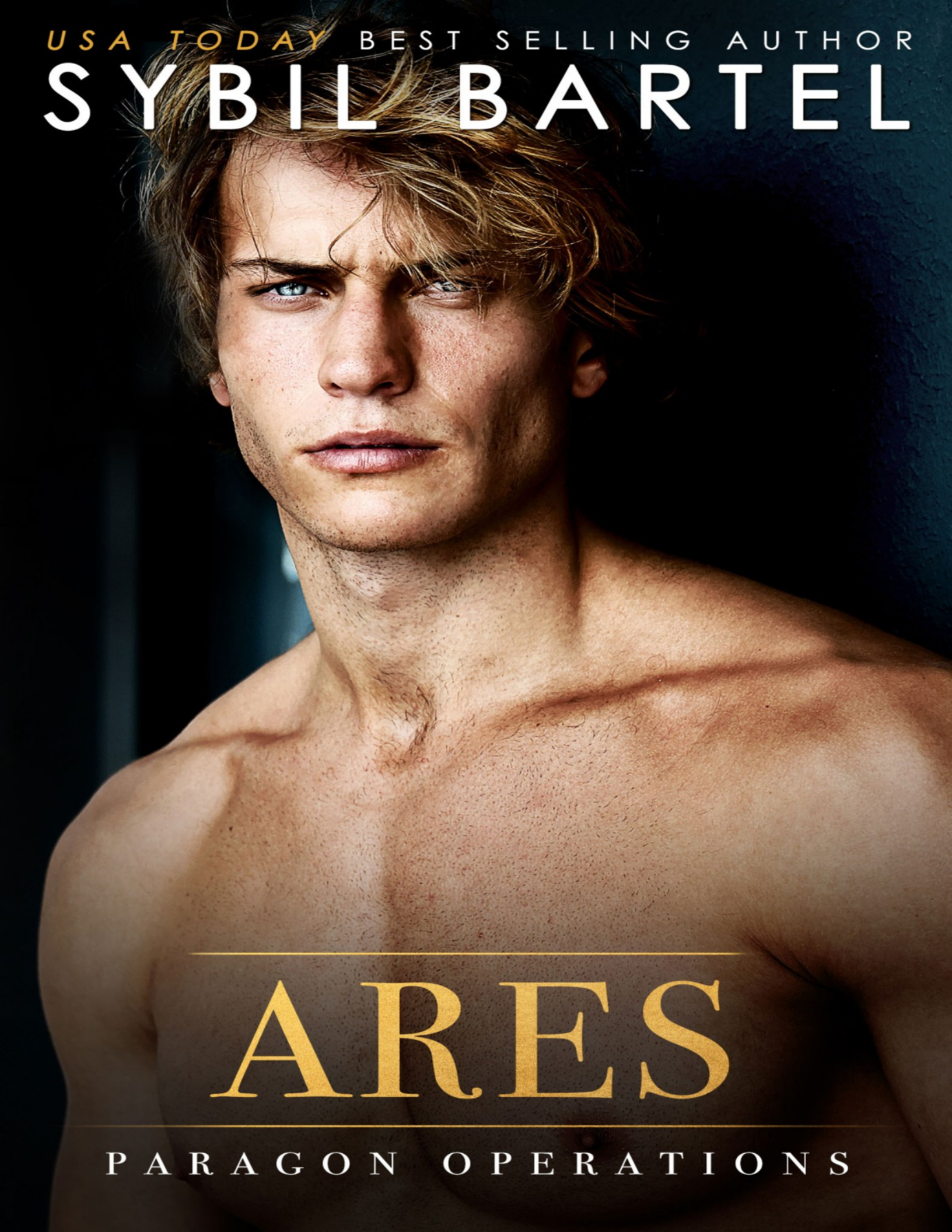

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
SYBIL BARTEL
ARES
PARAGON OPERATIONS

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ARES

Mercenary.

Dominant.

Sine Pari.

The first rule of Delta Force was don’t talk about Delta Force. The second rule I wasn’t at liberty to discuss.

Serving with the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment–Delta was an honor. CAG was my home, and I protected my brothers…. Until I didn’t.

Staring at the terrorist through my scope, I had her in my sights. Black hair, hazel eyes, bruises all over her face. I knew what I had to do.

But I didn’t do it.

I broke the second rule.

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DEDICATION

For my only child, my beloved son, Oliver.

You were my greatest gift.

The sun brightened the day you were born, and my world came alive the moment I held you in my arms. 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 so very much for all of your love and support. I hope you enjoy Ares and Aracet's journey as much as a bright sunrise.

Gratefully yours, XOXO

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PROLOGUE

Eight years ago.

Syria. Classified location.

"Take the fucking shot, War God."

Sighting through my scope, my finger on the trigger, the familiar weight of the suppressed MK22 in hand, I hesitated.

This wasn't our target.

The woman wasn't even on our list of HVTs.

She wasn't supposed to be a woman, period.

"Helo approaching extraction point," Bellows clipped through comms. "T minus two mikes until exfil."

"They're gonna hear that chopper any second now, War God. Fucking send it, or I will," Chaos warned.

Cataloging every speck of green and brown in her hazel eyes, her expression of fear, the mottled bruising covering her face, the strands of dark hair that'd escaped the burqa that was ripped open over her face, I called it. "No shot. Abort."

"Bullshit," Chaos countered. "We both have the shot."

"I say again. Abort." The woman's hands violently shook as she aimed

an AKM assault rifle towards my POS. “Not our target.”

“The fuck he isn’t,” Chaos argued. “The gate guard, HVT, and his four bodyguards are all our targets, and that gate guard’s aiming right at your POS. Don’t let the fucking outfit fool you. We know these pussies throw on burqas, thinking they won’t get shot if they’re dressed like a female.”

The HVT and his male bodyguards were nowhere in sight, and the gate guard wasn’t a man. “Stand down. Not our target.” Rolling once, then commando crawling behind an outcropping, I issued orders. “Chaos, Bellows, exfil on my order. Jax, get ready to cover.” I stood.

“Copy,” Bellows replied.

“Roger,” Jax confirmed.

“I’m fucking cover, War God,” Chaos argued. “Exfil with Jax and Bellows.”

“Negative.” My op, my call. “I’m holding position until everyone’s cleared the wadi.” Sighted on the woman, I took in the state of her face one more time, then scanned the compound. Clear. Too fucking clear. Our main target was supposed to have exfilled this location by now.

Rotors sounded in the distance.

Bellows issued a sitrep. “Helo in T minus thirty seconds.”

I gave the order. “Exfil. Move, move, move.”

Shit went FUBAR in rapid succession.

A burst of fire pierced the arid landscape. Rounds flew over my head. The kickback from the AKM threw the woman against the compound wall, two dozen tangos spilled out of the north and south gates, and Chaos engaged.

“Fuck this. Gate guard in my sights.” Chaos sent it.

I reacted.

A fraction of a second later, my aim calculated, my shot was chasing his.

Tangos fanned out like ants, a firestorm exploded, and the landscape erupted with muzzle flashes. Rounds flew toward the incoming helo. Jax, Bellows and Chaos returned fire, and I watched through my scope.

Eyes wide, body shaking, rifle across her lap, the terrified brunette sat in the dirt.

Then, an inch away from her head, my round hit Chaos’s. The two fragmented bullets exploded, metal shards struck the side of her head, and the woman screamed.

Redirecting my aim, scanning the squirters, I looked for our primary targets.

No HVT. No bodyguards.

Engaging, dropping tangos, I issued orders. “Exfil, exfil, exfil!”

Two hours later.

Al-Tanf Garrison.

Syrian desert.

The helo touched down at the forward operating base. Bellows and Jax exfilled, but Chaos grabbed my arm.

“What the fuck was that?” he yelled over the rotor wash.

Ignoring Chaos, tipping my chin at one of the two helo pilots I vaguely knew, I raised my voice. “Thanks for the lift.”

Expression locked, the UH-1Y Venom pilot, Saint, nodded back.

Grabbing my gear, I exfilled the helo.

Chaos followed.

The Yankee lifted off.

Scanning the base, I shouldered my kit.

Chaos stepped in front of me. Then he fucking shoved me. “Start fucking talking.”

I glanced past him at Jax and Bellows as they paused outside the shipping container that served as our command center to watch the altercation. Tipping my chin at them, I focused back on Chaos. “Nothing to say.”

“You fucking hesitated, Jax took a round, and I don’t goddamn miss.”

Two inches shorter than my six-four frame but with twenty more pounds of muscle, Chaos thought he could take me. He thought he could take every guy in the Unit. He couldn’t. But today wasn’t the day I was going to school him.

I held his glare.

“I fucking know you, Grayson. I’ve spotted for your ass. I know what you’re capable of. You sniped my kill shot.”

“You’re saying I purposely struck a bullet with a muzzle velocity of three thousand feet per second in twenty-five-mile-per-hour winds with thirty-five-mile-per-hour gusts?”

“I already fucking said it,” Chaos challenged.

“Do you know the statistics on making a shot like that?” A billion-to-one odds.

“Do you know how many of us were calculating the fucking wind speed when those squirters fanned out?” he countered.

“All of us.” They should’ve been. Everyone in the Unit had gone through the same sniper training. Our lives depended on knowing distance, bullet drop, wind speed and direction, air pressure, temperature, the Coriolis Effect.

“Wrong,” Chaos ground out, getting in my face. “Only you were calculating that shit—after you ordered us to exfil.”

“You’re starting to sound like H.” My brother, Helios was also Delta. He was a year and a half older than me, assigned to a different Unit, and went by H for short because he hated call signs. He told everyone to call him by his name or not fucking talk to him.

“That’s because I fucking served with Helios before you.”

My point exactly. “I know.”

Chaos studied me a beat. Then he shook his head. “Don’t pull your Intelligence Support Activity training or PSYOPs bullshit on me. We’re Delta, not the fucking ISA. I don’t give a shit how fucking smart you think you are. You sabotaged the op, and Jax got hit. Don’t fuck me again, Grayson.”

“I didn’t fuck you in the first place.” I fucked his kill shot. “No HVT, no bodyguards. Mission aborted.”

“The gate guard fucking fired, and you forgot the goddamn rule of this Unit.”

I didn’t forget, and the unofficial rule wasn’t unique to this Unit or any other Tier One unit. Protect your brothers—always. Today, I’d protected a beaten woman.

The command center door banged open, and the troop commander yelled across the dirt apron. “Grayson, Chaos! Get your asses in here!”

Glaring at me, Chaos yelled back. “Yes, sir!” Then he lowered his voice. “This isn’t over.” Shoving past me, aiming to knock my kit off my shoulder, he headed to the shipping container.

Jax followed Chaos inside, but Bellows waited and raised an eyebrow at me.

I shook my head.

Bellows stepped into the cramped space, and I followed, pulling the door shut behind me.

The troop commander eyed me, then launched into debrief. “Direct action attempt for our primary HVT, Ahmad al-Adani, and his bodyguards was unsuccessful, but now we’ve got a FRAGO.” The war-hardened Sergeant Major hit a key on his laptop, and an image was projected as he scanned our Unit with a warning glare. “Aracet Vandon,” the troop commander’s voice boomed. “American. Nineteen years old. Abducted two years ago.”

Fucking sledgehammered, I stared at the smiling teen’s picture on the retractable screen.

The same female I’d had in my sights two hours ago.

Except she hadn’t looked like the young, pretty teenager in the image then. She’d looked fucking terrified.

Bellows spoke up. “Isn’t that the cousin of that American who married al-Adani’s brother a couple years back after meeting him online, then detonated her suicide vest in Turkey?”

Jesus.

“Affirmative,” the troop commander confirmed.

Standing next to me, Chaos crossed his arms. “Was Vandon abducted or husband shopping?” Then he muttered under his breath. “Fucking ISIS brides.”

It wasn’t an invalid question or sentiment, but Chaos hadn’t had the same sight line as me. He didn’t see the woman’s face.

The troop commander switched the image to an aerial shot from a satellite. “Abducted. Both Vandon and her cousin were picked up two years ago by Ahmad al-Adani’s bodyguards after flying commercial into Istanbul. The cousin was there willingly. Vandon was not. Until today, no one had a lead on Vandon. Agency and Brass assumed she was dead.” He zoomed in. “ISA just sent this over. It’s from fifteen hundred today.”

A collective shift swept through the command room as every Tier One looked at the same damn thing I saw through my scope. A beaten nineteen-year-old wearing a burqa that’d been ripped away from her bruised face. Cowering against the compound wall, holding an AKM upright by the barrel, hands nowhere near the trigger, the teenager may as well have been holding a broom.

Chaos glanced at me and lowered his voice. “You should’ve fucking told me.”

Delta Force had the best comms in the SOF community, but that didn’t make them one-hundred-percent secure. “Nothing out here’s unhackable.”

“I wouldn’t have taken the shot,” Chaos argued.

Before I could tell him that if he’d followed fucking orders, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, the troop commander spoke up.

“Got something to say, Chaos?”

Chaos raised his voice. “No, sir.”

“Then listen the fuck up. The Fragmentary Order is hostage rescue.” The troop commander switched the image on the screen again. This time we were looking at the aerial shot of the entire compound with the single access road that led in and out. “We’re retrieving the girl.”

“How the fuck do we know this chick isn’t wearing a suicide vest?” Jax asked.

“We don’t, and ISA intel was thin. But as of twenty minutes ago, sat imagery showed she’s still alive and still outside the main gate of the compound. Proof of life means we’re going in.” The commander downloaded the FRAGO parameters, including the airstrikes that’d clear a path before we infilled, then glanced at his watch. “Kit up. The 160th’s inbound. Night Stalkers will touch down in ten. And remember…” Sergeant Major Hutchenson looked pointedly at each of us. “Infill, exfil. Precision extraction.” He looked at me. “Secure the hostage and get the fuck out.”

“Copy,” I acknowledged.

Sergeant Major Hutchenson glanced to my right. “Chaos, Jax, hang back. You, too, Grayson.”

“Yes, sir.” Chaos threw me a glare.

“Roger, sir,” Jax answered the troop commander as he eyed me while bleeding through the gauze he’d wrapped around his arm on the helo transport back to base.

I shut the door behind the rest of the Unit, and Sergeant Major Hutchenson ripped into Chaos. “Last time I’m going to remind you. Grayson’s Team Sergeant. Follow fucking orders.”

Chaos stood straighter. “Yes, sir.”

The troop commander glanced at Jax. “Get the Unit medic to look at that arm.”

Jax did what every operator in Delta would’ve done. He lied. “Just a graze. I’m fine, sir.”

Sergeant Major Hutchenson sighed, then jerked his chin between the two of them as he looked at me. “We good?”

Needing to get back to that brunette, I didn’t contradict Jax’s readiness. “Fully operational.” Then I compounded the fucking lie. “*Sine Pari*.” Without equal.

Ignoring Delta Force’s creed, one I’d both recited by rote and, before this very second, had spent every waking minute striving to live up to, the troop commander stared me down. “I don’t need to explain the optics on this one.”

“No, sir, you don’t.” Speed, surprise, and violence of action was our operational motto. Complex hostage rescue and counterterrorism were our

areas of expertise. We were trained for this. The politics was his department.

“Good. Go get the girl.”

With a chorus of “Yes, sirs,” we exfilled the shipping container.

Five minutes early, with the rotors kicking up desert dirt, a matte black Night Stalker MH-60 landed fifty yards from our POS with their gunner behind the M134.

We loaded into the helo.

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ONE

Aracet

Present.

"Thanks so much for the extra help today, Michelle."

Neatly stacking the files so they'd be organized for the next person who took over this job, my nerves still shot from this morning, I missed the cue to respond to my current fake name.

The older woman stood on the opposite side of my desk. "Are you doing something fun tonight?"

I looked up. Then I realized my mistake. "Oh, you're welcome." I forced a small smile. "Today was nothing." It was everything. Well, everything bad in my world. For the past two weeks, I'd already been restless.

Then I saw him again this morning.

Or thought I had, right before I told myself it was a coincidence and that making a rash decision then would be worse than a planned one now.

"Oh, it was much more than nothing." Nancy, the grandmother who'd worked at this accounting firm since before she'd been married, smiled. "Organizing all those client receipts saved me so much work. I don't know what I would do without you." Her kindness was so genuine, I felt guilty.

“Well, you’re all set for now. It should be easier to enter the information.”

She oscillated her hand like she was waving me off. “You know it will be, but I’m more concerned with you having some fun. Tomorrow’s Friday, and you only work a half day, so I hope you have something planned this weekend?” She raised her eyebrows like both a scolding parent and a gossiping teenager. She’d also never spoken to me this directly about my personal life.

The panicked uneasiness I’d been trying to push down turned into full-blown anxiety.

My skin crawled, my heart rate kicked up, and I knew I’d made another mistake.

I’d stayed too long.

Two weeks ago, I’d noted the date on the calendar, and the disquiet crept in. The anniversary was a catalyst. It was every year. But it was also the little things, and they’d been stacking up. A smile of familiarity from a coffee shop cashier. A mail carrier waving at me when I was out grabbing lunch for my boss. Forgetting to religiously scan my rearview mirrors every time I drove somewhere. Then last week, that disquiet had turned into uneasiness when one of the librarians at the local public library had addressed me by my fake name as I returned some books.

I’d immediately started planning, but that was where I’d made the mistake.

Instead of doing an internet search at the library that night, I should’ve already been gone—digital dust wiped, vague letter of resignation handed

in, car dumped, alias destroyed.

I should've been states away by now.

But the money at this small accounting firm had been too good. It was more than double what I usually made in jobs I could get with fake IDs, bogus references, and fabricated work experiences. I'd gotten greedy. Or maybe tired. But that last thought wasn't one I could entertain. I didn't have the luxury of tiredness. If it was time to go, I went. No matter what.

But last week, when my instincts were all but yelling in my face, I hadn't left.

Then this morning, I saw him.

The tall, muscular, blond man I'd been seeing in every town, city, state I escaped to. Except I couldn't be sure it was the same man because I'd never directly looked at his face. I tried to never meet anyone's direct gaze. Not on the streets, not in grocery stores, not anywhere public.

I kept my head down.

Always.

When you're a former teenage terrorist, that's what you do. But I didn't have time to think about that now either.

Stepping back from my desk, I pushed in my chair and lied to Nancy. "Nothing special planned tonight." Three minutes after I walked into my rented apartment, I would be back out the door and on the road.

My boss for the past six months, the woman who'd made me banana bread and chocolate chip cookies, who got me coffee every time she got herself a mug, smiled mischievously. "I know I'm stepping over the line

here, but I've been wanting to mention this for months now. I have a grandson who I think would be perf—"

I cut her off. "I appreciate you thinking of me, but I have to run." Shoving my arms into my secondhand winter coat, I set up the next lie. "I need to check on my grandmother." I didn't have a grandmother. Not anymore. Not that I actually knew if any of my relatives were still alive.

"Of course, dear." Nancy moved out of my way as I came around the desk. "You're such a good granddaughter. And assistant!"

"And you're a great boss." I grabbed my purse that had a wallet with a fake ID and a couple twenty-dollar bills. The rest of my money—diligently saved over five years—was secured in a hidden interior pocket in the purse's lining. It was my lifeline.

"No need to flatter me, dear, but I'll take the compliment." Nancy followed me toward the glass front doors of the single-story office building that the accounting firm owned.

"You should." My stomach knotting, I pushed open the door and was blasted with the frigid air Minnesotans called spring. Then, in a moment of weakness, I stupidly glanced back and broke one of my cardinal rules. "Goodbye, Nancy." I never said goodbyes. People remembered them.

Her easy smile creased with well-earned wrinkles, the older woman held the door for me. "You have a good evening, dear. And tell that grandmother of yours I said hello."

Surreptitiously scanning the parking area in front of the building, looking for a black SUV that wasn't there, I palmed my keys and lied again. "Thank you. I'll tell her."

“Good. Drive safe, dear. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She wouldn’t. “Good night.” Holding the too-thin coat closed, I rushed to the car I’d bought seven months and two states ago. For an extra two hundred and fifty dollars on top of the one-thousand-dollar price tag that was five hundred too much, the guy who sold it to me had kept the registration in his name.

Wrenching open the rusted driver’s door, hating the creak that persisted no matter how many times I’d sprayed WD-40 on the damn thing, I got behind the wheel. Ignoring the seat springs that poked into my ass, I shoved the key into the ignition.

Then I had a moment.

That split second before I turned the car over, wondering if this would be the time it didn’t start.

I’d never had a car that I didn’t have to worry about it starting.

“Come on,” I whispered to the old maroon coupe as my breath clouded around me. “I just need you to start a couple more times.” And make it a few dozen or few hundred more miles. I hadn’t decided which yet.

I turned the key.

The 1989 Pontiac Grand AM with a faded hood turned over, and I gave it a few seconds to warm up before I threw it into Reverse. Then, because backing into a parking space for a quicker getaway was too suspicious when no one else at work backed into spots, I reversed out of the space, shifted into Drive, and pulled out of the lot. Braking at the stop sign before I turned onto the main road of the small downtown area, I scanned the street in both directions.

That’s when I saw it again.

The black SUV.

The same one with tinted-out windows I saw parked on the main street this morning. Except now the engine was running, and it was in a curbside spot right in front of the coffee shop.

The same shop I’d stopped at before work for my usual cup of black coffee.

The same coffee shop where, at nine o’clock this morning, a tall, muscular, blond man had been standing in the back. His booted feet had been spaced barely one foot apart, his hands clasped in front of him, his left palm over his right, and his thumbs interlocked.

Eight hours ago, I’d told myself it was a coincidence.

For five years, I’d been telling myself it was a coincidence.

Men in the military stood a certain way.

Veterans lived all over.

There was more than one tall, muscular, blond man who had served in the military, and the man—if it even was the same one—had never approached me.

Wavering on the fine line between paranoia and self-preservation, considering my options, I stared at the black SUV for too long.

A left turn would take me out of town.

A right turn would lead back to my apartment.

Left was safe. Right was closure. My main priority was not risking exposure, but I hated leaving evidence behind. Not that one duffle and some

food was evidence in a criminal sense, but it was proof of existence. And a loose end.

I scanned the main street….

Then I turned right.

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TWO

Ares

The brunette spotted the SUV.

She'd also seen me this morning, but same as every other time I'd purposely put myself in her direct line of sight, she hadn't made eye contact. The woman never made eye contact.

She was looking now, though.

Staring at the tinted driver's window of my rented SUV, the brunette idled at the stop sign.

Tracking her for the past five years, knowing her patterns, behaviors, habits—what she ate for fucking breakfast—I knew this woman better than she knew herself. She was going to run. Again.

The only question was why the hell I was here.

Why I'd been here for the past week, doing exactly this.

A burner I'd brought with me on this trip, one that I rarely used, rang through the SUV's speakers.

I glanced at the screen and contemplated not answering, but my brother would only call back repeatedly until I did.

Watching the woman scan the length of the main drag that ran parallel to the town's business district, I accepted the call. "Helios."

“What the fuck’s in Medina, Minnesota? And why the hell did I have to try three goddamn burners before you answered one?”

I wasn’t surprised Helios had tracked me. I’d been ignoring him lately. I’d been ignoring a lot of shit. Except the brunette. I never fucking ignored her. “Coffee stop.”

“You don’t fucking drink coffee, and that doesn’t answer my question about the goddamn burner.”

There were two things my brother gave a damn about, and one skill he was exceptional at besides killing. Our stepsister, Feralyn, and I fell under the former category, sniffing out bullshit the latter.

I ignored the spot-on comment regarding coffee. “What’s up?”

“You tell me, motherfucker. You haven’t been to the house to see Haven in fucking forever.”

“You banned me.” The house in question belonged to Feralyn, but Helios lived there with her. So had I, off and on, until recently, when Helios and Feralyn… *Jesus*. I still couldn’t think about it without getting pissed.

Everything made me angry these days.

“You fucking judged us,” Helios accused.

Yes, I had. Then I’d stood the fuck down after speaking to Feralyn because she’d told me to. One of the few things Helios and I had in common besides genetics and the Unit was Feralyn. We did whatever she asked of us, if she asked for something, which was rare. But more than that, Feralyn was the only sister I had. It didn’t matter to me that she wasn’t blood. Her father had married our mother when she was barely older than a toddler.

We met her at the damn wedding, for Christ's sake.

She'd cried through the whole thing. Helios yelled at her to stop, I'd handed her makeshift tissues from a roll of toilet paper, and the dynamics of our relationships had cemented. I spent the next couple decades attempting to look out for her. Helios had taken another approach. I felt like I'd fucking failed her. But Feralyn assured me she was happy.

Or she was the last time I'd spoken to her. But that was a while ago, which was most likely why Helios was calling. Feralyn had probably told him she hadn't heard from me. A by-product of our absentee-parent upbringing was that Feralyn worried about me and Helios. Especially if she didn't hear from one of us. It used to be Helios who was the problem on that front. Now it was me. Fucking irony.

The brunette with hazel eyes in the maroon Pontiac with a hood that'd faded to gray finally turned onto the main drag and passed me.

Pulling away from the curb, I followed. "What do you need, Helios?"

My brother sighed like he was put out. "I *need*, motherfucker, to know when you're coming to see Haven."

That was the other new development I was still digesting. Helios's nickname for our stepsister. When he'd first said it, we'd been kids. He'd been pissed as hell at us, and the term had been an insult aimed at her. Feralyn had gotten upset. Now Helios used it almost exclusively.

Keeping a sedate distance behind the Pontiac, I took a left when the woman hung a right because I already knew where she was going. Making a U-turn at the next intersection, I kept it noncommittal with Helios. "Next time I'm in town."

“When the fuck is that gonna be?”

Eventually. “Soon.”

“Don’t pull that vague bullshit on me. I know you’re up to something. Who the fuck’s in Minnesota? And don’t try to say it’s some shit related to Paragon Ops because we both know it’s not.”

Paragon Operations. Where we’d both landed after the Unit. Helios got to keep taking out his aggression, I got to stay under the radar, and we each pulled in an astronomical amount of money. More than either of us ever would’ve dreamed of when we’d enlisted in the Army.

Yeah, we got shot at, usually because of Helios, but the assignments for the paramilitary contractor and security firm weren’t anything either of us hadn’t done countless times while active duty. Besides, the tech and weaponry were superior, we were both now rated to fly every aircraft in Paragon Operations’ fleet, and neither of us were dead.

Unwilling to make a promise I couldn’t keep, I evaded by sticking to the basics. “I’ll call Feralyn when I’m back in town.”

“*Jesus fucking Christ*,” Helios muttered before his intonation dropped from aggression to resignation. “Who’s the woman?”

“What woman?” Half a klick ahead of me, the brunette slowed down to turn into the driveway of her rented apartment.

“The one you’re currently stalking in fucking Minnesota, of all places.”

Pulling onto the shoulder, then reversing until I was off the road, I angled the Tahoe behind a cluster of trees that still gave me a sight line to my target. “Not stalking anyone.” That was exactly what I was doing.

Along with recon, and a solid fucking dose of contemplating my life choices because fuck, I couldn't keep doing this.

"Yeah, right." Helios smirked. "Feed yourself whatever bullshit you need to sleep at night. Or don't. I don't give a fuck what you do. Just call Haven. And don't make me come fucking find you."

Distracted, I threw the SUV into Park. "Copy."

"*Fucking Christ,*" Helios muttered.

"What?"

"I already had a gut feeling, and my instincts are never wrong. But you distracted? That acquiescence bullshit?" Helios swore again. "This—whatever the fuck you're up to—is gonna turn into a shit show."

I watched the woman get out of the Grand AM and clock her six. "I gotta go."

Helios snorted. "Yeah, I bet you do. Get fucking laid while you're at it. You've been an asshole for months. Scratch that. You've been an asshole for years."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you back. Don't get dead." Helios hung up.

Ignoring Helios's comments and the fact that I hadn't actually fucked a woman in years, I watched the brunette scan the road. Then she pulled out a cell and glanced at it before jogging up the steps to her apartment.

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THREE

Aracet

Unable to shake the feeling that I was being followed, I glanced toward the deserted road that'd seemed like a good idea when I'd rented the apartment.

Now it felt like another mistake.

And the hyperawareness that'd been born from a special cocktail of fear, self-hatred, and regret was picking at my nerves and spiking my adrenaline. I could've sworn the black SUV had followed me, but it'd turned off miles ago.

Scanning the road, I told myself it didn't matter.

Three minutes did.

Taking the prepaid cell—a luxury I couldn't afford and shouldn't have kept—out of my jacket pocket, I noted the time. Then I powered it down and removed the SIM card as I rushed up the steps to the old apartment over a converted garage of an abandoned house.

Well, half-remodeled house that the owner said he'd run out of money for when he'd rented me the place. He'd also warned me he was putting the property up for sale come summer, and potential buyers would want to see the apartment.

In two minutes and fifty seconds, that wouldn't be a problem.

Running through a mental checklist that'd become rote—or obsession—I didn't think.

I moved in a choreographed pattern I had down to a science.

The few toiletries I had went into a small case that tucked into my duffle where my clothes were always kept, neatly folded.

Next, I grabbed the first of two garbage bags I'd taken from work a week ago and tossed out everything from the fridge, including a container of leftover homemade macaroni and cheese from last night that I wouldn't be eating. With my stomach rumbling, I added the staples from the cupboard, then tossed in the cell and tied off the bag.

Using my only towel, I wiped down every door, cupboard, drawer, and faucet handle before swiping across the kitchen and bathroom counters, the kitchen and coffee tables, and the nightstands. Then I wiped the key to the apartment and left it on the counter before rolling up the bedding and stuffing it into the second garbage bag. Shouldering my duffle and carrying the two bags, I walked out the door, then pulled it shut and wiped the handle with the towel.

Seconds later, everything was in the trunk, and I was back behind the wheel, shoving the key into the ignition.

The car turned over, and two little words played in my head.

Mátia mou.

Like a chant, they always repeated. The memory of how and when I'd first heard them was buried in a drugged-out haze of trauma with a heaping side of intentional compartmentalization, but I still heard them. And despite trying to only ever absorb the alliteration and deep, masculine voice that'd

originally said them, I could never fully separate those two elements from context.

So the words haunted me. With both a voice that was a balm to my soul, and flashbacks that were a reminder of my sins, they played again.

Mátia mou.

The evening air chilly, the car interior even colder, my jacket no measure of protection against my past, I shivered at the triggered memory of violence, death, the scent of copper, and a bloodied hand holding mine. I'd never told any of the therapists or psychologists about the memory or flashbacks, and it'd taken me years to gather the courage to look up those two words. Then I'd been even more confused.

Mátia mou. My eyes. In Greek, it was a term of endearment.

Except it'd been said to me in a low curse—and a curse was what I deserved. The term of endearment, I didn't. But that had never stopped me from obsessing.

Those two words had become my mantra.

Whenever I was frightened, stressed, lonely, or drowning in anxiety, every night as I tried to fall asleep, any time I needed solace, I reached for the memory and repeated the mantra.

I repeated those two words, and told myself I mattered.

Silently saying them now as if they would absolve me of my past, I threw out the garbage bags in a dumpster behind a small grocery store, then drove to the public library.

Parking in front, I scanned the street for that black SUV and the sidewalks for a tall, muscular blond man. When I didn't see either, I

grabbed the woolen knit cap I kept in my jacket pocket and pulled it down low before I got out of the car and rushed inside.

The librarian greeted me with a smile and a warning. “We close in fifteen minutes. So if you’re checking something out, please be aware.”

“Thank you, but I’m only using one of the computers for a few minutes.” I was a lot of things, including a thief if the need arose, but I wasn’t a book stealer. As much as I wanted something new to read, I wouldn’t check out a book knowing I’d never return it.

The librarian nodded, and I headed to their bank of ancient desktops.

Using an email address I’d created seven months ago, I sent a resignation letter to Nancy and a notice to the landlord that I’d vacated the apartment. After deleting the email account, I risked a quick internet search. Then I cleared my search history and aimed for the exit.

As I passed the circulation desk, the librarian glanced up and smiled. “Have a good night.”

Not even knowing what that looked like anymore, I nodded and rushed out.

Keeping my head down in the quickly approaching twilight, I scanned the street and sidewalks again.

No mystery man.

No one watching me.

No one paying any attention to my existence, period.

Hurrying to the car that would only be mine for another seventeen miles, adrenaline and phobias that’d bred into neurosis took over my thought process.

Leaning into it, I ran through a mental checklist.

The folded title to the car was safely tucked into my wallet.

Fifty-two hundred dollars in cash was secure in my purse lining.

The car had enough gas to drive to the buy-sell-trade lot I'd found online that promised to take any running vehicle.

Five blocks from the used car lot was a bus station.

A two-dollar-and-fifty-cent ticket would get me to the Minneapolis bus depot.

Then a two-hundred-and-five-dollar bus ticket, nineteen hundred and twenty miles, two transfers, and forty-two hours would get me to my next destination.

Another city that started with the letter M.

A city that wasn't cold.

Scanning one last time for a black SUV with tinted windows, I cranked the engine.

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FOUR

Ares

It took the brunette less than three minutes to walk back out of her apartment.

Her turnaround time was getting better.

With two garbage bags and a duffle I'd searched on more than one occasion, she double-timed it back down the stairs and threw everything into her trunk. Then she was on the road, passing my POS without glancing toward the partially hidden SUV.

"Sloppy," I muttered, pulling out after her and noting that my instincts had been right about her running again.

Following at a safe distance, taking perverse pleasure that my presence this morning may have triggered the timing of her exfil, I thought about her MO.

The woman systematically worked in locations beginning with M.

Midland, Texas. Mobile, Alabama. Muskegon, Michigan. Monroeville, Pennsylvania. Madison, Wisconsin. Mesquite, Texas. Metairie, Louisiana. Medford, Oregon. Muncie, Indiana. Meridian, Idaho. Mesa, Arizona. Memphis, Tennessee, and now Medina, Minnesota.

Thirteen locations in five years.

This past one she'd stayed at the longest.

The city before that, the shortest.

The recurring theme of place-names that started with M? I had a theory. One I'd never get confirmation on unless I asked. But I hadn't spoken to the woman in eight years, and I wasn't planning on breaking that streak anytime soon.

Following her to a neighborhood grocery that was closed for the night, I watched her toss her two trash bags and towel into a dumpster. Then she hit up a public library before driving seventeen miles to a buy-sell-trade car lot.

A salesman was on her before she got her door open.

Parked down the street, I watched her breath cloud as she briefly spoke to the asshole standing too close to her. She shook her head four times, then studied her piece-of-junk car before nodding. Two seconds later, she was following the salesman into a trailer that was being used as an office. Eleven minutes after that, they both came out, and the asshole got behind the wheel of her car.

He popped the trunk.

She grabbed her duffle, then shut it.

He pulled the car around to the front of the lot as she shouldered her bag and headed down the street.

Already having clocked the bus station half a klick back, I knew where she was going.

Each relocation the same, this was also her MO.

Keep the duffle and purse, dump everything else, tie up loose ends with emails sent from bogus email addresses, then get on a bus.

I hadn’t bothered hacking into the public library’s network, but I’d bet she sent emails to quit her job and terminate her rental, then attempted to wipe her digital footprint. Operative word being *attempted*.

Thankfully, the woman wasn’t a hacker.

Not thankfully, she wasn’t playing it safe tonight. Walking alone in this area was reckless, but not scanning her surroundings while she was on foot was downright dangerous.

The asshole salesman slapped a price on the windshield of her junker that was probably double what he paid her, then retreated to his trailer office.

I kept vigil until the brunette was halfway to the bus station.

Then I drove ahead of her, parked, and pulled my laptop out of my go bag.

By the time she walked into the bus station, I’d hacked into their security feeds.

Watching in real time, I kept an eye on her as she moved around the station, then got on a bus heading for Minneapolis. Setting my laptop on the passenger seat, I followed. Twenty-six minutes later, the bus pulled into the 5th Street Transit Center.

I parked and hacked the building’s security.

The woman headed for a ticket counter.

As she counted out cash, I breached their network and typed a command.

The agent printed out her ticket, and my search populated with her destination.

“No fucking way.” I reran the search.

Same result.

In forty-two hours, the woman was going to be in Miami.

I shut my laptop, threw it in my go bag, and pulled out of the lot.

An hour later, I was wheels up in Paragon Operations’ new Embraer Phenom 300E jet.

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FIVE

Aracet

Just past two p.m. local time, the bus pulled into the station.

Every muscle in my body was stiff, and I never wanted to travel this way again, but the thought was fleeting.

Everything was fleeting because the moment I stepped off the bus, I was hit with a wall of humidity and heat that I'd never encountered, not even in Arizona.

It was punishing.

The air was so thick, it didn't feel like you could actually breathe. Exhausted and suddenly slightly panicked, I tried to inhale deeply. Diesel and jet fuel coated a breath that was laced with hot pavement, moldering vegetation, sweet flowers, pungent spices, and the distinctive but distant brine of salt air.

Everything was foreign.

The people, the air, the palm trees, the intense vibrant green of the palm fronds, even the color of the sunshine—strikingly bright golden yellow that was shining down from a sky so brilliant, the tropical blue looked almost fake.

Visually, I was in awe.

It was as if Miami were alive, while all the other places I'd stayed had barely been living. The sum of it, just from a bus terminal, even as sweat dripped down my back and beaded at my temples, had my mind racing with dangerous thoughts. Roots, a life, no running.

The brightest sunshine I'd ever seen.

Living every day unmuted.

I drew in another breath, this one only slightly easier, and hefted my duffle higher on my shoulder. The stream of people getting off the bus, greeting friends or family, the musicality of Spanish, English, Haitian, and some other islander languages all blending in harmony, slowly dissipated into the lull between deliveries of tourists, visitors, and residents.

With my winter coat draped over one arm, the weight of it suddenly more cumbersome than the humid air, I scanned the bus station. Stupidly looking for a tall, muscular blond man who was nowhere to be seen, I walked into the terminal and headed for the restroom.

Five minutes later, locked in a stall, lingering in the air-conditioning of a public bathroom, I had to face reality.

All of my clothes would need to be replaced.

Wool, flannel, thermal cotton, long underwear, knee socks—I couldn't wear any of it, not without passing out from heat stroke. The temptation to toss it all in the restroom's trash was overwhelming. Normally, I'd find a secondhand clothing store to trade in items, but I couldn't imagine my Minnesota wardrobe would fetch anything but a donation receipt.

I was also partial to the first pair of boots, or any shoes for that matter, that I'd bought brand-new for myself six months ago. My Doc Martens

1460 Vonda Floral Leather Lace Ups had been a ridiculous splurge on my budget, but the embroidered red roses and green leaves had been too pretty to resist. The boots were also the only pair of shoes I currently owned.

Changing into a more worn pair of jeans, I substituted my long-sleeved black T-shirt for a white short-sleeved one. Then I pulled my too-long black hair up, twisted it into a messy bun, and sorted the rest of my clothes.

Keeping my underwear and bras, one other pair of jeans, a thinner, cotton cardigan, and two T-shirts that could double as nightshirts, I zipped up my duffle. With my pile of folded castaways in my arms and my purse and bag over my shoulder, I exited the stall when the bathroom was empty. After dumping the clothes in the trash and washing my hands, I was out of the restroom and back outside as another bus pulled up.

Suddenly feeling ten years lighter, I breathed easier.

The sun looked brighter.

I smiled at a little girl who was holding her father’s hand.

Then I got on a cross-city bus.

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SIX

Ares

Forty-two hours after I'd last seen her in person, I was parked across the street from the bus station in a Paragon Ops armored Yukon Denali, watching the brunette get off a Greyhound.

For almost two days, I'd tracked her.

Hacking security cams at every stop along the route, making sure she didn't divert, I'd watched her.

Because that's what I did.

I stalked this woman.

For the first three years post Jax's and Bellows' deaths, I'd kept tabs on her as she progressed through the system. Back then, I was still Delta. Still *Sine Pari*. Every mission I rained down hell, aiming to avenge the deaths of my Unit brothers.

Then the brunette had been cut loose. Reintegrated into society.

Except the woman didn't reintegrate.

She fell off the fucking grid.

That first week, she'd lived on the streets, seemingly wandering randomly. Then she'd emerged from a used clothing store, duffle over her

shoulder, and walked to a bus station. Aracet Vandon disappeared, and the first of over a dozen fake IDs popped.

That'd been five years ago.

I quit the Unit and had been tracking the brunette teenager who'd fucking ruined me with a single sight through my scope ever since. Except she hadn't been a teenager in seven years, my anger didn't bring back Jax or Bellows, and I'd become expert at avoiding the truth.

Not shooting an American teenager in Syria who'd been born to grifters, then followed a cousin down a rabbit hole to hell out of misplaced familial loyalty wasn't my mistake.

Not sidelining Jax on that FRAGO eight years ago was.

If I had, Jax might still be alive. If I'd admitted my team was compromised, Bellows might still be alive. But I didn't, and their blood was on my hands. I had to live with that.

But this woman didn't.

Running all over the country like she was in WITSEC, hiding behind fake IDs, living like her ticket was up when Jax and Bellows had made the ultimate sacrifice for her—it had enraged me.

But I couldn't fucking leave her alone, and that rage had morphed into obsession years ago.

My cell rang through the Denali's speakers.

I watched the woman tilt her head toward the sun and briefly close her eyes before I glanced at the caller ID that said it was a blocked number. I answered without speaking.

Typing sounded in the background, then it paused. "Grayson?"

“Who is this?”

The brunette walked into the bus station.

“November.”

I focused up. Besides Paragon Operations, there was another security contractor in town, Alpha Elite Security. AES was Adam “Alpha” Trefor’s outfit. The former SEAL started his firm years ago and relocated his headquarters from Manhattan to Miami Beach before my boss, Nix “Phoenix” Erikson, had bought a high-rise across the street. Then Nix moved Paragon Ops HQ off his retrofitted, armored mega yacht to land.

Both Paragon Ops and AES were private security and military defense contractors. Nix and Alpha, former Team mates and friends, had decided to pool resources and take joint assignments when the need arose instead of getting in each other’s way.

Except tensions were high between some of the AES and Paragon Ops guys. No joint assignments had come down the pipeline yet, and no one at Paragon Ops wanted any part of the higher-profile assignments AES took on. Every Tier One at Paragon Ops made a religion out of staying under the radar, and the former SEALs at AES were a tight-knit group.

Nathan “November” Rhys, AES’s resident hacker, was the exception.

An entity unto himself, November was infamous if you were one of the select few who knew anything about his background. He also kept a back door open between AES servers, Paragon Ops servers, and Paradigm Holdings. The latter was a group of shell companies masking the fact that seven satellites were privately owned and only utilized by AES, Paragon

Ops, and Paradigm's owner, Ghost—who happened to be Feralyn's stepbrother, which was another fucking story.

But November orchestrating that hack and keeping it fluid so we all could use Ghost's satellites was a testament to his skills. It was also the main reason why I didn't want to be on November's radar.

"What can I do for you, Rhys?"

"You looked at a property in Key Largo." November recited an address.

Now I was really fucking listening. "According to who?" I hadn't gone in person, and the property wasn't officially for sale. But yes, I'd scouted a three-bedroom, three-bath oceanfront house with a private boat launch on Largo. I'd also wiped my digital footprint after I'd looked at it.

November ignored my question. "Still interested?"

"I didn't say I was interested in the first place." I scanned the bus station, but the brunette hadn't come back out yet.

"You've been purchasing investment properties since Paragon Operations moved to Miami Beach," November stated as typing resumed in the background.

I'd been investing in real estate before that, but he wasn't incorrect. I'd purchased a few places recently because I'd needed somewhere to dump my money. I also preferred living digitally off the grid, I didn't usually stay in one place, and all of my investments were buried in shell corporations. Owning multiple places meant I could move around. The investments fit my lifestyle, which apparently hadn't been a problem for November to hack.

Mentally making a note to check all my digital backstops, I cut to the chase. "What's your interest in the property?"

“I own it.”

That, I didn’t know. “Since when?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

The brunette walked out of the bus station in a different outfit, carrying a considerably less full duffle bag. “And I was your first call?”

“Yes. Five-point-two-five million if you’re still interested.”

Suspicion surfaced. “That’s two to three million under market value.”

“It’s what I paid for it.”

The brunette got on a cross-city bus. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”

I threw the Yukon into Drive to follow the bus. “With all due respect, Rhys, there’s a catch. I’m not interested unless I know what it is.”

The former Air Force Cyberspace Operations Officer hesitated. “I have investments in the area.”

Now I was fucking getting it. “How close?” Key Largo was only twelve square miles.

“Close.”

“Copy.” Neighbor close. I threw the Yukon back into Park and made the decision. “I’ll take the property. Give me an account to transfer the money to.”

Rhys recited a number.

“Hold.” Quickly bringing up one of my offshore accounts, I typed. “Transferring now.”

“Transfer received. I’ll handle the paperwork. You can take possession anytime.” November recited another number. One I was very fucking familiar with. “That’s the security code for both the gate and entry.”

The eight-digit number was my fucking birthdate. “You knew I’d take the place.”

“There was a high probability. Enjoy the property.” November hung up.

I pulled into afternoon traffic to follow a bus and a brunette who had no idea what she’d walked into.

For five years, my obsession had grown.

Now the brunette was in my world.

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SEVEN

Aracet

The secondhand clothing store had been an experience and a revelation.

Bright colors, featherweight materials, tropical prints. It'd taken me thirty minutes to just soak it all in. There were no dull maroons, pine greens, or dusty navies. There were flowy skirts, sundresses, tank tops, flip-flops, bathing suits, and linen pieces I coveted but ultimately shied away from.

Fifty-seven dollars and eighty-four cents later, I had a new wardrobe, all neatly folded and safely zipped into my duffle.

Now I was one block back from the ocean, negotiating with a Miami Beach motel clerk. "Thirty-nine a night, and no continental breakfast."

The handsome, perfectly groomed gentleman, who was somewhere between mid-thirties and mid-forties and dressed nicer than any man I'd ever met, looked me up and down with rightful judgment. "The breakfast is put out daily whether you eat it or not."

"Okay, no free happy hour drink." The woman at the secondhand clothing store had told me about the motel. She'd said the prices were a fraction of the hotels along the beach and that this particular place was safe, clean, and I could negotiate a cheaper nightly rate if they had vacancy.

The clerk rolled his blue eyes, but a hint of a smile played on his lips. “Fine. Thirty-nine a night. But only during the week. On weekends, it goes up to fifty-nine. And, honey, you can have the cocktails and breakfast. Lord knows you look like you could use both.”

“Deal. And thank you.” I smiled.

He winked.

“Cash, as promised.” I handed over enough to cover me for one week. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be here longer than that. I couldn’t afford to be. At least, not without getting a job. But a monthly rental was what I was really after. Something with more privacy than a motel.

The clerk handed me an actual room key on a key chain. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“You won’t even know I’m here.”

He sized me up again. “I doubt that. The second the German tourists in the upper floor suite get a look at you, my quiet week will go to hell.”

Shit. “I, ah, I’m not here for anything like that.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, Little Miss Runaway in the Doc Martens. You’re not looking for any man. That’s what they all say.” He pointedly aimed his sharp gaze at me for a deliberate moment. “Me included when I first got here.” The wink returned, but this time it was accompanied by a mischievous smile.

I shouldn’t have taken the baited smile or engaged in any more conversation. I’d already pushed my limit for people interaction. But there was something about him…. “And now?” I stupidly asked.

He held up his left hand and wiggled his ring finger. “An old ball and chain got me when I was too young, too pretty, and too idealistic to know better than to get tied down.” His sigh was dramatic. “So now I run this joint, and he makes me dinner every night.”

As if speaking of him conjured him, a slightly older-looking, very fit, very muscular, ruggedly handsome, tattooed gentleman carrying a basket of fresh produce came through a door behind the reception area. He smiled wide. “Is Henry telling you how I tied him down?”

“Nightly,” Henry deadpanned.

The older man laughed. “You love it.”

Henry sighed again. “I do.” His hand fluttered toward me. “Pasqual, meet Rose Martens.” As if daring me to correct the made-up name he just gave me, Henry raised an eyebrow at me. “*Rose*, meet the old ball and chain.”

I didn’t contradict my new nickname. I’d used the ID that said I was Ari, but I wasn’t opposed to being Rose while I was here. I also wasn’t opposed to giving Henry a little of his own shit. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Henry.”

Pasqual laughed again. “I see you already have Henry’s number.”

Henry eyed me like I was a traitor. “I knew you’d be trouble.”

“Always fun to mix it up around here,” Pasqual added. “Meet us on the veranda for cocktails at six? I’m making empanadas and croquettes for hors d’oeuvres, and tonight’s drink is going to be a mango margarita.” Hefting his basket, he nodded at the bright orange-yellow fruit inside. “Fresh-picked mangoes, of course.”

“Sounds great.” It didn’t. I needed to stay as invisible as possible, but exotic food and tropical-fruit-flavored drinks on a veranda with ocean-scented humidity and strangers I could pretend wanted to be my friends seemed… enchanting. Everything about Miami had been enchanting so far.

“Right.” Henry smirked, pointing accusingly at me but glancing at Pasqual. “Did you see that eye contact drop when she answered?” Crossing his arms, he looked back at me. “She’s a beauty and a liar. Look out, straight men everywhere.”

Pasqual nudged his husband’s shoulder. “Don’t be a cynic.”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Henry argued, as if I weren’t standing right there or like he knew me.

“Ignore him, Rose.” Pasqual offered another smile like he didn’t have to ever think twice about who he doled them out to. “I hope we see you on the veranda. Tonight, or any other evening you’re with us.”

“Thank you so much.” I picked up my duffle from where it’d been resting at my feet. “Which way to the room?”

“All the way to the end.” Henry nodded toward the far end of the motel. “Lower unit.”

“Oh good, you gave her the corner suite.” Pasqual winked at me. “Pretty room for a pretty girl.”

Henry really rolled his eyes. “Don’t let it go to her head. And besides, she haggled with me like a professional thief. Therefore, she’s getting the room for a steal.”

“Thirty-nine a night?” Pasqual asked with a chuckle. “That’s what he lets all the unbooked rooms go for when we’re off season.”

“Miami doesn’t have an off season.” Henry eyed the basket Pasqual was still holding. “Don’t you have drinks to make?”

“Yes, dear.” Pasqual nudged Henry again, then headed toward another door. “See you soon, Rose!”

“Nice meeting you,” I called after him before I glanced at Henry. “I like your old ball and chain.”

“Good. Then we’ll see you for cocktail hour. Don’t let the Germans scare you off. Pasqual or I will keep them in line if we need to. Now go before I change my mind about your rate or room.”

“I’m going, and thank you.”

“Mm-hmm,” Henry feigned nonchalance as he typed something on his laptop behind the reception desk.

It wasn’t until I was heading to my room, wondering how I could sneak a few quick internet searches on Henry’s computer, that I realized I’d not only joked with Henry and Pasqual, but I’d also had a longer conversation with them than I’d had with any human, outside a work environment, in five years.

Unsure how to process that or the lightness I was feeling over the fact that neither had recognized me, that no one had, I took in the lush tropical greenery, aqua pool, and crisp white stucco of the motel. All of it made me feel like I was on a vacation, but when I slid my key into the lock and pushed open the door, I felt like I’d won the lottery.

Tile floors, modern furnishings in whites, blues, and tans, air conditioner humming, the fresh scent of cleaning products. I took in the

galley kitchen, living area, separate bedroom and a large, spa-like bathroom. Pasqual had been right. The room wasn't a room at all.

This was a suite.

And it was the nicest place I'd ever stayed in.

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EIGHT

Aracet

Self-consciously fingering one of the tied strings of fabric over my shoulder that was the only thing holding up one of my new dresses, I glanced around the veranda again.

Then I touched the side of my head.

My hair wasn't up—I rarely wore it that way—but it was pushed behind my ears because of the heat, and I wanted to make sure the scars weren't showing. At least, not too much. With the sun sinking and the drinks flowing, I didn't think it would be too much of an issue, but I still rubbed at my left temple. Just past my hairline, I felt the ridged scars.

Dropping himself dramatically into the chair next to mine, Henry eyed the trio of German tourists over the rim of his mango margarita. "Stop fussing. You look beautiful, and you have nothing to worry about with those three pricks. I already warned them that if they hit on you, they'll be dealing with Pasqual. And trust me, no one wants to mess with my husband."

Discreetly lowering my left hand, I sipped my own margarita. It was delicious, and it was virgin at my request. "I'm glad he's graduated from *old ball and chain* to *husband*."

Henry bodily turned in his seat to stare at me. His gaze roamed over my face as his eyes narrowed, then he snorted and leaned back in a modern take of a wicker chair. “I misjudged you, Rose Martens.” He took another sip. “And I rarely misjudge people.”

After only the brief encounter in the lobby and the half hour I’d spent out here with Henry, Pasqual, the three young German men, and a handful of other motel guests who drifted in and out, I somehow felt more comfortable around Henry and his husband than I had around anyone else in years. Maybe ever.

It was the reason I asked my next question. “How did you misjudge me?” Scanning the lanai, I inadvertently met the tallest German’s gaze. He smiled.

Henry casually glanced between me and the guy. Then he chuckled in a self-deprecating way. “Oh, I was definitely off about you.” He tossed back the rest of his drink, then looked at me. “No blush, no smile back, no acknowledgment of your admirers whatsoever. You’re either the coolest cat this place has seen in a long time, or you’re more locked down than my husband’s past.” He stood. “And that, my darling Rose, is saying something.” He wiggled his glass. “Another virgin margarita for the male ego assassinator?”

I smiled up at him only because I was about to ask for a courtesy I wouldn’t extend to me. “No, thank you. And thank you for your compliment, albeit an offhanded one. May I ask a favor?”

“Another drink in me, darling, and you can ask anything. Except for sex. I’m spoken for. Besides, you don’t have the right equipment to satisfy me. Not since I came out.”

I held my smile. “May I briefly use your laptop to do a quick job search?”

Henry tilted his head as if attempting to mask suspicion with mock curiosity, but the frown drawing his eyebrows together painted another picture. “What about your cell phone?”

“I don’t have one.”

“No cell phone, no car, one duffle, and a fake ID. The plot thickens.” His back straightened, and his body language turned guarded. “What sort of work are you looking for?”

“Accounting.”

“Numbers,” he stated, like he wasn’t buying it.

“Yes.” Blinking once, I didn’t elaborate. Only inept liars overly explained themselves, and psychopaths didn’t blink, while nervous people frequently blinked. The things I absorbed growing up with a grifter as a father and a stoned neo-hippie bohemian as a mother were schizophrenic, largely impractical and mostly illegal, but sometimes utterly useful. Reading people was useful, but I hadn’t become truly adept at it until the past five years.

Henry’s stare held for another uncomfortable moment, then he sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. But if your searches reset my algorithms on my socials and I start getting ads for financial advice, I’m going to shortsheet your bed and put sand in your morning yogurt.”

“Stop choosing violence.” Coming up behind Henry but looking at me, Pasqual chuckled. “Ignore him. He doesn’t know how to shortsheet a bed.”

“I absolutely do,” Henry argued, turning his head toward his husband.

Pasqual sank a hand into the back of Henry's hair, focused his gaze on him, and then held him captive, both with his gaze and grip, for a heart-fluttering moment that felt way too intimate to witness. Then Pasqual released Henry with a wink.

Henry let out a deep sigh, then looked back at me with a flushed face. "The password's 90210. And that's an ode to the remake, not the original, because I'm not that old."

I had no idea what he was talking about. "Of course, and thank you."

Henry shooed me away. "Go. Before I change my mind or put you to work on my books."

"Or on the reception desk so you could have a break every now and then," Pasqual added.

"Like you take breaks?" Henry asked him with no little ire.

"I won't be long." Leaving them to their argument or foreplay, or whatever that was, I quickly headed toward the front office. I wouldn't mind working for Henry and getting to sample Pasqual's food and drinks daily, but I definitely could not live here. Other than the fact that I couldn't afford it, there were too many people.

Eventually, I would get recognized.

But for now, I was glad that neither Henry nor Pasqual had done a double take when or since they'd met me.

Stealing into reception, I sat behind the tall counter and used the touchpad to wake up Henry's laptop, then I typed in his passcode.

Moments later, with the backdrop of people chatting and laughing on the veranda, I was on a local job postings site, deep in my search, when two

large, tattooed forearms landed on the reception counter.

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NINE

Ares

Standing in a glass office on the top floor of Paragon Ops headquarters, thirty-one stories above Miami Beach, I trained the binos on a motel a block away.

Cypher came up on my six. “Still tracking her?”

“I didn’t think you left the command room on the twenty-ninth floor.” I watched the woman I’d followed all afternoon step away from the motel manager and walk into the lobby.

“You’d be wrong, and by her, I mean the brunette. Mid to late twenties, was in jeans and boots.” Cypher flanked me. “Now she’s in a dress.”

Lowering the binos, ignoring his direct hit, I glanced at the hacker. “What are you doing here this late?” Unless he was on overwatch, he usually came in early and was gone by now.

Arms crossed, the former SEAL, who’d briefly served with Delta before his military career blew up, rolled his shoulders and tilted his head, first left, then right. “Nix is going to speak to you about an assignment.”

Cypher didn’t usually play Nix’s mouthpiece. He was Paragon Ops’s hacker, and his MO was to stay behind his monitors. “What assignment?”

He nodded toward the motel. “You’ve got movement.”

I lifted the binos. Sure enough, one of the tourist fuckers left the poolside patio happy hour and followed the brunette's route into the motel lobby. "How the fuck did you spot that?"

"I didn't."

Dropping the binos on the desk, I threw him a glance as I pulled out my cell. "We're a quarter klick out and four hundred and forty feet up. Everyone looks like ants, but you saw specific movement. How?" Swiping on my cell, I brought up the feeds to the motel's security cameras I'd already hacked.

"Instinct, but interesting to know you have the building's stats memorized." Cypher glanced over my shoulder. "And the three German tourists were clocking her the second they saw her. Tallest one was waiting for an opening. She just gave it to him."

Jesus. "How fucking long have you been tracking my movements?"

"Today?"

Fuck me. I wasn't sloppy. Or I hadn't been. Except this was now twice in one day that I'd been tracked. Coming into HQ to get eyes on the woman had been a mistake, but it'd also given me a clear sight line to the motel.

"In general," I replied, because Cypher's cryptic question implied he'd been watching me for a hell of a lot longer than one day.

"It's in the job description. I track everyone at Paragon Ops." He nodded toward the screen, and we watched in real time as the German asshole leaned his arms on the reception desk. "You going to do something about that?"

“No.” He was. “Call the motel.” I gave him the number I’d already memorized.

Cypher dug his cell out of his pocket and dialed. “How do you want me to play it?”

I didn’t care. “Ask about rates.” I just needed the line ringing and the manager entering the lobby to answer it because I’d already run background checks. He was more than a motel manager, and his husband was a hell of a lot more than a hobbyist chef.

Cypher put his cell on speaker as the call went through.

The line rang, and the brunette’s gaze cut to the phone.

Four people watched the phone ring two more times.

Then the manager walked into the lobby and grabbed the handset a split second before his voice came through Cypher’s cell. “Oceanside Hotel and Suites, please hold.”

“Copy,” Cypher replied.

We watched on the security feed as the manager said something to the German asshole. The guy slowly leaned back, looked pointedly at the brunette, then nodded at the manager before he walked out.

Tracking his exfil, the manager unmuted the call. “Thanks for holding. How can I help you?”

Cypher hung up, and Nix walked into the office.

The owner of Paragon Operations nodded at his hacker, then glanced at me. “Ares. A word?”

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TEN

Aracet

Reluctantly, I glanced up at the tallest German tourist, but I avoided direct eye contact, and I didn't say anything.

He smiled. "I did not know you work here."

I'd learned a long time ago to say as little as possible when you spoke with someone. Not about to tell this guy I didn't work here, I glanced toward the veranda. "Is there something you need help with?" Where the hell was Henry?

Leaning closer, the German with tattooed arms lowered his voice. "You can come dancing with me tonight."

I didn't flirt, I rarely smiled, and I never encouraged a man's attention. But over the years, I'd inadvertently attracted some. I'd also encountered my fair share of men who mistook disinterest for aloofness, then turned it into a personal challenge.

Apparently, my purposeful disinterest on the veranda had sparked this guy's pursuit.

I focused on the screen of Henry's laptop. "No, thank you."

"Are you sure? I heard about this new club—"

The phone on the reception desk rang so loud, I startled, and he stopped talking.

Then it rang again, somehow sounding louder than the first time.

The German frowned. “Are you going to answer?”

Absolutely not, but where the hell was Henry? He had to have heard the ringing from the veranda.

The phone rang a third time, and Henry rushed in to grab it. “Oceanside Hotel and Suites, please hold.” Muting the call, he glared at the German. “Drinks are on the veranda, not in here. Are we clear?”

Slowly leaning back and resuming his full height, the guy stared at me for a moment. Then he looked at Henry and nodded before walking away.

Henry unmuted the call as he watched the guy leave. “Thanks for holding. How can I help you?” Sighing exaggeratedly, Henry replaced the handset on the outdated phone. “Impatient military prick.”

Or maybe the phone was retro. I couldn’t tell. A lot of things in this motel were a combination of old and new. Not that I was focusing on the phone or how loud it had rung anymore. Something else Henry had said struck a nerve. “How do you know it was someone from the military?”

“He said *copy* when I asked him to hold.” Henry nodded toward the door leading to the veranda. “How long was Mr. Can’t Take A Hint bothering you? You should have come and gotten me.”

“It was fine.” It wasn’t, and I was trying to tell myself the military comment and caller were all a coincidence. “I was almost done anyway.” I quickly deleted my search history, closed out the browser, and reached to power off the laptop.

Henry's gaze narrowed. "If you're not finished, why are you shutting down?" He pushed my hand away from the Power button. "Leave it on. Hell, search away, *Pretty Little Liars*." He waved at his computer with a flourish. "May as well, now that your stalker is gone."

I mentally shuddered at the stalker comment and immediately thought of a tall, muscular blond man. "I wasn't lying." Not just then. And I'd seen enough job postings to get started on a few leads.

Henry looked at me like I was out of my mind. "You're absolute shit at pop culture references. *Pretty Little Liars* was a TV show."

Ah. "I don't watch television."

"First of all, the fact that you used the word *television* is a problem. Second, who the hell doesn't watch TV?"

I didn't. Offering a slight shrug, I redirected the conversation. "Thank you for letting me borrow your laptop." I stood and stepped away from the desk chair on wheels that was more padded white leather chic than office chair utilitarian.

Henry backfilled my position and set his drink down with one hand as his other landed on the keyboard. For a split second, he froze. Then he looked up at me as his palm went flat over the keys. "Wait."

Alarm gripped my nerves. "What?"

Henry's other hand landed on the keys, palm also flat, fingers spread. Then he abruptly stood and yelled. "Pasqual!"

The urge to flee, to leave my duffle and just run, was so overwhelming that my body vibrated. Then I started justifying. I had my purse strapped crossbody. I had the money in it. I could leave all my clothes. I could get

new fake IDs to replace the ones hidden in my duffle. It wouldn't matter if Henry or Pasqual or anyone else found the three remaining IDs in my bag in the room—I hadn't used any of those yet. And most importantly, they didn't know who I was. They didn't know my past. At least not yet, but the way Henry had yelled in a panic? *Shit, shit, shit*.

I took a step toward the door. "What's wrong?" *Leave, Aracet, LEAVE NOW*.

"Do *not* move," Henry warned before he yelled again. "Pasqual!" But his husband was already walking into the reception area with a powerful military-style stride I'd somehow missed before.

Sparing me a quick lips-only smile that was nothing like his laughter earlier this afternoon, Pasqual took in his husband's stance and the laptop that Henry still had his hand on. "What's going on?"

"It's happening again." Henry shoved the computer toward Pasqual. "We're being hacked."

Hacked?

An image of a tall, muscular blond man immediately flooded my mind, but just as fast, I dismissed it. This couldn't be related. I didn't even know if it had been the same man. Different boots, different outfits. Hell, the few times I'd dared a glance toward his head, even his hair had been different. Sometimes shorter, sometimes longer, sometimes darker blond, sometimes lighter. And the different hats—baseball, watch caps, beanies. I'd observed a lot of people over the years. I'd been people-watching my whole life. And one thing I'd learned was that normal people, not people like me, didn't drastically vary their appearance.

This wasn’t about a tall, muscular blond man or me being hacked. It couldn’t be.

“It’s all right.” Squeezing Henry’s shoulder, Pasqual sat at the reception desk. “Settle down. I’ll check.” Pasqual’s hands started flying across the keyboard.

“No, it’s not all right,” Henry spat. “She was using it, and it overheated like last time. We both know what that means, and do not tell me to *settle down*.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Pasqual replied distractedly. “This happens, love. You know they do this from time to time.”

They? Oh God. “I should… leave you both to it.”

Henry’s tone angry and Pasqual’s gentle but firm, they said, “No” in unison.

Panicked, I glanced toward the door.

Henry angled to block my escape, then he glared down at me. “I swear to hell, if you run right now, I will grab that scrawny *Pretty Little Liars* neck of yours and choke the living daylights out of you.”

“Henry,” Pasqual warned. Then his hands abruptly stilled.

“What?” Henry snapped, glancing at his husband a second later when he realized Pasqual wasn’t typing anymore. “What did you…” Leaning over Pasqual’s shoulder, he scanned the laptop screen. Then he lost it. “I fucking knew it!” Henry pointed at me. “It’s her!” He glanced back at Pasqual. “I told you this would happen. I knew she would—”

“I should go.” Cutting Henry off, aiming for the door, I didn’t look back. “I’ll just grab my duffle.” I wouldn’t.

“She’s right.” Pasqual’s calm tone unnerved me. “We should get her out of that suite.” He glanced at me. “It’s just precautionary. Nothing to worry about.”

“Bullshit,” Henry spat, but the anger from moments ago was fading into resignation. “You’re just saying that so *Pretty Little Liars* doesn’t have a fucking coronary on our terrazzo floors. You saw which security cameras they tracked. Whoever hacked us this time had nothing to do with you.”

Wait. With Pasqual? “It’s okay.” Inching backwards, telling myself this was about Pasqual and whoever he was, I reached for my usual lie. “I have to check on my grandmother anyway. Actually, I’ll probably stay with her.” They could keep the money I’d paid upfront. Leaving expediently was my only play here.

Henry’s hand came up, condemning finger pointed. “I already told you what I’ll do if you run.”

Pasqual lowered Henry’s arm as he looked at me. “It’s not that you aren’t safe here, but I won’t lie. A hack has occurred on our system, and every security camera angle that was viewed had you in frame. I’m not saying this was specifically targeted at you, or the pattern I’m seeing isn’t random.”

“It’s not random,” Henry argued.

“All the same,” Pasqual continued. “I’d like to relocate you out of that suite. Do you really have somewhere else to go?”

“Yes.” No. But I’d find some place. A new motel tonight, a bus ticket tomorrow. Shit, I should leave immediately. Staying tonight would only prolong the inevitable, but something wasn’t adding up. My notoriety had never attracted this kind of attention. I was more shunned spectacle than

tracked criminal. And after only a few hours in this city, despite this hacking incident, I didn't want to leave Miami. The sunlight, the bright tropical colors everywhere, the scents, the sounds, even the punishing humidity, it had all grown on me. I didn't want to get on another bus or pick a new town. But I couldn't afford to stay.

"She's lying," Henry told Pasqual. "Look at her eyes."

"There's nothing to look at." Berating myself for not recognizing sooner that Henry was a human lie detector, for going to the happy hour in the first place, for asking to use Henry's computer, I had to force myself not to blink or drop eye contact. "And no need to relocate me." The offer itself was beyond suspicious, but more than that, I was already way too involved with them. I needed to get out of here. *Now*. "I'm going to grab my duffle, then I'll leave. I'm sorry about… whatever happened on your computer." I told myself again that it wasn't about me. If I was being tracked or hacked, something would've happened before now. And if any of those terrorists were still alive, which I'd been assured they weren't, I'd already be dead.

Henry exhaled, and suddenly all of his ire deflated. "Pasqual, just go with her. I'll call Maurice and have him comp a room. She can stay at his motel." He opened a drawer, fished out a set of keys, and tossed them to Pasqual. "You're driving her, though, because I've already had a few cocktails, but don't fucking flirt with Maurice."

Pasqual caught the keys single-handed. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Yes, you would, you filthy fucking degenerate. I don't even know why I love you."

Pasqual tipped an imaginary hat and winked.

“That. Right there,” Henry accused Pasqual. “Don’t fucking do that with Maurice.” Henry aimed his pointed stare at me. “You. Call me once you’re settled. I idiotically feel responsible for you now, and I hate worrying.”

Before I could lie and say I’d call him, Henry tipped his head back and groaned at the ceiling.

“No fucking phone. *Of course*.” Lifting his head back up, Henry eyed Pasqual. “You still have those prepaid burners?”

“Always, and don’t worry.” Pasqual’s hand landed on my shoulder. “I’ll take care of her. Leave the security system disabled and go back to the guests.”

Henry stared at his husband for a moment. Then, very seriously, he saluted Pasqual before performing a perfect about-face and walking out of the reception area.

Still firmly gripping me, Pasqual turned us toward the front glass doors. “This way, Aracet.”

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ELEVEN

Ares

I followed Nix into his office.

"Shut the door." The former SEAL walked behind his desk, leaned down to type on a laptop, then spun it around to face me.

I closed the glass door that was useless against privacy in a building occupied by Tier One operators, then glanced at the image on the screen.

My brunette. Getting off the bus at the Miami station earlier this afternoon.

"Aracet Vandon," he stated. "You're familiar with her."

I was more than familiar, which Nix knew. He'd also probably seen every redacted detail from that FRAGO eight years ago, including how I'd fucked up. Nix wasn't only a former SEAL, he'd done a stint with the CIA's Special Activities Center. Specifically the paramilitary unit within their Special Operations Group known as Ground Branch. Nix was also the son of a Vice Admiral. All of which made him Navy royalty. He had connections I could only imagine, not to mention he was a hacker and world-class spy. He probably knew what I'd been doing for the past five years.

But that didn't necessarily mean he knew the depth of my obsession.

Not denying my familiarity, I tipped my chin.

Nix eyed me a beat, then glanced down at the screen before shutting the laptop. “New intel suggests a resurgence of ISIS activity. Reports indicate a successor to Ibrahim al-Hashimi has been appointed and is active.”

He was half right. The self-appointed head of ISIS successor was Aimal al-Hashimi, aka The Vulture. Except he was dead, and I had firsthand knowledge of how it went down. Not that I spoke of that particular incident or any other eliminations. Instead, I deflected. “The Syrian opposition strongholds were razed. There is no current successor.”

“This is a recent development, and we don’t have precise location confirmation yet. Informants are still scouting the subterranean tunnel network between Syria and Iraq.”

Fuck. I knew where this was going. “Who is it?”

“Bin al-Adani.”

It took less than a fraction of a second to make the connection. “Ahmad al-Adani.” The fucking jihadist fighter and trafficker who’d taken Aracet and her cousin. The terrorist I’d killed eight years ago. But that wasn’t who the fuck Nix was talking about. I knew the damn prefix meaning.

“Bin al-Adani is Ahmad al-Adani’s son, but yes, same family,” Nix corrected and confirmed. Then he dropped the hammer. “Intel suggests Vandon was directly embedded with Bin al-Adani, and is the only known living ally who can identify him.”

“No. You’re not involving her.” No fucking way. And who the hell knew if the woman was an ally of anyone. I sure as hell wouldn’t be after the reintegration she went through for three fucking years.

“I haven’t given the parameters yet,” Nix countered.

“Answer’s still no.” I wasn’t going to let the woman get dragged into this. “Use sat imagery and facial rec. This isn’t a civilian’s responsibility.”

“There’re no existing images of al-Adani. Every alphabet soup agency has tried and failed to capture satellite imagery of him. Now the situation’s critical, and top Brass wants a positive ID before we strike.”

Nix didn’t deal with *top Brass*. He had a direct line to the man himself. It didn’t matter that the administration had changed twice since he’d been Ground Branch. Nix was *Tertia Optio*. Every Commander in Chief kept Nix in their back pocket.

“How top?” I challenged.

Nix eyed me. Then he launched into the parameters of an assignment with impossible fucking odds.

I should’ve refused.

Except this wasn’t a damn assignment.

This was a direct order.

It was also history repeating itself. As if every step I’d taken in the past eight years was a damn joke. Like fate was fucking me twice. First with those hazel eyes and that FUBAR mission, and now with an obsession I’d never been able to shake. Arguably the latter was destiny, but it didn’t matter what descriptive you gave this. All thoughts of the brunette being in my world for my own personal depravity sank under the weight of my dishonor, and I knew what I was going to do.

A war was coming.

One I was going to create.

“Questions?” Nix asked.

Only one that mattered because this wasn’t going to be a mission with Tier One operators in theater. “Timeline?” This was going to be me and her, and I wanted to know how much fucking time I had left with my brunette.

“Immediate. Vandon needs to be recruited and on board STAT. Location intel’s incoming. Once we have it, you’ll be Oscar Mike.” Nix’s cell rang, and he glanced at it.

My head spun up, my hands itching to shoot or rig, I turned to leave.

“Ares.”

I glanced back.

“Cypher’s overwatch, I’m backup if needed, but no one else gets read in. This needs to be clean. Understood?”

Nothing about breaching an ISIS cell in a tunnel and cave complex with a civilian, let alone my brunette, was going to be clean. If those jihadists spotted her, she was dead. If they spotted me, they’d torture us both, then she’d be dead. At best, with a team of trained operators, this would be a suicide mission.

Internally cursing every stalking step I’d taken over the past five years, irate with myself for not taking her completely off-grid when I’d had plenty of opportunity, I made a silent vow.

If I was going to walk that woman through the valley of death, I was going to rain down hell.

I tipped my chin at Nix.

Then I walked the fuck out.

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TWELVE

Aracet

My name echoing in my head, panicked shock stalling my flee reflex, I allowed a man I didn't know to lead me across a motel that had its security cameras disabled.

Five paces away from the lobby, down a fragrantly scented, tropically landscaped pathway, I found my voice. "Wait."

"It's best that we don't, love." Ushering me to my suite with his unrelenting grip on my shoulder, Pasqual stopped in front of the door and held out his free hand. "Key."

I fished it out of my purse and dropped it on his outstretched palm.

With quick precision, he unlocked the suite, then pushed open the door and scanned the two rooms like I would have. "You're all clear. Grab your belongings."

My mind racing, quickly glancing across the suite for a nonexistent escape, I weighed my options but wound up right back where I was. A captive. For now.

Resigned to my current circumstances, I grabbed my duffle that I always kept packed and ready to go for reasons so close to this scenario that my actions were almost comical. Then I headed back out the door and

walked right past the man I'd foolishly assumed was nothing more than a culinary enthusiast and margarita maker.

The moment I passed him, Pasqual took my duffle, then resumed his grip on my shoulder. Except instead of pushing me ahead of him, he fell in beside me, matched my pace, and leaned so close that to an outside observer, we'd look like a couple.

He maintained the façade and his silence as we walked down pathways too pretty for the internal soundtrack of my pounding heart. Then he led me around the side of the motel to a tiny parking lot that was tucked between the surrounding buildings that all towered over the two stories of the Oceanside Motel and Suites.

Aiming a key fob at the last kind of vehicle I would've expected a man like Pasqual, let alone Henry, to drive, Pasqual opened the passenger door of a rusted sedan that looked older than my last car.

I got in.

Pasqual shut the door that squeaked before taking a cell out of his jeans pocket and quickly typing as he rounded the front of the musty-smelling car. Then he shoved the phone into his pocket and tossed my duffle in the back seat before practically folding himself in half to get behind the wheel.

Surprisingly, the vehicle started right up, and Pasqual pulled out of the tight parking spot like a professional race car driver.

I lasted two blocks. "This doesn't seem like the type of car Henry would drive." Or be caught riding in.

Pasqual chuckled. "That's because he doesn't. He has a Bentley Continental GT convertible in Silverlake Metallic." He spared me a quick

glance as he smiled. “The color matches his eyes.”

I didn’t know that make or model, but it sounded expensive, and a convertible definitely seemed to fit Henry. Except none of that explained why we were in this junker. “So Henry just keeps your keys in the reception desk drawer and hands them to you when you need them?” I couldn’t comprehend that level of trust, junker or not.

“No, I keep my keys there for him.” Pasqual glanced at me again. “The Bentley’s not always reliable.”

“And he drives this car?”

Pasqual grinned. “Not yet.”

I shouldn’t have been asking personal questions—at least not these ones. I shouldn’t have gotten into this car in the first place. There’d been people around the motel. I could’ve made a scene. I could’ve run.

I could’ve asked how the hell Pasqual knew my real name, and why Henry’s laptop had been hacked before.

But I was in denial.

Or maybe I was just tired and resigned to letting this play out because more than Pasqual saying my name, more than this entire inexplicable evening where this couple had seemingly taken me under their wing, Pasqual’s behavior toward me hadn’t changed since he’d said my name.

I didn’t want to admit the weakness, but that right there was the reason I was sitting in his car.

I wasn’t Aracet Vandon the traitor.

I was just Aracet…

In a car with a man who'd gotten a very specific gesture from his husband.

I glanced at Pasqual. "Henry saluted you."

The man in jeans and a short-sleeved linen button-up shirt gave me a quiet chuckle that was as laid-back as his outfit. "He did."

"Were you in the military?"

Pasqual frowned. "You're not asking if Henry was?"

I used the trick often, but I hated when someone replied to a question with one of their own. "Was Henry military?"

Pasqual hesitated for a brief second. "He was."

"And you?"

"You're not going to ask which branch Henry served in? Or how he survived authority?"

No. "You wouldn't tell me if I did." I didn't know Pasqual, but I already knew enough to recognize a kindred spirit. Pasqual didn't run his mouth, and he wouldn't give you any information about his husband that Henry hadn't already told you himself, and even then, I doubted he would speak about him.

"Very astute."

I ignored the backhanded compliment. "Which branch were you in?"

"Brief stint in the Air Force."

"And that's why you get hacked at the motel?" More importantly, their backgrounds and not mine seemed to be the reason why it happened.

Pasqual turned a corner and waited until he pulled up to the next red light before he answered. “No. That would be my time with the NSA.”

I studied him. Salt-and-pepper hair, tan, muscular, no lines on his face to match his hair color except on the outside corners of his eyes that I had ignorantly thought looked kind when I first met him. Now, I saw him for who he was. A former Air Force airman who had worked at the NSA.

No wonder he’d recognized me. “That’s why you called me Aracet.”

Pasqual gave me a pointed look. “I’m not judging you.”

He should. “What did you do at the NSA?” Besides counter-hacking, apparently.

“Intelligence,” he replied vaguely, pulling up not to a motel, but an apartment complex on a residential street. “We’re here.”

Suddenly more wary than when he’d used my birth name, I scanned the street that had no pedestrians. “This isn’t a motel.”

“No, it’s not.” Pasqual opened his door.

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THIRTEEN

Aracet

Carrying my duffle, Pasqual walked up three flights of outside stairs and down a long exterior corridor where a rusted railing—the only separation between me and a thirty-foot drop—looked like it was one good push away from toppling over the edge.

I'd never considered myself to be someone who was afraid of heights, but a queasy stomach and sudden lightheadedness had me hugging the wall opposite of that railing.

"Here we are." Pasqual stopped at the last apartment, the only one with a door perpendicular to the corridor. Reaching down, he took a key from under a coir mat, then unlocked the door and pushed it in. With a quick glance inside, he stepped back and gestured for me to enter.

I walked in.

It was small.

Studio small.

Four walls, queen-size bed, two-seater couch, tiny coffee table, one nightstand, galley kitchen, small table with two chairs, a bathroom opposite the front door with a stall shower and a closet with louvered doors next to

it. One window by the front door, one high above the bed that didn’t open, and one with frosted panes in the bathroom.

The bedding, the refrigerator, the nightstand, the counter, the tile flooring, the walls, the single kitchen cabinet, the closet doors, the air conditioner by the front door, they were all white. The couch was navy, the table was glass, the two kitchen chairs were light wood. Bars covered all the windows.

“What do you think?” Pasqual set my duffle on the couch and my key on the coffee table, but he didn’t close the front door.

Everything was clean, in seemingly perfect condition, and the furniture had been placed with almost measured precision. “I think if Henry were on a budget, he and his military orderliness would approve.” The studio apartment, while not nearly as designed as the Oceanside Motel and Suites, had a certain Henry-esque quality about it. Efficient, functional, neat, and orderly.

Pasqual chuckled. “Don’t be fooled. Henry didn’t enlist to learn structure. He joined the Navy to prove a point. He’s never had to worry about money. He chooses to work. But I’m guessing you know what it’s like to work hard for your money.”

I did, but I didn’t comment. My life was a product of my choices.

Pasqual studied me a moment, then he tipped his chin toward the small space. “Rent’s normally fifteen hundred a month. Basic utilities—water, electric, garbage—are included. Landlord’s an acquaintance. I talked him down to twelve hundred for the first three months, then it reverts to full price. The cash you gave Henry has already been applied toward your first month. Most importantly, though, you’ll be safe here.”

Far too disarmed by him, I spoke freely. “Safety isn’t exactly my problem.” Notoriety was.

“Safety should always be your number one concern, young lady. Here in Miami or anywhere else.”

Properly scolded, I nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He fished his cell out of his pocket and handed it to me. “This is a prepaid burner. There should be enough airtime to last you ninety days if you use it sparingly, and you’ll need to purchase a charger. I programmed the number for one of my other burners, and the landlord’s number is in the text history. You’ll have to arrange with him to pay the rest of the first month’s rent. Next week is fine. Can you swing it?”

Heat touched my cheeks for reasons I couldn’t decipher in the moment other than I felt guilty for everything he was doing for me, especially knowing I wasn’t going to stay. “Yes.”

“Good. Call the motel if you need us or don’t find a job right away. Henry will have something for you if you’re willing to work housekeeping or man the desk after hours.”

“You’ve been more than generous.” Staring at the phone in my hand, emotion I’d tried very hard to make myself immune to, welled. Then I locked it down and tried to hand the cell back to him. “I can’t accept this.” His background, the hacking incident tonight, for all I knew, he was somehow tracking the cell. Not that I had much else to hide from him now that he knew my identity.

“It’s just a burner. Keep it.”

It was more than that, and we both knew it.

“Before you worry, it was paid for in cash. It’s as untraceable as you’re going to get.” Pasqual turned toward the door but paused to glance back before he walked out. “Henry knows everybody, and everybody knows him, but he doesn’t make or collect friends. He keeps everyone at a safe distance. Except today, he chose not to. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I did. Intimately. “Yes.”

“Good. Word of advice?”

After everything he’d done for me, I didn’t want to be disrespectful, but I felt the same about authority as his husband. “All right.”

“Don’t leave the second I drive away. Whether tonight’s hack was about you, me, or generalized phishing is irrelevant compared to the vast amount of digital intel that’s tracked daily.” Pasqual held my gaze for a suspended heartbeat to see if I would respond.

I didn’t. But his point was noted and somehow comforting.

He continued. “Stop running, Aracet. You can’t hide from your past or identity forever. Trust me, I tried. Give Miami a chance. The city may surprise you.” Pasqual smiled with alarming genuineness. “It surprised me.” With his eyes shining and his smile holding, he winked. Then he quietly closed the door behind him.

Now I understood why his husband had told him not to flirt.

Pasqual’s smile, the affection and contentedness behind it, was a loaded weapon.

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FOURTEEN

Ares

Following the former Air Force 1N2X1 SIGINT Analyst who'd been with the NSA—which accounted for two of the only three details I'd been able to pull on him besides his name when I'd run his background—I watched Pasqual Serra park in front of an apartment complex in Grapeland Heights.

With the same damn grip on her shoulder that he'd employed when walking her to his piece-of-shit sedan in the motel parking lot, he led the woman up three flights of stairs.

Retrieving a key from under a mat, Serra unlocked a door, glanced inside, then retreated.

The woman walked in. Serra followed. The door stayed open.

Parking the Denali across the street, I cut the engine and waited.

Seven minutes later, Serra exfilled. Scanning the complex and street once, including my POS, his gaze didn't linger, and I didn't expect it to. He was better trained than that.

Jogging down the stairs, he retraced his steps.

I grabbed a piece of tech I needed and got out of the SUV. Intercepting his trajectory, I stepped in front of the former airman. "Serra."

A decade older than me, four inches shorter, built like a brick shithouse, the cryptologist turned Signals Intelligence Analyst smiled. “Do I know you?”

Cagey prick. “The brunette. What were you doing with her?”

Crossing his arms in a flex meant to intimidate, Serra studied me a beat. “Oh, of course. I see the family resemblance now. How’s Helios?”

Still an asshole, forever my brother. I didn’t show my surprise that he knew Helios. In certain circles, everyone knew my brother. “The brunette?”

“She’s fine.” Serra rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Ares, right? God of war. Quite the namesake.”

“Why the relocation?” I demanded.

The fucker frowned, then let his gaze drift a second before he focused up. “CAG, right? If I remember correctly, you were known for your sniper skills. Your brother, too, but you surpassed his confirmed kills.”

If he knew I was Combat Applications Group, he knew who and what I was. “As a courtesy, I’ll ask one last time. What are you doing with the brunette?”

“Summarizing here. You know her?”

I waited.

Serra nodded. “All right. Since you know her, and taking into account your years in the service, I’m going to assume your knowledge isn’t of a personal nature. In which case, I’m going to ask you a question. One time.” Fucker paused to make sure he had my attention. “What do you want with her?”

“Classified. Why is she in Miami?” Translation, did she know the analyst before relocating here?

Serra smiled. “Who doesn’t love the best beaches in the continental United States?”

It wasn’t her MO. The brunette had never picked an oceanfront location before. “Why was she at your motel?”

“Good question.” Serra winked, then dropped the smile. “Secondhand clothes, bargaining over the room rate—I’m going with word of mouth. She probably heard about us from one of the local shops.”

I watched for tells. He had none. Whether he was downloading the truth or not, the fact remained the woman wasn’t at his place anymore. “What threat necessitated the move from the motel?”

“Why are you assuming there was a threat?” Serra challenged.

I didn’t trust a fucking word this prick said, but I asked the question. “How close are you with your former colleagues?”

He laughed. “I’m not.”

I showed my hand. “She entered your lobby from the poolside ingress, a German followed, your partner kicked him out, you entered. Then you escorted her with protection-detail maneuvers to her room, retrieved her bag, got into an unregistered vehicle with no GPS, and drove her to a new location. Something triggered the exfil. What was it?”

Serra sighed. “It never leaves us, does it?” Then he smiled ironically. “I wondered if the breach on the motel’s server tonight was from my former friends at the NSA. It’s not unheard of. They like to see what I’m up to from time to time. But now I’m thinking it was you. Or your hacker at Paragon

Operations.” Raising an eyebrow for confirmation he wasn’t going to get, he paused a beat. “In retrospect, I should’ve recognized the difference. Didn’t think I was getting rusty. Then again, I didn’t spot you on my tail when I drove here.”

“I wasn’t on your six.”

He let out a half laugh. “Right. Traffic cams. Digital dust is everywhere.”

Not if you were careful. “The hack was the reason for the relocation?”

“Yes, but precautionary.”

“Her decision or yours?”

Fucker didn’t hesitate. “Mine.”

Nodding once, I moved to step around him.

“One request?”

I glanced back.

“Leave her alone tonight. That girl’s been through a lot.” He tipped his chin toward the apartments. “Friend of mine owns this building. She’ll be safe here. He’ll keep an eye out.”

That was exactly what I was concerned about. Other eyes on her.

I didn’t ask who owned the building or acknowledge his request. Mission intent, I headed toward the apartment building.

“You’re not what I expected,” Serra called after me. “You’re different than Helios.”

Still fucking surprised he knew Helios, I didn’t bother telling him we were as different as two brothers could be—except for one commonality.

Obsession ran in the blood.

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FIFTEEN

Aracet

The air conditioner hummed, humidity spilled in from the window I'd cracked open, and the overhead fan made a dizzying pattern of chopped-up moonlight on the ceiling.

Lying on top of the covers in the perfectly firm bed in the dead of night, I stared at the darkness here that was nothing like the dark in Minnesota.

Cast shadows from the waxing gibbous, streetlamps, other apartments, and city life all danced on the walls as the scent of night filled the small studio with exotic florals, cooking, and the distant ocean.

I hadn't left.

I didn't even check bus schedules.

But I had brought up the same job search I'd done at the Oceanside, then scrolled for three and a half minutes. The sky didn't fall, no government agency kicked down my door, and the burner wasn't hacked—that I knew of.

I'd also barely made a perceptible dent in the airtime.

I glanced at the glowing alarm clock on the single nightstand that was on the opposite side of the bed from the window.

Two fifty-nine a.m.

One minute until Fourth Watch.

I stared at the clock. Then the two, five, and nine changed to three-zero-zero.

I looked back up at my chaotically flickering ceiling pattern courtesy of the fan. Except there was nothing *my* about the ceiling or any other part of this apartment….

But maybe there could be.

I glanced at the single-counter kitchen that was smaller than the one in the motel suite, and I felt a kinship with its compact tidiness. The fridge that was shorter than me, the two-burner electric stovetop, the small stainless sink, the one overhead cabinet, the little white toaster—I could see myself making food there. A meal for one. Two pieces of toast for breakfast. Cold orange juice in the fridge. Maybe they had mango juice here.

Maybe I'd never find out.

The spiritual warfare of the hour hijacked my thoughts even further, and I imagined a picked flower of whatever variety was making the apartment smell like that sweet, lush, heady muskiness. I'd use one of the glasses from the upper cupboard as a makeshift vase and put the flower next to the bed so I could smell the scent of summer all night long.

I could rest easy at night with the chain on the door, the new-looking deadbolt thrown, and the secured bars on the window that faced the exterior corridor. The latter didn't bother me. Usually, the blatant tell of window bars or a caged screen door signaling a high-risk, high-crime area would be a deterring factor for me, and I'd look for another place to live.

But I’d been lying here for hours, window open, and all I’d heard was traffic and the usual chatter of people living their lives. It’d now faded to cicadas and tree frogs and the occasional truck or car passing, but the same thought kept churning in my mind….

I could live here.

I could spend sleepless nights with the languid breeze and the scent of the ocean. I could greet each morning with that blanket of bright yellow sunshine I’d witnessed yesterday. I could dip my toes into the impossibly clear turquoise waters I’d spied on my cross-city bus ride.

And maybe enough time had passed.

Yes, Pasqual—and I was assuming Henry now, too—knew who I was. And yes, there’d been that horrible hacking incident. But Henry had told me to call him tomorrow. Pasqual had set me up with this apartment and told me to stay. Neither had called me a traitor or a terrorist.

They hadn’t shunned me.

Maybe it was a sign. Maybe this was a new beginning. And maybe, for once, the girl who’d spent her childhood moving more often than she changed clothes, the neglected kid who’d learned how to survive on scraps, the teenager who’d held on to every moment as if it were her last, could finally find peace and dwell in her own skin.

Pasqual’s words echoed in my mind.

Give Miami a chance.

The mango margarita, flaky empanada, and crispy croquette long gone, my stomach rumbled, and my mouth watered for more, but a contentedness

I never would have imagined possible a few hours ago was embracing my heart.

Pasqual’s smile and Henry’s salute flashed through my mind.

I turned on my side to face the window.

Miami and the unknown were out there.

So was the possibility of two new friends.

When you had nothing, the prospect of something was an intoxicating thought.

So much so that I rolled back to face the nightstand and grabbed the burner. Keeping the brightness at the lowest setting to preserve the battery until I bought a charger, I quickly brought up the job search again and scrolled. With an idea brewing, I didn’t pause on any of the opportunities I’d gone for in the past. Instead, I stopped at a posting I’d already seen twice but dismissed each time. Now, I wasn’t dismissing it. Even better, the hourly rate had increased twice since I’d first seen it.

I read the posting.

Barista still needed. PLEASE! I don’t care anymore if you have experience. I will train you and *give you free coffee. Just show up! $18/hour, 40 hours a week.*

An address followed.

Using an app already on the cell, I mapped it from my current location, then I did the math.

It was a long walk from here, across a couple of busy roads, but if I was careful, I could afford a junker car, gas, auto insurance, and the rent on that

hourly rate…. And I wouldn't be hidden away in an office all day, avoiding people and circumventing living.

This really could be a new life.

I checked the coffee shop's hours, memorized the address, set the cell phone back on the nightstand, and rolled over to face the window.

I tucked my hands under my cheek.

Minutes later, I was asleep.

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SIXTEEN

Ares

Before taking the stairs to the third floor, I stepped into the shadows.

Making sure I was out of the NSA analyst's field of vision, I watched the fucker get into his sedan. Then he scanned the block, the apartment complex, and my last POS before I'd moved out of his line of sight.

I gave him credit for not immediately leaving, but that's all I gave him credit for.

He drove off sixty seconds later.

Palming my cell, I made a call.

Cypher picked up on the first ring. "Grayson."

"I need you to run a background check." My preliminary search this afternoon hadn't cut it. Cypher would be able to dig deeper. "Pasqual Serra. Air Force, then NSA."

"Don't need to. I'm in his motel's server as we speak, but I'm not the only one hacking him."

"NSA?"

"Yeah. They've got back doors all over his shit."

"Because?"

“Because they’re the fucking NSA.” Cypher typed. “They’re also probably still pissed they let one of their best cryptologists and analysts slip through their chokehold.”

“Context?”

“Serra got fed up one day and walked. Took all his intel with him. Didn’t download any of the intelligence he was sitting on, wiped his own machine, dropped his letter of resignation on the director’s desk, then called security on himself to walk his ass out of the building.”

Jesus. “How do you know all this?”

“Every hacker knows this. Serra’s a legend.”

“Then why are you in his server?” Or more importantly, how?

“After you spoke with Nix, then left, I breached his firewall to get eyes on your brunette. She was already Oscar Mike, but I saw the back doors. Now I’m cleaning up his system for him.”

“In your spare time.”

“When you tell the Director of the NSA, who also happens to be the General serving concurrently as the Commander of U.S. Cyber Command to fuck off, you earn my time.”

“Good to know.” Cypher’d had his own run-in with Command.

“It isn’t. You don’t want my attention.” Cypher’s typing paused. “We done, or do you need something else?”

“How locked down is Serra?”

“This intel wasn’t free-floating around CAG?” Cypher resumed typing.

“No.” Not that I’d heard.

Cypher exhaled. “Two hours after he walked, Serra was hooded and snatched by a tactical team. Unclear if it was the Agency’s Ground Branch or a black-budget op carried out by a contractor, but they held him for forty-eight days.” The backdrop of keys clicking stopped. “Every interrogation tactic we were trained in, they used.” Cypher paused. “Serra didn’t break.”

I glanced up at the third floor of the apartment building. “That’s confirmed?”

“Affirmative.”

And the brunette had walked into Serra’s motel, of all the fucking motels in Miami Beach. I asked Cypher a version of the same question I’d asked the analyst. “How does Oceanside Suites play into all this?”

“It doesn’t. Serra purchased the motel after he retired. Legit business. No intelligence chatter connected to the place other than the fact that he owns it. Serra’s locked down. Whatever he knows about the brunette will stay with him.”

“And his partner?”

“Husband,” Cypher corrected. “Henry Forester was Navy, SWCC. Passed BUD/S and made it through SEAL Qualification Training. The only reason he didn’t get pinned with a Trident was because of a politically fueled technicality on his marksmanship scores. Didn’t stop him from serving twelve years alongside the Teams, though. Earned a Bronze Star with Valor, a Meritorious Service Medal, and four Good Conduct Medals. Bottom line, Forester won’t say shit about the woman either.”

“Copy. Thanks.”

“Need anything else, you know where to find me.” Cypher hung up.

The main window of the third-floor end unit darkened with a shadow, then it was pushed open six inches.

The shadow retreated, and I waited.

An hour later, when there hadn’t been any other movement or lights going on or off, I took the stairs to the top floor of the apartment building. Scanning ahead, watching my six, making sure no one in any of the other units saw me, I paused five feet from her front door and adjacent window.

Then I reached up.

Quickly placing the magnetically mounted motion-activated wireless micro-surveillance camera to the metal soffit underhang, I adjusted the lens angle, then retreated.

Two minutes later, I was back in the Denali, on my cell. Checking both the field of vision for the camera and the sensitivity settings, making a mental note to adjust the camera’s placement tomorrow, I watched the woman as she lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

For hours, she didn’t sleep.

Restless, rolling from side to side, she alternated between watching the alarm clock on the nightstand, looking out the window, and staring up at the damn ceiling.

I thought about my ropes on her.

I thought about rigging the fuck out of her until that restlessness was gone.

Fuck, I wanted my hands on her.

Shortly after oh three hundred, with my cock hard, patience gone, and a new breed of guilt over this woman so fucking deep that I wasn’t going to

touch it, she rolled toward the window, put her hands under her face, and finally closed her eyes.

A weight landed on my chest.

Her breaths lengthened.

Her lips parted, and it hit me. Five years, and I'd never seen the woman fall asleep. Five years, and I'd never seen her look so damn peaceful. The heaviness on my chest increased, and I stared at the prettiest woman I'd ever laid eyes on.

Then I remembered who the fuck I was.

Shutting down the app, scanning the street, I turned the Denali's engine over and drove to my closest residence.

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SEVENTEEN

Aracet

Dawn broke with a surreal kind of light that was more golden than the sun had ever managed to achieve in any of my previous locations. Minnesota could light up a winter sky with northern lights like I'd never seen, but this sunlit dawn wasn't something I'd ever experienced.

It was stunning.

But along with daybreak, as if a switch had been flipped, came a wall of humidity.

My new-to-me sundress was sticking to my body, and the open window was no longer blowing in a salty breeze. The six-inch risk between sash and sill that I'd taken last night was now a funnel for mugginess.

Groggy and tired with the kind of exhaustion that a night of sleep couldn't fix even if I had gotten it, I pushed myself off the bed. Two steps and I was at the window, closing and locking it as the air conditioner chugged with a wet sort of labored sound, like it was offended by me and my careless act of window mutiny.

Cognizant of what must be an expensive electric bill, I hesitated as I looked down at the poor appliance that never got a day off. Then I lowered the temperature on the unit by one degree with a mental note to raise it back up as soon as the room cooled down. Looking back out the window, I stared

at a day that was already prettier than my last five years of days combined… or the three before that, but I didn’t want to think about the past.

Taking in the tropical colors and vibrant greens of the landscaped patches dotted between clean streets and sidewalks that’d never housed dirty snow for months on end, I stretched my arms and back. Between the stiffness of too little sleep, too many previous days on a bus, and not enough exercise to combat carting that heavy duffle weighted with winter clothes over seventeen hundred miles, I was sore.

Hoping the shower would have very hot water, I was turning toward the bathroom when a ping sounded.

Conditioned and still rooted in my past, every muscle in my body froze, but the sticky hair on the back of my neck rose.

Then I scanned.

Windows and front door locked. Bathroom empty. Alarm clock not blinking. No one outside on the exterior corridor.

The ping sounded again, and my gaze shot to the nightstand.

The cell phone.

I hadn’t turned it off last night.

Wary, I walked toward the nightstand and picked it up. There were two texts from a number I didn’t know.

You didn’t call.

I hate texting. Answer the damn phone.

The cell rang.

I swiped to answer, then held the phone to my ear, but I didn't speak.

Henry's voice came through the line with a petulance that belied the early hour. "It's me. You don't have to screen your calls. Besides, no one knows this number anyway."

"Pasqual does. He gave me the phone." And apparently gave Henry the number, but Henry wasn't mentioning anything about my real identity. "And good morning." I moved to the kitchen table and sat. Could it really be this easy?

"Good morning to you, too, Miss Sass at Bumfuck O'Clock. Congratulations. You had me worried. I hope you're happy with your shit-for-following-directions self. And just so you know, I'm calling you before coffee because you forgot how to dial a phone."

Not sure how to respond to all of that, grateful he wasn't acting any differently toward me than yesterday, I looked out at the sunrise. "Okay?"

"No, it most certainly is not okay that you and Mr. Henry colluded behind my back, and he whisked you off to Alaska."

"I'm not in Alaska." The heat could attest to that. "I'm on…" I stood and looked out the window toward an intersection and the only sign, but I couldn't read it from here. "I'm in an apartment." Somewhere west of him.

"I know where you are *now*. No thanks to you." Henry exhaled with an exaggerated sigh. "Pasqual says you need a job. Come to the motel."

Pasqual's words from last night replayed in my mind.

Henry knows everybody, and everybody knows him, but he doesn't make or collect friends. He keeps everyone at a safe distance. Except today, he chose not to.

A small tremor of something that wasn't discontent or happiness—not that I actually knew how the latter felt—fluttered in my stomach. "Um, thank you for the offer. Truly. I had something else in mind, though." I hesitated, then stupidly blurted out my plans. "I'm applying for a job I saw posted."

"Which one?" Henry demanded.

I bit my lip, and my stomach growled. "I'll, ah, let you know if it works out."

"Well, whatever this mystery job is, ask for more money." His tone turned to grudging approval. "I have a feeling you're worth it."

"Thank you." I glanced at the empty little galley kitchen. "I have to go. I have a few errands before I head out."

"Like what? Coffee? I bet Pasqual left you high and dry in that dump. The man can cook and mix a mean drink, but domesticated he is not." Henry held the phone away. "Pasqual, did you get Rose groceries before you dumped her in Siberia?"

"She's across the bridge, love. Not Siberia."

"Off island, mainland, Grapeland, I don't care what you call it. It's not Miami Beach," Henry argued with his husband. "It may as well be Siberia."

Pasqual's chuckle carried through the line. "Go take her coffee. I'll watch the front desk."

"Did you hear that, *Pretty Little Liars*? I got a ticket to freedom, and you and I have a breakfast date." Keys jingled. "Be ready in fifteen. I'm on my way."

“Wait.” *Shit*. “I, um, really do need to run some errands before I go apply for that job.” And I wanted to get to the coffeehouse soon. Not seven a.m. soon, but right after what I imagined would be an early morning rush.

“Then I’ll drive you after we eat. Caffeine being the most important meal of the day and all that.” Henry argued with me like he did with Pasqual. Roughshod, and like no wasn’t an option.

“That’s sort of one of my errands.” This entire exchange felt foreign, invasive, and like way too much information to give a stranger. It also felt like the most normal interaction I’d had with another person, minus my conversation with Pasqual last night, since forever. “I need to shop for a car.”

Henry didn’t even pause for a single breath. Holding the phone away again, he addressed his husband. “Pasqual, she needs a car. Give her your piece of shit and get rid of it once and for all. Lord knows, you can afford a new one.”

Oh my God. “I am not taking Pasqual’s car, Henry.” It probably wasn’t worth much, but that wasn’t the point. Pasqual had seemed more than attached to that vehicle. Besides, I’d been in it, and despite its flaws, it ran better than any car I could afford.

Henry snorted, then spoke to his husband. “She’s saying she can’t *take it*. Sell it to her for a dollar.”

“Absolutely not.” I was not taking that car for any price. “Tell Pasqual immediately that I am not purchasing his car, not for any price,” I demanded.

“*Women*,” Henry muttered under his breath before raising his voice to speak to Pasqual again. “You waited too long to jump on the offer. Now

she’s changed her mind. You should’ve donated that piece of junk to her when you had the chance. The tax write-off would’ve been more than the car’s worth.”

Not wanting to be involved in any of Henry’s creative accounting or more of this conversation, I gave up on being the polite version of myself. “I’m not having breakfast with you today, and I’m hanging up now, Henry. I’ll talk to you soon.” Maybe.

“Too late. I’m already walking out of the lobby and on my way to you.” His tone turned sing-song. “Be ready, *Princess Bride*. We’re going to caffeinate, then car shop before your walk down the employment aisle. You’re welcome.” Henry hung up.

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EIGHTEEN

Ares

The notifications on the surveillance camera I'd installed at her new place alerted at dawn.

Grabbing my cell and sitting up in bed, I swiped to the app.

The woman closed the window.

Then she glanced down for a beat before looking back out and stretching her arms high above her head.

The thought of restraining her in that position made my cock pulse.

Then she stretched her back.

More deviant thoughts took hold, and I was imagining her without that sundress she'd slept in. How my knife would easily cut through the thin straps on her shoulders. How I could put her in my own version of a dress.

She turned away from the window, and I shut down my depravity.

A moment later, instead of heading to the bathroom that was just out of my field of view, she stopped, scanned the apartment, then picked up something on the nightstand.

I zoomed in.

A cell phone. One I didn't know she had.

She started at it a beat, then held it to her ear.

By the time she started talking, I was already logged into Paragon Ops's servers, tracking cells for her location. Too many to isolate which could be hers, more than a few burners in her vicinity, I concentrated on the latter, quickly memorizing numbers. Then I tracked down cells for the SWCC and the analyst. The analyst didn't have any in his name, and none of the burners at her POS had a history of calls with the motel, but I got lucky with the SWCC.

He had a cell and was currently on a call with one of the burners.

The brunette sat at the kitchen table with the cell to her ear.

I programmed the burner's number into my contacts.

She got up, came to the window, and looked out toward the street. Then she continued her conversation for two more minutes before setting the cell back on the nightstand and heading toward the bathroom.

I watched the security feed for sixty more seconds.

When she didn't make a reappearance, I took a quick shower and dressed. Then I spent the next ten minutes on my laptop, wiping her digital footprint from Minneapolis to Miami, including her shopping trip and the brief stint at the motel. I was hitting the last keystroke when my cell alerted with another notification from the surveillance app.

I checked the feed.

The woman and the SWCC.

She was standing in the open door of the apartment. His back was to me, blocking most of her from view, but I saw enough. Short yellow skirt, white tank top, boots.

My cock took note of her, and I upped the volume.

The SWCC scanned the length of the brunette. “Thought you were going to escape without me?”

The brunette stared up at him. “Are you a pilot?”

“Of what?” the SWCC asked, incredulous.

“Airplanes,” she stated seriously.

“No.”

The brunette frowned. “What other kind of pilot did you think I meant?”

“With you, *Miss Congeniality*, you never know.” Glancing past her, the SWCC scanned the apartment. “This place is a dump. I don’t know what Pasqual was thinking.”

The brunette’s even tone held. “It’s the nicest place I’ve ever stayed.”

“Sad, Rose Martens. That’s just sad.” The SWCC reached around her.

She shifted.

He jerked the door shut. “Come on. I have lattes waiting in the car, and I don’t want them to get hot.”

Cell in hand, keeping the app open, I double-timed it to my sky garage, got behind the wheel of the company Denali, and the Dezervator sensors activated.

“You mean cold,” the brunette retorted. “And I’m back to Rose Martens? How many nicknames are you going to give me?”

The hydraulic system under the SUV engaged, and the robotic shuttle began transferring the vehicle into the elevator specially designed for

vehicles.

“I mean it’s South Florida, we drink iced lattes here like civilized human beings, and you need to keep up with whatever I nickname you because I have a feeling there’ll be a lot. Let’s go.” The SWCC pivoted and aimed for the stairs.

The woman fell in on his six, then I lost visual and audio.

Closing out the security camera app, I brought up satellite feeds, tracked them to the SWCC’s convertible, grabbed the license plate, then hacked into his vehicle’s GPS.

The Dezervator opened at ground level.

Then, with Nix’s timeline and my own damn obsession in mind, I drove out of the garage.

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NINETEEN

Aracet

Staring at the time display on the cell phone for a brief moment, I debated turning the damn thing off.

If I thought it would've deterred Henry from showing up here, I would have.

Instead, I rushed through a shower, left my hair wet, and went to look through my bag of secondhand clothes.

Cursing myself for not washing at least one of the outfits in the small, stacked washer and dryer unit I'd discovered in the closet last night, I debated for only a few seconds. With my legs and underarms freshly shaved, I chose a short, flirty skirt with three tiers of soft cotton in shades of pale yellow. Pairing it with a thick, white ribbed racerback tank top that landed perfectly at my waist, I used the mirror on the back of the bathroom door to scrutinize my reflection.

My skin was pale, my hair was several shades darker than my natural brown, and my bra straps were showing.

I glanced down at my feet, then toward my two shoe options by the closet door.

The flip-flops would be less hot and probably look better with the outfit. Not that I had much fashion sense to begin with, but I'd learned over the years what stood out and what didn't. I always aimed for the latter.

But flip-flops didn't seem appropriate for applying for a job, let alone car shopping, and I'd never needed something more professional than my Doc Martens at my last job, so here I was—with only two choices.

Which was one more than I'd had a day ago.

Grabbing a pair of socks, I pulled them on before I stepped into the boots and laced them up. Then I headed back into the bathroom and used my compact folding hair dryer. It'd been a necessity in the cold winters of Minnesota, but I didn't think I'd be using it too often here.

After my hair was reasonably dry, I twisted it up. Leaving a few strands by my temples loose so they covered my scars on the left side, I secured the haphazard style with my only hairclip, a cheap plastic tortoise-patterned butterfly clip I'd gotten at a drugstore. One pair of fake gold hoops later—the only earrings I owned—I was ready.

Checking the time on the alarm clock, foolishly thinking I'd make a clean exit before Henry showed up, I grabbed my purse, the cotton cardigan I'd kept yesterday, the apartment key, and the cell phone.

Then I opened the door to a smirking Henry.

Arms crossed, impressive biceps only half hidden by his short-sleeved button-up linen shirt, Henry raised an eyebrow behind a pair of square-framed gold aviators with the brand name *Cartier* in small cursive letters on one side of the dark green lenses. "Thought you were going to escape without me?"

“Are you a pilot?” With his white shirt, perfectly pressed navy slacks and the sunglasses, he almost looked like it—if pilots doubled as models.

“Of what?”

“Airplanes.”

“No.”

“What other kind of pilot did you think I meant?” What other kind was there?

“With you, *Miss Congeniality*, you never know.” He looked past me into the apartment and sighed. “This place is a dump. I don’t know what Pasqual was thinking.”

Probably that it was the cheapest, safest furnished apartment in Miami that he could find on short notice, and that he wanted me out of their motel. “It’s the nicest place I’ve ever stayed.”

“Sad, Rose Martens. That’s just sad.” Reaching around me, he pulled the door shut with an air of finality. “Come on. I have lattes waiting in the car, and I don’t want them to get hot.”

“You mean cold. And I’m back to Rose Martens? How many nicknames are you going to give me?”

“I mean it’s South Florida, we drink iced lattes here like civilized human beings, and you need to keep up with whatever I nickname you because I have a feeling there’ll be a lot. Let’s go.” He about-faced with perfect precision and headed toward the stairs.

I stupidly followed.

With a quick one-two step, Henry flew down three flights as if they were merely an inconvenience for his long legs.

I was another story. Winded from the humidity, already feeling the heat on my skin, I made it to street level. But then I had to hustle across the apartment building's adjacent parking lot to keep up with Henry, and now I was paying for it.

Scanning the other cars and slowly awakening neighborhood, Henry opened the passenger door on an illegally parked, sparkling blue convertible that was as stately and showy as its owner.

Panting, eyeing the off-white leather seats, I had a moment.

"Problem?" Henry asked impatiently.

"I'm a little sweaty." And a whole lot not used to the thick air.

"It's Miami. Everyone sweats."

I looked up at a man who was much more than a motel clerk. Not a hair out of place, not a bead of sweat so much as dampening his shirt, Henry looked completely unaffected by the heat. "You're not."

"Child. I'm a Floridian." He lowered his glasses. "And I served for twelve years in hellholes that, sadly, you can imagine."

Instantly transported to the past, feeling the very real weight of him referencing my true identity for the first time, a swallow got stuck in my throat. Then it was as if I were trying to breathe through desert dust and foreign soil instead of muggy humidity and bloom-weighted branches of dripping oleander, and my lungs constricted.

"Get in the car, Aracet."

My real name, the command, his tone of voice, it snapped me back to the present, and I sucked in a deep breath of fragrantly warm, honeyed florals. Trying to recover from the anxiety-not-anxiety whiplash, the fact

that he wasn't judging me, my reaction to a dominantly issued command I didn't want to think too closely about, I said the first thing that came to mind. "You sound like Pasqual." He sounded like a voice I remembered saying something very different.

Mátia mou.

"Pasqual sounds like me," Henry corrected, putting his sunglasses back on and nodding toward the convertible. "The sooner you get in, the sooner you'll get to experience the miracle of ventilated seats."

"Ventilated," I repeated, getting in and wondering if he was going to bring up my past again or ask about it, because that was the other, albeit rare, reaction I had encountered during those first three years post Syria. Outside of the counselors, therapists, and military personnel, everyone I met either shunned me or started asking intrusive questions. Both reactions were horrible, but the questions were always worse.

"Air-conditioned," Henry added as he shut my door, then walked around the front of the vehicle like Pasqual had walked around his—with military purpose.

A moment later, he was behind the wheel, the engine was running, the promised air-conditioning was both blowing in my face and on my ass, and soft jazz was serenading us through on the sound system.

Henry picked up a drink from a cup holder and handed it to me. "You're not allergic to coconut, are you?"

"No. Why?" The iced latte's plastic cup sweating more than me was of little comfort as I brought the cold caffeine to my lips.

“It’s a coconut milk latte. Dairy will kill you.” Grabbing his own drink, Henry checked his rearview and side mirrors before pulling onto the street.

About to take a sip, I paused. “Coconut milk?” That was a thing?

“Yes.” Driving one-handed, Henry took a swallow of his coffee.

I sniffed mine. “I’ve never had it.”

He let out a half snort. “I can tell.” Taking a corner, he turned onto a busy thoroughfare. “Stick with me, and I’ll ruin you in all the best ways possible.”

A chill settled over my bones, and I lowered my drink. Then I told this man a truth I’d never said out loud to anyone. “I’m already ruined.”

Braking for a light, Henry turned his head toward me. “I meant ruin you for inexpensive shit like cow milk and bad coffee. But I can see how that might’ve sounded.”

Regretting I’d said anything, I tried the latte.

The first tentative sip going down smooth, my hunger more feral than a few missed meals, the heat all-encompassing, this entire morning surreal, the next thing I knew, I’d drunk half the latte.

“I’ll take that as a win for Team Coconut Milk.”

Half embarrassed, half confused about how I’d landed here, I glanced at my new, self-appointed friend. “It’s very good. Thank you.”

Henry shifted in his seat, and his tone turned formal. “You’re very welcome.”

I took another sip, Henry drove, jazz floated around us, and a humid breeze kissed my face.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes against the golden sunlight that permeated my shuttered eyelids and colored even that palette with shades of bright yellow. “Where are we going?”

“When the day is this perfect, does it matter?”

No. No, it did not. “I should say yes,” I admitted.

“You should tell me what you want for breakfast.”

Still not opening my eyes, I smiled. “I have a choice?”

Henry let out a laugh that had zero humor. “Of course not.”

I peeked at him.

His lips curved with a mischievous smile, and sunlight glinted off his white teeth like he was starring in a commercial for toothpaste. “Driver’s choice.”

I should’ve known what was coming.

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TWENTY

Aracet

"No," I argued too little, too late. "We are not going here."

Pulling into a half-round portico and up to the valet of an expensive-looking oceanfront hotel, Henry put his Bentley into Park. "Darling, we've already arrived." Lowering his voice as the attendant approached, he issued a warning. "Smile. You're on camera."

The valet opened my door with a flourish, but he addressed Henry with a wide smile. "Mr. Forester, good to see you!"

"Manuel." Henry nodded, opening his own door and getting out. "I see you've moved up in the world."

"Yes, yes, because of you." Manuel aimed his smile at me as I reluctantly got out of the car. "Good morning, Mr. Forester's guest."

"Come now, Manuel. She's more than my *guest*." Already around the vehicle, Henry draped a lazy arm over my shoulders as if we were more than perfect strangers. "But don't spread rumors. You know how I hate that."

Manuel's smile instantly converted to grave earnestness. "Of course not. I would nev—"

“Good.” Cutting him off as he shuttled me up the front steps of the extravagant hotel, Henry called over his shoulder to the valet. “And we’re only having breakfast. Keep the Bentley close.”

Henry swept me through glass doors and into a hotel lobby that was my worst nightmare.

Luxury, people who wanted to be seen, attentive staff, and security cameras.

It was the exact type of place I avoided at all costs.

Anxiety mounted to full-blown panic. My breaths coming shorter, my feet starting to feel like leaden weights in my highly inappropriate boots, I put my hand on Henry’s stomach to stop him from walking me any further into hell, and someone called his name.

“Henry Forester,” a female voice drew out with that particular inflection of both judgment and condemnation that every woman understood.

Pausing his stride, Henry turned us toward the reception desk where an impeccably dressed woman, who was around his age and as stunning as Henry was handsome, stood. “Dinah. How are you?” Keeping what I was sure was a purposeful distance meant to disrespect the woman, he also kept his arm around me.

“Wonderful.” The woman eyed me up and down, then looked back at Henry. “And you?”

“We couldn’t be better.” With his sunglasses still on and the fresh scent of his aftershave or cologne floating around us, Henry glanced down at me. “Could we, darling?”

Panicked, stunned, and with my hand still on his stomach, I didn’t say anything because I didn’t have time.

With his trademark smirk, Henry was already leading us past the reception desk and toward the rear of the hotel with a command issued so low, only I could hear. “Breathe, *Princess Bride*. You’re fine.”

I was the exact opposite of *fine*. “That woman thinks we’re a couple, and she hates me.” The couple part felt like the worst kind of betrayal to Pasqual, and the hatred part was like a full-blown anxiety train ramming into my chest and lungs.

I didn’t do betrayal. Not anymore.

And people hating me was both my biggest trigger and a double-edged sword.

It was why I had spent the past five years on the run.

But I couldn’t begin to explain that to anyone because what I’d done was unforgivable. I deserved any hatred aimed at me. Except my selective memory didn’t actually contain all of the horrific details of the very event that had defined this absolute shit destiny, so my brain tripped into panic at the slightest hint of hatred aimed my way.

“I-I need to leave, Henry.” My voice shaking, my body followed. “Right now.”

Pausing mid-stride, Henry whipped off his sunglasses and turned to me, gripping both of my shoulders. “Take a breath, Aracet. *That woman* doesn’t know you. She’s throwing attitude because you’re with me and she spent ten fucking years trying to suck my dick.”

My eyes widened at both the manager's harassment and Henry's blatantly crude disclosure in a hotel lobby full of guests and employees within earshot.

"Yeah," he agreed, as if I'd reacted solely to the manager's offense. "She harassed the hell out of me when I worked for her and kept doing it after Pasqual entered the scene. Trust me, her death glare was about what she isn't, not who you are—*if* she knew you, which she doesn't."

I still didn't want to be here, let alone risk the exposure. "I want to leave."

"We will." He dropped his hands. "As soon as we have breakfast by the ocean and you realize a thing or two about Miami Beach." He took my hand and threaded our fingers together. "Trust me? For an hour?"

My head dropped and my heart was pounding, but all of a sudden, a surreal feeling eclipsed my anxiety, and I was unexpectedly noticing something else.

Basic human touch.

With our hands laced, a wholly unfamiliar comfort, one I had not experienced since early childhood, gripped the jagged edges of my existence and knit them together. But I didn't know how to trust it. "Why are you doing this?"

"Why wouldn't I take you to breakfast?"

Because no one else ever had.

When I didn't reply, Henry squeezed my hand. "Hey."

I looked up.

“Come on, *Pretty Little Liars*.” Breaking the emotional moment, Henry leveraged his mischievous smile. “Us beautiful people need to stick together. It is a club, after all.” He winked.

I gave him a look.

He raised an eyebrow at my outfit in return. “We’re going to have to work on your wardrobe choices, though. The boots stay, but that ruffled skirt, mini or not, needs to go.”

“I just got it.”

“Maybe you just got it. But, honey, that skirt isn’t from this decade.”

“I like vintage.” I glanced down. “And the tiers.”

“Then I’ll find you some 1980s Versace couture.” Henry put his sunglasses back on. “Come on. Breakfast at the Veranda is waiting. You’ll like the view of the ocean and pool better than that skirt.”

“You’re making me feel self-conscious.”

“I doubt you need me for that. I’m betting you do that all by yourself.” Pausing to open another door, he glanced down at me. “Probably every day of your life.”

I couldn’t see his eyes behind his mirrored aviators, but I didn’t need to.

Henry Forester wasn’t judging me.

He was empathizing.

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TWENTY-ONE

Ares

The SWCC's Bentley turned in at the Faena Miami Beach.

The smart move would've been to drive past, park, then hack the hotel's security system and track the woman digitally.

I didn't play it smart.

Telling myself this was recon, I followed them.

Pulling past the valet, I took the last spot under the covered drop-off, parked the Denali, and got out as the SWCC prick put his arm around the brunette and led her inside the hotel.

The valet caught up to me with a guarded smile. "Good morning, sir. Checking in?"

"No." I handed him a hundred-dollar bill. "Leave the Yukon, and I'll match that tip when I come back out."

The valet glanced at the bill. "Of course, sir."

Already Oscar Mike, I headed into the lobby in time to see a blonde woman behind the reception desk call out to the SWCC.

"Henry Forester," the woman drawled.

Sunglasses on, arm around my brunette, the fucker didn't avoid the

attention. He courted it.

Halting mid-stride, keeping my brunette locked under his arm, the SWCC prick turned toward the woman and raised his voice. “Dinah. How are you?”

Half the fucking lobby looked at them.

“Wonderful.” The receptionist scanned my brunette, then addressed Forester. “And you?”

“We couldn’t be better.” Forester looked down at my brunette. “Could we, darling?”

My brunette didn’t respond, but her tense body language spoke volumes.

Forester threw a smirk at the receptionist, then leaned down to Aracet and said something I couldn’t hear as he led her toward the restaurant fronting the pool and ocean on the east side of the property.

Then the fucker really pissed me off.

Zero situational awareness, halting again, taking off his sunglasses, the asshole turned toward her and grabbed her shoulders as he got in her face.

Distress tanked the brunette’s expression.

Fighting every instinct to intervene, I stood the fuck down. But I was only giving it thirty seconds.

Watching the SWCC, I counted.

At twenty-nine seconds, Forester smartly dropped his arms.

She said something I couldn’t hear.

Then the fucking asshole grabbed her hand—the same hand I'd held eight years ago on a Night Stalker Black Hawk.

The brunette looked down.

The SWCC said something else, and her stiff stance radiated with tension, but he kept fucking talking.

Instead of pulling away, the woman looked up at him.

Forester fucking winked. Then the asshole opened the door to the restaurant and ushered her through.

For five seconds, steeped in irrational rage, I fought the urge to breach the restaurant, extract her by any means necessary, and put down the SWCC in the process.

Then I drew in a deep breath, took another hundred from my wallet, and headed back to the valet. Five minutes later, I was doing what I should have in the first place.

Recon. From a distance.

Logged into Paragon Ops's servers, hacked into the hotel's security feeds, I watched the brunette order breakfast as my cell vibrated with an incoming call.

I glanced at the number on the screen.

Nix.

I sent him to voicemail.

Five seconds later, a text came through.

Nix: *Call me. STAT.*

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TWENTY-TWO

Aracet

Pasqual was right. Henry did know everyone.

Staff, guests, locals—more than a dozen people approached the table to speak to him.

Each time, he introduced me as someone else. His cousin, his wife, his sister, his special friend, his torrid affair, his assistant, his PR manager, his costar, his dirty little secret. I couldn't remember all the explanations any more than I could the names he invented for me each time. Some I recognized as famous people—none of whom I resembled.

Not one person questioned his lies.

Everyone smiled at Henry.

And no one recognized me.

Finished with his omelet, Henry pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair. "Have you figured it out yet?"

Still savoring the last bite of my pancakes that had some sort of tropical syrup on them, I finished chewing before I answered. "That you're a compulsive liar?"

"Cute." His expression serious, his gaze stayed locked on mine. "Where are we?"

I glanced around. “At a restaurant.” A very unusually designed hotel restaurant with red cushions on wooden chairs, a draped canopy of red-and-white material over the outdoor dining area, bright turquoise tiles on the wall of the restaurant—which was really the exterior wall of the hotel because we were sitting outside—that depicted seaweed and red coral. Everything was all at once over the top and elegantly tasteful.

“We’re on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach at a luxury five-star oceanfront hotel,” Henry corrected before leaning forward and lowering his voice. “Where no one knows or cares about your past.”

“That’s because I haven’t been recognized yet.”

“You’re not hearing me, Aracet.”

A flash of panic hit when he used my real name, and I glanced around. “Please stop that.”

“I’ve called you fifteen different names in the past hour, and no one paid attention to a single one of them any more than they would have if I’d used your birth name. No one recognizes you.”

“You knew who I was. How long did that take?” In retrospect, I realized he’d probably recognized me the moment I walked into his motel.

“Miss I Don’t Have A Television, in case you haven’t realized it yet, I’m the opposite. I watch a lot of TV. Some might say obsessively. But have you seen me on my phone once? Am I doom scrolling socials? Have you seen me take a single selfie? No, no, and no. And that’s my point. Society’s moved on. You’re yesteryear’s news, darling. And there wasn’t that much coverage of the incident to begin with. After your parents pleaded with the media to help find you, the hype died down. The reports of your homecoming were eclipsed by the sensationalism of your cousin’s death.

Which, not to speak ill of the dead, but fuck her. She dragged you into a hell you didn't deserve. But I digress." He waved his hand toward my face. "All of that prettiness you got going on was not the spotlight you think it was."

My stomach flipped, then roiled. Everything he'd said was both the most offensive and kindest thing anyone had ever said to me. But I was hyperfocused on a detail he'd let slip. "My parents were on the news? Together?"

"Yes and yes."

"What did they say?" Neither of my parents, for differing reasons, trusted any sort of authority. And the two of them standing together when they'd hated each other? When all of my earliest memories before they split up were of them arguing or one of them storming out? I couldn't imagine them united on any front. I couldn't even imagine either one caring enough to give the media the time of day, let alone ask for help in locating me.

"All the usual things parents say when the spotlight is on them, and they don't want to look guilty as shit."

Ah. That sounded more like it, or at least the implied sentiment that they didn't want to seem unconcerned. But the guilt comment didn't track. Both of my parents were inherently selfish. My mother only ever cared about where her next high was coming from, and my father was never engaged unless he was hustling someone. I wasn't sure either was capable of the sentiment Henry was assigning to them. "Guilty of what?"

Henry's expression shut down, and his voice lowered to sedate. "Of neglect."

I didn't know what hit harder, being so seen or the actual truth of my childhood that even I never acknowledged.

“Besides,” Henry continued, as if he hadn’t just trenched through the foundation of dysfunction that was my upbringing. “You’re older now, you look different enough, and your hair—not a fan of the black dye, by the way—has changed. No one younger than me is going to notice you.”

I grasped at anything to change the subject. “How old are you?”

“I’m forty-one years *young*, thank you very much.”

“And Pasqual?”

“Now you’re getting personal?” He rolled his eyes. “This isn’t about age.”

No, it wasn’t. Not anymore. I nodded, but my head was spinning, and an old hurt was digging through my emotions with a sharp-edged shovel.

“You didn’t know,” Henry stated, his tone returning to that emotionless composure that spoke to his military background.

“Know what?”

“I was going to say your parents speaking to the media, but seeing your face now, I’m guessing you didn’t know about any of the media coverage.”

“I was told about it.” Well, some of it. But I’d been forbidden from watching any of it. Not that I’d had access to a television or the internet at the time. Then, once I’d been on my own, I’d never dared to look. All I knew was that my parents never came to see me, never sent a single letter, and every authority figure meant to reintegrate me into society said my old life was gone.

Henry leaned forward. “What, exactly, were you told?”

The waiter came up behind Henry. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, but put breakfast on my account, Thad.” Waving the waiter off, Henry didn’t so much as glance at the guy. “We’ll leave when we finish our drinks.”

“Sure, sure. No problem. More coffee or juice?” The waiter aimed a loaded smile at me, then lowered his voice to salacious. “Ma’am?”

Henry turned in his seat and glared at the guy who looked barely old enough to serve alcohol. “You’re pushing your luck and my generosity, Thad. She’s off-limits to you and every other little prick here. Understood?”

Thad’s face reddened. “I wasn’t—”

Henry abruptly stood.

The waiter took an instant step back. “I mean, yep. I got it. No problem.”

“No problem, *what*?” Henry demanded.

“No problem, sir,” the waiter amended, his tone formal as he straightened his back like Henry was his commanding officer.

“Glad we understand each other. Leave before your tip reflects your shit judgment.”

The waiter took off.

Henry watched until he disappeared into a service station, then sat back down and looked at me with a calm-as-hell expression, like he hadn’t just threatened some teenager over me. “You have a question to answer.”

I had one of my own. “Did you used to be his boss?”

“Unfortunately.” Henry let out an exaggerated sigh. “Hired that little prick when he was still in high school.” He picked up his coffee. “The

dumb shit didn’t have good judgment then, either, but he was never late, and he never called in sick.”

Not for the first time, I thought about Henry as a boss. But this time I was thinking how my life would’ve been so different if I’d had a Henry in it when I was high-school age. “He practically saluted you.”

Henry smirked. “If he wanted a better tip, he should have.”

The single statement revealed a lot about my new friend. “Did you manage all your subordinates like they were in the military?”

“Is there any other way?”

I wouldn’t know. I’d never had someone work under me. “I’ve never been a manager.”

“I’m betting you haven’t been a lot of things.” Henry set down his coffee. “Now, stop avoiding the question.” Leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table, he steepled his fingers and focused all of his attention on me. “How much do you know about the media coverage of what happened to you?”

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TWENTY-THREE

Aracet

What happened to you.

The four words twisted in my mind before bashing themselves against the embedded narrative in my brain.

The only narrative I knew.

The one I'd been spoon- and force-fed until I repeated it by rote like a good little reformed girl.

Nothing happened *to* me.

I happened to everybody.

I flew to another country. I engaged with terrorists. I embedded with jihadists. I colluded. I conspired. I picked up a rifle.

I was a traitor.

To my country. To humanity. To everybody I'd ever known.

Aracet Vandon is bad. Aracet has no family because she is bad. Aracet made bad choices. Aracet now lives with those choices.

No family, no future, no love, no worth.

Work. Only work.

Work hard enough, repent strongly enough, stay invisible long enough. Then one day I might actually *be* enough.

I looked at a man who'd served our country, same as the men who'd died saving me. "Nothing happened to me. I happened to everybody else."

Henry's chest rose with an inhale, and the side of his jaw moved with a tic. Then his voice came so low, I barely heard it. "Is that what they told you?"

Alarm prickled up my back and chill bumps raced across my upper arms, defying the humid ocean air. I leaned into the narrative I knew. "There is no they. There's only me."

"Did they tell you to spew that bullshit, too?" Henry's nostrils flared. "Let me fucking guess. ARSOUTH, then BAMC?"

I didn't dare blink, let alone speak.

Henry misread my silence. "Army South? Brooke Army Medical Center? Full medical, then psych decomp. That is, after JPRA had stepped in. Joint Personnel Recovery Agency? Repatriation protocols. Three protocols, actually. Recovery, Transition, and Home Base. They '*helped you'* to '*manage'* your '*emotions*.'" He put air quotes around *helped you*, *manage*, and *emotions*, spitting them out like they were the offense and not my actions.

Suddenly panicked that he had essentially outlined my entire three years post rescue, I said nothing.

"Go ahead, *Pretty Little Liars*. Give me those big green-and-gold eyes like you're shocked. Hold on to your sudden silence. But don't expect me to

sit here and pretend everything you just said isn't utter bullshit. I know what the hell victimization looks like."

I didn't dare speak.

Leaning forward, Henry's voice became one-hundred-percent military. "I graduated BUD/S and SEAL Qualification Training. I earned a Trident. I should've been assigned to a SEAL Team. Instead, I was relegated to Special Warfare Combat Crewman because of my sexual orientation." He leaned back in his seat. "I shouldn't have had to hide who I was to do the job I earned, and you shouldn't have to hide from who you are to have the freedom you deserve."

Eight years of meticulous thought process and five years of carefully planned hiding, and a Navy veteran with a Bentley destroyed it all in under a minute. My soul shook with identity crisis, and I bled anxiety. "I'm not hiding from who I am." I didn't know who I was.

"Yes, you are."

I tried to push all the pieces that were left of me into a pile of something substantial, but I was just dust. No, I was worse than dust. I was nothingness, and Henry was truth, and I'd never realized in all of my purposeful hiding that I had no purpose.

"I'm in the wide open," I argued, because that was all I had. Right here, right now, I was in the restaurant of a *five-star luxury hotel*, sitting in their outdoor dining area, surrounded by tables full of people.

"You're white-knuckling life like you're about to be stormed by SEAL Team Six."

Oh, how close he was. Except the holy rain of hell that'd exploded my drugged-out captivity into bloodshed eight years ago wasn't a SEAL Team. It was Delta Force. A fact I wasn't supposed to know but had overheard. "I am not."

A man I never should've sat down to a meal with stared at me as if I were the last thing he ever expected to witness. Then the Special Warfare Combat Crewman walked down a different path of the past.

"Pasqual was taken too. They held him for forty-eight days, interrogating him around the clock. But it wasn't a jihadist ISIS cell in Syria. It was our own government. Every tactic they use on enemies of the state, they threw at him. When he didn't break, they finally let him go. Do you know what he looked like when he stumbled into our apartment forty-nine days after he quit his job at the NSA?" Henry's voice turned to pure rage. "Forty-nine days, Aracet. Forty-fucking-nine days later, he came home to me in the same outfit. By then, they were rags hanging off his body that were drenched in sweat, blood, and excrement. Thirty pounds of muscle had been starved off him. He reeked of betrayal by the very country he served, and his face was beaten beyond recognition. But that man smiled at me with bloodstained teeth and spoke with a dehydrated rasp like it was his last breath." Rage hardened every muscle in Henry's expression, and he inhaled. "Do you know what he said to me? Do you know what the first words out of his mouth were after forty-fucking-nine days of hell?"

Horror-stricken, tears welling, I shook my head.

"*They did their worst. I did my best.* Then he collapsed."

Tears fell.

Henry sat in silent rage.

I sat in silent anguish.

The SWCC recovered first, except his tone didn’t lose its anger. “Don’t ever spew that *nothing happened to me* bullshit again. I don’t know why the hell fate keeps fucking with me, but you walked into my motel, and it wasn’t a coincidence. It sure as hell paints a picture, though. One I’m all too goddamn familiar with.”

“I’m sorry.” For all of it.

“Don’t.” Henry pointed a condemning, admonishing finger at me. “Don’t apologize to me or anyone else. You were the victim. They did their worst.” Henry looked me in the eye. “But you did your best.” He held his ruthless stare for a heartbeat. Then, as if a switch had flipped, half his mouth tipped up. “Now you have me.” The deadly seriousness suddenly gone, but not the military disposition that came with it, he set his napkin, still folded, on the table. “Let’s go. You need a car, and I need to walk past Dinah with your *Pretty Little Liars* self under my arm.” He pulled out his wallet and fished through a stack of bills, then tossed three twenties on the table for the tip.

Deep-seated guilt for the expensive meal he’d bought me and for walking into his motel stuck to me like the humidity. “I’ll pay the tip.”

“You take one cent out of that discount store purse, and I will announce to the entire hotel who I’m dining with.”

Shock ripped through me.

Henry repocketed his wallet. Then the bastard winked.

I exhaled. “You’re kind of frightening when you want to be.”

“Kind of?” Draping his arm over my shoulders and letting his hand hang loose like an errant shirt forgotten on a clothesline, Henry leaned down to my ear. “Darling, you have no idea how truly violent I can be.”

Swimming in the heat of his cologne and musk, the crisp linen of his shirt brushing against the exposed skin on my nape and shoulder, I didn’t doubt for a single second that Henry could hold his own. But with him dressed up in his designer clothes and perfectly assembled persona, I didn’t feel threatened.

I felt protected.

So much so that I leaned into his half embrace and the side of his tall frame like he was the shield of my armor. Which was why I should’ve immediately extricated myself from him.

Instead, I let him lead me through the lobby.

I smiled at the woman behind reception as she glared at us, and Henry ignored her. I stood silent as Henry tipped the valet. I waited as he shooed away said valet and opened the passenger door for me himself. It wasn’t until I slid into his Bentley and Henry smirked that I realized how far I’d fallen into the false trappings of familiarity.

“Comfortable, *Princess Bride*?”

Under the scrutiny of one very acerbic, very intuitive Henry Forester, the heat of embarrassment flushed my cheeks. “Too comfortable,” I admitted, securing my seat belt.

“No such thing.” With his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses, Henry shut my door, strode to the driver’s side, and got behind the wheel. “Let’s talk cars. What’s your budget?”

I glanced at the time on the dashboard clock as he drove through the hotel's portico toward the ever-busy traffic on the ocean-fronting avenue. "Fifteen hundred dollars, max."

Henry hit the brakes hard, then lifted his sunglasses to look at me. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." Another car exiting the hotel's valet pulled up behind us.

"You need to add a zero to that budget. What the hell did you do with all the money they gave you?"

Gave me? "What money?"

"Snitch-and-tell money. Don't fucking tell me that you gave it up for free."

"Gave what up?"

The car behind us honked.

Henry ignored them. "All the intel you had on the ISIS cell."

I didn't have any intel. The terrorists were all dead before I was deemed lucid enough to be interrogated, and I'd never learned their language. "I didn't have any information to give."

"You were embedded with an ISIS cell for two years." The car behind us honked again, but Henry continued to ignore them. "Are you telling me that not one agency offered you money for your time in captivity?"

"No, and they shouldn't have." I'd made the decision to follow my cousin. I'd fired that rifle they'd put in my hands. "I wasn't an asset, Henry. I took drugs." Even more ashamed now that I knew his and Pasqual's backgrounds, I looked down at my lap. "I don't remember most of what happened in those years." Only the horrific parts.

“You *took* drugs, or you *were* drugged?” he asked, but it didn’t sound like a question. It sounded like a command.

“Does it matter?” I wanted out of the conversation.

“Yes, Aracet, it matters.”

All the years I’d longed to hear my real name, and suddenly, I didn’t like it when Henry used it. “I was drugged.” Forcibly. Every single day. But I wasn’t going to tell him that.

The car behind us laid on the horn.

Henry stared at me for a full two seconds. Then he pulled into traffic.

I wanted his soft leather seat to swallow me whole.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Ares

I could've gone to Paragon Ops HQ or one of my residences, but I didn't.

Staked out across the street from the hotel, parked in the garage of another damn hotel, focused on my laptop and the security feeds I'd hacked, I didn't track the superbike until the Ducati pulled up next to me.

The engine revved, and I glanced over.

The rider tipped his chin.

Resigned, I shut my laptop and lowered my window.

Helios flipped up his visor. "I left Haven home alone for this shit, motherfucker. Who the fuck are you tracking?"

"You just wanted an excuse to ride." We both had a penchant for superbikes and speed.

"I don't need an excuse to do shit." He cut the engine, then got off the bike and removed his helmet as he rounded the front of the Denali.

I unlocked the doors.

My brother got in on the passenger side and scanned the garage, then Collins Avenue. "Who the fuck's at the Faena?"

The brunette was none of his goddamn business. "Why are you really

here?”

“Fucking Nix.” Helios adjusted the air-conditioning, then leaned back in his seat. “Prick called and tried to use some reverse-psychology bullshit on me. Threw that shit out in the middle of a sentence. Asked when I was coming back on the schedule, then said to coordinate with you if I fucking talked to you, implying that we don’t fucking talk.”

We didn’t anymore. Not as often as we used to. “What’d you tell him?”

“What the fuck do you think I told him?” Helios tracked a car pulling into the garage. “That I’d be back when I was fucking back, and to do his own goddamn dirty work if he wanted to harass your ass.” He jerked his chin toward the Faena Hotel. “This have to do with the Minnesota chick?”

My guard went up. “I never said I was in Minnesota for a woman.”

“*Jesus fucking Christ*.” Leaving his helmet on his lap, Helios shoved a hand through his hair. “You think after thirty-five years, I don’t know your ass?” My brother looked at me, and for once, there wasn’t the usual Delta operator mask in place. “Fucking talk to me. What’s going on?”

I glanced across the street. Then I gave my brother a partial truth. “You know what was two weeks ago?”

“Is that a trick fucking question?”

Helios had flown himself up to Arlington for the funerals. Operators didn’t forget dates like that. “No.”

“Good.”

We sat in silence a beat. Then I opened my damn mouth. “I’ve been thinking about Jax and Bellows. That mission. My mistakes.” I always thought about it. But I didn’t think about that day without thinking of the

brunette because the two were so intertwined, an IED wouldn't blow them apart.

"Told you back then, and I'll tell you again. You didn't do shit except your job. Jax made his decision. Hell, he made the same damn call you or I or any other fucker in the Unit would've made. FRAGO or not, that mission wasn't complete. We're *Sine Pari*. We get the fucking job done." Helios looked at me. "Jax and Bellows got the job done. Don't fucking dishonor that."

"Copy."

"And don't pull that fucking complacent bullshit either," Helios warned.

"I'm not pulling anything." Except hacking a hotel's security feeds to watch the brunette and the SWCC asshole.

"Yeah, you are. We all signed up for this. Every guy in the Unit did. We're fucking warfighters. We step into violence, we go primal, we complete the goddamn mission—whatever it takes. Then we carry the battle scars, and we do it with honor. Start fucking living. You walked off the battlefield. Jax and Bellows didn't. Don't fucking throw away the life they fought to protect."

He was right. But I couldn't tell him the life I really wanted. I couldn't even reconcile that shit with myself.

I looked through a scope eight years ago, and it reset my baseline. Everything since had been about her. At first, anger overrode the need to protect. Then the two comingled, and obsession grew. I told myself the past five years was protection, but it wasn't.

I was stalking the woman because I couldn’t go a damn week without knowing she was breathing.

Now she was here, in my world by some stroke of fate, and I was going to strip her freedom.

Helios shook his head. “I know what you’re fucking thinking. All those books you’ve read, and I can still fucking read you better than any bullshit written on a page.”

I didn’t respond. With Helios, you didn’t have to. He said what he was thinking, whether you wanted to hear it or not.

“It’s fucking ironic.” Helios scanned the garage again. “Our mother naming you after the god of war and me after a fucking sun god. She got that shit backwards.”

“She didn’t.” I destroyed lives. Helios had saved our stepsister. “Feralyn’s world rises and sets with you.”

“I’m not discussing Haven with you, but my point stands. Ever since we were kids, before our piece-of-shit sperm donor got dead, you were trying to pull Mom out of that shit show. We didn’t have a fucking snowball’s chance in hell of changing that situation, we were too goddamn young. But Christ, you tried. Every time he took a swing at her, there you were. I had to pull you back so many goddamn times, I thought he’d kill you before he got to her. Thank fuck he offed himself.”

“He didn’t off himself.” The abusive asshole was drunk when he wrapped the only car we had around a tree.

“Whatever the hell you wanna call it, he did us all a fucking favor.” Helios looked at me again. “It wasn’t your job to save the woman who

brought us into the world. She sure as shit didn't look out for us."

"She was our mother, Helios."

"She was fucking neglectful, and she abandoned us."

"She didn't abandon us. She married Feralyn's father, and they moved to Costa Rica."

"When we were fucking *kids*," Helios practically yelled. "You had to raise Feralyn."

"You had to raise me."

Helios scoffed as he looked back out at the street. "Then I fucking failed. Because whatever the hell you're doing—the rope shit, the secrecy, all the damn places you've bought but never fucking sleep at for more than a week—that's not living. That's fucked up."

"You're giving me life advice." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, I fucking am. Man up. Jax and Bellows weren't your goddamn fault." He shoved open his door and got out. "And fucking call Haven. She wants to see you." Helios slammed the door shut and got back on his Ducati.

Then he secured his helmet, revved the Panigale V4 R, and took off.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Aracet

Henry eyed the mechanic and sighed like he was thoroughly disgusted with him, his time was being wasted, and this entire conversation was beneath him. “Seriously?”

The burly guy who could’ve been either thirty or fifty, I couldn’t tell, stood his ground. “Yeah.”

“That hunk of junk hasn’t moved since I’ve been coming here, and you think you’re going to get three grand?” Henry waved a dismissive hand toward said hunk of junk. “*For that*?”

“Yeah.” The mechanic, who smelled two days past an overdue shower, eyed me up and down before settling his creepy gaze on my breasts. “You want a nine-eleven? Got a pretty one out back. For a sweet piece like you, ten grand. I’ll throw in your first oil change for free.”

Henry snapped his fingers in the guy’s face. “Eyes up here, asshole. Disrespect her again, and you’ll be eating the fucking pavement. The offer’s now twelve hundred for the piece-of-shit Honda, plus two oil changes, and you’ll keep the fucking Accord in your name until she comes back for the Porsche. Which you’ll sell to her for seventy-five hundred—*if* she wants it.”

The mechanic snorted. “No deal.”

“Your fucking loss, Frank.” Henry draped an arm around me and steered us back toward his Bentley as he called over his shoulder. “I’ll remember this the next time the Bentley needs service.”

We made it to Henry’s convertible, and he’d opened my door before Frank the mechanic yelled out to us.

“Eight grand on the Porsche, fourteen hundred on the Honda, and *one* oil change!”

Henry looked down at me and winked as he answered Frank. “Thirteen hundred on the Accord, and you wash it first.”

I opened my mouth to say I didn’t need the car to be washed, but Henry gripped my shoulder and squeezed. “Final offer, Frank.”

“Fine,” Frank grumbled. “Give me ten minutes.”

Henry glanced back and reiterated the only other requirement I’d given him for a car besides the price. “Remember, that Accord stays in your name. She’s not paying sales tax or registration fees.”

“Yeah, yeah, I fucking got it. Make sure you have the cash. I’m grabbing the keys.” Frank walked into the first open bay of his shop.

I looked up at Henry. “I think you missed your calling as a professional haggler.”

He smirked. “Trust me, that’s not even close to my best talents.” Reaching into his pocket, Henry took out the fifteen hundred he’d insisted I give him before we’d pulled into his mechanic’s lot. With his back to the open bay doors of the shop, he discreetly peeled off two hundreds and handed them to me.

Pocketing the money, positive I did not want to know what Henry considered his greatest talents, I spontaneously hugged him. “Thank you.”

Henry made a derisive sound not dissimilar to his mechanic as he briefly hugged me back. “I’m not saying you’re welcome. That car’s a piece of shit, and I vehemently disapprove. You’re upgrading the second you get a job.” He eyed me. “Which you’d already have if you’d accept my offer instead of going to this mysterious interview today.”

“It’s not an interview. I’m just applying, and there’s nothing mysterious about it.”

“And yet she holds her secrets.” Henry rolled his eyes, then donned his sunglasses, leaned against his Bentley, and crossed his arms. “How much do you want to bet Frank just hoses off the Accord and calls it good? The asshole should hose himself off.”

I laughed.

Henry’s sunglasses-covered gaze shot to me. “Jesus Christ.”

My smile fell. “What?”

Henry’s expression turned deadly serious. “Do me a favor?”

I was careful not to make a promise. “What?”

Frank dragged a hose out of the second bay door.

Henry removed his sunglasses. “Do not ever, and I mean *ever*, lose that.”

Distracted by Frank as he turned on the water, I glanced from the mechanic to Henry. “Lose what?”

“That laugh, *American Beauty*.” His voice quieted. “It’s enchanting.” He stared at me for a moment like he was trying to figure something out.

Then he quickly shoved his sunglasses back on and focused on Frank spraying off the Honda. “Did I fucking call it, or did I call it?”

Trying to remember the last time I’d truly laughed and coming up empty, I looked back at Frank aiming the high-pressured spray at the old Accord like he was pissed off. “You definitely called it.”

“Hey, Frank,” Henry yelled. “Don’t forget the tires!”

The mechanic flipped off the Special Warfare Combat Crewman, and I glanced toward the street.

A black SUV with tinted-out windows drove past.

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TWENTY-SIX

Aracet

I folded up the street map I'd gotten at a convenience store. Then I checked my reflection in the built-in vanity mirror on the sun visor of my new-to-me car.

There was nothing I could do to change my hazel eyes, but I made a mental note to get hair dye remover and a new color later today. The black I'd been dying my hair somehow looked harsher in the Florida sun than it had in Minnesota. I also missed my real hair color and how, when I was younger, the deep russet brown would naturally lighten with reddish hues in the summer.

Maybe I was ready to stop dying my hair altogether.

I looked back at the coffee shop that didn't seem any less busy than if it were a prework rush of customers, and anxiety filtered in.

In the middle of the night, in theory, this job had seemed like a good idea. Then Henry had reiterated my thoughts by proving his point at breakfast—my past was invisible in Miami. But was I ready for working with the general public?

I glanced down at my white tank, yellow skirt, and Doc Martens. Then I threw on the little black cotton cardigan and looked back at the vanity

mirror. No makeup. No styling products in my clipped-up hair. No style to my hair, period, I was as unremarkable as I was going to get.

Grabbing my cell, I pulled up the local online job postings one more time.

The barista-slash-counter help position had an original post date of three weeks ago. And now the *immediate help needed* part was underlined.

I glanced from my cell to the artsy sign above the front doors.

Cafecito Del Cielo.

The place was busier than any large chain coffeehouses I'd been to, and from the outside, it looked brand new. The two large plate-glass windows on either side of the double front doors—also glass—had a few homemade signs in them advertising Cuban coffee and fresh-baked goods. But other than that, the front exterior looked like a modern take on art deco with light-gray paint, angled lines, and shiny chrome.

Not that any of this mattered.

I needed a job, they needed help, and I was here.

Screw it.

I got out of the Honda, locked the door, and headed into Cafecito Del Cielo.

A door chime rang overhead as I walked in. The scent of fresh-roasted coffee beans engulfed me. Upbeat Latin music filled the backdrop of cheerful voices and ringing laughter, and a neon-pink-haired barista looked up and smiled wide. "Hello!"

I instantly fell in love with the place.

Working a giant, gleaming silver espresso machine, the barista's smile held as she warmly greeted me. "Welcome to Del Cielo! What can I get you?"

I stepped up to the counter, but a sudden shyness overtook me. Glancing at the menu, latching on to the first thing I saw, I looked back at the woman who was around my age. "An iced banana latte and hopefully a job. I saw your ad."

The woman's eyes instantly went wide. "Oh my gosh. *Oh my gosh, oh my gosh*." She set down the metal container of whatever she was steaming and reached across the counter as if she were going to grab my hands but stopped herself. "Are you serious? Really?"

I had an urge to laugh but didn't. "Yes. Very," I added.

"You're hired!"

I smiled. "That easily?"

"Right, of course!" She laughed. "I'm Hailey. *Please* work here." Her expression turned momentarily serious. "Are you a felon, non-citizen, or lacking a Social Security number?"

I felt like I'd been gut punched when she asked the first question, not that it was the first time I'd been asked. "No to all three." Guilt twinged even though I wasn't technically a felon.

Hailey leaned closer and lowered her voice. "And you're okay with the whole… you know?"

True alarm struck. "I don't know."

"Oh." Hailey leaned back, then glanced at the floor for a second before she inhaled and looked back up. "Okay, full disclosure?"

“Does it have something to do with why this job has been posted for weeks and you keep increasing the hourly wage?” Did I want to know if it did?

“It does,” she hedged, drawing out the reply as she looked over my head.

The door chime rang.

Hailey smiled wide. “Hi, Antonia! Double-shot mocha, extra hot?”

I turned to see an older, elegant woman practically melt with relief at either Hailey’s memory or the prospect of a caffeine fix. “Yes, *please*.”

“Coming right up!” Hailey glanced at me, and her smile, the same one she’d given the other customer, held. “And an iced banana latte, on the house. Have you ever had one?” Already moving with practiced ease and seemingly choreographed movements, the pink-haired barista had both hands working two machines at once. “They’re new, and I make them with vanilla soy milk, banana cold foam, and banana syrup. I promise you’ll love it. Well, if you like bananas, that is.” She winked at me. “Then hopefully you’ll take the job.”

I didn’t have time to answer.

The door chimed again, and I stepped aside as a group of four college-aged kids walked in, followed by an elderly couple, then another woman. Hailey addressed everyone by name, recited their orders before they told her what they wanted, and continued her marathon of coffee creation and bakery distribution.

For twenty minutes, I observed and learned two things.

I loved the iced espresso, soy milk, cold foam, and banana concoction she'd slid across the counter to me, and I wanted a life that made me smile like Hailey the barista.

When Hailey finally had a lull, she smiled again and nodded toward the back of the service area. Following her direction, I walked over to meet her as she lifted a hinged part of the counter and stepped out into the main floor that had a collection of armchairs, sofas, tables, stools, and wooden seats.

Carrying a bus tub, rag, and spray bottle, Hailey stopped at a table in the back. "Okay, so." She set the bin down and glanced around. Then she looked at me with a sadness I wasn't expecting. "There was kind of… an incident here. And there was damage. But everything is fixed now, and when I reopened, not only did my regulars return, but business really picked up, and I'm only me. I run the place solo, or I did. But now I'd love help so that my customers don't have to wait too long for their orders." She smiled hesitantly. "So please, please decide to take the job. You can have all the coffee you want and any bakery items left over when we close. I'll pay you eighteen dollars an hour, and I don't even care how many hours you can work, but we're open seven days a week, seven a.m. to seven p.m. I'll take what I can get."

Holy shit. I quickly did the math. "You work here eighty-four hours a week?"

"Not always?" She said it like it was a question. "My cousin owns the place, and she sometimes fills in, but she's opened other locations and manages those."

Wow. "A family business." With two cousins working together. I didn't know how to wrap my head around that or process the stinging irony of my

past against this woman's present, so I didn't. I tucked it down deep.

"Yep!" Hailey replied not only cheerfully, but proudly. "So will you take the job?"

"Yes." This seemed like fate. And a gift. Maybe I truly was supposed to come to Miami.

"Yay!" Hailey hugged me, but then quickly pulled back and apologized. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I'm just so thankful." She laughed. "And I don't even know your name!"

I'd been doing it for so long, I never thought much about it, but this time, I felt the lie. "I'm Ari." A hitch caught in my throat. "Ari Mitchell," I recited, using the name on the current fake ID I was using. "But I have to warn you, short of clearing the tables and wiping them down, you'll have to teach me everything. I've never worked in hospitality before, but I do love coffee." I glanced around the almost-full coffeehouse. "And this place is great." I thought about Henry and wondered if he would like an iced banana soy milk latte instead of his coconut milk one.

Hailey's expression softened. "It really is. And I'm happy to teach you. But can I ask, if you've never worked in this field before, why now? What did you use to do?"

"I come from an accounting background, and I just got tired of being in an office." The door chimed again, and three people walked in as an elderly couple walked out. "How about I start now by clearing these tables?"

Hailey nodded with infectious enthusiasm. "Yes, please." She glanced toward the newcomers and called out a greeting, complete with their names and orders, before she looked back at me. "Okay, Ari Mitchell, former

accountant. Welcome to Cafecito Del Cielo.” She grinned as she clasped her hands. “This is going to be great.”

“Thank you so much. For the job and the banana latte.”

“You’re welcome, but thank *you*.” She headed back behind the counter.

I picked up the cleaning rag and spray bottle.

Then I smiled to myself.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Aracet

I hadn't worked so physically hard in all my life. At least, not since I was a child and lived on a farm during harvest season one year.

I was thoroughly bedraggled and exhausted, but more content than I'd ever been. Most of all, not one person had looked at me twice. At least not in a way that indicated they recognized me from my past.

Hailey, on the other hand, looked exactly how she had when I'd first walked into Cafecito Del Cielo almost nine hours ago. Cheerful, smiling, and unfazed by the sheer volume of coffee she'd served today.

Pausing in her seemingly endless supply of momentum that was not fueled by a single drop of coffee—I'd learned she didn't partake in the riches of caffeine—Hailey nodded approvingly at me. "You're a lifesaver. You did great today." She clasped her hands. "*Please* come back tomorrow."

My conscience bucked at her first sentiment, and my ever-present guilt had already slashed through it, replacing the narrative despite everything Henry had said this morning. But then, something else happened.

Maybe it was the result of an honest day's work, the community of this place, the scent of coffee I may never be able to wash off, or maybe it was a barista with neon-pink hair. Hailey looked so earnest when she pleaded, a

hint of a smile broke through all of my self-berating. “You’re overpaying me compared to my skill set. So unfortunately for you, you’re not getting rid of me that easily.” Even if I did feel close to collapse at the moment.

“Yay!” Hailey clapped once, but then her expression sobered. “I totally understand it’s a lot to learn at first, and no sane person wants to work my hours, but how about starting when we open and working through lunch? Say seven a.m. to three p.m.? And you can totally choose your days off. I know the ad said full time, but honestly, I’ll take whatever hours you’re willing to work.”

“Seven to three it is, and I prefer full time.” I needed the money.

“Perfect! And if you’re flexible on your days off, Sundays are usually a slower pace, and Tuesdays are our least busy day of the week. I know that isn’t two days off in a row, but…?”

I’d always hated weekends in the past. Having my days off split like that would be a nice change. “No, that’s great. Sundays and Tuesdays off definitely works.” I untied the apron she’d given me that had somewhat saved my white tank, but not so much the sleeves of my cardigan, even though I’d pushed them up after wiping down my first table.

Hailey took the apron from me. “I’ll toss this in the laundry bag in back. I need to grab a few new cleaning rags anyway. Would you mind turning off the *Open* sign and locking the front door? Then I’ll quickly wipe down the machines and grab you cash for today. Tomorrow, we can get you set up with payroll. Good?”

“More than good. Thank you.” I made a mental note to use the cell phone Pasqual had given me and open an online bank account tonight.

Hailey headed toward the back, and I walked to the front.

As instructed, I pulled the string to turn off the large pink neon *Open* sign and briefly wondered which came first—the sign or Hailey's hair color. But then I completely forgot about bright neon.

As I was locking the front doors, a black SUV crawled past the coffee shop.

An SUV that was exactly like the one I saw earlier this morning at the mechanic's, and just like the other ones I'd seen in Minnesota and every other town I'd been in over the past five years.

Alarm bred, and a chill ran up my spine.

Hailey's voice carried through the now quiet space. "Did you get the lock okay? It sticks sometimes."

"Oh, um, yes." This time, I noted the make and model before the SUV turned a corner. It was a GMC Yukon Denali, but I didn't catch the license plate number. Thankful that Hailey had me pull around the building and park in one of the spaces out back during a lull this afternoon, I quickly glanced at the empty parking lot before scanning the street one more time. Then I turned toward the service counter and schooled my expression. "Why don't you show me how to wipe down the machines, and I'll help you clean up for the night?"

Hailey, with her unending patience, did exactly that. Then we prepped supplies for the next day. A half hour later, the coffee shop was sparkling, Hailey had armed the alarm, and we were exiting through the back door as the setting sun painted the sky in fiery shades of red, orange, brilliant pink, purple, and lavender.

With a pocketful of cash, a free pumpkin muffin and chocolate croissant in a brown sack, and a hot chamomile tea—all courtesy of Hailey—I

wondered for the countless time why no one had wanted to work here.

Using a skill I'd learned from years' worth of underhanded interrogations, I indirectly asked. "I'm really surprised no one applied for the job. Cafecito Del Cielo is great." Hailey made it great.

Stopping before she got in her car, Hailey smiled, but it was with closed lips and a look in her eyes I couldn't quite decipher. Sadness, maybe. "It really is an amazing place." She glanced up at the sky. "I'm lucky I get to make people happy every day." She looked back at me. "That makes me happy." Her gaze dropped as she opened her car door. "See you tomorrow at seven?"

"I'll be here," I promised.

When she looked up, her smile was back in place. "Awesome. Thanks again for today. I hope you have a good night."

"You, too." I shoved the key into the lock on the driver's door because I'd learned the key fob for the old Honda didn't work.

"Hey, Ari?"

I glanced up. "Yes?"

"I think a lot of people misunderstand the neighborhood. There's some danger. Every city has that. But mostly, this is just a community with a lot of hard-working people."

"Like you." I smiled.

For the first time all day, Hailey didn't smile back. "I don't really think of what I do as work. But if I did, I'd say I love this job."

"I understand why." If I wasn't so paranoid of being recognized, if my heart hadn't ricocheted around my chest every time I'd waited on a

customer, if I hadn't been too nervous to look anyone in the eye, I'd love it, too. I hoped to get there. Or at least not be swimming in nerves like I was today because I picked a hell of a way to drown myself in immersion therapy.

Hailey smiled. "Night, Ari."

"Good night, Hailey."

I got in my car, and Hailey got in hers. Since she'd parked closer to the alley exit that ran behind the building, she drove off first. Watching her taillights disappear, I braked for a stop sign, checked both directions, then turned onto the street.

Half a block away, parked under a tree, was a black SUV.

A black GMC Yukon Denali.

I hit the gas on the old Accord.

The little sedan lurched forward, and I floored it through a yellow light, then checked my rearview mirrors as I took a corner too fast.

The SUV's headlights came on.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Ares

I tracked her.

All goddamn day.

The hotel breakfast, the mechanic's, then the coffee shop.

Where she took a fucking job.

For five years, she'd hid in the shadows, constantly switching locations and IDs, never working anywhere where she interacted with the general public, and always dressing in concealing clothing.

Now this.

Short skirt, tank top, and a fucking cashier position.

The woman hadn't made eye contact with a single customer, not while I'd watched her first through the café's security cams I'd hacked into, then from my stakeout position across the street. All fucking day, I fought from going inside, approaching her while she was a captive audience, and cataloging every micromovement of her reaction as I let her see me and hear my voice.

I wanted the forced reunion more than I wanted to put the woman in my ropes, but I was giving her the day. One last vestige of freedom.

But I didn't give her the illusion of safety.

After the café closed, when she'd approached the front door to lock it, I'd pulled out and driven past, nice and slow. A half hour later, when she'd exfilled the rear of the building, I was already parked in her field of vision.

Each incident was calculated, and both times she'd clocked me.

Good.

I wanted the woman to know I was closing in.

I wanted those hazel eyes tracking the SUV.

Tomorrow, the brunette who'd altered my fucking DNA would look at me.

Tomorrow, I'd see if she remembered me.

Until then, I was still in recon mode. Following her for the past hour while she'd made a halfway decent attempt to shake me, I ignored the alerts that kept pinging on the security app for the camera I'd installed outside her front door.

Keeping her in my sights, I called Cypher.

The hacker answered on the first ring. "Ares."

"What's the deal with Cafecito del Cielo?"

"The coffee place in Little Havana?"

"Yes." I watched the brunette circle the streets a few blocks from her place.

"Nothing current as far as I know."

"For a place that has nothing going on, they've got high-tech security cameras." They also had heavy encryption and an almost unhackable firewall. I'd had to keep bypassing it before I got shut out altogether.

“Their system was set up by AES. Past history, though.”

That explained the firewall and why the place had all of their digital dust wiped. “Why was Alpha Elite Security involved with them?” Another alert for the brunette’s security camera came through on my cell.

“Long or short version?” Cypher asked.

“Short.” I glanced at what triggered the feed. The same damn thing that’d been triggering it for the past forty-five minutes. Silently cursing, I followed the brunette as she pulled into her complex’s lot and parked in the furthest, darkest corner.

“AES got involved after one of their operators had a connection to the place. Situation’s since been resolved. Security install remained. Feeds aren’t actively monitored, but the system’s encrypted.”

“Copy.” The brunette got out of the twenty-year-old Honda Accord she’d bought this morning and walked across the parking lot. “Gotta go.”

“Roger.” Cypher ended the call.

I pulled up the feed for her security camera.

Then I watched the brunette’s expression as she came up the stairs and saw what was waiting for her.

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TWENTY-NINE

Aracet

An hour later, with barely any gas left in the tank, I took one more circuitous route through a neighborhood adjacent to the one where my apartment was.

I hadn't seen the exact black Yukon Denali with the fancy grille since the coffeehouse, but I'd seen a lot of other Yukons. Most were black. I saw a lot of black SUVs, period. And almost every car had tinted windows down here.

I told myself this was Miami.

The sun was hot.

Full-size SUVs were a popular vehicle in a city where there was a lot of money.

Hell, they were popular in Minnesota, where the winters were thirteen months long and the snow was deep, but the icy roads were worse.

With my heart rate almost back to normal and my body fighting exhaustion, I finally pulled up to my apartment building.

Then I wondered if I could park in the complex's lot. I hadn't thought to ask Pasqual if I needed some sort of permission or sticker, or if I was supposed to pay an extra fee.

After parking in the furthest spot from the building, I pulled out my cell phone, quickly powered it on, and typed a text.

Me: *Sorry to bother you, but do you know if I am allowed to park a car in the apartment complex's parking lot? Or if I need permission?*

The reply was almost instant.

Pasqual: *You're all set, and you are never a bother, love*.

I typed back.

Me: *Thank you, Pasqual*.

Pasqual: *Anytime. Have a good night. X*

I powered down the cell, marginally curious at the lack of texts from Henry, and locked up my car. Scanning, always scanning, I headed across the lot and up the stairs to my place.

When I got to the top of the steps, I no longer wondered why I hadn't heard from Henry.

Leaning against my front door, holding a takeout bag, looking thoroughly put out, Henry sighed. "It's about time. The damn coffee shop closed an hour ago. I thought I was going to have to send out a search party." He frowned. "You do know cell phones have GPS, right?"

Oh my God. "Hi, Henry."

"Don't *hi* me." He pushed off the door. "Do you know what hour-old Cuban food tastes like? You're lucky I didn't let myself in and put all of this in the oven—if you can even call that toy-sized excuse of a box an oven."

"That would have been breaking and entering, and I would have felt compelled to call the police."

Henry smirked. “This is Old’s Havana, darling. The cops would’ve asked why I didn’t break in sooner. And besides, I don’t *break* in. I’m not an animal.”

Ignoring his semantics, I used my key and let us into the small studio. “Should I even ask how you knew where I was all day?” I put my bakery bag of goodies into the fridge before walking toward my bed and dropping my key and purse on the nightstand.

“Should you even have to ask what my husband used to do for a living?” Henry waltzed past me and started rooting through my one cupboard. “Not that I needed his particular skill set today. This is Miami Beach. Dozens of people saw me this morning with my sister-wife-cousin-girlfriend.” He waved a dismissive hand as he opened the oven, looked inside, then shut it. “More than a few were all too happy to ask why my girl was slinging cafecitos and wiping down tables across town instead of sunning herself poolside at my fine Miami Beach establishment.”

Double oh my God.

Wary of sitting on my bed while I smelled like a coffee bean roastery, I perched on the edge of the little love seat and took off my boots. “Good to know everyone is so concerned about your sister-wife’s place of employment.”

Henry smirked. “Right? Nosy assholes.” He opened the microwave, glanced at the bag of food, then looked back at the microwave. “Full confession?”

“Would you humor me if I said partial?”

“No.” He turned to me but pointed behind him at the microwave. “I

don’t do *that*.”

“Okay…?” Unsure where this was going or if I even cared, all I wanted was a shower and bed. But I had to admit, whatever he had brought smelled good, so I took a stab at his implication. “Do you need help?”

“Fine,” he replied haughtily. “I’ll set the table while you shower away that I-swam-in-a-vat-of-Cuban-coffee smell. Then you can do whatever it is you do with the nutrient-sucking, texture-destroying plastic box. But hurry. I don’t have all night, and Old’s Havana waits for no woman.”

Too tired to smile, but appreciating the utter continuity of Henry’s disposition, I grabbed a fresh outfit before heading into the bathroom.

A pro at fast showers, I walked out three minutes later in a sundress with wet hair.

Henry looked at me like I was an alien. “That’s how quickly you shower?”

“Yes.” I headed to the paper box containers on the counter, all neatly lined up, and picked up the first one. Setting it in the microwave, I pushed the button for one minute, then leaned against the counter. “Why? How long does it take you to shower?”

“Woman, I am not answering that.” Henry took a seat at the table I knew was small, but once he lowered his tall frame to one of the chairs, it looked downright doll-sized.

I smiled.

Henry squinted one eye at me. “If you’re laughing at me, I’m taking the food and leaving.”

Suddenly starving, wanting whatever he brought instead of my two baked goods, I sobered. “I would never.” I would, maybe, if we had met more than eight years ago. I didn’t have a carefree sense of humor like that anymore, but Henry sitting at that table was a sight.

He rolled his eyes. “*Pretty Little Liars*, you’re transparent as hell.”

Salivating as the studio filled with the exotic smells of spices, I impatiently opened the microwave before the minute was up, grabbed the first box, and placed it on the table. Then I threw in the next container and pushed the minute button again.

“Thank you for bringing dinner.” Even if he was unannounced. Which I was beginning to understand was Henry in a nutshell. That, and he did what he wanted, when he wanted. “It smells great.”

“It should. It’s the best Cuban in all of Miami.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You won’t have to once you taste it. Nothing’s better. Except Pasqual’s cooking, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed, taking the second container out and placing it on the table before throwing in the third box.

A couple minutes later, I was seated with Henry, the entire table was full of carryout containers, and he was rattling off the names of the dishes, none of which I had ever heard of. “*Ropa vieja*, *enchilado de mariscos, croquetas*, *empanadas*, *moros*, and *maduros*.”

“I have no idea what any of that means.” But I couldn’t wait to try it all.

Serving up helpings of each dish, Henry elaborated. “Braised and shredded flank steak, seafood stew, fried meat croquettes, savory hand pies,

rice cooked with black beans, and sweet, fried plantains. You have so much to learn, Rose Martens."

"I'm back to being Rose? Whatever spices are in the food smell amazing."

"You wore your Doc Martens while working on your feet all day. I figured it was appropriate. And Cuban food is a combination of Spanish and Caribbean flavors, so you get the best of two worlds. You're welcome."

"Thank you."

"*Buen provecho*." Henry dug in.

I didn't know what *buen provecho* meant, but assumed it was equivalent to bon appétit, so I picked up my fork from the perfectly aligned place setting Henry had laid out, and I tried the shredded beef first.

Oh my God.

Rich flavor burst on my palate as the beef melted with a tenderness I was not expecting. The next thing I knew, I was double-fisting a fork and spoon, alternating bites of everything because I couldn't decide which was my favorite.

When I finally looked up, Henry was sitting back in his chair, watching me with both eyebrows raised.

"This is delicious." I forked a sweet, fried plantain.

"Have you eaten since those pancakes this morning?"

The fork halfway to my mouth with the bite of plantain—or maduros—I paused. "Not unless you count a banana latte, but that huge stack of pancakes could've fed me for three meals." If I'd bought them myself or

gotten the meal as takeout, I would've rationed it. "By the way, you really need to try an iced banana latte. They're really good."

Deadly serious, Henry issued an order. "You need to eat more."

Emotions washed over me, and none of them were good.

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THIRTY

Aracet

Sitting across from a virtual stranger at a table full of takeout containers, I inhaled.

I appreciated Henry. I truly did.

I could even accept the absurdity of this fast friendship that I still couldn't wrap my head around. Not unless this was a charity-slash-mercy friendship Henry was checking off from some arbitrary Good Samaritan life-goals list he had. That wouldn't explain Pasqual's involvement, but I had a feeling Pasqual was happy if Henry was happy. Or maybe he was just a good person who did extraordinary acts for compromised people. Either way, between the thoughts of Pasqual, Henry's comment, and the fact that Henry was here, I didn't answer right away.

I was too busy trying to shove down embarrassment-driven anger over a trigger the doctors at the Brooke Army Medical Center had labeled as PTSD.

In that moment, I didn't care what it was called.

I didn't want my food intake monitored. I didn't need any part of my life monitored. I'd done my time on that base. I'd gone through all of their mandatory counseling. I'd detoxed from the drugs that'd been pumped into me. I'd been watched every second of every day. Then I'd been released to

a halfway house and watched some more. I'd gone through their *recovery and reintegration process*.

I did not need someone asking me when I ate, let alone ordering me to eat more.

I was not a project.

Glancing down at all the food Henry had brought, feeling like I was in the wrong for what I was about to say, but also unwilling to leave it unsaid, I drew in a deep breath and glanced up. "While I appreciate your concern, I don't need—"

"I'm going to stop you right there and clarify something. I am not them, Aracet. This isn't reintegration two-point-oh. I will never ask nor expect details about your past, but I am here to listen if you need to talk. The food comment was me expressing concern over your well-being, not monitoring you."

I didn't talk about my reintegration—ever. Not only was I legally forbidden from doing so, but that darkness was mine to live with. I didn't place blame on my cousin. I didn't allow myself to think about her, period. The stain of bloodshed was mine. The repercussions of my actions, I owned. The flashes of memories, the events I could remember in full, every horrific detail, all of it was the heavy timber of my cross. I bore that weight alone.

But I'd never had someone outside of that Army base speak to me how Henry was now.

Reintegration, well-being, monitoring—how he knew their language in the first place, what his husband had been through, what they'd both been through, made me angry and sad. But it also made me feel incredibly

exposed. It was why I never got close to anyone. “I’m uncomfortable with this conversation.” It was the single most intimate thing I’d said to another human being outside of the mandated reintegration counseling.

“Okay.” Serious, respectful, Henry nodded. “Boundary noted. No talk about food intake.”

I didn’t like the term *food intake*. I didn’t like how the entire studio apartment had filled with a prickling heat that made me want to scratch at the invisible tethers of my past. And I especially didn’t like how I now felt like I needed to apologize. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? Being honest?”

Yes. “Maybe.”

With a noncommittal nod, Henry picked up his mystery drink and used it to gesture at my matching Styrofoam cup with a straw. “Try your daiquiri.”

Not knowing what was in the drink—Henry hadn’t said when he’d described the rest of the meal—I hadn’t touched it yet. “I don’t really drink alcohol.”

“It’s nonalcoholic, and it’s mango.”

“You got me a mango daiquiri without alcohol.” It wasn’t really a question. I was processing.

“You said last night you don’t drink, but you liked Pasqual’s mango margaritas. Figured this would be a safe bet.” Henry tipped his chin toward the cup. “Try it.”

Already full, I tentatively took a sip. Sweeter than Pasqual’s margarita, the fresh mango and lime were a perfect accompaniment to the flavorful

meal. I drank another, longer sip, then set the cup down. “It’s good. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Henry set his cup down. “Any other subjects off-limits?”

I wanted to squirm in my chair. “Is this how you usually start a new… friendship?”

“Woman. There’s nothing new about either of us, and we’re way past the starting line. May as well get used to it. If you don’t want to discuss particular subject matters, now’s your chance to veto them.”

“Or forever hold my peace?” I was only half joking.

Henry wasn’t joking at all. “Yes. Are you ready for my boundaries?”

I wanted to stay in Miami. I already loved it here, especially after working at Del Cielo today. But I didn’t know from one day to the next what zip code I would be in, and the responsibility of a friendship, or whatever you called this… assault of Henry-Forester-friendship-bombing-with-boundaries, was overwhelming. “I don’t think I’m the right person to be having this conversation with.”

“Is there another Aracet Vandon in the room?”

I glanced around. Then I looked back at the six-foot Special Warfare Combat Crewman turned motel owner, picked up my cup, and drank.

Henry held my stare for exactly three seconds.

Then he shook his head. “Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.”

I knew it was a quote from a movie, and even though I’d never seen *Casablanca*, I still corrected Henry. “Walked.”

“Whatever.” Narrowing his gaze, Henry eyed me. Then his usually expressive face completely locked down. “I have two boundaries. The first is threefold. Do not ever ask anything personal about Pasqual, speak ill of him, or interfere in our relationship.”

Oh my God. “I would never do any of that.”

“I’m not finished. If there is anything I want you to know about my husband, I’ll volunteer the information, but I expect you to keep it in confidence, same as any personal details he may share with you. Understood?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Expression grave, Henry nodded. “Good. And so we’re clear, reciprocation of that boundary applies. Nothing you tell either of us goes any further.”

“Thank you.” I hadn’t thought any different. Both Henry and Pasqual had been accepting of who I was, and while I didn’t plan on sharing any more than they already knew, an unfamiliar feeling of comfort touched a part of me that I kept locked down.

Henry nodded, but then he stared at me a moment. “My second boundary is do not fall in love with Pasqual.”

Shocked, I blinked. In addition to the fact that Pasqual was probably close to two decades older than me, he was very, *very* much in love with Henry. Treading as gently as possible because I felt there was something very complex behind Henry’s locked expression, I attempted to reassure him. “Pasqual is your husband, and he loves you deeply.”

“I know he does.” Then Henry really shocked me. “He’s also not gay.”

Oh. *Oh*. “I—”

“Boundaries. Now you have them.” Cutting off the conversation, Henry stood. “I have a husband waiting for me. I’m going home. You’re on cleanup duty.”

“Okay.” Compartmentalizing everything, including the fact that Pasqual didn’t have the least bit of interest in me and didn’t seem like a man who’d step outside his marriage, I shoved it all down and focused on what was in front of me. Dishes were the least I could do after Henry had brought an incredible meal over that I never would’ve had without his generosity. “Thank you for dinner.” Pushing my chair back, I stood and winced as I stretched my sore legs.

Henry frowned. “You good?”

“Yep. Just stretching.”

He nodded toward my discarded boots. “You need sneakers if you’re going to stay at Del Cielo and work twelve-hour shifts.”

“I’m staying.” As long as I wasn’t recognized. Otherwise, I would have to… I shoved that thought down too. “And I’m only going to be working from seven a.m. to three p.m.”

“Good.” Henry stepped toward me and gave me a life-affirming bear hug. “But still get yourself some real shoes, Rose Martens.”

As I hugged him back, the corners of my mouth curved up. “So you can give me another nickname?”

“Why else?” He pulled back, but he held my shoulders. “For real. You good? No assholes bothered you today?”

“I’m good. Really.” The image of the black Yukon flashed in my mind.

“Okay.” He kissed the top of my head, then released me. “Call if you’re not.” He headed to the door. “And turn your damn phone on for once.”

“You seemed to find me just fine without it.”

“Don’t make me stalk you, *Pretty Little Liars*.” He opened my front door.

“I have a feeling Henry Forester does what Henry Forester wants, no matter what.”

Henry glanced back and gave me a brilliant, albeit impish, smile. “Now you’re getting it.”

I smiled back. “Good night, Henry.”

“Good night, *Ari*.”

I shook my head. Then I let my next thought out so naturally, so unguardedly, that I didn’t realize how it could be construed until the second the words passed my lips. “Tell Pasqual I said hi.” *Shit*. “I mean, I didn’t mean—”

“Stop,” Henry ordered with no little force. “That isn’t a boundary. If you’re in my life, you’re in Pasqual’s. I’ll never stand between you and a friendship with him, same as he wouldn’t stand between me and you. This isn’t an either-or scenario, and I don’t do occlusion in this arena. My boundary has to do with the difference between loving someone and being in love with them. Understand?”

No, because I’d never been in love. At least, not with a living, breathing, right-in-front-of-me, real-life man. But a memory of a deep, masculine voice? Two words? That, I could relate to. “I understand.”

“Good. Because to know Pasqual is to love Pasqual. And you can tell him hello all by your *Pretty Little Liars* self when you come to the motel for happy hour tomorrow.” Without giving me a chance to decline the invitation or say anything at all, Henry rushed through a goodbye. “Mm-kay, bye, see you at six tomorrow!” He shut my door.

A small laugh escaped.

Then I cleaned up, set the alarm clock for six a.m., and fell into bed.

For the first time in years, I didn’t lie awake for hours.

I immediately drifted to sleep.

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THIRTY-ONE

Ares

For seventy-eight minutes, Forester was in her apartment.

I wanted to fucking pound the SWCC's face in for bringing her food, except the woman hadn't eaten since breakfast. But him going inside her place? The thought of any man with her? It was reducing me to the trigger I was trained to be.

Wishing I had my MK22 sniper rifle, I tracked Forester as he finally fucking left.

Then I watched on the security cam as the brunette moved around her kitchen. Carefully dividing portions of the leftovers, putting the food in the fridge, she stacked the containers and squared the corners. Then she scrubbed the dishes, used a washcloth from the bathroom to wipe down the kitchen table and counter, and turned out the light. Still wearing the dress she'd put on before eating with the prick SWCC, she crawled into bed.

Sixty seconds later, breathing even, the woman was sacked out.

I watched her for another hour.

When she hadn't moved, I reluctantly closed out the app for the security camera feeds, threw the Yukon into Drive, and headed across town.

Too keyed up to go back to the penthouse or any of my other residences, I pulled into the underground parking of a familiar high-rise, then headed to a dedicated elevator. Swiping a security card, I hit the call button for the top floor.

Seconds later, I was walking into the private club.

Early for a weekend, but not for a weekday, it was busy with the usual scene.

I didn’t pay attention to any of it.

My gaze locked on my target, I crossed the main floor and took a seat at the bar.

Knowing me and my habits, the bartender wordlessly put a tumbler of ice water in front of me.

I slid a twenty across the bar.

He nodded thanks.

The music, voices, the sounds of the club, all of it made me appreciate the nonverbal exchange with the bartender. I wasn’t here to talk. To anyone.

As if on cue, the woman’s voice landed on my six before she flanked me. “Good evening, sir.”

Anger ratcheting up, not bothering to control my irritation, I turned my head.

Blonde, stacked, face overly made up, naked under her slip dress, she took in my expression, and hers faltered. Dropping her head, she stumbled through an apology. “I-I’m sorry, master.”

I didn’t say shit.

I wasn’t a fucking master. I was a disgraced operator who let his Unit brothers die because of a woman.

The blonde stepped back.

I held my ruthless expression.

She took the fucking hint.

After she walked away, I threw back the water and stood. Then I allowed myself to scan the main floor once. Bodies, motion, depravity. None of it was a panacea.

None of it compared to the brunette.

Disgusted with myself, I left the way I came—gaze locked on my target, not making eye contact with anyone.

Twenty-eight minutes later, after a pit stop at Paragon HQ for a tracker, I was back at her complex, but I didn’t park across the street.

I drove into the lot, pulled into the spot next to her vehicle, and got out of the SUV. Scanning first for bystanders, then crouching, I placed the magnetic GPS tracker on the passenger side undercarriage of the Honda.

Back in the Denali, I brought up the app to double-check the device was live.

Then I drove to my closest residence, took the SUV up to the sky garage, and headed to the shower. Ignoring my hard-as-shit cock and all thoughts of a hazel-eyed brunette curled up asleep in a nothing-there dress, I scrubbed myself down.

Ninety seconds later, naked on my own bed, I lost the fucking fight.

My hand went to my cock, and my head went to her.

I fucking exploded.

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THIRTY-TWO

Ares

At oh six hundred, I was back at Paragon Ops HQ, getting off the elevator on the twenty-ninth floor. Bypassing the command room, I headed to the equipment room, pressed my thumb against the biometric scanner and entered.

Ninety seconds later, having what I needed, I headed to the command room.

Using another biometric scanner, I entered.

Cypher looked up from his multi-monitor setup. “You’re in early. Nix has been looking for you since yesterday.”

“He could’ve found me. Do you ever leave?”

“Not last night.” Focused on his screens, Cypher jerked his chin toward the gear I’d stowed in the cargo pocket on my tactical pants. “Get what you need?”

“Working on it.” The app on my burner pinged with an alert. “Question.”

“Shoot.” Cypher typed.

Fishing the cell out of my front pants pocket, I checked the alert. The brunette was up and moving. “Do you have access to drone airstrikes?” I

shoved the phone back in my pocket.

“You know Nix does.”

I wasn’t asking about Nix’s direct line to the Air Force’s Air Combat Command. “Not what I’m asking.”

Cypher stopped typing and swiveled in his chair to face me. Then he repeated himself. “Nix does.”

The two-word response, enunciated with emphasis, was answer enough, but I pushed it. “Do you personally have access to drone-strike capability, in theater, on short notice?”

Always cagey, more than guarded, the hacker studied me a beat. Then he turned back to his keyboard and monitors and resumed typing. “Not without causing attention you don’t need and favors you don’t want to owe.”

Fuck. “Copy.” I turned to leave.

“But I know someone who does.”

I glanced back at Cypher.

He gave me a name we both knew. “You didn’t hear that from me.”

“Roger.” I exfilled the command room, took the elevator down to the garage, and got back in my company Yukon. Then I drove to Grapeland Heights.

Parked across the street and down half a block from her complex, I watched the brunette exit her apartment and get in the Honda. Exiting the parking lot, she turned in the opposite direction from my POS, but I caught her scan of the street.

Then I saw the exact moment she clocked the SUV before fear hit her expression.

“That’s it, woman. You see me.”

She took off, but I didn’t pull out to follow.

For the next fifteen minutes, using traffic cams and the GPS tracker I’d put on her car, I followed her progress to the coffeehouse. Then I hacked their security feeds and watched the woman park behind the building and enter through the rear.

Five seconds later, black baseball cap on, I was Oscar Mike.

Scanning the neighborhood, I crossed the street on foot. Then, lockpicks in hand, I took the three flights of stairs and headed directly to her front door. Six seconds, and I was in.

The familiar scent of her shampoo and soap hit me, and my cock got hard.

My gaze cut across the small studio.

The SWCC was right. The place was subpar. But it was cleaner than any of the other places she’d lived over the past five years, and there were bars on the windows. Not that they’d stop someone like me.

Moving efficiently, I searched her duffle, fridge, bathroom, and closet. Same toiletries she always used, all new clothes minus a few articles she’d already had, and no food other than the leftovers from her dinner last night and two baked goods in a brown sack.

Everything she owned was packed in the duffle. The bed was made. And the air-conditioning was turned up to eighty degrees.

I set to work.

Eight minutes later, leaving no trace that I'd been there, I pulled her front door shut and retreated to the Denali. Twenty minutes later, I was reversed into a spot in the corner of Del Cielo's parking lot, watching my obsession.

Avoiding eye contact with the customers, alternating between clearing tables, working the register, and making coffee drinks, she hadn't noticed the Denali yet.

Waiting for a break in the stream of customers, wondering if the woman remembered my face, my voice, the flashback that haunted me hit without warning.

Simultaneous airstrikes lit up the north and south sides of the compound.

Smoke, debris, dead tangos. Firepower kept raining down from the northeast outcropping. The girl, still outside the front gate, was screaming.

Issuing orders through comms, I sprinted. "Bellows, get JTAC to send another airstrike to that fucking ridgeline."

"Copy," Bellows confirmed.

I hit the girl's POS and kicked her abandoned AKM out of reach.

Chaos yelled through comms. "RPG!"

Shoving the girl to the dirt, I threw myself on top of her.

The screaming stopped, the RPG struck Jax's position, the explosion lit the night sky.

Fuck. *"JAX!"*

"Exfil, exfil, exfil!" Chaos yelled through comms, returning fire. "Jax is

down. Bellows is hit. Secure the hostage and fucking move, *War God!”*

Taking heavy fire, suppressing rage, kneeling over the girl, I aimed toward the ridgeline, but then I saw them. Our primary HVT, Ahmad al-Adani, and his four bodyguards making a run at two vehicles. I fucking unloaded, dropping all five. Then I grabbed the front of the girl’s ripped burqa and patted down her torso. No suicide vest. “Moving. Need cover.” I yanked the girl up, and the material fell away from her head.

“I’m here, I’m here,” Bellows grunted through comms, his voice barely audible over the firefight. “Covering War God. Chaos, get Jax.”

“Negative,” Chaos argued, laying down cover fire. “Bellows, get your ass to the extraction point. War God, fucking exfil*!”*

A shaking hand landed on my wrist.

I glanced down.

Fragmented shrapnel embedded in her left temple, half her face covered in blood, eyes wide, tears falling, the girl looked up at me with panicked terror.

For a split fucking second, the entire goddamn firefight disappeared, and all I saw were those hazel eyes. The two words, wrenched from the dark depths of my past, fell out of my mouth. “Mátia mou.”

“War God!”

The firefight flooded back in as Chaos yelled my call sign through comms, and I leaned down to the girl. “United States Military. I’m getting you out of here. Hang on.” I threw her over my shoulder. “Hostage secured. Oscar Mike. Chaos, cover.”

“Copy, covering. GO.” Chaos unloaded.

The girl gripped the back of my plate carrier, and I fucking ran.

The Night Stalkers came in low and fast, the gunner laying down heavy artillery, the Black Hawk hovered three feet off the ground.

I mounted with the girl.

Chaos threw an unconscious Jax into the helo.

I shoved the girl aside to get at him.

Bellows collapsed a meter short of the helo.

I grabbed tourniquets.

Chaos grabbed Bellows, got them both on board, then the helo was airborne.

I was already cinching the tourniquets on Jax's legs—Jesus, his legs. *Chaos was getting one on Bellow's arm and pressing QuikClots to his chest. I grabbed my ketamine and injected a full dose into Jax's upper thigh. Chaos shoved a fentanyl lollipop into Bellow's mouth. The floor of the helo a pool of blood, my knees soaked, my boot slipped as the Black Hawk banked.*

I sat back.

The girl crawled onto my lap. Dark brown hair matted with blood, eyes on mine, she held a shaking hand out to me.

I took it.

A car pulled out of the parking spot right in front of the coffeehouse's entrance, kicking me back to the present.

Throwing the Denali into gear, I grabbed the closer spot.

A brunette with hazel eyes looked up from the cash register. Then she fucking froze.

I got out of the SUV.

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THIRTY-THREE

Aracet

The Denali.

The black Yukon Denali with the same fancy grille pulled into the very front parking spot.

My heart slammed into my chest.

Run. *Run, right now*.

The driver’s door opened.

RUN, Aracet.

But then he got out.

Tall.

Muscular.

Blond.

Standing at the register, my body frozen, I couldn’t move.

Then I couldn’t not stare.

Striding with purpose, his body moving with unnatural grace, his muscles sinuous and flexing and obscenely large, he didn’t walk into the café.

He aimed.

Like a predator, like a man possessed, like a soldier on a mission, he came right at me.

I didn’t hear the bell over the door chime.

I didn’t notice Hailey call out a greeting instead of a name.

My brain misfiring, my mind fixated, my stomach flipped over as I locked in on the sheer size of his large, black boots… but then my gaze traveled up.

His black cargo pants stretched around muscular thighs. His front pocket below his narrow waist held the clip of a menacing pocketknife. His fitted black T-shirt outlined defined abs. His biceps stretched his short sleeves. His chest was solid muscle. His shoulders were twice the width of mine.

Compelled, as if in a trance, I didn’t stop there.

I looked up.

Square jaw, full bottom lip, cut cheekbones. Dirty-blond hair, shorter on the sides, longer on the top, fell over one eye. His strikingly criminal handsomeness gripped my heart. But his eyes, his lethally focused stare. Dear God, his stark, almost colorless, impossibly intense, blue-eyed stare boring into me as if he’d been waiting his whole life for this moment struck me body and soul.

Then all at once, my lungs seized and my heart stopped as an assault of images exploded through my brain.

Instant and jarring, each one flashing like the snap of a paparazzi’s camera, they burst like audible pops.

A soldier looking down at me.

A helicopter full of blood.

A huge hand engulfing mine.

Stark, colorless blue eyes.

Those eyes.

“Coffee, black.” His deep, quietly commanding voice said the two words like a military order.

I shivered. Then I was instantly hearing another deep, quiet, menacingly dominant voice saying two words.

Mátia mou.

Like a deer in headlights, staring at the impossible, knowing it couldn’t be true, but self-destructively wanting this man to be the one I had briefly encountered eight years ago before I was ripped from the protection of his arms, I stood rooted in sheer panic.

Hailey. Sweet Hailey, interrupting Hailey, savior Hailey, appeared at my side. “Do you want that black coffee hot? A large?”

With his penetrating stare locked on mine, every other sighting of tall blond men over the past five years was mocking me with the sheer size and intensity of this man in front of me now as he tipped his chin.

“You got it.” Hailey recited the price before retreating.

With a hand so large it seemed unreal and fingers so long I could practically feel them wrapping around mine, he took a single credit card from his front pocket. Tapping it against the payment reader, he dropped his gaze from mine for only the briefest of seconds as he swiped a few times on the screen where the tip section was. But I didn’t even pay attention to the fact that he was tipping on a black coffee.

Muscles flexed and veins stood out like a relief map of danger on his forearm, and I salivated like an animal.

Resuming his unnerving stare, he shoved his credit card back into his pocket.

Engrossed in him, in his symphony of masculine dominance, a captive to his icy blue-eyed scrutiny, I dangerously ignored the fact that he could be staring for a wholly different reason other than firsthand knowledge of who I was, and instead could be staring at me with hatred-fueled recognition from years-old media coverage. Still, I didn't—couldn't—look away.

And I couldn't explain the overwhelming sense of familiarity.

I did not know this man. But his voice, his eyes…

I didn't realize the absolute riot of panicked nerves coursing through my veins had morphed from extreme fear and anxiety to something else entirely.

Something heated.

And utterly consuming.

I also didn't realize until too late that Hailey had set the large black coffee in front of me, not in front of him, before she took off to make the next order.

With a shaking hand, I started to push the hot coffee toward him.

His hand abruptly landed on top of the cup.

For a heart-pounding suspended moment, I breathlessly stared as both of us held on—connected but not touching.

Then I realized what I was doing and jerked my hand back as I sucked

in a sharp breath.

Ever so slightly, his eyes narrowed.

The movement was so infinitesimal that I would've missed it if I hadn't been recklessly, shamelessly hanging on to his impassive gaze.

Then, without a word, without any form of acknowledgment, he turned and strode out the same way he came in—like a lethal warrior.

Holding the coffee by the top of the cup, shouldering open the front door, he headed toward his big, black SUV. But on the way, right as he passed the trash can out front, without breaking stride, without even looking at the receptacle, he unerringly dropped the coffee into the garbage.

A moment later, he was behind the wheel of the Yukon Denali, driving out of the lot.

"Wow," Hailey murmured.

I dragged my gaze away from the front of the shop to look at her.

She smiled. "Someone has an admirer." She nudged me like we were in on a secret. "He left you a twenty-dollar tip."

My throat suddenly dry, another image, this one horrific, one I used to have constant nightmares about, flashed in my mind.

Two mortally wounded soldiers lying unconscious in their own blood.

It was the only memory I'd confessed to one of the myriad of doctors in a moment of flashback-induced panic, right before he told me that two operators had made the ultimate sacrifice rescuing me. Except he'd made it sound noble. Honorable. But I knew the truth. Two men were dead because of my actions.

Using every ounce of the most important survival technique I'd learned out of sheer necessity during three years of interrogation and reintegration and two years of hell before that, I shoved down my emotions. "Do…" My voice caught, and I cleared my throat. "Do you know that man?"

"The ridiculously gorgeous Mr. Black Coffee?" Hailey's smile turned soft.

Mr. Black Coffee. "Yes."

"Never seen him before. But I think we'll be seeing him again soon." Her smile turned into an excited grin. "He was *captivated* by you. He couldn't look away from your eyes. They're really pretty, by the way."

Mátia mou.

Mátia mou. *Mátia mou*. *Mátia mou*.

No. *No*.

It couldn't be him.

It couldn't be the soldier who'd rescued me. That man would hate me. He would have stared at me with abhorrence. *He would have said my name with condemnation*.

I reached for reason but came up short. "He threw away his entire coffee."

Hailey frowned. "Really?"

"Yes. Right before he got back in his SUV, he tossed it in the trash without ever taking a sip."

Hailey stared at me for a second as if dumbstruck. Then, bright and sweet and full of amusement, she laughed. "Oh, then he is *definitely* your

new admirer. Mr. Black Coffee who doesn't actually drink coffee. And he ordered it hot. There's poetry in that." She winked at me.

Four college-aged women walked into the café.

Hailey called out a greeting, and then she was off, making their order.

The rest of the day, every second I wasn't helping a customer or making drinks, I stared out the front window, looking for a black SUV and the most alarmingly handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Ares

The brunette hadn’t recognized me.

But the woman knew me.

Locking in on my gaze the moment I spoke, she’d fucking trembled.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Aracet

"Thank you *so* much for staying and helping!" Hailey called out across the finally empty café. "I think we were even busier than usual today. If you lock the front door, I'll make you a banana latte to go."

Oblivious to the time, I did a double take at the large clock on the wall. It was five minutes past seven p.m. "Oh, sure. And I'll lock the door now, but I think I'll pass on caffeine this late." I was exhausted. Mentally.

"I can make it with decaf espresso," Hailey offered.

My mouth actually watered at the thought of one of her iced banana lattes, which was an improvement over what I'd salivated over earlier today. "Thank you. That sounds perfect."

"Awesome. And I'm almost done with cleanup and tomorrow's prep, so we should be out of here in a few."

Already at the front doors, looking for a black SUV, obsessing over who the man was, I didn't respond.

As promised, a few minutes later we were walking out the back exit. Hailey with a backpack over her shoulder that she didn't have yesterday, and me with an iced decaf banana latte and orange scone.

We said our good nights, and she took off, but then I lingered a moment.

When I didn’t see any black Yukon Denalis with fancy grilles, I drove back to the apartment. Practically weeping at the trek up three flights of stairs, vowing to purchase sneakers tomorrow, I walked up to a Post-it note stuck to my front door.

I read the slanted but neat block writing.

You’re missing happy hour.

And your cell phone is off.

CALL ME!

Henry

Pulling the note off the door, I let myself inside, dropped my purse, tucked my drink and scone into the fridge, then took a quick shower. Three minutes later, wearing a T-shirt and clean underwear, I started a load of laundry, then grabbed my latte from the fridge and my cell from my purse before falling onto the bed.

After powering up the damn thing, I called Henry.

He answered before the first ring. “Do you know what I’m doing, Miss *Late For Dinner*?”

“I didn’t know we were having dinner.” I sipped the latte and practically groaned.

“*Late For Dinner* is a movie, and I’m holding my phone when I never hold my damn phone. Do you know why?”

“Because you don’t like cell phones?”

“No, and keep up. I meant, do you know why I’m holding my phone?” Voices sounded in the background, like Henry was outside by the pool area

of the motel.

Before I could guess at an answer to his question, he answered for me.

“Because I was worrying about you, when you know I hate worrying, let alone waiting for your *Pretty Little Liars* self to call. Where were you? We had sneaker shopping to do this afternoon, then happy hour. And for the record, I refrained from leaving you fifteen texts because Pasqual reminded me you’re on a pay-as-you-go plan, so you’re welcome.”

“Thank you? And I was at work.” Wondering if I could live off these things, I drank half the latte.

“You were supposed to get off at three.” Henry sighed. “Now tell me why you stayed so late. Did you ask for paid overtime?”

Despite my day, despite my racing heart that never slowed and the utterly consuming thoughts of an almost-six-and-a-half-foot muscular god of a man who had only said two words to me, I let out a small laugh. “No, I am not asking for overtime pay. You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m practical, and I’m looking out for you.”

“You’re also pushy.”

“You wouldn’t love me any other way. Now, answer the first question. What was more important than happy hour with me and Pasqual?”

I smiled. Then I thought about it. If there was anyone I could talk to about what had happened today and who would have an objective opinion on whether Mr. Black Coffee knew who I was or if he’d stared at me like that for some other reason, it would be Henry.

“Okay.” I exhaled. “Promise not to judge?”

“Absolutely not. But tell me anyway. Wait. Should I get Pasqual for this, too?”

Oh God. “Please, don’t.”

“This is going to be about a man, isn’t it?”

“Do you want to hear or not?”

“On tenterhooks, darling,” he replied sarcastically. “Now lay it on me.”

I told him everything.

From the black SUV and tall blond man sightings over the past five years, to the SUV sightings in Miami, to every detail of today’s encounter with Mr. Black Coffee.

Henry didn’t say a word.

“That’s it. Do you think it’s… the same man?” I couldn’t refer to him as a guy. Mr. Black Coffee was too masculine and dominant to simply call him a guy. Not even Mr. Black Coffee fit, but I hadn’t come up with an alternative.

Henry blew out a breath. “Well, that didn’t take long.”

Instant alarm flooded in. “What do you mean?”

“Man Meat, darling.”

“What?”

Henry chuckled. “You, *American Beauty*, have officially found yourself some Man Meat. Congratulations. And no, I don’t think it’s the same man. Someone that hot—or as delicious as you described him—would definitely be someone you would’ve noticed and remembered. But I am now wondering why you conjure up a mysterious, ridiculously tall and muscled

Man Meat of a man everywhere you go. Is there something, or *someone*, you want to tell me about?”

My hackles went up. But then I remembered the conversation Henry had brought up last night. Quietly, tentatively, I used a single word. “Boundary.”

Henry’s tone immediately turned from teasing to deadly serious. “Of course. Say no more.”

“Do you think Mr. Black Coffee knows who I am?”

“No. I think he took one look at those eyes and your pixie little self and was as smitten as you. He’s probably a caveman, but alas, not all of us can be perfect.”

I ignored his offhanded compliments. “What if he did recognize me but was just trying to figure it out? And what if he comes back and is… angry? Or says something in front of my boss and I lose my job?”

“First of all, I’ve heard of Hailey. If she found out you’re Aracet, she wouldn’t care. You’d keep your job as long as it didn’t cause a riot or something equally outrageous, which it won’t. Second, in my experience, people who have hate don’t usually keep it in. If Man Meat knew who you were, and if he was eye-fucking you like that because he wanted to off you, he wouldn’t have held back. He would’ve said something. Probably a loud something to make a scene because assholes like that get off on it.”

My latte long gone, I set the cup on the nightstand and settled back into the pillows as I thought about Mr. Black Coffee. “He seemed like the opposite type of man from someone who’d cause a scene.”

“Then there’s your answer. He doesn’t know you.”

“It’s that simple?”

“No, but we’re not mind readers, people are predictable, and you only have facts to go on at this point. Until or unless Man Meat proves otherwise, he’s just that—Man Meat.”

“I very, very much dislike that term.”

Henry smirked. “Then ask him his name tomorrow when he comes in to get a coffee he doesn’t drink.”

I shivered at the thought of seeing him again. “You don’t know that he’ll come in, and I’m not asking him his name.” I’d never asked a man, or a boy, for his name. I went from being a neglected and naïve seventeen-year-old to abductee to being reintegrated, then living on the run. None of that had left any room, let alone energy, for normalcy or dating. Not that I was thinking of dating. But Mr. Black Coffee’s presence, his intensity…

Henry chuckled. “Oh, Man Meat will definitely show back up. But I have a feeling you won’t have to ask his name.”

“What? Why?”

“You’ll see. Speaking of Man Meat, I have to go. Pasqual is smiling at me. Call me tomorrow. And leave your cell on!”

“Good night, Henry.”

His tone softened. “Good night, *American Beauty*.”

I ended the call and powered down the cell phone. Then I set it on the nightstand and looked out the window.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I remembered my dreams….

Blue eyes, strong hands, and protective arms.

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THIRTY-SIX

Aracet

I got to work two minutes before Hailey, and God, did I use those one hundred and twenty seconds.

Scanning the street, driving slowly through the front parking lot before pulling around to the back of the building, I looked everywhere for the black Denali.

I'd looked at every single black SUV on the drive to work, and there'd been a lot, but not a single one had been exactly like the Denali that was in the parking lot of work yesterday morning.

I was beginning to wonder if the front grille was custom.

I was also starting to realize I may have spent five years running for no reason. The world was *full* of black SUVs. It was also full of tall men. But as I sat in my old Honda with the window down and the humidity still gentle this early, as I listened to the coo of mourning doves and the rhythmic buzzing of cicadas, I couldn't be upset at a path that led to this.

If nothing else, this moment was priceless.

I was looking forward to seeing Hailey and the steady customers I was already learning the names of. No one was judging me. Miami was

beautiful. Henry and Pasqual were a lifeline I never realized I was missing, and my heart was fluttering in anticipation.

Maybe I would see Mr. Black Coffee again, and maybe I wouldn't.

But I'd had a priceless moment yesterday, too.

A single encounter had shown me I was not defined solely by my past.

I could have a future.

I smiled at the thought as Hailey pulled around the building and parked next to me.

As soon as we were out of our cars, her contagious energy spread like the scent of jasmine that grew along the back of the alley. "Good morning!"

I smiled at Hailey and her pink hair that seemed brighter today, which reminded me that I'd wanted to strip the black dye out of mine. "Good morning to you." I made a mental note to get the hair dye remover later this afternoon when I went shopping for sneakers.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long." Hailey unlocked the back door, disabled the alarm, then turned on the lights.

"Not at all. I pulled in right before you."

Unexpectedly and seemingly spontaneously, she one-armed hugged me. "I think Del Cielo is growing on you." Her voice was singsong, but she gave me a hopeful look that was so earnest, I let out a small laugh.

"Yes, it definitely is."

"Yay! Because I love working with you."

I felt both a familiar pang of guilt and an unfamiliar hopefulness that'd taken root mere minutes ago when I was sitting in the car. "Ditto."

Thankfully, the conversation turned to work because, as soon as Hailey unlocked the front door, we had a stream of customers, exactly like the day before.

Except unlike yesterday, I was looking up every two seconds, waiting for a black Yukon Denali to pull into the lot.

By nine a.m., there'd been no Denali and no Mr. Black Coffee.

By ten a.m., I was losing hope.

By ten thirty, I was trying to make peace with an espresso machine that hated me as a line of waiting customers, used to Hailey's expertise, suffered through my inexperience. I was about to wave a white flag, or worse, burst into tears of frustration, when the sharp, high-pitched whine of a racing motorcycle grew louder right before the engine revved twice like it was downshifting.

A collective glance from half the customers went toward the front windows.

I followed suit.

A very tall, very muscular rider in all black got off a very expensive-looking superbike that was parked right in front of the café.

Then the rider took off his helmet, and my heart stalled out.

Mr. Black Coffee.

He set his helmet on the seat of his bike, then ran a hand through his wavy, almost unruly hair as he strode toward the front door of the café.

"Oh my God," I murmured, my nerves taking flight.

"Your admirer is back," Hailey whispered right before the bell over the door chimed, and she raised her voice to greet him. "Good morning! We'll

be right with you!”

No deep voice, no response.

For the next couple of minutes, with my heart beating so fast that I could hear it pounding in my ears, I worked through every order I was backed up on as Hailey manned the register and worked on hers.

Then Hailey reached past me for a new bag of coffee beans and lowered her voice. “He didn’t come up to the register yet. I think he’s waiting for you.”

Oh my God. “Okay.”

“And just so you know, he hasn’t taken his eyes off you.”

Oh my God. “I’ll, ah, go to the register now.”

“You better.” Hailey went to refill one of the bean hoppers.

Nervously wiping my hands on my apron, I stepped toward the register.

Then I looked up.

Every single second I’d spent obsessing over him for the past twenty-four hours mocked me. Leather jacket, leather pants, his eyes colder, his muscles bigger, his height towering, he looked like vengeance coming to collect for the sins of my past, and I wanted to prostrate myself at his feet.

The power of his presence had magnified exponentially—by his bike, his riding gear, but mostly by the penetrating stare that seemed to have only intensified since yesterday.

My face flushed, my bones suddenly feeling too weak to hold me together, I barely found my voice. “Good morning. I would ask if you want a black coffee, but…” Trailing off, I waited to see if he would acknowledge the full cup he’d thrown out yesterday.

He didn’t.

Studying my face for two frantic beats of my heart, just long enough to send me into both an anxiety tailspin and a whipped frenzy of jittery nerves, he stared at me a second longer. Then he tipped his chin toward the menu board high on the wall behind me. “Your favorite drink?”

I glanced at the board. Not because I didn’t know or needed a moment to make sure my voice wouldn’t shake, or because I wanted a second away from his intensity. It wasn’t any of those things.

It was the tip of his chin.

The single gesture—precise, dominant, made while maintaining eye contact—it landed like a command, and I felt the compulsory need to follow it.

He tipped his chin. I looked.

It was both that simple and complex. But now I was looking back up at him and wondering how delusional I was. Too handsome, too tall, too commanding, he was too… everything for me.

His inscrutable stare taking me in, showing no mercy as I spiraled into insecurity, he waited.

I braved a truth. “The iced banana latte.”

He tipped his chin again, but this time it was directed at me and the register.

I boldly interpreted his version of dominant sign language and rang up one banana latte. Then I glanced back at those ice-cold eyes that were in such direct contrast to everything Miami. “Anything else?”

“Not today.”

My heart somersaulted, and my wayward hope from earlier this morning grabbed on to the hint of promise. Then two new words echoed in my mind.

Not today.

Teetering on the edge of sanity, I gave him the total. “It’ll just take a minute.”

His only response was to pull a credit card from the front pocket of his pants, but I was already at the espresso machine, making the sweet banana-coffee concoction that I couldn’t imagine a man like him tasting, let alone drinking.

In my concentrated effort not to look like a neophyte, I didn’t pay attention to the bell over the door ringing several times, Hailey’s greetings, or the small rush of new customers. But I did notice a very tall, very muscular blond man move toward the pickup counter.

As I finished making the latte and put on the lid, I had a moment of doubt.

Then I had an idea.

Reasoning that I would pay for it with my tips, I quickly poured a large black coffee. Then I took the iced latte and the hot coffee over to the pickup counter and placed them in front of him. “One iced banana latte and one backup. Just in case.”

Staring down at me, he didn’t comment.

“My treat,” I added, suddenly more self-conscious than I’d ever been.

Same as yesterday, he picked up the black coffee by palming the top of the lid and gripping the hot part of the cup above the protective heat sleeve

with his fingers. But then he used the hot coffee to push the iced latte back toward me. “My treat.”

Before I could say thank you, let alone process what he’d done, he was already striding out the door as every woman in the café, including me, watched him go.

Then, same as yesterday, he walked past the trash can and dropped the coffee into it.

I didn’t think.

Slipping under the counter, rushing to the door, shoving it open, I stepped into the hot mugginess and called after him. “Why do you throw out the coffee?”

His eyes, that piercing gaze, it stayed locked on mine as my heart wildly beat to a rhythm only he elicited. Then his gaze fell—down the length of my body, hovering on my boots, then moving slowly back up my legs, over my breasts, and finally back to my eyes.

Every inch of my flesh erupted with goose bumps.

Then his voice—*oh my God, that voice*—it took on a new kind of depth in the bright sunshine, as if he were darkness and his voice was reminding the daylight who was in control. “I need both hands for what I do.”

My stomach fluttered, and a tightness squeezed deep in my core. “It’s a beautiful bike.” The second I said it, I regretted it. I didn’t know what kind of sophomoric foolishness had come over me, but I wanted to melt into the pavement.

Sharpening my embarrassment, he didn’t reply.

He didn’t acknowledge me at all.

He put on his helmet, threw his leg over the bike with practiced ease and an obscene display of the muscled strength in his thighs, then started the engine.

Before I could sink any further into the humiliation of my rash decision to run after him, I walked back into the café.

Hailey glanced toward the sound of the revving engine, then back at me.

I kept my head down as the telltale high-pitched whine of an accelerating motorcycle filled Del Cielo for a mere second before disappearing altogether.

Hailey smiled. “You’re safe now. You can look up. He’s gone.”

Suddenly realizing that he hadn’t said he needed both hands to ride, that he’d said something altogether different—*I need both hands for what I do*—I didn’t reply.

Safe wasn’t something I would ever be around a man like that.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

Ares

I spent the rest of yesterday riding and ignoring Nix. I checked on the place in Largo. I tracked her movements—gas station, drugstore, secondhand clothing place, motel for their happy hour, then apartment. I watched her fall asleep courtesy of my cameras. Then I stopped at the club, lasted twenty minutes, and was back at her place, parked across the street until dawn.

A workout, shower, and few hours of sleep later, I was here.

Timing it to hit the lull between morning and lunch rush, I pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop for the third day in a row. As I angled my company ride into a spot, my cell rang.

Glancing at the caller ID on the Denali's center display, seeing Paragon Ops main number, I answered. "Cypher."

"It's Nix. I need you here, STAT."

I watched the brunette behind the counter make eye contact as she served some fucking college-aged dude. "Twenty minutes."

"Negative. Now." Nix hung up.

Resigned, I pulled out of the lot and drove to HQ.

When I stepped off the elevator, Nix—phone in hand, eyes on the screen—was waiting. “Command room,” he ordered, already Oscar Mike.

I followed.

As soon as we entered the concrete-enclosed server farm, Nix was issuing orders to Cypher. “Pull up the sat feeds, the new intel, terrain maps, air traffic, and surveillance for the past forty-eight for comps.”

The large screens on the wall and the monitors in front of Cypher started populating.

I immediately recognized the location. “No.” No fucking way was I taking the brunette back there.

“You don’t know what I’m proposing yet,” Nix argued, moving to the largest screen on the far wall and pointing at a live sat feed of what was left of a compound that I had fucking flashbacks of. “You know where and what this is.”

Of course I fucking knew.

ISIS compound. Syria.

The reason Jax and Bellows were dead. The hellhole I’d pulled a hazel-eyed brunette from. The fucking place where I’d betrayed everything I stood for.

I said nothing.

Nix launched into his plan, laying out parameters. Then he downloaded every fucking redacted detail of the brunette’s time in captivity. Every detail I’d suspected but had been unable to hack for five years.

Four hours later, tamping down rage, I was in a standoff with Nix.

“Tap into ISA, NSA, the agency, whoever you have to. Fuck, do it yourself. Get headshots of everyone at that damn compound, then I’ll show them to her.” And fucking level the hellhole if she ID’d the asshole.

“Impractical,” Nix argued. “There’re potentially thousands in the underground network, and this is time sensitive. We need to infiltrate.”

“Not happening,” I warned. “It’s a shit plan. There’s no way to infiltrate undetected.”

Seated, arms crossed, staring up at the same goddamn feeds we’d been going over all day, Nix spun in his chair to face me. “Then we keep looking and find a way.”

“Then what?” I asked for the tenth fucking time. “The compound is forty klicks from the nearest town, and calling it a town is a fucking stretch.” I glanced at Cypher. “You know this terrain. You know where I’m fucking going with this.” The brunette wasn’t doing this. No goddamn way.

Nix cut in. “We all know the optics. No town, no market, no plausible cover story if she’s intercepted. But that’s not the op. You only need to get her close enough to ID.”

“You’ve been looking at the same feeds and intel as me. There is no *close enough*. That’d be a fucking breach.” I wasn’t taking her back to ground zero. Full fucking stop.

Cypher finally spoke up. “Concur with Grayson.”

Nix spun back in his chair to face the screens. “Then we send her in solo.”

“No fucking way.” I’d take the brunette off the grid immediately before I allowed that. Somewhere Nix would never fucking find her. “We’d need a

team to bring her back out alive. At which point, send in a Unit. Or fucking send DEVGRU. Kill or capture, DNA collection, I don't fucking care. Brass'll have their answer either way."

"POTUS isn't authorizing a JSOC op for this. No one wants to start a war with Syria."

We were already at war. All the fucking time. Terrorists didn't sleep. "Then track the tunnels under the compound. That's your fucking op. Al-Adani will leave the site eventually."

Same as every other time I'd brought it up, Nix dismissed it. "Too many tunnels, and the Department of the Treasury already confirmed a large asset transfer to an offshore account allegedly associated with al-Adani."

All shit Nix had mentioned over the past four hours. "Then bring in Trefor. Have Cypher read in November. Put me and whoever else is unassigned on the ground. Joint op with AES. We'll recon the fucking tunnel exits." Then I'd detonate them.

"If we knew where all the access points were, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Nix spun back around, stood, walked over to one of Cypher's encrypted laptops, and began typing. "We're out of time. All intel says the threat is not only credible but imminent. The Commander in Chief won't authorize an airstrike without a positive ID, and the woman is the only asset we have that can achieve that." He turned the laptop to face me. "This is the account."

I strode over to the desk and looked at the screen. As I watched, an eight-figure balance was decreasing in increments of two hundred dollars every second. *Goddamn it*. "Put OFAC on this. Have them freeze the

account.” The Office of Foreign Assets Control enforced financial sanctions all the damn time. It was their fucking job.

Countering every rationale I had, Nix had an answer for this shit too. “We both know if OFAC steps in, we lose the trail.”

I used to speak the same language as Erikson. I lived for the *we* bullshit. Now, as of four hours ago, I didn’t. I knew the brunette had been a victim. I knew she hadn’t picked up that AKM on her own. I didn’t know when I first had her in my sights that she was American, but it wouldn’t have changed a damn thing. I still wouldn’t have taken that shot.

As much as I hated to admit it, Helios was right.

Every Delta operator would’ve done what Jax had that day. There was no guarantee that if he’d been one hundred percent, he would’ve gotten off rounds first or avoided the RPG if he hadn’t. And any one of us could’ve been in Bellows’s POS. War was fucking war. We’d all signed up for this.

But the brunette hadn’t.

And I was fucking pissed Nix was showing me this account when he could just as easily hack it as OFAC could. “That’s a shit ton of money to leave in the hands of al-Adani. There’s also more than one agency that can stop it, including you.”

“Allegedly in al-Adani’s hands,” Nix corrected, ignoring my last point. “We won’t know until or unless he’s eliminated. Either way, he or someone close to him has already siphoned off thirty-four and a half million over the past two days.” Nix leveled me with a look. “Four more days, and al-Adani will have over a hundred million with seventeen potential targets across the U.S. to spend it on.” The controlled calm of a ruthless Tier One morphed

into the covert operative that was the deadly mastermind behind Paragon Ops. “We need the brunette—STAT.”

I scraped the bottom of the barrel for excuses. “She won’t do it.”

“I’m no longer asking, Ares.”

Anger flaring, I kept my expression controlled. Then I lied. “She’s not stable.”

“Get her stable,” Nix ordered before glancing at his watch. “You have forty-eight hours.” Then the warfighter POTUS had tasked with being his *Tertia Optio* gave me one final warning. “After that, I’m bringing her in myself.”

Without a fucking word, I walked out of the command room.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

Aracet

I glanced at the large clock on the wall above the seating area of the café.

Four-oh-two p.m.

He hadn't come in today, and I'd already stayed too late.

Wiping nonexistent crumbs off a table, I gave the varnished wood one more swipe, then picked up the dish bin and headed back behind the service counter.

Hailey smiled at me. "The tables look great. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I just wanted to make sure everything was clean for you before I left." It was partially the truth, so I didn't count it as a lie.

Hailey's smile softened to a hopefulness I was incapable of. "And maybe you wanted to stay to see if your admirer came in?"

I felt my face heat. "He's not my admirer." I'd spent the past thirty hours telling myself that latte and *my treat* meant nothing. "Anyway, what else can I do for you?"

A loud burst of laughter came from a trio of women around my age who were sitting at the same table they'd occupied every afternoon since I'd started.

Both Hailey and I turned to look.

Every day, about the time I would be leaving, the women came in. Sometimes they arrived together, and sometimes they filtered in individually. I couldn't remember their names, but I'd helped Hailey make their iced drinks a couple of times now. Usually, the sight of them, their friendship, lifted the small part of my spirit that hadn't been broken by circumstances and life choices. Normally, I enjoyed hearing their laughter.

But the taller blonde's voice carried, and not for the first time this week, I heard her mention the clubbing scene in Miami, specifically one place that she named again. "And you know what else goes on there."

The dark-haired woman fanned herself. "I should be so lucky."

The shorter blonde shook her head. "There is just too much eye candy in Miami."

The brunette laughed. "Too much eye candy, or too little time?"

The taller blonde said, "Both!"

They all laughed, but the shorter blonde's smile turned wistful. "I'm hoping for more than eye candy, but not at that place. I don't have enough nerve for that—yet. Or maybe ever. I don't know. But I want to go to E11even and dance."

The taller blonde grinned. "Then let's make that happen *tonight*." She glanced at her cell and stood. "Right now, though, I have to run." She shouldered her purse as the other two stood. "So we're definitely meeting at E11even later, but not until midnight or a little after, when it'll really be going off."

The women said their goodbyes with promises to meet up later.

An unfamiliar restlessness that had nothing to do with my past spread like needling pinpricks, and I wondered what the woman meant by not having enough nerve. I glanced at Hailey. “Have you ever been to those clubs? E11even or the other one?”

Hailey laughed. “No.” Drawing the word out, she shook her head. “Definitely not my scene.”

I didn’t know what that meant or what sort of *scene* I would be excited about, let alone brave enough to try, because I’d never been to a club. As casually as I could, in case I wanted to drive past the place one night, I asked where it was. “So you know where that other club is?”

“Oh, yes. It’s in Miami Beach.” She rattled off a street and hotel name like I should feel some sort of way about them. Suitably impressed or mildly condemning? I couldn’t tell. But neither notion matched Hailey’s personality.

So I memorized the names she’d given me and chalked up Hailey’s reaction to either personal choice on how she liked to spend her free time or an experience she’d already had and wasn’t eager to repeat.

As I glanced at the clock on the wall again, my mind fell back down the rabbit hole of utter obsession and total unreserved fantasy that had been plaguing me for days.

Mr. Black Coffee.

Just the thought of him—those almost colorless blue eyes, his voice, his sternness, his presence, that sleek motorcycle he’d pulled up on yesterday—made my heart rate kick into overdrive.

Flushed, I tried to force down thoughts of the blond man who looked more like a god or a model for… I didn't even know what. Masculine dominance and unattainably superior genetics with a side of lethal brooding. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be alone with him, but just once, I wanted to experience it.

Embarrassed by my own thoughts, heated in all the wrong places, I hastily untied the apron at my waist. "I think I've cost you enough in hourly wages today." I still hadn't reconciled how much Hailey was paying me compared to my experience. But it was more than that. This didn't feel like a job.

I knew I was still settling in, and I hadn't purchased a pair of sneakers yet—the secondhand store didn't have any in my size when I went yesterday, and I wasn't quite used to being on my feet all day yet—but I loved working here. I hadn't been recognized once, and the stream of repeat customers with the same drink orders was comforting on a level I hadn't expected.

I felt like I belonged to something without having to actually belong.

Hailey nudged my shoulder with hers. "Ari, you're worth every cent." Her expression turned serious. "Actually, you're worth ten times what I pay you. But please don't quit."

The corners of my mouth tipped up. "I have no plans of leaving."

A cell phone rang, and both of us momentarily paused.

Then Hailey smiled. "Take your call, and I'll make you a banana latte to go."

It took me a second to realize it was my cell phone ringing and that I hadn't turned it off since I'd texted Henry last night to let him know I got home safe after happy hour at the motel.

Quickly grabbing my bag from under the counter, I fished out the cell, glanced at the caller ID, then swiped to answer as I turned my back on the few customers sitting in the café. Then I lowered my voice. "Henry, I can't talk. I'm at work."

"It's four thirty. You should already be on your way here for happy hour. You know what traffic is like this time of day. Why are you still there?"

"Because I am." The bell over the door chimed. "I have to go."

"*Pretty Little Liars*," Henry sighed. "Do you know what gave you away just now?"

The hair on the back of my neck rose.

Hailey called out a generalized greeting. "Hi! I'll be right with you."

"I said I can't talk right now," I warned Henry. "I'll call you later."

"Man Meat. That's what," Henry stated, completely ignoring me and making me regret I told him about my secret obsession. "He's there, isn't he?"

Gooseflesh crawled across my shoulders and ran down my arms. "Hanging up now. Don't call back," I uselessly ordered before ending the call and turning off the ringer.

Shoving the cell into the pocket of my jeans, I turned around.

Then I felt as if I'd been slammed in the chest by a semi.

My obsession stood three feet back from the service counter, but his usual ice-blue gaze had been replaced with a glare of hot fury. His lethal

stare only left me long enough to drop to the pocket where I'd stashed my cell. Then his glare returned to my eyes, and a muscle in his jaw jumped.

Hailey handed me my iced latte as she spoke to Mr. My Treat, who'd morphed into Mr. Livid. "Can I get you your usual dark roast? Large?" she asked with feigned cheerfulness.

"No," he bit out, his glare locked on me.

Hailey's tone and countenance held. "Something else?"

For a split second, his glare landed on her, but he jerked his chin at me. "Her."

"I'm so sorry. She's off the clock. But I can help you."

His glare cut back to me. "I want her."

Completely inappropriate and ill-timed, desire flared bright and hot as intense heat washed over me.

As if he sensed it, or maybe it was just my aching, lustful longing, but I could have sworn the uptick in his glare was mirroring the deeply intense, sexual tension I'd never, ever felt.

But then, all at once, it hit me—*really* fucking hit me.

Every bone in my body suddenly crushed under the damning weight of belated realization, I glanced at Hailey. "It's okay. I got this." Terrified, I stepped up to the cash register and attempted to put on the best performance of my life, because Henry had been wrong about all of it. This man hadn't been coming in here every day for me at all.

He was here because of who I used to be.

I met his glare of fury. "What can I get you?"

He threw Hailey a warning glance. “Leave.”

“I’m the manager, and I don’t take kindly to threats to my employees or myself.” God bless her, Hailey was standing her ground, but it only ramped up my fear and guilt.

Trying not to shake, I nodded in what I hoped was reassurance. “It’s okay. I got this.” If all else failed, I knew how to lie to pass a lie detector test. Right this moment, it was the only takeaway from my reintegration that I was currently thankful for.

“You sure?” Hailey asked, ignoring him for a second.

The only thing I was sure of was that my new life was crashing down around me and I wouldn’t be here tomorrow. “Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll be at the side station if you need me.” Eyeing the still-glaring wall of muscle, Hailey stepped away from the service counter.

My so-called admirer watched her retreat. Then he turned his glare of fury on me and said the very last thing I was expecting. “Who’s harassing you?”

“W-What?”

The movement so minimal it was almost undetectable, he leaned forward. Then he repeated, verbatim, what I’d said to Henry. “*Hanging up now*. *Don’t call back*.” His voice dropped into a lethal threat. “Who is harassing you?”

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THIRTY-NINE

Ares

"Who is harassing you?" I demanded, enunciating very fucking clearly so there was no mistake about my intent.

Her face blanched, and she dropped eye contact. "Ah, no one." She looked back up—at my fucking chest.

"Eyes on me," I ordered.

That hazel gaze met mine. "You were listening?"

Every fucking word. "Name." Still enraged with Nix, with the fact that al-Adani was alive, now more protective of this woman than I'd ever been, I wanted to eliminate whoever the fuck was on the other end of that call.

"A-Ari," she stuttered.

"The name of who was calling you." I didn't give a shit about the Ari Mitchell alias she was currently using.

"Oh. I…" She cleared her throat. Then her posture went straight, and she met my glare head-on. "I don't think that's any of your business. Can I get you a coffee? Black?"

"No."

"Okay." She nodded once, then glanced at the damn wall behind her. "We have a lot of different options to choose from. I can recommend

something else if you—” Looking back at me, she stopped short. “Want,” she finished in a quieter tone.

I fucking stared at those hazel eyes. Two seconds, and my lack of response had its intended effect. The woman spoke first.

“You usually come in the morning,” she blurted.

“Who called?”

She frowned. “Why were you late?”

“Work. What’s his name?” I’d hack her burner for a number, but getting the woman to answer the question wasn’t only the quickest way to extract intel, it was also a test of her submissive deference. Once I read her in—*if* I read her in—if she was eristic enough to want any part of Nix’s plan, then I needed to know she would follow my every goddamn order to the letter.

“Whose name?” The lines between her eyes deepening, she was either a master of contrived innocence, feeling my dominance, or she’d finally fucking recognized me.

I was betting on the former. “The man you hung up on.”

“I didn’t hang up. What’s your name?”

“His first.” The woman wasn’t getting my name without earning it.

“I didn’t say it was a he,” she argued.

“You didn’t have to.” So help her, it better have been the SWCC or the analyst, and not that fucking tourist who’d hit on her.

Biting her lower lip, she nodded again. Then she drew in a quick breath, let it out, dropped her gaze to the register and rang something up. When she looked back up, her entire demeanor had morphed. No facial muscle movement, gaze fixed, her locked-down expression almost rivaled mine. “I

chose for you. Maybe this time you'll try it. Iced soy milk latte with banana syrup and banana cold foam. Six dollars and seventy-five cents. You can pay now."

With my movements deliberate but unrushed, I pulled out my wallet, extracted a twenty, then slid it across the counter.

Taking the bait, she reached for it.

Breaking every rule I had, I grabbed her wrist.

The brunette gasped, the pink-haired barista rushed us, and some college-aged prick in the café who'd been watching me the whole time stood up.

Unhurried, not letting go of the brunette, feeling each rapid beat of her heart as her pulse jumped against my fingers, I shoved my wallet back into my pocket with my free hand. Then I leaned across the counter and fed the woman who made me lose all fucking control an outright lie followed by the deadly truth. "I'm no threat to you. But say the word, and I'll handle whoever's harassing you." I let go of her wrist.

She yanked her hand back, sans the twenty.

"Make the drink for yourself. Keep the change."

Pivoting, I threw a warning glance at the college prick.

Then I walked the fuck out before I did something stupid—like take the woman with me and disappear.

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FORTY

Aracet

Holding her phone, Hailey stepped up next to me. “Get his license plate number. I’m making a call to my security—ah, alarm company. He’s not coming in here again.”

“No.” Putting my hand over hers and the phone she was about to raise to her ear, I lowered her arm as I watched him get into his black Yukon Denali. Despite Henry’s assurances that there were a lot of Denalis on the road, I still wondered about the Denali I saw here that first night at closing. “Leave it alone.” He didn’t recognize me. He’d touched my wrist—no, he grabbed it, held it, then looked into my eyes. But he hadn’t told me I was a traitor. Or a disgrace. Or that I should be dead like my cousin.

He hadn’t been angry at me.

He’d been angry for me.

Because of Henry.

“Ari,” Hailey practically whispered. “I think I should call.”

I sucked in a breath, then turned to face her. “Please, don’t. He wasn’t…” How the hell did I explain this? The man was not normal. Nothing about his daily visits were normal.

But weren’t they?

How many customers—how many men—came in here every day and smiled and flirted with Hailey? How many of them ordered the same thing each day?

A lot.

And it wasn't just the men.

Looking at Hailey and her pretty face and pink hair, I let a small smile come through. She wasn't simply a barista. She was an entire institution. One that people paid daily to see. The coffee here was the best I'd ever had, but Hailey was the real draw. Pure of heart, full of life, exuding joy—she was the main show.

"How many admirers do you have come through here on a daily basis?" She opened her mouth to argue, but I held up a hand. "It's a lot, as it should be. You're amazing, in so many ways. And I confess that I don't have a lot of experience with men, and I didn't have the benefit of older brothers, but I really don't think Mr. Black Coffee is truly a problem."

A seriousness that wasn't rare, but also not usual in the four days I'd been here, descended over Hailey's features. "That wasn't a normal admirer encounter, Ari. You have to see that."

Did I? Who was I to judge what was normal? "I think he heard me on the phone with my pushy friend as I pushed back, and he misconstrued the situation. I don't want to jump to conclusions." And I really didn't want to move again. Not now. Maybe not ever. I loved Miami so far. But a moment ago, before he'd spoken, when my stomach had dropped and the fear had set in, when I was ready to leave this city within the hour, I realized something.

The fear had been missing the past couple of days.

I had been living without it.

But I hadn't fully grasped that until it had flooded back in, consuming me both physically and mentally. Except this time, there had been more to that fear. There'd been dread. A pervasive, soul-crushing dread that I would have to leave here—the city, my apartment, this job, Henry and Pasqual, even the car that was already giving me trouble each time I went to start it.

I didn't want to leave.

And that man—with his voice and those eyes—hadn't recognized me.

"Are you sure?" Hailey grasped my arm. "Really, really sure? Because I know… people."

A small laugh escaped. "I'm sure you know a lot of people." I didn't really know anyone. But I had Henry and Pasqual. And I was sure if I mentioned the incident to Henry, he would be here all day tomorrow with Pasqual as backup. "And I'm sorry to laugh, I know you meant that in all seriousness and in the best way possible, so thank you. I'm grateful for both your concern and the offer. But I'm fine."

Hailey looked at me for another second. "Okay." Then she smiled wide. "Can I say it?"

Oh God. "Yes?"

She kept grinning. "It's not bad—not really."

"Oh God."

She laughed. But then her voice went all conspiratorially quiet. "It was kinda hot, in a totally dominant, masculine-energy-on-steroids kinda way. Like, if that was in a movie?" She nodded as if we'd just watched the whole

scene unfold on the big screen. “Am I wrong? I mean, of course he shouldn’t have grabbed you. And as your boss, I’ll fill out an incident report so my cousin knows, and everything will be documented so that—”

“Stop. No reports, no need to tell your cousin, no nothing. Okay?”

Hailey drew in a sharp breath.

“I’m asking. Please?”

“How about I document the incident, but hold off on doing anything with it, and I won’t tell my cousin unless he does something egregious again?”

I exhaled in relief. “Okay. And then—”

“And then we agree it was kinda hot, in a totally inappropriate way, of course.” She smiled.

Heat flushed my face, and I smiled back. “Okay, agreed.” She almost reminded me of Henry. “You rushed to the register like you were going to fight him.”

“I was.” Serious again, indignant, her face showed all of her emotions. “Bullies don’t scare me.”

There was most likely a whole lot more to that story, but I wasn’t going to pry. I loved this job, and if I was ever going to befriend a boss, it would be her, but I didn’t get close to people for a reason. “Noted. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but I didn’t do anything.” She picked up the twenty as the bell over the door chimed and an elderly man walked in. “Mr. Romerez! Café Cubano?”

The man replied with something in Spanish.

Hailey chuckled and shoved the twenty into my hand. “Take your tip and your banana latte and go!” She nudged me toward the rear hallway. “But don’t forget to come back tomorrow.”

I’d almost forgotten about the banana latte she’d made me before Mr. Black Coffee had walked in. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” She almost had. Things would have been way different right now if I’d been recognized.

“Good,” Hailey replied cheerfully. “See you tomorrow!”

“Seven a.m.,” I confirmed, grabbing my latte.

As I walked out the back to my car, guilt ate at me over the fact that I was hiding my past from her. That she was trusting me with her customers without knowing who I really was. But a part of me also wondered if Henry was right about her not firing me if she did know who I was.

Dismissing the thought, I got behind the wheel of the old Honda and turned the key.

The damn car made the same sound it had this morning and yesterday. Like it was struggling to live.

“Oh, come on.” I tried again, and thankfully, after making the metal grinding noise again, it started. Quickly, before the stupid car decided to quit on me, I put it in Reverse, backed out of the parking spot, then headed straight to the apartment.

I wanted to shop for a pair of sneakers and an extra pair of jeans for work, and I needed some groceries, but I didn’t trust the car. I was also suddenly so tired, I didn’t want to deal with a car that might break down tonight.

Well, afternoon.

It was only five p.m., the sun was still high and bright, and I really wanted to drive to the beach, but the thought of putting up my feet won out. So I headed to the apartment with the intent of a quiet evening of laundry, leftover Cuban food, and a book I'd borrowed from the lost-and-found box at work. Something about a railroad to Key West.

The car made it to the apartment, and I was walking up the second flight of stairs when a flash of black caught my eye.

I looked toward the street, and my heart jumped.

A black SUV turned the corner, but I didn't see it in time to note the make or model. I also hadn't paid attention to my rearview mirrors or the traffic around me on the way home. I'd been so focused on the damn car, hoping like hell it didn't break down, I'd just driven straight here.

Cursing myself, wondering if I should go up to the third floor or retreat back to the car and drive around for an hour, I waited thirty seconds.

The late afternoon sun beat down on me like a wall of heat, sweat made my shirt stick to my back, and someone came out of a first-floor apartment.

But no more black SUVs showed up, and I didn't want to run into any neighbors.

So I hauled ass up the third flight of stairs and quickly let myself into the apartment. It wasn't until I was stripping to do laundry that I remembered my cell and Henry.

I glanced at the phone. Five texts and four missed calls.

I shoved my clothes into the small washer, then sat on the bed.

Henry: *Rude!*

Henry: *Don't hang up on me!*

Henry: *Ok, fine. I get it. Work and all that. But I still say Man Meat was there*.

Henry: *It's happy hour. Where are you?*

Henry: *I hate texting. CALL ME*.

Sighing, I dialed.

Henry answered before it even seemed to ring. "Where are you? Pasqual made your favorite."

"What's my favorite?" I hadn't tried a single thing Pasqual made that I didn't like, but I hadn't mentioned a favorite.

"Man Meat."

My mouth opened, then closed.

"*Fine*," Henry sighed exaggeratedly. "It's empanadas. Get over here."

"I'm not your pet." I lay back and stretched out on the bed. "Besides, my clothes are in the washer." Empanadas sounded delicious, though.

"I'll come get you and bring a robe. You can keep it. Keep ten of them. I only have fifty billion from an ill-advised PR hack, but that's another story. Was Man Meat there today? And for the record, one day soon, I'm coming into that place, even though you're practically in Hialeah and you work during my busiest hours, but I'm coming. Then I'm going to sit there and nurse one of those banana lattes you rave about while I wait for Man Meat to show."

I was secretly glad Henry hadn't come into Café Del Cielo yet. I didn't know why, but I felt the need to keep my mystery man to myself. "You're

obsessed with Man Meat.” Jesus, that sounded wrong.

Henry laughed, loud and spontaneous. “Yes, I am. But only Pasqual’s. Now stop keeping me in suspense. Have you gotten his name and number yet?”

“No and no, and I’m done talking about it.” Foolishly aiming to redirect him, I remembered the conversation those three women were having, and then I stupidly asked Henry about the club in an attempt to take the heat off me and Mr. Black Coffee. “Have you heard of this club?” I recited the name, then the address Hailey had given me.

“Oh my God, yes!” Henry’s voice ramped up with excitement. “You *have* to go.” For the next fifteen minutes, he launched into a tell-all about his clubbing days, the nightlife scene in Miami Beach, all the places I needed to go—but without him because he was a taken man—and how he knew the perfect outfits for me to wear.

Tuning Henry out, I thought about my mystery man’s hand on my wrist.

The tingles that’d spread up my arm, then fallen down my body like the tails of fireworks.

I thought about his eyes.

His voice.

Then Henry’s voice brought me back to reality. “*Pretty Little Liars*, are you listening to me?”

“Yes.” No.

Henry exhaled again. “Fine, I get it. You’re tired. Go to bed.”

“Already ahead of you.”

Henry’s voice turned emotionless, which was to say, he got emotional. Or protective. I was still learning how to interpret the many sides of this messy thing called friendship. “Can I bring you something for dinner?”

I fought down an instant stiffening of my own emotions. Then I told myself Henry wasn’t telling me I had to eat, he was making a kind offer, and the two were very different. “Thank you, but I’m good.”

“Okay.” Then he didn’t follow up with any comebacks or sharp retorts.

I took what was probably a purposeful pause or cue to revisit our previous conversation on boundaries, and I used it as an excuse to end the call. “Good night, Henry. Give Pasqual my best. I’ll see you soon.”

“Good night, Rose Martens.”

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FORTY-ONE

Ares

I tracked her fucking burner.

It'd been the SWCC.

Then I watched and heard as her shit car almost didn't start, and I got more pissed. About every damn thing. Especially how her small wrist had fucking imprinted in my grip.

It was all I could think about.

That, and getting her off the grid. Then I'd go to Syria and fucking end this no matter what political bullshit was behind it. But would I fuck over Nix and his POTUS connection like that? Leave a hundred million in the ether for the next gen of ISIS? Would I go on a suicide mission for a brunette with hazel eyes?

The answer was yes—to all of it.

But the last vestige of humanity left in me recognized that this woman might want to have a say in how this went down.

With Nix's fucking intel drop on every redacted detail of her time in captivity replaying in my head, I'd watched the woman fall asleep in her studio apartment, then I drove to the club.

Now I was sitting at the bar, angrier than I'd ever been.

The bartender, once again, placed a water in front of me but knew better than to engage.

The man in the suit taking the seat next to me wasn't as smart. "Grayson."

"Jagger." I glanced to make sure I had it right. Shirt partway unbuttoned, calculated grin, winking at a woman passing by. It was Jagger.

The most impulsive of the Black triplets looked at me and smirked. "You're one of the few who gets it correct."

Wasn't hard if you paid attention to detail. Which I did—in exacting measure. "What do you need?" Jagger was self-serving. I wasn't a woman he could fuck or a vice he could exploit. He wouldn't bother with small talk unless he had an agenda.

"I'm here to find out what you need." He nodded thanks to the bartender as he put a scotch, neat, in front of him.

I threw Jagger a glance.

Picking up his drink, he chuckled. "All right, I confess." He took a swallow. "I don't give a fuck what you do. Or don't do, as the case may be. But I was sent to find out what you need because, apparently, you're bad for business."

"I'm not engaging anyone."

"Exactly. You've been in here how many nights in a row? Getting all your little bunnies twisted up in a frenzy, but not *engaging*? What's the problem?"

"A man can't have a drink?" I wasn't an official member, so I couldn't tell him I'd paid my dues.

Jagger threw me a sideways glance. “You don’t drink.” He watched a blonde walk past, then tossed back half his scotch and stood. “Here’s the deal. Like I said, I don’t give a fuck what you do. But maybe lose your whole Spartan vibe for a night. Do your thing or have an actual drink. Hell, get shit-faced. Fuck a woman or three.”

I turned to look at him.

His smile dropped. “Or not. Okay, great.” He threw back the rest of his drink, then slammed the glass on the bar. “Glad we had this talk.” Tipping his chin at the bartender, he took off after the blonde.

I tracked his retreat for two seconds.

Then I grabbed a twenty out of my wallet, tossed it on the bar, and walked out of the club.

I was getting in the company Denali when my personal cell rang.

I turned over the engine, then adjusted the air-conditioning before answering. “Helios.”

“We fucking talked about this. Why the fuck haven’t you come to see Feralyn yet? And what the fuck are you doing at the triplets’ joint for the third night in a row?”

Fucking tired, I scanned the garage.

Helios kept going. “You need to get a fucking life and stop going to that goddamn kink club. Just find someone to fuck and be done with it.”

“Like you did?”

“One, I never went to that fucking cesspool. Two, insult Haven again like that, and I’ll beat the fuck out of you. Three, get a goddamn grip. You’re spiraling.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, motherfucker. Be here at oh nine hundred for breakfast. Be fucking nice to Haven. Act like you give a shit about her—without fucking dumping any of your psycho bullshit on her this time.”

I thought about going back to my sterile penthouse. No pictures. No personal items. No evidence anyone lived there. I relented to Helios’s demands. “Fine. Oh nine hundred.” That’d give me time to stop at the coffeehouse first, and I needed to see Helios and Feralyn anyway. If I was going to handle al-Adani on my own, I didn’t know if or when I’d ever see them again.

“Don’t be late.” Helios hung up.

I glanced at my watch.

Eight hours until Café Del Cielo opened.

Ten hours until I had to be at my stepsister’s house.

Thirty-six hours until I had to contend with Nix over my brunette.

I pulled out of the underground parking garage.

Seventeen minutes later, feeding my obsession, I was parked outside her apartment.

Then I pulled up the feeds for the extra cameras I’d installed.

No lights on, the moon casting long shadows, I watched her small form on the bed. She was curled in the same fetal position facing the window she’d fallen asleep in earlier, her dark hair spilled over the pillow. But now the white sheet was pulled up to her neck.

Switching from the camera in the ceiling air vent to the one in the air-

conditioning unit under the window, I got a look at her face.

Hands tucked under her cheek, her breathing even, she looked fucking peaceful.

I watched my brunette until just before dawn.

Then, telling myself I was giving her this one last day for her sake before I ruined her fucking world tomorrow, I drove home for a quick workout and shower.

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FORTY-TWO

Aracet

He came in hours earlier than he usually did.

But he wasn't approaching the counter to order.

Seemingly casual, Hailey breezed past me, stopping only long enough to whisper under her breath. "One call, and I'll have someone here faster than the cops to handle him."

I lowered my head. "No."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Then may I have permission to swoon? In a non-real-life sort of way?"

Thankfully, I didn't have to answer. More customers walked in, and Hailey had already moved past me, calling out her greetings as she worked both of the espresso machines.

Rattled by nerves and an anticipation that was so self-destructive that I ignored it, I relived his strikingly handsome but lethal glare and his gentle but firm grip from yesterday. Remembering how his long fingers had encircled my wrist like both a constraint and total possession, I dared another glance at the blond god who'd invaded my dreams all night.

Standing back in worn jeans that fit him like a glove, his hair damp as if he'd just showered, he was wearing a white T-shirt that fit him so snugly, it should've been illegal. His heavy boots looked too expensive to be combat gear, but they still gave off that soldier vibe. His eyes shielded by sunglasses, he watched everyone.

Or at least that was what I thought he was doing.

I couldn't see his stark blue gaze behind his aviators, so I didn't know what he was looking at. But the hairs on the back of my neck were saluting him, my body was vibrating, and my hands were trembling.

Every molecule of my being was rioting under the notion that he was staring at me.

After yesterday, at a minimum, I should've been very wary of him. But my traitorous heart and dancing nerves were betraying me.

Hailey fluttered around me in her usual coordinated symphony of rapid movements that I'd never be able to achieve, let alone mimic beyond a cheap imitation that was more hectic pandemonium than masterful concerto. "Your admirer is staring at you. And who's counting, but this is the fourth day in a row."

Oh, I knew. On both counts. "I see."

"He's definitely waiting for you to be at the register." Giving me a quick look, she raised an eyebrow, wordlessly asking if I was all right taking his order.

"Then let's not make it easy for him." My nerves couldn't take it. Not yet, and not how he looked today—like he was almost human. Well, compared to him in his riding gear, and yesterday, when he'd turned into a

hulking warrior. His expression today was back to aloof, and it made him entirely too magnetic. Not that I got attached to men. Or anyone. And while I wasn't opposed to the idea of sex with no strings, I'd never tried it, and this man wasn't giving off those vibes. At all. He seemed to want to stand guard there all day like a silent, threatening sentry. "He can wait a little longer." I moved into Hailey's space to take over the order she was making. "I'll finish these."

"Thanks, and got it. Hopping back on the register now. Operation Make Your Admirer Wait is in full effect." Hailey winked at me.

"He definitely isn't an admirer." The man didn't look like he *admired* anyone. He looked like he would kill you before he would smile.

Hailey laughed. "Okay. Whatever you say, sweet Ari."

I wasn't sweet. But I didn't correct Hailey. "I'll grab the pastries for the next order and make that blended coffee."

"Perfect. I've got the cappuccinos for Benny and the lattes for Julio behind him," she rattled off, still impressing me with how she remembered everyone and their orders.

I grabbed the tongs and a bag for the croissants filled with chocolate and pistachio cream that had been selling out before nine every morning. "I don't know how you keep all the customers straight." Morning rush was a sea of faces I tried to avoid. All except for one face.

"When you love what you do, I think it comes naturally." Hailey shrugged, then glanced up as the door opened for what felt like the hundredth time in the past hour. "Sophia!" she called out. "Good morning!"

The very pretty but very shy, impeccably dressed petite brunette, a regular who looked about our age, stepped up next to my mystery man and gave us a small wave. Then her enchanted voice, with its exotic accent and musical cadence, fluttered over the crowd. “Good morning, ladies.”

Everyone in the place turned to look at her.

Everyone except my supposed admirer.

His head locked toward my position, his tall, muscular body unmoving, his hands clasped in front of him without them actually being folded together, he stood as if he were facing a firing line. Or a commanding officer.

A shiver wracked my body like a wave of treason, and I closed the glass door to the bakery case a little too forcibly. “Sorry,” I murmured so only Hailey could hear me. “Here are the pastries.” I set the bag on the counter before quickly turning to the area where the blenders were.

“Got it. Thank you.” Hailey handed over picture-perfect cappuccinos with heart designs in the foam and rang up the next customer.

Pretending not to see my stalker, or mystery man, or whoever he was, I thought again about how Hailey had said she’d never seen him in the coffeehouse before the day I’d started. I didn’t not believe her, she seemed to have a spy-worthy photographic memory along with her superior barista skills, but I also didn’t underestimate the man standing by the door.

Every day he looked slightly different, but it wasn’t his clothes.

It was him.

As if he picked a mood or vibe and just… exuded it.

I didn’t know how to describe it except to say I recognized it. Well, I recognized the outfits that changed daily while the boots remained consistent. I recognized that there was no discernible pattern to his way of dress to indicate what he did for a living. But I’d also noticed the expensive motorcycle and his aviators that were definitely the brand-name ones, not the cheap knockoffs. I tracked how he’d stood in a slightly different location each day, and how he never got caught in the line of foot traffic going in and out of the shop.

He positioned himself purposely…

Exactly how I would.

Hailey called out over the sound of the running blender in front of me. “How’s that caramel frappe coming?”

Shit. “It’s ready.” I quickly turned off the blender, poured the drink, and handed it over. Then I dared to look up right as he stepped toward the register.

“Ari, can you get the next customer while I make the lattes?” Hailey asked, throwing me to the proverbial wolves. But in this case, it was only one wolf—who’d grabbed my wrist yesterday like he owned me.

“Sure.” My heart rate ratcheting up to a death metal blast beat, my voice and hands shook as I looked up at aviators, perfect stubble over a cut jaw, and full lips that were almost too beautiful to belong to a man. Licking my own lips like some Pavlovian animal, I tried to make my expression as composed as possible. “Good morning. What can I get for you?”

“Any more harassing phone calls?”

I couldn’t have stopped it if I’d tried. I heard the way his voice bent around the *m* in more, and the past rang in my head as if he were the same man, saying the same words to me right now.

Mátia mou.

I shoved the memory down. “No.”

As if assessing if I were lying, he stared for a pointed measure before giving his order. “Two large coffees, black. Fruit smoothie. No sugar, no milk, no protein powder.”

I blinked. Then I tumbled into the chaos my heart was creating. *Three* drinks? And he was ordering a smoothie? Even the word coming from his mouth, delivered in that dominant voice, was so very wrong.

A slight shift on the right side of his forehead as an eyebrow rose above his aviators said he was waiting. Impatiently.

I cleared my now dry throat and tried to unstick my tongue from the disastrous signals of crestfallen jealousy my brain was sending it. “No protein powder?” In the few days I’d been here, I’d heard all sorts of order modifications to the menu of caffeinated drinks, teas, and blended beverages. But not one person had ordered a smoothie without protein powder. I was pretty sure avoiding protein was illegal in the land of beautiful people.

“No.”

Three more customers came in as I stood there contemplating this man’s life and who the recipient of this smoothie was going to be. Whoever she was—because it had to be a woman—I hated her.

Too late, I realized my face was flaming, and I had stared too long. I also had to ask a specific question because he'd left out a crucial detail in his order, but I didn't want to ask it. I didn't want to talk to him again. Because now all I was hearing in my head were those two words.

Mátia mou. *Mátia mou*.

Mentally shaking my head to clear the fog, I dropped my focus to the register as I rang up two black coffees like my fingers were marionettes controlled by a puppeteer with essential tremor. Then I asked the dreaded question. "What kind of fruit?" Any kind of berries, and I would definitively know it was for a woman. The men who ordered the smoothies for themselves always got bananas. I didn't know why. They just did. But the women who ordered the protein-packed sugar bombs always went tropical or berry.

Holding my breath, my fingers hovering like a hummingbird's wings over the register, I waited.

But he didn't answer… until I looked up.

Then his voice and his order mocked me. "Blueberries, strawberries, and ice."

I rang up the exacting order for the exacting man who had an exacting woman.

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FORTY-THREE

Ares

Her hands shook as she dropped eye contact and rang up the coffees. “What kind of fruit?”

Fucking transfixed by her, Nix’s deadline ticking down in my head, I’d forgotten to specify. I never forgot.

She didn’t look back up.

Savoring this unfettered time I was allowing myself with her, I waited.

Like a submissive, like a woman terrified, her peaceful expression from last night gone, she lifted her head and met my aviators as if she could see me.

She couldn’t. Not through the mirrored lenses. I recited Feralyn’s breakfast of choice, minus the brand of vegan protein powder she used because this place didn’t have it. “Blueberries, strawberries, and ice.”

The other woman in my life, the one I’d stalked for too long, dropped her guard, and her shoulders fell. Then her voice followed. “Coming right up.” She recited a price, then called out my coffee order to the other barista before glancing back at my chest. “Receipt?”

“No.” Refusing to give in to temptation or repeat yesterday’s mistake, my credit card was already in hand. Tapping it against the reader, I added a

hundred-percent tip, but the woman had already moved to the blender station.

I strode to the back of the café, to the rear of the pickup counter area. With the wall at my six and the woman in my peripheral, I scanned the shop and every customer in it.

Then a familiar face walked through the door.

“Blade!” the pink-haired barista called out.

The former SEAL grunted in response.

The barista wasn’t deterred. “Double-shot, double-whip, double-salted-caramel iced latte?”

I lowered my head, not my gaze, but it was already too late.

The six-foot-four, third-generation legacy Navy SEAL had already spotted me. “Yeah.” Glaring in my direction, he barked an order at the barista. “And one of those pumpkin muffins or whatever other baked shit you have today.”

“Coming right up,” Pink Hair replied without missing a beat as Blade aimed for me.

Two feet away, he stopped and focused on my aviators. “What the fuck are you doing on this side of town?”

We were equal in height, but the inked SEAL had thirty pounds of bulk on me and an axe to grind. His brother, also a former SEAL, worked at Paragon Operations. Blade worked for Alpha Elite Security, and he hated Nix, hated that Nix had recruited his brother. By proxy, Blade hated everyone at Paragon Ops.

“Same as you. Getting coffee.”

Blade eyed me. “Right. Because I drink the shit I ordered.”

I didn’t respond. I waited.

Blade tipped his chin over his left shoulder. “New counter girl. You gonna claim she has nothing to do with why you’re here?”

I searched his expression for tells. “Nothing to claim.” He didn’t recognize her.

“Two black coffees and a blueberry-strawberry smoothie,” the new counter girl in question called out.

“Good to see you, Blade.” My focus already on the *new counter girl*, I moved past the SEAL.

Sliding the drinks over in a cardboard cup holder, the woman didn’t make eye contact, but didn’t immediately let go of the tray either.

Knowing full damn well that Blade had eyes on me, I still seized the opportunity.

Reaching for the tray, extending two of my fingers over three of hers, I zeroed in on my target. Then, wondering when the fuck she’d remember the first time, I touched her for the third time.

Jerking her hand away, the woman looked up at me. Fear, accusation, and desire all warred in her expression.

Leaving my aviators on, purposely keeping her at a disadvantage this morning, not retreating, I remained Delta still.

The manager-slash-barista called out to her. “Ari, two mocha frappes, extra whip.”

“On it.” My brunette stepped back and turned toward the blenders.

I picked up the tray of drinks.

Blade’s sharp gaze cut between me and the woman, then narrowed.

Already aiming for the door, I double-timed it to my company Denali.

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FORTY-FOUR

Aracet

It took me four extra hours of work and the entire day to garner the courage to ask Hailey.

A few minutes after seven, my heart despondent, my feet aching, my apron stained, I locked the glass front door of the shop and turned off the neon *Open* sign. Then I headed back behind the counter where Hailey was wiping down the machines.

Picking up a rag, I asked, “Who was that man you called Blade?”

Hailey glanced up with a look of shock on her face. Then a quick shudder she couldn’t hide made her hands tremble. “Oh. He’s just a regular.”

Bullshit. “You used a fake cheerful voice when he came in.” And I was ninety-nine percent certain he wasn’t ordering that sugar-overload drink or the muffin for himself. There hadn’t been an ounce of fat on his overly muscled body.

“Did I?” Hailey studiously returned to wiping down the same machine she’d already cleaned. She also didn’t mention how I’d stayed late today.

“I haven’t seen him before today, so I can’t say for sure, but he didn’t look like a pumpkin muffin kind of guy.” Not that I was really asking about

him. I saw who he'd spoken with.

Hailey abruptly stopped wiping, and when she looked at me, the color had drained from her face. "Okay. I knew this would come up sooner or later, but the job? The one I couldn't fill before you came in? Which, I'm so grateful for—please, *please* do not quit on me—but I wasn't exactly honest when you first asked." She let out a heavy exhale. Then she spoke rapid-fire. "There was a major shootout in the café. Like, an honest-to-God drive-by, bullets flying, customers hitting the ground, glass shattering, and *everything* was destroyed."

My mouth opened, then closed.

"No one was killed, or even hurt, not really, *thank God*. But the person the shooters were after was a regular customer and my friend. And Blade? He's… Well, he was here. He protected us." Hailey twisted the rag in her hands. "Then he went after the shooters because he's, um, well, it's kind of his job. And now my friend? She's with him."

Kind of his job.

I was almost too afraid to ask. "What job?"

Hailey fidgeted with the rag again. In a week of working around obscene amounts of caffeine and sugar, I'd never seen her shift her feet, avoid eye contact, or wring a cleaning rag. "I don't know if I'm supposed to say." She drew in a deep breath, then looked back at me. "But he does work for the company that helped me fix up the store, and they didn't make it a secret who they were."

Oh God. "They?"

She nodded. "Alpha Elite Security."

If anxiety was a shower of pins and needles, it washed over me. “Alpha Elite Security,” I repeated slowly, even though my heart had jumped into a vortex of dread.

“Um, yeah? Former SEALs. They do… security.”

One word and the impact threw me into a tailspin. “*SEALs*?”

“Shoot. I don’t know if I’m supposed to actually say that, but it’s on AES’s website, and—”

I bent in half.

“Ari?”

I couldn’t fucking breathe. “I’m good.” Forcing myself to straighten, I shook one of my feet to sell a lie. “Leg cramp.” Oh my fucking God, my stalker was Special Operations Forces. Same height, same build, same movements, same look all the way around as Blade—*oh my God*. “So, SEALs?” My voice cracked. How—*how*—had I missed this?

“Um, yeah.” Hailey reached for me as I turned to brace myself on the counter. “Are you okay?”

How could I have not fucking seen it? A man looking exactly like Mr. Black Coffee had been in *every* town and city I’d run to. Except now I knew it wasn’t someone who just looked like him. It *was* him. It had to be.

Standing back up, trying to ignore the new surging riot of bile threatening to expeditiously exit my body like my stalker had exited the shop earlier, I had to ask again. “And you’re sure you’ve never seen Mr. Black Coffee before? Because he spoke to Blade today like he knew him.”

“No, I’ve never seen him before this week. I would’ve remembered him. I mean, I usually remember all of the customers—at least the regulars.

But someone like Blade? I definitely would've remembered."

"Someone like Blade." It was a statement, not a question. I'd heard every word she'd said about Alpha Elite Security and their SEALs.

Nodding somberly, Hailey answered a question I hadn't asked. "Military."

I was going to throw up. Of course Blade was military. He was a damn SEAL. And his buddy, Mr. Black Coffee and Smoothie, was probably one, too.

Hailey went still, then her voice went really quiet. "Ari?"

"What?" I barely managed, desperate to cling to denial, but all I could think of was every city, every town, every alias. Every shit job and glance over my shoulder. Every *minute* I'd spent hiding since they'd let me go from that halfway house. It all came down to this second, and none of it had been enough. They were still tracking me.

"Do you have a connection to the military?" Her hand landed on my shoulder and gently squeezed. "Did you lose someone you love to service?"

Time stopped. Then it fragmented into memories I never wanted to remember. "Yeah," I half lied, barely breathing.

"I'm so sorry."

I hated lying to her. I hated lying, period. I did it so much, I wasn't sure who I was anymore. But I sure as hell remembered the weight of that assault rifle in my hands.

Choking on regret, I offered the least I could do for this woman, considering she may never see me again after we walked out of this coffee shop tonight. Except it wasn't just a coffee shop. It was more of a

community than the Army base I'd been held at for that first year post-rescue. And that was the thought that kicked me back to reality. "I'll finish up the cleaning."

Everything I'd learned about the military while living on that base had taught me that it was a very transient world. So maybe I was overreacting. Maybe Blade knew Mr. Black Coffee from service, maybe he didn't. But so what? Them knowing each other didn't mean they knew who I was or knew the Delta Unit that'd rescued me. It didn't even mean that Mr. Black Coffee *was* military. They were both so ripped, they could know each other from a gym. The thought swinging my emotional pendulum back in the opposite direction, I offered Hailey a not-quite-there smile.

She looked at me like she was worried I was going to lose it, but then her expression leveled out. "That'd be great, thank you. It'll give me time to finish cashing up before my class." Without further comment, she headed to the office in back.

Already thinking of names of different towns that started with M, just in case everything fell apart tomorrow, I didn't ask what Hailey meant by class.

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FORTY-FIVE

Ares

I rang the doorbell.

Nine years I'd slept at this house, and now I was ringing the damn bell for permission to enter. The fucked-up metaphor between this locked door and the brunette, between past, present and control, wasn't lost on me. Nor was the fact that I didn't belong here any more than I did with the brunette.

Helios threw open the door, took one look at the tray of drinks, and ripped into me. "You a fucking pussy coffee drinker now?" He didn't step back.

"You're a pussy coffee drinker now." I stepped forward.

"Is that Ares?" Feralyn called from the kitchen.

Blocking me from entering, Helios lowered his voice. "You give her shit, I'm fucking done with you."

"So you've said." Many times.

Feralyn came up on my brother's six, and like no one else could, she calmed him the fuck down with a single hand on his arm. "Helios."

My brother stepped back.

I walked in and leaned down to my stepsister for a quick half hug—her arms around my neck, me motionless. "Feralyn." Extricating myself from

the human contact I'd first started denying myself eight years ago, I thought of a brunette's wrist, then her soft fingers as I held out the tray, smoothie side forward toward my stepsister. "Strawberry and blueberries only."

With a bright smile, Feralyn plucked the blended fruit drink out. "Thank you so much. I hope you're hungry."

"If you cooked, always."

Helios snorted with contempt. "Don't let him get away with kissing up to you now when his ass has been MIA."

Feralyn smiled up at my brother like he wasn't an asshole. "We were away first."

"Whatever." Helios jerked his chin toward the kitchen. "Let's get this reunion shit show over with."

Feralyn looked at me with complete innocence. "Is this a shit show?"

"Is there cake on the floor?" I countered, aiming a direct hit at Helios.

"One time!" Helios's index finger immediately went up. "One fucking time I made a mistake, but I didn't drop that fucking cake." He looked at Feralyn. "Don't blame that part on me, Haven. I said I was sorry."

"Did you?" she asked, still playing him.

Helios's hands went to his hips. "I said I should've eaten the cake, didn't I?"

Feralyn frowned.

Tilting his head back, Helios groaned. "*Jesus fucking Christ,*" he muttered. "I was eighteen and leaving for basic training."

“It was your birthday, and she’d made you a cake,” I corrected, leaving out the part where he’d bitched about it, hurt her feelings, and she’d dropped the cake.

Helios threw me a glare. “I fucking know what the hell day it was. All I’m saying is that the damn cake hitting the floor wasn’t my fault.”

Both Feralyn and I stared at him.

Helios looked between us, then threw up his hands. “Fucking fine, it was my fault. Can we goddamn eat now?” Bypassing us both, he stalked toward the kitchen.

The shy version of the sister I knew growing up emerged, and Feralyn’s voice quieted with hesitancy. “It really is good to see you, Ares.”

Guilt surfaced, and I placed my hand on her shoulder. “It’s good to see you too.”

She touched my wrist, then called me out. “One day, I hope we can hug again. I miss my brother.” Dropping her hand, she quickly moved out from under my grip. “Come on. I have breakfast ready, and I made your favorite. We’ll eat on the lanai.”

It took me a beat to recover. “Huevos Habaneros?”

Feralyn smiled over her shoulder. “Of course.”

I followed her out to the back patio.

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FORTY-SIX

Ares

Watching her the same as he'd always watched her—like a hawk—Helios tracked Feralyn as she walked back into the house. Then he glanced at me. "What the fuck is up with the coffees?"

"Caffeine." A last chance to see my brunette in an environment she controlled.

Helios's gaze cut back to Feralyn as she started dishes. "You don't fucking drink caffeine."

Imagining the brunette here, in my penthouse, at the Largo place, I leaned back in my seat. "You don't know what I consume."

"Besides a steady fucking diet of self-loathing, you *consume* the same damn shit you always have." Helios eyed me. "Any fucking food that's put in front of you."

He wasn't wrong. "Coffee was in front of me." The brunette had been in front of me. For fucking days. Watching her get off that bus, then tilting her face up to the sun, the image burned into my brain and I'd had plans.

Now this shit with Nix and al-Adani, and I was up against a wall. I needed to approach the brunette tomorrow. Read her in before Nix got to

her, and give her a choice. But I was hesitating. The same way I'd hesitated when I'd first looked through that scope eight years ago.

"At a fucking joint in Little Havana?" Helios challenged.

Jesus. "Bored with domesticity already?"

"Fuck off, and never say that shit to me again." Pushing up in his seat, he leaned his arms on the table. "I can hack that place's security feeds."

"You could." Fuck, I needed to scrape them. The fact that I hadn't already told me how far I'd slipped.

Helios's eyes narrowed. "What's Nix asking you to do?"

The last goddamn thing I wanted to. "I thought I was here to see Feralyn."

"You're here so Haven can see you, motherfucker."

I scanned from the pool to the ocean. "Now she's seen me." I looked pointedly at my brother. "You too."

Helios stared at me a beat. Then he sank back in his seat. "*Jesus fucking Christ*," he muttered. "I fucking knew Nix was up to some FUBAR shit. He and Cypher have been locked down, and no one else knows what the fuck's up. Whatever the hell he's gotten you into, I'm coming with."

I stared at the ocean, but all I was seeing was the brunette. Last night, sleeping, the peacefulness on her face. "No, you're not."

"The fuck I am. Who the hell has your six better than me?" Helios answered his own question. "No one."

"You're right." I looked at my brother. "But Feralyn needs you. You're not touching this op."

Helios's expression locked down, and he became the operator he was. "Syria or Iraq?"

"I'm not discussing it." The fact that he'd zeroed in on the two potential locations meant he already knew too much.

"Then tell me what the fuck this has to do with bumfuck Minnesota, the random places you've been stalking over the past five years, and a fucking coffee joint in Little Havana."

"Leave it," I warned.

"Or what, motherfucker? You'll disappear to one of your four fucking houses?"

"Five," I corrected, aiming to sidetrack him but mentally fucking myself as I silently tallied the house per year I'd collected since a brunette had been reintegrated into society.

"Five motherfucking houses now?" My brother looked at me like I was insane. "What the fuck do you need five goddamn houses for?"

"You're seriously going to ask me that?" He owned an island.

"Yeah, I'm fucking asking. You don't stay at any of them for more than a week. You mostly hide out in that fucking penthouse."

The penthouse was convenient. It was close to Paragon HQ. It was also my closest residence to him and Feralyn. "I stay at the houses." On a random, alternating schedule. Or I used to. Now I apparently only collected them, because I couldn't remember the last damn time I'd slept somewhere besides the penthouse.

"First, don't think for a fucking second that we're done talking about this fucking op and Nix. Second, why the fuck aren't you dumping your

cash offshore like every other normal fucking asshole? Five empty houses isn't investing. It's a goddamn problem. I'm not gonna judge the rope shit you're into. But the houses? Jesus fucking Christ."

I wasn't touching the rigging comment, and none of the houses were empty. They were all furnished, but that wasn't the point. "You have your jet and the island. I have residences. It's the same damn thing."

"*That's* the fucking bullshit that goes through your head? No wonder you're goddamn spiraling."

"Fuck you. The house we grew up in. How often did you want to leave?" Both of us had wanted out. Neither of us had options.

"You said fucking shithole wrong, and every goddamn day."

"Exactly my point. We grew up trapped. Now you can fly to your island. I can take off to one of my houses. Same goddamn thing." I stood. "I gotta go." I needed to run through all the al-Adani intel again. Something felt fucking off about it. Or I was missing something.

Not getting up, Helios eyed me. "We do all the Paragon Ops assignments together."

Helios was unhinged on the battlefield. He caused as much chaos as he wreaked, but there was no one better to have on your six. "We used to." I saw now how that'd been a mistake. I'd meant what I said when I told him Feralyn needed him. "You're standing down on this one."

"At least tell me who the fuck the target is."

If I did, he'd be in theater before me. I wasn't telling him shit, but I did risk asking a question. "You remember Venezuela?"

“*Fucking Christ*. Now I know it’s a goddamn suicide mission that Nix roped you into if you’re asking about that shit storm. Yeah, I fucking remember. What about it?”

“Who sent the airstrike?”

“Who the fuck do you think?” Helios gave me the same name Cypher had. “Why?”

Feralyn walked out to the lanai. “What are you two talking about?”

“Guy shit. Nothing you want to hear.” Glaring at me in warning, Helios stood and gripped the back of her neck.

Leaning into Helios, Feralyn looked up at me. “Ares, are you leaving already?”

“I am. Thank you for breakfast.”

Her face fell. “When will I—we—see you again?”

Instead of answering, I held out my arms.

She immediately looked up at Helios.

Tipping his chin, he dropped his hand.

My sister walked into my embrace. Then she hugged me hard and whispered, “I love you.”

“Same,” I replied to the only person who’d ever given me those words.

“Whatever assignment you’re going on next must be bad if you’re letting me hug you.” Ever perceptive, Feralyn looked up at me and quietly pleaded. “Please be safe.”

Making no promises, I released her, then glanced between them. A memory from nineteen years ago, when Helios left for basic training, hit.

He’d looked between me and Feralyn back then like I was looking between them now.

“I’ll let myself out.” I looked pointedly at my brother. “Take care of her.”

For once, Helios wasn’t combative. “Always.”

I turned to leave, but not before I saw the tears in Feralyn’s eyes.

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FORTY-SEVEN

Aracet

I spied the bag hanging from my front door handle the moment I got to the top of the outside stairs.

Quickly glancing behind me, I didn't notice anyone or anything out of place. I didn't see anyone, period. I was beginning to think everyone who lived here was either in hiding or worked from home.

Scanning the corridor and the doors to the other apartments one more time, I approached my place with an ingrained caution. Then I used the car key to gingerly lift one side of the plastic grocery bag off the door handle.

A mess of black slinky material was inside.

Mentally sighing, I grabbed the bag and unlocked the door to the apartment. Once I was securely inside, I tossed my purse on the small kitchen table and fished out whatever was inside the bag before holding it up.

A dress.

A very small, very short, very revealing slip of a dress with the softest fluttering tiers on the skirt I'd ever seen.

I hated how gorgeous it was, and I hated Henry's perfect taste in clothes, and I hated tall, blond, muscular men who ordered fruit smoothies.

Pulling out the cell, I powered it on and sent a text.

Me: *You didn't need to buy me a dress*.

Four texts came through, one after another, as if Henry had them queued up, ready to fire.

Henry: *This one's actually new.*

Henry: *You're welcome.*

Henry: *Wear it the next time you go out.*

Henry: *And by next time, I mean tonight. You're going out.*

I quickly typed.

Me: *I'm not going out, certainly not tonight, and I can't accept this gift.*

It looked expensive, like more than the rent here expensive. And the tag on it didn't have a price. I didn't know any places that sold clothes that didn't put a price on the tag.

The cell pinged with a new text.

Henry: *Oh, you're going. And wear heels. The higher the better.*

Me: *No, thank you, and I don't wear death trap shoes*.

I wore boots. And now I owned flip-flops, but I hadn't worn them yet.

Henry: *Did you just refer to the best invention for women's fashion as death traps?*

Me: *Yes*.

Henry: *This calls for an emergency intervention. I'll be there in fifteen. We're going shopping*.

Oh my God.

Contemplating chucking the phone, I texted back.

Me: *I've been on my feet for twelve hours. I'm not going anywhere but the shower and bed.*

After I ate something. And had a breakdown. Because I still hadn't truly processed everything that'd happened at Del Cielo today, why I was still here, or if it even mattered anymore.

Henry: *What's your shoe size?*

I was wondering why I wasn't running, and Henry wanted my shoe size. There had to be some kind of ironic simile in there somewhere.

Me: *I'm not falling for that.*

Henry: *Fine. I'll go shopping all by my lonesome and guess. I already got the dress size correct. How hard can heels be? I'll just ask for pixie size in a Pretty Little Liars color.*

Jesus. He could even pout through texts.

Me: *I'm not being guilted into going shopping. Good night, Henry. And thank you for the dress. It was a lovely gesture, but it's too small. I'll bring it to the motel tomorrow so you can get your money back.*

I started to power off the phone, but another text came through.

Henry: *The dress is nonrefundable, and don't bullshit a bullshitter. It fits perfectly. I'll be there in an hour—with heels. Unless you text me your size, you get my guessing skills. Which, as you know, are superior. And don't even think of not letting me in when I get there. You're modeling the dress. With heels!*

Me: *No shoes, and I'm not modeling anything. I'm going to bed. Good night!*

Resigned to the fact that I'd probably wake up tomorrow with another bag hanging from my front door handle, one with shoes, I powered down the phone.

Then I microwaved leftovers, ate them like it was a race, and started a load of laundry. Once the washer was halfway through its cycle, and I was reasonably certain there'd be enough hot water for me, I stepped into the shower.

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FORTY-EIGHT

Aracet

I walked out of the bathroom and stopped dead in my tracks.

On my bed, next to the dress, was a strappy pair of bright red heels sitting on top of a shoebox.

Fury and fear slammed into each other, my heart rate went haywire, and I spun toward the door.

The deadbolt was locked—or relocked.

Furious, but now tamping down the familiar, self-protecting fear that I'd foolishly let settle into background noise over the past few days, I grabbed the prepaid burner and powered it back on. Then I sent a text.

Me: *You broke into my apartment to leave me shoes? After I told you not to buy me any?*

My hands shaking, my anger mounting, I stood in the middle of the studio, wrapped in a towel, feeling every inch of my violated safety in this damn apartment as my wet hair dripped on my shoulders, then rolled down my back, but Henry didn't reply.

I shot off another text.

Me: *Do not EVER break in here again!*

I was about to turn off the phone or destroy it when a text came in.

Henry: *Hello, love. This is Pasqual. Henry is with a customer but asked me to reply. Seeing your previous texts, though, I'm not inclined to type what he said. Rest assured, I'll speak to him about boundaries and not crossing any more with you. But please, keep the dress and shoes. I'm sure you look beautiful in them. X*

Before I even finished reading the text, another came through.

Henry: *Don't listen to Pasqual. I don't have an issue with boundaries. You forgot to use your security chain. And you're welcome for the heels.*

Another text came in with a name of a place followed by an address in Miami Beach.

Henry: *Tell the doorman you're Rose Forester. You're on the VIP list. Go. Dance. Flirt. But don't leave with anyone and DO NOT let any hot men follow you home! I'm not coming out that late to rescue your skinny ass.*

Two more texts followed.

Henry: *And call me in the morning so I know you're not dead in a ditch somewhere.*

Henry: *That means an actual phone call. NOT a damn text.*

Then another.

Henry: *Lastly, for the record, it was already a travesty to leave that dress in a grocery bag, but I had to minimize the chances of it getting stolen from the questionably "safe" dump Pasqual left you in. Hate my methods if you want, but I'm a man of principles. I didn't technically break in. And I would never leave ruby red patent leather Jimmy Choo Azia sandals sitting on a doorstep. So you're welcome. Again!*

I quickly typed.

Me: *How did you “technically” not break in?*

Henry: *Woman. I didn’t “break” anything. What the hell do you think Special Warfare Combat Crewmen do? Knit sweaters?*

No, I thought they specialized in insertion and extraction of SEAL Teams and every direct-action, counterterrorism operation that came along with that responsibility. At least, that’s what I’d read they did when I’d used the precious little data on my cell and looked it up after he’d told me what he’d been in the Navy. I just never thought it would translate to Henry breaking into my apartment while I was in the shower.

Me: *Don’t break into my apartment again.*

Then I typed three more words to make sure he was hearing me.

Me: *I MEAN IT.*

His reply was almost instant.

Henry: *ON TIME, ON TARGET, NEVER QUIT*.

I didn’t give a damn about a Navy or SWCC motto right now. He’d crossed a damn line, but before I could type that, he was already sending another text.

Henry: *FINE*.

Henry: *Whatever*.

Henry: *Wear the damn dress, and I won’t let myself in next time.*

My gaze landed on the bed and the bright red high-heeled sandals that were perfectly placed next to the dress that was now laid out as if it were on display. Fucking Henry.

Not bothering with a response, I powered down the burner and tossed it onto the nightstand.

“I am *not* going out tonight,” I muttered to no one.

The air conditioner hummed, but the studio apartment didn’t otherwise talk back.

Turning, I headed back into the bathroom. Then I combed through my wet hair, twisted it up, used my clip to secure it, donned one of my T-shirts, and hung my towel.

Less than three minutes later, I was back in front of my bed, standing over the dress, staring.

An image of a somber, blond-haired, ocean-eyed man filtered in, and I forced the thought away before it could take hold. Instead, I focused on the dress.

It really was beautifully made. Whisper-thin spaghetti shoulder straps, bias cut, the flutters of fabric sewn in vertical strips on an angle, I imagined the skirt part of the dress would undulate like fresh leaves in a soft breeze as you walked.

I wanted to try it on, I really did.

Except I was afraid that once the silky material was hugging my body, I wouldn’t want to take it off. More than that, I was worried about what I’d see in the mirror if I put on an expensive dress and designer heels. Or rather, what I wouldn’t see. What I needed to keep reminding myself of because, ever since that breakfast with Henry, I’d been selectively forgetting parts of my past.

As Henry’s words from that morning filtered in, I needed to remember that I was not just a young woman in Miami…

Where no one knows or cares about your past.

I was a traitor to my country.

On that thought, I scooped up the dress, heels, and shoebox, dumped everything in the closet, turned off the lights, and got in bed.

An hour later, still awake, feeling like I was crawling out of my skin, I stared at the ceiling.

A half hour after that, when I glanced at the clock for the umpteenth time, I broke.

“Fuck it.”

Throwing the sheet back, I got out of bed.

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FORTY-NINE

Ares

I followed my brunette from Del Cielo to her apartment. I watched as she hesitantly looked inside the bag the SWCC had left on her door handle an hour ago. Then I watched as she sent a flurry of texts, ate leftovers, and got in the shower.

Minutes later, a familiar Bentley pulled up to the complex, parked illegally, and the fucking SWCC got out.

Holding a box, he jogged up the three flights of stairs, then knocked on her door. The prick waited less than ten seconds before he was picking her lock.

I grabbed my Glock from the center console holster. Wishing I was still in jeans and wearing my SOB holster instead of the clothes I'd changed into to go to the club later, I was out of the Denali and crossing the street when the asshole got her door open.

My 9mm in hand, aiming for the stairs, ignoring the motion alerts from the security cams blowing up my burner, I hit the east side of the complex's property.

Forester exfilled her apartment, sans box.

Changing course but keeping the SWCC in my line of fire, I stepped around the corner of the building.

Focused on his cell, fucking oblivious that he was one breath away from changing addresses, Forester headed back to his Bentley and got behind the wheel.

My burner pinged with more motion alerts from the security cams, the SWCC drove off, and I watched the Bentley disappear around the corner before heading back to the SUV and opening the app.

I spied my brunette first.

Hair wet, wrapped in a towel.

My cock immediately hard, I spied the heels next.

Sitting on top of the box the SWCC brought, laid out next to a small-as-hell dress.

I fucking saw red.

The brunette grabbed her burner, furiously texted, then tossed the cell onto the nightstand and muttered, “I am *not* going out tonight.”

She headed into the bathroom.

Two minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, she was back.

Hair up, wearing a T-shirt, she stood at the foot of her bed. Then she grabbed the dress, shoes, and box, threw everything in the closet, hit the lights, and got in bed.

An hour later, she was still awake.

Using my personal cell, I dialed a number that wasn’t in my contacts.

It rang twice before the call was answered. “Grayson.”

“Is this a secure line?”

“Encrypted on my end. Checking yours now. Hold….” Typing sounded in the background. Then, “You’re a go.”

“Do you have airstrike capability?”

“Hypothetically speaking?”

“No.” There was nothing hypothetical about what I wanted to do. “Preparing for an eventuality.”

“Location?”

“Eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border.”

“Timeline?”

I watched the brunette look at the alarm clock for the tenth time. “Next twenty-four hours, but that could slip.”

“Understood.” Typing resumed in the background. “Potential target type and size?”

“Hard target.” I gave him the square footage of the compound.

“HDBT?”

“Not technically.” It wasn’t a hard and deeply buried target. It didn’t have reinforced underground concrete walls. “Compound isn’t fortified, but there’s a bunker and tunnels.”

The typing stopped. “A bunker-buster is another conversation. One you should have with your boss.”

“Don’t need a bunker-buster.” One way or another, I was going to get that motherfucker al-Adani above ground.

The typing resumed. “Assuming you’ll be in theater, your proximity to the target?”

“Danger close.” I gave him the coordinates.

“I can send a tactical UCAV within four minutes.” He stopped typing. “Or I can get a medium-altitude long-endurance UCAV prototype in the area within eighteen to twenty hours.”

Jesus. “You’re involved in the development of unmanned combat aerial vehicles?” I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Preference?” he asked, bypassing the question.

The rapid deployment first option was a military drone. How the fuck he had access, I didn’t want to know. It wasn’t what I was concerned about. Backlash was. But if Nix’s intel happened to come through with a hard POS for al-Adani, I’d need immediate engagement. “Repercussions on the first option?”

“Multiple UCMJ violations and federal and international war crimes charges. If any parties are caught.”

“How many parties would be involved?” It was one thing if it traced back to me. But no way in hell did I want anything coming back on the brunette.

“Not as many as your second option.”

“Fuck it,” the brunette muttered, her voice coming through my burner.

The typing stopped. “Repeat,” he ordered.

“Background from a surveillance feed,” I replied, giving him the only explanation I was willing to divulge as I watched the brunette get out of

bed, stop at her closet, then head into her bathroom. “Has the prototype already been tested?”

“Yes.”

When he didn’t elaborate, I made the call. “Second option. Give me an account to transfer the funds to and the amount.”

“Quid pro quo.”

He was the last person I wanted to owe. “What do you want?”

“You don’t have what I want—yet.”

“Context,” I demanded.

“Later.” He rattled off four digits. “Eighteen, fifteen, nineteen, five. Text that code to this number when you’re cleared hot.” He gave me the number.

I memorized the code and the number. “Copy.”

“Unless you hear otherwise from me, the prototype will be locked in by twenty-two hundred tomorrow. I’ll keep the window live and burner active for forty-eight hours. If I don’t receive the code by then, this conversation never happened.”

“Roger.”

He hung up, and the brunette came out of the bathroom.

Black dress, red heels.

Jesus.

She fished her fake ID and three bills out of her wallet, then slid them into her bra and picked up the cell. After typing for a beat, she powered down the cell, dumped it on the nightstand, and grabbed her keys.

Already fucking pissed about where this was going, I watched my brunette navigate three flights of stairs in heels she had no confidence in, but she didn't head to her Honda.

A fucking rideshare rolled up to the front of the complex.

She got in the back, and the driver took off.

My control dangerously close to gone, I fucking followed.

Nineteen minutes later, I was seething.

The rideshare pulled up to a club.

My goddamn club.

As I watched the brunette get out of the car, it hit me.

Eighteen, fifteen, nineteen, five.

A1Z26. The simplest cipher in existence.

R-O-S-E.

Aracet "Rose Martens" Vandon walked up to a doorman who was posted at the first-floor entrance of the public-facing side of the business, and I realized how full of shit Nix was.

My brunette, the op, al-Adani—none of it was contained.

And it was about to get a hell of lot more public.

I pulled the Denali into the underground parking for club members.

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FIFTY

Aracet

The whisper of silky material flirted around my thighs as I sauntered on too-high heels toward the bar with a confidence I didn't have.

Everything about this was a bad idea.

But I couldn't lie awake in that bed one more minute, thinking about a man with cold blue eyes who may or may not be Special Operations Forces, may or may not know who I was, and who may or may not be married.

At the very least, he has a woman in his life.

But he'd touched me. Twice.

So now I was here, stupidly testing Henry's theory and, even more stupidly, testing my anonymity.

The music, more sexy vibes than straight-up thumping bass, made my hips sway and my nerves dance with a toxic mix of fear and anticipation. Courting a love affair with my new self-imposed immersion therapy, the dress and red heels in my exact size were just the side of daredevil kink I needed to pull this off.

Go. Dance. Flirt.

But don't leave with anyone.

With Henry’s directives playing in my head, wondering if tonight would be the night I was recognized, I approached the bar and leaned over the glossy, underlit surface.

A dark-haired bartender—tall, muscular, and so handsome he was intimidating—smiled without commitment. “What can I get you, beautiful?”

I wasn’t beautiful. But tonight, in this dress, with my hair brushed smooth and what little makeup I possessed applied with care, I felt my cheeks warm. “A Cîroc and tonic with a lime twist, please.”

I couldn’t afford the top-shelf vodka, nor would I be able to taste the difference between it and any other brand—not that I had much experience. I could count on one hand how many times I’d ordered alcohol.

But I was all too familiar with perceptions.

A woman who’d been embedded with jihadists and betrayed her country by firing a rifle at soldiers sent to rescue her wouldn’t order top-shelf vodka in a night club in Miami Beach.

The bartender winked. “Coming right up.”

Discreetly pulling out the second to last bill I’d brought with me from my black bra, I placed the folded hundred on the bar, keeping my hand over it. Then I glanced behind me toward the dance floor.

Beautiful women in far more revealing dresses than mine and men too pretty to be real swayed to the sultry beat.

The bartender returned. “Here you go, beautiful.” Setting the drink in front of me, he rubbed a delicately cut lime rind around the lip of the glass

with both expert precision and a quick deftness that had me staring at his long fingers.

My breath hitched as I remembered another man's long fingers.

Then the bartender twisted the peel and placed it on top of the ice. "Would you like to start a tab?"

"No, thank you." Taking my hand off the hundred dollars I couldn't afford to waste any more than the twenty I'd already spent on the cab ride here, I slid the money toward a bartender, who I was sure took home a lot of women. Or men. Maybe both. I never could tell.

"Twenty-five, then." He picked up the bill.

I picked up the only drink I'd have tonight. "Keep the change."

The bartender paused for only a second. Then he smiled for real. "Thank you. What's your name, beautiful?"

I lied. "Katarina."

"Sexy. I like it. Next one's on me, Katarina." The bartender winked again, then his attention shifted to another customer.

I turned to face the dance floor, and a man was right there.

"I agree." Sweaty, leering, his dress shirt unbuttoned too low, a dirty-blond haired, dark-eyed, twenty-something guy smiled at my breasts. "Definitely sexy." His gaze met mine. "*Katarina*." He fingered the skirt of my dress. "Good girl vibes, huh?" He leaned down toward my ear, and his cheap cologne surrounded me before his hot, alcohol-laden breath landed on my neck. "Down that drink. Then I'll take you to the dance floor, and we'll find out just how good of a girl you really are." Leaning back up, he suggestively lifted an eyebrow.

An overwhelming urge to throw my drink in his face made my hand shake. Tightening my grip on the glass, keeping my expression blank, I looked directly into his eyes. “You’re not worth a hundred dollars.” Sidestepping to evade the presumptuous way he’d tried to cage me against the bar, I headed toward the dance floor.

“Katarina, wait!”

Weaving into the crowd to disappear, the maneuver almost second nature, I didn’t look back. But I did do what the sweaty jerk had told me.

I drained the Cîroc.

By the time I was in the thick of the club, my throat was burning, lime essence was tingling my lips, and I was feeling the music.

Or the alcohol.

No tolerance for substances anymore, my eyes closed and my hips moved. Deep bass pulsed in my chest like a transonic heartbeat, and I let the sea of bodies sweep me into their collective rhythm.

Then it happened.

So fast I wasn’t expecting it, the vodka swirled the past into the present, and suddenly I was seventeen years old, a needle was being injected into my vein, and my head was spinning out of control.

Anxiety wrapped around my throat, my heart rate flew into a panicked frenzy, and I stumbled on the heels.

The lights, the pounding beat, the drink I now regretted—all of it shoved my equilibrium off a cliff, and I started blindly pushing through gyrating bodies. Just when I thought I would never escape the swarm of limbs, a wall appeared, and I reached for it. One palm flat, the other still

holding the glass, my back to the club, I leaned both hands and my forehead against the smooth surface and sucked in one, two… four breaths.

Five.

Six.

On the seventh inhale, I remembered the dizziness wasn't a drug forced into my body. Two more deep breaths, and I reminded myself I'd chosen this.

I was here because I wanted to be here.

I pushed off the wall.

I was free.

I turned to face the club, and the glass was plucked from my hand.

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FIFTY-ONE

Ares

Head down, empty drink in hand, she turned to face the club.

Incensed, I took her glass and handed it to a passing waitress.

Not touching her, not showing an ounce of the rage coursing through my veins, my operator expression locked in, control harnessed, I waited for her to look up.

Inches from the hidden ingress to the depravity upstairs—impiety she shouldn't have fucking known about—she stood there as if she were innocent.

She wasn't.

Neither was I.

Acutely familiar with the debaucherous self-indulgence of the private club over twenty floors up—one that had a hidden door in a very different kind of club because it not only catered to voyeurism, it accommodated clientele who didn't want to be seen using the discreet entrance around the block—I knew exactly where the brunette was standing.

Right next to a goddamn door she'd been leaning against two seconds ago as if deciding if she should walk through it or not.

Nipples peaked under a low-cut neckline, black material scarcely covering her thighs, her dress short enough for immediate access, the woman was outfitted for one thing only.

Inhaling, straightening her spine, shifting her footing, her reactions too delayed to be sober, she finally looked up.

Those hazel eyes landed on me, and the woman jerked back, hitting her shoulder against the wall.

My control slipped, and my jaw ticked. Ruthless, I leaned toward her.

Then I pressed my thumb against the concealed scanner five millimeters from her hip, caught a hint of her light floral scent mixed with heat, and stood back up.

The door unlocked.

Familiar with the protocol, I pushed it in only a few inches and nodded for her to enter.

Staring up at me wide-eyed, acting as if she were terrified by my presence, she didn’t move.

“Go,” I ordered.

Glancing from me to the door and back, she crossed her arms in front of herself like a shield.

One drink and two goddamn lifetimes too late, way past any defensive tactics toward me, she had one more second to retain her agency. Then I was taking it from her.

Leaning down to her ear, I gave fair warning. “Walk through the door, or I’ll make the decision for you.”

Her gaze cut to the concealed panel.

I pushed it in half a foot.

She turned and stepped toward her choice.

Biting back praise, ignoring my half-hard cock, I tamped down the simmering rage over the fact that she'd come here, but not the fucking fantasy of it. That, I acknowledged.

I wanted my ropes on this woman. I wanted to mark her, brand her, fuck her.

I inhaled the urges like an addict.

Then I exhaled reality.

The woman wasn't a bottom, and I was out of time.

With ambient light from the dance club illuminating the path forward, I followed the brunette.

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FIFTY-TWO

Aracet

Oh my God, it was him.

And there was a hidden passage.

He was here.

Mr. Black Coffee, Mr. I-Have-a-Woman, Mr. Smoothie, and a concealed door I'd been leaning against without having a damn clue it was there.

How strong had that drink been?

Why was he here?

And how the hell did he know about this door and wherever it went?

All questions I should've asked, but I was caught in that penetrating stare. The anger in it, the coldness, the impossible familiarity—I couldn't look away.

And that voice.

That mind-bending, impossible-to-fucking-ignore voice of his and his dominant threat. I never had a chance. I was walking through the door without asking a thing.

He stepped in behind me, shut the door, and the passageway lit up all at once as if on a sensor.

Startled, I jerked around to glance at him, and that's when I saw the bouncer or bodyguard standing there next to him.

Well over six feet, in black cargo pants with a black polo shirt, earpiece, hands clasped in front of him, a holstered weapon on his hip and dead eyes staring past me, the giant tower of muscle spoke to my stalker. "Grayson."

Grayson? Was that his first or last name? And suddenly I was noticing what *Grayson* was wearing. A dark blue dress shirt that looked custom-made to fit his massive biceps and narrow waist, black slacks and… riding boots. Not the heavy combat boots he was wearing this morning, and not superbike-racetrack-style ones, but protective riding-gear boots. Expensive ones.

"Tank," Grayson returned. "Not your usual assignment."

The beast of a bodyguard didn't acknowledge me, let alone glance my way, but a look of disdain crossed his features. "Favor for Luna."

"Problem upstairs?" Grayson asked.

"Disturbance last night. Quiet now." Tank tipped his chin toward the long corridor. "Elevator one's queued."

"Copy." Moving past me, my so-called admirer—but more like a stalker because this was too much of a coincidence—headed down the hall.

I glanced one more time at the bouncer-slash-security-guard, then followed the man who'd threatened to force me into this concrete hallway in the first place.

It wasn't until we were a few yards away from the guard, and a second set of steps sounded from the opposite direction of the hall, that I realized Grayson made zero sound as he walked.

He stopped at an elevator that I would've missed in the low-lit hallway, and without him doing anything, the doors opened.

The second set of footsteps sped up, and a different man's voice came from behind us.

"Hold the elevator."

Grayson stepped inside, his hand went to the panel, and he threw me a cold glance before looking past me.

Suddenly feeling a sense of danger and urgency, I stepped behind Grayson and dropped my gaze.

Then, from my downcast vantage point, I watched as suit pants, custom-cut by the perfect drape of them, and designer loafers stepped onto the elevator before thankfully turning to face forward.

The doors closed, and the newcomer spoke. "Grayson."

"Black."

"Pet?"

"Negative."

"Guest?"

"Interloper."

The rapid-fire cryptic conversation between them had my head spinning, but then Grayson used a word that piqued my vocabulary kink.

Interloper.

It was offensive at best, but I was one too many Cîrocs past caring about him insulting me to this other man with a shoe size almost as large as Grayson's. Which was stupidly what made me glance up.

And… *Jesus*.

Shockingly handsome, almost as tall as my stalker, almost as muscular, and definitely wearing a custom-made suit, the model-perfect blond man—if you liked men who looked like an advertisement for wealth and power—had his head turned, gaze angled past his shoulder, and his eyes squarely locked on mine. “Interesting,” he replied to the offensive term I’d been given before he looked at the man who’d assigned it. “Best of luck.”

The elevator stopped, the doors opened, and a rush of new air surged in, carrying the beautiful man’s cologne—vetiver, sandalwood, burnt vanilla, cardamom, dark spice—then it was gone as fast and efficiently as Black had exited the elevator.

I no sooner realized my stalker had no scent other than leather and soap before he, too, was striding out of the elevator.

My instinct to protect myself, either ahead of my thoughts or so far behind it’d lost the race, had me trailing my stalker off the elevator as quickly as I could move in my skyscraper sandals. But the second I stepped off the lift, my heels sank into thick carpet.

The abrupt change from hard flooring to soft, dense cushioning made me stumble, and I glanced down.

Deep royal-blue cut pile that was so dark it was almost navy spread out before me in a sea of luxury. Much too belatedly, I wondered where the hell we were.

Glancing back up, I caught the back of Mr. Expensive Vetiver Cologne right as he disappeared through another hidden door past two more elevators. Then I scanned from one end of the room to the other.

It was a very, *very* expensive, chic lobby with a small reception area.

The semicircular space had velvety rich wall covering in a tone-on-tone pattern that matched the color of the carpet. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over Miami Beach's sparkling nightscape of high-rises as the backdrop of the darkened ocean reflected moon pennies. A million miles above all the traffic, the city took on an entirely different perspective of neon glitter dotted with tiny palms, rushing cars, and waves dancing under starlight.

The view was stunning.

But it was interrupted by a woman as beautiful as the elevator man had been handsome, who stood behind a dark wood reception desk that was so modern, I didn't know if I could call it a desk at all. In a black sleeveless dress that came up to her neck and fit her body like a glove, the brunette with a slicked-back low ponytail smiled coyly at my stalker. "Mr. Grayson. Good evening." She didn't take her eyes off him. "Guest?"

He tipped his chin, and her greeting answered one of my questions.

Grayson was his last name.

"Preapproved or vetted?" the receptionist asked so casually, in such a soft-spoken voice, it was almost innocuous.

Mr. Grayson shook his head.

"Understood." The woman briefly lowered her head, and her arms moved slightly as if she were typing or writing something. "Preferences?"

"Mezzanine."

"Of course. Empirical or Saltire? Private or shared? Supplies?"

“Latter. Either. Caveat, observational. The usual,” Grayson replied quickly and succinctly, as if enumerating an outline in code.

“Understood, and… you’re all set.” The receptionist looked back up at him and gestured toward a set of doors, which was the only other point of interest in the lobby besides a low, black, padded leather bench by the windows. “Enjoy your evening.”

Without acknowledging the woman again, Mr. Grayson took two strides toward the dark wood doors that matched the reception console and gripped the handle of one of them.

He looked back at me.

With his stark gaze even more intimidating in the subtly lit, lavish sky lobby, he paused to hold my stare.

Then he opened the door.

Music, moans, voices, grunts—a cacophony of sound effects that could only mean one thing came shamelessly spilling out of the barely opened door.

My heart leapt as my stomach bottomed out.

Adrenaline and fear ripped through my veins in equal measure, and I glanced toward the elevators in a panic.

Grayson’s jaw ticked. “Walk inside, Aracet.”

I completely froze.

My name hit so hard, every molecule of my being shattered apart as my atoms were blasted into a frenzied chaos. Then with my next breath, they slammed back together, re-bonding into an entirely new version of myself.

It was him.

It was *mátia mou*.

He was the military assaulter who'd killed to save my life—Mr. Black Coffee, the stalker, the man I'd been catching glimpses of in every city and town I'd run to—the Delta Force operator. *All* of them had been him. *He* was him. And now he'd clipped my name in a demanding order, and every single facet of my life had irrevocably shifted.

Mátia mou.

The memory of his voice, the man in front of me, the past, the present—it all twisted into a storm of destruction.

God help me, I walked through the door.

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FIFTY-THREE

Ares

The expression of shock followed by horror as she drew in a sharp breath didn't need my decades of service under Joint Special Operations Command to decipher.

She knew who the hell I was now.

To her credit, or the drink she'd had, the woman walked through the door.

Empyros was in full swing.

The main room of the sex club already had people fucking, the glass-fronted ancillary rooms were all occupied, the banquettes for observers were full, the bars were busy, and more than a dozen men turned to look at her—three of them mid-fuck of their subs.

Possession rang through my head like a goddamn watchtower bell.

My brunette.

Except the woman didn't belong to me, and I wasn't here to change that. Fucking fate or happenstance, or bad choices on her part had landed her directly in my world of depravity, and now I was going to test her.

Stalling one pace past the entry, the woman stopped dead in her tracks and stared.

Shadowing her six, I leaned down to her ear. “Now that you know who I am”—her scent, the same soap and shampoo that I’d been obsessing over for five years, infiltrated my senses—“you’re going to find out why we’re here.”

Chill bumps broke out across the back of her neck, and she pivoted on heels that were too damn high for her. “I—” Stumbling, she quickly righted herself, then looked up. “I do not know who you are.”

She fucking knew. “You followed me out of the coffee shop because you knew.” The first damn time she looked me in the eye at that café, her face flushed. When she heard my voice, her body trembled. Subconsciously or not, she knew exactly who I was.

The woman tried to sidestep the facts. “That was instinct.”

Bullshit. “No, it wasn’t.” She’d looked at me exactly how she had eight years ago.

“You were throwing the coffee out,” she argued.

I stared.

She amended. “All right, fine. I thought you looked familiar.”

After five years of stalking her, I should. But eight years ago, drugged or not, the woman had fucking seen me. Not just the operator, but the man. That hand she’d reached out hadn’t been for her. She saw Jax and Bellows. She knew what was happening. She may have crawled onto my lap for comfort, protection, and stability in a world that’d failed her, but that outstretched hand had been an offer for me.

Shoving down the memory, I focused up. “How much have you had to drink tonight?” I’d only clocked her ordering one vodka at the bar

downstairs.

“You brought me to a…” Her head dipped, her voice lowered, and she leaned toward me. Distance wise, the fraction of an inch was close to imperceptible. But in my world of operator dominance, it was palpable. “You forced me to walk into a sex club, and you’re asking how much *I’ve* had to drink?”

Precisely. “Yes.” But I hadn’t forced her.

“One drink. You?”

“I don’t use alcohol.”

“Use,” she repeated. “Is that supposed to be an insult?”

“It’s a statement of fact. Turn around and walk toward the staircase on your left.”

She crossed her arms. “Why? What are you going to do?”

“Follow.” And make sure no one touched her because I hadn’t—not yet. Which meant she was still fair game and could be approached.

“And then?”

Then I was going to test the fuck out of her. “Turn around and walk, Aracet.”

“That’s not my name.”

Ignoring the people who were now taking notice of us arguing, I closed two of the eight inches she’d left between us. “You can either walk on your own, or I can take the choice away from you.” Soon enough she’d have all of her choices, save one, stripped. Until then, with the growing crowd, she was lucky I was humoring her.

“What gives you the right to tell me what I can or cannot do?”

Telling and too late, the timing of her indignation spoke for itself. “Circumstances.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the one you’ve earned.”

“Meaning?”

“This is a club for dominants, and you’re standing here as my guest.” I nodded toward the Saltire Mezzanine. “Understand, though, that if I carry you up those stairs kicking and screaming, not one member or staff will come to your aid.”

The color drained from her face, and her gaze cut to the doors that were not only locked from this side, but required a biometric scan or key card of a member or staff to unlock them.

I clued her in. “The doors are secured.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re locked in. Have you ever used a safe word?”

The woman completely blanched. “I have a cell phone, and I’ll call the authorities.” She stepped back from me. “This is kidnapping.”

She’d left her cell at her apartment, and the police would be stopped in the lobby and told to get a warrant. “You entered voluntarily, and I asked you a question.”

“You telling me to walk through the door—two doors—is not voluntary.”

“Safe word?”

“Fuck you.”

“Choose another.” One she wouldn’t use multiple times before the night was through.

“No.”

“Red is sufficient.” Pedestrian, but sufficient. “Repeat it.”

“Absolutely not. I’m not playing any of your—” She waved her hand toward the people fucking behind her. “I’m not participating in your twisted games.”

“Good. Because this isn’t a game.” Her life was going to depend on her actions, her ability to follow strict instruction, and her tolerance levels over the next couple of hours.

“Let me out of here, Mr. Grayson, or I’ll find someone who will.”

“Go ahead.” I nodded toward the damn bystanders that were only watching us because I never engaged like this. “I’m sure any of the Doms will entertain you.” They’d fuck her within an inch of her life.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Providing alternatives.” Adapting my fucked-up plan. I had more than one option for due diligence. I could watch her get dominated and catalog her reactions. But then I’d have to gut every motherfucker who touched her.

“To what?”

“Me.”

The woman who’d altered my DNA, who’d destroyed the fucking foundation of my operator identity, stared at me with those hazel eyes. Then she tried to cut me off at the knees. “Red.”

I turned toward the Saltire Mezzanine.

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FIFTY-FOUR

Aracet

I panicked.

I'd panicked and pretended I didn't know exactly who he was, when we both knew it was a lie.

Then I told myself the alcohol had clouded my judgment.

It was an excuse, a weak one at that, because my head hadn't started to spin until he, him—*mátia mou*—Mr. Grayson, whatever his first name was, whoever he was now, had told me to walk into a sex club.

An actual sex club.

The sounds from behind the door when he'd opened it—they'd been real.

The moans, the clap of wooden paddles against flesh, the slap of skin on skin, the crack of whips, the grunts, the screams—pleasure or pain, I didn't know which—it was all making me dizzy.

It was also making a traitorous ache curl low in my belly.

An ache that was residing right next to righteous anger because, while I didn't have a frame of reference for this particular fucked-up situation, I had the exact experience to know better. I'd been here before. Men

threatening sex, violence, violence and sex, or just violence wasn't new. Not to me.

And that voice I'd idolized for eight long years. The one I'd used as a barometer to choose every town and city I'd fled to because of an irrational attachment to a letter and an obsession with alliteration I'd never had until my drugged-out self heard a deep rumble of a voice mutter two words.

I loathed Grayson, but I hated myself.

I hated how I was spiraling into a dark abyss because he was *not* new here.

This is a club for dominants, and you're standing here as my guest.

My battered heart had flatlined twenty floors below. My soul was crushing in on itself. My libido was roaring to concupiscent life and reacted to every single moan around me.

I was reacting to the Delta Force operator in front of me.

Especially to him.

By God, I wanted to hate him.

I was desperate to hate how transcendentally beautiful and stoic and imposing he looked standing in his kingdom of dominance.

But all I hated was how this club was making me feel like an erotomaniac.

My skin was crawling, my conscience was condemning every last person in here, and my body—*my traitorous fucking body*—was humming with desperate anticipation.

"Safe word?"

“Fuck you.” How dare he rob me of the one hope that’d kept me going all these years. The one ideal that my life had been more valuable than that mission. That I’d been worthy of more than my mistakes. That those two words, even though they’d been spoken with the weight of war, with the condemnation of my choices, didn’t matter because *I* had mattered.

My eyes.

It’d been possessive, no matter how it’d been said.

I’d belonged.

I’d belonged to someone strong and good and protective.

I’d *mattered*.

But now I was here. In this nothingness brothel, where women were objects and I was triggered, but my brain was misfiring, and my body only knew that those sounds meant sex, and the tall, muscular, blond man was real, but he was *here*.

“Choose another,” he demanded, as if me telling him off had been my safe-word choice to begin with.

“No.” I should’ve said *mátia mou*, but I wasn’t giving away that memory. I wasn’t giving this man anything.

Not anymore.

He’d already spent eight years residing rent-free in my mind. If this was the kind of sickness he was into—kidnapping and forcing women into sex, telling them they voluntarily chose it—then he was no better than the terrorists he’d rescued me from.

Except the second I thought it, my soul was disconsolately protesting, desperate to cling to the notion that I was wrong. That this was a different

man. But I knew it wasn’t. The moment I heard him order coffee, I knew to the very depths of my being that it was him. And he had been right, I had followed him out of the café because I knew. My soul would recognize his voice anywhere. I just didn’t want to believe it—hope in it.

“Red is sufficient. Repeat it,” he ordered, not dropping the safe-word issue.

“Absolutely not. I’m not playing any of your—” I couldn’t even look behind me. Stupidly, I waved my hand instead, like he couldn’t see all the people having sex right out in the open. “I’m not participating in your twisted games.”

“Good. Because this isn’t a game.” His voice and his expression deadly serious, he didn’t even glance at any of the naked women draped all over every piece of furniture. He hadn’t so much as glanced at any of the people having sex.

I didn’t know what was more disturbing—his staidness, the lethal intensity of his seriousness, or his complete lack of emotion when he’d said my name. Hell, his impassivity as he looked at me now with those almost colorless blue eyes should have been the most disturbing.

But my brain was as sick as his tastes because it wasn’t processing his demeanor as anything other than dominant.

Dominant soldier.

Dominant Delta operator.

Dominant warfighter.

I wanted to succumb.

Except the part of me that had gone dormant the moment this man had walked into the coffee shop, the self-preserving younger version of myself, the inherent survivor, she suddenly awakened and told me to fight.

So, I tried.

Rationally, I knew the odds were against me. I knew the ruthless brutality that lethal Tier One operators like him were capable of. I'd heard rumors of him and his Unit's decorated military service. I'd found out that much about him and the operators that'd rescued me. They were all Delta. Knowing that, knowing I was up against an immovable force, I still tried to threaten him. "Let me out of here, Mr. Grayson, or I'll find someone who will."

"Go ahead." He tipped his chin at the people having sex behind me. "I'm sure any of the Doms will entertain you."

"Are you threatening me?" Of course he was. How was I stupid enough to think I could attempt the same on him and not suffer the consequences of it coming back at me?

"Providing alternatives," he stated without an ounce of remorse or emotion, as if he hadn't started a silent war against me eight years ago.

I dared to ask. "To what?"

"Me."

My stomach dropped, and the reality of it all—the sightings in every town, the stalking, his ability to track me, the coffee shop visits and their increasing frequency, his presence downstairs tonight, this club, the locked doors—it all came to a head, then collapsed around me with, once again,

my choices. Except now, I had no choice. He'd calculatedly, predatorily driven me into a checkmate.

Cornered, I used the only possible chance of survival I had. I surrendered to his game. "Red."

The Delta Force operator didn't say a word. He didn't so much as blink. Turning toward the staircase on the left side of the club, he walked away.

Panic seized every muscle in my body.

Then a woman with larger breasts than mine, wearing nothing more than a see-through lace chemise that ended above her exposed, shaved cunt, flitted over to me as her gaze stayed locked on the broad shoulders of a Delta operator. "If you don't go after Master Grayson, I will. Heck, every sub in here will. We all want a piece of him. You should see what he can do with—"

"Excuse me." Cutting her off, I rushed after a man who may have saved me once, but he definitely didn't want to do that now.

In fact, looking past his impenetrable exterior, I was almost certain he wanted to kill me.

Pathetically, in this setting, wearing this dress, going against every fear-based instinct of self-preservation I had, I already knew I was going to let him try.

The Delta operator who'd lost his teammates because of me could extract his pound of flesh.

Then maybe, just maybe, I would finally be free of this punishing guilt.

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FIFTY-FIVE

Ares

Before I heard the invidious murmurs of the unattended subs, ahead of every acknowledging nod from the Doms, I knew the woman had followed.

I could fucking feel her.

I didn't attach. Not to objects or human interactions.

But my brunette?

Every measured breath that passed through her lungs had attached to the beat of my heart, and I didn't just feel her, I needed her.

Except right now, I was royally fucking pissed. I was also hard as hell. I wanted to punish her for coming here and drop to my knees at her feet in equal measure.

I wanted to ruin this woman exactly how she'd ruined me.

But I needed her breathing to sustain my depravity. I needed to see those peaceful breaths in her sleep to remind me that I was alive, she was fragile, and my duty was to protect.

I was *Sine Pari*. I'd been trained for the fight. I was a god of war, and a warfighter didn't need reason to own the battlefield. But fuck, I needed her.

If her breaths stopped, so would my heart.

Right now, I'd welcome the treasonous organ quitting on me.

But the mission wasn't complete, al-Adani was alive, and eight years ago, when I looked through that scope and saw those eyes, whether I wanted it or not, the responsibility for this woman's life became mine.

I had to protect her.

It was now ingrained in me to protect this woman. Right after I tested every fucking limit she had.

Hitting the top step of the mezzanine, cursing myself for not having the upper level cleared, I strode toward the St. Andrew's cross. Ignoring the spectators, my gaze already tracking the brunette coming up the stairs, I didn't check my waiting supplies.

I fucking stared.

Black dress, red heels, huge tits, gaze downcast.

I ignored the pulse of my cock.

She scanned the crowd of ten and growing.

I rolled back my left sleeve.

She crossed the mezzanine.

I rolled back my right sleeve.

Head down, approaching me like a good little bottom, she stopped two feet in front of me. "I want to leave."

I bet she did. "Remove your shoes."

She looked up. "Why?"

"Because I said so." Glancing at the supplies placed out for me, I cataloged. Four short ropes, six long ropes, EMT safety shears, a crisis hook

knife. I also had my switchblade.

Picking up one of the long ropes and unspooling it, I quickly measured the length against my arm span. Exactly four—twenty-six feet—as I always requested.

The brunette's gaze followed my movements with growing alarm. "What are you doing?"

I drew a few feet of the six-millimeter-thick hemp rope through my fingers, testing the lack of tension out of habit. "Contemplating." Watching her—cataloging, obsessing, fantasizing—like I always did.

She eyed the rope. "Contemplating tying me up?"

"That's the general idea."

"In front of all these people?"

"Yes." Especially that, but I took note of how she hadn't immediately said she wasn't going to submit. She also didn't throw her safe word at me. "Are you familiar with Shibari?" I'd teach her the difference between Shibari and Kinbaku. But not yet.

"Are you familiar with Title 18, United States Code, Section 1201 and 1203?"

Interesting. "Studying to be an attorney?" I'd imagine after three years of reintegration, she'd looked up a lot of laws.

"It's unlawful to kidnap and detain me."

"I did neither. Do you need help removing your shoes?"

"Are you listening to me?"

“Every word.” I thought of the diamond pattern of a Hishi Karada, how her heavy breasts would look with my ropes around them.

“Then escort me out of this place.”

“If you didn’t want to be here, you wouldn’t have walked through the door. Conversation’s over. Remove your shoes, step toward the saltire, then face me.”

“And if I don’t?”

I felt the crowd at my back. I heard the tension in her voice. I saw the shift of her feet, the cut of her gaze toward the stairs.

But the woman didn’t look at the crowd, and she hadn’t bolted.

I stepped into her personal space. “Why do you think you’re here, Aracet?”

Looking up, holding eye contact, her tone didn’t waver. “Because you want your pound of flesh.”

“For?”

The pulse in her neck jumped, and her voice dropped to a whisper. “You know why.”

I remembered the weight of the woman in my arms, the blood and bruises on her face, the shrapnel wounds on her head, the fear in her eyes, Jax and Bellows, the floor of the helo, the unmistakable pallor of death—I remembered all of it as if it were yesterday.

That day fucking haunted me.

But the reaction of a kidnapped nineteen-year-old when the Black Hawk landed at Al-Tanf Garrison—and the litter team, then a medic, attempted to

take her from me—had fucking changed me on a cellular level.

The memory assaulted the present.

Kicking up a dust storm, the helo touched down.

Two—three—medics, litter teams, swarmed.

Shouted rapid-fire instructions punctuated the heavy thump of blades.

Jax was dead.

Bellows wasn't going to make it.

Their blood, mixed with the kicked-up dust, coated every-fucking-thing.

The brunette gripped me with superhuman strength. Head turned in, curled in a tight ball on my lap, fists white-knuckling—my plate carrier, my hand—clumps of her bloodied hair whipped against us in the rotor wash.

They took Jax.

They took Bellows.

Chaos exfilled with Bellows, jogging alongside the rickshaw.

A two-man litter team reached for her, four hands going to her head, back, and shoulders.

It was instant.

The high-pitched scream filled the helo. Then she dropped my hand, gripped the back of my neck, dug her nails into my flesh, and bodily arched away from them.

"NO." Shouting over the rotors, wrapping my arm around her, I fucking glared. "Stand THE FUCK down!"

The litter team retreated.

A medic, male, mounted the helo. Fucker kneeled in Jax's and Bellows's blood. "Master Sergeant, she needs medical!" He palmed her shoulder.

Her scream pierced my fucking armor.

"Don't fucking touch her!" I yelled, jerking her away from him.

He yelled back. "She needs off this helo!"

"I'm carrying her!" Shifting my legs, ready to kill, the calculation took less than a fraction of a second. Kick to his head, snap his neck. *"Stand* the fuck *down!"*

The fucking medic didn't move. "Are you hit?"

I roared. "MOVE."

The medic retreated.

I cupped the back of her head. "I got you. I got you." Mátia mou. *My brunette. "I fucking got you." Holding her tight, I exfilled the helo.*

Sobbing, she wrapped her legs around my hips.

I carried my brunette.

Staring down at a brunette who'd once trusted me with her life, I gave her the truth. "I don't want a pound of flesh." It'd never make up for the lives lost—including hers. "I want your submission." But I wasn't going to touch this woman.

My ropes would.

I was a rigger, and tonight, the brunette was mine.

Leaning down to her ear, I lowered my voice to calculated dominance. "Do you want my ropes on you?"

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FIFTY-SIX

Aracet

"I want your submission." Grayson leaned toward my ear and turned his voice into a weapon of pure seduction. "Do you want my ropes on you?"

My heart rate skyrocketing, I barely remembered to breathe, let alone comprehend what was happening. "I don't understand why you're doing this. If you want to hurt me, there are easier ways." The danger of this was so far past alarming that questions were swirling, but so was his intoxicating scent because I could smell him now, and every ounce of his warm, primal dominance was filling my head.

Drawing a length of rope through his long fingers, he leaned closer still, and his warm, minty breath fell on my neck. "Do you think I want to hurt you?"

Barely grasping on to reality by my fingertips, I trembled. "I think you want to punish me."

"Do you need to be punished, Aracet?" He wrapped the rope around his wrist twice.

My womb heated, my nipples hardened. "No." Oh God. Did I? We were in a sex club. This wasn't… I couldn't… *Jesus*. "I—I don't know your name." What was I *doing*?

“You heard it.” He twisted two more lengths around his wrist. “Remove your shoes, keep your eyes on me, and step back toward the saltire, Aracet.”

Hearing my name pass those lips, the way his dominant voice wrapped around the three syllables and owned them, the intensity in his eyes, his focused attention on me as if I were the only person in existence, the scent of him—it was as if he’d cast the perfect spell.

My body obeyed without my consent. The heels were discarded, I stepped onto the low base of the cross, and a pitiful protest came out as nothing more than a whisper. “I need a reason.” My back a mere two feet from the thick wooden beams of the menacingly tall X, I wondered how hard his muscles would feel under my touch. “A real reason.”

“Do you know the term Shibari?” In direct contrast to his lulling, deep voice, he moved swiftly. Gripping the outside of my hand, raising his, the loops of rope from his wrist dropped like a coiled snake and wrapped around mine. Then he let go of my hand and yanked the cord he was fisting.

Bindings snugged around my wrist with terrifying, but utterly divine, constraint.

I gasped.

Without letting go of the rope that was holding my wrist hostage, he grabbed another. “Shibari, broadly translated, means to tie or bind. The connotation is aesthetic, which makes the term largely misused. But Kinbaku, what I’m doing now, is erotic tight binding.” He knotted the second rope to the first. “The act of wrapping requires focus. Mindfulness.”

Pulling my bound wrist over my head toward the upper X of the cross, he stretched my arm to its limit. Then, so quickly and deftly, I almost missed it, he fed the rope through a metal ring high above my head, made a

U-shaped loop with it, another double-stranded loop around his fingers, and pushed one through the other before giving them a practiced tug.

“Tying, binding, knotting—they aren’t simply about physical constraint.” Pausing his movements, he looked into my eyes. “It’s an intense act of trust.” He jerked the rope.

The back of my hand smacked against the wood, mind-bending pressure bit into my entire arm, heat flared in my core, and every fiber of my being suddenly zinged with a newfound awareness of him—his strength, his power. But most of all, I felt the intensity of being trapped and the whisper of his breath on my skin.

It was a prophetic awakening.

“*Grayson*,” I begged, both pressing my thighs together and trying to pull away from the cross, but my wrist was now bound to it, and I could only stand an arm’s length away.

Ignoring my plea, glancing to my side, he scanned the distance left between my body and the X-frame. “Frictions, column ties, cinches—every wrap, or single line of rope around your body, is an exercise of trust.” Lowering his voice still, moving infinitesimally closer, bringing his mouth almost to mine, he stared into my eyes like no man ever had. “How far are you willing to go for that reason you wanted, Aracet?”

My lips parted, but no answer came.

“One bound wrist, and you’ve already lost your voice?”

I barely nodded.

He issued an order. “Flex your fingers.”

I made a fist.

“Do you feel the constraint?”

I licked my bottom lip at the word *constraint*. “Yes.” My voice no longer my own, the answer was more breath than affirmation.

“Good.” His impenetrable gaze swept from my hand, down my extended arm, past my neck, to my breasts.

The single glance left a trail of needy fire.

His eyes met mine. “Do you remember your question?”

My throat was a desert. My mind was a cyclone. This man was going to leave me in ruins. “Why?”

“How important is it to you?”

I couldn’t remember. I lied. “Important.”

“Enough that you would surrender physical control to get your answer? Would you hand over your agency and completely submit? Are you willing to give me the responsibility of your safety? Are you willing to go that far? Do you trust my focus, skills, and experience? My attentiveness?” His unnerving gaze bored into my soul. “Are you capable of obeying me?”

Dear God, this man was not my savior.

He drew a length of rope across my heaving chest without his fingers actually touching me. “How vulnerable are you willing to be?” His booted foot kicked my legs apart. “Can you handle heightened sensory awareness? Do you understand this isn’t your past?” His voice lowered with every ounce of dominance his presence exuded. “Do you understand the dynamic of complete loss of control from willful surrender? The bond that would create?” His breath feathered over me like sin. “Do you want that level of intimacy?” He leaned closer still. “With me?”

If seduction were a monster, he was its master.

The only word that mattered spilled from my soul. “Trust.”

War-hardened ice-blue eyes took me in with the calculation of an operator. “Trust is profound openness.”

I blinked.

“I want your dress gone. I want my ropes biting into your naked flesh.” A muscle on his jaw flexed. His voice turned lethal. “Do you want this, Aracet? Do you want to feel my ropes against your bare skin?”

My core wept, and my soul keened. “*Please*,” I whispered.

“Begging isn’t consent,” he clipped, leaning back, his tone all at once hard and uncompromising. “Communicate clearly and articulate your needs. Either consent or safe word out.”

Wanting his stern tone gone, desperate for his darkly dominant voice to return, frantic to have his body back close to mine, I shook with need. “I consent.”

“Shaking your head no while issuing verbal confirmation is not consent.”

My head started nodding. “I consent. *I consent*.”

“To?”

I was going to regret every second of this, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“Everything,” I barely whispered.

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FIFTY-SEVEN

Ares

One wrist bound to the saltire, less than a foot between her back and the cross, my brunette shook with fear. “I consent. *I consent*.”

“To?”

Giving me that hazel-eyed stare, she whispered her fate. “Everything.”

I fucking inhaled.

Then, switchblade in hand, with two flicks of my wrist, I cut the fucking shoulder straps of the dress another man had bought her. Ignoring her shocked gasp of fear, leaving the dress where it fell, I grabbed a long cord.

In the next second, I was rigging.

Bight, overhand knot, the rope over her head, a single-cord square knot between her shoulder blades, I snapped the line. Then, bringing the rope back to her front, I held her gaze and started lacing.

Hishi Karada.

This woman was going to wear *my* rope dress.

But not with her fucking bra on.

Feeding the last overhand knot just above her cunt, I looked into those hazel eyes that’d once seen the man underneath the operator. “Underwear’s

coming off. Consent?”

Her sharp inhale strained the diamond pattern.

“Answer,” I demanded.

“I consent,” she whispered.

My cock, strained against the confines of my pants, pulsed, and my switchblade was back in hand. Sliding the sharpened tip under the fabric between her breasts, I pulled the knife toward me and watched as her chest was hauled against my ropes.

Then I yanked the serrated side of the blade against the fabric, cutting open her bra.

Her breasts dropped with their natural heaviness, and she gasped.

I was already cutting the string sides of her underwear.

The flimsy material hit the floor, and I didn’t hesitate.

Shoving the switchblade back into my pocket, working with practiced speed, I knotted an elaborate Matanawa for her sweet-smelling cunt. I extended and bound her other arm to the upper saltire. I grabbed two more ropes and secured her ankles with column ties to each side of the bottom of the cross.

Then I stood back up and allowed myself the moment.

My brunette. In my ropes. Bound to the saltire.

Naked except for my Hishi Karada, Matanawa, and the bra I’d left provocatively hanging.

She was fucking beautiful.

Drinking in every inch of her exposed flesh, dragging my gaze over her restrained, shaved cunt, admiring the swell of her hips, I took in the reddened fullness of her pinched breasts outlined by my rope dress and the hardened peaks of her perfect nipples.

So fucking beautiful.

But I had her here for a reason.

Dominant, merciless, ignoring my rock-hard cock and the urge to end every asshole here who was looking at her, I grabbed the last rope. Then I bent my knees until I was eye level with her and brought my chest within a millimeter of those huge breasts. “Do you know where you’ll feel the pressure of my ropes the most?” I let the fabric of my shirt brush against her hard nipples.

Her pulse jumped, and she drew in a pretty little breath of shock. Then she bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

“Your nipples.” I dragged a bight over the top of her breasts, avoiding said nipples, then dropped it lower. Skimming over the knotted ropes against her cunt, I applied the slightest amount of pressure on her clit. “Your cunt.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Are you going to… *here*?”

“We’re way past innuendo. Articulate,” I demanded for the second time. “Tell me if you need to come. Communicate succinctly, or we’re done.” The ultimatum was a risk. Rational thinking made them nonstarters, but I didn’t want this woman rational. Bound in my ropes, submissive under my thumb, her cunt already soaking my knots, I knew I fucking had her. But I needed more.

Her gaze cut past me, and the color drained from her face.

“Eyes on me,” I demanded.

Her hazel gaze cut back, her bottom lip trembled, and her eyes welled.

“You look at me. Only me. Understood?”

She nodded.

“Use your voice,” I clipped, delivering the order with calculated coldness.

“I-I understand.”

Refraining from praise, from the fucking urge to touch her, I didn’t let up in tone. “Do you need to cry?”

“I-I’m trying not to.”

“Tears are warranted.” I was going to break this woman. “Silence is not. Express your emotions, or I stop. Those are your rules. Do I need to repeat myself?”

“N—” She caught herself. “Yes. Please.”

My cock hardened at the interjection. “Two rules. Eyes on me and communicate.” And fucking feel my ropes. “Questions?”

“Too many,” she whispered, the first tear falling.

“Then ask.” I wouldn’t answer them.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You haven’t earned that answer yet.”

She glanced down at my rigging. “I feel… floaty.” She looked back up. “What are you doing to me?”

Pushing every damn boundary I could. “Testing your restraint.”

“I’m already tied up.”

Not how I wanted her. “You’re bound,” I corrected, adjusting the double rope under her breasts. “Let me know if you’re in pain.”

“It all hurts.”

I tightened a knot. “Does that arouse you?”

She started to look past me again, at the now-crowded mezzanine.

“Rules,” I barked. “Eyes on me.”

Her gaze instantly landed back on mine.

I repeated the question. “Does the pain arouse you?”

Her face flushed, then her eyes welled.

“Answer,” I commanded.

“Yes.”

Using every tactic I’d been trained in, I schooled my expression. “Does that trigger you?”

Silent tears slid down her cheeks, but she didn’t answer. She didn’t fucking need to.

Moving closer, seeing the shame written all over her face, I lowered my voice. “Are you triggered by the pain of my ropes, the constraint, your past, or the arousal they’re causing?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Think. Then answer the question, Aracet.” She was never going to fucking forgive me for what was coming next.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “Why do you like this?”

I rigged for release. I knotted for pleasure. But this? What I was about to do? I fucking hated it. But the woman had earned at least one answer from me. “Because control is my language of choice.” And I allowed myself to rig, but not fuck. Fucking had been off the table ever since a hazel-eyed brunette walked out of the government halfway house, and I couldn’t control my stalking.

“Please,” she begged. “Stop.”

Guilt hit. “You know your safe word.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. Then she asked the wrong question. “Is it not enough to ask you to stop?”

“No.” I steeled myself. Then I leaned down to my brunette, brushed my lips against the scars above her left temple, the ones barely concealed under her hair, and I aimed. “Is this what al-Adani did to you? Did he control you?” I brought my mouth to her ear. “Did he put that assault rifle in your hands? Tell you to shoot?” Fucking hating myself, I leaned back and caught her gaze. Then I pulled the trigger. “Did you enjoy watching those American operators bleed out on that helo?”

Tears already streaming down her face, instant horror hit her eyes, and her heaving chest straining against my ropes stilled—for a fraction of a second. Then she sucked in a breath, her face contorted, and she yelled. “RED!”

The mezzanine went silent, and for a single beat, I froze. Then I reached for the last knot on her Hishi Karada to untie it.

She lost it.

“I said red! *Red, you sick bastard*!” The wooden saltire shook as she bodily tried to throw herself against my rigging. “RED!”

I grabbed the hook knife.

She fucking panicked. “DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH ME!”

Gripping the quick blade, about to cut her lose, I lowered my voice. “I’m releasing you, Aracet.”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!” Her voice hitched, and she broke out in a sob. “*Don’t you dare fucking call me that*.”

“Cutting the ropes now.” I sliced through three bands.

“REEEEED!” Her guttural scream echoed through every fucking floor of Empyros.

I stepped back, and the crowd parted as the most lethal Black triplet, Jarek, strode to my POS and flanked me. “What happened?”

I did what I had to do. “I found her breaking point.”

“Un-fucking-find it,” Black demanded.

The brunette, my brunette, rigged in my ropes, adorned with my knots, let out another panicked, rasping, curdling scream. “*REEEED*.” Eyes closed, hands fisted, sobbing uncontrollably, she kept screaming. “RED, RED, RED!”

“Her name?” Jarek demanded.

I glanced at the former Marine. His expression locked, he either had a better poker face than any Tier One I’d ever encountered, or he didn’t know who she was.

I looked back at my sobbing brunette.

Yanking on her wrist restraints, voice now hoarse, she didn't quit. "I said red! Get me out!" She slammed her head back against the cross. "*Get me out of here*!"

"Goddamn it," Jarek muttered, sizing up my brunette. "This once, I'll clean up your shit, Grayson. But give me her fucking name. She's only listed as *guest*."

I threw the Black triplet a warning. "You don't need her name."

"RED!"

I pivoted and left.

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FIFTY-EIGHT

Aracet

"Stop screaming."

Rough and demanding, almost angry, the male voice wasn't the same deep, resonant calm that'd driven me to madness, but I couldn't stop myself.

"Red," I rasped, half- yelling, still crying, eyes squeezed shut. "*Red*."

"Open your eyes, sub."

Sub. *Sub, sub, sub*.

"Fuck you," I croaked. My nipples were hard, my core was pulsating, the back of my head was throbbing, and every other inch of my body was on fire as rope both dug into my flesh and held me together.

"You done?"

"No." I wasn't done. "Where is he?" Where was the bastard who'd whispered about trust? *Who'd kissed my scars*. And why the hell couldn't I open my eyes? Fuck all those people watching me. Watching him. *Watching his hands*.

"He's gone."

My eyes popped open.

The man from the elevator. Standing right in front of me, looking mad as hell, his suit gone, he was wearing a worn T-shirt and jeans.

He raised an eyebrow. “You listening to me now?”

Despite his broad shoulders and muscular arms that were as big as a Delta Force operator’s, he wasn’t him. And I didn’t see just the man from the elevator…

I saw every person behind him staring at us.

My panic reached a new height. “I-I need Grayson.”

“You got me.” The elevator man stepped closer. His eyes stared harder. “Permission to touch you?”

Touch me? No. *No, no, no*. My mind twisted. *This is wrong. Very, very wrong*. My head was shaking no, but the words suddenly weren’t coming as I choked back sobs.

“I need to release you, sub.”

Every binding rope suddenly felt like a noose, and the hysteria bubbled up and spilled over. “Get me out. *Get me out of here!*”

“I intend to. But in order to do that, you need to give me permission.” The crowd was closing in behind him. Everything was closing in. “Do I have your consent, sub?”

“Yes.” A choked sob broke free. “*Yes*.”

He instantly moved.

His palm landed in the middle of my chest, and as his fingers slid behind the knotted harness separating my exposed breasts, my nipples inexplicably, horrifyingly, got harder, but he was already cutting.

With his swift movements and a hooked knife, the ropes started to fall away….

But a tingling sensation started all over my body, except it wasn't pins and needles. It wasn't my limbs or my muscles reawakening after being bound or held in an awkward position for too long. It was appallingly, embarrassingly, the exact opposite.

This was fire.

This was need.

This was every inch of my body burning with a prickling heat for something far worse than the debasement of being tied up in a sex club and having the sins of my past thrown in my face after the gentlest of kisses I'd ever received.

An irrational, dawning anger swept through the mess of emotions and sensations that'd overtaken my mind and body, and I lashed out at the man from the elevator. "Where the hell did he go?"

"I'm not his keeper."

"But you saw him," I accused, trying not to look at all the people watching us or take on the deep shame that was pouring into every wounded corner of my psyche like hot, burning oil. "You said he left."

"Few more cuts, sub. Brace yourself, or tell me now if you think you'll need assistance."

I was tied to a wooden cross with a million bands of rope. How the hell did I not need assistance? "I don't need your help."

"You're already getting it." The man from the elevator, who suddenly didn't seem at all like the man in the suit, even though he looked just like

him, lowered his tall frame as he reached for the elaborate knot that was in front of the juncture of my legs.

Adrenaline-fueled panic slammed into me, my breath fled, and my heart took off. “Stop!” *Oh God*. “D-Don’t touch me.” Not there, not him, not here.

Squatting with his muscular thighs holding him steady, his face level with my core, he tipped his head up slightly. Then his gaze locked on mine and his hands froze, but he didn’t let go of the knots. “I’m not touching you, sub. My hand’s on the rigging.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. “I-I’m not wearing underwear.” And those ropes were the only thing left covering me.

The blond-haired man who now looked too austere to be the handsome man from the elevator held my panicked stare with an unwavering expression, albeit impatient. “Seventy-two,” he stated flatly.

“W-What?”

“Seventy-two women have come through the club this evening. Do you know how many of them I’ve seen naked?”

My heart was hammering so hard, I thought I was going to have a life event. “No.”

“All of them. Now listen closely because I’m going to give you a choice. Do you want to hold still for five seconds while I cut you free? Or do you want to wait five minutes while I leave you here to go find a female staff member to do it?”

The panic seesawed into deep abandonment issues I thought I’d locked down too many years ago to count. Tears of humiliation slid down my face.

“I-I can’t be naked.” *Please don’t leave me*. Not here like this.

“That’s a second six or minute six problem, sub. Make a decision.”

I shut my eyes against this entire fucking disaster and the ashes of my dignity. “Please cut me free.”

A whisper of a touch skimmed across my bare pussy, the ropes tugged, and then a frantic pound of my heart later, all the tension holding me in place, save for one arm still above my head bound to a wooden cross, was gone.

“Brace,” his rough voice ordered.

Air moved as he stood. My wrist was released. My arm fell, and my knees buckled.

Crying out with a terrified gasp, my eyes opened, my head spun, and my gaze landed on the carnage of my dress and underwear as the floor came rushing at me.

A metal clank sounded, a knife landed at my feet, my body went vertical, and I was pushed back against the cross.

I lost it. “Don’t tie me back up!”

“Take a fucking breath, sub.” The order harsh and demanding, delivered with force, was like a slap to the face.

I sucked in air.

“Inhale. Again.”

I breathed in as scratchy jeans, a soft T-shirt, and hard muscles pressed against my front.

“I told you to let me know if you needed assistance.” Strong fingers wrapped around my wrists and began to rub painful circles as a muscled thigh shoved between my legs. “Sit, sub.” Without my consent, he shoved me down on the makeshift seat of his jean-clad leg.

My wet, exposed core landed on worn denim, and the last sensation I was expecting swamped me. Thick and teeming, perfidious desire flooded in, and it was the last straw.

In the next second, I was hysterically sobbing.

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FIFTY-NINE

Ares

I was going to kill Jarek Black.

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SIXTY

Aracet

I didn’t register his heavy, muscled arm around me.

I didn’t recognize the hoarse voice pleading through ugly sobs as mine.

I couldn’t identify the unfamiliar masculine scent as a rope cutter took off his T-shirt and yanked it down over my head.

But I felt every inch of bare chest and hard muscles as he picked me up and cradled me like an infant.

Then my wet face fell against his warm pec, and I could breathe.

His voice quietly rumbled, vibrating against my cheek. “That’s it, sub. Calm down.”

A hitched sob escaped.

“You’re safe. I’m getting you out of here.” He carried me down the stairs.

Everyone stared. At me, at him. Especially at him, and especially the women. “Th-they’re staring.” His T-shirt covered my bottom, just, but I still felt the exposure of my nakedness, of my stupidity. Of how I’d willingly, masochistically sent myself to the slaughter. Now I was bare from the waist down, and a man who was naked from the waist up was carrying me out of a sex club where I hadn’t had sex.

Carrying me how I'd only ever been carried once before.

The memory of it, of Grayson, his voice, all the old flashbacks, new ones I didn't know I had, images I'd spent years suppressing, recollections I wasn't sure had been mine—all of it was coming at me faster than a tidal wave. I didn't know if a Delta operator's ropes or his accusation or his kiss to my scars had triggered this, but it was all I could do to keep everything shoved down.

"Not your concern, sub. Let them look."

The crowd parted at the bottom of the stairs.

I whispered, "I'm sorry."

"No apologies." Ignoring everyone, striding through the sea of nakedness and debauchery, carrying me as if it were nothing, the rope cutter kept to his quieter tone. "You did nothing wrong."

I did everything wrong. *So very wrong*. That tidal wave surged.

"I feel you spiraling, sub. Calm that breath. Slow it down."

Tears dripped. "I-I don't know what's happening to me." I was a pendulum. My mind was not my own, and every part of my body felt like the leaden weight of impossible-to-overcome odds.

"You're safe. You're covered. I've got you. We're leaving," he clipped in succinct dominance before issuing an order. "Repeat that back to me."

"I-I'm safe." I wasn't. "I-I'm covered." Just barely. "You've got me." He was strong. "We're leaving." He hadn't left me in that place.

"Good," he praised, if a grown man with no soft edges was capable of such a thing. "Did you hear yourself?"

“I…” I didn’t know. “Yes?” Too small, too broken, my voice didn’t sound like my own. At least, not like the one I’d had since I’d been released back into society. But I didn’t want to think about that or the tidal wave or the years before it any more than I wanted to drown in the humiliation of tonight.

“Again, sub.” Angling behind the main bar, he shouldered through a concealed door. “Repeat those stations.”

The lighting changed, the noise reduced to almost nothing, and in that moment, I didn’t grasp what he meant by stations unless it was a biblical reference, but it didn’t matter. We were in a darkened corridor, and I repeated everything. “I’m safe. I’m covered. You’ve got me. We’re leaving.” I didn’t stutter.

“We’ve left,” he corrected, stepping onto a waiting elevator and pushing a button that said G.

The doors shut, air whooshed—from me, from the elevator shaft—then we were descending away from hell.

I both sank in his arms and felt the need to stand on my own two feet. “You can put me down.”

“I will, sub. In a minute.”

“Okay.” Suddenly so overwhelmed and exhausted that I could barely breathe, I closed my eyes and shamelessly curled into his warm strength. I would worry about everything—my shoes, my clothes, my keys, my fake ID, my life—in another minute.

But when the elevator stopped, when an elevator man held me tighter as he walked across an underground garage, when he opened the passenger

side of a giant truck, I wasn't thinking about a minute.

I wasn't thinking about anything as he gently slid me into a blessedly comfortable seat.

I wasn't thinking, period, when his breath washed across my face as he buckled me in. "What's your address, sub?"

I murmured numbers and a street name, praying I could sink into the void of nothingness, but his warmth was gone, and I suddenly remembered why. "I took your shirt."

"Got plenty more."

The door shut, quiet engulfed me, and I got my wish.

Nothingness.

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SIXTY-ONE

Ares

Fucking Jarek Black.

Holding my brunette too goddamn close, shirtless because he'd given her his, the Marine carried her to his truck and put her in the front passenger seat.

Then he fucking looked at her as he buckled her in.

My burner vibrated a split second before the Denali's Wi-Fi registered the incoming call.

I glanced at the display.

The brunette looked at the triplet like he was the one who'd put her into subspace.

I hit the button on the steering wheel to accept the call, and Nix's voice came through the speakers. "We need to talk."

"Go."

Black shut her door and rounded the vehicle without scanning the garage. Then he opened his door, reached behind his seat, and threw on a new shirt before getting behind the wheel.

"New intel. Compound location was confirmed by a second inside source. HVT is residing in the southeastern quadrant, but he's in a newly

dug-out, non-reinforced bunker with direct surface access."

"Copy." The compound location, we already had. But the southeastern quadrant detail, along with the new bunker and direct infill-exfil access, was new. I made a mental note to text those specific coordinates, along with the bunker intel, to the cell number I was given for my alternate plan.

"Here's where it gets interesting. HVT is rumored to be surfacing during a monthly supply drop in approximately thirty-six hours."

"For?"

"New bodyguards. It's apparently a known pattern. Every few months, new bodyguards are brought in. Al-Adani surfaces, cherry-picks, retreats. Always happens during a supply drop. Women or wives of the bodyguards are brought in on the truck with the potential new guards. Entire exchange happens in less time than it takes for the supplies to be unloaded. This is our in. You and Vandon will be on that truck. She makes the ID, you exfil with the truck after supplies are unloaded."

"And if I'm *cherry-picked*?" No fucking way was I taking Aracet into that bunker. The plan alone was pissing me off.

"You won't be. Second source is a current bodyguard. He'll make sure you get picked up from the village, but not chosen from the new guards."

"If we trust this source, how the fuck is he going to guarantee that? My size and stature alone guarantee I'll be picked. Then she's in the direct line of fire the second al-Adani sees her eyes."

"Source confirms he has influence on final selection, and we'll put Vandon in a burqa and colored contacts. But we need to be in theater to

finalize parameters. Get ready to roll out. Wheels up at eighteen hundred tomorrow. Where are you at with the woman?”

“Nowhere.” But fucking Jarek Black was. “I gotta go.” Black’s truck was pulling out of its parking spot.

Nix didn’t drop it. “What do you need to get the woman ready?”

“She’ll never be ready. She’ll break under pressure.”

“All she needs to do is confirm an ID.”

“Then show her a fucking headshot.” If Nix could find one after I executed my plan.

Nix exhaled. “You spoke with November.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A drone prototype’s being relocated to the Middle East as we speak. Cypher’s only one step behind November, and you’re not thinking clearly.”

Goddamn it. “Al-Adani needs to be dead.” Nix had said it himself.

“Concur. But this needs to go down the right way.”

“There’s a wrong way to eliminate a terrorist?”

“When there’s a hundred million involved that could backslide into the wrong hands, yes.”

“So that’s the price of Aracet’s head? A hundred million?” Because she’d be al-Adani’s first shot the second he realized she was alive.

“Aracet?” Nix asked, locking in on my slip.

I fucking owned it. “That’s her name.”

Nix was silent a beat. Then he read the situation like he’d had eyes on the club, on my whole goddamn life. “I’ve been where you’re at.”

“You haven’t.” The former SEAL was Navy royalty. His father had been a Vice Admiral. His career trajectory may not have been all his choosing, but I knew him well enough to know patriotism was in his DNA. He’d never chosen a woman over the safety of his brothers.

Nix exhaled. “Our uniforms may have been different, but our service wasn’t. Missions we had no say in, objectives decided for us, Teams or Units assigned by Brass, controlled execution, and predicted outcomes. This assignment isn’t any different. So, yes, I have been there. We both have, countless times, but that doesn’t change the optics. We either get the woman to identify the HVT, or the mission will be reassigned and someone else will get to Vandon. If you want to control the parameters on this, then get the woman ready, and let’s do this the right way. Copy?”

I fucking hated that he was right about the reassignment. But a dead al-Adani was a dead terrorist. “My plan’s solid.” I glanced at my watch. “In less than twenty hours, you can transfer the money, and I’ll handle my part.”

“Then we lose the trail of the next cell the money would filter down to, the locations of the seventeen targets, and the network of jihadists tasked with executing them.”

Fucking Christ. “Does it ever end?”

“No.”

“I don’t want to put her through this.” Her screams tonight, the ones from eight years ago—they were fucking echoing in my head.

“Understood. But don’t dismiss the will of the woman. Read her in. Give her a chance at retribution.”

“This goes against every instinct I have,” I admitted.

“Again, understood. But we have a job to do. Good copy?”

“Lima Charlie.” I hung up and followed Black’s truck out of the underground parking garage.

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SIXTY-TWO

Aracet

A deep, rough voice spoke, rousing me from… I didn't know what. Sex club unconsciousness? Grayson trauma? Rope-induced mania?

I glanced around the cocooning, insulating cabin. Large truck, larger dashboard, expensive display. Elevator man behind the wheel with a new T-shirt on.

"I'm sorry. What?"

He repeated an earlier sentiment. "No apologies." Turning onto a vaguely familiar road, he scanned his rearview mirrors. "I asked if you needed anything before we hit your place."

All of my apprehensiveness came back, and I glanced down at my naked thighs on a stranger's leather seat. "Do you know where my shoes are?" I thought of Henry, and my stomach twisted with deep remorse.

"Negative."

He didn't offer more, and I didn't push it. Red patent leather sandals with obscenely high heels weren't this man's problem. And frankly, they were the least of my concerns right now. I'd given a stranger the address of my apartment.

Too late to walk it back, I asked the most pressing question in my fucked-up thoughts. “Does Grayson go to that… place often?”

“I don’t divulge club or member information. Ask him next time you see him.”

Considering Grayson had left me there, that wasn’t likely to happen. But I didn’t say that because it stupidly hurt too much to think about, let alone say, which was the very definition of insanity after what Grayson had put me through. I shouldn’t want to ever see him again. But I did.

Worse, I was now past rage and fully entrenched in blaming myself for the whole evening and for not being strong or good enough—or whatever he’d needed me to be—to earn his reason.

That stupid fucking reason of why he’d wanted me *bound*.

He’d said he didn’t want his pound of flesh, but for all I knew, that’d been a lie. I wasn’t experienced with anything close to what’d happened tonight, but I wasn’t ignorant. Men didn’t need a reason for their sexual preferences. But I foolishly put stock in his word. I’d believed his coercion dripped in dominance. I’d fallen for his seductive voice and deft binding. I’d believed I was important enough to warrant the false intensity he was spoon-feeding me like a cosseted indulgence I was worthy of.

Black, Elevator Man, whoever he was, took another turn. “How do you know Grayson?”

“I don’t.” But for a moment, in that club, when he was trussing me up like his ropes were affection and I was his treasured gift, I’d thought I did.

“You came with him.”

“That doesn’t mean I know him.” I would never tell a soul how we had initially met—if you could call it meeting.

“He doesn’t bring subs to the club.”

Good for him. “Why should he? There were already plenty of willing participants.”

At least, according to that woman in the see-through negligée who was all too eager to enlighten me to that fact. I hated how pretty she’d been. But not as much as I hated myself, or the way I’d reacted to Grayson’s compelling and entrancing dominance. The thought alone had anger simmering once again as it rose to override all other emotions because, apparently, I wasn’t finished with the roller coaster of self-berating sentiments yet.

The man from the elevator, who either had a split personality or a doppelganger, kept talking as if I hadn’t said anything. “He also doesn’t usually rig like that.”

I had no idea what that meant. “I thought you said you didn’t divulge information about the club or its members?” Of course, I wanted answers about Grayson, but I didn’t want to hear what he did with other women.

“I don’t.” Exhaling like he was put out, the rope cutter turned onto my street. “Just trying to figure out my next move.”

I didn’t know what that meant either. “Good luck with that.” I was sure he hadn’t asked to be saddled with a hysterical woman tonight.

“Wouldn’t need luck if you’d tell me who the fuck you are and what Grayson did to set you off.” He pulled up to the curb in front of my building

and put his truck into Park before looking at me. “Then I can prevent it from happening again.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t be returning to… that club.”

“Empyros. And I wasn’t talking about you.”

Refraining from letting out a sarcastic *“Great”* in response and desperately trying not to think of Grayson going back to that club with another woman, I made a mental note to look up what Empyros meant. It sounded Greek. “Thanks for the ride. If you give me a couple minutes to change, I’ll bring your shirt back.”

The man who looked exactly like the suited man in the elevator but somehow different stared at me for so long, I didn’t think he was going to say anything else.

I reached for the door handle.

“Grayson’s a rigger. Not a sadist.”

My hand on the door, my body aching in ways I couldn’t begin to understand, I looked down at the soft gray-blue T-shirt and the indentations from the ropes still visible on my ankles. “I don’t know if you know him well enough to make that statement.”

“You think you do?”

Avoiding the hurtful question that shouldn’t have hurt, I looked at another man who had rescued me. Then I saw what I hadn’t before. What I definitely should have seen. “You were in the military.” He had that presence about him, and he’d used certain language.

“Marines,” he confirmed.

“But you’re not now.” His haircut seemed too… untidy.

“Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

Belatedly, I remembered the saying. I’d heard a lot of military-isms during the time I spent on a base, having every cell of my brain dissected for dissidence. “Be right back.” I pushed open the car door.

“Hold,” he ordered, opening his own door.

I tried to stop him. “I don’t need an escort to my place.” He already knew where I was living. I didn’t want him to know the exact apartment, too.

His door slammed shut, and he was on the passenger side of his truck as my feet hit the pavement. “Didn’t ask what you needed, sub.” Gently grasping my upper arm, angling me out of the way of the open door, he pushed it shut, then moved to my side. “It’s late. You’re getting an escort whether you want it or not, but I am respecting your boundaries and refraining from carrying you because it’s clearly one of your limits. As far as the shirt, I don’t give a fuck. Keep it. I’ve got plenty more.” Releasing my arm only to put his hand between my shoulder blades, he clipped out an order. “Watch your step.” Then he propelled me forward.

We walked across warm pavement, wet grass, and a tiled walkway before we reached the stairs.

I was so immersed in the different textures under my feet and how sensitized my skin was—to the air, the slight breeze, the movement of every muscle that’d had a rope bound over it—that I didn’t realize we were at the stairs until he paused.

“Which floor?”

I purposely glanced toward the end of the building that was opposite of my apartment. “I have it from here.”

The Marine stood there, saying nothing.

A few seconds passed, and when he still didn’t say anything, I looked up at him.

His gaze already locked in on mine, he schooled me. “I don’t give a shit where you live. I’m not here to fuck you, and stalking isn’t my kink. I’m going to take you to your place. Then I’m going to make sure you don’t sub drop before I get you inside because that piece of shit Grayson left you flooding.”

“Flooding?” Nerves tingled in my wrists and ankles where I’d pulled against the bindings the hardest.

“Emotional flooding—shame, anxiety, panic, fear, brain fog, withdrawal, despair, rejection sensitivity.” He rattled off the symptoms like they were simple explanations. “Grayson left you in the thick of it.”

An absurd need to protect the Delta operator who had indeed left me suddenly made my hackles rise. “I used the safe word. I didn’t want him touching me.”

“Doesn’t fucking matter. You were his guest. It was his job to tend to you and your aftercare.”

“Aftercare,” I repeated, feeling like I’d entered an alternate reality.

The Marine drew in a deep breath, and his intense gaze cut away. Then he looked back at me like he was fighting for every ounce of patience as his voice came out low and rough. “Listen to me very carefully, sub, because

I'm only going to say this once, and this advice may save your life." He paused.

I nodded.

"Stay *the fuck* away from Grayson. Your inexperience, the fact that you said *the* safe word, my presence here, the state you're in—all of that aside, which are reasons enough—you don't belong with a rigger. And you sure as hell don't belong with Grayson. You hear me?"

The lump in my throat was instant, but the tears were faster.

The Marine stared at me while I silently cried. But then the silence turned into sobs, and his voice took on that quieter tone he'd used when he'd carried me out of Empyros. "Permission to touch you?"

I cried harder.

"*Goddamn it.*" A man from an elevator pulled me into his arms.

I sobbed on his fresh shirt.

He picked me up.

Then he was carrying me up the stairs, my hands went to my face, and I was just surrendering—surrendering like I couldn't to a Delta Force operator.

"You got your keys, sub?"

His voice was wrong, and his smell wasn't primal musk and leather, and I didn't know if I had my keys or not. "I-I don't know."

"When did you last have them?"

Shit. "My bra."

"Check."

I didn’t know if it was the dominant demand or the brazenness behind it, but I stopped crying. Then I was reaching inside his shirt and feeling around my cut-in-half bra that was still miraculously clinging to the sides of my large breasts.

The single key, warm from my skin, next to my fake ID, both of them stuck to my breast with sweat, was thankfully there. “Got it.” I pulled out the key and held it up like an Olympic trophy.

“Unlock your door, sub.” Still holding me, a Marine with muscles as defined as a Delta operator’s leaned down so I could reach the lock.

It wasn’t until I was turning the key that I realized he’d found my place without me telling him which one it was. “How did you know this was my apartment?” I turned the handle.

Not answering, he shoved the door open with his shoulder, stepped inside, then kicked the door shut.

Immediately, the small studio felt claustrophobic, and panic crawled around my nerves like a burn you couldn’t soothe. “I got it from here.”

“Already told you I’m not taking advantage of you, sub.” He placed me on the bed without fanfare. Then he moved to the galley kitchen with a single stride, turned on the light over the stove, and opened the fridge, then the freezer. “Do you have bottled water?”

“I drink from the tap.” Bottled water was expensive.

“Not a good idea in Miami. You also need bottled on hand for hurricanes. I’ll have some delivered. No ice trays?”

They hadn’t come with the apartment. “No. And I can get my own water.”

Without comment, he opened the one upper cupboard and took out a glass. Then he turned on the tap and let it run, holding a finger under it.

“It’s not going to get any colder.” I’d noticed that my first night here. The water out of the tap never got cold like the water in Minnesota did.

“Running it to clear the line.” He wasted another few seconds of water, then filled the glass and brought it to me. “Drink. All of it.”

Still holding my key, barefoot, sitting up on the bed, I took the glass and brought it to my lips. Then I realized how thirsty I was.

I drank all of the water in a few gulps.

Wordlessly taking the glass from me and refilling it before handing it back, the Marine stood there while I drank.

After I finished, he filled the glass again, but this time he set it on the nightstand. Then his hands went to his hips, and he stared down at me. “Where are your emotions at?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Wasn’t looking for an apology. Scale of one to ten, ten being shit, one being solid, how do you feel mentally?”

Oh. Compared to those first few days back on US soil without drugs in my system and flashbacks happening while I was awake, this was a walk in the park. “I’m okay.”

“Scale,” he demanded.

“Five.” I didn’t know one. Five seemed like a reasonable answer.

He nodded. “Do you understand that you did nothing wrong tonight and you have nothing to be embarrassed about?”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“No, it’s not.”

Debatable. But I wasn’t going to argue with him. “Okay.”

He studied me another few seconds, and then he headed for the door, pausing only long enough to turn off the light above the stove. “Call the club if you need anything. You may ask for me.” He opened the front door.

I took note of how he used *may*, as in I had his permission to ask for him. “I don’t know your name.”

Silhouetted against the yellow cast of the outside corridor lighting, the Marine looked over his shoulder. “I don’t know yours.”

I lied. “Ari.”

He lied back. “Black.”

Feeling brave now that he was leaving, but also not wanting to be alone, I called him on the cryptic name. “That’s the same name as another man who was in the elevator when Grayson brought me up to the club. He looked just like you, but he acted different.”

“Suit?”

“Yes.” I hesitated barely a second, debating how to clarify, then just went with my gut. “Yes, an expensive custom-cut suit, precisely tailored, and he wore it, it didn’t wear him, but everything about him seemed like a façade.” He’d been too handsome and too perfect. That man was not the same man I was talking to now. I was certain of it.

“Did he smile?”

“No.”

“Hit on you?”

“Definitely not.” In fact, I was pretty sure he’d passive-aggressively insulted me with his *“Best of luck”* comment. Not that Grayson hadn’t opened that door by calling me an interloper.

“That was Jacek. My brother.”

Something was off. “If he’s your brother, why did you ask if he was in a suit or if he’d smiled?” I’d already told him he looked just like the other man. Identical to him, as a matter of fact. But their mannerisms were very different.

“Because if he’d smiled or said something inappropriate, it would’ve been my other brother, Jagger.”

Oh my God. “You’re an identical triplet?”

He tipped his chin.

“Jacek, Jagger, and…?”

“Jarek. Take care, sub.” Then the door shut, and Jarek Black was gone.

Suddenly swamped with bone-deep exhaustion yet feeling boneless and uncoordinated as if I were drunk, I reached inside a stranger’s shirt. Unsticking the ID from the side of my breast, I tossed it on the nightstand, then fished out the ruined bra through the shirt sleeves before dropping it to the floor. Lying back on the bed, barely managing to inch up to the pillows, I spied the cell next to the glass of water an identical triplet had left for me.

Then I looked down at my body and slowly drew up the T-shirt to my neck.

Rope indentations. Crisscrossed all over my body.

Shame and amorous desire flooded in, and for a heart-pounding moment, I thought about taking a picture—to preserve the shocking symmetry of his patterns, to drown in the humiliating beauty every time I needed to remind myself of who I was, to remember this ruthless need coursing through my body like fire. To feel alive… to feel his ropes.

Yanking down the T-shirt, I curled onto my side.

Even that movement made me feel where his ropes had been.

Closing my eyes, praying for sleep, I remembered what a triplet had said right before he'd closed the door.

Sub.

Not Ari.

Sub.

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SIXTY-THREE

Ares

Jarek Black pulled up to the curb in front of her place.

My brunette didn't immediately get out of the truck.

Tinted windows, not parked under a streetlamp, I couldn't see inside the cab, but I fucking watched the truck. Black had one minute to let her out before I intervened.

Fifty-three seconds later, the passenger door opened.

Then I watched a fucking avalanche.

My brunette got out of the truck, unsteady and barefoot. Black grabbed her arm. Led her to the stairs with his hand on her back. Fucking spoke with her. She fell apart. He picked her up. She sobbed in his arms. He carried her up the stairs. Then she reached inside her shirt while still in his arms, took out her key, and unlocked the apartment.

Black shouldered open the door, stepped inside with her, then kicked the door shut.

I was out of the Denali.

Glock in hand, cell in the other, I swiped open the app. Watching Black get her water, I double-timed it across the street, aiming for the complex's exterior stairs.

Then I heard Black’s question and fucking halted.

“Where are your emotions at?”

I focused on the live security feed.

“I’m sorry?” Watching her as she sat on the edge of her bed, head down, I heard the fear in her voice.

“Wasn’t looking for an apology,” Black countered. “Scale of one to ten, ten being shit, one being solid, how do you feel mentally?”

“I’m okay.”

My brunette was far from okay.

“Scale,” Black ordered.

“Five.”

She’d lied.

Black tilted his head to make eye contact. “Do you understand that you did nothing wrong tonight and you have nothing to be embarrassed about?”

Her chin fell to her chest, her hands gripped the edge of the bed, and she rocked once. “That’s a matter of opinion.”

“No, it’s not,” Black clipped.

Her voice tanked to submissive. “Okay.”

The asshole watched her a beat, then turned off the light above the stove and headed to the door. “Call the club if you need anything. You may ask for me.” He opened the front door.

Enraged, I closed out the app.

Two minutes later, Black came down the stairs.

I was waiting.

The asshole stepped right up to me. “You walk the fuck out on a sub like that again, not only are you banned from the club, but you’ll answer to me.”

I had no intention of going back to Empyros. “What did she say in the truck?”

“That’s what you’re fucking worried about?” Black looked ready to unleash. “You left her fucking flooding. The woman doesn’t have goddamn food or water in her place. It’s fucking hurricane season, and that’s your concern? What she fucking said?” The Marine eyed me a beat, then shook his head in disgust. “*Un-fucking-believable*. This wasn’t about rigging at all. You were fucking vetting her for something. I should’ve known something was up when you walked in with her.” Black turned toward his truck but stopped short to throw me a warning. “Stay the fuck away from her, and don’t ever bring your work shit into my club again.”

“Scrub Empyros’s security feeds from tonight.”

“Fuck you, Grayson.”

“If you don’t, I will.”

Already behind the wheel, about to pull the door shut, Jarek glanced back. “I had respect for you downrange. But you want to know the difference between us? Priorities. I don’t give a goddamn about the fucking security feeds right now. I’m going to get the woman water.” He slammed his door shut, the diesel engine turned over, and he took off.

Jarek Black was right.

Our priorities were different.

Heading back to the Yukon, I opened the app on my cell, then grabbed the laptop from my go bag.

Alternating between watching her lying there in fetal position, eyes closed, and working on the laptop, I wiped Empyros's security feeds. I deleted all traces of me and the brunette from the cameras in the club downstairs, in the elevators, hallways, lobby upstairs, back corridors, private elevator, and the multiple cams in the garage, including Black carrying her out. Shutting down my laptop, I stowed it back in my go bag. Then I waited and watched.

My brunette fell asleep.

Black returned thirty-two minutes later.

Not glancing toward my POS, he got out of this truck, grabbed two cases of bottled water from the bed, and carried them up to her place. Leaving them outside her door, he didn't knock or look in her window before jogging back down the steps, retreating to his Ford F-250 Tremor, and taking off.

I watched her for another hour, reminding myself of my fucking vow not to touch her. But if the woman woke up, if I saw tears again, I didn't give a fuck what she'd yelled at me.

I was breaching that goddamn apartment.

She didn't wake up.

Another hour, and she hadn't moved at all.

But my thoughts had. They'd swung from *no fucking way was I taking my brunette back to hell* to Nix's comment.

Give her a chance at retribution.

But I couldn’t do that without giving her full disclosure.

Resigned to reading her in tomorrow, needing a couple hours sleep, I threw the Yukon into gear and pulled away from the curb.

Driving to the penthouse, I thought about the one thing Black had said that was right.

Our priorities were different.

He’d gotten her water, but I was going to make sure she’d be alive to drink it.

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SIXTY-FOUR

Aracet

I woke to pouring rain and two cases of bottled water outside my front door.

Standing there exhausted, holding my keys in one hand and the repurposed plastic bag Henry had used for my now- ruined, probably thrown-out dress, I stared down at the waters.

“I hate you, metaphors.” Whatever the hell this one was about other than the fact that when it rained in Miami, it truly poured.

Already late for work, I set down my plastic bag that had a change of dry clothes because I didn’t own a stupid umbrella, it was dumping rain, and the walk to my car would drench me. Silently cursing instead of being thankful for a triplet’s kindness, I hauled the cases of water into the apartment. Then I locked the door behind me, picked up the plastic bag, and looked out at a day that perfectly matched my mood.

Too drained to muster the anger and heavy emotions I’d had all night until I’d finally fallen into a restless sleep, I double-checked that the plastic bag was sealed up before I tucked it into my purse. Then I put my head down and rushed to my car.

Half a minute later, soaked through, I was behind the wheel, and the key

was in the ignition.

But the fucking car didn’t start.

Rain pelting the metal box so hard, it sounded like hail, I tried turning the key three more times.

Nothing.

Absolutely fucking nothing.

Draping my arms over the steering wheel, resting my head against them, I closed my eyes. But then all I was seeing was an ice-cold, hardened gaze and chiseled features.

“Shit.” Leaning back up, glancing at the rain, knowing from firsthand experience that I was waterproof but my purse wasn’t, I debating going back to get the cell phone I’d purposely left behind so it didn’t get wet.

I could go back upstairs, call for a cab or rideshare, then come back out and get wet all over again.

Or I could just walk to work.

It would be quicker than waiting for a rideshare at this hour in this weather, and as a crow flies, work wasn’t far.

But in sheeting rain, Del Cielo felt like it was, as Henry would say, in Siberia.

Speaking of Henry, I could go back upstairs and call him or Pasqual for a ride. But I hadn’t turned on the cell this morning or called Henry on purpose. I was an expert chameleon, even better pickpocket, and an adept liar. But not with Henry. He would know in an instant something had happened last night, and I wasn’t prepared to relive it, let alone be grilled about it.

So walking it was.

Three minutes later, regretting every damn thing as icy-cold needles of tropical rain assaulted me with baffling intensity when it was at least seventy-five degrees out, I inadvertently trudged through an ankle-deep puddle.

“Damn it!” Before I could curse myself for not packing an extra pair of socks in my plastic bag, a motorcycle pulled up alongside me.

A black racing superbike.

With a rider I recognized.

Mr. Grayson flipped up his visor. “Get on.”

I stood there, speechless.

Then I wasn’t speechless. I was the entire pendulum of emotions from last night all over again, with anger leading the charge. “Do you stalk me everywhere?”

“No. Get on the bike, Aracet.”

“I don’t trust you.” Fuck him. “And I don’t know you.” But last night, I’d stupidly thought I did. Except I didn’t even know how many motorcycles he had. All I knew was that this one was different than the one he’d ridden to Del Cielo, and I wasn’t sure why the hell that mattered out of everything else when I didn’t even know his first name and it was dumping fucking rain, but it mattered. Standing at attention in the forefront of my mind, *mattered*. Like a warning sign.

Do not trust this man.

Shivering from the rain, from him, I repeated my ridiculous words so I was sure he heard them, but it was a joke. “I don’t trust you at all.”

I trusted him with my life.

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SIXTY-FIVE

Ares

"I don't trust you at all."

Those eyes. Minutes before a sunrise that wouldn't penetrate, rain coming down hard, refracted light from streetlamps that were still on, that hazel gaze still pierced through the predawn and my conscience.

The ghost of this woman was in me, always. But this was different.

Today, she was different.

I focused up. "You trusted me to rig you before you knew who I was, but you don't trust me to keep you safe on a Ducati in the rain?"

"Are you asking me to separate the wheat from the chaff?"

I stared at the woman for a second too long. "No." I'd never underestimated her. She'd stayed on the run, she'd kept her head down until last night, and the woman read. Voraciously. Like me.

I'd never underestimated her intelligence or her power over me—until she'd just fucking schooled me with a metaphor of rightful, biblical proportion.

Zero comeback for a woman who saw right through me, I trained my gaze on traffic and revved the engine like an asshole who'd actually leave her here.

“Wait!”

I glanced back.

Soaked, long-sleeved shirt stuck to her breasts, nipples erect, hair in her face, looking lost, vulnerable and ten years past wary, she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid eyes on.

I said nothing.

“Is your name really Grayson?”

I still wondered what the fuck Black had said to her in his truck. “Last name, yes.”

“First?”

“Does it matter?” Nothing I said to her would undo last night or change the past.

“You know my name,” she argued.

I knew a lot more than that. Like how her car hadn’t started. Unfortunately, that wasn’t intel I had when I decided on the Ducati this morning over the Denali. I was only thinking she’d be less likely to spot the bike over the SUV, and I’d planned on tailing her close in this weather. Then the woman had started fucking walking, and I wasn’t leaving her out here unattended to go back for the SUV.

“Get on the bike, Aracet.” I wanted her out of the rain, but I also wanted my brunette on the back of my Ducati.

“No. And it’s Ari. Now.”

“It’s raining harder. Now.”

Ignoring my mimic of her cadence, she looked up at the threatening sky. Like a purveyor of chaos, she closed her eyes and welcomed the storm. Her voice floated on it. “What if we crash?”

“What if we don’t?” I knew how to handle the bike.

She lowered her head and looked right at me. “We will.”

We already had. “What’s worse than death?”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Being left tied up in a sex club while you have a breakdown.”

No fucking words to counter that, I said nothing.

She amended. “Living in fear.”

I gave her the order for the last time. “Get on the Ducati, Aracet.”

“Ari,” she uselessly corrected.

“I’m never going to call you by a name other than the one you were given.” It was unique. And it fit the beauty who was the only woman who’d ever held me hostage.

“Not even a pet name? Oh, wait. You already gave me one. *Interloper*,” she spit out, losing half the delivery to the pouring rain.

I refrained from pointing out the factual accuracy of it. Whether my submissive brunette from last night was showing some shades of her true personality or still experiencing sub drop didn’t matter right now. I’d assess after I got her out of the rain.

Switching gears, going against every dominant propensity I had, instead of ordering her to get on the bike, I went with another tactic. “May I ask a favor?”

“No.”

“Question?”

“Maybe.”

I held out my hand. “Let me get you out of this weather.”

She stared at my outstretched offer. “That’s not a question.”

“I know.”

She shivered. Then she stepped up to the bike, grasped my gloved hand, and hesitated. “I don’t know how to do this.”

That made two of us, but I wasn’t going to apologize for last night. “Step on a footpeg, swing your leg over, and hold on.”

With practiced ease, she got on the Ducati. “I didn’t mean the motorcycle.” Her arms wrapped around my waist.

I undid the chinstrap on my helmet.

Her hand landed on my shoulder and gripped. “No. You’re going to need to see in this weather more than I’m going to need to protect my brain. Keep your helmet on.”

I took it off. “Not open for discussion.” Twisting in my seat, I brought it over her head.

“You put that on me, and I’m getting off this bike.”

I fucking hesitated. Like I always did with this woman. “Are you going to safe word out if I force it on you?”

“I’ll do worse,” she countered, rain running down her face, making her lashes stand out and her eyes look even more haunted.

I took the bait. “Which would be?”

“I’ll go back to the club.” She dropped her hammer. “Without you.”

Using every ounce of Delta training not to react, wondering how this woman always fucking saw right goddamn through me, I shoved the helmet back on. Then I shifted into First.

“Don’t go too fast,” she warned, right before she dug a knife into my dominance. “I’m not wearing a helmet.”

My stepsister would’ve already had my helmet securely strapped on. Any other woman wouldn’t have been on my bike.

Ignoring both those thoughts and the arms wrapped around me in a death grip just like they had eight years ago, I shot into traffic.

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SIXTY-SIX

Aracet

He didn’t go slow.

He drove like we were under fire and the enemy was closing in.

If I thought the needling rain was bad before, it was nothing compared to this.

Shards of piercing pain pelted every inch of exposed flesh that wasn’t sheltered by his broad shoulders, muscular thighs, or tall frame. I wanted to wring his neck and shove him off his own bike in equal measure. Fear was screaming at me faster than the speedometer, my arms kept slipping over his leather jacket every time he took a corner, and I shook.

I wish I could say it was from the chilling rain and the speed of the superbike. Or the fact that he’d tracked me down—again. Or that I’d blindly gotten on his death machine without telling him I needed to be at work or even ask where he was taking me.

But it was the bastard himself who was making me shake.

It was his heart-shattering stare and that dominant voice of his—especially his voice—saying he would never call me anything other than Aracet. Using the name I used to love but that now only lived in media infamy and the furthest reaches of my childhood memories I refused to let

surface. Hearing the way his deep baritone sliced through the three syllables but somehow made them blend like viscous honey. All of it wracked my body with tremors that had nothing to do with temperature, but here I was.

Gripping on to him for dear life.

Wanting to hate him for last night.

Still reeling from the instant panic when he'd almost driven off and left me for a second time, my emotions were in shambles, but I hungered for something tangible to sink all my unspent shame, anger, and righteousness into. It would be so much easier than blaming myself for everything. Like having an accomplice on a forsaken night, I could spread the loathing.

Maybe that's what I'd been unconsciously doing when I'd gotten on his motorcycle.

Did collusion get any more purposeful than riding into the abyss with a Tier One operator who killed for a living? Or used to kill. I didn't know what he did now besides show up across the country, change his appearance without actually changing a thing, and blend into the shadows when his size and presence alone made him the least invisible person I knew.

Not that I knew him.

Not more than his rigid, defined abs under my arms, his control of the bike, and his mellifluous voice. *God*, his voice.

I should've recognized it the first time he came into the coffee shop.

I should've recognized a lot of things over the years.

Mátia mou.

The memory was still the anchor to my drift, even after last night, even if I didn't want it to be. Or worse, wanted it more now. As if my soul was

already ahead of my mind, his muttered possessive from eight years ago played on repeat.

Mátia mou. *Mátia mou*. *Mátia mou*.

Shivering like hell, pushing against the past, I opened my mouth to ask where we were going right as he pulled up to a mirrored skyscraper.

The oceanfront high-rise shot into the sky like defiance against the hurricanes I'd read about, and its architectural feat was almost overshadowed by its opulence.

It was the absolute last place I expected a Ducati-riding, Delta-Force-operator stalker to be pulling up to.

With the first act of common sense I'd had all morning, I noted the *Bentley Residences* sign emblazoned on the drive-up entrance of the skyscraper that was taller than any of the surrounding buildings.

He pulled into a garage but then drove directly up to what looked like half industrial elevator, half spaceship as lights illuminated a path forward, and giant steel-and-glass doors closed in around us.

Removing his helmet as water cascaded off us onto the polished concrete floors, he issued an order. "Stay on the bike."

Transfixed by some sort of hydraulic system that looked like it belonged in a futuristic movie, I watched as it surrounded the bike's wheels and started moving us forward into another, slightly smaller space. "Is this a car elevator?"

"Dezervator," he replied.

I had no idea what that was, but a few seconds later, we were being whisked up in a giant rounded elevator with glass walls that was large

enough to hold an SUV. The first floors we shot past looked more like a luxury hotel than residences as glimpses of a multi-story lobby, restaurant, bar, and spa blurred past.

I didn't realize I was still holding on to Ares, let alone had my arms around him in a death grip, until he shifted slightly forward on the bike.

Taking the hint, I dropped my arms.

Straddling the bike, he stood right as the elevator stopped. Then the same hydraulic system in the floor that had moved us into the elevator moved the motorcycle forward into a four-car garage—in a high-rise apartment. Except the term *garage* barely fit the high-end space with a wall of glass that looked into a palatial open-plan oceanfront condo with gleaming floors and magazine-worthy furnishings.

"This is your garage?" I glanced at the other three bays. "Inside your apartment?" I saw the black Yukon Denali with the fancy grille, another superbike, and a low-riding sports car I was sure was expensive but didn't know the make of.

"Sky garage," he corrected, putting down the kickstand. "Penthouse, not apartment. Dismount." Hanging his helmet on the handlebars, he waited for me to get off the bike. Then he swung his long leg over the Ducati and started toward a glass door. "This way."

I took in his pristine floors, and I had a moment. "I'm soaked." He was ridiculously rich, and I was desperately poor. "I'll make a mess in your place." Too late, I realized the innuendo of my word choice. But then a flashback of him with his ropes in hand and his expression of such focused intent that I would never forget it traitorously played, and I forgot about his floors.

Without a word, the man who was almost six and a half feet tall, the Tier One who’d rescued me from terrorists, the Delta operator who’d muttered a Greek term of endearment like it was a holy curse, glanced at me with his stark blue eyes.

Then he walked into his penthouse—not apartment.

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SIXTY-SEVEN

Ares

Same as running after me at the coffeehouse, same as her hitting the mezzanine stairs last night at the club, she came after me.

Like a starved dog.

Except she wasn't a canine, and she wasn't following me.

She was following her fears.

And fuck, those eyes of hers never changed. Drugged out and holding an AKM in a Syrian ISIS stronghold at nineteen, or drenched through eight years later, strapped with nothing more than a small purse as she stood in a Miami Beach high-rise, she looked the same. Hazel eyes filled with fear, clothes that didn't look like hers, huge breasts, sunken cheeks, and a small frame that suggested too many skipped meals over genetics.

Time had done little to age her because trauma and circumstances had already taken their toll, but Jesus, she was still beautiful.

And I still wanted to protect her.

But I couldn't protect her from the one damn thing I had no control over —her memory. If I was fucking lucky, once I read her in, she'd tell me she didn't know or recollect al-Adani. Worst-case scenario, in twenty-four hours, I would be walking her into hell.

At least I wasn’t rigging her up in a sex club and leaving her.

Aiming for the laundry room to grab her some dry clothes, I told myself it was progress.

She reminded me it wasn’t. “I didn’t expect someone like you to live in a place like this.” Stepping dangerously close to me in the confined space, her gaze took in the washer and dryer that were more expensive than all of the cars she’d ever owned combined. “I would have guessed more subterranean cave than oceanfront condo.”

“There are no caves in South Florida.” Porous limestone with a high water table, the geology here didn’t lend itself to caves. “Not unsubmerged ones.”

“It was a metaphorical statement.” Her back to the doorway, she blocked my exfil.

“I know.” Holding out clothes, I tipped my chin toward the hall. “Bathroom’s behind you.”

She eyed my outstretched hand, then looked up at me. “I have my own clothes.”

“These are dry.” And weren’t bought by a SWCC or belong to a fucking Marine.

“So are mine.”

I scanned the length of her drenched body, then looked back at her.

She glanced down. “Right. I meant I have some in my purse.”

Her purse was fucking soaked. “Take the clothes, Aracet.”

Avoiding contact, she reached for them. “Is this another order?”

She could take it however she liked. “Excuse me.”

Angling around her, not looking back to see what she’d do, I headed to the main bedroom. Bypassing a shower, I quickly changed into dry clothes, swapped my riding boots for a dry pair of Lowa MK2 GTX combat boots, and headed back to the open-plan kitchen in under a minute.

The penthouse was silent.

I glanced down the hall.

A slice of light shone at the bottom of the closed door of the half bath.

I focused on the next task.

Eight minutes later, I had water boiling, pasta cooking, ingredients simmering in another pan, and no woman in sight. Suddenly understanding every time Helios had kicked down a door to get at Feralyn, I glanced toward the hall.

Then I took a stride.

The bathroom door opened, and a wet-haired, dry-clothed brunette stepped out. Then she looked up and stopped short when she saw my POS.

“Problem?” Seeing my T-shirt and sweats on her, possession took hold. I made a mental note to remove Black’s shirt from her apartment.

“Multiple.” Her feet bare, her arms slightly extended, her hands curled tightly around the bundle of wet clothes she was holding. “But you’ll have to be more specific. You’ll also have to tell me where you want these, unless you have a plastic bag around that isn’t…” She scanned the place. “Torn.”

“Laundry room. Leave your clothes on the washer.” I pivoted back toward the stove before I turned into the fucking starved dog.

Twenty seconds later, almost as silent as an operator, she set her boots on the floor near the kitchen island and flanked my position. “What are you doing?”

“Cooking.” She smelled like rain and my clothes. If the woman knew half the depravity running through my mind, if she had any sense of self-preservation, she wouldn’t have been standing so fucking close.

“What are you making?”

Hopefully not a mistake. “Pasta.”

“You don’t strike me as a pasta eater.” She turned a block of cheese over to look at the nutrition label. “Organic? You seem like someone who consumes protein like it’s free. Bodybuilder shakes and keto bars.” She dismissively pushed against the carton of oat milk with one finger until it spun halfway around. “Supplements before and after gym time.”

Anger mounting—at Nix, at myself, at what I was going to put her through—I didn’t mention that I didn’t go to a damn gym. I had one right here in the penthouse. “The pasta’s for you.” I was carb-loading her before I downloaded intel that would, at best, ruin her day.

“For me,” she stated, picking up the block of cheese. “This organic sharp cheddar is for me when I don’t even know your first name, but you just happened to be on your motorcycle at six thirty in the morning, in the pouring rain, on the exact route I take to work.” With a wary exhale, she dropped the cheese back onto the counter. “Right. Don’t cook on my account. I don’t need charity. I also didn’t need a death-defying ride.” She crossed her arms. “How long do you plan on keeping me hostage? I have a job I need to get to, and I’m already late.”

I turned off the burner under the sauce.

Then I got in the woman's face and set her straight. "You voluntarily got on my bike. You're uninjured. You're in dry clothes. There are two elevators behind you. You can use your burner to call work or ask to use mine. And this is not last night, Aracet." My voice lowered. "I'm neither rigging nor touching you."

She flinched as if I'd hit her.

I didn't let up. "If you want to leave, then go." If this woman took a single fucking step toward those elevators, I'd show her what I was truly made of.

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SIXTY-EIGHT

Aracet

He shut off the stove.

Then a Delta operator in full warfighter mode turned and concentrated all of his lethally focused attention on me.

Startled, the flight instinct flooded my veins with adrenaline, and I retreated a step, but I had nowhere to go. My back hit the counter behind me, and I regretted every second of flying this close to his flame.

But then he spoke, and his voice—*dear God, that voice*—became the low, authoritative dominance from last night that'd given me false promises of intimacy, and he wove the exact spell to both disarm every one of my fears and turn me into a mindless supplicant at his feet. "You voluntarily got on my bike. You're uninjured. You're in dry clothes. There are two elevators behind you. You can use your burner to call work or ask to use mine. And this is not last night, Aracet." His tone melted into criminally executed seduction. "I'm neither rigging nor touching you."

In a twisted play of reverse psychology, an involuntary tremor shot through my betrayingly wanton body at the thought of him never touching me again, and I flinched as the ghost of his ropes tingled everywhere he'd bound me.

A treacherous storm darkened his eyes, and his tone became downright threatening. “If you want to leave, then go.”

I didn’t know this man, but in that moment, I knew one absolute.

He was not offering me an escape from him.

All sense of self-preservation gone, I stupidly didn’t want to leave. I didn’t even want to think about it. Mesmerized by every single thing about him, by how I’d gone from extreme despair the second I’d awoken this morning to this inexplicable humming coursing through my veins ever since he’d shown up on his motorcycle, I wanted the opposite of distance.

Dressed in his clothes because the ones in my purse had been soaked, smelling his clean scent everywhere, the urge to sink into this man’s depths was so overwhelming, I barely remembered I needed to be at work.

I wanted answers. I wanted his name. I wanted to know why he’d left me last night. I wanted to know why he’d bound me in the first place.

I just *wanted*.

But I wasn’t so far gone that I missed his not-so-veiled threat. He was all but baiting me to try to leave. He was also calling my bluff. We both knew I hadn’t demanded that he take me to work or my apartment. I hadn’t demanded anything.

I also hadn’t escaped the anger seesawing through all of my other shit emotions. As if the weather was mocking me, sheets of rain, the same ones that’d assaulted us during our ride here, kept pelting the windows of his sky-high penthouse. Except this far up, with thick glass between us and the violent weather, it wasn’t the storm outside that I was worried about.

It was the storm inside.

His, mine, ours.

I tested his false assertion that I could leave. “So you can continue to follow me?”

Focusing back on the stove, stirring the pot of pasta as he turned the flame back on underneath the other pot, he didn’t say anything.

“I asked you a question.”

“I heard.” His tone having reverted back to that quiet reserve that was more intimidating than when he’d been looming over me, he didn’t so much as glance my way.

Terrific. “Now you’re mercurial too.”

“I didn’t accuse you of having erratic moods.”

The way he said it, he may as well have. “I wasn’t talking about myself.” But I had a feeling he knew exactly what I’d meant and had intentionally misconstrued the meaning. Which made me feel like an asshole, and then I was right back on that fucking pendulum, and I couldn’t stop the words coming out of my mouth, when I was never combative like this. “I was saying that, on top of your other stellar personality traits, you’re also mercurial, which wasn’t a compliment.”

“You’re still in sub drop.” Calmly throwing the diagnosis at me, stirring the roux with one hand, picking up the oat milk with the other, he slowly poured in a measured stream like a professional chef as he had an entirely different conversation. “Exhaustion, fear, sadness, worry, self-doubt—all are normal and to be expected. The carbohydrates will help.”

I ignored every spot-on physical and emotional state I was in as if my life depended on it. “Why bother with oat milk if you’re going to use cheese

made from cow's milk?" I also vehemently ignored the fact that he was making my favorite food.

"It cuts down on the lactose. You're not going in to work today."

"Of course, I'm going to work." The idea of not going, even for a half day, took root, and my thoughts ping-ponged like my emotions. "You're lactose intolerant?" It would fit. He didn't seem tolerant of much of anything, me included. Except he was saying I wasn't going to work, which meant… I didn't know what that meant.

"No, I am not lactose intolerant. But lactose malabsorption interferes with the metabolism of tryptophan, which you need. I'll handle Del Cielo and let them know you're not coming in." He pulled a cell out of his pants pocket and swiped across the screen with one hand, then quickly typed.

"Are you a scientist?" *Metabolism, tryptophan, malabsorption*—who was this man? "You're not calling anyone for me." How bad would it be if I took my day off today? "Is that really why you're using margarine and oat milk with dairy cheese? To cut lactose?"

He shoved the cell back into his pocket. "Yes, to the latter. No, to the former. Not open for discussion on Del Cielo—it's already handled—and sharp cheddar contains less than one gram of lactose per serving."

"Great." Not great. Wait. "You texted Del Cielo? Just now?"

"I texted your boss."

"Hailey?" He had her number?

"Yes," he confirmed.

My head spun, and I stood there like an idiot—for a second, for a lifetime—for exactly as long as it took for two memories to wage a full-out

assault as they hit back-to-back.

My mother, the only time I remembered her ever cooking for me, standing at the stove in a yellow kitchen, making homemade macaroni and cheese.

Me making the same dish the night before I left Minnesota, attempting to comfort myself with the one good memory of my childhood that I had.

Now a Delta operator who'd rescued me from terrorists, from myself, from the rain, who'd cut off my clothes, tied me up, and left me naked was making the same damn dish.

A single tear fell.

Then a wrenched sob, louder than any storm, cut through a penthouse kitchen.

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SIXTY-NINE

Ares

My brunette lost it.

Her choked sob echoed. Then she was spiraling. Backing away, sinking into a sub drop I was hoping to catch before she hit rock bottom, she threw accusations as tears ran down her face. “You did this. You *planned* this. You liar. You lied about everything you said last night”—her head jerked toward the stove—“*and now this*.”

“Aracet.” I stepped toward her.

Her arms flew up, hands out. “DON’T! Don’t come near me. Don’t pretend like you don’t know. *You cut my clothes off*. You left me!”

Breaking all my rules, I grabbed her chin. “No, I didn’t.”

“YOU LEFT ME THERE NAKED.”

“ARACET.”

Flinching, chest heaving, she blinked.

I lowered my voice but held my grip. “I made a vow, and I’m already breaking it. I need you to hear me right now.”

“Wh-what vow?”

“Not to touch you.”

She drew her arms in.

“Do you hear me now?”

Staring, she didn’t respond.

I let go of her chin and asked again. “Do you hear me, Aracet?”

Tears streaming, bottom lip quivering, she nodded.

“Good. I made a vow not to touch you, but you’re sub dropping on me. If you can’t hear my voice, my commands, if I’m unable to verbally communicate with you, that’ll leave me no other choice.”

“Y-You’ll tie me up?”

“No.” But fuck, I wanted to.

Swimming in my shirt, arms crossed, she gripped herself. “Th-then what will you do?”

“Break my vow.”

Her trembling stilled, then her voice dropped to nothing but fear. “And touch me?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Every fucking way I shouldn’t. “I want you to understand something before I answer that.” Holding her gaze, clocking her tremors, I watched every damn breath she took. “I didn’t leave you last night. I was in the garage at Empyros when Black put you in his truck. I was across the street when he walked you to your apartment. I was on your complex’s property when he carried you inside. I did not leave you.”

Her eyes widening, she said nothing.

I went full disclosure. “I didn’t happen upon you this morning, and not one word of what I said while I was rigging you last night was a lie.”

Her voice, her body, every inch of my brunette stilled, but her expression warred. “So you do follow me.”

Every-goddamn-where. “Yes.”

She barely whispered, “*Who are you?*”

“My name is Ares Grayson. Eight years ago, I was a Master Sergeant with 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment–Delta, and we had a mission. You were my target.”

Her knees gave out, and she slid to the floor.

Not letting up, I kept downloading. “You were in my sights, but I saw the bruising on your face. Then I saw your eyes.” I squatted. “I didn’t pull the trigger.”

“Why?”

Because she was beautiful and broken, and I wanted to save her. “Because I couldn’t.”

“Your brothers. Those operators…”

“Jax and Bellows.”

Shuddering, she completely drew in on herself. “They *died* because of me.”

“No.” I knew the woman had survivor’s guilt. It fucking bled from her. Every move she’d made for five years was fueled by it. “They died because of a mistake I made.”

Her head was shaking before I'd finished the sentence. "No. *No*. It was me. *My fault*."

"I am not at liberty to discuss classified intel, but you are not responsible for Jax's and Bellows's deaths. Rigging you last night was not payback. Not touching you now isn't punishment or for lack of want. I'm protecting you." Not that it fucking felt like it right now. "You have no reason to trust me, but I did not lie to you last night. I was, however, testing you."

"You said, *testing my restraint*."

"Yes, I did." I wanted this woman off my floor and in my arms more than I wanted to fucking breathe. "Your emotional restraint."

Her face paled.

I measured my tone. "We have a lot to talk about, but I need you to eat first." I leaned an inch toward her. "I want you to get up and take a seat at the table while I finish cooking. Can you do that for me?"

She shook her head.

"You've trusted me twice before." Even though I destroyed her trust last night when she gave it to me for the second time, I stood and held out my hand. "I'm asking you to trust me again."

She watched me stand. Then her gaze cut to my hand, and she spoke in a stilted whisper. "Why are you… making macaroni and cheese?"

It was the last question I thought she'd ask, but this woman had always been an observer. "Look at me," I demanded.

Instantly complying, she gave me those hazel eyes.

"Take my hand," I ordered.

“And you’ll tell me?”

“Yes.”

Same as eight years ago, she reached out to me.

Same as back then, I took it.

Then I wrapped my hand around hers and drew in a breath that was eight fucking years in the making.

Pulling my brunette to her feet, I gave her the full weight of my obsession. “You made the pasta dish the night before you left Minnesota.” I brushed two fingers across the inside of her wrist. “Making it this morning was intentional.”

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SEVENTY

Aracet

Ares Grayson.

Ares.

God of war.

He was named after the god of war, he was making me my favorite food, and he followed me.

"*Ares*," I whispered as he led me to the kitchen table that was all glass and chrome and as cold as his eyes. "That's Greek." Why did it feel as if I were floating?

"Yes, it is." He pulled out a chair. "Sit."

His command was gravity, and gravity struck. I fell into the seat. "You're Greek?"

"My biological father was." Still holding my hand, he caressed the inside of my wrist with the gentlest touch that belied every other part of him. "Stay seated." Placing my hand in my lap, he pushed my chair in.

Before I could thank him—which was an insane thought because who thanked a god of war that stalked you? Who thanks a rigger for pushing your chair in so close to a table that it makes you a practical prisoner right before he walks away and leaves you again? I shouldn't thank him.

Except he’d told me those two men’s deaths were not my fault.

And he’d given me their names.

Jax and Bellows. *Jax and Bellows.*

I silently chanted it over and over because now I could, because now I could at least say their names even though it would never be enough. Nothing would. But I would never forget the ultimate sacrifice they made. I would never forget how every inch of that helicopter’s floor was covered in their blood. My life was never worth their valor and honor.

A god of war set a glass of water in front of me. “Drink.”

Our eyes met, but then he returned to the stove because even he knew—he especially knew—my life wasn’t worth Jax’s and Bellows’s.

“I said *drink*, Aracet.”

With trembling hands, I picked up the glass.

A Delta operator stirred a pot of boiling pasta. He salt and peppered his lactose-free oat-milk-and-roux combination. He held a grater over the pan and shredded the cheese directly into the sauce.

Watching his concentrated effort, my mind spinning, my body tired, I started to fall into a deep well of shame for the past, for five minutes ago, for now. “I apologize. I didn’t mean…” I didn’t know what I’d meant. “I’m not usually so combative.”

A warrior who knew actual combat and whose biological father was Greek looked over his shoulder at me, then nodded at the glass of water in my hands and gave his order again. “Drink.” His gaze returned to the stove, and he shredded more cheese the same way he’d poured oat milk in a

perfect, steady stream earlier—like a professional chef. “You’re still experiencing the effects of last night. It’s to be expected.”

I drank the water, but I was *experiencing* a lot of things. Like a conversation I didn’t want to navigate. Or all of the questions I had that now seemed irrelevant or answered or both. Except they wouldn’t go away, and his single-word response when I asked if he followed me was replaying with the same force it’d been delivered with.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

“You intentionally provoked me last night,” I blurted.

“We’ll discuss that later. Right now, you’re hungry and need to eat.”

My hackles rose like a tidal rapid. “You don’t know me enough to declare that.” Did he stalk my mealtimes along with my eating habits? “And pasta is hardly breakfast food.” Not that I’d ever cared about what I ate at any given time. I was just grateful to not go hungry. *And fuck*, I was being combative again. “I—I’m sorry. Please disregard what I just said.”

Grayson—Ares, and my God, even his name was as lethally dominant as he was—didn’t comment. He set the grater in the sink and silently stirred the pot. Literally and metaphorically.

In that moment, I hated how I so easily fell prey to his silence. But wasn’t that exactly what had been happening for eight years? He lived in silence in my soul.

Now I had this visual. A god of war who cooked. And his voice had given me so many more words to digest. *Coffee, black. My treat. Do you*

want my ropes on you? Do you want that level of intimacy? Tears are warranted. Does that arouse you? Get on the Ducati, Aracet.

Except all I was doing was drinking in the intoxicating lethality of his deadly grace, and my body was humming at the predatory beauty of him, of what else I knew those hands of his could do.

I almost hated myself for not being able to look away, but he was so damn resplendent in his silent confidence and unwavering dominance that it would've been a sin not to watch.

So that's what I did.

I studied the veins in his hands that crawled up his forearms and disappeared under his sleeves. I tracked the effortless flex of his biceps. I watched the seamless flow of every one of his coordinated muscle movements as if they were solely for my consumption.

But every new second that I allowed myself to sit here and get drunk on his masculine beauty, every beat of my heart that got pulled into his magnetism, I wondered who I was becoming. Was I this attention starved? Was it him? Was he right about the aftereffects of last night? I didn't know.

All I knew was that I wasn't this person.

Or maybe I was.

Maybe it took a death-defying ride on a motorcycle in the pouring rain on a half-deserted Miami Beach oceanfront avenue for me to realize who I was. Maybe it took this silent warrior telling me I was hungry to truly bring out the colors of my personality.

Except personality colors weren't encouraged in all of those horrible counseling sessions. Nothing unique was encouraged. That was the problem

with their counseling. They wanted you to be an individual without actually being individualized. The great myth of modern psychology. Fit into this box, showcase any of these symptoms on our arbitrary list, be a candidate for these preapproved medications, and you too can be cured. With a prescription, of course. It was all bullshit. If a pill could fix what was in my head right now, I would reach for it with both hands.

I watched his hands as he drained the pasta, and another question escaped this new mental state called Ares Grayson that I wasn't sure I would ever be able to navigate. "How often do you make homemade macaroni and cheese?"

"Not as much as I used to."

Used to? Did he cook for himself growing up? "Childhood favorite?"

"Not of mine."

Instant dread and punishing jealousy washed over me like the monsoon we'd driven through to get here. "You're a father?"

"No." He poured the pasta into the pot with the sauce, and then his stark blue-eyed gaze met mine. "Are you a mother?"

A memory I unfortunately recalled in sickening detail flashed in high definition, and nausea surged. I wanted to recoil, to run, to rage. I wanted to escape this too-cold air-conditioning and his penetrating gaze, but I was sixty-something stories in the sky, and I knew better than to let go of my eight practiced years of flashback compartmentalization. "No."

He held his intense stare a moment too long. Then he wordlessly focused back on his culinary creation.

A couple minutes later, with more of his deft movements and my spectator sporting while I shoved down the past, he'd placed napkins, utensils, and steaming bowls of pasta in front of us. Taking the seat across from me, he sat at a kitchen table that looked too insubstantial for an almost-six-and-a-half-foot god of war.

Then, without looking at me, he leaned slightly over his bowl and began eating.

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SEVENTY-ONE

Ares

Other than Feralyn, I'd never cooked for a female.

I'd never had a woman in this penthouse.

I'd never had a woman in any of my residences, period.

Now I was fighting not to show rage, and wanting to destroy whatever had put that look of terror on her face when I'd asked if she was a mother. I was also wondering why the hell she wasn't touching her pasta while simultaneously shoveling mine in because that's what the military taught you.

Eat when you had the chance, and eat fast.

But the brunette wasn't eating at all.

I didn't look up. "Please eat."

No movement across the table, she didn't respond.

If I looked at her, I'd pick up that fork.

I told myself not to fucking look.

I did anyway.

Crossed arms, huge breasts, my T-shirt, dyed, damp hair drying in soft waves, hazel eyes locked on me.

I choked down the bite in my mouth with a forced swallow, then picked up my water. My gaze on hers, her eyes on my mouth, I drank. She watched.

I set the glass down.

She stared at my throat.

I issued an ultimatum in the form of an order. “Start eating.”

She looked down at her bowl but otherwise didn’t move.

My control snapped.

Abruptly standing, I rounded the table, yanked out the chair next to her, angled it to face her, sat the fuck down and grabbed her fork and bowl.

Then I speared a bite and held it to her lips.

She looked up at me, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

I used to think the only thing that could come close to breaking me was Feralyn crying.

I was wrong.

This woman broke me a thousand times over. “*Fáte, mátia mou*.” Please fucking eat.

With those haunted eyes locked in on me, she opened her mouth.

I fed her the bite.

Then another.

Halfway through the bowl, I dropped the first intel bomb. “Do you remember Bin al-Adani?”

Her lips already closed around the fork, she pulled back, but she didn’t swallow.

“Chew the bite, Aracet.”

She slowly complied, then swallowed what looked like a boulder.

“Do you remember him?” Pushing this was the last damn thing I wanted to do to her, but no fucking way would I leave her exposed for another operator or team.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“How well?”

Her arms still crossed, she gripped the sleeves of the T-shirt. “I remember.”

“Enough to identify him?”

“He’s dead.” Her voice pitched to a low, simmering anger. “They assured me he was dead.”

“We have intel to suggest otherwise.”

Abject horror hijacked her expression, and chill bumps spread up her arms.

Already neck deep, I downloaded both the task we needed and classified intel I shouldn’t have but was unwilling to keep from her. “We’re going to remedy that—pending positive identification.”

She stared at me for a full beat. Then my brunette transformed in front of my eyes.

Leaning back in her chair, dropping her hands to her lap, her expression locked down with a practiced maneuver worthy of any Tier One. “This is why you’ve been following me all these years and why you’re approaching

me now. You—the government—knows I have firsthand knowledge of who he is, and you want me to ID him."

"No to the former. Yes to the latter." Jesus, they'd trained her well in those fucking reintegration years. That, or she'd learned to survive by shutting down.

Not commenting, she held her stare like a trained operator.

Wondering where this woman had been last night, I aimed below the surface. "What are you feeling right now?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Why? Will it make you more comfortable if I have a breakdown at the prospect of my terrorist captor being alive? Do you want me to outline the individual emotions surrounding my captivity? Tell you he's a monster who drugged me?"

"I'm aware of the specifics. I'm asking how you feel." Defensive was the fucking answer.

"Angry."

"Good." That'd serve her well if I let her do this, which was a giant *if* because every instinct I had was yelling at me to take this woman out of the equation and fucking protect her. But that didn't mean I wouldn't follow through with due diligence and recon where she was at. "Anything else?"

"I would be lying if I said no. But it's not pertinent, is it? You know he's alive, and you want him dead."

Taking in a very different woman than the one who'd been bound by my ropes, I didn't pull any punches. "If I had asked you last night, while I was rigging you at Empyros, if you remembered al-Adani, would you have been this calm?"

“Last night wasn’t about a terrorist.” With a dozen shades of green and brown that were more effective than any camo pattern, my brunette gave me her hazel-eyed stare that hid the secret of her perception. “Last night was about you.”

Taking the hit on the chin, I acknowledged it. “It was.” Not how she was implying, though. “It was also about control.”

Ignoring my comment, she fired off an accusation in the form of a question. “How long have you known he’s alive?”

“I wasn’t made aware of al-Adani’s status until two days ago.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“You’ve been following me for five years. You have every reason to lie,” she accused.

Once again, I owned it. “Before two days ago, my actions had nothing to do with al-Adani or your potential ability to identify him. Since then, with the exception of last night at Empyros, my engagement has been a result of you landing in Miami.”

“Meaning?”

“I live here. You moved here.”

“I didn’t move…” Trailing off, catching on to my purposeful wording, she inhaled. “I obviously relocated here not knowing you live here.”

“Understood, but that doesn’t change my answer.” Or my motivations. “Have you been choosing locations that start with M because of what I called you eight years ago?” The muttered endearment, spoken as a low curse, wasn’t a moment I was proud of. Nor was it a part of my upbringing I

wanted to remember. But here I was, eight years later, staring at the fallout of my shit genetics as history repeated itself.

The biological sperm donor who'd abused my mother called her the same damn endearment I'd called this woman.

I'd never lay a hand on my brunette, or any woman, but abuse was a broad term. I was a rigger, an operator, and a stalker. This woman had suffered plenty at my hands.

My brunette, the woman who would always be *mátia mou* to me, countered my question with one of her own. "Do you want me to identify Bin al-Adani?"

She deserved the truth, so I gave it to her. "No. I want to level his entire Syrian compound, eliminating him in the process."

"He's still at…" She cleared her throat. "There are women and children in that compound."

"Which is why I haven't taken action." Yet.

"You," she stated.

"Yes," I confirmed, even though it wasn't a question. "I have a UCAV in theater."

"I'm assuming you mean drone, but I don't know that acronym."

Preternaturally calm after her sub drop, I watched her intently for tells. At the first fucking hint of one, I was pulling back and taking her out of the equation. But the woman wasn't showing any signs, and she wasn't just any woman. She was a teenager who'd survived terrorists, then three years of reintegration reprogramming. Right now, that was the woman I was speaking with. The one who'd learned to shut down. "Unmanned Combat

Aerial Vehicle.” The only question was how long she could sustain the emotional disconnect.

“You or the military has a UCAV… in theater?” she asked, zeroing in on the distinction I wasn’t stating.

“Both.”

Her eyebrows drew together. “But?”

No one saw through me like this woman, not even Helios. I told myself I had plenty of time to dissect the how and why of it. But I didn’t. We were both out of time. I either pulled her off the grid within the hour, or I started prepping her for Nix’s plan and every damn contingency I could think of. How the woman saw me was irrelevant. But damn it, I wanted to know. “Why do you think there’s a but?”

She didn’t hesitate. “I can see it in your eyes. You’re not telling the whole truth. Or you’re withholding something you think I’ll react to. In this case, I believe you’re saying you have an armed drone at the ready, and that’s the one you want to use, not the military’s.”

Compartmentalizing the spot-on hit, aiming for clarification I already knew I didn’t fucking want, I homed in on the targeted intel I needed. “How often do you read people like this?”

“Every day.”

Until that fucking second, I didn’t know jealousy had a taste. Bitter, metallic, it filled my mouth and my head. “You read people every day.” Now I understood Helios’s island.

“I try to. Except…” The woman stared at me. “Your voice didn’t change, but you’re angry now. And that change, or distinction, especially

when someone doesn’t alter their expression isn’t something I can read with everyone. Actually, with anyone.” Her head dipped for a beat, and when she looked back up at me, her cheeks were flushed. “But I think, or rather, I feel as if I can read you.” She drew in a deep breath. Then her voice went quiet. “On the helicopter? Do you… remember?”

Every fucking second. “Yes.”

“It happened then, too.” Releasing her crossed arms, she looked down at her lap as she folded her hands together. “But it first happened when you called me *mátia mou*.” She sat dead still for a full five seconds.

Then she looked back up and gave me those hazel eyes. “Yes, I can read people. Usually their intent and any obvious signals. Because I’m always trying to stay anonymous, I rely on it. I look for anger in people because I’m triggered by it. Especially if I think someone recognizes me. Otherwise, I don’t… I don’t feel people. And your anger is… different. It doesn’t elicit the same flight response. You’re just—you’re different to me. I don’t feel other people like I do you.” She brought her clasped hands to the center of her chest and tapped herself twice. “I don’t feel them in here.”

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SEVENTY-TWO

Aracet

He abruptly stood.

Then he picked up the dishes, took them to the kitchen, and for the next couple of minutes, he systematically and methodically cleaned. After the last bowl was in the dishwasher, he washed and dried his hands, then came back at me in the same abrupt manner.

Except now he looked calculating, predatory, and all warrior.

When he silently held out his hand to me, it was all dominance.

Refusing to regret a single word I'd said, I took his hand.

Just like when he'd pulled me to my feet in the kitchen, he gently but firmly pulled me to my feet now. Grasping my hand with intention, but not feathering his fingers over the inside of my wrist, he led me to his couch and sat me down.

Then he lowered his incredibly tall frame to the coffee table and sat so he was facing me. Resting his forearms on his thick, muscular thighs, he clasped his hands, and the quiet, dominant, thoroughly addictive voice from the club came out. "Thank you for telling me how you feel. I'm not expressing a shared connection toward you because it's irrelevant to this

conversation, minus past events that point to the fact that I will do whatever it takes to protect you. That is my promise to you."

My heart flew toward the storm-hidden sun, then immediately plummeted. "Except you said you follow me." He'd said himself, specifically. Not that he had been ordered to. So if he harbored no *shared connection*, then why follow me?

"Yes. For five years."

"But you won't say there's a shared connection?" The transparency I was getting out of him already felt like the limits of what he was willing to disclose, but I asked the question anyway because there'd been a shift. I could feel it, see it, but I couldn't name it.

Instead of answering my current question, he answered a previous one. "I'm not active duty anymore. I work for a private security and military defense contractor called Paragon Operations. The owner's been tasked with getting a positive ID on al-Adani. Knowing our history, he asked me to read you in. If an ID is made, the hit will be sanctioned. The current plan is to be in theater by tomorrow, when a supply run is being made for the compound. There's a small window when the truck returns to the compound, before it enters the gate, when it's presumed al-Adani and his bodyguards will meet the load. Normally, we'd attempt to capture sat imagery, then either run facial rec or show you the image and ask for confirmation. Unfortunately, to date, our intelligence has been unable to capture any images of al-Adani, rendering facial rec software useless."

My mind spun, but this time it wasn't with thoughts of last night and the Delta operator in front of me.

Anger bled into resolve, and I knew what I was going to do before a god of war even told me the plan. “It’s true, he does occasionally meet the supply trucks. Or he used to. How do you know that? And how do you plan on getting there by tomorrow, let alone being there when he meets the truck?”

“Paragon Operations has a fleet of private jets. We’d fly out this afternoon. The less you know, the better, but I will confirm that we have an inside source, and the operational plan, as it stands, is for you and me to be on the supply vehicle.”

“The supply trucks are small, and they don’t only have provisions,” I warned.

“Understood.”

Did he? “Bin al-Adani switches out his bodyguards. If he’s meeting the truck, that means there’ll be new guards on it.”

“We know.”

“The jihadists hate Americans. If we’re on the truck, how will you keep our identities hidden from them?” The second they realized who we were, they’d kill us. Or worse, capture us.

“Let me worry about the details. Once the ID is made, because of the small window when al-Adani and his men will be outside the compound, because of intel we have on an imminent threat, the plan is to take immediate action.”

I knew what immediate action meant. “The attack drone.”

“Air strike, but yes.”

“While we’re there on a supply truck.” I never wanted to think about, let alone relive that air strike from eight years ago. The sheer decibels, the smell of burning bodies, the unfathomable shake and vibration of the earth. The Delta operator who’d thrown his body over mine right before a second explosion.

“It’ll be targeted, but it will be danger close.”

I looked at the stark-eyed warfighter that I never imagined would be both my savior and my escort back into hell. “All right. I’ll make the ID.” I had to. For my own conscience. For redemption.

Ever so slight, as if I’d said the absolute wrong thing, tiny lines appeared between Ares’s eyebrows. “To be clear, you do not have to do this.”

“I know—”

“I’m not finished.” Cutting me off, his tone bit with finality before it lowered with an almost softness. “You have choices. There are alternatives, ones that do not involve your participation.” His expression solemn, he leaned a fraction of an inch closer. “I can have you off the grid within the hour. No one will ever find you.”

An instant rush of fear and anxiety threaded through my veins, and only one question became important. “Off the grid… without you?”

He tipped his chin.

“No.” I didn’t care that the look in his eyes said it cost him to give me that option. He still gave it, and it hurt more than the events of the past ten years of my life combined.

“Understood.” His gaze dropped, and he took a cell phone from his pants pocket. “Change of plans. I’m infilling solo. I’ll capture a headshot, and you can make the ID from that.” He swiped across the screen.

I put my hand over his. “If that was a viable plan, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, and we both know the details you’re leaving out in that scenario.”

A Delta operator stilled under my touch, and his gaze met mine. Silent, but waging a war behind those almost colorless blue eyes, he said nothing.

“You must know Bin al-Adani doesn’t let anyone look at him.” And why. “He’ll kill you if you make direct eye contact—if you even get the chance.” There was a reason he always kept his head down, and it wasn’t because he was an ISIS terrorist. “And even if you do manage to capture an image of him and I’m able to verify it, how long will that take?” Al-Adani and his guards would be back in the compound by then.

“Seconds.”

“If everything goes smoothly.” Which it wouldn’t. I’d lived there for two years. Yes, I’d been drugged out of my mind, but I’d had moments of clarity. I remembered the guards. I knew how ruthless all of those men in that compound were. “The very second they realize you’re American, they’ll kill you.”

He abruptly stood. “Excuse me, I need to make a call.” He turned toward the hallway. “Until this is handled, you’re staying under secured protection.”

“You mean, until they kill you.” I was not on board with any part of his *infill solo* plan or his *secured protection*.

Striding down the hall, he didn’t reply. He didn’t even pause.

I shot to my feet and raised my voice. “I’m not going to let you die for me.”

He whipped around in a flash of fury. “You are not doing this, Aracet.”

“Then why make the offer? Is that even your decision to make?” Would he have asked if it wasn’t? “I’m not unfamiliar with the extent and depths of the government’s reach.” I’d already put the pieces of this whole fucked-up puzzle together. “I’m betting your boss was only the first person they approached. If I don’t do this for Paragon Operations, or if you try to do it by yourself and die, then what? They’ll send some other black ops contractor or operator to make me do this?”

“No.” His nostrils flared. “You’ll be off the grid.”

I was already off the grid. It hadn’t made a single difference. But that wasn’t what had me so damn angry. “So let me see if I have this straight. You’re willing to die for this ID, but you don’t want me to risk my life, won’t give me a say in what I want, and refuse to listen to reasoning. Did I get all that right? And are we going to talk about the part where you can’t protect me if you’re dead? Do you think I’ll stay *off the grid* then?” I didn’t even wait for an answer. “If you really want to protect me, then take me with you. If you’re saying I have a choice, then I choose to do this together.”

One of the elevators pinged, and the doors started to open.

Ares Grayson, warfighter, Delta operator, rigger, was next to me in less time than it took for my heart to pound a single panicked beat.

Then a giant, muscled, six-and-a-half-foot, blond-haired, blue-eyed virtual replica of Ares stepped off the elevator, took one look at me, and instantly drew.

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SEVENTY-THREE

Ares

It took less than a second.

Helios recognized her and drew. “What in the fuck?” His aim dead center on her forehead, fury contorted his expression. “A goddamn traitor? This is who the fuck you’ve been hanging out with?”

My Glock already drawn, moving into his direct line of fire, I aimed at my brother. “Lower your weapon.”

“*Fuck* no.” He repositioned his aim to my forehead.

“Now,” I warned.

“Why?” he barked. “So you can sleep with the fucking enemy?”

“She’s not the enemy, and watch your goddamn mouth.” One more disparaging remark about her being the enemy, and I was putting a fucking round through his good shoulder.

Helios roared. “Jax and Bellows are fucking dead because of her!”

I yelled the fuck back. “If you fucking believed that, you would’ve already pulled the trigger.”

“You’re standing right the fuck in front of her,” he argued.

“Never stopped you before. You would’ve shot through me.” The

fucking prick.

"*Jesus fucking Christ*," he muttered. "One. I've never fucking shot you. Two. I sure as shit should've dropped you on your fucking head a few dozen more times when you were a little fucking shit. Then maybe you'd have some goddamn sense by now."

Aiming at his shoulder, I didn't comment.

Still as an operator, the woman said nothing.

For a tense second, Helios didn't stand down. Then he lowered his aim but didn't holster his Glock. "Start fucking talking."

I held position. "Holster your weapon."

"I'm not wearing a goddamn holster, motherfucker." Helios shoved his Glock into the back waistband of his jeans. "Didn't fucking think I needed one coming over here." He glanced at my brunette and sneered. "Now I fucking know better."

Not about to subject Aracet to any more of Helios's bullshit, I leveled my brother with a warning glare as I shoved my piece into my SOB holster. Then I turned to face her.

Eyes wide, she looked up at me. "I didn't know you were carrying."

"I always carry." I just wasn't obvious about it like Helios was. "Go wait for me in the bedroom while I speak to my brother."

Her gaze cut past me for a split second.

Helios snorted.

Glancing over my shoulder, I gave him the stare of death. "Outside terrace, now," I ordered.

Not fucking moving, Helios crossed his arms. “It’s sheeting fucking rain, asshole.”

“You’re waterproof.” Asshole.

“*Christ,*” Helios bitched, smartly making a wide arc around my brunette as he aimed for the sliders.

I waited until he was outside under the covered Florida room, then I looked back down at her. “Head to the bedroom. I need two minutes.”

She glanced at Helios. “That’s really your brother?”

Unfortunately. “Yes.”

Helios yelled through the slider door he’d left open. “I don’t have all goddamn day, motherfucker!”

She flinched.

I wanted to kill Helios. “Everything will be okay.” Taking her hand, risking the touch that would only fuck with me later, I squeezed once, then let go. “Helios’s bark is worse than his bite.” It wasn’t. Except for in this scenario, since neither my brunette nor the penthouse were riddled with bullet holes, I didn’t count it as a lie.

“Ares!”

I turned my brunette toward the hallway. “Go.” Then I gave her a small push and headed to the terrace.

Hands on his hips, eyeing me like I’d lost my goddamn mind, Helios shook his head. “You’re fucking insane. You know that, right?”

I shut the slider behind me.

“What the fuck do you think that’s gonna do?” he challenged. “Save her fucking feelings?”

As an adult, I’d never punched my brother. Right now, I goddamn wanted to. But before I could finish the thought, Helios was smirking.

“I fucking knew it,” my brother gloated.

My sixth sense, the one that’d kept me alive on the battlefield, hit seconds too late.

I pivoted.

My brunette, behind the wheel of the company Denali, already had the Dezervator’s doors closing.

“*Goddamn it*.” Throwing open the slider, issuing orders, noting the now-empty spot on the kitchen counter where I usually left all my keys, I silently cursed myself for both turning my back and not immediately throwing Helios out. “Passenger elevator, *now*. You’re fucking driving.”

“The fuck I am,” Helios countered, following me into the penthouse. “If you’re stupid enough to fucking chase her, or stalk her, or whatever the hell you’ve been doing this whole goddamn time, then you’re on your own, motherfucker.” He hit the call button for the passenger elevator. “I’m going home to Haven.”

Already double-timing to my bedroom, I shot off a text to Nix. Then I unlocked the safe in my closet, grabbed the spare key to my Aprilia RSV4, jogged back to the sky garage, and waited the sixty fucking seconds for the Dezervator to come back up to the sixty-second floor.

Two minutes later, knowing exactly where she was heading, I was weaving in and out of Miami traffic.

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SEVENTY-FOUR

Aracet

I stole his fancy black Yukon Denali.

I shoved my feet into my boots, grabbed the keys off the counter—all of his keys—and got behind the wheel.

I'd had to.

I wasn't going to let him do this. I wasn't going to be held hostage under the guise of protection while he went on a suicide mission. This was finally my chance at redemption.

I needed to do this.

Except Ares was going to cage me.

Fortunately, I knew someone who wouldn't.

So, I got behind the wheel and hoped like hell I could figure out how to get the damn car elevator to work before Ares or his brother caught up to me. For once, I got lucky.

Fucking technology.

The second I closed the driver's door, the elevator did its thing. The Yukon moved forward, the elevator doors closed, and I dared a glance toward the terrace.

Through four walls of glass—the Denali's window, the elevator's door, the sky garage wall, and the slider to the terrace—I saw it.

The fury of a god of war.

Ares threw open the slider door from the terrace right as the car elevator started its descent.

A heart-pounding minute later, the hydraulic system pushed the Denali out of the lift and into the garage.

I started the SUV and fucking floored it.

The tires screeched as I flew out of the underground parking. Misjudging a sharp turn, jumping a curb, I held on to the steering wheel for dear life as the heavy vehicle thumped over another curb and skidded onto the oceanfront road.

Then I sped through traffic.

I ran red lights.

I wove around cars as if Ares's life and my redemption depended on it, because they did.

Pulling up to Oceanside Suites, illegally parking in front, not even caring if the SUV was towed, I threw open the driver's door and ran into the motel.

Like a beacon of hope, Henry was behind the reception desk.

But the moment he saw me shove through the glass door, the second he took in my face, he was on his feet.

I threw my hand up. "Wait." If Henry got angry or, worse, hugged me, I would fall into that pendulum of emotions, and I couldn't afford to do that

right now. “Stay there.”

“Woman,” Henry warned. “You run into my motel looking like that, you better start talking, or I’m going to start breaking things. And by things, I mean people. Specifically, assholes named Ares Grayson. What the fuck did he do to you?”

I froze. My heart, my breath. Everything I had trusted about Henry crashed to a dead halt, and the pendulum—*that fucking pendulum*—swung. Betrayal wasn’t a strong enough word for the impact slamming into me. “You *knew*?”

“I suspected.” Despite my raised hand still up, loitering like a useless broken appendage, Henry came around the counter. “Pasqual ran into him. He said Grayson was solid, but wouldn’t tell me more than that, and you didn’t give me Man Meat’s name.” Eyeing me like I was a caged animal, he suddenly shook his head. “No. You do not get to look at me like that. Don’t give those *Pretty Little Liars* wounded eyes. I’m not the enemy here. And there’re a hell of a lot more SOF assholes in town than you realize. So, yeah, I suspected Man Meat was Grayson. I also thought a Tier One wouldn’t be the worst kind of asshole you could fall for. But now you’re upset, I’m fucking pissed, and you don’t want me to lose my temper. Start downloading, woman.”

That whispered comment Henry had given me about the violence he was capable of seemed like both a lifetime and a second ago, and I told myself he was right. Henry wasn’t the enemy, I hadn’t known Ares’s name, and no one was to blame for any of this except me. “Grayson—Ares—he didn’t do anything to me. Not exactly.” Except stalk me, tie me up, turn me into this mess of emotions that were still clinging and sliding around like

tentacles I couldn’t shake, then tell me I wasn’t going to have a shot at redemption. And I just, I needed…

I didn’t know what the hell I needed.

Did I really think that Henry or Pasqual could do for me what Ares had outlined? Private jets and inside contacts and hidden positions on a supply truck in the middle of the Syrian desert? By tomorrow?

Of course not.

So why had I stolen a Delta operator’s Denali?

Closure? Time? Friendship? I didn’t have any of those luxuries, and Ares would be here any minute. So why had I come? For Henry’s nicknames and hugs? Iced lattes and the most carefree drive I’d ever had in his luxurious Bentley convertible? Acceptance?

Love?

“I just…” I suddenly realized the fault in all of my circumspect thinking. It changed nothing. Same as I couldn’t reconcile the dichotomy of a SWCC who drove a Bentley and lived in a motel while a Delta operator drove a Yukon and lived in a Bentley Residence, I couldn’t assign reason to everything.

Some things in life just were.

I also realized I absolutely could not tell Henry about Ares’s and Paragon Operations’s plan. And I definitely couldn’t ask him or Pasqual for help. Ares was going to do whatever he was going to do, and I couldn’t control that.

But I could stand by my choice. I could be strong enough to identify the monster who’d drugged me for two years straight. I could open the box of

memories I’d stuffed that face into, and I could survive a look inside.

I hadn’t lied when Ares had asked me how I felt about all of this. I was angry. But anger wasn’t my motivation here.

Jax and Bellows were.

Men like Henry and Ares were.

And I’d never told Henry thank you.

I looked up at the handsome Navy SWCC. “I just came to say—”

A wall of humidity struck my back as the door burst open behind me.

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SEVENTY-FIVE

Aracet

"She didn't come to say anything." Deep and commanding, wrapped in a rigger's sex club dominance, Ares's voice landed on my soul as his body heat surrounded my shoulders.

Henry's glare was aimed directly above my head, but his raised voice was aimed at someone else. "Pasqual!"

For six suspended seconds, my entire existence became a war god's primal musk and my heartbeat. The organ pumped, my lungs filled with obsession, and the memory surfaced.

Mátia mou.

Over and over, with a seeming eternity of beats, breaths, and whispered sacrilege, my entire existence—that only twenty-four hours ago felt ripe with possibility—was drowned out.

Then, on the seventh second, like he was one of the ancient wonders of the world, Pasqual emerged from the corridor that led to his culinary domain.

The former NSA analyst's sharp gaze took in the situation in less time than it took my heart to push through another pump, and his hand landed on his husband's shoulder.

Ares stepped to my side, and the lobby doors opened again.

Henry, Pasqual, and I all looked.

One blond man, one dark-haired man, both dominantly imposing and authoritarian in a way only former Special Operations Forces unit members were, walked in.

“Cypher.” A smile as bright as the warmth in his heart spread across Pasqual’s face as he stepped toward the dark-haired man, hand extended.

Cypher shook with Pasqual. “Serra.”

“It’s been a while.” Pasqual glanced at the blond man. “Phoenix.” He offered his hand to him as well.

Phoenix and Pasqual shook, but the former said nothing.

Pasqual nodded at Ares. “Grayson.” Then he glanced back at his husband. “Henry, this is Phoe—”

“We both know who the fuck he is, and his name’s not Phoenix.” Henry crossed his arms. “You’re supposed to be dead. What are you doing here, Nilsen?”

“It’s Nix Ericson now,” the blond man corrected. “Call sign Phoenix.” His voice was so deep and controlled, it was almost too quiet to hear. “I run an outfit headquartered in town.”

“I know what the hell Paragon Operations is.” Henry jerked his chin at Cypher, then looked back at Nix “Phoenix” Erikson. “Why the fuck are two SEALs in my motel?”

Moving to my side, opposite of where Ares was standing, Pasqual crossed his arms. “Good question. I hope this doesn’t have anything to do with our girl here.”

My heart stuttered, but only because it didn’t take a degree in polemology to understand what was happening here. Ares had called in his boss and the other man as backup, probably because of Henry’s and Pasqual’s backgrounds, or maybe just for a good old-fashioned show of force, but it didn’t matter why. I did not want Henry or Pasqual involved. It’d been a horrible mistake to come here, but I couldn’t leave it now. I needed to give Henry an excuse, in private. “I just need a moment with Henry. The rest of you can…” I stupidly gestured toward the doors. “Leave.”

Three warfighters stared down two motel owners.

Phoenix—Nix, whatever he went by—tipped his chin at Pasqual. “Good to see you, Serra. When you’re ready to step back into the game, give me a call.”

Pasqual chuckled. “I’m retired. But if I wasn’t, you couldn’t afford me.”

Nix retained his lethal seriousness. “Name your price, and it’s yours.”

Pasqual dropped his smile and his arms. Then his hand landed on my shoulder. “Walk away from Aracet.”

If a room could go still, the lobby of the Oceanside Suites turned down the sheets and switched off the lights. Not even in the middle of the night in the dead of winter in an empty house on a deserted road in Minnesota had it been this deathly quiet.

Pasqual scrutinized Nix. Ares’s colorless gaze stayed locked on Henry, and a man named after a method for encryption stared at me.

Nix’s leaf-green eyes landed on me. “Miss Vandon, would you like a new life?”

All of a sudden, it was ten years ago—eight years ago—it didn't matter which. Because same as in the past, while I could make a decision—to follow my cousin, to steal a Yukon—when it seemed like I had a choice, it was already too late. I was being controlled.

Controlled by absent parents.

Controlled by a sociopathic cousin.

Controlled by terrorists.

Controlled by operators, agencies, and the military. Controlled by the rules of engagement and war, but never by me. Where was my own agency? Where was my life? And why was I only asking this now? I didn't know, but neither the answer nor my life was here.

Not in this lobby with five dominant men.

Bypassing them all, I walked out the door.

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SEVENTY-SIX

Ares

I aimed to go after my brunette.

The SWCC stepped into my trajectory. “I will wipe the fucking floor with your pretty-boy face if you take one more goddamn step.” He jerked his chin toward Nix and Cypher. “That goes for all of you.” Throwing me a warning glare, the SWCC was Oscar Mike. “Pasqual, keep these assholes here. I’m going after her.”

The former NSA analyst eyed me. “Consider it done.”

Nix addressed me once Forester was out the door. “Break in weather’s coming that we won’t have later. Wheels up in T minus forty. Take the Yukon. Cypher and I will handle your bike. Give him your key.” He tipped his chin at Serra. “Vandon wasn’t my call, but both of my offers still stand.” He walked out.

Cypher eyed Serra for a beat. “Could use you at Paragon Ops. Nix would make it worth your while.”

“Like I said, I’m retired.” Serra glanced from me to Cypher. “And it doesn’t look like your D-Boy is going to let her go anytime soon.”

“You know where to find me.” Sidestepping Serra’s comment, Cypher held his hand out to me.

I handed him the key to the Aprilia.

Cypher walked out of the motel lobby and got on my bike as Nix pulled up behind him.

The NSA analyst watched them take off, then zeroed in on me. “I’m surprised you let Henry go after her.”

Letting Forester exfil was as purposeful as calling in Nix and Cypher for backup. I wanted thirty seconds alone with the analyst, but I wasn’t letting him know that. “Ever piss off a SWCC?” Forester never would’ve taken me, but SWCCs had a reputation.

“Routinely.” Serra tipped his chin toward my brunette and his husband as they stood outside the motel. “What do they have over her?”

Running down my options on how to play this—ignore, deny, deflect—what I really wanted to know was how deep this fucker still was. “When’s the last time you had a pulse on any classified SIGINT?” It was a long shot, but I wanted to know if the NSA had any footage on al-Adani. Then I could end this op right fucking now.

“Borrowing part of the ethos from your boss’s former SEAL days, I think I speak for both of us when I say, never out of the fight.”

I glanced toward the SWCC as he talked to my brunette. “Not what I asked.”

Serra crossed his arms. “The fact that you asked the question in the first place is the problem, Master Sergeant Grayson.”

Reading every inch of his body language, noting his tone, more than familiar with his targeted psychological bullshit aimed at deflecting my question told me all I needed to know. The analyst didn’t have his pulse on

this. I redirected my questioning. “How deep is Forester’s influence over Vandon?”

“Ask him. Or better yet, ask Aracet about the nature of her and Henry’s relationship.” The prick pretended to study me a beat. “But I have a feeling you don’t usually ask a lot of questions.”

For the same reason I didn’t tell this asshole that he didn’t speak for me, I didn’t ask how he knew my prior rank. The fucker wanted me to bite. Wasn’t going to happen.

Tipping my chin at the analyst, I turned toward the door. “Let Forester know she’ll be offline for a while.”

“Henry won’t leave it alone.”

I glanced back. “If he cares about her, he will.”

“We both care about her.” Fucker raised an eyebrow. “Do you?”

I’d already risked my life for the woman. A detail he should’ve known if he knew my former rank because all of my military records, my entire digital footprint since birth, everything had been wiped when I’d joined Paragon Operations.

This fucker knew I was Delta, he knew Cypher, and he knew Aracet’s real name. He knew who the hell I was.

Ignoring his question, I walked out of the motel lobby.

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SEVENTY-SEVEN

Aracet

"Hey!" Henry yelled after me.

Rushing toward the SUV only to remember it wasn't mine, I wished like hell I hadn't come here. I also wished I had my own clothes, that my car had started this morning, and that I'd done every single thing over the past ten years differently. I didn't want to turn around to face Henry any more than I wanted to ID a terrorist.

My hands were suddenly shaking, poisonous doubt was creeping in, and I reached for the door of a vehicle that wasn't mine.

Henry's palm landed on the glass of the driver's window with a loud slap. "What the fuck is going on? And don't tell me nothing. What is that asshole forcing you to do?"

Nix strode out of the motel with his eerie green-eyed gaze locked on me and Henry, and I lowered my voice. "He's not forcing me to do anything." Ares had asked. Then he'd stripped away my choice.

"Bullshit, and your lies aren't pretty anymore." Henry shoved his way in between me and the SUV as Nix got behind the wheel of an identical black Yukon Denali. "Start talking," Henry demanded, glancing at my

clothes. “And you better tell me exactly what the hell you were going to say before Mr. Military Man Meat stalked into the goddamn lobby.”

Heavy traffic, honking cars, the rain now a persistent drizzle, humidity fought with exhaust fumes as I stared at the Miami Beach I’d loved a few days ago. Hell, even hours ago.

Now it all looked different.

I glanced up at Henry.

He looked different too.

The tropical luster of the city had dulled, but Henry’s handsomeness had turned sharp.

I told my unexpected friend a partial truth. “I was going to say that I would be away for a little while.” Maybe a day, maybe forever. Even if I hadn’t agreed to this insane plan, there were no guarantees in life. Both of us could be hit by a swerving car in the next second, and how horrible would that be when I hadn’t even thanked him for his service yet? But I couldn’t tell him that now because it would be too much of a thread for Henry to pull on.

“Away where?” Henry demanded as Cypher walked out of the motel and straddled the motorcycle Ares had ridden to Del Cielo.

And shit, *Del Cielo*.

Cypher put on the helmet Ares had left on the seat, then the superbike roared to life.

Henry snapped his fingers at me. “Fuck the SEAL. I’m talking to you, woman. Away where?”

Cypher sped off, Nix followed, and I looked back at Henry. “I can’t tell you.” Because I didn’t know, and just like this city and Henry, Ares’s proposition-not-proposition now looked different. Perspective was a vicious bitch.

“Right.” Henry nodded like he was in agreement, but then he dropped his acerbic hammer of intuition. “So he’s taking you back to ground zero, probably with some bullshit he spoon-fed you about patriotism, reparations, or amends, then topped it off with the you’re-the-only-one-who-can-do-this cherry. How am I doing so far? The terrorist cell that took you has reformed? The jihadists they killed are still alive? Some cousin’s brother’s son, or some other distant fucking relative, has picked up the cause, is now a threat, and you’re somehow, miraculously, the only one who can identify him?”

Jesus. “Henry, stop it.”

He pointed at me. “That’s it. That’s the fucking lie he fed you.” Henry’s face contorted with rage, but his voice dropped. “Please tell me you are *not* that fucking stupid. Whoever the hell they want an ID on, there’re a dozen other ways they can get it. Hell, they can send in a SEAL Team or a Delta Unit. Those operators can take a goddamn blood sample of anyone in their sleep and match their DNA before they wake the fuck up. They’re trained to do that shit and more. They fucking live for it. Trust me, I know. So tell me, Aracet Vandon. Why *the fuck* do you think Ares goddamn Grayson, former Delta Force operator, who was unstoppable on the battlefield and infamous for his sniper skills, needs you? Give me one reason, woman. *One*.”

I hated Henry for being right.

I also hated Ares for being right.

“I need to go.” Ares would be coming for me any second to either hide me away or take me with him, I didn’t know which, but in that moment, it no longer mattered. I needed to say goodbye to my friend. “Please understand, Henry.”

“Go where? To the same place that already almost killed you? For a fight that isn’t yours?”

This was everyone’s fight. I didn’t get a free pass because I wasn’t in the military. Murdering terrorists affected more than me, Henry, Pasqual and Ares. Why should Ares and men like him carry all of the burden when I could help?

As if the mere thought of him was enough to make me look for him, I glanced toward the lobby where Ares was talking to Pasqual.

Tracking my movement, Henry lost it. “Uh-uh. No fucking way. You are not doing this, Aracet. I see that shit written all over your pretty little face. You’re not responsible for whatever bullshit Grayson has his hooks into you for, and I shouldn’t have to spell out the obvious. You’re not a Tier One. You didn’t enlist, and you’re not a trained operative with decades of experience. You were a teenager with a psychotic fucking cousin who dragged you into a shitstorm.”

“I didn’t say I was responsible.” I also didn’t say I wasn’t.

“No, but you had that fucking look like you think you own this. The past is the past. You paid your dues. You don’t owe that Unit asshole or anyone else a goddamn thing.”

I owed Ares for my life. “I’m not going to argue with you, Henry.”

“So you’d rather die?”

Even though I'd already thought it and dismissed the notion for myself, Henry's retort hit like blunt force trauma, wiping out my breath and backfilling it with crippling anxiety. I hated how right he was, but not as it pertained to me. I did not want a life where I didn't look for a tall, blond, muscled man everywhere I went. Because now, more than anything, as fucked up as it was, I realized Ares and his stalking had been the one constant—the *only* constant—I'd ever had, and I didn't want to live without that.

I glanced down at my rose-embroidered boots I'd worked so hard to afford that now seemed so damn trivial. "I'm afraid of death." I was afraid of my warfighter dying.

"Most sane people are."

I looked up at Henry. "What did you think you had to prove when you joined the Navy?"

He didn't hesitate. "That I was a man."

I'd never walked in Henry's shoes. I didn't know what his upbringing was like, what any of his life was like before he'd created the one he had here in Miami. But I could empathize with the need to prove a certain worthiness. "I have something to prove, Henry." I took his hand. "I need to go with him."

Henry's entire demeanor shifted with a single heartbeat. His shoulders fell, his anger retreated, and a version of him I'd never seen, one that was more vulnerable, that looked both younger yet older from life circumstances, stared down at me. "I'm asking you not to."

"Why?"

His exhale sounded as tired as I felt. “Because you remind me of who I once was.” His voice quieted. “And I want to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I squeezed his hand. “Or protect the younger version of yourself?”

“Fuck you.” With no humor in his tone, he said it in jest as he tugged on my hand and pulled me in for a hug. “Damn you all to hell, *Pretty Little Liars*. I fucking *hate* caring about people.”

I melted into his embrace. “You care about Pasqual.”

He snorted. “Yeah, and that almost killed me.”

“But it didn’t.”

“No, but you might. And don’t think I haven’t noticed that your hair’s damp and you’re wearing his clothes. Are you going to fess up about that?”

I ignored the first sentiment that had been tossed out in jest but struck like a physical blow, bypassed his second comment, and detoured to his third. “Are you going to fess up about what’s upstairs at the dance club you sent me to?”

Every muscle in Henry’s body stiffened at once, but he didn’t let go of me. Then, low and threatening, his voice landed on me like judgment. “That son of a bitch didn’t force himself or Empyros on you, did he?”

“No, and boundary.” I was not going there with Henry. “But I want to know why, of all the clubs, did you put my name on the guest list of that one?”

“Security.” Each of his muscles settled in a domino effect like it was a concerted effort on his part. “Because of what’s upstairs, they have better

security downstairs. I didn’t know Grayson—” Stopping himself, respecting the boundary, Henry inhaled.

I didn’t say anything, and Henry didn’t let me go.

The world continued to spin, and Miami Beach moved all around us like we were nothing more than palm fronds being swayed by an ocean breeze.

Then Henry tightened his hold on me and lowered his voice. “Do you love him?”

“He doesn’t love me.” That much I knew, but it hurt my heart to say it.

“That isn’t what I asked, darling.”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t even want to think about it, but I couldn’t deny that the second he’d asked, my heart had silently answered with a resounding *yes* even though it made no sense. I didn’t know the man. And yet, he was all I knew over these past eight years. A voice, a hand held, a life risked. The protective, cradling arms of a lethal killer. A warfighter who’d tried to save his brothers, but still held me as we helplessly watched them die. Every flashback, every scrap of a memory, every drug-induced hazy visual—they all formed the intricately woven simplicity of fate.

My soul belonged to a god of war before I had ever met him.

Henry pulled back. “I think you do know.” He kissed the top of my head. “I hope he’s worth it.” Stepping away, he glanced over my head. “She’s all yours. But if you hurt her, I’ll fucking kill you.” Henry about-faced and walked back into the motel.

I looked behind me.

Muscled, lethal, stoic, a god of war, the keeper of my heart, the man who smelled like primal musk and a home I'd never had, assaulted me with his penetrating gaze as surely as his rigged ropes had bitten into my flesh. "Ready?"

My stomach in knots, my heart jumping, my nerves all over the place, I would never be ready for whatever was coming next, but I nodded anyway.

He held open the passenger door of the black Yukon Denali with the fancy grille that I'd stolen.

I got in.

A Delta operator shut the door.

It wasn't until he was pulling away from the motel that I realized Ares may have heard what Henry had asked me.

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SEVENTY-EIGHT

Ares

Gripping the steering wheel, replaying the way Forester had his arms around her, I pulled away from the motel.

I'd seen the woman bleeding, beaten, and naked. I'd cradled her in a Black Hawk, stalked her for five years, left her rigged and flooding, spoon-fed her at my table, and broken the cardinal rule of the Unit for her. All of it had destroyed me.

But watching the SWCC hold her like he owned her?

I was coming un-fucking-hinged.

The woman shifted in her seat. "Wherever you're taking us, I need my duffle bag."

Pavlovian and fucked up, I became the starved dog. When she spoke, my gaze involuntarily cut to her.

Head turned toward the window, voice flat, arms crossed, hunched in the seat, she looked like she was bracing for impact.

Good. She should be. A ten-minute drive with me in this mood wasn't going to be a fucking picnic, but a ten-hour flight would've been a hell of a lot worse. "You don't need anything right now." Not where I was taking her.

"I have… medications in my duffle."

The woman had a travel packet of ibuprofen and a tube of OTC antihistamine cream. “You don’t have any prescriptions.”

“How do you kno—” She cut herself off. “Never mind,” she amended.

I knew everything about her. Including the answer to the last question Forester had asked her. The four-letter word was cycling through my head the same goddamn way the visual of the SWCC’s arms around her was. “It’s my job to know.” Same as I knew the woman didn’t love me. Transference because I’d rescued her? Yes. But love? *Fuck*. And that, more than this whole goddamn week, was fucking with my head.

Her attitude spiked. “I didn’t ask. I said never mind, but good to know this is only a job for you.”

“It would have been for you, as well.” But she wasn’t grasping that, and I needed to focus the hell up because her headspace was a damn wild card. I was trained to operate in chaos. She wasn’t. Any other situation, her impulsiveness, her propensity to run at the first sign of trouble, the actual fucking fact that she’d taken off, the emotional state behind it—all manageable. But not on an op. The second she’d taken the Denali, I’d made the decision to bench her—after I got a detailed description of al-Adani out of her. Then I’d fucking handle this.

“I’m not a Tier One. I didn’t enlist. I’m not a trained operative with decades of experience.” She spewed the excuses in rapid succession like they’d been downloaded to her. “This is not my job, and I’m not getting paid for this—whatever *this* is.”

Ignoring her outburst, I zeroed in on her vocabulary. “Did the SWCC tell you all that?” I’d only heard the tail end of the narrative he’d fed her.

She defended the prick. “His name is Henry, and he’s my friend. Friends look out for each other.”

“What other friends do you have?” This woman needed a dose of reality. She’d met Forester less than a week ago. He was fourteen years her senior, and minus texts and calls, she’d only interacted with him five times in person.

The brunette recrossed her arms but didn’t reply.

“Engaging in defensive body language doesn’t change the question.”

“Intentionally provoking me doesn’t make you right. It just makes you an asshole.”

Stopped at a light, I gave her a warning glance. “Who I am doesn’t factor into the equation either.”

She threw me that hazel-eyed gaze, but unlike earlier in my penthouse, it was full of anger. “It has everything to do with you and nothing to do with Henry. He was protecting me. He was warning me. He was pointing out pertinent details you didn’t when you practically forced this on me.”

I hit the gas, ran the light, cut across a lane of traffic, and pulled to the shoulder before slamming the brakes.

The hard stop pitched her against her seat belt, her arms came straight out to brace, and her expression flipped to shock.

I threw the SUV into Park, ignored the traffic swerving around us, and leveled the woman with my entire focus. “I did not force this on you. I downloaded intel and informed you of your options.” Then I made the fucking call for her because she’d chosen wrong.

Eyes wide with shock, she glanced at the traffic. “What the hell are you doing?”

Giving her a reality check. “Do you have any other friends? Have you ever had any besides that cousin?” It was a low blow, but the point was valid.

Her chest rapidly rising and falling, the anger in her eyes returned, and the woman looked at me like she wanted to eliminate me.

“Answer the question,” I demanded.

“After five years of stalking, you don’t have the right to judge me.”

“I’m not.” I absolutely was. I didn’t have friends for a damn good reason. I had Helios, Feralyn, and colleagues. None of whom I trusted wholesale. “I’m assessing your mental stability.”

She bodily turned in her seat to face me. “Excuse me?”

“You still want in on the op?” No way in hell was I infilling with her. But I’d give her *pertinent* fucking details—right before I dropped her off with Helios.

“I said I did.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“Yes,” she immediately threw back.

“Then understand the parameters,” I countered before taking direct aim. “If I were to take you in, we would be infilling with no backup, no military support, no overwatch, limited ammo, zero guarantee of a secure exfil, and a one hundred percent chance of torture if we’re captured. If that happens, they’ll kill me first. Then you’ll be right where you were eight years ago.” It should’ve been enough to scare the woman, but she wasn’t just any woman.

Surviving al-Adani and his guards once before, operating through the lens of guilt, scare tactics alone wouldn't work. But my uncensored psych eval of her might goad her into reason. "Bottom line, you're not separating emotion from task. You're not showing the ability to delineate martyrdom from intel dissemination, and you're using anger as a crutch for survivor's guilt. You don't have the mental stability for this. That's what makes you unfit for the op."

The woman recoiled. "You think…" Her throat moved with a hard swallow. "You think I'm only doing this to free myself from guilt?"

"You made an emotional decision at the penthouse, then ran to Forester. Now you're throwing down indignation and framing it as morality."

"How is this *not* an emotional decision?"

There it was. Not that I needed validation for my decision to bench this woman, but if I had to explain how emotion was certain death on the battlefield, we were already at a nonstarter.

Throwing the SUV into Drive, I shot into traffic and made a call.

The brunette glanced nervously behind us. "What are you doing?"

I ignored her as my burner connected to the Denali's speakers.

Nix answered on the first ring. "We're number nine for takeoff. You're late."

"Abort," I ordered.

The brunette whipped her head toward me.

"Negative," Nix argued. "Sitrep?"

It became eight fucking years ago all over again. "Already made the call."

“Explain,” Nix demanded.

I couldn’t. A nineteen-year-old with haunted eyes had derailed my life, my career, and everything I stood for. Eight years later, she was doing it again, and I was fucking letting her. There wasn’t a goddamn explanation for that. I manipulated the truth like the woman had twisted her reasons for agreeing to the op. “Asset compromised.”

Nix, perceptively, didn’t ask how. “When?”

“Irrelevant.” I’d texted him for backup. He’d watched her walk out of that fucking lobby. I no longer trusted him to keep her safe. “You’re on speaker.” It was the only warning he’d get as I drove to Feralyn’s house.

The former SEAL didn’t miss a beat. “Miss Vandon, this is Nix Ericson. Can I ask why you’ve changed your mind?”

The woman threw me under the bus. “I didn’t. Your Delta operator changed his.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that referring to Mr. Grayson as anything other than his call sign, in any situation, is not only problematic but dangerous. Is this going to be an issue moving forward?”

The woman looked out her window and muttered a negative. “No.”

“Say again,” Nix demanded.

The woman raised her voice. “I said no. Not that I know his call sign to use it anyway.”

“Then address him by his last name in public,” Nix commanded, sidestepping her last comment before giving me a direct order. “Grayson, take me off speaker.”

I disconnected the call from the SUV's built-in Bluetooth and picked up the burner. "You're a go."

"Who got to her? Serra or Forester?"

"Neither."

"Then what's the problem? Besides your personal involvement?"

The insult didn't stick. "My op, my call. Abort current queue position for takeoff. Making a stop. I need thirty minutes."

"This is a joint op, radar's showing worsening conditions, and the takeoff window's closing. You don't have thirty minutes," Nix argued before issuing orders. "Bring her to Executive. We'll reassess midair. Pivot if needed."

Fuck his pivoting bullshit. "Negative. I infill solo or utilize *Tertia Optio*." If he didn't want me taking out al-Adani and his bodyguards, he better call in the Agency, and do it STAT. Because the second that supply truck returned to the compound, whether I was boots on the ground or watching via sat feeds, if I saw so much as a fucking hint of al-Adani, I was sending the UCAV.

"I know what *Tertia Optio* means," the brunette interjected, raising her voice so Nix would hear. "Drive to the airport. I'll get you your ID, and I'll do it quicker than the CIA or any Special Operation Forces team can."

"There's our *Tertia Optio*," Nix replied to me. "Double-time it to Executive." He hung up.

Stopping for a light, I took in every inch of the woman who simultaneously starred in my most depraved fantasies and made me want to

throttle her. “Give me one valid reason why I shouldn’t drive you to my brother’s for close protection detail while I handle this.”

“Aside from the fact that your brother hates me, no one will protect me better than you. But that’s not the reason.” She looked me dead in the eye. “Jax and Bellows gave their lives for me. Now I’m going to give you Bin al-Adani for theirs.”

Fuck. *Fuck*.

For a suspended beat, I stared at my brunette.

I’d watched this woman for years. From an outstretched hand on that helo exfil to every city she’d run to. From reintegration to all the jobs she’d taken. From her survivalist instincts to the isolation she endured. I tracked this woman because I was fucking transfixed by every damn thing about her.

I stalked her because I saw myself in her.

I was obsessed with her because she was absolutely fucking beautiful.

But this right now, her knowing the risks, knowing where she’d have to return to, setting her trauma aside and insisting she ID the terrorist for the sake of Jax’s and Bellows’s sacrifice? This moment was hitting the hardest.

Eight years ago, I’d put myself between her and the firefight. Now I was going to do it again. “Give me al-Adani’s description. In detail.”

With calm determination, my brunette schooled me. “Do you think the most detailed description I could give you would hold up against eight years of aging versus my two years’ worth of memories, including how his voice sounds?”

The light turned green, and I hit the gas. Then, at the next intersection, I turned the SUV around because my brunette was right. Her ID would ensure we had al-Adani. It'd also ensure something else.

The woman I'd fallen for was going to start a war.

But I was going to wage it.

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SEVENTY-NINE

Aracet

The airport was for private jets, the SUV flew past the security entrance, and the man next to me was silent.

Not man.

Warfighter.

The rare breed of human trained to bring death with a lethal finality you never saw coming or a roaring hell of devastation that made you fear survival.

He was also a Delta Force operator who'd cut me down with his savagely ruthless words.

The truth had hurt, but I'd needed to hear it. I also needed to keep my emotions in check and not forget why I was doing this. Even the thought of seeing the unspeakably evil man who'd held me hostage for two years was enough to send me spiraling. But I could fall apart later. Or, if I was lucky, get back on the pendulum because anything would be better than the state I was in eight years ago.

But I wasn't going to think about that now.

I wasn't even going to think about the details or how the hell we could possibly live through this.

I was going to trust the warfighter next to me.

And pray like hell my heart survived this.

I looked at the Delta operator who unknowingly owned every piece of my soul.

Silent since he'd turned the SUV around, he sped across the tarmac like we were in a presidential motorcade. His expression was a locked mask of seriousness. His biceps strained the short sleeves of the black shirt he'd changed into after our motorcycle ride. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, and I hadn't thought he could get more dominant. Except thirty seconds ago, he'd shrugged out of his leather jacket, tossed it into the back seat, and I'd gotten a glimpse of his gun. The lethal 9mm, holstered at the small of his back, had made every defining detail of his dominance stand out that much more. Still staring at him, I stole the unadulterated moment, and drank in his commanding presence.

Then I boxed my emotions and mentally reached for the part of my brain I used to catalog my surroundings as Ares pulled up to a gleaming white plane.

With light and dark-gray accents and *G800* painted on the tail, the private jet had a six-digit registration number on one of the engines. The tip of the left wing had a small bright-red light, the tip of the right had a green one, and the tail had a white light.

Ares parked the SUV, turned off the engine, and gave me a command like I was a soldier in his army. "Hold position." He opened his door.

The cabin of the Yukon instantly filled with the high-pitched whine of the jet, and I inhaled a lungful of burning fuel. Then Ares was out of the SUV, his door slammed shut, and the noise dropped precipitously before it

briefly came roaring back as he opened, then closed the liftgate. Too few seconds later to shore up my compartmentalization, my door was opened, and a war god held out his hand.

I backslid into emotions.

Ares Grayson, Delta operator, rigger, had only offered me the gesture once before.

Suddenly, I was counting all the times he'd actually touched me as his words replayed in my mind, eliciting the same polarizing reactions of relief and hurt as when I'd first heard them.

I made a vow not to touch you.

I looked up into stark blue eyes.

Still as a sentry, his dirty-blond hair being tousled by the unnatural roar of wind from jet engines, the scent of wet pavement competing with airplane fuel, Ares stared back. Except his intense gaze was void of emotion, harbored zero warmth, and put the fear of God into me.

Contrary to our first encounters in Del Cielo and last night, all of which now seemed like a lifetime ago, I didn't hunger to touch this man. I didn't want to feel that consuming pull of need when his skin touched mine. And maybe, just maybe, that was why he usually avoided contact with me. That, or he could feel my desperation and insidious want that crawled all over my body every time he came near me.

Suddenly more insecure than terrified, I made my own vow.

Do not touch Ares Grayson.

Dropping my gaze, I reached for the inside handle on the door and got out of the SUV without the help of his false chivalry. Then it happened all

at once.

My boots hit the wet ground, I looked up at a god of war, and soft rain sprinkled down like fate was asperging us.

My vow forgotten, my emotions flooding back in, I reached for him.

My hand halfway to his chest, he grasped it.

Then strong fingers curled around mine, and the world stopped spinning.

But my heart didn't stop breaking.

No longer able to internalize my biggest fear as ominous rain and telling emotions spattered my face, I begged. "Promise me you won't die." I would not survive his death.

Leaning his head down, protecting my face from the storm, his forehead touched mine. Then his next breath was so quiet, I almost didn't hear it. "*Mátia mou*."

Before I could inhale, Ares stepped back, and his gaze cut across the airport with a quick scan. Then he looked back down at me and squeezed my hand.

My heart pirouetted.

Releasing me, he nodded toward the jet. "Walk directly to the airstairs and board."

Newly committed to my fate, I followed his orders.

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EIGHTY

Ares

I knew fractions.

As Delta, as a sniper, I had to.

One millisecond or millimeter could change everything.

Eight years ago, a single glimpse of this woman had changed my life, and now a fraction of movement as she reached for me flipped my fucking world again. This time from operator to dominant.

Taking her hand, I locked in on that green-and-gold gaze as she stood in the storm.

Looking up at me like I was her only anchor, ignoring the rain as it fell on her face and beaded on her eyelashes, my brunette begged. “Promise me you won’t die.”

I would promise this woman everything if I could, but life didn’t hand out guarantees. Instead, I gave her the worst fucking part of my genetics that had been the reason behind the vow I’d given her. “*Mátia mou*.”

I’d never meant for those two fucking words to come out of my mouth, let alone mean them in the manner I’d said them. But I wouldn’t apologize for them either. I’d fucking hated the term of endearment my piece-of-shit father had used on my mother every time he wanted to manipulate her. I’d

despised the way she'd fallen for it, like some kind of cleansing ritual, washing him in forgiveness. I swore I'd never speak Greek or be like my father. I'd end my own life before I ever laid a hand on a woman.

Then I passed Selection, became the definition of violence, and at the lowest point of my career, muttered my father's words.

Already obsessed with her, I'd made the vow then and there that I wouldn't touch the woman.

Except I'd never imagined the countereffect this brunette would have on me.

The two words I'd hated, the Greek heritage I'd spent a lifetime ignoring, the language I hadn't spoken since the last time our father had forced me and Helios to recite Aristotle's theory on excellence in Attic Greek—which had been fucking ironic—became my cornerstone.

And the woman became my anchor.

Seeing the fear in her eyes instantly dissolve into raw emotion as I used the term of endearment that was now the preeminence of any words I could give this woman, I had to step back. Before I changed my mind about putting her on the plane, or worse, slammed my mouth over hers, I scanned the apron. Then I looked back down at her, squeezed her hand once, and released her as I issued orders. "Walk directly to the airstairs and board."

Like a submissive, like a woman who wanted to pretend she could lock it all down and be the job, she got on the plane without hesitation.

Shouldering the kit I'd grabbed from the back of the Denali, I scanned the apron one more time before I sent a quick text to the burner number I'd been given.

Me: *Status?*

A moment later, the reply came through.

It's not twenty-two hundred yet.

I texted the latest intel Nix had given me.

Me: *HVT is in a new non-reinforced bunker in the southeastern quadrant of the compound with direct surface access. Penetration capability of the prototype?*

This time, the reply was almost instant.

Bunker depth?

Me: *Unknown*.

Hold.

Ten seconds later, my cell rang, and I swiped to answer.

"Penetration's possible in that quadrant. If you switch from location one, use the same code followed by a two."

"Copy."

The call ended.

Shoving my cell into my pocket, I hit the airstairs for the Gulfstream, and my gaze immediately landed on my brunette as I stepped into the cabin.

Standing in the main aisle, arms crossed tight, reconning seats like it mattered which one she chose, she radiated panic.

Nix was on my six before I got past the galley. "New intel. We need to talk."

"In a minute." My brunette turned in a circle like a caged animal.

“We don’t have a minute.” Nix secured the airstairs. “We’re cleared to taxi.”

“Then give me ten seconds.” My brunette was flooding. I had an idea why, and I needed to be on her, front and center, giving her face time.

“Nothing you say to Vandon in the next ten seconds or ten hours is going to alleviate her nerves or change the optics, and we have new parameters.”

“Taxiing,” Cypher announced from the cockpit.

“Copy,” Nix replied to Cypher. Then he handed me my ass. “If you want to bring her out alive, focus up.” Pivoting, he headed back to the cockpit and angled into second chair.

I moved past the galley, dumped my kit on the cabin floor, and issued my brunette an order. “Take a seat, Aracet.”

Rubbing her arms, she sat.

I took the seat next to her, then wordlessly buckled her in as we taxied to the runway.

“Cleared for takeoff,” Cypher called out.

“Cabin secure,” I answered, buckling my own seat belt as the engines spooled up.

Aracet grabbed the armrests.

I grasped her chin, turning her face toward mine. “Afraid of flying?”

“No, I just….” She inhaled. “I’ve only flown two times. Well, three. But only twice in a plane.”

Releasing her chin, I took her hand. “You’re safe. All three of us are pilots, and Gulfstreams have a high safety rating.”

She didn’t reply, but her fingers curled around mine as the G800 hit V1.

Five minutes after takeoff, the Gulfstream still climbing, her hand relaxed, and she made to pull away. “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t let go of her. “For?”

“I know you made a… vow.”

My head tripped on her last word for a beat, then I caught her intent. “Yes, I did. To not touch you. I also vowed to protect you.”

She glanced at our clasped hands, and her voice dropped. “But you’re touching me now.”

“I am.” And I’d catch hell from Nix for it.

“May I ask why you made that decision?”

I was back at fractions. This time, less than a second. Her question, her voice, her tone. I was in full dominance mode, but suddenly, I was the one who was flooding. Possessive thoughts invading every cell, emotion ruling over all the reasons why I didn’t want her on the op, I didn’t want to let go of this woman. I was also tired of holding back. “Because I was and still am too invested in you.” I was more than fucking invested.

She looked up at me with wide eyes. “You’re invested?”

She didn’t emphasize *you’re*, and there were two ways to interpret the question, but this was the brunette. I knew what she was asking. “I haven’t been tracking you for any other reason than my own agenda. So, yes, I’m the one who’s invested.”

She asked a question I'd been waiting for. "Would you have approached me if Bin al-Adani wasn't a threat?"

"Yes."

"To protect me?"

"No." There was no protecting this woman from my obsession with her.

Her voice became submissively quiet. "Because of a… connection?"

Connection was benign compared to the electromagnetic pulse that obliterated every rational thought whenever I was in the vicinity of this woman, let alone touching her. "Do you need me to answer that?"

"Please."

My cock had woken up the second I'd taken her hand, but now it was fucking straining against my pants at the sweet submissiveness she was capable of. "Connection is a weak descriptor, and shared traumatic reality is too clinical. Neither are incorrect, but I prefer bonded."

My gold-and-green-eyed brunette blinked. "You—you're bonded. With me."

Holding up our clasped hands, then bringing them to my lips, I clarified the distinction I hadn't yet earned. "Bonded to you, yes." Inhaling the scent of her skin, I dragged my teeth over the stretched flesh of her knuckles, then kissed the sting. "But bonded with you? Not yet." Reluctantly, I let go of her. "We need to discuss something."

Glancing at her hand, she nervously nodded. "Okay."

"I need you to look at me for this conversation."

She immediately glanced up.

Taking in every inch of her face, her expressive eyes, her full lips, the small scar that started before her hairline on her left temple, the way she was both submissive and looked at me like she truly saw me, I cataloged all of it. Then I locked it down and focused up. “Nix is going to speak to you as if your part on this op is a foregone conclusion. It’s not. I heard everything you said in the SUV, but I’d still prefer you to stand down on this.”

She started to speak.

I held up a hand. “That would require you to tell me everything you remember about al-Adani, no matter how insignificant you may think it is. I’m not arguing your point that a firsthand account trumps downloaded intel, but there are other optics at play here. Mainly, the compound is housing multiple terrorists and has intel Brass wants to get their hands on. My objective, though, is singular. Al-Adani is my target, and I’m not going to be as selective as Nix when it comes to eliminating him. That said, I understand this is not solely about me.” I watched her for tells. No fidgeting, sitting calmly, breathing even, she didn’t give any away. I laid out the option. “Do you need retribution?”

My brunette didn’t miss a beat. “Are you asking if I want to kill him?”

“Yes.”

Rapid-fire, the concept, reality and repercussions played out in her expression, accelerated breathing, and the tension in her clasped hands. Then, just as quick, she shut it down. “That’s an emotional decision.”

“It is.” And it went against everything I knew as an operator.

“But you’re asking me to answer it anyway?”

“I am.”

Glancing toward the window as the G800 leveled out at cruising altitude, she drew in a steadying breath, then looked back at me. “What would you do if I wasn’t here?”

Send the airstrike, collect DNA samples after, and have Cypher intercept the hundred million. “You know what I would do, but your answer should be independent of my objective.”

She nodded, and her gaze dropped to her lap. Then she downloaded intel none of the reports had. “Al-Adani has killed a lot of people, and not just his bodyguards. He would force me to watch. That was when I learned how to stare without focusing and see without reacting. I had to. Because if I looked away or made a single sound, he’d drag out the inevitable and make them suffer. Selfishly, for my own survival, I pretended none of it was real. Being constantly drugged made that easier. It also enabled me to forget.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “That was the hardest part of coming off those drugs. Not the physical withdrawal symptoms, but the overwhelming emotions that’d previously been dampened, and the flashbacks that were akin to hallucinations. I had to process all of that, then let it go.”

Using every tactic in my operator arsenal, I still had to fight not to show my coursing rage.

I knew war. This woman knew trauma.

We both sat there for a silent beat.

Then she looked back up at me. “Evil doesn’t begin to describe al-Adani. He needs to be eliminated. But I can’t be the one to do it, and I can’t ask you to do it, let alone go in by yourself. I know your capabilities, but it

physically makes me unable to breathe at the thought of you going in solo. I cannot ask that of you."

"This is my job, and you're not asking."

Nix stepped out of the cockpit and aimed for us.

Having only a second to reiterate her options, I leaned down to my brunette and touched my lips to the scars hidden beneath her hair on her left temple. "Remember what I said, *mátia mou*. You don't need to do this."

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EIGHTY-ONE

Aracet

Striding down the aisle of the very expensive, very luxurious private jet, Nix "Phoenix" Erikson watched every second of Ares's lips on my temple.

Ignoring his boss, Ares's deep, rough whisper sank into my soul. "Remember what I said, *mátia mou*. You don't need to do this."

I shivered at his two words for me, his touch, his closeness, his warm breath, his clean masculine scent that still hinted of leather from his discarded jacket. But most of all, I felt his protective sentiment feather across every one of my frayed nerves before it sank into my soul and raced through veins with another layer of electrically charged awareness of him. I didn't know how many more layers of desire for this man I could take. Once this plane landed, I didn't know if I would ever get to find out. All I knew was that I'd made up my mind. I wasn't going to give Ares the detailed description of al-Adani that he wanted—not unless he was taking me with him, which I still wasn't sure if he would.

Ares straightened in his seat, and the blond-haired, green-eyed former SEAL sat down across from us. With his direct eye contact, sinuous movements, and laced hands, Nix looked like the very picture of controlled calm.

But the operator seated next to me had become the tempest.

A muscle jumped in Ares's jaw, his stare had turned to an iced-over stone façade, and the veins in his forearms stood out in relief.

Even if Ares wasn't reacting to his boss's presence, I could feel Nix's ambush coming.

Hell, I was witnessing him roll in like fog. Except there was nothing benign about either of these two men. Their combined atmosphere radiated with more threat and lethality than the entire cell of jihadists I'd been forced to live with. The terrorists had been chaos—erratic, frenzied, violent. But these two men were a controlled force of deadly power.

Whatever Nix was about to say, my soul felt a shift coming. My skin chilled, and my breath failed on the return loop to fill my lungs.

Unsurprising, but no less intimidating, Nix spoke first. "Miss Vandon, so we're clear, you're seated at my table now."

Already having been chastised by this man, I didn't dare blink, let alone look at Ares.

Nix continued, but he didn't lead with the warning I was expecting. "This flight, the operation, your presence, is all because of Grayson."

Like a lamb drawn to the slaughter, I glanced at my Delta operator savior.

His stare glacial, his expression harder, the god of war said nothing.

Scrambling to process the conjunction Nix had used, the single word repeated in my head. *Because*. Nix wasn't stating the obvious, that Ares would be in charge once this plane landed, or that I needed to obey his every order. He wasn't warning me about the danger we would be walking into. Nix was presenting fact.

I was here *because* of Ares—a fact I knew well.

“I know why I’m here.” And it wasn’t because I had a seat at Nix’s table.

“I’m not sure you do,” Nix countered.

“Watch it,” Ares warned Nix, low and lethal.

The SEAL barely glanced at Ares, and the slight tip of his chin in acknowledgment was even less of a movement before he focused his eerie green-eyed gaze back on me. “There are multiple factors at play here, the details of which I’m not at liberty to discuss, but as I said, you’re here because of Grayson. In that vein, while your cooperation is not mandatory, mission success will ensure that you don’t find yourself on another flight, with another team, with other agents or operators you have no history with. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Last fucking warning,” Ares ground out as he glared at Nix.

The SEAL didn’t back down. “Asking a simple question.” His focus on me, Nix held my gaze with the intent of intimidation, and I understood him perfectly.

Nix was threatening me.

His agenda took precedence, and his offer back at the motel for a new life was contingent on my cooperation. I didn’t blame Nix. He had to be ruthless in order to own a private security and military defense contracting firm.

But I also understood now, without a doubt, that unlike anyone else, Ares would protect me at all costs. “I’m neither ignorant nor stupid, Mr. Erikson. I understand.”

“Watch what you fucking say next,” Ares warned Nix.

Addressing me, Nix ignored him. “I wasn’t accusing you of a lack of intelligence, Miss Vandon.”

I didn’t believe him. “Yet you felt the need to remind me that I’m alive because the man next to me saved my life eight years ago. Which I’m fully aware of. Every day, I’m cognizant of why I’m here and two Delta Force operators are not.” *Extremely* cognizant. “I don’t need a reminder any more than I need a warning about what you expect from me once this plane lands. I’ll get you your ID. But like I already expressed to Ares, I need to see al-Adani in person to do it.”

Nix stared at me for a tense moment. Then his full attention shifted to Ares, and it was as if I were no longer in the cabin. “Our inside contact changed the parameters. He’ll be waiting on the apron when we touch down in Jordan. He’ll drive you and Vandon to Al-Mushannaf, where you’ll rendezvous with the supply truck, then board as a potential bodyguard for al-Adani with Vandon posing as your wife. From there, it’ll be the same route to the compound past Az Zalaf that we already discussed.”

“Not fucking happening,” Ares argued. “I’m not taking her in theater without our own transport.”

Nix pulled a cell phone out of his pants pocket and glanced at it. “The contact’s already prearranged passage at the Jaber Border Crossing.”

Ares turned to me, and even though his expression was controlled, I could see the anger flaring in his eyes. “I need to speak with Nix privately. Wait for me aft cabin, in the stateroom.”

I glanced toward the rear of the plane where there was an open door to a

bedroom suite. Goose bumps raced up my arms.

Ares unbuckled my seat belt and lowered his voice. “Go.”

I stood.

Nix glanced up from his cell. “Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Vandon. There are clothes for you laid out on the bed.” His attention immediately dropped back to his phone.

Properly dismissed, I looked back at my Delta operator.

He nodded once.

I walked to the back of the plane.

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EIGHTY-TWO

Ares

Glancing from Nix to me, my brunette openly wore both her submission and strength. Dismissed by Nix but waiting for a sign from me.

I nodded.

She headed aft cabin and shut the bulkhead door.

Nix set down his cell. “How big of a problem is this going to be for you?”

“Talk to her again like that, and we’ll have a big fucking problem.”

“I’m not speaking any different than I normally do. You’re hearing it differently. So I ask again, how big of a problem is this going to be?”

Refusing to give him a reason to sideline me and go at Aracet again, I locked in. “It’s not.” I had one mission. Protect my brunette. Al-Adani was a dead man.

Nix eyed me. “I wasn’t asking as Phoenix.”

I’d paid attention to signs my entire life. Body language, voice modulation, eye contact, expressions, lack thereof. I watched people, animals, traffic, crowds, weather. I scrutinized the battlefield. I analyzed patterns. I tracked how humans and animals moved. I looked for problems —fucking everywhere. Then I eliminated them.

But as a kid, I'd avoided them. It'd been my only control in a world where I had none. By the time I was a teen, I called it survival. It wasn't until I enlisted that I realized it was my best asset. Observation, acute and factual, was a skill set I could hone for warfighting.

Which was exactly what I did.

It kept me alive, fed a need, and made me think I was unstoppable—until I looked through a scope and saw a beaten young woman.

Then it became an obsession.

I told Nix what he wanted to hear. "I've got it handled." Outside Helios, Feralyn and Aracet, I considered Nix the next closest person to me, but that didn't mean we were friends.

"Wasn't what I asked."

I didn't give a fuck what he asked. "There's no way in hell I'm taking her into Syria without our own transport. And so we're clear, I'm against every fucking angle on this that involves her. She doesn't need to go in."

Nix threw down the same bullshit excuse as he glanced at his cell. "Like I said, passage at the Jaber Border Crossing is already prearranged, and the contact's expecting you and a wife."

"Getting out of Jordan isn't the problem, and you know it. Exfilling Syria through the Nasib Border Crossing is." Which I'd handle. I'd done it enough times, I had my own contacts. "Taking her with me is an unnecessary complication."

Nix sent a text. "This is our only in to get on that supply truck and have boots-on-the-ground eyes on the compound and al-Adani. Passports, clothes, and hardware are all in the stateroom."

“This is your only way,” I reminded him.

Nix looked up from his cell. “Did Vandon give you a detailed description of al-Adani?”

I knew where he was going with this. “You already gave me the basics.” Nix had downloaded approximate height, weight, and hair and eye color the other day. “Ten seconds with al-Adani and his bodyguards, and it’ll be clear who’s in charge.”

“So she didn’t confirm that he has amblyopia?”

Lazy eye? I suddenly remembered Aracet’s warning. *He’ll kill you if you make direct eye contact.* “She told me enough.”

Nix’s flat expression said he knew I was full of shit. “You’re not sending that airstrike. New parameters stand. Infill with our contact, get Vandon close enough to make the ID, call it in, then exfil with the supply truck. I’ll make sure there’ll be a vehicle waiting when you get back to Al-Mushannaf, and you know how to get through the Nasib Border Crossing from there. Cypher and I will hold position on the apron. Entire op should take less than six hours.” He glanced at his watch. “With current tailwinds cutting our flight time by fifty-eight minutes, we’ll be on the ground at Amman Civil Airport at oh four thirty. Kit up, sleep.” Nix leveled me with a warning. “Get your head straight.” He strode back to the cockpit.

I aimed for the stateroom.

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EIGHTY-THREE

Aracet

The pendulum was back.

But it wasn't an emotional roller coaster so much as a wide swing that kept hitting two sides of the same coin.

Ares Grayson.

Delta operator, bonded stalker.

A burqa in my hands, a thousand pressure points of anxiety triggered, my legs too weak to hold the sudden weight of everything, my heart was racing, and my pulse was flying faster than this damn plane.

The door to the sky-high bedroom abruptly opened, and my warfighter ducked as he stepped inside, then closed us back in.

A brief glance toward the cabin told me that Nix was back in the cockpit, but still…. "You should have knocked. I could've been indisposed."

Ares, Grayson—I still had a hard time thinking of him as Ares, even though he was most definitely a god of war, on so many levels—scanned my face before briefly glancing at the clothes in my hands. Then the gentle giant side of him, the side that silently observed things regular people

couldn’t or didn’t want to see, took the burqa and set it on a built-in dresser before squatting in front of me.

One knee up, one down, balancing his weight on the heel of his boot, resting a forearm on his thigh, his hand in a loose fist, he made himself eye level with me. “I’ve already seen you indisposed. You’re flooding.”

I was. Except I hadn’t known that term before a triplet had used it. Oh how apt it was. I probably should’ve lied, but I didn’t. “Yes, I am. Well, if panicking counts as flooding.”

“Talk to me.”

I stared into his glacially stark eyes and suddenly realized what color they actually were. “How high up are we?”

Either used to non sequiturs or women who were close to hysteria, he didn’t even blink before he gave me an immediate answer. “Cruising altitude.”

I didn’t know how high that was, but it fit. “That’s the color of your eyes.” I glanced past him toward the window. Above the clouds and the storm and the entire world, the air and sky looked thinner up here. The color out the window was blue, but it was more transparent than when you were on the ground looking up. “I’m trying to remember a specific word for crystal clarity. Not pellucid. Something else. I know I’ve read it before.” I looked back at him, at the light blue of his eyes that were outlined with a dark navy, and it came to me. “Limpid. Your eyes are limpid.” I remembered the word could also mean serene and untroubled. A god of war with crystal-clear eyes. Irony was so very fickle.

“You’re not panicking because of my eye color.”

“Are you panicking because of mine?” I held up the small case that had been with the burqa. “Because these are colored contacts.” Brown ones.

“Precautionary, and I don’t panic.”

Life without panic? Without anxiety? Without constantly looking over my shoulder and wondering when I would be recognized? Oh, yes, please. “I’d like to learn that trick.”

“I’d like you to never need it. What’s going on?”

My heart carved out another Delta operator-sized shelter for this man and his sentiment. If he said one more soul-crushingly tender word to me, there would be nothing left of the impetuous organ. At least nothing that I owned.

Dropping the contacts case back onto the bed, I stared at him. This close, the angle of his jaw was sharper, and the knot of his Adam’s apple was more pronounced, but so were the darkened circles under his eyes. Without thinking, I reached up and traced a finger under his right eye. “You’re tired.”

Capturing my wrist, he dragged a heavy thumb over the pulse point on the underside before placing my hand on my lap. “We’re both going to sleep after you talk.”

A shiver of added anxiety landed on top of the rush of sudden adrenaline. “*We’re* going to sleep?”

“Yes.”

I dared to ask. “Where?”

“On the bed.”

The adrenaline rush turned into full-blown spiking alarm. “Together?”

“Yes.”

“I…” *Oh God*. Tell him. *Tell him, Aracet*. “I’ve never shared a bed with a man before.”

Miles above the earth, hurtling towards impossible odds, his inhale was audible. Then his voice came out low and rough. “Good.”

Whispered hope slipped past my lips. “Bonded?”

Instead of answering, he unfurled his fist and held his hand out to me, palm up.

I placed the entirety of my trust in him with a single gesture.

The strength and warmth of his hand wrapped around mine, then the most dominant version of his voice landed on me like weighted security. “Talk, Aracet.”

I opened my mouth.

Then the still-seeping wound of his betrayal bled out.

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EIGHTY-FOUR

Ares

She looked up, and I saw the hurt in her eyes before she landed the accusation. “You left me rigged last night.”

In a half kneel in front of her, maintaining the position of perceived subservience, holding her hand, I treaded carefully. “You told me not to touch you.”

Her cheeks flamed, and she immediately dropped her head. “That didn’t mean I wanted anyone else touching me.”

“You can’t have it both ways, Aracet. You used your safe word. You were very clear, in a very specific environment with a very distinctive dynamic.”

“I know. I just—”

“You don’t know, not with total comprehension, and I take full responsibility for that. So let me be very clear right now. I was respecting your trust. You didn’t only safe word out, Aracet. You explicitly stated that I was not to touch you after you used your safe word. If I had continued to do so, we would be having a very different conversation, if we were speaking at all, because the hurt you’re expressing would be an altogether different emotion. Any trust between us would have been destroyed. So while you may feel deceived or betrayed right now, which we can talk through until

you’re comfortable enough to process those emotions, I will not walk back my actions last night or my responsibility as a Dom.”

Sitting with what I’d said, she didn’t immediately reply, and I gave her the space to process.

“I only ever wanted to be touched by you,” she barely whispered.

I exhaled a breath I’d been holding since she’d gotten off the bus in Miami. Then I tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Believe me, I want nothing more than to be the only man who touches you. But that is a decision you make. While the dynamic I operate in is dominance, the power lies with you. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She trembled at my touch, but she didn’t otherwise move or speak.

“Something else is bothering you.” I felt her disquiet like I could feel an ambush coming.

She looked back up, but that hazel-eyed gaze that’d given me everything from determination and indignation to understanding to the softness of her sweet submission was now holding tears. “I know you tie up other women. One of the submissives at the club told me. She said—I don’t want to repeat what she said. But is this your thing? This *dynamic*? You put your ropes on women and whisper seduction to them? Ask for their trust and tell them that you’re going to be intimate with them?”

Every accusation, however misconstrued, hit with the force of a targeted JTAC strike, and I dropped her hand to dominantly grab the back of her neck. “I’ve never spoken to the women I’ve bound.”

“*Women*,” she repeated with palpable hurt. “I can’t—” Shaking her head, her hand went to her chest. “I don’t know how to process this. I can’t

go to that club ever again. I know I'm not…. I'll never be enough for you. Not that we've even remotely talked about that, and oh my God, I'm horrified I even said that out loud, but this is where my mind's gone—down this spiral, which is insane. I should *not* be thinking about this. We're on a private jet, flying to Syria, for God's sake. We could be dead in hours, and none of this will matter. But you said we were sleeping together. So here I am, choosing that, of all things, to lose it over because I can't not think about how it felt to see that woman—or sub or whoever she was—practically shove me aside to get at you, and I can't do *this*." She thumped her chest. "I can't take this soul-crushing hurt, but it won't go away."

Pulling out my cell, I dialed a number, then put it on speaker.

The call connected after three rings. "What the fuck do you want, Grayson?"

"What do I do with the bottoms at the club?" I demanded. "In detail."

"You fucking with me?"

"No. Answer the question, Black. You're on speaker."

"Why? You trying to save face with the woman you left in sub drop?"

Staring into my brunette's panicked gaze, I didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Un-fucking-believable. Ari, you there?"

I answered for her. "Her name is Aracet, and yes, she's here."

My brunette's face paled at the mention of her real name.

"Christ. Your funeral, Grayson. Aracet, it's Jarek. You want to hear this?"

Gripping her nape harder, I held her gaze. "She wants to hear it."

“Fuck off, Grayson. Aracet, your call. Tell me what you want.”

“Yes.” Her voice broke, but then she cleared her throat. “Please, tell me.”

Black downloaded, in detail. “He rigs the fuck out of subs at the club. Shoulders to ankle. Different patterns. Then ties them to whatever the hell is closest—Saint Andrew’s Cross, suspension frames, spanking benches, bondage beds, swings, chairs, you name it, he’s tied a sub to it.”

My brunette double over, then whispered, “I’m going to be sick.”

Black heard her. “Then you definitely don’t want to hear what he does next.”

“I…” She drew in a short breath. “I think I need to.”

“Think or want?” Black demanded.

Sitting back up, she gripped my wrist and pushed my hand away. “Please go on, Jarek.”

“He leaves them rigged. Then any club member who wants a turn can fuck them.”

My brunette, the woman who once saw the man underneath the warrior, looked at me with shock, judgment, hurt, disgust. “He just…. Then what does he do?”

“Nothing. He appoints another Dom in charge of the sub and is gone before the sub gets her first dicking.”

With the pulse on the side of her neck jumping, she stared at me. “He doesn’t have sex with them?”

“No,” Black stated succinctly. “Never.”

My brunette's voice quieted. "Does he speak to them while he's… rigging them?"

"Woman, he doesn't speak to them at all. Grayson's known for his proclivities at Empyros, but talking isn't one of them. Fucker spoke more to me last night than he has in the past five years. Why do you think you two drew such a crowd? It sure as hell wasn't solely for Grayson's scening. Everyone wanted to hear what the fuck War God had to say."

Her brows knit together. "War God? And that's… that's how long he's been coming to the club?"

"No, five years is how long he's been out of the Army. War God was his call sign. Grayson didn't start coming into Empyros until a year later. Rigging started about six months after that." Voices sounded in the background. "My brothers are here. Gotta go. You need anything else, sub?"

"Aracet," I corrected.

"Copy," Black replied distractedly. "You need anything else, woman?"

"No. Thank you."

"If that changes, call—"

I hung up on Black and pocketed my cell.

My brunette looked at me with those hazel eyes I wanted to fucking drown in. "You really don't talk to them?"

"No. With the exception of my sister, an occasional female client, or the woman who belongs to a half-brother of Feralyn's, I don't speak with other women, Aracet." Not for the past five years.

"Why not?"

I grasped the back of her neck again, but this time I leaned in. “Because they aren’t you.”

“*Ares*,” she whispered.

The plea in her voice my undoing, I fucking snapped.

I kissed my brunette.

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EIGHTY-FIVE

Aracet

Ares “War God” Grayson, Delta operator, rigger, savior, master of seduction, kissed me.

Dear God, did he kiss me.

Gripping my face, his thumb digging into my jaw like he was losing control, he invaded my mouth like a starved man—for a mind-altering moment.

Then he became the exacting rigger.

Angling my head to fit me against his dominant assault, grasping the other side of my face, curving his tongue around mine how he’d wrapped his ropes around my body, he kissed me with the expertise of a skilled lover.

And suddenly, I was awash in emotions.

Jealousy dripped down my cheeks.

Insecurity twisted in a familiar abandonment loop.

Greed made me grip fistfuls of his hair.

Gratitude for his touch mushroomed into hope, and conviction for every one of his pretty words swirled into a heady storm right before the crippling fear that he would take all of this away set in.

But then an animalistic groan from my controlled Delta operator vibrated from his chest and sank into my mouth, and I became sensations.

Fire ripping through my body, desire slicked between my legs, clenching heat deep in my womb. All of it took over, and I was reduced to a single parasitic entity.

His.

His to claim. To dominate. To control.

I needed him.

God, did I need him.

And just as I leaned off the bed to practically claw my way to him, he was grabbing my waist, standing to his full height, bringing me with him, and pivoting.

In the next second, he was seated on the bed, I was straddling his thighs, and his hands were gripping my ass as he thrust up while pulling me down.

The full weight of his enormity rammed against my core, and I gasped.

Eating my shock, he deepened the kiss, then thrust again.

My gasp turned feral, a growl ripped from my soul, and I became the succubus to his incubus. My fingers dug into his hard biceps, my hips ground down on his, and a sexual beast awakened inside me like the first dawning as I kissed him back with feral hunger.

But then he was gripping two handfuls of my hair and yanking my face away from his. “Aracet.” Deep and husky and full of impending danger, he barked my name like an order.

Pins and needles with the bite of smarting pain raced across my scalp, and I begged. “Please don’t stop.” I didn’t want to die never knowing how

sex felt—how this man felt—with that beast of his inside me.

Every muscle in his war-hardened body froze except his hands. Releasing my hair, he grasped both sides of my face. “We need to talk about this.”

My stomach dropped the moment I heard the demonstrative pronoun. “This?”

“There’s an After-Action Review.”

My mind on sex, on him, I tried to play catch-up. *After-Action Review*. I’d heard of those. AARs. They’d spoken about them on the Army base. I assumed he meant there was one about me. “What does it say?” I’d never seen it.

“Al-Adani assaulted you.” He drew in a deep breath. “I kissed you without consent.”

Oh.

And Jesus, I didn’t want to talk about this. Especially not after he’d just kissed me like that. But now he was staring at me as if I were fragile enough to break from a single whispered word. Which, maybe I was. But in that moment, I didn’t want to be the victim.

I wanted to be the woman Ares Grayson kissed without permission.

I wanted him to stare at me without reservation.

I wanted to be as beautiful as he was dominant.

I just wanted him.

Even in my darkness, with the hard words I didn’t want to say, I wanted him. This man, his eyes, his sharp angles, his rough edges, he was a thing of beauty. “I wanted you to kiss me. You didn’t need consent. And I wasn’t

exactly… I mean, he didn't…" I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I didn't want that evil man's name or his memory in this bedroom—however unconventional a bedroom it was. I didn't want this moment poisoned by my past. But I should've known a man who didn't pull the trigger when his mission had been to eliminate would use the same caution now as he had then.

So, I spoke a truth I'd never said out loud. "Al-Adani didn't assault me sexually." Not how Ares was implying. "He doesn't like women." He preferred young men.

"You were with him for two years, Aracet." He spoke so gently but so dominantly, I almost questioned my own flashes of memory.

"I know. And he and his guards did every other horrible thing, but al-Adani didn't touch me. Not like that."

"There was evidence of sexual assault."

Inhaling Ares's scent, trying to push down the past, I explained with as few details as possible. "I was drugged, stripped, and beaten. And he made his guards… do things." The memories, like always, came unbidden, but this time, the flashes of the night before my rescue were at the forefront.

My face was throbbing, my ears were ringing, my bruised ribs stabbed with pain each time I breathed in, but I needed to move. Except the drugs were wearing off, and I hated this stupid nausea. I needed more pills. Or the needle. But he hadn't been giving me that lately. Why wasn't he giving me that? Wait. Why did my legs feel wet?

I opened my eyes.

Packed dirt, rugs. A single bulb hanging from an extension cord, tacked to the low ceiling, was lit. Which meant it was night. And I was lying on the floor. Again.

I glanced down at my legs.

Naked. Again.

Bruises all over, my thighs spread, there was…

Jesus. *Not again.*

Blood spray streaked across my flesh like that artist who threw paint, and it speckled the rest of my legs down to my toes until it was dripping—dripping everywhere.

Swallowing down bile, I told myself it wasn't my blood. I told myself my spread legs meant nothing. They'd done everything else to me, but never that. *And I knew what that spatter meant. I just—I needed to keep quiet right now. Stay still. Pretend I wasn't awake.*

Don't move, don't make noise, don't cry.

Just close my eyes. Close them and wait.

Another drop trickled, this time from my stomach to my side.

My gaze landed on my blood-splattered stomach, but then I saw it.

The dried, caked-white crust covering my pubic hair.

I lost it.

Turning my head, I retched. Body-heaving, pain-exploding, retched. *The stench of vomit, blood, semen, and death hit my nostrils as a slew of angry Arabic and spittle landed on my face, then I was kicked in the head.*

Everything went dark.

Blessedly dark.

But then my head was pounding worse than ever, and I was awake again—a minute, an hour, a day later, I didn't know. Hot sun was pounding down, sweat stuck to my hair and chest, and I was back in my torn burqa.

Which meant daytime.

Which meant more drugs.

And hopefully water. Except… I glanced around. I wasn't inside the courtyard. I wasn't inside at all. Slumped against the exterior wall of the compound, endless desert all the way to the horizon line, no one in sight, something heavy rested on my legs.

I looked down.

A rifle.

A big black metal and wood rifle was in my hands.

I started to shake.

"Aracet?"

Startled back to the present, I sucked in the dry air of a private jet instead of desert dust and mentally shook my head as I looked into stark blue eyes. "Right." Ares Grayson. War God. "I don't want to talk about this."

Gentle and so tender it made my heart hurt, he drew his thumb across my jaw and over my bottom lip. "Understand, but we need to."

"Why?"

"Besides the fact that you just disappeared on me?" He raised an eyebrow.

“Okay.” I drew in a deep breath. “Point taken.” Then I said the rest in a rush because I never wanted to speak about this again. “Al-Adani only had sex with men. Mostly his bodyguards, and usually, they weren’t willing participants. He seemed to like it better that way. He always threatened them with exposure or death, and he’d make me watch and use that as a threat to me as well as to keep them quiet. But if, or rather when, he suspected one of them wasn’t going to stay quiet anymore, he killed them. Except he had a ritual beforehand. He made them… do something.” Revulsed, enraged, horrified, terrified to be saying this to Ares, I dropped my head and whispered, “On me.”

With two fingers under my chin, Ares tipped my head up. “On you?”

Deep shame sank into my soul. “He made them ejaculate on me, then killed them with a sword.”

For a single, frantic beat of my heart, Ares’s expression remained utterly locked. Then his nostrils flared, he leaned toward the door, yanked it open and yelled. “NIX.”

I started to shake.

Ares gripped my face hard. Then he lowered his voice to a reverent whisper. “Thank you for telling me.”

Tears welled. “Please don’t say anything.”

But a former SEAL was already standing in the doorway, not missing a single inch of my telling position on Ares’s lap.

Belatedly, I moved to get off.

Ares held me in place with both a pointed look and the tightening of his grip on me. Then he glanced at Nix. “Al-Adani isn’t swapping guards for

safety. He’s having sex with them.”

Nix looked at me. “You witnessed this?”

I choked down everything—the fact that I’d finally told someone the truth, the violent flashbacks I’d kept buried for years, the fear that Ares would never look at me the same way again, the rage at an evil man. “Yes.”

“You never disclosed this intel,” Nix accused without using an accusatory tone.

I didn’t disclose a lot. “When you see young men die at the hands of a madman, you learn to be quiet.” I looked down at the operator’s lap I’d sat on only once before. The circumstances were so damn different, but all I could think was that I still wanted Ares to save me. Except this time, it was from the trauma of my past and a conversation I never wanted to have.

“Anything else?” Nix demanded.

“No. Once I was stateside at that Army base and was told Bin al-Adani was dead, I thought that was the end of it.” I glanced up and looked from Nix to Ares. “I’m sorry. I didn’t trust anyone enough to say something before today.”

Ares stroked my cheek. “You have nothing to apologize for.” He glanced at Nix. “This changes the parameters. I’m not risking getting separated from Aracet if I’m cherry-picked for guard duty.”

Nix looked from Ares to me. “You said young men. What was the upper age limit of al-Adani’s preferences?”

“Early twenties. Maybe.” My stomach turned. “He liked them younger than him. And smaller.”

Nix gave me a single nod, then looked back at Ares. “Age and height knock you outside his range of preferences. Initial plan remains. Get the ID and get out.”

Ares’s muscles tensed under my thighs. “We have his description, medical condition, and now predilections. I’ll handle it.”

Nix glanced at me. “Al-Adani has a lazy eye?”

“Yes. In his left eye.”

Nix fired off another question. “Did you witness any other males with the same condition while you were on the compound?”

“I was forbidden from looking directly at any of the men.” I was also kept isolated the majority of the time, but I didn’t share that information.

Nix looked back at Ares. “Two to four percent of the population has amblyopia, and it’s linked to genetics. There could be more than one male in that compound who’s within al-Adani’s age range and has the condition.” Nix looked back at me. “Do you want to stand down?”

I said, “No,” as Ares said, “Yes.”

“The woman has spoken.” Nix walked out of the bedroom area, closing the door behind him.

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EIGHTY-SIX

Ares

Compartmentalizing fury, a raging hard-on, and fuck, that kiss, I lifted my brunette off my lap and stood her between my legs.

Then I was the opposite of respectful.

I yanked her boots off by the heels, pulled my sweatpants down her legs, picked her up by the waist, then tossed her onto the bed.

When I stood, she spoke up.

“You’re angry.”

“Yes, I am, but not at you.” I couldn’t be pissed at her for wanting in on the op when I was right there with her.

“Thank you,” she quietly offered.

“For?”

“Not treating me differently after I told you… what I told you.” Her head dipped. “And for not looking at me as if I’m broken.”

I had to count to ten. “You’re not broken.” She was fucking assaulted, and al-Adani was a dead man. “We are going to have a conversation about hard limits, though, but not now.” I shut the shades on the windows.

She tugged my T-shirt down around her thighs. “May I ask a question?”

“You may.” I doubted she was going to stop at one question, though. And whatever the hell she asked next was going to be loaded. I saw it written all over her face. Even if I hadn’t, I’d have to be dead not to have heard the insecurity in her broken comment. My brunette hated being vulnerable. My bet, she was about to reach for leverage in the form of intel to level the playing field.

“How long have you known you were a dominant?”

There it was. “Since the first time I had sex.” I stepped out of my boots.

“When was that?”

Fishing my keys, cell, and knife from my pockets, I tossed them on the built-in dresser. Then, because I wanted her to know we were done with leverage, stealing cars, and any other bullshit between us, I pivoted, leaned over the bed, braced my hands on either side of her head, and got in her face. “I was fifteen, six feet tall, and full of anger and raging hormones. She was a nineteen-year-old college student with a penchant for partying. She tried to top me. I wasn’t having it. It didn’t go well for her, but she bragged to her friends about the size of my cock, then word spread. For the next few years, I found plenty of coeds to dominate, but I didn’t do repeats or attachments. I had enough going on at home to deal with. Mainly, a young stepsister I was raising. When I enlisted, the pattern continued—dominant sex, no attachments. Eight years ago, the frequency of that pattern radically reduced. Five years ago, it stopped. Then I discovered rigging. Any other questions?”

Eyes wide, she blinked.

I pushed off the bed, yanked my shirt over my head one-handed, then killed the lights. In the next second, I was horizontal with my brunette,

pulling her back to my chest, and all the shit in my head dissipated.

I exhaled.

But she only tentatively settled into me.

“You still have questions. Ask,” I demanded.

“How do you know that?”

I took a second to register how her voice sounded different in the dark. The mechanical sound waves of the plane hadn’t changed, and the electromagnetic waves of light wouldn’t interfere with cabin conditions, but Jesus, her voice sounded sexier.

“Because I do. What else do you want to know?”

She drew her legs up into a fetal position. “How did you discover rigging?”

“I started working with Nix five years ago—”

“Wait,” she interrupted, looking over her shoulder. “So when Jarek mentioned five years ago, was that around the same time I was released from that halfway house?”

The exact same month. “Yes.”

“That’s really when you quit the Army?”

“Retired,” I corrected. “But yes.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

I raised an eyebrow at her apology-slash-order.

Unmoving, she held position.

I knew the woman could see me. Status LEDs, switch panel backlights, emergency exit and ordinance signs, the photoluminescent floor path strips

—I’d set the stateroom to “sleep” mode, but there was still enough ambient light to see my face.

Another beat, and she amended. “Please continue.”

Wordlessly praising her shift from demand to request with a single stroke of her cheek using the back of my fingers, I downloaded the rest. “At the time, Paragon Operations was based on a retrofitted yacht. If you were on board, you were crew. I learned the ropes, literally. Placement, coiling, knotting—it was controlled, precise, task oriented. It became therapeutic, then a channel for dominance without sexual penetration.”

“And the club?” she asked, her voice barely there.

“I knew Black from a few deployments downrange, knew him and his brothers owned Empyros. I called and said I was coming by. First few times there, I observed. Then I started rigging.”

I saw the war of emotions cross her features.

Then my brunette turned her head, resumed her fetal position, and said nothing.

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EIGHTY-SEVEN

Ares

Thirty minutes later, my woman was still awake.

"You're tired, Aracet. Close your eyes."

"I'm turned away from you. How do you know my eyes are open? And how do you know I'm tired?"

I inhaled a lungful of my brunette. Rain, shampoo, jet, my T-shirt, and the unmistakable scent of her—woman, home. "Late night, early morning. I've also watched you for five years." I could fucking feel it when she fell asleep. The world muted. I could also tell when she was spiraling. "I know when you're unsettled."

There wasn't a logical explanation for it. No book I'd read had ever scientifically pinpointed it, but it wasn't dissimilar to how you synced with your brothers on the battlefield. Except this was on a whole other level. Nothing I'd ever experienced connected like the synapses that fired every time she was near. More than a sixth sense, more than emotion, I was bound to this woman as sure as I was put on this earth to kill.

Same as I could read her, she read me and what I hadn't said. "You know when I'm…. *Jesus*. You watch me sleep."

It wasn't a question, and I didn't deny it. "I have."

She exhaled. Long and choppy, the air leaving her lungs was accompanied by a tremor. “He says without remorse.”

“I don’t hide from my actions. In return, I expect the same from you. Don’t refer to me in third person or disassociate. If you have questions, ask. If you want or need to have a conversation, talk.”

“And you’ll tell me why you thought it was okay to watch me sleep?”

“I’ve already given you the single most crucial reason for all of my actions when it comes to you.”

In the darkened cabin, I felt her move a split second before the slight rustle of sheets, then my brunette was facing me. “Because you’re…” Trailing off, her voice quieted, but her tone became weighted with uncertainty as she looked up at me. “Because you feel that you’re bonded to me?”

“It’s more than a feeling, and yes, I am.”

Consternation hit her expression, then she shook her head. “I don’t—never mind.”

“No. Speak freely,” I ordered.

She exhaled, then she was downloading. “Doesn’t this seem one-sided to you? I don’t know anything about you—not any of the details that paint Ares Grayson the man as opposed to War God the operator. And that feels really unbalanced, especially when you seem to know everything about me.”

“Not everything.” I didn’t know what it felt like to sink inside her and lose myself.

“Name one thing you don’t know about me.”

What sounds she made when she came. “What you think day to day.” I wanted to know everything that went through this woman’s head.

“But the generalities you know?”

I was still scratching the surface. Like the incredulity in her tone right now wasn’t anger. It was fear, and I was going to address it. “Yes, on generalities like your background, what you went through during reintegration, why you stay on the move. I’ve read your file.” I downloaded personal information I’d never discussed with anyone besides Helios and Feralyn. “We’re not dissimilar. We both grew up with absentee parents and had to fend for ourselves. And the incredulousness in your tone isn’t because you’re angry with me. You’re afraid of me getting too close.”

Her body went completely still. “You’re talking about a file? Not an After-Action Review, but a *file*?”

A thick one, predominantly redacted. “Yes.”

“And you’ve read it.”

Wasn’t a question, but I answered. “Yes.”

She rolled to her back. “I’m going to need a moment to process that.”

“All right.”

Her inhale was short but deep, then she held it as if she were counting before she slowly exhaled through her mouth. When she repeated it, I noted the 4-7-8 breathing technique.

Then the urge to praise her, like I would have if she were bound in my ropes, was front and center, and I had to kick all thoughts of her tied to that saltire out of my head.

I was never rigging this woman again.

She exhaled for the third time. “Why am I more upset about you reading some files on me than I am about the stalking?”

Forcing myself to lock down the memory of how she’d looked in my Hishi Karada, I focused up. “Because you didn’t willingly download the intel about yourself, and after three years of reintegration, I’m sure you perceive that as a disadvantage. But just as I’m bonded to you, you feel similarly toward me, which allows for a certain amount of justification. You can compartmentalize the stalking, dress it up, and call it protection.”

“I…. Okay. I’m processing that, too.” She was silent for a beat, then, “You don’t speak like anyone I’ve ever met.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” I’d also take the fact that she hadn’t denied her attachment toward me.

“Except you didn’t paint yourself in a very good light with your compartmentalizing stalking comment.”

“I don’t have to.” I fingered a strand of her hair. “You’ve already done it for me.”

She neither confirmed nor denied it, but she stretched her legs, brushing them against mine. “I saw all the books in one of the rooms of your penthouse.”

“The library.” I kicked a leg over hers and pulled her feet between mine. “I like to read.” She borrowed books, I bought them, but the pastime was one we shared.

Rolling back toward me, leaving her legs between mine, she tucked her hands under her cheek. “What else do you like to do?”

Stalk her. Bind her. Warm her cold feet, thread my hand into her hair, listen to her voice. “My job, work out. Depending on time and circumstances, cook.”

“Under what circumstances do you like to cook?”

“This morning.”

My brunette went quiet for a full two minutes. Then, naked from the waist down, legs tangled with mine, she whispered into the darkness. “I forgive you, Ares Grayson.”

Low and quiet, but with the entirety of my dominance and depravity, I whispered back. “I didn’t apologize, Aracet Vandon.”

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EIGHTY-EIGHT

Aracet

Rough and deep, and so damn dominant that it made my entire body shudder, his bedroom voice, his darkened-stateroom-soaring-miles-above-the-earth voice, whispered across my soul like seduction. “I didn’t apologize, Aracet Vandon.”

I breathed in every single molecule of a warfighter and held it.

I held it as if each ticking second of my suspended breath would further memorialize this moment.

Ares Grayson. Unguarded. Unapologetic. And unequivocally himself.

How could I not love him?

Except that was the problem. Falling for this Delta Force operator meant loving him more than I loved my own life—there was no other way. But that meant I would die without my heart intact. Or worse, live. Because while he called it bonded, I called it something entirely different.

Ares Grayson was my soulmate.

And I’d inextricably intertwined my soul with a god of war.

If he died, so would every viable part of me.

War-hardened muscular arms tightened around me before his whispered command landed like a direct order. “Exhale.”

My mind my downfall when it came to his dominance, my respiratory system followed his command.

“That’s it,” he quietly drew out, brushing his lips against the scars on my temple. “Nice and easy.” His own exhale mimicked mine. “One more deep breath. Then let yourself relax. Settle in and drift.”

“My mind’s already drifting.” At full speed. And every achingly needy part of my body that he wasn’t touching had become a beacon of self-doubt.

“Inhale, *mátia mou*,” he ordered.

I inhaled.

“Good.” His voice lowered. “Close your eyes.”

I closed them.

He whispered quieter still. “You’re safe, you’re protected, and I’ve got you.” Pulling me in closer, he drew me in against his warm chest. “You’re going to sleep now. No fear. No worry. Your only focus is my arms around you.”

His voice lulling, his body cocooning, I felt the weight of exhaustion luring me under his spell, but I couldn’t let go. Not yet. “Bonded?” I hedged.

“Yes.” His arms tightened around me.

“Will you tell me what that means to you?” My heart needed one more answer. Something to quiet the still-whispering insecurity.

His lips brushed against the pulse point on my neck. Then his voice became pure sex. “It means I miss your provocatively wet cunt when I haven’t fucked you yet.”

Ohhh God.

Carnal lust shot like fire to my core, my mouth watered, and the ghosted memory of his ropes came roaring back. Practically feeling their tactile, fibrous roughness where they'd dug into my flesh with a punishing cocktail of pleasure and pain, I didn't just become desire. I turned into a mess of frantic need. "Then why—"

Two of his fingers pressed against my lips with an exacting pressure only matched by his ropes. "I'm not fucking you on this airplane, or in front of an audience."

I pulled away from his fingers on my lips. "But in a sex club—"

"That was rigging."

That had been mindfucking. "And this is?"

His hand sank into my hair, and his lips brushed against my temple. "Me earning it."

My speech flatlined, but my mind, body, and emotions all flooded. Then I was soaring as high as this plane.

So very soft and with a defyingly gentle calmness, his voice whispered against my ear. "I'm going to kill al-Adani and every single one of his bodyguards. Then I'm going to make you mine."

My breath caught, and I realized how wrong I'd been.

Seduction wasn't the monster.

Ares Grayson was.

"The god of war," I whispered.

"Delta," he countered.

“Is it the man or the warfighter who’s bonded to me?” I shouldn’t have asked, but my heart was already lying at his feet, and this battle was always going to be his.

“I’m *Sine Pari*. There is no separation between the two.”

Just as there was no separation between my heart and soul. “Bonded,” I breathed, dipping my toe into the deeply dark waters of his world of war, dominance and submission.

“Not yet. But you will be.” Tilting my head up as he leaned down, his full lips landed on mine with a kiss as quiet as this warrior was silent. “Now sleep.”

Fragile hope bloomed.

Brushing one more kiss to my forehead, he then settled back and adjusted my head, tucking me into the perfect curve between his shoulder and chest.

Inhaling the clean scent of his deodorant and natural musk, allowing myself to luxuriate in his protective strength, I nestled into my makeshift pillow.

“That’s it,” he murmured, vining his dominance with my whispering subconscious need to please him. “Drift, *mátia mou*.”

His arm snaked around my waist.

The private jet’s engines hummed.

I drifted.

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EIGHTY-NINE

Ares

Like every time I'd watched her, she drifted off to sleep.

Unlike every other time, it was in my arms.

Contentment I'd never known warred with the speed of the G800, the need to protect this woman, and my rock-hard cock.

I wouldn't fuck her on this plane, but goddamn it, I wanted to.

I wanted to sink inside her, fuck her raw, then order her to stay with Nix and Cypher while I handled al-Adani.

But I also understood the headspace of living with ghosts. I saw the look in her eyes when I'd given her the choice on al-Adani. I knew that look too damn well.

She didn't only need to see that asshole eliminated, she needed to have the power of being a part of it. Then my brunette would be free of that fucking compulsion to keep running. She could reassess and recalibrate. Adopt a new headspace. Tell anyone who recognized her to fuck off, living in the knowledge that it didn't matter if the whole damn world saw Aracet Vandon because she'd know she'd taken direct action. She'd gotten retribution. I'd be by her side, and those ghosts she was carrying, that survivor's guilt, it'd quiet down.

There was no question. I had to do this for her.

But fuck, deliberately putting her in the line of fire went against every instinct I had.

The bulkhead door to the stateroom silently opened, and Nix scanned from Aracet to me before lowering his voice as he leaned in and set an envelope and comms on top of the credenza. “Sat feeds show the supply truck left the compound five mikes ago. Our contact followed in a Toyota Hilux.” He tipped his chin toward the envelope. “Payment for the contact.”

Sound asleep, my brunette hadn’t stirred, but I glanced at her before I nodded in acknowledgment.

Nix checked his cell as it lit up with an incoming text, then shoved the phone into his pocket. “Make sure Vandon doesn’t speak unless it’s a Code Red. The contact doesn’t know she’s American, and I want to keep it that way. Both Cypher and I will be on overwatch, and Saint was in Italy, taking possession of a new Leonardo helo. By the time we land, he’ll be in Cyprus on standby.”

If I needed a helo for exfil, we were fucked.

Flying into Syria was a guaranteed hot extraction. The entire country was a conflict zone, there was an FAA ban, and the Syrian Civil Aviation Authority aggressively enforced airspace sovereignty, but those weren’t the biggest obstacles. No private helo operations were sanctioned in-country. If crossfire or MANPADS didn’t take you out, the Syrian Air Force’s Soviet-era MiGs would. Their fighter jets were old as hell, but they flew five times faster than any helo.

I kept my voice low when I stated the obvious. “Restricted airspace.”

“Understood, but if anyone’ll do it, it’s Saint.”

That’s because Saint was fucking psychopathic. He was also a sadist. I’d seen him once at Empyros, wished I hadn’t, and I didn’t judge kinks. After countless tours, the former Marine helo pilot had been recruited by the Agency doing who the hell knew what before he’d landed at Paragon Ops. Even then, it was rare to see him in the field. Probably because no one saw Saint unless he wanted to be seen. That all said, if I needed to get my brunette out of Syria STAT, and if a helo extraction was possible, Saint would make it happen.

I nodded at Nix. “Anything else?”

The SEAL glanced at my brunette, then looked back at me. “I know what you’ll do once she IDs al-Adani.”

Before I could tell him to fuck off, he held up a hand.

“Not a criticism. All I’m asking is for enough time to grab the intel I need to trace this down the line.”

“Fractions of a second matter.” He fucking knew that.

“Understood. But I’m only asking for a few minutes, max.”

He was asking for a hell of a lot more than time. “No promises.”

Nix stared me down a beat, then tipped his chin before glancing at his watch. “Two hours thirty until we’re wheels down.”

“Copy.”

Nix retreated, and I looked at my brunette.

Then the parallels struck.

I’d had three women in my life who mattered to me, and I’d tried to save them all.

Except I hadn’t saved my mother from my piece-of-shit father, and I didn’t save Feralyn from Helios.

But I sure as hell was going to save Aracet Vandon from having to worry about that al-Adani motherfucker ever again.

“*Mátia mou*,” I whispered, tracing the scars on her temple that’d come from my round.

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NINETY

Aracet

One second, I was dreaming of a deep voice and two words whispered in my ear.

The next, a firm grip was in my hair, and a different version of that deep voice was issuing a command. “Wake up.”

My heart flipped, then the poor organ was pounding as if I were running. “I’m up.” And officially panicked as I blinked open my eyes to dim lighting and a transformed operator.

“Good.” His thumb coasted over my jaw, then swept across my bottom lip.

The caress, more commanding stroke than gentle touch, sent shock waves through my system. But the sight of Ares standing over the bed in full War God mode doused a fire that normally would’ve landed between my legs the instant he touched me. Instead, fear erupted.

Not for my own safety, but for his. Because all of a sudden, things had gotten very real, and Ares had transformed back into the warfighter I’d first seen eight years ago.

Rapid-fire, he started issuing instructions, but all I could focus on was what he was wearing.

A tactical vest loaded with magazines was fitted over his T-shirt. A holster, strapped to his left thigh, held a gun that looked bigger than the one he'd pulled on his brother. The pockets on his cargo pants were stuffed with outlines of more magazines. There was a new watch on his wrist that looked more compass than timepiece. His boots weren't the expensive riding gear ones or the heavy, polished combat boots I'd seen him wear before. These were dirty, scratched, and stained with substances I shuddered to think about. They were also well worn. But his expression? That was new.

And it was what frightened me the most.

"Aracet," he clipped, sharp and short.

Startled, I flinched. "Yes?"

"Repeat what I said," he ordered, with none of the intimacy in his tone that'd been there before I'd fallen asleep.

My mind scrambled, but apparently my brain didn't have the same wanton disregard for a Delta Force operator's instruction because in the next second, I was regurgitating the main points of his safety speech. Or rather, tactical brief.

"Single, double, and triple taps for yes, no, and good, respectively. Don't speak unless it's an emergency, not even if it's just the two of us. Not until we've… exfilled."

"What's the emergency distress call?"

"Code Red."

Ares barely tipped his chin. "Good. Let's get you dressed."

"I…" Oh God. "I need a moment." I glanced toward the bathroom.

Ares stepped back and opened the door for me without comment.

Indelicately and clumsily, I untangled myself from the sheets I didn't remember pulling up around me and got off the bed. Feeling self-conscious that I wasn't wearing anything other than the T-shirt he'd given me at his penthouse, I didn't have time to think too hard about it because the moment my feet touched the bathroom floor, Ares shut the door behind me.

I blew out a breath.

Then I made the mistake of looking in the mirror.

Jesus. My hair. Blow-dried a lifetime ago in a studio apartment in Miami, then drenched in a storm, taken for a ride on a motorcycle and ignored while I set foot in my first penthouse, had a breakdown, stole a Yukon, walked out of a motel lobby, was driven to a private airport, got on a private jet, then bedded down with a bonded Delta Force rigger… and fallen asleep.

I looked like hell.

The bags under my eyes were worse.

And Ares had kissed me.

Kissed me and held me down as he'd thrust up.

Heat coursed through my body, and I touched my bottom lip. Plumper, fuller, redder than usual, it tingled under my finger.

I was—

The door opened, and Ares's stark gaze met mine in the mirror as he leaned against the frame. "Talk."

"I could've been using the bathroom." This was the second time he'd barged in on me.

“You weren’t.”

“Is your hearing that good?” The sound of the plane’s engines was a constant noise-canceling machine.

“When you master every decibel you can potentially create, then aim to avoid them, you become attuned to sound. No flushing, no water running. No cabinets opening or closing.” He held my gaze for a calculated beat. “No cardboard toilet paper roll turning against the spindle.”

Double Jesus. “Okay.”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” Of course I wasn’t.

“Then you’ll stay on the plane.”

I was beginning to seriously hate this pendulum of emotions. This time, it was anger, it was bright and hot, and I was throwing it at a too-calm intruding operator. “Don’t weaponize my fears against me. If I wanted to stay behind, I would’ve said so.” Then, because I couldn’t stop myself, more shitty anger spilled out in the form of antagonism because why not shoot the messenger? “If you’d let fear hold you back every time you got scared, I’m sure you would’ve missed a lot of missions, or at the very least, made different choices.”

This warfighter. He did *not* miss a single beat. “They’re called orders, not choices. With the exception of eight years ago, I followed every one.”

Properly chastised, even though his tone was nothing other than factual, I checked myself. “Of course. I’m sorry.”

“I own all of my actions. I’m not looking for an apology. Where’s your head at?”

Right. Emotions off, focus on the mission. But oh, how much easier said than done. “I just needed a breather. I’m…” I was about to say I was fine, but I stopped myself. “I’m as okay as I’m going to be.”

“Breather from what, specifically?”

He’d been forthright with me, so I was frank with him. “You.”

“Because?”

Shit. “Maybe I misspoke.” Heat flamed my cheeks. “More like, a breather from…” I pointed from me to him. “This.”

“Sexual tension?” With zero change in his tone or a single minuscule movement to indicate he was talking about anything other than something completely benign, he held my gaze with his impenetrable stare.

Unsure how to answer something I couldn’t fully grasp myself because I’d never experienced this before, I clung to the edge of his pool of dominance again. “You’re a lot to take in, Ares Grayson.” All six feet, four inches of him.

Leaning on the doorframe, his gaze steady, his eyes darker than usual, he merely nodded. “Understood.” He pushed off the frame but kept his head ducked so he could clear the doorway. “Come on. I need to kit you up.”

I glanced longingly at the small but lavish glass-enclosed shower. “Do I have time to quickly wash my hair?” And stand under a deluge of water until this entire thing was over?

Ares didn’t just turn around. He strode fully into the bathroom, came up to my back as I stood at the vanity, and without a single hesitation in his

predatory advance, he took the hair elastic off my wrist.

Then he was using his fingers as combs.

Pulling my hair back into a ponytail, threading the elastic, twisting the tangled locks, drawing them halfway through another turn of the elastic, he made a double loop like he did with his ropes, then he gave a sharp tug to tighten his creation.

Shivers cascaded over my body at warp speed, my hair was now in a messy bun that wasn't messy, and the entire, dominant incident took less than ten seconds.

More than a head taller than me, his eyes holding mine in the mirror, his hand landed possessively on my nape. "We'll shower after." His fingers gently applied pressure. Then he dropped his gaze and his arm, and retreated. "Time to get you dressed."

Angling his wide shoulders and impossible height through the doorway, he strode out of the bathroom.

Gobsmacked, desire coursing through me, staring at my new hairdo and now-flushed face in the mirror, I turned my head to the side.

Perfect.

The bun was perfect.

Dear God. How many women had he done this for?

"*Aracet*."

"Coming!"

A new level of jealousy consumed my soul, and I walked out of the private jet's bathroom.

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NINETY-ONE

Ares

I'd never thought of kitting up as sexual—until I fitted my brunette with Kevlar.

My headspace still in that fucking bathroom with my hands in her hair, I had to adjust the Velcro straps on her armored vest twice.

"It should be tight, but not too tight to breathe," I instructed, my voice sounding hoarse even to my own ears.

"Okay."

Her response, whispered and breathy, went straight to my cock as I tested the fit by sliding a finger along the side of her breast. "Good?"

"Mm-hmm."

Holding back a low growl of approval, I grabbed the leggings that'd been with the burqa. "Sit."

Holding the hem of my T-shirt as it skirted her thighs, she sat on the edge of the bed. "Do I have to wear the contacts?"

I should've said yes, but I was already bending toward this woman. "Not if you keep the burqa on." I squatted in front of her. "Do you know how to shoot?" Bunching the pants to make them easier to step into, never

having dressed a woman, not even Feralyn when she was young, I held the left side out first.

Pointing her toes, she stepped into the first pant leg, then the other as she nervously shook her head. “No.”

I started to pull the pants up her calves. “I’d like you to be armed.” Preferably with a fucking M4, but I’d be lucky to get a subcompact on her.

“I’ve got this.” Yanking the material from my hands, she stood and quickly pulled the leggings the rest of the way up, giving me a split-second view of that sweet cunt. “And I don’t think a gun is a good idea for me.”

Grabbing a holster and the small semiautomatic I’d left on the dresser when she was still asleep, I held them up. “Thigh holster and a Glock 42. The subcompact holds six rounds, and the holster will fit under the burqa.”

“I wouldn’t know how to use it.”

I made a mental note to teach her after this shit with al-Adani was handled. “Point and shoot.”

She crossed her arms over the vest. “You make it sound easy.”

It was. “Is that a yes?”

She bit her bottom lip.

Still squatting, I reached for her leg. “I’ll strap it on and you can—”

She stepped back.

I glanced up.

Her voice went south. “The last time I fired a gun, I shot at you.”

Immediately on high alert, I ran down every damn second of the first part of that op eight years ago—something I’d done thousands of times—

but this time I was looking at it from another angle. How the fuck did she know she'd shot at me? Short answer, she wouldn't. Not unless someone had said something to her. "Who told you that?"

"I didn't need anyone to tell me." Her gaze hit the floor. "I remember."

She couldn't remember what she hadn't seen. "You weren't aiming at me." I'd been out of her field of view, and the woman hadn't known what the fuck she was doing. Firing the round in my direction had been coincidental.

"I *know* I shot at you." Her throat moved with a hard swallow, then her gaze met mine, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Please don't make me carry a gun, Ares."

My name. Her lips. *Fuck*.

I stood and grabbed the burqa, fully fucking aware of the congruence between al-Adani and me. He'd put her in a burqa and shoved an AKM in her hands. I was about to put the same damn garment on her. But I wouldn't force her to carry.

"Copy. No gun." I put the black material over her.

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NINETY-TWO

Aracet

Ares was fluent in Arabic.

I didn't know why I hadn't thought of this, or the countless other details that a god of war would preternaturally, tactically engage over the course of a minute, let alone an hours-long car ride through bleak desert.

Ares sat on the narrower middle section of the old truck's bench seat, putting himself between me and their contact. He spoke Arabic with no discernible American accent that I could tell. His clothes, dusty rifle, shemagh, worn boots, and plastic-framed sunglasses all made him blend in—as much as his height allowed for.

Then there was his attention toward me.

When I'd hesitated getting into the single-cab truck with one of al-Adani's bodyguards after Ares had already gotten in, he'd tipped his chin once. After we were on the road, he'd periodically, covertly, rubbed his thigh against mine in a quick, three-part gesture—down, up, down. During the border crossing, when he'd handed over our fake passports, and I'd nervously leaned forward to look at the border patrol agent, he'd stealthily tapped his boot against mine two times. Then, after we were through the checkpoint, as he shoved our passports into his pocket, he'd used the back of his hand to tap my arm three times.

All of it was the nonverbal form of communication that he'd taught me as we'd gotten dressed on the plane.

One tap for yes or go.

Two taps for no or stop.

Three taps for everything was okay.

And the communication device in my ear was for emergencies.

For the past two hours, Ares, fully in warfighter mode, had kept me relatively calm. But as the old truck bounced over the uneven dirt road and crested the final hill before it dipped toward the desolate town two kilometers ahead, my leg started to bounce.

Ares's large, booted foot knocked against the toe of my boot twice.

Then the driver, who was supposedly one of al-Adani's bodyguards but who looked at least thirty years old, abruptly slammed on the brakes.

Before the truck lurched to a stop, Ares had moved.

His right arm shot across my chest to keep me from flying into the dashboard. Left-handing his rifle, he shoved the barrel point-blank against the guard's chest. A cloud of dust kicked up around the truck as Ares yanked the key from the ignition, and clipped out something in Arabic.

The guard switched to heavily accented English. "I want my money now."

Ares switched to English. "You'll get it once I see al-Adani."

"No," the guard argued. "I am not stupid. This is not what your Army calls reconnaissance. This is assassination. You will shoot Bin al-Adani

when you see him. His guards will shoot back. Then you will be dead, they will take your money, and I will have nothing. Give the money now."

Ares pressed the barrel of the rifle even harder into the man's chest. Then he spoke with a lethal calmness. "How about I shoot you now?"

Sweating under the restrictive burqa, cold fear snaked up my back.

Anger contorted the guard's face. "Then you will not get on the supply truck."

Dropping the car key on my lap, Ares gripped his rifle with both hands. His right finger overtook his left on the trigger. "I'll take my chances."

The guard didn't back down. "The men have orders to kill you if I do not return with you."

"I'll tell them you're a traitor."

For a heart-stopping moment, neither man said anything, and I couldn't breathe in the stifling hot cab of the truck.

The guard broke first. "Fine. Give me the papers."

Ares didn't drop his aim. "What papers?"

"The Jordanian passports for me and my wife." The guard got angry. "Give them to me!"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Ares countered.

The guard raised his voice even more. "Your man promised them to me! Give them now!"

For a split second, I thought Ares was going to kill the man. Then he very slowly reached inside his tactical vest and pulled out an envelope.

Handing it to me, he issued instructions. “Retrieve only the female passport. Then place it on the dashboard in front of you.”

I did as Ares asked. But I couldn’t help noticing the substantial amount of cash in American dollars that was inside the envelope next to the remaining passport. Neither Nix nor Ares had mentioned this detail, but I should’ve known an informant would not do anything for free. At least, not any of al-Adani’s men.

I handed the envelope back to Ares, and he slid it under his tactical vest.

Ares picked up the passport, but then held it just out of reach of the driver. “You have three choices. Take your wife’s passport now and get yours with the money after you follow through. Or get out of the truck.”

Fuming mad, al-Adani’s guard sneered at Ares. “That is two choices.”

“Third option. Take your last breath. Decide now. You have two seconds.”

The guard reached for the passport.

Ares handed it to him, then grabbed the car key from my lap. Shoving it back into the ignition, he issued the guard orders. “Drive. No stopping until we get to the supply truck.”

The guard said something in Arabic, but he turned the engine over. The barely functioning air-conditioning started back up with the foul stench of body odor and dirt, and the truck lurched forward.

Keeping his finger on the trigger, Ares lowered his rifle to his lap, but he didn’t take his aim off al-Adani’s man as he discreetly touched his right ear.

Then his voice whispered through the communication device in my ear. “You okay, *mátia mou*?”

My heartbeat, battered and frantic and barely contained by the tightly fitted Kevlar vest under my burqa, turned into a gallop.

I touched my boot to his once.

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NINETY-THREE

Ares

The fucking contact was losing it more than my brunette.

Muttering in Arabic that I was a dead man, he took the passport and ground the gears as he shifted into First.

The old Toyota pickup truck hit a divot in the dirt road, and I tapped on my comm before lowering my voice. “You okay, *mátia mou*?”

My brunette inhaled, then used the toe of her boot to hit mine once.

Yes.

She was okay, but I fucking wasn’t.

Something was going down.

The bodyguard was throwing off so many goddamn tells, I wanted to eliminate him. My sixth sense was hitting like a blast wave, and a half klick out from the town, I could already see there was a suspicious lack of activity.

Laundry drying on clotheslines, windows and doors closed, no vehicle or pedestrian movement.

“*Slow down*,” I ordered the guard in Arabic.

Cypher’s voice came through comms as the asshole hit another divot and bounced the Toyota Hilux through a rut. “Tracking your POS. Supply

truck idling near the southeastern perimeter of the village. Two tangos in the cab. Four more loaded into the back thirty minutes ago. All armed, no females. Additional SUV in proximity. White Land Cruiser, tinted windows. No eyes on occupants, but I've got four heat signatures inside. No movement since the SUV pulled up to the supply truck. Sitrep?"

Not answering Cypher, training my scope on the town ahead, scanning, I spotted the supply truck and the SUV—parked side by side.

Fuck.

I gave the guard one goddamn chance to come clean. "Who's in the white Land Cruiser with tinted windows?"

Suddenly stepping on the gas, the asshole replied in English. "I know no vehicle like that."

I fucking moved.

Reaching across the guard, yanking his door handle, I unloaded a round into his gut and got off a second shot to his head as I kicked him out of the vehicle.

Blood sprayed, the truck swerved, my brunette screamed, and I slid into the driver's seat. Keeping my foot on the gas, I jerked the steering wheel in a hard left as both the supply truck and the SUV swung around from their positions, aiming for us.

Cypher's voice came through comms as the first shots hit the truck. "Sitrep."

"We've been made. Taking fire. Contact down." I yanked the blood-splattered door shut, put the window down, positioned my M4 barrel out,

then spared Aracet a glance, but I couldn’t see shit through her burqa. “Talk to me, woman,” I demanded. “You good?”

“Exfil,” Nix ordered.

Ignoring Nix, my brunette dead still, I briefly let go of the wheel to grab her shoulder. “Aracet,” I barked. “Status.”

She jumped as a few more rounds hit the truck. “I-I-I’m okay.”

“Good. Hang on.” Whipping the old Hilux around, I scanned the rearview mirrors, then the open fucking desert in front of us before checking the gas gauge. “Cypher, how much firepower on that fucking truck?”

“Heavy ammo, but no RPG—”

A hailstorm of automatic fire hit the pickup.

Letting go of my M4, shoving Aracet’s head down as the passenger window exploded, I aimed the pickup off-road and swung a wide arc back toward the town. “Negative on exfil. We’re taking too much fire.” Middle of the day, ten hostile gunners between two vehicles—no fucking way was I attempting to outrun them across open desert all the way back to the border crossing. Solo, yes. With my brunette, fuck no. “Give me counterattack POS options in that fucking town, Cypher.” Otherwise, I was calling in the UCAV right fucking now.

“South-southwest side, past the wadi,” Cypher replied. “Two lanes north of the perimeter access road. Vacant two-story building, three open vehicle bays, rooftop sniper POS. Narrow street. Supply truck’ll get hung up if you lead in from the northeast.”

“Copy.” That’s all I needed—a few seconds’ advantage. “Confirming route. South infill past wadi, north heading, cross perimeter access, switchback west. Cypher, confirm.” More fucking rounds flew past the pickup.

“Negative,” Nix cut in. “Maintain engagement. Directional heading west. Repositioning satellites now. Five minutes for image capture of the hostiles in white SUV.”

My brunette’s voice came through comms a fraction of a second before I heard her over the automatic gunfire raining down. “H-He had white Land Cruisers. Before.”

Fuck Nix and his five minutes. Aracet’s ID of al-Adani’s vehicle was confirmation enough.

Flooring it, I hit the bank of a wadi, the truck caught air, and I gave my woman a warning. “Brace.”

We slammed down in the dry riverbed, and Aracet cried out.

The supply truck spun off, but the Land Cruiser followed. I tapped off my comms, grabbed my burner and dialed. Cell to my ear, I scanned my brunette. “Aracet, status.”

No response.

“*Aracet*.”

“I-I’m okay.”

The call connected. “I have eyes on your position.”

Shots hit the bed of the truck, and I swerved left. “How long to get that UCAV locked in?” Automatic fire sprayed the passenger side of the truck, and I swerved again.

“Already locked in,” November replied.

“Send it,” I ordered.

“Confirmed. Go for strike. Sending in T minus three… two…. Sent. Impact will be danger close. Repeat, danger close.”

“Copy.” More fucking rounds hit the pickup.

“Exfil riverbed on the south bank. Reengage supply truck into kill zone,” November ordered. “Maintain speed. Two minutes to impact. Wait for my instruction at T minus thirty seconds, then cut south and accelerate.”

“Roger. Driving out of the wadi now,” I replied to November before putting the call on speaker and tossing the cell onto the seat.

“Ares.” Sitting halfway up, my brunette gripped my thigh. “N-Nix. He’s demand—”

“Hold on, woman.” I cut a hard right and downshifted as we hit the steep bank of the wadi.

The tires spun, the truck lost speed, the Land Cruiser paralleled our position and its windows came down.

Then the fucker in the front passenger seat aimed a belt-fed at us.

“ARES!”

“Get down!” The Hilux’s tires caught the top of the riverbank, I swung my M4 toward the asshole, my woman ducked, and I unloaded.

Seven-six-two rounds ripped into the pickup, the windshield spidered, the rear window shattered, and Aracet screamed.

“Cut south. Repeat, CUT SOUTH.”

Glass everywhere, ears ringing, my woman prone, barely hearing November, I yanked the steering wheel to the right and floored it.

Then I gripped the back of Aracet's neck. "Open your mouth!"

The airstrike hit. The desert fucking exploded. The blast wave lifted the Hilux and compressed my lungs.

I grabbed the steering wheel with both hands.

Blood coated my right one.

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NINETY-FOUR

Aracet

The window on the white Land Cruiser went down, and everything went still—for a time-bending second.

The gunfire stopped. The truck's whining engine and spinning tires went quiet. The entire desert of hell instantly went silent as everything turned into slow motion, and I saw him.

Bin al-Adani.

The evil murderer, the terrorist, the monster who had beaten and drugged me for two years was looking right at me.

Then he hefted a giant gun and aimed at our truck.

Realtime slammed back into me, and I was yelling. "ARES!"

"Get down!" he ordered.

I ducked as the pickup cleared the top of the riverbank.

Ares swung his giant rifle toward my shattered window.

The small cab of the truck exploded with gunfire and hot shell casings.

Then I saw it.

A bullet pierced al-Adani's forehead.

I didn't have time to take a breath.

Fire ripped into my body.

Glass shattered.

I screamed.

Ares gripped the back of my neck.

The earth shook, and the desert turned into a giant ball of fire.

Heat, pressure, pain slammed into my chest.

My body collapsed.

I tried to take a last breath.

No air.

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NINETY-FIVE

Ares

No. FUCK NO. “Aracet!”

The truck slammed back down, the tires fought for purchase, the steering wheel shook, and I hit the brakes. “ARACET!”

November’s voice came from the still-connected call on the burner that was now in the footwell. “SUV and supply truck neutralized. New hostiles on your six. Three vehicles rapidly approaching impact zone. Charlie Mike. Repeat, Charlie Mike.”

My knife already in hand, my woman breathing but not responding, I yelled at November and the goddamn burner as I shoved glass off her and cut away the burqa. “Aracet’s down. Targets eliminated.” I shot that fucker with the belt-fed. “Continue what fucking mission?” If my brunette was dead, I was leveling this whole goddamn region.

My ears ringing, November’s voice was a distant echo. “Armed hostiles one klick north of your position. Exfil, EXFIL.”

“Not fucking moving!” Face down on her legs, her hair soaked in blood, the fucking burqa filleted open around her head and neck, I gave up being careful and ripped the material down her back. “Come on, woman.” In a fucking fury, goddamn desperate, I checked her pulse—thready but there. Then I was sifting through her hair, finger skimming for GSWs. “*Mátia*

mou.” FUCK FUCK FUCK. “Talk to me, beautiful.” *Please goddamn talk to me*.

Shouted Arabic and wild shots fired into the air carried across the desert a second before November issued an order. “Turn on your comms.”

Gently lifting her head, I yelled at November. “Fuck off!”

“COMMS.”

Holding her bloodied face, praying she opened those hazel eyes, scanning every-goddamn-where for GSWs, I shifted the weight of her head to one hand to tap on my comms and felt it. “I don’t have goddamn time for this, November.” Graze wound. Left temple. Not a GSW—*thank fuck*. But Christ. *Left fucking temple*.

“I’m patched in with Cypher and Nix. We’re all on the line. Sitrep,” November demanded.

“Fuck you, Nix.” Grabbing one of the few QuikClots I had from my vest, I tore open the packet with my teeth, then pressed the bandage to her temple.

“Hate me later,” the asshole replied. “Incoming hostiles. Oscar Mike.”

Ignoring Nix and the fucking glass and desert dust everywhere, leaning my unconscious brunette up against the seat, I grabbed a roll of gauze and quickly wrapped the QuikClot to secure it. Then I cut away the rest of the fucking burqa because the graze wound alone shouldn’t have made her lose consciousness.

“You’re out of time,” Cypher added.

“Directing Saint to H-4 Air Base in Jordan,” November cut in. “Grayson, head east, one hundred and thirty klicks.”

“Aracet’s hit, vehicle’s compromised.” Smelling fuel, I glanced at the fucking gas gauge as I ran my hands over her armor. *Goddamn it*. Two impacts, but the armor wasn’t pierced. “Gas tank took rounds. I won’t make it fifty fucking kilometers.”

“Get as far east as you can,” November replied. “Redirecting Saint to intercept.”

“Ground Control Station at H-4 has a Reaper in the air. No payload on board, but asking now for a low-altitude de-escalation flyover,” Nix added.

“Vandon’s status?” Cypher asked.

“Graze wound to the head, LOC, armor hit but intact. Potential blunt force trauma. Still assessing for more GSWs.” Quickly running my hands down her sides, then over her thighs, I fucking begged. “Come on, woman. Wake up.” I skimmed her lower legs and found it.

Back of her right calf, a through-and-through was bleeding like hell.

I grabbed a tourniquet and roll of QuikClot gauze.

“Reaper flyover incoming,” Nix stated.

“Three vehicles converging on your location,” November warned.

I got the tourniquet on her leg, and the Reaper buzzed our POS. A new fucking wave of rounds hit the truck and fired into the air after the RPA.

“Exfil, exfil, exfil,” Cypher ordered.

Throwing the pickup into gear, I hit the gas.

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NINETY-SIX

Ares

The Reaper shot past us, the three vehicles kept coming, and my woman slumped against the fucking mess of tempered glass fragments.

Shifting through the gears, I barked into comms. “Where the fuck is Saint?” I glanced at the gas gauge that’d dropped to empty.

“Three minutes to intercept,” November answered as the fuckers behind us kept firing off rounds.

My rearview mirrors shot off or shattered, I glanced back at the two pickups with two tangos each and the sedan with one driver. Then I scanned the desert and an outcropping ahead. “Is Saint solo piloting? Any heavy artillery on board?”

“Affirmative to solo,” Nix answered. “Negative on heavy firepower.”

Fucking Christ. I glanced again toward the jagged outcropping that was half a klick away, rapidly did the calculation, and made the call. “Turning due east for counterattack defensive position. Four hundred meters. Tell Saint to hover until hostiles are down.”

“Grayson—”

Done with this fucking bullshit, knowing this was my only tactical move, I tapped off my comms and wedged my M4 between the seat and the

door. Then I hit the gas for one final push, and yanked the steering wheel in a hard left.

The Hilux cut east, the driver's side tires drove up onto the rocks, the truck tipped at a seventy-five-degree angle, and I grabbed my brunette.

Yanking her to my chest, I locked my arms around her and twisted.

For a suspended second, the truck caught air.

Then it slammed down on its passenger side and slid.

My back hit rock, desert and the busted-out window frame of the passenger door. My chest took the weight of my woman, and dust filled the cab.

Holding my brunette, I kicked out the spidered windshield.

Then I was Oscar Mike.

Climbing out of the fucking cab, laying her at the front of the vehicle, reaching back in for my rifle, resting the barrel of the M4 on the now-vertical truck bed, I sighted through my scope.

Truck one, truck two, sedan. Eight hundred meters out.

I waited.

Six hundred meters out.

Waiting.

Five hundred meters.

Four hundred meters.

At three hundred and fifty meters, I took my first shot, then two more as incoming rotor wash sounded overhead.

All three drivers dead, the passengers in the two trucks firing at my POS, I pulled the trigger two more times.

The last two tangos eliminated, I shouldered my M4 and signaled up to the helo *all clear*.

The Leonardo AW139 landed fifteen meters out.

I picked up my unconscious woman and ran.

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NINETY-SEVEN

Ares

Saint lifted off.

With my brunette in my lap, I threw on a headset, then carefully fit her with one, avoiding her head wound as I issued Saint orders. “Specialty Hospital in Amman. Get as close as you can.” I’d used the facility once before and was familiar with the layout. “Med kit?”

“Behind your seat.” Low and fast, Saint flew nap-of-the-earth. “I’ve got a contact at King Hussein Medical City. If I call ahead, I can land on the helipad there.”

“Do it.” I grabbed his medical kit.

“Roger. You hit, too?”

“Negative.” Repositioning her on my lap so she wouldn’t pitch, I angled her back to my chest, cinched her tourniquet tighter, then grabbed new QuikClots and gauze.

Saint glanced back. “GSWs to the leg and head? Any other injuries?”

Holding her leg steady with my knees, pressing the QuikClots to the entry and exit wounds on her calf, I quickly wrapped gauze to secure the bandages. “Affirmative on GSWs. Armor took a couple rounds. Internal

blunt trauma unclear. LOC approximately five minutes. Potential concussion."

"Copy. Calling ahead now." Saint cut his intercom and switched to radio frequency.

Her lips parted, then her voice—*that sweet fucking voice*—came through my headset.

"Ares?"

Jesus fucking Christ, I could've wept. "I'm right here, beautiful." Careful of her head and leg, repositioning her again, I cradled her against my chest. "Hang in there. We're almost out of here. Can you open those gorgeous hazel eyes for me?"

"Noise." She didn't open her eyes. "Wind?"

"We're on a helo."

Her face tightened.

Silently cursing this full-circle bullshit, remembering every fucking second of our previous helo extraction, wishing like hell she didn't remember but seeing the lines in her face that said otherwise, I aimed to reassure her. "We're safe. No one's dying."

"He's dead. I saw." She reached for her temple.

I gripped her wrist. "Careful, *mátia mou*."

Her fingers extended, she felt the edge of her bandage. "You shot him." With a shaking hand, she touched the middle of her forehead. "Here."

"Yes, I did." But I was fucking enraged that I'd let her get shot in the process.

The tension in her face vanished. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. You’re injured.”

“I…” Her hand dropped, and her head sagged.

FUCK. “Come on, woman.” Gentle but firm, I tapped her cheek. “Don’t fall asleep on me now.”

No response.

“*Aracet*,” I barked.

She drew in a quick breath but still didn’t open her eyes. “Tired.”

I fucking exhaled. “I know, beautiful, I know. But stay with me.” I flipped up my mic and yelled over the cabin noise. “SAINT.”

Nodding once, he switched his headset back to intercom. “Go.”

“ETA,” I demanded.

“Thirty-eight minutes.”

Fuck. “Fly faster.”

“Already hugging the ground at twenty-five feet, doing a hundred and twenty knots. If you want max speed, you know the trade-off.”

Fucking no-fly zone. I did know the tradeoff. More speed meant more altitude, which would put us on radar. “Copy. Get us there in one piece.”

“Plan on it,” Saint replied, scanning the desert.

I stroked my brunette’s cheek. “You still with me, *mátia mou*?”

“Ares?”

Come on, woman, open your eyes. “Right here.”

“The wind…. Have you heard it… whistle through the pine trees in Yosemite… in winter?” Her voice hoarse, she didn’t wait for a response. “Sounds like rushing…. Tinkling sheets of ice…. Cold sound. But delicate.”

“What were you doing in Yosemite in the middle of winter?” I asked the question to keep her talking, but I also wanted to know how the fuck I’d missed her being in a national park.

“Camping. Squatting…. Trying not to freeze to death. Little girl…. Scary.” The helo pitched, and her head lolled.

Catching her cheek, I brought her closer to my chest as I scanned the desert for fucking hostiles. “How old were you?”

Not answering my question, she coughed, then winced. “Heard the wind through the palm trees too…. Where you live. Giant silver palms…. Thick trunks.” She coughed again, and blood came up.

Fuck. FUCK. “Aracet, are you struggling to breathe?”

She ignored my question. “The palm fronds clatter… in the wind. So loud… like clapping. Sounds like… sounds like… stacked blocks falling. Not a cold sound.”

Goddamn it. “I asked you a question.” Shoving my headset off one ear, I leaned down to her chest, but I couldn’t hear shit over the engine noise.

“Do you know what else I’ve heard?” Her cadence suddenly sharper, she picked up her head.

My gaze immediately cut to her.

Looking right at me, she gave me her hazel-eyed stare. “I’ve heard your breath after your deep voice mutters Greek. When you exhale, it doesn’t

sound like wind.” Her eyes fluttered shut. “It sounds… it sounds like…” Her neck lost tension, and her head slumped.

“*Aracet*.”

A too-short breath hitched through her lungs. “Like life. You sound… like my life.”

Her chin fell to her chest.

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NINETY-EIGHT

Aracet

Lights.

People speaking in tongues.

Stark blue eyes and dirty-blond hair.

Ares.

I reached for him….

A mask covered my face.

Wait!

I need…

I was floating.

I wasn’t floating.

My head was throbbing. Something was beeping. I blinked.

Too many lights.

My leg was burning.

Angry voices were arguing… in another language?

A man appeared above me. Golden eyes, black hair. “She’s awake.”

The arguing stopped, the black-haired man disappeared and another man, older, in a white coat, looked down at me. Gray hair, dark eyes. He

smiled. “*Keef halek*?”

“She speaks English.”

That voice! *I’d know that voice anywhere*.

“Of course.” The older man switched to English. “How are you feeling?”

“Ares,” I rasped.

A strong, calloused hand grasped mine. “Right here, *mátia mou*.”

I turned toward his voice and saw those stark eyes that I needed to see, but pain exploded on the left side of my head, and I winced.

The older man started speaking rapidly, but not in English, and not to me.

It struck me all at once.

The mission, the shooting, the explosion. The monster was dead.

Bin al-Adani is dead.

The older man looked down at me and switched back to English. “You have two gunshot wounds, a concussion, pulmonary contusions, and are on IV antibiotics. Despite what your husband is saying, you need to stay in the hospital at least overnight. I will get the nurse to administer more pain medication now.”

Panic hit—for everything he’d said—but most of all because of the last part. No drugs. Not again. “No.” I yanked on Ares’s hand with all the strength I had. “Do *not* drug me.”

“No opiate pain meds,” Ares firmly stated.

The older man, the doctor, immediately switched back to what I now recognized as Arabic.

“English,” Ares demanded.

The doctor looked at me. “You’ve had surgery. The anesthesia and pain management you were given will soon wear off. We had to perform significant debridement to your leg wound, less so to your head wound. Right now, you need rest and pain management.”

I squeezed Ares’s hand.

He immediately spoke up. “She says no pain meds.”

The doctor’s expression tightened. “May I ask why?”

Ares raised an eyebrow at me.

I barely shook my head.

Ares looked back at the doctor. “Because it’s her choice.”

The doctor’s expression smoothed out, then his tone changed. “I see.” He nodded. “Instead of morphine, I can prescribe a lesser narcotic.” He said a name I did not know. “It will manage the pain, but it comes with a lower risk of dependency. Shall we try that?”

I looked at Ares, but suddenly the pain in my leg and head was increasing, the beeping noise became faster, and I started to panic. I didn’t want to be in a hospital in whatever country we were in, and irrational fear that I wouldn’t be allowed to leave started to suffocate me.

Ares leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Take a slow breath. You’re safe. I’m right here.” He squeezed my hand. “Another breath. Deeper this time.”

I inhaled, and my chest burned. “Hurts.”

“Your chest is bruised, but the imaging shows no internal bleeding or broken ribs. You’re going to be okay.”

I took a shallow breath and begged. “Don’t leave me.”

Darkness flashed across his eyes. “That’s never going to happen. Do you remember what I told you?”

Bonded. Tears welled. “Yes.”

“Good.” Ares nodded once. “Now I’m going to ask you to trust me. I see the pain in your eyes, and I know your fears, but I also know your strength. I’ve taken the medication the doctor’s offering. Short-term use, you’ll be fine, and it’ll help with the pain.”

Everything hurt, and my thoughts spun out of control. “What if I want more and more drugs for the pain?”

“You’re going to heal, so you won’t need them. But I’d also never let it get to that point. In two days, your chest will feel better. In seven to fourteen days, there’ll be skin closure over the wounds. A few more weeks after that, you’ll have regained full strength.”

My god of war. “You’re speaking from experience.” My heart shattered at the thought of him in pain.

His voice lowered with warfighter dominance. “I’d like you to take the medication, Aracet.”

“I don’t want to be here,” I whispered, trying to shift away from the burn in my leg, but the second I did, breath-stealing pain made me gasp.

Ares immediately issued the doctor an order. “Give her the pain medication.”

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NINETY-NINE

Aracet

One second, a nurse was pushing a needle of something into my IV as sun streamed into the hospital room.

The next, I was being jostled, and I opened my eyes to darkness.

Then my body was lifted, pain flared in my leg and head, and I drew in a breath. "*Ares*."

"Hold on, *mátia mou*. Quick relocation. I got you." Holding me like an infant, cradling me to his chest, Ares angled us out of a vehicle.

My throat parched, my voice was barely a rasp. "Hurts."

"I know." Warm lips touched my forehead. "Give me thirty seconds to get you on board."

Heat and dryness surrounded my body, and suddenly I was in the past as I looked up at a night sky full of stars. "Board?"

"The Gulfstream. We're going home."

Home. "I don't have a home."

Ares's strong arms shifted underneath my knees and back, and pain curtailed my thoughts. "Saint, you got the IV?"

"Roger," a man's voice replied. "On your six."

“Moving,” Ares stated.

“Moving,” the other man repeated.

Ares carried me up airstairs and into a dimly lit cabin. Then he headed to the stateroom in the back of the plane and carefully laid me down on the bed.

The man with the golden eyes and black hair reached over Ares as he was placing a pillow under my leg, and hung an IV bag on a hook I hadn’t noticed before. Then we made eye contact, but the man didn’t speak. He didn’t even nod. He stared at me for a telling second, then turned to leave.

Ares glanced at the man he’d called Saint. “Meds?”

“On the credenza.” Saint walked out of the stateroom, closing the door behind him.

Ares turned toward the built-in dresser, the engines of the jet started up, and then things were happening too fast.

The plane was taxiing. Ares had put on gloves and was checking my IV line and bag. Then he had three prefilled syringes from a small black bag on the dresser, and he was using a sterile alcohol swab to wipe one end of the Y-shaped line coming out of my arm that wasn’t attached to the IV bag.

The jet’s engines roared like we were about to take off, my body started to shake, and I panicked. “Wh-What are you doing?”

Squatting on one knee next to the bed, Ares carefully laid his arm over my waist and held me down as the jet thrust forward. “Keeping you secure as we take off, then giving you another dose of antibiotics.”

The plane lifted off, my body shifted, and pain radiated from my leg.

Ares removed his arm from my waist, picked up the first of three syringes, and inserted it into my IV.

“Wait.” *Oh God*. “Wh-What is that?”

With his eyes on me, he pushed the syringe plunger. “Saline flush.”

“H-How do you know how to do this?”

In Delta operator mode, his cold blue eyes steady, his voice was detached. “Tactical Combat Casualty Care and experience.”

I nodded, but then my head hurt right along with everything else.

Picking up a second syringe, he didn’t wait for me to ask what it was. Uncapping the needle, tapping the vial and then depressing the plunger until a tiny bead of liquid appeared at the end, his movements were quick, efficient and practiced as he pushed the syringe into my IV. Then he looked at his watch. “This is the antibiotic. It’ll be a slow push over five minutes.” He depressed the plunger only a small amount. “After I finish this, I’ll do another saline flush, then give you more pain meds and let you sleep.”

I didn’t want more pain medication, but I also didn’t want to hurt, and I was desperate for sleep. “Okay.”

He glanced at his watch, gave the syringe another minuscule push, then scanned my body. “You’re shivering. Is that from nerves or the cabin temperature?”

I suddenly remembered a winter in Yosemite when I was a child. I was cold, but not that cold. “Just chilled.”

Without comment or letting go of the syringe and my IV, Ares stood and single-handedly reached into an overhead storage compartment, coming

away with a blanket. Shaking it out, then carefully laying it over me, he once again squatted, checked his watch, and pushed on the syringe.

Five minutes later, after injecting the second saline syringe, then putting a pill directly in my mouth, he held the back of my head and tipped a water bottle to my lips. “Drink.”

Feeling like I would never quench my thirst, I eagerly drank.

After a few sips, he pulled the bottle away.

Then my warfighter looked down at me with the deadliest expression I’d ever seen. “You were mistaken earlier about not having a home.” His voice sank into pure dominance, and he shattered my entire existence. “I’m your home.”

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ONE HUNDRED

Ares

I waited until the pain meds hit her system and she fell asleep, then I grabbed the supplies to change her leg bandage.

A single knock sounded before Nix opened the bulkhead door and scanned my brunette. “Her status?”

Still too pissed to talk to the asshole, I didn’t answer as I checked the last infusion for hydration I was giving her.

Nix leaned against the credenza. “No leaked intel or chatter from the op, our extended hold on the apron in Amman, or the twenty-two hours at the medical complex. Cypher wiped all digital footprints, DNA confirmed on al-Adani, and the account funds were tracked and seized. Mission success.”

Getting in his face but keeping my voice low so I didn’t wake her, I fucking seethed. “She’s shot, your contact burned us, and you’re a goddamn asshole. That’s the last fucking time you use her.”

“If we didn’t pull her in for this op, someone else would have, and the parameters would’ve been out of our control. You know this.”

“Doesn’t fucking make it right.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He nodded at her. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s in pain and fucking terrified.” My woman told me she didn’t have a goddamn home. “How the hell do you think she’s doing?”

The asshole SEAL didn’t miss a beat. “You’ll take care of her.” He glanced at his watch. “Slight reroute. There’s weather on the radar and a backup at Executive in Miami. We’re landing at FXE. One of the company Yukon’s will be waiting, and Talerco will meet us on the ground in Lauderdale. He’s been read in on her status. Once he clears her, Cypher and I will hold for a positioning flight, and you can head back to Miami.”

“I didn’t ask for Talerco.” Talon Talerco, former SARC and arguably the best combat trauma medic I’d dealt with, was Paragon Ops’s unofficial medical backup. He was also a relentless flirt with women. “Aracet’s stable.” I’d stolen the meds I’d needed before I’d snuck her out of the hospital in Jordan, and the G800 was stocked with triage supplies. If my woman had internal bleeding, was critical, or I’d been unable to handle her needs solo, I wouldn’t have exfilled her from the hospital. And Saint sure as hell wouldn’t have helped.

“I called Talerco.” Crossing his arms, Nix nodded toward the lav. “Shower. I’ll keep watch.”

“I’m changing her bandages.” Except for when she’d been in surgery, I hadn’t left her side. Even then, I’d stood outside the fucking operating room.

“It’s been twenty-six hours since the helo exfil,” Nix stated.

I knew exactly how long it’d been.

When I didn’t reply, Nix exhaled and shook his head. “Christ, you can be like your brother.” He jerked his chin toward the lav. “Go fucking

shower, soldier.”

I glared at Nix, but then I grabbed clean clothes from my go bag and hit the en suite.

Ten minutes later, I was in bed with my brunette, her bandages were changed, her breathing was slow and even, and I could finally take a fucking breath.

I closed my eyes.

Except for a midflight rousing where I removed her IV, gave her more pain meds, and she asked to use the bathroom, we slept the entire flight.

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ONE HUNDRED & ONE

Aracet

I woke to a blond-haired man grinning down at me. “There she is.” He smelled like coconuts and the ocean. “What’s shakin’, Graysonette?”

“Talerco,” Ares snapped in warning, but it was too late.

Disoriented and nauseous, panic spread at seeing the stranger, and I sat up. Pain shot from my leg, dizziness struck, and I started to fall back as my head spun.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa there, Nine Lives.” The blond man gripped my shoulders. “Wait ’til War God here gets you up. No passin’ out on my watch. Speakin’ of, gonna check this graze wound first. See whatcha got goin’ on. Sound good?”

As the new man held my shoulders, Ares sat behind me, and I belatedly realized we were still on the plane in the stateroom, but we weren’t flying. Daylight was also coming in through the windows.

Then I remembered I’d woken sometime during the flight, had to go to the bathroom, and Ares had carried me—literally sat me on the toilet—and I’d peed in front of him… while wearing a hospital gown.

I looked down.

Hospital gown.

Jesus.

As Ares made a human chair behind me, his chest as my backrest, his legs straddling my hips, he spoke near my ear in his quiet, calm tone. “Talon Talerco was a combat medic. He’s going to check your wounds, then we’ll deplane.”

Could this get any worse? “Does he have to?”

Just like in the hospital, Ares didn’t hesitate. “No.”

Keeping my head down, avoiding eye contact with Talon, I spoke as quietly as possible to Ares. “Then why is he here?”

“A second opinion,” Ares stated matter-of-factly.

The pain medication had worn off, but I didn’t care. Eight years ago, I’d had injuries that’d hurt just as much, and minus the dizziness that I was telling myself was just lack of food or water, I was clearheaded enough to figure out what was going on. Ares was worried. “Do you think I need a second opinion?”

Talon chuckled. “I like this Graysonette, War God. She’s a keeper. I think y’all should make babies and name ’em somethin’ that starts with A. In the meantime, Miss Vandon, do you need me to reassure you of my confidentiality or of War God’s nursin’ abilities? Normally, when I’m seein’ this much distrust, I’d ask if you need me to extract you from the situation. But I don’t think that’s the issue here, darlin’. Am I wrong?”

I didn’t know if it was the mention of my last name, the sudden but incomprehensible and yet already fully formed image of Ares as a father, or Talon’s threat of taking me away from Ares that had me instantly freaking out, but I flinched. Then I was shivering, and I just wanted this all to be over with. “I do not want to be taken away from Ares.”

“That’s what I was suspectin’, darlin’, but thanks for answerin’. And for what it’s worth, you’re in good hands. Now, how ’bout that checkup? Promise, it won’t take more than a few minutes.”

Ares’s left hand fisted, but then it was as if he caught himself showing a display of anger, and his fingers straightened out on his thigh. “Let Talerco look at the wounds.”

I nodded in consent.

Talon was quick. More efficient than any of the Army doctors I’d been subjected to years ago, he methodically but thoroughly checked everything. Unwrapping my calf, checking both sides, and rewrapping it with a fresh bandage quicker than Ares had when he’d changed it midflight, Talon then removed the bandage from my head. Lifting my hair and looking at my temple, he told Ares to leave the head wound unbandaged, checked my eyes and gave clipped instructions for my leg wound care. Then he sat back on his haunches. “Questions?”

Apparently, I passed inspection. Relieved it was over, and all too glad to have the gauze off my head to care about what the hell my hair looked like, I glanced up and met Talon’s gaze. “No questions. Thank you.”

Talon smiled with the same kind of ease as Pasqual. “Nothin’ doin’, darlin’. Nothin’ doin’.” Then he stood with the exact warfighter presence that Ares had—strong, lethal, controlled—right before he gave me a mischievous wink and rattled off a phone number. “You call me if that changes, darlin’. And for the record, chicks with scars?” His smile turned into a grin. “*Sexy*.” Drawing the word out, he winked at me one more time, then glanced at Ares, and his expression turned deadly serious. “You know the drill, War God. Any signs of infection, get her to an ER. And rehab that

leg when she's ready." Grabbing a black bag with a red cross stitched on it, Talon threw me one more smile, then headed out of the stateroom.

I exhaled, and Ares curved his body around mine.

His shoulders came in, his hands braced on his knees, his thighs bracketed mine, and his breath landed on my neck, but he didn't otherwise touch me. "*Mátia mou,*" he quietly murmured.

I closed my eyes, and for a moment, we just sat together.

I breathed him in. His scent, his strength. I listened to his heartbeat. I settled into his warmth. I fell in love with a silent god of war.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"For?"

"Killing him. Giving me closure I didn't know I needed. Not making me stay behind." I carefully turned my head and looked up at the beautifully austere Delta operator who had saved me in every way I'd needed saving, but also gave me the autonomy I'd needed. "I know you didn't want me to go with you."

"I didn't want you injured," he corrected, his voice rougher and deeper than usual.

"I know." Daring, and yet feeling more right than anything I'd ever done, I reached up and stroked the shadow that'd grown along his jaw. "I'm still saying thank you."

His long fingers encircled my wrist. "Aracet."

Nix appeared at the door. "Yukon's on the apron, and we just got clearance for our positioning flight. Your call."

“We’re driving.” Carefully but quickly, Ares extracted himself from behind me and stood.

Then he assembled himself into the warfighter.

He shouldered a black bag, pocketed a cell phone and keys, picked up a gun, dropped the magazine, slammed it back home, then shoved the weapon into his back waistband and reached for me.

“Need assistance?” Nix asked.

“Negative.” Wrapping the sheet from the bed around me, Ares picked me up, and Nix stepped back.

Then my Delta operator carried me off the airplane.

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ONE HUNDRED & TWO

Ares

"Half a pill," I argued, standing at the open passenger door of my company Denali.

My hazel-eyed brunette stared up at me without mercy. "No."

I'd gotten her off the plane and into the SUV without incident. Then I'd made the critical error of asking her if she wanted the next dose of pain meds.

I repeated the same damn argument I'd given her five seconds ago. "You're overdue."

"I'm okay right now."

"Woman," I stated, exasperated and fucking inappropriately thinking about how if she were in my ropes, I'd force-feed her the damn pill.

Her expression softened, and same as on the plane, she reached for my damn face.

I gave her fair warning. "You touch me right now, we're going to have a problem."

Arm up, hand halfway to my jaw, she froze. "What kind of problem?"

The kind where I slammed my mouth over hers, then looked for the nearest hotel so I could sink inside that sweet cunt and fuck her into submission. "One you're not ready for. Last time I'm asking." Next time, I

was ordering her to take the damn pill if she needed it. “Pain med, yes or no?”

She dropped her arm, but her expression remained soft. “No, thank you.”

“Copy.” Pocketing the bottle of pills, I unshouldered my go bag, fished out a couple of items, then fit the duffle into the footwell. Adjusting the sheet that was partially wrapped around her, rolling half of it up, I placed it on top of the go bag, then lifted her leg onto the makeshift footrest. “Okay?”

She shifted slightly in her seat. “Yes. Thank you.”

Every time this woman thanked me, I thought about fucking her. I also couldn’t stop looking at her face or the graze wound that was practically on top of where my and Chaos’s fragmented rounds had hit her all those years ago. The docs in Jordan had cleaned her up. Her hair wasn’t soaked in blood anymore, but the side of her face was bruised, and they’d shaved around the wound. She looked like she’d been through fucking hell, but Jesus, she was beautiful.

Muttering a “Welcome,” I activated a couple of instant ice packs I’d taken from the plane, then placed them on either side of her calf. Handing her two protein bars I’d also grabbed from the Gulfstream, I nodded at the bottled waters in the center console cup holders. “Eat and drink. We have an hour drive.”

“Okay.”

Refraining from kissing her, I shut the door, and my burner rang. Ignoring it, I got behind the wheel, turned over the engine, and adjusted the AC temp for her.

My brunette held out one of the protein bars for me.

For a fraction of a second, I stilled. The gesture small, the impact leveling, I stared at the only woman besides my sister who'd ever offered me food. I'm sure my mother fed Helios and me when we were young, but I had no memory of it.

This, I would fucking remember.

Shot, bruised, in a hospital gown, needing the sustenance far more than me, my brunette was still giving it up.

I didn't take the offering lightly or diminish it with dominance and tell her to eat. I accepted the bar. "Thank you."

The same innocent flush from the coffee shop when I'd given her that latte spread across her cheeks. "You're welcome."

Unwrapping my bar, I ate half in one bite, then threw the SUV into Drive. As I pulled out of Lauderdale Executive, another call came through on my burner, this time the number showing on the Denali's touchscreen display.

Swallowing a bite of her bar, my woman glanced from the screen to me. "H?"

"My brother." Sending him to voicemail, I finished my bar, uncapped one of the waters for her, and pulled onto the highway

Helios called back.

Taking the bottle, she shifted in her seat again. "Please don't feel as if you need to censor your life because of me."

Ignoring the call, I glanced at her and saw the pain in her eyes. It was fucking killing me, but I'd respect her decision on the pain meds—for now.

“One, Helios drew on you.” I still hadn’t forgiven him for that. “Two, I’m not censoring. You’ve now seen every aspect of my life. I don’t have anything to hide, but I will shield you when I deem it necessary.”

“By your brother’s reaction to me, I’m assuming he knew the men who were killed. So please don’t blame him on my behalf. I’m not angry with him, and you can’t protect me from everything.” Her voice turned quiet. “I am who I am, Ares.”

I took in her perspective, then gave mine back. “I don’t want you running anymore.”

She stared out the front windshield like she was staring down the barrel of her past.

Going against my need to protect her, to crowd her thoughts with my presence, I gave her room to think.

A minute later, she slowly turned her head toward me. “Just to confirm, every city, every town over the past five years, you were there. Every time I thought I saw you, that actually was you.”

“It was.”

“Then what would this”—she gestured between us—“be?”

I looked at my brunette. “Our beginning.” A second fucking chance to do it right. “No hiding.” I held out my hand, palm up. “No running.”

She glanced from my hand to me. “And… everything else?”

“We work it out. Together.”

My brunette gave me her hand. Then her voice caught with emotion. “Together.”

“Yes.” Bringing our joined hands to my lips, I kissed the back of hers. “Talerco was right.”

A chill raced up her arm. “About?”

I winked at my woman. “Scars are sexy.”

The touchscreen display lit up with another call from Helios.

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ONE HUNDRED & THREE

Ares

Resigned, I accepted the call through the Denali's Bluetooth, but I gave Helios a fucking warning. "We're not past your bullshit at the penthouse, I'm not discussing it now, and unless Feralyn is injured, stop calling."

"What the fucking fuck?" Helios asked, ignoring every damn thing I'd said. "You were radio silent because you were in the goddamn hospital?"

Christ. "Not as a patient. This conversation's over."

"The fuck it is," Helios snapped. "Haven's freaking the fuck out, you asshole."

Feralyn's voice sounded in the background. "Helios, please. Just tell me if he's okay."

"Put Feralyn on the line," I demanded.

"Fuck no, motherfucker. I'm putting you on speaker…. Now you're on speaker. Fucking talk."

"Feralyn, hello."

"*Oh my God*, Ares. Are you okay? You sound tired. Helios said you were in the hospital?"

"I didn't fucking say it," Helios argued. "Nix did. Which, what the actual fuck, asshole? I should've known before that prick. I'm your goddamn brother, not him."

“Helios,” Feralyn chided. “Let Ares talk.”

“I’m fine, Feralyn.” But my brunette wasn’t. Shifting again, she let go of my hand to remove the cold packs and adjust her leg.

“Please come over. I can make dinner. *Please*,” Feralyn begged, when she never fucking begged.

“I’m not alone, Feralyn. Another time.”

“Who the fuck is with you?” Helios demanded. “Is that fucking trait—”

“Stand the fuck down, Helios,” I barked.

Aracet glanced at me.

Fuck my brother. “Feralyn, I’ll speak to you soon. Hanging up now.”

“Ares, wait. Helios, stop it. Ares, please come over. Bring your friend. I just want to see you. I know—I mean, I heard… I’m just worried.”

“You should go over,” Aracet quietly interjected.

Feralyn immediately caught it. “Hello? Is that who’s with you?”

I mentally fucking groaned, which made me sound more like Helios than I ever wanted to admit. “We’ll talk soon, Feralyn.”

“Please. She can come, too. We can swim while Helios grills.”

“*Jesus fucking Christ*, woman,” Helios bitched. “Now you’re volunteering me for dinner duty?”

Ignoring Helios’s bullshit, I addressed Feralyn. “She just got out of the hospital. She’s not cleared for swimming yet.” I didn’t know if my brunette swam at all. But the idea of her in a swimsuit, showing off those breasts, suddenly had me seeing red.

Feralyn's inherent kindness came out. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I hope she's okay?"

"I'm all right. Thank you for asking," Aracet answered. "But it sounds like you want to see your brother. I told him he should come over. I'll be fine on my own."

Helios, Feralyn, and I went silent.

Then Helios broke the ice. "Stepbrother," he corrected. "That motherfucker may say he's Haven's brother, but the reality is you need a goddamn cheat sheet to navigate the fucking shit show that's our family tree. Speaking of shit shows, you may as well come over, Vandon. Bring my asshole brother with you."

Before I could put Helios in his place, Aracet answered. "I'm not driving."

Helios snorted. "Ares knows the goddamn way. He lived here for nine fucking years when it wasn't even his goddamn house. Did he tell you that?"

"One more word, Helios," I warned.

"And you'll what?" Helios challenged. "Passive-aggressively punish Haven by staying away another few months?"

"*Helios*," Feralyn reprimanded. Then, "Vandon, is it? I'm so sorry. No one's being punished, but please come over—if you're feeling up to it. We'd love to meet you. I'll make us all dinner."

I was about to decline, but my brunette beat me to it. "Thank you for the offer. Maybe another time. But I think Ares should come over."

“Feralyn, hold.” I put the call on mute. “I’m not making excuses for Helios, he’s an asshole. But I do want to know why you’re pushing me away.” Less than five minutes ago, she’d agreed—no more running.

“Cursing aside, I think your brother seems more worried and protective than an asshole. But I’ll take your word for it. Like I said, you should go over.” Leaning her head back against the seat, she closed her eyes. “And I’m not pushing you away. Your family wants to see you.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you.” I also didn’t miss how she said *your family*.

“That’s going to make for a boring next couple of days, then. I plan on sleeping before I need to—”

Feralyn’s voice came through the speaker, cutting Aracet off. “Ares? I have another idea for you and Vandon.”

With my brunette’s partially unsaid comment ricocheting in my head like a damn bunker-buster, I took the call off mute. “Her name’s Aracet, and she’s too tired for company. We’ll be in touch.”

Feralyn didn’t let it go. “When will you be home? I’ll just drop off dinner.”

“Not necessary.”

“Nice fucking try,” Helios grunted with his usual derision. “And I’m not telling Haven no. So make up your mind, asshole. You come here, or we show up there with food. If we’re mobilizing, tell me which fucking place you’re heading to.”

Resigned to get this over with, I gave up the location. “Bentley. ETA forty-five minutes.”

“We’ll see you in sixty,” Helios confirmed.

“Copy.” I ended the call and glanced at my woman. Her eyes were still closed, but I saw the strain on her face. “I’ll make sure they don’t stay long. Feralyn’s well-intentioned, but Helios is—”

“A lot like you, but with swearing?”

I looked back at the road. “Outside of genetics and both of us being Delta, we’re nothing alike.”

She didn’t reply.

My restraint held for ten seconds. Then I glanced at her.

Eyes open, head turned toward me, eyebrows raised, her look said it all.

Without a word, I focused back on driving.

Five minutes later, my brunette was asleep.

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ONE HUNDRED & FOUR

Aracet

Disoriented, I woke with a start.

Dark walls, one made of glass, two motorcycles and a sports car. We were in the sky garage of his penthouse, and a very intense, very still Delta operator was standing at my open car door, staring down at me.

His voice, while quiet, cut through a suddenly tense silence. “What do you need to do in a couple days?”

Oh. Right. What I’d been about to say when his sister and brother were on the phone. “Work.” I needed to call Hailey before I lost the job altogether.

“You’re not going back to the coffeehouse.”

“I—” Wait. “What?”

“How much pain are you in?”

It sounded like a rhetorical question. “That’s not the point.”

“Answer the question, Aracet.”

Every time he said my name, it did something to me. It wasn’t just his voice, and right now it certainly wasn’t his clipped tone, but it was… something. My nerves tingled, my heart fluttered, and I was blurting out my laundry list of complaints I already wanted to move on from. “My leg is throbbing, my chest is significantly less sore than in the hospital, my head is

only a dull ache, and I desperately want a shower, my own clothes, and I need to walk—to know that I can."

"You are not going back to work," he asserted, as if it were law.

I broke eye contact for a brief second just so I could have a single breath without his intensity. Then I glanced back up at a Delta operator who looked mad enough to kill. "What did you think I was going to do?" Clearly, he had money, but I didn't. And as uncomfortable as it was to talk about, it definitely needed to be said. "I have very limited funds. Or I did. I don't even know where my purse is anymore." Which, *fuck*. My purse. And Jesus, my boots. I had on hospital socks. "I don't even have shoes, Ares. I need to work."

"No, you do not need to work. I'll support us, and your purse is secure in my go bag, along with your boots."

He stated what would be a dramatic life shift so calmly and rationally that for a moment, I was stupefied.

Taking my silence as acquiescence, he nodded once. "Good." Leaning into the SUV, he undid my seat belt. "You'll spend the next few weeks healing and rehabbing. Then we'll take it from there." His arms slid under me.

"Wait."

He froze but he didn't retreat, and for a horrible second, I thought of my safe word.

Jesus, I wasn't going there. This was just a conversation. This wasn't—I didn't know what the hell to call the dynamic from the club that'd come roaring back in less than a blink. Or how easily I'd fallen into it and the

notion of him supporting me. But the racing tingles and almost unbearable anticipation of him carrying me again when my leg was shit, my head was spinning, and I needed the bathroom and a damn shower was the most alarming part.

“Ares, please.” I closed my eyes, sucked in a breath, and his intoxicating scent filled my head. Suddenly, I wanted to name it so I could capture his evocative musk, but I couldn’t pinpoint any single source. It was soap and freshly dried laundry. It was metal and leather and dark desert nights. It was the whispers of his environment that always shifted with him—rain, motorcycle, gunpowder, airplane, expensive new SUV—all of it contributing to his heady, mouthwatering scent. Raw and warm, masculine and primal, Ares Grayson smelled like danger and home. A home I’d never had, but now I had his words. *I’m your home*. And dear God, I couldn’t think clearly with him this close. “I just… I need a moment.”

He withdrew his arms.

The sudden loss of him was more painful than my head and leg combined, but I needed to explain myself. I needed him to not be angry with me. “Please don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry, Aracet.”

I glanced up at him. Oh, that stark, atmospheric-eyed gaze. So cold, yet so endlessly deep. He looked down at me with zero anger in his expression, and that was the problem. He was looking at me with no expression. “Please don’t turn into the warfighter right now.”

His chest rose, and his stance shifted. “All right.”

Nothing in his expression gave. He was still the Delta operator. But maybe… maybe this was Ares protecting himself. Or bracing. Either way, I

tried to quickly form an entire childhood's worth of neuroses into a single coherent explanation.

"Until I was seventeen, my life was a series of transient, unstable situations. My mother was a hanger-on, my father ran every con you can imagine, and I was passed around to anyone who would house me. I learned early to take care of myself, work any job I could get, save money, and be patient. My goal was to turn eighteen, be financially prepared when I did, then leave the madness. But then my cousin, who I had an unhealthy attachment to because she was close in age, said she was getting on a plane and marrying some guy she met online. I knew it was bad. So, when she wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't even consider not getting on that plane, I used every cent I had to buy a one-way ticket. It was the wrong choice. My cousin…" Time had taken away the hate in my heart for her, but I still hated myself for that decision. "She was a lost cause. But I didn't have to be. If I'd had money to get right back on a plane once I saw what was happening, then maybe everything would've been different."

"I saw the airport security footage," Ares stated in the same unemotional tone. "You would've been taken regardless."

I quickly processed the fact that he'd seen the footage, that what he said was the same narrative as those military psychiatrists, and I shoved it all down. "My point is that it's uncomfortable for me to be completely reliant on someone else."

"The past eight years prove you're self-reliant," he both argued and complimented.

"I meant financially."

"How much would make you comfortable?"

Jesus. “I’m telling you I need to make my own money.”

“I understand. I’m countering with an offer. What amount, secured in an account in your name, would give you security and peace of mind?”

I didn’t know if I was insulted, touched by the seemingly absolute sincerity of his offer, or if I was just too damaged or too enamored to see how thoroughly fucked up this was. “You can’t buy me, Ares.” Money you didn’t earn came with strings. Always.

“I’m not.” He pulled out his cell, quickly swiped across the screen a few times, then started rapidly typing. “Simple redistribution of funds.” His movements deft, his hands so much larger than the phone, it was a visual in contrasts. “But to clarify. When I said together?” He shoved the phone back into his pocket. “I meant exactly that, in every traditional sense. Starting a new beginning, comingling our lives, what’s mine becomes yours—cash, assets, family.”

Family.

Ares nodded once as if he’d pulled the unspoken thought straight from my mind. “Everything, Aracet.” He took back a few of the inches he’d put between us and lowered his tone to that spine-tingling dominance that made me forget my own name. “I’m only speeding up the process. You now have a funded account in your name. I texted the login details to your burner.”

“My burner,” I repeated, shell-shocked.

“Yes. Your prepaid cell. It’s in your duffle, which is in the back of the SUV.”

“You have my clothes?” And I was still in a hospital gown?

“Yes. I had your items retrieved from the apartment when we were en route.” Quickly moving past the fact that he had someone break into my apartment, he issued more directions. “When you log in to the bank account, change the password. After we’re home, I’ll get you a new, non-prepaid encrypted cell. Other than that, your only focus right now is going to be healing, rehabbing your leg, and settling into a life where you don’t hide. You’re also going to allow me the opportunity to both protect you and establish trust between us.” He searched my eyes for a single, weighted heartbeat. “Taking care of you is me protecting you. Understand?”

My throat bottling emotions, unable to speak, I nodded.

“Good.” He swept a tangled lock of my hair behind my ear. “Since you compromised for me, I’ll offer the same. Would you like to walk into the penthouse, or may I carry you?”

The tears came. Fat drops rolling down my face in an epic display of exactly what I didn’t want to be—plummeting off an emotional cliff.

Somehow, I managed to keep my voice relatively intact. “Thank you. I would like to walk.” Shifting in my seat, I turned to get out of the SUV.

His body still leaned toward mine, one hand braced on the car frame, the other fisted and pushed against the open door, the veins in his arms were popping, his muscles were flexed and bulging, but he didn’t move back. “Do you need assistance getting out of the vehicle?”

The formality, his tone, his hovering, his offer to let me walk when he clearly didn’t want me risking it—all of it made me fall deeper for him. “I can manage.”

“Yes, you can.” Tossing out the high praise as if it were nothing, he

stepped back a foot. “But no reverting to your peregrinate ways.”

Halfway out of my seat, I halted. “Did you just use peregrinate in a sentence?” Of course, he did. I heard it. But I was still taken aback. It was one of my most hated, favorite words. Years ago, I’d wondered if there was a word for how I lived because I didn’t have wanderlust. I didn’t crave adventure, but I was on the move. In a library in Michigan, I’d stumbled upon the word.

“Did you think I was illiterate?”

Shit. “No, of course not. I didn’t mean to insult—”

“I was joking, Aracet.” His expression and voice both deadpan, he held perfectly still as I stared at him. Then he winked.

“Oh.” *Oh my God*, *my heart*. I didn’t know how many more sides to this complex man I could take before I lost myself completely to him. “Do you do that often?”

“No. Just adding levity.” His tone softened. “I would, however, like you out of the vehicle and lying down before Helios and Feralyn arrive.”

Right. His family. “Ah.” Angling out of the SUV, holding on to the door handle for support, I stepped onto the running board with my left foot, put all my weight on that leg and stood. Then I realized my mistake. “I have to admit….” Inhaling, then just going for it, I lowered my right foot first before stepping down with my left as quickly as possible. “I—” Momentary pain shocked me, but it was way, way less than I imagined, and I was now standing, weight almost equally distributed between both legs. Relief struck, and I finished my thought. “I don’t want to be lying down when your brother and sister show up.”

Ares moved back another foot. “Because?”

I tested a small step. The pain was nothing compared to stepping off the running board, but apparently it was enough for me to lose all filter. “Because family dynamics are complicated, I don’t know how to navigate that on a good day, I’m definitely at a disadvantage right now, and all of this has me thinking about the solitude of my studio apartment.”

His expression immediately hardened. “You’re not going back there.”

“Ares?”

Unforgiving, stoic, and one hundred percent warrior, he locked his intense stare on me for a single beat of my heart. Then he tipped his chin with dominant acquiescence.

“Please let me walk into the penthouse.”

He stepped back. But then a Delta operator held out his hand.

I let go of the door handle and took it.

He laced our fingers.

Something deep inside me that’d been absent my entire life settled. But words I’d never had an opportunity to truly express pushed to the surface. “Thank you for your sacrifice. For everything you risked, especially your life.” Mine wasn’t worth his, but I also would never not cherish what he had given me.

A god of war reduced my naïveté to the vast, incomprehensible difference between us. “My sacrifice isn’t that I’m willing to die. It’s that I’m willing to kill.”

Guilt-stricken tears welled. “Ares, I’m so sorr—”

“Don’t apologize for how I choose to comport myself. I don’t lust for war, but I am ready to step into violence. I carry that duty willingly.”

Doing anything other than acknowledging the true weight of his sacrifice would be the worst form of insult. Nodding once, praying it was enough, hoping he felt my gratitude, I squeezed his hand—a hand that killed as swiftly as it rigged, caressed as gently as a whisper, and held on to me as tight as one of his knots.

I couldn’t stop them.

The tears fell.

And a god of war left them to stain my cheeks as he slowly led us inside his lair in the sky.

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ONE HUNDRED & FIVE

Ares

My brunette was crying, Helios and Feralyn were minutes out, and I wanted every damn thing to be different, except this.

Her hand in mine.

Leading her to the couch, fucking proud of her for walking, giving her space to expel her emotions, I held on to her as she sat. Then I kicked over the ottoman and reached for her leg.

She beat me to it. “I’ve got it.” Lifting her own leg, she glanced back toward the sky garage. “May I please have my duffle?”

“Of course.” Double-timing it back to the SUV, I grabbed her bag and made a mental note to get her some loose-fitting clothes to wear while she rehabbed. Or a stack of my T-shirts. The latter option was on my mind as I set the duffle next to her.

She reached to unzip it, then glanced up at me. “Do I have time for a shower before they get here? *Can* I shower?”

“No on time, and yes to shower, if we keep the wounds covered. I’ll help you after they leave.”

Her cheeks wet, her eyes tired, her voice went quiet as she pulled the sundress she’d worn the first evening at the analyst’s motel out of her bag. “Can you, ah, please turn around?”

The alert on the security panel that someone was coming up in the elevator sounded. “No.” I took the dress from her hands, slid it over her head, and pulled it down past her hips. Then I untied the hospital gown and tugged it away. Lifting her to standing with one hand under her arm, partially yanking down the hem of the dress, gravity doing the rest, I eased her back to sitting, then swept my thumbs over her cheeks.

The entire process took less than five seconds, but my brunette blew out a breath as if winded.

“I’m grabbing you water. You’re taking a pain med.”

“No.” She took another breath, then tentatively finger-combed her hair. “I’m good. I just wasn’t expecting…” She glanced up. “I’m sure I look like hell, but I’m good. I promise.”

Before I could tell her she was beautiful, the elevator doors opened.

“Ares!” Feralyn rushed out with Helios on her six.

Stepping in front of my brunette, I aimed to head off Feralyn, but my sister was already glancing past me as Helios scowled. “Feralyn.”

The lost child I’d watched grow into a woman hesitated only a fraction. Then she threw her arms around my neck. “You’re really okay?”

“I’m fine.” I gently pushed her back with a hand on her shoulder. “Nothing to worry about.”

Feralyn glanced at Aracet, then chided me. “Ares. I’m seeing plenty to worry about.”

Letting the comment go, I glanced over her head at a glaring Helios and threw him a warning glare back before I flanked my now-standing brunette. “Feralyn, this is Aracet. Aracet, this is my sister, Feralyn.”

“Stepsister,” Helios corrected.

Ignoring him, Feralyn focused on my woman. “I’m so sorry you’re injured. I wish it were under better circumstances, but it’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise on meeting you, and I’m all right,” Aracet replied.

Helios snorted, then his free hand landed possessively on Feralyn’s nape as he held up a small cooler. “Where’re you setting this up, Haven?”

“Oh, um….” Feralyn looked up at Helios, and her face flushed as she leaned into his side. “Where do you think?”

Leaning down to her ear, Helios said shit we thankfully couldn’t hear.

Aracet glanced at me.

Since getting her out of the Denali had taken precedence over everything else, I hadn’t warned her about Helios and Feralyn. Now she had a front-row seat. I tipped my chin.

Then I glanced at Feralyn and set boundaries. “Kitchen’s fine. Thank you for bringing dinner. You can leave the food on the counter.”

Picking up on the cue, Feralyn reached for the cooler, but she also glanced around. “Of course. And your penthouse is… nice.”

“*Nice*.” Helios smirked. “That’s the kiss of death in Haven-speak. She hates the place.” Not letting Feralyn take the cooler, he dumped it on the kitchen island.

“Helios,” she stated with no little irritation as her cheeks flamed. Then she looked at me. “I don’t hate it. It’s just…” She scanned the place again. “Not what I expected.”

“Told you that you didn’t know everything about him,” Helios clipped, pulling her under his arm. “Let’s go. I’m fucking starving, and our table at Isla Canarias is waiting.”

Feralyn looked up at my brother and smiled. “It’s always waiting.”

“Yeah.” Helios looked down at her the same way he’d been looking at her for nine years. “I fucking know.”

Feralyn’s arm snaked around his waist. “How do you do that?”

“One of my many mysteries, woman.” Helios kissed the top of Feralyn’s head, then jerked his chin at me. “We’re out.” He spared Aracet a glance. “Vandon.” Pivoting, hanging on to Feralyn, he led her to the elevator and hit the call button with the side of his fist.

“Wait,” Feralyn protested, glancing back. “I need to tell them about the food.”

“They’ll fucking figure it out.” The elevator doors opened, and Helios led them inside before turning them to face us.

Feralyn glanced from me to my brunette. “Good night, Ares. Good night, Aracet.”

We both returned the sentiment.

Helios punched the call button inside the elevator, then threw me one last glare. “No more goddamn solo ops, motherfucker.”

I reminded him of a conversation we’d had months ago, after an op that hit way too close to home. “You said you’re retiring.”

“Fuck off. I said when we fucking retire, we do it together.”

The elevator doors slid shut.

Aracet exhaled as she sat back down on the couch. “I think he corners the market on expletives.”

“A feat he would proudly claim.” I headed to the kitchen.

“And your… brother and sister? Are they… together?” she asked tentatively.

“Brother and stepsister. Feralyn’s father married our mother.” Grabbing plates and utensils, I didn’t answer her other question.

“That must make for some interesting holidays with your parents.”

“All of our parents are deceased, biological and step.” I filled two glasses with ice. “It’s just the three of us. What about you?” I knew her situation. I knew every damn thing about the woman. But I wanted to hear it from her.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.” She pushed to the edge of the couch and stood.

I was on her in a flash. “What do you need?”

She dipped her head. “Nothing. I’m just going to the restroom.”

“This way.”

“I remember.” She glanced up at me. “I don’t need help. Or an escort.”

She needed a hell of a lot more than an escort to the restroom. “You’re getting it anyway.”

“You’re not coming in with me this time,” she warned.

Not wanting her on her feet for long and unwilling to engage in an argument with the woman, I led her down the hall and held her elbow as she stepped into the bathroom. Then I retreated. “Call out if you need help.”

“I won’t.”

I shut the door, and my cell vibrated with an incoming call. Fishing it out of my pocket, I glanced at the caller ID, then answered. “That didn’t take long.”

“You know what I can’t fucking figure out?” Helios asked.

“Where’s Feralyn?” I could’ve brought up the security feeds, but that wasn’t the point of my question.

“Secure in the SUV while I’m standing in your motherfucking garage because I’m not subjecting Haven to this fucking conversation. You fucking the traitor?”

I strode down the hall so Aracet couldn’t hear my end of the conversation. “She has a name. Use it.”

“That’s not an answer, motherfucker.”

“It’s the one you’re getting.”

“*Jesus fucking Christ*,” he muttered. “Are you fucking roping her or some shit? Is this an actual fucking thing now?”

Fucking asshole. “Hanging up.”

Ignoring me as usual, Helios exhaled. “You know what’s really fucked up?”

Yes. My fucking brother. But I didn’t engage.

In typical Helios form, he said exactly what he was thinking. “I actually can’t fucking tell with you anymore. Op’s over, but you’re acting like a goddamn dog with a bone around her. Playing nurse like you don’t give a fuck about the optics.”

“You’re going to mention optics to me?” Un-fucking-believable.

“Yeah, I fucking am. Because me and Haven have nothing to do with work. Every motherfucker at Paragon can judge all they want, but they’ll still have my fucking six in a firefight. What the fuck do you think will happen next time you need backup and word’s out you’re shacked up with Vandon?”

Rage hit. “Keep it up, and you’ll be as dead to me as this fucking conversation.”

Helios was silent a beat, then he spoke in an even tone like he was the reasonable one of us. “Jax and Bellows are dead. Vandon isn’t. That’s the fucking optics with operators like Chaos.”

“This conversation’s over.”

“No, it fucking isn’t. I’ve already talked to Nix. That solo bullshit in Syria isn’t happening again. You go out, I go out. So fucking think about that the next time you take an assignment. Because it’s not gonna be every motherfucker at Paragon Ops watching our six anymore.” Helios hung up.

Aracet stepped out of the bathroom.

Shoving my cell back into my pocket, I strode down the hall.

She looked up at me and frowned. “Is everything okay?”

Drinking in my woman, for once, I understood Helios. My brother hadn’t simply chosen to be everything to Feralyn. He’d calculated, orchestrated, manipulated, then controlled the trajectory, deploying every tactical engagement for warfare he’d been trained in.

It had worked.

Helios was now everything to Feralyn, she was everything to him, and I was looking at a hazel-eyed brunette who was everything to me. “Come on.

You need to eat.”

“Can we eat outside?” She glanced toward the ocean. “The view is beautiful.”

My gaze locked on my woman, I couldn’t deny it. “Yes, it is.” I led her to the terrace, pulled out a chair from the outdoor dining table, and helped her sit. “I’ll get the food.”

She looked up, and for the first time, she smiled at me. “Thank you.”

My cock pulsed, my lungs filled with air, and an eight-year weight lifted off my chest. “You’re welcome.”

I headed inside for the food before I picked her up out of that chair, laid her on the table, and fucked her on the terrace.

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ONE HUNDRED & SIX

Aracet

Ares had gone quiet again.

He also ate as if it were a race.

The food was amazing—grilled chicken with a green sauce, a salad with so many colorful vegetables I didn't know what all they were, warm bread, cookies—but I wasn't sure Ares had tasted any of it. He did clear his plate, though, and drink all his water.

Now he was silently staring out at the ocean, waiting for me to finish, but every time I glanced down at my plate, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him look at me.

Sore, tired, my leg wounds a low, steady throb, I wanted to lie down, but I also wanted to soak in this moment. Talking or not, Ares's presence was more calming than any drug. It also made me so hyperaware of him, I wanted to be closer.

I wanted any part of his body touching mine.

But I especially wanted to be in his arms—which was both an exhilarating and terrifying thought. The man had kissed me the same way he fought—without mercy. I couldn't imagine—

"Aracet."

Realizing I'd been staring at his lips, I looked up at his eyes.

“Woman,” he stated, almost sounding like his brother. Then his chest rose and fell twice. “You’re not going to look at me like that. Not yet.”

I felt the heat crawl across my face before my voice came out in a breathy whisper. “Okay.” I didn’t even know what I was agreeing to.

“Good,” he praised in that low tone that was no less forgiving. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Then you’re going to bed.”

All at once, my stomach fluttered, and that floaty feeling from after he’d rigged me came back, and I was mindlessly agreeing to his commands as he stood to his imposing height. “Okay.”

Pulling out my chair, not giving me an option to walk, my Delta operator picked me up.

His scent—soap, ocean breeze, him—surrounded me, and I leaned my head against his chest and submitted to whatever was going to come next.

He carried me through his bedroom, into the en suite bathroom and set me on the sink counter. Turning on the faucet for a large, freestanding, modern bathtub, he grabbed two folded towels and draped them over the rim of the tub. Then he pulled out a bin of medical supplies from a lower cupboard, set it on the counter, stripped off his shirt, and stepped between my legs.

Shocked speechless by my very first sight of him almost naked, I greedily scanned every inch of him before he tipped my chin up so he could look at my left temple.

Expression grave, he gently pushed back a lock of my hair. “The wound’s closed enough. I can wash your hair.”

Breathless, I stared at his arms, his chest, his shoulders. “You’re beautiful.” His muscles were so exquisitely defined, I had no words. But dear God, his scars.

He had *so* many scars.

If war were an artist, it’d painted his flesh. Round scars, jagged welts, thin lines, thicker strokes, all colored in the hues of survival.

He was more than beautiful.

He was Ares.

His calloused thumb stroked across my bottom lip. “Give me those eyes.”

I looked up at my god of war.

“You, Aracet Vandon, are beautiful.”

The flush that’d spread across my face on the terrace was nothing compared to the heat that stroked through my belly, then radiated. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rough and formal and quiet, I basked in the very voice that had given me a second chance at life. And for a moment, he allowed that pull between us to hover, grow. Bond.

Then, without warning, instruction or asking permission, he stripped off my dress, lifted me up, and carried me naked. Setting me into the hot water but holding my right leg out, he carefully rested it on the edge of the bathtub over the towels. “Good?”

Oh my God. The hot water seeping into my bones felt more than good.

“Yes.”

Same as he had at Empyros, same as he had on the plane, my warfighter stared at me.

And I stared at him.

Then, shirtless, scarred, my god of war kneeled on the side of the bathtub and washed my body with the dominance of ownership and the touch of reverent devotion.

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ONE HUNDRED & SEVEN

Aracet

Ares didn’t touch me.

Nine days ago, he’d lifted me out of the bathtub, dried me off, brushed and braided my hair with exacting precision, then tucked me into bed.

Since then, he hadn’t touched me.

Except to change my bandages for the first forty-eight hours.

We slept separate—me in his bed, him in a large lounge chair and ottoman that he’d pulled to the foot of his bed—but he hovered.

Dear God, did he hover.

He watched me, he fed me, he doled out anti-inflammatories on a schedule so precise, he woke me. He fielded two calls from Henry when I said I wasn’t up to speaking to Henry or Pasqual yet. He found a temporary barista to help Hailey when I said I was worried about how I’d left her. He issued warnings every time I stood, walked or moved by myself—*careful*, *slow*, *easy*. On the third day, when I’d attempted to change my leg bandage myself, he’d issued instructions. On the fourth day, I woke to him standing over the bed, taking off the bandages altogether.

Then he’d started me on light strength training. Those instructions were even more detailed and were always followed with an ice pack that he handed me without so much as touching my fingers.

He also silently checked his laptop, sent texts, and worked out in his home gym, but only after I went to sleep. Or when he thought I was asleep. Then he would go run on a treadmill and lift weights, checking on me in between his sets.

He watched me, always.

Even when he was on his computer or reading one of his books. Every time I looked up, he was watching.

And his books. Oh my God, he had a whole library of them. Everything from Greek mythology, science fiction, thrillers and fantasy, to military and historical fiction, biographies, history, war tactics, biology, and chemistry. But no romance. I'd looked. Despite that, I'd read two thrillers already, and had been leafing through two books since yesterday. *Once an Eagle* and *The Mission, The Men, and Me*. Both were the most broken-in books on his shelves, minus a taped-together copy of *The Lord of the Rings* that looked too fragile to touch.

I was outside on the massive deck that he called a Florida room, stretched out on a lounger with the books as an ocean breeze steadily but lazily blew softly over my skin, when he was suddenly standing over me.

I looked up.

His stark blue-eyed gaze even more translucent in direct sunlight, he stared down at me with an expression I couldn't decipher. "Would you like to get your feet wet?"

I didn't know if he meant literally or figuratively, but I glanced at the small pool that was on the terrace. While I was hot, the darker tiles of the

pool, the limited size of it, the few steps up needed to get to it—none of it was as appealing as the giant turquoise ocean in front of us. “In there?”

“No.”

“Oh.” I shrugged.

“Yes?”

That was another thing he’d been doing. Anytime I answered one of his infrequent questions, if I didn’t give what he considered a direct enough response, he followed through with clarification. I didn’t know if it was because I’d been injured or if this was just how he was, but it’d been both disarming and educating. It made me more aware of how I spoke to him. Or rather, communicated. The very word made gooseflesh race across my neck and down my arms because I remembered, every waking hour I was with him, the only other time he’d insisted on explicit communication.

A tremor slid up my spine, and I shifted on the lounger to sitting, hoping he missed it. “I would love to go swimming somewhere other than the pool on your balcony.”

Missing nothing, his gaze cut to my back, then came back to my eyes. “No swimming yet. Four more weeks. How sore is your leg?”

Another thing I’d been working on, which had been incredibly hard, but also easier than I thought it ever would be, was that I only told him the truth. Not lying was a dynamic shift for me. But not lying about my feelings, physical state, pain level—even my opinions—had been almost too easy with him. He never appeared to judge. He never appeared to react, period. He always simply listened to my answers.

He also stored them away.

More than a few times, he'd brought up something I'd said earlier and revisited it. My pain level, my emotional state, my thoughts on the books I'd read. Henry. He definitely remembered everything I'd said about Henry.

I missed Henry and Pasqual. I did.

But this safe cocoon Ares had made for me? I didn't want it tainted with anything from the outside world. Selfishly, not even from his sister—stepsister—who he clearly cared about. I wasn't sure yet how he felt about his brother.

"Aracet?"

I sucked in a breath. "Sorry." There was also that—how he said my name. To even be able to hear it was one thing. But how he said it? He blended the first two syllables with a softer tone, then let the last roll off his tongue as if my name were a native language, and only he knew it. Jesus, I could listen to his voice forever. "My calf is a little sore, but better each day." Twisting my foot slightly to make sure, I nodded. "I'm good. The exercises have helped a lot. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you up for a ride?"

Oh, the motorcycle. Motorcycles, actually. I'd been so damn soaked, cold and distracted by his driving the first time, though, I had to admit, I felt cheated. I'd ridden on the back of my father's old Triumph when I was young, before he'd lost it in a poker game. I'd loved it. The wind, the freedom. Then again, my father had never driven as fast as Ares.

I looked up at a complex Delta operator. "Do you mean ride, as in one of the motorcycles?"

"Yes."

“Are you going to drive death-defyingly fast again?”

“I was getting you out of the weather that morning, and I had control of the bike at all times.” He studied me for a moment. “Were you truly scared or just angry with me?”

I had to think about that. “Both, and I’d never been on a bike in the rain.”

He nodded. “It’s not raining today, and I like speed. That said, I wasn’t planning on pushing either you or the bike. I’d like to take you somewhere, and I’d like to ride, but we can take the Denali or the ZR1X.”

I glanced toward the sky garage. “That’s the sports car?”

“The Corvette, yes.”

I still couldn’t imagine him in the low gray metallic vehicle that looked like a racecar. “Where do you want to go?”

“You’ll see,” he cryptically answered without so much as a hint in his expression. “Your choice on vehicle.”

My heart melted at the simple act of him offering me the choice, and excitement spread. Even more than the idea of swimming in the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. “I’d love to go for a ride.”

He tipped his chin, but then he walked away.

Swinging one leg off the lounger, gently lifting the other, I watched him disappear down the hall.

Not completely used to his abruptness yet, but not unfamiliar with it now, I grabbed the books and the glass of water he’d brought me earlier and stepped inside as he reappeared.

Holding an armful of folded material in one hand, a large shoebox in the other, he stopped at the dining room table. Setting everything down, he called for me without looking up. “Come here, Aracet.”

A sudden shiver of nerves, from both his tone and the command, cascaded through me as I walked over.

Carefully arranging two piles next to the box, he didn’t look up to meet my gaze until I stopped in front of him. “Are you familiar with protective gear?”

Already knowing where this was going, but also not quite believing it, I glanced at the supple leather. “The concept, yes.” I had to ask. “Does Feralyn ride with you?”

“No.” Laying a hand on the first neatly folded pile, he started listing details as if I would know what they meant. “Riding pants. Tech material for warm weather breathability with abrasion resistance and integrated knee and hip armor.” He touched the next pile. “Your jacket, also rated for abrasion resistance. Arm, shoulder and back armor. Stretch panels and mesh pockets. And your boots.” He unlidded the box.

My shock holding, I forgot manners. “I already have boots.”

“Not riding ones.” He pushed them toward me.

I glanced at the markings on the side of the cardboard box. “They’re my size.”

“They are.”

“They’re new.” Only two people in my life had bought me shoes. Henry had been the first.

“Correct.”

“Are the pants and jacket new?” They didn’t have tags on them.

A Delta operator looked at me with that stark gaze that saw everything. “Are you going to ask what you really want to know?”

I hated myself right now, but my chest was caving in, and I didn’t know how to manage this sudden crushing sensation, so I asked. “Do you buy special gear for all of the women who ride with you?”

“No.”

That was it? *No*? “I asked the question, but you’re not answering it.”

“I answered exactly what you asked, but you’re not articulating your needs.”

“How many other women have you rigged?” The question—ugly and telling and steeped in jealous insecurity so profound I was choking on it—came out before I could stop this horrific train wreck of a disaster I was turning our day into.

Low, quiet, dominant, but with a new tone that was almost gentle, he caressed my name. “Aracet.”

The crushing sensation on my chest became unbearable, and all I wanted to do was apologize, but I held up a hand. “You know what? I don’t want to know.” *What the hell am I doing?* This was supposed to be a motorcycle ride. Dear God, a date—if a rigging Delta operator dated. Regardless, my leg was feeling better. I had been restless. The four walls of this penthouse weren’t enough to contain a god of war—I knew that. But suddenly I needed air.

Alone air.

Breaths that didn’t fill my pining soul with the most intoxicatingly addictive scent of Ares Grayson.

I turned toward the elevators, two sets of them, neither of which I’d ever used or knew the difference between—if there was a difference—and that was only the tip of the iceberg of what I was realizing I didn’t know about this man or his life.

“I’m going for a walk.” Announcing my intent as if I needed permission, I punched the call button between the elevators as I started to shake.

His voice came from too close behind me. “You’re going for a walk, or you’re panicking?”

I didn’t know what I was doing except irrationally spiraling and being unduly horrible to him. “I don’t owe you an explanation for everything.” But that was just it. I owed him for everything. My life two times over and every breath since. And until this moment, I didn’t mind giving him explanations. Once I’d adjusted to the shift, I discovered I not only liked it, I craved it. I craved the interaction so much now, I’d silently been calling it what he’d named it—*together*. Except now it didn’t feel like anything other than me being vulnerable.

“I’m not demanding, Aracet. I’m asking.”

I whipped around. “Is that what you’re doing? You stalked me for years, and now you’re asking how I feel?”

“Five years, and yes,” he interjected, like it wasn’t completely unhinged.

“Five years. Then you came into the coffeeshop, followed me to a dance club, took me to that sex club. *You tied me up, Ares*.” Every word, my voice pitched higher.

He denied nothing. “Yes, I did.”

“Then you took me back to…” I couldn’t even say it. “You took me back there when I know you didn’t want to. You killed for me. Again. You saved me—again.” *Oh God, my chest hurt*. “Then the hospital. On that airplane. Now here. You bathed me. You cooked, you hovered, you issued commands. But now you don’t touch me? And you have riding gear in my size? How many women have you done this with? Did you give them what you gave me? Your time, your focus, your *money*? I can’t even bring myself to look at that account because I’m afraid, but that’s not even the worst part. You know what is? *I don’t know how many women you’ve tied up*. That’s the *absolute* worst part of all of this, but I can’t even express why!”

He tipped his chin over my shoulder. “The elevator’s arrived.”

I exploded. “That’s your response? I don’t know what that means!”

“Take your walk, Aracet.” Pivoting, he strode down the hall.

I got on the elevator.

The doors closed, and I burst into tears.

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ONE HUNDRED & EIGHT

Ares

I had to walk away before I grabbed her, but I wasn't letting her out of my sight.

I brought up the security feeds.

The second the elevator doors closed, she covered her face and fell apart.

Cell in hand, I was already making a call.

It was answered on the fourth ring. "Is this who I think it is?"

"Yes."

"This ought to be good. What do you want?"

I recited the address.

"Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"In five seconds, she'll be in the lobby."

"Last I checked, I don't have a transporter."

"She needs you."

His tone abruptly changed. "I'm on my way. Don't let her leave." The call cut out.

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ONE HUNDRED & NINE

Aracet

The tears were falling too hard and too fast for me to see, let alone make a rational decision, and I'd left everything upstairs.

My purse, my money, the keys that were in my purse, the cell that I hadn't touched because I was too afraid to see a text with a login to a bank account a Delta operator had set up for me.

And fucking hell, my boots.

I was barefoot in the lobby of a billion-dollar building, and I was sobbing like an insane person.

Pushing out of the nearest exit that dumped me onto an eastward-leading path, I aimed for the ocean but didn't make it that far.

I found the pool I'd seen from sixty-something stories up. With loungers and umbrellas and most of all, albeit shocking, no loitering residents to embarrass myself in front of. Or embarrass him. Except I didn't know if he knew anyone in the building because that was another thing I didn't know about him.

Crying harder, covering my mouth, trying to rein it in, I sank into a chair under an umbrella in the farthest corner away from the pool. Then I pulled up my good leg, wrapped my arm around it, and tucked my face to my knee.

I didn’t know if anyone in the residences above could see me, and I wasn’t sure I cared. For the first time since the nightmare my life had turned into when I was seventeen years old, something other than those events took precedence.

A god of war who had riding gear in my size took precedence.

I loved him.

I recklessly, irrevocably loved a man I didn’t know or understand.

I didn’t even know how I ever thought this would be remotely possible. I was responsible for his friends’ deaths. His brother hated me. He didn’t even touch me anymore.

But he wanted to take me on his motorcycle?

A fresh wave of tears hit.

“Aracet!”

I jolted.

Then all of a sudden, my chair was pulled out, and I was looking up at the handsome face of the first friend I’d ever had. “Henry.” I dissolved into choking sobs.

“I’m here, and I brought backup, and *Jesus Christ, look at you*.” Henry dropped to his knees and pulled me into his arms as Pasqual gripped my shoulder. “What the hell did that asshole do to you? I’m going to fucking *kill him*!”

“Henry,” Pasqual quietly chided. “Give her comfort.”

“I’m already on my knees, holding her. She’s fucking injured. I can’t—*oh, fuck this*.” Henry abruptly stood, taking me with him. Then, careful of

my leg, he stepped over to a lounger, straddled it, and sank down with me still in his arms. “Pasqual, angle that umbrella over us.”

Hot sun was replaced with shade.

I kept crying.

“Sh, sh.” Adjusting me so I was sideways across his lap, then carefully but quickly inspecting the wounds on my calf, Henry rubbed my back and gently rocked. “I got you, baby girl. You’re safe.”

Pasqual sat on the end of the lounger. “We both have you, love. You’re going to be okay.”

I sobbed until I couldn’t breathe.

Then I started talking through the tears, and I couldn’t stop.

I told them.

I told them everything.

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ONE HUNDRED & TEN

Ares

I stood back, just out of sightline, but not out of earshot.

She downloaded all of it.

Including how I'd coerced her into the club scene, then left her rigged.

I knew I'd be risking this when I called the SWCC, but I didn't see another choice. The woman needed support outside of my influence. It fucking killed me to admit it, but I wasn't blind.

I knew who I was.

The woman didn't.

But now she might.

The SWCC cradled her in his arms like I hadn't.

The former NSA analyst smiled at her how I didn't. "You know what I think, love?"

My brunette swiped at her face. "No."

"He loves you. Deeply." The analyst's smile muted. "But he doesn't know how to reconcile that with who he is yet." The asshole fingered a lock of her hair, surreptitiously checking her head wound before pushing her hair behind her ear with a familiarity that enraged me. "But he will. Give him time to adjust."

“I’m going to kill him,” the SWCC muttered.

“No, you won’t,” the analyst countered, calm, measured. “You’re going to support them. We both are. You don’t turn down people who need you, love. You never have.”

The SWCC sighed. “I’m too fucking mad for you to be this damn perfect right now.”

The analyst chuckled and gripped his husband’s shoulder. “Just keep comforting her. It’s working. I’m going to find Grayson and check on him. Can I bring either of you anything?”

“A gallon of your mango margaritas and a tub of tissues.” The SWCC looked down at my woman. “She’s soaking my shirt.”

“Two waters coming up.” The analyst stood, then leaned over to kiss each of them on the forehead.

Retreating until I was at a reasonable distance but still within sightline, I propped a boot against the side of the building and waited.

As if he’d been tracking me the whole damn time, the analyst immediately found my POS.

With his hands in his pockets, his expression easy, he casually smiled. “Grayson.”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. You heard everything?”

The question tossed out as casually as his stance, I noted every trade trick he was deploying and nodded once.

“Not judging, just asking.” Flanking me, he leaned against the building

and glanced back toward the pool area. “She’s a special girl.”

She was a woman.

The analyst glanced at me. “You disagree?”

“No.”

“Mind if I ask you a question?”

I tipped my chin again.

“Who do you think you would disappoint by loving her?”

I wasn’t playing into his PSYOPS one-oh-one bullshit. “This isn’t about me.” I didn’t give a fuck about anyone else’s opinion. If I did, I wouldn’t have called in the SWCC. This was about my dominance, her limits, and our history. I couldn’t change the past, and I wouldn’t apologize for who I was. I didn’t expect any different from her. But she needed to trust me. Clearly, I hadn’t established that yet, so I’d called in backup. “This is about her.”

“Then you’ve got the right attitude.” The analyst pushed off the wall. “But you were mistaken about one thing.”

I took the bait. “Which is?”

“When you called Henry, you said she needed him.” Serra looked me in the eye. “She needs you.”

Holding his stare, I didn’t comment.

The prick smiled again. “I’m heading to the lobby bar. I promised them waters. That should give you enough time to extract your woman from my husband’s lap.” Serra took off, then called over his shoulder. “Nice building, by the way. Not sure it suits her, though.”

I tracked the analyst until he entered the lobby.

Then I headed for the pool deck.

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ONE HUNDRED & ELEVEN

Aracet

I felt him before I saw him.

Shrinking against the safety of Henry, I whispered, “He’s coming.”

“If you didn’t think that was a foregone conclusion, we need to talk later.” Henry glanced up, but then he cupped my face and lowered his voice. “I don’t like your tears, and I’m still fucking livid about Syria and what he did at the club. But I know what Pasqual would say to you right now, and as much as it pains me to say this, I think you need to hear it.” Henry paused.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the silhouette of a warfighter’s shadow cast across the pool deck, then stop a couple of feet from the shade of the umbrella. Trying so hard not to turn to the man who had me losing control of every emotion I’d thought I’d had a handle on, I gripped Henry’s wrist because I could. “Okay,” I barely breathed.

“No man is all good or all bad, and there’s no such thing as perfect. There’s only perfect for you, *Pretty Little Liars*.” Henry swiped his thumbs across my cheeks. “But if you want me to make him leave, I will.”

Just knowing Ares was there, I started to tremble. “What should I do?” The question scarcely a whisper, I’d never asked anyone that in my entire life. I’d never had anyone to ask. I was the seventeen-year-old girl who followed her cousin to save her. I was the woman who lived with the deaths

of two soldiers on her conscience. I'd spent my entire adult life hiding. I didn't ask anyone for anything.

"Woman, do not ask me that. What I should tell you to do and what I want to tell you to do are two very different things."

Helpless in that moment, I stared at him.

"Jesus Christ," Henry deadpanned, staring back at me. "If you look at him like that, I know why he called in reinforcements."

A new shadow of shame cast across me and my behavior. "I didn't mean to be needy." Ares deserved a woman who wasn't weak.

"Trust me, *needy* isn't the issue here. Okay, fuck, it is. Except not how you're thinking, so don't fucking go there. But you need to understand one crucial fact." Henry glanced toward the ocean, but when he looked back down at me, his expression had completely changed. No emotion, no personality, no warmth hiding behind the sarcasm. Locked down, distant and cold, he didn't just look frightening, his eyes had become like Ares's.

Then, calm and unyielding, Henry spoke like Ares. "Tier Ones are not men. They're lethally trained operators who execute orders. Deadly force isn't simply a sworn oath, it's the entire mindset. Direct action, HVT eliminations, counterterrorism, hostage rescue—every op demands their ability to be incomparably swift and violent. On the battlefield, they're warfighters. But in an emotionally committed relationship, they're a caged animal." He stared pointedly at me. "I was a caged animal."

My heart cracked.

Henry's chest rose with an inhale. Then his voice, his expression, his entire demeanor was once again the Henry I'd first met. "The first time

Pasqual hugged me, he had to physically restrain me."

"Henry," I whispered, a new wave of tears welling.

"Boundary," he stated forcibly. But then a six-foot Special Warfare Combat Crewman leaned in close, brought his forehead to mine, and spoke in a low, commanding whisper. "Give him time to adjust, but never stop being yourself, Aracet Vandon." Abruptly pulling back as he gently pushed me forward a few inches until I was off his lap, Henry fixed a glare past me. "She's all yours. If you break her again, not even Pasqual will be able to stop me." He stood.

"Copy," came the deep, quiet response.

I shivered. Henry stepped over the lounger. A Delta operator backfilled his position, and Pasqual's hand landed on my shoulder.

"Water, love. Drink it all." Pasqual held a bottle dripping with condensation in front of me as he handed the cap to Ares.

Ares's stark-blue gaze stayed locked on mine as he took the cap, and I took the water.

Pasqual gently squeezed my shoulder, then looked between us. "Be good to each other." His hand left me and landed on Henry's back. Then he led them away.

Suddenly too embarrassed to look at Ares, I watched them go, but then it occurred to me. I looked back at a six-foot-four operator who was straddling the lounger. "You called them."

"I called Forester, but yes."

Ares had never said as much, but I got the distinct impression he did not like Henry. At all. "May I ask why?"

“You needed someone other than me to talk to.” He nodded at the water. “Drink.”

I took a sip. But then another thought occurred to me. “Who do you talk to when you need someone?”

“I read. How are you feeling?”

That crack in my heart split wide open. But at the same time, a newfound mission threaded the jagged edges and began to weave a tapestry of hope despite my mortification at my meltdown upstairs. “Deeply embarrassed. I’m sorry I yelled.”

“You didn’t.”

My face flamed, but not from the midday heat. “I did.” I drank some of the icy-cold water. “You don’t talk to your brother or stepsister?”

“Helios isn’t much for conversation, and Feralyn and I don’t have the type of relationship where I confide in her.”

I listened to what he didn’t say, and even though it was his sister, jealousy flared. “But she confides in you?”

His slight nod was all the answer I got. “Drink your water. Then we’ll go for a ride.” Leaning forward, he pulled my flip-flops out of his back pocket and set them at my feet.

The water halfway to my lips, the depth of my shame reached a new level. Lowering the bottle, I stared at the flip-flops for a moment. Then I looked back up. “I said things upstairs I shouldn’t have. Word choices I regret. I didn’t mean ‘hover’ in a negative way. All you’ve done is take care of me, and I’m grateful. Truly.” No one had ever done for me what Ares had.

For once, his gaze didn’t hold mine. It landed on my leg. “You’re injured because of my actions.”

“I don’t think or believe that.” Careful of my words, I aimed to alleviate both of our consciences. “I’m alive because of you.” But now I wanted to ask what I should have upstairs. “Are my injuries why you haven’t touched me in nine days?”

“Yes.” Ares tipped his chin at the water, and for the briefest of seconds, his Adam’s apple, already defined, stood out more. “Drink.”

Relief soothed the edges of my inflamed emotions, but now I was watching him, wondering what it would feel like to skim my fingers over the masculine lines of his throat, or if he would even allow it.

Taking a sip of water, letting the coolness swirl once through my parched mouth, I swallowed. But then it was as if I’d kicked at the door of an animalistic thirst, and I was suddenly tipping my head back, eyes closed, guzzling like there was no tomorrow.

The last swallow was barely past my lips when the water bottle was pulled away.

Startled, I looked at Ares, but he was already capping the bottle and standing up.

Then a Delta operative held out his hand to me. “Ready for that ride?”

Nervous anticipation spread like wildfire, and my soul leapt. “I am.” I placed my palm in his.

He stroked across the back of my hand with a mere feather of a touch, and desire shot through my veins. Then he laced our fingers, stole my

breath, dominantly but gently pulled me to my feet, and nodded at my flip-flops.

I stepped into them.

In a language that felt more intimate than his ropes, and very much like he was letting his caged animal out, he wordlessly led me back into the building.

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ONE HUNDRED & TWELVE

Ares

I led my woman back to the penthouse.

Holding my hand and gripping my wrist like she'd gripped the SWCC's, she was silent.

Wanting to put her in the gear I'd gotten her, then get her on the back of my bike, I didn't talk until I had her next to the dining table. Then I issued an order. "Take off your dress."

She let go of my hand. "What?"

"I'm checking your wounds."

She glanced at the riding gear. "That's not how you usually check it."

This wasn't a week ago. She wasn't in a tank top and underwear, curled in bed, refusing meds and pretending not to be in pain while I elevated her leg. "This isn't a usual circumstance." But moving forward, commands like this would be.

Her face flushed. "I'm okay."

"This isn't a negotiation, Aracet. I'm going to check all of your injuries." I was getting eyes on that sweet body and any residual bruising. "Then I'm going to wrap your leg before I put you in your gear."

Her throat moved with a swallow. Then she slowly removed her short sundress.

No bra. Nipples hard. String bikini underwear.

My cock already primed after nine days of watching her every move, I circled my brunette.

Analytical—because I fucking had to be right now—I first tested the yellowed bruising on her back that was probably from when I tipped the Hilux, then firmly pressed on her chest where her armor stopped the rounds.

She didn't flinch. My woman shivered.

Dropping to one knee, I skimmed my hands down the front and back of her leg. The entry and exit wounds—higher on the right, lower on the left—were finally sealed, but the bruising was extensive.

I stood. "Wait."

She crossed her arms over her breasts.

I hit the kitchen and washed my hands. Then I was back on her, front and center. Casual, gentle, using my knuckle to push a strand of her hair away from her left temple as I checked the scabbed wound, I lowered my voice. "You did well waiting."

She looked up at me with those eyes. "Is that what you like?"

"When I give a command, yes." I dragged my knuckle over the faded bruising on the side of her face I still hadn't forgiven myself for. "How does that make you feel?"

"Nervous."

I ran the back of my hand down her arm. "Is that why you're covering your breasts?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

“Break it down.” Nudging her left wrist, I gave a silent command to lower her arm. “What exactly makes you nervous?”

Her left arm dropped to her side. “That I won’t be… submissive.”

I ran a knuckle over her right wrist. “I think we’ve already proven that you are.”

Watching my hand, she dropped her right arm. “I meant submissive enough.” She looked up at me. “For you.”

Full breasts, peaked nipples, cheeks flushed, voice soft, underwear wet with need—even if her expression wasn’t innocent, needy, and completely fucking submissive, she was perfect. I leaned down to her ear. “Bonded,” I murmured.

Chill bumps hit her torso. “Ares?”

I fucking loved her reaction to me. “Yes?”

“Am I allowed to touch you?”

“You do touch me.” More than any woman ever had, but I sidestepped the question because we needed to have a different conversation first, and I wasn’t having it here. Picking up the supplies I’d left on the table, I squatted. “What’s your pain level?”

“Um.” She watched me place bandages on each wound, then wrap her calf. “It’s not really pain. Just soreness. Sometimes I have the tingling we talked about.”

“To be expected.” I secured the compression wrap and stood. Then I let my dominance out in full force and gave explicit directions. “Go get your white tank top and black socks from the bedroom, use the bathroom if you need to, then bring the clothes to me.”

She hesitated. “What about a bra?”

“Go, Aracet.”

She took off.

I watched her for a limp, for uneasiness, for any tells that she was in pain. I also watched the perfect curve of her hips and the bounce in her sweet ass. Then I palmed the hairbrush I’d grabbed from the bathroom earlier and one of the few hair ties she owned. I’d ordered her more, along with a new wardrobe I’d picked out, but I hadn’t had anything delivered to the penthouse.

Hair wild, face flushed, expression apprehensive but excited, my brunette came back with those full breasts on display and held out the neatly folded items.

“Thank you.” I took them. “Turn around.”

Her posture stiff, she pivoted.

I dropped the clothes on the table. “Tip your head up.”

She complied.

Then, careful of her graze wound, I brushed her hair.

By the second stroke, her posture eased. By the fifth, her exhale was a quiet moan. I’d noticed on the airplane that my woman liked her hair touched. Or, more accurately, my hands in her hair.

Brushing until her thick waves were tamed enough to work with and she was as relaxed as I’d allow before putting her on the bike, I then separated her hair into three sections and gave her a single, long braid. Once I’d secured the hair tie, I issued a command. “Face me.”

She lazily turned.

I wanted to fuck her on the spot. Instead, I nodded at her temple. “Tension okay?”

She sucked in a breath as if focusing up. “Oh.” Carefully, she felt her wound. “Yes, it’s okay.”

“Good.” I grabbed the tank top.

Then I dressed my woman in her new riding gear.

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ONE HUNDRED & THIRTEEN

Aracet

My panties were wet, my pussy was clenching with painful emptiness, the vibration of the superbike was hell, my thighs spread around him was a cruel tease, and his voice in my head, with all other sounds muted, was torturous aural erotica.

It was perfect.

My arms around him, the feel of his unforgiving strength, the sheer size of him compared to me, his unbelievable control of the bike, the weather, the wind, the slowly dipping sun, the ride, it was all perfect.

Exquisitely, agonizingly perfect.

I wanted it to last forever.

I wanted him to immediately pull over and make me come.

Every second of him slowly dragging up my riding pants, slipping his fingers inside the waistband and brushing his knuckles over my mound as he zipped them, was playing on repeat as my poor sex throbbed with need.

I was so consumed by his carnal seduction—how he'd caressed and wrapped my leg, brushed and braided my hair, dressed every inch of my body in protective gear—that my thoughts were fragmented. I hadn't even asked where we were going because it didn't matter. I would ride, quite literally, into hell with this man.

Pulling me from my thoughts, he asked a pointed question. “When were you in Yosemite?”

I wracked my brain, trying to remember if I had ever told him about that horrible memory from childhood, but I could’ve sworn I hadn’t. “I was young. Ten years old, maybe.” I couldn’t be sure exactly because my birthday was never celebrated growing up. “How do you know about that?”

“Helo exfil to Jordan. You mentioned it.”

Oh God. I didn’t remember that. “What else did I say?”

He hesitated. It was only for the briefest fraction of a second, but I noted it. “You described the sound of wind in Yosemite in relation to Miami.”

It wasn’t a thought that was novel to me. Yosemite lived in my horrible memories. It was the first time I thought I was going to die. Left at a vacant campsite where we’d been squatting, my mother and her then-boyfriend had left me in a tent for two days. Saying it had been cold, inhospitable, and isolating was a gross understatement. I could still hear the eerie wind in the trees. By comparison, Miami was all golden sunlight and vibrant greenery.

But more importantly than my memories, Ares had hesitated with his answer. “What else did I say?”

This time, he didn’t pause. “You mentioned my voice.”

Not even the hum of the superbike’s engine could compete with the rush that crawled up my spine each time I heard his voice through the helmet. But it wasn’t just how I heard it now. It was his voice, period. And it was that exhale when he’d first said those two Greek words. The sentiment, his

deep baritone, they'd become everything to me—my cornerstone, my reason, my hope. "Your voice sounds like life to me."

"So you said."

I felt the heat of embarrassment, but I wasn't sorry I'd said it. "Should I be concerned about anything else I said?"

"No." He segued into a different topic. "You haven't logged in to your bank account. Why?"

Oh, Jesus. That. "I'm afraid to."

"Because?"

Because I'd grown up with a con man as a father. "Money you don't earn comes with strings."

"This money doesn't."

"Ares—"

"Do you know the difference between a choice and a decision?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "A choice is a selection from a predetermined set of options you have no control over. A decision is a commitment made with intent. I decided to gift you the money. Few things in life are guaranteed. We could die in the next minute. If you'd checked the account, you would be living this minute with the security of financial freedom."

"I…" Shit. "I never considered it from that perspective." I'd only looked at it from the perspective of my life's experiences. "Thank you, sincerely. And I'm sorry for not logging in yet."

"No thanks or apologies needed. I have your new cell when you're ready."

“Okay.” It was difficult not to reply with an automatic, but no less sincere, thank you, especially when I hadn’t even noticed he’d brought the new cell phone he’d given me over a week ago.

He didn’t comment further, and for the next few minutes we were quiet, but a question that’d been plaguing me since the airplane kept needling. “When did you learn how to braid hair and make perfect messy buns?”

“When or on who?” he astutely asked.

Oh God. “Both?”

“Feralyn. Twenty years ago.” Accelerating, he passed a car and pulled onto a bridge with the most incredible turquoise-blue water on either side.

“Your sister has pretty hair.” It was as amber as her eyes. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is, but this isn’t about Feralyn. Ask what you really want to know,” Ares demanded as he downshifted and slowed for traffic.

“Did you ever braid the hair of any of the women at the club?”

“No.”

There wasn’t any relief in his answer because I’d been too afraid to ask the question with regard to any women he’d been with. I could compartmentalize the women at the club. I knew he had not slept with them. But his past before that? He had probably been close to my age now when I’d first met him. I knew there was an age gap between us, but I’d never thought about it until this second, and all I was thinking about was that he’d lived an entire life by then. I had no claim to be jealous, but Jesus, I was. I was also suddenly in a tailspin over it.

“Aracet,” he clipped, sharp and chiding.

Hearing my name said like that, by the one man I wanted to say it, always made my stomach flutter, but now it also made my muscles tense because I was spiraling. “How old are you?”

“Four-seven-eight. Inhale, hold, exhale. Do it now.”

How did he—

“Inhale,” he commanded.

Counting, I drew in a deep, short breath, held it, then exhaled in the pattern I’d been taught by a psychologist on that Army base.

“Again,” he ordered.

I breathed through the pattern again, then another time.

“Good,” he praised without his tone changing. “Now listen very carefully.” Suddenly accelerating, he pulled into the lane of oncoming traffic to pass three cars.

The speed kicked me back, adrenaline surged, and I clamped my arms around him tighter.

Calm, rational, in direct contrast to his driving, a god of war’s voice filled my soul. “This is you and me now.” Cutting back into the forward-bound lane of traffic, he enunciated his next word. “Together.”

I exhaled with an emotion I had no words for except that I felt safe—speeding on his superbike, in his arms, offering the fragility of my heart to his care—I trusted this man with my life. “Together,” I repeated.

His gloved hand landed on my thigh, and he squeezed. “How’s the compression bandage feeling?”

Another layer of adoration for my god of war compounded. “That was a

compression bandage you put on my leg?”

“Yes. For the ride.”

I had no words for how much I loved him. “Thank you. My leg is okay.” But my heart, the very organ I’d just foolishly thought I was simply offering up for his care, was no longer my own.

He stroked my thigh.

I felt the touch all the way to my soul.

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ONE HUNDRED & FOURTEEN

Ares

She'd gone silent when I'd pulled up to the Key Largo residence.

I'd lifted her off the bike and led her inside, but now she was scanning the interior like she was seeing walls for the first time.

She focused on the view. "This house is extraordinary."

She was extraordinary. "Water?"

"In a minute." Without a limp but still moving slower than she had pre-injury, she walked right up to the glass sliders overlooking the gulf.

Shedding my jacket, I tossed it onto a kitchen stool, then dumped the Ducati's keys on the center island.

"Is this what your brother meant when he asked which place to meet you at? Is this your home?"

"It's one of my residences." She was my home. "I have three more in addition to this place and the Bentley penthouse."

She turned to look at me. "You have five homes?"

"Residences. Yes." I was going to drill the concept of home into this woman if it was the last thing I did.

Her expression a sudden storm of emotions, none of them were good.

I headed off the predominant one. "I've never brought a woman to any of my residences. Besides Feralyn at the penthouse, you're the only one."

Inhaling, she deployed the 4-7-8 breathing technique again, then slowly nodded. “Thank you for explaining.”

“I was stating fact. Do you want to discuss what else made you upset about the residences?”

She was silent a beat, then my brunette came out with it. “There’s such a vast difference between us that sometimes it’s hard to notice anything else.” She glanced down at her riding boots. “This is one of those times. You have a lot of experience and expertise. And I don’t just mean your military training or being Delta Force—which is incredible. I mean everything. Even with the simplest gestures in how you touch me, it isn’t simple.” An innocent shyness filtered into her voice. “Neither was how you kissed me.” She looked up. “I know you have a past—”

“My past isn’t in this room, Aracet.”

“Isn’t it?” Color flushed from her face to her chest. “You’re very dominant, Ares.”

I didn’t deny it, and I knew exactly where she was going with this. “My dominance wasn’t born from sexual encounters, nor is it limited to the bedroom.” My need for control was deeply ingrained long before I’d ever fucked. “Neither is your submission.” If it were, we wouldn’t be here. My brunette bled need in an exact shade that matched my dominance.

“I don’t know what my… preferences are.”

I was her fucking preference. Which she’d realize as soon as I sank inside her and dominated every inch of that sweet body while I fucked the insecurity out of her.

But we needed to have a conversation first.

Which was why I'd brought her to Largo. No memories of me reading her in on al-Adani or her subsequent rehab, this was neutral ground. For both of us. I needed her hard limits. She needed a safe place to disclose them. Largo was my closest residence to the penthouse that had a waterfront view, and my brunette had been staring at the fucking ocean for nine days straight.

De-escalating her differences bullshit, I tipped my chin toward the glass sliders and temporarily changed the subject. "Do you prefer gulf or ocean view?"

She turned back around, then glanced north to south. "Both are beautiful. It's incredible that one side of this island fronts the Atlantic Ocean and the other side the gulf."

Stepping into her six, I reached around her and unzipped her jacket, then I pulled out her hair tie. "You're incredible." Quickly undoing the braid, I ran my fingers through her thick mane. Then I slid off her jacket, tossed it onto the couch, pushed her hair over one shoulder and kissed the other. "Never forget how strong you are or what you've survived."

She shivered, then her voice turned quiet, submissive, needy. "But is that enough? If I don't work or give back for what was given to me, then what is my purpose?"

This woman's ability to both humble and gut me was endless. "Living your life without fear or hiding is purpose enough. I know both Jax and Bellows would agree. If I'd been taken out eight years ago, I'd want the same for you. All you need to do is live, *mátia mou*."

"Ares," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Remembering my teammates, saying nothing, I gave us both a minute.

Then, intentional with my movements, I slid an arm around her waist and checked in. “Together?”

Her body melted into mine. “Together,” she confirmed.

With the back of my fingers, gentler than I’d ever touched a woman, I traced the length of her arm and brought her to the reason we were here. “Other than what you disclosed on the flight to Syria, I need to know your hard limits.”

Stiffening against me, she repeated the term with trepidation. “Hard limits?”

“Yes. Sexually and physically.” Grasping her wrist, lifting her arm out and slightly above her head, I held firm. “For example, how I’m allowed to touch you.”

Beautifully submissive, the tension in her elbow and hand released, and she gave me the weight of her arm. “You say that as if you need permission to touch me.”

“I do.”

Turning her head, she looked up at me. “Is that really why you hadn’t touched me? You thought you needed permission?”

Sweeping a lock of her hair back from her left temple, I checked her new scar. “I have touched you, *mátia mou*.”

Color flushed her cheeks. “I don’t mean when you bathed me that first night or changed the bandages.”

Lowering her arm, I released her wrist. Then I put a foot of distance between us. “You were injured and in pain. Any sexual advances would’ve

been inappropriate. We also needed to have this conversation. Do you remember what I said at Empyros? Who the club is for?”

The heat that’d beautifully colored her cheeks faded. “Do you want to bind me again?”

I was fucking hard thinking about it. But I wouldn’t rig her again. “What I want and need are very different from what I’m willing and unwilling to do.”

My brunette stared at me, but then the hazel-eyed woman saw me. “What do you want?”

“Your pleasure.” Every inch of her body under mine.

“What do you need?”

“Dominance, ownership, and your pleasure.” No one would ever touch her again except me.

“And your ropes?” Brave, no hesitancy, she asked the question with the same fortitude that’d gotten her through the past ten years of her life.

But that wasn’t the woman who’d emerged when she was in my ropes. “No rigging.” Not unless she begged, and even then, I would have to consider it from all angles. If she could handle it, if I was willing to risk triggering her, if I wanted that dynamic, what expectations it would set—for both of us.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not something I need.” Not now.

She searched my face, my eyes. “How do you know that?”

I’d explained the origin of my obsession but not the need, because I knew damn well the price of full transparency. Need was weakness. I didn’t

engage in powerlessness. Control was my drug of choice, and I wouldn't emasculate myself or my dominance. But I would give her context. "Because once I fuck you, I'll own you." Completely.

"Bonded?" she whispered, hesitant, the flush in her cheeks more prominent.

It wasn't a question about me. This was about her needs.

"Yes. You'll bond to me." I'd make damn sure of it.

"Because of sex?"

Because I'd dominate the fuck out of her—starting now—which was exactly what she needed.

Closing the distance between us, leaning down to her neck, I dragged my mouth across the edge of her ear, then bit the soft flesh. "Because I'm going to learn every inch of your body and make you come in ways you never imagined." My cock straining against my riding pants, wanting inside her, I brushed my lips against hers with a reminder of why we were having this conversation. "But first, I need your hard limits." Standing back up, I resumed a foot of distance. "I need to know your triggers. What I can and cannot do while I fuck you, pleasure you, touch you. How hard I can push. How rough I can go. Anything you may think will trigger you, I need to know."

A tremor shook her small frame. "I-I don't know. I've never—" She sucked in a shallow breath, then her voice didn't carry past an exhaled whisper. "I've never done this."

My cock pulsed, possession mainlined, and I briefly closed my eyes as I took my own damn breath.

Mistaking my beat of silence, she pulled the trigger on filling it. “You’re disappointed. This is what I was afraid of, that I wouldn’t be enough for you. That with my inexperience, I won’t be able to satisfy—”

“Stop.” I cupped her cheek. “There is not one thing about you that disappoints me. I’ve been waiting eight years for you, Aracet Vandon. The thought alone of your inexperience makes me harder than I’ve ever been. Possession isn’t a strong enough sentiment to capture it. If you were on birth control or if we’d already had the discussion on limits, you’d be pinned against this slider, and I’d be balls deep, coming inside that sweet cunt of yours.”

Her face flamed. “*Ares*.”

“Keep giving me those hazel eyes and saying my name like that, and we’re going to be having a different conversation.” One about where I was coming. “Limits, *mátia mou*. Download them. Now,” I ordered.

She tilted her head away from my grasp, and her gaze dropped. Then she confessed one of the realities of her past. “I know I said I’d never done this. But the full truth is that for those two years in captivity that he—that he never…” Blowing out a breath, she slowly looked up, but she didn’t meet my eyes. “I don’t actually know if I’ve ever had sex.”

The rage at al-Adani, his father, and every fucking terrorist in their cell was back in an instant. But this wasn’t a goddamn question of her not knowing if she’d *ever had sex*.

It was fucking rape.

If those motherfuckers weren’t already dead, I would be hunting down every last one of them and gutting them before I put a round through their

heads. But right now, my rage wasn't what my brunette needed.

Engaging every fucking tactic in my arsenal not to show anger, I kept my tone even. Just. "Were you ever given a sexual assault exam?" There wasn't one in her file.

"No." Her gaze fell to my shoulder. "I said I didn't want one, and the military doctors didn't push." Her voice turned hollow. "But they did take blood and run tests. The results were all negative."

I knew the results. No STDs, but there hadn't been any intel on whether or not they'd given her a pregnancy test. "Do you have flashbacks of any other incidents of assault outside what you already shared with me?"

She shook her head but didn't give me a verbal response.

Grasping her chin, I tipped her head up. "There are no wrong answers here."

Her eyes welled. Then my brunette spoke with the same rasped whisper she'd had in the hospital in Jordan. "Please, Ares. I don't want to be the broken victim." A tear fell. "I just want to be the woman worthy of your desire."

"*Mátia mou*." *Jesus Christ*. "This was never a question of worthiness. You already are my every desire."

"Then can we please stop talking about what I don't know and can't answer?"

Fuck, this was not how I wanted to get here. But this was my brunette. I'd walk through hell to meet her on her terms if I had to. "Will you immediately communicate if you're triggered?"

"Yes."

“How?” I demanded, testing her.

Lines drew between her eyebrows. “Stop?”

“Stop is sufficient. So is your safe word. Repeat it.”

She looked away. “I don’t want to.”

“Because?”

Her voice hit the fucking floor, then my brunette gave me her hazel eyes and took me out at the knees. “Because I never want to do that to you again.”

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ONE HUNDRED & FIFTEEN

Aracet

My god of war slammed his mouth over mine, and same as on the airplane, he kissed me.

Deeply, passionately, skillfully, like a man utterly and dominantly possessed.

Except he didn't just invade my mouth and steal my breath.

He picked me up.

My back slammed against the glass slider, he hiked my left leg over his hip, dipped his leather-clad hips, then drove up and into my core with the hard length of his desire.

I cried out.

His tongue driving into my mouth as his hips circled against mine, he ate my cry. Then my warfighter, my dominant operator, growled.

The deep, animalistic roar my undoing, I became primal need.

Fisting two handfuls of his hair, rocking my core against the too many and too-thick layers of material between us, I lifted my right leg, locked my ankles behind him, and used all of my strength to pull him against me.

My god of war stilled.

Then his hand was on my right calf, and his voice was on my lips. "Pain level?"

My leg wasn’t the problem. My nipples were painfully tight, and my core was pulsing with a need I had no words for except *desperate*. “I’m fine.”

“Answer the question, Aracet.”

My brain grasped the three warning syllables of my name, but my hips jerked against his. Then something extraordinary but equally terrifying happened. Every thought, every uncensored truth, flowed from my mind to my lips, and I was doing exactly what he had been conditioning me to do since that night at Empyros.

I bled truth. “I’m aching so badly between my legs—worse than when I was in your ropes—that it’s making me feel crazed. My nipples are so hard they hurt, but I want more pressure. I want to feel your teeth on them like when you bit my ear. My mouth feels empty without you invading it, like I need to fill it, to taste, to bite. Everything feels like I’m on fire, and I just want to feel what it’s like to have you inside me. But not gently. Not slow. I want the full weight of you on top of me. I want your muscular body overpowering mine. Dominating, thrusting, taking control.”

“Good, *mátia mou*.” His voice cold and commanding, no softness or affection, no change in tone when he spoke those two words, he bled dominance as he pulled off one of my boots, then the other. But then he leaned down to my mouth, and with a heart-crushingly gentle touch, he kissed me once before he spoke against my lips. “Now you’re going to tell me if you want me to come inside you.” Reaching between us, he unzipped my pants. “Or if you want my cum all over that sweet cunt of yours.” Trailing the back of his hand over my tank, he slid his fingers between the valley of my breasts. “Coating your mound, your thighs, your breasts.”

Grasping the hard peak of my nipple, he pulled his head back to look down at me. Then he twisted the sensitive bud without mercy.

Desire ripped through my body, and I gasped.

“Do you want my cum inside or on you?” Twisting harder, he leaned closer. “Do you want to be owned, or do you want to be delivered?” His fierce, punishing gaze all warfighter, my Delta operator waged war. “Answer, Aracet. Where am I coming tonight?”

I begged, I consented, I whispered. I submitted. “Everywhere.”

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ONE HUNDRED & SIXTEEN

Ares

"Answer, Aracet," I demanded, mainlining dominance, watching every inch of her face as I pinched her nipple. "Where am I coming tonight?"

Giving me those eyes, my brunette fucking submitted. "Everywhere."

Releasing her nipple, I palmed her throat. "Good." Dragging my tongue across her bottom lip, I praised. "Good, *mátia mou*." Locking in on her eyes, I held firm. "So we're clear, I'm going to come all over that sweet cunt of yours. Then I'm going to come inside you." I was going to fuck her raw and fuck her hard. "Yes?"

Her needy half gasp, half moan made my dick harder.

"Not an answer, *mátia mou*." Gripping the back of her left leg, pinning her against the slider, I was holding position until I heard that fucking consent one more time.

She gave it. "Yes." Her voice hit pure sub. "*Please*."

Keeping my grip on her as I stepped back from the slider, I released her throat to snake my arm under her perfect ass. Hitching her higher on my hips, angling her cunt over my hard-on, I walked us into the main bedroom.

Then I laid my brunette out on the bed.

Braless, hair wild, a strip of stomach showing between her tank and unzipped riding pants, looking up at me with need—she was so damn

fucking sexy.

“Giving me those eyes, lips wet, hair loose, laid out for me, you’re fucking beautiful, woman.” Leaning over, I kissed her deep.

Moaning, she snaked her hands around my neck.

Grabbing her wrists, I positioned her arms over her head and issued an order. “Wait.”

Breathless, she didn’t reply.

Testing her and my own damn restraint, I strode into the kitchen and grabbed a few bottled waters out of the fridge. When I walked back into the bedroom, her eyes were trained on the door, and she was lying exactly as I left her.

“Good, *mátia mou*.” Holding her gaze, I set the waters on the nightstand, stepped out of my boots, emptied my pockets—cell, wallet, knife—and dumped the items next to the bottled water. Then I unholstered my Glock, placed it within reach out of habit, and pulled my T-shirt over my head.

Her breathing accelerated, the pulse in her neck jumped, her gaze cut to my chest, and she licked her lips.

“That’s it, beautiful. Eyes on me. Look your fill.” I could fucking taste her anticipation. “Think about how I’m going to strip you down and own every inch of you.” Wrapping my hands around her waist, dragging my tongue across the exposed strip of flesh, I pushed her tank top up and over those lush breasts.

Then I latched on to one of her perfect nipples and sucked hard.

Her entire body jolted, her shocked gasp echoed, and her arms came halfway off the bed.

Shoving her wrists back down, grazing the peaked flesh with my teeth, already fucking loving her responsiveness, I grabbed both breasts. Then I bit her nipple with the kind of pressure she'd fucking feel and sucked harder as I swirled my tongue.

Letting out a throaty groan, she reached for me.

My mouth popped off her breast. "Did I tell you to move, *mátia mou*?"

One nipple dark and wet, tank pushed up to her neck, she sucked in a breath. Then she shook her head.

"Arms back where I put them. Lock your hands if you need to. I'll tell you when you can touch me." Eight years I waited to taste what was mine. I was taking my time. "Understood?"

She lowered her hands to the bed and nodded.

"Verbal response," I demanded.

"I understand."

"Good." Eyes on hers, I latched on to the other nipple.

When I swirled my tongue, her knees came up. When I bit down, her hips thrust. But when I sucked hard, my woman cried out like she was about to come.

I couldn't wait any longer. I needed her naked, and I needed her cunt.

Pulling her tank over her head, peeling down her pants and soaked underwear, careful of her calf, I stripped her naked, leaving only her

compression bandage on. Then I kissed, bit and sucked my way from her ankles to her neck, intentionally bypassing her bare cunt.

Squirming under me, moaning every time I applied more pressure, my brunette was fucking perfect.

“That’s it, *mátia mou*, give me those sweet moans. Let me hear how much you like my mouth on you.”

“Ares.” Trembling harder, she looked at me with more need than when I’d had her in my ropes.

“Right here, beautiful.” Sucking the tender flesh at the hollow of her neck, I left my mark before I kissed her and checked in. “How are you feeling?”

My brunette begged. “I need you.”

“You’re going to have me. Every inch.” I winked and stood. Then I stripped off my pants, stroked myself once, and climbed onto the bed.

Kneeling between her legs, I grasped her ankles. Keeping my gaze on hers, I pushed her knees up and planted her feet on either side of my thighs.

Then I spread her legs and looked down at what was mine.

Fucking Christ. Wet, mine, perfect. She was beautiful.

Her thighs trembled. “Ares?”

I looked up at my brunette. “You’re stunning, *mátia mou*.”

“I’m nervous.”

I refrained from telling her she should be. “Because I want to consume every inch of you? Or because no man has ever tasted you?”

“I have no experience—with anything. And you’re…” She glanced down at my cock, and her voice went south. “You’re so big.”

Leaning over, I kissed the top of her cunt, then brought my mouth within an inch of hers and cupped her face. “I’m going to make you fall the fuck apart. When I’m inside you, when my mouth is on you, when you’re coming, when I’m filling that sweet cunt, you’re going to know exactly who owns you. Yes, you’re going to feel me. Yes, it’s going to hurt. But beautiful, I’m also going to make you orgasm like you never have before.” I kissed her once. “Trust me, *mátia mou*.”

She whispered, “I do.”

“Good.” I didn’t give her any more time to think.

I kissed her with fucking intent. Then I moved down her body, positioned myself between her thighs, and issued an order. “Keep those pretty eyes on me, beautiful.” With my gaze locked on hers, I stroked my tongue through her sweet cunt.

She fucking levitated.

My cock surged, I slid my arms under her thighs and gripped to hold her down, then I dove back in to the sweetest cunt I’d ever tasted. *Fuck*, I couldn’t remember ever tasting another woman. “So goddamn perfect, *mátia mou*.” I tongued her entrance, licked her desire, then sucked her clit.

“Ares!” Bucking against my hold, she fisted my hair.

This time, I didn’t stop my woman from grabbing on to me.

I latched on to her clit, drove two fingers into her tight cunt, and sucked hard.

"*Oh my God*." Her back arched off the bed, her knees came up, then she was coming.

Pulsing, wet as hell, her sweet cunt constricted around my fingers

I bit down on her clit and sucked the nub through my teeth, circling over it hard with my tongue.

My woman screamed, a second orgasm hit, and she fucking detonated.

Releasing her clit but keeping my fingers inside her, crawling up her body, swirling my tongue over each of her hard nipples, I bit the side of her neck, then sank my tongue into her mouth.

She moaned.

Fisting my cock, I kissed her. Stroking through her mouth, priming my hard-on, letting her taste herself, I wanted to sink inside her tight heat then and there and fucking explode.

But first, I was erasing her goddamn past.

Stroking through her mouth one more time, I pulled back so she could see me. "You're fucking stunning when you come, *mátia mou*." Brushing against her G-spot, feeling every inch of her tightness spasm, I slowly withdrew my fingers.

"Wait." She grabbed my wrist, and with her legs spread, hair wild, breasts heaving, my woman begged. "Don't leave."

"Never," I promised. "Arms around my neck."

She grasped onto me.

Then, hovering above her, gripping the back of her neck, making damn sure she was with me, I held those hazel eyes and brought my cock against

her cunt. I stroked myself. “You ready, *mátia mou*?” I became control. “Are you ready to be owned?”

“Yes, *please*.”

Two words, and I fucking exploded.

Groaning, refraining from pulling back so I could watch every goddamn rope of cum land on her, I held the head of my cock against her mound and fucking pumped. Coating her in my seed, aiming to erase every goddamn trigger from her past, I came and fucking came.

“*Mátia mou*.” *Fuck*. “You feel that, beautiful?” I rubbed the head of my cock across her mound.

Tears falling, legs shaking, she nodded.

“Look,” I demanded. “You fucking see that?”

“*Yes*,” she whispered.

“Good.” I palmed her sex. “This is my cum on you.” My hand flat against her mound, I delivered her from her fucking past. “Only mine.” Rubbing up her stomach, over her breasts, coating those hard nipples, I spread my seed all fucking over her. “I come on you. My seed coats these breasts.” I tweaked her nipples and twisted. “My seed coats your cunt.” I dragged two fingers through my release, then drove them into her.

Her knees hitched, and she cried out.

“That’s it, *mátia mou*.” Rotating my fingers, I coated her walls with my cum. “Feel me, feel my seed inside you. I own this cunt.” Leaning down to her mouth, pulling out of her tight heat, I kissed her. Then I shoved my two soaked fingers past her lips. “I own this mouth.” Thumbing her clit with my

other hand, I slid my still-hard erection through her slick folds. “I own every inch of you.”

Moaning, she sucked my fingers.

“That’s it, woman. Taste and feel. Now you know what it’s like to be owned by me.” I drew my fingers out. “Are you ready to be claimed?”

Her fingers dug into the back of my neck. “Please, Ares.”

“Say yes, *mátia mou*,” I demanded.

Forceful, fucking transcending, my woman gave me her complete submission. “Yes!”

I drove into my brunette with a single thrust.

Her scream hit, and I fucking roared.

“Mine.” *Jesus fucking Christ*. “*Mine*.”

Her hips jerked, her cunt constricted, and she gasped. Then she fucking bonded to me. “Yours,” she cried. “*Always yours*.”

I slammed my mouth over my woman, then I fucked her.

I fucked her like a man possessed.

I fucked her how I’d fantasized.

I fucked her exactly how she needed—dominating, controlling and rough. Thrusting against her G-spot, bottoming out at her cervix, grinding my hips against her clit, biting her nipples, driving my tongue deep, I owned her.

Then her cunt gripped my cock, an animalistic groan roared from her chest, and she fucking fell apart.

Driving in to the hilt, I exploded inside her sweet cunt and came with her.

Pump after pump, filling her womb, I claimed my woman.

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ONE HUNDRED & SEVENTEEN

Aracet

Time reconstructed without me.

One moment, his dominance was the air in my lungs, his mouth, hands and cock had turned my entire body into an erogenous canvas, I'd forfeited my agency, tears were falling, and the earth was shaking.

Everything hurt.

Everything felt fucking perfect.

Now my mind was floating, he was on his back, and I was tucked into that special corner spot between his shoulder and neck. Absolutely wrecked, involuntarily shaking from head to toe, shocked, sated, deeply rooted in newfound sexual hunger, I lay helpless with my pussy throbbing and wet and full as his deep, rough voice penetrated the sex-drenched haze of the bedroom.

"Good?"

Dear God. No, I was not good. I was a spineless mess of Ares ruin.

Barely having the strength to push away from the wall of muscle that was his chest, I looked up at him. "If you're the vice, I'm the sinner." Sex seeped out of me.

Stark, atmospheric, his blue-eyed gaze looked down at me. Then a god of war who had a filthy, dirty mouth spoke with reverent authority.

“Bonded.”

“Addicted,” I corrected. My body still uncontrollably shaking from his full-out assault, like the animal he’d just turned me into, I reached for my warfighter soulmate. “And I need more.”

He smiled.

Ares Grayson, resplendent in his sweaty, muscled nakedness, *smiled*.

With my hands braced on his chest, I smiled back. Then—shy, exuberant, *free*—the joy spilled over, and I couldn’t stop it. I giggled.

All at once, the smile was wiped from my Delta operator’s expression, and a lethal seriousness was in its place. “You’re stunning when you laugh, Aracet Vandon.”

I couldn’t hold it back anymore. “Ares?”

“Aracet.”

I breathed in everything about him. “I love you.”

A god of war moved.

Faster than a blink, he rolled, shoved my thigh with his knee, unerringly notched the head of his hard length against my still-dripping core, and he drove into me with a single, forceful, punishingly erotic, possessively dominant thrust.

My back arched, pleasure-pain exploded, my body sang, and I groaned.

His lips met mine.

Then a warfighter bonded his soul to mine. “I love you.”

The tears came back.

This time for an entirely different reason.

Slow and measured, with long, deliberate strokes, keeping me locked in his beautifully stark gaze, he drove me to the very edge.

Then he did exactly as he had promised.

Thrusting his impossibly huge length deep inside me, hitting that spot that both hurt and made my entire body feel electrified with pleasure, he took command of every cell of my being and dominantly, expertly brought me to a keening, soul-shaking orgasm.

Stretching me, drawing out my pleasure, then rocking into me one more time, he buried himself inside me completely and claimed my soul as his pulsing, hot seed drove me over another edge.

Too much, too perfect, shaking, sobbing, gripping the back of his neck, delivered from my past, I held on to my god of war with everything I had. "*Ares*."

"*Mátia mou*." Grasping my face, swiping my tears, he caged me in with his muscled arms and his war-hardened body. Protecting me, loving me, cleansing me in his strength, he brought his mouth to mine and whispered his demanding governance. "That's it, beautiful. I've got you. Let go." Soul-touching and gentle, he kissed me. "You're safe now, *mátia mou*. Let it all go."

The war this man had waged for me. "I'm safe."

"Yes, you are."

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ONE HUNDRED & EIGHTEEN

Ares

Buried to the hilt, bracing my arms on either side of her, giving her enough of my weight so she could feel my dominance, I caged her in and gave her the safety to let go. “You’re safe now, *mátia mou*. Let it all go.”

Flooding, death-gripping the back of neck, she cried. “I’m safe.”

“Yes, you are.”

Tears fell down her face. “*Ares*.”

“I’m right here, beautiful.” I stroked her cheek. “You’re beautiful, and you’re strong.”

“I’m sobbing,” she half-cried, indignant.

I pushed her hair from her face. “You’re healing, and you’re bonding.” She was perfect.

“You’re a monster,” she whispered.

I smiled. “I’m your monster now.”

“Good.” She smiled back. But then her eyes closed, and her grip around my neck lost its tension. “I think you drugged me with sex.”

“Not drugs. Emotions.” Slow and careful, I pulled out of her. “Let’s get you hydrated before you completely sub drop on me.”

Pain twisted her face, her hand went between her legs, and she crossed her legs. “Oh my God, I need the restroom.”

I kissed her once. “I’ll grab a washcloth. Wait.”

“Ares. *Oh my God*.” She rolled to her side. “I’m—*shit*. Your sheets. *There’s so much*.”

I picked her up.

Her hands covering her cunt, she gasped.

I carried her into the bathroom, set her on the counter, then I braced my hands on either side of her and got in her face. “Sex is natural. The aftermath is natural. I don’t give a damn about sheets. When was your last period?”

Her eyes popped with shock, but she stopped cupping herself. “I’m not sure.” She crossed her arms.

“Approximate,” I ordered.

“Um.” She stared at me like a deer in headlights. Then she told me something I didn’t know about her. Something that hadn’t been in any of her files or records. “I get my period very infrequently.”

“Since when?”

“Always.”

“Underlying medical condition?”

She crossed, then uncrossed her legs. “Not exactly.”

“Aracet,” I warned.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. “Stress isn’t really an underlying medical condition.”

Reining in a wave of anger, making a fucking vow to eliminate all her stress, I checked my tone. “Last cycle?”

“I’m not sure. It was very cold in Minnesota. So, winter.”

Winter. Fucking winter. It was the end of Spring. I took two deep breaths. Then I kissed her forehead. “Thank you for telling me.” I turned the faucet to hot, grabbed a washcloth, wet it and rang it out, then issued her an order. “Spread your legs.”

She parted her thighs.

I wiped her cunt.

She grabbed my wrist with both hands. “You’re angry.”

“Not at you, *mátia mou*.” At the fucking world. At myself. I met her gaze. “Do you want children?” I hadn’t—until a hazel-eyed brunette, full of my seed, told me she got infrequent periods.

“It seems like you do.”

Once again, this woman saw right through me. I gave her the responsible answer. “It would have been irresponsible to come inside you if I didn’t.”

Weariness hit her expression and she let go of my wrist. “True.”

“We’re tabling this discussion for now.” I finished wiping her thighs and swollen cunt, then tossed the washcloth in the sink. “You need hydration, food, then sleep.”

“Just sleep, please.”

Already pushing at the limits of my tolerance, she wasn’t forgoing fucking food and water. “No. You’re going to eat.”

“Water would be good.” She crossed her arms over her breasts again. “I’ll let you know when I’m hungry. Right now, I’m just tired.”

Reading what she was putting down, I aimed at clarification. “Is it being told when to eat that’s a hard limit, or being told that you need to eat?” When I’d fed her at the penthouse the first time I’d cooked for her, she’d eaten. She’d also been in sub drop. But every time since that I’d cooked for her, she’d eaten what I’d served. If feeding her was a hard limit, that was going to be a problem for me.

“More like an aversion.” She glanced at her leg. “I don’t like to feel… monitored.”

Her reintegration. “Copy.” I caved on feeding her. For now. “Tell me when you’re hungry, no matter what time it is. Understood?”

“Yes.” The tension in her shoulders visibly relaxed. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. How’s the leg?” Between the ride down and knowing I was going to fuck her, I’d brought the pain meds in case. But she hadn’t taken any since the first night back at the penthouse, and that’d been a test of wills.

“Okay. Only a little sore. Can I take off the compression bandage now?”

She could. But I’d do it for her. Quickly unwrapping her leg, I tossed the bandage, then I picked her up and carried her back to the bedroom.

Color hit her cheeks. “I can walk.”

“Yes, you can.” I dropped a kiss to her forehead as I laid her in bed. “And I can give you proper aftercare.” I cracked open one of the bottles of water from the nightstand and held it out to her. “Drink.”

Thirsty, submissive, she complied.

I drank a bottle, waited for her to finish hers, then crawled into bed with her.

Angling her back to my chest, pulling her into my arms, fucking content, I exhaled. "*Mátia mou*." My brunette. My woman.

She rolled to face me. Then she looked at me exactly how she had eight years ago in that helo—like I was her fucking savior—and gave me words only one other person ever had. "I love you."

I was Delta. I was *Sine Pari*. I was a warfighter. But I'd been a starved man.

Now I wasn't. "I love you." I kissed my brunette. "Sleep, beautiful."

A smile touched her lips, her eyes closed, and two minutes later, she was out.

Still facing me, curled into fetal position, her hands wrapped around my bicep, my brunette had been asleep for two hours.

Same as all the nights in the penthouse, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Then, I'd been obsessed. Now, I was fucking consumed.

My cock hard, the taste of her in my mouth, I was thinking of waking her to feed her when my burner vibrated with an incoming text.

Rolling slightly, I grabbed the cell off the nightstand and glanced at the screen.

Dock. Five minutes.

The number not one I recognized, it didn't matter. I knew who it was.

Shifting, slowly removing my brunette's hands from my arm, I paused when she stirred. Waiting five seconds, ten… Twenty. She settled back in,

and I rolled out of bed. Grabbing my riding pants, tactically exfilling the bedroom, I glanced back from the doorway.

My brunette. My woman. Bonded. Asleep. *Mine*.

I pulled the bedroom door shut, then stepped into the leathers. My cock coated with every orgasm from her tight cunt, smelling like sex and sweat, bypassing boots, I headed to the sliders and stepped out to the lanai.

Crossing the yard, skirting the pool, I took the path toward the water.

Three minutes, fifty seconds later, I was at the end of the dock, clocking the property north of mine as I sat in the corner of the built-in bench seating.

November materialized from my six.

I glanced past him at the dark-haired woman standing ten meters back. Head down, turquoise bikini, hands clasped behind her back, she toed some invisible pattern on November's dock.

Sitting three feet from me, the hacker ignored the woman. "Grayson."

"Rhys."

No laptop, cell or tablet in his hands, November scanned toward my house. "How is the woman?"

Mine now. "Fine. Thanks for the assist." I didn't clarify beyond that. Sound carried across water. He'd know what I meant.

November nodded, then scanned the south end of my property. "Perimeter security needs to be extended past the water line."

Now that I had my brunette, I'd be shoring up security on all my properties. "I'll handle it." I tipped my chin toward his woman. "Does she want to come sit?" It was late, and she seemed uncomfortable.

The woman didn’t look up when I mentioned her, but she stilled.

“She knows her place.” November didn’t so much as glance at her. “Supplies arrive?”

I didn’t fucking judge kink, and when it came to November, there were a hell of a lot of rumors. But even I had to admit, the intensity of the TPE dynamic between him and the dark-haired woman was fucking extreme.

Surreptitiously scanning the woman again, looking for distress and seeing none, I focused back on the hacker. “I haven’t checked yet.”

“Rations are stocked in the pantry and fridge. Female clothing is on the left side of the main bedroom’s walk-in closet. Yours is on the right. Vehicle was delivered and garaged yesterday.” November ticked off the supplies I’d ordered last week and needed delivery help with.

I’d wanted the house stocked, but I didn’t want to leave my brunette to come down and do it myself. Nor did I want any unknown delivery services in the place. I didn’t advertise where my residences were. To anyone. Figuring November had connections down here who knew how to be discreet, I’d called in a favor. He’d said he’d handle it, but I’d failed to ask the pertinent fucking question of who was going to be in the house.

“Thanks for accepting the deliveries.” Something told me I’d owe him more for this than the UCAV.

“I didn’t. I was in Miami until tonight.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. I looked over in time to see the dark-haired woman take a step back before she froze again. I glanced at November. “Then who the hell was in my house?”

November went as still as his woman. Then he looked at me with lethal warning. “Atala.”

Recognizing the look and disposition of a man possessed, I didn’t glance again at what was his. “Your woman?”

“My wife.” November stood. “Let me know when you’re ready to outfit your safe room.” He turned to head back to his dock.

The house had a fucking safe room? “Where is it?”

November glanced back. “Bunker. Under the garage. Concealed entry behind the air handler. Is this going to be your full-time residence?”

Still processing the bunker intel, I glanced at the fifty-foot Azimut Flybridge at the end of his dock. It was rigged with fishing gear. November didn’t seem the type. “Don’t know.” I’d let my brunette decide. “You fish?”

“No.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, November retreated to his dock, aiming for his wife. But then he walked right past her.

She fell in on his six, but she must’ve said something because November stopped, pivoted, and dipped his head to listen to her.

She clasped her hands in front of herself and leaned slightly toward him.

November looked over her head. Then he nodded once.

The woman took off. Down the dock, onto the Azimut, moving like her feet didn’t touch the fucking ground, she hit the bow, then dove into the water.

I glanced back at November.

Eyes on where she’d gone under, he didn’t move.

I looked back toward the bow, but the woman didn’t surface.

A minute later, she still hadn’t surfaced.

At ninety seconds, about to go after her, I glanced at November. He hadn’t fucking moved. I looked back at the water. No ripples, no air bubbles, nothing. Then, at the two-minute mark, the woman surfaced at the ladder on the side of the dock and climbed up.

Expression locked, November held position.

Practically fucking prancing, clearly happy with her late-night swim, the woman aimed for November, then stopped short and dipped her head.

November said something I couldn’t hear, but she immediately moved around him and headed toward the house.

Giving her a ten-pace lead, November glanced from me to the foot of my dock, then followed his woman.

I looked behind me.

Aracet.

My jacket over her naked body, holding the front together, barefoot, walking hesitantly, my brunette came down the dock.

“*Mátia mou*.” Goddamn, she was sexy.

Her gaze briefly cut toward November’s property. “Who was that?”

“Neighbor.” I tapped my thigh. “Come here. On my lap.”

“Ares.” She scanned north to south. “There are other houses.”

“No one’s going to see.” But I was. I was going to watch her tight cunt sink down onto my cock. I held out my hand. “Come.”

Gripping the sides of the jacket as if it would protect her from my depravity, she took my hand.

“Good,” I praised. “On your knees, straddle my thighs.”

Even with the quarter moon, I could see her blush. “But your neighbor?”

“Our neighbor, and he’s not watching.” The hacker had his hands full.

Tentative, shaking slightly—from nerves, muscle fatigue or anticipation—she put her weight on one knee and positioned her other leg over my lap.

“Good, *mátia mou*. Hands on my shoulders.”

“Your jacket will fall open.”

I looked into those eyes that had haunted me from the moment I first saw them. “One, good. Two, I like you in my clothes. Three, this is you and me. No one else.” I gripped her chin. “Trust me, beautiful. As much as I want the entire world to know you’re mine, I’m not fucking you in front of anyone.”

Her voice dropped to an insecure whisper. “Is this enough… without your ropes?”

“Woman.” I’d spent all night making her mine. I was about to fuck her again on this dock. I threaded a hand into her hair. “You’re more than enough.”

She traced a scar on my chest. “That wasn’t what I was asking.” She looked up at me. “Do you want to put your ropes on me?”

Yes. A resounding fucking yes. But now we had a safety issue on top of the trauma. “Seeing you in my rope dress was enough.”

She didn’t let it go. “You pushed me for transparency, to articulate my needs. I’m asking for you to tell me yours.”

Christ, I wanted inside her. “This is a safety issue, Aracet. If you’re unwilling to use your safe word, then this conversation is over before it begins.”

“What if I am willing?” She dropped her head. “But a different one.”

Grasping her chin, I tipped her head back up. Then I searched every inch of her face. “You want to be rigged.”

One shoulder, it was barely a shrug, and her gaze dropped again.

“Look at me,” I ordered.

She met my gaze.

“Keep your eyes on me, and tell me what you want.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I want to try again.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because…” Her gaze started to drift, but she caught herself. Then my brunette shocked me. “Because I want to feel empowered. I want to have you dress me up in your ropes, make me beautiful, and be the center of all of your focused attention.”

“You are powerful. You are beautiful. You are the center of my attention.” She was going to have to give me a hell of a lot more of a compelling reason to consider it. “None of those are reason enough.”

Frustration tightened her expression. “Because I want to isn’t enough?”

“No. Unzip my pants.”

Her hands steady, but her movements distracted, the jacket fell open and exposed her breasts as she undid my pants. “Then what would be a good enough reason?”

That’s what we were going to find out. “Take out my cock.”

Licking her lips, she freed my erection. Then she sat back on my thighs and tentatively stroked me as she watched her movements. “I’ve never done this or tasted—”

“Aracet.”

The stroking stopped, and she looked up.

Fuck me, those eyes. In the moonlight, they were a prettier fucking sight than her huge breasts. “Lean down, put your lips around my cock, and suck.”

“But my—your jacket isn’t very long. It’ll ride up over my… I don’t have on anything underneath.”

I knew exactly where my riding jacket fell on her thighs and what would happen the second she leaned over. “Give another excuse, and you won’t be wearing anything while you suck my cock.”

This time, she didn’t hesitate. Leaning down, my woman wrapped her lips around me and sucked.

Fuuuck.

My head fell back, and for ten seconds, I let the enthusiasm of my brunette do me the fuck in. Her lips, her tongue, her small hands wrapped around the base of my cock. *Christ*, I could’ve come.

Tipping my head up, I watched her for another five seconds. Then I gripped her hair. “Stop.”

Her lips popped off. “Did I do it wrong?”

“No.” She was fucking perfect. “Lose the jacket, and straddle my thighs again. Bring that cunt closer.”

Slow, not knowing how damn sexy she was, she gave me a mini striptease, then carefully straddled my thighs again, placing her hands on my shoulders.

“Cup your breasts,” I ordered.

She didn’t just cup them. She squeezed her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

“That’s it, *mátia mou*.” Releasing her hair, I stroked through her wet heat. “How sore are you?”

“I want you,” she half whispered, half moaned.

“You have me.” I slid two fingers into her cunt and grabbed my cock. “Scale of one to ten. How sore?”

Her hips ground down on my hand, and she pushed her breasts together. “I don’t know. I just need you inside me. I need to… *please*.”

“You’ll come, beautiful.” I wouldn’t deny her.

Rocking her hips, she pulsed around me. “I want you to as well.”

“That’s definitely going to happen.” Stroking her cunt one more time, then withdrawing my fingers, I spread her slickness over the head of my cock. “Soreness level?” Gripping her hip in one hand, my cock in the other, I rubbed against her tight heat.

“Mm…” Her eyes closed. “Five or six. Maybe.” Then my brunette gripped my shoulders and looked right at me. “But it will feel so good

sore.”

I drove into her.

Her cry carried across the water, I thrust up as I pulled her hip down, and her sweet cunt took every inch of me as her legs gave out.

“Oh my God.” Clinging to my shoulders, her cunt flush against my base, her head lolled, and she constricted around me.

Balls deep, my brunette and the stars my new favorite view, I thumbed her clit and issued an order. “Eyes on me.”

Hazy and sex drunk, she gave me that green-and-gold-eyed gaze. “I haven’t forgotten that you didn’t answer my question.”

“Didn’t think you would.” I circled her clit harder. “Do you want to come now?”

Pushing against my thumb, rocking her hips, her tight cunt took every inch like she was made for me. “You’re distracting me.”

“That’s the general idea.” Fuck her to distraction. Drown in that hazel gaze.

Her eyes fluttered shut. “I thought my pleasure was.”

“Very astute.” I could listen to her voice for the rest of my life and still not get enough. “That, too.”

Her cunt gripped my cock and pulsed hard. “And yours.”

“Secondary.”

She stopped grinding her hips and looked at me. “What if I didn’t come?”

Jesus, she was beautiful. “I would make you.”

“What if I couldn’t?”

I swept her hair behind her shoulder. “I’d find a way.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “And what if I wanted to be tied up in your ropes with my legs spread wide, and your patterns all over my body, too helpless to move while you came inside me over and over until I couldn’t take it anymore, but I’d have to because I was rigged, and you’re my rigger?”

Jesus fucking Christ. “Aracet.”

She whispered. “*Please*?”

Depravity infiltrated my dominance. Then every way I could rig her was front and center.

I looked at the woman who I’d once thought had taken everything from me. Now she was offering me her agency. “I’ll think about it.”

Shy and sweet, my brunette, my submissive, my fucking goddess, smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re not going to be thanking me tomorrow.” Her tight cunt already so damn swollen, she was going to be sore as hell.

“I’m going to be thankful every day I get to wake up in your arms.”

I grabbed her hips and drove into her hard. “You’re in my arms now.”

“Thank you, Ares Grayson.”

I came inside my *mátia mou*.

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EPILOGUE

Aracet

Both in expensive custom-tailored black suits, both wearing gleaming black dress shoes, each of them immaculately groomed, they walked into the small vestibule.

Pasqual smiled wide.

Henry frowned.

Pasqual took my hand as he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “You look stunning, love.”

Henry stood back, glaring at me like he was sizing up an alien. Then he threw out an accusation with a fervor as if I’d offended the entire universe. “What the hell did you do to your hair?”

“Nothing.” I glanced at Pasqual. “And thank you.”

“*Nothing*,” Henry repeated with disdain before shaking his head. “That’s the problem.”

Remembering Ares’s whispered words as his strong hands had held me down this morning, I fought a shiver. Then I ignored Henry’s opinion.

“What are you two doing in here?” The ceremony wasn’t for another five minutes. I glanced at the clock on the wall again. Yes, I had five minutes. I’d always been careful with time, but since being with Ares,

learning all of his likes and dislikes, I knew he didn't just have an extreme dislike of tardiness where I was concerned, it worried him. That worry I understood deeply.

Pasqual glanced the length of me. "We couldn't wait to see you."

"I needed to make sure you didn't do…" Expression incredulous, arm out, hand up in the universal symbol for stop, Henry made a circular motion aimed at my hair. "*This*."

My gaze shot back to the mirror for a brief glimpse. My hair in soft waves, my dress exquisite—better than anything I ever could have imagined—my cheeks flushed, my makeup simple, I looked like me. A very happy me.

I smiled at Henry. "If by *this*, you mean exactly how I wanted to look today, then thank you very much."

"You're not welcome *very much*," Henry both snapped and mimicked before his tone turned to concern. "What's wrong with the Gianvito Rossi Yvonne lace mules?"

"The what?"

"The shoes," Henry amended, deep worry lines creasing between his eyebrows. "Don't they fit?"

"Oh, yes. They're perfect. I just…" I stepped into the delicate sandals with a three-inch heel that were nothing more than a whisper of white lace across the forepart of my feet. "I hadn't put them on yet." I looked up at both men. "I didn't want to get them dirty."

Pasqual's wide smile turned into a soft look I didn't know how to decipher. "Who's giving away the bride?" He glanced from me to his

husband.

“Don’t look at me.” Henry stepped forward and lifted my hair with both hands. Holding it up, he glanced at each side of my head like he was a stylist and was assessing his options. “I only pick out the dress. I’m no one’s daddy.”

Pasqual’s smile brightened.

When he didn’t say anything, Henry, still holding up my hair, glanced at him. Then he groaned. “*Oh my God*. Take mercy on the man, *Princess Bride*, or I’ll never hear the end of it.” Letting go of one side of my hair, Henry reached into his pocket.

I glanced at Pasqual before looking up at Henry. “Mercy?”

Henry rolled his eyes. “He wants to give you away.”

“Oh.” *Oh*.

Pasqual’s voice softened to match his expression. “I would be honored.”

Tears welled. “Thank you.” My voice broke, and I fought not to cry. “That would be perfect.” Truly perfect.

Henry smirked as he came away with more than a few hairpins. “Then it’s settled. Pasqual gets to play Daddy, and *Princess Bride* gets to be a princess. But first, we need to fix this mess before you embarrass the dress I got you.” Henry held out his hand and issued me an order. “Hold these.”

I opened my palm, and he dumped ten gold hairpins, each with a tiny little cluster of three sparkling crystals on the end, into my hand.

Staring at my palm, at the beauty of the hairpins and Henry’s thoughtfulness, a tear slid down my cheek.

Pasqual reached forward and swiped it away with his thumb.

Then, for the next few minutes, Henry pulled and twisted my hair, expertly pushed the pins into place, and Pasqual told me no less than five times how beautiful I looked.

Finally, when I felt all my hair, except for a few loose strands, was off my neck and pinned with a soft but secure hold, Henry stepped back.

With his expression locked, he made a spin gesture with one hand as he clipped out an order. “Turn.”

I spun in a slow circle.

When my eyes met Henry’s again, he nodded. Then my best friend smiled. “Now you’re worthy of the dress.”

I blushed.

Pasqual smiled.

Tears fell down my cheeks.

Pasqual gripped my bare shoulder with his warm hand, Henry shook his head, and then one of the rarest moments of my life happened.

We all laughed.

But then my laughter turned into a choked sob, and the door to the vestibule burst open.

All three of us turned.

Ares, in a tuxedo, glanced at the two men with fury before tempering his expression and looking at me. “What’s wrong?”

Henry scoffed. “Aside from the fact that you’re not supposed to see the bride before the ceremony, you cretin?”

I smiled.

Ares

Helios muttered under his breath so the priest couldn't hear him. "Getting hitched in a fucking church. *Goddamn*, motherfucker."

Ignoring my brother, I didn't bother telling him Feralyn had inadvertently picked the venue. After we'd told him and Feralyn we were getting married, Feralyn had mentioned that our parents' funeral mass was here. Then she'd said how she thought a wedding would be some kind of full-circle bullshit. My woman had gotten teary. Now we were here.

I didn't care where I married my brunette.

The vestibule door opened, and the SWCC walked out. Striding down the aisle, he took up position next to Feralyn.

This time, Helios growled under his breath. "If that motherfucker steps one inch closer to Haven, there's gonna be bloodshed."

Saint appeared from the apse and stepped up next to Helios.

Helios looked at me like I was fucking insane, then he glanced at Saint. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Saint didn't have time to answer.

The analyst stepped out of the vestibule with my woman, and every fucking second of the past eight years hit me in the chest.

Mátia mou.

My brunette.

My bride.

Coming down the aisle, she was all I saw.

When the analyst handed her off, my eyes never left hers.

She was so goddamn beautiful, I momentarily forgot what I'd asked Saint to get.

The priest opened his mouth to start the scripted ceremony, and I glanced at Saint.

Stepping up to the priest's position, Saint flanked him. "One moment, Father."

Aracet looked from Saint to me.

Saint handed me the light blue nylon cord.

Once braided with interlocking square knots in a Solomon bar pattern, now undone, it was Jax's Infantryman Shoulder Cord.

My brunette, my soon-to-be bride, drew in a small breath.

"Aracet." Looking into those hazel eyes that'd changed everything, letting the length of the cord uncoil, I took her left hand. The hand closest to her heart. "I've been bonded to you since the moment I saw you." I wrapped her palm with a Shibari hand tie. Then I pulled her hand to mine and wrapped my left palm, my rigging hand, in the same pattern before holding out the end of the cord toward Saint.

Stepping forward, Saint pulled our hands close and tied the final knot.

I looked into my brunette's gold-and-green eyes. "Now, you are bonded to me."

Saint nodded at the priest. "You may proceed, Father."

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading ARES! 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.

BONUS SCENE!

If you would like to read what happens on Ares's and Aracet's wedding night, click here for an upcoming ARES Bonus Scene!

If you're ready to meet the other dominant, alpha, Tier One Operators at Paragon Operations who will make your e-reader combust, then check out the rest of the series!

Paragon Operations

PARAGON

PHOENIX

HELIOS

ARES

CYPHER

SAINT

CHAOS

JUDAS

CHURCH

Turn the page for a preview of CYPHER, the next book in the Paragon Operations series!

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CYPHER

Navy SEAL.

CIA Agent.

Hacker.

Before the Teams, before I was recruited for Ground Branch, there was her. Brunette, tall, haunted eyes. The mute girl next door.

I watched her. Tracked her. Learned ASL. Every day, I signed to her. She never engaged. Until she did.

A tinted-out Suburban pulled into her driveway, and two armed men jumped out. She frantically signed for help. I sprinted toward them, but I was too late. They threw her into the back and peeled out.

Six seconds, and she was gone.

For thirteen years, I hacked every corner of the dark web, but there was no evidence she'd ever existed…

Until she walked into Paragon Operations an hour ago.

CYPHER is a standalone book in the heart-pounding Paragon Operations Series by *USA Today* bestselling author, Sybil Bartel! If you're ready to step into a whole new world of romantic suspense, come meet Cypher and the darkly dominant Tier One Operators at Paragon Operations who will make your e-reader combust!

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SAINT

I stepped up to the altar and saw him.

In a sea of faces, he may as well have been the only guest. Black hair, eyes like a tiger’s, his expression as unwaveringly impassive as it’d always been, he stared.

Forcing myself to look at the practical stranger I was about to marry, I feigned a smile.

My fiancé leaned forward and excitedly whispered, “He made it. First row, black suit. Do you see him?”

I glanced at the Marine who’d debased and demoralized me. The dominant who’d cracked my resolve. The agent I’d supplicated to for mercy… right before he’d left me.

My traitorous voice broke. “Yes.” I knew the operative whose call sign was Saint—he was anything but.

“That’s my brother.” My soon-to-be husband winked, then nodded at the reverend. “We’re ready, Father.”

SAINT is a standalone book in the heart-pounding Paragon Operations Series by *USA Today* bestselling author, Sybil Bartel! If you're ready to step into a whole new world of romantic suspense, come meet Saint and the darkly dominant Tier One Operators at Paragon Operations who will make your e-reader combust!

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CHAOS

Hell-raiser.

Havoc maker.

SOF Operator.

I didn’t pass Selection and join Delta Force to be a team player. I was an assaulter. Always had been. The only difference between enlisting and the hell I came from was three square meals a day and no prison sentence after pulling the trigger.

Except nothing good lasts forever.

The bad conduct discharge took me out of the Unit, but my infamous interrogation tactics, questionable morals, and expert sniper skills landed me a job with the top paramilitary defense contractor, Paragon Operations. Unleashed on the private sector, I embraced my new pay grade…

Until a hostage recovery assignment landed me flat on my back.

The air knocked out of my lungs, my own weapon trained on me, the hostage—the only person to ever take me down—stood over me.

Then the sexy-as-hell woman demanded my name.

I smiled.

She pulled the trigger.

CHAOS is a standalone book in the heart-pounding Paragon Operations Series by *USA Today* bestselling author, Sybil Bartel! If you're ready to step into a whole new world of romantic suspense, come meet Chaos and the darkly dominant Tier One Operators at Paragon Operations who will make your e-reader combust!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In November 2020, my only child, my son Oliver, passed away tragically and unexpectedly in his sleep from an undiagnosed congenital heart defect. My Sweet Boy was only fifteen-years-old.

Oliver was my entire world. Born with the auto immune disease Crohn's, he overcame every obstacle life threw at him and he not only survived, he thrived during his time here on earth. Intelligent beyond comprehension, he was a straight A student, (with a 4.45 GPA!). Oliver was also an incredibly talented cellist in his high school Philharmonic Orchestra, a piano player, a black belt in Karate and Jiu Jitsu, and a compassionate friend to everyone he met. He had the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known. I was blessed with a gift beyond measure the day he was born.

Oliver taught me about unconditional love and perseverance. He showed me what determination looked like, and he showed the world how someone so young, yet so wise, could handle life's obstacles with grace and humbleness. Oliver made me a better person. He brightened every single day. His smile was my joy, and he truly made this world a better place.

I will never understand why he was taken so young, and I cannot imagine a day where the grief isn't so punishing that it robs me of all breath. I would give anything to have just one more minute with him so I could hold him, and tell him I love him. But life, for all its beauty, cruelly doesn't work like that. So this is me, holding my son and telling him how I love him more than words. This book, that was in the final stages of editing when he passed, is a testament to his perseverance. My new reality, while unfathomable, is me doing my best to honor the memory of my beautiful son.

My Sweet Boy—you were, and will forever be, my most treasured gift.

I love you, Oliver Shane.

I love you more than anything.

XOXO

Mom

Special Note:

While there are no adequate words for this profound loss, I am consoled by two humbling and incredible events that have taken place since.

By the hand of God, and facilitated by Oliver's orchestra director, along with the generous donations for music students that were given in Oliver's name at his memorial service, the symphonic music Oliver was writing before he passed has been 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 of 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.

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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 unwavering 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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