

Rolling Thunder

Coastal Fury, #1

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Prologue

I still wasn't sure if early retirement suited me, but it sure as hell suited *Rolling Thunder*, formerly known as *Mike's Tropical Tango Hut*. As if anyone had ever tangoed across the worn floors of this dive.

Former dive, I corrected myself. It had taken me a month of hard labor and a small boatload of cash, though I still had plenty of boatloads left where that came from, but I'd finally gotten the bar up to my standards. All the damned toucans and flamingos and palm trees had been the first things to go, followed by the furniture and fixtures and just about everything else. I'd practically gutted it down to the studs.

Now there were hardwood floors instead of linoleum, pine walls in place of cracked plaster. Gone was the horseshoe-shaped Frankenstein of a main bar in favor of a hand-built custom rectangle, teak with mahogany inlays and brass rails. In the other room, I had the requisite pool tables, dartboards, and pinball machines, along with a platform stage for live entertainment and an actual dance floor that still wouldn't be tangoed across, by anyone. Strictly rock at the *Rolling Thunder*. The kitchen was fully upgraded, the basement and stock rooms full of fresh product.

Only one piece of the original establishment remained, a single bar stool at the far end of the bar. Its floor-bolted, rust-flaked steel pole and faded, vinyl-padded swivel seat were at odds with the gleaming wood and comfy cushions that comprised the rest of the seating. The old stool still had the bullet hole right near the top. Mike had never patched it up, though I'd long since fished out the spent round.

That stool was for Robbie.

I tossed the bar rag over my shoulder and took a few steps back to admire the overall work. Not half bad, if I did say so myself. I'd always wanted to own a bar.

Well, okay, that wasn't completely true. I'd always wanted a life of action and adventure, chasing down bad guys, kicking ass and taking names, and I'd had that for more than twenty years, even though it hadn't come around exactly the way I expected. Always thought I'd be a bounty hunter, or an international spy, or possibly a ninja. I'd been disappointed as a kid to find out that "ninja" wasn't an actual job title you could put on your resume. What I had been was damned good at my job, and through it, I'd gotten everything I always wanted and then some.

So, yeah, "bar owner" hadn't been first on my childhood list of dream careers, but it had been a close second ever since I discovered the joys of alcohol.

I walked toward the bar and the bullet-scarred stool, smiling faintly as I picked up the folded RESERVED sign from the counter and placed it on the seat. Then I picked up the bottle of Four Roses and poured two shots into the glasses I'd set out earlier. I lifted one and clinked it against the other.

"Sorry you couldn't be here, asshole," I said with a smirk. "Here's to you."

Just as I tossed back the shot, there was a knock at the front door.

My hand moved instinctively to the place where I no longer carried my weapon, and I shook my head and blew out a short, exasperated breath. *You're a civvie now, dipshit.* The most dangerous thing that might knock on my door these days would probably be some pissed-off drunk who'd been relieved of his keys, and it couldn't even be that yet since the place didn't officially open for another half-hour. My reaction to unexpected sounds was just hard to break.

I grabbed a coaster from one of the stacks on the counter, tipped the emptied shot glass upside-down on the surface, and headed for the door. Couldn't see who was out there through the high windows, but whoever it was knocked again when I was halfway there. It might be one of the girls. I'd hired four of them to waitress and help me tend bar, figuring if I didn't attract any business right away, at least I'd enjoy their company. I'd told them to go around back when they got here and given them the security code, but maybe one of them forgot.

I reached the door, twisted the deadbolt and cracked it open, ready to repeat my instructions about using the back entrance... for the first and last time, because whichever one it was, she'd be out of here if she forgot again. I didn't like repeating myself. Fortunately for the girls I'd hired, though, it wasn't one of them.

"Mike," I said as I looked the older man on the sidewalk up and down, then pulled the door open wider and tempted the hot Florida sun to breach my air conditioning. "You look... touristy."

"You don't." He cracked a lopsided grin and craned, trying to look over my shoulder. "Evening, Special Agent Marston. Just swung by to see what you've done to my place."

"One, it's my place, for which I paid you way more than this rathole was worth. Two, it's just Noah now. I'm retired." I only winced a little as I said the R-word this time. "And three, we're not open until five. It's four-thirty."

Mike snorted. "Well, it's five o'clock somewhere," he said as he tried to push past me, "and let's not forget point number four: I seem to recall 'free drinks for life' being part of my asking price for this-here historic watering hole. Now, if you'd be so kind as to move your large, cranky ass out of my way, I hear a double shot of whiskey calling my name."

"You sure you don't want a Mai-Tai or something to go with that getup?" I relented with a laugh and let him pass, resplendent in his board shorts and Hawaiian shirt, complete with flip-flops. "What the hell, come on in. Drink all you want. With you, I figure *for life* is only gonna last a few years, anyway."

Instead of the smart-ass comeback I expected, Mike stopped short and gave a low whistle. "Okay. Not what I thought you'd do with the place."

"Yeah, what'd you think I'd do?" I quipped with a smirk. "Throw in some garland and hula girls to complement your classy décor?"

"No idea. Just not this, I guess." He flashed a grin over his shoulder, and it wasn't hard to see it was truly impressed. "Pretty good for a grunt."

I shrugged. "Say that when the hula girls get here," I said with a short laugh as I steered him toward the bar. "You looking for Evan or Jim?"

"Jack," he said. "Trying to cheap out on me, Marston?"

"Never saw you hit the Jack, old man."

"Yeah, that's because it was coming out of my pocket. Now it's coming out of yours, and they're a lot deeper than mine." He laughed. "Seriously, though, I'll take whatever's handy."

I nodded, slipped behind the bar, and snagged a bottle of black-label Jack Daniels from the mirrored shelves before bringing it over to him with two clean double-shot glasses.

"I'll join you," I said as I set it all down on the bar.

"Won't stop you, but I will offer you a bit of advice, ex-bar owner to newbie bar owner," he said as he watched me pour the shots. When I finished, he picked one up and grinned. "Try not to drink all your profits."

"Good advice."

Our glasses clinked, and we threw back the shots. Mike let out a satisfied exhale and set his empty glass on the counter, pretending not to notice when I grabbed a coaster and slipped it beneath just before the glass touched down. While I refilled him, he stared down the bar at the lone mismatched stool. "You really left that thing in," he said as he shook his head in wonder. "And here I thought you weren't the sentimental type."

"It's for Robbie," I said simply.

Mike cranked an eyebrow and nodded once. I knew he wouldn't mention it again.

As I started to pour the second round, I heard footsteps from somewhere beyond the bar and managed not to whirl toward the sound or reach for my nonexistent sidearm this time. Instead, I turned calmly to see a tanned, dark-haired girl in her early twenties, wearing a snug halter top and capris molded to her long, shapely legs and standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Hi, Mr. Marston," she called with a little wave. "Kaiti and I got here a little early. Mind if we start the dinner prep back here?"

I smothered a grin at Mike's dropped jaw. "Go for it, Rhoda," I told her, "and from now on, you don't have to ask."

"Got it." She winked and sketched off a mini-salute, then disappeared into the kitchen. A pair of muted giggles drifted through the open doorway, and then things started clanking around back there.

Mike recovered and shook his head, one corner of his mouth twitching up. "Nice hula girls," he said. "How many did you hire?"

"Four."

"Bet they're all half your age, too," Mike noted with a smirk. "Do they all drool over you like that?"

I shrugged. "Must be my charming personality."

"Right. The baby blues and the six-pack have nothing to do with it, you glorious bastard." Mike grimaced good-naturedly and downed half his shot. "So, you're ready for your grand opening tonight?"

"Yeah." I waved a hand around at the empty bar. "Grand."

“Well, you can’t exactly expect a rush yet. Your door’s still locked.” Mike motioned toward the front door.

“Because we don’t open until five,” I lifted my shot glass, “and I’ve still got a few more profits to drink.”

“I can help you with that.” Mike laughed.

That’s what we did for the next twenty minutes. When I unlocked the entrance and flipped the outside lights on, I didn’t expect a lot of fanfare. Nobody camped out on the sidewalks to wait for the so-called grand opening of yet another Orlando bar.

What I got, just as my ass hit the seat of the stool next to Mike, was a group of six filing in the door, laughing and talking all over each other. Three couples, all of them twenty-somethings and half of them military, two of the guys and one of the girls. I pegged them as Navy sailors on leave, out with their SOs for the night. Not likely to cause much trouble.

Before I could get up to serve my first customers, Joey and Nadia, the other two girls I’d hired, were out of the kitchen and behind the bar before the group bellied up. Joey was the kind of curvy blonde people associated with California, Nadia a slender black woman with a light Caribbean accent. They’d both worked bars before, and they handled the group like a well-oiled, tip-maximizing machine, all smiles and service.

I decided to keep my ass where it was for now. Might as well enjoy being retired for a minute after slaving over this place for a month.

The group had lined up on the right-hand side of the bar, out of sight of the oddball reserved stool, while Mike and I still sat at the front. Once their drinks had been served, one of the Navy boys nudged his buddy and pointed at something on the back wall, one of my personal decorations, a smooth wooden staff topped with a snake’s head carved from black onyx.

“That look familiar to you, Jeff?” he said.

The kid whose name was apparently Jeff stared at it, and then his brow went up. “Cobra Jon.”

“Yeah,” the first one said.

His girl looked from the carved snake to him. “What’s Cobra Jon?”

“Who,” Jeff said. “Bahamas gang leader. Big-time drug dealer, mass murderer. Had a walking stick just like that with a spring-loaded knife. We studied him at boot.”

“Yeah, our CO was a little obsessed with that psycho... or the guy who brought him down, anyway,” the kid who’d started the conversation said with a faint sneer. “Captain Tolbert practically worshipped the ground this guy walked on.”

From the look on Mike’s face, I could see he was listening to their conversation and preparing to jump in.

I elbowed him in the ribs to cut him off hopefully.

“Your captain worshipped a mass murderer?” the other civvie girl asked. “Seriously, Ty, that’s creepy.”

“Not Cobra Jon. The guy who caught him,” Ty said. “Guess he was some kind of super-badass. The Bahamas cops never could make anything stick, but this guy took on Cobra Jon and his whole gang by himself or some shit. Least, that’s how Tolbert made it out.”

The other kid, Jeff, shook his head. "He never said by himself. You suck at paying attention, Ty," he said, "but you're right about one thing. Cap did have a hard-on for that Marston guy."

I managed not to groan aloud. Now there'd be no stopping Mike.

"They had a bunch of replicas like that one in boot for training," Ty said, pointing to the staff again. "Wonder how one got into this place. Hey, did Cap Tolbert ever say what happened to Cobra Jon's actual weapon?"

"You're looking at it, kid," Mike called out across the bar.

Goddamn it.

His words got the group's attention. Ty stood slowly and stared at him. "You serious?"

"Damn straight I am." Mike raised his glass in a mock toast. "Want to hear about it?"

"You know those few years I said you had left in you?" I muttered under my breath. "That's about to be shortened to a few minutes."

"Lighten up. You're retired," Mike said as he flashed me a grin. "Besides, socializing is good for you. Don't you want to help shape the minds of the next generation of American patriots?"

"Yeah, I do," I sighed, "but I'm not allowed to shape minds with a sledgehammer."

"Be nice." He turned his smile to the group, who'd gotten up and circled the bar with polite curiosity that suggested they didn't mind humoring an old man with a crazy story. They had no idea that Mike's crazy story happened to be true.

"So... that's really Cobra Jon's walking stick," Jeff said when they reached us. "How'd it get there?"

Mike jerked a thumb at me. "Ask him."

Six pairs of eyes turned to me, and I sighed and rolled my shoulders. "It got there with a couple of metal brackets and some shaped wood dowels," I said. "Picked them up at Home Depot."

The girl with the military bearing laughed and punched Jeff's shoulder. "Ask a stupid question," she said.

Mike gave me a look. "Are you gonna tell them, or am I?"

"Tell us what?" Ty seemed a little agitated. Definitely the cocky hotshot of the group, probably at least a rank above the other two enlisted and itching to throw his weight around in front of them. "That can't be the real thing."

Instead of refuting him, Mike calmly drained the rest of his drink and set his glass down. "Where are my manners? I haven't introduced myself," he said. "Name's Mike Birch, former owner of this establishment, and this here's the new owner." He nodded at me. "Noah Marston."

Ty flinched back a half-step in surprise but didn't speak. Jeff found his voice faster, despite the goggle-eyed stare he leveled at me.

"You... you're Special Agent Marston?"

"Retired Special Agent," I tried not to growl, deliberately avoiding Mike's expression. He was enjoying this far too much.

All three Navy officers snapped to attention, and Mike about fell off his stool while he held back a laugh.

"Don't do that," I sighed, and when they didn't relax I added, "At ease."

The instant the words left my mouth, they all started talking at once.

I gestured with both hands to get them quiet. “You really want to know?” I asked. “Yeah, that was Cobra Jon’s, but the snake carved on it isn’t actually a cobra. It’s a black mamba.”

Ty blinked a few times. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t *sir* me,” I said rougher than I intended to, and then forced myself to ease down. There wasn’t a boot-camp soldier alive who’d ever fully bought their CO’s war stories, and I was sure Tolbert had... embellished whatever he told these kids. “Really, it’s no big thing. This is just a bar, and I’m just the guy who owns it.”

“You’re a legend,” Jeff said eagerly. “Can you tell us about it? Cobra Jon, I mean. What really happened.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but a look from Mike stopped me. “Yeah, all right, but I’m gonna need another drink,” I said as I signaled for Nadia, who was closest to us. I asked her to pour me a draft and then settled back on the stool.

“Well,” I said, “like all the best stories, this one starts with a girl and a sandy beach.”

Chapter 1

Southern coast, Florida — ten years ago

Donald had warned Tessa that it would be a little muggy in Florida, but he hadn’t emphasized it nearly enough. Actually, he’d flat-out lied. There was muggy, and there was Florida, which she would definitely describe as soggy-bordering-on-drenched. How could there possibly be enough moisture in the air to make every outdoor space feel like a sauna?

But she did have to admit, the scenery was spectacular.

She stood at the edge of a pristine stretch of white-sand beach that backed up to rocky cliffs, her camera bag slung on a shoulder. She hadn’t dared use the Hasselblad once on this assignment since the Florida humidity would’ve damaged it, so she’d brought the Nikon D3 FX with a waterproof housing and a VR lens. Even so, she wouldn’t take it out of the bag until she was ready to use it.

This area was restricted, but her editor had gotten permission from the Coast Guard for her to shoot here as part of her piece on tidal pools. Donald Farr had an excessive number of military connections for the editor of a magazine that focused on environmental conservation, even one as big as the *National EcoStar*. Of course, she knew exactly why he knew so many big military names, but he kept all that pretty low-key at work. She didn’t think anyone else on the staff actually knew who Donald used to be, even though the information wasn’t that hard to find.

She supposed he had his reasons for keeping that quiet, though. Besides, his contacts had definitely opened a lot of doors for her. She’d traveled to places she never imagined she would see, but this was her first time in Florida.

A little muggy. Very funny, Donald.

Tessa swiped an arm across her forehead and started slowly across the spit of beach toward the cliffs and the caves she expected to find there. She found herself oddly reluctant to walk across this sparkling sand where few, if any, human feet had ever trod before, to sully the beauty of this largely untouched natural haven with her footprints. But she'd already covered a number of tidal pools in public areas where careless tourists tromped through the water and upset the delicate balance of life they contained. Now, she needed undisturbed sources for comparison.

She was sure to find at least one here, maybe more. The conditions were perfect for tidal pools to form.

It wasn't long before she spotted a sizeable cave entrance with an almost perfect line of stones cutting through the sand, leading to the mouth of the cave. This looked very promising. If there was a tidal pool inside, it would be large and rich with life. Maybe even something she could shoot without a macro lens. Starfish, sea urchins, anemones... any of them would make for fantastic photos.

Tessa stopped a good distance back from the cave, so she could get some good shots of the entrance before she ruined the scene with footprints. At least out here, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone stealing her camera bag while she was busy. She took out the Nikon and snapped several standard shots and then attached a polarizing filter and took more. Tomorrow she'd probably return here, after the tide washed away the signs of her passage, to catch everything again at the golden hour just before sunset.

When she was satisfied that enough of her shots were usable, Tessa began a slow approach toward the cave, stopping every few steps to snap more pictures. Shadows from the backdrop of cliffs crept across the camera's field as she drew closer, occasionally darkening it enough to trigger the flash.

She was about fifteen feet back when she first saw something inside the cave, just to the right of the entrance. She only caught a glimpse in the camera flash, but it looked like some kind of irregular formation growing from the floor. Dark stalagmites, maybe. Which was odd, because sea cave floors were usually smooth near the mouth where the tide washed in.

Another few steps, another few photos. This time the flash picked out more of whatever it was, and Tessa realized it couldn't be a natural feature of the cave. There was something lying there on the ground, partially covered with a coating of sand. Her heart fluttered as she briefly considered the possibility of an alligator. They weren't fond of saltwater, but they could tolerate it for brief periods.

The object in the cave didn't seem to be alive, though. She detected no movement. Still, gators could be extremely still when they weren't moving with a purpose. Like hunting prey.

"Hey!" she called out, half-startling herself as she broke the relative silence out here, punctuated only by rumbling surf and the occasional calls of birds. "Hey, is there anyone, er, anything in there?"

Her mouth went dry as she recalled that startling an alligator was a bad idea. They reacted to noise... and they could be just as fast on land as they were in the water. Usually faster than people.

But nothing answered her. Nothing moved.

For some reason, the lack of response filled her with more dread. Something about this felt very wrong.

Despite her fear, Tessa crept closer to the cave, trying to peer into that dark corner off to the right. It was impossible to see. Though she probably didn't have enough exterior shots to create the spread she wanted, she moved a little faster and came to within five feet of the entrance. She fiddled with the Nikon's settings for a moment, cranking up the ISO and slowing the shutter speed, and then aimed the camera toward whatever-it-was inside.

The flash burst against the darkness. She paused, suddenly not sure she wanted to find out what that horribly silent object was, but finally, she switched to review mode. The most recent picture appeared on the screen.

She had to force herself to look.

An instant later, Tessa fell to her knees in the sand, a scream clawing at her throat. Her entire body shook like she was being electrocuted, and she had to actively fight not to drop the camera.

That was not an alligator.

It was a dead body.

Chapter 2

"Do you think he's in there?" Holm said as we approached the weathered wooden shed, the last building on the property we hadn't searched.

I shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

"Yeah, I know." My partner looked past the outbuilding to the inlet and the private dock where the sweet little Jeanneau cruiser was tied up. "I'm supposed to be fishing right now," he said a little wistfully. "Quiet Saturday morning, just me and the water and a six-pack."

"Right," I replied. "When we get back, I'll put out an APB and tell all the bad guys to take weekends off, because they're interrupting your fishing plans."

"Could you?"

I smirked and nodded at the shed. "Arrest first. Fish later."

"Great motto. You should put that on a bumper sticker or something," he muttered.

Once we got within twenty feet of the shed, both of us slowed our steps and went silent. We were here to pick up Karl Francke, a small-time drug dealer who'd killed an undercover cop and took out an off-duty Coast Guard officer in the crossfire. Okay, he'd allegedly killed them. Technically Francke was a suspect, but I knew he'd done it. I'd seen the video of his initial interrogation.

If they'd let me handle the questioning, Francke would've been in custody and awaiting trial right now. And we wouldn't be out here on a Saturday morning, interrupting Holm's little fishing extravaganza.

I heard something and motioned for my partner to stop. He did, and the questioning look he gave me turned into a raised eyebrow when the sound came again. A slight scrape from inside the shed, like something heavy being nudged across a wood floor.

“Hey, Robbie,” I said, loud enough for the guy inside to catch. “I think he’s in there.”

A gunshot went off. The bullet punched through the door of the shed in a shower of splinters, passing about a foot to my left.

“Ya think?” Holm shouted as we both sprinted for the building.

More shots sounded, and more splinters exploded from the door. We pressed against the front of the building to the right of the assault on the entrance, and I glanced back around the corner. No window on that side of the shed, but there could be one on the other side. Might be a back door, too.

And I didn’t feel like spending the rest of the weekend chasing Francke.

“Make some noise,” I told Holm in a low voice while jerking my head at the corner of the building.

He rolled his eyes but faced the door to comply.

“Federal agents!” he yelled as I slipped away and headed toward the back. “Come out of the building, Francke. You’re under arrest.”

Two shots responded in rapid succession.

“Goddamn it, would you just be under arrest?” Holm called out. “I’m supposed to be fishing.”

Shockingly, that didn’t seem to make the suspect surrender.

I rounded the back of the shed and spotted the back door just as it burst open and Francke sprinted out, gun in hand. His focus was on the docked cruiser fifty feet away, so he didn’t even see me coming.

It almost wasn’t fair.

I was on his tail and lunged, tackling him to the ground before he realized I was there. He tried to bring the gun up, but I caught his wrist and slammed his arm on the ground. He let out a pained snarl as the weapon slid from his fingers. I wrenched his arm back, snapped a cuff on his wrist, and grabbed his other arm.

“When somebody says you’re under arrest, you should probably listen,” I said as I finished cuffing him. I got off Francke, and he groaned as I hauled him to his feet. “You’re under arrest.”

Francke tried to jerk away, a half-hearted effort. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Back here!” I shouted for Holm’s benefit before I bothered responding, and then I grabbed Francke’s elbow and steered him around the shed.

“Didn’t do anything, huh?” I said in low tones. “Aside from killing two people and firing on federal agents.”

He gave me a sour glance. “You were trespassing. I got rights.”

“Yeah. The right to remain silent,” I said sarcastically. “Except you don’t even have that, because I’m not bringing you in for questioning. People who are being charged with murder don’t have rights.”

Holm jogged around the corner, took a glance at the situation, and grinned as he fell into step beside me. “This means I can still go fishing, right?”

“Looks like,” I said with a grin. “After we process the scene and bring this asshole in.”

“Processing. My favorite,” Holm sighed.

Our sedan was all the way around the front of the property and slightly down the road, obscured from the view of the main house. When we reached the car, I

shoved a sullen Karl Francke into the back seat and shut him in, then grabbed the keys from my pocket and tossed them to Holm.

“Start the AC, will you? I’ll call for a team.”

“Couldn’t we just let him suffocate in there? Don’t answer that,” Holm said as he started for the driver’s side.

I reached in my jacket for my phone, and it started ringing just as I pulled it out. The call was from the office. Even before I answered, I had a feeling Holm wasn’t going to see the inside of a fishing boat anytime soon.

“Marston,” I said into the phone.

“Hey. It’s Griezmann,” a female voice responded, and I heard the sounds of traffic in the background. “What’s your situation?”

I smirked. “Under control. We have Francke in custody, and I was about to give you a call. Need a team down here.”

“Birn and I are en route with one.”

For some reason that didn’t make me feel great. “Are you a mind reader now, Agent Griezmann? Because I don’t remember calling for backup on this, so I know that’s not why you’re already on the way here.”

“No, it’s not,” she said. “District 7 just called in about a body, and the director wants you and Holm on it. We’re supposed to take over your scene so you can head out there.”

I sighed and ran a hand over my hair. “Did he say why?”

“Nope.”

“Of course not,” I said. “All right. Fill me in.”

She gave me the details, and I knew this was going to be a long one. By the time I hung up with Griezmann, Holm was watching me with a wary expression.

“I’m not going fishing today, am I?” he asked.

“Not a chance,” I said with a frown. “We’ve got a weird one, Robbie.”

“How weird?”

I shook my head as I caught sight of the black truck turning onto this road and headed in our direction, followed by a white van. Griezmann and Birn weren’t just on the way. They’d been practically here already.

“Guess I’ll tell you on the way,” I said. “Apparently, we’re in a hurry.”

Chapter 3

The place was getting a little crowded when Holm and I arrived at the rocky little spit of government-owned beach. In addition to a pair of agents from CGIS, presumably the ones who’d called our office, at least four Miami cops and two paramedics had piled onto the crime scene. Also, there was a civilian woman off to the side, seated on a rock with a blanket around her and a foam cup of something gripped in both hands. She seemed rattled.

I’d hazard a guess that she was the one who’d found the body.

What little information I received, I’d passed to Holm on the way. I also had our forensics people coming a few minutes behind us to round up the evidence and get

it back to the lab. I seriously hoped the locals hadn't screwed up the scene too much since I knew they'd been the first responders.

We headed for the Coast Guard agents standing off to the side of the cave, talk in low tones with their heads bent toward each other. One of them I recognized: Will Parker, the tall dark-haired guy with the goatee. Our paths had crossed on a few previous cases, but I didn't recognize the nearly-as-tall blonde woman with him, and I knew I'd met just about everyone at the Miami CGIS office.

"Parker," I called out when we got close, drawing him and the blonde from their conversation. "I heard you guys actually called us in for this one. What happened? Did your director lose a bet or something?"

Agent Parker snorted a laugh. "Nah. For once, the jurisdiction is pretty cut-and-dry, unlike how this place is about to be." He pointed across the beach toward the rhythmic lap of the surf. "High tide in about ninety minutes. It's gonna flood your crime scene."

Well, that explained the rush, even if it didn't explain why the director had earmarked me and Holm for this assignment. I'd have to ask her about that when we got back to the office.

"Huh," I said with a smirk after Holm offered his greeting to Parker. "I think that's the first time anyone from CGIS has ever uttered the words *your* and *crime* and *scene* to me in that order." I nodded to the blonde, who hadn't said a word since we came over. "So, who's your friend here?"

"Special Agent Yvonne Bell. She's on loan from the L.A. office while Carla's out on maternity leave," he said as he mimed my nod to the woman. "Agent Bell, this is Special Agent Marston and Special Agent Holm, from MBLIS." He gestured at each of us in turn.

Agent Bell slowly raised an eyebrow and stared at us. "What's em-bliss?"

"Em-bee-el-eye-ess," I spelled out for her. "Military Border Liaison Investigative Services."

"Well, that's a mouthful." She smiled faintly and held a hand out to me, and then Holm. "Nice to meet you, agents, if that's what you are. Never heard of your agency before."

"Likewise, and join the club," I said with a laugh as I shook her hand.

For the most part, MBLIS operated under the radar by design. We were technically an adjunct agency to both CGIS and NCIS, the larger Navy operation for criminal investigation, but we handled military-related crimes that crossed international borders. Apparently, this one fell squarely into our jurisdiction.

Definitely unusual. Whenever a case crossed our office, we typically had to broker at least one pissing contest between agencies. If not with one or both of our sister agencies, then with the CIA or the FBI, and the occasional jousting match with the NSA or the Secret Service for good measure, but it looked like the rest of the alphabet planned to sit this one out.

I was suspicious already. Whatever it was about this case that prevented the typical frenzy of agent-sharks, I had a feeling I wasn't going to like it.

"Anyway," Parker sighed, "everything we've already got, the photos and notes, I'm sending to your email. Don't worry," he added at the look on my face. "The scene's hardly been touched."

I frowned. "Hardly?"

“Preliminary visual inspection which is how we determined this is your case, but there’s plenty of clean shots before the footprints.” He flashed a crooked smile. “Believe it or not, Marston, some people do know how to process a crime scene. Even cops, on occasion.”

“Yeah, all right.” I shook my head and grabbed a pair of gloves from my kit as Holm did the same. “What about the civilian?”

Parker glanced at the woman sitting on the rock. “The witness is Tessa Bleu. Photojournalist on assignment from some magazine.”

“Witness to what? I thought she just reported the body.” I shared a look with Holm and cast my gaze to the woman, who was talking earnestly to one of the paramedics. “Did she see the murder happen?”

“Not exactly. It’s all in my notes, and you can ask her yourself.” Parker shook his head and then nodded to Bell. “We’re out of here. Good luck, Agent Marston. Agent Holm.”

Agent Bell said a hasty goodbye and followed him down the beach.

“Great,” Holm muttered after their retreating backs. “I bet they pushed this off on us just because it’s Saturday. Some people have better things to do with their weekend, you know. Like me.”

“Hey, don’t knock the overtime. You can spend it on a bigger boat for next weekend,” I said, taking a minute to look over the entire scene. The local cops were moving off, wrapping things up, and our blue-suited techs had just arrived and were headed toward us with kits and a stretcher. “We’d better get moving before the tide comes in. I want a quick look at the body, and then I need to talk to our witness.”

Holm looked at the woman and grimaced sympathetically. “I guess somebody’s probably having a worse weekend than me. At least we signed up for checking out dead bodies. She didn’t.”

“Yeah. Come on.”

I grabbed a flashlight and headed for the cave with Holm tailing right behind. The body was just to the right of the entrance, a black male not much older than twenty in a filthy tank top and cutoff jeans, no shoes. He sprawled on his stomach with his head turned to one side, hands tied behind his back with a braided gold rope and a single gunshot wound to the back of his head.

This looked unfortunately familiar.

“Ah, what the hell,” Holm breathed as I crouched next to the body and directed the flashlight toward his upper arm. Sure enough, the victim had a tattoo of a hooded snake wrapped around his bicep.

“He’s a Black Mamba.” I stood up, shaking my head as I walked slowly around the body. “And this looks like a Congo Kings hit.”

“Ya think?” Holm said bitterly. “I swear to God, if we’re getting dragged into a Bahamas gang war, I quit. Seriously, is one lousy Saturday fishing trip too much to ask?”

“We don’t know anything yet.” I stopped at the victim’s bare feet and directed the flashlight down. There were several cuts and gashes along his soles, some of them deep. Small flecks of white grit were caught in the deeper ones. “He didn’t get these cuts on this beach. Looks like coral.”

“Oh, good. So if he was killed somewhere else and just dumped on American soil, we can hand this off to the RBPF.”

“Don’t think so.” I knew Holm wasn’t really interested in passing off the case, and neither was I. He was just eternally butt-hurt about his fishing trip. “Look at the saturation around his head. He was shot here.”

“Yeah, I know,” Holm grumbled and started to inspect the upper part of the body.

At some point soon, we’d have to deal with the Royal Bahamas Police Force. They weren’t going to like ceding the investigation to us, but at least now I knew why none of the other U.S. agencies wanted to touch this one with a ten-foot pole.

The Black Mambas were dangerous, especially their leader, Cobra Jon. The biggest gang in the Bahamas, they had zero interest in answering to the authorities and had been responsible for more deaths of law enforcement personnel than the rest of the Bahamian gangs combined. The worst thing was that nothing ever stuck to them. An endless parade of tainted evidence, unflinching alibis, and vanishing witnesses clung to every charge brought against them. If Cobra Jon couldn’t bribe his way out of a situation, he’d slaughter his way out instead.

And speaking of witnesses, I had to interview ours, though I doubted she’d seen anything helpful. Just then the techs filed into the cave, their blue paper scrubs rustling with every step.

“Supervise the collection, will you, Robbie?” I said. “I need to speak with Miss Bleu, so I can get her off my crime scene.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Ethan... I don’t like this one.”

I nodded. “Me, neither.”

There was something off about the whole thing, but I’d have to worry about it once we brought everything back to the office. Time and tide waited for no man, regardless of whether he had a crime scene to process.

Chapter 4

Tessa Bleu watched me approach with a tired sort of wariness. She’d ditched the paramedics and the blanket, and beneath it, she wore canvas shorts, a mesh top over a t-shirt, and sensible shoes. No jewelry, no wedding ring, a light layer of makeup artfully applied that was nevertheless starting to smear a bit in the humidity. She carried a small string backpack and a camera bag strapped across her body like a shield. Her deep brown hair was wrangled into a loose French braid, and her wide green eyes regarded me with curiosity and something more.

Pretty thing, but not from around here. She seemed fairly capable, possibly even resilient, though she obviously hadn’t been prepared to stumble across a dead guy on this remote beach.

“Ms. Bleu,” I said as I stopped in front of her and fished out my badge. “Special Agent Ethan Marston. I know you’ve probably been through this already, but I have to ask you a few questions about what happened here today.”

She gave a tiny, shuddering sigh and sipped at whatever was in the cup she still held. "I guessed as much. Are you also with the, er... Coast Guard police?"

"No, ma'am. I'm from a different agency."

"Which one?"

And here I'd been hoping to skip the mouthful. "MBLIS," I told her, adding what the acronym stood for. "We're the red-headed stepchild of coastal military investigations."

That got her to laugh and relax a little. "All right, Agent Marston. What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with how you found the body."

She nodded, closing her eyes for a moment. "I was shooting the cave," she said and then broke off with a gasp. "Pictures," she added quickly. "I was shooting with a camera, not a gun. I didn't kill anyone."

"Don't worry, Ms. Bleu," I said with a faint grin. "I knew what you meant. You're not a suspect."

"Oh. Good." She smiled a bit. "Call me Tessa."

I nodded. "Okay, Tessa. You were shooting the cave, and...?"

"I have permission to be here," she felt compelled to add. "From the Coast Guard."

"Tessa," I said as gently as I could. Whatever she'd seen, other than the body, it had clearly rattled her more than her outward appearance let on. "I promise you're not in trouble here. You don't have to justify anything."

She glanced at me, blew out a long breath, and stared into the distance. "I'm sorry. I've just never seen anyone who was murdered before," she said softly. "I suppose you have though, right? You must be used to it."

I gave a noncommittal shrug. We weren't exactly here to discuss my career or how many bodies I'd seen, let alone whether it bothered me. "Are you okay to keep talking to me, Tessa?"

"Yes. I'll be fine." She shuddered, squared her shoulders, and faced me fully. "So I was shooting the cave, coming up to it, and I saw something in the flash. At first, I thought..." She laughed a little. "I thought it was an alligator. I read up on them before I came to Florida and found out that sometimes they hang around salt water, even though they're freshwater animals. So I was cautious."

I smirked. "Good call. Did you happen to read that the best thing to do if you run across an alligator on land is to turn and run in the opposite direction?"

"Yes. In a straight line, not a zigzag," she said in that way one recounts something from rote memory. "But it wasn't moving, and I was still pretty far away. Besides, it only took a few more shots to realize it wasn't an alligator."

"You saw that it was a person."

She nodded slowly. "And he was dead. I would've gone in there, tried to help, if it wasn't very clear that he was beyond helping," she said almost defensively as if I'd accused her of malicious lingering with intent to watch a man die. "So I stayed out here and called 911. That's when I saw the other guy."

"What other guy?" I said, sharper than I intended.

Tessa's brow furrowed. "Didn't Agent Parker tell you?"

Before I could reply, the steady background noise of the surf surged loud, and a wave lurched around the rock she was sitting on to lick at my shoes before receding into the ocean.

"Tide's coming in fast," I said as I watched the waters continue to encroach on us. "Can you walk and talk? I need to get back to the scene."

"I take it that means he didn't tell you." Tessa stood, brushed herself off, and stepped down next to me. "After I made the call, I saw —"

"Ethan!" Holm cut her off as he trotted out of the cave, waving his arms over his head. "You'd better come in here. We've got a second body."

I glanced at Tessa, but she looked just as confused as me. "The other guy I saw was alive," she said and pointed toward the top of the cliff above the cave. "He was up there, looking down."

Damn it. So that's what Parker meant when he said she was a witness. But at this distance, it'd be impossible to make a positive identification of someone standing on that cliff. Like I figured, what she'd seen wasn't very helpful.

Tessa cleared her throat and patted her camera bag nervously. "And I... er, took a few pictures of him. The man on the cliff," she clarified. "In case he had something to do with this."

Somehow, I managed not to curse aloud. If the guy up there had been the killer and he realized she'd taken his picture, even from this far away, whoever it was might try to retaliate.

"Come with me," I practically growled as I started toward the cave, where my partner had disappeared back inside. "I'm going to need your camera."

She crossed her hands protectively over the bag. "Well, you can't have it."

"Excuse me?" I stopped to glare at her. "You've got photos of the body and the possible killer on there. It's evidence. I need it."

"And yet I'm not going to give it to you," she said defiantly.

I sighed. "Are you really going to make me get a warrant, Ms. Bleu?"

"No," she said. "All you have to do is ask nicely."

I chuckled and relented, already liking her more. "Fine. Could I please borrow your camera?"

"No, but I'll give you copies of the pictures," she said with a smile as we started toward the cave again. "Where should I send them?"

I hunted through my pockets, found a business card, and handed it to her. "Email's on there. Work and cell numbers too," I said. "Get them to me as soon as possible when you go back to wherever you're staying. I'd also like to have a quick look at the pictures when I'm done... but I still have more questions for you, so don't go anywhere yet. Please."

She nodded and slowed, hanging back from the entrance. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not go in there," she said almost under her breath.

"That's fine."

There was still a pair of local cops on the scene, so she'd be safe on the off chance the man from the cliff came back, even though I knew he wouldn't. For all we knew, he could've been a tourist who'd wandered the wrong terrain, or even a Coast Guard grunt on patrol. And if it was the killer, he wouldn't risk being seen here by people with badges.

"I'll be out soon," I told Tessa.

She managed a nervous smile. "I'll be right here."

I headed inside to find the techs prepping the body for the stretcher and Holm further back in the cave, playing a flashlight beam across the surface of a sizeable tidal pool.

"You're not gonna believe this," he said when he caught sight of me. He waved me over. "The good news is, I think this other body is way out of our jurisdiction."

Frowning, I skirted the pool and walked toward him. "Whose jurisdiction is it, then?"

"I don't know. Maybe the British Royal Navy or the Caribbean colonial army?" He gestured dramatically with the flashlight, aiming it beyond the tidal pool.

There, seated against a thick stalagmite, was a blackened, grinning skeleton half-buried in damp sand, clutching a thick, cloudy glass bottle in one bony hand and an ancient pistol in the other. The splintered and heavily eroded remains of a small wooden boat were scattered around and behind the long-dead figure, who'd almost certainly been a pirate.

A spark of excitement rose in me, but I tamped it down. Now wasn't the time to indulge my little personal side quest. Then again, I wasn't going to leave a find like this for someone else to grab or for the Coast Guard to confiscate out from under me.

"Let's bag and tag it," I said. "Everything we can get. Take photos, too."

Holm arched an eyebrow. "Shouldn't we call, I don't know, the museum cops or something?"

"Museums don't have cops, Robbie." I suppressed a grin as I took a few steps forward. "My crime scene, my evidence. Anything I decide might be relevant, even if it doesn't look that way."

My partner opened his mouth to say something, and then shut it with a knowing smile. "You really think this is related to the..."

He didn't have to finish the sentence.

"Could be. This is the right area," I said quickly, trying not to let my excitement at the possible find get away from me, "but I'll worry about that after we deal with the fresher dead guy. For now, we take it all with us."

"I'll get the bags," Holm said.

At least something good had come out of working on Saturday, but with the case shaping up the way it had been so far, it'd be a while until I got the chance to dig into these old relics.

"Dead men tell no tales," I murmured as I grabbed the small digital camera from my pack and started snapping pictures. "But I think you're going to tell me plenty, aren't you?"

The skeleton's silent grin was his only reply. Still, I thought I could make him talk.

Chapter 5

The MBLIS office was on the Miami coast, a few miles south of the NCIS and CGIS satellite offices. Unlike our sister agencies, whose headquarters were in D.C.,

the Miami location was the main branch, since most of our operations involved Mexico, Central America, and of course, the Caribbean islands. This meant that our director was onsite.

I needed to have a word with her before we dove into this case.

Normally I would've knocked on the door to Diane Ramsey's office, a perfunctory courtesy before I walked in anyway. Today, I didn't bother with the knock. When I walked in, Diane was seated behind her desk, looking at something on her computer.

Damn. I'd kind of hoped I was interrupting a meeting.

"Marston," she said as she glanced up with frowning hazel eyes. One of the youngest directors in the history of the agency, Diane was just shy of forty but looked thirty most days. Today she seemed especially youthful in a casual, brightly colored blouse and slacks instead of her usual dark pantsuit, her hair down and loose. "You look upset."

"Not upset, exactly. Just curious." I helped myself to the chair across from her desk. "Why'd you pull us off the Francke case, right in the middle of an arrest? You know I don't like leaving things unfinished."

She sighed and tucked a blonde curl behind her ear before swiveling fully to face me to fold her hands on the desk. "I thought CGIS told you there was a rush on that murder scene. Because of the tide?"

"Yeah, they did," I confirmed. "So why didn't you just send Birn and Griezmann out there? Would've been faster than scrambling a team to take over our bust."

She looked at me for a moment. "You know why."

"No, I don't," I said. "Enlighten me."

"Because you and Holm are better investigators," she said matter-of-factly.

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

The director drummed her fingers on the desk. "You know what? I'm not doing this with you today, Marston. I assigned you the case. So just work it, and shut up about it."

"Diane," I pressed as I made my tone firm.

She averted her gaze, and I knew my hunch was right. The orders were coming from someone with higher clearance than her, and there was more to this case than I was being told.

"You know, it'd be a lot easier doing my job if I had all the facts." I leaned forward in the chair. "So are you going to spill it, or do I have to work in the dark?"

"Ethan... I can't. Not this time," she said quietly. "Please, for once, could you just not push it?"

I took a minute to think about that, then decided to shrug it off for the moment. I liked Diane, at least better than our previous director, and I knew she could get in trouble if she shared classified information. Honestly, she probably didn't have the whole story either.

"All right. I won't," I told her, "but you know I'm going to find out what this is about anyway."

That got a smile from her. "I'm counting on it."

"Well, I'd better get to work. Got a dead body downstairs." Two of them, actually, though I hadn't told the director about the other find in the cave. I knew damned well it didn't have anything to do with the murder, and I wanted to keep it under

wraps for as long as possible. Didn't feel like listening to anyone complain about misappropriation of resources. I stood, walked to the door, and then turned back before I opened it. "By the way, you spoiled Robbie's fishing plans. He's a little peeved."

Diane smirked. "He'll get over it."

"Probably, but you're not the one who has to listen to him bitch."

Her laughter chased me as I left the director's office and headed downstairs to the squad room on the main floor. On a Saturday, most of the stations were left deserted by the lucky agents who didn't get shanghaied into working weekends, but Holm was at his desk across from mine, talking on the phone.

He saw me coming and held up a finger as he turned slightly away, the phone to his ear. "I don't give a damn about your cancellation policy," he said into it. "I'm not paying for a boat that I don't get to use. If I don't have a refund by Monday, I'll shoot you. I have a gun." With that, he slammed the phone down, rolled his eyes, and grinned at me. "You have to be firm with customer service."

"Uh-huh. Threatening to shoot them was a nice touch." I waited for him to stand and come around the desk before we headed for the elevator. "I take it that you've finally accepted that you're not going fishing today."

Holm snorted as the elevator dinged and the doors opened. We stepped in, and he thumbed the button for the lower level without a word exchanged between us. After being partners for four years and in the same Navy SEAL unit for three years before joining the agency, our wavelengths were fairly synched on the job.

"Yeah, I get it," he said. "I should really just buy a damned boat."

"You've been saying that since boot camp," I reminded him.

"Hey, a boat is a big investment." Holm shrugged. "I don't want to commit until I find the perfect one."

I held back a smirk. Commitment issues were practically Holm's middle name, and not just when it came to boats. "Like I keep telling you, you can always borrow mine."

"Ethan, you live on your boat," he countered. "I'm not going to sail your house out just to go fishing."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Maybe I should've told him that I owned an actual house too. I just preferred living on the boat, since it was closer to work and convenient for other things that I enjoyed.

I didn't want to take away his fun, though. No matter how much he complained, Holm was definitely a boat-of-the-week kind of guy.

The elevator dinged open on the lower level, where both the morgue and the lab resided. Usually, when we were getting started on a case, we'd check in with the medical examiner first, but she wasn't here yet. Ethel Dumas didn't work weekends unless she absolutely had to. However, Bonnie and Clyde would have something for us.

Our full-time lab team, Rosa Bonci and Joe Clime, practically lived in the basement of the office building. The onsite techs who'd been out to collect the body were usually dispatched on-call, but they were also technically supposed to handle processing evidence during the off-hours. Bonnie and Clyde would never allow that, though. Not in their lab.

When Holm and I walked into the lab, Clyde was on the main computer, his mop of curly brown hair in Einstein-like disarray. The twenty-something tech was dressed in stiff new jeans and a well-worn tee shirt beneath his pale green lab coat, studying something on the monitor. Bonnie was nowhere in evidence.

"Where's your partner?" Holm called out by way of greeting.

Clyde flashed a grin over his shoulder and pointed at the closed glass door leading to the back half of the lab. "Running a DNA test on your boat. We've got something for you, by the way."

"I hope it's something about the dead guy who has the killer we can still catch," I told him. "The other evidence is secondary."

"Of course it is, but you know Bonnie is obsessed with pirates, and she thought she recognized something in that mess of wood they brought in."

The spark of excitement I'd felt earlier grew slightly. Still, I had a job to do before I could focus on my little hobby. "Okay. Show us what you've got."

Clyde typed away and pulled something up on the screen, a grainy looking photo of a young black male. "Fingerprint match to your victim. Name's Chad Sweeting. He's got a record with the RBPF for assault, possession, and disturbing the public, and he's definitely a Black Mamba."

I nodded. Nothing I hadn't expected to hear, but it was good to have a name. "Have an address for this guy?"

"Not on record. He did have a phone, but I doubt it's registered. Looks like a disposable. Plus, it's a bit damp." Clyde jerked his chin toward the far counter, where a small, older-style brick phone lay disassembled and drying under a fan. "So what are we thinking? Mambas versus Kings and the snakes are down by one?"

"Maybe," I said slowly.

It sure as hell looked like a gang hit, but I didn't like the fact that the victim had been killed on American soil. I needed to know what Chad Sweeting had been doing here, and why his killer had taken him out and left him. That wasn't the Congo Kings way. When they made an example, they wanted everyone in their turf to see it, and a remote cave on a Florida beach wasn't their turf.

Plus, there was that thing with the director to consider, the way she didn't tell me our clearance wasn't high enough for this.

I was about to suggest that we head over to the Bahamas for a chat with the Bahamas police force when the glass door at the back slid open and Bonnie rushed in, all smiles and excitement. The short Hispanic woman was quite a contrast to her tall, slim partner in crime, all rounded curves and floral prints under her gleaming white lab coat.

"Marston! Oh, good, you're still here. You are going to love me," she said as she strode toward us.

"You know I already do," I said with a smirk.

"Yeah, but this is big. Huge." She came up next to Clyde and bumped him out of the way, and he stepped back laughing with his hands up. "Okay, first, I can definitely date the pinnacle to the late 1600s," she said as her hands went to the keyboard. "I'll have a more exact time period soon."

Holm furrowed his brow. "What the hell's a pinnacle?"

“Ship-to-shore boat,” I said, a faint smile tugging at my lips. “Typically used by merchants... and pirates.”

Bonnie tossed a grin. “Exactly, but even better than the date, I found this.” She tapped a few more keys and brought up an image on the monitor, a close photo of one of the larger sections of planks from the cave that looked to have been part of the hull. She zoomed the image in toward a black mark, showing that it was made up of distinct lines that were trying to form part of a picture.

“It’s a wood etching,” she explained. “It wasn’t unknown for galleons in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to have their flag symbols branded into the hulls of the pinnaces to avoid ownership disputes. This is only a partial, and it’s really worn down, but I managed to clean it up a little and extrapolate what the rest of the design would’ve looked like.”

With a few clicks of the mouse, a rough sketch of an image was superimposed on the photo: a winged skull with a snake threading itself into the jaw and out the left eye socket.

The Dragon’s Rogue.

“Holy shit,” Holm said as he elbowed me and grinned. “That’s the one, isn’t it? Your white whale.”

“Yeah. That’s the one.” Even though I was seeing it, I couldn’t quite believe it, though I didn’t doubt Bonnie’s skills.

My grandfather had spent most of his life searching for the pirate ship DRAGON’S ROGUE, convinced it’d gone down somewhere between the south Florida coast and the Bahamas. I’d joined him in the search when I was six years old, after I lost my father, and had kept it up even after my grandfather passed away four years ago.

But for all that time, we’d never found a shred of physical evidence. The whole thing had been running on wishes, faith, and a big dose of sentimentality on my part. I’d pretty much given up on actually finding anything.

Until now.

“So, what do you want to do?” Holm said.

I pushed away my childhood dreams for the moment and focused on the task at hand. There was a time for treasure hunting but now wasn’t it. “We’re still waiting on Ethel and the rest of the evidence, so we’ve got time. Let’s go shake a few branches at the RBPF and see what falls out.”

Holm nodded. “Works for me.”

We left Bonnie and Clyde to their science and headed out.

Chapter 6

The sea was calm, and because our Defender Class boat made good time we reached Nassau in under an hour. We docked at the RBPF marine unit and encountered no trouble commandeering a couple of motor scooters to head for Central, where I was sure we’d find a lot more resistance.

The Central Police Station was a few blocks in from the waterfront, a two-story building painted tropical teal with white trim. It looked clean and breezy enough

from the outside, but inside waited a mixed bag of Bahamas cops who may or may not be on the payroll of one gang or another and may or may not be in favor of cooperating with U.S. law enforcement no matter where their loyalties lay. I had at least one solid contact on the force, but he wouldn't be in on Saturday, so I'd have to take my chances.

Holm and I approached the desk sergeant with our badges out.

"Afternoon," I said to the uniformed man behind the desk, who watched our approach with a mixture of boredom and mistrust. He was an older guy, salt-and-pepper brush cut with a squared jaw and a thick pink scar across the back of one hand that was already reaching for the desk phone. "We need some information about a Bahamian citizen for a case we're working."

The desk sergeant grunted. "You want Captain Laury, yeah," he said in a gruff, chopped tone as he snagged the phone's handset and punched numbers with a blunt index finger. "I get him. You wait there." He jerked his head to the side.

"Actually, I don't want Captain Laury," I said flatly, resisting the urge to reach across the desk and hang his damned phone up. I'd dealt with Kosmo Laury on a handful of previous cases over the years, and he was probably the most unhelpful son of a bitch on the entire Bahamas force. Not to mention I strongly suspected he was in bed with Cobra Jon and would, therefore, taint my investigation.

"Too bad. You get him," the desk sergeant said. "Wait there."

I exchanged a glance with Holm, and we moved off to the side, away from the path of the front doors. It was relatively quiet in here on a hot Saturday afternoon with just a handful of civvies waiting on wooden benches beyond the front desk and three officers standing around, two of them chatting and one on his phone.

We didn't have to wait long before a door at the back of the boxy waiting room opened and a man in a white uniform stepped partway out, waving an arm at us. Light-skinned and long-limbed with a gleaming shaved head and a full goatee, he looked like he might start villainously twirling his mustache at any second.

"Agents, welcome," he called in a false friendly voice with a hint of musical Islander accent. "Please, come on through."

I snorted and moved across the room with Holmes trailing me. When we reached Captain Laury, he grinned widely and stepped back to let us past. "We can talk in my office. Right this way."

"You know, Laury, this doesn't have to be a long conversation," I said to his back once he closed the door behind us and started through the clutter of the bullpen that lay behind the entrance. As we followed after him, I noticed that few of the desks were occupied, and no one looked up at the captain and his visitors. "All we want from you is an address."

"I'm happy to help the American police in any way I can," he said half over his shoulder, still striding fast, "but of course, there is protocol to consider. Please, come in, and we'll talk."

He stopped in front of a plain wooden door and opened it onto a relatively spacious office. Inside, the window was open and two large, oscillating stand fans took sentry positions in the back corners and blew a cross-breeze through the stale room.

"Fine," I grunted as I stepped into the office.

Even though I hadn't dealt directly with the captain too often, I figured he wanted to throw a bunch of rules and procedures around so he could say that he was so sorry, but they just couldn't cooperate, and why not turn the investigation over to him. That way, he could sweep it under the rug with the rest of the gang activity.

That wasn't going to happen, but it looked like I'd have to let him try.

Once we were all inside, Holm and I took the wooden folding chairs while Laury circled around the desk and plopped into the cushioned seat behind it, long limbs sprawling and white teeth flashing.

"Now, what can I do for you agents? My sergeant failed to mention exactly which agency you're with?"

We performed another synchronized badge flash.

"MBLIS. Special Agent Marston," I said and jerked a thumb at myself before gesturing to my partner. "Special Agent Holm. Like I said, we just need an address for one Chad Sweeting."

"Chad Sweeting?" Laury repeated. "That name doesn't ring a bell."

"It doesn't? I'm shocked," Holm said as he feigned a look of surprise at me. "He doesn't know the name."

I managed not to laugh. "And here I thought a police captain would know every single soul on the island personally. Come on, Laury. I'm not here with veiled threats, and I'm not trying to piss on your turf. I want an address, you've got records. Look it up."

A look flashed in the captain's eyes. "I'll need to know why you're looking for this information, Agent Marston."

"Because he's dead, and I'm trying to find out who killed him."

"Dead?" Captain Laury threw his head back and laughed. "So you think you can come into my station and investigate the murder of my citizen, under my nose? I could have saved you the trip if you'd called. Clearly, this is my investigation now."

"The hell it is," I said. "Sweeting was murdered on American soil. My victim, my case."

Laury's eyes narrowed. "If this Sweeting is a Bahamian citizen—"

"With all due respect, Captain, but it doesn't matter," I cut in, my annoyance barely restrained. Something in the look he'd just given me suggested that he did recognize the name after all, and he was about to dig in that much harder. "I'm investigating this case. Period, full stop."

"No, you are not," Laury argued. "My department is taking over, and if you want us to cooperate with you in any way, you'll stop this pointless interference or you won't get so much as a phone call when we find the killer."

Holm cleared his throat. "You really don't want to go this way, Captain."

"Is that a threat, Agent Holm?"

"A threat? Nah." He laughed. "Maybe a strenuous suggestion."

Laury glowered at him and then at me. "I want all the evidence you have on this investigation delivered to my people, today, and I want you agents off the case."

"Why's that, Captain?" I said as I leaned forward casually, an unfriendly smile on my face. "Is there something you don't want us to find?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "This is my business, not yours."

“Yeah? Because I’ve gotta tell you, so far it seems like Black Mambas business.” I smiled inwardly as the mention of the name made him flinch. “So is your business to find out who killed my victim, or is it to save your own ass when Cobra Jon comes looking to take a bite out of somebody?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Laury sputtered.

I was on my feet in an instant and lunged toward the sweating captain. “Address,” I growled as I slammed a hand on the desktop. “Now.”

With slow, sullen movements, the captain rolled his chair toward the bulky computer on his desk and typed laboriously for a minute.

“We have no address on file for Chad Sweeting,” he said tightly.

“Yeah, no shit. If you did, I’d be there instead of here,” I shot back. “Why don’t you try your off-book records, Captain? You know... the ones you can’t keep on a computer without implicating yourself for all the dirty crap you’re into.”

He glared at me for a moment, then opened a bottom drawer of his desk and took out a battered notebook. After he flipped through several pages, he grunted without looking up.

“All I have is a last-known address,” he said before rattling off a number and street name. “It’s from two years ago.”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically. “I’ll try not to mention your name when I get around to interviewing Cobra Jon.”

Captain Laury dropped the notebook in his desk, slammed the drawer shut, and gave a bitter laugh. “And for a moment I thought I should be worried. I doubt you’ll live long enough to drop anyone’s name if you plan to involve him. In fact, I almost feel sorry for you.”

“Yeah? I was going to say the same about you,” I said. “I probably shouldn’t, but I’ll do you the courtesy of warning you now. When I wrap up this investigation, you and that little book of yours are next on my list.”

The captain watched us with glittering eyes as we left his office.

Chapter 7

The address Laury gave us was in The Grove, about twenty minutes out of downtown Nassau. The neighborhood could be generously described as ‘not great,’ if you were trying to avoid calling it a slum. Like most of Nassau, The Grove was a dense mix of high-end stone showplace homes and close-set, brightly painted wooden houses that ranged from cheerful and well-maintained to shabby and falling apart. Around here, there was less stone and more wood, less cheer and more desperation shading into resigned brokenness.

When we found the place, it was about what I expected, little more than a shack with haphazardly boarded windows behind a rotting, graffiti-tagged stockade fence. Clearly, the place hadn’t been occupied in a long time, but that didn’t mean no one had been here. Evidence of a fairly recent party littered the overgrown, postage-stamp of a front yard: crushed beer cans, cigarette butts, a battered canvas shoe with half the sole torn away, the blackened remains of a small campfire.

“Are we even going to bother?” Holm said as we eased the scooters onto the dirt walkway that led to the entrance of the leaning structure. The house had been coral pink once, but weather and neglect had faded it to a dingy pale shade that resembled diseased gums.

I shrugged and dismounted the bike. “We’re here. Might as well look around.”

My partner followed me to the door, both of us with hands on our weapons as I reached out and rapped on the peeling surface.

“Anybody home?” I called out, knowing damned well there wasn’t, though I couldn’t discount the possibility that some junkie or drunk had wandered inside and passed out. There was no response, either in the form of an answering voice or the sounds of scrambling to escape from my unfamiliar, unaccented greeting that the majority of residents in The Grove would recognize as law enforcement.

With one hand still on my gun, I turned the knob and pushed the door open. It wasn’t a surprise to find the place unlocked. The surprise was finding it still semi-furnished and relatively free of clutter, despite evidence that the house had been used as a neighborhood party pad after the previous occupant had abandoned it.

Or maybe Chad Sweeting had been here more recently than we’d been led to believe.

I walked in slowly with Holm right behind me. The front room held a faded green sofa and a small end table, with a stand across from the sofa that had probably held a television at some point. There was a fine layer of dust on everything, but it wasn’t as thick or grimy as it would’ve been if the place had been deserted for two years.

The rest of the rooms were in similar states, everything coated with dust that suggested a few days of absence rather than a few years. In the kitchen were a chair and two tables, a few dishes in the rack next to the sink and a few more in the cabinets. There were some cans and boxes of food, but nothing in the fridge. The bathroom had a shower curtain, soap, shampoo, and a few towels. There were two bedrooms, one small and completely empty, the other slightly larger with a single, hastily made bed, a three-drawer dresser, and a few button-down shirts and linen slacks hanging in the closet.

Since this place was potentially tied to a crime, once we made sure no one was in the building, Holm and I donned gloves and sifted through what little there was to investigate. Other than the strange, half-lived-in state of the house, there wasn’t much of interest, until I started looking through the apparently empty dresser in the larger bedroom and found that the bottom drawer wouldn’t quite close all the way.

I pulled it out as far as it would go. The wood of the frame had warped slightly, and the drawer stuck stubbornly at one corner until I whacked the side with the heel of my hand and dislodged it. I set the drawer aside, reached into the space, and felt something flat and rectangular loose on the floor of the drawer space.

It was a thin book with a faded leather cover. Some kind of ledger, the pages crinkled and a little grimy. I flipped through it briefly and found it half-filled with entries. There were four columns filled out for each line: a date, a set of numbers that didn’t make sense on first pass, a name, and a dollar amount.

“Hey, Robbie,” I called as I walked from the bedroom toward the kitchen, where I could hear him opening cupboards. “Have any luck?”

“Nothing. You?” He turned as I walked in and saw the book in my hands. “Hey, look at that. Something.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, it’s something. I just don’t know what yet.” I flipped the ledger to the furthest page with entries and looked at the last one. “Final date in here is yesterday, when our vic was killed.”

“We don’t know exactly when he was killed yet. Still waiting on the doc, remember?”

“He hadn’t been in that cave long when we got there,” I told him.

Holm frowned. “And you know this, how?”

“Body was too dry,” I said. “He couldn’t have been there more than twelve hours before the witness found him. High tide, remember? That’s why we had to haul ass at the scene.”

He grinned and shook his head. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. I don’t know why I never manage to put this stuff together before you do.”

“What can I say? I must be a genius.” I smirked as I grabbed an evidence bag from my field pack and slipped the ledger inside. “If there’s something in here, Bonnie and Clyde will find it.”

“So we’re headed back?”

“Soon. I’d like to make a quick stop on the way, though.” I took my gloves off, stuffed them in a pocket, and looked out the curtainless kitchen window. “That restaurant Tomaz Sands owns, it’s between here and downtown, isn’t it?”

Holm stared at me. “You want to go to the Royale Verde?”

“Yeah. Why not? I mean, we’re already on the island,” I said. “It’ll save us a trip back later.”

“Fishing,” Holm muttered under his breath. “Nice boat, cold beer, warm sun. That’s all I wanted.”

I clapped his back. “We are going fishing.”

“Not the kind of fishing I had in mind.” He sighed. “Fine. Let’s go, then.”

We headed outside to reclaim the scooters, and I led the way to the restaurant in a marginal section on the outskirts of downtown. The Royale Verde was not a tourist spot, and Tomaz Sands was not a businessman, at least in the traditional sense of the word. He was the leader of the Congo Kings, and though his restaurant did serve food, it was mostly a front for gang activities.

It was just after noon when we pulled into the small, crushed gravel lot in front of the building, painted bright green to go with the restaurant’s name, with white and gold trim. There was only one car in the lot, an understated classic Jaguar that was one of Sands’ signature vehicles, but there was a handful of mopeds near the front of the building and a handful of young men to go with them, lounging on the two picnic tables beside the entrance and watching us with cold sneers.

Neither of us bothered flashing badges as we dismounted the scooters and approached the building. They already knew who we were. Not us, specifically, but their pig senses had to be firing on all cylinders.

There were six of them, ranging in age from teens to mid-twenties, all sporting jeans and tank tops and various head coverings, ball caps and bandannas and do-rags. They got up all at once and ambled over to congregate in front of the entrance, blocking the way with folded arms and menacing stares.

Holm and I stopped about five feet from them, and I addressed the one in front, the oldest and probably most senior. "Looking for the boss. Is he in today?"

The kid's lip curled, and he gestured with a slight lift of his chin. "We closed."

"Oh, you work here?" I asked without a hint of sarcasm showing. "What time do you open?"

"Never for you, *cochon*," one of the others said. The comment drew a few snickers.

I took a step forward and jerked my head toward the Jaguar in the parking lot. "I know that car belongs to Tomaz Sands," I said. "That means he's here, and I need to talk to him. Now, you can move out of the way, or you can be moved. Your choice."

The leader snorted. "You gonna move me? I'd like to see that."

"Okay," I said.

My fist flew and caught him in the jaw. He moved a good three or four feet, from standing to sprawling on his ass in the dirt.

As the rest of them tensed to spring at me, there was a soft click from the direction of the building, and the door to the restaurant swung open slowly.

"Stand down, boys," a mellow male voice with a breezy accent called from the shadows of the opening. "Sure these gentlemen don't want more than a talk with me. Isn't that right, gentlemen?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said as I flexed my hand briefly. "Just a little chat."

"Please. Come in."

The kid I'd clocked scrambled to his feet and drew aside with a glare as he rubbed his jaw, and his buddies backed off warily. When we headed for the entrance, I caught the minute flash of sunlight on glass and saw the lens of a security camera above the door, mounted flush with the wall. That was clever. It also meant Sands had seen us arrive and watched to see how we handled his boys before he announced himself.

Holm and I walked inside, and the man who'd invited us in closed the door. Tomaz Sands was tall and lithe, forty-something, with a cap of short, tight curls and thick eyelashes framing clear, amber-brown eyes. He wore a suit without a jacket, the tie loosened and the sleeves unbuttoned and rolled halfway up his arms. He flashed a wide smile that revealed a crooked front tooth and offered a hand. I took his in a strong grip, and then he shook with Holm's.

"I hear you know my name already," he said. "And you are?"

I introduced myself and my partner as my gaze darted around the room, taking it in to check for possible threats. The dining area was rustic chic, all wood tables and chairs on a knotted plank floor. Restrooms to the left, bar at the back, and two other doors that probably led to the kitchen and storage. No one else in the room, unless they were ducked down behind the bar.

My hand stayed close to my gun, and I knew without looking that Holm had taken the same stance.

"Agents Marston and Holm," Sands said. "Did you know the best way to remember someone's name is to use it frequently in conversation when you meet them? I'm not sure if I am pleased to meet you yet, Agent Marston and Agent Holm." His mouth continued to smile, but his eyes failed to reflect it as he looked

at each of us in turn, and then started for the bar. "Let's have that talk, then. Would either of you care for a drink?"

"Pass," I said, sharing a glance with my partner before we walked after him. "We're on duty."

"On a Saturday?" Sands shook his head without breaking his stride. "You Americans are all so overworked."

"Tell me about it," Holm grumbled. Thankfully, he refrained from bringing up his spoiled fishing trip again.

Sands circled the bar, walked behind it, and started making himself a mixed drink. "I, however, am not on duty," he said as he grabbed various bottles, poured and blended with practiced flair. "Therefore, I believe I'll have a drink."

"Knock yourself out," I told him and waited until he came to rest behind the bar with an ice-choked glass of some concoction or another in hand. "So, Tomaz, any of your boys been up to the Florida coast lately? Say, two days ago?"

Sands lifted an eyebrow. "Which boys do you mean, Agent Marston?" he asked. "You see, I'm still using your name. Agent Marston. Believe me, I will never forget it."

There was a threat behind his calm tone that I chose to ignore. "I mean whichever one of them executed one of the Black Mambas on my turf."

Something darkened his gaze at that. "Tell me why you come to me with this, Agent Marston."

"Oh, I don't know," Holm cut in. "Maybe because of the back-of-the-head shot and the gold rope that the victim was hogtied with. We know how you Kings really like your gold."

"Agent Holm," Sands said with ever growing calm, the dangerous kind, "it sounds like you are accusing me of murder."

"You? Never," I said. "We just think you know something."

"Yeah, and we'd sure like to hear it," Holm added.

I nodded along. "Sometime today would be nice. I mean, you can wait for a warrant or call a lawyer or whatever, but that'll just make you look guilty. I'm sure you know that, Tomaz." I watched his eyes contract as I spoke. "See what I did there? I used your name. Good tip, by the way."

"Enough," Sands barked suddenly, hard enough to rattle the ice in his drink. "I had nothing to do with this."

"Sure, you didn't. You're just a poor, misunderstood rival gang leader."

Sands shook his head and stared into the distance, his face a stony blank. "You can leave my restaurant now," he said as he reached an arm out and poured the contents of his glass into a nearby bar sink. "It seems I am on duty today, after all."

I sensed something in his tone that gave me pause because it bordered on confirming the suspicion I'd had when I first saw the body in the cave.

"Why's that, Tomaz?" I asked casually as I caught his gaze. "This wouldn't be an unexpected business matter with Cobra Jon, would it?"

Holm shot me a questioning look, but he didn't say anything. He'd known something was off about the crime scene, too.

“And if it is?” Sands let out a snort. “You police have no interest in the truth. What does it matter to you? A gang member is killed, another is arrested, regardless of whether he is guilty, and you call that justice.”

I stared hard at him. “It matters to me. I’m not the RBPF here, Tomaz. I’ve got a dead guy with a bullet in his brain, and I want to know who personally fired that bullet. That’s who I plan to arrest. One man... the right man.” I watched his reaction as I added, “Even if he’s not one of yours.”

Sands clenched his jaw briefly and then forced it to relax. “Let me make this clear, Agent Marston,” he said in measured tones. “I may almost believe you, but I do not trust you. Still, you seem like an honest man.”

“Thanks. Does that mean you’re going to tell me something?”

“I suppose it does.” A long sigh eased from his throat. “This is not the first time the Black Mambas have arranged something very similar, and they do it when they have a need to dispose of one of their own.”

My brow went up. “What were they up to the last time this happened?”

“That, Agent Marston, is something you will have to discover yourself.” Sands closed his features off again. “Good day to you, gentlemen.”

That was our cue to leave, and we took it.

Chapter 8

The medical examiner was just wrapping up the autopsy when Holm and I got back to the office late that afternoon, right around four. She barely glanced at us as we walked into the morgue, probably because she was elbow-deep in the victim’s chest cavity.

Ethel Dumas had been with MBLIS since the agency’s founding almost thirty years ago, and she showed no sign of slowing down even at fifty-five years old. That included work and her personal life. A tall, solid woman with Amazon-like proportions, a thick mane of black hair, and perfect skin and teeth, Ethel was perpetually single and loving it. She liked to say that she’d dated half the men in Miami and the other half just didn’t know what they were missing yet.

She was also physically strong as hell and preferred to work alone, despite the agency’s policy to maintain at least two full-time staff in each department. As directors came and went through the agency, they’d periodically try to hire ME assistants that Ethel would proceed to intimidate into quitting. She’d driven off the latest one just about a week ago. The poor guy was crying when he left the building, and HR had to ship his personal belongings to him since he’d refused to set foot in here ever again.

No one knew what she’d done to him, and she wasn’t telling.

After a minute or so, Ethel extricated herself from the body and crossed the room toward the sink while holding her gloved and bloodied hands up. “You boys need to stop with these weekend murders. Just because they’re criminals doesn’t mean they shouldn’t keep a civilized schedule.”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about,” Holm said. “It’s just plain rude, killing people on a Saturday.”

“Amen to that.” Ethel stripped her soiled gloves off, dropped them in a trash can, and took her time washing her hands. When she finally turned toward us, she was smirking. “Hope you don’t think I’m going to tell you anything you don’t already know.”

“I do think that,” I said. “Actually, I’m counting on it.”

Ethel laughed. “Yeah, you got me. I do have a few things that may interest you, even though most of it’s pretty straightforward.”

I nodded. “Walk me through it.”

“Okay, then.” She started back toward the splayed-open body on the autopsy table, and Holm and I approached to stand on the other side. “You’ve got your standard single-bullet, back of the head kill shot here,” she said as she motioned to the victim’s head. “Your standard beach sand all over the body. That shit gets everywhere, even in places you don’t want me to mention.” She winked. “And your standard rope burns around the wrists. Just another gang-banger popped by a rival gang, right?”

“Wrong,” I said.

“You’re right. It’s wrong.” She sent me a bemused grin. “You seem pretty sure of that already, though. How’d you come to that conclusion?”

Holm decided to answer that. “Mister *brazos bolas* here marched into the Congo Kings headquarters and questioned the head honcho after we mostly struck out at the victim’s house.”

Both Ethel and I stared at him.

“What?”

“Your Spanish sucks, Robbie,” I said.

He frowned. “Doesn’t that mean brass balls?”

“Well, you got the balls part right, but *brazos* means arms.”

Ethel finally let out the laugh she’d been suppressing. “Maybe you should stick with *cojones*, Mister Arm-Balls,” she said. “It’s easier to remember than *bolas de latón*, which is what you meant to say.”

“Arm-balls?” Holm made a face. “Guess I’d better take that Spanish refresher course I’ve been putting off.”

“Anyway, back to the body,” Ethel said as she grabbed the corpse’s forearm, lifted it, and pointed to the marks around his wrist. “He’s got genetic material under his fingernails, which is being tested right now, but that’s not the interesting part. These ligature marks aren’t right. There are no signs of abrasion, which suggests the victim didn’t struggle at all after he was tied. Highly unlikely. And beyond that, the damage is only superficial with barely any internal bleeding, which means...”

“He was already dead when his wrists were tied,” I said.

Ethel cocked a finger-gun at me and pulled the trigger. “Give that man a cookie.”

“So this was almost definitely a setup, meant to look like gang-on-gang violence.” I walked slowly down the length of the table to take a fresh look at the body. “Did you get anything from the wounds on his feet?”

She nodded. “That’s the other interesting thing I was going to tell you about. He walked on coral, slashed his feet up pretty bad. He wasn’t wearing shoes at the time, and I also found some wood splinters in there.”

“Wood?” I cranked an eyebrow. “He could’ve picked that up in the cave, but not the coral. There wasn’t any in there.”

“Yeah, I heard about your pirate ship. Bonnie’s fit to burst,” Ethel said with a laugh, “but the splinters in your victim’s feet were not from some ancient wreck unless you know about any pirates who used epoxy. That was modern wood from a modern boat.”

I blinked. “You’re sure about that.”

“The lab rats are testing the stuff right now, but yes, I’m sure,” she said. “Looks like your victim washed up from a boat wreck. He was still alive when he got to shore.”

“Until somebody came along and shot him,” I muttered with a frown. There hadn’t been any sign of a recent shipwreck on that beach or any type of rescue equipment. No inflatable raft, no life vest. Just a dead guy who kept generating more questions than answers.

“All right. Thanks, Ethel,” I said. “We’d better go see if the lab rats have turned up anything.”

“Don’t you boys go finding any more dead bodies until at least Monday morning,” Ethel called after us as we left the morgue. “I’ve got plans with a live one tonight.”

Once we were out in the hall and heading for the lab, Holm snorted and shook his head.

“That woman is insatiable,” he said. “Hey, have you ever—”

“No,” I said before he could finish what I knew he was going to say.

“Me neither, but I’ve thought about it.” He wagged his eyebrows. “You have too, right?”

I decided not to dignify that with a response. It’d be like sleeping with my sister if I had one.

My much older sister.

In the lab, Bonnie was on the main computer and this time Clyde was nowhere in evidence. One of the computer monitors showed a magnified image of a spent bullet, and the other was flashing with a search result. Bonnie turned with a smile when we walked in.

“I hear this wasn’t just another gang shooting,” she said, curiosity plain in her eyes. “Tell me everything.”

“When we know, you’ll know,” I told her as I returned the smile and pointed at the screen. “Looks like you matched something there.”

“I did!” She typed something, and the flashing search box vanished to be replaced by a mugshot of a man with thick dreadlocks, facial tattoos, and a dead-eyed stare. He looked surprisingly familiar, though I couldn’t pull his name from wherever it might be lodged in my head.

“The bullet from the victim matches an unregistered gun used in two previous crimes,” Bonnie said. “This guy was accused of both but never convicted, because they couldn’t find the weapon and the witnesses... Well, you can guess what happened to the witnesses.”

Yes, I could. Witnesses to any crime committed by the Black Mambas tended to clam up quickly and change their minds about ever seeing anything. If they didn’t recant fast enough, they usually caught a swift case of death.

“The weapon is a nine-millimeter Smith and Wesson 952,” Clyde announced as he rounded the corner through the open back room door, carrying a couple of creased folders which he handed to me. “I managed to find copies of both case files for you on those previous crimes.”

“Which were murder and attempted murder,” Bonnie said, “and the suspect’s name is—”

“Agay *Sniper* Benta,” I said, finally coming up with the name. “Cobra Jon’s right-hand man.”

“That’s the one.” Bonnie grinned.

Holm made a tutting sound. “Dude shot his own flunky,” he said. “Must be hard to find good help these days.”

“Yeah, and we need to know why, because I don’t think the Black Mambas are done with whatever Chad Sweeting started.” I glanced at Bonnie and Clyde. “I’m gonna need solid evidence just to pick this asshole up for questioning, or he’ll just weasel out of it again. Can you find it for me?”

They both nodded. “You know we can,” Clyde said. “Might get a hit from the stuff under the victim’s fingernails, but that’ll be a while. We’ve got a few more possibilities though.”

“Aces up our sleeves,” Bonnie added.

“Fine.” I nodded thoughtfully. “Call me when you have something.”

We headed out and took the elevator back to the squad room.

“I guess today is well and truly shot,” Holm said just as the car stopped on the main floor. “Want to grab drinks tonight?”

“What, you and me on a boat?”

“Screw the boat. Now I’m thinking bars and babes.” The door chimed open, and he walked out first, stretching his arms. “Found a new place I’ve been meaning to check out, somewhere we haven’t been before.”

I skirted around him toward my desk, knowing it’d be a while yet before I left the office. But hell, I could use a drink later. “Yeah, where’s that?”

Before he answered, I stopped short when I realized there was someone already at my desk, and she smiled when she saw me.

“Agent Marston,” she said. “I emailed you but I didn’t hear back, so I thought I’d come by and make sure you had everything. See if I could help with your case.”

I managed not to groan. It was Tessa Bleu, the civilian from the beach. The last thing I needed was a civvie trying to play detective.

Even one as pretty as her.

Chapter 9

Tessa had her camera in hand, and she looked between Holm and me expectantly as if she was waiting for us to give her a badge and start walking her through the evidence. I figured she’d probably been watching too many cop shows.

“Thank you, Ms. Bleu,” I said. “You really didn’t have to come all the way down here, though. I would’ve checked my email eventually, and those pictures really don’t have much we can use. I’ve seen them.”

She smiled. "It's Tessa, remember? And that's exactly why I came." She held up the camera. "I sent you smaller copies, but the original image files are too big to email. I shoot at the highest resolution. So I thought if you downloaded the photos directly from the camera, maybe your lab could get something from them. You do have a lab, right?"

I had to admit, that actually might be useful. "Yes, we have a lab," I told her. "Is it okay if my partner takes your camera down there? I'd like to ask you a few more questions, while you're here."

"Um, it's..." She clutched the camera closer, stared at Holm, and bit her lip. "It's very expensive," she finished almost apologetically. "Please be careful."

He smiled. "Kid-glove treatment all the way. I promise."

"All right." She handed it over to him like a mother letting someone else hold her newborn baby for the first time, then reached in a pocket and drew out a black cord. "Here's the USB cable. You'll bring it back to me?"

"Of course. This shouldn't take long." Holm took the cord, gave me a 'we'll-talk-later' look, and then headed for the elevator.

He probably wanted to know why I'd decided to question her further when she couldn't possibly have anything more to say beyond what she'd told us at the scene. To be honest, I wasn't sure myself. I just had a feeling that she was more important to this case than I'd initially thought.

I pulled a chair out from an unused desk and brought it over next to mine.

"Have a seat," I told her as I circled behind the desk and sat down.

She watched me as she lowered herself into the chair. "Is this an interrogation?"

"No," I said with a laugh. She'd definitely been watching too many cop shows. "Believe me, you'd know if I was interrogating you."

"Oh. Okay." I wasn't sure if that relaxed her any, because she kept looking around wide-eyed at everything as if she expected an armed SWAT team to pop out and swarm her. "I've never been in an agency before. It's so... normal. Is this what the FBI and the CIA look like?"

I laughed again. "Not exactly. They have bigger budgets. They do look pretty normal, though, just like us. It's not all flashy computers and high-tech target ranges and urgent meetings around tactical simulation layouts. Just a bunch of people sitting at desks."

"With badges and guns," she said with a smile.

"True." I returned the smile and swiveled my chair to face her fully. "So, Tessa, what made you decide to entrust us with your camera? I seem to recall you refusing to hand it over, back on the beach."

She blushed slightly and glanced away for a moment. "Okay, so I'm a little overprotective of my equipment," she said. "Tell me this, though. Would you hand over your gun if someone asked you to?"

I grinned. "Point taken."

"That wasn't the only reason," she admitted with a sigh. "Honestly, I was scared and more shaken up than I realized at the time. I've never seen a dead body before. I mean, I have at funerals, but... never like that. Not with blood and everything." She closed her eyes and shivered.

"His face. He looked so horrified," she whispered.

I'd seen worse, but now wasn't the time to start talking about all the dead bodies I'd encountered on the job, not to mention the ones from my time in the Navy. She was right about the expression frozen on the victim's face, though. Horrified, yes, and betrayed.

Sweeting must have known, in the split second before the bullet entered his brain, that a man he trusted was going to pull the trigger. That look on his face might've been one of the things that ignited my suspicion about this case since the beginning.

I decided a change of subject was in order since Tessa looked like she was about to cry. I could just work my way back to the case when she calmed down a bit.

"So you're here in Miami on assignment?" I asked. "What's the job?"

She brightened at that, and I could see she loved talking about her work. "I'm doing a big piece on tidal pools for the *National EcoStar*. That's the magazine I write for. I mean, sometimes I take freelance assignments, but mostly I work for the *EcoStar*."

Something about the name rang a bell, even though I wasn't a magazine reader unless I was stuck in a waiting room with nothing better to do than check out whatever reading material was lying around. That didn't happen often, and the selection was usually along the lines of *Redbook*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Popular Mechanics*. Still, I knew that name, and not because of the magazine itself.

I was pretty sure I knew someone other than Tessa who had something to do with the *National EcoStar*.

"Oh, and I had permission. To be there." Tessa pulled me from my thoughts with the hasty comment as if I'd questioned her right to take pictures of a beach. Probably because there had just happened to be a murder victim there. "The Navy gave my editor the okay."

I made a noncommittal noise and then forced myself to pay more attention to her. "That's fine. CGIS didn't say anything, so I guess they already checked on your clearance," I said. "Tell me more about your tidal pool piece. I'm assuming you were trying to get photos of the pool in that cave?"

"Yes. I knew there was likely to be one in there," she said as her gaze wandered away from me again. "The conditions were just about perfect. I started out taking wide shots of the area, and I was closing in on the cave when I noticed the... you know. In my flash. That's when I called 911."

"So you didn't get any pictures of the actual pool, or anything inside the cave besides those exterior shots?"

She shook her head. "This was supposed to be my initial shoot, and then I was going to go back tonight and maybe tomorrow to get some pictures in different lighting. I stayed out when I saw... him, because it was a crime scene. Why, did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. You did great," I told her. "Thank you for not screwing up my crime scene."

I was also kind of selfishly glad she hadn't been in the cave before we got there. Otherwise, my ancient shipwreck find would've been hers, and I had a feeling I never would've gotten near it. No doubt the skeleton and the boat wreckage would have made a great story for her magazine, and then it all would've gone to some museum.

No one would have cared that the DRAGON ROGUE was important to me personally. It was probably a national treasure or something, but I had to be the one to find it.

I owed that to my grandfather.

“Agent Marston,” Tessa said slowly as she studied my face. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance I would be allowed to go back to the cave tonight, so I can get my photos?”

“Sorry, but no,” I said. “It’s still an active crime scene for now.”

She nodded as if she’d expected me to say that. “All the more reason for me to help with your case. The sooner you solve it, the sooner I can get back there and finish my job.”

“Thank you, but I think you’ve given us all the help you possibly can,” I said. “It’s best if you stay out of it until we’re finished.”

She looked so disappointed that I was tempted to try coming up with some mundane, pointless research she could do to keep her busy and safely out of the way while feeling like she was helping. Before I could do that, the elevator dinged and rumbled open, and Holm strode out with her camera carefully cradled in his hands.

“We’ve got everything we need from this baby,” Holm said when he reached us and presented Tessa with the camera. “Bonnie and Clyde were very impressed. This is the high-end real deal you have here, Ms. Bleu. Great photos, too, under the circumstances.”

“Thank you,” she said almost shyly as she took the camera and packed it away in her ever-present bag. “I hope they were helpful.”

“You know, they actually might be.” Holm caught my eye and nodded. “Bonnie thinks she can blow up a few of them enough to get a workable image of the figure on the cliff. It’s going to take a while. Probably tomorrow morning, she said, but if it’s who we think it is...”

“We can place him at the scene, and we’ll have enough to bring him in,” I finished with a smile. “See, Tessa? You have been helpful.”

She returned the expression, but her smile wilted slightly. “Who is he?”

“It’s best if you don’t know that,” I said. “Trust me, you don’t want to be in the middle of all this.”

Her lip quivered a little. “What if I already am?”

“What do you mean?” I said sharper than I intended to, thinking she’d tried to go poking around in the case on her own.

She sucked in a tiny breath. “Well, I... I took a picture of a guy who might be a killer. He was pretty far away and I used a telephoto lens, but what if he saw me? Do you think he’d come after me?”

I actually figured that Agay Benta had gone back to the Bahamas to report to his boss and regroup, so they could finish whatever their victim had started here. However, there was a chance he’d seen her, and though it was impossible he’d been able to identify her from that distance, he could be making inquiries. And maybe he would end up thinking she knew something that she didn’t.

I sighed and reached for the phone. “Where are you staying?” I asked her.

“The Palm Bay Inn, room 430,” she said with an apprehensive look on her face. “Should I be worried?”

That wasn't far from here, at least. "Probably not, but I'm going to call Metro and have them keep an eye on your motel tonight, just in case," I said. "I'll ask them to keep a low profile, too. If any of them are asking around, they'll get suspicious if they notice a random police presence where there shouldn't be one."

"Any of who?" Tessa breathed.

Damn. I didn't want to mention the word "gangs" to her, and I held a hand out in Holm's direction as he opened his mouth, probably to do just that. "We think the killer may have associates," I said carefully. "They aren't usually around here, though. They're in a completely different country."

"What, like Mexico? Is it a drug cartel?"

Both Holm and I had to smother a laugh. "Do you get your information from CSI, or *Law and Order*?" I asked, gently teasing.

"*Miami Vice*, actually," she murmured with the hint of a smile. "So, there's no Mexican drug cartel involved?"

"Nope." I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring look. No Mexicans. Possibly drugs and almost definitely weapons, but no cartel. Even that was too much to say without freaking her out, and I couldn't have her acting paranoid. That was the surest way to draw attention from the wrong people.

I put in the call to Metro. They grumbled about it, as usual, citing the typical excuses about being short on resources and manpower, but the Miami police had a lot more at their disposal than MBLIS, and we'd always had a decent working relationship. We rarely pushed as hard as the other agencies when it came to matters of jurisdiction, so when we did, they knew it was actually important.

"They'll keep an eye out," I said to Tessa as I hung up the phone. She didn't look reassured, so I added, "Tell you what. If you're not going anywhere tonight, I'll swing by later to check up on you. Okay?"

"Okay," she said with a suggestion of relief. "Thank you, Agent Marston."

"If you're Tessa, then I'm Ethan," I said.

"Ethan." Her smile grew wider. "See you tonight?"

"I'll be there."

I walked her to the elevator and called a cab for her on the way, then made sure that the agent on door duty would keep an eye on her until the taxi arrived. When I headed back to my desk, Holm watched me with a faint, knowing smirk.

"What?"

"You told her to call you Ethan," he said. "You like her. Don't worry, partner, she likes you too."

I rolled my eyes as I reclaimed my seat. "What makes you think that?"

"Come on, man." He snorted and folded his arms. "You asked what hotel she was staying at, and she gave you her room number. That was TMI. She wanted you to know exactly where she was."

I'd noticed, and I was only half surprised that he had too. When it came to our jobs, observation was the name of the game.

"She's a potential witness," I said.

He arched an eyebrow. "And? You'll be off duty when you check on her tonight. Don't tell me you're going to let a pretty girl and a nice hotel room go to waste."

"We've got work to do," I said, ignoring his comment.

He smiled as he headed for his own desk. "Not for long," he said in a sing-song tone.

Holm was right. There wasn't much more we could do on this case tonight since we were waiting for a reason to collect Benta legitimately. Normally I would've just gone out to get him anyway, but I wanted this to go by-the-book as much as possible.

The Black Mambas weren't going to wriggle out of this one.

So I'd order some dinner and eat while we wrapped things up here, and then go with Holm to that bar he wanted to check out, though I wouldn't drink much before I headed over to the Palm Bay Inn.

I was kind of looking forward to my last stop tonight.

Chapter 10

Tessa slid into the cab that pulled up in front of the MBLIS building with a last nervous glance at the brown-haired man in the dark suit sitting on a bench across the street and reading a newspaper. He was wearing sunglasses while he read, which she'd noticed wasn't that unusual in Florida because almost everyone wore sunglasses outside, no matter what they were doing. That wasn't what had concerned her, really.

It was more the way she kept catching him sneaking glances at her, and how he looked away fast when he saw her staring. He seemed like he was watching her. Still, he didn't move when she climbed into the taxi, and he didn't look up once as it drove away, even though she watched through the back window until she couldn't see him anymore.

Clearly, it wasn't the man she'd seen on the cliff. The possible killer had been black, and this man was white. Unfortunately, there was still something about the guy with the newspaper that made her nervous, edgy.

She was just being paranoid. Maybe. Probably. Agent Marston, Ethan, didn't seem concerned that someone would come after her, but she couldn't manage to shake the feeling of trouble that had invaded her since she found the body in that cave. Despite the uneasy feeling, she didn't want to hide in her hotel. She'd never been to Florida before, and she might as well get a taste of it while she was on Donald's dime.

"I'm sorry, I've changed my mind," she said to the cab driver a few minutes after she'd given him the address of the hotel to drop her off. "I think I'd like to get some dinner. Can you recommend any good restaurants in the area?"

The driver, a short and balding man with a laid-back demeanor, glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "What kind of food you looking for, and how much you looking to spend on it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anything that's really good, whatever it costs," she said with a half-excited smile. "It's not my money, anyway. My boss is paying, so I might as well make it count."

The driver let out a laugh. “Best kind of dinner’s the free kind,” he said. “In that case, I’d say you want Chez Rockport, up on the harbor front. Pretty place, great food, terribly overpriced.”

“That sounds great,” she said with a conspiratorial grin. “Can you take me there?”

“Will do.”

It didn’t take long to reach Chez Rockport, and it was a pretty place. A long, two-story white building with a teal blue roof and trim, set on a private dock on a street lined with restaurants, bars, and shops. Tessa smiled, her happiness with the recommendation plain as she paid the driver, including a healthy tip.

The place looked busy but not completely packed. She didn’t go inside right away. It was a gorgeous night, the sun just beginning to set over the sparkling expanse of water, and she walked to a nearby railing to stand and look out across the harbor as she breathed in the tang of the ocean that saturated the air.

When Tessa finally turned to head for the restaurant, movement across the street caught her eye. She wasn’t sure exactly why until she realized that a different cab had stopped on the opposite side of the road from Chez Rockport, and the man who might have been watching her at the agency building climbed from the back.

At least, for one brief, heart-stopping moment, she thought it was him. The hair looked the same, but he wasn’t wearing sunglasses and he was dressed in a tan button-down shirt and dark slacks instead of a suit. He also didn’t glance in her direction, as far as she could tell.

It couldn’t be the same man. Even though there was a strong resemblance, she convinced herself that it wasn’t him.

Still, her heart pounded too quickly until she entered the restaurant and got out of his sight.

A hostess greeted her at the door and brought her to a table toward the back of the crowded dining room right away. She asked for the house wine, looked over the menu, and when a server came to her table not long after she was seated, she ordered sliced filet mignon with wild mushrooms and fig sauce, pomme frites on the side, and a chef salad with house dressing... because why not? Again, Donald was paying for it.

While she waited for her meal, she thought about Special Agent Ethan Marston.

He knew more than he was telling her, of course. She couldn’t imagine that a federal agent would confide in her about an investigation she was barely involved with outside of finding the body and possibly being followed, although she wasn’t going to think about that.

That wasn’t the reason he was on her mind, though. She’d been impressed with him from the moment she saw him, his intelligence and take-charge attitude appealed to her. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he was damned good-looking. Those direct blue eyes of his didn’t seem to miss anything.

She wouldn’t mind at all if he was here across the table from her right now, actually. Maybe she could convince him to have dinner with her tomorrow night. There were plenty of restaurants in Miami to try, and she could expense both meals to her account with the magazine.

Plus, he was coming to her hotel tonight. That might be even better than dinner.

By the time her food arrived, she realized she was practically starving and dove right in. The cab driver had been right about this place being good. The salad was crisp and sweet, the pomme frites cooked precisely to the perfect texture, and the steak just about melted in her mouth. Chez Rockport easily rivaled some of the best restaurants she'd been to in Manhattan.

After dinner, she got a second glass of wine and decided to indulge in the gelato trio they had on offer. It was just as scrumptious as the food had been, though she didn't manage to finish the entire dessert. Still, it was definitely worth ordering.

By the time she asked for the check, the population in the restaurant had thinned out a bit. She suspected this was just a temporary lull between the early and late dinner crowds since it was Saturday night at the beginning of tourist season. When the server returned with her receipt after running her card, she added a thirty percent tip and a smiley face above her signature, silently daring Donald to comment on her tipping habits when she got back to New York. She knew he never would, though. He'd just roll his eyes and mutter something about how he could never find service as great as she apparently did wherever she went.

She always tipped thirty percent, regardless of whether it was a server, a valet, a barista, or hotel housekeeping. Donald could afford it, and anyone who worked a job that involved tipping deserved it.

With a quick stop in the restroom, Tessa threaded her way through the chattering business of the dining room toward the bar at the front of the restaurant. She'd seen a service phone near the entrance that she assumed could be used to call a taxi. There was a sign on the wall above the phone to that effect, so she picked it up and followed the instructions, reaching a dispatch service that informed her a cab would arrive in ten minutes.

She hung up the phone, turned away, and from the corner of her eye spotted a man at the bar who'd apparently been looking at her and was just turning back to the drink in front of him. Brown hair, tan shirt, dark slacks.

It was the man who'd gotten out of the taxi across the street outside. The one she'd thought might have followed her from the agency. That theory suddenly seemed a lot more plausible.

Tessa's heart jumped into her throat and stayed there, hammering a rapid beat as she pushed through the small crowd gathered near the entrance, murmuring an occasional breathy "excuse me." She stole glances over her shoulder at the man. He made no move to look around or leave his seat, but he could see her. She had no doubt he was watching her in the mirrored wall that ran the length of the bar.

Once she got outside, she gulped air and looked around almost frantically, as if the taxi she was told would arrive in ten minutes was somehow already waiting for her. Of course, it wasn't. She forced herself to move casually as she walked off a little way down the sidewalk, toward the other restaurants and bars on this busy strip of road.

There were so many people around. Surely, if this man was associated with the killer and looking for her, he wouldn't try anything with so many witnesses, would he?

Tessa remembered Agent Marston's little joke about *CSI* and *Law and Order* and realized that maybe she didn't know anything about any of this. Maybe having witnesses wouldn't matter to whoever he was if he was really following her.

He couldn't be, though. That kind of thing only happened in movies and TV shows. She had to stop being ridiculous and relax, enjoy herself in Miami. The taxi would be here soon, and she would head back to the hotel, maybe watch one of those movies in which a woman was being followed by a shady, suspicious figure, and wait for Ethan to get there.

Just when she managed to catch a breath, she saw him come out of the restaurant. Tan-shirt, dark-slacks man, formerly sunglasses-and-newspapers man. She was sure of it now. He glanced in her direction and for just a moment he looked startled as if he hadn't expected to see her, and then he turned quickly and walked a few steps in the other direction. He didn't go very far.

Screw this, Tessa thought with a vehemence that surprised her. She wasn't going to spend the rest of her time in Florida looking over her shoulder, wondering if every stranger she happened to spot more than once was following her. Instead of running off, she spun and headed toward the man. There were plenty of people around out here. If he meant her harm, surely someone would stop him or call the police.

He noticed her approach, and panic flickered briefly in his eyes. He looked left and right as if searching for someone who could save him from the impending confrontation, and then he appeared to decide on a neutral expression, as if he had no idea she was coming to speak with him.

She'd gotten to within ten feet of him when there was a sharp, echoing crack from somewhere in the distance. At the same time, the man in the tan shirt jerked back with an utterly shocked expression on his face, as if someone had just told him that his dear old mother had died having bondage sex with a stranger in a sleazy hotel room. He staggered sideways, turned his head and met her gaze directly. His mouth opened like he was going to speak.

Blood poured out of it instead. That was when she noticed the rapidly spreading stain on his shirt, just before he dropped to his knees and keeled over sideways, his limbs jerking and twitching.

Tessa gradually realized that people were screaming in horror. "Oh my God!" one shrill voice rang out above the sudden, discordant noise. "I think she just shot that man!"

She blinked several times. Was that woman talking about *her*? Blankly, she stared at her empty hands as if she expected to suddenly find a gun in one of them. As she looked down, another one of those sharp, rolling cracks split the air, and a small section of sidewalk exploded in front of her feet.

Tessa stopped thinking. She spun on a heel and ran.

Chapter 11

I couldn't believe Holm had talked me into coming to a place called Mike's Tropical Tango Hut.

My partner's big find was in the middle of a strip of evening entertainment businesses along the harbor front, on the same block as Chez Rockport, one of the biggest draws in Miami. The place was clearly arranged to catch people leaving the fancy wharf restaurant who weren't ready for their night on the town to end. Everything about this bar screamed tourist trap, from the cheesy bright colors of the furnishings to the bird-themed décor dripping with flamingoes and toucans. Not to mention there were enough fake palm trees in here to qualify it as a jungle.

Still, the drinks were good, the prices were fair, and the atmosphere was bright and positive. I'd vote it the bar least likely to devolve into an ugly brawl.

We'd found seats at the far end of the bar, where we could see the whole place. Holm was finishing up his second boilermaker while I was still working on the whiskey sour I'd ordered when we arrived half an hour ago, mindful of my later appointment with the photographer.

I still wasn't sure exactly why I'd offered to check up on her personally, but it felt like the right thing to do.

"So, Cobra Jon," Holm said out of the blue after we'd spent a few minutes drinking without conversation.

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. "What about him?" I asked.

"I don't know. I guess it's just... we've never worked a case with a direct connection to this guy before, right?"

"Don't think so," I said after a moment's thought. "There was that body in the shipping container we investigated last year that was linked to the Black Mambas, but the DEA took point on that halfway through. Had somebody undercover on the U.S. end."

Holm nodded. "Right, I remember that one. And the lifeboat thing around Thanksgiving, wasn't that related too?"

"More or less."

That had been a tough one. A lifeboat had washed ashore near a naval base containing the bodies of two women who'd been brutalized and stabbed multiple times. MBLIS had been called in because the women were Bahamian natives, and it turned out one was the girlfriend of a Black Mambas member, the other the wife of a Congo King. The murders hadn't been gang-related, though. Their killer was American, a moderately wealthy and privileged bastard who'd figured he could just help himself to whatever he wanted in the Bahamas, including human beings.

We'd managed to track the son of a bitch down and arrest him before the gangs could extract their own justice, but sometimes I wondered whether I would have minded too much if they'd gotten to him first. What he'd done to those women was horrific. Still, justice had been served, and Leland Foster was never going to leave the federal prison cell where he currently rotted.

"Did you have a point about those cases?" I asked Holm, who'd fallen silent again.

"Yeah. Well, not really, but sort of," he said. "The point was Cobra Jon."

"Again... what about him?"

Holm downed a generous slug of his boilermaker, nearly emptying the glass. "With what we've got so far, it looks like he didn't pull the trigger. Benta did. So, we can pin the murder on the lieutenant, but we'll have nothing on the boss-man."

"Our job is to solve the murder," I said.

“Yeah, and whose job is it to stop Cobra Jon from hunting us down when we take out his right-hand man?”

“That would be the RBPF,” I said slowly as I caught his point and drummed my fingers on the bar counter. The chances of the Royal Bahamas Police Force actually making a move against Cobra Jon hovered around zero. Those who weren’t accepting kickbacks from the gang leader were too terrified of him to attempt a confrontation. Some of them were both. “I guess it’s up to us, then.”

Holm frowned. “What is?”

“Taking down Cobra Jon.”

“Are you insane?” he blurted.

“Well, I’m no shrink, but I’d have to agree with your friend there,” a nearby male voice said.

I looked toward the voice and found a bartender in a tropical green apron standing on the other side of the counter, watching us with bemused interest. He was an older guy, average height and average build with a strong resemblance to Tom Selleck in *Magnum P.I.*, right down to the wavy hair and Chevron mustache. He even dimpled when he smiled.

“Thought you could use a refill,” the bartender said with a nod at Holm’s close-to-empty glass. “Plus, I couldn’t help overhearing your mention of Cobra Jon. You clearly know who he is, so imagine my surprise when I heard you say you want to take him down.”

There was a reserved, cautious look in the bartender’s eyes beneath the friendly surface, and it didn’t take me long to figure out what that look meant. Without having heard the entire conversation, he thought we were headed for trouble of the stupid kind. Probably pegged us as either small-time criminals looking to make a name, or at best, gung-ho bounty hunters with no clue what we might be getting into. Either way, I read him as about half a step from calling the cops for our own safety.

Despite the fact that he’d misread the situation, I liked that about him.

“You can back off the panic button, buddy,” I said with a smirk as I pulled my badge out and showed it to the bartender. “I’m Special Agent Marston, and this is Special Agent Holm. Don’t worry, we’re off duty.”

There was relief in the bartender’s laugh as he leaned forward to read the ID. “MBLIS, huh?” he asked with a thoughtful look. “That’s... Military Border Liaison Investigative Services, right?”

“Wow, I’m impressed!” Holm grinned. “Nobody knows what that stands for.”

The man shrugged. “I’m a bartender. We know everything,” he said as he offered a hand to Holm, and then me. “Mike Birch. Pleased to meet you.”

“Would that be Mike of *Mike’s Tropical Tango Hut*?” I asked.

He laughed again. “One and the same. Yes, I am the mostly proud owner of this fine establishment. So why, you may ask, am I serving drinks?” He leaned forward, propped an arm on the bar, and continued in a loud, conspiratorial whisper. “Because overhearing people’s conversations is a hell of a lot more interesting than lying on a beach all day.”

“I hear you. Beaches are overrated,” I said with a chuckle.

“Exactly, and this is the most interesting conversation I’ve heard all week in here.” Mike pointed to Holm’s glass. “Ready for another boilermaker?”

Holm flashed a sheepish smile. "Maybe just a draft this time. I should probably lay off the whiskey since some people are making me look like a dumb frat boy," he said with a pointed glance at my half-full tumbler.

"Yeah, and some people don't need any help looking like a frat boy," I shot back with a smirk. "Hell, I'd be on my third or fourth by now if I didn't have something else to do after this."

Holm nudged me. "Something, or someone?"

"I'm guessing that means you're good without a refill, Special Agent Marston," Mike said with amusement as he grabbed Holm's mug. "Let me get your draft."

"Thanks. And we're not working right now, even though it sounds like it, so you can drop the special agent bit," Holm said. "He's Ethan, and I'm Robbie."

"Got it. Back soon."

The owner-slash-bartender started making his way toward the taps at the front of the bar, and Holm sat back with a grin. "See? I told you this place was worth checking out."

"I guess it's not half-bad," I admitted.

"I mean, it's a little... colorful, but I like it." He panned a gaze over the crowds at the bar, around the tables, and moving in and out of the secondary room where they presumably kept the dart boards and pool tables. "I'm digging the female-to-male ratio, too. I'd say it's, what, three to one?"

I nodded. "About that, yeah." There were definitely plenty of unattached women in the place, moving around mostly in pairs or larger groups, drinking and laughing. More than a few were snapping pictures of the bar, the crowds, or their friends mugging it up and leaning all over each other in tangles of tanned limbs, bright smiles, and lofted drinks with little paper umbrellas stuck in them.

If one were so inclined, and I figured Holm was, the chances of getting friendly with someone were fairly high tonight.

"So, what do you think?" Holm leaned aside to look past me. "I need a list of likely candidates, somebody who needs cheering up. See anyone who looks lonely tonight?"

"Yeah," I quipped. "You."

"Ha-ha." Holm's smile didn't dim. "Hey, here comes Mike. I bet he's got an inside line on the ladies."

"Ask him, then."

Holm rolled his eyes. "I will. You're useless."

I didn't argue. Normally I'd be just as into the game as my partner, ready to let loose and have some fun on a Saturday night, but tonight, I couldn't quite manage to leave work at the office. There was more to this case than we'd uncovered, and Holm was right to be wary of Cobra Jon. Arresting Agay Benta wouldn't be the end of this, even if we managed to get a conviction where other law enforcement agencies had failed.

If we wanted justice served and also wanted to be alive to see it, we'd have to stop Cobra Jon before he stopped us. Taking out the most powerful gang in the Bahamas was a big ask for what should've been a more-or-less straightforward murder case.

Somebody had to do it, though. If no one else was going to step up, then I would.

Mike reached us and set a fresh glass of beer on the bar counter in front of Holm. "You were going to ask me something?"

"Man, you've got good hearing," Holm said with a laugh.

The owner-bartender smirked. "It pays to keep an ear to the ground in a job like this. Literally. You wouldn't believe the tips I get thanks to a few well-placed observations."

"So you own the place and you rake in the tips," Holm said with an arched eyebrow. "You must be rolling in it."

"Hardly." Mike laughed. "Might not look much like it, but this joint is prime commercial property. My payments are astronomical." He winked as he added, "Consider that a plug for a good tip."

I was only half listening to their conversation when a minor commotion near the entrance caught my attention. People were rushing toward the front windows, jostling to see outside, pointing and talking excitedly. Whatever had grabbed their interest, it wasn't fun. They seemed somber, worried.

As the noise level dropped slightly, I heard muffled sounds from outside. It sounded like screaming.

"Anyway, about that question," Holm said, oblivious to the shifting mood of the crowd. "I was wondering if you could point out a few ladies who might be looking for company, since my partner here is being less than helpful."

Just then, the front doors of the bar burst open and a woman rushed inside, disheveled and breathing hard as she pushed through the mini-mob gathered around the entrance. My gut flipped as I realized who it was.

I shot to my feet. "Her."

"Huh? I thought you were tapping out of female-gazing tonight," Holm said.

"No, I mean it's her," I half-growled over my shoulder, already moving toward the new arrival. "Tessa Bleu."

The panicked woman who'd just stumbled into the bar looking like someone had unleashed the hounds of Hell at her heels was my witness, who I'd definitely put in a taxi to go back to her nice, safe hotel where Metro could keep an eye on her.

So what the hell was she doing here?

Chapter 12

It took me a good ten minutes to get Tessa calmed down enough to explain what was going on. Not long after her frantic entrance into the bar, sirens had sounded outside, and half the people in the place had transformed into lookie-loos and wandered out of the bar trying to get a glimpse of whatever had taken place on the strip. The rest carried on drinking and partying.

At least they weren't crowding Tessa. My threatening looks whenever a curious or concerned onlooker tried to approach probably had something to do with that.

Right now she was sitting on the bar stool I'd been occupying a few minutes ago, coming down from a serious case of the shakes with the help of a mint julep that Mike had mixed her up, on the house. He'd told me, out of her earshot, that it

was low on alcohol and high on mint to mask the chamomile he'd added to help her relax. His special jittery-people blend, he'd called it.

I was really starting to like this guy.

Tessa sipped her drink and shuddered. "I'm sorry," she said for about the tenth time. "I just can't... I'm sorry."

"Please stop apologizing," I said as I shared a look with Holm, who'd resumed his seat on the stool next to her. The sudden, startling entrance of our witness had sobered him up fast. "Now, you said there was a shooting."

She gulped and nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "I was having dinner at Chez Rockport," she whispered miserably. "The cab driver suggested it. And they just shot him. It all happened so fast."

My brow furrowed. "The cab driver was shot?"

"No, the man who was following me."

"Someone was following you in the cab?"

She shook her head almost violently, and her face crumpled. "I'm getting all mixed up," she said as a sob escaped her.

"It's okay." I placed a comforting hand on her back, and she shivered briefly and settled. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

For a moment she looked on the verge of breaking down. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Some of the visible tension left her on the exhale. "I guess it started when I left your office."

"What?" I was instantly tense. "If something happened at the office, why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was anything. At least, I talked myself out of it being something," she said with a small sigh. "Maybe I shouldn't have, but it seemed crazy to think somebody was following me."

Damn it. If I had thought for a minute that she was going anywhere but back to the hotel, where I'd already arranged to have her watched, I would've made sure she took this more seriously. I sure as hell would going forward.

"Okay," I said as I forced myself to stay calm. "What made you think you were being followed?"

She hesitated, her lips pinched. "There was a guy across the street who kept looking at me, I guess. Sitting on a bench, reading a newspaper. He was wearing a suit. I watched him after I got in the cab, and he didn't even look up once I left," she said. "Then I thought, at the restaurant..." She let out a breath. "I saw him again, but he was in different clothes and I figured I was being paranoid."

Vague alarm bells started to go off in my mind. If it was one of Cobra Jon's men following her, they wouldn't have been subtle. They sure as hell wouldn't have changed clothes to throw her off, and they probably would've just approached her the minute she was away from the agency and accessible.

"Can you describe the man at all?" I asked.

"Not the one from the beach," she said. "White man, around forty, brown hair. I never really got a look at his eyes. He was probably about your height, and a little stocky." She shivered again. "I saw him at the bar when I was leaving the restaurant. He came outside, and I decided to ask him who the hell he was and why he was following me, and... that's when they shot him."

Her throat worked briefly. "He died right in front of me. I've never seen anyone die," she whispered.

As traumatic as this obviously was for her, none of this was making much sense in the context of my case. Not yet, anyway. I didn't have enough to connect the dots.

"What happened after he was shot?" I asked. "What made you run, if the shooter had already taken the target out?"

"You mean besides the man dropping dead at my feet?" She flashed a dry, weary smile. "That would be the second bullet that almost hit me."

"What the hell?" Holm said almost indignantly, managing to startle Tessa. "Sorry, Ms. Bleu. It's just... this is crazy. You have some random guy following you, who apparently has nothing to do with anything, until a third party shoots him and then tries for you. None of that fits in with anything."

I sympathized with his frustration, but I was better at controlling it. "The important thing is that you're safe," I said to her. "I want to talk more with you about this, but first I need to go out there and have a chat with Metro while they're still processing the scene. If this is related to the beach murder, I'm going to need their full cooperation. Robbie, can you keep an eye on her for a few minutes?"

He gave me a grim smile. "I'll keep both eyes on her."

"Thanks. I won't be long."

I gave Tessa's cool hand a sympathetic squeeze, and then headed outside.

The half-block between the bar and the snarl of emergency vehicles in front of Chez Rockport grew progressively less populated by spectators as the uniformed cops worked crowd control. Still, no one tried to stop me until I neared the yellow crime scene tape across the sidewalk, where a stone-faced officer on the other side of the tape barely glanced at me as he said, "You'll have to turn back, sir. Police investigation."

"Yeah, I know." I pulled out my badge and opened it toward him. "Special Agent Ethan Marston, MBLIS. I've got an investigation of my own, and I think this one's crossing it."

The officer turned to look, and his features relaxed slightly as he lifted the tape. "Good. Hope you've got more of a clue than we do," he said. "This one's a real head-scratcher so far."

"Tell me about it." At least I didn't have to waste time explaining the agency to him. Most of the Metro cops who worked this area were familiar enough with MBLIS to avoid the credentials dance. "Who's in charge up here?"

"Detective Peterson." The officer nodded to a blond-haired man in jeans and a brown jacket near the cordoned walkway leading to the restaurant, who was nodding and scribbling in a notebook as an elderly couple in formal clothing talked excitedly at him. "I'll tell him you're coming," he said as he grabbed a CB unit from his belt.

I smirked. "Good idea. The detective looks like he could use a break."

"Yeah, he's working through the whole panicked witnesses don't know anything but he still has to take statements stage," the officer laughed.

"I hear that. Thank you."

As I approached the detective, I watched him grab his CB and speak into it. He tried to hide his look of relief as he excused himself from the elderly couple, turning them over to a nearby officer before he came toward me.

“You’re with MBLIS?” he called out.

I nodded and introduced myself, then said, “Detective Peterson, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” The detective blew out a breath and raked fingers through his hair. “So, what do you know about my lovely crime scene?”

“Not much,” I admitted, and proceeded to give him a capsule version of the beach murder, the possible witness who really hadn’t seen anything, and the apparently unrelated man following her who’d ended up his victim. “My witness says there was a second shot fired, and that it was meant for her,” I finished up.

Detective Peterson tilted his gaze skyward for a moment. “Well, shit,” he said under his breath. “We did find a bullet in the sidewalk, but we thought it was a miss and the shooter took out his target with the second one. You’re saying the first bullet was the kill shot?”

“Apparently, according to Ms. Bleu,” I said. “She’s pretty shaken up, but I believe her. What have you got for witness statements so far?”

The detective grunted. “Not as much as I’d like, and of course, they’re all conflicting.” He pulled a face. “We’ve got the usual knee-jerk ‘a black guy did it’ and ‘a Hispanic guy did it’ crowd, a few claiming they saw ‘guys in sunglasses’ and it must’ve been the FBI or the CIA. Somebody didn’t see anything but heard a guy whistling ‘something creepy’ before the shots were fired. There’s a homeless dude around here claiming God shot the victim for his crappy haircut.” He paused. “Oh, and one woman says she saw a lady with brown hair and green eyes shoot the guy, and that she was standing right in front of him when she did it.”

Brown hair and green eyes. That could’ve been Tessa. She certainly wasn’t the only brown-haired, green-eyed woman in the world, and probably not the only one in this part of Miami tonight, but she had been right in front of the victim when he was shot. “She might mean my witness, but Ms. Bleu didn’t kill him,” I said. “She only went to confront him, like an idiot.”

“Civilians, right?” Detective Peterson said with a crooked smile. “Yeah, we know it wasn’t her. We already found where the shots came from. Up there.” He pointed toward an adjacent building, a two-story brick place with no signage and several boarded windows on the second floor. “Found the brass on the roof. Looks like .308 Lapua casings, though of course we can’t be sure until the lab processes them.” He shrugged. “Unfortunately, we do still have to talk to your witness.”

I nodded. “Long as you’re not going to charge her with fleeing the scene or anything.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. She’s a victim in this too, whatever the hell this is.”

“It’s something, that’s for sure.” I thought about mentioning my newly forming suspicion that the shooter had been Agay “Sniper” Benta. Lapua bullets were a common choice for snipers, and Benta had been known to use the less powerful .308, just because he was so damned cocky.

But I’d hold off until I gathered a bit more evidence, or at least made a little more sense of the situation.

“Listen, I’d appreciate it if you’d send me copies of your reports and evidence results from this, as soon as possible,” I said as I produced a business card and

handed to the detective. “I promise I won’t try to take point on the investigation. I’d just like to be in the loop, but this one’s all yours.”

“Gee, thanks.” Detective Peterson took the card, then dug in a pocket and handed me one of his. “Same here? If you can keep me in the loop..”

“You got it.”

Just then, an officer with corporal insignias on his uniform came toward us waving a hand to get Peterson’s attention. “Hey, Detective, we got something weird—” he started to say, and then broke off with a glance at me. “When you have a minute,” he finished.

“It’s fine, Halsey. This is Special Agent Marston with MBLIS,” the detective said. “It seems we have a mutual interest in this one. What have you got?”

Halsey paused for a beat to process that, and then plunged ahead. “We found a second ID in the victim’s jacket,” he said. “Same name as the one on his license, Gordon Traynor. Only this one says he’s with a private security company out of D.C., something called VeriSafe. I had Babs look it up.” He frowned slightly. “They specialize in protecting high-end targets. People. Bodyguard type stuff.”

Well. Wasn’t that interesting.

Detective Peterson looked at me with raised eyebrows. “You said the victim was following your witness, but she apparently didn’t know him,” he said. “Is it possible she was his assignment?”

“No idea. If she was, she didn’t know about it.” And if this Gordon Traynor was supposed to be protecting Tessa somehow, he’d done a piss-poor job of casing his environment.

“Guess we’d better find out,” the detective said and turned to Halsey. “You and Babs find out whatever you can about this VeriSafe place and what Traynor was doing here, okay? Maybe the guy was just on vacation and in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I doubt it.”

The corporal nodded. “We’re on it.”

As the officer headed away, Detective Peterson looked back at me. “Where’s your witness? I’d like to have that talk with her now, if you don’t mind.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” I said. “Come on.”

I led the detective back down the street toward the bar and thought about my earlier conversation with Director Ramsey, and the orders that had come from above my clearance level to put me on this case.

Now I was starting to think that high clearance thing might have nothing to do with the Black Mambas, and everything to do with Tessa Bleu.

Chapter 13

Mike Birch turned out to be not only knowledgeable, but very accommodating. By the time I returned to the bar with Detective Peterson in tow, he’d started to clear the place out by gently urging people to leave. Then he closed the place outright, showing the last of the patrons to the door and dismissing his staff out the back.

"You didn't have to do that," I said as he closed and locked the door after the last customer. "It's Saturday night. Probably a big night for you, money-wise."

Mike grinned. "Hey, you're right. I'll just open up again and call 'em all back inside," he said, making no move to do so. "Don't worry about it. Your girl there's pretty shook up, and I'm not a real big fan of the Saturday night crowd anyway. Especially when there's a violent crime right outside my door."

I raised an eyebrow. "What usually happens when there's a violent crime right outside?"

"Don't know. First time there's ever been one," he said with a laugh. "You officers and agents go ahead and do your thing. I'll be in the back cleaning up."

"Thanks, Mike. I appreciate the help." I held out a hand, and he shook it. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to pay you back."

He nodded. "I could always use more regulars, if you're looking for a watering hole to frequent. So come on back. Tell your friends." He spread his hands out in front of him, like he was framing a picture. "Mike's Tropical Tango Hut, favorite hangout of special agents and Miami detectives. Free mint juleps if you get shot at."

"Nice slogan." I tried not to laugh too loud. "We'll take you up on that."

"I'll hold you to it. By the way, those doors are one-way locks," he said with a nod toward the entrance. "Anybody can leave from inside, you just can't come back inside once they shut."

With that, Mike turned and headed for the back, and I made my way toward the booth where Holm had relocated Tessa in an attempt to make her more comfortable. The woman looked scared and exhausted at the same time, but exhaustion seemed to be winning. She had leaned her head against the back of the booth and closed her eyes. Holm sat protectively next to her, while Detective Peterson and the junior detective he'd grabbed outside on the way to the bar hung back looking awkward.

I stopped in front of the table. "Tessa," I said gently. "You still with us?"

"Mmph." Her eyes fluttered open, and she lifted her head and smiled at me. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm so tired all of a sudden," she said.

"Your adrenaline's crashing," I said, noticing that Holm had furnished a pitcher of ice water and a glass. It'd be good to keep her hydrated and prevent her from bottoming out. "I'd like to talk a little more about what happened, if you're up for it."

She gave a slow nod and reached for the filled glass. "I think I'd better be. If somebody tried to kill me, I'd rather you caught him as soon as possible."

"Yeah. Me too." I motioned the detectives over. "This is Detective Peterson, and..." I couldn't quite recall the other guy's name. He was younger than Peterson, dark-haired and olive-skinned with nervous eyes behind round, wire-framed glasses.

"Detective Rothchild," the younger guy stammered.

Tessa looked from one to the other and tensed slightly. "Hello, detectives." She sipped her water. "I'm sorry. This is just a little overwhelming for me," she said in a small voice. "I've been questioned by so many people today, it's getting hard to keep track."

“Tell you what. I’ll ask the questions, and the detectives can just observe,” I said with a glance at Peterson. “If that’s okay with you guys.”

He shrugged. “Fine by me,” he said agreeably. “She’s your witness.”

While I slid into the booth on the opposite side from Holm, the detectives snagged a couple of chairs from a nearby table and dragged them over, positioning themselves on the open side of the booth. “I’ve already told them everything you told me earlier, so we don’t have to go through all that again,” I said to Tessa, and watched the lines of her body relax. “What I want to ask you now has to do with a few things the detectives found out at the scene.”

“You mean where that man was shot,” she said flatly.

I nodded. “His name was Gordon Traynor. Does that mean anything to you?”

Her body language showed nothing but confusion in response to the name. Tiny frown lines appeared between her brows, and she leaned forward slightly with both hands wrapped around the water glass. “No. Should it?”

Holm perked up a little too. I hadn’t gotten the chance to brief him on what I’d found out in this increasingly strange case, so this would all be news to him.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I said. “It turns out he worked for a private security firm that specializes in protecting important people.”

This time her reaction was shock. “He was following me,” she said slowly. “Do you think—” She cut herself off, pressing her lips together. “No, that’s impossible. I’m not important. I’m just a journalist.”

“We still don’t know for sure that he was here specifically for you,” I said, though that chance was increasingly slim. “Maybe he wasn’t even working. He could’ve been on vacation, and maybe you just happened to catch his eye. Say, he wanted to ask you out, but he was shy and hanging back.” Even as I said it, I knew it was ridiculous. If he was date-stalking Tessa, he wouldn’t have thought about changing his clothes when she changed locations. But I pressed on, because I needed her to stay as relaxed and un-freaked out as possible. “For now, though, we have to consider the possibility that he was following you professionally.”

Holm caught my gaze and sent me a look that clearly said *what is this happy horseshit*, but he kept his mouth shut.

“I don’t understand,” Tessa said faintly. “Why would a private security firm be protecting me?”

“You’ve never had this kind of protection before?” I asked.

“No.” She shook her head for emphasis. “I mean, why would I?”

I decided to consider the journalist angle, and the possibility that all this was unrelated to the murder here in Florida. “You write for a national magazine,” I said. “Assuming you don’t use a pseudonym, plenty of people have seen your name. Your picture, too, I’m guessing. Can you think of any pieces you’ve written that might have upset someone, either for the *National EcoStar* or one of your freelance jobs?”

“No! I take pictures of wildlife and geography, and I write about the environment,” she said, sounding flustered and freshly upset. “I mean, this piece on tidal pools wouldn’t have been flattering, but only to tourists who keep stepping in them. And I’ve barely started the groundwork, let alone actually writing the piece. It’s not even going to be published until the August edition.”

Okay, so that was a dead end. Some angry tourist who wanted the right to trample through tidal pools was damned thin, especially considering the hypothetical tourist would've needed to have inside knowledge of the *EcoStar's* publishing schedule, and also just happen to be a sniper, or know how to hire one.

"Nothing inflammatory, then?" I asked. "Not at any point in your career."

"Nothing." Tessa let out a thin, watery sigh. "This is crazy," she whispered. "Do you know who killed this private security guy, or why whoever it was took a shot at me, too?"

"We're working on that, ma'am," Detective Peterson said as he stood and motioned for the younger detective to do the same. "Rothchild and I need to get back to the crime scene, but we do appreciate your time. Agent Marston, if you don't mind a quick word before we go?"

I nodded and slid from the booth, knowing why the detective had decided to cut the interview short at this point. It was obvious Tessa had no idea who Traynor had been, and even if the deceased private security guard had been hired to protect her, she'd had nothing to do with it and no knowledge of his contract. Plus, she was too shaken up to provide anything further.

After I let Holm know that I'd be right back, I followed the detectives to the doors.

"Looks like you're going to have a fun night," Peterson said, turning as we reached the entrance. "Me too, apparently."

"Yeah, about that." I glanced back at the booth, where Tessa was sipping at her water with trembling hands while Holm spoke in low tones. "I already asked Metro earlier to keep a low-profile watch on her hotel, but I changed my mind. I'd like high-profile, squad cars on the premises, officers at her door. Can you set that up for me?"

"No problem." To his credit, Detective Peterson didn't say a word about manpower or budget cuts. "What's the location?"

"The Palm Bay Inn. Room 430."

He scribbled the information in his notebook. "I'll make the call as soon as I check back in at scene," he said. "You'll let me know if you get any leads?"

"You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," I said.

Peterson smirked. "Way of the world, my friend. Good luck with your case."

"Same to you."

I pushed the door open to let Detective Peterson and his nervous underling out, and made sure it was closed and locked before I headed back to the booth. Holm and Tessa both watched me expectantly as I took a seat.

"Okay, Tessa," I said. "We're going to have a full police presence at your hotel tonight, from now until we catch this guy. Beyond that, Holm and I will be just outside, all night."

My partner gave me the hairy eyeball. "We will?"

"Yup. We're on stakeout detail," I told him.

I could hear the groan he didn't let out.

"Are you sure?" Tessa asked, the release evident in her voice as she looked between us. "Thank you so much. I just can't believe... Maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight, knowing you're there."

She looked at me when she said that last part. The jealousy rolled off Holm in thick waves.

“Come on. We’ll drive you back there,” I said as I stood and pulled out my phone. “I’m just going to let Mike know that we’re heading out.”

As I walked back toward what I assumed was the kitchen, I opened a blank text and tapped out a message to Holm. I didn’t want to tell him exactly why I’d made the call, but I knew he was trying to figure out why the hell we were going to stake out the hotel in addition to the full police presence, which by itself would be enough to protect Tessa.

Pretty sure the shooter is Benta. He’ll try again. Want to catch him in the act, I typed and pressed Send.

His reply chimed before I reached the kitchen door.

No waiting for a warrant? I’m down for that.

Yeah, I figured he would be.

Chapter 14

The Palm Bay Inn was a far cry from the Hiltons, Marriotts, and Regencies that sprinkled the greater Miami area. More resort than hotel, the place boasted an ocean view, both indoor and outdoor swimming pools with companion hot tubs, tennis courts, and a full onsite gym. The fourth floor, where Tessa’s room was located, was actually the top floor where they kept the furnished suites. Very nice digs for a journalist, even one who worked for a popular national magazine.

I had to wonder who was paying her expenses.

Tessa and I stepped into the elevator at the lobby level, heading up. I’d left Holm outside in the car to wait for me while I made sure Metro had their officers in place. I also wanted to do a quick sweep of her room for anything that might be in there. Listening devices, surveillance cameras, people with guns waiting to kill her. At this point, I couldn’t rule any of it out.

Of course, I wouldn’t tell her exactly what I was doing. She was already scared enough.

“All this and a free continental breakfast too,” I said in an attempt to lighten the mood while the elevator rose smoothly with just the two of us inside. “Must feel more like a vacation than work sometimes.”

She blushed slightly and looked at her feet. “Donald made the reservations. I would’ve been happy at the Holiday Inn, but he insisted.”

“Donald?”

“My editor,” she said almost dismissively, and then cleared her throat. “Ethan, I...”

“What is it?” I prompted her when she didn’t continue.

She shook her head and sighed. “Nothing.”

I didn’t think it was nothing, but I decided not to press her. For now.

The doors slid open on the fourth floor, and I stepped out in front of her, making sure there was no one around before I beckoned her out. “Stay behind me, okay? It’s just a standard precaution.”

It wasn't, but again, I was trying to keep the freak-out level low.

We didn't run into anyone in the corridors until we reached her hallway, where two cops in uniform stood outside her door. The sight of them made her come up next to me, shivering slightly.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said. "It's all so surreal."

"Yeah." I had to admit, this case was fast approaching the top of my list for most complicated. "Listen, I want to check your room before you go in. Can you stay out here with these officers for a minute?"

She slowed and stared at me. "Just another standard precaution?"

"Something like that."

I could tell she didn't quite believe me, but she'd let it pass.

The Metro police were Officer Gilliam and Officer Burks. After a brief round of introductions, I told them I wanted to sweep the room, and Burks used the key card the front desk had given him to unlock the door.

I got the sense that the officers were a little put out by my request since they'd probably already been through the place themselves, but it wouldn't hurt to check twice.

The door opened onto a spacious main room with a plush cream carpet, buttery-soft leather couches, and a gleaming coffee table and end tables. The wall-mounted flat screen was easily fifty inches, and there was a shelf beneath the television holding a cable box, a DVD player, and assorted remotes. French doors at the back of the suite led to a large, furnished balcony that looked out over the hotel courtyard, and the sandy beach leading to the ocean beyond.

For probably the first time in my entire career, I slipped my shoes off before I moved further into the room. That carpet was just too pretty to trample across.

I spent a minute or two listening for any noise that might indicate someone was in the suite, even though I was certain the officers' search had been thorough enough to find a person if there was one in here. When I didn't hear anything apart from the muffled conversation between Tessa and the officers outside the door, I moved further inside and pulled out the bug sniffer I'd grabbed from the car.

The device was a small black rectangle with an antenna, capable of detecting RF frequencies. I moved slowly through the main room and passed the sniffer over and under every surface, listening for the clicking sounds that would indicate an open frequency. Then I repeated the process in the bathroom, which was just as well-appointed as the main room and contained both a shower and a whirlpool tub.

I didn't really expect to find anything in the way of surveillance. However, while I was scanning the luxurious bedroom, the bug sniffer started clicking like crazy when I passed the antenna beneath the nightstand, the green lights on the front flashing all the way up to full strength.

With a muttered curse, I grabbed a glove from my pocket where I kept a few emergency supplies, including evidence bags, pulled it on, and felt under the small table until I found a small protrusion wedged behind a leg and pried it out. It was a listening device about the size of a hearing aid, sophisticated and probably expensive. The smaller the electronics, the more it cost.

I slid the tiny black device into an evidence bag, tucked it in a pocket, and scanned the rest of the room. At least it was the only one, but the fact that there was a bug present at all had me convinced.

For whatever reason, Gordon Traynor had been here working, and Tessa Bleu had been his assignment.

Once I'd finished the scan, I went through the whole place again for a second visual inspection. Didn't find anything else. I was still uneasy as I headed for the door and slipped my shoes on. I'd prefer not to tell Tessa that her room had been bugged, but she had to know, and so did the officers guarding her. Vigilance was more important than ever now.

Tessa must've seen something in my face as I stepped out of the suite because her eyes went wide and she gasped. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"Not anymore," I said with as much reassurance as I could. "There was a bug in your bedroom. A listening device," I clarified, in case she thought it was a cockroach or something. "It was the only one, and I removed it."

"Oh my God," she whispered. "He really was following me."

Officers Gilliam and Burks looked at me. "Sorry, sir," Gilliam said. "We, ah, inspected the suite thoroughly, but we failed to, ah..."

"What, you don't have one of these?" I smirked and produced the bug sniffing device. "Don't worry about it. I know Metro's kit doesn't come standard with RF detectors, and I wouldn't have found it either, without this. It's too small to spot with a visual inspection."

Both officers relaxed slightly. "Thank you, sir," Burks said.

"No problem." I looked at Tessa, smiled and motioned her forward. "It's safe to come in."

She only hesitated for a moment before she walked toward me, murmuring thanks to the officers as she passed them and stepped through the door I held open.

Once she was inside the suite, she looked back at me. "You and Robbie don't have to sit outside all night, you know. There's plenty of room in here. Two big couches and a bed."

I almost laughed. Apparently, my partner had gotten himself on a first-name basis with her too, after he ragged me about it.

"Tempting, but we can't," I told her. "The idea is to catch the bad guys before they get this far. That's why we'll be outside."

"Okay." She blew out a breath, looked around the room for a minute, and then stepped in front of me. "Thank you for doing all this for me, Ethan. I wish I could be more helpful, but I have no idea what's going on."

I tamped down my initial instinct to say I was just doing my job. Didn't want to sound dismissive. Instead, I went with, "You're welcome."

Suddenly she was hugging me.

I blinked twice in surprise and then hugged her back carefully, mindful of the stares from the officers a few feet away.

"Try to get some sleep," I said as I gently disengaged from her. "Whether or not anything happens tonight, I'll check in with you in the morning, okay?"

She stared at me solemnly. "Goodnight, Ethan. Be careful."

"I will. Goodnight."

I backed out of the suite and closed the door, and then handed one of my cards to Gilliam.

“My partner and I will be right outside,” I said. “Call me if anything changes?”

The officer nodded. “Will do.”

It didn't take long to make my way out of the hotel and across the street to where Holm waited in the passenger seat of the unmarked sedan. I slid into the driver's side, and he thrust a tall paper cup with a plastic lid at me. “Terrible coffee?”

“Thanks.” I accepted the cup and took a sip. It was, indeed, terrible. “She called you Robbie.”

He smiled at the windshield. “Did she?”

I dropped the matter without further comment. “Found a bug in her room.”

“Damn. This thing's turning into a hell of a mess.”

“Yeah.” I shifted and settled back in the seat. “Gonna be a long night, too.”

“My favorite kind,” he quipped.

For a while, we sat without speaking, and both of us scanned the surroundings for anything suspicious or unusual. Eventually, Holm finished his burnt and greasy coffee, crumpled the cup, and tossed it into the back seat. “Should've grabbed some terrible hot dogs to go with that.”

I snorted. “The coffee's doing enough damage.”

“Yeah, well, I'm hungry.” He patted his pockets for a few minutes, then gave up and flumped back against the seat. “Ethan, what are we gonna do about Cobra Jon?”

“I don't know,” I answered honestly.

“Do you know how many LEOs he's killed?” LEOs meant law enforcement officers.

“No,” I admitted.

“Eight. And that's just him, personally. The Black Mambas have killed at least three more.” Holm clenched his jaw. “I'm not saying we shouldn't, but I can see why the other agencies never go after him. He's dangerous because he doesn't give a shit about anything.”

That wasn't exactly true.

“There are some things he cares about,” I said as a rough theory started to form in my mind. “One of them is money. He probably has a few people that matter to him, but unless one of them is Benta, we've got nothing to use there. So we go with money.”

“Are you suggesting we rob the man?” Holm asked incredulously.

“No. I'm suggesting someone already did, in a manner of speaking.” The more I thought about it, the more plausible it seemed. “That someone would be Chad Sweeting.”

Holm frowned. “Our beach victim?”

“Think about it,” I said. “Most likely scenario here is that Benta pulled the trigger on Cobra Jon's orders. He wouldn't tolerate an unsanctioned hit on one of his guys, and Benta wouldn't cross him. So, why would he order his own man killed?”

“Because Sweeting screwed up royally,” Holm said as he considered that. “None of them would actually rob the boss, so he must’ve cost Cobra Jon money, somehow.”

I nodded along as he talked. “Maybe Sweeting mucked up a deal or a contract. Or he... lost something. A delivery, a shipment.”

“Yeah. That’s a damned good theory,” Holm said with rising excitement. “So, the kid loses something big, something he can’t make up for. Weapons or drugs, probably. He flees the country, hides out in a cave. And then Benta—”

“Is here.” I cut him off sharply as I made out a figure with unruly dreadlocks slipping behind the palm trees that lined the sidewalk on our side of the street, headed toward us. “Nine o’clock.”

Holm’s gaze tracked the line. When he spotted the night-dark, creeping silhouette, his hand moved to his holster and flipped the snap. “Go now?”

“Wait. Let him get a little closer.”

We both drew our weapons with steady, careful movements and waited with hands on the door handles. The target slithered closer. When Benta started to ease out from behind a palm tree, his stare riveted to the hotel across the street, I gave a barely perceptible nod.

Holm and I burst from the car at the same time, weapons raised. “Federal agents!” I called out. “Stay right there, Benta.”

He didn’t stay. He whirled and ran.

Chapter 15

“Damn it, they always run,” Holm gritted through his teeth as we took off after the suspect.

Benta didn’t have much of a head start, but he was milking it for everything he could. Ten yards down the sidewalk, he cut a long diagonal across the empty street and half-turned with something in his hand. A gun, probably the S&W nine-mil he’d killed Sweeting with.

He fired twice. Missed both of us, but in response to the gunfire, red and blue lights flashed to life on the squad car that had been tucked unobtrusively along the side of the Palm Bay. The siren blipped and the engine roared to life.

Benta did a double-take and spun on a heel before stumbling a few steps. I took a shot at him, and he snarled and clutched his arm briefly before he sprinted ahead.

“Grazed him!” Holm announced as he ran along beside me. “We splitting off yet?”

“Soon.” I kept one eye on the sprinting figure, the other on the squad car that roared into the street and turned in the direction Benta had gone with a screech of tires. “Do not let Metro kill him. We need him alive.”

“Got it.”

“Good. We split right there,” I said with a quick nod at the upcoming cross street. “You stay straight, I’ll cut left.”

“How many blocks you want?”

“Three.”

Holm acknowledged with a flashed thumbs-up. “Here comes your exit.”

“See you on the corner,” I said as I swung left down the side road and put on a burst of speed.

We’d used this tactic plenty of times with running suspects. One of us swerves off-route to a hastily planned destination point, the other uses carefully placed gunfire to drive the runner straight toward it.

Only this time, we had the added distraction of local cops in a squad car who weren’t in on the plan. I could hear the siren wailing and the engine rumbling as I hit the next back street parallel to the main road and pounded pavement up it.

Then a gunshot split the air. Too early to be Holm moving Benta down the third block. If that son of a bitch shot my partner—

My phone buzzed. Somehow I managed to fumble it out and press it to my ear, but I didn’t even get the chance to spit a word into it before Holm’s voice gasped, “Make it one!”

Benta had already cut left. He’d emerge from the side street ahead of me any second.

I ran harder, pushing off with every leaping step, head down and elbows tucked to minimize drag. Sure enough, the target popped out at the corner of the next street up, about fifteen yards from my position.

Then he made a mistake. He turned toward me, probably intending to double back and shake the squad car before he worried about the guys on foot.

He’d hit full stride before he noticed me.

Benta skidded to a stop and tried to scramble around, but he was too late, and he knew it. He raised his gun just as I squeezed a shot off and nicked his shin. Snarling a curse, he dove sideways and fired.

I zigged around the shot, pivoted on a heel, and launched myself at him while he was trying to regain his feet.

The impact knocked him to the ground. His arm shot up and whacked the butt of the gun against my shoulder. Son of a bitch, that was gonna leave a mark. At least he had the sense not to try repositioning the weapon to fire. That would’ve cost him seconds he didn’t have.

He had even less time than he figured because I was faster. I pressed a forearm against his throat, wrenched the gun from his fingers, and tossed it aside.

Benta hissed and bucked hard, throwing me halfway off. He nearly managed to scramble out from under me when I grabbed a handful of dreadlocks and jerked his head back before shoving the muzzle of my gun under his chin.

“Stop moving,” I growled as I planted a knee on his chest.

He stilled and glared at me, his hands opening in reluctant surrender as he moved his arms up slowly.

“Ethan!” Holm’s voice called from somewhere to my left, under the cry of the siren that was growing increasingly louder. I caught flashing lights in my peripherals as the squad car approached from the right and slowed.

“I’ve got him. Grab his weapon.” I gestured with my head in the direction I’d thrown the gun, my eyes not leaving Benta’s. His were filled with rage.

“You’re under arrest,” I told him as I grabbed my cuffs with my free hand. “Want to guess why?”

He said nothing.

It didn't take long to get him cuffed and hauled to his feet, and I maintained a grip on the cuffs in case he decided to try bolting. By that time Holm had collected and bagged Benta's gun, the officers were climbing out of the car, hands on their weapons. They were young and fresh-faced, about the same age, height, and build. With the hats covering their hair, the only real visible difference was that one's face was rounder than the other's.

"Thanks for the assist," I told them as they approached warily. "We can take it from here."

The officer who'd been driving the car, the one with the slightly pointier face, frowned a little. "Who's this guy?"

"Our suspect," I said.

Benta lunged at him with a low growl, and he danced back, startled. The handcuffed man gave a mocking laugh that prompted the round-faced cop to scowl and draw his gun.

"Put it away, kid," Holm drawled as he came up next to me. "The suspect is what we call neutralized. You shoot him now, and you're gonna find yourself on the other side of these cuffs."

"He thinks this is funny," the round-faced cop said hotly.

"Yeah. They all think it's funny until those prison doors slam shut." I jerked on the cuffs a little. "Isn't that right, Sniper?"

"But—"

"Holster your weapon, rookie," I said firmly.

The round-faced cop put his gun back reluctantly and looked at his partner.

"Are we supposed to take him in?" he asked.

"No, you're not," I said before the pointy-faced one could answer. "You're supposed to get in your car, drive back to the hotel, and help protect the witness."

The driver huffed. "But you've got the guy."

"Too bad. You're on protection detail," Holm said, clearly irritated. "Get back there and protect."

They looked at me, and I shrugged. "You heard the man."

Amid a flurry of grumbling, the officers plodded back toward the squad car. They were just about to open the doors when Benta spoke for the first time since I'd spotted him on the main street.

"Bye-bye, baby cops," he said in a soft and chilling tone.

The officers popped the doors open and practically flung themselves into the car, executing a clumsy three-point turn before they drove off in the opposite direction.

I watched them leave and sighed in Holm's general direction. "Maybe I should've told Detective Peterson exactly who I figured was going to show up when I mentioned the stakeout to him."

"You didn't tell him?"

"Nah. They would've had to take him in, and I want him all to myself."

Holm grinned. "I'll go get the car."

As my partner walked away, I frog-marched Benta out of the street toward the sidewalk, turned him around, and forced him into a seated position on the curb. I kept one hand on his shoulder while I held my gun with the other.

“So, do you want to talk now, or in an interrogation room?”

He failed to reply.

“Interrogation room it is, then.”

His head moved slightly as if he meant to look up at me, but then he changed his mind and kept his gaze straight ahead.

After a moment of silence, I decided to try again. “I’d love to know what you’re thinking right now, Benta.”

“I’m thinking you’re a dead man,” he said without looking at me, in that same chilling tone. “Special Agent Marston.”

Okay. I had to admit, hearing my name come out of his mouth was unsettling. There was no way he should’ve known that. Still, I couldn’t let him know that he’d gotten to me.

“That’s funny because I was thinking the same thing about you,” I said. “Your boss isn’t going to be happy when he finds out you got pinched before you could finish the job.”

Benta laughed. It was just as chilling as his speech.

“Suit yourself,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders. “By the way, you can forget those dreams of lawyers dancing in your head, right along with the extradition to the Bahamas you think you’re getting. I’m charging you with a crime committed on American soil, and my agency has international jurisdiction.”

He stiffened briefly beneath my grip. At least I’d gotten to him, too.

Holm pulled up with the car, and I tugged and shoved the resistant Benta into the back seat. Then I slammed the door shut before I got into the passenger side. “Let’s go.”

Holm drove forward, hung a right at the next intersection, and emerged on the main street to point the car in the direction of the agency building.

“You all right?” he said eventually.

“Yeah. You?”

“Fine,” he said. “For a sniper, this asshole’s a lousy shot.”

If Agay Benta had an opinion about Holm’s observation, he kept it to himself.

I yawned and stretched briefly. “Hell of a Saturday, wasn’t it?”

“Tell me about it,” Holm grumbled. “What time is it, anyway?”

I smirked. “A little after two, according to Mister Dashboard Clock. Which is practically in front of your face if you could be bothered to look.”

“Hey, I’m concentrating on driving.” He blew out a breath and glanced in the rearview mirror. “Did the statue back there tell you anything?”

“*Nada*,” I said, though he had told me something inadvertently. He knew my name, which meant I had to figure out how and probably why. “He did accept my offer to take a tour of the interrogation room, though.”

“Great. I love guided tours.” He smiled, but the expression was weak, and he looked just as exhausted as I felt. “So, what’s the tour schedule look like?”

“I’m thinking he can cool his heels in a holding cell tonight and think about how much fun we’ll have in the morning.”

A genuine grin flashed on Holm’s face. “Hallelujah,” he said, and then his features fell. “Wait. Does that mean we’re going back to the hotel?”

“Nope. You’re going home.”

“Thank God,” he breathed. “And where are you going?”

“Home. Probably.”

A low, liquid chuckle drifted up from the back seat.

Holm glanced at me with alarm. “Uh, maybe you shouldn’t go home.”

“Bullshit. I’ll go wherever the hell I want to,” I said, refusing to play Benta’s game. He might be good at terrorizing civilian women and underling gang members, but he wasn’t getting under my skin. I’d crack the son of a bitch in the morning and get on with taking down the rest of the Black Mambas, including Cobra Jon.

These assholes had picked the wrong beach to murder people on.

Chapter 16

Tessa woke at seven in the morning on Sunday, surprised she’d been able to get to sleep at all. After everything that had happened yesterday, a day that felt like it had gone on for a week, she’d been sure she would toss and turn all night, jump at every little sound, and generally worry herself into a total wreck.

She hadn’t, though, and she suspected that Special Agent Ethan Marston had something to do with that.

Not directly, of course. He hadn’t been in the room with her, standing over her bed like a rugged, gorgeous angel, even though she wouldn’t have minded if he had. There was just something in the way he did things that made her feel personally protected. Safe and sound.

Unfortunately, that feeling didn’t negate what was happening to her. A private security agent had been following her around Miami for who knew how long until she noticed him. Then someone had killed him and tried to kill her. She was damned lucky to be alive.

For a moment, she considered calling Donald in New York and telling him what happened, but he’d worry too much. He might even pull her off the assignment, and that was the last thing she wanted. Besides, it was Sunday morning, and he was probably still in bed.

Speaking of her job, she was starting to wonder whether she’d ever be allowed to get back to it, with everything that had happened and was still happening. If she had to, she could probably find another place to shoot, but that tidal pool had seemed so perfect. The cave couldn’t be a crime scene forever, could it?

Maybe she’d ask Ethan about it when he got here. He’d said he would stop by this morning.

She was probably a little more excited about that than she should’ve been.

Tempting as it was to take a long soak in the whirlpool tub, she decided on a shower instead. She had no idea when Ethan might stop in to check on her, and honestly, she might as well try to get some work done. There was plenty more background research she wanted to put into her piece.

Not that it’d be easy to focus on intertidal plants and salinity variations when she’d nearly been shot last night. But she was going to try.

Once she was showered, Tessa slipped into the luxury plush-lined bathrobe the hotel had provided and brought her laptop out to the suite’s living room. Already,

the bright Florida sun strained at the edges of the thick vertical blinds pulled across the sliding glass doors that led to the balcony, giving the room plenty of light even through the thin spaces between them. She left them closed, not quite ready for that kind of intensity yet.

As she settled onto one of the couches, she glanced at the closed door across the room and shivered. There were police officers on the other side of that door, making sure she didn't get killed. The thought was chilling.

She opened the laptop, powered it on, and pulled up Google, fully intending to dig into HighWire for background sourcing.

Instead, she found herself searching for Special Agent Ethan Marston.

The general details of his career were readily available. Almost immediately, she found an article from a military publication about him joining MBLIS as an agent four years ago. Prior to that, he'd done three tours in the Navy, two of them as a Navy SEAL, and he'd been awarded two Bronze Stars, a Silver Star, and a Navy Distinguished Service Medal.

She looked up the awards. Both of the stars were combat medals, the Bronze for heroic or meritorious service or achievement, and the Silver for gallantry in action. The Distinguished Service Medal was apparently more important and was awarded for exceptionally meritorious service to the United States.

Fascinating. She couldn't imagine the kinds of things he must have been through to receive those awards, but she figured it was probably intense.

The article didn't say much about his personal life, so she went back to the search results to see if she could find anything more. There were several pieces from local news media that mentioned him as an agent in stories about his cases, arrests, and convictions. Not much about his Navy service beyond the general background information, but then, most of that stuff wouldn't be easily accessible to the public.

That didn't mean she couldn't find out, though. After all, she was a journalist.

A few pages into the search results, she found a headline about the death of a Commander Franklin Marston. She clicked through and read the article with a tug of sadness. Franklin was Ethan's father. A highly decorated Marine officer, he'd been killed in action overseas at the start of the Gulf War. According to the article, Ethan had been twelve years old at the time, and his mother had died of a heart condition five years before that.

She couldn't help wondering what happened to twelve-year-old Ethan, who was apparently an only child after he'd lost both of his parents.

Suddenly unwilling to snoop around in Agent Marston's life any further, Tessa closed the browser, set the laptop on the end table next to the couch, and indulged in a long stretch. It was still early, especially for a Sunday morning, and the free continental breakfast offered by the hotel probably had plenty of options still available, but she thought she'd just order breakfast from room service instead. The food was probably better, and she didn't have to pay for it anyway.

Besides, if she left the room, the officers would most likely have to follow her. She wasn't keen on the idea of wandering the hotel with a pair of uniformed cops in tow. She'd look like a convict... or a target.

Just as she stood to head for the room phone and call the front desk, there was a knock at the door, and she jumped a little. It was probably one of the officers.

Maybe they'd heard her moving around and showering, and they wanted to check in now that she was presumably awake.

She crossed the room and looked through the peephole. The familiar face she saw waiting on the other side made her own break out in an unbidden smile.

"Ethan," she said as she opened the door, "I didn't expect you this early on a Sunday."

He smiled with faint surprise. "Wasn't sure if you'd be up and around yet, either, but I'm glad you are. Mind if I come in a minute?"

"Not at all."

"Would you like some breakfast?" She stood aside, and then closed the door after him when he walked inside. She suddenly felt nervous and flustered with the memory of what she'd been doing a minute ago, prying into this man's life like a stalker. She barely glanced at him as she headed for the main room. "I was just about to call room service. I could order you whatever you'd like."

He didn't respond. She stopped, turned around, and found him watching her with a bemused tilt of his head.

"Guess you haven't been up long since you're not exactly dressed yet," he said.

"Oh! I, um..." she stammered, at once acutely aware of the nothing she was wearing beneath the hotel robe. "Breakfast?" she blurted out.

His laugh was gentle and warm, without a trace of mockery. "Actually, I'm not real big on breakfast. I appreciate the offer, though, and I did bring coffee. Hope you don't mind cream and sugar."

She finally realized he was carrying a foam coffee cup in each hand, and heat crept up the back of her neck and spread to her face. How had she not noticed that?

"It's perfect. Thank you," she said as she accepted the cup he held out to her. "You can probably tell I haven't had any of this yet today."

"Clearly." A small smile played on his lips. "Why don't we sit down?"

She nodded in relief. "Good idea."

Tessa took a seat on the couch where she'd been using the laptop, and she was surprised at the disappointment she felt when Ethan sat on the other couch, opposite her. It was nothing personal, probably just easier to talk when they were facing each other, but she liked being near him.

Her blush returned as she considered exactly how much closer she wanted to be, and she pushed the idea away. That was not appropriate.

Ethan watched her for a moment, almost as if he could read her thoughts. She tried not to squirm. Finally, he flipped the plastic tab on his coffee cup open and took a sip.

"Did you manage to get any sleep last night?" he asked.

His concern touched her, and she smiled. "Actually, yes. I knew I was safe. What about you?"

"Oh, I slept like a baby after we got our suspect in custody," he said.

She gasped. "You caught him?"

"Yeah." He didn't elaborate, but concern filled his features. "Unfortunately, it's doubtful that he was acting alone. That means you'll have to keep the police detail until we can put this whole thing to bed."

“So I’m still in danger,” she said as she tried to keep the disappointment from her face. “I guess I can’t go back to the beach and finish my photo shoot, then?”

“Not yet. Hopefully soon, though.”

It wasn’t that much of a surprise, but she had hoped for a moment that with the immediate danger gone, she could get back to work. She’d probably have to call Donald tonight and explain at least some of what happened. It looked like her stay in Florida was going to be extended.

“All right,” she said. “You’ll tell me when it’s safe to go back?”

“Of course,” Ethan said with a smile. “You know, you’re a lot more cooperative than my witnesses usually are.”

“Really?”

He laughed under his breath. “Yeah. A lot of them think I’m exaggerating the danger, or they decide they can take care of themselves. Until they find out that bravado doesn’t deflect bullets.”

“Ugh.” She shivered a bit. “Well, at least I know I’m not bulletproof. My parents didn’t raise any fools.”

“Good to know.” He smiled and sipped his coffee, thankfully missing her subtle wince as she thought about what she’d just said... and why reacting would be a bad idea, since she really shouldn’t know that he’d been orphaned at twelve. “Anyway, I just stopped by to give you the good-news, bad-news report,” he said as he stood. “I have to get to the office. Got a suspect to interrogate.”

Tessa got up with him and realized she hadn’t even touched her coffee yet. She popped the lid open and took a sip so she wouldn’t appear ungrateful, finding the coffee still warm and not half-bad. “Well, thank you. I appreciate it,” she said. “Ethan, would you—”

She cut herself off before she said what would basically amount to asking him on a date.

“Would I what?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “I was going to ask if you wanted to have dinner with me tonight, but that would be...”

“I’d love to,” he said into the space of her awkward silence.

She blinked. “You would?”

“Don’t look so surprised.” There was amusement in Ethan’s gaze, and something more. Something that made Tessa’s insides flutter with breathless anticipation. “It may seem like it, but I’m not my job all the time. Besides, I can still protect you when I’m off duty.”

She bit her lip and glanced away briefly. Now she couldn’t tell if he’d agreed because he liked her or because he felt obliged to keep her safe. “Thank you,” she said uncertainly. “How... uh, how should we work this?”

For an instant, she thought he looked frustrated, but his expression cleared quickly. “I’m not sure exactly how much time I’ll have to put in at the office, but unless something drastic comes up, I can pick you up around six,” he said. “You’ll be here?”

“Yes. I’m going to stay in today,” she said. “Until you get here.”

“Good.” He seemed pleased that she didn’t have plans to wander around town placing herself in harm’s way. “You have my number. Call me if you need anything, and I’ll see you tonight.”

She managed to smile and stay pleasant as she walked him to the door, as she received brief introductions to the officers that had come on shift earlier that morning to replace the ones who'd guarded her through the night, as Ethan dismissed himself and turned to head for the elevators. After she closed the door on the rest of the world and went back to the couch, she sank down and released a long, unsteady breath.

Even though they'd caught the shooter, it wasn't over yet.
There was still someone out there trying to kill her.

Chapter 17

My little misstep with Tessa was still niggling at me when I got to the office. That line about protecting her while I was off duty, I hadn't meant to say it out loud since I'd finally admitted to myself that my interest in her wasn't purely business.

She'd definitely picked up on it, though. I'd seen the uncertainty in her expression when I mentioned protection and duty, and I knew what she was thinking. She figured my accepting her invitation to dinner was part of the job and probably thought I was being polite.

I'd just have to prove that idea wrong tonight.

Holm's desk was empty when I walked into the squad room, but Griezmann and Birn were in their usual places, which was actually unusual.

"What are you two doing here on a Sunday?" I asked.

They both looked up, and Griezmann flashed a grin. "Cleaning up after you," she said.

Meisha Griezmann was a flawless, curvy redhead who looked more like she was playing a federal agent on TV than an actual, working law enforcement officer. That was one of her biggest advantages in the field because looks were deceiving and she could kick just about anyone's ass without breaking a sweat.

"Yeah, what she said." In contrast to his seemingly delicate-flower partner, Lamarr Birn looked like the business end of a tank. Hit like one, too. "How much of a paper trail do you have on this asshole, anyway?"

"What, you mean Francke? About a mile, give or take," I said with a laugh. "You know how much the director loves documentation."

Birn grunted and rolled his eyes. "Hence, our presence on Sunday morning," he quipped.

"At least it's all about volume, not organization," Griezmann said. "There's more than enough here to make the conviction stick. Nice work, Marston." She frowned around her computer screen at me. "Speaking of nice work, why'd you and Holm get pulled off the case at the last minute? Not that I want your murder or anything. I'm just curious."

I snorted. "One word. Clearance."

"Say no more," she said with a knowing smile.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened to spit out a flustered-looking Holm with his tie tugged loose and his gear bag jammed under one arm, a cup of coffee clutched in the other.

“Sorry I’m late,” he grumbled as he stalked toward his desk. “You wouldn’t believe the traffic in my neighborhood. I mean, it’s Sunday, for God’s sake.”

Birn let out a low chuckle. “Exactly. See, there’s this thing called ‘church’, you know? Some folks go there occasionally on Sunday mornings.”

“You go to church, Birn?”

“Every week,” he said. “When I’m not doing your paperwork, you godless heathen.”

Holm struggled against a laugh. “How do you sit on those skinny wooden bench things without breaking them?”

“Strength comes from the Lord,” Birn said with a straight face, and then cracked a smirk, “and also from the sections of reinforced pews at the back.”

Holm’s laugh broke free. “I’d pay good money to see you singing church songs.”

“Hey, admission is free. Come down anytime.”

“Are you trying to convert me, Agent Birn?”

“Okay,” I said, fighting a smile myself. “Much as I’m sure we’d all love to hear Lamarr’s rendition of ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus,’ we’ve got work to do. Ours is downstairs, Holm.”

“Aww. No singalong?” Greizmann pouted playfully. “I’ve got a great falsetto, you know.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, I bet you do. Raincheck?”

“Any time you want it.”

Holm stowed his stuff and pulled himself together before we headed for the elevator. I placed a call to holding on the way down and made arrangements to have Benta brought to an interrogation room. Once we reached the basement, I led the way to the lab.

“I want him to stew in there for a bit,” I explained at Holm’s questioning look. “Plus, I’m hoping Bonnie and Clyde have our evidence ready to nail him with.”

“Right. Good plan,” he said.

Not as good as I wanted, but it was the best plan I had at the moment.

In the lab, the dynamic duo was already up and about. Of course, it was possible they hadn’t even gone to bed last night. Clyde made a beeline toward us, scooping a thin manila folder from the surface of the main table on his way.

“Got those pictures you wanted,” he said with a smile. “Had to do a little digital reconstruction, but I’d say there’s about a ninety-five percent chance of positive identification. That camera with the original photos was seriously high-grade.”

“Thanks,” I said as I opened the folder. Ninety-five percent was a good number, but even if the positive ID stuck, it only placed Benta at the scene definitely after the murder.

They were incredibly clear shots, though. Inside the folder were blown-up images of a face and part of an upper body above a rock border. The face definitely belonged to Agay Benta, and it was angry. Murderous, if one were inclined to give that expression a more precise description.

Still, it wasn’t enough. The Black Mambas had slipped from the grasp of law enforcement with more evidence than this.

“What about the gun?” I said, referring to the weapon we’d collected after the chase last night. “Tell me it’s the murder weapon.”

“We can prove that, more or less,” Clyde said with a slight wince. “I mean, there are some anomalies in the tests that we ran, but again, it’s a good percentage. Ninety percent chance of a match, at least, and his prints are on the weapon, so there’s that. However, uh...” He paused and cleared his throat. “There are multiple sets of prints on the gun. At least three, including the suspect’s. So that gets a bit muddled.”

Damn it, how the hell did these guys manage to get wiggle room built into forensic evidence? Even with the high probabilities on both pieces of evidence, a really good lawyer had a chance at winning the case, and Cobra Jon had really good lawyers.

The only sure thing here was a confession. Apparently, I’d have to get one.

“Okay, this is good work. It’ll help when I talk to the guy,” I said in an attempt to bolster Clyde’s crestfallen expression as I handed the folder off to Holm. I knew he’d want a look, too. “Did Bonnie find anything else?”

“She did,” Bonnie announced as she emerged from the back room, looking far too happy for this hour of the morning. “I analyzed those wood splinters found in the victim’s feet. They’re from a StanCraft Twin Arrow.” She bumped Clyde out of the way and pulled up something on the monitor, part of an investigation report. “Looks like that’s Cobra Jon’s favorite model. He has ten of them registered to his... er, fishing charter company, Bahamas Bass.”

“Yeah, right,” I snorted. Everyone knew that charter company was a front for smuggling, but somehow, magically, his boats never got boarded or searched by any port authority. “Okay, so we’ve got a potential way to tie the victim directly to Cobra Jon. Any way to make a positive ID on the boat?”

“Sure.” Bonnie shook her head and gave a slanted smile. “Find the rest of it.”

I started to crack a joke, but then I caught a glimmer, the beginnings of an idea. If there really was a shipwreck out there somewhere, we might be able to use it for more than just proving that Sweeting had been associated with Cobra Jon. In order to pull it off, though, we’d need a little more information than what we had to work with at the moment.

“Hey, I know that look,” Holm said suddenly. “What’s on your mind, partner?”

I blinked and tucked the idea to the back of my thoughts for now. “Nothing just yet. I have to take a crack at Benta, and then I might know more. Guess I’ll just go in with what we’ve got. It should be enough.”

“Oh, wait! I’ve got something else for you too,” Bonnie said excitedly as she tapped at the keyboard. The image of the report vanished, to be replaced by a computer-generated 3D image of a large, simple wooden boat with four oar locks, two on each side, and a familiar icon burned into the hull.

“This is your pinnace,” she said. “I got the results from the carbon dating, and this baby dates back to 1687. That sounds like the right year to me.”

A grin tugged at my mouth. “Bingo,” I said softly.

The DRAGON’S ROGUE had been commissioned and built in 1687 for an English nobleman, Lord Jonathan Finch-Hatton, who’d set off for the Caribbean only to lose his grand ship to pirates on its maiden voyage. The fate of the Englishman was unknown, but under the command of Captain Guilford ‘Mad Dog’ Grendel, the ship had terrorized the seas for five years before vanishing during a typhoon in 1692.

“I’m running DNA tests on the remains, too,” Bonnie said. “I mean, there won’t be anything for him specifically, but we may be able to find a modern relative and trace him back through genealogy.”

“You know it’s a him?” Holm asked.

Bonnie’s head bobbed a few times. “Absolutely. Male Caucasian, approximately 45 years of age. Cause of death was dehydration, though he’d also been shot and had a broken leg when he died.”

“Wow. And you got all that from a skeleton, huh?”

“I’m going to get a lot more,” she said and then turned to me. “You should go back to that cave, see if you can find anything else in there.”

“Yeah, I think I will. Pretty soon, probably,” I said. Maybe I’d go back there with Tessa while she finished her photo shoot. I knew she was chomping at the bit to return to the scene, and I wouldn’t mind spending more time with her. Especially on a warm, deserted beach.

Of course, that would depend on how our sort-of date went tonight.

“I can’t wait to see what else you find in there,” Bonnie said as she practically bounced on her feet. “Real pirates, wow. This is so exciting. Are you excited?”

I gave a wry smirk. “I’ll be more excited when I can close my live case, so I can focus more on this one. Thanks for the great work. Now, I have to go poke the bear and see if I can get him to bite.”

I’d let Agay Benta cool his heels long enough. It was time for him to answer my questions, whether he wanted to or not.

Chapter 18

Holm and I stood in the observation room for a few minutes and watched Agay Benta on the other side of the one-way glass. He sat on the opposite side of the table in the room, facing what was a mirror on his side, arms folded with a mild scowl on his face. Occasionally he rearranged his hair, leaned back or forward slightly, or took a break from folding his arms to drum his fingers on the table.

Altogether his attitude was one of annoyed impatience like he was waiting on a delayed flight rather than an interrogation that could put him in prison for the rest of his life. The reason for that was clear enough. He didn’t think he was going to prison.

I looked forward to changing his mind.

“Shouldn’t he be cuffed?” Holm asked eventually.

“Nah, all the better if he takes a swing at me,” I said with a shrug. “Then we’ve got him for assaulting an officer on top of everything else.”

“Yeah, well,” Holm sighed, “I’m not so sure he’s stewing in there. More like basting or possibly marinating. He still thinks he can rinse all this off.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he does, but he’s wrong.” I flipped through the folder in my hand to make sure I had all the stage dressing I needed. “Make sure that camera stays rolling, okay? We need everything airtight on this one.”

“You know I will. Just... be careful in there. He turns deadly real fast.”

“That’s my middle name.”

He grunted. "Since when is careful your middle name?"

"Not careful. Deadly," I said with a smirk. "We're going to get him."

"I hope you're right," he called after me.

I was already moving toward the interrogation room door. When I let myself in, Benta didn't even glance in my direction.

"You might as well bring me back to the cell because I'll be out by tomorrow morning," he said. "I'm not talking."

"Funny. Those sounded like words coming out of your mouth to me." I moved casually to the chair across from him, sat down calmly, and placed the folder on the table in front of me. "I'll give you a few minutes if you need to clear your throat or something."

I stared at him and waited. Then I waited some more, while his expression moved from sneering through irritation to disbelief, and beyond that, to anger.

"What?" he finally snapped. "What do you want?"

"For you to talk." Still calm and unhurried, I opened the front of the folder, took out the photo that was on top, and put it on the table, turning it around so that it was facing Benta. It was a mugshot of the victim, taken when he was arrested in the Bahamas for public assault. "You know this guy?"

Benta made a show of leaning forward and pretending the study the picture for a moment, then leaned back with an insolent smile. "Nope."

"Hmm." I tapped my chin with a finger. "Maybe you only recognize him from the back, since that's where you shot him." I dropped the next photo from the folder on top of the first. It was a close-up picture from the crime scene of the bullet hole in Sweeting's skull. "Oh, wait, you might need a wider shot to really identify him," I said as I placed another photo next to it, this one a full-body picture from the crime scene.

"Don't know him." This time Benta didn't even try to look at the pictures.

I sat a little straighter. "It might help," I said dryly, "if you moved your eyeballs in the direction of the photos before you lie about recognizing them."

He widened his eyes and rolled them down slowly so he could take an exaggerated look at the pictures. "Sorry. Never seen him."

Though I already suspected this was the direction the interrogation would take, it still irritated me. I hated uncooperative suspects, especially when both of us in the room knew damned well what they'd done. Still, it wasn't quite time to get persuasive yet.

"You know, some people really hate having their picture taken," I said conversationally as I poked at the remaining papers in the folder, spreading them around a bit. "Are you one of those people, Benta? I have to be honest, you don't look all that photogenic."

An unhealthy smile lifted his lips. "Take all the pictures you want, *jefe*."

"Oh, I'm not your boss, but I do want a word with him. That'll have to wait, though, because I'm talking to you." I returned the smile. "Besides, I don't need to take a picture of you. I've already got one."

With that, I extracted the blow-up of Benta's face and put it on the table, on top of the other photos. "Pretty good likeness, isn't it?" I asked. "That's you looking over the cliff, right where we found your underling's body. I can show you the full-sized one with the cave in the shot if you're interested."

Benta shifted instantly from mocking sneer to rage. “That bitch with the camera wasn’t even there until long after I—”

He cut himself off as he realized what he’d said, but it was too late.

“Ah,” I said softly. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Tell me about the bitch with the camera.”

A sullen glare was his only response.

“She’s the one you tried to kill at the hotel last night, isn’t she? After you missed her outside Chez Rockport.” I shook my head in mock sympathy. “How did you manage to miss that shot, by the way? I thought your nickname was Sniper.”

The silence from him swelled to a whole lot of aggressive nothing.

“What I really don’t get is why you took out the private security guy first,” I went on. “I mean, your *jefe* is gonna be seriously pissed off when he finds out you missed your target. What’s the deal here, Benta?”

“I want a lawyer,” he said stiffly.

I shot to my feet and slammed a hand on the table. “You don’t get a lawyer!” I shouted. “Not this time, asshole.”

His sneer faltered slightly. “I know my rights.”

“Bullshit you do. First of all, you’re not a U.S. citizen.” I snatched the rest of the folder up and circled the table slowly toward him. “Second, you don’t get a lawyer when you’re under arrest and being charged with murder until *after* you’ve been formally processed... and you haven’t been yet.”

For the first time, Benta looked uncertain. “You didn’t arrest me.”

“The hell I didn’t. Remember last night, when I said *you’re under arrest?*”

“You have no evidence—”

I slapped the folder down in front of him to interrupt his weak protest. “A witness saw you and *photographed* you at the crime scene. We’ve got a ballistics match between the gun we took off you last night and the bullet that killed the victim, your prints are all over the place, and your DNA is under the victim’s fingernails.” That last one was a bit of a stretch since I didn’t have the test results from the organic matter under the vic’s nails yet, but I was going with it anyway. “So that’s at least one murder we’ve got you for, and we’ll have a second to pin on you once Metro processes the evidence from the restaurant shooting. Oh, and then there’s attempted murder against an officer of the law, and we can probably tack on stalking with intent, too.”

I wasn’t actually sure if “stalking with intent” was a real charge, but what the hell? It sounded good.

Benta shivered slightly and stared straight ahead. “I want a lawyer.”

“You keep saying that. It’s not going to get you one any faster,” I said. “You’ll have a lawyer when I’m damned good and ready to give you one.”

He tensed as if he was going to spring at me.

“Oh, so you want to add assaulting an officer to your list of charges?” I said as I pointed at the glowing red light in the corner of the room that marked the camera’s location. “Go ahead. Jump me.”

“I want a lawyer,” he murmured again.

“You can’t have one.”

“I want a lawyer.”

“Two counts of murder. Attempted murder. Stalking,” I said, ticking items off on my fingers. “That’s about a hundred and fifty years in prison if you’re lucky. How about we toss interfering with a federal investigation onto the pile, while we’re at it?”

“I want—”

I grabbed his shirt and hauled him halfway out of the chair. “Go on. Say lawyer,” I snarled in his face. “You are not getting off this hook.”

Benta gave a weak laugh. “You forgot about your own camera.”

“What camera?”

He actually paled a few shades as he sputtered something incomprehensible.

“I think you’re misreading the situation here, Benta.” I lowered him slowly back to the chair and let go of him. “See, you’re used to dealing with police officers. Miami Metro, the RBPF. If they can’t be bribed, you can break their systems and wiggle through the cracks.” A cold smile spread on my face as I moved around the table and took my seat again. “The thing is, I’m a federal agent. Our rules are different.”

The bravado resurfaced briefly. “FBI, CIA, Coast Guard,” he recited with derision. “All of you are still Americans, and you have American rules.”

“Sure, they do,” I told him. “Not us, though. I’m sure a smart guy like you is familiar with the word *jurisdiction*, aren’t you?”

“Yes. That word means you have to bring me to the Bahamas.”

“You see, that’s exactly where you’re misreading things.” My smile stayed in place. “What we have at MBLIS is international jurisdiction. Want to guess what that means?”

His expression froze.

“It means no embassies, no forced cooperation, and we get to ignore that pesky extradition problem that other agencies have.” I almost laughed at the way his face fell. “Now, you’re right that I can’t assault you. On the other hand, I can use reasonable force on an uncooperative suspect as determined by my own judgment.” I leaned toward him and grinned. “You’re being uncooperative, Mr. Benta. Would you like to find out what I consider reasonable?”

He stared at me for a long moment, and finally muttered, “Fine.”

“Fine, what?”

“I know him. Chad Sweeting.” He nodded at the scrambled photos on the table, and the ghost of a smile formed on his mouth. “Arrest me for his murder, if you want to.”

“Maybe you missed the part where I said I already have arrested you.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I want the why.” I shoved the blown-up image of Benta aside and tapped on the crime scene photo of the victim. “You tried to make this look like a gang hit, like the Congo Kings took him out. So, I want to know why you murdered one of your own guys, and then farmed out the scene to spread the blame elsewhere.”

Benta’s lips pressed together hard.

“You guys are badasses, right?” I asked. “Powerful and untouchable. Never serve time for shit. Why not take the credit for this one? If you were pissed at the kid, you could’ve used him as a lesson to the rest of your little minions not to cross you.”

No response from the peanut gallery.

“Were you trying to buy time, force the inevitable investigation to look elsewhere?” I was spitballing now, talking more to myself than Benta. “If that’s the case, why didn’t you hide the body better? Or... did you just think no one would find him there?”

A telltale tightening around Benta’s eyes suggested I was on the right track.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” I mused aloud. “Those shores are deserted for miles. The Navy owns the land, but the terrain is unusable. You figured the body wouldn’t be found for a long time, if ever, but then the photographer came along and spoiled your plans.”

Benta strained in his seat, and a vein throbbed at his temple.

“You’re holding something back,” I said. “Did I miss something, or do you just really need to take a dump?”

He managed to relax and sent me a cool stare. “I’m done talking to you.”

“Fine. How about I talk to your boss, then?”

He didn’t respond, but something dark flickered in his gaze.

“I guess that settles it.” I rose and started gathering the documents from the table, stuffing them back into the folder. “For your sake, I hope Cobra Jon is a more forgiving man than his name suggests because I hear he has a pretty long reach. You might not live long enough to be sentenced.”

Benta failed to react to that. He sat there staring dully into the mirror as I left the room, locked him in, and went back to observation.

“Well, we’re halfway there,” Holm said when I joined him behind the one-way. “He confessed to the murder, more or less. How are we going to find out what they’re up to?”

I turned to stare at the motionless Benta for a minute. “He’ll crack. He just needs a little more alone time, now that he knows the score. He stays in interrogation. Have somebody go in there and put him in chains until we get back.”

Holm’s jaw clenched in dismay. “Back from where, exactly?”

I stared at him. “Nassau. Didn’t you listen to the interview? We’re going to talk to Cobra Jon.”

“I thought you were bluffing,” he groaned.

“Do I bluff?”

“Yeah, you do. At everything but poker.” A reluctant grin formed on Holm’s face. “Okay, sure, let’s go confront the violent cop-killing gang leader that no law enforcement agency has ever been able to pin anything on with our complete lack of evidence against him. Sounds like fun.”

I smirked. “It does, doesn’t it?”

“No,” he intoned, “but we’re going anyway.”

“Damn straight.”

I was actually looking forward to the challenge.

Chapter 19

This time we called ahead to the marine unit and reserved a squad car because the scooters were kind of a pain in the ass. No one minded since it was Sunday and the patrols weren't exactly out on the island in force.

Though we'd never dealt directly with Cobra Jon, I'd done my research. The best place to find him would be his house. He didn't even try to hide where he lived, and he flaunted all the money he had from various illegal endeavors like a dare.

With an address on the east end of the island, the neighborhood that Cobra Jon called home was a far cry from the rundown turf where Tomaz Sands ruled. The Congo Kings were the top of the heap when it came to street gangs, but the Black Mambas inhabited the next level of wannabe gentlemen criminals reminiscent of Prohibition-era gangsters. Here, the houses were high-end and set on larger tracts of land with plenty of greenery and palm trees and looked like the Bahamas that tourists usually envisioned.

Cobra Jon figured he was entitled to the finer things in life, while Sands was old-school. Hence the rivalry between them.

"So, that idea you had earlier," Holm said from the passenger seat as I navigated the streets toward the address. "Ready to share it yet?"

It took a minute for me to figure out which idea he meant. "Still not much there, honestly," I said. "The thing is, I was thinking about shipwrecks."

"Right. Your pirate boat," he said.

"That, and our victim. Those wood splinters from the Twin Arrow." I tapped the steering wheel in thought. "We can be almost positive that Sweeting wrecked a boat somewhere between the Bahamas and that beach, and then somehow got to shore. That means the boat couldn't have gone down too deep."

Holm was already nodding. "So you were thinking not just shipwrecks, but recovery."

"Exactly, and why do people recover shipwrecks?"

He grinned. "For the treasure."

That was my working theory. Sweeting was transporting something valuable on that boat, and whatever it was, Cobra Jon wanted it back. It would explain why Benta left the body where he thought it wouldn't be discovered, and why he attempted to misdirect a potential investigation by framing the Congo Kings. They didn't want a police presence in the area to screw up their recovery operation.

If we could catch Cobra Jon in the act of reclaiming whatever had been on that boat, he'd never be able to slip out of it. We could put him away for good.

"That's the place," Holm commented, pointing through the windshield.

Just ahead on the right was a large ocean-blue house bordering on mansion set far back on meticulously landscaped grounds that were surrounded by an eight-foot, wrought iron fence. Men in suits prowled the place, with one standing just inside the gate, one walking the fence perimeter, two circulating the grounds, and one at the front entrance of the house. No doubt they were all armed and able to instantly communicate with the boss.

"You know what? I don't think they're going to let us in," my partner said.

I frowned as I slowed the car and pulled to the curb on the opposite side of the street. "I think you're probably right, but it's worth a shot."

"Is it really?" he asked sarcastically.

"Guess we'll find out."

We got out and crossed the street, prepping our badges to show the gate guard who watched our approach with an unfriendly expression. I kept scanning the area, alert for possible surprise movements, and picked up on faint sounds carried from the back of the house on a warm breeze. Water splashing, soft music playing, voices laughing and chattering. So there was definitely somebody home in there.

“Hey there,” I called to the man as we neared. “Special Agent Marston, Special Agent Holm, MBLIS. We’re looking for Jon Calabar. He in there?”

The guard said nothing.

Holm and I stopped at the gate and exchanged a look, and I passed a hand in front of the guard’s face.

“Jon Calabar,” I said. “Cobra Jon? Need to speak with your boss, buddy.”

The man took in a slow, deliberate breath. “Got an appointment?”

“No,” I said.

“A warrant?”

“Strike two.”

“Piss off, then.”

“You believe this?” Holm chuckled and shook his head, looking from me to the guard. “We just want to have a chat with the man. I thought you Black Mamba boys weren’t afraid of us little ol’ law enforcement types.”

I picked up his play and ran with it. “That’s what I heard, too. I mean, C.J. doesn’t have anything to hide, right?”

The guard’s expression moved a fraction, and I caught sight of the man who’d been walking the fence approaching at a deliberate stride. One of the lawn guys seemed to be headed in our direction, too.

This was going to get ugly soon.

“Fine, how about this?” I said as I reached into my jacket and saw the guard tense, going for the gun holstered at his side. I held my free hand up. “Take it easy, Rocky. Just getting my contact info.”

The guard grunted.

I pinched a business card from my pocket and handed it through the bars. “I’d appreciate it if you could have Mr. Calabar contact me at his earliest convenience.” Holm watched me with a raised eyebrow but didn’t ask questions. “I think he’s going to want to hear what I have to say.”

With a fraction of a smile, the guard plucked the card from my hand, and then deliberately crumpled it into a ball and dropped it on the ground. “I’ll pass the message along.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Holm followed my lead as I walked away and headed for the car. He waited until we were inside to comment. “That went well,” he intoned. “Huge waste of three perfectly good weekend hours, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, I didn’t ask. We’re not done yet.” I started the engine, put the car into gear, and pulled onto the street, accelerating slowly past the house.

“Where are we going now?” he asked.

I glanced in the mirror at the house and smirked. “Pool party.”

He huffed a sigh. “I’m guessing it’s not one we were actually invited to.”

“Nah. We’re crashing it.”

I drove three blocks, hung a right, and then took the next right turn to double back toward the house and come up behind it. I figured, correctly as it turned out, that Cobra Jon didn't have any neighbors directly behind his place. The property was bordered on the next block by a stand of palm trees, and glimpses of more fencing and the house beyond were visible through the trunks. The only difference was that the fence along the back border was three-foot white stockade instead of iron, and there was no guard at the simple hinged gate.

That didn't rule out the presence of more guards, though. It just meant they were probably better hidden back here.

Once again, Holm and I climbed out of the car and headed for the property. We didn't bother with the badges this time as we wove our way through the trees, half-crouched and eyes open.

The backyard was much larger than the front. After the trees and the dense vegetation, the stockade fence protected an emerald-green expanse of grass with a fair-sized garden just starting to sprout in the back left corner. Closer to the house, a chain-link fence surrounded a massive pool and patio area littered with party-goers, mostly of the female persuasion. No guards in sight back here.

Cobra Jon had to be among them somewhere.

We crept toward the back gate. It was probably locked, but the fence was short enough that we could vault over if it came to that. I was within touching distance of the gate when a gunshot rang out, and I felt the wind of a bullet pass my head.

A single female scream rang out from the pool party, followed quickly by a few more. I ignored the commotion and whirled left, in the direction the gunfire had come from, and drew my weapon in a single smooth motion. There was another shot, this time to my right, and Holm sprang into alert.

Two suited guards burst from the treeline behind us, one at either end. The one near me fired again, and I returned fire, intentionally hitting the ground in front of him to shower dirt and splintered plants in his face.

"No casualties, if you can help it," I called to Holm. "I don't want the paperwork."

He grunted an affirmation as he traded gunfire with his target.

The guy I'd fired at had leapt aside and rolled with the shot. Now he'd found his footing again. I ran at him and tackled him to the ground. Then I smashed the gun out of his hand as the cries from the interrupted pool party intensified and the sounds of scrambling and running joined them.

I glanced back at Holm, made sure he'd engaged his target, and returned my focus to mine, who struggled beneath me as he tried to finger-walk a hand to his lost weapon. I lashed out a foot and kicked the gun further.

When my weight shifted, he pushed out from beneath me and hauled himself back to his feet.

I had my weapon trained on him before he could make another move.

"Like I told your buddies out front, we just want to talk to your boss," I said evenly, not looking away from him. "You good, Robbie?"

"Yeah," he called. A quick side-glance showed him in a similar position, his target disarmed and scowling in front of him.

"Okay, then." I gestured with my chin to the back gate. "I don't feel like going back around to the front door. Let's go this way. You and your partner there first."

Holm walked the second guard over, and we moved them at gunpoint through the gate and across the back yard. A lone figure remained in the pool area near the lounge chairs at the shallow end to watch our little progression.

“Just the man we wanted to see,” I drawled when we got close enough to make him out.

From his files, I knew that Cobra Jon was Polynesian by birth but had grown up in Cuba, where he’d embarked on a life of crime starting in his early teens. He was twenty-two when he relocated to Nassau Bahamas and had brought most of his original crew with him. Here he’d stayed for the past fifteen years, putting down roots and fertilizing his empire.

He was slightly taller than average, his head shaved to black stubble and dressed in nothing but a pair of red swimming trunks that left his hairless, muscled body and the snake tattoo that coiled up his left arm and draped over his shoulder on display. In his right hand, he held his iconic walking stick, polished hickory topped with a carved onyx snake’s head, the black mamba that gave the gang its name.

One of the guards started to stumble an apology when we halted them in front of Cobra Jon, but he held up a hand to stall the words.

“Go to the house and help the others tend to my guests,” he said. “They’re a bit unsettled, after all the gunfire.”

“You sure, *jefe?*” the other one said.

Cobra Jon did not confirm that he was sure, but his expression must have because both guards hustled toward the house.

I gave a nod to Holm, and we both holstered our weapons. “Well, you’re not stupid. I’ll give you that. I guess you know that your guys started the firefight.”

“Yes, because someone was attempting to trespass on my property.” The gang leader looked coolly between us. “I’ve been informed that an Agent Marston and an Agent Holm asked for me at the front gate. I assume that is the two of you.”

“Fair assumption. I’m Marston, he’s Holm.” I pointed to the walking stick. “What’s with the cane? You don’t seem particularly infirm.”

He stared at me. “You didn’t break into my home to ask after my physical health, Agent Marston.”

“You’re right. I didn’t.” I offered up a sigh as if I was sorry for the intrusion. “The thing is, Mr. Calabar, my partner and I are in the middle of an investigation, and I’m afraid that an acquaintance of yours is involved. His name is Agay Benta.”

The gang leader gave a slow blink. “Call me Jon,” he said without a trace of friendliness. “What does your investigation have to do with me?”

“Gee, Jon. You don’t seem too concerned about your friend,” Holm said. “You didn’t even ask about Benta.”

“No need to,” he said. “I am aware he has been taken into custody.”

“Yeah? Well, are you aware that your main man missed his target?” I watched his face and saw the slightest of reactions, a small twitch at the corner of one eye. “That’s right. We have solid evidence to convict Benta of murder, and we’re going to bring you down with him.”

I was expecting the cold, unfeeling laugh that followed my words, but it didn’t stop me from being a little disappointed. They always wanted to do things the hard way.

"You can't possibly be saying that you have evidence to charge me with Chad's murder," Cobra Jon said. "I haven't been off the island in weeks."

A look passed between Holm and me. "I didn't say who was murdered or where it happened, Jon," I said, emphasizing the name. "You seem a little too informed for someone who had nothing to do with it."

"As I mentioned, I am aware that you have Agay in custody," Cobra Jon said smoothly. "I'm a reasonable man, so I will allow you to leave my property now without pressing charges for unlawful entry."

This time, I laughed. "I don't think so. You're coming stateside with us, so we can question you regarding the murders of Chad Sweeting and Gordon Traynor."

Another eye twitch. "So now you are falsely accusing me of two murders?"

"For starters," I said. "Except you can scratch the *false* part."

Cobra Jon started to look angry, but then he relaxed his features with visible effort. "Very well, Agent Marston. I will go with you and your partner, but only because you need to learn a very important lesson about me and my affairs."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"Simply that I will not be accompanying you off-island." A disconcerting smile lifted his lips, and he reached his free hand out toward a patio table just behind him.

Our weapons were out instantly. "Don't even think about it," Holm snapped before I could.

"I have no malicious intent, agents," Cobra Jon said as he stepped aside to give us a clear view of the table, which held nothing but an empty drink glass and a cell phone. "What I am doing is for your protection. If I don't tell my men that I am leaving with you willingly, they will stop you. Rather permanently, I'm afraid. It's what I pay them for."

"Fine," I said without lowering the gun. "Make your call."

He reached out again, picked up the phone, and started tapping far too many times for dialing a number.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"It's called texting. I want to keep this message low-key, so my guests aren't any further alarmed than you've already made them."

I almost demanded that he place a call anyway, so we could hear what he said, but at this point, it didn't matter. It was a big enough risk trying to bring him in at all, and even if he spoke with his guards, they probably had some verbal code that would let him tell them whatever he wanted anyway.

It took him a while to finish texting. When he finally stopped, he moved to slip the phone in his pocket.

"Uh-uh. Back on the table." I gestured with the gun. "You can lose the walking stick, too. No weapons."

He rolled his eyes, tossed the phone on the table, and leaned his cane against one of the lounges. "Satisfied?"

"Not until you're behind bars," I said. "Let's go."

Even as we walked him across the backyard toward the squad car, I knew nothing was going to stick. Not this time, at least. Still, I had a lesson of my own that I wanted to teach him.

I would not be intimidated into giving up.

Chapter 20

Cobra Jon, handcuffed in the back seat, didn't have much to say until we were nearly through downtown Nassau and headed north, toward the RBPF marine unit. That was when he shifted and leaned forward, baring his teeth in a fake smile. "Are you even slightly aware of the monumental mistake you two are making right now?"

"Mistake," Holm repeated. "Hey, are we making one of those?"

"Not just a mistake. A monumental mistake," I corrected mockingly. "Like, they're going to build big marble statues dedicated to our mistake."

"Wow. I've always wanted to be immortalized with a statue." Holm half-turned to glance at our passenger. "Maybe you can tell us what kind of mistake we're making. Like, besides monumental. Did I forget to put on deodorant this morning, or is it just Marston's terrible driving?"

Cobra Jon's eyes narrowed. "You've crossed the wrong man," he said through his teeth. "Mark my words—"

"Okay, hold up," I interrupted. "Do you think you could pack any more clichés into that threat? I mean, I know you're not a native English speaker, but 'mark my words' is a little unimaginative. Maybe try a few movie quotes or something."

Holm coughed to cover a laugh. "Good idea. Like, you can't go wrong with Nicholson. How'd that one from 'A Few Good Men' go? I'm gonna rip your eyes out and piss in your dead skull?"

Cobra Jon loosed a string of non-English words that were clearly expletives.

"Much better," I told him. "Only threats are probably more effective if the people you're threatening understand what the hell you're saying."

He fell silent, his face reddening briefly before he sat back against the seat.

It wasn't long until we reached the marine unit and drove around back to the station parking lot which bordered the docks.

"Just have to return this car, and then we'll all have a nice little boat ride," I said as I pulled into a slot and cut the engine. "You want to wait out here, Robbie?"

"Sure. While you're gone, me and C.J. can talk about movies, and who's gonna piss in whose skull."

I nodded. "Just remember, you're not Nicholson. You're Cruise."

"Hanging from a yardarm, then. Got it," he said. "I'm not sitting in this hot car, though. I'll wait outside."

We both exited the vehicle, leaving our gang leader to sweat in the back seat. I hadn't even stepped away from the driver's side when the rear entrance of the precinct swung open, and a familiar, unwelcome figure strode toward us, arms swinging angrily at his sides.

"Captain Laury," I half-groaned. "What brings you to the marine unit on a Sunday?"

I knew the answer to my own question, just as I knew I wouldn't get one from the captain. Cobra Jon must've sent multiple texts from his house, and at least

one of them had been to his personal law dog. Maybe I should've been glad that he'd planned to stop us from taking him in more or less legally, instead of opting for the criminally permanent way. Couldn't quite find any gratitude to spare, though.

"I have no idea what you think you're doing, Agent Marston, but you need to release Mr. Calabar immediately," the captain practically sputtered before he'd reached us. "I will not tolerate this maverick American behavior."

I stared at him, straight-faced. "How do you know who we've got in this car, Laury? You can't possibly see from there."

He ignored me and kept coming until he was a few feet away from Holm. "All you need to concern yourself with is releasing the innocent Bahamian citizen you've just arrested without cause or evidence."

"Who said I'm arresting him? I'm just bringing him in for questioning," I said evenly. "Read him his rights and everything. Didn't we, Holm?"

"Oh, yeah. Every word of them," my partner said.

Laury's eyes practically bugged out of his head with anger. "You come to my island," he began, then choked himself off so badly that he had to pause and take a deep breath. "You will let him go, or I will call your director and force you to."

Part of me knew this was the end of it, and we weren't getting any further without more evidence. Director Ramsey couldn't let me bring Cobra Jon in even if she wanted to... and she wouldn't want to. In fact, she was probably going to bawl us both out on Monday morning, unless she decided to make a special trip into the office today just to read us the riot act.

Still, I didn't want to give up without a fight.

"Fine. Call the director," I said as I stepped back and folded my arms. "I'll wait right here."

Laury looked uncertain for a second as if he'd been bluffing and I'd just called him on it. Then he scowled, produced a phone and dialed a number. Eventually, he said into the phone, "This is Kosmo Laury with the RBPF. Get me Director Wallace."

"Nice try, but that's not our director," Holm said.

I heaved a breath. "Wallace is the CGIS director," I muttered.

"Oh," he said. "Great."

So much for hoping it was a bluff. Laury probably didn't know Diane Ramsey personally, but if he had a connection with Wallace, the Coast Guard Investigative Service would have no problem coming down on MBLIS for a protocol breach. Sometimes Brian Wallace got a little jealous that we had more jurisdictional leeway than they did.

While I waited for Laury to finish the transfer song-and-dance that would end our little mission, I leaned down to peer into the back seat. Cobra Jon was looking right back at me with an unbearably smug expression.

That was fine. I could wait a little longer to wipe that look off his face.

It took about ten minutes for Laury to move past Holm and circle the squad car toward me with the phone still pressed to his ear. He stopped and held it out with a sickly grin. "Your director would like a word."

"Probably more than one," I grumbled as I took the device and wiped it on my shirt before holding it to my head. "Diane. Enjoying your Sunday?"

"I was. Please note my use of past tense," she said tightly. "What the hell are you doing on Nassau, Marston?"

"My job."

She gave a frustrated snarl. "Don't even try that with me. You're going after the bird in the bush when you've already got one in hand. Can't you just focus on the case you're working, for once?"

I held back a sigh and paced a few steps away. "It's all the same case, Diane," I told her. "The bird in my hand is trying to shit all over it, and I want the whole damn flock."

"I know, but you're still an officer of the law, and you can't arrest people without evidence!"

"I thought I made it clear that I'm not arresting him," I said tersely. "I'm questioning him."

"No, you're not." Director Ramsey's exasperation turned to reluctant sympathy. "I'm sorry, but you can't hold Jon Calabar. You have nothing to hold him on. I'm ordering you to turn him over to Captain Laury's custody."

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't start shouting at her. "Yes, ma'am," I said, not quite managing to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Far be it from me to disobey an order."

"Ethan—"

"No, don't. I know you have to." That knowledge didn't make it any easier to swallow. "Gotta go. I have work to do."

I ended the call before she could say anything else and then turned back to Laury and tossed his phone toward him. He startled and fumbled in the air, nearly missing the catch.

"Looks like he's all yours," I said icily. "Does that mean you're going to arrest him instead? I'll let you borrow my cuffs."

The captain didn't reply, but at least he'd stopped looking so damned triumphant.

Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same for Cobra Jon. When I opened the door and stood aside to let him climb out, his face was the picture of smarminess, the definitive cat-ate-the-canary expression. He turned away, and I unlocked the handcuffs and stuffed them in my pocket, glaring at him.

"Mr. Calabar." Captain Laury immediately rushed over to the gang leader, all solicitation and concern. "Are you injured? We can certainly press charges against these men for harassment."

Cobra Jon waved him off and caught my gaze, the promise of retribution glinting in his brown eyes. "That is not necessary, Captain."

Laury shot me a disgusted look. "You did not even allow him to dress before you dragged him from his home? You Americans!" He shook his head. "Come, Mr. Calabar. I will drive you home personally."

I waited until they were several paces ahead to walk around the squad car and join Holm on the other side. "So, what did we learn from this?"

"Make sure I try harder to talk you out of crazy ideas?" he said.

"Well, there is that. We also know that Cobra Jon has a direct tattle line to the Bahamas police, so we'll have to factor that in when we make our move." I stared after Laury and Calabar, sickened by the way the police captain fawned over the

worst criminal in his jurisdiction. “He’s a whole lot cockier than I figured, too, and I already thought he was a brazen bastard,” I said thoughtfully. “We may have a chance to use that against him.”

“Yeah,” Holm snorted. “If we ever manage to bring him in for questioning.” He glanced at the receding pair, and then looked at me. “How much trouble are we in with the director, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Lots.”

“That’s what I thought,” he breathed. “Okay, so what are we doing now?”

I jingled the keys to the squad car. “We turn the keys in and take the boat home. We’re not done for the day, though. By the time we get back to the agency, I think Benta will be feeling a little more chatty.”

If I couldn’t get Cobra Jon directly, I’d use his lackey to hit him when he wasn’t expecting it.

One way or another, his ass was mine.

Chapter 21

Back at the office, Holm and I hit the lab first, where it turned out there was more good news. Bonnie and Clyde had pulled together enough pieces of the puzzle to firmly convict Benta of Sweeting’s murder. Provided we could find the weapon used in the second murder, the rooftop assassination, it would be that much easier to pin Gordon Traynor on Benta, too.

“Here are the DNA test results from the material under the victim’s fingernails,” Bonnie said as she handed me a few stapled sheets of paper. “It’s a match to Agay Benta.”

“I’ve got more,” Clyde called from a side counter, raising a hand to gesture us over. “Finally got that phone that was found in the tide pool dried out and cleaned up.” He picked up the clunky device from the surface where it was plugged into a charger and powered it on. “Like I figured, it’s a disposable, and the number isn’t registered. But the last number he called from it was. Bonnie?”

Taking her cue, Bonnie headed to the computer and started typing. “Sweeting placed a call at 11:04 P.M. the night before his body was found which places it at about thirty to sixty minutes before the estimated time of death,” she said, and an image flashed onto the screen of a driver’s license with a familiar face. “The number he called is registered to Agay Benta’s phone.”

“I don’t know,” Holm said slowly. “Thirty to sixty minutes? That’s a tight time frame to get here from the Bahamas, even if you’ve got a lead foot like Ethan does.”

I rolled my eyes. “Boats don’t have gas pedals, Robbie.”

“Fine. A lead throttle, then.”

“Anyway,” Bonnie said as she swallowed a laugh, “it doesn’t matter, because Benta wasn’t in the Bahamas when Sweeting called him.” She started typing again, and this time pulled up a map of southern Florida marked with a red dot at the southeastern shore around the bluffs where we’d found the body, and a green

dot that was maybe fifteen miles away, in South Miami. "I tracked the call location here, to the Blue Lagoon Hotel. That's where Benta was when he took the call.

Holm's forehead creased. "The Blue Lagoon?"

"Guess they couldn't afford that last N," I said. "So, Benta was already in town and presumably checked into a hotel when Sweeting got here?"

"Yup. I can't tell you which room he was in, though. Cell phone signals aren't that specific," Bonnie said as she closed her map and handed me a piece of paper with the hotel's address and phone number on it. "You just connected something in your head. I can tell. Spill it."

"Just expanding on my theory," I said absently as I stared at the scribbled address.

Holm nudged me. "Care to expand out loud?"

"Oh. Yeah." I lifted a shoulder and tucked the paper in my pocket. "Okay, let's say I'm right that Sweeting was piloting a boat filled with treasure or at least what passes for treasure according to Cobra Jon. Money, weapons, drugs, or any combination of those." I paced a few steps. "He's heading to the coast, and Benta's already here with a location established, waiting on the shipment."

"Except Sweeting has an accident on the way," Holm said as he warmed to the narrative. "He wrecks the boat, makes it to shore, and contacts Benta. Wait, if the phone's soaked, how does he make the call?"

That put a wrench in the idea until Clyde came up with a way around it. "The phone isn't soaked when Sweeting washes up," he said. "It was found in the tide pool at the scene, but there was also a water-tight case with the victim's clothing and effects. He must've kept it in there until he made the call."

"Right. You travel by boat, you protect your phone from moisture," I said, thinking of the waterproof pouches we used on MBLIS watercraft. Except, admittedly, I kept forgetting to drop my phone into one when we shipped out. I'd have to pay more attention to that.

Holm gave a thoughtful nod. "Yeah, that's plausible. So he calls Benta, tells him the boat's gone down, and he's stranded."

"Sweeting thinks he's waiting on a rescue," I added, "except when Benta arrives, he decides to take the smaller loss of manpower and protect the location of the merchandise by killing the only other person who knows where it is, and leaving the body where he thinks no one will find it until it's too late."

"Plus making it look like the Congo Kings did it to misdirect, in case someone did find it," Holm said.

Bonnie clapped her hands. "Great theory. Think you can prove it?"

"Yeah, I do," I said as I looked toward the door to the lab. "Or at least I think I can get someone else to prove it. Time to have another little chat with our friend Benta."

After I thanked Bonnie and Clyde, we headed for interrogation. I didn't need props this time. Benta had all but confessed to Sweeting's murder, and even if he didn't, we had plenty of evidence to convict. I just needed him to confirm the why, even though I was practically convinced I had it right.

Holm headed for observation, and I went into the interrogation room. Benta was still in the chair where I'd left him hours ago, only this time he was secured with

prison chains attached to a ring bolt in the floor. He looked a hell of a lot less comfortable than the first time we'd talked.

He opened his mouth when I walked into the room, but I spoke first. "If I hear the word 'lawyer' from you, Benta, I guarantee there's going to be a serious camera malfunction in your immediate future. When the camera's off, so are these kid gloves I'm wearing right now. Understand?"

Wisely, the man closed his mouth.

I took a seat in the chair across from him, leaned forward, and folded my hands on the table. "Just talked to your boss."

Some of the color drained from his face.

"Now, you can deny it all you want, but he knows you missed your mark," I went on. "I'll be honest with you here. When law enforcement personnel screws up, sometimes we lose privileges, have our pay docked, maybe get suspended. At worst, we get fired and have to find another job. When people like you screw up, though..." I let the words hang in the air a minute. "Like I said, I honestly don't know, but I can guess that if you got fired, that firing would come from a gun, and you'd be on the wrong end of it."

"I don't want to talk to you," Benta said.

I frowned at him. "Well, at least you didn't say 'lawyer.' That's an improvement."

He let his head fall back and huffed at the ceiling. "Go to hell."

"Don't worry. I will, once your lawyer shows up," I said dryly. "I'm telling you now, though, you're going to beat me there unless you cooperate with me."

"Cooperate!" Benta barked a laugh and raised his head slowly. "You've arrested me for murder. How much cooperation do you expect?"

"More than this, if you want to live long enough to make it to your new federal home behind bars."

He had nothing to say to that.

I gave him a few minutes, and then leaned back and arranged my hands in my lap. "Let's try something else. I'm going to tell you a story, a true story. About you. Stop me if anything's wrong with it."

With that, I launched into my theory, starting with him checking into the Blue Lagoon. His expression shifted gradually from stoic disinterest to something that bordered on alarm by the time I reached the end.

He didn't stop me.

I gave him a few minutes, but he failed to comment. "So, how'd I do?" I asked him.

He stared at me, blinked, and shook himself. "You're guessing."

"Maybe... but from the look on your face, I'd say it's a pretty good guess."

Benta looked away and held his body rigid. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?" I looked hard at him. "Whatever was on that boat must've been worth a lot to Cobra Jon. Enough that he didn't mind having you execute one of your own to keep anyone else from finding it, so what was it? Something expensive, I'm guessing."

He gave a half-hearted sneer. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Is it weapons? Cash? Drugs?"

He flinched a bit at the last word.

“Okay, so it’s drugs,” I said. “He’ll want them recovered. Where did the boat go down, and when is he going after it?”

This time Benta faced me with a chilling stare.

“I don’t like you,” he said flatly. “So if I knew that, I would tell you, just to make sure he kills you.”

The implied threat was easy enough to ignore. Cobra Jon was already gunning for me after my little trip to his house today.

“Maybe you don’t know when, but you know damned well where. You must have told him,” I said. “So how about you tell me, if you want me dead so badly?”

His upper lip curled. “As I said before, Special Agent Marston... go to hell.”

It struck me then that I’d never bothered introducing myself to him by name. I also remembered that he’d somehow known Gordon Traynor was associated with Tessa, and I still had no idea why he’d killed the private security guard.

“Are you psychic, Mr. Benta?” I asked.

He frowned. “What?”

“You know my name. I never gave it.”

He smiled for the first time since I’d entered the room. “Ethan Marston, former Navy SEAL. Robert Holm, also ex-Navy. Tessa Bleu, photographer and journalist for *National EcoStar* magazine. I know many things, Agent Marston.”

I practically broke my arm patting myself on the back for not lunging across the table at him and rearranging his teeth.

“Care to tell me how?” I asked with forced calm.

“You would be surprised what money can buy, including information,” he said as a smug tone crept into his voice. “All you need is a willing source. For example, a former Marine who has just joined a private security company and feels that he is... how do you say it? Not getting paid enough for this shit.”

A chill shot down my spine. “You bought Traynor,” I said. “And then you killed him so he wouldn’t talk.”

His smile widened. “She is a pretty thing, isn’t she? All of my friends in town agreed when I showed them her picture.”

Tessa.

I was already up and headed for the door.

Chapter 22

Tessa couldn’t decide what to wear to dinner tonight, and it was driving her crazy. The choice shouldn’t be that hard. It wasn’t like this was a real date, anyway, since Ethan had pretty much said he was just going so he could protect her.

Still, she wanted to look good. Maybe that way, she could get him to see her as more than a job, even if it was only for while she was in town.

She’d taken all of her clothes out of her suitcase and the hotel closet and then put them all back in frustration, at least three times by now. She had to make a decision soon, or she’d still be wearing this robe when Ethan got here. Mindful of the potential danger out there, and the fact that there were police officers standing

guard at her door, she'd stayed in the suite all day, alternately researching and relaxing while she indulged in room service and pay-per-view movies.

It was a pleasant break, considering the circumstances, but she had to get back to real life now.

Finally, she decided to go flirty-casual with a short, green flared-skirt sundress that matched her eyes and a lightweight white sweater in case it got chilly later. Did it even get cold in Florida? If this was New York, she could count on the temperature dropping at least ten degrees when the sun went down, but the weather patterns were different here.

Maybe she'd leave the sweater. It wasn't likely to be cold, and if the temperature did slip, Ethan might offer her his jacket.

She laid the outfit on the bed, slipped the robe off, and wiggled into the dress, smoothing the fabric down to her waist. Now she just had to decide which shoes to wear with this. Probably the white strappy sandals she'd picked up impulsively in the gift shop at the airport when her flight had arrived in Miami, and she'd ended up having to wait an hour until they found her luggage. Where did those end up, anyway?

As she looked around the bedroom for the plastic gift shop bag which she was pretty sure she'd left the shoes in, there was a muffled buzzing sound from somewhere near the bed. Frowning, she moved toward it and tried to banish the insane idea that someone had slipped a bomb into her room, and it was about to go off. She didn't even know what a bomb sounded like.

Her face flushed slightly when she finally recognized the sound as her phone. Being involved with multiple murders was really doing a number on her brain, it was making her paranoid.

Probably with good reason, she told herself. Better paranoid than dead.

She hunted around while the phone kept buzzing and finally found it on the floor between the bed and the nightstand. It must've fallen down there after she turned off her alarm this morning, and she'd been so busy forcefully relaxing that she hadn't given it another thought.

The caller showing on the screen was Donald, and she winced a bit at the number next to his name. This was his fifth unanswered call today. He was going to be worried, not just as her boss, but as practically family.

She pressed the answer button hurriedly and brought the phone to her ear. "Hi, Donald," she said in a rush. "Sorry I missed you earlier."

"You missed me? Tessa, I've been trying to call you all day." His voice was thick with concern. "What happened?"

The question was almost a demand, and she frowned. He seemed a little overly upset for a bunch of missed calls.

"Well, I had the phone on vibrate, and it must've fallen behind the nightstand this morning," she said. "I haven't gone anywhere yet, so I didn't realize it was missing."

"I'm not asking about your phone, Tessa." Donald let out a long, ragged breath. "I'm asking about the murder."

Crap. She hadn't wanted him to find out about that. He could be a little overprotective, and he might insist on pulling her assignment and having her

come home. That was the last thing she wanted... and not just because she was excited about the piece on tidal pools.

There was a certain special agent she really wanted to spend more time with.

"I'm fine, Donald," she told him. "Really, I've got police protection and the shooter didn't even come close to hitting me—"

"What?" he interrupted with a strangled shout. "What shooter? My sources said you only found a dead body, not the actual killer!"

Well, double crap. He didn't even know about last night until she'd opened her big mouth. She thought for a moment and realized that he shouldn't even know about the first body unless he'd been snooping... which he'd basically just admitted to.

"Hold on, Donald," she said. "What sources?"

His silence was guilty enough to tell her plenty.

"Donald? I'd like an explanation."

A heavy sigh came through the phone. "Okay, just calm down," he said. "It was for your own protection."

She had a bad feeling about this. "What did you do?"

"Tessa..." He paused again. "When I heard you were caught up in a murder investigation, I hired a private security company to keep an eye on you."

"Oh my God," she gasped. The man who'd been following her... Donald had sent him. And now he was dead.

"I wanted to make sure you were safe," he went on, mistaking her horrified shock for anger. "Then I got a call from the company a few hours ago, telling me that their agent hadn't checked in. When I couldn't reach you—"

"Donald, wait," she interrupted forcefully. "Listen. Do you know the name of the man they sent here for me?"

"Yeah, I've got it here somewhere. Hang on." She heard a brief rustling in the background. "It's Gordon Traynor."

Her blood ran cold. "He's dead," she whispered.

"He's what?" Donald roared on the other end of the phone. "Tell me that's not the shooting you were talking about."

"It is, but don't worry, I'm fine," she said with a little more strength in her voice. "I noticed him following me, and..." She stopped and shivered. If she told Donald the whole story, how she'd seen a man killed right in front of her and dodged a second shot meant for her, he'd flip out and probably come down here to drag her back to New York personally.

Besides, she couldn't actually leave because of the first body.

"You should come home, Tessa. Right now," Donald said when she didn't continue.

"No. I can't," she told him. "I'm a witness, and they need me here. Plus I have a job to do."

"Screw your job! I'm putting you on the first plane back—"

"I'm not leaving," she said with quiet force. "Donald, I'm perfectly fine. There are police guarding me twenty-four-seven, and Agent Marston is protecting me. I have to stay."

His pause seemed calmer this time, and she started to hope she'd gotten through to him. "Okay," he finally said. "I can't believe I'm agreeing to this, but I

won't make you come home. Yet. But I want to speak with this agent of yours, and you'd better keep your phone on you at all times. Understand?"

"I will." She managed not to roll her eyes. "Please don't worry."

"You know I'm going to," he said, but she could hear at least a little bit of relief in his voice. "Should I assume you're going to extend your stay since I'm guessing you haven't been able to get back to your shoot yet?"

She smiled. "Yes, please."

"I'll contact the hotel, then. Just be careful, will you? And make sure Ethan contacts me as soon as possible."

"Okay. I'll call you later tonight, Donald."

"I'd appreciate that."

They said goodbye and hung up, and Tessa took a few minutes to compose herself before she resumed the search for her sandals. Eventually, she found them in the closet, the bag half-hidden under her smaller suitcase.

She was fastening the strap on the second sandal when she realized that Donald had asked for 'Ethan' to call him... but she'd never said that name. All she told him was Agent Marston.

For a moment, she considered calling Donald back and demanding an explanation. The thought was driven from her head when she heard raised voices coming from just outside the room and then someone started banging on the door.

Her heart stopped. Paranoia kicked in, and she wasted precious seconds looking almost frantically around the bedroom, trying to decide whether she should hide in the bathroom or under the bed, or maybe make a run for the balcony. No, this suite was on the fourth floor. She couldn't jump that far.

A loud bang came from the main room. Her breath caught, and it didn't start again until a familiar voice shouted, "Tessa! Where are you?"

"In here," she called immediately on a tremendous exhale. It was Ethan. She took a few steps toward the bedroom door, but her legs started shaking and she changed course to sit hard on the edge of the bed. If the shooter didn't kill her, the adrenaline rushes would.

It was less than a minute before Ethan rushed through the door on high alert, one hand on the gun in his holster. He scanned the room quickly, and then met her wide-eyed stare with worried eyes.

"You alright?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said. "You scared me. What happened?"

"Apparently, nothing." The tension drained from his body, and he crossed the room to stand in front of her, a slight frown on his face. "Sorry about that. I got a tip that..." He trailed off as his gaze raked her, and his jaw clenched as he swallowed almost imperceptibly. "You look amazing."

An unexpected smile lit her face. "Thank you."

"I guess you're ready for dinner, then?" he asked with a gorgeous, crooked grin.

She let out a startled laugh. "You burst in here like you think I'm dead, about to draw your gun, and now you want to go out to dinner?"

"Well, yeah. I'm hungry." That devil-may-care smile of his remained in place. "If you're sure you're okay, I think we should go."

"Without talking about this?"

"We can talk over dinner."

This time, she detected just a hint of strain beneath the words, a low current he was trying to stem for her benefit. For some reason, he wanted her out of this hotel room right away.

Considering the way he'd exploded into the suite, she suspected he had a good reason.

"Okay. Let's go," she said with a forced bright tone. "I just need to grab a few things."

She swiped her purse from the nightstand, tucked her phone and charger inside. When she nodded at Ethan, he started from the room, and she grabbed the sweater she'd decided against earlier on the way out.

Maybe she'd need it tonight, after all.

Chapter 23

Officers Gilliam and Burks had been back on shift outside Tessa's door when I arrived at the hotel. I hadn't given them much of a reason for my concern, but they insisted on following us to the restaurant and keeping watch from outside. That was fine with me. Right now as far as I was concerned, the more eyes on her, the better.

I did feel bad about leaving Holm behind, but at least I'd told him the whole story. Not that he hadn't heard what Benta said from observation and was ready to kick the guy's ass just as hard. He'd stayed at the office to bring the suspect back to holding and finish the paperwork.

It hadn't been easy twisting his arm to take the rest of the night off when he was finished, but he'd eventually agreed. Only because he said he'd feel like a third wheel if he joined us for dinner.

Despite the whole lot of nothing that had been happening at the hotel when I got there, I was still tense. I'd relaxed somewhat when I had Tessa safely in my car and we were headed for downtown Miami. There was actually a good chance that Benta had been bluffing about flashing her picture around to his friends since most of them were likely to be on Nassau. He'd also undoubtedly wanted a way to get a rise out of me. Still, I wouldn't risk believing that she was completely safe until I had Cobra Jon firmly in custody.

The Black Mambas had to be de-fanged, and I was going to make sure that happened.

"So," Tessa said once we'd picked up speed on the highway, "are you going to tell me what all that was about, or do I have to guess? Oh, and there's something I need to tell you, too."

I glanced aside at her with a raised eyebrow. "You first."

"Oh, no. I'm not the one who busted down your door looking to shoot someone," she said with a smile. "You show me yours, I'll show you mine."

I tried not to let my mind put any kind of spin on those words. While I still wanted to take her out just for pleasure, part of this had to be business now. That dress she was wearing definitely did not help me focus on the working part of this relationship, though.

“Okay, fine,” I breathed. “I told you that we have the shooter in custody.”

She gave a small, worried nod. “Did he escape?”

“Hell, no. I’d have sent the Marines and a couple of SWAT teams to get you if he did,” I told her, only half joking. Agay Benta wasn’t worth dispensing that much firepower, but Cobra Jon just might be. “No, he just said something during the interview that... concerned me.”

“Interview,” she mused. “Is that what you call an interrogation when you’re trying not to scare civilians?”

The comment startled a laugh from me. “Didn’t know you were into the lingo.”

“Hey, you’re looking at a bona fide military brat,” she said proudly as she pointed to herself. “I don’t know a lot about the agencies, except that they work with the military pretty regularly, and a lot of them are ex-military themselves, like you. I’m guessing Navy?”

Color me impressed. “Good guess,” I said. “You’re right.”

“I knew it.” She smiled. “So, you were saying about the interrogation?”

This time, I laughed for real. “You’re not going to let me out of this, are you? Okay, the interrogation. Benta claimed that some of his friends might know what you look like, and he made a strong suggestion that they could come after you.”

She shivered, and I almost regretted my honesty, even though I knew that the best way to protect her now was to make sure she knew what was going on. That way, she’d be more likely to notice if something seemed off and react to it.

“Benta,” she said quietly. “Is that the killer’s name?”

I nodded. “Agay Benta. His nickname is Sniper.”

“My God.” The words were nearly a whisper. “He really was trying to kill me.”

“Yes, but he didn’t, and he won’t. Not as long as I’m breathing,” I told her firmly. “Trust me, I plan on breathing for a long time, and that means you’ll keep breathing too.”

She laughed a little, and some of the tension drained away. “Thank you. For protecting me, I mean.”

“You’re welcome.” I flashed a smile at her. “I hope you know that’s not the only reason I agreed to dinner tonight.”

Her breath caught, and a flush crept into her cheeks, suggesting she had been thinking that... until now.

“Where are we going for dinner, anyway?” she said after a long pause.

“Oh, no. You said you had something to tell me. I showed you mine, remember?”

Her answering laugh was musical. “You’re right. It’s only fair. I have to tell you, anyway, because it’s related to the case. Well, one of them, anyway. Maybe both.”

Suddenly I was tense all over again. “What do you mean, related?”

“It’s about Gordon Traynor.” Tessa sighed. “I’ll never forget his name as long as I live. That poor man is dead because of me,” she finished in a tormented whisper.

I wanted to reassure her that it wasn’t her fault. After what Benta had told me, I knew it was pure greed that got Traynor killed, but I had to hear what she was getting at first.

She stared through the windshield and blinked a few times. “I know who had him following me. It was my editor. Somehow, he learned about me finding that body, and he got worried. So, he hired the security company to protect me. Not

Gordon personally,” she added quickly, as if that mattered for some reason. “That’s just the guy they assigned.”

Okay, that seemed a bit of an extreme measure for a boss to pay for that kind of protection for an employee. “Tessa, why would your editor go to the trouble of putting a private security detail on you?”

“Um.” She bit her lip and glanced at me. “That’s just the way he is. Uncle Donald is a little overprotective of me.”

“He’s your uncle?”

“Well, not really. We’re not related, but I’ve called him Uncle Donald since I was little. He’s actually my godfather.” She squirmed in embarrassment. “I don’t usually tell people that, because I don’t want them to think I got the job at the *EcoStar* through nepotism. Donald didn’t hire me, though. He didn’t even know I was applying as a journalist until my HR paperwork landed on his desk.”

“Guess I can understand why you don’t tell people about that,” I said with a smirk. “It’s not easy to have a career when people think you’re related to the boss.”

She gave me a surprised look. “You sound like you know that from personal experience.”

“Not exactly,” I told her. “My father was a Marine, and that’s exactly why I enlisted in the Navy instead. Didn’t really stop the speculation about strings being pulled for me, but it would’ve been worse if I’d joined the Corps.”

“I can see that.” She cleared her throat, and her expression fell again. “Anyway, I thought you should know that Donald hired the security. I still can’t believe that man died for me.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Her head swiveled to face me, and she must have caught the edge of anger in my voice. “You don’t have to protect me from reality, you know. He was only there because of me, and the sniper missed and hit him.” She grimaced. “If I hadn’t gone over there to confront him—”

“Then you’d be dead now, too. It wasn’t your fault,” I said as I modulated my tone. My anger wasn’t with her, it was with Traynor for selling her out, along with me and my partner and whoever else he’d compromised when he sold privileged information to Benta.

“How is it possibly not my fault?”

The exit I needed to take was coming up, and I slowed the car and merged into the far lane while I considered how much to tell her. Knowing about Traynor wouldn’t help protect her any further since he was dead. The only thing it might do was help her stop feeling guilty over the death of a man who didn’t deserve anyone’s sympathy.

Once I realized it wouldn’t compromise anything to tell her the truth, I decided to come clean.

“Traynor got himself killed,” I said as I pulled off the exit. “The shooter didn’t miss you with the first shot. He was aiming for Traynor because the man made himself a loose end by selling everything he knew about the investigation to Benta.”

I’d stopped at a red light at the end of the onramp, and the street light above the car revealed Tessa’s face as it paled several shades. “That’s how he knew where I was staying,” she rasped. “And if he really told his friends what he knows...”

“Yeah. Exactly the reason I wanted you out of that hotel so fast,” I said. “In fact, I’m thinking you shouldn’t go back there at all.”

She shuddered. “Where should I go? Donald just extended my room so I could finish the assignment, but now... I don’t know anything.”

“I’m not sure yet, but we’ll figure it out. I think having a nice, quiet dinner will do us both good right now,” I said. “We can talk after we eat.”

Tessa gave a slow, absent nod. “This is all so crazy. Speaking of crazy, I forgot to mention something about Donald.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“I don’t know. I guess that depends on whether or not you know him because he seems to know you.”

A note of disquiet pumped through my veins. “I don’t know your editor,” I said carefully, even as I recalled the first time she’d mentioned the *National EcoStar*, when I thought briefly that I knew someone who worked there. Still couldn’t remember who, though.

“Are you sure?” Tessa cocked her head slightly. “I told him that Agent Marston was working on the case, and he knew your first name was Ethan without me saying it. He was in the military, too. My father’s best friend. Donald Farr?”

“Holy shit,” I blurted without thinking. “Your editor is Admiral Farr?”

“So you do know him,” she said with a touch of awe. “I never knew he was an admiral.”

“Technically, he was a fleet admiral,” I managed, still blown away that Farr was her Uncle Donald. He’d also served a term on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and last I heard, he was retiring to “dabble” in civilian journalism.

Apparently, his idea of dabbling was to become the editor of a national magazine.

Tessa watched me with mild concern. “Are you okay, Ethan?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” I shook off the shock and paid attention to the road since I’d almost missed the turn for the restaurant where I planned to take her. “I didn’t know him well, but he was tight with my CO, so I ended up working with the admiral on a few missions. Didn’t think he’d really remember me.”

“I guess he did,” Tessa said. “Who was your CO? I might know him. I’ve met quite a few of Donald’s military friends.”

I smiled at the memory. The CO had been a great man, an exceptional officer, and an even better friend. Our whole unit had been close with him, including Holm. He’d retired soon after the end of my last tour, but unfortunately, he’d passed of a heart attack three years ago. I was still pissed off that I’d been out of the country on a case and unable to attend his funeral.

“His name was Hawkins,” I said. “Captain Dean Hawkins. We called him Hawk.”

Tessa gasped. After a long pause, she whispered, “He was my father.”

Chapter 24

Tessa was too shaken to talk much more, so I figured I’d wait until we got seated and had something to drink before I pressed her for anything else.

The restaurant was called Columbo's Bistro. It was a low-key place with a weathered plank exterior that didn't look like much from the outside. Despite its less-than-swanky appearance and the strange Italian-French name combination, both the food and the service were excellent. More importantly, the place was quiet, even on weekend nights.

I requested a booth near the back and shepherded Tessa to the table. Her shock was just starting to abate as we took seats and the hostess laid out menus and poured two glasses of ice water. When prompted for her drink order, Tessa mumbled something about house wine and lots of it.

I asked for a Coke. No alcohol for me tonight, thanks to my personal alert level being pushed through the roof by recent developments.

"Okay, I have to know," I said once the hostess left, attempting to break her mood. "If Hawk is your father, how is your last name Bleu?"

"Bleu is my mother's maiden name," she said with a little laugh. "I only use it for my byline and press credentials. It was actually Dad's idea." She gave a sad smile. "He said if I was going to have my name out there, he didn't want any of his enemies to be able to trace me back to him. I always thought he was exaggerating a little."

"Maybe he was, but only a little." I grinned and shook my head. "I just can't believe you're Hawk's daughter. He was a hell of a commander... and a friend."

"He was a hell of a father, too," she said with a smile. "I'm still shocked, but I'm glad you knew him."

"So am I."

Tessa dropped her gaze to the table, playing absently with her menu. "So, what does this mean?" she asked. "As far as the case."

"Well, it doesn't mean that it's over, or I'm off it, if that's what you're asking. I also don't think it's entirely a coincidence." As I considered the possible connections, the light dawned with regards to at least one thing. "It does mean I've got a better idea of why it was assigned to me in the first place."

She looked curiously at me. "You didn't want the case?"

"It's not that I didn't want it. I just shouldn't have been assigned to it," I explained. "Holm and I were in the middle of wrapping up a current case when this one came in, and there was another pair of agents who should've taken it. Instead, the director had them take over the tail end of our operation and sent us out to the murder scene instead." I shook my head. "When I asked her about the switch, she basically told me that my clearance level wasn't high enough for answers."

"So, an admiral would have a lot higher clearance than you," Tessa put in.

"Exactly."

"Uncle Donald." She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Speaking of my overprotective godfather, he'd like you to give him a call."

"What, now?" I asked.

"He said as soon as possible."

"That means now." I sighed.

Just then, a waitress came to the table with the drinks and asked for our orders. I knew what I wanted without looking at the menu, but Tessa hadn't even gotten the chance to read hers.

“What’s good here?” she asked.

“Everything,” I said.

The waitress beamed at both of us. “That’s what I like to hear. If you’re not ready to order yet, I can come back in a few minutes?”

“No, it’s fine,” Tessa said as she scanned the menu quickly. “I’ll have the chicken strozzapreti with cream sauce, please.”

I couldn’t hold back a grin. “Make that two.”

“You got it,” the waitress said as she scribbled the order down and collected the menus. “We’ll have that out for you soon.”

After she left the table, Tessa gave me a look. “Were you planning to order that?”

“Yeah. That’s what I always get here,” I told her. “Did you know that ‘strozzapreti’ means ‘priest-stranglers’ in Italian?”

She snorted a laugh. “No, I did not. By the way, I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re stalling with small talk because you don’t want to call Donald.”

Honestly, I hadn’t even realized I was doing that, but she was right. “Okay, you got me. Getting reamed out by angry, overprotective male relatives is not my favorite activity.”

“I would imagine it’s not, but please, call him,” she said. “Otherwise I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Well, okay, since you asked so nicely.”

I got my phone out and dialed the number as she read it to me. The call connected, and it only rang twice before a gruff male voice answered with, “This is Farr.”

“Admiral,” I said. “Special Agent Marston. I believe you requested a call?”

A relieved exhale filled the line. “Ethan. It’s good to hear from you,” Farr said. “Been a long time.”

“Yes, it has, sir. I’m surprised you remember me, though.”

“Of course I remember you, and don’t call me sir. Only my staff does that now.” Though his tone was hearty enough, I could hear the strain running through his words. “Are you with Tessa now?”

“I am. She’s right in front of me,” I told him.

My comment drew a huff from her. “Tell him I’m still fine,” she said.

“She says she’s still fine,” I repeated dutifully.

“Good, and you’re going to make sure she stays that way.”

I decided that went without saying, so I wouldn’t bother acknowledging it. “Admiral, did you request to have me assigned to this case when you found out Tessa was involved?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Still blunt as ever. I always liked that about you.” He paused to blow out a breath. “I did, in fact. Is that going to be a problem?”

“No, sir, it’s not.” I didn’t bother correcting myself. The “sir” was automatic, a product of years of titles and service and respect. “I’m just not fond of being told my clearance isn’t high enough to question my orders.”

The look on Tessa’s face suggested that she’d never heard anyone talk to her Uncle Donald this way. She was shocked... and if I wasn’t mistaken, impressed.

“Well, you have my apologies for that,” Farr said. “To be honest, it wasn’t my call to invoke clearance. I just wanted to make sure that my goddaughter had the best people to help her through this unfortunate situation.”

I decided not to mention that I considered gang murders and double-crossing private security agents that had nearly gotten Tessa killed a bit more severe than an unfortunate situation. Instead, I said, “That’s what I’m here for.”

“Thank you,” he said heavily before he lowered his voice as if he thought Tessa might overhear him. “She’s Hawk’s daughter, you know.”

“Yes, she mentioned that.”

“Then you know how important she is.” The retired admiral cleared his throat. “Listen, Hawk knew the end was near. Before he died, I promised him I’d take care of his daughter like she was my own, and I intend to do just that.”

“I understand. So, is that why you hired the private security?”

Tessa watched me closely as if she was expecting to hear the answer to that one.

He took his time responding. “Can we keep this between you and me?”

“I can’t guarantee that, sir,” I said.

He sighed. “No, I suppose you can’t. If I know Tessa, she’ll pry it out of you about two seconds after we hang up.” The fondness apparent in his voice went a long way toward diffusing some of my bluntness.

“The truth is, I always have some kind of protection detail on her when she goes out on assignment,” he admitted. “My usual company couldn’t get anyone to Miami in time for this one, but VeriSafe said they could. It’s the first time I’ve used them.”

I cut my gaze away from Tessa. “In that case, I suggest you make it the last time, too.”

“Don’t worry. I will,” he said.

I heard Tessa drum her fingers on the table. “Ethan, what’s he saying?” she demanded.

“I heard that,” Farr laughed, “and I suppose you’d better tell her. Let me just say that I’ll sleep a lot more soundly, knowing you’re protecting my goddaughter. I owe you one, Ethan.”

“You can count on me, sir.”

“I know I can.”

We ended the call, and I tucked my phone away and looked at Tessa. She seemed a little miffed, to put it mildly.

“So what is it?” she asked. “I know he told you something I’m not going to like.”

“Yeah, he did.” I smirked. “Apparently, this isn’t the first time he’s had you followed on an assignment.”

“Oh, come on,” she groaned. “How many times?”

“Well... all of them.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” she nearly shouted.

I held up a placating hand. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Ugh. You’re right,” she breathed, “but Donald and I are going to have serious words when I get back to New York.”

I could definitely see that happening. Tessa had more or less calmed herself down when the waitress returned with our meals. Just before I could dig in, my phone went off in my pocket.

"That better not be Uncle Donald checking in already," I grumbled as I pulled it out and looked at the screen.

It was Holm.

"My partner. I have to take this," I told Tessa, turning away slightly before I answered. "Yeah, Robbie, what's up?"

"Oh, you know," he said, "just interrupting your dinner with work."

I grunted. "Mission accomplished, then."

"How's that going, by the way? I mean dinner."

"Largely uneaten, at the moment," I said. "Do you have an actual reason for calling, or am I about to hang up on you?"

"Easy, tiger." He chuckled. "I do have a reason, and you don't even have to do anything about it for a few hours."

I waited a beat. "Are you going to tell me sometime tonight?"

"Oh, right. I set up a meeting for you with Dollar Store."

I groaned inwardly. Wendell Muskie, otherwise known as Dollar Store, was a small-time grifter who divided his time between here and the Bahamas, shuttling back and forth on an ancient, rust-eaten speed boat that always seemed a breath away from sinking. He mostly sold shoddy but harmless street merchandise to tourists, but he was occasionally contacted by the gangs to help move heavier things.

The first time we'd busted him, we cut him a deal, and he'd been working for us as an informant for over two years now. His information was almost always good. Unfortunately, he was also a pain in the ass to deal with.

"Ethan, did you just drop dead to get out of meeting up with Dollar?" Holm said in my ear.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Why aren't you meeting with him? He's your informant."

"Hey, he's your informant when I'm off duty," he shot back cheerfully. "Somebody told me to take the night off, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. So, why'd you contact Dollar if you're not working?"

"I had a hunch," he said, "and it panned out. He claims he's got details about Cobra Jon's recovery operation."

That cheered me right up. "Okay, you're forgiven. When and where?"

"Tonight at Mike's, nine o'clock."

I frowned. "Who's Mike?"

"Did you hit your head tackling that guard at Calabar's place?" he snorted. "Mike's Tropical Tango Hut. We were just there less than twenty-four hours ago."

"Oh, that Mike," I said. "How does Dollar know about the place?"

"Apparently he's been going there for years. Fertile tourist grounds, and all that."

That made sense, at least. Just this once, I'd let the coincidence slide. "I'll be there. Thanks, Robbie."

"No problem. Enjoy the rest of your date."

"I'll enjoy it more when you stop talking and let me eat."

He laughed. "Later, partner."

I said goodbye and hung up, then took a minute to consider what to do from here. The idea of sending Tessa back to the Palm Bay didn't sit well with me, even with full police protection in place. That location was too compromised. Truthfully, I didn't even want her out of my sight unless it was absolutely necessary.

Depending on how much info Traynor had gathered and turned over to Benta, it was possible that his friends who may or may not have been in town knew my home address... at least, the one that was on file. I owned a nice little two-bedroom house, the one my grandfather left to me, but I rarely went there. Holm was the only one who knew I actually lived on my boat.

She would be safe there.

"Ethan?" Tessa asked, gently interrupting my thoughts. "What did Robbie want?"

I put the phone away and turned back to her. "Got a new lead on the case. How do you feel about going with me to talk to an informant?"

"Wow, really? That sounds... kind of fun, actually." She smiled, but then her expression faltered. "Are we going right now?"

"Nope. Not until nine o'clock," I told her. "Still plenty of time to eat."

Her smile reformed. "Thank God. I'm starving."

"Copy that."

At least dinner was still warm when we finally got to it.

Chapter 25

The Sunday crowd at Mike's was just as dense and frenetic as Saturday's had been. Apparently, these people didn't have to be at work tomorrow morning. It made sense, considering this place catered to tourists.

Dinner had been nice once Tessa and I had finally been able to eat in peace. I'd even send Gilliam and Burks back to the hotel to wait for a call from me. They hadn't protested too much. Stakeouts and protection details were always exhausting, and I figured everyone could use a break for a while tonight.

Tessa had decided to go easy on the wine at dinner since she was excited about meeting an informant, and I was still sober as a judge. I noticed that, as we wove our way through the crowds at the bar, the party atmosphere wasn't quite as tolerable without a single drop of alcohol in me.

One of these days, I'd have to hang out here when I wasn't on the job.

The stools that Holm and I had occupied last night were empty, so we took seats there. It wasn't long before a familiar, grinning face bellied up to the other side of the bar with a glass tumbler in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other.

"Two nights in a row counts as a regular," Mike said. "Evening, Special Agent Marston. Whiskey sour?"

"Not tonight," I said with a smile, impressed that he'd remembered both my name and my drink. "I'm on the clock right now, so I'll have to go with ice water."

The bar owner raised an eyebrow. "I hope no one's in need of a free mint julep."

"Haven't been shot at yet today." I laughed.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Mike turned a friendly expression to Tessa. “Good to see you again, too,” he said. “Anything for you, Ms. Bleu?”

She giggled. “I’ll have water as well, thank you.”

“What’s so funny?” Mike asked, a mock threat in his voice.

“You’re a poet and you don’t know it,” she said, then gasped and clapped a hand briefly to her mouth. “Oh my gosh, I don’t know where that came from. I haven’t said that since I was ten years old.”

Mike laughed. “Well, you’re right. I am a poet,” he said. “That’s two waters, right? I’m on it.”

“You did it again,” Tessa pointed out. “Sort of.”

“I never said I was a good poet.” He smirked.

“Hey, Mike,” I said just before he turned to leave. “I’m meeting somebody here. Scrawny, twitchy guy, bushy hair and big front teeth, probably wearing a puka shell necklace. If you see him, can you point him my way?”

His brows drew together. “You’re meeting Dollar Store? On purpose?”

“Why am I not surprised you know him?” I said with an amused head-shake. “Yeah, it’s on purpose. Just send him back here.”

“If you say so. Don’t buy anything from him.”

“Definitely not happening. Thanks, Mike.”

He left to get our waters, and I turned on the stool so I was facing the crowds. “He’s usually punctual, at least, so he should be here soon,” I explained to Tessa.

“Okay,” she said. “Hey, why do you call him Dollar Store?”

I shrugged. “Actually, he calls himself that. Says he can get thousands of items for cheap, even though he charges more than a dollar.”

“He sounds... interesting.”

“That’s one word for him,” I intoned.

Mike was back quickly with two tall glasses of ice-choked water and cheap wooden coasters to go with them. He stuck around and made small talk for a minute, but then he had to get back to serving when customers started heaping up against the horseshoe-shaped bar like popcorn in hot grease.

At nine on the dot, I spotted Mike at the front of the bar, talking to the man of the hour. The bar owner leaned in toward Dollar, presumably to speak above the crowd noise, but then he jerked back fast, and his face crinkled. He finished his end of the conversation with broad gestures in my direction before he hurried away from the informant.

“Uh-oh,” I said under my breath. “Looks like somebody’s scoring a ten on the stinker scale tonight.”

Tessa frowned. “What’s that?”

“You’ll see when he gets here,” I told her. “Or rather, you’ll smell.”

Dollar swam through the crowds, creating his own pocket of space as the patrons drew back from him with reactions that varied from mild disgust to jaw-dropping dismay. Tonight, he wore ripped jeans shorts and a grubby t-shirt bearing a crudely drawn black-and-white caricature of a kid with glasses and the words *Harry Pothead* beneath it. The sandals on his feet looked black, but a few spots had been rubbed more or less clean, showing the original brown beneath the filth. The smell reached us before the informant, a thick cloud of mingled diesel fuel, weed, and body odor.

“Oh my God,” Tessa groaned under her breath, turning away as she gagged. “I think your ten was on the low side. He’s more like a twelve.”

“Yeah.” I concentrated on breathing through my mouth until the faint dizziness passed. “Hey, Dollar,” I greeted him when he got close enough, and nodded at his shirt. “You probably shouldn’t advertise that. Weed’s not legal, you know.”

“Hey, man, I ain’t smoking,” he slurred, blinking at me with bright red, glassy eyes. He thrust a grimy hand in my general direction. When I didn’t take it, he lowered his arm slowly.

“Can we do this outside, dude?” he loud-whispered, a puff of sour breath hit my face as he rubbed his palms on his shorts and looked around with a twitching stare. “Don’t want nobody to hear.”

Outside sounded good to me. At least the open air would diffuse some of the stench.

“Lead the way,” I said as I slid from the stool and looked back at Tessa. “You want to come with? If you’d rather stay inside—”

“No, I’ll come,” she said. “It’s got to smell better out there.”

That was probably an accurate assessment.

We followed Dollar through the bar, out the door, and down the sidewalk to the alley next to the building. He stopped at the mouth of the alley and waved us in, trailing behind us. The narrow passage was dead-ended at the back of another building and contained nothing but a rancid, overflowing dumpster that still smelled better than the informant. A single yellow bulb mounted above the trash cast a dirty pool of light, and there was an olive green, solid metal door led out of the restaurant a few feet behind the dumpster, presumably from the kitchen.

We congregated next to the foul metal container, Dollar in front of us with his back to the alley’s entrance. He looked from me to Tessa, and an oily smile formed on his gaunt, malnourished face.

“Your new partner’s a lot prettier than the old one,” he said carefully as if he had to sort his words before he could pluck them from his tongue. “Cept it was Holm that called me. How come he’s not with you?”

“He’s off tonight, and she’s not my partner.” I left it there with no attempt at introductions. He really didn’t need to know her name. “Holm says you have something for us.”

Dollar gave a woozy nod and made a long, awkward attempt to clear his throat. “Man, I’m thirsty,” he slurred. “Cotton-mouth, you know how it is. You got a drink on you? Need to wet my whistle somethin’ fierce.”

“Just spill it, Dollar.”

An injured look formed on his face. “I was just trying to be friendly-like,” he whined.

“We’re not friends,” I said. “Now if you’ve got something, I want to hear it. Otherwise, I’ll get Metro to pick you up for public intoxication.”

He snorted laughter. “Dude, I’m not drunk. I’m friggin’ stoned out of my mind.”

“I’ve noticed,” I said dryly. “Listen, Dollar—”

I pressed my mouth shut over the rest as I caught a glimpse of movement over the informant’s shoulder, by the entrance to the alley. Shadows slinking through shadows. Instinctively, I pulled my piece and pointed it in the direction of the motion.

“Federal agent,” I called. “Identify yourself.”

Dollar’s arms shot up, trembling. “Hey, man! It was just a little bit of weed, I swear...”

“Shut up,” I hissed.

I felt Tessa’s hand on my arm as she shuffled behind me. “What’s going on?” she whispered.

Before I could answer, the crack of a gun exploded in the alley. Dollar jerked and cried out, a red stain blooming rapidly near his left shoulder as he crumpled to the ground.

I fired twice into the shadows, then whirled and grabbed Tessa, shoving her behind the dumpster. “Stay down,” I growled. “Don’t move.”

Without waiting to hear her response, I whirled back and took several leading steps away before dropping to a crouch as I narrowed my eyes to scan the shadows.

Another shot rang out and grazed past me. I didn’t move, my gaze finding the muzzle flash from the dark, where I took aim and fired.

There was a heavy thud. One arm flopped into the light cast by the yellow bulb mounted above the dumpster, a gun held loosely in the hand. The weapon slipped from the fingers on impact with the ground.

Then I heard a faint click.

I dropped flat on the pavement, half a second before three shots flew over my splayed form. I was rolling before the gunfire stopped, tracking the movement of the muzzle flashes as they stuttered closer to my position.

Then I jackknifed to my knees and raked fire across the shadows until I heard something fall heavily.

“Anybody else want to commit suicide tonight?” I called into the silence that rolled over the final thud of the second assailant hitting the ground.

There was a bang behind me. I whirled, weapon pointed, to see Mike rushing out of the metal door with a shotgun in one hand and a flashlight in the other, his eyes wild with anger.

“What the hell...?” he started and then stopped when he recognized me. “Holy Christ almighty,” he blurted. “I’m gonna go broke on that mint julep deal. Everybody okay out here?”

I relaxed by degrees and lowered my gun before turning my attention to Tessa. She was wedged in the back corner formed by the dumpster and the wall, trembling and white-faced but physically unharmed. I walked toward her, held a hand out, and when she took it, I pulled her gently to her feet.

“Sorry I scared you,” I said.

“It’s fine. I’m alive,” she said in a shaking voice. “Is Dollar...?”

I squeezed her hand briefly before I let go and glanced around the corner of the dumpster. Dollar Store was flat on his back, breathing shallowly with his eyelids fluttering. “We’re okay. He’s not,” I said to Mike as I tipped my head toward the informant. “Can you call 911, and do you have a bar rag on you?”

“Yes, and yes.” Mike panned the flashlight beam across the alley to illuminate the motionless bodies of the assailants. At least there weren’t any more live ones lurking around. He leaned the shotgun against the wall, drew a clean rag from his apron and tossed it to me. Then he moved to stand near Tessa.

“Why don’t you come and sit down over here, on the steps?” he asked, gently steering her toward the concrete stoop beneath the door with a hand on her back. “Before you pass out.”

She gave a numb nod, and I left her in Mike’s care so I could tend to Dollar.

He groaned when I knelt beside him and pressed the folded bar towel to the wound in his shoulder, keeping pressure on it. When he tried to lift his head, I pushed it carefully back down.

“Don’t move. We’ve got an ambulance coming,” I told him as I heard Mike speaking in low tones to a dispatcher, giving the address of the bar and a brief description of the scene.

Dollar’s eyes widened. “Ambulance?”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “They won’t arrest you.”

He relaxed but almost instantly tensed again. “They shot me,” he murmured. “It hurts.”

“Yeah, it does. You’re gonna make it, though.”

I suspected I already knew how this happened. It was a fair assumption that the shooters were Black Mambas, and they’d followed this poor, stoned son of a bitch to the bar, probably guessing that with his paranoia, he’d draw me outside. Tessa must’ve looked like an unexpected bonus to them.

Dollar groaned again. “What about Harry?”

It took me a minute to realize he meant the ridiculous shirt he was wearing, now saturated with blood, and I gave his uninjured shoulder a gentle pat.

“I think Harry took one for the team,” I said. “Sorry, man.”

“Oh.” He blinked his red eyes owlishly. “Hey, dude. I was gonna tell you something.”

“Yeah, you were,” I said as I heard approaching sirens in the distance. “Maybe you could do that real quick?”

His nod turned into a wince. “It’s about the boat. The sunk one. I know what’s on it. Fifty bricks of heroin.”

Holy hell. That was a few million dollars’ worth of merchandise. No wonder Cobra Jon hadn’t minded killing a few people to get it back... not that he needed a particular reason to murder people.

“Do you know when he’s going after it?” I said quietly.

“Tomorrow, midnight.” Dollar gave a pained cough, and his body tensed again. “He came to me for a night runner.”

Well, shit. A night runner was a stealth boat, ocean-camouflaged, invisible to radar, and capable of lightless operation with a satellite-run nav system. The military had been using the technology for a few years now, but capable models were just starting to pop up on the black market.

“You give him one?” I asked.

“Gave him a connection.” Dollar’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “So he’ll probably get his hands on one, but that’s for his divers. He’s taking the big ship out... personally overseeing the operation.”

Well, at least that meant we’d be able to spot the cocky bastard out there. Still, we’d never take him out if he saw us coming first. The only way to catch him now would be to find out the location of the wreck and beat him there. “You don’t happen to have the coordinates where the boat went down, do you?”

Dollar shook his head. "Sorry. Watch out for the bomb, though."

"What bomb?"

"Smuggler's insurance," he rasped. "He uses HBT-nitrate with a remote trigger, so even if the boat sinks..."

I sighed. "He can blow it up underwater."

Smuggler's insurance was the name given to bombs with enough explosive power to obliterate a boat, along with any evidence it contained, in case the smuggler got caught. Modern-day pirates were particularly fond of the tactic and liked to wait until authorities boarded the vessel before they shucked off and blew everything.

"All right," I said at last. "Thanks, Dollar. I appreciate the heads-up."

"Enough to spot me a twenty?" he said hopefully. "Business's been slow lately."

Instead of releasing the rebuke that was on the tip of my tongue, I teased my wallet out one-handed, extracted three twenties, and pressed them into his good hand. After all, the man had been shot trying to help me out, and what he'd told me was actually useful.

Dollar grinned at me, showing green-stained teeth. "Thanks, dude."

"Yeah. You're welcome," I said as the first of the emergency vehicles screeched to a halt in front of the alley, painted the space with flickering red and blue. I stayed with him until the EMTs rushed down to take over, then headed back to Tessa and Mike, my brain churning.

If I didn't locate that wreck in the next twenty-four hours, my window to catch Cobra Jon would close, and I wasn't sure if I'd ever get it open again.

Chapter 26

Even though I'd told Tessa that we were headed for a marina, she was still surprised when I brought her on board my boat.

It had taken around two hours to process the scene at Mike's bar. Once the ambulance had collected Dollar Store and whisked him away, probably to discover the joys of medical-grade morphine, I'd gotten preliminary confirmation that the assailants had been Black Mambas from the tattoos they shared with my cave victim. Metro didn't complain all that much when I played the jurisdiction card on the grounds that the attack was tied directly to my case, and I'd had the bodies transported to the morgue at the agency. Doc Dumas would be in first thing tomorrow morning to deal with them.

Now, at just before midnight, we were standing on the forward deck of the Mariah Jean, the Boatel 50 I'd inherited from my grandfather along with the house. It was docked in a private section of the marina with key card access and oversized slips, so we'd have privacy. More importantly, only my partner knew where to find the boat and that I'd be on it.

Named after my grandmother who had passed away just a year before my father, the fifty-foot houseboat was basically a camper mounted on pontoons, with a full-length canopied lounge deck as a second floor. Inside was a living room, kitchen, and small dining room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom with a full

shower. One bedroom had twin bunk beds, the other a queen-sized bed. More than enough room for me and a guest.

Tessa looked around at everything as I led her to the entrance that opened onto the living room, a smile on her face.

"I can't believe you live here," she said. "This is amazing."

"Thanks." I wasn't one to brush off a compliment, and besides, I did love this boat. "Did you want to get out of that dress?"

Her lips parted silently, and a flush rose to her face.

"Sorry," I said as I cleared my throat. "I just meant I've got some more comfortable clothes you can wear if you want."

It took her a minute to answer. "Yes, that would be great," she said huskily.

Pushing down my own response to her reaction, I led her on a quick tour of the place. She gushed over the full-sized appliances in the kitchen, bestowed a charmed smile on the dining room that was really more of a breakfast nook, and gazed a little too long at the queen bed in the master bedroom while I hunted up a pair of drawstring shorts and a t-shirt. She went into the bathroom to change, and I headed for the kitchen to see what I had to drink.

A few minutes later, we were both on the couch in the living room with a cold beer apiece. She'd tucked her legs beneath her and leaned her head on the back cushion, while I slumped back next to her, legs apart and beer held between them, fighting the exhaustion that sunk into my bones.

It'd been a damn long day.

Tessa eventually stirred and tilted her head toward me with a smile. "I still can't believe you knew my father. Did your father know him, too? You said he was a Marine, right?"

"Yeah, he was, but I doubt he knew Hawk," I said, consciously peeling the stiff tone from my voice. "He was killed in action overseas in late '90, at the start of the Gulf War."

"Oh, no," she breathed. "I'm so sorry."

For some reason, I thought I detected a hint of guilt mixed with her sympathy, but I decided not to pursue it. After all, there was zero chance she'd been the one to gun him down.

"Thanks, but it's okay," I said. "I was twelve at the time and we'd lost my mother a few years back, but I ended up living with my grandfather, and... I think that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me."

I was surprised I'd said that out loud. Didn't usually talk about my grandfather much, but not because I was deliberately avoiding the subject or anything. It just never really came up.

Tessa smiled. "Tell me about him. Your grandfather, I mean."

"Okay," I said slowly, wondering why she was so interested. "Well, for one thing, this was his boat. Mariah Jean was my grandmother's name."

"He named it after his wife? That is so sweet."

"Yeah, they were solid together. Tobias and Mariah Lancaster, my mother's parents." I smirked and sipped my beer. "The gold relationship standard that my father claimed he could never live up to. That attitude ended up causing a few problems."

"So, your mom and dad...?"

I shrugged. "My father was a bitter man about a lot of things, especially after Mom died, but you asked about my grandfather," I said to change the subject. "While it was just him and me, things were good. Really good."

Tessa smiled, but she also looked guilty again.

"Okay, lady, that's it." I poked her playfully in the side. "What are you hiding? There's something you're waiting for me to say."

She laughed and held a hand up in surrender. "You got me," she confessed. "Robbie told me about the pirate ship."

"That's what you were trying to get out of me? Wow. You'd make a lousy interrogator."

"I know," she said. "I'm a good listener, though. Tell me about it?"

"What makes you think I need somebody to listen?" I shot back with a smile. "Seriously, I'm not all broken up and tortured about my grandfather. I have no idea why Robbie thinks that."

She reached out and took my hand. "He says you hardly ever talk about it."

"Yeah, well, that's because we're at work most of the time." I gave in with a sigh and relaxed into the couch. "The ship is called the DRAGON'S ROGUE, and it sailed under Captain Mad Dog Grendel in the late 1600s. My grandfather heard stories about it when he was a kid from an old man who claimed to be Grendel's great-great-grandson, who'd heard stories from *his* grandfather and so forth, back to Grendel himself. He was fascinated, so he started digging around some more. Eventually, he figured out that the ship probably went down somewhere in this area."

"So he started looking for it?" she asked.

"Off and on. Mostly, he did a lot of research and found pretty much everything there was to find." I swallowed more beer to wet my throat. "The real searching didn't start until I came to live with him."

Her smile warmed. "You helped him look for it."

"The search for the DRAGON'S ROGUE was what saved me," I admitted. "I was a pretty messed-up kid after my father died. I'd already lost my mom, and once she was gone, with my father deployed most of the time, I was disconnected. I was shuffled around, staying with base families who didn't really want me there but felt like it was their duty to help a fellow Marine. In the year before he was killed, I'd run off from whoever I was supposed to be staying with and break into my own house, where I could take care of myself."

"Oh, Ethan, that's awful," Tessa said with glittering eyes.

I frowned. "It just was. Anyway, the first weekend I was with my grandfather, he asked if I wanted to go out on the boat and search for pirate treasure with him. What twelve-year-old boy could resist that?" My lips twitched into a smile. "We went out just about every weekend. Roamed the seas, kept detailed maps of all the places we'd searched. He taught me how to sail and scuba dive, so I was way ahead of the curve by the time I joined the Navy, and... well, I guess that's it."

"That's it?" She nudged me with an elbow. "You're leaving out the part about what else you found in that cave."

"He told you about that, too? Of course, he did," I muttered. "The ship-to-shore boat, the skeleton, they definitely belonged to the DRAGON'S ROGUE. It's the first

physical evidence that my grandfather was right, and the ship itself has to be around here somewhere.”

Tessa leaned back with a satisfied smile. “Incredible,” she said. “And to think you found it because someone else died in that cave, three hundred years later, and you happened to be investigating the murder. What are the odds?”

To be honest, I hadn’t really thought about the odds. I was just glad I’d found it before someone else did. “I guess they’re about the same as the odds of meeting my CO’s daughter, who lives in New York, at a murder scene in Miami,” I pointed out.

She grinned. “Not a fair comparison. Those odds were fixed.”

“Right. By Uncle Donald,” I elaborated. “Your godfather, the admiral, also a hell of a coincidence.”

Tessa gasped suddenly and sat up straight. “Oh, no. I promised I’d call him tonight,” she said. “I know it’s late, but I’d better do it now. Otherwise, he’ll scramble the whole fleet or something to hunt me down.”

“Yeah, in that case, you should probably call him,” I said with a laugh.

“I’ll just...” She grabbed her purse from where she’d dropped it on the end table next to the couch and extracted her phone. “Mind if I go back there a minute?” she asked, pointing toward the bedrooms. “I’m still a little mad at him, and I might want to yell.”

“Go for it.”

With a hurried thanks, she hustled off into the back. I stood and stretched, then took her half-empty beer and my mostly empty one to the kitchen. It was already late when we’d gotten here, and I knew we were both exhausted. The time to turn in was upon us, especially since I was due in the office by eight, and I still had work to do.

I hoped Bonnie and Clyde were up to the task of locating a downed boat somewhere off the coast because it was the only option I had left, short of torturing Benta for the information. I suspected even that wouldn’t work on him, though.

He had every reason to fear Cobra Jon more than me. All I could do was lock him away for life, but his boss could end him.

I’d just rinsed out the beer cans and dropped them in the returnables bag when I heard soft footsteps behind me. I turned to find Tessa approaching me with a sleepy smile.

“Didn’t hear a lot of yelling back there,” I said with an arched eyebrow. “Does that mean the conversation went well?”

“I decided to make him sweat about what I’m going to do to him when I get back to the city.” She raised a hand to cover a yawn. “I’m sorry,” she said when she finished. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought.”

“Not a big surprise. You’ve been running on adrenaline all day,” I told her.

She stepped closer to me. “Ethan, you saved my life tonight,” she said and held up a finger. “Don’t you dare say you were just doing your job, either. Even if you were, I don’t want to hear it. Just let me be grateful.”

A smile formed on my face. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

“You weren’t?” She blinked. “Okay, then what were you going to say?”

I had every intention of verbalizing my thoughts, telling her how much I admired her even though we'd only known each other a few days. Instead, I found myself with my lips pressed to hers.

That was when I decided the kiss said more than I could with words.

I was reluctant to pull back. When I finally did, she gasped and grabbed for me, catching a handful of my shirt. "All of a sudden, I'm not tired anymore," she whispered.

"Me neither," I murmured, and went in for another kiss.

As it turned out, we only needed one bed that night.

Chapter 27

When Tessa woke, for a moment she was so disoriented that she froze in place. At first, nothing seemed familiar, until she looked at the tanned, sculpted, and very male arm draped around her waist and felt the warmth pressing lightly against her back.

Ethan.

A sleepy, satisfied smile crept across her face as she took in the rest of her surroundings. The soft bed, the sheets tangled around his legs, pale sunlight peeking around the edges of the drawn curtains. The gentle sway of the boat beneath, much calmer than the waves they'd made together last night.

Her body warmed pleasantly with the memories.

There was no clock in the room, and she'd left her phone on the kitchen counter where she'd tossed it after the kiss, so she had no idea what time it was. Ethan breathed slowly and evenly beside her, showing no indication of waking.

She lay there for a few moments, dressed in his oversized-for-her t-shirt and nothing else, enjoying the comfort and thinking she'd fall back to sleep. Her mind and body had other ideas though, and soon, she was almost wide awake and unable to lie still. Reluctantly, she slid Ethan's arm off, pulled on the discarded shorts that had landed on the floor next to the bed, and padded to the bathroom.

Once she'd finished in there, she debated on waking him but decided against it, at least until she checked the time. There was a clock in the kitchen, telling her it was six a.m. She was surprised that she'd woken so early and even more so that she felt completely rested despite getting only six hours of sleep.

Five, she corrected with an internal smile. They'd been making waves for at least an hour.

Figuring that Ethan probably had things covered with regards to when and how he was getting up, she decided to make breakfast, starting with coffee. There was a coffee machine on the counter next to the stove, and she found a can of Columbian roast in the cabinet above it. When she had a pot brewing, she moved to the fridge to see what kind of breakfast-type things were available.

Part of her expected to find standard bachelor contents in the refrigerator. A takeout container or two, a jar of pickles or mustard, maybe a half-empty quart of milk that was starting to sour. She was surprised to find it fully stocked, mostly

with actual ingredients instead of pre-packaged stuff. There was a similar situation going on in the freezer.

Still smiling, she pulled out eggs and milk, hunted down a loaf of bread, and located a spice rack, and then poked through the cabinets for the dishes she needed. She was just removing the first batch of French toast from the griddle on the stove when there was a throat-clearing noise behind her.

She jumped and nearly threw the spatula at Ethan, who was leaning shirtless and barefoot against the fridge as he watched her with a smile.

Damn. He was even sexier when he'd just rolled out of bed.

"So you're a journalist and a chef," he drawled. "I'm impressed."

She huffed through her nose and went back to taking the food off the griddle before it could burn. "Chef? Hardly," she said. "I know how to make three things, and French toast happens to be one of them."

"Yeah? What are the other two?"

"Maybe I'll make them for you sometime," she said with a grin.

He made a noise deep in his throat and crossed the kitchen, coming up behind her to wrap an arm around her waist and plant a soft kiss on her neck. She shivered deliciously at the contact.

"Morning," he murmured before he moved away. "Thanks for making breakfast. I'll fix us some coffee."

"You're welcome," she managed, feeling almost cold after he'd withdrawn. God, she could get used to this way too fast. Right now, she didn't even want to think about what would happen when she had to go home.

She just wanted to enjoy the moment.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in the breakfast nook with steaming mugs of coffee, warm French toast, and brown-and-serve sausage links. Sunshine brightened the windows and warmed the chairs, and the view through them was a gorgeous expanse of sparkling blue water. They ate in comfortable silence, but Tessa knew that soon, they'd have to discuss where to go from here.

Unfortunately, that destination probably wouldn't be back to the bedroom for the rest of the day, though she wouldn't have minded that one bit.

"So," she ventured after they'd both cleared their plates and Ethan had poured them a second round of coffee, "I guess I'll need to go back to the hotel, even if it's just to get my stuff."

He flashed a smile. "No need. I had Metro pack everything up for you and leave it at the marina office last night. We can just walk down there and pick it up."

Warmth filled her at his thoughtfulness, as well as for what the gesture hinted at. "Does that mean I get to stay here with you?"

"Wouldn't have you anywhere else. As long as you're in Miami, my boat is your boat."

"Thank you," she said honestly.

He nodded with an expression that seemed just as suggestive as hers felt.

It was going on seven when they left the boat on foot and headed for the marina office, Ethan in a cotton shirt and the pajama pants he'd eventually worn last night while she was still dressed in his shorts and t-shirt. He didn't seem concerned that they were walking around in their nightwear, so she decided it wouldn't bother her either.

The marina was beautiful. The white sand paths, sun-warmed stones, and swaying palms of the gated private section gave way to a gleaming boardwalk and a cluttered collection of boats in all shapes and sizes on the public side, all bobbing gently beside separate docks. There wasn't much in the way of human movement yet, but seagulls circled and swooped among the sails, and she spotted a few pelicans floating on the breeze or perched on dock posts. Somewhere, a distant bell clanged a steady, soothing rhythm that mingled with the occasional hum of an engine.

"I love this place," Tessa said when they reached the office building. "It must be amazing to live here."

Ethan chuckled. "Most of the time," he said as he opened the glass door and gestured her inside. He was only a step behind her, and the door swung closed once he stepped through.

The interior of the office was a spacious waiting room that looked more like a lounge with soft carpets and comfortable chairs. Three service desks were spaced along the back wall with short queuing lines leading up to them, but the only other person in the place was a sixty-something man behind the third desk. He looked up and smiled when they entered.

"Ethan," the man called cheerfully as he waved them over. "You here for your delivery?"

"Yep. Morning, Claude," Ethan responded as he walked across the room, and Tessa followed him with a curious gaze fixed on the attendant. After spending so much time around Ethan as an agent, it was strange to see someone treating him like a regular person.

"Got it right here for you." Claude grabbed something behind the counter and started pulling it around. He emerged at the end grasping the two wheeled suitcases she'd packed for the trip.

"Three items total," he said as he wheeled them over. "These two, and one laptop bag. I'll grab that."

Ethan took the handles of the suitcase. "Appreciate it. How's your knee doing today?"

"It's behaving so far." Claude chuckled as he made his way back around the counter, where he ducked down and came up with her laptop bag. He placed it on the surface and turned a smile in Tessa's direction. "Are you going to introduce me, Ethan, or do I have to play detective?"

Ethan's laugh was warm. "This is my friend, Tessa," he said. "Tessa, this is Claude."

"Pleasure to meet you," the man said.

She returned the smile. "Likewise. Thank you for holding my things," she said as she reached for the bag on the counter and slung the strap over her shoulder.

"Oh, these are your things?" Claude waggled his eyebrows and looked at Ethan. "You know, Tobias had a lady friend he'd bring out to the boat on occasion after you shipped out. Very classy woman, like yours."

Tessa felt her face warm at the suggestion that she was Ethan's woman.

"Yeah, I remember her. She was good for him," Ethan said. "Thanks again, Claude. We've got to head back, but I'll see you later."

Claude beamed. "You two have yourselves a good day, now."

“Right back at you,” Ethan called as he led Tessa toward the door.

She waited until they were back on the boardwalk to ask. “I guess he knew your grandfather?”

“Sure. Boat’s been here for thirty years now,” he said and smirked. “So has Claude. Probably longer than that.”

“He seems like a real sweetheart.”

Ethan nodded. “Definitely.”

She wasn’t sure what else to say about Claude, so she brought up the subject that couldn’t be avoided much longer, even though she wanted to. “What’s the plan for today?”

He looked off into the distance for a moment. “I’ve been thinking about that. You’re safe here, but I’d rather not stick you on the boat and make you spend the whole day alone while I’m at work. I also don’t want you going back to the hotel.”

“What’s going on with that, anyway?” she asked. “You had those officers go to the hotel last night when I wasn’t even going to be there. Are they really staking out an empty room?”

“Actually, they are,” he said as a smile twitched at his lips. “The hotel records show you as still checked in, and Metro wants any of the guys associated with Benta as bad as we do. They’re hanging around, hoping a few of them turn up so they can arrest them.”

Despite the warmth of the early morning, she turned briefly cold as she remembered the shooting last night, the bodies in the alley. She pushed the images aside.

“Okay, so if I’m not staying on the boat and I’m not going to the hotel... what am I doing?”

“Well, I think you should come to work with me,” he said.

For some reason, that made her ridiculously happy. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s the safest possible place, and you’ll be surrounded by federal agents.” He sent her a smile that conjured an entirely different set of images to her mind. “That, and I’d really like to be around you as much as possible.”

“Mmm, I’d like that, too.”

He grinned. “It’s settled, then. Today is officially Bring Your Tessa to Work Day.” She couldn’t have imagined a better holiday to celebrate.

Chapter 28

I headed for the office a few minutes early so I could get Tessa settled in the conference room before the official work day started. She’d brought her laptop bag along, and she insisted that she would be fine hanging out and doing research on her computer while I tried to set things up for what I hoped would be the final showdown with Cobra Jon.

Sticking her in a room at the agency didn’t feel right, but it was the best option I could come up with. I already cared about her more than I thought was possible. If anything happened to her, I’d never forgive myself.

I didn't think Hawk would forgive me, either, and he was tough enough to come back from the grave and seek vengeance.

At the agency building, I brought her upstairs and down the quiet, carpeted hall past the director's office to the conference room. A large, gleaming wood table surrounded with cushioned chairs dominated the space. There was a combination whiteboard and bulletin board on the right-hand wall, a United States flag and the MBLIS seal on the left, and a counter along the back of the room beneath the window with a sink, coffee machine, and baskets of wrapped snack food.

"This is nice. Quiet," Tessa said as she walked inside, and I followed. She was setting her bag on the table when I closed the door, and she sent me a questioning look. "Why'd you do that?"

"Wanted to give you something real quick," I said as I moved toward her, drew her close, and kissed her.

She moaned softly against me, and it took a lot of willpower to pull away from her.

"You can give me that any time you want," she said with a searing smile.

"Believe me, I want." I grinned back. "For now, though, duty calls, and I think you'll be okay in here until I'm done." I pointed toward the counter at the rear. "You've got your snacks and beverages, and the bathroom is the next door down the hall to the left. There's an intercom next to the door that buzzes the front desk if you have questions or need anything, and I'm a phone call away." I paused and frowned a bit. "You have your phone on you, right?"

She giggled and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Dad, I've got it," she said teasingly. "Now you sound like Donald."

"Hey, there are worse things than being a fleet admiral," I countered with a smile. "Even a pushy, overprotective one."

"I'm still glad you're not him," she said, the look in her eyes telling me exactly why she didn't want to be related to me.

I was giving serious thought to stealing another kiss when there was a knock at the conference door.

"You in there, partner?" Holm's voice called from the hallway. "Sheila from the mailroom said she saw you going upstairs with a mystery woman. Are you decent, or do I need to call for a janitor?"

"Yeah, we're in here," I said with a touch of disappointment. "And decent."

The door opened, and Holm walked in, looking more awake than he usually did at this hour. He carried a cardboard drink holder with three tall coffee cups nestled into it.

"Good morning, y'all," he said as he freed one of the cups and handed it to me. "I am the caffeine god, and I come bearing gifts. This one's yours, Ms. Bleu." He held a second cup out to her.

"You're awesome," Tessa said with a smile. "Thank you, Robbie."

He flashed a smile. "Aw, shucks. 'Tweren't nothing, ma'am," he drawled. "Looks like you're camping out in our fine conference room today."

"Yes," she said as she patted her laptop bag. "I have work to do, too."

"Never a bad thing." Holm wrenched the drink carrier off the last cup and dropped the cardboard into the trash can under the whiteboard. "Ready to get to it, Chief?"

“Always,” I said as I gave a nod to Tessa. “Good luck with your research.”

“Thank you. Good luck with your... uh, manhunt.”

“At this point, it’s a boat hunt,” I said with an amused shrug, “but thanks.”

I followed Holm out of the room and closed the door softly behind us. We were halfway down the hall toward the elevator when he gave me a bemused look.

“I saw that, you know,” he said.

“Saw what?”

“Those morning-after eyes you two were making at each other.”

I refrained admirably from punching him. “Got a problem with that?”

“Nope, not me.” He laughed before his expression sobered. “You look wiped out, though, and I know why. I should’ve been there with you last night.”

I knew that he was talking about the surprise alley shootout and that he felt guilty because he’d been the one to contact the informant. “Robbie, there was nothing you could’ve done,” I told him. “You’d have just given them another target. Besides, we didn’t lose any of the good guys.”

“Yeah, but Dollar got shot.” Anger flashed in his eyes as we stopped at the elevator and he jabbed the down button. “I’m the one who sent him out.”

Knowing my partner as well as I did, I understood that nothing I said right now would make him feel any better. He’d work through it, eventually.

“How’s he doing?” I asked, aware that Holm would’ve checked on him at the hospital at least twice by now.

“He’ll live. It was a through-and-through, and they’re discharging him sometime today. After he has a good, long shower,” he added with a smirk. “Man, he was seriously rank last night.”

“Don’t remind me,” I half-groaned. The ghost of that stench still resided in my nostrils despite the long shower I’d taken myself.

The elevator opened, and we stepped inside and headed for the basement.

“We need to get this bastard, Ethan,” Holm said once the doors closed. “He’s a goddamned force of nature.”

“No, he’s a man,” I said firmly. “That means we can stop him, and we will.”

He gave a grim nod. I’d told him everything I learned from Dollar Store last night while I was still at the crime scene, including the last piece of the puzzle we needed to carry out the sting.

“You think Bonnie and Clyde can pinpoint that downed boat?” he asked.

“They’d better,” I said firmly. “We’re out of options.”

As usual, the techs had beaten everyone to work that morning, and they were both bustling with energy already. We gathered around the main table in the front room of the lab, and I gave them the bullet point version of what happened the night before, along with all the information we had at this point.

“So basically, I need you to find a small, submerged boat in a very large sea,” I concluded. “Think you’re up for it?”

“Hell, yes, we are!” Bonnie cheered. Clyde looked less than convinced until she elbowed him and pointed to the terminal. “We got clearance to access NASA’s satellites last month, remember? Those images are super-high resolution. We should be able to magnify it enough to spot anomalies, and I can draw up an analysis that would let us match a submerged boat.”

Clyde only brightened a little. "I mean, you're right. That'll work, but there's a whole lot of ocean to cover, and we've only got... what, fifteen hours or so to do it?"

"There's not as much ocean to cover as you think," I said thoughtfully. "You're looking for a course from Nassau to the landing zone. He would've planned a route that avoided Coast Guard patrols, so factor that in. Plus, the wreck can't be more than a mile or two out from the coast, tops, because he swam to shore after the boat went down."

"Yes!" Clyde shouted, at once as enthused as his partner. "I can work with that. C'mon, Bonnie, let's do this."

As he rushed over to the terminal, Bonnie grinned at Holm and me. "We'll call you the second we have something," she said. "You guys go do your agent thing and let the lab rats work."

"Will do," I said.

We left the lab, and Holm cleared his throat on the way back to the elevator. "Aren't we out of agent things to do until they come up with a location?"

"Not even close," I told him. "Whether they find it or not, we're going to be out there tonight, and I want as many eyes on that water as possible."

Understanding lit his features. "So we're putting a team together?"

"Exactly."

"Sweet," he crowed.

Birn and Griezmann were at their desks in the squad room when we came in, and Holm made a beeline for Birn, perching on the edge of his desk. "Sorry you had to miss church yesterday, big guy. How'd you like to make up for it with a little midnight sting operation?"

He grunted. "It's too early for that much enthusiasm, Holm."

"I thought people who went to church enjoyed getting up at the crack of dawn."

"Only on Easter Sunday," Birn muttered.

"Buck up, partner," Griezmann said. "It'll be fun. We don't get to work with these clowns very often."

"Yeah, welcome to the circus," I said as I pulled a chair around from an empty desk and sat next to Griezmann. "Let me brief you guys real quick."

I explained the puzzle we'd assembled around the night Sweeting was murdered, how we'd learned about the heroin and the salvage operation, and then I got to the last missing piece.

"Bonnie and Clyde are trying to locate the wreck site, but it's not a guarantee they'll be able to," I told them. "We need eyes out there, and we'll need the firepower too. I don't know how many men Cobra Jon is planning to bring for the recovery."

"Holy shit, I can't believe we're actually going to bring down Cobra Jon," Griezmann said after a beat. "We are so in on this."

"Speak for yourself," Birn said with a crooked smile, and then added, "Hell, who am I kidding? Let's take that cop-killing bastard down."

I nodded and stood. "Knew I could count on you guys," I said as I returned the chair I'd been using to its appointed desk. "We'll keep you updated on the progress. Prep for the op starts at eight tonight, and I want us en route to the coast by ten. Our best chance is to beat him there and be ready when he comes."

With that, Holm and I headed for our own stations to make further arrangements. My first call was to CGIS, and when their central operator picked up, I asked to be connected to Special Agent Parker.

He answered after three rings. "Yeah, this is Parker," he said crankily.

"Hey, Will. It's Marston from MBLIS," I said. "Did I interrupt your beauty sleep?"

"Damn coffee machine's busted again. I'm waiting on Bell to get here with caffeine," he grumped. "So, with that in mind, what can I do for you at pre-caffeine o'clock?"

I held back a laugh. "Nothing as newsworthy as a busted coffee maker. You remember that body in the cave you guys turned over to us this weekend?"

"How could I forget?"

"Turns out the murder's connected to Cobra Jon, but I'm betting you already knew that."

"Yeah, I had that pegged for a gang hit," he said, a note of interest in his voice. "The vic was one of Cobra Jon's boys, though, right? So it must be connected to the Congo Kings."

"Nope. Sniper Benta actually took him out," I informed him, "and that's not even the most interesting part. Turns out our dead gang member's the start of a path that's leading straight to the big guy, and we have an opportunity to take Cobra Jon off the board permanently."

I heard him shuffle around, probably sitting up straighter. "I'm listening," he said, suddenly a lot more alert.

It didn't take long to secure Parker and Bell for the op. Once I hung up with the CGIS agent, I placed a call to Area 7 and spoke to the Coast Guard, asking them to divert patrols away from the area tonight so my target wouldn't get spooked. They agreed after I explained the situation.

I'd just replace the receiver when one of my interior lines flashed with an incoming call from the lab. I snatched it back up.

"Bonnie," I said into the phone, knowing it was her. She was always the one who called. "Tell me you have something."

"I have coordinates for you," she announced excitedly. "Sent you an email with the numbers and a satellite image. It's definitely a submerged, recent wreck, the right size for your victim's boat, and it's about a mile offshore."

A grin split my face. "Thank you, Bonnie. You're the best."

"I know," she said, a smile in her voice. "Clyde and I expect donuts."

"I'll buy you guys the whole damn bakery."

When I hung up with her, Holm was watching me from his desk across the aisle. "Best news ever?"

"Damn right," I said. "We've got the bastard."

Now we just had to get through a midnight firefight and capture mission on open waters, and this case would finally be closed.

Chapter 29

It was a different kind of long day, the type that dragged itself out around mundane but necessary activities while I wanted to do anything but make phone calls and requisition equipment. I was itching to go after Cobra Jon in the worst way, but I knew this had to be handled step by step.

I'd spent most of the morning working my Navy contacts to secure a ship. Most of the MBLIS fleet, such as it was, consisted of Defender Class response boats and SURC patrol boats, built for speed but not so much for stealth. We also had a single guided-missile destroyer which of course the Mambas would spot from miles away. The smaller power boats could be easily hidden, but I wanted to be invisible.

By noon, I had a good lead on a ship and was just waiting for confirmation. Holm and I spent our lunch hour with Griezmann and Birn, mapping out a tactical plan for the op. Then it was back to desk duty and the slow agony of waiting for the right time, though I took several breaks to check in on Tessa. At least time went faster with her.

We'd brought her to dinner at a nearby restaurant with the four of us. It was a good time, a welcome distraction from the tension, but I could think of a few better stress-relieving activities. Unfortunately, they required a little less company than I currently had.

Back at the office, just before eight when Parker and Bell were due to arrive, I headed up to the conference room. I had no idea how long we'd be out tonight, but I knew it'd be late and I didn't want to send Tessa off to some secure location to wait alone. So I'd had a little talk with the director, and she'd agreed to pseudo-protection detail.

Diane Ramsey had decided to stop being pissed at me about the unauthorized arrest attempt when she realized we had a real shot at breaking the Black Mambas. She and Tessa were going to hang out in the conference room and watch movies until our team got back.

When I entered the room, Tessa was standing at the far end, staring out the window above the counter. I cleared my throat, and she flinched slightly and ducked her head before she turned around.

"Ethan," she said, a faint rasp in her tone. "I was just..."

She'd tried to hide it, but her eyes were damp and her nose was tinged with red. She'd been crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked with a jolt of concern as I started across the room toward her. I'd only left her up here less than half an hour ago, when we all got back from dinner, so nothing should've happened between then and now. Maybe she'd gotten a phone call, problems at home or something.

I took her hand, and she gave me a trembling smile. "It's nothing," she said. "I guess I'm just worried."

"There's nothing to worry about," I told her. "We still have agents on the clock, and the director's going to be right here with you. No one is getting in this building."

She tilted her head. "I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you." Her smile grew bemused. "You know, the whole bad guys with guns thing?"

"Oh. That." I laughed. "This is far from my first time facing bad guys with guns, and I've survived so far. I'll be fine."

She didn't look especially convinced. "What if you're not?"

"I will be. Promise." It was a promise I wasn't a hundred percent sure I could keep, but I'd damned well do my best... and so far, my best had always proven good enough. The risks that came with the job weren't ever going to go away, but I knew that. It was something I'd lived with every day since I enlisted.

I'd always be willing to take those risks if it meant making the world safer from people like Cobra Jon.

"Well, okay. If you promise," she said, finally relaxing a little. "I don't suppose you have any idea when you'll be back?"

I shrugged. "Late o'clock?"

"I'll hold you to that," she said with a laugh. "In the meantime, take this with you."

She pulled me in for a kiss, and I was happy to return it.

Just as we separated, something thudded into the door outside the conference room, and a woman's voice muttered, "Oh, crap."

I headed back across the room. "Everything okay out there?"

"Marston, can you please open the damned door?" came the reply.

It was Director Ramsey. I smirked and picked up the pace, pulling the door open to find her standing on the other side of a TV cart, looking flustered.

"Hey, Diane," I said. "Technical difficulties?"

"Something like that." She rolled her eyes, and I stepped back to hold the door open while she wheeled the cart through. "Okay, I've got popcorn, chocolate, and chick flicks," she announced as she steered toward the back of the room. "Hope I didn't forget anything."

Tessa watched her with a smile. "I don't think so. We could probably hole up in here for days with that."

"Exactly. My agents are going to make sure we don't have to, though," the director said as she positioned the cart with the television facing the conference table. There were a DVD player and a dozen or so movies on the shelf beneath the TV, and heaps of bagged popcorn and candy on the bottom shelf. "Isn't that right, Agent Marston?"

"Couple of hours, tops," I confirmed. "We'll be back before the hero gets the girl."

Director Ramsey gave me a nod. "You'd better be. Now go on, get out of here. CGIS is waiting in the squad room."

"Okay, I'm gone. Have fun, ladies... just not too much fun."

Diane shooed me out, and I jogged down the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator to go one floor down. Everyone had congregated around Holm's desk, including Will Parker and Yvonne Bell, who'd dressed in casual black as requested. Bell, the California agent who was filling in for Parker's very pregnant partner, regarded me with the same cool detachment she'd shown at the original crime scene.

"Your partner claims you have a ship lined up for the mission," she said. "You know, Parker and I could've requeued a stealth boat from the Coast Guard. We still can."

"I'm sure you could have," I said with a smile, "but I got us a Ghost."

Parker gave a low whistle, and Holm gaped at me. I hadn't even told my partner that until now since I'd just received confirmation on the way back to the office from dinner.

“You’re shitting me,” Holm said, grinning. “How’d you pull that off?”

“Lieutenant Anderson owed me a favor,” I told him. “He just got bumped up to commander, and he’s stationed at Area 7.”

Birn and Griezmann were just as excited, but Bell remained unimpressed. “What’s a Ghost?” she asked.

“Only the baddest watercraft in the Navy,” Birn told her. “It’s a super-cavitating stealth ship, whisper-quiet at up to thirty knots, and almost completely radar-proof. Totally invisible at night.”

“I had to promise not to damage her, though,” I added with a grin. “Apparently, this ship is Anderson’s baby. He’ll have it waiting for us, kitted out with dive suits, scuba gear, and AAs.”

“Underwater revolvers,” Parker explained at Bell’s questioning look when I mentioned the acronym. “Uses flechettes instead of bullets.”

Agent Bell stepped back and raised both hands, snorting a laugh. “You know what? I’ll leave y’all to the technical stuff. You just tell me where to point and shoot.”

“Copy that.” Parker grinned.

I pulled up the strategies we’d worked out earlier and walked Parker and Bell through them, stressing the need to maintain stealth for as long as possible. We didn’t have a numbers estimate for Cobra Jon’s recovery crew, so we might be facing three guys or three dozen.

It took an hour to brief everyone and gear up, and another hour of drive time and clearance checks at the Navy yard. We boarded the Ghost a little after ten p.m. and spent thirty minutes on systems and equipment checks, then I programmed the coordinates into the nav unit and we were off.

Even Agent Bell was impressed with the Ghost. In addition to its formidable capabilities, it was probably the most futuristic-looking vessel in the Navy’s fleet. The super-cavitating ship looked like an all-black enclosed hovercraft without any obvious pontoons, except the lines of this thing were a lot sleeker and sexier than any hovercraft. Inside, the aircraft-style cockpit with blackout windows continued the theme, making it feel more spaceship than watercraft.

Too bad we didn’t have much of a need for speed on this mission. When the wing-like hull struts were descended into the water, lifting the main hull off the surface to decrease drag and achieve super-speeds, the Ghost basically looked like a Star Wars Imperial shuttle without the top fin.

Even without pushing the ship to max speed, we made good time reaching our destination. According to the satellite images Bonnie had provided, there was a sizeable coral reef near the wreck site with several protrusions that formed a partial atoll. At least a few of the rocky ledges rising above the surface of the ocean were tall and wide enough to further block our ship from view of anything coming out of the Bahamas.

We had the Ghost positioned on the west side of an uneven coral ridge that left a few spots open for line-of-sight toward the islands by eleven. Then, there was nothing to do but wait.

There were no exterior decks on the Ghost, so Holm and I took the lookout detail sitting on the roof of the ship, while the rest waited for our signal inside with the hatch open. We were already in wetsuits, the utility belts outfitted with all the

gear we could fit: standard sidearms in waterproof pouches, AAs and extra ammo, KA-Bar knives, flash grenades and flares for signaling. I also had my seven-inch S37-K blade, one of the weapons I'd kept from my SEAL days.

So far, the view through the night-vision binoculars showed nothing but empty seas.

"So, you and Tessa," Holm said out of nowhere. "Do I detect a thing developing between you, or what?"

"There's something I didn't get a chance to tell you last night about her," I said as I blithely ignored the question. "You're not gonna believe this, but she's Hawk's daughter."

"You're kidding! Holy small world, Batman." I couldn't exactly make out his face in the dark, but I felt him half-glowering at me. "So the reason you didn't mention this to me once all day while we were at the office is...?"

"It's complicated. Guess I just wanted to save the happy reunion and reminiscing old war stories stuff until after the mission," I told him. "Hey, but that's not all. Her boss at the magazine, who's also her godfather, is Admiral Farr."

"Damn. You've seriously been holding out on me," Holm said, but his tone was light. "Don't you think that's a hell of a lot of coincidence?"

"Actually, no. She's the reason you and me got assigned to this case." I paused to scan the horizon with the binoculars again. Still nothing. "Admiral Farr strenuously requested us."

"Huh. Clearance," he muttered. "That clears up a lot." Holm shifted, lifting his binoculars up to search. "You're still avoiding the question, you know. Is there a Tessa thing?"

Even though I'd just looked, I focused on the night-vision peepers again while I considered whether to respond. This time, I saw something. Saved by the drug dealers.

"We've got movement," I said, nudging Holm. "One o'clock."

It took a few minutes for the vessel to come into enough focus to identify, an older style cargo ship that looked familiar even at this distance. Cobra Jon used the big vessel frequently when he wanted everyone out on the waters, including the Coast Guards, that they couldn't do a damned thing to stop him.

"So where's the black runner?" Holm asked as he trained his binoculars in the right direction.

I kept watching, straining to make out as much as possible. Finally, I spotted movement that didn't sync up with the cargo ship, like a dark shadow skimming the darker surface of the water beneath. The indistinct shape was out in front of the much larger vessel.

"It's just ahead of the big one, and they're headed right this way," I told my partner. "Look at the shadows."

Holm paused while he searched. After a beat, he said, "Yeah, I see it."

A grin formed on my face. "Showtime."

Chapter 30

We had to wait until both ships stopped in the water, and that gave us a few minutes to adjust our strategy. The plan had been for one team to disable the black runner while the rest engaged the enemy, to make sure no one escaped. We'd brought explosive charges to accomplish that. Unfortunately, we hadn't counted on two ships, and the explosives wouldn't be enough to cripple the cargo vessel too.

So, we'd improvise. One way or another, I planned on having both of those ships dead in the water.

The black runner stopped not far from the east side of the broken circle of reef walls, and beyond it, the cargo ship's engines chugged down and the vessel drifted to within several yards of the site where Sweeting's boat had gone down. We dove off into the water in pairs, Holm and I first, then Griezmann and Birn, and finally Parker and Bell. The CGIS agents would head for the black runner to plant the explosives while the rest of us hit the big ship, boarding with the grappling hooks that had been stowed on the Ghost.

Our night vision goggles would only operate underwater to a depth of ten meters, but it was sufficient to stay under the surface with scuba gear and still track progress. I rounded the edge of the reef with Holm at my six and saw light coming from the black runner, a spotlight fixed to the belly of the ship that created a murky green pool in the water to a depth of about fifty feet. The dull glow didn't reach the bottom.

As I cut my course to swim around the illuminated area, two dark figures in scuba suits propelled into the glow and headed down, both of them equipped with flashlights. Hopefully, they wouldn't be able to bring up fifty kilos of heroin between them in a single dive... but we still had to be as quick as possible.

We made good time, and it wasn't long before Holm and I surfaced at the rear of the cargo shift. An aft entrance was the least likely to be discovered immediately, and we wanted to prevent anyone from sounding the alarm until it was too late. I tossed the grapnel up to hook the back railing, tugged the line to make sure it was secure, and waited several seconds.

No shouts or gunfire responded so I started the climb.

Once we were both on the back deck and found the area clear, I motioned Holm to the right, and we quickly stripped our tanks and flippers. We were taking the starboard side, heading for the engine room, while Birn and Griezmann would head up the port and quietly take out whatever resistance they encountered to help increase our odds.

We had fifteen minutes until Parker and Bell blew the charges on the black runner, and then all hell would break loose.

The starboard side gangway was clear all the way down when we started moving. I palmed my KA-Bar and kept my head on a swivel, alert for any motion or sound. We'd have to pass several doors coming out of common areas before we reached one that would lead to engine room access, and Cobra Jon's people might come through one them at any moment.

We'd made it about a third of the way when I spotted a door handle engaging as I walked past it. I motioned to Holm, and we took position flattened against the bulkhead on the hinged side of the door.

Seconds later, it swung open and just missed mashing my face. Footsteps sounded on the other side, and they paused as a hand gripped the edge of the door and pushed it shut. Two armed men in fatigues and flak vests, their backs to us, already headed toward the stern.

We moved at the same time to rush up behind them, used the same move to take them down. Reach around, clamp one hand on the mouth and jerk back, drive a blade into the neck through the carotid artery with the other.

They didn't make a sound as they died. Once they'd bled out, we shoved the bodies under the railing to let the ocean claim them and moved on.

As we neared the main entrance near the bow, the suggestion of voices drifted back, interspersed with occasional footsteps and shuffling movements. Someone laughed, and a few louder, indistinct words responded. I figured Cobra Jon would have people keeping a lookout on the forward deck and determined there were at least four up there. At least we wouldn't have to engage them yet.

I reached the main entrance, gripped the door handle, and pushed down slowly. The click of the latch disengaging wasn't that loud, but I still paused briefly to ensure there wouldn't be a response. The sounds of conversation continued from the forward deck, so I pulled the door open.

Behind it was another camo-clad man, arm outstretched as if he'd been moving to open the door from the inside. He stared at me, brow furrowing as he tried to work out whether I belonged here.

I acted before he could decide and headed through the doorway confidently, forcing him to step aside. His features morphed slowly from vague, puzzled curiosity to narrow-eyed suspicion as he looked from me to Holm, but by then I was past him and in a position to grab.

His gaze fell on Holm's bloodied knife. Just as his mouth opened, I clapped a hand over it and yanked back, pressing him against my chest as I dealt the killing blow to his neck.

There was no time to hide the blood that gushed from his wound and splattered all over the floor, and it was too risky to bring his body out to the gangway and send it over the side. The lookouts were too close, and they'd hear something. We couldn't leave the corpse here, though. If it was just the bloodstain, they probably wouldn't raise an alarm right away.

I gestured to the metal stairs just to the left of the door we came through, leading down, and we carried the body down and into the corridor heading sternward. It didn't take long to find a utility closet and stow the dead guy inside.

As we followed the signs, we made our way below to the engine room. Once we'd secured the door behind us, I checked my watch. Five minutes until boom-time, and we had to make sure this room was clear before then.

I went left, and Holm went right. We moved around the perimeter, checking down passageways between massive crankshaft fittings, and came together at the back of the compartment. I lifted my chin in silent question, and Holm gave a nod of confirmation.

"Clear," he said in a low voice.

"Clear," I responded in kind as I scanned the area until I spotted a door marked Maintenance on the rear bulkhead. I headed for it, indicating for Holm to follow as I opened the door onto a tool closet. Just what I hoped to find.

Grinning, I reached in and grabbed two heavy-duty pipe wrenches, and handed one to Holm as I did another time check.

“Two minutes,” I told him. “You ready for this?”

“Affirmative,” he quipped.

We moved off to opposite sides of the compartment again, and I sheathed the KA-Bar and brought out my sidearm, still gripping the pipe wrench with one hand. Unfortunately, I couldn't check in with Birn and Griezmann yet since we'd agreed to radio silence until the fireworks started, but I hoped they were in position.

The clocked ticked down. When we hit zero hour, I shouted, “Go!”

Though we couldn't hear the explosion of the black runner from in here, there was going to be plenty of noise.

I went with the wrench first, smashing through pipes and hoses, shattering gauges, obliterating anything that was vulnerable to a strike from a heavy, dull object. More clanking, crunching, and hissing sounded from the other side of the compartment as Holm did the same. When I ran out of easy things to destroy, I jammed the pipe wrench between a couple of piston gears and started firing on hard targets, punching bullets through essential equipment. Holm's weapon began discharging seconds after mine.

The gunfire would definitely draw attention, and now we'd have to be ready for company... but this ship wasn't going anywhere.

“Move out!” I called, running for the hatch into the engine room as I ejected the spent magazine from my gun and rammed the new one home.

We reached the exit at the same time. Holm threw the door open, and I rushed through into the passageway and made for the ladder to the next deck above. My partner was right behind me.

The muffled sounds of chaos above decks drifted down, and I heard multiple footsteps pounding the stairs, headed our way. We probably wouldn't make more than one deck before they engaged which would put us two levels below the surface.

So we just had to fight our way up top.

When we hit the next deck, we split off to either side of the ladder. It wasn't long before they came down fast and hard. I took the lead man down with two shots to the chest, and Holm caught the guy behind him with a side shot, sending him stumbling forward to collapse over his fallen companion.

That was when the rest of them started to return fire.

We dashed off in opposite directions along the passageway and took cover, flattening behind the narrow ribs that protruded from the bulkheads at regular intervals. Bullets blasted and careened off steel beams and iron deck grating, and the hot smell of cordite filled the air.

I shot the thugs down one by one as they advanced until finally the last two in line decided to do an about-face and retreat. With their backs to me, it was easy to drop them and leave them alive.

I had questions, and they'd better have answers.

A final shot sounded from Holm's direction as I approached the pair of groaning men collapsed on the deck, ten feet from the stairs.

“You okay, partner?” I called out.

“Course I am,” he responded as he made his way toward me around the bodies he’d dropped. “Looks like you caught a couple of fish.”

I shrugged, and my gaze flicked down to the guys at my feet. One of them, the one I’d shot in the leg, was trying to reach for a weapon lying on the deck.

Before he could snag it, I stomped on his wrist and aimed my sidearm at his head. “Game’s over, snake,” I told him. “Where’s Cobra Jon?”

His buddy, who’d taken a nasty shoulder shot, kicked out at him and glowered. “Keep your mouth shut,” he gritted through his teeth.

“Huh,” Holm said as he came up beside me. “I don’t think that one is going to cooperate.”

“I think you’re right,” I said, using the same genial tone as my partner. “What should we do about that?”

“Shoot him?”

“Okay,” I said and put a bullet through his forehead.

The remaining man let out a horrified gasp and tried to yank the arm that was pinned under my foot free.

I stepped down harder. “Where’s Cobra Jon?” I repeated in flat tones.

“Forward deck,” he gasped. “Please...”

I looked at Holm. “You believe him?”

“Sure,” he replied. “He looks like he’s allergic to bullets.”

“Okay, then.” I reached down and hauled the trembling man to his feet, and then spun him around and pushed him face-first against the bulkhead.

“You’re under arrest,” I told him as I grabbed a pair of zip-cuffs from my utility belt and secured his arms behind his back. “That is unless you move from this spot before our backup gets here to take you into custody. You do that, and we’re going to escalate things from arrest to death. Got it?”

The man nodded frantically. “I got it,” he stammered.

“Good.” I turned him to face forward and shoved him down into a seated position, and then peered up the ladder. Didn’t hear or see anyone else coming down. I still had no idea how many people were on this ship, but we had to have made a dent in Cobra Jon’s ranks by now.

We headed topside. There was no movement all the way up to the door we’d come through from the starboard gangway, but even before I opened it, I could hear activity outside. I stood for a moment with a hand on the latch and looked back at Holm.

“I’ll take the deck,” I said. “Need you to head to the rendezvous point and make sure Birn and Griezmann made it. They might need backup.”

A frown creased his brow. “If Cobra Jon is really there, and he’s got more backup...”

“Yeah, I know. I won’t engage if there’s too many to handle.”

“Why am I not buying that?”

I smirked and gripped his shoulder. “Because you’re a smart man with a long memory. I really mean it this time, though. I want the son of a bitch bad, but I’m not dying for him.”

“Still not buying it, but whatever,” he said with a sigh. “If you die, I’m taking your desk. You have a better view.”

“It’s the same damn view you have.”

“I don’t mean the windows. I mean Gisela Carson’s desk,” he said. “She’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes and grinned. “You’re not getting my desk, because I’m not dying. Neither are you,” I said. “Now get moving.”

“Fine. I’m dust.” He still hesitated, just for a second, and then turned and ran off toward the port side. When he was out of sight, I opened the door.

The slight sounds I’d heard through the bulkhead clarified into an angry voice barking orders, and the shuffle-click of weapons locking and loading. I checked my own weapon, decided that half-capacity wasn’t enough, and quickly replaced it with a full magazine.

I crept along the bulkhead to the corner, drew in a deep breath, and swung around with my weapon at the ready.

There was no time to assess. I fired on anything that moved as I ran on a diagonal course toward the nearest cover, belatedly watching three men in camouflage drop to the deck. Return fire whizzed past me, and I tumbled behind a utility box and took a moment to catch a quick breath.

When I popped up, there was one man advancing on my position. I squeezed the trigger twice and put him down, then ducked again.

No answering shots were fired, and I knew that none of the guys I’d hit had been Cobra Jon. Cursing under my breath, I eased a glance around the corner of the box and spotted movement on the port side of the deck.

I jumped up in time to see Cobra Jon perched on the top rail in full scuba gear. He spotted me, and his features contorted in rage as he yanked his face mask down and tumbled backward over the side.

“Goddamn it!” I shouted, pounding across the deck after him. I smashed into the rail, leaned over fast, and fired uselessly into the water below, where he’d already vanished.

He had to be headed for the dive site. We’d stopped them from getting away, but the bastard would want to set off his smuggler’s insurance and destroy what remained of the wreck. Then his lawyers would find a way to get him off whatever charges we threw at him. Again.

No way was I going to let that happen.

I cursed inwardly as I realized that in order to follow him, I’d have to get to the aft deck and retrieve the rest of my gear. It would be almost impossible to catch up with a head start like that since he’d be moving a hell of a lot faster through water than I could on the ship.

That was when I spotted the discarded tanks and flippers spilling from a half-open storage hatch a few yards down the port gangway, and a smile eased across my face. Thank you, Birn and Griezmann. They must’ve carried their gear up the gangway en route to their entry point, rather than leaving it behind.

With a mental reminder to thank them for their foresight, intended or not, I strapped a tank in place, secured a pair of flippers on, and followed Cobra Jon into the drink.

Chapter 31

Though I couldn't see it yet, I could smell the scorched results of Parker and Bell's successful detonation as I dropped feet-first from the side of the cargo ship. With both vessels crippled and the big ship secured, the only thing I needed to complete my royal flush of satisfaction was Cobra Jon in custody.

Once I was in the water and oriented toward the black runner, I made out a faint bubble of light in the distance moving away from me. So he had a waterproof flashlight like his divers, and I could pretty much guarantee his face mask had night vision too. He wouldn't have risked his precious person on a blind swim.

I torpedoed toward the light, maintaining a streamlined body position as I powered through the water with strong dolphin kicks. Though I didn't have a flashlight on me, I did have calcium flares that would operate underwater. For the moment, however, I didn't need them.

As long as I kept a line of sight on the light blob that was Cobra Jon, I'd be able to avoid giving away my position with a flare. I had an advantage in that he didn't know I was following him, and I wanted to keep it that way.

My body strained, flagging toward exhaustion as I pushed hard to increase my speed, but I kept it up. Slowly but surely, I was gaining on him. The distance between the black runner and the cargo ship wasn't that far, but I suspected the gap had widened a bit through drift when they'd powered the engines off, and I'd have a lot of ground to cover.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been swimming when the water took on a lighter cast, and I saw the murky, glowing pool that had been beneath the black runner when we swam by earlier. The explosion hadn't impacted the spotlight, but when I looked up, I could pick out jagged shapes of floating debris that said Bell and Parker had done sufficient damage. I'd also closed the distance even further because the moving blob ahead of me had become a vaguely defined human silhouette.

I was within ten yards of the spotlight when Cobra Jon stroked toward the center of the glow and bent down to swim for the bottom.

Opting to hide my presence from him for as long as possible, I turned into a downward course just outside the reaches of the spotlight and drove hard. Just as I caught a glimpse of the ocean floor below, my night vision sputtered for several seconds and then went dark. I'd passed the ten-meter depth, and there was nothing but blackness below me.

I kept moving, touched bottom, and found my feet quickly. A few pivots later, I made out the gleam of a flashlight illuminating parts of a wooden boat, resting at a drunken cant on the sandy bottom. The vessel was largely intact save for a large, jagged gash in the hull, below the water line on the port side.

Sweeting must have scraped across part of the reef and kept going without noticing that he was taking on water until it was too late.

I powered through the water toward the wreck, drawing the AAI along the way. The gleam of the flashlight winked from sight just as I made contact with the side of the boat, and I knew Cobra Jon was making his way below decks to trigger the chemical bomb.

Time was running out.

It was time to risk being seen. I pulled a flare and activated it, bathing the immediate area in a red glow. I made my way to the top deck, quickly located the hatch, and swam into the murk beneath.

A door at the back of the submerged cabin stood ajar, and light glowed behind it. I stroked over to it, tossed the flare through the gap, and then immediately grabbed the edge of the door and wrenched it wide open through the water, steadying the revolver in my other hand.

Cobra Jon had the flashlight tucked under an arm, his back to me as he tried to pry open a panel on the back wall with a crowbar. For the first time, I noticed that his black mamba walking stick was holstered to his back, sword-style, and I wondered why the hell he'd brought his cane for a swim.

Suddenly he turned away, alerted by the flare, and looked right at me. Sheer outrage flooded his face behind the mask.

He tried to lash out with the crowbar, but the gap between us was far too wide. Without flinching, I pulled the trigger on the AAI, firing a flechette in his direction. The projectile zoomed through the water and left a tight trail of expanding bubbles in its wake.

He tried to move, but the shot tore through his wetsuit and punched into his left arm. Blood streamed and clouded the water, and the snarl that escaped him was almost audible as he lifted his feet and kicked off the wall, aiming himself in my direction.

I squeezed off another shot that missed him by half an inch before he plowed into me, driving me back against the door. My gun arm snagged on a jagged section of deck board, and the AAI slipped from my gloved hand.

Instead of engaging me, Cobra Jon kept moving, streaking back out through the hatch toward open water.

I didn't have time to light another flare and retrieve the weapon. I jerked my arm free and kicked after him, surfacing from below decks in time to see him making a beeline for the surface. I pushed hard and closed in on him as we entered the dull green glow cast by the spotlight overhead until I was close enough to reach out and grab his ankle.

He jerked as his forward momentum halted, and then bent his head to glare down at me with pure hatred.

I held tight to his ankle one-handed and stretched for my KA-Bar with the other. Just as I wrapped my fingers around the hilt, Cobra Jon wrenched his captive foot up and doubled at the waist, his hand slapping my face mask as he scrambled for my mouthpiece.

I ducked my head and slashed the blade blindly through the water in a wide arc, catching nothing but drag resistance.

When I raised my face to him again, he'd drawn his walking stick. Only this time I realized was a long blade protruding from the bottom end of the cane, and he was plunging it down toward my outstretched arm.

At least now I knew why he kept the cane around.

I had to let go of him before he could skewer my forearm. The blade sliced through the back of my glove instead, gashing my hand deep enough to burn and throb as the wound flooded with saltwater.

Once again, the son of a bitch refused to stick around and fight, and he started stroking straight upward again.

I was right on his heels, but he broke the surface first. When I came up, he was pulling for the smoldering husk of the black runner, and the rope ladder that dangled crookedly over the side to trail out into the water.

He was fast, I'd give him that. What I wouldn't give him was the chance to escape or to retrieve a different, deadlier weapon.

I pulled my mouthpiece out and slammed the KA-Bar back into my belt, freeing both hands to swim after him. He was still struggling up the ladder when I reached it, grabbed the nearest rung, and pulled as hard as I could. There was a ripping sound from somewhere above as one of the ropes gave way and the ladder dropped further, throwing him off-balance.

He clung to it one-handed, yanked one of his flippers off, and threw it at me like an awkward frisbee.

"A little childish, don't you think?" I shouted as I swatted the makeshift projectile from the air.

He was busy throwing the other one. Without the flippers slowing him down, he scrambled up the precarious ladder with renewed speed.

I ditched my own footwear and power-climbed after him.

Cobra Jon vaulted over the deck railing on the black runner seconds ahead of me, but he failed to rip the rest of the failing ladder away and drop me back into the water. He'd probably calculated that he didn't have time for that, so he'd go for a more substantial weapon instead.

I wouldn't give him the chance.

Two rungs later, I gripped the railing and pulled myself up, swinging my legs over in a single fluid motion. I barely had time to take stock of the destruction: the blackened deck flooring, the smoldering forward cabin, the mangled remains of a man who'd presumably been piloting the craft blasted onto the raised platform that overlooked the deck. I spotted Cobra Jon running for an aft hatch and sprinted after him.

He was reaching for the handle when I tackled him into the wall.

With a roar of outrage, he tensed and drove a knee into my stomach. I let out a gasp, and he stomped hard on my foot and shoved me back. Though I only stumbled a few inches, it was enough for him to squirm out and stumble back as he tried to orient his cane for an attack.

I pulled my seven-inch blade free and ducked under his swing. As I sprang up and lunged at him, he sliced a palm karate-style against my forearm, knocking my swipe at his chest away. My blade only dragged along his side without causing any damage.

"I'm going to kill you slowly, Agent Marston," he spat as he swung the cane again.

Instead of dodging the blow, I stepped forward, and the wooden stick slapped my side. Then my hand was at his throat. I squeezed hard, reaching back to wrench the walking stick away from him and toss it across the deck.

"You shouldn't play with knives," I told him dryly. "Somebody might get hurt."

He struggled and lashed out with fists and feet, but I maintained my grip and circled around his body so I was behind him, then reached over his shoulder and

locked him in a chokehold. His gasps dwindled to wheezing shivers and his flailing limbs slowed as his air supply ran out.

Just before he hit unconscious, I bent my head close to him. "If I was going to kill you, I'd have done it by now," I said, "but I don't want you to die. I want you to pay."

Then I increased the pressure just a fraction, and he went limp.

My body was screaming for a breather, but I couldn't stop yet. He had to be secured first. I refused to leave him even the slightest chance to get away, whether it was a legal loophole or an actual escape attempt.

I flipped him over with a foot, unstrapped his dive tank, and then zip-cuffed him with his hands behind his back. I added another set just below the first, and then pushed his splayed legs together and cuffed his ankles for good measure. Once that was done, I dragged him over to the starboard side railing, currently facing the direction of the cargo ship, and thought about tying him to the rail while I was at it. That would probably be overkill, though.

Finally, I stripped off my own tank and dropped it on the deck.

I removed my gloves to inspect the wound on the back of my hand. The bleeding had slowed somewhat, thanks to the saltwater, and the long, ragged gash was painful but not critical. He hadn't cut any tendons, at least. I stood there for a moment as I flexed my slashed hand and looked around, idly wondering whether there was anything on this boat that I could use to bind the wound. That was highly unlikely, so I'd just bleed until I could rendezvous with the rest of the team.

However we were going to make that happen.

We hadn't planned on being this separated, and I had no way, short of dogpaddling with a hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight, to drag Cobra Jon's unconscious ass back to either the cargo ship or the Ghost. Radio contact was out, too, since the blast had destroyed the black runner's control room in the forward cabin.

My gaze fell on the snake's head staff lying on the deck a few yards away, its blade still exposed. I walked over, picked it up, and carried it back to where Cobra Jon lay as I inspected the weapon a bit more closely. The blade hadn't been present when I glimpsed it underwater the first time, I was sure of it. That meant there had to be some kind of mechanism that allowed him to keep it hidden.

I ran a thumb along the length of the wood until I encountered a slight skip in the smooth surface. An almost imperceptible line, thinner than a pencil sketch, traced the circumference of the staff about six inches above the point where it joined the blade. I gave it an experimental twist, thinking that the blade portion might screw into the handle, but it didn't budge.

When I turned my inspection to the head of the staff, I discovered a tiny button beneath the snake's jaw. I pressed it, and the walking stick separated at the joint I'd found.

"What a fun little toy," I said with a smirk as I bent to scoop the bladed section off the deck. There was a slot in the bottom of the upper portion, and the blade slipped inside cleanly, closing with a faint click as the quick-release mechanism engaged.

I grinned and weighed the staff in my hand, appreciating its heft.

“I’m keeping this,” I said to the unconscious gang leader. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Cobra Jon didn’t answer, so I decided that he didn’t mind at all.

I turned my thoughts back to contacting my team and decided that for now, my best bet was to set off some flares and hope at least one of them was in a position to see them. Just as I reached for the flare pouch, I saw a light coming from the cargo ship’s location, brightening steadily. I couldn’t make out what was behind the glow, but the source of the light was definitely approaching the black runner.

As I stood at the rail trying to make it out, I heard the buzz of a small engine, then a few minutes later, a voice rising above it.

“Ethan!” The shout that echoed across the water belonged to Holm. “Goddamn it, Ethan, where are you? Ethan!”

Yes. He must’ve launched one of the cargo ship’s lifeboats, and he wouldn’t have done that unless Birn and Griezmann were safe and they’d already searched and secured the ship. I hadn’t exactly had time to tell anyone that I was going to swim after Cobra Jon.

I snatched a flare and ignited it, and then held it above my head to wave it back and forth.

“There!” I heard Holm shout, and the approaching light swelled a lot faster.

Still holding the flare high, I leaned back against the railing to wait.

This was going to be a sweet trip home.

Chapter 32

It was going on four in the morning when Holm and I got back to the agency with Cobra Jon stuffed unceremoniously in the back seat. He’d been drifting in and out of consciousness, spitting threats whenever he was awake, and I couldn’t wait to be divested of the poisonous bastard. Parker and Bell had stayed behind at their own office, and I’d sent Birn and Griezmann directly home from the Navy yard with a promise that they would receive no grief from the director for not immediately filling out their paperwork.

If Director Ramsey even hinted that she expected any of us to write a single word of after-action report tonight, I’d shove my badge up her ass. Figuratively, of course.

I’d let Holm drive back to the office so I could place calls to the director, and to Tessa. I’d assured them both that everyone was fine, mission accomplished, but I’d refrained from giving many details, even though Diane had pressed for them. I was too damned tired to talk that much.

The first stop was holding, where I informed the guards that our prisoner needed medical attention, but he was absolutely not to be placed in the med ward. The on-call doc could see him behind bars, with armed guards shoving weapons at various vital organs so they could shoot him if he breathed wrong.

Everyone knew who he was, so no one had a problem with the instructions.

Once we’d left Cobra Jon in not-so-friendly hands, we headed for the main agency building and went straight to the conference room. The door was slightly

open, a wedge of light spilling into the semi-dark corridor, and the sounds of a movie at low volume drifted through the opening.

I nudged the door aside with a foot and peered into the room. Tessa and Diane were seated across from each other at the far end of the conference table near the television, a large, mostly empty bowl of popcorn and several candy wrappers strewn across the surface between them.

However, neither of them was actually watching the movie. They were both facing the door, and they scrambled from their chairs when the door opened fully. Tessa practically ran the length of the room, while Diane moved at a more sedate pace, a bemused smile on her lips.

“Ethan, thank God,” Tessa breathed as she threw her arms around me. “Are you really okay?”

I hugged her back. “Of course I am.”

She shivered briefly before she drew away and turned a beaming smile in Holm’s direction. “Robbie,” she said. “You’re okay, too.”

He quirked a grin. “What, no hug?”

Laughing, she stepped over and hugged him.

I refrained from glaring.

“Okay, put a cork in the love fest,” Diane said jokingly as she drew up and leaned in the doorway, regarding us with a cautious gaze. “So just to recap, Jon Calabar is currently alive and in a holding cell, and you have... how did you put it? A metric shit-ton of evidence.”

I nodded. “Thirty kilos is close enough to a metric shit-ton, right?” I asked. “That’s how much his divers recovered before our CGIS friends blew their ride. We’ve also got the smuggling boat, a nice fat cargo ship full of damning stuff, and... what else, Robbie?”

“Five gang members we left tied on the ship for the Coast Guard to pick up, all of whom are willing to testify against Cobra Jon in exchange for us not killing them,” he chimed in with a smile. “Think that’ll do it, Director?”

“Yes, I do,” she said with a highly satisfied expression. “Fantastic work, gentlemen.”

Holm offered a mock bow. “Thank you, thank you,” he intoned.

“Diane,” Tessa said suddenly, turning toward the other woman, “thank you so much for letting me stay here and for staying with me. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I was alone tonight.”

“You’re very welcome. It was a pleasure,” the director said with a smile. “Now, I think I’ll turn you over to Ethan because I really need to go home.”

“I second the going-home motion,” Holm said as he stifled a yawn.

I was about to voice my agreement when my phone buzzed in my pocket. For a moment, I debated not even looking at it, because I couldn’t imagine anything good coming from a phone call at this hour, but I dragged the device out with a frown and glanced at the screen.

It showed as the line coming from the lab.

I sighed and gave everyone an apologetic look. “Guess I’d better take this,” I said, moving a few paces away before I answered. If there had been some kind of screw-up with anything our techs had processed, it could torpedo the whole

operation. Cobra Jon's lawyers were known for getting gang charges dismissed with even the slightest flaw or loophole.

"Yeah, Bonnie?" I finally said into the phone.

"Ethan! Can you come down to the lab?" she said excitedly.

I blinked a few times. At least this didn't sound like bad news. "I will, but only if you answer a question for me," I told her.

She hesitated for a second. "Okay, what?"

"What the hell are you doing in the lab at four in the morning?" I teased.

A laugh responded. "Oh, you know me and Clyde. There's always something to do, right? Besides, we had to make sure you guys came back okay."

"You could've done that from home, you know," I said with a chuckle. "Any chance you could tell me why I'm coming down to the lab?"

"It's a surprise."

"Good or bad?"

"Really good," she said. "And it's not about the case."

I smiled. "I'm actually relieved to hear that. Be there in a few minutes," I said before ending the call.

When I replaced my phone and turned back, Holm was glowering at me. "Listen, I don't know what that was all about, but my bed is not in the lab," he said. "Unless you really, desperately need me down there, count me out."

"Go home," I said with a smirk. "She didn't tell me what they want. Whatever it is, I'll fill you in tomorrow."

"Thank you," he said. "I'm out of here."

He headed for the stairs, and Diane left as well, saying she had a few things to wrap up in her office before she headed home. That left me alone in the corridor with Tessa.

Just what I'd been hoping for earlier in the day, but I was too wiped out to take advantage of it. Instead, I took her hand loosely and smiled.

"Looks like I have a minor delay before we get out of here," I said. "That is, assuming you want to stay on my boat again tonight? It's safe to go back to the hotel, but it's a little late."

"Plus, all my stuff's on your boat," she added. "Even if it wasn't, though, I'd rather stay with you."

I was glad to hear that. "So, how tired are you? I do have to go downstairs for a minute. You can wait in the conference room if you'd like, but if you want to meet Bonnie and Clyde, you're welcome to join me."

She smiled broadly. "You work with Bonnie and Clyde?"

"Yeah. Not their real names, but it's close enough." I laughed. "I take it that means you want to come with me."

"Yes, please."

I brought her to the elevator, and we rode down in comfortable quiet. She looked around with interest as we walked down the hall to the lab, and when I brought her inside, her eyes widened in delight. "Wow, look at all this equipment," she gushed, then flashed a grin at me. "I thought you said your job wasn't like all those cop TV shows."

"Okay, well, most of it isn't," I conceded with a chuckle, "except maybe this part."

We'd only taken a few steps into the lab when Bonnie emerged from the back room with Clyde in tow. They were both smiling from ear to ear, and Bonnie carried a folder in one hand.

"Oh, you brought company!" she called on the way toward us. "Hi, there," she said to Tessa. "I'm so glad Ethan finally brought someone from the outside world with him. We don't get out much." She winked and held a hand out. "I'm Rosa Bonci, but you can call me Bonnie."

"Tessa Bleu," she said happily as she shook.

Bonnie gasped. "You mean Tessa Bleu with the *National EcoStar*? Oh my gosh!" she practically squealed. "I read you all the time, you know. Absolutely loved your piece on the Galapagos penguins. Oh, and the one on the Taylor oil spill? So insightful, and your photos are just fantastic!"

Tessa looked stunned for a moment in the face of Hurricane Bonnie, but then she laughed and blushed slightly. "Thank you so much. I never really get to meet readers, and I'm delighted that you know my work."

"Know it and adore it," Bonnie confirmed and then shot me a narrow-eyed glare. "Why didn't you tell me that *the* Tessa Bleu took those pictures of your suspect?"

"Er, sorry. I had no idea it was relevant to your interests," I said. "Does that mean there's more than one journalist named Tessa Blue?"

Bonnie rolled her eyes at me and smiled again. "We're not even finished with the introductions," she said, gesturing to her partner. "This is Joe Clime, otherwise known as Clyde."

"Pleased to meetcha," Clyde said as he shook hands with Tessa.

"There, now we're all acquainted," Bonnie announced, obviously in a hurry to get to her big news. "You're never going to believe what we found, Ethan. I mean, my jaw's still on the floor."

It seemed to me that her jaw was attached right where it was supposed to be since she had no trouble jabbering away, but I didn't mention that.

"You're right," I drawled. "I can't believe it, because you haven't told me what it is yet."

"It's about your skeleton. Remember when I said we might be able to identify him through DNA if we could get a match to a modern person and trace the genealogy?"

"Yes, I remember," I said slowly.

She thrust the folder at me. "Well, it worked," she said triumphantly. "I managed to extract a DNA sample, and Clyde ran it through the usual channels. Let me tell you, we were both shocked when we got a hit almost right away."

I glanced at the folder without opening it. "Whatever's in here, you know I probably won't understand a word of it. How about you just tell me?"

"Okay, fine," she grumbled good-naturedly. "The DNA is a partial match to someone who's already in our database."

"And that person would be...?" I said as I twisted my hand in wrap-it-up gesture.

Bonnie's grin practically swallowed her face. "Special Agent Ethan Marston."

"What?" I whispered as the breath left me. "Wait a minute, that doesn't make any sense. I must've left trace DNA on something, and your samples got contaminated."

“You know, I thought that too, at first,” Bonnie said. “So I went ahead and processed another extracted sample from a different area, with completely sterile tools, and the same results came back.”

I shook my head. “How is that even possible?”

“Well, you’d know if you actually looked at the report I just handed you,” Bonnie shot back, still smiling. “The remains you found in that cave belong to Lord Addison Finch-Hatton, and you are his direct descendant.”

Suddenly I felt a little light-headed but in a good way. This might have been one hell of a bizarre coincidence, but if it was true, I wanted to believe it. Finding Lord Finch-Hatton opened up a whole world of possibilities and unlocked more potential than I ever thought possible.

In a nutshell, it meant that if I did manage to find the DRAGON’S ROGUE, I had a solid claim of ownership. I was related to the original owner.

“It’s all in there,” Bonnie said, reaching out to pat the folder. “DNA comparisons, genealogy reports, everything. You should probably just take that home with you because you look dead on your feet.”

I gave a weak laugh. “Thanks for noticing,” I said, and looked at her fondly. “Thank you. Both of you. I can’t believe this. You went above and beyond, and I appreciate it more than I can say.”

“You can grovel tomorrow,” Bonnie said and winked. “Go on, get out of here.”

After a round of goodnights, I walked Tessa back out to the elevator, half-dazed and almost too excited to sleep. At least it would keep me awake for the drive home, where I was sure I’d have no problems crashing, especially with such beautiful company.

“This is really amazing,” Tessa said quietly as we boarded the elevator. “You know, maybe that’s why your grandfather was so fascinated by the ship when he heard about it, and why you were so enthusiastic when he shared it with you.” She lifted an awed smile. “It’s in your blood.”

“Maybe,” I agreed as her words stirred something in me, though I knew I wouldn’t be able to truly process any of this until I got some sleep. “For now, I think we should both focus on dragging ourselves out of this building, into the car, down to the marina, and directly to bed.”

Her smile turned suggestive. “I really like that last part,” she said huskily.

I decided that maybe sleep could wait for at least a little while after I brought her home.

Chapter 33

The next morning found Tessa and me on the deserted beach where it all started, at just before eleven. She had her photography equipment, and I had a bag of gear and my grandfather’s old metal detector. I might’ve only gotten four solid hours of sleep, but I felt pretty great.

After I coordinated the plan with Holm, I’d left a message on Diane’s cell phone informing her that neither of us was coming into the office today unless there was a life-threatening emergency, and if she didn’t like it, she could fire us. We both

knew damned well that she wouldn't, and the vacation days we'd taken were so few and far between that if we combined them, it'd add up to about a year off.

He'd just wanted to go back to bed, but I had a lot more I wanted to do, and none of it had anything to do with the Black Mambas or the Congo Kings or crime in general. I was glad to put all that out of my head for the day.

The temperature had already hit eighty degrees, and the air was heavy with humidity. Here on the shore, though, a steady ocean breeze kept the dampness circulating and cooled things down just enough to make the atmosphere close to perfect. Days like this, I was grateful to live in Florida.

I breathed in the fresh air and sunshine as Tessa and I walked along the sand toward the entrance to the cave. She'd already explained that she had all the shots she needed of the exterior, and she only wanted me to wait until she'd gotten broad photographs of the inside before I tracked any footprints through. I didn't have a problem with that.

When we reached the cave, I dumped my stuff, plunked down in the sand near the entrance and gave her a little wave as she headed in. Before long, her camera was flashing away, strobing the mouth of the cave with brilliant white snaps of light. The tide would've come and gone by now to wash away any blood evidence that remained of the murder, creating the untouched scene she'd been trying to capture in the first place.

Nature always reclaimed what humans destroyed, one way or another.

The warm sun and the comforting breeze conspired against me, and my eyes started to dip closed. I actually nodded off a few times, and I had to stop myself from stretching out in the sand for a quick nap. I hadn't been this relaxed in a long time.

I gave myself a few more moments of lazing on the ground, and then pushed to my feet and stretched, jogging in place for a minute or two to get my blood circulating. I was brushing the sand off my backside when Tessa popped her head out and smiled at me.

"You can come in now," she said.

"Thanks, boss," I quipped.

"Hey, this is my scene to protect now." She beckoned, and I grinned as I hefted the backpack and metal detector before walking into the cave.

Tessa was crouched next to the tide pool, flashing away. "I'll have to get the micro-lens out and take close shots, but that can wait a while," she said without looking up. "I want to see what you find."

"Probably nothing, but it's worth a shot," I said with a shrug.

She popped off three more pictures, and then straightened and stowed the camera in her back. "So, how do we search a cave for pirate treasure?" she asked with genuine excitement apparent in her voice.

"First," I said as I moved past her toward the back of the cave where we'd found Lord Addison and his smashed pinnace, "let there be light."

I rested my bag on the cave floor, unzipped the main compartment, and pulled out two battery-powered lanterns. I switched them on, and a cheerful glow filled the space, casting twisted shadows on the walls behind groupings of stalagmites.

Once I'd positioned the lanterns on either side of the long-dead English lord's final resting place, I picked up the metal detector and powered it up, listening to the comforting whine I'd heard so many times as a boy.

"Now," I said with a grin, "we can look for treasure."

"How does it work?" she asked.

I showed her the best way to hold the grip with one hand and the stem with the other, to allow for slow movements that covered every inch of ground without straining the wrists of the operator, and pointed out the LED bulb that would start flashing when the sensor was close to buried metal and glow solid once it was directly above.

"It makes kind of a squidgy beeping sound when it lights up," I explained.

Her face crinkled in amusement. "I think squidgy is my new favorite word."

"Oh, so journalists have favorite words?"

"Yep. My previous favorite word was 'indubitably,'" Tessa said with a nod. "It's just really fun to say."

"Huh, I guess it is." I laughed. "Never thought about that."

I watched Tessa as she covered a sizeable area of ground in the vicinity of the old shipwreck. After several minutes of silence from the metal detector, she handed the metal detector to me and said, "I think you should try. I'll bet this machine likes you better."

"Sure, it does," I said with a smirk as I took over and positioned my hands. "Really, I doubt there's anything else to find."

"But there could be," she urged. "Keep going."

I shrugged and started passing the dish-shaped sensor across the ground in slow sweeps. The movement was familiar, comforting, and I smiled as my grandfather's face flashed through my mind.

You treat that machine like she's your lover now, Ethan. Baby her real good, and she'll reward you and give up her treasures.

I'd been twelve the first time he said that to me, and it took me a few years after that to fully grasp the double entendre.

"So," Tessa said after I'd been sweeping for a few minutes, "how do you think Lord Addison ended up here? I mean, pirates stole the DRAGON'S ROGUE before he ever reached his first destination, but somehow, he ended up in their ship-to-shore boat, so apparently, they didn't kill him."

I was pleased that she remembered so much of what I'd told her. "You know, I'd been wondering the same thing," I mused. "I can think of a few scenarios."

"Ooh, investigative guesses. Let's hear them," she enthused.

"The first thought I'd had was that he escaped in the confusion when the ship was boarded and managed to shove off in the pinnace without anyone noticing," I conjectured. "It would've been possible, though not likely, with a night raid. That theory doesn't pan out, though." I glanced over my shoulder at her. "Know why?"

She thought for a moment and brightened. "Because the pirates burned that brand into the smaller boat, so it wouldn't have been there if he escaped right away."

"You got it." I smiled. "So that leaves the second most likely scenario, and the one I believe is true."

"Which is?"

“Lord Addison joined the crew.” I nodded to myself as I completed a full-length sweep of the cave floor and moved a pace ahead to scan the next strip of land. “It was pretty common for pirates to keep captives around and use them for labor, provided they acted docile and cooperative. If the captives ended up trying to fight back later, they’d just shoot them.” I shrugged. “Chances are he was on the ship the whole time, until it went down.”

Tessa gave a delighted laugh. “That seems like a smart choice. Between ‘swab the deck’ and ‘die,’ I’d take the mop every time.”

I decided not to tell her that there were a lot less pleasant duties than pushing a mop that pirates liked to have their captive labor perform.

I’d almost reached the far side of the cave with the metal detector, and I was about to inform Tessa that the treasure hunt was being called in favor of relaxing for the rest of the day when the machine let out a little burble and the green light flashed weakly.

Tessa gasped and rushed over. “Did that just make a noise?”

“Yeah, I think it did,” I said with faint surprise as I moved the sensor even slower than before. It was probably just a metal bottlecap washed up by the tide. At best, it could be another piece of the shattered pinnacle with a few rusty nails in it.

Nothing happened when I eased the detector to the left. When I swung it to the right, the light flashed stronger and the warble-beep lasted longer.

“So that’s what squidgy sounds like.” Tessa laughed.

She kept her hands on my shoulders as I moved the dish of the detector around until I pinpointed the place where the beeping drew into a solid note and the light stayed steady. I scuffed a divot into the sand with a foot, then carefully set the machine aside on the ground.

“It’s a strong signal, so whatever it is shouldn’t be too deep,” I told her as I knelt on the ground and started scraping sand away.

Tessa hunkered down beside me to watch. I dug a hole with my hands, sifting the sand through my fingers with each shallow scoop. Less than a foot down, I brushed something rough and damp.

I cleared out enough sand to uncover the surface of what I’d felt. It looked like burlap. Very old burlap.

Both of us held our breath as I dug the object out of the ground. It was a small, worn sack about the size of a sandwich bag, pulled closed with a threadbare drawstring... and it was heavy. Several objects inside it shifted and clinked together as I lifted it.

There was a cigarette burn-sized hole in the side of the bag, and something gleamed mellowly behind it.

“Oh, my God,” Tessa breathed. “Is that...?”

I couldn’t speak as I eased the drawstring opened gently, trying not to break the material any further. I peered inside and sucked in a shocked breath.

The sack was full of gold coins. Actual pirate treasure.

“I don’t believe it,” I said, a slow grin spreading on my face as I reached in and plucked out one of the coins. “Think this was Lord Addison’s retirement package or what?”

Tessa let out a joyful squeal and threw her arms around me. “It’s real!” she cried. “Oh, Ethan, this is so wonderful. You finally have proof. That ship has to be out there, and I just know you’re going to find it.”

It warmed me that she hadn’t started gushing about how I was rich or said anything about how much this little sack of metal had to be worth. She was only happy that I’d found what I’d been looking for so long.

When she drew back, I took her hand and pressed the coin I’d extracted into it. “I want you to keep this,” I said, folding her fingers around it as shock flooded her face. “I would’ve given up if you weren’t here telling me to keep going, so don’t even think about refusing, or I’ll make you swab the deck.”

The protest that had been forming in her expression melted into happiness. “In that case, I’ll just say thank you.”

“No, thank you,” I said.

Our gazes locked, and I had to fight the urge to propose cave sex. There was way too much sand here, and we still had time.

She was going to stay with me again tonight.

When the thrill of discovery died down, I collected my gear, and together, we headed back out to the beach, wandering to the shoreline. I’d stowed the sack of gold coins deep in my bag, both so I wouldn’t lose them and so I didn’t spend too much time obsessing over their existence. At the moment, I just wanted to be with Tessa.

We sat in the damp sand and kicked off our shoes, letting the warm surf wash over our toes. After a while, Tessa leaned her head on my shoulder and sighed.

“You’d better keep in touch with me when I go back to New York,” she said with a false glare. “I mean it.”

“I will,” I promised as I slipped an arm around her waist.

“I wish I could stay.” She sighed again and scooted closer to me. “Also, I wish we’d met while my father was still alive. Maybe we could’ve ended up living closer together.”

I wished that, too. “It’s not like we’ll never see each other again,” I said, though I wasn’t sure that was true. “You’re welcome on my boat any time you’re in the neighborhood.”

“Well, if you’re ever in New York, you can stay at my place,” she said, and then instantly blushed. “I mean, if you want to.”

I smiled and lifted her head gently, tracing her jaw with my fingers. “I do.”

The kiss that followed was sweet and salty, as timeless as the ocean that lapped at our feet.

Epilogue

Miami, Florida – Present Day

I could still taste Tessa’s lips as I wrapped up the story. Lost in the memory, it took me a few moments to pull my thoughts together and focus on the present,

and the bar in which I sat. No longer Mike's Tropical Tango Hut, but the Rolling Thunder. My bar.

So much had changed since then, but some things remained the same.

Gradually, I picked up on the barrage of chatter that was washing over me. My audience of six twenty-somethings had grown considerably to a small crowd, and at some point, the overhead music had been turned down so they could all hear me. I wagered Mike had something to do with that.

He'd be lucky if I didn't kick his ass when this fiasco was over.

"Okay, settle down," I called out as I raised a hand to stem the tide of questions being thrown at me. "Yes, the coins were real. No, I didn't marry Tessa, and no, you can't touch Cobra Jon's staff. That probably answers everything, right?"

Ty, the original cocky hotshot who'd goaded Mike into making me tell this story in the first place, leaned forward eagerly, all traces of his earlier antagonism gone.

"What about the DRAGON'S ROGUE?" he asked. "Did you ever find it?"

That was a story I definitely didn't want to get into tonight. "Maybe," I hedged. "Look, I wasn't even going to—"

"What's the deal with the old stool back there?" another young man to my right said, one who hadn't been part of the original crowd. "There's a bullet hole in it. Did you guys have a shootout in this place, back in the day?"

I heaved a sigh and glared hard at Mike, and he laughed. "Don't look at me. I'm not telling 'em."

"All right, listen," I said. "If you really want to know about the stool and the bullet, come back tomorrow night. I'll think about telling you then."

A wave of protests mingled with more questions arose, and I made a cutting gesture. "Hey, I'm all talked out tonight, okay? Get out there and do bar stuff," I said with a chuckle. "That's what this place is for. In fact, everyone here gets a drink on me, as long as you leave me alone for the rest of the night."

This time, a cheer went up, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the crowd dispersed and patrons started filtering around the bar.

At some point, one of the girls must've freshened my drink because there was a frosty mug of beer behind me on the counter. I grabbed it and stood on legs that were half-numb from sitting for so long.

"Going outside for some air," I said to Mike. "Care to join?"

"That depends." He smirked. "Are you gonna punch me for riling these guys up?"

"Haven't decided yet. Probably not."

"I'll take those odds," he said as he reached back and grabbed his own drink.

Beyond the crowd that had been listening to me yammer on, there were at least a few dozen others in the bar, seated at tables or playing pool and darts in the back room. "When did this place get so packed?" I murmured.

"They've been trickling in all night," Mike informed me. "Looks like your grand opening was a success."

I snorted. "Except that I just took a bath on free drinks for sixty or so people."

"Hey, you didn't get your business sense from me. I only gave out freebies to people who got themselves shot," he chuckled, "including yourself at least one time if I remember correctly."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't remind me."

We walked out the door, hung a right, and by unspoken consent made our way down the alley which was considerably cleaner than it had been ten years ago. I'd had the old dumpster hauled out and replaced with two brand new containers, swapped the dirty yellow light with a bright halogen, and installed two pairs of security lamps at the front and back of the alley.

"Huh. Things seem a bit brighter than they used to," Mike remarked as we settled on the stoop in front of the service door.

I nodded in confirmation. "No more shadowy ambushes back here."

"Good call," Mike said.

We sipped our drinks in silence for a few minutes, and I let the memories run their course as they drained slowly out of me. There was good and bad in my past, just like everybody's, but it was time to focus on the present.

"You know," I said casually, "I didn't expect to actually make money on this place. I planned on running in the red for at least a few years."

"So much for that plan, right? You're profitable. What a bummer," Mike joked. "You should have a good cry in your beer about it."

I smirked. "Maybe I will."

"Well, here's to you and the Rolling Thunder," Mike said as he raised his glass. "May the storms of life steer clear of your new venture, even if you're tempting fate by naming the place after a storm."

"That was... a very strange toast, but what the hell, I'll drink to that." Grinning, I clinked my mug against his and tossed back a long swallow. Cold beer tasted pretty good when it came from a bar that I owned. At least, it didn't taste like I'd paid six bucks for a draft that was half foam.

It tasted like success, and all the stories I still had left to tell.

