intel to draw him out on their own timetable?” Griffin speculated in a rough voice, mirroring Jesse’s thoughts as he hurriedly holstered a weapon at his back and strapped another to his thigh. “Otherwise, how would Zoran know we were coming to France unless he had someone planted in Bama keeping tabs on Jesse, and they learned about the wedding and Ella’s job offer?”

“And what, the French detained us long enough for word to travel to Zoran and give him time to get to Rochella’s?” Oliver sounded surprised by the idea, but sadly, Jesse wasn’t shocked. This was par for the course when it came to the CIA. “Why not just take Zoran down themselves if they expect him to go after the women? None of this makes sense.”

“It’s not what you think,” Carter spoke up, ending the theorizing. “I’ll explain what I know on the way.”

About damn time. Jesse secured his Beretta M9 to his side and another 9mm at his leg. Then he strapped the sheath containing his favorite stainless steel sawback bladed knife to his other leg. And lastly, he slung the strap of his M4 around his neck. If Ella was hurt in any way, it’d be a bloodbath.

“Shit, all that hard work Sydney did infiltrating Aleksa’s,” Oliver began after digging through one of their bags, but

Aleksa was the last thing on Jesse's mind right now, "and the French took the software."

"Griffin and I will take the first vehicle. Gray and Jack the second. Jesse and Oliver, you're in the third." Carter shut the trunks as soon as everyone had their gear. "I'll put us all on a call in a minute to tell you what I know."

After Jesse had on his chest plate and vest with mags, he hopped into the passenger side of the vehicle in a hurry, trying Ella again with no luck as Oliver followed the others.

Jesse mounted his phone to the dashboard, wanting to call Thatcher to demand answers, but he knew Carter would be calling any second, so the conversation with his old boss would have to wait until after Ella was safe. "Ella's okay," he said under his breath. "If someone at DGSE really did tip off Zoran that we're here, then he won't hurt her without me there to watch."

"And Savanna? Sydney?" Oliver asked while changing lanes. "He has no reason to keep them alive."

"Damn it, you're right," he said while accepting the call from Carter on speakerphone. "What do you know?"

"No answer at the Rochella estate. Lines may have been cut. Or the signal blocked," Carter dropped the bad news on them. News that could only mean ...

The worst-case scenario was playing out now.

"Tell us what you know," Jesse demanded, worried Carter was somehow responsible for placing Ella in danger, even if it was ultimately Jesse's failed hit last year that sparked the domino effect.

"I learned today that Thatcher left out a few important details from the case file he handed over to you," Carter

slowly revealed, and if he went any slower, Jesse would likely snap. “The CIA, French Intelligence, and MI6 are all after the same man.”

“You?” Oliver asked.

“No. Not today, at least.” Carter paused. “When Zoran appeared on CCTV footage in Bulgaria, what Thatcher didn’t tell you is that he was in a wheelchair, and it looks like he’s not the one personally coming after you. He hired out.”

The blood rushed from Jesse’s face at Carter’s words. “Who? Who the fuck is coming after Ella? After me?”

“The MI6 officer couldn’t tell me too much, and she had to keep knocking the wind from me to get close enough to whisper in my ear without drawing attention,” Carter quickly shared, “and yes, I trust her, despite her being a pain in my ass ... but she said she began working with the CIA as soon as they learned who Zoran hired to carry out his revenge. Thatcher has a bigger fish to catch than Zoran, and they used Jesse to get to *me*.”

Static crossed the line, not a good sign. If someone was at the Rochella property with a jamming device to cut all comms, the team would be going dark soon.

“I assume DGSE was brought in by Thatcher when he learned we were headed for Paris.” Carter paused, or maybe it was static. “Today was just a stunt to put the word out there that I’m in Paris along with Jesse and Ella. I’m the key piece to their plan.” More static while Carter was speaking, damn it.

“Who? Who the hell ... after you that the CIA and the ...”
Shit, they were losing the connection.

“The Check ...” The line cut out again, but Jesse knew what he was going to say, and a surge of anger had him losing

control, punching the dashboard with his free hand.

Oliver side-eyed Jesse. “You know who Carter was talking about, I assume?”

Jesse nodded. “The Chechen,” he responded, wishing like all hell it wasn’t true.

“You’re shitting me. I thought he was just a myth. A bedtime story the Russians told to scare the shit out of their kids about Chechnya. The hitman, The Chechen, is real?”

“Can you hear me?” Carter asked a moment later.

“That’s a good copy,” Oliver quickly responded.

“I’m the only one who has ever faced him and survived,” Carter explained. “Not even those who hire him know what he looks like. But MI6 intercepted intelligence shortly after the Bulgarian agents were killed that it was The Chechen’s team who performed the hits, and MI6 alerted the CIA.”

It wasn’t just Zoran they had to worry about. The most psychotic of all hitmen known to exist, a man even the most deadly Russian assassins feared, was now after the woman he loved.

And Jesse had walked right into the Agency’s trap to draw out The Chechen, using his new working relationship with Carter to help them get to the elusive hitman. Zoran would’ve come for Jesse regardless, but damned if he felt ...

Before Jesse could think or say more, Griffin announced, “We’re here. But—”

The line went dead. And when Jesse peered out the window, he knew why. Someone must have set a breaching charge to the front gate of the Rochella estate. The property had already been hit. The blast had torn the double gates clear

from their hinges, and it appeared vehicles had rolled right over the mangled metal.

The DGSE sent Jesse's team there, knowing damn well the women were in danger, but why in the hell weren't they also there for an assist as Oliver had questioned, especially if the agencies wanted their mark bad enough they were willing to risk Ella's life to get him?

That could only mean one thing—The Chechen, himself, wouldn't be showing his face tonight, and the CIA and other agencies must have anticipated that.

Bait. The girls and my team are the bait in hopes The Chechen will eventually come for us himself. And all three agencies would sit and wait, using them, until The Chechen made his moves.

“They better still be in there and alive.” Jesse sent a silent prayer up as he exited the vehicle, no time to lose.

But he knew one thing for damn certain. After Ella and the others were safe, and once Jesse and his men took down Zoran and The Chechen—Thatcher and any officer responsible for placing Ella in danger had better hide because Jesse would be coming for them next.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



TEN MINUTES EARLIER

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?” ELLA QUIETLY ASKED SYDNEY, hoping to get her thoughts on this strange situation. She’d been noticeably quiet since Henry Rochella had picked the three of them up, and Ella was curious to know if Sydney’s radar was in sync with her own. That there was something a little fishy about ... well, everything.

Ella joined Sydney by the window inside Henry’s second-floor study and looked out at the property. There were enough antique-style lampposts illuminating the grounds that the coat of snow on the ground sparkled.

“Yeah, what do you think?” Savanna softly chimed in, clearly curious for Sydney to share her thoughts as well now that they were alone for the first time.

Ella twisted her neck to view her best friend sitting in a leather armchair next to a lit fireplace, the flames from the blazing fire throwing shadows and effectively hiding whatever emotions Ella was certain were visible on Savanna’s face.

Savanna had witnessed her fiancé brutally tasered that morning as she’d been taken from Griffin’s arms, same as Ella had been pulled away from Jesse. And the horrific sight of both men stubbornly resisting the effects of the tasers made Ella sick to her stomach every time she remembered the scene. She’d never felt so helpless as she watched Jesse on the ground, trying to reach for her and failing, his body convulsing. Veins prominent at his neck.

“We’re pretty secluded out here,” Ella commented when Sydney continued her silence. “Don’t you think it’s strange that the French didn’t take us to their main office?”

“It’s also weird that the place where they did take us just happened to be near Henry’s mansion,” Savanna pointed out. “Oh wait, millionaires have mansions. Billionaires like the Rochellas have compounds.” And from what Ella could tell, Savanna was right. The place was multi-building-huge. “Plus, it seemed like the French officers knew ahead of time to release us into Henry’s custody.”

Ella mulled over Savanna’s theory. “So you don’t believe what Henry said in the car?” *Why would he lie about that?* He’d explained that he was contacted to pick them up because of the information on Ella’s visa. She’d listed Rochella as her temporary employer, and as such, her stay in France would be longer than ninety days. He’d gotten two more women than he’d bargained for, but ... “How else would the French officers know I’m in Paris because of Rochella if not for the visa application?”

“True, but the guys did mention Thatcher on the plane. Asked Jesse if he still trusted him given our welcome to Paris by the police,” Savanna reminded her. “I remember Griffin saying Thatcher was Jesse’s old boss. Maybe we’re here because of him?”

The boss who wanted Jesse back, as in back to being a hitman. “But what motive could Thatcher possibly have to turn on Jesse like that?”

“Hell if I know,” Savanna remarked, grit to her tone. They were both growing more frustrated the longer they were separated from the others. “But maybe the French knew you’d be on the plane, and for whatever reason, they chose that house to detain us all, anticipating they’d be handing us over to Rochella. Because their target is Carter. That female MI6 officer Carter said hated him was there this morning, so.”

Savanna's words must've had an impact on Sydney because she turned to face them.

"Thirteen hours," Sydney said, finally breaking her silence, looking back and forth between them. "We were held for thirteen hours without a single question. We were denied a phone call, and any attempts to see my team were refused. Hell, they wouldn't even let us stay when we objected to leaving without the guys."

"A.J. would have hijacked Air Force One if we'd been allowed to call him," Savanna commented, clearly trying to remain as calm as possible.

They'd both spent the day doing their best not to fall to pieces in that holding room. Sydney, of course, didn't have to "try," she was just flat-out calm. Level-headed. But also super quiet, which made Ella nervous.

Sydney had been worried there were people listening or watching the holding room, so she'd advised them to keep their mouths shut and not entrap themselves in any way. But they were alone now, and Sydney was still a solid 2 out of a scale of 10 on sharing her thoughts or emotions. And Ella only gave her the two points because she'd finally said something just now.

Sydney's eyes narrowed, her gaze falling to the floor, and Ella could practically see the wheels in her head turning. "Then night falls, and as you said, we're whisked away to Henry's, a five-minute drive from a DGSE safe house," she finally continued her line of thought.

What are you getting at? Who set this all up? Why?

"Henry didn't question why our plane was intercepted by the police on the car ride here. I guess that's an oddity in

itself,” Savanna said, raising a point Ella had thought about as well on their drive there. “Maybe the officers gave him a fake explanation, though?”

“Henry barely said a word in the car, period.” He’d sat in the passenger seat of the Range Rover beside his driver, eyes straight ahead and fingers drumming his thigh. He’d definitely seemed nervous, but Ella had assumed it was because he’d been called to pick up one of his “gems” from police custody, at some off-the-books location, no less. And well, he was probably stunned, perhaps questioning whether he ought to kick her out. *Boot me back to Bama*. “I’m a little surprised he agreed to pick us up in the first place unless the police sold him a convincing story.”

“I’d like to know what that story was since we’re so in the dark.” Savanna shifted in the seat, clutched the chair arms, and tipped her head back, eyes going to the ceiling.

Ella looked back to Sydney, who was once again staring out the window. “Do you think someone is coming for us? That Zoran guy?” She’d done her best to avoid asking because she didn’t want to hear any other answer than no, and she was worried Sydney would give her a yes.

Sydney glanced at her. “I’m certain someone is coming.”

Ella stumbled back at Sydney’s words, but it was the stone-cold look on her face that frightened Ella even more.

Sydney had flipped a switch and was now in operator mode, preparing for a battle. But how would the three of them, even with Henry’s security team, go up against such a calculating criminal as Zoran? The man was so dangerous the CIA had ordered Jesse to kill him.

Savanna quickly stood. “My fear that this has all been a ruse just to get us away from the guys, like a plot twist in a romance novel ... that’s possible?”

Savanna had already been through so much, and it crushed Ella that she was dealing with more, especially so soon after she’d narrowly survived the hell of being hunted down by criminals herself.

“But why would the good guys help the bad ones?” Ella asked, more so speaking her thoughts aloud rather than expecting Sydney to provide another answer. She may have been one and done in the answer department. But when Sydney peered straight at her with a slight nod, Ella blinked at the unspoken message a few times before speaking. “Oh. No, I don’t believe it. Henry’s not helping Zoran. He didn’t tip off the police that we were coming to Paris. No way.” She adamantly shook her head. She wasn’t someone who blindly trusted people, but Savanna said Griffin had checked out the Rochellas, and they were clean. *Too clean, though?* Now she was thinking like Jesse, damn it.

“Why would a billionaire fashion mogul help Zoran?” Savanna asked, backing up Ella, or at the least, not quite ready to throw that particular fashion mogul under the bus, which is what Jesse would most likely do when he was free. He’d bulldoze right over Henry and flatten him without remorse if he was in any way responsible for endangering Ella.

“A number of reasons,” Sydney said in a low tone. “Blackmail. Threats of harm to his family. Tit for tat.”

What possible tit for tat could have Henry, the billionaire, helping a bad guy? Unless, well ... *Hmm*. But before Ella could process her thoughts, Sydney set her palm to the

window and, in an eerily calm voice, announced, “I need a gun. They’re here. The property has been breached.”

“What?” Savanna and Ella said at the same time, just as the door to the study opened, and Henry rushed in.

“My security team has alerted me to a threat.” Henry looked straight from Ella to the bookshelf off to her left. “I have a safe room. They’ve advised us all to go inside. It’s impenetrable.”

“Your security team is running for the hills,” Sydney remarked. “Or, in this case, the forest.”

Still in a bit of a shocked daze, Ella did her best to snap herself back to the reality of the situation. Looking out the window, she saw Range Rovers rolling up the driveway in the distance, and sure enough, men running away from the property.

“Your crack security team seems to have abandoned ship,” Sydney said, still not a hint of fear in her voice, but Ella’s heart rate was maxed out, and from the look on Savanna’s face, hers was too.

Henry and Sydney were the only ones who remained calm in the midst of what would surely soon become chaos.

Sydney stalked straight for Henry as he slid the bookshelf to the side, revealing a steel door. “Who are you helping? You’re involved, but which side are you on?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I did you all a favor, and you’re going to question me?” Henry cursed under his breath while punching in a four-digit security code, and the door electronically opened outward. “Now get in.”

“We’re not locking ourselves in a room with you.” Sydney stepped directly in front of him, and Ella wasn’t sure what to

do or think. They had limited options at the moment.

Safe room with Henry, who may be aligned with the bad guys for whatever reason, or stay out there and for sure get hurt. Both options sucked, but she had to go with option one. Safe room with Henry and hope for the best, not assume the worst. “Sydney, we don’t have a choice.”

Sydney looked back at Ella, then over at Savanna. “I need a weapon. A few. Provide me with those, and you might temporarily earn my trust.”

“What do you plan to do? Go up against them yourself?” Henry pointed toward the window, his jaw strained.

“Now that your team has taken off, someone has to do something.” Sydney went back to the window and shifted the drapes to the side for a better view. “I count ten tangos. They’re fanning out. Getting into position. I need to make my move now before they infil the main house.”

“Fine.” Henry tossed both hands in the air. “It’s your death wish.” He hurriedly moved into the safe room and came back out a moment later with a sidearm and a knife.

Sydney eyed the gun, checked the mag, then tucked the weapon at the back of her jeans. The knife remained in hand. “You’re rich. Rich people like archery. Where do you keep your bow?” Her monosyllabic tone, so cool and calm, almost had Ella feeling like everything was okay too.

“My office downstairs. Three doors down from the foyer, you’ll find the bow displayed on the wall behind my desk,” he answered, then moved into the safe room.

Ella wrapped an arm around Savanna’s back and pulled her in tight, hoping it’d ease her friend’s trembling body as they stood outside the entrance to the safe room. Savanna was

probably in flashback hell after what happened to her in October.

“We’ll be okay,” she whispered reassuringly, trying to channel some of Sydney’s badass strength.

“Phone lines are down,” Henry announced from the safe room. “My mobile doesn’t work either.”

Sydney peeked into the room. “And yet, I see they kept your security cameras and lights on.” With her back to Ella and Savanna, she said, “If anything happens to them while they’re in the room with you, if you so much as touch them in any way, I will come back up here and gut you with this knife, are we clear?”

“Come on.” Ella lightly patted Savanna’s shoulder, prompting her to head into the small space, sidestepping Sydney.

“You’ll be okay.” Sydney gave Ella a nod and shut the door, securing them inside the room. Ella swallowed down the lump in her throat when she heard the bookshelf slide into place.

Henry dropped onto the only chair in the room opposite the wall of security screens and kept his focus on the changing views of the property. Only eight screens, but there had to be dozens of cameras across the sprawling estate. “She’s not the most likable woman I’ve ever met,” he said in a deep voice while Ella and Savanna stood next to him and watched as well.

Ella didn’t bother to respond, too stunned this was all happening. And with Sydney suspicious of Henry and his motives, how could Ella not be? There was more than just a little something off about this whole thing. “We just happened

to be in the study where your safe room is located when men stormed your property. Little convenient, don't you think?"

"Almost as if you knew this was going to happen," Savanna added, her fingers racing over the screen where Sydney headed down the back stairs.

"Well, considering French Intelligence was holding you today for some reason, a guy can't be too cautious, can he?" Henry's tone was clipped, and Ella figured it'd be best to keep one eye on the man in case there happened to be another weapon in the room that he decided to go for with Sydney gone.

Before Ella could respond to him, what felt like an explosion from beneath them rocked the floor and had Ella stumbling, but Savanna grabbed her arm to keep her upright. "What was that?"

"They blew a hole in my front door," Henry said through gritted teeth. Oddly, he sounded more frustrated than scared.

Ella watched two figures in all black, faces covered by masks, rifles in front of them, enter through what was once the double doors in the foyer of the home. Two more quickly followed. *They're inside now.*

"One of those guys turned down the hall where Sydney is," Savanna softly said.

Ella tapped at the arrows on the keyboard, trying to sort through the camera views to find Sydney. "There. She's in the office. She's got the bow."

"And she has company," Savanna pointed out, but Sydney was clearly aware she wasn't alone. She dropped to one knee, twisted her torso toward the open doorway, and let an arrow

fly, hitting the would-be assailant standing there directly in the jugular. “Yeah, wow, okay, she just did that.”

“Where are the other three guys who came inside?” Ella shifted screens again, but froze at the sight of one image, then clapped a hand over her mouth as tears welled in her eyes.

“Our guys,” Savanna said when Ella was unable to get her voice to work. “They’re here.”

Ella lowered her hand from her mouth. “They were released just in time.” *With their weapons?*

Jesse stealthily maneuvered across the property toward the house, his shoulders hunched slightly forward and his rifle trained ahead.

He’s a skilled operator, Ella reminded herself, while at the same time trying not to think about what he’d admitted to her on the plane. That Zoran was alive because he’d been “off his game” that day, distracted by Ella’s impending marriage to Brian. *Hopefully, he won’t be off tonight with me here.* She couldn’t bear it if anything happened to him, let alone see it on camera the way Savanna had seen her husband executed by terrorists in 2015.

And, oh, Savanna. This couldn’t be easy for her. Ella reached out and squeezed her hand in support.

The sight of Griffin had her clutching Savanna’s hand even tighter as they watched him moving alongside Jesse, then shooting someone ... on the roof?

The rest of Jesse’s team seemed to fan out to different locations, but Ella’s attention was riveted to Jesse. To his every move as she followed him from screen to screen. “They’re inside now.” She brushed her fingers over Jesse’s face on the screen, which now showed him in the foyer.

She gasped when Jesse discharged his weapon. She couldn't hear anything from inside the safe room, and she wasn't sure if that made watching the action better or worse.

Griffin and Oliver were now behind Jesse, who held up a fist, a signal for the guys to remain in place for a moment. Jesse allowed his sling to catch the rifle, then withdrew a sidearm from his hip and a knife from his thigh. He motioned toward the stairs as if letting the others know he was moving up a level. Griffin and Oliver remained downstairs, one going left and the other right.

It was killing her to remain in the room while they were out there risking their lives, but there was no other option. She and Savanna were decent shots, but they couldn't join the fight. Not with an unknown number of "tangos," as Sydney had called them.

"No one has found the study yet. That's something," Henry spoke up for the first time in a few minutes, but Ella didn't bother to respond.

Regardless of whether or not he was involved, and her gut was leaning toward "he was," she knew her role as a "gem" was over. Her main concern right now was that everyone walked away from the night alive and preferably uninjured.

"I lost him on camera. You see him?" Ella frantically searched the screens, but just as she was on the brink of panicking, she found him, thank God. But also, just in time to see Jesse draw a knife across a masked man's throat. She covered her eyes with her hand like she did when watching a horror movie. Even though she loved crime shows and podcasts, she'd never cared for blood and gore. And especially not when her "husband" was the one to cause the red river to flow.

She was going to lose the three bites of food she'd forced down when the French had provided them with dinner earlier.

Ella slowly lowered her hand, watching Jesse on the move again, gun in one hand, knife situated in his other.

And before she knew it, another tango had turned the corner, catching Jesse by surprise. But Jesse dropped him to the ground a moment later and wrapped a leg over the guy's chest.

He sliced yet another throat, the man's blood spurting all over Jesse, and Jesse brought his gun to the man's chest and shot him next. End his suffering quicker?

How could she watch any more of this, even if the killings were justified? Seeing Jesse perform his job in vivid detail on screen was too real, too much for her to handle.

And now it was Savanna squeezing Ella's arm for support.

Was that their new friendship motto? *Real friends help each other watch the men they love kill people.*

Griffin was the next to take a life. His rifle instead of a knife.

Ella spotted Oliver on another screen in time to see him take down an enemy with his sidearm, after which Sydney ran into the room poised and ready to release another arrow seconds before she realized it was Oliver.

After they exchanged a quick word, Oliver peered straight at one of the cameras. "We're coming," he mouthed.

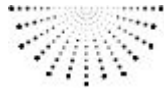
"I'm sure Sydney told them we're here," Ella softly said, the sick feeling in her gut easing up some.

"Gray's inside now. Carter too," Savanna announced. "Perimeter must be secure. That's a good sign."

“Jesse,” Ella cried out at the sight of him entering the study on screen a minute later. She hurried to the door and set her hands against it, not sure what to do. She needed him to give her the OK.

She looked back at the screens and discovered Jesse peering around the room searching for a camera, and when he spotted it, she read his lips: “It’s all clear. You can come out.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



JESSE NEARLY SQUEEZED THE BREATH FROM ELLA'S LUNGS, holding her so tight against his frame that his ammo vest dug into her ribs, not that she cared. She didn't want him to let her go.

"I want a bow," Ella mumbled, thinking about Sydney and how she'd handled herself while waiting for the cavalry she hadn't known was coming.

"What?" he whispered, still cupping the back of her head with one palm while the other remained firmly against her back. At least he'd shifted his rifle to his side before hugging her, so she was grateful *that* wasn't digging into her as well.

"Everyone okay?" The deep voice belonged to Carter.

"We're good," Savanna answered, but Ella remained quiet, not ready to leave Jesse's strong embrace.

"Did anyone touch you? Did Rochella—"

"No," Ella cut Jesse off, her voice trembling. "No one hurt me."

"Thank God. I'm so sorry," he rasped into her ear before easing up on his hold and slowly releasing her. Ella reluctantly untangled herself from him when that was the last thing she wanted to do.

“I’m okay. We’re all okay,” she whispered, letting her tears flow as the shock of what had just happened tried to take hold. She’d held herself together while in the safe room watching the scene unfold, but now her resolve was faltering. The attack on Henry’s estate was the proverbial cherry on top of a day from hell. And she needed to keep moving forward, or the fears that were right on her tail would overtake her. Not gonna happen. “The timing of this ...”

“I know.” His tone was grave, but as he stared into her eyes, she swore she saw what looked a bit like hope. “Shit,” he said, breaking the moment. “I, um, got blood in your hair. Probably on your sweater too.”

“It’s okay.” She set her hand to his chest, needing to feel the comfort of his heartbeat, but the chest plate and ammo vest were in the way.

He took another step back and peered around the room as if remembering they weren’t alone or that he’d taken the lives of multiple men only minutes ago.

Ella followed his gaze and did a headcount of who was now with them in the study. Henry was parked in the armchair by the fireplace, as still as a mannequin, but that was probably because Carter stood beside him, a sidearm in hand and a look on his face that would put the fear of God into anyone.

Griffin and Savanna stood near the safe room, as far away from Henry as possible. The grim expression Griffin was aiming at Henry pretty much said it all—he didn’t trust the man. He probably shared the same concerns Sydney expressed right before she’d gone badass operator mode on the intruders.

When Gray and Sydney joined them in the room a second later, Ella had to assume Jack and Oliver were outside, keeping an eye on the property for any unexpected visitors.

“They didn’t cut the lights or security cams, just jammed the phone and comm feeds,” Sydney shared, stating the obvious, which seemed uncharacteristic of her based on what little Ella knew. Which meant Sydney was going somewhere important with that line of thought.

“That’s because he’s watching us.” Carter lifted his gaze to the camera above the doorway and aimed his weapon. Ella squeezed her eyes shut but still flinched when he fired.

“Who?” Ella asked as Jesse reached for her waist and pulled her to his side.

“What’s going on? Who were those men?” Henry spoke up before anyone could even contemplate answering Ella’s question.

“A man like you would have security, but there were no bodies other than the ones we put down.” Carter crouched before Henry’s chair and set the muzzle of his gun to the man’s knee, which had Henry pinning his back to the red leather and his hands gripping the chair arms. The corner of Carter’s mouth twitched before he tilted his head to the side and studied Rochella as though deciding whether or not to kill him.

Carter wouldn’t, would he?

“They didn’t stay and defend you. So, why’d your guards cut and run?” Carter’s smooth tone could melt butter, and yet somehow, that made him come across as almost more intimidating.

Were it not for the firm hold Jesse had on her, Ella’s legs would most likely have given out ten minutes ago.

Dead bodies littered Henry Rochella’s home. And Jesse’s boss was holding a gun to the fashion mogul’s knee. This was

the stuff of movies, not her life.

“I pay my men to protect me. Not enough to die for me. They warned me of a threat, and we went into the safe room. They’re not trained fighters, which you all clearly are,” Henry answered, his tone a bit sharper than she’d expected, given Carter’s proximity. Nothing timid, and certainly not charming, about Henry right now.

“I’m only going to ask you this one time.” Carter’s even-tempered voice inched lower this time, deep-blue-sea kind of low and dark. “Are you working for The Chechen?”

“The who?” Henry’s eyes widened, and maybe he was a good actor, but to Ella, he seemed as surprised by the question as she was.

Because who in the hell was The Chechen? Was the word “The” part of his name, like the actor *The Rock*? The two words had rolled from Carter’s tongue with such a heavy weight.

“*Those* were The Chechen’s men?” When it was Sydney’s voice that broke the silence, Ella looked at Sydney in shock. Emotion, damn near a 6 out of 10, which seemed to be a lot for her, crossed her face. Tight draw of the lips. Sharp line across the brow. And *oh-shit* creases around Sydney’s eyes.

Yeah, that’s not good. Sydney showing fear? The woman cut down those men in the house like she was playing paintball.

Carter stood and lifted his gun from Henry’s knee, then set eyes on Sydney. “That was his team. But I don’t think he had plans to hurt anyone tonight. He wanted confirmation we were here in Paris.”

“And most likely to study our moves and learn how we operate,” Gray said while pointing to the blown-out camera. “He was watching us.”

“I’ll go destroy the footage anyway. We don’t need it falling into any other hands that we were here,” Sydney said, blinking slowly and suddenly appearing pale and exhausted. She looked to Gray and waited for his nod before quietly making her way to the safe room, eyes focused on the floor and bow still in hand.

A cold bluster of air shot up Ella’s back. Ella had yet to see Sydney act like anything other than a badass. Nothing seemed to scare her. And now it felt as if Sydney had seen a ghost.

Jesse must have sensed Ella’s fear because he tightened his hold of her. It had to be hard for Jesse to stand down and watch Carter handle Henry when she knew he most likely wanted to tear the man apart if he was in any way connected to what happened tonight. The fact he’d reined in his anger instead of attacking Henry, that he’d chosen to stay by her side and comfort her, meant more than he could possibly know.

“We should get out of here soon,” Griffin announced, but Ella had a feeling the guys wouldn’t be going anywhere without Henry or prying answers from him first.

But *did* he have answers? Or was this all a misunderstanding?

“You still haven’t answered his question with a yes or a no.” Gray’s menacing tone drew Ella’s focus to see Gray had moved next to Carter.

The two team leaders stood before Henry, and it seemed to be enough to put that fear of God back into him.

“No, I don’t know any Chechens.” Henry looked toward the fire, away from the two men. “But I am working with French Intelligence. This,” he began while opening his palms, keeping only his profile to Ella, “was not a coincidence.”

Ella closed her eyes at his words, her head falling. Shoulders drooping. She’d hoped and prayed for a misunderstanding.

Jesse maintained his hold of her and began moving his thumb in small, soothing circles over the small of her back. The way he’d maintained control of his anger, especially at the revelation from Henry, had her breath stuttering a little. Because so much of her was still afraid that control would soon snap.

“Talk,” Gray prompted.

Henry nervously settled his hands on his knees and focused his gaze there as well, then cleared his throat. “A week ago, I was contacted by French Intelligence and offered a deal.”

“Why? Your record was clean,” Griffin said.

That’s right. Griffin had been the one assigned to look into Henry, and Ella knew he’d be kicking himself in the ass for missing whatever *this* was.

“I may have purchased some hard-to-get furs and other fabrics through less than legal channels this year. There’s been a lot of supply chain issues if you haven’t been paying attention to the news,” he said, defending himself, which was going to be a wasted effort in this room. “The police knew, but they turned a blind eye to it.”

“Money tends to shut people’s eyes,” Gray remarked, then made a get-on-with-it motion, directing Henry to keep talking.

“Well, the police no longer wanted my money. They wanted my help. And they promised me I’d avoid charges and they’d permanently look the other way if I agreed to do one thing.”

No. Ella squeezed her eyes closed, knowing what was coming. And she wasn’t sure if her heart could take the news. She’d been so excited when this icon of the fashion world had sought her out and said he loved her designs, offered her a chance to work with Rochella. But it was all fake. My God, she felt like a fool. How could she have ever truly believed a billionaire would stumble upon her Instagram account with only fifty-nine followers? “There are no Southern gems. No retirement-birthday party for your mom in June. It was all fake,” she whispered, tears choking her up now.

“The retirement and party are real, but no, there are no, um, gems.” Henry’s words had her opening her eyes, her heart breaking. “I was instructed to help them draw a woman to Paris. A woman whose interest was fashion. And well, that’s why they picked me. They seemed to already know so much about you, I—I don’t know.” He looked at Ella, and there was a hint of apology in his eyes, but she refused to accept any *sorrys* from him if he were to offer. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Jesse spoke up this time, and unlike Carter’s tone, Jesse’s was cutting. Knife-across-the-throat cutting. And she almost closed her eyes again at the memory of him doing exactly that.

“What was the plan?” Carter holstered his weapon, but Gray and Jesse kept hold of their rifles at the ready.

“They said I had to come up with a believable way to get you to Paris the first week of the new year,” he revealed. “The

wedding was a surprise.” He cleared his throat again. “For the American too, from the way he reacted when I told him.”

“The American?” Jesse lowered his hand from Ella and took a step forward, slowly leaving her side. The rational part of her brain said it was okay, but her heart ... it squeezed a bit as he did so. “The guy happen to resemble Harrison Ford?”

Wait, what?

“Yes, I suppose you could say that,” Henry answered. “He didn’t share his name, but he was accompanied by French Intelligence in our first meeting, and then he spoke to me on the phone a few times after that.”

The way Carter looked over at Jesse had Ella’s stomach knotting for the hundredth time that day. Impending doom? Apocalyptic-kind?

“Your MI6 friend left out that detail,” Gray said. “She didn’t tell us *they’re* why we’re in Paris to begin with.”

Carter looked away from Gray as if he wasn’t ready to address that problem. “When did they tell you the second part of their plan?”

“At what point did they let you know Ella would be coming to your house as bait?” Jesse asked this time, and she saw the transformation happen, even with his profile to her. The man who’d comforted her moments ago was prepared to kill Henry right now.

And based on the slope of Henry’s shoulders, he realized Jesse was now the major threat in the room. She was Jesse’s “wife,” after all.

“Late this—this morning, I swear. I had no clue about this when I went to Alabama,” Henry answered in a breathy voice. “Officers showed up at my estate and told me they’d be calling

me later in the day to pick up Ella and two others. Then they sent my security team home for the day.”

“The guards that were here before the property was breached, were they actually French operatives?” Gray asked.

Henry nodded. “They said if their plan worked, then armed men would show up at some point after Ella was at my home. And they’d stick to the woods out back and keep an eye on the property in case you all needed an assist once you showed up.”

“So, they waited for your home to be breached before releasing us,” Gray summarized the situation. “That’s why we were being held so close to your property. How fucking kind of them to make such arrangements.”

“I’m assuming they didn’t tell you their actual plan?” Carter probed a moment later.

“No, they only told me they were after someone dangerous, and well, they didn’t think he would personally come tonight, but they’re hoping to somehow catch him. I, um, don’t know. They were vague.”

“Of course they were,” Gray said under his breath, and his attention moved toward Sydney, who’d reentered the study from the safe room.

“The DGSE will follow us when we leave here, then.” Carter turned toward Gray. “They’ll keep tracking us in hopes The Chechen will come after us himself now that he knows we’re really in Paris.”

“What does he want with us? This, um, Chechen?” Ella softly asked, still trying to wrap her head around the fact one of her fashion idols had used her like bait to save his own ass.

Carter looked at Ella with regret. “It’s me he wants.”

Ella set the heel of her hand to her forehead and massaged, her head hurting from trying to understand it all. “Let me get this straight. Henry helped get *me* here, and the agencies only wanted me here because then Jesse would come. And if Jesse came, then Carter would too. And if Carter’s here, then this Chechen will eventually come because he wants Carter?” *What-the-what?*

The fact Carter nodded meant he’d followed her rambling, and it was on point.

“We really need to go,” Gray insisted, tipping his head toward the door.

“I just need a minute alone with him first before we do.” Jesse let the sling catch his rifle, then bent over Henry, fisted the lapels of his suit jacket, and jerked the man to his feet.

She knew Jesse’s “reined-in control” was too good to be true. Henry had used Ella, placed her in danger, and that was something a man like Jesse wouldn’t be able to forgive and forget.

“He’s not worth it.” But the question was, could she calm Jesse down? Would he listen to her?

“Just one minute,” Carter surprised her by saying while twirling his finger like a helo blade to signal to the guys to head out.

“Take her out of the room,” Jesse said without looking back at Ella. “Griffin, please,” he urged, never losing his focus from his target. From the man he was about to destroy. Or ... kill?

At the feel of Griffin’s hand on her arm, Ella yanked herself free of his touch. “No,” she rejected, the stubborn fight in her replacing her fear.

Jesse kept his grip on Henry, who seemed smart enough to realize he shouldn't resist or try to fight back at the moment. His blue eyes caught Ella's, and he tipped his head, his mouth drawing into a hard, firm line.

Ella drew her hands to her hips and did her best to stand her ground. "If you want that minute with him," she began, "then you're going to have to take it while I watch you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



OUTSKIRTS OF VERSAILLES, FRANCE

“HOW’D CARTER PULL THIS OFF?” ELLA ASKED AS SHE PEERED at what looked like a small castle from the window of the SUV the team had acquired about two hours ago, shortly after leaving Henry’s estate. They’d abandoned the three Suburbans “gifted” to them by French Intelligence in exchange for two vehicles, minus tracking devices this time. Another “how’d Carter manage to do that?” added to the growing list of questions in her head.

“It’s a bed-and-breakfast and closed for the season,” Griffin answered, which wasn’t quite what she’d asked, but maybe Griffin didn’t know how Carter had arranged for their temporary quarters.

“Hmm.” Ella turned her attention to Jesse sitting next to her in the back seat, his gaze laser-focused out the window. There’d been no time for him to change, and with his hand resting atop the rifle on his lap, he appeared to be expecting another ambush.

They were parked in front of the bed-and-breakfast, waiting for the rest of the Falcon team to give them the “all clear” that it was safe to go inside.

Jesse had barely spoken a word since they’d driven away from Rochella’s estate, which was now in need of extensive repairs, and probably a crime-scene cleaning crew as well. But they’d left without a drop of Henry’s blood on Jesse’s hands, and for that, she was grateful.

There had been a few harrowing seconds during her and Jesse’s showdown in that study when she wasn’t sure what he’d do though. She’d resisted the urge to visibly sigh with

relief when he'd finally grunted and shoved Henry into his chair unharmed.

"*You owe her a thank-you and an apology,*" Jesse had grumbled before striding Ella's way. He'd reached for her hand and guided her from the study before Henry had a chance to speak.

And now, here they were in front of a magnificent place that looked like something straight from *Beauty and the Beast*. But the alarming events that had transpired earlier that night were still playing out in her mind despite the fairy-tale setting.

She had to admit it was charming, made even more so by the patches of pristine white snow clinging to the shrubbery and coating the ground. Ella guessed the place was several hundred years old and had maybe been a small chateau in its prime before it'd been restored and modernized here and there over the years.

"It's beautiful, even in the dark. I can't wait to see it in the morning," Savanna said wistfully as Griffin reached across the console for her hand. "They're still watching us, though, right? We ditched the tracked SUVs, but someone has eyes in the sky, don't they?"

"More than likely." Griffin looked back at Jesse, who didn't make eye contact, so he focused on Savanna. "Hard to ditch a drone, but swapping vehicles and taking a longer route to get here was more about losing a possible tail from the, well, bad guys."

Oh, true. Ella hadn't considered that possibility. She also wasn't overly concerned that French Intelligence probably had eyes on them right now, even if they had used her as bait, luring her straight into danger for whatever reason.

But the French and CIA wouldn't just let them get slaughtered by this Chechen, whom she still knew nothing about, would they? If he tried to attack them again, she had to believe the intelligence agencies would surely swoop in with air support or something. "So, you think if this, um, Chechen was having us tailed, you were able to throw them off?" *And what about Zoran? Where was he, and did he still fit into the picture of problems?*

"We did our best to shake off anyone on the ground," was all Griffin said, which prompted Ella to lean closer to the window and scan the starry sky.

"At what point are you going to fill us in on what's going on, and who this scary-sounding Chechen is?" Ella asked, probably for the fifth time since they'd left the Rochella estate.

"I think it's best we all talk when we're together in the same room." Griffin twisted in his seat and peered at Ella. "Gray updated his dad and A.J. on the situation before we left Paris though."

"Oh. Well, at least someone knows what's going on," Ella said when Griffin gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry, I'm a ball of nerves. I didn't mean to be pissy." But then she couldn't help but ask, "Did A.J. lose his mind when you told him what happened tonight? Is he okay?"

Had A.J., or well, maybe Beckett, hit a few walls at the news of this *new* problem? The Chechen?

She'd love to talk to her brother, but the guys had taken her phone and powered it off in Paris to prevent it from being used to track their location. Savanna's as well.

"I imagine A.J. handled the news as any brother would," Griffin replied. "But the Hawkinses need to beef up security in

light of the additional threat. Rory and Chris as well.”

“You said Zoran most likely wouldn’t come after my family since that’s not his style, but this, um ... Chechen might?” Ella asked, noticing Jesse shift on the seat, obviously uncomfortable by the fact that his best friend and sister were going to need *more* protection because of what was happening.

“According to Carter, anyone is fair game when it comes to that man, so we’ll need to bring additional support to Alabama to watch over everyone there,” Griffin responded, still keeping his comments vague-ish about this “man” that the guys clearly feared more than Zoran. “Jack’s motioning for us to come,” Griffin tossed out a moment later.

“Wait,” Jesse said, and Ella startled at his sudden command. “Let me get the door for you. I want to have your six as we walk in.”

Have my six? Her eyes locked on to him as he exited the vehicle and prowled around the front of the SUV with the grace of a panther. Upon opening her door and helping her step out, he quickly escorted her toward the side door where Jack waited for the four of them.

“You okay?” Savanna whispered to Ella as she came up beside her. “I am, but I’m not, if that makes any sense. Just trying to keep as calm as you were back in the safe room. You know, be optimistic that everything will work out.”

Savanna really was an optimist, especially since she’d met Griffin because, with his help, everything had worked out when she’d found herself embroiled in trouble. She’d even found love again because of that danger. Ella wasn’t so sure things would work out the same for her. It was hard to maintain any level of optimism when there was a man out

there gunning for them, especially a man that even Carter seemed to fear.

“I’m feeling a bit broken, to be honest,” Ella quietly confessed. “Just last week, I was opening Christmas presents with my family, and today I’m in France being chased by psychopaths.” When Jesse momentarily stopped walking, she realized he’d overheard her.

From her peripheral view, she spied Jesse’s focus fall to the rifle held securely in his grip before clearing his throat and moving forward again.

The broken one. That’s how Jesse thought of himself, and she hadn’t meant for her words just now to hurt him or for him to think he’d “rubbed” off on her.

“I have to believe we’ll be okay. We’re strong, Southern women, remember?” Savanna’s confidence had definitely been renewed with Griffin back at her side, that was for sure.

“Right.” Ella managed a quick smile, then followed Jack into the common living space.

Some of their bags were already in the room, and Ella spotted one of her suitcases. Carter and his teammates had inspected their luggage for tracking devices while still in the trunks of the three SUVs before they’d even left Rochella’s and ditched those vehicles.

She removed the jacket Jesse had placed over her shoulders back at Henry’s estate and set it on one of the loveseats by the fireplace. Maybe she had time for a shower and clean clothes? Of course, answers were all she really wanted right now.

Carter was balancing a laptop on his palm when he strode toward her and Jesse. “I know you want answers. But why

don't you wash up first. We have some more calls to make." A mind reader as well as mysterious, huh?

"I think that's a good idea," Griffin said, looking at Savanna and placing a hand on her back. "Come on, you too. I'll take you to one of the rooms."

"You're not leaving my sight." Jesse's deep, authoritative tone stopped Ella in her tracks just as she was about to reach for her suitcase. He set down his rifle and removed his vest, then unstrapped a metal-looking plate he'd had on over his shirt. "Let's go." He didn't take off the sidearm strapped to his thigh or the one holstered at his hip. And where was that knife he'd been so handy with? Would he have used that on Henry had she given him that "one minute"?

But he didn't hurt him. He did that for me, she reminded herself.

Jesse grabbed one of the suitcases Ella had packed back in Bama, then directed her toward the staircase with a tilt of his chin.

Ella was about to follow orders, but at the sight of Sydney kneeling and searching a bag, she paused. "I didn't get a chance to thank you, Sydney." She waited for Sydney to look up at her. "You risked your neck for us."

Sydney gave her a blank look, seemingly uncomfortable with the thanks or possibly unsure of what to say or do. All Ella got from her was a nod before she returned to digging through the bag, shaking her head and muttering to herself. The only thing Ella could make out was something about Aleksa and "what a waste."

Starting again for the staircase, she clocked Gray's gaze pinned on Sydney, something she'd noticed happened often. It

was curious, but she didn't have time to dwell on it because Jesse gently nudged her to get a move on with the bag.

Once they reached the landing, Ella chose the first bedroom that she came across. After flicking on the lights, she swallowed a little gasp at the quaint room laid out before her.

The wall behind the king-sized bed was a soft purple which showcased the gorgeous headboard—an intricately stitched needlepoint design of colorful wildflowers held within a gilt frame, something one might expect to see in a French castle. Vintage leather suitcases stacked on each side of the bed served as nightstands, and the lamps resembled old-fashioned lanterns. “Charming,” she said under her breath, forgetting for a hot minute why she was there. This was most definitely not their honeymoon.

It's all a sham. Even Henry's offer.

The sound of the door clicking shut tore away those depressing thoughts. Turning, she found Jesse had already reached the bed, set her suitcase there, and was in the process of opening it for her. “I'll wait here while you shower.” He sat on the bed and removed his Beretta M9—which she recognized because A.J. and Beckett had the same one—and held on to it, resting it on his thigh.

“You, um, think you need that?” she asked while searching the bag for toiletries and a change of clothes. It was late, but she doubted Jesse would approve of her wearing her pajamas around his teammates, not that she would anyway.

“Not taking chances,” Jesse remarked, his eyes shifting to the wood floors as if he were avoiding eye contact. “Ella,” he said when her back was to him.

She went still at the unexpected tenderness with which he'd spoken her name. "If you're going to apologize about what happened tonight, you don't need to. From the sounds of it, we were all manipulated. I assume it's a greater-good kind of thing though." She turned to the side to look at him. "Does it suck? Of course. But like you said on the plane ... it was a necessary evil." With that, Jesse blinked as if stunned by her choice of words, and maybe she was a little surprised as well.

Part of her bought into what she'd just said, and the other part—the jury was still deliberating.

Without waiting for him to comment, she went into the connecting bathroom, closed the door, and dumped her stuff onto the vanity alongside the single sink. She pulled aside the pale purple shower curtain surrounding the clawfoot tub and turned on the water for the shower.

"Three minutes," Jesse said from the other side of the door, knocking twice. "After that, I'm coming in to make sure you didn't slip and fall."

"That's hardly enough time."

"Four," he countered with a grunt, and she rolled her eyes but didn't protest.

She couldn't wait to get rid of the clothes she'd worn for what felt like weeks.

Once free of them all, she stepped into the shower and let the not-yet-warm water pelt her tired body.

"You shouldn't have resisted," she said, knowing Jesse was most likely leaning against the door and able to hear her. "You were tasered because of me. I'm sorry." She went on when he remained quiet, "I didn't want to go with Henry when they released us, by the way. The officers forced us. I didn't

want to leave you there. That killed me, just so you know.” Her voice broke this time, and she wasn’t sure if he’d heard her last words over the running water that was taking forever to heat up since it’d most likely not been used in some time.

“I’m just thankful you’re okay.” His voice was too close, which meant only one thing.

Ella parted the curtain enough to peek out, finding Jesse inside the bathroom with his back to the closed door.

“What happened to my four minutes?”

He cocked his head, and the twitch of his lips, like he was fighting a smile, took her by surprise. “You were talking to me. I didn’t want to be rude and miss what you were saying.”

“Oh, is that so?” The sight of her “husband” standing there fully clothed and watching while she showered behind a nearly sheer curtain pushed all the dark thoughts away.

“Do you want me to leave?” His sultry voice was teasing now, and he rolled his tongue between his lips.

She thought back to when he’d licked her pussy and sent her into orgasm heaven on board that plane. She couldn’t believe how much she’d been missing before that magical moment between them.

Jesse pushed away from the door and took one step closer to the tub. “Do you?” he asked again, his tone deeper this time.

She pressed her thighs together, the sound of his commanding voice sending a little jolt between her legs. “You can stay,” she whispered, “but maybe move back to the door again.” *I might completely forget what happened tonight and pull the curtain back and let you enjoy another show. Participate again too.*

She still couldn't believe she'd started touching herself on board the plane the other night, feeling the need to get off knowing Jesse was in the bathroom stroking his cock while thinking about her. It'd been brazen and bold and downright crazy. And she didn't regret it for a second, not even after their slight tiff about his hitman job that morning before the police had intercepted the jet.

How could she regret it when her body yearned for this man on so many levels? The fact that she was aroused and turned on right now was evidence of their insane chemistry. The physical and emotional connection was off-the-charts.

And he's gone from my hate list, so there's that too.

Jesse backed up against the door and rubbed the muzzle of his gun along his thigh, which should have shocked her back to the gravity and danger of their situation, but it didn't.

"Maybe I should wait outside." His eyes moved over the curtain again, like if he looked hard enough, he'd be able to see through it. "I can't be distracted again."

Again? Like he'd been with Zoran that day last year? When she'd read between the lines of what he'd said to her on the plane, that Zoran survived because he was distraught over her upcoming marriage to Brian, she hadn't been sure how to react.

"Jesse?" she whispered, feeling a bit panicked that he was going to cut and run. Not physically, but emotionally bail on her.

"What?" The word came out choked, like a muffled sound as if he were dealing with an internal battle of some sort, and she needed to pull him to her side before he surrendered to the

worries and bad thoughts. She prevented him from unleashing on Henry, so there had to be hope.

Her heart was pounding furiously as her nerves took over, but with both hands, she parted the shower curtain, relieved the water was now warm and allowed her “husband” to see her completely naked for the first time in three years. On the plane, he’d seen most of her, but not *all* of her.

“What are you doing?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“Nothing has been real,” she began in a soft voice, shivering despite the warmer water, and her nipples hardened to painful points. “The marriage. The Southern gems. Nothing. But what I feel for you here and now, despite all the craziness ... is real.” She set a hand over her heart and kept going so she wouldn’t break down and sob. “What I feel for you right now, it’s real. And no one can take that from me.” She swallowed. “From us.”

He stepped forward. “What are you saying?”

“You need to know that as angry as I might get with you at times, or as scared as maybe I’ve been ... my vows to you were real.” *I love you. I’ll always love you.* But why couldn’t she say that right now?

Jesse’s gaze fell to the tiled floor, his chest expanding with a deep breath as he holstered his sidearm, and she nervously waited for his next move.

Shifting his attention to the door, Jesse clicked the lock in place before turning to her. The strain in his jaw beneath his facial hair and the vein at his neck were signs he was still trying to fight something. Or maybe he was fighting his desire to come to her?

“Are you going to reject me, Jesse Edward McAdams?” she whispered. “Or are you going to love me?”

Two steps closer, and he was within arm’s reach. “I told you my vows were real. So are the photos in my wallet. All of it,” he returned in a low tone that had a shiver going down her spine. “How I feel about you, and how I have always felt about you is more *real* than my own existence,” he rasped while erasing the last bit of space between them, and without hesitation, he cupped the back of her head. He looked deep into her eyes and added in a hoarse voice, “It’s so real that in three years, I haven’t so much as touched another woman.”

His lips met hers, and she sealed her eyes as his tongue explored her mouth, and it took her a few seconds to truly comprehend what Jesse had confessed. And he’d said a hell of a lot.

She didn’t want to cry because of his confession. She didn’t want to break into an ugly sob at the fact he’d admitted he hadn’t been with another woman since New York, not while they were kissing, but ...

The tears unleashed anyway, blending in with the water overhead. Jesse must have heard the emotion choking her up, or felt it in her kiss because he slowly eased back and brought both hands to the sides of her arms, holding her tight while her wet skin soaked through his shirt.

She needed to tell him about Brian. To tell Jesse he was the only man she’d been with since New York too. And the only man, as of the other day, who’d gone down on her ... ever. *Ever-ever*. Thirtysomething years old, and she’d never let a man set his face between her legs until Jesse.

But the knock at the bathroom door had Jesse stepping back, and he drew the curtains together as if terrified one of

his teammates would see her naked body.

“Hey,” Griffin called out from the bedroom. “Thatcher’s on the phone, and he’s finally ready to talk to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



“JESSE, DID YOU HEAR ME? I SAID I’M SORRY,” THATCHER repeated. The secure line from which he’d called was currently broadcasting his words through the speaker of Jesse’s phone. Jesse closed his eyes, those last four words triggering an unpleasant memory, taking him back to Bama during his senior year in high school.

“I said I’m sorry. Did you even hear me?” Jesse’s father had grumbled before picking up the wrench he’d thrown at him in the garage, out of sight for Rory or his mom to witness.

Afterward, his father had taken a knee in front of where Jesse sat, his back to the wall and his hand massaging his ribs in an effort to ease the damage his father had inflicted with more than just the wrench. *“You have to stop getting into fights at school.”* Like always, his dad’s tone had become more calm and even, almost like he cared. Like he’d really felt bad about hitting him. *“You can’t keep playing the hero, fighting other people’s battles for them just because they’re too weak to do it themselves.”*

“What am I supposed to do, Pops?” His ribs had been on fire from the pain, but he’d swallowed a groan. He never let his dad know how badly he’d hurt him, but it’d always taken a bit more effort to hide the pain from his mom and sister. *“The*

guy had it coming. He was picking on someone three years younger, and I'm not gonna just watch it happen."

"I said not to involve yourself, and that's what I damn well mean. Don't you give me lip, boy. Don't talk back to me." He'd leaned in and spat out the words, his breath smelling strongly of alcohol. Single malt scotch. Always Glenlivet. "You get suspended one more time, and you're going to the Army the second you turn eighteen. Now get the hell out of my garage and clean yourself up. I'm sending you to the Hawkins Ranch to do some real work since you're not allowed to go to school for three damn days."

"Jesse?" He opened his eyes at the sound of Ella's soft voice guiding him back to the present, and he spotted her standing on the other side of the table where his cell phone lay faceup.

Those beautiful blue eyes were the calm to his storm. Always had been. She'd never had a clue about his father's temper or abuse, but she was always the first person he'd sought out back then to help "revitalize" him, in a way. There'd always been something about her that put him at ease, long before his attraction to her had become sexual. Her fresh outlook on the world made all the ugly at home fade away.

And looking at Ella right now, not even five minutes after he'd admitted to her in the bathroom how he really felt ... made the memory with his dad hurt less. The pain in his chest felt as though it was shrinking in size the longer she stared at him.

Ella reached over and set her palm over his hand on the table. Had something officially changed between them upstairs?

She'd witnessed him take lives that night, and he'd have throttled Henry if she hadn't stopped him.

But the moment they'd shared in the bathroom felt significant, and that kiss had him wondering if they were finally working toward that "middle place." And it gave him hope. But first, he had to deal with Thatcher, as well as the world of problems his old boss had created for him.

"Yeah, I heard your apology," Jesse finally spoke, and based on the anger he heard in his own voice, he figured everyone in the room was most likely worried he was on the verge of a mental breakdown. The only two teammates missing were Jack and Oliver, who were outside walking the perimeter for another security check.

Jesse purposefully avoided scanning the room for everyone's reactions to this shit-show between him and Thatcher. He needed to keep his attention on Ella if he was going to get through this call.

"And I don't accept your apology," Jesse slowly added when Thatcher opted for silence this time. "I don't care what you're about to say as to why you lied, used, and—"

"Just hear me out," Thatcher cut him off. "I'm in France right now. I can come to you if you'd like?"

Of course, he was in France. What'd Jesse expect? For him to sit on the sidelines? No, Thatcher may have had E-9 status, the highest Air Force enlisted rank when he left, but he'd never lost the scrappy, go-for-the-jugular, New Guy mentality. He was an overachiever when it came to cutting down the world's bad guys, and at one time, Jesse had admired that about him.

“Let me guess, you know exactly where we are too.” Carter approached the table and set his palms down alongside Jesse’s. “Share the drone feed with us. We need to know if or when any threats might drop in.”

“You’re in the clear right now. You did have a tail, but you lost them. But our eyes in the sky lost them as well,” Thatcher revealed the shit news.

“It’s a wonder you can even find your balls these days,” Carter remarked. “Of course, you probably keep them in a steel box on top of some suit’s desk back at Headquarters, don’t you? Letting them call the shots.”

“How I’ve missed you, Dominick.” Thatcher’s sarcasm bled through the line.

Jesse looked at Carter from the corner of his eye, realizing there was an obvious beef he’d been unaware of between the two men. New boss versus old boss. Well, if tonight was proof of anything, it was that Jesse was firmly on Carter’s side. And he now understood why Carter hadn’t liked Thatcher from the get-go. He’d most likely worked with him before.

“Sending you the transmission now. You should have access to our drone feed within sixty seconds,” Thatcher said, after which Carter looked Sydney’s way, signaling her to handle it. “By the way, we heard that a little birdie whispered some intel into your ear,” Thatcher added. “I bet you’re asking yourself whether or not that was part of the plan too.”

Carter’s nostrils flared, and his hand snapped into a fist. Something about this MI6 officer clearly got under his skin and disrupted his usually calm and collected demeanor.

“You don’t sound all that apologetic to me,” Jesse said, trying to redirect the conversation before Thatcher could get in

another dig at Carter. “You should have told me about The Chechen. I should have known what was at stake.” He pushed away from the table and stood tall. Ella gave him a compassionate look, and he was surprised to realize his body wasn’t as tightly strung as he expected. “You manipulated this entire situation.”

“I didn’t anticipate the fake marriage, I’ll have to give you that. A nice touch—trying to entice Zoran to make a move earlier than he may have planned.” Thatcher knew exactly what buttons to push. He was still playing mind games—the man couldn’t seem to help himself.

“Had I known Zoran hired The Chechen to do his dirty work, you know I’d never have let Ella come to Paris. I’d have never let her leave the country. Period.” Jesse had nearly forgotten Thatcher was also responsible for setting up Henry Rochella’s offer to Ella and her trip to Paris. Fuck, he wanted to rip his boss apart and take his time doing it too.

He looked at Ella, her eyes wide, a hand over her mouth. She’d just put the pieces together as to the role The Chechen played. She’d heard him mentioned while at Rochella’s, and after talking with Griffin in the car, she knew he was dangerous enough to require additional protection for her family in Alabama.

But the team had yet to tell her and Savanna all the reasons why the guys were worried, including what they’d learned since their detainment by the French. And Jesse hated that she was about to hear more bad news.

“The Chechen is a ... hitman?” Ella asked.

His chest tightened at the thought of her comparing him to The Chechen. God, he hoped she’d never see him like that.

“He’s a hired assassin, yes,” Carter replied when the words remained trapped in Jesse’s mouth. “Responsible for killing various heads of state and dignitaries. But he’s open to any target if the price is right.”

“We’ve been hunting him for years, but Carter’s the only lucky bastard we know of who’s seen his face and walked away to tell about it,” Thatcher commented. “The Chechen knows Carter is personally involved in this op, which means he won’t send a team like he usually does.” Thatcher’s casual tone had Jesse lifting the phone, wishing he could fist the bastard’s shirt and look into his eyes. “We need to get him, no matter what.”

“No matter what?” Jesse did his best to dial down his anger before he chucked the phone across the room. “You’re coloring way outside the lines on this one. Bringing Ella into this is a bit much even for you.”

“I didn’t bring her into this.” Thatcher’s apologetic tone was long gone now. “She was destined to get caught up in the consequences of your failure to kill Zoran because your fucking feelings were hurt over Ella marrying someone else. You brought her into this. Don’t pin that on me.”

Jesse closed his eyes, unable to look at Ella after Thatcher’s comment. Everyone in the room already knew that bit of truth, but hearing Thatcher, of all people, say it aloud in Ella’s presence tested Jesse too much.

In Thatcher’s mind, he was simply playing a game of chess, moving the pieces around until he achieved checkmate on a grave threat. And he’d clearly do anything to win the game. But bottom line, it was Jesse who’d given him those particular chess pieces to work with because Thatcher was

right. Had Jesse finished Zoran eighteen months ago, there'd be no case right now. No lead to The Chechen.

He let go of the phone and turned, spotting Griffin standing alongside Savanna. When Griffin's eyes met his, Jesse knew his teammate understood exactly what he was feeling right now. He'd want to shred anyone who placed Savanna in harm's way.

"What's the plan, Thatch?" Carter's use of his nickname solidified they'd once worked together.

Griffin nodded at Jesse, his way of letting him know he had Jesse's back, whatever he needed. And he appreciated that. *But what do I need? I need Ella safe, not mixed up in this.*

"We wait for The Chechen to come for you, and then we drop in and help you take him down. Captured, not killed. We need him alive to confirm some of his kills and the location of a few bodies." And that was Congress speaking through Thatcher right now. Carter was right—Thatcher's balls were more than likely boxed and on a desk somewhere in D.C.

"You think we'll just sit it out and wait?" Jesse slowly turned back toward the room where Ella was now seated on one of the sofas. "I won't do this."

"What's the difference?" Thatcher shot back. "You were okay when it was Zoran going after you and Ella."

"There's a huge difference. Zoran's MO is eye for an eye. He won't slaughter an entire family to nail one target like The Chechen may do." Carter's quick comment had Jesse closing his eyes.

Slaughter. Not the word he wanted Ella focusing on. Her family. Fuck, her family. If anything happened to them because of this. "Only one person we know of has ever faced

The Chechen one-on-one and survived,” Jesse added, opening his eyes and tearing his fingers through his hair, trying to grasp the situation and devise a new plan, one that didn’t include Ella. *Or* her family becoming collateral damage.

“Lucky for you, that person is on your team,” Thatcher arrogantly remarked, and Jesse stole a quick look at Ella, her face ghostly pale, eyes on the floor.

Damn it. This was too much.

“Your people shouldn’t have taken our software,” Sydney spoke up before Jesse could lash back at his old boss.

How had he ever thought of Thatcher as a father figure? *Joke’s on me, isn’t it? He couldn’t care less about what happens to me.*

“We were using Aleksa, hoping to track Zoran before he got to us.” Sydney handed her laptop to Carter, which showcased the live aerial view of the bed-and-breakfast from the Agency’s drone feed. “If we can find Zoran, maybe we can find The Chechen *before* he finds us.”

“Zoran’s not the HVT, but he needs to be taken down,” Thatcher commented. “He does know Jesse’s name, which means he knows Ella’s.”

“Who leaked my name? Was that part of your fucking plan too?” He needed to punch or shoot someone, damn it.

Ella was on her feet now, face still lacking a bit of its normal color, but she strode his way as if sensing he was an animal in the wild, feeling threatened, and he might bolt. Or bite.

Hell, she was right.

And when she stood by him, stroking his arm, she managed to calm him down when he should have been the one helping her.

She remained steady even when Thatcher said, “We had no choice. We needed Zoran to know your name so that the plan would work with The Chechen. Your name was leaked to someone at Bulgarian Intelligence we believed would share the intel with Zoran for the right price.”

If Thatcher was in front of him right now, so help the man ...

“Why the wife?” Sydney asked, saving Thatcher from a tongue lashing from Jesse. “You know everything about everything, which means you know why Zoran’s wife was murdered in the first place.”

“Why does that matter?” Thatcher replied. Why the hell was he keeping *that* a secret?

“It matters because, in part, Ella and Jesse are in this situation because Zoran’s wife died,” Sydney answered, the confidence in her tone causing Gray to look her way.

“Well, we can’t bring her back to life, and that information won’t help you. I need you to focus on The Chechen. The DGSE are now taking point on Aleksa’s operation, and if you want us to continue to share that drone feed with you, I suggest you not push back on this.” Thatcher was quiet for a moment, and Jesse looked around the room, not sure what to do. Thatcher now had *them* by the balls.

“If you change your mind, and you’d like me to pay you a visit, you know how to reach me. And, Jesse, for what it’s worth, I really am sorry. But the necessary evils of the job—”

Carter ended the call, cutting him off, and Jesse was grateful. He couldn't tolerate any more bullshit from that man, just as he'd never accepted the meaningless apologies from his father over the years.

Some apologies were just too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“ALL THE FLIGHTS TONIGHT ARE FUCKING BOOKED,” GRAY said while striding into the room alongside Jesse.

After Carter had unceremoniously ended the call with Thatcher ten minutes ago, Jesse had disappeared from the living room, presumably for a change of clothes. His shirt had been damp from their shower kiss, but he’d been too anxious to get on the call that he hadn’t swapped it for a dry one.

She was grateful he’d returned in jeans and a plaid button-down. She hadn’t wanted to admit to him that the dried blood on his clothes had been doing a number on her stomach, tossing what little contents were in there every which way like she was on one of those God-awful carnival tilt-a-whirl rides Beckett’s daughter, McKenna, loved. Worst of all, though, was the gruesome vision of him slitting those men’s throats at Henry’s estate. That might stay with her forever.

Ella quickly shook the thoughts from her mind and replaced them with a different memory, one she never wanted to forget—his confession that in the three years since their weekend in New York, he hadn’t so much as touched another woman. After which, he’d kissed her like she’d always belonged to him.

“Wait, what?” Ella blinked, realizing she’d lost her focus.

Gray remained standing by Jesse, hands diving into his pockets. “My guys in California can’t get a flight to Alabama until the morning.”

“That’s still quicker than if I send some of my people.” Carter looked up from his laptop and checked his watch. “The Chechen only confirmed tonight at Rochella’s that I’m actually here.”

“And what does that mean?” Ella asked.

“If The Chechen decides to send a team to Alabama as leverage to try and force me out into the open ... Gray’s guys should get there before any of The Chechen’s men do.” Carter leaned back in his chair by the table covered in tech and slipped his big hands into his dress slacks’ pockets

Leverage? Part of her wished she hadn’t heard that. “So, your guys will help protect my family?” Not that Beckett and the others couldn’t hold their own. Shep, Caleb, and the ranch hands were pretty damn good with a gun, but as far as Ella knew, they’d never killed anyone. And A.J. may have been like Rambo in her mind, but he had his wife and baby to watch over as well, which would complicate things.

Gray moved in front of Carter, and stood near Jesse. “I could only get five guys on such short notice, but hopefully that’s enough.”

Hopefully? Yeah, not the word she wanted to hear when it came to the safety of those she loved.

“I could send more guys, but by the time they got there ...” Carter let his words drift free, and Ella angled her head to look around Gray to see Carter shaking his head. “Plus, we may need the help here if we’re going to face off with The Chechen.”

“A.J.’s going to drive his wife and baby to D.C. to keep them safe. He’ll take a flight back tomorrow so he can focus without distractions,” Jesse noted, his tone dark and deep.

A distraction. Like Ella had been for Jesse. And would she be a distraction once again as he faced going up against both Zoran and The Chechen?

“I’m sorry, Ella.” Gray stroked his jaw, eyes moving to the floor. “I would’ve sent guys to Bama sooner if I had known about The Chechen. We didn’t believe Zoran would ever come after your family. The Chechen being involved changes everything.”

Ella thought back to Jesse’s words to Thatcher though. He wouldn’t have let Ella even go to Paris, period, if he’d known about The Chechen. “The only one who should be apologizing is Jesse’s old boss,” she whispered.

Gray quietly tipped his head as if still feeling the need to apologize, and then he joined Carter at the table and reached for a laptop.

When Ella focused back on Jesse, his jaw was locked tight, and their eyes briefly connected before he turned toward the fireplace. His taut back muscles visibly flexed beneath his shirt, and she could tell he was working hard to contain his emotions.

Savanna squeezed Ella’s thigh, offering silent support while they sat like spectators on the couch and observed the living room of the quaint bed-and-breakfast, now transformed into a command center.

The former Army operators began throwing around military acronyms and jargon left and right as they discussed

operational plans that went over Ella's head for the next thirty or so minutes.

"The only time I've seen him like this was when you were on one of your dates," Savanna quietly said, and Ella followed her tipped chin toward Jesse.

Dates? God, October felt like a million years ago when she'd gone on a bunch of dates in one last attempt to get Jesse to finally step forward and demand *he* be the only one she dated.

But Savanna was right. Jesse was fidgety. Not his norm.

He pulled at the collar of his gray and black plaid button-down shirt like it was choking him. He uncuffed and rolled the sleeves to his elbows only to push them back down again a minute later. Next, he fussed with his ball cap, apparently unable to decide whether to wear it with the bill facing forward or backward.

"Is he going to punch something? Or maybe someone?" Savanna's soft Southern accent was smooth and sweet like the honey she added to the homemade iced tea she always prepared for Ella back home.

"Looks like he wants to hit a lot of *someones*."

Jesse now had his knuckles firmly planted on the oak table on either side of a laptop ensconced in some sort of heavy-duty, indestructible-looking black box, but he was still fidgety. From what Ella could tell, Jesse was a "perfect storm" of fury gathering momentum with each passing minute.

At least he didn't hit Henry the way he hit that wall in his workshop. "I feel helpless," Ella mumbled a few seconds later, hating that they weren't able to do anything other than sit and

watch. “And I’m about to become as fidgety if I don’t do something.”

“Distract yourself. And me too.” Savanna nudged her in the side. “Tell me something. Anything that will take our minds off this craziness.”

Ella thought about it for a second, then leaned over and whispered, “Jesse hasn’t been with another woman since New York.”

Savanna gasped. “Really?”

Yeah, Ella was surprised at that revelation, especially since she’d followed Jesse’s orders and moved on with her life. Well, she’d accepted Brian’s proposal, and had even planned the wedding, but in reality, she’d never moved on.

“Well, that’s, um, kind of a big deal.” Savanna lowered her voice and said, “He waited for you, even when you were engaged. That says a lot.” Her friend’s romantic heart was probably doubling in size about now. At least she was distracted. Goal achieved. “That means he always hoped you’d wind up together,” she added, clasping her hands to her chest.

Anticipating Savanna’s next question, Ella said, “Before you ask, no, I haven’t told him yet. We were interrupted by your man just after we kissed, and I didn’t get a chance.”

“Sorry. I swear, sometimes I think Shakespeare was right.” Ella caught a surprising glimmer of a smile cross Savanna’s lips. “‘*All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.*’ And the writers of our lives loooooove to screw with us. The tension. The buildup.” Savanna mimed an explosion with her hands. “Then boom.” She peeked at Ella. “That interruption will lead to something hotter and heavier later, I bet.”

“Speaking from personal experience, I take it?”

“Gray walked in on Griffin and me one time.” Savanna’s cheeks blushed pink. “I was topless too. So, just be lucky Griffin didn’t burst in on *your* moment.”

“And you two were ...?”

“Oh.” Savanna twisted to face Ella. “Griffin went ahead and finished the, um, job, anyway. And I’ll never look at a swimming pool the same.”

Ella’s soft chuckle must’ve caught Jesse’s attention because she felt his eyes on her before she turned to confirm it. He leveled her with a heated gaze, one that told her the sound of her laugh detoured his thoughts as well.

He couldn’t afford to be distracted when he needed to be “mission-focused” but the man also needed to loosen up before he did punch someone or something.

And for Ella, maybe it was better to think about hot sex with Jesse than their current situation. Or to worry about how A.J. was handling the news about The Chechen without being in France to help. That had to make her brother a bit crazy.

Jesse pinned her with an unexpected sultry stare and slowly rolled his sleeve to the elbow again, revealing his corded forearm. Could he work the buttons of his shirt free next? Show her the hard wall of muscle that she wanted to slide her palms up inch by muscular inch?

Is it getting hot in here? What is wrong with me?

“Okay, your boy is eye-fucking you right now.” Ella’s sweet friend’s casual use of words like “eye-fucking” was new. Savanna had recently shared that Griffin had brought out a naughty side in her, and she was loving it.

“Would it be wrong for us to ...?” Ella whispered, unable to take her eyes off her “husband” as he worked the second sleeve to his elbow now. And when her gaze shifted to his large hand, all she could think about were his fingers pumping inside her just before he captured her pussy with his mouth in the bedroom of the plane.

The Chechen. Zoran. Everyone's in danger. And we're making eyes at each other.

“I think it'd be wrong if you two didn't. It's been three years,” Savanna said. Like Ella would ever forget that fact. “The fact neither of you slept with anyone else is *Guinness World Records* material, in my opinion.”

Ella lightly laughed, unable to stop herself. Ella really did love this new side of Savanna.

“Yeah, he no longer looks like he wants to punch something.” Savanna nudged Ella, catching her in the ribs. “Take him out of here. Do it now. The others won't notice y'all are gone.”

“Sure,” Ella teased in a low voice. “Hey, hubby, can you come screw my brains out upstairs? Distract me from this freaking insanity? Maybe slap a hand to my mouth, so I don't scream so loud everyone hears? Oh, and can you do that delicious thing with your tongue again.”

Savanna was the one chuckling now, and this drew Griffin's attention. He strode away from where he'd been standing, blocking Ella's view of Jesse for a moment with his large frame as he approached. “You two okay?” Griffin stood opposite the coffee table, which had a few magazines for a centerpiece. “You're not laughing because you've lost your minds or something, right?”

Savanna swatted the air, and Ella assumed she'd tossed an eye roll in for good measure, but her focus was on Jesse. "We're making do with the situation in the only way we know how."

Ella shrugged and added in agreement, "A.J. always uses humor to cope. Rory's husband too. I guess we're attempting that over the loss of our sanity."

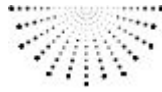
"Riiiiight," Griffin dragged out as if not quite believing either of them.

"Hey, we've got incoming," a voice that sounded like Jack's popped over one of the radios. "I have eyes on the driver of a BMW."

"Who is it?" Jesse drew a weapon from the back of his jeans while holding the radio, and the others in the room gathered around him, awaiting more information from Jack.

"Welllll, shit." A touch of Jack's Texas roots rolled through his tone. "Looks like that hot MI6 officer is paying us a visit."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



CARTER STRODE ACROSS THE ROOM TOWARD THE FULLY stocked bar set against a long panel of windows that looked out onto a spacious courtyard. His back was to the room, but Ella could see his reflection in the glass as he snatched up a bottle and a crystal tumbler.

The second Jack had reported he was escorting this mystery woman into the house, Carter had made a beeline for the alcohol as if the bartender at the Drunk Gator back in Bama had just announced “last call.”

Ella had only gotten a quick glimpse of the MI6 officer at the airport, so she wasn’t prepared for the woman who came walking into the living room alongside Jack. Already taller than average, her black ankle boots with thick wedge heels gave her another boost. And were those thousand-dollar Gucci boots? *Yup*, Ella noted, spying the signature Gucci logo. Well, this woman definitely had class. And money.

A thick mass of soft waves the color of whiskey fell nearly to her waist, a beautiful contrast against the red peacoat she wore. But what had Ella standing to her feet were the agent’s startling green eyes. They were a clear, deep green, like that of a flawless emerald and just as breathtaking. And at the moment, those eyes were burning a hole into Carter’s back.

“Hi.” *Annd, I’m such a dork.* In spite of feeling like an awkward country girl in front of this elegant creature, Ella rounded the coffee table and came closer to their “guest,” all the while mentally sizing her for an Ella Hawkins design. Which, unfortunately, only reminded her of Henry Rochella’s lies and manipulation. *Sixtieth follower my ass.*

“Ella.” The woman nodded her acknowledgement because, of course, she knew Ella’s name. But her green eyes were still burning that hole through Carter’s pressed white button-down. He was the only man in the room in formal dress, as if auditioning for Daniel Craig’s replacement in the next Bond movie. Now that she thought about it, Carter had been wearing those same clothes under his “battle armor” at Rochella’s.

“Still drinking on the job, I see.” The British accent made the jab sound congenial when this woman, whose name they’d yet to learn, was giving off vibes that were anything but pleasant. She was clearly pissed off and thoroughly irritated with Carter—if her body language and burning gaze directed at him were anything to go by.

Back still to the room, Carter casually lifted a hand in the air. “Everyone, meet Zoey. Zoey, this is everyone.”

“Are we okay with her being here?” Jack spoke up, moving farther into the room to where Gray and Sydney stood by a row of laptops on the oak table near the fireplace.

“I don’t know what to think,” Jesse said, breezing past Zoey without so much as a glance, hurrying to Ella as if their guest was a potential threat. At least he’d stowed his weapon after Jack had radioed them of their unexpected visitor.

Griffin must’ve felt the same as Jesse because he made haste and sat next to Savanna.

Ella remained standing, unable to tear her focus from Zoey. The name fit her perfectly—beautiful and mystical. Ella knew it meant “life” in Greek, and there was no denying Zoey had a presence. She would also really look killer in one of the dresses from Ella’s “winter collection” of designs. Maybe the light blue silk would soften the woman’s “Fuck you, Carter” look she had going on.

When Jesse’s hand went to the small of Ella’s back, she realized she was wearing a tee she’d designed that proclaimed, *Bless Your Heart* on the front in sparkly red letters. She’d always loved the shirt, but standing next to this Zoey person, it made her feel unrefined. But the comforting touch of Jesse’s palm lightly moving up and down her back quickly erased that thought.

Ella zipped her focus to Carter when he finally faced the room, a bottle of Glenlivet scotch in hand. He poured a generous portion into the tumbler in his other hand without lifting his gaze to their visitor. “Who sent you?”

“No one, you cold-hearted bastard.” Well, that delivery was a bit rougher than Zoey’s first one. “Put the drink down and look at me.”

Carter took his time lifting the glass to his mouth without meeting her eyes. He didn’t seem worried about her presence, nor did he give a damn about pissing the woman off.

Ella looked up at Jesse, trying to get a read on him, but when she followed his gaze, his attention was fixed on the bottle of scotch.

“You have sixty seconds to explain why you’re here before we escort you out,” Carter said, his tone flat. Even-tempered. Like she was a bothersome fly he was swatting away.

Ella had witnessed Carter's stony expressions before, but this felt different. Almost like he was actually trying to be a jerk when maybe he didn't want to be. The fact this woman's presence led Carter to drink on the job had to mean something though.

She'd overheard the guys say Zoey had punched him a few times back in that DGSE holding room, but hadn't that been for show so that she could whisper intel into his ear? Wasn't she on their side?

Ella's shoulders slumped. Or was that all part of the intricate plan concocted by the alphabet soup of agencies involved?

"The eyes in the sky gave you permission to roll on up? They sent you?" Gray stepped forward, hands sliding into the pockets of his khakis as he fixed his attention on Zoey.

"No, but they didn't stop me. Obviously." Zoey faced Gray since Carter refused to give her his attention. "I've been suspended. My boss, and Thatcher, realized I shared intel with Carter at the—"

"Suspended? Really." Sarcasm from Carter. Not a good sign. Nor was the second drink he was already pouring himself after quickly polishing off the first. "That was an act. They wanted you in that room with me. Make it look like we were on the same side. Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Zo." Ella caught him wince after he'd said the nickname, but the stony expression was back in seconds. And what did that mean?

Ella thought back to their arrival in Paris. Jack, or maybe Oliver, had joked about what Carter might have done to earn this woman's hostility. And were they on the brink of finding out?

Carter turned his gaze to Zoey, and the room went still. The tension between them was razor sharp and molasses thick, sucking up all the air in the room.

“I’m not bullshitting you.” Zoey took two confident steps farther into the room but kept herself at a comfortable distance from the lion staring back at her like his duty was to complete the circle of life. Chew her up and spit her out. Send her on her merry way in about three seconds. Yeah, that cool, calm look of his was gone the closer Zoey came, and now Ella knew why he hadn’t wanted to face her until now. He’d have shown his hand, exposed his ... emotions. “You know why I’m here. You know why I had no choice but to come.”

“I also know you’ll let your quest for vengeance get us all killed,” Carter hissed.

Vengeance? Ella looked back and forth between the two dominant personalities as they faced off, then scanned the room. Everyone seemed to be in the same boat as Ella. Unsure what to say, if anything at all.

“You’ve been hunting The Chechen for years, Zoey. And now you think you have a shot at getting to him through me.” Carter set the bottle and his glass on the bar before stalking toward her. “I won’t let you die for him.”

“You can’t stop me.” Zoey lifted her chin in defiance. “And it’s been clear over the years that you stopped giving a damn about helping me.” Zoey’s voice faltered as the first sign of emotion slipped through. “You got your vengeance for your wife’s killer, but you failed to keep your promise to help me get mine for Preston.”

Preston? Ella shot Savanna a quick worried look, checking to make sure she was okay. If Zoey lost a man she loved, it might bring on a wave of emotions for Savanna if she were to

sit through this conversation. Memories of her own loss would likely roll through her mind like a tsunami.

Griffin had Savanna on her feet a moment later, most likely having sensed the same. “If you’ll excuse us.”

Ella reached for Savanna’s hand as they started past her, and she gently squeezed, letting her know she loved her.

“What’s she talking about?” Sydney broke the silence that had enveloped the room like a blanket of fog once again after Savanna and Griffin had left.

Zoey turned and gave Sydney her attention. Maybe she’d sensed Sydney’s strong presence, realizing she commanded the respect of her gaze. “The Chechen killed my fiancé.” She jerked her thumb Carter’s way. “And this asshole let him.”

“Is that really the story you’re still selling?” Carter’s gravelly tone raised the hairs on Ella’s bare arms. She smoothed her palms over them like she was chilly rather than frightened so Jesse wouldn’t feel the need to whisk her away too. No, she wanted to be there. She wanted to know the circumstances behind the situation she’d been thrown into and the dangers they were all facing.

“It’s not a story. I’m stating a fact.” Zoey squared off with Carter again, this time with less than a foot of space between them. “You left him alone to die.”

Carter leaned in, dropping his gaze to level her with a steely look. “Both of us couldn’t stay and keep fighting The Chechen, not when a bomb that would level three blocks was on the verge of going off.”

Ella closed her eyes and clutched her stomach at Carter’s revelation and the picture it painted.

“One of us had to handle the bomb, and I had the best chance. More experience. Your stubborn fiancé insisted I go.” He paused for a moment. “He was MI6. He knew what he was getting himself into. People die in our line of work. People we care about become collateral damage because of our fucking battles.” His tone gradually ticked up and up into a full-on yell, and Ella’s eyes widened in shock. “But like hell will I let you be that fucker’s next victim,” he snarled, emotions officially on display from the man.

Zoey was visibly shaking, but was it because she wanted to cry or hit Carter? “I’m not leaving, not without killing Yuri myself,” she returned in a calm tone.

Yuri? Was that The Chechen’s real name?

Zoey faced Gray as if seeking his approval, so she must have known he was co-leader of the team.

Carter went back to the bar for drink number three. The alcohol made sense now. He felt guilty and a whole lot of other feelings, she was sure. Feelings she doubted a man like Carter was used to sharing so publicly.

“I’ve accumulated years of intel I can share with your team. I can help you bring down this man once and for all.” Zoey slipped her hand into her coat pocket and retrieved a USB, but when Gray reached for it, she shook her head and returned it to her pocket. “You’ll have it when you talk your arsehat partner into agreeing to accept my help.”

Gray frowned and looked at Jack, then over to Sydney. “How do we know this isn’t part of Thatcher’s plan? They may have eyes in the sky, but they don’t have eyes and ears on the inside.”

Ahhh, true. Could Zoey be trusted, especially when it sounded like she'd go to any lengths for revenge? What if she knew about the plan with Rochella? Jesse wouldn't let her stay if that were the case, and Ella knew it.

"I was the one who informed the CIA that Zoran hired Yuri, so the Agency owed me a favor. When I learned they'd be intercepting your plane in Paris, I was allowed to tag along," Zoey steadily explained. "But I wasn't privy to any of the initial intel regarding why you all came to Paris or what they'd planned at Rochella's. I knew when you knew." Her polished British accent, combined with her poise and sophistication, made even such critical information sound elegant.

But a polished tone didn't make it true. And based on the way Gray eyed Zoey, he wasn't sure whether they could trust her or not.

"I risked my neck by giving Carter that intel at the safe house. And I risked my job." Zoey turned toward Carter, his back once again to the room, a drink in hand. "But you're right, no one stopped me from coming here, which leads me to believe that cocksucker Thatcher hoped things would play out this way. He most likely knew what I'd do even before I did. My suspension may have been calculated as well. I wouldn't put anything past the CIA, or hell, my own boss."

"If Thatcher wants you here, it's for his own benefit, that's for damn sure," Jesse spoke for the first time since Zoey's arrival.

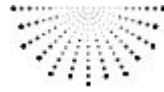
"He wants Yuri. We all do. But the difference is Thatcher wants the son of a bitch captured and will use any means to achieve that, and I want The Chechen dead," Zoey informed Jesse, leveling him with a hard look. Her gaze then moved to

Ella, and her green eyes softened. “I promise I would never use innocent people to get what I want though. I would never have agreed to Thatcher’s plan involving you.”

The plan. Rochella. Paris. All fake. Ella closed her eyes for a second, doing her best not to stalk across the room and throw back a shot of one of her favorite whiskeys she spied there.

“Yuri won’t come here. Nor will he send his men. If Thatcher told you to stay here like sitting ducks, it was because he knows you won’t actually do that.” Zoey shook her head. “I’ve worked with him before, and I know how he operates. He’s anticipating you won’t follow his rules.” She turned toward Carter. “Especially you.” She let go of a deep exhale. “There’s a reason you’re called The Rogue One.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“I THINK THEY NEED TO HASH THIS OUT,” JESSE SUGGESTED. “Alone.” He dropped his hand from Ella’s back and stalked over to the bar, snatched the bottle of Woodford Reserve she’d eyed earlier, then slipped out the door to the courtyard without another word.

Did he just ...? Ella looked around the room, taken aback by Jesse’s abrupt exit, especially the part where he left her there, which wasn’t like him. Everyone but Carter and Zoey quickly cleared out, so Ella ran to their room, grabbed a coat and shoes, and hurried outside in search of him.

The jacket was Jesse’s, the one he’d thrown over her shoulders at Rochella’s after the battle, and his strong, masculine scent clung to her nose as she hugged her arms to her chest in the freezing night air.

The courtyard was enclosed by stone walls, and she imagined it was beautiful in the summer, but the few circular wrought iron tables were covered in snow, and the raised garden beds were bare. The only illumination came from the windows of the B&B and the moon overhead, surrounded by a handful of twinkling stars.

She would’ve taken a moment to appreciate the beauty of the scene if she weren’t worried about her “husband.”

“Jesse,” she cried out softly when she spotted him, his ass on the snowy ground, knees propped up and his back against the stone wall. He had to be frozen to the bone.

“I’ll just be a second. Go back inside. It’s too cold,” he said, raising the bottle and taking a long swig.

Ella ignored his order and crouched before him, not wanting to get her sweats wet with snow. And from the looks of things, Savanna’s prediction was wrong—she and Jesse wouldn’t be “consummating” their fake marriage tonight. Technically, it was well after midnight at this point anyway.

And why did that thought disappoint her so much? After everything she’d heard between Zoey and Carter, was there something wrong with her to even still want sex?

Because it’s not about sex. She needed the emotional connection being with him gave her. The comfort and security of his embrace. The way he made all the bad disappear when his eyes were set on hers.

“Why’d you leave me?” she asked gently, tipping her head. Although based on his odd behavior since the phone call with Thatcher—the uncharacteristic fidgeting and now sitting in the snow drinking straight from the bottle—she wasn’t sure he’d answer.

“I didn’t leave you. I just needed, um.”

What, what do you need that you don’t want to tell me? Ella set a hand to his knee, and he lowered the bottle from his mouth to silently peer at her.

“Well, you going to share or not?” She held out her hand for the bottle and gave him a small smile, hoping to lighten the mood a bit and ease the storm of thoughts in his head.

He studied her, mouth twisted to the side like the question needed serious consideration, but then his lips curled into a grin, and he handed over the bottle. “We drank this in New York. Remember?”

“How could I forget any part of that weekend?” The whiskey burned her throat but was effective in warming her chest. She licked her lips, catching a drop there before handing it back to him.

His smile slipped at her confession, and he lifted his eyes to the starry sky.

“Carter’s right,” Jesse said solemnly, returning his focus to her.

Those two words knocked the wind from her lungs and brought her to her knees on the snowy ground. She’d feared this would happen. That he would eventually backpedal from what he’d said in the bathroom earlier because he was terrified she’d become “collateral damage.”

She had to take the situation by the horns before Jesse ran with it—not in the direction she wanted to go. Not this time. Not anymore. *You want that middle place, remember?*

“Just because Carter is right about the job being dangerous doesn’t mean he’s prophetic. It doesn’t mean I’ll die because ...” *Because of your past. Or your future with Falcon.* “I thought you and I were making progress.” She leaned forward, grabbed hold of his free hand, and squeezed. “What you said to me in the shower and—”

“I meant every word,” he rasped, letting the bottle in his other hand slip to the ground. “But I can’t change the fact I’m terrified something will happen to you because of me.”

“I don’t know if I made this clear,” Ella began around a snuffle, “but I accept you for who you are and who you were. And I want you. Every part of you. All of it.” Her tears fell freely now as Jesse pulled her onto his lap. “I just want you, and I don’t care about anything else. Please, please don’t run from me. Not again.”

“Oh fuck, Ella.” He closed his eyes, rested his forehead against hers, and sighed, his chilly hands caressing her face. “I don’t deserve you, but I don’t want to give you up.”

She eased back and placed her palm to his cheek, prompting him to lift his gaze to hers, and when his beautiful blue eyes met hers, she cried, “I sure as hell won’t let you give me up ... and you know how damn stubborn I am.”

His response was a tender kiss, which she hoped meant he was ready to let go of his worries and allow himself to be with her.

He pulled back only to lean in again and give her a quick peck on the lips. This time when he drew back, his attention shifted to one of the windows, to where the team appeared to be reassembling in the living room. “I guess we should go inside and hear the verdict.” Jesse stood and reached down to help her stand, and she brushed the snow from the knees of her sweats, but they were wet now anyway.

After snatching up the almost empty bottle from the ground, he hooked her arm with his and they crossed through the courtyard.

“Carter blames himself,” Jesse said before they reached the door. “He may not have acted like it, but I can tell he feels responsible for the death of Zoey’s fiancé.”

“I can’t imagine having to leave someone behind knowing they would undoubtedly die,” she softly said as he unlinked their arms to open the door.

“It’s the last thing anyone in the Army ever wants. Dying is better than being the only one to come home.” His voice was strained, and she knew he was speaking from an unbearable experience, and possibly more than one time.

Opening the door, he ushered Ella inside to the sound of Gray in the living room, adamantly declaring, “She’s staying.”

“Like hell she is,” Carter growled back at Gray, the two men face-to-face and Zoey nowhere in sight.

Jesse placed the bottle on the bar and motioned for Ella to have a seat on the couch, then sat beside her and fidgeted with his hat a few times before parking it on his knee.

“I won’t die,” Zoey announced, striding into the room, wheeling a Louis Vuitton suitcase behind her. “I’m an asset. Not a liability,” she said, opening her palm to reveal the USB.

Carter didn’t turn to see that she’d just offered the USB as an olive branch, but Sydney didn’t hesitate. She made it to Zoey in three quick strides and had the USB inserted into a laptop within seconds.

“Am I your plan?” Carter turned and asked. “The bait to finally get your mark?”

“That’s the CIA’s plan.” Zoey pointed skyward, which Ella assumed was a reference to the Agency’s drone. “Not mine. I say we focus on Zoran Mestrović and his last known whereabouts. We find leverage to draw him out. We find him, and I think we can get to Yuri,” she countered in a calm tone.

“Yuri won’t have shown his face to Zoran. You’re grasping at straws, like always,” Carter answered, his clipped tone not

as fierce as before, but he was still working his jaw a bit hard.

“Do you know where Zoran has been aside from Bulgaria?” Jesse joined in, most likely because Zoran was the reason they were there in the first place, and until he was dealt with, Ella was in danger.

“Zoey doesn’t know.” Carter pinned her with an icy glare. “Do you?” he challenged.

“Between your team and what I know, we can figure it out.” Zoey didn’t falter, not a damn bit. And maybe she could help? “You’re right that Zoran has most likely never seen Yuri’s face, which could be to our advantage. Yuri’s team of men, however, have. We can track the team sent to assist Zoran in his revenge plot back to Yuri.”

“What do we actually know about Yuri?” Jesse asked.

And the hat was back on Jesse’s head again. Fidgety, and yet somehow, still focused as he waited for an answer.

“Facts, not the rumors circulating about him,” Jack added, looking at Jesse briefly before focusing back on Zoey.

“Real name is Yuri Kuzmin. He was born in the Chechen Republic in 1978. His father fought in the First Chechen War in the mid-nineties. The Russians had tried to take Chechnya back after it declared its independence in ninety-one.” Zoey shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat and kept her gaze steady on Jack. He seemed the most agreeable to Zoey assisting them, and Ella assumed Carter already knew this information. “Yuri was sixteen when his father and mother died in a bombing during the war, and that year marked his first time taking a life. The next four years are all based on rumors and legend. So we can’t confirm. But the stories say Yuri killed as many as fifty Russians during that time period,

stealing from them as well to survive. And that's when he earned his name as The Chechen. A name the Russians began to fear after that."

"And what happened next? The post-legend time period? The last twenty-plus years?" Jack folded his arms and rocked back in his black military-looking boots as he stared at Zoey. The joking side of him was gone as he listened to her rattle off facts about their opponent.

"According to MI6 records, Yuri became a contract killer in 2001. No longer specifically targeting Russians. He turned his skill for killing into a formal line of work. Having made a name for himself, he attracted a lot of criminals around the world seeking him out to do their dirty work," Zoey explained, keeping her profile to Carter. Not that Carter was looking at her. His back was to the room once again as if he couldn't stomach the idea of Zoey working the case with Falcon.

"When did he stop killing people himself and start sending mercenaries to do the work for him?" Jesse asked.

Carter turned to face the room but said nothing. Maybe he knew he was losing the battle. If Zoey were able to help them, how could they refuse? Carter clearly trusted her enough to let her through the door, which meant he most likely believed she was being honest.

"For whatever reason, after the day Yuri faced Carter and my fiancé, he went off the grid. He stopped handling the jobs himself, well, from what our intelligence has gathered. He started training younger men to go out into the field and handle the hits for him."

"Outsourcing murder. So, he really did branch out. He could also kill more people that way. Take on more jobs with less risk of exposure," Jack said, shaking his head in disgust.

Zoey nodded, then looked at Jesse. “I don’t know how much Thatcher told you, but it was Yuri’s men who killed the Bulgarian agents and their wives. We believe the murders were performed in front of Zoran so he could personally confirm the deaths. We think that’s what he’d planned to have Yuri do to you and,” she said while peering at Ella, “your wife.”

“And Thatcher made sure Zoran knew I was the shooter.” Jesse stood and circled the table, his anger taking a front seat again. “My *wife* wouldn’t be in any danger now if he hadn’t done that. Did you know Thatcher set me up? Fed my name to Zoran as his wife’s shooter?”

Oh shit, things were about to go seriously south if Zoey’s answer was anything other than no.

Zoey surrendered her palms as if sensing Jesse wasn’t someone she wanted to tango with, and not that Jesse would ever hurt a woman, but Zoey didn’t know that. “Absolutely not.”

“None of this changes the fact that the CIA and other asshole agencies want Zoey here with us. They wouldn’t have let her roll up otherwise, and aren’t we playing into their hands by letting her stay here?” Carter asked.

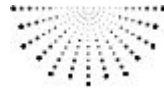
“They’ve been pulling our strings this whole time,” Jesse said, eyes dead set on Zoey. “Including yours, from the sounds of it.”

“But that doesn’t mean she needs to go,” Gray remarked. “My only question ... is this still a capture mission?” He crossed his strong arms over his barrel of a chest.

“You’re willing to forgo the rules?” Carter asked, raising his brows as if shocked by this.

Gray looked at Jesse, then over at Zoey. “Fuck it. And fuck what my father wants.” He nodded, his decision clearly final. Ella had to assume Gray’s father, the Secretary of Defense, wanted The Chechen brought in alive, like Thatcher. “I say we do it. We kill Yuri and Zoran. Take them all out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



EUROPEAN HISTORY 101. FRESHMAN YEAR. IT'D BEEN ELLA'S least favorite class at The University of Alabama. She'd never been great at memorizing facts, and her nineteen-year-old self had preferred living in the present, not concerned with the past or which Louis built the Palace of Versailles.

She'd failed her midterm that semester, a test that just so happened to focus on France. And that same night, she'd had too much tequila and had been rejected by Jesse when she offered him her virginity.

And now here we are in Versailles, France, near the palace of all freaking places. And the past was now more relevant than she could have ever envisioned as a freshman in college. Well, Jesse's past, that was for sure.

Ella's shoulders jumped on instinct at the growly voice she recognized as her big brother over the phone line. Jesse quickly switched the call off speaker and brought the phone to his ear.

"You think I don't know that? Fuck, A.J., you know I'd never have gone through with the wedding or Paris had I known he was involved." The vein at the side of Jesse's neck throbbed as he did his best to get a handle on his anger.

She didn't envy Jesse dealing with a pissed-off Hawkins. But in A.J.'s defense, he had their whole family to worry about and keep safe back home. And it was in A.J.'s nature to want to be on the frontlines of a fight protecting Ella himself. He was torn between two duties and with no choice but to trust Falcon Falls on this one.

Ella sat up from where she'd been lying down on the couch in the living room. She'd drifted in and out of sleep for the last several hours, and according to her watch, it was five a.m.

Jesse was currently standing at the bar, one hand planted on its surface as he hung his head, his frustration clear. The team had yet to put together a mission plan on which they all agreed. Ella wished she could help, but she had a better shot at trying to pass that history exam than coming up with any viable options to contribute to the team's brainstorming sessions.

She searched the room for a distraction, someone or something to keep her from fixating on whatever A.J. had to be saying to keep Jesse quiet.

A.J. forgave you, she mentally told Jesse as if telepathy were a real thing. *Before the wedding. Kind of, I think.* But now, she wasn't so sure how A.J. felt.

Gray looked up from his laptop, the only other person in the room at the moment. Zoey and Carter were somewhere, probably arguing for the umpteenth time. And Griffin and Savanna were asleep, well, that or having sex.

Jack and Oliver stuck to the cold outdoors, unlucky for them.

And Sydney? Probably checking in with her ex about her teenage son despite the late hour back home.

“Hey, why don’t you two get some rack time after he ends his call?” Gray jerked a thumb in the direction of the stairs.

Ella’s tongue pinned to the roof of her mouth as she contemplated the thought. The bed upstairs would be better than the lumpy couch designed more for aesthetics than comfort. But she wouldn’t complain. At least she’d been able to doze off here and there. That was what Jesse needed. Sleep. He’d be less likely to put a hole through a wall like he did back in his workshop in Bama the other day.

“You’ll have to help me convince him.” She tilted her head toward Jesse, still on the phone with her brother. He’d just yanked the hat from his head and slapped it against his thigh, likely reacting to whatever lecture A.J. was giving him.

Please, God, don’t let Jesse feel guilty again. No more going backward. A.J. would be getting an earful from her, deserving or not, if that became the case.

“He wants to talk to you.” Jesse’s bloodshot eyes connected with Ella’s, and he wearily hauled himself her way.

The phone in his hand may as well have been a grenade with the pin pulled. She didn’t want anywhere near it, but what choice did she have?

Their fingers brushed when she slowly took the phone from his large open palm, spying the callouses there, a result of his labors of love in his workshop. She’d swear she could almost feel his pulse against her skin at the quick exchange. His energy felt angry and punishing, and of course, not directed toward her. But he did want to punish someone.

When she took the phone, he quickly pulled his hand away like they'd just completed a dope deal at the "shady corner" back home. Well, it'd been that way up until Beckett posted a sign last year that Ella had first assumed was a joke, which read: "Dope = Dealing with Deb Hawkins, not Jail Time. A fate much worse ..." He'd even added the ellipsis, maintaining a straight face the whole time while creating the sign too.

And everyone in town said her brother was grumpy and lacked a sense of humor. Ha.

Ella couldn't help but laugh every time she drove past that corner, but the only weed she'd seen since that sign had been posted were the ones growing from the cracks in the sidewalk.

"Ella?" A.J.'s voice was loud enough for her to hear despite the distance between her ear and the phone in her hand.

Right, he was waiting for her, and she was once again distracted. Maybe she'd rather talk to Beckett, the grump, than the Navy SEAL because she was sure her brother was going to go Tier One operator on her.

"Hi," she squeaked, sounding like a timid little mouse. *How pathetic.* "A.J, don't be ..." What was the right word? *Dot. Dot. Dot.* Now she had ellipses on the brain. *I'm so deliriously tired I can't think. Oh, I can also blame jet lag ...*

And if she were losing it, how was Jesse handling all of this since he'd had zero shut-eye? She was mentally cracking jokes, but he'd probably crack someone's skull.

"I'm on my way to D.C. with Ana and the baby."

"Yeah, I heard you were worried if they were there, you might be, well, distracted," Ella softly responded.

Jesse secured his hat back on before flicking the bill a little as if the brim hooded his eyes too much. He stood a good foot away, hands in his pockets. Jaw working overtime as he studied her while she waited for her brother to continue.

“I figured it’d be better if they weren’t in Alabama,” A.J. answered after a quiet moment. “I’m taking them to Adriana’s. Adriana and her baby have Secret Service detail while Knox is overseas on an op, and I need Ana and Mac somewhere White House-safe while I focus on keeping everyone else at the ranch protected from this new threat.” That made sense. Knox was a teammate of A.J.’s, and his dad was the President of the United States.

“Why aren’t Mom and McKenna with you, then?” *But* Ella already knew the answer.

“Beckett won’t let his daughter out of his sight, you know him. And Mom is ... Mom. She has her shotgun, the one I gave her. She thinks she’ll protect the ranch. You know how stubborn she can be. Plus, we have Gray’s guys coming for an assist.”

She heard little Mac crying from the back seat, and it was gut-wrenching to think this was happening to her family. That A.J. was having to take Ella’s three-month-old nephew to D.C. for Secret Service-level protection.

Because Jesse didn’t complete one mission. She hated herself for that thought. But it’d popped into her head anyway just before the rest of A.J.’s words had a chance to truly sink in, and now she knew why Jesse looked more than just tired and angry.

“They know,” Ella whispered, drawing her hand to her chest as the room began to spin. *My family knows, oh God.*

That was why Jesse had remained glued next to her, anticipating the shock that'd hit as soon as A.J. laid the news on her. Jesse had her by the arm a moment later, easing her down on the couch before she whacked the table or something. She didn't need a concussion.

“Beckett insisted we tell Mom and Dad about the threats. The fake wedding. All of it.” A.J.'s words were a nuclear bomb to her emotional state.

“Dad cried when he heard Jesse and I were getting married. He must be so ...” Dot. Fucking. Dot. The ellipsis appeared in a dialogue bubble over her head as her voice trailed off, unable to come up with the words.

Jesse wrapped a supportive arm around her back, pinning her to his side as she let it all sink in.

“Dad doesn't exactly want to talk to Jesse anytime soon. And well, Mom, is—”

“Mom,” she finished for A.J., her heart breaking. This was not how she wanted her parents to learn the truth. And what had to be going through their minds about Jesse? How much did they know? Had A.J. used the word hitman when explaining it all to them?

Yeah, so Ella is fake married to an assassin. No worries, he only killed bad guys. A sarcastic A.J. talking briefly filled her thoughts, and it had her queasy.

“We had to tell Jesse's parents too, for obvious reasons,” A.J. went on, another twist of the knife in her heart. “His dad was angrier than Beckett, which is shocking. Because Beckett is fuming about The Chechen news.”

She assumed Jesse overheard A.J. just now and probably couldn't stomach any more. He let go of her and stood.

“Just be careful. And tell everyone I’m sorry,” Ella softly said.

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” A.J.’s clipped tone had her stomach squeezing again, and though Jesse couldn’t have heard him now that he was a few feet away, she assumed A.J. had said as much to him already.

“Let me know when you’re on your way home. Okay?” Ella requested, slowly standing, her legs a bit wobbly.

“Love you, Sis. Stay safe.” A.J. ended the call, and when Ella handed the phone back to Jesse, it was only then that she realized they were alone in the room. Gray must’ve sensed they needed space.

“Are you okay?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest as if trying to stave off the worries pelting her like hail the size of golf balls.

“The question is, are *you* okay?” He looked exhausted and close to breaking, yet his first concern was for her. Right now, all she wanted was for this man to feel whole and stop regretting his past.

Am I okay? Circling the coffee table, she spotted a Rochella magazine lying among the others there and briefly considered chucking it into the fireplace.

Jesse must have tracked her line of sight because he snatched up the magazine and walked over to the fireplace, crouched in front of the flames, and tossed it in. And in the process exposed the fact he still had a gun tucked at the back of his pants sans holster.

Ha, sans. One of the few French words I know. Annd I am losing my ever-loving mind again.

Jesse slowly stood and faced her, widened his stance, and planted his hands on his hips like a warrior, the flames behind him a backdrop providing a dramatic effect as he stared at her, a dark gleam in his eyes.

She couldn't look away if she wanted to. As he studied her, heat rose up the column of her throat and over her face as though she were standing before the fire herself. This was a look she'd seen from Jesse before, *but* it was levels above in terms of dark intensity.

His gaze moving over her wasn't a gentle caress of his eyes. More like the rough touch of a sex-starved man. And that man could make out her nipples despite the wall of fabric layered between them. He could see the bare V between her legs regardless of the material becoming damp the longer he stared at her.

Where she was soft and delicate, he was tense, a rigid wall of muscles. Firm and hard everywhere. And despite the brim of his hat shielding his forehead, she could read the piercing look in his eyes that compelled her to remain in place.

Screw or fight. That's what he needed. He'd always been known as a fighter growing up. But damn if she didn't prefer him to be Jesse, the lover. And if he needed to release his tension, to let go, she'd rather it be with her.

"Jesse," she let out on a shaky breath, finally moving her feet and closing the distance.

He tilted his head but didn't budge.

"Do you want me?" She set a hand to her abdomen while stopping a few feet away from him. "Do you need me?"

He turned to face the stairs, and the light from the fire threw shadows across his handsome face. With his profile to

her, he replied in that low, raspy drawl of his, “I always want you, Ella Mae, but I won’t use you, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

Now’s the time. He needed to hear the truth from her.

Wetting her lips and heart pounding three times its normal speed, she closed her eyes and shared, “And if I were to tell you that I haven’t had sex in three years and *I need you*, what then?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



JESSE HAD HER HAND TWINED WITH HIS IN THE SPACE OF A heartbeat, and she nearly tripped over her own feet as he led her up the stairs without uttering a word.

Once in the bedroom, he set his gun and hat on the dresser and turned to face her. His dark expression and deliberate strides had her quickly backing up to the closed door.

The look in his eyes matched the hard flesh her fingers ached to touch still hidden beneath his plaid button-down shirt.

He brought his palms flat on either side of her head against the door, caging her there with his strong frame, and his muscular arms bent at the elbows as he leaned in closer.

“Explain.” The order had her heart racing, and a warm, tingling sensation traveled into her chest.

She nibbled on her lip, searching for the words.

“Tell. Me.” His gritty reaction was the last thing she’d expected from her revelation.

Was he angry? She stole a glimpse of his hand from the corner of her eye before looking back up at him.

“Brian didn’t ... *fuck* you?” He spit the word *fuck* out harshly, like he wanted to kill Brian all over again, which

made no sense. He should've been glad Brian hadn't had sex with her, but instead, he seemed offended on Ella's behalf.

Ella lightly shook her head, her normally sassy mouth betraying her under Jesse's intense scrutiny. "No," she finally murmured, lifting her chin in search of that backbone of hers. "How—how could I?"

The look in his eyes didn't soften, and it took her a minute to realize he was trying to wrap his head around the news. For years he'd assumed she'd been with another man because he'd "given her up."

But she hadn't shared her body and definitely not her heart with anyone. And now he knew. But what would he do with that news?

"I guess you should also know I've never let a man go down on me." Her tone remained barely above a whisper, and his lips parting was the only indication he'd actually heard her confession. "*Ever*. My first time was on the plane." His silence was going to destroy her if he kept it up. She slowly walked her fingers up his chest, and his breath hitched. "Say something."

She gasped when he thrust his pelvis forward, pinning his body to hers. At the feel of the hardness between his legs pressing tight to her, it was obvious he was as aroused as she was.

Jesse angled his head and brought his mouth to her ear, catching the soft part of her lobe between his teeth before letting go to whisper, "I need to fuck my *wife*."

Wife. The deep tone of his voice had her knees nearly buckling, but she refrained from collapsing against him. *I'm a*

Hawkins woman. Be strong. Wait, no, I'm a McAdams. Well, hell, what am I? The marriage was fake, after all.

Grounding herself back to the moment, she set a hand on his cheek, directing his attention to her face. “Only if you promise to make love to me after.”

Jesse rolled his lips inward for a brief moment, his attention snagging on her mouth before journeying back to her eyes. “With us, darlin’, they’re one and the same. Hard or soft. Slow or fast. With you, it’s always love.”

“Even in New York?” she whispered.

“*Every* time with you,” he rasped, his teeth grazing over her lower lip. The impending storm gathering over everyone’s head was yesterday’s news for now. Time stood still as she tethered herself to the present, to this moment with him.

He slanted his lips over hers and wasted no time to invade her mouth with his tongue, taking full control.

She fisted his shirt, prepared to tear it from his body as he freed his hands from the door. One palm went to her waist before slipping under her shirt and following the curve of her spine. He unsnapped her bra with deft fingers, and she arched into him as he deepened their kiss.

Her hands flew to the buttons of his shirt, momentarily fumbling in her hurried state. Clearly as impatient as she felt, he took over the task and ripped his shirt clean open, shrugging it from his shoulders before it fell to the floor. And in the blink of an eye, he’d peeled her top over her head and yanked the already unclasped bra down her arms, bringing their bodies tight together again.

The feel of his chest pressed to her breasts had her rotating her hips in circles, wanting to feel other *hard* parts of him.

“You’re mine,” he declared, sending her heart into overdrive once again.

With one hand practically glued to her ass beneath her sweats, she worked at his buckle, doing her best not to bite his tongue as desperate need ravaged her.

“Jesse,” she cried when he palmed her sex, his rough hand cupping her there without moving. Just holding her pussy like he owned it. And holy hell did he ever.

“You know what saying my name does to me,” he reminded her, and yeah, Ella knew. And also, she wanted him to tear her apart because she needed this more than she needed her next breath.

“Jesse,” she said again, provoking him a little more by stealing her lips from his to set her eyes on him.

She felt his chest lifting against her as he breathed through his nose, studying her, possibly torn between flipping her around and fucking her right against the door or taking her on the bed.

He slowly guided a finger along her seam before two went inside her tight channel. “No one ever touches you again. Fucks you. So much as looks at you.”

She felt that order all the way down to her toes, but she also knew it was more of a rough command directed at himself: *Don't screw up and lose her.*

This possessive side of him, though, had existed in her dirty thoughts over the last three years. Those words had played out in her mind during her fantasy-hate-sex.

“No one but you,” she promised at the realization he was waiting for compliance before he continued stroking her sensitive, swollen flesh.

And the dark smirk that chased across his lips for a second had her leaning into his palm. She let go of his buckle to grab hold of his biceps with both hands, searching for stability with her legs trembling as he drove a few fingers deep into her soaked center.

“Mine,” he growled before planting his mouth over hers in another all-consuming kiss. The kind she was sure would have launched a thousand-whatever ships in Troy.

From Troy? Ugh, screw history and my past, and the fact she’d ever let someone else take her v-card in college and had sobbed for months straight about it since Jesse hadn’t been the one.

“I need to taste you,” he declared after breaking their mouths, and in one surprisingly fast movement, he was on his knees with her sweats and panties around her ankles.

He held her hips, his fingertips buried into her flesh while looking up at her. And she met those eyes darkening to a deep sea blue from desire.

He remained quietly observing her as if needing her to know there wasn’t just desire in his gaze, but love there too ... and then he turned his attention to her center, and her eyes rolled up to the ceiling the moment his tongue flicked her sex, parting her folds with one long sweeping motion.

Now it was her palms plastered to the door as a wave of pleasure swelled up through her body, her breasts rising and falling from deep, quick breaths.

“Hands in my hair,” he commanded, and she obeyed, feeling a bit drunk as she neared climax, his tongue driving her wild.

She tore her fingers through his now-shorter wedding-haircut-hair before cupping the back of his head to draw his face even closer to her sex, nearly grinding his face with her pussy in time with the strokes of his tongue.

“That’s my girl,” he drawled in a low, seductive voice before gripping her hips, locking her in place as if knowing she was about to come and wanting to hold her still as she rode the ecstasy wave.

“Jesse, Jesse ...” His name fell from her lips around ragged breaths and between harsh moans she’d never known she was capable of producing.

Still a bit high and a little oxygen-deprived as if at mountain-top level, she nearly collapsed into him when he was on his feet again.

She shivered when he swiped a finger over her wet sex before sucking his index finger right in front of her. “You’re going to be tight. Three years. Need you to be ready for me.”

“Ohhh, well, believe me,” she said around a light, deliriously euphoric chuckle, “I’m ready.”

He reached for her hand and situated it over the bulge in his jeans, reminding her of his length and thickness. How big he was, and yeah, he was right. It would hurt. But bring on the pain. That kind she could handle.

“I want you to tear me apart,” she said in a small voice, a little nervous about being so vocal with her dirty thoughts.

“Mm.” Jesse backed her to the door again and swooped both arms overhead, linking her wrists with one hand while his other lightly swatted her overly sensitive pussy. “You do, do you?”

“Like that time in New York, but no rules this time.” She dragged her teeth along the line of her lower lip, and his cock twitched against her body.

“I think it’s safe to say we’ve broken all of our rules over the past few days.” He brought his free hand between their bodies and palmed her breast, and he swallowed her gasp with a kiss.

Remaining captive to him, arms still up as his prisoner, she arched into him, ready for Jesse to fill her after three years of torturing themselves by waiting.

“Please. Fuck me,” she begged between kisses.

“Are you on the pill?” he asked while pressing his jean-covered shaft to her naked sex, and the friction of his slight hip rotation had her sensitive area tingling and pulsing.

“No sex in three years. No need,” she reminded him. “Condoms are in the same suitcase pocket as they were last time.”

He eased his face from hers and gently freed her wrists. “Good girl.” He slanted his mouth over hers again, kissing her softly this time, delicately coaxing her mouth open with his tongue. A stark contrast to the possessive hold of her ass cheeks where he now grabbed. “Tell me this ass will be mine too one day.” The rough texture of his tone had chills crashing over her every-freaking-where.

“Yes, you can have that first, too.” She eased her face back to find his eyes. “But not tonight,” she added with a small smile, her ass clenching just at the thought of his big cock anywhere near there.

“I fucking better be the first,” he said while squeezing her flesh harder and nipping her lower lip. “And, darling, you’ll be

mine.”

She didn't want to know how many women he'd been with before New York because maybe she felt as possessive of him as he did of her. But it was nice being a first-anything for him. And as she thought about his vows, more importantly, she was his first and only love.

Jesse startled her when he abruptly released her, but it was for a good reason. He was still partially clothed, and that needed to change.

Her panties and sweats were around her ankles, and she stepped free from them while her fantasy came true. Jesse removed his belt, and the sound of his zipper going down had her tightening her thighs with what was to come.

The visual of him pumping his cock on the plane as he'd watched her pleasure herself came to mind, and her pulse picked up its pace in anticipation of him being inside her.

He had her on her back on the bed within seconds of him stripping free of his jeans and boxer briefs. A condom rolled over his cock before she was able to take him in her mouth like she longed to do.

“You have no idea how badly I want you,” he said while going to his knees, one leg on each side of her body. He parted her thighs with his hand and skated his palm along the soft, silky flesh of her inner thigh close to her sex.

“I want-need you too.” The connection. The feeling of safety. The passion. All of it.

He slowly positioned himself over her body, setting his forearms on each side of her, holding the brunt of his weight.

“Three years of jerking off to you, and now I have the real thing. I have you.” He set the head of his cock at her center

and filled her in one hard and fast movement. Her back bowed off the bed when he pulled almost all the way out and slammed back into her so deep their pelvic bones hit. “Are you okay?” he asked, probably seeing the tears at the corners of her eyes as her body stretched and took all of him.

“Oh,” she cried while reaching for his arms to hold on to him, “I’m more than okay.” She lightly nodded her permission to keep going, and he bared his teeth when plunging deep inside her again. Her wetness glided over his cock with every thrust, and she clenched around him, causing him to curse under his breath.

“Do that again, and I’m going to come embarrassingly fast,” he hissed, a stern look passing across his face as if struggling not to fall to pieces.

But her man wasn’t broken anymore, was he? How could anyone feel broken in a moment like this? All she felt was absolutely whole with their bodies connected.

“I’ve never been good at listening,” she teased while tightening her pussy again around his cock, and he lowered himself, so his chest touched her tits.

“You like being a bad girl, don’t you?” He ran his tongue along the line of her lips, demanding she open her mouth.

She resisted. Being, well, disobedient. *Bad.*

“Fuck, Ella,” he said while lightly biting her lip and thrusting even harder inside her. “You’re going to get yourself in trouble with me.” He set a soft kiss to her lips before pulling out, which left her feeling empty. But not for long.

He had her on her hands and knees facing the headboard a moment later, and he squeezed the flesh at her hips while taking her on all fours hard and fast.

Ohhh, she wasn't going to last long in this position. He was the one playing dirty now. Her breasts bounced each time he pumped into her. Groans competed with growl-like sounds from him, and he moved one hand around to her center without losing his rhythm and played with her sensitive spot.

"One rule, actually," he said while his chest touched her back, leaning into her. "My girl always gets off first."

Her quads tightened, and an almost violent tremble seized her limbs as she rocked against the pad of his finger as he continued to take her hard. "I'm ... coming," she shared the obvious through gritted teeth.

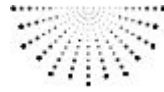
"Thank God," he murmured before she felt him find his own release, grunting hard.

He rolled her to her back a moment later and pinned her to his side, his arm beneath her body and his hand draped over her hip.

"Well, I feel, um, less tense. Do you feel a little better?" She peeked at him, a knowing smile on her face.

The dark, anguished look from earlier was gone. And she'd swear he looked ten years younger right now. Well-rested too. "I think you know the answer to that." He smiled. "But give me a few minutes because I plan to make you mine all over again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“TELL ME SOMETHING, HAS ANYONE EVER ASKED YOU HOW many people you’ve saved? Or do they just want to know your kill count?”

Jesse reached for his cup of liquid black fuel from the Keurig machine and faced Jack at his question. The boys had set up the coffee maker at the bar in the living room sometime overnight. No Red Bull on hand, but thankfully coffee had been left at the B&B.

It was ten hundred hours, and although Jesse had managed to get a few hours of shut-eye after he and Ella had made love that morning, he wouldn’t survive the day without caffeine.

Jesse considered Jack’s seemingly random question, knowing it was directed his way since they were the only two in the living room at the moment. Jack had popped in to warm up by the fire for a bit while Griffin swapped places with him outside, shockingly leaving Savanna alone in her bedroom. Jack better not get too comfortable because there wasn’t a chance in hell that Griffin would leave his fiancée alone for long.

“Come to think of it, I guess no one has ever asked me how many people I’ve saved.” Jesse shrugged and swiped his free hand over his damp hair. He’d managed to sneak in a

quick shower without waking his sleeping beauty before coming down for the coffee pick-me-up and seeing if there were any developments.

“Weird, right?” Jack sat on the hearth of the fireplace and warmed his hands near the flames. “Every asshole’s life I take, I count that as a bare minimum of three saves.”

“Really?” Jesse smiled, probably for the first time in twenty-four hours, in light of what they’d all been through.

“Yeah, I figure the odds would be in my favor that the bad guy would’ve, at least, killed three people had I not taken him out. So, when you do the math, it adds up.”

“You a betting man?” Jesse held the lip of his mug close to his mouth, a swirl of steam hitting his face before he took a heavy gulp, welcoming the burn as it slid down his throat. It was the kick in the nuts he needed to wake up and get his head back in the game.

“I only place bets if it’s a sure thing, and never with Griffin. Learned the hard way.” Another casual shrug from the man as if they weren’t carrying the world on their shoulders.

Not that I even thought about the danger we’re facing while I plowed into my wife this morning.

Brian. Fucking Banker Boy Brian. He hadn’t slept with Ella. Never had his cock or his tongue between his woman’s thighs.

The moment she’d shared that news, he’d nearly lost his control and split Ella apart in his desire to have his way with her. He’d had to fight like all hell to calm down the animal inside him before he’d touched her upstairs.

“Wait, what?” Jesse blinked as he replayed what Jack had said. “Why won’t you place bets with Griffin?”

Jack's smirk had Jesse thinking about Griffin's coin toss. Heads or tails. Who'd stay back on the jet in Albania with the women to protect them, and who'd join the op with Sydney. Griffin had won the toss-up to stay. "Two heads on the coin, right?"

Jack nodded. "I haven't told Gray yet that Carter borrowed the coin to flip for the Alpha One spot with Gray."

The guys all had call signs, nicknames from their Army days, but they'd decided on their flight to Albania it'd be easier to number themselves. They'd gone with Alpha Team and ranked everyone based on their respective Army rank when retiring. Gray had served longer than Carter, but Carter had insisted he was still better qualified as team leader out on ops. After some back-and-forth, Griffin had casually tossed Carter the coin to flip for the spot.

"Well, hell." Jesse smiled for a second time that morning. And maybe all that tension relief with Ella really had been what the doctor, aka his wife, had ordered.

Wife. He kept forgetting the ceremony wasn't real. And worse, that Ella's parents knew the truth. From what A.J. had said, Beckett's daughter had been as broken-hearted at that news as Ella's father. *My dad, though, fuck my dad.*

According to A.J., when he'd gone over to Jesse's parents' place to explain the situation and the danger involved, his father had hissed, *Always causing trouble. Guess he didn't change after all.*

And Jesse's smile quickly dissolved at the thought.

"You look spooked all of a sudden. You good?" Jack stood and began putting on his black leather gloves.

Jesse sipped his coffee and forced a nod. “Right as fucking rain.”

“Suuuure.” Jack came up next to him and slapped a gloved hand to his back. “And I’m not running on coffee and the bitter memories of my ex-wife hating my guts.” He removed his hand from Jesse’s back and stretched one of his gloves as if they were a tight fit. “At least Ella won’t be your ex-ex. Since the marriage isn’t real.” He peeked at Jesse as if checking to see if he’d hit a nerve. “Unless you two plan to stay together?”

Before Jesse could summon a response mentally or verbally, he spotted Ella coming down the stairs. Light-colored jeans that had a ’90s vibe to them and a nude-colored turtleneck tucked in at the waist. Once downstairs, her cowboy boots clicked against the wood floors as she made her way into the living room. “Morning, Jack,” she greeted, tucking her blonde hair behind her ears. It’d been in a bun at one point last night, but her locks now lay in soft waves over her shoulders and brushed the tops of her breasts.

Jesse’s attention remained on her full tits, grateful her nipples weren’t poking against the fabric since she was swiping her hands up and down her arms as though she was “nippy.”

“Morning, Ella,” Jack returned, suddenly pulling out his Texas roots by tipping his ball cap like a Stetson.

Did Jack even know how to ride a horse? Just because he was from Texas didn’t make him a cowboy, he supposed.

“I’ll be freezing my ass off outside if you need me.” Jack set his hat back in place and left the living room, and once he was gone, Jesse gathered Ella into his arms as if they hadn’t just shared body heat not too long ago.

“You left me alone. Almost shocking,” she said into his chest before lifting her chin to search his gaze.

“You’re safe here, but I don’t think we’ll be at this place much longer,” he replied, sliding his hand up along her silhouette before sweeping her hair over her shoulder.

He cupped her cheek, and she leaned into his touch and closed her eyes. They hadn’t discussed the call with A.J. or the fact her family knew the truth or any of the other problems they were facing since they’d gone to bed earlier, but he supposed they would need to face reality soon.

At least he wasn’t in a wall-hitting mood anymore, thanks to Ella.

“Any news?” she softly asked, peeling her eyes open to find his gaze.

“Not sure yet.” He gathered some of her hair now at her back into his hand, twisted it around his knuckles, and lightly tugged, tipping her mouth up before stealing a kiss. He was worried that as soon as the team made an appearance and discussed their lack of leads, his mood would grow foul again.

“Mmm.” She pressed her lips to his palm after their kiss and brushed her mouth over the inside of his hand.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Sydney’s voice had Ella’s palms sliding up Jesse’s chest while her shoulders fell, clearly disappointed they were no longer alone.

He slowly released her and turned to see that both Sydney and Zoey had joined them in the living room. Dark jeans. Red tops. Had they matched on purpose?

“We think we stumbled upon something that might help us,” Sydney announced as she maneuvered around him and Ella to get to the table littered with tech devices.

Zoey crossed her arms over her red fleece sweater, her expression about as unreadable as Carter's usually was. And yet, since she'd arrived, Jesse had caught glimpses of Carter's defenses slipping while in her presence.

It was understandable though. Being the one to walk away when a teammate didn't was a fate worse than death. No Ranger, soldier, Marine, sailor, SEAL, or the like ever wanted to be in that position.

In Carter's case, his work with the CIA also cost him his wife. He'd been to hell and back, and he was somehow still walking. Jesse's greatest nightmare was to suffer the same fate, which was the main reason he'd kept his distance from Ella over the years.

There wasn't a chance in this life or the next that Jesse would survive the loss of Ella. But he refused to let himself imagine any scenario that didn't result in her being over a hundred when dying of natural causes. And he had to go first. No alternative.

Their life together cruised through his mind now. Snapshots of a future for them he'd never allowed himself to visualize before filled his head. He brought a hand to his chest to try and make sense of the strange feeling those thoughts had stirred up. Was that what peace felt like?

"Did you hear me?" Sydney cocked her head, and at the feel of Ella's hand on his back, Jesse blinked and reset his focus to the present.

"Sydney and I believe we can get to Zoran through his wife. Well, because of his wife's murder." Zoey's lips matched her fleece, and knowing Ella, she'd called it Christmas red. Or candy apple red. "This whole thing is in motion because she died and he survived, right?"

Don't remind me.

“There’s nothing Yuri loves more than a client out for revenge. According to our sources, that is. Given what happened to his parents, it makes sense for the retribution-angle to hit closer to home with him. So, Yuri accepting the assignment from Zoran fits.”

Jesse had always considered the op last year a failure because Zoran’s wife had been killed. He’d been so furious about what happened that he would have left the CIA regardless of Ella’s decision not to marry Brian.

Had Jesse known Zoran survived the shooting, he would have hunted him down long ago to prevent the entire situation from spiraling into the colossal disaster that it now was.

He’d have snuffed the life from Zoran while in a coma if he’d had to, taken no chances the fucker would wake and seek revenge. And so help Jesse, if Thatcher *also* knew the prick had been alive all that time, being kept in hiding by his people, that’d be one more nail in Thatcher’s coffin.

“What is it? What aren’t you saying?” He didn’t know the woman at all, but there was something in Zoey’s eyes that he was picking up on, and he’d take her theory over no leads at all.

“She’s quiet because she doesn’t have all the facts.” Carter’s rumbly voice from behind had Jesse turning to see Carter and Gray standing at the edge of the room like they were waiting for an invitation to join them.

“What we have is better than nothing,” Zoey remarked, and Carter kept his focus on Jesse without offering her his attention.

“And what is it that you have?” Jesse prompted, wanting to be clued the fuck in.

Carter swiveled his gaze past Jesse, presumably to focus on Zoey before speaking. “They think Dragan, Zoran’s brother, may have set up Zoran. Possibly cut a deal with Aleksa and Bulgarian Intelligence as well. Or just the Bulgarians.”

Zoran’s brother? Jesse turned to the side so he could look back and forth between his teammates. And for now, he supposed that included Zoey.

“I’ve listened to enough crime podcasts to know family members are usually at the top of the suspect list,” Ella shared, which had Jesse squeezing her gently, hating she was involved in all this. And also, since when did she listen to crime podcasts?

“What would be his motivation?” Jesse asked. “We assumed the brother may have been somehow connected to the business before I shot Zoran, but from what we can tell now, Aleksa is running the show, and the main outcome of Zoran and his wife’s shootings was that Dragan got ...” *Ohh*. Jesse looked up to see Zoey nodding as if confirming where his thoughts had trailed off to. “You think Zoran’s brother wanted the kid? His nephew?”

Zoey pointed toward one of the laptops in response. “I won’t go into detail how we know, but—”

“Because she can’t,” Carter hissed. “Because she doesn’t have facts. This is all speculation.”

Zoey shot him a sharp look, but Carter didn’t back down. Hell, the man didn’t so much as move a muscle from what

Jesse could tell. Stone cold again. How hard did he have to work to keep his emotions in check around this MI6 officer?

“Just tell me.” *I need to hear it, whatever it is.* If there was a chance they could use the information to help get to their targets, then damn it, they had to do it.

“We believe Zoran’s wife was having an affair with Dragan. Well, a while ago, at least,” Sydney jumped in to continue their theory. “I think the kid is Dragan’s son, not his nephew. Not that Zoran knows that.”

Didn’t see that coming. “Why would Dragan want the mother of his child dead?” Gray interjected, drawing Sydney’s attention. “If they had a kid together, why arrange for her death?”

So, he was on the same page of disbelief as Carter? And Jesse fell somewhere in between. He wasn’t sure what to think or if this news would ultimately help them get to either Zoran or The Chechen, but he’d listen.

“Sadly, it doesn’t take much effort to list reasons why Dragan might want the mother dead,” Sydney went on, shifting her focus to Jesse as if she’d already argued too much with Gray and was done with him. “It could also be that the brother made a deal with Aleksa. Aleksa was Zoran’s right-hand man. He may have wanted Zoran dead to take over the business, but the plan would only work with the wife out of the picture.” She paused to let her words sink in. “Thatcher lied to you, if you haven’t figured it out. The wife wasn’t innocent. She was as crooked as her husband and very involved in their organization.”

Well, that wasn’t a shock—Thatcher lying. Nothing would surprise Jesse anymore when it came to that man, not unless he’d done something saintly.

“But would Dragan go to such great lengths to raise his son himself? Kill his own brother? The mother of his child?” Jesse thought about his own father, and a shiver rolled down his spine.

“You see, there are too many holes in their theory.” Carter folded his arms tight across his chest. “And where’s the DNA test to prove any of this?” When no one responded, he huffed out, “Exactly.”

“Is it so hard for you to believe Dragan only wanted the best for his son? And he wanted to raise him, not send him off to some boarding school?” Zoey stood before Carter and placed her hand on his chest. Carter dipped his chin to look at her as if she were insane for touching him. “Is it possible he wasn’t like Zoran, and he didn’t want two criminals taking care of his only child?”

Carter leaned closer to her, drawing his face near hers. “Are you suggesting he did the right thing? That his actions were justified?”

“No, of course not. But some people do crazy things for the people they love.” Zoey’s voice cracked under Carter’s vicious stare. A bit surprising she’d allowed him to get under her skin after remaining strong all night. Well, all morning.

“And some people are just plain crazy,” Carter coldly remarked.

“Maybe we should all take a step back,” Ella spoke up. “Literally.”

Carter swiveled his focus toward Ella, and, lucky for him, lost the growly-look because team leader or not, the only man allowed to snarl at his woman would be Jesse, right before he ravaged her in bed.

“Even if any of this is true,” Gray began as Carter took a step back from Zoey, which had her letting go of a breath, “how does that help us?”

Sydney and Zoey eyed Gray at the same time. “We do what Thatcher did. Leak the intel,” Zoey announced. “Plant seeds of doubt in Zoran’s mind that his own flesh and blood tried to murder him. That his brother, and possibly Aleksa, set him up and turned him over to Bulgarian Intelligence,” she went on, her British accent growing a bit thicker as she spoke that time. “And Zoran will have no choice but to go to his brother. Maybe Aleksa too. Confront them. He won’t be able to stop himself.”

“Zoran knows Aleksa is being watched and has to assume Dragan is as well. He won’t take that risk,” Gray countered.

“And people *also* do crazy things when they’re burned by the people they trust,” Zoey said, and Jesse was certain the jab from her was meant for Carter, but Carter didn’t so much as tighten his jaw at her words. No reaction. “My guess is Zoran goes after the one who means the most to him. His brother.” She pursed her lips for a moment. “He’ll go to Austria. And Yuri will know that if Zoran goes there ... so will we.”

But would they really go to Austria knowing Yuri would be expecting them to? Give the prick time to lay out his own plans for their arrival? Plus, the CIA and MI6 probably wouldn’t be able to fly an unmanned drone over German or Austrian airspace. His team would lose their “eyes in the sky” advantage. *Which Yuri will want and anticipate. Shit.*

“I need facts. Evidence. Confirmation that any of this is possible. Or that you can even get word to Zoran about this. We can’t whisper in another Bulgarian officer’s ear the way

Thatcher did about Jesse being the shooter,” Gray said in a level tone as Carter remained still and silent.

“DGSE didn’t have a problem leaking our presence when we arrived in Paris. Word clearly got to Zoran and Yuri. If French Intelligence can do it, so can we,” Zoey tossed back, ignoring his remark about needing proof.

Jesse cupped the back of his neck, working at the kinks there as he considered the idea, thinking back over the last few days and how everything had unfolded.

Thatcher never wanted Jesse back with the CIA. He’d expected and *needed* Jesse to stay with Falcon to draw out Carter. All a fucking act, right down to his questions about Ella and the team in the workshop.

And Rochella, damn it. He still wished he’d pummeled Henry, but for Ella’s sake, he’d withheld his anger. But it’d been Thatcher who’d ultimately sent the prick to Alabama, and on the same damn day that he’d given Jesse the Zoran case file.

Thatcher had strategically set up the dominoes because the man knew everything about everyone, and all he had to do was knock one down, and his plans fell the way he’d intended.

So, how the hell were they supposed to stop something already in motion? Thatcher was relentless in taking down his marks, and he’d go to any lengths for justice. But justice came with a price this time—Ella at the center of it all.

Take her to Austria? Could he do that? Place her right in front of their two enemies, one of whom happened to be a man even the best of the best Russian assassins feared?

“Thatcher will do anything to complete a mission,” Jesse said under his breath when another thought struck him. *He’ll*

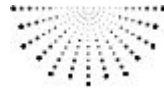
do anything. Absolutely anything.

The wheels of his mind kept spinning as he struggled to make the dramatic leap he felt coming but hated to admit might be true. But would Thatcher really ...?

“What is it?” Carter asked, sensing Jesse had stumbled onto something.

“We need Thatcher on the phone. I think he can confirm these theories. Like you said, he had to have known about the wife’s involvement in the business, which means he may know a lot more.” His stomach muscles tensed, and his body shook with anger as he revealed, “I think Thatcher was the second shooter. He’s the one who killed Zoran’s wife.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“YOU’RE DIGGING YOUR OWN GRAVE, THATCHER. I’D GET TO the point. Answer my question.” The fierce and heated look in Jesse’s eyes had Ella turning to the fireplace, her nerves stretching like she was inside one of those saltwater taffy machines being pulled apart.

The crackle of a loud exhale sounded over the speakerphone, but Jesse’s former boss didn’t speak up. And wasn’t that an answer in itself? No response was *still* a response.

Ella caught Savanna’s eyes as she came into the room a moment later, refreshed from sleep and a shower from the looks of it. She shot Ella a curious look, tipping her head toward Jesse. His rumbly tone must have traveled all the way upstairs. In response, Ella shook her head—*It’s not good*.

Ella then walked behind where Jesse and Carter stood with the phone between them to get to the fire and lowered herself to sit on the hearth, crossing her legs at her ankles to keep from jiggling her leg and drawing attention to herself in the now crowded room of operators.

Savanna had just settled into the crook of Griffin’s arm on the couch, the same one where Ella had tossed and turned,

dozing on and off before her morning of wonderful sex. *Back to reality now.*

“Thatcher, damn it, tell me. Did you kill Zoran’s wife?” Jesse’s free hand balled into a fist, and Thatcher would’ve been on the receiving end of a punch if he were in the room.

She didn’t want to see Jesse come apart, though, not when she’d spent the morning witnessing him piece himself back together. His walls had come down, and he’d handed her his heart.

Ella closed her eyes as Thatcher’s silence became deafening.

“Yes, yes, it was me behind the long gun that day. I killed Zoran’s wife, and I would’ve placed a second bullet in Zoran had I known your shot wasn’t lethal.” Thatcher’s response rolled slow and steady, for some reason calling to mind her mom’s bowling technique—gently releasing the ball to trundle down the alley, seemingly with little force, and yet, the pins always fell.

And right now, when Ella opened her eyes, those pins were symbolic of Jesse’s control ... as he lost it. She had a profile view of him, but she could see that the rage no longer simmered, it was a full-on boil. Thatcher’s confession was sure to be the final straw for Jesse, especially since Thatcher had purposefully set into motion a plan that jeopardized Ella’s life.

“Why?” Carter asked when Jesse remained quiet. It was the eerie kind of quiet that raised the hair on her arms.

Forcing herself to stand, she approached Jesse and smoothed her hand up and down his taut back. She felt him draw in a deep breath before stealing a look at her from over

his shoulder, his brows tight, rage still clinging to his blue eyes as she hoped the veil of anger would, at least, lift a little.

“Because of that deal with the Bulgarians and the intel they gave us, we stopped a terrorist attack. At least a hundred civilians would’ve died if we hadn’t played ball. So, how about you focus on that?” Thatcher’s answer had Jesse’s gaze swinging back to the phone still in his palm. Ella continued to stroke Jesse’s back, doing her best to calm him and loosen the grip of anger that seemed to prevent him from speaking.

“Details,” Carter barked out. “Now. No more games.”

Ella spied Zoey cutting across the room to stand near them. “Zoran’s brother, Dragan? Was he involved?” Zoey asked, her tone as sharp as Carter’s. “Is he the kid’s biological father?”

“How the hell did you ...?” Thatcher dropped his words, and yet, that was their answer.

Sydney and Zoey had been right. Impressive. But what did that mean? All of this was over Ella’s head. She taught third grade and designed clothes as a hobby. Hunting criminals was miles outside her wheelhouse.

“You wouldn’t have been on board with us killing the wife. And frankly, you didn’t need to know the details back then,” Thatcher defended himself before anyone else had a chance to ask more questions. “And I didn’t tell you yesterday or in Alabama because I was trying to protect you from yourself.”

“Oh really?” Jesse’s humorless chuckle sent a shiver rolling down Ella’s spine. “Your definition of protecting me is fucking hilarious.”

“If you knew about the kid, you’d go to Austria, and I’m telling you now if you think that’s the right play, you’re mistaken. You’ll get yourself killed, I guarantee it,” Thatcher

hissed, and Ella wondered if this was yet another game or if his plea was genuine. “We can’t offer you drone support there. Or any kind of support. The Austrians already objected to an operation there.”

“You telling me not to go ... means you really want me to go, once again assuming I’d do the opposite of what you order,” Jesse bit out.

“If that were the case, I would’ve already told you about Dragan’s deal with Aleksa to cut out Zoran by handing him over to Bulgarian Intelligence,” Thatcher insisted. “I’d have fed you that lead.”

“He has a point, I hate to admit it,” Zoey spoke up, which had Jesse looking her way, and Ella only caught a shadowed glimpse of his profile from that angle, but he was most likely baring his teeth at anyone suggesting Thatcher had a point.

“Do not go to Austria. That is the wrong move,” Thatcher reiterated. “I’m warning you.”

“We don’t need your help. *Your* help is what got us all in this mess in the first place,” Jesse responded while looking back toward the phone.

“You do need my help. Don’t be stubborn because you’re pissed at me,” Thatcher quickly remarked. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t know Zoran survived until a few weeks ago. I would’ve handled him myself long ago if that’d been the case.”

“How am I ever supposed to believe another word from your mouth?” Jesse was trembling now, the little pulses beneath her palm at his back a dead giveaway. “You’ll do whatever it takes to get your hands on The Chechen, including making a deal with Zoran himself—my life in exchange for

Yuri's." He shook his head. "My death would be worth all those lives saved, right? Statistically speaking. That's how you do the math in your head. It's how you calculate your decisions."

And now it was Ella shaking. The idea of Jesse being used as a martyr to bring down a criminal ... not an option.

"I'd never do that, and you know it. Every decision I've made that led us to this point was calculated, yes. But I trusted you could handle it. You're the best I've ever worked with, and I also knew—"

"I'd do anything to protect Ella," Jesse cut in, his tone venomous.

Thatcher, and well, the entire room, fell quiet for a few seconds before Thatcher solemnly said, "I've been like a father to you. A father doesn't want to see his son die before he does."

"You're no father to me." Jesse's words punched through the air.

"Maybe you're right," Thatcher slowly remarked. "I didn't smack you around the way he did."

"Son of a bitch." Jesse turned and launched the phone into the lit fireplace before he bowed his head and planted his hands at his hips, panting.

Thatcher's comment burned a hole in her heart as the fire consumed the phone, and her thoughts swirled like a tendril of smoke. Now she understood her mother's comments about Jesse that day in the stables at home—*Jesse didn't have an easy life growing up ... not my secret to share.*

"So now you all know about my dad." Jesse tossed both hands in the air and did a three-sixty to look at his teammates,

but he avoided eye contact with Ella. “It’s a non-issue. We need to focus.”

Your dad beat you? How had she missed that? Why hadn’t her parents stopped it from happening if they knew? Called child protective services, damn it? A million thoughts slammed her at once, but Jesse’s sudden litany of curses under his breath proved he was anything but fine and able to move on and focus.

His father was the first one to break him, wasn’t he?

And now she wanted to kill the bastard herself for ever hurting the man she loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ELLA STEPPED INTO THE COURTYARD AND IMMEDIATELY spotted Jesse near the lonesome garden beds in the far corner. Crouched on his haunches, head down, and forearms braced on his thighs, he was the image of dejection.

Moments earlier, when he stormed from the living room, nearly tearing the door to the courtyard from its hinges, everyone stood quietly watching him, clearly unsure what to say or how to react. Ella had quickly grabbed both of their jackets and followed him outside.

Another courtyard moment, this time in the bright sunlight of a cloudless winter sky.

She couldn't believe she'd spent years being angry at Jesse without so much as a clue as to the enormous amount of pain and hurt he'd kept bottled up and buried deep inside.

She wanted to cry a tear for every ounce of suffering he'd endured, then wrap her arms around her big, growly man and comfort him.

“You know the funny thing?” Jesse surprised her by asking while slowly rising, arching his shoulders back, and facing her. “For years, I really believed Thatcher would've made a better father than my old man, even though he was always off saving the world. I had thought ...” The unfinished sentence floated

into the chilly air as he met her eyes. “But by using you, like you were just one of his game pieces, he’s hurt me more than my dad ever did.” He squeezed his eyes closed. “I’d take all the beatings in the world every day for the rest of my life if it meant protecting you from this mess.”

Beatings. That word hung heavy on her soul, her stomach turning from nausea, but she closed the gap between them.

His eyes opened when she nudged his jacket against his chest, and his gaze fell to the black North Face fleece in her hands. Her focus remained on his hard jaw, his lips pressed into a tight line as he worked through his thoughts.

“Rory never told me,” she whispered, unsure what to make of that. But if Rory had known, she never would have allowed their father to walk her down the aisle when she’d married Chris. Right? It didn’t add up.

And Ella didn’t think for one second that Jesse’s dad had ever laid a hand on his mom or Rory. No, Jesse would’ve ... well, killed him.

He blew out a deep breath, his lips parting just a fraction to allow for the pent-up oxygen to escape, and then he accepted the jacket.

“My parents fought a lot when we were kids. Usually about me. My dad thought I was a shithead failure at everything in life. And my mom defended me.” He shrugged, but Ella had the distinct feeling he’d only scratched the surface. That this was merely the tip of the iceberg of his hell. “I would find Rory huddled in her closet rocking back and forth, her hands over her ears during their fights.”

Ella resisted the urge to close her eyes at the picture he’d painted of her best friend. Someone else she cared about

who'd kept pain bottled up and maybe had been too afraid to share.

Picture-perfect lives were usually photoshopped. Hadn't her mother said something like that in the stables?

"I'd shut us in the closet together and tell her stories to take her mind off the shouting." A surprising smirk met his lips. "Peter Pan. Adventure stuff. Hell, I often made up my own stories. Maybe that's why she became a treasure hunter before she became a, you know, bad guy hunter," he said, putting on the fleece. When Ella reached out and circled her arms around him, he pulled her in tightly and ran his fingers through her hair for a few quiet moments.

"Rory only saw Dad hit me here and there. A slap across the face. Belt to my ass. Shit like that. Not too different than most parents did in those days. I mean, we grew up in the eighties and nineties when that stuff was still a thing," he explained, his tone more matter-of-fact now, less ragey.

She had no desire to unglue herself from him though. She was where she wanted and needed to be. And he kept stroking her hair as if that was helping him get through it.

"Rory blocked out the memories. It wasn't until she started seeing Chris's therapist that she said she, herself, began to remember everything." He paused for a second. "I assume she didn't want you to know when we were kids, for the same reason as me. Who wants to tell their friends their dad is an asshole?"

The *sorry* she wanted to offer felt so small and unworthy of his experience, so she kept the word trapped behind her lips until something *more significant* came to mind.

“Dad’s abuse got worse when I was a teenager. And he hid those beatings from my mom and Rory. They, um, still don’t know how often he beat the shit out of me. Never hit my face. Nowhere visible. Clever abuser even when he was drunk.”

Her stomach wrenched at his confession, the words prompting tears to begin trickling down her cheeks as her heart broke into a million pieces.

“I was always getting into fights at school, and in hindsight, I think only part of it was because I hated seeing the small guy picked on by someone bigger. You know, my dad issues. The other part was, it just felt good to be able to hit back. Fuck if I don’t want to admit that, but for so long I just had to take it from my dad, so if anyone was willing to fight me, well ...” She felt his chest rise from a shrug.

He was trying to play it off, and he didn’t need to act as if it weren’t a big deal. His dad hurt him. Physically. Emotionally. And he’d gotten away with it.

Ella was certain her mother was unaware of exactly how rough Jesse’s childhood really had been. Otherwise, she would’ve pointed her shotgun at Jesse’s dad. *Dealing with Deb Hawkins, a fate worse than jail* ... Beckett definitely had that right. Ellipsis and all.

“So, yeah, he was why I went into the Army, but he was also why I stayed in longer than expected.” His hoarse tone had her pulling back, and there were tears in his eyes as well.

Even though her hands were cold, she reached up and cupped his face, surprised to find his skin so warm. *Emotions can do that*, she supposed. “What do you mean?”

“From what I could tell, whenever talking to my mom, they no longer fought. Dad rarely drank. They were happier.”

He swiped a hand over his head. “So, I couldn’t help but think I’d been the problem all along. Dad even started going to church with Mom. So I stayed away.”

“Jesse,” she cried, tears flowing down her cheeks like a running faucet. “It was absolutely not you. Please, don’t think that.”

“I know that now.” He shook his head. “The Army wasn’t the escape I thought it’d be. The things I had to do. What I saw. The buddies I lost. It all fucked with my head.”

And that’s why you stayed away from me. Her lips caught her salty tears, and she tasted his pain in each drop.

“And then Thatcher came along with promises that I wouldn’t have to watch any more friends die. That I could work alone. Keep saving the world and make a difference but on my terms.” He closed his eyes again. “I was at my breaking point, Ella. And the CIA loves nothing more than to take a broken man, break him down to absolutely nothing, then put him back together to fit their needs.”

Her stomach roiled for the hundredth time in the last few minutes alone.

“Ella, there’s something I have to tell you.” The dark, somber tone of his voice had her capturing her lip between her teeth as her nerves pitched her forward, her hands going from his cheeks to his chest.

“What?” A gasp left her lips at the grave look in his eyes as he stared down at her.

“When I say I was at my breaking point, well, I was there in the literal sense.” His trembling words shook her to her core. “On a ledge, to be exact. Not that the Agency knew that, but ...”

Oh, God. She fought the sob trying to storm free, which would have her falling to her knees.

He slid his hands along her sides and gripped her arms as if sensing she might crumble. “I couldn’t jump. I wouldn’t have done it. Because I knew that’d hurt you. And my mom. Rory. A.J.” He held her a bit tighter, focusing those brilliant blue eyes on her. “And I’ve only ever wanted you protected. Safe and happy, so ...”

Unable to hold back any longer, she broke down and sobbed. And just as she began to collapse, Jesse scooped her against his frame and held her tight. She knew why he’d kept this from her. It wasn’t easy for him to share, but more than that, he knew she’d be hurt and devastated. He’d spent his life keeping her from being hurt by what he perceived as his shortcomings, failures, and his resultant actions.

Veteran suicide was ... too real. And God ...

“Shh. It’s okay. I’m ... doing much better. I’ve been getting help. Virtual, um, therapy sessions. To work on myself,” he whispered. “I started a little over a year ago.”

Therapy? She was speechless at the fact he really had been trying after she called off the wedding with Brian, and she hadn’t known. Her cheek was to his chest, his heartbeat in her ear as he held her to him, comforting her.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to find my way to you. To try and piece myself back together to be the man you deserve.” He quietly added, “I didn’t know if you could love someone so broken back then.”

Ella nearly startled at his last comment, and she pulled back and swiped her hands over her cheeks, willing herself to

pull it together. “Loving someone unconditionally means you’re there for them at their highs and lows.”

He quietly studied her before saying, “I’m back on a team now because I was wrong. Being alone was never the answer. And more than anything, I don’t want to live in a world where we’re not together.” He paused for another second. “I was waiting to be perfect for you, but I realize now perfection’s not achievable. For anyone, really. And if these last few days have taught me anything, it’s that feeling whole is my kind of perfect, and that’s how I feel when I’m with you.”

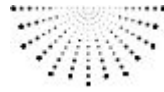
Oh God. Her heart.

“I love you, Ella Mae.” It was the first time telling her this aside from the wedding, and those words zipped her heart back together. *She* felt whole again. “Unconditionally and forever,” he added, his voice cracking this time.

Ella slid her palms up his chest and placed her hands over his heart. Once she was certain her voice would remain steady, she lifted her gaze and looked into his deep blue eyes. “I love you too. So much. And I’m so damn proud of you for working on yourself. For not quitting on yourself, on us,” she cried out softly. “Because I don’t want to live without you either.” Pressing up on her toes, she set her lips to his.

Jesse groaned and took her mouth in a bruising kiss that felt as though he was conveying more than his vow of love and his desire for her. No, that groan was the sound of ... relief.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



“YOU SURE YOU DON’T NEED MORE TIME?” CARTER ASKED, appearing apprehensive as he scratched the front of his throat and looked everywhere but at Jesse. It was clear this situation had him crawling out of his skin even as he attempted to play the role of the understanding boss.

Yeah, makes two of us. The last thing Jesse wanted was for his new teammates to worry that he’d snap one day because of childhood trauma.

And honestly, now that Ella was in his life and there were no more secrets between them, he didn’t feel anything other than lucky. Lucky that she was strong, forgiving, and well, patient. She’d had decades’ worth of patience.

“I’m solid. I promise.” Jesse looked over at Gray, the only other teammate in the room, which Jesse assumed was on purpose. Just the team leaders confronting their newest recruit to ensure he was stable. “Charlie mike,” he added. Military lingo for, *continue mission*.

“Roger that,” Carter responded, his shoulders relaxing slightly, probably relieved he’d just escaped a “feelings” conversation. But the man’s behavior around Zoey had Jesse thinking that Carter wasn’t as emotionally stunted as Jesse once believed.

“So,” Gray declared loudly, about as subtle as a shotgun blast at an indoor firing range. The word punctured the air and had Jesse peeling his focus away from the direction of the kitchen, where Ella and Savanna had gone a few moments ago. He’d given Ella the go-ahead to share the details of their conversation in the courtyard, or however much of it she felt compelled to share. He was done with keeping secrets and putting up walls. He just wanted a fresh start. A new beginning. And in order to make that happen, he had to eradicate the threats to Ella.

“Are we going forward with Zoey and Sydney’s plan?” Jesse asked as he set his back to the wall by the fireplace. The conversation they’d had outside had put both him and Ella through the emotional wringer, and he was still a bit shaky. “Are we drawing Zoran and Yuri to Austria?” he continued, looking back and forth between Gray and Carter.

Gray folded his arms over his chest, his biceps stretching the sleeves of his black tee, and Carter shoved his hands into the pockets of his dark slacks.

“I think it’s our only play to end this within the next forty-eight or so hours,” Gray said, and Jesse was somewhat surprised that Carter had let him take the lead. The two team leaders seemed to be struggling with their roles at every turn, still vying for pack alpha, as it were.

“I agree.” Carter tilted his head and snapped his attention to Jesse, his narrowed eyes appearing to be still assessing for damage. The kind you couldn’t see. The kind that most veterans who suffered dealt with. Invisible wounds.

Jesse surrendered a palm, the gesture meant to reassure Carter once again that, *Yeah, I’m good*. “Thatcher knows he

won't be able to stop us if we're hell-bent on going to Austria, but he'll do his best to, at least, make a show of it."

"Right. He'll have DGSE waiting for our arrival at the airport. Not that we'll be flying from Paris to Austria, but we can let them think that," Carter remarked in an even tone. "Griffin and Savanna are taking the jet home. Once my pilot drops them off in Alabama, he'll turn around and fly to Salzburg when we're ready for an exfil post-op."

"Does Griffin know he's not coming with us?" Jesse asked, pushing away from the wall.

"Not yet, but he won't want Savanna in harm's way, and I can't say I blame him," Gray answered, then unlocked his arms and held a hand up. It didn't take a mind reader to know Jesse was about to suggest Ella head home as well.

Jesse nodded. Unfortunately, sending Ella home wasn't an option. "So, how are we getting to Austria without Thatcher interfering? You know he'll do his best to keep us from going. If not all of us, at least Carter." Without Carter in Austria, the plan would fail. Yuri wouldn't show his face unless Carter were present.

Gray and Carter exchanged another look, and Gray took one step forward. They'd clearly come to an agreement as to who would be taking point on the logistical details.

"We split up and drive the two SUVs to the airport in Paris. As soon as we're within range of restricted airspace and the Agency's drone is no longer overhead ... we make our move," Gray explained. "We'll all hop out, except Savanna and Griffin, who will head to the hangar where we assume the DGSE officers will be waiting. And while the officers are busy discovering the rest of us aren't with them, we'll have already

boosted two cars from the terminal parking lot and have left the airport.”

“Griffin and Savanna won’t be stopped from flying home. Thatcher and the DGSE don’t care about them. Just me.” Carter peered at Jesse. “And maybe you, if what Thatcher said on the phone is to be believed, and he really doesn’t want to see you die.”

Jesse almost laughed at the idea Thatcher actually cared. No, that ship of belief had sailed the moment he placed Ella in danger. Hell, more like when he killed Zoran’s wife for the sake of a mission. And Jesse would have to confront him face-to-face once this op was complete and the team was Stateside.

“Not sure Thatcher will fall for this plan or expect it.” *But Thatcher has to know there’s no other way. Could still all be a mind game, and he really wants us there.* “He might stick around as the CIA or DGSE jump through the hoops of attempting to stop us, but ultimately, like you said, Thatcher knows we’ll find a way to Austria if we set our minds to it.”

“We’ll be divided into two teams when we leave the airport in the new vehicles. One team heads to Austria by train, the other by car,” Gray told him. “Sydney, myself, and Jack are with you and Ella. We’ll be taking the train. Carter, Zoey, and Oliver are heading there after swapping the boosted car for a legitimate ride.”

Carter took one step closer. “We reserved a private compartment on a luxury train that departs early tomorrow from Paris. Unlike the high-speed passenger trains, there’s only one quick stop in Frankfurt. And you’ll have privacy in case there’s the need to discuss operational details.” Carter paused for a breath. “It’ll take you longer to get there since it’s not quite as fast, and it goes to Vienna instead of direct to

Hallstatt, but I think this is the best course of action. From Vienna, you can catch another train ride to Hallstatt.”

“About a three-hour ride between Vienna and Hallstatt,” Gray noted.

“I understand why we’re separating,” Jesse began, “because—”

“Because if something happens to us, Carter can save our asses.” The casual, almost joking comment had come from Jack, standing at the entrance to the living room, coffee in hand.

“And the reason half of us are taking a train instead of driving is to put our faces out there for Yuri to confirm we’re en route?” *Bait. Ella as bait.*

“I know it can’t be easy for you to take Ella to Austria, but Zoran wants to watch you two die himself, so you’ll be safe on that train,” Gray slowly explained, and frustrating as it was, Jesse knew their options were limited. “Yuri will assume Carter’s coming to Austria as well, but he’ll know that we wouldn’t risk putting all three of you together on a train.”

Jesse pinched the bridge of his nose and dipped his chin to his chest. They’d be unarmed on the train, which had Jesse nervous. He could protect Ella in other ways, sure, but not having a gun wasn’t ideal.

“And, uh, what about the rest of your guys scattered about Europe? You already have guys in Hallstatt watching over Dragan’s place, right?” Jesse let go of a deep breath and lowered his hand to look at Carter.

“We have guys in Austria now, and I’m bringing more in as we speak.” Carter went over to the Keurig machine, Jack’s

cup of java likely a reminder he needed some. Better than shooting scotch like he'd done before.

Jack stepped farther into the room, sipping his coffee. "If we're assuming Zoran and Yuri are expecting we'll show up in Austria, that means they'll have almost as much time as us to cook something up."

"For all we know, their plans began last night once they confirmed we were in France, and they're just going to alter them for Austria," Gray replied. "It's also possible Yuri has men en route to Bama as we speak too." A spark of anger ignited at his comment, at the idea Ella's family might be in danger and that Ella would be heading straight toward a psychopathic hitman *and* another man who wanted her dead.

But as much as it pained Jesse, in order to keep Ella safe ... he had to do the last thing in the world he wanted—place her in danger.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“ZORAN’S IN AUSTRIA.” SYDNEY ROSE FROM HER CHAIR AS she made the announcement around nineteen hundred hours that night. Her palms landed on the dining room table Jesse and the team had dragged into the living room earlier that day. Based on the color and pattern, Jesse guessed it was red oak.

And now he couldn’t help but think back to his workshop in Bama and the unfinished table sitting there. How long had it been since Thatcher had shown up like a wrecking ball to his life? Jet lag and time changes and a hell of a lot of stress had made it feel like it’d been weeks, not days. *Today’s January third, right?* He shook his head. *And who am I kidding? My life was fucked before Thatcher showed up because Ella hadn’t been mine. I’d yet to take the leap and share the truth with Ella like my therapist had encouraged me to do.*

Jesse pushed his hands into his pockets, doing his best not to fidget. The closer it came to leaving for Austria in the morning, to Ella leaving the safety net of the bed-and-breakfast in Versailles, the more worked up he was getting.

“Local CCTV footage in Salzburg outside a bank caught Zoran getting out of a limo and into a wheelchair,” Sydney added.

“I think it’s safe to assume my asset successfully relayed the intel to Zoran about his brother and son if Zoran’s in Austria,” Zoey said, sending a smug look across the room to where Carter leaned back against the bar, elbows propped on the surface and ankles casually crossed.

Carter stroked the scruff on his jaw, seemingly unaffected by her comment, maybe waiting for an *I told you so*, but Jesse doubted she was the type.

“He’s about seventy kilometers away from Hallstatt. My guess is he heads there tonight,” Sydney shared.

“He won’t hurt the kid if he finds out he’s not really his son, right?” Ella’s soft voice and concern for the son had Jesse’s heart squeezing.

“No. I mean, God, I hope not.” Sydney righted herself and visibly cringed. “He raised him from birth, believing him to be his biological child.”

“Once we get there, Yuri won’t be able to resist a chance to get all three of you,” Zoey remarked, and when Jesse stole a quick look at the MI6 officer, she was resting one red nail against her chin, eyes intensely focused on Carter.

“*But* we’re obviously splitting y’all up for the trip to Hallstatt. Don’t want to hand the cocksucker a three-for-one special,” Jack tossed out his two cents again as he settled himself on the hearth. “He’s not dumb enough to think we’d put the three of you in the same room with a come-and-get-me sign around your necks once we arrive.”

“Yeah, under no circumstances will I allow Ella to be lured into any room, cave, or fucking flying vehicle if we think Yuri will show up there,” Jesse rasped, that unsettled feeling

sparkling to life again. Might as well be walking into a lion's den. *Fucking perfect.*

"Flying vehicles?" Jack erased the smile from his lips with the back of his hand. "Like a plane?"

A little joking around during an op was normal, but with Ella's life on the line, Jesse couldn't see the humor in anything right now. "Yuri must be pretty damn confident that I'll bring Ella with me." Jesse had to think like a hitman to get into the man's mind, a skill he'd never hoped to use again.

"You're anticipating he makes contact with us on our way to Austria, aren't you? The one stop in Frankfurt. It's the opportunity for someone on Yuri's team to get on and off the train if need be. You think he's going to try and force my hand? Find a way to guarantee Ella shows up for some fucking showdown?" Jesse closed in on Carter, freeing his hands from his pockets in the process.

"Yes, he'll plan a way to make sure Ella is with you whenever he decides to make his move," Zoey quickly answered, and the blood rushed from Jesse's face at how calmly she'd delivered her words.

Was she as bad as the CIA? Would she go to any lengths to get her mark? The man killed her fiancé, so maybe.

Zoey surrendered a palm. "It's imperative we keep the ball in our court."

"Did you just throw a basketball metaphor at me?" Jesse hissed.

"Whatever Yuri's planning, we'll be prepared," Zoey went on, ignoring his comment. "And based on Yuri's MO, he'll probably have an explosive device somewhere in Hallstatt that

he'll threaten to detonate if we all don't meet him where he wants."

Jesse gritted his teeth as he remembered that Zoey's fiancé and Carter had been in a similar situation years ago. There'd been only the two of them, and since Carter was more experienced with explosives, he'd gone to defuse the device. Yuri had killed Zoey's fiancé in the meantime. How could she be sure they wouldn't have a déjà vu moment with this op?

"I know," Zoey said as if reading his thoughts. "But this will be different. We'll have a team. And no red tape from our agencies to cut through."

"So, you think he'll threaten to hurt civilians in order to force Jesse's hand, to make sure I show up wherever he wants me to go?" Ella was on her feet, and Jesse circled the table to get to her as Savanna and Griffin stood as well.

"I won't let that happen," Jesse firmly told her, taking Ella's hands into his. "I'm not letting you walk into any kind of trap. That's not up for discussion."

"Jesse." Carter's tone held a warning that had him snapping his gaze to his boss without dropping Ella's hands.

"I don't care if he threatens to bring down all of Europe. Ella's not going anywhere at that madman's request." He tried to keep his head on straight, but when it came to Ella, he wasn't sure he could. "Dealing with Zoran was one thing. We knew he wouldn't go to such extremes. An-eye-for-an-eye kind of guy," he said at the memory of A.J.'s words. "Zoran wouldn't kill someone's mother or son as retribution for the death of his wife, but with Yuri involved, this is ..."

Jesse abruptly let go of Ella's hands, realizing their concern about Yuri sending men to Alabama was spot-the-

fuck-on, and they were more than likely already there. But so were Gray's men.

He wasn't sure if Yuri would risk taking anyone out in broad daylight, but if he was short on time and wanted to keep "the ball in his court," then he might do the unexpected.

Jesse checked his watch and then reached for one of the burner phones from the table.

A.J.'s plane arrived in Birmingham a few hours ago, and he'd need a heads-up. It was highly likely the worst-case scenario might happen today—that Ella's family would be targeted, and A.J. needed to be prepared.

"There's only one way on God's green earth Ella would go anywhere Yuri wanted her to," Jesse said, his voice shaky at the realization. He knew Ella would do anything if her niece, practically a daughter to her, were in trouble.

Ella's blue eyes focused on him as if she struggled to comprehend what he was truly suggesting. "McKenna," she murmured.

"A.J.," Jesse said the second the line connected, and he switched it to speakerphone. "Where are you?"

"In Shep's truck. We're heading to the sheriff's station to check on Beckett. About one mile out," A.J. answered. "Why, what's wrong?"

"I think McKenna might be Yuri's next target." Jesse spied Savanna grab hold of Ella as if she might collapse as he added, "And I'm guessing his men are in town by now."

But they weren't too late, or they would've already heard about it.

"What the hell was that?" Jesse heard Shep rasp.

The line was quiet for a moment before A.J. responded, “Some type of explosion.”

“The sheriff’s station,” Shep began in a grave tone. “It’s on fire.”

* * *

JESSE PACED BACK AND FORTH IN THE LIVING ROOM, WEARING down the wood floors as he waited for A.J. to call him back after the call had abruptly ended.

The closest police station to their small town was twenty minutes away, and based on the sounds of gunfire that had ripped through the air before the line went dead, A.J. didn’t have time to wait.

“Two of my guys were with Beckett,” Gray reminded him, but that didn’t stop Jesse’s racing thoughts or worries. “We anticipated this possibility and were prepared for it. You just nailed the timing.”

“Shep’s with A.J. too, and surely they’re armed,” Savanna said, reiterating the fact that the guys were prepared and knew what they were doing. Jesse shook his head. He should’ve been the one to calm Savanna, not the other way around.

But calm was a state of mind lost to him right now.

Ella was on the couch, hugging her knees to her chest and rocking back and forth, just as Rory used to do when she was a kid hiding in her closet to escape their parents’ fighting, and it fucking broke his heart. But he couldn’t bring himself to go to her. To do anything other than pace, because it was killing him that he wasn’t there helping A.J. And if anything happened to Beckett or McKenna, it’d be his fault. Prepared or not.

“You don’t know my guys,” Gray said, “but you know A.J. won’t let anyone take McKenna. Not a fucking chance.”

A.J. wasn’t one of the President’s clandestine operators for nothing, sure, but Jesse had no idea how many tangos were at the sheriff’s station or how much firepower they’d be up against.

“They got there in time. That explosion,” Jack began, joining the efforts to calm Jesse down, “was probably from a breaching charge to infil the station. Not to hurt anyone. They need McKenna alive to bait Ella.”

“And Beckett?” Jesse rasped. “They don’t need him alive.” He could barely stomach getting the words out while the love of his life, Beckett’s sister, rocked anxiously on the couch.

Jesse bowed his head and focused on getting his breathing and heart rate under control. He’d handled the worst of the worst situations in Iraq. Remained calm and level-headed throughout the war and on missions for the CIA. But this was Ella. Her family.

“Thankfully, Gray had time to send in backup, but I didn’t realize you were in the dark about Yuri until Paris.” Zoey’s words had Jesse swiveling his head her way. “I had assumed Thatcher would have clued you in. I didn’t know how to reach out to Carter either. I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault.” Carter’s surprising words had all eyes looking at him, but the burner phone rang before anyone could say more.

“It’s A.J.,” Jesse announced, which had Ella abruptly dropping her feet to the floor and standing. “What’s the status?” he asked after putting the call on speaker.

“McKenna’s safe. Beckett has some burns, and the deputy took a bullet to the arm. But between Gray’s guys and us, we killed the eight fuckers who showed up,” A.J. quickly sputtered, and Jesse’s vision blurred before he could blink away the tears of relief, his gaze landing on Ella as she buried her face in her palms. “Did you hear me? We got here in time.”

They got there in time, Jesse replayed the words as he tried to wrap his head around the fact everyone was okay.

“Let me talk to Ella,” A.J. remarked, his breathing ragged and his tone clipped this time.

Ella lifted her head and, with a trembling hand, reached to hold the phone.

“Ella, McKenna wants to talk to you,” A.J. said, and Jesse had to brace his palms against the table before he dropped to his knees.

“Hi,” McKenna whispered. “Daddy is okay. We’re okay.”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry that ...” Ella’s voice trailed off as tears ran down her cheeks, and the sight was going to destroy him.

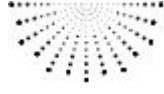
“I have one request,” McKenna went on. “Come home before something bad happens to you too.” McKenna burst into tears, and Beckett could be heard in the background calling for her. Jesse’s fingers curled inward into fists as he worked to fight the emotions threatening to take him under.

“Let me talk to Jesse, baby girl.” Beckett’s rumbly tone cut through the line, followed by a few short coughs as if trying to clear the smoke from his lungs.

Jesse walked back to Ella and peered down at the phone in her palm, but he knew what was coming. How could he not?

“Jesse. My daughter could’ve been hurt, or worse. She watched me kill people today,” Beckett started in a low voice, “I’ll never fucking forgive you for this.” And then the call ended.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



JUST OUTSIDE FRANKFURT, GERMANY

ELLA PEERED AT JESSE SITTING IN THE BLUE VELVET SWIVEL chair across from her inside their posh cabin on the train. Arms locked across his chest, hands tucked under his biceps, his chin suddenly dropped to his chest as he nodded off.

For the last hour, the poor guy had done his best to resist sleep. He'd been fighting to keep his eyes open ever since they'd boarded the train that morning in Paris. But the smooth ride and ambient sounds of the train were winning the battle.

When night had fallen, she'd begged him to lie down with her and try to get at least a few hours of sleep. He'd reluctantly agreed and wrapped her in his arms. She'd passed out immediately, but she doubted he'd slept at all.

After what happened back home with her family, all Ella had wanted to do yesterday was sleep. Her heart and head had hurt far too much whenever she replayed the nightmare of events that could have gone so much differently had A.J. not shown up in the nick of time. McKenna's and Beckett's words had torn Ella apart, and she knew they'd done a number on Jesse too. How could they not?

The look on Jesse's face when Beckett said he'd never forgive him had just about broken her heart. Jesse hadn't spoken to her all that much since that call, and she'd tried to tell herself that it was because he was as shaken about what happened as she was. And then he'd been laser-focused on working with the team to come up with an action plan for Austria.

Of course, Ella also knew he felt guilty that she hadn't joined Savanna on the plane as McKenna had requested.

She and Jesse had finally taken a step forward in their relationship, and she prayed to God that Yuri's surprise assault hadn't taken them back three.

"Are you reading up on Hallstatt?" Ella stole a look at Sydney sitting off to her left on the couch. Her iPad was in hand as she scrolled through information on the screen with the touch of her finger.

Gray and Jack had gone to the dining car an hour ago in preparation for the stop the train would soon be making in Frankfurt. None of them were armed for obvious reasons, but if Yuri discovered they were heading to Austria by rail, Frankfurt would be the only chance to have someone board if the bastard wanted to make any pre-Austria moves. With his failed attempt to grab McKenna in Alabama, Zoey believed he'd initiate a backup plan.

"Yeah, I've actually been there before, but it was a long time ago," Sydney said, her tone soft as though lost in thought.

"Business or pleasure?"

"Honeymoon."

"Mm." Ella knew Sydney was divorced, so what could she say to that? And Sydney wasn't one to engage in girl-talk, so Ella decided it best not to probe. She closed her eyes, thinking back to yesterday morning at the airport when she'd quickly hugged Savanna and Griffin goodbye before they'd parted ways for Carter's private hangar. And right after, the rest of the team had boosted two cars from the long-term parking lot.

Once Carter's jet had taken off, Griffin had called with the news that DGSE had been waiting at the hangar, as expected, but Thatcher hadn't been with them.

“Thatcher let us go because, like it or not, he knows he has no choice,” Jesse had said after Griffin’s call.

“She’ll forgive you for not going home.” Sydney’s remark jolted Ella into opening her eyes. “She’s what, thirteen? She doesn’t understand what’s going on.” Sydney’s unexpected opinion had Ella looking her way. “McKenna reminds me of my son a little.” A smile ghosted her lips. “And Beckett will forgive Jesse.”

Sydney had briefly met the Hawkins family at the wedding but hadn’t had a chance to see firsthand just how grumpy and stubborn her brother was. Beckett didn’t forgive easily, especially when it came to his daughter. After everything he’d been through while raising her as a single dad ... no, he’d go for the jugular if anyone placed her in harm’s way. And the only target in his sights right now was Jesse. Fair or not, he’d hate Jesse for what happened.

“My brother has been through a lot. Forgiveness isn’t something he’s known for,” Ella whispered, trying not to wake up the man she loved. The last thing she wanted him to hear was the doubt in her tone or her fear that she’d never be able to mend his relationship with her family.

Sydney rested her iPad on her lap, her gaze shifting to the window as the scenery breezed by. “I understand that. Anyone who so much as touched a hair on my son’s head would never see the light of day again.” Her words fell from her mouth swiftly and without remorse. And Ella truly believed the woman would cut down anyone who messed with her family. Zero hesitation.

Ella thought about Sydney’s expertise with the bow back at Rochella’s. A total badass. A hero.

Tipping her chin in Jesse's direction, she said, "But he deserves to be forgiven. He's not the enemy, and your brother will see that."

God, she hoped so. She was barely able to stomach the breakfast Jesse had forced her to eat on the train that morning, and every time she imagined her family refusing to welcome Jesse into their arms once back home, she wanted to puke.

"Zoran won't forgive his brother though," Sydney stated, her tone icy. "If Dragan really did sleep with his wife, and his brother is the biological father, that's not going to end well."

"You think Dragan might already be dead? And what about the kid? I don't want him to be collateral damage in this."

"We have Carter's guys watching Dragan's home, but Zoran's smart enough not to use the front door. He has to know everyone from the Bulgarians to the CIA are watching that house. But I have no doubts he's found a way to confront his brother. There may even be an underground network of tunnels to and from the home." She lifted her iPad and switched the view to one of the cameras Carter's men had positioned on the house. "He won't hurt his son. And we won't let anything happen to the boy when we take down Zoran."

Ella nodded, trying to be optimistic, given Sydney's confident tone.

Falcon was lucky to have Carter's "other men" at their disposal for an assist, which just added to the mystery that was Carter. Ella had built him up in her head as some billionaire vigilante. Of course, she knew nothing about his finances, but based on everything she'd witnessed so far, the man had money. Lots of it.

“No sign of Yuri or his men yet, which we expected,” Sydney continued, keeping her voice low, presumably not to wake Jesse. “But he’s somewhere in Hallstatt. I’m sure of that.”

“And you think Zoey’s right about Yuri having a backup plan?” *What is with the boxing match going on in my stomach?* Ella pressed a trembling hand to her abdomen. “Is he going to plant a bomb in that small town?”

Sydney let go of a deep exhalation and looked up from her screen to peer at Ella. Her expression hardened, and she looked more like the woman with a bow in hand back at Rochella’s, a warrior. “I think so, but we’re ready for whatever he throws our way.”

Ella’s eyes followed Sydney’s hand to the iPad, where she switched screens back to whatever she’d been previously studying about Hallstatt.

“We’re fairly confident Yuri wants us inside that mountain.” Sydney tapped a short nude-colored nail at the screen. “The salt mine there is the perfect location for a ... well, battle. It cancels the risk of a drone aiding us if we’re inside the mountain. Plus, we won’t have access to thermal imaging to know how many tangos we’re up against. No working comms.” She swiped through a few images, schematics for the salt mine within the mountain.

The website headline revealed the salt mine was 7,000 years old and home to the oldest wooden staircase in Europe that’d been used to carry “white gold” (aka salt) from the mountain. It was now a tourist destination, and the ninety-minute tour also included going down a 64-meter miner’s slide.

“Tunnels,” Sydney noted. “There’s a maze of opportunities for us to get lost in. The skywalk and Rudolf’s Tower nearby for overwatch positions. Yeah, this is where he wants us. Plus, it’s closed for renovations right now.”

Well, the “lost” part and lack of thermal imaging didn’t exactly do wonders for Ella’s nerves. “But do *we* want to go there?”

Ella had listened to the team discuss the salt mine last night, but all the military jargon and acronyms they’d thrown around had gone over her head.

And apparently, Gray would be team leader for this op, unlike in Albania. There’d been some heated exchange about the role of “Alpha One,” and the team had decided Carter’s history with Yuri might jeopardize his objectivity on the mission. Zoey had agreed, which drew a few snarls and broody looks from Carter toward her.

“It’s most likely the best way to keep the people in the town safe. Far enough away to prevent any casualties,” Sydney said with a nod. “As long as we deactivate whatever bomb we’re certain he’ll have planted somewhere in the village, at least.”

“And you said Oliver’s got that covered? He has explosives training?” Ella asked, shifting her focus to Jesse when his head rolled forward a bit more, and she hoped he didn’t startle awake.

“He does, but Carter’s more experienced, though, for obvious reasons, we need him with us. I’m sure he’s schooling Oliver during their car ride now.” Sydney was quiet for a moment before adding, “Gray’s a solid team leader. A great operator. You have nothing to worry about. I trust him with my life, which is saying a lot, I promise.”

Ella set her hands to her jeaned thighs and leaned her head back against the couch, which converted to a bed, but they wouldn't be staying the entire length of the "two-day" excursion. "Gray. Is there a story there?" *Why did I just ask that?* "Sorry. Not my business. I'm just anxious and—"

"We dated at West Point," she answered, her tone softer than Ella had expected.

"It's not hard working together now?"

"It's been a long time. We lost touch over the years."

Ella dropped her focus to the iPad now resting on Sydney's thigh. "Do you think maybe ...?" *Mind your own business*, she quickly chided herself. But when she looked up, an apology on the tip of her tongue, Sydney spoke first.

"We're not right for each other. And we never were, which is why I turned down his marriage proposal right before his first deployment." Sydney blinked, seemingly surprised at herself for sharing such personal information so easily.

Ella kept her mouth shut, unsure how to react to that news.

"Gray didn't even know my real last name back then. He didn't know I'm an *Archer*. Young love. Nothing more."

Right. Archer. The billionaires. Ella almost laughed at how fitting it was for Sydney to be so proficient with a bow given her family surname. "I heard that your call signs back in the Army were Romeo and Juliet. Kind of ... poetic, no?" Maybe that wasn't the right word. *But still.*

A small smile crossed Sydney's lips. More unexpected emotions from a woman Ella had pegged as icy. Maybe she was just guarded, and she had every reason to be. "The story of *Romeo and Juliet* doesn't end well. In any version or remake."

True. And yet, Ella knew Savanna's romantic heart would try to rewrite Sydney and Gray's ending. But hell, maybe Sydney was right. Some stories were meant to end tragically.

Not hers and Jesse's story. No damn way.

Before either could say more, Jesse jerked his head back as the train began to slow. They must've been approaching the station in Frankfurt for the fifteen-minute stop there.

Jesse immediately locked his focus on Ella, his eyes bloodshot from fatigue. How was he supposed to operate tonight without rest? And that's what the team was planning. They had no intention of dragging out their time in Austria.

"We're here," Sydney announced and abruptly stood. She set the iPad on the couch as she reached for a thin gold handle by the window. She ducked her head and kept her attention on the window as the train slowed to a stop.

Jesse stood from the swivel chair, crossed the cabin in two strides, slid onto the couch next to Ella, and reached for her hand. His touch and the way he peered into her eyes stopped the flurry of nerves that'd been relentlessly abusing her insides. "I got you," he mouthed, and she hoped that meant forever-forever. No steps backward, no matter what.

"I'll go check on the boys. I assume you're staying with Ella?" Sydney turned toward them, and Jesse nodded.

Yeah, like hell would he leave her alone in the cabin. He wasn't armed, but his body was a weapon in itself. She'd seen what he was capable of back at Rochella's.

Once they were alone, Jesse wrapped his arm around her back and tucked her against his frame before setting a kiss to the top of her head. "You okay?"

“I’m trying to be,” she returned, willing her lips to stop quivering, worried he’d notice. She didn’t want his attention divided. He needed to focus on the mission and not on her emotional state or well-being.

“You’re not going inside that mountain. Bomb in the village or not.” The gritty tone of Jesse’s voice had the hairs on her arms standing beneath the long sleeves of her blouse.

She twisted in his embrace to face him, but he didn’t pull his arm away at her movement. “You don’t have a choice. I can’t let anyone die because of me.” Her nerves came at her full swing again. Harder punches than before.

Jesse tipped his head, his lips in a tight line. A “fuck no” written in his eyes and growly expression. “You want me distracted? If you’re there, then I’ll be distracted, and I might die.”

“Don’t you play dirty with me,” she quickly snapped through clenched teeth. “I’m part of this, whether you like it or not.” Squeezing her eyes closed, she shut out the dark look on his face—irritation that she was refusing to comply with his demand that she stay out of danger as well as determination to compel her to listen to reason. To be honest, she was terrified. Absolutely freaking terrified to go inside some 7,000-year-old salt mine with the world’s most dangerous assassin waiting for her. “The only thing keeping me sane is that I’ll be with you. And I know you’ll never let anything happen to me. Or to you. Because you know I wouldn’t survive losing you either.”

The conversation they’d had in the courtyard yesterday felt like years ago, and his confession resurfaced in her mind. It broke her into a million pieces to know he’d fought to prevail over his internal battles because of his love for her. She was

certain they would get through this night. Their love could piece everything back together, couldn't it?

“What's that sappy saying? Love makes the world go round? Well, we'll prove that tonight. Somehow. Some way. You all will conquer this asshole, and he'll get what he deserves. Zoran too,” she said, doing her best to channel some of Sydney's badassery.

When Ella opened her eyes, she found Jesse staring at her with parted lips. “Ella, I—” He let go of his words when the door to their cabin flew open, and Gray stood there breathing hard.

Jesse sprang to his feet. “What happened?”

“One of Yuri's men boarded the train to give us this phone.” Gray held out a phone as Jack and Sydney filled the cabin behind him. “Yuri will call us when he's ready to meet.”

“I assume the guy got away?” Sydney asked.

Jack nodded. “He wasn't armed, but he knew we couldn't make a scene.”

Ella peered at the image Gray had pulled up on the screen. “That's what I think it is, right?”

“Too zoomed in to help us ID a location, but that's C4,” Jesse answered. “The C4 is the main charge, and it's attached to a fuse.” He pointed to the screen, keeping his tone steady, clearly doing his best not to frighten her. But that was impossible at this point. “And the fuse is attached to a trigger. Once the fuse ignites the charge, that's what causes the—”

“Explosion,” Ella whispered, drawing her hands to her abdomen. “So, Zoey was right. If we don't do what he says, he'll set this thing off.” She turned to Jesse and set her hands to his chest. “You don't have a choice, you hear me?” She

tipped her chin to cast her gaze on his face. “You’re not sacrificing others for just one person.”

“*Just* one person?” He clutched her arm and guided her away from the others and toward the window before gripping her biceps. “You’re not *just* anything, damn it. You’re my whole fucking world. I’m not losing you.” Jesse’s raspy words were coated in something *more*. Absolute terror.

If she went into that salt mine, he really was worried she might not make it out alive ... wasn’t he?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



HALLSTATT, AUSTRIA – LATER THAT NIGHT

ELLA GAZED OUT THE WINDOW OF THEIR LAKEFRONT ROOM, the sound of Jesse speaking over a burner phone to A.J. a faint murmur in the background as she focused on the reflection of the village lights shimmering atop the water.

The lodge Carter had chosen was Austrian-quaint and painted a beautiful sunset yellow with multiple terraces overlooking the water. The entire village felt almost as if she'd stepped back in time.

Alpine houses with charming window boxes, now topped with snow. A majestic stone church, steeple reaching toward the heavens. A picturesque town square with small shops, a bakery, and cozy-looking restaurants.

If only she and Jesse were there for their “honeymoon.” She could imagine stepping out onto their private veranda, Jesse wrapping his arms around her as they took in the view as husband and wife. He'd rest his chin on her shoulder, maybe press a kiss to her cheek, and murmur into her ear all the naughty things he'd be doing to her later.

And in the morning, after a night of making love, they'd walk along the bank of the lake and take in the sights of the beautiful village as the sun kissed the snow-capped Alps surrounding them.

Hallstatt was wedged between the lake and mountains on a narrow strip of land and was most likely the image for a jigsaw puzzle out there somewhere. The whole place was a stark contrast to their grave situation and what was soon to go down. Ella rubbed her hands along her biceps, trying to erase

the chills when reality once again grabbed hold of her at that thought.

The team assumed they'd hear from Yuri sometime around midnight, which was in an hour, and that he'd most likely planned their "showdown" for tomorrow.

Ella did her best to convince herself that Falcon's "counterplan" would succeed. But there was also the matter of a bomb hidden somewhere in the city for Oliver to deal with, and that had her stomach turning as well.

"Tunnels. I fucking hate tunnels." A.J.'s words over the speakerphone had Ella swallowing the massive lump down her throat and turning to the room, honeymoon fantasy officially vanishing from her mind. "You don't know this," A.J. went on, "but I had to deal with an operation involving tunnels in Budapest last year."

"Seems there's a lot I don't know about you," Ella found herself saying, joining in on the conversation.

"I was just, uh, giving Jesse a few pointers about how to operate when you're navigating a maze of ancient tunnels," A.J. said hesitantly, obviously unaware that Ella had been within earshot.

But she and Jesse had no more secrets. Right now, the only barrier between them was his insistence she not go anywhere near the salt mine, which she refused to obey. If she didn't show up, Yuri promised to detonate a bomb somewhere in Hallstatt.

The horrific image of an explosion destroying the village and killing the innocent residents had her stomach flipping yet again. She quickly pushed those thoughts away, terrified she'd manifest the scene into reality if she hung on to it for too long.

But no way would she choose herself over a city of innocent people, and Jesse knew that about her as well as the fact it was pointless to argue with her. She'd just as willingly sacrifice herself for a village of strangers as she would for her niece, McKenna. In her mind, there was no choice.

"I can't believe you're taking her into that mountain, but I know you'd rather die than put my sister in harm's way," A.J. said, reading Ella's thoughts, and Jesse's jaw clenched at his words.

"I don't want to, but she's—"

"Stubborn," A.J. finished for Jesse, and she needed to change the direction of this conversation fast before they both teamed up against her.

"How's Beckett?" she deflected. That wasn't the wisest choice of subject since Beckett's vow to never forgive Jesse still hung problematically in the air, but there weren't exactly any rainbow-sunshine type of conversations to be had right about now.

"Grumpy. Pissed," A.J. quickly remarked as if wanting to get this talk over with fast. "But physically, the burns aren't bad. He'll be okay."

"And McKenna?" Her young niece had experienced a truly frightening ordeal, and witnessing her father and uncles take lives only made it that much worse. She'd be needing therapy, and that'd be another nail Beckett would hammer into Jesse's coffin when they returned.

"She's a tough kid, you know that. I think once you're back home, she'll feel better. We'll *all* feel much better."

Ella searched Jesse's gaze, but his attention was fixed on the old, slightly beat-up wood floors.

“And you, are you ...” *Mad? Angry again? Want to throttle the man I love?*

Ella’s unfinished question had Jesse dragging in a deep breath, his focus zipping to the phone as though A.J. were standing there.

“My job comes with risks too. The work I do has the potential to put everyone I care about in danger at some point.” A.J.’s answer had Jesse releasing a breath. Because A.J.’s response was the same as saying, *No, I don’t blame Jesse.* “I’ll try and talk Beckett down. Just focus on ...”

“Staying alive?” she sputtered, and there went Jesse’s jaw again, working double time.

“I don’t like the situation, but I know you’ll be okay. If I didn’t trust Jesse to keep you safe, you know I’d already be in Austria with you,” A.J. said, his voice suddenly breaking when he added, “I love you, Sis.”

“I love you too,” Ella choked out, then cupped a hand to her mouth, tears welling in her eyes even though in her gut she was certain this wasn’t a final goodbye. Everything was going to work out because she refused to believe the bad guys would win.

Yet, the events of the last few days unfolded in her mind—the DGSE holding room, the attack at Rochella’s estate, the B&B in Versailles where plans to take down Yuri had been formulated, and finally the attack on her family back home. It sounded like an action movie.

Her thoughts returned to Yuri and images of an explosion, death, and destruction. She wished it really were a cinematic experience and not real life.

“Jesse, take me off speakerphone so I can have a word with you,” A.J. said a heartbeat later.

Jesse brought the phone to his ear and set a palm on the windowpane. His bicep flexed, stretching the fabric of his shirt as he leaned forward a bit, head bowed.

Ella sat on the bed, her legs too wobbly to support her, and placed a hand over her heart, hoping to calm herself down.

“Yeah, okay. Roger that,” Jesse said a minute later, then lowered the phone from his ear and joined her on the bed. “I’m so fucking sorry,” he apologized straight away, reaching for her hand.

She turned toward him and leaned closer, brushing her lips over his for their first kiss since Beckett and McKenna had been under attack.

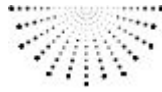
“Stop apologizing. That’s not what I need from you.” She pulled back to find his eyes. “I didn’t just get you only to lose you. Or for you to lose me.”

He quietly studied her, his lips drawing into a tight line, his forehead creased with worry.

“Hey,” she said while palming his cheek when he’d yet to talk. “I’m too stubborn to die. Got it?” She did her best to keep her voice steady, so he wouldn’t hear the panic trying to strangle her words.

Jesse’s brows pinched as he brought his nose almost to hers. “Roger that,” he rasped before drawing her back in for another kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



“WE RAN A LOT OF SUBTERRANEAN OPS BACK AT FORT Bragg,” Oliver commented, dragging a hand through his brown hair, his back to the wall inside Carter’s suite where the team was all gathered.

The room felt small and tight to Ella, with the operators and their gadgets and weapons scattered about the space. It wasn’t exactly Marriott-sized like the rooms back home.

It was just after midnight, and the team anticipated they’d soon be hearing from Yuri. They’d go after Zoran once Yuri was no longer a threat. *One mark at a time*, Carter had said. The most dangerous first.

“But what y’all will be doing is different than the situations we prepped for at Bragg, and unlike the ops we ran in Afghanistan,” Oliver went on, eyes on Carter. “Plus, you can’t breach with explosives, or you’ll risk creating instability when you’re inside the mine.”

More disturbing images muscled their way into Ella’s mind—a mineshaft caving in, boulders crashing down and trapping them. She cringed and shifted closer to Jesse on the couch, and he set his hand on her thigh and lightly squeezed.

“We won’t have earpieces. No radios. No way to communicate once we’re underground as well,” Carter

announced, sharing the bad news Sydney had already told Ella on the train.

Right about now, Ella missed Savanna like crazy. She needed her friend to distract her and make her laugh in the midst of this chaos like she'd done the other day. Of course, she was relieved that both Savanna and Griffin were back home and no longer in danger.

“So, once we're inside, Yuri will give you the location of the bomb?” Ella spoke up, still a bit unclear on what they expected to happen tonight. “And what if Yuri's lying about where he hid it?”

“He won't lie.” Zoey was on her knees in front of a duffel bag sifting through its contents alongside Sydney across the room, and she stopped what she was doing to put eyes on Ella.

“Really?” Ella found it hard to believe this MI6 officer would just trust a deadly assassin to tell the truth.

“The one thing we know about Yuri is that while he's ruthless, he's notoriously true to his word. And he's also not a terrorist. While he'll go to extraordinary lengths to take down a target, he's not the destroy-a-city kind of killer.” Zoey's green eyes remained sharp on Ella. “That doesn't mean he won't follow through if he doesn't get his way, though, which is why we operate under the assumption he'll do anything, including leveling this village, if we don't do exactly what he stipulates.”

“He provided an accurate location of the weapon back when ...” Carter let his words trail off, and Ella had to assume he was referring to the op during which Zoey's fiancé died. “Well, it was accurate. And I had time to deactivate it.”

“You’re the expert on the guy. There has to be other, um, evidence that leads you to believe he’s telling the truth, right?” Ella assumed the team had already had this conversation, but she hadn’t been privy to all of the details.

Zoey looked at Ella again and nodded. “As horrific as this may sound, my intel suggests Yuri started changing his MO because of boredom. He was getting his marks almost too easily. So, he began taking jobs that were much more challenging.” She visibly swallowed. “Like taking out one of the best MI6 operators, for instance.”

Your fiancé. Goose bumps peppered her skin, and she shivered. Zoey had lost the love of her life. Same as Carter. Savanna. *I can’t lose mine too.*

“And in taking on these so-called impossible hits, Yuri changed his tactics. Upped the ante, so to speak. He started using more extreme methods to draw out his targets,” Zoey went on, her voice breaking a little as if remembering her loss. “He’d tailor his strategy based on the mark.”

Ohh. “Threatening to take down three city blocks would force someone like,” Ella began, glimpsing at Carter, “a CIA operative out into the open, but maybe not a Russian mobster if that was his target. Is that what you’re saying?”

Zoey nodded. “According to my intel, it’s more of a game to him. Even if he sends a team as he’s been doing, he’s the one to design the trap. But there’s been no known instances where a bomb went off.”

“And what if tonight is the ...” Ella let go of her words when Jesse tightened his grip on her thigh, and she almost yelped. He eased up a second later, probably realizing his fear of losing her had triggered the tight hold of her leg. She

covered his hand with her own, trying to, well, reassure them both.

Zoey's eyes fell back to the bag as she responded, "We won't let tonight be his first time, I promise."

Carter coughed into his fist as if needing to change the subject. Haunted by his memories, maybe? "If he stays true to his MO, Yuri will allow one man to leave the mountain to deactivate the weapon, but we'll already have Oliver waiting in the village. And Jack will call him the second he exfiltrates the mine to provide the location."

"Our issue still remains that Yuri won't let *you* leave the mine," Jesse said, which had Ella's attention.

"Even if I'm Yuri's priority, Zoran hired him to kill you and Ella," Carter added, then turned his attention to Ella. "And he'll make sure that happens. So, we've prepared a plan to get you out of there with Jack without allowing Yuri to change his MO and murder a thousand innocent people because he got pissed you got away."

Wait, what? She blinked a few times, replaying what had been said, then focused back on Carter currently lifting a map that'd been open on the bed, and he motioned for Ella to join him.

"We can get to the mine by walking," Carter went on once she was standing next to him. "That way, we can use the cover of night to go undetected just in case Yuri does have other plans. When we're there, we'll need to use the emergency stairs alongside the lift up the mountain to get to one of the entrances."

"Okay." The word barely escaped Ella's lips as she anxiously awaited the news as to how in the hell she'd be

fleeing the salt mine without triggering an act of terror upon the village.

“Because of the mountains, we have plenty of overwatch positions. There’s also the Skywalk and Rudolf’s Tower where some of my other guys are already positioned.” Carter expelled a deep breath and shot a quick look over his shoulder toward the room—probably to Jesse. “My guys have identified and scoped out Yuri’s men already hiding on the mountainside as well. Another reason we’re assuming shit’s going down soon.”

“The mine is currently closed for renovations, but we’ll need to disable their security cameras if Yuri hasn’t done so already,” Gray chimed in. “The moment you escape with Jack, they’ll simultaneously take out all of Yuri’s men to ensure you have clear and safe passage.”

“No one will be able to radio to anyone in the village to detonate the bomb, and Yuri *also* can’t get word out after he realizes you’re escaping to do so because of comms not working from within the mine,” Carter said, piggybacking off Gray’s words.

“What if you miss someone hiding in the woods? And that person makes the call to set off the bomb?” Ella quickly asked, her pulse racing.

“We can’t use thermal imaging to check how many tangos we’re up against *inside* the mountain,” Sydney answered, and Ella looked over to where she kneeled alongside Zoey with a big-ass gun in hand. Was that an M4? “*But* we can confirm how many are outside the mountain waiting for us. I already sent a small drone over the area. Not the kind you buy at Target, either.” She casually winked. So calm for such a crazy

time, and Ella actually appreciated that. It was, well, comforting.

Ella shifted her focus back over her shoulder to Jesse to get a read on him. “I still don’t understand how I’m getting out of the mountain with Jack. I’m assuming we’ll be face-to-face with Yuri when he provides the location of the bomb. So, how do we escape?” She went over to Jesse as he stood. “And I hate leaving you.”

“I can’t get into some gunfight with an assassin with you there, Ella.” He wrapped his arms around her hips, tipping his head a touch as he captivated her with his blue eyes. “You know I can’t let you into that mountain without having a way to get you out safely,” he said without answering both of her questions.

“And you can trust me,” Jack added from behind them. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

To her. He was speaking to Jesse. Offering him a promise that she knew he needed to hear and believe.

“We need to get Yuri to meet us in a specific location in the mine. There’s an old miner’s slide that’s now a tourist attraction that you and Jack will use to get away. As soon as my men on overwatch spot you and Jack exit the mine, they’ll eliminate all external threats within a matter of seconds.”

The slide? Really?

Jesse parted his lips as if prepared to share more, but the phone given to them on the train began ringing.

“It’s time?” Ella’s stomach continued to cramp as Carter swapped the map for the phone and placed the call on speakerphone.

“Carter Dominick?” the man asked straight away. “Is that really you?”

“Yuri,” Carter hissed. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“I’ve been waiting for this day for years.” Yuri’s accent weaved through his words.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Carter remarked in a steady tone, and Ella peeked at Zoey, who eyed the phone, her lip caught between her teeth as if resisting the urge to speak.

“I’m sure you know where I want to meet.” The line went quiet for a moment. “In thirty minutes, I’ll text you which entrance I want you to use. Nothing will happen to you or your people before you have the location of the bomb. And you have my word you’ll be allowed to send one man to defuse the bomb.” He paused again. “And you know my word is good, Dominick.”

“Don’t want to be considered a terrorist. That’s not your style,” Carter flippantly responded. “That’s why you’re not detonating the damn thing now to take us all out while we’re in the village, am I right?”

“I’d prefer not to kill a village of people, but you know I’ll do what needs to be done if I don’t get my way,” Yuri calmly answered. “It would have been easier to use the young girl instead, but your men were better than mine in Alabama—I’ll give you credit where credit is due.”

“You bastard,” Ella hissed, unable to stop herself. But McKenna was her family and ...

Jesse grabbed hold of her and pinned her against his body, crushing her cheek to his chest as he held her tight, arms wrapped around her.

“Ella ... did I strike a nerve?” Yuri’s words had Ella’s fingernails biting into Jesse’s back, and she had to remind herself he was playing mind games and that the better team would win tonight as they had in Alabama.

“Don’t say her name,” Jesse growled out in warning.

Yuri was quiet for a second before continuing, “You and I will fight the way we did last time, yes? Well, before you saved yourself and left your MI6 partner to die.”

“Do you think of me every time you look in the fucking mirror?” Carter asked, and his dark tone had the hairs on Ella’s arms standing. “Or did you finally find a plastic surgeon able to correct the damage from my knife?”

“I kept the scar on my cheek,” Yuri quickly replied. “It’s been beneficial in serving as a reminder to kill without remorse.”

“No,” Carter snapped. “That scar has kept you in hiding. You started sending errand boys to handle your business. Afraid you’d get hurt again.” He brought the phone closer to his face. “Afraid I’d find you and finish the job.”

“I guess we shall see who is truly the better man tonight, then.” Yuri’s voice cracked as though he were feeling the pressure of a confrontation with Carter.

Was Carter getting to him, and if so, was that good or bad?

“We will have our moment,” Yuri continued, his tone betraying a touch of something like ... *madness*? “And I will take my time ending your life. But first, first, I will personally kill your friends.”

“You won’t touch her. I promise you that.” Ella felt a tremble roll through Jesse’s body as he tightened his hold on her.

“Promises are a fragile thing. They’re so often broken. But I keep my word. Always.” Yuri’s voice took on even more of that creep factor Ella was familiar with from serial killer crime shows, and it had her body tensing. “I heard you brought a friend along to play. Another MI6 friend you’ll let die. How are you, Zoey? Still searching for your revenge, my love?”

Oh God. An image of Hannibal Lecter and the disturbing sound of his voice saying, *Good evening, Clarice* popped into Ella’s head as chills fluttered across her skin reminding her that this wasn’t a movie. No, it was very, very real.

Ella turned her head to check on Zoey to see that she’d somehow managed to remain steady despite the conversation.

“Did you know the Nazis dumped valuables into the lake here when they learned they were going to lose? Blew up mine shafts where they hid their spoils of war as well. There’s a lot of history in this place. I can feel it all around. Some good. Some bad.”

Yuri babbling about the Nazis? That put him at a ten out of ten on Ella’s psychopath meter.

“The question will soon become, will the history books report about the entire devastation of one village,” the prick continued, “or the loss of a few lives that never belonged there in the first place?”

“And ... the line’s dead.” Carter shook his head.

“He’s off his fucking rocker. Rails. Whatever it’s called,” Jack spoke up, and Ella nodded in agreement.

“You okay?” Carter focused on Zoey.

“No,” she replied. “He knows I’m here. And he knows I’ve been obsessed with finding him for years, so he’ll assume I’ll be able to predict his next moves, which means he’s going to

fuck with us.” Her brows tightened as her gaze fell to the floor. “He’s going to change his MO.”

Jesse released Ella, and she watched the color drain from his face as he said, “The mine ... it’s just a distraction, isn’t it? He’s not going to be there.”

Zoey’s lips parted to answer, but a quick rap at the door had everyone in the room on alert.

Gray went and checked the peephole. “We have a guest.” He faced the room, eyes on Jesse. “Are you ready to punch your old boss? Because Thatcher’s here.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



JESSE SLAMMED THATCHER UP AGAINST THE WALL INSIDE THE hotel room within a second of Gray opening the door. “Tell me right now why I shouldn’t end you?” The snarling, broody man was ready to rip his former boss apart if someone didn’t stop him soon.

“Jesse,” Ella called out sharply, hoping to draw his attention away from his target.

“Stand down,” Carter bit out while he and Jack grabbed hold of Jesse’s arms, urging him to let go of Thatcher, but he didn’t relent until Ella positioned herself practically right alongside Thatcher in order to garner Jesse’s attention.

Carter and Jack backed away when Jesse tossed his hands in the air in surrender. “Come here.” He offered his hand to Ella and then stepped away from Thatcher, pinning her to his side in the process.

“How long have you been following us?” Gray asked, moving to confront Thatcher as the man adjusted the collar of his black button-down shirt. He was dressed similarly to Carter, but he was probably thirty years older.

“You followed us from the B and B,” Jesse answered for Thatcher as he stroked Ella’s back. “You had to have been

close to our place in France. Tailed Carter's ride to Austria from the airport and to our hotel here."

"I knew you'd find a way to lose our eyes in the sky and didn't want to chance you slipping away." Thatcher's hands dipped into his slacks' pockets as he eyed Jesse. "She'll die if she goes into that mine. I'm here to help."

"Yeah, you've been a great help so far," Jesse hissed, shifting his hand around to her hip and giving it a squeeze, clearly restraining himself from going for Thatcher's throat.

"I told you if you came to Austria, you'd end up dead. And I'm trying to prevent that from happening." Thatcher's soft tone almost convinced Ella he cared, but weren't CIA operatives experts at the art of persuasion and such? "If you haven't already figured it out, the mine is a trap."

"The bomb's not in the village, is it?" Zoey stepped forward, closing in on Thatcher and Jesse. "It's in the mine."

"Yuri only gives a fuck about Carter. He'll bring down that mine with the rest of you in it, I'm sure of it," Thatcher said. "I guarantee he has plans to redirect Carter elsewhere, but first, he'll keep his deal with Zoran and have Jesse and Ella killed."

"That's not his MO. Or Zoran's. Zoran wants to watch Jesse and Ella die." This time it was Sydney who spoke up. And when Ella peered her way, Sydney's eyes were narrowed like she was carefully considering her next words. "But both Carter *and* Zoey are here, and Yuri knows what he's up against. He has to go about his plans in a different way. The men on the mountain. He wanted us to know about them. They're a decoy to ensure we come to the mine, assuming if they're there, Yuri will be too."

“Plus, he sounded a bit unhinged,” Jack tossed out the reminder. “I think having Carter in the mix is throwing him off.”

“Maybe we can use that to our advantage,” Zoey suggested.

“But the question is, *you* being here, is that also part of the plan?” Jesse bit out. “Another tit for tat? You make a deal with someone?”

“No,” Thatcher quickly replied. “I swear. I’m here to help. It’s time we take this bastard out, but I won’t let you die because I ...”

“Because you what?” Jesse snapped, reigniting Ella’s fear that Jesse was seconds away from reaching for him again.

“Because,” Thatcher began as she spied his shoulders falling, “I always choose the mission over my operators.”

“And you suddenly had a change of heart? Don’t want any more bodies on your conscience?” Jesse drawled sarcastically. “Bullshit, Thatch. You want the credit for taking down one of the most sought-after assassins. You don’t care about me. Or Ella. No one. Mission first. Always. Like you said.”

“Regardless of his reasons for being here,” Carter said, pointing to Thatcher, “I think it’s safe to say Yuri never intended to meet us inside the mine. And I apologize for not realizing that sooner.”

“It was the only location Yuri could be certain we’d have no aerial advantage with CIA or military support,” Zoey reminded him, surprisingly coming in for his defense. “It made the most sense.”

“But that also means whatever entrance he texts us to use,” Gray said while quickly checking his watch, “is where the

explosive device will be located. The C4 may have only been intended to trap us inside the mine. A contained blast. Not enough that'd kill his crew positioned on overwatch on the mountainside."

"And after the blast, he'd send those guys in to pick off any of us who survived," Jesse said in a low voice. "But if Yuri wants Carter alive, that text he sends to indicate which mine entrance to use will probably also demand we split up. For Carter to use a different mine entrance, one away from the blast zone."

"I think he plans to redirect the *three* of us, not just me. And use the explosion to take out our team. He made a deal with Zoran, and Zoran will want to watch you two die up close. He can't live stream the feed of you dying from within the mine. Plus, he said he wants to kill my friends personally. Regardless," he rushed out, and took a quick breath, "he'd have planned to take me, or *us*, somewhere else. But where?"

Zoey snatched the old-school map of Hallstatt from the bed, studied it for a moment, and then went for her phone. "My guess? Schloss Grub. It's a castle on the other side of the lake." She tapped at her screen. "A seventeen-minute drive around the lake to get there from here. Can't take a boat, or he'll see us coming."

Jesse let Ella go and stepped alongside Zoey to eye her phone. "Plenty of surrounding woods to cover us by foot when we infil. Soft perimeter despite being a castle. They'd have a hard time with a big element advancing on them, which they won't be expecting."

"Because they think we'll be on the mountainside," Ella whispered in understanding.

“I can send my drone over the water. Fly it low. Confirm he and his men are there. Get a tango count,” Sydney offered. “I’ll have to stay behind, then. And you’ll need to leave now. We’re short on time.”

“What about me?” Ella softly asked, and Jesse faced her, his shoulders sagging.

“I’ll stay back with Sydney and watch over Ella,” Thatcher offered, quickly snatching Jesse’s attention.

“Over my dead body will you be staying with her. Hell no,” Jesse growled. “You’re coming with us to the castle. Apparently, you can still operate since you killed Zoran’s wife last year.”

“Are you sure you want him with us?” Gray asked, looking back and forth between Jesse and Thatcher.

“I’m not taking my eyes off this bastard.” Jesse moved closer to his former boss and cocked his head as if daring him to protest, but Thatcher remained quietly observing him.

“I’ll call the guys on the mountainside and let them know there’s been a change in plans. They’ll need to stay put, so Yuri doesn’t realize we figured out his plan.” Carter removed his phone from his pocket. “We can deal with the bomb in the mine after Yuri is dead. There’ll be no point in him setting it off once he realizes we’re not there.” He twirled a finger in the air. “We roll out in three minutes. We need to get to him before his text comes through.”

“Carter,” Zoey spoke up. “When we get to the castle, Yuri’s mine. I’m killing him. Understood?”

Carter pinned Zoey with an intimidating look, brought his phone to his ear, and turned his back to the room. Well, there

was his answer—over *his* dead body would he allow Yuri to end Zoey the way he'd killed her fiancé.

“Ella?” Jesse took her hand. “I need a word.” He guided her to the door, and they started for their suite.

“Are you okay?” she asked once they were alone. “I know being in the same room with Thatcher wasn't easy.”

“I want to kill him, but I'm ... trying to ... not be that guy.”

For me. He's trying for me. For us.

Tears filled her eyes at the realization Jesse was, in a sense, getting his way. She wouldn't be placed in danger tonight, but he would be, and that still scared her to death.

“But I almost screwed up again. If you'd gone into that mine tonight, I would have lost you.” His voice was hoarse, and he circled his arms around her waist and pinned her to his hard frame.

“It wouldn't have been your fault. And you and Zoey figured it out before Thatcher even showed up. You can't blame yourself for anything. Please. I—I don't.” More tears fell down her cheeks, and she swiped her tongue along the seam of her lips, catching them.

She pulled back, demanding that he look her in the eyes.

“I can't help but feel guilty.” He shook his head. “But right now, I need to focus on the op. And then I'll spend my life apologizing for all of this.” He brushed the back of his hand along the contour of her cheek. “But if anything happens tonight,” he slowly began, “I need you to remember how much I love you. So fucking much.” He swallowed. “But don't remarry some banker boy like Brian. I—I couldn't handle that, even in death.” His one hand on her hip squeezed a bit tighter.

“You’ll always be mine. Even if it’s from the grave, you’re my forever.”

She chewed on her lip at his words, the tears crashing down and hitting the hand still cupping her face. “Soul mate. That’s what you are. You’re my forever-forever. In life and in,” she said around a thick swallow, “death.”

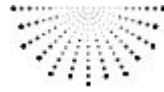
He set his forehead against hers for a moment before guiding her chin up to look at him again.

“But don’t you dare piss me off and die, Jesse McAdams,” she cried before he kissed her, and his tongue slipped between her lips, dueling with hers. “And besides,” she said between kisses, “you’re the best, right? This Chechen has nothing on you.”

He stopped kissing her and eased back, seeking her gaze. “So, you want me to be a killer tonight?” His forehead tightened in surprise.

“No, *he’s* a killer. You’re a hero. There’s a big difference.” She stabbed his chest while sniffing. “And tonight, you’re *saving* lives.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



“I MADE HER A PROMISE. I SAID I’D COME BACK, AND I PLAN on delivering.” Jesse lay flat on his stomach, a blanket of fresh snow beneath his body, awaiting orders from Gray and Carter to advance away from the cover of the tree line and to the castle. Thatcher was at his three o’clock, kitted up in his own gear. He was the last man Jesse wanted alongside him, but what choice did he have?

“And I plan to make sure that happens.” Thatcher adjusted his night-vision goggles, shifting them up and away from his eyes, and Jesse ignored him.

The castle was a hundred meters away from their location, and his team had already heard from Sydney by phone, confirming via drone there were armed tangos on-site.

They’d split up into two assault squads. Alpha Team was at the backside of the castle, and Carter had his guys who’d been previously keeping an eye on Dragan’s home, now converging at the side entrance as Bravo Team.

Jesse knocked his NVGs up, drew the stock of his fully blacked-out rifle against his shoulder, and leveled his aim up at one of the towers where he’d spotted movement. He went for his radio and transmitted, “This is Alpha Five. I have two tangos with AKs on the tower in my line of sight.”

“This is Alpha One,” Gray answered. “That’s a good copy. We’re weapons hold until we’re breachers up.”

“Roger that,” Jesse replied.

“This is Bravo One. My team is in position,” one of Carter’s guys transmitted. “I have two armed tangos near the boathouse. Confirming visual of the tango Juliet spotted walking along the front of the target location.”

Juliet was Sydney’s call sign, and right now, she was their saving grace with her small drone keeping watch for them. But the flying time of the drone was limited, and they’d be losing the signal soon.

“This is Alpha Two,” Carter responded a moment later. “Roger that.”

“I made a mistake,” Thatcher quietly said. “I didn’t realize that until Versailles.”

“I don’t want to hear anything from you,” Jesse growled, wanting nothing more than to punch him in the jaw to shut him up. He hated that Ella was in Austria and anywhere near the danger. He knew Sydney would protect her, but if it weren’t for Thatcher, she wouldn’t need protection. Period. She’d be safe at home.

“I thought if Ella were in danger, you’d be more motivated to take the mission, but I neglected to take into consideration that ... she can also be a distraction for you. She was why you missed killing your mark eighteen months ago, so I’m here to make sure Yuri is handled tonight in case you’re distracted again,” Thatcher went on anyway, and Jesse cursed under his breath.

And Carter is a distraction for Yuri. “So, you don’t actually care about me. Or her. Your little declaration that you

were done prioritizing the mission over the operators was bullshit. You're here because you want to nail Yuri." Jesse clenched his teeth and gripped his weapon tighter to keep his hand from trembling. He was *not* going to allow himself to get distracted by anyone or anything. And he wasn't going to fuck up like he did eighteen months ago. "Does Langley even know you're here? Or did you go rogue too?"

Thatcher shifted his rifle and eyed the tower through his scope, his silence an affirmative. The CIA didn't know he was in Austria, which meant he didn't have operational authority to be there.

"Haven't been on an op like this in a long time," Thatcher deflected a few seconds later. "Of course, I was usually in the sky, but the feeling is still the same. The anticipation and buildup."

Why did he sound excited right now? Did he miss war? Jesse sure as hell didn't miss Iraq or the sick-in-the-gut feeling he got when his team left the Green Zone and advanced into the Red Zone, one of the most dangerous areas in the world at that time.

"This is Alpha Two. Juliet's drone spotted four people tied up inside. Bags over their heads," Carter abruptly announced and rattled off the location in the castle.

"Alpha Five and Seven, prepare to take out their tower overwatch," Gray ordered Jesse and Thatcher, and God, Jesse hated that Thatcher had a call sign. "Bravo One, on my mark, you've got the guard out front."

"New information," Carter rushed out a moment later. "The drone also caught sight of Zoran's son." He quickly provided the boy's location. "If he's in the castle, Zoran must be there as well."

Which meant Carter had been right. Yuri had more than likely planned to bring the three of them to the castle after exploding the C4 in the mine to take down the rest of their teammates. Zoran wanted his revenge. He wanted to watch Jesse and Ella die.

“No innocents are to become collateral damage,” Carter commanded. “Understood?”

“Roger that,” the two teams answered over the radio in unison, and of course, they’d do everything in their power to prevent a child from dying or any of the other innocent people inside getting hurt.

“Alpha Five and Seven, send two headshots in thirty seconds,” Gray told them, and Jesse readied his rifle.

“Just like in Bulgaria, the two of us are about to fire at the same time,” Thatcher said. “But maybe kill your mark this time?”

Jesse gritted his teeth once again, ignored his former boss, and remained steady. “This is Alpha Five,” he said when it was time. “Target acquired and locked. Preparing the shot in three, two, one.” He and Thatcher fired at the same time.

“This is Alpha Two, breachers up. Clear to infil.”

Jesse quickly stood and patted Thatcher on the shoulder, signaling for him to move. If Yuri wasn’t aware that three of his men had just been taken out, he’d know in a matter of seconds that his plan had backfired because Jack and Oliver were setting the breaching charges at the backside, and Bravo Team would breach the front.

The blast would be localized, just enough det cord to get the team inside. And thankfully, Sydney’s drone had provided

the location for the kid and other innocents inside so they could ensure their safety.

Jesse assumed Zoran was in the same room as his son, given the circumstances. And that prick would be his to deal with tonight for putting a revenge hit out on Ella.

“They know we’re here,” Carter said over the line a moment later. “Alpha Six and Four are now inside.”

Jesse kept his body low, his boots softly crunching across the snow, as he peered through the green-tinted scope, searching for any other tangos. When he heard the ripple of gunfire and a bullet whizzed past him, he quickly took a knee and crouched for cover behind a tree to determine the location of the shooter. “This is Alpha Five. We have a new tango in the tower. Working to get a shot to clear our way.”

“Roger that,” Gray replied, and more gunfire popped like fireworks from within the castle.

“When you have eyes on our HVT, don’t forget, he’s mine,” Zoey reminded the team, and despite her British accent, she sounded just like a Southern woman, one in particular. Hard-headed and stubborn to the core. Ella.

“Ignore her directive,” Carter snapped out, making it clear their high-value target, their HVT, was his. He wanted to finish what he started with Yuri years ago.

Jesse quickly rounded the tree, locked the shooter in the tower in his sights, and pulled the trigger. “Tango down in the tower,” Jesse alerted the team. “We’re clear to continue.” He swiveled his focus to Thatcher, now at his six, who nodded, and they began moving again.

“This is Alpha Four,” Jack said. “Advancing to the second level. First floor now clear for entry.”

“This is One,” Gray replied. “That’s a good copy. Advancing in now.”

“Stop.” Thatcher suddenly grabbed hold of Jesse’s arm and yanked him back just in time to avoid a headshot from an unexpected tango. Seconds later, Thatcher pegged the shooter near the bushes by the castle.

Jesse let go of a deep breath and purely out of reflex, gave Thatcher a nod of thanks for saving his ass.

He’d *thought* he had his head on straight, but he’d nearly lost it. *Distracted. Yeah, I’m still distracted. Fucking great.*

“This is Six,” Oliver said as he and Thatcher entered the castle from where his team members had blown the door down not long ago. “Second floor now clear. Two more tangos down.”

Jesse rounded a corner, checking the hallway for new threats as Carter instructed, “Bravo One, send two men to the boathouse in case any men from the mountainside escape our snipers there and head this way via water.”

“Roger that,” Bravo One replied just as a crackling sound came over the castle’s intercom system.

“Dominick,” a voice rang out from the built-in speakers, most likely used for the daytime tours. “This is unexpected.”

Jesse set his back flat to the wall and moved his NVGs back in place, scouring the dark hallway as he let the sling take his rifle and reached for a sidearm and knife. He had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

Yuri would attempt to pressure Carter and the others into revealing themselves in exchange for the hostages on the third level. What choice did he have?

“You’ve got us outnumbered,” Yuri went on. “But I have four innocent people here with me. If you don’t want their blood on your hands, then you’ll allow my men to disarm you so we can have a face-to-face. Zoran Mestrović wants Jesse though. I’m sure he’s here, but without the lovely Ella.” Yuri’s use of Ella’s name had Jesse’s skin crawling.

“You kill the hostages, and you lose your only leverage,” Carter responded, and he must have grabbed hold of one of the castle’s radios from his current location because his voice sounded over the intercom speakers. “You have another card up your sleeve. What is it, Yuri? How do you really plan to get us alone?”

Static filled the line for a second. “You’re right. You do know me well. Unfortunately, you were correct in assuming the mine was a decoy, a way to separate you from your team. I’d always planned to bring you here. But there *is* a bomb in the village. I don’t lie, remember?”

Jesse’s stomach turned, and his body went rigid at what he was suggesting.

Ella and Sydney. No. Fucking. No.

“Come upstairs and order your men to back off, and you can have the location. I’ll take Zoey in exchange for Ella. She comes upstairs as well,” Yuri announced.

“Ella will be okay,” Thatcher said before moving toward a panel on the wall.

The intercom. What are you doing?

“You want me, Zoran, not Jesse,” Thatcher remarked, his voice filling the speakers. “I was the one who killed your wife.”

“What are you doing, damn it?” Jesse hissed at Thatcher. They were running out of time, and no way would the man sacrifice himself for Jesse. Thatcher must not have trusted Jesse to get the job done. He wanted to be in the room with Yuri.

Thatcher held up a hand, a request for Jesse to let him handle the situation.

“We’ll sort it out. The four of you come, then. I’ll let you make a call to deal with the bomb once you’re with me,” Yuri said. “Order the rest of your men to stand down and leave the castle grounds.” He went quiet for a few seconds. “If you don’t, I make the call to detonate the bomb now, and you turn me into a terrorist.”

“This is Alpha Two,” Carter transmitted over their radios, “we have no choice. Alpha Six, get Juliet on the phone and tell her what’s going on. Let her know I’ll call the second I get the location, and you’ll need to explain to her how to defuse the bomb over the phone.”

What if they were too late? What if Yuri detonated the bomb anyway?

This is my fault. He shouldn’t have left Ella across the lake. Or maybe he should’ve ... what? *What could I have done?*

“Focus,” Thatcher ordered, standing before him now and gripping his shoulder. “If you don’t want her to die, think about Ella as motivation, not as a distraction.” God, how he hated getting a pep talk from this man. “You made a promise, remember?” Thatcher reminded him of his own words. “Now it’s time to fucking keep it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“HIS MEN ARE GONE,” ONE OF THE GUARDS SAID UPON entering the room. The place was dark with two wall sconces as the only source of illumination, which afforded them just enough light to see. Three windows faced the mountainside on one wall, three the direction of the lake on the other.

Zoran was in his wheelchair alongside his son, who had his back to the wall where he sat on the floor, hugging his knees, eyes on the ground. Zoran appeared frail, not like the robust man Jesse had scoped eighteen months ago. His too-long brownish-gray hair was partially hidden by the popped collar of his jacket, and his hair nearly concealed his eyes from view as well.

Jesse diverted his focus from Zoran to check on the four hostages tied up, thankfully within range of one of the windows that Sydney’s drone had spotted them through earlier. Their hands were tied behind their backs as they sat in what looked like dining chairs that’d been brought into the room. Black cloth bags hung over their heads, and since they were quiet, Jesse assumed their mouths were taped as well. But there were twitches of movement to indicate they were still alive.

Two men armed with AKs flanked them, standing just off to the side of the window and out of range for any of Alpha or Bravo Team's men to take a shot.

But where was Yuri?

Jesse, Carter, Zoey, and Thatcher had been stripped of not only their weapons and ammo, but their chest plates as well. Not a great sign.

"You're the one who shot me." Zoran's wheelchair whirred as he moved closer, but Jesse tore his gaze over to Zoran's frightened ten-year-old boy.

This asshole isn't going to win Father of the Year anytime soon, Jesse thought bitterly.

"I am." Jesse had his only "weapon" ready to go, his fists locked at his sides. "I didn't shoot your mother though," he said, speaking to the kid, causing the boy's eyes to dart his way.

He saw something of himself in that boy. A father was supposed to protect his child, not hurt him.

"Where's the bomb? Where's Yuri?" Carter stepped away from the wall where they'd been lined up, but in doing so, one of the armed men trained his AK on him.

"You killed my wife?" Zoran asked, his tone sharp as he looked at Thatcher instead of answering Carter.

"Your brother and your right-hand man offered you and your wife in exchange for intelligence. I did what I had to do," Thatcher remarked.

Zoran tipped his head, quietly studying Thatcher as he lifted a 9mm from his lap. "Tell me why I shouldn't end your life."

“You want revenge for the death of a woman who cheated on you with your brother?” Thatcher asked.

Zoran rolled closer. “Your intelligence is inaccurate. My wife didn’t cheat on me. Yes, my brother is the boy’s biological father, but only because I’m sterile.” Zoran kept his weapon steadily focused on Thatcher. “I wanted our son to have my blood, at the very least. My wife was, what is the saying, artificially inseminated.” His eyes remained locked on Thatcher. “My brother wanted the boy. *He* betrayed me. Aleksa Stanković betrayed me. My wife? No, she was no traitor.” And with that, Zoran abruptly fired. Thatcher snarled and clutched his shoulder as he went down on a knee, but the stubborn SOB didn’t make a sound, unlike the hostages who cried out, their voices muffled.

Two weeks ago, Jesse would’ve knelt alongside his old boss to help. But now? He hated that even a small piece of him worried Thatcher might die. After everything Thatcher had done, and with Ella still in danger ... he should’ve asked Zoran for the gun and killed his former boss himself.

“You put me in this chair,” Zoran noted, his eyes and now the gun in his hand pointed to Jesse. Biting down on his back teeth, Jesse prepared himself for the bullet that was sure to come.

“I told you to wait,” a man barked out as he strode through the open double doors with a few armed men. Jesse breathed a quiet sigh of relief, pretty sure Yuri had just saved him from taking a bullet.

“Yuri,” Zoey whispered, stepping forward alongside Carter.

“Hello, Zoey.” Yuri strode closer to the four of them.

The lighting wasn't good enough for Jesse to make out the man's eye color, but he was well-built, at least six-four, and had dark hair. The light from the sconces, though dim, highlighted the scar on his cheek that Carter had gifted him years ago.

"Where's the bomb?" Jesse asked, needing to cut straight to the point to save Ella and Sydney. And a thousand others.

"My men won't interfere and risk you killing us or the hostages if that's what you're afraid will happen once you share the location." Carter managed to keep his tone steady when Jesse knew he wanted to rip the man apart.

Yuri stroked his jaw, his eyes roaming over Carter as if he'd been waiting for this moment for so long he almost didn't believe Carter was really there. "You know, tonight hasn't gone much differently than I originally planned. You're still here. The bomb is still there." He pointed to the window, the direction of Hallstatt. "And we'll have our ... what do you Americans call it? A Western showdown."

"The bomb," Jesse prompted, holding himself back from lunging forward and getting their showdown started right the fuck now. If that's what this hitman wanted, he'd happily go up against him.

Yuri lifted his wrist and checked his watch like he had all the time in the world. "In fifteen minutes, a bomb inside the Bone House will detonate. Hidden in the room where the decorated skulls are located. That's not enough time for your men to get across the lake, so I hope you have someone there who can defuse it." He shrugged, then flicked his finger, gesturing for Carter to make the call.

Fifteen minutes? He struggled to remain calm, but his pulse raced and his stomach knotted.

He doesn't want to be labeled as a terrorist, Jesse reminded himself, hoping the assassin wouldn't suddenly change his tune tonight. If anything happened to Ella ... so help him.

But Yuri, a man who'd been so clever for decades, had to be off his game. Otherwise, he'd have anticipated Falcon Falls' arrival, and the team could use that to their advantage. Press the right buttons to guide the narrative their way.

Jesse pivoted his focus to Carter holding the phone, speaking to Sydney. He searched his memories for what he knew about the Bone House from his research on Hallstatt. The Bone House was in St. Michael's Chapel, a stone's throw away from their lakefront lodge.

When Carter lowered the phone, he looked at Jesse with a slight nod, letting him know Sydney was on it.

"How do you want this to play out?" Carter asked coolly after pocketing his phone. "You're armed, and we're not."

Yuri stepped alongside Zoran's wheelchair. "He's unable to fight for his revenge, but others can do it for him. Unless you want to just go for him now?"

Zoran looked over his shoulder at Yuri, sweeping his hair away from his face as if needing to get a good look at the man, seemingly confused by his cryptic words.

"On second thought," Yuri started while pivoting to face Zoran, "I'll take care of it." He shot Zoran twice in the chest, and more cries erupted from the hostages.

Yeah, you're nuts. Jesse ripped his focus toward the boy who'd watched his father executed before his eyes, but the kid didn't budge.

“That wasn’t ideal,” Yuri said after Zoran’s body had slumped forward in the chair. “But he insisted on being here, which means he saw my face. My deal with him was to kill you and Ella,” he added, “but I never promised he’d leave alive.”

The last thing Jesse had expected was for Yuri to eliminate one of their problems for them. Evidence Yuri wasn’t stable, especially in Carter’s presence. But to be honest, Jesse wasn’t so sure if he’d be able to kill Zoran in front of the kid.

“And what of the boy?” Zoey whispered, her attention riveted toward the ten-year-old.

Yuri followed her gaze to the kid. “I’ll train him. A new me, what do you think?” He sported a slight smile, eyeing Zoran in his wheelchair, and then he handed off his weapon to one of his guards and gestured for him to remove Zoran.

Jesse needed to try and get Yuri as close to the window as possible. Griffin was their best sniper, but he wasn’t with them tonight, so Jack was on the long gun. With any luck, he was already perched on high ground, his scope trained on the window, ready for when he had a clean shot.

“Are you giving us guns to even the playing field?” Carter asked as Yuri began to roll one dress shirt sleeve to his elbow. “I thought you wanted a face-off? Or do you plan on being like Stalin? Line us up and shoot?”

Yuri winced at being compared to a Russian. *Smart thinking, Carter.* While waiting for Yuri’s next moves, Jesse glanced at Thatcher, still on his knees and holding his shoulder.

“Fine, fine.” Yuri did a three-sixty in the room to peer at his men. “Rifles down.”

The guards looked at each other, their fear on display that their boss was losing it. That it was becoming more inevitable by the second that they'd end up dead just like their counterparts who Falcon had taken down upon infiltrating the castle.

“Now,” Yuri yelled, spit flying from his mouth. He smoothed a hand over the scar on his cheek, a gleam in his eyes as he looked at the man who had put it there, no doubt excited that he was on the cusp of the payback he cherished.

Yuri's men slowly set down their AKs as if more afraid their boss would turn on them than Jesse and the others at the moment. They kicked them away, but Jesse had to assume they were also packing sidearms and knives.

“You're mine, Yuri. You deal with me,” Zoey calmly said.

Yuri grinned as if impressed by her boldness, but Carter grabbed hold of her arm when she tried to move past him.

“Zoey, Zoey.” Yuri shook his head as Carter restrained the woman who appeared to be hell-bent on her own revenge. “What if I were to tell you I didn't kill your fiancé that day?”

“You're lying,” she responded, and Yuri flinched as if offended.

Jesse looked away from him and took inventory of the room while Zoey distracted him as planned.

Five guards. But who'd they fear more? Jesse and his teammates? Or their boss?

Jesse calculated his next steps, playing them out in his head. The guard off to his left would be the first to go. Use him as a shield when the other guard would go for a sidearm on instinct.

“I’m not a liar. You know that. You’ve been researching me, right?” Yuri pushed the heel of his hand beneath his chin and cracked his neck, looking more and more like a psychopath, then stalked two steps closer, eating up the space between himself and where Carter held on to Zoey.

They were too close to each other for Jack to get a clean shot.

Yuri looked toward the window, which lacked blinds and drapes, and he backed up one step as if realizing he’d be in a sniper’s line of sight.

So, you have some sense left in you. They needed to knock the rest out and soon.

“Preston was your target,” Zoey said, her tone less steady this time. “You never fail, right?”

“He was my mark, but he got away from me that day. Better fighter than I’d anticipated.” He smiled. “By the time I caught up with him on the street, he was already dead. Someone else killed him. Bullet to the head. But a dead mark is still a dead mark.”

“You’re lying,” she said again, and Yuri snarled.

Being compared to a Russian. Called a liar. His trigger points.

Zoey started to go for him again, and Carter worked hard to pull her back. Jesse was pretty sure Yuri had also hit *her* trigger point. Preston.

Jesse stole a quick look at Thatcher, and he nodded, confirming he’d still be able to fight. But he’d wait for Carter to make the first move.

Seconds later, Jesse spotted Carter in his peripheral view shove Zoey toward Jesse as though pushing her to safety before he went for Yuri.

“Don’t kill them,” Yuri growled out to his men in warning. “I’ll deal with them after *I* kill Carter. I made a promise to do it personally, and fuck if ...” He lost his words when he dodged a swing from Carter. “Just keep them occupied,” he hissed while striking Carter in the side a second later.

Jesse swiftly focused back on the guards, who appeared confused yet again by their boss’s order. They had to know they’d die if they didn’t kill Jesse or Zoey first, but they appeared to still be contemplating which fate would be worse. Try their hand at fighting Jesse and Zoey? Or defy orders?

We’re about to find out. Jesse lunged toward the guard at his nine o’clock.

Grabbing hold of the guard’s legs, he pulled the man to the floor and into a chokehold, then snagged the gun holstered at his back just in time to use him as a shield when another guard fired his sidearm, deciding to disobey Yuri’s directive.

The bullet pegged the guard in Jesse’s grasp at the same time he shot the other man, nailing him in the head.

“Jesse,” Thatcher roared, suddenly throwing himself in front of him before Jesse realized what was happening and ...

Zoey popped off a shot at the guard that’d just fired, catching Jesse by surprise, but it was too late for Thatcher. He’d taken one in the chest.

“What the hell,” Jesse hissed, angry at his old boss for sacrificing himself. He didn’t have time to check if he was alive or yell at him for what he’d done because he and Zoey

had two more guards to deal with while Yuri and Carter fought alongside one of the walls.

The two remaining guards were smarter than the others, maintaining their positions by the hostages, weapons trained on their heads.

But if Jesse and Zoey lowered their guns, would these guards shoot to kill, also ignoring Yuri's command? He couldn't take any chances, so he ran through the possible outcomes in his head as he glanced at Thatcher on the floor. Slight movement from his legs. Still alive?

"We both put our guns down at the same time," Jesse offered. "Your boss doesn't want you killing us. And you know if you shoot a hostage, the second you pull the trigger, you're dead."

"And what do you suggest? We fight too?" one of the guards sputtered.

Jesse stole a look at Carter and Yuri as they continued fighting. "You have a better idea? Because I'm not getting rid of my gun if you're still holding one. We just shoot each other, then?" He kept his voice as steady as possible.

"Fine," one of the guards spoke up. "Same time, we all lower our guns, and we go at this like them."

Jesse nodded and took a knee, waiting for the moment to go for the knife he'd carefully snatched from one of the dead guards by his feet, the one who'd been a human shield.

The second the two men started to move their guns away from the hostages, Jesse released his sidearm as well, and he remained kneeling, waiting for their next moves.

"You got this?" he whispered to Zoey, who was still off to his side.

“Of course,” she answered as the two guards maneuvered around the hostages, suddenly rushing them with new weapons. Knives.

“I can’t kill you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t make you suffer,” one guard said as Jesse dodged the first wild swing of the blade. The guy was as big as Yuri, but Jesse had gone up against his type in the past.

And Thatcher had been right about one thing.

Ella needed to serve as his motivation, not as a distraction.

Jesse struck the beast of a man with his elbows and then leg kicks before dropping to his knees and stabbing the man in the side in the process.

A groan from Zoey momentarily stole his focus, and he realized she was pinned down beneath a guard, grappling to stop the knife he had aimed at her throat.

Jesse sprang to his feet, ignoring the guard he’d been fighting to save Zoey. He pulled the man off her, and in one fast movement, sent a side kick to his abdomen, kicking him into view of the window, and Jack nailed the fucker. Thank God.

Jesse spun around to find the guard he’d stabbed coming at him with a knife, and their bodies collided within a second. From over the guy’s shoulder, he spied Zoey on her back, aiming a gun their way. Jesse quickly shifted to the side, allowing her to take the bastard down with a headshot. The man crumpled to the ground, knees first before falling backward instead of forward like in the movies.

But shit, something wasn’t right.

Jesse set a hand to his side, then to his abdomen in search of what felt like ... a knife. He bit down on his back teeth as

he held the handle of the blade, not sure if he should keep the thing in there for now.

“Leave it,” Zoey hissed as she stood, then turned her attention to their HVT and Carter still battling damn near Mortal Kombat–style.

“Back away from him. Now,” Zoey yelled out, her gun aimed at Yuri as Carter and the man continued to go blow for blow. Bloody and beaten up, the both of them.

Jesse looked around the room, grateful the hostages and the boy were still unharmed, but the poor kid was rocking and clutching his legs, clearly terrified.

“Zoey,” Carter called out, breathing hard. “Don’t.”

Now that Yuri’s men were no longer a threat, Jesse’s awareness zeroed in on the pain in his side, but he ignored it as he tried to decide what in the hell to do next.

“The CIA wants him alive.” Was Carter serious?

Yuri backed away from Carter and focused on Zoey, panting. “You either kill me, or I kill you,” he rasped around a cough, blood spurting from his mouth. One eye swollen shut. “Your choice.”

“Tell me the truth.” Zoey started for Yuri, and Jesse remained locked in place. Save the hitman? Or help her kill him? “*You* murdered Preston.”

Yuri wiped his lip with the back of his hand and shot her a bloody, psychotic grin. “As I said, someone else beat me to it. I don’t lie.”

“Who?” she asked, her tone trembling and her arms beginning to shake. She was getting too close to the man, and Jesse knew she was seconds away from being overwhelmed by

Yuri, but before Jesse could react, Yuri flung himself her way, prompting Zoey to pop off a shot.

The bullet struck him in the gut, but he kept moving, kept going after her.

“We have to,” Jesse hollered to Carter, letting him know the man needed to die. Screw the Agency.

Carter nodded, and in one fast movement, they both went for him, grabbing hold of his arms and flinging him in front of the window where Jack sent the shot, not missing a beat.

Jesse released his hold of the man’s arm, and Carter did the same, allowing the hitman to fall to the ground.

On his back, Yuri rolled his head to the side, coughing up blood as he focused on Carter. “I guess the ... better man ... won. But I was getting ... bored any ...”

“Crazy fucker,” Carter said after Yuri’s eyes closed, and then Carter knelt to check for a pulse.

“Ella,” Jesse said, breathing hard at the realization they still had the issue of the bomb to deal with. “Sydney. We need to get them on the line.”

There’d been no explosion, which they would have heard by now from across the lake. But when Jesse checked his watch, there was still one minute left before the deadline.

“Everything is okay now,” Jesse called out to the hostages, then looked over at the boy who still clung to his knees.

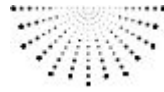
“I’ve got Sydney on the line,” Carter rushed out a moment later, clutching his side as if his ribs were broken. “They’re okay. The bomb has been defused.”

And it was only then that Jesse collapsed to his knees, allowing the pain from the knife to overwhelm him. “They’re

okay,” he whispered as his lids became heavy. “They’re okay.”

“Shit,” he overheard Zoey as his eyes shut. “I think Thatcher’s dead.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



HELO BLADES. SHIT. “YOU HAD AIR SUPPORT ALL THIS TIME, and you held out on us?” Jesse turned his head from where he lay and watched Oliver deal with Thatcher’s chest and shoulder wounds. “And you, old man, you’re too stubborn to die, I see. Should’ve known.”

Thatcher groaned and rolled his head to the side to face Jesse. They were both on the snowy ground outside the castle, flat on their backs.

Oliver had also been a medic, so he’d successfully removed the knife from Jesse’s abdomen and was currently keeping Thatcher from bleeding out.

“I’m for damn sure not gonna let some assassin’s lapdog finish me. Not going out that way,” Thatcher said around a cough, then looked in the direction of the helicopter flying their way. “No thanks for taking a bullet for you, huh?”

Jesse would’ve laughed, but he knew that’d hurt too much. “Yeah, yeah. You caused this disaster, but you taking a bullet for me should absolve you of your sins, huh?”

“A guy can try, right?” Thatcher’s index finger danced in the air, obviously loopy from the shot of morphine Oliver had given him. “And no, the bird isn’t with me.”

Jesse was a little woozy from the stab wound and morphine as well, so maybe he wasn't actually hearing chopper blades right now?

"I made a call to an Agency guy I still trust who's stationed in Austria before we infiltrated the castle earlier. He couldn't get himself involved with the op, but he offered to arrange a medevac if needed." Carter crouched next to Jesse and looked over at Thatcher. Carter was pretty banged up, but he was tough and clearly doing his best to act unfazed by the damage to his body. "Need to airlift him from here so he doesn't croak, I suppose."

"How considerate of you, Dominick. You sure you don't want me to die?" Thatcher asked, turning his attention to Carter.

"As nice of an idea as that is, I'd say no one on our team dying tonight is a win." Carter tipped his chin in the direction of the chopper hovering in search of a landing spot, confirming Jesse wasn't hallucinating. "Sydney and Ella are en route. They'll be here soon."

Jesse tried to sit at the news, but Carter palmed his chest, guiding him back down to remain flat. "How about staying still for now? We don't know if that knife hit anything important."

"Right," Jesse grumbled. "Fine." He let go of a breath, which ... hurt. The morphine in him wasn't quite enough to completely eradicate the pain, but as long as Ella was okay, and as Carter had said, no one on their team had died, he could deal with a knife wound. "What do we know so far? You know, about everything." *Am I making sense?* Jesse looked to his right to see another needle in his arm. "Did you just jab me with more morphine?" he asked Oliver.

“Got a problem with that?” Oliver lightly laughed before pulling the needle free of his arm and redirecting his attention to his main patient, Thatcher.

“Fine, fine.” Jesse waited for his vision to be a little less blurry as the drugs moved through his system. “So?” he prompted, waiting for Carter. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been passed out before the guys had dragged him from the castle and to the ground outside.

“Sydney handled the bomb, which you already know. And my guys dealt with the men on the mountainside and took care of the C4 in the mine. So, there was no damage to the historical site. We also confirmed Dragan’s dead. There was an underground tunnel that Zoran used to get in and out of his brother’s home without notice,” Carter explained, rising to his full height, and then he made a come-hither motion, and Gray appeared a moment later.

“I’ll have the Agency handle Zoran’s right-hand man, Aleksa, in Albania. Then all loose ends will be tied,” Thatcher spoke up, and Jesse had nearly forgotten about Aleksa. “Hostages okay? The boy?”

Jesse looked at Zoran’s son, Nikola, now standing alongside Gray. He’d had to witness all that violence. He hadn’t even tried to flee the room during the shooting and fighting either. And that reminded him of McKenna and the hell she’d endured back in Bama. The morphine couldn’t erase the pain from guilt, that was for sure.

“I’m okay,” Nikola spoke up in English. “Better now that I’m ... away from them all.”

Damn. Okay. Well, that was ... something. Tough kid.

“Hostages are fine. Bravo Team is handling them. We need to exfil before they call the police,” Carter remarked as the helo finally landed in the distance. “Shit. Hold on.”

Jesse forced himself to sit this time to see what had Carter’s attention. He clutched his abdomen, which was bandaged, and ignored Oliver’s scowl at his movement, which he could only make out in the dark because of the flashlights Oliver had positioned on him and Thatcher so he could see his “patients.”

“I know what you’re going to do, and I’m begging you not to.” Carter held on to Zoey’s wrist, but she attempted to pull free. “He lied. Yuri killed Preston. Don’t go chasing ghosts.”

“I have to know for sure,” she shot back. “If someone else killed Preston that day, I need to know.”

“He was trying to throw you off. It was a mind game,” Carter hissed. “Don’t let this fucker win. Don’t throw away your life for revenge. You have it now.” He tossed his free hand toward the castle. “He’s dead. You have your retribution. Let it go.”

Zoey shook her head as two men from the helicopter hustled Jesse’s way with a stretcher for Thatcher. “I have to be sure,” she reiterated.

“No.” Carter let go of her and surrendered his palms between them. “Please. Don’t do this. Go back to London. Patch things up with MI6. Stop this insanity of—”

“You’re telling me that if you found out someone else murdered your wife, and they were still out there, you wouldn’t do the same?” she challenged, and Carter’s shoulders fell. “I have to know if Yuri was telling the truth. I have to get to the bottom of what really happened the day Preston died.”

“Zoey.” Carter’s voice faltered this time, and he knew there was no point in fighting her. He tore his hands through his hair. “You’re going rogue, aren’t you?”

“I have no choice. And also, you look like shit. See a medic yourself.” And with that, she took off in the direction of the woods, a fearless woman on her hell-bent mission of revenge.

“Fuck,” Carter cursed under his breath before turning back toward everyone who had been watching the scene unfold like a reality show, but before Jesse had a chance to say anything, he heard Ella’s voice, and his heart paused for a beat.

“Jesse?” Ella called out.

“Ella.” Jesse struggled to get to his knees and clutched his chest, worried his heart might actually stop at the sight of her running toward him.

Ella fell to the snowy ground before him, her eyes going to the bandage wrapped around his abdomen before he reached for her, to hell with the wound. “They didn’t tell me you’re hurt. What happened?” Tears ran down her cheeks as a soft sob left her mouth. Relief? Worry? Fear? All of the above choking her up? And hell, him too.

Jesse pulled back and cupped her cheeks, needing to look her in the eyes, to double-check she was alive, breathing, and had no scratches on her. “I’m fine. Just a stab wound.”

“We need to get you on the chopper, sir,” one of the guys from the helo said, gesturing for Jesse to stand.

“I’m going with him,” Ella cried, holding on to his arm to help, and he hid a groan from the uncomfortable hole-in-the-gut feeling as he rose. “I’m never leaving your side. You’ve

got me for life, you hear me?" she whispered, and he closed his eyes at her words and nearly fell back to the ground.

"We have your brothers to deal with back home," he reminded her as she and the medic helped him to the helicopter to join Thatcher for a ride to the hospital, most likely in a larger city like Salzburg. "Your family. Mine."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," she said, her voice barely audible over the helo blades, and then Jesse stopped walking and turned toward everyone from Falcon still there.

"Thank you," he mouthed to them, so damn grateful to be part of a team again, to not be on a one-man show.

And moving forward, he promised he'd be a better man and teammate. And the man Ella deserved.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA – TWO DAYS LATER

“ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?” JESSE ASKED AS THEY NEARED the Hawkins Ranch.

He turned his attention to Ella, sitting beside him in his RAM, her hands slightly trembling as she gripped her black denim-covered thighs. Working his focus up over the tantalizing hint of cleavage revealed by her silky black blouse, he now felt a bit underdressed for the “welcome home event” in his faded jeans and plaid shirt open to a white tee.

“They’re all there waiting for us,” she said softly before skirting her teeth over her bottom lip. “But I’m glad Rory was able to make the trip back from Virginia to be here today. She and Savanna will make me feel less—”

“Panicked?” He waited for her nod, then redirected his attention back to driving. “I’m never going to be ready to face your family, or mine, now that they all know the truth.”

He’d hoped to return home sooner, but the team had to wait for Jesse to get released from the hospital in Salzburg, as well as for Carter’s private jet to make its way back from the States since his pilot had flown Savanna and Griffin home right before the op.

From what Jesse learned, Thatcher had discharged himself from the hospital without a word to anyone and was more than likely evading the inevitable ass-chewing he was sure to get for heading to Austria without permission, especially considering the outcome. The CIA had wanted Yuri alive, but Jesse had to believe they’d rather have a dead assassin than one still on the streets.

Thankfully, at zero three hundred hours, Aleksa, Zoran's right-hand man, had been taken down, so all the loose ends were officially tied.

Well, *almost* all loose ends were tied. Zoey had a new mission. Finding out whether or not Yuri lied to her. And Jesse had a feeling the team would be seeing her again down the road, whether Carter wanted to or not.

"I just hope Beckett tones down the growly when we see him," Ella softly said, redirecting his thoughts.

"Beckett is always growly," Jesse remarked, noticing her fiddling with her wedding band and diamond ring before peering at his left hand on the steering wheel, forgetting he'd removed his band before the op and hadn't put it back on. But they weren't actually married, and now her family knew the truth, so ...

"I've got you," she noted. "*We've* got this." She reached for his right hand resting on his jeaned leg and squeezed. "Or we could pull over and go tomorrow instead," she added with a chuckle. "I could give you, what's it called? Road head?"

The truck nearly went off *said* road when he spied her licking her lips, her gaze settling on his crotch, making his dick jump at the idea of her luscious lips wrapped around him.

"I still haven't tasted you. It's not fair," she tossed out and threw in a sexy pout to taunt him.

He lightly laughed and shook his head but quickly tore his gaze back to the road. They hadn't gone through hell overseas just to get into a car accident now. Pulling his hand free from hers, Jesse clutched his stomach at the pain that flared up. His abdomen still hurt like a motherfucker, and although the

saying, *laughter is the best medicine* might be true, it definitely didn't apply after you'd been stabbed in the gut.

"You okay?" she asked, cutting off his thoughts.

He bit down on his teeth and nodded, hoping she wouldn't notice how much pain he was in. He'd refused to take any more meds since he'd left the hospital, preferring to "get through it like a man" as Ella had repeatedly chided during the previous day, giving him a hard time for not even taking Advil.

"I'm fine, but hey, if you recall, I wanted to make love last night in our hotel room, but you turned me down. Taking a naked shower in front of me, knowing full well the doctor said I wasn't allowed to shower yet. You're looking for trouble, tempting me like that." He shifted his palm to his crotch, the discomfort there more than his abdomen now.

"First of all," she began around a soft chuckle, "showers are best taken naked. Pretty sure that's the point. And secondly, you're still recovering from being stabbed. I didn't want you to get hurt if we had sex."

"Nothing wrong with my dick, I can assure you." He shot her a devilish grin, noticing her legs pin together at his words.

"Oh, we're here." Her abrupt announcement snatched his attention to the road and away from the sight of her hand as it landed between her thighs like she was aching for his cock to fill her.

Jesse peered at the sign, **Hawkins Ranch**, and his shoulders fell as he turned onto the road leading to the ranch. There was still a decent stretch of distance between where they were now and the main house on the property, at least.

Feeling a bit fidgety, he flicked the brim of his ball cap, then spun it around backward. Then faced it forward again, deciding maybe he ought to hide his eyes a little for when they showed up.

“I’ll handle Beckett. Don’t worry.” She patted his leg. “But Mom said on the phone that your dad is there too.”

The tightening of his abdomen at the mention of his father had his stomach hurting again, but it now competed with the pain filling his chest at the idea of facing that man. “You think Zoran’s son, Nikola, will be okay?” he whispered at the memory of the stricken look on the boy’s face, and he could only hope he didn’t grow up to become like his father. “I think I became a fighter because of my dad, and so ...” He gulped, and she smoothed her hand up and down his jeaned thigh a bit more to try and comfort him.

“He’ll be much better raised by whoever adopts him than under the care of criminals, and didn’t he say as much himself?”

“Yeah, but I had morphine in me at the time, so I don’t know. Plus, he had to witness all that violence.” He shuddered at the memory.

“Mm. You’re forgetting something.”

He slowed the truck, trying to stall their arrival a bit. “What’s that?”

“He also saw some heroes in that castle too. He saw good prevail.” Ella paused for a moment. “But I’d like to check in and find out what happens to him.”

“Agreed.”

Ella smiled, and damn was it infectious. “And I’m sure that McKenna will also be okay,” she softly added.

“She’s tough like her aunt.” But his heart still squeezed at the thought of what McKenna had witnessed at the sheriff’s station. And from the sounds of it, the damage from the explosive breach set by Yuri’s men and the resulting fire was going to require Beckett to rebuild at least part of the station.

“A.J. said he’s working on him,” Ella said, reading his thoughts.

When the house came into view, Jesse’s heart climbed into his throat at the sight of all the cars parked in the circular driveway out front. *A grand welcome back? Ha. Sure. More like he’d be receiving a few punches to the face.*

Parking behind Shep’s Jeep, Jesse unbuckled and said, “Let’s, um, just get this done, I suppose.” He released a few shaky breaths, feeling more nervous now than when he was trapped in the room of the castle unarmed.

“Like I said, we’ve got this.” Ella palmed his cheek and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. He held his face near hers for a moment, relishing in the fact this woman was finally his.

A few seconds later, he figured it was time to face the music. Hopping out of the truck, he quickly navigated around the hood and opened the passenger door, offering Ella his hand as she stepped out.

Jesse smoothed his hands along the lapels of the red and black plaid jacket-style shirt to steady his nerves, and Ella went for his hand and laced their fingers together. *That* helped the harsh pangs in his chest.

Before they had a chance to climb the steps of the wraparound front porch, the door opened, and Bear came barreling out.

Ella quickly dropped his hand and jumped in front of him, arms outstretched to intercept the dog and keep him from jumping on Jesse, as was his habit.

“Protecting me?” Jesse asked with a smile as Rory spoke a command for Bear to sit.

Ella peeked back at him, still on guard. “Always.”

He reached for her hips and drew her back to his chest. “Ditto, darlin’,” he whispered into her ear before he allowed reality to settle back in that he had a whole lot of people to confront.

“There’s my favorite brother,” Rory said in a playful tone, but as soon as Jesse sidestepped Ella, he saw the emotion in her eyes. Relief that he was okay and had made it home alive.

“I thought I was the annoying one,” he responded, thinking back to their text exchange the night three years ago when she’d set him up with Ella in New York.

“The only one,” Rory returned while looping her arms over his shoulders and hugging him, careful of his stomach.

She turned her attention to Ella, swiping tears from beneath her eyes. As Jesse crouched to scratch Bear on the head, he looked up to see Chris exiting the house alongside A.J.

He’d spoken to A.J. since Yuri had died, but seeing his best friend face-to-face after he’d put his little sister in danger was harder than he’d anticipated.

“Welcome home, brother,” Chris said, hurrying down the stairs. He gave Jesse a quick one-arm hug before tossing a look back at the house where everyone had begun filtering out the front door.

Okay, so we're doing this right here? Jesse swallowed and pivoted his focus to the group standing on the porch. Everyone except Beckett and McKenna.

“Ella,” Savanna cried out, running with open arms, and Griffin strode behind her and tipped his head Jesse’s way in hello.

How would he face the rest of her family? Look Ella’s dad, Rick, in the eyes after what he’d put the man’s only daughter through? And then there was the marriage lie.

“Jesse, a word.” The sound of his father’s voice was like another knife to the gut. Jesse slowly turned his gaze toward the man. Time hadn’t changed the fact that Jesse resembled the bastard more than a little, something he’d always hated. “Over here.”

Jesse glanced at Ella, finding her now surrounded by her family and barely visible as they went in for hugs.

He avoided making eye contact with his mom on his way to his dad, who now stood off to the side of the house for privacy.

“I knew you were a fuckup, but this, this is beyond anything I could ever imagine.” His dad crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Jesse.

Jesse bowed his head. He was now taller than his dad though only by an inch, but Sean McAdams, even in his late sixties, was still strong and fairly jacked. Not that Jesse doubted he’d win in a matchup with him. And he’d be lying if he said that over the years he hadn’t envisioned such a fight. But it was time for him to put the past behind him so he could start fresh with Ella.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Jesse remarked, unwilling to offer his father an apology or any excuses. Hell no.

“Boy, look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Jesse bit down on his back teeth and hissed between his barely parted lips as he slowly forced his eyes on his dad’s, not because he’d ordered him to, but because he was no longer the boy who had to stand there and take it. He was a man whose days of putting up with this bastard were long over.

“I’m so pissed at you I can barely see straight,” his father went on, just like back in the day. Jesse shook his head when he glanced down and saw his dad’s palm twitch. Would he really try to hit him out here in front of everyone? Expose himself as the asshole he was? All that talk of redemption ... his mother deserved better if he was still the same man he’d been all those years ago.

“Walk away,” Jesse slowly said. “I advise you to leave before you make a scene, or I promise you, the only one who will end up flat on his back will be you.”

“You don’t deserve that girl. You know that, right?” His dad leaned in closer, and Jesse smelled the alcohol he’d supposedly given up on his breath.

“Jesse,” Ella said from behind just before she sidled up next to him and secured a hand around his arm. “You should do what he says,” she boldly stated, lifting her chin, eyes dead set on his dad. “In fact, you should get off our property before I tell everyone about the kind of man you really are.”

Jesse’s focus remained riveted on the firecracker trying to protect him once again.

“What nonsense did he peddle to you?” his dad asked.

“Just the truth,” Ella calmly said. “And if you don’t walk away right now, *I* will punch you. You can count on that,” she added, her tone grittier this time, and heaven help him, he was going to kiss her right there.

“You two belong together, then.” His father huffed out a deep breath and hip-checked him like an immature ass while walking past.

Ella guided Jesse’s focus to her, an attempt to calm him down. “Some people don’t deserve forgiveness. I’m sorry, but I won’t ever forgive him for what he did.”

He angled his head and studied her, unsure what to say. He had so many emotions flying through him right now.

“Your mom and sister should know though. They need to know what he did to you,” she whispered.

“We’ll see. But first, I need to face your family.” Chills coated his arms when he saw Beckett and McKenna circling the house from the back, striding side by side, and Ella turned to follow his gaze.

“Ella!” McKenna called out, breaking free from her father’s side to race their way. Ella dropped to her knees and wrapped McKenna in a tight hug while Jesse stared at them and set a hand to his chest at what felt like a fist pumping there. But it was just his heart working double time.

“Jesse,” Beckett said in a clipped tone on approach, which had Ella quickly untangling herself from McKenna and turning their way, looking ready to do battle with her brother if necessary.

But in this case, Jesse didn’t want any barriers between him and Beckett.

“Thank you for safely returning her home,” Beckett said, his tone low and deep. “Now get the hell off our property before I remove you myself.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE LEFT WITH ME,” JESSE MURMURED while he held Ella in his arms as they lay in his bed later that night. “You should have stayed at the ranch.”

Ella quietly lifted her palm and smoothed the back of her hand over his cheek.

“I never want to come between you and your family.” He repeated what he’d said to her multiple times since they’d left her parents’ house three hours ago.

After he’d made a quick round of apologies to her family, as well as to his mother ... he’d done as Beckett had demanded and gotten the hell out of there, but Ella had run after him, jumped into his truck, and refused to get out. “*Where you go, I go,*” she’d stubbornly said while fastening her seat belt.

“Beckett is fiercely protective of his daughter. He’s still mad. But unlike your dad, you deserve forgiveness. The chance to patch things up. And honestly, when it comes to my parents, I think they’re more upset that the marriage is fake.”

Not married. Shit. That made *him* sad too.

Ella lowered her palm to his chest. “Right now, I just want to be in your arms. Maybe make love?”

“You’re trying to distract me. You wouldn’t have sex with me in Austria, but you will now?” He almost laughed. “You must really be worried about Beckett, then.”

She shook her head. “Yes, I’m a little stressed. But you know how I get when I’m tense.”

Yeah, he did. His woman needed some relief, and he’d be more than willing to give it to her if that’d help.

Ella eased free of his embrace and stood from the bed. “You know how many times over the years I thought about coming into your bedroom and us making love?”

He rolled flat to his back and folded his arms behind his head, propping himself up to put eyes on her. She peeled off her blouse and tossed it, then went for the snap of her bra.

Yeah, his brain would turn to mush in 1.5 seconds if she continued stripping.

“I was thinking maybe you could teach me martial arts. Some karate?” she casually mentioned while undressing. “Or, ohhh, how to use a bow.” She unzipped her jeans and shoved them down. “I’d like to be a badass like Sydney.”

He smiled, cocking his head as he watched her slowly drag her black satin panties down her thighs, exposing her smooth center. “You’re an original. And God willing, you’ll never need to defend yourself again for any reason, but I can teach you some stuff.”

She worked her lip between her teeth and knelt on the bed, setting her palms to his legs, which were now covered in gray sweats that did nothing to hide his erection. “Good.” Her eyes fell to his crotch, and she licked her pink lips.

“Everything will be okay,” she said like a promise he hoped he could believe.

He sat up and held on to her hips, forgetting whatever pain remained in his abdomen.

As she took hold of the hem of his shirt, he lifted his arms to assist her in ridding him of his white tee. “I want you,” she whispered. “Need you. But I don’t want you getting hurt. Sex ... will have you contracting your abs, right?” Her shoulders fell, and she gave him that sexy little pout he loved. “And an orgasm would too, I suppose.”

“Baby girl, you’re sitting here naked on my bed. There’s not a chance in this life or the next that I’d give a damn about some abdominal discomfort.” His eyes fell to her tits, and he smoothed the pads of his thumbs over her hard nipples before swallowing her whimper with his mouth. And as he kissed her, their family problems became a distant memory.

His beautiful woman managed to rid him of his pants and boxer briefs within the next few seconds, and she was back on her knees, shifting his legs apart as if preparing to ...

Well, fuuuuuck. He threw his head back when her warm, wet mouth sank down onto his cock, and her hand worked up and down his length in a perfect rhythm ... so much better than he’d ever fantasized.

Threading his fingers through her hair, he looked down, intoxicated by the sight of her full lips wrapped around his length as she took all of him. The pain in his stomach was nothing compared to the overwhelming pleasure tearing through his body right now.

“Mmmm.”

“That *mmmm* might be the death of me, darling,” he rasped, fighting his release. “Don’t forget my rule. You first. Always.” He gently guided her head away, which was damn

near painful to do, especially when she licked her lips and swiped her hand beneath her bottom one, eyes pinned on him.

“Can’t we forgo that rule this one time?” she asked, her voice deep and sultry.

“No, now be a good girl and get on your back.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, which had his balls tightening as they swapped positions.

Unfortunately, he probably needed to wait a day or two before they had sex, but no way was he waiting to taste her again.

Staring at him with wide eyes, she traced her fingers gently over the bandage wrapped around his abdomen, but she didn’t seem to surrender to the worry. Too caught up in the desire, same as him. *That’s my girl.*

He carefully lowered himself down her body, dragging his mouth over her warm skin in the process before his tongue settled between her thighs.

“Ohhh,” she cried the moment he flicked her clit, knowing the exact spot she loved, and he crooked two fingers deep inside her wet pussy, before removing them to glide over her puckered flesh before setting his mouth between her thighs again.

“Damn, girl, you’re wet.”

“Going down on you turned me on ... quite ... a lot,” she said around a few breathy moans as he ate her up. She orgasmed a few minutes later, her nails biting into his shoulders as she murmured, “I love you.” And those three words nearly had him coming as well. “But now,” she drawled, “it’s my turn to get you off.”

* * *

JESSE SIPPED HIS COFFEE THE NEXT MORNING WHILE STARING at the unfinished table inside his workshop. His shoulders fell at the sight of the hole in the wall he needed to plaster, and he thought back to the day he'd caused the damage. It felt like forever ago, rather than last week.

Thatcher had texted him at around zero five hundred hours that morning, letting him know he was back at Langley with a promise “never to hear from me again unless it was really important,” followed by an apology text.

The man had knowingly and purposefully placed Ella in danger, so the odds of Jesse forgiving Thatcher were about the same as him forgiving his dad. Slim to none. His therapist had once told him, “*You don't always need to forgive someone in order to move on, you just need to forgive yourself for whatever feelings or behaviors they may have inspired.*” And maybe she was right.

Jesse set his coffee down and turned on the radio, debating whether to sand the tabletop or patch up the wall as a way to distract himself and keep from overthinking the Beckett situation.

Ella was still asleep, and he'd done his best not to wake her when he'd left bed following Thatcher's text two hours ago.

“Hey.”

Jesse's shoulders startled at the fact A.J. had just gotten the drop on him. Fatigue? Stress? Then again, A.J. was a skilled operator, but he hadn't even heard his truck tires crunch over the gravel on approach. “It's early. What are you doing here?”

He turned to face his best friend, hoping they were still best friends.

“Ella called me. About thirty minutes ago. She said you were out here.”

Ah, my sneaky woman. Trying to patch things up between us?

A.J. strode past Jesse and over to the tabletop still attached to the workbench. “We didn’t get a chance to talk at the ranch yesterday.” A.J. ran his hand along the top, his eyes remaining on the wood. “And don’t be mad at my sister, but she may have mentioned there’s a reason there was tension between you and your old man.”

Jesse removed his hat and scratched the back of his head before putting it back on, wondering how much Ella had told him.

“You should tell Rory. And your mom.” A.J. lifted his gaze to him. “You should’ve told me a long-ass time ago too.”

Jesse’s stomach knotted, and why the hell was he feeling emotional right now?

“I would’ve helped you. We could’ve done something about him.”

So, you know everything-everything. He’d told Ella back in France she was free to share what she’d learned with Savanna, and anyone for that matter, but *this* conversation still wasn’t one he quite knew how to navigate.

They were both operators. Men who took lives to save others. Feelings weren’t always the easiest thing to discuss. Operational plans? Roger that. But talk about how your dad beat the shit out of you? That’d be a negative.

“The reclaimed wood,” A.J. went on, his hand now gliding across the smooth surface again as if searching for rough spots. “You always chose reclaimed wood because you wanted to save the wood, wishing you could ...”

Save myself? Fix myself? Make something whole again. Useful. All Jesse could do was nod, because his emotions had his throat tightening.

A.J. lifted a hand and stroked his beard. “You’re my best friend, brother. Always will be. I just wish I could have helped.”

“Still best friends, huh?” That was all Jesse could latch on to right about now.

“Of course.” A.J. smiled, and he could tell his Tier One best friend was fighting tears. “And, um, Mom wants you over for supper tomorrow. Beckett will be there. Mom will make things right. You know how stubborn she is. As stubborn as my sister.”

Jesse tipped his face to the ceiling, closing his eyes. Fighting *his* tears.

“But there’s still one problem to address.”

A.J.’s words had Jesse opening his eyes, pivoting his focus back to his best friend. “And what’s that?” *Aside from Beckett?*

He pointed to Jesse’s left hand, and Jesse lowered his focus to try and figure out what he was getting at.

“Your ring. It ain’t there,” A.J. remarked, his tone firm. “Why not?”

CHAPTER FORTY



ELLA REMOVED HER APRON, THE RED ONE WITH WHITE LETTERS that spelled out *Roll Tide*, her alma mater, and sighed when her focus snagged on the bare ring finger of her left hand. She'd felt silly wearing the beautiful engagement ring and wedding band since they weren't actually married. And since Jesse had never put his band back on ...

"They'll be okay." Her mom approached from behind and gently gripped the sides of Ella's arms.

Okay was a relative term, but as Ella looked out the window over the sink at Jesse and Beckett standing across from each other and talking, she hoped *okay* meant Beckett would forgive Jesse. But based on the way her brother just slapped his Stetson to his jeaned thigh and stabbed the air, she wasn't so sure.

"I don't know if Jesse's parents will be okay though."

"You know the *whole* story now? Jesse's *mom* knows the *other* stuff that happened?" Ella turned, surprise ripping through her.

Jesse had talked to Rory last night and filled her in on the truth about their dad, but he'd opted not to tell his mom, deciding why ruin her happiness?

“Yeah, I know everything now. Donna kicked Sean out last night.”

What, the, what?

“Rory was pissed, as she should’ve been. And from what I learned from Donna, she barely stopped Rory from slugging Sean.” Ella’s mom shook her head. “Donna was understandably upset to discover she’d been unaware of how horrible Sean had been to Jesse all those years. She blames herself.”

Another reason why Jesse hadn’t wanted her to know. He didn’t want his mother to feel guilty.

“You forgive Jesse for everything that happened, right?” Ella swallowed the uncomfortable lump down her throat as she studied her mom.

“He worked for the government. It’s not like he was that John-something-or-other character.” She waved a dismissive hand in the air, and Ella grinned at the fact her mom knew about the famous movie, *John Wick*.

A movie I watched to learn more about Jesse. She wanted to face-palm herself for doing something so ridiculous.

“Your brother’s work is just as dangerous. Maybe more. A.J. thinks I’m a clueless fool who believes his BS story that he’s just a bodyguard.” Her mom faked a laugh. “Sure, sure.”

Well, damn.

“But let’s not tell your father. He doesn’t need the stress.” Her mom shrugged and then snatched two glasses and poured them some Riesling. “So.”

“So.” Ella smiled and took a sip of the fruity white wine, doing her best not to look out the window again, to not worry

her brother would remain forever mad at Jesse.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” her mom began, “and I believe, despite what happened with Rochella, you should pursue fashion. Even if it’s only a hobby, you have real talent, sweetheart. And your designs should be shared with the world.”

Oh, okay. Well, that wasn’t where she’d expected the conversation to go. “Funny you say that because ...” Ella sidestepped her mom and grabbed her phone from the counter. “You’ll never believe who reached out today.” She opened her Instagram account and clicked on her latest follower, Elizabeth Rochella. “Henry’s mother learned what her son did, as well as the trouble he’d gotten himself into, and she’s decided not to step down in June as planned.”

“What are you saying?” Her mom grinned ear to ear as Ella set her phone back down.

“Elizabeth’s interested in my designs. Offered to hire me.”

“Wow.” She took a large gulp of wine.

Ella shrugged as if it were no big deal. “I told her no. And then she attempted to buy my silence, obviously worried I’d share what happened with her son to the media.”

Her mom’s eyes widened. “What’d you say?”

“I was about to say no to the bribe, but the kids really do need new tablets and a better playground.” Ella smirked. “She made a generous donation to the school after our call today.”

“Ella Mae, that’s my girl.” Her mom winked and took another sip of wine. “But what about fashion?”

Ella stole a quick look out the window before answering. “I may start taking it more seriously. Just in the summertime

when school's not in session," she said as Savanna and Rory joined them in the kitchen.

"How are they doing?" Rory glanced toward the window over the sink, and Ella pivoted to the side to put eyes on her brother and Jesse. At least Beckett's hat was back on his head, and no punches were being thrown.

"Beckett is growly and grumpy," her mom began, "but beneath that tough exterior, he's a softy."

"Softy? Ha." Savanna slapped a hand to her mouth. "Sorry, but I'm pretty sure he's the male version of ... well, Sydney, since they're both parents."

"Sydney?" *Yeah, maybe*, Ella decided. Both strong and protective of their kids. And if Ella hadn't had a chance to have a little one-on-one time with Sydney on the train during which she'd surprisingly opened up a bit, Ella wouldn't think there was a soft bone in that woman's body. But like Beckett, there appeared to be more beneath the surface.

"Sydney is the pretty blonde from Falcon Falls? The one Beckett couldn't take his eyes off at your fake wedding?"

Oh really? And, uh ... to the fake part.

"That's her," Savanna answered for Ella while circling the large kitchen island to stand next to her as Ella's mom began pouring glasses of wine for Rory and Savanna. "You and Jesse are officially together, right?"

As soon as they'd come home, her plate had been full of so many things to deal with that she hadn't had a chance to catch up with Savanna and Rory and fill them in on the "Ella and Jesse" story.

Ella fixed her attention on her wineglass and swirled the light gold liquid around. "I think so."

“Think so?” Rory whispered as if Ella had said something offensive.

“As long as you two don’t follow the pattern in romance books ...” Savanna let her words trail off like Ella was supposed to know what she was talking about. “By that, I mean allow something or someone to come between y’all around the seventy-or-so percent point if you were characters in the book. Or fall into some drama of miscommunication. In other words, do something stupid that keeps you apart.”

Ella looked at Savanna to see her swiping a hand through the air.

“Roger that.”

The sound of Jesse’s deep voice, laced with a bit of amusement, made Ella’s heart skip wildly as she quickly turned to where he stood at the threshold of the open back door, his eyes set on her.

“I won’t do anything stupid, I can promise you that.” Jesse’s voice grew deeper as Ella studied her man.

He had on a gray sweater-coat, and the popped collar framed his jawline. His hair was much shorter now, though still sexy, but at that length, it almost looked brown, and she was digging the look.

But his eyes.

Heaven help her, those blue eyes that turned much darker when aroused or angry ...

They were like a lifeline to her soul.

“Y’all should get married for real.” Her mom’s words tore Ella’s attention in her direction, and Ella raised the glass to her lips, hoping the wine would steady her nerves. “Unless Rory

pulled another sly matchmaker move on you two and already sent in the paperwork. You know,” her mom continued while playfully waggling her eyebrows, “sent in that marriage license you two signed in front of me to try and sell the wedding idea as real.”

Ella almost choked on her wine as the door clicked shut. Beckett was there too, standing behind Jesse, and well, he looked less scowly. A good sign.

“Darn.” Rory lightly smacked a palm to her forehead. “I wish I’d thought to do that, but I didn’t.”

“But I did.”

Ella nearly dropped her glass as Jesse slowly moved toward her, a sexy smile on those gorgeous lips of his.

“What?” Ella mouthed, unable to get her voice to work as he dropped to one knee, pulled a small black box from his pocket, and opened it.

My rings.

“Ella Mae, will you stay married to me?” Jesse asked, his voice rough as he lifted the box and presented her the diamond and band. It was then she noticed his wedding band was already back on his ring finger. He followed her gaze there and said, “I’m being optimistic.” Then he shot her a devilish grin that had her insides melting, but she also could see the emotion in his eyes.

Ella stole a quick look at her older brother, and Beckett nodded his approval, which meant ... he and Jesse had made up. And that was the best “engagement-marriage” present ever.

“Well?” her mom prompted, and Ella fell to her knees before her husband, tears filling her eyes as she nodded.

“Is this the middle place?” she cried. “Are we officially there?”

Jesse tipped his head and smiled. “If that place is being happy, being your husband, then hell yes, we’re there.”

Her heart slammed against her rib cage, and she ignored the rings to fling her arms over his shoulders. “Yes, yes, yes. I’d love to stay married to you.”

Jesse brought his mouth to her ear while gently cupping the back of her head, his warm breath making her shiver as he whispered, “Good girl.”

EPILOGUE



WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA – FOUR MONTHS LATER

“MOM REALLY SHOULD START A WEDDING PLANNING BUSINESS. And your wedding can be her next gig.” Ella elbowed her brother, Beckett. “Your date is gorgeous. How come I don’t know her? She’s not from here.” And was this the first time she’d seen her brother on a date?

Ella’s gaze cut to McKenna, who was laughing at something A.J. was saying while they danced, and it was such a relief that her niece was doing well after everything that had happened. The family had immediately gotten her into therapy to manage any post-traumatic stress she might be experiencing, but McKenna seemed more concerned about a boy she liked in school than anything else. Normal thirteen-year-old-girl stuff, thank God.

And seeing McKenna was a reminder of Zoran’s son. Nikola had been adopted by a family in France. The DGSE had pulled some strings, and from what Ella had learned, he was also thriving.

Turning her attention back to her brother, Ella noticed his focus wasn’t on the date he’d brought to Savanna and Griffin’s wedding. No, his eyes were on Sydney Archer as she danced with her son, who was about half a foot taller than his mom. Sydney was mid-twirl when she looked straight at Ella and Beckett as though feeling their eyes on her.

Beckett coughed into a closed fist, shifted to the side, and faced Ella. “What were you saying?”

Ella smiled. *Huh, interesting.* “The wedding is beautiful. And maybe you’ll get married next, you know, since I’ve already tied the knot. It’s your turn.” She searched the crowd

for her other two single brothers, Shep and Caleb. There was a far better chance Beckett would marry before either of those playboys.

“Yeah. Glad they decided to have their reception here,” Beckett answered in a low, almost distant-sounding voice, ignoring the other part of what she’d suggested.

Savanna and Griffin had wed at the local church. The *only* church in town. But Ella’s mom had transformed the ranch into a wedding site yet again.

Unlike Ella’s wedding, a white tent had been set up, with a makeshift dance floor in the center. And surrounding the dance area and band were round tables with cute cross-back chairs and centerpieces of in-season flowers in various shades of pink, arranged in silver vases.

Strings of lights overhead created a soft glow, which definitely played up the romantic factor. But Ella’s favorite part of the entire night ...

Savanna’s smile.

Her beautiful best friend looked so happy. And she also looked stunning in the dress Ella had designed for her to wear, which would become part of what Ella was dubbing her “Walkins Glen Southern Wedding Collection.” Well, she was still playing around with the name, but Ella had been more than excited to design a gown for her best friend.

The silhouette was an ivory ball gown with a scalloped chapel train. The sweetheart neckline and Basque waist style looked perfect on Savanna. The fabric was made of tulle and lace, with a sequined net skirt, and pearls and crystals on the corset finished the look.

“Beautiful,” Ella remarked at the sight of the bride and groom on the dance floor. Savanna was absolutely radiant in her gorgeous dress and Griffin looked beyond elegant in his tux. *And where’s my husband?*

She found Jesse standing at the bar with a few of his Falcon Falls teammates who’d all come for the wedding. The team had taken several jobs since January, but none had been quite as dangerous or high risk as the one with Yuri.

Like Griffin and Savanna, she and Jesse were making things work despite the fact Falcon’s headquarters was in Pennsylvania. For the most part, Jesse was rarely in Pennsylvania. He spent most of his “off op” time at home with her, and he continued making furniture on the side because he was really damn good at it.

She’d moved into his house until they could build their own place. Jesse wanted a new home for the two of them to start a family. A fresh start.

His mom and dad were still separated, and in Ella’s mind, maybe that was for the best. According to Savanna, with the exception of romance books, not all stories had a guaranteed happily-ever-after. And so maybe, the story for Rory and Jesse’s parents wasn’t a romance. But Ella had to believe his mom would find her way to happiness eventually, whether that was with Jesse’s dad or someone else.

“I’m happy that you’re happy,” Beckett unexpectedly said, almost as if he’d read her thoughts too.

Ella pivoted her focus away from where Jesse was now belly laughing at whatever Jack had just said.

“What about you? Your happiness?” She angled her head. “McKenna wants a mom. She’s said that to me on more than

one occasion.”

Beckett frowned, and his shoulders fell, but he remained quiet.

“Not everyone is like ... her,” Ella softly said. *Her*. The “her” no one dared talk about in Walkins Glen. McKenna’s mom.

“I need a drink.” *And* Beckett’s broodiness was back.

“And maybe dance with your date?” Ella suggested, and he grunted in answer before parting ways. She should’ve known better than to bring *her* up.

She didn’t want anything to sour her happy mood, though, so she decided to have a little fun.

Ella went to her assigned table and snatched her phone. She scrolled through the sexy images she’d taken of herself while getting ready for the wedding earlier but hadn’t sent to her husband.

She opened her Instagram and sent User1231 a private story. Three, in fact, of her wearing nothing but pink lace lingerie and high heels.

Ella chuckled at the memory of how this game all started. Two weeks ago, she noticed a new follower on her Instagram page. User1231 had no profile image, no posts, and the only person they followed was Ella. For having been in the CIA, her husband wasn’t very stealthy when it came to social media. Or maybe he wasn’t trying to be in this case because it didn’t take her more than a minute to figure out that 1231 referred to their wedding date—December 31st.

So that night, she’d sent him a sexy text, and he’d nearly broken down the bedroom door to get to her.

He knew she'd never sext a stranger, so he realized she'd figured out he was User1231. But he'd played it up a bit as if he were clueless so they could have some of that hot angry-sex they both loved.

Ella looked over at Jesse reaching into his pocket and smiled when he caught his lip between his teeth as he viewed his message. He nearly dropped his phone when her dad sidled up alongside him and threw an arm around his shoulder.

Shit. Yeah, that'd be her bad luck to have her father catch a glimpse of her half-naked.

Her heart squeezed, though, at seeing her dad and Jesse together. He loved his son-in-law, and their relationship was the kind Jesse needed in his life.

Jesse shot Ella a quick look across the way that told her she was "in trouble" later while pocketing his phone and taking the shot glass Oliver handed him.

Ella smiled, loving every minute of her husband's flushed cheeks, knowing he'd be making her cheeks, the *other* ones, red later for that.

She adjusted the halter of her pale pink bridesmaid dress, making sure that everything was where it belonged. *No nip slips so far. Good.*

Ella turned toward the dance floor, preparing to ask A.J. to dance, but before she had a chance, a pair of large hands settled on her hips. She turned and looked over her shoulder at her husband. "Hey, you."

"How's my gorgeous wife?" he asked in a deep voice, knowing full well that tone set her insides on fire with desire.

"I'm pretty amazing." She turned into his embrace and draped her arms over his shoulders.

“You’re also a bad girl,” he murmured suggestively, his gaze falling to her cleavage. “I swear your breasts look bigger.”

She wet her lips, and he caught the movement of her tongue sweeping across her mouth as she did so, and he leaned in and captured her bottom lip, lightly tugging.

“Do they now?” she whispered after he released her lip. “You feel like having a close-up look to check for yourself?”

His hand slid down her bare back and cupped her ass, the fabric a flimsy barrier. “After those pictures you sent me, did you really think I wouldn’t be demanding an in-person viewing right now?”

“Mm. My studio?”

He snatched her hand a moment later, which she took as a yes.

Savanna caught Ella’s eyes as Jesse practically dragged her out and mouthed, “Go ahead.” Ella knew exactly what her best friend was referring to, and it wasn’t sex.

Once outside the tent, they hurried toward her design studio, doing her best not to trip in her heels with Jesse moving so quickly. But she knew he’d never let her fall. He had her. Always.

Jesse began working at the knot of his tie the moment they were alone, then left the skinny black material to hang loose around his neck as he twirled his finger as a directive to strip.

She eagerly obeyed, doing her best not to peek at the wrapped present on a nearby stool.

Down to her pink bra, panties, and tan thigh-high stockings, Jesse slowly ate up the space between them. He

unbuckled and unzipped his slacks, then released the button.

“Perfect,” he rasped while stroking himself, and then within a second, he hoisted her up and set her on the steadiest of tables in the studio, and she locked her legs around his strong, muscular thighs, linking her ankles behind his back.

He pulled the fabric of her panties to the side while staring deep into her eyes. They’d stopped using protection pretty much the day she’d officially become his wife, and she loved feeling him raw and deep inside her.

“Ready for me?”

She leaned back on her forearms, keeping her gaze on him while tipping her hips up as an answer, and he plunged inside her, her chest lifting from the deep thrust.

He had one hand holding her hip while the other shifted the thin material of her strapless bra down to reveal her peaked nipple. “I swear your breasts are bigger. Maybe I had too much tequila.”

“Mm. Maybe,” she said as he lowered his hand down the center of her body to her clit. He smoothed the pad of his thumb in small circles there while making love to her, and she did her best not to cry out too loud from the orgasm that had her head spinning a few minutes later.

“Fuck,” Jesse hissed while coming inside her, dropping his head to her forehead and resting it there for a moment.

“Wedding sex,” she said with a laugh after he helped clean her up, and she secured her dress back on before anyone barged in. Her family didn’t have the best timing, especially her mom.

“What’s that?” Jesse tipped his head, studying the wrapped present on the stool.

“Oh. A gift. But I was going to give it to you on another day. You know, it’s their wedding, so I didn’t want to ... you know.” *What am I saying?* Her nerves were tangling her words up, and did he understand anything she’d said?

“Another gift?” Jesse palmed her cheek and angled her head, drawing her lips to his. After a sensual kiss, he whispered, “You just gave me your ass the other night, you’re good for gifting for the next decade or so,” he murmured darkly, and her body heated up again at his words. And at the memory of that crazy night where she’d been surprised by the naughty and filthy things that’d come from her own mouth. But it’d been ... insanely hot and perfect.

“We can wait, then,” she said, pretending to play it off as no big deal, knowing he damn well wouldn’t wait.

“Mmhmm. Sure.” He released her a moment later and went to grab the silver box and untied the bow.

“It’s my first time designing something that ... small. The first piece for a new fashion line,” she said, her heart racing.

“Really?” He smiled and then lifted the lid only to drop the box a second later once he’d removed the small item from it. “Baby clothes?”

Her gaze fell to her abdomen, and she set a protective hand there. “Well, I’m pregnant, so I thought, why not?”

Jesse stumbled, his eyes falling to the floor for a moment as if in disbelief.

Shit, was he upset?

“You’re pregnant with my kid?” His words had stretched out so tight that they nearly snapped on delivery.

“Well, I think it’s your kid,” she teased, hoping she wouldn’t snap too while she waited for her husband to process the news she hadn’t planned to give tonight. But Savanna had said “go ahead,” so ...

“You think, huh?” Jesse arched a brow and set the outfit down on the stool before coming toward her. “The baby is mine, that’s for sure.” He covered her hand with his and lifted his gaze to her eyes. “Just like you’re mine.” His eyes became glossy as he said, “You made me whole again, Ella Mae. And now you’re making me a father.” He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment as a tear fell down his cheek. “And I promise I won’t be anything like my dad.”

She lifted her palm between them to cradle his face. “I know,” she whispered. “You’ll be the most amazing father, just like you’re the most incredible husband.” Tears now steadily streamed down her face, and he opened his eyes, and a smile snagged his lips.

“We can still have sex, right? We didn’t hurt the baby just now, did we?”

She chuckled. “It’s good for me, in fact. Plus, I think this pregnancy is making me all kinds of horny.”

“You’re already horny.”

“Hornier,” she teased, setting her hand to his chest now, finding his heart thrashing there.

“So, we should have sex again, is what you’re saying?” He wagged his brows, and she squealed when he scooped her back into his arms.

“Right now?”

“You object?” He lifted a brow.

“You love it when I play hard to get, so ...” She wriggled free from his arms and tossed a saucy look over her shoulder. “Come and get me,” she challenged and started for the door.

And Jesse, being faster than anyone she’d met in her life, had her gently pinned to the door within a second.

“All mine.” He swept the back of his hand over the contour of her cheek while the palm of his other hand landed above her shoulder on the door.

Her handsome husband was right.

He was no longer the broken one. He was whole again.

And now, she was more than just whole. She was on her way to becoming a mother. And that middle place, happiness ... was theirs.

FALCON FALLS CROSSOVER INFO

Crossover Information

The Hunted One (Falcon Falls, book 1) is Savanna and Griffin's story.

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The Falcon Falls Series is a spin-off from the Stealth Ops Series (Echo Team, books 6-10).

I love having worlds crossover. Below is information on where you'll find some of these other characters - as well as where else you may have first met the characters from Falcon Falls.

Gray Chandler was in *Chasing the Knight* and the epilogue of *Chasing the Storm*. Jack London was also in *Chasing the Knight*. **Chasing the Knight* stars Gray's sister, Natasha.

In *Chasing Daylight*, we first meet the Alabama crew (Jesse, Beckett, etc). This is A.J.'s book. We also discover the tension between Ella & Jesse in this book, and that tension continues in *Chasing Fortune*, which is Jesse's sister's book (Rory).

A.J. is “visited” by Marcus in his book, *Chasing Daylight*. Marcus is mentioned in multiple books in the Stealth Ops series.

Carter Dominick was in *Chasing Fortune* and *Chasing the Storm*.

Oliver and Griffin are briefly in *Chasing the Storm* as well. But in *Chasing the Storm* - Griffin is only referred to as “Southern sniper guy.”

What is Next?

Sydney & Beckett (book 3) - April 2022

Be sure to join my [newsletter](#), Facebook [groups](#), or follow me on [Insta](#), [TikTok](#), or [Facebook](#) to learn more about the upcoming releases. Plus, get access to teasers, giveaways, and more.

The Falcon Falls [Pinterest](#) muse/inspiration board.

Continue for a *music playlist*, reading guide, and Stealth Ops/Falcon Falls Family Tree!

PLAYLIST

Throw It Back - BRELAND, Keith Urban

Been There Done That (Feat. Tove Styrke) - NOTD

Remedy - Alesso

Cry Dancing - NOTD, Nina Nesbitt

All Too Well (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift

Beautiful Mistakes - Maroon 5, Megan Thee Stallion

I Just Need U - TobyMac

My Girl - Dylan Scott

Eyes on You - Chase Rice

In Case You Didn't Know - Brett Young

Love to Lose - Sandro Cavazza, Georgia Ku

Someday - OneRepublic

Wrecked - Imagine Dragons

Run - OneRepublic

Undeniable (Feat. X Ambassadors) - Kygo

Overpass Graffiti - Ed Sheeran

Lady - Brett Young

[Spotify](#)

*Note: Spotify adds “suggested” songs to the end of my list, so you may see other songs there.

ALSO BY BRITTNEY SAHIN

Find the latest news from my newsletter/[website](#) and/or Facebook: [Brittney's Book Babes](#) / the [Stealth Ops Spoiler Room](#) / [Dublin Nights Spoiler Room](#).

A [Stealth Ops World Guide](#) is available on my website, which features more information about the team, character muses, and SEAL lingo.

[Stealth Ops Timeline](#)

[Reading Guide](#)

[Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board](#)

* * *

Falcon Falls Security

[The Hunted One](#) - book 1 - Griffin & Savanna

The Broken One - book 2 - Jesse & Ella

Book 3 (April 2022) - Sydney & Beckett

Stealth Ops Series: Bravo Team

Finding His Mark - Book 1 - Luke & Eva

Finding Justice - Book 2 - Owen & Samantha

Finding the Fight - Book 3 - Asher & Jessica

Finding Her Chance - Book 4 - Liam & Emily

Finding the Way Back - Book 5 -Knox & Adriana

Stealth Ops Series: Echo Team

Chasing the Knight - Book 6 -Wyatt & Natasha

Chasing Daylight - Book 7 - A.J. & Ana

Chasing Fortune - Book 8 - Chris & Rory

Chasing Shadows - Book 9 -Harper & Roman

Chasing the Storm - Book 10 - Finn & Julia

Becoming Us: *connection to the Stealth Ops Series (books take place between the prologue and chapter 1 of Finding His Mark)*

Someone Like You - A former Navy SEAL. A father. And off-limits. (Noah Dalton)

My Every Breath - A sizzling and suspenseful romance. Businessman Cade King has fallen for the wrong woman. She's the daughter of a hitman - and he's the target.

Dublin Nights

On the Edge - Travel to Dublin and get swept up in this romantic suspense starring an Irish businessman by day...and

fighter by night.

On the Line - novella

The Real Deal - This mysterious billionaire businessman has finally met his match.

The Inside Man - Cole McGregor & Alessia Romano

The Final Hour - Sean and Emilia

Stand-alone (with a connection to *On the Edge*):

The Story of Us– Sports columnist Maggie Lane has 1 rule: never fall for a player. One mistaken kiss with Italian soccer star Marco Valenti changes everything...

Hidden Truths

The Safe Bet – Begin the series with the Man-of-Steel lookalike Michael Maddox.

Beyond the Chase - Fall for the sexy Irishman, Aiden O'Connor, in this romantic suspense.

The Hard Truth – Read Connor Matthews' story in this second-chance romantic suspense novel.

Surviving the Fall – Jake Summers loses the last 12 years of his life in this action-packed romantic thriller.

The Final Goodbye - Friends-to-lovers romantic mystery

FALCON FALLS & STEALTH OPS FAMILY TREE

Falcon Falls Team members:

Team leader: **Carter Dominick - Army Delta/CIA**

- Dog: Dallas

Team leader: **Gray Chandler - Army SF (Green Beret)**

Family:

- Admiral Chandler (father)
- Natasha (sister) / daughter: Emory
- Wyatt (brother-in-law)

Jesse - Army Ranger

Family / Friends -

- Wife: Ella Mae
- Sister: Rory
- Parents: Donna and Sean
- Brother-in-law: Chris
- Friends: AJ, Beckett, Caleb, Shep Hawkins

- Beckett's daughter: McKenna
- AJ & Ana's son: Marcus (Mac)

Griffin Andrews - Delta

- Married to Savanna

Jack London - Army SF (Green Beret)

- Divorced (Jill London)

Oliver Lucas - Army Airborne

- Tucker Lucas - brother (deceased)

Sydney Archer - Army

- Divorced/Has a son

* * *

Stealth Ops Team Members

Team leaders: Luke & Jessica Scott / Intelligence team member (joined in 2019): Harper Brooks

Bravo Team:

Bravo One - Luke

Bravo Two - Owen

Bravo Three - Asher

Bravo Four - Liam

Bravo Five - Knox (Charlie "Knox" Bennett)

Echo Team:

Echo One - Wyatt

Echo Two - A.J. (Alexander James)

Echo Three - Chris

Echo Four - Roman

Echo Five - Finn (Dalton "Finn" Finnegan)

WHERE ELSE CAN YOU FIND ME?

I love, love, love interacting with readers in my Facebook groups as well as on my Instagram page. Join me over there as we talk characters, books, and more! ;)

FB Reader Groups:

Brittney's Book Babes

Stealth Ops Spoiler Room

Facebook

Instagram

TikTok

www.brittneysahin.com

brittneysahin@emkocomedia.net

Pinterest Muse/Inspiration Board