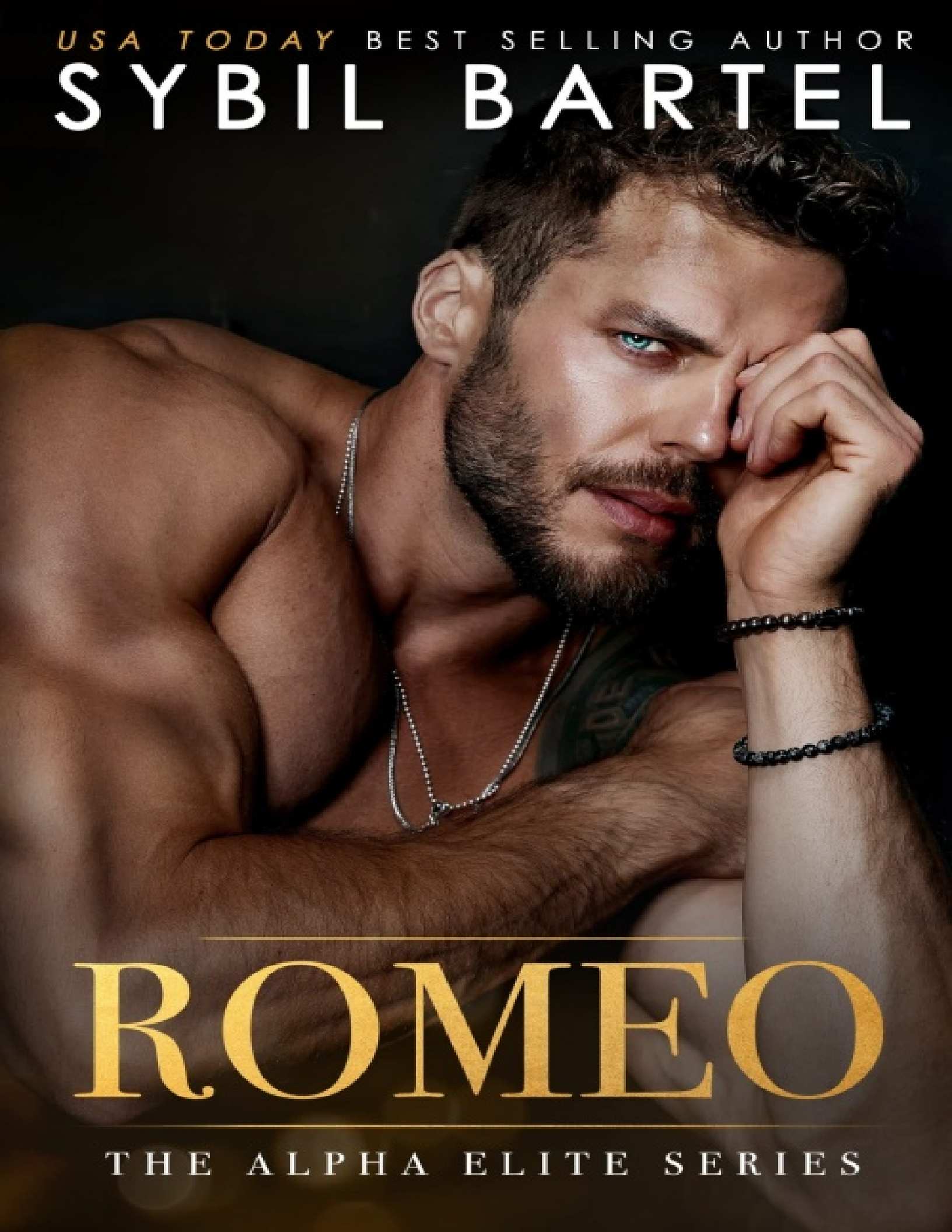


USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SYBIL BARTEL



ROMEO

THE ALPHA ELITE SERIES

ROMEO

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SYBIL BARTEL

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Warning: This book contains offensive language, alpha males and sexual situations. Mature audiences only. 18+

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ROMEO

Pilot.

Handler.

Marine.

My first memory was in the cockpit of a plane. My second was of a uniform. All I'd ever wanted was to be a pilot. The Marines gave me wings, and I gave them my all.

Half a dozen deployments, countless flight hours—I knew the controls in the cockpit better than I knew my own name. I never made mistakes. But war didn't care how good you were. One surface-to-air missile and my career was over.

Thinking I'd left dangerous missions and adrenaline rushes in my rearview, I was piloting a seaplane in the Florida Keys when a beat-to-hell, dark-eyed blonde washed ashore. In nothing but a bikini, she asked me for help. Help I couldn't give without an assist from Alpha Elite Security. Except AES wanted a favor in return.... One that would put me right back in the line of fire.

Code name: Romeo.

Mission: Rescue.

ROMEO is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by *USA Today* Bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Roark “Romeo” MacElheran and the dominant alpha heroes who work for AES!

For my only child, my beloved son, Oliver.
You were my greatest gift. The world was a better place with you in it.
Everything in my life was better because of you.
Thank you for teaching me unconditional love, perseverance, and
compassion.
You are and will always be my entire world.
I love you, Sweet Boy, and I miss you beyond measure.

[Oliver Shane Bartel 2004-2020](#)

For my readers, thank you for all of your love and support.
Gratefully yours, XOXO

PROLOGUE

Nine Months Ago

My fingers raw, my voice hoarse, I sang the last line of the song and abruptly stood from the piano bench. The applause suffocating, tears threatened. I barely bowed before making a beeline for the large open-air deck I'd been staring at all night.

Pushing out the glass door, hoping against hope that a single breath of fresh air would take even one second of this pain away, I was instead hit with the biting chill of a Manhattan autumn night, dozens of stories above the evening traffic.

Going straight for the railing, not caring who was watching, I gripped the edge and looked over.

The pull was overwhelming.

One misstep.

One move.

No pain.

Adrenaline surged unlike a high I'd ever experienced.

The deep voice came out of nowhere. "Sad song."

Despite the gooseflesh already covering my bare arms, a new kind of chill raced up my spine, but I refused to look in the man's direction.

“It’s a cover,” I argued pointlessly.

“I know what it is.” Suited arms ending at large hands holding a crystal tumbler leaned on the railing next to me. “It’s supposed to be a love song.” One hand lifted. Ice in the glass shifted. A hint of oak and peat breezed past. The arm returned to its perch on the railing. “But the way you sang it...” His voice trailed off.

I stupidly opened my mouth again. “Love songs are for idiots who believe in fairy tales, and I’m not a singer.”

He chuckled. “Can’t argue with your first assessment, but what do you call sitting at a piano, singing to a crowded room at a charity event?”

Money. I needed the gig, but I didn’t admit to that. “I’m a songwriter.”

His tone turned serious like he gave a shit about me. “Then why were you playing someone else’s songs?”

I stared down sixty-six stories because I wasn’t going to explain to a stranger or anyone else why the music had disappeared. “Please leave.”

“Will you jump if I do?”

My head whipped up, and I looked at him.

Gray eyes, black hair, no smile, custom suit. He looked right through me.

An entirely new and totally different flavor of adrenaline surged, mainlining through my veins. My whole body shivered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

As casually as if he knew me, he brushed my long, blonde hair away from my face and tucked it behind my ear. “I think you do.” His unwavering gaze studied me. “Bad breakup?”

The new kind of high his expensive cologne and dominating presence were feeding my broken soul stretched out across the entire balcony, and words I was not prepared to say came out. “A death.”

“Mm.” He nodded slowly as his gaze drifted to the cityscape. No condolences, he drank again.

I looked back down.

“Do you want to feel the grief or the guilt?”

Once again, my head lifted, and my eyes met his in a strange, intense kind of pull I wanted no part of but couldn’t bring myself to walk away from. “What are you talking about?” I couldn’t admit, even to a stranger, that there was no difference between my grief and my guilt. Intricately threaded together, they existed as one.

His gaze more focused, his scent stronger, the man moved closer without actually moving. “There’s a third option.”

“Not for me.” Distant, like the street so far below us, my lie carried away in the evening breeze.

“Maybe, maybe not, but I know jumping off this balcony is a waste of both a good voice and a beautiful woman.”

“I’m not beautiful.” I couldn’t be. Not now, not ever.

His laugh came again—deep, ironic, soulless. “But it would be a waste of a good voice?”

Navigating around the question, I foolishly gave even more information away. “I write the songs. I was never meant to sing them.” That wasn’t what I’d been about. But I hadn’t worked in months, rent was due, funeral

expenses were sitting on my credit card and I didn't have any cash to fuel the singular vice of coffee that was keeping me alive.

"You seemed to have done the opposite tonight." The dark-haired man turned to face me. "How about you try another opposite and polarizing direction?" This time he did move when he leaned down to my ear and dropped his voice. "Let me fuck you for fifteen minutes. Then you can tell me if you still feel the grief that's making you want to jump. Or..." His lips touched the edge of my ear a moment before his teeth bit. "Maybe you'll feel something different."

My head spinning, my body responding, I desperately reached for more. "Fifteen minutes?"

Standing to his full height, he took a sip of his scotch. "The time it takes for my driver to get us from here to my penthouse."

"How high up is your penthouse?"

"Thirty-two stories."

That was enough. "Do you have a balcony?"

"Better. I have a rooftop deck with a heated pool."

Thirty-two stories. That could work. "Private?"

"Of course."

Like an animal trapped in a pit, frantically clawing its way to hell, I pulled more dirt over my self-imposed grave. "How much time does it take to get down sixty-six stories?"

His predatory gaze locked on mine, he took another swallow of his drink. Then he raised one eyebrow. "I'm not entirely sure this conversation won't come back to bite me in the ass or that I should be entertaining this

line of questioning, but I admit, I'm both entranced and turned on by your complete lack of self-preservation. That said, just for clarification regarding your previous question, do you mean by elevator or jumping?"

A second surge of adrenaline, just like the first one he'd given me, flooded my system and I knew. I was going to jump.

"Elevator," I answered.

His shrug was casual and practiced. "Depends."

"On?"

Something close to cruelty flashed in his eyes before he masked it. "Some activities make time pass quicker." His voice lowered. "And some make time cease altogether."

"Like?"

"Surrender. Delayed gratification." He paused, his eyes focused on mine like he could read me. "Pain."

This was a test. I'd met and avoided dangerous men like him my whole life. But tonight, on this balcony, standing on a proverbial cliff, I didn't want to avoid the danger. "I want the activity that takes away grief."

The smile that touched his lips as his hand took mine was sinister. "Pain it is, then."

ONE

Roark

Muscles burning, drenched in sweat, I pushed my left leg harder as I headed toward the northernmost tip of the island. The last mile of my morning beach run always the hardest, I glanced out at the ocean as the first hint of sunrise crested the horizon.

Keeping pace next to me, Missy followed my glance and barked once.

“Not yet, girl. You can swim when we’re done, but we better pick it up. Sun’s almost up.” And it’d be hot as hell once it was. “Missy, sprint,” I commanded.

My golden retriever took off ahead of me.

Feeling every pace in my left thigh, I kicked it up and sprinted after her.

As we rounded the last bank, Missy veered off course, making a beeline for the coastal sea grape hammock.

Whistling the command for her to return, I slowed, but she didn’t come back.

Five years old, meticulously trained to obey, Missy never ignored commands.

Cursing under my breath, I headed after her. “Missy!”

A single bark came from deep in the sea grapes.

“Christ.” I scanned the beach in both directions, but it was empty. “If you’re going after a deer or turtle, you’re gonna piss me off.”

Missy barked again, but with urgency.

Hearing the whine in her tone, my instincts kicked in. “Missy?”

This time she didn’t bark. She cried. Twice.

Wishing like hell I had my SIG Sauer P320 9mm on me, I scanned the shoreline again then I looked out to sea. The sun still wasn’t up, but the first rays cast enough light across the water, and I saw what I hadn’t earlier. The silhouette of a sixty-five meter long yacht. Unmoving, about two hundred yards out. Huge. Distinctive.

Fuck.

Missy cried again. Loudly.

Knowing how sound carried across the water, I glanced one more time at the yacht and dropped my voice. “Quiet, girl. I’m coming.” I pushed the sea grapes aside.

Jesus Christ.

Sitting next to a woman who was lying on her side, Missy whispered.

Shaking or convulsing, in nothing but a torn yellow bikini, her hair plastered to her face, half covered in sand, I could still see the bruises and scratches all over her body.

The woman made a small mewling sound.

Missy nudged her shoulder with her muzzle.

The woman flinched, then shook harder.

“She won’t hurt you.” Crawling further into the growth, I spared Missy a quick glance. “Retreat.”

Never willfully disobeying me, my dog didn’t retreat. She lay down next to the woman and softly cried.

Nothing on me but my car keys, I hoped like fuck this woman wasn’t OD’ing. “What’s your name?” Taking in what I could see of her, I crawled closer.

“S-S-Sailor,” stuttering through chattering teeth with a raspy-as-hell voice, she fed me a fake name.

She was fucking lucky Missy had disobeyed me and was worried about her because I didn’t question her lie. Instead, I stripped off my sweat-soaked shirt. “What’d you take, woman?” Draping the shirt over her upper body, I hoped like hell I didn’t need Narcan.

“N-n-nothing,” she whispered, her voice even more hoarse. “Pl-please go.”

I scanned the length of her body again, but this time, I noticed her swollen, bruised ankle. “Not happening. You cold?” It was already in the low eighties. She wasn’t cold. She was in shock, dehydrated and who the fuck knew what else.

“Y-you sh-shouldn’t b-be here.”

“My dog’s here, I’m here.” Where I went, Missy went. And apparently, vice versa, not that it’d been tested before this morning. “Do you have any other injuries besides your ankle?” Glancing at what bruising I could see on her ribs, it was clear someone had worked her over. I only hoped like hell it wasn’t who I suspected.

Missy whined.

“Quiet,” I commanded, putting a hand on Missy when what I needed to do was roll this woman to her back and see what the fuck I was dealing with.

“S-sorry,” the woman barely whispered.

“Not you. Missy.”

“Th-that’s her name?” With a shaking hand, the woman pulled my shirt closer to herself.

“Yes. How long you been out here?” This wasn’t a popular section of beach, but it was Key West. Nowhere on the island was remote. She hadn’t been out here long, otherwise someone would’ve found her, or heat stroke would’ve gotten her.

“Sh-she’s a p-p-pretty dog,” she stuttered in that same raspy voice, evading my question.

Whining once, Missy licked the woman’s hand.

For a single beat, I fucking stared.

Missy didn’t lick women’s hands. She’d been trained to deal with humans in stressful situations, and God knew, I’d put her through enough shit to be a fucking expert, but I’d never seen her deliberately do that with anyone else unless I gave her a command to comfort. Even then, she’d nudge the person, not fucking lick them.

“She likes you,” I grudgingly admitted. “But she’s not trained in first aid. Let’s get you out of here and to the hospital. You can have that ankle looked at.”

Two things happened at once. One I never thought I’d see.

The woman vehemently said no, and Missy moved.

Positioning herself in front of the woman, my dog bared her teeth at me.

TWO

Sailor

The golden dog moved quick as lightning, putting herself between me and her huge, shirtless, muscled owner who had a tattoo covering his entire left shoulder.

Cold, shaking, my ankle throbbing unbearably with every beat of my heart, I almost wanted to cry in relief. No one had been on my side in so long, I'd forgotten what it felt like, but I didn't have time to capture the sentiment, let alone hold on to it.

They were going to find me the second the sun came up, and this giant beast of a man was only making it worse.

"N-no hospital," I forced out past my stupid chattering teeth. "*Leave.*" I couldn't trust him. I couldn't trust anyone.

"Woman—"

His dog growled.

The man's expression turned murderous, and he barked out a dominant, threatening command. "*Missy, retreat.*"

His order scaring even me, the poor dog slowly lay down, dropping her head to her front paws, but she didn't move away from me.

Looking angry as hell, the man eyed the dog.

As if they had a silent line of communication, Missy whined, but her tail thumped against the sand.

My hands shaking uncontrollably, I tried to pull his damp T-shirt closer, but my fingers slipped, and the shirt slid to the sand.

“Okay, woman, that’s it.” Snatching the T-shirt and shaking it out, he aimed for me. “Arms, neck, head—any injuries there?”

It wasn’t simply a question, it was a demand. The same kind of forceful demand he’d issued to his dog that said not answering wasn’t an option.

“No.” I barely got the single word out before he was shoving the shirt over my head.

Salt, heat and musk hit me full force, and suddenly, I was there. That place. My eyes closed, my mind blank, my thoughts floating, the heady escape between free and numb I couldn’t achieve on my own. A reprieve I’d only ever gotten from one other source, but this distraction, it was different. *So very different*. No sex, no pain, no leaving my body so my mind could soar free. This was earthy and dark and masculine, and one single inhale made me want to taste, touch and feel his scent until it drowned out every other breath. I wanted to—

“*Woman.*”

My eyes popped open as he barked at me the same way he’d barked at his dog, and the grief, the pain, my bruised body, my circumstances—they all came rushing back. But so did something else—the reality of this giant man hovering over me. Except now, there was the beginning of sunlight coming through the dense leaves, and I could truly see him.

Or rather his chest.

And his huge biceps.

And every defined muscle that looked too big to fit in the T-shirt he was currently threading my arms through like I was a rag doll. The movement making my ribs hurt, I sucked in a sharp breath, and a small cry escaped.

The dog sat up and nudged him then me.

For a brief moment, his expression tightened, and he nodded, but I wasn't sure if he was acknowledging Missy or me. Then his voice came out, but it wasn't dominant like when he was asking me questions or commanding like when he was ordering the dog. It was gruff. "I see those ribs."

Part of last night flashed through my mind.

The sea breeze lifted my hair and brushed it off my shoulders. The touch softer than any I could remember over the past nine months, I gripped the cool metal railing and closed my eyes.

Before I could draw my next breath, a hand fisted in my hair and yanked my head back. "You still want to jump?"

It wasn't a question. It was a threat.

Spidery threads of awareness I didn't want any more crawled across my skin, and I lied. "No."

Hot breath touched my ear. "You're lying." The fisted hand tightened. "What happens when you lie to me?"

Everything. Nothing. I didn't know anymore.

Pulling me back from the railing by my hair, then slamming me against it so hard pain shattered my breath and radiated from my ribs, he growled in my ear. "I asked you a question, song bitch."

The stars closed in on me, and I made a decision. "Yes."

Yanking me back before throwing me against the railing again, he jerked my bikini bottom to the side. "Too fucking bad. I own you, and I'm not done with you." Hard length shoved roughly into me from behind. "You'll fucking jump when I say jump."

"You gonna manage to get out from under here, or do you need an assist?"

I blinked away last night's memory.

Finished with dressing me in his shirt, the man with the deep voice pushed my hair off my face as if he were petting his dog, and a ray of sunlight glinted. Then, in a spectacular show of force, it fell across the man's face and lit up his eyes.

Blue, striking, like the ocean at his back, they stole my breath. But then suddenly, same as my midnight swim, it felt like I was drowning. Except this time, I wasn't holding my breath for as long as I could. I wasn't kicking my legs as hard as humanly possible, or pumping my arms as I ignored sore ribs and searing pain in my ankle while bullets dove through the water all around me.

This time, I was drowning in regret.

"You can't help me." Turning my head, closing my eyes, I tried to inhale a breath shallow enough for air but not deep enough to feel the bruises on my ribs. "You have to leave."

Grasping my chin, he turned me back to face him. "Not happening."

His firm hold sending a telltale shiver down my spine as his words made tears well, I tried not to cry. Last night, I'd promised myself I was done with that. But now, I was fighting pain and the gnawing desperation

this stranger's single touch made me feel, and it was everything I could do not to lose it.

Pulling out of his grasp, I looked away. "Please, you have to go." They would shoot him if they saw him, right after they shot me. Or worse, they'd shoot him and take me back. The thought alone made me want to reach for this man even more and beg for his help, but I couldn't. I already had the blood of that crew member on my hands. I wasn't going to be responsible for one more person's death.

On his knees to fit under the low-hanging trees, the giant man leaned back on his heels as he checked his watch before his hands went to his hips. "The truth?"

Pain eating away at my resolve, I nervously glanced at the leaf canopy above us as more early morning sunlight started to filter down. "It doesn't matter." A dose of reality from a striking man kneeling in front of me wouldn't change the fact that I was royally screwed. With or without his help, my days were numbered. I didn't even know why I was fighting it at this point, but I was, so I needed to get deeper into what little cover I had before the sunlight grew any brighter.

Ignoring me, he answered his own question. "If I thought my dog would follow me out of here with voice commands, and if I hadn't seen the yacht two hundred yards out, I would leave you here. I'd call it in when I got back to my SUV, give the EMTs your coordinates, and make it their problem."

Forgetting about my bruises, I sucked in a sharp breath as my fear compounded. "You can't do that." Oh God. The boat was that close to shore?

Shaking his head in either disgust or resignation, he scanned our makeshift hiding place and glanced over his shoulder toward the ocean before looking back at me. “You limping out, or am I carrying you? Because I have a charter flight in an hour, and I need to do prechecks.”

For the first time in forever, I felt a seed of hope. “You have a plane?”
He was a pilot?

THREE

Roark

No hospital, no EMTs. Fucking figured.

Fighting for patience since I'd crawled under this insect-infested canopy of sea grapes, I refrained from swearing. "You limping out, or am I carrying you? Because I have a charter flight in an hour, and I need to do prechecks." I didn't. This was one of my rare days off, and I had shit to do at the house. The remodel wasn't going to finish itself, and the last thing I wanted to deal with was a woman who was either using or running or both.

Her expression did a one-eighty. "You have a plane?"

There was a lot of shit I didn't put up with. Surviving six deployments did that to you. High on my list were women who wanted a piece of you because of the uniform or the fact that I had wings.

Fucking hating that she was injured, pretty and screwing with my morning schedule, I watched her dark doe eyes for tells. "That depends."

"On?"

I should've counted the fact that she was no longer shivering as a win, but I didn't. Suspicious of the whole damn situation, I tested her. "What do you need a plane for?" I fucking knew why. Not that I was holding my breath for her to tell me the truth. I knew what went down on that yacht, and I was betting she'd either jumped ship, literally, or was tossed. Either

way, getting involved was a surefire way to shorten my lifespan, not to mention break the one damn promise I'd made to myself on my last fateful day of active duty.

She looked away. "To get out of Florida."

I didn't give her any points for a half truth before I gave her one of my own. "Then you're out of luck. I fly sightseeing charters over the Keys and Tortugas." Flights guaranteed not to get me shot at, which was the promise I'd made to myself. No more fucking firefights. "Let's go." I held a hand out, but we both knew she couldn't walk.

Not taking the bait or my hand, she turned her entire body away from me, but not before I saw the grimace on her face as she moved. "I'm good. You can leave."

Christ. "Woman, if you were good, my dog wouldn't be sitting here, refusing to leave your side."

Without looking, as if she had zero self-preservation, she reached back and casually pet Missy like she wasn't a trained canine capable of sinking her teeth into her jugular with a single voice command. "She's a good girl."

Missy licked her hand.

Fucking speechless, I stared.

Missy hated women. All women. She would sit by them at my command. She would nudge if she sensed duress. She'd even sit at a woman's feet if she felt compelled. But she didn't fucking lick women. Ever.

She was exactly as she should be—a jealous bitch who knew who the fuck her master was. Until now.

Incredulous, I looked at my dog. “You gonna pull her out, too?”

The traitorous bitch wagged her tail.

“Remember who feeds who,” I warned as I reached for the blonde.

The woman sucked in a sharp breath as I slid my arms under her. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Not leaving you here.” Picking her up, holding her against my chest, I pushed with my legs to a crouch. Despite her weighing next to nothing, I felt every pound in my left leg. “Duck your head, and hold your injured leg as still as possible.”

“No,” she rasped, grasping at my neck and digging her fingers in as her whole body shook. “Y-you can’t. The sun’s up.” She frantically looked toward the water. “They’ll see me.”

“Someone from the Contender? Or Kentworth himself?”

Her dark doe eyes landed on me, and she fucking froze with fear.

“Knowing who owns the yacht doesn’t make me associated with that asshole.” I’d heard stories, all of which I’d hoped weren’t true, but her reaction to his name and the shit condition she was in told me more than I wanted to know.

No stutter, no shivering, not even a blink, she stared at me.

Kentworth wasn’t known for mercy, not in the circles he traveled in. “Did you jump, or were you thrown overboard?”

Her throat moved with a swallow, then her voice came out in a haunted whisper. “I jumped.”

“They know you’re missing?”

She barely nodded. “A searchlight was crisscrossing the water all night.”

Fuck. Glancing through the sea grapes at the anchored yacht, I knew full well the second I stepped out from under the cover of the hammock, we’d be in their sights.

Holding the woman, making a choice I didn’t want to, I tipped my chin at my dog. “Missy, patrol.”

The traitorous bitch nudged the woman’s foot and whined.

I put more authority into my tone. “Patrol. *Now.*”

Reluctant, my girl whined once more, but then she ducked under the bushes and hit the beach.

“What is she doing?” the woman’s raspy voice whispered next to my ear.

“Hopefully not being a target.” I didn’t relish sending Missy out as bait, but I was hoping none of Kentworth’s guards were skilled with a sniper rifle. “What kind of firepower is on the Contender?”

She practically shrank in my arms as Missy ran north up the beach. “I don’t know.”

Christ. “Handguns, rifles, automatics?” Missy turned at the point and started heading back. “How many guards on board?”

She shivered. “I-I’m not sure. Some wear guns in holsters, some carry them.” Her rasp got quieter. “You sent her out there to see if they would shoot at her?”

Yeah, I did, and it was fucking killing me. “Are the guards prone to shooting?”

Watching Missy's retreat, she didn't answer my question. "Why would you do that?"

"Would you prefer they shot at you?" My dog was quick, and she knew what to do if she heard gunfire.

The woman looked up at me. "But she's just an innocent animal."

Innocent was a far cry from what my girl was capable of. "She can handle herself." As Missy approached our position, I quietly whistled for her to hurry up.

Five yards out, Missy made a final sprint toward the sea grape hammock, and a distinctive sound carried across the water.

A split second later, a bullet hit the sand two feet from her.

"*Goddamn it.*" I spun as I issued Missy a command. "Divert!"

Hitting the ground, I covered the woman with my body. She gasped, and Missy flew into the hammock ten yards from our position. Four more shots rang out in the early morning dawn, then shit went eerily quiet.

I didn't fucking move.

I listened.

Wind, surf, swells hitting the side of the yacht, the woman's rapid heartbeat, mine, Missy's panting.

The woman started to speak, but I quickly put my hand over her mouth. Holding my weight on my elbows so I didn't fucking crush her, I put a finger to my lips. No time to deal with her terrified expression, I glanced toward Missy's position.

Laying low like I'd taught her, she waited and watched me for her next command.

The foliage thick on this part of the island, the canopy just high enough for her to clear it, I gave her the hand signal to crawl.

Quick but careful, Missy maneuvered under the sea grapes toward us.

Rolling off the woman, making sure not to rustle any of the leaves, I whispered to Missy. “Guard.”

As I moved away from the woman, Missy backfilled my position.

“*Wait*,” the woman begged in a panicked whisper. “Where are you going?”

“No time to wait, woman. We’re chasing dawn, and they’re plucking shots. They know you’re here.” We were out of options. Without water in her already compromised state, she wouldn’t survive the heat of the day. “I’m going to my truck to grab supplies.” Mainly, my fucking gun. “Stay hidden and wait. Missy will protect you. When I get back, I’ll patch you up, then get you out of here.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

I didn’t throw it in her face that before the shots, she couldn’t wait to get rid of me. “Wait an hour past nightfall, then crawl out. Get to the main road, and follow it north until you find help.”

“And Missy?”

“Keep her with you. She’s trained. Guard, attack, patrol, heel—say her name then give the command. She’ll listen.” She’d also find her own way home.

The woman didn’t ask any more questions. Holding her ribs and rolling to her side, she put her arm around Missy and laid her head in the sand.

Missy licked her again.

For a split second, irrational anger flared. I didn't know if I was fucking irate that my dog was choosing this woman, of all people, to take a liking to or if I was more pissed that I was noticing the color of her eyes and wondering what she'd look like when she wasn't beat to hell.

Shaking the thought away, I turned to leave.

Her raspy, hoarse whisper hit my back and fucked with my head. "I don't know your name."

I glanced over my shoulder. "Roark."

"How will I find you?"

"You won't." I'd find her. If I made it out alive.

FOUR

Sailor

He said his name like he said everything else—short and firm and full of lethal dominance. “Roark.”

I didn’t have time to soak in the unusual name or consider where it might have come from. Instead, I asked the one question I didn’t want an answer to. “How will I find you?” Thirstier than I’d ever been, my ankle throbbing harder with each passing heartbeat, surviving the day out here seemed impossible. If I had to crawl my way out hours from now, and if I somehow managed to go looking for him, which would be a big *if*, I couldn’t imagine where I would find a man like him.

A man who hadn’t asked any prying questions.

He didn’t even question why I was on the boat in the first place.

He’d just blindly jumped in to save me and literally used his body as a shield when the bullets started flying.

I’d never met a man like him.

And while I didn’t know anything about him except his name and that he had a highly trained dog, I did know this. He was as lethal as the guards on the yacht.

Quiet in tone, but no less deadly, he issued two words as his piercing blue eyes landed on me. “You won’t.”

Then he was gone.

Silently escaping the makeshift hideaway I'd found after crawling up the beach and brushing away my tracks in the sand, the man who looked like a guard himself disappeared into the sunlight.

Missy nudged my hand.

"I know, sweet girl," I whispered, petting her soft fur. "Doesn't feel the same without him. I can only imagine how you feel." I scratched behind her ear. "Thank you for staying."

Her tail thumped like she knew what I was saying, then she licked my hand.

In another life, I would've smiled. "I like you, too."

Gentle, as if being careful of my bruises, she leaned into me and rested her head on my thigh, but she trained her gaze toward where her owner had gone.

"He'll come back," I reassured. "I have a feeling he's not going to leave you for long." The way he was with her, I suspected she went everywhere with him.

Missy thumped her tail but didn't lift her head.

Shifting in the sand as gingerly as possible, I was trying to ease some of the pressure off my ribs when shots rang out, echoing across the water.

Missy flew into a protective stance, putting herself between me and where the sound of the gunfire had come from.

Adrenaline surged and I was on my knees. Grabbing her collar, I held her back and gave her a command I assumed she knew. "Missy, stay."

More gunfire, in quick succession, popped across the beach, and the golden retriever strained against my hold. Whining, she quickly looked back at me like she was asking for permission to run after her owner.

Panicked, torn, not knowing what to do, I was only certain about one thing. If she yanked against my hold, I wouldn't be able to hang on to her.

More shots sounded, but this time, they were closer.

Flinching, swallowing down fear, I released her and whisper-yelled, "Go, Missy. Guard!"

She didn't hesitate.

With more agility than any dog I'd ever seen, she maneuvered out of the thick tropical brush and went flying down the beach.

Before I could take a terrified breath, gunfire erupted all around me.

Leaves and bark raining down, an involuntary cry escaped, and I didn't think.

Frantic, blindly half-crawling, half-limping, pain shooting up my leg, I pushed farther into the dense underbrush.

I didn't care about my ribs or my leg or my cracked lips and parched throat. Shots were sailing past me, and I was pushing against sharp branches, crawling for my life.

I would not die like this.

I would not die like this.

Tears I didn't know I had left smeared my cheeks as sharp branches scratched at my skin.

My breath coming shorter, my vision started to tunnel, and a ringing filled my head.

Then I saw it.

Light.

A hole in the dense, punishing underbrush.

Escape.

Desperate, panicked, I reached.

Crawling over a low branch and around roots coming out of the sand, my injured leg got caught, and I fell on my stomach. Pain shot through my middle, black spots swam into view and the ringing in my ears got louder. But then my brother's innocent voice breached my tropical hell.

Come on, Sailor. Keep going!

My arms shaking, I pushed up. "Shane?"

You're so close!

Dragging my leg over the branch, I openly wept. "*Shane.*"

Almost there, Sailor. Push through!

"I'm coming, Shane." Pain seared every muscle, and I faltered.

Push through, PUSH THROUGH.

My head spinning, I did what my brother said.

I pushed through.

Hot sunlight covered my upper body, and for one labored breath, I felt it. "I'm free, Shane."

His sweet voice squeezed my heart in memories. *Not yet, Sailor.*

I fell face-first into the sand, a boat engine whined, a dog barked and shouting erupted.

Huge hands wrapped around my waist, and I was pulled upright.

I looked up into ocean-blue eyes on a stern face.

“I did it. I pushed through.” My vision blurred.

Then everything went mercifully black.

FIVE

Roark

Double-timing it through the mangroves, I ignored the wild shots sailing past my head until a cluster of firing echoed across the island from where I'd left the woman.

Running back the way I'd come, I cleared the sea grapes to see Missy sprinting up the narrow beach. With half a dozen armed guards on board, the Contender's ferry speedboat gunned it toward our position as movement downwind caught my attention.

Fucking Christ.

I sprinted out of the hammock as the woman hit the sand face-first.

The Contender's ferry speedboat beached, Kentworth's guards started shouting, and Missy went full throttle toward them.

I reached the woman as Missy attacked the first asshole jumping off the boat.

The guards shouting, Missy barking, shots fired.

No time to be careful, I grabbed the woman around the waist, pulled her legs out of the mangroves, and yanked her upright. For half a second, she looked at me with sheer determination. "I did it. I pushed through." Then her eyes rolled back, her head slumped and she went limp.

Picking her up, I fucking ran.

Whistling for Missy, hitting a footpath through the mangroves and sea grapes, I didn't aim for stealth or covering my tracks. Holding the woman with one arm and palming my keys with the other, I cleared the end of the path as it fed out to the public parking lot.

Scanning, I sprinted toward the Defender.

Ignoring my left leg, opening the rear, unceremoniously dumping her in the back, I went for the driver's door.

Missy burst out of the path and ran full tilt at the SUV.

Making zero attempt to conceal their pursuit, two of the guards fired wild shots as they chased Missy.

Jamming the key in the ignition, I turned the old engine over and threw it in drive. Leaving my door open, I stepped on the gas and cranked the wheel. The Defender turned on a dime, I slammed on the brakes and Missy jumped onto my lap.

Hitting the gas, yanking my door shut, I floored it out of the parking lot as shots plinked against the back of the Defender.

Cursing the motherfuckers firing as Missy settled into the front passenger seat, I reached out to her. "You hit, girl?"

She licked my hand as I ran it over her coat and glanced in the rearview mirror.

Not feeling any wet fur, I took the wheel with both hands as I turned onto the Overseas Highway. The shooters didn't have a vehicle, but I didn't think for a second that they wouldn't follow us.

They would.

I'd taken one of Kentworth's girls, and they'd seen my red '97 Land Rover Defender 90, which was the only one like it on the island. If they asked any of the locals, they'd know in a heartbeat who I was and where to find me.

I weighed my options.

The woman was right, she did need a ride out of the Keys. Taking my next left, I turned toward the airport, then glanced back at her.

Still passed out. *Fuck*. "Woman, you hear me?"

Missy looked in the back and whined.

"You were supposed to stay with her, girl, not come after me." I raised my voice. "*Woman.*"

Still no response.

Like a fucking fool, I didn't drive straight to the hospital and dump her. I turned into the airport and headed toward my seaplane. The woman needed medical attention, but patching her up wouldn't make a damn bit of difference if Kentworth's men got their hands on her again.

Driving across the apron toward my plane, I saw the two black SUVs before they saw me.

"Goddamn it." Hitting the brakes, I threw the Defender in reverse.

Staring toward the plane, Missy whined.

"I know, girl, but we're not flying the Cessna today." Spinning the SUV around, I threw it back in drive and gunned it out of the airport. I wasn't a hundred percent sure the black SUVs were waiting for us until I spied one turn around in my rearview mirror.

Making a sharp left onto a side road, thankful there was no one out this early, I drove over a center divide and headed into Key West proper.

Rolling when I took the turn, the woman groaned from the back.

Missy looked at me.

I tipped my chin. "Go."

Missy jumped into the back as I saw the SUV in my rearview come barreling out of the airport.

Three successive turns and I was deep into a residential neighborhood, weaving a random path, but I could only do this for so long. The island was less than eight square miles with only one road in and out. I didn't have a garage at my place to conceal the Defender, and if they'd already traced the tail number of my plane, they'd find my house.

That left air or water to get her off this island, but my plane was compromised, and I didn't have a boat. Fuck. *Fuck.*

I took two more quick turns, and Missy whined from the back.

I glanced at her.

Sitting on the seat as the woman lay on the floor, Missy nudged her shoulder, but she didn't move.

Christ. A fucking morning run. That's all I signed up for when I'd rolled myself out of bed at oh five hundred. "It's going to have to wait, girl." I took another corner and wound my way down a narrow alley, then came out the other end and headed west across town.

After a few more turns, when I was confident I'd lost them, I pulled into the Old Town parking garage to buy myself a few minutes. Finding a spot on the upper level with a view of the street, I grabbed my cell and dialed.

Neil Christensen answered on the first ring. “Ja.”

Danish, former Special Forces, we’d met in Afghanistan. He was now a real estate developer building high rises in Miami, but he had a place in Key Largo, and more importantly, he usually had his boat docked there.

“Hey, need a favor. Is your Cobalt in Largo?”

“No, Miami. What is going on?”

Fuck. “Ran into a problem this morning.” I scanned the street for the black SUV.

“What kind of problem?”

I glanced in the back. “An injured blonde one.”

Neil was quiet a beat.

The black SUV turned the corner and slowly came down the street. “I gotta go.” I started to hang up as the second black SUV came around the corner and caught up to the first SUV’s six.

“I can have the Cobalt in Largo in three hours,” Neil clipped.

It would’ve taken me two hours to drive up there, but now I wasn’t chancing it. “Thanks, but my options just downsized.”

“Explain,” Neil demanded.

“If I had time, I would.”

“You need Luna.”

André Luna owned a personal security firm based out of Miami. All his guys were former Marines who knew their shit, but Luna was localized. “Not unless he’s gotten a bird or wings since I last spoke to him.” Every time Luna needed air support, he called me.

“Trefor, then,” Neil stated.

“Already on my radar.” Except that wasn’t a call I wanted to make. Not unless I had to. Adam “Alpha” Trefor owned Alpha Elite Security, and he owed me a favor, but cashing it in would come with strings.

“I will make the call. What is your location?”

“Parking garage, Old Town.” One of the SUVs pulled into the garage. “But it’s too late. Incoming tangos. I gotta go.” Hanging up, I killed the engine, shoved my SIG Sauer 9mm into the back waistband of my sweats and jumped out.

Rushing to the rear, I opened the door, grabbed the cover I had for the Defender and gave Missy the hand signals for *silent* and *stay*. Shutting the door, I threw the cover over and prayed like fuck the woman didn’t come to yet.

I was lowering to a crouch behind a sedan parked across from my Defender when one of the black SUVs hit the second level and came down the aisle.

Sighting, I aimed.

Then I waited.

SIX

Sailor

Leg throbbing.

Ankle on fire.

Sweat dripped.

My thoughts fractured as I tried to open my heavy eyelids.

Hot breath panting.

Wet warmth.

Whine.

Oh God.

The beach, the dog, the man—I tried to speak past my parched throat.
“Missy?”

The voice that rasped through an eerily muted, confined space didn’t sound like my own.

More wet warmth, but this time it was on my hand.

I reached up as I forced my eyes open.

My fingers landed on soft fur before my eyes could adjust to the muggy darkness.

I pet the dog as she sat on a seat looking down at me. “Where are we?” The last thing I remembered was pushing through the dense brush and rooted trees on the edge of the beach and.... oh my God, the boat engine I’d heard.

“No, no, no.” I grabbed the seat and tried to pull myself up. Searing pain shot through my ankle and ripped up my leg. My head swam, and I tried to suck in a breath, but suddenly, it felt like I was suffocating on the dense air as my ribs ached in protest.

Shoving my dirty, sandy hair from my face, I frantically looked around.

“Missy, where is—” I stopped midsentence. Driver seat, steering wheel, oh thank God. “Whose car are we in?” Why were all the windows dark?

Nudging my hand and putting her paw on my arm, she then lay down on the bench seat with her head on her paws.

It was almost as if she were telling me to get down and stay quiet.

Suddenly more afraid, I stopped trying to pull myself up. Dropping my voice to a whisper, I asked a dog a question like an insane person. “What’s happening?”

Big brown eyes stared back at me, but she didn’t whine or sit up.

“Okay.” I nodded as I heard a car engine and tires making a rubber-on-polished-concrete sound.

Closing my eyes, trying not to panic, I took another breath, but this time, it was measured and slow so I didn’t hurt my ribs any more than I had to.

Before I finished the inhale, I smelled him. The ocean-eyed, dominant stranger who hadn’t asked me any real questions. His scent—beach, metal,

musk, fresh laundry. This was his car.

Before I could think what to do, the tire-screeching sound came closer and stopped. Then muffled voices were arguing. Men's voices. Muted, their conversation indistinct, it didn't matter. The cadence, the rhythm, the tone, I knew those voices.

I'd heard them for the last nine months.

I didn't hesitate.

Grabbing Missy, I pulled her down on the floor and covered her body with mine as two shots rang out.

SEVEN

Roark

With the front windows down, the SUV stopped behind my Defender and the passenger door opened.

“Check under that cover,” the driver ordered as I sighted on him.

Stupidly not scanning his surroundings, the guard in the front passenger seat checked his magazine and slammed it back home before getting out. “What the hell am I looking for? No one’s going to hide under a car cover in this heat. You’d be cooked in under five minutes.” His arm loose, his weapon pointed down, he walked toward the driver’s side of the Defender. “You honestly think the stupid bitch jumped ship just to hole up in a fucking parked car? Shit. I know she’s been off since day one. I told Boss she had a fucking screw loose, but did he listen? No. Now look where the hell we are. Miss Loose-Screw takes a nosedive off a billion-dollar yacht, and I’m what? Looking under fucking tarps in a rank garage in this swamp-ass hellhole for her crazy ass? I don’t care how hot she is, this is bullshit.”

“Shut the fuck up and look. It’s the only covered car in this garage. Where the hell else do you think she’d be?”

“With that pilot dude who took her,” the guard argued.

“His plane’s grounded, you fucking idiot. Just check under the goddamn cover,” the driver ordered impatiently. “Boss said to find her, so we’ll

fucking find her.”

“Fine, but if there’s no one under here, next time, it’s your ass who’s getting out to check.” The guard grasped the front of the cover.

I pulled the trigger.

The driver’s head snapped right, the guard spun, and I fired a second shot through the open front windows of the SUV.

Before the guard drew his weapon, the bullet pierced his skull between the eyes.

His body hit the ground, and I was moving.

Quickly checking the rear of the SUV to make sure there were no other guards, I rounded the side of the Defender and lifted the cover only on the driver’s side before opening the front door.

Panicked, the woman gasped. “Are you okay?”

For a split second, I fucking paused.

My life was compartmentalized. Missy, work, the Cessna, the house. I didn’t walk away from the Marines unscathed. No one who served in combat did. I wasn’t fucking special. But those first dark months post medical retirement shaped my current life.

I didn’t get attached.

I didn’t fuck around.

I worked and took care of Missy.

A woman asking me if I was okay wouldn’t have thrown the man I used to be. It shouldn’t have taken me off guard now. But a beaten, half-drowned, underfed hot mess of a woman with armed men after her was asking me if *I* was okay?

Not fucking with the irony of that, I barked an order at my bitch. “Missy, come.” Then I threw the woman a warning glance. “You stay.”

Doe-eyed, the woman gave me a silent nod.

Leaving my gun in the Defender, I grabbed an extra T-shirt and a pair of gloves I kept for emergencies.

Missy jumped out, and I gave her another command. “Missy, patrol. Perimeter.”

Barely giving the body next to me a sniff, she took off, trotting down the length of one side of parked cars as I pulled on the gloves.

Knowing Missy would bark in warning if someone was approaching, I still moved as quickly as possible.

First reclining the driver seat, then opening the rear driver’s side door, I yanked the dead driver into the back seat. Sliding behind the wheel, I raised the front windows, pulled the SUV into the parking spot next to the Defender and cut the engine. Opening the rear, I picked up the dead guard lying on the ground and heaved him into the back. Nothing I could do about the bloodstain on the concrete, I slammed the liftgate, rounded the side and grabbed the two phones sitting on the center console. Removing the SIM cards and crushing them, I tossed the debris into the back of the vehicle. Carefully wiping down everywhere I’d touched with my T-shirt before leaving the key inside, I hit the lock button and slammed the door shut.

Getting behind the wheel of the Defender, tossing the T-shirt behind my seat, I ignored the shell-shocked woman in the back who was staring at me and cranked the engine.

Her raspy voice came at me with a frightened stutter. “Y-you can’t drive with the cover on.”

Sparing her a glance as I braced a hand on the passenger seat and looked out the rear window, I backed out of the space. “I’m not. We’re moving parking spots.”

“W-why?”

No time to assess whether she was in shock or scared, I cut to the chase. “You cold again?”

She cleared her throat. “No.”

Scared. “Good. Hang on.” I spun the Defender, drove down the aisle and pulled into a parking spot at the end. By the time I threw it into park, cut the engine and opened my door, Missy was running toward me, barking once in warning.

Grabbing my gun, I glanced at the woman. “Wait, and don’t make a sound. Someone’s coming. I’ll let you know when we’re clear.” Getting out, I held the door open. “Missy, car.” She jumped in, and I gave her the hand signal for *silent* before quietly closing the door and quickly pulling the cover back down.

Gun in hand, squatting behind the SUV, I watched a couple come out of the stairwell.

Laughing, not paying attention to the covered Defender or the black SUV, they made their way to a vehicle parked halfway down the aisle. A minute later, they were gone.

Lifting the cover, I opened the rear door of the Defender.

Two pairs of eyes met mine. One terrified, one excited.

Missy thumped her tail, then licked the woman.

The woman stared at the gun in my hand.

I leveled with her. “Two of the guards are down, but there was another vehicle. I doubt we have more than a few minutes before the second SUV finds us. Less, if anyone heard the shots. Kentworth had people watching my plane, and my Defender is the only one like it on the island. That means your options for getting out of here are limited.”

“Did you kill the guards?” she asked in a throaty rasp that I was beginning to think was her natural voice.

Reaching around her, I stowed my gun in my backpack and grabbed the water bottle I’d brought for after my run and handed it to her. “Yes.”

Taking the water with trembling hands, she only nodded before drinking half the bottle. Then the woman fucking threw me for the second time.

Sitting on her ass on the floor of my Defender in nothing but my T-shirt and a wrecked bikini, she gently placed her hand under Missy’s jaw like she was a fucking dog whisperer and held the water above my bitch’s muzzle.

“Drink, sweet girl.” The woman tipped the bottle.

Like I’d trained her to do, Missy drank.

After giving my dog half of the water that was left, the woman took another swallow for herself. Then her eyes closed, and she went still for a beat. Taking a shallow breath and opening her eyes, she gave me an expression steeped in resignation as she offered the water bottle back.

Her tone in check, she asked the right question. “What are my options?”

Hands on my hips, I fucking stood there.

“I can’t go to the police,” she added when I didn’t say shit.

Mentally shaking the bullshit in my head away, keeping my eyes on her, I took the water bottle. “Can’t or won’t?”

“Won’t.” Her voice still a sexy, throaty, low rasp, she calmly spoke like this entire situation wasn’t FUBAR. “I know what will happen if I do.”

“Then you also know what won’t happen.” The police wouldn’t do shit to Kentworth or any of his men. Finishing the water, I tossed the bottle back in the Defender. “Second option is the hospital.”

“No.” Her arm snaked around Missy. “Third option?”

“You need medical attention.” Pointing out the obvious, I wondered what happened to the panicked woman in the sea grape hammock who told me to leave her the fuck there.

She grimaced as she adjusted her leg. “The hospital will be the first place they look for me.”

I didn’t disagree. Kentworth probably already had eyes on the place. Except that wasn’t the fucking point. I could evade Kentworth’s shit-for-training guards. I could get her off this island. I could make sure she got the medical attention she needed. All of it was possible.

The question was why the fuck was I still involved?

I could’ve walked the hell away from this woman back on the beach and called it in. I also could’ve handed this over to the Feds. Hell, I could’ve called André Luna and asked him to take care of it. And I damn well knew I could’ve made Missy leave with me when we were back on the beach. I hadn’t leashed her in years, but I wasn’t above reminding her who her master was.

Except I hadn’t done any of that.

I was fucking standing here, two murders in, staring at doe eyes. Any deeper in this woman’s shit, and I wouldn’t have to fuck her because I’d already be bottoming out.

Fuck.

I threw down a bullshit excuse. “I’m not a medic.” I knew basic combat triage. I could brace her leg, wrap her ribs, shove Advil down her throat and watch her water intake so she didn’t puke.

Staring at me, she slowly nodded. “Military.”

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t confirm it. “Clock’s ticking.”

She dropped her gaze and her tone lost the bravado she’d had a moment ago. “You didn’t ask why.”

“Why what?” I knew what.

Her hand subconsciously gripped at Missy’s coat. “Why I’m in trouble in the first place.”

“I don’t have to ask.” Young women fell prey to vultures like Kentworth every fucking day. I just never made it my problem. I wasn’t active duty anymore. I was out of the rescue business.

She looked back up at me. “Because?”

“I don’t care.” The why of it didn’t matter.

Inhaling, her shoulders slumped, her nod was painted in defeat and her gaze went back to her lap. “I get it.”

She didn’t fucking get it at all.

“I’m just another nameless, helpless woman.”

I was just another nameless, fucked-in-the-head vet. Didn’t mean shit in this world. Sooner she learned that, the better. “Tell me your real name.”

Her laugh was deep-throated and husky and didn’t fit the injured woman who was meals shy of what her pre-sex-trafficked weight was,

judging by the way her bikini had hung on her. “What makes you think Sailor isn’t my real name?”

Fucking *banter*? Two dead bodies, an international sex trafficker after her that not even the Feds had managed to nail, and she was fucking joking, *flirting*?

Ignoring her and the sound of her goddamn laugh, I shoved the shirt I’d used to wipe down the SUV into my backpack before grabbing my keys and cell out of the front.

Finally, alarm hit her tone. “What are you doing?”

Shouldering the backpack, I slammed the driver door shut. “Option three.”

EIGHT

Sailor

Slinging his backpack over one shoulder, he slammed his door shut. “Option three.”

Holding my ribs and paying for my laugh in more ways than one, I shamelessly stared at his shirtless chest. I shouldn’t have been noticing his rippling muscles or the hard planes of his stomach or the way the veins in his arms stood out like a relief map of warrior courage every time he moved, but I was.

I was stupidly focusing on every inch of his body because if I didn’t, I was going to fall apart.

Taking my mind off my ankle and what little time I probably had left on this earth, a part of me was almost angry about how he looked because he was the perfect distraction. One I wish I had met before Kyle, but I couldn’t entertain that train of thought. If I did, I would hate myself more, not that it would change what was coming.

What I knew was going to come the second I’d jumped off that boat.

I wasn’t afraid to die.

Death would be merciful compared to the last year of my life. I would be with Shane. Everything would finally be as it should. I silently said the

words now, same as I had countless times, same as I'd said them to myself last night.

Right before I jumped off that yacht.

I'd convinced myself I wanted death. But now, I was staring at the ocean-colored eyes of a man who personified heroism, and I was wondering if I'd been in so deep on that yacht that I couldn't recognize my own thoughts or see the distorted reality I'd put myself in.

Maybe I hadn't jumped for the reasons I'd told myself. Maybe what I'd really wanted was the opposite of death and despair, but I was too afraid to admit it. I knew the consequences of believing in anything good.

Good was one step away from bad. Hope could crush you faster than your worst nightmare, and life was more fragile than a single breath. I knew all of that because I'd lived it. But now, I was looking at a man I never should've met. A huge, dominant, alpha man who'd protected me, carried me and saved me.

He'd even killed for me.

For my own sanity, with everything this man was clearly capable of, I should've been terrified of him, but I wasn't. I didn't even feel sorry for the two guards he'd killed. After nine months of witnessing their cruelty, I was glad they were gone. But their deaths were going to come with a price, one I should've been warning Roark about. More than that, I should've insisted he leave and get as far away from me as possible, but I selfishly said nothing.

"Come on." Gruff and without eye contact, the man who was more lethal than any of Kyle's guards held a hand out to me. "We're leaving the Defender here."

Without hesitation, his loyal dog jumped out of the SUV and stood next to him as if she were born to be his.

For a heartbeat, I stared.

Starved of anything good for so long, I soaked in the exchange. I envied Missy. That sense of belonging. The steadiness, the love, the companionship—she was his and she knew it. She loved her master, and he loved her back with every command he'd taught her.

“Time,” he clipped, still holding out his hand.

Shoving down my thoughts, I tried to focus, but my gaze landed on his hand and suddenly all I saw was the size of it—the size of every part of him. Desperate not to fall back down the dark hole of escape that had gotten me here in the first place, I swallowed past gnawing hunger that never abated and looked up. “I don’t think I can walk.”

His stark blue gaze gave nothing away. “I know.” Without warning, his huge arms snaked under me.

Sucking in a sharp breath of pain and surprise then instantly regretting it, a cry of distress I couldn’t hold in escaped as he lifted me out of the SUV.

“Put your hands on your ribs,” he clipped in a stern order.

“Why?” Blinking back tears, my cheek against the heat of his bare chest, I barely got the question out.

“Pressure.” Using his shoulder, he shut the rear door of his Defender. “Press against your ribs when you breathe.” Still holding me against him, he pulled the cover down over the SUV. “It’ll help with some of the pain.”

Nothing ever eased the pain. “You know this how?” I gently slid my hands over my right side.

“Simulates a compression bandage. Temporary fix.” He glanced at his dog as he started walking toward the stairwell. “Missy, heel.”

The golden retriever fell back a step, then quickly moved to his left side and kept pace.

Impressed with how well trained she was, I filed away another command she knew. “Where are we going?”

Roark didn’t answer. He scanned the garage, and I realized how stupid a question it was.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” Whether he got me away from Kyle’s men now or even bought me a few days, the end result would be the same. I wasn’t walking away from Kyle Kentworth. Not when I knew too much.

Roark didn’t answer that question either as he quickly glanced into the stairwell. “Missy, patrol.”

The dog went down the stairs.

Her paws almost silent on the concrete steps, I watched Missy disappear around the second landing.

Keeping to his silent routine, Roark waited a few seconds, then he followed.

Bracing to be jostled as he went down the stairs, I held my ribs and my breath as he took the first set of steps.

In a blink, we were on the ground level.

As I exhaled, I realized what he’d done. “Thank you.”

“For?” Still holding me firmly against his chest like he’d done on the stairs, he did another quick glance around the corner into the open garage area.

“You purposely held me steady as you went down the stairs.”

He didn’t comment as he stepped into the lower level of the garage and headed for the far end where Missy was standing by the exit, waiting patiently.

Alarm spread when I saw the open street and glaring sunlight just past Missy. Wanting distance between us and a car with two dead bodies, I hadn’t thought about how exposed we’d be on the streets of Key West at this hour.

“We shouldn’t walk out there.” It was too early for the hordes of tourists to be out that would help camouflage our movements. Not that Roark’s height or build was easy to miss, especially shirtless, but at least with crowded streets, we might’ve been a little less visible.

“We’re not going far.” Roark scanned both the garage and the street out front. “Missy, come.”

Without any more of an explanation, he stepped into the early morning sunlight.

NINE

Roark

Turning left onto Grinnell Street, I kept my head on a swivel and aimed for the water a block away.

As if knowing we stood out like a fucking target at this hour with no tourist foot traffic, she shrank in my arms, pressing herself closer against my chest.

I wanted to double-time it, but I couldn't run with her in my arms. I'd rattle the fuck out of her, and I'd already hurt her when I'd picked her up out of the Defender.

Hoping like hell the Tortuga was still docked and hadn't left on a charter yet, I scanned every direction for the second black SUV before I turned left onto the boardwalk.

"You have a boat?"

Ignoring the rasp in her voice and her question, I spied the fishing charter and, thankfully, the weathered former Navy engineer hosing off the decks.

Walking through the open gate of the marina, I headed down the dock.

Catching my approach, Jack stowed the hose and met us starboard. Taking in the woman with a single glance, he tipped his chin at me. "Mornin'." He glanced at Missy. "Hey, girl."

“Need a favor. Time-sensitive.” I scanned the direction we’d come from. Still no black SUV or guards. Yet. “Can you drop us at my place?”

Following my glance, then looking back at me, Jack didn’t hesitate. “Yep.”

“Appreciate it.” I glanced down to my left. “Missy, go.”

Missy jumped aboard and went to the old man as I stepped onto the boat with the woman.

Jack pet Missy once before turning toward the tie-downs. “First aid kit’s in the galley. Top cabinet on the left.”

“Copy.” I headed inside with two females.

As I set the woman on the small counter in the galley and dropped my backpack on the floor, Jack fired up the Tortuga.

Still holding her right side, she shifted uncomfortably on the cold metal. “We’re going to your house?”

Grabbing the first aid kit out of the cupboard, I riffled through it. “For now.” Dumping what I needed on the counter before putting the kit back, I asked what I didn’t want to know. “Any injuries I can’t see?”

Glancing down, she shook her head. “My ribs are just sore, and I don’t think my ankle is actually broken.”

Pausing, I stared at the woman.

Once she realized I wasn’t moving, she glanced at my still hands then lifted her head. All the bravado gone from her features, she looked so damn young and vulnerable that I wondered what her age was.

Biting her lip, she lied. “I’m okay.”

My expression locked, I kept my tone even. "Rape kits collect evidence for prosecution."

Heat hit her entire face, and she went quiet as fuck as she quickly looked away. "I don't need that."

I grasped her chin and brought her eyes back to me. "Need and want are two different animals."

Her eyes on mine, her throat moved with a swallow. "I don't want that," she whispered.

Keeping my shit locked down when all I wanted was to get my fucking hands on Kentworth, I nodded as I released her. "Any medication allergies?"

"No."

Opening two packets of ibuprofen, I shook out the tablets, then filled a cup with water and handed both to her. "Take these. Sip the water."

She took the meds without comment as I filled a pan with water and set it on the floor for Missy.

Quickly scanning her bare arms and legs that were scratched to hell, I rummaged in a drawer. Grabbing an industrial-sized serving spoon before grasping the back of her calf on her injured leg, I rested her foot against my thigh.

Flinching, she almost dropped the cup.

"Drink." Using the counter as leverage, I bent the spoon into a right angle. "Any progression of pain? Shortness of breath?"

"No." Her voice, still raspy as fuck, came quieter. "What are you doing?"

“Makeshift splint.” Placing the flat ladle part of the spoon under her heel, the handle ran partway up the back of her calf. Holding the splint in place with one hand, I used my teeth to tear open a package of self-adhesive bandages. Then I carefully wrapped her ankle.

She started to tremble.

“Drink,” I reminded her.

“You haven’t.”

“My hydration isn’t a prerequisite for yours.” I wound the last of the bandage around her foot.

“You made my safety a prerequisite to yours.”

No answer for that, I didn’t say shit. I opened a couple antiseptic swabs and swiped them over the scratches on her legs.

She sucked in a sharp breath as the alcohol touched her cuts. “You don’t talk much.”

Opening another packet, I cleaned a cut on her cheek that didn’t need stitches but was deep enough to leave a scar. It pissed me off. “You were supposed to wait.”

Inhaling, she averted her gaze. “I heard them shooting at you.”

“I had it handled.”

“It didn’t seem... handled.”

Refraining from telling her exactly what the fuck I was capable of and that single kill shots were merciful compared to what I’d wanted to do to those two asshole guards, I aimed to get intel out of her. “How’d you wind up on the Contender?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She focused on the cup in her hands. “Just so you know, they fired into my hiding place. That’s why I couldn’t wait.”

I wasn’t seen leaving the spot I’d left her in. That meant she’d either moved or she’d let Missy out. “You were hidden. Next time I say wait, wait. What happened with Kentworth?”

Ignoring both my order and question, she grasped the edge of my T-shirt. “I should give this back to you.”

She should tell me what the fuck happened. “Leave the shirt on. Kentworth take you?” I used the last swab to wipe the cuts on her arms.

Not giving a straight answer, her shoulder shifted, then she finished the water and set the cup down. “You seem to know a lot about him.”

Neither confirming nor denying it, I gathered the debris off the counter and dumped it in the backpack.

She frowned. “There’s a trashcan behind you.”

“Not leaving a trail.” Picking the pan up, I washed it and the cup.

Her forehead still creased, she looked at me like I was both her worst nightmare and the second coming as she stated the obvious. “There are two dead men and a pool of blood in a parking garage a block away. I think you’re beyond not leaving a trail.”

There were also five security cameras we’d passed. “It’s not my trail I’m concerned about.” I glanced out the small galley window as I shouldered the backpack. “Time to move.” I reached for her.

Holding her right side with one hand, she leaned back. “You didn’t drink any water.”

Throwing her a look that said exactly how I felt about being mothered, I picked her up.

Averting her gaze and exhaling through her mouth, her throaty voice took on a defeated tone. “Sorry.”

Ignoring her apology, I glanced at the only woman I told myself I needed in my life. “Missy, come.” Carrying the blonde to the lower deck, I glanced up at the helm. “Jack, drop us a few doors down.”

Saluting in acknowledgment, Jack eased up to a neighbor’s dock that was partially hidden by mangroves.

Nodding thanks, I stepped off with the woman, and Missy followed.

Jack was reversing the engines on the old charter boat before I’d scanned all the neighbors’ yards and windows.

Stiffening in my arms, the blonde followed my glance. “I don’t see any of the guards. What are we looking for?”

We. Christ. I tempered my answer. “Anything that doesn’t fit in.”

“My entire life, I’ve never belonged anywhere. I’m not sure I know what fitting in or not fitting in is supposed to look like.”

My patience cued for desertion, my head sinking in the natural scent of her, not remembering the last time I’d held a woman—all of it combined with the fact that Missy was a fucking traitor for her, and I hit my bandwidth for bullshit. “Shut it down, woman.” Scanning the street, I skirted the neighbor’s fence.

Mimicking me, she glanced down the street. “I’m sorry.”

Feeling every step in my left leg, my patience officially gone, I laid into her. “I didn’t ask for your past or apologies.” The less she spoke, the better.

I wasn't in the goddamn mood to burn my entire setup here, not any more than I already had, let alone get my head twisted up in a woman.

Exasperation clouded her tone. "I didn't ask for your help."

Fucking hell. "I didn't ask to spend my morning getting shot at." Crossing the yard of the house next to mine, I aimed for my back door.

Like an impending storm, her voice went eerily quiet. "Put me down."

Taking the steps of my back porch two at a time, I did the opposite. "No."

"I said, put me *down*."

With a quick glance at the neighbors on either side of me, I tightened my hold on her with one arm while I opened the back door with the other. "Missy, inside," I ordered before pausing on the threshold and giving the blonde the full weight of my stare. "Two hours ago, I wasn't on Kentworth's radar. Now he knows my plane, my ride, the name of my business, and I'm sure, this address. Putting you down on a busted ankle isn't going to change that. But if you want to go at it alone against a sex trafficker, then, by all means, say the word. That, I will put you down for because I don't do belligerent, woman. So make a choice, because I didn't leave my Defender in that garage to stand here as target practice for Kentworth's asshole guards."

TEN

Sailor

His eyes narrowed, and the expression on his face turned more deadly than after he'd killed those guards. "Two hours ago, I wasn't on Kentworth's radar. Now he knows my plane, my ride, the name of my business, and I'm sure, this address. Putting you down on a broken ankle isn't going to change that. But if you want to go at it alone against a sex trafficker, then say the word." His voice dropped and his tone turned menacing. "That, I will put you down for because I don't do belligerent, woman. So make a choice, because I didn't leave my Defender in that garage to stand here as target practice for Kentworth's asshole guards."

Irrational anger flaring, inflammatory words threatened to spill out.

I wanted to tell him to fuck off. I wanted to say I would go at it alone because I'd always gone at it alone, but the second I thought it, grief rushed in faster than my deflating anger, and the truth hurt.

I'd never gone at it alone.

I'd had Shane.

He was my reason and my anchor. The old me, the year-ago version of myself, I'd never gotten angry or confrontational. I didn't let assholes or obstacles get me down. I didn't give up on my dreams. I'd even told myself

I didn't have bad days. If things went sideways, I pivoted. Whatever it took, I did it, and I smiled through it because it was never about me.

It was about a little boy that a useless addict of a mother had neglected before the world had chewed him up and spit him out. I'd had the benefit of being a teenager before she'd disappeared on us, but Shane had only been five.

His shy smile and big brown eyes were my world, and I'd vowed to make a better life for him than the hand either of us had been dealt. That meant I didn't have time to get angry at people who judged me. My focus was on the songs and the hustle. Keep writing, keep moving, keep trying, and above all else, keep a roof over our heads and make sure Shane never went to bed hungry.

But I'd failed him.

In the worst way possible.

Every second of the life I'd built for Shane and myself was nothing but a cliff. I'd been standing, dangling one foot over the edge, the whole time. Except I didn't realize it until too late, and I wasn't the one who fell.

Shane was.

He'd paid the horrific price for my selfishness, and I'd been existing with impossible guilt ever since. Every breath I took had hurt worse than the last until nine months ago, I couldn't take it anymore. Too much of a coward to own my mistakes, I'd walked back to that cliff's edge, literally, on a balcony in Manhattan.

But once again, I didn't fall.

I'd found a different path of destruction. Or maybe Kyle Kentworth had found me. Either way, I thought my choices would only affect me. But life

was cruel, and now here I was, staring at angry blue eyes, standing on another cliff, putting another person at risk.

I hated myself.

Injured ankle or not, I knew what I had to do. But when I opened my mouth, the right words didn't come out.

Like a coward, I didn't step back. I didn't even jump. I hovered. Then I put the onus on a stranger who'd already risked his life to help me. "I should tell you to put me down."

Piercing blue eyes stared at me for one frightening second.

Then the man who'd carried me through gunfire saved me again. But he didn't do it quietly, and he didn't do it blindly.

Stepping onto the screened porch, he issued his warning as sure as he issued his commands to his dog. "The next time you refuse to make a decision for yourself, I'm dumping you with the Feds."

Hurting and exhausted, my reply was out of my mouth before I could censor myself. "Then why did you save me if you're only going to kill me?" The second someone saw me with a federal agent, Kyle would be the least of my problems.

Roark's lethal gaze cut to mine as he shoved a key into his back door. "Explain."

Saying both nothing and more than I should, I simplified the truth. "Handing me over to any government agency would be a death sentence." He said he knew Kyle. Who did he think was on Kyle's yacht every night?

Walking us into a pristine kitchen, Roark kicked out a chair, but he didn't set me in it. The dominant, lethal man in front of me, who was all

muscles and controlled anger, dumped me on the kitchen table, dropped his backpack on the floor and stepped between my legs.

Grasping my jaw and neck in his huge hand, he held firm as he gave me his lethal stare. “What do you have on Kentworth?”

It happened all at once.

My heart rate exploded, my ankle throbbed, and a new kind of drug feathered up my back and radiated out from every inch of his grip on me. A tingling sensation low in my belly made heat spread between my legs, and my veins flooded with desperate, ugly need.

The same kind of need I’d felt the first time Kyle touched me.

Except it wasn’t the same.

It wasn’t even close.

My nerves painfully pulsing deep in my core, my skin on fire, my heart rate erratic, everything about this man was so much more intense than anything I’d ever experienced, it felt like I was going to shatter.

Or climax from his single-handed, lethally dominant grip.

Suddenly terrified of this man, of how he could make me fracture into irreparable pieces, my body betrayed me, and my voice cracked. “Don’t do this.”

The military man who flew a plane and had arms almost as big as my thighs did the last thing he should have.

His deep voice pitched to a low, murderous snarl, and he gripped me tighter. “Put a fucking leash on it, woman.”

Wetness flushed between my legs, and I was there. In that place I’d escaped to every day for the last nine months. Except this *there* was nothing

like anything I'd ever experienced with Kyle. Even thinking that thought was traitorous to my mind and body. "You don't understand." Immeasurably more intense, everything about this man was infinitely more dangerous than a thousand Kyles.

"I know exactly how the fuck you're looking at me, how you've been looking at me. I saw every tell you gave off the second I put my hand on you."

His tone, his voice, every domineering inch of him calling to me like a moth to a flame, I couldn't stop myself. Biting my lip, stabbing my own fate, my hoarse whisper bled desperation, and I begged. "Touch me."

ELEVEN

Roark

Her body language morphing the second I put my hand on her, she fucking begged. “Touch me.”

My cock instantly hard, my hand on her throat tightened before my nostrils flared in disgust at both myself and her. I’d fucking misread her *don’t do this*, but I wasn’t misreading shit now. I could practically taste her need as she leaned into my grip. “No.”

As if in a trance, she blinked. Then heat hit her cheeks, and she sucked in a breath. “I’m sorry, I—”

“This happen every time a man puts a hand on you?” Conditioned, Stockholm syndrome, kink—fuck, just naturally submissive, it didn’t matter. I had no goddamn right asking. I wasn’t a shrink, and the end result was going to be the same. Kentworth was a dead man, and I wasn’t fucking her.

Her flush deepened and she tried to lean back. “What?”

Her seductive rasp going straight to my dick, I didn’t let go of her. Telling myself I needed to know what the fuck I was dealing with, I pushed the envelope. “Answer the question.”

Looking guilty as hell, she shook her head as much as she could in my grasp.

“Words,” I demanded.

“No.”

She was lying, and I was a goddamn glutton for punishment. Giving this woman way more latitude than she deserved, I gave her room to explain.

“No, what?”

Her head dipped, and that same raspy whisper that made my dick hard came back. “No, it doesn’t always happen.”

She was full of shit, but I still stared at her for a beat, trying to remember the last time I questioned my own judgment. Maybe she was telling the truth, but experience and life taught me no one was ever a hundred percent honest. She could just be submissive as hell, but my money was on cunning liar.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not one of Kentworth’s piece-of-shit clients.” I grasped her chin so she fucking saw me when I said what I said next. “I don’t fuck trafficked women, and I’m not fucking you.”

A flash of something close to despair followed by indignation hit her eyes before she shut it all down and disguised her shit quicker than any Marine I’d ever served with. Her tone taking a one-eighty, the sex-laced rasp in her voice held, but she threw her version of an order at me. “Please step back.”

“No.” I was already an asshole. If I had to intimidate her to get through to her, then so be it. “Here’s how this is gonna go down. You want my help, you level up. Tell me right now if I’m going to have a problem beyond Kentworth, because I don’t do addicts.” No fucking way was I going down that road.

Her chest rose and fell, and she managed to hold her controlled expression for another beat, but then it dropped right along with her bravado. “I’m not an addict.”

I didn’t say shit. There were countless addictions.

She nodded slowly like she could hear my thoughts. “I apologize.”

I let go of her, but I didn’t step back. “For?”

Her gaze cut to my hands as they went to my hips, and she fucking sucked in a breath.

My dick hard, my attitude shit, I bit out a command. “Eyes on me, woman.”

Zero hesitation, her dark-eyed gaze met mine again, but this time, she looked lost as fuck. “I don’t know what happened when you... put your hand on me.”

Bullshit. “Yes, you do.” But I wasn’t going down that hole with her. The clock ticking, I needed intel. “Tell me what you have on Kentworth.” If she couldn’t go to the Feds, she knew something more than simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Her throat moved with a swallow. “Nothing, it’s just that no one... voluntarily leaves him.”

No shit. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

A spark of attitude hit her tone. “If you know so much, then why are you asking me about him?”

“Level up, woman,” I warned.

“I don’t know what that means.”

Yes, she did. Testing her, I put more force behind my next words. “Quit stalling, and tell me what’s really going on.”

Her entire expression shut down like she was conditioned as fuck, but then she started talking. “I was on Kyle’s boat. I didn’t want to be there anymore. We got close enough for me to see the shore. I jumped. He sent his men after me. You found me first. Now he wants me dead or back. I’m not sure which.”

I watched every fucking inch of her face as she regurgitated her story without emotion or tells. “What did you see on the yacht?”

“Men having sex with women.”

“You recognize any of those men?”

She blinked and her eyes left mine. “No.”

Lie. “The women?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t know any of them.”

Truth. “You see the guards take anyone out?”

She hesitated. “No.”

“Look at me and try that answer again.”

She immediately brought her gaze to mine. “Maybe.”

Jesus fuck, this woman. “You either saw something or you didn’t. Think carefully before you tell me another lie.” I was done with her bullshit.

She took a shallow breath. “There was a crew member....” Trailing off, she looked past me. “He may have tried to help me.”

“Help you do what?”

“I don’t know.”

I grabbed her chin again and tipped her face up. “What did he help you do?”

The doe eyes back, she stared at me for a full beat. Then she closed her eyes. “I didn’t want to do something. He tried to help.”

My jaw ticked. “Look at me, woman.”

Her eyes opened.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to know what that asshole Kentworth had tried to do to her and make him suffer tenfold for it, but this wasn’t my woman, and now wasn’t the time. “What happened to the crew member?”

“I don’t know, but he disappeared, and we weren’t docked.”

I let go of her. “Anyone else disappear?” A crew member falling off the radar wasn’t anything Kentworth couldn’t take care of. If he was questioned by authorities, his lawyers would bury it. But she was a loose end, and men like Kentworth didn’t need a reason to tie up loose ends. Regardless, something was still off. One missing crew member wasn’t enough of a reason for Kentworth to send a boat full of guards after her.

She gave a half shrug. “People always came and went.”

“What else did you see?”

She crossed her arms and pulled them in close like she was trying to protect herself. “Nothing.”

A cold nose nudged my hand. Fucking irritated with the woman and pissed at myself for getting involved when I’d kept my ass out of the line of fire on this island, I glanced at my dog and issued a command. “Retreat.”

Missy sat.

Fucking Christ. “I said, *retreat*.”

Whining once, she lay down.

“You’re scaring her,” doe eyes whispered.

My gaze cut to the woman. “I’m not scaring her. She can rip my fucking throat out in two seconds flat. She’s staying because of the vibes you’re giving off.”

Doe eyes barely lifted her head enough to look at me. “Is she a service dog?”

Every muscle in my body went fucking rigid. “No. Did you fuck Kentworth?”

TWELVE

Sailor

His entire demeanor turned to instant rage without him moving a single muscle. “No. Did you fuck Kentworth?”

If he had struck me in my bruised ribs, it would have hurt less.

I knew what he was doing.

I was the master of deflecting. I deflected so much, I’d become a reflection of Kyle’s every wish while I was with him, but this guy had me in spades. Turning the spotlight back on me, he made a mockery of my honest question. I could have answered him. He deserved to know the truth after what he’d done for me in that garage, what he was still doing for me. But I didn’t give him the truth. I didn’t even tell him I’d never slept with any of Kyle’s clients.

I played his game.

“She doesn’t look like an attack dog.”

His hands on his hips, his low-slung sweats showing off every inch of his defined V and glistening muscles, he stared me down. Then he spit out two words like I’d offended him even further. “Attack dog.”

Not saying anything, I tried to hold his stare. But the fierce intensity in his eyes as his gaze focused intently on me made my heart rate skyrocket, and I wanted to crawl out of my own skin.

The magnitude of this man's dominance made a mockery of Kyle Kentworth.

Foolishly, I wanted to lose myself in him. Instead, I should've been bracing for impact because something was coming. I could feel it as sure as I felt my ribs with every breath. I didn't know this warrior of a man, but I knew enough to understand that when he opened his mouth, he cut deep. Every word he spoke sliced away at a place inside me that I was trying to hide from. It didn't matter if he was giving me his version of biting reality delivered with cruel honesty or one of his controlled comments that only hinted at his depth of concern—they both crushed me.

A year ago, I would've had the fortitude to walk past a man like him before I got sucked into his vortex, because I knew myself. I knew my own propensities. I could just as easily get lost in a man's attention as I could the keys of my piano and the words in my head.

I'd always wanted to crawl into places where I could hide from reality.

Notes, chords, songs, music, men.

Shane was the one place I could focus my attention for good. Channel them into something deserving and worthy, but in the end, I'd even fucked that up. I'd let down the one person who'd loved me, who would ever love me, unconditionally.

Now, I was here.

Staring at a man with a depth in his eyes that looked darker than my own thoughts, and for once, I felt like I understood what I was seeing, but I couldn't touch him.

I couldn't even reach for him.

Not physically or literally.

So I sat and waited for what I had known was coming since before I'd jumped off that boat.

THIRTEEN

Roark

She fucking stared at me and waited.

I could read anyone.

You looked long enough, you kept your mouth shut, people gave tells.

But this woman was throwing me.

Her expression bled resignation, but the fact that Missy was sitting guard at her feet and ignoring me said she was scared out of her mind. Or tripping on adrenaline. Hell, maybe she was waiting for me to dump her or fuck her, not that I should've given a shit what the hell she was thinking, but I was already committed. I was getting her off the island, and I needed to cover my tracks. But in order to do that, I needed backup and hacker-level skills that were beyond my scope. Not liking my options but knowing what the hell I needed to do, I got down to it.

Careful of her ribs and leg, I reached for her.

Her standoff silence broke. "What are you doing?"

Missy stood.

Sparing my dog a glance, I gave her a firm command to stay before looking back at the woman. "Taking you upstairs." I picked her up.

Her face pinched, but she didn't protest.

Carrying her to the master, I paused outside the walk-in shower. “What did I tell you downstairs?”

Glancing around my remodeled bathroom, she didn’t look at me. “You said a lot of things.”

“Specifically about touching you,” I clarified.

Her cheeks flamed and her voice turned to her shade of soft. “You said you weren’t going to sleep with me.”

I said fuck, not sleep—not that I was going to bed down with this woman either. “Remember that,” I ordered as I kicked off my running shoes, stepped into the shower with her still in my arms and turned on the water.

Twisting her head away from the spray, she pulled her cut-up arms in close and curled into me. “It’s cold.”

“It’ll warm up.” I let go of her uninjured leg. “Put your good foot down, but don’t put any weight on that ankle. Hold on to my arm.”

Tentative and slow, she did as I told her, and for a split second, I lost my fucking head.

Vulnerable, unguarded and short as fuck, she was so goddamn submissive, the urge to praise this woman for her deference hit full force, and I had to bite back two words of encouragement. Telling myself to focus the fuck up, I peeled my shirt off her and tossed it in the corner. Then I took a look at the bruising on her ribs and assessed.

“What kind of pain is it when you inhale?” I lightly pressed three fingers where the bruising was the worst.

Her head down, holding on to me with one hand, she flinched but didn't cry out. "Sore."

"Bruised sore or sharp pain when you inhale sore?" It looked like the motherfucker had taken a goddamn bat to her.

"Um." She tried to move her back away from the spray. "The first one."

I looked over her shoulder. *Jesus fucking Christ*. Two large welts cut across her back. "Why didn't you tell me your back was injured?"

"It's...." She drew in a breath as I untied her bikini. "I'm okay."

Tamping down a new level of pissed, I tossed the top toward my T-shirt. "Woman, when I ask where you're injured, you tell me." Pushing her hair over her shoulder, I looked at the lash marks. "This from Kentworth or the mangroves?"

The arm holding her ribs went across her breasts. "I-I don't know if I had them when I left the boat."

"Yacht, and you said you jumped." Unable to tell if she was lying or traumatized, I let it go for now and hooked a thumb in her bottoms.

Her body went rigid. "What are you doing?"

"Just getting you out of this suit, and getting you cleaned up." The fucking material was hanging off her. "When was the last time you ate?" I dragged the bottoms over her hips and let them fall.

A firmness hit her tone I hadn't heard yet. "Don't."

Tipping her head back to rinse her hair, I fucking humored her. "Don't what?" She was already naked.

"Parent me," she warned. "I don't need a father figure."

She needed a hell of a lot more than that, none of which she was going to get from me. “Not my intention, woman.”

“Then what is?”

Her hair, thick and long as hell, tangled in my fingers. “We went over this.” Grabbing the shampoo, my mind going AWOL, I thought about her hair wrapped around my fist.

“I don’t think we did.”

I caught her doe-eyed gaze. “Can you lift your arm to do this?”

She glanced from the shampoo to her hand on me, then focused on her arm across her breasts. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t answer mine.” Which was answer enough. Dumping shampoo into my hand, I tried to remember the last time I washed a female’s hair that wasn’t canine. I fucking couldn’t.

“I can lift my arm if you give me privacy.”

“Not happening.” I wasn’t leaving her with only one good leg in my shower. Been there, done that, except no one had caught my fall.

Her throaty voice went a shade quieter. “Why?”

“You’re not hitting the floor on my watch.”

She didn’t reply.

I washed her hair.

FOURTEEN

Sailor

Quick and efficient, the same way he cleaned up after shooting those two men, he washed my hair.

His movements measured, as if he had done this countless times, he soaped the citrus-smelling shampoo through my hair before running his hands with the direction of the water to rinse it.

The muscles in his arms flexing, the veins standing out, I stood in an almost hypnotic state, soaking in the attention and his touch. My cuts burned, my ankle throbbed and my ribs smarted with every breath. But my skin tingled, and gooseflesh raced across my arms as awareness I couldn't ignore pulsed between my legs.

His sweatpants plastered to his muscular thighs, I couldn't stop myself from looking up a few inches.

Oh my God.

Feeling the involuntary sharp inhale of breath against my ribs, I flinched.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, soap in his huge hands.

Forcing myself not to look again at the even bigger bulge barely contained by his sweatpants, I shook my head.

“Words, woman.”

I didn’t know if I hated it or loved it when he called me that. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Fine,” he muttered before his rough hands swept across my arms and shoulders with surprising gentleness.

“I can wash myself,” I belatedly protested.

“The same way you can escape Kentworth yourself?”

I should’ve hated him. His brusqueness, his overbearing attitude, the way he barked commands at both me and his dog. At a bare minimum, I should’ve been frightened of him. But I wasn’t.

I was only afraid of how my body reacted to him.

How my mind and soul bent toward his every command.

I didn’t need a psychologist to tell me I was trading one vice for another. Or that a sensible person would’ve gone to the police or let him take me to the Feds like he’d threatened. But I wasn’t doing any of that.

Standing naked in front of him, I let him run his obscenely large hands over my body, and I fantasized.

His touch, his scent, his eyes, his dominance, the hard length of him fitting inside me—I shivered.

“Almost done, woman. Hold on.”

And his voice.

Oh God, his voice.

Deep and resonant and perfectly pitched for chords my fingers ached to play. “Do you sing?” The thought carrying from my mind and traveling

across my lips before I could stop it slipped out, and I silently cursed myself for revealing too much.

A frown, deeper than the usual crease between his eyebrows formed, but he did what I was beginning to understand he was a master at. He avoided my question.

“Done,” he stated, reaching just outside the shower for a towel hanging on a hook. Wrapping it around me, he picked me up again. Then, leaving the shower on, dripping wet, sweatpants and all, he walked me into his bedroom and set me on his bed. “Wait.” His single-word order issued like a command, he retreated.

I watched his wide back as he stepped into a walk-in closet, grabbed clothes, then disappeared into the bathroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

Wondering at his modesty when he’d stripped me bare, I took a tentative breath of relief to have one moment of reprieve from his consuming presence, and his scent hit me.

Intoxicated, not caring about my ribs, I inhaled again.

Citrus, fresh laundry, warm summers, cedarwood—*oh God*.

Lying down on my good side, I breathed in everything about this dominant man, but this time, the warm summer and cedarwood scent was stronger and something more than the pulsing ache between my legs filled my mind.

Notes, chords, music—it came out of nowhere.

One year of nothing. No sounds, no fluttering of notes, no music I could escape in, it’d all disappeared with Shane’s last breath, but suddenly, it was back.

Except it wasn't.

It wasn't my music, and it wasn't the music I'd made for Shane.

These were different sounds, different chords, different melodies. But suddenly, they were all there, playing in my head in a building crescendo that was as unfamiliar as the person I'd become.

Crushing guilt hit me faster than I could take a breath, and suddenly, I was choking back sobs as desperately as my hands wanted to capture the sounds and push them across the keys.

Before I could grasp at reality, the bathroom door was bursting open, and a fully-dressed giant beast of a man with his gun drawn was scanning the bedroom and moving to the windows as if we were under siege.

Grief, shame, guilt, *so much guilt*—emotions coming faster than I could process, drowning me in a tidal wave of unbearable heartache, all I could do was bury my face in fresh laundry, warm summers, and cedarwood, and sob uncontrollably.

“What happened?” A rough, angry voice demanded.

My soul crushing from the inside, I couldn't talk.

Memories burying me in anguish, I couldn't breathe.

I was back at that day. I was back on that balcony. I was back at all the places where I'd lost everything.

“Woman.”

I didn't want this.

Instead of a punishing hand in an elevator grasping my wrist, a firm hand gripped my shoulder. “*Woman.*”

Deep, resonant, the dark and rich melody that was his voice burst into a rising, torturous tempo.

Instead of being shoved to the floor in a dark limo, I was being turned to my back on a soft bed. “Look at me.”

I didn’t want the music to come back. I didn’t want *this* music. Choking on sobs as big as the hole in my heart, I futilely tried to make it stop by covering my ears, but it was too late.

Shane was gone. *Shane was gone. Shanewasgone.*

Thick fingers grasped my jaw, but instead of a cock being shoved down my throat, an angry order bit through the rising noise like a crashing cymbal. “Open your eyes.”

I didn’t deserve to have the music back. Especially not this. This wasn’t Shane’s melody. No beauty, no harmony, no perfect wisp of a smile, no huge brown eyes—this wasn’t his. This wasn’t even the sound of waves slapping a yacht. This wasn’t escape. This was agony. *Agony*. The cry ripped from my breathless lungs. “*No.*”

“Don’t make me hurt you, woman,” the deep voice warned in pounding, haunting, angry notes that ricocheted in disorderly chaos.

Oh God, I couldn’t breathe. It had to stop. I needed it to stop. *Make it all stop.* “Make it stop!”

“Last warning.”

The notes faster, the tempo harder, the grief punishing, I couldn’t breathe. *I couldn’t breathe.*

The tormented cry filled my head, and my hands were yanked from my ears.

“SAILOR.”

The music stopped.

Like a hard slap, the two syllables of my name echoed through every nerve in my body. Wrists pinned, shocked out of my meltdown, my eyes opened.

A livid pilot swam into view.

Then a furious canine rushed the room.

Teeth bared, growl snarling, hackles raised, she jumped on the bed. Standing over me, the dog that a pilot-turned-killer had meticulously trained engaged in a standoff with her owner, barking once in heated warning.

Nostrils flaring, the warrior that was trained by the military didn't so much as blink.

Inches above me, he didn't even lean away.

His glare locked, his chest rapidly rising and falling, he let go of one of my wrists to pull out his cell. Dialing, he put the phone to his ear.

The first ring echoed in the tension-filled silence.

Letting go of my other wrist, he stood to his full height and stared at me for one heartbeat.

Then he turned and walked out.

A golden retriever lay down at my side.

FIFTEEN

Roark

Ignoring my traitorous fucking dog and the shit in my head, I called the one person I knew who could fix the woman without needing a hospital. Or a psych ward.

But fuck. *Fuck*. I'd goddamn yelled at her. Thirty-fucking-eight years old and I'd never yelled at a woman. I swore I'd never be my father, and what had I just done? FUCK.

Talon Talerco, former SARC, and the best combat medic I'd ever served with, finally answered on the fifth ring. "What up, Mikkey? Long time. You miss me?"

"Need your skills." Standing in the hall like a fucking stalker, I glanced in my bedroom.

Still on her back, her wrists in the same position from when I'd yanked her hands off her ears and pinned them to the bed, she hadn't fucking moved.

My guilt compounded, and Talon chuckled. "I got many skills, flyboy, but I'm reservin' 'em for my ladies. Speakin' of, they're sittin' right here, waitin' on me. You got somethin' to say, say it, otherwise, I'm out."

"I need you to cast a potential broken ankle." And do whatever the fuck it is that he did with hysterical women, because I'd fucking fucked up.

Staring at the ceiling with those doe eyes and looking so goddamn lost I wanted to kill every motherfucker on that boat, the woman finally blinked. Then she turned onto her uninjured side and curled into a ball.

Giving me stink eye, Missy slowly laid her head onto her front paws.

“Fuck no,” Talerco retorted. “Hobble your Scottish ass over to the ER, or the vet if it’s Missy. Hell, fix your own shit. You could get anythin’ with wings airborne downrange, no matter what kinda shape those pieces-of-shit birds were in. I know you can fix one little ole bone. Besides, not workin’ today. It’s my day off.”

“It’s not for me, and you don’t work.” Not for money, he didn’t have to. Fucker was loaded.

Talerco sighed. “All right, I’ll bite. Where are you, and who’s it for?”

“Female. My place.”

The woman pulled the towel up to cover her shoulder and half her face.

Talerco’s laugh echoed through the line. “You have got to be shittin’ me. You sayin’ you’re finally bringin’ home the two-legged ladies? The great Mikkey MacElheran, sworn bachelor and dog whisperer, has turned from a Roark into a *Romeo*?” Talon laughed harder. “This I gotta see.”

“Then get down here.”

Talerco kept fucking laughing. “To do what? Tape a twisted ankle? You afraid to touch her or somethin’?”

Avoiding looking at the woman, I walked into my closet and lowered my voice. “More than an ankle,” I ground out.

“Oh, I bet,” Talon drawled sarcastically. “You check to make sure she ain’t sunburnt?”

“Fuck you.” I grabbed clothes that would swamp her.

“No, that’s what you should be doin’ with her.” He laughed at his own joke.

“There’s a situation.” I took a clean SIG 9mm from my gun safe and two extra magazines.

“Ain’t there always when a woman’s involved?”

“Talerco,” I warned.

He kept fucking going. “In fact, there’s supposed to be a situation. A *somethin’ up* situation. And that, my friend, is you. The up part, I mean.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Now leave me to it, and go earn your new nickname, Romeo. I got two blonde beauties that need my attention more ‘an this conversation, and the waves are callin’.”

“When have I asked you for a favor?” I demanded before he hung up.

“Can’t recall, but I’m sure—”

“Never,” I cut him off.

Silence.

Then Talerco let out a long sigh and his tone did a one-eighty. “Goddamn it, you ain’t shittin’ me, are you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “How bad?”

“Remember Mexico?” I asked cryptically.

“Christ,” Talon cursed. “Fuckin’ sex traffickers. Yeah, I remember Mexico. You tellin’ me you got a similar situation?”

“Worse.” Kentworth was organized, global, had deep pockets and even deeper connections.

“Call Luna. He can handle this.”

“Negative.” With Kenworth’s reach, this woman needed more than that.
“Not in his wheelhouse.”

“Cops?”

“You know how that ends.” Even though I’d suggested it to her, I knew what would happen if she went that route. The second the cops heard Kentworth’s name, they’d pretend to take a statement, then dismiss her. The moment she walked out of the police station, one of Kentworth’s guards would be waiting.

“Fine,” Talerco conceded. “I’m on my way, but for the record, you’re single-handedly destroyin’ my date today with perfect waves and my two gorgeous ladies.”

“Appreciate it.”

He chuckled, but this time it was without humor. “Now I know it’s serious. Thank you ain’t in your vocabulary, Mikkey.”

A lot of shit wasn’t in my vocabulary before this morning. Sailor had meant Navy, not doe-eyed blonde. I glanced at the beaten, underfed woman on my bed. Sensing my movement, Missy looked up from her guard position and showed me her teeth, but the woman didn’t move. Her eyes closed, her face pained, she breathed faster than someone asleep. “Thought I was Romeo now,” I answered Talerco distractedly as I heard a vehicle drive down the street.

“I’m reservin’ judgment till I lay eyes on your woman. Anythin’ else I need to be prepared for?”

Moving across the bedroom, I tossed the clothes on the bed. “Not mine, and bring a full kit, but hang on.” Glancing out the back and side windows, scanning the yard and water beyond, I made a decision. “Don’t drive down

yet. I'm calling Trefor and asking him to have Zulu pick you up." Adam "Alpha" Trefor's company, Alpha Elite Security, had five global locations, but he'd recently relocated his headquarters from New York to Miami, bringing some of his key people with him, including his best pilot, Zulu. Most of Trefor's business was military contracts and black-ops shit the government wanted to keep their hands clean of, but Alpha had one key advantage André Luna didn't—long-range jets. A whole fucking fleet of them.

"Hold up." Talerco's tone turned lethally serious, and his Southern accent took a backseat. "You're calling in AES to fly me down? What the hell's going on, MacElheran?"

Moving to a window in my office that faced the front of the house, I glanced between the blinds and scanned the street for movement because I knew my neighbors. There was never traffic this early in the morning. "I was seen."

"By who?"

I heard the vehicle again a split second before a tinted-out black SUV came around the corner.

Fuck.

"Roark," Talerco snapped.

"Someone from AES will be in touch. Pack heavy." He'd get my meaning.

Talerco's Southern accent came back full force. "You're tellin' me to gear up, load out, bring my full med kit *and* wait for a taxi in a motherfuckin' AES corporate jet when you got your own damn wings? What the fuck kinda shit have you gotten yourself into?"

The black SUV drove slowly down the street, but this time, it didn't circle the block. It stopped two doors down. "I have to go. Bring some clothes for her." I strode back to my bedroom.

"Christ, I'm not gonna like what I see when I get there, am I?" He didn't wait for an answer. "What size is she?"

I glanced at the woman on my bed that was curled into a ball with strands of long, tangled blonde hair splayed everywhere. "Malnourished size. Wait for someone from AES." I hung up and issued my girl a command. "Missy, backyard, patrol."

Shockingly, Missy hopped up and went downstairs, going out her dog door. A second later, she was in the backyard, walking the rear of the property.

The blonde opened her eyes and looked from me to the 9mm I was holstering. Fear robbed her features. "Who did you call?"

I paused to look at her. "A friend."

The fear in her eyes turned to duress. "You shouldn't have told anyone about me. No one else can be involved." Her rasp cut to a whisper. "You shouldn't even be involved."

No fucking shit. But now I was. "I make my own decisions." Shoving the extra magazines into my cargo pockets, I didn't sugarcoat. "We need to move."

SIXTEEN

Sailor

I'd tried to warn him off, but it was like talking to a brick wall.

"I make my own decisions." Shoving extra ammunition into the pockets of his military-looking, black cargo pants, he gave me a look that said I was out of my mind if I thought for one second that he wasn't in control of his own destiny. "We need to move." He walked with purpose into the bathroom.

I stared at the black T-shirt stretched across his chest and biceps as he grabbed a first aid kit and came back, setting it on the bed next to me.

My nerves frayed, my body beyond exhausted, my ego still stinging with indignity over my meltdown, all I could do now was ride the wave, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to ask what was going on. "What's happening?"

A lifetime ago, I would've walked away from a man who'd yelled in my face the nickname Shane had given me. But I was no longer that woman, and this woman was not only mesmerized by his sheer strength and competence, but I was still reeling from the melody and chords that had come flooding back into my head after a year of nothing. The new melody, a sound unlike anything I'd ever written, was no longer crashing into my

consciousness and taking over every thought, but it was still there, hovering in the background, causing an itch to play I hadn't felt in forever.

"Location's burned." His voice converged with the notes in my head, and the scent of him became stronger as he reached for my towel.

The old me would've held the towel tight. I wouldn't have let a stranger see me naked for a second time. I would've known that he could overpower me in seconds. Ragdoll me over his shoulder and carry me off to somewhere I'd never find my way back from. The woman I used to be would've realized that this lethally dominant man could break me harder and faster than Kyle ever could. But I wasn't thinking about any of that.

All I could hear as I stared at him were the new ominous notes and haunting melody. Worse, an insane part of me trusted this man when I didn't trust anyone. I never had. Shane had been the only person in my life I'd ever put my faith in.

But here I was, not even pretending to hold on to the towel as he pulled it away.

Instead, I was desperately trying to push the music to the background. But the urgency of the here and now crashed into the music already in my head and layered in a chorus of dangerous chords. The melodic translation of his military-speak echoed on repeat, forming its own crescendo, and I fought to concentrate.

Location burned. Location burned. LOCATION BURNED.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "The other black SUV, is it here?"

His giant hand cupped the back of my neck, and the music instantly stopped.

I sucked in a shallow breath and opened my eyes.

Firmly holding my nape and grasping one of my arms, he nodded as he raised me into a sitting position. “Already made a second pass down the street.” His gaze assessing but clinical, he quickly glanced from my arms to my ribs to my ankle as he picked a T-shirt up from the pile of clothes he’d tossed next to me. Slipping it over my head, he fed my arms through the long sleeves as if I were a child, and I snapped out of it.

“I can do this.” His touch sending goose bumps racing across my body, I pushed my arm through the second sleeve.

“Roll the cuffs,” he ordered in a brusque tone as he knelt on one knee and propped my leg on his thigh. Inspecting my ankle, his expression didn’t change, but his jaw ticked as he opened the first aid kit.

I turned back the cuffs of his shirt two times, wondering if he knew his precise movements had a sound. “How are we going to leave?” We’d left his car in that parking garage.

“Boat.” With a careful touch but also with quick dexterity, he unwrapped the wet bandage from my ankle. Holding his makeshift spoon-splint in place on my foot, he pulled a fresh bandage out of his medical kit.

I stared at his hands. “You have a boat?” Veined, tan, thick fingers—I didn’t know how he managed small tasks with them, like buttoning a button. But then I was thinking about what else he could do with those large fingers, and every nerve in my body was suddenly singing along with the notes in my head that didn’t belong to me. They belonged to him. He wasn’t a protective warrior, he was an entire symphony of alpha dominance.

“Borrowing one.” With swift movements, actually answering my question, he had my ankle rewrapped in seconds and was grabbing another article of clothing off the bed when Missy came running back into the room,

whining and pacing. Glancing at her, he held a pair of sweatpants out for me. “Give me your good foot, *now*.”

Missy whined again, nudging Roark.

Panic dousing the music in my head, I reached for the pants. “I got it.” Shoving my legs through, barely pausing to be careful of my ankle, I stood on one leg and rolled the waistband down as Roark strode to the window.

“Stay here.” Taking his gun out of the holster on his hip, he was already moving toward the door. “Missy, guard.”

Before I could beg him not to leave me alone, his heavy black boots were barely making a sound as he rushed down the stairs.

Taking up position in the open doorway facing the stairs, his loyal dog did exactly as he told her to do. She stood guard.

“Missy,” I whispered, suddenly as frantic as I was before I jumped off that yacht. “Come here.”

Feet scuffling and a grunt sounded.

Missy moved.

Lunging for her, accidentally putting weight on my ankle, pain seared up my leg, but I caught her collar. “No,” I whisper-hissed, holding my ribs with my free hand.

Pulling at my grasp, she growled low and menacing but not at me.

Then a crash and shattering glass exploded, echoing through the house before something heavy thumped.

I couldn’t hold on to the dog anymore.

Yanking out of my grasp, Missy flew down the stairs.

SEVENTEEN

Roark

Weapon drawn, I glanced around the corner at the bottom of the stairs.

A shadow moved outside the back door before a muffled voice spoke. “Go, go, go. Flanking.”

“Fuck you. You go in. Hart and Brent are missing. We should be calling for backup.”

The shadow moved again before the first man spoke. “No time. The dog’s in there, they’re in there. Breach.”

“You fucking breach. You’re the soldier.”

One military-trained asshole, one asshole.

Moving along the wall, not making a sound, I hit the kitchen and quickly glanced out the side window. Then I unlocked the back door, cracked it and stepped back.

“Move aside,” the military-trained asshole ordered before steps sounded on the back porch. “Did you open the door?”

“Do I look suicidal? You saw the size of that dude on the beach. I didn’t open shit. He’s probably standing behind the door, waiting to pound your face in. That fucker looked insane.”

“You’re paid to handle insane.”

“Hell no, I’m not. I’m paid to watch hot, naked chicks suck dick. Slap them around a little if they get out of line. No fucking way am I getting paid enough for this shit.”

“Cover me.”

The muzzle of an automatic rifle breached first.

Silently holstering my 9mm, I waited.

Weapon aimed, the soldier stepped into my kitchen.

“You see them?” the nonmilitary asshole whispered.

The soldier held up a closed fist. Then he made a crucial mistake. He swung left toward the open kitchen without looking behind the door.

I moved.

Grabbing the barrel, torquing down, I yanked.

Too stupid to let go of his weapon, the fucker stumbled into my kitchen.

Slamming my elbow into his face, I twisted the rifle and kneed him in the groin as his nose exploded with blood. Before he dropped, I was striking the butt of his AK-47 into the back of his head.

The soldier crashed into one of the kitchen cabinets, shattering the glass front before he hit the floor.

I already had the rifle aimed and was moving to the back porch when the second asshole took off across the yard.

Missy ran into the kitchen, growling at the unconscious asshole on the floor.

“Stand down,” I ordered as I kicked my back door shut and wiped my prints from the rifle after releasing the magazine and pocketing it. Grabbing

duct tape from a kitchen drawer, I secured the asshole's legs and hands, crushed his phone's SIM card and fished his wallet out of his back pocket.

No ID, no credit cards, a few hundred in cash.

Missy whined and ran toward the front room.

"Fuck," I muttered, duct taping the asshole's mouth shut. "What do you see, girl?"

Standing at the front window, her nose between the blinds, Missy whined again but she didn't give a warning bark.

I took the stairs two at a time.

Balancing on one leg, holding a fucking lamp over her head, the woman stood just inside my bedroom. When she saw it was me, she lowered her arms.

"Are you okay?" Her eyes frantically scanned my length. "Where's Missy?"

"Get off that foot." I took the lamp from her. "Sit on the bed."

"There's blood on your arm." Holding on to the dresser, she didn't move.

"Woman," I growled. "*Sit.*"

Not fucking waiting to see what the hell she did, I grabbed my go bag, my M16 and Missy's tactical vest from the closet. Shoving the rifle into my bag, then rinsing that asshole's blood splatter from my arm in the bathroom, I strode back into the master.

Perched on the edge of the bed, the woman gave me her frantic, doe-eyed expression again. "I heard breaking glass."

“Broken kitchen cabinet.” That fucking asshole guard of Kentworth’s. The kitchen and the master suite were the only two places in my house where I’d finished the remodel. Pissed that I’d have to fix the cabinet in the kitchen, I whistled for Missy.

Bounding up the stairs, my dog made a beeline for the woman, licked her hand, then leisurely made her way to me as if I hadn’t just given her the command to get her ass to me pronto.

Trying not to be mad as hell at a canine, I slipped her vest over her head and buckled it. “Let’s go.”

The woman stood.

“Not you, the dog. You’re not walking on that foot.” Or without shoes.

“How far are we going?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I shoved some first aid supplies in my go bag and shouldered it. “You’re still not walking.” I picked the woman up.

“I’m sorry.” Low and quiet, her voice fucked with my head as she put an arm around my neck.

“Quit apologizing.” Glancing out the bedroom windows, I scanned the street.

“Maybe you’re right.” The woman looked behind us. “Maybe you’re crazy and I shouldn’t apologize for getting you into my mess. Anyone else would’ve just left me on that beach and not gotten involved.”

“I’m not anyone else.” I followed Missy down the stairs. “I’m a Marine.”

“You said you fly a seaplane for tourists.”

“Once a Marine, always a Marine.” Hitting the bottom step, I turned the corner into the kitchen as Missy started in with a low growl.

“So that means what? Instead of walking away from danger, you walk into—” Seeing the asshole on the kitchen floor, she inhaled sharply. “Is he dead?”

“No.” I kicked the backpack away from the asshole. “Missy, stand down. Pick up the backpack.”

Reluctantly backing away from the unconscious fuck on the floor, Missy grabbed the backpack with her teeth.

“Bring,” I ordered Missy as I set the woman on the kitchen table.

Dumping the backpack at my feet, Missy put herself between us and the asshole.

I grabbed the backpack, shoved it in my go bag, and shouldered it. I spared the woman a glance, but she was still staring at the guard on the floor. “Stay here. Missy, guard.”

I did a sweep through the living room, catching all the windows that faced the front of the house. No one on foot, no black SUV, no cops.

I checked one more time.

Still clear.

Hustling my ass back to the kitchen, I scanned the backyard.

“Are there any more guards out there?”

“No.” But there would be as soon as the one asshole that’d run off got word back to Kentworth. Reaching for the woman, I gave Missy a command. “Missy, heel. Left side.”

The woman put her arm around my neck again, but this time she held her ribs with her other hand. “Maybe we should stay here.”

“Not an option.” I opened the back door and scanned the yard one last time.

The woman’s voice dropped to a whisper. “What if they come back?”

Closing the door behind us, I didn’t bother locking it. “Not a question of *if*, it’s when.”

She shrank against my chest.

I double-timed it across my backyard.

EIGHTEEN

Sailor

He moved with the grace of a panther but with the speed and agility of one of those super soldiers you saw on TV or read about in books. Holding me as if he carried injured women every day of his life, he made me feel safer than I could ever remember feeling. Which only made anxiety crawl that much more across my already frayed nerves.

Safe wasn't a luxury I could afford.

That word wasn't even in my vocabulary.

But this man, striding at a fast clip across his neighbors' backyards like he owned every house and had a right to be there, he gave new meaning to my definition of confidence. He was so much stronger than I'd ever been, and I wanted to lose myself in him.

I wanted to drown in everything about him.

I also wanted to know why he favored his left leg. And why the beautiful animal keeping pace next to us was so acutely trained.

As if she knew I was looking at her, Missy lifted her head and made eye contact.

"Do dogs usually look directly at you?" I'd never had a dog. Shane had wanted one, but I was afraid we wouldn't be able to afford it. I couldn't

even think about the guilt from telling him no now. If I did, I'd sink so deep into my guilt and grief that I'd never come back.

Roark glanced out at the water. "No."

"She's looking at me."

"You're looking at her." Crossing one more neighbor's backyard, he headed toward a small dock with a moored boat. "Missy, board."

The dog ran ahead and jumped onto the boat.

"She knows what board means?"

"She knows many commands." Stepping into the boat, Roark set me in a seat next to the captain's chair, then reached under a padded cushion and pulled out a set of keys.

"You trained her well."

Quickly untying the boat and starting the engines, he didn't answer me.

Missy circled the perimeter of the small craft with her nose to the deck, then she sat next to her owner as he eased us away from the dock.

One hand on the throttle, the other steering, Roark momentarily let go of the wheel to pet Missy's head and scratch behind her ears. In turn, she licked his arm. The bond between them was so pure and their love for each other so genuine and uncomplicated, it hurt to watch.

The punishing ache in my heart for Shane ruthlessly grew larger. I missed him so much, I almost couldn't think about it.

Looking away from Roark and Missy, I stared out at the ocean I'd jumped into last night, and my thoughts turned to the dark place I never imagined I was capable of before a year ago.

What would have happened if I'd just sunk to the deep depths of the bottom? Would this man and his dog still be running on the beach? Having breakfast? Flying tourists in a seaplane? Would that captain of the fishing charter be out with clients? Would there be a new round of girls brought aboard Kyle's yacht for another night of partying where he made God knows how much selling them to the disgusting clients he ferried in? Would that crew member with the boyish smile, who'd tried to stop Kyle from hurting me, still be working on the Contender?

Would anything in any of these people's lives be any different?

Would someone else have killed two of Kyle's guards and left a third unconscious?

I didn't know, but I did know one thing for certain.

No one would have cared if I was dead.

The one person who would have was already gone.

I didn't realize tears were falling down my cheeks until a cold nose nudged my hand before a furry head rested on my thigh.

"Hi, sweet girl." Just like her owner had, I pet her and scratched behind her ears. But she didn't lick my arm like she had Roark.

I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "I don't blame you, girl."

"For what?" a gruff voice asked.

I glanced up.

His eyes as blue as the tropical ocean around us, Roark stared at me. But unlike all the other times he'd looked at me, this time, something was different. Something I couldn't pinpoint.

Feeling lightheaded, I scratched the back of Missy's neck. "Nothing."

His expression unreadable, he stared at me for a moment. Then he looked back out across the water. “If it was nothing, she wouldn’t be trying to comfort you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if she was a comfort dog, like one of those ones they brought into hospitals, but something else occurred to me. “How does she know how to both comfort and protect?” I didn’t know anything about dogs, let alone ones that had been trained for the police or military, but I didn’t think they were the same as the dogs who were service animals. It seemed unusual to have one that could both console and use deadly force.

Steering the boat toward a small island with thick mangroves, Roark glanced behind us. “She knows what she’s told.”

The weight of the long-sleeved shirt he’d put me in, despite its huge size, was starting to feel constricting. “So you told her to come comfort me?” I tugged at the neck.

For a long moment, the man who was more mysterious, more dominant and more closed off than anyone I had ever met said nothing.

Then he uttered a single word that cut through my wounded heart as sure as a knife through flesh. “No.”

Hurt I didn’t want to feel from a man I knew next to nothing about wove into irrational feelings of humiliation, and I opened my mouth. “Looks like she knows more than she’s told.”

His huge hands on the helm, his jaw ticked as he swung the boat around and pulled into a thick stand of mangroves growing along the shoreline of an uninhabited key. Cutting the engine, not saying another word to me, he glanced all around us as he pulled out his cell phone.

The morning sun, the heat, my ribs, my ankle, him, Shane, everything—
it was suddenly all too much, and my head swam.

Leaning to my good side, I closed my eyes.

NINETEEN

Roark

Cutting the engine, I dialed my cell.

Adam “Alpha” Trefor picked up on the first ring. “Roark.”

“I have a situation.”

“I have a solution. What can I do for you?”

“I need air transport. Plus one. As soon as possible.”

“To?”

“Circumstantially dependent.”

“Extraction. Understood. I’m bringing November in on this call. Level of urgency?”

“Critical.”

“Good copy. Hold.”

I glanced behind us and Trefor came back on the line.

“Roark, you’ve got both November and me on the line. November, Roark needs an extraction. Two for transport. Drop off TBD.”

“Copy. Tracing your cell now,” November stated with the telltale background noise of a jet. “Key West, gulf side, north end of the island. Are you in the water?”

“Affirmative.”

“Can you get to Key West International? I’m in the air with Zulu. We’re approaching Miami. We can divert to your location.”

“Already attempted it. My Cessna’s on apron, but it’s being watched.”

“By?” Trefor asked.

“Unsecure connection,” I evaded.

“November?” Trefor asked.

“Tracing. Hold,” November replied before adding, “Line’s secure. Roark, you’re a go.”

“Kyle Kentworth.”

Both Trefor and November went radio silent.

“Since you recognize the name, you know what I’m up against.” I gave them full disclosure. “I have an injured female. She’s one of Kentworth’s. There was hostile fire on a secluded beach on the northeast side of the island followed by an incident at a parking garage in Old Town. My plane, my ride and my home are all compromised. I need the security camera footage from the Old Town parking garage from this morning scrubbed as well as any traffic cams between Grinnell Street and the marina. I also need a sweep team for a black SUV on the second level of the parking garage as well as my residence.”

“Tangos in the SUV?” Trefor interrupted.

“Two,” I confirmed.

“Residence?” he asked.

“One. Still breathing.” Maybe.

“Copy,” Trefor replied. “November?”

“Closest cleanup crew is four hours out. Flying them in draws attention, but it’s an option. That would cut arrival time down to one hour.” November paused as he typed. “Hacking security cameras at garage now.”

“I don’t have four hours. Kentworth’s security is already on island, looking for us. They’ll notice two of their own are missing long before that timeframe. November, before you erase the security footage at the garage, can you check if a second black SUV entered the parking garage after oh seven hundred?”

“Checking,” November replied.

“Sitrep at current location?” Trefor asked.

I glanced around. “Clear.” For now.

“Can you get to Largo? There’s a private airstrip.”

“Already considered it, but I’m on a small craft with limited fuel and firepower. The Contender’s two hundred yards offshore, its ferrying speedboat already deployed. I can’t outrun either.”

“Understood,” Trefor replied. “November, options?”

November was quiet a beat. “No second black SUV has entered the garage since you left. Plates pulled on the first SUV, relaying intel to sweep team now. And... footage scrubbed.” November paused, then, “Alpha, offline.”

“Copy,” Trefor replied. “MacElheran, hold.”

The line went silent.

I glanced behind me.

My dog was now sitting with the woman, her head on her lap, getting her ears scratched. Both of them looked at me with the same damn

expression.

Trefor came back on the line. “I’m back. November’s offline, but here’s what we’re going to do. November and Zulu are flying into EYW. They’re twenty-one minutes out. That’s the good news. The bad? The Contender’s moved, and it has a visual on the airport. After Zulu and November land, they’ll grab transportation and pick you up at Sunset Marina. With any luck, none of Kentworth’s men will spot the tail number on the Gulfstream and make the connection before we get in and out. But as you know, this is Kentworth. He has resources, crew, security and long-reaching connections. The worse news is, since he’s on every agency’s radar as well as mine, you know what’s going to happen. If anyone outside Kentworth’s crew discovers you have a direct witness to Kentworth’s activities, they’re going to come after her. All the agencies will want her brought in.”

“No fucking way,” I clipped, starting the engine. It’d take me twenty minutes to carefully make my way to the marina.

“Since you called me and not the Feds, I figured that would be your response.”

“It’s not just mine,” I warned.

“Understood. Can you speak freely?”

“No.” She could still hear me over the sound of the engines.

“Okay, then I’m going to assume you discussed going to the Feds with the female and she declined?”

“Affirmative.” Reversing the engines, I backed us out of our hiding spot.

“WITSEC?”

“Not happening.” Turning the boat around, I kept to the perimeter of the key.

“She in bad shape?” Trefor asked.

“Considering? No. In general, yes. I need Talerco. I already called. He’s on standby.”

“Good copy. I’ll have him waiting in Miami once you get up here.” Trefor then cut to the chase. “So we’re clear, our options for getting her out of this are now down to two. Your involvement is trickier.”

I fucking got it. “Remove the threat or new ID.”

“Exactly,” Trefor confirmed. “I can have November start a background on her, see how deep this goes. Can you give me her name?”

“No.”

Trefor paused, then he asked a question that showed exactly why he’d been in charge of his SEAL Team. “Do you know her name?” His instincts were always spot-on.

“Negative.” Keeping us at a trolling speed, I scanned the open waters for any sign of the Contender’s speedboat.

“Christ, MacElheran, when you step in it, you really step in it. How did this wind up on your radar?”

“Washed ashore,” I answered cryptically.

“Figuratively or literally?”

“The latter.”

“Did Kentworth toss her off the Contender?”

“Close.” I glanced at the woman, but her eyes were closed.

“You’re telling me she jumped off that yacht and swam ashore? While injured?”

“Affirmative. Which is why we need to discuss the second option.”

“Understood, but new ID or not, he won’t stop coming for her if he knows she’s alive.”

“That’s my guess.” I gave the boat a little more speed.

“You don’t have to guess. That’s exactly what he’ll do, especially if she was one of his personal toys. She beat up? Wrists? Ankles? Torso? His proclivities range from violent to extreme, and that’s just the physical. If she was his and made it out, she’s lucky to be alive.”

My gaze cutting back to her small form now curled on her side, I got more pissed with every word out of Trefor’s mouth. “Not a toy,” I ground out. No woman was.

“Figure of speech, but good copy, I’ll rephrase,” Trefor appeased. “Interpreting your tone, I’m going to assume she was personally involved with Kentworth and not his clients, but either way, we’ll do what we do. I’ll handle Talerco and see you when you get up here. You good making it to Sunset Marina without an escort? If we have to, I can loop in Coast Guard.”

“Negative on the latter, affirmative on the former.” I glanced at my watch. “Time?”

“Good copy, affirmative on clearance to the marina, negative on Coast Guard. Hold for time.” Trefor paused. “Eleven minutes airtime left. Ground transport is already waiting. It’s six minutes from the airport to the marina. If you don’t connect with them in twenty, call me back. What kind of craft are you on?”

Missy whined.

I scanned the water all around us, looking for any approaching boats. “A Grady White, turquoise, center console.” Fuck, what did Missy see that I didn’t?

“Copy that. I’ll relay to November. I hear Missy’s with you. Anything else I need to know?”

Missy barked once.

Pushing the throttle, I scanned left and right. “No. I gotta go.”

“Ten-four. No easy day.” Trefor hung up.

Missy barked twice in rapid succession. Her warning bark.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Slack-jawed, eyes closed, head bent at an odd angle, the woman was sliding out of her seat.

“*Fuck.*” Cutting to idle, I turned and grabbed for her just before she hit the deck.

TWENTY

Sailor

My head swimming, my body being jostled, I tried to open my eyes.

“She coming to?” a male voice asked.

“Not yet.” Vibrations rumbled against my ear from a deeper voice.

“Who is she?” the first male voice asked.

“Don’t know,” the deeper, rumbling voice answered.

I knew that tenor. It was familiar. Like a song. One of my songs?

A third male voice spoke. “I’ll run facial recognition once we’re back on the plane.”

Facial recognition. The two words stumbled around in my mind. It sounded bad, but I was so tired I couldn’t sort it out. Giving in to a heavy weight pulling me under, I started to drift.

Sleep.

I needed sleep....

Wet heat glanced across my hand.

“Missy, sit,” the deeper voice ordered sternly.

Whispers of awareness fluttered to life then feathered across my skin.

That voice.

“She’s concerned for her,” the third male voice said.

The first male voice chuckled. “Unless you’re feeling suicidal, November, I wouldn’t be telling him that.”

November? Was it winter?

“She’s trained to be aware,” the deep voice growled.

More flutters skittered across my skin. It felt too warm to be winter. I was warm. Hot, even. And tired. *So tired.*

“Trained or not, she’s exhibiting concern for the female,” the third male voice said.

I started to drift.

“Shit,” the first voice clipped. “November, tangos, two o’clock. Now there’re four of them.”

Four what? Did I care?

“I see them,” the third voice replied calmly. “Sending traffic control request for emergency clearance now.”

“That’s drawing unwanted attention,” the first voice warned.

“Medical clearance, not VIP status. MacElheran, get her on board. Zulu, start the engines. I’ll handle the SUVs.”

“The second they see us, they’ll open fire,” the deep voice warned.

The voices started to blend together.

“I already alerted airport security. They’re on their way. Get her aboard. No one fire back, and we’ll get out of here clean.”

“Copy. Let’s go, MacElheran. Flanking. November, cover our six.”

“Good copy.”

The stiff wall of heat around me moved, and I was jostled.

Pain radiated from my ankle, and a cry escaped my lips.

“Fuck.”

Shots exploded in my head and in the air around us.

My eyes popped open.

TWENTY-ONE

Roark

Scanning the apron, looking for incoming airport security, my gaze cut to what was now four black SUVs clustered by my Cessna.

Vowing to kill those assholes if they touched my plane or shot at us, I stepped out of the vehicle with the woman in my arms. Missy followed, and the woman cried out in pain.

The front doors on all four SUVs opened, and Kentworth's guards poured out, aiming right for us.

"Fuck," Zulu muttered a split second before the guards opened fire.

The woman came to and looked right at me.

Doe eyes. Terrified.

Fuck November's no-return-fire bullshit. Marine to SEAL, I spared Zulu a glance.

"Loud and clear." He nodded, drawing. "Covering, go."

Zulu opened fire, and I double-timed it toward the Gulfstream, opening the forward cabin door. "Missy, board!"

My bitch hustled and I followed suit.

Rushing down the aisle to the divans in the aft cabin, I dumped the woman and issued her a single command. "Buckle in."

Not waiting to see if she was conscious enough to follow orders, I hauled ass back to the cockpit and climbed into the first chair. Ignoring prechecks, I started the engines, drowning out the sound of gunfire.

Zulu came flying up the airstairs and took second chair. “Those fucks better pray they didn’t hit my Gulfstream.”

“You take captain’s seat,” I ordered, starting to get up.

“No time,” he clipped, buckling in and grabbing his headset. “Get us out of here.”

Laptop in one hand, November ran up the airstairs and closed the hatch. “Clear!”

I thrust the engines and put on my headset.

Ground control was already on us. “Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, this is Key West ground, do you copy?”

“Key West ground, Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey,” I answered. “Say again.”

“Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, priority clearance granted. Clear for taxi. Proceed via alpha two, hold short of runway two-seven.”

“Key West ground, Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, proceeding via taxiway alpha two, holding short of runway two-seven. Appreciate the priority clearance.” I muted the mic. “November, get the woman buckled in.”

“Copy.” November headed aft cabin.

The radio crackled again. “Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, you’re welcome. Over to Key West tower on one-one-eight-dash-

two. Good day.”

Unmuting my mic, I scanned the apron out my side window. “Roger, Key West ground, good day.” I switched radio frequencies. “Key West tower, Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, holding short of runway two-seven.” Pushing my mic up, I glanced at Zulu. “Sitrep.”

“We’re not leaking fuel, doing what prechecks I can.” He glanced out his side window. “No visible damage. Get us in the air.”

“Copy.”

The tower came back on the radio. “Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, Key West tower, taxi into position.”

“Roger, Key West tower, Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, taxiing into position.” I muted the mic again and glanced down the aisle. The woman was huddled in a ball in the aft cabin with Missy at her feet while November, that fuck, already had his head in his laptop. “November,” I barked. “Cabin secure?”

The woman flinched.

November barely lifted his head long enough to look out his window. “Secure.”

Fuming, I glanced at Zulu. “The second we’re wheels up, you’re taking over.”

“Good copy.”

The tower came back online. “Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, you’re cleared for takeoff, runway two-seven. Good day and good luck.”

“Gulfstream November four zero niner two whiskey, roger, cleared for takeoff. Good day, Key West tower.” I thrust the engines, and the Gulfstream 650 lifted into the air with ease. Once I was out of the airport’s traffic space, I unbuckled. “Zulu, take the controls.”

“Taking the controls,” he confirmed easily, as at home in the cockpit as I was.

“You want November for second chair?”

“I can get us to Executive, but send him up here anyway.”

“Copy.” I stepped out of the cockpit and paused in the galley to grab three waters and a couple granola bars. Then I went down the aisle, throwing November an order on the way. “Second chair, now.”

Closing his laptop, November stood. “Alpha and Talerco will be on the ground at Executive Airport when we land. Alpha for sitrep and an assist from Talerco for the female.”

I didn’t say shit to the fucker who couldn’t put down his laptop long enough to get the woman a water. Walking past him and taking a seat next to the woman, I dumped two of the bottles beside me.

She stared out the window. “I see the Contender.”

Her throaty rasp kicking me in the gut, I opened a water. “That’s in your rearview.” For the moment.

She turned at the sound of my voice. “Who are those men, and whose plane are we on?”

“Friends. Their plane.” I held the water out. “Drink.”

Her eyes tracking my movement, she didn’t move. “You have friends willing to put themselves in danger for... *this*.” She whispered the last

word.

“It’s what they do,” I evaded. “You need to hydrate.”

She didn’t let it go. “What exactly do they do?”

I gave an answer more palatable than mercenaries. “They’re from Alpha Elite Security, private defense contractor.”

The distress was instantly back, twisting her already pained features. “I can’t afford to pay for any of this.” Her head and voice dropped. “Not with money or any other way.”

Refraining from grabbing her chin and forcing her to put her eyes on me, I issued her a stern command. “Look at me.”

She gave me those doe eyes.

I wanted to fucking rip Kentworth apart limb from limb. “You’re not paying a fucking cent, and *no one* is going to take advantage of you. You hear me?”

She barely nodded.

“Say it,” I demanded.

“I hear you,” she whispered.

“Good. Now, drink.”

Slow, with a slight tremor in her hand, she reached for the bottle. “Thank you.” Robbing me of her eyes again, she dropped her head and stared at the water. “I don’t remember getting off your boat. What happened?”

It wasn’t my boat, and I’d fucked up is what happened. “You passed out from dehydration. Sip, don’t guzzle.”

“Sip,” she repeated before doing what I told her. “I never realized how unmasculine that word was until you said it.”

Not fucking touching that comment, I took Missy’s collapsible bowls and a pouch of her food from her vest, then filled one bowl with water and the other with her food.

While Missy ate, I tore open a granola bar for the woman. “Any food allergies?”

Her eyes welled, and for a beat, she didn’t respond. Then she shook her head.

I handed her the bar. “Eat.”

The three of us ate and drank.

Missy wolfed her food down, and I finished next. The woman was still picking at her bar after I washed out Missy’s bowls in the lav and stowed them back in her vest.

Now that we weren’t under immediate threat and I had some backup, I took a beat to study her. Her brown eyes had a shadow of dark blue around the edge, her lips were full as fuck and every other part of her face looked like a woman you’d see on a magazine cover—if she wasn’t beat to hell with a mess of wavy blonde hair everywhere.

Her cheeks heated. “What?”

“You nauseous?” Small bites, pausing between each one, her throat swallowing twice each round—she looked like she was going to hurl.

The breath she took seemed like it came easier. “A little.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

She glanced down at the bar. “I’m not sure.”

My nostrils flared. That fuck Kentworth was a dead man. “You want something else? I can check the galley for crackers.”

“This is fine, thank you.” She glanced at Missy. “What else is in her vest of tricks?”

She didn’t want to know. “Supplies.” Including an innocuous looking keychain that hid a knife, GPS tracker, and cyanide-laced needle. The latter of which I’d never used but was now thinking about as I fixated on that fuck Kentworth and what he’d done to her.

She nodded like she knew what the hell I meant. “More supplies for Missy.”

The vest was her version of a go bag. “Three days’ worth.” The woman not being able to remember the last time she ate was fucking with my head. “Did Kentworth withhold food?”

Picking at another bite of her bar, the woman took a page out of my book and didn’t say shit.

“Cleared for landing,” Zulu called from the cockpit. “Five minutes.”

“Cabin secure,” I replied to Zulu before looking back at the woman. “You need to use the restroom?”

“Um.” Heat hit her cheeks again, and she glanced at her injured foot.

That was a yes. “Arm around my neck,” I ordered as I stood and picked her up.

“No, wait. I mean, please....” She bit her lip, but then it came back. The version of this woman I’d seen in my kitchen. The one who begged. “Please put me down,” she pleaded, her voice turning submissive as hell.

My cock got hard, and I fucking cursed myself. “I’m not a voyeur, woman.” I opened the lav door and set her down on her good leg. “Just minimizing the time on that ankle. Knock when you’re done.” I shut the door.

Then I fucking stood there, hands on hips, wondering what the hell had happened to me.

Before I had an answer, a soft knock sounded.

Opening the door, I picked the woman back up and carried her two fucking paces she could’ve managed herself. And since I was already losing my goddamn mind, I buckled her in.

Mute, doe-eyed, she stared at me as I took the seat next to her. Then she asked the million-dollar question. “What’s going to happen after we land?”

“We’re going to get you patched up.” Then she was going to be looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life, or I was going to kill Kyle Kentworth.

TWENTY-TWO

Sailor

The lavish private jet that would've given me butterflies a year ago smoothly touched down at a noncommercial airport and taxied to a spot on the tarmac near a parked black sports car. The silent, muscular man with the laptop that had an intense but almost vacant stare opened the door at the front of the plane, but then he stepped back.

A blond-haired, green-eyed man with an infectious smile came aboard and greeted laptop man. "What up, November?" He glanced in the cockpit. "How's it hangin', Zulu?" Angling toward the aisle, he blatantly checked me out as his smile turned into a grin. Then he glanced at Roark. "Well, hot damn, Mikkey, I was right." The man who looked like a surfer but talked with a Southern twang laughed as he dropped a duffle and a large black bag with a red cross stitched on it into an empty seat. "It's official, you're Romeo." He patted his leg and glanced at an excited Missy. "Come 'ere, girl. Give Uncle Talon some love."

Missy bounded over to him and jumped on his leg.

Roark scowled as he stood. "You know damn well she's not supposed to jump up."

The surfer chuckled as he scratched behind Missy's ears. Then he looked at me with mischief in his eyes. "Romeo here's just jealous his ole

girl loves me more 'an him.” He looked down at Missy. “Ain’t that right, girl?”

Missy’s tail wagged but she didn’t lick the man.

November glanced out the open door. “Where’s Alpha?”

“He’s comin’, but he said he had to take care of somethin’ first. Gives me a head start. You can close her up.” The surfer pet Missy one more time. “Down, girl. Go see that pretty lady over there and keep her company.”

Missy came over and jumped onto the seat next to me as November closed the door, then immediately went to his laptop. As if talking to himself, he asked, “Romeo?”

Talon glanced at November. “Yep, I called it. Mikkey’s now Romeo. You hackin’ your way into Fort Knox?”

November looked at the surfer with the same locked expression and intent stare he’d used on me. “If you mean the United States Bullion Depository, then no. Why Romeo?”

“Situational awareness, my friend.” Talon smiled at November like he hadn’t just insulted him. “New situation, new call sign for Mikkey. Speakin’ of....” The surfer slapped Roark on the shoulder. “You makin’ introductions, Romeo, or you gonna leave me hangin’?”

“Sailor, Talon Talerco. Talon, Sailor.” Roark looked at Talon. “She’s dehydrated, potential fractures on her left ankle and right ribs. Contusions post and pre ocean immersion. Eight hundred milligrams of ibuprofen given at oh seven hundred. LOC twice, SAEK denied. No known drug allergies.”

Talon’s demeanor immediately flipped as he grabbed his bags. “Copy,” he replied, deadly serious as he moved around Roark and came down the aisle. Setting his bags next to me, he squatted so he was at eye level. “Hey,

darlin', heard you been havin' a rough day." His piercing green eyes looking at me like he could read every reason in my head that made me jump off that yacht, he casually grasped my wrist. "How 'bout we take a look."

It was instant.

Fear broadsided me and I was jerking my hand back, shrinking away from him.

Roark was next to me in a nanosecond, barking out an order at Talon. "Stand *the fuck* down." Except Roark didn't just bark the order, he growled it in the most terrifying, threatening tone I'd ever heard.

Still squatting in front of me, Talon held his hands up. "Just checkin' her pulse, brother. LOC once with dehydration isn't unexpected, but twice is concernin'." He looked back at me. "I apologize, darlin'. I should have asked first. Won't happen again, I promise."

A low, threatening sound came from Roark, and Missy jumped off the couch and went to her master's side. If dogs could glare, she was glaring at Talon.

Seemingly unfazed, Talon lowered his hands and reached for the duffle bag. "Brought you some clothes, darlin'. Wasn't sure what size, so I got multiples. Somethin's bound to fit. But first, how 'bout I take a look at you, fix you up some, and make you feel better. Then you can put somethin' more comfortable on than Romeo's ole sweats. That sound like a good plan?"

I didn't realize I was shaking until Roark barked another order at Talon. "Clear the cabin. Five minutes."

“Copy that.” Talon stood and casually went down the aisle, opened the door, and walked off the plane.

November silently closed his laptop and followed.

Once they were both gone, Roark closed the door to the section of the plane we were in. I watched his huge back and wide shoulders rise with a deep inhale before he turned to face me with his hands going to his hips. “Talerco won’t hurt you. He’s a Navy hospital corpsman with special training. He’s the best combat medic I know, and he’s seen it all, but if you want him gone, say the word. I’ll do my best to patch you up with the supplies he brought, then we can reassess.”

Trying to choke down a hundred emotions that’d been triggered with one touch by his friend, and what he was saying to me right now—I shook my head and prayed I didn’t cry. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

The tears came anyway. I didn’t deserve this man’s help or his friend’s. “He was only trying to help. I didn’t mean to....” To what? Freak out? Face my own fears? See something reflected back at me that showed just how far I had sunk? “I’m sorry anyway.”

For three impossible seconds, he stared at me. Then he shattered my very existence. “What do you need from me right now?”

Covering my face, I burst into tears. The one thing I needed most I could never have again. But the fact that he’d asked was more than I knew how to deal with. Embarrassed I was crying, horrified about all of it, I wanted every single thing to be different. But most of all, I wanted to not be the burden I was to this man.

My body shook with another sob, and a rough hand landed on my nape.

Roark's masculine scent curled around me as his fingers curved around my neck. Holding me steady, he didn't say a word.

He didn't have to.

I felt his touch, his version of comfort, through every frayed nerve and aching hurt in my body.

This warrior didn't comfort. Too stoic, too alpha, I knew he wasn't a man who would hug you and hold you tight. But he didn't have to because this touch, what he was doing right now, his silent support—it was a thousand times more meaningful.

I never thought I would feel comfort again, not after losing Shane. I didn't want to. I didn't want to feel life at all. Shane was gone, and I didn't deserve to be comforted. But this touch, by this man, I felt it all way to my very soul, and maybe, *oh God, just maybe*, there was something left for me here in this world.

Too afraid to let my thoughts wander any further down that path, but also terrified not to, I pushed it all aside, and I just let myself soak in the warmth of a warrior's hand.

Radiating more than just heat, I wanted his touch to last forever. Even more, I wanted it to be there the next time I needed it, but I knew exactly how fragile and cruel life was. So I memorized everything about this moment—his firmness, his warmth, the silent compassion this man was capable of—and I stole it. Burying it deep, I swiped at my face and reluctantly looked up.

Ocean-blue eyes stared down at me.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Dropping his hand, he once again became the impenetrable man from the beach. “Good?”

Choosing to hold on to the memory of his touch instead of the repercussions of the aftermath, I nodded.

Opening the door and glancing at his dog, Roark tipped his chin. “Go get Talon.”

TWENTY-THREE

Roark

Talerco, November and Missy filed back on board. November went to his fucking laptop, Missy went to the woman and Talerco raised an eyebrow at me.

I nodded.

Talon gave the woman a reserved smile that made me want to level him. “You mind if I check you out, darlin’?”

Petting my dog, the woman shook her head.

Grabbing his bag, Talon sat on the divan a tolerable two feet away from her. “While I enjoy seein’ that blonde mane wave around, I like words even better.” He fucking winked at her. “Affirmations are my love language.”

Before I could follow through with leveling him, the woman spoke up for herself.

“I doubt you need affirmations.”

Talerco put his hand to his chest like he was offended. “Are you callin’ me a liar, sugar?”

“She has a name,” I ground out.

Talerco spared me a glance as he took shit out of his kit. “So do you, but that don’t mean I’m gonna use it.” Looking back at the woman, he hazed

me. “*Romeo*. Suits him, don’tcha think, darlin’?”

The second he was done fixing her up, I was going to wipe the cabin floor with his face.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Talerco pointed at her. “I saw that. You almost smiled. How ’bout we listen to those lungs?” Before she could give him permission, he was standing over her with a stethoscope pressed to her back. “Breathe as deep as you can for me but not deep enough to hurt.”

She inhaled, but then her face immediately twisted, and her eyes closed.

I moved.

Talerco shot me a warning look before speaking to her. “Hey, hey, hey.” He put his fucking hand on her shoulder, and his Southern accent took a backseat like it did when shit got real. “You’re okay, Sailor. I’m not hurting you, am I?”

She shook her head.

The fuck he wasn’t. “She has cuts there.”

“Copy.” Talerco tipped his chin at me, but the fuck didn’t listen. He moved the stereoscope across her back. “Can you tell me what just happened?”

“I-I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just....” She cleared her throat as Talerco moved the motherfucking stethoscope again. “You.... It’s nothing.” She swallowed. “I’m fine.”

It wasn’t nothing, and she wasn’t fine. Fuck this. “Talerco,” I clipped. “Outside, now.”

November came up on my six. “A word?”

I spun and glared. “No.”

Talerco stepped in and fucking handled me. “I think we got this, Romeo. You okay, Sailor? Can I look at your ankle?”

I glanced back at the woman.

Not making eye contact with me, she answered Talerco. “Okay.”

Her voice was so goddamn small and fragile, I wasn’t moving. “I said, no.”

The airstairs opened and Adam “Alpha” Trefor came aboard.

In a custom suit and thousand-dollar shoes, Trefor quietly moved down the aisle and exchanged a look with November before holding his hand out to me. “Roark.” Calm, steady, he dressed the part, but I knew he was as lethal in a suit as he was as a SEAL.

“Trefor.” I shook his hand.

Looking past me, he nodded at Talerco before addressing the woman. “Sailor, I’m Adam Trefor, Alpha Elite Security. Nice to meet you. May I borrow Roark for a moment?”

Her head dipped and she nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” As if he knew what the fuck had been going on not five seconds ago, Trefor threw down a platitude. “You’re in good hands with Talon. We won’t be long.” Turning, he moved past me and dropped his voice. “Close the door.”

Fucking fuming but getting his point, I ordered Missy to stay with the woman. “Missy, down. Guard.” My dog lay at the woman’s feet as I looked at her, but her head was still down. “Woman.”

She looked up.

“You need me, call for me,” I ordered.

Heat hit her cheeks, and her voice went soft. “Okay.”

Holding her gaze for a beat, I closed the door. Then I walked to the conference area of the cabin where Trefor and November were already seated as Zulu came out of the cockpit.

I tipped my chin at Zulu. “How’s the plane?”

“Systems are all online, but I’m grounding her until I can do a full exterior check. Any heat from Key West International?”

November shook his head. “All handled. We’re clear.”

“Copy that. I’m heading out. I need to do prechecks for the next flight.” Zulu glanced at me. “Glad you’re in one piece.” He nodded at Alpha and November.

“Appreciate the assist this morning, Zulu,” Alpha replied.

“Anytime.” Zulu walked off the plane.

November waited until Zulu closed the main cabin door after him, then he turned his laptop around to face me. “I ran her through our facial recognition software. You might want to see this.”

“Want or need?” Big fucking difference.

Trefor issued his brand of an order. Cordial but unyielding. “Have a seat.”

I sat.

November pushed the laptop toward me.

I looked at the screen.

If I wasn’t already sitting, the image of the woman on the laptop compared to what was in the aft cabin would’ve brought me to my knees.

She was a fucking shell of the stunning young woman smiling for the camera.

My head spun, I asked a stupid fucking question. “What happened?” I knew what the hell had happened. His name was Kentworth.

But November started talking and a whole new level of fucked came out. “Evelynn Grace Tory. She was put in the foster system along with a half brother. Mother was an addict, died when she was sixteen, brother was five. When she turned eighteen, she fought to get custody of her brother, but it took her five years to prove she could support him. When she finally gained custody of her brother, she held it together for three years before the brother died. Congenital birth defect. That was twelve months ago. He was thirteen. He passed while she was at a gig. She came home, found him unresponsive and called 911, but he was already gone.”

Jesus fuck. No wonder she looked lost as hell. “Gig?” I glanced at November before looking back at her picture.

“She’s a singer-songwriter, mostly the latter. No formal education, employment history a laundry list of minimum-wage jobs. She was taking what she could get to support herself and her brother while she wrote songs. She has dozens of copyrights. From what I found, she used to take singing gigs, but they were infrequent. Mostly she tried to sell her music.”

Fuck, that throaty rasp probably was her true voice. “Did she?”

“Yes.” November turned the laptop around, typed, then faced it back toward me. “Commercials, sound clips, some TV and movie credits, but I imagine she was aiming higher.”

I looked at a long list of credits with her name, but it didn’t say Evelynn Grace Tory. “Sailor Grace?”

“Stage name, pseudonym.” November took the laptop again. “She was pushing her work at all the big-name music studios, trying to get in the door. Then her digital footprint stopped three months after her brother’s death.”

“What happened then?”

“Kentworth,” Trefor answered me before addressing November. “Show him.”

November looked at Trefor.

Alpha nodded. “He needs to see.”

November glanced back at his screen and typed. “She was the entertainment for a charity event in Manhattan nine months ago.”

Manhattan? “Entertainment?” My jaw ground. “What was she doing in New York?” Kentworth’s yacht was usually in the waters off the coast of Key West or Miami. Rumor had it, he trolled everywhere from south Florida to South America for his trafficked women.

“She lives in New York, or did, Brooklyn specifically. Her apartment manager hasn’t seen her in nine months. He said some muscle paid her rent for a year in advance.” November typed again. “As for the charity gala nine months ago, she played piano and sang covers, according to the event’s organizer. Kentworth was in attendance, donating a sizable sum, probably money laundering, but that’s off-topic. As far as I know, the event was the first time they met.” He pivoted the laptop and hit play once it was facing me.

I watched security camera footage of what looked like a rooftop deck on a high-rise. At first, there was nothing, then a dress-and-heels-clad Evelyn

pushed out a set of double glass doors and beelined for the drop. Clutching the railing, wind blowing her hair, she leaned her head over the edge.

I was about to close the fucking laptop because I wasn't going to sit here and watch a suicide attempt, when a prick in a suit casually walked out. Drink in hand, he leaned his arms on the railing next to her. Keeping his face away from the security cameras like he knew exactly where they were, he drank his drink, but then he must've said something to her, because her head whipped up.

Grainy, shadowed by night, I could still see the look in her eyes.

Doe-eyed. Lost as fuck.

That motherfucker Kentworth. "He preyed on her."

"Elevator," Alpha clipped.

November reached around the laptop and hit a couple of keys.

The video clip changed to a new one, and I was suddenly looking at her and Kentworth in an elevator in full light, wishing like hell I wasn't. One second she was two feet away from him. The next, he was grabbing her wrist, twisting her arm behind her back and slamming her face-first against the elevator wall. One of her legs buckled, a heel fell off and she dropped to her knees, but the motherfucker didn't let go of her wrist.

No wonder she'd flipped when Talerco grabbed her wrist. "Trefor," I warned.

"Keep watching," he ordered.

Not fighting back, fingers grasping at a handrail, the woman didn't even flinch as that asshole yanked her arm to the point of breaking before bending over her and yelling until she dropped her head. No audio with the

clip, but I fucking saw it. Veins popping on his neck, mouth open, that fuck was yelling.

Then, as quickly as it happened, Kentworth let go of her and stepped back. She slumped to the floor, and that asshole straightened his cuffs. Staring straight ahead, he said one more thing before the elevator doors opened and he walked out.

For a beat, she sat there.

Then she reached for her heel with a shaking hand, put it on and used the handrail to pull herself up. Smoothing down her dress, she pushed her hair back and walked out of the elevator.

“Next footage,” Alpha ordered November.

“No.” I fucking stood and strode to the aft cabin, throwing open the door.

Missy sat up, and the woman looked at me with those eyes.

Fitting her leg with a soft cast, Talerco squatted by her foot. “Nothin’ doin’, Romeo, nothin’ doin’. Your woman’s good. We’re just fixin’ her up.”

“Out,” I ordered Talerco.

Glancing up, he took one look at me then stood. “Be right back, darlin’.”

My eyes on her, I waited till Talerco walked out and closed the door.

Then I did what I fucking should have back at my house.

Grasping her chin, tempering my tone, I gave her too little too late. “I have never yelled at a woman before this morning, and I will never yell at you again.”

Her eyes welled.

I gave her what no one else had ever gotten out of me. “I apologize.”

“You don’t have to,” she whispered in her throaty rasp that I was now wondering what the hell sounded like when she sang.

“Yes, I do.”

Staring at me for a beat, she slowly nodded like she understood the shit in my head. “Then I forgive you.”

“Don’t.” Letting go of her before I did something stupid, I opened the aft cabin bulkhead.

Arms crossed, leaning against a seat, Talerco eyed me. “You good?”

No. “Fine. Fix her up. She has untreated scratches on her back.”

Not questioning me, Talerco nodded. “Copy that.” He went back to the aft cabin and shut the door.

TWENTY-FOUR

Sailor

Don't.

Like the final chord of a piece, Roark's single edict echoed in my mind, breaking pieces of me I didn't know I had left to break. Without thought, I glanced at his girl.

The golden retriever looked at me like she was as confused as I was, then she put her head down on her front paws.

"I know, girl," I whispered.

Talon casually walked back into the small, private area of the plane and shut the door. "You okay, darlin'?"

"Fine."

"Huh. That's the exact same answer I got from Romeo, and for the record, never said you weren't." Going to one knee, he checked the Velcro straps on the Aircast that he'd already fitted on my ankle.

Trying to push down all thoughts of Roark, I focused on Talon, but I couldn't tell if he was flirting without humor or actually saying I was okay. "Is my ankle broken?"

"Don't think so," he answered absently as he tightened one strap. "But this here ain't a substitute for X-rays. It'll hold ya till you get checked out,

though.” Standing, his hands went to his hips, and he frowned as looked down at me. “Good news or bad news?”

My stomach dropped. “Bad.”

“That was the easy part. I gotta look at those ribs, darlin’, and it isn’t gonna be fun.”

I tried to make a bad joke. “This has been fun?”

His smile came out. “More ’an you know.”

I saw the mischief in his eyes. “What does that mean?”

“Pretty sure you already know, darlin’.” He winked.

I didn’t. Neither did I ask. “You can look at my ribs.” The sooner I got it over with, the better.

“All right, then, darlin’. I’ll walk you through it, but first, we’re gonna look at that back.” Stepping forward before I could argue that he’d said ribs, not back, he already had my wrists and was putting my hands on his waist. “Lean into me if you need to and tell me if you start to feel faint.” Quickly but gently, he lifted my shirt up my back.

The cold air-conditioning of the plane hit my skin, making me shiver, and Talon went silent.

Alarm spread. “Is it bad?”

Losing most of his Southern accent, Talon’s voice turned hard. “MacElheran said scratches, not welts.” Lifting my shirt higher, he gently freed my right arm from the sleeve. “Who did this, Sailor?”

I tried not to think about it, but the memory came anyway.

“Someone’s birthday is today.” Kyle traced an invisible line down my arm to my wrist.

Gooseflesh broke out across my skin. "I don't celebrate birthdays." Not anymore.

"Then it's time to change that." His fingers encircled my wrist, and he applied pressure.

Knowing the silent command, I went to my knees, but I didn't give in. "Celebrations are for people who deserve them." I didn't.

His laugh was as dark as his soul. "Deserve has nothing to do with it. If I say we're celebrating, then we're celebrating." He leaned down to my ear. "The only question is how." Pulling my arm up my back with one hand, he fisted my hair with the other and yanked until my head fell back. "Shall I have the chef make you a cake?"

My stomach rumbled, but nausea rose. I didn't have a chance to say no.

Kyle pulled my hair harder and gave me a different option. "Or would you prefer another kind of celebration? One of my choosing?" Abruptly letting go of me, playing his brand of mind fuckery, he stepped back.

I remained kneeling, facing away from him. Different meant punishing, and his punishments were painful. But pain meant forgetting.

I didn't even have to think about it. "Your choosing."

"Good answer, birthday girl." A crop whispered across my bare back before a cuff went around my left ankle. "Ready?"

"Sailor."

I looked up.

Talon stared at me. "Does Romeo know who did this?"

I was trapped. If I said yes, I was admitting to what'd happened. If I said no, Talon looked exactly like the kind of man who would push me for

more information.

No easy answer, I simply nodded.

“And the bruising around your ankle? I’m assuming that wasn’t accidental either?”

Technically, I hadn’t meant to twist and fall with the cuff on, but I nodded again.

“Roark said you were submerged. You were in the ocean with those welts?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“How long?”

I didn’t know why he needed to know, but it seemed important, so I answered as best as I could. “I’m not sure. For as long as it took to swim about two hundred yards to shore.” It’d felt like an eternity when I was in the water, but now I hardly remembered the swim, only the bullets and the pain of kicking.

Inhaling deeply, Talon went to one knee. As clinical as Roark had been when he’d looked at me, Talon examined my ribs. “Just so you know, darlin’, if Romeo doesn’t take out that piece of shit who beat you, I’m doin’ the job for him. Deep breath for me.” Without warning, he pushed on my ribs where they were bruised the worst.

Pain robbing me of all breath, I saw stars.

“Sorry, darlin’, sorry,” Talon muttered absently as he pushed again.

Gasping, I flinched away from him. “Please, stop.”

“Nothin’ doing, darlin’, nothin’ doin’, just checkin’, once more.”

His large hand pressed against my back this time as his other hand held the front. It didn't hurt as bad, but tears were already streaming down my face.

Still holding me on the front and back of my rib cage, he eased me back against the couch. "All done, darlin'." He reached for something in his medical kit.

"What's the good news?" I asked, out of breath from the pain.

"Nothin's gonna puncture your lungs. You ever taken opiate pain meds before?"

I didn't know if he was joking about the puncture thing or actually being serious. "I've never taken anything." Growing up watching a mother snort, shoot, swallow, or drink anything that would make her high, I didn't touch alcohol or drugs.

Pulling an IV bag out of his kit, Talon paused and glanced at me. "What am I not hearin' in that statement? You recoverin'? NA? AA?"

"No."

"Not a judgment, darlin'," he warned. "I need to know before I give you anythin'."

"I didn't take it as one, and I don't want any pain pills."

Talon sat back on his heels and looked pointedly at me. "Okay, spill. I've had Marines in better shape 'an you beg me for morphine."

Still feeling where he'd pressed on my ribs, my ankle throbbing, but not as much, I was just... tired. I was tired of aching and welts and scratches and pain and grief and guilt. I was tired of wondering what the six-foot-five pilot was doing on the other side of the door. But mostly I was so

profoundly homesick, I had no descriptive words or musical notes to give it. More than anything, I just wanted to be able to hug my little brother and smell him one more time.

Nothing had ever smelled like home to me except Shane.

Not even my mother.

I looked at the blond surfer in front of me and I told him the truth. “My mother was an addict.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Talon studied me a moment. “Would you prefer I didn’t give you anythin’ for the pain?”

“Yes.”

“That Advil Romeo give you help any?”

Nothing helped. “Yes.”

Talon’s eyes narrowed. “I’m callin’ bullshit, but I’m also respectful of a woman’s right to choose.” He winked. “Fluids and antibiotics it is.” Standing, he hung the IV bag over my head on a little hook in the airplane’s ceiling like it was put there for this exact reason, then he put on gloves. Taking out five plastic syringes and setting them on a small clean hand towel he’d placed next to me, he then pulled a section of medical tape off a roll and stuck one end of it to the back of his gloved hand. “You allergic to any antibiotics?”

“Not that I know of. Why do I need them?”

“Open wounds in bacteria-infested bodies of water are never a good combination. Those welts don’t look infected, and the wounds are closed now, but I don’t know what they looked like when you went for a swim, so I’m choosin’ precaution. You’ll feel a little sting, darlin’.” Quick and

methodical like he'd done this thousands of times, he took my arm, swiped an alcohol wipe in the crook of my elbow and slid a small needle in me faster than I could blink. Two seconds later it was taped in place and he was unwrapping the syringes. Using another alcohol swab to wipe the end of the line he'd put in my arm, he picked up one of the syringes and pressed on the top till it leaked a few drops. Then he connected it to the line in my arm.

Rationally, I trusted him, but emotionally, I panicked. "What is that?"

"Just flushing your line before I give you antibiotics." His green eyes met mine as he depressed the plunger on the syringe in a start and stop motion until it was empty. "Promise, darlin', no pain meds." He grabbed the next syringe.

Suddenly, I felt lightheaded. "That's a lot of antibiotics."

"Only one is antibiotics." He did the same start and stop motion with the second syringe. "First and last two are just saline." He picked up the third syringe, looked at his watch, and very slowly pushed just a little of the syringe, then looked at his watch again and waited.

"What are you doing?" My heart racing, panicky tingles spreading across my body, it felt like if I didn't talk, I would pass out.

Green eyes glanced at me. "Slow IV push on the antibiotics. We'll be done in five minutes." He tipped his chin at the bag over my head. "Then I'll hook you up to that drip for hydration, which is just a fancy bag of water and saline, and we'll get you on your way to feelin' better." He glanced at his watch and pushed a little more on the syringe before looking back at me. "You ever take anythin' for that anxiety?"

"I don't have anxiety." I just wanted to crawl out of my own skin at the moment. That or rip the IV from my arm.

“Just white coat syndrome?”

“You’re not in a white coat.” I wanted to vomit.

“Figure of speech.” He glanced at his watch and pushed a little more of the syringe. “You ever take a Xanax?”

“No.” I had to look away from what he was doing.

“Want one now?”

I glanced up at him. “I said I didn’t want any pain medicine.”

“Not a pain med. It’s a mild sedative for anxiety and panic disorder. It’d take the edge off of what you’re feelin’ right now.” He glanced at his watch and depressed the syringe a little more. “Your pulse is jumpin’, your breathin’ quickened, and you’re lookin’ at this IV like I’m poisonin’ you. Puttin’ two and two together, I’m guessin’ you saw your mama shoot up, and you’re not diggin’ what’s happenin’ right ’bout now.”

I didn’t know if I was more embarrassed by how spot-on he was or if I just hated what was happening. “I don’t need a Xanax.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed one, darlin’. I asked if you wanted one, but point taken.” He pressed the last of the antibiotic syringe in and grabbed the next saline one. “Almost done.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I hoped I didn’t faint.

TWENTY-FIVE

Roark

The look in her eyes when she'd said she forgave me was fucking with my head. Taking the seat in the conference area of the cabin I'd vacated, I threw Alpha a warning. "Kentworth is going down."

Alpha looked at me the same fucking way Talerco had. Then he nodded at November.

November hit a few keys and turned his laptop to face me.

"I don't need to see any more fucking footage."

"Watch," Alpha ordered.

I looked at the screen. Street view of Manhattan, three SUVs at the curb, middle one with the back door open, that fuck Kentworth walked into view and got in the SUV.

"I said I don't need to see this."

"Yes, you do," Alpha countered.

Five fucking seconds later, she appeared in the camera's angle.

Then she walked the same path as Kentworth and got in the same SUV.

Slamming the laptop closed, I glared at Trefor. "What the fuck did he say to get her in that SUV?"

"You're asking the wrong question," Alpha calmly replied.

“What do you think is the right question? And don’t feed me any bullshit about his extra security, his contacts or how he’s impenetrable.” No one was ever one hundred percent immune.

“It’s not extra. That’s Kentworth’s usual protocol.”

“I’m supposed to be intimidated by three SUVs? Half a dozen of those fucks Kentworth employs as security came after us today, and not one of them managed to hit me, Missy or the woman.”

Trefor raised an eyebrow. “Did it occur to you that maybe they weren’t shooting to kill?”

“No.” Trefor didn’t give tells. The fact that he’d just intentionally given a corresponding facial movement with his question told me he was angling for something. But speaking of shooting, I glanced at November. “What’s the status on the SUV in the garage in Old Town and the asshole in my house?”

“Hold.” November pulled his cell out and shot off a text.

I looked back at Alpha. “Cut the bullshit. Save us both the time and feed me whatever bottom line you’re angling for.”

Studying me, Trefor leaned back and rested his arms on the table between us, steepling his fingers. “I’m after Kentworth. I have been for a while. The Feds want him—hell, half a dozen agencies around the world want him.”

“Then go get him.” The fuck was on his boat last night. He’d be there again.

“Not that simple,” Trefor countered.

Shocker. “Because?”

“Sitrep,” November interrupted. “Garage cleared, house in progress.” He looked up from his cell at Trefor. “The captured guard is still alive, barely. Do we want him to stay that way?”

I said, “No,” at the same time Alpha said, “Yes.”

I glanced at Trefor and leveled him with a look. “He entered my house armed, with intent to kill. He has military training and won’t necessarily break under pressure if tapped for intel. That makes him both useless and a liability.”

“Keeping him until this is over could give us leverage,” Alpha argued. “Then we hand him to the Feds.”

“Kentworth won’t give a shit about him.” There was no leverage. The guard would be replaced before tomorrow.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Alpha countered. “But I disagree on tapping him for intel. He’s not trained like my men. He’ll break.”

I conceded the point. If he’d been any good, he would’ve gone after a legitimate job at AES for a hell of a lot more money. “What if this drags out? You have facilities for that?”

“Yes.”

Fuck. “Fine.” I glanced at November. “Keep him.”

“Copy.” November shot off a text.

Trefor eyed me. “This is why you should come work for me.”

“Fuck off.”

“Hear me out.”

Goddamn it. “No. You want me to pay you for today, I will, but we’re not having this conversation.” I wasn’t putting myself back in the line of

fire.

Trefor's tone turned lethal. "We're already having this conversation, and don't insult me. I'm here because you asked. End of." Dialing it back, he leaned forward. "Look, I want Kentworth. Yes, there's money in it for me. Yes, I'm stretched thin on personnel. Yes, you're motivated, available and skilled, and I'll pay you enough to clear the debt on your Cessna. After that, you can pick and choose whatever assignments you want. Hell, just fly for me, and I'll be grateful."

That fucker. "You ran a background check on me?" If he knew I was still paying on the Cessna, then he knew I had a mortgage.

"Technically, I didn't," Trefor evaded.

I threw November a hostile glare. "Next time you want information on me, fucking ask. If I want to tell you, I will. Understood?"

November didn't miss a beat. "I'm doing my job, which, in this instance, directly benefitted you."

This should be good. "How the fuck so?"

"Without watching your digital footprint, I wouldn't have known where you were today, which of the six black SUVs in that garage had the bodies, what direction the guard went after fleeing your house, and I wouldn't have known that Kentworth ran all the same checks on you that I did. I also wouldn't have had the opportunity to reverse ping that fleeing guard's cell and backdoor my way into Kentworth's texts where I found a message he sent to his head of security just before oh seven hundred that had your name, photo, address, occupation and the Cessna's tail number. A text that also said he wants both you and the female brought in alive."

Jesus fucking Christ. Giving November a pass for hacking me this time, I asked what I needed to know. “Why does Kentworth want me alive?”

Trefor and November exchanged looks.

“Tell me,” I demanded.

November turned to his laptop, effectively checking out.

I looked at Alpha.

Adam “Alpha” Trefor folded his hands together. “Kentworth likes toys. Male and female.”

TWENTY-SIX

Sailor

“How’d you get the nickname Sailor?”

My eyes still closed, I wondered why Talon’s voice didn’t have any music to it like Roark’s did. “Who said it’s a nickname?”

Talon chuckled. “No one names a woman pretty as you Sailor. Trust me, I was in the Navy, and I know sailors. You ain’t that.” His scent intensified and the air shifted. “All done with the syringes. Hooking you up to the IV now.”

Opening my eyes, I watched the veins and muscles in his forearms move like notes across a score as he worked on the IV then tossed stuff back in his medical bag. “Maybe it doesn’t have anything to do with sailing.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “Just the same, I bet there’s a story behind it.”

Not one I was going to tell him. Not that I ever told anyone, anyway. It was my nickname and my memory of Shane.

“Mind if I ask you somethin’ else, darlin’?”

Yes. “No.”

“What triggered you earlier?”

I didn’t answer.

“Life’s a minefield with PTSD, huh?” Talon casually shook his head like he hadn’t just diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder in a single sentence. “Never know what you’re gonna get, but it sure ain’t a box of chocolates.” He kept talking like we were having a two-way conversation. “For me, comin’ off deployments, not bein’ downrange where you expect life to be a certain way, it was all the noise back home. War is loud, you expect that, but goddamn, life’s louder.” He chuckled ironically as he pulled something else out of his medical kit. “I never noticed it before bein’ outside the wire, but I did when I got home. You ever notice the noise of life? That what got you started when I first met you? My voice? Sometimes it ain’t a noise at all. Sometimes it’s a smell.” He half smiled. “I’ve been told I smell like the beach.”

“You do.” He smelled like the ocean and coconuts.

“Can’t take the credit.” He grinned. “Surf wax.” He bent and looked at my cheek. “Bein’ on the waves is my one addiction, next to my ladies, of course.”

Ladies? I didn’t ask, and he didn’t elaborate.

Instead, he used a fresh alcohol swab to gently dab at my cheek and skillfully wove his way back to his original question. “Somethin’ ’bout me trigger ya, darlin’? Because if I know what it is, maybe I can avoid it in the future.”

“You can’t,” I admitted.

A frown creased his handsome face. “You sure ’bout that? I got a lotta tricks up my sleeve besides antibiotics, hydration and casts. Some even Romeo ain’t seen yet.” He winked as he fanned his hand by my cheek.

“I’m sure you do.”

Sitting next to me, he uncapped a small tube of something. “How ’bout while I seal this cut up on your cheek so it won’t scar too bad, you tell me what I did.”

Weary, exhausted and stupidly trusting he wouldn’t say anything to Roark, I opened my mouth. “It was your eyes.” The swallow stuck in my throat, and I barely whispered the truth. “It felt like you saw me.”

“Ah.” Holding my face, he squeezed the tube across the cut on my cheek, capped it, and checked the IV. Then he took his gloves off, tossed them in his kit and focused his gaze on me. “You’re right, darlin’, I did see you. You wanna know why?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “I tried it once too.” As casual as if we were talking about the weather, he nodded. “You been where I have, you see enough, you learn to recognize it. But more ’an that, I’ve been there and came out the other side.” He shook his head. “But not because I did it on my own.” His voice, his demeanor, they turned deadly serious. “I had to be resuscitated.”

My heart rate flew into the stratosphere, beating so hard I thought I was going to have a heart attack. “Why are you telling me this?”

He chuckled, but there was no humor to it. “Honestly, darlin’, I don’t know. I can count on one hand the number of people who know, and not one of ’em is on this plane. ’Cept now you, so maybe this stays between us?”

Tears welled and I nodded.

“Wanna tell me what got you here?”

My horse voice cracked on a desperate whisper. “I jumped off a yacht.” I tried to swallow past the grief. “I thought I wanted to be with my brother.”

The man who surfed and knew combat trauma care nodded without an ounce of judgment. “I hear ya. I thought I wanted to be with my wife.”

Grief rolled down my cheeks. “She’s gone?”

“Gone from this life.” His hand covered his heart. “But not from here. Your brother passed?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I’m sorry for you too, darlin’. Even though I know the words ain’t always a comfort. In fact, sometimes they’re the opposite, but I mean ’em as intended.” He held out his hand, palm up. “So what do ya say we make a pact?”

I nervously looked at his hand.

“It’s an easy one, promise.”

Nothing was easy. “I’m not a pact kind of person.”

“Me neither, darlin’, but I’m feelin’ it today, and Romeo’s one of the best men I know. I think you’ll take comfort in this kinda pact.”

Remembering what I’d asked of Roark in his kitchen, my tearstained cheeks heated, and I pulled my hands closer to my body. “I-I don’t think so.”

“For the record, he ain’t judgin’ you, darlin’. That snarly disposition’s how he gets when he cares ’bout somethin’. And trust me, just like you and me, he doesn’t like to care.” Talon’s voice turned solemn. “He doesn’t trust it.”

I didn’t trust anyone.

Talon tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “I heard that.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to, darlin’. You’re projectin’ it loud and clear. You don’t trust no more ’an the rest of us. But the difference between us and you is that we have each other, and this is why I wanna make a pact with you.”

All I could do was stare at him and wonder how I’d wound up here.

“Family ain’t what you’re born into. Same as friends, it’s what you choose.” He extended his hand toward me. “How ’bout a new kinda family—me, you and Romeo. *Pact*,” he stated heavily.

“Roark isn’t going to want that.”

The surfer slash medic grinned wide. “Oh, darlin’, if you never trust another word I say, trust me on this. He’ll want it.” He winked before tipping his chin toward Missy who was still lying patiently at my feet. “Besides, you already got Missy eatin’ out of the palm of your hand, and I ain’t never seen that dog take to no one ’cept Romeo. Now, come on and humor an old man. Take my hand.”

“You’re not old, and Missy came to you.”

“Missy didn’t come to me, I called her over. And I’m gettin’ older by the second, waitin’ on you to accept my offer of friendship.”

The heat of both embarrassment and shyness flushed my cheeks. “You said family.”

His voice softened. “That I did.”

“I don’t have any family,” I admitted, a fresh wave of silent tears falling.

Talon’s expression sobered. “Now you do.” He took my hand and squeezed. “Pact, Sailor-whatever-your-real-name-is, *pact*.”

“Pact,” I whispered, my heart both breaking and maybe feeling just a little less heavy as I tried to pull my hand back.

Talon didn’t let go. “One more thing, sugar. Can you do me a favor?”

I stiffened. He’d done so much for me, but I didn’t like owing anyone favors. I’d spent my entire childhood watching my mother trade favors. “Not without knowing what it is,” I answered as truthfully as I could.

He flashed a quick half smile. “I knew you were spunky, darlin’. I like it. Keep that up. Give Romeo a run for his money.” His expression sobered. “But that’s not the favor. This is.” His tone turned grave. “You ever feel like jumpin’ again, you give me a call first. Deal?”

“I don’t know your number.” Or have a cell phone anymore. Kyle had taken mine the moment I’d gotten on his yacht all those months ago.

Talon rattled off his number and made me repeat it back to him twice before he was satisfied. “Good, darlin’. Now remember our deal.”

Maybe it was this surfer slash medic, maybe it was his pact, maybe it was because I finally realized I needed something more, but I nodded and gave him a truth I had not even admitted to myself yet. “I don’t want to jump anymore.”

“Glad to hear that, darlin’.” My new friend squeezed my hand before letting go. “I’m turnin’ you over to Romeo before that Scottish temper kicks in and he decides to come barrelin’ in a second time.” Zipping his bag, he stood. “You take care, darlin’. Romeo’ll remove your IV when it’s done, and remember to go easy on that ankle.” Pausing, he stared at me a moment. “Whatever the story behind it is, Sailor suits you, so I’m leavin’ it be. Besides, you made it ashore, and I can’t think of a more apt nickname

'an that because a sailor always returns to port." He winked. "Give Romeo hell, darlin'. Been a pleasure." He walked out the small door.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Roark

For a full ten seconds, I studied Alpha. Something was off. Kentworth didn't scare me, no matter what the fuck his proclivities were. Dead was dead. He could eat a bullet like any other sex-trafficking asshole.

Then I remembered what Alpha had said earlier. He was right. I wasn't asking the right question. "Why haven't you gone after Kentworth before this? If you had the resources to bail me out today, you had the time to pick that motherfucker off."

For a full beat, Trefor stared back. "I can't personally go after him."

I tipped my chin toward November. "Send him." Laptop or not, I knew who he used to be. November may have sat behind a desk when he was an Air Force cyber security specialist, but he was as lethal as any of us—maybe more so because you'd never see him coming.

"I can't involve AES either," Trefor admitted.

"Last time I'm asking. Why the fuck not?"

Staring me down like he was assessing whether or not he could trust me, Alpha didn't say shit.

Knowing his game, I waited.

Ten seconds down, he nodded. "I made a deal."

“Which means?”

“I promised someone something.”

“Cut the fucking bullshit, Trefor.”

“I have a deal with his boss,” was all he admitted.

Staring at Trefor, I wondered if I ever knew him at all. “You’re not touching a human trafficker because you cut a deal with his bankroll?”

“More or less,” he evaded.

“Try more.” I wasn’t letting this slide.

“I already told you enough to put you at risk.”

Bullshit. “November’s sitting here. He at risk too?”

“This doesn’t involve him, this was a decision I made, but yes, he’s aware of the situation.”

Fucking situation. “That’s what a beat-to-hell woman is to you now, a situation?” I changed my mind, I didn’t want to hear any more. “Don’t bother answering that.” The picture painted, I tried to rein it in, but I was fucking done. “You’re not here because I called.” The self-serving prick. “You saw the opportunity to use me to go after Kentworth because I’m not on your payroll.” I stood. “Don’t ever fucking call me again.” Aiming for the aft cabin, I turned.

The air shifted behind me, and Alpha issued one of his orders. “Sit. *Down.*”

I spun, expecting to see Trefor on his feet, but it was November standing while Trefor calmly sat.

Throwing a warning glare at the Air Force hacker, I looked at Alpha. “We’re done.”

“What was the first goddamn thing I said to you when you called this morning?” Trefor demanded.

I heard his damn question, but I was focused on the fact that he’d not only swore, but his tone had gone from corporate fuck to pissed-off SEAL. Except Adam “Alpha” Trefor didn’t lose his shit any more than he would show his hand. Not unless someone cracked his wall, and I’d only ever seen that one other time.

“I’ll remind you,” he clipped. “You said, *I have a problem*. My response? *I have a solution*.” He stood. “What part of that wasn’t about friendship?”

Leverage, quid pro quo, stocked favor—I could list half a dozen reasons, but I didn’t.

Head fucked over a brown-eyed blonde who’d gotten under my skin, I stood there.

Knowing he had me, Trefor nodded once. “Whatever resources I have, they’re yours. November will help you get your woman settled, then go after Kentworth. End that prick or hand him over to the Feds. I don’t care which.”

I should’ve said no because he was withholding information. I also should’ve fucking told him she wasn’t mine. But I didn’t say either.

Both our lives were fucked with Kentworth breathing, so I leveraged.

“She’ll need a new ID, full setup. Foolproof.” She’d have to start over. Whether Kentworth was dead or not, who the fuck knew who’d she’d seen on that yacht over the course of nine months, not to mention the fact that whoever was behind Kentworth could know about her.

“Done,” Trefor agreed.

This time I asked the right question. “Does Kentworth’s payroll know who she is?”

“Not that I’m aware of, and minor distinction, he doesn’t fund Kentworth or his activities.”

“You said boss.”

Trefor looked me right in the eye. “I did.”

Boss. Not payrolled. *Jesus Fuck*. “Who am I going to have on my back if I take out Kentworth?”

“No one.”

“Bullshit.” Boss meant mafia. Mafia meant big fucking problem if you took out anyone they didn’t already want dead. “Which family?”

“You’re not going to have a problem.” Trefor didn’t deny the mafia connection. “That’s a promise I’m making you.”

I didn’t know if I believed him, but I took him at his word because if anyone could cut a deal with the fucking mafia and come out the other end, it was Trefor. “And if I hand Kentworth over to the Feds?”

Trefor inhaled and his gaze drifted. When he looked back at me, he gave me the hard truth. “That could potentially be problematic.”

“Understood.” Dead men didn’t talk. “How soon can you get her an ID?”

Trefor looked at November.

“Forty-eight hours,” November answered.

“I need it sooner.” I wasn’t going to leave her to go after Kentworth without knowing first that she got set up. If, for any reason, I didn’t come back, I needed to know she’d be good, but fuck, forty-eight hours when

someone like Kentworth was after you was a long fucking time. More importantly it gave him the opportunity to cover his tracks and disappear.

Trefor and November exchanged a glance.

November shook his head.

Trefor didn't budge. "Forty-eight hours."

Fuck. "If Kentworth hacked my shit, it's only a matter of time before he realizes an AES jet was on the apron in Key West and he comes looking in Miami. We need somewhere safe to land for forty-eight hours, and I want backup."

"Agreed and done." Trefor glanced at November.

"Copy." November opened his laptop. "We have a client pickup in New York. Departure is set for oh nine hundred. I can keep a touchdown in Ashville off the radar."

"Black Mountain?" Trefor asked.

November nodded. "Currently vacant."

"Make it happen. I'm letting Echo know." Trefor pulled out his cell and sent off a quick text before glancing at me. "We've got a secure property in the mountains. Access in and out is limited. I'm sending Echo with you. He served on the Teams with me, and he's familiar with the location. Anything else you need, let me or November know. Otherwise, I'll be in touch." He held his hand out. "For the record, I meant what I said earlier."

"Understood." Neither of us big on apologies, we shook.

Trefor nodded, then glanced at November. "Keep me in the loop. You going to New York?"

"Copy, and no, wasn't planning on it."

“Who’s flying up?” Trefor asked.

“Zulu and Victor.”

Christ. “I’m not putting the woman on a plane that Conlon’s flying.” I’d seen enough of Vance “Victor” Conlon’s helicopter antics to last me a lifetime. It was a miracle he’d never crashed.

“He’s working on his flight hours.” November glanced at me. “He’ll be second chair.”

Fucking figured Conlon didn’t have his pilot’s license. “Is that a question or a statement?”

“You can fly second,” November offered.

“Gulfstream?”

November nodded. “650. Same as this one.”

Tempting. “I’ll think about it.”

“I have a meeting to get to.” Trefor glanced at me. “Take first chair, give Zulu a break. Conlon could use your brand of instruction.”

“I’m not an instructor.” I was a fucking pilot.

“Exactly.” Trefor clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll be in touch.” He walked off the plane, and November stood.

Closing his laptop, November fit it into a messenger bag, then paused to look at me. “What gear do you want?”

I knew what he fucking meant. He was asking what I needed to take down Kentworth. “I have my own gear.”

“We have better.”

Not for what I needed. “After you get her a new ID and she’s secure, you just let me know when and where Kentworth’ll be at his next public event.” I already knew how I was going to take that fuck down.

“And if that doesn’t happen?”

“Make it happen.” Kentworth had already been to one charity event. “Find out why he was at that event in Manhattan and create a similar scenario.”

November nodded. “I can do that. How are you going to get around his security team?”

“I won’t have to.” I was going to walk up to the fucker and look him in the eye when I killed him.

November stared at me for a beat. “The keychain.”

I didn’t deny it. I’d loaned it to Trefor once, and November seemed to have a pulse on everything that happened under the AES umbrella. “Just draw Kentworth out. I’ll handle the rest.”

“I’ll draw him out, but I’m also going to have a team on standby and personally take point on overwatch.”

What the fuck? “Trefor said no AES involvement.”

“I said personally, and Alpha won’t know because he won’t ask.”

I read between the lines. “If you’ve got back channels you can work to take Kentworth down, then why are we having this conversation? Kentworth should’ve already been handled.” Then I could get back to my business, the woman could move on with a new setup, and I could quit obsessing over doe eyes and blonde hair and possessive thoughts that hadn’t been on my radar before this morning’s run.

“Until now, there wasn’t an immediate need to handle Kentworth.”

Fucking Christ. He was a violent human trafficker. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Understood.” November’s vacant expression descended. “I’ll be in touch.” He turned toward the airstairs as Talerco came out of the aft cabin.

I raised an eyebrow at Talerco.

He nodded once. “She’ll be good, but I’d feel better knowin’ that ankle got some images taken.” Talon glanced at a retreating November before looking back at me. “Takin’ Missy out?”

I caught his drift. “Yeah. In a few.” It’d only been fucking minutes and I was already jonesing to lay eyes on the woman. Worse, hear her voice. Telling myself this was a simple sitrep for her, to let her know what was coming, I aimed for the galley.

“I’ll wait outside.” Talerco walked toward the airstairs.

“Copy.” Grabbing a water, I headed aft cabin.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sailor

Both Missy and I looked up when Roark ducked to step through the small doorway.

Glancing at the IV, he held out a bottled water. “You hungry?”

“No, thank you.” Holding my ribs, I shifted to a more upright position and took the water.

Roark frowned. “Talerco didn’t give you something for the pain?”

“I declined,” I admitted.

Unlike Talon, he didn’t ask why. Lowering his huge frame to the couch across from me, his long legs took up almost the entire aisle space.

Trying not to stare at his muscular thighs as they strained the fabric of his pants, I opened the water and took a sip before recapping it.

Resting his forearms on his legs, he studied me for a long moment.

Then he spoke with his deep voice that seemed to touch every part of my skin when I heard it, and both his words and the urge to put my hands on piano keys overwhelmed me.

“There’re two ways out of this.”

Out and this.

I tried to mentally shake away the heaviness of two innocuous words and focus on what was my now, but it was hard not to think about every single thing I had done wrong. I hadn't thought about *out* when I'd jumped off the Contender. Part of me didn't think I would survive the fall, and another part thought I'd simply be pulled back on board and punished by Kyle.

I wasn't thinking about getting out when I hit the water. I just had to get off the boat at that very moment or I'd lose my mind. But then I'd surfaced, and a wave washed over me. Panic set in, and I'd started swimming in the direction I thought land was, even though I couldn't see it once I was in the swells that were so much larger than I'd ever imagined. Everything was so terrifyingly dark, and the current was impossibly strong. Then I heard shouting and the bullets started flying. After that, I didn't think about anything except kicking as hard as I could.

When my foot touched bottom, I wept as I crawled to shore and dragged myself into those sea grape bushes. The next thing I knew there was a dog followed by a Marine and more bullets. Bodies were dropping, guards were chasing us, and I didn't have time to rationalize one second ahead, let alone two.

Until we'd gotten on this plane.

Then the reality of the next seconds, minutes, even hours, it became so looming, so weighted, I felt as if I were being crushed from the inside, and I couldn't think about it at all.

Except now I had to face the facts.

Roark was right, there were two options. But he was also wrong. There were two more that I'd counted. All together there were four choices—

death, Feds, back to Kyle, or run.

I knew Roark meant the second and last of those options, but that second one may as well have been synonymous with the first.

I reiterated my stance on going to the authorities. “I’m not going to the police or any government agency.” I’d seen several badges on the men who’d come and gone on that yacht over the past nine months.

Roark didn’t so much as blink. “That leaves new identity.”

My heart twisted and my stomach tightened as panic laced with a new level of grief. Suddenly too hot, unable to swallow past the lump in my throat, I tried to open the water but my hands shook.

Taking the bottle from me, Roark undid the cap then held the bottle back out to me. “November’s working on setting you up, but it’ll take forty-eight hours. Until then, we’re heading to a new location to lay low.”

ID, new location, forty-eight hours, all of it overwhelming, I focused on the least consequential. “November?” I asked, barely finding my voice.

“White shirt, laptop.”

The scary, quiet one. Hands trembling with anxiety, I took the water and sipped.

Watching me intently, Roark waited until I’d taken three sips, then he took the water back, capped it, and tossed the bottle next to me. “If you don’t talk to me, I don’t know what’s going on.”

Desperately trying to swallow down panic, I absently rubbed at my ribs and gave a nonanswer. “Mm-hm.”

A new identity was the least of what I needed. If I testified against Kyle, I probably would’ve been given a new identity and whisked away

somewhere. But the reality of actually becoming someone else, of being *named* something else, it was making me panic so bad, I was starting to have trouble breathing.

“Hey,” Roark stated.

I nodded, but I couldn’t look at him. “I-I hear you.” My voice as shaky as my hands, all I’d done in front of this man was break down or be helpless. I’d turned into everything I swore I’d never be. This, what I was, what I’d become—it wasn’t any better than my mother.

“You’re panicking. Why?”

I stood. “I, um, I need to use....” I pointed at the restroom, but I forgot my arm was attached to an IV line and it tugged. I flinched as the needle pulled against the tape. The tears came without warning and a curse followed. “*Shit.*”

Two huge hands cupped my face, and suddenly he was there, in my space, towering over me with strength and warmth and ocean eyes and full lips. He smelled like masculine cedarwood and expensive leather airplane seats and the scent of just him as he’d carried me off that beach.

But then he spoke, and he became even larger.

“Take a breath.” Deep, quiet, calm, his voice surrounded me in safety. “Slow it down.”

A whole new fluttering of notes played across my skin, chasing the anxiety away but not the fear, and this time, the tear that slid down my cheek was for a whole new reason. “I’m trying.”

He didn’t move. He waited.

Another tear slid past my defenses as a glimpse of hope slipped between my lips. “Please don’t leave.” My voice caught. “You’re helping.”

His chest steadily rose and fell, but his voice came out gruff. “Right here, woman.”

More desperation slipped out.

“Why?” I wished I’d never spoken the foolish question aloud, but something about this incredibly alpha man turned every shade of my reality, past and present, into a different color with different sounds. Everything was rawer at the same time it was more vibrant, and I didn’t know how to breathe around him. Worse, I was wondering how I ever breathed without him.

Knowing he wouldn’t answer my question, not that I wanted him to tell me the real reason why he was helping me, I tried to pull away.

But rough hands tightened their grip, and the silent Marine pilot with military-trained friends said the last thing I was expecting.

“Don’t make me hold on to you, woman.”

As sure as I knew I could never give up the name Sailor, I knew this man wasn’t talking about physically holding on to me.

I asked the last question I should have. “Do you want to?”

His penetrating stare cut to my very soul. “No.”

I wasn’t upset. I wasn’t even hurt this time. I sympathized because I knew exactly what he meant. I didn’t want the music to come back every time he touched me. I didn’t want the panic tsunami to recede into an ebb tide simply because his hand cupped my face. I didn’t want to crave his deep voice or the thrill of having him so near I smelled nothing except him.

I didn't want to want him at all.

Desperate wanting only led to devastating hurt, and my heart wouldn't survive another punishing blow.

I spoke the truth. "I understand."

"No, you don't," he clipped, rough, almost hard, before controlling his tone. "Tell me why you panicked."

I knew he was talking about the ID, but I gave him the answer to a different question, one he hadn't asked. "You scare me."

He called me out on my half-truth. "I'm talking about your reaction when I said new identity."

Oh God. *Breathe, Sailor, breathe.* "You're offering me something I can't accept."

"Can't or won't?"

"Does it matter?" Because I was slowly losing touch of what did.

"Yes."

Could two people stare at each other so intently like this and it only be one-sided? "Why?"

"Answer my question, woman."

There it was again. *Woman.* But it wasn't the word, it was the way he said it—heated, thick, meaningful. It swirled around my wounded self before sliding down my throat and settling into flutters low in my belly, and I almost felt like maybe I was a woman. Maybe I was what he called me, in the way he said it. Maybe I wasn't only broken, helpless and sad. Maybe I was something more to him, and so help me, I wanted to be that.

I bargained. "Tell me why it matters, and I will."

“Stop,” he ordered as if he knew the stages of grief.

“Why? I have nothing else to barter, and we both want an answer.” I didn’t care about stages. I was this moment, and he was more than a man with a dog who’d accidentally found me. But admitting that, let alone thinking it, unless I knew why he was holding me like this—it was too dangerous.

“Don’t pull that bullshit with me, woman. I said no one would take advantage of you. That includes me, bartering or not.”

“Then why are you holding me like this?”

His nostrils flared and his chest rose, but he didn’t give me an answer. He didn’t speak for three impossible breaths.

Then he gave me what I had asked for. “Because you matter.”

Tendrils of awareness shot across my entire body.

They were the right words, the best words I could have hoped for, but they hung in the air and grew as big as his dominance until his scent became stronger, the echo of his voice got deeper, and his grip was no longer comforting but commanding.

Heat surged between my legs, and I stopped caring about everything except this moment.

He’d called me a woman.

He’d said I mattered.

Wanting to feel the connection between our eyes on my lips, I pleaded for him in a desperate whisper. “Roark.”

A growl erupted from his chest the same time as his curse. “*Fuck.*”

Then his lips were on mine.

TWENTY-NINE

Roark

I swore to myself I wouldn't fucking touch her.

Then she rasped my name, and that was it.

My mouth was on hers.

Fuck me.

Cock hard, hands gripping, I wanted to take every damn thing from this woman as I sank my tongue deep. Then she melted into me like she had in my kitchen, and for two goddamn seconds, I didn't give a shit about my rules.

I fucking kissed her.

Then she angled her head to kiss me back, and I was out of options.

I had to step back now or this was going a hell of a lot further than she could handle.

Pissed, groaning into this woman's mouth like I was going to give her more, I pulled back.

Her cheeks flushed, her lips wet, her thick, wavy hair everywhere, she slowly blinked.

She was so goddamn perfect in that moment, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Staring at her for a beat too long, I forced myself to drop one hand. “A new ID means you stay alive.”

The sex-hazed look of a woman in need disappeared in a split second, and the frightened doe eyes came back. “A new ID means I lose the only thing I have left that matters.”

Raw, consuming possession blindsided me, and I wondered if the thing she was talking about was some asshole. “Explain.”

“Sailor.”

The nickname. Putting two and two together, I suddenly wanted to take out the fuck who’d given it to her. Because no woman would nickname herself that or hold on to it if it meant life or death, not unless it was significant as hell.

“Who gave it to you?” I demanded.

Her gaze dropped.

I pulled a dick move. “I need to know what I’m dealing with. Tell me.” She didn’t need to tell me shit. In fact, she shouldn’t. She should’ve been telling me to fuck off.

Taking the deepest breath I’d seen her take yet, she looked up. Then she fucking slayed me. “My brother.”

Nodding once like I wasn’t a complete asshole, I let her go. “Taking Missy out. I’ll be back.” Turning, I tapped my leg once, giving Missy the command to follow.

“Roark?”

Fuck, that voice.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Have a seat. I’ll remove that IV in a minute.”

The heat on her cheeks deepened. “Okay, thank you.”

Not acknowledging her thanks because I didn’t deserve it, I hit the airstairs with Missy on my six. Still tasting the woman’s lips on mine, I gave my dog a command. “Hurry up.”

Missy took off.

Telling myself to forget about the kiss, *that fucking kiss*, I locked my shit down and turned toward Talerco. “She good?”

Talerco glanced across the apron. “Told ya she was. Fast thinkin’ with the spoon-splint, by the way.”

“Improvised. Learned from the best.” Talerco had taught me what I knew about field medicine. Most importantly, use what you had.

“Adapt and overcome, is that it? You gonna start spoutin’ SEAL shit now that you got a new best friend?”

Needing a distraction and a new fucking hobby besides doe eyes and blonde hair, I looked at him. “You got something to say, say it.”

“I just did.”

“Not in the mood,” I warned.

“When are you ever?” he clipped.

“Meaning?”

He shoved his sunglasses to the top of his head. “How long we known each other?”

Long fucking time. “Long enough for me to know you’re pissed off about something.”

“You trust Alpha over me now?”

“No.”

“But you’re not gonna tell me who the fuck jacked that woman up or why the hell you gotta call in the cavalry just to get you outta Dodge?”

“Kentworth,” I stated.

Talerco didn’t say shit for a full two seconds, then he shook his head. “Jesus. Fucking. *Christ*.” He scanned the apron more vigilantly. “How the hell did one of Kentworth’s women wind up in your lap?”

“Morning run. Missy found her hiding in the mangroves, wouldn’t leave her. I had two choices—leave without my dog or take the woman with me. Kentworth’s guards were already on her six. Turned into a firefight. Left two dead in a garage in Old Town, took another one down in my kitchen.”

“*Fuck*, brother.” He glanced at me. “You’re both burned. Kentworth’s a ruthless son of a bitch. He won’t quit.”

Glancing across the apron, I didn’t disagree.

Talerco let out a long sigh. “You’re goin’ after him.”

It wasn’t a question, but I confirmed it anyway. “I’m going after him.”

“Then I’m in.”

No, he fucking wasn’t. “You’re going home to your women.”

“You think AES’s got better aim ’an me?”

“No.” Talerco, despite his laid-back attitude, had preternatural skills. He could surf, suture, or shoot better than anyone I knew. I’d tried to get him in the pilot’s seat numerous times, but he wasn’t interested. Said he liked to surf the waves, not the clouds.

He snorted. “Then why you holdin’ me back?”

I threw him a look. He knew why.

“Fine.” Talerco shook his head like he was put out. “I’m goin’ home to my ladies, but for the record, just because you called in the big guns doesn’t mean I can’t haze your unaccented Scottish ass ’bout your billionaire pretty-boy new bestie who’s wavin’ fancy planes at you like a dealer holdin’ out fixes for a junkie. Fifty bucks says you’re workin’ for him by week’s end.”

“A, I’m not a junkie. B, I’ve never had an accent. C, fuck off.”

“I’m all good, thanks, but don’t ever forget where your mama came from.”

“Your point?” I asked lethally. No one got to speak about my mother. She’d raised me by herself, and she’d been a saint.

“All I’m sayin’ is, maybe if you talked like your mama, throw down with a little Scottish brogue, you could land that woman.”

Christ. “Not everyone is a problem you need to fix, and I’m not trying to land anything.” That woman needed my help, not my fucking advances. And she sure as shit didn’t need the baggage that would’ve come with them, which was why I didn’t fuck around.

“Trust me, this ain’t me bein’ the hero.” Talerco paused, then he turned unusually serious. “Brother to brother, we had each other’s back when neither of us had no family left. But now I got a taste of that again, and I just want the same for you. Besides, I see the way that woman looks at you. She’s not gonna care ’bout your past or the scars you’re carryin’. Hell, it’ll probably make her like you more. And when’s Missy ever taken to a female? Never,” he said, answering his own question. “So all I’m sayin’ is, maybe you should think hard ’bout this one, then lock that shit down fast.

Because trust me, the second she's healed up, a woman who looks like that, with a voice like hers?" He shook his head. "She'll be single for all of two seconds."

"You're fucked up, you know that?"

He laughed. "Yeah, but I got two women and you got none, so who's the dog that don't hunt now?"

"Like I said, fucked up."

"Speakin' of, now a good time to tell you I made a pact with her? You, me, her—we're now a threesome. You're welcome. Gave her my number too."

Telling myself not to level him, I fucking inhaled, twice. "I have a gun," I reminded him.

He kept talking. "You gonna ask why I did that?"

"I don't have to, and she doesn't have a phone." At least she hadn't had one on her.

"She's got a memory that works just fine, and I'm bein' serious."

"I know." That was the fucked-up part. Talerco honestly thought he could save everyone.

"Then you know she doesn't have anyone."

I fucking knew, but now I wondered what the hell he'd gotten out of her. "What'd she tell you?" A black Range Rover pulled into the airport and headed our way.

"She told me she jumped."

My gaze cut to Talerco.

His expression went on lockdown. "She tell you why?"

I didn't say anything.

Talerco nodded slowly. "You should ask her, brother." He pulled his sunglasses back down over his face and lost his accent. "Really fucking ask her, Roark." Without another word, he walked to his Challenger.

The Range Rover pulled up, and Vance "Victor" Conlon got out of the driver's side while another guy about my size got out of the passenger side.

They both grabbed bags out of the back and headed toward me as Missy bounded back, taking up position on my left side.

"Well, here's a change in circumstances." Conlon held out his hand. "Hear I get to fly the great Roark MacElheran today."

"November said his name was Romeo," the other guy clipped, nodding at Missy. "Who's the mutt?"

Missy growled low.

Not stopping her, I shook Conlon's hand. "No stunts today."

Conlon chuckled. "Right, got it, *Romeo*."

I glanced at the other prick. "Her name's Missy. If you call her a mutt again, she'll break both bones in your forearm."

The fucker gave her a look like he doubted me. "Copy that."

Conlon smiled. "Now that's out of the way, Echo, Romeo. Romeo, Echo." He glanced toward the Gulfstream we'd flown in on. "Where's the guest of honor?"

"I'll get her."

"We'll escort," Conlon replied.

"Don't need an assist to walk from one plane to the next."

Echo smirked. “That’s what every fucker says right before bullets start flying.” Bypassing me, he headed toward the open airstairs.

I cursed under my breath.

Conlon chuckled. “Welcome to my world.”

THIRTY

Sailor

A man almost as tall as Roark, similarly dressed in black, with arms just as big but covered in tattoos, came aboard the plane, followed by an angry-looking Roark and another man with two-tone eyes.

The first man, armed and more dangerous looking than Roark, scanned the plane and ignored me.

The second one followed Roark and Missy as they came toward me.

Roark went to my IV to check it while the third man, dressed in an impeccable suit, nodded at me. “Sailor, I presume? Vance Conlon. Most people call me Victor, but I’ll defer to your preference. The rude one behind me is Echo. Feel free to ignore him.” With a slight British accent and smelling like expensive cologne, he winked and gave me a practiced smile before taking note of Missy at my feet and glancing at Roark. “Need help?”

Roark practically growled at him. “Shut the door, Conlon.”

“Right.” He glanced at his watch. “Ten minutes.” Without waiting for a response from Roark, he was closing the small door.

I looked up at the man who’d kissed me more possessively than I’d ever been kissed in my life before he’d abruptly pulled away and acted like it’d never happened. “More friends of yours?”

“No.” Holding the IV bag with one hand, he reached in the duffle he’d brought from his house and took out one of those small packets of sterilized cotton you find in first aid kits. Setting the IV bag down next to me, he tore open the packet, bent over me and as quick as his friend Talon, he held my arm, slid the IV out, and pressed the gauze to the crook of my elbow as he bent my arm up.

“Keep pressure on that for a second.” Disposing of the IV bag and line in the restroom, he then grabbed the bag of clothes that Talon had left, opened it and set it next to me. “Pick what you’d like, and I’ll help you get dressed. We’re going to a colder climate.”

One arm bent, I sifted one-handed through the clothes that all had tags on them. Pants, shorts, tank tops, T-shirts, two dresses, two sweaters, even some underwear. I’d never had so many new clothes at once in my life.

As I picked out a soft T-shirt, leggings and a sweater, I grabbed a brand-new hairbrush that had been thrown into the bag. Then I asked a question I knew I probably wouldn’t get an answer to. “Can you tell me where we’re going?”

He didn’t hesitate. “No.”

While not loud, his answer was so sharp, I looked up.

Standing over me, hands on his hips, Roark was as imposing as he was beautiful—if you could call a man as masculine as him beautiful.

Holding the clothes and hairbrush, I tried not to show the fracture slowly taking me apart every time I looked at him. “I’ll get dressed.” I stood.

The shadow on his jaw that I could still feel against my face looked more than a day old, but it didn’t hide the tic as he stared at me. “That kiss

never should've happened."

I'd told myself after he'd abruptly walked off the plane that this would happen. That he would put up boundaries, tell me it was a mistake. I was even expecting a version of this. But hearing it and expecting it were two different things. The fissure already splitting what was left of my composure aimed for my heart. I tried to grasp at what little, if any, dignity I had left and I ignored what he said.

"I don't need help getting dressed." I took one step on the Aircast Talon had fitted me with and every nerve in my ankle screamed in protest. Sucking in a sharp breath, I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out so he wouldn't reach for me, but I shouldn't have bothered.

The man who'd carried me across Key West swept me up and crossed the distance to the bathroom in only two of his huge strides. Setting me down just inside the door, his hand slid to the side of my neck.

The intimate touch sent shivers through my entire body, but it contradicted everything he'd just said. Then, as if to only confuse me further, he reiterated what he'd already told me. "I'm not taking advantage of you, woman."

Suddenly, I wondered if he was saying it because he needed to convince me or because he needed to hear it himself.

My body already aching every way it could possibly ache, I gave up being safe and went for honest. "Maybe I wanted you to take advantage."

Not daring to wait for a response, I dropped my gaze and shut the door.

Then I sank to the thankfully closed toilet seat and dropped my head to my hands.

THIRTY-ONE

Roark

She opened the lav door.

Her hair tamed, her clothes fitting better than the ones I'd given her, she didn't look at me as she held out my sweats and T-shirt. "Thank you for loaning me these."

I hated her outfit.

My screwed-up head didn't like her in clothes that weren't mine, and I fucking hated the fact that she was dressed in shit that Talerco brought her, but something else was off that I couldn't pinpoint.

I'd be fucking crazy to say she didn't look like herself because I had exactly two images of her pre-Kentworth for frame of reference, but this woman didn't look like she was supposed to.

Grabbing my clothes from her and shoving them in my bag, it hit me as I reached for her.

It wasn't just the new outfit.

It was every single thing about her.

The hair wasn't messy, the doe eyes were locked down to reserve, the clothes were plain, and the rasp in her voice was low-key and muted.

She'd put the brakes on her personality.

I lifted her up and she smelled different. Like some kind of soap or some shit that must've been in the bathroom. Whatever it was, she didn't smell like me anymore, and I fucking hated that too.

I selfishly issued her an order. "Arm around my neck, woman." I didn't need her participation to carry her, but I fucking said it anyway. "Missy, come."

I stepped off the plane to Conlon and Echo waiting. They flanked me, and we walked to the other Gulfstream in silence.

Conlon took the stairs first but paused before the cockpit. "You want second chair? I can sit with her."

The woman tensed in my arms and my decision was made. "No."

"Right." Conlon smiled and joined Zulu.

I headed to the aft cabin with Missy on my six as Echo pulled the hatch shut before taking a seat up front.

Zulu fired up the engines, and I set the woman and my bag down. Glancing at my watch, I buckled her in as Missy sat at her feet. "How are your ribs?"

She turned her head away. "Fine."

She wasn't fucking fine. "I'll give you more Advil when we land, but you'll need to eat first."

She pulled her good leg up and tucked her bare foot under her opposite thigh. "How long is the flight?"

Trefor had said Black Mountain. Closest airport was Ashville. "One hour fifty-five minutes." Fuck, she needed socks and shoes.

“You can’t tell me where we’re going but you know the exact flight time?” she asked in the same muted tone, but this time with a side of attitude.

I wanted to grab her face and force her to look at me. Then I wanted to kiss the hell out of her until she dropped the bullshit she was pulling right now. Except kissing her was what got us here in the first place.

Fuck.

Not answering or touching her, not moving across the aisle like I should have, I buckled my own damn seatbelt.

Zulu started to taxi, and unlike the last flight where I was too focused on the woman to care, I hated being sidelined to passenger right now.

She stared out the window and called me on my silence. “You didn’t answer.”

Fuck this. “Woman, look at me.”

She turned.

No doe eyes.

“I didn’t tell you where we’re going because I don’t know the exact location, but I know which airport is closest, and I’m a pilot. I know flight times.”

She searched my face. Then, “You’re more than a pilot.”

I didn’t touch that. “Speak your mind, woman.”

“I just did.”

“You’re pissed.” I fucking got it. “Out with it.”

She looked at me for a hot second, then she let loose. “I’m tired, sore and have no idea where I’m going, what’s going to happen once we get

there, or what will happen after that. I'm on a private jet with mercenary-looking strangers who carry guns, and before last night, the sad truth is, none of this would've actually bothered me because I thought...." Stopping herself, she inhaled. "Because I didn't think I deserved or wanted better." She looked me right in the eye. "Then you showed up." Heat hit her cheeks and she turned away. "There, I spoke."

If I was this woman's measure of worth, she was more fucked up than I was. "We're not finished. Turn around."

She gave me her eyes, but I got a dose of attitude right along with it. "Stop telling me what to do."

If she'd stop fucking avoiding me, I would. "Talk to me about the new ID."

"Why?" Still with the attitude, but the doe-eyed innocence that made her look like she wasn't completely fucked over by life came halfway back. "You've already decided it's happening. You've got November working on it." She made air quotes around *working on it*.

Done with this bullshit, I put my hand on her shoulder.

She inhaled sharply.

I held steady.

Her eyes closed and she dropped her head. Then the woman in my kitchen, the one who'd stood naked with me in my shower, she came back. "I'm sorry. I'm not ungrateful, and I understand the reasoning behind it. I'm just tired and ashamed and have absolutely no way to pay you back for any of this."

Checking my tone, I lowered my voice. "No apologies. I already told you you're not indebted, and you have nothing to be embarrassed about.

You want to tell me about the name?”

“No,” she quickly retorted.

“Understood. If November can swing it, is there another name you’d like?”

She started to lean her head toward my hand but stopped herself. Her voice came quieter. “No, thank you. Whatever’s easiest for him.”

Not wanting to take my hand off this woman, I squeezed once, then forced myself to let go. “What would you like to eat? I’ll check the galley after we’re in the air. We’ll get you fed, then you can sleep till we land.”

“I don’t have any preferences, but I’m not hungry.”

“Woman,” I warned.

“Coffee, please. With cream and sugar.”

“Done.”

Zulu thrust the engines, the G650 lifted effortlessly and I unbuckled both our seatbelts before grabbing her a pillow and blanket. “Be right back.”

Looking tired as fuck but not as upset as before, she nodded.

I made coffee, but when I walked back aft cabin, the woman was curled on her side, using my dog as a pillow.

Both of them were asleep.

THIRTY-TWO

Sailor

The cold air rushed my face a moment before consciousness, and suddenly I was being picked up.

Blinking away sleep, I opened my eyes to a strong jaw and stern face. “You carry me a lot.” My voice sounded scratchy, even to me.

“Didn’t want to wake you.” Roark’s tone was gruff, almost like he was apologizing for something. “We landed.”

“Where are we going now?” Even though I asked, I didn’t hold out hope he’d tell me.

“Vehicle.”

The blanket still around me, I curled into him and decided that right now I wouldn’t care if he walked us off a cliff. As long as I got to fall with his arms around me and his masculine cedarwood scent blocking out the world, I would embrace it.

But the stoic, ocean-eyed warrior who carried me everywhere would never let that happen.

Turning his body so my cast went out the open cabin door first, he ducked then followed, taking the stairs quick and sure like he carried women all the time. Maybe he did. I didn’t even know if he had a girlfriend.

The thought twisting me with jealousy, I couldn't imagine what she would be like if he did, but rationally, I didn't think there was any way this man would have ever kissed me if he belonged to another woman.

Clearing the steps of the plane, crisp air all around us, I had a moment of nostalgia for fall in New York, but it was quickly followed by thoughts of cold winters in my underheated apartment when Shane was always shivering, and another layer of guilt piled onto my grief.

Selfishly pushing down all thoughts of Shane so I didn't fall apart, I focused on the two men on either side of us as Roark walked us toward a rugged-looking SUV.

Both men continually scanned our surroundings the same way I'd seen Roark do as Echo moved behind us like a human shield. Then Vance opened the back passenger door of the SUV.

"Missy, car," Roark clipped.

Missy hopped in and Roark set me beside her as Echo tossed bags in the rear. Vance tipped his chin at Roark, then he headed back toward the plane as Echo got behind the wheel and Roark got in the front passenger seat. Seconds later, we were speeding across the tarmac like they did this sort of coordinated maneuver all the time.

Maybe they did.

Maybe this is what Alpha Elite Security was about, rescuing people from dangerous situations and whisking them off to new lives.

New lives with new names.

Names not given to you by family.

My airplane nap having done nothing for my mood, I looked out at the wintry landscape and felt even guiltier for keeping Shane in New York when there had been warm, tropical places like Key West that I could've taken him to.

But I never took him anywhere.

I was always working.

Fighting tears, I rubbed my ribs, and a cold nose touched the back of my hand.

"Hey, girl." I ran my hand over Missy's soft fur.

Roark briefly glanced over his shoulder and took in me and his dog before addressing Echo. "Drive time?"

"Hour-forty," Echo answered.

"Direction?"

"North-northwest."

"Supplies?" Roark asked.

"Stocked."

"Borrow your phone?"

Echo gave Roark a glance that said it all. "What's wrong with yours?"

"Tracked. Left it on a boat in Key West. Don't want to waste a burner for this."

Echo pulled his cell out, unlocked the screen and handed it to Roark.

Roark swiped a few times and handed it back. "Make a quick stop," he ordered before rattling off the name of a place. "Next two rights."

"Copy." Echo turned right onto a fairly busy road and floored it.

For ten minutes, Echo drove in and out of traffic before pulling up to what looked like one of those hunting supplies stores then he parked near the front.

Roark glanced at me. “Shoe size?”

Huddled in the blanket from the plane, I forgot I had bare feet. “Seven.”

“Jacket size?”

Embarrassment heated my face. “I’ll be fine for two days.”

Roark gave me a look, except it wasn’t a look. It was expressionless and stern and completely unreadable like him, and yet it conveyed everything he wanted to get across—answer his question and do it now.

“Medium,” I admitted. Or at least it had been. But my stomach had hurt for a year now, and it’d only gotten worse the past nine months.

Unaware of my internal spiral, Roark nodded and glanced at Echo. “Back in ten.”

“Copy.” Echo casually scanned the parking lot as Roark got out and strode toward the store.

I was hoping to ride out the ten minutes with the scary, inked beast of a man in the driver’s seat in silence, but apparently Echo had other plans.

“November said you were one of Kentworth’s toys.”

I couldn’t imagine the austere man with the laptop saying the word toy. “I was on the Contender,” was all I admitted.

“Heard Kentworth’s got a brother.”

I stilled.

No one knew Kenny was Kyle’s brother. No one. I only knew because one of the times Kenny had landed his helicopter on the Contender and

brought more women, he'd stopped to talk to Kyle in the master suite. They didn't know I was right outside listening because all the guards had dispersed. They always did when Kenny showed up. He was a hundred times more vicious than Kyle. He was also Kyle's procurer. He got the women. Kyle brought the clients. Kenny never met the clients, and the women who even mentioned Kenny disappeared.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," I lied.

Echo looked at me in the rearview mirror. "None of Kentworth's personal women ever lasted two weeks on the Contender and lived to tell about it, but you managed nine months?"

I didn't tell him that I'd let Kyle do whatever he'd wanted to me or that his addiction, like mine, had grown. I didn't admit that I'd craved it. Escaped in it. And I especially didn't tell him that I'd finally jumped because Kyle had become softer with me, even on my birthday, and it was my own shame that drove me over that edge, not Kyle.

Desperately trying to hide my humiliation, I looked away and lied again. "I don't know anything about Kyle's personal life."

Echo scoffed. "Sure." Then he turned in his seat, and his lethal expression zeroed in on me. "There's only one way a woman lasts nine months in Kentworth's sights." He held his knowing stare for a tense moment. "You were his." He turned back around. "And I'm betting every round in my magazine you know who the hell the brother is." He glanced at Roark as he strode back toward the SUV. "You better hope Romeo knows what the hell you've gotten him into."

Roark opened my door, and guilt consumed me.

But then he silently, carefully put a down jacket around me before slipping my good foot into a fur-lined half boot.

I wished I'd drowned when I'd jumped off that boat.

THIRTY-THREE

Roark

The woman had been sleeping for the past eighteen hours.

I hadn't slept a fucking wink.

Checking on her every couple of hours, seeing her curled up with Missy who refused to leave her side, I didn't admit I was jealous of a dog.

I also didn't acknowledge that I couldn't sleep without Missy or that the bitch never lay with me how she was with the woman—lengthwise, at her side, like a fucking canine body pillow.

The woman held my dog like she belonged to her.

Echo came up silently on my six. "She wake up yet?"

"Only to eat something last night." Stepping back from the door, I pulled it almost shut. "You're supposed to be on perimeter patrol."

"Was." He handed me his cell. "Alpha said to call him."

"I'll take a shift outside. Come get me if she wakes up."

He smirked. "Translation—don't touch the woman, don't speak to the woman, don't fucking breathe near her." He shook his head. "Copy that, Romeo."

Scowling at the SEAL, I dialed as I walked outside.

Trefor picked up on the first ring. "Romeo?"

“Call me that again and I’m hanging up,” I warned.

“Noted. You in a good place to talk?”

I was on top of a fucking mountain with no other signs of civilization.

“I’m outside.”

“Good copy. All right, I know you spoke with November.” He paused.

I didn’t confirm or deny it.

Alpha continued. “I also understand we discussed one scenario on the apron in Miami, but I think we have a greater opportunity here than simply cutting off the head of the snake.”

“I’m listening.” I wasn’t. I was being fucking territorial about Echo being in the house alone with her and wondering if he would keep his word.

“I believe the female has inside information on Kentworth’s organization.”

“No.” No fucking way. “We’re not going there.”

“Hear me out.”

“No, you fucking hear me, Adam. Even if she did have intel, even if she named every prick on Kentworth’s payroll and recited their social security numbers by heart, there’s no possible way any agency could execute a coordinated attack that would grab everyone. There’d be stragglers, and her involvement would get out.” I’d heard what she’d said about the Feds, and I’d read between the lines. Kentworth had clients in law enforcement. “There won’t be a single corner on the fucking planet she could safely hide in after that.”

“I’m not talking about government agencies handling it.”

Knowing where he was going with this, I tried to rein it in. “I know you’re the best at what you do, and you can maneuver in ways the government can’t, but you don’t have the numbers to pull this off.” Simple math. Kentworth’s reach was far and wide, his client list was longer, and the number of guards he’d sent after her on the beach was only the tip of the iceberg.

“Not in headcount, but in skill set I do,” Trefor calmly stated like we weren’t talking about her life.

“Not fucking happening.”

Trefor was quiet, then, “Kentworth has a brother.”

That got my attention. “There’s never been mention of a brother.” Mafia boss or not, Kentworth had a reputation for being a lone wolf.

Echo opened the door of the safe house and let Missy out.

Alpha dropped his bomb. “We believe the female knows who he is.”

Echo tipped his chin at me. “Sleeping beauty’s awake.”

“Hanging up,” I warned Trefor.

“Talk to her,” Trefor ordered. “See what you can find out.”

“I’m not going to repeat myself again. The answer’s no.” I hung up, but this changed everything. If Kentworth had a brother, and she’d seen him, taking Kentworth out wouldn’t eliminate her problem. Not by a long shot.

Goddamn it.

“Correction.” Echo glanced behind him. “Awake and on the move.”

Striding toward the house, I whistled for my dog. “Missy, come.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Sailor

Roark stormed into the bathroom with Missy on his heels.

Looking angrier than I'd ever seen him, he barked an order at his dog. "Missy, retreat."

Glancing between me and her owner, Missy then dipped her head and literally backed out of the bathroom.

Roark slammed the door shut. "Kentworth's brother. Start talking."

Panic slammed into me as my stomach dropped and my heart rate flew into a crescendo. Then I lied to the one person I didn't want to lie to. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Woman," he warned in a lethal tone.

Thankful I was still dressed as I sat on edge of the bathtub, waiting for it to fill with hot water, I didn't bother mentioning that he hadn't knocked. Sadly, that didn't disturb me. I hadn't had privacy in nine months. I hadn't wanted it. Privacy meant time alone with my thoughts. But thinking about the past nine months while this man was standing right in front of me—it felt so wrong, I couldn't even put words to it. But I could put notes. They were already coming fast and frenzied, and full of dominant anger. But not the kind of anger Kyle had taken out on me. It was a betrayal to even

mention Roark in the same breath because he wasn't standing in front of me, angry at what I had done.

Roark was angry *for* me.

The man who'd kissed me like he not only needed me but wanted me, and not in a twisted, sexually depraved way, but in the way a man cherishes a woman he wants, Roark was being protective of me.

So protective that I didn't know if I could tell him the truth.

I knew what he would attempt to do. What he was probably already planning on doing because I'd heard snippets of his conversation with the men on the plane.

Roark was going to get me a new identification, then he was going after Kyle.

Stalling, hating the position I'd put him and all of his friends in, I ran my hand under the faucet and adjusted the temperature.

Then I hedged. "Who said he has a brother?"

"Trefor."

Adam Trefor. The man I assumed was the owner of Alpha Elite Security and the fancy planes and was Roark's friend. *Shit*. "He sounds like he knows a lot about Kyle."

"Fuck this," Roark muttered before grasping my chin and tilting my face up to his.

I sucked in a breath, and the same electrified awareness that happened every time he touched me shot through my body, both igniting arousal and tempering my frayed nerves.

His expression was so stern it was frightening, but his voice came out low and hypnotic. “I am not angry with you. Nothing you say to me will change that. Do you understand?”

“No.” Because I had nine months of ammunition for him to be angry with me about—I was angry at myself. “If you knew me, you wouldn’t say that.”

“I know the woman I’m looking at right now, the one who responds to my touch, and I don’t give a fuck about the rest.”

Heart and soul, I was starved for the words he’d just laid on me, but I still couldn’t grasp them. I didn’t comprehend his willingness to help me, or the surety of his conviction, all without anything asked of me in return.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted in a terrified, hoarse whisper, answering his initial question.

“Which part?”

Oh God. “I’m afraid to say.” He’d closed the door on the kiss. I got that. But if I was going to have to lie to him about Kyle’s brother, I didn’t want to lie about anything else. I just, I couldn’t. Not to him. Not after everything he’d already done for me.

His thumb stroked my cheek. “Words, woman.”

I valiantly fought desire and tears, but when I opened my mouth, the wrong words came out. “Why are you doing this, knowing I respond to you like this, when you said the kiss never should’ve happened?”

His hand, his body, his eyes—everything about him went still. “You don’t want me, woman.”

Shock momentarily pushed away my fears. “I didn’t say that.”

“I’m telling you that.”

“Why?”

Without missing a beat, he answered as if he were merely saying his eyes were blue. “I’m not what you need.”

The anxiety, the fear, the humiliation, it all came back and I pulled away from his grasp and his penetrating stare. “I understand.”

“You don’t.”

I looked up at him. “Then tell me.”

His hands on his hips, his chest rose with an inhale. “You first. Why do you think I’ll be angry with you if you tell me what you’re holding back?”

I reached for the woman I used to be. The one who wrote songs and knocked on doors and did what she had to do to make ends meet. I reached for that bravery I thought I used to have, and I gave him the truth. “I’ve only kissed you once, and I’m already jealous of every woman that’s ever gotten to be with you. If I told you about even one day of the past nine months of my life, you would hate me. Next to the worst day of my life, I literally can’t imagine anything feeling more horrible than that right now.”

His nostrils flared, and his hand was back on me in a fraction of a second. Except this time, he didn’t just grasp my chin. His entire palm covered my throat as his thick fingers grasped my jaw.

Meeting me at eye level, his voice went lethally quiet. “Seeing the state you’re in is enough to make me want to kill Kentworth. *Not* hate you.” Before I could say anything, he dropped his hand and reached past me to turn off the water. “Take your bath, woman.” He turned toward the door but paused and looked back at me. “Whatever you know, whatever you have on

Kentworth, for the record, I was asking for my intel purposes only. Not to sell you out.”

He shut the door behind him.

THIRTY-FIVE

Roark

I walked out of the bathroom and out of the house before I fucking kissed her again, or worse.

Missy on my heels, she followed me outside.

Standing on the front porch, messing with his phone, Echo didn't glance up. "You pace more than a bitch in heat."

"Fuck off. Doing a wide perimeter check. Back in an hour."

"Whatever floats your boat, Romeo."

Asshole. "Watch the woman." I glanced at my dog. "Missy, patrol, perimeter."

Nose down, my bitch took off toward the side of the house.

Echo looked up and glanced after Missy. "She even know what that means?"

"Unlike you, she's trained."

Echo chuckled. "There might be hope for you yet, Marine. Keep up the jokes." He went back to his phone.

Refraining from telling him to fuck off, I walked the mountain.

An hour later, I was about to make a second pass when I heard it.

Distant but distinctive.

Piano.

I headed back toward the house, and with each step closer, the music grew.

I'd seen the piano in the living room when we'd first arrived and I'd cleared the place. I saw every damn piece of furniture. But I dismissed them all except the king bed in the master where I'd carried her to because that's where my fucking head was at with this woman since she'd first leaned into me in my kitchen and begged.

Except now I wasn't thinking about the damn bed.

Like a moth to a flame, I was aiming for the living room, but when I stepped inside, I fucking froze.

Seated on the piano bench, her hands moving across the keys with unfathomable speed and skill, the woman played liked a goddamn virtuoso.

Stunned, I fucking stared.

Then she slowed it down and began to sing.

Jesus.

Fucking.

Christ.

Her voice. *Her goddamn voice.* Haunting and sexy but so damn raspy it sounded like the woman had drowned off that yacht, she filled the whole room.

Her hands on the ivory, her fingers at home with the keys, her eyes closed—she looked how I felt when I was in the cockpit.

Then her words hit me.

Did he hurt you, baby?
Do you need my protecting?
Can you feel me, baby?
Do you know he's breaking?

There's an ocean between us
Did you think you'd survive?
The distance is drowning
You can't make it here alive.
I thought I told you
Leave me alone
I thought I told you
You're too far from home
You have to stay
Stay, stay, stay on your own

Did he hurt you, baby?
Do you need my wings?
Can you feel me, baby?
I'd give you everything

But there's still an ocean between us.
And you're going to drown.

I thought I told you.

You're too far from home.

Even if he hurt you, baby

You have to stay

Even if you need me, baby

You have to stay

Stay, stay, stay, on your own

Stay, stay, stay, this is your home.

The final note hanging in the air, her hands still on the piano, she hadn't played that song—giving it life, she'd fucking owned it.

The layers of this woman compounding, I didn't speak. I couldn't.

With a whole new dimension to her voice, her rasp filled the silence. "I can't sing away the pain."

Maybe not, but she sure as fuck could sing about it.

She shook her head, then glanced over her shoulder. "Your whole not speaking thing is a silent weapon, pun intended."

The only weapon in this room was her voice. "I'm unarmed." Technically, my weapon was holstered, but I may as well have been without it. I'd never been this disarmed by a woman.

Her laugh was the same as when I first heard it—throaty, honest and fucking sexy, but now it sounded different. Everything about her sounded different. "If there's one thing I take away from all of this, it's that you, Roark whatever-your-last-name-is, are never unarmed."

“MacElheran.”

She nodded as if she already knew. “Scottish.”

“Your turn.”

She looked over her shoulder again, but this time, her chin was dipped, and her face was flushed. “You know my name.”

I did. But she didn’t know that, and the fact that she still wasn’t telling me was more than enough of a reason to walk the fuck away.

Except I didn’t.

I stood there. Letting her stare at me, letting her pain sink under my skin, and for half a second, it fucking hovered. Possibility. Woman. More.

A sudden breath filling her lungs, she turned back toward the piano. “Names are relative.”

I didn’t disagree. Fucking Talon and his *Romeo* bullshit was proof enough.

More of her husky voice filled the room. “Everything’s relative. Life’s one way, then a single event happens and everything you thought you knew becomes a different way, relative to that event. So maybe it doesn’t matter what we’re named.” Her fingers fluttered against a few keys. The melancholy sound matching her voice and body language, she spoke over the next notes. “Maybe the only thing that matters is what we call ourselves.”

I could’ve told her again that she mattered—I knew that was this woman’s trigger. It was anyone’s trigger who didn’t have blood to fall back on. I could’ve told her I saw through all her bullshit decisions that landed her here. But who the hell was I to push a platitude on her?

I just wanted to fuck her once.

Taste that voice when she came. Sink to a level of mindfuck that was so head deep that I broke the last parts of her that weren't already destroyed. I wanted to do it just to see if her eyes would change to the color they were on the beach when I found her.

I wanted to see if she was that woman underneath it all, because I hadn't seen that woman since she'd pushed herself out of the mangroves.

But she was right.

What the fuck would any of that matter relative to her name? Fucking her wouldn't change what was on her birth certificate or what her brother had nicknamed her any more than it would the shit in my head.

No answer worth giving, I didn't offer one. I grabbed the water I'd left on the table, uncapped it and drank as I fucking stared.

"I hear that." Her hands stilled again. "The water bottle in your hand. The crinkle of the plastic as your fingers twist the cap on—or off—it's the same sound, and without looking, I know you're drinking. I've seen you drink. I know the movement in your throat when you swallow. I know your stillness happens when you lean on a doorframe but not when you're sitting. I know your eyes are on me because I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise with awareness."

My cock pulsed and I changed my mind.

"One sound," she continued, "and it's all relative." She glanced back. Her eyes briefly met mine, then they dipped to my shoulder against the doorframe and the water bottle in my hand before she focused back on the piano keys. "One sound and everything is relative to it, causing a ripple in the silence that surrounds you."

I wanted to fuck her more than once.

“Exactly relative,” she rasped, slowly nodding. “Did you know your silence has a sound all of its own?” She played a few haunting notes. “I hear it every time you’re near.” As if in pain, her voice morphed into a tone different than her speech or song. “But do you know what sound I don’t know?”

My sound. When I finally sank inside her and tasted that pain.

Her hands went to her lap, and her voice dropped to a whisper. “I don’t know what it sounds like when a child first meets God.”

My thoughts slammed shut, and I fucking stilled. “Your child?” November hadn’t said shit about her having a kid.

Her shoulders went tight, and her entire body tensed as if bracing for impact. The quick shake of her head looked like it’d fucking break her. “No.” Her chest rose with an inhale. “My brother.” She put her hands back on the piano. “But he may as well have been mine. I raised him.” Her fingers moved across the keys. “But I didn’t protect him.” The haunting melody took on a life of its own, and she began to play.

Really fucking play.

For the next eight minutes, I listened.

Her hands, her notes, no voice, the sway of her body—she owned the fucking pain coming from that piano.

I didn’t know shit about music, and Missy was the only being I’d ever raised, but I did know one thing.

The hauntingly desperate piece I was hearing sounded exactly like the death of a child.

THIRTY-SIX

Sailor

I wasn't Sailor. I wasn't the sister whose hands sailed across the piano keys, making music that made a young boy smile.

I wasn't a musician.

I wasn't even the owner of this song.

I was grief.

Tears flowed and the notes, so ingrained in my soul, played themselves as if they knew the score and the way home to that final chord. But I couldn't go home, not ever again, so I wept.

I wept and I played and I felt a presence behind me I'd never felt before, making me cry harder because I knew it was impossible.

Everything was impossible.

As if my hands knew this to be true above all else, they stilled on the last note and held it for that single breath that could have been his last, and then the music died.

Deafening silence followed, and I wanted to crawl out of my own head. But the heat behind me, the awareness that'd torturously blanketed everything since a six-foot-five, ocean-eyed warrior of a man stepped into my atmosphere—it didn't go away.

And it wasn't relative.

I'd lied.

That sound, his sound, his silence, it was an entity of its own, and it was terrifying.

Because the dominant, stoic, overbearing man behind that silence made me feel the one thing I knew was a lie. He made me feel not alone.

But I was.

Utterly, painfully, deservedly alone.

Thinking otherwise would crush what little was left of me, and I couldn't afford that. I'd made Shane a promise. A promise he would never, ever hear, but I'd made it anyway. I'd promised to go on. I'd promised to earn the name Sailor. I'd wept over his grave, and I'd promised to live.

I'd tried.

God, how I'd tried.

For three horrific months, I'd sat in the apartment and tried to write music.

But I couldn't put notes together that weren't there, and trying hadn't worked.

Try. One little word. Three letters strung together had never been so hard because there was no escape from this kind of loss. Trying didn't change the past or take away the pain. Playing songs I knew didn't soothe my soul or feed an unbearable emptiness. I'd sat at the piano and I'd tried, but every note I hit hurt. It hurt so bad, I couldn't do it. I couldn't keep trying—not like that, not if I wanted to breathe.

Desperate, I'd taken a gig.

And accidentally found another sound.

Or it'd found me.

It didn't matter. It was the sound of escape. The space in between. The point where noise and harsh notes and blinding grief turned into a muted hum. The place where pain met the ringing clatter in my head and turned into something else. That sound had a malicious smile and devious intent and a name that I didn't care was Kyle Kentworth. Sex was the notes, pain exacted on my flesh the melody, and the mindlessness of it all was both my escape and my living.

Until it wasn't.

But I was stuck on a yacht at sea, the escape waning, and I was no longer in control of the score.

So I'd jumped.

And somehow, the life that was for the living landed me here, but I didn't deserve it.

Nothing I did gave me the right to peace, but maybe the stoic man standing behind me deserved it. I didn't know his demons, but I'd been looking into his eyes for two days, and I saw how it lived in him too. I couldn't change that. Nothing I said would change his past any more than it would change mine.

But maybe I could share something with him.

Maybe it was time to tell someone.

And he'd asked....

"I'm not a sailor," I admitted, grief dripping down my cheeks. "But I was Sailor to him." I glanced up into the ocean-blue depths of a man who

looked like he understood pain, and I gave him my most treasured truth. “My brother nicknamed me Sailor because he said my hands sailed across the piano keys like a boat on the water.” A choked sob escaped. “That’s all I have left of him. I need to keep it, or I’ll be no one.”

His stride ate the distance between us, and his huge hands gripped my face. “Did you write that piece?”

My heart in my throat, I barely nodded.

His rough thumbs brushed across my cheeks, swiping at my tears. Then a former Marine pilot broke what was left of my shattered heart. “You’re still Evelyn Grace Tory.” His expression fierce, he let go of me. “Never quit your music, woman.”

Before I could process my shock that he knew my real name, let alone say those words, the six-foot-five Marine with impossibly wide shoulders was retreating.

Striding out of the room with a silence that belied the size of him, he ducked out of habit as he walked through the doorway.

A beautiful golden retriever with chocolate eyes looked at me before glancing longingly after her owner.

“Go,” I whispered.

Her tail thumped, but she hesitated.

Punishing grief slid down my cheeks. “Missy, go.”

This time, she didn’t hesitate.

She did what I was too cowardly to do.

She went after him.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Roark

Kissing this woman again was a fucking red light, but not touching her wasn't an option.

Striding across the room, my hands were on her before I had a game plan because I wasn't thinking about what this woman deserved.

I was only thinking about what she needed.

I wasn't blind. I knew why the fuck she fell into Kentworth's orbit. It was the exact reason why I should've been walking away. Grief was punishing her. Same as it'd gotten a hold of me after losing my career and mother.

I didn't pretend to know the grief of losing a kid brother you'd practically raised, but I knew the guilt of having the woman who'd raised me die not knowing if her only son would walk again. She passed while I was in a fucking hospital, halfway around the world, jacked up on pain meds, getting surgery after surgery to fix a leg that I was lucky to keep. She'd been distraught, wanted to fly over, but I'd said no. I'd selfishly told her not to come.

Then she had a heart attack and was gone.

Stateside ME had said it'd been a ticking time bomb, nothing I could've done, but I fucking knew. The stress of my injuries and my attitude post

injury had killed her. I spent years living with that guilt. Still lived it.

Which was why I was the last person this broken woman needed in her life, but I selfishly wasn't leaving her alone.

Grasping her face, I showed my cards just to give her a simple truth I hoped like hell she'd understand. "You're still Evelyn Grace Tory." She'd written and played that piece with far more talent than I had hours in a cockpit.

The stunned expression in her eyes didn't do a damn thing to crush either my anger at Kentworth or the shit hand she'd been dealt, let alone tamper the raging hard-on I had for this woman.

Releasing her before I crossed any more lines, I gave her the best advice I had. "Never quit your music, woman."

Striding out of the living room, masochistically hoping she started playing again, I aimed for the guest room I hadn't slept a wink in as I pulled my burner cell out and dialed.

November answered on the first ring. "It's not finished yet."

Sixth sense motherfucker. I didn't bother asking how the former Air Force Cyber Security Officer knew why I was calling. "When will the fake ID be ready?" I needed to get the hell off this mountain so I could go after Kentworth. I also needed to be in my plane where I could control the thrust and altitude and my own damn headspace.

"You didn't ask for a fake ID. You asked for a new identity. That takes time."

She started playing again as Missy trotted into the bedroom.

The longer I heard that music or her voice, the worse this was going to get, for both of us. “Tell me again why the hell you’re not handling this with whoever you have waiting in the wings?”

As a rule, I didn’t trust people. Especially not a slick hacker, and especially when it came to handling someone like Kentworth. Not only was the woman in deep, but now my ass was on the line too. A few days ago, before laying eyes on this woman, I wouldn’t have been having this conversation with November. I would’ve dumped the woman with AES and already handled Kentworth. But now I was second-guessing myself because a wounded blonde with doe eyes had me so spun up, possessive shit was running through my head.

“Do you want Kentworth taken down, or do you want this new identification?”

“What the fuck do you think?”

“Both,” November answered in his usual perpetually level tone. “I’m working on the latter. Foolproof takes time.”

I didn’t have time. Every minute gave Kentworth an advantage, and every encounter with the woman sunk me deeper. I should’ve been taking her to the nearest hospital for X-rays, not fixating on how many fucks in Kentworth’s inner circle I’d need to take out before I could see straight again. “Give me a ballpark.”

“Same as before, but a new identity doesn’t solve everything. Did you talk to her like Alpha asked?”

“Not fucking happening. I don’t care what she does or doesn’t know. We’re not making her any more of a target.” If there was a brother, I’d handle it. I wasn’t putting her in the line of fire for intel. It wasn’t her job to

cut through Kentworth's organization. Fuck what Alpha had said. A snake with no head was a dead snake.

"You sure that's the right call?"

It was the call I was making. "Yes."

"She's playing again," November stated.

I paused for a moment to listen.

"How long?" November asked.

Jesus, she was talented. "What?"

"How long has she been playing?"

Suspicion hit. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because there isn't a piano on the Contender, and she didn't perform any engagements for three months before that, except the charity event."

Christ. She hadn't been playing since she lost her brother. "I don't know," I admitted, scrubbing a hand over my face. "Maybe an hour."

"That's good." In a lower tone, almost casually, November said the two words like he was a normal fucking human being.

It hit me. "You arranged for us to land in a place with a piano."

"I'll let you know when the identity's finished." He hung up.

Fuck. I was being played. Had been since November figured out who she was.

"Who arranged for a piano to be here?" she asked.

Spun up, my head twisted, I hadn't noticed she'd stopped playing, let alone walked up behind me.

I eyed Missy as she went for the woman. "You fail as a watchdog."

Limping on her cast to meet Missy at the doorway, she pet her. “Is that what she’s supposed to be? A watchdog?”

She wasn’t supposed to be anything except what she was. “What happened to staying off that ankle?”

“What happened to your leg?”

I fucking froze.

Before I could pull my shit together, she opened her mouth again.

“You favor it. Your left.” She nodded at my leg as she scratched behind Missy’s ears. “When you were carrying me, when you walk on sand, when you got in the pilot’s seat.” She looked up at me. “You tell Missy to walk on your left.”

I didn’t advertise shit about myself. Not one goddamn thing. I didn’t date. I didn’t fuck around, and I didn’t wear shorts. I lived, worked and existed in the southernmost part of the United States where it was eighty degrees year-round, but I didn’t *fucking* wear shorts.

Because this was the conversation I avoided.

Except I’d never actually had a conversation like this. Not with a woman, and definitely not with one who didn’t know shit about me, but here she was. Noticing what no one outside the military noticed.

My goddamn leg.

Like a fucking omen, ghost pain flared and a burning sensation crawled up my left calf and thigh. Fighting not to rub the ache, I tipped my chin at her foot. “Get off that ankle. I’m going to do a perimeter check.” I aimed for the doorway she was standing in.

Like I knew she would, she stepped back to let me pass.

I was halfway across the living room when she caught me with that voice of hers.

“Kyle has a brother.” Her rasp more pronounced than when she sang, she blurted the intel out like it was a confession.

Turning, I faced her.

“None of the guards or anyone else on the Contender know they’re related. He only goes by his first name. I’m not even sure if he has the same last name, but I heard him speaking to Kyle early on when they didn’t know I was listening. They’re definitely brothers.” Her hand twisted in Missy’s fur. “The night before I jumped, he was on board. I overheard him tell Kyle he should get rid of me. He said I’d been around too long, that I’d seen too much.... He said he would have the guards take care of it. They argued.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “But that’s not why I jumped.”

I didn’t say one goddamn word.

Taking in my expression, her shoulders dropped right along with her gaze. “I know what you’re thinking.”

She had no goddamn clue what I was thinking. “No, you don’t.” I was going to kill Kentworth and his brother, along with every one of his guards.

“Maybe you had good intentions earlier. Maybe you even believed what you were saying when you said you wouldn’t hate me if you knew more details. But I see it in your eyes. You think less of me for having been with Kyle.”

I knew my own goddamn intentions. I’d meant what the fuck I’d said. Now she was going to doubt me? After everything I’d done?

Like an enraged, jealous fuck, I aimed. “What makes you think I thought more of you to begin with?”

Her head bobbed like she was expecting the insult, but she didn't give me the woman who'd pushed through the mangroves on the beach. She didn't even give me a fight. She fucking acquiesced. "I deserved that."

She didn't deserve any of the shit I was throwing at her.

As if she owed me an explanation, she kept talking. "I don't expect you to understand, I'm not even asking you to, but when I..." She inhaled, then she rushed through her next words. "When I lost my brother, it hurt too much. I couldn't cope. I didn't know how to escape the pain of that kind of grief." Her dark eyes met mine. "But I needed to escape it. I needed a distraction I couldn't give myself, and Kyle was that distraction. Until he wasn't. I didn't think—" Cutting off mid-sentence, she shook her head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Just know that I was the one who jumped into his vortex. I wasn't thinking about an expiration date or an exit plan. I just didn't want to be in my own thoughts anymore." Her voice dropped. "I didn't want to feel that pain."

For three goddamn seconds, I stared.

Then I turned my back on her and walked the fuck out.

It wasn't until I was halfway across the front of the property that I realized Missy wasn't by my side—my left side, where I'd trained her to be. Subconsciously. Like a goddamn crutch.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Sailor

He was angry, and I got it. I didn't blame him for that, but he was wrong about one thing.

I wasn't Evelynn anymore.

Evelynn Grace Tory wouldn't have fallen prey to someone like Kyle. She would've known better.

But she died when Shane died.

Everything I'd ever done, every song I wrote, every door I knocked on, every sample I sent and kept sending, how I kept hustling, it was all for him. My brother was my world. We were all each other had, and he'd trusted me. The long nights I'd spent working in studios when he was too young to cook for himself, let alone be left on his own all night, he would crawl into bed and pull the covers up and tell me he was brave. He'd tell me he would be okay alone while I went to work or gigs or recordings. He was always telling me it was okay.

And I'd justified it.

I'd justified chasing my dream instead of getting a nine-to-five to pay the bills. Long nights, scarce funds, everything we had going back into my music instead of his basic needs—I'd put him through hell.

And he'd told me it was okay.

I'd leave him alone at night, forget to make his lunches, miss parent-teacher conferences. I'd even sent him to school in threadbare clothes, telling myself I was doing my best, but I'd failed him.

I'd left him alone at night.

I'd left him alone that night.

I'd left him and he'd died.

Alone.

From a birth defect I'd never known about, one he'd never complained about because he never, ever complained. All he'd ever given me was his sweet smile. Every late pickup, every missed meal, every shitty, horrible, neglectful thing I put him through—he'd simply smile when I finally showed up and give me his nickname for me.

I could still hear it now.

Sailor.

Tears I couldn't stop, guilt I couldn't take, it crushed my heart and choked every ounce of breath I didn't deserve.

Sinking down to the couch, curling in on myself, wishing I'd never surfaced when I'd jumped off that boat—I was drowning in grief when two paws landed on my thighs and a wet tongue swept across my hands as I covered my face.

Crying, I wrapped my arms around Missy's furry neck. "Shane would have loved you." He'd always wanted a dog.

As if she knew what I was saying, her tail wagged and she licked my cheek.

“You’re just like him.” I hugged her tighter. “Loyal and sweet and loving.”

A deep-throated snort sounded from the entry to the kitchen. “Girl, if you knew what that bitch was capable of, you wouldn’t have your face that close to her teeth.”

I looked up at the man they called Echo.

He raised an eyebrow as he shook his head at me. “Fucking ballsy, I’ll give you that.”

Leaning back from Missy but not letting go of her, I ran my hand over her head. “She’s not a bitch.”

“She’s exactly that, and the fact that she’s not glued to Romeo’s side right now should have you more concerned than plastering your face next to her jaw and offering up your jugular like Christmas dessert.”

I frowned. “She’s not a threat.”

The huge, inked man looked at me like I was out of my mind. “Sure.” He smirked. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Is she military trained?”

“Nope.” He flashed a smile that was scarier than what he was saying. “Worse. She’s MacElheran trained.”

“What does that mean?” Roark said he flew seaplane tours out of Key West.

“Exactly what I said.” Echo scanned the living room and windows behind me.

A lump formed in my throat that had nothing to do with my own grief. “He trained her to kill?” Why would he need a dog trained to fight?

“Kill, maim, break a bone.” His words were casual, but there was nothing casual about him. Describing Missy as if describing himself, he moved past me with a relaxed posture that was rehearsed. “Rip off some flesh.” He scanned from left to right as he glanced out a window. “Take out your jugular.”

“I don’t believe you.” I scratched Missy’s head as she smiled at me.

“Your kind never do.”

My kind? “What the hell does that mean?”

His hardened gaze cut back to me. “Tripping.”

What? “I’m not on drugs.”

“Didn’t say you were.” He glanced at the dog, then at me. “But you’re definitely tripping, girl, if you think petting Cujo here is going to earn you a ride on the Romeo train.” He tipped his chin toward the door Roark had walked out of. “Trust me, that ship has sailed. Hell, I’m not even sure it was ever in port.”

Embarrassment heated my face. “I’m not trying to sleep with him.”

His laugh was rough and deep and scarier than his smile. “*Sure*. And I’m not a former SEAL holding an M4.” He winked. “But keep hope alive, sweetheart. Looks good on you.” Just like his friend, he walked out.

I watched him leave through the same door as Roark before I cupped Missy’s face. “He’s wrong, you know.”

Smiling at me, she licked my hand.

I kissed the top of her head. “You’re not a killer, are you girl?”

She wagged her tail.

“Didn’t think so.” Breathing easier than I had been, the ache in my ribs receding, I tried to count the small blessings as I stood. “Come on. I’ll take you out, then we’ll snuggle under the covers, and you can hog the bed again.”

THIRTY-NINE

Roark

She fucking took my dog out.

Opening the door and watching over her like Missy would ever think of taking off, the woman told my dog to take a piss. Except she didn't give Missy the dignity of saying piss.

“Go pee, girl.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

Staying to the shadows, I grabbed my cell and shot off a text to Echo.

Me: *Where the fuck are you?*

“Come on, Missy.” The woman clapped her hands. “Go pee.”

My dog stared at her like she was out of her fucking mind because she was.

My cell pinged with a new text.

Echo: *Watching your girl tell your bitch to take a shit. Fifty bucks says you lose your shit before the dog.*

More pissed by the second, I fired a reply.

Me: *Get her the fuck inside.*

Echo: *You get her inside. She's your bitch.*

Me: *Not the dog, the woman!*

Echo: *Who the fuck did you think I was talking about?*

Goddamn it.

I stepped out of the shadows. Missy immediately turned toward me, but the woman didn't hear me.

She clapped again. "Come on, girl, go pee."

My jaw ticked. "She doesn't know what the fuck you're talking about."

The woman jumped.

I glanced at my dog. "Missy, hurry up."

No hesitation, Missy took off to do her business.

Crossing her arms against the cold mountain air, the woman looked at me, but she didn't make eye contact. "Hurry up," she murmured. "Good to know."

"Get back inside," I ordered.

"I'll wait for Missy."

Inhaling for patience I didn't have, I stared at a woman I wanted to both strangle and fuck. "No, you won't."

She waved an errant hand across the landscape. "Why? You think Kyle's going to climb a mountain to retrieve one of the hundreds of women he's dated?"

My nostrils flared, and I gave up reining it in. "Is that what you were? His *date*?"

"Fine," she yelled, throwing her hands up. "I slept with him! I'm a danger addict or thrill seeker or adrenaline junkie or whatever the heck you

accused me of being in your kitchen, I'm *that*! There, I said it. Is that what you want to hear? That I'm crazy? That I'm a slut? That I'm morally reprehensible because I had sex with a man who sells women, and I didn't care because it was an *addiction*?" Tears streaming down her face, her raspy voice broke. "Or maybe you want to hear that I enjoyed it? That I used him like he used me? That every party, every night, every time he put his hands on me was one more second I didn't have to think about my past. How about that, Mr. I'm-Hiding-An-Injured-Leg? Does that justify your shitty attitude and judgy addict label?" She swiped at her face and turned toward the house. "Take your own damn dog out." Limping, she managed to stomp back into the house before slamming the door.

Missy flanked my left as Echo appeared on my right. "Well, you fucked that all to hell."

"Shut up."

"You want my take?"

Missy whined and nudged my hand. "No."

He told me anyway. "She has a point."

"Fuck off."

Echo laughed. "You're one sorry son of a bitch, and that's saying something." He slapped me on the shoulder. "Welcome to AES. You'll fit right in, motherfucker."

"Not happening."

Stepping toward the house, Missy looked back at me expectantly.

"That's what they all say." Echo smirked. "Right until Alpha hands them their first paycheck." He turned toward the woods. "Go inside and

fuck her. Or don't. I don't give a shit if you two limp off into the sunset together. Just be ready at oh two hundred."

"I don't fucking limp."

"Okay, Purple Heart. Whatever you say."

Goddamn it. "What the fuck is happening at two a.m.?" And how the hell did he know about my past? I told both Trefor and November my shit was off-limits.

"November's sending a pigeon."

My anger taking a momentary backseat, I looked at him. "What?"

"Courier." Echo checked his magazine then looked at me with a lethal expression. "He's sending her new papers and intentionally leaving a trail."

The anger came back tenfold. "That was *not* the goddamn plan."

Echo shrugged. "Shit happens when you make plans." Echo slammed the magazine back into his M4. "But when you dangle a carrot, some motherfucker's bound to come after it."

A trap? "This mountain hideaway was all a fucking ruse?"

Echo tipped his chin toward the road. "One way in, one way out, controlled choke point—you got a better way to corner a slippery motherfucker like Kentworth?"

Was he out of his fucking mind? "He'll never come after her himself. He has dozens of pay-to-play mercs working for him."

"Yep." Echo smiled wide. "And we'll take out every last one of them, except the brother."

Wondering what the fuck he knew and how he knew it, I sidestepped. "There's been no confirmation of a brother."

“Trust me, that asshole has a brother,” Echo countered confidently before nodding toward the house. “And little miss sunshine’s seen him.” His tone turned lethal. “He’s head of Kentworth’s security, and he’s his procurer. Your girl’s going to ID him.”

“No, she’s fucking not.” *No goddamn way.* “We are not putting her in the line of fire, and we’re not doing this here. There’re two of us. Who the fuck knows how many guards Kentworth’ll send.”

“Then you better gear up. Safe house’s stocked. Hope your aim’s better than your attitude, Romeo.” Echo stalked off into the shadows before calling out, “Be ready, motherfucker. I don’t plan on getting shot tonight.”

FORTY

Sailor

The door burst open.

His voice, low and threatening, carried across the huge bedroom before his dog jumped on the bed. “Tell me exactly who Kentworth’s brother is, right now.”

I held a hand out for Missy, but she didn’t face me. Turning her back, she sat directly in front of me, putting herself between me and her owner.

Focusing on her, I ran my fingers down her coat. “That’s the second time you’ve barged in without knocking. Are you always this abrasive with women? Do you speak to them how you speak to me?” With a voice I could write a thousand angry chords of dominance about.

“Answer my question,” he demanded.

“Answer mine.”

His penetrating gaze unwavering, he did what he always did when he didn’t want to answer something—he stared.

“You won’t break me.” I foolishly told myself I was saying what he wanted to hear.

“You’re already broken, woman,” he snapped.

“You’re right, I am.” I didn’t hide from that fact. I only tried to hide from the grief and guilt. “There’s nothing you can do to me that would be worse than the worst day of my life, and I already lived through that, so stare all you want with your threatening glare. I’m not going to answer your question first.”

His nostrils flared. “I meant your ankle.”

“I know what you meant, but I’m talking about every single other part of me. And for the record, Talon said he didn’t think it was actually broken.”

“Woman,” he warned, his voice dropping even lower.

But then he didn’t say anything else. Hands on his hips, anger emanating off of him, he stood there, expecting to get what he wanted out of me.

The sad part was that if I wasn’t so wrung out, if the past couple days hadn’t happened, if I had met him under any other circumstances—who he was, *how* he was, with me, with Missy, his dominance, his brooding protectiveness—I would’ve given in to him.

I *wanted* to give in to him.

I wanted to give this man anything he wanted just so I could hover around his axis, if even for a minute. I had a feeling—no, *I knew*—that one minute with this man, with his guard down, it would be better than every minute with every man I had ever been with combined.

But I was tired.

And sore.

And admittedly, a little pissed off.

He could have told me the command for taking Missy out. He could've said it nicer. He could've knocked instead of barging in and demanding I tell him who Kyle's brother was. This wasn't even about that right now for me. Being on this mountain, we were so far removed from a yacht in tropical waters that my previous life almost didn't seem real. But what did feel real was this man and the way he touched me and how he'd brought the music back.

Except in this moment, he wasn't being that man or the man who'd held my shoulder and calmed my frayed nerves. He was being the Marine who wanted to protect, but I didn't want that right now.

So I stared right back and waited.

His dog on my side, the room charged with an energy I could write dozens of songs about and play endless notes on, I waited.

Then I was rewarded.

His inhale sounded across the room, and his voice, while calmer, was still low and deep and intoxicatingly dominant as he uttered one word. "No."

No, he didn't speak to all women like he spoke to me? Should I want to know why? "Because?"

"They're not victims of a sexual predator."

"I..." I had no comeback for that. Trying to peel back the layers of every nuance of what he'd just implied, I went with the first layer. "You think I'm a victim?"

"No."

I frowned. "What?"

“I don’t think. I know.”

Absently petting Missy, regretting the things I’d yelled outside, I was torn. I didn’t regret him knowing. I couldn’t hide who I was. But I didn’t want this man looking at me like I was the victim. I was a lot of things, but I’d tried hard my whole life to make conscious decisions. I didn’t want to be like my mother. I didn’t want to act victimized. I was grief. I was guilt. I made every mistake I could have made with Shane but not because I was a victim. “I told you, I willingly went with Kyle.”

“How many times?” he demanded.

Shocked that he was asking, I looked at him. “I don’t think that’s any of your—”

“How many times did you willingly go somewhere with him? The first time? The second? How many places did he take you? Key West is a long way from New York City.”

It was my turn to stare at him. “How do you know I live in New York?”

“Lived,” he corrected. “Your landlord says you haven’t been in residence for almost a year.”

My throat constricted, and my carefully compartmentalized walls came crashing down.

A panic that had nothing to do with the man standing in front of me or how he knew so much about my life but had everything to do with his last sentence—it grew into a fissure inside my chest.

Unable to speak, I barely nodded.

Missy turned around, but I couldn’t even pet her. My arms crossed, my world closing in, my mind going to the darkest corner of my despair, I

leaned forward.

Residence.

I wanted to cry.

I wanted that one night back.

I wanted to have drowned offshore in Key West.

But I didn't want a war-hardened warrior to see my triggered meltdown over the simplest mention of the shitty apartment that was once Shane's and my home. That place, that horrible, unsafe, drafty one bedroom where I had last seen Shane alive, where I'd seen him...*oh God*. That apartment was all I had left of Shane, and I'd just abandoned it.

For months.

Oh God, please.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't let a Marine pilot see me lose it. This was my grief. Shane was my brother. I should've saved him. I should've protected him. I should've—

I shoved off the bed in a panic.

A huge, rough hand grasped my jaw, and suddenly I was staring into wild blue eyes. "I don't speak to any woman like this."

The scent of dominance swirled around me, but it was too late. "I don't care." The waves were crashing, and I was a horrible, *horrible* person.

"Hey." The grasp on my jaw tightened. "What's going on?"

Pushing the hand away, I had to escape.

My throat closing, my heart beating dangerously fast, my breath short, my booted ankle throbbing, my ribs aching, I aimed for the door.

I needed air.

Words hit my back. “Where’s the woman who crawled through the mangroves?”

What woman? She was dead. I was dead. I couldn’t do this. Shane was gone. “Gone.”

“Who’s the brother, woman?”

My brother was gone, but I needed him.

I needed Shane.

I needed to hear what mattered most.

“Sailor,” I rasped.

“Who’s the brother, Evelynn?”

My steps faltered.

Evelynn.

Evelynn.

Like flowing water, like summer wind, like birds soaring, the deep, quiet tenor curled around the name and owned it, but the thickness of my grief was too great. I couldn’t breathe it in. I couldn’t breathe at all.

Tears escaped. “No.”

A heavy hand grasped my nape.

“I can’t.” The waves were crashing, and I didn’t know how to survive this. “I can’t feel this.” Grief and shame and fear and twelve months of hell were suddenly suffocating me. “I can’t breathe.”

Shoulders gripped. Body turning. Dark ocean eyes. “Yes, you can.”

No, I couldn’t. No I couldn’t. *No I couldn’t.*

“Please,” I begged. “Make it stop.”

Huge hands grasped my face, my head was tilted back, and dominance filled my mouth.

FORTY-ONE

Roark

Fucking impotent, I watched her panic attack unfold.

Then she begged.

No hesitation, I moved.

Grabbing her face, slamming my mouth over hers, I took her panic.

I took it and I tasted it—her voice, her grief, her pain, her fear.

Fuck, I tasted it.

Hot, submissive, desperate. Mind-bending.

Her arms tangled around my neck, and she dissolved into me. Then she kissed back.

Like the woman who'd crawled through mangroves, she threw herself at me like she'd thrown herself onto that damn beach.

I didn't want to fuck this woman. I wanted to own her.

Dominating her mouth, holding her jaw, I took what I wanted, but then I gripped her hair and pulled her off. "Woman." *Fuck*.

Eyes closed, thrusting her hips once, she let loose with a throaty cry of desperation.

"Stop," I ordered.

She fucking froze.

My dick got harder, and I bit out a command. "Look at me."

No hesitation, I got her eyes. Doe eyes.

"Tell me why you panicked." She'd been triggered, and if anyone knew triggers, I did. But I stupidly wanted to know exactly what it was for her. Fuck, I wanted to know every damn one of this woman's triggers and eliminate them. If that wasn't a recipe for disaster, I didn't know what was.

"Please, don't," she whispered.

"Don't what?" I knew what.

"Make us stop." Her gaze dipped. She inhaled. Then her fingers brushed against the back of my neck, and she gave me a sex-rasped confession. "I don't want to." As soft as her hands on my neck, her hips moved against mine.

My cock pulsed, and my nostrils flared. "I'm not a fix, and you're injured." If she ground against my cock one more time, she was going regret the fire she was playing with. "Tell me what just happened."

Her gaze, her fingers, they slid to my biceps. Light as fuck, she traced a vein, then ignored my question. "You have an injury, too."

I wanted to pin this woman down and fuck her until she said my name. "Don't test me right now," I warned.

"You won't hurt me."

I'd fucking destroy her. But that wasn't the point. I needed to know how I'd triggered her, and I needed to find out who the fuck the brother was so I could stop this shit plan of November's before it went sideways. "Who's the brother?"

This time when she stilled, it wasn't out of submission. Her chest rising and falling her only tell, she met my eyes. Then she gave me brazen. "If that's what you want from me, take it."

"No." She had no goddamn clue what she was getting herself into. Releasing her, I turned to go because that was the only defense I had left against this woman.

"What happened to your leg?"

My steps halting, I faced her. "What happened to your brother?" I knew what. But I was testing this woman. If she wanted a piece of me, I was getting one in return.

She called me on my shit. "You know where I live but not about my brother?"

"Thirteen, congenital birth defect, diaphragmatic hernia. Undiagnosed according to the ME's report." I knew. And I was done. "I'm not using you to get intel, and I'm sure as fuck not getting inside you because you can't control your panic attacks. You want a piece of me, come at me. But do it as the woman who crawled through mangroves looking for a second chance, not as a woman looking for a fix." Giving her my back, I told myself I wasn't turning around for her again.

"Roark."

Fuck, that voice. *That goddamn voice.*

"Let it go, woman," I warned. "You don't know what you're playing with."

"I'm not playing."

Bullshit. "Missy, come."

“Please. Don’t leave.”

My bitch hesitated, and I had to throw her a look before she jumped off the bed and headed to the door.

I followed until a small hand landed on my arm.

“The music came back because of you.”

I didn’t look at her, but I fucking paused. “Not what I asked.”

“It was the apartment,” she blurted.

That got my attention. “The trigger?”

Her voice quieted. “Yes.”

I looked down at her. “Why?”

“Because it’s the last place I saw Shane, and I abandoned it.” Her throat moved with a swallow, and she shook her head before dropping her gaze. “That place and his nickname for me are all I have left of him.”

“Give me your eyes,” I demanded.

She looked up.

“How long have you been having panic attacks?” She started to turn away again. “Look at me when you answer.”

Doe eyes. “Since I lost him.”

“Did you cut a deal with Kentworth to pay the rent in advance?”

Color hit her face. “Yes. I...” Closing her eyes, she inhaled, then she looked back at me. “I couldn’t stay there anymore, but I couldn’t give it up.”

I fucking got it. It took me three years before I sold my mother’s place. “How long do you need?”

She frowned. “What?”

“How long do you need to hold on to the place?”

“I...” Wariness edged into her expression. “Why are you asking?”

Because I was going to pay the fucking rent and give her a breather. “My mother died while I was downrange. I needed time. How long do you want to hold on to the place?”

She was shaking her head before I’d finished my sentence. “You’re not paying my rent.”

“You ready to go back?” I challenged.

All the color drained from her face. “No.”

My eyes on her, I pulled my cell out and dialed.

November answered on the first ring. “I know you spoke to Echo and ___”

“Pay the rent on the woman’s apartment in Brooklyn. Twenty-four months upfront. Take it out of what Trefor’s offering me.”

November paused. Then I heard typing. “Consider it done.”

Hanging up, I pocketed my phone. “You have two more years to decide what to do with the place. Set that trigger aside.”

She stared at me. Then she went where I knew she would. “I can’t pay ___”

“Second thing you’re going to set aside is ever mentioning money to me again. You want to pay it forward someday, go ahead. Otherwise, this topic is closed. Understood?”

Eyes welling, she nodded. Then she gave me the best fucking version of her voice yet. “Thank you, Roark.”

My cock pulsed the same time shit hit my chest. I tipped my chin.
“Taking Missy out.”

“I’m sorry about your mother.”

Inhaling, I stared at her. Barely up to my chest, she was so fucking small, but more, she was vulnerable. Apparently my brand of vulnerable, because I couldn’t look away. The fucking irony wasn’t lost on me that when I first saw a mess of blonde hair and legs hiding in that sea grape hammock, I wanted nothing to do with this woman. I sure as hell didn’t want to blow up my life over it. Now I was on a mountain, staring at a woman fighting to find purchase with the odds stacked against her, and I didn’t just get it, I wanted to fix it.

I wanted to protect this woman.

“Tell me who the brother is.”

Her expression locked down. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

She bit her lip. She worried her hands. She stood with all her weight on one leg. But she didn’t answer.

I told myself I wasn’t going to take advantage of her, but fuck. “Don’t make me go back on my word, woman.”

Her tongue soothed where she’d bit. “I don’t know what that means.”

Christ, those lips. “We both know if I put my hands on you, I’m going to get what I want.”

Sex-laced and so fucking raspy it went straight to my dick, she spoke how she sang. “I want your hands on me.”

FORTY-TWO

Sailor

He surged like a massive, six-foot-five, dominant tidal wave.

His hands went to my face, his lips touched mine, but he didn't kiss me.

He threatened me with a command I was never going to follow.

"Fucking say stop, woman."

"No," I defied, my voice huskier than I'd ever heard it. "Put your hands everywhere."

With a growl erupting from his chest right before his mouth slammed over mine, I was airborne before his roar bled into me. His huge hands lifting me by the backs of my thighs, his tongue sunk soul-deep, and he kissed me.

Oh my God, did this man kiss me.

Like he needed me for oxygen, he stroked hard as he leveraged his hold on me to rub my aching core up and down his huge erection.

"Ribbs," he growled against my lips.

Desire surged between my legs, and I gripped his short hair. Terrified he would stop, I gave him what he wanted to hear. "I'm fine."

I didn't care about breathing.

I didn't care about pain.

I didn't care about anything except getting him inside me.

This man had become my new drug.

But he was right. His mouth dominating mine, he wasn't a fix.

He wasn't an escape from my grief. He wasn't a balm for my anxiety. The notes, *his* notes, his music, his intoxicating, consuming, devouring dominance already pounding in my head as intensely as his groans with each stroke of his kiss—he wasn't even an addiction.

He was danger.

And he could crush me in a blink

His huge arm moving to my back, his rough hand both gripping my hair and cradling my head, this giant beast of a man with his punishing kiss laid me down on the bed so gently, my soul wept.

Dark ocean-storm eyes staring down at me, he hovered, and for just one moment, I saw it. Something so close to fear.

My heart erupted into a thousand frantic beats of apprehension. “Roark?”

So slowly, so tenderly, he lifted from behind the knee of my injured leg and placed my casted foot on the bed next to his hips. Then his voice came out like dominance-laced velvet. “Say no, Evelynn.”

I knew right then.

I was ruined.

If I ever hungered again, it would be for this man, for this moment. His eyes, his touch, his hardened alpha-warrior nature held back just for me. He was so protective, even when it meant protecting me from himself.

I would never say no to this man.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

“This isn’t what you want,” he warned in his deep, gravelly voice.

I’d only ever wanted one thing more, but my brother was never coming back. “I want you.”

His sharp inhale was the only warning I got.

Same as before, he surged, but this time it wasn’t a tidal wave.

Deep and drugging and meant to brand, his tongue sank into my mouth the same time his hand cupped between my legs and gripped. Primal, and so intensely sexual, his hips ground slow and erotic against mine as his fingers stroked against my soaked leggings.

Then his thumb pressed down on my clit.

My back arched, my hands gripped handfuls of bedding and I sucked air right from his mouth into mine.

His echoing groan shook his chest and vibrated through my entire body.

In two swift movements, my pants were over my hips and pulled down past my knees.

Biting my bottom lip, licking his sting, he thrust two fingers into my wet core as he sank his tongue deep. Stroking me like I’d never been touched before, his fingers, pressing so firm, but so, so rhythmically slow, I started to come.

Pulling back from my lips and my body, his thick fingers stayed deep inside me, but they stilled as he looked down at me. Staring, intent, fierce, he single-handedly unbuckled his belt. His gaze locked on mine, his eyes searching, he paused for only the briefest of moments to see my reaction, as if silently asking.

Reaching for him, tangling my fingers in his hair, I pulled myself up to his unyielding strength and whispered against his lips. “Yes.”

The sound of his zipper rocketed through the thick silence of the bedroom.

Desire surged and I pulsed deep in my core.

His nostrils flared, and his hand went to my throat, gently pushing me down to my back. Slowly drawing his fingers out of my tight heat, he lifted my legs.

My thighs going to my chest, my leggings at my knees, feeling more exposed than if I was naked, I reached for his hand on my throat and wrapped my fingers around his wrist.

His eyes locked on mine, and for one breathless moment, he hovered.

Then, hot, thick, and hard, gripped by his fist, the head of his erection pressed against my entrance. His knuckle against my clit, he moved in a controlled, tight circle.

Feeling the sheer size of just the tip breaching me, I drew in a sharp breath.

He thrust into me.

Shocked pain ripped through my stretched core and bled from my vocal cords like a wounded animal. “*Roark.*”

His grasp on my throat holding me down, he tightened his grip.

Then he stroked my clit and pulled out only to thrust back in, long and slow.

The punishing invasion flipped to relentless need, and a cry I’d never heard myself make filled the entire room. My toes curled, a tremor rocked

my body, and he started to move.

Really move.

Hard and slow and ruthless, he fucked me.

His hand on my throat, his thrusts deep, the grind of his hips a rhythmic, symphonic masterpiece, he fucked me, and he destroyed me.

His eyes never leaving mine, he didn't kiss me.

He didn't compliment me.

He didn't encourage me.

He simply, masterfully took dominant control of my body and shattered everything I ever thought I knew about sex.

Tears dripped, my moans grew louder, and my pussy started to pulse.

His thumb pressed harder. His hold got tighter.

"Oh God." I was going come.

But suddenly, I didn't want to. His eyes never leaving mine, his control of my body—this was too intimate. He was too close, too much. Every stroke, every thrust, every circle of his thumb, it was as if he saw each breath of my broken soul and played my body to his own tempo and pace.

I didn't want to come in front of him.

I didn't want him to see me splinter into a million pieces of his doing.

As if knowing my thoughts, my fears, he drove harder, and a breath-stealing ache throbbed deep in my womb.

Panic gripped me, and I started to shake. *"Wait."*

His eyes turning into a storm, his thumb pressing mercilessly against my clit, he leaned down to my mouth.

“Come,” he demanded.

My body a traitor, my core grasped every inch of him and pulsed hard.

Gripping my jaw, holding me prisoner in his fierce gaze, he drove fast and hard into me. Then he stilled and pumped his hot seed into my womb.

I shattered.

Pleasure, pain, light, dark, musk, Marine—my world exploded.

Every inch of the mountain sky raining down like a thousand twinkling lights of ruin, there was no roof overhead and no ground beneath me. Just orgasm, air and heartbeats—and they all belonged to him.

I belonged to him.

Until he silently, stoically, pulled out of me and rolled to his back, his gaze fixed on the nothingness above us.

My thighs shaking, my core pulsing, hot addiction leaked between my legs. My mind fractured but my body hummed, and I drew in my first full breath since losing everything as my soul soared to places I didn’t know were possible.

All I wanted was more.

More Marine, more warrior, more him.

Then his deep voice, quieter than I’d ever heard it, shattered everything. “Who is Kentworth’s brother?”

Shock tensing every muscle, his semen dripped out of me.

Distant, hoarse, my voice, my throat, my vocal cords, they betrayed me for his brand of dominance. “Kenny.”

For one heartbeat, he didn’t move.

Then he zipped his pants and stood.

Without so much as a backward glance, he strode toward the still-open door, and I panicked.

“Was that fucking?” He’d said he wouldn’t fuck me. He’d bit the words out like an edict, but then he’d paid my rent, pulled my pants down and shattered me so deeply I’d forgotten my own name, both of them.

“You got what you wanted.” As his heavy boots crossed the threshold, he issued a command. “Missy, come.”

The golden retriever got up from the floor at the foot of the bed, and just like her owner, she didn’t look back as she walked out.

FORTY-THREE

Roark

Staring into those doe eyes, fucking her, coming inside her—*Jesus*. My head was so jacked, I had to walk away before I took her again. And again. Then never fucking stopped.

Standing in the living room with his back to me, Echo looked out at the dark mountain. “You use a condom?”

“Fuck off.” Her scent all over me, her voice in my head saying my name like a plea as it played on repeat, I dug my phone out of my pocket.

“That’s a no.” Echo scanned the yard. “The way she screamed, hundred bucks says you knocked her up.” Turning, he smirked. “Way to go, pops. Oh-for-two on fucking shit up.”

“Leave,” I ground out, dialing.

“You fucking leave. It’s your turn for patrol.”

Aiming for the front door, my cell to my ear, I was almost outside when Echo called after me.

“Don’t worry, I’ll check on the missus. See if she needs any aftercare.”

I spun. “You fucking so much as speak one word to her, I will end you.”

Echo grinned as he dropped to the couch and kicked up his feet. “You can try.”

Trefor answered on the fifth ring. “Romeo.”

Walking out of the safe house, I slammed the door behind me. “You fucking promised,” I accused Trefor. “And that’s not my name.”

“That’s the point,” he stated calmly. “Which promise are you referring to?”

“November said this was a secure line. Use my fucking name.”

“Nothing is ever one-hundred-percent secure. That’s why I have a business. And for the record, it’s officially in the paperwork I retain for employees—you’re Romeo.”

Motherfucking goddamn it. “What paperwork? And I’m not your employee.”

“Next of kin paperwork. Liability insurance. And you’re right, you’re not, but you could be. Or you could come aboard as consultant. Pays better than employee.”

“I don’t have next of kin,” I ground out, reliving every fucking second of sinking inside that woman.

“I know. I spoke with Talerco. That’s why his name is on the paperwork, and Missy will go to him.”

My head so goddamn fucked up, I’d momentarily forgotten about my dog. Glancing to my left, I saw her standing five feet away like she was fucking pissed at me. I was pissed at me. Christ, I’d come inside the woman.

Forcing myself to focus, I didn’t acknowledge the additional bullshit Trefor just threw at me. Instead, I got to the point. “The identity was supposed to come in clean, and we had a deal. Now you’re pulling this

fucking baited trap setup behind my back, and doing it with only one other trigger finger on this goddamn mountain besides me? What the fuck do you think is going to happen if Echo and I get taken out?”

“Her new identity is clean, the plan is solid and Echo’s worth half a dozen trigger fingers.”

“Bullshit. No one’s that good, and this is fucking sloppy. You never would’ve pulled this as a SEAL.” He’d always been by the book. He’d taken care of his Teams. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Trefor?”

“Alpha,” he corrected. “And do you mean besides running a business?”

I fucking seethed. “This isn’t about your goddamn company. This is about the woman.”

“Okay.” Trefor exhaled. “Here’s the truth. I didn’t lie. Taking down Kentworth is a payoff, but he isn’t the tip of the spear in his world. Going after only him was never a landmine I was going to step on for one woman, but I will get her out. Just not the way you think it should happen. You’re going to have to trust me on this. The wheels are already in motion. Echo briefed you. You have your orders. We make the play for the brother. If she IDs him, November does his job, then I take out a much bigger piece of the organization. No one will know the intel came from the woman, and she walks away clean.”

“There’re a hundred fucking variables in that scenario that could go wrong.”

“They could also go right,” he argued.

I played the one card I had. “Call the fucking plan off, and I’ll give you the brother’s name.”

Trefor exhaled. “If all I needed was a name, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You and I both know the difference between an ID and a live capture.”

Yeah, I fucking did. A confirmed ID wasn’t even in the same ballpark as a capture. He didn’t just want a name for the brother. He wanted a hostage he could extract intel from. *Fuck.*

His plan already in motion, my hands goddamn tied, I had no choice. I had to play this out, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t telling Alpha exactly where we stood. “You and me? We’re fucking done after this.”

Alpha paused. “You may not see this right now, but I want the same damn thing as you. I want these traffickers taken down. I’m just looking at the bigger picture. I also know that for the most part, Talerco and Luna have left you alone these past five years, but I’m not going to. I don’t give a damn what branch our uniforms were from a decade ago. We were brothers then and we’re brothers now. Yes, I want you on my team, part-time, full-time, I don’t care. More importantly, you need a place to land.”

I hung up.

He immediately called back.

Livid, I answered, but I didn’t say shit.

“I wasn’t finished.”

“I am.”

“Are you?” Trefor challenged.

Already fucked, I took the bait. “Get to the point.”

“PTSD is a fucking bitch, but you don’t have to live it alone.”

Impotent anger surged to a new threshold, and my hand was on my SIG before I bit out my next words. "I don't live alone."

"I'm not talking about a canine."

"You know her goddamn name."

"You're right, I do. I also don't believe in coincidence. This assignment fell in your lap for a reason."

"It's not a goddamn assignment. *It's a woman.*"

"Exactly my point."

"Fuck your goddamn point." And fuck him.

"You done?"

"No." Now I was seriously pissed. "If one fucking hair on Evelyn's body is touched by this jacked-up plan of yours, I'm coming for you."

"Evelyn," Trefor stated.

"Don't test me, Alpha," I warned.

"I don't have to," the fuck said calmly. "You already showed your hand. Finish this assignment, take the position at AES, quit squandering your talents, and for fuck's sake, open your eyes. Duty isn't a goddamn choice." His tone turned lethal. "You came home when other brothers didn't. Honor that." He hung up.

FORTY-FOUR

Sailor

Sitting on the edge of the bed, dried tears on my cheeks, I pathetically pulled the comforter closer around me because it had the barest hint of his smell, but I didn't get up.

I glanced at the bathroom for the hundredth time.

I didn't want to clean up.

The second I did, he would be nothing more than a memory.

Air moved, and another entirely different masculine scent hit me a breath before a large, inked hand landed in front of my face with a glass tumbler.

"Drink." Echo's low voice rumbled as he issued an order just like his friend.

I didn't want to drink, I wanted to drown. But not in alcohol. "No."

"Not a request."

I looked up at him. His eyes were the color of the whiskey he was offering but with green around the edges, and there was a barely noticeable diamond piercing his left nostril. His black hair pushed back, a giant gun hanging from a shoulder strap on his right side, he lifted an eyebrow.

His neck, his hands, his arms, they were all covered in ink. “What kind of name is Echo?”

“What kind is Sailor?” he immediately countered.

I took the drink.

He chuckled. “Smart choice.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t want to spar with me, sweetheart.” He tipped his chin at the glass in my hand. “Drink up.”

I took a sip.

“I didn’t say nurse it. Down it.” He turned toward the door. “Then hobble your ass out here and meet me in the living room. We have something to chat about.”

“What if I say no?”

He smirked. “Then we’ll find out exactly how pissed Romeo can get when I come back and carry you out.” He disappeared down the hall the same way he’d come into the bedroom—silently.

I downed the drink.

My throat burned, my heart hurt and regret ate at my stomach, but I got up and limped to the bathroom in my stupid cast-brace-thing. Then, I made the mistake of looking in the mirror.

Dark circles under my eyes, sunken cheeks, sallow complexion—no wonder he’d walked out.

He.

I shook my head, and my blonde hair, in more tangles than waves, looked exactly like you’d expect it to look when you couldn’t remember the

last time you'd had a haircut—a total mess. But none of that stood out as much as the cut across my cheek and the look in my eyes.

I'd stupidly thought he had haunted eyes.

The front door banged open.

“You trying to wake the neighbors?” Echo asked sarcastically.

“Fuck off.”

“I wouldn't go in there if I were you,” Echo warned.

A moment of tense silence followed.

Then Echo chuckled. “Smooth, pops.”

I moved toward the open bathroom door.

“What did I tell you?” Roark asked in a lethally low tenor.

“Aim that SIG at me all you want. Won't change the fact that you fucked shit all to hell with the missus. Just know, you pull the trigger, you're on your own in an hour. Like I said before, hope your aim's better than your attitude.”

“If you touched her, you're dead.”

I shrunk back from the door.

Echo laughed outright. “Crying chicks ain't my kink, motherfucker. That's all you.”

Roark's tone flipped. “She's crying?”

“What the hell did you think would happen when you fucked her to O town then walked out? She'd rejoice?”

Angry footsteps echoed across the hardwood floors.

My heart suddenly racing, I quickly closed the bathroom door and locked it. Then I scurried to the shower and turned it on.

The knock sounded a moment later, but it wasn't a knock.

Roark pounded on the door. "Open up, woman."

My core tingled, and goose bumps raced across my skin. All my traitorous heart could think was that he came back.

"You heard me," he warned.

I wanted to open the door. Worse, I wanted to drop to my knees when I did and beg him to not be angry with me. But I knew what I was doing, and it was exactly the same thing that had gotten me to this very moment.

He was right.

I was an addict.

I was addicted to anything that would take away the grief.

But something else had happened when he'd grasped my throat, held me down and thrust rhythmically in and out while imprisoning me in his gaze.

He showed me I wasn't the only one screwed up here.

He didn't get to come back.

Not like this.

"Fuck off." My tone hoarse, the shower loud, the natural rasp in my vocal cords—a rasp I'd hated until the very moment I'd put my hands on piano keys and paired notes with it—it was muted, and my voice didn't carry. Not enough.

I repeated myself.

“Fuck. OFF.”

For two single beats, my words hung, drowning out the shower, and endorphins surged.

Suddenly, it was like when I played for a live audience. The delivery of the first notes as a crowd quieted, the apprehension before I gave my voice, the melding of anticipation and nerves coming together in perfect harmony.

I was high.

For exactly those two single beats.

Then the door kicked in, and a six-foot-five angry warrior came at me.

FORTY-FIVE

Roark

For the second time tonight, I fucking lost it.

I kicked in the goddamn door.

Borrowed clothes, a mane of blonde hair and dark doe eyes, she looked at me with terror and backed up.

I fucking stilled as my dog ran into the bathroom and put herself between me and the woman.

“Missy, retreat,” I ordered threateningly.

The dog stared at me.

“Now,” I barked.

The woman flinched, but the bitch left.

Shoving the door shut that still miraculously latched, I unholstered my gun.

Tracking my movements, the woman jerked with fear as her eyes went wide as fuck.

Slowing my draw, hating myself, hating what this woman had put in my head, fucking furious with Trefor and every asshole who worked for him, I placed the gun on the counter. “Do you know how to shoot?”

Not fucking looking at me, eyes trained on the gun, a quick jerk of her head in the negative was all I got as she held her arms tighter.

“Ever held a firearm?”

Another quick shake of her head.

I stepped back. “Pick it up.”

Eyes on the gun, she started to shake.

Mind set, already fucking past the point of no return, I put more force in my tone. “Pick it up.”

Her entire fucking body recoiled.

“Pick it up.”

Like a terrified rabbit, her arm darted out and she grabbed the gun, but then she retreated, holding it away from her body.

“Right hand on the grip, left under your right for support, finger on the trigger, aim,” I clipped, issuing the instructions like an order because it fucking was.

Her eyes welled. “No.”

“Aim,” I barked.

Shaking uncontrollably, wrapping her hands around the grip, she raised her arms.

My head fucked, my dick hard, I gave her the power. “Do you want to shoot me?”

Her head shook like her body, the gun wavered, and she choked back a sob.

I fucking asked. “Do you want to die?”

She broke.

Shoulders dropping, arms lowering, bending at the waist, she fucking dissolved into tears.

“Say it,” I demanded.

She cried harder.

“Do you want to die?”

“N-no,” she sobbed.

“Remember that next time you want to jump. What does Kenny look like?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“What does he look like?” I demanded.

“B-brown hair, evil b-brown eyes. He-he wears a necklace. W-with a gold Italian horn pendant.”

Stepping forward, I took the gun from her.

She sank to the floor.

Echo pounded on the door. “Courier incoming. Go time.”

“One minute,” I clipped.

Then I crouched.

Grasping her jaw, I brought her head up. When her eyes met mine, I fucking punished her with my anger. “I’m no one’s addiction.” Standing, I put the gun on the counter. “Stay here, and do not come out, no matter what you hear. Anyone besides me or Echo comes through this door in the next hour, you fucking shoot them.”

Turning, I opened the bathroom door and barked at the canine standing across the room. “Come.”

Dodging past me, Missy went to the woman, but she kept her eyes on me.

Glaring at a dog I was no longer sure was mine, I issued the bitch an order. “Missy, guard.”

Closing the door, I went to gear up.

FORTY-SIX

Sailor

The front door slammed shut, and I fell apart.

I didn't know how long I cried—a minute, a lifetime.

I cried until I heard it.

The same thing I'd heard every week on the Contender.

A helicopter. Approaching fast.

Oh God.

Scrambling to my feet, I shut off the water and held the shower door open. “Missy, inside, inside. *Hurry.*”

The golden retriever quickly stepped into the shower.

Closing the door, I grabbed the gun on the counter. Then I sunk to the floor, back against the shower, and pulled my knees up.

Missy whined. The helicopter got louder, and my hands shook.

I aimed the heavy gun at the bathroom door.

FORTY-SEVEN

Roark

Strapped, I walked out of the house to the sight of Echo drawing on one of André Luna's men as he stood next to his SUV.

"You know this motherfucker?" Echo asked. "He's not AES. Says he doesn't know November."

Shade muttered under his breath in Italian before tipping his chin at me. "Roark."

"Stand down. He's with Luna and Associates." I bypassed Echo. "Shade."

Nodding at me but eyeing Echo, Shade held out an envelope. "Like I told this fuck, I don't know November, but Luna does, and he asked me to courier. Instructions were to hand the package off to you directly. Said I'd be followed and to let it happen, but I haven't had a tail."

Taking the sealed envelope, I shoved it in my jacket pocket. "Appreciate the drop-off."

Echo lowered his weapon. "Where'd you come from?"

"I've got a place in the mountains," Shade answered Echo vaguely. "But I met an AES jet at Ashville to pick up the envelope." He looked back at me. "No one on the ground was watching me there either."

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Echo muttered. “You even know how to look for a tail?”

Shade gave me a look. “Who the fuck is this asshole?”

“SEAL,” I clipped to the former Marine.

Shade smirked. “That explains it.” He glanced at Echo. “I know what the fuck I’m doing. No tail. No drones. No one on the ground at Ashville. No one hacked the GPS on my SUV because I disabled it, and my cell is a burner. Any other questions?”

Echo had pulled his cell out and was dialing before Shade finished his last sentence.

Shade glanced at the house. “Missy inside?”

My jaw ticked. “Yeah.”

Shade nodded as he scanned the perimeter. “Remote setup, easy choke point, good visibility.” He looked back at me. “Who were you hoping would follow me up here?”

My instincts crawling all over me, I glanced at Echo, who was still on the phone. “Luna didn’t tell you?” Something was off.

“No, he didn’t get much intel out of November. All I know is, you called Christensen at the crack of dawn, wanting his boat, then hung up. Next we heard, November was calling Luna, asking if he had anyone in the vicinity to courier. Which, gotta say, makes me suspicious as hell. I can count on one hand the number of people who know about my cabin. Property isn’t even in my name. Seemed like AES knew about my place.”

“Not AES—November. He’s Trefor’s right hand and a former Air Force cyber security officer. He hacks everything.”

“Christ.” Shade glanced again at Echo. “Who is he?”

“Echo,” I answered, scanning the property. “He’s AES.”

“Figured that much. What’s his last name? He looks familiar, but I can’t place him.”

“Don’t know.” I caught a distinctive sound in the distance.

“He Italian?”

The wind cut across the property and momentarily muted the distant sound. “No clue.”

Shade looked toward the house as Echo ended his call. “Who’s Missy inside with?”

I didn’t have time to answer.

The helicopter came from the backside of the mountain.

Rising from the west like a fucking Phoenix, it hovered for two seconds, then came toward the small clearing surrounding the cabin.

“Mother. *Fucker*,” Echo swore. “I did not see that coming.”

Goddamn it, that’s what was off. One way in didn’t account for air support. Fuck, I should’ve predicted this.

Echo sighted his M4. “Shit, I didn’t know Kentworth had a bird. Did you?”

“Kentworth?” Shade asked incredulously as he grabbed a sniper rifle from his SUV and sighted on the chopper.

“Yeah,” Echo answered. “Romeo here took his favorite toy.”

Shade threw me a look, then shook his head before looking back through his scope. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

Ignoring him, I sighted through the scope of my M16 and cataloged every detail as I counted heads. Sikorsky S-76D, matte black, no visible registration number. Two pilots in front. Three people in the second row of seats. At least two in the third row. "I count seven."

"Eight," Shade corrected.

"I've got the two pilots in front. Romeo, cover second row. Shade, or whatever the fuck your name is, you got third row covered?"

"Copy," Shade answered.

"Don't fire," I warned.

"Why the fuck not?" Echo asked. "Unless you got an ID on Kentworth's brother from your girlfriend while you were busy fucking her, I'm not playing the odds on this. They've already seen us. The second that bird lands, squinters are coming out. We're past having the tactical advantage. That leaves one option. Shoot first."

I sighted on the middle row of passengers, but I warned both Echo and Shade. "We don't know how much fuel they're carrying. If anyone hits the tank and she blows, we're going to attract heat from local authorities." Not to mention the FAA.

Echo snorted. "I can fucking aim, Romeo. I'm not going to take out the fuel tank unless I shoot it on purpose. Shade, you know how to use that sniper rifle?"

"Can you wipe your own ass?" Shade countered.

"Then we're good," Echo replied. "Coordinated hit. The second that bird touches down, everyone hit their targets. Copy?"

Fuck. Fucking Trefor and his goddamn plan. I wanted to shoot every asshole on that helo, but long run, I knew it'd be better for the woman and every victim of Kentworth's if the whole operation was shut down.

I made the call. "We're not taking anyone out yet. I have an ID."

Echo threw me a look before sighting his M4. "Description?" he demanded.

"Brown hair, brown eyes, gold Italian horn necklace. Goes by Kenny."

"That could be every motherfucker on that bird," Echo clipped. "Original plan. I'm not getting fucking shot tonight. Bonus, we'll have a faster ride off this mountain."

"You fire at the pilots while they're in the helo, you'll fuck the controls." I knew what blood spray did to a bird.

"Alpha said you could get anything in the air," Echo argued.

"Christ, he always like this?" Shade asked.

I didn't answer Shade. The helicopter landed, and I saw who was in the middle of the second row between two guards. "Hold fire." *Goddamn it.* "They have a hostage."

The two guards in the middle row got off the helo with Jack, the Tortuga captain, handcuffed and shackled, between them. One guard aimed at Jack's head and the other aimed at us as two more guards spilled out after them. Weapons drawn, they dragged a beat-to-hell, nearly unconscious guy out after them. Then a fifth guard I hadn't spotted stepped off the chopper with an RPG locked on us.

"You're gonna fucking owe me for this, Romeo," Echo said over the sound of the blades still rotating. "For the record, we should've fired before

they hit the ground.”

The asshole with the RPG would’ve locked on us if we had. “Hold position,” I warned as the pilot shut down the bird and casually opened his door like he held all the cards.

“Pilot’s wearing a gold necklace,” Echo clipped so only Shade and I could hear. “That’s Kenny Kentworth. I have a clean shot right now.”

Shade cursed in Italian. “I never met Kentworth or his brother, but that pilot’s last name isn’t Kentworth. He’s a Domenico brother.”

Echo swore.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“No one you want to fuck with,” was all Shade had time to reply.

With an AK-47 casually resting on a shoulder strap, the pilot grinned at me. “Roark MacElheran. I believe you have something I want.” He nodded toward Jack. “I brought a little incentive.”

Looking like he’d put up a good fight before he was taken, Jack stared at me with the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut. “Don’t do it.”

“Who are you?” I asked the pilot, stalling.

“Still have the shot,” Echo quietly said.

“Sighted on the RPG fuck,” Shade added under his breath.

The pilot chuckled. “My name’s not important. Get Eve out here in the next two minutes, and you can all live to see another day.”

“He’s lying,” Jack interjected.

The guard to Jack’s right kicked the back of his legs, and Jack dropped to his knees with a grunt.

“Now you have one minute,” the pilot warned.

“No one else is here,” I ground out.

The pilot nodded slowly as he glanced around. Then he looked pointedly at me. “Okay, you want to play it that way? No problem. We’ll just kill all three of you and go look for ourselves.”

“You can try, motherfucker,” Echo goaded. “We’ll get at least six shots off between us before we go down, including a round in your fuel tank.”

The pilot smiled. Then he raised his voice. “EVE! Get the fuck out here or your boyfriend dies!”

FORTY-EIGHT

Sailor

The distinctive sound of the helicopter's blades slowing down made fear ripple through every nerve in my body.

Missy whined and pawed at the closed shower door.

"Ssh, it's okay, girl." It wasn't okay. I knew the sound of that helicopter.

Pushing myself up, I dared to quickly glance out the one window in the bathroom.

Oh God.

The angle was wrong since the bathroom was on the side of the house, but I got a glimpse, and that was all I needed.

It was Kenny's helicopter.

Then I heard their voices—Kenny, Echo, Roark—but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Steeling myself, praying none of them saw or heard me, I risked unlatching the window and pushing it up just an inch.

Cold air blew in along with Kenny's voice as he gave a short laugh. "My name's not important. Get Eve out here in the next two minutes, and you can all live to see another day."

"He's lying," an older man's voice replied.

Oh my God. Was that the captain from the boat?

A grunt sounded, and Kenny dropped the fake humor in his tone. “Now you have one minute.”

“No one else is here,” Roark said threateningly.

“Okay, you want to play it that way? No problem. We’ll just kill all three of you and go look for ourselves,” Kenny warned, except it wasn’t a warning.

I knew what Kenny would do, and it made my blood run cold.

“You can try, motherfucker,” Echo clipped. “We’ll get at least six shots off between us before we go down, including a round in your fuel tank.”

“EVE!” Kenny yelled. “Get the fuck out here or your boyfriend dies!”

Panic making my heart pound, I shut the window.

I didn’t know how many guards Kenny had brought with him, but I knew it would at least be a few, and that meant Roark and Echo were outnumbered. This was all my fault. Kenny was going to kill Roark.

There wasn’t even a decision to make.

Shaking, I set the gun on the counter and quickly opened the shower stall door. Missy came right for me, but I could tell she was anxious and wanted to be outside with her owner.

“I’m sorry, girl, but I’m making you stay here. You’re the best dog ever. Take care of your daddy.” Hastily giving her a pat on the back, my hand landed on a lump in her vest.

Quickly unzipping the small pocket, I found a keychain with a car key, house key, and key fob. But it wasn’t the same set of keys Roark had used earlier on either his car or house, and they looked off, somehow.

Remembering a self-defense class I'd taken years ago and how to use keys as a weapon by putting them between your fingers when you made a fist, I prayed Roark wouldn't be angry and I pocketed the keychain.

No more time to waste, I stood and gave an anxious-looking Missy a command. "Stay."

Then I rushed out of the bathroom and through the house.

Not stopping to think about what I was doing, I pulled open the front door.

Then I froze.

Oh, dear God.

Kenny and four guards were pointing weapons at Roark, Echo and a third man. One of the guards even had a military-looking rocket launcher, but worse, Brad, the crew member, was lying beaten on the ground, and Jack, the boat captain from Key West, was on his knees with a fifth guard holding a gun to his head.

Bile rose, and sheer terror mixed with anger as I started to shake.

Kenny's gaze whipped toward me. "Well, look who it is." He gave me his evil grin before cutting the act. "Get the fuck over here, girl."

"No," Roark barked, never taking his eyes or aim off Kenny. "Back in the house, woman."

Praying Roark would survive this, I did what I had to do.

I walked toward the helicopter.

FORTY-NINE

Roark

“Back in the house, woman,” I warned, but she didn’t fucking listen.

Limping past me, her eyes on that asshole Kenny, or whoever the fuck he was, she headed right for the helo.

“I’m taking the shot,” Echo whispered.

“No,” I growled.

“Don’t fucking do it, SEAL,” Shade warned. “She’ll get hit in the crossfire.”

“*Woman*,” I warned as she approached the helo. “Stop right fucking there.”

“Get on the chopper,” the asshole pilot ordered.

Apologizing to Jack, not listening to either of us, the woman knelt by the guy on the ground and glanced at the pilot. “Brad needs medical attention.”

Who the fuck was Brad?

“Get on the chopper, and he can have it,” the pilot argued.

“No,” the woman fucking countered like the pilot wouldn’t shoot her dead in a heartbeat. “You let Jack and Brad go, and tell the guards to lower their weapons. Then I’ll get on the helicopter.”

The pilot laughed. But then he pulled out a sidearm and aimed it at her while still holding his AK-47. “How about I shoot all three of you, drag your bleeding ass aboard, and then kill your new friends before we take off?” He spared her a furious glance. “Does that sound better, you worthless bitch?”

Kentworth, Domenico, whoever the fuck he was—he was a dead man. “You shoot her, you die.”

The woman glanced over her shoulder at me, and her look said it all. Then she grabbed the unconscious fuck and tried to lift him. “Fine. You win, Kenny. I’m getting on the helicopter, but not without Brad. He needs medical attention, and you’re going to drop him off at the closest hospital.”

“Now or never,” Echo whispered.

“Suicide call,” Shade countered.

“I guarantee we’re better shots,” Echo argued.

They were both right.

“Fire her up,” Kenny-slash-Domenico ordered the second pilot before tipping his chin at the guard nearest the woman. “Get those two on board.”

“Leave Jack here,” the woman demanded as she stepped back from the guard while he heaved the body aboard. Then he aimed his weapon at her.

“Woman!” I yelled, enraged.

She glanced back.

I put every fucking ounce of dominance into my tone as a warning. “Do not get on that helicopter.”

“I’m sorry, Roark.” She climbed aboard.

The helo's rotors began to spin at flight speed as all the guards except the RPG fuck filed back on board, keeping their aim on us.

"*Romeo*," Echo barked.

"Stand down," Shade snapped. "That RPG will take us all out."

Fucking enraged at November, at the woman, at myself, I watched as the pilot and then the RPG asshole got on board. The helo lifted into the air with the back door open, the RPG still aimed at us.

When they were out of range, Echo lowered his weapon and turned on me. "We fucking had them. We should've taken the shots before that bird even touched down."

"They would've fired the RPG anyway," Shade argued. "Then we'd all be dead, and who'd go after the woman?"

I glared at Echo. This was on November and him. This had been their goddamn plan, and now the woman was gone. Not saying a fucking word, I walked over to Jack and pulled my knife out. Cutting his zip ties, I helped him up.

Jack looked apologetically at me. "They came aboard under the guise of a fishing charter. I didn't see it coming."

"Not your fault." If Kentworth had tracked my connection to Jack, he'd been one step behind the whole damn time. I glanced at Shade. "Jack needs to get patched up and taken back to Key West."

"Copy that." Shade eyed Echo, then walked toward Jack.

Echo pulled out his cell. "Getting November on the line."

Fucking seething, I laid down orders. "He better have an AES jet on the ground in Ashville by the time we get off this mountain. I want the location

of the Contender. I want to know where the fuck that Sikorski S-76D is at all times, and I want to know who the hell the Domenico brothers are.” Every asshole on that helo was now in my sights. “I’m grabbing our gear and Missy. Pull the SUV around.”

“Copy,” Echo replied, having enough sense not to fuck with me right now.

Taking my cell out as I aimed for the house, I called the only helicopter pilot I knew who made it a habit to bypass every federal aviation regulation the FAA had.

“*Jesus fucking Christ,*” Echo clipped as my call went through. “Look up.”

“Romeo,” Conlon chuckled as he answered. “Let me guess. You’re calling for relationship advice.”

I glanced up at the helo.

They shoved the unconscious guy out the open door.

I turned toward the house. “I need you to track a helo with no registration number.”

FIFTY

Sailor

On my knees on the floor of the helicopter as we lifted into the air, I gently shook Brad again, but he wasn't coming to. His eyes almost swollen shut, his face bloody and puffy, bruises everywhere, he barely groaned.

"Come on, Brad, hang in there. We'll get you help." Clinging to the crew member from the Contender who'd tried to stop Kyle the first time he'd whipped me, I looked up at the nearest guard and shouted over the wind from the still-open door. "He needs a hospital right away!"

Kenny glanced over his shoulder and nodded at the guard.

Before I realized what was happening, the guard aiming the rocket launcher out the open door moved aside. Arms wrapped around me from behind and the guard closest to me shoved Brad hard.

"NO!" My scream chased Brad's body as he fell from the helicopter and plummeted to his death.

I didn't realize I was still screaming until the guard pulled the door shut.

"Shut her the fuck up," Kenny ordered.

The arms around my waist pulled me back. A hand went over my mouth. I was thrown into a seat. Straps went around my shoulders and waist, and a sharp sting bit my neck.

My head spun, the helicopter blades thumped, and angry ocean-colored eyes swam through my consciousness.

Roark.

Roark.

The helicopter tilted. Or I tilted.

Oh God.

I was going to die.

Evil brown eyes looked back at me. “You’re fucking lucky Kyle wants you back, bitch.” He snorted. “I would’ve put a bullet between your eyes.”

I was never going to see Roark again. “Where are we going?” My speech slurred, my tongue felt thick in my mouth. Clumsy and slow, I reached into my sweater pocket.

“Where the hell do you think?” Evil brown eyes turned away. “Back to the Contender.”

The Contender.

My vision blurred.

The boat.

My head fell forward.

Kyle.

My body grew heavy.

A deep voice played in my memory.

Because you matter.

My fingers touched keys.

Keys?

The helicopter slipped away.

Big brown eyes on an angelic face with a wisp of a smile appeared. My heart crushed, but my soul soared.

Shane.

I love you, Shane.

FIFTY-ONE

Roark

Alpha walked into the command room at AES headquarters in Miami just before dawn. Nodding at me, he addressed November. “Sitrep?”

Head down, hands on keyboard, November didn’t look up. “Working on it.”

Two fucking hours to get off the goddamn mountain, two hours in an AES Gulfstream to get back to Miami, the sun about to rise, and November still didn’t have a fucking lead on where either the helo or the Contender was.

I looked at Conlon. “That Sikorsky had to refuel somewhere. If you were flying, where would you have touched down?”

Conlon typed on his own computer. “Assuming I was heading back to Key West, given the range of that bird, assuming it had some fuel when it left Black mountain, they would’ve had to refuel twice to make it to the Keys. As to where they did that?” He glanced up. “Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville, Orlando, Lauderdale, Miami—there’re a dozen places.”

“Then why the fuck aren’t we finding them?” I demanded.

“I’ve checked every one of those places—nothing.” Pushing his chair away from the workstation he was sitting at, Conlon stood. “You sure there was no tail number?”

Echo spoke up from the back of the room. “We’re fucking sure. Chopper was stealth.”

“Right.” Conlon leaned over and typed something. “I’ll increase my radius.”

Fucking livid, I looked at Trefor. “It’s been four goddamn hours.”

Trefor nodded and glanced at November. “Where are we on satellite?”

“Still scanning, but a matte black helo flying off the radar and under the ceiling at night is a shot in the dark.”

“The Contender?” Trefor asked November.

“Left Key West waters yesterday heading north. Shortly thereafter, the AIS transponder was switched to silent. Hasn’t refueled anywhere or turned their Automatic Identification System on since. Incidentally, I’ve got an ID on the body dumped from the helo. Brad Stratum. Twenty-four. Florida driver’s license. Last seen getting on board the Contender for a crew position six months ago.”

That was the crew member the woman had told me about. Which didn’t do shit in helping us find the yacht’s current location. “So, we’re still fucking nowhere.” *Goddamn it.* “We don’t even know if the woman was taken to the Contender.” I looked at Trefor. “What do you know about the name Domenico?” November hadn’t answered any of my fucking questions about it. “Shade ID’d the asshole. Why aren’t we tracking the bastard that way?”

Trefor stared at me for a beat like he was trying to decide how much to tell me. “Domenico was the last name of their father. Mother’s maiden name was Kentworth. The brothers were raised by the mother because she wanted to keep them out of the father’s family business.”

Family business my ass. “Fucking mafia you mean. How many more Domenico or Kentworth brothers are going to come out of the woodwork?”

“None. Once we had confirmation from Shade, we ran backgrounds. There are only two brothers, and both parents are deceased. The Domenico name isn’t relevant to this current situation. Besides the usual digital footprint we have on Kyle, nothing current is coming up on the brother, but we’re watching all of Kyle’s properties and bank accounts for any activity.” Trefor glanced at his watch. “Outside of that, I’ve asked Jacek Black to come in on this. Given his business and his brother’s military background, he may have some actionable intel. He and his two brothers should be here any minute.”

“What the hell kind of intel?” The Black triplets owned a goddamn private membership sex club in Miami—they weren’t in the security game.

Trefor pulled out his cell and glanced at it. “They’re here. Let’s find out.” He glanced at November. “Pull the photos up.”

“Copy.” November switched to a different laptop in front of him and started typing.

One of Trefor’s men, Whiskey, opened the command room’s door, then stepped back.

“You have got to be shitting me.” Echo shook his head as the Black brothers walked into the command room. “Fucking triplets? And you’re goddamn *identical*?” He looked at Conlon. “Did you know about this? What the fuck is in the water in Miami?”

Conlon held his hands up. “Don’t look at me. I’m only a twin.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Echo muttered, staring at the three brothers. “All of you served? How the fuck did they tell you apart?”

The brother standing in the back with the telltale locked expression spoke up. "Only I served," Jarek stated. "Marines."

Alpha stepped forward and shook the first triplet's hand. "Jacek."

The triplet wearing a suit and a somber expression nodded. "Adam."

"Hold up. You can actually tell them apart?" Echo asked Trefor incredulously.

"Yes." Alpha spared Echo a glance before he lifted his chin at the other two brothers. "Jagger, Jarek." He glanced at his men, starting with Conlon. "This is Victor, Echo and November." Alpha nodded toward me. "And I believe you've all met Roark. Thanks for coming."

"Glad to come, but as I told you on the phone, I don't know how much help we can be. We're not in the security business." Jacek glanced at Missy lying next to me, then at one of the large monitors on the wall where November had started populating the screen with image after image of young women.

"Understood." Alpha turned toward the screen. "I just want to know if you or your brothers or anyone at your club has crossed paths with any of these women."

Jarek's expression turned dark a split second before it locked back down. Then the three brothers looked at each other.

Jacek spoke up. "What's this about?"

"A current assignment we're working on," Alpha answered vaguely.

"This is getting us nowhere." Out of fucking patience, I pushed off a desk I was leaning on and looked pointedly at each of the brothers. "Do any of these women work at your club?"

Jacek said, “No,” at the same time Jagger said, “Yes.”

I looked between them as they glanced at each other again.

Jacek frowned at Jagger before meeting my gaze. “None of them work on staff at the club.”

“Cut the bullshit, Jacek,” I warned.

“I’m not bullshitting you, Roark. None of them are servers or house staff.”

“I’m not fucking talking about cleaning staff or waitresses.” He knew exactly what I was asking.

“Those are the only positions we employ women for,” Jacek argued.

Jesus Christ. I threw a glance at Jagger, who was a notorious player. “You selling these girls?”

Jagger smiled like I wasn’t about to pound his pretty-boy face in. “We’re not that kind of club. We don’t sell women. We don’t have to. They come to us. What they do at our club after they walk through the door is on them.”

My jaw fucking grinding, my leg killing me, I stepped into Jagger’s personal space. “I’m going to ask you one more time. *Which girls?*”

Missy stood and came to my left.

Jarek flanked Jagger. “We don’t sell them. We’re not traffickers.”

“Right.” Conlon smirked. “Not that I’m speaking from personal experience, but there’s plenty for sale at your club.”

Jarek slid his empty stare toward Conlon. “You got something to say?”

“I believe I just said it,” Conlon countered, stepping to my right.

“Gentlemen,” Alpha interrupted. “We’re only looking for actionable intel. These women are suspected of having interaction with a person of interest, and all we want is information. If you recognize any of them, we’d like to speak to them.”

Jagger snorted. “We’re not in the information business.”

“We’re not involved,” Jacek stated definitively.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Echo muttered, stepping into the mix. “It’s fucking Kentworth we’re after. He took Romeo’s woman. You get any of these girls from Kentworth or not?”

“Call me Romeo one more time,” I warned Echo. “See what happens.”

The asshole spared me a glance. “As much as I want to bite on that or see the twin go head-to-head with triplets one, two and three, we all know we’re out of fucking time. I’m cutting to the chase.” He looked back at the Black brothers. “If any of you triple Js recognize these women as Kentworth specials, then speak the fuck up. Kentworth is in our sights, and he’s going down, one way or another. Personally, I hope my fist is involved. Either way, it’s happening. So if you’re in business with this piece of shit, or if you’ve got any of his girls, consider this your only warning.” Echo eyed each triplet. “Because I’m out of patience, and bad fucking shit goes down when that happens.”

None of the triplets said a fucking word.

“Right.” Conlon smirked. “Not involved.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Well, that went swimmingly.” The fucker winked at me before affecting a serious expression. “Pun not intended, of course. I’m going to my office to make a few calls. I’ll let you know what I come up with.” He

glanced at the triplets. “Blacks, always a pleasure.” Grabbing his laptop, Conlon walked out of the control room.

Glaring at the brothers, Echo crossed his arms.

November deleted the women’s faces from the screens and silently retreated to his setup in the corner.

Trefor looked at Jacek and reiterated what Echo had said. “We’re going after Kentworth. Any intel your women have would be helpful. I’m asking on both a personal and professional level. AES isn’t the only agency after this operation. Once we move in, I can’t guarantee that your name will stay out of it.”

Agency, operation, guarantee—I wanted to level every asshole in this room.

“I appreciate the heads-up, but I can assure you none of the women in my purview have any intel on Kyle Kentworth,” Jacek replied.

“Sure they fucking don’t,” Echo ground out.

Jarek’s expressionless stare cut to Echo, but his jaw ticked.

I aimed my next question at him. “What about Kentworth’s brother who ferries the women on his helo to Kentworth’s yacht? You going to deny they know anything about that too?”

Jarek didn’t say shit.

Jacek frowned. “We’re not involved with Kentworth, and I was unaware he had a brother.”

Toeing the fucking line between Echo’s outright hostility and my own damn code of conduct, I glared at a man who sold sex for a living. “Everyone in this room knows exactly where your personal fortune comes

from. Pretend all you want that you're not involved, but know this. I've seen firsthand what Kentworth does to someone who crosses him. You better fucking pray you're telling the truth."

"We're leaving," Jarek announced, turning toward the door.

Jagger followed as Jacek glanced at Trefor. "If I knew anything, I'd tell you."

Alpha nodded. "Thanks for coming in."

Jacek glanced at me. "Good luck."

I didn't say shit as he followed his brothers out of the command room.

"Triplets," Echo muttered.

Conlon walked back into the command room with his laptop. "I think I've got something." He typed. "November, I'm sending it to you. Pull up this satellite image."

"Copy." November nodded at the largest screen in the room as it populated with an aerial shot of undeveloped acreage with a road leading in to three structures, one of them distinctive.

Conlon pointed at the largest building in the image. "Private hangar on a property in Indiantown in Palm Beach County. It's registered under an inactive land development corporation as a hunting retreat." Conlon rattled off the name. "November, I hit a wall tracking anything on the corporation."

"On it." Head down, November started typing.

Conlon looked at me. "There's an old permit that was pulled for a house and storage building but nothing else. That's definitely a hangar, and it's large enough to house a Sikorsky. The property's remote. Eight hundred and ninety acres that back up to over eighty thousand acres of protected wildlife

preserves. With that much land, a helo coming and going wouldn't draw much attention, if any. If I was looking to hide a private, unregistered bird, this is where I'd do it."

November stopped typing and looked up at me. "Three years ago, the same corporation bought a Sikorsky S-76D."

"Address," I demanded.

November recited it.

"Missy, come." Already aiming for the door, I nodded at Conlon and glanced at Echo.

"Right behind you, Romeo." Echo grabbed his M4. "Let's go get that motherfucker."

FIFTY-TWO

Sailor

Just like another sunrise a lifetime ago, early rays peeked over the horizon, but this time, I wasn't hiding in a sea grape hammock. I was in a descending helicopter that was angling a precise landing on a yacht's helo pad.

My head still swimming, my body still heavy, I was barely able to force my fingers closed over a set of keys that were my only proof that the last few days had even happened. That, and an Aircast on my left foot.

The helicopter touched down, and Kenny barked orders at his guards. "Get that bitch off my chopper."

The door was pushed open, and temperate early morning sea air blew in, telling me we were somewhere tropical, even though I couldn't see anything but miles of ocean in every direction.

A lone figure stood in the shadow of the upper deck as two guards unbuckled me and unceremoniously dumped me on the yacht.

My limbs still weak from whatever drug they'd shot into my neck, I fell to the landing pad in a crumpled heap.

Kenny glared at the lone figure on deck, then his guard shut the door, and the helicopter lifted back into the air.

Wind whipping around me, I kept my face down until the rotating thump of the blades was a distant sound swallowed by ocean swells.

Then I turned my head.

Slow, like the predator he was, hands in the pockets of his custom-tailored suit pants, Kyle Kentworth walked across the deck and circled my prone position.

Stopping in front of me, he dragged his eyes up my entire length from my Aircast to my cut cheek. Then he held my gaze and made me want to crawl out of my skin as he stared intently. “You fucked him.”

Fear spidered across my skin, chilling me to the bone, but I didn’t deny it. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” Removing one hand from his pocket, he rubbed two fingers and his thumb over his jaw in a slow, rough motion meant to intimidate. “My girlfriend jumps off my yacht, fucks another man, gets three of my guards killed, breaks her promise to me, and now she wonders what I want?”

Every muscle in my weak body froze. “I’m not your girlfriend.”

His eyes briefly narrowed before he masked the reaction. “So you’re not denying you fucked the Marine?”

Everything I had ever thought Kyle Kentworth was capable of was a complete sham. I knew he was cruel. I knew he had no respect for anything other than himself. But I never knew just how insane he was until this very moment. “You said on that balcony in Manhattan that you didn’t believe in love.” I hadn’t either. Not then. Not the kind of love I had been talking about. “Men who don’t believe in love don’t have girlfriends.”

His laugh was sickening. “You’re so fucking naïve. Did you think I paid your rent for a year in advance because you were simply a fuck toy?” He snorted. “I can have my way with a dozen different women every night for free, Eve.”

Eve. My skin crawled even hearing him say it. “I didn’t break my promise to you.”

“Has it been twelve months?” He slid his hand back into the pocket of his pants.

Remembering some of the things he used to keep in those pockets, panic threaded my breath. “You didn’t say twelve months. You said come on your yacht with you for a *few* months. That’s when I said I couldn’t afford to do that, and you offered to pay my rent in advance. I never asked for a year.”

His tone turned insolent like it did right before he got mean. “I want what I paid for.”

Fear coated every inch of my nerves, but I wasn’t the same woman who’d walked on this boat nine months ago. “Let me go.”

“Go where?” he mocked, tipping his chin toward the endless ocean. “For a swim?”

Every ounce of bravado I’d had when I got on Kenny’s helicopter was a memory so distant, the only hope I had left was that Roark was safe. Choosing not to play games with Kyle, I gave him the truth. “I would drown or be eaten by sharks if I did that.”

Not bothering to confirm the ugly truth of my situation, he stared at me for a long moment. Then the side of him I thought I knew well, the side I

used to crave so that I could escape—it came out, reminding me with ugly humiliation who I was.

“Did he fuck you how you deserve?” Kyle’s gaze cut to my ankle. “Hard and rough?” He looked back at my mouth, my eyes. “Did he make you swallow? Force it down your throat? Twist your clit till you scream?” His voice deepened as he listed his own sick desires. “Beat you into submission how you like?”

Disgrace threatened to drip down my face. “You like those things.”

“Your wet cunt didn’t?” Taking a step toward me, he tilted his head. “I bet your pussy is dripping right now.” His gray eyes cut to my leggings. “How about I find out? Force you to your hands and knees, spank you raw, then shove three fingers in. Would you like that, you little traitorous bitch? Should I finger you till you come, then shove my cock so deep you remember *who the fuck owns you?*” he abruptly yelled before affecting his muted tone again. “Or am I not good enough for you now?” Taking one hand out of his pocket again, he made a sweeping gesture across the yacht. “Is all of this not good enough for you?”

Terrified, I wanted to cry, but I also hated myself for getting on that helicopter. I was stupid. So, so stupid. I should’ve known he would’ve given orders to kill Brad. He or Kenny, it didn’t matter which. The end result was the same, and I should’ve known. “It was never about the money.”

Immediately squatting and getting in my face, Kyle’s features twisted with anger. “Do you think you’re fucking special? Do you think every bitch who’s been on my cock, getting themselves off on my money and power, hasn’t said the same goddamn thing as they come all over me?”

Biting my inner cheek, I told myself not to cry. Not from fear. Not from anger.

Kyle liked tears.

He got off on them.

The more, the better.

I would not cry. *I would not cry.*

His breath blasted me as he yelled point-blank in my face. “I asked you a goddamn question!”

Suddenly, it hit me.

I hadn’t gone to my knees.

I hadn’t even considered it.

A week ago, I would’ve been begging him to hurt me, to forgive me. Worse, I would’ve wanted it. I would’ve wanted every twisted thing he could dish out because I’d felt I deserved it. I was responsible for Shane’s death. I blamed myself for leaving him that night, for not seeing all the times he was ill, for not realizing his episodes weren’t just him being tired.

I was drowning in guilt.

I still was.

But a six-foot-five Marine didn’t blame me for my brother’s death. He didn’t even think I could have prevented it. His voice had music like Shane’s smile had a whole world of love.

But Kyle, he knew what had happened to Shane. He’d beaten it out of me early on, but he’d never, not once, told me I wasn’t responsible. In fact, he’d played into it.

He’d used it.

On me.

For nine months.

Slow, like a rolling, deep ocean swell with the depth and conviction of its power, it washed over me.

Hate.

Unfiltered, unadulterated, consuming hatred.

But not for myself.

Inhaling, feeling Kyle's assault on my ribs but not the pain, I knew what I had to do.

Palming the keys, I dropped my gaze.

Then slowly, with one weak, shaking arm, I pushed to a submissive kneeling position.

For two determined beats of my heart, Kyle did nothing.

Then he grunted, stood, and pivoted. "Get in the stateroom."

FIFTY-THREE

Roark

Sitting in the driver's seat of an AES Range Rover, Echo screwed a silencer onto his M4 before shoving extra magazines in his Kevlar vest. "Please fucking tell me that M16 is untraceable."

Putting my own silencer on the muzzle, I called him on his bullshit. "You said your crew would send in a sweep team after us."

Echo stopped what he was doing and looked at me. "First of all, it's not my crew. Crucial fucking detail. It's a third-party, AES contracted crew. Second, never trust anyone to clean up your shit." He tipped his chin at my rifle. "If that's registered, tell me now and we'll swap you out."

As much as I hated the arrogant prick, I'd gotten used to him. "Nothing on me is traceable."

Smirking, he went back to checking his magazine. "Except your DNA and your bitch in the backseat, motherfucker." He picked up his cell and dialed, putting it on speaker.

I glanced at Missy. She thumped her tail.

November answered on the first ring. "In position?"

"You tell me, hacker boy." Echo scanned the dense Florida-style forest all around us. "Our asses are so deep in these woods, I can't see shit except mosquito breeding grounds all around us. Give me a sitrep."

“You’re five klicks north-northwest of the compound. Sending coordinates to your phone now. Satellite imagery had a helo landing in front of the hangar an hour ago, but as of last sweep it’s no longer parked in front. Heat signatures are showing three bodies in the main residence’s upstairs bedrooms, most likely sleeping, another in the security room downstairs, left of main entrance. Two more heat signatures are in the hangar. Those are the only ones moving around.”

“Good copy. Send us both the screenshots of those heat signatures.” Echo glanced at me. “How fast are you on that leg?”

“Fuck off.” I slid my own tactical vest over my head.

Echo nodded and glanced at his watch before scanning our surroundings and speaking to November. “Send us an updated heat signature screenshot in twenty-five minutes, then on my command, cut their perimeter alarm and put their security feeds on a loop.”

“That’ll give you five minutes to breach and clear the main house,” November warned.

“Copy that.” Echo handed me an earpiece. “Switching to comms. Keep overwatch. Alert on any incoming tangos.” He checked his watch again. “Twenty-five starts now.”

“Affirmative.” November hung up.

Fitting my comm, I glanced at the coordinates and heat signature images November had sent one last time, then I pocketed my cell and grabbed the bolt cutters from behind my seat. “I’ll take down the guard in the security room, then head to the hangar. Hit the three upstairs, then meet me in the hangar. The pilot is the only one we leave breathing.” Until we got intel out of him, then the asshole was mine.

“Copy that.” Echo shouldered his M4. “Time to make it rain.”

We both got out of the SUV, Missy followed, and we quietly closed our doors.

Fitting one arm of the bolt cutters through my belt and shouldering the strap on my M16, I gave Echo a directional hand signal.

He nodded, then we were moving.

Twenty minutes later, after trekking through thick vegetation and Florida humidity, we’d covered four and half of the clicks and had visual on the compound.

Signaling for Echo to stop, I dropped to a crouch, and Missy sat on my left.

Coming up on my right, Echo pointed at a concealed section of the electrified chain link fence with barbed wire on top that constituted the compound’s perimeter security and gave me the hand signal for wait.

Tipping my chin in acknowledgement, I grabbed the bolt cutters.

Echo sent November a text.

We waited.

Then Echo nodded.

Before I cut the fence, I glanced at him and dropped my voice. “Three upstairs. Meet me in the hangar.”

“Copy,” he whispered back, glancing at Missy. “She good?”

“Yes.” I cut the fence.

We all slipped through. I gave Missy the hand signal for *heel*. Then we were sprinting toward the main house with a canine on our six.

The fucking idiots didn't even have the front door locked or the door to the adjacent security room closed.

The asshole behind the security monitors had a bullet between his eyes before Echo hit the stairs.

Pivoting, weapon aimed, I skirted the perimeter of the house and ran to the hangar with Missy on my six. Sticking to the side of the building, I closed the distance to the open front doors but paused when I heard voices.

Going to a crouch, I glanced around the corner into the space.

The pilot and one guard. Both fucking with the helo. Two clean shots.

Sighting, I pulled the trigger.

The guard dropped, and the pilot spun toward the open hangar doors, reaching for his sidearm.

He was too late.

My second shot grazed his right hand. He dropped his 9mm, and I was moving.

Letting out a string of curse words, he grabbed his bleeding hand but didn't reach for his gun.

"Where is she?" I demanded as Missy bared her teeth.

For a split second, the fuck looked between me and my bitch, and he showed fear. Then he shut it down and masked it with attitude. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Weapon aimed, Echo came into the hangar. "If you had half a brain, you'd answer his question."

The asshole glared at us. "If either of you had half a brain, you'd know who the hell you just fucked with."

Echo moved to my right. “Romeo, do I look scared?”

“No.” Stepping over the dead guard, I moved closer to the asshole. “Where’s the Contender?”

“Again,” he sneered. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Shoving the muzzle of my M16 point-blank against his head, I gave him one last warning. “Tell me where she is, or you die.”

“If I tell you, Kyle kills me. If I don’t, you kill me. Sounds like I’m dead either way.” The fuck winked. “Go ahead, shoot. You still won’t get the girl.”

“You pull the trigger, we’re back where we started,” Echo warned, aiming his M4 at the asshole’s groin. “Give me one shot. I promise he’ll talk.”

No, he wouldn’t.

I’d been at this game too fucking long not to see the resignation in the asshole’s eyes. He knew he was going to die. The only question was what I’d get out of him beforehand.

Switching tactics, I purposely eased my M16 back a fraction of an inch. “You were supposed to be head of security. If you were worth a damn and had more than five fucking guards on watch, she never would’ve made it over the side of the Contender to begin with.”

Like I knew he would, the fucker smirked. Then he bragged. “You think you military pricks are the only ones who know how to run security?” His ego talking, he didn’t wait for a response. “I never have less than ten guards on at any given time. Twelve during peak hours because do you know what crazy bitches high on ecstasy and cocaine do?” He laughed. “Oh, that’s

right, you don't." He leaned into my muzzle. "Because you can't afford what we're selling."

My expression locked, I kept my tone even. "Twelve guards aren't going to keep her from jumping overboard again."

He grinned. "If you think there's a chance in hell she'll make it out of the stateroom in one—"

I pulled the trigger.

The asshole dropped.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Echo muttered as he palmed his cell. "Glad I'm not cleaning that up."

"She's on the Contender." I turned toward the open hangar doors. "Let's go."

FIFTY-FOUR

Sailor

Every step feeling like my last, I limped up the stairs to the top deck and paused outside the stateroom.

With my hand on the keys in the pocket of my donated cardigan, I wondered if I could do this.

I glanced out at the ocean, but only the truth stared back.

I hadn't lied to Talon.

I didn't want to jump anymore.

I wanted to see a six-foot-five Marine pilot again. I wanted to pet a sweet golden retriever. I wanted to play the song that'd come from my grief, Roark's music and Shane's innocent smile. I wanted to sing the words that were born on that mountain.

I wanted to live.

Glancing down at the expansive yacht, it hit me.

She was pretty. Beautiful, really. Long and sleek and modern, all white, smooth lines. I didn't deserve to die here. Shane didn't die in a beautiful place.

If I was going to die, it wasn't going to be here.

Gripping the keys, I stepped into the stateroom.

Kyle spared me a glance and grunted. Then he did what I knew he would, but it still took me off guard. “Get those fucking clothes off.”

“My cast,” I replied absently, changing my mind.

I did want to jump.

“I don’t give a fuck about the cast,” he sneered. “Show me your cunt.”

I couldn’t do this. I didn’t want to let him touch me again. Not after Roark. I would rather jump. That wouldn’t be dying on the boat. That would be drowning, and drowning wasn’t pretty.

“May I sit?” My voice shook, with fear, with determination. “The pants won’t fit over the cast.” Would stabbing him in the eye with the keys stop him long enough for me to get to the deck? “I-I need to be careful of my foot.” Could I get close enough to him to do it?

“Not my fucking problem. If you hadn’t jumped, you wouldn’t have a broken foot.”

Acid coated my tongue. “Please.” Would I be strong enough to hurt him?

“No. Get those clothes off before I cut them off.”

Was there another weapon in the room?

I glanced around once.

Nothing.

I started to shake.

Shane’s voice whispered in my memories. *You can do this, Sailor.*

Unbuttoning his shirt, his predatory stare on me, Kyle reached for his belt. “What the fuck are you waiting for, song bitch?”

“It’s just....” Dropping my head, I let my hair fall over half my face, and that’s when I saw it. His cell phone on the nightstand. *Oh God*. “This would be easier if I could sit on the bed.” Maybe jumping wasn’t my only option.

“For fuck’s sake, sit, but hurry up. I have business to take care of today.”

“Of course.” Pretending to struggle more than necessary, using the bed for leverage, I limped over and positioned myself between him and his phone. Then I sat on the silk-and-linen duvet that had been replaced too many times to count over the past nine months because of my spilled blood, and I pushed my leggings down my right leg.

Praying he still kept his cell on silent and that he had the same passcode I’d seen him use hundreds of times, I bent to push the material over my foot and I went for it. I typed in the code with one hand.

The screen unlocked.

Holding my breath, I quickly pulled up text messages and typed in a number I’d memorized.

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

I jumped. “Wh-what?” Pretending to mess with my leggings, I typed one word onto the waiting screen.

He gave me his sinister half laugh. The one that said very bad things were about to happen. “Nervous? Wondering how I’ll punish you?”

I glanced one more time at the cell.

Pact

I hit send, then deleted the text and turned the screen off. “I’m not nervous.” I was praying.

Praying there was cell phone coverage out here. Praying I remembered the number correctly, and praying I wasn’t making the second-worst mistake of my life.

Suddenly, Kyle was there at my side, grabbing the wrist of the hand I’d just used to send the text. Glancing at his phone, he glared at me. “What. *The fuck*. Are you doing?” His grip tightened to the point of pain.

“I-I was just....” My free hand going to the keys, I couldn’t think of a lie.

“You were just *what*?” He grabbed my other wrist.

Panicked, not thinking straight, I didn’t let go of my only hope, and my hand came away with Roark’s keys.

“*What the fuck is this?*” Kyle roared, grabbing the keychain, but holding the key fob up. “You brought a tracker on board?”

His slap echoed through the stateroom a split second before pain exploded across my face. “I—”

“Think twice before you lie to me.” Holding my wrist in a punishing grip, he yanked the key fob off the chain and dropped it onto the thick carpet before grinding the heel of his shoe on it.

“I swear, I wasn’t.” Blood pooled in my mouth. “There’s no tracking device in it.” *Oh God*, was there?

Grabbing his cell phone, glaring at me with dead grey eyes, Kyle dialed and barked out orders as soon as someone answered. “Get security up here.

Now.” Hanging up, he pinned me with a look. “You’re going to pay for this, song bitch.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Roark

Following me out of the hangar, Echo spoke into his cell. “Seven-seven-five-one-three, secure line, requiring assistance.... Housekeeping, full service, six disposals.” He gave our address, then ended the call. “Hold up. You’re a pilot. Alpha says you can fly anything.”

“I can.” Scanning the perimeter, I strode past the house with Missy on my left.

“Then let’s take the bird. It’s faster, and we won’t have to trek back through that fucking swamp.”

Pausing midstride, I turned on him. “Do you know how much fuel is on the helo?”

“No, but fire her up, and I’m sure I can figure it out.”

Fucking prick. “Do you know how many or what kind of satellite tracking systems are on board?”

“Clearly not any good ones if November couldn’t find the bird.”

Saving my breath, I didn’t bother explaining how flight tracking systems could be fucked with. “It’s broad daylight. Kentworth could be tracking the helo via his own transponder, and if we did know where the Contender was at this very moment, there’s no guarantee we wouldn’t be shot down on approach since we have zero intel on Kentworth’s protocols.”

His expression locked, Echo fed me a line of his SEAL bullshit. “No easy day.”

Christ. “No helo. Let’s go.”

“Fuck, fine.” Echo glanced behind us. “Meet you at the fence.” Pivoting, he jogged back to the hangar.

I headed to the break in the fence and let Missy through, then followed.

Echo came up on my six with the RPG over his shoulder. Grinning, he stepped through after me. “Always wanted one of these fuckers.” His expression went deadpan. “For personal use, of course.”

Ignoring his brand of insanity, double-timing it back to the AES Range Rover, I turned off my comm and pulled out my cell.

November answered on the first ring. “I saw and I heard. Sweep team en route.”

“She’s on the Contender. We need to find it, *now*.”

“Already working on it. Get back on the road. I’ll call with a sitrep.” November hung up.

Fuck this. I dialed again.

Neil Christensen answered how he always answered. “Ja.”

“Your Cobalt still in Miami?”

“Ja.”

“You busy?”

“I am always busy. What do you need?”

“Scuba gear, ammunition, and a navigator.” Fuck AES.

“Your location?”

“One hour out from Miami.”

He gave me the address where his Cobalt was docked. “I will be there in sixty minutes.” Christensen hung up as we reached the Range Rover.

“Calling in your own backup?” Echo opened the rear and dumped the RPG.

Not answering his question, I let Missy in the back, shucked off my tactical vest and got in the front passenger seat.

Echo slid behind the wheel. “Let me guess—Danish Special Forces Jægerkorpset turned billionaire developer?”

Being as fucking civil as I could, I stowed my M16 and grabbed a water bottle. “We need to get back to Miami.” Taking one of Missy’s collapsible bowls out of her vest, I gave her water.

Echo didn’t start the vehicle. “What’s wrong, Romeo? Don’t trust a SEAL for an ocean op? Or is this an AES thing?”

“Drive,” I ordered, before finishing the water and thinking about a doe-eyed blonde who had been worried about my hydration.

“Why’d you call in backup when we don’t have a location yet? Something you’re not telling me?”

I looked at him. Then I fucking let loose. “Your plan was shit, the woman was taken and you were willing to risk her life to capture a sex trafficker. I don’t trust you or any asshole at AES. This was reckless from the get-go.”

“You had a better fucking plan?”

“Yes.”

“Which was?”

I was going to level him then kill Kentworth. “Take Kentworth out.”

Echo smirked. “That’s not a plan, that’s a given. And for the record, the choke point wasn’t my idea.”

My jaw fucking ground. “Who’s was it?”

Echo half shrugged. “Alpha, November, who fucking cares? No plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

“Don’t feed me SEAL bullshit. Get us on the road or I will.” Leaving him and his fucking RPG out here.

Shaking his head, Echo started the SUV. “Copy that, Marine. But if you know where the hell she is, we should be making plans.”

“Fuck you.” I put Missy’s bowl back in her vest. Something kicked at my instincts, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Echo chuckled as he backed out of the dense underbrush he’d wedged the SUV in for cover. “You’re one surly bastard. I’m beginning to get why the blonde went with the brother.”

My SIG was out of my holster and aimed at his head in one second flat. “Joke about her safety one more time.”

He snorted but briefly held up his hands. “Copy that, Marine.”

My cell vibrated with an incoming call.

Holstering my 9mm, I answered without looking at the display. “You better have something for me.”

“Roark,” Talerco stated without humor or his Southern accent. “Where’s Sailor?”

Adrenaline surged but I fucking froze. “Kentworth’s brother took her six hours ago. Got the jump on us at an AES safe house with a helo,

firepower and an RPG. What do you know?"

"*Fuck*. She texted. Or I'm assuming it was her. It was one word from a blocked number. Luna's trying to track it now, but you need to get November in on this."

I cursed myself for not giving her my number and making her memorize it. "What was the text?"

"Pact."

That was her. "How long ago?" I demanded, glancing at Echo and motioning for his cell.

"Couple minutes," Talerco answered.

Echo handed me his phone.

"Did you text back?" I asked as I dialed November.

"Tried. Won't go through."

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. "Hang on, getting November on the line." I put both phones on speaker.

November answered immediately. "Echo."

"It's Roark. I have Talerco on speaker with us. She texted him from a blocked number two minutes ago. I need you to trace that text."

"Copy. Talerco, what's your number?"

Talerco gave it to him.

"On it," November confirmed. "I'll call you back, Romeo." November hung up.

I didn't bother taking my cell off speaker. "Let me know immediately if you hear from her again."

“Copy that, but goddamn, Romeo, how the fuck did this happen? You had her. How’d that asshole track her down? Shit, please tell me she’s not back on that boat.”

“November intentionally left bread crumbs to the safe house, hoping to lure the brother out. I don’t have confirmation she’s back on the Contender, but that’s my guess. The yacht’s transponder went radio silent yesterday.”

“*That motherfucker,*” Talerco cursed, and his Southern accent was back. “Call Vikin’, and read him in. I’m on my way.”

“Already called. I’m meeting him in forty. Stay with your women.” This was going to get a hell of a lot worse before it got better. I wasn’t asking that of him. I knew how Talerco operated. He wouldn’t stay with Christensen on his boat. He’d be front and center in the action.

“Let me rephrase, Romeo. I ain’t askin’. I’m tellin’ you I’m comin’ in. Vikin’s boat in its usual spot?”

I gave him the address Christensen had given me.

“Copy. Be there in forty.” Talerco hung up.

Echo glanced at me as he pulled out of the wooded acreage and onto a county road. “I’m coming too.”

I didn’t fucking argue.

I’d need both him and Talerco if I was going to pull this off without getting the woman killed.

FIFTY-SIX

Sailor

My face stinging, my pants half off, the two keys still in my hand, I tried to swallow down blinding fear as four armed guards rushed into the stateroom with their weapons drawn.

Kyle barked orders. “All cell phones off, radio communication only. Get us on the move. Our position’s been compromised. I want all hands on deck watching for any incoming threats.”

All four guards lowered their weapons as the guard in front, one I’d never seen before, looked from me to Kyle with a stone-faced expression.

“Now!” Kyle yelled.

The new guard stepped forward. “With all due respect, sir, the transponders have been off since we left Key West. Per your orders, none of us have used our cell phones except for when I answered your call just now. We’re presently in the Gulf Stream, but if we charter further east, we’ll lose the current and need to refuel sooner. I know you wanted to stay out of port for as long as possible.”

Rage contorted Kyle’s features as he leaned toward the guard. “Work. It. *Out.*”

The keys slipped in my shaking hands, and I felt something sharp pinch between my fingers.

“Yes, sir. Consider it done,” the guard replied. “I’ll speak to the captain now.” He turned to leave, and the other guards followed.

I glanced down. A sliver of a cut between my first two fingers where I was holding one of the keys had welled red. My gaze focused on the key, and I had to refrain from drawing in a sharp breath.

It wasn’t a car key.

Not a normal one.

The notched part of the key had separated from the head as if it were a sheath, and a small, sharp blade was partially exposed.

Hope surged.

“Not so fast,” Kyle barked.

Flinching, I looked up, but Kyle was glaring at the men.

Aiming his anger at the two guards in back, he motioned for them. “Brent and Cavers, you’re both staying.” He glanced at the new guard. “Send two of the girls up.”

Oh God.

The two guards who’d been on the Contender from before I’d jumped gave each other a knowing look. Then they each took up a position on either side of the door.

The new guard frowned. “Sir?”

“Blondes,” Kyle practically yelled. “*Now.*”

Oh God.

I knew what was coming. Kyle had done this before. To humiliate me, teach me a lesson, or simply because he felt like it in that moment, he would punish me publicly. He’d always liked an audience—on the decks, in

the main cabin, anywhere someone could watch. I'd abhorred it, but I'd always taken it, thinking I deserved every humiliation Kyle doled out.

My cries the last time were what put that poor crew member in the line of fire when he'd come at the sound of my screams. With guards standing watch and women lined up on their knees as if they were next, Kyle had whipped me on the main deck for everyone to see. While they'd all watched, Brad had come to my defense, foolishly telling Kyle I'd had enough. One glance from Kyle to his guards, and Brad was being carted off. I hadn't seen him again until the helicopter landed on the mountain.

Shoving down the memory that felt like a lifetime ago, I tried to focus on the newly discovered weapon in my hand.

I couldn't overpower Kyle and two guards, but maybe that wasn't the point.

Maybe it wasn't my purpose.

I hadn't saved Shane, and I couldn't save the women who were currently on the Contender. But if I could get close enough to Kyle and use the blade before his guards stopped me, then maybe I could put an end to this. Maybe I could stop Kyle Kentworth from ever getting to another woman again.

Oh God, I didn't know if I could do this.

But I had to try.

I had to.

Daring to glance at the guards, I then looked up as Kyle yanked his shirt off and undid the clasp on his watch.

One guard smirked. The other, stone-faced, looked at my breasts.

“Clothes *off*,” Kyle snapped at me.

This was it.

This was my only chance, but I needed to get the sheath off the knife without him noticing.

“I...” My voice cracked and I tried again. “I need to use the restroom.” Dropping my gaze, I quieted my voice. “Please.”

Kyle’s inhale sounded across the room, and I could practically feel his anger and desire growing in equal measure. It filled the master suite with an acrid, caustic tension I’d never noticed before meeting a stoic, silent Marine pilot.

Lowering my voice even more, I gave up on whatever semblance of dignity I’d ever thought I had on this boat. “Please, sir. I do not want to have an—”

“Hurry the fuck up,” Kyle barked.

Scrambling to my feet, leaving my one pant leg hanging, I limped in a rush toward the bathroom, but before I got to the door, Kyle issued an order at the guard nearest me.

“For fuck’s sake, get that shit off her.”

The guard who’d eyed my breasts stepped forward as he pulled a switchblade from his pocket. With a look that said he was as sick as Kyle, he grabbed the waist of my leggings, and in two swift cuts they were in a heap on the floor. Reaching for the neck of my shirt before I could react, he slashed it down the center.

Fear, anger and cold air-conditioning hit my naked flesh, and my nipples pebbled.

Reaching for my sweater, the guard intentionally rubbed the back of his knuckles across my breasts.

“Touch my property again, and I’ll turn that knife on you,” Kyle bit out, reprimanding the guard before throwing an angry look at me. “You have one minute to get the fuck back out here.”

The stone-faced guard made a show of closing his switchblade as I turned toward the bathroom.

“Eve.”

My skin crawled and bile rose. I looked over my shoulder.

Cold, vicious grey eyes stared at me. “One minute. Naked and in position,” Kyle stated with intent.

With the keys concealed in my palm, I rushed into the bathroom and shut the door.

Flushing the toilet, then turning on the water, I sucked in a breath and tried to calm my shaking hands as I looked down at the two keys.

That’s when I noticed it.

The car key wasn’t the only unusual key.

The key that looked like a house key had a thin line where the notched part met the head. When I pulled on each part, a slight click sounded, and the key separated into two parts. But this one wasn’t a knife. Thin and as long as the key itself, a deadly looking needle emerged right before a bitter, almond-like scent hit my senses.

Sedative? Poison?

I didn’t know. I didn’t even have time to wonder how or why Roark had these.

A double knock pounded on the door. “Eve!”

Startled, I shoved the needle back in and whispered, “Thank you, Roark.”

“Minute’s up!”

Shoving the cut shirt and cardigan off my shoulders, I closed my hand tightly over the keys.

I love you, Shane. I love you so much.

Wearing nothing but my cuts and bruises and Aircast, I opened the door.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Roark

Echo eyed me from across the deck of Neil Christensen's Cobalt. "You even know how to use a rebreather, old man?"

Talon chuckled. "Oh shit, here we go." He glanced at Christensen as he zipped up his wetsuit. "You wanna make a bet, Vikin'? Fifty bucks says Romeo paints the deck with Repeat."

"I do not gamble." Piloting his Cobalt, Christensen scanned the dark ocean with night vision binoculars.

"It's Echo, motherfucker, not Repeat." Echo checked the magazine on his M4. "And for the record, I'll take any one of you pussy Marines down one-handed."

Talon grinned. "Repeat, Echo, same thing. But it won't matter what I call you if you piss off flyboy again. You seen what he carries on his keychain?" Talon made a slicing motion across his throat before shaking his head. "That shit's next level."

Fuck, *the keychain*. That was it. That's what I'd missed. Reaching for Missy, I patted down her vest.

No goddamn keychain.

Cursing myself, I pulled my cell out.

“What’s he got, a pocketknife?” Echo smirked. “You going old school, Romeo? You gonna take down Kentworth with a toothpick on your Swiss Army knife?”

Talon chuckled and nodded at me before he lifted his rebreather over his head. “Now you gotta show Repeat.”

Even if I had it, I wouldn’t have shown Echo shit. I was still pissed at him for the bullshit in the mountains. I didn’t care whose idea it’d originally been, he’d gone along with it.

Pulling up the GPS tracking website on my burner for the device hidden in the key fob, I logged in.

Fuck.

She had taken it.

Fuck.

It’d been transmitting all day, until thirty minutes ago when it’d abruptly gone radio silent.

“Christensen, cut the engines.” Standing, I stepped toward the helm and checked the Cobalt’s nav system. “What’re the coordinates November gave you?”

Christensen recited them from memory.

“We’re heading in the wrong direction.” *Goddamn it.* “This was thirty minutes ago.” I held the cell out.

Christensen glanced from the phone to the Cobalt’s GPS before looking at me. “Explain.”

“Keychain.” He’d know what I meant.

“The woman has it?”

She had to. It'd been there when I'd originally buckled Missy into her vest, and the last time I'd fed her on the mountain, I'd felt it. But it wasn't there when I'd given Missy water after leaving the hangar. The woman must've taken it before she'd gotten on the helo.

"She has it." Or had. I was betting Kyle had found it and destroyed it. Either way, we had a position in the middle of the fucking ocean that was only thirty minutes old.

Swells rocked the Cobalt as Christensen scanned the dark horizon line. "Alpha's hacker gave confirmed coordinates."

"They were coordinates from a visual confirmation by a cargo ship two hours before sunset. This is from thirty minutes ago when they were in the Gulf Stream." My instincts telling me I was right, I glanced again at the coordinates on the cell. Then I calculated the speed of the Contender and the current. "Kentworth's already evading, and if he found the tracker, he'd change course. You and I both know he'll go southwest of that position. He'll need to refuel, and he wasn't heading toward U.S. waters when the container ship spotted them. That leaves the Bahamas. Taking into account their last known position and the speed of the Contender, we need to head south-southwest eight nautical miles."

"What's goin' on?" Talerco asked.

I glanced at him. "She had the keychain."

"Oh shit. Had?" Talerco asked.

"Okay, what the fuck is up with this keychain you all are talking about?" Echo interjected.

Ignoring Echo, I spoke to Christensen. "We can intercept them in seventeen minutes."

“If you are wrong, and the trafficker went north, we are thirty-four minutes off course.”

I wasn’t wrong. “Turn around. Get us within a couple clicks. We’ll get a visual.”

Christensen didn’t reply, but he throttled the engines, turned south and entered the new coordinates into the Cobalt’s nav system before cutting the lights on the cruiser.

“Sixteen minutes,” I warned Talerco and Echo. “And no one touches Kentworth.” That fucker was mine.

Talerco held his hands up. “Not robbin’ you of your glory, Romeo.”

“I shoot who I shoot,” Echo countered.

I glared at him. “You kill Kentworth, I kill you.”

Echo shrugged. “You can try.” He checked the valves on his rebreather before testing his mouthpiece.

Talerco chuckled. “Your funeral, Repeat.”

Echo glared at Talerco, but I didn’t say shit. I fucking watched the tracking site, hoping for an update.

Fifteen minutes later, Christensen slowed down the Cobalt and used his night vision binoculars again before handing them to me. “Two clicks south-southwest.”

I took the binoculars.

There it was. The fucking Contender.

I handed the binoculars to Talerco but spoke to Christensen. “Can you get us within one click without being seen?”

“Ja.” Christensen glanced at the three of us. “You will have six minutes once you’re in the water.”

I double-checked the oxygen and scrubber on my rebreather. “Kentworth’s brother said there’re twelve guards on board at any given time. I expect they’ll be dispersed across all three decks. Christensen’s covering the bridge once you two clear the first and second decks. I’ve got the top deck and master stateroom. We’re hitting the guards and any hostile crew, then we’re getting the woman out. The rest of the crew and women on board will be left for the Feds. Stealth, no trail. Let’s make this quick. In and out.”

“In and out—just like your first lay, Repeat.” Talon hefted his M4 and grinned. “Let’s fuck some shit up, ladies.”

Echo glanced at me as he stood in the same full dive gear as me and Talon. “You know he’s fucking insane, right?”

Asshole. “He’s the best SARC you’ll ever meet. You’re lucky he’s here.”

“Hot damn, Romeo. Earnin’ that sweet-talker nickname already.” Grinning, Talon slapped me on the shoulder before moving to the edge of the Cobalt. “Knew I got it right the second time ’round. I don’t even miss Mikkey.” Fitting his mouthpiece in, Talon stepped overboard.

Echo glanced at me. “Don’t run to your death.” Fitting his own mouthpiece, he followed Talon into the dark ocean.

“He means the woman,” Christensen stated. “Do not forsake safety for emotion.”

Glancing at the Danish former Special Forces, I didn’t insult him by recounting how we met downrange. “Something happens to me, give Missy

to the woman.”

Neil gave me a single warning look. “Do not let anything happen. Remember, I promised the Federal agent that the trafficker would remain breathing.”

“I’m not making that promise.” Christensen was my friend, but I’d already warned him about this when we left the dock. “I only agreed to let you bring your Fed contact in on this because there’ll be trafficked women on board. We’re not equipped for that kind of cleanup with the resources we have tonight. My priority is the woman.” That, and to kill every fucking guard on that yacht.

Christensen stared at me for a beat. Then he gave me his version of an agreement. “Six minutes. I will dock to the Contender’s starboard side. Clear the yacht, get the woman, get off. Then I will call it in.”

“Copy.” Securing my mask and mouthpiece, I stepped overboard.

Ten feet below the surface, Echo and Talon were waiting.

Echo tapped the illuminated compass on his wrist and pointed southwest.

I nodded, and we all swam toward the yacht.

With Echo in the lead, we hit the stern of the Contender and silently climbed aboard. Shoving up our masks and removing our mouthpieces, we all stowed our fins. Glancing at us, Echo tapped his wrist then held up two fingers before making a zero.

In position in twenty seconds, coordinated attack.

I nodded and Echo took off toward the lower deck.

Talon saluted me before heading for the second level.

My rifle aimed, I bypassed the first two levels and made my way to the top deck.

Twenty seconds later, my foot hit the top step, and I heard four muffled shots in two quick double-tap patterns.

“Two down on lower deck,” Echo quietly stated through comms.

“Two down on mid deck,” Talon added.

“Moving,” Echo clipped.

“Copy,” Talon replied before another muted shot sounded through the comms. “One down on the bridge. Backtrackin’ to galley.”

“In position,” I quietly added before quickly glancing over the top step then dropping back down. “Four men, five women on top deck.” All sitting clustered on the loungers. Shifting slightly, I glanced again. The door to the master bedroom was closed. “No visual into the stateroom.” *Fuck.* “Moving.”

“Romeo, hold for backup,” Echo ordered in a whisper through comms. “Coming your way.”

“Negative.” We all had silencers, but the shots were still audible. “Out of time. Clearing the top deck.” Visualizing the position of the four men, I exhaled.

Then I stood and fired four consecutive shots.

The first three men slumped instantly, but the fourth drew and fired before I hit him mid chest. His shot caught the mask on top of my head, and the women started screaming, but I was already moving.

“Four down. Breaching stateroom.” Firing low to spider the glass of the slider but not hit anyone inside, I kicked through the door.

Two naked blonde women were on their knees, their hair held together in one of Kentworth's fists, as the fucker sat bare-chested on the edge of the bed. The women positioned in front of him like human shields, he held a gun to one of their heads. "If you want to kill me, you'll have to shoot through them. But fair warning—you kill me, they kill her." He tipped his chin.

My gaze cut left.

Two guards, both standing, both aiming point-blank at another naked blonde woman on her knees.

My blonde woman. Head down, not looking at me.

Enraged, I aimed between Kentworth's eyes. "Tell your guards to stand down."

"Romeo, sitrep" Echo ordered through comms.

Kentworth smirked. "You first."

The distant sound of two more suppressed rounds sounded, and Talon spoke through comms. "Galley and lower decks cleared. Vikin', move in."

"Copy," Christensen responded. "Docking. Time, two minutes."

"Your guards stand down or you die," I warned Kentworth.

"Romeo, coming up on your six," Echo quietly clipped.

Kentworth glanced at my gear. "Military?" The fuck smiled like I wasn't sighted on his forehead. "No chance you'll shoot and risk killing the women."

"Please!" one of the women sobbed as she tried to drop to the ground, but Kentworth yanked her hair harder.

“Fuck this shit,” Echo said through comms right before his footsteps crunched over broken glass and he flanked my left. “He may care if he shoots them, motherfucker, but I don’t.”

Neil spoke through comms. “Helm secure, crew contained. Time, one minute.”

His eyes on Kentworth, Echo tipped his chin at me. “What do you say, Romeo? Double tap?”

“Right,” I called.

“Left,” Echo replied.

We fired simultaneously.

The two guards aiming at the woman dropped, and I fired again.

The blonde women screamed as my second shot pierced their hair just below Kentworth’s grip, severing his hold on them as the bullet grazed his arm.

Before Kentworth could scramble and grab the two women again, Echo had the muzzle of his suppressed M4 against the asshole’s forehead. “Go ahead, motherfucker. Reach for them.”

Kentworth aimed at me but glanced at Echo. “You kill me, I kill him.”

“Time,” Christensen clipped through comms.

In nothing but her cast, the woman pushed to her feet. Head down, one hand fisted, still not making eye contact with me, she aimed for Kentworth.

The blondes on the ground crying and scrambling to crawl away, Kentworth blind to what was coming up on his six, the woman raised her fisted hand in slow motion, and I caught the glint of metal.

I knew what she going to do, but I wasn’t going to stop her.

Impassive, Echo looked at me. Then he lowered his weapon.

Kentworth smirked. "At least one of you has some fucking sense."

"Women secured in cabins," Talon said through comms. "We blowin' this joint?"

"Federal agents incoming," Christensen answered. "Move out."

The woman shoved the cyanide-laced needle into Kentworth's neck.

Kentworth turned on her.

I shot him in the back.

Echo followed suit. "How's that for good sense, motherfucker?"

Kentworth dropped. I slung my M16 to my back, and pulled the needle out of his neck because the keychain had her prints on it. Then I grabbed a sheet off the bed.

Gaze downcast, one arm at her side, the woman stared at the dead asshole as she held out a trembling open palm.

Taking the sheath from her, I covered the needle. Then I wrapped the sheet around her and picked her up.

"Moving," Echo clipped, weapon aimed.

"Moving," I confirmed, falling in behind him.

"Fucking keychain," Echo muttered as we stepped over broken glass.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Sailor

My world spun to a stop the moment he crashed through the slider glass doors.

In a head to toe black wetsuit with scuba gear, weapons strapped to his body, his aimed rifle hiding his face, I still knew it was him.

I would know him anywhere.

Because the moment Roark MacElheran stepped into a room, the sound, the vibrations, the very essence of every breath I'd ever taken—it all changed.

Moving with predatory, super-human military skill, he dripped seawater as he pointed his giant rifle at Kyle and the guards. Just like he did when he found me hidden under a sea grape hammock on a deserted beach, he assessed everything in a single glance.

Shame coated my nakedness and circumstance as two gun barrels pressed into either side of my head.

I had a choice. Roark had a choice. Kyle had a choice.

But Shane never did.

Those two women in Kyle's grip didn't.

I couldn't fix the past.

But I could fix this.

As if my body instinctively knew what I needed to do before my mind grasped the reality of it, my fingers were already pulling the sheath off the needle.

“Right,” a dark, haunting, deeply melodic voice growled.

“Left,” the distant voice replied.

Air whipped past my head on both sides like a crescendo in stereo.

The two guards crumpled like toy soldiers.

Screams filled the cabin, but I was rising to my feet.

My legs moving, my fisted hand coming up, everything around me faded into the background.

Except for my target.

One small area of vulnerable flesh.

My heart slowed, my breath stilled, and my arm rose up.

I drove the needle into Kyle’s neck.

For one fleeting, suspended second, everything lifted. The guilt, the grief, the weight of loss, the anger, the punishing death grip of a sorrow so deep I couldn’t breathe through it—it all hovered on that cliff.

My cliff.

Balanced.

Floating.

Adrift.

But then the suspension stopped, and chaos erupted.

Kyle's body twisted and fell, women screamed, men barked orders, my palm holding the sheath opened with admission of guilt, material wrapped around my body, and I was lifted.

Ocean-colored eyes slid into view.

Angry, storming ocean-colored eyes.

Reality slammed into me and I lost my balance.

I plummeted off that cliff.

FIFTY-NINE

Roark

She didn't speak. She didn't move. She didn't look at me except for when I'd picked her up in that fucking stateroom, but then she'd checked out.

I'd carried her off the yacht and onto the Cobalt, dressed her in clothes from the bag Talon had brought her and set her down in a seat protected from the wind, but she still hadn't fucking moved. Not even when Missy licked her hand.

Her head had tipped back as Christensen opened up the throttle on the Cobalt and she'd stared unseeing at the night sky.

Ten minutes later she was still fucking staring.

I glanced nervously at Talerco.

Nodding, he came over, crouched in front of her and checked her pulse, but she didn't even flinch.

"How ya doin', darlin'?" He rubbed her arm. "You cold? You want Romeo to get you somethin' to drink?"

Her hair blowing in the wind, she kept fucking looking up at the stars, but she didn't say shit.

Talerco glanced at me. "First kill?"

Echo must've told him. I nodded.

“Okay, darlin’, you’re gonna be fine. Just a little shock, is all.” He patted her knee, then glanced at me as he stood. “She’ll come ’round. Talk to her. Have Missy do her thing.” Talerco resumed his seat.

Talk to her. Jesus fucking Christ, I wanted to throttle the shit out of her for getting on that goddamn helo, then I wanted to be angry at her for being goddamn naked as I killed every last asshole on that yacht all over again.

Fucking talk to her.

What *the fuck* was I supposed to say? It’s okay? It wasn’t fucking okay. I was goddamn pissed off.

“Missy, up,” I ordered my bitch.

No hesitation, my canine jumped onto the seat next to the woman and laid her head on her lap.

Slow and traumatized, the same goddamn way she’d moved in that stateroom after Echo and I shot those guards, she lifted her hand and pet Missy’s head.

Then she spoke for the first time. “It’s over?”

Fuck. *Fuck.*

That goddamn raspy voice.

Relief swamped me, but I still had to tamp down my fucking rage. Checking the ammo in my magazine out of habit, I scanned the marina as Christensen maneuvered his boat toward one of the slips. Real was relative, and whether or not it was over was up to her. I didn’t say shit.

“When you don’t say anything, it usually means something bad.” Her head still tipped back, she closed her eyes. “I killed him, but you didn’t say anything.” She repeatedly rubbed Missy’s head in a gesture I recognized for

what it was. “I thought it would feel over... or better. But it doesn’t. Do you think there’s a Heaven?”

I thought a lot of shit. “No.”

Shivering, she looked back across the water. “Why not?”

Because I’d seen the shit that’d happened downrange. “Dead is dead.” Breathing was breathing. There was no in between. I wanted to reach for her, but I fucking didn’t. All I saw was her naked in front of that asshole.

“Are you afraid to die?”

I should’ve gotten her a blanket from Christensen’s cabin, but I selfishly didn’t because she was talking. Pissed as hell, I still wasn’t going to get the fuck up and walk away from that voice. “No.”

“Why not?”

Death was merciful compared to some of the shit I saw my brothers live through. Survival wasn’t always the Hail Mary civilians thought it was. “Death is inevitable.” I’d thrown that fucking sheet I’d wrapped her in overboard the second I’d gotten clothes on her, but she still smelled like that goddamn yacht. Like him.

“Do you feel guilty for killing those men?”

“No.” I wanted to kill them a dozen times over. Then I wanted to get in my shower with her and order her to tell me if she’d fucked that piece of shit again, but I didn’t trust myself to know the answer, and that was a goddamn problem.

“Not at all?” she asked as innocently as if we were talking about what fucking color the sky was.

“I’m a Marine, woman.”

“I thought you said you were a pilot in the Marines.”

All Marines knew how to fight, but I didn’t correct her. I knew what she was after. “I was Force Recon before I went through flight training.”

She looked directly at me for the first time since getting her off that fucking yacht. “How long were you in the military?”

“Fifteen years.”

Her eyes welled like we were talking about something else. Then her voice slid to the quiet rasp I wanted to own. “Thank you for your service.”

I never disrespected the military, but I hated being thanked. The Marines did more for me than I ever did for them. “It was my honor.” The Marines had trained me well, and I’d learned how to be a man in the military. But now I was sitting on a boat with a doe-eyed trafficked blonde, and I was at a loss. What the fuck was I supposed to say to this woman? Words wouldn’t change whatever the hell had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours.

She stared at me for a long beat, then her gaze drifted over my shoulder. “I don’t feel guilty either, for you know....”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Does that make me a bad person?”

If that shit made her bad, then I was a fucking monster. “It makes you human.”

Tipping her head back, she looked up. “It’s my fault.” That rasp of hers dropped to barely a whisper. “My brother. It’s my fault he’s gone.”

Fuck. I couldn’t assuage her guilt. No one could. I gave her facts. “Medical examiner’s report said otherwise. Congenital birth defects are just

that. An accident of birth, not fault.”

Her body stiffened. “How do you know that?”

“Which part? What the report said or that it wasn’t your fault?” The way she’d tensed up, I wasn’t sure if she was pissed her privacy had been invaded or if she was intent on shouldering the burden of her brother’s death.

“Both,” she admitted.

I fucking got it. I didn’t like anyone knowing my shit either and I knew guilt, but I wasn’t judging this woman—not for that. “November ran a full background check and you’re not God.”

Her breathing sped up and she blinked, but then she diligently focused on every damn thing except me. “Is there anything you don’t know about me?”

Jesus fuck, I wanted this woman to look at me. I wanted my hands on her, and I wanted her eyes focused on me, but I didn’t touch her. Not after what I saw tonight, and not in front of the other men. Feeling fucking impotent with my hands proverbially tied, I said what I wanted to say to her face, not her profile. “Yeah. All the important shit.”

Christensen docked. “Luna is waiting. Two Escalades. I will take care of the gear.”

“Copy.” Shouldering my bag, I stood and was about to pick the woman up when she turned to Talerco.

Grabbing his arm to get his attention, she gave him her voice and attention, but it was tentative and submissive. “Pact?”

Talon looked up from stowing his guns. Deadly serious, he answered her like they had a private fucking language all their own. “Always.”

“I would like to go home.”

Sucker punched, it was like taking an IED to the gut.

“Copy that.” Ignoring me, Talerco glanced at Echo. “Zulu busy?”

Echo looked at me but answered Talerco. “Depends.”

Refusing to look at me, the woman pleaded with Talerco. “Please.”

Echo raised an eyebrow at me.

Suddenly wanting to kill every motherfucker on this boat, I barely controlled my tone. “Woman.”

Her gaze downcast, she looked over her shoulder.

Conscious of every pair of eyes on me but hers, I asked, “You want to go back to New York?” Where she was unprotected, fresh off her first kill and needed help just to walk.

She nodded.

“Words,” I demanded, fighting a new level of pissed.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “It’s safe now. He can’t come after... us.”

Us. Jesus fucking Christ. I didn’t know what the hell I’d expected after tonight, but it wasn’t this. I should’ve known though. I knew what expectation was to begin with. “I’ll take you.”

Messing with his cell, Echo interjected. “Zulu’s on standby at Executive.”

“Talon can take me to the airport,” she quietly argued.

That's all Talerco needed to hear for him to turn on the fucking hero act. Lifting his chin at me, he threw Echo a glance. "Repeat, let Zulu know we're comin'." He slung his bag and put an arm around the woman's waist. "Come on, darlin', let's getcha home." He picked her up and stepped off the boat.

Slapping me on the shoulder, Echo silently followed Talerco.

I watched them walk all the way up the dock and get in one of the waiting black Escalades.

She never fucking looked back.

Christensen stepped next to me. "The most difficult mountain to cross is the threshold."

Neil Christensen was the only man I knew who spoke less than I did. He was intelligent as fuck, well read, and when he did speak, he was known for citing shit like classic literature. "Is that a quote?"

"No. Danish proverb."

"Your point."

"You did not open the door for her."

I'd fucked the woman. The first goddamn woman I'd touched since I'd lost my military career. How the hell had I not opened a door for her? "You're wrong."

"I am right. You are wasting time. If you want the female, cross the threshold." He turned toward the scuba gear.

I moved to help him.

"Go," he ordered. "The canine is restless."

I glanced at Missy. Sitting at my feet, watching our exchange, she was waiting, and it hit me. She hadn't whined to go after the woman when Talerco had taken her. She'd stuck to my side. My fucking left side.

My cell pinged with a text.

I pulled it out of my bag.

Talerco: *Apologies, brother.*

Shoving the damn thing back in my bag, I glanced at Missy. "Come." Then I told Christensen thanks in Danish. "*Tak.*"

"*Det var så lidt,*" he replied.

I stepped off the boat and Christensen called after me.

"Do not choose solitude unless you want to be solitary."

I glanced back. "Another proverb?"

"No. Advice." He went back to packing the gear.

I walked up the dock with a canine on my left.

SIXTY

Sailor

Using the spare key from the building manager, I let myself into my apartment.

First the smell, then the punishing emptiness hit me.

Dankness, mildew, dust.

Then I was drowning in memories.

Smiles, cuddles, Shane diligently doing his schoolwork, his sweet voice, the books he always brought home from the library because we had no TV—it all assaulted me as I looked at every shitty piece of worn-out second-hand furniture that was frayed beyond redemption while a fifteen-thousand-dollar used baby grand piano sat in the middle of it all.

Choking guilt ate at my stomach as my heart crushed into irreparable pieces.

Then my gaze landed on his bed.

My body weighted with a thousand lifetimes of shameful regret, I limped over and picked up his pillow, burying my face in it.

His scent was gone.

Shane's scent was gone.

Shane was gone.

Dissolving into gut-wrenching sobs, I slid to the floor.

SIXTY-ONE

Roark

I threw my tools in the back of the Defender and closed the tailgate.

“Cessna looks good. You always do the maintenance yourself?”

I turned.

Trefor, dressed in a suit when it wasn’t even oh eight hundred, tipped his chin at my ride. “Defender too?”

“You’re a long way from Miami.”

He looked out across the apron and the ocean beyond. “Never imagined as a kid I’d stand on the tarmac next to my own plane.” He looked back at me. “You?”

“I know what you’re doing. Won’t work.” I glanced at his Falcon parked a few spots down. I hadn’t seen him come in. Then again, I hadn’t been paying attention to any of the air traffic at the airport today. I’d been doing the same damn thing I’d been doing for three weeks—burying myself in work.

Trefor frowned. “What is it you think I’m doing?”

Trying to play human while being a dick. “If I’d wanted a jet instead of the Cessna, I would’ve bought one.” A fucking poor man’s version

compared to Trefor's fleet of Gulfstreams and his own private Falcon, but I made my point.

"Fair enough. Thought you should know, the female is safe."

I'd already asked November. Trefor was bullshitting me. "Safe would be her not back in New York at her own place using her own name." I'd had November courier the documents to her, but she hadn't used them.

"Kentworth's dead. Christensen's Fed contact took custody of the guard from your place, and he's already in WITSEC. November buried the female's current footprint, and there've been no incidents. It's done." Trefor shrugged. "It was her choice."

Incidents. Fucking Christ. I didn't say shit. I waited for him to say what he'd come to say.

He scanned the apron again, then looked at me. "You want my take?"

"No."

"I'm saying it anyway. You feel for that woman as much as she feels for you. Life doesn't wait for perfect moments. Trust me, there are none when it comes to this. If you want her, go get her, but do it before you lose another month. Or years," he added quietly.

"I don't need advice." And it hadn't been a month, yet.

"Fair enough." Alpha waited as a plane took off, then spoke again. "How about a job?"

"Got one."

"This one's lucrative and will only take you the day." He glanced around. "Doesn't look like you have any clients waiting."

Asshole. “I’m busy.” I whistled for Missy, who was lying in the shade a few yards off.

My bitch trotted over and looked at Trefor before sitting on my left side.

Alpha nodded at her. “You can bring Missy. It’s just a pickup of a client in South America. A few hours on the apron watching the plane while my men retrieve a client. Then a drop-off in New York before returning to Miami. Easy three-leg trip on one of the Gulfstreams.”

When I heard New York, I knew he’d planned this. “Every one of your employees can pilot.” Alpha made sure of it. He either hired them that way, or he had them go through flight training on the job. That was part of the reason for his success. All his men were not only highly trained former Special Forces or SEALs, they were all certified pilots.

“True,” he admitted.

“Then why are you here?”

“To incentivize you. Do this job and you’ll make enough to pay off the Cessna. Then come work for me. Part-time, full-time, I don’t care. I just need someone like you. You can keep your business down here. Hire another pilot to do the day-to-day. Fly for AES, fly for yourself—we both win.”

I didn’t say shit. I waited because there was more. Alpha always had an angle.

“After the pickup and drop-off, you can stay in New York a few days.” He paused. “Or be home by sunset.” He finally dropped the incentive part of his plan. “Bring the girl back with you. She’s not happy in New York.”

I went on high alert and Missy stood. “How do you know?”

“She doesn’t leave her apartment.”

Five fucking words, and it felt like I’d been kicked in the chest. Adrenaline surged and I knew I was going to get her before Alpha finished his sentence, but I held out for a beat. “Fine. I’ll take the job.”

“Excellent.” Alpha glanced at his watch. “Zulu will touch down in thirty minutes to pick you up.”

Enough time to run home and shower, but I needed to make a few things straight with Trefor first. “I’m taking this job, which we both know is your version of a carrot, but I’m not committing to full-time, and I’m not taking high-risk assignments or giving up my business.”

His expression sobered. “Understood. We’ll work out any other details as we go. Maybe we keep a Gulfstream in Key West, or maybe you keep a residence in Miami. Either way works for me. November will onboard you, and for now I’ll pay you per assignment.” He threw down a sum that was more than three times the going rate. “Good?”

Fucking Adam “Alpha” Trefor and his money. I didn’t need the cash, but I was going to take it and his job offer because for the first time in five years, I wasn’t thinking about only myself.

“Fine,” I agreed.

He held his hand out and we shook, then Alpha gave me one of his rare smiles. “Welcome to AES, Romeo.” He turned to leave but stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “One last thing. Give Christensen a call.”

“Why?”

His smile held. “Call it a hunch.” He walked away.

Aiming for my Defender, I held the door for Missy, then got behind the wheel and dialed Christensen.

He answered like he always did. “Ja.”

“Trefor told me to call you.”

Christensen gave me an address, then recited a gate access code that took me off guard. “Residence has same access code.”

I paused. “Why are you giving me an address with my birth date as the access code?”

“It is a waterfront residence with a private airstrip north of Miami proper.”

“Waterfront,” I stated.

“Intracoastal,” Christensen clarified. “East acreage runs south to north along the water. Airstrip is on the west end of the property to comply with local noise ordinances. The property is yours if you want it.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Thrown, it took me a beat to ask the pertinent question. “Runway length?”

“Five-thousand-nine-hundred-foot grass strip. I have already pulled permits if you wish to pave it.”

If *I* wished to. And fuck, a fifty-nine-hundred-foot runway? I only needed twenty-five hundred feet to land the Cessna. That length airstrip could handle both Trefor’s Falcon and the AES Gulfstreams. “Is there a hangar?”

“Ja. Newly built, paved access from runway, hydro-swing doors. Eighty feet in length, sixty-five in depth, thirty in height. It will fit the Cessna.”

That would fit a hell of a lot more than my Cessna. It'd fit Trefor's Falcon. I rubbed a hand over my face. "Let me guess—Trefor put you up to this and had you build out the property."

"I have owned the property for many years," he evaded.

"Did he buy the place and tell you to hand over the keys to me?"
Fucking Trefor.

"He asked to purchase it. I did not sell it to him. I was already making hurricane modifications to the residence. The hangar, I built. I am giving you the gate and residence access codes. You have six months to decide if you wish to purchase or lease to purchase." He gave me a lowball number that I knew was at or below cost and a fucking steal for a property with that amount of land in South Florida.

If I flew one mission a week for Trefor, I'd have the place paid off in a year.

Passing on this would be fucking asinine.

Christ. Here went nothing. "I'll take it, but I'm paying you fair market value for it."

"The price is the price. Give me your answer after you have seen it. Residence is furnished. You can take the female there."

Jesus. "Now I know you've been talking to Trefor behind my back."

"I speak with many people. I do not speak behind anyone's back."

I had to admit, despite his reticent attitude, he wasn't lying. If Neil Christensen had something to say to you, he fucking said it. But it still didn't add up. "Did Trefor tell you he offered me a job?"

"No. He expressed his interest in having you fly for him."

Checking my watch, I started my Defender. “How long have you owned the property?”

“Five years.”

About to throw my SUV into drive, I paused. Five years ago was when I was medically retired from the Marines and came back to Florida. Five years ago was when Christensen told me I should come to Miami. Five years ago was when I ignored him and found a piece-of-shit, hurricane-damaged, run-down house on the water in Key West and bought it for pennies on the dollar. A month later I put a deposit on an older Cessna Grand Caravan EX Amphibian, sight unseen. Flying the plane down to Key West was the first time I’d been in the cockpit since my near-fatal crash on my last deployment.

I’d almost lost my shit on that flight.

But I took her up the next day.

And the next.

Then some fucking tourists asked for a ride.

Mentally shaking away the memories, I threw an accusation at my friend. “You’ve been holding on to that property.”

“Ja.” He didn’t deny it. “Now it is yours. The time is right.”

I looked at my dog sitting in the front passenger seat. Her tail thumped.

I fucking inhaled. Deep. “Appreciate it.”

“Cross the threshold.” He hung up.

Cross the threshold.

Christensen’s advice hitting hard, I dialed my cell before I could think twice about what the fuck I was going to do.

November answered on the first ring. “Romeo. Glad you decided to join us.”

I cut to the chase. “I need a favor.”

“All right.”

I told him what I wanted. “Can you make that happen before tomorrow morning?”

“Yes,” he stated without intonation. “Security system?”

I gave him the six digit access code.

“Consider it done. Zulu’s touching down in twenty. I’ll onboard you after this assignment, but remember this number. Four-four-one-six-five.”

“Four-four-one-six-five,” I repeated.

“That’s your AES ID number. Anything goes wrong on this assignment, call the number I’m texting you. Give your ID for verification, and an answering service will reroute your call to the command center here. Questions?”

“No.”

“Text sent. Memorize the number, then delete the text. I’ll be in touch.” November hung up.

I drove home to shower and grab my go bag.

SIXTY-TWO

Sailor

The knock on the door was loud and quick.

Jolted out of my thoughts, my heartrate skyrocketed and I dropped my pen, but then I froze. Not expecting anyone, too afraid to move from the couch, I glanced toward the open window and sheer curtains that stood perfectly still before I looked around the room and took stock.

No lamps on. No music playing.

Everything was muted except for the small misshapen rectangle of natural light I sat under that came from the skylight above me—the one advantage to having the top-floor apartment in this shitty building.

Glancing back at the door, I didn't get up to look out the peephole. I didn't move at all. I listened to my heart pounding in my ears and waited because I didn't hear retreating footsteps.

I hadn't heard footsteps approach either.

Silently cursing myself for not having one of those fancy doorbells with a camera, I made a mental note to get one as I stared at the door and willed whoever it was to leave.

But the knock came again, this time harder, and I practically jumped out of my skin.

With shaking hands, my eyes on the door, I felt around on the couch for my cell in case I needed to call 9-1-1, but before I could find it, the person knocking spoke.

“I know you’re in there.”

That voice.

His voice.

Marine, pilot, killer... savior. Hero. Dog whisperer. Medic, warrior, mercenary, rescuer—I could use a thousand words to describe that man, and it’d never be enough, but it wouldn’t matter what I called Roark. No arrangement of letters would change how he’d looked at me the last time I saw him.

I was not getting up. No way.

Then he spoke again in his deep, rough voice, but this time he infused his tone with his signature brand of dominance that made my knees weak and my nerves sing. “Open the door, woman.”

It wasn’t a request, it was an order, and every part of my body wanted to leap off the couch. Except I’d played this song before and it wasn’t a love song. It wasn’t even a good, tragic song. It was just... bad. Fire-in-my-veins, destroy-what-was-left-of-my-shattered-heart bad.

Suddenly, lyrics popped into my head.

Without thought, the man at the door momentarily taking a backseat, I leaned over my crisscrossed legs, snatched my pen off the floor, and began writing.

Writing.

What I’d been unable to do since—

I shut the thought down and let my pen fly across the blank notebook page. Half was filled with frantic chicken-scratched words before I was once again jolted out of my thoughts.

The knock heavier, the voice angrier, he didn't bark out a command. This time the Scottish warrior issued a low, threatening warning. "Five seconds. You come out, or I'm coming in."

My pen stilled as my gaze shot to the door.

Lock, chain, deadbolt—he couldn't get in.

Could he?

Oh God. A six-foot-five wall of muscle could get through any door, but especially mine, because it was a cheap, shitty apartment with only a flimsy entrance to a dank lobby that apparently hadn't been a problem for a Marine pilot turned mercenary.

Shit.

"Three seconds," he warned.

Tossing my pen and pad down and untangling my legs, my bare feet hit the hardwood at the same time as his last warning came. "One second."

I undid the chain, flipped the deadbolt and unlocked the door. But I didn't open it. I stepped back.

My heart beating so hard it hurt, my breath short, I watched the handle turn.

The door opened, and there he was.

Roark "Romeo" MacElheran.

T-shirt, cargo pants, boots—the notes I'd been struggling with for almost a month soared into a crescendo of crashing chaos and haunting

melodies, and all I could do was stare.

For a single heartbeat, that was exactly what I did, both relishing and drowning in the symphony that was this dominating, stoic man.

But just as fast as the music soared when I'd laid eyes on him, it ebbed to a whispering lull as the sound of a wildly thumping tail took center stage.

Roark wasn't alone.

Next to him, barely holding her seated position on her owner's left side, was the prettiest dog I'd ever known.

Without thinking, I dropped to one knee and held out my arms. "Missy."

Standing, whining, doing a two-step dance with her front paws, the faithful golden retriever looked up at her owner.

His gaze zeroed in on me, Roark tipped his chin.

Missy ran and jumped.

One second I was kneeling, the next I was on my ass with paws on my shoulder and a wet tongue licking my face.

The music stopped altogether and I laughed.

"Oh, pretty girl, I missed you, too." Running my hands through her soft fur, I hugged her.

The door slammed shut, and the canine immediately reacted to the sound and the meaning behind it. The reunion over, she nudged my hand once, but then she quickly retreated to her position of subservience at her owner's left side.

Scanning the room once, Roark's intense gaze slid along the length of my body before zeroing in on me again. Then he took me completely off guard.

“We had unprotected sex.”

Acute shame flamed my cheeks. “I’m clean.” I’d gotten myself tested a week after being back here when the tears had stopped long enough for me to pull myself together and venture out. But every step on the grimy city sidewalks had been a reminder of a life I’d lost, of how Shane would never walk these streets with me again, and I hadn’t left the apartment since.

Roark’s unwavering stare locked on mine, he watched me like he was studying me, looking for something I wasn’t saying.

Oh God.

I realized what he was waiting for.

My stomach twisted with an unfamiliar sense of loss. Then my voice turned extra raspy and betrayed me. “I....” I had to clear my throat. “I’m not pregnant. I was, um....” I didn’t finish the sentence. Telling him I’d been on forced birth control courtesy of a dead man, a man I’d killed—I couldn’t say the words. It felt like such a deep betrayal to even think of Kyle while Roark was standing right here, that it physically hurt.

With his expression completely locked down, Roark stared at me, and time as I knew it suspended.

Then his inhale filled the tension between us like an interlude.

“Get dressed.” He tipped his chin at my left foot. “Can you walk on that ankle yet?”

Unable to speak, I nodded.

“Meet me outside.”

His voice, that beautiful deep tenor that was so quietly dominant—it somehow managed to rumble through the small apartment and seep into

every corner. My mind flooded with the memories of him that I desperately tried every day to suppress as he turned to leave.

Except he didn't walk out. Not immediately.

Pausing by the framed pictures on the wall of Shane and me, he scanned every one.

Then he completely shattered me.

Placing his entire hand, palm flat, against the glass on one of the frames, he covered my favorite picture of me and Shane in a silent act I had no words for. Holding perfectly still for the briefest of seconds, he then dropped his hand, opened my door and walked out with Missy on his heels.

My heart racing, my head spinning, I sat there stunned.

Oh God, he'd put his hand on Shane, on me, as if he were saying he saw us both.

Then, just like it always did when I allowed myself to remember it, his voice played in my mind in a chorus of notes.

Open the door, woman. You come out, or I'm coming in. We had unprotected sex. Get dressed. Can you walk on that ankle yet? Meet me outside.

Tears welled and slipped down my cheeks.

Reaching for my shirt, I dabbed my eyes but then I realized what I was wearing, or rather, what I wasn't.

I looked down.

Oh God.

T-shirt riding up, my bare legs sprawled on the floor, I sat in my underwear and nothing else.

Embarrassment chased away the notes and the tears, and for the briefest of moments, it made me wonder what would happen if I just stayed here and didn't go downstairs.

Remembering all over again the last time I left these four walls, my gaze went to the only object of comfort besides Shane that I used to have but now was something that haunted me as much as my guilt.

The baby grand piano took up the entire living room.

I quickly looked back at the framed photo on the wall that Roark had just silently acknowledged.

Staring at Shane's angelic, smiling face, the image both crushed me and brought tears, but it also did something else today. It made me smile. "I love you, Shane."

A wind blew in from the open window, fluttering the curtains.

Closing my eyes, inhaling deep, I let the tears fall. "I felt that, Shane."

The breeze blew again.

All morning, it'd been cool but still. The curtains hadn't moved. I hadn't even seen them shift. A part of me wanted to laugh. "Are you trying to tell me something? Because you know what will happen if I meet that man downstairs." More likely what wouldn't happen. Roark had made it very clear he wasn't interested in me when he'd walked out of that bedroom in the mountains. Not that I blamed him.

Soft, like the wisp of a smile Shane wore, the curtains fluttered one more time.

"Fine. Message received."

Getting up and crossing the small space, I glanced out as I closed the window. Not that I expected to see Roark waiting in the alley, but I looked anyway. He'd fit right in, blending into the dark, moody atmospheric vibe of the narrow lane between my building and the next that only got direct sunlight for a couple precious hours at mid-day when the sun was high overhead.

Ruefully glancing at my notebook and the unfinished lyrics that had come as swiftly as the man who'd all but knocked down my door, I shook my head.

Then I grabbed the notebook, shoved it in my giant bag and hurried to my bedroom to get dressed.

SIXTY-THREE

Roark

She looked like a different woman.

Thick, wavy blonde hair everywhere, rings on every finger, bracelets clattering every time she moved her arms, she was no longer tan and she was still too thin, but she was stunning. The faint scratches on her arms and legs had mostly healed, the shadow of the deeper cut still on her left cheek, I almost blew my entire fucking plan when I saw her sprawled on the floor in nothing but lace underwear and a sheer shirt.

Fuck. This woman.

Missy keeping pace, I took the stairs down the six flights, wondering if it was why she was so thin, or if the woman simply forgot to eat. I saw the open notebook with notes and words scrawled in a haphazard pattern and selfishly wondered if it was the song I'd heard her sing in the mountains.

Pushing open the joke of a door that constituted her building's security, I glanced at Whiskey waiting on the sidewalk, eyes on his cell, no ride behind him. "Where the fuck is Echo?"

"He had to run a quick errand." Whiskey shoved his phone in his pocket. "Didn't know you were a pump and dump. I would've told him to wait." He looked behind me. "Speaking of, where's the lucky lady?"

Refraining from pounding his face in, I gave him one warning. “Speak about her like that again and I’ll end you.”

He almost cracked a smile. “Copy that, boss.”

“I’m not your boss.” Fucking asshole. “Text Echo. Tell him to get back here.”

He threw me a look. “Alpha was right about you.” Glancing at her building again, he pulled his cell out. “What are the odds she’s actually coming down?”

Who fucking knew? “Fifty-fifty,” I admitted, digesting what he said about Trefor and trying to decide if I gave a damn.

Whiskey shook his head as he sent a text. “Women.” Pocketing his cell and scanning the street, he then glanced at Missy. “The dog like her?”

I eyed the former SEAL. “Why?”

He smirked. “That’s a yes.”

I didn’t confirm or deny it. I just wanted to get the fuck out of the city and away from the noise, and I wanted the woman to come down on her own so I didn’t have to drag her ass out. “What the fuck did Trefor say?”

“That you’re surly as hell, can fly anything, and have nerves of steel.” Not making eye contact, he glanced down the street.

I read his body language. “And?”

The former SEAL looked pointedly at me. “And that we’re all supposed to do whatever the hell you ask until he can get you on board full-time.” He tipped his chin toward her building. “This little errand? Case in point.”

I didn’t know if I was fucking offended or just pissed off. “We were dropping your client in Manhattan before flying back to Miami anyway.

How is a twenty-minute pit stop in Brooklyn a favor?"

"Were we going back to Miami?" Whiskey shrugged before his tone sobered. "At any rate, thanks for the assist today. You going to make a habit out of it?"

A brand-new black tinted-out SUV came down the street in a neighborhood that was all late-model cars. "I didn't assist." I flew one of Trefor's Gulfstreams in and out of Columbia and waited two hours on the apron guarding the plane for a six-figure fee Alpha had already transferred to my account. Whiskey, Echo and Zulu did the heavy lifting on the K&R hot extraction exfil before Zulu and I flew us out of there. Then we'd landed in Teterboro and dropped the client in Manhattan, which was how I was standing here on the blonde's doorstep, potentially making the stupidest fucking move of my life.

"You flew us in and out. We're all in one piece. That's an assist," Whiskey countered, following my gaze to the black SUV before he swore low under his breath. "*Shit.*"

Stepping in front of Missy, I watched the windows of the SUV to make sure none of them started to go down. "You expecting company?" I quickly scanned the sidewalks for civilians.

"I'm always expecting company." Casually drawing but keeping his arm behind him, Whiskey followed the SUV's approach as it slowed. "Get yourself and the dog back inside the building." Pulling his cell out, he dialed.

"Missy, retreat." I yanked open the building's security door that didn't latch properly and let Missy in before pulling my SIG. "I'm not going

anywhere. Anything escalates, you cover the front windows. I got the back.”

“Copy,” Whiskey confirmed before rattling off his AES ID number to whoever answered his call. “This is seven-seven-eight-four-three requesting a plate run. New York tango lima fifty-one seven.... Affirmative.” He hung up. “You’re girlfriend’s got trouble.”

“Trefor said this shit was handled.” *Goddamn it.* “Kentworth’s dead. Who the fuck is this?”

“His boss.” Whiskey spared me a glance as the SUV came to a stop in front of us. “Massimo Vincenzo.”

Jesus fucking Christ. That’s who Kentworth had worked under? The head of the Sicilian mafia empire? I was fucking livid Trefor hadn’t told me, but now I got it. You didn’t start a war with Vincenzo unless you were insane and suicidal. “I thought Vincenzo was underground.”

“Apparently, today he’s not.” Whiskey walked toward the SUV as the back window slid down.

Covering his six, I stayed one pace back as a slick dark-haired fuck in a suit gave us a cunning smile. He looked at Whiskey first. “You, I don’t know.” His gaze cut to me. “But you seem to have quite the reputation. Hello, Mr. MacElheran.”

I didn’t say shit.

“What do you want, Vincenzo?” Whiskey asked, casually letting his arm drop to his side.

Vincenzo chuckled. “So you do know who I am.” He cut the pretense. “Good. Because I have a message for your boss.”

“I don’t have a boss,” Whiskey countered.

“Of course.” Vincenzo spoke to Whiskey but looked at me. “Tell Mr. Trefor that while I am continuing to honor our deal, I do have a need for a certain form of entertainment for a little party, so I’ll be borrowing his songstress for an evening. Which, if you ask me is a fair trade, all things considered. One evening of her time is surely worth less than two of my cousins’ lives.” He tipped his chin at me. “Perhaps you knew them? Domenico brothers? No?” He didn’t wait for a response. “No matter. I’ve almost forgotten it. Incidentally, thank you for letting us know where the Songstress is. Three weeks in Key West, while entertaining, was getting a little warm for my tastes. Glad we all finally sorted this out. Is the belladonna coming down soon?” He looked over my shoulder.

Fucking irate, I stepped forward, but Whiskey closed a fist, silently telling me to stand down. “If you have a message for Alpha, tell him yourself. As far as the rest of it, we don’t know any songstress or whoever the fuck your cousins were, so move along.”

Echo pulled up right on the SUV’s six as the door to the building opened, and the woman stepped out with Missy.

Vincenzo smiled wide. “The Songstress, I presume?”

Weapon drawn like this wasn’t Brooklyn, middle of the day, Echo was out of the AES Range Rover and at the driver’s window of the SUV, tapping on the glass with the muzzle of his gun. “Open up, motherfucker.”

Both of the tinted front windows went down, revealing two suits with weapons drawn, one aiming at us, the other at Echo.

Whiskey and I drew.

“This right here is your problem, Vincenzo,” Echo clipped. “You should’ve had your guards shoot me while they had the chance. I’m still pissed about Vienna. Now you’re the one who’s outgunned.”

Vincenzo chuckled. “Bygones. Besides, we didn’t fire first.”

“Bullshit,” Echo argued. “But if you want to agree to disagree, your call. Just do it on your own time because we’re busy. Tell your guards to move. We’re done here.”

“Not quite. I want to speak with the woman responsible for taking down a notorious trafficker.” Vincenzo glanced from Echo to the woman. Then he made the mistake of gesturing for her to come over. “Songstress, come.”

Missy growled and Echo switched to Italian, speaking rapid-fire.

Vincenzo chuckled and switched to Italian as well, but all I could make out was *woman* and *kill*.

“Echo,” I warned.

“I fucking got it,” Echo answered me before saying something to Vincenzo in Italian, then switching back to English again. “Final fucking offer.”

Vincenzo smiled, said something to his guards in Italian, and they lowered their weapons. Then the prick nodded at the woman. “Have a nice life, Songstress.”

The windows went up and the SUV drove away.

I didn’t fucking hesitate.

I aimed at Echo. “What the fuck did you tell him?” And Jesus fucking Christ, the Kentworths were related to Vincenzo.

Holstering his weapon, Echo walked right into my muzzle. “Nothing you need to worry about because it’s handled. You’re welcome, asshole.” Ignoring my SIG aimed point-blank at his chest, the prick glanced at Whiskey, then the woman. “Let’s go.” He turned toward the Range Rover.

I aimed at his head. “I said, what *the fuck* did you tell him?”

Enraged, Echo spun on me, but before he could open his mouth, a small hand landed on my arm.

“He said he would owe him a favor if he left me alone.”

All of us looked at the woman.

Echo snorted. “Of course she fucking speaks Italian.” He switched to Italian and let loose with a string of curses.

I didn’t lower my aim. “Why?” I demanded.

“Because I’m a goddamn gentleman. You want to draw more attention, Romeo, keep it up. Otherwise, let’s get the fuck outta here.” Echo turned toward the Range Rover and muttered, “I fucking hate New York.”

I didn’t buy his bullshit excuse. Echo was self-serving, but I holstered my weapon and tapped my leg for Missy to come because I didn’t have a goddamn choice. I had to take Echo at his word.

Echo got behind the wheel, Whiskey got in front and I held the door for the woman while she got in. Then Missy followed me to the other side, jumped in the back and I took the seat behind Echo. Echo pulled into traffic, and for two tense minutes, no one said a goddamn word.

Then the woman, wringing her hands, broke the silence. “I’m sorry, Echo. I don’t know who that man was.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Echo answered, his tone ten degrees calmer.

“All the same, I apologize.”

Whiskey turned in his seat. “Your voice always like that?”

Echo smirked. “Ask that again and see who Romeo draws on next.”

Heat hit the woman’s cheeks.

Whiskey glanced at Echo. “Just wonder—”

“Stand the fuck down, Whiskey,” I ordered.

“Copy that, boss,” the asshole answered sarcastically, facing forward.

The woman twisted her hands again.

Brushing her hair aside, I cupped the back of her neck and dropped my voice. “You’re good.”

A shiver went through her body, but she nodded.

Not letting go of her, I rubbed my thumb across her smooth skin.

Her eyes closed and she leaned into my touch.

Echo drove to Teterboro.

SIXTY-FOUR

Sailor

He brushed my hair off my shoulder, then gently but firmly grasped the back of my neck. “You’re good,” he quietly reassured.

A tremor went through my entire body, and just like before, this man’s dominant touch had the power to take every one of my frayed nerves and soothe them in a way I’d never felt before. But then his thumb stroked my neck, and desire erupted like fire across my heated skin.

Closing my eyes, wanting to soak in every second of this man’s touch, I allowed myself to lean into him and just breathe.

I didn’t ask where we were going.

I didn’t ask who was in the black SUV.

I didn’t ask if he was still as angry with me as he’d been on that other man’s boat.

I simply listened to the sound of his breathing and the music came. Not Shane’s music. Not the pieces I so easily created for him because his goodness was life itself.

This was Roark’s brand of gravely assertive, controlled notes that fell into haunted melodies with sweeping epics of rolling thunder. This was dark chords and heavy arpeggio that would suddenly dip like soaring wings

before falling into quiet interludes of purring engines and steady heartbeats, only to come roaring back with erotic harmonies and dominant tempos.

This was Roark's music.

I didn't know these sounds before him.

I hadn't known them since.

But sitting here with his hand on my nape, I felt it.

I heard it.

It ebbed and it flowed, it roared and retreated, but it played all the way to the airport, and it kept playing as he silently, dominantly led me to a private jet and put me in a seat. It hummed while I watched the man he'd called Whiskey join the handsome pilot in the cockpit who I'd seen on a flight out of Key West a lifetime ago. It played as Echo sat facing us a couple rows up.

But then, all of a sudden, the music hit a crescendo as Roark's eyes met mine and his big hands deftly buckled me in.

My heart raced, my breath caught and my thoughts turned singular.

I didn't care who was watching, I wanted this man to kiss me.

But I remembered the last time I saw him.

I remembered every second I had ever spent with him.

This man didn't give public displays of affection.

His hand on my neck was the closest he'd ever come to touching me intimately in front of other people.

But I wanted to touch him.

I wanted to reach for him and never let go.

“Roark,” I whispered, the sound of my voice no match for the intensity of his stare.

As if reading my thoughts, my needs, he grasped my chin and held my gaze for a moment, then he let go.

Before I could catch my breath, the plane was taxiing and we lifted into the sky. But I wasn’t listening to his music anymore as we leveled out.

I was watching him.

Scanning the plane and the view out the windows, absently petting Missy as she sat on the floor next to him, he released his seat belt and stood as his tension-filled energy drove him to his feet.

Dark ocean-colored eyes looked down at me. “Drink?”

It suddenly occurred to me that I knew next to nothing about this man. “Do you drink?”

“Coffee, water,” he answered succinctly.

No alcohol. I wondered if there was a reason behind that or if it was simply who he was. “Water would be nice, thank you.”

Nodding once, he went toward the front of the plane.

Echo watched him pass, then he looked at me. Holding a tumbler of amber colored liquid, he took a sip. “What was in the needle?”

My muscles stiffened. The memory filled my head, and I knew I should’ve felt remorse, guilt even, but I didn’t. I also had no idea what had been on that needle. “Does it matter?”

Both he and Roark had shot Kyle after I’d shoved the needle in his neck. I would never forget the moment. But it didn’t play in my head on

repeat every night like finding Shane did. I didn't even think about Kyle Kentworth anymore.

Echo smirked. "Nope." He took another sip of his drink.

"Who was the man in the black SUV?" If he could ask me a question, I figured I could ask one back.

His expression locked down. "Does it matter?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. It could for him. "Does it?"

"Nope." Echo finished his drink and set his glass down. "Glade the ankle's healed." He winked. "You clean up good." Stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles, he laced his hands over his abs. "Go easy on Romeo." He closed his eyes. "I almost like that motherfucker."

Roark came back and handed me a water.

"Thank you."

Tipping his chin, glancing at Echo, he took the seat next me. "What'd he say to you?"

"I think he likes you." I opened my water and drank.

SIXTY-FIVE

Roark

Not sure if she was serious or fucking with me, I drank my water.

She capped hers and glanced out the window. “When you said to meet you outside, I didn’t realize we were going for a plane ride.”

Fuck. Realizing my mistake, I owned it. “Would you have come with me if you had?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

I nodded. “How’s the ankle?”

“Better, thank you.”

Christ, I fucking hated this small talk bullshit. I hated it more that we had an audience. Wanting to get her on my own damn plane, I glanced at my watch.

“Somewhere you need to be?”

There it was again. That sexy rasp, but with a teasing tone. I didn’t know shit about this woman outside the basics, but the more I uncovered, the more I wanted to know.

“Somewhere I want us to be,” I corrected.

She didn’t miss a beat. “Which is?”

I looked at her. Then I cut the bullshit. “You trust me?” She shouldn’t.

Again, she didn't hesitate. "With some things."

Honest. I respected that. "Like?"

"My life."

"Fair enough." That was the part of me she'd seen.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

Where it all began. "I'm going to show you."

She gave me a half smile. "When we get there?"

Fuck, this woman. "When we get there."

"Then what?" she asked curiously.

I didn't want to have this conversation in front of Echo or anyone else, but I recognized the fact that she'd gotten on a damn plane with me and three mercenaries for hire without batting a fucking eye. I owed her the truth. At least some of it for now.

"I don't want to have a private conversation in front of an audience, woman. I want to take you somewhere and show you a piece of something I think will help you. If you want more intel than that, I'll lay it out. If you need me to tell Zulu to turn this plane around, I'll do it. If you're uncomfortable with any part of this, I'll respect that and fix it. I'm nothing like that piece-of-shit Kentworth, but I recognize that I've just put you in a similar situation. I'm asking for trust when I haven't earned it. My intent isn't to make you uncomfortable. That said, just like you asked Talerco for help, if you asked Echo, Zulu or Whiskey for the same, they'd do it, no questions asked. Understood?"

Her eyes welled and she nodded, but she looked away.

Fuck. “I don’t want to put my hands on you, woman. Not here, not now. Give me your eyes.”

She looked back at me.

Doe eyes. Vulnerable, young, innocent, tear-stained doe-eyes. Jesus, I was going to fuck this woman up. “Do you need me to turn the plane around?”

She shook her head. “No.”

I fucking exhaled. “Why the tears?”

“You already helped me.”

No, I hadn’t. Not enough. I didn’t dance around the truth. “You haven’t left your place in three weeks.”

Surprise hit her expression. “You’ve been keeping tabs on me?”

“AES has checked on you,” I answered vaguely. “You get the package I sent?”

She frowned. “Package?”

“New ID.”

“Oh.” She inhaled. “Yes, I got that.”

“You didn’t use it.”

Her hands twisted in her lap. “I didn’t think I needed to.” Her voice quieted. “I told you I didn’t want to be someone else.”

I remembered exactly what’d she said. She didn’t want to lose the last thing she had left of her brother. I fucking got it. After seeing that picture of the two of them, I got it even more. The child had the face of an angel. I’d never had a brother, but I felt her pain.

“Did something change today, with that man?” She looked up at me.
“Do I need a new ID?”

Not if my plan worked out. “No.”

She put her trust in my answer. “Okay.”

Remembering the notebook I saw in her place, I changed the subject.
“You been writing music?”

She looked out the window and gave a small laugh that was nothing like the one I’d heard from her before. “I wouldn’t call it writing.”

I didn’t say shit. I waited for her to give me her eyes again.

Shy, sad, she glanced at me.

I held her gaze. “What would you call it?”

Her voice went quiet. “Trying.”

I nodded. “Life’s about the process.”

She stared at me for beat, then her voice came out in the same quiet rasp. “I never thanked you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

She bit her lip, then she blurted out the last thing I was expecting, but the one thing I’d been fucking fixated on for three goddamn weeks.

“I didn’t have sex with Kyle, not after I got on the helicopter. He took my clothes, but he hadn’t touched me yet before you....” She trailed off and dropped her gaze to her lap. “I just, I wanted you to know that. There’s been no one since....” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Roark. For all of it.”

I fucking inhaled. Deep.

I didn't know possessiveness before this woman. I didn't get fucking jealous because I didn't get attached. My piece-of-shit old man taught me that the person you needed most would be the one who was there the least. So I'd stopped needing shit a long time ago. After he'd left my mother, I focused instead on taking care of shit. The irony wasn't lost on me that my oldest memory was of him in uniform, showing off his cockpit. I was lucky my mother never held it against me for following in his footsteps. She'd deserved better from me after my injury. I would never be able to take that back.

But this woman—the past three weeks of being pissed at her for getting on that helo, for being naked on that fucking yacht—that I could do something about.

Grasping her chin, bringing her eyes to mine, I gave what I had. “You don't need to apologize to me, woman.”

SIXTY-SIX

Sailor

The plane touched down in Key West and we taxied to a far corner of the tarmac.

Even though I felt safe with Roark, and a weight that I hadn't realized the significance of had lifted when he'd told me I had nothing to apologize for, apprehension and anxiety crawled around in my head as I remembered the last time I was here.

Roark unbuckled my seat belt, but he didn't say anything about our destination. Standing, he tapped the side of his left leg, and Missy dutifully got up.

He grabbed my large shoulder bag with one hand while his other landed on the small of my back. Then his deep, rough voice touched the anxious part of my soul that hadn't settled since losing Shane. "This way."

Not getting up from his seat, Echo glanced at Roark. "Later, Marine."

"SEAL," was all Roark said.

Echo's gaze met mine. "Take it easy."

"Thank you." I'd been too far away to hear what the man in the SUV was saying, and I didn't know why Echo had offered him a favor on my behalf, but I was grateful.

I should've been more frightened when they'd all pulled guns on each other, but I was only afraid for Roark. Except I hadn't been. Not really. I'd seen him in action. I knew what he was capable of. I didn't doubt his ability to handle any situation. I didn't doubt any of his friends or the men who worked for Alpha Elite Security. They were clearly all highly trained and lethal, which probably should've scared me, but I felt safer when they'd drawn their weapons than I ever did on the Contender. And while I wondered who the man Echo had negotiated with was, I'd had three weeks to process the reality of the world I'd fallen into with Kyle Kentworth. I was lucky to be standing here. I was also better off not knowing who that man in the SUV was, or what went on in his or AES's world.

Echo simply tipped his chin at me in acknowledgment, and Roark led me down the aisle.

Before we got to the exit, the handsome, muscular pilot I had not been introduced to yet stepped out of the cockpit and focused his intense stare on me. Striking eyes, full lips, not much older than me, he looked both stealthily lethal and meticulously controlled in his dress shirt that stretched over his biceps.

"Miss Tory." He held out his hand. "Zulu. Nice to see you on your feet again." His smooth voice and commanding presence were more than intimidating.

"Thank you." I shook his hand. "And thank you for the ride."

"Anytime." His gaze went to Roark. "Return flight?"

"Not tonight." Roark's deep voice quietly landed on my shoulder as his hand moved to my hip. "You heading back to Miami?"

Awareness raced across my body as desire and apprehension flared from both Roark's touch and his reply to the pilot. Belatedly, I was thankful for my indecision when I'd gotten dressed. I couldn't decide what to wear, so I'd thrown a change of clothes in my shoulder bag as backup.

"Briefly," Zulu replied. "Then on to Saint Tropez."

"Long day," Roark stated.

A dark expression descended over Zulu's features. "I need to check on something."

"Problem?" Roark asked.

"The Solace," Zulu answered vaguely. "She's moored with no crew."

"Where's the widow?"

"Not sure."

"Zulu," Whiskey called from the cockpit. "We've got clearance."

"Copy that," Zulu acknowledged Whiskey before tipping his chin at us. "No easy day." He returned to the cockpit.

As Roark led me down the airstairs, I fixated on what the pilot had said. "Do you think that's true? That there're no easy days?"

"It's a SEAL saying," Roark replied as he bypassed his red SUV that was parked a few yards away and steered me toward a private plane.

A huge single-engine plane that had both floats and wheels.

Forgetting about the pilot's ominous comment, I stopped in my tracks and stared.

A seaplane.

A plane that could go anywhere. "This is yours."

It wasn't a question, but he answered anyway. "Yes."

Suddenly, I got it.

Him, his presence, his dominance, the rugged turboprop plane—it all fit together like a beautifully arranged piece that you couldn't ever compose because the notes, the sounds, the entire score—it was already perfectly put together.

I was in awe.

But I wasn't the only one.

As Roark effortlessly jumped up on one of the large floats and opened a door, Missy danced excitedly next to me.

I laughed. "I think somebody likes to fly."

Roark glanced over his shoulder and looked from me to Missy. Then he just stared for a long moment.

Heat flushed my face and awareness tingled up my spine. I smiled. "I meant Missy."

Still staring at me, he didn't move for two heartbeats. Then he hopped down, grabbed Missy by the handle on the back of her tactical vest and lifted her to the float. She deftly took the two-step ladder that led to the cockpit and jumped aboard, hopping right into one of the front seats, tail wagging like crazy.

My smile grew. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say she's your copilot."

Roark didn't laugh. I'd never even seen him smile. But the corner of his mouth twitched, and he shook his head before glancing at his faithful companion. "Missy, retreat." He looked back at me as Missy hopped down

from the seat and went to the rear of the plane. “Come on, woman. We’re losing daylight.” Without warning, he grabbed my waist and lifted me onto the float. “Watch your step. Take the seat Missy vacated.”

Excitement fluttered in my belly. “The front seat?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Holding my flowy, boho maxi skirt, glad I’d worn ballet flats even though I hated wearing closed-toe shoes, or any shoes for that matter, I climbed onto the seaplane and into the far front seat.

Roark circled the plane, checking things I couldn’t begin to guess at. Then he came aboard as deftly as his dog, secured the door and put on a pair of aviators that were sitting on top of the controls.

The moment we were closed in, I could smell him everywhere.

Leaning over, he wordlessly buckled me into a harness type seatbelt and fitted me a headset before putting one on himself. Starting the plane, he began speaking to air traffic control in rapid-fire speech that was not only a language all its own, but it added a whole new layer of complexity to the magnetism of this man.

Then Roark’s hands were moving in a coordinated orchestra across all the levers, buttons and switches of his plane as effortlessly and as synchronized as if he were an entire symphony.

The seaplane started to move and the flutters in my belly turned into a riot.

Before I could grasp the complete and total admiration I had for this man, we were taking on speed and the wheels were leaving the ground.

The plane took to the air completely differently than the jet, but it was a thousand times more magical. As the pieces of this complicated, stoic man started to come together, he banked the seaplane and took us out over the water.

My breath caught.

We were soaring over the ocean like a bird gliding over the waves.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face.

"Take the controls," he commanded.

Tearing my gaze away from endless miles of aqua waters stretched out before us, I glanced at him. "What?"

He tipped his chin at the steering wheel thing.

Tentative but also so, so excited, I had to ask. "Are you sure?"

"Woman," he stated, conveying an entire conversation in one word.

My smile unrelenting, I gripped the two handles. "Now what?"

"Bank left, easy turn, level out."

Next to the whirring sound of the plane's engine, his voice coming through the headset was my new favorite sound. "You sure? I just... turn the steering wheel thingy?"

"Yoke, and yes, left turn. Now." He let go of his controls.

I turned the yoke.

The left wing dipped sharply, and the entire plane tilted at a steep pitch. I squeaked out in surprise and let go of the controls as rapid-fire speech came through the radio.

Roark took his yoke and leveled us out as he replied to air traffic control. “November two two eight Juliet Hotel turning left, traffic in sight, maintaining VFR, one thousand for two thousand.”

“Two two eight Juliet Hotel, one thousand for two, good day,” air traffic control replied.

I didn’t know what I was mesmerized with more, the sound of his voice or his capabilities. “What were you saying to them?”

“I was confirming that we see the other air traffic and alerting them of our altitude. They verified my transmission.” He glanced out his side window. “Take the controls again.”

I held my hands up and let out a short laugh of embarrassment. “Not a good idea. You saw what just happened. I almost crashed us into the ocean.” I could command the keys on a piano, but I knew my limitations. Metal, fuel and wings over an ocean was beyond my reach.

Roark didn’t even crack a smile. “I would never let that happen. Take the controls.”

Awareness tingled across the back of my neck, and I turned toward him. “Why?”

He looked right at me, but I couldn’t see his eyes behind his aviators, and he didn’t say anything.

“For the record, the stare of shame is much more effective when I can see your eyes.”

His gaze held, but his voice both lowered and became more commanding. “Take the yoke, woman.”

Without thought, my hands went to each side and gripped. “I’m not turning again.”

“Forget what you know about driving a car.”

“That’s easy because I don’t know much.” I’d only gotten my driver’s license so I could have a valid ID.

His eyebrows drew together. “You don’t know how to drive?”

“I passed a driver’s test.” Barely. In a borrowed car, because when you had nothing, a car was a luxury.

His frown deepened. “Do you have a vehicle?”

“I have a baby grand—much more practical for what I do.” Or did.

I felt more than heard his inhale through my headset. “You’re going to bank left again, slight pitch, slow and smooth. When you see the horizon line, even out and aim directly toward it. Level the plane out the same way you turned into the pitch. Understand?”

“Bank, pitch, slow, smooth, horizon, level out.” It was a whole song. “Got it.” I didn’t have it.

“Slow and smooth,” he repeated, his voice doing more to my nerves than the plane.

Following his instructions, this time tilting the yoke much less, I did as he said. The plane soared through the turn, and when I gently corrected my steering, we leveled out.

“Good.”

Soaking in his praise as if I’d been starved of it my entire life, I smiled. “Now what?”

“Fly.”

I glanced at him.

“We’re heading due west.” Staring straight ahead, he didn’t elaborate.

“Due west?” Out into the ocean? The vast, endless ocean with miles and miles of nothingness?

He barely tipped his chin. “Into the sunset.”

Every tense muscle in my body went completely rigid.

If he’d opened my door and pushed me out, it would have been less shocking.

“You brought me up here to see the sunset?” He’d flown to New York, picked me up, and brought me back to Key West to watch the sun disappear into the ocean?

He turned his head to face me. “Yes.”

My hands gripping the yoke of his seaplane, my eyes welling, I stared at him, but I couldn’t speak.

He pushed his sunglasses up. Then the Scottish warrior Marine pilot gave me a gift. “Some things you are in control of.”

I looked back out at the vastness of the ocean. The sun started to dip toward the horizon in a spectacular cacophony of orange, pink and lavender as tears silently fell down my cheeks.

“I’m flying,” I whispered.

His deep-voiced affirmation came through the headset and touched every piece of my broken heart. “You’re flying.”

SIXTY-SEVEN

Roark

She cried and she flew the Cessna.

I left her at the controls.

The sun set.

She still flew.

Fifty nautical miles later, the tears stopped.

Another fifty and she leaned back in her seat. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Fuck, that voice. This was my favorite intonation of hers yet. But hearing it through the headset? Jesus. I wanted to sink so deep inside this woman that I never came up for air.

“Welcome.” My own damn voice sounding rough, I took the plane. “Taking the controls.”

“Okay.” Letting go of the yoke, she gave me her short laugh. The one that said she was embarrassed. “That’s probably a good idea now that I’ve flown us into oblivion over a dark ocean.”

I didn’t explain to her that I was verifying I had control of the aircraft. I also didn’t tell her I’d fucking fly into oblivion with her any day, any time. Hell of a better way to go than in a sand trap downrange with a surface-to-

air missile taking out your bird before you hit the ground with full fuel tanks.

Turning the Cessna around, I headed us back.

It wasn't until I was on approach for my place that she spoke. "Are we landing in the water?"

"Yes." Best part of an amphibious plane.

She looked out the side window. "Near your house?"

Right up to it. "Yes." The reason I'd bought the place.

"An airplane. On the water."

A doe-eyed blonde. In my head.

I landed and Missy barked twice like she always did when we touched down at the house.

The woman turned in her seat then looked at me in the dark cockpit. "Is something wrong?"

"No. She speaks every time we land here."

"Here," the woman stated. "At home?"

I took note of how she said home instead of my house. "Yes."

"Why?"

"She's excited."

The woman smiled. "Wait. It isn't a command you taught her?"

"No," I admitted, pulling the Cessna up to my dock.

The woman laughed. Her real laugh. "Something Roark MacElheran isn't in control of." She glanced out the side window at the house and her tone immediately sobered. "What happened to the man in the kitchen?"

“Turned over to the Feds.” And I’d already fixed the damage in the kitchen.

She looked back at me. “You didn’t get in trouble?”

“No.” I killed the power on the Cessna and the ambient lights went dark in the cockpit as I first took off her headset, then mine.

A trace of panic filtered into her tone. “Roark?”

“Right here, woman.”

“Are you?” she whispered so damn quietly.

I knew what she was getting at. “Yes.”

I heard and felt her inhale. “Okay.”

Pushing her hair back so I could have skin-on-skin contact with her, I cupped the back of her neck. “You got a problem with the dark?”

She exhaled. “Sometimes.”

I could’ve turned the cockpit lights back on until I got her off the plane, but I didn’t. Instead, I kept my hand on her and gave her a moment because I wanted this woman to get used to me.

When her breathing evened out, I applied pressure and stroked her soft skin once. “You good?”

She shivered but she nodded. “Yes.”

I dropped my hand. “Dinner?”

The shy rasp of this woman’s sexy voice came out. “Thank you. That would be nice.”

Nice. Fuck. That was the last thing I was. Feeling the rock of the wind against the plane, I issued the woman an order. “Wait.” I glanced back as I

opened my door. “Missy, come.” My bitch trotted up the aisle, tail wagging, and backfilled my seat as I stepped out of the cockpit. Lifting her down onto the float, I let her go.

She jumped across to the next float, then onto the dock.

I glanced at the woman. “Coming around to get you.”

Ducking under the fuselage, moving to the opposite side, I stood with one foot on the dock, one on the plane, and opened the woman’s door. “Wind’s strong tonight. Hands on my shoulders,” I ordered as I unbuckled her. “I’ll lift you down.”

Submissive, she did as I instructed. “Okay.”

I set her on the dock, but then shit went still between us.

She didn’t let go of me, and I didn’t let go of her.

Staring at me like I was her last salvation, the woman gave me the same damn brand of need she’d given me three weeks ago in my kitchen. Except this time, it didn’t piss me off. It made me want to fuck her right here.

For the second time with her, I bit back a goddamn affirmation for her submissiveness and stepped away. “Take Missy inside.” I handed her my keys. “I’ll be up as soon as I tie down the plane.” I realized my mistake a second too late.

Her gaze cut to her hand and her entire fucking body language flipped on a dime.

Shit. “I’m taking you up. Keys, woman.” I reached for them.

“No.” Her palm closed and her head shook like a bobble toy as she stepped back. “I’m good.”

She wasn’t fucking good. “Different set of keys,” I pointed out.

The shake of her head turned to a nod. "I know." She kept staring at her hand. "But, um, where did you get those... other ones." She looked up. "Why did you have them?"

I fucking inhaled. "Which one?"

Doe eyes. "They didn't come as a set?"

"No."

"Oh God," she whispered. "The one I..."

The cyanide. Fuck. "You don't want to know." I'd never told anyone.

"I think I do."

"Think and know aren't the same thing, woman."

She didn't react for a beat, then the nodding came back. "Okay. I get it. Just..." Inhaling she stilled. "Was it poison?"

"Yes."

She blinked. Then she shocked the fuck out of me. "Did you have them made for yourself or for your protection?"

I fucking stood there.

I didn't tell her that when you get blown to hell downrange and wake up in a hospital in Germany and some doc you've never met tells you you'll never walk again, you get fucking pissed. Irrationally, ungrateful to be alive, *pissed*. I also didn't tell her that when a Marine loses his shit and tries to strangle said fucking doc, he's put on suicide watch with arm restraints and pumped full of tranqs. For three goddamn days, I'd stared at the single house key to my mother's place that I'd attached to the outside of my gear as a stupid fucking talisman on my first deployment. That key sat on the table next to my hospital bed, just out of reach, taunting me with every

fucking way I could use it to kill myself and everyone around me—if I could only reach it.

When they took the restraints off, I swore to myself I'd never be that fucking helpless again.

Staring at a woman who'd had a taste of her own damn helplessness, I gave her the truth. "I made the two keys when I got back stateside after being medically discharged." Insurance policy. If I ever went down in a fucking fireball again, I could cut myself free of my harness or take myself out. Either way, I wouldn't wake up helpless in some hospital at someone else's mercy.

No judgment, no change in expression, just doe eyes—the woman nodded. "The key fob? Did it have a GPS tracker in it? Kyle said...." She inhaled then she came out with the rest in a rush. "When he saw the keychain, he yanked the key fob off and smashed it. He said it was a tracking device."

If that fuck wasn't already dead, I'd kill him again. "It was."

"Did you make that too?"

"Yes. After I got the Cessna." My first flight up, I took her out over the ocean, lost my shit, then lost my bearings. Eventually I brought her back down and got us home, but the fucking trigger had been flipped. Needing control back, I fitted a fake key fob with a tracking device, added it to my keychain and gave Christensen the login info for the website that traced the tracker. I told him if I ever went missing, to find my ass and bury what was left next to my mother.

The woman glanced at the Cessna, then looked back at me. "I think I get it. I'll wait inside." She turned to walk up the dock. "Missy, come." Her

raspy-as-fuck voice carried across the water as she clapped her hands once. Her jewelry clinked like wind chimes, and my bitch followed her.

I fucking stared.

Her blonde hair and long skirt getting caught in the wind, she ignored both as she stopped where the dock hit the grass and stepped out of her shoes. As she bent to pick them up, Missy licked her face.

The woman laughed and hugged my dog.

Then they both walked into the house barefoot.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Roark

I secured the plane and crossed my yard, scanning out of habit.

When I opened my backdoor, a canine was sitting by her empty food dish and a doe-eyed blonde was staring at my stripped-down living room. “Remodeling?”

“Building out.” There wasn’t anything left inside to remodel. “It was gutted when I bought it.” I pulled shit out of the fridge.

She turned with a frown. “You purchased a house with no walls?”

No walls, no floors, no stairs. “Price was right. Dock was intact. Do you eat meat?”

She glanced around the kitchen. “I eat anything.”

She looked like she ate nothing. “Chicken okay?”

“Yes, thank you.” She glanced to where the broken cabinet had been. “How come the house was gutted?”

“It’d been damaged in a hurricane. Roof held, but interior flooded. Former owner took it down to the studs, then ran out of money.” I pulled out a pan and turned on the oven.

“Oh.” She glanced at the kitchen table, and color flushed her face. “Did you fix the broken cabinet yourself?”

Christ. If she looked at the table one more time like that, I was going to forget about dinner and fuck her on it. “Yes.” Forcing myself to focus, I pulled a loaf of bread from the freezer because this woman needed carbs. “Also put in the floors, the stairs and the kitchen. Did the upstairs master and bath. Still working on the rest of the house.”

“Wow.” She glanced at my arms. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Don’t, woman,” I warned, seasoning the chicken.

“Don’t what?”

“Put me on a pedestal.” I tossed the chicken in the pan.

Her voice went quiet. “You saved my life.”

“I also killed. Doesn’t make me a hero.” I washed my hands and rinsed some vegetables.

“Do you regret it?”

I looked at her. “We already had this conversation.”

“I know.”

But she needed to hear it again. “No, I don’t regret it.”

Her chest rose with an inhale. “I don’t either.”

“You shouldn’t.” I turned the heat up under the pan and grabbed a cutting board. “What’s with the jewelry?” Something about it seemed significant.

She glanced at her wrists and fingers before she absently twisted the pieces. “What do you mean?”

“You weren’t wearing any when I first met you.”

“Met me,” she repeated, letting it hang there a beat. “No, I wasn’t wearing any then.” She glanced at Missy. “I think she’s hungry. Should I feed her?”

“She’ll eat when we eat. Jewelry?”

She turned away from me to lean against the counter. “It’s... a selfish story. You don’t want to hear it.”

I wanted to hear every damn thing about her, selfish or not. But I’d bet my Cessna there wasn’t anything about this woman that was self-serving. “Try me.”

She touched a particular bracelet on her left wrist. “It started after I sold my first song. I ran home to tell Shane and take him to this diner he loved so we could celebrate. On our way to eat, we passed a little boutique that had all this pretty jewelry. We’d passed the place dozens of times, and I’d always admired the pieces in the front window. But that day, Shane stopped and said we should go in. He said I should get something nice so that I could wear it and see my success.” She made air quotes when she said *see my success*. “I told him I didn’t need any jewelry, but he insisted.” She smiled and her eyes welled. “He didn’t understand that getting him out of the foster system was more than enough for me. I didn’t need anything else.” She reached for Missy and pet her. “But I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. He was being so insistent that day when he was always so easy going. He was such a gentle soul.” She inhaled deep. “Anyway, we went in. He picked up a bracelet, and I tried it on. I loved it, so I bought it on the spot. It was the first piece of jewelry I ever owned.” She rubbed her hands over her wrists. “That day started a tradition with me and Shane. Every time I sold a song, we went to the boutique, then the diner.” She looked up at me.

“I should’ve bought him something each time, but I didn’t.” Her voice dropped. “I was selfish.”

I was right. There wasn’t a single self-serving thing about this woman. “Selfish would’ve been denying him the opportunity to see you happy.”

Tears fell down her cheeks and she looked away. “I hope one day I believe that.”

“So do I.” But I knew damn well grief and guilt didn’t have a timeline. “You weren’t wearing any of the pieces on the beach.”

She swiped at her face. “No, I wasn’t. After Shane passed, I took everything off. It hurt too much to look at those memories.” She rubbed her hands and flexed her wrists as the pieces all clinked together. “It hurt too much to hear him every time I moved.”

But she’d put them back on. “Now it doesn’t.”

“Now it doesn’t,” she agreed, turning to watch me chop vegetables. “Can I help?”

I took note of both her changing the subject and her hands. The subject change I respected, but her hands? They were small as hell. The handles on my kitchen knives were as thick as the grip on my SIG. I couldn’t imagine this woman yielding either, but I sure as fuck could envision her fist around my cock. Which made me worse than an asshole for thinking about fucking her right after the personal grief she’d just shared with me.

Spun up and head fucked by how much I wanted this woman, I pushed the cutting board and knife over to her. “You like to cook?”

She half-laughed. “Not really.”

That short laugh again. I wanted to fuck that sound out of her. “Slice the peppers. Lengthwise,” I added.

“Okay.” She set about making a fucking mess of a vegetable.

Not saying shit about the difference between lengthwise and mangled, I threw the bread in the oven and tossed the vegetables I’d already cut into another pan. “How you’d learn the piano?”

She gave up on the decimated red pepper and picked up a chunk to eat it. Slowly chewing, she stalled. “Have you ever spent a winter in New York City?”

“No.” I flipped the chicken, covered the pan and cut the heat.

“They’re cold.”

I didn’t say shit. I knew where this was going.

“The places I lived were cold. My mother.... Let’s just say she wasn’t around. But there was a church nearby, and they had heat.” She shrugged. “I used to sneak inside because it was warm. I took to hiding under the piano. One night, the custodian Roger found me, except he didn’t kick me out. Instead, he told me I’d be better off parking myself at the piano than under it. Then he sat down on the bench and played a short jazz number. Next thing I knew, I’d crawled up next to him, and he was teaching me a few chords. After that, I was hooked. For the next few years, I snuck into that church every night and played.”

Grabbing plates and Missy’s bowl, I paused to look at her. “You’re self-taught?”

“I guess, mostly. Roger would occasionally leave me an old score or two, but I couldn’t read music at first. So I just made up my own songs, playing every night until my hands hurt or I fell asleep on the keys. It

became my escape. Then one night when I went to sneak into the church, the backdoor was locked. I knocked and knocked but no one answered. I knew something was wrong. Roger had stopped locking the door years before. He wouldn't close up until I went home. Worried, I sat outside the back door all night. In the morning, the pastor showed up. He said Roger had passed away." She looked out the kitchen window. "I never got to thank him."

I shook the pan of vegetables and cut the heat. Then I grasped her chin and brought her eyes to mine. "If he heard you play, you didn't need to thank him."

She gave me those doe eyes that fucking did me in. "You think so?"

"I know so." Before I kissed her, or fucked her on the damn kitchen counter, I released her. Grabbing two glasses, I handed them over. "Water's in the fridge. Silverware and napkins are in the drawer on the left."

"Okay." Her quiet rasp speaking volumes, she moved with an almost ethereal grace toward the fridge.

Watching her out of the corner of my eye as I buttered bread for her and plated the food, I took in every damn detail. A mane of curly, wild blonde hair, bohemian outfit, no makeup except eyeliner, she carefully folded and creased the napkins before meticulously placing the silverware in the proper formation my mother had taught me. I wondered at a woman who stood barefoot and couldn't slice a vegetable but made a meal out of a place setting.

Filling Missy's bowl with her kibble and some of the chicken and vegetables, I set it down, but didn't give her the command to eat. Trained,

she stood prone in front of her meal, licking her chops as I set our plates on the table.

“She’s not eating?”

I pulled a chair out for the woman. “I didn’t tell her she could yet.”

“Oh.” She glanced at Missy before taking her seat. But then she stilled as she stared at her dinner. “Wow. This looks amazing.” Her voice quieted with something close to sorrow. “Thank you, Roark.”

I wanted this woman saying my name, but fuck, not like that. “Missy, eat.” I took my seat as my bitch went to town on her meal. Then I looked at the woman. “Anyone ever cook for you?”

It wasn’t even a half laugh that accompanied her wry smile. “No.”

Pieces of this woman fell together, and I made a fucking vow.

I was going to cook for her every damn chance I got.

SIXTY-NINE

Sailor

Missy finished her meal first, followed by her owner.

As I savored the last bite of the best dinner I'd ever had, Roark addressed his dog. "Missy, clear."

The trained golden retriever picked up her metal bowl, jumped up with her two front paws on the edge of the counter, and dumped her bowl into the sink.

A clanking sound filled the kitchen, and I couldn't stop myself. I laughed at both the absurdity and the complete representation of Roark's character that he would teach his dog to clear her dish. As if joining in on the humor, Missy danced around my chair and wagged her tail furiously as she barked once.

Then I really laughed. "Did Daddy train you to clear your plate?" I scratched behind Missy's ears as I smiled at her owner. "That is so Roark."

In a move I'd never seen him make, let alone imagined, he leaned back in his chair. His posture wasn't relaxed, he was too commanding for that, but it also wasn't battle ready.

His intense gaze locked on me, his tone gave nothing away. "I'm a verb now?"

Daring to stare at a man who was more handsome, stoic and lethally capable than anyone I'd ever met, equal parts awareness and shyness fluttered across my skin like the concerto to his symphony. "You are many things, Mr. MacElheran."

I still couldn't believe the man who'd taken me without mercy in a cabin on a mountain had made me dinner. No man had ever so thoroughly fucked me for my pleasure or cooked for me. But Roark had both moved around his kitchen with fluid and precise movements like a trained chef and expertly and skillfully made my body come alive under his touch. His sautéed chicken and vegetables, the French bread he'd heated and buttered for me but hadn't eaten himself—it was all delicious, but the way he'd felt inside me? Oh God. I would give up food to feel that again.

But I didn't want to go there.

I didn't want to dare to hope. So I pushed aside the memory of him on that mountain, and my hand unconsciously rubbed over my full stomach.

The grief came out of nowhere.

Roaring up and flooding me without constraint, the thought of my fullness, the meal I'd just had, the amount of food—punishing guilt for not taking better care of Shane crushed me.

Barely able to breathe, knowing I was about to fall deeper down the hole that I couldn't ever climb out of, I stood to clear my plate. "Thank you for dinner. It was wonderful."

Watching me intently, Roark didn't move. "What just happened?"

"Nothing. May I have your plate? I'll clean up." I held out my hand. It shook.

"Sit," he ordered in his deep, dominant voice that matched his stature.

Fighting not to heed his command, I remained standing. “It’s only fair. You cooked, I’ll clean.” I tried to smile.

“We’re not talking about the dishes, woman. I’m asking why your expression turned sad before you thanked me for dinner.”

“I—” Stopping the lie I was about to tell him, caught off guard by his acute observation, I dropped my hand.

Maybe I didn’t have to pretend with this man.

Maybe I could speak the truth.

Maybe I could show the darkness I so desperately tried to hide.

Maybe....

I inhaled.

Then I told him how broken I was. “I was thinking how full I felt, then I thought about the three years I had with Shane, and I wondered if I’d ever provided well enough for him that he felt as full as I do right now, and not just physically full. But the second I wondered it, I knew the ugly truth and the guilt I carry crushed me. Then I tried to stuff it down because I didn’t want you to see it.”

Ocean-colored eyes stared at me. Then a man who was more compassionate than anyone I’d ever met gave me his version of comfort. “He didn’t look underfed in the photos on your wall.”

Tears welled. “I should’ve cooked for him.”

“I don’t know what you should or shouldn’t have done. All I know is that you couldn’t have prevented his death, and a child who smiled like he did in those photos was not unhappy. He appeared loved, fed, and for the last years of his life, he had the security of a roof over his head that you

provided for him. One day, I hope there's a measure of acceptance in that for you."

I had to take three deep breaths before I was sure I wasn't going to burst into tears. Then I had to take two more before I could speak. "Thank you," I whispered.

"I wasn't giving you a version of reality to make you feel better, nor was I soliciting gratitude."

"I know. That's what made it so perfect." He understood.

"I'm not perfect, woman," he warned.

I couldn't stop the small smile from touching my lips. "Perfection is in the imperfections." I'd heard that somewhere once. "But I understand and hear what you're saying, and I appreciate all of it." I didn't ask him to hand me his plate this time. I reached for it and cleared both our dishes.

When I turned to get our glasses, he was standing right there.

His piercing blue eyes staring down at me, his expression so guarded, he looked lethal, his gaze cut from my lips to my eyes.

Too afraid to touch him but wanting nothing more, I stood perfectly still.

He still said nothing.

"Hi," I whispered.

"I'm not perfect," he repeated.

Apprehension spread. "I know." I didn't.

"I was combat wounded."

I didn't inhale, I didn't even dare to blink. I merely nodded because suddenly I did know. "Your left leg." I'd felt it in his gait the very first time

he'd carried me.

"My left leg," he confirmed, even though my statement hadn't been a question.

But now I had a hundred questions, and they flew through my mind. Then just as fast as I thought them, they dissipated like a hollow note held too long, and I realized none of them mattered. Except maybe one. But I wouldn't ask unless he opened the door because I knew he hated questions as much as I did.

So I said nothing.

I simply stood caged in by a dominant man so unbelievably commanding and self-possessed, and I just breathed. I breathed for me. I breathed for him, and I breathed for Shane.

The silence between us was full and thick and moved in sync with every one of our heartbeats, and I cherished it. I craved it. I'd craved it since I'd first experienced it. It was heated and sexual and intoxicating, but it also felt safe. So safe that I was afraid to even think about how I could settle into this man. How I could find a home in his brand of confident silence.

Except unlike every other time I'd been this close to him, he seemed tense, almost rigid in his quietness.

Shifting his left leg so minimally that it was nearly imperceptible, his gaze hardened. "Ask," he demanded.

"Ask what?" He spoke so few words that every one stretched beyond their meaning and formed its own musical chord.

"What everyone else who finds out wants to know," he bit out.

Like an adagio tempo, I kept my response even. “I don’t have any questions.” Not about his leg or his injury or how it happened or what he felt about it. The latter I could see written all over his face right now. The former questions only mattered if he wanted to tell me. I would never intrude. Not on this man.

In the first derisive sound I’d ever heard him make, he half-exhaled, half-snorted as he stepped back and cut me off from his gaze. Patting his leg once, he moved toward the backdoor. “Missy, come.”

The loyal retriever got up and trotted toward him.

Opening the door for her, he stood just inside the threshold and grasped the top of the door frame in an unconscious habit I could see him doing a thousand times over.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t give Missy any more commands.

He merely stared out at his plane and the gulf while his girl sniffed around the yard.

The one question I had grew to biblical proportions.

With his back to me, as if he could read my mind from a mile away, he spoke. “I told you to ask, woman.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

Not letting go of the doorframe, he looked over his shoulder at me.

SEVENTY

Roark

Her nervous energy filled the entire fucking kitchen.

Resigned, I issued her an order. “I told you to ask, woman.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

I glanced at her.

She was fucking beautiful.

Crazy talented and suffering from a whole damn life of trauma. But beautiful.

I looked back at the water because I couldn’t bring myself to answer her question when those doe eyes were cutting into me.

“No,” I admitted.

Her hum of an answer told me exactly what her expression would read like right now.

I’d disappointed her.

Everyone in her life had let her down.

I knew I had to tread lightly. I’d made this woman a promise that no one would take advantage of her, me included. But stepping carefully had never been my thing. I didn’t question shit. I assessed, made calculated moves, then got the job done. Except this woman wasn’t a mission, and I wanted to

fuck her more than I wanted to be in a cockpit, and I didn't have a parachute for that kind of fucked-up freefall.

Because this woman was the mother of all freefalls.

Her bracelets, her rings, hell, even her earrings, all made tinkling noise as she moved across my kitchen.

Then her sexy-as-hell raspy voice came from a foot behind me. "That was my question."

"I know." Now. Stuck in my own bullshit, I'd misjudged her.

"Do you love flying?"

My fingers dug into the top of the door frame. Then I made a stupid fucking move, and pulled a Trefor one-liner on her. "You're asking the wrong question." And I was asking for trouble.

"I wasn't asking so much as thinking out loud."

Her voice no longer sounded raspy to me. It sounded like sex and fucking and that piano in the woods. And something else I didn't want to admit.

I didn't say shit.

She moved. But it wasn't toward me. It was a shift—her body, her breathing, her clinking jewelry. Her words followed.

"I love Shane. I love music. I never loved anything else. Except..." Her deep inhale betrayed her disquiet. "I loved that feeling in your plane. Up high, soaring like a bird, the control, the freedom—my mind was undressed." She exhaled like she was guilty of living. "Nothing was in my way."

I fucking got it. Both the survivor's guilt and not wanting shit in your way so you could just fucking breathe. But this woman's freedom wasn't in a cockpit behind the controls.

I looked over my shoulder.

Doe eyes met mine.

I gave her what I could. "Your freedom is your hands on those piano keys."

Staring at me like she did that first time, like she was lost as fuck, she whispered a question I'd never heard anyone have the nerve to ask out loud. "Do I have any control?"

I didn't tell her none of us had control over life or death—she already knew that shit firsthand. "Your control is your voice." I watched her for a reaction, but she gave none. "You already knew that."

She nodded, slowly, but not in resignation, discovery or acceptance. "My control is my voice."

No intonation in her last statement, I had to ask. "Your music?"

She laughed. The exotic, throaty, make-my-dick hard laugh. "I'm definitely not in control of my music. Most days, I don't even know where the notes come from. They just do and I play them."

"Talent, woman." I looked back at the water. "You have it in spades. Use it."

"I've been trying to, but New York?" I heard her earnings move as she shook her head. "It's not working."

Three fucking words, and my pulse jumped and adrenaline exploded.

My in.

My fucking in.

The whole reason I'd brought her back down here. She just handed it to me on a goddamn silver platter. But I wasn't going to take this woman, not like she'd been taken before. I didn't give a damn what she'd said about making the choice to jump into Kentworth's vortex. It was bullshit. She'd been vulnerable as hell, and he'd preyed on her. I wasn't going to do that to this woman. I wanted her, and I'd lay the path, but fuck, she needed to walk it.

"Say the words, woman," I demanded.

"What do you want me to say?"

"This isn't about what I want." This was about what she could handle.

Her voice came closer. Her exotic scent became stronger. "Isn't it?"

"Don't," I warned.

"Don't what?"

"Come closer."

"Or?" she whispered.

I turned and she was right on my six.

Haunted, sexy eyes. Full lips. Wild blonde hair I wanted to fist.

I was done.

"I'll carry you upstairs and fuck you all night. Then I'll take away your choice." I'd fuck her every way I knew how to make her not want to leave. Then I'd fuck her to make her want to stay.

Shock made her blink. "What choice?"

I laid the path. "The choice to walk away."

My dominance and need for control hung unchecked in the air between us.

Then this woman who I thought was vulnerable, fragile and submissive, she fucking smiled. Except it wasn't a submissive smile. It wasn't even close. "Take me upstairs."

"You know what you're giving permission for?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "You."

My eyes on her, I whistled for Missy.

My bitch came inside, and I locked the door. Then I studied the woman before I gave her one last warning. "This isn't a cabin in the woods, woman."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

Like only a woman who wrote words for a living could express, she made my hard truth palatable. "This is more than this moment."

Yeah, it fucking was.

I picked her up.

SEVENTY-ONE

Sailor

Just like on a beach a lifetime ago, he dominantly, commandingly, picked me up.

Then he barked an order at his dog. “Missy, go lie down.”

His heavy booted feet hit his stairs, but he didn’t make a sound as he carried me to his bedroom.

The fluttering apprehension in my belly turned into a storm of desire as he silently set me down in front of his bed.

I didn’t know what this man had planned for me, and I’d lied downstairs. I didn’t know what I was agreeing to, not all of it. But I did know one thing with complete conviction—I wanted every single moment this man was willing to give me.

Staring at me with even more intensity than his usual unwavering ocean-eyed gaze, he deftly undid the button on my cropped sweater. But unlike the last time when he’d undressed me in haste, this time he did it with a slow seductiveness, sliding the material down my arms. Then he grasped the hem of my tank top, and paused.

Entranced, by him, by his intensity, I merely nodded.

He pulled my shirt over my head.

The cool air of his bedroom met my bare breasts, and my nipples hardened with a desire that pulsed between my legs.

His gaze dropped to my chest, and his nostrils flared.

A full body flush tingled across my skin in an excited rush. The mere thought that I could make this man inhale like that was so exhilarating, I reached for him.

Catching my wrists in a firm grip, he put my arms back down at my sides and held them there for a heated, poignant moment.

Desire pulsed deep.

But then he let go of my wrists and brushed the backs of his knuckles over my aching nipples before sliding his fingers under the waist of my skirt.

Wetness slicked my core.

Tantalizingly, agonizingly slow, he rubbed back and forth as if giving me a preview of what else he was going to do with his fingers, and I couldn't stop it.

I moaned.

His gaze immediately came back to mine.

But it was no longer the stoic, ocean-eyed one I'd grown to crave.

This was dark and heated and so deeply melodic, a whole new movement of this man's symphony emerged. But then the six-foot-five warrior dropped to one knee, cupped my hips, and slid both my skirt and thong down my legs, and I was no longer hearing music.

My heartbeat in my throat, my pulse in my ears, I was drowning in need.

His warm cedarwood scent intoxicating my senses, his eyes on me, his stare irrevocably and permanently branding me, he leaned forward and touched his lips to the bare skin right above my most sensitive spot.

No longer able to keep my hands still, I gripped his hair. “Roark.” *Oh God*. He wasn’t going to fuck me all night long. He was going to destroy me.

No words, not taking his eyes off me, the Marine stood to his full height. Stripping off his shirt with a single grasp of the material behind his head, he unbuckled his belt and undid his pants in a swift movement so full of intent, he took my breath.

Then the Marine, the war-hardened warrior—he stepped out of his boots, and stepped back.

Staring at me with a suddenly locked expression, he went heart-stoppingly still.

His eyes on mine, Roark dropped the rest of his clothes.

I couldn’t stop myself.

Barely glancing at his unbelievably incredible body or his impossibly huge length, my gaze dropped to his left leg.

The sharp inhale was involuntary.

My heart collapsed, and everything I thought I knew about this man disintegrated. But then it grew into staggering proportions, and I dropped to my knees.

My eyes, my fingers, my heart, my soul—they took in every scarred, burned, tortured inch of this man’s battle, and love took me.

Without permission.

Without hesitation.

Without boundaries.

My fingers barely dancing across his wounded flesh, my thoughts bled out. “Does it hurt?”

“No.” He paused, then his voice ground out the next word as if he were angry. “Sometimes.”

I dared to ask. “What happened?”

“Surface-to-air missile came at my helo. Couldn’t avoid it.”

Every word he said was without intonation. “You were piloting?”

“Yes.”

Oh God. “You crashed?”

“Yes.”

I had to inhale three times before I could grasp the enormity of not only what had happened to him, but that he wasn’t just standing here breathing, he was larger than life.

His capabilities, his skills, his intelligence, the sheer strength of his huge, muscled body—he was truly a warrior.

I was completely in awe of him. “You survived.”

“Others didn’t.”

Even though he’d said the two words in the same emotionless timbre as his other responses, I heard every ounce of responsibility and culpability he didn’t emote in his tone. I not only felt deeply for him, I understood that kind of guilt. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Your brother wasn’t yours.”

Oh my God, this man.

Tracing the raised, scarred flesh of what I could only imagine must have been horrifically painful wounds, I finally understood the sweeping epic that was this warrior's symphony. "Your scars are beautiful."

SEVENTY-TWO

Roark

Light as hell, her fingers traveled over the shrapnel, burn and surgery scars. Then a blonde with doe eyes and unbelievable talent said the last goddamn thing I was expecting. “Your scars are beautiful.” Rising to her feet, she wrapped her arms around my neck and sank her fingers into my hair. “It means you’re alive.”

Jesus, this woman.

I wanted to bury myself in her and not come up for fucking air until we’d both come too many damn times to count, but I needed to know what the hell I was dealing with and level up on my own shit first. Which I couldn’t do with her touching me.

“We’re both alive, woman.” Grasping her wrists, I took her hands off me and held them prone. “Tell me what triggers you have.”

Her face fell as she glanced at my hold on her. Then she lifted her head, but she didn’t make eye contact as her voice turned to both a submissive rasp and hurt whisper. “What?”

“Triggers,” I repeated, forcing myself not to demand she look at me.

“Do you have triggers?”

I kept my tone in check. “I haven’t been sexually assaulted.”

Her sharp inhale hit the whole damn room and she tried to pull away from me. “Don’t make me a victim. You didn’t check in with me before, and there are all kinds of triggers.”

“I’m talking about sex, woman, and I’m checking in with you now.”

Still not looking at me, her voice dropped but it also took on an edge of defensiveness. “I saw your reaction when you showed me your leg. Is that a trigger for you?”

Fuck this.

I grasped her chin. “I like control. I like to fuck hard, and I’m going to call the shots every damn time we’re in the bedroom because that’s who I am. Your body language, your voice, your tells, they’re all submissive. But I’m checking in because you don’t know me yet. I don’t want to scare you, trigger you or put you in any uncomfortable situations. I’m not a sick fuck like that asshole I took out, and I’m not into kink, woman. But I’m also not into you topping from the bottom. Not in the bedroom, not in my head. Lastly, I don’t have condoms. I meant what I fucking said downstairs. We take this to the next level, I will take away your choice. I know what I want. You get in my bed, woman, I’m not watching you walk away from me again without a fight.”

Keeping her hands at her sides where I’d left them, her fingers fluttering against her thighs like they were moving across piano keys, she studied me a beat. “I don’t want control. I don’t have any triggers that I know of, but I feel like I’m supposed to ask why on that second to last part.”

“Why what?”

Her throat moved with a swallow. “Why no condoms.”

“I was stating fact.”

She inhaled, then her sexy rasp came out submissive as hell. “I think it’s more than that.”

Christ. “I don’t fuck around. No condoms means no fucking around.” Self-policing, keeping it honest, removing temptation, call it whatever the fuck you wanted—it’d kept me in check until a doe-eyed blonde on a mountain took what little sanity I had left.

Her hands stilled. “You don’t have sex?”

I had with her. “Not usually.”

She didn’t ask why. She cut right to the core. “Because of your leg, or because you don’t want to get close to anyone?”

I gave her the truth. “After the injury, I wasn’t in a headspace that was healthy.” For anyone.

“How long ago did it happen?”

“Five years.”

She nodded slowly before frowning. “You said not usually.”

I didn’t hide the truth. “Until you.”

The slow nod came back. Then a doe-eyed blonde looked at me like she did that first time in my kitchen. “Every single piece of you fits. Like a symphony.”

Fuck. “I’m not a piece of music, woman.” And I was done being this close without being inside her. Grabbing her by the waist, I picked her up with a growl of intent.

Her surprised gasp turned into a giggle as I tossed her on the bed.

Grasping her ankles, I spread her legs wide, and settled between them.

“That right there. That growl.” Her smile was shy, submissive and fucking perfect. Then she gave me a reverent whisper. “*Symphony*.”

If she wanted to hear what I sounded like, I’d give her a goddamn symphony. But first, I was going to hear hers. My hands on her thighs, my thumbs stroking her soft flesh, I leaned down and swirled my tongue over her clit. “You on something?”

Moaning as her eyes fluttered shut, she shook her head.

“Words,” I demanded, dipping my head lower and licking her sweet cunt.

“*Oh my God.*” Her hands twisting in my hair, she ground her hips.

My cock hard, my restraint weak, I stroked her slick heat again and sunk two fingers inside her. “Not an answer, woman.”

“No, but.... *Oh God.*” She turned her head, and her voice went on lockdown. “I’m sorry. Wait.”

She was so damn tight, I slowly slid my fingers out so I didn’t hurt her. Then I sat up, but she still didn’t give me her eyes.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

She didn’t hesitate, but she was biting her lip.

“Don’t look away from me when we’re in here. You don’t need to hide from me, and you don’t ever fucking apologize for who you are. Understand?”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Woman.”

Inhaling, she nodded. “I understand.”

“Good. Now explain.”

Closing her legs, she started to turn away, then caught herself and looked back at me as she blurted it out. “I’m not on anything, but I haven’t had my period in a long time.”

I wasn’t surprised. She was underfed. “How long?”

She bit her lip again.

Fighting the urge to pull that flesh free, hell, to keep from touching her at all right now, I fisted my hands. I wanted this woman to answer without me having to chase it. “This isn’t an interrogation, woman. I want to be inside you, and I want you to feel me.” I wanted to fucking own her. “Understand?”

Her cheeks flushed and she came out with the rest of it. “It’s been irregular my whole life, but the past year, it’s been nonexistent.” She looked away, and her voice turned sad as hell. “Do you want children?”

Fuck this. I grasped her chin and brought her back to me. “I want you. If you want kids, we’ll work it out.”

Holding my gaze, she called me on my shit. “That’s not what I asked.”

I fucking stared at this woman. Then I quantified my answer. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

Grasping her knees, spreading her wide, I fisted my cock and rubbed through her heat. My eyes on hers because I couldn’t look away from this doe-eyed blonde, I sank inside her. Gripping her hips and bringing her to me as I thrust deep, I held her tight as I bottomed out.

Her breathy gasp followed by her moan went straight to my dick, and I drove in and out of her mind-bending tightness. But then I cupped her face

and stilled. “In the Marines, I didn’t think about a tomorrow. After my last deployment, I didn’t think, period.” Holding her close, I ground my hips. “Now all I’m thinking about is coming inside a doe-eyed blonde who plays piano like an angel.” Dropping my voice, bringing my mouth to hers, I pulsed hard in her sweet cunt. “You feel me, woman?”

“Yes,” she whispered with her sexy rasp.

“You understand what I’m after?”

Her voice coming quieter, she said the one damn word that I needed to hear. “Living.”

“Living, woman,” I agreed as I caged her in and surged deep, giving her a taste of what was coming. “Knees up, spread your legs wide.” Sliding a hand under her ass, angling her, I pulled her to me as I thrust hard.

“*Oh God.*” Her back arched and her nails dug into my shoulders.

Grinding against her clit, I could’ve fucking come on the spot. “Wrong name, woman.”

“Roark,” she breathed in the sexiest fucking iteration of her rasp I’d heard yet.

“That’s it, woman.” Thrusting hard and deep, I drove into her, hitting her G-spot.

Her eyes closed, her head fell back and her cunt started to constrict around me.

“You’re not coming yet,” I warned, gripping a fistful of her hair at the back of her neck and bringing her focus back to me. “Eyes,” I ordered.

Submissive, no hesitation, she gave me her sexy doe eyes as her body yielded to my touch.

“Good.” Slowing it down, grabbing the back of her knees, I pushed her legs all the way back until her ass came off the bed. Then I switched my angle and sank to the hilt.

Her sharp inhale filled the room, and I drove deep, thumbing her clit. “Now you’re coming.”

She fucking detonated.

“*My* woman,” I growled, filling her sweet cunt with living.

SEVENTY-THREE

Sailor

The light of day, the early morning noise of New York City traffic, the crushing reality of Shane being gone—none of that woke me.

Rolled to my back in a soft bed that smelled like man and musk and fresh laundry, rough hands pushed my thighs wide. Then a thick cock slid inside my tight, sore pussy as the perfect heavy weight of a stoic warrior came down on me.

“Morning.”

Oh God, his sleep-rough voice.

I shivered.

Then my back was arching, my hands were grasping at his huge biceps, and I heard every beautiful, dominant note that was him at the same time my own music swirled into a melody of heated desire.

“Good morning.” I loved him inside me. I loved him waking me up. I loved how he filled me so completely that we became one. And I’d loved falling asleep in his arms last night after he’d come inside me three times.

I loved everything about this man.

Easing back, he thrust deep and slow. “I’m taking you somewhere this morning.”

My small laugh wasn't even a laugh. It was a giggle. An utterly unlike me, feminine and shy giggle. I didn't even care. "Yes, you are taking me."

He thrust harder.

I moaned as I lifted my hips to meet his. "So, *so* good."

"You're tight and sore, woman. I'm not fucking you for hours. Come, now." His thumb zeroed in on my clit with an expert touch.

So expert that I tried and failed not to go a place of deep jealousy. Fighting his commanding tone and dominant control of my body, I shifted my hips the smallest fraction away from him. "How do you know?"

"Don't deny me your orgasm, woman." Grasping my thigh, pounding into me harder, he angled his huge cock skillfully against my G-spot.

Oh God. I was going to come no matter how hard I tried not to. "How do you know?" I asked again, putting more urgency into my question as I dug my nails into his arms.

"I can feel your tightness. You flinched when I entered you, and I fucked you till you passed out last night." He pressed his thumb in a delicious, deliberate circle. "I know when you're sore. Come."

The tremor started in my legs as my core began to pulse, and desperate jealousy bled out. "How do you know how to touch me so well?" I demanded.

Every single muscle in his body went lethally still except his nostrils. They flared.

Buried deep inside me, holding his body above mine, his thumb still on my clit, his piercing, fierce gaze cut into me with storming ocean-colored

eyes. “I am not my past. You are not yours. There is no one in this bedroom except you and me. Understand?”

I understood, but emotionally, I couldn’t help my feelings.

He must have seen it in my eyes.

“Speak,” he demanded in his lethally dominant tone.

The words came out in a rush. “I’m jealous you’re so experienced. That you know how to do... what you do to me, to my body.”

The intensity of his stare grew. “I’m older, and you said you had no triggers.”

His abruptness, the dominant way he spoke, how he cut straight to the heart of the matter with total honesty—I was only beginning to get to know the nuances of this man. But I understood the warrior. I knew now what he has been through, and I didn’t take offense at his reply. But I did correct one, not so subtle difference. “You asked about sexual triggers.”

“This is sex, woman.”

The single sentence hit my heart like a physical blow to the chest. A year ago, a different lifetime ago, the woman I had been, she wouldn’t have said anything. But here, now, with this man, I wasn’t going to say nothing. I couldn’t, not if I wanted to be able to breathe again. The past year, the past three weeks—they’d taught me that life didn’t come with anything except brutal honesty, and you never got a second chance to say the first thing on your mind.

“No,” I stated quietly before whispering my truth. “It’s more.”

For one heart stopping moment, he didn’t move. He didn’t blink.

Then he surged.

Like a warrior on a beach, like a beast in the mountains, like a turboprop soaring over the ocean, he surged, and he thrust and he drove into my core as his tongue thrust into my mouth, and he growled as his fingers pinched my clit and his hips slammed into mine.

His roar filled the entire bedroom as I shattered and he exploded.

His hot release pumped deep into me as I constricted around him with a blinding, consuming, devastating, pleasure and pain, mind-altering orgasm.

Before I could even draw a single breath into my locked lungs, my body was pulled upright, the warrior was moving, and I was straddling his muscle-hard thighs.

Rough, huge hands gripped my face, my jaw, and an angry ocean swam into view.

His chest heaving, his huge length still pulsating inside me, my sore pussy contracting in response to every one of his pulses, his stare cut into my soul. Then his beautiful voice filled my heart.

“You have nothing to be jealous of.”

I took my gift. “Thank you.”

He tipped his chin. “You good?”

His release dripping out of me, my body quivering from the best sexual experience of my life next to last night, my mind reaching for more, reaching for good instead of pain—I was actually good. More so than I ever thought I could be again. “Yes.”

“Then we’re moving.” With no kiss, or any words of affection, this stoic man who spoke with actions carefully lifted me off of his still-hard length, then turned me and swept an arm under my legs to pick me up.

As he stood, I could feel his release seeping out of me. “Roark, I’m going to make a mess on your floor.”

“Woman,” he stated, walking us into the master shower and turning on the water.

But then he didn’t say anything else.

Just like three weeks ago, he gently set me down and he washed me. My hair, my body, every inch in the same efficient manner, but unlike last time, he watched me the whole time. His touches lingered. The color of his eyes darkened. The differences were subtle but monumental, and my heart soared.

When he’d rinsed the last of the shampoo from my hair, I smiled. “Do I get to wash you now?”

“No.”

I smiled wider because the thought of this incredibly alpha man allowing me to wash him was almost comical. “Ever?”

Throwing me a look that said I was out of my mind, he quickly scrubbed his chest with soap then rinsed. “Towel off, woman. Get dressed.”

“Is that an order?” I teased.

In half a second flat, I was picked up, my back was against the cold tile and the head of his enormous erection was pressing at my entrance. “Keep it up,” he warned, “and I’ll give you a real mess.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, I brought my lips to his. “Promise?”

His reply wasn’t verbal. The low growl came from his chest and filled my mouth as he slid his tongue past my lips and kissed me hard. Then he

pulled back and set me down. “Go, woman, or we’ll never make it out of the house.”

My legs weak, my stomach fluttering, my core pulsed even though I was sore. “And that’s a bad thing?” I wanted to stay in this man’s bed and in his arms, forever. More, I wanted to stay in the protection of his presence and let him shield me from the world, but I knew that wouldn’t be fair to either of us. I couldn’t put that burden on him any more than I could bury myself from the fact that I was still breathing.

Grasping my chin with a firmness I wasn’t expecting, Roark caught me off guard. But then he spoke, and I’d never felt so stripped down or understood.

“You’re not going to want to hide forever.” Deep, quiet, he said the words with both compassion and utter conviction.

I blinked back tears, but the grief of losing Shane, it was always there. Front and center, or just barely under the surface that even the thinnest of scratches would set the tsunami of it free, it was suddenly consuming. Soul crushing, breath stealing, it came like it always did, ruthlessly. But for the very first time, I didn’t feel so punishingly alone in my grief.

The naked war-scarred alpha warrior standing tall at my side, keeping his hold on me, keeping his gaze steady, he gave me the moment.

When the breath finally came back into my lungs, I grasped his wrist and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Right here, woman.” He held his stare for one heartbeat, then dropped his hand. “Get dressed. We’re taking the Cessna.”

I didn’t ask where.

It didn’t matter.

I was going to get to soar like a bird with a man who fucked like a stallion.

SEVENTY-FOUR

Roark

I double-checked the coordinates as I got a visual on the grass airstrip.

“Where are we going?” she asked excitedly through the headset. “It’s so pretty around here. Wait!” She pointed at the western acreage. “Are those orange trees?”

I glanced out my side window. Orange groves. Christ. “Yes.” Christensen way undersold this property.

Banking east, I lined up for approach, lowered the flaps and dropped altitude.

“*Oh my God*, we’re landing on someone’s lawn?”

“Private airstrip,” I corrected, touching down on the manicured grass and glancing toward the two-story residence that was three times the size of my Key West house.

“Private airstrip,” she repeated, turning in her seat to take in the property. “More like private mansion and waterfront estate.” She looked east. “With a dock.” She glanced at me and gave me her teasing smile. “You’re holding out on me. You could’ve landed in the water.”

I glanced at the dock as I taxied toward the house. It was twice the length of my current dock. “Next time,” I promised.

“Wait.” She looked around again as I pulled the Cessna onto the paved apron fronting the residence and hangar. “Whose house is this?”

Not answering that question yet, I cut the engine, took her headset off and unbuckled her. Stowing my headset and unstrapping my own seatbelt, I opened my door. “Wait, woman. I’ll come get you.” I tapped my leg. “Missy, come.”

My bitch jumped into my seat as I vacated it, then followed me off the plane. Closing my door and hopping down, I scanned the property as I walked to the opposite side of the plane. Missy followed, but I could tell she was itching to run.

Opening the woman’s door, I reached for her.

Quiet, but with a shy smile on her face, she let me lift her down, but then she looked up at me and tilted her head. “Roark MacElheran.”

“Evelynn Tory,” I shot back.

She smiled, but I caught the telltale shiver she tried to hide. “You’re up to something.”

Yeah, I fucking was.

Missy nudged my hand twice.

“Go play, girl.” My dog took off, and I took my woman’s hand. “Come on.” Scanning the grounds again, taking in the size of the hangar, the sound of the water, the fact that I couldn’t see a single fucking neighbor, I decided I didn’t care what the inside of house looked like. The property was perfect.

Lacing her fingers with mine, letting me lead her toward the house, my woman shook her head. “Now I really know you’re up to something.”

I took the bait. “Because?”

She held up our clasped hands. “Public display of affection.”

“Nothing public about it.” I led her up the front steps. “There’s no one here but us.” Exactly how I liked it. I could fuck her right here on the veranda.

Punching in the security code Christensen had given me, I pushed open the front door, but then I dropped her hand and stepped back. “Woman first.”

“*Woman*,” she repeated, studying me. “Singular.”

Holding her gaze, not telling her she was the woman of the house, I tipped my chin.

She glanced toward the grounds. As if my bitch knew she was looking for her, Missy came running. Crossing the front lawn, bounding up the steps, she hit the veranda at full speed, aiming for the open door.

“Halt,” I ordered.

Missy put on the brakes and stopped by my woman, tail wagging.

My woman laughed then pet my bitch. “I think she wants to go inside.”

“I want you inside.”

Heat flushed her cheeks as my woman glanced at me with a shy smile. “Okay.”

With a breeze coming off the intracoastal that kicked at her mane of wavy blonde hair, my woman crossed the threshold.

Missy followed, and I closed the door before giving her the hand signal to go roam.

Missy took off, but my woman only took three steps into the huge open-plan living area with double-height ceilings, white floors and modern

furniture. When she saw what was by the front windows, she froze.

“Oh, my God.” Her hands going to her chest, she spun and looked at me. “Whose place is this?”

“Mine.”

Her eyebrows shot to her forehead. “Yours?” she asked incredulously. “You said you were a pilot. This place, it’s, it’s—” Taking in the space, she gestured with her arms spread wide and her jewelry clinked. “The house, the grass landing area, the orange trees, the dock—all of it, *it’s huge.*”

My muscles tensed. “I’m not destitute, woman.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you were, it’s just...” Something close to panic cut into her features. “How many bedrooms does it even have?”

Fuck. “Does that matter to you?”

“Do you know?” she fired back.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Thirty seconds and I’d case the joint and tell her exactly how many bedrooms the place had, but this wasn’t about that. I saw the look in her eyes. She came from nothing. I’d come from nothing. This place was something. I fucking got it. Shit like this was hard to take in first go around.

She blinked. “Roark.”

“Woman.”

For three seconds she looked at me like I was out of my fucking mind, then her face softened, her shoulders dropped and she laughed. Her deep, husky, sexy-as-fuck, real laugh. “It’s yours, and you don’t even know how many bedrooms it has.”

Relief swamped me. “First time here,” I admitted.

Her expression, her body language, they immediately sobered. Then her voice dropped to a whisper. “There’s a hundred-thousand-dollar Steinway grand piano in the living room.”

“I know.” November had come through.

Missy came trotting back, nudging my hand on her way to the front door.

“*Roark*,” she barely breathed.

I wanted my hands on her. I wanted to fuck her on the pristine couches and every other damn piece of expensive furniture, leaving our mark on this place. *Our* place. But this woman needed a moment to take it in, and I wasn’t going to crowd her, not on this.

Missy whined at the door.

“I’m letting her out. Look around, woman. I’ll be right back.”

Not waiting for a reply, I stepped outside with my bitch and pulled out my cell. Dialing, I scanned the property.

Christensen answered on the second ring. “Ja.”

“How many bedrooms does the house have?” I still didn’t give a shit. The property was perfect, but I asked anyway.

“Five.”

“Thanks.” I looked out at the water. “Draw up the paperwork. I’m taking the property.”

Christensen was silent a beat. Then, “You crossed the threshold.”

I glanced through the front windows. My woman was standing at the piano. “I crossed the fucking threshold.”

“Good. I will be in touch with the paperwork.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Velkommen.” Christensen hung up.

I whistled for Missy and she came running, but she didn’t sit. She pranced in front of me, happy as shit.

“You like the place, girl?”

She barked once.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Come on, let’s go in.”

When I walked back inside, my woman wasn’t standing at the piano.

She wasn’t even fully dressed.

Her shoes and her bohemian skirt were on the shiny floor, and her ass was parked on the piano bench. Tank top, underwear, jewelry—she looked like she did this morning when I made her breakfast—barefoot, half dressed and at peace.

“I’m beginning to think you don’t like wearing clothes, woman.”

“My skirt was in the way of the pedals.” Her fingers ran across the keys, but she didn’t play them. The only sound coming from her bracelets as they clinked against each other, she looked up at me. “Someone special needs to play this piano.”

“You need to play that piano.” She was so goddamn beautiful like this. No pretense, no fear, doe eyes, wild, innocent. I wanted to fuck her on that bench.

Heat hit her cheeks, her head dipped and she smiled. “Are you saying I’m special?”

“No,” I replied, deadly serious.

Her eyes cut to mine.

“You’re more.” Much fucking more. “You’re a survivor.”

Her gaze dropped to the keys. “Thank you, Roark MacElheran.”

“You’re welcome, Evelynn Tory.”

I saw the tremor she tried to hide from across the room. Then her voice turned to the quiet, submissive rasp that made my dick hard as she looked back up at me. “You’re the only person who calls me that.” Her eyes briefly cut to my lips. “Evelynn, I mean,” she added in a whisper.

I didn’t tell her that I liked how her body shivered and her nipples turned hard when I used her name. Or that she turned submissive as fuck. She was one-hundred-percent woman when I called her Evelynn, but I wanted to see what she’d do when I sunk inside her and called her Evelynn Grace. Except I was saving that.

Just like I was saving Sailor.

I hadn’t earned the right to call her either. Not yet. But closing half the distance between us, I aimed to change that. “You like the house?”

Her laugh bubbled up as she looked at the cathedral ceilings, then glanced out the expansive windows. “Is that a trick question?”

“No.”

At my serious tone, she turned on the bench to face me. Her expression sobering, she nervously clasped her hands. “It’s a beautiful house in a beautiful location with the most beautiful piano I’ve ever seen.”

Good. “You like it here?”

She smiled. Shy, pure, sweet. “Yes, very much.”

Not taking my eyes off hers, I went for it. “Enough to make you want to stay?”

Her throat moved with a swallow. “*Roark*,” she whispered.

Stepping in front of her, using my dominance, I grasped her chin. “Don’t think. Answer the question.”

“No.”

I fucking stilled.

Her voice pitched to a low, throaty rasp. “You’re enough to make me want to stay.”

My nostrils flared and my grip tightened. “Grab the bench, woman.”

No hesitation, her bracelets shifted and she grasped the bench.

“Legs apart,” I demanded.

She spread her thighs.

I dropped to my knees and she sucked in a sharp breath.

Grabbing her ankles, putting her feet on my shoulders, I pushed her legs wide. Then I ripped her lace underwear, covered her sweet cunt with my mouth and tongued her.

She fucking levitated. “*Oh my God.*”

I bit her clit then swirled hard with my tongue as I sunk two fingers inside her.

Her hands fisted in my hair, and she moaned.

I sucked her clit again, then looked up at her. “I want you with me, woman.”

Her hips, moving with my strokes, stilled, but her hands tightened in my hair. “Roark.”

Not easing back, knowing what my touch did to this woman, I stroked her without mercy. “In this house, in Key West, on my plane.” I rubbed deep. “In my bed. Every night, woman.”

Her entire body shook with a tremor as her small hand grasped the side of my face. But then a lifetime of insecurity creased her brow, and the woman who threw herself onto that beach, the woman who told me to take her upstairs, she disappeared. “Are you sure?”

Fuck this.

Pulling my fingers out, I stood. Then I picked her up, straddled the bench, and brought her down on my lap as I gave her the full weight of my dominance. “Unzip my pants.”

She didn’t just unzip, she pulled my hard cock out and stroked me.

Still holding her by the waist, I lifted her, lined her up and brought her down as I thrust deep.

Her tight cunt constricted around me, and she let loose with a feral groan that filled the whole damn room. Then my wild doe-eyed blonde brought her knees up, ground her hips and wrapped her arms around my neck as she rode me.

Fuck, this woman.

Her voice, her talent, her grief, I wanted to bury myself in her forever, the wild and the broken parts. But not before I made her fucking understand.

Grasping her throat with one hand, her hip with the other, I halted her.

Her eyes closed, her head back, she made a sound of protest. “Don’t stop.”

Feeling the vibration of her voice on my palm, I issued her an order. “Look at me, woman.”

Doe eyes immediately met mine.

I fucking pulsed inside her. “Does this feel right?”

Her tight heat contracted around me in response as she gave me my favorite part of her voice. The quiet rasp. “Yes.”

“Ask me again if I’m sure.”

She gripped my wrist with both of her hands. “Are you sure?”

Dropping my guard, I let her see all of me as I held her gaze. “Never more so, Evelyn Grace.”

Her face, her body, they softened, but her hands tightened. “I’m broken,” she whispered. “And you’re—”

“Don’t finish that sentence.” I knew where she was going with it. “I’m fucking human.” Same as her. “Grief doesn’t make you broken. You’re fucking beautiful, exactly as you are.”

Her voice went quieter. “I have anxiety.”

She had undiagnosed PTSD. “You have me.”

“I would worry every time you walked out the door that you weren’t coming back.”

“I wouldn’t have been bareback inside you all night and this morning if I thought you wouldn’t worry.”

Her thumb stroked the inside of my wrist. “Are you going to counter everything I say with the perfect answer?”

“No, I’m going to fuck you, then tell you you’re moving in.”

She smiled. Sexy, shy.

Deadly serious, I stared.

Her expression sobering, she gave me her doe eyes and the whisper I now owned. “Okay.”

I slammed my mouth over hers.

Then I fucked my woman on her piano bench.

EPILOGUE

Sailor

My hair was brushed from my face a second before the intoxicating scent of cedarwood, fresh laundry and soap fell around me.

Warm lips touched the side of my neck as rough hands slid up my thighs and pushed my legs wide.

Still sleepy, my eyes closed, I smiled as the heated flush of desire tingled across my body. “Mm. My favorite way to wake up.”

“Woman.” Deep, gravelly, and so, *so* sexy, his voice brushed against my cheek as his weight settled around me.

I threaded my hands through his shower-wet hair and suddenly, a thread of irrational jealousy flared. “Did you go running already?”

“Yes.” His expert fingers stroked through my core.

My knees came up, and my back arched because my body knew what was coming and I was already wet, but my mind swung on a pendulum. “You didn’t wake me to go with you.” He always took me with him. I didn’t run, but I walked the beach or played fetch with Missy if she wasn’t running with him.

“You needed your sleep for today.” He circled the head of his hard length against my slick entrance.

Ignoring what today was because I was dreading it, I opened my eyes and irrationally focused on the wrong thing. “But I always come with you.” We did almost everything together.

His dark, stormy, ocean-colored gaze met mine and he stilled as he stared intently. “I kept you up late. You needed sleep.”

He had kept me up late, but only because I was doing what I always did when the grief became too much. I was trying to escape, and I was doing it with his dominant touch and losing myself in his heated commands.

I looked away. “Did you see anyone on your run?”

Grasping my chin, he brought my gaze back to his. “What’s going on?”

I tried to shrug, as much as I could when I was caged in by a giant warrior. “Nothing. You just usually take me with you.” The thought of him running the beach by himself suddenly felt a thousand times worse than him going on an AES flight without me.

His piercing blue eyes stared down at me like he could read my thoughts. “Do you need to come with me?”

Looking away, I thought about lying because I knew what today was. I knew I was having anxiety over it, but more, I was embarrassed. I was a grown woman. He’d taken me into his heart and his home. He never used protection. He’d said it was because he knew what he wanted. But we’d never had a conversation about it beyond that, and until this moment it hadn’t mattered. Except now he’d gone somewhere without me for the first time since we’d been together, and it was mattering. Every fear I carried was front and center, staring me in the face, reminding me of how in the blink of an eye, I could lose everything.

“Stop holding back, woman. Speak.”

“I can’t.” I didn’t want to be a burden to this man.

“Can’t or won’t?”

I pushed at his chest, but he didn’t budge. “Never mind. Let me up. I need to shower.” He smelled clean and fresh, and I felt weak and needy and ashamed.

No warning, no preamble, his huge, hard length thrust inside me and he gripped the sides of my face. “Speak, woman.”

A shocked gasp escaped, and my entire body shuddered, in pleasure, in the pinch of pain that happened every time he first entered me and stretched me to my limits with his sheer size. I gripped his hard biceps, and my mouth opened to speak, but then he pulsed deep inside me and my thoughts scattered.

“Answer my question,” he demanded.

The words, like the music that had been flowing unchecked since I’d moved in with him, came rushing out. “I don’t like you going anywhere without me. I don’t want you to find another woman on the beach and rescue her. I don’t want to lose you how I lost Shane. I don’t even like when you’re more than an arm’s reach away from me, and I know that sounds crazy and needy and dependant, and I’m sorry.” Shame slid down my cheeks. “I know I can’t be with you every second of every day. You’ll get sick of me, or worse, resent me. But you asked, so I’m saying it. I’m sorry. I’m just, I’m afraid of today and you went running without me, and now everything all of a sudden feels overwhelm—”

His mouth covered mine.

Languid and slow and soul-crushingly tender, he kissed me.

Then my Marine pilot, warrior hero pulled back and gave me his version of love. “I’ll wake you tomorrow.”

Air filled my lungs. “And the next day?”

“Every day, woman.”

I exhaled.

Except he wasn’t finished. “But the days you need to sleep in, you’re going to tell me. Then you’re not going to panic when you go back to bed because I’m only a phone call away. Understand?”

Holding back emotions, I nodded.

He stroked the side of my face. “As far as today, I’m right here. You’re not doing this alone. You need to pivot, we pivot. You need a break, we break. You need to walk away from it for now, then that’s what we do. We’re crossing that threshold together, woman. All right?”

Small pieces of my broken heart fluttered together like pianissimo notes. “Okay.” I loved this man, more than I knew how to express. But I also had one last insecurity trying to weave threads into my consciousness that he hadn’t addressed, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want reassurance.

“Say it, woman.”

I didn’t bother asking how he knew I was holding back. He just always did. “I don’t want you rescuing any other women.”

Pulling back, he thrust deep with a growl. Then he used his most dominant voice. The one that made me slip away to a place so intoxicating, I never wanted to leave. “Who am I buried inside, woman?” he demanded.

“Me,” I whispered.

His grip on me tightened as he ground his hips. “I got what I want.”

“Promise?” I dared to ask.

His nostrils flared, and he grew even bigger inside me. “Don’t make me take you where you’re not ready to go, woman.”

“What if I am ready?” I was. I wasn’t. I didn’t even know what all he meant, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t give me even one second to think about it.

Surging like the storm he was, he thrust so hard and so deep that I was suddenly there, on that precipice, on that cliff. Except this one wasn’t of my own making. This one was tall and dominant and stoic, and I wanted to fall.

I wanted to fall hard.

Knowing my body better than I knew it myself, my warrior took us over the edge in a spectacular crescendo of dominance, filling me with his seed as I fell apart around him.

My mind, my body, both naked and sated, I relished in the feeling of him on me, in me, and all around me for one perfect, peaceful moment as he let us both come down.

Then he was picking me up, and walking us into the shower before setting me on my feet and turning the water on. “Shower.” He cupped the back of my neck and squeezed once. “I’ll make coffee before we head out.”

Then my warrior was gone, leaving the bathroom how he always moved, with a quiet stealth that was as lethal as his body was powerful.

I did exactly as he said. I showered.

I was finishing getting dressed when he called for me.

“Woman,” his deep voice carried up the stairs without him raising it. “You ready?”

Woman.

I loved when he called me that. He said it differently now, and just hearing his voice made me smile despite the long day I knew we had ahead of us. “Coming!” I checked my hair one more time in the mirror.

I’d gotten it trimmed last week, and while Roark had growled when I’d walked out of the hair salon, muttering something about wild before warning me not to cut it “short” again. I’d laughed and he’d kissed me right there, on the street, in public. Next to the day I’d gotten Shane out of foster care, it had been the best day ever.

Roark made me feel like I belonged—to him, in his world.

Whether we were in the new house just north of Miami, or the Key West house where’d we’d stayed last night because he’d wanted to check on some work he’d hired out, he’d seamlessly fit me into his life as if I’d always been in it. I’d even gone with him on two flights he’d flown for AES. But most of all, he’d not only given me space and time to play, he made me feel like I was his priority. Never showing impatience or making me feel like I was a nuisance or a burden, it made me realize just how deep the wounds of my childhood were, but it also made me grateful.

I didn’t know where I’d be without a six-foot-five warrior who’d followed his golden retriever into the bushes on an isolated beach a lifetime ago. Wherever it was, it wouldn’t be here, with a stoic, dominant, alpha pilot who showed love through his actions and his touch.

Roark was so perfect for me, I couldn’t help but wonder if Shane had somehow sent him to me. Touching my bracelet, the first one Shane had picked out, my eyes welled. “I love you, Shane.”

Missy trotted into the bathroom and nudged me.

Blinking away the grief that was always going to be a part of me, I scratched behind Missy's ears. "Let me guess. Daddy sent you to get me."

"Woman," Roark warned as he called up the stairs. "Stop calling me Daddy to my bitch."

I winked at Missy. "Come on, let's go. Daddy's calling."

"I heard that."

I smiled as I followed Missy downstairs. "What else am I supposed to say? You are her Daddy."

Growling, he grabbed me before my bare feet touched the bottom step as he wrapped his huge arms around me. "First, I'm her master, not her Daddy or her father or the fucking mutt who knocked up her mother. Second, you forgot shoes." Leaning down until my feet touched the floor, he dropped his voice. "Third, but most important, you good?"

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "I'm good."

He eyed me. Then he gave me an out. "I can do this without you." It was the third time he'd offered in as many days. "In and out, I'll be home in half a day. Missy will stay with you."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." More than he'd ever know. "But I need to go with you." I needed to be there. I needed to feel him, and I needed to make sure I was making the right decision before we did this.

"Understood." Roark dropped his arms but grasped the back of my neck. "You ready?"

I wasn't, but I inhaled and put on a brave face. "I am."

His intense gaze locked on me, he stared for a heartbeat. "We're just meeting the movers. You point at what gets packed up, then we're out. If

it's too much, we leave everything as is and deal with it another time."

I loved this man. I loved how he took care of me, how he understood me, how he showed his concern. "Thank you, but I need to do this. I want Shane's things here with me."

He nodded once. "Then we're moving." He headed toward the front door instead of the back entrance we usually used.

"We're not taking the Cessna to Miami?" He'd said we were going in one of the AES jets, but they were usually parked in Miami.

"No. Whiskey and November flew down to pick us up. They're at EYW," he replied with his perfectly deep, rough voice.

"Okay." I slipped on shoes as Missy danced excitedly around me. "You know, one day I'm going to make you sing for me."

"Not happening, woman." He turned toward the front door, but then he did something I had only seen him do once before. As if unconsciously, as if it were a part of his very being, his hand went to the wall, fingers splayed, and he pressed his palm to the framed picture of him and his mother.

For two seconds, my heart stopped as he held his hand there, expression locked. Then he opened the door and gave me his intense, unwavering stare.

Unbidden, the tears came and I understood.

His love.

For his mother.

For Shane.

For me.

I stood on tiptoe and threw my arms around his neck.

Then I said what had been growing in my heart, in my soul, since he'd crawled under a sea grape hammock a lifetime ago. "I love you, Roark MacElheran.

Quiet, like an ebb tide, his rough tenor surrounded me in the reverent tone I only ever heard when he was inside me. "*Woman.*"

Roark

Three damn words playing on repeat in my head like I'd won the fucking lottery, all I was thinking about was getting inside my woman and showing her exactly what I thought of the bomb she'd dropped before we'd walked out of the house for the airport. Which was why I'd missed it until I was buckling her sweet ass into one of the passenger seats on the Gulfstream and my knuckles brushed against her hip.

"Woman." Jesus fucking Christ.

She smiled sweetly at me. "Yes?"

"What the hell are you doing?"

She blinked. Then gave me doe eyes. "Coming to New York with you?"

No *goddamn* underwear. Again.

I growled.

She was coming all right. Six goddamn ways from Sunday. Then I was going to take her over my knee.

My stare lethal, I tightened her seatbelt. Then I slid my hand up one of the long-ass skirts she wore to drive me out of my fucking mind and gripped her bare hip. Leaning in close, I dropped my voice to a warning.

“You get on a plane one more time without underwear, and I will spank the fuck out of your sweet ass.”

She giggled.

My sexy, raspy-voiced woman fucking giggled.

Then she did me in. “Promise?”

She was insatiable.

Three weeks with this woman, and I’d learned two crucial things. The more I let out my dominance, the more submissive she became. But with that submission also came something else. Her music. Not just any music, but haunting sounds and complicated arrangements she seamlessly laced together with her grief-stricken lyrics that she sang in a husky, throaty rasp. It made me both fucking proud and hard every time I heard it.

I didn’t know how the hell I’d gotten so lucky to have this woman fall into my lap, but I did, and I wasn’t letting go.

“Wear underwear in public,” I warned.

She smiled. “Okay.”

I stared at her. “Christ,” I muttered.

She gave me innocent doe eyes. “What?”

“Don’t *what* me, woman. You’re bullshitting me.” She hated wearing underwear as much as she hated wearing shoes.

The smile came back, but it was shy and submissive. “I love you.”

“You love my bitch, my bird and my cock.”

Her smile turned to trouble. “True. But not in that order.”

I fought a smile. “Watch it, Sailor.”

Her eyes widened, then they filled with tears and her voice went hoarse. “*Sailor*,” she repeated in her quiet rasp. “You’ve never called me that.”

With the exception of introducing her to Talerco, yes I had. Once. But I hadn’t fucking said it. I’d yelled it. Like a goddamn asshole.

“I hadn’t earned it,” I admitted. But I was about to.

“Roark,” she whispered.

I grasped her face. Then I fucking earned it. “Love you, woman.”

Looking through the binoculars, I scanned the decks of the sixty-five-meter Heesen yacht. Not seeing anyone, I switched to heat signature and scanned again.

Pulling out a burner, I dialed.

The call was picked up on the second ring. “Ghost ship?”

“Ghost ship,” I confirmed.

“Docked?”

“Negative.” I gave the coordinates. “Take possession.”

“Copy.” Pause. “You sure about this?”

I wouldn’t be calling if I wasn’t. “Captain and two crew will be helo’d out at oh one hundred.”

“Crew or armed escort?”

“Both.”

“This is going to cause backlash.”

It’d be pointless if it didn’t. “Refuel in St. Kitts.”

“Then?”

“I’ll be in touch.” I hung up, took out the SIM card and tossed it into the ocean.

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading ROMEO! If you are interested in leaving a review on any retail site, I would be so appreciative. Reviews mean the world to authors, and they are helpful beyond compare.

Turn the page for a preview of [ZULU](#), the next exciting book in the Alpha Elite Series!

ZULU

Navy SEAL.

Sniper.

Mercenary.

The Navy trained me to be the best, but the Teams turned me into a deadly weapon. Every mission honing my tactical skills, I never missed a shot. Living for my brothers and the Trident I'd earned, I didn't look past my next deployment.

Then my friend and former teammate made me an offer—private sector, government contracts, combat missions and the chance to fly my own jet. Retiring from the Teams, but not the mission, I joined Alpha Elite Security.

As second-in-command at AES, I demanded precision because I didn't do things the wrong way. Until a mysterious brunette walked through the door and everything went FUBAR.

Code name: Zulu.

Mission: Exfiltrate.

ZULU is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by USA Today Bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Zane “Zulu” Silas and the dominant, alpha heroes who work for AES!

NOVEMBER

Airman.

Hacker.

Mercenary.

Hacking one of the government's top agencies when I was seventeen, then covering my tracks before telling them about it was my first mistake. My second was thinking they'd want to know that if I found the opening, anyone could. Nineteen hours later, five armed men in uniform kicked down my door.

I had a choice. Prison or recruitment.

The Air Force took me in and trained me to be the best Cyberspace Operations Officer they'd ever had. Being the gatekeeper for the military's strategic operations intel was an honor, but it put a target on my back. I never traveled without security—until I made my third mistake.

Four days and twenty-two hours later, barely able to stand after events that I wasn't at liberty to discuss, I erased my past, changed my identity, and went off the grid. Then I joined Alpha Elite Security. I was invisible, exactly as I'd planned... until she found me.

Code name: November.

Mission: Extrication.

NOVEMBER is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by *USA Today* Bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Nathan “November” Rhys and the dominant, alpha heroes who work for AES!

ECHO

Navy SEAL.

Mercenary.

Ghost.

Joining the military wasn't a choice, it was survival. It was also the last place they would think to look for me. Hiding in plain sight, I lived in the shadow of deployments... until an off-the-books mission put me in the crosshairs of my past.

My cover blown, I walked away from the SEALs and sought refuge at the one place where I'd be more invisible than on the Teams—Alpha Elite Security. As a Black Ops government contractor, AES was the world's leading provider of security solutions. High stakes, higher price tag, and complete anonymity. Trained to kill long before the Navy put a gun in my hand, I fit right in.

Legally aiming my rifle, taking any AES assignment that guaranteed action, I lived to fight. But then I made a mistake. One single misstep and I was face-to-face with the only woman who could kill me faster than a bullet.

Code name: Echo.

Mission: Evade.

ECHO is a standalone book in the exciting Alpha Elite Series by *USA Today* Bestselling author, Sybil Bartel. Come meet Echo and the dominant, alpha heroes who work for AES!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I write the last line of ROMEO, I'm filled with trepidation because I never intended to write this story—not like this. I didn't know ROMEO would be a journey of grief.

I also never imagined, not even in my worst nightmares, that I would lose my only child, my son, Oliver. Fifteen months ago, my Sweet Boy passed away tragically and unexpectedly in his sleep from an undiagnosed birth defect in his heart that is so rare, less than 1% of the population have it.

I cannot help but think about the correlation of that rarity and my beloved son.

Oliver was a rare and extraordinarily intelligent, compassionate, and gentle soul. Born with an autoimmune disease, he not only overcame the obstacles life threw at him, he thrived. Oliver was a straight A student with a 4.45 GPA. He was an incredibly talented cello and piano player, a black belt in Karate and Jiu Jitsu, and a compassionate friend to everyone he met. Oliver had so much perseverance and determination that I was, and still am, in awe of him.

There are no adequate words for the grief of this ruthless separation. I am, however, consoled by two humbling, and incredible events that have taken place.

By the hand of God, and facilitated by Oliver's orchestra director, along with the generous donations given in his name, the music Oliver was writing before he passed was turned into a full orchestral piece called *Oliverian Fantasy* by the amazing composer Brian Balmages. I hope everyone hears Oliver's melody, and I hope orchestras and symphonies around the world play this incredible, haunting, and absolutely beautiful piece.

You can listen to *Oliverian Fantasy* [here](#).

Another outcome from Oliver's passing is that there is now the *Oliver S. Bartel Memorial Scholarship Trust*. Each year this trust will award a Vero Beach High School Orchestra graduating senior a scholarship to help continue their musical pursuit in college. This is the only scholarship of its kind for orchestra students at Vero Beach High School. You can read about the scholarship [here](#).

Lastly, as I write these final thoughts, while I cannot begin to describe the level of grief or put into words the all-encompassing pain of this kind of loss, I want to say this: I love you Oliver Shane Bartel. There is not a waking moment that I do not miss everything about you. Thank you for being the greatest gift of my life. I am beyond proud of you. I will endeavor

to live my moments here on earth with the same compassion, love, fortitude and perseverance you so humbly possessed. I hope this book does your memory justice.

I love you my Sweet Boy, here, now, always, forever.

I love you more than anything.

XOXO

Mom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sybil Bartel is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of unapologetic alpha heroes. Whether you're reading her deliciously dominant Alpha Elite mercenaries or her protector hero Alpha Bodyguards, her page-turning romantic suspense, and heart-stopping military romance all have sexy-assin alpha heroes.

Sybil resides in South Florida, and she is forever Oliver's mom.

To find out more about Sybil Bartel or her books, please visit her at:

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The Oliver Bartel Memorial Scholarship Trust