Inferno

by FieryTribune

Summary

What happens in Prague doesn’t stay in Prague.
A few years ago, Will read an article in *Cosmopolitan* about the difference between how men and women approach romance. He doesn’t remember much of it, given that he was reading it while waiting for a drug lord to show up at his wife’s OBGYN appointment, but he does recall the author claiming that women have a tendency to imagine a future with any man they find attractive. Even the handsome stranger on the subway could be the subject of a married-with-two-kids-and-a-picket-fence daydream.

What stuck out to Will was that according to the writers at *Cosmopolitan* (who, given the TEN SUBLIMINAL TRICKS THAT WILL GET HIM TO PUT A RING ON IT headline blared across the cover, were probably not the foremost experts on true love), he approaches romance like a woman. He *always* imagines a future with women he’s attracted to. He daydreamed about his future with Gigi right up until the moment she dumped him. He daydreamed about Emma and the adorable little spy babies they’d have. He daydreams about the cute little blonde who works at the coffeehouse on the corner of his street, and the pre-school teacher with a penchant for cardigans who lives on the first floor of his building, and the pretty brunette who walks her Golden Retriever in the park where he goes for his morning runs.

Truth be told, he’s always been kind of proud of his daydreaming. He thinks it marks him as emotionally available. Open to new experiences. Brave enough to take risks.

Then he met Frankie.

His smartass, hardass, hot-as-hell-and-she-knows-it partner throws him for all kinds of loops, because daydreaming about her isn’t like daydreaming about other women. Daydreaming about Frankie is complicated and dangerous. Hell, *Frankie* is dangerous—and not just because she can kill him a dozen different ways with her bare hands.

Sometimes he forgets how dangerous she is. Sometimes she stands too close to him, or they stare at each other just a little too long, or he catches a whiff of that perfume she wears, and he forgets. He forgets, and he starts to daydream, and the only thing that makes him stop is remembering what happened at that wedding in the south of France.

That floral dress she wore, all ruffles and soft colors. Her hair, curled and pinned back and falling ever so slightly across her forehead. The way she laughed at her own joke about marrying a Backstreet Boy, her lips pressed together like she wanted to say it in that deadpan way she’s so good at but she just couldn’t resist letting a smile break free. (That smile—man, he would move mountains for that smile.) That brief moment when she offered up a rare confession about herself in a soft, almost wistful voice that broke his heart. *I just never thought my life would end up like this.*

He can still remember the longing that ached in his chest when she glanced down at his mouth and then leaned a little closer to him. If he’s honest with himself, he feels that longing all the time when he’s with her. Crouching behind a car amidst a hail of bullets. Talking trash across the pool table. Brainstorming over Chinese food, bickering over mission plans, frowning at her when she says things like, *For god’s sake, Will, can you stop vomiting your feelings all over me for, like, five seconds?*

But longing or no longing, France left a mark on him. He meant it when he said that she didn’t make him feel safe. She mocked him for it—*Do you hear yourself? Who talks like that?*—and Susan mocked him for it too—*You don’t feel safe? Dude, that is so lame*—and neither of them
were wrong. The marriage was fake and and Frankie didn’t owe him anything and he took it all way too seriously. But seeing her climb another guy like a tree after they’d just had a moment? That hurt.

After Gigi, he decided he didn’t want to hurt like that again. So every time he starts to daydream about his partner, he remembers how things in France ended. It’s in both of their best interests to keep his longing to himself. She doesn’t do emotional attachments. She’s not the girl he can get ice cream with. He thinks she might begrudgingly acknowledge that they’re at least friends now, but the rest of it? She said it best at the start of their partnership: Hard pass.

And then one morning in Prague, while he’s leaning against a wall with a pastry in his hand and a breathtaking view spread before him, he tries to think of France and it doesn’t work.

He’s thinking about her even before she shows up. But then he hears her voice, and his heart somersaults in his chest. He turns to face her. She’s dressed in all black, and he likes that because black suits her, but the cream colored coat that’s draped over her shoulders and fluttering in the breeze is working for her too. She smiles at him. (That smile.) And then he can’t help but laugh, because even if he was thinking about her and waiting for her and hoping—desperately, desperately hoping—that she might show up, he didn’t actually think she would.

But here she is.

They talk about fate. She steals some of his pastry. And then she opens the door for him, What, like you knew I’d show up here? and he steps through it because he can’t help himself. No. But I hoped. He waits for the snarky comeback, or the eyeroll, or the casual step back to put some distance between them, but she doesn’t pull any of her usual maneuvers. She just watches him, her eyes fixed on his, the corners of her mouth turned up into a slight, soft smile, and he wonders. What if…?

He takes half a step toward her just to see what she’ll do. She doesn’t move. Her gaze slides down to his lips, and then back up to his eyes.

France, he thinks, trying to ignore the longing that’s flooding his chest. Remember France. She shut him out in France. She slept with someone else in France. She walked away from him in France.

But this isn’t France, and this time, she’s not walking away. He waits, holding his breath, because she will. He knows she will.

But she doesn’t. She’s as still as a statue, her green eyes fixed on his. Her smile widens just a little, and he can’t help it. He leans toward her. She watches him, unmoving. He leans even closer but she still doesn’t move an inch, not even when he glances down at her mouth.

He hesitates, his heart roaring in his ears. He wants to give her one last chance to back away. He also maybe, possibly, needs a second to work up the courage to forget about France and focus on now. He wonders if, while he’s trying to work up said courage, she might get impatient and just close the distance herself. It wouldn’t surprise him. She’s the most impatient and impulsive person he’s ever met.

But she doesn’t. She waits. And he waits too. He thinks they could probably stand like this for hours, both of them waiting to see who will finally break and make the first move, but as much as he loves to beat her at stuff and then rub her face in it mercilessly, he has no interest in winning this particular battle. All he wants to do is kiss her.
So he does.

They’re standing so close that it doesn’t take much effort. He just leans forward, closes his eyes, and presses his mouth against hers. Despite all the tension that’s been thrumming between them for months, there aren’t any fireworks. There’s nothing desperate about it, nothing frenzied or frantic. He just kisses her, chaste and sweet like when he kissed Hannah Seaver at the middle school formal while slow dancing to *Heaven* by Bryan Adams. It lasts five seconds, maybe seven, and then he pulls away.

He watches as Frankie’s eyes flutter open. She gazes at him with the same stunned look she wore after she kissed him to protect their cover. He wants to smile at her but he can’t because fear is suddenly surging up into his throat. This is going to be just like France. He can *feel* it. She’s going to walk away from him all over again, only this time it will be worse because this time it was a real kiss and not a fake one. He opens his mouth, ready to make a joke and give her an out so he doesn’t have to listen to another *What we do is too important to risk messing up* speech, but he doesn’t get the chance. She grabs a fistful of his jacket, yanks him forward, and crashes her mouth against his.

The intensity of it steals the breath right out of his lungs. This time it is frantic and frenzied and desperate, and he drops his pastry in surprise when her tongue slips into his mouth. Her other hand threads through the hair on the back of his head, and it’s the feel of her nails scratching along his scalp that finally helps him accept what’s happening.

He’s kissing Frankie.

He’s kissing Frankie and *she’s enjoying it.*

Visions of the future start to pop up in his brain like rose-colored jack-in-the-boxes. He slams every single one of them shut immediately, determined to focus on what’s real instead of what’s in his head. He focuses on the way her body feels against his. The way she tastes, like pastry and coffee and, inexplicably, peppermint. He slides a hand beneath her coat and palms the small of her back, and she arches beneath his touch. He brings his other hand up to her face, stroking her cheek the way he’s always wanted to but couldn’t because she for sure would’ve broken his hand. She leans into him, pushing him backwards, but he smiles against her lips and pushes back harder so that she’s the one who ends up pinned against the stone wall. *Point for Chase,* he thinks, boxing her in with his arms.

She smiles, nips at his bottom lip, and rolls her hips against his. *Point for Trowbridge,* he corrects as he chokes on his breath.

Somewhere nearby, someone wolf whistles at them. Their mouths part with a pop, and Frankie immediately ducks her head. If Will didn’t know better, he’d think she was embarrassed. But he does know better, and he’s guessing that her sudden fascination with the lapel of his coat has less to do with their whistling audience and more to do with her habit of avoiding eye contact when she’s feeling vulnerable.

They stand in silence for a minute, trying to catch their breath, and then he says to the top of her head because she still hasn’t looked at him, “Have breakfast with me.”

There’s another beat of silence, and then she says, “It’s noon, Will.”

“Lunch then. Oooh, brunch? *I love* brunch.”

“Of course you do.”
There’s laughter threading through her voice. She finally looks up at him, and he smiles. “You don’t like brunch?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What kind of monster doesn’t like brunch? Everyone likes brunch.”

“I like brunch, okay? I just don’t Instagram pictures of it while sipping mimosas.”

“I don’t sip mimosas.”

“I have seen you sip mimosas.”

“Susan ordered it for me!”

“That doesn’t help your case,” she says on a laugh.

He grins at her because he can’t help it—she’s got one of those infectious laughs that would make anyone smile, even if they didn’t suffer from resting smile face—and before he can catch himself he lifts his hand and strokes it softly over her cheek again.

Her body stiffens almost immediately. The smile freezes on her face. He can practically see her armor starting to fall back into place, and determination flares in his chest.

“Nope,” he says, pressing her back into the wall. He flattens his hands on the stone parapet and tilts forward to kiss her. She kisses him back, but not for very long.

“Will,” she breathes into his mouth.

“Nope,” he repeats. He trails his lips along the curve of her jaw and murmurs, “Not going to let you, Frankie.”

“Not going to let me what?” she huffs.

“Pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I wasn’t pretending,” she says, sounding defensive. “I just don’t want to go to brunch and talk about our feelings.”

He leans back to look at her. “You have feelings?”

“That depends, is murderous rage a feeling?”

He decides not to answer that. “Fine, no brunch. Let’s go for a walk.”

“So you can talk my ear off? Hard pass.”

“You could buy me another pastry.”

“It’s not my fault you threw that one in the dirt.”

“You put your tongue in my mouth, it is definitely your fault.”

“Are you complaining about my tongue in your mouth?”

“No,” he says quickly, and probably a little too eagerly. She smirks at him. He slides his hand along the curve of her hip. “Definitely not complaining,” he says, just to make sure it’s clear.
She glances down at his mouth. “I haven’t packed yet.”

He frowns because they’re not flying back to the States until tomorrow morning and he knows she’s a last minute packer. “Okay?”

“We should go back to the hotel so you can help me pack.”

Now he’s really confused. “You hate when I help you pack.”

“I do not.”

“You definitely do. And besides, you make fun of my clothes rolling system all the time so I don’t think—”

“Shut up, Will,” she hisses just before she yanks him forward by his scarf and kisses him. Her tongue is in his mouth again, and he decides it’s even better the second time. He wonders if it’ll be better the third time too, and if it’ll just keep getting better and better until all he wants to do is make out with her like some kind of hormonal teenager.

When she pulls back, he feels a little dazed. It must be written all over his face, because she smirks at him again. She smooths her hand over the collar of his coat the way she did after they first met and she planted a bug on him, but he doesn’t think that’s what she’s doing this time. Judging by the look on her face, he won’t be wearing his coat—or anything else for that matter—for much longer.

“Take me back to the hotel so we can pack, Will,” she whispers.

That’s when he finally realizes that packing is just a euphemism. “Oh,” he says stupidly.

“There’s the light bulb,” she murmurs with a laugh.

She’s making fun of him, but he doesn’t care. There are dozens of reasons why they shouldn’t go back to the hotel, but he doesn’t care about any of them either. He doesn’t even care about what happened in France anymore. Why should he? She’s not the same person she was then. And neither is he.

He’s spent his whole life convinced that someday he’d find that one right person. He thought that he’d know instantly that she was the one, and she’d know it too, and they would live happily ever after and fulfill every fantasy he’s ever dreamed. Frankie’s always told him that he’s an idiot for thinking that, and he’s always written her off as someone who just doesn’t get it. But maybe she’s right. Maybe what’s real and standing right in front of him is better than some elusive, made-up fantasy. Maybe what they have—messy and complicated and terrifying but also unique and thrilling and fun—is what he’s really been after all these years. Maybe his problem isn’t that he hasn’t met the right person yet. Maybe his problem is that he’s been trying to force the right person into the wrong daydream.

He grabs Frankie’s hand and hauls her toward the street. She told him once that he was absolutely under no circumstances to hold her hand unless he wanted her to break it. Either that rule no longer applies or she never really meant it, because she doesn’t pull away. She just falls in step next to him, matching him stride for stride until they get to the curb and he stops to hail a taxi. It doesn’t take long before a car pulls up next to them. He swings the back door open for her and she climbs in without making a ladies first joke. He follows her into the backseat, and he’s barely gotten the address for the hotel out of his mouth before she’s kissing him again.

About halfway to the hotel, not long after Frankie climbs into his lap, it crosses Will’s mind that they might be making the driver uncomfortable. He wonders if he should mention it to Frankie. He
starts to, but she yanks his scarf off and leans forward to suck on his throat, and he forgets what he was going to say.

Some undetermined amount of time later (in his defense, it is extremely hard to concentrate when Frankie is in his lap), the car stops in front of the hotel. Will doesn’t even notice until the driver clears his throat loudly. Frankie throws a wad of bills at him, slides out of Will’s lap, and climbs out of the car. Will makes eye contact with the driver in the rearview mirror.

“Sorry about that,” he says, flashing an apologetic smile.

“Young love,” the driver says with a kind smile. “You should enjoy it and not apologize.”

“Thank you,” Will says, smiling wider. “And in this city, too. Honestly, Prague is so beautiful. When you have views like this, how could you—”

“I’m going to finish what you started without you if you don’t get out of the car,” Frankie interrupts, bending down to glare at him.

Will snaps to attention. “Right. Let’s go.”

He shoots another smile at the driver, who is staring at Frankie with wide-eyed admiration, and then gets out of the car. He wants to reach for Frankie’s hand again, but she’s got them both shoved into her coat pockets. He tries not to be too disappointed by that, and follows her toward the main entrance of the hotel.

He chances a glance at her after they walk through the front door. Her eyes are sweeping the lobby the same way they do during a mission. He’s guessing she’s looking for the team, but he doubts she’ll find anyone. Standish flew back to the States early this morning with Jai. Ray’s still at the hospital, and Susan’s probably with him. The four of them aren’t flying out until tomorrow morning, so for the next twenty hours or so he and Frankie have nowhere to be and nothing to do.

Well, maybe not nothing.

They get on the elevator behind an older couple. A family piles in after them, and Will finds himself sandwiched into the back corner of the elevator with Frankie’s back pressed against his chest. He leans forward a little and blows softly into her ear. She shivers and then shifts so that the heel of her boot is crushing his toes. It hurts, but it’s worth it.

The elevator starts to climb slowly. In front of them, two of the kids from the family are arguing about lunch. The older couple is talking softly about furniture. Will blows into Frankie’s ear again, and when her body shudders ever so slightly in response, he grins. He’s really going to enjoy figuring out all her sensitive spots and then using them against her every chance he gets.

The elevator gets to their floor before he can torture her anymore, and they jostle through the crowd to get off. Once they’re in the hall he expects Frankie to turn around and tell him that he’s going to pay for his antics in the elevator, but she doesn’t. She just strides down the corridor in the direction of their rooms, which are across the hall from each other. She stops in front of her door and pulls a card key out of her pocket.

He crowds into her space and puts his hands on her hips and his mouth by his ear. “I like when you shiver.”

She doesn’t reply. The door unlocks with a soft click and she pushes the handle down and then shoves the door open with far more force than necessary. She turns to face him as she steps into the room, tugging him after her by his lapels, but as soon as he’s cleared the threshold she shoves him
backward and uses his body to slam the door closed. He grins at her as she yanks his coat off with a look of focused determination.

“Can’t wait to get me naked, huh? Can’t say I blame you.”

His coat hits the floor and then she takes a step away from him. He frowns because he thought teasing her might lead to more kissing, not more space. She holds his gaze as she rolls her shoulders back, and her coat falls into a puddle at her feet. It’s hot as hell, and he swallows.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, Whiskey,” she murmurs, shaking her head.

He steps toward her and slides his hands along her waist. “Making sure you finish won’t be a problem.”

She arches an eyebrow at him the way she does when she’s impressed.

He smirks. “Admit it, that line was sexy.”

“Maybe a little.”

She kisses him before he can bask in his sexiness, and everything gets a bit hazy after that. For a while it’s all just a blur of discarded clothing and warm skin and caresses and kisses. She seems eager to get to the main event, but he’s not. If he’s going to live in the moment instead of daydreaming about the future, he wants this moment to last as long as possible. He also promised that he wouldn’t start what he couldn’t finish, and that’s a promise he intends to keep. She can mock him for it all she wants, but he’s a firm believer in the chivalric code of ladies first.

And second too, apparently.

He’s considering going for a personal record of three when she swears under her breath and reaches down to yank on his hair. He follows her unspoken command and kisses his way up her body. She sighs when he brushes his lips over hers, shuddering a little beneath him.

“Like I said,” he murmurs into her mouth. “Won’t be a problem.”

“I hate you.”

It lacks all her usual sass. Her hands are stroking lazily over his back, up and into his hair, and her mouth is languid beneath his. Everything about her is always so purposeful and precise, but the way her hands are roaming over him now isn’t. He thinks it’s the first time he’s ever seen her completely unguarded and content, and it makes him brave enough to whisper, “No you don’t.”

He sucks lightly on the curve of her shoulder. She turns her head, and when her tongue darts out to trace the shell of his ear, it’s his turn to shiver.

“Finish what you started, Whiskey,” she whispers, lifting her hips suggestively.

She doesn’t have to tell him twice.
It isn’t until they’re sprawled next to each other in bed, staring at the ceiling and panting as they try to catch their breath, that Frankie realizes she’s made a terrible mistake.

Her mistake isn’t jumping into bed with Will. She’s wanted to do that for a while now, though she’d cut out her tongue before she admitted it to him or anyone else. She decided a long time ago that she wasn’t going to apologize for doing what she wanted when she wanted, and that includes getting naked with the Captain America/Care Bear hybrid that the U.S. government has forced her to be partners with.

No, her mistake was what she did before she jumped into bed with Will. Don’t start something you can’t finish, Whiskey. What the hell was she thinking, issuing him a challenge like that? He’s absurdly competitive. She’s absurdly competitive. They keep score for everything, from who can take out more armed terrorists to who can drink the most beer and still hit the bullseye on the dartboard, and she should’ve known that sex would be no different.

It’s not that she’s opposed to a friendly competition over who’s better in bed. She’s not opposed to any type of competition she can win, and this is a battle that she most definitely should win. After all, how good can a man who cries while watching Field of Dreams be?

The answer is good. Very good. Three-times-total, made-her-momentarily-forget-her-own-name good, and god, he is never going to let her live this down. She should’ve kept her damn mouth shut.

Still, even with the specter of his future Hey remember that one time we slept together and I got you off not once, not twice, but three times? comments hanging over her, it’s hard to call this losing. She can’t remember the last time she felt so pleasantly worn out. Her muscles are warm, buzzing the way they do after she’s had a particularly good workout. The sharp edge of need that she thought might drown her in the taxi ride back to the hotel is gone. She can hear Will breathing next to her, and it’s kind of nice not to have to worry that he might be plotting to kill her like some of her previous lovers have. She makes it a habit not to stay too long after the fun stuff is over, but she feels so relaxed that she could—provided Will doesn’t open his big dumb mouth—maybe even fall asleep.

“That was amazing,” Will says right on cue.

It’s a testament to the strength of the endorphins still coursing through her bloodstream that she doesn’t immediately get out of bed.

“Yeah,” she says instead. Because honestly? It was.

“You’re flexible.”

She turns her head to look at him. “You didn’t talk as much as I thought you would.”

“I didn’t think you’d want me to,” he says, smiling a little.

The idea that he was doing—or not doing—certain things specifically for her makes her stomach do that nervous swooping thing that she’s started to associate with him. She ignores it.

“If I’d known getting naked is what it took to shut you up I’d have done it a long time ago.”
“Well, now you know. Next time I’m waxing poetic about the comeback of rom-coms just take your shirt off.”

Next time. Frankie sighs. So much for basking in the pleasant afterglow. “We can’t do this again, Will.”

She expects him to look sad or disappointed, but he just cocks his head like a puppy hearing a noise for the first time. “Why not?”

“We work together.”

“Pretty sure we worked together twenty minutes ago too, and you seemed way less concerned about it then.”

Frankie props herself up on her elbows. “That’s because we needed to get this out of our systems. It’s like you said—what’s going to happen is going to happen whether we like it or not. So we let it happen, and now we can move on instead of dancing around each other all the time.”

“Move on?” he repeats, cocking his head again.

She feels guilty all of a sudden, and she hates herself for it. “Don’t do this, Will. Don’t get all emotional—”

“I’m not being emotional,” he cuts her off. And, to her surprise, he’s right. He looks completely unruffled. “I’m taking a page out of your book and being practical. Realistic. And realistically speaking, one time was never going to be enough for us.”

“For us?” she challenges. “Or for you?”

He smirks at her. “Come on, Frankie. You’re really going to tell me that one time was enough for you?”

She bristles. “I could walk out that door right now.”

“Sure. But can you promise that you’re never going to want to walk back in again?”

She definitely can’t. In fact, she’s kind of already thinking about round two. But no way in hell is she about to tell him that.

“You’re not that good, Whiskey.”

His answering smirk is both infuriating and sexy. “That’s not what you said five minutes ago. Actually, I’m pretty sure you said—”

She smacks a hand over his mouth before he can finish. “I know what I said. I don’t need you to repeat it.”

She can feel his smile beneath her palm. Rolling toward him to cover his mouth required crossing the neutral space between them, and now the front of her body is pressed along the side of his. He wraps an arm around her, and when he skims the tips of his fingers upward along her spine, her back arches automatically and she ends up pressed even closer.

He glances down at her mouth, and while she’s seriously tempted to let him do what he is clearly thinking about doing, she knows she shouldn’t. Despite what everyone seems to think of her, she doesn’t actually enjoy being cruel to people who don’t deserve it. Will might be ridiculously
annoying, but she doesn’t want to lead him on.

“I’m not your girlfriend, Will,” she tells him as gently as she can. “We’re not dating.”

He pulls her hand away from his mouth. “I know that, Frankie.”

“Do you though?”

“Yes. I mean, it’s not like I thought sleeping together would make you suddenly want to marry me.”

She nearly chokes on her tongue. “I am not going to marry you.”

“I said I’m not expecting you to marry me.”

“Cool. Answer’s still no.”

He laughs. He lifts a hand and traces his fingers over her clavicle. Frankie tries to stay as still as she can, willing her body not to react to his touch, but it doesn’t listen. Traitor.

“I think we should keep sleeping together,” he says quietly.

She shakes her head. “I told you, I’m not—”

“My girlfriend. Yeah, I heard you. You don’t want to label it, and I’m fine with that.”

She blinks at him. “You’re fine with that? Since when? Aren’t you the guy who told me transactional sex was sad?”

“Yeah, but this isn’t transactional. We might not be getting married anytime soon, but you definitely care about me.”

“I definitely do not.”

He smirks. “Oh yeah? Is that why you let that buyer go in L.A. when you thought I’d been shot? Because you don’t care?”

She glares at him. “So what are you saying, you want to be friends with benefits?”

His face lights up. “That’s the first time you’ve ever called me your friend.”

“Oh my god,” Frankie groans, rolling away from him.

He curls his hand around her arm before she can get out of bed. He pulls her down and onto her back, and then lifts his body on top of hers in one smooth motion that she has to admit is kind of attractive. Her brain is shouting push him away push him away, but her traitorous body has other ideas and her legs part of their own accord so that he can settle between them. The air between them is suddenly charged, and Frankie can’t even think of something snarky to say because she has to concentrate so hard on not pushing her hips up against his.

“Yes,” he says softly, brushing her hair back from her face. “I want us to be friends with benefits.”

“Sounds complicated.”

He shakes his head. “It’s really not. Everything we were doing before stays exactly the same. We work together, we lead the team together, we save the world together. But now we also sleep
“I thought we decided that what we do is too important to risk messing up."

“Don’t you think pretending there’s nothing between us might be just as distracting and dangerous?”

He’s got a point there. She’s also a little surprised by how tempted she is to say yes. She wouldn’t mind having sex this good on a regular basis. She also wouldn’t mind having it with someone who isn’t trying to kill her or use her for information. They work all the time and she’s constantly paired off with him to do fieldwork, so it’d be annoyingly convenient. And truth be told—though not out loud even under threat of imminent death—she kind of likes Will. He makes her laugh, and he’s not intimidated by her, and even his most ridiculous quirks are starting to leave her fondly exasperated instead of enraged. All in all, she could do a lot worse.

“I still think it’s a bad idea,” she says anyway.

He looks amused. “Why?”

“Because you don’t have it in you. You can’t do casual, Will. You are literally incapable. You’ll try really hard at first, because you always try really hard, but within a week you’ll decide that you want things to be more serious. And then you’ll start buying me flowers and asking me to be your plus one at weddings and trying to get me to let you keep a toothbrush at my place.”

“Well that last thing is just good hygiene. Do you really want to share your toothbrush with me?”

She gives him a look. “That’s not the point.”

“Fine. Then let’s set some ground rules.”

“Ground rules?”

“Yeah. Ground rules.” He rolls off of her and toward the other side of the bed, and Frankie misses the contact immediately. When he scoots back toward her, he’s got a pad of hotel stationary and a pen in his hand. He props himself up on his side to face her, and then uncaps the pen and writes *FieryWhiskey Rules* in his slanted handwriting at the top of the first sheet.

“What the hell is FieryWhiskey?” she asks, shifting so that she’s on her side facing him too.

“Our ship name,” he says innocently as he underlines it.

“Our ship name? What does that even mean?”

He doesn’t respond. He’s writing a series of numbers down the left side of the page. She prods his shoulder.

“Don’t ignore me, Will. What’s a ship?”

“Like a relationship,” he says, finally looking up at her.

“We don’t have a relationship."

“Working together is a relationship,” he points out. “Friendship is a relationship."

“Do you have a ship name with Standish?”
“No, but I’ve never slept with Standish.”

“So this is a romantic thing.”

“Yes.”

She plucks the pen out of his hand and scratches out FieryWhiskey. “Rule number one: No ship name.”

“I am open to other suggestions,” he says affably. “We could use our real names instead of our code names. Winkie, maybe? Frill? I’ll be honest, though, I kind of like FieryWhiskey cause whiskey is flammable. So when you put us together we’re like this inferno—”

“If you ever want to have sex with me again you’re going to drop this ship name thing right now.”

He blinks at her for a second as if he’s seriously considering his choices, and then he says, “Okay,” and takes the pen back. “No ship names,” he says aloud as he writes it next to the number one. He looks up at her. “What else?”

“No pet names.”

“You mean in public?”

She frowns at him. “Why would I only mean in public? I don’t want you to call me honey boo snickerdoodle behind closed doors either.”

He smirks. “Do you want to make an addendum of all the things I’m not allowed to call you?”

“Just write down no pet names, you dork.”

He obeys, but he smirks the whole time he does it.

“No couple crap,” she says next.

He lifts his eyebrows at her. “Couple crap?”

She waves her hand. “Flowers, gifts, poems.”

“Has a guy ever written you a poem?” he asks, looking genuinely curious.

“No, but I have a feeling you might be the first.”

“I do like sonnets,” he acknowledges.

Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose. “I knew this was a bad idea.”

“No, no, it’s okay. I’m writing it down. See? No couple crap including, but not limited to, flowers, gifts, and poems.”


He looks mollified. “All right.”

“And chocolate. No, wait. You can bring me chocolate. But not if it’s in one of those horrible heart shaped boxes.”

“No heart shaped chocolate boxes. Got it. What else?”
“No dates.”

“Wait,” he says, holding up his index finger. “What constitutes a date?”

She ticks the list off on her fingers. “Restaurants with white tablecloths. Going anywhere that would require me to wear high heels. Anything that involves candles or sappy music. Anywhere that I would be introduced as ‘Will’s friend Frankie.’ Oh, and anything that might make you even think about PDA.”

He furrows his eyebrows and doesn’t write anything down.

“No PDA is non-negotiable,” she says.

“Yeah, fine. But we’re still going to have movie night, right?”

She laughs, but when he doesn’t join her she stops. “Oh, you’re serious,” she says in surprise.

His frown deepens into concern.

“Will, we don’t have movie night. Sometimes I come over to your apartment to talk about work and you’re already watching a movie so you force me to sit and watch it with you. But that’s not movie night.”

“I don’t force you to do that.”

“And they’re always terrible movies.”

“You’ve Got Mail is not terrible!”

“It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He looks incredulous. “You’ve been shot multiple times!”

“Enduring two hours of Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan making googly-eyes at each other was way worse,” she says matter-of-factly.

He sighs. “Fine. What if we take turns picking the movie?”

“What if I just pick the movie every time?”

“What if we take turns, and on the nights that it’s not your turn, I’ll make it worth your while afterward?”

She narrows her eyes at him. He drops his gaze down to her chest, and even though he can’t see anything because her body’s beneath the sheets, she still feels a spark of desire. “All right,” she murmurs. She’s already thinking about all the things she could do to him on his leather couch.

“So, no ship names,” he reads off the list, oblivious to her thoughts. “No pet names, no couple crap, and no dates. Any other demands?”

“Not at the moment. But I reserve the right to add things later.”

“Fair enough. And down here,” he says, drawing a line in the middle of the page, “We put my demands.”

He starts to write something down, and she cranes her neck to look. “Wait, since when do you get
demands?”

“Since this is a democracy and not a dictatorship. Number one, movie night.” He looks up at her. “Occurs weekly.”

“It wasn’t weekly before,” she protests.

“You watched *How To Lose A Guy In Ten Days* with me the week after we watched *You’ve Got Mail*. That’s weekly.”

“Ugh,” she groans. She collapses back onto her pillow. “I regret this already.”

“Don’t be dramatic. I only have one other request.”

“Is it that I have to call you by a pet name? Because I refuse to call you daddy.”

He makes a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. “That’s gross. Don’t call me daddy.”

“Not for a million bucks,” she assures him, still staring up at the ceiling.

“It’s not about pet names.”

“What is it then? Do I have to wear lingerie on Wednesdays? Do you have a kinky fantasy you want to explore?”

“It’s about other men.”

It’s like all the air has suddenly been sucked from the room. Every muscle in Frankie’s body goes tense. She can feel Will watching her, but she doesn’t look at him. She stares steadfastly at the ceiling. “You want to sleep with other men while you’re sleeping with me?” she jokes, trying to lighten the mood. It falls painfully flat.

“Frankie,” he murmurs.

She finally turns her head to look at him.

“I don’t want to share you.”

A flurry of emotions explodes in Frankie’s chest, but she can’t put any of them into words. The silence balloons between them, agonizing in its intensity. The look on his face is so earnest she can barely stand it, and suddenly all she can think about is the way he looked at her at the Dead Drop after their mission in the south of France. The uncharacteristic coldness in his eyes, the insincerity of his smile, the flatness in his tone when he dismissed the apology she was clearly trying to make by saying *Thanks for the beer*.

He was apologetic almost immediately after it happened, just like all the other times he’s snapped at her or hurt her feelings, but it left a mark on her that wouldn’t go away. It had been so long since she’d cared enough to feel badly about disappointing someone, even longer since she’d had to grapple with caring about someone in a non-platonic way, and going out on a limb to try to make amends only to have her efforts rejected outright was...painful.

Then Emma showed up. Once Frankie got over her knee-jerk jealousy, she was almost grateful. All Will’s heart-eyes were now directed toward his new girlfriend, and that meant she could go back to doing what she did best: Being a spy and being alone. She learned a long time ago that being alone was better than being constantly afraid. Life sucks, and it’s hard, and no matter how tightly you
hold on, the good stuff always gets taken away. Every person she’s ever really, truly, soul-deep loved has been taken from her. A terrorist attack. Bullets and a bomb followed by a betrayal. When you lose enough people that you love in such dramatic and traumatic ways, it’s easier to just keep everyone at arm’s length.

Except Will won’t stay at arm’s length. He keeps squeezing his way into all the places she’s tried to keep him out of, and now here he is, giving her those goddamn heart eyes again, and she can’t take it. It’s not that she’s incapable of being exclusive with someone. It’s not even that there are other men she wants to sleep with, because there aren’t. It’s that if someone like Will is asking her to promise that she’ll be with just him, then he’s not interested in being friends with benefits. He wants more. And she can’t do that.

She opens her mouth to tell him that, but he beats her to it.

“You’re not my girlfriend, so I can’t ask you not to sleep with anyone else.”

She blinks at him in surprise. He looks tired all of a sudden, and maybe a little frayed, and it’s so different than the joyful energy he usually radiates that she wants to reach for him. She doesn’t.

“All I’m asking is that you be honest with me,” he continues. “If you sleep with someone else, I want to know. I don’t want to find out months later. Or from anyone else.”

She gestures at the sheet of rules sitting between them. “And what happens to this if I do?”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.”

They stare at each other. Another silence crescendos between them. And then Will bends forward and scribbles something onto the sheet of paper. He pushes it across the mattress toward her when he’s finished, and she glances down to see his signature at the bottom of the page.

“I’m in,” he tells her. She lifts her gaze to his, and he holds out the pen. “What about you? You in, or you out?”

She should probably ask him for some time to think it over. She should probably weigh the pros and cons, and think through all the consequences, and consider how it might affect the dynamics of the team and her own ability to do her job.

She plucks the pen from his grasp and signs the paper with a flourish. “In,” she says, tossing the pen down onto the mattress and then looking up at Will.

He smiles, that wide and dazzling smile that he flashes when he’s really, really happy, and Frankie can’t help but grin back at him.

“So what now?” she starts to say, but the words are barely out of her mouth before Will has lunged across the bed to kiss her. She laughs into his mouth as they careen backward onto the mattress, and then again as Will paws at the sheet covering her body.

“Can’t wait to get me naked, huh?” she teases, running her hands through his already thoroughly mussed hair. “Can’t say I blame you.”

“I told you Standish gets that from you,” he says, glancing up just long enough to quirk an eyebrow at her. “Next time he throws your words back at you, I want you to remember this moment.”

“Really? You want me to remember this next time Standish is being a jerk?”
He finally gets the sheet out of the way, and the look he gives her body makes her ache. “Stop talking about Standish in bed,” he orders.

“You started it.”

“And now I’m finishing it. Apparently I’m good at that.”

She wants to point out that he’s just thrown her words back at her, but when his mouth descends to hers she forgets all about it.
“Bullshit.”

Will whips his head up to look at Frankie. “What?”

“You heard me,” she repeats, smirking at him. “Bullshit.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Come on, don’t lie,” she says, nodding at the pile of playing cards sitting on the mattress between them. “Pick ‘em up, boy scout.”

He groans and reaches out to grab the giant pile of cards with a glare.

“Good boy,” Frankie purrs, her eyes gleaming.

“You’re cheating,” Will accuses.

“You’re a sore loser,” she counters. “This was your idea, by the way. I wanted to go to the casino, remember?”

“Yeah but going to the casino meant putting on pants. And I like when you’re not wearing pants.”

Will watches as Frankie glances down at her body. She’s wearing the button down shirt she’d taken off him hours ago and nothing else. He would’ve preferred she not even put that on, but they ordered room service a while ago and she couldn’t answer the door naked.

It’s not the first time she’s worn his clothes. She’s terrible at packing for cold climates, so she usually ends up wearing one of his sweatshirts or his extra pair of gloves or—he will never, ever let her forget this—his underwear. But seeing her in one of his shirts is new, and the fact that he’d only have to flick open a couple buttons to see all of her is definitely something he could get used to.

“I do have nice legs,” Frankie muses, still staring at herself.

“Dangerous legs,” Will points out, shuffling his newly acquired cards into the stack in his hand. “That guy in Ecuador probably still has bruises around his neck.”

“He deserved it.”

“Agreed. Now come on, it’s your turn.”

“What are we on?”

“Fours.”

She lays down the last two cards in her hand. “Two fours.”

“Bullshit,” he says immediately.

She presses her lips together as if to stifle a smile and shakes her head.

He gapes at her. “No way. No freaking way.”
She flips her cards over and reveals the four of hearts and the four of spades. “Two fours.”

“Unbelievable,” he says, tossing his cards down onto the bed. “You cheated.”

“No I didn’t. I’m just better than you at this.”

“No way! Bullshit is my game.”

“Is it though?” she asks, tilting her head. “Or do you just really like that scene from *How To Lose A Guy In Ten Days*?”

“I knew you liked that movie,” he declares, brandishing his index finger in her face.

She bats his hand away. “That movie is burned into my brain the same way getting waterboarded is.”

That brings him up short. “You’ve been waterboarded?”

“Twice,” she answers absently as she collects the cards scattered all over the bed.

He stares at her. It’s not like he’s never been tortured before. And it’s not like he didn’t know, somewhere in the back of his mind, that she’s been tortured before too. It’s bound to happen to every spy at least once. But there’s something about the way she says it so casually, the same way she might say *yeah, I’ve been to Vegas* or *yeah, I love eating tacos* that makes him suddenly sad for her. There’s a lot he doesn’t know about her, but he does know that everything she's been through started when she lost her parents. It seems unfair that something so traumatic has only led to more trauma.

She glances up at him, flickers her gaze over his face, and then immediately bristles. “Don’t do that,” she growls, pointing at him.

“Don’t do what?”

“Feel sorry for me.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for you. I’m *empathizing* with you because being tortured sucks.”

“I’m a spy, Will. Torture’s part of the job. If you’re going to get all soft on me now just because you’ve seen me naked then you’re not going to see me naked anymore.”

“All right,” he says, holding his hands up. “I’ll keep my empathy to myself.”

“Thank you.”

Before he can say anything else, his phone buzzes on the table next to the bed. He stretches out to grab it. As soon as he picks it up, Frankie’s buzzes too. He grabs hers, tosses it at her, and then looks down at his screen. It’s a text from Susan.

*Ray’s out of the hospital. You want to grab some dinner with us?*

“Oh man,” he says.

“You get a text from Susan about dinner with her and Ray?” Frankie asks.

Will looks up at her. “You got it too?”
“Yep.”

“You think we should go?”

“It’d probably look suspicious if we didn’t.”

He sighs. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll tell her I’ll meet her in the lobby.”

“Me too.”

He texts Susan back, and then climbs out of bed. He needs to take a shower. Maybe Frankie will take one with him.

“Hey,” Frankie calls.

He turns to look at her. She’s still lounging on the bed, propped up on one elbow with her legs stretched out across the sheets. There’s some sunlight filtering in through the blinds that hits her hair just right, making it look almost blonde, and the words well up in his throat unbidden.

You’re beautiful.

He swallows them because he knows she won’t take it well. The look on her face when he told her he didn’t want to share her is still burned into his brain. It’s the first time—other than a few missions when they’ve been only a hair’s breadth from death—that he’s seen her look scared. Even before he saw that look on her face, though, he knew. He knew as soon as she rolled over and said I’m not your girlfriend. Every cell in his body had ached to say Yeah but you should be. All he wanted to do was pull her close and whisper Come on, Frankie, be brave. But he didn’t, because he knew that she wouldn’t. It doesn’t matter that she cares about him. It doesn’t even matter that she’s grown so much in the last few months that realizing she wants to kiss him no longer sends her sprinting into the arms of another man. She’s not ready to be with him. Not yet.

So, he had a choice to make. He could beg her to be with him anyway, and ruin their team and their friendship and any hope for the future in the process. Or, with a few stipulations on his end, he could let her dictate the terms of the relationship.

It wasn’t a hard decision to make. It’s going to be hard to actually carry it out—to swallow all the things he wants to say and resist the urge to do all the sappy lovestruck stuff that even her eyerolls and her sarcasm bring out of him. But giving all that up in exchange for getting to keep her close until she’s ready? That’s a no brainer.

“Earth to Whiskey,” Frankie says, interrupting his reverie.

Will snaps to attention. “What?”

“I said, can you handle this?”

“What, watching Susan and Ray giggle at each other?” He lifts his arms above his head to stretch. “Probably not, but she’s my best friend so I’m going to make it work.”

Frankie glances down at his abs while he stretches. “I didn’t mean Susan and Ray,” she says, looking back up at his face.

“So you meant eating dinner? Because I’ve been eating food for a couple decades now so I think I’ve got that covered.”

“Will,” she says pointedly.
“Oh, you mean our double date that’s not a double date because you and I don’t go on dates.”

She gives him a look.

“I can handle this, Frankie.”

She frowns, clearly skeptical. “I don’t think you can. You’re going to want to blab to your best friend about our awesome sex. Probably over margaritas.”

He perks up at that. “Was it awesome for you?”

She ignores his question. “I don’t want anyone to know about this.”

“Because you’re embarrassed about how much you liked it?”

“Because it’s nobody’s business,” she corrects. “It’s complicated enough already. I don’t want to add anything else to the mix.”

“You know Susan’s a profiler, right? The best there is. There’s a pretty strong possibility she’s going to notice something’s different, whether we say anything or not.”

“But you’re not going to say anything to her, right?”

Will opens his mouth to tell her that yes, of course he’ll keep it to himself if she’s uncomfortable, but he thinks better of it at the last second and snaps his mouth closed.

“Will,” Frankie says, drawing the word out into a warning.

“You want to take a shower with me?”

She squints at him. “Are you negotiating with me right now?”

He shrugs and then grins.

She gets out of bed and pads barefoot across the room. When she stops before him, he realizes she’s a little shorter than she typically seems because she doesn’t have her combat boots on. He can see the hint of a bruise forming low on her neck where he must’ve sucked just a little too hard, and maybe it makes him a neanderthal but he kind of likes knowing he left a mark on her.

She prods him in the chest with her index finger. “Promise me you won’t say anything.”

“Is that a yes or a no on the shower?”

“Promise me first.”

“So you can double cross me? No way.”

“How do I know you won’t double cross me?”

“Please,” he scoffs. “I’m an eagle scout.”

She rolls her eyes. “Stop saying that like it’s sexy.”

“It is sexy.”

“It’s not sexy.”
“Whatever. You going to take a shower with me or not?”

“I smell like lemon verbena,” Frankie mutters grumpily.

Will grins at her. “We both do. We’re twinning.”

She gives him a look over her shoulder. “Next time you say *twinning* I’m going to kill you.”

“If you kill me who’s going to wash your back in the shower?”

“I’m sure I can find someone.” She scans the room, and then nods toward the other side of the lobby. “Like maybe that guy over there.”

Will follows the direction of her gaze to see a well-built, broad shouldered man sitting in a chair and reading the paper. His forearms are covered in tattoos, and the beard coating his jaw is thick and dark. He’s magazine cover handsome, and exactly the kind of guy Will imagines that Frankie would take back to her place.

“He’s got a man bun,” Will says incredulously.


Will frowns at her. “I have a tattoo.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

The man stands up and folds his paper neatly beneath his arm before heading toward the elevators.

“Oh, and he’s tall,” Frankie observes with clear interest.

“I’m tall,” Will points out.

The man saunters past them, smiles, and then double takes when he sees Frankie. He stops. “Hello,” he says to her, flashing a mouthful of perfectly straight, white teeth.

“Hello,” Frankie replies.

“Hey guys!” Susan’s voice calls. Will glances toward the entrance of the hotel, and sees Susan and Ray waving wildly at them from just inside the doors.

“Oh, time to go,” Will says, shoving Frankie toward their friends.

“But I was just about to ask him if he’d wash my back,” Frankie says, glancing over her shoulder at the now confused looking man with the tattoos and the man bun.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Will says through gritted teeth.

Frankie smirks at him. “You’re looking a little green there, Whiskey.”

He glares at her. “You’re mean.”

“You like it,” she whispers just before they stop in front of Susan and Ray.

Susan insists on hugging both of them, as does Ray. Frankie stiff-arms Ray away from her and says *Touch me and you die,* but she welcomes Susan’s hug without a hint of hesitation. Will’s just finished patting Ray on the shoulder and saying he’s glad to hear the good news from the doctor
when Susan says to Frankie, “Ooh, somebody’s been getting busy.”

A bolt of panic lances Will’s chest. He feels Frankie’s body tense next to his. “What?” she says.

“You’ve got a hickey,” Susan answers, gesturing at Frankie’s neck.

Frankie’s hand flies up to cover her neck as Ray goes “Oooohhhh!” like a teenager. Frankie looks at Will, which makes Susan look at Will, and Will looks back and forth between them like a deer in headlights.

“Who’s it from?” Ray asks, leaning forward eagerly.

“Yeah, Frankie, who’s it from?” Will says, turning to face his partner with lifted eyebrows.

Her frown deepens for a split second, and then her face smooths into indifference. “Some guy I met at a bar last night.”

“Look at you enjoying your time off,” Susan says, shoving Frankie lightly on the shoulder. “What was he like?”

“He had a man bun, actually,” Frankie says, glancing at Will with a wicked grin. “Very tall. Lots of tattoos.”

“I need a drink,” Will announces. “Anyone else want a drink?”

Will spends the cab ride to the restaurant listening to Frankie tell Susan all about her fake one night stand. Apparently his name is Michal, and he used to be a famous hockey player but now he runs some nonprofit that works with orphans. She spends nearly three minutes describing a very intricate tattoo he supposedly has on his back, and then another two talking about how tall he is. Will knows she’s only doing it to push his buttons, but it’s working.

Once they get to the restaurant, they’re shown to a table in the back. As they settle into their seats, Frankie leans toward Will and hisses, “White tablecloths?”

“I didn’t pick the place,” he mutters back.

She huffs at him and snatches the drink menu off the table. Their waitress arrives a minute later. She’s young, probably around Gigi’s age, and her dark hair is pulled back into an elegant looking bun. As soon as she gets to the table, she zeroes in on Will. He chats with her like he always does with everyone. Frankie ignores them and keeps her head buried in the drink menu. But then the waitress compliments Will’s shirt.

“It really brings out your eyes,” she says, smiling down at him. “They are so green, by the way.”

Frankie lifts her head. Will suddenly gets an idea.

“Oh, thank you,” he says, smiling at the waitress. “I got them from my dad. My mom always said it was my dad’s eyes that first caught her attention.”

“I can see why,” the waitress giggles.

Frankie clears her throat. “Can we order drinks?”

“Of course,” the waitress replies. She takes their drink orders, and then saunters away.
“Looks like Will might enjoy his time off too,” Susan says with an arched eyebrow.

“Oh please,” Frankie snorts. “Eagle scouts don’t do one night stands.”

“Maybe it’s time to broaden my horizons,” Will says, unfurling his napkin with a flourish. Frankie glares at him. He grins at her and reaches for his water glass.

“Nice,” Ray says, draping his arm around the back of Susan’s chair. “Everybody gettin’ busy in the city of love.”


“Huh?”

“Paris,” she repeats. “Paris is the...nevermind.”

When the waitress brings their drinks, she flirts with Will again. Will flirts back. Frankie drinks her wine aggressively. Will winks at her when Susan’s not looking.

When the waitress brings their appetizers, she brings an extra plate of food. “The chef made this by mistake and I didn’t want it to go to waste,” she says, setting it directly in front of Will. She smiles. “I thought perhaps you and your friends would like it?”

“That is so sweet,” Will says. “Thank you so much, we’d love it.”

“Score,” Ray says, reaching out over the table to fist bump Will. Will feels weird about it, but he taps his fist against Ray’s. The waitress beams and then heads back toward the kitchen.

“I love when flirty Will gets us free food,” Susan says to Frankie, leaning over the table with a grin.

“Yeah, so great,” Frankie mutters, violently stabbing at the foie gras with her fork.

Frankie’s on her second glass of wine when the waitress comes to get their dinner orders. Will makes a show of not being able to choose, the waitress leans down to point at the menu so that her chest is close to his face, and then suddenly Frankie’s water glass spills all over them.

“Oh no!” Frankie gasps in that fake apologetic voice Will last heard her use when she “accidentally” kneed a lecherous Real Madrid fan in the balls because he wouldn’t leave Susan alone. “I am so sorry. I’m just so clumsy, oh my gosh...”

“It’s fine,” the waitress assures Frankie with a genuine smile. “I’ll get some towels.”

She hurries away. Will turns to Frankie with a glare. “Seriously?”

“Slipped right out of my fingers,” she says with a shrug.

He tosses his now sopping wet napkin onto the table. It lands with a soggy smack. “All that fun you had with the man bun make you clumsy?”

Frankie narrows her eyes at him. “Not the same, Will.”

“Oh, maybe he’ll scrub my back,” Will quotes at her pointedly.

“All I did was say hello!” she says, throwing her hands out. “You’re ten seconds from mounting her.”
“Are they in a fight?” Ray asks Susan. “I feel like they’re in a fight. You know when they do that thing where they’re supposedly talking about one thing but it’s actually something else?”

“Subtext,” Susan supplies, glancing between Will and Frankie with lifted eyebrows.

“More like sex text, am I right?” Ray says with a snort.

Everyone at the table turns to look at him.

“No?” he says.

Frankie makes a sound of disgust in the back of her throat and rolls her eyes. “No,” Will says. Susan shakes her head at him. Ray hangs his head.

The waitress reappears with some towels. She looks like she’s ready to help Will dry himself off, but he’s a little worried that Frankie might stab her with a steak knife so he thanks her profusely and then ushers her away.

“Do you two want to tell me what’s going on?” Susan says once Will is sufficiently dry.

“No,” they say in unison.

“Well then do you think you can behave for the rest of dinner? Because it’s not very often that we get to share a nice meal in a beautiful restaurant without having to worry about getting shot at. So if you can’t act like adults, then you can go and Ray and I will eat alone.”

“Yeah,” Ray says, puffing out his chest.

Will holds his hands up. “You’re right, Susan. I’m very sorry.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” Frankie echoes.

Susan nods. “Thank you.”

They manage to get through dinner without another incident. Will tones down his flirting considerably, and the waitress seems to notice. She’s still polite, but way less friendly. Will expects his partner to continue glaring at their waitress even after promising to behave, but Frankie surprises him and does the opposite: She completely ignores both the waitress and him. It’s like all of a sudden there’s a brick wall between them, and no matter what he does he can’t get through. Even a long, drawn out story about his first time in the field—the perfect opportunity for her to mock him mercilessly—gets ignored. She just keeps her eyes fixed on her plate until Susan speaks, and then she comes back to life.

By the time they leave the restaurant and start walking along the river, Will feels like an idiot. Frankie’s right—her teasing him about getting man bun to wash her back is not the same thing as him openly flirting with the waitress right in front of her. He wants to apologize, and he’s opening his mouth to do just that, when Susan gasps and points to a sightseeing boat that’s down on the river.

“We should go!” she says, turning to look at Frankie and Will.

“Eh,” Frankie says.

Will stares down at the boat. “Yeah, I don’t know, Sus.”

“I think you guys owe her for almost ruining dinner,” Ray says, straightening up to his full height.
Frankie arches an eyebrow at him. He deflates a little, glances over at Susan, and then seems to get a burst of courage and puffs out his chest again. Susan smiles up at him fondly, and then looks back at Will and Frankie.

“Well?”

And that’s how they end up sharing a blanket on a cold, hard bench in the back of a sightseeing cruise.

Despite the fact that they’re sharing a blanket, Frankie is very determinedly not touching him. In fact, the only reason they’re technically sharing a blanket is because Will draped it over her legs anyway after she snarled, *No I’m fine.* Her arms are crossed and her posture is rigid, and it makes Will long to reach out and smooth his hand along her back until she relaxes. Ray and Susan are sitting across the aisle on the other side of the boat, huddled beneath their own blanket and talking softly, so Will figures now’s as good a time as any to try to make amends.

“You have to admit the city’s beautiful from this angle,” he says, glancing at Frankie.

“Mhmm,” she replies, staring fixedly at the river.

“I bet in the summer it’s really nice.”

“Mhmm.”

He watches her, waiting for some semblance of recognition, but she continues to act like he doesn’t exist. “Hey,” he says, nudging her knee with his own.

She turns to look at him with a sigh. “What?”

“I’m sorry.”

Her expression softens a little, and that’s enough encouragement for him. He slides closer to her on the bench so that the sides of their bodies are pressed against each other.

“I wouldn’t have slept with that waitress.”

She shakes her head and looks back out at the water. “You don’t do one night stands.”

“That’s not why.”

She shifts on the bench, and their knees brush. There’s a long pause, and then she looks at him and says, “I wouldn’t have slept with man bun.”

He nods. “I know.”

They stare at each other. He wants to kiss her, but Susan and Ray are a few yards away and the no PDA rule is non-negotiable. He pulls his hand out of his coat pocket instead and smooths it over her thigh beneath the cover of the blanket.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” she murmurs.

Panic flares in his chest, but he ignores it. “Doesn’t feel like a bad idea.”

“Bad ideas never do.”

“We just need to work out the kinks. We’ll figure it out.”
She lowers her gaze and stares at a spot on his coat. “Maybe.”

“Hey,” he says, squeezing her thigh. She lifts her eyes back to his. “Do you trust me?”

The ghost of a smile appears on her lips. “Against my better judgement.”

“Hey, come on, I’m an eagle scout. We’re the definition of trustworthy.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “It’s never going to be sexy, Will.”

He grins. “We’ll see.”

Resisting the urge to reach out and grab Frankie’s hand during their return trip to the hotel feels like the hardest thing Will’s ever had to do.

They ride the elevator up to their floor with Susan and Ray. Susan’s room is next to Frankie’s, so Will is forced to go to his own door while Frankie goes to hers. He pats his pockets, pretending to search for his card key so he can linger and outlast Susan, but Frankie already has hers out and is slotting it into the reader. Will watches her, but she doesn’t look at him.

“Night guys,” Susan says as she swings her door open for Ray.

“Night,” Frankie says as she opens her door too.

Resigning himself to the fact that Frankie’s clearly having second thoughts and he’s going to have to sleep alone, Will pulls his card key out of his jacket pocket. “Night,” he echoes.

He turns toward his door, unlocks it, and then pushes it open. He pauses on the threshold and turns around, hoping for one last glimpse of Frankie, and is surprised to find her standing in her doorway, her arms crossed over her chest and her shoulder leaning against the doorframe.

She tilts her head toward Susan’s room and quirks an eyebrow. Will confirms that Susan’s door is shut, and then nods. Frankie steps out into the hall and closes the door to her room softly behind her. Then she crosses the hallway in two long strides, rises up on her toes, puts a hand on either side of Will’s face, and kisses him.

The clock on the bedside table says 11:03 when Frankie stirs against Will’s chest.

The ambient city light leaking through the curtains gives Will just enough illumination to see her moving through the dark room. She bends to pick up her discarded clothes, pulling them on as she finds them, and then sits on the edge of the bed to put on her shoes. He watches her with his hands folded behind his head, admiring the fluidity of her movements. When she’s done with her shoes, she glances at him over her shoulder.

“I figured you’d ask me to stay,” she murmurs into the darkness.

He wanted to. He still does. But he knows better.

“Would you stay if I asked?” he says instead.

She gazes at him for a moment, a half smile on her lips, and then she rises from the bed. She turns to face him, bends down, and presses her mouth against his in a long, lingering kiss.

“Good night, Will,” she whispers.
And then she’s gone.

The clock on the bedside table says 2:49 when Will wakes to the sound of someone pounding on his door.

He sits straight up in bed, immediately reaching for his gun that’s sitting next to the clock.

“Will, open the door,” Frankie’s muffled voice calls.

He leaps out of bed and strides toward the door with his gun still in his hand. When he swings the door open he finds her standing on the other side, wearing sweats and holding her cell phone. Her face is pale and serious.

“Frankie?” he says, squinting at the brightness of the hallway lights. “What’s wrong?”

“Standish got attacked.”
Hey guys. Just a quick note for y’all. When we get a season two (and yes, I said when and not if because I refuse to believe I’m never going to see these dorks bickering on my screen again), I want two things: I want to know more about Frankie’s backstory, and I want to know more about her friendship with Jai. Since we don’t know much about either of these things yet (again, fingers crossed for season two), I’m making my own canon—and you’re going to start seeing some hints of it in this chapter. Just thought I’d give you a heads up in case something seems unfamiliar. Also, thanks for reading :)
“I’ll tell him. We’re on our way.”

“I sent a plane. It’ll be at Vodochody in forty-five minutes.”

Frankie smiles despite herself. Even at his most distraught, Jai is still on top of things. “Keep us posted?”

“Yeah. I think I have to...” He trails off.

She waits, but he doesn’t finish. “Jai?” she prompts.

He clears his throat. “Should I call his mom?”

Fuck, Frankie thinks, rubbing a hand down her face. This is why she doesn’t like to get emotionally involved. Decisions like this.

“No,” she decides. “The hospital will do it.” Which is true. But also, she can’t bear the idea of Jai having to call Standish’s mom. It’ll wreck him.

“Okay.”

“Get a drink,” she suggests.

“Mamont?”

She thinks it’s supposed to be a joke since his voice lifts at the end, but it’s too soon to joke about that night. It’ll always be too soon.

“Glenfiddich,” she tells him. “Save me a glass.”

“Always do.”

She hangs up and immediately heads for Will’s room. She bangs on the door with both her fists and calls his name.

No answer.

She pounds again. “Will, open the door.”

A few seconds later the door swings open, and Will’s standing before her in plaid boxers and a gray t-shirt. His gun is in his hand. “Frankie?” he says with a squint. “What’s wrong?”

“Standish got attacked.”

All the color drains from his face. “What?”

“Jai called me. Standish was stabbed. We don’t know by who. He’s in surgery now. Jai’s got a plane meeting us at Vodochody in forty-five minutes. We have to go.”

“Why didn’t he call me?” Will demands.

“He did. You didn’t answer.”

Will turns on his heel and disappears back into his room. Frankie catches the door before it slams in her face and follows him. Will snatches his phone off the table next to the bed, and Frankie watches as his face contorts from confusion to surprise. He looks up at her. “Standish called me.”
“What?”

She moves closer to him, and he puts the voicemail on speaker and holds the phone out between them.

“Hey Will,” Standish’s voice cuts into the room. Frankie wonders if it’s the last time she’ll ever hear it. “I’m home now. I’m kind of happy you didn’t pick up. Look, there’s something that’s been hanging over my head, and I’m not even really sure I should tell you, but...it’s about Emma. The person who killed her...it was Tina, all right? And I just—”

Whatever he’s about to say next is cut off by the sounds of a struggle. For a second all they can hear is rustling, and then a cold voice says, “You shouldn’t have shot my girlfriend.”

There’s a muffled scream on the other end of the line, and then the call ends. Frankie and Will look up at each other. “Ollerman,” they say in unison.

“He’s dead,” Will says. “We watched him jump out a window.”

Frankie shakes her head. “Wouldn’t be the first time someone faked their death.”

“I identified his body.”

“You identified a body,” she corrects. “You said yourself it was too crushed to tell.”

Will stares down at his phone, his eyebrows furrowed. Frankie watches him, trying to gauge his next move. She expects it to go one of two ways: Either he’s going to slip immediately into Leader Will mode and send her off to pack her bags so they can get to the airport, or he’s going to be Emotional Will and want to talk about how worried he is for Standish.

She doesn’t expect him to wind up and hurl his phone at the wall like a major league pitcher. “Damn it!” he shouts. His phone ricochets off the wall and then bounces across the carpet until it lands next to Frankie’s feet. There’s a giant crack down the center of the screen.

“You’re probably going to regret that later,” she observes.

Will mutters another curse and paces to the other side of the room. When he paces back toward her, she immediately recognizes the expression on his face—the same cold, furious look he wore right before he nearly lit a man on fire.

“Hey,” she says, stepping into his path. He glares at the floor. “Look at me, Will,” she orders, hardening her voice.

He obeys.

“We’re going to get Ollerman. But right now, Standish needs you. Go check us out with the front desk. I’ll get Susan and Ray and we’ll meet you in the lobby. Okay?”

He stares at her for a moment, his jaw clenched, and then he nods. “Okay.”

It’s an eight hour flight. Will spends the first three hours pacing back and forth down the aisle of their private jet, calling every single contact he has to try to track down Ollerman.

Susan tries once or twice to get him to sit down. He brushes her off. Ray tries too, but all he gets is a glare. Susan puts *When Harry Met Sally* on the TV at the front of the plane, but Will doesn’t even look at it. Eventually she gives up and goes to sit next to Ray on the couch. Not long after—and not
surprisingly, considering it’s the middle of the night—they’re both asleep.

Frankie’s watched it all from the back of the plane, her legs gathered up beneath her in the oversized seat. One of the reasons she hasn’t bothered to try to calm Will down is because she understands why he feels the need to be doing something. When you’re a spy, it’s not uncommon to hold the lives of millions of people in your hands. It’s terrifying, sure, but it’s also empowering. Whether or not those people survive depends on how good you are at your job and what decisions you make.

Being stuck on a plane halfway across the Atlantic Ocean while your friend fights for his life, on the other hand, is the definition of powerlessness. All of them feel it. Susan and Ray and even Frankie herself are feeling anxious and frustrated by their inability to help Standish. But Will feels everything so deeply, and he’s made such a habit out of being responsible for each and every one of them, that Frankie knows it’s the worst for him.

But understanding his frustration isn’t the only reason why she hasn’t left her seat. She’s also just not sure what to say. She’s not good at empathy, or sympathy, or heartfelt pep talks. She’s made it her mission in life to avoid that stuff. Will makes that all but impossible, of course. Even before they started sleeping together she found herself trying harder to connect with people instead of just pushing them away on instinct. But now that they’ve shared a bed the pull feels even stronger, and with it comes the fear that she’ll try to comfort him and somehow just make things worse.

When there are three hours left in their flight, she gets up and makes some instant coffee in the small kitchenette. She pours two cups, one for herself and one for Will, and adds some cream and sugar to his. Then she takes a deep breath and forces herself to walk down the aisle toward where her clearly frustrated partner is sitting.

“Yes, thanks for nothing,” Will says, hanging up his phone with an annoyed sigh just as Frankie stops next to him. He glances up at her, and she holds the cup out wordlessly. “Thanks,” he says, taking it from her.

“Sure,” she replies. She sits in the chair across from him. “No luck?”

“No.” He sips his coffee and then grimaces. “This is disgusting.”

“Thanks,” she says dryly. She takes a sip from her own cup and then says, “Yeah, that’s gross.”

Will snorts out a laugh. Frankie grins at him. A beat of silence passes.

“So,” Frankie says, rubbing her thumb along the edge of her cup absently. “Tina killed Emma.”

Will’s expression goes blank. “Yeah.”

She waits for him to say something else, but he takes another sip of coffee instead. This time, he doesn’t grimace. Frankie shifts in her seat. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He lifts his head to look at her with a bit of a smirk. “Do you?”

“Not really,” she admits. But I thought you might, she nearly says. It brings up a memory she’d rather not relive, though, so she just keeps her mouth shut. Silence descends between them.

“I let her into our family,” Will says at last, resting his elbows on the table between them and then staring down into his coffee. “She wouldn’t have even known who Emma was if it wasn’t for me.”

“That’s not true and you know it. Emma was hunting the Trust just like we were. She wasn’t some
helpless, innocent civilian, Will. She was a spy. And a damn good one at that.”

“I know that. But—”

“But nothing. Emma chose to work for MI6. She chose to go to Berlin, just like Tina chose to pull that trigger. Every time you act like it was you who made those decisions instead of them, you lessen Emma’s sacrifice and you exonerate Tina for her murder.”

Will blinks at her, clearly taken aback. Frankie immediately wonders if she’s gone too far. She should’ve been more sympathetic, or maybe a little gentler. Maybe she should’ve tried to hug him or rub his back the way Susan always does when he’s upset. Either way, it’s too late to take it back now.

“Sorry,” she mutters, lifting her coffee to her lips.

“No, you’re right,” he says. Normally she’d be a little offended that he sounds so surprised, but she’s honestly a little surprised herself. He tilts his head and studies her, his brow furrowed. “That was...that was really insightful, Frankie.”

“Jai said it to me once,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. And then she realizes what she’s just said, and she freezes.

Will leans forward, obviously intrigued. “When?”

“Long time ago,” she answers with a shrug, taking another sip of her awful coffee just for something to do.

“Did you lose someone like I lost Emma?”

“We don’t have to talk about this.”

“You mean you don’t want to talk about it.”

“No I don’t,” she says bluntly.

They stare at each other for a moment. She expects him to push her like he always does, but he doesn’t. “You want to watch a movie with me?” he asks instead.

“What movie?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “I have Runaway Bride downloaded on my laptop.”

Frankie crinkles her nose. “That sounds terrible.”

“It’s Julia Roberts. She’s America’s sweetheart. Also, I think you’re really going to identify with Richard Gere’s character. And their chemistry. God, Frankie, it is palpable.”

“I can’t believe I’m sleeping with you.”

He grins at her and gets out of his chair. Frankie mutters under her breath at him. When he comes back, he stops next to her and says, “Scoot over.”

“Why?” she says, looking up at him.

“We can’t watch from opposite sides of the table.”
“We could.”

“We won’t.”

Frankie sighs and scoots over a chair. Will slides into the seat she just left and sets his laptop on the table. A few clicks later, music starts to play softly out of the speakers along the side of the keyboard. Julia Roberts appears on screen, riding a galloping horse and wearing a wedding dress and a distraught expression.

“Is she late to her wedding?” Frankie asks.

“No, she’s running from it.”

“Running from it?” she repeats, turning to look at him. “Why is she running from it?”

“It’s called Runaway Bride, Frankie.”

“So, what, she’s just going to run from weddings the whole movie? That’s stupid.”

“Just watch it,” Will says with a laugh.

Hours later, Will and Frankie burst into the waiting room at the hospital with Susan and Ray hot on their heels. Jai is pacing across the room, and when he turns to face them Frankie notices that his suit looks wrinkled and there are dark circles under his eyes.

“Jai,” Frankie breathes.

He gives her a look, but before she can say anything he gestures at an older woman sitting nearby. “Everyone, this is Edgar’s mother, Esther Standish.”

Esther gets to her feet. For a moment, nobody says anything. And then Will steps forward, a warm smile on his face. “Mrs. Standish. What a pleasure.”

“You must be Will,” Esther says, shaking his proffered hand. “I’ve heard so much about you from Edgar.” She glances around at the rest of them. “I’ve heard so much about all of you. You are all very dear to my Edgar.”

Her eyes well up all of a sudden, and Frankie freezes. Will, of course, does not. He puts his arm around Mrs. Standish and leads her back to her chair, and Susan starts toward them too. Ray follows her like an obedient puppy. Frankie hesitates, and then decides to sit in a chair by the door.

A few seconds later, Jai lowers himself into the seat next to her. For a long moment, they just sit there in silence.

“I don’t like this,” Jai says at last.

Frankie leans forward and puts her elbows on her knees. “Me neither.” She glances at Jai. “Things were easier before.”

“But were they better?”

Frankie looks past him to where Will is sitting, his arm around Esther. He’s got her smiling already, and he’s smiling too, and Frankie’s heart suddenly squeezes in her chest. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do.”
Frankie snaps her gaze back to his. Jai turns his head to look over at their team, and then looks back at Frankie with a sad smile. “They would be glad we found new people.”

Frankie’s heart squeezes again. She leans back in her chair and rests her head on Jai’s shoulder. “Yeah. They would.”

Frankie once told Will that he was absolutely, under no circumstances, to hold her hand unless he wanted her to break it. She meant it. She made an exception in Prague when he was hauling her toward a cab, but she rationalized it by telling herself that it was just foreplay. She wouldn’t let it happen again.

But when the doctor walks in the waiting room and asks to speak to the family of Edgar Standish, Frankie finds herself wanting to reach for Will’s hand. They all crowd around the doctor and listen as he explains Standish’s injury (a deep stab wound with a serrated knife) and the damage (severely punctured lung), how the surgery went (touch and go for a while, but they successfully repaired the lung) and his prognosis (it’ll be a long recovery, but he should be okay.)

Esther collapses against Jai in a fit of happy tears. Jai looks so thrilled that his friend is going to be okay that he doesn’t even seem to mind the sobbing woman in his arms. Susan hugs Ray. And then all of a sudden, in the middle of the relieved celebration, Will’s fingers are weaving through Frankie’s.

She glances down at their hands, and then up at him. He’s got tears in his eyes, but he’s smiling. He’s holding her hand tightly, like he never wants to let go, and Frankie finds that for once, she doesn’t mind.

Four days later, Frankie runs into Will outside the hospital.

They’ve seen each other quite a bit over the course of the last four days, but they haven’t managed to get a moment alone. Between sleeping (separately) for twelve straight hours after that first interminably long night, keeping Standish company, and sitting through briefings with the higher-ups who are very concerned that Ollerman is still alive and the Dead Drop was compromised, they’ve had their hands full. So when they run into each other on the sidewalk in front of the hospital and no one they know is around, it feels like fate.

Will’s face lights up as soon as he sees her. Frankie tries to ignore the swooping feeling in her stomach. “Hey you,” he greets.

“Hey. You headed out?”

“Just to get Standish some lunch. I’ll be back.”

“He still complaining about the hospital food?”

“Yeah. But in his defense, it’s bad. I think I saw an ant in his jello.”

Frankie makes a face. “Ew.”

“Yeah,” he laughs. “I can grab you something too if you want.”

She shrugs. “Sure. You know what I like.”

Will lifts his eyebrows. Frankie holds his gaze even though she didn’t mean it like that. Or maybe
she did. She doesn’t even know anymore. It’s been nearly five days since she was last in Will’s bed, and all she can think about is when she’s going to be back in it again. She’d be annoyed with herself if she wasn’t so damn frustrated.

Will steps into her space, and Frankie’s stomach swoops again. “What are you doing tonight?”

“I thought I’d clean my guns.”

He smirks. “Why don’t you come over to my place instead?”

She hesitates for a split second. If she goes to his place, then it’ll be real. She won’t be able to write off whatever this thing is between them as something that only happened in Prague. She knew that would be the case when she signed that ridiculous sheet of rules, but still. This is a big step.

“Oh, okay,” she says.

He grins. “Okay.”

She smiles like an idiot the entire way to Standish’s room. Somewhere in the back of her mind there’s a nagging voice telling her that she should’ve said no, that she’s getting too involved and too attached, but before it gets too loud she finds herself in the doorway of Standish’s room.

Susan is sitting in a chair next to the bed. Ray is behind her, shoveling jello into his mouth from a plastic cup. Frankie frowns at him.

“He ate mine first,” Ray says around a mouthful, pointing his plastic spoon at Standish. Frankie wonders if she should tell him that Will saw an ant in it, but decides against it.

“Frankieeeee,” Standish greets, grinning at her from his hospital bed. “What up, girl?”

“Hey Standish,” Frankie says, stepping into the room. “How you feeling?”

“Only hurts when I breathe, so, that’s a win.”

“How is that a win?”

“Well cause I’m still breathing.”

Frankie snorts out a laugh.

“Frankie, I’m glad you’re here,” Susan says, getting to her feet. “Can you keep him company until Will gets back? I’ve got some calls to make and Ray has a meeting with the director.”

Frankie gives Standish a look. “Did you try to get out of bed again?”

“I needed to find something edible or I was going to starve!” Standish howls, and then he immediately winces and clutches at his chest. “Oh, ow, ow, owww.”

“You’re an idiot,” Frankie tells him.

Standish cracks one eye open and looks at Susan. “You gonna let her talk to me like that while I’m wounded and suffering?”

“She’s right. You’re an idiot.”

“I hate all of you.”
Susan smiles and leans forward to drop a kiss on his forehead. “Behave.”

“Right, like Imma try to get out of bed with Nikita over there giving me the death look,” Standish replies, gesturing at Frankie.

“You know, if I break his ankles he can’t get out of bed,” Frankie tells Susan.

Susan pats her on the shoulder. “We’ll keep that in mind as plan B.”

Once Susan and Ray are gone, Frankie makes herself comfortable in the chair next to Standish’s bed. She pulls out her phone and starts to scroll, but she can see Standish studying her from the corner of her eye.

“You don’t have to babysit me you know,” he says innocently. “If you want to go sharpen your knives or count your grenades or do whatever it is you do in your spare time, you can. I promise I won’t get out of bed.”

“Your promises mean nothing to me, Standish.”

“Well that’s hurtful.”

“You need to stop pushing yourself,” she tells him sternly, finally looking up from her phone. “Every time you do, you make other people worry.”

He smirks. “You worried about me, Frankie?”

“Obviously I didn’t mean me,” she answers, rolling her eyes. “I meant Will, and Susan, and probably your mother.”

“Okay, but would you have been sad if I died?”

She shrugs. “Sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Would’ve taken us forever to find a replacement nerd as good as you.”

Standish furrows his eyebrows and tilts his head. “That’s actually the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

He snorts. There’s a brief silence where Frankie goes back to scrolling through her phone, and then Standish says, “You know what we should do to celebrate you saying nice things about me?”

Frankie looks up again. “Pretend I didn’t?”

He holds his arms out and smiles. “Bring it in, girl.”

She snorts. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on,” he whines. “You’re the only person who hasn’t hugged me yet. Jai even hugged me!”

“So?”

“So don’t you feel left out?”
“Not even a little.”

“Nobody’s here, Frankie. Nobody’s going to see. It’ll be our little secret.”

“I’m not going to hug you, Standish.”

“I think you are.”

“I think I’m not.”

“Well then I’m going to tell Will you did.”

Frankie narrows her eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh I would. If you hug me, I won’t tell a soul. But if you don’t hug me, I’m going to tell Will you did. And you know he’s going to cry, and then make a big speech about how far you’ve come.”

“This is blackmail,” she tells him. “I’ve killed for less than this.”

He beckons her toward him with his arms still spread. “Come on, I’ll make it quick. Two, three seconds tops. You don’t even have to hug me back.”

Frankie glares at him and considers her options. On the one hand, it’s a terrible precedent. If she hugs him now he’s going to want a hug every time he almost dies, and given his still-shitty combat skills that’s going to be often. On the other hand, she really doesn’t want what she’s got planned for Will tonight to be derailed by an extended speech about her emotional growth.

Frankie glances toward the doorway, but it’s empty. He’s right. No one’s around. So she sighs, gets to her feet, and leans just far enough over the side of the bed for Standish to wrap his arms around her shoulders and squeeze.

“Ohhhhh yeah,” he says in her ear. “That’s the stuff.”

“Okay,” she says, immediately leaning out of his reach. “That’s enough of that.”

“You know, you actually smell really good.”

She arches an eyebrow at him. “That surprises you?”

“I mean yeah, kinda. I try not to get too close to you, what with your tendency to just hit people when they annoy you, but I always assumed you’d smell like gunpowder and violence. Turns out you smell like lavender.”

His face contorts into a sudden wince, and his entire demeanor changes. “Tina smelled like lavender,” he mutters, looking down at his hands.

To her surprise, Frankie feels a sudden, nagging urge to comfort him. She tries to shove it back down, but the longer he stares glumly down at his hands, the stronger the urge gets. She knows it’s because she’s been in his place before. She knows how he feels, and it sucks. But she also knew how he felt back at the Dead Drop when she heard him Whitney-Houston-crying in the bathroom, and she hadn’t felt an urge to comfort him then. So why now?

Will, she realizes.

Damn him.
She sighs and crosses her arms over her chest. “Look, Standish, I’m not very good at this, so if you want to talk about your feelings you should probably just wait until Will gets back. But for what it’s worth...I know how you feel. And it gets better.”

He smiles sadly. “I know you’re trying to be nice to me cause I almost died and you liked our hug more than you want to admit—”

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“—but unless you’ve had a girlfriend who turned out to be an evil, murdering psychopath that was working for the bad guys during your entire relationship, you really don’t know how I feel.”

Every self-preservation instinct in Frankie’s body is telling her to let the moment slide, but before she can stop herself she says, “It was a boyfriend, actually.”

Standish snaps his head up to look at her. “Wait, really?”

“Yes really. But if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it. And break your knees.”

“I won’t tell anyone, I swear,” he says, holding his hands up defensively. “But, like, wow. I have so many questions.”

She shakes her head. “Not answering them.”

“Oh come on,” he whines. “You can’t drop a bomb like that and then not tell me anything!”

“Watch me,” she says, settling back into her chair again.

“Hey guys,” Will says brightly. He strides through the door and sets a bunch of bags on a nearby chair. “What’d I miss?”

“Just telling Standish about all the times I’ve been stabbed,” Frankie says, shooting a meaningful glance in Standish’s direction while Will’s back is turned. Standish mimes zipping his mouth closed and throwing away the key. Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Long list?” Will asks, turning around to face them.

“So long,” Frankie replies.

“Well, as much fun as it sounds to relive all the times you almost died, what do you say we change the subject?” He holds up a box of Uno cards. “I got Uno for our lunchtime entertainment.”

“Oh hell yeah,” Standish says. “’Yall bout to get your asses whooped by a man in a hospital gown.”

Will smiles. “I admire your confidence, kiddo, but I’m actually pretty good at this game.”

Frankie smirks at him. “Hopefully better than you are at Bullshit.”

Will stares at her in surprise from the other side of Standish’s hospital bed. Frankie bites her lip so she won’t grin at him, but she can’t help but look him up and down. God, she can’t wait for tonight.

Standish glances between them. “Can y’all stop having eye sex so we can play this game?”

Will laughs. “I’ll deal.”
Will’s sheets smell like him.

Frankie lays sprawled on her stomach, her face buried in one of his pillows, trying to figure out what he smells like. It’s not lemon verbena, she knows that much, but she can’t figure out what it is. She’s never been great with scents. She can see a string of numbers and memorize it in five seconds flat, she can hear the cocking of a gun from forty yards away with almost inhuman precision, and she never forgets a face or a voice. But smells aren’t her forte. She’s just never really had a reason to pay attention to them.

Until now.

His sheets smell just like the sweatshirts of his that she’s stolen. They smell like he did in Prague when he leaned forward and kissed her softly, and like he did earlier when he pressed her back against his front door as soon as she walked in and murmured Finally into her mouth. She could just ask him, she supposes. But that would mean admitting that she a) noticed it and b) actually likes it, and there’s no way she’s doing that. She also has a feeling she’ll be subjected to a very long story about how he spent years trying to find his signature scent, and nobody needs to hear that.

His bedroom is dark and still, though the sounds of New York at night are leaking through the closed window. She caught her breath a while ago, but her muscles are still humming. The sweat has dried on her skin, and she’s starting to feel a chill. Reaching for the navy blankets that are tangled at the end of the bed would be logical, but dangerous. If she gets warm and comfortable, she’ll fall asleep. And she can’t sleep here.

She feels the mattress shift a little, and a moment later Will’s mouth is tracing a hot, wet trail across her bare back. “Tired?” he whispers in her ear.

She smiles into his pillow. “No.”

His hands skim along her hips and she can feel the calluses on his palms, rough against her skin. “Good,” he whispers.

So good, she thinks as he rolls her over and lowers his mouth to hers.
Five

Chapter Notes

Well, the news about season two/permanent cancellation is depressing. But I’m not ready to let my spies go yet, and I’ve got a whole lot of ideas about all the trouble they could get into. So, if you’re interested, stick around. I’m going to write my own season two right here.

For two months after Prague, Will feels like he’s living in a dream. He saves the world. He drinks beer with his adopted family. And then he gets to take Frankie home.

She doesn’t stay all night, of course. She never stays. But his sheets smell like her, and takeout menus from all her favorite restaurants have found their way into the stack on his desk, and he’s started collecting all the bobby pins of hers that he finds lying forgotten on his floors.

They still fight all the time. She drives him crazy with how impulsive she is, and nothing seems to annoy her more than his tendency to give people he doesn’t know the benefit of the doubt. He hates that she shoots first and asks questions later. She hates the way he steadfastly refuses to let her “motivate” assets unless it’s absolutely necessary. He’s both impressed and endlessly frustrated by her single minded focus during missions. She’s both exasperated and begrudgingly respectful of his willingness to derail missions just to help people.

They bicker about everything. How to infiltrate a terrorist cell in Budapest. How to get a nuclear warhead across the Kazakhstan border. How to apprehend a billionaire philanthropist who runs a sex trafficking ring in Sao Paolo. They compete over everything too. Who’s better at ping pong. Who can disassemble and reassemble a gun the fastest. Who speaks Russian the most fluently.

They’re always at odds. They’re total opposites. On paper, they shouldn’t work. And yet, somehow, they do.

Despite their constant sparring and the limitations of sneaking around behind everybody’s backs, they manage to fall into a routine. On overnight missions where they stay in hotels, Will gets an extra room key from the front desk and slips it to Frankie. On overnight missions where they’re not in hotels, they settle for sexting and the occasional makeout session in whatever semi-private space Frankie manages to find. In New York, she comes to his place.

The Dead Drop—which has been rebuilt and seriously upgraded in terms of security—is off limits. They spend a lot of time there, and they often find themselves alone, but she’s never initiated anything and Will hasn’t either. He likes to think of it as their neutral zone. On missions they’re super spies, and in his apartment they’re lovers, but at the Dead Drop they’re just Frankie and Will. (There’s also a pretty serious chance Jai has the whole place bugged, and Ray has a tendency to just appear out of thin air with a What’s up party people?, so it’s probably in their best interest to just keep their hands to themselves.)

Will isn’t sure whether Frankie is any closer to being ready for a real relationship than she was in Prague. Sometimes he catches her watching him, her eyebrows furrowed a little as if she’s confused. Sometimes she does things—like reaching for his hand when they’re undercover, or sitting closer than she needs to while they’re drinking with the team, or saying things like Do you know what we should do this weekend? while they’re eating takeout on his couch—and he thinks
maybe she is.

But then other times she gets spooked. Most of the time it’s after he does something that comes too close to breaking a rule. One time he picked her a flower while they were waiting for a nuclear scientist to meet with a Yemeni general in the botanical gardens in Madrid. In Paris he bought her a latte with a heart drawn in the foam. In Brussels she got sliced by a stiletto knife across her stomach and the entire length of her left thigh, and that night in his hotel room he loved her with a little more reverence than usual.

Her reaction to moments that creep too close to real is always the same. She stops talking to him. She keeps at least six feet of distance between them when they’re in the same room. She screens his calls, ignores his texts, and goes AWOL from his bed. The first time she did it, it scared the hell out of him. He was sure she was going to call everything off, and he was dying to ask for Susan’s advice, but he knew Frankie would never forgive him if he did. So he swallowed his fear and waited her out, and it worked. It’s worked every time since then too. Sometimes she’s distant for days and sometimes it’s only a few hours, but she always finds her way back into his arms.

Two months into their new normal, on a Thursday night after three long days and a messy mission in Buenos Aires, he’s opening a bottle of her favorite wine in preparation for movie night when he hears a knock on his front door. Her insistence on knocking when she comes over exasperates him a little. He’s told her a million times that he leaves it unlocked for her when he knows she’s coming, but she refuses to let herself in. He’s guessing it’s because it would make her feel too much like his girlfriend. He can’t even begin to imagine the tailspin she’d send herself into if he actually gave her the key he had made for her a while back.

He sets the bottle of wine down, crosses the apartment, and swings the door open with a smile. “I swear on my mom’s pecan pie, if that pizza—oh. Susan. Hey.”

Susan lifts her eyebrows at him from the other side of his doorway. “Your mom’s pecan pie?”

“Best there is,” he says automatically. “Won the competition at the Indiana State Fair in ’95 and ’96.”

“It’s adorable that you’re proud of that.”

“My mom says the same thing. What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

He steps out of her way, and she gives him a sheepish smile as she passes by him and into his apartment. “I had a fight with Ray. I was hoping we could talk it through.”

“Did he do something stupid?” Will demands, closing the door behind him. “Because we can sic Frankie on him if you want.”

“Actually I think I’m the one who—oh, what’s this?” She turns away from his kitchen island with the bottle of wine in her hand and a curious look on her face. “Expensive bottle of wine and two wine glasses. You expecting someone?”

Lying to his best friend, even after two months of sneaking around, doesn’t come easily to Will, so he blurts out, “Just Frankie,” before he even realizes what he’s saying.

Susan’s eyebrows shoot upward. “Frankie? Our Frankie?”
“It’s not like that, Sus,” he says, trying to laugh it off. “We were going to go through some leads on Ollerman. That’s all.”

“Leads on Ollerman,” Susan repeats, sounding unimpressed.

“Yeah.”

“What leads?”

“You know. The leads.”

She smirks. “What I know is that you can’t lie to me. You’re terrible at it.”

He really is, but Frankie will kill him if he tells Susan the truth. His mind races to find another excuse. “All right, fine,” he says, holding his hands up in defeat. “We’re not working. We were going to watch a movie. She lost that bet we had about whether Standish could get a date with that dancer in Buenos Aires, so she has to watch *Casablanca* with me. I bought the wine as a consolation gift.”

It’s not a total lie. Frankie did lose that bet, and he did threaten to make her watch *Casablanca* to pay for it. But during their last night in Buenos Aires she offered up a very appealing alternative to settle the bet, and Will had...well, he’d taken her up on it. And he’s not sorry.

“Why wouldn’t you just say that?” Susan asks.

“Because I didn’t want to get another lecture about how Frankie and I should stop ignoring our feelings.”

“Well if you two would stop ignoring your feelings then I’d stop lecturing.”

There’s another knock on the door. Will swings it open. Frankie’s standing on the other side with a pizza box in her hand. “I got supreme, so you owe me,” she tells him, shoving the box into his chest before breezing into his apartment. She glances at him over her shoulder with a wicked smile. “And I have some ideas on how you can pay.”

As soon as she turns around and comes face to face with Susan, she stops dead in her tracks. There’s a beat of stunned silence, and then Frankie says in a forcibly bright voice, “Susan. Hey.”

Susan is obviously trying very hard not to grin. “Hey Frankie.”

Frankie turns around and gives Will a look that usually indicates he’s in trouble. “Susan’s here.”

“Yeah,” Will says, closing the door. “She had a fight with Ray.”

The annoyance dissolves immediately from Frankie’s face. She turns back to Susan. “You want me to kill him?”

“No.”

“You sure? Cause I’ve been keeping a list of ways I’d like to do it in preparation for when he inevitably screws up.”

“You have a list of ways you want to kill Ray?” Will says, coming up beside her.

She shrugs. “Yeah. I keep it on my phone. Easy access.”
“That’s horrifying.”

“So is the fact that you’ve seen The Devil Wears Prada twenty-two times.”

“That movie is iconic, Frankie. Meryl Streep deserved an Oscar.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and turns back to Susan. “I can hurt him without killing him if you want. I’ve got a list for that too.”

“Stop making lists about how you can hurt our team,” Will says.

“Stop telling me what to do,” Frankie shoots back.

“Guys, it’s fine,” Susan interrupts. “You don’t need to do anything. The whole thing is my fault. I’m the one who messed up.”

Frankie gives her a sympathetic look. “You want to talk about it?”

Will gapes at his partner, completely stunned that she seems to genuinely be willing to listen to Susan talk about Ray. He glances at Susan, thinking they’ll share a look of shock, but Susan doesn’t seem surprised at all.

“No, no, I don’t want to interrupt,” Susan says, waving her hand. “I know you guys had plans—”

“We didn’t have plans,” Frankie interrupts. “I just came over to talk about work.”

“Leads on Ollerman?” Susan says, suddenly smirking again.

Will decides to cut in before Frankie gets stuck in a lie. “Stop pretending like you’re not here to hold up your end of the bet,” he says, nudging Frankie with his elbow.

She looks at him. “What?”

“I told her that you have to watch Casablanca with me since you lost the bet,” Will explains. “Pretending you don’t know what I’m talking about isn’t going to get you out of it.”

Sneaking around has its downsides, but doing it with a spy makes covering their tracks a little easier. Frankie picks up on his lie almost immediately, and her face smooths from confusion into a look of desperation.

“Please tell me every single detail about your relationship with Ray so I don’t have to watch this stupid movie,” she says, turning to Susan.

Susan laughs. “You don’t mind, Will?”

“Of course he doesn’t mind, we’re going to talk about feelings,” Frankie snorts.

Will shrugs. “Can’t argue with that.”

“All right,” Susan laughs. She sets her purse on one of the stools in the kitchen, and then watches with lifted eyebrows as Frankie walks past her like she owns the place and opens a cupboard to pull down an extra wine glass and three plates. Will is almost positive that his best friend is wondering how his partner knows where he keeps his dishes, so he tries to distract her.

“So what happened with Ray?”
Susan sighs. “His parents are coming to visit him next week and he asked me to have dinner with them.”

Frankie makes a horrified sound. “Why?”

“What do you mean why?” Will says. “He cares about her. He wants to introduce her to other people he cares about. That’s normal.”

“They’ve only been together for two months,” Frankie says, setting the extra wine glass down on the counter. “It’s too fast.”

“It does feel fast,” Susan admits.

Will puts the pizza box down and starts to gather all the unopened mail he has spread across his dining table so they have space to eat. “But you said last week things were going really well.”

“They are going really well. But it’s Ray.”

“So?”

“So am I crazy for doing this, or what?”

“Valid question,” Frankie muses as she pours wine.

Will shoots her a look. “Not helping.”

“She’s the one who said it,” Frankie points out.

Will grabs the last scrap of mail. “Still not helping.”

“Give me the pile, I’ll put it in your mail basket,” Susan says, holding out her hand.

Will hands over the stack. “We talked about this, Sus. You decided to start this relationship with an open mind.”

“I know,” Susan moans, walking toward Will’s desk. “But meeting his parents after two months? I didn’t meet my ex-husband’s parents for six months, and that—”

She stops abruptly. She sets the mail down on the desk and reaches for something else, but Will can’t tell what it is. He shoots Frankie a confused look, but Frankie just shrugs and lifts her wine glass to her lips.

“Susan?” he calls. “You okay?”

When Susan turns to face them, she’s got the sheet of paper they wrote their rules on in Prague grasped firmly in her hand. “What’s this?”

Frankie immediately chokes on her wine.

“Uhh...” Will says dumbly. “That is a...nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Really? Because it looks like a relationship contract.”

“It’s not a contract, it’s just ground rules,” Frankie corrects automatically.

Will rounds on her with wide eyes. Frankie immediately blanches. “Not that I would know,” she
says quickly. “Because this isn’t my apartment and that’s definitely not mine. I’ve never even seen it before.”

“Is that why your signature’s at the bottom?” Susan asks her dryly.

Will and Frankie share another look. Will lifts a shoulder at his partner as if to say We might as well tell her, and Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose and mutters, “Oh god, here we go.”

“I knew it,” Susan hisses, pointing at them with the sheet of rules still in her hand. “You two are sleeping together!”

Will holds out his hands. “This is not a big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal!”

“No, it’s not. It’s just casual, okay?”

“Casual?” Susan repeats incredulously. “What do you mean casual?”

Frankie looks up. “We’re not together, Susan. We’re just colleagues who happen to hook up occasionally.”

Susan narrows her eyes. “How often is occasionally?”

“Like, once a week.”

“Plus three,” Will mutters under his breath. “During a slow week.”

“You hook up four times a week and you think that’s casual?” Susan demands.

“I’m going to kill you,” Frankie says to Will.

He grins at her. “No you’re not. You’d miss me too much.”

“Prague,” Susan says before Frankie can threaten Will again. “It happened in Prague, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Will confirms.

“I knew it,” Susan says, shaking her head. “I knew it.”

“How long have you known?” Will asks.

“Since Prague.”

Frankie snorts. “Yeah right. You just guessed that because the paper has the hotel name on it.”

“Girl, please,” Susan says, waving off Frankie’s disbelief. “You smelled like lemon verbena when I hugged you before dinner and you had a hickey on your neck. And you,” she says, pointing at Will. “You had that glow.”

“What glow?”

“That I-just-had-sex glow.”

“I don’t have a glow.”

“You definitely have a glow,” Frankie says. Will gives her an incredulous look. She shrugs. “I like
Will grins.

“By the time Frankie spilled her water all over that flirty waitress I was sure,” Susan continues.

The smile drops off Frankie’s face. “That bitch.”

“Hey now,” Will says.

“Does anyone else know?” Frankie asks, ignoring him.

“I haven’t told anyone.”

“Not even Ray?”

“Definitely not Ray,” Susan says with a laugh. “If I’d told Ray, he would’ve already told the whole team.”

Frankie sets her wine glass down on the counter with a clang. “The rest of the team can’t know.”

“Okay,” Susan agrees.

“I’m serious,” Frankie says. “If I have to listen to Standish make jokes about his parents getting busy I’m going to gouge my eyes out.”

“You know, it’s really a sign of how much you’ve grown that you’ve embraced your mentorship role with Standish,” Will tells her.

Frankie gives him a look. “If you want me to embrace you later tonight you’re going to quit talking about my emotional growth.”

“Aww,” Susan says, putting a hand over her heart. “Listen to you threatening to withhold sex. It’s like you’re already married.”

Frankie sighs. “This is my nightmare.”

The next morning, Will is halfway through composing a text to Frankie about all the reasons why she should definitely meet him for brunch when he gets a message from Ray.

**URGENT. MEET AT DEAD DROP ASAP.**

Will sighs. “So much for brunch.”

When he arrives at the Dead Drop, Susan is the only one in sight. “Hey Will,” she greets, smiling at him from behind the bar. “I’m making screwdrivers. Interested?”

“Definitely. You the only one here?”

“Jai and Standish are in the back. There was talk about an exploding chapstick, but I didn’t ask any questions.”

Will shakes his head. “Yeah, I don’t blame you.” He slides onto the bar stool in front of her. “You talk to Ray?”

“I did,” she says as she pours some vodka into a glass. “I took your advice and told him that I
wasn’t ready to meet his parents, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t serious about us.”

“And?”

“He seemed disappointed, but he understood. We’re okay.”

“Good. I’m glad. Also, about last night…” Will glances over his shoulder to make sure no one is in earshot, and then he leans forward. “Thanks for being willing to keep you-know-what a secret.”

She smiles. “I’ve been keeping it a secret for two months now.”

“Yeah, about that. Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

“Because I figured you’d tell me when you were ready. Like I did with Ray.” She slides the finished drink toward him. “I’m glad it’s finally out in the open, though, because there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Will reaches for the glass. “If you’re worried about me because we’re casual and haven’t officially labeled it yet, you don’t need to be. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she says, smiling again when he sips the screwdriver and gives her a thumbs up. “But it’s not you I’m worried about.”

Will frowns at her. “You’re worried about Frankie?”

“Yes.”

“She’s the one who wants to keep it casual.”

“I know that. But that doesn’t mean it’s casual for her.”

Will blinks at her. “I am so confused.”

Susan sighs and leans against the bar. “Look, I know she acts like she’s invincible. And I know she’s probably playing all this off like it doesn’t matter to her. But she’s not, and it does. She cares about you. A lot. And the last time she was in a situation like this, it didn’t end well for her.”

Will frowns. “The last time? What do you know that I don’t?”

“You know I’m not allowed to tell you that.”

“So this is something you read in her file, not something she told you,” Will guesses. Susan presses her lips together. Will sets his glass down with a thunk. “Did you get to read the classified parts of her file before you did her psych profile?”

“Stop asking me questions you know I can’t answer.”

“So that’s a yes.”

Susan holds up her index finger in a gesture that’s very reminiscent of Will’s mother. “Will Chase, stop putting words in my mouth and listen to what I’m saying.”

“Okay,” he laughs. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’re good for her. And you guys could be really, really great together. But it’s going to take her some time to get there. You need to be patient.”
“I have been patient. I am being patient.”

Susan gives him a look.

“What? You don’t think I can be patient?”

“I think you’ve been patient so far. But I also think that when you decide you want something, you go after it at a hundred miles an hour. And it was pretty obvious last night that you want her. And that’s fine, because she wants you too. But if you ask her for too much, too fast, she’s going to shut down.”

Will sighs. “Yeah. I know.” He picks his glass back up and shakes it absently, watching as the ice cubes in the bottom clink against each other. “She gets spooked sometimes.”

“When things get too serious?”

“Yeah.” He looks up at Susan. “You remember Brussels?”

Susan nods. “She got attacked by that guy with a knife.”

“I didn’t think she’d come to my room that night, but she did. And it was…” He trails off, unsure of the right word.

“Intense?” Susan supplies.

Memories from that night flash through Will’s mind. The way Frankie watched him when his slow exploration of her body brought him face to face with the angry red slashes from the knife. Her skin, hot to the touch, and her hands, constantly pulling him toward her even when he couldn’t get any closer. The sound of her voice in his ear, soft and tinged with desperation, and the way she’d curled into him afterward and fell asleep.

“I thought she’d stay the whole night,” he says. “She fell asleep after, which she never does. But then I woke up the next morning and she was gone, and she avoided me for three days after that.”

“But she came back,” Susan points out.

“Yeah.”

“Will,” Susan says gently, reaching out to put a hand on his. “It’s not about you.”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“The way she’s pushing you away and then pulling you back. How she gets spooked when you guys get too close. It’s not because she doesn’t care about you, or because she doesn’t want to be with you. She’s just...fighting demons from the past.”

“I don’t suppose you can tell me what those demons are.”

Susan smiles a little. “It’s not my story to tell. But if you’re patient, and you keep proving that you’re worthy of her trust, she’ll open up eventually.”

“Eventually,” he sighs, and then takes a long swallow of his screwdriver.

The door to the Dead Drop opens with a clang. Will turns to see Frankie breezing into the building, a cup of coffee in one hand and her phone in the other. She doesn’t look up from her phone until she’s halfway across the room, and when their eyes meet and she smiles, Will’s heart does a little
flip in his chest.

“Hey you,” he says.

She stops next to him and bumps her shoulder briefly into his. “Hi.”

Susan is grinning at them from the other side of the bar, and Frankie notices immediately.

“Stop it,” she orders, pointing at Susan.

“I’m just happy to see my friend,” Susan says, holding up her hands defensively. “That’s all. Also, I’m making screwdrivers. You want one?”

“Of course.”

Susan turns away to grab another glass, and Will leans closer to Frankie. “You look nice.”

Frankie glances down at herself with a frown. “I wear this blazer all the time.”

“And I like it all the time.”

She looks up at him, her eyebrows furrowed. “Weirdo,” she murmurs, but the corners of her mouth are pulled upward in a smile.

“What are you doing tonight? Want to try the taco place by my apartment?”

Frankie casts a look in Susan’s direction, but if the profiler is eavesdropping on their conversation, she’s not letting on. “I’ve seen you every night this week, Will.”

“Yeah, and you’ve had fun, right?” he says, letting his eyes linger on her lips.

She smiles but doesn’t answer his question. “I can’t. I promised Susan we could get sushi.”

Susan turns back to face them and sets a glass in front of Frankie. “Sorry,” she says, shooting Will an apologetic look. “But you’ve been hogging her lately, and there’s a new place I want to try.”

“Well I like sushi. Can I come too?”

“No,” they answer in unison.

“Good morning super spy family,” Standish says brightly.

Will glances over his shoulder to see Standish and Jai making their way across the room. He turns on his stool to face them. “Hey guys.”

Standish eyes the drink in Frankie’s hand. “What’re we drinking?”

“Screwdrivers,” Susan answers. “Interested?”

“ Heck yes.”

“Jai?”

“No, thank you,” Jai says, crinkling his nose. “I don’t care for orange juice.”

“Jai has a thing about oranges,” Frankie says, grinning at her friend.
Jai smooths his hands down the front of his suit. “Excuse me, it is not a thing. It is an intense dislike rooted in a deeply traumatic childhood memory.”

“Ooh traumatic childhood memories,” Susan says. “I’m all ears.”

“No,” Jai says simply.


“What do you want Standish?”

Standish grins. “What’re you doing tonight?”

“Nothing,” Will replies with a shrug. “No one wants to hang out with me so I’m going to watch a movie by myself.”

Susan and Frankie share a look and then simultaneously roll their eyes.

“Okay, don’t know what that’s about,” Standish says, glancing between the three of them with a confused frown. “But you remember that girl I told you about? The one who works at the coffee shop?”

“The one you’ve been stalking for a month because you’re too afraid to ask her out?” Frankie asks with a smirk.

“I am not stalking or afraid how dare you. But also yes. That one.”

“Just talk to her, Standish. If she says no, I’ll change her mind for you.”

“I feel like your methods for changing people’s minds probably wouldn’t help my chances.”

“Definitely would not,” Jai confirms.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, because after we got back from Buenos Aires, I went to the coffeeshop and asked her out.”

“Hey-o,” Frankie says, raising her glass.

Will thumps Standish on the back. “That’s great, kiddo. I’m really proud of you.”

“Did she say yes?” Jai asks.

Standish tilts his head. “Sort of?”

“What do you mean, sort of?” Susan asks.

“Well, apparently she won’t go out with me unless I get a date for her friend.” He smacks a hand onto Will’s shoulder. “Which is why I need my good friend Will to come through for me and go out on a double date with us tonight.”

Will feels Frankie’s body go suddenly still next to his. He glances at her, but she’s not looking at him. He shakes his head at Standish. “I appreciate you thinking of me, Standish, but I’m going to pass.”
“No, wait, just listen,” Standish insists. “She is literally the perfect woman for you. She teaches first grade, so she loves kids. She loves romantic comedies and classic movies. She’s read every single novel on *Time* magazine’s greatest novels of all time list. She has two dogs. And she’s a volunteer soccer coach on the weekends.”

“Standish—”

“And look,” Standish cuts him off, shoving his phone in Will’s face. “She’s definitely a ten.”

Will pushes the phone out of his face. “That’s nice, but—”

“Nice? Nice? She’s gorgeous. She could be on magazine covers. Come on, man, look.”

Standish shoves his phone back in Will’s face, and Will has no choice but to look. “She’s pretty,” he says neutrally.

“So you’ll come, right?”

“I can’t.”

“You just said you didn’t have plans.”

“Right, but—”

“But what? Come on, man. I need this.”

Will can feel the eyes of every single person in the room on him, and somehow it feels like more pressure than disarming a bomb. He has less than zero interest in going on a date with anyone who isn’t Frankie. But he still remembers how vehemently she told Susan last night that she didn’t want anyone to know about them, and if he’s supposed to be single than he needs to act like he’s single. Also, Standish is right—he does need this.

“Okay, fine,” he says, holding up his hands. “I’ll go.”

Several things happen at once. Standish says, “Yesssss, thank you!” and pounds Will on the back. Behind him, Will can hear Susan sigh heavily. Jai’s tilting his head the way he does when he’s studying something he finds fascinating, but his eyes are fixed on Frankie. Will looks at Frankie too, and watches as she blinks down at the drink in her hand for half a second and then lifts it to her mouth and downs the rest. Will frowns and turns toward her, suddenly wondering if he did something wrong, and that’s when Ray makes his entrance.

“Hey party people,” he says, bursting in the door. “Glad you’re all here cause we’re on a time crunch. You guys are getting on a plane to Toronto in an hour.”

“Toronto?” Standish repeats. “What’s in Toronto?”

“You remember Gabriel Dubois?”

“Belgian arms dealer with political aspirations,” Jai answers.

“The asshole we had a shootout with in Amsterdam,” Frankie adds.

Ray grins. “Right on both counts. Intel says he’s planning to close a deal this afternoon with a white nationalist group in Toronto for hundreds of AR-15s and some canisters of the biological weapon we were trying to secure in Amsterdam. Your mission is to stop the sale, apprehend Dubois, and secure the canisters and the guns. I’ll have dossiers for you on the plane. Any
“Yeah, how committed are we to apprehending Dubois instead of just killing him so he can’t sell weapons to racists from jail?” Frankie asks.

Ray looks at Will the same way he always does when Frankie needs to be told no.

“Pretty committed,” Will answers.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Shocker.”

“He might have useful intel,” Will points out.

“Well if there’s intel,” she mutters sarcastically. She still hasn’t looked at him, and the feeling that he did something wrong is starting to intensify.

Ray glances back and forth between them, obviously confused. “Are we good?”

“Yeah,” Frankie says before Will can. “I’ll meet you guys at the airport.” She thunks her glass down on the bar and then strides toward the exit without another word. The door slams behind her.

Standish frowns after her. “Wow, she really hates Dubois. You better keep an eye on her, Will. I bet she’s going to forget,” he lifts his hands and makes some air quotes, “that whole apprehend-not-kill thing.”

“Yes, well, sometimes a bullet is necessary,” Jai says, shooting Will a cold look. “I’m going to go pack.” He turns on his heel and heads for the back room.

“Oh, oh, Jai wait,” Standish says, hurrying after Jai. “You think you can help me pick out an outfit for tonight? I want to look fly.”

“Ooh, an outfit for what?” Ray asks, trailing after them.

Will turns back around to face Susan, but she’s already making her way out from behind the bar and heading in the same direction as everyone else.

“Sus?” he says, because she’s got that sway in her hips that says she’s mad and her heels are clicking on the floor like angry knives. “Where you going?”

She shoots him a look. “To revise my psych profile of you. Turns out you have the emotional intelligence of a goldfish.”

“Wait, what?” he says, getting up from his bar stool. “What did I do?”

“You’re going on a date, Will,” she says, stopping in her tracks.

“Well, yeah, but only because Frankie doesn’t want anyone to suspect that we’re...you know.”

“And you think that means she wants you to go on a date with another woman?” Susan says slowly as if he’s an idiot.

Will blinks at her, a little stunned, and then it hits him—he just agreed to go on a date with another woman in front of Frankie.

“Oh, shit.”
Will doesn’t get a moment alone with Frankie until they’re in Toronto, standing in the back of a delivery truck that’s filled with crates of AR-15s. She’s double checking all the weapons she’s carrying—which, for the record, seems like way more than she actually needs—and he can’t help but notice that her movements are a little more...aggressive than usual.

“Frankie,” he murmurs.

She ignores him.

“Frankie, come on. You’ve been ignoring me since the Dead Drop.”

“I’m busy,” she tells him. She flips open a switchblade, studies it, and then flips it closed and deposits it into one of the pockets of her tactical gear. She moves on to her guns next.

“I know you’re mad at me,” he tries again.

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Oh, come on. I can feel the rage. It’s like invisible hands wrapping around my neck and squeezing.”

“Well if you see the light, run towards it.” She slams a magazine up into her gun to punctuate her sentence.

Will winces. “Listen, I wasn’t trying to upset you. I don’t even want to go. I just panicked because I knew you didn’t—”

“Shut up, Will,” she snarls, snapping her eyes up to meet his.

“No,” he says petulantly. “I’m trying to—”

“Shut up, Will,” she repeats, pointing a finger at the ear that’s currently holding a comm.

That stops him short. He forgot they were on comms, and that the rest of their team can hear everything he’s saying. He wavers for a second, trying to decide if he should just wait for a time when she’s less heavily armed and they’re not about to start a shootout with a bunch of white nationalists and arms dealers, but he can’t stand the idea of her thinking that he wants to go on a date with someone else.

“I know you’re upset about the thing.”

“Oh my god,” she groans, rolling her eyes.

“It’s obvious you’re upset about the thing. And I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for the thing to be
a...thing.”

“I don’t care about the thing, Will.”

“You obviously do.”

“Is it also obvious that I want you to shut up?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty clear.”

“Good. Maybe try shutting up then.” She puts her hand up to her ear. “You in position, Jai?”

“Affirmative,” Jai says over the comms.

“Standish?”

“All good on my end,” Standish replies.

“Frankie, Will, they’re headed your way now,” Susan’s voice cuts in.

“When this is over, we’re talking about this,” Will says, crouching down behind one of the crates.

“Before or after your date?” Frankie quips.

The back door of the truck rolls upward before Will can reply, and Frankie steps out from behind a crate with her guns blazing.

Will loses track of her for a while after that. There’s a lot of shooting and punching and shouting. A burly guy with a neck tattoo gets the upper hand on him at one point, but just before he can lift his gun to point it at Will’s face, a knife buries itself in his neck tattoo. The man keels over immediately, gurgling as he chokes on his blood.

“Thanks for that,” Will says as he gets to his feet.

“Didn’t do it for you,” Frankie says over the comms. There’s a grunt and then a scream, and Will turns around to see her shove the limp body of a man away from her. Her eyes meet Will’s from across the warehouse, which is now littered with dead or unconscious bodies. “I did it for Susan so she wouldn’t have to go to your funeral.”

“Aww, thanks girl,” Susan says over the comms.

Will slides the empty magazine out of his gun and shoves in a new one. “You’re obviously upset.”

“I swear to god, if you say obviously one more damn time,” Frankie growls.

“Uh, guys?” Standish’s voice says over the comms. “Dubois is making a break for it. Headed for the south exit.”

“Oh hell no,” Frankie snarls, turning on her heel and then sprinting in the direction of the south exit.

Will follows her, jumping over bodies and weaving in and out of boxes and parked trucks. He turns one last corner around a giant stack of wooden pallets, and is just in time to watch Frankie tackle Dubois to the ground. They roll across the floor, struggling for the upper hand. Will sprints forward to help, but there’s no need. Frankie ends up on top, pulls her spare pistol from her leg holster in one fluid motion, and clicks the safety off.
“Please give me a reason,” she tells Dubois, her gun leveled at his forehead.

He holds his hands up in defeat.

“You suck,” Frankie tells him. She gets to her feet with her gun still trained on him. Will steps forward and rolls Dubois over onto his stomach.

“Jai?” Frankie asks as Will zip ties Dubois’ hands behind his back.

“Canisters are secure,” Jai reports over the comms.

“So are the guns,” Susan adds.

Will hauls Dubois to his feet. “And we’ve got Dubois. Nice work, team.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Frankie says. She casts a look at Will over her shoulder. “Wouldn’t want you to be late for your big date.”

Will sighs as he watches her walk away. Dubois looks at him. “She seems annoyed you have a date.”

“Shut up,” Will says, shoving him forward.

They follow Frankie back through the maze of boxes and trucks to the main room of the warehouse. Susan is directing a recently-arrived extraction team in the direction of the crates of AR-15s. Jai and Standish are bickering about the containment units for the biological weapon. Will shoves Dubois into the back of a transport van, and then scans the room for his partner.

She’s standing at the far edge of the warehouse, drinking from a bottle of water as she watches the extraction team going through the weapons crates. Will moves toward her. He’s only taken a few steps in her direction when her gaze shifts away from the crates and lands on him. His steps hitch momentarily because he expects her to roll her eyes and walk the other way, but she stays put. He decides to take that as a good sign.

“Nice tackle back there,” he says when he stops next to her. “You play professional football in one of your past lives?”

She shrugs. “Was kind of hoping he’d reach for my gun so I could shoot him.”

“Well I’m glad he didn’t.”

“That makes one of us.”

There’s a beat of silence as Will tries to figure out what to say. Frankie turns the bottle of water in her hand absently, the plastic crinkling in her grip. Jai and Standish are still bickering over containment units in the distance, and now Susan is trying to play referee. Even if they’re still on comms, none of them are paying any attention to him or Frankie, so Will decides to seize his chance.

“I don’t want to go tonight,” he says, turning to face her. “I’d rather be with you.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Then why’d you say yes?”

“Because if I said no, I would’ve had to explain why. And you said you didn’t want anyone to know.”
She doesn’t answer. She hasn’t looked him in the eye yet, and it’s starting to make him nervous.

“If you don’t want me to go, I won’t,” he says softly. “I’ll tell him something came up.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t do that.”

“But if bothers you—”

“It doesn’t.”

“Frankie—”

She finally looks at him. “I don’t care what you do, Will. Or who you do it with.”

He leans a little closer to her. “Come on, we both know that’s not true. I know you care—”

“I really don’t. You can date whoever you want. It doesn’t matter.”

He stares at her. Somewhere in the back of his mind, there’s a quiet voice whispering that she’s lying. She’s upset he said yes, and she’s afraid she’s going to get hurt, so she’s pushing him away. It wouldn’t be the first time, and it probably won’t be the last. All he needs to do is stand his ground and have some faith in her.

But he’s tired. He’s tired of waiting and hoping that maybe this time will be the time she finally lets him in. After two months of climbing every wall and dismantling every layer of armor only to find taller walls and thicker armor, he’s frustrated.

“So that’s it,” he says. “Two months of this and you still don’t care.”

The tiniest hint of emotion shivers across her face, but it’s gone so fast he isn’t even sure he really saw it. “Nope.”

“Fine. Guess I don’t care either.”

He walks away from her without looking back. She doesn’t try to stop him.

“You said what?”

Frankie collapses onto her couch next to Susan, careful not to spill her very full wine glass all over her favorite sweatshirt. “I said I didn’t care.” She takes a sip of wine, sighs because she really needed a drink, and then glances over at her friend.

Susan is giving her one of those looks. “Girl,” she says, equal parts exasperated and disbelieving.

“What? I don’t.”

“You are so full of shit.”

Frankie laughs because she can’t help it—she likes when Susan gets mad enough to curse. “We’re not together, Susan. We never were. We were just having sex.”

“Yeah, four times a week. During a slow week.”

“I can’t believe he told you that.”

“And let’s not forget your movie nights. And all the time you guys spend shooting darts or playing
pool or trying out all the taco places by his apartment.”

“There’s one taco place and we haven’t been there yet.” Frankie clarifies, holding up her index finger.

“Frankie, come on. The two of you are more together than some of the married couples I know.”

“Well that’s just sad for your married friends. Look, Will and I agreed that we would be casual. We made rules to keep it casual. And there’s no rule on that stupid list that says he can’t go on dates. So if he wants to go on a date, he can go on a date. It’s fine.”

“So you’re telling me you don’t care even a little bit that he’s out there right now laughing with some other woman?”

“You think they’re laughing?”

Susan shoots her another look in response. Frankie tries to withstand it—honestly, she does—but the sudden mental image of Will leaning across a white tablecloth, laughing and making heart eyes at some other woman while they sip wine and talk about dumb movies breaks the last of her resolve.

“Ugh, fine,” she groans. “I care, okay? I care and I hate it. I hate her stupid pretty face and her stupid dogs and her stupid first graders and if Will is laughing with her then I hate him too.”

Susan doesn’t seem surprised by the sudden outburst, and Frankie finds that both annoying and comforting. “I also hate you,” she adds.

Susan shakes her head. “No you don’t.”

“No, I don’t,” Frankie sighs. “I do hate her though. Whatever her name is. Probably something gross, like Ashley or Nikki or Britney.”

“If you hate it so much, why didn’t you just say you didn’t want him to go?”

“I don’t know,” Frankie says, pushing a hand through her hair. “I guess I just figured that she’s probably better for him. I mean they like all the same dumb stuff. She’s a teacher, so she probably hasn’t killed hundreds of people. And they can spend their Saturdays holding hands and walking their dogs and talking about how many Oscars Meryl Streep should’ve won.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Susan says softly, reaching out to set her hand on Frankie’s knee.

Frankie shakes her head. “I can’t give him what he wants, Susan.”

“What is it you think he wants?”

“Someone who doesn’t run the other way when he turns his heart eyes on full blast.”

“Well why can’t that person be you?”

“Because I’m emotionally stunted.”

“You are not.”

“I really am.” Susan opens her mouth to argue, and Frankie lifts a hand to stop her. “I know you read the classified parts of my file, Susan. You couldn’t have written an accurate profile about me or assessed how I’d fit on this team unless you knew everything. I know you know what
happened.”

Susan presses her lips together, but Frankie doesn’t need confirmation. She knows she’s right.

“Based on everything you know, everything I’ve done and been through, do you really think I’m capable of the kind of relationship Will wants?”

“Honestly?” Susan says, leaning forward to set her wine glass on the coffee table. “Yes.”

“Susan—”

“Look, Frankie, you said it yourself. I know all the skeletons in your closet. But I also know you. I know you’re capable of having a healthy relationship with someone because you have one with me. You have one with Jai. And you’ve got a pretty good start on a romantic one with Will. Your problem isn’t that you’re incapable. Your problem is that you’re scared so you’re self-sabotaging.”

“You’re shrinking me,” Frankie accuses. “You said you wouldn’t shrink me.”

“I’m not shrinking you. I’m just…” Susan sighs. “You’re my friend. I care about you. And I don’t want you to throw away this thing with Will just because you’re scared it’s going to turn out like the last one.”

Frankie tightens her hold on her wine glass and stares at the coffee table, willing herself not to drown in the sudden flood of memories. There’s no warmth behind her eyes—she cried all her tears out a long time ago, and there are very few things that are painful enough to bring them back—but her throat feels tight and her fingers are flexing involuntarily, longing for the steel comfort of a gun. Susan waits her out, watching her calmly, and it’s the profiler’s patience and warmth that finally eclipses the darkness and brings Frankie back to the present.

She takes a sip of wine and leans back against the couch. “So what do I do?”

“That’s up to you.”

“What would you do if you were me?”

“If I were you?” Susan repeats, reaching for her wine glass again. “I’d go over to Will’s place and tell him that if he goes on a date with another woman again you’re going to break both his knees.”

Frankie grins. “That does sound like me.”

“And then I would tell him that you don’t want him to go on dates because you care about him and you want him all to yourself.”

Frankie frowns. “Less like me.”

“It could be you. You just need to be as brave with him as you are with terrorists and drug lords and dirty bombs.”

Frankie sighs. “Why is this scarier than diffusing a bomb?”

“Because you’ve never been blown up. But you have had your heart broken.”

“I haven’t—”

“Oh shut up, yes you have.”
Frankie snorts out a laugh, and Susan laughs too. Frankie tips her wine glass at her friend. “You, Dr. Sampson, are very annoying. But I like having you around anyway.”

Susan smiles. “Good. Cause you’re stuck with me.”

A few hours later, Frankie finds herself standing outside Will’s front door.

She’d left her apartment brimming with confidence. Susan had hugged her on the sidewalk in front of her building and said Go get him, and Frankie had taken off in the direction of Will’s apartment with the same spring in her step that she gets when she’s on the way to topple a genocidal military regime.

Halfway to Will’s, though, she had a sudden change of heart and turned back around.

Three minutes after that, she realized she was being a coward and stopped. She stood frozen on the sidewalk, trying to make up her mind, and then groaned so loudly at herself that she startled a couple walking by. They hurried past her, gripping each other’s hands just a little bit tighter, and Frankie found herself staring at their hands and thinking of—shit, more like longing for—Will.

It was pure stubbornness that made her turn around and finish the journey. Now she’s standing outside his door, frowning at the metal number 14 that marks it as his, trying not to think about all the ways this could go wrong. She’s been here before. She’s made this decision before. Last time, she put her faith in the wrong person. Is she doing that this time too?

“Only one way to find out,” she mutters to herself, and then lifts a hand to knock firmly.

For a second she wonders if he might look through the peephole, see that it’s her, and not answer. Or maybe he’s not even home. Maybe he’s still out on his date, laughing at whatever jokes first grade teachers think are funny. Maybe he went back to her place. Maybe he brought her back to his. What if—

But then the door swings open and Will is standing there, his eyebrows lifted in surprise, and somewhere deep in her chest a part of her exhales in relief.

“Hi,” she says when he doesn’t say anything.

The corner of his mouth quirks upward. It’s not a smile, but it’s close enough. “Hey.”

“Can I come in?”

He steps out of the way and swings the door open. “Sure.”

She crosses the threshold and walks into his apartment. She scans the room, helpless against the urge to check and see if he’s alone. A blanket rests in a crumpled heap on the corner of the couch, and a single glass filled with dark liquid sits on the coffee table. A black and white image is paused on the TV screen, and when she looks closer she recognizes the movie as Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. It’s one of Will’s favorites. It was his choice for their first movie night after Prague. She’d sworn up and down once it was finished that she thought it was boring, and a lot of it was. She remembers almost nothing about the plot. But she does remember glancing over at Will during the big speech at the end, realizing that he was mouthing the lines along with James Stewart, and thinking that even though he was a giant nerd it was kind of cute.

“I lied to you,” she blurts out, turning to face him before she can lose her nerve.
Will looks taken aback, and maybe a little confused. “What?”

“In Toronto. When you asked me if I cared. I lied.”

Understanding dawns on his face. She waits for him to speak, for all his feelings to come gushing out like they always do, but he slides his hands into his pockets and doesn’t say a word. Panic starts to simmer in her stomach. She wants to run, but he’s blocking the door and she knows that if she walks away from him again, he might not let her come back.

“I care about you,” she says, forcing the words out of her mouth even though her throat feels like it’s closing up. Her voice sounds small to her, scared and a little pathetic, but she swallows and keeps going anyway. “I care about...us.”

“So why’d you lie?”

“Well according to Susan, I have a tendency to self-sabotage.”

She expects him to smirk and agree, but he doesn’t. He just keeps watching her. She shifts beneath his gaze, self-conscious. He’s not making this easy on her, and she hates him a little for it, but she gets it. It’s one of the oldest spy tricks in the book—the more chances you give someone to talk, the more likely you are to hear what you want to hear. Defiance flares in her chest, tempting her to refuse to give him what he wants, but there’s something about the way he’s looking at her that smooths the edge of her rebelliousness away.

She takes a deep breath. “Look, Will, good things don’t happen to me very often. And when they do, they usually end badly. And I didn’t want—I don’t want this to end badly. And I don’t want you to date other people. And I know I’m a little late with that because you already went on a date tonight, but if she asks you out again—and she will, because you’re you—I don’t want you to go.”

She’s out of breath by the time she finishes. Will studies her for a moment, and then his lips smooth into a genuine smile.

Frankie isn’t sure why he’s smiling, so she follows her first instinct—she threatens him. “If she already asked you and you already said yes I will break your knees,” she says, brandishing her index finger at him.

He laughs and shakes his head. “I didn’t go, Frankie.”

That brings her up short. “You...what?”

“I didn’t go,” he repeats. “I told Standish that I tweaked my back in Toronto.” He frowns. “I’m a little offended by how readily he believed me and how many times he said the phrase, Yeah, well, when you get older stuff happens, but that’s another story. The point is, I didn’t go.” He gestures at the TV and the crumpled blanket and his drink. “I’ve been here all night.”

She glances at the TV and then back at him, mystified. “Why?”

He walks toward her, and the closer he gets the faster her heart seems to beat. He stops about a foot away from her, and she tilts her head back to look him in the eye. Now that he’s so close she can smell the scent that clings to his sheets and his clothes and her skin every time she leaves in the early hours of the morning, and it takes every ounce of her self control not to grab him by his faded FBI t-shirt and pull his mouth down to hers.

He lifts his hand and pushes a strand of her hair back from her face. “Because the only person I want to go on a date with is you.”
“Dates are against the rules,” she says automatically because she’s an idiot and she doesn’t know what else to say.

He smirks. “Yeah, well, considering you just burst into my apartment to tell me that you’re crazy about me—”

“That is not what happened.”

“—I think it might be time to rethink the rules.”

There are at least half a dozen sarcastic or insulting things she could say to that. She’s pretty sure that he’d find at least three of them funny. But when she opens her mouth they die on her lips, and all she’s left with is the truth.

“Will, I’m terrible at this.”

“At what?” he murmurs, brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheek.

“Dating. Relationships. Anything that requires any semblance of emotion.”

His hand trails down her neck, his fingertips feather-light on her skin. “I think you’d probably be pretty good at it if you tried.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve got faith in you.”

“Well I don’t have faith in me.”

“Then I’ll have enough faith for the both of us.”

It’s an incredibly Will Chase thing to say, and she knows he doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean, but she’s not sure if it’s enough. “You can’t make me good at this through sheer force of will.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” he muses, his fingers tracing the v-neck of her t-shirt. “I like a challenge.” His touch is soft but purposeful as it dances along her sternum, and she can feel heat starting to spark in her veins.

“I can’t think when you do that,” she snaps, reaching up to yank his hand away from her skin.

He smirks. “Since when do you think? Aren’t you all about acting first and thinking later?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been acting for two months now,” she points out. “It’s probably time to start thinking.”

He crowds into her space, sliding a hand along her waist until he’s palming the small of her back. “You know what I think?”

“That we should stop saying the word think?”

“We should be together.”

It’s not what she expected him to say, and hearing it makes her feel like the world has screeched to a halt. Every muscle in her body contracts, ready and willing to help her bolt for the door, and for some inexplicable reason her ears have started ringing. She blinks at him. He watches her steadily. She takes a deep breath, pulling back from him a little and opening her mouth to respond, but Will
beats her to it.

“Don’t do that,” he says, pulling her close again with the hand that’s still on her back.

“Do what?”

“Panic.”

She feels a flash of annoyance. “I’m not panicking.”

“Yes you are. I’ve seen you do it before. Your face goes blank, and your body goes rigid, and then you start to pull away from me. And if I let you pull away, then you go AWOL.”

“Let me?”

“Yes, let you,” he repeats. He lifts his other hand up to her face to stroke over her cheek again. “For the record, that’s why I’m touching you. So you won’t pull away and go AWOL.”

“Really, that’s the only reason?” she asks, shooting him a smirk.

“Well, I do like to touch you,” he admits. “It’s a testament to my discipline that I’m not constantly touching you all the time.”

“You truly are a marvel,” she teases.

“But it’s not just because I like it,” he says softly, tilting his head forward so that they’re breathing the same air. “It’s because when I touch you, you stop panicking. Which is funny, because most people you know would probably say you hate being touched. But you don’t. You just act like you do because it lets you keep everyone at arm’s length. It’s why you used to prefer—and yes, I’m using the past tense there—transactional sex. It’s why you don’t do PDA. Because if you can keep the boundaries physically, then they’re easier to keep emotionally.”

His hand has slipped underneath the hem of her t-shirt, and he’s now tracing patterns across the skin of her lower back. “And here I thought Susan was the shrink,” she jokes, but it comes out sounding breathless.

The corner of his mouth quirks upward. “I’m not claiming to be an expert in psychology,” he tells her, shaking his head. “Just you.”

And then he’s kissing her, his lips brushing insistently over hers, and it’s like a switch has been flipped. She can feel the tension starting to ease slowly from her body. She reaches for him, her arms coming up around his neck and pulling him closer, and he comes willingly. He tastes good. He always tastes good—like laughter and long nights and coming home—and she likes it. She likes him.

He pulls back too soon, but she lets him go. She keeps her eyes closed, not ready to give up the calm that’s settled over her. When he strokes his thumb along the swell of her cheek, she opens her eyes.

“I’m not asking you for anything you don’t want to give, Frankie,” he whispers. “You don’t need to start spending the night. You don’t have to hold my hand in public. We don’t have to tell anyone at work.”

“If I don’t tell Susan how this goes she’ll kill me.”
He laughs. “Yeah. Me too.” He strokes his thumb along her cheek again. He can’t seem to stop touching her. She doesn’t mind. He’s right—it does help.

“So when you say together,” she says, shifting just a little closer to him. “That means…?”

“Dates,” he answers with a smile. “I want to take you on dates. And, yes, it’s going to involve some couple crap.”

She crinkles her nose. “You’re going to buy me flowers, aren’t you?”

“Probably. And I’ll probably tell you I think you’re pretty, and call you just to hear your voice, and make you a playlist of all the songs that remind me of you. I might even buy you a heart-shaped box of chocolates.”

“Poetry and pet names are still a hard no.”

He laughs. “All right. But how about the rest?”

She lets out a slow breath and studies him, her eyebrows furrowed. There’s still so much he doesn’t know about her. So many things could go wrong. They’re going to drive each other nuts and they’re going to fight all the time. But for the first time in years, she doesn’t want to run.

“I’m in,” she says.

She watches as joy seems to light him from the inside out, his smile so bright it’s nearly blinding. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

He lifts both his hands to her face and stares at her like she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, his green eyes gleaming with emotion. “Frankie…”

She rolls her eyes at him even as her heart shoots up into her throat. “God, Will, just turn the heart eyes off and kiss me already.”

She doesn’t have to tell him twice.

Three days later, Frankie is sitting at a table in the Dead Drop, nursing a beer and laughing while Jai tells Susan the story of how they once convinced the very superstitious Crown Prince of Morocco that they were a pair of psychics who could speak to horses.

“She talked to the horse for ten minutes,” Jai says, grinning at Frankie over his drink. “It was simultaneously the most ridiculous and the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Did it work?” Susan asks.

“Of course it worked,” Frankie scoffs. “He took us straight to the palace, and while I went around and became one with all his horses, Jai snuck into the library and stole the manuscript.”

“I was back just in time to hear her declare that the Crown Prince’s prized stallion was feeling—and I quote—’very sensual’.”

“You did not,” Susan says, gaping at Frankie.

“Totally did. And I think he was, too. He must’ve really liked whatever perfume I was wearing,
because his nose got to second base within two seconds of meeting me.”

Susan collapses against the table in a fit of laughter. Jai and Frankie grin at each other. “Good times,” Frankie says, reaching out to clink her beer bottle against Jai’s glass.

He smiles at her. “Never a dull moment with you, Francesca.”

“Guys,” Standish says, suddenly slipping into a chair next to Susan. “Guess what I just found out.”

“Did you know that Frankie used to be a horse psychic for the Crown Prince of Morocco?” Susan asks him, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

“What?” Standish says, looking at Frankie. “What does that even mean? Is that some kind of weird sex thing?”

“Why is it always about sex for you?” Jai asks.

“It’s not always—you know what? Nevermind. Listen. I was just talking to Will, and guess what? He has a girlfriend.”

Frankie’s a spy. She’s got years of practice pretending that she doesn’t know things she really does. But there’s something about hearing the words Will and girlfriend so close together that sends all the air rushing out of her lungs, and it’s all she can do not to choke on her own breath.

“What?” Jai asks.

“Yeah, what?” Frankie echoes, trying to keep her voice even. Susan glances at her from the other side of the table. Frankie ignores her.

Standish looks over his shoulder as if to check for Will, and then leans over the table toward them conspiratorially. “So we were playing pool, and I asked him when we were going to reschedule that double date he cancelled cause he’s old and threw out his back.”

“Grandpa,” Frankie snorts because she can’t help it.

“And then all of a sudden he gets all serious and says that he can’t go with me because he’s,” Standish makes some air quotes, “seeing someone now and she’s,” another set of air quotes, “really important to him. Apparently he’s been chasing her for months and he finally convinced her to give him a shot.”

Warmth blossoms in Frankie’s chest and spreads through her veins, making her feel a little like she’s floating. It’s pathetic. But she also kind of likes it? God, what is happening to her?


Standish rounds on her. “What do you mean sweet? He’s been holding out on us!”

“Well he does have a right to his privacy,” Susan points out. “He doesn’t have to tell us everything.”

Standish gives her a look. “Oh, so you already knew, huh?”

Susan seems offended. “I didn’t know.”

“Whatever, you knew.” Standish looks around at the rest of the table. “What about you guys? Did you know? Am I the only one who didn’t?”
“I try to avoid talking to Will about his love life,” Jai answers. “It’s a slippery slope, and he has a lot of feelings. But I’m sure she’s extraordinary.”

There’s something about the way Jai says the last sentence that makes Frankie turn to look at him. He smiles at her, and she knows instantly—Jai knows it’s her, and he’s known for a while.

“Frankie?” Standish demands. “Did you know?”

“Nope,” she lies. “News to me.”

“Well what the hell,” Standish says, collapsing back against his chair. “Why’d he keep her a secret? Ooh, do you think there’s something wrong with her? Like, she’s a dominatrix for furries or she’s got horns or something?”

“What?” Frankie says.

“What is wrong with you?” Susan demands.

“You’re a moron,” Jai tells him.

“Okay, all right, no need to be mean,” Standish says, holding his hands up. “I’m just saying Will isn’t the type to keep this stuff a secret, so there’s got to be a reason for it.”

“Maybe he’s being respectful of her privacy,” Susan offers pointedly. “And maybe you should be respectful of his.”

Standish purses his lips like he’s considering it, and then he shakes his head. “Nah, that ain’t gonna happen. I gotta know who she is cause he got it bad.”

“Got it bad, huh?” Susan repeats, shooting another look at Frankie across the table.

Frankie ignores her. “Maybe she’s famous.”

Standish frowns. “What?”

“Well if she’s famous, then they’d need to keep it a secret,” she explains with a shrug. “Will can’t be a spy and have his photos splashed all over the internet. And she probably wants to protect her privacy too.”

“We did have that mission in L.A. a few months back,” Susan points out. “Maybe he met her then.”

“There you go,” Frankie says.

Standish leans forward, his eyes gleaming in excitement. “Who do you think it is?”

“Could be anyone,” Jai says. “Charlize Theron.”

“Jennifer Aniston,” Susan offers.

“That girl from that zombie TV show he likes,” Frankie adds.

Standish’s eyes are the size of dinner plates. “I’m going to go hack all their lives and see if they’ve ever had any contact with Will.” He leaps from his chair and sprints to the back room without another word.

“That should keep him busy for a few hours,” Susan observes.
Jai sets his glass down. “I should go make sure we don’t have a repeat of the Ariana Grande incident.”

“Good idea,” Frankie says.

Jai shoots her a knowing smile, and then gets to his feet and follows Standish into the back room. Frankie smiles after him, feeling another wave of warmth coursing through her veins.

“Somebody’s happy,” Susan says.

Frankie shrugs and takes a swig of her beer. “Must be the alcohol.”

“Hey party people,” Ray greets as he walks through the front door. “Finally finished my meeting from hell and I am so ready for a drink.”

“Hey,” Susan says, glancing up at him when he stops behind her chair.

Ray leans down to kiss her hello and says, “Hey babe.”


Ray grins. “I miss anything?”

“Standish is stalking celebrities,” Susan answers.

“Again? Didn’t he learn anything from the Ariana Grande incident?”

“Apparently not.”

Over Susan’s shoulder, Frankie sees Will exit the other room and slide behind the bar. Susan asks Ray about his meeting, and as he plops down in the chair next to her and starts to explain, Frankie takes advantage of the distraction and gets up to meet Will.

He sees her coming and smiles. “Hey you.”

“Hey,” she says, resting her elbows on the bar and leaning toward him.

His eyes travel down to the v-neck of her shirt, and then back up. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Wouldn’t mind some whiskey. Outside in ten?”

“I’ll be there in five.”

She stifles a smile, pushes off the bar, and heads back to the table. “I’m going to go,” she says, stopping next to Susan’s chair. “Long day. Need to get some sleep.”

Susan smirks up at her. “Yeah, I bet.”

“Annoying,” Frankie accuses.

“Stuck with me,” Susan shoots back.

Frankie laughs. Ray glances between them with a stupid smile on his face. “I never know what you guys are talking about.”

“Night,” he says, still standing behind the bar.

Frankie can feel his eyes on her as she leaves, but she breezes out the door without looking back. She walks about a hundred yards down the sidewalk until she gets to an alleyway, where she leans against the corner and waits.

Exactly five minutes later, Will walks out of the Dead Drop. Frankie watches him move toward her beneath the street lights, admiring the angled slope of his shoulders and the way he walks with such an easy athleticism. By the time he’s a few feet away from her, she’s grinning. He’s grinning too. She grabs him by the front of his shirt and pulls his mouth down to hers, and he presses her back against the nearest wall and kisses her like he hasn’t seen her in years.

“That gets better every time,” he whispers when they eventually part.

She rolls her eyes. “So cheesy.”

“You liked it.”

“I definitely didn’t.”

“You’re smiling.”

“Stop talking.”

“Make me.”

She does.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe it’s just me, but I think watching Frankie and Will try to figure out how to actually *be* in a relationship would’ve been just as entertaining as the will they/won’t they. So, like I said before, stay tuned. I’ve got a lot to say :)
And so we begin our first foray into Frankie's mysterious, complicated, tragic past...

Being in a relationship with Will is different than Frankie thought it would be.

Back in their unresolved sexual tension days, she’d refused to allow herself to spend any time thinking about what it would be like to be Will Chase’s girlfriend. She knew from experience that daydreaming was the first step down a slippery slope, and she had no interest in repeating the mistakes of her past. After Prague, she tried to do the same. Having sex didn’t mean having feelings. They’d made rules for a reason, and she had a vested interest in keeping him at arm’s length. Good guy and good sex aside, she still had no desire to repeat her mistakes.

But the longer their arrangement lasted, the harder it was not to wonder. If she hadn’t given him such all-encompassing rules, what would he be like? What would *they* be like? She caught glimpses of it here and there: hearts drawn in latte foam, chocolate bars slipped into her jacket pockets, whispered declarations against her skin in the dark stillness of his bedroom. He bent the rules a lot considering he was an eagle scout, and every time he did she found herself in a tailspin. It was never the act itself that sent her running. It was knowing that whatever he’d done was only the tip of the iceberg. She wasn’t an idiot. She knew he wanted to give her more. And the fact that she started to want more was fucking terrifying.

But wanting more didn’t mean wanting to live in a romance novel, and that’s what she’d always thought being with Will would be like. Rose petals all over the bed. Candles and earnest entreaties to slow dance to some stupid song. Dramatic fights followed by making out in the pouring rain.

Except as it turns out, she was wrong. She’s never found rose petals on his bed. He’s the only man she’s ever dated who owns candles and lights them regularly, but he seems to do so because he likes when his apartment smells like warm vanilla sugar or cranberry chutney, and not because he’s trying to set a mood. He sometimes sends her a song to listen to—and it is almost always sappy—but they don’t dance unless a mission calls for it. They fight a lot, but they don’t make up by making out in the rain. Girlfriend label aside, what they’re doing now isn’t all that different than what they were doing before.

Well, that’s not entirely true. Things are definitely different. When they’re off the clock and out in public together, he touches her more. It’s not PDA. It’s just...touching. He puts his hand on the small of her back. He steers her places by holding her elbow. He grazes his fingers along her thigh beneath tables and bars. He puts his arm around the back of her chair. And, wonder of all wonders, she doesn’t mind. One of these days she might even reach out and hold his hand.

He tells her that she’s beautiful a lot. It’s actually one of the more annoying things about their new normal, because he does it at the worst possible times. Handcuffed together in a filthy Bulgarian prison cell. Pinned down by heavy gunfire while she’s shouting at him, asking if he has an extra clip. Studying blueprints while surrounded by colleagues in the middle of the Hive. If he hadn’t looked so goofily earnest every time, she might’ve punched him. Or kissed him. Hard to tell, nowadays.
And, yes, he’s bought her flowers. Just once, when they were on a mission in London. She always suspected that he was a roses kind of guy. Instead she’d swung her hotel room door open to find him holding a handful of purple orchids, and the girly-girl she thought she’d buried years ago suddenly came back to life and swooned. (Outwardly, she did not swoon. Outwardly she rolled her eyes and smirked at him and said *Gee thanks.* But an hour later, when she was sprawled across his chest trying to catch her breath, and he traced his fingertips up her sweat-slicked spine and whispered *Did you like them?,* she closed her eyes and whispered *Yes.*)

About three weeks after they decide to be together, the Israeli government requests their help. They get sent to Tel Aviv to pose as a happily married and absurdly wealthy American couple that’s interested in investing in a firm with dubious business connections. Happily married means PDA and giggling and pet names, but it also means sharing a room. For the first time since France, Frankie has no choice but to stay an entire night in the same room as her partner.

The first night, Will offers to sleep on the couch. At first she thinks he’s being an ass, but then she realizes he’s serious—if she wants her space, he’ll give it to her. She stares at him, stunned, and then she yanks him into bed and doesn’t let him out until the next morning. And honestly? It’s pretty great. It’s nice to fall asleep with his arms wrapped around her. It’s nice when he wakes her up at two in the morning for another round. It’s nice to open her eyes in the morning and find room service coffee on the bedside table and Will Chase in the shower, smiling at her while he shampooos his hair.

The mission in Tel Aviv takes four days. It’s not pretty, but they get the information they were sent to get. They fly back to the States immediately. They land in New York around noon and spend the afternoon drinking with the team at the Dead Drop, and then around dinnertime they go back to Will’s place. They order Chinese, watch a few episodes of a new show they’re both hooked on, and then she climbs into his lap.

Later, when she tears herself away from his side and starts to get dressed again, she can feel him watching her. She knows he’s wondering why she could stay with him for three nights in Tel Aviv but can’t do it here. She knows he wants to ask her to stay. Hell, she *wants* to stay. But they haven’t been more than a couple hundred yards apart for four straight days, and it scares her how much she’s liked it.

She leans over his bed and kisses him goodbye just like she’s done every time since Prague. He catches her hand before she can walk away. She looks down at him, holding her breath and wondering whether he’s going to force her to tell him no, but all he says is, “Don’t go AWOL.”

“I won’t,” she promises.

She can tell he doesn’t believe her. So the next morning when they meet in the lobby of the federal building for a debriefing with the director and some diplomats, she’s armed with a latte that has a heart drawn in the foam. (For the record, she did *not* ask the barista to do it. She Googled coffee shops that do it automatically on all their drinks. The shop she found was twenty minutes out of her way, but extra travel time was better than having to ask for a foam heart like some kind of lovestruck moron.)

When she hands Will the latte, he stares down at it like she’s just handed him a million bucks. “Told you I wouldn’t,” she says.

He looks up at her with tears in his eyes, which is a little too much for her, so she rolls her eyes and says, “Get it together, Whiskey,” before turning on her heel and heading for the elevator.

And that’s pretty much how it goes for a month. Missions. Drinking with the team. Dates. Sex.
Rinse, repeat. For the first time in a very long time, Frankie feels like the universe is finally going to let her have something good.

And then Rafael shows up.

“This is cruel and unusual,” Standish announces as he shuffles into the room.

Will grins at him over the rim of a coffee cup. “It’s nine AM, Standish. Most of New York has been up for hours.”

“I am not most of New York,” Standish replies. “I am a hacker, which means I’m nocturnal. I’m supposed to get to sleep in after a long night of staring at my screen. Instead, I’m here. So I’m going to take a nap on this pool table.”

He climbs onto the pool table and sprawls out with his arms covering his face.

“You’re going to scratch the baize,” Jai observes from behind the bar. He’s hovering over a French press coffee maker, watching it with the same attention to detail he watches everything with.

“I don’t know what that means,” Standish says, his voice muffled from beneath his arms.

“The green cloth on the top of a pool table is called baize,” Wills tells him helpfully. “Most people call it felt because they think it’s felt, but it’s not actually felt. It’s a wool-nylon blend called baize.”

“Where’s Frankie and her Nobody cares when you need her?” Standish wonders.

Will frowns. “Rude.”

“She’d probably tell you not to scratch the baize,” Jai observes. “She doesn’t like scratched baize.”

“Shut up, Jai,” Standish replies.

Susan walks into the room with Ray hot on her heels. “Good morning, everyone. What is that unbelievable smell?”

“The perfect cup of coffee,” Jai answers. “It is one of my many, many talents.” He looks up with a smile. “That and explosives.”

“Can you make explosive coffee?” Standish wonders, finally moving his arms away from his face.

Jai looks thoughtful. “That is an excellent idea.”

“Is it though?” Susan asks.

Will shakes his head. “No.”

“All right, team, let’s get this party started,” Ray says. He presses a button hidden on a nearby wall and a screen starts to descend from the ceiling. Then he pulls a laptop out of his bag and sets it on the nearest table. He straightens, scans the room, and then frowns. “Where’s Frankie?”

Susan glances at Will, but Will shrugs. Frankie didn’t stay at his place last night—they still haven’t managed to cross that line yet—and he hasn’t heard from her yet this morning.

“She’ll be late,” Jai calls from behind his French press. “Had to yell at her landlord.”
Will frowns. “What?”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure she won’t hurt him.” Jai’s eyebrows furrow. “Much.”

“I bet she doesn’t even pay rent because her landlord thinks she’s so terrifying,” Standish says.

Jai straightens behind the bar. “I can confirm that she pays considerably less than the other tenants in the building.”

Will’s frown deepens. Frankie didn’t text him to tell him she’d be late. He didn’t know she was having issues with her landlord. He’s never even been inside her apartment. Is it a bad sign that he’s never been inside his girlfriend’s apartment?

“She said to start without her because Will can just fill her in when she gets here,” Jai says.

Will perks up a little at that, but Ray frowns. “Actually, I don’t think we can start without her.”

“Why not?” Will asks.

“Well, this mission came straight from the director and it’s for her,” Ray replies. The screen behind him blinks to life and turns blue, and he pulls a remote from his pocket and presses a few buttons. “We’ll need the whole team to provide support, but it’s pretty much a Frankie thing.”

Standish props himself up on his elbows. “Is it because you need her to torture someone into submission?”

“No,” Ray scoffs. He puts his hands on his hips and looks thoughtful. “I guess I can give you the background while we wait for her since she already knows all of it. You guys ever heard of the Fantasma cartel out of Colombia?”

“Are you kidding?” Will says. “They’re one of the most dangerous cartels in the world. They’re also one of the biggest suppliers of cocaine in the United States.”

“Actually, as of last year, they’re the biggest,” Ray says. “They own 80 percent of all the cocaine traffic in South America, and last year they brought in nearly $7 billion worth of profits.”

Standish sits up and whistles.

“They’ve got distribution down to an art form. It’s almost impossible for us to infiltrate or stop them, because every time Interpol or the DEA sets up a raid, the cartel gets tipped off that they’re coming.”

“Wait, the cartel’s got people inside both agencies?” Will says in disbelief.

“Yep.”

“Are they with the Trust?” Susan asks.

“Not from what we can tell, no,” Ray answers. “This seems to be a separate network.”

“What about the Colombian authorities?” Will asks.

Ray smiles humorlessly. “Cartel’s got that covered too. Turns out, the Colombian authorities know exactly who runs the cartel. But they can’t—or won’t—go after them because it’s a very powerful family that’s been involved in national politics since the 80s. In fact, rumor has it that the current president of Colombia is only president thanks to their support.”
“Who’s the family?” Susan asks.

Ray clicks his remote and the screen behind him suddenly reveals a professionally taken photo of a smiling group of people. An older man and woman are seated on a bench in a flourishing garden. Behind them and to the left is a woman standing in the arms of a man, and to the right is another man standing alone.

“This is the Hernandez family,” Ray says. “This distinguished looking gentleman in the center is Juan Carlos Hernandez, the man who’s rumored to have built the cartel from the ground up. He and his wife, Valentina, have two kids. Their daughter Isabella is married to Mateo Rodriguez, who’s a forward for the Colombian national soccer team. Their son, Rafael, is a Harvard-educated entrepreneur. He’s also the current head of the cartel and has been for about five years.”

Ray clicks his remote, and a few pictures of Rafael populate the screen. Will studies them with interest, because Rafael Hernandez looks more like a movie star than a cartel leader. He’s tall and broad shouldered, and his jet black hair is gelled and styled immaculately. He’s got the kind of jaw that Will has always wished he had—sharp and prominent with a strong chin—and it’s coated with just enough facial hair to make him look slightly scruffy. In every picture he’s wearing a well-cut suit, and peeking out from beneath his sleeves are the inked edges of tattoos.

“For a few months now, Interpol has been hearing chatter that Rafael is interested in more than just trafficking drugs,” Ray says. “He wants to build a global crime syndicate, and he’s been recruiting the leaders of some of the world’s most powerful criminal organizations to join him. That includes the Five Families of New York.”

“The Five Families?” Standish says incredulously. “Wait, you mean like the mafia?”

“Yes,” Ray answers.

“I thought they were all gone,” Standish says. He looks at Will with wide eyes. “The mafia is still a thing?”

“Yes, very much so,” Will answers.

“That’s horrifying.” Standish breathes.

“We hunt terrorists and genocidal dictators and you’re horrified by the mafia?” Susan asks dryly.

“Have you seen The Godfather, Susan? That shit is crazy.”

“Rafael is in New York, isn’t he?” Jai pipes up from his position behind the bar. “That’s why you need Frankie.”

“Yes. He called Frankie as soon as he landed last night.”

Will straightens in his chair, suddenly concerned. “Why is the head of the Fantasma cartel calling Frankie?”

Ray tilts his head. “Well, technically, he called Lana Tyler. But still.”

“Ray, what are you talking about?” Will demands. “Who’s Lana Tyler?”

Before Ray can answer, Frankie’s voice calls out from the other room, “Jai? Please tell me you still have coffee, because this has been the morning from hell.” A moment later she breezes through the doorway, and Jai holds a steaming mug out for her. “Oh thank god,” she sighs, taking the mug
from him. “You’re the best.”

She turns to face the rest of the room, but when she notices the screen filled with pictures of Rafael Hernandez she goes still. She stares at it for a long moment, an unreadable expression on her face, and then her gaze darts briefly in Will’s direction. As soon as their eyes meet, he gives her a look that says What’s going on? She looks at Ray without acknowledging it.

“What is this, Ray?” she asks.

“Rafael Hernandez landed in New York City last night,” Ray answers. “And he called Lana Tyler as soon as he did.”

“Did he come here for her?”

“No. Intel indicates that he’s here to meet with the Five Families to recruit them to join his syndicate, but—”

“He’s building the syndicate?” Frankie interrupts in disbelief. “You mean he’s actually following through?”

“Yes, and by all accounts he’s been pretty successful. He’s meeting with the Five Families tonight. And the director wants you in that meeting.”

“I haven’t spoken to Rafael in months. How do you even know he’ll want to see me?”

“Because he left a voicemail saying he did.” Ray reaches out and taps the space bar on the laptop sitting nearby, and a smooth, baritone voice fills the room.


There’s a long pause. Will can’t take his eyes off Frankie. She’s staring at the floor, the same unreadable expression on her face that’s been there since she first saw Rafael’s face plastered all over the screen.

“I want to see you,” Rafael’s voice finally says. It’s softer than before, and the only way Will can think to describe it is as longing. “Call me.”

The recording ends. Frankie doesn’t move. For a second, silence hangs in the air. And then Will says to her, “So you’re Lana Tyler.”

She looks up at him. “Yeah.”

Standish raises his hand. “Yeah, hi, I have a question. Who the hell is Lana Tyler?”

Frankie sets the mug in her hand on the bar with a dull thud and a sigh. “Rafael Hernandez runs the Fantasma cartel, which—”

“Oh, actually,” Ray cuts her off, lifting his index finger, “I already gave them all the background on the cartel. All they need to know about is you and Rafael.”

The phrase you and Rafael makes Will’s stomach drop. He watches as Frankie shoots Ray an annoyed look, and Ray shrinks back against the wall. “Sorry,” he mutters. “Just trying to save you some time.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and turns to face the rest of the team. “The Fantasma cartel has been a step ahead of the DEA and Interpol for years because they have moles on the inside. About two
years ago, Interpol asked the CIA to intervene and identify the moles so they could remove them and then take down the cartel. The director assigned the mission to me.”

“Did they send you in to torture people?” Standish asks.

Frankie folds her arms over her chest. “No, they sent me in undercover.”

“To torture people?”

“I’m going to torture you if you don’t stop interrupting me.”

Standish smirks. “Will would never let you do that.”

“I might if you don’t let her finish,” Will says.

Standish looks scandalized. Frankie shoots a brief smile in Will’s direction, and the sense of dread that’s been gnawing at him ever since she walked in fades a little.

“The DEA knew that there was an American transport company based here in New York that was responsible for getting most of Fantasma’s product into the States,” Frankie continues. “But they were never able to prove it. So I took the owner, John Tyler, to a black site and convinced him that it would be in his best interest to let his niece take over all his operations.”

“And when you say you convinced him, you mean…” Standish says.

Frankie sighs. “It means I used enhanced interrogation techniques.”

Standish grins. “Knew there was going to be torture in there somewhere.”

“So you went undercover as the niece,” Will prompts, trying to get them back on track.

“Yes,” Frankie confirms. “Lana Tyler. The story was that my Uncle John had a heart attack and was unable to run the family business anymore, so I stepped in. And the first thing I did was fly down to Bogota to meet with our biggest client.”

“But if the CIA had control of the transport company that was getting all the drugs into the States, why didn’t you just bust up the cartel from the inside?” Susan asks.

“Because that wasn’t the mission,” Frankie answers. “My mission was to figure out who the moles were so they couldn’t compromise their agencies any further. And to do that, I had to get Raf to trust me enough to tell me who they were.”

“You seduced him, didn’t you?” Standish says a little too gleefully.

Will thinks about the way Rafael said I want to see you in his voicemail, and the way Frankie just called him Raf without a second thought. “No,” Will says quietly, his eyes fixed on Frankie. “She made him fall in love with her.”

Frankie’s gaze collides with Will’s and holds. Her chin is lifted defiantly, but he knows her well enough to read the discomfort in her eyes.

“Frankie?” Standish says in disbelief. “You’re telling me Frankie made someone fall in love with her?”

“Dude, she’s actually really good at it,” Ray says, leaning toward Standish. “According to the reports, she had him head over heels in like two weeks. Ooh!” he exclaims, straightening. “I have
pictures!” He presses one of the buttons on his remote, and suddenly the screen is filled with pictures of Frankie and Rafael.

For a long moment, nobody says anything. Will couldn’t even if he wanted to. He’s too busy staring at surveillance photos of his girlfriend wrapped in the arms of a drug lord, sitting in the lap of a drug lord, kissing a drug lord.

There’s one picture in particular that Will can’t seem to tear his gaze away from. They appear to be exiting a nightclub. Frankie’s wearing a form-fitting, deep blue dress with a plunging neckline and an absurdly short hem. Her legs seem to go on for miles, and her feet are encased in a pair of sparkling silver stiletto heels. Rafael, dressed in a sharp gray suit without a tie, has his right arm slung around her shoulders. His mouth is by her ear. He must be saying something incredibly funny because Frankie is laughing, her head tilted toward him, and Will can’t get over how ridiculously happy she looks.

Standish lets out a low whistle. “Okay, so, I know this guy is real bad news and everything, but can I just say—he is handsome as shit. And Frankie, I mean damn girl. Y’all are cute as hell together.”

“Standish,” Susan chastises. Will knows she’s doing it on his behalf, but Standish has no idea that he and Frankie are together so there’s no point. Ray doesn’t know either. Hence the picture collage of Frankie draped all over Rafael.

“You do you have these, Ray?” Frankie’s voice cuts through the room. It’s the same voice she uses when she interrogates someone, and Ray’s eyes widen.

“I was just trying to be thorough,” he says apologetically.

“Take them down. Now.”

Ray obeys, despite Standish’s complaints. Will finally looks at Frankie. She’s watching him, another unreadable expression on her face. “How long were you under?” he asks.

“Seven months.”

Will feels like a knife is being twisted in his chest. She spent seven months pretending to be in love with someone? Surely even someone as committed to their job as Frankie couldn’t last seven months without developing some type of feelings. Especially given her acknowledged fondness for bad boys.

“You spent seven months undercover as the handsome drug lord’s girlfriend and you didn’t get the names of any of the moles?” Standish asks incredulously.

“I got plenty of names,” Frankie says with a glare. “But there were more of them than we thought. It was an entire network. And I had to be careful. If he noticed that every person he told me about ended up disappearing, then he would’ve been suspicious. So it took some time.”

“But you didn’t get them all,” Will says.

“No. The agency pulled me after seven months.”

“Why?”

She glances at Jai. Will follows her gaze, and watches as the two friends share a look he can’t decipher. “There was another mission they needed me for,” she answers vaguely.
Will frowns. “You were deep undercover with one of the most dangerous cartels in the world and they *pulled* you? The agency wouldn’t pull someone off a mission like that unless—”

“It was a matter of national security,” Frankie finishes for him. “And I was the only agent that could do what they needed done.”

“What did they need done?” Standish wonders.

“That’s classified,” Frankie says bluntly. “But it wasn’t supposed to be permanent. I was supposed to complete the mission and be back in Bogota within a week. But then you stole classified information and put it on a tarball, and I got sent after you instead. You know how that turned out.”

“I was more important than a cartel?” Standish says, puffing out his chest.

“The *information* you stole was more important,” Frankie corrects. “Trust me, the fact that I’m here instead of there has nothing to do with you.”

Standish deflates. “That was mean.”

Frankie doesn’t look like she cares.

“Why does Rafael think you left Colombia?” Susan asks.

“He thinks my uncle got cancer,” Frankie replies. “As far as he knows, John Tyler is the only family I’ve got and I’m very attached to him. The doctors he needs for his cancer treatments are here in New York, and I won’t leave New York as long as he’s sick.”

“And since he’s not really sick but at a CIA black site, you can manipulate that story however and whenever you want,” Will says. “The director can send you back under anytime.”

Frankie nods. “Yeah.”

“So why hasn’t he?”

She shrugs. “Because what we do here is more important.”

Will stares at her. She hasn’t come right out and said it, but he can’t help but wonder—if their missions stopped being so successful, or if they caught Ollerman and dismantled the Trust entirely, would the director have her on the next plane down to Bogota to hop back in bed with Rafael?

Frankie, oblivious to his thoughts, turns to Ray. “So what’s the play?”

“Reconnect with Rafael and get yourself invited to his meeting tonight with the Five Families. We need as much intel as we can get on the syndicate he’s building.”

“You’ve got Lana’s phone?”

Ray holds out a cell phone. Frankie takes it and moves her thumb across the screen. After a beat of silence, the room fills with the sound of ringing. Will blinks in surprise. He hadn’t expected her to put the call on speaker phone. She meets his gaze from across the room, and he wonders if she did it on purpose so he could hear everything.

Rafael answers after the second ring. “Lana?”

Frankie breaks eye contact with Will and looks down toward the floor. “Hey Raf.”
“I’m in New York.”

“So you said.”

“I want to see you.”

Frankie waits a beat, and then says, “Business or pleasure?”

“Both.”

Frankie lets another silence linger. If she’s trying to play hard to get, it’s working. Will can almost feel the tension radiating through the other end of the line.

“Ty Bar at the Four Seasons,” she says at last. “One o’clock. Don’t be late.”

“Business or pleasure?” Rafael asks, his voice a suggestive hum.

Frankie smiles. “We’ll see.”

She hangs up the phone, and the smile drops immediately from her face. Everyone in the room is staring at her, but she turns to look at Susan. “Lana’s into fashion. I need outfits. You up for some shopping?”

Susan blinks in surprise, and then nods. “Yeah, of course.”

Frankie glances at Standish. “We’ll need access to the Four Seasons security feed, and cameras and mics throughout the bar. Can you and Ray get that done by one?”


Frankie looks at Jai. “I’ll get you the ring. It’ll need a new tracker. And whatever else you come up with.”

He smiles. “I have some ideas.”

Will wonders what ring she’s talking about, but she doesn’t explain. “All right then,” she says to the team. “Let’s go.”

Everyone files out of the room. Will gets to his feet and starts to follow Ray and Standish so he can help them with surveillance, but when he tries to pass by Frankie, she takes a step forward and blocks his way. He looks at her in surprise, but she keeps her eyes on the retreating figures of their team. Susan stops in the doorway and glances over her shoulder at them.

“Give me two minutes,” Frankie tells her quietly.

Susan nods and then disappears. Frankie turns to face Will, tilting her head back to look up at him. He gazes down at her, trying not to think about that picture of her in Rafael’s arms or how she murmurs Rafael so easily.

“Are you okay with this?” she asks softly.

He slides his hands into his pockets. “Well, it came straight from the director and it could be our only chance to get some intel on a global crime syndicate, so I think I have to be.”

She furrows her eyebrows at him, but he doesn’t offer any more of an explanation. He can’t. What’s he supposed to say? Of course he’s not okay with it. He doesn’t want her within a mile of
Rafael Hernandez, let alone pretending to be in love with him, but this is the job. This is what they do. Rafael is creating a crime empire that could have catastrophic consequences, and Frankie’s the only person in the world who can get enough information out of him to stop it. What other choice do they have?

“Will,” she says quietly, taking half a step closer to him. “This is deep cover. I have to be her. And she’s in love with him.”

“I know.”

“It’s going to look like—”

“I know, Frankie.”

For the first time all morning, he can read her expression clearly. She’s upset. Given how hard he’s had to work to get through her defenses in the past, he’s a little surprised that she’s letting it show so plainly on her face. It pulls him toward her like a magnet, and though they’re always careful about touching each other at the Dead Drop, he can’t resist the urge to reach out and curl his fingers around hers. She doesn’t pull away, which surprises him again, but it also sends a wave of calm over him.

“Don’t worry about me,” he tells her, dropping his voice to the low timbre that he usually reserves for when she’s upset. “Just do your job.”

She weaves her fingers through his so that they’re holding hands instead of him just clasping her fingers. “Whatever it looks like, it’s not,” she whispers. “He’s a mark. That’s it.”

Will’s heart shoots up into his throat. A few months ago she wouldn’t have bothered to reassure him at all, let alone with such sincerity, and now she’s doing it while holding his hand.

“Okay,” he says, because he doesn’t trust himself to say anything else. The last thing she needs right now is for him to blurt out something crazy like I think I’m in love with you.

“We’ve got to go, Franks,” Susan calls from the doorway.

Frankie lets go of Will’s hand and steps away from him. “Can you make sure Standish and Ray don’t screw up the surveillance?” she asks.

He laughs. “Yeah. I’m on it.”

She smiles and then turns and walks away. Will watches her go. The farther she gets from him, the stronger the sense of dread in the pit of his stomach gets. By the time she disappears from view, he feels like he’s going to be sick.
It isn’t until Frankie steps through the front doors of the Four Seasons hotel that she feels like she’s finally remembered how to be Lana Tyler.

She certainly looks the part. Between her Prada dress, her Louboutins, and the Hermes purse hanging from her elbow, she’s wearing nearly twenty thousand dollars—and that doesn’t include her jewelry. Her hair is curled and loose, her makeup subtle but flawless, and her nails are painted a deep, blood red. She can see people turning to look at her as she passes, her heels clicking on the floor. If she wasn’t in character already she’d be telling a few of the men to wipe the drool from their chins. Instead, she smiles. Lana Tyler knows exactly how beautiful she is, and she likes to be seen.

It’s three minutes after one o’clock when she enters the bar. She’s late on purpose because she knew Rafael wouldn’t be, and because Lana’s the kind of woman who likes to make an entrance. Frankie spots him almost immediately. He’s sitting at a low table in the back corner, and there are already two drinks before him—a glass tumbler that she’s certain contains the most expensive rum the bar carries, and a martini glass holding a bright pink cosmopolitan. Lana loves cosmos. Frankie doesn’t hate them, but they’re not her drink of choice. She imagines that Standish is going to keel over laughing at the sight of her drinking pink alcohol.

Rafael sees her and immediately gets to his feet. As always, he’s dressed immaculately. His three piece navy suit looks like it was made for him, and it probably was—he cares very deeply about his appearance, which is why Frankie made Lana the kind of woman who wears Chanel and Cartier. One of Rafael’s favorite things to do was to take her into downtown Bogota and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on clothes and jewelry for her. My queen should look like a queen, he used to murmur to her in Spanish, usually while taking off whatever he’d bought for her a few hours before. Lana thought it was sweet. Frankie, not so much.

She can see the tattoos snaking out from under his sleeves and across his wrists. She knows that the patterns twist up his arms, across his chest, and down his back. A memory of the last time she’d seen those tattoos flashes through her mind—sweat drenched skin, whispered Spanish, white-hot pleasure—and it feels so wrong it takes her breath away. She’d give just about anything to be curled up next to her partner on his couch instead of walking toward a drug lord, but this is her job. Rafael is running a cartel and building a criminal empire. Somebody’s got to stop him, and she’s somebody. You’re Lana Tyler, she thinks as the distance between her and Rafael shrinks. You’re Lana Tyler, and you’re head over heels in love with this man.

“Hello Rafael,” Frankie says, finally stopping in front of him.

Rafael’s smile widens. His eyes are dark, so different than Will’s vivid green, and once again Frankie feels a pang of longing in her chest. She quashes it immediately. If she’s going to get through this meeting, she can’t think about Will.

Rafael steps toward her, and she lets him wrap his arms around her waist in a lingering hug. “Hello beautiful,” he says in Spanish, his voice low. He brushes his lips over a spot just below her ear as he pulls back, and her body shivers involuntarily.

As they lean away from each other, she lifts her hand and strokes her thumb along the stubble on his jaw. “You look good,” she tells him in Spanish.

He catches her hand as she lowers it and kisses the inside of her wrist. “You look better,” he says in
“Flatterer,” she accuses.

“It’s not flattery if it’s true.” He gestures at the table. “I ordered for you.”

“Of course you did,” she says, laughing.

He pulls one of the purple upholstered chairs out for her, and she sits. He sits too, his chair so close to hers that when she crosses her legs, her ankle brushes the inside of his calf. Frankie sets her purse on the table, and then sips her drink. Rafael watches her, his eyes traveling over her face. Frankie lets him look for a while, pretending to scan the room while he does. Eventually she sets her glass down and meets his gaze.

“So. You’re here.”

“I’m here.”

“Why?”

“For you.”

Frankie rubs her thumb along the stem of her glass. “You’ve never lied to me before, Raf. Don’t start now.”

He leans toward her. “You don’t think I’d come here for you?”

“I think you thought about it once,” she says. “I think part of you even wanted to.”

“More than just part,” he says, reaching for her hand. His thumb strokes over her skin. “And more than just once.”

“And yet,” she says, lifting a shoulder.

He turns her hand over and strokes his fingers over her palm, and then up along her wrist. “You’re angry,” he says in Spanish.

“No.”

“You wanted me to come with you.”

“I knew you couldn’t. This isn’t Bogota, Raf. You’re not protected here, and you’re too smart to risk your business or your freedom. Or mine, seeing as they’re intertwined.”

“Intertwined,” he repeats, his lips stretching into a suggestive smile. “Suits us, no?”

She bites her lip and glances at his mouth so that he’ll assume she’s thinking the same thing he is, but she doesn’t answer his question. “Is there something wrong with the shipments or the schedule?”

“No. Your employees are just as efficient as they’ve always been. I have heard no complaints.”

“So then what are you doing here?”

He lets go of her hand and reaches for his glass. She watches as he takes a long swallow of rum, and then sets the glass down. When he leans forward again, he rests his elbows on his knees. A
moment later, she feels his hands smoothing over her calf beneath the table. In Bogota, Lana would have uncrossed her legs and let his hands slide higher. But they’re not in Bogota. They’re in Manhattan at the Four Seasons, and despite what she told Rafael, Frankie knows that if Lana were real, she actually would be upset that he hadn’t come with her to New York. She wouldn’t let him back in so easily.

“Do you remember when we went to Belize?” Rafael asks.

Another flash of memory invades Frankie’s mind. A private villa on the beach. An entire week of nothing but sand, sun, and Rafael. That was when she’d sealed the deal. She’d been sleeping with him for three months at that point, but Belize was the first time he opened up to her completely. He’d told her about how he wanted to expand his cartel into a global empire. At the time she’d thought it was only talk. She’d played the dutiful girlfriend and encouraged him, telling him that she thought it was a brilliant idea and if anyone could do it, he could. If she’d known that he was actually going to follow through, she might have been more careful.

“Vividly,” she tells him. “You wouldn’t let me put on any clothes.”

He laughs. “I liked tasting the sun on your skin.”

“I remember.” She smiles at him. “Why do you ask?”

“I did it, mi amor,” he murmurs, leaning closer. “What we talked about that night on the beach. The syndicate is real.”

Adrenaline pounds through Frankie’s veins. This is it. This is why she’s here. She’s dying to start asking for details, but Lana wouldn’t do that. Lana would be surprised.

“What?” Frankie says in disbelief.

He smiles. “I have connections already in Germany, Russia, and Spain. And soon I will have some in New York. That is why I came. To finalize the agreement. I have a meeting tonight.”

“With who?”

“Have you heard of the Five Families?”

Frankie glances around the bar because that’s what Lana would do. “The mafia?” she whispers.

He smiles and strokes his fingers down around her ankle and then back up. “Yes. They are eager to make a connection. And they are particularly interested in whether the business arrangement you and I have might extend to them.”

Frankie studies him. Lana may be an heiress who wears haute couture and lets billionaires buy her diamonds, but she’s also a CEO who runs a multimillion dollar company that smuggles drugs for a violent cartel. Rafael didn’t fall in love with her because he liked to take off her clothes. He fell in love with her because she could talk about philosophy and economic theory afterwards, and because unlike his other girlfriends she’s never put up with his shit.

“What are they moving?” she asks, slipping into business mode.

“Weapons.” He smiles. “I’ve been told you Americans like your guns.”

Frankie doesn’t smile. “That’s outside the purview of the DEA and Interpol. That’s ATF and the FBI.”
“They tell me that won’t be a problem.”

“And you trust them?”

“Of course not. What is it your uncle says? Trust, but verify. They have their sources. I have mine.”

Frankie’s blood runs cold, but she keeps a straight face. “You have people in the FBI?”

“Not yet. But I will. Just like I will have people all over the globe by the end of this year. And so could you.”

“I run a company, not a cartel,” she says, sipping her drink.

His eyes linger on her mouth around the rim of her glass. “You could take your family’s company global. In every city I have a presence, your company would prosper. You were the one who inspired me to be more, Lana. It’s only fitting that we do this together. Starting in New York.”

“You said you made connections already,” she points out. “You already got this thing off the ground, and you did it without me. I’m not one of your one night stands, Raf. I don’t believe something just because you tell me to. So spare me the hopeless romantic bullshit about how you want to do this together.”

Rafael smiles at her, wide and dazzling, and Frankie wonders what her team is thinking as they watch all this. Rafael runs one of the most violent criminal organizations in the world. He’s famous for executing his employees himself when they mess up, and for slaughtering not just his enemies, but their entire families. An inexperienced agent would assume that Rafael prefers a soft and submissive woman, someone who carefully steers clear of conflict. But Frankie’s not inexperienced—and she knows Rafael loves her most when she’s a ball-busting bitch.

“I would never risk you or your company unless I was sure, mi amor,” he says. His voice is honeyed and smooth, the same tone he used to employ whenever he was apologizing to her. “I wanted proof that I could do what I promised. I needed to complete test runs in other places first.”

“And you were successful?”

“Yes. And now I’m here. For you.”

“For business,” she corrects.

He smiles. “Why can’t it be both? You used to take conference calls in my bed. You were at my side in every meeting.”

“So does that mean I get an invite to your little meeting tonight? Or is that boys only?”

He smiles again. “I would be honored if you would join us. It would give you a chance to hear everything I have done so far. And everything I still plan to do. Hopefully with you by my side.”

“Where’s the meeting?”

“Fuego. Eight o’clock.”

Frankie smiles. “I assume that’s a nightclub.”

“You assume correctly. I picked a reggaeton club because I know how much you like it.” He slides his hand along her calf again and leans over the table toward her. “I would like for tonight to be
like it was before, Lana. Business. Dancing. You, back in my bed where you belong.”

“And what makes you so sure I belong there?”

He reaches for her right hand, and she lets him take it. He stares down at the ring on her fourth finger, and Frankie looks down at it too. The two carat emerald is wreathed by diamonds and set in a platinum band. It’s a Hernandez family heirloom. Rafael gave it to her after a lavish birthday party he threw in her honor, and she remembers being genuinely surprised when he presented it to her.

“Why else would you still wear this?” he asks, lifting her hand to his lips.

She lets him kiss her knuckles, but then she pulls her hand free. “Because it complements the dress.”

He smirks. “You are angry with me.”

She sips her drink instead of responding.

He leans a little closer. “Do you remember our meeting with the Zapata brothers? You were angry with me after that, too.”

She remembers. It was one of the few times she’d been genuinely furious with him, and not just pretending for the sake of reeling him in. They’d fought on the terrace of their hotel room in Cartagena, screaming at each other in a furious torrent of Spanish until their rage turned into something else. She still remembers the sharp edge of the balustrade digging into her back, the silk hem of her dress gathered at her waist, the breathless, blazing rush of his body driving into hers. She remembers his mouth at her throat, and his voice whispering Te amo. She remembers coming apart so hard she saw stars, and feeling shattered not just by the pleasure but by the revelation. I’m in love with him.

Except she wasn’t. She knows that now. She felt something for him, and that night in Cartagena had been so intense that she’d felt like it was real. But it wasn’t. She didn’t love him. She didn’t trust him. She didn’t respect him. He didn’t know the real her, and he never would, and she didn’t want him to. She was just looking for someone to hang onto because she was lonely and wounded and lost. She’s been lost since she was seventeen. Maybe she’s still lost now. Maybe she’s just as broken and desperate today as she was in Connecticut and Venezuela and Moscow and Cartagena but it doesn’t feel like it. It doesn’t feel like it because when she’s done playing this stupid game of cat and mouse she’s going to go back to the Dead Drop, back to Will, and being with Will makes her feel...found.

“But you didn’t stay angry,” Rafael murmurs. “You enjoyed my apology too much.”

“I remember,” Frankie tells him, forcing herself to push Will from her mind. “And you can stop doing that, because it won’t work.”

“Doing what?” he asks, smirking a little.

“Reminding me of all the nights we spent together. I remember them too. But it doesn’t change anything. I came to New York. You stayed in Bogota. And when I left, we decided we wouldn’t wait for each other.”

The smirk drops immediately from his face. “You’re with someone.”
It’s not a question, so she doesn’t answer it. His expression darkens just like she knew it would. He’s always had a jealous streak, and when he’s jealous she can get him to do pretty much anything she wants. That’s what she’ll need him to be tonight—ready and willing to tell her anything she wants to hear. Plus it’ll give her a reason to refuse to sleep with him. Because there’s no way in hell she’s sleeping with him.

“Who is he?” Rafael demands.

Frankie lifts a shoulder in a careless shrug. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“If I told you, you’d kill him.”

“Yes. I would.”

He’s not exaggerating. He would. She got hit on once by a tourist in a bar in Bogota. Rafael beat the man bloody right there in the middle of the bar, and he would’ve killed him if Frankie hadn’t stepped in and said *It’s not worth it. You know I’m yours.*

“What about you?” she asks. “Am I supposed to believe you’ve been sleeping alone?”

“Whores,” he says with a scowl. “They mean nothing. They’re not you.”

“Oh, of that I’m sure,” she says, sipping her drink.

He looks amused by her arrogance, and his anger fades a little. He reaches for her right hand again and strokes his thumb along her knuckles. “I don’t want another man’s hands on you.”

“I don’t belong to you, Raf.”

“Give me tonight.”

“I’ll give you business. And dancing.”

“Give me you.” He closes more of the distance between them, his face close to hers. “I promise you’ll come harder than you ever have for that hijo de puta you’re fucking now.”

The words are jarring, but Frankie forces herself not to recoil. She licks her lips, glances down at his mouth, and lets the moment drag on. He needs to think she’s considering it. He needs to think that even if she’s playing hard to get, there’s no way she won’t end up back in his bed.

She lifts her eyes back to his. “I’ll see you at eight,” she murmurs. And then she reaches for her purse and gets to her feet.

He rises too. “Wear red,” he says.

She arches an eyebrow. “Because?”

“Because it’s my favorite color to take off you.”


“Yes,” he says, also in Spanish. “But you wore red the night you told me you were in love with me.” He takes a step toward her, sliding his hand along her waist, and lowers his mouth to her ear. “I’d like a repeat performance,” he whispers before brushing his lips over her cheek.
She can tell by the smirk on his face when he leans back that he thinks he’s got her. She smirks too, because cocky Rafael is just as easy to control as jealous Rafael.

“I’ll see you tonight, Raf.”

When Frankie walks into the back room of the Dead Drop, the entire team is already there. Will is the first to see her. Their eyes meet across the room for a brief second, and then he immediately lowers his gaze. Frankie’s stomach drops. And then Standish sees her.

“Dude,” he says, straightening in his chair. “How come you didn’t tell us you and the handsome drug lord were engaged?”

“What?” Frankie says with a frown. “Raf and I weren’t engaged.”

“I told you,” Jai says, pausing just long enough from typing on his laptop to shoot Standish a look of smug superiority. “It’s not an engagement ring. It’s just a ring. She’s not even wearing it on her left hand.”

“Oh, but look at it,” Standish says, gesturing at Frankie’s right hand. “That shit would pay off my student loans and leave me enough to buy a car.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s an engagement ring,” Frankie says, walking down the steps and into the room. “It was just a gift.”

Standish snorts. “Just a gift. Who buys gifts like that?”

“A drug lord who makes seven billion dollars a year?” Susan suggests.

“He didn’t buy it,” Jai says matter-of-factly as his fingers fly over his keyboard. “It’s a family heirloom.”

It’s not very often that Frankie feels like smacking Jai, but she definitely does right now. He keeps typing, totally oblivious, but Will snaps his eyes back up to Frankie’s in surprise. She instantly feels guilty. She doesn’t care about Rafael or his stupid ring, and she would’ve shoved it through his smirking lips and down his throat if she could. But she couldn’t so she didn’t, and now Will looks a little heartbroken and a lot jealous, and seriously, fuck this mission.

“Whaat?” Standish says. “That’s even worse! Guys don’t give family heirlooms to random girls. Back me up here, Will.”

“It’s not pertinent to the mission,” Will says evenly.

Standish snorts again. “Yeah, okay. All I’m saying is, if I give a girl some ring that’s old and fancy enough to be called an heirloom, it’s cause I’m planning to wife her up.”

“Give it a rest, Standish,” Susan says.

Standish turns back to his computer screen with a scowl. “Y’all know I’m right,” he mutters to himself.

“I assume everything came through?” Frankie asks, desperate to talk about something other than Rafael’s damn ring.

“Crystal clear,” Jai confirms, looking up from his screen. “I’ve got the blueprints for Fuego here.”
Frankie crosses the room to stand behind his chair and study his screen. “There’s a VIP room here,” he says, pointing at a spot on the blueprint. “It’s on the second floor, and looks out over the dance floor. I’m guessing this is where you’ll be meeting with the Five Families.”

“What are y’all meeting in a club for anyway?” Standish says, spinning in his chair to look up at Frankie.

“Raf always has meetings in nightclubs,” she replies with a shrug. “They’re loud and busy and filled with drunk people who don’t pay attention to anything but can still give you an alibi. And in Bogota, his cousin owns half of them.”

“So it’s not just because he likes to dance with you?” Standish asks with a smirk.

Frankie smacks the back of his head.

“Oh!” he yelps, cowering away from her.

“You deserved that,” Susan tells him.

“His cousin owns this club too,” Will says. “He also owns a few restaurants in the Bronx and Brooklyn.”

“And Rafael owns a penthouse apartment in Central Park West,” Jai says. “Standish, show her.”

Standish clicks his mouse and brings up a set of pictures. Frankie leans down, takes one look at the first picture, and then says, “Yeah. I’ve been there.”

“Of course you have,” Standish says. “Let me guess—he bought it for you as a gift.”

“Yeah,” Frankie confirms.

Standish gapes at her. “Wait, are you serious?”

“She didn’t accept it,” Frankie says. “She’s got her own place. But yeah, he bought it for her when she moved back to New York.”

Standish frowns. “Why do you keep saying she like it ain’t you? He bought that for you, Frankie.”

“No, he didn’t,” Frankie argues. “He bought it for Lana Tyler, who doesn’t exist. I created her, Standish. Everything about her was designed specifically for him.” She can’t help but look at Will. “Nothing between me and Rafael was real. He’s just a mark.”

Once again, Will doesn’t hold her gaze very long. And once again, Frankie feels her stomach drop.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Standish scoffs. “Y’all reminiscing about your sexy times was real convincing. Dude told you he could make you co—”

Frankie smacks him again.

“Oh!” he yelps, cowering again.

“All right, let’s just focus on the mission,” Will says. “Jai, you take Standish and get surveillance set up at Fuego. Same idea as this morning. Focus on the VIP room.”

Jai nods.
“Susan, finish those profiles you’ve been working on for the reps from the Five Families. Frankie will need to know as much as possible.”

“On it,” Susan says.

“I’ve got all the intel Ray could dig up on the syndicate so far.” He finally looks at Frankie. “I’ll write up some bullet points for you. You should get some rest.”

“Yeah, busy night of dancing and dirty talk with your boo coming up,” Standish says, and then immediately leaps from his chair and ducks behind Jai so that Frankie can’t smack him again.

“I will kill you dead,” she threatens.

“Not if you can’t reach me.”

“I don’t know why you’re hiding behind me,” Jai says mildly. “We all know that I would choose her over you.”

Standish straightens and looks appalled. “Excuse me?”

“I said what I said,” Jai says, getting to his feet and heading for the door.

Standish follows him. “First of all, how dare you. Second of all, you and Frankie don’t even have a handshake. And third of all…” His voice trails off as they disappear from view, leaving Frankie alone with Susan and Will.

“I’ve got a lot of reading to do,” Will says, gathering up a stack of files. He takes the long way out of the room, walking clear around the table so that he doesn’t have to pass by Frankie, and she watches him go with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Once he’s gone, she turns to look at Susan.

“He saw the whole thing?”

“Yeah.”

“How bad was it?”

Susan winces. “Pretty bad. I mean, we were all together so he had to pretend like it wasn’t. But I don’t think he’s okay.”

Frankie sighs and collapses into the chair Jai had been sitting in. She pinches the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off a pounding headache.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” Frankie spits. She yanks the absurdly high Louboutins off her feet and tosses them onto the floor. “I hate Rafael.”

“Well if you ever decide you’re sick of being a spy, you should go into acting. Cause it sure didn’t look like you hated him.”

Frankie glares at her. “Seriously, you too? I was doing my job. It’s not my fault I’m good at it.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. That wasn’t helpful.” Susan walks around the table and sits in the chair next to Frankie. “At least it’s over.”
“For now. Tonight will be worse.”

Susan frowns. “You’re not going to…?”

“Of course not,” Frankie scoffs. “I’d rather stick my hand in a garbage disposal. But Rafael is used to getting what he wants, and the longer he goes without getting it, the more relentless he’ll be. If you think he came on strong this morning, wait until you see what he’s like at a nightclub.”

Susan puts her hand on Frankie’s knee. “I’m sorry you have to do this.”

Frankie tilts her head back and stares up at the ceiling. “What if things are different after this?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what if Will looks at me differently?”

“He won’t.”

“He just did.”

Susan shakes her head. “He’s not judging you, Frankie. He’s just jealous. And probably worried, because according to the dossier Ray dropped off, Rafael killed one of his ex-girlfriends.”

“Elena,” Frankie says. “She cheated on him.”

“Yeah, so imagine what he’d do if he found out you were CIA. He’d kill you too.”

Frankie snorts. “Oh, I’d love to see him try.” She lets her mind wander briefly through a fantasy of punching Rafael hard enough to rearrange his hundred dollar haircut, and then she turns her head to look at Susan. “What should I do about Will?”

“Will likes to talk through his feelings.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Frankie snorts. “So, what, he needs to talk to you over margaritas?”

Susan gives her a look. “No, Frankie. He needs to talk to you. He’s jealous and upset and worried about you. He needs to be able to tell you all that, and he needs you to listen without making him feel like he’s crazy or annoying. So go ask him how he feels. And then listen.” She tilts her head. “Probably wouldn’t hurt to reassure him that you’re not in love with Rafael.”

“I’m not.”

Susan holds up her hands. “I’m not the one you need to tell.”

Frankie sighs. “This day sucks.”

Before she climbs the steps to the upstairs office to see Will, Frankie ducks into the bathroom to change. She feels marginally less annoyed once she’s wearing jeans and a t-shirt instead of Prada, and even better once Rafael’s ring is off her finger. But when she goes to set the ring next to the Oscar de la Renta dress she and Susan bought for tonight, her annoyance returns. It’s red. She’s tempted to go out and buy something else just so Rafael won’t get the satisfaction of thinking she dressed for him, but she knows she can’t. She needs him to think that she did dress for him. And she hates that.

Will must not hear her feet on the steps, because when she swings the door open to the upstairs
office, he looks up in surprise from where he’s seated behind his desk.

“Hey,” she says.

He closes the file he was looking at and slides it under another stack of files. She thinks he meant it to be nonchalant, but it definitely wasn’t. “Hey,” he returns.

She steps into the room and closes the door behind her. “What are you doing?”

“Just reading over intel reports on the syndicate.”

She crosses the room and walks around the edge of the desk to stand next to him. He watches her silently as she pulls the folder he tried to hide out of the stack and then flips it open.

It’s not an intel report on the syndicate. It’s a file on her time undercover in Bogota, and jammed into the folder is a stack of surveillance photos. In the top photo, Rafael is holding her hand and leading her out of a boutique in downtown Bogota. In the next, she’s in a bikini and draped over him on the deck of a massive yacht.

Frankie glances up at Will. “Intel on the syndicate, huh?”

Will doesn’t say anything. He stares down at his hands in his lap, looking defeated and maybe even a little ashamed, and Frankie’s heart aches in her chest. She wants to climb into his lap and wrap her arms around him and murmur I don’t want him I want you against his lips, but Susan didn’t say to kiss his feelings away. She said to listen.

Frankie closes the file and sets it down, and then leans against the edge of the desk. “Talk to me, Will.”

He looks up at her with a slight frown, probably because it’s the first time she’s ever asked him to talk to her. She tells him to stop talking to her a lot. But she’s never asked him to do more of it.

“Tell me how you feel,” she rephrases, thinking he might need clarification.

His frown deepens. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? I’m trying to listen to your feelings.”

“Since when?”

“Since now.”

He looks incredulous, and Frankie sighs and starts to rise from the desk. “You know what? Nevermind.”

“No, wait,” he says, reaching out to grab her arm. She stops. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I just...it’s been a rough day.”

“Yeah. For me too.”

His expression softens. “Please don’t go.”
She hesitates because she feels self conscious and a little nervous, but he’s got that earnest look on his face that’s been harder and harder to resist lately, so she sits on the desk.

He lets go of her arm, and leans forward to put his elbows on his knees. He stares down at his hands for a while and she watches him, waiting, until he says softly, “I hate the way he looks at you.”

She waits, but he doesn’t say anything else. “How does he look at me?”

“Like he owns you.”

Frankie shakes her head. “He doesn’t.”

“I know you said he’s just a mark,” he says, still staring down at his hands. “That none of it was real. But it looks real in those pictures. And it looked real at that bar. That ring on your finger, and all those memories you guys have...it’s like this whole other part of you that I don’t even know.”

“I’m not her, Will.”

“But you are,” he disagrees, finally looking up at her. “You lived seven months of your life with him, even if you were pretending to be someone else. And after that long, how much of it is even pretending? You said it yourself this morning. You have to be her. And I watched you do it, Frankie. You were...you were remarkable. I didn’t even recognize you.”

“You weren’t supposed to.”

“But I should,” he insists. “Out of everyone on this team, I should always be able to see through the bullshit and see you. I’m your partner. I’m...” He shakes his head instead of finishing. He leans back in his chair and sighs. “I just feel like there’s so much about you that I don’t know. And I’m okay with that because I know we’re taking things slow. I still only want what you want to give. But then I see you with him and I just...I feel like he knows you better than I do.”

Frankie crosses her arms over her chest. “If I sent you downstairs to get me a drink, what would you get me?”

He frowns. “What?”

“Just answer the question, Will.”

“Uh. A beer, I guess.”

“Be more specific.”

“You like wheat beers. You hate IPAs.”

“What if we’d just finished a really rough mission? What would you get me then?”

“Liquor.”

She opens her mouth, but he anticipates her question and beats her to it.

“Something dark. Whiskey or bourbon. Never gin. You hate gin.”

“If I sent you to get me a change of clothes from my apartment, what would you get me?”

“Black jeans. T-shirt. Combat boots. Maybe one of those zip-up sweatshirts with the thumbholes.”
“If I told you I was having dinner with my family, who would I be talking about?”

“Kelly.”

“And if I told you I had a terrible day and I wanted you to cheer me up, what would you do?”

“Take you to a shooting range or to the gym for some sparring. Then out for pizza. Then back to my place.”

“And at your place?” she asks, smirking a little.

“I’d take my time like I did that night in Brussels. You like that. When you have bad days you like to be taken care of, even though you’d never admit it, and you’d never ask for it.”

His last answer makes her heart skip several beats, but she ignores it. “You know how Rafael would answer those questions?” she asks.

Will shakes his head.

Frankie counts the answers off on her fingers. “A cosmopolitan or a tequila sunrise. Something expensive, probably a dress, and a pair of Louboutins. My nonexistent Uncle John. And an expensive dinner, dancing at a nightclub, and then a hard and dirty fuck.”

Will stares at her, clearly taken aback. It’s the wording of her last sentence, probably, but at least she knows she’s got his attention. She holds his gaze purposefully, forcing herself not to look away.

“He doesn’t know me, Will. I didn’t let him. But I let you.”

Her words hang in the air. Will’s expression is a flurry of emotions—surprise, relief, tenderness, confusion. She tries to wade through them all, trying to pick the most prominent one, but she can’t.

“You were with him for seven months,” he says eventually.

She nods. “Yeah.”

“And in all that time, you never felt anything?”

She hesitates. She can’t lie. She knows that. Trust is important to him, and the quickest way to lose his trust is to lie. She doesn’t want to lose his trust. But she doesn’t want him to think less of her either, or to wonder if she’s still got feelings for the criminal she’s going to have to pretend to be in love with tonight.

“I did,” she admits. “You’re right. Eventually, the lines blur. He’s a horrible human being, but he was...I don’t know. He was good to me. Better than the last few guys before him.”

Will’s eyebrows furrow, and Frankie knows that he wants to ask about the other guys, but he doesn’t.

“He’s in love with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Is that what you felt too? Were you in love with him?”

She sighs. “There were moments when I wondered if I was. But I know now that I wasn’t. I was
lonely, and I liked being wanted. But I never loved him. And I don’t love him now.”

Will studies her. She thinks he wants to believe her, but she isn’t sure he does. Maybe it’s just her imagination playing tricks on her, or maybe it’s the same old fear rearing its ugly head and telling her that she’s not meant to have what other people have, but she thinks he looks a little disillusioned. And that’s exactly what she didn’t want. It’s why she never talks about her life before this team, before him. Because if she does then he’ll see her, really see her, and she doesn’t think he’ll like what he sees.

This time it’s her turn to stare down at her hands. Warning bells are going off in her head, and a familiar self-preservation instinct is welling up in her chest. She needs to give him an out. It’ll hurt less if he takes an out she offered than if he pulls back on his own.

“There’s a lot of things in my past I’m not proud of, Will,” she tells him. “Rafael’s not the only criminal that I’ve…”

Slept with? Had feelings for? She can’t settle on a description so she just lets the sentence hang unfinished and keeps going.

“I’m not like you. I haven’t always made the right decisions. I’ve caused a lot of damage, and I’ve got a lot of baggage, and if that’s not something you want, I get it.”

His chair creaks, and she looks up to see him rising to his feet. He pulls gently on her knees, spreading her legs so that he can stand between them while she sits on the desk, and then he lifts his hands to her face and strokes his thumbs along her cheeks.

“I want you, Frankie.”

Hope starts to swell within her, but she stifles it. “This is going to happen again,” she warns him. “There’s going to be other things, other people, that come up. Rafael is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the Titanic. I’m not scared of icebergs.”

She stares at him. It’s sweet, and exactly what she wanted to hear, but it’s also so…

“God, Will, that line was terrible.”

He laughs in surprise. “Oh come on. It was romantic.”

“It was awful. So, so bad.”

“Yeah, I can tell by your smile that you really hated it,” he says. And he’s right—she’s smiling, and laughing, and it feels good. Being with him feels good.

She puts her hands on his hips and pulls him even closer, smoothing her thumbs over the muscles sitting above his hip bones. “I’m sorry about what you had to watch this morning. And I’m sorry you’ll have to watch it again tonight.”

He brushes her hair back from her face. “Who you going home with?”

“You. Always you.”

She’s stunned as soon as she says it. She doesn’t promise the future like that, not after what happened with her last partner, but it feels right, and she doesn’t regret it. Not even a little.

“Then that’s all I need to know,” he says. And then he leans forward and kisses her, his hands
framing her face, and the last vestiges of Frankie’s fear evaporate completely.

A few seconds later, the door to the office swings open behind her and Jai’s voice says, “Francesca, do you—”

Jai stops talking abruptly. Will jerks back from Frankie’s mouth, his eyes wide and guilty. Frankie ducks her head, her forehead pressing into Will’s sternum, and smiles.

“Oh,” Jai says. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“You weren’t,” Will says, taking a huge step back. “Frankie just had something in her eye, and I was—”

“Will,” Frankie cuts him off. “He already knows.”

Will blinks at her. “What?”

“He already knows,” she repeats. “About us.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Will demands, “You told Jai about us and you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t tell him,” she corrects, getting to her feet. “He just knew.”

Will looks over her shoulder at Jai, and Frankie turns to follow his gaze. Jai is standing in the doorway, a tube of lipstick in his hand and an amused look on his face.

“You told her you knew but you didn’t tell me?” Will asks him.

Jai shakes his head. “I didn’t tell her I knew. She just...knew.” He smiles at Frankie. She smiles back.

Will looks back and forth between them incredulously. “What are you guys, telepathic? I don’t know if I should be impressed or terrified.”

“Probably both,” Jay says with a shrug.

“Definitely both,” Frankie agrees. “What do you need, Jai?”

He holds up the lipstick. “Do you want a lipstick knife, an exploding tampon, tranquilizer breath mints, or a compact that holds micro trackers?”

“All of the above.”

He gives her a look. “Did you buy a clutch that will fit all of the above?”

“Of course I did, who do you think you’re talking to?”

He grins. “That’s my girl.”

“This is ridiculous,” Will says, still looking shocked. “Does anyone else know about us?”

“Standish and Ray don’t,” Frankie replies.

“And you’re welcome for that,” Jai says, pointing the lipstick tube at her. “Standish was on his way up here two minutes ago and I sent him to the back room instead because I wasn’t sure if you two were...”
He trails off and gestures vaguely at them. Frankie grins.

Will frowns. “We don’t have sex at work, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Maybe not yet, but you will,” Jai says.

Will’s face flushes. “Will not.”

“You’re dating Francesca. You will.”

Will looks at Frankie. She shrugs. “He’s right. I’ll steal your virtue eventually. Probably on the pool table.”

Jai shakes his head. “I don’t need to hear this. I’m going to go update Susan.”

“Update Susan about what?” Frankie wonders.

“Oh, we have a competition going,” Jai says brightly. “Whoever helps you two avoid Standish and Ray the most wins. Helping you avoid getting caught making out is worth five points.”

“What if we’d been naked?”

“Frankie,” Will admonishes.

“Ten points,” Jai answers without hesitation.

Will makes a strangled noise in the back of this throat.

“You want me to help you win?” Frankie asks Jai. She looks at Will. “Take your shirt off.”

“No!” Will says, clutching his hands to his chest.

“No cheating allowed,” Jai says. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“Don’t you have bugs to plant?” Will asks, still hugging himself.

“Ah, yes,” Jai says. “Excuse me.” He starts to leave, then turns back around. “Please keep your clothes on while I’m gone. I’d be terribly disappointed if Susan got ten points when I just got back in the lead.”

“I got your back,” Frankie assures him.

Jai beams and then disappears from view.

Frankie turns to look at Will. He’s glaring at her. “What?” she asks.

“Were you really going to have sex with me just to help Jai win a bet?”

“Were you really going to turn down sex with me just so he wouldn’t?”

“Yes!”

She shakes her head. “No you wouldn’t.”

“Yes I would.”

She reaches out, grabs him by his belt buckle, and pulls him flush against her body. She tilts her
head back to look up at him and smiles. “No you wouldn’t.”

“I’m not that easy, Frankie,” he tells her even as his hands settle on her waist. “I’m an eagle scout. We’re very disciplined.”

“Oh well in that case,” she says, starting to step backward, but he yanks her forward against his chest and leans down to give her a kiss that makes her whole body hum.

“Disciplined, huh?” she says when he pulls away.

He smiles. “Well your clothes are still on, aren’t they?”

“Unfortunately.”

He laughs. “Want to help me sort through this syndicate intel?”

“No,” she says, pulling his head down to hers so she can kiss him again.

“Hey, where is everyone?” Ray’s voice says distantly from downstairs by the bar. “Susan? Will?”

Their lips part with a pop, and Frankie sighs and rests her forehead against Will’s shoulder. “I hate him so much.”

Will laughs and presses a kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll make it up to you later.”

“You better.”

“Between the security feeds of the club and the cameras and mics we planted, there’s not a single blindspot or dead zone,” Jai says proudly from his seat at the bar next to Will. “We’ll be able to see and hear every single thing from the van.”

“Nice work,” Will says, thumping him on the back.

Jai beams proudly, and Will can’t help but smile. He’ll never be as close to Jai as Frankie is, but they’ve come a long way. He’s glad.

“I guess that means we get a front row seat to Frankie’s dance party,” Standish says from behind the bar. His eyes go wide. “Oh shit, do you think we’ll get to see her doing the Macarena?”

“You’ve never been to a Latin dance club before, have you?” Jai asks.

Standish frowns. “They don’t do the Macarena?”

“No.”

“Even I knew that,” Ray says from the stool on the other side of Jai.

“All right, people, let’s go,” Susan says walking into the room. Will turns on his stool to see his best friend clapping her hands at them urgently. “We’re running late, so take her through the paces quick.”

“Where is she?” Will asks.

Susan turns around and then frowns when she realizes Frankie isn’t behind her. “Franks, come on!”

“I’m coming!” Frankie’s voice calls.
“She’s stretching for her big dance number,” Standish snickers.

Will shoots Standish a look over his shoulder. “Hey, lay off. She doesn’t need to go into tonight’s mission in kill mode.”

Standish snorts. “Isn’t she always in…” He trails off. His jaw drops, and his eyes widen, and then his adam’s apple bobs as he swallows and says, “Oh damn.”

Will turns around to see what Standish is looking at, and his mouth immediately goes dry. All the breath leaves his lungs at the same time all his blood starts rushing toward his groin, and the combination of the two makes him feel suddenly dizzy.

“Wow,” he says before he can stop himself.

Frankie’s dress is a deep shade of crimson, and it clings to every one of her curves. The fabric is cut asymmetrically across her collarbone, and although her left arm is sheathed by a sleeve, her right shoulder and arm are bare. The bodice is fitted, but the dress flares at her hips and flows all the way down to her knees, with a slit cutting high along the thigh of her left leg. She’s wearing an absurdly high pair of black platform heels with fabric that loops around her ankles and then twists up the bottom of her calves.

Will has a sudden and very vivid fantasy of her legs wrapped around his hips and those heels digging into the backs of his thighs. He snaps his eyes up to her face in an attempt to stay focused, but it doesn’t help.

Her hair is pulled back, and there are several braids woven loosely into the updo. Her eye makeup is dark, and her lips are painted the same color as her dress. Long silver earrings dangle from her ears, and Will blinks in surprise when he notices two additional diamond studs in each ear. He hadn’t realized her ears were pierced that many times. When he manages to tear his gaze away from her hands—which are sliding yet another earring into the cartilage at the top of her ear—and finally look her in the eye, he finds her watching him.

“Close your mouth, Whiskey,” she teases, her lips stretching into a smile.

Will snaps his mouth closed.

“Come on, we don’t have time for you idiots to stand there and drool,” Susan says, clapping at them again. “She’s hot, she knows it, let’s go. Tell her the game plan.”

“Surveillance is up and running,” Jai says.

“Dead zones or blind spots?” Frankie asks.

“Nope.” Jai crosses the room and holds out a black satin clutch. “All of your requested materials have been packed.”

“Thank you,” she says, taking the purse. She sets it down on the nearest table and then lifts her left foot onto a chair, revealing a considerable amount of leg. “Susan, the knot.”

Susan hurries over and crouches to fuss with the part of Frankie’s high heel that’s tied behind her calf.

“The director called about twenty minutes ago,” Ray says. “He wanted me to reiterate that he needs as much information as possible about the syndicate and the mafia’s involvement, but you are under strict orders to keep your cover intact. Non-negotiable.”
Frankie rolls her eyes. “All right.”

“Better?” Susan asks her.

Frankie bends over and looks at her calf. “Yeah.” She drops her foot back to the floor. “Standish, stop looking at my ass.”

Will glances over his shoulder at Standish, who suddenly looks terrified. “Right. Sorry. Please don’t kill me.” He slides a small box across the bar. “Jai, give her the comms. I’m afraid to get closer.”

Jai grabs the box and then crosses the room to hand it to Frankie.

“I tricked out Lana’s phone,” Standish says. “It’s in your purse. There’s an app on there that will let me triangulate any wireless signal to—”

“I don’t care,” Frankie cuts him off, waving her hand. “Save the nerd explanation for when I need it.”

“All right then.”

“I’ll be driving you to the club,” Will says as Frankie slides the comm into her ear. “Then I’ll join everyone in the van to keep an eye on things. Ray will stay here and keep an ear out for any chatter from the mafia just in case they’re planning some sort of coup.”

“One last thing,” Jai says. “I have a present for you.”

He holds out the family heirloom emerald ring that Rafael gave to Frankie, and Will can’t help but feel a stab of jealousy at the sight of it.

Frankie arches an eyebrow. “I don’t think you understand the concept of a present, Jai.”

Jai smiles. “Press the emerald once and it’ll still activate the tracker,” he says. “Press it twice and…” He presses the center stone twice, and a sharp metal tip springs up between a few of the diamonds.

“Ooh,” Frankie says, her eyes lighting up.

“Enough chemicals in that to take down an elephant,” Jai tells her.

“Or several cartel thugs.”

“Not that we’ll be taking down any thugs,” Ray says. “Because we’re keeping our cover completely intact no matter what.”

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Heard you the first time, Ray.”

“All right, let’s get going,” Susan says. “Good luck, Frankie.”

Frankie smiles and then heads for the door. Will follows, jogging after her so that once they’re on the sidewalk outside, he can dart in front of her and open the back door of the black sedan parked by the curb.

“Full service chauffeur,” she says, smirking at him.

He points at his neck. “I even wore a tie. What do you think?”
“You look like a middle schooler going to his first dance.”

Will frowns. “Is that a compliment?”

“No,” she laughs, getting into the backseat.

Will smirks and then closes the door behind her and jogs around to the driver’s side.

“Don’t drop her off until you get my go ahead,” Jai calls out as he climbs into the driver’s seat of a large black van.

“Roger that,” Will says, giving him a thumbs up. He climbs into the car, and then readjusts his rearview mirror. Frankie’s got a stack of files sitting next to her, and she’s already studying one.

Will lets himself look at her for a minute, admiring the way she chews absently on the inside of her lip as she reads, and then he shifts the car into drive and pulls out after Jai.

They don’t talk on the way to the club. Will glances at the rearview mirror often, hoping to catch her eye, but she’s intently focused on what she’s reading and he doesn’t want to interrupt. It isn’t until Jai’s voice floats over the comms that she looks up.

“All right, Will. Drop her off.”

“On the way. We’re two blocks out.”

“Muting comms now,” Jai replies. “Frankie, we’ll be radio silent unless you ask for us or we need you.”

“Got it,” Frankie replies. Her eyes finally meet Will’s in the rearview mirror.

“You look great,” he tells her.

She smiles. “Yeah all the drooling you did earlier made that clear.”

He grins and focuses his attention back on the road. A minute later he pulls up in front of the club. There’s a long line of people snaking down the block, waiting to get into the club, and two massive bouncers standing on either side of the entrance.

“I assume you won’t wait in line,” Will says.

Frankie snorts. “No.”

Will parks the car directly across from the entrance and climbs out. The bouncers immediately zero in on him, but he ignores them as he jogs around the car, swings open the door, and holds out his hand.

Frankie puts her hand in his and steps out of the car like an actress arriving at a movie premiere. Will can’t take his eyes off her. He’s always known she’s an extremely talented agent. She didn’t get the agency’s best kill-or-capture rate by accident, and he’s been undercover with her enough to see her skills firsthand. But there’s something about this alias that’s particularly striking. Frankie doesn’t just pretend to be Lana Tyler. She is Lana Tyler.

“Good luck,” he tells her. It’s not what he wants to say, but now isn’t the time for a poetic declaration. She’d kill him.

She looks over at him, her earrings swaying with the movement. Their eyes hold for a second, but before she can say anything a deep voice says, “Miss Tyler?”
Frankie turns, and Will looks past her to see a burly man with a diamond stud in each ear standing with his hands folded in front of him. “Welcome to Fuego,” he says. “Señor Hernandez is waiting for you.”

He holds out his arm to escort her. Will expects Frankie to roll her eyes and walk right past him, but she isn’t Frankie anymore. She’s Lana Tyler. So she takes the proffered arm with a stunning smile and a nod of gratitude, and then sashays right past the massive line of people and through the front doors without looking back.
Nine

Chapter Notes

You guys this chapter is SO long. I'm very sorry. But I couldn't seem to find a good place to cut it any earlier than I did, so here we are.

Despite Susan’s pleas to hurry up, Frankie’s glad she arrived late to Fuego. It’s in character, for starters. But it also means that by the time she’s escorted through the pulsating lights and pounding bass beats of the dance floor to the VIP room that’s on the second floor, the representatives from the Five Families have already arrived and she doesn’t have to be alone with Rafael.

The VIP room isn’t really a room in the traditional sense. It’s more of a terrace—it extends over the main bar area and some seating downstairs, and looks out on the dance floor the same way a private suite would overlook the sports field at a stadium. Sliding glass walls encase the room and drown out the music from downstairs. With glass making up three of the four walls, it feels sort of like a fishbowl—and as soon as Frankie walks in, she knows exactly what a fish must feel like.

She’s the only woman in the room. The representatives from the Five Families range in age from early twenties to late sixties, but every single one of them is male, and every single one of them looks her up and down hungrily the moment she enters. Rafael is on the far side of the room, nursing a glass of something dark and looking more like a menswear model than a drug lord, and though Frankie hates herself for it she feels a little bit more relaxed as soon as their eyes meet. She studied Susan’s profiles of the Five Families and their representatives, but the mafia is still unfamiliar territory for her. Rafael, however, is not.

“Lana,” he says with a genuine smile. He crosses the room to greet her, and she leans into his embrace and tilts her head so that his lips can brush over her cheek. “You’ll give them all heart attacks with that dress,” he whispers in Spanish before he pulls back.

Frankie smiles at him when he leans away. “You asked for red,” she replies in Spanish.

His eyes darken with desire just like she knew they would, but he’s too good of a businessman to get off track. “Gentleman,” he says in English, turning to the room with a smile. “May I present Lana Tyler, CEO of Tyler Enterprises. I believe you’re familiar with her work.”

Frankie smiles at the men gathered before her. “My apologies for keeping you waiting. I’m sure you’re all intimately familiar with the joys of New York traffic.”

One of the oldest men snorts in agreement. The youngest of the representatives—he can’t be more than twenty—gets to his feet and says gallantly, “A woman as beautiful as you should never apologize.”

Rafael’s hand immediately finds the small of Frankie’s back, and Frankie doesn’t even have to look at him to know that he’s jealous. “I like them already, Raf,” she says, smiling up at him.

He smiles thinly. “Wonderful. Shall we begin?”
An hour later, Frankie’s more than a little stunned.

She’d assumed that the intel reports on the syndicate that she and Will went over this afternoon were incomplete. She’s spent enough time by Rafael’s side to know how careful he is about who he trusts and what he reveals. That’s why the director has been so insistent about her maintaining her cover—until they root out the moles, she’s the agency’s only source of reliable intel on the Fantasma cartel and Rafael.

But the longer Frankie spends listening to Rafael explain to the Five Families what he’s already managed to do with the syndicate, the more alarmed she becomes. The agency’s intel reports aren’t just incomplete. They’re flat out useless. Rafael hasn’t just made connections in Germany, Russia, and Spain. He’s forged business partnerships with some truly dangerous organizations and leaders, and he’s already raking in the profits.

The difference between his exploits overseas and here, she discovers, is her. Rafael’s pitch to the American mafia rests almost completely on her company. The Five Families have a lot of questions but, luckily, Frankie’s prepared. During her time undercover, she didn’t just pretend to run Tyler Enterprises—she actually ran it. She had to. Rafael would’ve seen right through her if she hadn’t. That means she knows every route, every detail, and every possibility, and it’s clear that the Five Families are impressed. By the time the meeting comes to a close, the New York mafia and Rafael have agreed in principle to a pretty significant partnership.

As the last of the mafia representatives leave, Frankie feels Rafael come up behind her. His hands slide along her hips, and his mouth presses against her bare shoulder. “You were extraordinary.”

“You sound surprised.”

“By your brilliance? Never. It’s why I fell in love with you.”

“Then you won’t mind if I ask to see what you were showing Lorenzo DiCicco from the Genovese family five minutes ago.”

Frankie can feel his chest shaking against her shoulder blades as he laughs. “Of course not.”

He leads her by the hand to the high top table where his laptop is sitting. “He was asking to see the expenses from my work in Spain,” Rafael explains as he opens the laptop. Frankie tries to pay attention to the three separate passwords he enters, but she doesn’t catch them. “I can show them to you, but I’d like to start with something else first. I think it will be of far more interest to you.”

“Okay,” Frankie says.

He turns the laptop to face her. There’s a spreadsheet on the screen filled with names, numbers, dollar amounts, and other color coded entries.

“What am I looking at?”

“The syndicate ledger.”

Frankie looks over at him in surprise.

He smiles. “You know I have always despised the way my father keeps paper ledgers. Well, I recently persuaded him to join the twenty-first century. The cartel is digital now, and so is the syndicate. Every transaction the syndicate has completed is listed here. Every contact is here. All of these deals are already agreed upon or in negotiation.” He presses his index finger on the mouse pad, and another tab appears and populates. “But these are potential opportunities that are still
Frankie leans toward the screen. There are dozens of organizations and names listed, and she recognizes plenty of them—a famous organized crime family in Italy, various dictators and rebel military leaders, radicals in Ukraine, even the Belgian arms dealer Dubois that her team busted in Toronto a month ago.

“You’ve made contact with all of these people?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Raf,” she breathes. She doesn’t even have to pretend to be surprised. It’s even worse than she thought. “This is…”

“Remarkable, right? But you haven’t heard the best part.”

“There’s more?”

He gestures at the screen. “Every entry coded in green is an opportunity for your business to expand. But the entries coded in blue are new ventures that I thought you might wish to pursue. Things I have heard you express interest in before. Art, for example. You remember that painting I bought you?”

He says it the same way someone else would say Remember that one time I bought you lunch? but the painting he’s referring to was a genuine Renoir that was worth $13 million.

“Yes,” she says, still feeling a little stunned.

“These six entries are famous art thieves. I hired this one last month to get you another Renoir. It should be in your possession within the week.”

“What?” Frankie says, gaping at him. She can just imagine Standish losing his mind out in the surveillance van. He hired an art thief to steal art for her! Who does that?!

Rafael brushes his hand over her cheek. “Given how much you loved the first one, I couldn’t resist. I never could resist you.”

“Rafael,” she says, pulling his hand away from her face. “That’s very generous of you. And I’m very grateful. But we’re not together anymore.”

“We could be.”

“You mean tonight.”

“Not just tonight. I’ll stay in New York for a while if you’ll have me.”

“You can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“No one will know I’m here. We’ll stay at our place.”

She doesn’t have to ask where their place is—she knows he means the penthouse apartment he bought for her.

“Raf—”

“We don’t have to go out,” he says, leaning closer to her. “We don’t even have to leave the bed.
Forget about that American asshole you’re seeing. He can’t make you happy like I can. He doesn’t love you like I do.”

“You have to go back to Colombia eventually. And then what am I supposed to do?”

“Come with me,” he pleads. “I’ll buy you a jet. I’ll pay a pilot to be ready around the clock. It’s only a five hour flight. You can fly here to see your uncle whenever you want. As much as you want. Just come back home.”

It’s the kind of speech she’d hear in one of those ridiculous movies that Will loves, and the moment Will crosses Frankie’s mind it hits her like a lightning bolt. Those green eyes. That wide smile. The way he pulls her close every time a spark of panic flares in her chest.

Home is being with Will.

“Lana?” Rafael murmurs.

The man who met Frankie outside the club and escorted her upstairs appears in the doorway before she can answer. “Señor,” he says.

Rafael clenches his jaw at the interruption but doesn’t look away from Frankie. “What?” he snarls.

“There’s a situation that needs your attention.”

Rafael closes his eyes and exhales slowly, clearly trying to control his temper. When he opens his eyes again, he smiles at Frankie. “We’re not finished,” he says, reaching up to cup her cheek.

“So you keep saying,” she replies.

He laughs, a genuine laugh that rumbles through his chest, and then stalks toward the door.

The second he’s got his back turned, Frankie pulls her clutch off the table. Rafael’s laptop is the definition of a gold mine. Everything the agency could possibly want or need to know is accessible from it. Normally she’d just steal it herself and maybe kick Rafael in the balls on her way out, but she’s under strict orders not to break her cover. Besides, she’s got an entire team sitting in a van out back. She can distract Rafael long enough for someone to steal it, and they can pin the theft on one of the Five Families. That way the agency gets the laptop and she’s created enough distrust between the cartel and the mafia to ensure their business arrangement ends before it even begins. Win-win.

Frankie fishes through her purse under the cover of the table, finds the makeup compact, and pulls out a micro tracker. She grabs the laptop under the pretense of adjusting the screen to see it better, and presses the tracker onto the bottom of the machine.

“Jai,” she murmurs softly.

“I’m here,” Jai’s voice says in her ear.

Frankie glances up at Rafael, but he’s still listening to whatever the other man is saying. “I’ve got a tracker on the laptop. I’ll keep him busy. Steal it while I do. It’s got everything we need.”

“On it,” Jai says. “Muting again now.”

Rafael turns around, catches Frankie’s eye, and smiles. She smiles too. Then he glares at the man he’s talking to, waves off whatever he was saying, and crosses the room to stand next to her.
“I’m done with business for the night,” he says, reaching out to shut the laptop.

“Good, so am I,” Frankie says. She smiles up at him. “I believe you were about to ask me to
dance.”

“Was I?” he asks, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, you were.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Because I’m still considering it.” She brushes past him and toward the stairs, and then casts a
smoldering look at him over her shoulder. “You coming? Or are you going to make me find
someone else to dance with?”

His eyes flash. “Don’t you dare.”

She smiles and crooks her finger at him. “Ven aqui, papi.”

“Ummm,” Standish’s voice says in Will’s ear. “Did y’all know Frankie could move like this? I
mean damn.”

An unpleasant mental image of Frankie in the circle of Rafael’s arms, her hips rolling against his,
invades Will’s brain. He grips the steering wheel of the sedan he’s driving tighter and says, “Can
you focus, Standish?”

“I am focused,” Standish insists. “You’re the one who insisted on following the tracker to steal the
laptop. The rest of us are stuck in this van watching Frankie and her drug lord boyfriend make a
sequel to Dirty Dancing Havana Nights.”

“Good movie,” Jai’s voice says.

“Right?” Susan replies. “So good. Will hated it.”

“I didn’t hate it,” Will disagrees. “I just thought the original was better.”

“The original didn’t make me want to get out of my seat and dance,” Susan says. “Diego Luna,
though? He can—and I cannot emphasize this enough—get it.”

“You know I’m on comms too, right?” Ray’s voice says.

“You can get it too, Ray.”

“Nope, we’re not doing this,” Standish says. “No flirting over the comms. We get enough of that
with Will and Frankie.”

“Will and Frankie aren’t together,” Jai says.

“That doesn’t count, Jai,” Susan tells him.

“That’s two points,” Jai insists.

“Guys, focus,” Will says. “Rafael’s goon is pulling over now.” Will steers his sedan up to the curb
a few cars back from the SUV he’d been following, and then leans forward to peer out of the
windshield. “And I’ll give you one guess where he brought the laptop.”
“The penthouse,” Susan and Jai say in unison.

“Cocky bastard,” Will mutters. “I’m going in. Keep an eye on Rafael. Let me know if he leaves the club.”

“He ain’t leaving,” Standish snorts. “He’s too busy getting to second base.”

“Shut up, Standish,” Will says.

“All right, grumpy,” Standish mutters. “Jeez.”

Will watches as a burly man climbs out of the driver’s seat of the SUV with the laptop under his arm and then disappears into the building. Will climbs out of his car and strides up to the entrance, where a doorman opens the door for him with a broad smile.

Will darts inside the lobby, but he’s not quick enough to get on the elevator with Rafael’s thug before the doors close. There’s a second elevator nearby, and Will presses the call button repeatedly until the doors open. He gets on and presses the button for the penthouse, but nothing happens. He presses it again. Still nothing. That’s when he notices the card key reader above the buttons.

“Jai, do the elevators in this building run on card keys?”

“Hold on, let me bring up the file.” There’s a beat of silence and then, “Yes. You need a card key to get up to the penthouse.”

“Standish, can you override the system please?”

“Oh so now you want to be nice to me?”

“Just do it.”

“Okay, fine, give me a minute.”

Will steps off the elevator and lifts his cell to his ear so that it looks like he’s on the phone. The silence drags on for a minute, then two, and with nothing to do and no one to distract him, Will’s mind wanders immediately to Frankie.

All the confidence he felt this afternoon in the upstairs office of the Dead Drop is gone. Seeing Frankie and Rafael work together to close a deal with the mafia unsettled him. They played off of each other so naturally, exuding the same kind of easy chemistry that Will has always loved about his working relationship with Frankie, that it made him wonder—is it true that Rafael doesn’t know her? There’s a lot he doesn’t know, there’s no question about that. But he seems to know her far better than Frankie realizes. He knows how to read the expression on her face. He knows the different cadences of her voice. He knows when to let her talk, and when to do the talking, and how to finish her sentences. Will feels like he’s still learning those things, and the fact that Rafael might know them better than he does—well, it’s not a comforting thought.

“How’s Frankie doing?” he asks.

“She’s fine,” Susan answers in a tone that’s clearly supposed to be casual.

Standish snorts. “Rafael sure seems to think so. Dude is—ow! What the hell Susan.”

“Just do what Will asked you to do and stop with the commentary,” Susan’s voice snaps.
“When did I become every one’s favorite punching bag?” Standish whines.

“When you decided to be a smart ass,” Jai replies.

“I’ve always been a smart ass. But this physical abuse is new and I’m planning to go to HR about it.”

One of the elevators makes a soft ding sound, and Will turns around to see Rafael’s thug stepping out into the lobby. His hands are empty. He’s rubbing his eyes like a toddler who just woke up from a nap, so when Standish says, “Okay, I’m in,” Will slips past him and onto the elevator.

“Next stop, penthouse,” Standish’s voice says in a terrible British accent as the elevator doors close and the car begins to rise.

Will taps his foot impatiently. The sooner he gets his hands on this laptop, the sooner Frankie can peel herself off of Rafael and come home. What had Rafael said to her? _He can’t make you happy like I can. He doesn’t love you like I do._ Bullshit. Will knows he makes her happy. He might not steal paintings for her or give her family heirlooms worth millions, but who cares? Frankie doesn’t give a shit about art or jewelry. She likes pizza and kickboxing and saving the world. She likes movie night and playing pool and that thing he does with his tongue. Whatever—or whoever—she’s done in the past doesn’t matter. She chose him. She’s with him. And some tattooed, handsome as shit, billionaire bad boy throwing himself at her doesn’t change that.

Right?

The elevator finally stops with a soft ding and the doors slide open. Will expects to step directly into the penthouse apartment, but he finds himself standing in a small vestibule instead. A giant metal door looms directly across from the elevator, and there’s not a doorknob or a lock in sight. He takes a cautious step toward it, and a small metal panel that’s situated at eye level glides open to reveal a metallic circle with a glowing screen in the middle.

“Oh shit.”

“Will?” Susan says in his ear. “What is it?”

“The door only opens with a retinal scan.”

“What?” Standish demands. “Who the hell puts a retinal scan on their front door?”

“A paranoid drug lord worth billions of dollars,” Jai says.

“I don’t understand,” Susan says. “How did Rafael’s guy get in?”

Will sighs. “He was rubbing his eyes when I saw him get off the elevator. He must have had contact lenses with Rafael’s scan. Damn it.”

“There’s no other way to get in?” Ray asks.

“Not without becoming Spiderman. It’s the 24th floor.”

“No wonder he told Frankie they could hide out there,” Jai says. “Nobody can get in.”

“Wait,” Susan says. “Frankie said Rafael bought this penthouse for her.”

“So?”
“So it’s probably not just his retinal scan that opens the door. It’s hers too. We can pull her from the club, set up a diversion for him, and send her there while he’s distracted. She can steal the laptop before he gets back.”

“If he’s paranoid enough to have a retinal scan on his front door, he’ll be keeping track of who uses it,” Jai says. “And that means he’ll know Frankie was the one who came in and stole the laptop.”

“That’s a big ol’ no,” Ray says. “She has to maintain her cover or we’re all in big trouble.”

“Wait, guys, I got an idea,” Standish says. “You remember that mission in Dubai, when I remotely hacked that maharaja’s phone using Jai’s phone? Well, I put that same app on the phone Frankie’s using now. I thought we might need to hack one of the mafia guys.”

“What are you saying?” Will asks.

“I’m saying that if Frankie can turn Rafael’s laptop on and then leave her phone within five feet of it, I can use the phone to remotely access and hack the laptop. Once I’m in, I can download the files without having to steal the actual computer.”

“So she has to go back to the penthouse with him.”

“Yeah. But I don’t think it’s going to be hard for her to convince him to take her there.”

It won’t be. That’s not the problem. The problem is that Will doesn’t want her to go. But he doesn’t have much of a choice.

“Unmute us, Jai,” he orders.

“Unmuted,” Jai replies.

Will’s ears fill with the sound of a rapid reggaeton beat a moment later, and he knows it’s the same song Frankie and Rafael are dancing to. “Frankie,” he says over the din. “We’ve got a problem. Get somewhere we can talk.”

Frankie doesn’t say anything. A beat passes, and then Standish says, “Yeah, she’s still livin la vida loca. Maybe she didn’t hear you over the music.”

“Just give her a minute,” Susan says.

Another long moment of nothing but music. Will tries to picture Frankie on his couch, wearing one of his t-shirts and laughing while they play drinking games over pizza, but it doesn’t work. All he can think about is the brief glimpse he got of her dancing with Rafael before he left the surveillance van.

“Get me a drink,” Frankie’s voice suddenly says in flawless Spanish.

“Where are you going?” Rafael asks.

“Just get me a drink,” she replies.

“She’s leaving the dance floor, Will,” Susan says. “Hang on.”

Will waits another minute or two, listening as the pounding bass beat gets quieter, and then Frankie’s voice says in his ear, “Will? What is it?”

“Rafael sent the laptop back to the penthouse he bought for Lana.”
“Cocky bastard,” Frankie mutters.

Standish snorts. “That’s what Will said. It’s so adorable when you guys do that.”

“You can still steal it,” Frankie says, ignoring Standish. “I can pin it on the Five Families.”

“I can’t. The penthouse door has a retinal scan. I can’t get in.”

“Why is there always a damn retinal scan?” Frankie grumbles.

“Standish says that if you can get your phone within five feet of the laptop while it’s on, he can hack it remotely and download the files.”

“But there’s a catch,” Standish pipes up.

Will frowns. He didn’t know there was a catch.

“Rafael can’t use the laptop while I’m hacking or downloading,” Standish explains. “He’ll be able to see what I’m doing if he does. So once the laptop is on and your phone is in position, you need to keep him away from it until I’m done.”

“Okay,” Frankie says. “How long will that take?”

“I don’t know. It depends on what kind of firewalls he’s got, what kind of system he’s running, how much data I have to download—”

“How long, Standish?”

“Two hours. Three to be safe.”

“So let me get this straight. I have to go back to the penthouse with Rafael, get him to turn on his laptop, and then keep him distracted for three hours so you can hack it and download the data?”

“Yes.”

“Without blowing your cover,” Ray adds.

The ensuing silence, broken only by the distant sound of latin dance music, is deafening. Will feels like someone has shoved a knife into his heart.

“Will,” Frankie says.

He can hear the question in her voice, even if she doesn’t say it. What am I supposed to do? He knows what he wants to say. Don’t do it. Come home. We’ll figure something else out. But he can’t. The syndicate has the potential to be huge, bigger even than the Trust. The information on Rafael’s laptop is critical to stopping them, and if Frankie doesn’t steal it tonight, the director will send her back down to Bogota to get it—and he might not let her come back.

Will clenches his hands into fists and forces his voice to come out steady. “It’s your call, Frankie. Whatever you decide, I’ll back your play.”

Another long silence drags on. Will stands as still as a statue, waiting with his heart in his throat.

“I’ll do it,” Frankie says.

The knife in Will’s chest twists. He feels like he can’t breathe. He closes his eyes and tries to
inhale, but his lungs can’t seem to draw in any air.

“I’ll call you when the download is done,” Standish says. “I’ll block all other incoming calls, so
when you hear your phone ring that means you’re good to go.”

“I’m going off comms,” Frankie replies, her voice clipped and businesslike. “Jai, if I need an
extraction, I’ll activate the tracker in the ring.”

“Roger that.”

“Fiery out.”

The distant sound of music stops abruptly, and then there’s only silence. The floor seems to tilt
beneath Will’s feet. He leans heavily against the nearest wall and slides slowly down until he’s
sitting, his knees by his chest and his head in his hands.

Standish clears his throat over the comms. “So, uh, just so we’re all on the same page...she’s
definitely going to sleep with him, right?”

Nobody answers him. Will pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Patch the video feed through to my
phone, Jai.”

“Will,” Susan says, sounding anguished.

“Do it,” Will snaps.

He unlocks his phone and waits, and a few seconds later he’s watching live footage of Frankie
making her way across the dance floor at Fuego. Rafael is waiting by the bar, his elbow resting
against the edge and his foot up on the rung of a nearby stool. He’s scowling at the crowd. But
then he sees Frankie and he smiles, his eyes raking over her body as she moves toward him.

Frankie stops in front of him, puts a hand on her hip, and tilts her head the way she does when
she’s saying something particularly snarky. Rafael snags two shots from the bar, and holds one out
to her as he replies with a smirk. Frankie takes the shot out of his hand and throws her head back to
swallow it. When she’s finished she leans past him to put the empty glass on the bar. Rafael stares
down at her. Frankie holds his gaze, takes the other shot glass from his hand, and swallows its
contents without taking her eyes off him. She sets the second glass upside down on the bar next to
the first.

Rafael steps into her space. Frankie tilts her head back to look him in the eye. They stare at each
other for a second, and then Rafael wraps an arm around her waist, pulls her flush against his chest,
and kisses her.

“Cut the feed, Jai,” Susan says in Will’s ear.

Will doesn’t argue. The screen goes black, but it doesn’t matter. The image is already seared into
his brain.

When Frankie walks through the front door of the Dead Drop four hours later, she finds Jai and
Susan standing on opposite sides of the bar, their heads bent together over two bottles of beer. Ray
is sitting on a stool nearby and staring at his phone. They all turn in her direction when she enters,
but before Frankie can greet them, Standish whistles at her from a booth along the wall.

“Look who’s finally back from her sexy seduction mission,” he says, grinning at her from behind
his laptop.

Frankie shakes her head. “I didn’t sleep with him, Standish.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie sees Susan and Jai share a look.

Standish frowns. “But you were there for four hours. You took your comms out. I hacked the laptop and downloaded the ledger and there were no interruptions.”

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees.

“So if y’all weren’t doing the horizontal hula then how’d you keep him distracted?”

“I interrogated him.”

There’s a beat of stunned silence where everyone just stares at her, their faces blank in surprise, and then Ray demands, “You did what?”

“I interrogated him,” Frankie repeats calmly.

Ray gets to his feet. “Are you insane? The director specifically told you not to blow your cover.”

“The director’s not going to care that I blew my cover.”

“Oh hell yes he is.”

“No, he’s not.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

Frankie takes a step toward him and shoves a folded sheet of paper into his chest. “These are the names of every single law enforcement agent Rafael has on his payroll. It includes employees from the DEA, Interpol, local Colombian authorities, and about a dozen American cops from cities up and down the east coast.”

Ray opens his mouth, but Frankie cuts him off. “Don’t worry, I got them all. I double checked. Twice.”

She pulls an iPhone out of her clutch and shoves that against his chest too. “This is his phone. It has direct access to a cloud account that, as of two months ago, contains every single detail of the entire Fantasma operation. You now have access to the cartel’s ledger, smuggling routes, shipment dates and times, every bank and business that launders the profits, every store house where they package the drugs, and anything else you might need to bring them down.”

She gestures at Standish. “Thanks to super nerd over here, you’ve got the syndicate’s ledger. Thanks to Jai’s surveillance, you’ve got video of Rafael explaining what he’s done so far with the syndicate in Germany, Russia, and Spain. And you also have him and the mafia on video discussing at least half a dozen felonies they plan to commit on American soil.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “You also have Rafael. I left him handcuffed to his bed. He told all his goons not to bother us for a few days so there’s no hurry, but you might want to send a doctor over there sooner rather than later. I left the door cracked for you. I thought cutting his eyeball out would be a bit much.”

There’s a long moment of silence. Ray looks dumbfounded. Susan and Standish are staring at her with wide eyes and bewildered expressions, but Jai has what appears to be a proud smile on his
face. When Frankie makes eye contact with him, he raises his glass at her. She smiles.

“You got all that in four hours?” Susan asks in disbelief.

Frankie shrugs. “Rafael is used to inflicting pain, not receiving it. He’s not an operative. He’s a spoiled rich kid who inherited his daddy’s business. It wasn’t hard to break him.” She looks at Ray. “You should probably call the director.”

Ray stares at her for a full three seconds, still stunned, and then he snaps to attention and fumbles for his cell phone. Frankie watches as he dials, and then she makes her way toward the bar.

Jai slides a glass filled with amber liquid toward her. “I’m surprised you left him alive.”

“He’s got more to say,” Frankie replies, lifting the glass to her lips. “I just didn’t want to hear any more of it.”

“Was it hard?” Standish asks.

Frankie looks over her shoulder at him. “Was what hard?”

“Torturing a man you spent months pretending to be in love with.”

Coming from anybody else, the question might seem judgmental. But Standish looks genuinely curious, and Frankie’s gotten used to his naiveté. A few months ago, she hated it. Now, she kind of hopes he’s lucky enough to stay that way. She wasn’t.

“Was it hard for you to shoot Tina?” she asks.

He looks taken aback. “No. I mean, it was hard to decide to do it. But then once I decided, it was easy.”

“Well there’s your answer.”

“But isn’t this different?” he presses. “I mean, I wasn’t the one pretending. But you were. Aren’t you the Tina in this situation?”

Jai straightens on the other side of the bar. “Frankie is not—”

“It’s okay, Jai,” Frankie cuts him off.

Jai hesitates, but shuts his mouth.

Frankie sets her glass down on the bar. “Do you know what I was doing three weeks before I met you, Standish?”

Standish shakes his head.

“I was in Bucaramanga. There’s a company there that manufactures shoes for a major American retailer. Factory workers hide drugs in the soles of the shoes, Tyler Enterprises ships the shoes into the United States, and then the cartel separates the product from the footwear and distributes the drugs. It’s one of Rafael’s most reliable smuggling routes.”

Frankie leans back against the bar. “We got word that the owner of the shoe company had been offered more money by a competing cartel in Medellin, and that he was going to take it. It would have decimated a key part of Rafael’s network, and my company’s bottom line would’ve taken a hit, so we went to Bucaramanga to have dinner with him. Rafael told me he was going to offer him
more money. But he didn’t. Instead, he brought the owner’s wife and six kids into the restaurant, lined them up on their knees, and said that unless the owner signed over his company, they’d all die.”

Frankie looks down at her hands. They aren’t shaking. She’s seen too much, done too much, to have physical reactions like that anymore. But the memory is gnawing at her, threatening to eat her alive, and she can taste the bile rising in the back of her throat.

“The man gave up his company for his family. But as soon as the paperwork was signed, Rafael executed every single kid anyway. And then he tied the owner and his wife to a pole, set the restaurant on fire, and took me outside to watch it burn.”

When she looks up at Standish, his face is slack with horror. She can feel Susan watching her, and Jai too, but she keeps her eyes on Standish. “There was nothing I could do. But I knew someday there would be. Someday was today. And no, it wasn’t hard.”

A beat of silence lingers in the air, broken only by the sound of Ray’s voice as he talks to the director in the other room. Standish shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Frankie downs the rest of her drink and looks at Susan. “Where’s Will?”

“When you went off comms, he went home.” Susan casts a furtive look at Standish and then adds vaguely, “I think he thought you’d be out all night.”

A sense of dread washes over Frankie. “He thinks I…?”

Susan nods.

Frankie turns on her heel and walks out of the bar without another word.

Frankie gets a text from Ray as she’s walking down the hallway toward Will’s front door.

_Rafael is in custody. Director is soooo happy. Everyone cleaning house now. Interpol going after the cartel first thing in the morning. YOU ROCK I OWE YOU A DRINK._

Normally she’d send a snarky text back, but for once she doesn’t care about harassing Ray. She just wants to see Will. She stops in front of his door and feels a dizzying sense of deja vu, but she pushes it down and knocks. She stands there for what feels like an eternity, wondering if she’s going to have to pick the lock just to get in, and then she finally hears the deadbolts sliding open.

When Will opens the door, the first thing Frankie notices is that his eyes are red. He’s wearing a Mets t-shirt. It’s the one she stole from him to sleep in when they were in Tel Aviv. _Smells like you_, he’d said to her when she threw it at him as they were packing to leave. She wonders if he’s washed it, and if he hasn’t, if that’s why he’s wearing it.

“Hey,” she says.

He doesn’t say anything.

“Can I come in?”

He swings the door open, but he doesn’t wait to see if she comes in. He just leaves the door ajar and walks back into the apartment without a word. It’s so unlike him that Frankie falters in the doorway. She steps across the threshold and closes the door behind her, and then watches as he
collapses onto his couch. There are no lights on and the TV isn’t on either, so the apartment is dark and dead silent. It feels chilly, but she can’t tell if it’s the actual temperature of the room or if it’s just a reflection of how he greeted her.

Frankie crosses the room to stand next to the couch. There’s a half empty bottle of whiskey sitting on the table in front of Will, and he has a glass in his hand. He doesn’t look at her.

“We got the ledger,” she tells him.

He nods.

“You want to know how I distracted him long enough to get it?”

He shakes his head and lifts his glass to his lips. “Nope.”

Frankie closes the distance between them and snags the glass out of his hand before he can take a sip. He finally looks up at her. She swallows the rest of the whiskey in the glass and sets it on the table. Then she puts a hand on his shoulder to steady herself as she climbs onto his lap, high heels and dress be damned, so that she’s straddling his legs. He turns his face away from her, but she hooks her fingers under his chin and pulls his head back so that he has to look her in the eye.

“I didn’t sleep with Rafael.”

Surprise flickers over his face. “You said we got the ledger.”

“Yeah because I interrogated him. Not because I slept with him.”

For a minute Will is frozen in shock, his mouth slack and his eyes wide. And then he sputters, “You blew your cover?”

“Yeah.”

“But the director—”

“The director has plenty of agents who are willing to jump into bed with someone to get information. I’m not one of them. Not anymore.”

His mouth is hanging open again. She doesn’t know whether she wants to punch him or yell at him for being so surprised she didn’t sleep with someone else. Maybe she’ll do both.

“But apparently you didn’t know that,” she tells him pointedly.

“Frankie—”

She punches him on the shoulder before he can finish his sentence. And she does it hard.

“Ow!” he yelps, curling in on himself and clutching his shoulder.

“What the hell, Will. I can’t believe you thought I was going to sleep with him.”

“You took out your comms,” he says defensively, still holding his shoulder.

“Yeah because I knew Ray would have an aneurysm about me blowing my cover.”

“Because you weren’t supposed to! You disobeyed a direct order—”
“I do that all the time! You of all people should know that. The director sure as hell does. And despite all the cussing and yelling he does about it, he doesn’t actually care. You know why? Because he trusts me. Which is more than I can say for you.”

“Frankie—”

“I didn’t just get the ledger,” she cuts him off. She’s angry now, far angrier than she realized, and she wants him to know everything she managed to get done while he was here drinking alone and assuming the worst about her. “I got the names of every single law enforcement agent on Rafael’s payroll. I got access to the cloud account where he stores all his data on the cartel. And I got him, too. Ray has him in custody. The agencies are cleaning house already. Interpol is going after the cartel first thing tomorrow. By next week the cartel and the syndicate will be gone because of me. And I didn’t have to cheat on you to get it done.”

Guilt and grief paint the expression on his face. He leans forward, his hands sliding along her thighs toward her hips. “Frankie…”

“You told me to do my job,” she snaps at him, shoving his hands off of her. “You said you’d back my play. I thought you trusted me.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“I wanted to.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know, okay?” he says sharply, finally matching the anger in her voice. “I don’t know.”

He rakes a hand through his hair, frustration and anguish written clearly across his face, and all of a sudden Frankie’s heart sinks. She knows. And he does too. He’s just too nice to say it.

“It’s because I’ve done it before,” she says quietly. His eyes snap up to meet hers. “In France,” she clarifies. “We were married. And I slept with someone else to get information.”

“We were fake married,” he corrects. “We weren’t together then.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.” His hands glide along her thighs again, smoothing up to her waist, and this time she doesn’t push him away. He leans forward. “This isn’t on you, Frankie. It’s me. You’re right. I should’ve known you’d find another way. I should’ve trusted you. I’m sorry.”

All her frustration completely evaporates. It always does when he apologizes. He’s just so damn sincere that it’s impossible to stay angry with him.

“Don’t be mad at me,” he whispers, his hands brushing over her waist. “I meant what I said earlier. I just…it was harder than I thought it would be to see you with him.”

He’s got that look on his face again—the one he wore earlier today when Jai told him Rafael’s ring was a family heirloom, and then again in the upstairs office when he asked her if she was in love with Rafael. The jealousy is clear but there’s something else too, something that looks like pain, and she’s a little startled by how upset she is at the idea that she might have hurt him.
“You saw him kiss me, didn’t you?” she asks.

He nods.

She brings her hands up to his face and strokes her thumbs along his cheeks the way he usually does to her. “I’m sorry. I had to make sure he wouldn’t bring his security back to the apartment with us.”

“You had to make him think you were going to sleep with him.”

“Yeah.” She shifts a little closer to him. “But I didn’t mean to make you think it too. It was never even an option, Will. As soon as he shut the door behind him, I punched him in the face.”

Will snorts. His fingers stroke along her thigh and heat sparks in her blood, but she ignores it. “How much damage did you do?”

“Enough that I don’t think he’ll ever want to be alone in a room with me again. But I kept hearing this annoying voice in my head telling me not to go too far. Sounded a lot like you. And I guess it was annoying enough to make me behave. I even left the door cracked open instead of cutting out his eyeball for Ray.”

Will snorts again. “I’m so proud.”

“You should be.”

She drapes her arms around his shoulders and tilts closer to him. He lifts his hand to her chest, and she watches him as he watches his fingers trace along the diagonal cut of her dress across her collarbone. She can tell that he’s trying to decide if he wants to say something, and she still remembers Susan’s instructions from earlier—he needs you to listen without making him feel like he’s crazy or annoying—so she waits.

“I hate that he touched you,” he confesses. “I hate that he kissed you.” And then he frowns. “Does that make me sound like him?”

“You’re nothing like him, Will.”

He traces his fingers upward to her mouth, and then along her lips. She opens her mouth and catches one of his fingers gently between her teeth, tasting his skin before letting him go. She can see the desire flare in his eyes, but he doesn’t kiss her. A familiar ache starts to throb deep in her body.

“You told him this morning that you don’t belong to him,” he says softly.

“I don’t.”

He flattens his palm on her sternum, and then smooths it up and over her bare shoulder. His hand is warm, but goosebumps spread like wildfire across her skin anyway.

“Why?”

She could sidestep him. It wouldn’t be hard. A simple I don’t belong to anyone would be enough. But the words taste like a lie, and she does enough of that with her job. She doesn’t want to do it now too.

“You know why,” she says instead.
“Say it.”

She doesn’t. She can’t. She closes the last bit of distance between them and kisses him instead, slanting her mouth over his in a way that makes it clear how she feels. She doesn’t want him to think about her and Rafael. She wants him to think about this—about her arms around his neck, and her legs around his hips, and her tongue in his mouth. She wants to drown out the bitter taste of Rafael that burns like acid in her throat and replace it with Will—with his goodness, and his kindness, and the way he makes her feel like she deserves those things.

When they first started sleeping together, she wasn’t good at this. The *act* of kissing, yes. She’s goddamn great at that. But kissing someone the way he likes to kiss her—to communicate a feeling, to convey affection, to bask in another person and how they make you feel—that was something she had to learn to do again after years of refusing to do it. Will’s been a patient teacher.

But there’s need building inside of her, sharp and hot and relentless, and she can barely breathe around it. So she slides off of his lap and onto her feet, bending forward so that their mouths are still joined, and tugs him up after her. He follows her lead, rising from the couch to stand and wrapping his arms around her waist. She knows his apartment like the back of her hand now, so it isn’t hard to walk backward around the furniture, down the hall and to the left, and into his bedroom without separating her mouth from his. She stops at the foot of his bed and yanks on the hem of his shirt, pulling it up and over his head.

“Did you wash this?” she whispers as she drops it on the floor.

“Why would I do that?” he says, lowering his mouth to her throat. “Then it wouldn’t smell like you.”

She wants to make fun of him, but his mouth is hot on her skin. “Hopeless,” she breathes. It’s all she can manage to get out.

His mouth descends slowly down the column of her neck, and then suddenly he drops into a crouch. She looks down at him in surprise, and watches as his hands smooth along her legs and then around to the knot of her high heel on the back of one of her calves.

“We’re keeping these shoes,” he murmurs. “You’re wearing them on our next date night.”

She arches an eyebrow at the top of his head. “Bossy.”

He looks up at her. “That’s rich coming from you.”

The straps of her high heel come loose, and he slides it off of her foot and then moves on to the other shoe.

“If you like them that much, I can leave them on,” she offers.

He shakes his head. “Gotta make new memories first.”

Guilt stabs her in the chest. She wonders how much of her time on the dance floor with Rafael he saw, but she doesn’t ask.

He loosens her other shoe and slides it off, and then stands. She’s shorter than him now, smaller, and it isn’t the first time she’s realized that she kind of likes that. His hands settle on her waist, but he doesn’t meet her gaze. He’s staring at her body.
“This dress too,” he says, his voice drenched with want. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life dreaming about you in this dress.”

“Take it off,” she breathes, pressing closer to him.

The sound of her zipper sliding down echoes like a gunshot through the silent room. He peels the dress from her body slowly, almost reverently, and her heart shoots into her throat. It used to scare her when he was like this—deliberate, worshipful, so awed by her that she couldn’t tell if it was lust or love. She’s afraid tonight, too, but it’s different. She’s not afraid of how he feels about her. She’s afraid because she thinks she feels the same.

She throws herself into kissing him and undressing him rather than lingering on her fear. The rest of their clothes end up puddled on the floor next to his Mets t-shirt and her high heels, and then he guides her back onto the bed. Her skin feels flushed with want, and she can taste it on his lips. He starts to kiss his way down her body, but she catches his face and guides it back up to hers. She sees him frown before he kisses her, and she knows it’s because he knows how much she likes his mouth between her legs.

“Don’t you want…?” he whispers.

“You,” she whispers back. “I want you.”

He gives her what she wants. He always does. She fists her hands into the sheets and inhales, arching beneath him, and then he starts to move and everything starts to blur. He knows what she likes. It isn’t hard to find their rhythm. It’s as good as it’s always been, it’s better than it’s ever been, and she’s tightening her legs around his hips, getting ready to roll them over to do that thing he likes, when he whispers, “Francesca.”

He’s only called her that once before. That night in Brussels when she showed up at his door feeling haunted and fragile, and the only thing that made her knife wounds stop burning was his hands on her body. The intimacy of her name falling from his lips—her real name, the name her parents insisted on calling her, the name Nick whispered before everything blew up, the name only Jai has been given permission to use—hits her hard. In Brussels, she’d managed not to react. Tonight, she’s not as self-controlled. Her body shudders, and something between a whimper and a sob tears out of her throat without her permission.

He notices. He lifts her hips a little, changing the angle, and says it again. “Francesca.”

This is going to be one of those moments, she realizes. One of those moments she never forgets, one where she closes her eyes years from now and still sees everything etched permanently and perfectly before her. She wants him to remember it too.

“Will,” she whispers in his ear. She can hear the desperation in her voice, so she knows he can too. “I don’t belong to him.”

“I know.”

His rhythm picks up speed, and the new angle of her hips wrenches another unbidden sob out of her, but she tries to keep the looming, white-hot release at bay. He doesn’t know. She has to say it. She needs to say it.

“I belong to you.”

He goes still above her. His face starts to pull back from where it was buried in the curve of her neck, and she’s suddenly terrified that he’s going to try to look her in the eye.
“No, don’t,” she begs, wrapping her arms around him. “Don’t stop, Will, don’t—”

He moves immediately, pushing in deep, and she sighs as the panic fades. He sucks on the pulsepoint of her throat. His body is moving deliberately, maddeningly slow, but it feels so good all she can concentrate on is the heat coiling tighter and tighter inside her.

“You’re mine,” he whispers, awe and wonder coloring his voice. It doesn’t sound like a question, but she knows it is.

“I’m yours,” she promises.

Afterward, Will struggles to stay awake.

Frankie is curled into his side, her head on his chest and one leg slung over his. He’s tracing patterns on her back. Her breathing slowed and evened out a while ago, but he can’t tell if she’s asleep. He’s afraid to check in case he wakes her up. He spent all day and half the night terrified he was going to lose her. But he’s not afraid anymore. Not after what she told him.

_I belong to you. I'm yours._

Her body is warm and soft and still against his. He’s sated and exhausted and so far gone for her that he knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that he’s never going to feel about anyone else the way he feels about her. He desperately wants her to stay the night, but he won’t ask her to. She already gave him more than he dared hope for.

He falls asleep with his arms wrapped tightly around her.

When he wakes, she’s gone. He turns to the other side of the bed, blinking with bleary eyes, but it’s empty. The clock says 9:07. He rolls over and buries his face in a pillow. It smells like her. Longing aches in his chest and makes his throat tight. He really thought she’d stay this time.

Eventually, he sighs and climbs out of bed. He pulls on a pair of boxers and wanders out of his bedroom, scratching the back of his head and squinting in the morning brightness. When he gets out into his living room, he stops dead in his tracks.

Frankie’s still here.

She’s sitting on a stool at his kitchen island, eating cereal and reading a copy of _The New York Times_, which gets delivered to his front door every morning. She’s got one leg tucked up beneath her body, and she’s wearing his Mets t-shirt.

Will stares at her, completely dumbfounded. She must feel his eyes on her, because she looks up. Her eyes trail over his body, and when they meet his, the corner of her mouth quirks upward. “Morning.”

He moves his mouth, but no sound comes out. She waits, her smile widening the longer he stays silent. “Morning,” he finally manages to sputter.

She uses her spoon to point at the box of Cheerios sitting on the counter. “I ate all your Cheerios.”

“Oh,” he says stupidly.

“I’ll buy you some more. I figured you’d want eggs anyway.” She turns back to the newspaper that’s spread over the counter. “There’s still coffee if you want some.”
He shuffles over to the French press Jai bought him. He pours himself a mug, his back to her, and tries to give himself a pep talk as he gulps the scalding coffee. Don’t make this a big deal. It’s not a big deal. Pretend it’s just like every other morning. Pretend she stays over all the time. Don’t give her a reason to panic.

He’s so focused on his internal monologue that he doesn’t realize she’s behind him until her arms slip around his torso. He jumps a little in surprise, coffee sloshing onto the counter, and he thinks he can feel her smiling into his shoulder blade.

“Are you freaking out?” she murmurs.

“Nope,” he says resolutely. “Not even a little. This is totally normal. I am totally normal.”

He can practically hear her roll her eyes. She turns him around to face her, snags the mug of coffee out of his hand, and sets it on the counter. Then she looks up at him expectantly.

“Are you freaking out?” she repeats.

He nods. “Yeah. My heart is racing. I think I have third degree burns in my throat. And my hands are shaking.” He lifts one of his hands up to her face. “See?”

She smiles. “You want me to go?”

“No!” he yelps, probably a little too eagerly judging by the smirk she gives him. He puts his hands on her hips. “No,” he says more calmly. “I want you to stay.”

And then he wonders—is he pressuring her? Does she feel pressured?

“Unless you want to go,” he says in a rush, releasing his hold on her hips. “If you want to go, then you can totally go. You don’t have to stay. I would never force you to stay. I mean, I couldn’t make you even if I wanted to. You’d probably kick my ass if I tried and you’d definitely win because I’d be too distracted thinking about how nice you look in my shirt.”

She arches an eyebrow at him.

“Not that you need me to be distracted to kick my ass,” he clarifies. “You are more than capable of kicking my ass. Also, for the record, I would never kick a woman’s ass.” He frowns. “Wait, yes I would. I would because we are equals, and you being a woman has nothing to do with whether or not I should kick your ass. I am an equal opportunity ass kicker. Not that you deserve to get your ass kicked. That’s not what I meant. I meant—”

“Oh my god,” Frankie mutters with an eye roll just before she shuts him up with a kiss.

Will has spent a considerable amount of time daydreaming about what it would be like to wake up one morning and find his girlfriend still in his apartment. Reality pales in comparison to even his most vivid fantasy. His eyes are closed, but he knows it’d be one hell of a photograph. The sun pouring in through the windows. The morning paper spread over the kitchen island. Two forgotten mugs of coffee and a half-eaten bowl of Cheerios, and Frankie wrapped in his arms. Frankie, in nothing but his t-shirt. Frankie kissing him like she means it, languid and beautiful and without even a trace of hesitation.

She pulls back from his mouth, but she doesn’t go far. “Better?” she whispers.

The words are welling up in his chest, surging up into his throat, hovering right on the tip of his tongue. I love you. I’m in love with you.
“Not yet,” he whispers, and leans in for another kiss. She smiles against his lips and drapes her arms around his shoulders with an easy familiarity that makes him ache. The words rise again. *I love you.*

An ear splitting ring shatters the quietness of his apartment.

Frankie pull back from his mouth. “Ten bucks says it’s Ray.”

Will shakes his head. “Not taking that bet.”

She smiles at him and then slides out of his embrace to grab her phone from the counter. “Ray,” she answers, leaning against the kitchen island across from Will. “What have I told you about calling me before ten AM?”

Will can’t hear what Ray says on the other end of the line. He doesn’t care. He’s admiring Frankie’s legs, and the way the hem of his t-shirt falls just past the curve of her ass, and the way it swells over her chest.

“Fine,” Frankie says. “But only if you bring me donuts.”

Will finally lifts his gaze to her face. Frankie smirks at him, clearly amused by his unashamed ogling. “Is Will coming to this meeting?” she asks. There’s a brief pause, and then she lifts her eyebrows and says, “Oh, he didn’t answer? Weird.”

Will pushes off the counter and closes the distance between them. He left his phone in his bedroom. He has no desire to go get it. He slides his hands along Frankie’s waist and ducks his mouth down to kiss her neck.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Frankie says, tipping her head to the side to give him better access. “Maybe he’s with someone.”

“Standish says he has a secret girlfriend,” Will hears Ray’s voice say on the other end of the line.

“Lucky girl,” Frankie murmurs. Will slips his hands beneath the hem of her shirt and starts to inch it upward, his palms smoothing along her skin. Frankie makes a soft, appreciative humming sound, and then clears her throat. “I have to go, Ray.”

“You can’t be late,” Ray’s voice says.

“Just bring the donuts,” Frankie replies.

“Wait, what kind? What—”

Frankie hangs up the phone in the middle of Ray’s sentence, and his voice cuts off abruptly. She drops her phone on the counter with a thunk, and then grabs Will’s face in her hands and kisses him. She tastes like coffee and Cheerios and promise and possibility and the words well up in his chest again. *I’m in love with you.*

“We have to be at the federal building in an hour for a debriefing,” she whispers, pulling back a little. “And I can’t wear that dress, so I need to go back to my place.”

He still hasn’t seen her apartment. He wants to go with her, but after everything that happened last night, he doesn’t want to ask for more from her so soon.

“You can borrow some of my clothes if you don’t want to hail a cab in that dress,” he offers
instead. “But only if you shower with me first.”

She smiles. “Deal.”
Ten

Chapter Notes

Guys, your comments are so kind. Thank you :)

Frankie spends the entire day buried in the federal building.

Will sits in on the beginning of her debriefing, along with Ray and the giant box of donuts he was instructed to bring, but they get dismissed after an hour. Frankie has to stay. Will tries to catch her eye as he stands up to go, but she doesn’t look at him. It’s probably better that way—the last thing they need is some asshole in a suit noticing and deciding that they can’t lead a team together—but he’s still disappointed.

He spends the rest of the day trying to keep himself busy. He runs errands. He cleans his apartment. He has lunch with Susan, and calls his mom, and FaceTimes with his sister and his nephew. But all he can think about is Frankie, and whether she’s going to get spooked and bolt. She hasn’t gone AWOL in a month, not since they decided to actually be together, but he figures if there’s anything that could change that, it’s what happened in his bed last night.

I belong to you. I’m yours.

A little after five o’clock, she finally texts him. Are you home?

Yeah, he replies. And then he also types, Are you done? How was it? You want to come over?

She doesn’t answer. He stares at his texts, and at the little caption that says Delivered underneath them, and at the blank screen where her answer should be. There isn’t even an ellipsis that indicates she’s typing. He must have come on too strong. He spooked her. He groans, collapses back on his couch, and announces to his empty apartment, “I’m an idiot.”

And then there’s a knock on his front door. He gets up, makes his way across the apartment, and swings the door open. Frankie is standing on the other side, still dressed in the navy suit she was wearing when he saw her at the federal building.

She smiles at him and holds up a paper bag. “I would’ve asked what you wanted for dinner, but I wanted Gallo’s so I didn’t care what you wanted.”

It’s an incredibly Frankie thing to say, and she’s still wearing that suit so she must’ve come straight from her debriefing, and god, he is so in love with her.

He steps across the threshold of the doorway, puts his hands on either side of her face, and kisses her in the middle of the hallway like his life depends on it. She stiffens in surprise, but then her body relaxes, and she fists the hand that isn’t holding a bag of food into his shirt and pulls him closer.

When he finally leans back, she smiles. “Missed me, huh?”

He laughs. “Is it that obvious?”
“I think you made it pretty clear.”

He laughs again. “You want to come in?” he murmurs, stroking his hand along her jaw.

She nods. “Yeah.”

He doesn’t move out of the hallway or out of her embrace. She doesn’t move either. He swallows the fear surging up into his throat and whispers, “You want to stay the night?”

Her gaze flickers over his face. “Yeah,” she whispers back.

Emotion wells up in his throat, and he thinks he can feel his eyes starting to warm with tears. I love you, he thinks. He knows he can’t say it to her. Not yet. So he shows her instead.

Their food gets cold. Neither of them care.

Around two in the morning, Will wakes up to Frankie kissing her way across his chest. For a moment, he thinks he’s dreaming. He’s not used to waking up in the middle of the night to find her still here. But then her mouth descends lower, and then lower still, and then it’s wet and hot and closing around him and fuck, he’s definitely not dreaming.

Will’s alarm goes off at five. Frankie groans and rolls away from him and buries her head in a pillow. He turns the alarm off, and then wraps an arm around her and presses a kiss against the slope of her shoulder.

“You want to go for a run with me?” he whispers.

“You wanna die?” she mumbles back.

He laughs. He ducks forward and buries his face in the back of her hair and inhales, because her hair always smells good and she’s half asleep so she won’t make fun of him.

“Don’t leave while I’m gone,” he whispers.

She grunts at him. He hesitates, unsure whether his morning run is worth the risk of coming back to find an empty bed, but he’s going to have to start trusting that this is their new normal eventually. Might as well start now. He slides out of bed, gets dressed, leans down to kiss her on the forehead, and then heads out.

He has to force himself to run his usual route. He keeps wanting to turn around and go back to his apartment. The only way he manages to keep going is by promising himself that if he gets back and she’s still there, they’re not going to leave the bed all day.

She’s still there when he gets back.

He stands in his bedroom doorway, hands on his hips, drenched in sweat, and grins. She’s sleeping on her side, her body curled slightly inward, one arm beneath the pillow that’s under her head. Most of the blankets have been kicked down to the end of the bed, but she’s got the sheet draped over her. He studies the smooth expanse of her bare back, and the curve of her hips beneath the sheet, and the way her hair fans over the pillow. She’s gorgeous, and she’s his, and he should probably shower before he greets her but he doesn’t want to wait.

He toes his shoes and socks off, and then pulls his sweat-soaked shirt over his head before lifting
the sheet and sliding beneath it. He rolls her gently onto her back and then hovers over her, ducking his head down to nuzzle her neck.

“Frankie,” he calls.

She grunts at him. She makes the same sound at Standish when she’s trying to concentrate and he won’t stop asking her questions.

Will grins. “Frankie,” he breathes again, darting his tongue out to taste her skin. She tilts her head to the side so that more of her neck is exposed, but makes no other move to indicate that she’s awake.

He scrapes his teeth lightly across her skin, and then smooths his tongue over it. “Francesca,” he whispers.

That does it. She stirs beneath him. “Do you not understand the concept of sleep?” she grumbles, pushing half heartedly against his chest. And then she huffs, “Gross, Will. You’re sweaty.”

“You want to get sweaty too?” he asks, kissing his way down to her collarbone.

“That is a god awful line,” she says, but her arms are winding around his shoulders and pulling him closer. “Do better.”

He kisses her. He slides his hand down between their bodies, and when his fingers stroke over her, she hums into his mouth and parts her legs.

“Yeah, it obviously didn’t work,” he whispers.

Her nails dig into his back. “I can think of better uses for your mouth than being a smart ass.”

He grins and gives her what she wants.

They fall asleep afterward. They shower eventually. He makes pancakes. And then they stumble back into his bedroom and, barring the occasional trip to the bathroom or the kitchen, they do exactly what he promised himself they would—they don’t leave the bed. For sixteen hours, Will’s entire world revolves around Frankie. They talk and they laugh and they nap and they have sex and it’s so much better than Will ever thought it could be. If he wasn’t in love with her before, he most definitely is now.

It can’t last, of course. They can only stay cocooned in his apartment for so long before their jobs and their lives come knocking again, and the knock comes in the form of a call from Ray around ten that night.

“What is it, Ray?” Will answers in a hushed voice.

“Why are you whispering?” Ray asks.

Will is whispering because Frankie is asleep on his chest and he doesn’t want to wake her, but he’s not about to tell Ray that.

“I’m not. What do you want?”

“Meeting at the Dead Drop ASAP. We’ve got a new mission.”

Will closes his eyes and sighs. “Okay. I’ll be there.”
He hangs up. He waits, and sure enough Frankie’s phone blares a moment later. He pulls it off the bedside table to silence it, but is surprised when Frankie holds out her hand. Apparently she wasn’t asleep after all.

He sets the phone in her palm, and she slides it unlocked and puts it to her ear without lifting her head from his chest. “What?” she says, sounding annoyed. There’s a pause, and then she says, “Fine,” and hangs up. She drops her phone onto the mattress, but makes no attempt to get up.

For a moment, neither of them say anything. Will plays with her hair, his fingers combing gently through the strands. It’s one of the many things that, over the course of the last few days, he’s learned she likes. She prefers the right side of the bed. She sleeps with her gun fully loaded on the bedside table next to her, no exceptions. She likes his pancakes. She thinks it’s ridiculous he has five types of body wash in his shower. She makes a pretty decent grilled cheese for someone who claims to burn everything she tries to cook. And—his favorite new discovery—she likes when he calls her by her full name. He has no idea why she likes it, and he has a feeling she’d like it considerably less if he did it in front of other people, but it doesn’t matter. It feels like a secret only he knows, and that thrills him.

“No, I don’t think they’ll notice if we just don’t show up.” Frankie asks, interrupting his thoughts.

Will smiles. “Probably.”

“Needy bastards.”

He laughs. She buries her face in his chest for a moment, and then she sighs and pushes herself off of his body and out of bed.

He watches her get dressed with his hands behind his head like he’s done a million times before. This time, it feels different. When she leans over the side of the mattress to kiss him goodbye, he wraps his hand around her neck and traces his thumb along her jaw. She leans into the kiss. For a second, he thinks he might be able to persuade her to get back in bed.

“I’ll see you there,” she murmurs against his lips.

He lets her go reluctantly.

She pauses in the doorway and looks at him over her shoulder. “You should wear that blue shirt.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She smiles at him, one of those smiles that’s shy and vulnerable and rare, and then she disappears.

Not long after Frankie leaves Will’s bed, she’s standing behind the bar at the Dead Drop, sipping a cup of Jai’s famous coffee and trying not to make fun of Standish while he tells them about his most recent first date.

“So we’re going out again on Friday,” Standish finishes.

“That seems like a terrible idea,” Jai says mildly, lifting a cup out of the saucer that’s sitting on the bar in front of him.

“Oh come on, everyone deserves a second chance,” Standish says.
Frankie snorts. “That is definitely not my motto.”

“Yeah, yeah, we all know you love ‘em and leave ‘em,” Standish says, waving his hand.

The front door swings open, and everyone turns to look. Will walks in with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder and a paper bag in each hand and announces, “I brought falafel.”

The rest of the team murmurs excitedly and swarms toward the bags. Frankie doesn’t. She’s too busy staring at the blue shirt Will is wearing. When she lifts her gaze to his face, she finds him watching her. He winks. She lifts her mug to her lips to hide a smile.

“All right, everyone,” Ray says. “We’re headed to Marseille in about an hour.”

“We’re all going, right?” Susan asks, looking up from her falafel. “Because the last time you guys went to the south of France, I had to stay here.”

“Everyone is going, yes,” Ray says, smiling at his girlfriend.

“What’s the mission?” Frankie asks.

“Marseille is home to MOCEX, which is an engineering company that specializes in underwater technology. Most of the time, their equipment and research focuses on deep sea exploration and other boring ocean stuff.”

“Do they work with humpback whales?” Standish asks hopefully.


“You said they do underwater shit. Whales live underwater. Why don’t they work with whales?”

Ray looks baffled. “I...I don’t know.”

“What do we need from MOCEX?” Will asks, trying to get them back on track.

“Well, their engineers have spent years working on an advanced sonar and navigation system that’s supposed to be the next groundbreaking technology. The head of the engineering team, a guy by the name of Armand Blanchet, designed it to improve deep sea diving exploration.”

“Let me guess,” Frankie says. “He designed it to make the world better, but a bunch of greedy assholes want to weaponize it.”

“Right-o,” Ray says. “A team of mercenaries hired by an Iranian terrorist abducted Blanchet’s wife and daughter. They’re holding them hostage until Blanchet conducts the final test of his system at MOCEX headquarters on Tuesday night. If the system works, then Blanchet will be delivering it to the mercenary team in exchange for the lives of his family. Your mission is to make sure that he does not succeed in doing that.”

“Obviously we have to save the family too,” Will says.

Ray tilts his head. “Well, technically the mission is just the navigation system.”

Frankie sets her coffee mug down on the bar. “We can do both.”

Everyone in the room turns to look at her. “Look at you, caring about innocent civilians,” Susan says, lifting her eyebrows.
“Actually, I was thinking that if we don’t save the family, then the Iranian terrorist and his merry band of mercenaries will probably just use them to force Blanchet to build another system.”

“Logical,” Jai says.

“But also compassionate,” Will points out.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Do we know who the mercenaries are, Ray?”

“What she means is, are any of them old friends or exes from her days as a terrifying assassin?” Standish pipes up.

Frankie shoots him a look. “You know I can jump over this bar and get to you faster than you can get to the door.”

“Like I said. Terrifying.”

“We don’t know who the team is, no,” Ray answers. “But I’ll have a dossier for you on the plane with all the other information you need to know. We’re flying private, so you’ll have time in transit to figure out the mission logistics. Once we land, you’ll only have about two hours before the final test is set to begin at MOCEX.”

“All right,” Will says. “Let’s go.”

Everyone grabs their bags and heads for the door. Frankie sees Will hanging back, pretending to readjust his duffel and search his pockets for something. She makes her way out from behind the bar and stops next to him.

“Nice shirt,” she murmurs, bumping her shoulder gently against his.

He smiles. “Thought you’d like it. You want to sit by me on the plane?”

“No.”

He looks surprised, and then a little hurt. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll force me to watch a stupid movie after we figure out our mission plan.”

“What if I let you pick the movie?”

“Can we watch John Wick?”

He crinkles his nose. “You know I can’t watch that movie. That dog part in the beginning makes me cry.”

“Jai, you want to watch John Wick with me on the plane?” Frankie calls without taking her eyes off Will.

“Yes,” Jai calls back.

Frankie smiles at Will. “Guess I’m sitting with Jai.”

“Blanchet is headed for his office now,” Jai says over comms. “Will, Frankie, you’re up.”

“This better work,” Frankie says from her position just inside the door of Blanchet’s office.
Will, who is sitting in the chair behind Blanchet’s desk, looks unconcerned. “It’ll work.”

“My plan was better.”

“We voted,” Will reminds her. “I won. Even your movie buddy voted for me.”

Frankie narrows her eyes at him. The office lights are off so it’s dark in the room, but she can still make out the look on his face thanks to the ambient light filtering through a window nearby.

“I can’t believe you’re still mad I wouldn’t sit by you.”

He scoffs. “I’m not mad.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

“Can you two focus, please?” Susan says over the comms.

“I am focused,” Frankie says. “Will’s the one who’s not focused.”

“I am completely focused,” Will says, holding out his hands. “I am the epitome of focus.”


There’s a beat of silence. Frankie lets it linger. She knows she’s right. And Will’s going to prove it in three, two...

“You know I hated John Wick,” he accuses, straightening in his chair. “You know that.”

“Oh please, you loved John Wick,” Frankie counters. “You just hated the beginning with the dog.”

“The beginning with the dog shapes the entire rest of the movie! It’s literally the entire point of the movie.”

“The point is revenge.”

“Yeah, for the dog!”

The door to the office opens before Frankie can reply, and Armand Blanchet hurries in. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees Will sitting at his desk.


Blanchet wheels around to flee but Frankie slams the door shut and steps in front of it. “Not going to happen.”

Blanchet turns back around to Will. “I was on my way to meet you right now,” he says. He pulls a flash drive out of his pocket. “I have the system right here.”

“We’re not the people who took your family,” Will says, getting to his feet and walking around the desk. “I’m Special Agent Will Chase. This is—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Frankie warns.
Will sighs but obeys. “We know you’re planning on trading the system to get your family back.”

“Please,” Blanchet pleads, clasping his hands in front of him. “If I do not deliver this system they will die.”

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Will says. He holds his hand out. “Give me the system, and then we’ll help you get your family back.”

Blanchet shakes his head. “I cannot.”

“We can save your family. But only if you give me the system.”

“You do not understand. These people are dangerous.”

Frankie pulls the gun out of her waistband. They don’t have time for this.

“Listen, I get it,” Will says, his voice dropping to a soothing, persuasive tone. “Family is important. If someone had my family, I’d be scared too. But we can help you.”

“You cannot,” Blanchet says, shaking his head again. “They will—”

Frankie clicks the safety off and presses the muzzle of her gun to the back of Blanchet’s head. “Give him the system. Now.”

Blanchet immediately hands the flash drive to Will.

Will shoots Frankie a look. “Two more minutes and I would’ve had him.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Guys,” Standish’s voice says over the comms. “You’ve got company headed your way. Team of three, armed.”

“Francesca,” Jai’s voice cuts in.

Frankie frowns at his tone. “What?”

“It’s Dominique.”

“Dominique?” she repeats. And then it hits her. “Like, infiltrating the NCR office in Belgrade, Dominique?”

“Yes.”

Frankie swears under her breath and shoves her gun back into the waistband of her jeans. If the mercenary team is being led by Dominique, they have to change their plans.

“Give me the decoy,” she snaps at Will.

Will frowns, but he tosses the decoy flash drive at her. She catches it and holds it up in front of Blanchet’s face. “The people you’re supposed to meet are on their way here. You give them this flash drive and you tell them it’s the right one.”

“My family—”

“If you want to save your family, you’ll tell them this is the right one,” Frankie cuts him off. “Tell
them it won’t work unless you enter the passcode, and you’re not entering the passcode until they take you to your family. We’ll follow you there.”

“Frankie, you need to move,” Jai’s voice says urgently in her ear.

“This won’t work,” Blanchet whines.

“You do this, and you do it convincingly, or I’ll kill your family myself,” Frankie threatens.

“Frankie,” Will says, sounding appalled.

“Are we clear?” Frankie asks Blanchet.

He looks terrified. “Yes.”

Frankie shoves the flash drive into his chest and then bolts toward Will. “Get under the desk,” she says, rolling the desk chair back and shoving him forward. He scrambles beneath the opening where the chair was, and Frankie ducks down and squeezes in after him two seconds before the office door swings open.

“Mr. Blanchet,” a female voice says. Frankie recognizes it as Dominique’s. “Congratulations on the successful test run.”

“Thank you,” Blanchet says, his voice shaking. “I was on my way to meet you. I...I just needed to get my car keys.”

“There’s no need for that. We’ll take the system now. Your family will be freed once we’ve left the premises.”

“No.”

There’s a tension-laden pause. “Excuse me?” Dominique says.

“There is a passcode on the system,” Blanchet replies, his voice still shaking. “You cannot use it unless I enter the passcode. I won’t enter it until I see my family and know they are safe.”

Another pause. Frankie holds her breath. Blanchet is a terrible actor, but if they’re lucky, Dominique will think it’s just fear.


There’s some rustling, and then Dominique says in hushed Farsi, We’ll do it once we clear the passcode. Frankie feels Will’s fingers tap against her hip twice. She looks at him and nods. The door slams closed. Frankie doesn’t move. Neither does Will.

“You’re clear,” Jai says.

Frankie climbs out from under the desk. Will follows.

“Tracking the decoy now,” Jai says.

“We need a car,” Frankie tells him. “You’ll have to follow in the van separately.”

“There’s a stairwell outside the office,” Standish’s voice interjects. “Take it down to the first floor. The doorway at the bottom should lead you out to the staff parking lot.”
Frankie takes off for the door with Will hot on her heels. She’s halfway down the first flight of stairs when Will says, “So is this Dominique an old friend of yours?”

“Something like that.”

“What happened in Belgrade?”

“Not the time, Will.”

He doesn’t say anything else. She thinks he’s probably annoyed with her, but that doesn’t matter right now. He’ll have to wait.

They jog the final few flights in silence, and then burst outside and into the parking lot. They scan the cars, and then Will points. “That one.”

They both jog toward the driver’s side door.

“You know I hotwire faster than you,” she tells him.

He sighs and goes around to the passenger side. Frankie smashes the window and then unlocks the doors. She’s got the car running within two minutes, and they peel out of the parking lot.

“Head north,” Jai’s voice says in her ear. “Take a right on Chemin du Roy d’Espagne.”

A few seconds later, Frankie turns the wheel hard. The tires squeal as the car careens to the right. Will grabs the handle above the door and hangs on, and a memory of the night they first met floods Frankie’s mind.

“Two traffic circles, then left on Andre Zenatti,” Jai says.

The engine of the car roars beneath the hood as Frankie steps on the gas. Will turns to look at her. “It wasn’t necessary for you to threaten his family.”

“Actually it was,” Frankie says, weaving in and out of traffic. “If Dominique didn’t believe him, she would’ve killed him. And then she would’ve gone back and killed his family to tie up loose ends. She doesn’t leave people alive.”

“And she’s a friend of yours?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you’ve worked with her.”

“I’ve worked with lots of people.”

“When did you work with her?”

“Still not the time, Will.”

“Fourth street off the circle,” Jai reports. “Bertrand.”

“It’s an auto body shop,” Standish’s voice says. “Looks like six heat signatures inside the shop, and the three plus Blanchet that are pulling up now. No cameras, so I can’t tell you if the ones inside are armed.”

“They’re armed,” Frankie says.
Will glances out the window. “Cloudy night. No moon. Standish, can you cut the power for the block?”

“Can a duck quack?” Standish replies.

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Wait for my go ahead,” Will tells Standish.

“Straight through the circle, Frankie,” Jai says. “Second building on the right.”

“The one with all the cars out front,” Standish adds.

Frankie snorts. “Thanks, Standish. I had no idea an auto body shop would have cars out front.”

“Frankie’s hangry,” Standish announces. “Who told y’all we should’ve eaten dinner first? That would be me. I was right. Feel free to say it.”

“Shut up, Standish. I can’t drive when you’re being a smartass,” Susan says.

Frankie slows the car to a halt in front of the auto body shop. “What are you thinking?” she asks, turning to Will as she shifts the gear stick into park.

He shakes his head. “We can’t go in guns blazing. We don’t know where the wife and kid are.”

“So we cut the power,” Frankie suggests. “Take them out one by one.”

“Right. I’ll look for the family. You secure Blanchet. You okay taking on your friend?”

Frankie rolls her eyes and gets out of the car. “She’s not my friend.”

“There’s an entrance in the back,” Jai says. “One of you can go around the right side of the building and get in through the garage doors in the back.”

“Two heat signatures just inside the garage doors,” Standish adds.

“I’m on it,” Frankie says. She closes the car door quietly, and then creeps around the side of the building as Will heads for the front entrance. The neighborhood is eerily quiet, so Frankie can hear the dull drone of voices when she stops outside one of the open garage doors and listens. She peeks around the corner, and sees two men standing on either side of a half-destroyed Camaro, talking and smoking cigarettes.

“Frankie?” Will’s voice says.

“In position,” she whispers, ducking back behind the corner. She shoves her gun into her waistband and then pulls out a switchblade.

“Cut the power, Standish,” Will says.

“And Standish said, let there be night,” Standish replies gleefully.

The whole block goes pitch black, and Frankie darts forward into the darkness. All it takes is her hand over the mouth of the first man and three quick stabs in the right places, and he crumples to his knees.

“Mehdi?” the other man’s voice says.
Frankie prowls around the back of the Camaro and closer to the second man. He lifts his gun and points it out toward the garage doors Frankie had been standing by a few moments ago.

“Mehdi?”

A kick to the back of his knee and a stab to the carotid, and Frankie’s alone in the main garage.

“Two down,” she says, grabbing a greasy rag from nearby to wipe the blood off her hands and her knife.

Will grunts and then says, “One down.”

“Four to go, plus three civilians,” Standish says.

Frankie trades her switchblade for her gun. She pushes open a door that says Employees Only and immediately comes face to face with the barrel of an AK-47. She shoves the muzzle upward and ducks just before the bullets start flying. They rip into the ceiling, raining plaster on top of her, and the noise shatters the silence of the garage. The man with the gun snarls and tries to slam his weapon back down to aim at Frankie’s head, but she blocks it with her forearm and shoots him twice in the gut. He collapses backward.


“Found the family,” Will replies. He grunts and swears, and then says, “Get up here, Frankie.”

Frankie takes off down the hallway in the direction of the front of the shop. She rounds the corner into the main lobby, and sees Will in the middle of a boxing match with Dominique. Another man is lying unconscious nearby. Frankie starts forward to help her partner, but gets blindsided by a sucker punch to the jaw as soon as she steps into the room. She grunts in pain as her body slams sideways into a counter and her gun goes flying out of her hand.

Her vision swims and her face feels like it’s exploding, but she takes a deep breath and straightens. She tosses her hair out of her eyes so she can size up her attacker, who freezes when he gets a look at her face.

“Frankie?”

Frankie grins. “Hey Luka.” She spits a mouthful of blood onto the floor and then lifts her fists.

“You know, this didn’t work out very well for you last time. No hard feelings if you want to walk away.”

He raises his fists too. “I’ve been practicing.”

“Hopefully more than just fighting,” she snorts.

Luka’s jaw clenches. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Luka. You’re dumb but you’re not that dumb.”

She’s trying to get a rise out of him, and it works. Luka’s face turns purple with rage, and then he charges at her with a roar. Frankie dodges his first punch easily, and hits him with a right hook in his side and then a quick left jab. He bellows in pain and twists around, wrapping his massive arms around her and lunging forward. They smash into the nearest wall, grappling for the upper hand, and although Frankie is quicker and a better fighter, Luka’s too big to overcome in such close quarters. He pins her against the wall, shoving one of his tree-trunk sized thighs in between her
legs so she can’t knee him in the groin.

“Knew I’d be back between your legs eventually,” Luka sneers. He wraps a hand around her throat. “You weren’t that great either, you know.”

Frankie laughs even as his fingers tighten their hold. “Is that why you asked me for a second night?”

She twists, thrusting her arm down across his, and then sends her elbow rocketing backward into his nose. He stumbles backward, clutching at his face. Frankie strides after him, pulling her knife out and flicking the blade open. She slashes at him, but Luka catches her hand and then drills her in the stomach with a giant fist.

All the air goes screaming out of Frankie’s lungs. She doubles over, and black spots dot her vision. She feels Luka wrench the knife from her grasp, and in a split second he’s got an enormous arm wrapped around her from behind and the switchblade pressed to her throat.
“Put the gun down or she dies,” Luka shouts in Frankie’s ear from behind her.

Frankie looks up, still gasping for breath and blinking away black spots. Dominique is on the ground on all fours and Will—who is bleeding from a gash above his eyebrow—has his gun pointed at her.

Will turns at the sound of Luka’s shout, and when he sees Frankie with a knife at her throat, the color drains immediately from his face. _He’s going to do something stupid_, Frankie realizes.

“I said put the gun down!” Luka shouts.

“He’s not going to put it down, you idiot,” Frankie wheezes. She’s talking to Will, not Luka, and she holds her partner’s gaze so he’ll know. She still remembers him letting Ollerman walk away to save her life, and he can’t do that here. They have no leverage. If he puts that gun down, they’re both dead. Their best bet is to stay in a stalemate until Jai and the others show up.

Luka, of course, has no idea that Frankie’s not talking to him. He’s all brawn and no brain, and he’s clearly pissed she implied he sucks at sex. (Which, for the record, he does.)

“Guess I should slit your throat then, huh?” Luka spits in her ear.

“All right, hey, take it easy,” Will says, his voice dropping into the same soothing tone he’d used on Blanchet earlier. He holds his hands up in surrender, but he doesn’t put his gun down. “Nobody needs to slit anybody’s throat.”

Dominique takes advantage of Will’s distraction and gets to her feet. She glances toward Luka and Frankie, and then her eyebrows furrow. “Frankie?”

“Hey Dom,” Frankie says, still a little short of breath. “You want to tell your brother it’s not polite to slit people’s throats?”

“It’s also not polite to ruin someone’s job,” Dominique shoots back. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh you know, just seeing the sights, making sure you don’t sell weaponized tech to terrorists. The usual.”

Dominique looks surprised. “You’re with the CIA again?”

“Again?” Will asks, frowning at Frankie.

Frankie ignores him. “Let’s just say I’m on whatever side you’re not,” she says to Dominique.

Dominique puts her hands on her hips and sizes Frankie up. “I’m surprised they took you back, seeing as you spent so much time making them look like idiots. That and all those agents you killed.”

Frankie can feel Will staring at her, but she doesn’t look at him. She doesn’t want to see disappointment or surprise or any other emotion on his face that might indicate he suddenly thinks less of her.

“I think you’re mixing up your facts, Dom. That’s what happens when you talk about shit you weren’t part of.”
“I didn’t have to be part of it. You’re famous, Frankie. Every assassin knows your name. You know in some circles, they call you the widowmaker.” Dominique smirks. “It’s a little too Hollywood for me, but I can’t dispute the accuracy. Wherever you go, death and destruction follow.”

“You sound jealous.”

“Of what? Your new life as Uncle Sam’s bitch? You got neutered.”

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that when I put a bullet in your skull.”

As soon as she says it, Frankie knows it’s a mistake. Luka flicks the blade against her throat, and she winces at the sharp pain and the sudden feeling of warm blood oozing down her neck.

“You’re in no position to make threats,” Luka growls.

Will looks furious. “She’s not, but I am.” He levels his gun at Dominique. “Drop the knife or your sister dies.”

Dominique lifts her hands. “Easy, Captain America. We can still make a deal.”

“Frankie, Will, flashbang incoming,” Jai’s voice cuts in over the comms.

Frankie barely has time to close her eyes before a deafening, bone-rattling boom and a blinding flash of light rock the room. Her body curls inward involuntarily, and she feels the knife scrape along her throat as Luka flinches too. She can’t see a thing and her ears are ringing but the pain at her throat focuses her.

You have to move, she thinks.

She slams her elbow backward into Luka’s ribs, and feels a whoosh of air near her ear as he gasps. She ducks under his arm and tries to dart in Will’s direction, but she’s disoriented from the flashbang and so she stumbles. She lands on her knees, gasping, her head spinning.

Get to Will. She tries to crawl forward but she’s so off-balance she can feel her body tilting sideways. She leans into the tilt, crawling jaggedly until she gets to the wall she knows is nearby and flattens her back against it.

Her eyesight returns before her hearing. It’s blurred and her eyes burn like hell from the smoke, but she can make out a few shadowed forms moving quickly through the room. A few seconds later—or a few minutes, she can’t tell—one of the shapes strides toward her. She tries to lash out when it crouches in front of her, but whoever it is catches her fist easily and then presses her hand against a bearded jaw.

Jai, she realizes. She opens her fist and flexes her fingers, clutching his face, trying to squint hard enough to see him clearly. His hand trails along her arm and up her shoulder, and then he wraps his arm tightly around her and pulls her to her feet. She leans against him heavily, and lets him guide her out of the shop and into the cool night air. He sits her down on something—she’s not sure what—and then his hands are on either side of her face and tilting her head back. He presses something soft against her wound, and she hisses in pain. He lifts one of her hands up so that she’ll hold the cloth against her neck, and then he leans down. When he’s only a few inches away from her nose, his face comes into blurry focus.

She can hear his voice, but it sounds like it’s coming from very far away. She reads his lips. Stay here.
He starts to walk away, but she catches his sleeve. He turns back.

“Will,” she says. She’s probably shouting, but she can barely hear her voice so she isn’t sure.

Jai smirks. Frankie reads his lips again. He’s fine. Stay here.

She watches as the blurred outline of his body walks away. She blinks, rubs at her eyes with her free hand, and then blinks some more. She counts to twenty, slowing her breathing down the way she was taught. Her vision starts to clear. The ringing in her ears is still insistent, but less painful.

She pulls her hand down from her neck and sees Jai’s favorite pink patterned pocket square smeared with blood.

“Damn it,” she mutters. He’s never going to let her live this down. She presses the fabric back to her neck and gets to her feet. She pauses for a minute, trying to get her bearings, and then once she’s steady she heads straight for the entrance of the autobody shop.

The lobby is smoky, but not impossibly so. Standish must have turned the power back on because the fluorescent ceiling lights are on. Frankie scans the room quickly, looking for threats, and the first thing she sees is Luka on the floor a few feet in front of her. She falters for a second when she realizes that he’s not just unconscious, but hogtied. And then she grins. Jai hasn’t hogtied someone for her in a long time, but she should’ve known he wouldn’t hesitate to do it to Luka.

Frankie scans the rest of the room. Blanchet and his wife and daughter are huddled behind a counter, their eyes wide as they talk to Standish and Jai. Dominique is unconscious and restrained. And beyond her, crouching next to a concerned looking Susan, is Will.

He looks up at almost the exact moment Frankie spots him. They stare at each other for a second, and then he shoots to his feet. He sways, and Susan reaches out to steady him, but he shrugs her off and lurches forward.

Frankie meets him halfway across the room. He lifts his hands, reaching for her face, and for once Frankie doesn’t even care that they’re not alone—she willingly steps into the physical contact. A knife to the throat and the after-effects of a flashbang are pretty low on the ever-growing list of dangerous things they’ve been through together, but after her whispered confession in his bed the other night and the entire day they’d spent wrapped around each other after that, a knife and a flashbang seem pretty jarring.

Will holds her face, his eyes searching hers, and then he tilts her head back just like Jai had. She lowers the pocket square so he can see the wound and says, “I’m fine.”

Will’s thumb strokes over her chin. “You’re bleeding.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not fine.” She lowers her head, and her gaze gets caught on the gash above his eyebrow. “You’re bleeding too.”

He drops his hands to his sides. “Yeah, your friend sucks.”

Jai appears next to Frankie before she can reply. “French authorities are on their way. We need to go.” He glances at the cut on Frankie’s neck and then down at the ruined pocket square in her hand. He shakes his head sadly. “The things I do for you.”

Frankie grins. “Never a dull moment.”

“Only in my dreams,” he sighs.
They decide to stay the night in Marseille. Everyone is tired and hungry but there are protocols they have to follow before they can go off the clock, so they head back to the hotel where Ray booked them some suites and pile into Susan’s to regroup.

Frankie notices immediately that Will is hovering. He’s trying not to, but his eyes keep lingering on her neck and he’s standing closer to her than he usually does when they’re working. Part of her likes it. But a larger part of her is worried that she likes it, and worried that Standish keeps glancing between them with a slight frown, almost like he’s noticed something is different.

It’s Ray, of all people, who saves the day. He calls wanting information on Luka and Dominique, and Frankie heads toward the bedroom to take the call. Will looks like he wants to follow her but Jai—god bless him—announces, “I’m going to clean Frankie’s cut. Will, can you coordinate with the Hive?” and then doesn’t wait for an answer and slams the door behind him.

“Smooth,” Frankie teases after the door is shut. “How many points did that get you?”

He turns to face her. “What happened after you left the Dead Drop the other night?”

Frankie freezes with her phone halfway to her ear. “Frankie?” Ray’s voice squawks on the other end of the line.

“Hold on,” she tells him. She covers the mouthpiece with her hand and looks at Jai. “What?”

“Something’s different between you two,” Jai says. “And it’s not just him. It’s you.”

Frankie shakes her head. “Jai…”

He waves a hand. “Nevermind. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. Just don’t screw it up.”

“I screw everything up.”

“We both know that’s not true,” he says, holding her gaze. “This is good for you, Francesca. Don’t screw it up.”

She has no idea what to say to that, so she doesn’t say anything.

Jai motions for her to sit on the bed. “Come on. You look like you just walked out of one of those terrible horror movies that Standish is obsessed with.”

Frankie sits obediently on the end of the bed and tilts her head back. She talks to Ray while Jai methodically cleans and bandages her cut. When he’s done, he points at her and mouths Don’t screw it up. And then he leaves the room and pulls the door closed after him.

When Frankie comes back out into the living room after she’s done talking to Ray, Jai is gone. Standish is sitting in an armchair in the corner of the room, a giant pair of headphones over his ears, typing furiously. Will and Susan are nowhere to be seen, but when Frankie listens, she hears their voices floating down the hall. She follows the sound until she ends up in the bathroom doorway.

Will is sitting on the edge of the countertop surrounding the sink, and Susan has a first aid kit spread out next to him. He glances up when Frankie leans against the door jamb. His eyes light up when he sees her, and her stomach swoops. She wonders if she’ll ever get used to that. She hopes not. She kind of likes the way it feels.
“Hey you,” he says.

“Hey.”

Susan glances over her shoulder. “Hey girl.”

“You mind if I do that?” Frankie asks her, nodding at the first aid kit.

Susan looks surprised. Will looks both surprised and thrilled. Frankie’s a little surprised herself. She’s not one to fuss over people when they’re hurt, but Jai’s words are ringing in her ears—Don’t screw this up—and she can feel that familiar longing building in her chest, that yearning that only ever goes away when she’s close to Will.

“Of course not,” Susan replies. As she passes by on her way out of the bathroom, she squeezes Frankie’s forearm affectionately.

Frankie smiles at her.

“I’m going to close the door,” Susan tells her, reaching behind Frankie for the doorknob.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “I’m cleaning his cut, not taking off his clothes.”

“Can you do both?” Will asks hopefully.

“Yeah, I’m definitely going to close this,” Susan laughs, ushering Frankie into the bathroom so she can pull the door closed. “Standish still doesn’t know his parents have been getting busy. We should keep it that way.”

“I hate you,” Frankie tells her.

Susan just grins and shuts the door.

Frankie turns to face Will, ready to say something snarky, but the words die on her lips when she sees the expression on his face. Why does he look at her like that? How does he look at her like that? The things he heard Dominique say, the things he’s heard other people say...doesn’t he listen? Doesn’t he know who she is? What she’s done? He doesn’t know the worst of it, she knows that. She thinks she’s going to have to tell him at some point. She’s terrified he won’t look at her the same way once he knows everything.

“Come here,” Will says softly, holding out his hand.

Frankie moves toward him, a moth to the flame. She puts her hand in his. He pulls her forward, but he doesn’t need to—she’s already moving as close as she can, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, kissing him before she can blurt out something stupid like Please don’t ever stop looking at me like that.

One of his hands smooths up her back. The other settles on her face, which she usually likes, but his fingers press against the spot where she got sucker punched. She flinches away from him and breaks the kiss, wincing, and the look on his face is so concerned that her heart aches.

“What’s wrong?”

“Got sucker punched,” she answers, gesturing at her jaw.

He puts a hand beneath her chin and turns her face toward the lights hanging above the mirror. She glances past his shoulder to her reflection, and she notices the skin that’s starting to darken on her
jaw at the same time he says, “You’re bruised. I didn’t even see it.” He lets go of her chin. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

He looks like he feels guilty, and she doesn’t like that, so she kisses him again—slowly, deliberately, exactly the way he likes. When she feels his body start to relax, she leans back. He smiles at her, his heart eyes on full blast, and she rolls her eyes because she can’t help it.

She tears open a packet with an antiseptic wipe inside, and then lifts the wipe up to his face. “It’s going to sting,” she warns, pausing a few inches from his cut.

He gives her a look. “I’ve been tortured. I think I can handle this.”

“Oh, tough guy.” She swipes it over his cut without warning, and he winces and grunts. She smirks at him. “You were saying?”

“You’re mean.”

“You like it.”

“I really do.”

She snorts. She focuses on his cut again, gently wiping along the split skin. She can feel him watching her, his eyes flickering over her face, but she concentrates on what she’s doing.

“So,” he says in a voice that’s supposed to be nonchalant but definitely isn’t. “Big dumb guy is one of your exes.”

Frankie trades the now-bloodied wipe for a fresh one. “I don’t think he qualifies as an ex. I only slept with him once.”

Will doesn’t reply. Silence hangs over them. A sticky, uncomfortable feeling starts to well up in Frankie’s chest, and she doesn’t like it. First Rafael. Now Luka. She’s not going to apologize for having a life before Will, and she’s not going to make excuses for how much sex she had or who she had it with, but that doesn’t mean she likes being judged.

“I’ve slept with a lot of men, Will,” she tells him, staring steadfastly at his cut as she continues to clean it. “I thought you knew that.”

His hands smooth over her hips. “I don’t care how many guys you’ve slept with.”

She snorts. “Yes you do. Men always do.”

“Did your other boyfriends care?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I never asked them because I didn’t care if they did.”

“Do you care if I do?”

“You said you didn’t.”

“I don’t.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.”
“It does to me,” he says, his voice dropping into that low tone that always makes her want to close her eyes. The last time he used it they’d been standing in his kitchen. *God you’re beautiful,* he’d whispered, pulling her into his arms. And she’d *felt* beautiful. She’d felt happy and whole and fearless. But she doesn’t feel any of those things now. She just feels broken all of a sudden, and scared, and maybe a little stupid for letting herself belong to a man that she’ll never be good enough for.

*Don’t screw this up.*

She’s definitely going to screw this up.

“Frankie.”

“What?” she asks, trying to keep her voice even.

“Can you look at me please?”

No, she nearly says. *I should leave,* she thinks. But she doesn’t say no and she doesn’t leave. She lowers her hands from his face. She hesitates, a few seconds sliding slowly past, and then she finally looks him in the eye.

He’s got that look on his face, that earnest you-can-trust-me-because-I’m-Will-Chase look. He shakes his head. “Whatever you did before you were part of this team doesn’t matter to me. There’s nothing in your past that could change the way I feel about you.”

He doesn’t say *whoever you slept with.* He says *whatever you did,* and she knows it’s because he’s figured out that this isn’t about her sexual history. It’s about her—about all the people she’s killed, all the lives she’s destroyed, all the terrible things she’s done in the name of revenge masquerading as justice.

She wants to believe him. She wants to believe him so badly. But she doesn’t.

She tosses the used wipe into the sink next to the other one. “You can’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t know what’s in my past.”

“So then tell me.”

“No.”

“We’re together, Frankie.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So I want to know things about you. I want to know about your past.”

She shakes her head. “No you don’t. Trust me.”

“So what are we going to do, just not talk about it for the rest of our lives? Just ignore it whenever it pops up like it did today?”

Hearing the phrase *the rest of our lives* come out of his mouth makes her feel a little dizzy, but she ignores it. “Sounds like a plan.”
“Francesca,” he breathes, reaching up to touch the side of her face that isn’t bruised.

Her heart flutters in her chest—seriously, what is it about her full name coming out of his mouth that makes her feel so emotionally wrecked?—but she shakes her head and pulls his hand away from her face. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t Will Chase me.”

“How come you can use my name as a verb and I can’t use yours?”

“Because I said so.”

“Let me prove it,” he says, reaching for her waist as if he’s incapable of not touching her. “Let me prove that nothing can change how I feel about you.”

He draws her body forward until his forehead is pressing gently against hers, and the spy part of her brain whispers, **He knows you don’t like eye contact when you’re vulnerable. He’s keeping you close without making you look at him. He’s lowering your defenses.** But the knowledge of what he’s doing doesn’t matter. It’s working. She closes her eyes and doesn’t pull away. She doesn’t want to pull away. She doesn’t want to screw this up.

“Please talk to me,” he whispers. “You don’t have to tell me everything right now. Just pick one thing, Frankie. Just one. Like Belgrade. Tell me why you were in Belgrade.”

She was in Belgrade because of Nick. She can’t tell him about Nick.

*Don’t screw this up.*

She leans away from him. Will doesn’t let go of her waist, but she doesn’t want him to. She just needs a few inches and a few seconds to breathe and find her equilibrium again. He waits for her. He always waits for her. She wonders if someday he’ll get tired of waiting.

“I needed to steal some data,” she says eventually, staring at a spot on his collarbone. “I hired Dominique and her team to help me do it.”

“Were you working for the CIA?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“So when Dominique asked if you were with the CIA again…?”

Frankie sighs. “Do you remember when we first started working together, and we had that mission in Rome? And we ran into Marco at the Fascia Rossa party?”

“The guy you said you used to do jobs with before you joined the CIA?”

“Yeah.” She shakes her head. “That wasn’t the whole truth. I did work with him before I joined the CIA. But it was before I joined the CIA for the second time, not the first.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The agency recruited me when I was twenty-one. I worked for them until I was twenty-seven. And then I quit. I went back eventually. But not for a while. I worked with Dominique—and Marco, and a lot of other people—during the years in between.”
He doesn’t answer. She can see what he’s thinking written clearly on his face. He wants to ask her why she quit. He wants to ask her why she went back. He wants to ask her what she did during all those years in between.

A knock on the bathroom door shatters the moment. “Guys?” Susan’s voice says through the door. Frankie steps backward out of Will’s grasp. He drops his hands to his sides. “What?” he calls.

The door swings open. Susan pokes her head into the bathroom with an apologetic wince. “Sorry. But Ray needs to talk to you, Will.”

“Of course he does,” Will sighs.

“I’m going to get some air,” Frankie says, moving toward the door. Will looks at her. Once again she can read the expression on his face plainly. Don’t go, it says.

She goes.

Will doesn’t chase after Frankie.

He wants to. He wants to grab the phone from Susan’s hand and tell Ray that whatever he needs can wait. He wants to pull Frankie close and tell her that he loves her over and over again until she finally believes him. But he doesn’t.

After he gets off the phone with Ray, he goes back to his own suite because he’s got a few other calls to make and Susan looks tired. Usually he doesn’t mind doing this stuff. He likes checking off the boxes and tying up the loose ends and doing all the managerial shit that Frankie hates. But tonight, it feels like torture. He just wants to see Frankie.

When he’s finally finished, he heads straight for Frankie’s room. She doesn’t answer when he knocks. So he goes down to the lobby and gives the lady at the front desk a taste of his hapless but adorable husband routine. My wife went to bed early—the time difference between here and Cleveland is just really something, you know—and I wanted to explore a little but then I misplaced my key and now I’m locked out and can I please have another one? Please don’t tell my wife, though, she’ll kill me.

He gets a copy of Frankie’s room key without much fuss, and then heads back up to her room. He lets himself in.

“Frankie?” he calls before he steps fully into the room. She sleeps with a loaded gun next to her, and he knows she won’t hesitate to use it if she doesn’t know it’s him. “It’s me.”

He waits a beat, and then wanders into the suite. The living room is empty. The bedroom is empty. The bathroom is empty. She’s not here. Now he knows why she didn’t answer the door. It makes him feel a little better to know she wasn’t ignoring him when he knocked, but not much. He has no idea where she is, and he wants to see her. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and calls her. It rings and rings, and then her voicemail picks up. He hangs up and tries again. Her voicemail picks up again.

He frowns and stands in the middle of her suite, trying to decide what to do. He could stay here and wait for her to come back. He could go back to his suite and get in bed and hope she comes to him. He could keep calling her until she answers. But all those options require waiting, and he doesn’t want to wait. So he walks down the hall and knocks on Jai’s door.
The door swings open a few seconds after he knocks, and Jai appears. He’s still wearing a three piece suit. Will wonders if he sleeps in them. “Hey,” he says brightly. “What’s up, buddy?”

Jai frowns. “What do you need?”

Will stifles a smile. Typical Jai. “Do you know where Frankie is?”

“No.”

“Can you find out?”

Jai slides his hands into his pockets. “How would I do that? Do you think I have a tracker on her?”

The way he says it makes Will think he’s supposed to say no, but he knows Jai better than that. “Do you?” he asks.

Jai stares at him for a second, his eyebrows furrowed, and then his expression smooths out and he says, “Wait here.”

He disappears back into his suite. Will knows he’s supposed to stay out in the hallway, but he doesn’t. He follows Jai and closes the door behind him.

When he gets into the living room, Jai is bent over his laptop. “This is why you and Francesca are good together.”

Will frowns. “What?”

“You’re both terrible at following directions,” Jai replies, straightening. He turns around. “She’s at a bar. I texted you the address.”

Will pulls his phone out of his pocket. Sure enough, he’s got a text from Jai with an address. “Thanks.”

“Of course.”

Will slides his phone back into his pocket but doesn’t leave. Jai stands across from him, his hands in his pockets and a blank look on his face. A beat of silence passes, and then Jai says, “Why are you still here?”

“Do you know why she quit the CIA?” Will blurts out.

Jai’s eyebrows shoot upward. He looks more shocked than Will has ever seen him. “She told you that?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“About an hour ago.”

Jai blinks. And then he looks Will up and down and murmurs, “Interesting. I guess she does know how to follow directions.”

Will has no idea what that means, and he has a feeling Jai wouldn’t explain it even if he asked. “Do you know why?” he repeats.
“Yes. But I’m not going to tell you.”

“I don’t want you to tell me. I just wanted to know if you knew, because if she trusts you enough to
tell you, then maybe someday she’ll trust me enough to tell me.”

Jai shakes his head. “She didn’t tell me, Will. I was there.”

It’s Will’s turn to be surprised. “You were there when she quit?”

“Yes.”

“Did you quit too?”

Jai smiles faintly. “Is that the word she used? Quit?”

“Yeah.”

Jai’s smile widens. “I believe the actual term is went rogue. And yes, I did.”

Will is stunned. Not just that Frankie went rogue—although he has a million questions about that—but also that Jai followed her. Will knows very little about Frankie’s relationship with Jai, but he’s always suspected that the profound, almost impossible trust she seems to have in him is the result of one of two things: Either Jai was around before she developed the trust issues she has now, or they went through enough together that Frankie realized he was worthy of her trust and she let him in. Will hadn’t considered that both might be true.

He wants to verbalize all the questions that are rattling around in his brain, but he knows Jai won’t answer any of them. Jai is fiercely loyal to Frankie, and there’s no way he’ll spill her secrets. Will doesn’t want him to anyway. He wants to hear them from Frankie.

“Do you think she’ll ever trust me?” he asks instead, even though he’s afraid of the answer.

“She already does.”

“Not like she trusts you.”

Jai smiles again. “I’ve known her for a decade. I have a bit of a head start.”

“Touche.”

Jai’s smile widens. “Can I give you some advice?”

Will gestures at him. “Please do.”

“She’s worth it.”

There’s no hesitation. No doubt, no pause, no qualifier. Jai just says the words simply and outright, with the kind of conviction that makes it seem like he’s almost daring Will to disagree.

“She’s not perfect,” Jai continues, his voice even. “She’d be the first to tell you that she has regrets. But whatever hoops you have to jump through, however much time it takes—do it. She’s worth it.”

Will realizes all of a sudden what a privilege this is—not only to catch a rare glimpse of just how much Jai loves Frankie, but to know that Jai respects him enough to give his blessing to their relationship.
“Don’t tell her I said any of that,” Jai says, brandishing his finger at Will in warning.

Will laughs. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Will spots Frankie as soon as he walks in the front entrance of the bar.

She’s seated on a stool along the side of the bar, still wearing the leather jacket she’d had on when she disappeared from the bathroom at the hotel. There’s a glass of something sitting in front of her, but she’s not drinking it. She’s just staring at it, her eyebrows furrowed as she chews the inside of her lip the way she does when she’s deep in thought.

_She’s so pretty, Will thinks. And then, I wonder if our kids will frown like that when they’re thinking._

He shakes the last thought away and crosses the room, his heart hammering in his chest. When he slides onto the stool next to her, she looks up in surprise. Will holds her gaze, flashing what he hopes is a disarming smile, and says, “Did you know Jai has a tracker on you?”

Her lips stretch into a faint smile of her own. “Yeah. It was a gift.” She holds up her right hand, and twists the gold band that’s sitting on her fourth finger around with her thumb.

Will frowns. He’s seen her wear that ring before. In fact, come to think of it…

“You wear that ring a lot,” he says.

“I’ve got about a dozen of them, but this one’s my favorite. The earrings too,” she says, gesturing toward her ear. She tilts her head. “He did buy me a necklace for my birthday one year. Nice change of pace.”

“They all have trackers in them?”

She lifts her glass to her lips, still smiling. “Yep.”

The bartender leans over the bar and asks for Will’s drink order. “Whatever she’s got,” Will says absently, gesturing at Frankie’s glass. He’s still trying to wrap his mind around why Frankie would let Jai track her when they’re not on a mission.

“I would’ve thought that you’d hate having someone know where you are at all times.”

“I do.”

“Then why do you wear them?”

She shrugs. “Because he needs me to.”

There’s a story there. Maybe more than one. If Will had to guess, he’d say that Frankie went missing at one point, and Jai had no way of finding her, so now he makes sure that he’ll always be able to find her. Considering Jai once nano-tracked nearly two hundred wedding guests “just in case,” it’s not all that surprising. But the fact that Frankie _lets_ Jai do it—that she participates willingly—is another matter entirely.

The bartender slides a glass across the bar toward Will, who smiles in gratitude and then looks back at Frankie. “You really love him.”

Frankie makes the same face she does when Standish says something stupid. “Let’s not get crazy.”
Will waits her out. He’s learned that sometimes, if he doesn’t respond immediately to whatever snarky remark she makes, she’ll soften a little and give him a real answer.

He watches her stare down into her glass and then, after about a minute of silence, she murmurs, “He saved my life. It’s the least I can do.”

“How haven’t you saved his too?”

She shakes her head. “Not like he saved mine.”

Will stares at her. She’s not talking about bullets, or bombs, or bad guys with scores to settle. She’s talking about something else. He suddenly remembers that night in Berlin when he almost murdered the man he thought was Emma’s killer, and the way Frankie’s voice had cut through the cold air. You’re right about me. I’ve lived most of my life consumed by revenge. It’s who I was. Who I still am sometimes. She’d said that Will was the one who pulled her out of the deep dark rabbit hole. And maybe he was. But if he was, it’s only because Jai made sure she didn’t disappear down it entirely.

“I know you want to ask,” Frankie says quietly.

Will looks up at her. She’s watching him. And she’s right. He does want to ask. But the expression on her face is both apprehensive and resigned, and Will doesn’t want their relationship to be like that. He doesn’t want her to feel like she’s being interrogated, and he doesn’t want to take things that she’s not willing to give.

“You’re right,” he says, turning on his stool to face her. “I do. So here goes.” He takes a deep breath. “Would you rather have no taste buds or be color blind?”

He almost laughs out loud at the look on her face. “What?” she asks.

“Would you rather have no taste buds or be color blind?” he repeats. “I’ve given this a lot of thought. At first I was leaning toward color blind, because can you imagine a life without tasting food? I mean, I would be miserable. No more of my mom’s award-winning pecan pie. No more falafel. No more authentic Bavarian desserts. What kind of life is that?”

Frankie looks baffled.

“But then I started to think about all the things I’d miss out on if I didn’t see color,” he continues. “I mean, think about Van Gogh or Picasso or Monet. You think their work would be as impressive in black and white? Hell no. And no sunrises or sunsets? No blue sky jutting up against the red rocks of the Grand Canyon, no fall leaves or spring flowers in Central Park? Everything would just be so dull.”

Frankie’s lips are starting to stretch into a smile. Will forges on.

“And then I started thinking about you,” he says, gesturing at her. “I mean, obviously you’re pretty in color and in black and white. But sometimes when we’re somewhere dim, like this bar for instance, your eyes look darker. Kind of like these pine trees that are out by the fence in my parents’ yard in Indiana. But then when we’re in the sunlight they’re so much lighter—like jade, or juniper, or maybe a pear. And then I think, would I want to go through life without seeing the way your eyes change in the light? Or the way your hair looks almost blonde in the sun, but then really dark when it’s wet? And the answer has to be no.”

Her teeth scrape along her bottom lip, almost like she’s trying to keep herself from smiling any wider, and Will leans a little closer to her.
“Then again,” he says, dropping his voice into that low, almost inaudible tone she seems to like, “would I want to go through life not knowing what you taste like?”

Her eyes darken. He’s crossing into dangerous territory, he knows, and he doesn’t want to make this about sex. So he smiles. “It’s an impossible decision. I was hoping you might be able to help.”

She shakes her head at him. “You’re an idiot.”

“Yeah, but I’m the idiot who made you smile.”

She doesn’t argue. She can’t. She’s still smiling.

He reaches out and puts his hand on top of one of hers. “You want to make a deal with me?”

She glances down at their hands, but she doesn’t pull away. It’s the closest he’s ever gotten to holding her hand in public without being undercover. “What kind of deal?”

“I meant what I said. I want to know about your past. I want to know all the good stuff, and all the bad stuff, and all the stuff in between. So next time someone or something from your past shows up, I’m going to ask you about it. But I promise that if you tell me you’re not ready to talk about it, I’ll drop it.”

“You’ll drop it?” she repeats in disbelief. “You, the guy who spent thirty minutes telling me about all of his favorite teachers and then pouted for two days because I wouldn’t tell him who my favorite teacher was—you’re going to drop it?”

“Yes,” he says resolutely. “That’s my end of the deal.”

“So then what’s my end?”

“You have to try to be open to answering my questions. Even if it’s hard, even if you’re scared, you have to at least try to let me in.”

“And what happens if I don’t let you in fast enough?”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t disarming a bomb, Frankie. There’s no deadline. I mean, hopefully you’ll want to tell me things about yourself before I go deaf from old age and can’t hear you anymore, but—”

“That’s not far off,” she interrupts with a smirk.

It’s his turn to smile, but he resists the urge to rise to the bait. He wants her to know he’s serious. “I’ll wait as long as you need me to. I don’t care how long it takes. You’re worth it.”

Her eyebrows furrow. He recognizes that look. It’s the same look she used to give him before they were together, back when they were still following rules and pretending they were just colleagues who happened to share a bed. She’s trying to decide if she should believe him, and if she trusts him. He knows she’s fighting something he can’t see. She’s comparing him to someone. Maybe more than one person.

“So,” he says. “Do we have a deal?”

She studies him for another few seconds, her eyes flickering over his face, and then she leans forward and kisses him.

_In public._
It reminds him of their first kiss in Prague—brief and tentative, but full of promise. Will is so surprised he doesn’t even react. He just sits there, frozen for all five seconds of it, and then blinks at her like an idiot when she leans back and smiles at him.

“Deal,” she murmurs.

“You just kissed me in public,” he blurts out.

Her smile widens. “Don’t make it a thing, Will.”

“How am I not supposed to make that a thing?” he demands. “It is the thing of all things. The floodgates are open. You can’t take that back. Now I get to kiss you in public whenever I want. And I’m going to kiss you all the time.”

She shakes her head. “No you’re not.”

He frowns. “I’m going to kiss you some of the time?”

“No.”

“I’m going to kiss you...a few times?”

She smiles at him. “How about you kiss me right now and we’ll negotiate the terms later?”

“This is the best day of my life,” he breathes as he lunges toward her.

She laughs into his mouth.
Between Rafael, Dominique and Luka, and finding out that Frankie went rogue from the CIA for years to do something (or lots of things) that she is obviously worried will make him think less of her, Will feels like he’s had enough revelations about his girlfriend’s dark and mysterious past to last him a while.

He gets the next one exactly one month after they get back from Marseille.

“I can’t do this mission with you,” Frankie whispers to him as soon as they leave Ray’s office.

Will frowns at her. “What? Why?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Well our flight doesn’t leave for three hours. We’ve got time.”

Frankie darts her gaze around the hallway, but nobody is around. She’s standing ramrod straight, her shoulders pushed back and tense, and Will realizes that she’s nervous. He has never, not even once, seen Frankie nervous over a mission, so it must be personal.

“Hey,” he says, dropping his voice low and stepping into her space. “What’s wrong?”

She steps back. “Work,” she reminds him, darting her eyes around the hallway again.

He can get away with invading her space at the Dead Drop and in the field, but not here. Not where there are cameras and prying eyes.

“Right. Sorry,” he says, glancing over his shoulder. Ray’s door is still shut and there’s no one around, but he doubts Frankie is going to tell him anything here. “Let’s go outside.”

She follows him onto the elevator, and then through the lobby and out of the building. The sky is a dark and angry gray but it hasn’t started raining yet, so Will keeps walking until they’re standing on the concrete steps of the plaza out by the street, as far away from the building as they can get.

Frankie still looks unsettled. She stands a certain way when she’s wearing professional clothes—her shoulders back, her hip out, her hands half in her pockets. Even now, when she’s obviously nervous, she radiates the same casual confidence she always does, that unique Frankie mix between gorgeous and terrifying that Will is completely enthralled by. He gives her a minute, curious to see if she’ll offer an explanation unprompted, but she doesn’t. He’s going to have to ask.

“Is it because it’s in Zurich?” he asks, wondering if she did a job in Zurich like she did in Belgrade.

“Zurich is fine,” she answers without looking at him. Her eyes are following cars as they drive by. “It’s the Favre brothers.”
The Favre brothers are Swiss millionaires, twins, and self-proclaimed tech nerds. They don’t actually create anything themselves. They just use the sizeable fortune their father left behind to hold yearly conferences that attract a who’s who of geniuses, engineers, and programmers. Unfortunately—or fortunately, if you’re the U.S. government waiting for a notorious criminal to come out of hiding—the conferences also attract a who’s who of rich and ambitious criminals who are eager to get their hands on the next big thing. Intel suggests that Harmon Lin, a notorious Japanese crime lord, will be in attendance this year, and Will and Frankie have been tasked with extracting him and delivering him to Interpol.

“Do you know them?” Will asks.

She tilts her head. “You could say that.”

“Frankie.”

She finally looks at him.

“How do you know the Favre brothers?”

He can see it in her eyes—the same look she had when she told him that she “quit” the CIA and pulled jobs with people like Dominique and Luka and Marco—and he wonders if Ray’s intel that the Favre brothers are just harmless and bored rich guys is wrong, and if they’re actually criminals. He wonders if Frankie went undercover as one of their girlfriends in a bid to bring them down the way she did with Rafael. Or maybe she pulled a job and then had sex with one of them the way she did with Luka.

“I stole fifteen million dollars worth of jewelry from them,” Frankie says quietly.

Will gapes at her. That is definitely not what he thought she was going to say. She’s watching him closely, trying to gauge his reaction, and he knows that if he reacts poorly she’s going to shut down and never tell him anything again. So he scratches the back of his head and says, “Okay then.”

She surprises him again—a ghost of a smile appears on her lips.

He narrows his eyes at her. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“No,” she says, laughing a little. “I’m telling the truth. But god, Will, your face.”

“What about my face?” he says defensively. “It is a perfectly normal face. Better than normal in fact. This is the kind of face that people paint. I mean, look at these eyes. Look at this smile.”

He smiles at her, and she rolls her eyes. A beat of silence lingers between them.

“I am surprised,” he admits when it’s clear she’s not going to say anything else. “I didn’t realize you were…”

“A thief?” she finishes when he doesn’t.

“A jewel thief,” he clarifies. “Which, for the record, is the sexiest kind of thief. I didn’t think you could get any sexier. But here we are.”

“Stop being nice. I know you don’t think it’s sexy that I broke the law. You love the law.”

“I’m picturing you in all black leather cartwheeling through a bunch of lasers and then sliding a ruby into your bra. Trust me. It’s sexy.”
She makes a face. “I wouldn’t put a ruby in my bra.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at her. “Where would you put it?”

“Can you not be a horndog right now?” she says, shoving him in the shoulder. Despite her attempt to sound annoyed, she’s grinning. He’s glad. That’s what he was going for.

He holds up his hands. “All right. I’ll save it for later.”

Another beat of silence stretches between them. This time, he’s determined to wait her out. He watches as her smile fades. Her eyes are following passing cars again.

“It’s the only jewelry heist I’ve ever done,” she says eventually.

“But not the only burglary,” he guesses, thinking about that time in London when he watched her crack a safe as easily as other people tie their shoes.

“I’ve done a lot of those,” she confirms. She chews her lip and then says, “But not anymore. I’ve only ever done them out of necessity.”

He frowns. “What’d you need fifteen million dollars for?”

She opens her mouth, and then closes it again. “I’m not ready to tell you that.”

His heart sinks. When he promised her a month ago that he’d let things go if she told him she wasn’t ready to talk about them, he hadn’t expected it to be this difficult. Every cell in his body wants to push her for an answer because he’s dying to know her in a way that nobody else does, but he made a promise. And he keeps his promises.

“Okay,” he says.

“Will,” she starts, her voice soft.

“It’s okay,” he cuts her off. “We made a deal. You held up your end. I’ll hold up mine.”

Her gaze flickers over his face. “You’re disappointed.”

“Not in you.”

She smiles humorlessly. “What else could you be disappointed in?”

“Missing a chance to be in the field with you. I guess I’ll have to settle for the sound of your voice in my ear while I do all the work.” He frowns. “That sounded way dirtier than I meant it.”

She rolls her eyes and starts to walk in the direction of the nearest subway station. “Keep it in your pants, Whiskey.”

“I said it was dirtier than I meant it,” he insists.

She snorts. “Yeah, sure.”

He jogs a few steps to catch up to her. They walk in companionable silence for a while, weaving in and out of the crowds on the sidewalk, until Will says, “Can I ask a follow up question?”

She cuts him a look out of the corner of her eye. “Is it about the Favre brothers?”
“Yes.”

She shakes her head. “I knew you couldn’t drop it.”

“No, wait,” he says, latching onto her forearm and pulling her to a stop. A crowd of tourists in matching red MURRAY FAMILY TAKES NEW YORK t-shirts swarm around them before he can explain. Frankie surveys them incredulously, clearly trying to decide whether she wants to make fun of them or be annoyed. Will tightens his hold on her arm and drags her through the mass of people to the empty edge of the sidewalk.

“I’m not asking you to tell me why you needed the money,” he says once they’re free of the red swarm. “I just don’t understand why you can’t do the mission with me. I assume since you’re not currently in a Swiss prison that you didn’t get caught.”

She arches an eyebrow at him. “I don’t get caught unless I want to get caught.”

“Cocky much?”

“It’s true.”

“Fine. You didn’t get caught. So then why can’t you do the mission? Do they know it was you?”

“They don’t know,” she answers. “But their head of security is former Mossad and I’m pretty sure he knows. If I show up at their stupid nerdy conference, he’ll notice me right away and then he’ll follow me everywhere. We can’t afford extra attention. We need to be under the radar to extract Lin.”

“I’m guessing Jai is sitting this one out too?”

She smiles. “You know, Jai and I are capable of working without each other. We’ve done it before.”

“Great, so he can take your place in the field?”

“No, he pulled the heist with me. You’ll have to use Susan and Standish.”

Will frowns. “Why would you say—you know what? Nevermind. Who do the Favre brothers think you are, anyway?”

“Some super rich American heiress.”

Will smirks at her. “What is it with you and American heiresses?”

Frankie shrugs. “They’re easy. And it’s not like they’re all the same. Lana Tyler is rich and smart. Annabelle Baker, which is who the Favre brothers think I am, is not. She’s dumber than a box of rocks. She can barely read her own Instagram captions.”

Will snorts out a laugh.

“I’m serious,” Frankie says, smiling. “She needed to be non-threatening. She’s dumb so they feel smart and she’s rich so they won’t think she’s a gold digger.”

“So then why’d they want to hang out with her?”

Frankie gestures at herself. “Have you seen me in a dress and heels?”
“Wow,” Will says. “Just...wow.”

He starts to walk toward the subway station again, and Frankie falls in step next to him. “I’m pretty sure Wow is exactly what you say when you see me in a dress and heels,” she points out. “So whether you think it’s cocky or not, I’m obviously right.”

“You’re not going to fit through the door of the Dead Drop if you don’t shrink that ego a little.”

“It’s not my fault that I’m a ten.”

Will is helpless against the urge to give her body a lingering once-over. “You are a ten,” he acknowledges quietly.

She looks pleased. He waits, but she doesn’t say anything else. He nudges her with his elbow. “This is the part where you say, I think you’re a ten too, Will.”

“But you’re only a seven.”

He stops dead in his tracks on the sidewalk, sputtering in offense. She laughs—one of those amused, musical laughs that he loves—and warmth blossoms in his chest. He is so in love with her it’s pathetic.

He shakes his head at her. “I hate you.”

“No you don’t,” she says confidently.

He definitely doesn’t. He slings an arm around her shoulders and presses his lips to her temple as they start to walk again. “I’m at least a nine.”

She reaches up to hold his hand that’s sitting on her shoulder. “You’re a ten in a tux.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

“ tiêu.”

Forty-eight hours later, after Standish has blown his cover and the comms have mysteriously shorted out, Will runs into Frankie outside one of the gallery lounges at the Dolder Grand Hotel in Zurich.

“What are you doing here?” he hisses, yanking her into an alcove by the bathrooms.

“Looking for you,” she hisses back. “Lin is in the van with Susan and Jai. You and Standish were supposed to meet us at the extraction point twenty minutes ago. What the hell are you still doing here?”

“Standish got arrested by conference security.”

“What?”

A few conference attendees walking by turn their heads to look at Frankie. She smiles politely at them and wiggles her fingers in a cute little wave, but when they lose interest and turn away, the smile drops from her face.

“Why is he so incompetent?”
“Hey, come on,” Will says defensively. “He’s not incompetent.”

Frankie gives him a look.

Will sighs. “Yeah, okay, fine. Not his best work. Let’s just go get him and get out of here.”

“Do you know where conference security is holding him?”

“I think they have an office this way,” Will says, gesturing to his right.

Frankie frowns at him. “You think? What have you been doing for the last twenty minutes, playing Candy Crush?”

“I’ve been trying to avoid Lin’s security team. Stop being mean and let’s go.”

Frankie sighs with an overly dramatic amount of annoyance and follows his lead. Will scans the faces in the crowd as they walk, trying to make sure he avoids eye contact with anyone who might realize he was the last person to be seen with Harmon Lin, when Frankie suddenly veers to the side and collapses against a grumpy looking man in a black suit.

“Security!” she sobs in German, pawing at the badge pinned to his chest that does, in fact, say security. “My purse was stolen! Where is the security office? Oh my goooood my purse.”

“Please, ma’am, calm yourself,” the security guard says, frowning down at her. He glances up, notices that people are starting to stare, and murmurs, “You are causing a scene.”

Will steps forward and pulls Frankie off of the guard. “Sweetheart, please calm down.” He glances at the security guard. “I’m so sorry. But can you help us? My wife’s purse was stolen and we need to find it.”

“My puuuuuurse,” Frankie wails, throwing herself against Will’s chest. “It was an eight thousand dollar Hermes! It was a gift! If I have lost it forever I will die.”

“We’re going to find it,” Will says, rubbing her back soothingly. He shoots a desperate look at the security guard, who grimaces at him sympathetically.

“Security headquarters is that way,” he says, pointing to the left. “You will see a sign at the end of the hall that will guide you in the right direction. You can report the theft once you get to the office and they will help you. Please assure your wife that our staff will do everything they can to recover her purse.”


Frankie sobs dramatically into Will’s chest and lets him lead her in the direction the security guard indicated. As soon as they’re out of sight, she drops the act and straightens.

“Nicely done,” Will tells her as they hurry down the hall.

He’s expecting a smirk, or maybe a smug retort about how he should stop doubting how good she is at her job, but that’s not what he gets.

“I think it’s this way,” she replies instead, clearly mimicking his earlier words. “God, Whiskey, I leave you alone for one mission and you turn into a rookie.”

Will frowns at her. “That’s rude.”
“It’s also accurate,” she snaps back.

“Why are you being so mean?” he wonders.

And then he remembers that instead of exploring Zurich’s breakfast options this morning, they stayed in bed and explored each other.

“You’re hangry, aren’t you?” he asks her. “I told you this would happen. Why didn’t you eat the snack I left for you in the van?”

Frankie looks over at him incredulously. “What?”

“I left you one of those granola bars you like.”

“I hate those things.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Stop trying to make me like them. They taste like death and sawdust.”

“You can’t keep eating so much junk food, Frankie. You expend a lot of energy on a daily basis. Your body needs healthy fuel.”

“Stop mother hen-ing me, Will.”

He can hear the hard edge of warning in her voice, but he keeps talking anyway. “I know it’s difficult to maintain good habits given the nature of our jobs, but—”

Whatever else he’s going to say gets cut short because she hip checks him into the nearest wall. He slams into it shoulder first, and then bounces off with an oomph and stumble a few steps before straightening. A group of people nearby gape at him in surprise.

“Oh my god, babe, you’re so clumsy,” Frankie giggles in her best Valley girl voice, reaching out to loop her arm through his. She tugs him forward, and they walk arm in arm away from the group of people and then take a left at a sign that says Event Security above an arrow.

“Seriously, what is wrong with you?” Will hisses at her once they’re out of view. “Did you—”

“Do you know how many crazy people are here?” she cuts him off in a hushed but clearly angry voice as she whirls around in the middle of the hall to face him. “This is like Comic-Con for criminals and you went radio silent! One minute you’re talking my ear off and the next thing I know you’re gone, and then Susan shows up with Lin and she has no idea where you are—”

She was worried about me, Will realizes.

“—and I had to just sit there in that damn van, waiting for you like some kind of helpless moron—”

“Hey,” Will cuts her off gently, reaching out to put his hands on her shoulders. “Nothing happened to me, okay? I’m fine.”

She shrugs out of his grasp with a furious look. “Don’t do the voice right now, Will.”

He frowns. “What voice?”

“You could have at least texted me or something,” she snarls, ignoring his question. “Standish is
locked up with god-knows-who getting god-knows-what done to him and you’re out here wandering around like an idiot trying to find him and I didn’t even know."

Will smiles at her. He can’t help it.

“What are you smiling at?” she demands.

“You were worried about me and Standish. It’s sweet.”

She blinks at him, obviously stunned, and then her face morphs into a look of disgust and she groans, “Oh my god,” and stomps away from him.

Will follows her. He opens his mouth, but she holds up her hand without even looking at him. “If you say the word family I will punch you in the throat.”

“Security is right there,” he says instead, pointing at a sign that says Security. There are two men in suits standing on either side of a closed door that’s just beyond the sign. “Also, for the record, there’s nothing wrong with being worried about people you care about. It’s a good thing, actually. Healthy and normal.”

Frankie snorts an annoyed breath out of her nose and charges toward the security guards in a way that’s eerily reminiscent of an enraged bull. The one closest to her spots her first, but before he can open his mouth Frankie puts her hands on his shoulders, pulls him forward, and knees him in the groin. He collapses onto the floor, groaning and clutching his crotch, and she spins toward the other guard. He fumbles at his hip and draws his gun, but Frankie disarms him easily and then pistol-whips him. He hits the floor like a sack of potatoes and doesn’t get up.

“Feel better?” Will asks.

“Yes, actually,” Frankie says, tossing her hair out of her eyes. She tries to open the door, but it’s locked. “Perfect,” she mutters. And then she takes a step back and kicks it open with a crash.

She stalks into the room with her gun raised. Will strides in after her with his gun raised too. There’s a long conference table in the center of the room and in the back, cowering next to a tall blonde woman and a glass door overlooking a balcony, is Standish.

“Hey kiddo,” Will greets, lowering his gun.

Standish straightens, glances between Frankie and Will in surprise, and then rounds on the blonde and says, “I told you my parents would come get me!”

The woman stares at Frankie and Will, and then glances at Standish with a completely mystified expression.

“You’re confused because they’re white and only ten years older than me,” Standish says with a sympathetic nod. “I understand. It’s really more of an emotional connection. They’re my spy parents.”

“I’m ten years older than you,” Frankie says, lowering her gun. “Will is definitely not.”

“Hey, come on,” Will says. “I’m not that much older than you.”

“We can go?” the tall blonde squeaks.

“Barbie’s right, we need to go,” Frankie says. “Come on, Standish.”
“Call me,” Standish says to the blonde, lifting his hand to his ear.

“There’s no way she’s going to call you,” Frankie says once they’re out of the room.

“You don’t know that,” Standish argues, glaring at her as they stride down the hallway. “We were locked in there together for an eternity. Things happen when you’re confined in a small space with someone. We forged a connection. A survival bond.”

Frankie snorts. “You didn’t survive anything except your own incompetence.”

“Will, Frankie’s being mean again,” Standish whines.

“You were only there for half an hour, Standish,” Will says. “There were bottles of water and snacks on the table. I don’t think survival is the right word.”

Standish throws up his hands. “Come on, man. You’re supposed to be on my side. Bros before hoes.”

“Don’t call her that. Apologize.”

“It’s just an expression!”

“Apologize.”

“Fine,” Standish groans. He turns toward Frankie with the same look he wears when he has to eat a vegetable and mutters, “Sorry mom.”

“I hate both of you,” Frankie announces. She shoves Will as they round another corner. “Especially you.”

“Yeah so I’ve heard,” Will says. “You told me this morning, remember?”

Actually she’d said I hate you for being so good at this about five seconds before she came courtesy of his mouth between her legs, but Standish doesn’t need to know that.

Frankie narrows her eyes at Will. He winks at her. And then all of a sudden Jai’s voice says over the comms, “Frankie? Can you hear me?”

“Jai,” Standish squeals before Frankie can answer. “What up bro? You fix the comms?”

“If you’re talking to me then yes, obviously I fixed them,” Jai says dryly.

Standish snorts. “I missed that sense of humor while I was locked up.”

Will catches a glimpse of Frankie rolling her eyes and he grins.

“We’re on the way to the front entrance, Jai,” she says. “Can you meet us there?”

“Already on the way,” Jai says. “Susan is pulling around now. Should be there in about thirty seconds.”

“The package still secure?” Will asks.

“Sleeping like a baby,” Susan’s voice replies. “How far out are you guys?”

“One minute,” Will says.
He can see the lobby just ahead, and he can feel the exhilaration of a finished job starting to buzz through his blood. Standish blew his cover and Frankie had to come get them and it definitely wasn’t the cleanest mission they’ve ever done, but they got the job done and no one got hurt. That’s a win in Will’s book.

He’s opening his mouth to suggest they all go out for fondue after they drop Lin off at the Zurich location of the Hive when a tall man with a perfectly trimmed beard and the bluest eyes Will has ever seen steps out in front of him and says, “Annabelle?”

Frankie stops dead in her tracks. Will stops too, partly because the man is blocking his path and partly because Frankie’s hand has found his forearm and she’s squeezing him so hard it’s almost painful. Half a second later, Standish crashes into their backs.

“Whoa, traffic jam,” Standish says.

Frankie doesn’t even snap at him. She’s frozen, her eyes wide, and the man in front of her stares back at her in wonder. Will looks a little closer and realizes it’s one of the Favre brothers—though he has no idea whether it’s Julian or Leo because they’re identical twins. He wonders if Frankie can tell them apart.

“My god,” Julian/Leo says, his voice breathless. “It is you.”

“Julian,” Frankie says with a bit of a southern twang that makes Will snap his head in her direction. “Hey darlin.”

*Guess she can tell them apart, Will thinks.* And then, *Why can’t she call me darlin?*

“Julian?” Jai’s voice demands over the comms. “Will, is she talking to one of the twins?”

“Yes,” Will says quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” Julian asks Frankie. A broad smile is starting to creep across his lips, and his eyes are sweeping over Frankie’s body with a familiarity that Will really doesn’t like.

“I wasn’t—” Frankie starts, but another voice cuts her off.

“Annabelle?”

The second Favre twin, Leo, materializes next to his brother. He squints at Frankie, and then his face smooths into pleasant surprise. He looks her up and down just like his brother had. “It *is* you. You look fantastic.”

“Hey there, Leo,” Frankie says. “Aren’t you sweet.”

“Leo?” Jai squawks over the comms. “Will, this is bad. If the twins are both there—”

“You,” a deep voice growls from somewhere off to Will’s right.

“Oh, shit,” Jai groans in Will’s ear.

A giant man with a massive scar zig-zagging down the right side of his face steps up behind the brothers and glares at Frankie. Will can see a gun tucked into the shoulder holster beneath his jacket, and he carries himself the way that Will’s military buddies do. *This is the guy who’s former Mossad, Will realizes.*
“You are either very brave or very stupid to come back here,” the man rumbles.

“There he is,” Frankie says, flashing one of her stunner smiles. “You’re never far behind the boys, are you, Elon? Just like my daddy’s favorite hound dog. Followed him damn near everywhere.”

“Why does Frankie sound like Dolly Parton?” Standish mutters in Will’s ear.

“Elon, be polite,” Julian says, glaring up at his head of security. He looks at Frankie. “Please, Annabelle, forgive his manners. Have a drink with me. Let’s catch up. I’ve missed you.”

“As have I,” Leo says, taking a half step forward so that he’s closer to Frankie.

Julian shoots an annoyed look at his brother. Behind Will, Standish snorts.

“Aren’t you boys sweet,” Frankie coos, putting her hand over her heart. “You know I’d love to stay and chat with y’all, but I’ve got to run. I’m meeting someone. Maybe we can catch up later.”

She starts to brush past the three men, but Elon reaches out and stops her with a massive hand on her shoulder. “Not so fast.”

“Elon,” Leo says, looking scandalized. “Let go of her.”

“No,” Elon growls. He narrows his eyes at Frankie. “You are not slipping away this time.”

“What on God’s green earth are you talking about?” Frankie says with a laugh. Her voice is honeyed, but Will can see that her body is tense and ready for a fight. “I didn’t slip away. I flew back to ‘Bama cause my daddy had a heart attack. He’s fine now, thanks for asking. I think he’s gonna live forever just to spite my mama. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to be going.” She turns toward Standish and snaps her fingers. “Henry, pull the car around for me please.”

“What?” Standish says.

“Miss Baker wants the car,” Will says, turning to glare at Standish. “Go get it. Now.”

“Oh-kaaaay,” Standish says, drawing out the word with a frown. He heads for the lobby with a baffled expression.

Once he’s safely out of Elon’s reach, Will turns back to Frankie. “Miss Baker, we’re going to be late if we don’t go now,” he says, sliding a hand along the small of Frankie’s back and pulling her out of Elon’s grasp.

Elon takes a lumbering step forward so that he’s standing between them and the front entrance. “You are not leaving this hotel.”

Frankie sighs and looks up at Will. “We don’t have time for this.”

Her accent is gone. Will grins. Honestly, he’s surprised she didn’t drop the southern belle act the second Elon put his hand on her. Will’s guessing she wanted Standish out of harm’s way. He’s going to tease her about that later.

“You remember Quito?” he asks, looking down at her.

She furrows her eyebrows. “In the bar or in the alley?”

“Alley.”
“Yeah. That’ll work.”

Will takes a step forward, claps his hands in Elon’s face, and shouts, “Hey-ho, look at me!”

Elon looks confused for about half a second, which is just long enough for Frankie to dart to his left and slam the heel of her boot against the side of his knee so hard that his leg snaps inward at an awkward angle. He screams in pain and pitches forward. As he falls, his nose meets Frankie’s upswinging fist with a sickening crack. The force of her punch sends his head snapping backward, and his hands fly up to his face as blood spurts everywhere. Without missing a beat, Frankie punches him again—this time across the face with her other hand—and he crashes to the floor in a heap.

The Favre twins gasp in unison and take a step away from Frankie. Will takes a step toward her.

“Come on,” he says. “We’ve got a delivery to make.”

She hesitates for half a second, and Will knows it’s because she wants to hit Elon again.

“Fiery,” he warns.

She sighs, but she listens to his unspoken request. They take off running toward the lobby side by side, past the horrified Favre twins and a group of clearly terrified hotel staff, and Will grins at her.

“Hell of a punch.”

She smirks at him. “Liked that, huh?”

“Sexiest thing I’ve seen all day,” Will admits. He tilts his head. “Except for this morning.”

Frankie laughs.

Will isn’t sure why he looks back over his shoulder. A gut feeling, perhaps. Divine intervention. Maybe just pure, dumb luck. It doesn’t really matter. All that matters is that he looks, and he sees Elon aiming a gun at Frankie from his sprawled position on the floor.

Will does the only thing he can.

He jumps between Frankie and the gun.
This is a long author’s note. Sorry. But I got stuff to say.

If y’all remember back when we started this little journey together, I told you I wanted to see two things during season two: more of Frankie’s backstory, and more of her relationship with Jai. Since we are not getting a season two (Honestly, ABC, I will never forgive you for that you are the WORST), I have taken it upon myself to write both of these things—and they are crashing to the forefront of our story for the first time (but definitely not the last) in this very chapter you are about to read. Buckle up, kiddos.

I will be honest with you and say you will probably come away from this chapter with more questions than answers about Frankie’s past. (Just be patient, okay? I have an outline to follow.) But if you are curious about how I got to this point, here are a few things you should remember:

- Susan’s profile of Frankie from the pilot. (“Cataclysmic loss, probably blames herself, definite fear of intimacy, and a need for retribution.”)
- Frankie and Jai meeting up in the pilot. (That hug! Frankie saying, “Because you’re the only one I trust.” Jai saying, “Frankie, I love you,” in a super casual way like he’s said it a million times before. Jai saying, “You need to stop pushing everyone else away,” and Frankie doing that little half smile like she’s heard that from him before.)
- Jai giving Frankie a pep talk before the party during episode three. (That soft, adorable smile on Frankie’s face after Jai says, “Whatever you decide, I got your back.” I swear, I melt every time.)
- That scene in episode five when Jai and Frankie go see Liam. (Jai saying, “So you and Will get a little bit messy, and now I have to deal with this jackass?” The exasperated look/eyeroll Jai does after Frankie smirks at Liam and says, “Miss me?” and Liam looks her up and down like he’s seen her naked and says, “Occasionally.”)
- The end of episode seven, when Frankie is watching Will and Emma talk to each other, and Jai is watching Frankie. (Frankie confessing to Jai, without even a trace of hesitation, “What’s weird is it makes me respect him more.” And Jai replying, “That’s even more annoying.” Honestly, I can’t decide what I love more: The fact that Frankie clearly has no problem saying whatever she’s thinking/feeling to Jai, or the fact that Jai looks at her with such clear affection.)
- Frankie and Will fighting about her past in episode three. (Will saying, “You were an assassin?” and Frankie saying, with just a hint of defensiveness, “Way to make it sound dirty.” Will shouting, “We don’t even know who the hell she really is!” and Frankie getting mad and shouting, “You want to know who I am? I’m a killer and now I’m your partner!”)

Okay, that is all. Happy reading :)
They started after her parents died. She used to dream about them sitting on that plane. Her mom with her nose buried in a book, her dad with his eyes closed as he listened to Ella Fitzgerald or Miles Davis or The Beatles, their hands clasped together between their seats because they were never not touching each other if they could help it. Francesca, her mom’s voice would say even though the dream version of her was still focused on her book. Francesca, I love you. And then everything would explode. One second they were there and then the next they were flames, and then ash, and then nothing. Frankie would wake screaming, and Kelly would come running, but Kelly wasn’t who she wanted.

In her early twenties, it was David. She would dream about his dark eyes and his killer smile and the too-small bed they shared in the back room of his mother’s house in Caracas. She dreamed most often of his hands—holding her waist as he taught her to dance, clasped over her knuckles as he taught her how to shoot a gun and throw a knife and pick a pocket, sliding over her skin in the darkness as he whispered Te amo mas que nada. But then her dream would shift and she’d find herself in that alley outside their favorite bar, on her knees in the dirt next to him as he stared up at the sky without seeing it, and she would wake screaming like before. Only this time, there was no Kelly. She was alone.

Next it was Nick. Nick and his dark hair falling across his forehead. Nick and those green eyes that seemed to look right through her. Nick throwing his head back to laugh. Nick kissing her on a bridge in Venice, making love to her in her apartment in New York, sliding a ring on her finger in Paris, bleeding out in her arms in a warehouse in Barcelona and whispering, Francesca, you have to go. She would wake drowning in tears but silent. She was still alone.

Eventually, it was a toss-up. Her parents. David. Mina. RJ. Sometimes she would see Jai standing over their bodies, tears streaming down his face and soaking into his suit, and she would hear Nick’s voice in her ear. You should’ve trusted your instincts, baby. She would wake with rage simmering in her chest, and then she would pull on her running shoes and sprint through the darkened streets of whatever city she was in. She was still alone.

She hasn’t had a nightmare in a long time. After what happened in Moscow, she decided she’d rather be the nightmare than let someone be hers. But when Will tackles her to the ground just as two gunshots crack through the air, and when she hears him groan in pain as they fall, the first thing she thinks is This is a nightmare.

Except it’s not. It’s real.

Everything after that is instinct and pure, blazing fury. She knows, even without looking, that at least one of those bullets hit Will, and she knows that it came from Elon’s gun. The floor is cold against her palms and hard beneath her hips and Will’s body is heavy on top of hers. She pushes back against him, and he rolls off of her and onto his back, groaning again. All around her, people are screaming and running toward the exits in a panic.

Frankie rises to her knees in the middle of the melee and pulls the gun from her waistband. Elon still has his gun raised and is trying to shift his aim down to her. He’s fast. She’s faster. They make eye contact the moment before she pulls the trigger and buries a bullet in his forehead and two more in his chest.

She waits a beat, gun raised, to make sure there are no more threats. Her vision is tinted red, and even though her breathing is slow and calm, there is a storm rioting in her chest. Will is on the floor next to her, bleeding and hurt, and the next person who comes after them is going to find out exactly why the CIA calls her when they need to break an asset.

But there’s no one else. Elon had no backup, hotel and conference security are nowhere in sight,
and people are running away from her, not toward her. So she shoves the gun in her waistband and
turns toward her partner.

“Will,” she breathes, leaning over him.

He’s on his back, his face screwed up in a grimace of pain. He’s clutching his left arm tightly just
above his elbow but there’s a wound above his hand too, closer to his shoulder, and there’s blood
dripping through the frayed edges of his shirt and onto the marble floor beneath him.

“Shit,” she whispers.

“M’fine,” Will gasps, opening his eyes to look at her.

“Yeah, you look great,” she shoots back, but it falls flat. She can hear the fear in her voice, and
when he meets her gaze she knows he heard it too.

“We have to go. Help me up.”

Frankie wraps an arm around his shoulders and hauls him to his feet. He sways a little, his breath
catching, and she steadies him. She rips her blazer off, balls it up, and presses it down hard on the
wound his hand isn’t covering. He flinches away from her and hisses in pain.

“Hey,” she says, pulling him back toward her. “Look at me.”

He looks at her. There’s sweat beading his brow.

“I’ve got pressure here. You keep pressure there.” She reaches for his hand that’s hanging limply
by his side and weaves her fingers through his. “You ready?”

The fact that he nods instead of making a wisecrack about how she’s holding his hand in public
worries her. She guides him forward, setting a quick but easy pace. She keeps her head on a swivel,
checking to make sure that nobody else is aiming a gun at them, though she has no idea how she’d
deal with it considering her hands are full.

“Guys? What’s going on?” Susan says in her ear. “Did we hear gunshots?”

“Is Standish in the van?” Frankie asks.

“I’m here,” Standish says. “What’s happening?”

“We’re on our way. Will’s been shot.”

“What?” Susan demands.

Frankie glances at Will. His face is drawn and pale, and his jaw is clenched. “It’s fine, Sus,” he
says. “Frankie’s got everything under control. Her bedside manner is way better than you’d
expect.”

“Yeah, I’m a regular Florence Nightingale,” Frankie says, guiding Will out into the main lobby.
The front entrance looms before them, and she can see a glimpse of the van through the open
doors.

“How bad is it?” Jai asks calmly.

“Just a graze,” Will says.
“We don’t know yet,” Frankie contradicts him. “There’s two wounds, Jai. Get the med kit out.” She and Will step through the doors and underneath the front awning of the hotel. She squeezes Will’s hand. “See the van?”

“Yeah.”

“Sir?” a hotel staffer says, darting up to them. “Are you okay?”

“He’s fine,” Frankie snaps. “Move.” She guides Will around the startled hotel worker and toward the van. “Standish, open the doors.”

The back doors of the van swing open, and Standish hops out. There isn’t a trace of humor on his face. He looks younger than usual and more than a little scared. Will, of course, notices.

“Hey, don’t look so worried,” he says kindly. “I’ve survived way worse than this.”

“Step,” Frankie tells him when they get to the back of the van. Will steps obediently into the back of the van, and Frankie guides him into a sitting position on the floor and then leaps in after him. “Standish, get the doors. Susan, go. Now.”

Standish hops in after her and slams the doors closed, and Susan hits the gas. Everyone in the van lurches backward, including the still unconscious Harmon Lin who is slumped in the corner behind the driver’s seat, but Frankie has her hands on Will and she holds him in place as she crouches next to him.

“Jai,” she calls.

“There’s a hospital nearby,” he answers, crouching next to her with the med kit in his hands. “Susan can get us there in nine minutes.”

“Make it eight,” Susan calls from the driver’s seat.

“No,” Will says, shifting beneath Frankie’s hands. “We have to go to the Hive.”

“You got shot twice, Will,” Frankie tells him. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“I’m fine. They grazed me. Susan, take us to the Hive.”

“Susan, ignore him. Go to the hospital.”

“I’m going to need you guys to get on the same page within the next thirty seconds,” Susan says.

Will looks up at Frankie. “It’s not life-threatening and we’re in the middle of a mission. We have an asset in our custody. Protocol dictates I go to the nearest Hive. Their medical team can handle this.”

“I don’t give a shit what protocol dictates. You’re going to the hospital.”

“I’m running point, Frankie. It’s my call. We’re going to the Hive.”

For a second, they just stare at each other. Frankie can feel irritation whipping through her blood along with her fear. If she was in Will’s position, she’d be saying the same thing. But that doesn’t mean she wants him to say it.

“Frankie?” Susan calls.
“Go to the Hive,” Frankie replies.

Will rests his head back against the van and exhales. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. If either of these wounds is anything but a graze, your ass is going to the hospital.”

She kneels next to him and looks at Jai, who holds out a pair of scissors wordlessly.

“What are you going to do with those?” Standish asks with a slight squeak in his voice.

“I’m going to cut off his shirt,” Frankie answers, stabbing the scissors through the sleeve of Will’s shirt up by his shoulder and then starting to cut.

“You could at least buy me dinner first,” Will says to her softly.

She shakes her head. “Don’t, Will.”

He stares at her, his eyes roving over her face the way they do when he’s trying to read her. She keeps her expression blank and ignores him, focusing on the task at hand. She cuts all the way around his sleeve, then peels the bloodied fabric down his arm and past the first wound.

“Move your hand,” she says, bumping her knuckles against Will’s.

He drops his hand, and she peels the sleeve the rest of the way down his arm. She bends forward to study the two wounds, and Jai leans over her shoulder to do the same. There’s plenty of blood and two angry, fairly deep red gashes in his flesh, but he’s right—it looks like the bullets only grazed him.

“Grazes,” Jai murmurs.

“Told you,” Will says.

Frankie ignores him again and pulls a cloth out of the med kit. She presses it against the lower of his two wounds, and he grunts in pain. “Hold it there,” she orders. Will lifts his hand and presses it on top of hers. He strokes his thumb over her knuckles, but she pulls free of his grasp, grabs another cloth, and holds it against the wound that’s near his shoulder.

“Call the Hive,” she says, looking at Jai. “Tell them we’re coming and to have the medical team on standby.”

Jai nods and reaches for his phone.

“Susan? How far out?”

“Zurich Hive is only six minutes from here.”

“Standish, make sure she gets nothing but green lights. When we get to the Hive, I need you to hack into the hotel security feeds. Erase any footage of us.”

“On it,” Standish says.

Frankie hears the click of Standish’s laptop opening behind her, and soon the sound of him typing furiously braids with the hum of the van’s engine and the steady cadence of Jai’s voice as he talks on the phone.
Will is still staring at her. Frankie knows he’s waiting for her to look at him, but she won’t. She can’t. Her heart is racing, and her hands are shaking, and all she can think about is the last time she had a partner who jumped in front of a bullet for her, and everything that happened after. The grief. The betrayal. The rage. The gaping, bottomless hole in her chest that demanded retribution but wouldn’t fill no matter how many bodies she offered. Her insatiable need for revenge is why she needed fifteen million dollars, and the money is why she stole the jewels, and the theft is why Elon shot at her, and Elon is why Will is sitting in front of her now with two bullet tracks carved into his skin.

She knows that a normal person would be relieved that the bullets only grazed him. And she is relieved. But she’s also a spy, and she used to be an assassin, and she knows how easily all this could have turned out differently. If Will had moved just a second later, everything would’ve been different. Two shots to the spine. Two shots to the head. Punctured lungs, damaged kidneys, destroyed arteries. He could’ve bled out. He could’ve been paralyzed. He could’ve died.

And for what? For her? Her life isn’t worth his. All the shit she’s done, all the lives she’s destroyed—a bullet in the back is what she deserves.

But not Will. Will should get to grow old. Will should get to marry a girl who didn’t sleep and shoot her way across the world, and they should get to raise two kids in a cute little house in the suburbs that has a Christmas tree up all year and a pond in the back. Will deserves better than this. Better than her.

The van hits a bump, and Frankie loses her balance and lurches forward into Will’s chest. She tries to lean back, but Will darts his hand out and curls his fingers around her hip to hold her in place. She hovers over him, finally lifting her eyes to meet his, and all of a sudden she remembers that moment in Rome after they disarmed a bomb and he said "Oh come on, you were trying to figure out what color my eyes are."

“Let go,” she tells him, her voice quiet enough that Standish won’t hear.

He holds on tighter. “Don’t do it, Frankie.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t push me away.”

Her heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of her chest. She hates that he knows her so well. *Kiss him,* a voice in the back of her mind says. *Kiss him.*

She pulls his hand off of her hip and presses it back on his wound. “You need to keep pressure on this.”

She pretends she doesn’t see the disappointed look on his face and leans back just as Susan announces, “Pulling in now. Frankie, you’ve got Lin?”

“Yeah. Standish, can you get the doors?”

Standish stops typing and scrambles toward the back doors. The van slams to a halt, and Frankie hears the driver’s side door open as Susan gets out. Jai gets to his feet and follows Standish.

For a second, it’s just Frankie and Will and the unconscious Harmon Lin in the back of the van. Will stares at her and Frankie stares back, a thousand unspoken things hanging in the air.

And then Susan appears, leaning over the back bumper and beckoning Will toward her, and the
moment ends. Will climbs out of the van, and Susan guides him into the arms of the waiting medical team, and Frankie watches them go with an ache in her chest that feels familiar in all the worst ways.

Over the course of the last few months, Frankie and Will have fallen into a rhythm at work.

All the things that made their professional relationship so volatile and combative in the beginning are all the reasons why it works so well now. She thinks quickly on her feet, he’s cautious and strategic. She trusts no one, he trusts everyone. Sometimes the team needs a kick in the ass from her, sometimes they need encouragement and empathy from him. Her personal relationship with Will—the way he makes her feel, and the demons from her past that are always hovering in the background, ready to pounce—is complicated. But her professional relationship with him isn’t. They balance each other out. She’s good at all the things he’s not, and he’s good at all the things she’s not, and together they’re as close to perfect as spy partners can get.

But they’re not together right now. Will is in the medical wing, and that means Frankie has to do all the things they’d normally do together by herself. Handing off Lin to a pair of cocky assholes from Interpol. Checking in with the head of the Zurich Hive. Completing the protocol checklist and the video conferencing debrief with Ray. She hates this shit, and she hates it even more now that she’s doing it alone, and answering all of Ray’s questions just reminds her of what she’s known since the moment she heard those gunshots.

This is all her fault.

Eventually, Ray runs out of questions. He signs off, and Frankie closes the laptop. She’s alone in a meeting room, and despite all the activity buzzing beyond the glass wall behind her, it’s quiet. She gets to her feet and turns toward the glass, staring through the slats of the blinds at agents she doesn’t know while they type and talk and save the world. It seems like forever ago that she was standing in a room just like this with Will at a Europol office in London.

Me and you, we save the world.

She wonders how many times she needs to save the world before it will feel like enough, and how many lives she has to save before she stops thinking about the ones she couldn’t. She thinks about her parents, who were only on that plane to visit her. David, who was only at that bar because she wanted to go. RJ and Mina, who died because she wasn’t smart enough, fast enough, good enough. And now Will.

Behind her, the door to the meeting room opens. She glances over her shoulder and sees Jai.

He smiles at her. “Finished with Ray?”

“Yeah.” She turns back to the window. “I’m surprised he’s not hopping on a plane to come nurse Whiskey back to health. He cried a little when I told him.”

“You’re joking.”

“I wish I was.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Is it?”

“No.”
Frankie snorts. Jai stops next to her, and holds out a flask. Frankie takes it wordlessly and swallows a mouthful of whatever’s inside. It burns all the way down. She hands the flask back, and Jai tucks it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. Neither of them look away from the window.

“Will is all patched up,” he tells her. “The med team is waiting on a few tests, but then we’ll be back on a plane to New York.”

Frankie nods but doesn’t say anything.

“He’s asking for you.”

Frankie crosses her arms. Her chest feels tight, as if something heavy is sitting on top of her and she’s cracking under the pressure. She feels the tension bulldozing through her veins, down her arms and legs to the tips of her fingers and toes, and she knows she needs to hit the gym before she gets on the plane. She needs to run until she can taste that metallic tang in the back of her throat. She needs to punch something until her knuckles are sore and her muscles ache.

“I know that look,” Jai says quietly.

“What look?”

“You’re about to do something stupid.”

Frankie chews the inside of her lip and doesn’t disagree. There’s no point. Nobody reads her as well as Jai. It doesn’t surprise her that he sought her out. He always finds his way to her side when she feels like this.

She knows the rest of the team is confused by their relationship. They think Jai lacks the ability to connect with people (he doesn’t), and they think she’s incapable of intimacy (she’s not), and they think the friendship is bizarre because it should be impossible for two people who are so closed off and distant with everyone else to be open and vulnerable with each other. None of them have even the slightest idea what she and Jai are like when they’re alone, and Frankie likes it that way. She thinks Jai does too. Jai is hers, and she’s his, and it doesn’t matter whether anybody else understands it. They do.

Jai doesn’t pelt her with follow-up questions. He doesn’t look at her. He just stands next to her, his presence familiar and soothing, and he waits, because he knows she’ll talk when she’s ready.

“I can’t do this, Jai,” she finally confesses. “I thought I could, but I can’t.”

“Which part?”

“All of it. Leading the team. Being with Will.” She finally looks at him. “What happened today was my fault.”

Jai meets her gaze. “Did you pull the trigger?”

Frankie shakes her head. “It’s not that simple and you know it. I’m a liability to this team. My past, all the enemies I have—”

“They’re my enemies too. Am I a liability?”

“It’s different for you.”

“How?”
“You heard Dominique. It’s my name everyone knows. My face. Not yours.”

He doesn’t answer. She turns away from the window and paces across the room. She feels restless and fidgety. She needs to run, she needs to hit something, she needs to shoot something. She lifts her hand and runs it through her hair.

“Stuff like that doesn’t stay buried, Jai. I was an idiot to think I could get away from it. Today it was just Elon, but what about tomorrow? Or the day after that? What happens when we run into the Bratva, or the Yakuza, or—”

“Nick?”

Frankie goes still. The word hangs in the air like a curse, and she closes her eyes and reminds herself to breathe. *Inhale. Exhale.*

She turns to face Jai. He’s standing with his back to the window, his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on her in that intense way that means he’s about to call her on her shit.

She shakes her head at him. “This isn’t about Nick.”

“It’s always about Nick. You’re the most stubborn and independent person I know but you let him influence every decision you make, including this one.”

Anger flares in Frankie’s chest. “That’s not true.”

“Don’t lie to me, Francesca,” Jai says, his eyes blazing. “You can lie to yourself, and Will, and whoever else you want, but not to me. I’ve pulled bullets out of your body. I got you home every time you were too drunk to walk. I kept my mouth shut while you fucked every guy who looked at you because you wanted to forget. The only reason you’re not dead—or worse—is because of me. So don’t lie to me.”

Guilt and gratitude and shame and love thrum through Frankie’s veins. She wants to cross the room and bury herself in his arms but she doesn’t.

“I’m not lying to you, Jai.”

“Then why are you running?”

She opens her mouth, but he cuts her off.

“And don’t tell me it’s because you’re trying to protect the team. They’re spies, Frankie. They’re going to get shot at whether you’re around or not.”

“At least if I’m gone I’ll know it’s not because of me.”

“That is such bullshit. You don’t want to be gone because it’s safer for them. You want to be gone because it’s safer for you. Because it’s easier when you only have to worry about yourself. Because if you’re not here then you don’t have to face the fact that you have people who love you.”

Frankie shakes her head. “They don’t love me, Jai. They can’t. They don’t know me.”

“I know you,” he says, taking a step toward her. “I love you. And I’m telling you, if you run you’re going to regret it every day for the rest of your life. Don’t you see the opportunity you have right in front of you? Let the past go. Build something new.”

“I can’t let it go when it keeps coming back,” Frankie says, holding out her hands. “Will is sitting
down there right now bleeding because of my past, because of my mistakes, and he doesn’t even know what I’ve done.”

“There it is,” Jai says, brandishing his index finger at her. “That right there. That’s why you’re running. Because you don’t think you’re good enough. You don’t think you deserve him.”

“Because I don’t.”

“He’s in love with you, Francesca.”

“No, he’s not,” she all but shouts, finally losing her temper. “He thinks he’s in love with me because he thinks he can fix me but he can’t. I can’t be fixed, Jai. I’m always going to be broken. This is it. This is as good as I’m going to get, and he deserves a hell of a lot more than this. He’s better off without me.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” Jai shoots back, matching the anger in her tone. “You don’t get to make unilateral decisions and tell people how to feel about you. It’s his choice, Frankie.”

“He’ll make the wrong one.”

“So, what, you’re just going to make it for him? If you run, he’ll chase you.”

“He won’t find me.”

“He will if I help him.”

Frankie stares at him, stunned. The words hang in the air, and the longer they linger the more she feels the sting in them.

“You’d choose him over me?” she asks quietly.

Jai’s expression softens, and she knows it’s because she sounds so hurt. “I’ll always choose you, Francesca,” he murmurs. “I’ll choose you even when you won’t choose yourself. That’s the point. I love you enough to tell you the truth, even when you don’t want to hear it. And the truth is you need this family. And you need Will.”

The door swings open before Frankie can formulate a response. A woman she’s never seen before walks in, and then stops dead in her tracks when she realizes she’s walked into the middle of something.

“Oh,” she says in surprise. She glances at Jai, and then frowns. “I have a meeting scheduled in this room. Is it double-booked again? Should I find somewhere else?”

“No,” Frankie says. “We’re done here.”

She heads for the door. Jai follows her. “Where are you going, Francesca?” he calls out after her as she strides down the hall and away from him.

Frankie doesn’t turn around. “To punch something.”

Despite what Frankie told Jai, she doesn’t start with punching.

She gets on the treadmill first. She shoves her headphones in her ears and turns the volume all the way up, and then she sets the machine to a decent speed and lets herself warm up. Once her blood is flowing and she’s started to sweat, she kicks the speed up faster. And then faster. And then faster
still. Before long she’s running at a punishing pace. Her feet are flying and her muscles are singing and the music in her ears is so loud that she can’t hear anything except the beat. Her mind is blissfully, gloriously blank. All she can think about is her feet hitting the treadmill belt and the steady *inhale exhale* of her breath.

Her lungs are screaming by the time she turns the treadmill off. She puts her hands on her hips and paces as she tries to catch her breath. The runner’s high pulsing through her bloodstream makes her feel like she’s floating and invincible. The last time she felt this high off endorphins was—

This morning. Will’s head between her thighs. Will’s body driving into hers. Will wrapping his arms around her when she nuzzled into his side afterward and slid effortlessly into a contented doze.

That’s when she decides to start punching things.

She wraps her hands, and then takes her headphones out because she likes to hear the thunk of her fists connecting with the punching bag. There’s only two other people in the gym and both of them have headphones in, so all she can hear is her fists and her breathing. She’s reveling in the steady rhythm of her movements and the way her knuckles have started to ache when Will appears behind the bag.

Her fists falter, and she falls out of rhythm. Will leans his chest against the bag, his head tilted to the side so he can see her. He’s wearing a gray short sleeve t-shirt, and Frankie can see the bandages over his bullet wounds. She stares at them for a second, her mind replaying the moment back at the hotel when he tackled her out of the way, and then she shoves the memory aside and starts punching again, this time a little lighter.

“Don’t lighten up on my account,” Will murmurs.

Frankie hits the bag with a hard one-two punch, and Will takes a step back to steady himself against the force of it. He grins at her. “That’s my girl.”

Frankie’s stomach swoops. She grits her teeth and slams another combination of punches into the bag. “Shouldn’t you be in the med wing?”

“I got tired of waiting for my partner to come visit me.”

Her stomach swoops again. “I was a little busy finishing our mission,” she tells him, pausing to wipe some sweat from her forehead with her arm. “The handoff to Interpol went fine, by the way. Also, Ray cried during our debriefing. You might want to start preparing now for all the hugging and crying you’re going to get when you get back to New York.”

The corner of Will’s mouth quirks up. “Yeah, he’s called me three times already.”

“Of course he has.”

She goes back to punching. For a few seconds, the only sound between them is her fists hitting the bag. Will is watching her again, just like he did in the van, and Frankie feels the sudden urge to get back on the treadmill and run until she can’t anymore.

“You want to tell me why you came here when you were done instead of coming to see me?” Will asks.

“Figured you were busy with the doctors.”
“So you’re not avoiding me?”

“No.”

“Because it seems like you’re avoiding me.”

“I’m not.”

“Now it seems like you’re lying to me.”

Frankie slams her fist into the bag with a frustrated grunt. “What do you want, Will?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“So talk.”

“I’m sorry I scared you.”

That’s not what she was expecting him to say. She stops and stares at him for a second, blinking in surprise, and then she goes back to punching without a response.

Will doesn’t say anything. He seems to be waiting for her. She’s noticed that over the past few weeks, he’s started waiting for her the way Jai does. Before they were together, Will would vomit his thoughts and feelings all over her and then lose his mind if she didn’t respond within five seconds. Now, he waits. Usually she likes it. In fact, she usually ends up giving in to him because she thinks it’s kind of endearing that he’s willing to swallow the millions of words he’s always ready to spout just for her sake. But not today.

“Frankie,” he says softly.

She shakes her head. “You didn’t scare me.”

“You’re lying again.”

“Jesus, Will,” she sighs, finally dropping her hands. “What do you want me to say?”

“I just want you to tell the truth.”

“The truth is you shouldn’t have done what you did. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking there was a gun pointed at you and I didn’t want you to get shot. What was I supposed to do, let him shoot you?”

“Yes!”

He gives her an incredulous look. “You’re joking, right? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” she spits at him, and then gives the bag a one-two punch that’s so hard he has to step back.

“You’re being a hypocrite,” he tells her, leaning forward again. “You would’ve taken those bullets for me.”

“So?”

“So it’s okay for you to take them for me, but I can’t take them for you?”
“Now you’re catching on.”

“This is ridiculous.”

Will steps between her and the bag before she can throw another punch. Frankie keeps her fists up by her chin, her muscles tensed and ready, and glares at him.

“Move.”

“I’d do it again,” he tells her without moving. “I’ll do it every time. If it’s me or you, I’m always going to choose you, Frankie. Always.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“Too damn bad.”

“You don’t even know what you’re choosing, Will.”

“I know you better than you think.”

“You don’t know shit,” she snaps, dropping her hands. “You want to know why I needed fifteen million dollars so bad that I stole that jewelry and pissed off Elon? Because I had to buy a list of names. Seventeen people. One of them had information I needed, but I didn’t know which one, so I started at the top and I went all the way through. Ask me what I did to them, Will. Ask me what I did to those seventeen people.”

He doesn’t ask. She counts the list off on her fingers anyway.

“Waterboarding. Electrocution. I’m pretty good with brass knuckles, but I can do a hell of a lot of damage with a stiletto knife and some pliers. Sometimes it took a few hours, sometimes it took a few days, but I broke every single one of them. And then I snapped their necks, or I put a bullet in their skull, and I moved on to the next name. That’s what you almost died for, Will. Seventeen people that I tortured and killed for information about other people I wanted to torture and kill. And that was just the first six months after I went rogue. Trust me, you don’t want to know what I did with the next three years.”

Will looks stunned. Frankie’s throat is tight, and her eyes are burning, and there’s a pain in her chest that she thinks might be her heart breaking, but she forges on anyway because if she’s going to do this, if she’s going to lose him so that he can find somebody who actually deserves those damn heart eyes, then she wants it to be over fast.

“Whatever good you think you see in me, Will, it’s not real. It’s wishful thinking. It’s you seeing a reflection of yourself. I’m a cold-blooded killer. I’m a nightmare. There are people you take bullets for and there are people you don’t, and I’m one of the don’ts. The sooner you get that through your head, the better.”

She turns away from him and strides toward the locker room, clenching her jaw against the sudden flood of tears that are threatening to fall.

Will doesn’t follow her.
Fourteen

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by episode seven, when Frankie and Will are checking to see if the house in Spain is empty, and Frankie finds a bunch of old records and gets *that* look on her face.

Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, right around the midpoint of their flight between Zurich and New York, Frankie gets a text from Will.

She’s sitting in the back of their chartered plane by herself. The rest of the team is scattered throughout the seats in front of her, and the cabin is silent. She’d assumed everyone but her was asleep. Apparently she was wrong, because her phone is buzzing and Will’s name is in the notification banner that lights up her screen.

They haven’t spoken since she walked away from him at the gym in the Hive. They made eye contact when she got on the plane, but only briefly. She’d walked past him without a second glance, collapsed into the last seat, shoved her headphones in her ears, and stared out the window until the plane took off.

She’s spent the last four hours trying to figure out her next move. In Marseille, Will told her there was nothing in her past that could change how he felt about her. She didn’t believe him then, and she doesn’t believe him now. Even if what she told him in the gym doesn’t change how he feels, she’s got a laundry list of other terrible things she’s done that will. She knows how good he is, and she knows how good she’s not, and she knows that men like him don’t fall in love with women like her. Even if they did, and even if he does, she can’t stay. Her past nearly cost him his life today. There’s no way they’re going to be able to make this work. She was crazy to think they could.

Her phone vibrates again. She unlocks it and opens her messages, and realizes that Will sent her a link to a song. She doesn’t recognize the album cover, and she should probably just ignore him, but her screen suddenly seems magnetic. Her thumb hovers over it, trying to resist the pull, but in the end it’s a lost cause. She presses the link.

Her music app opens, and a guitar begins to strum through her headphones. A few seconds later, a voice starts to sing.

When I look into your eyes

It’s like watching the night sky

Or a beautiful sunrise

There’s so much they hold

And just like them old stars

I see that you’ve come so far

To be right where you are
How old is your soul?

I won’t give up on us

Even if the skies get rough

I’m giving you all my love

I’m still looking up

All the breath rushes out of Frankie’s lungs, and her heart shoots into her throat, and she closes her eyes. All of a sudden she’s eleven years old again, sprawled across the living room floor with her dad in the house she grew up in, the record player between them playing Etta James’s *Trust In Me*.

*That’s the beauty of music, Francesca,* her dad’s voice says. He smiles at her, his green eyes kind and affectionate. *It says things for us that we can’t say on our own. If you don’t know what to say, just find a song that says it for you.*

She’s never told Will how much of her relationship with her dad revolved around music. She’s never told anyone that—nobody other than Nick, that is—because she doesn’t share her parents with people. Will has sent her songs before, but she’s never given him any indication that they meant anything to her. She didn’t want him to know. But now here he is, sending her a song about not giving up, and a voice in the back of her mind whispers, *This is fate.*

She turns the song off before she hears the rest. The hum of the plane and the silence of her headphones rings in her ears, but she clenches her jaw and stares out the window and doesn’t turn it back on.

Five minutes later, Will sends her another song.

She stares at the link. She should ignore him. She should text him and tell him to stop. She should turn her phone off.

She presses the screen.

*I’ve waited a hundred years*

*But I’d wait a million more for you*

*Nothing prepared me for*

*What the privilege of being yours would do*

She turns it off again. She doesn’t need to hear the rest. Being hers is not a privilege. Soft piano and sappy words aren’t going to change that.

Five minutes later, he sends her another song. She hates how much she likes his steady persistence. She hates the way she feels like there’s a magnet in her chest, pulling her toward the front of the plane where he’s sitting. She presses the link.

*I will not take my love away*

*When praises cease and seasons change*

*The whole world turns the other way*
I will not take my love away

She doesn’t turn it off this time, but she doesn’t hear the rest of the words either. She’s too caught up in the first few lines. Each of the songs he’s sent so far has been a message but there’s something different about this one, something that makes her heart ache in her chest.

Stop it, she types to him. She erases it instead of sending it. These songs suck leave me alone, she types out next. She erases that too. She closes her eyes and rests her head back against the seat and tries to remind herself why ending things with him when they get back to New York will be so much better for both of them in the long run.

Her phone vibrates in her hand five minutes later. She presses the link he sent her without even really looking at it, and the moment the first few chords pass through her headphones she’s hit with a flood of memories.

Although loneliness has always been a friend of mine
I’m leaving my life in your hands
People say I’m crazy and that I am blind
Risking it all in a glance
And how you got me blind is still a mystery
I can’t get you out of my head
Don’t care what is written in your history
As long as you’re here with me
I don’t care who you are
Where you’re from
What you did
As long as you love me

She almost texts him. She has the words Seriously, the Backstreet Boys? typed out, and her thumb is hovering over the send button, but she erases it. If she ignores him, eventually he’ll stop. After all, how long can he keep sending her love songs if she never responds?

The answer is four hours. He sends her songs for the rest of the flight, all four fucking hours of it, and she listens to every single one like some kind of lovestruck moron.

He sends her classics like Unchained Melody and You’re All I Need To Get By and Can’t Help Falling In Love and The Way You Look Tonight. He sends her ballads from the nineties like Back At One and That’s When I’ll Stop Loving You and I’ll Never Break Your Heart and I’ll Make Love To You. He sends her multiple songs from Ed Sheeran, and multiple songs from Taylor Swift, and a song about dancing from High School Musical 3 that almost breaks her resolve not to text him.

He sends her a song from that ridiculous circus musical with Zac Efron that he made her watch during movie night. He sends her that John Legend song he hums when he’s cooking, and that Adele song they danced to when they were undercover in Glasgow. She smiles when he sends her Kelly Clarkson’s My Life Would Suck Without You, rolls her eyes when she gets Miss Independent
next, and chews her lip when he finishes his Kelly phase with *Dark Side*.

There are artists she’s never heard of who sing lyrics that make her breath hitch (*Yours* by Russell Dickerson and *Grow As We Go* by Ben Platt and *She Is* by Ben Rector). There are songs that her father loved (*Something* by The Beatles and *Love Is Here To Stay* by Billie Holiday). There are songs about sex (*The Beauty Of Who You Are* and *Your Body* by some group called Plain White T’s and a song called *Marvin Gaye* that makes her snort). She didn’t realize he liked country music, but judging by the amount of songs he sends her (*All To Myself* and *Heaven* and *In Case You Didn’t Know* and—she nearly laughs out loud when she gets it—*Any Man Of Mine* by Shania Twain), he’s a closet country fan.

They’re ten minutes from landing in New York when he sends her a song that makes her heart skip a beat.

*How long will I love you*

*As long as the stars are above you*

*And longer if I can*

*How long will I need you*

*As long as the seasons need to*

*Follow their plan*

*How long will I be with you*

*As long as the sea is bound to*

*Wash up on the sand*

*How long will I want you*

*As long as you want me to*

*And longer by far*

She turns it off before it finishes. The words ring in her ears even once the sound is gone—*I love you*—so she turns on her workout playlist and turns the volume all the way up. Will texts her again a few minutes later, but she doesn’t look at it.

When they land, and everyone gets to their feet, she stays in her seat. She waits until the entire team is off the plane before she stands, throws her bag over her shoulder, and heads toward the exit.

She doesn’t see Will standing along the side of the stairway that descends from the plane until it’s too late. He steps into view and grasps her elbow in one smooth movement. Her muscles tense instinctively, but if he notices, he doesn’t show it. He pulls her around the staircase and out of view of the retreating figures of their team.

“How long will I love you?

As long as the stars are above you

And longer if I can

How long will I need you

As long as the seasons need to

Follow their plan

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“Nothing’s changed,” he murmurs, stepping into her space. She has to tilt her head back to look at him. “What happened today doesn’t change anything. Neither does what you told me.”

“Will—”
“I’m all in, Frankie. I belong to you. I’m yours. And I want you to be mine.” He reaches for her hand and presses something cold and jagged into her palm. “Take your time. I’ll wait up.”

He walks away. She watches him go, frowning, and then she looks down and sees the small metal key to his apartment sitting in her palm.

When Will unlocks his front door with the spare key he borrowed from Susan, part of him hopes he might find Frankie standing on the other side.

She’s not.

It was wishful thinking, he knows. He left the airport before she did and came straight home, so it would’ve been impossible for her to beat him here. But still, he hoped. He always hopes.

He closes his front door and takes a few steps into his apartment. It’s quiet and empty. One of Frankie’s blazers is thrown over the back of a chair at his dining table. There’s a pile of her bobby pins sitting on his kitchen island. Before they left for Zurich, he’d kissed her where he’s standing right now. He wonders if it will be the last time he gets to kiss her in his apartment. The thought leaves him feeling unsettled, so he pushes it away.

He should’ve gone after her when she walked away from him at the Hive. He doesn’t know why he didn’t, except that he was so taken aback by her unexpected confession that he didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t even the confession itself that made him freeze, though it’d be a lie to say he wasn’t a little horrified by the mental image of her systematically torturing and killing seventeen people. It was the way she said it. She was upset and mad as hell and he’s seen both of those things before but he has never, not even once, seen her so close to tears. He can handle her when she’s full of rage. He can handle her when she’s upset or scared or snarky. But he doesn’t know how to handle her when she’s trying not to cry.

He’s always known that her past is dark. Even after Germany, when she stopped him from lighting a man on fire and murdering someone he didn’t even know for sure was Emma’s killer, he knew Frankie had done worse. Their conversation in Marseille made it clear that she has complicated feelings about whatever happened when she went rogue. She’s not ashamed of it, per se, but she’s not proud of it either. He’s not arrogant enough to assume that her reluctance to talk about it is only because she thinks he won’t approve. But he also knows that even if she hates it, and even if she would never admit it, she cares very, very deeply about what he thinks of her.

Which is why he should’ve gone after her. When she got on the plane and walked past him with that look on her face he hadn’t seen since the last time she went AWOL, he knew he’d made a mistake. It was hanging in the air like smog, like something he couldn’t help but breathe in and choke on, and fear clawed at his chest because he knew. He knew what she was going to do. She was going to run. She was going to end things. He hadn’t gone after her, and she thought that meant he couldn’t accept her, and she was going to protect herself and walk away and he was going to lose her.

But then that song came on. He’d had his headphones in his ears and her playlist on since they took off, but he hadn’t really been listening. But then he did listen, and the words felt like coming up for air after nearly drowning, and he thought, I wish I could say this to her. And then he thought, Why can’t I?

So he sent the song to her. And then another. And another. Every once in a while the ellipsis would appear on his screen because she was typing out a response, but she never actually sent anything. So he just kept sending songs. He let other people say all the things he wanted to say, all the things
he was too afraid to say, and he found himself thinking about that night when she showed up at his door and they decided to be together.

*Then I’ll have enough faith for the both of us.*

When the wheels of the plane hit the ground in New York, he knew what he needed to do. If he meant what he said that night, he had to prove it. And proving it didn’t mean a big speech or a grand gesture. Those were his things, not hers. She needed a brief, simple, genuine affirmation that he still wanted her. She needed an action to prove he was serious. She needed space and time to decide for herself, without any pressure or demands.

So that’s what he gave her. He repeated her own words back to her. He gave her his apartment key. He told her to take her time, and then he walked away.

Now, he has to wait. It’s going to be hard. It’s already hard. But he’s got faith in her.

He heads back to his bedroom and unpacks his suitcase, trying to ignore the Mets t-shirt that’s crumpled on the top of his dirty laundry basket. He orders a pizza when he’s done, starts a fire in the fireplace because he knows she likes them, and then he settles down on his couch to wait for her with a bottle of wine and a movie.

Two hours later the movie is done, he’s finished half the pizza, and Frankie still hasn’t arrived. He considers the wine bottle sitting on his coffee table, and wonders whether it’s wise to have a second glass. He thinks she might want some when she gets here, and she’ll be annoyed if he doesn’t leave her enough, so he sets his glass on the coffee table and turns on another movie.

Two hours after that, she’s still a no show. He remembers the look in her eyes when he talked to her after she got off the plane, and he feels unsettled again. He pours himself another glass of wine and turns on another movie.

He falls asleep somewhere in the middle of the third movie. He wakes with a jolt as the credits roll, and thinks he hears the sound of a key in the lock. He leaps to his feet, whirling toward the front door, but it never opens. She’s not here.

A wave of profound, bone-deep disappointment crashes over him. The silence of his apartment is deafening. The fire is down to its last embers. The wine glass he set out for her sits untouched on his coffee table. For the first time, he allows himself to consider the possibility that she’s not coming. He gave her everything he had, everything he is, and it wasn’t enough.

His eyes are dry from fatigue. His limbs feel heavy, and his bullet wounds ache. He turns the TV off and sets the wine glasses in the sink. He goes into the bathroom and swallows some ibuprofen, and then he heads across the hall and stands in the doorway of his bedroom.

He can’t sleep in his bed. His sheets smell like her.

He goes back out on the couch, curls up underneath a blanket, and falls asleep thinking about her.

Will wakes to the feeling of a hand brushing gently through his hair.

He opens his eyes slowly, feeling muddled and fuzzy, and the first thing he sees is Frankie’s face. She’s sitting on his coffee table, one elbow resting on her knee, her opposite hand stroking his cheek. He nuzzles into her touch, and then he blinks at her blearily and rasps, “This is a dream, isn’t it?”
She smirks. “You dream about me a lot, Whiskey?”

He bolts upright at the sound of her voice. He stares at her, his heart galloping in his chest, and she drops her hand and leans back.

“You’re here.”

He doesn’t mean to sound so shocked. She looks nervous all of a sudden, more unsure of herself than usual, and she lowers her gaze.

“I know I’m late,” she says softly. Guilt chases across her expression. “I wasn’t going to come.”

“But you did.”

“I don’t know why.”

“Yes you do.”

She lifts her eyes to meet his. She swallows, her throat bobbing, and shakes her head. “You can’t fix me, Will.”

“I don’t want to fix you,” he murmurs, sliding off the couch and onto his knees before her. “I just want to be with you. All of you. The broken parts and the whole parts and the parts you’re proud of and the parts you’re not. I want all of you.”

She chews the inside of her lip and doesn’t answer. He feels the words starting to well up in his throat, and this time he doesn’t want to keep them at bay. She needs to know. Even if it scares her, even if it changes everything, even if she decides that she’s going to bolt and never look back, she needs to know.

“Frankie, I—”

“Don’t,” she cuts him off. Her fingers fist into his t-shirt, her knuckles white as she grips the fabric. She shakes her head. “Don’t say it, Will.”

He leans toward her. “Why not? You know it’s true.”

“If you say it we can’t go back.”

“I don’t want to go back.” He puts his hands on either side of her face. “I love you.”

She closes her eyes on an exhale. “Will…”

“I don’t need you to say it back,” he whispers. She opens her eyes, and he smiles at her. “I just want you to hear it. I want you to know. I love you, Frankie. I’m in love with you.”

The words hang in the air. Will waits with bated breath to see if she’ll run, but she doesn’t move from the coffee table.

He closes the distance between them slowly. Frankie watches him, her body as still as a statue, her eyes fluttering closed just before he brushes his lips over hers once, twice. He leans back again and they stare at each other, the silence between them building to a crescendo, and then her hand loosens its hold on his t-shirt. She slides it along his chest, up and around to the nape of his neck, and draws his face back to hers.

Every ounce of the tension that was radiating from her body seems to evaporate. She parts her lips
for him, and he strokes his tongue into her mouth. She parts her legs for him, and he rises into the space between them, wrapping his arms around her and pressing his body against hers. She kisses him back with abandon, and he knows that this is her response. She can’t say the words back to him, not yet, but she’s here and she’s not running and she’s giving him what she can, and that’s enough for now.

A few minutes later, when their clothes are scattered on the floor and she’s on top of him on the couch, sinking onto him with a sigh in his ear, he says it again.

“I love you.”

For a moment, she’s perfectly still above him. He waits for her. She pushes him backward against the back of the couch, her palms flat against his chest, and their eyes meet. He stares at her, stunned, because she doesn’t do this. She doesn’t make eye contact with him when they do this. Her teeth scrape along her bottom lip, and a flash of uncertainty flickers in her eyes. But then she rises up and strokes back down onto him, slow and purposeful and still holding his gaze, and the edges of his vision seem to blur.

He lets her set the pace because he knows she wants control. When he slips a hand between them and rubs his thumb against her, her eyes flutter closed. He presses harder, quickening the pace to what she likes, and her body reacts immediately. He’s surprised by how fast her release seems to be building. He wonders if it’s because of what he said. He leans forward, brushes an open-mouthed kiss over the hollow of her throat, and whispers, “I love you, Francesca.” She makes a soft sobbing sound in the back of her throat. A few seconds later she shudders, arches, and comes, and he knows.

He gives her a minute to recover. He strokes his hands through her hair, across her skin, and whispers everything he’s ever wanted to say but didn’t because he thought it would make her run. Eventually, her mouth finds his. She shifts on top of him, reaching past him to grab the back of the couch with both hands, and then she pulls her hips back and pushes them forward and he forgets how to breathe.

The way she’s moving, it’s not going to take him long to finish. Pleasure starts to crest within him. He lifts his mouth to hers, trying to say the words one more time, but she kisses them from his lips as the climax hits like a tidal wave and sweeps him into oblivion.

Will likes the way Frankie’s body fits against his.

He’s lying on his back on his couch, staring up at the ceiling, his fingers playing with strands of her hair. She’s draped on top of him, and their bodies are tangled beneath a blanket. The fire went out a long time ago and he never bothered to turn any lights on, so it’s dark. The city doesn’t sleep but it does doze, and it’s late—or early—enough that they’re surrounded by silence.

He moves his hand down from her hair and dances his fingertips along her spine. She shifts a little on top of him and lifts her head from his chest to look at him. He smiles at her. The corners of her mouth pull upward, and she sets a hand on his sternum and then rests her chin on top of it.

He pushes her hair behind her ear. She watches him. It’s not suspicious, exactly, but there’s curiosity in her eyes. “How did you find all those songs?”

He shrugs. “I pulled them from your playlist.”

Her eyebrows furrow. He grabs his phone from the coffee table. He opens his music app, and pulls
up the playlist he has labeled with a flame emoji, and then holds out the phone to her.

She takes it with the hand that’s not resting beneath her chin. He watches as she scrolls through it, and he can’t resist the urge to smooth his thumb over the lines between her eyebrows. The longer she scrolls, the more stunned she looks. Finally, she meets his gaze.

“Six and a half hours worth of songs?” she breathes in disbelief.

He smiles. “I have a lot of feelings.”

“Jesus, Will,” she murmurs.

“In my defense, I started it after Prague. I’ve had four whole months to add songs. So if you do the math, there’s sixty minutes in an hour, times six point five—”

“You’re not helping your case.”

He chuckles and curls a strand of her hair around his index finger. “Which one was your favorite?”

“Apparently I didn’t hear them all, so I don’t think I can answer that.”

“It was the Britney Spears song, wasn’t it?”

A genuine smile breaks across her lips, and his heart skips a beat. “You do drive me crazy,” she mumbles.

“But in a good way, right?”

She tilts her head. “Jury’s still out.”

He traces his thumb along her smile. She catches it between her teeth, her tongue pressing against his skin. Desire throbs in his body, but he doesn’t want to break the lazy comfort of the moment.

“You have to take the Van Morrison song off though,” she tells him, reaching out to set his phone back on the coffee table.

He frowns. “Crazy Love?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? That’s a great song.”

“Yeah. It was great when I lost my virginity to it too.”

He stares at her. “No way.”

“Yes way.”

“Tell me everything.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You’re such a girl.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

She looks intrigued. She squints at him as if she’s weighing her options, and then she says, “All right.”
“Kasey Hamilton,” he tells her without any prompting. “I was twenty. We met in psych class during a group project. She had this long blonde hair that she wore in a braid, and we dated all of fall semester before we finally did it in my dorm room.”

“Dorm room sex. Very romantic.”

“Hey, I lit some candles. Which, for the record, was definitely against the rules according to the student code of conduct, so I was romantic and a bad boy.”

Frankie traces her fingertips along his jaw. “I’m so turned on right now.”

“Really?”

“No.”

He snorts.

She smiles at him and skates her fingers down his neck. “What happened to her?”

“She dumped me when we got back from winter break. Then she got a frat boy boyfriend and pretended I didn’t exist. Wasn’t the first time I got dumped, but it hurt considering she was my first.”

Frankie’s expression hardens. At first he thinks she’s mad at him for some reason, but then she says, “Do you know where she lives?” and he laughs when he realizes that she’s mad at Kasey Hamilton for breaking his heart.

“No, but I should have Standish find out,” he says, stroking his hand over her shoulder. “Send her a thank you card.”

“For letting you have sex with her?”

“For dumping me so I could be with you.”

Her expression softens for a split second before she rolls her eyes. “If you said terrible lines like that to her then it’s no wonder she went for a frat boy.”

“You going to ditch me for a frat boy too?”

“No. Maybe a man bun, though.”

He laughs. She looks pleased by his amusement, and his heart stutters in his chest. That’s one of his favorite looks of hers—the one where she seems almost surprised by how funny he thinks she is, and maybe a little proud too.

“Your turn,” he tells her.

She doesn’t answer right away. He waits for her. “Kevin Jackson,” she finally murmurs. “I was seventeen.”

He knows her parents died at some point around then, but he doesn’t ask if it was before or after. They don’t talk about her parents. He has a million questions, but he knows better than to ask them. Her parents are sacred to her. She rarely mentions them, even in passing, and he thinks it’s because even now, nearly two decades later, it still hurts.

“So did you put on that song to set the mood?” he asks, playing with her hair again.
“He did, actually,” she says. “He knew how important music was to me, and he’d heard me listening to that song in my car.”

Will’s hand goes still in her hair. “Music is important to you?”

She surveys him for a minute with that familiar look she gets when she’s trying to decide if she wants to tell him something about herself.

“My dad was a musician,” she finally says. “He played trumpet for the New York Philharmonic. Music was important to him. So it was important to me.”

Will stares at her in surprise. She stares back, a mixture of self-consciousness and defiance on her face. He wonders if that’s what brought her here when all of her self-preservation instincts were telling her to run—the fact that he sent her songs for four hours and spoke to her in a language she used to speak with her dad.

“Before you ask,” she adds, amusement threading through her voice, “the answer is no. I have zero musical talent, despite his best efforts. I was more like my mom.”

“What was she like?” Will asks before he can stop himself.

“My dad called her an undercover nerd. Popular and social, but always the smartest person in the room.”

“And that’s you?”

“It used to be,” she says softly.

His heart twists in his chest. He imagines her at seventeen, bright and friendly with the world at her feet, and what it must have been like to lose so much so fast. He wonders what else she’s lost, and what’s been taken from her, and why she ended up so afraid to trust people. He marvels that even after all of that, she’s brave enough to give him a shot.

He strokes his thumb over her cheek. “I love you.”

Every time he says it, she looks less afraid than she did the first time. “You’re just going to keep saying it, aren’t you?” she murmurs.

“I’m going to say it until you believe it. And then I’ll say it a million more times after that.”

She pushes off his chest, her skin brushing along his as she rises above him and then lowers her mouth to his. It’s a brief kiss, more soft and sweet than he’s accustomed to from her, and his heart swells in his chest. Maybe he’s just being hopeful again, but he thinks he can taste the words on her lips. I love you too.

She pulls back and stares down at him, her hands on either side of his head and her eyes flickering over his face. He glides his hands down the sides of her body, her skin warm and soft beneath his palms.

“It’s really not fair how pretty you are,” he tells her.

She smirks. “Not fair, huh?”

“So not fair.” He curls a hand around her neck, and traces his thumb along her jaw. “Also, I love you. In case you didn’t know.”
She shakes her head. “I had no idea. You’re terrible at expressing your emotions, you know. You should really work on that.”

“I really should.” He skims his hand along the curve of her hip. “Can I start working on it now?”

Her smile is breathtaking. “I’d be disappointed in you if you didn’t,” she whispers just before her mouth meets his again.
For the record, if this really was season two, then Frankie probably would *not* have shown up at Will’s apartment last chapter. If we’d gotten the ten seasons of this show we deserved, I think we would’ve seen a lot of on-again, off-again Friskey. But I didn’t do that here because a) I don’t have time to write ten seasons worth of a show, b) I think the way I’ve set up their relationship—and the fact that Will unwittingly pursued Frankie in a way that reminded her of her dad—makes it believable that Frankie would have shown up despite her fears, and c) I’ve got more than enough angst planned for the future. (Insert devil emoji here.)

Also, while we’re on the subject of this fic not quite being the show, a note on timing: It’s hard to pin down how much time passed between the pilot and the finale. I originally decided it was six months, but Frankie said at one point that when she met Will, “it was Moscow, it was winter, and we were all cranky.” But it’s also clearly winter in Prague during the finale based on their coats and Will’s scarf, and a 3 to 4 month timeline felt too short for me. So I’ve settled on it being a year between pilot and finale. I kind of like that because it explains why Frankie had no problem playing drinking games in Will’s apartment while he packed—after a year, she’d be comfortable enough with him for that, and comfortable enough not to run the other way when he looked at her like he did before that kiss we never got to see (I weep).

The reason I bring this up is that you’ve probably noticed this fic time jumps. This chapter right here is set in July—three months after they decide to be together, five months after Prague. If this was the show and I was the showrunner, there would be episodes instead of time jumps—episodes focused specifically on Standish, Jai, and Susan, episodes focused on Susan and Ray (whom I love), episodes focused on Will and Frankie without being about their romantic relationship. But I have limited free time in which to write, so I ain’t got time for all that. So we’re going to stick with time-jumping to big moments in Friskey’s relationship. And these next few chapters will be...well. Big. Slow burn at first to build some context. But big. You should probably buckle up again.

It’s always hot in New York City in July, but this year is particularly bad. The humidity is stifling, the kind that clings to your skin and makes you feel like you’re breathing through a wet sheet, and Will wakes up several days in a row to find that his apartment windows are coated with condensation.

“It’s because you have the air conditioning so low,” Frankie mutters to him one morning when he points it out to her.

She’s sitting on a stool at his kitchen island with her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. She looks like she’s getting ready to cross the Alaskan tundra—she’s wearing one of his long-sleeve t-shirts and a hooded sweatshirt, and her legs are clad in a pair of his sweatpants that are so long on her he can’t even see her feet.
“Pretty sure you told me to turn it down last night when we got home,” he says, cutting into the frittata he’s got in a cast iron skillet on the stove. Frankie doesn’t eat eggs for breakfast, but she does like his frittatas. He’s prouder of that than he probably should be.

She snorts. “I think you took it a little too far.”

“Disagree.”

“Your apartment is a refrigerator.”

“The heat index is going to be 105 today.”

“I can’t feel my fingers.”

“You’re a drama queen.”

She mumbles something obscene at him around the rim of her coffee mug, and he laughs. He scoops a slice of frittata out of the skillet and onto a plate, and then turns toward the island and slides the plate across the counter.

“You were very cuddly last night,” he says, meeting her gaze over the island. “I’m going to leave the air at this temperature forever because I like cuddly Frankie.”

“I’m going to sleep at my place if you do that,” she shoots back, setting her mug down to reach for the plate.

He pulls it out of her reach. She arches an eyebrow at him. “You don’t fool me, you know,” he tells her. “I know you like to cuddle.”

“It was survival instinct.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

Her phone buzzes loudly on the counter and cuts off whatever snarky reply she’s planning to make. She unlocks her phone, and he watches as her eyes flicker over the screen. “Ray wants us at the Dead Drop.”

“Urgent?”

She puts her phone down and reaches for her fork. “Not urgent enough for me to leave without eating.” She scoops some frittata into her mouth and hums appreciatively.

Will grins at her. She notices.

“What?”

“You like my frittatas,” he says with a shrug. “You’re wearing my clothes. We’re bickering about cuddling. It’s so domestic.”

She rolls her eyes and shoves the plate away from her. “Nevermind. Lost my appetite.”

“More for me,” he says with a shrug. He reaches for her plate, but she pulls it back toward her.

“Changed my mind,” she mutters.

“Cause you love it.”
“Cause I’m hungry. Like I said. Survival instinct.”

He puts his elbows on the counter and leans toward her. “Come on, Frankie. Admit it. It’s the best breakfast you’ve ever had.”

“Definitely not,” she says around a mouthful.

“Liar.”

“Just because you don’t like the answer doesn’t mean it’s a lie.”

“Fine. What’s the best breakfast you ever had?”

“Short rib hash from a diner that’s not open anymore,” she says immediately. “It’s the only other egg breakfast I’ve ever liked. I think I ate it once a week my sophomore year of college.”

Will frowns. “What?”

She pauses with her fork halfway to her mouth. “Do you not know what short ribs are?”

He gives her a look. “I know what short ribs are, smartass. I’m talking about what you said about college.”

She looks baffled. “What about it?”

“You didn’t go to college.”

“Yes I did.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did,” she says, starting to smile. “You can’t work for the CIA without a college degree, Will.”

He frowns. “Yeah, but your file says you got an accelerated degree once you’d already been recruited.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So I thought—”

“You assumed,” she cuts him off. “You assumed I didn’t go to college after I graduated from high school. But I did. That’s just not how I got my degree.”

He gapes at her. She eats another bite of frittata, and even though she’s chewing she’s still smirking at him. Her smirking ability knows no bounds. Sometimes it’s infuriating. Sometimes it’s sexy. Right now it’s just confusing.

“How come you never corrected me?” he asks, thinking of all the times he’s said things like because you skipped college.

She shrugs. “Because you would’ve made it a thing.”

“I would not.”

“You definitely would.”
“I would not.”

“You’re making it a thing right now,” she points out.

He straightens and crosses his arms over his chest. “I have questions.”

“Of course you do.”

“Where’d you go? What did you major in? Why’d you drop out?”

She chews some frittata and doesn’t answer him. It’s a good sign that she hasn’t said the famous words yet— I’m not ready to tell you that—but she’s also not telling him what he wants to know and it’s killing him.

He narrows his eyes at her. “I can find out.”

“You could,” she acknowledges. “But you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll feel like cheating, and you hate cheating. Also because you want me to tell you. You like when I tell you things. Makes you feel special.”

“I am special.”

“Did your mom tell you that?”

He ignores the insult and squints at her. “You just mentioned your sophomore year. So you had at least two years on campus. What did you do during those two years that you don’t want me to know about? Did you star in a campus musical? Did you major in something super nerdy, like chemical engineering? Were you a party girl?” He gasps. “Oh my god, were you in a sorority?”

“Yeah, I was Kappa Kappa Gamma.”

“Really?”

“No,” she scoffs.

“Come on, Frankie,” he pleads.

She sets her fork down on her plate. “Why does it even matter?”

“Because I think you’re interesting and worth knowing.”

She blinks at him as though it’s never occurred to her that someone might want to know things about her just because she’s interesting and worth knowing.

He frowns. “Hasn’t a guy ever wanted to know things about you just because he cares about you and is interested in you?”

“No,” she says bluntly.

That breaks his heart a little, but he’s careful not to let it show on his face. She doesn’t like when she thinks he’s pitying her, and she often confuses his sympathy and empathy with pity.

“Never?” he presses.
She gets a faraway look in her eyes and glances down at her plate with a shrug. “Maybe a long time ago. But not since I joined the agency.”

“For the second time?”

“For the first.”

Will feels his heart break again. Part of him is incredulous—she hasn’t been with a guy who genuinely cared about her since she was twenty-one?—and part of him is angry—what the hell kind of blind, idiotic moron wouldn’t see how extraordinary she is?—but mostly he’s just determined to show her what it’s like to be with someone who actually loves her.

He leans across the counter and looks her in the eye. “I’m not like those other losers.”

She smirks. “Yeah, they didn’t make frittatas. Or cry over laundry detergent commercials.”

“I’m serious, Frankie. I want to know things about you. Even things that you think are unimportant, like where you went to college and what you did while you were there and why you didn’t get your degree from there.”

She furrows her eyebrows at him. He waits. He’s grown accustomed to the way she scrutinizes him. He used to be offended every time she gave him that suspicious, guarded look she’s so good at. Not anymore. He understands her better now. He doesn’t know all the details of her past yet, but he’s starting to suspect that somewhere along the way, somebody she trusted with her whole heart betrayed her.

“All right,” Frankie murmurs. She puts her elbows on the counter and leans toward him. “Let’s make it interesting.”

“Kinda feel like it’s already interesting.”

She smiles. “You’re nosy as hell. I bet you can’t go an entire week without asking me a single question about myself.”

He scoffs. “I can totally do that.”

“Then bet me.”

“What do I get if I win?”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know about college. And maybe some other things.”

“And if I lose?”

“I get control of your thermostat.”

“That’s it?” he says in surprise.

“I get control of your thermostat indefinitely.”

“Oh.” He frowns. “That seems risky. I’ve seen how warm you like to keep your hotel rooms.”

She smiles. “If you don’t think you can do it, then don’t take the bet.”

He narrows his eyes at her. “I can do it.”
“All right then.” She holds her hand out between them. “Bet.”

“Bet,” he echoes, shaking her hand. And then, because he’s Will Chase and he can’t help himself, he bends forward and kisses her knuckles. “Easiest bet I’ve ever won,” he murmurs, smiling up at her.

She smirks. “We’ll see.”

Twenty-four hours later, they’ve managed to stop a radicalized anti-government group from detonating three bombs at a global technology summit in Lisbon and Will almost loses the bet.

He’s sitting next to Frankie on the curb behind the arena they just saved from total destruction. They’re waiting for Jai and the rest of the team, and she’s sitting close enough that their shoulders are pressed together. Will bumps her knee gently with his. She smiles and bumps back.

_I love this and I love you_, he thinks. He could tell her. He tells her a lot. But he tries not to do it every time it pops into his head, because Susan let it slip the other day that Frankie worries sometimes that he’ll get tired of waiting for her to say it back. He doesn’t want her to worry, and he doesn’t want her to say it just because she feels like she has to, so sometimes he swallows the words instead of saying them.

Frankie, totally oblivious to his thoughts, pulls a tiny bottle of rum out of her pocket and waves it at him. “Want to start celebrating early?”

He laughs. “Are you serious? You did all that with a bottle of airplane rum in your pocket?”

“Sexy, right?” she says, smiling at him while she unscrews the lid.

He laughs again. But then she tips her head back and takes a swig, and his eyes follow the elegant line of her throat up to where her lips are wrapped around the bottle, and he feels a familiar tightening in his groin.

“Yeah, actually,” he admits.

She holds the bottle out to him with a smirk. Her lips are wet from the rum, and instead of ignoring the impulse, he obeys it. He leans forward and kisses the remnants of alcohol from her lips.

When he pulls back a few seconds later she looks surprised, but pleased. He snags the bottle from her hand, swallows a mouthful, and then shrugs. “Tastes better on you,” he says, handing the bottle back.

She shakes her head at him. “You think you’re so smooth.”

“Aren’t I?”

“No.”

“Your pupils are dilated. And you just looked at my mouth. I must be doing something right.”

She bites her lip around a smile, but before either of them can say anything else there’s a commotion off to Frankie’s left. They both tense, their hands reaching in unison for their guns, but there’s no need. It’s just a teenage boy walking his very large and very excitable puppy.

Will has always considered himself the ultimate dog person. Dogs love him, and he loves them. So he’s a little surprised when the puppy beelines straight for Frankie instead of him, lunging toward
her face to shower her with kisses. He’s even more surprised when Frankie laughs delightedly and reaches up to stroke the dog’s fur.

“Hey pretty girl,” she coos.

Will gapes at her. Frankie doesn’t notice. She’s too busy nuzzling the puppy. The dog’s tail is wagging maniacally. She climbs into Frankie’s lap and licks her face furiously, and Frankie laughs and lets her.

“Sorry,” the teenager apologizes in Portuguese.

“It’s fine,” Frankie says with a grin. Will can’t stop staring at her. She looks thrilled.

“Come on, Athena,” the boy says, tugging on the leash.

The puppy whips around at the sound of her name, and then trips over her giant paws as she scrambles out of Frankie’s lap and toward her owner. The boy laughs, and he and his dog take off running down the street.

Frankie watches them go with a soft smile on her lips, and then wipes her face with her sleeve. “Yuck. Puppy drool.” She finally looks over at Will, realizes he’s staring at her, and frowns. “What?”

“I didn’t know you liked dogs.”

She opens her mouth to answer, and then shuts it. She tilts her head. “Are you *asking* me if I like dogs?”

He almost says yes, and then he remembers their bet. He shakes his head. “Nope, that wasn’t a question. It was a statement. There was a period at the end, not a question mark.”

She smiles. “I had a dog growing up.”

“Oh,” Will says, trying desperately to ignore all the questions that are suddenly pummeling his brain.

Frankie seems to know that he’s struggling, because her smile widens. “He was a beagle. I named him Jesse. But you probably don’t want to know why I named him that, do you?”

“Nope,” Will says.

She leans toward him. “You want to hear about how I used to dress him up in my tutus?”

*WHEN AND WHY DID YOU WEAR TUTUS AND ARE THERE PICTURES I CAN LOOK AT?* a voice inside Will’s head screams.

“All you have to do is ask,” Frankie purrs, leaning closer to him. “I want to tell you about it.”

The last time she used that tone of voice was a week ago on a red-eye to Tunisia when she told him to meet her in the bathroom. Even though it was a private plane and the rest of the team was asleep, it was a risk. But good *god* was it worth it. So worth it, in fact, that Will hadn’t even minded when Jai—who Will suspected was only awake because he hadn’t gotten his hand over Frankie’s mouth fast enough to stifle her moan when she came—rolled his eyes at them as they walked past him on the way back to their seats.

“Ask me, Will,” Frankie purrs, leaning closer to him. “I want to tell you about it.”
Will buries his head in his hands and groans, both from the memory of their tryst on the plane and from the realization that he might never find out why his girlfriend wore tutus and named her dog Jesse.

Frankie laughs.

By the third day, Frankie is having so much fun teasing Will that she almost doesn’t care if she wins the bet.

She’s gotten it down to an art form. Every few hours, she’ll offer up a small, seemingly insignificant detail about herself. Sometimes, Will starts to blurt out a question and then stops himself just in time. Sometimes, his eyes go wide and then he groans in frustration and buries his head in his hands. Sometimes he just glares at her. But every time, regardless of which reaction he has, Frankie smiles and says, *All you have to do is ask.*

Around dinnertime on day five, after Will finds out she wasn’t joking when she told him she was prom queen, he tells her she’s cheating.

“I am not,” she says with a laugh.

“Yes you are,” he insists.

His face is flushed with frustration. Frankie is surprised to find that she thinks it’s kind of cute. If Standish and Ray weren’t playing pool three feet away, she’d shove Will up against the bar and kiss him until he stopped being so mad.

“I’m not cheating, Will,” she tells him instead. “We never made any rules. If there are no rules, it’s impossible to cheat.”

He sputters at her, unable to argue with her logic. She tilts a little closer to him.

“You seem frustrated,” she says in a low voice. “You want to throw in the towel and call the bet off? I promise I won’t turn your thermostat up too high.”

His eyes flash. “You’re going to pay for this.”

She smirks at him. “What are you going to do, Whiskey? Add more questions to that list on your phone you think I don’t know about?”

He huffs at her and storms away. She sips her beer and watches him go, amused and unable to resist winking at Susan, who knows about the bet and finds the whole thing hilarious.

Four hours later, Frankie is remarkably less amused.

“I swear to god, Will,” she says, yanking on his hair with far more force than necessary. “If you don’t get me off in the next thirty seconds...”

He chuckles against the inside of her thigh. “What are you going to do, Frankie?” he asks, looking up at her with a grin that’s infuriatingly sexy. “Do it yourself?”

“Yes. I don’t need you. I can—”

His tongue flicks over her, and the rest of her threat is lost as she arches off of his bed with a groan, one hand still fisted in his hair. For what seems like the millionth time since they got back to his place, she feels heat starting to coil tightly in her body. She gets lost in it, consumed by the way her
body feels like it’s about to combust, and then, when she’s hovering right on the edge and is this fucking close, he moves his mouth away from her just like he has every other time.

She sobs—literally sobs—in frustration and then unleashes a string of curses that would make a sailor blush. Will rises from his place between her legs, his body looming over hers in the darkness, and leans down to kiss the words from her lips. He tastes like sex, and a wave of desire shudders through her body. She digs her nails into his back hard enough to leave marks, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“You seem frustrated, Francesca,” he whispers. “You want to throw in the towel and call the bet off? I promise I’ll give you what you want.”

“I fucking hate you.”

He laughs, and then his hand is between her legs and he’s sliding his fingers into her. “Still hate me now?”

She whimpers instead of answering. She never whimpers. If she wasn’t so damn frustrated she’d be mortified.

“Doesn’t sound like hate to me,” he murmurs against her throat.

“Will, please,” she pleads, lifting her hips into his hand.

His breath catches a little, his mouth pausing against her skin, and she realizes immediately that she’s found something that will get her what she wants. She should’ve known asking nicely would be a turn on for him. Damn boy scout.

“Please,” she repeats, dropping her voice into that whisper he likes.

“Not fair,” he tells her, his mouth tracing the outline of her collarbone. “You know I like when you beg.”

Normally she’d object—strongly, strongly object—to the idea that she’s ever begged him for anything, let alone an orgasm. But he’s worked her over so well that she feels nearly incoherent with need, and she knows that he’s patient and determined enough to drag this out. She’s willing to beg a little if it means she can finally get some relief. She’ll just deny it happened later.

“Please,” she breathes again.

His mouth trails down her body, slow but steady, and then hits home. She bucks upward, and he splays the hand that’s not inside her over her hip to hold her in place. The spark ignites in her body again, building and building, and she’s so desperate for it that she wonders—is he really this good? Or is there some other reason why her body reacts to him like this?

A tiny flicker of fear flares in her chest, but before it can grow into something more defined, Will finally sends her over the edge, and she forgets to care about anything else.

“Hey guys,” Susan greets when Frankie walks into the Dead Drop the next morning with Will not far behind her.

“Hey,” Frankie replies as she drops into a chair at the table where Susan is seated. “You the only one who’s here?”
“So far.” Susan grins at Will. “You lose the bet yet?”

“No,” Will says petulantly as he sits in the chair next to Frankie’s. “And despite your very upsetting lack of confidence in me, I won’t. I only need to last another twenty-four hours.”

Frankie snorts.

“You’re not worried?” Susan asks her.

“No. He’s definitely going to lose. He almost lost five minutes ago.”


Frankie rolls her eyes. “For the last time, Will, you can’t cheat when there are no rules.”

“You’re seducing me with facts about yourself to trick me into losing. If that’s not cheating then at the very least it’s bad form.”

Frankie grins at him. “I’m seducing you with facts? Seriously?”

“You know it’s seduction. That’s why you keep using your sex voice.”

“My what?”

“Ask me about my dog, Will,” he says, his voice dropping into a low and breathy tone as he reaches out and strokes his hand over her knee in what she thinks is supposed to be a seductive way. “Ask me about how I was prom queen, Will.”

“That is not what I sound like.”

“Hey party people,” Ray says, walking in the front door before Will can reply. “Guess who I ran into a few blocks ago?”

Jai appears behind him, and Ray slings his arm around the shorter man’s shoulders and beams. “Jai and I walked to work together.”

“Yes, it was a delightful little journey,” Jai says, shooting a dark look in Frankie’s direction.

Frankie snickers, and then the door bursts open again.

“Good morning, beautiful people,” Standish announces as he swaggerers into the room with his chest puffed out. “It’s a lovely day to save the world, don’t you think?”

“Why are you so chipper?” Susan asks with raised eyebrows.

“I’m not chipper. I’m normal. This is normal.”

“No it’s not,” Jai disputes. “You barely speak before ten in the morning.” He frowns, looks Standish up and down, and then he smirks. “You’re wearing yesterday’s clothes.”

Standish frowns. “What? No I’m not.”

“You definitely are,” Will says.

“I’d recognize that ugly t-shirt anywhere,” Frankie adds.

Standish glares at her. “This is high fashion, Frankie. You wouldn’t understand.”
“You’re right,” Frankie deadpans. “I definitely didn’t pretend to be an heiress who wore designer clothes every day for seven months. I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that,” Standish says.

Ray frowns at him. “Even I know she was being sarcastic.”

“Did you sleep over at a girl’s house?” Jai asks Standish.

Standish’s face splits into a wide grin. “Yeah.”

“There it is,” Susan says. “I should’ve guessed. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Grocery store girl,” Standish gushes.

“Wait,” Will says with a frown. “I thought she was moving to L.A.?”

“She is. She’s leaving today. But she wanted a little piece of me before she left.” Standish wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“Gross,” Frankie says.

Susan snorts. Standish glares at them.

“Maybe we should get to the mission,” Ray says, glancing at Will.

“Good idea,” Will agrees. “Where we headed?”

“Cuba.”

Frankie knows, even without looking, that Jai’s eyes are suddenly fixed on her. She glances at him, holds his gaze for a beat, and then looks away.

Ray pulls a stack of folders out of the bag slung over his shoulder and starts to hand them out.

“These are your dossiers. There’s a lot to know, so you’ll want to make sure you read them.”

Frankie opens hers and is greeted by a photo of a man in his mid to late fifties. His gray hair is buzzed close to his head, and his face has the kind of weather-beaten, aged look that career criminals usually wear. There’s a scar across his left eyebrow, and his eyes are two different colors—one is blue, and the other is brown. Frankie flips the photo out of the way and studies the typed report beneath.

“Frank Bryce,” she reads aloud. She frowns and looks up at Ray. “Why do I know that name?”

“Probably because he’s former CIA,” Ray answers as he hands the last folder to Standish. “He was indicted back in 2010 for selling millions of dollars worth of weapons, explosives, and surveillance equipment to a dictator in Libya. He’s been one of the most wanted fugitives in the world ever since, but nobody could find him. Until now.”

“Who found him?” Jai asks.

“Scott Mendes and Ava Griffin. Mendes is MI6, but Griffin is CIA. Their info is in your dossiers.”

Frankie flips past the report on Bryce until she finds two pictures labeled Mendes, S. and Griffin, A. Mendes is a handsome guy around Will’s age with blond hair, brown eyes, and a well-kept beard. Griffin looks younger than Mendes, and is very pretty—her copper hair is long and tumbles down
around her shoulders, and her green eyes seem to pierce right through the camera.

“They were stationed in Cuba and deep undercover. Their mission was to gather intel on Liga Havana, where Mendes was working.”

“Liga Havana?” Will says, looking up from his file with a frown. “You mean the rum brand?”

“Yes,” Ray confirms. “Liga is a joint venture between the Cuban government and a private company called Chimera, which is an English beverage distributor. It’s the most popular brand of rum in the world even though it isn’t sold in the U.S.”

“I’ve had that stuff,” Standish says. “Spring Break in college. I don’t remember much of what happened after I drank it, but I remember it tasted good.”

“It is good,” Jai agrees.

“Rum brothers for life,” Standish says, holding out his fist. Jai bumps his fist against Standish’s with a smile. Frankie tries not to roll her eyes and fails.

“So why were Mendes and Griffin investigating Liga?” Susan asks.

“There were some whispers that Liga was using its shipping routes and equipment to transport people and drugs along with their alcohol. Mendes and Griffin are part of an inter-agency task force focused on trafficking.”

“Anyone want to take bets on whether they’re sleeping together?” Standish asks with a grin.

“Actually, they’re married,” Ray says.

“Whaaaat?” Standish says, whipping around to face Ray. “Like, in real life? Like Mr. and Mrs. Smith?”

“Yes.”

“That is both adorable and badass.”

“Focus, Standish,” Will says.

“Right. Sorry. Continue, Ray.”

Ray smiles. “About three months into their assignment, they started hearing rumors that Liga was also laundering money for an eastern European terrorist cell through a charity called Mundo Corazon,” he continues. “They secured invitations to Mundo Corazon’s annual fundraising gala in Havana with the goal of identifying some of the charity’s benefactors. While they were there, they saw Bryce.”

“Did he know he’d been spotted?” Will asks.

“They didn’t think so,” Ray says. “Griffin got word to the agency that Bryce was in the country and requested permission to bring him in. Permission was granted. Two days later Griffin and Mendes disappeared, and no one in the CIA or MI6 has heard from them since. It’s been a week.”

Standish winces. “That can’t be good.”

“No,” Will agrees. “What’s our play?”
“You have two objectives,” Ray says. “First, determine if Mendes and Griffin are still alive. If they are, we’ll coordinate an extraction to get them out of the country safely. Second, bring in Bryce.”

“Dead or alive?” Frankie asks.

“You’ve been given permission to do whatever needs to be done.”

Standish whistles. “This dude bout to die then cause you know Frankie always goes for the kill.”

“He’s a traitor who’s responsible for the deaths of CIA and MI6 operatives,” Frankie says, her voice sharp. “He signed his own death warrant.”

“We don’t know that Griffin and Mendes are dead yet,” Will reminds her. “And we don’t know it was Bryce who did it.”

“Yeah, sure,” Frankie says bitterly.

Jai catches her eye from across the room, and even though his expression is blank, she knows exactly what he’s remembering. She’s remembering it too. Will, of course, notices. He turns toward her, his eyebrows furrowing with an unspoken question, but she ignores him.

“When do we leave, Ray?”

“Two hours,” Ray answers. “You’re flying commercial this time. Your cover stories are in your dossiers. Will, you’ll be a wealthy businessman who is taking his mistress on a romantic getaway. Frankie, you’ll be his mistress.”

Standish snorts. Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Susan, you and Jai will be visiting history professors from England. Standish will be your grad assistant. Any questions?”

“Yeah,” Standish says, raising his hand. “Am I still allowed to buy Liga rum even though they might be funding terrorists? Or is that too morally questionable?”

Everyone in the room rolls their eyes.

Eight hours later, Frankie is sitting in the front seat of a black 1959 Cadillac Eldorado convertible as Will drives through the streets of Havana with the car’s top down. They’ve spent the last two hours working their way through a list of places that Griffin and Mendes could be, but they haven’t had any luck yet.

“Your taste in cars has really improved since France,” Frankie observes, running her hand over the red and white leather of the front seat.

Will smiles at her. “You like it?”

“I do.”

Will steers the car smoothly around a bike taxi that is inching along in front of them, and then reaches out and sets his hand on her knee. “I like this,” he says, stroking his thumb over the hem of her purple sundress.

“Thought you might,” she tells him with a smirk.
“You guys,” Standish gasps over comms. “Oh my god. This is the best pizza I’ve ever eaten in my entire life.”

“Really Standish?” Frankie says. “Will and I are driving all over Havana looking for possibly dead agents and you’re eating pizza?”

“You know my blood sugar crashes!” Standish says. “And seriously, this pizza. It’s the best. You fold it up and you eat it like a little pizza taco and—” There’s some loud chewing and then a muffled moan, and then Standish says with an obviously full mouth, “Oh god, I think I just died and went to heaven.”

“Can you please chew with your mouth closed?” Jai’s voice says with disdain.

“Gross, Standish,” Susan says. “You have grease all over your shirt.”

“You want to try it?” Standish asks.

“Get that out of my face,” Jai snaps. “If you drip grease on my suit I will end you.”

“I feel like I should threaten to pull the car over if they don’t stop bickering,” Will says to Frankie.

She snorts. His thumb is still stroking absently over her knee, and since his eyes are fixed on the road she takes advantage of the opportunity to study him. The white linen shirt he’s wearing makes his skin look tan, and he’s got the beginnings of some scruff on his jaw. He’s smiling—he’s always smiling—and she wonders what it would be like if they were here on vacation instead of looking for possibly dead agents and a traitorous CIA operative.

“Here we go,” Will says, guiding the car to a stop in front of a dilapidated building. “Guys, we’re here. Quit bickering.”

Jai and Standish keep bickering.

“Shut up you two,” Frankie snaps.

Jai and Standish stop bickering.

“Oh, sure, listen to mom,” Will says with a sigh. He casts a glance at Frankie. “Why do they only listen to you when it comes to stuff like that?”

“Because she’s violent and terrifying,” Standish replies.

Frankie shrugs. “He’s not wrong.”

Will chuckles and gets out of the car. Frankie does too. “Same as before?” Will asks as he walks around the hood of the car.

“Yep,” Frankie says, holding out her hand.

Will weaves his fingers through hers and then leads her toward the closed wooden door of a building painted bright pink. He knocks, and then calls out, “Javi? You home, buddy? It’s Rick and Kate. We thought we’d stop by and see if you wanted to grab dinner.”

Just like every other place they’ve checked out, there’s no answer. Frankie shifts a little closer to Will and casts a quick glance down one end of the street, and then the other. The only people in sight are a group of young boys, but they’re kicking a soccer ball around and aren’t paying attention.
“Clear,” Frankie murmurs.

Will turns the doorknob and then shoves his shoulder against the door, and it opens with a groan. “Oh look, honey, the door is open.”

“How convenient,” Frankie replies, following him over the threshold and into the building.

She closes the door behind her, and immediately pulls her gun out of the purse she has slung across her body. Will pulls his from his waistband. There’s a stairway just inside the door, and a colorful pattern of tiles follows the curve of the staircase up to a second floor. There are two doors on the first floor past the staircase, and Frankie follows a step behind Will as he heads for the first.

They clear the first room quickly and silently, and then move on to the second. Both are empty except for some broken furniture and a few scattered pieces of trash. There’s an eerie sort of silence hanging in the air, and Frankie feels like the hair on the back of her neck is standing up. She can tell Will feels it too. He walks toward the window and glances out, his shoulders tense as he looks for any sign of trouble, but he must not see anything because he turns back to her and jerks his head upward in an unspoken question. She nods.

He walks back toward the front entrance, and Frankie follows him up the stairs to the second floor. There’s only one door at the top. Will looks at her, and she nods. He turns the doorknob and opens the door, and they stride into the room with their guns raised.

It’s a studio apartment. There’s a kitchenette in the far corner, a bed on the opposite side of the room, and a small table for two sitting in front of windows that look out over a balcony. It’s the kind of place that Frankie knows Will would normally find charming, but if that’s what he’s thinking, he doesn’t say it. They’re both too preoccupied by the sight of Griffin and Mendes, who are tied to chairs in the center of the room and barely recognizable beneath all the blood and bruises.


Frankie follows his gaze and sees a closed door on the far wall next to the bed. “Mine,” she says. “You check them.”

Will darts forward toward Mendes and Griffin without an argument, and Frankie creeps in the direction of the bathroom. She stops in front of the door and then pushes it open slowly with her left hand and keeps her gun raised in her right.

The bathroom appears to be empty. It’s dead silent. She takes half a step inside. As soon as she crosses the threshold the door slams into her body with enough force to send her careening into the sink. The collision nearly knocks the gun out of her hand, but she hangs on and twists her body just in time to see Bryce leaping out from behind the door with a knife in his hand.

He lashes out at her, and Frankie curves her body inward to avoid the first swipe across her stomach, and then throws her head back as the blade whips an inch past her cheek. She curls her fingers around the edge of the sink and kicks both feet out. They connect with Bryce’s ribs and he crashes backward into the bathroom door. Frankie lifts her gun, but Bryce lunges forward and closes his hands around hers, turning the muzzle at the last second so that her shot buries itself in the door instead of his body.

They wrestle for a second, grappling for control of her gun. Bryce headbutts her hard enough to make her see stars. Frankie grits her teeth against the pain, yanks her hands forward so that his arms are outstretched, and then knees him in the stomach. Bryce gasps, snarls, and then throws his
weight into her and they stumble backward.

He pins her against the door jamb just as Will appears. He grabs Bryce’s shoulders and throws him off of Frankie and out into the main room of the apartment. Frankie straightens and lifts her gun, and Will turns and lifts his too. But instead of running toward them or freezing, Bryce turns the other way, takes three long strides, and crashes through the wooden shutters hanging on one of the windows.

Frankie sprints after him, Will hot on her heels, but by the time they get through the broken shutters and out onto the balcony, Bryce is nowhere in sight.

“Where the hell did he go?” Frankie demands.

A second later an engine revs beneath them, and a motorcycle tears out from under the balcony and races down the street. Will and Frankie raise their guns in unison, but before either of them can get a good shot, Bryce skids down a side street and disappears.

Frankie lowers her gun with an annoyed growl.

Will turns toward her. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She glances toward Griffin and Mendes. “Are they?”

“Dead,” Will says quietly. “Bodies are still warm.”

There’s a catch in his voice that draws Frankie’s eyes back to his face. Will is emotional and empathetic, but he’s also a spy. Dead bodies don’t upset him, especially when they’re the bodies of people he never knew, so she doesn’t understand the expression on his face that seems to be a mixture of fear and sadness. He reaches up and presses his hand against the side of her face, his thumb trailing over her cheek. Frankie frowns at him in confusion. She’s fine. They’re both fine. They’ve been involved in dozens of fights that were far more dangerous than this one. Why is he upset?

“Guys?” Susan’s voice says over the comms. “Everyone okay?”

“Yeah,” Will says, dropping his hand from Frankie’s face. “Bryce got away. Mendes and Griffin are dead.”

“Well that’s depressing,” Standish sighs. “What now?”

“We need to find Bryce,” Will replies.

“How are we supposed to do that?” Standish asks. “He could be anywhere.”

“Francesca,” Jai says pointedly.

Frankie knows what he’s thinking even if he doesn’t say it. “Yeah I know,” she sighs. She looks at Will. “I know someone who can help.”

Will smiles. “Is he a criminal or an ex-boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

“Both.”
“Oh, great,” Standish sighs. “Another one of Frankie’s exes.”

“He’s actually not that bad,” Jai interjects. “I think you might like him, Will.”

“Do you trust him?” Will asks Frankie.

“With this? Yes.”

“What does that even mean?” Standish demands. “What don’t you trust him with? Is he going to rob us? Kill us in our sleep? Dismember us and eat us?”

“Yes, Standish, he’s a cannibal,” Frankie says, rolling her eyes. “He’s going to eat you like you ate that pizza.”

“Is she serious?” Standish squeaks.

“Definitely,” Jai deadpans.

Will snorts. “Standish, run your facial recognition program through the security feeds at all of the major points of entry into the country. I doubt Bryce will make a run for it that way, but better safe than sorry. Susan, reach out to Ray with an update and see what he’s found out about any other contacts Griffin and Mendes might have had here. Jai, I need you to work on some micro-trackers that we can plant on Bryce next time we see him just in case we can’t apprehend him.”

“On it,” Jai says.

“What are you two going to do?” Susan asks.

Will smirks at Frankie. “We’re going to visit Frankie’s ex.”
Sixteen

“Is your brain going to explode?”

Will looks over at Frankie. She’s driving their rented Cadillac, her right hand on the steering wheel and her left elbow resting on the driver’s side door. Her hair is whipping in the wind. The aviator sunglasses sitting on her nose, along with the purple sundress and high-heeled sandals she’s wearing, make her look like the dream version of herself that he sometimes imagines when he thinks about whisking her away on a vacation where they don’t have to throw punches and shoot guns.

“What?” he asks.

“With questions,” she clarifies, her smile widening.

“Nope.”

“Liar.”

“Just because you don’t like the answer doesn’t mean it’s a lie.”

She snorts. A minute later, they pull up in front of a modest one story house. The exterior is painted a faded baby blue, and the trim is red. There are white patterned bars over the windows, and off to the right of the house is what appears to be a dirt yard.

Frankie shifts the car into park and then gets out, and Will follows her lead. He walks a step behind her as she heads toward the dirt yard next to the house. Half of the yard is covered by a corrugated metal roof held up haphazardly by thin metal poles. Tables, cupboards, chests of drawers, and other containers are scattered everywhere. Everything looks messy and run-down, but Will barely notices. He’s too busy staring at the cars.

There are three of them. A pair of classic Chevy Bel Airs, one painted a dazzling yellow and the other a flashy red, are sitting side by side. The chrome mirrors and trim on both have been shined to a spotless gleam. Next to them, parked in the dirt under the metal roof, is the most beautiful classic Cadillac Coupe Deville Will has ever seen.

He lets out a low whistle. “Wow,” he says. “Now that’s a car.”

“Oh, just wait,” Frankie says. “Now that’s a car.”

Will turns toward her, but before he can ask what she means he hears the roar of an engine. He turns, and sees a line of cars parading down the street toward them. Most of them are far more faded and worn than the ones parked next to the house. Each one is filled with two or three men who don’t look all that friendly. They pull their cars around Will and Frankie, parking in a half circle that’s boxing them into the yard, and start to climb out.

Will reaches automatically for the gun in his waistband. Frankie puts her hand on top of his. Will looks over at her, and she shakes her head with a smile.

“It’s okay.”

He hesitates, his hand still halfway to his gun.
“Trust me,” she says pushing gently on his hand.

Another revving engine pulls Will’s eyes away from her, and that’s when he sees it—a stunning 1958 Buick Special convertible painted a gorgeous sapphire blue. The chrome trimmings are sparkling in the Cuban sun, and the white leather interior is faded but clearly well cared for. The only person in the car is the driver, a broad shouldered man wearing a backwards baseball cap on top of his thick, dark hair. He’s sporting a well-trimmed goatee, and wearing an unbuttoned collared shirt with a bright floral pattern over a plain white tank top.

He parks his car and gets out, pausing to eye Will and Frankie’s rental car before he slams the door to his own. When he walks through the circle of parked cars, the other men part to make way for him. He stops a few feet away from Frankie, and she pulls her sunglasses off and takes a step toward him.

He looks her up and down and then folds his arms over his chest and smirks. “This must be a dream,” he says in Spanish. “I haven’t had a woman this beautiful at my garage in years.”

“That’s because you scare them all away with your loud shirts,” Frankie replies, also in Spanish. Or at least that’s what Will thinks she says. His Spanish isn’t as great as hers.

The man chuckles. “You haven’t changed.”

“Did you think I would?”

“No.” And then he grins and holds his arms out. “Get over here.”

Will can count on one hand the number of people he’s seen Frankie hug willingly, so he’s a little surprised when she closes the distance and lets the man sweep her into a bear hug. Will is proud of himself for not feeling immediately consumed by jealousy. He suspected she might have to flirt a little to get them the help they need. Sometimes that’s just what the job calls for. As long as she’s going home with him tonight, he doesn’t care what she says or who she hugs.

Frankie pulls out of the man’s embrace and then takes a step back so that she’s closer to Will. She nods toward the Buick. “Still looks good.”

“Better than good. No thanks to you.”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the man says, waving her off. “They were chasing you though, no?”

Frankie lifts a shoulder in a shrug instead of answering, and Will wonders when and why someone was chasing Frankie through the streets of Havana.

That’s when the man seems to finally realize that Frankie isn’t alone. He turns his attention to Will, looking him up and down curiously, and then he says to Frankie, “Where is Jai?”

“He’s around.”

The man smiles. “He is always around. What brings you back to Cuba?”

“I need your help,” Frankie replies, speaking in English for the first time.

The man lifts his eyebrows. He glances at Will one more time, looking even more curious than before, and then says, also in English, “Let’s go inside.”
He heads toward the blue house. Frankie and Will follow, but everyone else stays outside.

Neither Frankie nor the man say a word until they’re standing in the middle of a small kitchen, and the man holds out two bright green cans of Cristal beer.

Frankie takes a can and then sits in a chair at the kitchen table like she owns the place. She cracks open her beer and gestures at Will. “This is Will. Will, this is Hector.”

Will holds out the hand that isn’t holding a can of beer. “Your cars are amazing.”

Hector grins and shakes Will’s hand. “You should see them race.”

“Hector’s one of the fastest street racers on the island,” Frankie explains. “And also the best mechanic in Havana.”

“One of the fastest?” Hector scoffs. “You know I’m the fastest, Frankie. You rode in my car enough to know.”

Frankie smiles as Will sits in the chair next to her. “In addition to being the cockiest son of a bitch you’ve ever met, he knows everyone and everything. Nothing happens in Havana that Hector doesn’t know about.”

“Knowledge is power,” Hector says with a shrug. He looks Will up and down again, and then gives Frankie a curious look. “He your boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” Frankie says.

Will chokes on his beer. He hadn’t expected her to admit it. She pats him on the back with a smirk while he splutters.

Hector looks amused. “He seems surprised.”

“I like to keep him on his toes.”

“He’s not your usual type.”

“That’s what I like about him.”

Hector smiles, and then lowers himself into a chair across from them. “What do you need?”

Frankie pushes a photo of Frank Bryce across the table. “We’re looking for this guy. His name is Frank Bryce, but I’d be surprised if he’s using it.”

Hector studies the picture for half a second, and then tosses it back onto the table. “That’s Harley.”

“Harley?” Will asks.

“Yeah. We call him that because he rides a Harley.”

“Hector’s very creative,” Frankie says dryly, smiling at Will.

Hector mutters something in rapid Spanish under his breath that Will doesn’t catch, but Frankie laughs. Hector grins.

“Where can we find him?” she asks.
“I don’t know where he lives,” Hector answers. “He just shows up places.”

“Like where?”

“Races.” Hector leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. “We got one tonight. You should come.”

Frankie smiles. “Where else have you seen him?” she asks, sidestepping the invitation.

Hector shakes his head. “I’ve only ever seen him at races. But I can ask around and see if somebody knows something.”

“Do you think he’ll be at the race tonight?” Will asks.

Hector shrugs and leans back in his chair. “Could be. We got a couple big racers in the lineup. Harley usually shows up for those.” He glances at Frankie. “Your boyfriend likes cars. You should take him to the race. You can look for Harley while you’re there.”

Frankie puts her elbows on the table and leans forward. “If he doesn’t show I need you to find him for me.”

“Yeah?” Hector says, leaning forward to mimic her posture. “Last time you told me you needed something, you dented my car. And blew out a tire.”

“I fixed it,” Frankie points out. “And Jai got you a new tire.”

Hector smirks. “You come to the race and say hi to everyone, we’ll call it even. And I’ll find your man if he doesn’t show.”

Frankie looks over at Will with her eyebrows raised in an unspoken question.

Will shrugs. “Guess we’re going to a street race.”

Not long after they get to the race, Will is studying the bizarre variety of parts that are underneath the hood of a lime green Chevy. The car’s owner is explaining to a crowd of eager listeners how he fixed the engine with parts from a boat when Frankie appears at Will’s side, her fingers dancing along his back in greeting.

“Hey,” he says, shooting her a smirk. “You done hanging out with all your adoring fans?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “They’re not fans.”

“There was a lot of shrieking when that group of women saw you.”

“They shriek about everything. The short one is one of Hector’s sisters. He has five. Family dinners at their house are excruciatingly loud.”

Will stares at her, stunned into silence by the revelation that she went to Hector’s family dinners. Every time they’ve run into someone from her past, it’s been a tense affair. Here, it’s the opposite. Hector seems to respect the fact that Will and Frankie are together, but Will has noticed the way the mechanic watches her with clear affection. He’s not the only one. As soon as they pulled up, Frankie got mobbed by people who were surprised and excited to see her. She seemed exasperated, and definitely uncomfortable with all the hugging, but also just a tiny bit pleased—and that mystifies Will. He’s got a million questions. He can’t ask any of them or he’ll lose the bet.
“You know, I almost feel bad for you,” Frankie murmurs.

Will frowns. “Me? Why?”

“All those questions floating around in your brain about me and Hector,” she says with a smirk. “Must be torture.”

“It is,” he sighs. “Death by a thousand cuts. I might ask Jai to put me out of my misery with one of his exploding watches.”

He expects her to laugh, or to say something snarky. Instead, she frowns a little. He frowns too, opening his mouth to clarify that he’s only teasing, but then she steps into his space and wraps her arms around his waist. His arms circle around her automatically. He never turns down physical affection from her. Especially not in public.

“I was here with Jai in 2013,” she says quietly, tipping her head back to look at him. “We were looking for someone. We found him, and he shot me. Twice.”

For the second time in as many minutes, Will stares at her in surprise.

“It wasn’t pretty,” she continues, holding his gaze. “I’d be dead if it wasn’t for Jai. I was out of commission for a while afterward, so we stayed here until I was healthy again. It was the longest we’d stayed in one place since we left the agency, and I was…” Her eyebrows furrow as she searches for the right word. “Vulnerable.”

Will remembers how she’d been in France when she’d been shot, and how her pain and fear forced her to trust him when she normally wouldn’t. “Your guard was down,” he says, careful to word it as a statement and not a question.

She nods.

“And Hector swooped in and swept you off your feet with his fast car and his nice friends.”

She rolls her eyes. “Why do you have to make everything sound so romantic?”

“Because it is romantic. American spy falls in love with a Cuban street racer while she heals from a near death experience. It’s the tagline of a romance novel.”

She shakes her head. “I wasn’t in love with him.”

Will brushes her hair behind her ear. “That must be why you left then.” Frankie opens her mouth, but he beats her to it. “That was a statement. Not a question.”

“You bend the rules a lot for an eagle scout.”

“I think you like that.”

She smiles but doesn’t confirm his assertion. He doesn’t need her to. He knows he’s right. “I left because I had unfinished business,” she says. “I always finish what I start.”

“Even if it almost kills you,” he says quietly.

He hadn’t meant to sound so grave. He watches as a shadow passes over her face, one of those looks that means she’s thinking about something—or someone—else, and he wants to ask her what it is but he doesn’t. This time, it’s not because of the bet. It’s because he knows she won’t tell him.
“Frankie,” Hector says, appearing next to them. “He’s here.”

Frankie’s body stiffens against Will’s. “Where?”

“Behind you. White shirt. Hat.”

“Will,” Frankie prompts, but Will is already glancing surreptitiously over her shoulder. He scans the crowd, and spots Bryce sitting on the seat of his parked Harley and talking to two other men, one of whom is also seated on a motorcycle.

“That’s him,” Will confirms. He turns their bodies so she can see.

“He’s on his bike,” Frankie says. “He could take off again.”

“Let’s make sure he can’t,” Will says. She looks up at him, and he tips his head to the left. “You go that way, I’ll go this way. We’ll flank him.”

Frankie steps out of his embrace with a nod, and they part ways. Will makes a wide berth around Bryce, weaving through the crowds of people who are laughing and talking and drinking. In the distance, there are car engines revving. A breeze is blowing through the trees, making a nearby Cuban flag wave merrily. Will can see Frankie through the mass of people, her eyes fixed on Bryce as she prowls closer, and Will smiles. She looks like a lioness stalking her prey.

Will is five yards away when Bryce spots Frankie. He straightens, his back going ramrod straight. Frankie, who is two yards closer to him than Will, bolts forward. Will rushes forward too. Bryce stands and immediately swings at Frankie. She blocks it and hits him across the face. She throws another punch a second later, but Bryce catches her fist and then flings her body into Will.

Will grunts as Frankie slams into his chest and they tumble backward, hitting the ground with a thud. Frankie scrambles to her feet. Will jumps up after her and hears the purr of a motorcycle engine as Bryce starts his bike. A cloud of dust erupts around the tires.

Frankie disappears into the cloud. Will sprints after her. He hears a shout. A moment later Bryce roars past him on his Harley. Frankie flies past a second after that, riding a motorcycle that Will’s guessing belongs to the man who’s sprawled on his ass in the dirt, screaming a torrent of Spanish curse words at her retreating figure.

Will searches frantically for a third motorcycle, but there isn’t one. “Damn it,” he mutters, and then all of a sudden a car skids to a stop in front of him.

“Get in,” Hector says from the driver’s seat of his Buick.

Will doesn’t have to be told twice. He leaps over the passenger door and into the car. Hector punches the gas, and they take off down the road after Bryce and Frankie.

“What’s he headed for?” Will shouts over the wind.

“Havana,” Hector shouts back. “That is where this road leads. At this speed, he will be there in twenty minutes.”

“Frankie won’t let him get there.”

“There is a town up ahead,” Hector says. “If he knows it better than her, he might lure her in.”

Will clenches his jaw. “Can you catch them?”
Hector grins. “Of course I can.”

The engine roars beneath the hood, and Will hangs on as they accelerate down the narrow stretch of road. Hector whips the car around a Chevy that’s moving at a crawl, and then back onto their side of the road just before they collide with a rusted truck driving in the opposite direction. Will bites back a curse. He can see Frankie in the distance up ahead, her body leaning forward over the bike. Bryce isn’t far in front of her.

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

Will looks over at Hector in confusion. “What?”

“Frankie,” Hector yells over the engine and the wind. “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

Will blinks at the other man for a moment, stunned, and then he grins. “If I hurt Frankie, she’ll kill me herself. And even if she doesn’t, you’ll have to fight Jai for the honor.”

Hector grins. “He is very dangerous for such a small man.”

Will laughs. “You have no idea.”

The sound of gunshots stops any further conversation. Fear squeezes Will’s heart like a vise. He rises out of his seat, hanging onto the windshield with one hand as he pulls his gun out of his waistband with the other. Up ahead, Bryce has his gun out and he’s shooting at Frankie. She’s weaving to avoid the shots. Will takes aim, but every time he gets a clear shot, Frankie swerves into his field of vision. He needs to get closer.

“I thought you said you were the fastest racer on the island,” Will shouts at Hector. “You’re getting your ass kicked.”

Hector smirks. “You are a smartass like your girlfriend.”

Will grins. “I’m a smartass because of my girlfriend.”

The car speeds up even more, and Will hangs onto the windshield for dear life. Bryce isn’t shooting anymore, and Will’s betting it’s because he ran out of bullets. He can see the town Hector was talking about just ahead. Bryce and Frankie are hurtling toward it, and although Will and Hector are gaining on them, they’re not going to get there first.

A second after Bryce passes the first building on the edge of town, his bike whips to the left and down a side street. Frankie follows, and Will’s heart shoots into his throat when he loses sight of her. Three agonizing seconds pass, and then Hector whips the car around the same left turn. Will catches a glimpse of the back tire of Frankie’s bike just before she turns right. Hector follows her, the car’s tires skidding and squealing with each turn.

For about a minute and a half, Bryce weaves his way through a maze of side streets with Frankie behind him and Will and Hector behind her. Then all of a sudden Bryce swerves to the right, and Frankie swerves to the right, and Hector follows her, the car’s tires skidding and squealing with each turn.

Frankie takes a hard right at the next street, and Hector follows her. They’re back on the main road that cuts through the middle of the town. Frankie is just ahead, racing down the street, and so is Bryce—only this time he’s driving toward them. Frankie pops the clutch and the front wheel of her bike lifts off the ground and then slams back down, and she rockets toward Bryce even faster than before.
She’s not going to stop, Will realizes. Bryce doesn’t seem inclined to stop either, and neither of them are swerving out of the way. Just before they collide, Frankie’s bike veers to the left. She jumps so that her feet are balanced on the seat of her bike, lets go of the handlebars, and then leaps sideways and tackles Bryce straight off his bike.

They hit the ground and roll in front of a bright blue building labeled Teatro de Bauta. Bryce’s motorcycle careens toward Hector and Will, and Hector swerves at the last second to avoid it and then slams on the brakes. Will lurches forward into the windshield, his shoulder slamming against the edge and his gun falling out of his hand and clattering onto the passenger seat of the car.

Up ahead, Frankie and Bryce have stopped rolling and are lying about ten yards apart. Frankie is on her stomach, and she’s not moving. Bryce is though. He gets to his feet, swaying unsteadily, and then reaches down toward his ankle.

Spare gun, Will thinks. “Hector!” he shouts as he ducks down to retrieve his gun.

Hector snarls, and so does his engine as it roars back to life. The car races forward. Will closes his hand around his gun and then straightens just in time to see Bryce aim his newly acquired weapon at Frankie. Before he can shoot, Hector turns the wheel and slams on the brakes, and the back end of the Buick smacks into Bryce and sends him flying through the air. He lands with a thump on the sidewalk in front of the theater.

Will leaps out of the car and sprints toward Frankie. He drops to his knees next to her just as she rolls onto her back with a groan.

“Frankie,” he says, leaning over her. He pushes her hair out of her eyes. “Are you okay? Look at me. Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she mumbles. “I’m fine.”

“Will,” Hector calls, a warning in his voice.

Will looks up. Bryce is struggling to get back to his feet.

“What are you, a damn video game character?” Will growls. He lifts his gun, empties his magazine into Bryce’s chest, and then watches as the former CIA operative collapses onto the concrete.

Frankie picks her head up off the ground, squints at Bryce’s dead body, and then drops her head again. “That was sexy.”

Will can’t help it—he laughs.

Frankie sits up with a wince, her fingers digging into his forearm for support. “Standish is gonna be so sad he missed a car chase.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Will asks, searching her body for injuries.

“I’m fine. I landed on him.”

A car door slams, and then a shadow falls over them. Will looks up and sees Hector. “You dented my car, Frankie,” he says, folding his arms over his chest. “Again.”

“Pretty sure you did that on your own,” Frankie scoffs.
“So you’re the one who taught her how to body slam people with a car,” Will says, looking up at Hector with a smirk.

Hector chuckles. “I taught her everything she knows about cars. She do it to you?”

“First night we met.”

“She hit me with a bat the first time we met.”

Will snorts. “Sounds about right.”

“Oh, great,” Frankie grumbles, rubbing a hand over her face. “You guys are friends now.”

“I like him,” Hector tells her, tipping his head toward Will. “You should keep him.”


Frankie sighs. “I need a drink.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Frankie downs another shot of rum before answering. “Ask me once that kicks in.”

Will doesn’t reply. Frankie glances over at him. He’s got that worried look on his face that he gets whenever they’re done with a mission and she’s a little banged up. Her heart flutters in her chest. She hates how much she loves those looks.

She sets her hand on his knee under the table. “I’m fine, Will.”

He puts his hand on top of hers, his thumb stroking over her skin. His body is turned toward hers, and his other arm is slung around the back of her chair. He’s sitting closer than he usually does when Standish is in the vicinity, but Frankie doubts Standish will notice.

They’re at a bar in Havana, celebrating their successful mission with rum and food and more rum. There’s a live band playing salsa music onstage, and a crowd of people on the dance floor. Susan is somewhere in the middle of the crowd with Hector, who smiled and winked when Frankie brandished her finger at him and said *She has a boyfriend so keep your hands to yourself and make sure everyone else does too.* Standish, meanwhile, is on the edge of the dance floor not far from their table, and he’s…well, he’s doing something. But it’s not dancing.

“Oh my god,” Jai says from the chair to Frankie’s right. He’s laughing so hard that his eyes are watering. “Look at his feet. It’s like he’s wearing clown shoes.”

Frankie glances out at the dance floor and sees Standish attempting to lead a woman through some semblance of a salsa. It’s the most unathletic thing Frankie has ever seen, and she can’t help but laugh.

“Come on, guys, don’t laugh at him,” Will says sympathetically. “He’s trying.”

“It’s like he’s a Barbie doll,” Frankie says. “His hips only move one way.”

Jai snorts. He glances at her over his shoulder. “You should teach him.”

“Absolutely not,” Frankie scoffs. “He’s a lost cause.”
“Someone said that about me once,” Jai reminds her.

There’s a soft smile on his face, and Frankie suddenly remembers a bar just like this one in San Juan, and the way RJ had laughed and Mina had beamed while Frankie coached Jai through the beginning steps of a salsa.


“There’s no video,” Jai snaps, the smile dropping off his face. “And if you tell anyone I said that, I will blow up your apartment.”

“Seems a little excessive,” Will says with a frown.

Before Frankie can say anything, Standish collapses into the chair next to Jai. “I’m the worst salsa dancer in the history of the world,” he says morosely.

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees.

Jai snorts. Will gives her a look.

“What?” she says. “He is.”

“So embarrassing,” Standish whines, dropping his head into his hands. “I’m in Havana on a Saturday night, there are pretty girls who want a piece of my chocolate goodness, and I can’t figure out a few simple steps.”

“Chocolatey goodness?” Jai repeats incredulously.

“Gross,” Frankie says.

Will nudges her with his elbow. “Jai’s right. You should teach him.”

“No.”

“Come on, look how sad he is,” Will says, gesturing at Standish. “He looks like Eeyore.”

Standish picks his head up. “I look like Eeyore?”

“A depressed jackass,” Jai says. “That is apt.”

Standish sighs. “I can’t even argue with that.”

“You know you want to,” Will murmurs to Frankie.

“I would rather cut off my feet.”

Will frowns. “Why are you guys so excessive?”

“Oh look,” Standish says, nodding at the dance floor. “She found a new guy who can actually dance. That’s great.”

“Come on, Frankie,” Will whispers. His hand slides over her thigh beneath the table. “Do it for me.”

Frankie glares at him. “You know you can only use that line once a year.”
“I’m cashing in,” Will says with a smile.

It’s probably the considerable amount of rum she’s had, or maybe just the fact that she does kind of want to dance, but Frankie rolls her eyes and says, “Fine.” She snags the mixed drink that Susan left on the table, downs it, and then gets to her feet. “Come on, Standish.”

Standish frowns at her. “Where are we going?”

“I’m going to teach you how to dance so you stop making a fool of yourself.”

Standish jumps to his feet. “Really?” he says, sounding thrilled. And then he stops. “Wait. Are you going to smack me if I mess up?”

“Probably,” Frankie admits, curling her fingers around his elbow and tugging him after her. She leads him to the edge of the dance floor and then turns to face him. He backs away from her with his hands in the air as soon as she lets him go.

Frankie arches an eyebrow at him. “What are you doing?”

“I want you to promise that if I touch you, you won’t break my face.”

“Get your ass over here, Standish.”

“Promise you won’t break my face.”

Frankie sighs. “I promise I won’t break your face, okay? Just get over here.”

Standish sidles closer. He stops in front of her, reaches for her waist, and then makes a face. His hand is hovering a few inches from her body, still not touching her, when Frankie finally loses her patience. She steps into his space, yanks his arm around her body, and then grabs his hand and lifts it into position. When she looks up at him, he’s staring at her with his eyes wide and his mouth open.

“Close your mouth.”

He snaps his mouth closed. And then he tilts toward her and sniffs. “You smell like peonies.”

“It’s disturbing how familiar you are with scents.”

“I used to tear all the perfume ads out of my mom’s magazines cause they had half-naked ladies on them. I slept with them under my pillow.”

“Don’t tell people that. It makes you sound like a weirdo.”

“Right. My bad.” His gaze fixates on something over her shoulder, and he frowns. “How do I move like that?”

Frankie glances over her shoulder at a couple that’s spinning and gliding across the dance floor, and then looks back at Standish. “You can’t.”

“That’s very encouraging, thank you. You’re a wonderful teacher.”

“Don’t be a baby. Dancing like that takes years of practice.”

“Can you dance like that?”
“When I want to.”

“Frankieeeee,” a woman’s voice screeches before Standish can respond.

Frankie turns at the sound of her name and is immediately enveloped in a fierce hug by a short—but very strong—woman. When she leans back, Frankie realizes it’s one of Hector’s sisters.

“I am so glad you’re heeeeeere!” Maria wails in drunken Spanish and then goes in for another hug. “We missed you so muuuuuuch.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard,” Frankie says, extricating herself from Maria’s arms.

Maria grins at her. “You know, you broke my brother’s heart when you left. He spent weeks staring out at the ocean like—”

She stops abruptly when she notices Standish. Her eyes flicker down his body, inch their way back up, and then she smiles like the Cheshire cat. “And who is this?”

Standish’s eyes bug out of his head. He leans toward Frankie. “What’d she say?” he hisses. “Does she think I’m cute? Should I say hi? Should I play it cool? I should play it cool.” He strikes a pose, nods at Maria, and says, “Sup girl.”

“Wow,” Frankie says.

“He only speaks English?” Maria asks in Spanish.

“Yes,” Frankie confirms. “And he doesn’t even do that very well.”

“Is he the new boyfriend Hector said you had?’”

Frankie makes a face. “Ew. No.”

Maria grins at her. “So I can have him?”

“Are you being my wingman right now?” Standish whispers in Frankie’s ear. “Are you talking me up? Talk me up!”

“He’s all yours,” Frankie says, stepping aside and gesturing at Standish. “I should warn you, though, he’s the worst dancer you’ve ever seen.”

“That’s okay,” Maria says. “I will be his teacher.” She steps forward and slides her hands along Standish’s chest and then up around his neck. “Hello handsome,” she says in English.

“Hi,” Standish croaks.

“Would you like to learn the salsa?”

Standish nods feverishly and then swallows, his adam’s apple bobbing. “Y-yes. Yes I would.”

“Let me teach you,” Maria purrs, pushing Standish back into the writhing mass of the crowd.

Standish stumbles a little, but Maria has her hands around his shoulders and she keeps him from falling. Frankie watches them go with a grin. Once Maria sinks her talons into a man, there’s no getting them out. Standish definitely isn’t going home alone tonight.

“If a spot on your dance card has opened up, I think I know someone who might be interested,”
Will’s voice says in Frankie’s ear.

His breath on her skin sends a shiver drilling down her spine. “My dance card?” she repeats, turning to face him with a smirk. “Who talks like that?”

“My dance card?”

“No. But I’m a quick learner. Especially if it means I get to dance with you.”

“Real smooth, Whiskey.”

He laughs. “I think we’re about to find out how very not smooth I am,” he says, stepping forward and sliding his arm around her waist. He curls his fingers around hers and lifts her hand. “I know the frame at least.”

Frankie smiles. “This isn’t a ballroom. It’s a bar in Havana. You don’t need a strong frame. Relax your shoulders.”

“Like this?” He drops his shoulders and rounds them forward.

“Now you look like Quasimodo.”

He laughs. She presses her palm against his chest to straighten him up, and then moves her hands along his shoulders to adjust his positioning. “There. Now lean the top half of your body a little closer to me.”

He tilts forward, his face inches from hers. “Like that?”

“Yeah,” she says with a grin.

He glances down at her mouth, and she knows that if Standish wasn’t nearby, he’d be kissing her. “Now what?”

“Well, technically you lead because you’re the guy. I’m supposed to follow.”

“You’ve never followed me a day in your life, Frankie. You expect me to believe you’re going to follow me across this dance floor?”

“Depends on how good you are. If I like the way you move I’ll follow you across the dance floor and up to your room.”

“You’re going to follow me up to my room even if I’m terrible at this,” he murmurs, glancing at her mouth again.

He’s right, but she’s not going to admit it. “Are you going to be terrible at this?”

“Teach me what to do and we’ll see.”

She bites her lip around a smile. “Step forward with your left foot like you want to get closer to me.”

“I do. So that’s easy.” He steps forward, and Frankie moves her right foot back to mirror him.

“Now move it back to where it came from.”
Will steps back and Frankie does too.

“Now step back with your right foot,” she commands.

Will ducks his head down to watch his foot as he steps back.

“Now forward again to where you started,” she tells him. “And that’s it. That’s a basic step.”

“So you do all that together?” he asks, looking up at her. “First the left, then the right?”

“Yeah. It’s an eight count. You pause on four and eight.”

He gives her a look. “I have no idea what that means.”

She laughs. “Watch.” She leads him through the step, counting as she moves, smiling at the way his eyebrows furrow in concentration.

“Oh,” he says when she’s done it a few times. “Okay. I see.”

“Try it. You lead.”

He does the step again, his left foot moving forward and then back, and then his right foot moving back and forward. She follows his lead, watching him watch his feet, and after a minute or so and one or two clumsy hitched steps, he finally gets the hang of the beat. He grins up at her.

“Told you I’m a quick study.”

“Yeah, except you’re stomping your feet like an elephant.”

He frowns and looks down at his feet. “I am?”

“Don’t hit the floor with your heel. Hit it with the balls of your feet. And try to move your hips a little when you step. It’s the salsa. It’s supposed to come from your hips.”

He rises up on the balls of his feet and tries again, his eyes glued to his feet as he steps. He falls out of rhythm, huffs in annoyance, and then tries again. Frankie lets him struggle for a little while because she knows he wants to learn, but when he starts to look frustrated, she stops him.

“Hey,” she murmurs, squeezing his hand. He lifts his gaze. “Dancing is like sex. If you overthink it, you’re going to be bad at it.”

“Am I bad at it?”

“At sex or at dancing?”

“We both know I’m not bad at sex.”

She smiles. He smiles too, his eyes fixed on her in a way that makes her feel like she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. She used to hate that. She doesn’t hate it anymore. She doesn’t hate anything about this. His hand on her waist, his fingers curled around hers, his chest rising and falling a few inches from hers. She wants to dance with him. Really dance with him. Away from Standish’s curious gaze, and Jai’s amused smirk, and Hector’s gang of sisters, and anyone else who might make her wonder if she’s crazy for caring so much about an eagle scout from the midwest who cries over laundry detergent commercials.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” she murmurs.
He tilts his head. “Where?”

“There’s a club a few blocks from here. Less tourists. Louder music.”

“Still salsa?”

“Little dirtier than that.”

His hand slides lower on her waist. “You think I’ll be bad at that too?”

She grins. “Let’s find out.”

Anton is cleaning blood off his leather jacket when his phone lights up.

He considers ignoring the call. He’s tired. All he wants to do is get drunk and find a woman to fuck. But then he sees the number on the screen, and he knows he doesn’t have a choice. There are some clients he can ignore. This isn’t one of them.

“Yeah?” he answers.

“I have a job for you.”

Anton glances at the bloodied towel in his hand. “I am still cleaning up from another job. How much are you offering?”

“Half a million.”

For a second, surprise keeps Anton silent. He’s never been offered that much cash for a single person. “Who do you hate so much you are willing to pay half a million for their head?”

“It’s not a hit. Capture and deliver.”

“Who is the target?”

“She’s CIA.”

“Former?”

“Active.”

Anton tosses the towel into the sink. “That is risky. Once her absence is discovered, they will investigate. I could be hunted.”

“I’m sure half a million dollars is more than enough to keep you hidden in a beach town until the storm blows over.”

Anton sighs. It would be one thing to go after an official or an officer of the law in Russia. It is another thing entirely to go after an active operative of the U.S. government. Americans do not take kindly to such things, and he does not want to make American enemies. But half a million dollars is very tempting, and he doesn’t have much of a choice. If he says no, he will never receive another call again. That would mean the end of an extremely lucrative business partnership, and he can’t afford that. This is a risk he has to take.

“How can I find her?”
“She’ll be getting off a plane in New York tomorrow afternoon. I’m sending the flight details now.”

Anton’s phone beeps softly. “Hold, please,” he says.

He lowers his phone from his ear and opens the text he just received. He studies the details impassively, but the photo of his target makes him stare. He lifts his phone back to his ear.

“Pretty girl.”

There’s a chuckle on the other end of the line. “I’ll tell you what. As long as you bring her to me alive, I don’t care what you do to her between capture and delivery.”

For the first time all night, Anton grins. “Then we have a deal.”
Seventeen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will loses the bet.

Frankie doesn’t realize it at first. She has too much rum coursing through her veins, and she’s too distracted by Standish’s terrible dancing and Jai’s impromptu trip down memory lane to realize that Will asked her not just one question, but several. After that, she’s too caught up in Will. They duck out of the bar without anyone except Jai noticing, and they spend the next few hours on the dance floor of a nearby club that’s loud and dark and crowded. It turns out Will is much better at nightclub dancing than he is at salsa dancing, and it turns out Frankie likes that a lot.

Like, a lot a lot.

She shows him how much she likes it once they get back to his hotel room, and she must really wear him out—or at least the car chase, the dancing, and then the sex wears him out—because when she wakes up the next morning, he’s still asleep.

She teased him once that he’s like a heat-seeking missile when he’s asleep. No matter where she is in his bed, he finds her and wraps his arms around her. It took her a while to get used to it, but now that she is, she kind of likes it. She’ll never tell him because he’d never let her live it down, but when she sleeps at her place, she misses him. Her bed is bigger than his—or at least it feels like it; she still hasn’t worked up the courage to invite him over—and she gets cold without him. When she’s with him, though, she’s warm. It’s impossible not to be because he holds her so close.

This morning is no exception. Will is wrapped around her when she wakes up, his chest pressed against her shoulder blades and his arm slung around her waist. When she tries to slip out of his embrace, he tightens his arm around her.

“No,” he says in her ear. “Our flight doesn’t leave for hours.”

She smiles, but only because he can’t see her face. “I want coffee.”

“Well I want cuddles.”

“I can’t believe I have sex with a man who says shit like that.”

“You like it.”

“I can assure you I do not.”

She slips out of his grasp and onto the floor. He snatches her pillow once she’s gone and hugs it close to his body, burying his face in the fabric.

“Stop smelling my pillow, Will.”

“Your hair makes it smell good,” he says, his voice muffled.

“It’s called shampoo. You should try it sometime.” She leans over the bed and pulls the pillow away from his face. “I’m going to get some coffee. Are you coming?”

“Can you bring me some?” he asks hopefully.
“Because you’re so old you can’t get out of bed?”

“Yes,” he says solemnly.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine.”

He watches her get dressed, his eyes lingering on all the places where his mouth was last night, and she smirks at him.

“I’ll keep the bed warm,” he says when she heads for the door.

She shakes her head. “I’m not getting back in bed with you.”

“Yes you will.”

“No I won’t.”

She closes the door as he calls out, “Yes you will!”

Frankie holds her liquor well enough that she’s not hungover, but the sun still seems a little brighter than usual when she gets out of the hotel. She slides her sunglasses on as she walks. She’s missed Havana. She wouldn’t want to live here again—she likes New York too much—but maybe she and Will should visit more often. Take a real vacation for once.

She isn’t surprised when she runs into Jai at the hole-in-the-wall place that makes the best coffee in Havana. It hasn’t been discovered by tourists or travel websites yet, and she knows Jai thinks that’s the reason the coffee is so good. She thinks he’s probably right.

“Wondered when you’d drag your ass out of bed,” he says with a smirk when she sits at his table. He glances over her shoulder. “Where’s Will?”

“Still in bed.”

“That’s not like him.”

“I wore him out.”

Jai crinkles his nose. “I didn’t need to know that.” And then he frowns. “He’s not going to tell the others about...you know. Is he?”

“No. For a guy who never shuts up he’s actually pretty great at keeping secrets.”

“But he’s going to ask me about it constantly, isn’t he?”

And that’s when Frankie realizes that Will lost the bet.

The waitress arrives, and Frankie orders two coffees and a pastry for Will to go. Then she tells Jai she won the bet. He rolls his eyes, and then he gives her that look he saves for the moments when no one else is around.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” he tells her.

She scoffs out of habit. Jai watches her from the other side of the table and waits. She rubs her thumb over a nick in the wooden table and reminds herself to breathe around the sudden racing of her heart.
“I am,” she finally admits.

“Francesca.”

She looks up at him.

“You’re allowed to be happy.”

The waitress brings the coffees and pastry before Frankie can reply. She hands over some bills and tells the waitress she’s paying for Jai’s breakfast too, and then she gets to her feet. She pauses on her way out, leans down, and presses a kiss to the top of Jai’s head.

“Love you too,” he calls out after her.

She smiles and slides her sunglasses back on instead of replying.

She grins the entire way back to the hotel. She can’t believe she didn’t realize last night that Will lost the bet. She’s going to mock him about this forever. He went a whole week without asking her a single question, and then he blew it with less than twelve hours left. He’s going to be so pissed.

When she walks back in the hotel room, Will is sitting up in bed with his back against the headboard. He glances up when she enters, and she can tell she caught him lost in thought.

“What?” she asks, tilting her head.

“I won the bet,” he answers.

She almost blurts it out. But then she realizes it might be more fun to let him gloat like a fool for a while before pointing out he actually lost, so she crosses the room and walks around the bed to stand next to him.

“Did you?” she says noncommittally, holding out his coffee.

He shakes his head. “I don’t want it.”

Frankie frowns. “You asked me to get you some.”

He looks confused, and then shakes his head. “No, not the coffee.” He takes the cup from her, smiles when she hands him the pastry, and then tugs on her arm so she’ll sit on the edge of the bed. “I don’t want the win,” he clarifies.

“What?”

“I don’t want you to tell me about college.”

Frankie stares at him, completely baffled. “Why?”

“I mean, I want to know,” he says, leaning toward her. “But I don’t want to know this way. Does that make sense? I don’t want you to tell me because you have to. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me things.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t feel like that.”

“I love you,” he says, reaching up to stroke his hand over her face. Her heart flutters in her chest. Maybe someday she’ll be used to hearing those words from him. But not yet.
“I want to know everything about you,” he continues. “But what I want even more than that is for you to want that. And if you’re not there yet, that’s okay. You don’t owe me anything you don’t want to give. I’m just happy I get to be with you.”

It hits Frankie all of a sudden, like a sucker punch to the gut, just how good of a man Will is. He’s good in all the big ways—the defusing bombs, stopping terrorists, saving the world ways—but it’s the smaller ones that get to her. The way he waves at every baby he sees. The way he tips twenty-five percent at every restaurant, even when the service is terrible. The way he picks up litter at parks. The way he waits for her to be ready for things.

“Frankie?” Will says softly, setting a hand on her knee. “Did I...was that too much?”

That too. He does that sometimes. He makes a speech, or he tells her he’s in love with her, and then he says Was that too much? and looks genuinely concerned, and she always wants to say No, say it again.

“You and your damn speeches,” she murmurs.

He smiles. “I know you hate them.”

“They’re the worst,” she confirms, but she knows that the smile tugging on her lips belies her words.

She looks down at the coffee cup in her hands, and traces her thumb along the rim of the lid. An idea is starting to coalesce in her mind. It’s terrifying and overwhelming and it’s going to change everything. If she does it, she can’t undo it. He’s going to ask a million questions. She’s going to have to answer most of them. But for the first time since that awful night in Moscow seven years ago, she actually wants to let someone in. And she wants that someone to be Will.

“Do you want to stay at my place tonight?” she asks, glancing up at him.

He looks stunned. He blinks at her, his mouth hanging open a little, and then he swallows. “Yeah. I mean, if you...if you want me to.”

“I do.”

He starts to smile, one of those megawatt grins that lights up his whole face, and her heart flutters again. “Then I’d love to.”

As soon as Will arrives at Frankie’s place, he realizes why it took her so long to invite him over.

He’s not sure what he was expecting. Maybe a rundown brick building, something with graffiti and a rusted fire escape and a nearby corner store that gets robbed on a regular basis. He thought the inside of her apartment would probably be barren. Plain white walls, functional furniture, maybe a stack of takeout menus sitting amongst various weapons and tactical gear. She’s never struck him as the home type, and he always figured that for her, an apartment was just a place to sleep and hang out until her next mission.

He was very, very wrong.

She lives on a tree-lined street in Brooklyn, in a brownstone walk-up with a bright red door and an intricate iron door knocker. There’s a welcome mat at the top of the stairs, and flowers in a ceramic pot, and the entire exterior is so damn charming and so not Frankie that he double-checks the address she texted him at least three times before he finally knocks on the front door.
When she opens the door, he feels surprised all over again. She looks the same as she always does when they’re staying in for the night—yoga pants and a t-shirt, her hair down and curling a little—but there’s something about her standing next to a pot of brilliantly red begonias, in the entrance of a brownstone that has to be worth a couple million dollars, that makes him stare at her.

“Hi,” she says.

“You have flowers,” he blurts out like an idiot.

She frowns at him, looks down at the pot on her stoop, and says, “Oh. Mrs. Kaplan takes care of them. Trust me, they’d be dead if I had to do it.”

“Mrs. Who?”

“She lives there,” Frankie replies, pointing to the brownstone next door.

“And she plants flowers for you?” Will asks incredulously.

He’s not sure, but he thinks he sees a hint of a blush staining her cheeks. He can’t remember ever seeing her blush before. His incredulity hits a new high.

“She’s old and she likes flowers and it’s her way of saying thank you,” Frankie says dismissively. “Don’t make it a thing.”

“What is she thanking you for?”

“I stopped some dumb kid from trying to steal a package out of her hands last Christmas. It’s not a big deal.”

Will feels warmth blossom in his chest the same way it does when he watches the happy ending of a movie or reads a feel-good story in the paper.

“Stop it,” Frankie orders, brandishing her finger at him.

“It was probably a Christmas present for her grandson,” Will says, his voice catching. “You saved Christmas. And now she plants flowers for you. It’s just so—”


He knows she isn’t serious, but he also knows that if he doesn’t let it go she’ll slide from exasperation into embarrassment, and she hates being embarrassed. He holds up the bottle of wine he brought. “But I brought the good stuff.” He pulls a brown paper bag out from behind his back. “And those brownies you like.”

She glances at the bag. “The ones from the bakery by your place?”

“Yep.”

She considers him for a moment, and then says, “Fine.”

He steps toward her, expecting her to swing open the front door and invite him in, but she puts a hand on his chest and pushes him back onto the stoop. He frowns, opening his mouth to ask what’s wrong, and then he sees the expression on her face. She looks nervous. No, more than nervous. Terrified.

“I know you’re going to ask a million questions,” she says, avoiding his gaze. “I wouldn’t have
invited you over if I wasn’t ready to answer them. But there are still some things that I’m not ready to talk about.”

“Our deal still stands,” he tells her gently. “If you tell me you’re not ready, I’ll drop it.”

She lifts her eyes to his but doesn’t move out of the doorway.

He smiles at her. “We can drink wine and eat brownies on your front stoop if you want,” he offers. “But you should know that if Mrs. Kaplan stops by, I will charm the hell out of her. Old ladies love me. She’ll be asking about the nice young man you had over for months.”

A smile starts to tug on the corners of Frankie’s mouth. “I don’t think she’d call you young.”

“If you’re going to be mean, at least invite me in.”

She laughs. She steps backward and swings open the door, and he steps across the threshold before she can change her mind. He wraps an arm around her waist, and then leans down and kisses her hello. He lingers, waiting for the tension to ease out of her body. It takes a little longer than usual, but eventually it does.

“Hi,” he murmurs when he finally pulls back.

She smiles, rolls her eyes, and slips out of his grasp. As she shuts the door behind him and locks the deadbolts, he surveys his surroundings.

His jaw drops within half a second. The interior is even more gorgeous than the exterior. Hardwood floors. Pristinely painted walls decorated with photos and paintings. There’s a fireplace surrounded by a sofa and two armchairs to his immediate left, and then past the fireplace is a staircase that leads both up and down. Across from the staircase is a long wooden dining table with six chairs, and then beyond that is a stunning kitchen with white cabinets and white counters.

He feels Frankie come up next to him, her shoulder brushing his. “You going to ask?”

He looks over at her. “Ask what?”

“What I stole to afford this place.”

He studies her. He can’t tell if she’s teasing him or not. “You didn’t…?” he starts, but doesn’t finish.

“No,” she says with a smirk. “It was my great-grandfather’s. When he died it became my grandfather’s, and then my mom’s. And now it’s mine.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Since I joined the agency.”

“For the second time?”

“For the first.”

He blinks at her. “You’ve lived here since you were twenty-one?”

She snags the bottle of wine from his hand and walks back toward the kitchen. He follows her. “Working for the agency means you travel a lot,” she answers. “I lived wherever I was assigned. But this was always home.”
He watches her open a cupboard and pull down two wine glasses. They make a soft clinking sound as she sets them on the marble countertop of the kitchen island.

“When Jai and I rejoined the agency, we were given permission to work out of New York instead of D.C.,” she continues. “It was the first time I actually got to live here instead of just crashing here whenever I was in town. Jai lived here too for a while. I let him redecorate.”

Will surveys the sleek stools at her kitchen island, and the dining table that was clearly designed for dinner parties, and the massive clock hanging above the mantle of the fireplace.

“How much of this is your style and how much of it is Jai’s?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Jai designed it, but he made me approve everything.” She smiles as she works a corkscrew into the top of the wine bottle. “I think he had the time of his life, but I definitely did not. I never knew there were so many shades of white.”

Will laughs. Frankie pulls the cork free from the bottle with a dull thunk, and then reaches for a glass and starts to pour.

“I think you and Jai might be cuter than me and Susan,” Will tells her. She slides the glass toward him, and he takes it and then frowns. “Don’t tell Susan I said that.”

Frankie smirks as she pours herself a glass. “She said the same thing the first time she was here.” She sets the bottle down and finally meets his gaze. “Do you want a tour?”

“Definitely.”

“Well, this is the kitchen, obviously.” She points to her right, where a glass door surrounded by windows leads out to a deck. “That door leads out to the deck, and the stairs outside lead down to the patio. I’ll show you that when we go downstairs. We’ll go up first.”

She walks around the island and toward the staircase, wine glass in hand, and he follows her.

“You ever have dinner parties?” he asks, glancing at her dining table as they walk past.

She shoots him a look over her shoulder. “Do I seem like the type who’d host a dinner party?”

“No,” he admits. “But you didn’t seem like the type to live in a Brooklyn brownstone that could be a model for Better Homes and Gardens either.”

“I’m full of surprises,” she murmurs dryly. He thinks there’s a bit of an edge to it, maybe even a trace of bitterness, but he can’t tell.

He follows her up two flights of stairs. “Top floor,” she says when they get to the landing at the top. She points to the left. “Jai’s room is there.”

“It’s still Jai’s room?” Will asks in surprise.

She smiles. “He has his own place now. But it’s his room.” She turns to the right. “Bathroom,” she says, nodding at a closed door. And then she stops in the doorway to another room. “And this is...well. Self explanatory.”

Will pops his head in and sees exactly the kind of room he thought he’d find in her apartment—there’s a punching bag hanging from the ceiling, various display cases and containers of weapons, and tactical gear strewn across the floor. There’s a target painted on the far wall, and at least six
knives are sticking out of the center ring.

“Yeah, this is more like it,” he says, shooting her a grin.

She tilts her head at him. “Is this what you thought my place would be like? Guns and knives?”

“Maybe,” he admits.

Her lips curve into a humorless smile. “Because assassins have to sleep surrounded by weapons, right?”

There’s a little bitterness in her voice again. He frowns and steps closer to her. “Is that how you see yourself? As an assassin?”

“That’s what I was.”

“Yeah, was. What about now?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Depends on who you ask.”

He rests a hand on the doorframe and leans closer, almost boxing her in except that he still has to hold his wine glass. “You want to ask me what I see?”

She smirks. “You’re going to say you see your girlfriend.”

“I’m going to say I see a badass spy who saves the world,” he corrects. “Last week in Lisbon you saved over 50,000 people from a terrorist attack.”

“We saved.”

“Yeah, we. Me and you. Wouldn’t have happened without you.”

She studies him for a moment, her eyes flickering over his face, and then she ducks underneath his arm and heads for the stairs. “You don’t have to do that,” she says as she goes.

“Do what?” he asks, following her down the stairs.

“Turn on your after-school special voice and tell me I’m great.”

He snags her hand once they get to the next floor. “You are great, Frankie.”

She pulls free from his grasp, albeit gently. “Master bath and laundry,” she says, pointing to their right. It’s a clear sidestep of his words. He hesitates—he’s completely fascinated that she can be so cocky and so self-critical at the same time—but he follows her lead and lets it go.

She nods at the doors in front of them. “Closet.”

He can’t resist the urge to poke his head into her closet. He whistles. “This thing is huge. Also, wow, you have a lot of leather jackets and blazers.”

He glances over his shoulder in time to see her smile. She takes a few steps down the hallway, and then stops in a doorway. “Bedroom.”

“Your bedroom?”

“My bedroom,” she confirms with a smirk.
He walks past her and into the room eagerly. The walls are painted a deep shade of Oxford blue but the crown molding and baseboards are gleaming white. Her bed, with its upholstered headboard and array of blankets and pillows, looks both elegant and comfortable. There are windows framed by long curtains on the exterior wall, and a long, dark dresser with a television mounted above it sits across from the foot of the bed. It’s the kind of room Will could imagine spending an entire weekend in: tangled with Frankie beneath the sheets, watching movies and watching each other, smiling when they realized that the sun rose and set without either of them noticing.

For a moment, he’s overwhelmed by it all. The red door and red begonias; the giant kitchen; the room that still belongs to Jai; the bedroom that looks like it came from a Pinterest board. The fact that she’s mocked him incessantly on more than one occasion for caring so much about how his apartment looks, only to turn around and come home to a place like this, is exactly the kind of irony he’s come to expect from her. He’s surprised she lives here, but he really shouldn’t be. Of course she lives in a place like this. Of course she does.

He didn’t think it was possible, but he thinks he loves her more now than he did an hour ago. He doesn’t know how to explain that to her, and he doesn’t want to overwhelm her when he knows she’s already walking a tightrope of anxiety over his presence in her home, so he opts for their usual language—teasing.

“I don’t know why you sleep at my place when you have a bedroom like this,” he says, turning to look at her. “You must really like me.”

She’s leaning against the doorframe, her wine glass gripped in one hand. “Yeah, I guess so,” she says softly.

He doesn’t know when Yeah, I guess so became shorthand for I’m not ready to admit it yet but I love you. He’s pretty sure that’s exactly what she means, though. Warmth blossoms in his chest. He crosses the room in a few strides, wraps the arm that’s not holding his wine glass around her waist, and kisses her. She kisses him back, her tongue stroking into his mouth as her free hand slides along the nape of his neck. He slips his hand beneath the hem of her shirt to caress the small of her back.

She arches a little and smiles against his lips. “Don’t you want to finish the tour?”

He does. But he also really, really wants to make love to her in that giant bed. He wavers for a second, unsure, but he knows if they get in bed now they’re not going to get out for a while, and he kind of wants to see what surprises she’s hiding on the bottom floor of this place since she saved it for last.

He sighs and presses his forehead against hers. “Yeah.”

“We could stay here.”

“We’ll end up here eventually. And I don’t plan to leave for a while.”

She smiles. He weaves the fingers of his free hand through hers because he likes holding her hand, and she smirks but lets him. He follows her to the staircase and then down, past the floor he came in on and to the floor below, and as soon as he steps off the final stair, he freezes.

The far right side of the floor has a large leather sectional and matching chaise. They’re facing a TV that’s mounted above a fireplace that contains a crackling fire, and despite the July heat outside it looks tempting and cozy. The wet bar to his left looks well-stocked. There are French doors beyond the bar that lead outside to a well-furnished patio. But it’s the wall right in front of him—
the one that’s dominated by built-in bookshelves filled to the brim with what must be hundreds of books—that grabs his attention.

He lets go of her hand and walks toward the shelves, surveying their contents with awe. There are cheap paperbacks and mint condition hardbacks, worn leather-bound novels and giant textbooks. There are tall books and short books and fat ones and thin ones. And the genres and authors—she’s got everything. Shakespeare and Chaucer and Austen and Dickens. J.K. Rowling. Stephen King. Virginia Woolf. John Grisham. Sylvia Plath.

When he turns around to look at Frankie, he finds that she’s watching him carefully. He’s seen her watch assets and marks this way. There’s a little bit of the suspicion he’s so familiar with clouding her gaze, but she also looks almost...expectant.

“Have you read all these?” he asks her quietly.

She shakes her head. “No. Twenty of them at most, and only because of school. I’m not much of a reader.”

“So you’re a collector.”

He can see it in her eyes. She’s trying to decide if she wants to tell him the truth. He waits for her, careful to keep his expression blank and unassuming.

“They’re my mom’s,” she says at last. “She was a college professor. English lit. 18th and 19th century female writers were her specialty, but that was just what she taught. She liked pretty much everything.”

Will thinks about that time they had a mission in Bucharest and went undercover as English professors. He remembers looking at her during the flight over and saying, Aren’t you going to study the notes for our first lecture? and being confused when she shrugged her shoulders and said, Don’t need to.

“Where’d she teach?” he asks.

“Yale.”

There’s something about the way she says it, something about the way one corner of her mouth tugs upward ever so slightly, that makes him say, “Where’d you go to college, Frankie?”

She chews the inside of her lip for a few seconds and then says, “Yale.”

For a second, the word just hangs in the air. She’s surprised him so much tonight that he’s not even sure he’s shocked by this newest revelation. He thinks that from now on, the only thing that’s going to surprise him about Frankie is if she doesn’t surprise him.

“So let me get this straight,” he says, scratching the back of his head. “You’re beautiful and brilliant and funny. You have the highest kill-or-capture rate of any operative at the CIA. You live in the most gorgeous brownstone I’ve ever seen. And you went to Yale? ”

“I dropped out of Yale,” she clarifies.

“Why?”

The amused smile that’s been on her lips for the past minute fades. She takes a sip of wine, and then another, longer sip, and then she crosses the room and sinks down onto the couch. He follows...
her, sitting close enough that he can reach out and touch her if he wants, but far enough away that she still has some space.

She stares down into her wine glass. “I didn’t handle the death of my parents very well.”

Will thinks about what he knows of their deaths: the suddenness, and the violence, and what it must have been like for her to be seventeen and lose everything and feel like it was her fault. He doesn’t know anybody who could handle that well. He certainly wouldn’t.

“I’d always been impulsive,” Frankie continues, still staring down into her glass. “But grief made me reckless and rebellious. The only reason I don’t have a juvie record is because Kelly knew most of the local cops, and they felt bad about what happened to my parents.”

She leans back against the couch and finally looks up at him. “I didn’t want to go to college. I wanted to use my college fund to travel the world. But Kelly was pretty adamant about me going. She said it’s what my parents would’ve wanted, and I knew she was right. So I went. And I hated it.”

“Would you have hated it as much if you went somewhere that didn’t remind you of your mom?” he wonders.

She considers the question. “I think I would’ve hated it more,” she answers eventually. “The only reason I stayed as long as I did, and did enough work to keep my grades up, was because there were so many people there who knew my mom and loved her. It felt wrong not to at least try. But I partied a lot.”

Will is starting to feel guilty for making such a big deal about knowing this about her. College was a happy time for him—he loved every second of it, and he still goes back for alumni weekends when he can. He hadn’t considered that might not be the case for Frankie. He wants to apologize, but he knows if he does she’ll feel self-conscious, so he keeps his mouth shut.

“The summer before my junior year, I went on vacation with some friends down to Aruba. And I met a guy.”

“In Aruba?” Will asks in surprise.

She smirks. “Yeah. His name was David. He was from Venezuela, he was a bartender at the resort we were staying in, and I thought he was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. We spent my entire vacation together. The night before I was supposed to fly back, he asked me to stay with him. And I was young and stupid and crazy about him, so I did.”

Will blinks at her. “Wow. That’s…”

“Impulsive?” she suggests while he searches for a word. “Reckless? The dumbest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“I was going to say romantic,” he says with a smile.

She rolls her eyes. “I dropped out of college for a guy I’d known for two weeks. It wasn’t romantic. It was stupid.”

“I don’t imagine Kelly was thrilled.”

“No,” Frankie snorts. “She threatened to fly down and force me to come back, but she couldn’t. I was an adult.”
“So what did you do? Live in Aruba with David?”

“Yeah, for about a month,” she answers. “I got a job as a bartender and moved in with him. But then his dad died, and he had to go back to Caracas to take care of his mom, and I went with him.”

She swirls the wine in her glass. “Venezuela was a bit of a mess back then. David’s family—his dad and all his uncles and cousins—were part of this political faction and rebel group that was trying to change the government. David’s mom had sent him away to keep him out of it, but he joined again as soon as we got there. And I joined too.”

“Wait a minute,” Will says, leaning forward. “Are you telling me you…?”

“Tried to overthrow the Venezuelan government with my boyfriend in the mid-2000s?” she says, looking up at him with a smirk. “Yeah. I was American, and a girl, and I played a pretty good dumb tourist. David’s group found that useful. David is the one who taught me how to shoot a gun and throw a punch. Working for his group was the first taste I got of being a spy. And I was good at it.”

“So what happened?”

“David was murdered,” she says, lifting a shoulder.

She doesn’t say it with any noticeable grief in her voice. A hint of sadness, maybe, but nothing anguished. He knows David meant something to her—she wouldn’t have stayed in Aruba or followed him to Caracas if he didn’t—but she seems to have come to terms with his death in a way that she hasn’t yet with her mom and dad’s. Still, Will can’t help but feel his heart breaking for her. Every time he thinks he knows how much she’s lost, something new crops up.

“It was a group of government loyalists,” Frankie continues. “I think they probably would’ve killed me too if it wasn’t for his friend that was with us. I found out afterwards that the friend worked for the CIA. He passed my name on to his handler.”

“And that’s how you got recruited?”

“Pretty much.”

Will sips his wine and mulls over all the new information. Frankie watches him, and he’s pleased to see that she doesn’t look nervous anymore.

“You should write a memoir,” he tells her. “You’d make a fortune.”

She laughs. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

She smiles at him, one of those affectionate smiles that he loves because he knows she only gives them to people who she really cares about. “Any other questions?” she asks.

He thinks it over. “You said your mom taught at Yale.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“And your dad played for the New York Philharmonic.”

“Yeah.”
“So where’d you grow up?”

“Greenwich,” she answers. “Not far from Kelly’s house, actually. We drove past my street when we went to see her for that case.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” he says incredulously.

She gives him a look. “We’ve been together for three months—”

“Sleeping together for five,” he cuts her off.

“Together for three,” she reiterates. “And this is the first time you’ve ever been to my place. Are you really surprised that I didn’t point out my childhood home?”

“No,” he says petulantly. “But I’m still mad.”

“I’m sure you’ll get over it,” she says, lifting her wine glass to her lips with a smirk.

“You know, Greenwich is full of rich people,” he observes.

A hint of a smile spreads over her lips. “Yeah. I’m aware.”

“And I bet you could sell this place for close to five million if you wanted.”

“Current value is upwards of seven,” she says dryly.

Will chokes on his wine.

Frankie’s smile deepens. “If you’ve got a question, Will, ask it.”

He pounds on his chest to clear his throat. Once he can breathe again, he sets his glass on the coffee table in front of them, turns to face her, and says, “Are you a trust fund baby?”

“You going to try to marry me for my inheritance?” she asks instead of answering.

He knows she’s referencing the conversation they had a long time ago about complete trust and imaginary guys who fell through the ice in their imaginary pond, but the fact that she mentioned marriage without having an immediate panic attack makes his heart skip about six beats in his chest.

What he wants to say is, Would you marry me someday if I asked? What he says instead is, “I’m considering it,” because he doesn’t think she’s ready for that conversation yet.

She laughs. “We had money. But I don’t have a trust fund.”

“You got an inheritance though, didn’t you?”

“I got this place.”

“And an inheritance?”

She smiles. “Maybe.”

“That means yes. This is why your cover stories are always heiresses. Because you are an heiress.”

“I’m not an heiress.”
“Your seven million dollar brownstone says otherwise.”

She laughs. She looks relaxed, happy even, but he wants to be careful. She’s clearly trying to make an effort to let him in, and he loves that, but he doesn’t want to take advantage of her effort. He doesn’t want to push her too far, and then have her wake up in the harsh light of the morning and wish she hadn’t told him as much.

“Two more questions?” he asks.

She gives him an incredulous look. “Only two?”

“I’m trying to be respectful of your boundaries.”

“Since when?” she snorts.

He frowns. “Do you feel like I—”

“No,” she cuts him off. “I don’t. It was a joke.”

He tilts a little closer to her. “Frankie—”

She leans forward and kisses the rest of his sentence off his lips. It’s the kind of kiss that leaves him breathless, the kind that makes him want to write poems across her skin with his mouth, and his heartbeat falls into rhythm with three now-familiar words. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

“Ask me a question, Will,” she murmurs when she leans away.

He swallows and blinks at her. His brain feels fuzzy, so he asks the first thing that pops into his mind. “Why’d you name your dog Jesse?”

She grins. “Because I had a serious crush on Uncle Jesse from *Full House.*”

“Understandable. His hair was flawless.”

“It really was.”

“And the tutus you made poor Jesse wear?”

“I took ballet for a few years. My dad’s idea. Once he realized I couldn’t sing and wasn’t interested in playing an instrument, he thought dance could be my connection to music. But I was terrible.”

Will scoffs. “I spent hours with you on the dance floor last night. You’re definitely not terrible.”

“I was terrible on purpose,” she clarifies. “I wanted to do soccer with all my friends, and the practices were scheduled on the same night as ballet. Took me a while to convince him, but he gave in. He always did.”

Will stares at her. She gets this look on her face whenever she talks about her dad. He thinks it might be the softest expression he’s ever seen her wear. She gets a similar look when she talks about her mom, but there’s something about her dad that seems to hit her deep. The idea that his badass, spy-turned-assassin-turned-spy-again girlfriend was a daddy’s girl makes Will feel like he’s melting into a puddle of warm goo.

“So the books are your mom’s,” he says. “You have anything of your dad’s?”

She nods her head over his shoulder. “That record player.”
Will turns around. Between the bookshelves and the couch is a waist-high cabinet with open shelves that are filled with neatly stacked vinyl records. There’s an old, but clearly well-kept record player sitting on top. Will had been so caught up in all the books that he hadn’t even noticed it.

“My mom taught night classes on Tuesdays,” Frankie says. “So my dad would order pizza and we’d lay on the floor and listen to albums on that record player until she got home.”

“Can I…?” Will asks, turning back to her and gesturing at the record player.

She lifts a shoulder. “Sure.”

Will gets up from the couch and makes his way toward the cabinet, then crouches so he can browse through the albums. The vast majority of them are jazz and blues and soul, though there are a few other genres mixed in too.

“What album is your favorite?” Will asks, looking over at her.

She sets her wine glass down on the coffee table next to his, and then rises to her feet and walks toward him. “This one,” she says, stopping next to him and tapping her index finger on the album sleeve that’s sitting on top of the cabinet next to the record player.

He straightens. The sleeve she indicated is bright yellow. *Etta James* is printed in red block letters at the top. The words *at last!* are printed in green cursive above a picture of the singer. Will wonders if the album is out because Frankie was listening to it.

He gestures at it. “I know that song.”

“Which song?” Frankie asks, looking up at him.

“At Last.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not the best song on the album. Not even close.”

“Which song is the best?”

She lifts the arm of the record player instead of answering, and sets the needle down gently onto the vinyl. Etta James’s voice echoes from the speakers almost immediately.

*Trust in me*

*In all you do*

*Have the faith I have in you*

*Love will see us through*

*If only you’d trust in me*

*Why don’t you trust me?*

Will listens to the words, but most of his focus is on Frankie—the way she smiles, and that look on her face that’s soft and nostalgic and so beautiful it makes him ache. He wants to dance with her. She’ll definitely say no if he asks. But he’s going to ask anyway, because he’s head over heels in love with her and he wants to dance with her.

Frankie looks up at him. Her eyes flicker over his face, and then the smile drops from her lips.
“Don’t even think about it, Will,” she says, brandishing her finger at him.

He smiles and holds out his hand. “Dance with me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Francesca.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

He steps into her space and slides his arms around her waist, and then ducks down to kiss her. She’s tense against him, probably because she knows he’s trying to get her to let her guard down, but she opens her mouth for him when he traces his tongue across the seam of her lips. He kisses her purposefully, slow and intentional like he does on the nights he takes his time with her. She starts to loosen against him, and lifts her arms to drape around his shoulders as Etta James continues to croon in the background.

When Frankie finally relaxes completely, liquid and lithe in his arms, Will starts to sway.

“Cheater,” she whispers against his lips.

He grins and keeps swaying.

She lets him.

Will wakes suddenly from a deep sleep.

For a second, he has no idea where he is. This isn’t his bed, he’s not in his room, and it’s dark and quiet and still. The feel of Frankie’s body curled into his side, her breath warm on his shoulder, calms him. If she’s here, he’s okay.

The memories flood back all at once. Frankie opening her front door. Frankie pouring him a glass of wine in her kitchen. Frankie leaning against the doorframe of her bedroom, watching him. Frankie in his arms, slow dancing to Etta James, smiling when he whispered against her temple, I’ll have to remember to add this song to your playlist.

He turns toward the nightstand on her side of the bed and squints at the clock that’s sitting just past her gun. It’s two in the morning and he had a lot of wine, so he needs to go to the bathroom.

He tries to ease away from Frankie without waking her, but she sleeps lightly. Her fingers close around his bicep as he pulls away.

He turns back toward her. “Bathroom,” he whispers into her hairline before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Her grip loosens.

“I love you,” he can’t help but whisper.

She hums and burrows farther underneath the covers, but leaves her arm outstretched over his side of the bed. He doesn’t know if it’s because she’s waiting for him to come back, but that’s what
he’s going to tell himself.

He slides onto the floor and then pulls on his boxers. There’s no point, really, since she lives alone, but it’d be just his luck that the one time Jai decided to show up unannounced would be the one time Will decided to walk naked to the bathroom.

He walks around the bed and toward the door. He’s two feet from the threshold when he looks up and sees a shadow. Tall, broad Shouldered, looming in the darkness at the top of the stairs in the hallway. For a second, Will thinks it might be Jai. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice whispers, *Jai’s not that tall.*

The shadow raises his arm. Will’s instincts kick in despite his grogginess. He dives to the left and kicks the door closed with the top of his foot just before three gunshots crack through the air and three bullets slam into Frankie’s bedroom door.

Chapter End Notes

Do I think Frankie is the kind of person who would mock Will for living in a really nice apartment and then go home to an unbelievably nice place of her own? Yes I do. Do I think Frankie probably led a pretty charmed life up until she lost her parents? Yep. Do I think y’all are probably *really* pissed about this ending even though I warned you it would be a slow burn to set up the big stuff? Also yes. SORRY.
Eighteen

The sound of gunshots sends Frankie bolting upward in bed.

She’s got her gun in her hand in a second, pointed at the door the second after that, but the only person she sees is Will—standing with his back against the wall next to the closed door, hands ready, waiting.

For a few breathless moments, neither of them move. The gunshots ring in Frankie’s ears, but the house is silent. Ambient city light leaks in through the curtains of her bedroom windows, providing just enough illumination for her to notice when Will darts his eyes in her direction. She furrows her eyebrows at him. He shakes his head. He points at her gun, and then at himself.

Frankie slides out of bed, gun still trained on the door, and opens the drawer of her nightstand slowly and quietly. She pulls out the Glock sitting inside, and then steals across the room and hands it to Will. It isn’t until he’s got it in his hand, his finger on the trigger, that she bends over and grabs his discarded shirt from the floor. She shrugs it on and does three of the buttons. She creeps back to her nightstand, unlocks her phone, and sends a text to Jai. Then she crosses the room and steps into Will’s space, her body pressing against his side. The closer she is, the quieter they can be.

“You keep a gun on top of your nightstand and in your drawer?” Will says in a barely audible voice.

Frankie tears her gaze away from the door just long enough to shoot him a look. “Really? You want to tell me I’ve got too many guns right now?”

His eyes meet hers for a split second and then cut back to the door. “I don’t suppose you have any flashbangs lying around. Maybe in your underwear drawer?”

“Nope. Just slutty lingerie.”

He clenches his jaw the way he does when he wants to touch her but can’t because Standish is around. “Mean.”

“You started it.”

“Show me later?”

“Maybe.”

He smirks. A beat passes. The silence is overwhelming.

“How many?” she whispers.

“Only saw one.”

“You know him?”

“No.”

Another beat of silence passes.

“Maybe it was a burglar and he bolted,” Will says. His voice is still low and quiet, but there’s a
thread of hope in it.

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t a burglar.”

“How do you know?”

“Jai designed my security system himself. It didn’t go off. If someone got past it, it’s because they’re a pro.”

“Why would someone break in?”

“Why do you think?”

She glances up at him. The last time she saw that look on his face was when Luka had a knife to her throat. Before that, it was when he almost lit a man on fire. Frankie knows that of the two of them, she’s the one people fear. And usually, she should be. But when Will has that look in his eye, it’s a toss up.

She curls the hand that isn’t holding her gun around his forearm. “I want to know what he’s doing in my house. So save the headshot until after I get to ask some questions.”

He doesn’t acknowledge her request. “If he’s a pro, he’ll be set up in the hall. Probably at the top of the stairs. He’ll pick us off when we come out the door. We’re sitting ducks.”

“So we don’t go out the door. We wait for him to come in.”

“He won’t. He knows he’s outnumbered.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“How does that not matter?”

“Assassins don’t follow protocols, Will. He’s here for me, and he doesn’t get paid unless he gets me.”

“He’ll wait you out.”

“He can’t. The longer he waits, the more likely it is that my backup shows up. He’ll risk coming in. He has to. Trust me. It’s what I’d do.”

Will clenches his jaw. “Fine.”

“Open the door on my count.”

Frankie steps away from him and aims her gun at the door. She holds up one finger, then two, then braces her shooting hand with the other and nods.

Will turns the doorknob and flings the door open. The room lights up immediately with gunfire, and a barrage of bullets thud into the side of Frankie’s dresser and her wall-mounted television. Frankie keeps her eyes focused on the doorway. Will still has his back pressed to the wall, her backup Glock in his right hand, his left hand by his side.

The bullets stop. Frankie strains to listen. She thinks she hears the snick of a magazine sliding out, and a new one clicking in. For a long moment after that, there’s silence. With each passing second, Frankie can feel the old, familiar rage returning. She hasn’t felt it in a while, but it’s back with a vengeance now. There are bullet holes in her dresser. Someone is in her house. If she doesn’t have
to kill whoever this is to protect her and Will, she’s going to do awful things to make them pay for this.

Will’s left hand shoots up in a signal. Frankie steadies her aim, and then everything happens in a rush. The shooting starts again. The barrel of a gun and then an arm and then the top half of a body burst through the doorway along with the bullets. Will uses his left hand to grab the shooter’s elbow and shove the arm upward, and then he kicks his foot out and sends a man dressed in all black crashing into the edge of her dresser.

The man twists to face them, but Will is on him the second he turns around. He pistol whips him across the face with the butt of the Glock, pins the man’s shooting arm against the wall by the wrist, and then presses the muzzle of his gun against the man’s chest and says, “Drop it or you’re dead.”

Frankie steps out from behind Will so she’s got a clear shot. The man glances at her, and then back at Will, and she can tell he’s calculating the odds that he’ll be able to lash out at Will without getting shot by her. She waits, her finger on the trigger, ready. He opens his hand and his gun falls to the ground with a clatter.

Will kicks the dropped gun backwards and out of everybody’s reach. “Smart move.”

The man grins. Frankie only notices his next move because she’s waiting for it. Men like this don’t surrender that easily, and he’s still got a free hand. She sees his wrist flick, and catches a glimpse of a blade sliding into the palm of his left hand, and she doesn’t even think twice about it.

She shoots his hand.

Twice.

He screams in agony and doubles over, the knife clattering onto the floor as he cradles his now-maimed hand to his chest. Will bends down quickly and picks up the knife. The man slides down the wall to sit on the floor, still clutching his hand as blood spreads over the front of his shirt and into his lap.

“That was stupid.” Frankie snarls at him. “Try something like that again and my next shot goes between your eyes.”

“Fucking bitch,” the man growls, glaring up at her.

Frankie clicks her tongue at him. “That was stupid too.”

Will’s fist rockets across the intruder’s jaw a second later. His head snaps to the side from the force of Will’s punch, and the sound cracks through the room. He’s still for a moment after that, his jaw working and his chest heaving, and then he spits a mouthful of blood onto Frankie’s bedroom floor and scowls up at Will.

“Just to be clear,” Will says, bending down in front of him, “I’m not opposed to cussing. Sometimes it’s the best way to get your point across. And I think the whole don’t cuss in front of a woman thing is a little sexist.” He tips his head toward Frankie. “She cusses like a sailor when she’s pissed.”

“I do,” Frankie confirms.

“But I draw the line at calling her names,” Will says. He reaches out and pats the man’s cheek with a condescending smile. “Call her that again and I’ll hit you so hard they’ll have to wire your jaw
back together."

The man glowers at Will, but doesn’t say anything else. Will straightens and takes a step back. He glances at Frankie. “You got any zip ties?”

“You want this guy to bleed all over your bedroom floor?”

“Master bath is easier to clean.”

“I’ll move him, you get the ties.”

Frankie nods. She hurries upstairs, grabs some zip ties and her favorite knife, and then jogs back downstairs.

Will has her would-be assassin sitting inside her walk-in shower. He also has the showerhead on, and water is beating down mercilessly on the still fully-clothed intruder while Will watches in amusement.

He glances up when she comes in. Frankie tilts her head at him in an unspoken question.

“Wanted to make sure he stayed awake for you,” he explains. “Also, I’ve decided his name is Dick. I asked him what his name was, and he told me to go fuck myself, so I decided it’s Dick.”

Frankie presses her lips together to hide a smile.

Will notices. “What?”

“Nothing,” she says. She nods at the shower head. “Turn it off so I can put the zip ties on.”

Will turns the faucet off.

“Okay, Dick,” Frankie says, crouching in front of the man. There’s a trail of reddish water flowing from beneath his body down toward the drain. “Hands forward or I’m going to let my partner punch you in the face again.”

The man holds his hands out. His left hand is drenched in blood and dripping all over her tile. She can see that his arm is trembling, though whether it’s from the freezing cold water or the pain she doesn’t know—or care. She zip ties his wrists together with a little more force than necessary. She can feel him watching her, so when she’s done she lifts her gaze to his.

“You’re going to regret this,” he tells her.

She smirks. “Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you.” She holds up her favorite knife, and flicks the blade open. “Did whoever sent you tell you how good I am with one of these?”

“You’re not the only one.”

“Yeah except I’ve still got mine. All you’ve got is bullet wounds and a fat lip.”

The man glances at the knife in her hand and then back into her eyes without even blinking. It’s enough to tell Frankie that breaking him might take a while, and she doesn’t know if they have that kind of time. For all she knows, he’s got reinforcements on the way.

If she’s being completely honest, she’s also not crazy about flexing her enhanced interrogation
skills in front of Will. She can tell by the way he’s standing that he’s hovering on the same dark edge he flirted with when Emma died. She knows he wouldn’t stop her from doing whatever she wants. He might even help her. But Will Chase, no matter how furious and protective he feels right now, is still Will Chase. When all this is over, he’ll tilt toward guilt—and it will eat him alive. She doesn’t have much of her own soul left to protect. But she’s damn well going to make sure Will Chase gets to keep his.

She gets to her feet and turns toward him. “Did you get his phone before you put him in the shower?”

Will nods at the sink, and Frankie sees an iPhone sitting on the counter. She grabs it, and then returns to stand in front of the intruder.

“You’ve been pretty stupid so far,” she tells him. “Are you this stupid all the time, or were you just cocky tonight?”

The man glances at Will, probably because he’s thinking about calling her a bitch again, and doesn’t answer. Frankie turns the phone toward him, holds it in front of his face, and then turns the screen back toward herself. She swipes her thumb upward, and his unlocked home screen stares back at her.

“Yeah, you’re stupid all the time.” She looks over her shoulder at Will. “Dick has Face I.D. on his phone.”

Will clicks his tongue. “Bad move, Dick. Always stick with a code.”

Frankie looks down at the screen. “All his apps are in Russian. I should’ve guessed. Nothing good comes from Russia.”

“Hey,” Will says, coming up behind her. “We met in Russia.”

“I stand corrected,” Frankie says. She doesn’t look up from the phone, but she knows Will is grinning. “Let’s see who you are, Dick,” she says, opening his Instagram app.

The page takes a second to load, and then Frankie clicks his profile.

“Anton Sokolov,” she reads. “Wow, that is a lot of shirtless pictures.”

“Yikes,” Will says in her ear. “Less is more, Anton. Less is more.”

“I bet you send unsolicited dick pics, don’t you?” Frankie says, looking up at Anton.


Anton looks enraged. Frankie winks at him and then looks back down at his phone. “Let’s see who you’ve been talking to.”

She opens his recent calls. The top few are a series of numbers with no contact name, but when she scrolls down a little she finds a name she recognizes. She pauses, playing out the scenario in her head, and then she looks up at Will. “Can you go get my phone?”

He nods and disappears down the hall toward her bedroom. When he reappears, he’s got her phone in his hand. He holds it out to her. She unlocks it, scrolls through her contacts, and finds what she’s looking for. She glances back and forth between the number on her screen and the number on Anton’s, and then she looks up at the assassin with a smirk.
“Seems we have a mutual acquaintance, Dick. How long you been working for the Bratva?”

Anton shakes his head. “I don’t.”

“You’re lying. You know how I know?” She turns his phone toward him. “You talked to Sylvester last week. And the only people Sylvester talks to on the phone are people he does business with.”

“That is a friend from school.”

“Bullshit. Sylvester is Sergei Vasiliev’s nickname, and Sergei Vasiliev runs the Presnya Bratva. And I know that because I know Sergei.” She holds up her phone. “I’ve got his number right here. Same number that’s in your phone.”

Anton shakes his head. “You could’ve just added that.”

“You got his brother in here too?” Frankie asks, ignoring him. She scrolls through his contacts, and finds what she’s looking for. “Oh, look at that,” she says, glancing up at Anton. “There’s Misha. Looks like we’ve got two mutual acquaintances.”

He scoffs at her. “You expect me to believe Sylvester and Misha work with the CIA?”

Frankie pauses. The fact that Anton knows she’s with the CIA narrows down the list of who might’ve sent him considerably—and it definitely wasn’t Sergei or Misha, because they have no idea she’s CIA.

“No, I don’t,” she says.

“So then how would you know them?” Anton asks. He rakes his gaze over her body and then sneers. “You fuck one of them? Both of them, I bet. Whore.”

Will starts forward, but Frankie holds her arm out to stop him. “Don’t.”

Anton laughs. “You going to punch me again, Captain America? I only speak the truth. She is a whore.”

Frankie doesn’t need to look at Will to know he’s angry, but she glances up at him anyway. His entire body is stiff with fury, his lips pressed together in a hard line and his hands curled into fists. She can feel the rage radiating off of him in waves, and she knows that if she let him, he’d take a page out of her book and do something awful. But she doesn’t need him to. She can handle this.

She holds out the two phones in her hand, and Will takes them from her. She twirls her knife casually. Then she takes a step forward, crouches in front of Anton, and plunges the blade straight into his thigh.

Anton’s scream echoes off of her bathroom walls. He curls forward in agony, his face pale and sweating. Frankie watches him impassively, waiting until his eyes flutter open and meet hers, and then she twists the knife. He howls. She waits again, watching as he gasps for breath, and then she yanks the blade out of his leg with another twist.

She points the knife at him as blood drips from the blade and onto his legs. “You’re going to tell me who hired you, or I’m going to call Sergei and tell him you’re a snitch.”

Anton’s chest is heaving. He shakes his head. “You are bluffing.”

“I don’t bluff.”
“I’m not telling you shit.”

“You want to know how I know Sergei?” she asks, reaching out to wipe her knife on the fabric of his shirt. “I spent two months in Moscow hunting his lieutenants. I turned every single one of them into a snitch. Used them to blow up the entire Presnya trafficking ring. But once I got the information I needed, I didn’t give the snitches to the cops. I sent them back to Sergei. I’m sure you know how that turned out for them.”

All the color drains from Anton’s face. “You’re the demon mistress.”

Frankie grins. “You know, of all the nicknames I’ve gotten over the years, I think that one’s my favorite. It sounds a little melodramatic, but I gotta tell you, Anton, I earned it.”

“You’re lying,” he says, but he sounds far less sure than he did a minute ago.

Frankie shrugs. “Let’s find out.”

She holds out her hand without turning around, and Will sets her phone in her palm. She presses her thumb to Sergei’s name on her screen, and then turns it on speaker phone. It rings once, twice, and then a gruff, baritone voice snaps, “What?” in Russian.

“Sergei,” Frankie greets brightly in English. “You miss me?”

“Who is this?”

“Well, you knew me as Nadia. But I think your men started calling me the demon mistress after I left those two guys for you at Mercury City.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. Frankie waits.

“It has been a long time since you called,” Sergei says in English. “How do I know this is really you?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Frankie says. “You still got half your left ear missing from when I cut it off?”

Another long pause ensues, and then Sergei says, “What do you want, demon mistress?”

A flicker of fear shivers over Anton’s face. It’s brief, barely even there, but it’s enough for Frankie. He’s going to give in if she keeps going.

“Seems you’ve got another snitch on your hands.”

“Who?” Sergei growls.

“Hit man of yours. I think he’s going to sing like a bird.”

“Stop,” Anton whispers desperately, leaning toward her. “I will tell you what you want. Just hang up the phone.”

“Who is that?” Sergei demands. “Who do you have?”

“Sounds like he’s feeling talkative,” Frankie says. “I’ll call you back.”

She hangs up the phone amidst a barrage of Russian curse words, and then looks up at Anton expectantly.
There’s dread etched clearly on his face. “I thought you were a myth.”

“Oh, I am. I’m a bedtime story they tell Russian mafia boys to make them behave. Watch your back, keep your head down, or the demon mistress will come for you.” She smiles and leans toward him. “You want to find out why they call me that? Or are you gonna tell me who hired you?”

“I do not know his name.”

“Wrong answer.”

Frankie lifts her knife, and Anton tilts toward her. “No, no, wait! That is the truth! I do not know his name. Sergei gave him my number, and I do jobs for him when he calls.”

“How does Sergei know him?”

“I do not know. He said they were business associates.”

“You ever seen him in person?”

“No. We only speak on the phone.”

“What were your instructions for tonight?”

“Capture and deliver.”

That stops her short. She frowns, and in the beat of silence that ensues, Will says, “Deliver where?”

“I do not know. I was supposed to call him when I was ready to make the delivery.”

“How much did he offer you?” Frankie asks.

“Half a million.”

“And he told you I was an active CIA agent?”

“Yes.”

Frankie gets to her feet abruptly. She snags Will’s arm as she walks past him and toward the door, and leads him out of the bathroom and Anton’s earshot. She positions herself in the hall so that she has a clear view of Anton sitting in the shower. Not that it matters—with that gaping knife wound in his thigh, he’s not going anywhere.

“I want to know who hired him,” she says, glancing up at Will.

“Yeah, you and me both.”

“So we’ll run it like a sting. I’ll have Anton make the call and set up the delivery. You can tail us.”

“I don’t trust Anton.”

Frankie snorts. “If I tell him to make the call, he’ll make the call.”

“I’m not worried about the call. I’m worried about the delivery. I don’t like you being that far out of reach. He said they’ve never met in person. So I’ll pose as Anton for the exchange.”

“Just because Anton’s never seen him doesn’t mean he’s never seen Anton,” Frankie points out.
“It’s an unnecessary risk.”

“Unnecessary?” Will repeats incredulously. “This guy didn’t pay half a million dollars so he could play Monopoly with you, Frankie. I’m not sending you out there alone with Anton.”

“I won’t be alone. You’ll be—”

“No.”

“Will—”

“I said no.”

Something moves on the staircase to Frankie’s left before she can respond. She turns, ready to throw her knife, and Will raises his gun, but it’s only Jai.

“Francesca,” Jai breathes when he sees her.

She can hear the relief in his voice as he lowers his gun. He glances at Will. Surprise immediately registers on his face, but if he’s wondering when she started letting Will stay at her place, he doesn’t ask.

“I got your security system running again,” he says instead. “Someone cut the power to short it out, and the backup generator is dead so the system couldn’t register the interference and override it.”

Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose and mutters a curse. She completely forgot she promised Jai she’d replace the generator. He’s not going to be pleased.

“You told me you would replace it,” he says as if on cue.

“I know. I was going to.”

“When?”

“When I got around to it.”

“This is why you should just let me do it,” he snaps, stalking down the hallway toward her. “You could’ve been killed.”

“I wasn’t,” she points out. “I’m fine.”

“We got lucky,” Will says.

Frankie shoots him a glare. She doesn’t need him to give Jai more things to obsess over. Jai worries enough already.

“Lucky?” Jai repeats incredulously.

Frankie sighs. “Can we not do this right now?”


“There’s a Russian assassin in the bathroom,” Will answers. “His name is Anton, but feel free to call him Dick.”

Will is smirking, but Jai doesn’t crack a smile. “Is he alive?”
“Yes.”

Jai starts forward, but Frankie steps into his path and blocks the bathroom door. “No.”

He glares at her. “I let you have Frankfurt.”

“Frankfurt was different.”

“How?”

“I’m fine. You weren’t.”

“It doesn’t matter. He came to kill you. He needs to die.”

“Actually, his instructions were capture and deliver,” Will says. He’s glancing between them, his eyebrows furrowed, and Frankie knows he’s trying to figure out what happened in Frankfurt. “Apparently Frankie’s worth half a million dollars.”

“What?” Jai says in disbelief.

“He knows I’m CIA,” Frankie explains. “But he has no idea who hired him. Only that it was a business associate of Sergei Vasiliev’s, and they want me alive, not dead.”

“Sergei doesn’t know you’re CIA.”

“I know that. Sergei didn’t hire him.”

Jai glances at Will and then back at her. He seems to be weighing his next words, and when he finally vocalizes them she understands why.

“Most of the people who would pay half a million dollars for you don’t know you’re active CIA. And they sure as hell don’t know where you live.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie can see Will glancing between her and Jai again. Will has a lot of talents, and one of them is reading people. He’s smart enough to recognize that Jai’s saying something other than what his words convey, and Frankie doesn’t want that. She’s not ready to answer those questions.

“Will is going to pose as Anton so we can find out who hired him,” she says, shooting Jai a look that says Drop it. “There’s no point in speculating who it could be when we’ll know soon enough.”

Jai ignores her and steps closer. “You know who did this.”

She shakes her head. “We don’t know anything.”

“He’s fucking with your head, Francesca. Again.”

“If he wanted me, he wouldn’t send someone to get me. He’d come for me himself.”

“No he wouldn’t,” Jai argues. There’s barely controlled rage vibrating in his voice. “He didn’t go to Bogota. He had you pulled.”

“Wait, what?” Will says. “Who are we talking about? You told me you got pulled out of Bogota for a mission.”
Frankie shoots Jai an annoyed look. “I did.”

“Frankie—”

“Now’s not the time, Will,” she says, turning to look at him. “Right now, we need to figure out who sent Anton. Okay?”

He stares at her, and she can tell he wants to argue with her. He glances at Jai, and then back at her, and for a second she thinks he might. But then he says, “Fine.”

Frankie snags Anton’s phone from Will’s hand, gives her phone to Jai, and then brushes past them both without another word.

Anton looks up as soon as she enters the bathroom. Frankie crouches in front of him and holds his phone up.

“You’re going to call the guy who hired you,” she tells him. “You’re going to tell him you have me, and that you’re ready to make the delivery. And I swear to god, Anton, if you tip him off that I’m listening you’re going to find out why they call me the demon mistress. Are we clear?”

Before Anton can respond, an incoming call lights up his phone screen. Frankie studies the number, and then shows it to Anton. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

He nods. “Yes.”

“Why’s he calling you?”

“I do not know. I am supposed to call him.”

“You going to tip him off?”

Anton shakes his head. “No. I swear.”

“You better not.”

Frankie hits accept, then the speaker button, and holds the phone out between them.

“Hello?” Anton says.

“Deal’s off,” a voice snaps. “Don’t touch her.”

Frankie nearly drops the phone in surprise. She’d know that voice anywhere.

It’s Ollerman.

For a second, all Frankie can do is stare at the phone in shock. She’s been running through a mental list of who would send someone after her ever since she woke up to the sound of gunshots. It’s a long list, but Ollerman never even crossed her mind. They haven’t heard from him in months—not since he stabbed Standish and left him for dead—and although The Trust is still active and the team regularly completes missions aimed at dismantling them, Ollerman himself has been a ghost.

Until now.

Frankie looks over her shoulder at Will. His face is ashen, his jaw slack in surprise. Jai looks equally shocked. She turns back to Anton.
“Tell him you already have me,” she mouths in a barely audible whisper.

“I’ve already got her,” Anton says obediently. “You can’t back out. It’s too late. A deal’s a deal.”

“Let her go and walk away or you’re a dead man,” Ollerman says. 

Anton shoots a confused look at Frankie. An impulse throbs in Frankie’s chest, and she obeys it.

“I’m disappointed Ollerman,” she says, moving the phone away from Anton and toward herself. “Here I was thinking we’d finally be face to face again, and now you’re backing out like a pussy.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Ollerman chuckles. “Agent Trowbridge. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

“Let me guess. Anton is bleeding, in extraordinary amounts of pain, and so desperate to be free from the CIA’s most infamous interrogator that he was willing to sell me out.”

“Didn’t take that much convincing,” Frankie replies, glancing at Anton. “I must be scarier than you.” She gets to her feet and turns toward Will and Jai. “Good help is so hard to find nowadays, don’t you think?”

Ollerman sighs. “Yes, so it seems.”

“You know, I always thought it was Will you had a hard on for. You want to tell me why you’re sending incompetent Russian assassins to my place and not his?”

“Honestly, I’m surprised you’re even at your place. Don’t you usually spend most of your nights in Whiskey’s bed?”

Will’s jaw clenches. Jai lifts his eyebrows in surprise. Frankie grits her teeth and glares at the phone.

Ollerman laughs at her silence. “You know I have to say, Agent Trowbridge, I really didn’t think you had it in you. Will Chase is a walking, talking feeling. It was hard enough to be his boss, I can’t imagine being his girlfriend. But you just can’t seem to stay away from him, can you? And now that he’s said those three little words and you haven’t run for the hills...well, I’m starting to think the femme fatale might be in love.”

A creeping sense of violation drills down Frankie’s spine. How could Ollerman possibly know that Will has told her he loves her? She looks up at Will, wondering if he’s thinking the same thing she is—they need to check his apartment for bugs and cameras—and he meets her gaze with an angry look. He holds out his hand and wiggles his fingers in an unspoken request. *Let me talk to him.*

Frankie shakes her head. It’s better if Ollerman doesn’t know he’s here. “What do you want from me, Ollerman?”

“Well I wanted to use you to force Whiskey and your team to do a job for me. But apparently you’re off limits.”

Frankie frowns. “What?”

“I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me back up. You see, while you’ve been spending the last few months screwing Will Chase on every surface of his apartment, I’ve been rebuilding The Trust
back to its former glory. I can’t deny that your team set me back considerably in Prague, and you’ve continued to be a pain in the ass ever since, but that’s all about to change. Because I found myself a partner who’s got plenty of money. And as it turns out, you two know each other very well.”

Dread washes over Frankie. She looks up at Jai, who takes a step toward her with a desperate look in his eye. Frankie feels it too—a faint, all-too-familiar nausea roiling in the pit of her stomach—but she ignores it and forces her voice to come out steady.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Ollerman. I know a lot of people.”

“Oh, I think you know exactly who I’m talking about, Agent Trowbridge. And I’m curious—how much of what you did does Whiskey know about? I mean, on the one hand, it’s extremely impressive what you and Agent Datta managed to do in just three years. But on the other hand, you made yourself judge, jury, and executioner for an awful lot of people. Are you sure all of them were guilty? Or is there a chance that one of your many, many victims was innocent?”

Rage simmers in Frankie’s chest. She should have put a bullet in Ollerman’s skull when she had the chance. Next time, she won’t hesitate.

“You know, I used to teach interrogation classes at Quantico,” Ollerman continues when she doesn’t reply. “One of the first things I taught recruits was that everyone has a weakness. The key to getting what you want is figuring out where someone’s weaknesses are, and then applying the right amount of pressure. That’s why I wanted you. You’re Whiskey’s weakness. He’d do anything for you. But apparently he’s not the only one. And now I’m wondering—which one of your partners is your weakness? If you had to decide between them, who would you choose?”

“There is no choice,” Frankie says, her voice like steel. “I’m sure he told you that.”

“But you of all people know how empty words can be. Regardless of what he says, I’m not allowed to touch a hair on your head. And the fact that he’s still alive while the rest of The Collective rots in their graves speaks louder than anything you could possibly say. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t believe that the two of you are done with each other.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Ollerman. There’s two sides to every story, and you’ve only heard the side told by a liar.”

“Maybe. All I know is that I can’t wait for the day when he and Whiskey finally end up face to face. I think it’s going to come sooner rather than later. Until then, Agent Trowbridge, enjoy your immunity.”

Ollerman hangs up with a click, and the ensuing silence is deafening. Frankie can feel Will and Jai staring at her, but she doesn’t look up. Her heart is beating hard and erratic in her chest. Her fingers have gone numb around Anton’s phone. She tries to inhale, but she can’t seem to get any air into her lungs. She sways a little, the floor tilting beneath her feet, and then Jai’s fingers are wrapping around her bicep and he’s guiding her gently into the hallway.

“Breathe,” he murmurs in her ear, his shoulder pressing against her back.

When they cross the threshold into the hallway, the dam breaks and she sucks in a breath. Jai’s fingers tighten on her arm, a comforting squeeze that reminds her of a moment seven years ago when they stood together on the sidewalk outside this house and she told him something she’s never told another soul.
“Twenty-four hours,” Jai says to her. He turns her body to face him, but he doesn’t let go of her arm. “Maybe less with Standish’s help. I’ll find him. We’ll end it.”

“No.”

“Francesca—”

“He still has the program, Jai. Nothing has changed. We can’t touch him.”

“Maybe Standish could—”

“Could what? End up like RJ? Enough people have paid for my mistakes already. I won’t add Standish to the list.”

Jai looks anguished. “Our mistakes,” he murmurs.

“Frankie?” Will says, appearing at her side. “What’s going on?”

Frankie closes her eyes. She knew he was here. She knew he heard everything. But she hadn’t fully grasped what that meant until just now, when she heard the worry lifting his voice, and now she can’t breathe again.

Jai’s fingers tighten on her arm again. “Francesca.”

She opens her eyes to look at him.

“I’m going to take Anton in. And then I’m going to Will’s to check for surveillance devices.”

Will shakes his head. “I can call it in. You don’t have to—”

“He needs to,” Frankie cuts him off. “Just let him do it.”

Will glances between them. Neither of them look back at him. “Okay,” he agrees quietly.

Jai holds out her phone. “You need to call the director. Now.”

Frankie gives him Anton’s phone and takes hers. Will is still watching her. She starts to brush past him, but he reaches out and catches her elbow. She stops. He doesn’t say anything. Behind them, Jai stands as still as a statue. Silence swells between them, and then Frankie finally lifts her eyes to meet Will’s.

She can see the questions lurking there. She knows he’s drowning in them, and she feels like she’s drowning too, but she doesn’t know how to come up for air. She waits, wondering if he’s going to ask and she’s going to have to push him away.

His gaze traces over her face, and then he lifts his hand and brushes the backs of his fingers along her cheek. Frankie has never wanted anything more than she wants to drop her phone and bury herself in Will’s arms.

She doesn’t. She pulls gently from his grasp, walks into her laundry room, and closes the door behind her.
Frankie is sitting on the floor of her laundry room, her back against the dryer, rubbing her thumb idly across a jagged scar on her knee. She’s holding her phone to her ear with her other hand, but she’s not talking. She’s said all she needs to say. After an initial flurry of questions, Director Casey has gone silent too. She isn’t sure how long they’ve been on the phone. It feels like hours.

“You should have put a bullet in his head four years ago.”

There’s nothing accusatory in the director’s voice. It’s just blunt—he’s always blunt—and maybe a little resigned. But even still, Frankie feels a surge of anger.

“If I had, you’d be dead,” she snaps. “And so would your wife. Take it from someone who knows—your kids would not have been all right.”

That seems to shut him up, at least momentarily. And then he sighs. “You know him better than anyone, Trowbridge. What’s he doing with Ollerman?”

“I have no idea. Rebuilding The Collective, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s an asshole.”

“Would he give Ollerman access to the program?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s not an idiot. The program is the only reason he’s still alive and it’s the only reason he’s got any money. Giving it to Ollerman would be suicide.”

“Then let me repeat my previous question. Why would Agent Walker—”

“He’s not an agent,” Frankie cuts him off, and even she can hear the harsh edge of rage in her voice.

Casey sighs like he always does when she loses her temper. “He could have rebuilt The Collective at any point over the last four years. He didn’t. Why?”

“Because he knew I’d come after him if he did.”

“That hasn’t changed.”

“No.”

“And he knows your team is hunting Ollerman.”

“Probably.”
“So why work with him?”

Frankie stares at the scar on her knee and considers the question. She doesn’t know the answer. She knows what Jai would say. And she thinks even if it’s not the entirety of the right answer, it’s part of it. So that’s what she says.

“To fuck with my head.”

Casey sighs deeply. “I didn’t take this job to be part of a spy soap opera.”

“Neither did I,” Frankie retorts. “If your supposedly brilliant analysts at the NSA would figure out how to override the damn program we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But it’s been four years and apparently they’re all idiots, so here we are.”

“If Standish—”

“We’ve been over this, Casey. If you assign Standish to that task force, I’ll make your life a living hell.”

“Most agents can’t get away with threatening their director like that.”

“Yeah, well, most directors are more grateful to the agents who made their careers.”

Frankie can’t see him, but she’s guessing Casey is smirking. He always smirks when she reminds him that the only reason he’s got his current job is because she and Jai destroyed a global network of turncoat intelligence operatives and let him take the credit for it.

“You know, it wasn’t that long ago that you were pissed as hell at me for forcing you to join this team instead of sending you back to Bogota,” Casey points out. “And now you’re, what, Edgar Standish’s guardian angel?”

“You told me to be a team player. I’m being a team player.”

“Will Chase is rubbing off on you.”

Frankie closes her eyes and doesn’t reply. Casey knows her well, and she doesn’t need him to read between the lines of whatever she says and figure out that she’s maybe, possibly, probably falling in love with her partner.


“He knows nothing.”

“And the rest of your team?”

“You mean other than Jai?”

“Obviously.”

“Also nothing.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Casey says, “The fewer people who know about Ollerman’s new partnership, the better. The ghost of The Collective is enough to cause damage even if it doesn’t get resurrected. I want this kept quiet.”

“Are you asking me to keep Whiskey in the dark?”
“That depends. Do you trust him?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll leave it up to you to decide how much he needs to know.”

Frankie chews the inside of her lip. It would’ve been easier if he’d ordered her to keep her mouth shut. Then she wouldn’t have to decide how much she needs to share.

“And the rest of the team?” she asks.

“Need-to-know only. The team’s objective remains the same—dismantle The Trust and complete whatever missions you’re assigned. But let me be clear, Agent Trowbridge. Until further notice, I’m granting you full authority to take whatever measures you feel are necessary in order to stop Ollerman and Walker.”

Frankie leans her head back against the dryer and stares up at the ceiling. “Understood.”

“Keep me posted.”

Casey hangs up. Frankie lowers the phone from her ear. The sudden silence seems deafening. The laminate floor is cool beneath her legs, and the room feels chilly—probably because she’s still wearing nothing except Will’s button down shirt. One of his faded FBI sweatshirts is sitting in a laundry basket nearby. She stole it from him because she gets cold when she sleeps here without him. He thinks he lost it. He’ll never let her live it down if he finds out the truth, but she’s tempted to pull it on anyway.

She closes her eyes. She knows Jai is gone, probably on his way to Will’s apartment to check for bugs. Will, though, is still here. There’s no way he’d leave without telling her. And that means when she walks out of this room and goes to find him, she’s going to have to decide how many of his questions she wants to answer. She isn’t sure how demanding he’ll be. He’s been patient with her since they made that deal in Marseille. But Ollerman’s call has changed everything. It’s not just about her anymore. It’s about him and their team too, and the fact that her past is now their present and future makes her sick to her stomach.

What’s funny—or maybe just ironic, because she’s not laughing—is that a few hours ago, she fell asleep thinking that maybe she was ready to tell Will the truth. It’s not like all her reservations just evaporated into thin air. She was still afraid that he’d look at her differently. She was still worried that her darkness was too much for even his relentless sunshine to overcome. But there was something about having him in her house, something about falling asleep in her bed with his arms tight around her, that felt right enough to make her feel brave.

And then Anton happened, and Ollerman, and Casey. Jai looked at her with that anguished expression she first saw in Barcelona, and the all-consuming rage that fueled her for so long eclipsed everything all over again. Now all she can think about is that pitch black night in a Shanghai villa when Nick stood smiling on the wrong end of her gun and said You couldn’t love a good man if you tried.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe Will is too good for her. Maybe she’s too broken, too battered, too bruised. Maybe she’ll screw it up like she’s screwed everything else up, and all that’s left for her is darkness and solitude.

Maybe not.

She gets to her feet before she can change her mind. She opens the door and steps out into the
hallway, and runs straight into Will.

“Oh,” he says in surprise, his hands darting out to grab her shoulders and steady her. “Sorry.”

Frankie looks up at him. His hands drop from her shoulders. He’s still in his boxers, though he apparently put on his white undershirt at some point while she was on the phone with Casey.

“I was cleaning your shower,” he says, gesturing in the direction of her bathroom. He smiles a little, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Not eavesdropping, I promise.”

Frankie glances over her shoulder, and sure enough her shower is sparkling clean. Not even a trace of Anton’s blood is left. She looks back at Will. He’s still wearing that half smile, but it’s fading.

“I was going to clean the bedroom next,” he says quietly. “There’s some wood splinters from your dresser that probably wouldn’t feel good if you stepped on them in your bare feet. But if you want me to go, I can.”

It hits her again, just like it did in that hotel room in Havana, how good of a man he is. Cleaning her shower, worrying about her getting splinters in her feet, offering to give her space when they both know he’d never leave her side if he didn’t have to.

“I don’t want you to go,” she murmurs.

Relief chases across his expression. “Okay, good, because I—”

She doesn’t let him finish. She steps forward, grabs his face in her hands, and crashes her lips against his.

His body tenses in surprise like it did in France when she kissed him for the first time, and in Prague when she kissed him for the second, and then he wraps his arms around her and kisses her back so fiercely that it steals the breath right out of her lungs. He walks her backward in two long strides, pinning her between the nearest wall and his body, and desire roars through her veins like wildfire.

For a second, she wonders if this is a bad idea. There are so many things they need to talk about, so many things she needs to find the courage to say. She knows how important words are to him. But there’s no reluctance in the way he’s kissing her. He’s not humoring her, or holding back from her, or trying to coax her into letting her guard down. This is desire—pure and powerful and simple—and she wants him so badly her whole body is shaking with it.

His hands glide over her ass, down to the bare skin on the back of her thighs, and arousal flares in her stomach. His fingers tighten into a grasp behind her knees. He lifts her into his arms, wrapping her legs around his hips and pressing her back against the wall. His mouth blazes a trail along her jawline and down her neck. He scrapes his teeth none too gently against her throat, and then darts his tongue out to soothe her skin. She clutches his face, guiding his lips back to hers, and tries to show him with a kiss everything she can’t seem to verbalize.

He pushes off the wall and carries her down the hall and into her bedroom. He sets her gently on the edge of the bed and stands between her legs, kissing her with an intensity that’s overwhelming. She reaches for the hem of his shirt, yanking it up and over his head. He finds the buttons on her shirt next, and pushes it off her shoulders before discarding it on the floor.

He presses her backward onto the bed and crawls up after her, mapping her chest with his mouth. He reaches for the waistband of his boxers, and he helps her slide them off. He’s tossing them over the side of the bed when she closes her hand around him and strokes his length.
He sucks in a breath and goes still above her. She watches his face as she moves her hand, studying the way his jaw clenches and his eyes flutter closed. His head falls forward.

“Francesca,” he whispers, his voice catching.

She likes knowing she can do this to him—that he’s just as desperate for her as she is for him, and that it wouldn’t take more than her hand for him to lose control.

He grabs her arm to still her movements, his thumb pressing against her wrist where her pulse thrums beneath her skin. A moment passes where they both just breathe, and then he opens his eyes and meets her gaze. He lifts her hand above her head slowly. He holds it there while he reaches for her other hand, and then he pins both her wrists to the mattress above her head.

She stares up at him, breathless. He’s tried to do this before. She’s never let him because every cell in her body seems to rebel against any type of restraint, even with someone she trusts as much as she trusts him. His grip is loose at best. She knows that’s on purpose. It wouldn’t be hard for her to pull free like she has every other time. But she doesn’t.

He keeps an easy grip on her wrists with his left hand but skims his right down her body, his fingertips light enough on her skin to make her shiver. When he dips his fingers inside her, her eyes slam closed. When he rubs his thumb over her after that, her hips jerk and a strangled noise tears out of her throat.

He knows her well. He knows what she likes, and how she likes it, and he brings her to the brink with practiced ease. She sighs in protest when he stops, but it’s obvious he has no intention of teasing her. He kisses her, shifting above her to settle his hips between her legs, and then he pushes inside her in one slick, deep stroke.

She exhales something between a moan and a sigh into his mouth. He’s gentle at first, working her back up slowly, and then the rocking of his hips becomes more insistent. The climax he’d left her on the brink of starts to materialize again, and with it comes a need that she’s spent years trying to avoid. She bites her lip and tries to swallow the request, but she can’t. Every defense mechanism she’s got is gone. Her walls, her armor, all of it has collapsed.

“Say it, Will,” she whispers. “Say it.”

She’s not even sure he knows what she wants to hear, but it only takes him a second to breathe the words into her neck. “I love you.”

The response is on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn’t want to say it like this. Not when she’s so desperate to stave off the darkness that’s threatening to eat her alive, not when she’s so terrified that all the mistakes she’s made will resurface and rob her of the only good man who’s ever loved her. He deserves more than a heat of the moment confession. He deserves more than her, but she’s too selfish to let him go. She tried after Zurich. She couldn’t. She still can’t. She wants him too much. Needs him too much.

“I love you,” Will echoes as pleasure crests in her body and threatens to drown her. “I love you.”

She arches beneath him and shatters.

Will is wide awake.

It’s still dark outside. The sun won’t rise for another couple of hours. The house is quiet. Jai promised that the security system was fixed before he left, and Will knows that if it’s a system Jai
designed and checked, then there’s nothing to worry about. Nobody else is getting in this house tonight. But even still, he holds Frankie closer.

She’s curled into his side, one arm slung over his stomach, her head on his chest. He strokes his hand through her hair and revels in the sound of her deep, even breathing as she sleeps. She doesn’t say the words *I trust you* very often. She communicates her trust in other ways, and falling asleep next to him is one of them. He doesn’t take it for granted.

There’s a lot they need to talk about. Ollerman. The Trust. This mysterious group called The Collective. Her nameless former partner. Whatever Casey said on the phone.

They didn’t discuss any of it before she fell asleep. But that doesn’t mean they didn’t communicate. A few months ago, he would have misunderstood why she kissed him in the hallway. He would have assumed that she was trying to distract him, trying to avoid his questions. But he knows her better now. He understands that sometimes, during the moments she most wants to push him away, the only way she knows how to fight her fear is to give herself to him. He takes what she offers, and he gives her everything he has in return. It feels good—sex with her is the best he’s ever had—but it’s not the pleasure he craves. It’s the way she is afterward. Gentle. Affectionate. Vulnerable in a way she only ever is after they’ve been together.

He doesn’t know how much she’s going to tell him when she wakes up. He wants to know everything. He’s afraid for her, and for their team, and he wants to know what they’re up against. He wants to soothe the rage and the anguish that seemed to be strangling her before she locked herself in that room to call Casey. He wants her to finally let him in. He hopes she will.

At some point, he falls asleep. He’s not sure when. One minute he’s staring at the ceiling, playing with her hair and wondering if she’s got eggs and vegetables in her fridge so he can make her a frittata when she wakes up, and the next thing he knows he’s blinking awake as morning light streams through her windows.

It takes him a second to realize she’s not next to him. He rarely, if ever, wakes up after her, and it’s an even rarer occurrence when she manages to slip out of his embrace unnoticed. Her phone and her gun are still sitting on her nightstand, so wherever she is, it can’t be far.

He climbs out of bed, pulls on his boxers, and walks into the hall. He’s at the top of the stairs, preparing to head down to the kitchen, when he hears the shower running. He walks the rest of the way down the hall and stops in the bathroom doorway.

Frankie is standing in her absurdly large glass-panelled shower, her back to him and her head bent beneath the spray. She takes hot showers—hot enough that he’s complained in the past about his skin getting burned when he joins her—so there’s steam curling around her curves. Will lingers in the doorway, admiring how the water sluices over her skin. There’s a magnetism about her that seems to draw him in whenever he sees her. He can feel it now, pulling him toward her like a moth to the flame, but he stays put and watches her.

He’s been in love before. There are other women he’s looked at and thought *This is it. She’s the one.* But none of those relationships felt as real as this one. He didn’t realize until he fell in love with her just how much performing he used to do. Holding doors, buying flowers, saying and doing all the right things. It’s not that he didn’t care, or didn’t mean it. He did. But there was always an undercurrent of *This is what I’m supposed to do* and not *This is what I want to do* that shaped everything.

Frankie changed all that. Part of it was that sheet of rules, which expressly forbade him from doing all the things he’d always done. But a lot of it was just her—her distaste for anything that seemed
artificial, her indifference toward tradition just for tradition’s sake, her almost superhuman ability
to see through any and all types of bullshit. He had to learn to give her what she needed instead of
what he thought she should want. It’s been frustrating just as often as it’s been exhilarating, but it’s
worth it. She’s worth it. She’s the only woman he’s ever been with who has seen him at his
absolute worst and hasn’t recoiled. She’s the only woman he’s ever loved who not only challenges
him to be better, but holds him accountable for it. This time, he’s sure. This is it.

She’s the one.

He watches as she turns the faucet off, opens the shower door, and reaches for a fluffy white towel
that’s hanging on a hook on the wall. She doesn’t see him until she steps out of the stall.

“Morning,” he greets.

He doesn’t even try to pretend like he’s not staring at her body. The corner of her mouth lifts
upward into a smirk. She likes when he looks at her.

“Two days in a row I’m up before you,” she says, wrapping the towel around herself. “You feeling
your age, Whiskey?”

He moves across the bathroom and stops before her. She tilts her head back to look at him, her
smirk sliding into a smile. Her hair is dark when it’s wet, and it makes her eyes look greener. The
heat of the water has left her skin flushed. She smells amazing. He crowds into her space, his hands
sliding along her towel-covered hips, and ducks his head to kiss the curve where her neck meets
her shoulder.

“Wake me up next time,” he murmurs into her damp skin.

She holds her towel in place with one hand, but threads the fingers of the other through the hair on
the nape of his neck. “It’s not against the law to sleep in, you know. Even for an eagle scout turned
marine.”

He loves the way her voice drops lower whenever he stands this close. He nips lightly at her neck.
“How would I want to sleep in when I could shower with you? Especially in a shower that I’m
pretty sure is bigger than my entire apartment.”

She smiles into his shoulder. “I don’t have five kinds of body wash like you do.”

“It’s not the body wash I’m interested in.”

He fists his hand into the fabric over her hip and tugs. The towel jerks free of her grip and cascades
down her body, leaving her bare before him. He drops it on the floor and pulls her flush against his
chest.

“You smell good,” he breathes before he sucks on the pulsepoint beneath her jaw.

“What is it with you and Standish and the way I smell?”

“Don’t talk about Standish when you’re naked,” he replies, trailing his mouth down the column of
her neck.

Her fingers flex on the back of his head. “Will.”

That’s not the way she says his name when she wants him. That’s the way she says his name when
she’s trying to leave his apartment in the morning and he’s trying to coax her back into bed.
“Take a shower with me,” he says, skimming his hand along the curve of her hip.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I ordered us breakfast. It’ll be here soon.”

He leans back to look at her with a frown. “I would’ve made you breakfast.”

“With the expired milk and week-old takeout in my fridge?” she asks, arching an eyebrow.

“We could’ve gone to the grocery store,” he replies. “It would’ve been adorable. We could’ve held hands and kissed in the produce aisle and bickered about whether I could make short rib hash better than that place you loved in college.”

She rolls her eyes and slips out of his embrace. “There’s no way you’d make it better.”

“I could,” he insists, turning to watch her go.

“No you couldn’t.”

He glowers at her retreating figure. Next time they stay at his place, he’s going to prove her wrong.

He takes a quick shower, brushes his teeth, and gets dressed. He takes a detour into her laundry room to drop off his used towel, and finds his favorite FBI sweatshirt sitting in a laundry basket. He stares at it for a second, confused, because he thought for sure he left it in a hotel room in Munich.

He jogs downstairs and finds Frankie sitting on a stool at her kitchen island. She’s nursing a mug of coffee while she scrolls through her phone and chews a bagel. She’s wearing another one of his shirts that he thought he misplaced. He stops in his tracks and frowns.

“What?” she asks when she notices.

He gestures at her shirt. “I thought I lost that.”

“Did you?” she says innocently. She nods at a foil-wrapped bagel sitting next to her. “That one’s yours. There’s coffee over there.”

Will pours himself a mug of coffee from her French press and then slides onto the stool beside her. “I put my towel in your laundry room.”

“Okay,” she says without looking up.

“Found my favorite sweatshirt while I was in there.”

A look of recognition shivers across her face, but disappears almost immediately. “Hm,” she says noncommittally.

“Thought I lost that one too.”

“ Weird.”

“Any idea how it got there?”
“Nope.”

He grins and unwraps his breakfast. He lets her denial hang in the air for a minute or two while he eats his bagel, and then he says, “You don’t have to be embarrassed, you know.”

“Embarrassed?” she repeats, looking over at him with her eyebrows raised.

“Yeah,” he says with a shrug. “It’s okay that you miss me so much when you stay here that you sleep in my clothes. I miss you too. I sleep on your side of the bed when you’re gone.”

“I don’t miss you when I sleep here, Will.”

“The only alternative explanation is that you’re a klepto.”

“Maybe it’s not even your sweatshirt,” she says, turning toward him. “Maybe it belongs to one of my exes.”

“Yeah, cause you’ve dated tons of guys in the FBI,” he says with a smirk. “You love buttoned down boy scouts who don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re a smug son of a bitch, you know that?”

“You’re damn right I’m smug. My girlfriend the badass sleeps in my clothes cause she misses me. You’re lucky I’m not out on the street telling everyone who will listen.”

A hint of a smile appears on her lips. She gets up from her stool and walks around the island to pour herself more coffee. Will watches her with a warm feeling stirring in his chest. She loves him. She hasn’t said it. He thought she might last night, when she asked him to say it to her just before she came apart, but she didn’t. He doesn’t mind. He’s eating breakfast in her house and she sleeps in his sweatshirts and he’d have to be a moron not to see it. She loves him.

She turns around and walks back toward the island. She stands across the counter from him and sips her coffee. He finishes the last of his bagel and watches as her expression changes.

“You okay?” he asks eventually.

She chews her lip. Her hair is starting to curl a little as it dries. It looks soft, and he knows it will be if he reaches out and touches it, but now’s not the time.

“I know we need to talk about last night,” she says softly.

He blinks at her in surprise. He hadn’t expected her to bring it up. He thought he was going to have to ask.

“Do you want to?” he asks, genuinely curious.

She furrows her eyebrows and stares down into her mug. “I don’t know. I’ve never actually told someone the whole story.”

“What about Jai?”

“He was there for all of it.”

Will forgets sometimes just how long Frankie and Jai have been friends. Their relationship is unique. They’re not like him and Susan, with a friendship that’s demonstrative and affectionate and clear to even random passersby. Frankie and Jai’s friendship is far more tacit and private, hidden
like a massive iceberg floating just beneath the surface of the water.

But sometimes, it breaks the surface. Will saw it firsthand last night. Jai would have killed Anton in cold blood if Frankie hadn’t stopped him. She seemed to be on the brink of what looked like a panic attack until Jai soothed her. He looked at her like she was his entire world, and she spoke to him in a soft, broken voice that Will has never heard her use. By the time they parted so Frankie could call the director, it was clearer to Will than it ever has been before—Jai and Frankie love each other in a deeply profound way.

In the present, Frankie is quiet. Will waits her out. She rubs her thumb along the rim of her mug like she did in Havana right before she asked if he wanted to stay at her place.

“I don’t know where to start,” she confesses.

“Is it easier for you if I ask questions?”

“Does our deal still stand?”

That catches him off guard. He’d assumed that since she brought it up on her own, she was ready and willing to tell him everything. He hadn’t expected her to still want to hold a few things back.

“Are there still things you’re not ready to talk about?”

“Not things,” she says slowly. “Just...feelings.”

“I don’t understand.”

She glances up at him with a look of determination. “I don’t want to talk about how any of it made me feel. I don’t want to go there. I can’t.”

He blinks at her for a second, stunned. There are words that sound a lot like Susan’s sitting on the tip of his tongue. This isn’t healthy. You have to sort through your feelings or you can’t move on. Pretending they aren’t there won’t make them go away.

But when he looks across the counter at her, he can see that this isn’t up for negotiation. There’s tension in her shoulders, and she’s gripping her mug tightly. Her jaw is set, and her eyes are hard. If he pushes her, she’s going to push back.


She looks visibly relieved. “Then yes. It’d be easier if you asked questions.”

He shifts on his stool and tries to decide where to begin. He wants to start with her former partner, the one she seems to hate so much it paralyzes her, but he knows better than to go straight for the jugular so soon.

“What’s The Collective?” he asks instead.

“The predecessor of The Trust,” she answers without hesitation.

He waits, but she doesn’t say anything else. “I’m going to need a few more details than that,” he says dryly.

She smiles. “It was started by an MI6 agent who was known in intelligence circles as Clarke. Most people suspected that he was pretty high up in the MI6 hierarchy, but nobody knew for sure. The story was that he got tired of serving his country, and decided to start using his country to serve
himself instead.”

“Like Jimmy,” Will says, thinking of his nemesis.

“A hell of a lot smarter than Jimmy, but yeah,” Frankie agrees. “Clarke started recruiting operatives within MI6 to provide him with information that he could sell to the highest bidder. What made him dangerous, and what makes The Collective the precursor to The Trust, was that he didn’t stay in MI6. He recognized that building a global network of traitor spies could give him way more power and money than just focusing on the U.K.”

“Which agencies did he infiltrate?”

“All of them,” Frankie says, lifting a shoulder. “The CIA, Mossad, DGSE, BND, Interpol, Europol. He didn’t recruit high numbers of people like Ollerman does, but he didn’t need to. He focused on getting the right people instead—disillusioned operatives whose agencies trusted them with extraordinary amounts of information. After a few years, the mission became less about money, and more about consolidating power and influence. By 2008, The Collective had over two dozen operatives spread through every major intelligence agency in the world.”

Will frowns. “That seems small compared to the breadth of The Trust.”

“It wasn’t about numbers,” Frankie says, shaking her head. “It was about power. Clarke recognized something that Ollerman doesn’t—the more members you have, the more weak spots there are. If you’re small, it’s easier to avoid exposure.”

“So did anybody try to take him down?”

“The heads of the agencies did exactly what you’d expect them to do—they identified their best, most experienced agents and tasked them with rooting out the traitors. The only problem was that some of those agents were also members of The Collective. The ones who weren’t were easy to outmaneuver because they had no idea who they could trust. Eventually, everyone realized that working independently wasn’t cutting it. So the CIA director at the time, Dan Miller, called the heads of all the major agencies together. He thought they could beat Clarke at his own game.”

“You mean turning members of The Collective back to the good side?”

Frankie shakes her head. “Clarke built The Collective using well-known, experienced agents. Miller proposed creating a black-ops team made up of the opposite type—young but promising agents who The Collective wouldn’t suspect were threats. They would report directly to their agency heads, and nobody would know the team even existed, so there would be no loose ends. It was the inverse of The Collective.”

“Let me guess,” Will says. “You were the agent the CIA picked to join the team.”

A ghost of a smile appears on Frankie’s lips. “They picked two. I was one. Jai was the other.”

“Is that how you guys met?”

“No, actually. We’d met once before that.” Her smile deepens. “I may or may not have tried to kill him.”

“Seems to be a theme with you,” Will teases.

She grins.
“So who else was on the team?”

“Mossad sent Reuben Jabin Adelman. We called him RJ. He was the youngest of any of us—only twenty-one when we first started.”

Will whistles. “That’s young.”

“Yeah, well, what he lacked in experience he made up for with brilliance,” Frankie says. A soft, almost fond smile tugs on her lips. “He was a hacker. Imagine Standish’s skillset, but doubled. I’ve never seen anything like it. The word genius gets thrown around a lot, but RJ literally was one.”

Will notices immediately that she’s used the past tense—RJ was a genius. A memory of something she said to Jai last night flashes through his mind, something about how she didn’t want Standish to end up like RJ. A sense of dread washes over Will, but he keeps it to himself.

“BND sent Mina Schafer,” Frankie continues. “She had a doctorate in psychology. She was also a genius, but not like RJ. RJ was analytical. He was good with tech and data. Mina knew people. She could break an asset in interrogation in half the time it took most operatives, all without raising a finger.”

“So the team was you and Jai,” Will summarizes. “And RJ, who was like Standish. And Mina, who sounds like Susan.”

Frankie’s smile fades. She drops her gaze down to her mug and nods. Will hesitates for a second, but he has to ask.

“Was there someone on this team who was like me?”

She takes a long sip of coffee. Her shoulders are rigid, and her face has that impassive look he’s seen her wear every time the words I’m not ready to tell you that yet come out of her mouth. But she doesn’t say them this time.

“Nick Walker,” she answers. “He served in the Royal Air Force before joining MI6. But he wasn’t like you. He was…” She presses her lips together and shakes her head. “He wasn’t like you,” she repeats instead of finishing her sentence. “He and I did the majority of the team’s field work together.”

“So he was your partner.”

Frankie nods.

“Is he the one that Ollerman is working with now?”

She doesn’t answer. For a second, Will thinks she’s going to change her mind about talking to him. She looks the same way she does right before she gets into a fistfight—every muscle in her body seems flexed and ready, and there’s an almost audible crack of electricity humming off of her. The only difference between the Frankie standing across from him now and the one he’s seen take down men twice her size is her eyes. They’re glassy and out of focus in a way that’s totally uncharacteristic of her.

“What happened, Frankie?” Will murmurs, leaning forward so that his chest is pressed against the edge of the counter.

She leans back as soon as he leans forward. Will tries not to take it personally.
“Our team chased The Collective for two and a half years,” she says. “We were in Barcelona in 2011 on a mission when Nick took a couple bullets for me.”

Will remembers what she was like in Zurich when he was shot—the haunted look in her eyes, and the way she’d pulled away from him and rebuffed every attempt he made at pulling her back. He’d always assumed it was because she felt like it was her fault. Now he wonders if it was something else too.

“Jai had planted charges all throughout the building,” she says. “We had three minutes to get out before it exploded. There wasn’t enough time to get Nick out. So he asked us to leave him there. We didn’t have a choice.”

Her voice is quiet, but hard. This isn’t the same voice she used when she talked about David being murdered. It’s not the voice she uses when she talks about losing her parents, either. This is more detached, a recitation of facts without feelings, and another sense of dread washes over Will.

“We’d been in Barcelona because of a program RJ created,” she continues. “It was designed to analyze data from all the intelligence agencies that had been infiltrated by The Collective. It could identify patterns and make connections just like the program Standish put on that tarball, but it did more than that. It used an algorithm to identify which operatives in each agency were most likely to be Collective members. Barcelona was the first test run where we went after someone it identified. And it was right. It worked.”

There’s a but hanging in the air. Frankie doesn’t continue. A long silence drags on, and then Will prompts her gently.

“But?”

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She doesn’t look tense anymore. She seems more uncomfortable now, almost guilty.

“But it was dangerous,” she answers. “It was something RJ called self-smart. If you tried to run it on an operating system that was more advanced than what the program was designed to run on, it could read the code and update itself to mimic what it saw.”

Will blinks at her. “Wait. Are you telling me this thing was self-aware?”

She smiles a little. “It wasn’t going to come to life and take over the world, if that’s what you mean. But it could adjust and update itself. And because of that, it could shred through even the most advanced firewalls and security systems.”

“So if someone had control of the program…” he starts.

“Then they could access the digital mainframe of every intelligence agency in the world,” she finishes. “Classified reports, mission plans, funding allocations. The name, location, and cover identity of every single operative, active and retired. Bank records, medical histories, digital footprints. Everything.”

Will exhales a heavy breath. “In the wrong hands, that’s a nightmare.”

She nods. “Yeah. Which is why Mina wanted to destroy it as soon as we realized it worked.”

There’s a note of regret in her voice. “But you disagreed,” he guesses.

“My partner was dead because of The Collective,” she answers bluntly. “And we’d finally found
something that could bring them down. I wanted to use it to destroy them before we destroyed it. Jai and RJ knew how important it was to me, so they agreed. Mina got on board because she got outvoted.”

“Did it work?”

“For a while. Until The Collective took the program from us.”

She looks away from him and toward the windows that line the back wall of her house on either side of the door leading out to her deck. Will can tell that she isn’t finished, but he doesn’t prompt her like he has been. Her eyes are glassy again, and he knows her well enough to know that she needs a second to find her equilibrium.

Eventually, she looks back across the counter and meets his gaze. “We were in Moscow for a mission,” she says quietly. “Nick showed up at our safe house with a story about faking his death to protect us. I believed him. He had the names of some potential Collective members. I asked RJ to run the program and check them out. He did. And then Nick killed him. And Mina. He shot Jai too, but Jai’s flask took the bullet.”

She exhales a shaky breath and brushes her hair behind her ear. “He’d been part of The Collective since the beginning. He was Clarke’s protege, and Clarke was the head of MI6. He faked his death in Barcelona once he realized the program worked. And then he came back and took it and framed me for everything.”

Will feels like a bomb has gone off. His ears are ringing. His mouth is hanging open. Frankie is watching him carefully, and he wants to try to seem less horrified by her revelation, but he can’t. He just stares at her, dumbfounded. He’d suspected that someone she trusted had betrayed her. He’d assumed, after seeing her reaction last night, that it was her former partner. But he’d never, not in a million years, imagined something this bad. No wonder she didn’t want to let herself care about anyone on their team. No wonder she doesn’t trust anyone.

“Is that why you went rogue?” he asks when he finally finds his voice.

She nods. “The alternative was going to a black site for interrogation, and there was no way in hell I was doing that.”

Will swallows around the shock that’s still sitting in his throat. “So all those years you were rogue, you were trying to clear your name?”

“No.”

Will frowns.

She holds his gaze. “I didn’t give a shit about my name, Will. I didn’t care if I never worked for the CIA again. All I wanted was The Collective. Clarke. Nick. I wanted every single one of them dead.”

There’s a ruthlessness in her voice that he’s never heard before. He’s seen her be cold, and calculated, and vengeful. But this is something different, something dark and terrifying, and he suddenly remembers what Ollerman said last night about The Collective rotting in their graves.

“You killed them all, didn’t you?” he asks softly.

She hesitates. He waits. And then she lifts her chin and says, “Yes. That’s why they call me the widowmaker in Europe, and the demon mistress in Russia, and dama de sangre in South America.
Because I hunted every single one of them down. I broke them, and I executed them, and I killed everyone that got in my way whether they were part of The Collective or not.”

Her words ring in his ears. For a long moment, they stare at each other from opposite sides of the kitchen island. She’s watching him defiantly, almost like she’s daring him to judge her for all the blood on her hands, but condemnation is the last thing on his mind.

Later, when he’s by himself and has some time to really process what she’s saying, he might feel the same kind of horror he felt in Zurich when she told him about those seventeen people she tortured and killed. But right now, all he can think about is the smile on her face when she talked about RJ and Mina, and the way she looks at Jai when she thinks no one is watching, and how many people she’d lost even before she joined the agency. He imagines her spending two and a half years getting to know Nick, trusting him to have her back, grieving his death, and then finding out everything was a lie. He thinks about how angry he was when his brother died, the overwhelming rage he felt after Emma was killed, how much he hated Tina for betraying their team, and he knows—if someone did to him what Nick and The Collective did to Frankie, he would’ve reacted exactly like she did.

“How did you find them?” he asks.

“RJ had a security protocol in the program that none of us knew about,” she answers. “It was similar to a dead man’s switch. If he didn’t log in and enter a specific code every 48 hours, the program drafted a list of every suspected member of The Collective and every pattern it had identified and sent it to me. When I—”

“Wait,” Will cuts her off. “Why you?”

“Because he trusted me.”

There’s something about the way she says it, or maybe just the still-fresh memory of the way she’d smiled when she first talked about RJ, that makes Will think that she and the hacker were close. He wonders if this is why she’s always seemed so reluctant to form any type of mentorship relationship with Standish—because she had one with RJ, and then lost him.

“The list was just their names,” she continues. “I still had to find them, which wasn’t easy considering I was a fugitive and Jai was supposed to be dead. But we made it work.”

“That’s why you bought that list you told me about in Zurich,” he guesses. “And why you’ve worked with so many criminals. So you could find Collective members.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“So after you killed them all, did you destroy the program?”

That look shivers across her face again—the one she gets when she wants to tell him she’s not ready to share something. She stares down into her coffee.

“I saved Nick for last,” she says quietly. “I wanted him to know that I’d destroyed everything he sold us out for. But when I went after him, he was ready. He’d taken a page out of RJ’s book and created another dead man’s switch. If he dies, the program gets sent to every major criminal organization in the world. Dictators, drug cartels, Bratva, Yakuza, international syndicates. They’d all have access to the mainframes of every intelligence agency. It’d be catastrophic.”

“So you didn’t kill him.”
“No,” she says. He can hear the rage quivering in her voice again, can see it pulsing just beneath her skin as her shoulders straighten. “He uses the program for himself. He’s sitting on billions of dollars because of it. But we have a deal. As long as he doesn’t give anyone else access, he gets to stay alive. And as long as I let him live, he doesn’t share the program with anyone else.”

“Can’t someone destroy it remotely? Or create a firewall it can’t chew through?”

“The NSA has been trying to do that for years. They have an entire task force devoted to it. But nobody’s been able to do it. Like I said—RJ was a genius.”

“Maybe Standish could—”

“No,” she cuts him off, her voice sharp. “Standish isn’t going anywhere near that program.”

“But if he can—”

“I said no.”

Will leans forward. “Frankie, if Nick gives Ollerman access—”

“He won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know him. He doesn’t like to share.”

There’s something unspoken there, and Will wonders—not for the first time—whether she was in love with her former partner.

“Why would he work with Ollerman if you guys have a deal?”

“He’s not breaking the deal unless Ollerman accesses the program.”

“But why work with him at all?”

“I don’t know.”

Once again, a hint of something unspoken hangs in the air. Will studies her, trying to decide whether or not to push. He has a million questions. There are a lot of things he still doesn’t know. How she ended up working for the CIA again. Why Nick pulled her out of Bogota. Whether they were just partners, or something more. But she looks tired and spent, and she’s given him so much in the past twenty-four hours that he doesn’t think it’s fair to ask for more. He knows everything he needs to know. That’s enough for now.

He pushes his stool back and gets to his feet. She watches him warily as he makes his way around the end of the island and toward her. He reaches out for her when he’s close enough, but she takes a step away from him and his hand grasps empty air.

A beat of silence hovers between them, tense and uneasy. She won’t look at him. Will studies her face. He’s seen her wear this expression before. When she finally showed up at his apartment after confessing her sins in Zurich. That afternoon in the upstairs office of the Dead Drop when she told him that Rafael was just the tip of the iceberg. That night all those months ago when he told her he thought they should be together.

She takes a deep breath. “If knowing all this changes things for you—”
“It doesn’t.”

She snaps her gaze up to meet his. She searches his eyes, and he knows she’s looking for traces of indecision. She won’t find any.

“I don’t think you understand what I’m saying,” she murmurs.

“Yes I do.”

“It wasn’t just Collective members.”

“I know.”

“The CIA, Interpol—they sent people after me. I killed them. Innocent people, Will. People like you who were just trying to do their jobs.”

“I know.”

Her eyebrows furrow in confusion. “How can you…?” she starts. She doesn’t finish.

“I would’ve done the same thing,” he tells her patiently. “If what happened to you happened to me, I would’ve done the same thing.”

She shakes her head. “No you wouldn’t.”

“Yes I would.”

“Will—

“Frankie,” he cuts her off firmly. He leans toward her, but he doesn’t cross the boundary into her personal space. “Ollerman was right. I’d do anything for you. I’ve never loved someone like I love you. I love you more now than I did yesterday. I’m going to love you even more tomorrow. I’m always going to love you. And if someone took you from me, I’d burn the whole world to the ground to make them pay.”

The expression on her face takes his breath away—hope and wariness and fear blending together into one desperate look that makes him want to pull her close and never let her go.

“Don’t say things you don’t mean, Will,” she whispers. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I’m an eagle scout. We always keep our promises.”

She doesn’t smile.

“I’m not Nick,” he says softly. “Whatever he was to you, whatever he did—that’s not me. I won’t hurt you. But you have to let me in, Frankie. You have to let me love you.”

She stares at him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, her eyes glassy enough that he wonders if she might be holding back tears. He wants to close the distance between them and hug her and tell her over and over again how much he loves her until she believes him. But he can’t. She has to choose.

He holds his arms out. “Come here, Francesca.”

For a moment, she doesn’t move. He waits. And then she lurches forward and buries her face in his chest, her arms wrapping around his torso, her hands clutching the back of his shirt like she’s
hanging on for dear life.

He wraps his arms around her and hugs her. “I love you,” he murmurs into the top of her head.

She holds him even tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Aren’t you guys so proud of me for not leaving you with a horrific cliffhanger?! I mean, Ollerman is working with Frankie’s former partner who is a traitor with billions of dollars *and* a terrifying computer program that could end the world. BUT OTHER THAN THAT EVERYTHING IS GREAT.

Also, for the record, I’m not *trying* to write this many sex scenes. In fact, in the other way-too-long fic I recently wrote, I purposely *didn’t* write sex scenes unless I had to for the sake of the plot. But things are a little different with this story because Frankie is...well, Frankie. Plot-sex seems to happen a lot more because our girl has a really fascinating relationship with sex. So...sorry?
This chapter is loooooong. I have no excuse other than the fact that I *really* wanted it to end where it ends. In fact, consider yourself warned that the next few chapters will be relatively long. This is the last storyline arc before things get messy, and I want to knock it out so I can get to the “good” stuff. (Yes, I put that word in quotes. Yes, I did it on purpose. Don’t worry, everything will be fine. Eventually.)

Standish doesn’t figure out that Frankie and Will are together until September.

That’s not to say there aren’t any close calls during the preceding months. There are. Lots of them, actually. In fact, it’s kind of absurd that Standish doesn’t figure it out sooner.

He almost catches them making out a total of fourteen times.

On three separate occasions he actually does catch them making out, but assumes that Frankie is kissing someone who isn’t Will because of distance, dim lighting, or both.

Once, he almost catches them having make-up sex in the upstairs office of the Dead Drop after a particularly nasty screaming match. They’re saved only because Will remembered to lock the door.

Twice, Standish complains about how loud Will turns his TV volume up when they’re in hotel rooms with adjoining walls. Both times, Frankie publicly teases Will about going deaf from old age. Both times, Will privately reminds Frankie that she wasn’t saying he was old the night before when they had to turn up the TV so Standish wouldn’t hear them through the walls.

In June, Will and Frankie spend hours on the top floor of an abandoned warehouse in Los Angeles for a stakeout. The rest of the team is in a van a few blocks away. Frankie is bored. She repeatedly sighs and says When do I get to shoot people? the same way a small child would say Are we there yet?

Three hours in, she starts giving Will the look. Will tries to ignore her, but she’s wearing that shirt he likes and they haven’t seen each other in almost a week because she had to go to D.C. for something related to Rafael’s trial.

The second she sidles up next to him and brushes her lips over the underside of his jaw, he’s a goner. When she unbucks his belt, unzips his pants, and drops to her knees, he feels like he’s going to combust. Standish chatters over comms about his dating life and a burrito he recently ate, totally oblivious. Will tries to control his breathing and stay silent, but Frankie is ridiculously good at what she’s doing, and he comes so hard that he groans and swears. Standish notices. Frankie makes up a lie because Will is too blissfully incoherent to speak. Standish believes her. Jai and Susan do not.

In July, Standish calls Will at three in the morning. Frankie answers because she doesn’t realize it’s Will’s phone that’s ringing and not hers. Standish is so incredulous that Frankie is answering Will’s phone at three in the morning that his voice is nearly a shriek. Frankie makes up another lie.
that, in retrospect, Will realizes is pretty unbelievable. Standish believes it anyway because he’s stranded on Staten Island without his wallet and needs Will to come get him.

Frankie refuses to get out of bed and go with Will. She tells Will to tell Standish to “grow the hell up and stop chasing ass all the way out to Staten Island.”

Will does not pass along her message.

Sometimes, Will wonders whether Standish actually does know the truth, and is just respecting their privacy and waiting for them to tell him. Two instances, in particular, make him wonder.

The first happens in late July. The team gets sent to Tokyo to retrieve the abducted daughter of an American diplomat. There’s an inside man on the diplomat’s security team who tips off the kidnappers that an American black-ops team is on their trail. The kidnappers aren’t pros. They’re scared and desperate and true believers in their political cause, so Will and Frankie arrive at a dilapidated house just in time to see one of the kidnappers put a bullet in the eight-year-old’s head. Frankie empties her gun in his chest, but it doesn’t matter. They’re too late.

Frankie doesn’t handle it well. She gets drunk at a bar, beats the shit out of a guy who says something rude to her, and gets hauled out onto the sidewalk by Will, who can’t decide what he’s more heartbroken over—the dead little girl or his grief-stricken partner.

“Look at me,” he says, grabbing Frankie’s face in his hands once they’re outside. “I know you’re upset. I am too. But ending up in a Japanese prison isn’t going to make you feel any better.”

“Get off me,” she says, shoving his chest.

Standish appears on the sidewalk outside the bar with Jai and Susan in tow. Will ignores them. Frankie either doesn’t notice them or doesn’t care that they’re there.

“Fuck this bar,” she snaps, glaring at a bouncer by the door who seems to shrink a few inches beneath her furious gaze. “Fuck this city. Fuck this whole goddamn island.”

“Frankie,” Will says calmly.

“Fuck you too,” she says, rounding on him.

He shoots her a smirk. “That does seem to be one of your favorite things to do.”

He’s hoping if he teases her it will bring her back to herself. For a second, she goes silent. She stares at him with her eyebrows furrowed, her body swaying almost imperceptibly as she stands beneath a neon sign, and then she turns on her heel and starts to walk in the opposite direction.

“Nope,” Will says, darting in front of her and grabbing her shoulders. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She twists out of his grasp. “I’m going to find a better bar.”

“No you’re not,” he says, grabbing her again. “You’re going back to the hotel.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care. You’re done drinking. You’re going to take a shower and drink some water and sleep this off.”
She tries to jerk away from him, but he tightens his hold.

“You think I won’t hit you,” she says, glaring up at him. “But I will.”

“Hit me all you want,” he retorts. He pulls her against his chest and wraps his arms around her in a tight hug. “I’m not letting you go.”

She curses and tries to wrench out of his grasp, but she’s so wasted and upset that she’s not nearly as dangerous as usual. She can’t seem to extricate herself from his embrace. He’s not even sure she’s trying that hard.

Eventually, she stops fighting him. Her body goes limp. He strokes his hand over the back of her head, her hair soft against his palm, and loosens his hold.

“Francesca,” he whispers in her ear.

She presses her forehead against his shoulder and lets out a shaky breath that sounds suspiciously like a sob. “I hate this job,” she breathes, her voice so soft it’s an exhale.

He leans back just far enough to reach for her face again, his hands gentle on her cheeks. “It’s okay.”

“No it’s not,” she says, her voice catching. Her eyes are brimming with tears. He’s never seen her cry. He knows that if she wasn’t drunk, she wouldn’t be. But she is drunk, and she’s blaming herself even though it isn’t her fault, and he feels like his heart is shattering into a million pieces.

He presses his lips to her forehead, her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. He doesn’t care who’s watching. He doesn’t care about anything except her. She reaches for him, her fingers fisting in his shirt, and tilts forward to bury her face in his neck.

“I’m tired, Will,” she whispers. “I’m so tired.”

He doesn’t think she’s talking about sleep. But he doesn’t want to have that conversation with her when she’s drunk outside a bar in Tokyo with their team standing a few yards away, so he rubs a hand down her back and says, “Ready for bed?”

She nods into his neck.

An hour later, she’s asleep on his chest in his hotel room. There’s an empty glass of water on the bedside table, and her hair is still wet from their shower. It’s soaking through his t-shirt. He doesn’t care. He answers texts from Jai and Susan about Frankie. He gets nothing from Standish.

The next morning, he leaves Frankie sleeping in bed and goes out to find coffee, breakfast, and ibuprofen. He runs into Standish in the lobby of the hotel.

“Is Frankie…?” Standish asks, his voice quiet.

“She’ll be fine,” Will answers. “She’s still sleeping.”

Standish furrows his eyebrows. Will waits, wondering if the younger agent is going to ask about how he calmed Frankie down or how he knows that she’s asleep. If he asks, Will won’t lie. But he doesn’t ask.

Three days later, Standish bursts into the Dead Drop and announces that he’s found the perfect woman for Will. Will rolls his eyes and wonders how on earth someone could be so oblivious.
The second time Will suspects Standish might figure everything out is during a mission to El Salvador.

It’s mid-August, and it’s hot as hell. Will and Frankie get separated while posing as a pair of buyers interested in purchasing weapons from a notorious gang with ties to The Trust. Will’s cover gets blown, and an obnoxiously buff gang member knocks him unconscious and throws him in the back of an unmarked van.

Will wakes up tied to a chair. He’s in a small and dirty room. There’s a clock on the wall that he knows isn’t showing the right time, but it’s still ticking. Three guys stride through the door and demand to know who he works for. Will laughs at them and says something snarky that Frankie would be amused by if she were here. When they start beating him, he’s glad she’s not.

Every time they ask him a question, he laughs and refuses to answer. The violence gets steadily worse, and so does the pain. Will deals with it the way he was trained to: He forces his mind to go somewhere safe and happy. Nowadays, happy seems to be wherever Frankie is, so when he closes his eyes he sees her barefoot in her kitchen, wearing one of his t-shirts and nothing else, her head thrown back as she laughs.

By the time the door gets blown off its hinges and the real Frankie bursts in, her eyes blazing as she dispatches every single gang member in her path with a murderous look on her face, Will is more than a little worse for the wear.

Frankie holsters her gun and crouches before him, her eyebrows furrowed in concern. She brushes her hand over his cheek gently. “Hey you,” she murmurs.

Standish and Jai and Susan come flying into the room, dressed in tactical gear and clamoring to see Will, but he’s only got eyes for Frankie. He tries to smile at her around his swollen lip. It hurts. Everything hurts. He can taste blood in his mouth. His vision is a little blurry—he’s pretty sure he’s got two black eyes, and one of them is almost swollen shut—but he squints at her and says, “Hey beautiful.”

He realizes belatedly that he probably shouldn’t have called her that in front of Standish. She doesn’t seem to mind. She pulls her favorite knife out and flicks it open to cut the zip ties that are binding his wrists to the arms of the chair. He sighs in relief once he’s free.

Frankie puts her knife away and runs her hands over his body, searching for wounds. He winces when her palms slide along his ribs, and again when they brush over his shoulder. He can read the worry clearly on her face, but when she speaks her voice is calm.

“Anything serious I can’t see?” she asks, lifting her gaze to meet his.

“No weapons,” he says. He thinks his voice is slurring. He is so tired. “Just fists. They didn’t like when I laughed at them.”

She snorts. “Can’t imagine why.” She wraps an arm around him. “Come on,” she murmurs. “Let’s get out of here.”

She helps him out of the chair. He stands for a moment, swaying, and then stumbles and collapses against her. Jai and Susan step forward to help, but Frankie steadies herself against his weight and wraps her arms around him.

Will buries his face into the curve of her neck. “You smell good.”

“Can you walk?” she asks.
“Why do you always smell so good? Hey, Standish,” he calls, picking his head up. He squints. “Standish.”

“Yeah?” Standish says, stepping forward.

“Isn’t it weird how she always smells so good?”

“Yeah, man,” Standish says, smiling thinly. “So weird.”

“Will,” Frankie says with far more patience than usual. “Can you walk, or not?”

“I can walk.” He straightens and blinks down at her. “But only if we’re going to take a hot shower and then watch *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and cuddle.”

There’s a chance he’s delusional from pain. There’s also a chance that if he hadn’t recently been beaten to a pulp, Frankie would have punched him for saying the word *cuddle* in front of their team.

Instead, she smiles up at him. “How about a hot shower and *Die Hard*?”

Will crinkles his nose. “No way. *An Officer and a Gentleman*.”

“Hard pass. *Aliens*?”

“No. Come on, meet me halfway.”

*The Thomas Crown Affair.*

“Original?”

“Remake.”

“God, I love you,” he sighs, burying his face in her neck again. “Sold to the girl with the pretty smile that makes me weak in the knees.”

“I think that’s the blood loss,” she says, laughter threading through her voice.

On the way back to their hotel, Will lies sprawled in the back of the van with his head in Frankie’s lap. She’s stroking her hand through his hair, and it feels so good he thinks he could stay like this forever. He’s tired and he wants to sleep, but every time he starts to doze he jolts awake, alert and ready to fight. Frankie smooths her hand over his chest when he does, and his racing heart seems to slow beneath her touch.

They’ve been driving for twenty minutes when Will catches a glimpse of Standish leaning out of the passenger seat and across the center console toward Susan.

“Do you think it bothers Will’s secret girlfriend that he and Frankie are so close?” he asks in what Will thinks is supposed to be a quiet whisper but definitely is not.

“No,” Susan says, turning the steering wheel to guide the van around a curve. “I think she probably understands that they have a unique relationship.”

Standish glances toward the back of the van, and Will shuts his eyes and pretends to be asleep. When he cracks an eye open a few seconds later, Standish is leaning toward Susan again.

“He’s sleeping on her,” he hisses.
“He’s probably tired.”

“Yeah but she keeps touching him.”

“He could have died, Standish. She’s relieved.”

“But it’s Frankie. The only time she touches people is to punch them.”

“No, the only time she touches you is to punch you. She hugs me all the time.”

Standish frowns. “How come she never hugs me?”

“Maybe you should ask her.”

“I’m not asking her that,” he says incredulously. “She’ll break my face.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Frankie says.

Standish whips his head around to look at Frankie, his eyes wide with horror, and then he turns back around and sinks lower in his seat. “Jai, tell her not to break my face.”

“Don’t break his face,” Jai says dryly without looking up from his laptop.

“Can’t make any promises,” Frankie mutters.

Jai smirks. Susan snorts. Standish groans.

Will glances up at Frankie. “Hey.”

She looks down at him.

“I’m glad my secret girlfriend is so understanding about how close we are.”

Frankie smirks. “Go to sleep, dork.”

In the end, they get caught at the Dead Drop.

It’s Labor Day weekend. The team has just finished a mission that took them to a party in the Hamptons that required Will to play a spoiled millionaire with a fondness for pretty women (Frankie in a dress that really should’ve been illegal) and fast cars (a Bugatti that he drove back to the city way too fast).

Ray and Susan said their goodbyes a while ago. Jai is gone too, off to do whatever it is he does on holiday weekends. Will doesn’t know where Standish went. He doesn’t really care. Frankie is bent over the pool table, lining up a shot with an intensely focused look on her face, and Will is also intensely focused—on Frankie’s ass.

She’s not wearing that dress anymore. Just jeans and a t-shirt. But damn it, her ass looks just as good in jeans as it did in that dress. It’s really not fair how pretty she is.

The smack of the cue ball hitting another ball snaps him to attention, followed by a low chuckle from Frankie. “Oh, you’re definitely buying dinner tonight.”

Will surveys the table and realizes that while he was daydreaming about Frankie, she was running the table. All she needs to do is sink the eight ball and he’s toast.
“Ain’t over ‘til it’s over,” he says.

She straightens and smirks at him. “It’s over. I want Chinese.”

“Sink your shot and we’ll talk.”

“You just want me to bend over again.”

Before Will can answer (Of course he wants her to bend over again), Standish walks in the room.

“Hey Will,” he says brightly. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Better, thanks for asking,” Will replies. “I’ve been trying this new ice-heat system that I read about last month in a science journal and it’s really worked wonders. You start with ice for twenty minutes every two hours so that you can minimize inflammation and swelling, and then after forty-eight hours you switch to heat, which—”

“He’s just going to keep talking unless you tell him you don’t care,” Frankie interrupts, smirking in Standish’s direction.

“Hey,” Will protests. “Not everyone is as unsympathetic to my pain as you. Standish actually cares.”

“No he doesn’t.”

“Yes he does. Why else would he ask?”

“Because he wants something.” Frankie bends over the table to line up her final shot. “Tell him, Standish.”


“See?” Will says to Frankie. “He cares.”

“I was also wondering if I could take the Bugatti for my date tonight since we still have it signed out from the mission and we don’t have to return it until tomorrow morning,” Standish adds in a rush, punctuating the request with a sheepish wince.

Frankie takes her shot, sinks the eight ball in the corner pocket, and then straightens. “Sometimes it’s really exhausting being right all the time.”

“I totally care about your shoulder,” Standish insists. “I swear, dude, I want to hear all about your ice heat...thing.”

“ Forget it,” Will says, reaching for the rack so he can set up a new game. He looks at Frankie. “We’re playing again.”

“But I won.”

“Best out of three.”

Frankie rolls her eyes but starts to fish pool balls out of the closest pocket.

“So...can I take the car?” Standish asks.
Will glances at Frankie. She looks Standish up and down, and then shrugs at Will.

“All right,” Will says. “But if you wreck it, you buy it.”

“And no texting and driving,” Frankie says, giving Standish a stern look from the other side of the pool table. “If I have to tell your mother you died because you were texting some girl eggplant emojis while driving I will bring you back to life just so I can kill you myself.”

“No sex in the car either,” Will adds.

Standish makes a face. “Is it even possible to have sex in a two-seater?”

“Sure, if you’re creative enough,” Frankie replies with a shrug. “The hood is more comfortable if you’re planning on having good sex, though. On a Bugatti, anyway.”

Standish looks intrigued. “Have you—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Will interrupts. “Just make sure you have it back in the lot by eight tomorrow morning or I’ll send Frankie to find you.”

Frankie shoots Standish a wicked smile. “Trust me, you won’t want me to find you.”

Standish grimaces. “Yeah, I don’t doubt that.”

Will pulls the keys out of his pocket and tosses them to Standish. “Have fun, kiddo.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Frankie adds.

“Terrible advice,” Will mutters.

Standish grins. “Thanks guys.” He bounces out the door with a skip in his step.

Once he’s gone, Will turns to Frankie. “Do I want to know how you know it’s more comfortable to have sex on the hood of a Bugatti than inside one?”

She lifts her eyebrows. “I don’t know, do you?”

He considers the question. “Yeah, kind of.”

She leans against her pool stick. “It was with Rafael.”

“Oh.” Will frowns. “I thought you were going to say it was Hector.”

“Hector and I had sex in a lot of cars,” she acknowledges. “But Cuba doesn’t have many Bugattis. Rafael, on the other hand, had two. Perks of being a billionaire.”

“And you had sex on both of them?”

“Yeah. It was kind of a thing for him.” She frowns and tilts her head. “He had a lot of things.”

Will crinkles his nose. “Was that, like, all you guys did? Have ridiculous amounts of sex? Was he some kind of sex addict?”

Frankie smirks at him. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“No,” Will says, shaking his head. “I don’t.”
He turns his focus back to re-racking the balls. He tries very, very hard not to imagine Frankie having sex with Rafael on the hood of a Bugatti. He fails. It’s been a while since he was jealous. He forgot how terrible it feels—the warmth creeping across his skin, the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, the overwhelming desire to punch someone. It’s ridiculous and irrational, considering he and Frankie spend every night together and Rafael is rotting in a prison cell. But logic doesn’t stop his brain from conjuring up an image of the handsome drug lord bending his girlfriend over the hood of a five million dollar car.

“Will,” Frankie calls.

He shakes the awful image from his mind and looks up at her. “Hm?”

The corner of her mouth quirks upward. “You’re better.”

“What?”

“Sex with you,” she clarifies. “It’s better.”

A wave of pride washes over him, but then he frowns. “Are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

She arches an eyebrow. “Have I ever said anything just to make you feel better?”

“No.”

She gestures at him as if to say, *There’s your answer.*

He wants to play it cool. He wants to shrug and act like it doesn’t matter because he doesn’t care. But he can’t because he *does* care. He’s in love with her, and she’s definitely the best he’s ever had, and he wants to know if the feeling is mutual.

He sidles around the edge of the pool table and in her direction. She watches him with a hint of a smirk as he closes the distance. When he stops in front of her, she tilts her head back to look up at him. He takes the pool stick out of her hand, leans it against the table next to them, and then steps into her space.

“Better, huh?”

She smirks at him instead of answering.

“Like, a lot better?” he asks. “Or just a little better?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t have a ranking system.”

“But if you did, I’d be in the top tier, right? Or, like, close to the top? Maybe top three? Or, I don’t know, number one?”

Her smirk deepens. “You want me to say you’re the best I ever had?”

“Well am I?”

“I don’t know,” she says thoughtfully. “It’s been a few days. My memory of your abilities seems a little hazy.”

“Well I’d be more than happy to refresh it for you.” He slides his hands along her hips and presses her backward against the edge of the pool table. “Wouldn’t want you to make a decision without all
the facts. That would be irresponsible of me.”

She grins at him. “Eagle scouts are never irresponsible.”

“Never,” he agrees. He glances down at her mouth. “My place or yours?”

She lifts herself up to sit on the edge of the pool table. He raises his eyebrows. She grabs him by one of his belt loops and tugs him forward into the space between her legs. “Neither,” she whispers as she pulls his mouth down to meet hers.

It crosses Will’s mind very briefly that this could be a bad idea. They’ve only had sex once at the Dead Drop, and that was behind a closed and locked door. This is far riskier. On the first floor, out in the open, on top of the pool table—they could get caught.

But it’s a holiday weekend and everyone is gone. The bar is quiet except for the rattling of the heating vent above their heads. Frankie tastes good, and she feels good against him, and she’s right—it has been a few days since they’ve been together. It’s certainly not the longest they’ve ever gone without, but now that her legs are wrapped around him it feels like it’s been forever. He wants her. She obviously wants him. What’s the worst that could happen?

He’s got his hand up her shirt and she’s working on the buckle of his belt when Standish walks in.

“Hey guys, do I need to—OH MY GOD WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

Will jolts back from Frankie’s mouth and rips his hand out from under her shirt so fast it’s like her skin is suddenly on fire. He stumbles away from her. Standish is standing in the doorway, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open in shock. Will blinks at him, unsure of what to do next.

Frankie doesn’t seem to share his uncertainty. She drops her head and sighs. “Aren’t you supposed to be on a date?” she says, glancing at Standish over her shoulder.

“Aren’t you supposed to not be making out with Will?” Standish screeches.

Frankie hops off the pool table and turns around. “No, that was pretty much the only thing on my agenda for tonight.”

“ weren’t you supposed to not be making out with Will?” Standish screeches.

Frankie arches an eyebrow. “My what, Standish?”

He glances around the room as if she’s asked him to say a dirty word in church, and then he leans forward and hisses, “Your feminine wiles.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and turns toward Will. “Seriously, Will, you have to stop speaking old man in front of him. You know he repeats everything he hears. He’s going to get made fun of when he hangs out with kids his age.”

“I don’t speak old man,” Will says defensively.

She scoffs. “You definitely speak old man. Because you are an old man.”

“Seemed young enough for you when you were trying to take my pants off thirty seconds ago,”
Will retorts.

Frankie grins.

“Oh, god, make it stop,” Standish says, covering his ears and turning on his heel to leave the room. “I need to pour bleach in my brain.”

Will chases after him and catches him at the front door. “Hang on, kiddo.”

“Don’t touch me with your sex hands!” Standish yelps, leaping away from Will. “I don’t know where those have been!”

“They haven’t been anywhere because your timing sucks,” Frankie says, stopping next to Will.

Will shoots her a glare. “Not helping.”

“I’m okay with that,” she says with a shrug.

Will rolls his eyes and turns back to Standish. “We should talk about this before you go.”

“Talk about what?” Standish says angrily. “How you walk around being all hashtag real man goals, acting like a good dude who treats women right, and then you turn around and do this?”

“Am I the this in that sentence?” Frankie asks dryly. “Cause that feels offensive.”

“Standish, what are you talking about?” Will asks with a frown.

“You’re cheating on your secret girlfriend with Frankie!” Standish shouts.

For a second, the accusation hangs in the air. Will blinks, stunned once again by how completely oblivious Standish is considering he’s a spy, and then Frankie snorts and says, “Wow.”

“What do you mean wow?” Standish demands. “I know you don’t do emotional attachments, Frankie, but that doesn’t mean other people don’t! He has a girlfriend. Don’t you have any shame? Couldn’t you find some other guy to entertain you when you’re bored?”

Frankie stiffens the way she does when she’s offended, and Will finds himself caught somewhere between a disapproving frown at Standish’s implication and a wince in preparation for whatever snarky response is about to fly out of Frankie’s mouth.

“I’m the girlfriend, you idiot,” she snaps.

Will blinks in surprise. That wasn’t nearly as bad as he thought it would be.

“It’s a miracle you don’t run into more walls considering how blind you are. Ray Charles could see better than you.”

*There it is,* Will thinks with a sigh.

Standish looks flabbergasted. He glances at Will, and then back at Frankie, and then he squeaks, “Wait, what?”

“Frankie’s my girlfriend,” Will explains before Frankie can say anything else about how blind/idiotic Standish is. “We’re together.”

“Well when the hell did you break up with the other girl?” Standish asks incredulously.
“Oh my god,” Frankie says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“There was no other girl,” Will explains patiently. “It’s always been Frankie. I just told you there was another girl because we wanted to keep it private for a while.”

Standish glances between them again. “So you guys are, like, an actual couple? Like in real life?”

“Yes,” Will confirms.

“For how long?”

“Seven months,” Will replies at the exact same time Frankie says, “Five months.”

They look at each other. Standish raises his eyebrows.


Frankie rolls her eyes. “That means five.”

“So all those times I saw you kissing some other dude...” Standish says to Frankie.

“That was him,” Frankie says, tipping her head toward Will. “You should really get your eyes checked.”

“And that time you answered his phone?”

“I was half asleep and thought it was mine.”

Standish crinkles his nose. “Were you asleep in his bed cause y’all had sex?”

Frankie rolls her eyes again. “No, Standish, I’m making him wait for the wedding night.”

Standish blinks. “I think you’re being sarcastic,” he says with a frown. “But I’m not really sure and now I kinda want to ask if you guys are going to get married.”

Will feels Frankie’s body go rigid next to his. He glances at her. All the color has drained from her face. Her eyes are wide. He hasn’t seen her look this panicked in a long time.

“We haven’t talked about it,” he says neutrally, leaning toward her so that his shoulder brushes hers. “So don’t ask.”

Frankie seems to relax a little.

“Well you should talk about it,” Standish says. “You guys aren’t like other people. You can’t just go on dates all willy-nilly.”

“Old man words,” Frankie says to Will pointedly.

Will ignores her. “This isn’t willy-nilly. It’s the opposite of willy-nilly.”

“Oh, so it’s serious?” Standish demands.

“Yes it’s serious,” Will insists. He glances at Frankie, but she seems way less bothered by his confirmation of the seriousness of their relationship than she was by the idea of marriage. “Frankie and I are in a committed relationship and we’re very happy.”

“That’s even worse than willy-nilly!” Standish wails, throwing up his hands.
Will frowns. “How is that worse than willy-nilly?”

“I swear to god if either of you says that word one more damn time,” Frankie warns.

Standish rounds on Frankie and shoves his index finger in her face. “How could you let this happen?”

“Me?” she says incredulously. “What did I do?”

“Will, apparently!” Standish bellows. “Seven months and counting!” A sudden look of horror passes over his face, and he glances around the bar. “Oh god. How many other surfaces in this place have you guys done the nasty on?”

“Just your work station in the back room,” Frankie deadpans.

Standish makes a disgusted choking sound in the back of his throat.

“Frankie,” Will chastises. She shrugs at him like she’s not sorry. Will turns to Standish. “We haven’t had sex on your work station.”

“Yet,” Frankie adds.

“Will you stop it?” Will says to her.

“I think I just threw up in my mouth,” Standish moans, his hand clutching his throat.

“Standish, look, I know this is a shock,” Will says, reaching out to put his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “But if you would just calm down for a—”

“I will not calm down,” Standish says, wrenching out of Will’s grasp. He glares at Frankie. “Seriously, Frankie, how could you do this?”

“How is this my fault?” Frankie asks, throwing out her hands. “Relationships take two people, Standish. Why are you pissed at me and not him?”

“Because you’re supposed to be the practical one!” Standish shouts. “Of course he fell in love with you. He’d fall in love with a chair if it played hard to get. But you were supposed to tell him no! You were supposed to be all broody and closed off and keep your sexy venus flytrap moves for all the criminals with tattoos and bad attitudes. But noooo. You had to go all soft and let him charm you with his puppy dog eyes and his full lips! I do not approve!”

Frankie folds her arms over her chest. “You know, believe it or not, we don’t actually care if you approve.

Will frowns because she might not care, but he does. “I thought you’d be excited for us, Standish.”

“Excited?” Standish crows. “Do you know what happens to people who are in happy and committed relationships? They get married and they make babies. And I can’t compete with adorable green-eyed Chase babies!”

“Compete?” Will echoes.

“Did you just say babies?” Frankie chokes.

Standish ignores them. “Oh, sure, go ahead and tell me nothing will change,” he rants. “But I know how this shit works. A couple months after the wedding y’all will find yourselves some couple
friends named Bill and Karen or Joe and Cindy and you’ll have a game night that I’m not invited to because then the charades teams won’t be even. And then once Frankie’s knocked up, you’ll stop hanging out here after missions cause she’s tired and cranky and the smell of beer makes her want to puke. And then when the babies are finally born Will’s going to decide to stay home because he doesn’t like the idea of a nanny raising them and Frankie refuses to stop working.”

“Jesus,” Frankie murmurs.

“Standish—” Will starts.

“And then once the kids get older you’ll start fighting all the time,” Standish forges on, gesturing wildly. “You’ll fight about what school they should go to and whether they’re getting too much screen time and what curfew should be. And then all of a sudden Frankie files for divorce and starts sleeping with her divorce lawyer, and Will starts crying even more than usual, and the next thing you know me and the green-eyed Chase babies are spending Thanksgiving with Will and Susan, and Christmas with Frankie and Jai, and Frankie and Jai don’t even put up a tree, and NOBODY LEAVES COOKIES OUT FOR SANTA!”

A beat of stunned silence hovers in the air. Standish is panting a little, his eyes wild and his hands curled into fists as if he’s going to start smashing things like the Hulk.

Frankie glances at Will. “I think we broke him.”

“Yeah,” Will says, drawing out the word. “Standish, buddy, maybe you should sit down.”

Standish collapses into the nearest booth. He puts his hand over his heart. “I think I’m having heart palpitations.”

Will looks at Frankie.

“Don’t look at me,” she says, holding up her hands. “I’m the practical one and this has feelings written all over it.”

Will sighs and slides onto the bench across from Standish. He waits a minute or so, giving Standish a chance to calm down, and then he says gently, “You want to tell me what this is really about?”

“Why couldn’t you guys just pine after each other for the rest of eternity?” Standish says morosely. “Why’d you have to fall in love and mess everything up?”

“Why is that messing everything up?”

“Because when you guys break up, our team is going to break up. And then we’re not going to get to work together anymore.”

“Whoa, wait a second,” Will says, holding up a hand. “Who said we’re going to break up?”

Standish glances up at him. “Come on, Will. Everybody breaks up.”

“That’s not true. My parents have been together for almost fifty years.”

“Well my parents haven’t been,” Standish says as a pained look shivers across his face. “They ended up hating each other and it ruined everything. The last time my whole family was in the same room together, I was six.”

Will forgets sometimes how fortunate he was to grow up with the family he did. There were rough
patches for sure, and losing his brother sent everyone into a bit of a tailspin, but there’s no disputing the fact that the family he’s got is healthier and closer than the majority of others. He doesn’t know what he’d do without them.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Will says sincerely. “But that’s not going to happen with us. I won’t let it.”

“Oh, really? So when Frankie dumps you, you’re still going to want to work with her every day?” Will frowns. “Why would it be Frankie dumping me? What if I dumped her?”

“Oh, please,” Standish snorts. “I think we all know that in this situation, you’d be the dumpee and not the dumper.”

Will straightens in offense. “I could dump Frankie.”

“No you couldn’t.”

“Yes I could,” Will insists. “I could dump her so hard. I could—”

He stops abruptly when he glances over at Frankie and sees her watching him with her arms folded over her chest and her eyebrows raised.

“...not,” he corrects. “I could not. I would never.”

“Good save, bro,” Standish says with a smirk.

I love you, Will mouths, shooting Frankie an apologetic look and making a heart with his hands.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Look, Standish, I don’t know what happened with your parents. I don’t really care. Whatever weird daddy issues you’ve got, get over them. Because this—” she gestures between her and Will, “isn’t going to change.”

Will stares at her. She might not have said it as nicely as he would have, but for once, he doesn’t care. She just told Standish—without even a hint of hesitation—that their relationship is real and serious. He knew she felt that way. But he hadn’t expected her to be so willing to vocalize it to someone else.

Standish seems just as surprised. He turns in his seat and stares at Frankie in wonder. “You really like him,” he says with a hint of awe in his voice.

“Most of the time,” Frankie says dryly.

Standish glances at Will.

Will shrugs. “Sometimes I can be a bit much.”

Frankie smiles. Will wants to kiss it from her lips, but he doubts she’d appreciate him doing that in front of Standish. She might be ready to own up to their relationship, but that doesn’t mean she’s ready for a ton of PDA.

“Listen, kiddo,” Will says, putting his elbows on the table. “I can’t promise that our team is always going to work together. But I couldn’t promise that even if Frankie and I weren’t together. This business is unpredictable. But whatever does or doesn’t happen, it won’t change the fact that we’re a family. Even if we’re all in different countries working for different organizations, we’ll always be a family.”
“You promise?” Standish asks.

“I promise,” Will says.

Standish looks at Frankie. “You promise too?”

She shrugs. “Sure, whatever.”

“And you won’t forget about me when you have adorable green-eyed Chase babies?”

Frankie makes a face. “Let’s just leave my uterus out of this.”

Standish makes a face too. “I’m going to need you to never say those words ever again.”

“You started it.”

“Okay,” Will says, getting to his feet. “Come on, kiddo. Bring it in and give me a hug and then get going. You don’t want to be late for your date.”

Standish casts a hopeful look in Frankie’s direction. “Do you—”

“I would rather die,” she cuts him off.

“Seems a little harsh, but all right,” Standish says. He steps into Will’s arms and hugs him tightly.

“Thanks, spy dad.”

“Don’t worry, buddy,” Will says, patting his back. He winks at Frankie over Standish’s shoulder.

“She’ll hug you someday.”

“Actually, she already has,” Standish says brightly as he pulls away. “She hugged me that one time I was in the hospital after—” He stops abruptly when he notices Frankie glaring at him. “Oh, shit,” he says, shrinking back toward Will.

“I’m going to kill you,” Frankie tells him.

“Yep, time to go,” Standish says, giving Frankie a wide berth as he scuttles toward the door. “Love you guys, don’t have sex on my work station, byeee!”

He’s out the door a second later, and Will and Frankie are alone again. Will puts his hands on his hips and gives his girlfriend a look.

“Don’t,” she warns.

He smirks and walks toward her. “You been hugging Standish, huh?”

“It was one time, and it was only because he blackmailed me. And it will never, ever happen again.”

“Mhmm,” Will says, sliding his hands along her hips and pulling her close. “Sure.”

“I mean it,” Frankie insists. “No matter how many times he almost dies from this point forward, I will never hug him again.”

“I don’t believe you,” Will says, shaking his head.

She opens her mouth, probably to argue with him, but he cuts her off with a kiss. She hums against
his lips like she’s thinking about arguing with him anyway, but then she drapes her arms around his neck and kisses him back.

He’s contemplating walking her backward and toward the pool table again when the silence of the bar is shattered by a ringing cell phone. Frankie breaks their kiss and pulls her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans.

“Don’t answer it,” Will says, ducking his head down to brush his lips over her neck.

“This number’s not optional,” she says with a bit of a sigh. She lifts the phone to her ear and says, “Yeah?”

Will leans back because her voice has changed into that efficient tone she uses when they’re on a mission. He watches her face, trying to read her, but he can’t tell what she’s hearing on the other end of the line.

“When?” she asks. She listens for a few seconds, and then says, “Yes sir,” before hanging up.

“Everything okay?”

“It’s classified,” she says, wrapping her arms around his neck again.

Will gives her a look. “Seriously?”

She smiles. “The director needs me to interrogate someone who might have a lead on The Trust.”

“When?”

“Flight leaves in an hour.”

Disappointment floods through Will. Frankie must be able to read it on his face, because her expression softens a little. “Rain check?” she murmurs, scratching her nails against his scalp.

He nods and forces a smile. “Sure. Be careful, okay?”

She leans forward and gives him a quick kiss before heading for the door. “I’ll call you when I can.”

“Love you,” he calls out after her.

She smiles at him over her shoulder. “Try not to miss me too much.”

“Too late. Already do. You miss me yet?”

“Maybe,” she says. She shoots him a wink, and then she’s gone.

Sixteen hours later, Frankie is standing in front of a two-way mirror, watching with her arms folded over her chest as a terrorist named Raheem gets waterboarded.

“You sick of playing good cop yet?”

She glances over her shoulder and meets the gaze of Cole Roberts, the CIA’s best interrogator. Well, second best. She’s the best. But it’s Cole’s job to interrogate criminals and assets, and hers is to run a black-ops team with Will. She only gets called in for matters that might be related to The Trust or The Collective. Like, for example, when a terrorist named Raheem knows the location of
a cache of stolen bombs that’s up for sale.

Frankie turns back to the window with a shrug. “Good cop was worth a try. And he’s a sexist prick so it made sense for me to do it instead of you.”

“But you prefer breaking bones to smiling.”

“I prefer whatever gets the job done. And so far, this isn’t cutting it. If your guys don’t break him soon, I’m taking over.”

“Casey brought you in to assist,” Cole says, sliding his hands into his pockets as he stops next to her. “Not to take over.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Frankie replies without taking her eyes off the two-way mirror. “But feel free to run to daddy if you need confirmation that I have clearance to do whatever the hell I want.”

Cole snorts. On the other side of the glass, Raheem is gasping for breath as two men slam him down into a chair. One of the men shouts a question at him. Raheem says nothing. He’s shivering uncontrollably, but his jaw is set and his eyes are hard.

“Why’d Casey bring you in for this?” Cole asks. “Who’s Raheem trying to sell the bombs to?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“My clearance is just as high as yours.”

“Cool. Still not telling you anything.”

She can see Cole smirking at her in the reflection of the glass. She ignores him.

The men on the other side of the two-way mirror are shouting more questions. Raheem remains silent. Frankie watches his face, trying to gauge how close he is to breaking. The cache of bombs that’s at stake is massive, and Casey’s intel says that Ollerman—courtesy of Nick’s funding—is the likely buyer. The deal is going down within the next twenty-four hours. They’re running out of time.

“So,” Cole says, his voice dropping lower. He shifts a little closer to her. “You coming back to my place after this?”

Frankie shakes her head and shifts away from him. “No.”

“You got an assignment to get back to?”

“No.”

Cole frowns in confusion. “Are you punishing me because I made you be nice to the sexist terrorist?”

Frankie rolls her eyes. “No, Cole.”

He turns toward her. “Well then what’s the deal? The only reason I’m not pissed as hell every time Casey sends you in to hijack my interrogations is because you come back to my place when we’re done.”

“You’re a real charmer, you know that?”
“You’ve always liked it just as much as I do, Frankie.”

Frankie doesn’t argue because he’s not wrong. She did used to like it. And she can’t really blame him for asking what her deal is because every other time she’s been here, she’s slept with him. But everything’s different now—she’s different now—and the only place she wants to go once she cracks Raheem like an egg is straight back home to Will.

“It’s been almost a year,” Cole points out. “I’ve missed you.”

Frankie shakes her head. “You didn’t miss me. You missed fucking me.”

“Well, yeah.”

Frankie resists the urge to roll her eyes again. Will would hate Cole. For some reason, that makes her want to hate him too.

“It’s not going to happen, Cole,” she tells him. “Let it go.”

“You got a boyfriend now or something?”

Frankie finally turns to look at him. “You think that’s the only reason I wouldn’t sleep with you?”

He holds out his arms. “Look at me, Frankie. I could turn a straight guy gay.”

Frankie’s cell phone buzzes in her pocket. She shoots Cole a look as she pulls it out. “Go find yourself a straight guy then because I’m not fucking you.”

He grins. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

Frankie rolls her eyes. She glances down at her phone screen and is surprised to see Will’s name. He never calls her when she’s away for work. He texts her a lot, but he always waits for her to call him. She immediately presses accept and lifts the phone to her ear.

“Hey,” she says, pacing away from Cole. “What’s up?”

There’s a steady buzz of background noise on the other end of the line, and then Will says, “Oh. I didn’t think you’d answer. I was going to leave a voicemail.”

She knows as soon as she hears his voice that something is wrong. She shoves the door of the observation room open and walks out into the hallway.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry. I know you’re in the middle of something. If you—”

“Will. What’s wrong?”

He exhales slowly. “My parents got in a car wreck. It was a hit and run.”

Frankie’s blood runs cold. For a second, she’s seventeen again—sitting in a hard plastic chair, hearing words like terrorist attack and died instantly and so sorry even though the one word nobody ever said— orphan—shouted louder than them all.

“My mom’s okay,” Will continues, pulling Frankie out of her memory. “I mean, she broke her arm and she’s banged up, but she’ll be okay. My dad’s in surgery. He’s not...we don’t know how bad it is. My sister’s freaking out because the doctors won’t tell her anything. I’m flying out there, and I
didn’t...I just wanted you to know why I might not answer when you call.”

Frankie closes her eyes. Only Will Chase would be on his way to visit his parents, one of whom could be fighting for his life, and worry about whether or not she’d be upset if he didn’t answer her call.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

The hum of voices and activity echoes on the other end of the line—she realizes now that he must be at the airport—and then he says, “No.”

This is something she had to learn about him—that unlike her, he will always tell the truth when someone asks how he is. It worries her a little that he doesn’t say anything other than that one word. Usually he’s a fountain of explanations and emotions when she asks him a question. But not this time.

She doesn’t know what to say to him. She’s terrible with words. She knows how much they matter to him, and she still can’t believe that everything she told him in July didn’t send him running for the hills, so she’s been trying to verbalize her thoughts and feelings more. She’s not quite at the point where she can do it unprompted, but when he asks, she makes a conscious effort to tell him the truth. She’s not sure what to do now that the tables have turned and he’s the one not talking. She’s afraid she’s going to say the wrong thing.

“What do you need?” she murmurs, because she figures if she doesn’t know, she might as well ask.

“This,” he answers quietly. “You.”

A suffocating sense of helplessness washes over her. Will has needed her before. In Madrid after they first got together, when Susan ended up in the hospital after a mission went sideways. In Bangkok a few weeks ago, when they were chasing a lead on The Trust and Ollerman called to taunt Will with the memory of a failed mission that cost innocent people their lives.

She’s never been great at comforting people in pain—at least not since Nick made her realize how much safer it is to keep everyone at arm’s length—but Will makes it easy. All she has to do is be there. Listen when he talks, hold him when he doesn’t. Now he needs her again, probably even more than he did before, and she’s not there. She’s here, with Raheem the terrorist and Cole fucking Roberts.

“I know you’re working,” Will says as if he can read her mind. “And it’s important. You’re where you should be. I just needed to hear your voice.”

In the background, a bored-sounding woman starts to drone about flight 6713 to Fort Wayne. “My flight’s boarding,” Will says. “I have to go.”

“Call me when you can.”

“It’s okay, Frankie. Casey wouldn’t have called you if this wasn’t important. So you don’t—”

“Call me when you can,” she cuts him off firmly.

For a second, all she can hear is the noise of the airport. “Okay,” he says quietly. And then, “I love you. Be careful.”

He hangs up before she can reply.
Frankie lowers her phone from her ear. She stares at the screen for a second, trying to wrap her head around what just happened. She imagines Will standing in an airport terminal, waiting to board his flight, one hand rubbing his temples the way he does when he’s stressed or worried. She pictures him sitting on the plane, his jaw clenched and his shoulders tense as he imagines every worst case scenario. Her thumb hovers over the screen for a split second, and then she makes the call.

“Yes?” Jai answers.

“I need to get to Huntington.”

“Indiana?”

“Yes.”

Frankie hears furious typing in the background. “When can you leave?”

“I don’t know yet. Two hours, I think. If I haven’t lost my touch.”

“Let me see what I can do.”

He hangs up without another word. Frankie slides her phone into her pocket and goes back into the observation room. Cole turns to look at her, a smirk on his lips.

“Get your guys out,” she says. “We’re doing this my way now.”

The smirk fades from his lips. “Frankie,” he says in that condescending tone men sometimes use when they think they can change her mind. “If you just—”

“Now, Cole.”

He blinks at her for a second. And then he nods and says, “Yes ma’am.”

It takes Frankie seventy-seven minutes, four broken fingers, a dislocated elbow, and several cracked ribs to break Raheem and find out the location of the cache of bombs.

She’s on a plane that Jai chartered for her thirty minutes later.

Halfway to Indiana, panic hits her like a lightning bolt.

This isn’t her. She doesn’t rush through jobs and then hop on planes to go see people. She doesn’t show up unannounced and uninvited. People don’t need her like that. They need her to interrogate terrorists and shoot arms dealers and stop genocidal maniacs from murdering millions. But to be at someone’s side in a hospital waiting room for what might be one of the worst moments of their life? That’s not her. She’s not that girl.

The panic brings a wave of nausea. She leans forward in her seat, her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands, and tries to breathe around it. What the hell is she doing? She’s never been to Huntington. She’s never met Will’s family. What’s she going to do, waltz into the hospital like she’s one of them? This was a horrible idea. She can’t do this.

Her phone buzzes on the seat next to her. Susan’s name flashes across the screen. Frankie answers it because she needs a distraction so she won’t throw up.

“Hey girl,” Susan says. “Have you heard from Will?”
“He called to tell me what happened before he got on the plane to Indiana,” Frankie answers. “But nothing since then.”

“Me neither,” Susan sighs. Frankie can hear the worry in her voice. “When there’s an update, can you shoot me a text and let me know what he says? I’m worried about him. If this turns out badly, I don’t think he’s going to handle it well.”

For a second, Frankie doesn’t say anything. She’s trying not to imagine how devastated Will is going to be if he loses his dad. It makes her want to get to Huntington even faster, but the thought of being in Huntington with his family brings on another wave of panic, and before she knows it she’s blurring out, “I’m on my way there.”

“Where?”

“Huntington. I’m on a plane.”

There’s a confused silence on the other end of the line. “I thought you were doing something for the director,” Susan says.

“I was. I finished. Jai chartered me a plane. And now I’m halfway to Indiana because I thought...” Frankie buries her head in her hands. “Holy shit this was a bad idea.”

“No, no, this was a great idea,” Susan says soothingly. “Frankie, sweetie, this is good. This is so good. Will is going to be thrilled.”

“I’ve never met his family, Susan. We’ve never even talked about me meeting his family.”

“He’s been dying for you to meet his family for months.”

Frankie frowns. “He never told me that.”

“Would you have panicked if he did?”

Frankie thinks about how the thought of meeting Will’s parents made her want to throw up about two minutes ago.

“Probably.”

“They’re great, Frankie. You’ll love them.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“They’ll love you too.”

Frankie sits back in her chair and sighs. “I’m not really the kind of girl you take home to meet the parents, Susan. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’m the opposite of what his parents would want for him.”

“You’re on a plane halfway to Indiana because Will needs you,” Susan says. “You’re exactly the kind of woman they want for him.”

Frankie doesn’t say anything because she doesn’t know what to say.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Susan says, her voice dropping into that reassuring tone she’s so good at. “If you start to feel overwhelmed, just remember why you got on that plane in the first place.”

“Because I’m impulsive and have a tendency to make rash decisions without thinking about the
consequences?”

“Because you love Will and he needs you.”

Frankie’s heart skips a beat in her chest. She swallows around the lump in her throat. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Susan—”

“I won’t tell him. I promise.”

Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose and decides to change the subject. “I’ll text you when I know something.”

“Thanks. And call me if you need another pep talk. I am the queen of them, you know.”

Frankie can’t help but smile. “Queen of annoying is more accurate.”

“Just for that, you’re buying drinks on our next girls night.”

Frankie laughs.

Frankie is in an Uber, ten minutes from the hospital and trying to swallow around the nervous lump in her throat, when she gets a text from Will.

_Dad is okay. Haven’t seen him yet._

Relief washes over her. She stares at her screen for a second, trying to decide what to reply. Eventually, she decides not to say anything. She’ll see him soon, and she can figure it out then.

By the time she gets out of the car in front of the main entrance of the hospital, something strange has happened. She doesn’t feel nervous anymore. She feels like she does in the early stages of a mission—calm, alert, completely focused on the task at hand. Maybe when she’s standing in front of Mr. and Mrs. Chase, she’ll feel nervous again. But right now? Right now she just wants to see Will.

She’s headed toward the front doors when she realizes that a blonde woman holding two Starbucks cups is standing frozen on the sidewalk, gapping at her.

Frankie looks her up and down out of habit, checking for weapons or immediate threats, but finds none. She arches an eyebrow. “Hi,” she says, lifting her voice to make it a question.

The woman seems to realize she was staring and snaps to attention. She shakes her head and then smiles. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. It’s just...are you Frankie? Frankie Trowbridge?”

Frankie’s first thought is _Who the hell are you and why do you know my name?_ and she very nearly says it out loud. But then she looks closer. She’s seen this woman before—in framed photos in Will’s apartment, and in Instagram posts on Will’s phone that he shows the team while wearing that proud smile that lights up his eyes. Usually the woman is posing with her husband or one of her four sons, but there’s no mistaking those green eyes or that warm smile.

“You’re Sophie,” Frankie realizes. “Will’s older sister.”
Sophie beams. “That’s me.” She balances one of the Starbucks cups on top of the other and holds out her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you that I feel like I already know you.”

Frankie shakes her hand and tries to ignore the sudden nervous swoop of her stomach. She didn’t realize that Will talked about her with his sister. It’s not that she’s surprised—she shouldn’t be, given how close Will and his family are—but it does make her wonder what, exactly, Sophie knows about her.

“Nice to meet you too,” she says politely.

“Will didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“He didn’t know.”

Sophie’s face softens the same way Will’s does whenever he watches the ending of a sappy movie. Frankie shifts her weight from one foot to the other, suddenly self-conscious.

“I was—” she starts, and then stops when she realizes I was interrogating a terrorist is probably not something she should say to Will’s sister. “On a business trip,” she decides. “But I finished early and caught a flight.”

Sophie smiles. “Will calls them business trips too.”

Frankie doesn’t know how to respond to that, and she has no idea how much Sophie knows about what she and Will do for a living, so she just keeps smiling politely.

“But you didn’t come all this way to talk to me on the sidewalk, did you?” Sophie says with a laugh. It sounds a little like Will’s. She tips her head toward the entrance of the hospital. “Come on. I’ll take you to him.”

Frankie follows her into the hospital and toward the elevators. She slides her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket as she walks because she feels like fidgeting and she hates that. She’s faced down bombs and machine guns and mass murderers, and none of them have ever made her fidgety. Will’s older sister, with her pretty blonde hair and her stylish but conservative clothes, shouldn’t have that power over her either.

“How’s your dad?” Frankie asks after they stop in front of the elevators and Sophie pushes the button.

“He’s out of surgery, but we haven’t been allowed to go back and see him yet.” She glances at Frankie. “Will is a bit of a wreck. I don’t think he’ll calm down until he gets to see dad breathing with his own two eyes.”

“Is he pacing?”

“He was,” Sophie confirms. “Stopped for a while after he got to see mom. But then he started again.”

“Coffee was a good call,” Frankie says, nodding at the cups in Sophie’s hand.

Sophie smiles. “Starbucks didn’t have any french vanilla creamer.”

Frankie suddenly finds herself smiling too. “I think he drinks that stuff straight from the bottle.”
“He does. I’ve seen him do it. It’s—”

“Disgusting.” Frankie finishes in unison with Sophie.

They smile at each other. The elevator arrives, and they step on. Sophie presses the button for the second floor. Frankie’s phone buzzes in her pocket as the elevator starts to rise. She takes it out. It’s a text from Jai. Safe?

Yes, she types back.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Sophie says quietly.

Frankie looks up at her in surprise.

Sophie meets her gaze and smiles. “My brother’s crazy about you. Having you here will calm him down.”

Frankie doesn’t know what to say. She’s never been told she has the ability to calm anyone down. In fact, up until about thirty seconds ago, she would’ve sworn that Jai was the only person on the planet who would find her presence soothing.

The elevator doors slide open before she can formulate a response. Sophie steps off first, and Frankie follows her. They pass through what looks like a waiting area filled with couches and chairs, and stop in front of a door marked Chapel. Sophie swings the door open and steps inside. Frankie follows her.

The room is small. There are four rows of pews with an aisle down the center and an altar up front. All of the pews are empty except the second one from the front on the right side. Will is sitting on the end. All Frankie can see is his shoulders and the back of his head, but she’d know them anywhere.

“Will,” Sophie calls.

Will turns around. He smiles when he sees his sister. And then he looks past her and sees Frankie, and the smile freezes on his face. He stares at her, surprise clear in his eyes, and then he gets to his feet and steps out into the aisle.

“Frankie?” he whispers in disbelief.

“Hey Whiskey,” she says softly.

For a second, he stands motionless. The moment drags on long enough that Frankie wonders if she made a mistake in thinking he would want to see her. But then he moves, striding down the aisle with a determined look on his face, and Frankie barely has time to brace herself before he throws himself into her arms.

He buries his face in her neck with what sounds like a deep sigh of relief. She wraps her arms around his shoulders and smooths a hand over the back of his head. He’s holding her so tightly that she feels like she’s in the grip of a vise. She hears the door close behind her and she knows, even without looking, that Sophie has left them alone.

Frankie runs her hand over the back of his head again. “You okay?” she whispers in his ear.

He holds her tighter. “I am now.”
Guys. You say such nice things in my comments. Thanks for that.

Writing this fic has been cathartic for me. It was never supposed to be this long or this involved. It was supposed to end after chapter six and function as some filler during the hiatus between seasons. But then the show got cancelled, and everything changed. I love these characters a whole lot. They had *so* much potential, and it hurt not having any closure. So, I decided to write it out for myself. If it’s helped y’all deal with the loss too, then I’m going to count it in the win column.

On a lighter note, the whole time I was writing this chapter I had the song “I Won’t Say I’m In Love” from Disney’s animated Hercules stuck in my head. I am sure you will understand why when you read it. My internal monologue went something like this: Frankie, honey, I know you’re traumatized and scared. I am empathetic, considering I wrote (most of) the trauma for you. But good LORD woman would you just SAY IT ALREADY?

“So? What do you think?”

Frankie is sitting on a faded couch in the living room of the house Will grew up in. His parents are both spending the night in the hospital, so it’s just the two of them in the modest one-story home that looks exactly like Frankie imagined it would. Will is sitting next to her with a slice of his mom’s famous pecan pie on a plate in his lap. Frankie has a plate too, and she’s chewing a bite of it thoughtfully.

It’s sweet, but not too sweet. It seems to melt the second it touches her tongue. She’s never tasted anything like it, and she’s been all over the world. No wonder Will brags about it all the time. It’s fantastic.

Will is watching her with bated breath, waiting to hear whether she likes it. His parents’ two dogs, Bo and Daisy, also seem to be waiting for her—though Frankie’s guessing they’re probably waiting for scraps, and not her verdict on the pie.

She swallows, and then shoots Will an apologetic grimace.

He looks incredulous. “What?” he demands. “No way.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I want to like it. But it’s just...it’s not good.”

Will’s face falls. He stares down at his own plate, his shoulders slumping, and murmurs, “Oh.”

Frankie tries to keep a straight face. She really does. But she can feel the smile tugging on her lips, and the laugh is welling up unbidden in her throat. She tries to put her hand over her mouth to stifle it, but it’s pointless. She snorts.

Will snaps his eyes up to meet hers. His gaze flickers over her face, and then he narrows his eyes. “Seriously?”
She grins.

“You’re terrible.”

“You should’ve seen your face,” Frankie tells him with a laugh. “It was like when that falafel place closed. You looked so sad.”

“Not funny,” Will says before shoving a massive forkful of pie into his mouth.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Oh come on. Did you really think I was going to tell you that your mom’s famous pecan pie—the same pie that you have talked about *incessantly* since we met—was awful?”

“Honestly, I’m never really sure what’s going to come out of your mouth,” Will says with a shrug. “So it was a definite possibility.”

Frankie tilts her head. “That’s fair.” She scoops another forkful of pie into her mouth. It melts just like the first bite did, and she sighs. Of course his mom is a phenomenal baker. Of *course* she is.

“So what do you really think?” Will asks.

“It’s amazing,” she answers honestly. “Best pie I’ve ever had.”

“Thank god,” he sighs, collapsing backward against the couch.

Frankie arches an eyebrow at him.

“My mom made me promise that I’d give you some,” he explains. “Like, pinky swear, cross-my-heart promise. So tomorrow, when you meet her, she’s going to ask if you liked it. And trust me, she would’ve known if you were lying. She taught high school algebra for decades. She’s a human lie detector.”

The pie seems to turn to dust in Frankie’s mouth. She swallows and drops her gaze to her plate. Will didn’t ask her to meet his parents at the hospital. He said he didn’t want to excite them when they needed to rest, but she knows he did it just as much for her benefit as for theirs. He didn’t want to introduce her without talking to her about it first. But it’s obvious that he wants her to meet them before they fly back to New York. It’d be obvious even if he hadn’t just said the words *tomorrow when you meet her*.

He leans forward and puts his hand on her knee. “Frankie.”

She looks up at him. He’s wearing that patient look he gets when they’re discussing something that makes her nervous, and it makes her want to kiss him. If someone had asked her a year ago whether Will Chase was capable of being patient about relationship milestones, she would’ve sworn on her favorite gun that it was impossible.

She would’ve lost her favorite gun.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks softly.

“For what?” she asks even though she knows.

“Meeting my parents tomorrow.”

She lifts a shoulder. “I’m here, aren’t I?”
He smiles. “You didn’t come here to meet them. You came here for me. So that doesn’t really answer the question.”

The urge to run expands in Frankie’s chest, pushing against her lungs until she’s breathless. She can’t—she won’t—run away from him. But she can’t sit still, either.

“I’ve brought down drug cartels and genocidal dictators,” she tells him, getting to her feet. His hand falls from her knee. “I think I can handle your midwestern, pie-baking parents.”

She walks through an archway and into the kitchen before he can respond. She sets her plate in the sink and then grips the edge of the counter and leans forward, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Silence rings in her ears. His parents’ house isn’t in the middle of nowhere—they live on a cute little street with plenty of neighbors—but Huntington is so much quieter than New York. The lack of city sounds grates on her nerves. She feels light-headed. She forces herself to breathe through it.

She doesn’t have a frame of reference for this sort of thing. She hasn’t met a boyfriend’s parents since she moved to Caracas with David when she was twenty-one. The only relationship she’s been in since then that was serious enough to warrant meeting the parents was with Nick, and Nick was an orphan—there was no one for her to meet even if she’d wanted to. She steered clear of commitments after him. She had boyfriends, of course. Lots of them. But none of them were serious. None of them meant anything.

Will, on the other hand, means everything.

Frankie hears the faint creak of a floorboard behind her, and she knows that Will has followed her into the kitchen. She waits, expecting him to wrap his arms around her, but he doesn’t.

“You don’t have to do this, Francesca,” he says softly.

Frankie chews the inside of her lip. He’s using her full name on purpose. He knows it soothes her. She takes a deep breath and turns to face him.

“Yes I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“What are you going to do, Will? Tell your parents that your girlfriend flew all the way out here but doesn’t want to meet them?”

He shrugs. “I’ll tell them the truth. We’re taking it slow and you’re not ready.”

She shakes her head. “That’s stupid.”

“No it’s not. They’ll understand. They’d love to meet you, but they wouldn’t want you to feel uncomfortable. And neither do I. If you’re not ready, we’ll wait.”

Frankie folds her arms over her chest and studies him. He stands patiently beneath her gaze, smiling a little like he always does whenever she sizes him up. He wasn’t kidding when he told her he has resting smile face.

“If I ask you something, will you tell me the truth?” she asks.

“Of course.”
“Promise,” she commands, because she knows he has a thing about keeping his promises.

“I promise,” he says dutifully.

She leans back against the sink. “Do you ever get tired of waiting for me?”

He blinks at her. He obviously wasn’t expecting that to be her question. He opens his mouth as if to reply, but nothing comes out. He closes it again.

“That’s a yes,” she says dryly.

“No,” Will blurts out, taking a step toward her.

“No?”

He tilts his head and furrows his eyebrows, and she knows he’s trying to figure out how to answer her question without lying.

“You promised,” she reminds him.

He puts his hands on his hips. “If I tell you the truth, will you promise not to panic?”

Frankie hesitates. If he’s worried she’s going to panic, that’s not a good sign. But she’s curious, and curiosity has always been one of her downfalls. “I’ll try.”

“Yes or no,” he insists.

She sighs. “Yes.”

It’s his turn to study her. His eyes flicker over her face, and then he says, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

The world screeches to a halt. Frankie’s heart stutters and then stops in her chest. She’s pretty sure she’s not breathing anymore. “What?” she croaks.

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” Will repeats calmly. “I want us to move in together. I want to get married. I want to have kids. I want to be that cute old couple that wears matching cardigans and holds hands everywhere they go.”

“Will,” Frankie breathes. It’s the only word she can manage to get out.

“You’re it for me, Frankie,” he forges on. “You’re the one. And yeah, sometimes I get impatient or frustrated. It’s hard to wait when every part of me just wants to dive in headfirst. But you’re worth it. The life we’re going to have together is worth it.”

Yeah, she’s definitely panicking. The edges of her vision are black and fuzzy. Her ears are ringing. Her mouth is dry, and there’s a phantom weight on the fourth finger of her left hand, and there are memories she buried a long time ago suddenly flashing across her mind.

Will’s gaze flickers over her face again, and his expression softens from determination into affection. “Francesca...”

She brandishes her finger at him. “Don’t Francesca me right now.”

“You promised you wouldn’t panic.”
“I didn’t know you were going to propose!”

“I didn’t propose,” he says incredulously. “You think I’d propose to you in my parents’ kitchen?”

“You’d propose in a damn sewer if you thought it was the right moment, Will.”

He tilts his head. “That’s fair.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose and tries to take a deep breath, but all she can manage to do is suck in a shallow one. “Okay,” she says. “So you...shit. Okay.”

“Frankie,” Will says softly.

The tone of his voice makes her whip her head up to look at him. He’s closing the distance between them, and she knows he’s going to touch her. If she lets him, then it’s all over. He’s going to drop his voice into that low murmur she loves, and he’s going to kiss her exactly the way she likes to be kissed, and she’s going to melt and say yes to anything—to everything—and she can’t do that.

“No,” she says, taking a step back. “Stay over there.”


“Because when you get too close my brain stops working.”

A smirk starts to spread over his lips.

“Stop smirking, you jackass,” she snaps at him.

“How am I not supposed to smirk at that?” he asks, holding out his hands. “You just admitted—”

“If you finish that sentence I’m not having sex with you for a month.”

“Right,” he says with a snort. “Like you could go a whole month. You can barely go a few days.”

Frankie harrumphs at him but can’t argue. She folds her arms over her chest and surveys him from the other side of the kitchen. Will rocks from one foot to the other, obviously dying to close the remaining distance between them, but he’s too much of a boy scout to ignore her orders to stay put. The lightness fades quickly, and his words float back to her. One phrase in particular echoes loudly.

_I want to get married._

That phantom weight on the fourth finger of her left hand is back, this time heavier than before, and guilt sparks in her chest and starts to build.

“It’s the marriage part, isn’t it?” he asks softly.

She hates the way he reads her mind. “Will—”

“You freaked out when Standish brought it up,” he interrupts gently. “And you’re freaking out now.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not freaking out.”

“You’re definitely freaking out.”
“It’s just a lot, okay? I haven’t even told you that I love you and you want to talk about matching cardigans. I don’t even like cardigans.”

“The cardigans aren’t really the point, Frankie,” he says with a smile. “The point is—” He stops abruptly, and a stunned look passes over his face.

Frankie frowns. “What?”

He furrows his eyebrows. “You haven’t told me that you love me.”

“Yeah. I just said that.”

“But you didn’t say you don’t know if you love me,” he points out. “You said you haven’t told me. Meaning you do love me, you just haven’t said the words yet.”

She stares at him. Her ears are ringing again. “I…” she starts. She doesn’t finish. She doesn’t know what to say.

Fortunately—or maybe unfortunately—she doesn’t get a chance to say anything anyway. The dogs erupt into a wild barrage of barking at the back door. It’s so sudden and so loud that Frankie startles in surprise, her hand darting automatically to her empty hip. Will jumps too, turning toward the ruckus with his hand on his hip as well.

Daisy is clawing at the carpet in front of the sliding door as she barks. Bo, on the other hand, is practically throwing himself at the door, his body slamming into the glass with a startling intensity. Frankie stares at them, taken aback. She glances at Will, wondering if this is normal, but he’s frowning. She knows that look. It’s a look he gets in the field.

He glances at her. “They never bark like this.”

A split second passes where they stare at each other, and then they both move. Will grabs his gun off the counter, and Frankie slips into the living room and grabs hers from the coffee table. They meet at the back door.

Will flicks the back porch light on and then slides the door open. He steps out onto the deck, and she follows. The dogs tear out into the right side of the yard. They stop at the fence, barking wildly, but Frankie doesn’t see anything. She glances at Will. He meets her gaze, and then strides down the stairs of the deck and into the yard. Frankie follows a step behind him, her eyes scanning the shadows in the yard that are just beyond the reach of the porch light.

When they get to the fence, there’s nothing there. Daisy has stopped barking and is staring through the slats of the fence at a fixed point in the distance. Bo is pacing, something between a whine and a growl rumbling out of his throat.

“Hey,” Will says gently, stroking his hand over Bo’s raised hackles. “What’s wrong? What do you see?”

Bo whines and starts to dig at the fence. Daisy hasn’t looked away from whatever she’s staring at. Frankie follows her gaze, scanning the darkness of the yard next door, but she doesn’t see anything.

“You see anything?” Will murmurs to her, straightening.

Frankie scans the shadows one more time. “No.”
“Me neither.” He squints into the darkness, and then glances down at the dogs. “Come on, guys. Let’s go inside.”

Daisy hesitates, but turns away from the fence and toward Will. Bo continues to dig.

“Bo,” Will says, his voice sharp. He reaches down and tugs on Bo’s collar. “Come on, boy. Inside.”

It takes a few tugs, but Bo eventually obeys. Will heads into the house with the dogs trailing behind him. Frankie lingers for a second at the fence, eyeing the shadows. She doesn’t see anything, but whatever sent Bo’s hackles up is making the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She feels like someone is watching her.

“Frankie?” Will calls.

She casts one last glance into the darkness, and then turns toward the house and follows Will inside.

She pulls the sliding glass door closed behind her and locks it. Will sets his gun down on the kitchen counter, rubs his temples with one hand, and sighs.

“Ollerman is making me paranoid,” he says tiredly.


He looks up at her. “You think he’d come to Huntington?”

“No. It’s not worth the risk. There’s nothing here for him.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

He sighs again. He looks exhausted. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his shoulders are rounded forward in an uncharacteristic slump. When his posture goes sloppy, that’s when she knows he’s running on empty.

Frankie sets her gun down on the dining table and crosses into the kitchen to stand in front of him. Before she met him, her first instinct was always to avoid touching people. She kept her distance, even when she was tempted to reach out, because it was easier that way. Sex was one thing. But affection? That was off the table.

She’s different now. With Will, anyway. He looks weary and sad, and she wants to touch him, so she does. She lifts her hand to cup his cheek, her thumb stroking over the roughness of the stubble that’s coating his jawline. He closes his eyes and leans into her touch.

“You look dead on your feet,” she murmurs.

He smiles. “You always know how to make me feel pretty.”

“One of my many talents. Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

She starts to brush past him, but he catches her hip and holds her in place. She looks up at him, frowning in an unspoken question. He tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” he whispers.

It’s not the first time he’s said that. He said it at the hospital too, when he was hugging her so hard
it felt like she was the only thing keeping him upright.

“Me too,” she whispers back. And she means it. She’s standing in the middle of the house he grew up in, and she’s going to meet his parents tomorrow, and everything is going to be different after that, but she’s glad. Because she’s starting to think—even if she’s not ready to say it out loud—that she’d go just about anywhere for him.

He smiles and plays with the ends of her hair. “I think we should wait.”

“For what?”

“For you to meet my parents.”

Frankie’s heart shoots into her throat.

“It’s too soon,” he says. He’s watching his fingers in her hair instead of looking her in the eye. “Maybe in a few months, around the holidays, you’ll be ready. We can—”

“No, Will.”

He looks up at her in surprise. She’s a little surprised too, and more than a little terrified, but she can’t stand the idea of him sacrificing something he wants just because she’s so emotionally damaged. He’s sacrificed enough for her already. It’s her turn.

“I’m never going to feel ready,” she tells him. “So let’s just do it tomorrow.”

He blinks at her, stunned. “You want to meet my parents?” he says, his voice lifting with hope.

She nods. “Yeah. I want to meet your parents.”

A wide, impossibly bright smile spreads over his face. His eyes are shining with adoration and joy, and all of a sudden Frankie’s throat feels tight. In July, when she stood in her kitchen and showed him her scars, she thought he’d never look at her that way again. But he did—and he has every day since—and she loves it so much it’s pathetic.

“Dim the heart eyes a little, would you?” she murmurs.

He laughs. “Couldn’t if I tried.”

He leans forward to press his lips against hers. The apprehension in her chest sputters and dissolves. His hand slides along the small of her back, and he pulls her body flush against his. She drapes her arms around his shoulders and kisses him back, trying to tell him with a kiss what she knows she should verbalize but can’t. Not yet.

The atmosphere shifts. She can feel it in the way his lips start to move more purposefully over hers. His hand finds its way beneath the hem of her shirt and caresses her skin. When her body shivers involuntarily at his touch, she pulls back from his mouth.

He chases her lips, kissing her again, and desire flares deep in her body. He was right—she can barely go a few days without him, and it’s been more than a few days. But tonight isn’t about her. He’s tired and emotionally drained and he’s not like her. He doesn’t seek comfort that way.

“Will,” she whispers, pushing gently against his chest.

He shakes his head and lowers his mouth to her neck. “Don’t,” he breathes against her skin.
She frowns, but tilts her head so he has better access. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t tell me that you don’t want to take advantage of my emotional vulnerability.”

Frankie snorts. “Nobody talks like that.”

“I talk like that.” His mouth is still working over the column of her neck. “And that’s what you were going to say. You were going to say that I had a long day, and I’m emotionally fragile, and we should just go to sleep.”

“I wasn’t going to say it like that.”

“But you were going to say it.”

His hand is inching higher up her spine, and it comes to a stop right around the clasp of her bra. He sucks on the pulsepoint beneath her jaw.

“You’re a talker,” Frankie says, trying to keep her voice even. “That’s how you process things. If you want to talk, we can talk.”

“I spent the whole day with my sister. I’m tired of talking.”

His teeth scrape over her throat. She closes her eyes. “All right, you’re tired. Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m okay with us going to bed.”

“To sleep, Will.”

“Hmm,” he says as though he’s considering it. He flicks his wrist, and she feels the tension in her bra release because he’s unhooked it. “Hard pass.”

“That’s my line,” she protests. But then he’s walking her backward to pin her against the kitchen counter, and his hand slides around to the front of her body and beneath her loosened bra. She arches into his palm as he kisses her, and a soft, unbidden moan hums in her throat.

“God, I love that sound,” he murmurs against her lips.

“Will,” she says. It sounds way more like a whine than she intended. “I’m trying to do the right thing here. I’m trying to give you what you need.”

He finally leans back to look at her. “You think I don’t need this?”

“I think you and I are different.”

“We are different,” he says with a smile. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t need this.”

And then he’s kissing her again, and his hands are like fire on her skin, and the last vestiges of her self-control evaporate—until a cuckoo clock hanging on the wall warbles the hour and she remembers where they are. Pressed against the counter where his mom bakes pies. Making out a few feet from a refrigerator decorated with children’s artwork. Feeling each other up under the gaze of dozens of family photos.

“Wait, wait, stop,” she gasps, pushing against his chest.

He groans and buries his face in her shoulder.
“I can’t have sex with you in your parents’ kitchen, Will,” she says, laughing at his frustration.

He leans back. He gazes at her for a second, and then the corner of his mouth quirks upward. “Was it the cuckoo clock?”

“And the pictures on the wall.”

Will glances at one of the family photos hanging nearby. “Yeah, I don’t think Aunt Rita needs to see what I’m about to do to you.”

Frankie snorts.

He grins at her. “You think you can handle my childhood bedroom?”

“Can you?” she asks, arching an eyebrow. “All those times you fantasized about girls while you were a teenager, and now you’ll have a real one in your bed. Naked. And eager.”

His eyes widen a little, and then he grabs her hand and yanks her toward the hallway. “Yeah, this is happening.”

Frankie laughs.

The next morning Frankie is standing in the kitchen, sipping coffee and trying to decide whether Will will notice if she never returns the Indiana Hoosiers sweatshirt of his that she’s currently wearing, when the door leading to the garage bangs open amidst a shout.

It’s a good thing she left her gun in the bedroom, because if she hadn’t, she’d definitely be pointing it at the young boy who sprints into the room. He’s wearing jeans and a bright red t-shirt that says *Huntington Vikings Basketball* in bold black letters. His blond hair is wild and unruly, his skin still has the remnants of a summer tan, and his eyes are the same green as Will’s.

He stops dead in his tracks when he sees Frankie. She stares at him, equally taken aback. For a second, neither of them say a word.

“You’re not Uncle Will,” he says at last, sounding genuinely confused.

“No,” she confirms.

He tilts his head. “Are you Frankie?”

Frankie sets her mug down on the counter and makes a mental note to ask Will just how many of his relatives he’s been talking to about her.

“Yes.”

“Is that your *real* name?”

“No. It’s a nickname.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Francesca.”

He blinks at her for a second, and then he smiles. “I like that.”
His smile looks exactly like Will’s, which is maybe why Frankie suddenly finds herself thinking he’s adorable. “Thanks,” she says. “What’s your name?”

“Alexander William Harper.”

Frankie pauses for a second, running through what she can remember about Will’s family. Alex is the youngest of Sophie’s boys. His brothers are all in high school, but he’s only eight. Or maybe nine? She can’t remember. What she does remember is that he was a bit of a surprise for his parents, who hadn’t been planning on having another child.

“That’s a mouthful,” she observes. “Do you have a nickname?”

“You can call me Alex.”

He wanders into the kitchen and stops next to her. He tilts his head back to stare up at her, his eyes wide and curious like she’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. Frankie gazes down at him, her eyebrows raised.

“Are you in the FBI like Uncle Will?” he asks.

Frankie considers telling the truth, but then she realizes she’d have to explain the CIA and she’d rather not do that. “Sort of,” she says instead.

“Do you live in New York?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like football?”

“Not really.”

“Have you ever played Fortnite?”

“Yes.”

“Are you good at it?”

“No.”

He blinks at her. Frankie waits, because she has a feeling the interrogation isn’t over yet.

“You’re pretty,” he says eventually.

“Thanks,” she replies, lifting her mug to her lips.

“I bet that’s why Uncle Will wants to marry you.”

Frankie chokes on her coffee.

Alex watches her, his eyebrows furrowed, as she coughs and reaches for a nearby kitchen towel. He lifts his hand and pats her on the back.

“You shouldn’t drink too fast,” he says helpfully. “Then it goes down the wrong pipe.”

Frankie coughs into the towel. Alex continues to pat her back. When she’s finally caught her breath, he lowers his hand. She looks down at him through watery eyes and croaks, “What did you
just say?”

“You shouldn’t drink too fast.”

“No, before that.”

Alex furrows his eyebrows. “You mean about you and Uncle Will getting married?”

And that’s when Will walks in, his hair still wet from his shower and his gray Indiana Pacers t-shirt stretched across his chest in a way that makes Frankie forget for a split second that his nephew thinks they’re going to get married.

“Uncle Will!” Alex shouts, sprinting across the room and catapulting himself into Will’s arms.

“Hey buddy!” Will says with a surprised laugh. He catches his nephew and hugs him eagerly. He’s grinning from ear to ear, and the fact that Frankie suddenly finds him even more attractive just because he has a child in his arms makes her stomach drop straight down to her feet.

Will looks up and catches her eye over Alex’s shoulder. Frankie sips her coffee and tries to look like she’s not panicking. Will frowns at her, and she knows she failed.

“What are you doing here?” Will asks Alex, setting him on the ground. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Mom let me skip today cause I was sad about grandpa.”

Will’s expression softens. He presses his hand against Alex’s cheek. “Grandpa’s going to be fine, bud. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah but he could have died.”

“Yeah, well, the Colts could have gone to the Super Bowl. You can’t live your life on coulda woulda shoulda.”

Alex grins. “That’s what Grandpa says.”

“Yep,” Will agrees with a grin.

The door leading to the garage opens again, and Sophie breezes in with her phone to her ear.

“No, Carl. I said I’d be there. I just need an hour, okay? Don’t go in there without me.” She hangs up the phone with a sigh, and then casts an apologetic glance at Frankie and Will. “Sorry.” She looks at her son. “Did you introduce yourself?”

“Yes,” Alex says obediently.

Sophie glances at Frankie.

“He did,” Frankie confirms.

“Everything okay, Soph?” Will asks.

“No,” Sophie says with another sigh. “I took the day off to hang out with Alex, but the defense team just found some new evidence. Now the D.A. wants to talk plea deal and there’s no way I’m letting that as—” She stops abruptly, glances at her son, and then corrects, “jerk take a plea deal.”
Frankie lifts her eyebrows. She knew Sophie was a lawyer, but she didn’t realize that she worked for the D.A.’s office. If memory serves, Sophie’s husband, Scott, is a pediatric surgeon in Fort Wayne. So Sophie locks up bad guys and Scott saves kids’ lives, and they live in Huntington, Indiana with their four blond boys who get good grades, love sports, and have good manners.

Frankie smirks into her coffee and tries to resist an eyeroll.

“So you need to go into the office,” Will summarizes.

Sophie nods. She casts a brief look in Frankie’s direction. “I was hoping you guys could hang out with Alex for a few hours until I get this taken care of. Usually mom and dad would do it, but obviously that’s not an option today.”

Will immediately looks at Frankie. So does Sophie. Alex too. Frankie glances between the three of them, realizes they all have the exact same shade of eyes, and then says, “Sure.”

Sophie looks relieved. Will looks pleasantly surprised. Alex whirls around to face his uncle and says, “Can we take Frankie to Antiqology?”

Will glances at Frankie again. She has no idea what Antiqology is, but Will looks thrilled by the idea and she doesn’t have anything better to do, so she shrugs at him.

Will grins down at Alex. “Let’s do it.”

Antiqology is an antique store that doubles as a soda shop.

It’s cute and quaint and exactly what Frankie would’ve expected to find in downtown Huntington. Alex seems to know just as much about the hundreds of sodas they sell as the friendly woman behind the counter does. He insists that Frankie try his favorite—which, to her amusement, is called Alien Snot—and scoots his stool so close to hers that he’s practically sitting in her lap. Will tries to sit on her other side, but Alex won’t let him.

“No, Uncle Will. I get to sit in the middle.”

“What if I want to sit by Frankie?”

“You get to sit by Frankie all the time. It’s my turn. You sit over here.”

Will smirks down at his nephew. “You trying to steal my girl?”

Alex grins. “Jack says if someone steals your girl then she was never your girl to begin with.”

Frankie snorts into her Alien Snot. Will lifts his eyebrows. “I think your brother and I should have a talk about girls.”

Alex shrugs.

Will catches Frankie’s eye over the top of Alex’s head. “You want to sit by me?”

“I want to sit by Alex,” she says.

Alex beams. Will rolls his eyes, but sits on the stool he’d been instructed to sit on.

For the next hour, Alex talks incessantly about anything and everything: His brothers, his parents, his dogs, his best friends at school, what he wants to be when he grows up, how much he loves
superheroes. In between his mile-a-minute musings, he peppers Frankie with questions. Does she have siblings? What are her parents like? Who’s her best friend? Does she shoot guns at work? Does she like superheroes? Does she like movies? Does she want to see a movie with him? Can she come over later and play Fortnite and then sleep over so she can try his mom’s french toast in the morning?

Eventually Alex gets up to go to the bathroom, and Frankie and Will are finally alone. Will slides over onto Alex’s stool.

“Sorry about all the questions,” he says, his knee bumping against hers. “He’s a curious kid.”

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees, scratching her thumbnail against the peeling label on her soda bottle. “He gets that from his uncle.”

“You want me to tell him to stop?”

“No. It’s cute.”

Will’s hand coasts along her thigh beneath the bar. “He gets his cuteness from his uncle too.”

Frankie looks up at him and arches an eyebrow. “You sure?”

Will blinks at her, clearly offended. Frankie grins. He’s opening his mouth, probably to tell her that he knows she thinks he’s cute even if she’s going to refuse to say it, but he’s stopped short by someone behind him saying, “Will? Will Chase?”

Will turns around, and Frankie leans back on her stool to see a very pretty brunette standing nearby with her hands on her hips. She’s wearing a blue and white patterned dress that looks like it was made for her. Her makeup is flawless, and her dark hair is down and curling around her shoulders. She looks like she should be at Bloomingdale’s in New York, not at a soda shop in a sleepy town in Indiana, and for some inexplicable reason Frankie suddenly feels a little nauseous.

“Oh my god,” the pretty brunette says, her face lighting up when Will turns around. “It is you.”

“Vanessa,” Will says in surprise. He gets to his feet. “How are you?”

“I’m great!” Vanessa says brightly.

She steps forward and throws herself into Will’s arms for a hug, and Frankie immediately decides that Vanessa needs to be punched in the face.

“You look so great,” Vanessa gushes, leaning back to look Will up and down. “What’s it been, fifteen years?”

“Just about,” Will says. He reaches out and touches her lightly on the elbow. “You look great too. How’ve things been?”

Frankie stares at Will’s hand on Vanessa’s elbow and decides that Vanessa doesn’t need a punch to the face. She needs a bullet to the face. She never should have let Will talk her into leaving her gun at his parents’ house.

“Can’t complain,” Vanessa says with a cute little shrug and a cute little smile that makes Frankie want to kick her teeth in.

“I heard you married Eric Shay,” Will says with a hint of a smirk.
Vanessa laughs. “I did.” She holds up her left hand, but there’s no ring on her fourth finger. “Divorced three years now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Will says, and he sounds like he genuinely means it. Frankie knows he probably does—he’s too empathetic not to feel bad about someone getting divorced—but she wishes he sounded a little less sorry.

“Don’t be,” Vanessa says, waving her hand. “It was for the best. Plenty of fish in the sea.”

Her dark eyes dart briefly down Will’s body and then back up to his face. Will seems to notice, because he immediately turns toward her and says, “Sorry, where are my manners? This is my girlfriend, Frankie.”

Vanessa’s eyes settle on Frankie for the first time, and despite the polite smile on the woman’s face, Frankie knows she’s being sized up. She holds out her hand and offers Vanessa the same smile she usually gives terrorists right before she breaks their kneecaps.

“Hi.”

“So nice to meet you,” Vanessa says, shaking her hand. It’s obvious—to Frankie anyway—that Vanessa does not think it’s nice to meet her.

“Vanessa and I went to high school together,” Will explains.

Vanessa smirks up at him. “We also dated for two years.”

“Did you,” Frankie says, lifting her eyebrows at Will. He’s never mentioned Vanessa. Frankie isn’t sure if that’s a good or bad thing. She knows how much he loves telling people that his grandparents were high school sweethearts because he thinks it’s romantic, so she’s leaning toward bad.

“Feels like forever ago,” Will says with a laugh, leaning away from Vanessa and closer to Frankie.

Vanessa laughs too and reaches out to grab Will’s arm. He freezes, caught in her grasp. “You remember prom?” she asks, beaming up at him. “I was so disappointed I wasn’t prom queen,” Vanessa says, leaning toward Frankie as if they’re old friends. She’s still holding Will’s arm. “And Will was so sweet, he took me back to the school after the dance was over and gave me a little crown he made and had the school janitor play our song over the speakers. We danced all by ourselves right in the middle of the empty gym. Isn’t that the sweetest?”

“So sweet,” Frankie agrees, barely resisting the urge to say You know, I actually was prom queen.

“And then for graduation—”

Whatever adorable story Vanessa is about to share about how romantic Will was at their high school graduation gets cut off by the sudden reappearance of Alex, who skids to a stop next to Frankie and says, “Uncle Will, can we take Frankie to the bookstore? I want to get her a comic book.”

“Sure,” Will says with a shrug.
“Come on Frankie,” Alex says excitedly, grabbing Frankie’s hand. “We can walk there cause it’s close.”

Frankie gets to her feet. “Nice to meet you,” she says to Vanessa, even though it definitely was not.

“You too!” Vanessa says. Then she turns toward Will with a predatory look in her eye and says, “You want to stick around for a while until they’re done at the bookstore? Maybe catch up a little?”

Frankie is seriously—like, seriously—tempted to roundhouse kick her right in her pretty face, but there’s no need.

“Maybe another time,” Will says politely. He tips his head toward Alex. “I think my nephew is trying to steal my girl and I’m pretty dead set on keeping her for myself.”

It’s a clear dismissal, and it should probably make Frankie feel better, but it doesn’t. She doesn’t get a chance to hear whatever Vanessa says in response because Alex is tugging her toward the door and chattering loudly.

“They don’t have very many comic books, but if you look real close sometimes you can find one,” he says as they walk. “And if they don’t have any then maybe Uncle Will can drive us into the city and we can find you a good one.”

“Sounds great,” Frankie replies absently.

She glances over her shoulder. Will and Vanessa are hugging again. Frankie turns back around with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Suddenly all she can think about is how she used to wear her high school boyfriend’s varsity letter jacket everywhere, and whether Vanessa did the same with Will’s.

As soon as they get outside, Alex spots a man walking his dog on the sidewalk up ahead. “I’m going to pet the dog!” he yells, dropping Frankie’s hand and sprinting down the sidewalk.

“Ask first!” Will calls out after him as he exits the shop behind her.

“Okay!” Alex hollers back.

Will steps into the now-empty space by Frankie’s side the second Alex is gone. Frankie slides her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket because she knows he’s going to reach for her hand and she doesn’t really feel like touching him right now. Will frowns a little, but doesn’t say anything.

“Bookstore’s up that way,” he tells her instead, pointing toward the end of the block.

She nods and starts walking in the direction he pointed. In the distance, Alex is kneeling on the sidewalk and laughing as a golden retriever licks his face.

“Chases love dogs,” Will says, smiling fondly at his nephew.

“So I’ve heard,” Frankie replies.

Will glances at her. She ignores him. They walk in silence for about ten seconds, and then he turns toward her and says, “Okay. Why are you making that face?”

“What face?”

“That face.”
“This is my normal face, Will.”

“That is not your normal face. I am intimately acquainted with all your faces. I know your angry face and your tired face and your happy face and your I’m-going-to-murder-Standish face.” He smirks at her. “Your I’m-about-to-rip-your-clothes-off face is my personal favorite.”

Frankie rolls her eyes.

Will gestures at her. “But this? This is not your normal face.”

Frankie’s first instinct is to insist that she’s not making a face and everything is fine so he should stop being annoying and shut up. But then she remembers that she’s been trying to do the whole tell-Will-how-she-feels thing, and this is probably one of those instances when she should tell him how she feels.

“I didn’t know you had a high school sweetheart,” she says.

Will frowns. “What?”

“Vanessa. You never mentioned her.”

His frown deepens. “I didn’t know I was supposed to.”

“Did she wear your varsity jacket while you were together?”

Will looks completely mystified. “Does that matter?”

“Let me guess,” Frankie says instead of answering his question. “You guys broke up before you went to college because of the distance, but you promised you’d find your way back to each other just like they do in The Notebook.”

She expects him to zero in on the fact that she’s referenced one of the sappiest movies of all time, but he doesn’t even blink.

“It wasn’t like that, Frankie.”

“So she wasn’t the first girl you ever loved?”

Will purses his lips and doesn’t respond, but his silence is answer enough. Frankie feels her skin prickle with something that is definitely not jealousy because there is absolutely no way she’s jealous of Will’s high school girlfriend.

“I can see why you like her,” she says, trying to sound disinterested. “She’s annoyingly bright and bubbly.”


“She’s pretty too.”

Will gives her an incredulous look.

“What?” Frankie says defensively. “She is. She probably looked adorable in that crown you made for her. You know, actually, I’m surprised she’s not the one who took your virginity. I would’ve thought you’d be all about high school sweetheart prom night sex.”

Will reaches out and grabs Frankie’s forearm to pull her to a stop on the sidewalk. He gazes at her,
his eyes darting over her face, and then he says with a hint of disbelief, “You’re jealous.”

Frankie snorts. “Of the girl who wasn’t prom queen? Please. I actually was prom queen.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Wow. You’re really jealous.”

Frankie pulls her arm from his grasp. “Don’t flatter yourself, Whiskey.”

She starts to turn away from him. He closes his fingers around her bicep, yanks her back toward him, and kisses her before she can say something snarky.

When he leans back from her mouth a moment later, she opens her eyes to find him smiling down at her with a mixture of amusement and affection. He tucks her hair behind her ear.

“So let me get this straight,” he says softly. “I told you I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but you’re jealous of the girl who wore my varsity jacket when I was seventeen?”

“So she did wear your jacket.”

His smile widens into a grin. “I think my mom still has it. You want me to go home and grab it for you so you can wear it around and make sure everyone knows I’m yours?”

“You’re an ass,” she tells him, shrugging out of his grasp.

He laughs, pulls her back toward him, and kisses her again—this time with a little less innocence and a lot more promise.

Frankie isn’t sure when she became the kind of woman who gets jealous over ex-girlfriends. She’s not sure when she stopped hating PDA either. But apparently both those things happened at some point, because she’s currently standing in the middle of Huntington, Indiana kissing her boyfriend like some kind of lovestruck moron who can’t bear the thought of him loving anyone but her.

“Do you guys have to do that right now?” Alex’s voice interrupts. “It’s kind of gross and I want to go to the bookstore.”

Will and Frankie break apart, and Frankie ducks her face toward Will’s collarbone to hide what she’s certain is a completely idiotic grin. Damn him and his stupid charm virus.

Will laughs like he can read her mind and brushes a kiss over her forehead. “Sorry bud,” he says, scooting a more respectable distance away from her. “Couldn’t resist.”

“Excuse me,” a deep voice says.

Frankie turns to see two burly guys standing next to a cargo van that’s parked nearby. The hood is up, and one of them is holding jumper cables.

“What do either of you happen to have a car nearby that you could use to give us a jump?”

“Eagle scout to the rescue,” Frankie says, smiling up at Will.

He winks at her. “Yeah, I can help,” he tells the men.

“Can I take Frankie in the store?” Alex says, latching onto Frankie’s hand.

“Sure,” Will says. He brushes his hand over the small of Frankie’s back. “I’ll meet you guys in there. Or you meet me out here when you’re done.”
“Okay,” she says.

Alex pulls her toward a storefront with the words *Turn The Page Books And More!* emblazoned on the window. A bell jangles cheerily when they pull open the front door. Alex immediately beelines for the far corner of the store, but Frankie gets sidetracked by a table at the front that’s filled with dozens of records.

“Can I go look?” Alex asks when she stops at the table.

“Sure. Just don’t leave the store.”

“I won’t,” he promises, skipping toward the farthest aisle.

Frankie starts flipping through records. She owns all the Beatles records they have, but she finds a worn looking sleeve for a Jimmy Hendrix album that she doesn’t. She pulls it out and studies the cover art. Behind her, the bell above the door jangles. She looks up, and sees a tall man with his head bent and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes make his way past her and into one of the aisles. She looks back down and slips the Hendrix album back in its spot.

“Frankie?” Alex calls.

“Hm?” she replies as she pulls out an album by The Doors.

“I think I found one but I can’t reach it.”

“All right. I’m coming.”

Frankie takes one last look at the album and then slides it back in place and starts toward the aisle Alex disappeared down. When she rounds the corner, she spots him standing at the far end next to the tall man in the baseball cap, who is pulling a comic book off the top shelf. He hands it to Alex.

“Thanks,” Alex says brightly.

“Thank you,” Frankie echoes as she walks down the aisle toward them. The man looks over at her, and she finally gets a clear look at his face.

She stops dead in her tracks.

“Hey bartender,” Jimmy says. His lips are curled into the same smirk he wore right before Will punched him in Spain. “Miss me?”

Frankie reaches for her hip, and then remembers that her gun is sitting in her suitcase at Will’s parents’ house because Will assured her there was no need for guns in Huntington.

Fear surges up into her throat. Jimmy is armed—she can see the gun peeking out from under his jacket—and he’s got Will’s nephew within easy reach.

“Alex,” she says, trying to keep her voice even. “Come here. Now.”

Alex starts forward obediently, but Jimmy puts a large hand on his shoulder to stop him. “I think he’ll stay with me.”

Alex frowns. He twists his body to glance up at Jimmy, and then looks back at Frankie with a confused look. “Frankie?”

“It’s okay,” she says, nodding at him. She looks up at Jimmy. “What do you want?”
“You,” Jimmy answers with a smile. “And your little sidekick here. We’re going to go for a ride.”

“You can have me. You don’t need him.”

Jimmy’s smile deepens. “Nah, I think I’ll take you both. Really light a fire under Chase’s ass.”

“He’s outside,” Frankie says. “You won’t get past him with both of us.”

“He is outside,” Jimmy confirms. “But I don’t think he’ll be a problem. See, that’s the thing about boy scouts. They’re so eager to help people in distress they never stop to question who they might be helping.”

Rage and fear roar through Frankie’s veins, and the edges of her vision turn red. She takes a step forward. “If you hurt him, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Jimmy cuts her off, his hand tightening on Alex’s shoulder.

She presses her lips together and curls her hands into fists but doesn’t move any closer and doesn’t finish her sentence.

Jimmy bends down so that his mouth is by Alex’s ear. “Here’s the deal, kid. You’re going to walk outside and get in the van. And if you so much as make a peep, I’m going to kill your Uncle Will.”

Alex’s eyes widen in terror. He looks at Frankie. She nods at him. “It’s okay. I’m going to go with you.”

“Not a peep, kid,” Jimmy warns. “Got it?”

Alex’s bottom lip is trembling, but he nods.

“Good.” Jimmy straightens. “Same goes for you, bartender. Start walking.”

Frankie hesitates, but she doesn’t have a choice. If it was just her, she could risk it. She could charge at Jimmy, or sprint in the opposite direction, or reach for the knife that’s tucked into her left boot. But Alex is here, and if she does something impulsive and reckless she’ll be putting him at risk. She has to do as she’s told.

She turns around and walks slowly out of the store. The woman by the cash register smiles at her, and Frankie forces herself to smile back. When she gets outside, the van is pulled up to the curb and the two men who asked Will for help are sitting in the front seats. Frankie walks as slowly as she can toward it, scanning her surroundings for Will. She spots him sitting slumped in the front seat of his dad’s pickup truck that’s parked nearby. He’s not moving. Her heart shoots up into her throat.

“Don’t worry,” Jimmy rumbles with a hint of a laugh. “He’s not dead. Now quit walking like an old lady and get your ass in the van.”

Frankie opens the back door and climbs into the van. There are no seats, so she sits on the metal floor with her back against the side of the van. Jimmy shoves Alex in after her. Will’s nephew scurries away from Jimmy and throws himself at Frankie. She wraps her arms around him as he curls into a ball in her lap.

“Ain’t that sweet,” Jimmy says, leering at her. He holds out his hand. “Hand over your phone.”

Frankie pulls her phone out of her pocket and slides it across the floor toward him. Jimmy picks it
up and then drops it outside the van, and it lands on the street with a crack. He climbs into the van and slams the door closed behind him. “Go,” he snaps.

The guy in the driver’s seat shifts the van into gear and they pull away from the curb. Alex is trembling in Frankie’s arms. She rubs her hand over his back to try to comfort him.

Jimmy sits across from her. “You look good, bartender. Leather works for you.”

“Same can’t be said for you and baseball hats.”

Jimmy smirks. “You know when all this is over, you should let me buy you a drink.” His gaze dips down toward her chest and lingers there, and then travels back up to meet hers. “Show you how a real marine does things.”

Frankie glares at him. “I’m not like Will. When all this is over, I won’t let you walk away with just a punch.”

Jimmy grins. “Looking forward to it, sweetheart.”
Will wakes with a splitting headache.

He groans and leans forward, pressing his fingers to his temples. He feels like his head is going to explode. He opens his eyes, and realizes he’s sitting in the front seat of his dad’s pickup truck. The last thing he remembers is bending beneath the hood of the truck to put some jumper cables in place. And now he’s...here?

He turns his head, squinting out the driver’s side window, but the cargo van isn’t parked where it was. The two guys who asked for help are nowhere to be seen. A deep sense of unease settles in his stomach. Something is wrong.

He climbs out of the truck, slams the door, and winces at the sound but doesn’t stop. He strides toward the bookstore. The bell above the door jingles merrily when he yanks it open. He stalks through the store, glancing down each of the aisles for Frankie and Alex, but the place is empty.

“Can I help you?”

Will turns around. There’s a woman standing by the cash register, smiling politely.

“A woman came in here with a young kid not that long ago,” he says. “She was in a leather jacket. He had on a red t-shirt. Where did they go?”

The woman frowns. “They left about ten minutes ago.”

“Were they alone?”

“No. They were with a man.”

Will’s heart shoots into his throat. “What did he look like? Did she look angry or upset? Did she say anything? Which direction did they go?”

The woman looks taken aback by the vehemence of his questions. “He had a baseball hat on,” she says slowly. “They seemed fine. I didn’t...I’m not sure which way they went.”

“Do you have cameras in this store?” he demands.

She shrinks away from him. “No.”

Will turns on his heel and strides out of the store, pulling his phone out of his pocket to call Frankie. It rings in his ear after he dials, and then a split second later he hears an actual ring a few yards away. He follows the sound, his eyes glued to the pavement, until he spots a phone lying in the street.

It’s Frankie’s. He bends over and picks it up. A picture of the New York Mets logo is on her screen. He’d tried to get her to put an actual picture of him as his contact ID photo, but she’d refused. That’s stupid, she’d said. I see you every day. I know what you look like. I don’t need a picture of you on my phone. Eventually, when he won one of their dozens of bets, he cashed in. She flat out refused to use his picture, bet or no bet, so he settled on the Mets logo because she wears
his Mets t-shirt to bed when she stays at his place. Every time he calls her, he smiles when he thinks about her having to see that logo on her screen.

He’s not smiling now.

He stands on the side of the street, his heart pounding in his chest, his head pounding with pain, and tries to think. Two men asked for his help with their van, then knocked him unconscious. They didn’t kill him even though they could have. They took Frankie instead, and apparently Alex too, and they left her phone behind. But why? And what the hell are they doing in Huntington?

His phone buzzes in his hand. He doesn’t recognize the number.

“Frankie?” he answers.

“Hey Will,” a scratchy voice says on the other end of the line. Will’s blood runs cold. He knows that voice.

“Jimmy,” he snarls.

“You miss me?”

“What the fuck did you do with them?”

Jimmy clicks his tongue. “Come on now. Boy scouts shouldn’t curse. You’re supposed to be better than that.”

Will rubs his temples and takes a deep breath. He has to calm down. He needs to get as much information as possible out of Jimmy if he’s going to find Frankie and Alex. Jimmy’s a snake, but he’s a cocky snake. He might let something slip if he gets a chance to gloat.

“How’d you get out of prison?” Will asks.

“Well, turns out it’s true what they say. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. And you have some pretty powerful enemies, Chase. Which means I’ve got some pretty powerful friends.”

Ollerman, Will thinks. He doesn’t say it. “And you thought you’d come all the way out to Huntington to prove it to me?” he says instead.

Jimmy chuckles. “You think I’d willingly come out to bumfuck nowhere? I brought you here cause my new British friend wanted me to keep you out of New York for a few days. And I knew nothing would get you out of the city faster than your precious little family.”

Ollerman’s not British. Will frowns, confused, because he doesn’t have any British enemies. And then it hits him.

Nick.

He’s opening his mouth to ask what the hell Nick wanted him out of New York for when another realization stops him.

“Bring me?” he repeats. “What do you mean you brought me—” He stops abruptly when he understands what Jimmy’s implying.

“Who do you think hit your parents’ car?” Jimmy asks, giving voice to the realization Will just had. “You’re so predictable, Chase. Put the old folks in a bit of danger and you come running like the perfect son. I didn’t expect you to bring your bartender friend, though. Didn’t realize she was
your girlfriend. You guys were real cute sucking face on the sidewalk. Be a real shame if I had to kill her.”

Rage flares in Will’s chest. The next time he sees Jimmy, he’s going to put a bullet in his skull. “You were at my house last night, weren’t you?”

“Sure was,” Jimmy replies. “You know, I kinda thought your girl saw me in the neighbor’s yard. Guess she was too busy thinking about spreading her legs to look close enough.”

“Screw you, Jimmy,” Will hears Frankie snarl.

Will closes his eyes at the sound of her voice. He never thought he’d be so happy to hear her say screw you in front of his nephew.

Jimmy laughs. “Got yourself a hellcat here, Chase. Might have to tame her a little for you.”

Bile rises in the back of Will’s throat. “What do you want?”

“I want what you stole from me. I want the thirty million dollars I was supposed to get for the plutonium.”

“Your new friend didn’t pay you enough for your hit and run on my parents?”

“I did what he asked and he paid me just fine. But you owe me thirty million and I want what I’m owed.”

“I don’t have thirty million dollars, Jimmy.”

“Then I suggest you find it. Because that’s the price you’re gonna have to pay if you want to see your girlfriend and your nephew again. You’ve got forty-eight hours. I’ll call you to set up a meet. You miss the deadline, I’m going to send them back to you in pieces.”

“I want proof of life.”

“I’ll send you a picture.”

“No. I want to talk to my nephew. Now.”

Jimmy sighs. A moment later, Alex’s voice says, “Uncle Will?”

He sounds terrified. Tears prick Will’s eyes. He lowers himself down to sit on the curb and takes a deep breath. “Hey buddy,” he says, trying to keep his voice even. It won’t make Alex feel better to hear his uncle cry. “You okay?”

“I’m scared.”

“I know. But this is going to be over soon. Just do whatever Frankie says until I can come get you, okay? She’ll take good care of you.”

“Okay,” Alex sniffs. “I love you.”

“I love you too, bud.”

There’s a rustling sound, and then Jimmy says, “Satisfied?”

Will clenches his jaw. “Her too.”
“Not a chance.”

“Put her on, Jimmy, or I’m going to call every cop in the state.”

“You call the cops, she dies.”

“She dies, you don’t get a damn penny.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Jimmy’s voice—sounding more distant than before—growls, “You tell him anything you shouldn’t and I break the kid’s arm.”

“Oh, break a kid’s arm,” Frankie snaps. “You’re a real tough guy.” A second later, in a much gentler voice, she says, “Will?”

Will’s throat feels like it’s closing up. “Hey,” he manages to say.

“Alex is fine.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah. Listen, I know how you can get the money. Just call Jai. You know he’s good at finding things in a short amount of time. He found all that jewelry for us when we had that mission in Marseille.”

Will frowns. They’ve only been to Marseille once, and they weren’t there for jewelry. They were there for a sonar navigation system. He knows she’s trying to tell him something, but he has no idea what. He racks his brain, trying to find the connection between Jai, Marseille, and jewelry, and then it hits him—Marseille was where he found out that Jai has micro-trackers in all her jewelry. And she was wearing her favorite ring this morning.

Hope bursts in his chest for the first time since he woke up in his dad’s truck. “You’re right. I’ll call him.”

“This is what I get for letting you talk me into leaving my gun at the house,” she says next. “Safest town in America my ass.”

There isn’t even a trace of annoyance in her tone. She’s teasing him, even in the midst of this mess, and he loves her for it.

He closes his eyes. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“You better.”

“I love you. You know that, right? I love you so much.”

“Will,” she breathes. There’s something in her voice, a waver of emotion he doesn’t hear often. He wonders if she’s finally going to say the words back to him, but then Jimmy’s on the other end of the line.

“Forty-eight hours, Chase,” he says. “Or they come back to you in pieces.”

The call ends. Will lowers his phone from his ear. For a second he sits completely still, staring at the screen and trying to breathe around the storm of emotion in his chest.

Call Jai, he hears Frankie’s voice say somewhere in the back of his mind. Call Jai and get your ass out here to get us.
He calls Jai.

“Yes?” Jai answers after two rings.

Will scrubs a hand over his face. “I need you to track Frankie and tell me where she is.”

“I’m not going to track her every time you two have a disagreement, Will.”

“She’s been abducted.”

There’s a beat of stunned silence, and then Jai hisses, “What? I thought she was in Huntington with you.”

“She is. And so is Jimmy.”

“Your marine friend?”

“We’re not friends. But yes.”

“He’s supposed to be in prison.”

“He was. Nick got him out.”

The silence on the other end of the line is deafening, but brief. “Fucking asshole,” Jai snarls with so much venom that Will is taken aback. He’s never heard Jai sound so furious.

“Why would he let Jimmy take her but not Anton?” Jai demands.

“I don’t think he asked Jimmy to take her,” Will replies. “Jimmy’s doing this on his own. He said he already held up his end of the bargain with Nick. All he was supposed to do was get me out of New York for a few days. That’s why he hit my parents’ car. He knew I’d come if they were in the hospital. But he was surprised Frankie was here with me. So I’m guessing Nick wasn’t expecting her to be here either.”

“No,” Jai says. “I’m sure he didn’t expect that.”

There’s something strange in Jai’s voice that Will can’t quite put his finger on. It sounds almost like smug satisfaction, and maybe a little bit of pride.

“Why would Nick want me out of New York?” Will asks.

There’s a beat of silence, and then Jai says, “I have no idea.”

Will isn’t sure why, but he gets the feeling that Jai is lying.

“What does Jimmy want?” Jai asks.

“He wants the thirty million dollar payday we kept him from during that mission in Spain. He’s giving me forty-eight hours to come up with the money or he’s going to kill her and my nephew. Which is why I need you to find her.”

Will thinks he can hear typing in the background. He waits, rubbing his temples and trying not to think about how terrified Alex sounded, or why Frankie’s former partner would go through so much trouble to get him out of New York.

“She’s thirteen miles west of you and moving at forty miles an hour,” Jai says, his voice clipped
and businesslike. “At that speed, she’s in a car. Given your current location, and assuming she
continues moving at her current speed, you could catch her in thirty minutes if you leave now and
drive twenty miles over the speed limit.”

Will frowns. “How do you know my current location?”

“There’s a tracker in your watch,” Jai says the same way someone else would say *the sky is blue*.

“What?” Will says, frowning down at his watch.

“Frankie asked me to install micro-trackers in all of your watches after what happened in El
Salvador.”

“She never told me that.”

“She didn’t want you to know. She didn’t…” Jai clears his throat. “She didn’t handle your
kidnapping well.”

There are about a million reasons why Will’s heart shouldn’t feel warm inside his chest right now,
but it does. Stealing his watches so Jai could secretly place micro-trackers inside them in case he
ever got kidnapped again is the most Frankie Trowbridge way to say *I love you* he can possibly
think of.

“What do you need?” Jai asks. “I can be on a plane in twenty minutes.”

“I’d rather have you behind your screen. Let me know when Frankie stops moving. Call Ray and
tell him to alert Director Casey that Ollerman and Nick might be up to something in New York.
Then call the rest of the team, and get me as much information about the final location as
possible.”

“You’re not going after her now?” Jai asks incredulously.

Will sighs. “Trust me, Jai, if I could chase them down without putting Frankie and my nephew at
risk, I would. But I don’t know how many guys Jimmy has, and he’s got a tendency to booby trap
everything. I need reinforcements. And I know where to get them.”

Jai doesn’t answer.

“I’ll get her back, Jai,” Will says. “I promise.”

There’s another beat of silence, and then Jai says darkly, “You better.”

Will comes from a military family. His brother, his father, and his paternal grandfather were all
Marines. His maternal grandfather and two of his uncles were in the Air Force. Four of his cousins
are in the Navy. Two of them—twins Eric and Jake—are retired Navy Seals.

Eric and Jake live in Huntington County. Will calls them as soon as he hangs up with Jai.

Two hours later, he’s dressed head to toe in tactical gear and sitting in the back of Jake’s pickup
truck on the side of State Route 16. He’s trying to resist the urge to stand up and pace. Eric is
methodically cleaning an automatic rifle that’s already glistening. Jake is spitting sunflower seeds
and listening as Jai gives them the lowdown on the building where Frankie and Alex are being
held.

“It’s a manufacturing plant,” Jai says. “Been empty for over a decade now.”
“McCoy Allied,” Jake says after he spits a seed. “Used to make machinery parts for farm equipment until the recession.”

“No recent tenants, Jai?” Will asks.

“No. It’s empty. Sending the floorplans to you now.”

A moment later, the floorplans pop up on Will’s laptop that’s sitting in the bed of the truck. Eric stops cleaning his gun long enough to lean forward and study the plans. Jake leans forward too.

“I’ve got heat signatures,” Standish says. “Four on what appears to be the second floor, three more on the first. No cameras, so nothing to hack. You’re going in blind other than the signatures.”

“Jai, can you narrow in on her location?” Will asks. “Figure out which floor she’s on?”

“No,” Jai says. “But once you’re in the building, I can use your location to tell you how close you are to her.”

“What about entry?” Jake asks.

“There’s a back driveway you can take,” Susan offers. “But both the front and back driveways are long enough that Jimmy will have a clear view of anyone who approaches and plenty of time to react. Based on his profile, he won’t hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later. You’re better off going in on foot.”

“And after dark,” Eric says.

Will shakes his head. “I don’t want to wait that long.”

“He gave you forty-eight hours,” Jake points out, though not unkindly. “He knows you’re going to ask for proof of life before you turn over the cash. He won’t kill them before then. He can’t.”

“He could hurt them.”

“He’s going to kill them if he sees us walking up his driveway,” Eric says. “Potential pain doesn’t outweigh certain death. We have to wait for dark.”

Every cell in Will’s body is screaming No, now. But his cousins are right.

“Fine,” he agrees. “We’ll go after dark.”

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Frankie isn’t sure how long it’s been since she climbed out of the van and onto the gravel driveway of whatever the hell abandoned warehouse she’s in, but it feels like days.

She knows it’s probably only been hours. Considering how wide open the space around the warehouse is, it would’ve been difficult for Will to drive up unnoticed. She’s guessing he’s waiting for dark. That’s what she’d do. There are no windows in the small and narrow room that she and Alex are in, so she isn’t sure if it’s dark yet. But god, she hopes so.

Her arms are pulled behind her back, and her wrists are zip tied together and fastened to the seat of the chair. Both of her ankles have been zip tied to the front legs of her chair. It’s extremely uncomfortable. Her shoulders are throbbing, her knees are aching, and her right hand has fallen asleep.

She opens and closes her hand, trying to get some feeling back in her fingers, and glances across
the room at Alex. He’s also sitting in a chair, but his wrists are zip tied to the arms of the chair and his feet are free. He must be at least slightly comfortable, because he’s asleep—his head is tipped forward so that his chin is on his chest, and his shoulders are rising and falling slowly.

She’s glad. When they first got here, she’d been worried about him. He looked shell-shocked and pale, and even from a few yards away she could see him trembling. It took her ten minutes, but she managed to coax him into a conversation. By the time his eyelids started to droop, he’d already given her a scene-by-scene summary of at least four separate superhero movies.

She tilts her head back and stares at the ceiling. She’s already been through the paces, but she goes through them again anyway. She shouldn’t have let Will talk her into leaving her gun. She shouldn’t have left him alone with those two guys. She shouldn’t have let Alex out of her sight in the bookstore. She knows Will would be upset by how angry she is with herself. She knows he’d tell her that she had no reason to suspect that his parents’ car crash—a normal, everyday occurrence regardless of the trauma—was actually a ruse. She knows he’d say that dogs bark at squirrels just as often as they bark at criminals, and in the midwest people jump each other’s cars all the time, and nearly every single man in Huntington County wears a baseball cap in public. And he’d be right. But that doesn’t change anything. She let her guard down, and now Alex is paying for it.

She’s studying a stain on one of the ceiling tiles and trying not to think about how badly she wants to feel Will’s arms wrapped around her when she hears the sound of a shoe squeaking in the hallway.

She straightens. Despite the fact that it would be all but impossible for her to free herself from her restraints, Jimmy has a man sitting outside their room as a guard. The door is open—Frankie has a feeling Jimmy did that on purpose just to taunt her with the prospect of freedom—so she has a clear view when a second man appears next to their guard.

He peeks into the room, glances at Alex and then at her, and then says to the first man, “Boss said shut the door and leave them for the night.”

“Hey,” Frankie calls.

Both men ignore her.

“Hey,” she says, this time a little louder.

Alex jerks awake at the sound of her voice. The men peer into the room.

Frankie tips her head toward Alex. “If you’re going to make him sleep here, at least untie him from the chair. You want to bind his hands, fine, but let him sleep on the floor instead of being stuck in that shitty chair.”

The men share a look.

“Come on, seriously?” she says, letting just a hint of incredulity creep into her voice. “He’s just a kid. You’re going to lock the door, and I’m obviously not going anywhere. What’s he going to do, turn into the Hulk and smash his way out of here?”

The men share another look. The second one shrugs. The first one sighs and walks into the room. He pulls a knife from his belt and kneels in front of Alex. Alex shoots her a frightened look over the man’s shoulder, but Frankie catches his eye and shakes her head. He seems to relax a little.

The man cuts the zip ties off of Alex’s wrists, and then says, “Hold your hands together.”
Alex obeys. The man wraps another zip tie around both of his wrists.

“Don’t do anything stupid, kid,” he says.

Alex nods.

The man gets to his feet and shoots Frankie a look on his way out. Frankie smirks at him and croons, “My hero.”

He slams the door shut in response. Frankie closes her eyes and listens.

“Frankie?” Alex says quietly.

“Shhh,” she says. She listens. She can hear their voices retreating down the hallway. Once it’s silent, she counts to sixty. And then she opens her eyes.

“Come here, Alex.”

Alex rises tentatively from his chair and makes his way across the room. When he stops in front of her, she shifts in her chair and tries to sit up straighter. Her right shoulder tugs painfully, and she winces. She’s going to be sore as hell tomorrow morning.

“Are you okay?” Alex asks, clearly concerned.

Frankie ignores how much he sounds like his uncle and says, “I’m fine. I need you to untie my left boot. Can you do that?”

“Why?”

“Just do it, kiddo. Please.”

Alex kneels before her and sets to work on her laces. His bound wrists make it a slower process than it might otherwise be, but Frankie waits as patiently as she can. Once her laces are untied, he looks up at her.

“Now what?”

“I need you to reach inside. You’re going to feel something hard and smooth next to my ankle. Can you pull it out for me?”

Alex frowns. “Out of your shoe?”

“Yeah. Out of my shoe.”

He looks incredulous, but he does as he’s told. When he pulls his hand out of her boot with her second favorite knife clasped in his fingers, Frankie feels her lips break into a grin. “Good job.”

“What is this?” Alex asks, his eyes wide.

“It’s a knife. I need you to open it for me. You think you can do that?”

“How?”

“You see that little ridge on the side? You’re going to push it upward. Wait! Point it that way,” she says, nodding toward the wall. “Away from you. Okay. Now push.”
Alex pushes his thumb on the trigger, and the blade springs free with a snap. He jumps in surprise and nearly drops it. Then he looks up at Frankie with wide eyes and says, “That’s so cool.”

She grins. “Yeah. Okay. You see these plastic things around my wrists? Like the ones you have around yours?”

Alex peers around the back of the chair at her bound wrists and then nods.

“I need you to use that knife to cut them off me.”

Alex’s eyes go wide. “I can’t do that.”

“Yes you can.”

“What if I cut you?”

“You won’t.”

He shakes his head. “No. I can’t. I don’t want to.”

“Look at me, Alex,” she says firmly. He lifts his gaze to hers. “You can do this. I wouldn’t ask you to if I didn’t think you could.”

“You said Uncle Will would come get us.”

“He will. But we need to help him when he gets here, and we can’t do that if we’re tied up. I need you to cut me free so I can help your uncle.”

Alex looks unconvinced. Frankie racks her brain, trying to find something that will motivate him. Her right hand is falling asleep again. Her knees are screaming from being locked in the same position for so long, and she can feel her temper starting to fray, but she pushes the anger aside and focuses on the child in front of her.

“You remember that movie you told me about? The one with Spiderman?”

Alex frowns. “Which one?”

“The one where he wrote his uncle that note and said he was scared to do something and then he found out his uncle was the bad guy.”

“Into the Spider-Verse,” Alex supplies.

“Yeah,” Frankie says. “That one. Well this is just like that. You’re scared, and that’s okay, because everybody gets scared. But you have to do this, Alex. You have to be brave like Spiderman. I need you to be a hero for me.”

I need you to be a hero for me are words Frankie literally never thought she would say, and she will never, ever say them again if she can help it, but they seem to work. Alex lifts his chin and determination flashes in his eyes. Frankie feels an ache in her chest because he looks just like Will.

“Oh okay,” he says. “I’ll do it.”

He walks around the back of her chair. Frankie curls her hands into fists so that he won’t accidentally slice off one of her fingers. She cranes her neck to look over her shoulder, but she can barely see him at the edges of her peripheral vision. He seems to hesitate.
“You can do this, Alex,” she tells him. “Just put the sharp edge against the plastic and then push down hard.”

Alex takes a deep breath. Frankie closes her eyes and prays that he won’t accidentally cut her arm open. A moment later, the tension around her wrists disappears and the zip tie hits the floor with a soft smack.

“I did it,” Alex breathes in wonder.

Frankie pulls her arms in front of her body and groans at the throbbing ache in her joints. She rolls her shoulders and opens and closes her hands, trying to get the blood flowing again. Alex scurries around to stand in front of her.

“I did it,” he says proudly.

She grins at him. “You did great, kiddo.”

“Should I cut these too?” he asks, pointing the knife at her still bound ankles.

Frankie laughs. “I think I got it from here.” She smiles at the slightly disappointed look on his face, and then takes the knife out of his hand gently. “You first. Come here. Let me see your hands.”

He steps toward her and holds out his hands, and she slices off the zip tie. She examines his wrists, checking for abrasions, but he seems okay. “Feel okay?” she asks, looking up at him.

He nods.

She gives the rest of him a quick once over. She hasn’t let him out of her sight so she knows he hasn’t been hurt, but she checks anyway. When she’s satisfied he’s not broken or bleeding anywhere, she bends down and cuts both of her ankles free. Then she stands up and shakes her legs out with a sigh of relief.

“Do you feel okay?” Alex asks, staring up at her.

“I feel much better,” Frankie assures him. She ruffles his hair. “Thanks for your help, Spiderman.”

He beams at her and opens his mouth, but whatever he’s about to say gets cut off by the sound of an automatic rifle. Frankie whirls toward the door, shoving Alex behind her, but it doesn’t open. She glances down at her watch. It’s 8:25. It’s probably dark out by now.

Will, she realizes.

She wraps her fingers around Alex’s forearm and pulls him toward the door. She sizes up the width of the door as she walks, trying to determine how wide it will swing when it gets pushed open, and then guides Alex up against the wall next to it. Another sharp round of gunfire echoes through the building, followed by shouting.

Frankie bends down and looks Alex in the eye. “You need to do exactly what I say, okay? If I say run, you run. If I say hide, you hide. You understand?”

He nods, his eyes wide and terrified.

She reaches up to press her hand against his cheek the way Will did this morning. “You’re going to be fine. It’s almost over. I just need you to be Spiderman one more time. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes,” Alex whispers.
“Good.” She straightens as more shooting echoes through the building, this time louder than before. “Stay right there,” she tells him. “Don’t move until I tell you.”

He nods. Frankie turns toward the door, her knife in her hand, ready. She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and feels the familiar, pre-fight calm surge through her blood. She thinks of Will sitting slumped in his dad’s pickup truck, and Alex trembling in her arms, and fury starts to build. Part of her wants it to be Will who bursts through that door. The rest of her wants it to be Jimmy so she can kill him.

The moment stretches out, soundtracked by guns and shouting and the pounding of feet getting louder, and then the door flies open. Frankie tenses. Someone strides into the room. It only takes her a split second to realize it’s not Will.

It’s Jimmy.

Frankie darts toward him while his back is still turned, ready to slit his throat, but he moves at the last second and she has to readjust. She buries her knife in the side of his neck instead. He roars in pain. She kicks the back of his knee. His body buckles toward the floor when his knee gives out, but he tucks and rolls before she can pull her knife out of his neck and finish the job.

He grabs her arm and uses his momentum to take her with him. She flips forward, her body flying up and over his shoulder, and lands hard on her back. The impact seems to fissure through her bones. She gasps as he rolls over her, his shoulder crushing her sternum. He twists above her, turning to face her with the knife still sticking gruesomely out of his neck. There’s a maniacal glint in his eye and a gun holstered on his belt, and suddenly all Frankie can think about is what’s going to happen if she doesn’t win this fight.

“Run, Alex!” she shouts. “Run!”

Jimmy glances up toward the door and reaches for his gun. Frankie traps his hands before he can pull it free of the holster and pushes, straining to keep him stuck long enough for Alex to bolt. She holds him for a second, maybe two. He’s got the better angle, and he’s stronger, so eventually he rips free from her grasp and pulls the gun out with a snarl.

She hooks her leg around his body and flips them so she’s on top of him. He aims at her head as they roll. She ducks, and a bullet zings past her ear and buries itself in the concrete wall behind her. She punches him and then reaches for his gun, but he bellows and rolls them over again.

The back of her head cracks against the floor and her vision swims. He raises his gun as he looms above her. She closes her hands around his and pushes the muzzle away from her face just before he squeezes the trigger and a bullet slams into the floor above her left shoulder. He strains to pull the gun back toward her. She grits her teeth and strains to push it away. Her shoulders are screaming, still sore from being bound for so long, and she’s not sure how much longer she can hold him back. He’s straddling her thighs, his knees spread wide, so there’s no way to flip him like before.

Their eyes meet. He sneers at her. And then a gunshot cracks through the air and he crumples sideways. Frankie scrambles upward, adrenaline pounding through her veins, and lunges forward to grab his gun. It isn’t until she’s got it pointed at his face that she realizes there’s a hole in the center of his forehead and he’s dead.

“Frankie,” Will’s voice calls.

She turns toward the door. Will is standing framed by the doorway, dressed head to toe in tactical
She takes a step forward. “Where’s Alex? He was—”

“He’s fine,” Will cuts her off. “My cousin has him. He’s fine.”

They stare at each other. His eyes are roving over her, looking for injuries, and there’s concern written clearly across his face. Her heart is pounding in her chest, still racing from the fight, and it takes her a second to realize that it’s really over—that Jimmy is dead, and Alex is safe, and Will is here.

The moment it hits her, she moves. She closes the distance between them and throws herself into his arms, and he catches her and holds her like he’s never going to let go. She buries her face in his neck and inhales. He smells like sweat and shampoo and whatever that scent is that she’s loved ever since she first smelled it on his sheets.

“You okay?” he whispers.

The words are out of her mouth before she can stop them.

“I am now.”

Will stops in the doorway of Frankie’s room at the ER to stare at her.

She’s sitting on an exam table, her legs hanging over the edge, a clipboard of signed paperwork sitting next to her. Her head is bent, and she’s very determinedly texting on her phone. Probably Jai or Susan. Maybe both. There are two little lines between her eyebrows that tell Will she’s concentrating on whatever she’s typing, and he wonders if Jai is fussing at her the way he does when he’s worried but won’t just come out and say it.

She looks up suddenly and catches him staring. She arches an eyebrow. “See something you like?” she teases.

“How are you still this pretty after being tied to a chair for eight hours?”

She shrugs. “Trade secret.”

He laughs, and her lips spread into a smile. He holds up the cup in his hand. “Coffee. Black. And caffeinated even though it’s way too late for you to be drinking it.” In his other hand, he holds up the blue bag he got from the vending machine. “And this garbage.”

“Hot fries,” she gasps, and lunges forward to snatch the bag out of his hand. She rips it open, shoves a handful of the orange snack into her mouth, and then closes her eyes and moans appreciatively. “God, that’s so good.”

Will is tempted to say something inappropriate about the last time she said those words, but decides against it. “You done with the paperwork?”

“Yeah. Nurse said I could go.” She holds her hand out for the coffee, and he passes the cup to her. “Just waiting for you.”

“How do you feel?”

“Fine. I’m only here because you nag me less when a doctor tells you I’m fine.”
Will scoffs. “I don’t nag.”

“Yes you do.”

“Well I’m sorry for caring about your well-being.”

“Apology accepted. But only because it came with hot fries.”

He snorts.

She smiles, watching him over the rim of her cup, and then she lowers it from her mouth. “So you gonna ask?”

He frowns. “Ask what?”

“If I want to go upstairs and meet your parents.”

Will’s heart skips a few beats. He stares at her. She stares back. He clears his throat and tries not to stammer. “I, uh...I didn’t think you’d want to after today.”

“You didn’t think I’d want to?” she repeats, lifting her eyebrows. “Or you were afraid I didn’t want to?”

“Both,” he confesses.

She chews her lip and studies him for a few seconds. “You still want me to?”

_More than anything_, he thinks. “Yes,” he says instead.

She slides off the exam table. “Then let’s go.” She presses her bag of hot fries against his chest as she passes by him. “Your pockets are bigger than mine. Hold these.”

He takes the bag from her, unable to resist a smile. Once she’s in the hallway, he holds it out toward the trash can.

“I will break your face if you throw those away,” she says without turning around.

He grins and shoves them in his jacket pocket, and then jogs to catch up with her. They walk side by side to the elevator, bumping shoulders and smiling. Once they get on the elevator and it starts to rise, her smile fades a little. By the time the elevator doors open, and he steps onto the floor where his father’s room is, her smile is gone.

He reaches out and weaves his fingers through hers. She glances up at him. He winks at her, and her smile briefly returns.

When he stops in the doorway of his father’s room, he can feel the nervous tension radiating off of her. He squeezes her hand. She tosses her coffee cup in the trash and steps a little closer to him, her chest brushing against his arm. He knocks gently on the half-closed door, and then swings it open and pops his head into the room.

“Hey dad.”

“Yeah, she’s good.” Will steps into the room and pulls Frankie after him gently. “Actually, she’s here.”

His father straightens in surprise, and then his lips break into a broad grin. He looks thrilled.

“Frankie, this is my dad,” Will says, unable to resist a smile of his own. “Dad, this is Frankie.”

Will glances down at his girlfriend. He’s not sure what to expect from her. She’s not shy, but she’s suspicious by nature so she doesn’t really enjoy meeting new people. The fact that the new person is his dad makes things even more complicated, and Will has a feeling she’s going to be cautious and reserved.

He’s surprised when she lets go of his hand to step forward and offer it to his dad.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Chase,” she says politely.

His dad shakes her hand. “The pleasure is all mine. And please, call me Rick.”

“Are you feeling better?” she asks.

“I’m getting there.” He smiles at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I hear you had quite the adventure this afternoon. Thank you for saving my grandson’s life.”

Frankie smiles. “Actually, that was Will.”

“Not the way Alex tells it.”

“Well that’s cause Alex has a crush on her,” Will pipes up. “Every time he looks at her, I can see cartoon hearts floating around his head.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you,” his father says wryly.

Frankie laughs in surprise and turns to look at Will.

Will shrugs at her. “Guilty.”

“Speaking of my son,” his father says, straightening a little in bed so he can lean closer to Frankie. “Is he good to you? Because if not, I can straighten him out for you.”

“Dad,” Will says, feeling his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“Does he hold doors open for you?” his father presses. He shoots Will a look. “A woman should never open her own doors.”

“I actually prefer to open my own doors,” Frankie says, sounding amused. “Which, I can assure you, your son finds very frustrating.”

“But he treats you well?”

“Very well,” Frankie confirms. She glances at Will. “You raised a good man.”

For a second, Will forgets that his dad is in the room. It’s the expression on Frankie’s face—the affection in her eyes, and the way she’s smiling at him—and he wishes he could pull her close and say Come on, just tell me you love me already.

Frankie nods at the book in his father’s lap. “You’re reading Carol Burnett’s memoir?”
“Yes,” he says, glancing down at it. “I prefer memoirs and autobiographies to fiction, despite the fact that my grandsons say it makes me boring.”

Will watches as Frankie tilts her head and gets that look on her face that means she’s trying to decide if she wants to share something about herself. She slides her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket—a habit that usually indicates she’s either nervous or bored—and then shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

“My dad was a trumpet player for the New York Philharmonic,” she says quietly. “He played for her once.”

Will’s dad looks up from the book, his eyebrows lifted. “For Carol Burnett?”

Frankie nods. “In a production of Follies she starred in at the Lincoln Center. My mom said it was one of the best performances she’d ever seen. They loved her TV show.”

Will stares at Frankie, stunned. She talks more about her parents now than she used to, but he’s never heard her mention them in front of anyone else.

“My wife and I love that show too,” his dad says. “You know, we own all the episodes on DVD. We’ll have to break them out next time you come visit.”

Frankie smiles. “I’d like that.”

“Well, Rick, they were out of lemon tea,” Will’s mom says, walking into the room before anybody can say anything else. One of her arms is in a sling, but she’s holding a steaming cup in her other hand. “So I got the peppermint because it’s never too early for Christmas flavors, despite what—”

She stops abruptly when she looks up and sees Frankie.

“Oh,” she breathes.

“Hey mom,” Will greets, trying not to grin. His mom’s been dying to meet Frankie, and he imagines her desperation has only increased since hearing that Frankie saved Alex’s life.

His mom glances at him, her eyes wide. “Is this…?”

“This is Frankie,” he says. “Frankie, this is my mom.”

Frankie smiles and steps forward. “Mrs. Chase,” she greets, holding out her hand.

“Will,” his mom says, her voice wavering. She holds out the cup of tea. “Take this, please.”

Will takes the cup of tea obediently. Then he watches as his mother hurries forward, ignores Frankie’s outstretched hand, and throws her non-injured arm around Frankie’s shoulders in a fierce hug.

“Oh,” Frankie says, clearly taken aback.

Will smirks at her when she meets his gaze over his mom’s shoulder. “Chases are huggers. Dad would’ve hugged you too if he wasn’t stuck in a bed.”

“Absolutely,” his dad agrees.

“It’s so lovely to meet you,” his mother says, still hugging Frankie. It sounds like she’s crying. She probably is. Chases are criers too.
Frankie lifts her arms and wraps them tentatively around Will’s mom. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

His mom squeezes Frankie tightly and then leans back. She beams, tears in her eyes, and presses her hand against Frankie’s cheek. “Oh look at her, Rick. She’s stunning. Can you imagine the babies they’ll have?”

“Mom,” Will croaks.

“Twins,” his mother says jubilantly. “They run in the family, you know.”

Frankie looks completely floored, and definitely panicked. Will steps forward, ready to rescue her, but his dad beats him to it.

“You’re going to scare her off, Lori,” he says gently. “Give the girl some room to breathe and quit talking about non-existent grandchildren.”

“Oh of course,” she laughs, sounding flustered. She steps away from Frankie. “I’m sorry, honey, I just…” She trails off, gazes at Frankie, and then lunges forward for another hug. “Thank you for what you did for Alex. You have no idea how grateful we all are.”

Frankie pats her on the back awkwardly. “It was mostly Will.”

“Yeah, where’s my hug?” Will jokes, hoping it’ll pry his mom off his girlfriend before she bolts for the door. “Aren’t you proud of me?”

His mom lets go of Frankie and turns toward him with a smile. “You know I’m always proud of you, bug.”

“Bug?” Frankie asks, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Just a nickname,” Will tries to say nonchalantly, but his mom is already turning back to Frankie with a glint in her eye.

“You haven’t heard about the bugs?”

Frankie looks intrigued. “No. What bugs?”

“Mom—” Will starts.

“Will loved bugs when he was little,” his mom cuts him off. “We thought he’d grow up to be an entomologist. He was always reading books about them, and drawing pictures of them, and telling anybody who would listen all the facts he knew.”

Frankie grins at Will. “Bugs, huh?”

He gives her a look. “Little boys like bugs. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“He also had a lisp,” his mom says with a smile that’s way too mischievous.

“Mom,” Will sighs.

“I’m sorry, did you just say lisp? ” Frankie says, her eyes widening.

“Yes,” his mother confirms, clearly thrilled to have a captive audience. “When he was little, his favorite thing to do was dig up worms in the backyard, hold them in his hands, and come running into the house yelling, Bugs, mommy, bugs! Except he had a lisp, so it sounded more like Bugth,
mommy, bugth! And then he would chase his sister around the house and shout, Thophie’s thcared of bugth!"

“It was even cuter considering how chubby he was,” Will’s father adds. “His rolls had rolls. He looked like a little bowl of jello sprinting through the house.”

“Oh my god,” Frankie snorts, her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“Oh!” his mother exclaims. “Sophie helped me put all our old photo albums on the cloud. Would you like to see pictures, Frankie?”

“No,” Will says in horror.

Frankie grins. “I would love to see pictures of chubby Will and his worms.”

“I think I have some home videos too,” Will’s mom says thoughtfully. “That way you can hear the lisp.”

Will groans.

A few days later, in the backseat of an Uber on the way back to her place from the airport, Frankie texts Will a picture of his younger self holding a worm. We should hang this in the Dead Drop, she types beneath the picture.

She chuckles to herself after she sends it. She’s been teasing him incessantly ever since that night at the hospital. She’s called him bug boy more than she’s called him by his actual name. At some point, she’s going to take pity on him and admit that she actually thinks it’s adorable. But for now, she’s going to keep mocking him.

Her phone buzzes with his response just as the car pulls up in front of her house. Will has sent her the picture that was hanging on Kelly’s wall, the one where she’s wearing an extremely pink dress. Beneath the photo are the words, Only if we hang this one next to it.

Frankie smiles. She slides her phone into her jacket pocket and gets out of the Uber. She waves to Mrs. Kaplan, and dodges a man walking three very large dogs on the sidewalk before climbing the stairs leading to her brownstone. She’s nearly at the top when she notices the bouquet of flowers leaning against her front door.

She smiles. Leave it to Will to have flowers waiting for her as soon as she gets back from Huntington.

She bends forward and grabs the bouquet before turning to the security system panel mounted beside her front door. She unlocks the system, unlocks her front door with her key, and then crosses the threshold and kicks the door shut behind her. She rearms the system, and then wanders back into her kitchen to put the flowers in water.

She’s surprised they’re roses. Every other time Will has given her flowers, they’ve been orchids. She searches for a note, and spots something tucked into the middle of the bouquet. She pulls it out. It’s a postcard. The front has a photo of a quaint looking cafe that must be in Paris, because the Eiffel Tower is in the background.

Frankie frowns. A postcard seems like an odd thing for him to send, and she’s not sure why he’d choose Paris. They’ve been to Paris several times for missions, but it’s not a particularly important place for them. Not like Prague or New York.
She turns the card over. On the back, in a slanted script that’s definitely not Will’s, is a short message.

*Happy anniversary, baby.*

*Love always,*

*N*

Frankie feels like she’s just been punched in the gut. Her vision swims. The bouquet of flowers tumbles from her hand in surprise, and the postcard flutters down toward the floor. She reaches out to grip the kitchen counter and steady herself, and the memory of something Jimmy said to Will suddenly flashes through her mind.

*My new British friend wanted me to keep you out of New York for a few days.*

She’d assumed Nick hired Jimmy as a distraction because The Trust had something planned in New York. With her away for an interrogation and Will in Indiana, the team would’ve been far less effective at stopping a sudden attack. When nothing happened, she’d been relieved.

She sees now how stupid that was. She knows why Nick wanted Will out of New York. And she knows what would have happened if she hadn’t decided on a whim to fly out to Huntington.

She closes her eyes. The memories play like a slideshow on the inside of her eyelids, and with them comes a faint, all-too-familiar wave of nausea. She stands frozen for a moment, trying to breathe around the sickness rising in her throat, and then she snaps her eyes open.

She heads straight for her security system. She pulls up the entry record and skims through the data with her heart in her throat. The system hasn’t registered a single entry into her house—forced or otherwise—since the last time she was home. But that doesn’t make her feel better.

The flowers and the postcard are still on the floor where she dropped them. She stares at the tangle of roses spread beneath the postcard. She could throw them away. But then she’d know they were sitting in her trash can, and it’s all she’d be able to think about.

She swipes them off the floor and carries them downstairs instead. Her hands are shaking. She makes a detour to the bar and pours herself a glass of whiskey to calm her nerves. It burns the whole way down, but she knows it’s not enough. She leaves the glass and grabs the bottle.

The flowers make a soft thudding sound when she tosses them into the grate of the fireplace. She’s got a fire lit within seconds, and then she sits on her couch and watches as the edges of the postcard curl in the heat and the image of the Paris café melts into nothing.

The postcard is ash when her phone buzzes in her pocket. She pulls it out. It’s Will.

She doesn’t answer the call. She takes another long swallow of whiskey instead, and watches as the roses burn.

Will never thought he’d be the kind of guy who would consider lying to his girlfriend.

Every inch of him recoils at the word. *Lie.* It’s a whisper that haunts him for an entire week after
they get back from Huntington. Every night, after Frankie falls asleep in his arms, he stares at the ceiling and traces his fingertips across her skin and agonizes over what to do.

It’s his family, he knows, that changed everything. When it was just Frankie and their team at risk, he was willing to follow her lead. She knew better than he did how to deal with her former partner. But as soon as Nick—inadvertently or not—spread his reach to Will’s family, things changed.

Nick needs to be stopped. The only way to stop him is to destroy that program. Their best chance at destroying it is Standish. But Frankie refuses to let him try.

Will understands why. He understands that even though Frankie very determinedly keeps Standish at arm’s length, she cares deeply about him. Losing him to Nick the way she lost RJ would destroy her. But the longer Nick gets to roam free—and the longer he keeps funding The Trust—the more likely it is that innocent people are going to die. Letting Standish try to destroy the program is dangerous. But it’s no more dangerous than letting Nick do whatever he wants.

The way Will sees it, he’s got three options. He could do nothing and follow Frankie’s lead. He could go behind her back, lie to her by omission, and have Standish secretly work on the program. Or he could ask her if she’s willing to change her mind.

It takes him eight days to work up the courage to ask her.

“Hey,” he says to her one night when they’re alone at the Dead Drop. “Something’s been bothering me.”

“Is it that shirt you’re wearing?” she asks from the other side of the pool table. “Because it’s been bothering me too.”

He looks down at his shirt. “This is a great shirt.”

“It’s a terrible shirt.”

“It brings out my eyes.”

“It makes you look like an old man.”

Will frowns. “Well your shirt makes you look old too.”

She smirks at him as she bends over to line up her shot. “No it doesn’t.” She sinks a ball into the side pocket, and then looks up at him. “What’s been bothering you?”

He hesitates for a second, but Frankie hates when people beat around the bush, and she especially hates when he does it. So he doesn’t.

“What would Nick want me out of New York?”

He can tell as soon as the words are out of his mouth that he’s shocked her. Her entire body goes rigid. The color drains from her face. She blinks at him for a second, and then she murmurs, “What?”

“Jimmy wasn’t there to get his thirty million,” he explains. “I think he saw you and decided on a whim to get some revenge and some cash, but that’s not why he was in Huntington. He said a British guy hired him to get me out of New York for a few days. And the only British enemy I’ve got with enough power and money to get Jimmy out of jail is Nick. But why would Nick want me out of New York?”
Frankie stares at him for a long time. And then she shakes her head and says, “I don’t know.”

She’s lying. He knows she’s lying, just like he knew Jai was lying when he said he didn’t know either. Will considers calling her out on it, but decides to go straight for the jugular instead.

He sets his pool stick down. “We need to talk about the program.”

Surprise flashes in her eyes, but it’s followed quickly by anger. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Standish can stop it. We need to let him try.”

“Standish will end up dead if he touches it,” she says bluntly. “And so will Susan, and Jai, and you if you don’t leave it alone.”

“But not you?”

She presses her lips together and doesn’t answer.

“He won’t kill you,” Will says into the silence. “Why?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Frankie—”

“I’m not going to talk about it,” she cuts him off. “So stop asking.”

They stare each other down from opposite sides of the pool table. Every cell in Will’s body is humming with the desire to fight with her. He wants Standish to work on the program. He wants to know why, after everything they’ve been through, she can’t just tell him the truth. But if he pushes her, she’ll walk away. And he doesn’t know if she’ll come back.

“Ohkay,” he says eventually.

It’s not okay. Nick is hanging over them like a cloud. Frankie refuses to take advantage of their best chance to stop him and The Trust. And doing nothing when so many lives are at stake feels like cowardice.

That’s why Will ends up in Director Casey’s office two days later.

“Does your partner know you’re here?” Casey asks, his fingers steepled as he surveys Will from behind his desk.

“No,” Will says honestly.

Casey leans forward. “Let me tell you something I learned the hard way, Chase. Francesca Trowbridge is not someone you fuck with. You may think you’ve softened her up a little, but you have no idea what she’s capable of.”

“I know her better than you think.”

Casey looks unconvinced.

“Look, I don’t want to be here,” Will says, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees. “This is the last place I want to be and this is the last thing I want to be doing. But Nick Walker needs to be stopped. And as long as he’s got that program, he’s untouchable.”
Casey leans back in his chair. “I’m surprised she told you. I didn’t think she would.”

That catches Will off guard. “You didn’t tell her to?”

“No. I told her it was up to her how much she shared.”

The fact that Frankie willingly told him so much about Nick and her past is almost enough to change Will’s mind and send him out the door. But something holds him in his seat. He wants to say it’s his conviction that this is the right thing to do mission-wise, and that Frankie just doesn’t see it because she’s too close to it. But if he’s really being honest with himself, it’s not just about the mission. It’s about their relationship. Nick has a stranglehold on her. And until he’s gone, she’s always going to be out of reach.

“You’re sure about this?” Casey asks.

Will nods. “If anyone can destroy that program, it’s Standish.”

“And you don’t share your partner’s concern about his safety?”

“As long as he’s not part of the official task force, he’ll be safe. No one will know he’s working on it. And I’ll make sure he’s aware of the risks.”

Casey studies him for a minute, his lips pursed. And then he says, “All right. I’ll have the NSA get you all their files.”

“Thank you, sir.”

It isn’t until Will is out on the sidewalk in the cool September air that he wonders if he just made the worst mistake of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Before y’all go scream at me in the comments section, please take a breath and consider how trauma and high intensity emotions can affect people’s decision making. Things like fear, helplessness, and anger can make us do things that we would not normally do. And when the people we love are in danger or pain (or could be), we are willing to do drastic and uncharacteristic things to stop (or prevent) it.

I really believe Will is a salt of the earth guy. I also believe that if his parents were hurt, his father nearly died, his nephew was kidnapped and traumatized, and his girlfriend was nearly murdered by his nemesis, he’d want to make sure that the person responsible was held accountable. (He did, after all, tell Frankie he would “burn the world to the ground” if someone took her from him. And from what we saw of Dark Will after Emma died, I believe it.) If the person who did all that also had the power to topple entire governments and kill millions of people (which, thanks to RJ’s program, Nick does), Will would be even *more* motivated to do whatever it took to stop him. Even if it means going against his partner’s wishes.

I think Frankie lying to him was the final straw. She’s told him a million times she doesn’t want/isn’t ready to talk about things, but she has never—at least not since they decided to be together—lied to him. I think he’s confused and hurt. I think he’s a fixer
—he likes to solve problems and take care of people. And I think he’s so completely head over heels in love with her that he’s a) afraid of why she would lie to him about Nick and b) desperate to fix anything that causes her pain. Nick has caused (and continues to cause) her a hell of a lot of pain, and Will has a solution to end that pain (Standish) right in front of him. Add that to everything I said in the paragraph above and, well...Will does what he does. Is it going to blow up in his face? Probably. But as far as he’s concerned, this is what he *has* to do to save the world, protect his family, and help the love of his life finally be free of her god awful past.

Anyway, it’s totally fine if you disagree. Just maybe, like, do it nicely?
As soon as October hits, Will starts thinking about he and Frankie’s anniversary.

It’s been six months. Well, six months for her. She doesn’t count those two months when they were just rule-following friends with benefits, but he does. It’s a joke between them now, their differing timelines, and even though he sometimes teases her about how long they’ve been together, he knows the official count will always be hers. Which is why when October hits, he starts thinking about their anniversary.

Half a year. He’s been with Frankie for half a year.

Best half year of his life.

He isn’t sure how she’ll react when he asks her whether they can celebrate. In a lot of ways, she’s completely different than the woman who smirked at him in a hotel room in Prague and said, *Don’t start something you can’t finish, Whiskey.* They spend every night together. She lets him keep things at her place, and kiss her in public, and introduce her as his girlfriend. When he asks her how she feels, she makes a sincere effort to tell him. Sometimes, when they fight, he can tell she’s trying not to lose her temper and say something that will hurt him. When she fails and hurts his feelings, she apologizes. When the tables turn and he hurts her, she forgives him far quicker than she used to.

She’s still Frankie, though. She’s snarky and sarcastic and she rolls her eyes more than anyone he’s ever met. She has no problem calling him out, telling him he’s wrong, and making fun of him. She’s impulsive and reckless. She does the exact opposite of what he suggests in the field just because she can. She has to be coaxed into doing or saying anything that’s sentimental. And she still hasn’t said *I love you.*

He broaches the subject of celebrating their anniversary one Saturday afternoon while they’re waiting for the rest of the team at the Dead Drop.

“Hey, you know what I was thinking?” he says as he watches her pour a finger of whiskey into a glass for him.

“Hm?” she says.

“We should try that Italian restaurant by your place for our anniversary.”

She jerks her head up to look at him and spills whiskey all over the bar.

“Shit,” she mutters. She sets the bottle down and reaches for a towel to mop up the mess. Will watches as she wipes up the bar and then tosses the soaked towel into a nearby bin. When she turns back to face him, her expression is taut. She grabs the glass she’d been pouring for him and swallows the whiskey herself. She presses the back of her hand to her lips afterward, apparently trying to compose herself, and then she lifts her gaze to his and says, “Our what?”
“Anniversary,” he replies. He smiles. “You know what those are, right?”

She gives him a look. He laughs. She sets her empty glass on the bar and says with a slight frown, “When is our…?”

“Anniversary,” he supplies.

She nods but doesn’t repeat the word.

“The twenty-first,” he answers.

Her eyebrows lift. “That’s…”

“In a little over a week,” he finishes.

She frowns again. “And we’ve been…”

“Together for six months,” he says, resisting the urge to make a joke about how it’s actually been eight. “Half a year.”

“Half a year,” she repeats, sounding a little dazed. “Wow.”

It’s a testament to how far she’s come—how far they’ve come—that she’s flustered but not panicked. He’s proud of her, but he knows better than to say it. Not with words, anyway. The words will make her self-conscious. So he rises off of his stool, leans across the bar, and curls his fingers into the lapel of her blazer. She looks up at him, and then glances toward the door.

“Will,” she warns, but there’s a smile curling her lips. He tugs her over the bar and kisses her. She hums in the back of her throat and kisses him back, smiling against his mouth the way she does when she wants to tease him but has decided she’d rather kiss him instead.

All those months ago in Prague, he wondered if kissing her would just keep getting better. It has. He likes the brief kisses he gives her to say hello, and he likes the purposeful ones he gives her when he’s planning to make love to her, but these are his favorite—the lazy, lingering ones when they’re kissing just because they want to, and because they can.

When the door to the bar swings open with a squeak, Frankie pulls back from his mouth and turns her back to him. Will sits on his stool and tries to look as casual as possible. When he glances toward the door, he sees Jai and Standish standing next to each other with their eyebrows raised.

Standish glances at Frankie, and then at Will, and then looks at Jai and says, “They were making out, weren’t they?”

“Like teenagers,” Jai confirms with a smirk.

Frankie lifts her middle finger without turning around. Jai’s smirk widens.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Standish says. “Actually, you should keep going. It might help.”

“Help?” Frankie says, finally turning back around. “Help with what?”

Standish slides onto the stool next to Will. “Well, as you know, the best time of year is upon us.”

“Sweater weather,” Jai sighs happily.

of the year.”

Jai crinkles his nose. “That’s the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever said.”


“Please,” Frankie scoffs. “It’s Thanksgiving.”

“What?” Will says. “No way. There’s no way Thanksgiving is better than Christmas.”

“Guys, please,” Standish says, holding his hands out. “Halloween is the best. People give you free candy. You aren’t obligated to go visit any relatives. You don’t have to buy anyone a gift. And it’s the one night a year when even the goodest of girls wear something slutty.”

“You’re disgusting,” Frankie tells him.

“Not appropriate,” Will says disapprovingly.

“Goodest is not a word,” Jai adds.

“Usually, my sole ambition is to snag a good girl and take her home to my spooky Halloween lair,” Standish says, ignoring them. “Preferably a girl dressed as a cat, cause cats are sexy as hell.”

Frankie crinkles her nose. “Still disgusting, and now also weird.”

“But this year, my priorities have changed,” Standish forges on. “Because this year, I am in a committed relationship.”

Will frowns. He glances at Frankie, who shrugs. He glances at Jai, who rolls his eyes. And then he says, “With who?”


Will frowns again. “The firefighter?”

“Fire lady,” Standish corrects.

Frankie shakes her head. “Nope. They’re still called firefighters even when they’re women.”

“They’ve only been on four dates,” Jai tells Will. “It’s not serious.”

“Excuse you,” Standish says, rounding on Jai. “We decided to be exclusive. I have given up my player card to commit myself to my smokin’ hot fire lady. Pun intended. And she and her firefighter buddies are hosting a Halloween party in two weeks to raise money for some dumb charity they support.”

“Your commitment to giving back to the community is really touching,” Will says dryly.

Frankie snorts.

"Jenna asked me to bring as many friends as possible to the party," Standish continues. “Which means all of you have to come. And you two,” Standish gestures at Will and Frankie, “need to wear a couple’s costume.”

“ Heck yes,” Will says.
“Hell no,” Frankie says at the exact same time.

They look at each other, but Ray bursts in the door before they can argue about it. “Hey party people.”

“Hey Ray,” Standish says, leaning forward on the bar. “Can you and Susan come to my girlfriend’s Halloween party and wear a couple’s costume?”

Ray grins. “Dude, I’ve been planning our couple’s costume for ages. I think we’re going to be Popeye and Olive Oyl.”

“That’s adorable,” Will says.

“Is it?” Frankie asks, crinkling her nose.

“I’m going to go before I get volunteered to dress up as a can of spinach,” Jai mutters, striding quickly toward the back room.

“You can run but you can’t hide,” Standish calls out, scrambling off of his stool to chase Jai into the back room.

“Hey guys?” Ray says to Will and Frankie. “Can I talk to you in the other room for a minute?”

“Is it about Halloween costumes?” Frankie asks.

Ray frowns. “No.”

“Then yes,” Frankie says, walking out from behind the bar.

Will follows her into the other room. “Couple’s costumes can be fun, you know.”

“Name one couple’s costume that wouldn’t make me gag,” she says, glancing at him over her shoulder.

“Salt and pepper,” he says immediately.

She rolls her eyes as she leans against the pool table. “Boring.”

“Peanut butter and jelly.”

“Also boring.”

“Captain America and Peggy Carter.”

Frankie mimes throwing up.

“What about a plug and socket?” Ray suggests with a stupid grin. “You know, the guy is the plug because—”

“We get it, Ray,” Will says, leaning against the pool table next to Frankie.

Ray chuckles to himself until he notices Frankie staring at him, and then the smile drops off his face. “Okay. Moving on.” He pulls the door closed and then turns to face them with an uncommonly serious look on his face.

Will raises his eyebrows. “Is this a high-clearance mission?”
“Oh, this isn’t about the mission,” Ray says.

Frankie folds her arms over her chest. “If this is about how you want the team to get matching tattoos, the answer is still no.”

“No,” Ray says, waving his hand. “Susan talked me out of that.”

“Then what’s the deal, Ray?” Will asks.

Ray looks suddenly nervous. He tugs on his tie. “Well,” he says. He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and then says in a rush, “I’d like your blessing to ask Susan to move in with me.”

For a minute, the room is dead silent except for the heating vent rattling above their heads. Ray smiles—well, it’s really more like a grimace—and waits them out. Will glances at Frankie, but she’s staring at Ray with a look on her face that Will can’t parse. He looks back at Ray.

“I’m in love with her,” Ray says quietly when neither of them respond. “I know she’s out of my league. Like, way out of my league. But she’s the best thing that ever happened to me. We’ve been together for eight months. She’s met my family. I’ve met hers. We practically live together already. And I want to take the next step. I want to ask her to move in with me.” He frowns. “Or if I can move in with her, cause her place is way better than mine.”

Once again, nobody says anything. Ray rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet, looking between Will and Frankie like a kid who’s just asked his parents if he can get a dog. Frankie’s the one who finally breaks the silence.

“I’m confused about why you’re telling us this.”

“Because I need your blessing.”

“Yeah, you said that already. It doesn’t make any more sense the second time.”

Ray sighs. “Look, you guys are her best friends. She cares about what you think, and you know her really well. And I’m sure she’s already talked to you about it. So I just—”

“She hasn’t talked to us about it,” Will interrupts.

“Speak for yourself,” Frankie snorts.

Will twists to face her. “What?”

“I said speak for yourself.”

Will blinks at her for a second, stunned. “Susan talked to you about moving in with Ray?”

“Yeah,” she says with a shrug.

“When?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters,” he says, pushing off the pool table to stand. “I’m her best friend. Why wouldn’t she talk to me?”

Frankie and Ray share a look, and Will is so aghast that they seem to be on the same page about something that all he can do is let out an incredulous, “What the hell, Frankie.”
“This isn’t a big deal, Will,” she tells him calmly. “It doesn’t mean you’re not her bestie, okay? She just wanted an honest opinion and she knew I’d give it to her.”

“I’m an eagle scout!” Will insists.

“You’re also a hopeless romantic,” Frankie points out. “I’m not. I’m a realist. And if I thought she was making a mistake, I would’ve told her that. You might not have.”

“Wait, did you tell her it was a mistake?” Ray asks, his voice an octave higher than usual.

Frankie glances at Ray. “I told her if she wants to move in with you, she should.”

“You did?” Ray asks, sounding thrilled.

“You did?” Will asks, sounding as shocked as he feels.

“Yes, I did,” Frankie says, meeting Will’s gaze with another look he can’t quite decipher. She glances at Ray. “I also told her that if you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

Ray waves her off with a grin. “You’ve been saying that since day one.”

“I mean it, Ray,” she says, her voice dropping into that deadly calm tone she uses when she interrogates someone. “If you hurt her, I will make you bleed. Profusely.”

The smile freezes on Ray’s face momentarily, and then he shakes his head. “I’m not going to hurt her, Frankie. I’m going to marry her.”

Will catches a glimpse of Frankie’s jaw going slack in surprise before he turns toward Ray and says, “You’re going to what?”

“I’m going to marry her,” Ray repeats with a level of certainty that leaves Will stunned. “I already got my grandma’s ring resized. I already know how I’m going to propose. And if living with me doesn’t make her realize how far out of my league she is, then I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

“You can’t do that,” Frankie says incredulously. “You guys have only been together for eight months.”

Ray shrugs. “So what? When you know, you know. And when you know, there’s no reason to wait.”

Will glances at Frankie. She meets his gaze, and he sees it clear as day in her eyes—panic.

The door opens before Will can say anything, and Susan walks in.


“What?” Frankie says, sounding dazed.

“Haha ghosts,” Ray says, shooting Will and Frankie a look of warning. “That’s funny cause we were just talking about couple’s costumes for Halloween.”

“Couple’s costumes?” Susan repeats. And then her eyes widen and she looks at Will. “Oh my god, you guys finally told him you’re together?” She slaps her hand over her chest and tips her head back toward the ceiling. “Thank you, Jesus. That secret was getting exhausting.”
“Wait, what?” Ray says, clearly confused.

“Oh god.” Frankie groans and buries her head in her hands.

Will shakes his head. “We didn’t tell him, Sus. But you just did.”

“Oh,” Susan says. There’s a beat of silence. And then it seems to sink in that she just outed them, and she breathes, “Ohhhhh nooooo.”

“Wait a minute,” Ray says. His eyebrows are furrowed as if he’s trying to solve an extremely difficult math equation. He gestures between Frankie and Will. “You guys are...you guys are together?”

Will glances at Frankie, but she’s pinching the bridge of her nose with her eyes closed. “Yeah,” he says, because there’s really no point in denying it.

“Like, together together?” Ray asks. “Like, me and Susan together?”

“Yeah.”

“Since when?”

“It’ll be six months on the twenty-first.”

“Aw, six month anniversary,” Susan coos. “So cute.”

Frankie shoots her a look.

“Or not,” Susan says. “Not cute. Not even a little cute.”


She reaches out to put a hand on his arm. “I did. I’m sorry, babe. I wanted to tell you. But it wasn’t my secret to tell. Are you mad?”

“Mad?” Ray echoes. “Are you kidding? This is great. We can double date! Do you guys want to do a couple’s costume for Standish’s party with us? We could be a foursome! Like Fred and Wilma Flinstone and Barney and Betty Rubble!”

Frankie groans and buries her head in her hands again.

“I think we’ll pass,” Will says, reaching out to pat Frankie comfortingly on the back.

“Babe,” Susan says, squeezing Ray’s arm. “You can’t tell anybody about this.”

Ray’s eyes widen. “Standish and Jai don’t know?”

“No, they know,” she says. “I mean anyone outside the team. Frankie and Will want to keep this private, and we need to respect that.”

“I can do that,” Ray says, nodding fervently. He looks at Frankie. “I won’t tell anyone, Frankie. I swear. Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

“Oh good,” Frankie says, her voice muffled by her hands. “He makes promises like a five year old. I feel so much better now.”
That’s when Standish and Jai walk in. Jai frowns as soon as he sees Frankie. “What’s wrong?”

“Ray found out she and Will are together,” Susan explains.

“Oh,” Jai says, shooting his friend a sympathetic look.

“At least you didn’t catch them going at it on the pool table,” Standish mutters.

“What?” Ray says, rounding on Standish.

Jai holds his hand out. “Ten bucks, Susan.”

“No, no, hold on,” Susan says. “What do you mean going at it, Standish? Like, were they still fully clothed, or—”

“Can we not do this?” Frankie snaps, finally lifting her head out of her hands. “Yes, Will and I are together. No, nothing has changed. We’re still in charge of this team and we have a job to do and I expect all of you to be professional.”

“Yeah, y’all were real professional playing tonsil hockey when Jai and I walked in five minutes ago,” Standish snorts.

Frankie pushes off the table and starts in Standish’s direction with a murderously look on her face. Standish yelps and leaps behind Jai, and Will darts his hand out and grabs Frankie’s shoulder. “Nope,” he says, yanking her backward.

“Just one punch,” Frankie whines.

“Not happening,” Will says. He brushes his hand across her shoulder blades the way he did this morning when they decided to doze through their alarms, and he feels her body relax slightly beneath his touch. “Ray, now would be a good time to give us our mission.”

“Right,” Ray says. “Good call. But uh...can I maybe go to the bathroom first? I had a lot of coffee this morning.”

Will gives him a look.

“You know what? I can hold it,” Ray says with a wave. He turns toward everyone else and claps his hands together. “So. Mission. Who wants to guess where we’re going? I’ll give you three clues.”

Everyone just stares at him.

Ray sighs. “Fine. We’ll do this the boring way. What do you guys know about the Zaqar Network?”

“Nothing,” Will answers. “It’s just a myth.”

Frankie shakes her head. “No it’s not.” Everyone in the room turns to look at her. She looks at Will. “I’ve used it.”

He frowns. “As a client or an employee?”

“Both.”

Will gazes at her in surprise. It’s been a while since he was confronted with something about
Frankie’s past that surprised him. She gazes back at him steadily.

“Ummm,” Standish says, interrupting the moment. “What am I missing? Is this another one of your assassin things?”

Frankie sighs and looks across the room at him. “The Zaqar Network is like a concierge for criminals. Bad guys can’t just search Google when they need a mercenary team or safe transport for stolen goods. The network supplies services for people who need jobs done outside the law and with discretion.”

“Isn’t that what the dark web is for?” Standish asks with a frown.

“Yeah, if you want to get hacked by guys like you,” Frankie says. “There’s a reason the Zaqar Network hasn’t been infiltrated by intelligence agencies, and there’s a reason guys like Will think it’s a myth. There are no paper trails. There’s no digital footprint. If you want to use the network’s services, you have to know who to ask.”

“And if you ask the right person?” Susan asks.

“Then the network reaches out to you with terms of service and a fee.”

“How much is the fee?” Standish wonders.

Frankie shrugs. “Depends on the job.”

“Well you said you worked for them,” Standish says. “What was your fee?”

“They got twenty-five percent of my profit.”

“So…?” Standish prompts.

Frankie’s gaze flickers briefly in Will’s direction, and then she says, “So they got two million.”

Standish’s eyes bug out of his head. “What the shit did someone pay you eight million dollars for?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Frankie says stiffly.

“Like hell it doesn’t,” Standish yelps. “What’d you do, kill a crown prince or something?”

“Drop it, Standish,” Will says with a little more force than he means to.

Frankie glances at him in surprise. So does Standish. “Dude,” Standish says. “You’re telling me you’re not the least bit curious why your girlfriend—”

“She’s a federal agent, Standish,” Will cuts him off. “You don’t need to refer to her as my girlfriend. And unless the job she pulled is pertinent to the mission, it doesn’t matter. So drop it.”

Frankie looks pleased by his insistence. Standish does not. He folds his arms over his chest and pouts. “He always takes her side now,” he mutters to Jai.

There’s a chance Will is seeing things, but he’s pretty sure Jai winks at Frankie when he replies, “I know. So annoying.”

Frankie looks at Ray. “Why are you asking about the network?”

Ray slides his hands into his pockets. “Three days ago in Vienna, a man and a woman delivered
classified intel to a terrorism financier from Germany. They didn’t know it, but they were observed by a CIA operative who was deep undercover. The operative notified his handler, and the agency apprehended the pair at the border and sent them to a black site for interrogation. Their names are Cristian and Charlotte Morelli. Cristian told his interrogators that Charlotte is his wife, and that—”

“Wait, they’re married?” Standish interrupts. “This is another Mr. and Mrs. Smith deal? Like Havana?”

“Yes,” Ray confirms.

“Bet they’d wear a couple’s costume to their friend’s Halloween party,” Standish says pointedly to Frankie.

“Do you want her to kill you?” Susan asks him. “Because sometimes I wonder.”

“What did he tell the interrogators, Ray?” Will asks, trying to get everyone back on track.

“That he and his wife work for the Zaqar Network,” Ray continues. “And that he would tell the agency everything he knew about the network in exchange for full immunity and witness relocation for Charlotte.”

“Romantic,” Will says.

“Stupid,” Frankie counters, shaking her head.

Will frowns at her.

“They’d be better off keeping their mouths shut,” Frankie explains when she notices his look. “The network executes snitches. They’ll kill them both the second they get the chance. Immunity can protect her from prosecution but not from the network’s assassins.”

“That’s why he bargained for witness relocation,” Susan points out. “She’ll be protected from both.”

Jai shakes his head. “The network has connections everywhere. Chances are they’ll find her.” He looks at Frankie. “Cristian had to have known that. Rolling over doesn’t make sense. Network operatives are trained to withstand torture. Even if he loved her—”

“She’s pregnant,” Ray interrupts.

A hush falls over the room.

Will finds his eyes drawn toward Frankie. She meets his gaze, but only briefly. Will can’t take his eyes off her. All he can think about is what he’d do if he and Frankie were married, and she was pregnant with their child, and he had to choose. He already knows. He’d choose Frankie and their kid.

“So he took a calculated risk,” Frankie says. “His wife raising the kid in hiding or on the run is a better deal than mom and dad locked up at a black site while the kid gets raised in foster care.”

“Yeah,” Ray confirms.

“So what’s this got to do with us?” Jai asks Ray.

“The Morellis were hired by The Trust through the network to deliver a chemical weapon they recently purchased,” Ray says. He looks at Frankie and Will. “Director Casey wants you two to
pose as the Morellis so we can intercept the chemical, and then complete the delivery so we can apprehend whoever The Trust sends.”

“Wait a second,” Will says. “If Frankie’s worked for the network, then she—”

“It won’t be a problem,” Frankie cuts him off. “My contact at the network is dead. They won’t know me.”

“Did you kill him?” Standish asks.

“Yeah,” Frankie says bluntly. “Want me to show you how?”

Susan snorts.

“Do we know what the weapon is?” Jai asks.

Ray shakes his head. “All we know is that it’s extremely dangerous. The Morellis aren’t supposed to get their hands on it until Friday night during a fundraising gala at the Casino de Monte-Carlo, so we won’t know for sure what it is until then. The delivery to The Trust is scheduled for the next day.”

Will frowns. “Friday night is a whole week away. Why bring this to us now?”

“Because the Morellis are due in Monte Carlo tomorrow afternoon,” Ray replies. “They’re supposed to be spending the week there on vacation. While there, they’re scheduled to make two additional exchanges on behalf of the network. If they don’t make those exchanges, the network will know they’ve been compromised and they’ll cancel the deal with The Trust.”

“So Frankie and I have to pose as the Morellis for the entire week and complete the first two exchanges so we can get the weapon on Friday and deliver it to The Trust on Saturday,” Will summarizes.

“Yes,” Ray says. “You’ll be staying in the Princess Grace suite at the Hotel de Paris. The rest of the team—”


“No,” Ray says with a frown. “Why?”

Susan glances at Frankie. “They did a segment on that suite on CNN. It costs over $30,000 a night.”

Frankie smirks. “I guess the Zaqar Network paid the Morellis well.”

“Hold up,” Standish says. “Let me get this straight. You mean to tell me that Frankie and Will are going on a vacation mission? They get to stay in a suite that costs $30,000 a night for a whole week?”

“We have to make two exchanges for the network,” Frankie points out. “And we have to pretend to be the Morellis the entire time.”

“Oh no, pretending to be spies who are madly in love,” Standish gasps sarcastically. “That’ll be so hard for you guys.”

Frankie narrows her eyes at him.
“I just bought this suit, Francesca,” Jai says mildly. “Please don’t splash Standish blood all over it.”

“The whole team is going, right, Ray?” Will says.

“Right,” Ray confirms. “Although, you guys are the only ones staying in a fancy suite. Everyone else will be in a normal room.”

“But still in Monte Carlo,” Will says to Standish. “So you’re going on a vacation mission too, kiddo.”

Standish looks mollified. “I suppose that’s acceptable.”

Will can practically hear Frankie rolling her eyes.

“I’ll have all the details on the exchanges for you guys tomorrow morning at the airport,” Ray says to Frankie and Will. “Your chartered flight leaves at nine. You’ll be flying separately from the rest of the team.”

“Cause us poor folk gotta ride in coach,” Standish quips.

Susan smacks him on the arm.

“Any questions?” Ray asks.

Standish raises his hand. “Can I get a gambling allowance as part of my cover? And also maybe a James Bond car since I don’t get a fancy suite?”

Susan smacks him again.

Around dinnertime, Will looks up from the file on Cristian Morelli he’s been studying for the past two hours and says, “I need a break. My brain is melting out of my ears.”

“Gross,” Frankie says dryly. She’s sprawled across the couch in the upstairs office, her nose buried in a file on Charlotte. “Did you know Charlotte Morelli can crack a safe faster than I can?”

Will smirks at her from behind his desk. “You jealous?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

Will gets out of his chair and stretches, and then makes his way across the office to stand next to the couch. “Bet you’re a better shot than she is.”

“Maybe,” Frankie says without lowering the file.

Will bends over the couch and pulls the file out of the way so he can see her face. “You can’t be the best at everything, you know.”

“Yes I can,” she says matter-of-factly.

He smiles. “You ready to go? My place is closer to the airport than yours.”

“I still have to pack.”

“Come over after you’re done then.”

She arches an eyebrow at him. “You going to make me dinner?”
“Don’t I always?”

She looks offended. “I make dinner sometimes.”

He shakes his head. “Ordering takeout doesn’t count as making dinner.”

“Says you.”

“And literally everyone else.” He ducks his head to kiss her briefly. “Text me when you leave your place and I’ll start dinner.”

“Okay.”

He lingers for a second, his eyes flickering over her face. For the millionth time in the past month, guilt flares in his chest. It’s a feeling that he’s not accustomed to. He doesn’t keep secrets. Not from people he loves. He wants to tell her about his deal with Casey. But he can’t. Not unless Standish figures out how to destroy the program. Otherwise, he went behind her back for nothing.

He leans down and kisses her again, this time a little longer than before, and then he straightens. “Don’t be long. We have to catch up on This Is Us.”

She rolls her eyes. “I hate that show.”

“No you don’t.”

He runs his fingers lightly through her hair and then grabs his coat and walks downstairs. He’s halfway out the front door when Standish calls out to him from the other room.

“What’s up?” Will says, peeking his head around the corner.

Standish is sitting in the booth in the corner, staring at his computer in awe. “I did it.”

Will frowns. “Did what?”

Standish looks up at him. “I figured out how to destroy the program.”

Will’s heart leaps in his chest. “You did?” he says, hurrying into the room. “When? How?”

“Well,” Standish says, tilting his head. “I think I did.”

“What does that mean? Did you figure out how to stop it or not?”

Standish snorts. “Imma be real with you, nobody’s ever going to create a firewall that can stop this thing. Whoever designed this was...wow.”

“A genius,” Will says, remembering how Frankie described RJ.


“Are you going to actually explain this to me, or are you just going to keep gloating?”

“All right, impatient,” Standish accuses.

Will shrugs it off because it’s true.

“First, some context,” Standish says, holding up his index finger. “The problem with task forces is groupthink. In the beginning, somebody decides on a way to do things, and then everyone does
“Still gloating,” Will points out.

Standish smirks. “The NSA has been trying to play defense. They’ve spent all their time trying to build a firewall that the program can’t breach. But that’s never going to work because this program is always going to smash through shit. It’s like trying to defend LeBron in his prime. You can’t stop him from scoring. But if you score more points than he does, you win the game.”

Will shakes his head. “I’m lost.”

Standish sighs. “Do you read comic books?”

“Only the ones my nephew gives me. I like Captain America.”

“Of course you do,” Standish says, rolling his eyes. “That’s Marvel. What about DC Comics?”

Will shrugs. “I like Wonder Woman.”

Standish rolls his eyes again. “Of course you do.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“There’s this villain in DC Comics called Amazo,” Standish explains. “He’s an android. He runs on absorption cell technology, which means he can absorb all the powers and abilities of anyone he gets close to. It doesn’t matter whether they’re an alien like Superman, a metahuman like The Flash, or a human like Batman. If he gets close enough, he absorbs all their skills.”

“Kinda sounds like what the program does,” Will says with a frown.

Standish grins. “It’s exactly what the program does. If it comes across something more advanced or something new, it updates itself.”

“Because it’s self-smart,” Will says, remembering Frankie’s explanation.

“Right. But the thing about Amazo is that when he absorbs other people’s stuff, he absorbs all of it. Not just the powers. But the weaknesses too.”

“So…?”

“So if I can design something that the program hasn’t seen before, it’s going to update itself to match. And if what I design has a flaw, then the program is going to have that flaw too.”

“And then you could use the flaw to corrupt the whole program,” Will realizes.

“Bingo.”

Will grins. “You’re a genius.”

“I know, right?” Standish says gleefully.

“How long will it take to design something like that?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Standish says, wincing a little. “I don’t even know if I can. I need to dig a little deeper into some of the NSA files and the program specs and see if it’s possible.”
Will glances over his shoulder, but Frankie is still upstairs in the office. “This is your priority from now on.”

Standish frowns. “What about Monte Carlo?”

“That too,” Will says, waving his hand. “But any spare second you’ve got goes toward this, okay? This is…” He trails off, searching for the word. Suddenly, all he can think about is Frankie standing across from him in her kitchen when she told him about RJ and Mina and Nick—the rage in her voice, and the tears in her eyes, and the helplessness that felt like a vise around his throat.

“This is important,” he finishes quietly. “I’m counting on you. And so are a lot of other people.”

Standish nods. “I won’t let you down.”

Before she leaves to go back to her place and pack, Frankie wanders into the back room to talk to Jai.

“Hey,” she says as she stops across the table from him.

Jai, who is bent over a microscope, grunts at her. Frankie waits, because she knows better than to interrupt him when he’s working.

It takes a minute or two, but then he looks up. “What?”

“Can you make me a pair of high heels with knives that come out of the heel?”

Jai blinks. “Is that a serious question?”

Frankie tilts her head. “Yes?” she says, lifting her voice at the end. She doesn’t understand why he sounds offended.

“Can I?” he repeats incredulously.

“Oh. Sorry. Will you?”

“Yes,” he says with a slight huff. He bends over the microscope again. “Can I,” he mutters under his breath. “As if I couldn’t.”

Frankie smiles.

“I assume you’ll want them for Monte Carlo,” Jai says without looking up from the microscope.

“It’d be nice to have them for the gala on Friday night. But honestly, I just want to be able to stab people with high heels so whenever is fine.”

Jai lifts his gaze to look at her.

“Charlotte Morelli killed three people that way,” she explains. “If she gets to do it, I want to do it.”

“Okay,” Jai says with a smirk. “As long as you don’t use them on Standish.”

“Can I use them on Ray?”

Jai frowns. “Why would you need to use them on Ray?”

Frankie glances toward the door, but nobody’s there. She thinks the only person who’s still in the
building is Standish, and he’s probably glued to his laptop.

“Ray’s going to ask Susan to move in with him,” she answers. “And if it works out, he’s going to propose.”

Jai tilts his head the way he does when he’s digesting new information, and then nods the way he does when he approves of said information. “Good for them.”

“Yeah.”

“You disapprove?”

Frankie shrugs. “I don’t care what they do. Seems a little fast, but it’s none of my business.”

Jai smirks. “You think it's fast because they’ve been together as long as you and Will have. And if Ray asks Susan, Will might ask you.”

“They’ve been together longer than we have,” Frankie insists.

Jai doesn’t argue, but he does smirk a little.

Frankie looks down at the table and reaches out to wind a random cord around her fingers. A long moment of silence passes. She can feel Jai watching her. Eventually, she sighs and tells him what she came back here to tell him.

“He told me in Indiana that he wants to spend the rest of his life with me. He wants to get married and have kids and wear matching cardigans when we get old. I don’t even like cardigans.”

“You’d wear a cardigan for him.”

“No I wouldn’t.”

It’s a lie. They both know it. Jai slides his hands into his pockets. Frankie glances up at him. His eyes are flickering over her face, reading her expression. It’s not quite the same look he had in Zurich, but it’s close.

“You haven’t told him yet, have you?”

It’s vague, but Frankie doesn’t have to ask what he means. “No.”

“Because you think he wants all that more than he wants you.”

It’s not a question. Jai does that sometimes. He knows her so well that he doesn’t ask how she feels. He just tells her how she feels, and he’s always right.

She drops the cord. “I think he deserves all the things he wants. I think he’ll try to sacrifice them because he’s noble. But eventually…”

“He’ll leave you for someone who can give it to him,” Jai finishes when she doesn’t.

Frankie purses her lips and doesn’t reply.

“He loves you, Francesca.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not always enough.”
“You’re not going to know unless you tell him. Lying to him isn’t going to change anything. You’re only pushing back the inevitable.”

“I’m not lying to him.”

“You’re not telling him the truth either. A lie by omission is still a lie.”

She closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. “Things were so much easier when I didn’t care.”

“But were they better?”

He’s asked her that before. In the hospital after Prague, when they were waiting to see if Standish would live or die. A lot’s changed since then. But some things haven’t, and the truth about her past is one of them.

“No,” she admits.

Jai lets her answer hang in the air for a minute before he says, “Are you in love with him?”

Frankie swallows around the sudden tightness of her throat and nods.

“Then you have to tell him,” Jai says gently.

She exhales slowly. “I know.”
Pretending to be Will’s wife in Monte Carlo doesn’t feel like a mission.

It feels real.

It starts their second morning there. Frankie wakes in an absurdly large bed in the Princess Grace suite at the Hotel de Paris feeling warm and well-rested. The bed is empty, which isn’t surprising, considering Will’s annoying tendency to rise with the sun. The sliding door near the bed has been pushed open, and when she rolls over she can see the cloudless blue sky and the vast expanse of the ocean in the distance, dotted by white yachts and sailboats.

The clock on the bedside table says 9:37. She stretches and climbs out of bed. Will’s Mets t-shirt is lying on the floor exactly where she dropped it. She puts it on and then rummages through his side of the closet for the sweatpants he always packs for her. She finds them and pulls them on too, then wanders out into the suite.

She walks through the living room, past the dining table, and out onto the terrace. Will is sitting at the outdoor table with a massive breakfast and a newspaper spread in front of him. She stops behind him and bends forward to wrap her arms around his shoulders. “Hi,” she murmurs in his ear.

“Morning.” He lifts his hand to stroke over her forearm. “I ordered you that pain au chocolat you raved about yesterday.”

“I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

He smiles. “And bacon.”

She reaches past him and pulls a slice of bacon off his plate instead of the full plate sitting nearby that’s probably for her. “And coffee?”

“Got you your own carafe. You don’t even have to share.”

_I love you_, she nearly says. The words are right on the tip of her tongue, ready to tumble out, and it startles her how easily she could have said them. She pulls back from him, stunned, and he twists to look up at her.
“That was mostly for me,” he says with a smirk. “You don’t share coffee very well.”

“Snooze you lose,” she says, trying to find her equilibrium again. She chews her bacon and sits at the head of the table.

Will folds the newspaper closed and leans toward her. “No work today.”

“Nope,” she agrees. “Just playing house until our dinner reservations.”

“What do you think the Morellis would do?”

“Golf?” she suggests as she pours some coffee. “Gamble? Spend a ridiculous amount of money at Gucci?”

“What would we do?”

She looks up at him. “What?”

“If it was us,” he says with a soft smile. “If this was our vacation. What would you want to do?”

The morning sun makes his eyes look lighter, and he’s got stubble growing on his jawline. She forgets, sometimes, just how handsome he is. Or maybe she just tries not to dwell on it, because it makes her feel oddly sentimental that, after all the brawny tattooed criminals she’s taken to bed, she fell in love with a handsome marine with a heart of gold.

“I don’t know,” she says.

He doesn’t say anything. He seems to be giving her a chance to think about it. She studies him over the rim of her coffee mug and finds herself doing just that. What if this was their vacation? What if the ring on her finger was his, and she really was his wife, and they had a whole day to do whatever they wanted?

“Get back in bed,” she murmurs before she can think better of it.

He smiles. “Done.”

At some point that afternoon, when he’s curled around her and dozing and she’s staring out at the ocean and listening to him breathe, she realizes it doesn’t just feel real.

It feels right.

That feeling doesn’t go away. They have dinner reservations at restaurants with white tablecloths and candles and soft music. They go dancing. They go sailing. They gamble, and they walk the beach, and they hold hands and wander in and out of shops. All of it feels real, and all of it feels right, and every time she looks at him the battle between I love you and There’s something I have to tell you wages on her tongue until she swallows them both and decides to say nothing.

By the time Friday rolls around, the prospect of going back to reality—back to chasing The Trust and saving the world—leaves her feeling strangely apprehensive. The two exchanges they completed for the network during the week were simple and seamless, but she has a feeling the next twenty-four hours won’t be. Tonight, they have to pick up a dangerous chemical weapon. Tomorrow, they have to deliver it to The Trust. The stakes are high, and she should be focused. But all she can think about is Will.

When she walks out into the living room of their suite before the gala—dressed in a midnight blue
sleeveless gown with a high neckline, a high slit, and an open back that Susan swears will leave Will speechless—she’s determined to stay focused.

“In position,” Jai says through the comm in her ear. “Containment vessel ready if needed.”

Will is standing by one of the glass walls, his back to her as he stares out at Monaco Harbor. The brilliant oranges and pinks of the setting sun frame his body, giving him an almost ethereal glow, and Frankie lets herself admire the way his tux is cut even though she promised herself she’d stay focused.

“Standish?” Will asks.

“I’ve got surveillance up and running,” Standish replies.

“Did you run facial recognition?”

“Yep. Nobody in attendance that can blow your cover. Not yet anyway.”

“Keep an eye on it,” Will says.

“Jai,” Frankie prompts.

“I’ll keep an eye out too,” Jai promises.

Standish huffs. “What, like I’m incompetent?”

“You don’t know all the people we know,” Frankie explains.

Will turns at the sound of her voice. He freezes the moment he sees her, his mouth falling open a little as his eyes travel over her body.

“And by people you mean terrifying assassins,” Standish says.

“Wow,” Will murmurs.

“Wow?” Standish says. “Come on, bro, we all know she’s the president of the terrifying assassin club.”

“He was talking to me, Standish,” Frankie says.

“You saw her in the dress, didn’t you?” Susan asks, and Frankie can hear the smile in her voice. “I told you, Frankie.”

“You were right,” Frankie confirms, smiling as Will crosses the room toward her. He stops in front of her, and she reaches up to adjust his bowtie. He always ties it crooked. Sometimes she wonders if he does it just so she’ll fix it.

He brushes the backs of his fingers over her cheek. “You look beautiful.”

The reverence in his voice sends a shiver drilling down her spine. She smiles at him but doesn’t say anything because all of a sudden the only words she seems to know are I love you. He bends down to kiss her.

“For the record, I also look beautiful tonight,” Standish announces over comms. “This suit makes me look like Idris Elba would if Hollywood would get its shit together and make him James Bond.”
“Are y’all making out right now?” Standish sighs. “Come on, guys, we’ve got weapons of mass destruction to pick up. Keep your tongues to yourself.”

Will pulls back and smiles at her. Frankie wipes the lipstick off his bottom lip with her thumb and says, “I’ll do whatever I want with my tongue, Standish.”

Standish makes a gagging noise.

Will offers Frankie his arm with a smirk. “We’re heading out now. Susan, run us through the profile again.”

“You’ll be receiving the weapon from Dr. Khalil Mahmoud,” Susan says as Frankie and Will head for the door. “He’s a biochemist and Egyptian national who earned all his degrees at Cambridge. He’s wanted in six different countries for doing exactly what he’s about to do with you guys—making and selling chemical weapons.”

“Do we know what he specializes in?” Frankie asks.

“My notes say he’s previously sold G-series nerve agents.”

“Oh good,” Jai says dryly. “The most dangerous ones.”

“Will, he’ll be looking for you because you’re the one wearing the orchid on your lapel and that’s the identifying marker for the exchange,” Susan continues. “But based on his profile, he’s quite the ladies man. So I wouldn’t put it past him to approach Frankie instead if he sees her with you.”

“Doesn’t he know they’re married?” Standish asks.

“He makes weapons of mass destruction, Standish,” Will replies. “I doubt the sanctity of marriage matters much to him.”

“Remember your exchange phrases,” Susan says. “He’ll ask if you’ve been lucky at roulette, and you’ll say you lost it all on 21 black.”

“As soon as the exchange is underway, I’ll bring the containment vessel to the extraction point,” Jai says. “You’ll meet me there and hand the weapon off, and I’ll work on coming up with a fake that will fool The Trust tomorrow.”

“All right, team,” Will says. “Let’s do this.”

The Casino de Monte-Carlo was already stunning, but the fundraising gala has turned it into something even more spectacular.

White silk and sparkling crystal lights are draped from the ceiling and across nearly every surface. Waiters dressed in white tuxedos, carrying trays of hors devours and flutes of champagne, weave between gala attendees wearing haute couture and jewelry that’s worth millions. A glistening hardwood dance floor has been laid in the center of the room, and couples sway in time with a live band that’s playing a mix of jazz and subdued pop ballads.

Will guides Frankie around the room with his palm on the small of her back. They spend an hour sipping champagne and making small talk with various millionaires and philanthropists. Will seems to savor introducing her as his wife. Frankie’s lost count of how many times he’s introduced
her that way this week, but there’s something different about the way the word falls from his lips tonight. She tries to ignore the fact that it makes her want to smile because they’re working and she needs to focus.

They get asked more than once if they’re newlyweds.

“What’s with all the newlywed crap?” Frankie wonders after the CEO of a mobile telecom firm who seemed shocked they weren’t on their honeymoon excuses himself to make a trip to the bar.

“You’re acting like newlyweds,” Susan replies over comms. “It’s adorable.”

“It’s not adorable,” Frankie says with a frown. “It’s the mission.”

“I feel like now is an appropriate time to point out that you used to hate this,” Standish says. “I thought you were going to light the Dead Drop on fire the first time you found out you had to pretend to be Will’s wife. And now here you are, making gooey-eyes at him like he’s the wind beneath your wings. If you weren’t my spy parents, it’d be adorable. But you’re my spy parents, so I kind of want to vomit.”

“I’m going to punch him next time I see him,” Frankie tells Will.

“I can hear you,” Standish says.

“You were supposed to,” Frankie replies.

Will grins. “Come on,” he says, his hand sliding over her back. “Let’s gamble.”

Another hour passes, and there’s still no sign of Mahmoud. There’s plenty of time left in the evening, and there was no official schedule for the delivery, but Frankie feels restless anyway. She thinks Will does too. He’s fidgeting.

“Do you need a drink?” she asks him quietly as they stand at a roulette table.

He shoots her a questioning look.

“You’re playing with your cufflinks,” she explains as she places her bet. “That’s what you do when you’re nervous.”

He slides his hands into his pockets. “I’m fine.”

Frankie looks past him and notices an older woman who is clearly eavesdropping on their conversation. A quick once-over indicates she’s probably not dangerous—just nosy—but Frankie would rather be safe than sorry.

“Get a drink, Cristian, and stop worrying about bad luck,” Frankie says, letting her voice dip into a purr. The ball lands on red and the dealer slides a stack of chips toward her. She smiles at Will. “I’m already on my way to winning enough to buy that yacht you’ve had your eye on.”

Will picks up on what she’s doing immediately. He brushes his hand over her back and leans forward to press a kiss to her temple. “I’ll go see if they’ve got my whiskey at the bar.”

He wanders away from the roulette table. Frankie watches him go because that’s what Charlotte would do. And also because he looks painfully sexy in that tux.

“Your husband is very handsome,” the older woman says, scooting closer to Frankie as soon as Will is gone.
“Tell her I’m a ten in a tux,” Will murmurs over comms.

Frankie smiles at the woman. “He certainly thinks so.”

“So do you,” Will points out. “I saw you checking out my ass.”

“Vomit,” Standish says.

“How long have you been married?” the woman asks.

“Three years,” Frankie answers, because that’s how long Cristian and Charlotte have been married.

“Still newlyweds then,” the woman says with a kind smile. “Or at least that’s how it seems to an old woman like me. My Albert and I have been married for fifty years.”

“That’s sweet,” Frankie says as kindly as she can. “Congratulations. Any secrets on how to make it last?”

“There’s only two things that really matter,” the woman replies with a brief shrug. “Truth and forgiveness. Both are in such short supply nowadays. If you can’t expect them from your partner, then who can you expect them from?”

“Good advice,” Susan says over comms.

“Very good advice,” Jai agrees. He doesn’t say anything else, but Frankie knows him well enough to hear the pointedness in his tone. She knows it’s directed at her. Guilt floods her chest and constricts around her lungs.

“Forgiveness is the most important,” the old woman continues. “None of us are perfect. Wouldn’t be fair to expect our partners to be. So it’s important to forgive.” She leans closer to Frankie. “Of course, the other secret nobody talks about is good sex. Sometimes you only get to truth and forgiveness through a good tussle in the sheets.”

Frankie laughs in surprise. The woman grins at her.

“Ooh, she nasty,” Standish says over comms. “I respect that. Don’t love the mental image, but I respect that.”

Frankie lifts her champagne flute. “I’ll drink to that.”

The older woman winks at her. “With a husband as handsome as yours, I thought you might.”

Frankie’s not the type to make friends during a mission unless she has to. Making friends is usually Will’s thing. But she falls into easy conversation with the older woman. She’s listening to a story about a recent trip to Tuscany when the notes of a familiar melody float through the room.

_Trust in me_  
_In all you do_  
_Have the faith I have in you_  
_Love will see us through_
If only you trust in me

The first line of the song makes Frankie momentarily freeze. It takes her about two seconds to realize there is zero chance the band would choose to play this song on their own. She turns around immediately and scans the room.

She sees Will standing on the edge of the dance floor, his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on her. He’s giving her that smile that charms the hell out of her even though she’d never admit it, and his heart eyes are on full blast.

“Excuse me,” Frankie murmurs to the older woman. She doesn’t wait for a response. She leaves her champagne and her chips and crosses the room, closing the distance between her and Will. By the time she stops in front of him, she’s barely able to keep a smile from her lips.

“Hey you,” Will greets as if he has no idea why she’s standing in front of him.

She puts her hands on her hips and shakes her head. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Well we’ve got this big ol’ dance floor. And it is our anniversary in three days. Seems like a crime not to dance to our song.”

“Y’all have a song?” Standish says incredulously over comms. “This is your song?”

Frankie ignores him. “We’re in the middle of a mission, Will.”

“Our covers are married. This is what’s best for the mission.”

“Bullshit,” she says, but she can’t keep the smile off her face anymore.

Will smiles too. “Jai?” he prompts.

“I’ve got eyes on all surveillance feeds,” Jai replies. “Standish’s facial recognition is still running. I’ll keep an eye out for anyone troublesome.”

“And I’ve got an eye on the front entrance,” Susan says. “I’ll give you a heads up if or when Mahmoud arrives.”

“Well I’ve got my eyes on y’all cause this is cute as hell,” Standish adds. “Look at my spy parents all in love with their song and their anniversary and shit. I don’t even want to vomit anymore. Hashtag couple goals.”

“We’re going to mute you guys unless we need you,” Susan says dryly.

“No, come on,” Standish whines. “I want to hear Frankie say cute stuff to Will so I can make fun of her later.”

“Muting now,” Jai says.

“No, wait, I—”

Standish’s voice cuts out, and the comm in Frankie’s ear goes silent.

Will holds out his hand. “We both know you’re going to say yes,” he murmurs softly. “Why don’t we skip the banter just this once?”
She glances down at his outstretched fingers, hesitates, and then slips her hand into his. He smiles and leads her out onto the dance floor. He turns to face her and steps into her space, his eyes fixed on hers as one hand slides over the small of her back and the other curls around hers and lifts it into position. They start to sway, and the lead singer of the band croons in a passable impression of Etta James.

“You remember the first time we did this?” he asks as she drapes her arm across his shoulders. “In Rome?”

“Yes,” she replies. “You were extremely annoying.”

“You didn’t know it yet, but you’d been infected by the charm virus. I was already growing on you.”

“Yeah. Like a fungus.”

He snorts. His thumb strokes along the bare skin of her back, and she feels heat spark in her veins. “Was I really that bad?”

She studies his face. His expression is earnest and curious. He seems to genuinely want to know the answer. She could tease him and he’d probably follow her lead in the direction of a less serious conversation, but she doesn’t want to.

“I don’t know,” she answers honestly.

He furrows his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

“I’m not a good judge of things like that,” she says quietly. “Maybe you were annoying and invasive. I felt like you were. But maybe you were just a nice guy trying to get to know me, and I’d been with so many bad guys that I forgot what the good ones were like.”

He tilts his head. “Do you really believe that?”

“Believe what?”

“That I’m a good guy.”

She strokes her hand over the nape of his neck. “You know you are. You don’t need me to say it.”

“I want you to say it.”

“Because you’re insecure and fishing for compliments?”

“Because I’m in love with you and your opinion matters.”

Six months ago she would’ve rolled her eyes and told him he was shit out of luck, and if he wanted a pep talk then he should’ve asked Susan to dance. That was before she fell in love with him, though, and before she realized that she likes how much her opinion matters to him.

“You’re the best man I know,” she confesses. “Which isn’t really saying much, considering all the shitty men I know, but...”

“But what?” he prompts, pulling her closer.

She swallows. All this time with him and she’s still terrible at telling him how much he means to her. Those three little words would say it for her, she knows, but she doesn’t want to say them like
this. Not in the middle of a mission when they’re pretending to be other people.

She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t do this with anyone else.”

“Dance during a mission?” he asks with a smile. “Act like a newlywed?”

“All of it,” she clarifies. “Everything I’ve done in the last six months. I couldn’t have done it with anyone but you.”

He looks stunned. She waits, because she expects him to smile and turn his heart eyes on and say something intolerably sentimental, but the expression that spreads over his face instead is dark and agonized.

“That was supposed to be a compliment,” she jokes.

“Francesca,” he whispers. His hand tightens on hers. “What if I wasn’t?”

There’s a tinge of desperation in his voice, and she doesn’t understand why. “What if you weren’t what?”

“A good man,” he replies. “What if I made a mistake?”

“Everyone screws up, Will. Even eagle scouts. It doesn’t mean you’re not good. If mistakes defined us, then I’d be screwed.”

“So you’d forgive me?”

Frankie frowns at him, but before she can ask if he’s speaking hypothetically, Susan’s voice cuts in. “Sorry to interrupt, guys, but Mahmoud is here.”

The intimacy of the previous moment vanishes. Will straightens and scans the room over the top of Frankie’s head, and she casts a glance toward the closest entrance.

“Where, Susan?”

“Walking into your room now.”

Frankie spots him immediately. He’s short and stout, with a head full of silver hair and a matching beard. He’s carrying one of the linen bags that gala staff are handing out to attendees before they leave. They’re supposed to be filled with free gifts and favors, but Frankie knows Mahmoud’s isn’t. The fact that there are hundreds of unsuspecting people drinking champagne and laughing with no idea they’re only a step away from a very painful death sets her on edge.

“Target sighted,” she says in a low voice. She glances up at Will. “Headed for the craps tables.”

He smiles and offers her his arm. “Let’s shoot some craps.”

Frankie loops her arm through his and lets him lead her from the dance floor. He picks a craps table that’s close to the bar. It’s not the table Mahmoud is at, but they’re in his direct eyeline. Will pulls a few chips out of his pocket and hands them to Frankie, and she sets them on the table before glancing up at Mahmoud. He meets her gaze.

“We’ve been spotted,” she says under her breath, returning her focus to the table. The woman across from them is clearly very drunk, and she’s laughing loudly. Will hovers close to Frankie, but stands so that the orchid pinned to his jacket is visible. A minute drags on, and then two, but Mahmoud doesn’t move.
“Standish?” Will prompts.

“He’s just staring at you like a creep,” Standish replies. “He’s not even pretending to gamble.”

“Go get a drink, Will,” Susan says.

Will frowns. “What?”

“He’s a ladies man, remember? He’s waiting to talk to Frankie. Go get a drink.”

Will sighs. “Someday we’re going to find jobs where I don’t have to leave you at the mercy of lecherous criminals,” he says to Frankie.

“I’m never at their mercy,” she says, smiling up at him. “They’re at mine.”

“Truer words,” he murmurs. He presses his lips to her forehead. “Go get ’em, boo.”

He wanders toward the bar, and Frankie turns her attention back to the table. A few moments later, Mahmoud slides into the spot Will previously occupied. Frankie doesn’t even glance at him.

“Good evening,” he says.

“Good evening,” she replies. She doesn’t take her eyes off the table.

Mahmoud leans a little closer to her, though not close enough to touch her. “Your dress is beautiful.”

Frankie finally lifts her gaze to his. “Thank you. It’s my husband’s favorite color.”

“Oh damn,” Standish says in her ear.

“Behave, Frankie,” Susan warns. “He doesn’t like to be challenged.”

“Then he probably should’ve picked another woman,” Will says dryly.

“Your husband is a lucky man,” Mahmoud says. His smile is gracious, but his eyes are roving over her body. “What brings you to Monte Carlo?”

“Business. And pleasure. We like to mix the two.”

Mahmoud smiles, and it makes him look like the Cheshire Cat. “As do I. I’m afraid I’m a terrible gambler, though. Lady Luck is not kind to me. Perhaps that is because she has been too focused on you. Did you have any luck on the roulette wheels? I heard they are hot tonight.”

“I heard the same. Unfortunately, I lost it all on 21 black. These are my last chips.”

Mahmoud clicks his tongue in disappointment. “That’s too bad. Allow me to offer you some of mine.”

He curls his fingers around Frankie’s wrist, and then slips the handle of the linen bag into her grasp. He smiles at her, his face far closer to hers than she wants it to be, but she knows better than to pull back.

“Very generous of you,” she says.

He’s still holding onto her arm. He smiles and strokes his thumb over her skin. “I’ve heard the
casino gardens are breathtaking. Could I interest you in a stroll?”

“Darling,” Will says, appearing next to Frankie before she can answer. His hand slides over the small of her back possessively. “Did you make another friend?” He smiles smugly down at Mahmoud. “Everywhere we go, my wife makes a new friend. It’s like she can’t help herself.”

Mahmoud releases Frankie’s arm immediately. “She is very enchanting, your wife.”

“So it seems,” Will says pointedly.

Mahmoud ducks his head in a slight bow. “Good evening to you both,” he says, and then turns on his heel and disappears into the crowd. Will glares after him, his jaw clenched.

Frankie nudge him in the ribs. “Seriously?”

He looks down at her. “What?”

“Did you have to say it like that?”

“Like what?”

She drops her voice into a deep, decidedly angry tone. “So it seems.”

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“You definitely said it like that,” Standish confirms.

“I’m at the extraction point,” Jai announces. “Waiting on you to stop bickering while holding a weapon that could kill everyone in the building.”

Will offers his arm with a smirk.

“On our way, Jai,” Frankie says as she takes it.

They make their way arm-in-arm through the casino, out the front entrance, and along the paths that lead into the casino gardens where Jai is waiting. They eventually stop beside a fountain. There are two couples walking by, headed toward the casino, and a man lingering by the edge of the fountain. He’s in a tux and staring morosely into the water, but when he lifts his head and spots Frankie, he suddenly seems just as fascinated as Mahmoud.

“Oh good, another guy staring at my wife,” Will says dryly. He looks down at her. “Do you have to be so pretty?”

“It’s my burden to bear,” Frankie says with a shrug.

“Dude, you know she’s not actually your wife, right?” Standish says over comms.

“I don’t like it,” Jai says in a clipped, businesslike tone. “That guy’s been hanging around here too long. Like he’s waiting.”

Frankie sets the linen bag gently on the sidewalk at her feet, and then latches onto Will’s lapel and pulls him close so they look like a couple who came out here to be alone rather than two spies who are about to hand off an extremely dangerous chemical weapon to another spy.

“Standish,” she says, tilting her head back to look up at Will. “Time to put your James Bond suit to work and get rid of this guy.”
“On it,” Standish says. There’s a crashing sound over the comms, and then Standish says, “Son of a bitch.”

“You okay, kiddo?” Will asks, stroking his hand over Frankie’s cheek.

“Broke my ass bone,” Standish says with a groan. “Broke it so hard. One of y’all gonna have to ice this shit for me later. Ow. Son of a—shit that hurts.”

“Are you coming or not?” Frankie sighs.

“On my way. Give me two minutes.”

“Not that I need to tell you this,” Susan says with a thread of amusement in her voice, “but it wouldn’t hurt if you two played up the newlywed angle right now.”

“I think Susan just told you to make out with me,” Frankie says to Will.

He smirks. “Well if she insists.”

And then he leans down and kisses her, his hands sliding along her waist. Frankie wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him back, arching against his chest as he traces a pattern along the bare skin of her back. He flicks his tongue along the seam of her lips, and she opens her mouth for him.

A few seconds pass. Or maybe a few minutes. Frankie can’t tell. Will’s a hell of a kisser, something she’s always known but for some reason didn’t fully comprehend until just now, and she’s having a hard time focusing on anything except him.

Somewhere in the distance, she hears Standish talking to the man by the fountain, saying something about how casino security has requested his presence in the lobby. A moment later, his voice fades into the distance. Frankie doesn’t stop kissing Will. Her skin feels like it’s on fire everywhere he touches her. A familiar ache has started to throb deep in her body.

“Dude is gone,” Standish announces over comms. “Because I am smooth as hell even with a broken ass.”

“Heading in now,” Jai replies. “I’ll exchange your bag with another. You guys just keep...you know.”

“Making out like teenagers,” Standish supplies with a snort.

Frankie isn’t even a little tempted to lean away from Will’s mouth and snap at Standish. Will pulls her closer, one hand sliding down toward her ass. She scratches her nails through the hair on the back of his head, and he shudders.

“Five feet out,” Jai says quietly.

Frankie hears a soft rustle by her feet, and feels a soft whoosh of air against her skin, but keeps kissing Will.

“Weapon in my possession,” Jai says. “Taking it back to run tests now.”

Will leans back, and his mouth parts from Frankie’s with a pop. His pupils are dilated and there’s lipstick on his lips and he looks just as dazed as she feels.

“Good work, team,” he says softly. “Let’s rendezvous tomorrow morning and go over the plan.”
“My room, eight o’clock,” Susan says.

“My room,” Jai corrects. “So I don’t have to transport everything more than once.”

“Good call,” Susan replies. “I’ll bring breakfast.”

“I’m cutting comms now so Standish doesn’t whine in my ear about his ass anymore,” Jai says.

“Hey I took one for the team!” Standish whines.


“Yeah,” Frankie says. “See you tomorrow.”

Everyone says their goodbyes, and then there’s silence. Will is still staring at her, the same dazed look on his face. A breeze blows through the park. Frankie isn’t sure if it’s the chilly air or the way Will is looking at her, but she shivers.

“Sorry,” Will says, snapping to attention. He shrugs out of his tuxedo jacket and drapes it over her shoulders. “Come on,” he says gently, reaching for her hand. “Let’s go back to the hotel.”

It’s the jacket that does it. Later, she’ll find that amusing. Of all the things he’s done for her—saving her life and making her laugh and loving her despite her dozens of flaws and terrible past—it’s draping his tuxedo jacket around her shoulders that finally brings the words out of her.

“Will,” she says, tugging on his hand.

He turns back to face her. “Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Frankie’s seen a lot of expressions on her partner’s face. She’s never seen him look this shocked. He’s as still as a statue, her hand clasped in his, his eyes fixed on her face like he doesn’t believe any of this is real.

“What?” he whispers, his voice cracking.

She swallows the fear in her throat, and the explanation comes out in a rush.

“I know the timing sucks. I should’ve...I should’ve waited for us to get back to New York. Or said it before now. Or...I don’t know, just been less emotionally stunted. But I didn’t, and I’m not, and I’m just as terrible at this as I was six months ago, and I’ve never been more scared of anything in my entire life, which is really saying something considering how many times I’ve almost died, but —”

She stops and sucks in a breath, trying to calm down. She lets it out slowly and forces herself to look him in the eye and repeat the words clearly.

“I love you. I’m in love with you.”

He stares at her for a second. And then he lunges toward her, grabs her face in his hands, and crashes his lips against hers.

The intensity of it takes her breath away. She’s spent so long holding the tidal wave at bay, straining against the force of it, and now that she’s given up and let it free they’re both drowning in it. She wraps her arms around him, dizzy and overwhelmed, and realizes that she never wants to
say those words to anyone but him ever again.

When Will finally leans away from her, they’re both breathless. His hands are still on her face. There are tears in his eyes. He strokes his thumbs over her cheeks.

“You mean it?” he whispers. “You’re sure?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“Francesca,” he breathes. He says her name like it’s sacred. He tilts forward, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against hers. “I love you too.”

They barely make it to the hotel.

They stumble through the seventh floor entry of their suite and collapse onto the closest couch. They don’t even bother taking off their clothes. They remove only what they need to and shove aside the rest, desperate and impatient and clumsy. His fingers are rough when he strokes them over her to see if she’s ready.

“But get inside me,” she whines, digging her nails into his shoulders.

He does as he’s told and pushes inside her, slow but unrelenting, and she lets her head fall back against the couch with a shuddering moan. He gives her a second to adjust, his mouth working over the exposed column of her throat, and then he’s moving and she can’t seem to catch her breath.

“Say it again,” he begs.

She wraps her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his hips and whispers, “I love you.”

He’s not the type to casually curse, but she’s learned that he does it freely in bed when he’s too caught up to care about politeness. When he buries his face in her neck and groans something along the lines of You feel so fucking good a sense of triumph sings through her veins.

“I love you,” she repeats. She rakes her nails across the flexing muscles of his back. “I love you.”

One of his hands slides along the outside of her thigh, his palm hot against her skin, and then the thrust of his hips changes. He’s fucking her in earnest now, stroking in hard and just fast enough to drive her crazy, and now she’s the one cursing about how good he feels.

She knows that later, when they do this again (because of course they’re going to do this again, they’re going to do this all night if she gets her way), it’ll be slower. He’ll take his time with her, and she’ll draw things out for him, and it’ll be the kind of intentional and intense lovemaking that used to scare her. But this isn’t that. This is frantic, rough and dirty and good—fuck it’s so good—and the last coherent thought she has before she comes so hard she sees stars is that she never wants to do this with anyone but him again either.

Afterward, Will is gentle. He whispers something about how perfect she is into the hollow of her throat, and then lifts his mouth to hers and kisses her softly. She smiles against his lips, her heart so light in her chest that she thinks she could float, and it must be contagious because he smiles too.

They kiss for a while, lazy and affectionate. Eventually, they meander upstairs and into the
bedroom they’ve been sleeping in. They undress each other when they get there. She’s not sleepy, and he doesn’t seem to be either, so they lay tangled in the sheets and each other, their hands roaming without any real purpose.

“Penny for them,” Will whispers eventually into the crown of her head.

Frankie brings her arm up across his chest and rests her chin in the crook of her elbow so she can look at him. Their eyes meet and he smiles at her, sincere and handsome as hell, and the words come out without any conscious effort on her part.

“I’m happy.”

His smile widens. “Me too.”

She reaches out to trace the curve of his lips with her index finger. “I didn’t think I could be. I thought I was too damaged.”

Sadness flickers in his eyes. “Frankie—”

“Don’t,” she cuts him off. “Don’t do that nice guy thing where you say I’m not because we both know I am. I have been since I was seventeen.”

He combs his fingers through her hair. She loves when he does that. She loves him.

“Most people put the pieces back together when they break.”

He twirls a strand of her hair around his finger. “You tried.”

“Yeah. And every time I did, life just broke me again. So I figured, what’s the point, you know? Some people get to be whole and some people don’t, and I was one of the don’ts.”

She can tell by the look on his face that she’s breaking his heart. She’s not trying to. She just wants to make him understand, and for once it’s not hard to find the words. It’s the post-orgasm haze maybe, or maybe it’s just him and how safe he makes her feel.

“The thing is, I didn’t even care,” she says softly. “There was no one that made me want to care. But now there’s you. And I don’t feel broken anymore.”

He brushes his hand over her cheek and she thinks about the first time he ever did that, all those months ago in Prague, and how much has changed since then.

“I love you,” he whispers.

The awe in his voice makes her ache. How a man like him managed to fall in love with someone as scarred and dark as she is will forever be a mystery to her.

“I love you too.”

He smiles. “You finally believe me.”

She leans forward, chasing his smile and his warmth. “Yeah,” she breathes against his lips. “I do.”

Chapter End Notes
::Puts Etta James on the record player::
At laaaaaaaast…..
Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

I rated this fic M for a reason. And Lord knows there have been enough sex scenes for me to earn it. But I feel compelled to note for the record that this chapter is kind of brutal, and that it contains more curse words than the rest of the story combined (so far). So...idk, guys, just put your seatbelts on. Keep your arms and legs inside the car. And for the love of god, don’t drink the scary water.

The next morning, Frankie and Will are late to the team meeting.

Everybody has copies of everyone else’s room keys, thanks to Jai and his just in case philosophy. Will is sliding his key into the reader on Jai’s door when Frankie nudges him with her elbow and says, “Stop grinning.”

“I’m not grinning.”

“Yes you are.”

“That’s just my face. I have resting smile face.”

“You resting smile face is different. That’s I-just-had-sex face.”

Will pushes the door open for her. “Well whose fault is that?”

“You started it.”

“Yeah and I finished it too. Twice.”

Frankie smirks—he’s not wrong—and starts to walk into the room. Will catches her elbow and stops her before she can cross the threshold. She looks up at him, her face only a few inches from his. The door starts to swing shut. Frankie stops it with the toe of her boot before it slams closed, but she doesn’t take her eyes off Will.

“Say it again,” he whispers.

She smirks. “When are you going to stop asking me to say it every ten seconds?”

The corner of his mouth quirks upward. “Never. Does never work for you?”

Warmth blossoms in her chest. If she was the type of woman to swoon, she’d be doing it. But she’s not. Sure, she feels as light as air. And yes, there’s an insistent warmth spreading all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes. She is maybe, possibly, probably thinking about how nice it would be to wake up next to him every morning for the rest of her life. But she’s definitely not swooning. Nope. Not even a little.

“Please?” he whispers.

“I love you,” she murmurs, because apparently at some point Will Chase saying please in that soft
voice he only uses with her became the one thing she can’t say no to. “And I’m not saying it when we’re on the clock, so don’t ask.”

“Say it one more time to hold me over,” he says, leaning a little closer.

“Will—”

He kisses her.

Her knees are not weak. Her mind is not fuzzy. She is fine. Totally and completely fine.

“I love you,” he whispers into her mouth.

She leans into his kiss because she can’t help it and whispers, “I love you too.”

Oh, what the hell. Who is she kidding? She is completely, irrevocably, weak-in-the-knees, swooning-like-a-lovestruck-moron gone for him, and it feels so goddamn good that she doesn’t even care.

She lets him kiss her for a few seconds, and then she presses her palm against his chest and pushes him away from her. “We have to go to work now.”

“Right,” he says. “Gotta save the world with my boo.”

“Behave,” she warns.

He grins. “Yes ma’am.” His eyes dart down to her body. “I promise I’m not counting down the hours until I get to take your clothes off again.”

“Jesus, Will,” she mutters, rolling her eyes, but she can’t stifle her smile and he laughs. She pushes the door open and walks into the room before he can say anything else.

Jai is bent over something at a desk that’s positioned on the far wall. Standish is sitting in an armchair and squinting at some vials of clear liquid that are tucked into a padded briefcase on the coffee table. Susan is hovering over a bakery box sitting on the bed.

She glances over her shoulder as soon as they walk in, and then gives them a knowing smile as she straightens. “Nice of you to join us.”

“Couldn’t find my gun,” Frankie lies.

Susan smirks at Will. “You help her find it?”

“Twice,” Will says proudly.

“Go sit down,” Frankie mutters, shoving him toward the sitting area.

“I’ll save you a seat,” he tells her with a wink.

Susan watches him go, and then turns back to Frankie. “You know, most people have less sexual tension once they get together. Somehow you guys have more. Honestly, it’s kind of weird.”

Frankie shrugs. “I like it.”

“I can see that,” Susan says dryly.
“Hey Jai?” Standish calls out before Frankie can reply. “This stuff looks like water. Is it supposed
to look like water?”

“It’s not water,” Jai says without turning around.

“Well yeah, I know that.” Standish cranes his neck to look at Jai. “What is it?”

Jai doesn’t answer.

“Jaiiii,” Standish whines.

“Shut up, Standish,” Jai replies. “I’m busy.”

Standish frowns. “Okay, grumpy. No need to be rude.”

“Just give him a minute, Standish,” Frankie says. “You should know by now not to interrupt him.”

Standish scowls at her.

“I don’t think Jai is the one who’s grumpy,” Susan observes. She offers Standish the bakery box.
“Here. Eat some breakfast.”

Standish’s eyes widen. He dives for the box and tries to take three pastries. Susan smacks his
knuckles and tells him to take one until everyone else has had one. Standish hisses at her and
retreats to his chair with the biggest pastry he can find. Frankie smirks, grabs a pastry for herself
and one for Will, and then sits on the loveseat next to him.

Will puts his arm around the back of the loveseat casually after she sits. Frankie knows what he
wants. She considers the angle of everyone in the room, realizes that nobody will be able to tell,
and leans back against the cushions. Within two seconds, Will’s fingers are stroking between her
shoulder blades.

Finally, Jai turns away from the desk to face everyone. “Okay. I’m finished.”

“Thank god,” Standish mutters with his mouth full.

Jai shoots him a look.

“What’s the chemical, Jai?” Frankie prompts before Jai gives in to the temptation to punch
Standish.

“It’s called cyloraxin,” Jai answers. “As we suspected based on Mahmoud’s profile, it’s a nerve
agent. A nerve agent has one primary function—it blocks the impulses between nerve cells. This
particular agent inhibits the breakdown of a neurotransmitter that’s vital to muscle and gland
function.”

“What’s that mean for those of us who don’t have a degree in chemical engineering?” Frankie
asks.

“It prevents your muscles from relaxing.”

“What are the effects?” Will asks.

“Difficulty breathing, muscle spasms, loss of body control, seizures, paralysis, and complete
respiratory failure.”
“Oh is that all?” Standish says dryly.

“There’s a reason production of cyloraxin was banned over two decades ago,” Jai says. “This is the stuff of nightmares. Just a single drop on your skin can cause muscle spasms and extraordinary pain. It’s colorless, odorless, and tasteless. It mixes easily with water and can be dispersed through liquids, aerosols, and vapor.”

He gestures at the briefcase on the coffee table. “This is not a trivial amount. What we have here could kill thousands and it would be an extremely painful death.”

For a moment, there’s a horrified hush over the room. They all glance at each other, and then at the vials on the table.

“Is there an antidote?” Susan asks quietly.

“There are two,” Jai confirms. “Both must be administered within ten minutes of exposure in order to be effective. Obviously, their effectiveness depends on the amount of cyloraxin you’re exposed to. I was able to procure enough last night for all of us in the event of a worst case scenario. You will each be carrying around your own set of dosages so you can administer them immediately if you are exposed.”

“Seriously?” Will asks in surprise. “How did you pull that off?”

“He’s magic,” Frankie says.

Jai cracks a hint of a smile for the first time all morning. Frankie smiles back at him.

“So what’s the play for today?” Susan asks.

Jai motions to a briefcase on the desk. “These are the fakes. All but one of these vials is filled with water. The biometric scanners that were on the original vials have been transferred to these. I’ve reprogrammed them to open for your DNA sequence rather than the Morellis, and erased the tracking log. When The Trust pulls up the data record here,” he gestures at the screen that’s embedded in the top of the briefcase, “it will show that these vials have not been opened or tampered with since Mahmoud filled them.”

“I helped with that,” Standish says proudly.

“This vial,” Jai says, pointing at the one that’s tucked in the far right slot of the briefcase padding, “is actual cyloraxin.”

“For the test,” Frankie guesses.

Jai nods. “Precisely. The Trust has requested that you demonstrate by mixing it with water. I imagine that’s because that’s how they plan to disperse it. I have a case of bottled water in the van. I’ll send you in with a bottle.”

“Wait, what test?” Standish asks.

“These types of deliveries are always accompanied by a test,” Will explains. “The Trust will want to make sure that whoever filled the vials actually filled them with what they’re paying for. Frankie and I are going to be asked to do a demonstration.”

“On yourselves?” Standish asks in horror.
“No,” Frankie says. “Probably on someone The Trust brings.”

“We’re not going to let The Trust walk out the door with that vial though, are we?” Susan asks.

“There’s a tracker in the briefcase, and a micro-tracker affixed to each vial,” Jai replies. “After Will and Frankie have completed the delivery, I’ll be able to track its location. Ray has a tactical team on standby. Once I have a location, and Will and Frankie are clear, we’ll send in the team to recover the vial and to apprehend whoever The Trust sent in.”

“So it’ll look like someone knew about the exchange, but it won’t look like the Morellis are the ones who tipped anyone off,” Frankie says. “If we need to use them as a cover again, we can.”

“So what are we doing with the real stuff?” Standish asks, casting a worried look at the briefcase sitting on the coffee table.

“That’ll be in the van with us,” Jai replies. “After Frankie and Will are clear, and the tactical team has done its job and recovered the vial, they’ll bring it to us, and we’ll deliver the entire set to a team that’s on standby and ready to destroy it.”

“Can’t we do that first so I don’t have to sit in the van with it?” Standish asks.

“No,” Frankie replies. “The Trust has spies everywhere. If we hand off the cyloraxin now, someone could tip them off that the deal is compromised and they’re getting fakes. We have to wait until after we make the delivery.”

“Susan, you cool to drive the van?” Will asks.

“Yep,” Susan replies with a nod. “Wish I was driving the Maserati you guys are driving though.”

“And by you guys, you mean me,” Frankie says. “Because I’m driving.”

Will shoots her a look. “We’ll discuss it.”

“No we won’t,” she replies. “I’m driving.”

He ignores her. “Jai and Standish, you’ll be our eyes and ears from the van.”

Standish shrinks backward into his chair. “As long as I don’t have to sit by the scary water.”

“It’s not water,” Jai snaps.

“It’s scary water,” Standish insists.

Jai sighs.

Will and Frankie have a brief argument about who’s driving their Maserati GranCabrio.

Frankie wins.

Will pouts in the passenger seat until Frankie brushes her hand over his thigh and says, “I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Did not need to hear that,” Standish says over comms.

Frankie laughs.
By the time they park at the International University of Monaco, the sun has disappeared behind a growing mass of clouds. Frankie puts the roof of the car up so the interior won’t get rained on, and then climbs out onto the street. There’s a chill in the air, and it smells like a storm is rolling in. She hunches forward against the wind, grateful that she’s wearing her favorite leather jacket, and follows Will into the main building.

The university is closed on Saturdays, but locked doors and security systems don’t mean much to Jai and Standish. Frankie and Will get into the building with no problem at all, and then take the elevator up to the correct floor. They’re early, but that’s on purpose. Neither of them like to walk into places they haven’t cleared themselves.

“Standish?” Will says as soon as they step off the elevator.

“No heat signatures in the building except yours,” Standish replies.

Will and Frankie make their way down the hallway, checking every room on the way to get a feel for their surroundings. The building is eerily silent, and the brewing storm outside isn’t letting much light in through the windows. Every room is dark, and even the hallway seems dim despite the ceiling lights.

The delivery is set to take place in a sizeable lecture hall that’s not all that different from the one Frankie and Will taught in during their mission in Bucharest. Frankie notices immediately when they enter that there isn’t a single window. It’s pitch black until Will flicks the light switch on. There’s a large projector screen and a long whiteboard at the front of the room behind a lectern and a table. Five rows of seating are arranged stadium style so that each row is two steps higher than the last. A stairway aisle stretches down the center of the room between the rows, and leads up to a double door exit located on the back wall. There are two more exits on either side in the front of the hall.

Will sets the briefcase down on the table in the front of the room along with a bottle of water. Frankie stops next to him and studies the rows. The chairs have wheels and look lightweight, so they’d be easy to shove or throw at someone. A desk surface extends the length of each row and stretches down to the floor. If they needed to, they could hide beneath the desks and not be seen from the exits.

Will turns to look at her. “What do you think?”

“Three exits,” she says immediately. “Two of us.”

“Yeah,” he says, glancing at the exit in the back. “I don’t like the lack of windows either.”

Frankie lifts a shoulder. “No windows means no snipers.”

“It also means no emergency exit options.”

“You’ve got visitors incoming,” Jai says over comms. “Just entered the building, headed for the elevators.”

Frankie glances at her watch. “They’re early.”

“How many?” Will asks.

“Three, though one doesn’t look all that willing. Facial recognition is pulling up hits on all three. First is an Ivan Pachechik, currently works for the SVR. He’s the bald one. Second is Stefano Rossi, mercenary and assassin. Third is Victor Durand. He’s a French millionaire.”
Frankie and Will share a look.

“French millionaire and suspected rapist,” Standish adds. “Google says he’s got an open court case against him. There are nearly two dozen accusers.”

“I’ve read about him,” Susan says. “The stories are horrific.”

“He’s the test subject,” Frankie and Will say in unison.

“Does it make me a bad person if I don’t mind that a rapist is going to die a painful death from Jai’s scary water?” Standish asks.

“Quit calling it scary water,” Jai snaps.

“If it does, Standish, then I’m a bad person too,” Frankie answers.

“Save me a seat in hell,” Standish says cheerfully.

Will grins. Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Which door they coming in, Jai?” Will asks.

“The one by the stairwell.”

“There,” Will says to Frankie, gesturing at the door that’s on the same side of the room as the lectern.

Frankie steps behind the table so that her back is to the white board, and angles herself toward the door their visitors are going to enter. Will arranges the briefcase and the bottle of water to sit directly in front of them. Frankie slips her gun back into her waistband. She’s got three knives on her person, and she brushes her hands over each of them to take stock. There’s an extra clip in her jacket pocket.

“Did you bring an extra clip?” she asks Will.

“Yeah. Brought one for you too. How many knives you wearing?”

“Three,” she answers, looking up at him. “You want one?”

“And give you a chance to rub it in my face that you throw them better than I do? Hard pass.”

Frankie smiles. “Still my line.”

“Off the elevator,” Jai reports. “Ten seconds out.”

“You ready?” Will asks her quietly.

“Yeah. You?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

Their gaze holds for a second, and then the door opens and three men walk into the room. Pachechik is the first one in the door, his bald head shining beneath the fluorescent lighting of the room. Durand is the next one in. Frankie can tell it’s him because he’s wearing a suit worth thousands of dollars and he looks completely terrified. His arm is firmly in the grasp of a giant man with intricate neck tattoos. It must be Rossi. They stop about ten yards away.
“Gentleman,” Will greets. “I think we met at the gala last night, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Pachechik says in heavily accented English. “We did not have much luck with the roulette wheels. Did you?”

“Lost it all on 21 black,” Frankie replies.

They size each other up from across the table. Pachechik nods. “You have the product?”

Will pops the briefcase open and turns it toward them. Pachechik takes a few steps forward and surveys the contents. “Pull up the data record.”

Will taps the touch screen a few times, and the record appears. Pachechik squints at it, reading the lines of data, and then he glances over his shoulder at Rossi. Rossi shoves Durand forward and forces him down onto his knees.

“We would like a demonstration,” Pachechik says.

“A demonstration of what?” Durand wimpers, looking up at Pachechik. He follows the Russian’s gaze over to Will and Frankie, glances at the briefcase, and then clasps his hands in front of him. “Please don’t hurt me. Everything you’ve heard is a lie. It was all consensual, I swear. I don’t deserve to die. Please.”

Will stiffens next to Frankie, and she knows it’s because he doesn’t want to do this. It doesn’t matter who Durand is or what he’s accused of doing. Will’s too decent to want anyone to die in such a gruesome way.

“Whatever they’re paying you, I’ll double it,” Durand says as if he can sense Will’s hesitation. “I’ll triple it.”

“You can’t afford us,” Frankie tells him bluntly. She reaches for the vial of cyloraxin, but Will’s hand covers hers.

“I got it,” he says.

Frankie glances up at him. She wants to argue. She planned on doing this herself as soon as she knew one of them would have to, and she doesn’t want Will anywhere near cyloraxin whether he’s got the antidote in his pocket or not. But she can’t disagree with him. Charlotte Morelli may be a high-heel-knife wielding badass, but she lets her husband run point on all their deals. It’s the one thing Frankie doesn’t like about her. Other than the whole making-millions-selling-weapons-of-mass-destruction thing.

“Be careful,” Frankie murmurs, pulling her hands back. She slides them into her jacket pockets, and curls her fingers around the small leather satchel that contains the antidotes Jai gave her.

Will nods. He presses his thumb down on the biometric scanner for the right vial, and after a brief pause there’s a soft click. He takes a pair of rubber gloves out of his jacket pocket, pulls them on, and then reaches for the vial.

When he pulls it out of the briefcase, Frankie’s heart shoots into her throat. She leans closer to him without meaning to, every inch of her dying to pluck it from his grasp, but she doesn’t. She snags the bottle of water instead, unscrews the cap, and then sets it on the table for Will.

She watches as he lifts a syringe from the briefcase, slides the needle into the top of the vial, and fills the barrel with enough cyloraxin to kill a hundred people. She’s willing to bet he’s trying to
make sure Durand dies as quickly—and thus as painlessly—as possible. Will nestles the vial gently back into the briefcase, and then pushes the plunger of the syringe forward so the cyloraxin empties into the water bottle. He sets the syringe down on the table, screws the cap back on the bottle, and shakes it.

When he walks toward Durand with the bottle in hand, the millionaire tries to scuttle backwards. Pachechik and Rossi put their hands on his shoulders and hold him in place.


Pachechik grabs a nearby chair. Rossi forces Durand into it and lashes his wrists to the armrests with zip ties he pulls from his pocket.

“Please,” Durand begs, yanking against the restraints. “Please don’t do this. I’m innocent!”

“Plug his nose and tip his head back,” Will commands as he unscrews the lid of the bottle and walks to Durand’s side.

Durand wails, a desperate sound that makes Will’s blank expression twitch just enough for Frankie to notice. Pachechik and Rossi don’t. Rossi holds Durand’s head completely still, one massive hand pressed against each of his ears, and tips it backwards. Pachechik plugs the millionaire’s nose. Durand’s legs flail. His eyes bulge as he struggles to resist the urge to open his mouth, but eventually the need to breathe wins out. He opens his mouth, gasping, and Will dumps some cyloraxin-laced water down his throat. Rossi shoves his mouth closed immediately, and with Pachechik still holding his nose, Durand has no choice but to swallow or suffocate.

He swallows.

Rossi lets go of his jaw and Pachechik releases his nose. Durand sucks in a breath. “What did you give me?” he sobs. “What is that?”

His eyes are watering. His nose is starting to run. His body shudders hard, and he looks at Frankie with pure terror written across his face. “What’s happening to me?” he screams.

Pachechik and Rossi watch him closely, obviously curious about the effects of the chemical. Frankie watches her partner. Will’s jaw is clenched, his expression still blank, and his shoulders are rigid. He looks determined, merciless, but she knows better. He’s going to feel guilty about this later. He feels guilty about it already. She wants to cross the room and wrap her arms around him and whisper something comforting in his ear but she stays where she is, a few yards back from the others, guarding the briefcase.

The effect of the cyloraxin is sudden and violent. Every muscle in Durand’s body seems to spasm and then seize. Tears are streaming down his face. His fingers curl into talons. Frankie can see the muscles in his neck twitching wildly. He arches in the chair and screams. The inhuman wail is cut short by a strangled choking sound, and then a brutal seizure sends his chair tipping over. Durand’s face smashes into the floor, his body convulsing violently as he continues to choke and gasp, and then he goes still.

Rossi swears in Italian under his breath. Pachechik looks stunned.

“Satisfied?” Will asks, glaring at Pachechik as he screws the lid back on the water bottle and then snaps his gloves off.

Pachechik nods. He glances at Frankie and holds his hand out. “Bring it to me.”
And then all the lights in the room go out.

The darkness is overwhelming. Frankie reacts on instinct. She slams the briefcase closed so that the vial of cyloraxin is locked inside, pulls her gun out of her waistband, and ducks down behind the table with the briefcase clutched to her chest.

“You set us up,” she hears Pachechik’s voice snarl.

And then the sound of a scuffle fills the room—punching, grunting, heavy breathing. Frankie grips her gun, finger on the trigger, and grits her teeth. She wants to help Will, but she can’t. She’s got a chemical weapon in her hand, and she has no way of knowing who’s who in the darkness. Her eyes are trying to adjust, but there’s no ambient light to help her see anything. The room is pitch black.

“Standish,” she hisses. “Turn the damn lights on.”

No answer.

“Jai?” she calls. “Jai, can you hear me?”

No answer. Comms are down, she realizes. She hears a gunshot from over where Will is, and panic wraps like a vise around her throat.

“Whiskey,” she calls, desperation making her voice rough.

“Stay,” he calls back.

The sound of his voice calms her, but only briefly. There are more sounds of a struggle, and it takes every ounce of her self control not to race toward them.

The lights come back on, sudden and blinding. Frankie leaves the briefcase on the floor and shoots to her feet, blinking against the brightness. Pachechik is crumpled on the floor next to Durand, dead. Rossi has Will in a headlock, and Will’s face is turning red as he struggles to breathe. Frankie lifts her gun, squeezes the trigger, and puts a bullet in Rossi’s skull.

The mercenary’s eyes roll back into his head and he crumples to the ground. Will wrenches free from his grasp as he falls, gasping for air as his hands fly up to his neck. Frankie starts toward him, concerned, but stops dead in her tracks when the sound of someone clapping erupts from the back of the room.

She turns toward the sound, gun raised, ready to shoot. There are ten men wearing full tactical gear and armed with assault rifles standing along the back wall of the lecture hall. They must have come in when the lights were off.

And at the top of the stairs, smirking at her as he applauds, is Nick.

Frankie’s blood runs cold. Her lungs can’t seem to pull in any air. Guilt and grief and shame rise in her chest, dwarfed only by the unutterable rage that floods every inch of her body, and she grits her teeth and has to call on every ounce of her willpower to resist shooting him where he stands.

Other than the beard that now adorns his jawline, he looks exactly like he did the last time she saw him. He’s tall—well over six feet—and built like a professional athlete: broad shouldered and hard chested, with muscles that strain against the confines of his sleeves. His black hair is brushed back neatly, but she knows if she ran her fingers through it, it’d be long enough to fall across his forehead. He’s wearing a navy three piece suit without a jacket, and the sleeves of his white shirt are rolled up to his elbows to reveal tattoos covering the entirety of his forearms. On his wrist, he’s
wearing a silver watch.

She bought him that watch for his twenty-sixth birthday.

“Still one hell of a shot,” Nick says to her, sliding his hands into his pockets. “That’s my girl.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie sees Will straighten. He glances between them, a frown on his face, and she knows the second he realizes who’s standing at the top of the stairs because the same rage she feels thrumming through her veins shivers across his face.

She keeps her gun trained on Nick. “Never could resist a dramatic entrance, could you?”

He shoots her a boyish smile and shrugs. “Didn’t trust you not to accidentally shoot me if I burst in guns blazing.” He holds his arms out. “But even you’re not reckless enough to take on ten assault rifles.”

“You sure?” she asks. “We both know I could kill you from here before they can do a damn thing.”

Nick’s smile widens. He walks slowly down the stairs of the center aisle, his eyes never leaving hers as the distance between them closes. When he finally stops in front of her, he leans forward so that the muzzle of her gun presses against his sternum.

“You could kill me from here too,” he murmurs. “But you won’t.”

“Can’t,” she corrects.

“Same thing.”

“You know they’re not.”

Up close, it’s hard to ignore the vivid green of his eyes, and the slight crookedness of his nose, and the familiar scar above his right eyebrow. He got that scar in a bar fight in Tijuana. She’d stitched it up for him as she berated him for losing his temper and screwing up their mission. She knows now that he screwed it up on purpose. But at the time she didn’t, so when he pulled her into his lap and whispered I’m sorry, baby and kissed her senseless, she’d stopped being mad.

The corner of Nick’s mouth quirks upward like he knows what she’s thinking. “You miss me, baby?”

“Not even a little.”

“I missed you too,” he says despite her denial. His eyes flicker over her body. “You look fucking perfect. Jesus, you’re beautiful.”

She presses her gun harder into his chest because if he reaches out and touches her in front of Will she’s going to lose her mind. “What do you want, Nick?”

He pushes her hands toward the floor. “You know it turns me on when you snarl at me like that. Quit pointing your gun at me or I’m going to get a hard on like a fucking teenager.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Will sidle sideways.

Nick notices too. “I wouldn’t if I were you, Chase,” he says. He turns to look at Will. “In case you haven’t noticed, there are ten guns pointed at you. And I don’t give a shit whether you live or die.”

Will holds up his hands in surrender. Frankie notices for the first time that his gun is sitting on the
floor about three feet away from him. He must have lost it in the scuffle with Pachechik and Rossi.

When she looks back at Nick, she finds him studying Will with clear interest. “So this is the boyfriend,” he muses. “Decorated marine. Perfect disciplinary record. Coaches kiddie soccer in his spare time. He doesn’t even have a parking ticket to his name.”

“I got detention once in high school,” Will says dryly.

Nick looks at Frankie. “I can’t believe you let this guy fuck you.”

“All night last night,” Frankie retorts. “And again this morning. Probably as soon as we’re done here, too.”

Fury flashes in Nick’s eyes, but it’s gone quickly. His lips smooth into a smile. “We’ve been over this, Francesca. It doesn’t matter how many times you spread your legs. Doesn’t change a damn thing between you and me.”

“Try that once more with feeling,” Frankie tells him with a smirk.

They stare each other down, tension thick in the air. Nick takes a half step toward her, and she has to tilt her head back to hold his gaze. She can smell his cologne, the same Armani scent he’s always worn. She used to love that smell. Now, it makes her nauseous.

“It’s never going to last, baby,” he murmurs. “Men like him don’t love girls like you. They fuck you ‘til they’re bored and then they marry girls like Mina.”

“Don’t say her name,” Frankie snarls, pressing her gun against his ribs. “Don’t you dare.”

He leans into the muzzle. “You know I’m right. I’m the only one who knows all your dirty little secrets and still loves you anyway.”

“I’m not playing your games today, Nick. Tell me what you want or I’m going to walk out the door.”

“You know what I want.”

“You can’t have me.”

“Yet.”

“Ever.”

“Yet,” he repeats with a smirk. “I can be patient. In the meantime, I’ll settle for the cyloraxin.”

Frankie tilts her head toward the briefcase on the floor. “Take it.”

He smiles. “You expect me to believe that’s it?”

“You think Durand’s faking it? Looks pretty dead to me.”

“Oh I’m sure there’s something in there. But not all of it. You wouldn’t bring it all in. I’m guessing it’s nearby, though. Probably with Jai. So here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to turn your comms back on. And you’re going to tell Jai to bring the real stuff up here for me.”

Frankie shakes her head. “No.”
“Careful, baby,” Nick warns. “I’ve got all the cards.”

“All the cards except the cyloraxin.”

A slow smile spreads over Nick’s face. “Always have to do things the hard way, don’t you?”

He turns away from her, and gestures toward the line of men standing silently in the back of the room. Three of them trot down the stairs. Frankie watches them, trying to read the situation. She can’t stop them. The second she shoots one of them, the remaining seven will fill her with bullets.

Nick motions toward Will, and the three men stride toward him.

“No,” Frankie says, starting forward.

Nick catches her by the elbow. Will lunges for his gun, but one of the men slams the butt of his rifle against his head. Will drops to his knees, dazed, and is immediately flanked by two men. Frankie wrenches out of Nick’s grasp and points her gun at his temple.

“Back off or he dies,” she commands.

“They’re mercenaries, baby,” Nick says. “They only get paid if Ollerman gets his shit. They won’t trade my life for your boyfriend’s.”

As if on cue, the two men flanking Will point their guns at his head. The third levels his gun at Will’s chest, and the seven in the back of the room shift their aim to Will too.

Will meets Frankie’s gaze from across the room. There isn’t a trace of fear on his face. She thinks about last night, about the smile on his lips and the sound of his voice whispering I love you. She’d give anything to be back in that moment instead of here.

“You’re good, but you’re not that good, Francesca,” Nick says. “You can’t shoot me and all ten of them before one of them kills him. Give me the cyloraxin, and I’ll let your boyfriend live.”

“Don’t do it, Frankie,” Will says.

“Shut him up,” Nick snaps.

One of the men kicks the heel of his boot into Will’s ribs, and Will doubles over with a grunt. He clutches his ribs for a second, bent over and wincing, and then looks up at Frankie. “Don’t.”

“I kind of hope you don’t,” Nick says dryly. “I’d like to see his brain splattered all over the floor.”

“Call them off,” Frankie tells him.

“You going to give me what I want?”

She lowers her gun from his temple. “Call them off.”

Nick waves his hand. The three men step back from Will and stand at attention. Will gazes at her, and she stares back at him. You’d do the same thing, she wants to tell him. But she doesn’t have to. He knows. He’s done it before.

Frankie forces herself to look at Nick. “Turn the comms on.”

Nick gestures toward the back of the room. A second later, Frankie hears Jai in her ear.

“...piggyback the wireless signal,” he says. “Override the outside interference. I’m going to—”
“Jai,” she calls.

“Francesca?” he answers. She can hear the relief in his voice. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“I need you to bring the cyloraxin up to the drop point.”

There’s a beat of silence. “Why?”

“Just do it, Jai.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Let me guess,” Nick says. “He needs a little motivation just like you did. Tell him to get his ass up here or I’m going to hack into the U.S. military mainframe and send a missile to flatten the city he thinks I don’t know he’s hiding his parents in.”

There’s a stunned silence in Frankie’s ear. “Tell me that’s not who I think it is,” Jai murmurs.

Frankie glances at Nick. He’s smiling at her. “I can’t.”

“What’s going on?” Susan’s voice cuts in. “Who’s she talking to? Where’s Will?”

“I’m going in with the cyloraxin,” Jai says without answering Susan’s questions. “You two stay here.”


“Jai—” Susan starts.

“You let me go or Will dies,” Jai snaps at her. “Your choice.”

“We’ll go with you,” Susan offers.

“No,” Jai says. “Frankie can’t protect you two and Will. Stay here until you get the all clear.”

There’s a slamming sound, and then Jai says, “I’m on the way, Francesca.”

Frankie looks at Nick. “He’s coming.”

Nick smiles. “Thought he might. He always comes running for you. It’s impressive, considering all the pain you caused him.”

“You did that, Nick. Not me.”

“And who gave me the chance?”

Frankie doesn’t answer. He’s not wrong.

“He blames you,” Nick tells her. “He won’t admit it, but you know he does.”

“Don’t listen to him, Frankie,” Jai snarls.

“Why’d you wait until now?” she asks Nick, desperate to change the subject. She can feel her hands starting to shake. “Why didn’t you just intercept the cyloraxin last night if you want it so bad?”

“Because I didn’t know you two were posing as the Morellis until this morning. Ollerman’s guy on the inside was a little slow tipping us off. I think you know him. The name Cole Roberts ring a
Frankie stares at him, stunned. Nick smiles at her like he knows why. And apparently he does.

“What’s the matter, baby? You forget to ask him if he worked for The Trust before you jumped in his bed?”

Irritation whips through Frankie’s veins. “Is that what you do in your spare time, Nick? Keep a list of all the men I sleep with?”

“Be a long list, wouldn’t it? All those guys you had to screw to forget me.”

“I know you’re a narcissist, so this is going to be a bit of a shock, but not everything’s about you. I slept with Cole because I wanted to. It had nothing to do with you. None of them did.”

Nick smirks. “Does Captain America know about your laundry list of fuck buddies? Or how many boy scouts just like him you’ve killed? Jesus, the stories I could tell. I watched you snap a CIA agent’s neck and shoot five cops in Belgrade. Two hours later you were drunk and screwing Dominique’s dumbass brother.”

“Careful, baby,” Frankie taunts. “Your jealous streak is showing.”

“All that blood on your hands,” Nick sneers, taking a step closer to her. “All those men in your bed. Once he knows everything, he’ll want someone better.”

“You’re wrong,” Will’s voice rings out.

Frankie and Nick both turn to look at him. Will gets to his feet. The three men surrounding him watch closely, but don’t try to stop him.

“I know what you’re doing,” he says to Nick. “And it won’t work. You can’t break us.”

Will shifts his gaze to Frankie. The knot of tension that’s been sitting in her chest loosens. Warmth spreads through her, the same warmth she feels every time he looks at her that way, and when he smiles a little she wants to cross the room and bury herself in his arms and whisper I love you.

The door on the far side of the room swings open before anyone can say anything. Jai strides into the lecture hall.

“About time,” Nick says. “Good to see you old friend.”

Jai doesn’t return the greeting. He sets the briefcase on the table, opens it, and turns it to face Nick.

Nick saunters toward the table and surveys the contents of the briefcase. Jai’s eyes immediately shift to Frankie. She lifts her eyebrows at him from behind Nick’s back. Jai tilts his head and straightens his tie. Frankie bites the inside of her lip hard enough to draw blood so she won’t be tempted to smile.

“I want a demonstration,” Nick says.

Jai smirks. “Which of your lackeys do you hate the most?”

Nick nods at Pachechik and Rossi. “Bodies aren’t cold yet. If it’s the real stuff, the muscles will still seize up.”
“Fine.” Jai produces a syringe from his jacket pocket and reaches for one of the vials.

“No,” Nick says. “Not that one.”

Jai lifts his gaze to Nick’s with a questioning look.

“I know all your tricks, Jai,” Nick says with a grin. He points at a different vial on the other end of the briefcase. “Use this one.”

Jai clenches his jaw but grabs the vial Nick pointed out and uses it to fill the barrel of the syringe. He replaces the vial when he’s done, walks around Nick and past Frankie, and then crouches in front of Pachechik. He lifts the dead man’s shirt and injects the cyloraxin-filled syringe into Pachechik’s torso. His muscles spasm almost immediately.

Jai shoots a look at Nick. “Satisfied?”

Nick nods. “Very.”

Jai gets to his feet and walks back toward the table. He sets the syringe down, closes the briefcase, and then holds it out to Nick.

Nick smirks at him. “How many trackers do you have built into that thing?”

Jai doesn’t answer.

Nick pulls a small metal disc from his pocket and affixes it to the outside of the briefcase. He twists the disc like a dial, and a quiet whirring noise fills the room, followed by a click.

“Doesn’t matter,” Nick says with a smug smirk. “They’re dead now.”

Jai clenches his jaw again.

Nick looks amused by his apparent annoyance. “You’re too predictable, JD.”

Pain flares in Jai’s eyes, and then a murderous look of rage twists his face, and Frankie knows that if she doesn’t do something he’s going to kill Nick.


Nick stares at Jai a moment longer, and then takes the briefcase from him and turns to face her. “You changed your mind yet? You coming with me?”

“I’d rather shoot myself in the face.”

He smirks. “Love you too, baby.”

He starts toward the aisle between the rows of seats, but stops abruptly on the bottom step. “Oh. One more thing.” He turns toward Will. “I’m disappointed in you, Chase.”

“Oh yeah?” Will says, folding his arms over his chest. “Why’s that?”

Nick shrugs. “I just wouldn’t have expected you to be the kind of guy who would fuck another man’s wife.”

The words blast through the room like a bomb. Frankie feels like she’s going to throw up. Will turns to look at her, complete and utter disbelief on his face, and there’s nothing she can do but
stare back at him.

Nick glances between them. “Oh I’m sorry,” he says in a fake apologetic voice. “Did you not know? You’ve been sleeping with a married woman, Chase. Your girlfriend is my wife.”

He lifts his left hand, and reveals a tattooed wedding band on his fourth finger. “Til death do we part.” He shoots a smirk at Frankie. “Isn’t that right, baby?”

Frankie glares at him. “Fuck you, Nick.”

He grins. “Ready and willing.”

He winks at her, and then turns on his heel and climbs the stairs two at a time. The three men surrounding Will follow Nick. Frankie watches as they file up the aisle and out of the room.

Nick is the last one out the door. He shoots her one last grin from the doorway, and then the door slams closed behind him and he’s gone.

The room is silent for what feels like an eternity. Will is staring at the floor. Frankie watches him, her heart in her throat, waiting. When he finally looks up at her, she finds herself wishing all over again that they could go back to last night.

“Is it true?” he murmurs. “Are you married to him?”

There are a million excuses on the tip of her tongue, but none of them feel good enough. So she tells him the truth like she should have done a long time ago.

“Yes.”

She waits for his anger, or his shock, or his disappointment. When a look of betrayal shivers across his face instead, she feels like someone has shoved a white-hot knife in her chest.

He bends forward, picks his gun up off the floor, and walks away from her without another word.
Chapter Notes

In my defense, the reveal in the last chapter has been a long time coming. I started hinting all the way back in chapter five that Frankie a) had a partner before Will, b) was romantically involved with that partner, and c) it did not end well. Mentions of Nick started in chapter nine, and hints that Frankie was, at the very least, engaged to Nick started in chapter thirteen. This isn’t a plot twist that I just pulled out of thin air to shock y’all and give Frankie and Will a big obstacle to their happily-ever-after. I’ve been developing this for a while. I’ll spare you the manifesto as to why I think this backstory fits with what we saw from Frankie in the thirteen episodes we got. It’s not the only backstory that could fit, of course. It’s just the one I chose to write for my fic.

Anyway, you’re not going to get all your questions about Frankie and Nick answered just yet. But I can promise you two things: 1) You will know everything you ever wanted to know about them very soon, and 2) Nobody wants Frankie and Will to have a happy ending more than I do. (Except Standish. And Susan. And probably Jai.)

Okay. Tighten your seatbelts, kiddos.

Will doesn’t expect Frankie to chase after him.

He doesn’t expect anything, really. His mind is a jumble. He needs space, air, distance. He needs to get a handle on the storm of emotion threatening to swallow him whole.

He bursts out of the lecture hall and into the corridor. He feels dizzy, and the walls of the hallway seem to be closing in on him. All he can manage to do is put one foot in front of the other and focus on his breathing. Inhale, take a step, exhale. Inhale, take a step, exhale. In—

Your girlfriend is my wife.

He chokes on his breath.

“Will,” Frankie calls from behind him.

He ignores her. He can’t look at her right now. How could she not tell him this? She stood across from him in his parents’ kitchen and listened to what he wanted for their future and she said nothing. She spent last night in his arms whispering I love you and smiling every time he said the word forever and she said nothing. He’s been so patient, sacrificed so much just to make her feel safe, and it didn’t matter. None of it mattered. She never trusted him. She never let him in.

“Will,” she says, her voice closer this time, and then he feels her fingers curl around his arm.

“Don’t touch me,” he snaps, ripping his arm out of her grasp. He turns to face her, and he can tell by the look on her face that she’s startled by his anger. He is too, but he can’t seem to tamp it down. They’ve spent six months together. Six months and she never said a word.

Jai appears in the hallway behind her, the lecture hall door clicking shut behind him, and makes his way slowly toward them. Will remembers belatedly that they’re still on comms, so wherever Susan
and Standish are they can hear everything too. Then he realizes he doesn’t care. Let them hear.

The look on Frankie’s face is almost enough to calm him down. It’s a rare showing of everything she’s feeling—regret and guilt and fear and shame. But as he stares at her, his hands curled into fists, he can’t help but wonder whether she’s actually feeling all those things, or if he’s just seeing what he wants to see. He’s been so blindly, stupidly hopeful up until now. No reason to think he’s not being a blind idiot about this too.

“Will,” she whispers, and when her voice breaks on the word he knows he’s not imagining things. “I can explain.”

“Oh, now you want to talk about it?”

She shakes her head. “That’s not fair.”

“How is that not fair? You’re married. You’ve been married our entire relationship. And you never said a damn word.”

“You said I didn’t have to share anything I wasn’t ready to talk about.”

“Ready? ” he repeats incredulously. “When were you going to be ready? When I got down on one knee and asked you to marry me and you had no choice but to tell me you were already married to someone else?”

“You said you were being patient. You said I didn’t owe you anything.”

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before last night!” he explodes. “Before you flew out to Huntington and stood in my parents’ kitchen and let me talk about our future like some kind of blind idiot who couldn’t see what was right in front of his face.”

She looks devastated. “I wanted to tell you—”

“But you didn’t,” he cuts her off. “We’ve been together for six months, Frankie. Half a year. You could have told me that morning you told me about Nick. You could have told me in Indiana. You could have told me last night. But you didn’t. You didn’t even try.”

“I did try,” she insists.

“Obviously not very hard,” he shoots back. “How am I not supposed to think that there’s something seriously wrong with our relationship if you can’t even tell me that you’re married? ”

She shakes her head. “There’s nothing wrong with us, Will. That’s the problem.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“I knew if I told you it would change things.”

“You’re damn right it changes things.”

“I don’t want things to change,” she says, her voice rising. “I know what you want, Will. I’ve always known, even before you told me in Indiana, and I can’t...I can’t give that to you. Even if I want to, I—”
“Are you still in love with him?”

She blinks at him, stunned. “What?”

“Are you still in love with him?”

Now he sees it—that familiar fire in her eyes that blazes whenever they fight. “Are you kidding me?”

“You’re his wife, Frankie. I don’t think it’s an unfair question.”

“I’m his wife because I can’t kill him and he won’t sign divorce papers,” she snaps. “You think I like being married to the man who murdered my best friends? You think I enjoy waking up every morning wondering whether today’s the day he’s going to use that program to do something awful? I fucked up, Will. I trusted the wrong person and it cost me everything. If I could go back in time and do it all over again I would. But I can’t.”

Sympathy rises in Will’s chest. He shoves it away, determined to make her understand how much she’s hurt him, but then he hears a door open behind him. He turns around. Susan and Standish walk out of the stairwell a few yards away. Standish has a sheepish expression on his face, like he knows he shouldn’t have heard everything he did, but Susan looks concerned. She meets Will’s gaze, and he knows what she’s thinking even without her saying a word.

Don’t say something you’re going to regret, cariño.

Will takes a deep breath and turns back to Frankie. “We can’t talk about this right now. We have to call the director and tell him The Trust has the cyloraxin.”

She shakes her head. “The Trust doesn’t have the cyloraxin.”

“What?”

She looks over her shoulder at Jai instead of answering. Jai takes the hint and steps forward to stand at her side. “All they have is water.”

“Say what now?” Standish says.

“How is that possible?” Susan asks.

“Just show them,” Frankie says quietly.

All the fight has gone out of her voice. Will notices it immediately. Jai does too because he casts a worried look at her, but he does as he’s told. He brushes past Will, swings open the door to the nearest classroom, and beckons everyone to follow. Standish and Susan obey immediately. Will glances at Frankie. She avoids his gaze and walks past him and into the classroom.

Once they’re all inside, Jai makes his way toward the back corner of the room. He gestures at a trash can, and everyone crowds around it. A few bottles filled with clear liquid are sitting on the bottom of the container next to a discarded pair of rubber gloves.

“Is that…?” Standish asks.

“Scary water,” Jai says with a bit of a smirk.

Susan frowns. “I don’t understand.”
“I came here before I went down to the lecture hall,” Jai explains. “I poured the cyloraxin in these bottles and then I filled the vials with water. And now The Trust has a briefcase full of water, and we’ve got the cyloraxin.”

“But you did a demonstration,” Will says.

“I knew he’d ask for one,” Jai replies. “And I knew he’d want to pick the vial. So I had a dose of cyloraxin in the barrel of the syringe. It didn’t matter what vial he picked. The cyloraxin was already in the syringe.”

Will blinks at him, impressed. Susan and Standish seem floored.

“That’s the smoothest shit I’ve ever heard,” Standish says in awe. He claps Jai on the back. “Way to go, bro.”

“You knew?” Will asks Frankie.

She nods.

“How?”

“I straightened my tie,” Jai answers for her.

“That…makes zero sense,” Standish says.

“We’ve done something similar before,” Frankie translates. “Straightening his tie is a signal.”

Susan smiles. “Very impressive, you two. This is a definite win.”

“When do you think The Trust will figure it out?” Standish asks gleefully.

“Whenever they try to use it,” Jai replies. He gestures at the trashcan. “And this batch will be long gone by then.”

The smile fades a little from Standish’s face. “Can’t they just buy another batch though?”

“Yes,” Frankie answers. “We’ll have to find Mahmoud. Make sure he can’t make anymore.”

Will expects Standish to make a joke about how Frankie plans to make sure Mahmoud doesn’t create any more cyloraxin. Instead, Standish says, “What about the missiles?”

Will frowns. “What?”

“That guy. Frankie’s…” Standish glances at Frankie, swallows, and says, “…friend. He said he could hack into the U.S. military mainframe and send a missile. Can he really do that?”

“Yes,” Jai answers.

Frankie rounds on Jai with an incredulous look.

Jai stares back at her evenly. “If you want to keep him safe, Francesca, he needs to know what he’s up against.”

“We talked about this,” Frankie tells him in a low voice. “We agreed.”

“And now everything has changed,” Jai counters. “Casey told you it was need to know. And now
that they know Nick exists, they need to know the rest.”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m not—”

“They heard everything that just happened,” Jai interrupts. “You can’t make them unhear it. You might as well give them the context. Because if you don’t, Nick will.”

Will expects Frankie to dig in her heels. She doesn’t. She stares at her best friend for a moment, an unreadable expression on her face, and then she sighs heavily and pinches the bridge of her nose.

Jai watches her. “Do you want me to—”

“No,” she cuts him off. Her voice is harsh, but Jai doesn’t seem offended. He tilts a little closer to her, and Will watches in amazement as Jai reaches out, curls his fingers around her arm, and squeezes. Frankie exhales slowly and her body visibly relaxes. She looks over at him, and he smiles sadly.

“Do or do not,” he murmurs.

A ghost of a smile spreads over her lips. “That’s not fair.”

Jai just smiles. Frankie brushes her hand over his, and then turns her attention to the rest of the group. Jai lets go of her arm and slides his hands into his pockets as if nothing happened.

Susan and Standish seem shocked by the exchange. Will has seen interactions like this before—he still vividly remembers the night Anton broke into her house, and how Frankie seemed stunningly close to a panic attack until Jai grabbed her arm like he did just now—but he’s a little surprised too. They rarely put their intimacy on display. When they do, it’s breathtaking.

Frankie doesn’t seem to care about the team’s surprise. She settles her eyes on Standish. “No jokes,” she warns.

He nods. “Okay.”

“I’m serious, Standish.”

“I won’t,” he promises, holding up his hands. “I swear.”

She takes a deep breath, and then folds her arms over her chest.

“Ten years ago, Jai and I were part of a team just like this one,” she says. “It was an international interagency team. We had a hacker from Mossad named RJ and a profiler from BND named Mina. Nick was a field operative from MI6. We were tasked with chasing down The Collective, a group that was the predecessor of The Trust. They were rogue agents who sold secrets and conducted dirty deals for profit.”

She pauses. Her eyes have gone glassy and unfocused. The desire to reach out and comfort her throbs in Will’s chest, but he ignores it.

“Nick was a traitor,” she continues, her voice flat. “The head of MI6 was the head of The Collective, and he had Nick working as a double agent from the start. When RJ created a program that could track The Collective, Nick knew his days were numbered. So he faked his death, killed our team, and framed me as the double agent.”

It’s a far less detailed explanation than she gave him, but Will isn’t surprised by her brevity.
Honestly, he can’t believe she’s sharing anything at all.

“You married him before you knew he was a traitor,” Susan says softly.

Frankie nods.

“Oh, sweetie,” Susan breathes. She looks like she might cry, and Will feels another stab of sympathy. He can’t imagine what it must have been like for Frankie to realize that she’d been betrayed not only by her partner, but by the man she thought she’d spend the rest of her life with.

“Hold up,” Standish says in disbelief. “He framed you? What kind of monster frames his wife?”

“That wasn’t his plan,” Jai replies. “That’s just how it played out.”

Will frowns. “Wait. What was his plan?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Frankie says before Jai can answer.

Frustration sparks in Will’s veins because even now, even after all this, she’s still stonewalling him.

“You sure?” he asks before he can stop himself. “Because you didn’t think it mattered enough to mention that you married him either.”

Frankie’s gaze snaps up to meet his for the first time since they walked in the room, and that familiar fire is back in her eyes.

“Will,” Susan warns.

Will ignores her. “What was his plan, Frankie?”

“Francesca,” Jai says quietly, turning toward her. “You don’t—”

“He made a deal with Clarke,” Frankie cuts Jai off. “The program in exchange for my life.”

Will stares at her. She stares back.

“So you weren’t a mark,” Will realizes. “You were...he married you because he loved you.”

She purses her lips and doesn’t answer.

“How close were you to going with him?”

“He killed my best friends right in front of me, Will. What do you think?”

“But you killed the entire Collective and you didn’t kill him—”

“I can’t kill him,” Frankie interrupts. “If I kill him, he releases the program and every asshole with a computer gets access to every government mainframe in the world. You want me to end the world as we know it just so I don’t have to be married anymore?”

“Okay,” Susan says soothingly, glancing between them. “Let’s just take a deep breath and take a step back for a second.”

Will ignores her again. “How many times has he asked you if you’ve changed your mind?”

Frankie furrows her eyebrows. “What?”
“He asked you if you changed your mind. And I’m guessing it’s not the first time he’s done that. So how often do you see him, Frankie? Is that why he wanted me out of New York? So you guys could be alone?”

Her eyes flash. “If you’re going to accuse me of something, Will, then do it. Don’t tiptoe around it like a coward.”

“You think I’m the coward?”

“That’s enough,” Susan says, stepping between them. She turns toward Will and brandishes her finger at him. “Stop it.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You’re provoking her on purpose because you’re upset and it’s making things worse.”

“I’m upset because she lied to my face for six months,” Will says, gesturing at Frankie.

“I didn’t lie to you, Will,” Frankie says. “If you’d asked—”

“Oh, you’re right,” he cuts her off, throwing up his hands. “I definitely should’ve thought to ask whether or not you were married. My bad.”

“Enough,” Susan practically shouts.

The room goes silent. Frankie and Will glower at each other.

Standish raises his hand tentatively and says, “Can I ask a question that has nothing to do with the marriage?”

“Yes,” Susan says.

He looks at Frankie. “What program are you talking about?”

Warning sirens start to blare in Will’s head. He’s been so caught up in trying to cope with the painful whiplash of Frankie’s long-awaited I love you being followed so quickly by a snide your girlfriend is my wife that he forgot he’s not exactly innocent right now.

“What?” Frankie says, frowning at Standish.

“You said he had a program,” Standish replies. “You said it would let anybody with a computer access government mainframes.”

“Standish—” Will starts.

“Is it the same program you’ve got me working on?” Standish finishes, turning to look at Will with wide, innocent eyes.

Everyone turns to look at Will. The silence in the room is deafening. Will glances at Frankie, and finds her staring at him in astonishment. He wants to say something, wants to explain all the reasons why he had to do what he did, but for the first time in his life he can’t seem to find any words.

The surprise dissolves from Frankie’s face all of a sudden, and her expression goes blank the way it does during an interrogation. A deadly sort of calm seems to descend around her. She turns toward Standish and says in a quiet, even voice, “What program are you working on?”
“Frankie—”

“Shut up, Will.”

He shuts up.

“Answer the question, Standish.”

Standish glances between her and Will as if he’s not sure what to do. “It’s something the NSA has been trying to stop for a few years,” he says slowly. “It can smash through firewalls like nothing I’ve ever seen. And I’m guessing if the NSA has an entire task force devoted to it then it could probably smash through the U.S. military mainframe.”

Frankie turns her attention back to Will. “Did you give him the NSA files on RJ’s program?”

“Frankie—”

“Yes or no, Will.”

A thousand excuses and explanations are sitting on the tip of his tongue. She’ll hate every single one of them.

“Yes,” he says.

He expects her to explode with anger. What she does instead is much worse. She exhales a short, surprised breath of disbelief and stares at him like she’s seeing him for the first time, a look of hurt and betrayal the likes of which he’s never seen written across her face. He thinks of all the times she’s told him she trusts him without actually saying the words—the way she curls into him when she sleeps; the soft, almost shy smile on her face when she presented him with a key to her brownstone a few weeks ago—and regret squeezes his heart so tight he feels sick.

“You know, I always knew you were a self-righteous son of a bitch,” she finally says quietly. “But I never thought you were a hypocrite.”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t the same—”

“You’re right,” she cuts him off. “It’s worse. I told you, Will. I told you I didn’t want Standish anywhere near that program.”

“He can stop it, Frankie. He’s our best chance. Our only chance.”

“The NSA has an entire task force working on it.”

“And they’ve done nothing for four years.”

“So you thought you’d throw the kid to the wolves?” Frankie demands, gesturing at Standish. “What the hell is wrong with you? Do you have any idea what you’ve done? I can’t believe I care more about protecting him than you do.”

Will shakes his head again. “This isn’t about protecting him. I thought it was. I thought I understood why you were so adamant about keeping him away from it. But then I saw you with Nick and god, Frankie, he has you so twisted up in knots, so convinced that all the shit he did is somehow your fault, and you don’t even see it. The solution was right in front of you. It was right there and you wouldn’t take it. I did this for you because I had to.”

“You didn’t do this for me,” she practically snarls at him. “You did this for you. You did this
because your savior complex is the size of fucking Texas and you can’t stand the idea that there might be a problem you can’t fix. This wasn’t your problem to fix, Will. It wasn’t your decision.”

“It wasn’t yours either. We should have made this decision together.”

“Together?” she repeats incredulously. “You went behind my back!”

“Because you didn’t give me a choice! The minute Nick comes up you just shut down completely. You’re like a damn brick wall.”

“Because he’s not your problem, Will. He’s mine.”

“That’s bullshit. He became my problem the second I fell in love with you. That’s what love is, Frankie. You know that. That’s why you waited so long to say it to me, because you knew what it would mean. Last night was—”

“Stop talking,” she snaps, and even though there’s fury blazing in her eyes, he can hear the slightest quiver of emotion in her voice.

They stare each other down, caught in a stalemate. Will’s heart is pounding hard in his chest. He can feel adrenaline surging through his veins. He wants to fight with her. He wants to defend his decision and yell at her for hiding the truth and ask her why it was so easy for her to call Nick baby. But he knows none of those things will end well. She’s not going to be the first to back down. She’s too stubborn, and too wounded, and if he pushes her, she’s going to push back. They’re going to tear each other apart. His pride demands that he stand his ground and fight, but he loves her too much to listen to it.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Surprise flickers in her eyes, and he presses his advantage. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Frankie. I never want to hurt you. I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not good enough.”

He steps toward her. “Francesca,” he says, dropping his voice into that low tone she loves.

She takes a step back. “No.”

The rejection stings. He tries again and takes another step. “I just wanted—”

“I don’t care what you wanted,” she interrupts as she takes another step back. “You can’t fix this, Will. It’s done. What you did was unforgivable.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes I do.”

They stare at each other from across the room again. There isn’t a trace of doubt or hesitancy on her face, and a deep sense of dread wells up inside of him.

“We’re going to give you guys a minute,” Susan says softly into the ensuing silence. She reaches out for Standish. “Come on.”

“No,” Standish says, shrugging out of her grasp.

Susan blinks at him in surprise. Standish ignores her and takes a step toward Frankie. “It was my fault, Frankie. I did this. I was bored, and I asked Will to find me something to work on, and Casey gave him the files.”
Frankie shakes her head. “Standish…”

“This isn’t Will’s fault. It was me, okay? Don’t be mad at him. It was me.”

“You’re lying,” Frankie tells him gently. “I know you’re lying.”

“No I’m not,” he insists. “It was me.” He turns toward Will. “Tell her, Will. Tell her it was me.”

Will wants to hug him, but he thinks if he does then all the emotion that he’s just barely got a handle on is going to burst out. “It’s not your fault, kiddo,” he says instead.

Susan reaches out for Standish again. “Come on.”

“No,” Standish says, yanking his arm away from her. He gestures at Frankie. “She’s going to break up with him. We have to do something.”

Susan doesn’t say anything.

Standish turns away from her with a huff of annoyance and looks at Jai. “You have to talk to her, Jai. She listens to you.”

Jai looks heartbroken. “It’s not my place, Standish.”

“So you’re just going to do nothing?” Standish demands. “You’re just going to let her do this?”

He looks back and forth between Jai and Susan incredulously. When neither of them offers a denial, his face contorts into fury. “Screw you guys,” he mutters and storms out of the room.

“I’ll talk to him,” Susan says before she hurries after Standish.

Jai glances at Frankie. “I’ll mute the comms.”

He glances at Will and opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but seems to think better of it. He grabs the trash can with the cyloraxin, and then walks out of the classroom and pulls the door shut behind him.

For the first time since Nick’s unexpected appearance, Will and Frankie are alone. The silence is painfully loud. Frankie won’t look at him. Will is dying to touch her. He feels like every cell in his body is straining toward her, desperate for contact, but she’s refused him twice already and she’s so pissed at him that he wouldn’t put it past her to hit him if he gets close enough.

She’s the one who breaks the silence.

“How long has Standish been working on the program?”

Will hesitates, because he knows the answer will infuriate her. “A little over a month.”

She finally looks up at him. “A month?” she repeats in disbelief. “You’ve been lying to me for a month?”

“You’ve been lying to me for six.”

A flash of guilt chases across her face.

“You should have told me, Frankie.”
She lifts her chin defiantly. “And what would you have done if I had? Blown up at me like you did five minutes ago?”

“You don’t get to do that,” he says, shaking his head. “You don’t get to use my reaction as a justification for not telling me. If I’d found out from you instead of your asshole husband then I wouldn’t be so pissed right now.”

She winces a little when he says husband. “And then what?” she asks. “You said it yourself, Will. It would’ve changed everything. What’s the point of running the race if you don’t get the prize?”

He frowns because she’s speaking in riddles and she never does that. He studies her, taking in the tension in her shoulders and the tautness of her expression, and when he realizes it’s the same way she’s looked all those times she thought he was going to walk away, he suddenly understands.

“You thought I would break up with you because you can’t marry me,” he breathes, stunned.

He can tell by the way she suddenly drops her gaze away from his that he’s right.

“Seriously?” he demands, probably a little harsher than he means to. “That’s what you think of me?”

She bristles defensively. “I know what you want, Will. You’ve been talking about it since our first mission, so don’t act like it doesn’t matter to you. You want a church wedding and a picket fence and two kids and a dog and I can’t give you any of that.”

“Because you don’t want to? Or because of Nick?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. Because Standish figured out the program.”

She gapes at him. “What?”

“He figured it out. He’s going to create some new system, and plant a flaw to corrupt the program when it updates itself, and...I don’t understand all the ins and outs. I just know he figured it out.”

“So it’s done?”

“No. Not yet. But he’s working on it.”

He expects to see relief in her eyes, or excitement, or joy. And for a second, he does. But then it fades, and all he sees is dread and grief and pain. She hangs her head and takes a deep breath, and he doesn’t understand the defeated curl of her shoulders.

“Frankie,” he calls, taking a step toward her. “This is what you’ve been waiting for. Four years you’ve been waiting for that task force to do this and now Standish is doing it. We can end this. The program will be gone, and Nick won’t be untouchable anymore—”

“It’s not done yet,” she says, looking up at him. “This isn’t the first time someone’s told me they were close to figuring it out. It never works. And it doesn’t change what you did. You went behind my back and you put Standish in the crosshairs. Nick is going to come after him.”

“Not if he doesn’t find out.”

“He’s going to find out. He’s working with The Trust. They have spies everywhere, and so does he. You don’t know him like I do. He’s relentless. And when he finds out we screwed him out of the
cyloraxin he’s going to be out for blood. It’s only a matter of time. It doesn’t matter that Standish isn’t on the task force. It doesn’t matter how many bullshit promises Casey made you. You signed his death warrant.”

“Look, Frankie, I know you’re scared—”

“You don’t know anything, Will. You have no idea what this is like for me.”

His temper flares—how is he supposed to know if she won’t tell him?—but he swallows the angry retort on the tip of his tongue and takes a deep breath.

“Why don’t you explain it to me then?” he suggests.

She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t refuse either. She just stares at him, her arms folded over her chest and her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

Will waits her out as patiently as he can. It’s been a long time since he felt this way—like she’s a puzzle that he can’t seem to figure out how to put together. He felt this way a lot during the early days of their professional relationship, and again during the early stages of their romantic relationship. But not lately. He knows how to read the tilt of her head, and the tone of her voice, and the way she stands. He knows that her silences are just as full of meaning as her words. He knows her. But right now, that understanding seems to have fled. He’s completely bewildered.

“RJ was only twenty-four,” she finally says into the silence. “He had his whole life ahead of him.”

Will notices the subtle quiver in her voice immediately. And even though she doesn’t say it outright, he understands the implication. Standish isn’t much older than RJ was when he died.

“He had three little brothers,” she continues. “I met them once when we were in Jerusalem for a mission. His parents too. They had us over for dinner and showed us baby pictures and told us embarrassing stories. They were proud of him. And I sent him back to them in a body bag.”

Her voice breaks on the last word, and Will steps toward her without meaning to. “Frankie...”

She closes her eyes. “Jai was in love with Mina.”

Will blinks at her in shock. “What?”

“He was crazy about her,” she breathes. She’s pressing her fingers against her temples as if she can make the memories go away just by sheer force of will. “Mina knew. She was too good at her job not to know. But she had a boyfriend, and then she was worried about ruining their friendship, and then I think she was just scared. They both were. But they figured it out eventually and they were so ridiculously happy. You wouldn’t have even recognized him. And then Nick killed her, and Jai hasn’t been with a woman since. Not one. Because I broke him.”

“Nick broke him.”

“I did,” she insists, her voice thick with emotion. “I was the one who trusted Nick when he showed up in Moscow. I was the one who told RJ to run the program. I’m the one who let Nick walk out the door with it. I got them killed and I put the entire world at risk because I trusted the wrong person and I promised myself that I would never do anything that stupid again. And then I trusted you. I trusted you, Will, and you did the one thing I asked you not to do. And now I have to do this all over again. If Standish dies because of that program, that’s on me.”

Her eyes are gleaming with tears. Will thinks of Tokyo, of the only other time he’s ever seen her
cry, and he can barely breathe around the ache in his chest.

“How could you do this to me?” she whispers.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps, struggling to speak around the emotion seizing his throat. “I was just trying to protect you.”

“That’s what Nick said.”

The words feel like a slap to the face. Will nearly chokes on his denial. “I’m not him.”

“You lied to me, Will. You knew it would hurt me and you did it anyway.”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you—”

“But you did. How am I supposed to trust you again?”

“The same way I trust you,” he says desperately. “You lied too, Frankie. You lied about not knowing why Nick wanted me out of New York. You lied about being married to him. It sucks, and it hurts, and I’m mad as hell at you, but sometimes relationships are like that. We mess up, and we hurt each other, but then we fix it and we move on and we’re better than we were before.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not you, Will.”

Dread wraps its fingers around his throat. “What does that mean?”

“I think you know what it means.”

He shakes his head and tries to tamp down the panic rising in his chest. “You said our mistakes don’t define us. You said everyone screws up. One mistake, Frankie. I made one mistake and that’s it? You’re done?”

She looks anguished. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“Last night—”

“Last night wasn’t real. I was lying to you, and you were lying to me. Everything was a lie.”

“Everything? So you don’t love me? You didn’t mean it?”

She looks away from him and clenches her jaw and he can tell she’s trying not to lose control.

“Look me in the eye and say it, Frankie,” he tells her. “If you’re going to do this, do it right. Tell me you didn’t mean it. Tell me you don’t love me.”

She looks at him. Her eyes are brimming and he watches as tears finally spill down her cheeks, as she sucks in a breath and her chest hitches with the inhale, and his heart shatters.

“I can’t do this anymore, Will,” she whispers. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“No,” he says. “No.”

The impulse throbs in his chest—he has to touch her, he needs to touch her—and he obeys it. He starts toward her, closing the distance quickly, and she shakes her head.

“Don’t,” she begs, taking half a step back, but there’s a wall a few feet behind her and there’s
nowhere for her to go and she’s tilting toward him even as she steps away. He lifts his hands to her face and wipes the tears from her cheeks as he crowds into her space.

“Don’t do this,” he whispers. He’s crying now too. “Please.”

She closes her eyes, and a few more tears slip free. He wipes those away too, and then presses his forehead against hers and begs her like his life depends on it.

“Please don’t do this. I love you, Francesca. I’m in love with you. Please don’t do this.”

“Will,” she breathes. Her hands are on his chest. Her fingers flex against him, but she doesn’t push him away.

“Tell me the truth,” he pleads. “Tell me you love me.”

“It’s not enough,” she whispers.

“It’s always enough. Just say it, Francesca. Say it.”

She kisses him instead.

He can taste the salt of her tears on her lips. He thinks of all the times she’s shown him how she felt instead of telling him. He thinks of last night, of how easily and often she said I love you without any prompting. The fact that she’s kissing him now instead of saying the words feels like a step backward but he doesn’t care. If she’s kissing him then she can’t leave, and if she wants him then maybe she still loves him, and if he can show her how much he loves her, if he can get them back to that place they found last night where everything made sense and nothing hurt, then maybe she won’t break his heart.

A knock on the door shatters the moment.

Frankie breaks their kiss and ducks her face down toward his collarbone. Will breathes into the top of her head for a second, trying to compose himself. She pushes weakly against his chest. He obeys her unspoken request and takes a step back. He stares at her, trying to read her face. She swipes at her eyes and doesn’t look at him.

Another knock echoes through the room.

“Guys?” Susan’s voice calls through the door.

Will turns toward the door. A beat passes before Susan opens it, and Will wonders if she suspected what they were doing and is giving them a minute to get sorted out. When she glances quickly between them after she swings the door open, he knows he’s right.

“Sorry,” she says. “But we have a situation. You need to see this.”

Frankie brushes past Will and toward the door without a word.

“End of the hall on the left,” Susan says to Frankie as she walks by.

Frankie doesn’t say anything. Will follows her. Susan catches his arm as he passes through the doorway.

“You okay?” she asks softly.

“No.”
He looks down at her and suddenly remembers something she told him about Frankie months ago. *The last time she was in a situation like this, it didn’t end well for her.*

“Did you know?” he asks.

Susan glances down the hallway at Frankie’s retreating figure. “I knew her team died. I knew her partner was a traitor and that they were together. But I didn’t know she married him.” She glances up at him with a meaningful look. “I didn’t know you went behind her back, either.”

Will rubs his temples. “I don’t need a lecture right now, Sus.”

“What were you thinking?” Susan says anyway. “You had to have known—”

“She’s drowning,” Will cuts his best friend off, lowering his hand to look her in the eye again. “He’s eating her alive and she’s letting him.”

“It doesn’t sound like she has a choice.”

“That’s what he wants her to think. I’m not going to let him hurt her anymore.”

Susan squeezes his arm. “I’m not sure that’s your decision, cariño.”

Fear barrels through Will’s veins and he grits his teeth against it. He won’t lose her. He can’t. It’ll ruin him.

“Come on,” Susan says, pulling gently on his arm.

He follows her lead down the hall. Frankie is up ahead, only a few yards away from the room Susan directed her toward. Jai appears, stepping out of the room and into the hallway, and watches Frankie close the remaining distance.

Frankie ducks her head when she stops in front of him. Jai keeps his hands in his pockets but tilts toward her and says something. Frankie shakes her head. Jai pulls the pocket square out of his suit jacket and holds it out to her. Frankie takes it and closes it in a tight fist but doesn’t use it. Jai’s mouth moves again as he says something else. Frankie doesn’t look up and doesn’t respond. Jai watches her, waiting, and then he curls his hand around her arm the way he did earlier, leans forward, and presses a kiss to her forehead.

When Jai leans back, Frankie straightens. She turns her head to glance down the hall, sees that Will has almost caught up to her, and immediately pushes past Jai and into the room.

Jai turns to gaze after her but doesn’t follow. Will and Susan stop next to him.

“Jai,” Will says quietly. He isn’t sure what he’s planning to do. Apologize for hurting Frankie? Explain why he felt like he had to do what he did? Beg Jai to convince her not to throw everything away?

It doesn’t really matter, because Jai doesn’t want to hear it. “No,” he says simply. And then he follows Frankie into the room.

Jai’s dismissal doesn’t hurt as bad as Frankie’s, but it stings. Susan must be able to see it on his face, because she brushes her hand over his back and says, “Come on.”

Will takes a deep breath and walks into the room. It appears to be some sort of break room. There are round tables surrounded by plastic chairs, and vending machines lining one wall. Standish is
sitting at one of the tables with his laptop open in front of him. Frankie is standing to his left, her arms crossed over her chest and an impassive look on her face. Will stares at her. She doesn’t meet his gaze.

“What do we need to see?” she asks Standish once everyone is in the room.

Standish glances between her and Will. “Did you guys break up?”

“What do we need to see?” she repeats emotionlessly.

Standish twists toward her in his chair. “I don’t—”

“Please, Standish,” she cuts him off. “Just tell us what you found.”

It’s not the threatening tone she usually resorts to when he’s giving her a hard time, and Will can’t remember the last time she said please when asking Standish to do something. Standish blinks at her for a second, obviously startled, but obeys.

“I found Ollerman.”

“How?” Will says, stepping forward.

“What?” Frankie demands.

“You know I have programs constantly running searches for him,” Standish replies. “After I got out of the hospital, I added Tina to the search parameters. I flagged all of her known aliases. The IDs aren’t much use, obviously, cause she’s dead and rotting in hell somewhere, but she had bank accounts and credit cards and other stuff Ollerman could use. Seemed like a longshot, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

He hits a key on his laptop, and then turns it toward the rest of the room.

“He just used one of Tina’s credit cards at the Starbucks down the street. And he’s still there.”

Will takes a step forward and so does Frankie. They squint at the live feed on Standish’s screen in unison. It’s a video of the outside patio of a Starbucks. There are several tables and chairs spread beneath green cloth umbrellas that are fluttering in the wind. And sitting alone at one of the tables, sipping from a white cup as if he doesn’t have a care in the world, is Ollerman.

Frankie straightens. “Let’s go get him.”

Will turns to look at her. “It’s a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap,” she says, meeting his gaze. “But if you think I’m going to let him sit there and sip a fucking latte then you’re wrong.”

“I’m not saying we’re not going after him,” Will says, holding out his hands. “I’m just saying we should be careful. We need a plan.”

“I’ve got a plan,” Frankie says, folding her arms over her chest. “I put a bullet in his skull and then I pop some champagne.”

Standish raises his hand. “I like that plan.”

“I don’t,” Jai says.
Everyone in the room turns to look at him in surprise. He only has eyes for Frankie. “If you kill him, Nick takes over The Trust. It’s The Collective all over again.”

“Nick can do that whenever he wants, Jai,” she replies.

“But he hasn’t,” Jai points out. “Which means he hasn’t gotten something he wants from Ollerman yet. If we bring Ollerman in alive, we can find out what it is.”

“Ollerman won’t break in an interrogation,” Will says. “He didn’t the last time we had him in custody.”

Jai turns his eyes to Will. “That’s because you didn’t let Frankie do it.”

A hush falls over the room. Will glances at Frankie. She ignores him.

“Ray still has a tactical team on standby,” Jai continues. “We can use them for this. Ollerman won’t expect us to have reinforcements. We can surround him, cuff him, and take him to a secondary location. Frankie and I will take it from there.”

“We’re doing this together,” Will corrects. “We’re a team.”

“You can’t handle it,” Jai counters. “You won’t let her do what she needs to do.”

“He doesn’t get to let me do anything,” Frankie snaps.

“Guys, take a breath,” Susan says soothingly. “This is exactly what they want. I know we have some things we need to work through, but we need to put them aside right now. We started this together. We need to finish it together.”

“Jai and I will lead the tac team,” Frankie says. “Standish can provide tech support. Susan, you can drive.”

“What do you want me to do, play solitaire in the back of the van?” Will asks.

Frankie meets his gaze. “I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“I’m your partner whether you’re pissed at me or not,” Will tells her. “It’s my job to have your back.”

“Well you suck at it.”

“Frankie,” Susan chides softly.

Frankie usually softens when Susan admonishes her. Not this time.

“I don’t trust you,” she says, still staring at Will. “You want to come with us? Fine. But I’m running point with the tac team and Jai’s my second. He’s the only one I trust.”

It hurts to breathe around the shattered shards of his heart, but everyone is looking at him and Ollerman is waiting.

Reminder: The main objective of Team Whiskey right now is to capture Ollerman and bring down The Trust. They know Ollerman has something up his sleeve. He ain't sitting at Starbucks because he needed a caffeine fix. But they don't really have a choice here. They have to go after him, regardless of how risky it is.

Additional reminder: It's always darkest before the dawn.

Frankie has barely closed the door of the Maserati before Jai is turning toward her from the front seat and saying, “Standish figured out the program.”

She yanks the seatbelt down across her chest with a little more force than necessary. “So I’ve heard.”

“Only took him a month.” There’s a tinge of pride in Jai’s voice. “NSA had it for four years and got nowhere, and he did it in a month.”

“It’s not finished,” Frankie says, starting the car. “We have no idea if it’ll work.”

“His idea is solid. He showed me what he’s done so far. It’ll work.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Francesca—”

“Don’t,” she cuts him off, closing her eyes and squeezing the gear shift in an attempt to restrain her temper. “Don’t tell me to be hopeful, Jai. Don’t tell me this time is different. You say that every time, and it never is, and this time it’s not going to be some random guy from the NSA. He’s going to kill Standish.”

Jai doesn’t say anything. A beat of silence passes, and then Frankie feels his hand on top of hers, his palm warm over her knuckles. “Look at me, Francesca.”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly because she can feel tears threatening again and there is no fucking way she’s going to cry again today, even if it is only in front of Jai. When she feels the wave of emotion pass, she opens her eyes and looks at her best friend.

“You’re not responsible for his actions,” he tells her gently.

“I’m responsible for mine,” she counters. “I didn’t pull the trigger, but I handed him a loaded gun.”

She’s surprised when the corner of Jai’s mouth quirks upward. “I love you, Francesca. But sometimes I want to strangle you.”

Frankie stares at him, taken aback.

“I’m going to say this for the hundredth time,” he continues when she doesn’t voice a reply. “And
maybe this time it’ll finally sink in. RJ and Mina chose to trust Nick. I chose to trust Nick. And Nick chose to do what he did. Every time you act like you were the only one who made those decisions, you exonerate him and you diminish their sacrifice.”

Nick’s words come floating back—He blames you. He won’t admit it, but you know he does—and Frankie looks out the window and clenches her jaw against another wave of emotion.

“Look at me,” Jai says firmly.

Frankie sighs but looks at him.

“I don’t blame you,” he murmurs. “I’ve never blamed you. And it’s time for you to stop blaming yourself. Otherwise, I’m going to have to strangle you.”

Frankie can’t help it—she snorts out a laugh. Jai squeezes her hand with a smile and then lets go.

Frankie shifts the car into drive and pulls away from the curb. She checks her rearview mirror and sees the van carrying the rest of the team pull out behind her. She can’t see Will—Susan is driving and the front seat is empty—but knowing he’s there is enough. Her heart aches in her chest.

She and Jai drive in comfortable silence for a minute or so, but it doesn’t last.

“I’m going to turn comms back on,” Jai says. “But before I do, there’s one more thing I have to say.”

“Lucky me,” Frankie replies dryly.

“It will annoy you.”

“I’ve already hit my limit for the day. I think you’re safe.”

“You need to forgive Will.”

Frankie tightens her grip on the steering wheel and clenches her jaw. They’re coming up on a traffic light and she needs to stop, but she hits the brakes harder than she needs to. The car rocks as it halts. She turns her head and shoots Jai a look that would make anyone else cower.

“I was wrong. I haven’t hit my limit.”

Jai seems unbothered. “He’s right, Francesca. The solution was right in front of us and we were too afraid to take it. We did what was easiest for us, not what was best for everyone else. I should’ve done what he did. I should’ve made the decision for you.”

“You would never do that.”

“I would if I thought you needed me to.”

“You and I don’t lie to each other, Jai. And you’d blow yourself up with one of your watches before you went behind my back. So don’t pretend like you could’ve done what he did.”

Jai tilts his head in acknowledgement. “You’re right. I wouldn’t have lied or gone behind your back. But I wouldn’t have had to. If I told you I changed my mind and wanted Standish to work on the program, you wouldn’t have shut me out for suggesting it.”

“I didn’t shut him out.”
“You just said we don’t lie to each other, Francesca.”

She sighs. “Fine. I shut him out. Does that make it okay that he lied to my face for a month?”

“No. But it’s also not okay that you didn’t tell him about Nick once you knew your relationship had gotten serious.”

“That’s different.”

“No it’s not. You lied to him because you didn’t want to lose him, and he lied to you because he was trying to protect you. Motives matter, Frankie. You lied to each other because you’re disgustingly in love, and it’s absurd to end a relationship with someone that you’re disgustingly in love with just because you both made mistakes.”

Frankie gives him a look. “Disgustingly in love, Jai? Really?”

“I saw you two this morning,” he replies. “It was disgusting.”

She rolls her eyes. The traffic light turns green, and Frankie eases her foot onto the gas.

“You of all people should understand why motives don’t matter to me, Jai. You can’t do something awful and say you did it for love. That’s not okay.”

“He’s not Nick,” Jai says gently. “This isn’t—”

“I know,” she cuts him off. “I’m just saying that it’s not about whether or not we love each other. And it’s not about whether or not he meant well. It’s about trust. He broke it. He can’t fix it.”

“He can’t fix it? Or you won’t let him?”

Frankie shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Jai ignores her. “You don’t understand what it’s like, Francesca.”

“What’s like?”

“Watching you deal with Nick. You’re my best friend and I hate it, so I can’t imagine what it’d be like if I was in love with you. It’s no wonder he felt like he had to do something.”

“For god’s sake, Jai,” she sighs. “I handle Nick just fine.”

“No you don’t. You know you don’t. You hate losing so much you made me rig Monopoly dice so you could beat Will on game night, but you let Nick win every time you go toe-to-toe.”

“When the program is gone, and I can kill him, then I’ll win. Until then, there’s nothing I can do. He’s got all the cards, Jai. That’s how it works when you control a program that could end the world.”

“And how, exactly, do you expect that program to be gone if you refuse to let Standish work on it?”

Frankie grips the steering wheel tighter and says nothing.

“You’re not answering me because you know I’m right,” Jai observes.

“I’m not answering you because I’m trying not to punch you,” Frankie replies.
Jai smirks at her. “You would never punch me.”

“Keep talking and you’re going to find out how wrong you are.”

Jai snorts.

Frankie purses her lips around a smile. He’s right. She would never punch him.

Jai turns toward her in his seat. “Look, Francesca, I’ll have your back no matter what you decide. You want to be celibate for the rest of your life, fine. You want to go back to sleeping with a different guy every few days, fine. But that little old lady at the casino last night was right. Truth matters, but forgiveness does too. And personally, I want you and Will to have the happy ending you both deserve.”

Frankie shakes her head. “People like me don’t get happy endings, Jai.”

Jai smiles sadly. “Not unless you’re brave enough to go after them.”

Frankie has dreamed about killing Ollerman.

She’s dreamed about putting a bullet in his skull, and slitting his throat, and snapping his neck. She’s imagined the look of surprise on his face when he realizes it’s over. She’s wondered whether he might look suddenly afraid the way so many other men have right before she’s taken their lives. She’s pictured standing in front of a mirror afterward, looking herself in the eye, and knowing without a shadow of a doubt that she was justified.

So when she stops behind his table at Starbucks, and presses her gun to the back of his head, and she can’t kill him—well, it infuriates her.

The air around them is electric with an incoming storm. The sky is dark, the wind is starting to pick up speed, and the streets are empty even though it hasn’t started raining yet. Ollerman is the only person sitting on the patio outside the coffeeshop, and there’s not another human being in sight. It’s eerily quiet.

The tactical team fans out around Ollerman, their assault rifles trained on his seated figure, their feet silent on the concrete. If Ollerman is surprised to see them, he doesn’t show it. He sips his drink and watches them without a word. Frankie wants to smack the cup out of his hand, but she doesn’t.

Will is somewhere behind her. Jai stands beside her in the place Will usually occupies, a familiar presence that soothes the rage sitting in her chest.

“Let me see your hands, jackass,” she tells Ollerman.

Ollerman sets his cup down on the table and then holds his hands up in surrender. “Easy, Agent Trowbridge. I’m unarmed.”

She glances at Jai, and Jai holsters his gun and steps forward with a zip tie in his hands. He grabs one of Ollerman’s wrists and pulls it behind his back, and then reaches for the other. Ollerman cranes his neck to look up at Jai.


Jai ignores him and zip ties his hands behind his back.
“Stand up,” Frankie orders when Jai is finished.

Ollerman gets to his feet and turns to face them. He looks past Frankie and smirks at Will. “There you are. I thought for a second she might have left you at home.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Will says dryly.

Ollerman’s smirk deepens. “Oh, I’m not disappointed. I wanted to give you my condolences in person. It must sting to know that your girlfriend is married to such an infamous traitor.”

Will clenches his jaw and says nothing.

Ollerman turns his gaze to Frankie. “And you. Look how far you’ve come. From planning Whiskey’s murder to trading a case of cyloraxin for his life. So sweet. Of course, the thousands of people I’m going to kill with the chemicals you gave me might not agree. But who cares what they think?”

“I’m really going to enjoy the one-on-one time you and I are about to have,” Frankie tells him. “It’s like Christmas in October.”

Ollerman smiles and then makes a show of glancing around. “I’m disappointed you left Dr. Sampson and Standish on the sidelines. Dr. Sampson is such a calming presence, don’t you think? Very soothing. And Edgar, well, it’s just adorable how he’s become this cute little combination of you two.”

“Are we sure we can’t kill him?” Standish says over comms. “Please kill him, Frankie.”

“No matter,” Ollerman says lightly. He looks at Jai. “You’re the one I really wanted to see, Agent Datta. I’m glad you’re here. I owe you an apology.”

“Is that so,” Jai says, sounding almost bored.

“It is. You see, all this time, I’ve been overlooking you. It’s been my greatest mistake. Without you, this team would have fallen apart a long time ago.”

“I think you’ve got me confused with someone else,” Jai says.

“No,” Ollerman replies. “You’re the one who saved Ray and tracked me in Prague. You’re the one who found Standish and saved his life. You’re the one who destroyed the surveillance devices in Chase’s apartment. You’re the reason I can’t get into the Dead Drop. The list goes on and on.”

A deep sense of unease settles over Frankie. The hair on the back of her neck is standing up. Something is wrong. She swivels her head, taking in her surroundings, but there’s nobody in sight except the tactical team, and Ollerman’s hands are bound behind his back.

Will notices. “Fiery?” he asks quietly.

Jai darts a glance at her out of the corner of his eye and shifts a little closer to her.

“Now that we have the cyloraxin—thanks for that by the way—we’ll be starting our next phase,” Ollerman continues. “And I’m afraid I can’t have you messing things up for me again.”

The sense of foreboding in Frankie’s chest intensifies to the point that she feels like she can’t breathe. She glances toward Jai the same way she always does when she feels like she can’t breathe, and that’s when she sees it—the tiny red dot hovering on his jacket right above his heart.
“Jai,” she cries, lunging toward him.

Her hands connect with his shoulder and she shoves him a split second before a bullet rockets into his body. He gasps in surprise and stumbles from the impact. He glances down at the hole in his jacket, and then up at Frankie with a stunned look. For a second, they just stare at each other. And then Frankie’s instincts take over.

“Sniper!” she shouts. She leaps forward to tackle Jai to the ground. Another bullet whizzes through the air, skims the shoulder of her leather jacket, and buries itself in the leg of a nearby chair.

“Alpha, Bravo, secure the target,” Will shouts.

Ollerman is sprinting away from Frankie, his hands still bound behind his back, but she doesn’t care. Her only concern is Jai. She wraps her hands around the lapels of his coat and yanks him across the sidewalk and behind a tall wooden planter a second before a bullet smashes into the concrete where his head just was.

She props him up against the planter and huddles over him. A dull thud rings in her ears and the planter trembles from the force of a shot. She bends closer to him, her forehead pressed against his shoulder.

“Francesca,” Jai rasps in her ear.

She curls her fingers around his forearm and squeezes. “Charlie, Delta, Echo, locate the shooter. I’m pinned.”

“Two o’clock,” an unfamiliar voice reports over comms. “Fourth floor, last window on the left.”

“I’ve got cover,” another voice replies. “Delta, Echo, neutralize the shooter.”

The sharp report of an assault rifle splits the air. Frankie turns her head and sees one of the guys from the tactical team knelt behind a planter a few yards away. He’s shooting at something in the distance.

She leans back just far enough to see Jai’s face. He blinks up at her, dazed. His skin is pale, and there’s a trace of panic in his eyes. His hand fumbles at her side, his fingertips pressing against her hip.

Fear threatens to swallow her whole, but Frankie shoves it aside. She reaches out to push Jai’s jacket out of the way to find the wound. It’s on the right side of his body, just beneath his collarbone, and a growing circle of dark red blood is staining his gray vest.

“Susan,” she says as she rips her leather jacket off. “Bring the van around. Standish, find me a hospital and clear the route. Jai’s been hit.”

Frankie balls up her jacket and presses it to Jai’s wound. He grunts in pain, and his hand falls away from her hip. There’s a scream and a clatter, and Frankie turns her head to see that their cover shooter is dead. She ducks, and a second later another bullet rockets into the planter.

“Whiskey,” she calls.

“Here,” Will says.

She turns her head and sees him yanking the assault rifle out of the dead agent’s hands and then diving behind a planter just before another shot rings out. He rises to his knees and returns fire in
the direction of the sniper.


“Inside the building and on the move,” a voice replies immediately.

“Move faster,” she snaps. She presses her jacket harder against Jai’s chest. “Susan?”

“Incoming,” Susan replies.

“Susan, hold,” Will says. He ducks down behind his planter and shoots Frankie a look. “I’m out. He’ll light her up.”

“Extra magazine?”

“On his belt.” Will nods at the dead agent who is too far out of his reach.

“Diversion,” Jai rasps in Frankie’s ear.

Frankie traces her hand down his arm and finds his watch. She makes quick work of the band and pulls it off his wrist.

“What time?”

“11:45. Press twice.”

Frankie turns the dial on the watch to 11:45, and then looks up at Will. “Ready?”

He nods.

She presses the crown of the watch twice and then rises up from behind the planter just long enough to heave the watch as far as she can in the direction she knows the sniper is shooting from. She hits the deck just before another bullet slams into the concrete behind her, and then there’s a ground-shaking explosion in the distance.

Will darts forward, pulls the extra magazine from the agent’s belt, scurries back to take cover, and shoves the magazine in place. “Ready,” he reports.

“Susan,” Frankie calls.

“Coming up behind you,” Susan replies.

Frankie glances over her shoulder and sees the van barreling toward them on the sidewalk. “Delta, report.”

“Breaching now. Hold for status.”

She looks at Will. “Go.”

Will rises to his knees and starts shooting, and the van squeals to a stop behind them.

“Back doors are open,” Standish says over comms.

Frankie turns to Jai. “Hold this,” she tells him, nodding at her jacket.

He lifts a trembling hand and holds her jacket against his wound. Frankie slides her arms beneath his armpits and heaves him to his feet. Will darts forward, stepping between them and the sniper,
still firing off a steady pattern of shots to cover their retreat. Jai sags against Frankie’s side and
stumbles.

“Come on, JD,” she whispers, gritting her teeth as she tries to hold him up with an arm around his
waist. They stagger toward the van.

“Shooter neutralized,” Delta’s voice reports over comms.

Jai trips. Frankie grasps his torso tighter but she knows she won’t be able to catch him if he pitches
too far forward. Will appears on Jai’s other side and steadies him.

“I got you,” Will says gently, wrapping an arm around Jai’s middle. He presses his palm over Jai’s
hand to help him hold pressure on the wound.

The three of them close the remaining distance to the van quickly. Will helps Frankie heave Jai
into the back of the van. Frankie leaps in after Jai and props him up against the side of the van. A
sudden, brutal wave of deja vu rocks through her. She thinks of Zurich with Will, and Barcelona
with Nick, and her hands freeze on Jai’s chest. Will jumps in the van and slams the doors, and the
noise jolts her back to attention.

The tires squeal as the van peels out. “There’s a hospital close,” Susan calls from the driver’s seat.
“Hang on, Jai.”

“I’m on traffic control,” Standish says. “Susan, you’re clear. Don’t stop at any lights, I’ll change
them for you.”

“What do you need?” Will asks gently, kneeling next to Frankie.

“Get me a clean towel from the med kit,” she answers.

He hurries to obey. She pulls her jacket away from Jai’s chest and blood smears along the back of
her arm as she tosses it aside. She pushes his coat out of the way and bends forward to squint at the
wound. She can’t see a damn thing so she rips his vest open, and then his shirt, and buttons fly
everywhere. There’s a nickel sized hole in his body and it’s bleeding profusely. His skin is
drenched in sweat, and his breathing is becoming more labored.

Will appears at her side, a towel in hand, and Frankie presses it against Jai’s chest immediately. Jai
groans in pain. His eyes roll back and his head lolls forward.

“Jai,” Frankie calls.

He doesn’t respond.

“JD,” she says, lifting a hand to his cheek and tipping his head back to rest against the van. His
beard is coarse beneath her palm. “Look at me.”

His eyes flutter open.

“I need you to stay awake.”

He grunts.

“I know. But I need you to stay awake. Talk to me. Tell me something I don’t know.”

He exhales a shaky breath. “So many things.”
“Jerk,” she accuses, and he smiles weakly. “What’s the square root of 846?”

“Twenty-nine and change.”

“What’s the tenth element on the periodic table?”

“Neon.”

“What do you think of Lagaan?”

“Fuck you.”

She laughs despite herself. His eyes slip closed again. “Come on, Jai,” she calls. She can hear the panic in her voice. “Stay with me.”

His hand fumbles and lands on her knee but he doesn’t open his eyes.

“Look at me,” she orders.

He opens his eyes.

“This is Havana, okay? It’s Frankfurt. It’s Moscow. You’re going to be fine. We’re always fine.”

“File on my laptop,” he murmurs.

“You can show it to me later.”

He shakes his head. “File,” he insists. “RJ. Speech for your wedding.”

Frankie feels like the world has stopped spinning. “What?” she whispers.

“Best man speech,” Jai says, struggling to enunciate. “Made me listen to him practice. Recorded it. My Mina file.”

Frankie stares at him. There’s only one reason why, after years of keeping it a secret, he’d tell her this.

He thinks he’s going to die.

His blood is soaking through the towel. She can feel it, hot and sticky and wet on her fingers, and his face is as white as a sheet. He’s losing too much blood.

“No,” she says, scooting closer to him and pressing harder on the wound. Her eyes are warm all of a sudden, her vision blurred, and somewhere in the distance she hears Susan holler that they’re close, but all she can focus on is Jai.

“M’sorry,” he mumbles.

“Don’t you dare,” she says to him. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

He squeezes her knee. “Love you. Even when...strangle you.”

“Jai,” she whispers. “I can’t do this without you.”

“Yes you can.”

“Don’t make me. Please don’t make me.”
His eyes flutter open. “Don’t let him win,” he says, squeezing her knee again weakly. “Promise me, Francesca.”

She tilts forward and presses her forehead against his. “I promise.”

Jai loses consciousness just before Susan pulls the van to a screeching halt in front of the ER.

Will throws the doors open the moment they stop and leaps out onto the pavement, shouting for a doctor. Three people in scrubs come running. One of them is pushing a wheelchair.

Frankie helps them load Jai into the wheelchair. She rattles off information to the doctors, still holding pressure on the wound, as everyone sprints into the hospital.

Will follows a few steps behind her, watching. When they load Jai onto a gurney, Frankie’s at his side in an instant. She drops the bloodied towel when a doctor on the other side of the gurney asks to see the wound. She wraps her fingers around Jai’s arm, her knuckles white beneath the crimson stain of his blood on her skin, and strokes her other hand through his hair the way a mother might do to her sleeping child. A second doctor shoves in next to her and she steps to the side to make room but doesn’t let go of Jai.

When they push the gurney forward, the doctors shouting at each other and to the nurses, Frankie follows. She has to let go of Jai to give them room to work as they jog next to the racing gurney, but she follows them determinedly. She’s staring at Jai, her eyes flickering over his face, but she doesn’t look afraid. She looks like she does before they breach a room filled with hostiles—focused and calm.

The first indication that she’s not okay is when she tries to follow the doctors through a pair of double doors marked Hospital Staff Only Beyond This Point.

“You have to stay here,” one of the nurses says, grasping her shoulder.

Frankie wrenches out of her grasp and takes a step after Jai. “I go where he goes.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” another nurse says, stepping into Frankie’s path and holding her hands up. “You can’t.”

Will is suddenly afraid that Frankie might punch one of the nurses for getting in her way.

“Frankie,” he murmurs, stepping up behind her. He reaches for her hand. “You have to stay here.”

She yanks out of his grasp. “I go where he goes.”

“Our doctors need space to work,” the second nurse says kindly but firmly. “Distractions can mean the difference between life and death.”

Frankie goes still. The word hangs in the air like a curse.

Death.

Will watches her face. Something shivers across her expression, the first indication of fear he’s seen since they were in the back of the van, but it disappears as fast as it came.

“It would be helpful if you could fill out some forms for us,” the nurse adds gently. “It will help our staff give him the best care possible.”
Frankie nods wordlessly.

The nurse gestures at a sitting area behind them. “Find a seat wherever you like. We’ll bring everything you need. Can I get you some coffee? Maybe a bottle of water?”

Frankie shakes her head. The nurses share a look, and one of them glances at Will. He shakes his head. They cast one more look at Frankie, and then head for the front desk.

Will turns his attention back to Frankie. She’s staring blankly at the doors Jai and the doctors disappeared through. A long moment passes where she stands as still as a statue, her shoulders barely rising and falling with breath. Eventually she swallows and drops her gaze. She looks down at her hands. They’re shaking, and stained with Jai’s blood. She exhales sharply, a short expulsion of breath that isn’t all that different from what she did when she found out Will had been lying.

*Shock*, Will realizes.

He steps closer to her. “Francesca,” he whispers.

She glances up at him. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused, and he can’t tell if she’s actually looking at him or just looking through him.

She shakes her head. “I…” she starts. She doesn’t finish. It’s the first time he’s ever seen her look lost.

Will’s heart aches in his chest. He reaches out for her, trailing his hand gently down her arm, and she flinches like he’s hit her. He pulls his hand back. A moment passes, heavy with silence, and then she ducks her head and pushes past him.

He turns after her, frowning. She’s walking purposefully, striding toward the women’s bathroom. He watches her retreating figure for a moment, unsure of what to do, and then follows her. He’d rather force her to ask for space than leave her alone when she needs someone.

She’s only been alone in the bathroom for a few seconds. But when he pushes open the door and follows her inside, the change he finds is extreme. Gone is the calm and focused spy that rattled off Jai’s blood type and allergies. Gone is the shocked-into-stillness woman who’d stared after her best friend.

Her right hand is clutching her chest, her fingers clawing at the fabric of her shirt. Her ragged breathing echoes through the room, harsh and distorted. She bends forward, her left hand closing around a sink to steady herself, and tries to suck in a breath but can’t seem to.

Will starts toward her. She jerks upward and holds her hand out, keeping him at bay with a quick shake of her head. But then a shudder rocks her body and she curls forward again, a broken sound tearing out of her throat. Even from a few feet away, he can see her body trembling.

She straightens and stumbles away from him. She sets her palm against the tiled wall, her chest heaving as she stands with her back to him, and then her legs give way and she slides down the wall and onto the floor. She curls inward, wrapping her arms around herself, and gasps.

Will’s not sure what makes him do it. All he knows is that she’s having a full blown panic attack, and he has to do something. He strides toward her, drops into a crouch, and reaches out to curl his fingers around her bicep and squeeze just like he’s seen Jai do.

She inhales sharply. For the first time since he came in, it seems like she actually gets some oxygen into her lungs.
He reaches for her hand and brings it up to his chest. He puts it over his heart, the heel of his hand pressing her palm into his body, and then he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly so she can feel the rhythm.

“Breathe, Francesca,” he whispers. He squeezes her bicep and then breathes in and out again slowly. “Breathe.”

A sob shudders through her body. He ducks down to catch her eye. “Breathe,” he whispers when she meets his gaze. He inhales and exhales again. “Breathe.”

Her eyes flutter closed. Her bloodied fingers curl into his shirt. For a long moment, they stay like that—her huddled on the floor against the wall, him crouched before her, his hand over hers on his chest as they breathe in unison.

She tilts her head back against the wall when her breathing has evened out. She swallows, her throat bobbing, and then the tears start to fall. They spill down her cheeks silently. She doesn’t try to wipe them away.

“Francesca,” Will whispers, letting go of her bicep to reach for her face. He keeps her hand pressed above his heart.

She drops her head forward, and leans her face into his palm.

“I don’t know how to do this without him,” she whispers.

“Do what?”

A shudder drills through her body. “Live.”

Will sits down on the floor and pulls her into his lap and against his chest. She doesn’t fight him. He wraps his arms around her tightly. She buries her face in his neck, her body curling into his, and he rocks her gently as she cries.
All right, guys. I have been working on this chapter for what feels like a decade. It has been one of the hardest to write. I am equal parts excited and terrified that it is finally going out into the world. I am pretty sure that not everyone will like it. I am also pretty sure I’m okay with that. Here are some things you need to know:

--This is the only chapter in this fic that is written entirely from the point of view of someone other than Frankie or Will. (Or at least that’s the plan so far. Still got plenty of writing to do.) Please keep in mind that you are only seeing things from this one person’s point of view. You won’t have all the facts or details you want/need, but you’ll know everything they know. And just like with Frankie and Will, you will be reading their interpretations and biases, which may or may not be fair and true.

--This chapter starts in the past—over ten years ago—and then moves forward chronologically. By the time it ends, you’ll be back in the “present” of this fic, which means you’ll be back in the hospital in Monte Carlo in October 2019.

--This chapter is *extremely* long. Like, I am not even exaggerating. By my usual standards, it should be three chapters, not one. Sorry. But there was no way I could cut it into pieces. It would’ve interrupted the flow and ruined the theme I was going for. I think you’ll see what I mean when you start reading.

Buckle up, kiddos.

The first time Jai meets Frankie, she chooses not to kill him.

Jai isn’t sure how he missed her. He checked his surveillance devices three times, and his plan was perfect, and there wasn’t supposed to be anyone here.

But here she is.

She’s surprised too, he thinks. Her eyes widen just a little when he comes around the corner and they end up face to face. She’s wearing a dress that’s so obscenely tight it looks painted on, and a pair of ridiculously tall high heels that the one friend he managed to make in college used to call *fuck me heels*. She’s not his type but he looks anyway because he’s human and she’s beautiful.

She’s got the flash drive in her hand. The dress makes sense all of a sudden. That’s how she got in. Figures. He spends two weeks doing meticulous work to arrange the perfect theft and some girl in *fuck me heels* gets in and ruins his perfectly laid plans just because she looks like sex personified.

She notices him noticing the flash drive and smirks a little.

And then they’re fighting.

He didn’t expect her to fight so well. Her hair is long and kind of gorgeous if blondes are your thing. (They’re not his thing.) He thinks he’s won when he gets her in a headlock. But then she slides her hand across the front of his pants and strokes—purposefully, not painfully—over his dick. He grunts and freezes, shocked, and she takes advantage of his surprise. She ducks out of his grasp and punches him in the face.
Okay, so she’s sex personified and she’s got a wicked right hook. Noted.

They fight again. His knife leaves a bleeding but shallow wound on her forearm. She gives him some bruised ribs in return. And then she’s got his knife in her hand, and the blade is at his throat, and they’re both panting as she leans over him while he’s splayed across the giant wooden desk on the far end of the room. He stares up at her, waiting for the pain, and wonders how the CIA will tell his parents he died.

“What’s your name?” she whispers.

He isn’t sure why it matters. He isn’t sure why he tells her, either, but he does.

She smiles a little. “You’re dangerous for a short guy.”

“You’re dangerous for a hooker,” he throws back.

Her smile widens. “You wish I was a hooker,” she says with a wink. And then she knocks him unconscious.

When he comes to, she’s gone and so is the flash drive. She left his knife sticking out of the desk an inch from his head. He wonders why she didn’t kill him.

He finds out two days later that she’s CIA too. His handler is pissed because the financial records on the flash drive were their assignment, not hers. Her handler explains that she heard about the flash drive “in passing” and took advantage of an opportunity. Either way, the agency got the plans so it’s a win. Jai asks if she knew he was CIA, but his handler says no. She had no idea who he was.

Jai wonders again why she didn’t kill him.

The second time Jai meets Frankie, he doesn’t like her very much.

He’s the first one to arrive in the hidden back room of a pub in London because early is on time and on time is late. There’s no excuse for tardiness on any occasion, but there’s particularly no excuse when you’ve been summoned to a highly classified meeting with the members of a new black-ops team you’ll be working with for the foreseeable future.

The second person to arrive is a tall, stunningly beautiful woman with long copper hair and the bluest eyes he’s ever seen. She’s wearing an emerald green sheath dress, and Jai wonders who her tailor is because it fits her like it was made for her and he appreciates a well-tailored piece of clothing more than most. When their eyes meet, he finds himself shooting to his feet like some kind of weird chivalric knight who stands when a lady enters the room. He feels like an idiot until she smiles.

“Hello,” she says. There’s a hint of an accent to her English but Jai can’t place it. She stretches out her hand. “I’m Dr. Mina Schafer. BND.”

German, he realizes.

“Jai Datta,” he returns, putting his hand in hers. “CIA.”

Her hand is soft. She smells amazing. He wonders why he cares what she smells like. He’s never cared what a colleague has smelled like before. This is a bad precedent. He doesn’t like it. Maybe his one friend from college is right. He should get laid more often.
“I thought I’d be the first one here,” Mina says, smiling as she releases his hand. “I’m always the first.”

She’s got a gorgeous smile. Jai finds himself smiling too, which is odd because he’s not really a smiler.

“I am too,” he says. “My father always said early is on time—”

“—and on time is late,” she finishes. “My father said the same. Military?”

“Yes,” Jai nods. “Surgeon now.”

Mina’s smile widens. “And what does he think of his son the spy?”

“Who said I’m a spy?”

“Why else would you be here?”

“Maybe I’m a paper pusher.”

She puts her hands on her hips and gives him a quick once over. “I know a spy when I see one.”

“Takes one to know one?”

“I’m a profiler.”

Jai tilts his head. “Then I’ll stop talking.”

She laughs, and it’s just as gorgeous as her smile. Later—years later, in a hotel room in Portugal when she’s naked and draped across his chest and his fingers are combing through her hair—he’ll tell her that he loved her the first time he heard her laugh. It won’t be a lie.

In the moment, though, he doesn’t get a chance to dwell on it. The door opens, and in walks a tall kid with a patchy beard and dark eyes that dart around the room quickly. He’s wearing ill-fitting jeans and a t-shirt for a band Jai has never heard of. He’s carrying a bottle of Mountain Dew and a laptop.

“Hey hey hey,” he greets, waving his bottle of Mountain Dew. He has a bit of an accent too. “Is this the top secret spy meeting? Am I in the right place?”

“I doubt it,” Jai says.

“You must be Reuben,” Mina says, turning toward their new guest with a smile. “You’re in the right place. Welcome.”

Jai blinks at her in surprise.

Reuben crinkles his nose. “Only my mom calls me Reuben. I prefer RJ.”

“RJ it is then,” Mina says lightly. She offers her hand. “I’m Dr. Mina Schafer. I’m with BND.”

“I’m Mossad,” RJ says brightly, shaking her hand. “And yes, I know I look like I’m twelve. I’m not. I’m twenty-one and I’ve had alcohol and a girlfriend.”

“Good to know,” Mina says, a hint of a laugh in her voice.
RJ turns toward Jai. “Hi. Are you BND too?”

Jai turns toward Mina instead of introducing himself. “Are you in charge of this team?”

“No,” she says with a smile.

“But you’ve read all our files,” he accuses, because how else would she know who RJ was?

She smiles at him. “Perhaps.”

Jai doesn’t get a chance to respond because the door swings open and in she walks—the girl with the painted on dress and the fuck me heels and the killer right hook. She’s not in a dress anymore. She’s wearing a sleek black suit that he knows is both expensive and tailored, and he can tell by the way she’s carrying herself that she either comes from money or has spent a lot of time around people who have.

She stops just inside the doorway when her eyes meet Jai’s. “You,” she says, and he thinks he hears a trace of amusement in her voice.

“Wonderful,” Jai says dryly.

RJ glances between them. “Uh-oh.” He leans toward Mina. “We have a situation here, doc. Either these two used to date or they’re sworn enemies.”

The woman in the doorway smirks. “I like my men taller.”

“Sworn enemies it is,” RJ says.

“Did you hear about this meeting in passing?” Jai asks her acidly. “Thought you’d seize another opportunity?”

“Sore loser, huh?” she shoots back. “Typical man.”

Mina steps forward as if she can sense the brewing conflict. She holds her hand out. “I’m Dr. Mina Schafer. BND.”

“Francesca Trowbridge.” She shakes Mina’s hand, and Jai notices that her fingernails are painted a deep, blood red. They suit her. “You can call me Frankie. I’m CIA.”

Mina nods at RJ. “This is RJ. He’s Mossad.”

RJ grins and waves. “Hi.”

Frankie frowns. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” he says defensively.

Frankie smirks. “Let me guess. You’re a computer genius.”

RJ puffs his chest out. “Best hacker in the world. And that’s not an exaggeration. I am literally the best.”

Mina gestures at Jai. “And you seem to know Jai Datta already, which makes sense since you’re both CIA.”

“Yeah,” Frankie says, smirking again. “We’ve met.”
Before Jai can respond—he’s got a really devastating insult all lined up—the door opens again and a man who looks like he should be on the cover of *GQ* walks in. He’s tall, muscular, and dark-haired. He’s wearing dark jeans and a gray henley beneath a faded leather jacket, and there’s a silver St. Michael pendant hanging around his neck. He glances around the room, taking in each of them warily and without a greeting, and then his eyes fall on Frankie.

They stare at each other. Jai glances between them. He’s great at reading people. He’s not necessarily good at connecting with them, but he reads them extremely well. And these two? They’re definitely thinking about each other naked.

“Nick Walker,” the man says, holding his hand out. There’s a British lilt to his voice. “MI6.”

Frankie slides her hand into his. “Francesca Trowbridge. CIA.”

Nick smiles crookedly. “Yank.”

“Yeah,” she replies. “Sorry you lost the war. And all that tea.”

Nick hasn’t let go of her hand. “Guess you’ll have to make it up to me. Drink some tea with me later.”

“I don’t drink tea,” Frankie says, pulling her hand out of his.

His smile widens. “Then I guess you’ll have to let me buy you a drink.”

Frankie smiles.

RJ leans toward Mina. “Do you think he’ll teach me how to flirt if I ask nicely?”

Mina just smiles.

The first time Jai realizes he likes Frankie, it’s after she saves his life.

Unfortunately, saving his life means shooting a very wealthy, very powerful sheikh in the back of the head. And then they have to sprint through an outdoor market, hide in a cart with a bunch of chickens, and spend the night at a rural inn where they have to pretend to be married.

She’s used to being in the field with Nick, and he’s used to working behind the scenes with Mina and RJ, so they bicker the entire time. He hates how impulsive she is. She hates how he has to run through every possible scenario before making a decision. He hates her sarcasm. She hates his compulsive need for order. He doesn’t have a sister, but he thinks if he did this might be how he’d feel about her by the end of a long family vacation.

By the time they meet up with the rest of the team at a hotel in Dubai, they’re exhausted but they’ve reached some semblance of a truce. Mina is thrilled to see them, and hugs them both. Jai tries not to smell her hair when she does, because she’s got a boyfriend and also because it’s creepy to smell a colleague’s hair. RJ hugs them both too. Jai likes that hug less.

Nick bursts in the door ten minutes after they arrive. He stares at Frankie, relief clear on his face, and she stares back. Jai glances between them. It’s been two months since they all met for the first time in that London pub, and Frankie and Nick still have a considerable amount of sexual tension humming between them. As far as Jai knows, they haven’t slept together. Last time he checked, Frankie was dating some guy who plays for the New York Rangers and Nick preferred a stream of one night stands over a steady girlfriend.
“Hi,” Frankie finally says.

Nick clears his throat. “You get it?”

“RJ has it,” she replies. She tips her head toward RJ, who is bent over his laptop. Her eyes flicker over Nick’s face, studying him, and then she turns toward Mina and says, “I’m going back to my room to take a shower.”

“Okay,” Mina says with a smile.

“Don’t forget you promised you’d watch Empire Strikes Back with me if I cracked this in an hour,” RJ calls without turning around. “And I’m going to crack it in the next five minutes, which is both impressive and a personal record, so get your popcorn ready.”

Frankie shakes her head. “I smell like chickens, RJ. I’m not watching space movies with you when I smell like chickens.”

“You don’t smell like chickens,” RJ says, twisting in his chair to look at her. “You smell like rainbows and sunshine.” He looks at Jai. “Tell her she doesn’t smell like chickens, JD.”

Jai doesn’t usually appreciate nicknames. But when Mina pointed out that Jai and RJ sound eerily similar over comms and suggested calling him JD while on missions to differentiate, he’d agreed. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she put her hand on his shoulder when she suggested it.

Jai looks at Frankie. “Do you want me to lie to you?”

Frankie smiles at him. “No.”

Jai shrugs at RJ.

RJ scoffs at him and then gives Frankie a solemn look. “I’d never lie to you, Franks.”

She ruffles his hair as she walks past him on her way to the door. “Yes you would. But I still love you.”

“Love you too,” RJ hollers after her.

She disappears out the door with a grin, and Nick watches her go with a look on his face that Jai doesn’t want to decipher.

Five minutes later, Nick mutters, “I need to make a call,” and bolts for the door.

Jai notices Mina smiling after Nick. “What are you smiling at?”

“Well,” she says innocently. “Did you tell Frankie thank you?”

Jai frowns. “For what?”

“She saved your life, Jai.”

Jai scoffs.

Mina gives him a look. “You know, once you two get through this sibling rivalry phase, you’re going to be best friends. I’m predicting it now. You balance each other out.”
“Far be it from me to question your profiling skills, but I think you’re wrong.”

Mina smiles. “Well at least tell her thank you. I’m sure she’d appreciate it. You don’t need to make it a big deal. She’s quite fond of tequila. Hand her a bottle and say thank you and leave it at that.”

That’s how Jai ends up standing in front of Frankie’s hotel room later that night, knocking on the door with one hand and holding a bottle of tequila in the other.

When she opens the door, she’s wearing an oversized t-shirt with the Tottenham Hotspur logo on it. Jai thinks he’s seen that shirt before, but he can’t place it. He keeps his eyes fixed on her face because he’s pretty sure she’s wearing nothing under that shirt and he doesn’t want her to think he’s checking her out because she’s like his sister and that would be gross.

“Francesca,” he greets, nodding at her.

“Jai,” she replies. If she cares that she’s half naked in front of a colleague, she doesn’t show it. She leans against the doorframe, and Jai notices a bruise peeking out from under the collar of her shirt. He’s guessing it’s a hickey. He doesn’t ask because he doesn’t want to know.

“You like tequila,” he says, holding the bottle out.

Frankie looks confused. “Yeah,” she says, taking the bottle from him.

A long silence hangs over them. Jai fiddles with his cufflinks, thinks of the way Mina will smile when she finds out he did this, and forces himself to say, “Thank you. For...you know.”

Frankie smiles knowingly. “You’re here because Mina sent you.”

“No,” he disputes.

She arches an eyebrow at him. “I’ll make you a deal, Jai. You don’t lie to me, I won’t lie to you.”

He considers her proposal and then nods. “All right. I’m here because Mina sent me.”

“Mother hen,” Frankie mutters, but there’s no annoyance in it. Jai knows Frankie and Mina are close friends. They regularly discuss their love lives within everyone else’s earshot, which is how Jai knows that Frankie is sleeping with a hockey player and Mina has a relatively serious boyfriend who works for a German law firm. Not that Jai cares who Mina dates. Because he doesn’t.

Frankie straightens. “I’d invite you in for a shot but...” She glances over her shoulder, and then looks back at him with a bit of a smirk. “I’ve got company.”

Jai’s curious—there’s no way her hockey player is in Dubai, and he doesn’t know when she would’ve had time to pick up another guy—but he doesn’t ask because it’s none of his business. He nods. “Understood.”

He turns on his heel and starts down the hall until she calls out after him.

He turns around. “Yes?”

“Thanks,” she says, holding up the bottle. And then she smiles. “Being in the field with you was...not the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“I thought we weren’t lying to each other.”

Her smile widens. It’s genuine, maybe even affectionate. “Yeah. I’m not lying. I think I’ll stick
with Nick in the future, but...you’re not the worst.”

He’s flattered, because she’s a hell of a spy and if she thinks he’s not the worst then that’s a hell of a compliment.

He smiles. “Good night, Francesca.”

She winks at him just like she did the first time they met. “Night Jai.”

The first time Jai realizes he trusts Frankie, it’s when she helps him finish some unfinished business.

Their team doesn’t have a home base. The nature of their work takes them all over the globe, and it’s safer for them if The Collective can’t tie any of them to one specific location for an extended period of time, so they stay in safehouses for a few weeks and then move.

It’s a transient lifestyle, and sometimes Jai misses the predictability of having roots and a home. He’d never admit it, but the team makes it easier. They sleep somewhere different every few weeks, but they’re always together. No matter where they are in the world or what hellish thing The Collective is planning next, he can count on Mina’s kindness and RJ’s ramblings about Star Wars, Frankie’s quick wit and Nick’s booming laugh. It’s only been four months since they started working together, but Jai already knows these people better than he knows anyone.

They’re staying in a safehouse in Budapest when Frankie catches him with the file.

It’s late, nearly one in the morning, and he’s so caught up in reading that he doesn’t even realize she’s there until she plucks the file from his hand as she passes by him on her way into the kitchen.

“Hey,” Jai says. He shoots to his feet. “Give that back.”

She ignores him and reads the file while she fills the tea kettle with water. Jai watches her from the opposite side of the kitchen island and briefly considers forcing her to give it back. He decides against it. If he acts like it’s a big secret, she’ll be even more curious. Also, she’s wearing an oversized sweatshirt (which he’s guessing she stole from Nick since it’s got the Royal Air Force logo on it), and he’s willing to bet she’s not wearing anything underneath. He’d rather not fight with her when she’s only half clothed.

After she sets the kettle on the stove and flicks on the burner, she turns to look at him. “Why are you reading a file on the Hungarian mafia at one in the morning?”

He shrugs. “Research.”

“The Collective doesn’t work with the Hungarian mafia.”

“That we know of.”

She studies him for a second, her head tilted slightly, and then she says, “We said we wouldn’t lie to each other, remember?”

“That was a joke.”

“Was it? Because ever since we made that deal, I haven’t lied to you.”

He scoffs. “You’re lying right now. A lie by omission is still a lie.”
She frowns. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You and Nick.”

She looks surprised, and then her face goes blank. “Nick and I are nothing.”

Jai looks pointedly at her sweatshirt. “So you’re not sleeping with him?”

She closes the file and tosses it on the island between them. It lands on the counter with a smack. “Nick likes to fuck me. He also likes to fuck other women, and I’m not interested in being part of a harem. So no, I’m not sleeping with him. Not anymore.”

There’s a trace of bitterness in her voice that Jai wasn’t expecting. He feels guilty immediately. *Apologize*, a voice that sounds like Mina’s whispers in the back of his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

She studies him and doesn’t reply.

“You deserve better,” he adds.

She shakes her head. “He’s a good man. He’s just…”

“Terrified of commitment?” Jai offers. “More interested in sex than substance?”

She smiles sadly. “He’s had a rough life. Relationships are hard for him.”

Jai doesn’t know as much about Nick as she does, but he knows enough. He knows Nick was orphaned at the age of twelve after his father died in jail and his addict mother overdosed. He spent the next few years living on the street and doing a considerable amount of illegal things until he joined the RAF. The military straightened him out, and MI6 polished him up, but he’s still got a bit of a dangerous, fury-filled edge to him. From what Jai’s seen, Frankie’s the only one who’s able to soothe the rage that seems to always be boiling just beneath the surface. Jai would point that out if he thought it would help, but he doesn’t think it will.

“Any other questions?” she asks dryly.

“No.”

“Then you can answer mine.”

He sighs. When she gets that hard edge in her voice, there’s no avoiding her.

“One of my first missions with the agency was here,” he tells her. “The Hungarian mafia was running a sex trafficking ring to fund a terrorist cell. Still are. But they’ve got friends in high places, and the agency pulled my team before we could do anything about it.”

“So you have unfinished business,” she summarizes.

He nods.

She opens the file again. She studies it for a minute, her eyes darting across the page, and then she looks up at him and says, “Let’s go finish it.”

Jai stares at her. “What?”
She gestures at the file. “You know where they’re keeping the girls. Let’s go set them free and make the assholes who took them pay.”

“What are we, vigilantes?”

She smirks. “You’d be a good Batman.”

He shakes his head. “We don’t have the clearance to move on the Hungarian mafia.”

“Who cares? It’s the right thing to do.”

“Francesca—”

“You want to finish what you started or not, JD?”

They stare at each other from across the counter. He can’t believe she’s suggesting this. If they get caught, they could get kicked out of the agency. They could end up in prison. And that’s assuming they survive. Taking on a warehouse full of sex trafficking mobsters isn’t exactly a walk in the park.

“If we get caught, we’ll be in serious trouble,” he points out.

She shrugs. “So we won’t get caught. No one has to know. Just me and you. We’ll be back before dawn.”

He furrows his eyebrows at her. “Why would you do this for me?”

An odd look passes over her face. It looks almost like grief, but he isn’t sure. “Because I know how it feels to have unfinished business.”

“Your parents,” he says before he can stop himself. He knows that the authorities never officially caught any of the terrorists who were responsible for bringing down her parents’ plane. And he knows that infuriates her. It’s part of the reason why she joined the agency.

She folds her arms over her chest. “Do you want to finish it or not?”

Ten hours later, the team is sitting around the dining table eating a late breakfast. Mina is making pancakes. RJ is quizzing Nick about how to flirt. Frankie is huddled over her coffee, her hands pulled inside the sleeves of her sweatshirt because her knuckles are bruised and scratched. Jai’s trying not to make any sudden movements with his left arm because he tweaked his shoulder.

“So,” Mina says as she slides a pancake onto Jai’s plate with a spatula. “The Hungarian mafia got hit last night.”

Jai stares down at his pancake without really seeing it. Beside him, Frankie stiffens just a little.

“Hogtied, huh?” Nick says.

“Apparently Hungarian authorities found the mafia’s ledger too,” Mina continues. “It was sitting on the chest of the ring leader. They think someone beat him until he gave up the location of the ledger.”
“Sucks to be him,” Frankie says dryly. Then she pulls her hands farther inside her sleeves.

“I don’t suppose either of you know anything about that,” Mina says, glancing between Frankie and Jai with lifted eyebrows.

“Nope,” Frankie says.

Jai shakes his head. “Not a thing.”

The first time Jai threatens someone for Frankie, it’s after she starts sleeping with Nick again.

Jai returns from a recon mission to find Mina and RJ watching a movie in the living room of their Venice safehouse. The volume of the TV is up extremely loud.

“What’s going on?” he asks. “Why is the TV up so loud?”

“Frankie and Nick are upstairs fighting again,” RJ replies with a sigh. “I feel like a child of divorce who’s been asked to pick sides. I’ll pick her, obviously. Who wouldn’t pick her? But still.”

Jai shoots a look at Mina. She gets up from the couch and crosses the room to stand next to him. “Frankie got the codes from Rodriguez,” she says softly.

Jai frowns. “Isn’t that good?”

“She slept with him to get them.”

“Oh,” Jai says. And then he sighs. “Nick can’t keep doing this. It’s illogical and unfair. If he doesn’t want to be with her, then he doesn’t get to be mad when she sleeps with other people.”

“He does want to be with her,” Mina says. “He’s in love with her.”

Jai scoffs in disbelief.

Mina glances at RJ, but he seems glued to the TV. “Nick has a lot of trauma in his past,” she says quietly. “He’s lost a lot. Being vulnerable is hard for him. He’s afraid to lose her.”

“Well that’s exactly what’s going to happen if he doesn’t get his head out of his ass. She deserves better than this.”

Mina smiles.

“What?” Jai asks.

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head a little. “I just...it’s sweet how protective you are of her.”

Jai feels self-conscious all of a sudden. Being part of this team—living in such close quarters, getting to know everyone so well, having no choice but to let them see all of his flaws and quirks and intracices—has changed him. It makes him uncomfortable to think about how much.

“She’s my friend,” he explains.

“I know. I’m the one who predicted the two of you would be best friends, remember?”

“I remember.”

Mina smiles and then turns toward the stairs. “I should probably go make sure they’re not killing
each other. Wouldn’t be the first time she punched him when he’s being a jealous prick.”

Jai grabs her arm to stop her. “It’s okay. I’ll go.”

Mina glances down at his hand on her arm. Jai lets go of her immediately. Mina lifts her gaze to his, a slight furrow in her eyebrows. Tension cracks in the air. Jai clears his throat and fiddles with his cufflink and tries not to think about last night when he kissed her in the kitchen before fleeing for his recon mission.

“Jai,” she says softly. Despite being the one who came up with his nickname, she never uses it unless they’re in the field. “We should talk.”

“No,” he says. “It’s fine. There’s nothing to talk about.”

She leans a little closer to him. “Last night—”

“Was a mistake,” he cuts her off. “You’re with someone, and I was out of line. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

He brushes past her and toward the stairs before she can say anything.

By the time he gets to the top of the steps, he can hear Frankie and Nick yelling at each other from her bedroom down the hall. The door is mostly closed, but not all the way, so when he stops outside in the hallway he can hear what they’re saying perfectly.

“You don’t get to do this,” Frankie is saying, her voice quivering with rage. “You made your choice, Nick. And it wasn’t me.”

“I changed my mind.”

“No you didn’t. You’re just jealous. You’re like a five year old who ignores a toy until someone else decides to play with it, and then all of a sudden it’s your favorite.”

“Baby—”

“Stop calling me that,” she cuts him off. “I know that’s what you call the rest of them. And I hate that. I hate it.”

“That’s not what I call the rest of them. That’s what I call you. Only you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I haven’t slept with anyone since Quito, Frankie,” Nick snaps, his voice filled with frustration. “I could’ve fucked a dozen different women since then and I haven’t because none of them are you. I have to jerk off in the shower like a fucking teenager because I want you so bad and I can’t have you.”

If her silence is any indication, Nick’s confession seems to catch Frankie off guard. Jai’s a little stunned too. There’s a long pause. Jai peers through the opening between the doorframe and the door. He can see Nick standing in front of Frankie’s dresser, his hands on his hips, his expression desperate and frustrated. Frankie has her back to the door so Jai can’t see her face, but he can tell by the way she’s standing that she’s upset.

“You could have had me, Nick,” she murmurs. “You did have me.”

“What do you want me to say?” he says, holding out his hands. “I fucked up. I’m a fuck up. I’m a
shitty guy, Frankie, and I do shitty stuff, but I don’t want to be that guy anymore. I don’t want to hurt you. I want to be the man you seem to think I am. I want to be with you. I just—”

He doesn’t get to finish because Frankie lunges at him and kisses him.

When she pulls back, Nick looks dazed. Frankie blinks up at him. Nick leans in for another kiss, but Frankie leans away from him. They stare at each other for a second, and then Nick lifts a hand to her cheek and holds her face as if she’s something precious that’s made of glass and he’s trying his hardest not to break her.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“All of it. Everything. Give me another chance, Francesca. Please. I know I’ve already had a million. I know I hurt you. Just...just give me one more chance. Please.”

The request hangs in the air, and Jai holds his breath.

“I swear to god, Nick, if you fuck someone else—”

“Nobody else,” he whispers, shaking his head. “Just you, baby. Only you.”

He leans forward again, and this time Frankie doesn’t lean back.

Jai turns on his heel and walks back down the stairs.

He watches them closely for a few weeks after that. He’s waiting for things to go sideways, for Nick to get scared and sleep with someone else because he’s so self-destructive, but it never happens. Frankie’s happy—brightly, overwhelmingly happy—but Jai’s worried. So one night, when he finds Nick alone in the living room, nursing a scotch and watching a Tottenham game, he blurts it out before he can think better of it.

“You have to stop messing with her head.”

Nick looks over at him in surprise. “What?”

“Frankie,” Jai clarifies. “Quit messing with her head. You’re not the only one who’s got trauma, Nick. She’s been through a lot. She deserves someone good. So if you’re not serious about her, then let her go.”

Nick doesn’t say anything for a long time. When he does finally speak, his voice is quiet. “I’m in love with her.”

Jai doesn’t know what to say. Mina said Nick was in love with Frankie, but he hadn’t believed her. Hearing Nick say it outright is...unexpected.

“Then start treating her right,” Jai says. “Or I’ll kill you.”

Nick nods. “Understood.”

Later, Jai will wonder if he should have seen it then. He’s good at reading people, and by that point he cared enough about Frankie to study Nick more closely than he otherwise might have. But he eventually realizes that there’s no way he could have predicted what would eventually happen. Because Nick Walker was a lot of things: a traitor, a murderer, a criminal. But he was also—and still is—in love with Jai’s best friend.
The first time Jai realizes that Frankie is his best friend, it’s after Mina’s boyfriend proposes to her.

“You are aware I’m standing right here, correct?” Jai says dryly over the rim of his mug.

Frankie, who is pinned between Nick and the kitchen counter in their safehouse in Munich, and is somehow managing to giggle like a school girl and make out with her boyfriend at the same time, leans back from Nick’s mouth and shoots Jai an apologetic look.

“Sorry,” she says, trailing a hand down Nick’s bicep.

“I’m not,” Nick says, and buries his face in the curve of Frankie’s shoulder. She’s wearing his St. Michael pendant around her neck, and he traces his lips along the chain. “You smell good,” he says, his voice so low it’s almost a growl.

“And that’s my cue,” Jai says, turning away from them.

“No, Jai, don’t go,” Frankie says, pushing against Nick’s chest. She looks up at her boyfriend sternly when he leans back. “Nick’s going to the store to get us some ice cream.”

“It’s pouring outside,” Nick says incredulously. “I’ll get soaked.”

“So?”

Nick studies her for a second, his eyes flickering over her face, and then he sighs. “You’re lucky I’m in love with you.”

Frankie grins at him. “So lucky.”

He kisses the top of her head and then walks toward the coat closet. “You want something, JD?” he asks as he pulls on a raincoat.

“He likes mint chocolate chip,” Frankie replies. “Not the green kind.”

Jai raises his mug in confirmation.

Nick crosses the room and bends down to kiss Frankie again. “When I get back, I’m going to make sure you get wet too.”

She arches an eyebrow suggestively. “Already am, baby.”

“I’m going to throw up in this mug,” Jai announces.

Frankie laughs. Nick snorts. He kisses Frankie one more time, murmurs I love you, grins when she says I love you too, and then disappears out the door.

“Sorry,” Frankie says to Jai. She doesn’t sound sorry. Not even a little.

“At what point do you two exit out of the honeymoon phase?” Jai wonders. “Because it’s been six months now.”

“Don’t be jealous, Jai,” she says, grinning at him. “Just because I love him doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

“Well maybe you could love him less frequently,” Jai suggests. “Because by the time you two got out of the shower this morning there was no hot water left for the rest of us.” He bends down to
check his reflection in the glossy door of the microwave. “My hair is flat. And your libido is to blame.”

Whatever Frankie’s going to say next gets cut off by the sudden entrance of Mina.

Jai’s mouth goes dry as soon as he sees her. She’s always worn a dress well, but this one—a deep blue cocktail dress with a plunging neckline and a tasteful hem—is something special.

When he lifts his gaze to hers, she’s watching him. He freezes when he realizes she caught him ogling her, but Frankie steps in before the moment descends into awkwardness.

“Heey,” she greets. “What are you doing here? I thought you and Peter had big plans. We weren’t expecting you back until tomorrow morning.”

“He got called into work,” Mina says, stopping next to Frankie. “Case of the century.”

“Ah,” Frankie says sympathetically. “Hazards of being with Germany’s hottest young lawyer.”

“So it seems,” Mina says, setting her clutch on the counter.

Something is wrong. Jai can hear it in Mina’s voice, and he can see it in her posture. Mina’s a profiler, not a spy. She’s worked in the field when she has to, and she can do what needs to be done, but she’s not like the rest of them. She can’t hide her feelings for very long. Jai loves that about her.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

She stares at him from the other side of the counter for a moment, her eyes searching his, and then she says quietly, “Peter has asked me to marry him.”

Jai’s always wondered what it would feel like to have a broken heart. He’s known plenty of people who have had them, but he’s never had one himself.

Until now.

“What?” Frankie says, straightening. “Are you serious?”

“Very,” Mina murmurs. Her eyes haven’t left Jai.

“What did you say?” Frankie asks.

“I said I needed to think about it.” She finally looks at Frankie. “I would need to leave the team. I would…” She glances quickly at Jai, and then back to Frankie. “You would need to find a new profiler.”

“Is that what you want?” Frankie asks.

Mina looks dazed. “I don’t know.”

For a moment, a heavy silence hangs in the air. Jai sets his mug down on the counter.

“Congratulations,” he says softly.

Mina looks devastated. “Jai…”

“I have some work to do,” he says quietly. He turns on his heel and leaves the room before anyone can say anything else.
He’s bent over some circuit boards with a soldering iron in hand when Frankie opens his bedroom door a while later.

“Don’t you knock?” he asks.

“No,” she replies as she shuts the door.

She stops next to him. Jai ignores her. She doesn’t move. Eventually, he sighs and looks up at her because he knows she’s going to stand there until he acknowledges her.

“What?”

She holds up a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Not the green kind. “Want to eat ice cream with me?”

“Don’t you have plans with James Bond?”

She lifts a shoulder. “He can wait.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” She sets the pint down on the desk next to him and walks over to his bed. She settles on the mattress, leaning back against the headboard and stretching her legs out in front of her, and pops the top off her own pint. “I’ll sit here while you fire glue stuff.”

“It’s not…” He sighs. “Whatever.”

Neither of them say a word for an hour. Eventually, he stops soldering. He stares at the melted pint of ice cream that’s sitting untouched in a puddle on his desk, and feels like there’s a black hole in the place where his heart used to be.

“Come here, JD,” Frankie says quietly.

He sits next to her on the bed, his back against the headboard. She shifts a little, curling into his side and wrapping her arms around one of his, and puts her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

He tilts his head to rest against hers but doesn’t reply.

“You want me to kill him for you?”

Jai smiles. “No.”

The next day, Jai finds himself alone in the kitchen with Mina. They exchange polite small talk for a few seconds until Mina puts her hand on his arm and whispers his name.

Jai goes still beneath her hand. He doesn’t look at her.

“Tell me not to do it,” she whispers. “Tell me you don’t want me to marry him.”

Jai looks up at her. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“Yes it does.”

He shakes his head and pulls his arm from her grasp. “No, it doesn’t.”
The first time Jai finds out Frankie wants kids, it’s after he catches her waiting on the results of a pregnancy test.

He finds her pacing in the hallway outside the bathroom, chewing her lip and twisting her hands in front of her.

“Francesca?” he says. “Are you—”

“I took a pregnancy test,” she blurts out.

Jai stares at her, completely stunned.

“I’m usually on the pill,” she says, lifting a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. “Nick and I don’t...I mean, we like it better when—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence,” Jai cuts her off.

“I’m late,” she says instead, finally meeting his gaze. “And I’m never late. And Mina’s out with Peter and Nick is still in Prague with RJ and I…” She gives him an anguished look. “I can’t have a baby right now, Jai.”

He blinks at her, unsure of what to say. “So the test was positive?”

She glances toward the bathroom. “I’m too scared to check it.”

For a second, Jai is taken aback by the pure absurdity of the moment. When he met Frankie three years ago, he hated her. When he started working with her a year and a half ago, he still hated her. But now she’s his best friend, and she might be pregnant, and he feels this strange, overpowering desire to reassure her and protect her and comfort her. He doesn’t understand it. His whole life, everyone’s always told him that he’s terrible at friendships and intimacy and anything, really, that requires any semblance of emotion. And yet here he is, stepping toward his distraught best friend whom he used to hate, putting his hands on her shoulders and ducking down to catch her eye, and whispering, “Everything’s going to be okay, Francesca.”

“I’m a spy,” she says. Her voice has a hysterical edge to it all of a sudden. “Two nights ago I seduced an arms dealer and then shot him in the head. Nick and I aren’t married, and we’re both orphans, and we’re never in one place for very long—”

“Breathe,” Jai interrupts, squeezing her shoulders.

She sucks in a breath and then demands, “What kind of life is that for a kid? What kind of mom would I be? I can’t even remember to use a condom when I run out of pills, how—”

“You’d be an incredible mom,” Jai cuts her off. “But before you start thinking about spy daycare, why don’t we check the test?”

She glances toward the bathroom. “Can you do it for me?” she asks softly.

He’s taken aback—checking a pregnancy test for a woman that he’s never slept with and never will is another one of those things he never thought he’d do—but he drops his hands from her shoulders and walks into the bathroom. He reads the instructions carefully, and then he looks at the stick. He looks at the instructions, looks at the stick, and then checks it a third time just to be sure.

“Jai—”
“You’re not pregnant,” he tells her.

He can’t read the look on her face. She seems relieved. But also disappointed. And maybe...sad?

“Oh,” she says. She nods and swallows. “Okay.”

Once again, Jai finds himself doing something he never would have done a few years ago. He crosses the bathroom and goes out into the hall, pulls her into his arms, and hugs her tightly. He feels her exhale heavily, and then she melts into his embrace.

He pours her a drink after that. She sits on the couch and stares down into her glass of scotch, and Jai watches her and waits because he knows she’s got something to say.

“Nick wants kids,” she says quietly.

That stuns the hell out of him, but he doesn’t say so. “Oh yeah?” he says neutrally.

She nods. “Two little boys he can take to Tottenham games.”

“And what do you want?”

The softest smile he’s ever seen tugs on her lips. “A little girl with his eyes.”

Jai doesn’t know what to say to that, but he doesn’t have to think too hard about it because all of a sudden Mina bursts in the front door. She stops when she sees them, her eyebrows furrowing when she notices they’re drinking scotch at eleven in the morning, and then she blurts out the words that change Jai’s whole life.

“I broke up with Peter.”

The first time Jai almost cries in front of Frankie, it’s at her engagement party in Paris.

Well, it’s not a party. Not really. It’s more of a celebration dinner. But still.

The proposal wasn’t expected, but it wasn’t unexpected either. Frankie and Nick are in a good place, and have been for a while, and Jai doesn’t worry that she’s going to get her heart broken anymore.

They were at a cafe for breakfast. Nick slid the ring—a platinum band with a marquise diamond—across the table. It wasn’t even in a box. He just slid the ring all by itself across the table toward Frankie, leaned forward, and murmured, You’re the love of my life. Marry me. He didn’t get down on one knee. Frankie didn’t care.

Mina thinks it’s the most romantic thing she’s ever heard. RJ is also over the moon, though his attachment to Frankie inspired an adorably stern If you hurt her I’ll kill you lecture. (Watching RJ, who is the world’s biggest nerd, wag his finger in the face of Nick, who looks like a professional athlete, will always be amusing.) And because Mina and RJ feed off each other, they plan a dinner out to celebrate.

It’s a rooftop restaurant, and the Parisian skyline is breathtaking in the background. Frankie and Nick spend the entire dinner wrapped around each other, laughing as RJ weaves stories about living in their basement and nannying their children when they finally retire from the spy business.

Mina is so happy for them that she’s glowing. Jai can’t take his eyes off her. They’ve been spending more time together lately. They’re not dating. They’re just...talking. Sometimes he wants
to kiss her so badly it takes his breath away, but she was with Peter for five years and she needs some time to be on her own, so he’s waiting. She’s worth it.

Toward the end of the night, Jai finds himself standing at the edge of the roof, nursing a bourbon and staring at the skyline. Frankie appears at his side, stunning in a blue dress, her long hair loose around her shoulders. In her heels, she’s nearly taller than him. He doesn’t mind.

“Hey,” she says softly.

He smiles at her. “Congratulations.”

He’s said it already, but that doesn’t stop a smile from lighting up her face. He’s never seen her so happy.

“Thanks.” She puts her elbows on the parapet and leans forward. “Mina looks beautiful in that dress, don’t you think?”

Jai hums noncommittally and sips his bourbon. He can feel Frankie watching him, but he waits her out. He’s more patient than she is. He always wins these battles.

“Jesus, Jai,” she huffs eventually. She turns toward him. “Just sleep with her already.”

Jai gives her an incredulous look.

“Oh come on,” Frankie says, rolling her eyes. “You’ve been in love with her since you met her. Two years, Jai. You’ve loved her for almost two years now and she’s finally single.”

“She needs some time to get over Peter.”

“She dumped Peter months ago. For you.”

“She dumped Peter because she didn’t want to marry him. It had nothing to do with me.”

“Sometimes I really hate you.”

Jai can’t help it—he snorts out a laugh. Frankie grins at him. They stand in silence for a while, and then she turns toward him again.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

There’s a hint of nervousness in her voice, and Jai turns toward her in concern. “Of course.”

“I want a wedding. A real one. In a church with a white dress and rings and old fashioned vows. Mina’s going to be my maid of honor. RJ’s going to be the best man. And I was thinking that maybe, if you want, you could—”

“You don’t need to put me in the wedding. Francesca,” he cuts her off softly. “I won’t be offended.”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d walk me down the aisle.”

Jai stares at her.

“You’re the only person I know who won’t get sappy or let me get cold feet,” she says softly. “You look great in a tux. And I...I want you beside me for this.”
Jai feels an oddly warm sensation behind his eyes. His throat is suddenly tight. He grips his bourbon glass a little tighter, clears his throat, and says, “I’d be honored.”

Frankie smiles. Before she can say anything, though, Nick appears behind her and wraps his arms around her waist.

“Hey baby,” he says in a low voice. He ducks his head and kisses her shoulder. “Want to get out of here?”

“Yeah.”

She turns toward him, and Nick drops his arms from her waist and reaches for her hand instead. She weaves her fingers through his, but pauses before she lets him lead her away.

“It’s a beautiful night, Jai,” she says quietly. She glances toward the other side of the rooftop, and Jai follows her gaze to see Mina sitting next to RJ, her head tilted back in a laugh. “And that’s a beautiful dress.”

When Jai looks back at Frankie, she smiles at him. She lifts the hand that isn’t holding Nick’s and presses it against Jai’s chest over his heart. Then she leans forward and brushes a kiss on his cheek.

“If you want something, you have to be brave enough to go after it,” she whispers.

She winks at him when she leans back. And then she lets her fiance lead her away, smiling when he bends down to murmur something in her ear.

Jai watches them go, and then shifts his attention to Mina. She glances his way, and their eyes meet across the rooftop.

A few hours later, when Mina is standing in his arms in the middle of her bedroom, kissing him as he slowly unzips her dress, Jai tells her she’s beautiful. She smiles, pushes the suit jacket from his shoulders, and tells him that she loves him.

It’s the best thing he’s ever heard, and he doesn’t even have to think about how to respond.

“I love you too.”

The first time Jai sees Frankie cry, it’s when her fiance is bleeding out in her arms.

There’s blood everywhere. It’s on Frankie’s hands, her shirt, her jeans. It’s puddled on the floor beneath her. There’s a streak of it on her jaw. Nick is drenched in it.

“Francesca, you have to go,” Nick whispers.

“No,” she says, leaning over him. Her hands are pressing against a bullet hole in his chest but he’s got more than one and it doesn’t matter. He’s dying. Even if they could get him out of the building in time, he’d be dead before they got to the hospital.

“I’m not leaving you,” she says fiercely.

Nick looks past her to Jai. He doesn’t have to say anything—Jai knows what he’s going to ask—but he says it anyway. “You have to take her, Jai.”

Jai bends forward and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Francesca.”

“No,” she says, wrenching free of his grasp. “I’m not leaving him.”
Nick raises a shaking hand and brushes it over Frankie’s cheek. “Don’t make me responsible for this, baby. Don’t—” His breathing hitches. He winces and drops his hand. Frankie scoots closer to him. “Don’t make me responsible for your death.”

“Nick,” she whispers. All the fight has gone out of her voice, and Jai knows she’s going to leave even though she doesn’t want to.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” Nick whispers. “Only good thing I ever did was fall in love with you.”

There are tears streaking down Frankie’s cheeks. She leans forward and kisses him, and then rests her forehead against his.

“I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you too. So much, baby. So much.”

Jai gives them as long as he can, and then he reaches for her again. “We have to go, Francesca.”

She kisses Nick one last time, and then lets Jai pull her to her feet. She casts one last look at Nick over her shoulder, devastation and grief clear on her face, and then she turns and they run.

They get outside and free of the blast radius twenty seconds before the building blows.

“Where’s Nick?” RJ says as the timer on Jai’s watch winds down.

Mina has noticed the blood that Frankie’s covered in, and when she looks at Jai in horror all he can do is stare back at her.

“Franks?” RJ says. There’s an edge of panic to his voice. He’s noticed the blood now too. He steps toward her. “Where’s...where’s Nick?”

The building blows up. There’s a deafening boom, followed by a wave of heat, and they all cringe away from the blast. As soon as it’s over, Jai turns to Frankie.

She’s swaying on her feet, staring at the building in shock, and then a deep, heart-wrenching sob bursts out of her chest. She tilts and Jai catches her, his arms wrapping around her waist. He lowers their bodies as gently as he can onto the pavement.

She curls into him, another sob wracking her body, and he holds her as she cries.

The first time Jai sees Frankie’s brownstone, it’s a week after Nick’s funeral.

“This is going to be terrible,” RJ murmurs when they stop on Frankie’s front stoop. He’s fidgeting, the grocery bags in his hands crinkling with the movement. “What if...what if she...?”

“It’s going to be fine,” Mina says soothingly, brushing her hand along RJ’s shoulders. “She’s going to cry. Or maybe she won’t. However she wants to act is okay.”

“But what do I say?” RJ whispers. His eyes are glistening with unshed tears.

“You don’t need to say anything,” Mina says. “Just be here for her. We can’t change what happened, but we’re going to try our best to help her through it.”

RJ takes a deep breath and then lifts his chin. “Do or do not,” he says decisively.
It's the same *Star Wars* quote he says every time he’s about to do something difficult, and Jai knows that if Frankie were here, she’d smile and ruffle his hair and say *you big nerd* in that affectionate voice she reserves only for RJ.

“‘Yes,’” Mina says with a smile. “‘That’s the spirit.’”

Mina nods at Jai, and he knocks on the door. There’s no answer for a while, and then it swings open and Frankie is standing framed in the doorway.

Her eyes are red-rimmed. Her hair is pulled back and twisted messily into a bun. She’s wearing the same Tottenham t-shirt she wore the first time Jai ever knocked on her door, and everything hits him all of a sudden—the ring that’s still on her finger and the helpless rage of knowing that The Collective robbed her of the wedding and the life she’d wanted—and he struggles to breathe around it.

“Francesca,” he manages to say.

“Jai,” she whispers.

And then RJ is pushing past him, dropping his shopping bags on the front stoop and throwing himself into Frankie’s arms, and the barely-restrained grief they were all struggling to keep at bay bursts forth.

A few hours later, after Jai cooks a massive meal, Mina and RJ set to work on the dishes.

“Take her for a walk,” Mina says quietly to Jai.

He obeys. They walk around her neighborhood in silence. She’s not wearing a single piece of her own clothing. The sweatpants she’s got on are huge, obviously Nick’s, and the RAF sweatshirt is the same one she wore in Budapest what seems like forever ago.

Jai knows it’s going to be a long road for her, even if she is insisting on returning to the field in a few days, but when they round the corner to head back to her brownstone, he thinks she looks a little less weighed down by grief.

That, of course, is when they come across a woman in a wedding dress.

She’s posing on the steps of a walk-up not far from Frankie’s, and judging by the gaggle of giggling bridesmaids nearby, they’re taking wedding photos.

Frankie goes still next to Jai. He hears her suck in a breath, and watches as pain shivers hard across her face. He reaches for her without even thinking about it. He wraps his fingers around her bicep and squeezes.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to marry him,” he whispers.

She swallows. Her eyes never leave the woman in the wedding dress. “I did.”

Jai stares at her, certain that he misheard. “What?”

“He didn’t want to wait,” she whispers. “We were still going to have the wedding. But he wanted to be married, and I...we got married.”

“When?”

“Two months ago,” she says in a barely audible voice. Her eyes are brimming with tears. “I guess
that makes me a widow.”

Jai squeezes her arm again, and when she turns toward him and presses her forehead into his shoulder, he wraps his arms around her.

The first time Jai gets drunk with Frankie, it’s after Nick kills the love of his life.

When Nick walks in the front door of their safehouse in Moscow, Mina gasps. RJ curses in Hebrew. Jai stares. Frankie drops the mug in her hand, and it shatters all over the floor.

She looks like she’s seen a ghost.

She has.

Nick crosses the room. There are tears in his eyes when he reaches for Frankie’s face and murmurs her name like a sinner praying for forgiveness. Frankie flinches when he touches her, stares at him for a few seconds in shock, and then breathes his name and throws herself into his arms.

For a full minute or two, nobody says a word. They all just watch as Frankie cries, her hands brushing over Nick like she’s trying to convince herself he’s real. Nick wipes the tears from her face and whispers how much he loves her. It’s the gentlest Jai has ever seen him behave, but it’s obvious from Frankie’s reaction that this is a version of Nick she knows well.

When Frankie finally calms down, she asks for an explanation. Nick gives her one. He’d been lost and disillusioned by the military when Clarke recruited him to join MI6. Clarke had preyed on his isolation and his longing to do something good, and told him The Collective was rooting out corruption in intelligence agencies. Nick thought he was one of the good guys until he joined the team and slowly realized that The Collective wasn’t what he thought.

It was Frankie who changed everything. Frankie, beautiful and brilliant and fierce. Frankie, who loved him despite his fuck-ups and his brokenness and his rage. Frankie, impulsive and sarcastic and lethal but good all the way down to her bones. She made Nick want to be good, she made him want to defect from The Collective, but he’d been terrified that his defection would provoke Clarke into killing her. He tried to tell her the truth so many times—so many times—but he couldn’t. He was afraid she’d never forgive him for lying, and he couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

RJ’s program forced his hand. He faked his death so Clarke couldn’t force him to steal it. He thought it would end The Collective, and then he could come back and beg Frankie for forgiveness. But somehow, Clarke figured out he’d faked his death. He figured out where Frankie and the team were too. And now he’s coming for them and for the program. They don’t have a lot of time. RJ needs to run the program. They need to check it against some names that Nick has, and get a list of every Collective member it can identify, and then they need to destroy it and run.

The room is dead silent when he’s finished. Frankie stares at him, chewing her lip the way she does when she’s thinking. Everyone is waiting for her decision. She’s always been the one who makes the final call, and this is no exception.

“Trust me, baby,” Nick whispers. “Please.”

Frankie looks at RJ. “Open the program.”

RJ does as he’s told. He always does what Frankie asks. He’d jump off the roof if she told him to.

Mina is standing in the kitchen in the same spot she was when Nick entered. Jai is still standing by
the sliding glass back door. They share a look across the room. She’s got tears in her eyes. Jai knows she’ll be the first one to tell Frankie to forgive Nick.

RJ sits at the dining table and sets his laptop in front of him. Nick stands behind his chair, watching as he unlocks and starts the program.

And then Nick pulls a gun out and shoots RJ in the back of the head.

He turns the gun toward Jai next, and Jai tries to dive out of the way but he feels the force of the bullet hit him in the chest. He drops to the floor.

For a second after that, everything seems to be in slow motion. He stares at the sliding glass door next to him, blinking at his reflection, and realizes that the bullet hit his flask instead of his chest. The sudden, terrible realization that RJ is dead and Mina and Frankie could be too makes him want to bolt to his feet, but then he remembers that he’s unarmed and if he doesn’t play dead he’s going to end up actually dead. He’s no use to them dead.

He refocuses on the glass door in the same instant he hears Nick’s voice.

“Don’t, baby. Don’t.”

Jai can see Frankie and Nick in the reflection of the glass. Nick’s got his fingers curled around Frankie’s arm, stopping her from lunging toward the Glock that’s sitting on the kitchen counter nearby.

“Don’t touch me,” Frankie snarls, ripping out of his grasp.

Nick levels the gun at her. “Don’t make me responsible for your death, Francesca.”

Frankie goes still, probably more from the words than from the gun pointed at her. And then she steps forward, and the muzzle of Nick’s gun presses into her collarbone. “Do it,” she whispers.

Jai can hear the grief in her voice, the raw agony, and behind her in the reflection he can see RJ’s dead body slumped over his laptop.

“Do it,” she repeats. “Finish the job, Nick.”

“You’re not the job, baby. You’ve never been the job.”

“You’re lying. All of this was a lie. You married me so I would trust you.”

“I married you because I fell in love with you.”

“I don’t believe you,” she says, and her voice breaks on the last word.

“I told you the truth, baby,” Nick murmurs. “All of it was true except the end. Clarke found me, but we made a deal. If I give him the program, I get to keep you.”

“What?”

“Your life for the program,” Nick reiterates. “I made a trade. He can’t touch you. None of them can. You’re immune to The Collective. You’re safe.”

“My life?” she breathes. “You made a deal for my life but not theirs?”

“I didn’t have a choice. He knows you’re here. He’s got a team outside right now. I could either
watch him torture all of you to get access to the program or I could come in and get it for him and save you. I chose you.”

“You killed them, Nick.”

“It was mercy.”

“Mercy?” Frankie breathes in disbelief.

“Clarke would’ve done worse and you know it. I didn’t have a choice. I had to protect you, Frankie. You’re my wife—”

“No,” she cuts him off. “The man I married wouldn’t do this. He wouldn’t…” She trails off, and the room is silent, and then she whispers, “How could you do this?”

Nick lowers his gun and steps toward her. He lifts his other hand to her cheek and holds her face the same way he did all those years ago in Venice.

“I did it for us,” he says. “The Collective is corrupt, but so are our governments. You know it as well as I do. Even when Clarke is gone, there’s going to be someone else. There’s always going to be someone else. Let them destroy each other, baby. We’ve done enough for them.”

“You know what The Collective will do with that program.”

“I don’t care.” He leans even closer to her. “All I care about is you.”

“Nick…”

“Come with me. We’ll start over just like we always talked about. Me and you. A house on the beach. A little girl with my eyes and your smile. Everything you ever wanted. I’ll give it all to you. Just come with me.”

Frankie doesn’t answer. Jai watches their reflections as Nick inches toward her. He kisses her. She’s still at first, her back ramrod straight and her shoulders tense, and then she pushes against his chest and whispers, “No.”

“I know you’re upset,” he murmurs, pulling her close again. “But you have to understand—”

“No,” she cuts him off, pushing him away again. “There’s nothing you can say, Nick. You...you ruined it. You ruined us.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Nick says. He sounds frustrated. “I couldn’t save them, Frankie. There was nothing I could do.”

“You should’ve told me the truth before it came to this. We could’ve avoided all of this. We could’ve saved their lives. We could’ve...” Her sentence ends with a sharp exhale that sounds like a sob.

“I’m telling you now.”

“It’s too late.” It’s hard to tell from the reflection, but Jai thinks there are tears rolling down her cheeks. “I could’ve forgiven you for the rest, Nick. But not this. I can’t do this. I won’t.”

“He’ll kill you, Frankie. If you don’t come with me, he’ll set you up to take the fall for this.”

She swipes at her eyes. “I don’t care.”
“The agency will come after you. MI6. Mossad. Interpol. All of them. You’ll be a fugitive.”

“I’d rather be a fugitive than spend the rest of my life with you.”

The words hang in the air, sharp and painful. There’s a profound sense of finality to them, and Jai knows that she’s made up her mind and she’s not going to change it. There’s no way Nick doesn’t know it too.

“You’ll change your mind,” Nick says. There’s certainty in his voice, and Jai wonders how long his denial will last. “I’ll wait for you.”

“Then you’ll wait forever. I’m done with you, Nick. We’re done.”

She straightens and starts toward the Glock on the counter, but Nick raises his gun and points it at her. She goes still.

“Shoot me or go,” she says. “Because if I get that gun in my hand, I’m going to put a bullet in your skull.”

Nick hesitates for a second. They stare at each other, tension thrumming between them.

“Go out the back door,” he says quietly. “I can hold them off for five minutes. But not any longer.”

And then he grabs RJ’s laptop and strides out the front door.

The silence after he leaves is deafening. Jai counts to ten before he gets to his feet just to be safe. Frankie, who is standing frozen in the middle of the room like she’s not sure what to do next, jolts visibly in surprise when he stands up. She lunges reflexively for the gun on the counter.

“Easy,” Jai says, holding up his hands when she whirls around to point it at him.

Frankie stares at him. She blinks, and then lowers the gun. “He shot you.”

Jai pulls the flask out of his inside pocket. There’s a dent in the front. “He shot my flask.”

He doesn’t wait for her to respond. Now that he knows she’s not going to shoot him, he’s only got one thing on his mind.

“Mina?” he calls. He shoves the flask back in his jacket and heads toward the kitchen. She was standing behind the kitchen island when Nick came in. She’s probably hiding because she isn’t sure it’s safe yet. He needs to tell her it’s safe.

“Jai…” Frankie says, and he can tell by the tone of her voice what she wants to say. He ignores her. She doesn’t know. She’s wrong. She thought he was dead, and he’s not, and Mina isn’t either.

“Mina,” he says, rounding the corner of the island.

Mina is sprawled on the kitchen floor, her legs bent awkwardly beneath her and her arms flung wide. There’s a bullet hole in her chest above her heart, and blood on her white blouse. Her eyes are open, staring blankly at the ceiling, and her copper hair is fanned out over the floor. She’s wearing the necklace he bought her in Portugal. She’s not moving.

“Mina,” he breathes, crouching on the floor next to her. His hands hover over her bullet wound, but there’s no need for pressure to stem the bleeding. He knows what the location of her wound means. He can see that she isn’t breathing.
She’s dead.

He rocks backward and lands on his ass on the tile floor. He can’t take his eyes off her face. Ten minutes ago she was smiling at him. She’s never going to smile at him again.

“Jai,” Frankie’s voice murmurs from behind him. He feels her hands slide over his shoulders. “We have to go.”

He shakes his head but can’t voice a reply.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. She’s crying. He can tell by the quiver in her voice. “But we can’t stay here. We have to go.”

Everything blurs after that. They shove handfuls of clothes in a duffel bag, grab weapons and cash, leave their electronics, and flee. They stop at a convenience store and Frankie fills a basket with supplies. They end up in a seedy motel in a dangerous part of Moscow. He sinks to the floor between the two double beds. Frankie sits on the floor across from him, and sets a bottle of Mamont between them.

They drink it to the dregs. Neither of them say a word. Drunkenness eats away at the edges of Jai’s consciousness. He tells himself the numbness in his chest is from the alcohol. He knows it’s not.

He isn’t sure how the gun ends up in his hands. He just knows it does. He curls forward over his knees, closes his eyes, and all he can see is Mina’s smile.

The first thing he feels is the muzzle of the gun pressing against his temple.

The second thing he feels is Frankie’s hands over his.

They sit for a second, her hands on his, and then he feels her lips press against his forehead.

“She wouldn’t want this for you,” Frankie whispers.

For the first time since he found the love of his life dead on the floor, tears fill his eyes. They fall freely, dripping down onto his suit. He doesn’t lower the gun.

“Give me the gun, Jai,” Frankie whispers, tightening her hands on his.

He gives her the gun.

The first time Jai promises to follow Frankie through the gates of hell, it’s two days after their family is murdered.

Clarke didn’t waste any time. Frankie has been branded a traitor and a rogue agent responsible for the deaths of her entire team and the theft of a highly classified, extremely dangerous computer program.

Jai has been declared dead. His parents have been notified. He can’t reach out to them and tell them otherwise. It wouldn’t be safe for them. It’s better if they think he’s dead.

Frankie calls the head of the CIA from a burner phone and tells him the truth about Clarke and Nick. She knows he won’t believe her, but she does it anyway so it’s on the record.

“Turn yourself in,” Miller snarls at her. “You won’t last, Trowbridge. We’ll send our best after you.”
“I am the best,” Frankie replies. “Send whoever you want. They’ll come back to you in body bags.”

She hangs up before he can say anything else.

When she gets an email from RJ not long after that, they’re both stunned.

Jai knows, even without asking, what Frankie is going to do with the information RJ sent. He hasn’t paid attention to much of anything over the past forty-eight hours, but Frankie hasn’t left his side and he’s seen the change in her. She’s been gentle with him. But when she thinks he’s asleep, he sees how the thirst for revenge is starting to swallow her whole. It’s almost as if her body is vibrating with a new frequency.

She turns toward him and puts her hand over his. “Jai,” she starts.

He can see it in her eyes—that dangerous, vengeful edge. He doesn’t let her finish. “You’re going after the names on that list.”

She nods. “Yes.”

“I’m going with you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking.”

She looks pained. “I did this, Jai. I’m responsible for this. I trusted him.”

“We all did.”

“I married him, Jai. I’m…” Her voice hitches. She pauses, takes a deep breath, and lets it out. There are tears in her eyes. “Mina wanted to destroy it and I said no. I told RJ to run it. This is my fault.”

“No it’s not. We’re spies, Frankie. We signed up for this. We all knew it could end like this. Mina and RJ knew, and they took the risk willingly. All of us did. When you act like you’re the only one who made that decision, you’re robbing them of their sacrifice. And you’re exonerating him.”

Frankie closes her eyes and takes another deep breath.

Jai squeezes her hand. “They wouldn’t let you do this alone. And neither will I.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not going to survive this. I’m going to take as many of them with me as I can, but I’m not an idiot, Jai. I know how this ends.”

“So do I. I’m going with you.”

“Jai—”

“To the gates of hell and straight fucking through,” he cuts her off, his voice like steel. “I go where you go, Francesca.”

A beat of silence passes, and then she nods.

The first time Jai gives Frankie micro-tracker jewelry when they’re not on a mission, it’s four
months after what happened in Moscow.

They’re in Krakow chasing a lead. They get ambushed. They’re outnumbered, fighting for their lives, and then the assailants around them start dropping like flies. The sharp report of a sniper rifle fills the warehouse.

It takes less than two minutes. Jai and Frankie stand in the middle of the warehouse, the floor around them littered with bodies. The silence is unsettling. And then Frankie’s fingers curl around Jai’s wrist.

“Jai,” she whispers.

He glances at her. She’s staring upward. He follows her gaze up to a metal walkway that circles the upper floor of the warehouse.

Nick is crouching on the walkway, a sniper rifle in hand. He’s staring at Frankie. She stares back.

“You cut your hair,” Nick says.

Frankie lifts her chin defiantly but says nothing. Jai glances back and forth between them and thinks about the first time they met, and the electricity that had cracked through the air. It’s still there, even now, but there’s something new in it. Jai knows it’s Frankie’s rage.

“Give us a minute, Jai,” Nick says.

There’s no way in hell Jai is going to leave Frankie alone with Nick, but he doesn’t get a chance to say that.

Frankie’s grip on his wrist tightens. “No.”

Nick lowers the gun just a little, but Jai knows he could put a bullet in both their heads in a split second. “I gave you space, baby. Now it’s time to talk.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“You’re my wife.”

“I stopped being your wife when you put a bullet in RJ’s head.”

“I know you, Francesca. You still love me. I can see it in your eyes. You’re always going to love me.”

“Go to hell, Nick.”

She tugs on Jai’s wrist. They turn to walk out of the warehouse, and then Nick’s voice calls out after them.

“What if I gave you The Collective?”

Frankie goes still. She bites her lip. A beat of silence passes, and then she turns back to Nick.

He lowers his rifle a little more. “I’m Clarke’s second in command now. No one knows more than I do. I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I’ll help you destroy them and clear your name.”

“And what do you get in exchange?”
“You.”

Jai watches her. He knows that Frankie will never, ever go back to Nick. She’ll never forgive him for killing RJ and Mina. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t some part of her that still loves him. Jai would never say it to her, but he thinks Nick is right. Part of her is always going to love him.

“We can’t go back, Nick,” Frankie says. “You want to be the man I thought I married? Then help us bring them down because it’s the right thing to do.”

“I’ll help. But only if I get you.”

“You can’t have me.”

Nick clenches his jaw. “You’ll never find someone who loves you like I do.”

Jai feels his temper flare, but Frankie doesn’t look angry.


She turns on her heel and walks away.

Later that night, Frankie puts on a dress and goes to a nightclub. It’s the first time she’s gone to a club since Moscow. Jai goes with her. He watches from the bar as she dances with half a dozen different men. When a tattooed guy who’s best described by the words chiseled and dangerous kisses her in the middle of the dance floor, and she kisses him back instead of punching him, Jai knows what’s going to happen.

She leaves the dance floor and heads for the bar. The tattooed dangerous guy stares longingly after her. She stops next to Jai and signals to the bartender, and he slides a shot of vodka toward her. She curls her fingers around it but doesn’t drink it. Jai waits for her.

“Never thought I’d be a cheater,” she says eventually.

“He won’t divorce you.”

It’s not a question, but she answers like it is. “No.”

“Then you don’t owe him anything.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “Do you think he’s…?”

She doesn’t finish, but she doesn’t have to. Jai knows what she’s asking. Do you think he’s slept with someone else?

Jai hesitates. It’s the first time in a long time that he’s wanted to lie to her. It’s also the first time he’s sure that he’s right—no matter how much she hates Nick, some part of her is always going to love him.

“Yes,” Jai tells her. “But I’m guessing he thinks about you when he does.”

She tips her head back and swallows the shot and then gestures for another one. The bartender sets a new one in front of her and takes the empty glass.

“Are you doing it to hurt him?” Jai asks quietly. “Or are you doing it for you?”

“Both.”
Jai hesitates again. He knows if he says *Let’s go home,* she’ll go with him back to the hotel without argument. But he also knows she’s lonely. She’s not like him. She craves physical affection and connection. She needs it. And she needs to let go of as much of Nick as she can.

Jai reaches into his pocket and pulls out the ring that she wears when they’re in the field and he needs to keep track of her. As soon as she said *I want to go out tonight* he knew this was a possibility. He came prepared.

He slides it across the bar and leaves it sitting next to her shot glass. “Be back by two,” he tells her. “Or I’ll come get you.”

He thinks that to a random passerby, his instructions would sound odd. He probably sounds like a dad giving his daughter a curfew. But the only time she’s been out of his sight in the last four months is when they’re in the field and she’s wearing that ring. He knows he won’t be able to go to sleep tonight until she’s safe in the bed next to his.

Frankie stares at the ring, frozen. Jai watches her. Eventually she tips her head back, swallows the second shot, and sets the glass back on the bar. Then she slides Jai’s ring on the finger where she used to wear Nick’s.

She kisses his cheek before she walks away. “I love you,” she murmurs in his ear.

And then she’s gone.

The first time Jai and Frankie meet Director Casey, it’s three and a half years after Moscow.

Casey’s not the director yet. He’s the acting director, and he’s vying to make his appointment permanent after the untimely death (read: murder) of former CIA Director Dan Miller.

Casey has some stiff competition. He needs a way to set himself apart from his rivals and distance himself from the corruption that Miller’s reign was characterized by, so he sends a message to Frankie via some back channels about wanting to meet and discuss reinstatement.

At first, Frankie is adamant in her refusal. Her initial reaction is something along the lines of: *I’m not helping some opportunistic asshole get a job promotion thanks to shit we did without the help of the fucking CIA.* Jai responds by pointing out that her fondness for cursing has increased exponentially ever since she became a world renowned assassin. Frankie throws a tube of mascara at him.

Eventually, Jai talks her into hearing what Casey has to say. They demand to set the parameters for the meet, and Casey agrees. Jai sends him on a wild goose chase all over London just to make sure he’s alone and it’s not a set up.

Frankie and Jai drink at a pub while they wait for him. Well, Jai drinks. Frankie has sex with Patrick, the bartender/owner of the pub, in his office in the back. She always sleeps with Patrick when they come to this bar. Patrick is good looking, and he’s more than a little in love with her, but Jai suspects the only reason Frankie sleeps with him is because his office walls are covered in Tottenham memorabilia and Nick would fly into a rage if he knew she was fucking another Tottenham fan.

After Frankie emerges from the back office and drinks a glass of bourbon, Jai gives Casey the address of the pub.

Casey smiles when he slides onto a stool across the table from them thirty minutes later. “I didn’t
realize what I was signing up for when I told you I’d jump through your hoops.”

Jai doesn’t smile back. Neither does Frankie. Her body is tense next to his. He can feel the restless, furious energy coming off of her in waves. He thought screwing Patrick would calm her down. He knows she did too. That’s why she did it. Ever since that night in Krakow, sex has become an outlet for her. But now she’s tense again, and Jai knows that when this meeting is over, she’s going to yank Patrick back into his office and fuck him again. Judging by the way Patrick is watching her longingly from behind the bar, he won’t mind.

“You two have been busy these last few years,” Casey says into the silence.

Frankie lifts her glass to her lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The Collective has been decimated. Even with that program, they’re barely functioning. I suspect you might have something to do with that.”

“You suspect. But you can’t prove it.”

“No,” Casey acknowledges. “You’re very, very good at what you do, Agent Trowbridge.”

“I’m not an agent. You know that.”

“Would you like to be?”

Frankie lifts her eyebrows.

Casey puts his elbows on the table and leans forward. “As the head of the agency, I can assure you that we no longer believe either of you is a member of The Collective. We know you’re innocent. And we’ve formalized it in our records.”

“You hear that, Jai?” Frankie says. “Three and a half years later, after we did all their dirty work for them, they’ve decided we’re innocent. And they formalized it.”

“I’m touched,” Jai says dryly.

Casey looks undaunted by their sarcasm. “Miller was a corrupt fool. He let you take the fall because it was easier than pursuing the truth. I refuse to follow in his footsteps. We need agents like you who can do what needs to be done to protect American lives and interests. Your country needs you.”

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Frankie says acidly, “but my patriotism has worn a little thin since the U.S. government spent years trying to assassinate me. A rah-rah speech from Uncle Sam isn’t going to cut it.”

“What if I gave you Nick Walker?”

Jai feels Frankie’s body stiffen next to his. There isn’t a trace of a reaction on her face that Casey can see, but Jai knows her so well it’s like she’s shouting at him. Nick dropped off the face of the earth about two months ago. Frankie desperately wants to know where he is, because they’re extremely close to finishing off The Collective. Once they succeed, Nick will be the only loose end left. But so far, he’s proved impossible to find.

Casey seems to sense that he’s got the upper hand. “We know the remaining members of The Collective are meeting in Zurich within the next month to regroup and strategize. We don’t know when the meeting is, or where. But we know that you do.”
“Do I,” Frankie says noncommittally.

“We’ll make you a deal,” Casey continues. “You tell us where and when the meeting is, and we’ll tell you where Nick Walker is.”

“What makes you think he won’t be at the meeting in Zurich?” Frankie asks. “I don’t need you to tell me where he is if I know where he’s going to be.”

“He won’t be there,” Casey answers confidently. “He and Clarke are never in the same place at once. And I think you know that.”

He’s right. She does.

Frankie glances at Jai. Jai meets her gaze.

“I’ll give you a minute to discuss it,” Casey says. He slides out of the booth and walks over to the bar.

“We should take it,” Jai says as soon as Casey’s out of earshot.

Frankie looks at him incredulously. “We’re this close to finishing the job and you want to turn it over to the fuck-ups at the agency?”

“We can make it a stipulation of the deal that we get to lead the Zurich raid. We’ll finish it. They’ll just provide support.”

“Why bother? We can do it without them.”

“We can. But should we? Imagine having the resources of the agency behind us when we go after Clarke. It’d be a hell of a lot easier and safer than hiring people. Not to mention cheaper.”

Frankie casts a glance at Casey. “We won’t get to lead that raid unless we’re reinstated agents.”

She looks back at Jai. “You really want to rejoin the agency?”

Jai considers the question. He’s spent a lot of time thinking about what he and Frankie will do when The Collective is finally gone. If he’s honest with himself, all he wants to do is buy a house with a garden that Mina would have loved, and spend the rest of his life as far away from spies and guns and death as he can get.

But Frankie can’t do that. The past few years have changed her too much. He’s changed too. He’s just as distrustful and withdrawn as she is. But he had those tendencies before Nick. She didn’t. Sometimes, when Jai looks at her, all he can think about is how different she is. He doesn’t love her any less, but she’s not the same person. She doesn’t laugh as often as she used to. She refuses to connect with people. When he met her, she was openly and unhesitatingly affectionate. Now, unless it’s a man she’s planning to sleep with, she pulls away when anyone but him initiates physical contact.

When The Collective is gone, she’ll need a new purpose—something that will remind her that she’s more than just the terrible things she’s had to do these last few years. Jai knows he’s the only person on the planet she trusts. He’s the only person she’ll let help her figure out who she is without the shadow of Nick looming over her. And he has no intention of abandoning her.

“The Collective will be gone soon,” he tells her. “All of this will be over. We’ll need something to do.”
“You don’t want to retire?” she asks, and Jai can tell by the way she’s looking at him that she knows that’s what he wants.

“I want to do good with the life I still have,” he replies since he can’t lie. “They would want that.”

Pain flares briefly in her eyes, and she looks down into her glass.

“It’s your call,” he tells her quietly. “Whatever you decide, I got your back.”

She lifts her gaze back to his.

He smiles. “I go where you go, Francesca. To the gates of hell and straight through.”

The first time Jai realizes that Nick is never going to let Frankie go, they’re in a villa in Shanghai in the middle of the night.

Casey keeps his promise. Frankie and Jai lead the mission that kills Clarke and the remaining members of The Collective, and then Casey hands Frankie a slip of paper with a location.

They’re in Shanghai by midnight. It’s a cloudy night, so there’s no moon. The address is for a historical estate that’s about an hour from the city center. The distance from the city, the moonless night, and the lack of lighting makes the villa they break into almost pitch black. They have to linger once they get inside to let their eyes adjust.

The villa is clearly worth millions. It’s clean and well-kept. Nick’s brand of scotch is on the bar cart and there’s a pair of soccer cleats sitting by the back door. A Yale sweatshirt is tossed over the back of the couch. Frankie’s steps stutter when she sees it, but she clenches her jaw and keeps going.

Jai follows her lead. She clears each room on the first floor before heading to the second. Jai watches her back and tries not to worry about the way her hands are shaking, or the way she keeps inhaling and exhaling deeply as if she’s trying to control her breathing.

When they get to the master bedroom, and find Nick sleeping soundly in his bed, Frankie darts forward like a predator in pursuit of her prey. Jai wonders if she’ll shoot Nick as he sleeps, or if she’ll wake him so he knows it was her.

She freezes next to the bed. Jai frowns. She doesn’t move. He thinks she’s staring at the nightstand, but he isn’t sure. He takes a step to the side so he can follow her gaze.

There’s a framed photo of her and Nick on the nightstand. Nick is sitting at a cafe in Paris, the Eiffel Tower looming in the background as he grins at the camera. Frankie is behind him, her arms thrown around his neck, her lips pressed against his cheek. Her engagement ring sparkles on her fourth finger.

Jai glances up at her. She’s standing motionless, staring at the photo. The seconds drag on. Jai worries that Nick will wake up, and they’ll end up in a fight. He steps forward, wraps his fingers around her bicep, and squeezes. She blinks quickly a few times, takes a deep breath, and then nods. Jai lets go of her arm and steps back.

Frankie presses the muzzle of her gun to Nick’s temple.

Nick’s eyes flutter open.
“Hey baby,” Frankie whispers. “Time to pay the piper.”

She trails the muzzle down his cheek, and presses it over his heart.

“Should I shoot you where you shot Mina? Or do you want it in the back of the head like RJ?”

Nick stares up at her. “If you kill me, RJ’s program will be in the hands of every terrorist and criminal in the world by dawn.”

“Empty promises,” Frankie murmurs. “You were always good at those.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not empty, baby. RJ’s not the only one with a fondness for a dead man’s switch. If you don’t believe me, then have Jai check the laptop on my desk. If I’m lying, you can put as many bullets in me as you want.”

“Jai,” Frankie prompts without taking her eyes off Nick.

Jai strides across the room toward the desk. He grabs the laptop and opens the lid, blinks at the brightness of the screen, and then looks up at Frankie.

“There’s a password.”

“Rialto,” Nick says. “As in the Rialto Bridge.” He gazes at Frankie. “First time you ever told me you loved me.”

Frankie doesn’t respond. Jai clenches his jaw, but types out the word.

“If you’re thinking you can destroy the program while you’re in there, Jai, don’t bother,” Nick adds. “There’s a kill switch on that laptop. You’ve only got ten minutes without a second password before it activates. And we both know you can’t rewrite RJ’s code in ten minutes.”

He’s right, but Jai ignores him.

He doesn’t know how long he stares at that laptop screen, clicking through the program and reading RJ’s code and hoping Nick made a mistake. All he knows is that when he looks up to meet Frankie’s gaze from across the room, he’s never felt more helpless or more furious.

Frankie stares at him in disbelief. He can see it darkening her eyes—complete and utter defeat. She hasn’t broken yet. The loss, the betrayal, the years of danger and violence and pain, none of it broke her. But this might.

She looks down at Nick. He sits up slowly, his eyes fixed on hers. She keeps her gun pressed against his chest as he moves, but she doesn’t pull the trigger. She can’t.

“You going to do it anyway, Francesca?”

Frankie doesn’t answer him.

“Do it,” he whispers. He slides one of his hands over hers and presses the muzzle harder into his chest. Jai can see the wedding band tattooed on his finger. “You waited three and a half years, baby. This is what you want. Do it.”

She lowers her gun.

“I’m not you, Nick. I won’t kill innocent people to get what I want.”
“We both know that’s not true anymore.”

Guilt and shame shiver over Frankie’s face. Jai wonders if she’ll argue with Nick, or if she’ll point out that the only reason she had to do any of this was because of him, but she doesn’t. She just turns away from him.

Nick darts out of bed and catches her after she’s only taken a few steps toward the door. Jai has his gun up in an instant, ready to pull the trigger, but Nick isn’t trying to hurt her. He curls his hands around her upper arms to stop her, and she goes still. He steps into her space, his chest brushing her shoulder blades, and ducks his head down to press his lips against her shoulder the way he had all those years ago in Paris.

“I don’t care what you’ve done, baby,” he whispers. “I don’t care who you fucked or who you killed. I still love you.”

Frankie closes her eyes and doesn’t move.

“Francesca,” Jai says sharply. He doesn’t like that she hasn’t pulled away. He knows how it feels to be broken, and that it tempts you to do things you would never normally consider. Frankie saved him from himself all those years ago in Moscow. If tonight is his turn to return the favor, he will.

“Tell him to go,” Nick whispers in her ear. His hands slide down her arms. “Stay with me.”

Jai steps forward. “Francesca.”

A long, tension-filled silence hovers in the air. For the first time since Moscow, Jai is terrified that he’s going to lose her.

Frankie turns around slowly. She stares up at Nick, her eyes flickering over his face.

He brushes his hand over her cheek and smiles. “I love you.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t know what love is, Nick.”

“Do you? Look at your track record, baby. The rebel soldier. The traitor. The parade of criminals you’ve taken your clothes off for. You couldn’t love a good man if you tried. Because deep down, you know you’re just as damaged as I am.”

“That’s not true,” Jai snarls.

“Come on, Jai,” Nick scoffs, glancing over at him. “It’s cute you’re her little cheerleader, but we both know she’s not the same person anymore. All those terrible things she did to destroy The Collective and punish me? They changed her.” He smiles down at Frankie. “You’re just like me now, baby. And it looks good on you.”

Jai can see it in her eyes again—the same defeated look as before. If he can see it, he knows Nick can. Frankie isn’t the only one who’s changed in the last few years. Nick has too. And Jai knows that from now on, this is going to be Nick’s strategy. No more trying to wait her out. No more pleas and promises and sweet talk. He’s going to haunt her and taunt her and tell her she’s just like him until she’s too twisted up in knots to resist him anymore.

There’s not a chance in hell Jai’s going to let him take her, too.

He crosses the room to stand next to her and wraps his fingers around her bicep. “Let’s go, Francesca.”
She doesn’t move. “If you share that program with anyone else, I’ll kill you,” she murmurs, still staring up at Nick. “I don’t give a shit how many dead man switches you have. If you share it with someone else, you’re a dead man. And I won’t make it quick.”

Nick smiles.

The first time Jai realizes that Frankie is head over heels in love with a good man, it’s four years after Shanghai.

He’s at the Dead Drop with Frankie. He’s sitting at the bar, studying some sketches for a pair of exploding headphones he wants to make for Standish. Frankie is on the other side of the bar, pouring two glasses of bourbon. They’ve been here together for three hours, but neither of them have said a word. Jai knows this is why the rest of the team doesn’t understand their friendship. They don’t understand that sometimes, silence means more than sound.

“Hungry?” Frankie asks quietly.

“Sushi,” he replies without looking up.

“Fried chicken.”

“I would rather die.”

She snorts. “Samosas,” she counters, sliding a glass across the bar toward him.

He lifts his gaze to hers. “You know I don’t eat samosas that don’t follow my mother’s recipe.”

“I do know that,” she says, smiling as she lifts her glass to her lips.

He sighs at her.

“Come on, Jai,” she says, dropping her voice into that whine she does when she’s trying to convince him to do something. “You haven’t cooked for me in weeks.”

“I made you drunken noodles last week.”

“You were making them for yourself and I stopped by.”

“And ate the whole pan.”

She grins.

He puts his elbows on the bar and points his pen at her. “If I make samosas, you have to watch a movie of my choosing.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “And what fresh hell does Bollywood have in store for me tonight?”

Before he can reply, the front door to the bar swings open and Will walks in.

Jai’s not sure why he glances at Frankie as soon as he realizes it’s Will, but he does. He watches as her eyes light up, and the corners of her mouth tug upward, and her entire body seems to loosen. It’s as if the weight he’s watched her carry since Moscow has evaporated. For a second, she looks exactly like she did before everything went to hell.

“Whiskey,” she greets.
Jai wonders if Will has noticed that she says his name differently than everyone else does, almost like it’s her pet name for him and not the code name he was assigned by the U.S. government.

“Hey guys,” Will says brightly.

Jai glances over his shoulder to nod in greeting, but there’s no point. Will is giving Frankie the same look she’s giving him, and they’re so disgustingly in love that Jai is pretty sure they both forgot he’s here.

“How was Quantico?” Frankie asks. “You give the newbies all the teddy bear, touchy-feely crap they could take?”

“And more,” Will says with a laugh. He’s got a suitcase in one hand and a shopping bag in the other, but he drops them both on the floor and then pulls a small card out of the back pocket of his jeans. “They gave me a thank you card!”

“Gross,” Frankie mutters.

“Polite,” Will corrects. “And also adorable.”

Frankie scoffs. Jai glances at her. Despite her feigned disgust, he sees the same look as before in her eyes—the one that makes her seem like she’s lighting up from the inside out. She gets it every time she looks at Will.

Jai smirks a little. She is so in love with him.

“I’m going to go finish this in the back room,” Jai says, sliding off his stool and taking his sketches with him.

“Jai,” Frankie says pointedly. She never cancels plans with him to hang out with a boyfriend. Jai knows she’d put off reunion sex with Will if he asked her to. But he won’t.

“Rain check,” he replies, waving her off. He nods at Will as he heads for the back room. Will grins at him, so goofy and sincere that Jai can’t help but roll his eyes.

He knows he shouldn’t, but he stops just inside the hallway and out of sight so he can eavesdrop. He’s curious to see how she acts with Will when she thinks no one is watching.

“Come here, you,” he hears Will say softly.

Jai peeks around the corner. He watches as Frankie makes her way out from behind the bar. The moment she’s within reach, Will pulls her flush against his chest and kisses her, his hands sliding into her hair.

It’s...a long kiss. Long enough that Jai crinkles his nose and almost gives up on eavesdropping. But then Will pulls back. He beams down at Frankie, his thumbs stroking over her cheeks, and she smiles up at him.

“You got even prettier while I was gone,” he murmurs.

“Jai and I got facials.”

Will laughs. Frankie looks pleased by his amusement.

“I got you a present.”
Frankie arches an eyebrow. “Is it something slutty?”

Will tilts his head. “Would you wear something slutty for me?”

She shrugs. “Sure.”

Will gapes at her, clearly stunned, and then swallows hard. Jai would laugh if he wasn’t a little grossed out by the idea of his best friend seducing Will Chase while wearing leather or lace.

“Close your mouth, Whiskey,” Frankie says dryly.

“Right,” Will says, snapping to attention. “We’re going to talk about that later. But first…” He bends down, picks up the shopping bag he dropped on the floor, and holds it out for her. “Here.”

She stares at it. “What is it?”

“Just open it.”

She gives him a look, but takes the bag from him. She sticks her hand inside, and comes out holding a gray sweatshirt.

“The airport was freezing,” Will tells her animatedly. “Like, arctic tundra cold. You would have been miserable. So I bought this sweatshirt while I was waiting for my flight and I’m telling you, Frankie, it is literally the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Airport sweatshirts should not be this cozy. It feels like there are kittens on the inside!”

“Kittens, huh?” she says, glancing up at him. She’s got that look again. That I’m crazy about you look that Jai hasn’t seen in years.

“Kittens!” Will repeats emphatically. “So I thought, hey, Frankie likes cozy stuff. I should get her one on my flight back. But then you FaceTimed me last night—”

Jai nearly chokes on his tongue. Frankie FaceTimed Will? She FaceTimed him willingly?

“—and you were wearing my FBI sweatshirt because you missed me—”

“Because I was cold,” Frankie cuts him off. “And all my other sweatshirts were dirty.”

“Because you missed me,” Will insists. “Anyway, it made me think, why buy another one? I can just give her this one cause I slept in it and it smells like me, and you like how I smell.”

“I have never said those words,” Frankie tells him. “Not even once.”

“You didn’t have to,” Will says, beaming down at her with his chest puffed out. “I can tell. And there’s no point in arguing. We both know I’m right.”

“You’re a cocky son of a bitch.”

“Sexy, right?”

She laughs. And Jai, hidden around the corner and peering out at them like an overprotective big brother, feels like his heart is skipping beats in his chest. Because that laugh? That’s a genuine laugh. A real one. She laughs like that all the time now, and she smiles even more, and Jai never thought they’d get back to a place where she was happy and healthy and whole, but they did. Will makes her happy, and he’s a good man, and she’s head over heels in love with him.
For the first time in a very long time, Jai isn’t terrified by the thought of what would happen to his best friend if he died.

The first time Jai opens his eyes in the hospital after a sniper nearly kills him, Frankie is sleeping on him.

He feels like he’s dreaming. Everything looks a little blurred. His legs are stretched out in front of him in a hospital bed and covered by off-white hospital blankets that he’s positive are washing out his complexion. He blinks for a few seconds, trying to get his bearings—beeping monitors, his tongue like a ball of cotton in his mouth, a dull and distant pain in his chest—and then he realizes there’s a warm weight on his left arm.

He turns his head slowly and sees Frankie.

She’s sitting in a chair next to his bed. She’s holding his hand in one of hers, but her other hand is curled around his wrist as if she’s trying to take his pulse. The front half of her body is draped over the edge of his bed, and her head is resting on his arm. She’s asleep.

It could be the drugs. Or maybe it’s that he almost died, and definitely would have if she hadn’t shoved him so the bullet would miss his heart. Maybe it’s the memory of his goodbye and her promise. Or maybe it’s just that she’s his best friend, and they’ve saved each other so many times he’s lost count, and he never—not in a million years—imagined that someone like him could love, and be loved, so fiercely.

Whatever it is, his eyes fill and he starts to cry.

He wants to wipe the tears away because it’s embarrassing as hell to cry at all, let alone in public in a hospital gown, but when he lifts the hand she’s not holding, pain shoots through his chest. He winces and hisses out a breath through clenched teeth, and his body tenses just enough that it wakes Frankie.

She picks her head up off his arm and blinks. When she sees that his eyes are open, she shoots to her feet.

“Jai,” she breathes. And then she sees his tears, and the joy on her face dissolves into concern. She bends over him and brushes the tears from his cheeks. “Does it hurt?”

He nods.

She presses something plastic into his hand, and guides his thumb to the button, and he presses it immediately and probably more times than he should.

It takes a minute or so, but it works. Frankie stays bent over him. One of her hands is clasped over his. The other is stroking through his hair, and her forehead is resting gently against his.

She doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need her to.

When his body starts to feel like it’s floating, and he can’t keep his eyes open anymore, he jerks his hand a little beneath hers and mumbles her name.

“Go to sleep, JD,” she murmurs.

He goes to sleep.
The second time Jai opens his eyes in the hospital after a sniper nearly kills him, Frankie isn’t sleeping on him.

She’s standing in the doorway of his room, talking in hushed tones with a doctor and several nurses. Her voice is too soft to make out the words, but Jai can read the way she’s standing: shoulders back, chin up, arms folded over her chest, one hip cocked slightly to the side. It’s the same way she stands in meetings with important, high-level government officials—competent, polite but not submissive, assertive without being aggressive. He’s sure he was getting the best possible care anyway, but with Frankie standing watch he’s willing to bet everyone is on their best behavior.

When the doctor and the nurses leave, and she turns back to face him, their eyes meet. She smiles.

“How do you feel?”

“Washed out.”

Her smile widens. “Sorry. They were out of three-piece suits in your color so I had to settle for the gown. It’s real cute though. Brings out your eyes.”

“Fuck you.”

She laughs quietly. He likes her laugh. It reminds him of the way she and Mina used to sit on the couch together, drinking wine and talking for hours.

Her smile fades after a few seconds. She’s still holding his hand in her lap. She brushes her other hand through his hair. She did this after Frankfurt. He doesn’t think she’s even aware she’s doing it. When they’re alone, and she’s worried about him or scared, she touches him a lot. He doesn’t mind. He kind of likes it, actually. It’s soothing. And he knows what a privilege it is that she doesn’t hesitate to reach for him.

“What’d the doctors say?” he whispers.

“You’ll be okay. No knife throwing competitions for a while. But you’ll be fine.”

He squeezes her hand. “You saved my life.”

“I’ll add it to your tab.”

He snorts.

Her hand brushes through his hair again. “You should go back to sleep. The doctor said it’s important that you rest as much as possible.”

Her voice is soft and gentle, but he’s not fooled. He can see the worry lurking in her eyes, and he can feel it in the way she’s holding his hand. Her posture is rigid. She looks exhausted and worn. He has no idea what time it is, or how long he’s been in this bed, but he knows she’s been at his side since the moment she was allowed to be. He wonders if she’s even eaten.
“I’m going to be fine,” he whispers.

She nods. “Yeah.”

“So you should go back to the hotel. Eat some food and get some sleep.”

She shakes her head. “Not going to happen.”

“Francesca—”

“I go where you go, Jai.”

He blinks at her. She stares back at him. He knows he won’t win this battle. Not today. Maybe tomorrow. He feels like he might start crying again, and he’s annoyed by that. He blames the drugs. Speaking of drugs, his eyelids are starting to droop again.

“Gates of hell,” he mumbles.

The last thing he sees before he falls asleep is Frankie’s smile. “And straight fucking through.”
You guys. You say such nice things in my comments. Thank you times a million. Y’all are so kind.

FYI, this chapter is back to business as usual. It starts after the events of chapter twenty-seven, but *before* the events of the final two sections of chapter twenty-eight. So, when we open, Frankie is in the waiting room at the hospital and she has no idea whether or not Jai is going to survive.


Grief.

She hates how well she knows grief.

It feels sharp at first. Suffocating. Endless. Everything fades except the unbearable pain sitting in your chest, throbbing with every heartbeat, rasping with every inhale. But then it...subsides. The tears dry, and the sobs fade, and there’s just a dull ache in the place where your heart used to be.

It’s the numbness that’s difficult to explain. People understand the rage and the tears, but they don’t understand the numbness that follows. They don’t understand how terrible it is to feel like something you can’t control is eating you alive from the inside out. They can’t comprehend how you could feel trapped inside your own body, desperate to feel something, *anything* else, even if it isn’t good for you.

She’s an expert at things that aren’t good for you too. In the years since Moscow, she’s figured out which coping mechanisms take the pain away long enough for her to find her equilibrium again. Alcohol. Violence. Sex.

None of those things are an option at the moment. Hospitals don’t sell alcohol. The people she most wants to hurt aren’t here. And the only person she wants to have sex with is Will, and that’s...not a good idea.

So here she sits in a hospital waiting room, adrift in the familiar numbness of grief, clutching Jai’s pocket square like it’s a life preserver and trying to figure out how the fuck she’s supposed to wake up tomorrow morning if Jai dies on that operating table.

She puts her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands and tries to breathe. She can’t have another panic attack. The last one was bad enough.

She hates hospitals. The lighting is always so damn bright, and the chairs are always uncomfortable, and it’s always so fucking cold. She desperately wants a drink. She desperately wants to shoot someone, or punch something, or at least go for a run until she can’t breathe.

She desperately wants Will.
The door to the waiting room swings open, and she looks up. She hates the way her heart leaps in her chest, hoping that it might be Will.

It’s not.

“Hey,” Standish says quietly. He’s got a paper cup in his hand and a hesitant look on his face, like he thinks she might sprout three heads and devour him whole.

She gives him a half smile, the best she can manage considering the circumstances.

He shuffles toward her and holds out the cup. “Coffee?”

She doesn’t really want coffee, but he sounds like a five-year-old offering her his favorite stuffed toy in the hope that it might console her, and she knows she can’t turn him down.

She takes the cup from his hand. “Thanks.”

He sits down in the chair next to hers. His eyes are red-rimmed like he’s been crying. That explains where he’s been. Will sat with her until he had to go do the team leader stuff she should probably be doing but isn’t. Susan sat with her after that until she had to go make some calls too. Frankie didn’t know where Standish was, and didn’t think to ask because all she cares about is Jai. But now she knows.

She lifts the cup to her lips, takes a sip, and then immediately chokes.

“Jesus,” she sputters, lifting a hand to her mouth. She turns to look at Standish with watering eyes. “What the hell is in this?”

“Whiskey.” He looks sheepish. “You hold your liquor really well so I didn’t want to skimp.”

She coughs, blinks a few times, and then blows out a breath. “Holy shit. Give me a heads up next time.”

“Sorry,” he says, shifting in his chair. “I, uh, I saw Jai put some whiskey in your coffee in El Salvador when Will was in the hospital. I thought it might help.”

Frankie blinks at him in surprise. He stares back at her. She has the sudden, overwhelming desire to hug him. She doesn’t.

“Thanks,” she mutters, dropping her gaze.

They sit in silence for a while. She’s surprised by the quiet. She expected him to talk incessantly. He tends to chatter when he’s upset or when he doesn’t know what else to do. RJ was like that too.

The unwelcome comparison makes her take another long sip of her alcohol-laced coffee.

“I’m sorry,” Standish blurts out suddenly.

Frankie looks over at him with raised eyebrows. “What?”

“I didn’t know,” he says, turning to look at her. “About your team, and how you got married and then he went all psycho, and I just...I didn’t know. I didn’t know the program was...I didn’t know.”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine.”

“It’s obviously not since you dumped Will over it.”
The words hang in the air. Frankie doesn’t know what to say. Standish stares at her with the same alarmed look he gets when he realizes he’s blurted out something stupid that’s probably going to get him punched. When she doesn’t hit him, he closes his eyes and sighs.

“Shit,” he mutters, rubbing a hand down his face. “I’m sorry, Frankie. I’m terrible at this. I’m just trying to…”

Frankie watches him. RJ used to do this too. He always had good intentions, and he always wanted to say the right thing even though he rarely did. The desire to hug Standish wells up in her chest again, along with a familiar murmur that sounds a lot like Mina’s voice—Be kind to him, Franks—and before she can stop herself Frankie reaches out and puts her hand on Standish’s knee.

“It’s not your fault.”

Standish gapes at her. The surprise on his face makes her feel self-conscious, so she pulls her hand back and wraps it around her cup again. Standish closes his mouth and clears his throat and shifts in his seat.

“I’m still sorry,” he murmurs.

She nods. “Okay.”

They sit in silence again. Frankie drinks her coffee. Standish fiddles with his watch.

“Jai had a hard time when Emma died,” he says eventually.

Frankie looks over at him. She knows Jai had a hard time with Emma’s death. He spent every night that week sleeping in his room at her place. But she’s not going to tell Standish that, and she has no idea where he’s going with this.

“We had this real nice bonding moment over it,” Standish continues. “There was this thing about mayonnaise that almost ruined it. I mean, seriously, who eats fries with mayonnaise?”

“It’s actually not that bad.”

Standish looks at her like she’s just run over a box of puppies.

“Can’t knock it ‘til you try it,” she tells him with a shrug.

“Y’all nasty,” he replies. “Anyway, I didn’t think he’d talk to me. But I was committed, you know? Kept nagging him until he did. I came this close to asking him to take a bath with me.”

Frankie lifts her eyebrows.

“Keep your judgy eyes to yourself,” he says.

“I’m not judging. I’m just surprised you think he’d say yes. He’s way out of your league.”

Standish snorts. “Yeah. He is.” His smile fades. He fiddles with his watch again. “He said he’d never lost anyone in his friend circle, and that’s why it hit him so hard. But that wasn’t true, was it? You guys were with this other team before you were with us, and they…they passed away. So he lied.”

There’s a hint of hurt in his voice. Frankie thinks of Will—of how much it hurts to know he lied to her, and the look on his face when he found out she lied to him—and she doesn’t want Jai to wake up (god, she hopes he wakes up) and have Standish be mad at him.
“He couldn’t tell you the truth, Standish.”

“Was it classified?”

“Yes. But that’s not what I meant. Jai is...”

She trails off and searches for the words. She thinks about the way Jai used to look at Mina when he thought no one was watching. The way he used to smile when she laughed. The way his face would flush when she’d kiss him in front of the team, and how he used to let her pick out his ties.

And then she thinks of that night in Moscow, the tears soaking into his suit and the terror that stole the breath from her lungs when she thought he wasn’t going to give her that gun and she was going to lose him too.

“It’s too hard for him to talk about it,” she says, trying to swallow around the tightness of her throat. “RJ was like a brother. And Mina was...she was special to him.”

“Like, girlfriend special?”

Frankie thinks that if she wasn’t so exhausted, and if she wasn’t sitting in a hospital waiting room drinking whiskey coffee, and if she wasn’t so afraid of losing the only person on the planet she knows without a doubt loves her unconditionally, she might refuse to answer the question. But she is exhausted, and she is drinking whiskey coffee, and she could lose Jai. So she nods.


He doesn’t sound angry—just surprised, and maybe a little sad—but Frankie feels a sudden, overwhelming need to defend her best friend’s reluctance to tell the truth.

“He wouldn’t have talked to you if he didn’t want to,” she says. “He might not have told you the truth about why he felt what he did, but the feelings were real and he trusted you enough to share them. You shouldn’t take that lightly.”

Standish studies her for a second, his eyebrows furrowed. “Do you remember what you said to me when I was in the hospital after Ollerman stabbed me? When you said you understood how I felt about Tina?”

Unlike before, Frankie knows exactly where he’s going with this. And she kind of wishes he wouldn’t, because she’s more comfortable talking about Jai than about herself. But she’s too tired to put up much of a fight, and maybe if she tells him what he wants to know he’ll drop it.

“Yes,” she replies. “And yes, I was talking about Nick.”

“You said it was a boyfriend.”

“I lied.”

“For the same reason Jai did? Because it’s too hard for you to talk about it?”

“Because it was none of your business.”

He presses his lips together and drops his gaze, nodding in acknowledgement. She feels a pang of guilt for being harsh.

He lifts his eyes back to hers. “No offense, Frankie, but your husband’s kind of a dick.”

Frankie can’t help it—she smiles. “Yeah.”

“Was he always?”

“No.”

“So you...I mean, it wasn’t a mission thing like you had with Rafael? Y’all really loved each other?”

For a second, Frankie feels like she’s drowning in a tidal wave of memories. The British lilt in Nick’s voice, the rumble of his laugh, the weight of his ring on her finger, the way he looked at her when they said their vows and promised each other forever.

She doesn’t love him anymore. She stopped loving him a long time ago, and she’s so head over heels in love with Will—even now, when they’re broken and distant and furious with each other—that she knows she’ll never love Nick again. But sometimes, when she hears their song on the radio or she sees a Tottenham jersey, she remembers what it was like before everything went to hell, and it hurts.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Standish.”

“Right,” he says. “My bad.”

Another long silence ensues. Frankie finishes her coffee. Standish fiddles with his watch some more.

“I figured out the program,” he says after a while. “I mean, I’m not done yet. But I’m close. I showed Jai before...you know. He seemed really excited about it. I think it’s going to work. And if it works, then you can go all Frankie on your asshole husband, right?”

Frankie stares down into her empty coffee cup and doesn’t say anything. Standish fidgets in his chair, obviously trying to wait for a response, but he doesn’t last long.

“Do you want me to stop working on it?” he asks softly.

Frankie looks up at him in surprise.

“I don’t want to,” he clarifies. “I want to help. But if you want me to stop, I will.”

She wants to tell him to stop. She wants to tell him to delete everything he’s done, and give the files back to the NSA, and forget he ever even heard about the program. She wants to make him promise that he’ll never talk about it or think about it ever again.

But then she remembers the promise she made to Jai. She remembers the softness of his voice in the back of the van as he was bleeding out, asking for her word and knowing that she would never lie to him.

*Don’t let him win.*

“I don’t want you to stop,” she murmurs.

Standish’s eyes light up, and he grins, and then he seems to realize she might not appreciate his joy and the smile drops from his face. “Okay,” he says solemnly.
“You have to be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

“No you’re not. You let a sorority girl steal your wallet on Staten Island.”

“That was different. She was sexy as hell. This program isn’t sexy.” He tilts his head. “Well, yes it is. Just in a different way. It’s data sexy. All that code and those embedded security measures. Ooh, girl, you don’t even know.”

Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose. She regrets this already.

Standish puts his hand on her knee. She looks up at him in surprise. “I’ll be careful,” he says earnestly. “I promise.”

Frankie studies him. “We’re going to put a security system in your house. Like the one I have.”

He looks momentarily shocked, but then he nods. “Okay.”

“And you need to start wearing a tracker so that we know where you are at all times.”

“Okay.”

“And you need to give the files back and tell Casey you couldn’t crack it. If there’s a mole, we need them to think you tried and failed.”

“Okay.”

“And—"

“Frankie.”

“What?”

“I love you too.”

Frankie blinks at him. He squeezes her knee and smiles. She crinkles her nose and flicks his hand. “Get off me. I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It was implied.”

She scoffs. “Was not.”

“Definitely was,” he insists. “You put that implication down, and I picked it up, and now I’m holding it close like a tiny little implication baby that needs to be nursed and nurtured.”

He cradles an invisible baby in his arms. Frankie watches him in disgust.

“Someday,” he says, looking up at her with a grin, “you’re going to say the words. You’re going to say I love you, spy son, and I’m going to say I love you, spy mom, and we’re going to hug and cry, and it’s going to be the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Come on, spy mom,” he cajoles. “I know you want to say it.”

“You’re a sappy idiot just like your spy dad.”
Standish laughs, loud and surprised and joyful, and Frankie can’t help but smile.

Will is standing across from Frankie when she gets the news that Jai survived the surgery and is expected to make a full recovery.

He watches her closely. She’s trying to keep her emotions in check because she’s standing between Susan and Standish, but Will can see that her eyes have gone glassy. Her spine is ramrod straight, and he knows that her hands are in the pockets of her jeans because they’re shaking and she doesn’t want anyone to notice.

Susan hugs her when they get the good news. Standish whoops and pounds his fists on her back. Frankie meets Will’s gaze over Susan’s shoulder. He smiles at her. The corners of her mouth lift. For a second, everything feels okay again. But then the moment is over, and she looks away and her smile fades, and Will goes back to watching her from a distance and wishing he could do something, anything to make her stop hurting.

She disappears not long after that because she needs to call Jai’s parents. Standish follows her out, muttering something under his breath about finding some champagne.

Susan lowers herself gracefully into the chair next to Will. “You okay?” she murmurs, brushing her hand over his shoulder.

“Better now,” he admits. “If we’d lost him…”

Susan nods. “Yeah. I know.”

“Do you think you could run back to the hotel later and get some stuff for Frankie? I doubt she’ll leave, and I’m sure she’d appreciate clean clothes and stuff.”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

They sit in silence for a while after that. Will tries and fails not to stare longingly at the door Frankie disappeared through. He wishes he could go after her, but he isn’t sure how she’d react if he did. In the bathroom earlier, once she calmed down and he reluctantly let her pull out of his embrace, she seemed embarrassed. He hated that. So he pulled her close again, and brushed his hand over her cheek, and whispered her name. She stared up at him, her eyes searching his, and opened her mouth to say something. But he never got a chance to hear what it was, because an older woman burst into the bathroom at that exact moment and gasped There is a man in here! in scandalized French.

Will has never wanted to punch an old lady so bad in his entire life.

The moment was over after that. Frankie pulled gently out of his grasp and headed to the lobby to fill out paperwork. Will’s been watching her with an ache in his chest ever since.

He exhales heavily and rubs his temples. He feels exhausted and hollowed out. All he wants to do is go back to the hotel, climb into bed with Frankie, wrap his arms tightly around her, and sleep for days. But he knows there’s no way Frankie’s going to leave this hospital until she sees Jai. And he knows that even when she does eventually leave, crawling into bed with him is probably the last thing she’ll want to do.

This day sucks.
“Do you want to talk about it?” Susan asks him softly.

“You want to finish that lecture you started earlier?” Will asks, trying to lighten the mood.

His joke falls flat. Susan smiles humorlessly. “I’m not feeling very lecture-y at the moment.”

Will leans back in his chair. He tugs at a loose thread on the sleeve of his shirt. He wonders if his whole shirt would unravel if he tugged on it hard enough. He wonders if that’s how his relationship with Frankie is going to end up—undone and unraveled because of a loose thread from her past that he pulled.

He glances over at Susan. “Do you think I have a right to be mad at her for not telling me she’s married?”

“Yes.”

Will waits, but Susan doesn’t offer any additional comments. “But?” he prompts.

“I didn’t say but.”

“You didn’t have to.”

She sighs—it’s not exasperated, just tired—and shakes her head. “Now’s not the time, Will.”

“Now’s the perfect time,” he counters. He gestures at his surroundings. “I’m not leaving this hospital until Frankie does. Frankie’s not leaving until Jai does. And considering a sniper nearly killed him, that’s not going to be for a while. Might as well fill the time.”

“With a lecture?” she asks, lifting her eyebrows.

“Just tell me what you think, Sus. What you honestly think.”

Susan furrows her eyebrows and studies him for a moment. And then she sighs again.

“All right,” she says. She turns toward him. “Everyone handles trauma differently. No two cases are alike. But there are a lot of symptoms that are common, and their presence, frequency, and intensity can be indicative of the depth of someone's trauma.”

“Okay,” Will says slowly. “And?”

“And Frankie is one of the most traumatized people I’ve ever met.”

Will is more than a little taken aback. He frowns. “I know she’s been through a lot—”

“No, Will,” Susan cuts him off. “You’ve been through a lot. I’ve been through a lot. Frankie’s different. Frankie is...honestly, I have no idea how she even functions on a daily basis, let alone does her job at such a high level.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her symptoms—”

“What symptoms?”


Will feels like he’s just been punched in the gut. “Those are...she has all those.”

“Yeah,” Susan says. “And that’s just what you see. Trauma is powerful, Will. It can literally rewire your brain. The cognitive thought processes of a traumatized person are different than the thought processes of a healthy, well-adjusted person.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning Frankie’s brain doesn’t work like yours. At any moment, her brain could conjure up a memory that’s going to trigger an emotional and behavioral reaction that she’ll have to work twice as hard as the average person to control. She’s more likely to make cognitive errors, which means she interprets situations and people as dangerous when they’re not. She’s especially likely to do that if the situation resembles a previous trauma.”

Will can suddenly think of a dozen different times when he’s teased Frankie about overreacting with suspicion or aggression. He feels like he’s been punched in the gut again.

“She also suffers from an excessive and completely inappropriate amount of guilt,” Susan continues. “She assumes responsibility for traumatic events because she’s trying to exercise some control over what happens to her. She’s got one of the worst cases of survivor’s guilt I’ve ever seen.”

Now he thinks of Tokyo, of Frankie drunk and crying in his arms, blaming herself for a death she couldn’t have stopped and whispering I’m tired, Will through her tears. He swallows around the lump in his throat and pushes the memory away.

“So what are you saying?” he asks.

“I’m saying it’s understandable you’re upset with her. It’s okay that you’re angry, and you should be honest with her about how you feel. But it’s also understandable that she didn’t tell you. It wasn’t about you, or how she felt about you, or your relationship. It was about her, and her trauma, and trying to keep her head above water. Nick traumatized her. Severely and intensely and, based on what I heard today, he’s still doing it.”

“But why couldn’t she just tell me that? Why couldn’t she let me help her?”

“Because telling you would have forced her to relive the trauma,” Susan replies. “She’s spent years trying to distance herself from it, Will. Her self-preservation instincts are constantly telling her to stay as far away as possible from anything that reminds her of Nick and her former team. Even if she wanted to tell you—and I think she did—it would have been extremely difficult for her to work up the courage to relive it all.”

“And then Nick did it for her,” Will says quietly.

Susan nods. “Yeah. That was…”

“Bad?”

“Worse than bad,” Susan says with a grimace. “Trauma has a lot to do with control. It’s something that’s done to you without your consent. It’s bad enough that she was face-to-face with the man who traumatized her without any type of warning. But then he took control from her again. He threatened you. He threatened Jai’s parents. He told you they were married. He weaponized her coping mechanisms against her.”
“And then Jai got shot.”

“Yeah,” Susan agrees. She pushes her hair behind her ear. “When I teach classes on trauma-informed care, we talk a lot about re-traumatization—about how recalling or reliving a traumatic moment, or experiencing a situation that’s similar to the original ordeal can re-traumatize someone. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that what Nick and Ollerman did today has re-traumatized Frankie.”

Will thinks about finding her in the bathroom as she was struggling to breathe. He thinks about her fingers stained with blood and curled into his shirt, the tears rolling down her face, the feel of her body shaking in his arms as she sobbed. Sadness and fury war in his chest. He wants to rip Ollerman and Nick to pieces.

But then an unexpected thought strikes him, and it’s suddenly a little hard to breathe. His throat feels tight. He swallows around it.

“When I went behind her back and let Standish work on the program, I took away her control just like they did, didn’t I?”

Susan gazes at him, sympathy clear on her face, but doesn’t answer his question.

“I thought she’d be pissed,” Will says softly. “I was ready for her to be mad. But she wasn’t. She was…”

He remembers Frankie’s surprised exhale, and the way she whispered How could you do this to me?, and how she’d cried and said I can’t do this anymore.

“I re-traumatized her,” he breathes.

Susan puts her hand on his knee. “You weren’t trying to hurt her, Will. You can’t avoid her triggers if you don’t know what they are.”

“But she told me,” he insists. “She told me she didn’t want me to do it and I did it anyway. I thought she was too close to it to make the hard decision. I thought she needed me to step in and do it for her. I wanted to help her carry it all. But all I did was act like him.”

“No,” Susan says forcefully. “You’re nothing like him, Will. And she knows that.”

“She said it,” Will counters. “I told her I was trying to protect her and she told me that’s what he said.”

Susan shakes her head. “That doesn’t mean you’re him. You’re not. Frankie knows that. It might take her some time to see it because of her tendency to interpret everything as a threat, but she’ll see it eventually.”

Will rubs his temples. “What can I do until then?”

“Give her control,” Susan says without hesitation.

“What does that mean?”

“Everything needs to be her choice. You can tell her you’re ready to talk whenever she is, but don’t initiate the conversation. Don’t touch her unless she touches you first. If you do something for her, make it clear that you’re not expecting anything in return. And when it comes to work, she needs to be part of every decision. That doesn’t mean you have to do whatever she says. It just means she
needs to feel like she has a voice, and that it’s being heard.”

“Okay,” Will says, nodding. “I can do that.”

“There’s one more thing.”

Will doesn’t like the tone of Susan’s voice. He glances up at her, and he doesn’t like the look on her face, either.

“What?” he asks apprehensively.

“If she wants out, you have to let her out.”

“Out of what?”

“Your relationship.”

Will stares at her. Susan stares back with a sympathetic but clearly determined expression.

“She loves you, Will. But I don’t know if she’s going to be able to push through all this trauma and be in a serious relationship again. At least not right away. She might need some time.”

Will clenches his jaw. “Then I’ll tell her I’ll wait for her.”

“You can’t,” Susan says gently, reaching out to grasp his knee. “That’s what he does. He won’t let her go. She needs to know that you won’t try to force her the way he does.”

There’s warmth behind Will’s eyes, and a painful lump in his throat. He sniffs and clears his throat and tries to ignore the sorrow swelling in his chest but he can’t.

“How am I supposed to just let her go?” he whispers. “She’s my soulmate.”

Susan has tears in her eyes now too. “I know, cariño,” she whispers, squeezing his knee. “But if you love her, you need to do what’s best for her. And that means you need to be willing to let her walk away.”

Jai’s hospital room is dark and quiet.

The blinds on the window in the corner have been closed in order to shut out the city lights. It’s nine o’clock and the hospital is winding down into its nighttime routine. The hallways are relatively peaceful, but the door to Jai’s room is half closed as if to block out any lingering noise.

Will stands in the narrow space between the door jamb and the door, a gym bag of clothes and other things Frankie might want or need in his hand, and stares at the scene before him with a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes.

Jai looks pale but peaceful in his hospital bed. His eyes are closed and he’s fast asleep, the monitors next to him beeping steadily. Frankie is in a chair next to the bed. She doesn’t look particularly comfortable—she’s curled into a ball, her knees up by her chest and her head resting partly on her shoulder and partly on the back of the chair. One of her arms is stretched out toward the bed, and her fingers are curled around Jai’s wrist as if she’s taking his pulse.

“Sir?” a voice says behind Will.

He swipes at his eyes and turns around.
“Are you all right?” a nurse asks him with furrowed eyebrows. “Do you need anything?”

“Do you have an extra blanket?” he asks. “Maybe a pillow?”


She disappears for a minute or two.

“Here you go,” she says when she returns, handing him a soft, off-white blanket and a pillow.

Will murmurs his thanks and then slips through the doorway and into Jai’s room. He crosses the floor and stops next to Frankie. He sets the bag down by her feet where he knows she’ll see it when she wakes up. He straightens, pillow and blanket still in hand, and then hesitates. She’s a light sleeper. If he lifts her head and puts a pillow beneath it, she’ll wake up. He doesn’t want that. She needs to rest.

After considering his options, he decides to set the pillow on top of the bag at her feet. He’s draping the blanket gently over her body when she wakes up.

She barely stirs, her eyelids fluttering, and then all of a sudden she’s sitting straight up and her gun is pointed at his face.

Will’s heart shoots into his throat. He lifts his hands. “It’s just me,” he whispers.

Frankie stares at him, her jaw set and her finger on the trigger. And then recognition flickers in her eyes.

“Will?” she breathes.

“Yeah,” he confirms, his hands still in the air.

She lowers her gun. He lowers his hands. And then she sighs, bending forward to pinch the bridge of her nose with the hand that isn’t holding a gun. She looks so exhausted that he barely resists the urge to reach for her.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

“No, it’s my fault,” he says. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

She drops her hand from her face and looks up at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he assures her. “I just thought you might want some stuff.”

He gestures at the bag at her feet. She stares down at it with a blank look as if she doesn’t understand what it is and what it’s doing there.

“Clothes, toothbrush, stuff like that,” he clarifies. “Phone charger. Your laptop in case you want to watch some Netflix.”

She looks up at him. The last vestiges of sleep have left her eyes. She’s wide awake now, and she’s scrutinizing him, and he’s suddenly afraid that she’s going to think he was trying to work his way back into her good graces when she’s fragile and vulnerable.

“Susan got them for you,” he says.

“Because you told her to?”
He opens his mouth to insist that it wasn’t his idea, but he’s lied to her enough. He closes his mouth and opts to stay silent instead. Frankie runs her fingers over the blanket that he draped halfway over her before she woke up and pointed her gun at his face.

“Susan get the blanket and pillow too?” she asks, looking up at him. He thinks there’s a hint of a smirk on her lips, but he isn’t sure.

“Nurse, actually.”

“Because you told her to.”

It’s not a question, so he decides not to respond. They stare at each other for a moment, a million unsaid things hanging in the air, and then Will takes a step away from her because he wants to make it clear that he doesn’t expect anything from her.

“I’ll be out in the waiting room,” he says. “If you need anything else, just uh...just text me.”

He forces himself to turn around and walk toward the door even though every fiber of his being wants to pull her into his arms and hold her until everything is fixed and whole and right.

“Will,” she calls out after him.

He turns around to face her. “Yeah?”

She studies him for a second, another scrutinizing look on her face. “Thank you,” she murmurs.

He smiles. “Anytime.”
Thirty

Chapter Notes

All right, y’all. As I have mentioned to a few of you in the comments, I prefer to write a couple chapters ahead of where I’m posting. It ensures that the plot doesn’t turn into swiss cheese, allows me to get foreshadowing right, and prevents my perfectionistic heart from feeling too overwhelmed when I need some extra time to get a scene or a chapter just right.

Unfortunately, the last few weeks have been not-so-great in that regard. Mainly because chapter twenty-eight was three chapters of content that took three chapters’ worth of time to write and only one chapter’s worth of time to post. Add in the rush of the holidays and some unexpected events that popped up and I’m waaaay behind where I want to be.

So, all that to say, I’m going to have to take a holiday hiatus. I actually think this will be better. Next Tuesday is Christmas Eve, and the Tuesday after that is New Year’s Eve, and literally no one is going to be reading my fic on those days. And even if you were planning to, you’d probably be out of luck because I am not sure I’d have a chapter ready for you anyway. Sorry about that. I think the break will give me plenty of time to catch up though. And in the meantime, I can promise you three things: 1) I will definitely, without a doubt, be back on Tuesday, January 7th. Same time, same place. 2) I am *not* leaving you with a terrible cliffhanger. Everyone is safe. I promise. 3) Yes, the ending of this chapter is setting up *exactly* what you think it is. Yes, the chapter you’re going to get on January 7th is going to be *exactly* what you’ve been waiting for. You’ll have to be a little more patient than usual. But I promise it’ll be worth it.

Thanks again for sticking with me through this absurdly long story, and for the kind words you continue to leave in my comments. Happy holidays to you and yours, and I’ll see y’all in 2020.

The next day is a bit of a blur.

Will spends a lot of time on the phone because Ollerman got away. Apparently he had a car waiting just around the corner. Two agents from the tactical team gave chase under Will’s orders, but they both ended up dead. That brings the body count from Ollerman’s Starbucks visit to four—the two agents giving chase, the one who died at the hands of the sniper while giving Frankie and Jai cover, and the sniper himself.

They identified the sniper. He was American, former special forces, and apparently in a significant amount of gambling debt. Will’s certain that the debt is what brought The Trust knocking. He wonders how many other people with painful secrets Ollerman has exploited.

The cyloraxin was destroyed without any trouble. As far as they know, The Trust still has no idea they’ve got a case of water. Despite Jai’s close call and the agents they lost during the showdown with Ollerman, Casey is considering the mission a huge win.
Susan spends most of the day running errands and making sure everyone is fed and caffeinated. Standish is at the hospital first thing in the morning to see Jai, but he heads back to the hotel not long after.

“Frankie said I could keep working on the program,” he tells Will excitedly when they run into each other in the hallway not far from Jai’s room.

Will is stunned. “She did?”

“Yes.” Standish claps a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, spy dad. Imma save the day. You just focus on getting your girl back.”

He winks and then skips toward the elevators, whistling cheerfully. Will watches him go, completely flabbergasted. When he pops in to say hi to Jai a minute later, he’s dying to ask Frankie why she changed her mind about Standish and the program. But he remembers what Susan told him yesterday about giving Frankie space and control, so he decides to keep his mouth shut. He tries not to stare at her, but he fails. She’s too pretty even after sleeping in a hospital chair all night, and he loves her so much it’s insane, and there are more than a few moments when she glances up at him and their eyes meet and he has to force himself to look away.

By dinnertime, he’s exhausted. The chairs he slept on in the waiting room last night were not great for his back and even worse for his shoulder, and he’s had so much coffee that his hands are starting to shake.

“Go back to the hotel,” Susan tells him when she finds him hunched over his laptop and squinting tiredly at the screen. “Get some rest. I’ll stay here in case Frankie needs something.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“I said—”

“I said no.”

Susan sighs and disappears to visit Jai. When she returns a little while later, she’s got a bit of a smirk on her face.

“Jai wants to see you.”

Will frowns at her. “Why are you smirking?”

“I’m not smirking.”

“Yes you are,” he insists, getting to his feet. “And when I come back, I’m going to find out why.”

Susan just keeps smirking.

When Will walks into Jai’s room, he finds the injured spy sitting up in bed and looking much more like himself than he did earlier. There are bags under his eyes and it’s odd to see him in a faded hospital gown instead of a neatly pressed suit, but he’s got more color in his cheeks and his hair has been styled. Will wonders if Frankie did it for him.

“ Took you long enough,” Jai says as soon as Will walks in the room.

Will frowns and glances around the empty room. “Where’s Frankie?”
“On a wild goose chase.”

“What?”

“Come here,” Jai says impatiently, beckoning him forward. “We don’t have a lot of time before she comes back.”

Will crosses the room obediently and stops next to the bed.

Jai sits up straighter, winces, and then gives Will a determined look. “I’m sending Frankie home for the night. She can’t stay here any longer. It’s not good for her.”

Will nods. “She needs a good night’s sleep. But I don’t think she’s going to leave this hospital until you do.”

“You let me worry about that,” Jai says, waving his hand. “You’ve got one job. Go with her and stay with her. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

Will blinks at him, taken aback. Last time he checked, Jai was just as furious with him as Frankie. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jai. I don’t think she wants to be around me right now.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Jai says. “Of course she does. And I’m not asking. I’m telling. Take her back to the hotel and don’t let her out of your sight. If you do, I’m going to blow up your apartment while you’re still inside.”

“Jai—”

“Nick did this to me, Will,” Jai cuts him off. “And he did it to get to her. He knew it would break her.”

Will frowns. “Ollerman—”

“Oh, I’m sure Ollerman thinks it was his idea,” Jai says with an eye roll. “But this was all Nick. If you leave her alone tonight, he’ll come for her. And I don’t know what she’ll do.”

“What she’ll do?” Will asks incredulously. “Like, she’ll kill him? Or she’ll...”

Will can’t finish the rest of his sentence because jealousy has a vise-like grip on his throat.

“She doesn’t love him, Will,” Jai says. His voice is suddenly and surprisingly kind, and Will recognizes it as the same tone he usually reserves for Frankie. “She can’t. She’s too disgustingly in love with you.”

Will frowns. “Disgusting?”

“Disgusting,” Jai says solemnly.

Will’s frown deepens. “You realize that’s not really a compliment, right?”

“Listen,” Jai says, leaning forward. He winces as soon as he moves. Will reaches out his hand to help, but Jai waves him away impatiently.

“Listen,” he repeats. “It had to be you. There’s nobody else who would’ve been patient enough, forgiving enough, good enough to get her to open up again. And I don’t mean good in terms of sufficiency. I mean good. Decent. Noble. You’re so noble it’s disgusting.”
“Quit calling me disgusting.”

“It had to be you,” Jai repeats, his voice hoarse and edging on panicked. “It had to be. She’s in love with you, and she feels safe with you, and you have to get her out of this hospital to get some sleep before she wakes up from one of her nightmares and accidentally shoots a nurse. Please. You’re the only one I trust her with.”

“Okay,” Will says, reaching out to put his hand on Jai’s shoulder. “Take it easy, Jai.”

Jai stares up at him, his eyes wide and a little wild, his hands curled into fists. “Don’t leave her alone. Give me your word, Will. Promise me you won’t leave her alone.”

Will has never seen Jai this worked up before. So he says the only thing he can.

“I promise.”

Will has no idea how Jai talks Frankie into leaving the hospital. All he knows is that when he gets summoned back to Jai’s room, he runs into Frankie walking out the door with a murderous look on her face.

“Oh,” he says, stumbling a little in his effort to move out of the way before she runs him over. He glances past her and sees Jai smirking after her. “Are we…?”

“Let’s go,” she snaps and stalks down the hall.

Will casts another glance at Jai.

“Better go or she’ll leave you,” Jai says, still smirking.

Will hurries after Frankie.

She doesn’t say a word on the walk out of the hospital. Will offers her the keys to the Maserati once they get outside, but she shakes her head. That catches him by surprise, but he doesn’t say so.

He drives them back to the hotel in silence. The elevator ride up to their suite is silent too. When Will closes the door behind him, the gentle click of the lock is deafening. He follows Frankie into the suite, trying to ignore the nervousness that’s stirring in his chest. She beelines straight for a bottle of Jameson sitting on a table by the couch. He watches as she pours a glass and drinks it without pausing to take a breath.

When she’s finished, she meets his gaze from across the room. The sun is starting to set over the harbor and the colors in the sky are spectacular, but he can’t take his eyes off her. The fading light makes her hair shine and her eyes gleam. She’s so beautiful it’s almost painful.

She sets her empty glass down on the table, and it makes a soft clinking sound. “I don’t want to talk.”

He nods. “Okay.”

She seems a little surprised by his agreement. They stare at each other. She’s got that glint in her eye, the one she usually gets right before they end up tangled and panting in bed, and Will swallows. If she initiates something, he’s not sure what he should do. In the past, they’ve finished fights in bed. She communicates through touch the way he communicates through words, and he’s found that sometimes if they start with her language and then switch to his, they end up on the
But he hates the idea of sleeping with her when she’s fragile and vulnerable. He doesn’t even know what they are right now. She told him she was done but then she kissed him, and now they’re in this weird, uncertain space between together and broken. He’s afraid if they fall into bed without clarifying what they are, it’ll snap the last tenuous string holding them together.

When she starts walking toward him, he panics a little. But then she walks past him—straight into the bedroom without even sparing him a glance—and he frowns.

He follows her. He finds her in the closet, rifling through her clothes.

“I’m going for a run,” she says before he can ask. Her voice is flat and emotionless. He can feel tension coming off of her in waves, and he can see barely-controlled anger in the jerky, almost clumsy way she’s tossing her things aside to look for what she wants.

He moves toward his side of the closet because if she’s going for a run, he’s going with her. He takes his shirt off, and is reaching for a t-shirt when she straightens with clothes and running shoes in her hand. She stops when she sees him half dressed. Her eyes dip down to his chest, and then flicker over his torso. Will freezes, helpless against the heat that suddenly surges through his veins.

When her eyes flick back up to meet his, there’s a nearly audible crack in the air between them. Will feels longing spark in his chest, a familiar magnetic pull that draws him toward her. He can tell by the look on her face that she feels it too.

She turns on her heel and disappears into the bathroom. Will isn’t sure if he’s relieved or disappointed.

By the time she comes back out, he’s dressed and waiting for her. She stops dead in her tracks when she sees him. “What are you doing?”

“Going for a run with you.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t need you to babysit me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“I don’t want you to come.”

Will hesitates. Susan told him to give Frankie control and respect what she wanted, but Jai made him promise not to leave her alone. He has no idea which of those things he’s supposed to do right now. So he decides to tell her the truth.

“I promised Jai I wouldn’t let you out of my sight,” he says. “I don’t want to break that promise. So I’d like to come with you if that’s all right.”

She stares at him. He waits her out.

“Fine,” she says eventually. “But I’m not slowing down for you.”

He shakes his head. “That won’t be necessary.”

Will hasn’t run this hard in years.
Frankie started off at an easy jog. It didn’t last long. Will’s muscles were barely warm before she picked up the pace, and then picked it up again, and pretty soon she was tearing through the streets of Monte Carlo like the devil himself was chasing her.

Will runs almost every morning. He’s in great shape, and his body is used to running long distances. But he’s not used to doing what she’s doing right now.

At some point, when they’re in the middle of a dead sprint, he realizes that he isn’t sure how much longer he can keep up with her. He’s drenched in sweat. His lungs are aching, and so are his muscles, and he slept so badly last night and ate so little today that he’s starting to feel nauseous.

When Frankie slows to a stop on a street that’s angled into just enough of a hill that his already sore calves scream, he’s grateful. But then she staggers to the right side of the sidewalk. He watches as she curls her fingers around a waist-high stone barrier that lines the sidewalk, bends over it, and vomits into a bunch of shrubs.

Will moves toward her immediately. Frankie shudders hard, her body bent over the stone as she gasps for breath, and then throws up again. He stops next to her and rubs his hand comfortingly over her back. She’s so sweaty that fallen strands from her ponytail are plastered to the back of her neck. Her gray t-shirt is significantly darker than it was when they left the hotel. He realizes belatedly that he’s doing the exact opposite of what Susan said—he’s touching her and she didn’t touch him first—but he doesn’t pull his hand away.

She leans forward again, her body heaving, but nothing comes up this time. She stays bent over the stone for a minute, breathing hard, and then lifts the hem of her t-shirt to wipe her mouth. She straightens and turns around. For a second, Will is afraid she’s going to start running again. But she sits down on the sidewalk instead, her knees bent toward her chest as she rests her back against the stone barrier.

Will lowers himself down onto the sidewalk next to her. They sit in silence for a long time, watching as the street darkens from dusk into night. Every so often, someone walks by and throws them a curious sideways glance. Frankie doesn’t seem to care. Will doesn’t either.

When night has fallen completely, and their breathing has slowed back to normal, Will says what he’s been planning to say ever since he realized that Susan was right about what Frankie needs.

“I know you’re mad at me,” he murmurs. She stiffens next to him, but he forges on. “And you have every right to be. I violated your trust. I lied to you. And I’m sorry. I’m—I’m so sorry, Frankie. But if you meant what you said, and you can’t forgive me, then I...”

The words won’t come off his tongue. He doesn’t want to say them. But he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath and forces them out.

“If you don’t want to do this anymore, I won’t try to change your mind.”

He turns to look at her. He gazes at the side of her face, his eyes tracing over the curves and angles he knows like the back of his hand.

“I’ll let you go if that’s what you want,” he whispers. “Just don’t ma—” His voice hitches. He swallows the emotion caught in his throat and tries again. “Don’t make me do it tonight. Not when you’re hurting like this. Let me take care of you. Even if it’s just for the night.”

She finally turns her head to look at him. She searches his eyes. He waits, holding his breath.

She stands up without a word and turns in the direction of the hotel.
His heart sinks. He stands up too, ready to run again. But she doesn’t run. She stands frozen for what seems like an eternity, staring at the sidewalk with her hands on her hips and her back to him. And then she turns around, takes a step toward him, and presses her forehead against his chest.

Relief floods through him. He wraps his arms around her. When she lifts her arms and hugs him back, he doesn’t try to keep the tears at bay. He just holds her tighter and lets them spill down his cheeks.

Eventually, she leans back. He reaches for her hand before she can go too far. She doesn’t pull away.

The hotel isn’t far. They walk back in silence. It’s a different kind of silence than before. There’s no tension hovering in the air. Their furious sprint through the streets of Monte Carlo seems to have bled all the grief and rage out of her. When they get into their suite, he leads her to the bathroom. He puts toothpaste on her toothbrush and hands it to her, and she takes it from him without meeting his gaze. He leaves her brushing and steps into the shower stall to turn the water on as hot as it goes. He checks to make sure there are clean towels hanging on the rack outside the shower. Then he goes out into the bedroom to retrieve the Mets t-shirt she likes to sleep in. When he gets back to the bathroom, she’s just finished brushing her teeth. She sets her toothbrush on the counter, and turns to face him.

“Water’s hot,” he murmurs.

She steps a little closer to him. “You hate it hot.”

“I can wait.”

She looks up at him and shakes her head. “I don’t want you to.”

There’s no glint in her eye. There’s no sexual tension in the air. It’s not like they haven’t showered together a hundred times before without having sex. But he hesitates anyway.

“Stop overthinking it, Whiskey,” she murmurs as if she can read his mind.

She reaches for the hem of his shirt before he can reply. He lifts his arms so she can pull it up and over his head. He looks down at her once it’s off. She’s staring fixedly at a spot on his torso, her eyebrows furrowed and her bottom lip caught between her teeth. He follows her gaze, and realizes she’s staring at the bruise that’s stamped over his ribs. He got it from the boot of one of Nick’s guys during the cyloraxin showdown.

She brushes her fingertips lightly over his darkened skin. The look on her face breaks his heart because he can read it without any trouble. She feels guilty.

“I’m sorry.”

Her voice is soft and tinged with something that sounds a lot like devastation. He reaches up and cups her face in his hands, and when her eyes flutter closed he presses his lips to her forehead.

“Don’t be sorry,” he murmurs. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

She exhales slowly, her breath fanning over his collarbone. “Will,” she whispers, her hands grasping his hips.

“Don’t be sorry,” he whispers back.
He reaches for the hem of her shirt. She lets him undress her, and then she finishes undressing him. He plucks the bobby pins from her hair gently, leaving them in a pile on the counter, and then pulls her hair band out.

He guides her into the shower stall that’s flooded with steam. She steps under the showerhead, and he follows her. She tips her head back beneath the spray. He runs his fingers through her hair. Once it’s soaked through, he reaches for her bottle of shampoo, squeezes some into the palm of his hand, and then lathers it into her hair. He uses the remnants to briefly scrub his own hair, and then rinses them both. He repeats the process with conditioner and then washes her body with the shower gel that makes her smell so damn good. She watches him the entire time, but he doesn’t make eye contact. He doesn’t want her to feel like she needs to say anything.

When they’re finished, he turns the faucet off. He dries her body and pulls her Mets t-shirt over her head, and then dries himself off and tugs on a pair of boxers. He leads her out into the bedroom and pulls the covers back for her. She climbs in, but he doesn’t follow her.

“I can sleep on the couch if you want,” he offers quietly.

She looks amused. “You can shower with me but you can’t sleep with me?”

He feels a stab of guilt. “I don’t want you to—”

“Just get in bed, Will,” she cuts him off.

He gets in bed. As soon as his head hits the pillow, she curls into his side. He wraps his arms around her and strokes a hand through her damp hair.

He wonders if this is the last time he’s going to get to do this. She showered with him and now she’s sleeping with him, but he doesn’t know if that’s because they’re finding their way back to each other, or if it’s just because he begged her not to walk away tonight. He’s dying to ask. He knows he can’t.

Her breathing is slow and even, and she’s so still against him that he thinks she’s fallen asleep until she speaks.

“I love you,” she whispers into the darkness.

He tenses beneath her, stunned and thrilled and terrified. “Frankie,” he says, starting to pull away from her.

“Don’t,” she murmurs, pressing her palm against his chest to hold him in place. “Just leave it. Just say goodnight.”

He doesn’t want to say goodnight. He wants to tell her that even though they’ve got a ton of stuff to sort through, he loves her and he’s willing to sort through every ounce of it if it means he gets to be hers again. He wants to ask her if she said it because she wants what he does, or if she said it because she’s planning to say goodbye as soon as the sun rises.

He presses his lips to the crown of her head instead. “I love you too.”

She nuzzles a little closer to him. He holds her tighter. And in almost no time at all, she’s fast asleep.

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Jai is dying.
Frankie is drenched in his blood. It’s everywhere. She’s made so many people bleed, but she never realized just how much blood one person really holds.

“Jai,” she whispers. She’s trying to plug all the bullet holes but there are dozens and they’re all bleeding and it’s impossible.

“Should’ve let me die in Moscow,” he chokes. Blood leaks from his mouth and dribbles down his chin. “Just let me die, Francesca. Why can’t you let me die?”


“No,” Frankie sobs, straining against Nick’s grasp. “Don’t leave me, Jai. Please.”

Jai doesn’t answer. He can’t. He’s dead. His eyes are glazed over and his body is still. Nick pulls her away from Jai and back against his chest, his arms tightening around her until she feels like she’s suffocating.

“You’re mine, baby,” he murmurs in her ear. “You’ll always be mine.”

Frankie snaps awake and bolts upward in bed, drenched in sweat and gasping as she scrambles toward the nightstand for her gun. She’s on her feet in seconds, glancing around the room wildly with her finger on the trigger, but the only person she sees through the darkness is Will.

His back is to her. The sheets are pulled up to his chin and he’s still fast asleep, his shoulders rising and falling slowly as he breathes. Frankie stares at him for a second, trying to understand why he’s here and Nick and Jai aren’t, and then everything comes back to her: the sniper, the hospital, the run, the shower.

She was dreaming. It was just a dream.

She lowers her gun, and then fear slices through her.

Jai.

She reaches for her phone sitting on the bedside table with unsteady hands. She unlocks it and opens an app. Live footage of Jai, sleeping soundly in his hospital bed next to a monitor displaying a steady heart rate, lights up her screen. She toggles the view and checks on the agents outside his door. Both are alert. She toggles again and counts the undercover agents stationed throughout Jai’s wing of the hospital. One, two, three, four. She counts them again. One, two, three, four. Plus the two outside his door, there are six total. They’re all alert. And Jai’s still breathing.

She exhales in relief and lowers her phone. The clock on the bedside table says it’s one in the morning, which means she got about five hours of sleep before her nightmare. That’s longer than normal. Usually after days like this, she only gets two or three. She wants to say it’s because she was too exhausted to dream. And that might even be true. But she knows it also had something to do with Will. She rarely has nightmares when she sleeps with him.

On the rare occasion when she does, he usually wakes up with her. She still remembers how gentle he was the first time it happened. She probably scared the hell out of him, jolting awake in the middle of the night and reaching for her gun, but he hadn’t looked afraid. He just talked to her in that low voice she loves, his hands in the air and his body as still as a statue so as not to startle her. When he finally managed to coax her back into bed, he held her like he never wanted to let her go and stroked his hand through her hair until she fell asleep again.
She’s not surprised he didn’t wake up this time, though. He wasn’t touching her—which is a damn miracle, considering how much he likes to cuddle—so her sudden movement hadn’t roused him. She knows he didn’t sleep well last night because every time he came into Jai’s room he had coffee in his hand and dark circles under his eyes and his posture sucked. Between that, all the stress of the last two days, and their run through the streets of Monte Carlo, he’s exhausted. And when Will is exhausted, he sleeps like the dead.

She studies him for a moment, watching the gentle rise and fall of his shoulders as he sleeps. She wants to get back in bed. She wants to crawl beneath the sheets and into the warmth of his arms. She wants to bury her face in his chest and inhale whatever scent it is that clings to his skin and makes her feel like she’s home. She wants to feel the steady rhythm of his hands combing through her hair. But she can’t. The nightmare has her wide awake, and she’s not going to be able to fall asleep anytime soon. If she wakes him up, he’ll want to stay awake for her. And that’s not fair. He needs to sleep.

And she needs a drink.

She leaves her gun but takes her phone and pads out of the bedroom and into the living room. The bottle of Jameson is sitting exactly where she left it. She pours a glass, and takes it out onto the terrace. The night air is cool on her skin, but she feels flushed from the dream so she doesn’t mind. She’s trying to decide if she wants to put her feet in the jacuzzi or just stare out at the harbor while she drinks when her phone buzzes in her hand.

She doesn’t recognize the number but she has the phone up to her ear in a heartbeat, certain that it’s the hospital calling to tell her that Jai had unexpected complications and is being rushed back into surgery.

“Hello?”

“Hey baby.”

Nick’s voice washes over her like a wave. It’s not sharp or cold or cruel the way it was the other day. It’s the voice she remembers, the voice of the man she married, and she closes her eyes and forces the flood of memories back down into the depths of her heart where she keeps them under lock and key.

She swallows some whiskey and doesn’t answer him, but she doesn’t hang up either.

“I heard about Jai,” Nick says into the silence. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry your sniper sucks. Do it yourself next time.”

“I didn’t know Ollerman was going to go after him, Francesca.”

He sounds genuinely hurt that she thinks he’s capable of such a thing, and that annoys her. “You’ve never treated me like I’m an idiot, Nick,” she snaps. “Don’t start now.”

“If I wanted Jai dead I would’ve killed him a long time ago,” he insists. “I would’ve killed him in Krakow instead of saving his life. I would’ve killed him in Shanghai when he wouldn’t let you stay. I know how much he means to you, baby. I wouldn’t take him from you. I promise.”

“Your promises don’t mean shit to me.”

She expects him to snap back at her, but he doesn’t. Frankie stares down into her glass and wishes she’d brought the whole bottle out.
“Is this really why you called me at one in the morning?” she asks when the silence stretches out too long. “You woke me up to ask if I was okay after you ordered a hit on my best friend?”

“I didn’t order the hit. And I wouldn’t have called if I didn’t know you were awake.”

Ice drills down Frankie’s spine. She looks up from her glass and scans her surroundings, suddenly wishing she hadn’t left her gun in the bedroom.

“Your two o’clock,” Nick murmurs in her ear. “Top floor.”

She turns and sees a building in the distance. She has no idea if it’s a hotel or an apartment complex, but it doesn’t matter. Standing on the balcony in front of the only illuminated set of windows on the top floor is a tall and unmistakably broad figure. It doesn’t matter how far away he is or that she can’t make out any of his features in the dark. She knows it’s him.

“Were you going to stay up all night to see if I’d come out?”

“I’m awake for the same reason you are. If I’m drinking, I’m not dreaming.”

Another flood of memories threatens to drown her. By the time she and Nick found each other, they’d been through enough trauma that they both had nightmares. Hers were rare, typically provoked by anniversaries or bad days, but his weren’t. His were frequent and they were horrible. He’d writhe next to her in bed and whimper in his sleep, or he’d bolt awake with a gasp. He’s bigger than her—well over six feet and built like a quarterback—but he always seemed so small to her in the darkness, his body trembling as he struggled to catch his breath.

“I know we don’t dream about the same things,” he says quietly. “You’re up because you dreamed about losing Jai. I’m up because I dreamed about losing you.”

“How’d it feel to wake up and realize it wasn’t a dream?”

It’s cruel of her to ask, maybe, but she’s not sorry.

He doesn’t answer right away, and then he murmurs, “Like living my worst fucking nightmare.”

There’s an echo of regret in his voice that catches her off guard. The last few years, barring a few exceptions, all they’ve done is snarl and snipe at each other. She hates him for what he did, and he hates her for hating him, but there’s a thin line between love and hate. Their relationship imploded that night in Moscow, but somewhere beneath all that rubble and debris are the memories of the feelings that built it. It’s moments like this—moments when it’s just the two of them, and he talks to her the way he used to before they were broken—that she remembers how much she used to love him.

She swirls her whiskey in her glass. “What do you want, Nick?”

“I want to give you Ollerman and The Trust.”

She’s surprised at first, but a moment’s pause reminds her that she shouldn’t be. She’s wondered for a while now if this would be his play—if the only reason he was working with Ollerman was so that he could use him as a peace offering or as part of a deal.

“I didn’t trade myself for Clarke and The Collective,” she replies. “I won’t do it for Ollerman and The Trust.”

“I’m not asking you to.”
Frankie studies his figure in the distance. She doesn’t like being in his presence, but she wishes she could see his face. He’s the most gifted spy she’s ever met, but she knows how to read him. She’d know whether or not he was lying.

“But what do you want in exchange?”

“There are two jobs I need done. I want your team to do them.”

“We don’t do illegal shit.”

“It won’t be illegal. Trust me, your boyfriend the boy scout won’t disapprove.”

The fact that she’s not really sure if Will is still her boyfriend makes her feel a little dizzy. She swallows more whiskey and glances out at the ocean. There’s a massive yacht floating in the distance, lit up brilliantly against the night sky. It prods a memory she buried a long time ago. She and Nick were undercover at a yacht party. They had time to kill, and they were still in that phase where they couldn’t keep their hands off each other, and he’d looked so damn good in his linen suit that she’d dragged him into the yacht’s library and let him fuck her up against a bookshelf.

She pushes the memory away. “Was this always your plan?” she asks. “Fund The Trust, get Ollerman to trust you, and then sell him out to earn points with me?”

“Is that what you think?”

“I think everything you do has an ulterior motive. You only do things if they benefit you.”

He exhales on the other end of the line, and she can’t tell if it’s a sigh or a laugh. “So we’re going to have this fight again.”

“I don’t care about you enough to fight with you. I’m stating a fact.”

“You think pissing Clarke off so I could save your life was in my best interest? You think protecting you all these years while you hop from one bed to another has been beneficial for me? My life would be so much easier if I’d never fallen in love with you.”

Frankie snorts into her glass. “Right back at you, baby.”

“For fuck’s sake, Francesca,” he sighs, and she can hear the frustration in his voice. “How is what I did in Moscow any different than what you did for your boyfriend yesterday? That cyloraxin is going to kill thousands of people, and you didn’t even blink at letting me have it. You were willing to let other people die to protect him. And I did the same thing for you.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes it is. And you know it.”

Frankie feels like she’s getting a migraine. Her shoulders are so tense that she can feel the ache radiating up her neck and all the way down her spine.

“I’m not going to argue with you about Moscow,” she tells him. “If you want my team to work with you, then I want answers. When did you start working with The Trust?”

He sighs. “RJ’s program was designed to track The Collective,” he replies. “The Trust is a carbon copy of what Clarke built. The program identified all the patterns and players as soon as Ollerman rose to power. It’s just like I told you. There’s always going to be another Clarke.”
“But you did nothing to stop him.”

“I don’t work for MI6 anymore. I have no interest in spending the rest of my life playing whack-a-mole with a bunch of power-hungry assholes. But then he targeted New York. And I know how much you love that city. So I pulled you out of Bogota and we stopped the attack together. Remember?”

Frankie stares down into her glass. She’s spent a considerable amount of effort over the last two years trying not to think about what happened between her and Nick in New York. She doesn’t want to think about it now, either. She didn’t know the terrorists they stopped that day were affiliated with The Trust. But in retrospect, it makes sense.

“Once your team put him away, The Trust was too disorganized and too poor to do much damage,” Nick continues. “But then you let him escape. He started planning again. I kept an eye on him with the program. And then your team pissed him off in Prague, and he ordered hits on every single one of you.”

Frankie snaps her gaze up to stare at him in the distance. “What?”

“You heard me,” Nick says. “The only reason you and your team aren’t dead is because I paid off Ollerman and saved your lives.”

“If he had the money for hits—”

“He didn’t. Money’s not the only currency. He’s got leverage on some of the best assassins in the world. And they were all coming for you and your team until I stepped in. I saved you. And I saved them too.”

“You’re lying.”

“Come on, baby. Use your brain. Ollerman risked coming back to New York just so he could leave your RJ-wannabe bleeding in the street. Did you really think he would just disappear after that? You really thought he’d just leave you alone and go lick his wounds somewhere? He left you alone because of me. I bought you time to catch him. But you didn’t. You were too busy screwing your boyfriend on his kitchen table.”

Frankie feels like she’s been slapped. The words are too specific to overlook as a generalized taunt, and she remembers Ollerman saying something similar to her after Anton broke into her house. There’s only one way Nick could know she wanted Will so badly one night in May that they only made it as far as his kitchen table after they got in the front door.

He used RJ’s program to hack into the bugs Ollerman planted in Will’s apartment.

The sense of violation is so overwhelming she can’t breathe. It’s not just that Nick watched her have sex with Will. It’s all the rest of it. All those private moments when she fought her fears and silenced her demons and let Will love her—those are supposed to be their moments. Every time she fell asleep with him on the couch on lazy Sunday afternoons, every time he made her a frittata in the morning or his mom’s lasagna for dinner, all those times he pulled her close and smiled at her and said You’re beautiful, I love you for no reason at all except that he wanted to. It’s all ruined now, tinged with Nick’s presence the way everything else in her life is, and she hates that.

“He thought hiring that idiot Russian wouldn’t bother me since he wasn’t going to kill you,” Nick says, oblivious to her thoughts. “I made sure to disabuse him of that notion. But I had to fully fund him in exchange. It was the only way I could keep you safe.”
“Bullshit,” she snaps. “If you really wanted to protect me, you would’ve given me Ollerman as soon as he ordered those hits. Instead, you’ve been waiting until you could use him to your advantage.”

“I waited until I had enough information to bring down the whole operation,” Nick counters. “You’re not a damn rookie, Francesca. Stop thinking like one. You could’ve put a bullet in Rafael Hernandez’s head whenever you wanted. You could’ve called in a tac team and arrested him whenever you wanted. But you didn’t. You kept smiling at him and fucking him and running his cartel with him. You know why? Because you knew killing him or arresting him wouldn’t change the fact that he had a bunch of traitors spread through Interpol and the DEA. It’s the same reason you killed the entire Collective before you came for me and Clarke. Because you can cut off the head of a snake and kill it, but you can’t cut off the head of a hydra and expect nothing else to grow.”

Frankie closes her eyes. He’s right. She doesn’t believe for one second that he didn’t manipulate Ollerman and this entire situation to get them to this place. But she can’t argue with his logic, and it’s making her headache worse.

“I can help you, baby,” Nick says quietly. “I can give you the guy who put Jai in that hospital bed. Just say the word.”

Frankie glares at him in the distance. “I suppose it’s just a coincidence that you finally got all the information to bring down The Trust the day after a sniper went after Jai.”

“I don’t have all the information you need yet. That’s why I need your team.”

“You’re a billionaire, Nick. Hire your own damn team.”

“I want the best. You’re the best, aren’t you?”

She swallows a sarcastic retort and doesn’t reply.

“Two missions, Francesca. That’s it’s. You do these two missions with me and you’ll have all the information you need to end The Trust. I’ll give you Ollerman’s location, and you can take care of him the same way you took care of Clarke.”

“You know I can see through this, right? Whatever missions you’ve got planned are just a ruse. Ledgers, weapons, money. It doesn’t matter what the hell the objective is. It’s not really what you’re after.”

“I want you,” he acknowledges. “That’s not a secret.”

“And you’re delusional enough to think that working with you is going to make me fall in love with you again?”

“I’ve got two words for you, baby. New York.”

Guilt and shame make Frankie tighten her hold on her glass. “New York meant nothing.”

“Didn’t feel like nothing.”

“Things have changed, Nick. I’m in love with someone else.”

“I’m not worried about him.”
“You should be.”

“You’re my wife, Francesca. You really think a guy like that is going to fuck a married woman for the rest of his life? I saw the look on his face when he found out the truth. And there’s a reason you never told him. He’s no different than the rest. In the end, you’ll walk away from him. And I’ll still be here.”

The words hang in the air. Frankie drains the rest of the whiskey in her glass and then presses the back of her hand to her mouth. Nick waits for her, his tall figure a dark shadow in the distance.

“This isn’t going to end how you want it to,” she says eventually. “Even if things with Will don’t work, you and I are never going to be what we were.”

“If you’re so sure, then what are you worried about? Do the missions with me, bring down Ollerman and The Trust, and then you can spend the rest of your life trying to be good enough for Captain America.”

Frankie clenches her jaw. “Give me some time to think about it.”

“You’ve got the next two minutes.”

“This isn’t my decision to make, Nick. You’re not asking for me, you’re asking for my team. I can’t just sign them up to work with my jackass ex without consulting them.”

“You’ve got a lot of exes, baby, but I’m not one of them. We’re still married. And I don’t give a shit how your team feels about it.”

Frankie has the sudden urge to throw her glass down onto the terrace and smash it into a million pieces. She resists, but only because she doesn’t want to give Nick the satisfaction of knowing he got to her.

“Tick tock, Francesca,” he says. “Do we have a deal or not?”

Frankie closes her eyes and wishes Jai was here. “Fine,” she says. “But as long as our deal stands, my immunity extends to the team.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you protect them the same way you’d protect me. If one of them ends up with even a scratch before Ollerman’s dead and The Trust is gone, I walk.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end of the line, and then Nick says, “Deal. I’ll call you when the first mission is lined up.”

“Can’t wait,” Frankie says sarcastically.

She hangs up before he can say something else that makes her want to smash her glass, and then strides back inside the suite because she hates knowing that he can see her. She sets her glass down next to the bottle of Jameson but keeps walking, straight through the living room and into the bedroom, and she doesn’t stop until she’s standing next to the bed.

Will is still sleeping. She watches him breathe, peaceful and unaware that anything is wrong. It seems like forever ago that she was draped over him in this same bed, whispering that she loved him and he made her feel whole.
She reaches out to brush her fingers through his hair. “Will.”

He stirs but doesn’t wake.

She runs her hand through his hair again. “Will.”

His eyes flutter open. He blinks at her sleepily, and then smiles. “Hey you.”

She smiles back because it’s impossible not to. And then he seems to remember where they are, and everything that happened, and he bolts upright and reaches for her arm.

“Are you okay?” he whispers, his eyes flickering over her body as if he’s checking for wounds. “What’s wrong?”

The concern in his eyes makes her ache. She’s helpless against the urge to touch him. She lifts her hand and presses it gently against the side of his face. She strokes her thumb over the stubble on his cheek.

“We need to talk.”
Chapter Notes

Happy new year, y’all :) I hope your holidays were lovely and restful. Thanks for being patient with me as I took a break. I am appreciative that y’all were so kind about it in my comments. I *just* finished putting the final touches on this chapter last night, so I definitely needed the time.

I feel like I should warn you about this chapter, but all my warnings would be spoilers. It’s long. That’s about all I can say. So, like, idk. Go forth and read. And send good vibes out to LC on her birthday.

“We need to talk.”

As soon as the words come out of Frankie’s mouth, she can see Will visibly tense. Apprehension flickers in his eyes, and then disappointment, and he lets go of her arm. She lowers her hand from his face.

He pushes his fingers through his hair and exhales slowly. “Okay.”

He says it with about as much enthusiasm as Standish usually musters for vegetables. Frankie knows it’s because he thinks she’s about to end things for good. An uncomfortable silence hangs in the air. He looks over at the clock. His eyebrows furrow. He glances up at her and then looks away quickly.

“I know it’s late,” she says, feeling guilty for waking him.

“No,” he replies, shaking his head. “That wasn’t…”

He trails off. There’s an odd look on his face and she can’t read it, so she frowns.

“What?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

She puts her hand on his shoulder and stops him when he tries to get out of bed. “What?” she insists.

He stares up at her. “It’s after midnight. It’s our anniversary.”

The words feel like a sucker punch.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. They weren’t supposed to spend the whole weekend in the hospital, avoiding each other’s eyes as they stood over Jai. They’re not supposed to be staring at each other in the darkness, wondering if they can survive this. They’re not supposed to be broken.

Will’s eyes flicker over her face. His expression softens, and she knows he can see that she’s upset. She turns away from him and strides out into the living room before she loses control and cries for the hundredth fucking time this week.
The bottle of Jameson feels like an old friend at this point. She takes a deep breath as she pours a
glass and tries not to think about the way her hands are shaking. There’s a snide voice somewhere
in the back of her mind muttering about how disappointed her parents would be if they knew she
couldn’t have an emotional conversation with the love of her life without a glass of whiskey in her
hand, but she pushes it away and swallows a gulp so large it burns the back of her throat.

“I’m sorry.”

She turns at the sound of Will’s voice. He’s standing in the doorway of the bedroom. There’s
stubble on his jaw and his hair is mussed. His navy boxers are sitting low on his hips, showing off
the muscled lines of his torso. He’s handsome as hell. She knows they need to talk, but she wishes
this was like other fights they’ve had, when they could fuck their way to common ground and then
whisper to each other afterward until they worked out the rest.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” he says. “I wasn’t trying to make you…” He shakes his head. “It
doesn’t matter. I’m sorry.”

Frankie studies him. He stands calmly beneath her gaze and lets her scrutinize him.

“Did you mean it?” she asks eventually.

“Mean what?”

“That you’d let me go if that’s what I want.”

The pain that shivers across his face is unmistakable, but it doesn’t last long. He sets his jaw in
determination and nods. “Yes.”

“Even though you love me?”

“Because I love you.”

She knows him. He’s not lying. If she told him she was done and walked out the door, he wouldn’t
chase her. And if she walked across the room and buried herself in his arms, he’d hug her and tell
her he loves her. It’s her choice. And although the stakes have never been quite this high, the
position she’s in isn’t new. Because unlike Nick, Will has always let her choose. He let her choose
in his living room when he told her he wanted them to be together. He let her choose when she
wanted to stay all night, and when she wanted to kiss him in public, and when she wanted to invite
him to her place. He let her choose after Zurich, and that morning in her house when she first told
him about Nick, and in Huntington when she decided to meet his parents.

There’s only one time he hasn’t let her choose.

“Why’d you do it?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. “Why’d you lie to me?”

He rakes a hand through his hair and exhales a slow breath. “What happened in Huntington scared
me,” he says quietly. “I didn’t like how close I came to losing you, and Alex, and my parents. And
I just kept thinking that if Nick was willing to set someone like Jimmy loose just to get me out of
New York, then what else would he be willing to do? Who else would he be willing to hurt?”

Frankie knows the answer to that question. But she doesn’t say anything.

“I didn’t want to lie to you,” Will continues. “That’s why I brought it up at the Dead Drop. I
thought we could talk about it, and that you’d finally tell me why he seemed to have such a hold on
you. But as soon as I said his name, you shut down. You shut me out. And I just…”
He trails off and looks out the window. His hands are on his hips the way they are when he’s trying to think through a problem.

“Do you remember when we went to Havana?” he asks, looking back at her. “And we found Mendes and Griffin dead in that apartment?”

She nods.

“They were married,” he reminds her. “I hadn’t told you yet, but I knew that’s what I wanted for us. And when I saw them, all I could think about was how terrible it must have been for Mendes to watch his wife get tortured and not be able to stop it.”

Frankie remembers all of a sudden the way his voice caught that day, and the way he’d looked at her. She hadn’t understood why he was upset, and she’d meant to ask him about it later, but the dancing and the rum and the way he’d kissed her as soon as they got back to their hotel made her forget.

“That’s how it feels to watch you with Nick,” Will murmurs. “He’s a parasite. He’s sucking you dry, and you’re so convinced everything he did is your fault that you’re letting him. Having Standish work on the program made me feel like I was doing something to help instead of just watching you be in pain. I knew you were worried about Standish. So was I. But I thought if the responsibility was on me and not you, if I could carry the weight for you until he figured it out, then maybe I could…”

“Fix it?” she finishes when he doesn’t.

He nods. “Yeah.”

Frankie lowers her gaze and studies the whiskey in her glass. For a moment, they stand in silence. There’s been a dull ache in her chest ever since their fight at the university. But every time she’s in his presence she feels something else too, that familiar pull that always seems to draw her toward him. She can feel it now.

“I shouldn’t have lied,” Will continues. “I made a decision that should’ve been yours to make. I hurt you. And I’m sorry. If I could go back and do it differently, I would. But I still feel the same way now that I did then. I still want to do whatever it takes to bring him down. Because I hate him, Frankie. I hate the hold he has on you. I hate how much he hurts you. And I hate that you’re his wife and not mine.”

The last sentence makes her stare, but he doesn’t seem even remotely apologetic for saying it.

“But you’d still let me go?” she asks when she finds her voice again. “You hate him that much, and you want me that bad, but you’d let me go?”

He shakes his head. “I won’t make you stay. I’m in love with you, Francesca. You’re the love of my life. But hanging on to you when you want to go isn’t love. It’s just selfish.”

It’s completely different than what she’s used to hearing from Nick. For a second, all she can think about is what happened in New York a few days before she met Will. She thinks about standing in her kitchen with Nick after stopping a terrorist attack, and how empty she felt even though she’d just saved millions of people. She remembers realizing that she had to go back to Bogota, back to running a brutal cartel and pretending to be in love with Rafael, and how tired she was of living a lie. Jai was in Beirut. She hadn’t seen him in months, and she was so fucking lonely it felt like she was suffocating.
Nick noticed. He saw his opportunity, and he took it. When he reached for her the way he used to when they were in love, she hadn’t pulled away. And when he whispered to her right before he kissed her, it sounded like love.

*I’ll never let you go, baby. I love you too much.*

But it wasn’t love. She knows that now. She knows because *this* is love. Will, exhausted and hurting and desperate to keep her but willing to let her go if that’s what she wants. Will, who helped her through a panic attack and held her when she cried and chased her through the streets of Monte Carlo but didn’t try to leverage her vulnerability into a gain for himself. Will, who was so torn up when he realized how badly he hurt her that he cried.

Once again, a choice materializes in front of her. But for the first time since that moment in Prague when she had to decide whether to kiss him or walk away, she doesn’t have to think about it. She knows what she wants. And she knows she can’t have it until she tells him everything.

She swallows the rest of her whiskey, and then sets the glass down on the table. No more alcohol. She wants to do this without a crutch.

She walks around the end of the sectional and sits on the cushion that’s directly across from where Will’s standing. Her heart is racing. Her hands are shaking. She curls them into fists to steady herself and takes a deep breath.

“You know, my parents were a lot like yours,” she starts quietly.

If Will is confused about why she’s talking about her parents, he doesn’t show it. “Yeah?” he says.

She nods. “Yeah. They were completely, head over heels in love. Embarrassed the hell out of me when I was a kid. My friends and I caught them making out in the kitchen once. It was horrifying.”

Will smiles.

“My dad said he loved my mom the moment he first saw her,” she continues. “He said he knew she was his soulmate by the end of their first date. And I knew he believed that. But I didn’t. I didn’t think it was possible.”

The next words stick on her tongue. Her heart is beating hard and erratic in her chest, but she takes another deep breath and forces them out.

“And then I met Nick.”

She watches the reaction shiver across Will’s face—the surprise, and then the jealousy, and then the blank expression he wears when he’s trying to control his emotions.

She looks down at her hands. Her fourth finger is empty. For a long time after she stopped wearing Nick’s ring, she felt a phantom weight. She hadn’t realized she’d developed a habit of absently stroking her thumb over her bare finger until Jai pointed it out to her.

“The first time we met, I…” She doesn’t finish. She licks her lips and tries again. “I wasn’t expecting to…” She doesn’t finish that sentence either.

Frustration wells up in her chest and she pinches the bridge of her nose. She’s never talked about Nick with anyone other than Jai. She knows Susan would tell her it’s okay that it’s hard for her, but she hates it. She hates that even all these years later, she still feels ruined and ravaged. She hates that even after all the awful things he’s done, she can still look at Nick and catch glimpses of the
man she thought was her soulmate.

“Francesca,” Will says softly.

She looks up at him.

He shakes his head. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes I do.” He opens his mouth, probably to argue with her, but she won’t let him. “I want to, Will. I need to.”

It’s his turn to scrutinize her. She lets him. He crosses the room, sits on the opposite end of the sectional, and looks at her with so much kindness in his eyes that she feels like her heart is melting into a puddle on the floor.

“Take your time,” he whispers.

She swallows and stares down at her hands again. And then she takes a deep breath and tells him the truth.

She tells him all of it. Everything he needs to know about her and Nick, and maybe some things he doesn’t, and it’s hard, at first, to find the right words, but once she gets going it’s easier. She tells him about the first time she met Nick, and how it felt like she’d been hit by lightning when he touched her. The dance they did for a few months, sleeping with other people and sleeping with each other, and how she finally got sick of it and gave him an ultimatum. The way it felt when he didn’t pick her, and the way it felt when he changed his mind and begged for another chance. Their first *I love yous* on the Rialto Bridge. The plans they made for their future. The Paris cafe and the ring he slid across the table. Asking Jai to walk her down the aisle. Nick waking her up in the middle of the night to say *I don’t want to wait, marry me tomorrow.* Marrying him the next day and being sure it was the best decision she’d ever make.

She tells him about Nick, too. The scars all over his body from his parents and street fights and his time in the RAF. The tattoos he got to cover those scars. The tattoos he got for her. The nightmares that left him trembling. How jealous he would get, and how overprotective he was, and how he once snapped a man’s neck during a mission just for threatening her. How sweet he could be, and how stubborn, and how hard he tried to be a good man.

And then she tells him about Barcelona, and how awful Nick’s funeral was. She tells him about Moscow, and how Nick begged her to go with him. She tells him about Jai with a gun in his hand after Mina died, and RJ’s email that ended with *I love you Franks,* and all the times over the next three and a half years when Nick would pop up unexpectedly and ask her to be his again.

The last thing she tells him is what happened in Shanghai. That’s the hardest, because other than what happened in New York, it’s what she’s most ashamed of.

“I would’ve stayed if Jai hadn’t been there,” she concludes, her voice a whisper.

She forces herself to look up at Will. There’s no disappointment or disgust in his eyes, and she’s relieved. It soothes the shame that’s pulsing through her blood, but only slightly.

“Because you still loved him?” Will asks. It’s the first thing he’s said since he told her to take her time.

She shakes her head. “It wasn’t love. It was…”
She doesn’t know how to explain it. Resignation? Acceptance?

“Ending up with him felt inevitable,” she says eventually. “I knew he’d never stop chasing me. I knew I didn’t deserve anyone better than him. I’d become just like him. And if I stayed, then at least I could make sure he didn’t hurt anyone else. But it would’ve broken Jai, and I’d broken him enough already. So I left.”

Will doesn’t say anything. Frankie watches him. Even from across the room, she can see his eyes gleaming with unshed tears. She wonders if he’s crying for her, or if even though he hates Nick he’s managed to find some semblance of compassion for the scarred and broken man she tried so hard to heal.

Will gets up from the couch, and her heart shoots into her throat. He moves slowly as if he’s trying not to startle her. When he kneels in front of her, it reminds her so much of the first time he told her he loved her that she feels her throat tighten.

He leans toward her, and his sternum presses against her knees. He covers her hands with his. “You’re nothing like him,” he whispers.

She leans toward him like a moth to the flame. “Not anymore. You did that.”

“No,” he says, smiling a little as he shakes his head. “You did. I just had the privilege of standing next to you while you remembered who you really are.”

Not that long ago, she would’ve dismissed him as insincere or sentimental. But Will Chase is never insincere, and his sentimentality isn’t fake or self-serving, and she loves him so much it steals the breath right out of her lungs.

“Will,” she whispers.

He lifts her hands to his lips and kisses her knuckles. “I know you, Francesca,” he murmurs. “I know who you are deep down in the places that define you and drive you. You’re not him. You’re good. And you deserve good things.”

She feels like her heart is going to beat right out of her chest. It’s Marseille all over again—he’s saying all the things she wants to hear, and she wants to believe him so badly, but she’s still got cards in her hand she needs to put on the table and they still have things to discuss before she can give him all of herself.

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” he says.

She shakes her head. “There’s more to tell.”

His eyebrows furrow in an unspoken question.

She pulls her hands free from his because she’s afraid of how much it will hurt if he lets her go when she says the rest. Disappointment flashes in his eyes. She pretends she doesn’t see it.

“Nick called while you were asleep.”

His body stiffens. “When?”

“About ten minutes before I woke you up.”

His expression hardens. “How many times did he call you baby?”
Frankie blinks at him. “What?”

A hint of remorse flickers over Will’s face, but then he lifts his chin in defiance. “Every other word out of his mouth when he talks to you is baby. It’s no wonder you hate pet names. I would too.”

She stares at him for a second, stunned by the utter contempt in his voice, and then she can’t help it—she smiles. Will is noble, and he prides himself on consistently choosing to be the bigger person, but sometimes he can be petty. She kind of likes that about him.

He looks surprised by her smile. But then he smiles back sheepishly. “Sorry.”

The words are on the tip of her tongue. She hesitates for a split second but says them anyway. “I don’t hate it when you call me boo.”

He looks surprised again, and then completely thrilled. “Good to know,” he says softly.

It’s written all over his face that he wants to kiss her. Frankie forces herself to look away from him so he won’t. They can’t go there right now.

Will seems to take the hint. He gets up off his knees and sits next to her on the couch, leaving a respectable distance between them. “What did he want?”

“He wants to give me Ollerman and The Trust.”

Will blinks at her for a moment, clearly shocked. Frankie gives him a moment to process it. She knows the second it finally sinks in, because he clenches his jaw angrily. “That was his plan all along, wasn’t it? Slay the dragon to win the princess.”

“I’m—”

“Not a princess,” Will says, waving his hand. “I know. It’s an analogy. Just go with it.”

She bites her lip around a smile.

“Did you know that was his plan?”

“I suspected it. But I didn’t know for sure until after Jai got shot.”

“Why?”

“Because it was Moscow all over again. If Jai died, I would’ve been isolated and vulnerable. I would’ve wanted Ollerman and The Trust dead just like I wanted Clarke and The Collective. Nick’s a lot of things, Will, but he’s not stupid. He learns from his mistakes. And he learned from Moscow. He saw how I reacted to losing RJ and Mina. He knew I’d react the same way to losing Jai. And he knew if he pinned the death on Ollerman, it would give him a chance to swoop in and be my knight in shining armor.”

Will shakes his head. “Is he insane? He’s working with Ollerman. He had to know that you would hold him at least partially responsible.”

“He did,” she confirms. “But I think he also believed he could convince me that he was only working with Ollerman to protect me.”

“Why the hell would you believe that?”

“Because it’s mostly true.”
Will stares at her. He’s got that look on his face he wears when he’s jealous and trying not to be, and she realizes he thinks she’s defending Nick.

“Ollerman has nothing to offer him, Will,” she explains, trying to get him to understand. “Nick’s a billionaire. He doesn’t care about power. He doesn’t care about doing the right thing. All he wants is me. There’s no reason he would work with Ollerman except to protect me.”

Will frowns. “But if he takes over The Trust, he can use it to rebuild The Collective—”

“He doesn’t care about rebuilding The Collective,” she cuts him off gently. “He could’ve used RJ’s program to do that whenever he wanted. But he didn’t because he hated them. The only reason he became Clarke’s second in command was because he was trying to protect me. He always protects me.”

“Yeah, except from himself.”

A memory flashes through Frankie’s mind—Nick in Moscow, insisting he was protecting her while RJ’s dead body sat only a few feet away—and a wave of nausea slams into her.

She curls her hands into fists and takes a deep breath. Will seems to notice her reaction and responds immediately.

“Frankie,” he murmurs. He reaches for her, his fingers warm on her arm, but then he recoils as if she’s burned him. “Sorry,” he says, his hands hovering in the air halfway between them. “I’m sorry.”

She glances up at him. The memory fades as she focuses on the way Will drops his hands into his lap and curls them into fists. It’s not like him—his first instinct has always been to touch her when she’s upset, and she’s always liked that because she likes to be touched—but ever since the hospital, he’s been vacillating between reaching for her and holding back. She’s suddenly afraid it’s because he doesn’t want her anymore, and he’s only sticking around out of some noble sense of obligation because she’s in pain. She knows, logically, that her fear is unfounded. It wasn’t that long ago that he said you’re the love of my life. But logic doesn’t change the way she feels.

“Why do you keep trying not to touch me?” she blurts out before she can stop herself.

He blinks at her in surprise. “I wasn’t sure you wanted me to.”

“So it’s not because you don’t want to?”

She feels ridiculous as soon as the words come out of her mouth. She sounds like an insecure teenager.

“Don’t answer that,” she sighs, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Hey,” he says softly.

She feels his fingers curl around her wrist. She glances up at him.

“I always want to touch you,” he murmurs. His thumb strokes over the place where her pulse beats. He smiles. “All I think about is touching you. You make me feel like a teenager. If I could touch you every second of every day, I would.” His smile fades a little. “I’m just trying to respect your boundaries. I don’t know what we are, Frankie. I don’t know what you want. And I don’t want to pressure you.”
The impulse throbs in her chest. *Kiss him. Show him what you want.*

“I want to finish this conversation,” she says instead, because if she says it out loud then maybe it’ll be true. She glances down at his mouth—she really, really wants to kiss him—and then back up into his eyes. “I owe you that.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t—”

“I do,” she cuts him off firmly.

He searches her eyes, and then nods. “Okay.” He lets go of her wrist. “We were talking about Nick. And how he protects you.”

He grimaces a little when he says *protects you.* Frankie considers pointing it out, but she doesn’t want to get them off track again. She’s tired of beating around the bush. Might as well just say it.

“Ollerman put hits on all of us after Prague.”

Will stares at her, stunned. “What?”

“RJ’s program identified The Trust as soon as Ollerman rose to power,” she explains. “Nick knew what Ollerman was doing way before Standish’s program figured it out. He just didn’t care until it affected me. When Ollerman escaped from our custody after that busted prison transfer, Nick kept an eye on him because he knew I was on the team that was hunting him. So when Ollerman put hits on us after Prague, Nick knew. And he paid him off.”

“For the whole team?” Will says in disbelief. “He…?”

“Saved your life,” Frankie finishes. “Yeah.”

Will looks suddenly conflicted. Frankie knows the feeling well, and she hates that he’s getting a taste of it.

“You don’t owe him anything,” she says. “None of you do.”

“But you think you do?”

“No,” she says resolutely. “I don’t.”

Will seems taken aback by that. Frankie holds his gaze purposefully.

“Nick didn’t save you guys because he didn’t want me to suffer,” she explains. “He saved you because he wanted to be able to tell me he saved you. He thought it might make me love him again.”

“He’s got a really warped view of love.”

At one point not too long ago, Frankie might have felt a desire to defend Nick. His version of love is self-serving and twisted, but she understands it. She understands him, even if she hates the decisions he made and the man he ultimately became. But sitting next to Will, who’s been so steadfast and selfless and sacrificial even when it doesn’t benefit him, erases any lingering desire to speak on Nick’s behalf.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “He does.”

“So he started working with Ollerman after he bought out the hits?”
Frankie shakes her head. “No. It wasn’t until our run-in with Anton in July. Ollerman agreed not to kill me, but he didn’t agree not to torture me or use me as leverage. Nick didn’t like that loophole. So he fully funded The Trust so he could guarantee I’d be untouchable.”

“And now he wants to betray Ollerman?”

“He claims he’s been gathering intel on The Trust ever since they started working together. And he probably has, because that’s who he is. He gathers intel on everyone he meets so he can use it when he needs to. I’m guessing he’s had enough information to bring down The Trust for a while now. He’s just been waiting for the most advantageous time to use it.”

“Like when you’re vulnerable and heartbroken over your best friend.”

“Exactly.”

Will studies her for a moment. “How long have you known all this?”

His voice isn’t accusatory, but there’s a hint of suspicion there. She doesn’t blame him. She hasn’t exactly been forthright with him up until now.

“I didn’t know any of it for sure until he called me tonight,” she says honestly. “I asked for answers, and he gave them to me.”

“And he’s just going to give you Ollerman and The Trust without expecting anything in return?”

Frankie feels a flicker of apprehension in her chest. She knows he’s not going to like what she’s about to say.

“No. He wants to make a deal. He’ll give us Ollerman and The Trust. But only if our team does two missions with him.”

“No,” Will says immediately. “Absolutely not. We don’t do illegal shit for traitors.”

Frankie shakes her head. “It’s not illegal shit. He says they’re missions that will give us the info we need to take down The Trust.”

“And you believe him?”

“I believe that he thinks giving me Ollerman and The Trust will work in his favor. I believe we can use that against him.”

Will shakes his head. “We don’t need him. Next time we see Ollerman, we’ll do what you’ve always wanted and put a bullet in his skull. End of story.”

“Ollerman has people everywhere, Will. He’s no different than Clarke and The Collective, or Rafael and the cartel. We can’t just kill him and call it a day. We have to take down the entire network. Which means we need to know who all his people are. And the only way we’re getting that information is by working with Nick.”

“But why would he want us to work for him? What does he get out of forcing us to do missions for him?”

“They’re not for him,” Frankie clarifies. “They’re with him.”

Will blinks at her. “With him?” he repeats.
She waits, giving him a minute to figure it out, and then watches as the truth dawns on his face.

“He wants to work with you again,” he breathes.

She nods. “Yes.”

“And you want that too?”

“No.”

“Frankie—”

“I’m never going back to him, Will,” she says firmly. “If I could divorce him, I would. If I could kill him, I would. The last thing I want to do is work with him again. But we have to get Ollerman. The Trust has to be destroyed.”

Will clenches his jaw. “I know that. But we don’t need him. We’re close to doing it on our own.”

“No we’re not,” she disagrees. “We’ve been after Ollerman for more than a year. We’re no closer than we were when we started.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“How? When?”

“I don’t know. But we will.”

“Jai almost died, Will. He’s in a hospital bed right now. Eight months ago, Standish was too. So was Ray. Susan could’ve died. We could have died. Sooner or later, our luck is going to run out.”

Sympathy shivers across Will’s face. “I know you’re scared to lose them—”

“It’s not about that,” she cuts him off. “It’s about doing our job. The cyloraxin was only the beginning. Ollerman is going to kill millions of people unless we stop him. And this is our best shot.”

“But at what cost?” Will demands. “I’ve seen you with Nick, Frankie. You’re not...he eats you alive. And you let him.”

Annoyance flares briefly in her veins but she ignores it. “I can handle two missions with him if it means we get Ollerman and The Trust. And it’ll give us a chance to get him, too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Standish is almost done working on RJ’s program. He showed me and Jai what he had this morning. Jai thinks it’s the best chance we’ve had yet. And if Standish can finish what he’s working on soon, then we might get a chance to destroy the program during one of the missions we run with Nick. If we do, he’s fair game. And if we don’t, we still get Ollerman and The Trust. It’s a win-win.”

“And you’re okay with Standish doing this right under Nick’s nose?”

“Nick agreed not to touch any of you until Ollerman is dead and The Trust is gone. If anything happens to any of you, he loses me for good. He won’t risk that. Not when he thinks he’s so close to getting what he wants.”
What do you mean he agreed? You already said yes to the deal?"

Frankie swallows around the guilt in her throat and nods.

Will blinks, clearly stunned, and then the shock on his face dissolves into betrayal. "What the hell, Frankie."

"Will," she says, leaning toward him, but he rises from the couch and paces away from her. He stops next to the window. Frankie can see the anger in his gait, and the tension that’s stiffening his shoulders. He rubs his temples and sighs.

"Will," she calls.

He turns to face her. "How could you do this without talking to me?"

"I didn’t have a choice."

"Is this because I went behind your back? You wanted me to know how it felt?"

"No," she says firmly. "I asked him to give me time to talk to you and he said no. I had to make a choice on the spot, and I didn’t want to let our best chance at ending all of this slip away. I woke you up as soon as I hung up the phone."

Will sighs and rubs his temples again.

"You don’t have to do this," she tells him. "I only chose for me and Jai. If you and Susan and Standish aren’t comfortable—"

"You’re not doing this alone," he cuts her off, dropping his hand. "I’m not sending you into the lion’s den by yourself."

"I won’t be alone."

"Jai’s in the hospital, Frankie. He can’t watch your back. He can’t even get out of bed."

"Nick’s not going to hurt me, Will. And he’s not going to let anyone else hurt me either."

"That’s not what I’m worried about."

"Then what are you worried about?"

He opens his mouth to reply but seems to change his mind. He presses his lips together and looks away from her. His hands are on his hips again, and his jaw is clenched.

Frankie knows what he’s worried about even if he won’t say it. She wants to cross the room and kiss him until the tension seeps out of his body, but she knows she can’t. There have been too many times in their relationship when he’s sacrificed speaking his language to speak hers. This has to be different. She needs to own her part of this mess or they’re never going to make it.

She leans forward and puts her elbows on her knees. "I know I hurt you, Will. And I’m sorry. I should have told you the truth before he did."

A sudden flurry of emotions crosses his face—surprise, pain, grief. Guilt is prodding at her heart but she stands her ground against it.

"Do you remember when we were in Plaka earlier this month?" she asks. "We were there a day
early and we spent all afternoon going in and out of those little shops you love. We ate at that restaurant with the blue chairs.”

He nods. “I remember.”

“I tried to tell you over dinner that night.”

His eyebrows furrow as if he’s trying to remember. “You were skittish,” he says. “I thought you were stressed about the mission because Standish was running point.”

“It wasn’t Standish. I wanted to tell you about Nick.”

He shakes his head. “But you didn’t.”

“You were happy,” she murmurs. “I was happy. I didn’t want to give that up.”

“Was that the only time you tried to tell me?”

She looks down at her hands. “No. I tried the day after we got in that fight at the Dead Drop. And a hundred times after that. I spent this entire week trying to tell you. After we had dinner at Le Grill on Wednesday, it was right there. Right on the tip of my tongue. But I couldn’t get it out.”

“Was it me?” he asks. “Did I...do you not feel safe with me?”

She snaps her head up to look at him. “What?”

“Did I do something that—”

“No.”

He looks agonized. “Frankie, if I—”

“No,” she repeats. “It wasn’t about you, Will. It’s never been about you.”

She suddenly remembers her conversation with Jai the night before they left for Monte Carlo, when she admitted she didn’t want to lose Will and Jai told her that she needed to tell him the truth.

“Or at least it wasn’t about whether or not I felt safe with you,” she amends. “It’s just...hard to talk about him. Because I never have. I’ve never talked about him with anyone but Jai, and Jai was there for all of it. But it was different with you. I would’ve had to tell you everything, every memory that I’ve spent years trying to forget. I would’ve had to tell you that I couldn’t give you all the things I knew you wanted. And I was scared.”

“Of what?”

There are warning bells blaring in the back of her mind. She feels like she’s out on a limb, trying to keep her balance in the middle of a wind storm, but she steels herself against it and pushes on.

“Losing you. I didn’t want to lose you.”

He studies her. “Are you still scared?”

“I’m fucking terrified,” she says honestly. “And I think you are too.”

He sets his jaw in determination. “I meant what I said, Francesca. If you don’t want to be with me,
or if you need space—"

“Tell me the truth, Will,” she interrupts. “Don’t tell me what you think I need to hear. What do you want?”

“You,” he says immediately. “I want to be with you.”

“So when you say you’re worried about me working with Nick…?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to realize you never stopped loving him. And that you love him more than you love me.”

The words hang in the air. She thinks of that night she showed up at his apartment after interrogating Rafael. She remembers Will’s eyes were red, and that he looked completely and utterly defeated sitting alone in the dark with a half empty bottle of whiskey. She was angry he assumed she slept with someone else. And although the look on his face right now isn’t all that different than it was that night, she isn’t angry this time.

“You don’t trust me when it comes to him,” she says. “And that’s my fault. I haven’t given you a reason to. But I want to. I want you to trust me, Will. So ask me anything.”

He frowns. “What?”

“The deal we made in Marseille is off,” she says, straightening on the couch. “Nothing’s off limits anymore. Ask me anything you want. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

He stares at her for a long moment, his eyes flickering over her face the way they do when he’s trying to read her. She waits. There are things she still needs to confess, but she can wait until he’s asked all his questions.

“Are you still in love with him?” he murmurs eventually.

She doesn’t hesitate. “No.”

“You’re sure?” he asks. The caution in his voice makes her ache. “There’s no part of you, not even a little bit, that still has feelings for him?”

“I don’t love him. I don’t want to be with him.”

“But?”

She pushes a hand through her hair. “It’s complicated,” she admits. “I’m never going to get to a point where he walks in the room and I don’t feel something. It isn’t love. It isn’t lust. It’s just...memories. I thought he was the love of my life, Will. I thought I lost him, and then I thought I found him again, and then I watched him murder my best friends.”

Compassion smooths the concerned frown off of Will’s face, but she keeps going.

“I hate him. I feel sorry for him. And sometimes, when I look at him, I remember how much I used to love him. But I don’t love him anymore. I don’t want him. I want you.”

A flare of hope lights his eyes, but it disappears quickly. She knows he’s trying not to get his hopes up. Guilt stabs her again, and so does the desire to show him that she means it, but she stays seated on the couch and waits for his next question.

“When was the last time you saw him?”
“You mean before the ciloraxin exchange?”

Will nods.

“January. For my birthday. He was sitting on my front stoop when I came home. He bought me a first edition of *The Awakening* for my mom’s collection. I wanted to burn it, but my mom loved that book and first editions are rare. She would’ve had a heart attack if I destroyed it. So I donated it.”

“So you never saw him when we were together?”

“No. He called me once. After Anton broke in. But we didn’t talk long. It was mostly just arguing. Like what you saw at the university.”

“How did he want me out of New York last month?”

Frankie remembers the roses sitting on her front stoop, and a wave of nausea passes over her. “Because it was the anniversary of when he proposed. He wanted to see me without you around to interrupt.”

Will frowns. “Is that an anniversary you guys always celebrate?”

“No. He usually only shows up on our wedding anniversary.”

“Which is when?”

“A month from now.”

“So then why show up for the proposal anniversary?”

“I don’t know,” she replies honestly. “I haven’t asked him. But I’m guessing it’s because he realized I was in love with you. And he wanted to remind me that I wasn’t free.”

Will studies her. Another long pause hangs in the air. Frankie sits as still as she can beneath his gaze and waits for his next question.

“Is Shanghai the only time you were tempted to take him back?”

Fear expands in Frankie’s chest. She can taste it in the back of her throat, and she can feel it pressing against her lungs and leaving her breathless.

“No,” she admits. “There was one other time. After he pulled me out of Bogota. A few days before I met you.”

“What happened?”

She sits back against the couch. “The Trust was planning an attack on New York. I didn’t know it was The Trust until tonight when he told me,” she adds quickly, foreseeing a future question. “But Nick knew. He reached out to Casey and told him he knew when and where a terrorist attack would take place. He said he could prevent it, but only if I did it with him. So Casey pulled me out of Bogota and I flew to New York.”

“That’s what you meant when you said it was a matter of national security that only you could handle,” Will says.

She nods. “Yeah. Nick said he pulled me because he knew I loved New York. And I don’t think
that was a lie. But it wasn’t the whole truth, either. I think he pulled me because he was tired of watching me with Rafael.’

“There was no attack on New York,” Will observes. “So you guys were successful.”

“Yeah,” she acknowledges. “But it didn’t feel like it. I was…”
She looks down at her hands and tries to find the right words.

“I wasn’t in a good place,” she says quietly. “I was tired of working with the cartel and pretending to be in love with Raf. I was tired of working for the agency. I hadn’t seen Jai in a while because he was on assignment in Beirut. We talked a lot, but it wasn’t the same. I missed him. And Nick…”

The words die on her lips. She can’t seem to resurrect them.

“Took advantage of you,” Will finishes.

There’s hatred in his voice. She’s not used to hearing it so plainly. She looks up and sees it mirrored on his face. She thinks it’s hatred for Nick, but the idea that it might be directed at her too feels so awful she can barely breathe.

“I let him,” she admits. “I was lonely. Everything seemed pointless. And I just wanted to feel something.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

Her hands are shaking. She feels like fear is going to swallow her whole, but she doesn’t want to live like this anymore. She doesn’t want to wonder if he can love all the worst parts of her. She just wants to know once and for all.

“Yes,” she whispers.

She waits for disappointment or disgust to cross his face, but they never do. The hatred is gone. He looks heartbroken.

“Just once,” she says. Her throat is tight and her eyes are warm. “And I hated myself the second we were done. I told him it was a mistake and it would never happen again, but it didn’t matter. The damage was done. That’s why he wants us to work together again. Because he thinks it worked the last time.”

Will closes his eyes and hangs his head. Frankie feels the tears start to spill from her eyes but she doesn’t try to stop them.

“I’m sorry, Will,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

He looks up at her, and when he sees her crying, his expression dissolves into compassion again.

“Francesca…” he murmurs.

“I didn’t know,” she insists, shaking her head. “I didn’t know I was going to meet you. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have done it. I wouldn’t have married him. I would’ve waited for you.”

He crosses the room and kneels in front of her again, his hands gentle on her cheeks as he wipes away the trails of her tears. She tilts into his touch and tries not to sob.

“You shouldn’t be sorry for things you did before you even met me,” he murmurs. “I have regrets
“Did you marry a traitor?” she asks with a sniff. “Did you fuck him after he killed your best friends?”

“You want me to hate you because you hate yourself,” he says gently. “But I don’t. I haven’t lost as many people as you have, but I know what grief and loneliness feel like, Frankie. I know they turn you into something you don’t want to be. I get it.”

She shakes her head. “Will...”

“I love you,” he says, holding her gaze. “I’m in love with you. And if you don’t believe me, that’s okay. I’ll keep saying it until you do. And then I’ll say it a million more times after that. I love you.”

The earnestness in his voice and the gentleness of his hands on her face feel like salve on a wound. “I love you too,” she breathes.

He leans forward and presses his forehead to hers, his thumbs stroking over her damp cheeks. She closes her eyes and says it again. “I love you.”

For a moment, neither of them say anything. They just sit in silence, breathing each other in. There are a million feelings warring for dominance in Frankie’s chest, but rising above them all is a new and unfamiliar sense of relief.

Will isn’t the first person she’s told about what happened with Nick in New York. She told Jai too. She had to. They don’t lie to each other. She cried then too, and Jai was just as insistent about his love as Will. But the relief when she told Jai was less profound than it is now because she hadn’t expected anything else. Jai loves her unconditionally. He’d never abandon her.

But she hadn’t known what to expect from Will. She hoped for this. She longed for it. But she hadn’t known for sure. Now she does. And it’s such a relief she doesn’t know if she wants to laugh or cry.

“One more question,” Will whispers, leaning back so he can look her in the eye.

Frankie sniffs and then nods. “Okay.”

“Did you really think I was going to break up with you just because you couldn’t marry me?”

“I thought you’d try to be noble,” she replies. “That you’d stay with me out of a sense of obligation because you didn’t want to hurt me. And I didn’t want that.” She presses her hand over his heart. “You’re always so damn noble.”

He grins at her. “Sexy, right?”

She laughs. She can’t help it.

“God I love that sound,” Will whispers, tilting a little closer to her. His heart eyes are on full blast, and she wonders how she ever resisted them.

“You deserve what you want, Will,” she tells him softly. “And I can’t give you any of it. I can’t marry you as long as he’s alive. And I can’t...I don’t want to bring kids into a world that he’s in. They’d never be safe.”
“But if you could give me those things, would you? Would you want that life with me?”

She waits for the familiar panic to rise in her chest, but it doesn’t. She’s not afraid anymore.

“Yes,” she replies.

Joy and hope flash in his eyes. “So if Standish destroys the program—”

“You can’t make this decision based on if,” she interrupts gently. “What if he doesn’t? What are you going to do? Waste your whole life waiting for me?”

“Waste?” he repeats incredulously. “You think that’s what a life with you would be?”

“There are other women who can give you what you want.”

“No there aren’t. Because they’re not you. And I want you.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve got enough baggage to sink a ship.”

“I wasn’t afraid of your icebergs, Frankie. I’m not afraid of your baggage either.”

“He’ll never leave us alone, Will. He’ll never stop trying to break us.”

“Then let him try,” Will says, his eyes blazing at the challenge. “We won’t break.” A shiver of uncertainty crosses his face. “Unless that’s not what you want?”

It’s Frankie’s turn to brush her hand over his face. She remembers one of the first missions they ever did together, when they got locked inside that bank vault and the water was rising. He apologized to her for letting his emotions get the best of him, and gave her that look he’s given her so many times since, and it was the first time she felt the urge to reach out and press her hand against his cheek. She hadn’t. And she’s glad. She wouldn’t change a single thing about their relationship, even the hell they’ve been through the last few days, because all of it was leading to this moment.

“You know, I used to think I’d never love anyone more than I loved him,” she murmurs. “I didn’t think I’d get another chance to have what my parents had. And then I met you.”

“Francesca,” he breathes.

“I want to be with you, Will. And if you want that too, even with all my damage and baggage and mess, then I’m yours.”

He pushes her hair back from her face with a tenderness that leaves her breathless. “You’ve been through a lot the last few days,” he whispers. “If you need time, or space, I’ll give you as much as you need.”

She shakes her head. “I’m tired of putting my life on hold for him. Me and you, Whiskey. That’s all I need.”

“Me too.” His eyes are gleaming with unshed tears. “No more lies. I promise.”

“I promise too.”

He shifts closer, his chest pressing against her knees. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

She smiles. “You better.”
He doesn’t need another invitation. He surges toward her, his hands grasping her face and pulling her mouth toward his. It’s only been a few days since the last time she kissed him, but it feels like it’s been a decade. It’s even better than she remembers. She wonders sometimes if he’s such a good kisser because he’s so eager to please, or if it’s just another one of his many talents, or if she only thinks he’s great because she’s so head over heels in love with him. It doesn’t really matter though. All that matters is he’s good at it. Really good at it. Somehow, kissing him makes her feel both safe and reckless.

She wraps her arms around his shoulders and parts her legs. He immediately fills the space between them. His chest presses against hers. His hands slide along the outside of her thighs, and then he’s palming her ass and pulling her hips flush against his. Desire aches deep in her body, a spark she knows he’s going to turn into an inferno.

“Bed,” she sighs against his lips.

She expects him to get to his feet and immediately lead her toward the bedroom. He leans back from her mouth abruptly instead. He studies her, his eyebrows furrowed. She blinks at him, confused by the sudden distance.

“Are you sure?” he whispers.

“Seriously?”

He looks sheepish, and then determined. “I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

She opens her mouth to say something snarky about his damn chivalry, but then she remembers he knows about New York, and that it wasn’t that long ago that she was crying about sleeping with Nick when she felt broken.

“Will,” she says, putting her hands on his shoulders. “You’re not him.”

He shakes his head. “Not intentionally. But I—”

“You’re not him,” she cuts him off. “Full stop.”

“Francesca…”

His voice breaks on the word. Whatever he was planning to say he doesn’t, but she doesn’t need him to. She can hear it in his voice—the fear and the remorse and the fierce commitment to giving her what she needs instead of taking what he wants—and god, she is so in love with him.


She leans forward and brushes her mouth over his. His hands tighten on her ass. She lifts her hips in response, rubbing against him, and he inhales sharply.

“I trust you,” she whispers. She moves her hips again, and he groans in the back of his throat. “I love you.”

“I love you,” he echoes.

“Show me.”

He gets to his feet and pulls her with him. She keeps her mouth fused to his as she walks him backward toward the bedroom.
“Sure?” he murmurs after they cross the threshold of the room.

“Yes.”

They stop next to the bed. His hands slide along the curves of her hips, dip beneath the hem of her t-shirt, and travel upward. His palms are warm on her skin. He pulls her shirt up and over her head and drops it on the floor at their feet. His hands settle on her waist, but he keeps her at arm’s length. His eyes travel slowly over her body, dark with desire, and if she wasn’t turned on before she definitely is now.

He leans forward to kiss her again. He presses her gently against the side of the bed, but when she tries to crawl backward, he hangs on to her hips and stops her. His mouth leaves hers and traces along her jaw and down her neck. She tips her head back. His lips glide over her throat and across the raised line of her clavicle. He lifts his hands to her chest, his thumbs stroking her to attention, and when he replaces his hands with his mouth, she closes her eyes and bites her lip around a sigh.

He’s in no rush. His mouth is purposeful but unhurried in its exploration. Her focus wavers between the feel of his hands sliding over her body and the heat of his tongue on her skin. When he finally moves his attention downward, his lips gliding toward her navel, her stomach clenches in anticipation.

She opens her eyes and glances down at him. He’s kneeling at her feet. His hands splay over her thighs, and she leans back against the bed for balance and parts her legs for him.

“Will,” she whispers, brushing her hand through his hair as he leans toward her. “You don’t have to—”

She chokes on the rest of her sentence when his tongue flicks over her. Her hand clenches in his hair, her back arching as her hips tilt toward his mouth of their own accord.

“You taste good,” he whispers. He presses his forehead against her stomach and the heat of his breath on her skin makes her shiver. “So good, Francesca.”

Frankie feels desire explode inside her. His left hand curls around her hip and his fingers tighten their grip to hold her steady. His right hand is stroking along her calf, his fingertips feather-light on her skin, and then he wraps his fingers around her ankle and lifts her leg to drape over his shoulder.

“Will,” she whispers.

He turns his face toward her leg. “I love you,” he murmurs, his mouth moving along the inside of her thigh. She watches, breathless and aching, as he kisses closer and closer to where she wants him. When he finally hits home, she has to let go of his hair and fist her hands into the comforter to hold herself up. She tilts her head back and closes her eyes and tries to remember how to breathe.

Will is good at this. He’s so good at this. She still remembers the first time he did this, all those months ago in Prague, in that quiet hotel room painted by afternoon shadows. When he started the slow descent down her body with his mouth, she knew what he was going to do and she knew she should stop him. But she didn’t. She was curious about what he would be like, and even then she felt safe with him, and by the time she tugged on his hair and brought his mouth back up to hers, he’d gotten her off not once but twice and it was too late. She was addicted.

She still is. He knows it, too. He loves to do this, and she loves when he does it, and after eight months he’s even better at it because now he knows her. He knows when to suck and when to lick and the right amount of pressure and the right pace. He knows exactly how to curl his fingers
inside her and where to rub. He knows that if he takes her to the brink and then pulls back he can
work her up over and over again until she’s desperate for a release. Even the way he’s holding her
hip, his grip tight enough to keep her from writhing away but gentle enough to let her hips jerk
reflexively, is perfect.

She comes hard. It rocks her body, a wave of heat and sensation so sharp that a cry tears out of her
throat. Will works her through it, his mouth and his fingers gentling but still insistent. Even after
the initial intensity subsides, aftershocks shudder through her and pull another soft moan from her
lips.

When he slips his fingers out of her, she collapses back onto the bed and drapes an arm over her
face. She’s short of breath, her chest heaving, and the force of the orgasm has left her skin tingling
and her vision spotty. She feels drunk. She couldn’t formulate a sentence if she tried.

Will’s tongue flicks unexpectedly over the scar he gave her when he saved her life in France.
Frankie sighs and shivers. His mouth trails upward, tracing a leisurely path across her ribs, between
her breasts, and over her throat. She moves her arm away from her face, and he takes it as an
invitation and kisses her. He tastes like sex.

“I love that,” he whispers.

“What?” she sighs.

“You,” he murmurs. “The way you come.”

Desire aches between her legs. “Will,” she whines, pushing against his shoulder halfheartedly.
She’s barely caught her breath and he’s already winding her up again.

She remembers the first time she realized his mouth was good at other things too. It was after
Prague, the very first time she’d gone to his place with the explicit intention of sleeping with him.
Their first round, he was on his best behavior. He stayed silent and let her take the lead, probably
because he was afraid she’d walk out the door if he didn’t. But the second round...god, she still
thinks about it. His chest pressed against her back, his hand between her legs, his hips rocking into
hers, and all of it was secondary to the things he whispered in her ear. She hadn’t expected a man
who said things like **I need to feel safe** and **My true soulmate is still out there** to be able to say the
kinds of things that could make her shiver and ache and beg, but he did. He still does. And she
loves it.

He leans away from her mouth but stays bent over her body, one hand planted on the mattress by
her head as he hovers above her.

“You flush here when it happens,” he says, coasting his palm over her sternum. “It’s gorgeous.
There’s nothing prettier.”

“You’re biased.”

“So biased.”

She laughs.

He ducks forward and kisses her briefly, almost as if he couldn’t resist, and then leans back again.
His eyes are dark. “When we’re in the right position,” he murmurs, “and it hits you just right, you
arch your back and...” He trails off and palms one of her breasts possessively. He doesn’t finish his
sentence but she knows what he’s thinking.
“Will,” she tries to warn, but it comes out sounding breathy and wanting. God, she’s crazy about him. Her eagle scout with his heart of gold and his filthy mouth.

“It’s the sounds that get me though,” he whispers. “God, Frankie, the sounds you make. I know I’m doing it right when you try to stay quiet but you can’t—”

She yanks his mouth down toward hers to shut him up. He hums against her lips, smiling a little at her eagerness. She surges upward into a sitting position, pushing him back. She’s perched on the edge of the bed, her knees pressing against the sides of his hips as he stands between her legs. He kisses her like it’s the last time he’s going to get the chance. She likes his mouth between her legs and she likes the way he whispers filthy things to her in the dark but it’s the way he kisses her that she loves most. She’d kiss him forever if she could. She just might.

She curls her fingers into the waistband of his boxers and tugs them down over his hips. He steps out of them without breaking their kiss. She scoots backward on the bed and pulls him after her, clumsy but determined to keep his mouth fused to hers. It’s a huge bed, but Will guides her toward the top so that her head hits a pillow when she lays back. His chest is warm against hers and she arches up into him, but then he leans away from her and sits back on his knees between her legs. She misses his mouth immediately but the way he studies her body makes it worth it.

He puts a hand on each of her knees and skims his palms down the outside of her thighs as he crawls closer, his quads bumping against the backs of her legs as he widens his stance. She watches him, biting her lip, feeling like she’s drowning in need. He lifts her hips. She inhales in anticipation. And then he’s pressing inside her, still on his knees, still holding her gaze, and she fists her hands in the sheets and arches off the mattress.

When he’s buried to the hilt, she exhales a swear. The sense of fullness is overwhelming.

“Okay?” he whispers.

“Move,” she sighs.

He obeys and starts to move in smooth, easy strokes. It’s not a drive toward release. Not yet. He’s just enjoying the feel of her, fucking her slow and steady like they’ve got all the time in the world, and she closes her eyes and lets herself get lost in it. One of his hands is holding her hip steady but the other brushes over her face, his thumb caressing the arch of her cheekbone. It’s the kind of juxtaposition she’s learned to expect from him—demanding but gentle. When he presses the pad of his thumb against her bottom lip, she catches it with her teeth and then sucks on it.

The movement of his hips stutters briefly. “Fuck,” he hisses.

She grins at him and curls her fingers around his forearm. “Eagle scouts don’t say fuck.”

“They do when they’re inside you.”

“Feels that good, huh?”

Instead of replying, he pushes inside her with a little more force than before. Her breath hitches. When he does it again, she tries and fails to swallow a moan. He takes the hint. His hand tightens on her hip and he sets a new rhythm, deeper and harder and so damn good. An eagle scout from the midwest should not be able to fuck like this. She presses her heels into the mattress and pushes up, meeting him stroke for stroke. Soon, they’re both panting. There’s another climax building deep inside her, and she knows it’s going to wreck her. She digs her nails into his forearm as it blazes hotter.
“You’re close already,” he murmurs. He grins at her, arrogant and sexy as hell. “Feels that good, huh?”

“Put up or shut up, Whiskey.”

Her challenge brings him down off his knees. He covers her body with his own and changes the rhythm again. It’s faster this time, but it’s clear he’s making this about her. Every one of his thrusts is intentional, hard enough to make her breath catch and deep enough that she can’t tell where he ends and she begins. It’s exactly how she likes to be fucked, and he knows it. There are times when she likes his tenderness, and there are times when she likes it quick and dirty, but this—this is what does it for her.

“Good?” he breathes into her neck.

“So good,” she sighs, and she doesn’t even care how desperate she sounds.

One of his hands slips between them and his thumb circles over her. “Come again for me. I want to feel it.”

“Fuck, Will,” she groans.

“Come on, boo. Come for me.”

She huffs out a surprised laugh because there is no way he just called her that while he’s fucking her. She can feel him grinning against her throat, so she does the only thing she can do: She wraps her arms around his shoulders, and her legs around his hips, and flips them so she’s on top.

Will blinks up at her, dazed, his pupils blown wide with arousal. The orgasm she was on the brink of fades but she doesn’t care. She’ll get it back.

“Did you just call me boo?” she asks, leaning back to stare at him.

The corner of his mouth quirks upward. “You said you like it.”

“I said I didn’t hate it.”

“That’s Frankie-speak for you love it.”

“Frankie-speak?” she says incredulously.

He grins. “I’m fluent. One of my proudest accomplishments. That and how fast I make you come.”

He darts a hand toward the spot between her legs as if he wants to prove it, but she catches his arm. She bends forward and pins both his hands above his head. He lifts his mouth to kiss her, but she turns her face out of reach. He drops his head back on the pillow with an annoyed huff. She holds his hands in place, smiling with her mouth only a few inches from his, and then rolls her hips. He swears.

She clicks her tongue at him. “Such language.”

He shifts impatiently beneath her. She traces her tongue upward along the column of his throat and then sucks on his pulsepoint. He groans.

“Feel good, boo?” she asks, smiling against his skin.

He sighs. “Always a competition with you.”
“Are you losing or winning right now?”

“Definitely winning.”

She laughs. She lets go of his hands and leans back, but not far—just far enough to reach for the headboard for better leverage. Once his hands are free he slides them over her hips, purposeful and possessive and tugging just a little so she’ll move. She bites her lip and watches him, making him wait just a little longer, and then she tightens her grip on the headboard and starts to ride him.

His eyes slam closed and he swears. She picks up the pace. Pleasure roars through her body. She can feel the flames of an orgasm licking at her consciousness again. One of his hands slides up to her chest, and she arches into his palm. She loves this feeling—being in control and knowing that if she sped up just a little more she could pull a release from both of them—and she closes her eyes to enjoy it.

His thumb is on her the instant she closes her eyes. She gasps his name. He rubs harder, faster, and her second orgasm hits so sudden and so hard that her body bows backward and a strangled cry echoes through the dark room.

She’s incoherent for a minute or two after that. When she finally comes back to herself, she realizes that he’s sitting up. Her face is buried in his neck. His arms are wrapped around her, his hands stroking gently over her back. She shifts in his lap, wondering if he came too.

“Did you…?”

“No.”

“Jesus, Will,” she sighs. She wants to make a joke about his discipline being her favorite thing about him, but she can’t seem to find the words. She kisses his neck instead, her tongue swiping over his skin.

“I love you,” he whispers into her shoulder.

Her heart flutters in her chest. She wraps her arms around him and scratches her nails over the back of his head the way he likes.

“I love you too,” she whispers.

“You mean it?”

There’s insecurity threading through his voice and she knows why. She thinks of that classroom at the university and how she refused to tell him she loved him, and her heart aches.

She leans back to look him in the eye. She puts her hands on his face, her thumbs stroking over his cheeks. “Yes. I love you.”

His eyes are gleaming. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t need another apology.”

He pushes her hair back from her face. “Yes you do. I hurt you. I’m sorry. I’m—”

She tilts forward and presses her lips to his. “I’m sorry too,” she whispers.

They kiss for a while, easy and gentle, nothing like the rough kisses they’d exchanged between groans and pants a few minutes ago.
“Finish what you started, Whiskey,” she whispers against his lips eventually.

He rises onto his knees, one arm wrapped around her waist and holding her against him as he leans forward and lays her down on her back beneath him. He’s gentle at first. But he’s not the only one who knows what to do, and she’s got him panting fairly soon. Heat flares inside her again, but she knows she won’t get there before he does. She can tell he’s close. She grips his shoulders, ready to help him through, but he stops abruptly and his entire body goes still.

He pants harshly into her neck. She strokes her hand over the back of his head. She knows he’s trying to make it last, but she doesn’t understand why. Usually when he’s trying to hang on it’s because she hasn’t come yet, and he’s too much of a gentleman to chase his own release without trying to give her one too. But that’s not what’s going on here.

“He’s not the only one,” she says in his ear.

He doesn’t move. She digs her ankles into the mattress and lifts her hips toward his, and he sobs, “Don’t make me let you go yet.”

The anguish in his voice breaks her heart. She realizes suddenly why he’s been so doggedly resisting his own release. He’s afraid she’s going to walk away when they’re done. It doesn’t matter what she told him before they started. The intensity has worn away his certainty.

She didn’t think she could love him more than she did. But somehow she does, and it feels like something shifts permanently in her heart.

“Will,” she breathes in his ear. She strokes her hand over the back of his head. “I’m not leaving. This isn’t the last time we’re going to do this. I promise.”

He whispers her name, his voice breaking.

“I promise, Will,” she breathes. She lifts her hips gently. “Trust me.”

He meets the rise of her hips and rocks into her, slow for a few strokes, and then he picks up speed. She whispers encouragement, still combing her hand through his hair. It doesn’t take long. His hips jerk and he comes with a guttural groan, his body shuddering. He collapses on top of her, breathing hard. His skin is slick with sweat. She strokes her hands over his back. When he raises his head just enough to brush his lips over hers, she tries to kiss him with as much promise as he kisses her.

Eventually, he slips out of her and rolls over onto his back. They’re facing the wrong way on the bed, headboard and pillows at their feet, but it doesn’t matter. She curls into his side. He wraps an arm around her and combs his fingers through her hair.

She’s half asleep, lulled by the warmth of his body and the pleasant ache between her legs, when he says her name.

“Hm?” she hums.

He presses his lips to her forehead. “When all this is over, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

She’s not half asleep anymore. Shock keeps her still for a second. He waits. She takes a deep breath and then leans away from him, propping herself up on one elbow to look down at him. He meets her gaze with a look of certainty that takes her breath away.

“Standish will figure it out,” he murmurs. “And when Nick and the program are gone, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”
“Is that a warning or a promise?” she asks, her voice barely audible.

He smiles and brushes his hand over her cheek. “Which one do you need?”

“Promise,” she whispers.

Joy lights his eyes. “I promise.” He holds her face in his hand, his thumb stroking over her skin. “Me and you, boo. White dress, picket fence, two kids—”

She lunges toward him, her lips finding his, and he wraps his arms around her and kisses her like he’ll never let her go.
It’s still dark outside when Frankie wakes Will.

He looks peaceful, almost childlike, as he sleeps. His arms are curled around her pillow, hugging it to his chest with his face buried in the fabric. She smiles because she knows if she were still in bed, he’d be curled around her like that.

She bends over the side of the bed and presses her lips to his forehead. “Whiskey,” she whispers against his skin before leaning back.

He mumbles and shifts beneath the sheets but doesn’t wake.

She strokes her hand along the stubble on his cheek. “Will,” she calls.

He cracks one eye open.

“Hi,” she whispers, helpless against a smile. His hair is rumpled from sleep—and probably from her hands a few hours ago—and he looks so sleepy and adorable that she can’t resist running her fingers through it with a little more tenderness than she usually manages in the morning.

“Why aren’t you in bed?” he mumbles, his voice scratchy. His gaze flickers over her jeans and her blazer and he frowns. “Why are you wearing clothes?”

“Because that’s what people do when they go out in public.”

He curls his fingers around her forearm and tugs. “Take your clothes off and get back in bed.”

“Jai’s security detail is changing soon. I want to be there during the change.”

He gazes at her, blinking as he tries to process the information. He’s usually a morning person, and she’s usually not, and she’s guessing the role reversal is a little much for his sleep-addled brain. She strokes her hand through his hair while she waits for him to wake up.

“Okay,” he says eventually. He props himself up on his elbows. “I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t need to do that. It’s early. Go back to sleep. I just wanted you to know I was leaving.”

“I want to come with you,” he insists.

“I need to talk to Jai before we talk to the rest of the team. And I need to do it alone.”

“Then I’ll wait in the lobby for you. I’m already in trouble with him. I don’t want to be in even more trouble for letting you go back to the hospital alone.”

Frankie frowns. “Why are you in trouble?”

“I promised him I wouldn’t let you out of my sight. And then I fell asleep, and Nick called, and now we have a deal with the devil. He’s going to kill me.”

“I don’t think he expected you to stay up all night, Will.”

“It’s Jai. Of course he did. That’s what he would’ve done. And now he’s going to blow up my apartment with me in it.”
Frankie snorts.

Will looks deeply offended. “Is my potentially horrible death funny to you?”

She bends forward, her hands planted on the mattress on either side of his body, and kisses him instead of answering. For a second, he acts like he’s going to resist her and keep feigning offense. But then his body loosens, and a rumbling, contented hum echoes from deep in his chest.

Frankie smiles and pulls back from his mouth. “Don’t worry,” she whispers, still bent over him. “I won’t let him blow you up.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

He holds his hand out between them with his pinky finger in the air. “Pinky promise?”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Cross your heart.”

“Not doing that either.”

“You have to seal it or it doesn’t count.”

She brushes her lips over his. “Does that count?”

“Better do it again just to make sure.”

She couldn’t keep the grin off her lips if she tried, and she couldn’t resist kissing him if her life depended on it. He tugs on her blazer, pulling her closer, and it turns into a much longer kiss than she planned. The sheets are cool beneath her palms. Will’s fingers stroke along her throat and down to her sternum, dancing across her skin. The silent darkness of the early morning feels like a cocoon. She wishes they could stay like this all day. She wishes she could shed her clothes and bury herself in his arms and forget everything and everyone outside this room.

Someday, maybe, they can. But not today.

When she finally leans back to look at him, he’s got a dopey, blissful smile on his face. He plays with the ends of her hair. “I love you.”

He’s always sentimental in the morning, but this morning feels different. Everything feels different now. There’s no nagging voice in the back of her mind whispering that he’ll stop saying those words when he finds out who she’s been and what she’s done. There’s no fear, no shame, no impulse to pull away so she doesn’t accidentally show him just how much she cares.

“I love you too,” she whispers.

He smirks. “Promise?”

She rolls her eyes. She leans forward and kisses him again instead of answering, and then straightens. “I’m going to run down to Jai’s room and grab him some stuff. Meet me there when you’re dressed?”

“Okay.”
She drops one last, brief kiss on his forehead and then heads for the door.

“Try not to miss me too much while you’re gone,” Will calls out after her.

She glances at him over her shoulder. “You mean during the ten minutes we’re going to be apart? Gosh, I don’t know if I can manage.”

“You’re being sarcastic, but I’m going to pretend you’re being serious.”

She winks at him. “Whatever floats your boat, boo.”

Will groans and collapses back onto the bed. “That word coming out of your mouth is a damn sin.”

Frankie laughs and barely resists the urge to crawl back into bed and show him just how sinful she can be.

She smiles like an idiot the whole way to Jai’s room. Once she gets there, she fills a bag with things she knows he’ll want. She’s closing her fingers around his laptop when she remembers what he said in the van.

_RJ. Speech for your wedding. Recorded it. Mina file._

Frankie goes still. It’s not the best time to watch the video. Honestly, there probably won’t ever be a good time. Seeing RJ again, even if it’s digitally, is going to hurt like hell. But she’s curious, and she knows Jai is going to ask her if she watched it. She’d rather watch it here than in his hospital room where someone she doesn’t know could walk in and catch her trying not to cry.

She opens the laptop. Jai’s password is an interminably long string of letters, numbers, and symbols that she knows by heart. She knows how to override the three other security protocols he’s got in place too.

His Mina file is a folder containing mostly pictures and videos. Frankie is scrolling through the contents, scanning the labels and looking for the right video, when she notices one that was opened fairly recently—three nights ago, in the middle of the night. That was when Jai was working on the cyloraxin exchange plan, and she was telling Will she loved him. It’s labeled _Airport._

Frankie opens it. Nothing happens for a moment, and then all of a sudden Mina’s face fills the screen.

“Hello love,” she murmurs. Her eyes are bright with life and her smile is wide and beautiful, and Frankie immediately feels a deep ache in her chest.

“It’s four o’clock in the morning right now, and Franks and I are headed to the airport,” Mina says, her voice soft. “I didn’t want to wake you but I couldn’t leave without telling you that I love you. And you know me, texts feel too impersonal. So here we are. I’m already counting down the hours until I get to see you again. Call me when you wake up so I can hear your voice. And don’t forget you promised Frankie you’d make samosas when we get back. Okay, love you always. See you soon.”

Mina blows a kiss at the camera, and then the screen goes black. Frankie stares at it, trying to catch her breath. She thinks of Jai, sitting alone in this room in the middle of the night, watching a video of his dead soulmate while she was upstairs wrapped in the arms of hers. For the hundredth time since she realized she was in love with Will, she feels the desire well up in her chest—she desperately wants Jai to find someone who will love him the way Will loves her. But she knows she can’t push him. He has to open up again in his own way and in his own time. Just like she did.
She starts scrolling again. She finds a file labeled *RJ speech* a moment later. She hesitates because there’s still an ache in her chest from the Mina video. But then she clicks it.

The recording blinks to life and RJ appears. He’s wearing that *Star Wars* shirt he loved, the one with a tiny hole in the collar that Mina sewed for him more than once because he refused to throw it away. He looks so much younger than Frankie remembers, and that hurts more than she expected it to.

“Is this good?” RJ asks, the slight accent in his voice lifting with the question. “Should I stand here? Or over there in the light? Do we need a different background?”

“It’s just a test, RJ,” Jai’s voice says from off camera. “It doesn’t matter what the background is.”

“Yeah, but what if—”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect. Just read the speech you wrote and then we can critique it and make it better.”

RJ looks suddenly concerned. “But it’s going to be nice criticism, right? Not, like, the mean stuff that makes me want to cry?”

“Constructive criticism only,” Jai assures him.

“Swear on Mina.”

“I’m not—”

“Swear on Mina, JD.”

Jai sighs. “I swear on Mina.”

“All right,” RJ says, looking relieved. He straightens up to his full height and glances down at a wrinkled piece of paper in his hand. “Good evening, everyone. My name—” He stops abruptly and looks up at the camera. “Wait.”

“What now?” Jai asks with a hint of exasperation in his voice.

“I need champagne. I’ll have champagne in my hand when I make the speech. So I should practice that way. They say you should practice the same way you plan to perform.”

“Just use your Mountain Dew.”

RJ crinkles his nose. “That’s not classy enough. There’s no way Franks is going to have Mountain Dew at her wedding.”

“She will if you ask her to. She’d do that for you.”

RJ looks thrilled. “You think so?”

“Yes. Now can we please get this show on the road?”

“Right, sorry.” RJ leans off camera, and then returns to the frame with a tall bottle of Mountain Dew in his hand. He straightens and clears his throat.

“Good evening, everyone. My name is RJ Adelman. I’m the best man. And honestly, I’m kind of surprised by that. Because as I’m sure you all have noticed, I’m a giant nerd. And Frankie and Nick
are the coolest people on the planet. Nick is so cool he makes James Bond look super lame. He’s smooth and charming and funny and, I mean, look at him. His earlobes have muscles.”

RJ pauses and looks up at the camera. “Does that make me sound weird?”

“No,” Jai says. “Keep going.”

RJ dips his head back down toward the paper in his hand. “And then there’s Frankie. I don’t think Nick will mind if I confess to all of you that I like Frankie better than I like him.”

Off camera, Jai snorts. RJ looks up with a sheepish grin. “You think he’ll be mad?”

“No. Frankie will love it.”

RJ looks thrilled again. “Okay. Good.” He glances down at his notes again. “Frankie is my favorite person on the planet. She’s like the real life version of Princess Leia. She’s smart and funny and badass and she always does the right thing. I always wanted a sister, and I used to be sad I never got one, but now I know I didn’t get one because God knew that someday I was going to meet Franks. I know I’m the best man, so I’m supposed to tell Frankie how lucky she is to be marrying Nick, and I do think that’s true. But Nick, you should realize how lucky you are too. Cause God really did something special when he created your wife.”

RJ raises his bottle of Mountain Dew awkwardly. “I’m glad you guys found each other, and I’m glad I get to be part of your lives. I can’t wait to move into your basement and be your nanny. I love you guys. Congrats.”

He looks up at the camera with a shy smile on his face, and the screen freezes as the video ends.

Frankie’s heart squeezes painfully in her chest. Her eyes are warm and brimming, and she wipes the tears away as they start to fall. A dozen memories of RJ resurface as she stares at his frozen face—his laugh, his endless supply of graphic t-shirts, the bag of Skittles he always seemed to have in his hand. She misses him terribly, and it hurts to remember what happened not long after this video was taken, but it’s nice to hear his voice again. She’s missed it.

She scrolls through the rest of the files and finds pictures of her former team that make her smile even though Nick is in a lot of them. She comes across a video entitled haircut debacle and clicks it out of curiosity. When the screen blinks to life, and she realizes it’s a video of the time she messed up cutting RJ’s hair, she laughs out loud.

She’s halfway through watching it when Will walks in.

“Frankie?” he calls. He stops when he sees her sitting on the end of Jai’s bed, crying and laughing simultaneously. “Are you okay?” he asks in concern.

“Come here,” she says, beckoning him toward her.

He obeys. He settles on the bed next to her, and she leans into his side and sets the laptop on his knees.

“Watch,” she tells him, and then she starts the video over again.

She feels his body shake with laughter more than once while it plays. When it’s over and she looks up at him, he’s grinned.

“Remind me never to let you cut my hair,” he says wryly.
She laughs. “Mina was the one who cut his hair after that. He wouldn’t let me anywhere near him with a pair of scissors.”

“He didn’t seem mad though.”

“He wasn’t. He never got mad. He had a great sense of humor. Even when things were really bad, he always found something to laugh about. You would’ve loved him.”

“I’m sure I would have,” Will says softly. It’s that voice she loves—the one that’s low and intimate and just for her—and she leans closer to him.

“So was that Mina?”

Frankie nods. “You would’ve loved her too. Kindest person I’ve ever met. She brought out the best in everyone, but especially Jai. He lit up whenever she was in the room.”

“You looked really happy too,” Will observes quietly.

He’s smiling at her, but there’s a sadness in his eyes that she remembers seeing last night. She lifts her hand to stroke along his jawline. “I was.”

“I’m sorry you lost them.”

Grief throbs in her chest. She knows it’ll always be there, just like it’s still there for her parents. It’s been nearly two decades since she lost them, and she still aches every time she hears a Miles Davis song or walks past a library. But there’s gratitude woven through the strands of that grief, a recognition of the privilege it was to know them and be loved by them when they were alive. She’s starting to feel the same way about RJ and Mina. And she knows that’s at least partially because of the man sitting next to her, who made her feel safe enough to stop running and heal.

“They would’ve loved you,” she tells him.

His smile widens. “You think so?”

He looks genuinely thrilled, and warmth blossoms in her chest. She leans forward and kisses him.

“I know so,” she whispers against his lips.

Will is happy.

Like, really happy. Can’t sit still, can’t stop smiling, can’t stop daydreaming happy. And it is the best feeling.

Eight months ago in Prague, when Frankie grabbed a fistful of his coat and yanked his lips down to hers, his whole life changed. Even then, he could see the future—the white dress, the picket fence, the two kids. But he knew she didn’t, and she wouldn’t for a while, and he didn’t want to do what he’d done so many times before. He didn’t want to get so lost in daydreaming about a future that he lost sight of the woman in front of him.

He knows he still needs to focus on the present. He knows Ollerman and The Trust are a huge threat. He knows Nick can’t be trusted, and that they’re playing a risky game by letting Standish work on the program right under Nick’s nose. He knows Frankie is right that Nick will do everything in his power to drive a wedge between them. And he knows their team is going to be tested in ways they’ve never been tested before.
But he also knows his faith isn’t misplaced. He has faith in the skills of his team, and in their bond as a family. He has faith that Standish will figure out the program and how to destroy it. He has faith that Jai will heal. He has faith that Ollerman and Nick are too cocky for their own good, and that they’ll underestimate the team and pay a price for it.

But most of all, he has faith in Frankie. In her strength, and her resilience, and her courage. In her brilliance, and the way she strategizes, and the dizzying array of skills in her arsenal. He knows she bared her soul to him last night. He knows that in doing so, she said I love you louder and more assuredly than she ever has before. And he knows that what they are now is permanent. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever get to marry her. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever get to be the father of her children. But he knows that last night, Frankie Trowbridge promised him forever. They’re going to spend the rest of their lives together.

And he is over the moon about it.

Not long after she disappears to visit Jai, Will realizes he’s too amped to sit still in the waiting room. He walks to the hospital cafeteria and grabs himself some breakfast. He walks to the maternity ward after that and stares at the babies, grinning uncontrollably and imagining what it would be like if he were here because Frankie was giving birth to their first kid. Eventually he wanders back to the waiting room, and settles in a chair by the door. He pulls his laptop out to check his email. He’s got a ton of unread messages, but his eye gets caught on the date of the most recent email.

That’s when he remembers that today is their anniversary.

The original plan was to be back in New York by tonight so they could celebrate. He was going to take her to that cute little Italian restaurant by her place, and then back to her brownstone for wine and brownies from that bakery she loves. The gift he bought her is stashed in one of her kitchen cupboards, ready and waiting. After that, well...he had lots of plans. And none of them involved clothes.

Obviously, the majority of his plans are no longer possible. He isn’t sure when they’ll be leaving Monaco to head back to New York, but he knows it won’t be today. If they want to celebrate on the actual day of their anniversary, they’ll have to do it here. And he wants it to be special. Really special, because it’s their first one and he doesn’t want to start a lifetime of anniversaries with something lackluster.

He immediately starts brainstorming. He looks up the best restaurants and the most romantic spots in the city and tries to visualize what her reaction would be to each of them. He wonders if he should call the hotel and have them fill the suite with orchids. He considers booking a string quartet to serenade them with songs from their playlist while they share a candlelit dinner on their terrace. He ponders going to the closest jewelry store and buying her something shiny and expensive.

Then he realizes that after the previous few days, the last thing Frankie will want to do is get dressed up for dinner at a place with white tablecloths, or play along when he tries to surprise her with a stunning sunset view in a rose garden, or slow dance to their songs played by a classically trained violinist. She won’t want fancy jewelry he bought last minute either. She doesn’t necessarily dislike any of those things. Now’s just not the right time for them. She’ll want something simple.

He closes his eyes. “Think,” he mutters to himself. “Think.”

All of a sudden, he knows exactly what to do.
He’s just hung up with someone at the hotel who is going to make some arrangements for him when he gets a text from Frankie.

You can come back to Jai’s room now.

Before he heads back, he picks up a coffee for her and a newspaper for Jai. He whistles as he walks, grinning cheerfully at every person he passes. By the time he gets to Jai’s room, though, his heart is beating double-time. He wasn’t lying when he told Frankie she makes him feel like a teenager. It’s the whole nine yards too—the butterflies in his stomach, the overwhelming urge to fidget, the sudden inability to form coherent sentences. Now that they’ve been apart for a while, his heart is racing at the prospect of seeing her again.

He stops in the doorway. He tries to focus on Jai, but his eyes are drawn to Frankie. She’s sitting in a chair beside the bed, slumped a little in that casual way she sits when she’s comfortable. When her eyes meet his and she smiles, Will feels like he’s been hit by lightning.

He forces himself to look at Jai. The spy is sitting up in bed and looks even better than he did yesterday. His hair is styled again. Will makes a mental note to ask Frankie if she’s doing it for him, and if Jai’s willingness to let her style his hair is at all affected by the haircut debacle she had with RJ.

“Morning, Jai,” he greets. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Jai replies. “I’ve been instructed not to blow up your apartment.”

Frankie shakes her head at Will. “He wasn’t going to.”

“Yes I was,” Jai argues. “I was seriously considering it. I still am, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

“Stop it, Jai,” Frankie chastises with a smile. She leans forward in her chair. “You know he can’t tell when you’re teasing.”

Jai looks at Will. “I’m teasing. Does that help?”

“No,” Will says honestly. “You’ve got that look on your face.”

“Is it the look I wear when someone makes me a promise and then breaks it?”

Will feels a stab of guilt. He steps into the room. “I’m sorry, Jai. I didn’t mean to—”

“Stop apologizing, Will,” Frankie cuts him off. “He’s not mad at you. He’s just bored and he likes watching you squirm. Ignore him.”

Jai huffs at her. Frankie winks at him. She’s clearly amused by this conversation, and Will likes how relaxed she looks. It’s a marked difference from how she looked yesterday morning.

Will holds up the newspaper. “I brought you today’s paper as a peace offering.”

“I blew up a house using a newspaper once,” Jai muses.

“Jai,” Frankie laughs.

“What?” Jai asks innocently.

Frankie reaches out and puts her hands over one of his. Will tries not to stare. He’s still not used to seeing Frankie be physically affectionate with her best friend. But judging by Jai’s reaction, the
affection is not only normal, but expected.

“I’m not going to do your hair tomorrow if you don’t stop it,” she tells him.

“So you are doing his hair,” Will blurts out before he can stop himself.

Both Frankie and Jai give him the same look.

“Won’t tell a soul,” Will promises, holding up his hands. “Forget I even mentioned it. Here’s your paper, Jai. Please don’t blow me up.”

Jai smirks a little and takes the paper from Will’s outstretched hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I promise I won’t blow you up.”

Will can tell by Jai’s tone of voice that he’s trying to be sincere. Frankie is looking at her best friend with so much affection that Will wants to pinch both their cheeks like his grandmother used to do to him. He doesn’t, though, because Frankie would punch him and Jai would rescind his promise not to blow him up.

“I appreciate that, Jai,” he says instead. He turns to Frankie and offers her the cup in his hand. “Thought you might want some caffeine.”

“Thanks,” she says. She lets go of Jai’s hand. Her fingers brush Will’s when she takes the cup from him, and their eyes meet and hold.

Will smiles at her. She smiles back. His heart skips five beats in his chest. Swallowing the words God you’re beautiful I love you so much I can’t believe I get to spend forever with you I am the luckiest guy in the world let’s go make out in a janitor’s closet feels like the hardest thing he’s ever had to do.

“Oh for god’s sake,” Jai sighs. “Just kiss her already.”

Will looks at him in surprise. “What?”

Jai rolls his eyes. “She told me everything, Will. Apparently I’m stuck with you for the rest of our lives, and you’re not exactly a hands-to-yourself kind of guy.”

Frankie snorts into her coffee cup.

“I’ll have to get used to it eventually,” Jai continues. “Might as well start now. Just kiss her. You obviously want to.”

“I think I can manage to keep my hands to myself, thank you very much,” Will says, trying not to be offended by the way Jai said you’re not exactly a hands-to-yourself kind of guy.

“That makes one of us,” Frankie mutters.

Will shoot her a confused look. She grabs a fistful of his jacket with her free hand and yanks his mouth down to hers. He stumbles a little in surprise and puts his hands on the armrests of her chair to steady himself. Frankie tugs him closer, kisses him deeper, and Will’s surprise fades. She tastes like coffee. She smells like that perfume he loves. There are hospital machines beeping and nurses laughing in the hallway but it all seems dim and distant because he’s kissing the love of his life, and she’s enjoying it just as much as he is.
“Disgusting,” Jai mutters, but Will can hear the smile in his voice and he can feel a matching grin on Frankie’s lips.

And then Standish walks in.

“OH MY GOD!” he gasps. “Susan! Look! They’re sucking face! Her tongue is in his mouth! IT’S A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE!”

“It’s October, Standish,” Susan says dryly.

Frankie leans back from Will’s mouth. “Damn it,” she mutters.

“You love him,” Will whispers.

“Definitely do not,” she says. But she smiles as she says it, and Will knows she’s putting on a show just like Jai was. Old habits die hard.

“Excuse me, can someone please confirm that I’m not dreaming and my spy parents are back together?” Standish says. He turns toward Susan and holds out his arm. “Pinch me.”

Susan pinches him.

“Ow!” Standish screeches, clutching his arm. “What the hell, Susan.”

Susan rolls her eyes. “You said pinch me.”

“I didn’t mean violently. I think you popped one of my veins.”

“Can you quit yelling like a maniac?” Frankie says, shooting him a look.

Standish narrows his eyes at her as he rubs his arm. “That depends. Are you guys back together and madly in love forever and ever? Did you spend last night having makeup sex?”

“Gross,” Jai says.

“Super gross,” Standish agrees. “But makeup sex means they’re back together, and if they’re back together then our team isn’t going to break up, and we can all live happily ever after. So are you back together or not?”

“We’re back together,” Will confirms.

Standish slaps a hand over his heart. “Oh my god, I think I might pass out.” He reaches out and grabs Susan’s arm as if to steady himself. “This is the best day of my life.”

Susan pats his hand. “You really need to consider going to therapy and working through some of this.”

Standish ignores her and grins at Will. “Did you do a big romantic gesture? Did you get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness? Did you make a speech? I bet you made a speech. Was it more Runaway Bride Julia, or Notting Hill Julia? Was it both? If it was both, I may cry.”

“Will,” Frankie says pointedly. “Have you been forcing him to do Julia Roberts marathons with you again?”

Will scoffs. “No.”
Frankie lifts her eyebrows.

“It was his idea!”

Frankie sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose.

Standish leans toward Will. “Did you roll up like Richard Gere at the end of *Pretty Woman*?”

Jai frowns. “Frankie’s not a hooker, Standish.”

“I didn’t say she was a hooker.”

“You didn’t have to. That’s the entire premise of the movie. Just because I’m in this bed doesn’t mean I can’t hurt you.”

“Jai, dude, chill. Julia Roberts plays a hooker, but she’s a hooker with a heart of gold. If anything, it’s a compliment. And I—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Frankie cuts him off. She gets to her feet and brandishes her finger in Standish’s direction. “No more talking about hookers.”

“Can you at least tell us all about how you and Will got back together?” he pleads. He crinkles his nose. “But maybe skip the sex stuff cause I just ate a huge breakfast and I ain’t trying to throw up pancakes on my new boots. Ooh, by the way y’all, I got new boots. Look!” He holds up one of his feet with a proud grin.

“Standish,” Frankie says evenly. “Look at me.”

Standish looks at her.

“Put your foot down.”

He puts his foot down.

“We need to have a serious discussion. You need to focus.”

He furrows his eyebrows. “Does this discussion involve your asshole husband?”

“Yes.”

Standish sighs. “I hate that son of a bitch.”

“Join the club,” Jai mutters darkly.

“I need you to focus,” Frankie says to Standish. “No interruptions. No jokes. You’re going to have to make a decision when I’m done, and I need to know you have all the facts and you understand the stakes. Are we clear?”

Standish nods solemnly. “Yes ma’am.”

Frankie glances toward Susan. “Tell the guys outside we’re starting. They’ll know what it means. And then shut the door.”

Susan obeys.

Will glances down at Frankie. She doesn’t look relaxed anymore. Her expression is taut and
strained. It’s a look Will is familiar with—he’s seen it every time she’s been confronted with something from her past. He hesitates for a moment, unsure of how to comfort and encourage her when they’re surrounded by their team, but then he remembers last night when she asked him why he wasn’t touching her, and all the other times she’s calmed down after he’s reached out to her.

He brushes his hand over her shoulder blades. She relaxes a little beneath his touch. When she looks up at him, he smiles. She smiles back, and then looks over at Jai.

Jai smiles too. “Gates of hell,” he says quietly.

Will has no idea what that means, but it seems to reassure Frankie. She relaxes even more.

Susan closes the door behind her and rejoins them. “Okay,” she says, fixing her eyes on Frankie. “What’s going on?”

Frankie glances at Will one more time, and then takes a deep breath and launches into an explanation of her phone call with Nick and the deal they made.

Will watches their team as she talks. Jai has a blank expression on his face, probably because he already knows everything Frankie is saying. Susan listens attentively and without a trace of judgement, exactly the way a highly trained and skilled profiler should. Standish, on the other hand, lets his feelings show plainly on his face. He rotates through a series of shocked, angry, annoyed, afraid, and confused expressions, and occasionally murmurs things like What the shit and I cannot with this dude.

Will watches Frankie too. It doesn’t escape his attention that her eyes regularly dart in Jai’s direction as if she needs his reassurance. Nor does he fail to notice that Jai seems to give Frankie exactly what she needs every time their eyes meet. A nod, a half smile, a steady gaze—it’s never anything blatantly reassuring, but it always seems to be enough.

Will is watching Jai in fascination, trying to learn the art of subtly reassuring Frankie, when he feels Frankie’s shoulder press ever so gently against his. He presses back without thinking about it. A minute or so later, she does it again. And that’s when he realizes Frankie is seeking his reassurance the same way she’s seeking Jai’s. He might not offer it the same way Jai does, but she obviously needs what he’s offering. She needs him.

He’s over the moon all over again.

Eventually, Frankie finishes her explanation. Nobody reacts. They stand in a makeshift circle around Jai’s hospital bed, still as statues. The room is dead silent, the quiet broken only by beeping machines next to the bed. Standish, of course, is the one who breaks the silence.

“So let me get this straight,” he says to Frankie. “Your husband—the guy who murdered your previous team, stalks you like a creep, and is working with Ollerman and The Trust—wants us to do missions with him?”

“If we want him to give us Ollerman and The Trust, yes,” Frankie confirms.

“And you’re okay with that?” Standish asks Will incredulously.

“Not really,” Will says honestly. “But Frankie’s right. If we kill Ollerman, someone else—maybe someone worse—is going to step in and fill the power vacuum. We need to eliminate The Trust’s infrastructure and then kill him. And working with Nick is our best chance to do that.”

“You think we can trust him?” Susan asks Frankie.
“No,” Frankie replies. “If he could, he’d kill every single one of you and he wouldn’t feel bad about it.”

“Well that’s comforting,” Standish mutters.

“Nick only wants one thing,” Will says. “And that’s Frankie. He knows he can’t have her if one of us gets hurt. He agreed to her terms. So we’re off limits.”

“Are you guys going to pretend you broke up?” Susan asks. “Give him some hope?”

“No,” Frankie answers, shaking her head. “He’d see through it. It’s better if we’re together. He’ll be focused on trying to break us up and it’ll distract him.”

Susan turns her attention to Will. “You know he’s going to spend every waking minute trying to break you two up.”

“Yeah,” Will says. “I’m not worried about it.”

He winks at Frankie. She smiles. He glances back at Susan just in time to see her smile too.

“None of you have to say yes,” Frankie says. “As long as I run the missions with Nick, he’ll give us Ollerman and The Trust. So if you’re not comfortable working with him, you can sit out. No hard feelings. No pressure.”

“Did you already choose?” Standish asks, his eyes fixed on Will.

“Yes,” Will confirms. “I’m in.”

“As am I,” Jai says.

“I’m in too,” Susan adds.

Frankie gazes at Susan from across Jai’s hospital bed with an almost pained expression on her face. “You don’t have to do this, Susan.”

“I’m aware.”

“It’ll be dangerous.”

“We’re spies. Everything we do is dangerous.”

“He’s going to play mind games with you. It’s what he does. He’s going to try to turn you against Will and against me, and probably Ray just for the hell of it.”

Susan smirks. “He can try. But he’ll fail.”

Frankie glances up at Will. She doesn’t say anything, but he knows what she’s thinking. “Sus,” he says. “This is—”

“It’s my choice, right?” Susan cuts him off.

“Yes,” Will replies.

“Then I’m in.”

“Me too,” Standish pipes up.
Everyone in the room turns to look at him. Will glances at Frankie. She’s got that pained look on her face again.

“Standish,” she says quietly.

“Ollerman nearly killed me,” Standish tells her resolutely. “And Nick’s the biggest asshole I’ve ever met. They’re evil. Like, supervillain evil. And stopping dudes like that is exactly why I took this job. I’m in.”

Frankie studies him for a moment. “Do you remember that busted prison transfer when Ollerman escaped?” she asks. “You remember the way he fucked with your head while we interrogated him?”

Standish nods.

“Nick is ten times worse than that. He’s going to come after you. Probably harder than anyone else with the exception of Will.”

“Because he’s worried about his program?” Standish asks with a frown.

“Because he knows going after you will hurt me,” Frankie clarifies.

Standish blinks at her, clearly stunned by her admission that hurting him is equivalent to hurting her. And then, to Will’s surprise, he grins.

“This is it, isn’t it?” he says.

Frankie frowns. “What?”

“This is the moment we talked about. The one where you tell me—”

“I’m going to hang you out that window by your ankles if you finish that sentence,” Frankie cuts him off.

Standish’s grin widens. “Love you too, spy mom.”

Will snorts. Frankie elbows him in the ribs. He grunts in pain.


“Apparently,” Frankie says dryly.

“We have to trust each other,” Will says. “No matter what he says or does, we have to choose to trust each other and do what’s best for the team. No matter what.”

Jai nods solemnly.

“Absolutely,” Susan agrees.

Standish raises his hand.

“What, Standish?” Frankie says with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“Can we do a team cheer?” he asks. “You know, like sports teams do before they go out and play the big game? We could say Whiskey on three.”
“I’m not doing that,” Jai says.

“Hard pass,” Frankie agrees.

“We could group hug,” Susan offers.

Frankie crinkles her nose. “Harder pass.”

Will slings his arm around her shoulders and tugs her toward Jai’s bed. “Come on, boo. It’ll be fun.”

“You and I have very different ideas of fun,” Frankie says, pushing halfheartedly against him.

Standish darts toward the bed with a grin. He reaches his arms out toward Jai, but Jai glares at him and says, “Touch me and you die.”

Standish freezes, his eyes wide.

“Oh hush, you,” Susan says, and leans forward to wrap her arms around Jai. Standish throws himself over Susan’s back and squeezes her and Jai with a happy sigh. Will shoves Frankie forward and joins the pile himself.

“See?” he says in her ear. “This isn’t so bad. Right, Jai?”

“I’m going to blow up every single one of you,” Jai replies, his voice muffled from the bottom of the pile.

“I’m going to help,” Frankie says.

Everyone laughs.

 Twelve hours later, after they finally leave the hospital and head back to the hotel, Will stops Frankie from opening the door to their suite.

“Wait,” he says, covering her hand with his before she can get the card key in the reader. “Before we go in, I have to tell you something.”

She looks up at him with a question in her eyes. He smiles, brushes his hand over her face, and leans forward to kiss her. He lingers close to her mouth after their lips part.

“Is that what you had to say?” she murmurs. “Cause I would’ve preferred you say it behind closed doors and with a little more tongue.”

Will throws his head back and laughs. The same joy he felt this morning is thrumming through his veins again. When he glances down at Frankie, he sees her smiling up at him with that proud smirk she wears when she realizes he thinks she’s funny.

“That’s not what I wanted to say,” he tells her. “I just couldn’t resist.”

She tips her head toward the door. “You want to move that lack of resistance into a more private setting?”

He smiles and strokes his hand through her hair. “Not yet.”

She sighs a little, but there’s no exasperation in it. “What is it, Will?”
“It’s our anniversary.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I had the whole night planned out. But since we’re not in New York, we can’t do any of it.”

Guilt flashes across her face.

“Don’t do that,” he says, shaking his head. “Don’t feel guilty for things that aren’t your fault.”

“It’s—”

“Not your fault.”

He can tell she wants to argue with him, but she presses her lips together instead.

He curls a strand of her hair around his index finger. “You want to hear what I had planned?”

She smirks. “You’re going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not.”

“Of course I am. It’s romantic as hell and I want credit for it.”

She laughs. He barely resists the urge to kiss her again.

“All right,” she says. “What’d you have planned, Whiskey?”

“I made us dinner reservations at that Italian restaurant by your place. I requested a table by the window so we could people watch. I figured if it was a nice night out—which it is, I checked—we could walk back to your place after dinner. Take the long way and go down by the pier and see Manhattan all lit up. I know you love that view.”

“I do.”

She leans closer to him and wraps her arms around his waist. She teases him a lot about his heart eyes, but she’s the one who’s got them right now. He feels like he’s melting into a lovesick puddle beneath her gaze.

“I ordered half a dozen of those brownies you love from that bakery by my place,” he continues, determined to finish before he kisses her again. “Bought a bottle of your favorite wine.”

“Dessert,” she hums.

“Dessert,” he agrees, and he knows they’re both thinking the same thing. “I also got you a present.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “What is it?”

“Well if I tell you then it won’t be a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

“You hate some surprises. You would’ve liked this one.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. What is it?”

He studies her for a second, debating whether or not to tell her, but he knows he has to since he brought it up. She’ll hate it if he makes her wait. “You remember that set of throwing knives you drooled over in Munich?”
Her eyes light up. “You didn’t.”

“I did.”

She lunges at him, kissing him hard, her hands on either side of his face. He laughs against her lips and kisses her back.

When she leans away, he smirks at her. “I did good, huh?”

“So good.”

They grin at each other for a second. When she drops her hands from his face, though, she looks suddenly shy. Nervous, even. The last time she had that look on her face, it was right before she gave him the key to her brownstone.

“I got you a present too,” she says.

“You did?”

He didn’t mean to sound so shocked. She arches an eyebrow at him. “You’re surprised.”

“No,” he insists.

She gives him a look.

“Okay, maybe a little,” he confesses. “But only because I know you’re not really into gift giving.”

“I’m not. But you are.”

His heart skips a few beats in his chest. It’s stupid, probably, that he’s so touched by this. It’s just a gift. He got her one too. But the fact that she put effort into doing something she doesn’t really care about just because she knew it meant something to him is…it’s just really...

“I love you,” he blurts out.

She smirks at him. “You don’t even know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“If I tell you then it won’t be a surprise.”

He sighs. “Always have to throw my words back at me, don’t you?”

“It’s my burden to bear,” she says in mock solemnity.

He smooths his hands over her hips. “Come on, I showed you mine. Show me yours.”

She gazes at him for a moment like she’s trying to decide. “The New York Philharmonic does special events during the holidays,” she says at last. “This year, they’re doing Harry Potter in concert. They play the movie on a giant screen—the first movie, I think—but the orchestra plays the music live instead of using the film soundtrack. I got us tickets. Best seats in the house.”

Will stares at her, completely stunned. “Your dad’s orchestra?” he breathes when he finally finds his voice.

She nods.
“And Harry Potter?” he whispers, thinking of all the times she’s rolled her eyes when he’s talked about how much he loves Harry Potter.

She smiles. “Yeah. But if you want to wear that stupid costume you’ve got, you’re going to have to take Susan. I’m not going out in public with you when you’re dressed like a twelve year old wizard.”

“Frankie…”

“No negotiating,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s bad enough that I—”

He cuts her off with a kiss. She stiffens a little, surprised at the interruption, and then she melts against him and kisses him back. He presses her backward, pinning her against the door, and they make out for a minute or two like teenagers who can’t keep their hands to themselves.

When he finally pulls back, they’re both a little breathless.

She smiles at him. “I did good, huh?” she asks, resting her head back against the door. She’s giving him one of those lazy, self-satisfied looks she usually wears after she’s made him come so hard he’s incoherent.

“Very good,” he acknowledges. He plucks the card key out of her hand. “But now it’s my turn.”

He reaches past her to unlock and open the door, and then ushers her inside the suite. He pauses just long enough to deadbolt the door once it’s closed behind them, and then he puts a hand on the small of her back and guides her toward the living room.

When they get there, she slows to a stop and stares. He follows her gaze. The room looks exactly like he told the hotel staff he wanted it to look. There’s a stack of neatly folded and very cozy-looking blankets sitting on a cushion of the sectional. A pizza box, a pastry box, a bottle of wine, and two wine glasses are arranged neatly on the coffee table next to a vase of orchids and a single, already lit candle.

“I didn’t want to wait until we got back to New York to celebrate,” he tells her. “But it’s been a long few days, and I didn’t think you’d want a big fuss. So I found the best pizza in the city. Had the hotel track down a bottle of your favorite wine. And they recommended some bakery that apparently makes the best desserts in the country, so I got an assortment. I had them bring some extra blankets up too because you like to cocoon when we watch movies.”

He puts his hands on her shoulders and turns her gently toward the TV, which has the opening credits of John Wick paused on the screen.

“I’ve got a triple feature all lined up,” he tells her. “All three John Wick movies. I can’t promise I won’t cry during the dog scenes, but I’ll try my best.”

She doesn’t laugh or tease him like he expected her to. She doesn’t say anything. She glances at the coffee table and then back to the TV, her mouth open just a little in surprise.

“If you want to go out, though, we can,” he says, just in case this wasn’t what she had in mind. “Or if you want something else for dinner, or you want to watch a different movie, or if you just want to go to bed we can—”

She turns toward him and puts her hand over his mouth so he can’t finish the rest of his sentence. Her eyes flicker over his face. It’s the same look she gave him last night when he knelt before her and insisted that he loved her. Like she can’t quite believe he’s real.
“It’s perfect,” she whispers.

He feels like his chest is going to burst open with pride and relief and joy.

She lowers her hand. “When did you do this?”

“When you were with Jai this morning. I didn’t really do it, though. The hotel did all the work. I just told them what I wanted. They’ll bend over backwards for you when you’re spending thirty thousand a night.”

Frankie snorts. “No kidding.”

Will steps a little closer to her, his hands sliding along her hips. “Happy anniversary,” he murmurs. “First of many.”

Her eyes flicker over his face again, and her eyebrows furrow.

“What?” he asks, suddenly nervous.

“Are you sure about us? About me?”

There isn’t any insecurity in her voice. Just curiosity. But he doesn’t hesitate.

“Yes. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She studies him again, her eyes still roving over his face like she’s looking for something, and then she seems to make up her mind.

“Will,” she says, draping her arms around his neck.

“Frankie,” he replies with a smile.

“I want you to move in with me.”

Will stares at her, shocked and certain that he misheard. His heart seems to have stopped beating. His lungs seem to have forgotten how to work. There is a pretty serious chance he might faint. But then his heart roars back to life, and he sucks in a breath so fast it makes him dizzy.

“What?” he croaks.

“I want you to move in with me,” she repeats.

He gapes at her. “You want…?” he starts. He doesn’t finish. He clears his throat and tries again. “You mean, like, now?”

She smirks. “Well it’s a little hard to pack up your place when we’re halfway across the world. But when we get back to New York, yeah.”

He swallows around the shock that’s still sitting in his throat. “Frankie…”

“I’m not being impulsive,” she cuts him off as if she can read his mind. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“You have?” he says incredulously. “Since when?”

“Since you said it’s what you wanted while we were in Huntington,” she replies. “I wasn’t ready
then. But I am now. I talked to Jai about it this morning.”

“What did he say?”

The corners of her mouth turn upward. “He said if you’re moving in then you should be responsible for replacing the backup generator for the security system because I’m obviously too irresponsible to do it.”

Will blinks. “Oh.”

She leans a little closer to him. “He also said you’re a good man, and that he’s glad you make me so happy.”

Will feels a wave of relief wash over him. He isn’t sure why he’s so thrilled. He knows Jai trusts him and that he’s always approved of their relationship. But there’s something about hearing it from Frankie that makes him feel like he’s on top of the world.

“Good man, huh?” he says.

She smiles. “Best one I know.”

He strokes his hand along her cheek. “You sure you’re ready for this? All my clothes in your closet, and the Chase family recipe book in your kitchen, and me in your bed every night, even when you’re mad at me?”

“Never been more sure of anything in my life,” she whispers.

His eyes are suddenly warm. His throat is tight. He feels like his heart is going to beat right out of his chest.

“Always throwing my words back at me,” he whispers, his voice cracking.

“And you’re always crying.”

She’s making fun of him, but her voice is soft and her hands are brushing over his cheeks with a tenderness that makes him ache.

“What do you say, Whiskey?” she murmurs. “You in or you out?”

He bends forward to kiss her.

“In.”
I meant to say this last chapter, but it slipped my mind: The New York Philharmonic really did do Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone in concert in December. If you have not seen it, and you are a fan of both Harry and classical music, you should totally go next time there’s a performance in your neck of the woods. It’s so good. And while we’re on the subject, most of the things I reference in this fic are real, or have been based on real places and things and then altered slightly to fit my purposes. Frankie’s brownstone, for instance, actually exists. (And it is *gorgeous* y’all.) Antiqology is a real place in Huntington, Indiana. If you ever find yourself in Havana, you can rent the car that Frankie and Will drove. There is a restaurant with blue chairs in Plaka. There is a Starbucks just down the road from the University of Monaco, and it does have tall wooden planters outside that someone could hide behind if they were trying to avoid getting shot by a sniper.

Anyway, you get the picture. On to the story. Time to fasten your seatbelts again, guys.

“It has to be perfect,” Standish says. “Like. Perfect.”

“It’s not perfect?”

“No.”

Ray squints. “I think it is.”

“It’s not.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am one hundred percent sure.”

“I think it’s pretty close.”

“You’re blind, dude. It’s not. It’s crooked. It’s all limp on one side like some old lady with one boob that—”

“Standish,” Susan says, shooting him a disgusted look.

“We’ve talked about this,” Will reminds him. “No similes, metaphors, or analogies that mention female anatomy.”

Standish sighs. “Fine. But that shit is crooked and droopy as hell.”

Ray stretches higher, perched dangerously on the edge of a bar stool with the end of a Welcome Back banner in one hand and a piece of tape in the other. “How about now?” he asks.

Standish, who is standing by the front door of the Dead Drop, considers the banner.
“Higher.”

Ray lifts the banner higher.

“Too high. Lower.”

Ray lowers the banner.

“Lower.”

Ray lowers the banner again.


“My arms are starting to hurt,” Ray says with a hint of a pout.

Will takes that as his cue to step in. “Standish,” he says, sidling up toward the younger agent. “It doesn’t need to be perfect.”

Standish gives him a look that’s eerily reminiscent of a teenage girl with an attitude problem. “Of course it does.”

“This isn’t the first time Jai’s been here since he got shot,” Susan points out from behind the bar, where she’s arranging boxes of food from Jai’s favorite restaurants. “He was here yesterday. And the day before that. He’s been here almost every day since we got back from Monte Carlo a month ago.”

“Yeah, but this will be his first time here after being cleared for non-fieldwork stuff. This is his welcome-back-to-work party. And it has to be perfect.”

“I’m sure he’ll be so excited to be back he won’t even notice if the banner is a little crooked,” Will says kindly.

“That’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever said,” Standish replies.

Will frowns. “Rude.”

“You wouldn’t have said that to him if Frankie were here,” Ray tells Standish. “She’d have punched you.”

“She would not,” Will disputes.

“Yes, huh,” Ray insists. “Last week I told Susan I didn’t want to go to the ballet with her, and Frankie punched me on the shoulder so hard I almost cried. I still have a bruise. Look, I’ll show you.”

He starts to take his suit jacket off, wobbles dangerously on top of the bar stool, and then freezes.

“Woah,” he says, looking at Will with wide eyes. “I almost fell!”

“Ray, tape that banner up and get down,” Susan says. “If you fall and break your back and I have to move your stuff into my place by myself this weekend, you’re buying us season tickets to the ballet.”

Ray immediately tapes the banner up and starts to climb down from the stool.
“No!” Standish wails. “Stay up there and fix it until it’s perfect or I’m going to punch you in your Frankie bruise!”

Ray pauses in his descent and glances at his girlfriend with a look that clearly says Please help me.

“Standish,” Susan says firmly. “I know you want this party to be perfect because it’s your way of communicating to Jai that you love him and you’re glad he’s back—”

“Quit shrinking me with your witchy powers, devil woman,” Standish snaps.

“—but I think you’re being a little too detail-oriented about this,” Susan continues, undaunted by his interruption. “Will’s right. Jai is going to be so flustered that he’s the center of attention that he won’t even notice the banner.”

“Wrong,” Standish says. “Wrong, wrong, wrong. If that banner is crooked, he’ll notice. And if he notices, then he won’t be able to un-notice. And if he can’t un-notice, then he’ll start to stress. And we can’t let him stress. Frankie said his first day back needs to be calm. And she means it, too, because she told me if I babble incessantly about my breakup with firefighter girl, then she’s going to turn me inside out so all my organs find out what oxygen tastes like. And I don’t know what that means, but it sounds painful.”

“Yikes,” Ray mutters.

“Frankie’s just being protective of Jai, kiddo,” Will says, putting his hand on Standish’s shoulder. “She wouldn’t actually turn you inside out.”

“Hell yes she would,” Standish argues. “And my outside is way too handsome to be taken from the women of this world.”

“Debatable,” Susan says. She looks at Ray. “Get off the stool.”

Ray obeys.

“Traitor,” Standish hisses at him.

“If you got threatened by season tickets to the ballet you’d do the same thing,” Ray hisses back.

“You’re just as whipped as he is,” Standish says, gesturing at Will.

The front door swings open before Will can reply, and Frankie and Jai walk in. Everyone stares at them in shock because they’re thirty minutes earlier than they’re supposed to be. Jai and Frankie stare back.

“Surprise?” Susan says dryly.

Frankie smirks. “Apparently.”

“This is the worst surprise party ever,” Standish moans, burying his head in his hands.

Jai turns toward Frankie. “You owe me dinner.”

She smiles. “I didn’t take that bet.”

“You still owe me.”

“I absolutely do not.”
“Seriously, this sucks,” Standish whines. He gestures between Will and Frankie. “Don’t y’all communicate? Couldn’t you have texted him a heads up that you were going to be early so we could be ready?”

“I did text him,” Frankie says, glancing at Will.

Will frowns. “You did?” He pulls his phone out of his back pocket and sees that he missed two texts from Frankie. “Oh. You did.”

Standish sighs. “I’m surrounded by incompetence.”

“Guess you rubbed off on everyone,” Frankie quips.

Will unlocks his phone and reads the two messages. The most recent says *Got done early and Jai’s antsy. We’ll be there in twenty. But the one she sent before that says Been thinking about what we did in Belarus. Repeat tonight?*

Will looks up at her. She’s watching him. His mind floats back to what happened in Belarus, and he immediately feels a rush of heat.

“Yes,” he tells her. “Absolutely.”

She smiles. Her eyes flicker over his body, and Standish groans. “Can we stop with the sex smirking?” he whines. “I am so sick of the sex smirking.”

“What’s a sex smirk?” Ray wonders.

“That,” Standish says, pointing at Frankie. “That’s a sex smirk.”

“Do you want to see my murder smirk?” Frankie asks him.

“You know, if I remember correctly, you said it was the best day of your life when you found out they were back together,” Susan points out. “Shouldn’t you be glad there’s so much sex smirking?”

“Can we stop talking about sex smirking?” Frankie asks. “This party is supposed to be about Jai.”

Jai shakes his head. “I would prefer to talk about sex smirking. I’m quite tired of discussing my injury.”


Jai straightens his tie self-consciously as everyone turns their attention to him. “I’ve been officially released to return to non-fieldwork activities.”

Everyone cheers. Jai smiles shyly. Will thinks it’s adorable, but he knows better than to say it out loud.

“Way to go, man,” Standish says, stepping forward to thump Jai lightly on the back. “I’m proud of you.”

Jai shrugs him off and looks embarrassed. Frankie smiles at her best friend affectionately. Will wants to hug them both and decides he’s going to. “We should group hug,” he suggests.

“No,” Frankie and Jai say in unison.

“I want my own hug,” Standish says. He wraps his arms around Jai before Jai can stop him. “I love
“Okay,” Jai says, patting Standish awkwardly on the back. “That’s nice.”


Frankie crinkles her nose. “Sir Sniffs-A-Lot is giving me the creeps. Can we get this party started before he starts smelling the rest of us?”

“Yes,” Susan laughs. “We’ve got plenty of food, Jai. All your favorites.”

Standish releases Jai with a scoff. “Nah, Susan, we gotta start with the good stuff. Jai, I got you presents.”

“We got you presents,” Will clarifies. “As a team.”

“They were my idea,” Standish says.

Susan shakes her head. “They definitely were not.”

“I chipped in more than anyone,” Standish says proudly.

Ray frowns. “That’s not true. Actually, I don’t even think you paid me. Will covered you.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Standish says. He puts his arm around Jai’s shoulders and leads him toward the back room. “Come on, buddy. Let’s go look at the presents that were definitely my idea and that I definitely helped pay for.”

“Wait,” Susan says, coming out from behind the bar to follow them. “I want to take pictures.” She frowns. “Or maybe I should take a video.”

“I can take a video,” Ray offers. “That way you have both.”

Susan smiles and squeezes his arm as she passes. “Thank you.”

Ray smiles goofily. “Anything for you, babe.”

“I hate when he calls her babe,” Standish mutters to Jai.

Jai snorts.

The four of them disappear in the direction of the back room, leaving Will alone with Frankie. He turns in her direction. She’s already walking toward him. He holds his arms out for her, and she steps into his embrace without a trace of hesitation.

“Hi,” she murmurs.

He bends forward and presses a brief kiss against her lips. “Hi. You doing okay?”

“Well, the doctor’s really impressed. She said he’s way ahead of where she expected him to be, and that it’s the best recovery rate she’s ever seen.”

“But you disagree,” Will guesses, because even though the news sounds good, she doesn’t seem thrilled.
“No,” she says. She furrows her eyebrows and tugs absently on the collar of the half-zip pullover he’s wearing. “I just worry about him. He’s been pushing himself really hard, and he’s been so worried about being ready when Nick calls, and I don’t want him to…”

“Hurt himself?” Will finishes when she doesn’t.

She lifts her eyes to his. “Yeah.”

“I think it’ll help that he’s officially back at work.”

“Probably,” Frankie agrees.

She’s fiddling with the zipper on his pullover now. She’s got that look on her face, the one she wears when she’s feeling unsettled. He’s seen it a lot over the last month, usually when they’re talking about Jai. Sometimes, though, when he catches her alone at the Dead Drop or at her place—well, their place now—he finds her staring into space with that same look.

She doesn’t like to talk about it. And most of the time, he doesn’t make her. Rehashing it over and over again won’t change anything. They’re still waiting for Nick to call. When he does, they’ll have to work with him. Neither of them want to. But if that’s the price they have to pay to rid the world of Ollerman and The Trust, then they’ll pay it.

Today seems different though. They didn’t get a chance to talk to each other this morning because she was up early to meet Jai and Will got an unexpected FaceTime call from his nephew. He knew Frankie was nervous about Jai’s appointment, so he stopped her on her way out the door and kissed her soundly even though Alex groaned on the other end of the video call. But he didn’t actually get to talk to her. Now he wishes he’d made the time.

“You know,” he says softly, “I didn’t ask how he was. I asked how you were.”

She fiddles with his zipper instead of answering. Will waits her out.

She exhales slowly. “It’s our anniversary.”

Will frowns. “What?”

“Me and Nick,” she clarifies, looking up at him. “It’s our wedding anniversary today.”

Will shakes his head. “No. It can’t be. You said it was…” He trails off when he checks his watch and sees the date.

“Today,” she finishes for him.

Will doesn’t try to hide his scowl. “I know it’s not the same month, but I hate that it’s the same day as ours.”

“I don’t.”

He looks up at her in surprise.

She strokes her hand over his cheek. “I like that it doesn’t belong to him anymore. It’s yours now.”

Will smiles because he can’t help it. “Wow.”

“What?”
“That was so poetic.”

She rolls her eyes. “That wasn’t poetic.”

“Yes it was. You love me so much I’ve got you talking like a poet. It’s like my wildest dreams have all come true.”

“I hate you,” she says, pushing him away from her.

He laughs and tugs her back against his chest. “Wait, I can be poetic too. You know I love sonnets. _How do I love thee? Let me count—_”

“Shut up, Whiskey,” she murmurs, and pulls his mouth down to hers.

Will wraps his arms around her and kisses her back. He feels the last, lingering traces of tension melt out of her body. She smells so good he can barely stand it, and she tastes even better. He’s never going to get tired of kissing her. Never.

“Well isn’t that sweet.”

The front door to the Dead Drop slams closed a second after the words ring out. Will and Frankie break apart and reach for their guns in unison.

Standing just inside the door, smiling just as smugly as the last time Will saw him, is Nick Walker. He’s wearing a three piece suit again, though it’s black this time. It’s tailored perfectly, and Will can’t help but notice just how muscled the former spy is. He’s the epitome of Frankie’s usual type—brawny, tattooed, dangerous—and jealousy twinges somewhere in Will’s gut. He ignores it.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I used my program to let myself in.” Nick sets an unmarked box wrapped in brown paper on the table of the booth closest to him and then turns back to face them. “Your security system thinks I’m part of your team now. Which I guess is true, isn’t it?”

“It’s not your program,” Frankie says, lowering her gun. “And running missions with you doesn’t make you part of our team.”

Nick’s eyes travel down her body slowly, and then back up to her face. “Hello Francesca.”

She doesn’t return his greeting. “You said you’d call. Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see my wife.”

Will lowers his gun even though he doesn’t want to. “She’s not your wife.”

“Well, I’m not dead,” Nick replies, sliding his hands into his pockets. “And I didn’t sign any divorce papers. So I think you’re wrong, Chase.” He grins at Frankie and winks. “Happy anniversary, baby.”

Frankie holsters her gun. “Happy’s not the word I’d use.”

“First year we’ve been in New York for it. Feels different, doesn’t it? A little more special.”

Frankie glares at him. “It’s not.”

Nick smirks at her and tips his head toward Will. “Does Captain America know we got married in New York?”
“Yes,” Will answers.

Nick’s smirk deepens. “Does he know we spent the next two days fucking in every room of the brownstone you recently moved him into?”

Will tries to tamp it down, but he can’t—jealousy roars through his veins. He knows that Frankie sleeping with Nick in her brownstone is no different than him sleeping with one of his exes in his old apartment. But it feels different. And he hates that.

“There’s only one of us who lives in the past, Nick,” Frankie says, folding her arms over her chest. “And it’s not me.”

Nick narrows his eyes at her. “You can play house with your boy scout all you want. It doesn’t change anything. You’re my wife, not his. And if you think he’s not going to get sick of that, you’re wrong.”

“Frankie?” Standish’s voice calls in the distance before Will can disagree. “Will? Where you guys at?”

“Oh good,” Nick says with a smile. “I finally get to meet RJ’s replacement.”

Will’s heart shoots into his throat. Beside him, Frankie stiffens the way she does before a fight. Will tightens his hold on his gun even though he knows he can’t use it.

The door leading in the direction of the back room swings open. “I swear on baby Jesus if y’all are making out right now I’m going to—”

Standish stops dead in his tracks when he sees Nick.

“Oh shit,” he mutters, his eyes wide.

Nick smirks. “You must be Edgar.”

For a second, Standish doesn’t say anything. He glances at Frankie and Will and then back at Nick with a slightly panicked look on his face. Will opens his mouth, ready to call Standish over to stand between him and Frankie, but he doesn’t get a chance. Standish takes a deep breath and straightens, his chest puffing out a little, and meets Nick’s gaze head on.

“It’s Standish,” he corrects. “Only my mom calls me Edgar.”

Nick glances at Frankie. “I’ve heard that before.”

Will doesn’t know what that means, but Frankie clearly does. She glares at Nick.


“Not her ex,” Nick corrects. “We’re still married. So I guess that makes me your spy dad.”

“I only have one spy dad,” Standish says acidly. “And you aren’t half the man he is.”

Nick laughs. He turns toward Frankie and tips his head towards Standish.

“Found another loyal one, didn’t you, baby?” He leans forward like he’s planning to tell her a secret, but he’s still across the room and he doesn’t whisper. “Does he know he’s just a stand-in?”

Standish looks confused, and Frankie looks furious, and Will hates Nick so much he wants to
punch him in the face until he stops smirking. Maybe even after that too.

“What do you want, Nick?” Frankie asks instead of answering his question.

“I have our first mission.”

“Then start talking.”

“Well I can’t give you mission details without the whole team, now can I?”

Frankie purses her lips the way she does when she wants to curse someone out but can’t. “Go get everyone else, Standish,” she says instead.

For once, Standish obeys without comment.

Nick watches him go. “I’ve read his file,” he says thoughtfully once Standish is gone. “Smart kid.” He turns toward Frankie with a piercing look. “Did you give him the NSA files on RJ’s program?”

Will’s heart stops beating. He forces his face to go blank so that Nick won’t be able to read him, but Nick doesn’t even glance his way. He’s only got eyes for Frankie.

“No,” Frankie answers.

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll kill him if I do. And I don’t need someone else on my conscience.”

“You haven’t been that worried about the members of the NSA task force,” Nick points out. “Or any of the other guys Casey sent after me.”

“Well I can’t save them all, can I?”

There’s something quivering in Frankie’s voice that clues Will in to the fact that she’s just said way more than her words imply. And sure enough, a second later, that same something shivers across Nick’s face. He and Frankie stare at each other, tension cracking through the air, and Will suddenly feels like he’s on the outside looking in.

Nick takes a step forward. “That wasn’t me, baby.”

“Yes it was,” Frankie snaps, her eyes blazing. “It was The Collective. You were The Collective.”

“I didn’t know—”

“And what did you do when you did?” she cuts him off. “All those dead kids and me sobbing in your arms, and what’d you do, Nick? Nothing.”

“I went to Clarke. You know I did.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. He had an explanation that made sense—”

“It made sense?” Frankie repeats incredulously. “All those dead kids made sense to you? Or did you just want it to make sense because you were too much of a coward to face the truth?”

“It wasn’t the truth I was afraid of, Francesca,” Nick snaps. “And you fucking know it.”
Frankie doesn’t reply. Nick doesn’t say anything else either. Will glances between them. He has no idea what they’re talking about. Whatever dead kids Frankie is referring to, it’s not a story she’s told him.

On the one hand, that doesn’t bother him. He didn’t expect her to tell him every little detail of her life with Nick. He knows she’s not purposely hiding anything from him anymore, and that’s all that matters. But on the other hand, her reaction worries him. The way she’s looking at Nick—her eyes blazing, her shoulders tense, her hands curled into fists—that’s not for show. Whatever they’re talking about, she’s genuinely still furious about it. And Frankie doesn’t get mad about things she doesn’t care about.

The rest of the team appears before anyone can say anything. The change in both Frankie and Nick is immediate and identical—both of their faces smooth into blank expressions, both of their bodies relax, and in a heartbeat they’re back to looking smug (him) and annoyed (her). Will marvels at them, and can’t help but think that they must have been one hell of a team in the field.

“Jai,” Nick greets. “Glad to see you’re on the mend.”

Jai brushes past Susan and crosses the room to stand in front of Nick. “You touch one of them, I’ll kill you.”

“You going to blow me up with one of your bombs?”

“It won’t be that quick.”

Nick smirks at the threat. “You know what I think, JD? I think you want me to hurt one of them. Because then it’ll give you an excuse to do what you’ve wanted to do for years. We both know you don’t give a shit what I do with that program. The only reason you haven’t killed me yet is because she doesn’t want you to.”

Jai doesn’t argue. Will wonders if that’s true.

“You’d do anything for her,” Nick continues. “Even if it means you don’t get your revenge. You think you’re being noble, but really, it’s just pathetic. Because she doesn’t care about you. She never has. She just feels sorry for you. The same way Mina did.”

Frankie steps forward, her expression murderous and her hands curled into fists. Will expects her to go after Nick, but she doesn’t.

“Jai,” she calls. Her voice is softer than Will thought it would be. She doesn’t say anything else, but he doesn’t think she needs to. She and Jai are like that—they communicate in a single word what it takes other people paragraphs to say.

Jai ignores her. Will has never seen him look this enraged. He’s literally shaking. “Don’t say her name,” he hisses. “Don’t you dare.”

“You know, I don’t blame you for hating me,” Nick murmurs. “I started it. I took your girl in Moscow, so you took mine in Shanghai. And you’ve been keeping her from me ever since. But she doesn’t need you anymore, does she? She went and found herself a puppy who’ll follow her everywhere, and now you’re all alone. Just like you always thought you would be.”

“Stop it, Nick.”

Frankie’s voice cracks across the room like a whip. Nick turns to look at her. They stare at each other for a minute, and then Nick smirks.
“You’re right, baby. I’m being rude. Let’s see who else is on my new team, shall we?”

He paces forward until he’s standing in front of Ray.

“Ray Prince,” he says. “Let’s see here. Expelled from two separate private schools. Barely graduated from Quantico. Questionably competent at your current job, which you only landed because no one else wanted it. Considerable amount of credit card debt thanks to your terrible spending habits. Glove compartment full of parking tickets. Your life is just one mistake after another. But you know which one’s my favorite?”

Ray doesn’t answer, but Nick doesn’t seem to expect him to. He leans forward and grins.

“You fucked your best friend’s fiancee,” he says. “And not just once either. You screwed her for months. You’d smile to his face and listen to him spill his guts about how much he loved her, and then you’d sneak off to your little house in the country and bang her brains out.”

Ray clenches his jaw and says nothing.

“You’d smile to his face and listen to him spill his guts about how much he loved her, and then you’d sneak off to your little house in the country and bang her brains out.”

Ray clenches his jaw and says nothing.

“Now you got a new girl,” Nick continues. “And I gotta tell you, Ray, she seems way out of your league. I think we both know it won’t last.”

Even though Ray will tell anyone who will listen that Susan is way out of his league, he still looks a little devastated by Nick’s words. Will feels his temper flare. He’s glad when Susan reaches over and skims her hand down Ray’s back comfortingly.

Nick turns his attention to her. “Susan,” he greets.

“Nick,” she returns. It’s her professional voice, but Will can see the anger lurking in her eyes.

“Unlike your boyfriend, you’re quite remarkable.”

“Am I?” Susan says dryly.

“Multiple degrees from prestigious universities. Top of your class at Quantico. Well-respected by your colleagues. Very impressive resume. Probably one of the best in the world.”

“Not probably. It is.”

Nick smiles at her confidence. “Can’t quite figure out your personal life though, can you? All that professional success and you still have to compete with your sisters for attention. That divorce didn’t help your case. Your poor Catholic parents. They were so disappointed in you. And they didn’t even get any grandkids out of it.”

“Leave her alone,” Ray says angrily.

“It’s all right, Ray,” Susan says without taking her eyes off Nick. “Let him talk.”

Nick holds her gaze. “It was hard for you when your ex got remarried.”

“Our relationship was over. He moved on. I have too.”

“To Agent Screw Up,” Nick says, tipping his head toward Ray. “Seems odd that you settled for someone who’s so beneath you. But that’s what you wanted, isn’t it? You like knowing you’re better than him. That way, if he dumps you, it won’t hurt as much as it did when Mr. Perfect hit the road.”
“You know, not all of us live in perpetual fear,” Susan says calmly.

Nick lifts his eyebrows. “Fear?” he repeats.

“All this arrogance, all this cruelty, it’s just a defense mechanism,” Susan replies. “You’re so afraid you’re going to find out nobody loves you that you give everyone a million reasons not to. That’s why you’re so obsessed with Frankie. It’s why you can’t let her go. Because she’s the only person who’s ever really loved you. And you can’t cope with the fact that she doesn’t anymore.”

If her words hit home, Nick doesn’t show it. He just looks amused. “Always an explanation for everything,” he says. “Typical shrink. I’d be curious to hear how you justify trusting your boyfriend.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Good men don’t sleep with their best friend’s fiancee.”

“Good men make mistakes,” Susan corrects. “We all do.”

“Is that what you told Captain America when you came clean? I mean honestly, of all the men you could’ve picked, you had to pick the one who betrayed him? And you kept it a secret from him. For weeks.”

“You know all about secrets and betrayals, don’t you, Nick?”

Nick smiles. “I can see why Frankie likes you.”

“And I can see why she hates you.”

“Thin line between love and hate,” Nick muses. He shoots a wink at Frankie. “We’ve flirted with it more than once.”

Shame ripples across Frankie’s face. Will leans toward her and presses his shoulder into hers. She presses back.

“Best for last,” Nick says, moving on to Standish. He smirks. “You know, subletting your spy dad’s apartment is just as pathetic as living with your mom.”

Standish scoffs. “You can’t make any living-with-my-mom jokes I haven’t already heard from Frankie. Sticks and stones, dude.”

“Your favorite mantra, I’m sure,” Nick replies. “Because even after four years at MIT, three years at the NSA, and two years on a black ops team with America’s best operatives, you’re just as insecure and desperate for approval as you’ve always been.”

“Sounds like somebody’s been reading my psych profile.” Standish examines his fingernails like he’s bored. “We’ve been down this road already. It was a whole thing. You’re too late to make it hurt. Try again, jackass.”

Frankie is smirking. Will’s guessing she likes that Standish is giving Nick a hard time.

Will isn’t the only one who notices her smirk, though. Nick notices too. “Do you like Star Wars, Standish?” he asks without taking his eyes off her.

Frankie stiffens next to Will. Standish frowns. “Is that a nerd joke?”

“Fuck you,” Frankie snarls.

Standish looks mystified. Will has no idea what they’re talking about either, but judging by Frankie’s response, Nick was trying to hurt her and succeeded.

Nick turns back to Standish. “You know, the program you designed that identified The Trust was really something. Very impressive.”

His tone has shifted into something light and almost admiring, and warning bells start to go off in Will’s head. Standish has come a long way since he first joined the team, but playing mind games with someone as manipulative as Nick isn’t something he’s had a lot of practice doing. He could easily slip up and mention that he’s been working on destroying RJ’s program. And if he does, he’s a dead man.

Fear hits Will like a tidal wave. Frankie presses her shoulder against his like she can sense it. Will is desperate to say something to Standish, to warn him that he needs to tread carefully, but he can’t.


“You ever thought about tweaking it?” Nick asks innocently. “Maybe turning it into the kind of program that doesn’t just pinpoint patterns of corruption, but actually identifies the people responsible for them?”

“Identifies people?” Standish repeats with a frown. “You mean like in *Minority Report*?”

“Not exactly.” Nick smiles kindly, almost like he’s Standish’s mentor instead of his enemy. “That’s prediction. Predictions are flawed. This would be evidence-based fact. You’re identifying what people have already done, decisions they’ve already made. So you’d know for sure that the people you were going after were actually guilty.”

“Identifying the bad guys and getting proof all at once,” Standish says slowly as if he’s in awe of the idea. Will has no idea if he’s pretending or not.

“Exactly,” Nick says, his smile widening. “Imagine what you could have done if your program had taken things a step farther. You could have identified Ollerman right from the start. You could have stopped all of this before it even started. You’d be a hero.”

The word *hero* seems to puff Standish’s chest out a little. “Sounds nice,” he admits.

“Well that’s why you’ve been working on it, right?”

Standish frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Those program files you got from the NSA,” Nick says. “You’re trying to mimic its code to improve your program.”

Standish looks confused. “I don’t have any files from the NSA.”

“Come on, of course you do,” Nick scoffs. “It’s that program that rips through all those firewalls so easily. It’s just like yours, only more advanced. Frankie gave it to you.”
Standish shakes his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. Frankie hates talking to me about programming. She calls it my stupid nerd shit.” He shoots a glare at Frankie. “Which, for the record, I find very offensive. I don’t tell her to shut up when she talks about how much she loves interrogating people.”

Nick glances at Frankie.

“I told you,” she tells him. “I didn’t give it to him.”

Will senses an opportunity and seizes it. “Is there a point to all this?” he asks. “I thought you were here to give us our mission.”

Nick shifts his gaze to Will. Will stares back at him, trying his best to look like he’s bored and annoyed. Nick slides his hands in his pockets and takes a step away from Standish and toward the center of the room.

“Fine. How much do you know about The Trust’s leadership hierarchy?”

“Not much,” Frankie answers. “Ollerman is a paranoid control freak, so he’s good at covering his tracks. We know he has regional points of contact who handle things for him. We’ve apprehended or killed seven of them in the last year, but there are more. We know Tina Marek was his go-to operative, but Standish killed her.”

Nick glances at Standish. Standish tips his head back. “Sent that succubus back where she belongs,” he says in his I’m-trying-to-sound-tough voice.

Nick seems unimpressed. He looks back at Frankie. “So as far as you know, Ollerman handles everything himself.”

“Clarke couldn’t run a global network alone, and neither can Ollerman,” Frankie replies. “We know he’s got at least one right hand man. But we don’t know who it is.”

“Guess that’s why you need me, huh?”

It’s Frankie’s turn to look unimpressed. “Quit being a dick and tell us what you know.”

Will expects Nick to react angrily, but the former spy just grins. He seems to like when Frankie sasses him. Will finds himself annoyed by that, though he isn’t sure why.

“The Trust is a three-legged stool,” Nick explains. “Ollerman, obviously, is one of those legs. And you’re right that he doesn’t share power. He has sole authority over any and all moves the organization makes. But he relies on two other men to keep things running smoothly.”

“Who?” Frankie asks.

“The first is a finance guy. Matthew Blake. He’s a former high ranking official with FinCEN. When he inherited a hundred million dollars after his father’s death a year ago, he retired from public service. But he still manages all the financial aspects of The Trust.”

“Man, all I’m going to inherit from my dad is bad knees and heart problems,” Standish mutters.

“And the other?” Frankie asks, ignoring Standish.

“Think of him as Ollerman’s HR guy. He’s the one who handles personnel. Assassins, muscle for hire, inside guys, blackmail targets. He arranges all of it. He’s the point of contact for all the
regional guys you mentioned. He’s also one hell of an operative in his own right. Which means if he can’t find someone to do the job, he does it himself. He’s had to do a lot more of that since your sidekick killed Marek.”

“Sidekick?” Standish repeats, sounding extremely offended.

Frankie ignores him again. “Who is he?”


“Give me a name, Nick.”

Nick studies her for a second, his eyebrows furrowed like he’s trying to guess what her reaction will be. Will feels his stomach drop. He doesn’t know how he knows, but he has a feeling that whatever Nick’s about to say is going to hit Frankie where it hurts.

“Scott Pierce,” Nick says at last.

Frankie’s jaw goes slack in surprise.

“What?” Jai demands.

Nick shoots him a look. “You heard me.”

“No,” Jai says, shaking his head. “No way. That’s impossible.”

“It’s possible and it’s true,” Nick replies. “Pierce is the guy. Has been for a while now.”

Jai looks at Frankie. “He’s lying, Francesca.”

“Why would I lie about that?”

“Because you’re an asshole.”

Nick ignores the insult and looks at Frankie. “It’s him, Frankie. He’s the guy.”

Frankie glances at Jai. They seem to have an entire conversation without saying a word, and then she looks back at Nick. “Scott’s a good man.”

“He was a good man,” Nick corrects. “Until his wife and kid died the same way your parents did.”

The words feel like a slap to the face for Will, so he can’t imagine how they must feel for Frankie. She seems stunned. He’s desperate to reach out and comfort her, but he isn’t sure if he should in front of Nick, so he keeps his hands to himself.

“You remember what you told me in Dubai?” Nick asks softly.

Frankie furrows her eyebrows and doesn’t answer.

“You told me you could’ve gone either way after they died,” Nick reminds her. “And the same was true for Scott. Except he picked a different way than you.”

“What happened?”

“They died in a terrorist attack,” Nick answers. “Random attack while on vacation. Ollerman saw his chance and offered Scott a deal. He promised he’d give Scott the names of the men who
orchestrated the attack if Scott did a job for him. Scott did the job.”

“And got stuck,” Frankie finishes.

Nick nods. “Once you’re in, it’s pretty much impossible to get out. They own you.”

The words hang in the air. Once again, Will realizes that Nick and Frankie are having two conversations—the one everyone can hear, and the one lurking in the implications and subtext. Frankie’s eyes have gone a little glassy. There was a note of regret, maybe even remorse, in Nick’s voice, and it’s written on his face now too. They’re staring at each other from across the room as if they’re the only two people in it, and the silence of everything unspoken between them seems deafening.

To his surprise, Will feels a brief spark of sympathy flare in his chest amidst all the jealousy. He hates Nick. Like seriously hates him, probably more than he’s ever hated anybody. But he also remembers all those nights he stayed up late, agonizing over whether to come clean to Frankie about Standish and the program. He imagines that’s how Nick felt their entire relationship. And even though Frankie has told him more than once that he’s nothing like Nick, Will can’t help but wonder if he has more in common with Frankie’s husband than he wants to.

The unwelcome comparison fades from his mind when Frankie breaks eye contact with Nick and looks at him.

“Scott was our contact at Interpol when we were chasing The Collective,” she explains.

Will wants to blurt out that he loves her for taking the time to explain something to him in front of Nick, but he doesn’t. He just nods.

“You’ve met him,” she adds.

Will frowns. “I have? When?”

“June. In Paris. He helped us when we were looking for those arms dealers.”

It takes a second, but Will remembers. The first thing he recalls is that Scott Pierce was a really nice guy. Tall, blond haired and blue eyed, assertive but not domineering. He and Will had hit it off immediately, bonding over their military backgrounds and their midwestern childhoods, but then Frankie walked in the room and Scott froze. Frankie seemed just as surprised to see him as he was to see her. Will remembers instantly assuming that Scott was another one of her exes. But when he asked her about it later, she laughed. No, Whiskey. He’s just an old friend. Will had pressed for details about how they knew each other, but all he got as an answer was I’m not ready to tell you that yet. Now he knows why.

“So what’s your plan?” Frankie asks, looking across the room at Nick.

“We have to go after Blake first,” Nick answers. He smooths his hand over his jacket absently, and Will’s eyes are drawn toward the tattooed wedding band on his fourth finger. “Hack the system so it appears that the funds and ledgers are no longer secure and Blake can’t be trusted. Then I can step in and offer Ollerman the use of my finance guy.”

“That would put you in control of The Trust’s finances,” Frankie says.

“Yes,” Nick agrees with a smile. “And then I can give the data to you, just like we agreed.”

Will wants to point out that Nick is the least trustworthy person on the planet and they absolutely
should not believe anything he says, but based on Frankie’s expression, she already knows.

Nick must be able to see her hesitancy too. “Come on, baby,” he says, his voice dropping low. “Think it through.”

“I am. And I don’t trust you.”

“I’m already the primary funder of The Trust, Francesca. Blake is spending my money. You know what that means.”

“It means you already control The Trust’s finances whether we help you or not.”

Nick nods. “Exactly. All this does is give me access to things I don’t have, like the ledgers and the identity of other funders. You need that data to expose and prosecute everyone who’s working with The Trust.”

“But you already have access to all that,” Frankie points out. “You could use RJ’s program right now and give me everything I want. My team wouldn’t even need to leave this bar.”

“You’re right,” Nick acknowledges. “I could do that.”

“But you won’t.”

He smiles. “You get what you want when I get what I want.”

For the hundredth time since he walked in the door, Will wants to punch him.

“Why can’t we go after Pierce first?” Frankie asks.

“Because he works for Interpol,” Nick replies. “You bust him first, you’re going to send shockwaves through every intelligence agency on the planet. Ollerman and Blake will go underground. And if they go off the grid, not even RJ’s program will be able to track them. You’ll be right back where you started. Hunting for a needle in a haystack.”

Frankie looks annoyed. Will doesn’t blame her.

“This is the best way,” Nick insists. “Finances first, then personnel. The info you’ll get from these two guys will identify every person and organization that’s ever worked with The Trust. You’ll be able to destroy the whole thing. After that, all you have to do is kill Ollerman.”

Everyone in the room watches Frankie, waiting for her decision. A month ago, when they sat down and went through the details of what working with Nick would entail, they all agreed that Frankie would take the lead. Will is still her co-lead, of course, but he doesn’t know Nick like she does. She’s the one who gets the final say.

“Fine,” she says. She crosses her arms over her chest. “Where’s Blake?”

“Venice.”

Frankie looks like she’s been punched in the gut. Will isn’t sure why at first, and then he remembers—Venice is where Frankie and Nick fell in love.

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?” Jai says into the silence.

Nick holds up his hands defensively. “I didn’t tell him to live in Venice. He chose that on his own.”
Neither Jai nor Frankie look convinced.

Nick doesn’t seem to care. “I booked you a private jet,” he says. “You need to be there by tomorrow morning, so the plane leaves at eight tonight. Same spot we used to fly out of. I’ll meet you at this address in Venice.”

He pulls a small sheet of paper out of the inside pocket of his jacket and sets it on the bar. And then he smiles at Frankie. “Pack that leather jacket you’ve been wearing. You know how much I love you in leather.”

Jealousy flares in Will’s chest again. Nick shoots him a smirk like he can read his mind, and then turns to leave.

Frankie takes a step forward. “Wait a minute. That’s it?”

Nick turns around with his eyebrows lifted. “Did you want something else?”

“I want to know what the hell you’re going to make us do in Venice.”

Nick smiles. “You’ll find out once you’re there.” He leans forward. “Unless you want to discuss the details over lunch at our place? Seems fitting to celebrate our anniversary by mixing business and pleasure. Just like old times.”

“I’ll pass.”

Nick’s smile widens. “We can celebrate in Venice then. We’ve got lots of places there.”

Frankie looks sick to her stomach.

“See you soon, baby,” Nick says with a wink.

And then he’s gone just as suddenly as he appeared.
For a minute after Nick leaves, the Dead Drop is completely silent. Frankie stares at the front door, looking nauseated and a little pale. Will watches her. Everyone else is watching her too.

Standish, of course, is the one who breaks the silence.

“So, I know I’ve said this before, but your husband is a giant dick.”

The words seem to snap Frankie out of her thoughts. She glances at Will. He can still taste the jealousy sitting in the back of his throat, but he smiles at her and reaches out to weave his fingers through hers. She squeezes his hand tightly.

“I can’t wait until we own his ass,” Standish continues when no one responds. He rubs his hands together. “Ooh, it’s going to be so good. Maybe when I—”

“Shut up, Standish,” Jai snaps.

Standish looks appalled. “Okay, rude. What are you mad at me for? I’m not the one who pointed out all our flaws and then eye-fucked Frankie in front of Will.”

“Standish,” Susan chastises.

Standish throws up his hands. “What? He did!”

“Francesca,” Jai calls.

Frankie meets his gaze. They stare at each other for a second, and then she lets go of Will’s hand and strides across the room. Will watches as Jai pulls his phone out of his pocket and hands it to her, and then turns on his heel and moves toward the bar. He reaches beneath the second stool, flicks his wrist, and then all of a sudden a slab of the bar lifts open and two screens rise from seemingly out of nowhere.

“What the shit?” Standish says, scampering backward as if the screens might come to life and charge at him. “What is that?”

“It’s our security system,” Will answers.

“No it’s not. I know what our security system looks like. That ain’t it.”

“It’s our other security system. The one Jai designed.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Since when—”

“Shh,” Jai says, waving his hand without turning away from the screens. “Just stop talking for a minute.”

“But I—”

“Shhh.”

Standish looks incensed, but he doesn’t say anything else. For a moment, the only sound in the bar is Jai’s fingers tapping on a keyboard that also seems to have appeared out of nowhere.
“Done,” Frankie announces, looking up from Jai’s phone. She meets Will’s gaze from across the room. “They’re good.”

Will exhales in relief. “You check the house too?”

She nods. “No visitors.” She glances at Jai. “We good, Jai?”

“One second,” Jai says. He types for another few seconds, squinting at the screen, and then turns around. “Yes. We’re good.”

“If one of y’all doesn’t tell me what the shit you guys are talking about…” Standish says, brandishing his finger threateningly at all of them.

“Your phone’s security system can’t withstand RJ’s program,” Frankie answers. “Jai installed apps on all our phones that monitor for interference. We can’t stop Nick from listening in or reading our messages, but we can at least be aware if he is. I was checking to make sure he hasn’t hacked any of us.”

Standish looks worried. “Did he?”

“No. At least not yet.”

“And I was checking the Dead Drop,” Jai says, sliding his hands into his pockets and leaning back against the bar. “Nick used RJ’s program to hack our system so he could get in here. I needed to check and see if he left behind any tracking or monitoring software. He didn’t. And he didn’t plant any bugs while he was here either. No one is listening to us. For now, anyway. I’ll get an alert if that changes.”

Standish frowns. “So when you told me to shut up…”

“I was making sure you wouldn’t accidentally tell Nick we’re planning to put him six feet under,” Jai says. “Because then he’d put you six feet under.”

Standish looks sheepish. “Oh. My bad.”

Jai gives him a look and then turns his attention to Frankie. “Next move?”

Frankie glances around the room at their team. “Last chance. Anyone want out?”

Everyone shakes their heads. She looks at Will.

“Whiskey? You still in?”

He smiles. “You’re stuck with me, boo.”

Frankie’s lips barely form a smile, but Will can read the look in her eyes. She loves him, and she loves when he calls her boo. Even at work in front of their team. She’ll harass him about it later. But she loves it.

“So cute,” Susan whispers, her hand over her heart.

“It really is,” Ray admits.

“Yeahhh, I have a love-hate relationship with the whole pet name thing,” Standish announces. “On the one hand—”
“Shut up, Standish,” Jai cuts him off.

Standish nods. “Right. Shutting up.”

“Tell us what you need,” Jai says to Frankie.

Frankie chews her bottom lip and considers the question. “I need you to go back through your files and see what you came up with when we worked in Venice,” she says after a pause.


“All of it. Anything that’s waterproof. Acqua alta is bad this year. There’s water everywhere, and I want to know I’ve got the tools to deal with whatever the hell Nick has up his sleeve.”

Jai smirks. “I’ve got some things in mind.”

“Acqua alta?” Standish asks with a frown.

“It means high water,” Frankie explains. “Venice doesn’t have roads. It’s all canals. And they flood. This year is some of the worst flooding on record. So pack your rain boots.”

“I don’t have any rain boots.”

“Then I suggest you get some.”

Standish crinkles his nose. “I hate being wet. Why can’t we go somewhere warm and sunny that has roads? And maybe girls in bikinis?”

“I’ll pass your request along to Nick,” Frankie says dryly. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to oblige.”

Standish makes a face and mutters something under his breath that sounds like that jackass.

“What else do you need?” Susan asks.

Frankie turns to look at her. “I need profiles on Blake and Pierce. But you’ll have to be careful pulling their records. You can’t request them. Ollerman might have them flagged as a precaution. Have Standish hack them for you.”

Susan nods. “On it.”

Frankie turns to Ray. “I want a tac team on permanent standby in Venice. An unmanned safehouse as close to the address Nick left as we can get. And a weapons cache, identity exchange boxes, and everything else we usually have when we’re walking in blind.”

“You got it,” Ray says. “I’ll get you a list of all the events that are happening in the area over the next few days too. Might give you some clues about what Nick’s planning or where Blake might be.”

Frankie nods. “Yeah, good idea.” She turns to Standish. “I want you—”

“To hack shit for Susan,” he interrupts, waving his hand. “I got it.”

“Not just that,” Frankie says, shaking her head. “If we get the chance, we’re going to destroy RJ’s program in Venice.”

Standish gapes at her. So does everyone else.
“We’re...what?” Standish says.

“RJ’s program is self-smart,” Frankie explains, glancing around the room. “If it comes across something more advanced or something new, it updates itself to include the new process or code. And you’ve been working on a trojan horse virus that will seem like something new. So—”

“Well, it’s not really a virus,” Standish interrupts. “It’s a latent code that I can embed into an operating system or application. It combines old and new sequences of code in a unique pattern I invented, so it’ll appear new and trigger the program’s update process. Once the program updates, and my code is embedded permanently inside its code, I’ll be able to activate my latency protocol and take control of the program remotely.”

Everyone in the room stares at him blankly.

“So it’s a trojan horse virus,” Frankie says.

“No,” Standish insists. “Those are two different things. Viruses replicate, but trojan horses…” He trails off, looks around the room at all the still-blank expressions, and sighs in defeat. “Yeah, sure. It’s a trojan horse virus.”

“And it’s ready?”

Standish looks uncomfortable. “Technically? Yes. But I haven’t run as many tests as I’d like.”

“Then you have until we get on the plane tonight to run them. Because when we land in Venice tomorrow morning, I need it to be ready.”

“What are you going to do?” Susan asks.

“Nick’s going to make Standish hack The Trust’s financial system to bring down Blake. And when he does, Standish is going to act like he can’t do it.”

“You want me to play dumb?” Standish asks incredulously.

“Yes. I want you to hack in, download your trojan horse, and then pretend you can’t get past whatever Ollerman’s tech guys have come up with.”

“Why?”

“Because then I can ask Nick to use RJ’s program to do it for you. And when he does, you can activate your nerdy latency whatever, and give us control of the program.”

“Oh,” Standish says. He blinks. “That’s...that’s actually really smart.”

“It’s not smart,” Jai says, smiling at Frankie. “It’s brilliant.”

Frankie looks at Will from across the room. “Objections?”

Will doesn’t know what to say. Of course he has objections. He has objections to all of this. He doesn’t want their team working with Nick. He doesn’t want Standish trying to destroy RJ’s program right under Nick’s nose. And he sure as hell doesn’t want Frankie working with her asshole husband in the city where they fell in love. But he can’t say any of that in front of the team, and even if he could, he has no alternative options. They have to bring down Ollerman and The Trust. They have to take their shot at Nick while they can because they might not get another one. They’re stuck.
“No objections,” he says.

He can see it in Frankie’s eyes—she knows he’s lying. But she doesn’t call him on it.

“No objections,” he says. “Okay,” she says, turning back to the team. “We’ve got a limited amount of time to get this stuff done. Let’s get moving. Jai will text you the address of the airport we’re flying out of. Nick booked this plane, so it’s probably bugged.” She shoots a look at Standish. “So don’t run your mouth when you get there.”

“I never run my mouth,” Standish says. “I am the epitome of discretion.”

“Yeah, and I’m the king of the world,” Ray snorts.

Standish glares at him. “Shut up, ballet boy.”

Ray and Standish start to bicker, and Susan rolls her eyes and starts to referee. Will doesn’t pay them any attention because Frankie is walking toward him. When she stops in front of him, she reaches out and brushes her hand over his shoulder as if she’s brushing away some lint, but they both know there’s no lint.

“Meet me upstairs?” she asks softly.

He nods. “Okay.”

She gives him a tired smile and then turns away. Will heads for the stairs. When he gets to the top, he glances down toward the bar. Frankie has a box in her hand, and it takes him a second to remember that Nick walked in with a box but didn’t take it with him when he left. Jai is standing in front of her, and their heads are bent together like they’re discussing something. Will wonders if they’re talking about whatever is in that box. He wonders what’s in the box. And then he wonders if it’s better if he doesn’t know.

When he closes the door of the upstairs office behind him, the silence seems deafening. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He tries to remember one of the mantras Susan always repeats to him about managing his feelings, but he’s drawing a blank. All he can seem to remember is something Frankie said in Monte Carlo.

*Ending up with him seemed inevitable.*

He sighs and wanders over to the desk, running his fingers absently along the wooden edge as he walks around the side. The oak is cold beneath his fingers, probably because the heat doesn’t always work up here despite the consistent rattling of the vent in the corner. There’s an empty mug sitting on the corner of the desk, and a copy of *Thermodynamics for Engineers* sitting nearby. Jai must have been up here reading again. He does that sometimes when he wants some peace and quiet from Standish’s endless chatter.

Will studies the worn and faded wood. This desk holds a lot of memories. He remembers finding Frankie asleep up here once, the tips of her fingers peeking out of the too-big sleeves of one of his sweatshirts. He remembers watching her spin like a child in the desk chair as they bickered and then eventually bet over which one of them could disassemble and reassemble an AK-47 the fastest. (It’s him. She’s still pissed about it.) He remembers climbing on top of the desk and her after a particularly nasty fight, and the way she whispered *don’t you dare stop* and tightened her legs around his waist while Standish stood outside the door and whined about being locked out.

One memory, though, stands out above them all. A month after they decided to be together, he sat at this desk and confessed that he hated the way Rafael looked at her. Now, a month after they
decided to spend the rest of their lives together, he’s up here wrestling with an even worse confession.

He doesn’t know if he can watch her work with Nick.

The door creaks behind him. Will turns to see Frankie standing in the doorway. She closes the door behind her but doesn’t move toward him. They stare at each other from across the room, silence thick in the air. She’s still got that box in her hand. Apprehension flickers in his chest, and so does another flare of jealousy, but it fades when he recognizes the look in her eyes. It’s the same look she’s had every time she thinks he’s going to send her away, and he can’t bear the thought that she might be questioning whether or not he still loves her.

“Come here, Francesca,” he murmurs.

She sets the box down on the couch and crosses the room. He steps forward to meet her. She buries herself in his arms, her face pressed into the crook of his neck. He smooths a hand over her back. She lets out a heavy exhale, her body deflating against his, and he suddenly feels like a jerk. Here he is feeling sorry for himself, wondering how he’s going to watch her do this, and she’s the one who actually has to do it.

He dips his head forward to hold her tighter and catches a whiff of her hair. A few days ago, he found a travel-size bottle of hairspray rolling around the bottom of his backpack. He pulled it out, confused, because he doesn’t wear hairspray. And then—for reasons he still doesn’t understand—he smelled it. Frankie, of course, walked in the room just as he was doing so. She arched an eyebrow at him and said This is a new low for you, Whiskey. He sputtered out an explanation, and she laughed at him, and he had no choice but to kiss her just to shut her up.

That’s what her hair smells like now. That hairspray, and also that shampoo from the lime green bottle sitting in their shower, and those two other hair products that also come in lime green bottles that she keeps in their bathroom cabinet. He isn’t sure which scent is strongest, but it doesn’t matter because they smell like her and he likes that.

“I love you,” he murmurs into her hair.

She shakes her head and sighs. “I don’t know why.”

He knows she doesn’t mean it. She’s just emotionally drained and frustrated. But he doesn’t want to let it slide.

“You want me to list all the reasons?”

She huffs into his chest in response. He thinks it might have been a laugh, but he isn’t sure.

“There are a lot,” he tells her. “It’s an obnoxiously long list. But we’ve got a few hours before our flight leaves and I might be able to recite them all by then. I can’t promise summarizing all your finest qualities won’t make me want to write a few poems in your honor, though. Probably sonnets. And if I remember correctly, that’s the only rule we decided to keep.”

She leans back from his chest. She doesn’t go far—she’s still in his arms and she doesn’t seem like she wants to go anywhere anytime soon—but it’s far enough to look him in the eye.

“We kept the no pet name rule too.”

“Did we?” he asks innocently. “I must have missed that.”
She gives him a look.

“You like it,” he says confidently.

“I’ve never said that. Ever.”

“You said it last week.”

She frowns. “No I...” She trails off and he watches the realization dawn on her face. He smirks at her. She narrows her eyes and lifts her chin defiantly. “That was entrapment.”

“Entrapment?” he repeats incredulously. “How was that—”

“You know exactly how.”

“Bullshit. You walked into our bedroom wearing nothing but a towel—”

“I had just gotten out of the shower, Will. People wear towels after they shower.”

“And you stood there all damp and nice-smelling and undressed me with your eyes—”

“I did not.”

“You did. You looked me up and down and you said I was hoping I’d get some company in the shower in your sex voice and I’m the one who started it?”

“I didn’t say you started it,” she clarifies. “I said you tricked me into saying it because you wouldn’t get me off until I did. That’s entrapment. I never would have said it otherwise.”

“Liar,” he accuses.

The smile on her face flickers and then fades. He immediately feels like an idiot.

“Frankie,” he breathes, reaching up to hold her face. “I wasn’t—”

“I know.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know,” she cuts him off firmly.

He sighs and leans forward to press his forehead against hers. They stand there for a minute, soaking each other in while the heater rattles in the corner, and then she lifts her hand and strokes her fingers along his jaw.

“You know what else I know?” she murmurs.

“A hundred different ways to kill Standish with your bare hands?”

She snorts. “Yes,” she admits, laughter threading through her voice. She leans back to look him in the eye. “I know what we have, Whiskey. I know how I feel, and what I want, and it’s you. I love you. Only you.”

The knot of tension that’s been sitting in his chest loosens. He didn’t realize how much he needed to hear her say that.

“I love you too,” he breathes, stroking his fingers in a pattern over the small of her back.
“I’m sorry you have to do this.”

“You have to do it too.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not the same. If it were me in your shoes, I don’t think I could do it.”

“Yes you could. You can do anything.”

She smiles. “Because you’ve got enough faith in me for the both of us, right?”

Warmth blossoms in his chest at the memory she’s referencing. “You know, I usually hate when you throw my words back at me.”

“Cause I’m so much better at it than you.”

He ignores the insult. “But then you go and say things like that and I just…I mean, it’s like you want me to melt into a love puddle.”

“Don’t say love puddle. It sounds gross.”

“Love puddle,” he repeats immediately. “We’re standing knee deep in a love puddle, boo.”

She rolls her eyes, and he leans forward to taste her smile because he can’t resist. When they part, she sets her hands on his chest and takes a deep breath.

“Okay,” she sighs. And then she takes a few steps backward until she’s no longer in his embrace.

He frowns and drops his arms to his sides. “Why are you over there?”

“Because I promised no more secrets,” she replies as if it’s obvious. “I want to keep my promise, and I want you to trust me, so there are two things you need to know.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re over there.”

“I can’t think straight when you’re doing that thing with your hand.”

“What thing?”

“That thing on my back,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. “With the patterns.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “The patterns?”

“You know what I’m talking about,” she says, narrowing her eyes at him. “Quit smirking or I’m going to punch you.”

He wants to tease her, and he wants to close the distance between them and make it even harder for her to think straight, but he appreciates how much effort she’s putting into reassuring him, and he doesn’t want to make her feel embarrassed about liking to be touched.

“All right,” he says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “What’s the first thing?”

She folds her arms over her chest. Her shoulders are tense, and he can tell she doesn’t want to say whatever she’s about to, but her expression is determined.

“A couple months into my relationship with Nick, our team got a tip about a doctor The Collective was interested in,” she starts. “He specialized in stem cell research. They wanted him to work on
something for them, but he refused. So they blew up his research lab with him in it.”

Will frowns. “That seems a little excessive.”

“That’s one word for it,” Frankie says bitterly.

Will’s heart sinks at the tone of her voice. She’s about to tell him something tragic. He can tell.

“The lab was part of a hospital complex. It was in the same section as the children’s wing. When it exploded, it took the children’s wing with it. Fourteen kids died, and so did all the hospital staff who were working at the time.”

Shock and horror leave Will mute. Every time he thinks he knows how many terrible things she’s had to experience, he finds out it’s worse than he thought. His body tilts toward her without his permission, but he resists the urge to erase the distance she put between them.

“We’d been sent to extract the doctor and put him in hiding, so we were in the parking lot when it happened,” she continues softly. “There was a family behind us that was walking in to see their son. They were…” She exhales slowly. “It wasn’t great.”

He thinks of Tokyo, and how hard it seemed to hit her that they’d been too late to save that little girl, and he wonders if she had such a hard time because she remembered the last time she’d been too late to save a kid.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

She lifts her gaze to his. “It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that the man I married was part of a group that could do things like that. Nick knows that. He knows that unless I move past that, we have no chance. That’s why he’s always so eager to talk about our past. And that’s why I brought it up today.”

Will frowns. “I don’t understand.”

“He was fixating on Standish and RJ’s program. And when he fixates, it’s dangerous. He’s like a dog with a bone. He doesn’t give up. I had to make him focus on something else. And there’s only one thing that distracts him enough to shift his focus.”

“You,” Will realizes.

Frankie nods. “Me. So I picked a fight with him.”

“It worked.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. She studies him for a second, her eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t think I need to tell you that this is the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done. Standish is one mistake away from being in the crosshairs. All of you are. And I’m the only one who can keep you safe.”

Will feels jealousy start to surge up into his throat like vomit. He swallows it down, but the acrid taste lingers. He thinks he knows what she’s saying, but he asks anyway.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that when we get to Venice, there are going to be times when it looks like he still has a chance. It’s going to seem like you have something to worry about. But you don’t. Any fight I pick with him, any victory he seems to win, it’s just so that I can distract him. I made my choice, Will.
And I chose you.”

A flurry of emotions stir in Will’s chest. Love. Relief. Gratitude. Anger. Jealousy. But before he can settle on one, they’re all eclipsed by the realization of just how unfair all of this is for her. Nick broke her heart. Nick murdered the family she found after she lost her parents. Nick stalks her, and gives her panic attacks, and makes her question her worth. But she has to work with him, and she has to make him believe she might still love him, and it’s just...it’s so unfair.

“You shouldn’t have to do this,” he says.

“I shouldn’t have had to do a lot of things. But here we are.”

There’s resolve instead of resignation in her voice. He’s not surprised. He’s noticed this about her before. She’ll complain about missions in cold locales and how annoying Standish is and how much she hates that she can’t shoot bad guys just for being bad guys, but she never, ever complains about what she’s been through. She just puts her head down and pushes through and comes out on the other side, battered and bruised and stunning and extraordinary.

She must be able to read the sadness on his face because her expression softens. When she whispers, “I’m sorry,” he knows she’s misinterpreted what he’s heartbroken about.

He shakes his head. “Don’t be. I knew we’d end up here.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’ve spent the last month trying to figure out another way that we could do this.”

“Me too,” she admits.

“Any ideas?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

He sighs. “Me neither.” He rubs his temples and tries not to think about how much he wants to strangle Nick. “So what’s the second thing?”

She nods toward the box sitting on the couch. “Nick left that here.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” she says, lifting a shoulder. “It’s nothing dangerous. I had Jai check. It’s addressed to me. And today’s our wedding anniversary. So I’m guessing it’s an anniversary present.”

Will feels jealousy start to push against the back of his throat again. He wonders if he’ll ever get used to it. “You going to open it?”

“That’s up to you.”

Will lifts his eyebrows in surprise. Frankie holds his gaze resolutely.

“If you want me to open it, we can do it together,” she says. “But if you want me to throw it in the dumpster out back, I can do that too. Or you could toss it in the East River. Or light it on fire.” She smiles. “Whatever you want.”

It isn’t lost on Will just how sweet of a gesture this is from a woman who used to claim to be incapable of sweet gestures. For a second, all he can think about is how far they’ve come. Nine months ago they were friends with benefits, she went AWOL every time things got serious, and he had no idea she was married. Now they live together, and he regularly peruses jewelry websites
looking for the perfect engagement ring, and she’s offering to let him decide what to do with her anniversary present from her asshole husband.

“What if I put it in a trash compactor?” he asks.

Her smile deepens. “Sounds gratifying.”

“Or I could let Jai blow it up.”

“I’m sure he’d be more than happy to.”

Will lets his mind wander through a brief fantasy of just how much gratification he and Jai would get from blowing up whatever Nick put in that box for Frankie. But then he pushes it aside and focuses on reality. And the reality is they can’t afford to destroy it.

“You’re going to have to pretend like he still has a chance to win you back,” he tells her. “And that means you need to know what’s in that box. So we should open it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

She studies him for a second, probably looking for some hesitation, but she doesn’t seem to find any. So she crosses the room, grabs the box from the couch, and walks toward him. She sets the box on the desk, and then reaches down into her left boot and pulls out a knife. She flicks it open, and the blade flashes beneath the fluorescent lighting of the office. She’s reaching for the box when she glances up and catches him staring. She freezes with her knife poised over the box.

“What?”

He snaps to attention. “Nothing.”

She arches an eyebrow.

“You’re just really sexy with a knife in your hand,” he admits.

She rolls her eyes. “Keep it in your pants, Whiskey.”

He grins. She smiles and cuts the box open. When she lifts the flaps of the top, he shuffles closer to her and leans forward to see what’s inside.

It’s a square cardboard sleeve holding a vinyl album. The photo on the front is of a skinny man sitting on what appears to be the curb of a cobblestone street. James Morrison is written in capital letters in the bottom left corner, and beneath his name is the title Songs For You, Truths For Me.

Will glances up at Frankie’s face. Her eyebrows are furrowed, and her jaw is clenched the way it is when she’s trying to control her emotions. Her eyes have gone glassy. Her back is ramrod straight and her shoulders are set and rigid, and he can feel the tension radiating from her in waves. He watches as she pulls the album from the box slowly, her eyes flickering over the picture on the cover.

“Frankie?” he asks her softly when she doesn’t say anything.

She swallows hard. “You and I have a playlist,” she whispers. “Nick and I had James Morrison.”

Jealousy gnaws at Will’s heart. He glances at the album as she turns it over to look at the back. She
runs her hand over the cardboard the same way someone might stroke something priceless, and Will tells himself it’s because she’s lost in memories and not longing.

“We saw him in concert once at this remodeled industrial building in Germany,” she murmurs. “He never really hit it big. There were only a couple songs that made it on the radio. But we didn’t care. We loved him. And this album was...” She chews her bottom lip like she’s searching for the right descriptor. “It was our soundtrack.”

There’s a track list printed on the back of the album sleeve. Frankie points at one called Precious Love. “This is Nick’s favorite.” She lowers her finger down a line to the track If You Don’t Want To Love Me. “This is mine.”

She exhales slowly, and then lifts her finger to point at a third, a song entitled You Make It Real. “And this is our song.”

Will doesn’t know what to say, so he presses his lips together and opts to say nothing. Frankie looks lost, and more than a little sad, and even through the overpowering jealousy that’s threatening to drown him, Will once again feels terrible that she has to deal with all this.

She stares at the album for another few seconds, and then lifts her gaze to his. He watches as the haze of memory clears from her eyes and is almost immediately replaced with guilt.

“Will,” she says softly.

She doesn’t finish her thought, but he doesn’t need her to.

“Doesn’t feel great,” he admits. He pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “But as long as I don’t find you awake in the middle of the night, listening to this album because you miss him, I’ll survive.”

“I don’t.”

He frowns. “Don’t what?”

“Miss him.”

The knot in his chest loosens. He needed to hear that too.

“Good to know,” he murmurs.

She studies him, her eyes flickering over his face beneath furrowed brows. She sets the record back in the box, and turns to face him. “We can do this.”

“Yeah,” he agrees with a nod. “We can do this.”

She leans toward him, her head bent, and their height difference brings his mouth in line with the top of her head. He kisses her forehead.

“Promise me, Will,” she whispers.

He reaches for the hand hanging at her side and curls his fingers around her pinky.

“I promise.”

The address Nick left for them in Venice isn’t listed anywhere on the internet.
At the Dead Drop, before she goes upstairs to talk to Will, Frankie asks Jai to look into it. When he appears by her side on the tarmac at the airport a few hours later, he looks annoyed that he has to tell her he can’t figure out what it is. He knows it’s not a hotel, despite the fact that it’s surrounded by them. He knows it’s not a business. He knows that based on its location on the Grand Canal, and the landmarks it’s surrounded by, it’s probably valued in the millions. But he can’t say for certain what it is.

Jai rarely—almost never—says the words I don’t know. The fact that he’s saying them now, before the most dangerous mission they’ve ever had, is not comforting. Neither is the way Standish seems a little skittish after they board the plane, or the way Susan is overly cheerful when she insists they all play Uno, or the way Will seems to be even more affectionate than usual.

Frankie knows they’re all adults capable of making their own decisions. She knows they’re skilled spies who are capable of taking care of themselves. They signed up for this. But she feels the weight of their lives sitting on her chest, heavy and suffocating, and she feels like she’s cracking beneath the pressure. She sees Mina’s face instead of Susan’s, and she hears RJ’s voice instead of Standish’s, and when her eyes meet Jai’s she can see the ghosts lurking there. She’s failed before, and she could fail again, and she knows that this time, if she fails, she won’t come back from it.

Halfway through their flight, she’s still wide awake. It’s past midnight. The cabin is dark and silent and everyone is asleep except her. Will is in the seat next to her, his body turned toward hers. She’s studying the way his chest is rising and falling, and the peaceful look on his face, and the way his hair is just a little mussed. She’s definitely not watching him sleep though. Because that would be pathetic. She might be completely, ridiculously, devastatingly in love with him, but she is not pathetic.

His nose twitches sometimes when he sleeps. It’s adorable.

Yeah, she’s definitely watching him sleep.

She’s pathetic.

She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose and tries to figure out when, exactly, she became that girl. But then she decides she doesn’t give a shit, because no one is awake. If she wants to watch her boyfriend sleep, she can watch her boyfriend sleep.

She’s staring at the fourth finger of his left hand, thinking about what kind of wedding band he would wear and trying not to think about the silver band she bought for Nick three days before he faked his death, when Will speaks.

“Penny for them.”

Frankie jolts in her seat. “Jesus, Will,” she says, pressing her hand to her heart. And then she smacks his chest. “You know I hate that.”

“You hate when I ask you what you’re thinking while you watch me sleep?” he asks dryly.

She shoots him a look. “I wasn’t watching you sleep.”

“It’s okay. I know I’m cute when I sleep. I’d watch myself if I could.”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

She doesn’t have to look at him to know he’s grinning. She purses her lips around a smile of her own. He reaches for her hand. She watches as he turns it over in her lap, her palm facing upward,
and strokes his fingertips gently over her skin. He traces upward, feather-light over the inside of her wrist, and then back down. Goosebumps race over her skin.

“You want to talk about it?” he whispers.

“Can’t,” she whispers back.

It’s not an excuse. They can’t. She was right when she predicted that Nick would bug the plane. He did. Jai checked before they took off.

Anger flashes briefly in Will’s eyes. She knows it’s not directed at her. The arm rest between their seats is already up, so there’s nothing in her way when she leans closer to him. He wraps an arm around her and pulls her closer so that’s she’s halfway in his lap. She nuzzles into the curve of his shoulder, her nose brushing his neck. He’s warm, and he smells good. Like home.

“I had the best dream before I woke up to find you staring at me like a creep,” he murmurs, stroking his hand up and down her arm.

“Was it about throwing knives?”

“You’re the only person who thinks that’s a good dream.”

“Jai loves them too.”

“That doesn’t vindicate you the way you think it does.”

She snorts.

“It was about us,” he clarifies.

“Are you about to pretend you had a sex dream so that I’ll sneak off to the bathroom with you?”

“Would I need to pretend I had a sex dream to get you to do that?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so.”

She smiles. They’ve had airplane bathroom sex on more than one occasion. There’s also a slight possibility (read: definite certainty) that a bickering match on a flight somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico ended with him sliding his hand down the front of her pants and getting her off while everyone in the front of the plane was still very much awake. But she’s not feeling very sexy at the moment, and she can tell he’s not either, and honestly, it’s kind of nice to just sit in the circle of his arms.

“So what’d you dream about?” she asks.

“All this was over,” he answers. “Bad guys were vanquished, world was safe, and we finally got to retire. So we did. Took a long vacation.”

“Where’d we go?”

“I dunno. Somewhere with a beach. Lots of white sand and blue water. You wore a lot of very tiny bikinis.”

She smiles. “Of course I did.”
“Got a real pretty tan. And then when we got back to the city, you put on that white dress and married me in the same church your parents got married in.”

Frankie’s heart shoots into her throat. She’s always wanted to get married in that church. She thought it would be to Nick. She’s glad it wasn’t.

“ Took another vacation after that because we earned it,” Will continues quietly. “Then we came back to New York and opened a bookstore.”

She smiles. “What is this, a Hallmark movie?”

“Shut up, it’s my dream. We sold used books. And records, too. We had one of those Gone for Lunch signs that we’d put up on the front door so we could take long lunches down by the river every day. And on slow days, we’d have sex in the back office.”

Frankie traces her fingers along the neck of his sweater. “Just on slow days?”

“Well, sometimes you wanted to do it when there were customers out front because you have that kinky thing about public sex.”

Frankie taps her fingers on his chest. “I have two words for you, Will Chase: Berlin train.”

“Oh shit,” he says softly.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s what you said on the train to Berlin too.”

He laughs.

“So we spend the rest of our lives selling books and having sex, huh?” she asks, tracing the neck of his sweater again.

“Nah, we have kids too. Little girl, then a little boy. Jai becomes a master of diaper changing. Standish teaches them to play video games. Susan and Ray get married and have kids, and our kids are best friends with their kids, and our daughter marries their son.”

“I refuse to be related to Ray.”

Will laughs again. “Our daughter likes to argue just as much as her mom, and she also hates bad guys like her mom, so she grows up to become a prosecutor at the U.S. Attorney’s office. Little Will becomes a doctor. And we become those parents who brag about their kids to everyone they meet. Then they have kids of their own, and we spoil them rotten while we wear matching cardigans.”

“I never agreed to the cardigans.”

“You will.”

“I will not.”

She can feel his laugh rumble through his chest again. It’s soothing and familiar, and for the first time since she stood on the tarmac with Jai, she starts to feel at ease.

“Sounds like happily ever after,” she whispers.

He presses his mouth to the top of her head. “I think so too.”
Frankie closes her eyes. His hand is rubbing over her back like it does when she’s falling asleep in his arms at home. She concentrates on the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath her, and nuzzles her nose into his neck until she feels surrounded by that smell she loves so much, that mix of body wash and cologne and whatever it is that’s just...him.

“I love you,” he whispers.

She’d never say it out loud because she’s not that pathetic, but the last thing she thinks before she falls asleep is *Not as much as I love you.*

When Frankie wakes, that unsettled feeling is back.

It sits in the pit of her stomach like a brick, heavy and uncomfortable. Every muscle in her body is tense. There’s a headache pounding between her eyes.

Will notices. He doesn’t say anything because the rest of the team is awake and Susan has just handed them a psych profile on Blake, but he traces patterns on her knee while they read.

The feeling lingers when they land in Venice, and then intensifies as their water taxi drives them closer to the address Nick left. When the boat glides to a stop outside of a palazzo, they’re all a little stunned.

It’s gorgeous. The dock leading from the canal to a wrought iron gate is clearly brand new and looks pristine compared to some of the older ones nearby. Beyond the gate is a courtyard lined with privacy shrubs and a wrought iron fence.

The building itself is tall and elegant. The walls are a pale pink stucco, and the white stonework around the black-shuttered windows is beautiful. White pillars line the edges of each of the four floors, and lift to form pointed arches with intricate stone designs. Jutting out of the second floor is a large terrace bordered by an ornately carved railing and white stone balustrades. Beyond the terrace is a wall of glass that looks out over the Grand Canal. There are two additional but separated balconies on the fourth floor, also lined by white stonework.

The driver of the water taxi stops the boat at the end of the dock, and they all climb out with their bags in hand. Jai has Nick’s instructions, so he leads the way. The still-high waters of the canal lap up over the sides of the dock as they walk, and send Standish scurrying toward the gate with a muttered, “I swear to god if these boots get wet…”

The gate is marked by a sign that says *Private Property: No Trespassing.* Jai unlocks the security system that’s embedded in a post and then pushes open the gate. The courtyard behind it is small but impressive. If Frankie had to guess, she’d say the tilework is probably original. There’s a working fountain in the middle, and some classy furniture arranged nearby.

They follow Jai toward a short staircase. At the top, he has to unlock another security system. Once he does, a set of doors slide open and reveal an elevator. Jai steps on, and so does Susan.


“It’ll be fine, Standish,” Will says.

“Nope,” Standish replies, crossing his arms. “I’m too cute to suffocate in an ancient elevator with y’all.”

Frankie rolls her eyes, shoves him onto the elevator, and then steps in after him.
Standish whirls around to face her with a glare. “Devil woman.”

“Would you believe you’re not the first man to call me that?”

“Yes. And I doubt I’ll be the last.”

Will snorts as he steps onto the elevator. Between the five of them and their baggage, there’s not much room. The doors close slowly. The car doesn’t move.

“Why aren’t we moving?” Standish asks, his voice an octave higher than usual.

“Because there’s one more security feature,” Jai mutters. He’s squinting at a digital panel that’s on the side wall of the elevator.

“Did we have to do this after the doors closed?” Standish whines. “Why couldn’t we do it before?”

“Because that’s not how it works,” Frankie replies. “The doors will lock and we’ll be trapped if Jai doesn’t do this right. It’s a security feature.”

“I think I’m having an asthma attack,” Standish wheezes, grasping his throat.

“You don’t have asthma,” Susan says dryly.

Standish clutches his throat tighter. “Tell my mom I love her,” he croaks.

“Is it bad that I’m kind of hoping he suffocates from stress?” Frankie wonders.

“Yes,” Will replies.

Jai makes a soft *hah* sound, and then the car starts to rattle upward. Standish gasps in relief. “Thank you baby Jesus in the manger.”

“We could still get stuck,” Frankie points out.

Standish whimpers. Will shoots Frankie a look. Frankie grins at him. Standish shuffles a little closer to Will and bumps Frankie in the process. Frankie glares at him. Standish sticks his tongue out at her.

“I hate to break it to you, kiddo, but I can’t do much for you if we get stuck,” Will says.

Standish cuddles closer to him. “I find comfort in your presence.”

“If you find any more comfort than that we’re going to have a problem,” Frankie mutters.

Susan snorts as the elevator stops and the doors slide open.

Frankie and Will are the first ones off. They step into an entryway with soaring ceilings, marble floors, and a gorgeous chandelier.

“Wow,” Will murmurs.

Frankie eyes the fresco painted on the ceiling. “Yeah. Wow.”

“So is this a house?” Standish asks, appearing next to Frankie. “Did some rich Romeo and Juliet dude used to live here and count his gold coins? Because I’ve always wanted to count gold coins.
Like Scrooge McDuck in that *Christmas Carol* cartoon.”

“It’s not a house,” Frankie corrects. “It’s—”


Frankie turns toward his voice. He’s standing at the top of a sweeping marble staircase. His eyes meet hers, and when he smiles, her heart shoots into her throat. That’s not his smug, taunting smile. That’s the same smile he gave her the day she said *I do*.

“It’s one of the oldest existing buildings in Venice,” Nick explains, starting to walk down the stairs. “Built in the eleventh century. Owned by a Venetian nobleman who was executed for attempting an infamous coup d’etat against the republic in the 1300s. Burned down in the sixteenth century and then was rebuilt, and underwent extensive renovations in the eighteenth. It changed hands throughout the early twentieth, and then sat in disrepair until about five years ago.”

Nick steps off the bottom stair, and then crosses the marble floor to stand before them. The past few times Frankie has seen him, he’s been wearing a three-piece suit and sporting a beard. Not anymore. This time, he looks like the Nick she fell in love with—dark jeans and a henley, stubble on his jaw but no beard, and the silver chain that holds his St. Michael pendant visible around his neck. His sleeves are pushed up to his elbows, revealing his tattoo-covered forearms. Frankie’s eyes trip briefly over the ink words that start at his right wrist and curl upward around his arm, and then the wedding ring tattoo on his fourth finger that she knows looks like a band but actually consists of letters.

She forces herself to meet his gaze. He’s giving her that smile again.

She hates that smile.

“What happened five years ago?” Standish wonders.

“I bought it,” Nick replies.

The second the words come out of his mouth, Frankie realizes two things. First, this is why Jai couldn’t find any information on this place—because Nick has RJ’s program, and RJ’s program can make things disappear from the internet. Second, this is why she felt so unsettled. Because somewhere in the back of her mind, in those dark recesses of memory she ignores because they hurt too much, there was a memory of this place.

Well, not this exact place. More like the *idea* of this place. And now that she’s standing here, and Nick is standing across from her with that look in his eyes, it’s all flooding back.

Three weeks after they secretly got married, they stayed in Venice for a night in between missions. They ditched the rest of the team as soon as they arrived, hopped in a gondola headed for the Rialto Bridge, and traded daydreams about the future while they floated down the Grand Canal. They’d always talked about leaving the spy life behind and settling down in a house on the beach. But she remembers that afternoon, Nick suggested Venice instead. They could buy a palazzo, fix it up, and raise their kids and grow old in the city where they fell in love.

Frankie feels like she’s drowning in memories. She can see the same memories reflected in Nick’s eyes.

“You remember,” he says softly.

It’s not a question. He knows she does. She wants to deny it, but she knows she can’t. She can feel
Will standing beside her, his body taut as a bowstring as he watches her. She wants to fold herself into his side and brush her hands over his face and her lips over his mouth and whisper *Just you, only you,* but she can’t do that either.

“Yes,” she says instead.

Nick looks thrilled. Will’s jaw clenches.

“Hold up,” Standish says. He glances between Frankie and Nick with furrowed eyebrows. “Are you telling me there are now *two* criminal masterminds who have bought you real estate?”

“Who else bought you real estate?” Nick asks with a frown.

“Handsome drug lord,” Standish answers before Frankie can.

Nick smirks. “Oh, that’s right. Rafael and his penthouse.”

“I still think you’re dumb for not living in that penthouse,” Standish says bluntly. “It had a jacuzzi tub. And two floors!”

Nick shakes his head with a smirk. “She doesn’t need two floors. Her brownstone has four.”

Standish makes a choking sound. “Excuse me, you own a *brownstone*?!” he demands, whirling toward Frankie. “Like, a whole-ass brownstone? By yourself?”

Frankie shoots Nick a look and then says, “Yes.”

Standish gapes at her, his eyes wide, and then he breathes, “Oh my god, you’re rich. My spy mom is rich.” He looks at Will and grins. “You sly dog. No wonder you moved in. You gotta lock down your sugar mama.”

Frankie elbows him in the ribs. Standish grunts, doubles over, and gasps for air. Nick lifts his eyebrows.

“Can we move on?” Jai asks, stepping forward. He levels an annoyed look at Nick. “I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say we’re only here for business. Let’s get the show on the road.”

“Don’t you want to unpack first?” Nick asks.

A wave of nausea crashes over Frankie. She can’t seem to find the words to ask the question she already knows the answer to. Standish, still hunched over and clutching his ribs, lifts his head and asks it for her.

“Did you just say *unpack*?”

“What do you mean unpack?” Jai says in a dangerously low voice.

Nick gestures at the marble staircase. “I mean go upstairs and unpack.”

“We’re staying *here*?” Standish asks, straightening. “With *you*? In the house you bought for Frankie?”

Nick smiles. “That’s correct.”

“Well that’s not awkward at all,” Standish mutters.
Frankie finally finds her words.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” she snaps.

Nick grins. “What’s the matter, baby? You afraid you’ll be tempted to sneak into my room the way you used to?”

Frankie glares at him. “The deal was to run missions with you. Not live with you. We’ll stay in a hotel.”

“I don’t believe you specified staying in a hotel as part of your demands. You requested their safety, and you’ll be safer here than in a hotel. So really, I’m giving you what you asked for.”

“Bullshit. We’re going to a hotel.”

“Then the deal’s off.”

Everyone stares at him in surprise. Frankie grits her teeth and tries to breathe around the rage that’s building in her chest.

“Your choice,” Nick says with a shrug. “You staying here, or you going home empty-handed?”

“You’re a real piece of work,” Susan says.

Nick winks at her.

“We’ll stay,” Will says.

Frankie turns toward him, ready to argue, but he runs his hand gently down her back and looks down at her. He’s wearing one of those pleasantly blank expressions he wears when he’s talking to one of the cocky assholes they have to deal with during debriefings. His fingers dip beneath the hem of her blazer and trace a pattern on the small of her back, and she suddenly remembers their conversation in the upstairs office of the Dead Drop.

“Fine,” she says, looking back at Nick. “We’ll stay.”

Nick glances between her and Will, a hint of surprise flashing in his eyes, but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

“Excellent,” he says. “Standish, Susan, and Jai, you’ll be on the next floor up. I’m afraid there’s only two bedrooms on that floor, so Jai and Standish, you’ll have to bunk together. There are two beds in one of the rooms.” He smiles at Susan. “Don’t worry, each bedroom has its own bathroom. You won’t have to share with the boys.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” Susan says dryly.

Nick turns toward Frankie. “We’ll be on the top floor. The master suite on the right side is mine. Chase, you can take the bedroom on the left.” He smiles at Frankie. “And you can choose whichever one you prefer.”

“I already did,” Frankie says, leaning toward Will.

“Oh damn,” Standish mutters, flicking his gaze between Will, Frankie, and Nick. “This about to be like General Hospital. Except, like, General Spy Palazzo instead.”

Jai gives him a look. “You don’t have to say something just because you’re thinking it.”
Standish looks a little sheepish. “Right. My bad.”

Nick smiles. “Chase needs to be somewhere soon, so don’t take forever unpacking. We’ll meet in the salon in half an hour to go over the details.”

Apprehension wraps around Frankie’s throat like a vise.

“Where are you sending him?” she asks.

Nick smiles. “You’ll see.”
“Do you think you guys are going to have a hard time having sex tonight with the virgin Mary and baby Jesus giving you judgmental eyes from across the room?”

“Standish,” Susan chastises.

“What?” Standish asks from his sprawled out position on Will and Frankie’s bed. He gestures at the very old and very expensive painting hanging on the wall nearby. “It’s right there. Like, direct eye line. Y’all gonna have an audience while you do the horizontal hula.”

“I’m going to murder him,” Frankie mutters to Will. She’s standing by the open door leading out to their small private balcony, staring at the canal and trying to resist the urge to pull out her favorite knife and carve curse words into the walls.

Will runs his hand down her back. “No you aren’t,” he says quietly.

“I am,” she argues. “Won’t be quick either.”

“Do you think Nick put it there on purpose?” Standish wonders, oblivious to their hushed conversation. “Like maybe he thought the watchful eye of the messiah could keep y’all from doing the nasty?”

“Nick’s not religious and neither am I,” Frankie says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “So no.”

“Well you don’t have to be religious to have respect for baby Jesus’s virgin eyes.”

“It’s just a painting, Standish.”

“Yeah, a painting that’s been placed very strategically.”

“My knee is going to strategically find your balls if you don’t shut the hell up.”

Standish curls into a ball and covers his crotch with his hands. “Well you obviously need some Jesus.”

Frankie gives Will a look, but he’s already frowning disapprovingly at Standish.

“Stop provoking her, Standish.”

“I wasn’t!” Standish insists. “I’m just saying—”

“Just don’t say anything,” Will cuts him off. “And quit eating Doritos in our bed.”

“I can’t help it. You know I get snack-y when I’m stressed.”

“I swear to god if my pillow smells like Cool Ranch you’re going to lose a limb,” Frankie mutters. “Girl, these are Spicy Sweet Chili,” Standish scoffs. “You know I don’t play with Cool Ranch.”

Susan snatches the bag of Doritos out of Standish’s hand.
“Hey!” Standish yelps. “Give me back my stress snack! I’m under a lot of pressure!”

“We all are,” Susan says. “Frankie most of all. So quit being self-absorbed and act your age instead of your shoe size. Get off the bed and come stand over here and I’ll give you your gross chips back.”

“They are not gross,” Standish snaps. He scurries off the bed and snatches the bag back from Susan. “They’re delicious and comforting and you have bad taste and I’m ashamed to be associated with you.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

Standish makes a loud and offended harrumph sound, and then launches into a speech about why his snack preferences are better than everyone else’s. Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose again. Will curls his hand around the back of her neck, digs his fingers into her skin, and starts to rub small circles into her tense muscles. She exhales and closes her eyes.

“I’m going to be fine,” he whispers in a voice only she can hear. “I’ll jump through his hoops, and then I’ll come back here with a bottle of wine and we can scandalize baby Jesus together.”

Frankie snorts. Will leans forward and kisses her temple, and she can feel his smile against her skin.

The door to their bedroom swings open with a creak. Frankie turns toward the sound, and Will drops his hand from her neck.

Jai is standing in the doorway, his lips a thin line of displeasure. He scans the room until he finds Frankie. He holds her gaze for a beat, and she can see it all in his eyes—rage, sadness, worry.

“Clean,” he tells her. He glances at the rest of the team. “There are no bugs or cameras in any of our rooms.”

“Thank god,” Standish sighs. He gestures at his body. “Nobody gets to see my goods unless we about to get nasty.”

“Gross,” Frankie tells him.

Jai fiddles with one of his cufflinks. “We should probably go down to the salon.”

Will nods. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

He reaches for Frankie’s hand, and she lets him weave his fingers through hers and lead her toward the door. Susan is the first out into the hall, and Standish follows her while muttering about why they can’t call the salon the living room like normal people. Jai is hanging back just inside the doorway. Frankie knows why. She stops next to him. Will pauses with a frown, but then he glances between her and Jai and seems to understand. He squeezes her hand and shoots her an encouraging smile before he follows Susan and Standish out of the room.

“I’ve got RJ’s blinders and white noise protocols in place,” Jai tells her quietly once they’re alone. “Even if he plants something, it won’t work. You don’t have to worry about him watching or listening to you and Will.”

“Thank you.”

He nods and continues to fiddle with his cufflink. Frankie watches him. His presence feels just as
soothing to her as Will’s fingers did when they were massaging the tension out of her neck, but she isn’t sure her presence is having the same effect. He’s fidgety, and that’s not a good sign. Today is going to be hard for him. Tonight will be worse. Nighttime is always the hardest for him, and sleeping under the same roof as the man who killed the love of his life is going to suck.

Frankie reaches out and covers his hand with hers. “Stay with me tonight.”

Jai shakes his head. “No.”

“Will won’t mind. He can bunk with Standish.”

“No. Nick will notice that.”

“So what? I don’t give a shit what he thinks.”

“Well I do. And I’m not going to let him win.”

“Jai—”

“I said no, Francesca.”

Frankie sighs. “Why are you so stubborn?”

“Just trying to keep up with you.”

He says it in an uncharacteristically petulant voice, which makes Frankie smile. Jai notices. He smiles too. His expression softens, and he reaches out to fuss with the lapels of her blazer the way he does when he’s worried about her but can’t quite bring himself to say it.

Concern wars with affection in her chest. She expected him to refuse to sleep in her room even though she knows he wants to. If it was just the two of them, she would insist. But it’s not just the two of them anymore, and he won’t be alone. She never thought she’d think that bunking with Standish would be better than being alone, but a lot has changed since they all started working together. Standish is annoying and immature and self absorbed, but he loves Jai. He’ll keep an eye on him.

Frankie reaches up to straighten his tie even though it’s already perfectly straight. She knows she’s the only person on the planet who’s allowed to adjust his clothing. Sometimes she does it just because she can.

“Gates of hell,” she whispers.

“And straight fucking through,” he replies fiercely.

She smiles. “Come on,” she murmurs, clutching his sleeve and pulling him toward the stairs. “Time to save the world again.”

They walk down the hall and descend the marble staircase side by side, their shoulders and the backs of their knuckles brushing as they walk. Frankie tries to ignore the paintings hanging on the walls. They’re all depictions of various landmarks and scenes in Venice painted by famous Impressionists. There’s a Monet and a Renoir; a Manet and a Pissarro. Frankie likes Impressionism, and Nick knows that. He knows because he was with her when she realized she liked it—they spent two weeks pretending to be art thieves working for the Zaqr Network about a year into their relationship.
It’s not an accident that he chose these paintings. Nothing about this place is an accident. Not the crystal chandeliers that seem to make each room sparkle, or the calla lilies sitting in a vase in the entryway, or the fountain in the courtyard with a bunch of pennies sitting in the bottom. Nick put a lot of work into making this palazzo the kind of place she would’ve loved to live in once. Hell, she’d love to live in it now. And she hates that.

When they get to the bottom of the steps, Jai wraps his hand around her bicep and squeezes. Frankie would bet her brownstone that he knows what she’s thinking. She covers his hand with hers and squeezes back.

They cross the marble floor of the entryway and head in the direction of a wide corridor. The salon at the end of the hall is, unsurprisingly, gorgeous. The marble floors continue throughout, though the center of the room is covered with a red and gold patterned rug. Two couches, a chaise, and a coffee table are arranged on top of the rug beneath another crystal chandelier. On the far wall, floor to ceiling windows and a pair of glass doors look out over the terrace and the canal.

The room is decorated with a seamless mix of old world charm and sleek, modern pieces. Just like with the rest of the house, almost everything Frankie sees is something she would have picked out herself. The antique bookcases on the left wall catch her eye almost immediately. She’s certain that if she took a closer look at the titles printed along the spines, she’d find many of the same books that are in her mom’s collection. She doesn’t look.

Will is standing in front of the bookshelves. He turns toward her the second she passes through the archway of the corridor, and she crosses the room to stand next to him. Standish is sprawled out on one of the couches and gaping at the fresco painted on the ceiling, his mouth open comically wide. Susan is seated on the chaise. She’s running her fingers along the gilded golden edge of the coffee table with a similarly stunned, though less comical, look.

Nick is standing in front of the far wall of windows with his back to the room and his hands folded behind his back. He knows he’s got an audience, but he doesn’t turn around. Frankie knows he’s waiting for her to address him. A sudden, vivid memory assaults her—she’s standing in her kitchen, and Nick is wrapping his arms around her from behind and whispering in her ear I love the way you say my name—but she pushes it away and leans closer to Will.

“Nick,” she calls.

He turns at the sound of her voice. Their eyes meet, and he smiles. “Francesca.”

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

She expects him to be an ass and ask how she likes the palazzo before getting down to business, but he doesn’t. His shoulders straighten and his chin lifts as he glances around the room at the assembled team. Frankie tries not to think about how much she used to love that glint he gets in his eye before a mission.

“Venice is an ancient city,” he says to the room. “And like a lot of ancient cities—Paris, London, Rome—it has underground crypts and catacombs.”

“You mean like where dead people get buried?” Standish says with a slight squeak in his voice.

Nick looks amused. “Yes. The city has tried to keep up with its European siblings by marketing the underground into a tourist attraction. If you wanted, you could take a tour of some abandoned catacombs. There are no shortage of ghost stories.”
“Hard pass,” Standish says, shaking his head. “Super, duper hard pass.”

Nick looks amused again. Frankie hates that he seems to actually like Standish. He seemed to like RJ too.

“Good choice,” Nick replies. “It’d be a complete waste of your time.”

“Because?” Frankie prompts, trying to draw Nick’s eyes away from Standish and back to her.

“Because the most spectacular catacomb in the city isn’t open to the public,” Nick answers, glancing her way. “In fact, nobody’s even heard of it. You could Google it right now and you’d come up with nothing.” He looks at Standish. “Do it. Google the San Maurizio catacomb.”

Standish glances at Frankie.

“Don’t,” Frankie tells him.

Standish’s shoulders slump a little. He looks at Nick. “Mom said no.”

“Because she’s in work mode,” Nick replies. He gazes at Frankie from across the room, an affectionate smile pulling at his lips. “She doesn’t like to play when she’s in work mode.”

“No kidding,” Standish snorts.

“She’ll loosen up if you can make her laugh,” Nick says. He smiles. “Or if you know how she likes to be kissed.”

Frankie feels Will stiffen next to her. Standish crinkles his nose. “I’d rather not die an extremely painful death.”

“But what a way to go,” Nick murmurs, his eyes sweeping over Frankie’s body.

“What’s so special about the damn catacomb, Nick?” she asks.

His smile deepens. “The tunnels were originally confined beneath a church, but eventually they branched outward beneath the surrounding buildings. The history and the architecture are unreal. Original artwork, hand-carved columns. The tombs inside the crypts are masterpieces.”

“Tombs?” Standish squeaks. “With skeletons still inside?”

“Maybe.”

Standish crosses himself.

“You’re not Catholic so that’s offensive,” Susan says disapprovingly.

Nick ignores them both, his eyes still fixed on Frankie. “Most of the tunnels are permanently flooded with about three feet of standing water. When acqua alta is bad, it’s flooded almost completely. Creates a mirror effect.”

“And I care because...?”

“Because those catacombs are where The Trust keeps all of its digital financial records.”

Jai sighs heavily.
“They count their coins in a crypt?” Standish practically screeches.

Frankie gives Nick a look. “You have to be kidding me.”

“Nowadays, most criminal organizations go one of two ways with their records,” he says. “Option one: They keep physical ledgers of all their transactions, and run the risk of getting their shit stolen. Option two: They put it in the cloud, and run the risk of getting hacked by guys like Standish.”

“But The Trust does neither,” Frankie says.

Nick smiles. “Correct. They keep all their files on digital servers that have to be accessed in-person. I’m talking about those big ass ones that governments keep in top secret facilities to hold tons of data on site. Seven feet tall, three feet wide. You can’t hack into them unless you do it manually. And you’d need a shit ton of machinery to physically steal them. Either way, you’re getting caught.”

“That’s insane,” Will says.

“It’s also brilliant,” Frankie admits.

Nick smiles. “I thought you might appreciate it.”

“Hold up,” Standish says. “Why is no one talking about how these dudes are keeping giant machines—you know, things that stop working when they get wet—in a flooded crypt?”

“The San Maurizio catacomb is a network of tunnels that flood,” Nick explains. “But one of the chambers that those tunnels lead to was reconstructed to be waterproof and airtight. That’s where all the servers are. And that’s where we need to go.”

“You said we can’t steal them,” Frankie points out.

Nick shakes his head. “We can’t. And we won’t. We’ll hack them on site.”

“How many are there?”

“At least five.”

“Do you know how long that’s going to take?” Jai asks incredulously.

“Yes,” Nick replies.

“It won’t work,” Frankie says.

“You don’t think your sidekick can do it?”

Standish crinkles his nose. “Quit calling me that.”

“Of course he can do it,” Frankie snaps. “But you’re asking me to sneak him into a bunch of flooded underground tunnels that are extremely well-guarded by the most dangerous criminal organization in the world and then what? We hunker down for a week until he’s hacked into all five servers?”

“Actually, I don’t have to hack them on site,” Standish says.

The entire team turns to look at him in surprise. Standish turns his gaze toward Nick and gives him a suspicious once-over. “You knew that, didn’t you?”
Nick nods. “I did.”

“How?”

Nick smiles. “I’m a spy. It’s what I do.”

A deep feeling of unease blossoms in Frankie’s chest. “What are you talking about, Standish?”

“I got recruited by the NSA because I designed a remote hacking device while I was at MIT,” he replies. “I called it my Standish Hacks Into Things stick. My SHIT stick.”

Nobody laughs.

“Oh come on, guys,” he whines. “That’s funny.”

“It’s stupid,” Jai replies.

Standish sighs and glances up at the ceiling. “No one appreciates me.”

“Focus, kiddo,” Will prompts.

Standish straightens with another sigh. “It looks like a normal flash drive. But when you plug it in, it acts like a digital bridge between the machine it’s plugged into and whatever device I have it registered to. It allows me to hack into a system that’s not on the cloud without being physically present. It’s not all that different from the app I put on Frankie’s phone to access Rafael’s laptop. The only difference is that proximity isn’t enough. The device has to be physically plugged in.”

“So what do you need?” Will asks.

“I need to get in that room. From there, I can plug a stick into each server, get them up and running, and then come back here and hack all the servers remotely from my laptop.”

“He’ll have as much time to hack as he needs,” Nick clarifies. “And he can do it from a safe place without Ollerman or Blake knowing what he’s up to.” He glances at Frankie. “Just like you asked.”

“What happens when he’s in?” Frankie asks.

“He’ll transfer some of The Trust’s money into Blake’s private accounts, and he’ll make it look like the transfers have been happening for months. I’ll go to Ollerman, point out the discrepancy, and demand to know why his people are stealing my money. Ollerman will get rid of Blake, put my finance guy in charge, and I’ll get access to every piece of financial data you need. And then I’ll give it to you. Just like we agreed.”

“Why can’t Standish just download all the data once he’s in?”

“Because it’s probably all encrypted,” Standish answers for Nick. “It would take months, maybe even years to make it all accessible and readable. It’s way easier to do what he’s suggesting.”

Frankie purses her lips in annoyance. “And how, exactly, are we going to get into the catacombs of a church that’s probably guarded better than the Vatican?”

Nick grins at her. “Well for starters, it’s not a church anymore. It was converted into a palazzo in the eighteenth century. It changed hands a few times over the years, but it’s been in the same family for a few decades now.”

“What family?” Will asks.
“Matthew Blake’s,” Frankie guesses before Nick can answer.

Everyone in the room stares at her in surprise. Not Nick, though. He grins, his eyes bright with pride. “That’s my girl,” he says softly. “Always two steps ahead.”

Frankie ignores the affection in his voice. “You have to be fucking kidding me, Nick. Breaking into an underground room that’s guarded by The Trust is one thing. But breaking into an underground room that’s beneath the home of one of The Trust’s highest-ranking members is something else entirely. You’re out of your goddamn mind.”

“We’ve done harder things, baby. “

“Like what?”

“You want a list? We spent years doing impossible shit, Francesca. This is no different.”

“Matthew Blake is paranoid.”

“So what?”

“So if he lives in that palazzo then it’s not a palazzo. It’s a damn bunker.”

“So was that Swiss bank we robbed.”

“You robbed a Swiss bank?” Standish gasps.

“No,” Frankie says.

“Yes,” Nick corrects. He smirks at Standish. “And a Chinese casino too.”

“Oh my god, which one?” Standish says excitedly. He twists in his seat to look at Jai. “I can’t believe you watched Ocean’s Eleven with me and never told me y’all broke into a casino.”

“That’s Jai for you,” Nick says. “Always modest. He’s the only reason we got in and out of that casino without anyone noticing. Mina was so proud.”

Jai looks like he’s going to be sick. Frankie curls her hands into fists.

“We’re not here to walk down memory lane with you,” she snaps. “Tell me about the damn palazzo or we’re walking.”

“All right, easy,” Nick says, holding up his hands. “It has a security system that rivals nuclear missile plants. Armed guards, limited entry points that require two-step identification, surveillance without any blind spots.”

“And you still think we can break in?”

“I know we can.”

“How?”

He shrugs. “Inside job.”

“You know someone on the inside?”

“No.” He smirks and nods at Will. “But your boyfriend does.”
Frankie turns toward Will.

Will shakes his head. “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

He looks like he’s afraid she won’t believe him, and Frankie hates that. The impulse to touch him throbs in her chest, and she doesn’t ignore it. She reaches out and curls her fingers around his. She only hangs on for a second, but the relief on Will’s face makes some of the tension in her chest loosen.

“Ain’t they cute?” Standish says, smirking at Nick.

“Adorable,” Nick spits. He looks at Susan. “Frankie asked you to do a profile on Blake for her, right?”

Susan glances at Frankie instead of answering.

Nick seems amused by her lack of response. “You people are so damn loyal,” he marvels.

“Must be a real revelation for you, huh?” Susan replies.

Nick grins at her. “I know she asked you to do it. That’s what she does. She pretends like she flies by the seat of her pants, but nobody prepares for a mission better than my wife. That’s why she can be so impulsive in the field. Because she knows so much.”

Frankie swallows around the bile in her throat and nods at Susan.

“I did a profile,” Susan admits.

“And in that profile, what did you say was the motivation behind Matthew Blake’s decision to play for the other team?”

“He wanted the money.”

Standish frowns. “Hold up. Didn’t he just inherit, like, ten million dollars?”


Standish’s eyes bug out of his head. “That’s even worse. What the hell does he need more money for?”

“He started working with Ollerman before he inherited his family fortune,” Susan clarifies. “But even if he’d already inherited the money, he still would’ve agreed when Ollerman approached him.”

“Because he’s a greedy bastard,” Nick says with a chuckle.

Susan doesn’t disagree. “Most of us want money to help us achieve a goal—buying a new car, buying a nice house, paying off our student loans. Blake isn’t like that. Earning money is the goal. He’s got a lot of the same tendencies as an addict. Except instead of wanting drugs or alcohol, he wants to accumulate more wealth.”

“Did your profile also say that Blake was paranoid, Susan?”

“Yes.”

“And what do paranoid millionaires do when they’re concerned about external threats?”
“They spend a lot of money to protect themselves.”

Nick looks at Frankie. “When your boyfriend buried a knife in Ollerman’s chest two years ago, and the U.S. government faked his death, The Trust went temporarily underground. Blake panicked. He fortified all of his security systems and rebuilt everything from the ground up. That’s how he ended up in Venice. And he hired a professional to handle it all for him.”

“Who?”

“She’s one of the world’s foremost experts on security systems and protocols. She runs an extremely lucrative business and consults with law enforcement and intelligence agencies regularly. Blake made her an offer she couldn’t refuse. She has no idea she’s working for a criminal, though. She thinks he’s got family money. Which, technically, he does.”

Will closes his fingers around Frankie’s forearm and squeezes like he wants to get her attention. She doesn’t acknowledge it. She wants to know who Nick is talking about first.

“Who is she, Nick?”

Nick drops a stack of printed photos down on the coffee table with a smack, and then looks up at Will with a sly smirk. “You want to tell her, Chase? Or should I?”

Frankie looks over at Will, but he doesn’t meet her gaze. He lets go of her arm and strides across the room. When he stops next to the coffee table and glances down at the pile of photos Nick dropped, every muscle in his body seems to go rigid.

Apprehension races over Frankie’s skin like a shiver. She crosses the room and stops at Will’s side, and bends forward to pick up the top photo from the stack.

The woman in the picture is stunning: Tall, slender, cheekbones that make her look like a model. Her dark hair is long and gently curled, falling loosely around her shoulders. She’s dressed in a designer black suit that accentuates every one of her curves, and she’s wearing stiletto Louboutins that have to be at least four inches tall.

Standish leans forward and cranes his neck to look at the pile of photos still sitting on the table. “Oh damn,” he murmurs. “Who is she and how do I get her number?”

Frankie looks up at Will. She doesn’t have to ask.

“Her name’s Bianca,” he says quietly, meeting her gaze. “We dated when I worked in Rome.”

Frankie’s stomach flips, and a rush of uncomfortable, sticky heat prickles along her skin. Will worked out of Rome before he worked out of Paris. That means Bianca was probably his last girlfriend before Gigi.

“Come on, Chase,” Nick prods. “Tell her the truth.”

Will clenches his jaw. Frankie stares at him. He holds her gaze with an earnest look that makes it clear that, despite what Nick is implying, he’s not lying. There’s more to tell, sure, but he’s not trying to avoid telling her the truth. He just doesn’t want to do this in front of Nick and everyone else. Frankie doesn’t want him to either.

“They didn’t just date, baby,” Nick says when Will doesn’t answer fast enough. “They were in love. He told Susan she was the love of his life and the one who got away. They only broke up because she was launching an office in Beijing and he couldn’t go with her because he got a
promotion that sent him to Paris. If it wasn’t for the distance, they’d probably be married by now.”

Nausea wells up in Frankie’s throat. She feels like jealousy is going to swallow her whole, and with it comes a flare of anger. Somewhere in the back of her mind there’s a voice telling her it’s unfair to be angry. Will never told her about Bianca, but that’s not his fault. In Huntington, after she was less than thrilled to meet his high school sweetheart, he asked her if she wanted to know about all his exes. She said no. She had to. Because if she said yes, and he told her everything, then he was going to ask her to share too—and she hadn’t told him about Nick yet.

“You lived together too, didn’t you, Chase?” Nick asks even though it’s obvious he already knows the answer. “Did you tell Francesca that before you shacked up with her?”

Anger and jealousy flare again, only stronger this time.

“Frankie,” Will whispers.

Frankie shakes her head at him and takes a small step back. She doesn’t want to do this in front of Nick. Will closes his eyes like the distance has physically hurt him. She pretends she doesn’t notice and turns her attention to Nick.

“What’s the play?”

Nick glances between her and Will with a smug smirk. “We need two things to pull this off. First, we need a map of the catacombs so we know where the room we’re looking for is. Second, we need to be able to bypass the security systems to get in and out without alerting anyone. Bianca can give us both those things.”

“She won’t,” Will says.

“Is that why you fell in love with her?” Nick asks snidely. “Because she’s got the same moral code as you?”

“She’s a good person,” Will replies. “Obviously the concept is foreign to you.”

Nick glances at Frankie. “You ever wonder why he went from a security expert who’s on the board of a bunch of charities to an assassin they call the demon mistress?”

“She’s not an assassin,” Will snaps.

Nick’s lips curve into a smile. He doesn’t take his eyes off Frankie. “You were a project, baby. Captain America wanted to fix you because his savior complex attracts him to broken things.”

“She’s not broken,” Will snarls, stepping toward Nick with his eyes blazing.

Frankie reaches out and curls her fingers around Will’s arm before he can get any closer to Nick. Will relaxes slightly beneath her touch.

“If you’re going to ask me to interrogate her, the answer is no,” Frankie says to Nick. “I don’t interrogate civilians.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“The answer is still no,” Frankie says, gritting her teeth against a wave of shame. She lets go of Will. “It’s not happening.”

“For the record, I didn’t ask the question,” Nick says. “I had something else in mind.”
“Spit it out then.”

He glances at his watch. “Bianca will be at Majer Venezia in five minutes to meet with a friend. Chase is going to run into her on her way out. He’s going to tell her he made the jump to the private sector a year ago, and that he’s in town because my wife and I hired him to outfit our newly renovated palazzo with a world-class security system.”

“She’ll never believe I switched to the private sector,” Will says.

“She will when you tell her your girlfriend got murdered in Berlin last year,” Nick replies. “Losing your brother was hard, and she knows that. But losing a woman you love? That would break you.”

Will looks furious. Frankie can feel the same fury welling up in her chest. Nick doesn’t look like he feels even a little bad.

“You’ll bring her here to shore up the story,” Nick says, gesturing at their surroundings. “Introduce her to me and my wife in our stunning new home.”

Will folds his arms over his chest. “Why would I ask her to come here?”

“Well, because you want her expert opinion of course,” Nick says as if it’s obvious. “You’re still a little wet behind the ears as far as personal security, and truth be told, you’ve been thinking of calling her. But it was just so painful to say goodbye, and you weren’t sure you could handle seeing her again. But here she is, and it must be fate because you’re on your way to meet your newest client, and would it be too much to ask if she came along and made some recommendations?”

“And we need her recommendations why?” Frankie asks.

“We have a crypt beneath our palazzo,” Nick replies. “And it’s hard to know how to protect those things. Luckily, she can help. And I’m sure, given how talented of a spy your boyfriend is, he won’t have any trouble convincing his ex to show him the system she designed for Blake as a model.”

He smiles at Will. “It’ll finally give you a chance to use that app Standish made. You know, the one Francesca used to bring down the Fantasma cartel. You’ll leave your phone a few feet away from the system, distract Bianca for a bit, and then Standish will have access to everything we need to pull this job off.”

The words hang in the air. It’s a smart plan. Frankie searches her brain for alternative possibilities, for some other way they could get this done without her having to send Will out to meet an ex, but nothing comes to mind. There’s no other way to do this. Nick made sure of it.

Frankie glances at Will. He stares back at her with a look on his face that makes her want to bury herself in his arms. He reaches out and latches onto her pinky finger. Frankie’s heart aches in her chest.

“Majer Venezia is thirty-five minutes from here by water taxi,” Nick says into the silence. He glances at his watch. “And Bianca’s probably already with her friend. Better get going, Chase. You’ll want to make sure you’re ready to intercept her when she’s done.”

Will doesn’t move. He’s still looking at Frankie. She knows that if she tells him not to go, he won’t.

She pulls her hand away from his and looks at Standish. “Walk him down to the dock. Make sure
he knows how the app works. And get one of your micro-drones. We’ll need eyes on him.”

Standish gets to his feet. “On it.”

She looks at Jai. “Get him a comm.”

Jai pulls a small box out of his pocket. “Got one here.” He glances at Will. “Ready?”

Will clears his throat. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Frankie can feel him looking at her, hoping that she’ll look back, but she avoids his eyes. If she looks at him, and he’s still got that earnest expression on his face, she’s not going to be able to let him walk out the door. And she has to let him go.

She listens without turning around as their footsteps on the marble floor fade. When the palazzo is silent, she fixes her eyes on Nick. He’s only a few feet away from her. It’s the closest they’ve been since Monaco. She can smell his cologne.

“I know what you’re doing,” she tells him.

He smiles. “What am I doing?”

“It won’t work.”

“Because you think he’s so morally incorruptible that he would never, ever cheat on you?”

“He is. And he wouldn’t.”

“But he’s a hopeless romantic,” Nick points out, closing the distance between them slowly. “You said it yourself.”

She tips her head back to hold his gaze when he stops in front of her. “So?”

“So nobody believes in soul mates more than Will fucking Chase. And that woman he’s going to meet? She’s his. She’s perfect for him.”

“You’re wrong.”

“As soon as he sees her again, he’s going to realize it. And you know it. That’s why you’ve got that look on your face. You’re scared. Oh, he’ll try to resist it for a while. He’s too noble not to. But you’re married, and she’s not, and she can give him everything you can’t. They never fell out of love. It was all distance. And now there’s no more distance.”

Frankie thinks of The Notebook, and every other stupid romantic movie Will has made her watch, and how much he loves stories of lovers who find their way back to each other after being years and continents apart. She glares at Nick and tries to keep her composure, but she can feel the old familiar fear starting to rear its ugly head. She’d forgotten how horrible it feels, that awful combination of shame and anxiety and terror, and she can barely breathe around it.

Nick leans toward her. There’s no cruelty in his eyes. He’s not taunting her. Susan is still in the room, but he’s looking at her the way he does when they’re alone and he doesn’t have to perform for anyone.

“He’ll leave you, baby,” he murmurs. “But I won’t. I promise.”

_I promise._
Frankie turns on her heel and walks out of the room.

“It doesn’t matter what you say to him, Francesca,” Nick calls out after her. “You can’t fight their history. Or ours.”

Frankie ignores him. She leaves the salon, strides down the corridor, and takes the elevator to the courtyard. She jogs down the staircase, hurries past the fountain, and pushes her way through the wrought iron gate. Will is about to step into a water taxi when she finally gets out onto the dock.

“Will,” she calls.

He turns his head at the sound of her voice. His eyes light up when he sees her, and he immediately turns away from the boat.

They meet somewhere in the middle of the dock. He pulls her flush against his chest, and she wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him like it’s the last chance she’ll get. She doesn’t care that Standish and Jai are at the end of the dock, watching with a very confused water taxi driver. She doesn’t care that Nick is probably staring down at them from the terrace. She doesn’t care about anything except Will.

When they break apart, he presses his forehead against hers. “I love you,” he whispers. “Only you.”

The water taxi driver hollers at them in Italian.

“Will,” Jai calls. “You have to go.”

“Go,” Frankie murmurs, pushing gently against Will’s chest.

He leans into her hand. “Frankie—”

“I love you too,” she breathes. She pushes against his chest again. ”Now go.”

He gives her one last look full of longing, and then he goes.

Chapter End Notes

Before any of you detail-oriented accuracy folks tell me that Venice doesn’t actually have catacombs, and that the famous Venetian catacombs from Indiana Jones are actually based on Rome’s catacombs, I am totally aware. Yes, I could have set this mission in Rome instead of Venice to make it more accurate. But I didn't. I’m going to pretend Venice has an extensive network of catacombs, and it’s going to be a thing for the next few chapters, and the fact that they aren’t real means I can use my imagination to do whatever I want with them (which is an important freedom for my perfectionistic brain to have). So put your imagination caps on and pretend with me, okay? :)
“All right, Chase,” Nick says over the comm in Will’s ear. “Bianca is getting up now. Cross the bridge.”

Will, who is leaning against a green light post on the other side of a brick footbridge, straightens. “Fiery?”

“Yeah?” Frankie says in his ear.

“Might need your help on this one. Like in Prague with Karen.”

He wonders if she’s smiling. He hopes she’s smiling.

“Just don’t talk about Victor Dyck,” she says.

“What about sonnets?” he asks, jogging up the stairs of the bridge. “Think I should recite some sonnets?”

“If you want her to run the other way, sure.”

Will grins. He’s at the center of the bridge, and he can see Bianca down on the sidewalk on the other side, hugging her friend goodbye. “Love you, boo,” he says.

“I love you too,” Frankie says softly.

“Does anyone else miss the days when they would sneak around and only declare their love in private?” Standish wonders. And then he grunts, and Will smiles because he’s willing to bet Frankie or Susan smacked him. Maybe both.

Will is two steps from the bottom of the bridge when Bianca looks up. Their eyes meet, and her jaw goes slack in surprise. Will doesn’t have to try very hard to seem surprised either, because he is—it’s been years since he saw her, but she looks exactly the same. Slender and athletic, dressed to the nines, flawless makeup and perfectly curled hair. She’s beautiful.

But she’s no Frankie.

“Will?” Bianca breathes. The accent in her voice sounds just like he remembers too. He used to daydream about hearing that voice say I do.

He steps off the bottom step and onto the sidewalk. “Bianca,” he murmurs. “I...wow.”

They stare at each other for a few seconds, and then they both step forward at the same time with their arms outstretched. They pause in unison, hesitating with slightly nervous laughs, and then she steps forward and wraps her arms around his torso and he hugs her in return. She smells like he remembers too. Like gardenias. Every time he smells gardenias, he thinks of her.

When they finally break apart, he smiles down at her. She smiles back, and lifts her hand to brush along his cheek. “Look at you,” she whispers. “Just as handsome and American as ever.”

“I still have no idea if American is a compliment or an insult.”

“Neither do I.”
He laughs. “You look good too, B.”

The nickname slips out without his permission. Guilt immediately flares in his chest. He thinks of Frankie, watching and listening and trying to ignore Nick standing next to her, and his guilt intensifies.

“What are you doing here?” he asks Bianca.

“I live here now.”

He gapes at her. “No way.”

“Yes,” she confirms with a laugh. “I still have offices in Rome and Beijing. I have one in Dubai now too, in addition to some satellite offices. But my biggest client is here and he insists that I am here too in case something goes wrong. So, here I am.”

“Well you always wanted to live in Venice.”

Bianca smiles. “We both did, if I remember correctly. You were going to—what do you Americans call it?—be a stay at home dad.”

Will tries to ignore the guilt throbbing in his chest again. He knows how it feels to think about Frankie and Nick discussing kids, so he knows how Frankie probably feels right now. And it’s the worst.

He smiles. “Yeah. While you went off and conquered the world.”

“Yes,” Bianca agrees with a laugh. “I have always liked to conquer things. I’m sure you remember that as well.”

She arches a perfectly trimmed eyebrow at him and gives his body a once over. Will feels his face flush, and for a second all he can think about is Bianca naked, her knees on either side of his hips, her dark hair a curtain as she leaned over him and rolled her hips. He pushes the memory away immediately.

“Oh shit,” Standish says over the comm in Will’s ear. “Two minutes in and she’s already thinking about him naked.”

“Shut up, Standish,” Susan says.

Nick laughs. “He’s not wrong.”

“Shut up, Nick,” Jai snaps.

“So Dubai and Beijing, huh?” Will says, desperate to change the subject. “Glad to hear things are going so well for you.”

“And what about you?” Bianca asks. “What brings you to La Serenissima?”

“Work, actually.”

Bianca lifts her eyebrows. “I did not realize the U.S. government had a strong presence in Venice.”

“Actually, I don’t work for the U.S. government anymore. I joined the private sector about a year ago.”
“You?” Bianca says in surprise. “My patriotic soldier who waxes poetic about his duty to his country?”

Will smiles. “Oh, I’m still patriotic. I just…couldn’t do it professionally anymore.” He thinks of Emma, and he doesn’t have to pretend to seem sad. “I lost a girlfriend last year. She was also a soldier of sorts. And it was…it was hard. I decided it was time for a change of pace.”

Bianca’s expression softens. “Oh, Will,” she murmurs, reaching out to close her fingers around his arm. “I am so sorry, caro.”

“Thank you.”

Bianca squeezes his arm and then lets him go. “So what, specifically, do you do?”

“Security, actually,” Will says a little sheepishly.

She lifts her eyebrows. “You joined private security and you did not call me?”

“Well, I didn’t—”

“I would have given you a job,” she cuts him off. “Rome, Beijing, Dubai, one of my satellite offices. Wherever you wanted. You could even have worked with me here.”

“I didn’t want your charity, B.”

“Charity?” she repeats incredulously. “Says the man who recommended my services to the U.S. government.”

“I recommended you because you were the best.”

“As are you,” she insists. “It wouldn’t have been charity, it would have been a smart business decision. You should have called me, Will.”

“I’m sorry.” She doesn’t look placated. “I thought about it,” he tries again. “I wanted to.”

“But you did not.”

“I wasn’t sure if it would be welcome. We left things so…”

He doesn’t know how to finish that sentence, so he doesn’t.

“Painfully?” she supplies.

He swallows the guilt in his throat and fights another round of memories—their tearful goodbye, the phone calls they exchanged until they realized it was too hard to keep in touch, the way he moped his entire first month in Paris because every woman he looked at seemed to pale in comparison to the one he’d lost.

“Yes,” he admits.

She smiles sadly. She reaches out and brushes her hand over his face again. “You broke my heart, Will Chase.”

He frowns. “I didn’t—”

“Have a choice,” she finishes for him. She drops her hand. “And neither did I.”
“You could have…” he starts. He stops when she seems to bristle. “Sorry.”

She softens at his apology. “Same old fight,” she murmurs quietly. “In the end, our careers were more important to us than each other.”

“Not more important,” he disagrees. “Just…”

“In conflict,” she finishes.

He nods. “Yeah. In conflict.”

They study each other for a while. Will knows what he needs to do next, but all of a sudden he’s wondering if he can. He feels bad about using Bianca. He feels terrible that Frankie has to watch. He’d give just about anything to be back in New York, curled up in front of the fireplace, playing with Frankie’s hair and listening to her make fun of whatever movie he’s got on.

But he’s not in New York. He’s here, and he’s got a job to do, and if he doesn’t do this right then their entire mission is screwed and they’ll never get Ollerman. If Frankie were in his shoes, she’d do what needs to be done. So that’s what he’ll do too.

“This feels like fate,” he says quietly.

Bianca gazes at him the way she used to whenever he said something romantic. “Yes,” she breathes. “It does.”

He leans closer to her and watches as her pupils dilate. She leans toward him too, and he knows he’s got her.

“I wish we could catch up. I want to hear everything you’ve been up to. But I’m on the way to meet the clients I’m here for.”

Bianca looks disappointed.

Will furrows his eyebrows as if a thought has just occurred to him. “Actually,” he says. “Do you...would you want to come with me?”

“Come with you?” she repeats.

“This client is a big deal. Some guy who used to work for the British government and just moved into a ridiculously expensive palazzo with his wife. I can handle normal cities, but when we’re talking about a floating one…”

Bianca smiles. “Venice has its own challenges.”

“Exactly,” Will says. “And you’re the best in the business. So maybe, if you’ve got the time, you’d want to come with me? Be a second set of eyes and ears?”

“A consultant,” she says. “Like how we met.”

Will smiles. “Yeah. Exactly how we met.”

Bianca sizes him up with an expression that’s not all that different than some of the scrutinizing looks he’s gotten from Frankie. “All right,” she says. “I accept on one condition.”

“Name it.”
“You must consider coming to work for me.”

Will blinks at her in surprise.

“You’re smart, capable, and experienced,” she says. “You would be a good addition to my team. And, truth be told, I would like to live in the same city as you again.”

“That’s subtle,” Nick snorts in Will’s ear.

Will barely swallows a retort. He smiles at Bianca. “Okay. I’ll consider it.”

Bianca smiles too. “Fantastico.” She loops her arm through his. “Let’s go meet your clients.”

*This feels like fate.*

Frankie stares out from the balcony in her bedroom at Nick’s palazzo and tries to breathe. Will’s words to Bianca are lodged in her chest. They feel like jagged edges, scraping and gnawing at her lungs every time she inhales. They seem to devour more of her with every passing second, slowly eating outward through her chest and into her limbs, down to the ends of her fingers and toes. Soon, they’ll consume her entirely.

She knows Will loves her. She knows Will is only with Bianca because he’s doing his job. She knows what he’s doing is no different than what she’s doing with Nick. But it feels different, and she’s jealous and hurt and mad as hell, and she hates that.

A soft but purposeful knock draws her out of her thoughts. She leans back into the bedroom and glances at the door. Jai, Standish, and Susan are all gone. They’re in a cafe down the street, monitoring comms and surveillance from a distance because it would be hard to explain their presence to Bianca. Nick is the only other person in the house, which means Nick is outside her bedroom door.

She walks across the room and swings the door open. Sure enough, Nick is on the other side. He changed his clothes. He’s wearing neatly pressed blue slacks, and a white oxford shirt beneath a sharp gray sweater. With his tattoos covered and that watch she bought him on his wrist, he looks like the kind of man you’d take home to meet the parents.

Except he’s not, and her parents are dead.

His eyes linger on her body. She had to change too. She’s still in jeans, but she’s wearing an oversized red sweater and a pair of black suede ankle boots that make her look more like a trophy wife than her combat boots did. They also make her taller, so when Nick’s eyes finally meet hers, she doesn’t have to tip her head back too far to look at him.

“You look good,” he says.

“Yeah I know.”

He smiles. “You gonna tell me I look good too?”

“No.”

His smile deepens. He holds out his hand. “You’ll need this.”

Frankie glances down and sees a ring sitting in his palm. And not just any ring—it’s a platinum band with a marquise diamond. Identical to the engagement ring she used to wear.
Her heart shoots into her throat. She knows it’s not the same one. The ring he put on her finger in Paris is somewhere beneath the streets of Moscow because she threw it down a storm drain after he murdered their family. But this one looks exactly like that one, and she suddenly feels like she might vomit all over his shoes.

She looks up at him. “I’m not wearing that.”

“You don’t have a choice. We’re married. And Bianca will expect a ring.”

Frankie grits her teeth and glares at him. He lets her, his hand hovering between them patiently. He’s not smirking. She’s not surprised. The smirking, cruel man the rest of the team sees is part of who he is, but that part of him rarely makes an appearance when it’s just the two of them. Susan was right—it’s just a defense mechanism. He’s different when they’re alone. He’s more...himself.

She snatches the ring from his palm and shoves it on her fourth finger. It feels heavy and wrong and cold. Her nausea intensifies.

Nick stares longingly at her finger. “Forgot how good it looked,” he says softly.

“Don’t get used to it,” she mutters, and pushes past him in the direction of the stairs.

He follows her silently. She descends the staircase into the entryway, and then moves toward the elevator. The doors slide open as soon as she presses the call button. She steps on. Nick joins her and presses the button on the panel inside to take them down to the courtyard.

“Did you—”

“All the security systems have been disabled and hidden,” he cuts her off, though not unkindly. “I had Jai double check. Bianca won’t know we already have one.”

She nods. The elevator starts to descend. When the doors slide open, she steps off and takes the second staircase down into the courtyard. She’s wondering if she’s going to be lucky enough to wait for Will in silence when Nick’s hand closes around her arm.

Frankie freezes. His fingers are warm through the fabric of her sweater, and even though his grip is firm, it’s not painful. Nick’s a lot of things, and god knows he’s wreaked havoc on her emotionally, but he’s never, ever physically hurt her. All those muscles, all that strength and power and rage humming just beneath the surface of his skin, but he was never anything but gentle with her.

She doesn’t turn to face him. She just stands, frozen in place, her head tipped forward so that she’s staring down at her suede boots. She can feel him moving closer, his presence looming at her back. He curls his other hand around her other arm and it feels like Shanghai—like he’s surrounding her, like he’s everywhere, like he’s inevitable. She used to love that. The way she felt so small and protected in the circle of his arms, like he’d never let anything hurt her. She never expected him to be the one she’d need protection from.

Nick strokes his thumbs over her arms. “Do you know why I wanted us to do this mission in Venice?” he asks quietly.

“You said it wasn’t your choice.”

“You didn’t believe me.”

“I never do.”
“You used to. Before.”

“You mean before you murdered my family?”

“They were my family too, baby. I gave them up for you.”

She leans forward as if to pull away from his grasp, but he tightens his hold on her arms and whispers, “Please don’t.”

His grip loosens almost immediately. She knows he’d let her go if she tried to pull away again. She wants to. But she thinks of Standish and the target on his back, and Susan and Jai and Will, and she doesn’t.

He leans forward, and she can feel his breath by her ear. She stares at the fountain that’s a few yards away and listens to the running water while she waits for him to say something else.

“I wanted you to remember what it was like,” he says softly. “What we were like. We dreamed of this life, baby. This palazzo and this city and you and me. And we can still have it.”

Frankie swallows. It’s that voice again, the one she remembers from all those nights they spent whispering in the dark, and when she closes her eyes it’s almost like she’s right back in that Venice safehouse, tangled in the sheets with his skin against hers.

“I’m sorry,” he continues. His thumbs are stroking over her arms again. “I know I was a dick earlier.”

“You’ve been a dick a lot lately so you’ll have to specify what earlier means.”

He laughs. “This morning. And back in New York. And in Monte Carlo.” She feels him press his mouth against the curve of her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Francesca.”

She finally turns to face him. “You know it’s easier to just quit being a dick than to keep apologizing.”

He smiles. “But it’s so much fun when we make up.”

She hates that a brief spark of heat flares in her blood in response to his words. She also hates that he knows her well enough to recognize it. He takes a step closer to her.

“You remember that fight we had in Rio?”

“You mean after you ruined our entire mission because that guy kept hitting on me? Yeah, I remember.”

His eyes flicker down to her mouth. “You remember how we made up?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

He smiles because they both know she’s lying. “I could refresh your memory.”

“Or you could keep all your limbs intact. Your call.”

He laughs. She smirks. His eyes flicker over her face. His expression grows serious, and he lifts his hand to brush along her cheek. “Christ, I’ve missed you,” he whispers.

She turns her head away from his hand and starts to step backward. “Nick…”
“No, don’t,” he says, darting his other hand out to curl around her waist. “I’m still trying to apologize.”

“Well you’re terrible at it.”

“Haven’t I always been?”

“No. You used to be pretty great at it. But you used to be pretty great at a lot of things before you blew up our whole life.”

He blinks at her in surprise. Frankie’s a little surprised herself. She hadn’t meant to say something so honest. He lets go of her waist, and she takes advantage of the opportunity to put a foot or two of space between them. He watches her and doesn’t try to stop her.

“Is Chase any good at apologies?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” she says honestly. “But he doesn’t need to make them a whole lot.”

“Captain America is Mr. Perfect, huh?”

She can hear the bitterness in his voice. She shakes her head. “He’s not perfect, Nick. He’s just...honest.”

Nick stares at her. Frankie stares back.

“You want me to be honest?” he asks.

She shakes her head again. “It’s too late for that.”

He takes a step toward her so that they’re standing close again. “I was a dick in Monte Carlo because Ollerman was watching. And I was a dick in New York because I hate seeing you with him.”

Frankie swallows around the sudden tightness of her throat. “You said you weren’t worried about him.”

“I’m not. I know we’re endgame.” He reaches out and pushes her hair back from her face, his fingertips gentle on her forehead. “But you fuck him differently than all the others. You fuck him the way you fuck me.”

“Not everything’s about sex, Nick.”

Nick smirks a little. “So he sucks at it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying and you know it. I’m in love with him. And I think you know that too.”

Nick presses his hand against her cheek and leans forward. His other hand slides along her waist, and Frankie’s breath catches when he palms the small of her back.

“But you’re in love with me too,” he murmurs, his eyes darting down to her lips. “Aren’t you?”

The wrought iron gate shuts with a loud clang before Frankie can figure out how to respond to that. She jolts away from Nick and turns toward the gate. Will and Bianca are standing just inside the fence of the courtyard, and the look on Will’s face is terrible. Like he can’t decide whether he’s jealous or heartbroken or furious.
“Sorry to interrupt,” he says.

Frankie feels like she’s drowning in guilt. “You weren’t,” she says, shaking her head.

“You were,” Nick corrects. He winks at Frankie. “But we’ll let it slide, seeing as we have an appointment.” He beckons them forward. “Please, come in.”

Will and Bianca walk across the courtyard obediently. “You must be Will Chase,” Nick says once they’re close enough. He holds out his hand. “Nice to finally put a face to the name. I’m Charlie James.”

Will shakes his outstretched hand with a polite smile.

Nick gestures at Frankie. “This is my wife, Jessica.”

Will offers his hand, and Frankie shakes it. A breeze blows through the courtyard. She lifts her left hand and brushes the windblown strands of her hair behind her ear without even thinking about it. The diamond on her ring catches the sunlight. Will freezes, his eyes glued to her fourth finger. The look on his face is even worse than the one from a minute ago.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Frankie says, squeezing his hand to try to snap him back to attention.

The pain on his face smooths out. He holds her gaze for a split second, and then he looks away and lets go of her hand. “My pleasure,” he replies.

She misses the feel of his hand immediately. She misses him. He’s standing three feet away from her but it feels like miles and she misses him. She can’t do this. How is she supposed to do this?

Nick’s hand slides along the small of her back and then he taps his index finger against her three times. It’s something they used to do in the field, a way to reassure each other when they couldn’t speak. Frankie’s throat feels like it’s closing up.

Nick glances at Bianca. “We didn’t realize you were bringing someone.”

“This is Bianca Ricci,” Will says. “CEO of S.R. International. Best security firm on the planet. She was gracious enough to agree to give me a hand with your appraisal.”

“He exaggerates,” Bianca says with a musical laugh that makes Frankie want to punch her. “My firm is good, but we are only one of the best.”

“She’s being modest. They’re the best,” Will insists. He smiles at Bianca proudly, and Bianca blushes prettily. Frankie feels like she’s going to throw up.

“Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ricci,” Nick says, pulling his hand away from Frankie’s back so he can offer it to Bianca.

Bianca shakes it. “Please, call me Bianca.”

After she shakes Nick’s hand, she turns toward Frankie with a stunning smile. She looks like a damn supermodel, like an upgraded version of Will’s high school girlfriend Vanessa, and Frankie feels the sudden urge to push her into the canal. She wonders if Nick is right. If it wasn’t for their jobs pulling them apart, would Will have married Bianca? Would he have been a married man when they first met two years ago in Moscow? She thinks about the way Will smiles at Bianca, the way she calls him caro and he calls her B, and she knows the answer.
Frankie shakes Bianca’s hand because she doesn’t have a choice. She tries not to think about how that hand has probably been wrapped around Will’s dick more than once.

“Nice to meet you,” she says with the friendliest smile she can muster.

It must be a good one, because Bianca smiles wider. “You have a stunning home, Mrs. James.”

“Thank you,” Frankie says politely, dropping Bianca’s hand. “I’m still getting used to it. We just moved in.”

“Are you newlyweds?” Bianca asks.

“No,” Nick laughs, draping his arm around Frankie’s shoulders. Frankie reciprocates because she has to, and wraps her arm around his waist. Will clenches his jaw. “We’ve been married about nine years now. Together for eleven.”

“Oh wow,” Bianca says, her eyebrows lifted. “How did you meet?”

“Work,” Frankie says before Nick can come up with some stupid romantic story that will make Will turn green.

“I knew as soon as I saw her,” Nick says, smiling down at Frankie. “Always thought love at first sight was bullshit until she walked in. Best day of my life.”

Frankie’s breath hitches painfully in her chest. He’s not lying. He’s said that to her before, and he knows that’s what her dad used to say about her mom. His eyes flicker over her face, and then he leans forward and presses his lips against her forehead. Frankie knows that Bianca is watching her, waiting for her to react the way a normal woman would if her husband said something sweet, so she smiles and lifts her hand to weave her fingers through Nick’s hand that’s hanging by her shoulder.

“We’ve been living in Paris,” Nick continues, turning back to Bianca. “I worked for the British government in a sensitive capacity. Now that I’ve retired, I’m looking forward to leaving all that behind me. But things have a way of cropping back up, and I want to be sure that my wife feels safe here.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Bianca says brightly. She grins at Will. Will looks a little pale but grins back. Frankie stands in the circle of Nick’s arm and wishes that she was somewhere, anywhere but here.

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to start with a tour,” Will says to Nick. “Get a feel for what we’re dealing with. And then we can sit down and discuss what your priorities are and go from there.”

“Perfect,” Nick says. He smiles down at Frankie. “Ready, baby?”

Frankie smiles. “Ready.”

The tour of the palazzo is awful.

Will knows he has a tendency to be a little melodramatic. His kindergarten teacher did, after all, tell his mother that he was going to grow up to be an actor. But he doesn’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that following Nick through the house he bought for Frankie is literally one of the worst half hours of his life.
It starts in the entryway, when Bianca remarks about a vase of calla lilies. Nick smiles at Frankie and says they’re her favorite. Frankie smiles back. Will wonders if she likes calla lilies more than she likes orchids.

It gets worse in the salon. Nick stands next to the antique bookshelves and regales them with the story of how he once spent two hours following Frankie through rows and rows of books at Strand Book Store in New York. Will can tell by the look on Frankie’s face that it’s a true story. He hates that he’ll never be able to walk past that store again without thinking of his girlfriend wandering the aisles with another man.

When they get up to the first floor of bedrooms, Nick wraps his arms around Frankie’s waist from behind her and says they’re planning to have children. He says it because he’s talking about how important it is for all the bedrooms to be secure, but Will wants to punch him. When Nick says that his wife is hoping for a daughter, and Frankie’s eyes go glassy, Will can’t decide what he wants to do more—punch Nick or hug Frankie.

But nothing is as bad as standing in the master suite.

There’s a painting hanging on one of the walls. Bianca notices it immediately, and is floored to find out it’s an original Manet. Will isn’t surprised that billionaire Nick managed to get his hands on an original. But he is surprised when Nick mentions that Frankie likes Impressionist art. He openly stares when, after Nick’s prompting, Frankie launches into a brief overview of famous Impressionist painters. He remembers Rafael talking about buying her a Renoir, and how he assuaged his jealousy by telling himself that Frankie didn’t give a shit about art. Except apparently she does, and that must be why the staircase is lined with paintings, and he wonders how many other things Nick knows that he doesn’t.

Then he sees the photo.

It’s sitting on the bedside table in a simple black frame. The Eiffel Tower is in the background. Nick is sitting in what appears to be a cafe, and he’s grinning at the camera. Frankie is behind him, her arms around his neck and her lips pressed against his cheek. There’s an engagement ring on her fourth finger. It’s identical to the ring she’s wearing now.

Will’s entire world seems to narrow to just that picture. Up until now, he’d been able to convince himself that it was all fake. Frankie might like calla lilies, and she may have wandered bookstores with Nick in tow, and they may have discussed art and children, but that was all in the past. Over. Done. But there’s something about seeing this photo, and the pure joy that seems to radiate from the image, that makes him wonder if things between Frankie and Nick really are over. They sure as hell didn’t look over when he walked through the gate half an hour ago and saw their faces only a few inches apart.

Will can feel Frankie watching him. He doesn’t look at her. He can’t. He’s jealous and hurt and mad as hell, and the only thing that’s keeping him from breaking his cover is the knowledge that Nick will kill Bianca if she realizes all this is a setup.

When they end up back in the salon, Will tries to ignore how close Nick and Frankie are sitting on the opposite couch. Bianca sets her hand on his knee as she points out the fresco painted on the ceiling. Frankie stares at Bianca’s hand. Will feels guilty, and also a little smug, which makes him feel even more guilty.

He forces himself to focus. He explains all the security features he could install, which is easy because he just recites what he knows Nick already has. He explains some added features he could put in the windows and in all the bedrooms. And then Nick brings up the crypt.
“You have a crypt?” Bianca says in surprise.

“I completely forgot about it,” Nick says with a laugh. “I’ll show it to you.”

He reaches for Frankie’s hand, and then leads them all to an unassuming doorway in the courtyard that opens up to reveal a stone staircase that descends into the ground. Using their phones as flashlights, they descend the stairs into a large underground chamber.

“Wow,” Will says once they get down there. It’s eerie enough that he knows Standish would be freaking out if he were here. But it’s also strangely beautiful—there are pillars with stunning stonework, and the two feet of standing water covering the floor give the room an almost mythical feel.

“Is it possible for someone to break in through one of the walls?” Frankie wonders.

“It’s possible,” Bianca replies. “But it would be difficult to do so without damaging the integrity of the surrounding buildings and even the canal.” She glances at Nick. “Are there any other entrances?”

“Just that one,” Nick says. “If you don’t believe it’s a security risk to leave the door unsealed, is there a way we could fortify this room and use it?”

“What do you mean?” Will asks.

“Can I make it waterproof?” Nick clarifies. “I wouldn’t mind having a wine cellar.” He smiles at Frankie. “My wife is a bit of a connoisseur.”

“That’s definitely possible,” Bianca confirms. “In fact, I have a client who’s done something similar.”

“Do you have pictures?” Frankie wonders. “It’s hard to imagine without seeing it.”

Bianca smiles. “He’s rather private, so I’m afraid not. But his system is very much like what you and your husband are asking for. I’ll let Will take a look at it so he can keep it in mind as he designs some options for you.”

“We should get to work then,” Will says. He smiles at Nick and Frankie. “I’ll draft some options and bring them over in a few days. I can have my office call to set up an appointment.”

“Perfect.” Nick motions to the staircase. “Shall we?”

“One more question, Charlie,” Bianca says, stepping toward Nick. “I was wondering about your courtyard. If you’d like, we can…”

Her voice fades as she and Nick ascend the stairs. Frankie starts to climb up behind them. Will feels the impulse throb in his chest, and he obeys it. He reaches out and grabs her left hand, his thumb pressing against the ring on her fourth finger so hard that the diamond digs into his skin.

She pauses on the bottom step and turns to look at him. It’s risky, he knows, but there’s a curve in the staircase and Bianca and Nick are out of sight. He lifts Frankie’s hand to his mouth and presses his lips against her knuckles because he can’t go another second without touching her. He just...he can’t.

The pleasantly blank expression she’s been wearing since he and Bianca arrived dissolves. Her eyebrows furrow. For a second, he thinks she might burst into tears. She leans forward instead,
kisses him so briefly that he barely even registers the feel of her lips on his, and then turns and climbs the stairs back to the courtyard.

Will and Bianca spend the entire boat ride to Blake’s palazzo trading memories and stories of what they’ve been up to since they last saw each other. Bianca laughs a lot. So does Will.

It’s awful.

Frankie listens via the comm in her ear from the salon in Nick’s palazzo. She stands in front of the open door of the terrace, staring out at the canal with her back to her team and Nick. She can’t handle the pity that’s on Standish and Susan’s faces, or the concern on Jai’s, or the mix of longing and smugness on Nick’s, so she doesn’t look at any of them. She looks at the canal instead, at the boats and the people and the docks, and she listens while her boyfriend flirts with another woman so easily that it almost sounds real.

Maybe it is.

“Video’s live,” Standish announces. Frankie doesn’t turn around. There’s a brief silence in the salon. Over comms, Will marvels at how spectacular the outside of Blake’s palazzo is.

“Frankie?” Standish calls. “Do you want to…?”

“No,” she says without turning around.

“You don’t have a choice, baby,” Nick says softly, almost kindly. “We need your eyes.”

Frankie clenches her jaw. Jai appears next to her with his iPad before she can respond. He curls his hand around her bicep and squeezes. “I’ve got it here,” he tells the team.

Frankie leans closer to him. He doesn’t say a word, but he doesn’t need to. Frankie takes a deep breath and then takes the iPad from him. He doesn’t leave her side. She’s glad.

For a while, it’s not so bad. Frankie watches as Bianca points out some of the more advanced security features that aren’t readily noticeable as she and Will walk up the dock and then along the outside of the walled-in palazzo. Will asks all the right questions. Standish mutters about how sexy the advanced features are. Jai’s eyebrows are furrowed the way they are when he’s listening carefully and taking mental notes.

When Bianca and Will get into the control room just inside the exterior walls of the palazzo, Jai leans toward the iPad eagerly.

“All right, Will,” Standish says. “Open the app.”

“Oh, hold on one second,” Will says to Bianca, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I forgot I promised I’d text my nephew.”

“Alex?” Bianca asks. “Kevin? Or one of the twins?”

“Alex,” Will replies. “You wouldn’t believe how big he is.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“Of course I have pictures,” Will scoffs. “What kind of uncle do you think I am?”

Bianca laughs. Will grins, and then proceeds to spend the next five minutes scrolling through his
sister’s Instagram account and telling Bianca stories about his family. She seems to already know a
good deal about them, and when she says something about having visited Huntington once,
Frankie feels jealousy close around her throat like a vise. She wonders if Alex liked Bianca as
much as he liked her. She wonders if Alex liked Bianca more than he liked her.

“Get the show on the road, Chase,” Nick says.

“Sorry,” Will says, smiling at Bianca. “You know I get carried away.”

Bianca puts her hand on his arm. “It’s sweet. I’ve always loved how much you love your family.
You know I feel the same way about mine.”

Frankie grits her teeth.

“Did he open the app?” Nick asks.

“It’s open,” Standish confirms. He cracks his knuckles. “Okay. Here we go. Will, I need you to
stay in that room for the next few minutes.”

“Just a few minutes?” Susan asks. “You needed Frankie to distract Rafael for three hours.”

“I was downloading encrypted information then,” Standish says. “I’m just hacking into a system
here. All I need to do is get in and we’re good. Ten minutes, Will. The rest of you, shut up so I can
concentrate.”

He hunches over his laptop and his fingers start to fly over the keyboard.

“All right,” Will says to Bianca. “Tell me what I’m looking at here.”

Bianca tells him. Frankie listens carefully. She’s not Jai, so she won’t be as good at finding
weaknesses in the system and knowing how to exploit them, but she knows enough to know what
to listen for.

“And that’s pretty much it,” Bianca says about twelve minutes later.

“This is taking longer than I thought,” Standish mutters. His fingers are clicking furiously on the
keys of his laptop. “Stall her, Will.”

“What about the catacombs?” Will asks. “Didn’t you say there were some pretty extensive
underground tunnels beneath this place?”

Bianca nods. “Yes. We sealed all the entrances off except for the one that leads into this palazzo.”

“Can I see it?”

“Not if I want to keep my job,” Bianca says with a laugh. “But I can show you a map.”

Bianca brushes her fingers over a touch screen and pulls up a map. Frankie and Jai lean toward the
iPad in unison.

“Shit,” Frankie mutters. “That’s a lot of tunnels.”

“But only three entry points other than the one in the house,” Jai murmurs in return. “And all of
them are sealed.”

Frankie smirks at him. “Since when has a sealed door been enough to keep you out?”
Jai winks at her. “Who said it was?”

“I can get you the name of the waterproofing contractor,” Bianca tells Will. “That’s all you’ll need since you aren’t sealing anything.”

“What are these?” Will says, pointing at the map.

“Cameras, noise detection mics, laser sensors. The usual.”

“That’s a lot of hardware. What does he have down there, buried treasure?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. My job is to protect it, not ask questions. I know you haven’t been in the business long, caro, but discretion is important. Which is why we should go. I shouldn’t really have you here since you’re not part of my staff.” She winks at Will. “Yet.”

“Yet,” Will agrees with a laugh.

She starts for the door. “Come on. I’ll show you the drone monitoring system on the way out.”

“No, don’t leave Will!” Standish yelps. “I need more time!”

“Bianca, wait,” Will says, reaching out to grab her hand.

Bianca stops. She glances down at Will’s fingers wrapped around her wrist, and then up at Will with furrowed eyebrows.

“Is that really what you want?” he asks her. “You want me to come work for you? Or are you just being nice?”

Bianca smiles. “I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it. I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“Yeah,” Will says softly. “I’ve always loved that about you.”

Even through Jai’s iPad from miles away, Frankie can feel the atmosphere shift. Will and Bianca stare at each other, tension crackling between them. Will looks surprised, like he hadn’t meant to say something that could be interpreted as a pick up line, and Frankie wonders if he’s acting or if it’s real.

“What about you?” Bianca says quietly into the silence. “What do you want?”

“You mean for my career?”

“I mean for us.”

Will looks surprised again. Something sharp stabs Frankie’s heart.

“Careful, Chase,” Nick says. “We might need her again, and we can’t use her if she’s a woman scorned.”

“I’m not really sure at the moment,” Will says vaguely.

Bianca smiles and steps a little closer to him. “Really? You’re not sure?”

“Well,” Will says, drawing the word out. “Christmas is coming, so I’ve been thinking about other things I want.”
Bianca’s smile widens. It’s obvious she thinks Will is adorable. “And what are you going to ask Santa for?”

“One of those new iPhones, I think. The one with the three cameras so I can take better pictures of my nephews.”

“Excellent choice.”

“And new socks. You know how I feel about new socks.”

“I seem to remember a few discussions about new socks,” Bianca laughs.

Will grins at her, almost like he can’t help it, and Frankie wonders if it’s Bianca’s laugh that brought out his smile. She has a great laugh. Frankie hates her for it.

“Anything else?” Bianca asks, leaning forward.

They’re close now. Too close. Bianca is staring at Will’s mouth, and Frankie is too, because if he kisses her—if he kisses his Italian supermodel, CEO of her own company, works with half a dozen different charities, laughs like the girl-next-door ex—she’s going to throw Jai’s iPad straight into the canal.

“Maybe some candles,” Will says.

“My god, this is our first date all over again,” Bianca murmurs in exasperated Italian.

“Oh, come on,” Will says with a laugh. “Not fair. I was nervous.”

“Are you nervous now?”

Will nods. “Yes. Definitely.”

“What on earth for?”

“Pretty girls always make me nervous. I’m no Casanova.”

He says it in that self-deprecating voice he uses sometimes, that voice Frankie has always found charming, and then he reaches out and twists a strand of Bianca’s dark hair around his fingers. Frankie feels the stabbing sensation in her heart intensify. He did that to her this morning.

“That’s a lie,” Bianca murmurs. She puts a hand on his chest and smooths it upward toward his shoulder as she shifts a little closer to him. “You remember how our first date ended, don’t you?”

“I do,” Will admits. “But that was just because you felt sorry for me.”

Standish stops typing. “Oh my god, did they have sex on the first date?”

“Shut up and hack, Standish,” Jai snaps.

“I don’t do pity sex, Will,” Bianca says. “And I don’t do things I don’t want to do. When I want something, I get it. And do you know what I want right now?”

“I think I could guess,” Will murmurs. “American intuition, you know. We’re a very intuitive people. I pride myself on my ability to intuit.”
“Well my people are known for their passion,” Bianca says in Italian. She slides her hand around the back of Will’s head. “Allow me to remind you.”

She pulls Will’s mouth down toward hers. Standish lets out a high-pitched squeak, Frankie’s fingers flex around Jai’s iPad, and then Will blurts out, “Wait, no!”

Bianca freezes with her lips an inch from his.

“Ay dios mio,” Susan murmurs with a sigh.

Bianca lifts her eyebrows. “No?”

“Shit,” Jai mutters.

“You’re going to lose her, Chase,” Nick warns. “Lay it on thick or we’re screwed.”

“Look, B, I know what you want,” Will murmurs, tangling his hand in Bianca’s hair again. “I want it too.”

“Then let’s go back to my place,” Bianca practically purrs, arching toward him suggestively. “I don’t have another meeting until five.” She shoots him a wicked smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time we skipped an afternoon of work for something better.”

Frankie has a sudden, vivid fantasy of Will and Bianca stumbling through the front door of her place, their mouths fused together while they paw at each other’s clothes. It makes her want to punch something.

“Tempting,” Will murmurs. He sounds like he means it. “But the way we ended things was hard on both of us. I don’t want to jump in bed and then end up right back where we started. We need to talk first. Especially if you’re serious about us working together.”

Bianca sighs. “You know, you’re the only man—”

“I know,” Will cuts her off, laughing. “I’m old-fashioned. But you like it.”

“I do,” she says softly. She smiles and strokes her hand over his face. “I love it.”

“Done,” Standish announces. “You’re good to go, Will. Preferably not back to Bianca’s place, though, cause Frankie will kill you.”

“It’s too late to back out now,” Nick says. “She’ll know something’s up if you back off. Keep her on the hook, Chase.”

Frankie clenches her jaw and stares down at the iPad screen. Nick’s right. Will has spent all morning pretending to be smitten by Bianca. If he backs off now and suddenly acts like he isn’t interested, she’ll be suspicious. They can’t afford that. They might need her again.

“I’ve got an idea,” Bianca says, sliding her hand down to Will’s chest. “My meeting at five is with the senior staff of my firm. The managers of my other offices will be calling in. And one of our discussions will be about upgrades to this system.”

“This one?” Will asks, nodding at the system Standish just hacked into.

“Yes,” Bianca confirms.

“That could be bad,” Jai says, a hint of worry in his voice. “I need to know what they’re doing and
“Get yourself invited to that meeting, Chase,” Nick orders.

“Why don’t you join us?” Bianca says as if on cue. “It could help you get some ideas for what you want to do with the James palazzo. You can meet my staff and see how we work. And if you spend this afternoon sketching out some ideas, we can go over them as a staff and make some suggestions.” She shifts a little closer to him. “And then after that,” she murmurs, her voice dipping into a low purr, “you can take me to dinner. We can have that talk you’re so eager to have. And...see where the night takes us.”

Frankie feels like she’s going to be sick. Jai’s hand wraps around her bicep and squeezes.

“Say yes, Chase,” Nick says. “Jai needs you in that meeting.”

Will smiles. “All right. It’s a date.”

“It’s a date,” Bianca echoes with a stunning smile.

All the air rushes out of Frankie’s lungs. The iPad feels suddenly, inexplicably heavy in her hands. She stares at her boyfriend grinning at another woman like a stupid lovesick teenager, and then imagines them drinking wine over a candlelit dinner in some romantic as fuck restaurant, and something inside of her snaps.

She shoves Jai’s iPad into his chest. She takes the comm out of her ear, and shoves that at him too. Her pulse is thundering in her ears. Her hands are shaking. She needs a drink.

Run, a voice in the back of her mind hisses. He’s going to break your heart. Run.

“Francesca,” Jai murmurs.

She shakes her head. “Don’t.”

“Let’s just—”

“Let’s not,” she cuts him off. She turns to Standish. “Can you give me access to the catacomb map on my laptop?”


Nick gets to his feet. “I’ve got city maps in my study. We can compare the two and find the entry points.”

He smiles at her the same way he did in a London pub over a decade ago when he said Then I guess you’ll have to let me buy you a drink.

“There’s a bottle of scotch in there too,” he adds with a suggestive tilt of his head.

Frankie considers her options.

“Francesca,” Jai says.

Frankie starts in the direction of the study without acknowledging him. “Let’s go, Nick.”
Hey y’all. Last chapter was rough, huh? This one is a little bit better, but next week will be rough too. So let me say this:

I know y’all hate Nick. I hate him too. You’re supposed to. And jealousy storylines are the worst. That sick feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you’re jealous (or when you’re sympathizing with a character who is) is just blech. But this arc is a pretty important test for our spies. In Monte Carlo, they promised each other forever and that they wouldn’t let anyone break them. But making a promise is the easy part. Actually *keeping* that promise takes courage and trust and commitment.

Look, nobody wants Frankie and Will to live happily ever after more than I do. But as I’ve told some of you in the comments before, my favorite love stories are the ones where two people have to really fight for each other. Fluff is fun, and lord knows I’ve written plenty of it into this fic, but relationships are more than fluff. Relationships are hard and they take work. (Especially when you’re a spy.) I’ve put a significant amount of time and effort into writing this story. It’s not the only way these characters could have lived out a few extra seasons, but it’s the way I chose to do it for the story I wanted to tell. And I don’t want to get to the epilogue and feel like there’s even a hint of a possibility that someone or something could someday break Frankie and Will. I want them to be unbreakable by the time we get to the cardigans and kids. So if you’re still game to tag along for the ride, and you’re willing to trust me through this rough stuff, then buckle up. Let’s do this.

After Will parts ways with Bianca outside Blake’s palazzo, he calls Frankie.

She doesn’t answer.

He hangs up and calls her again.

She still doesn’t answer.

He hangs up and stares at his phone as the crowds on the sidewalk jostle past him like he’s a rock in the middle of a stream. There are a thousand tiny panic knives stabbing into his heart. He takes a deep breath and tries to ignore them. There are tons of reasons why Frankie might not answer her phone. Maybe she went for a run. Maybe she’s taking a shower. Maybe she and Jai are strategizing on the best way to get down into the catacombs. Maybe she’s eating a snack with Standish. Maybe she and Susan decided to grab a late lunch.

Maybe she’s mad at him because he agreed to go on a date with his ex, and Nick swooped in to comfort her, and now she’s naked in Nick’s bed and can’t hear her phone buzzing over the sound of their moans.

“Shit,” Will mutters, rubbing his temples. “Shit.”

He calls her again.
He gets her voicemail again.

He imagines her naked in Nick’s bed again.

He curses and pushes the terrible image from his brain and starts to walk back to the palazzo. He’s not being fair. Frankie told him she chose him. She told him she was all in, and that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Sure, he found her and Nick standing uncomfortably close together in the courtyard earlier. But she told him that might happen. She told him she might have to lead Nick on a few times, and that even if it looked like he had something to worry about, he didn’t. He should trust her. And he wants to. It’s the least he can do, considering she trusted him enough to send him out to meet with his ex.

Of course, he repaid her trust by agreeing to go on a date with Bianca. So that’s probably not the best example.

He rubs his temples again. Another curse word is sitting on the tip of his tongue. He didn’t want any of this. He was only in that room with Bianca because he had to be. He only told her he wanted to talk so she wouldn’t kiss him. And he only agreed to go tonight because they need to know if Blake’s system will be upgraded before they break in. It’s not like he could have said *I’m in for the meeting but hard pass on the romantic dinner.* Bianca is proud. She wouldn’t have let him sit in on a staff meeting if he told her he wasn’t interested. He had to say yes. Surely Frankie will understand that.

Right?

He passes a flower shop when he’s three minutes from Nick’s palazzo. He stops on the sidewalk and stares at the colorful bouquets arranged in the window. Maybe he should buy Frankie flowers. Maybe the florist has an *I’m-sorry-I-have-to-go-on-a-date-with-my-ex* bouquet. Or an *I’m-sorry-I-touched-her* bouquet. Or an *I-know-I-told-her-I-want-her-but-I-don’t* bouquet.

Flowers are cliche, he knows. Horribly sentimental. But Frankie likes when he’s sentimental. She didn’t used to. She still pretends she doesn’t. She rolls her eyes and makes fun of him every single time. But her eyes light up when he walks in the door with a handful of orchids. She smiles when he hands her a latte with a heart in the foam. And he’s been on the receiving end of some truly spectacular kisses after she’s found a post-it in her jacket pocket that says *You’re pretty or I love you or Wanna make out in the upstairs office later?*

If he walks in the palazzo with flowers, though, then everyone will see. Nick will say something snide, and Standish will say something obnoxious, and Frankie will feel self-conscious. And then she’ll get mad, because she hates feeling self-conscious.

He decides not to get flowers.

When he finally gets to the palazzo, he runs into Jai and Susan in the entryway. He doesn’t greet them. He doesn’t get the chance.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jai demands.

Will frowns. “What?”

“Do you know how hard it was for Frankie to send you off with your ex?” Jai whisper-shouts. “Do you know what being in this house with him does to her? And now you’re going to leave her alone with him tonight while you’re out with some other woman? How could you—”

“Easy, Jai,” Susan says, reaching out to put her hand on Jai’s arm. “He wasn’t trying to hurt her.”
“Well he did,” Jai snarls as he wrenches his arm out of Susan’s grasp. “I should shoot you where you stand.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Will asks. “You need me to be in that meeting.”

“Yeah, in the meeting!” Jai snaps. “That doesn’t require you to take her on a date afterward!”

“You know she wouldn’t have let him in that meeting if he said no to the date,” Susan points out. “There was nothing else he could have done.”

“He could have told her no!” Jai argues, throwing up his hands. “He could have told her he was seeing someone and to keep her damn hands to herself!”

“You know he couldn’t do that,” Susan repeats patiently.

Jai huffs at her.

“Look, Jai, I know you’re upset on Frankie’s behalf,” Susan says, reaching out to touch his arm again. “I get it. I hate this for her too. But Will’s not the one we should be mad at here. All of this is Nick’s doing. This is exactly what he wants us to do—blame each other.”

Jai scowls but doesn’t argue. He fiddles with his cufflink, and then brandishes his finger in Will’s face. “You fix this, Will Chase. You get your ass in there, and you tell her she’s the only woman you want, and then you do whatever it is you do when you two need to get back on the same page.”

“Talk?” Susan supplies.

“Fuck,” Jai corrects.

Susan crinkles her nose. “I did not need to know that.”

“Neither did I, but I had to live with them for two weeks and I didn’t have a choice,” Jai says. And then he scowls at Will. “Fix it or I’m going to blow you up.”

“Okay,” Will says, holding his hands up. “Okay. Where is she?”

“The study,” Jai replies. He curls his lip in disgust. “With him.”

Will feels his heart sink.

“Go, cariño,” Susan says, pushing him gently toward the hallway. “We’ll be upstairs if you need us.”

Will stumbles toward the corridor. There’s a new image in his head. Frankie sitting on the edge of a wooden desk with Nick’s head between her thighs and her hand tangled in his hair. He shakes his head to banish it, and then nearly trips over his own two feet in his haste. He strides down the hallway, through the salon, down another hall, and then bursts through the doorway of the study.

Frankie and Nick glance up in unison. They’re looking at what appears to be several different maps spread over a massive wooden desk. Frankie’s palms are planted on the desk and she’s leaning forward over her laptop. Nick is mimicking her position, and standing close enough that his shoulder would brush hers if he leaned a few inches to his right. There are two glasses of amber liquid sitting in front of them.

Will’s gaze collides with Frankie’s from across the room. For a second, he can see it all clearly on
her face—hurt, jealousy, anger, worry, confusion. And then it’s gone, and her expression is blank
the way it is in meetings with bureaucrats and diplomats. She straightens, folds her arms, and
breaks eye contact with him, and he knows. He hurt her.

Nick straightens with a grin. “Welcome back, Casanova. You know, I gotta say, I’ve got a whole
new level of respect for you. I had no idea you had so much game.”

“I did what the mission called for,” Will replies, glancing at Frankie again. She doesn’t look at
him.

Nick tilts his head. “Did you though? I mean, once she asked you on the date, you had to say yes.
But she only asked you because you spent all morning drooling over her. And nobody asked you to
do that.”

Will clenches his jaw against the rage that’s stirring in his chest. He knows Nick is just trying to
provoke him and rub salt in Frankie’s wounds. There’s no point in trying to defend himself.
Frankie’s the only person he’s interested in talking to.

“Francesca,” he calls, dropping his voice into that low tone she loves.

She lifts her gaze to look at him.

“Can we talk?”

“You’d have to make it quick,” Nick answers for her. He glances at his watch. “We have to leave
soon.”

Will frowns. “Leave? To go where?”

“All the entry points are going to require us to travel through flooded catacombs to get to the
servers,” Nick replies, gesturing at the maps spread over the desk. “I’ve got a guy in Naples who
makes state-of-the-art digitized wetsuits. And since we need them by tomorrow, we’re going to
have to go get them.”

Will glances at Frankie. She stares back at him wordlessly and doesn’t contradict Nick. Frustration
wells up in Will’s throat. Is she trying to get back at him for agreeing to go on a date with Bianca?
Or did Nick make their trip to Naples non-negotiable the same way he did when he insisted they
stay in his palazzo?

“Naples is on the other side of the country,” he says, barely controlling his anger.

“I’m a pilot,” Nick replies with a shrug. “I own a plane, and it’s only a one hour flight. We’ll pick
up our wetsuits and then come back.” He furrows his eyebrows. “Well, I promised we’d take
Standish to get some Neapolitan pizza while we’re there. But then we’ll head back.”

Will feels like he’s going to be sick. He looks at Frankie. “You’re taking Standish with you?”

“We don’t have a choice,” Nick answers for her. “He needs a wetsuit too, and he’ll have to try it on
to get the right fit.”

“Can you let her speak for herself?” Will snaps.

Nick smirks. “If she wanted to talk to you, she would.”

The words feel like a punch to the gut because they’re true. Frankie doesn’t let people speak for her
when she’s got something to say.

Nick smirks. “We’d invite you to tag along, but you and Jai need to work on some sketches for your big meeting tonight. Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of them.”

Will ignores the rage threatening to eat him alive and fixes his eyes on Frankie with the most patient, earnest expression he can muster. “We need to talk, Frankie.”

She studies him for a moment, her arms still folded over her chest. Will waits with his heart in his throat. When she sighs and starts to make her way out from behind the desk, Nick reaches for her.

“Baby,” he says softly.

Rage flares in Will’s chest again at the sight of Nick’s hand on her shoulder. He grits his teeth and wills himself to stay silent and still. If he loses his temper and blows up, it’s not going to end well.

Frankie shoots Nick a look over her shoulder. Nick drops his hand immediately. “We have to leave in ten minutes for the airport,” he tells her.

“I can tell time,” Frankie replies dryly. “I’ll meet you in the courtyard.”

She crosses the room and heads in Will’s direction without another word. She brushes past him and doesn’t make eye contact. He watches her walk down the hall and turn into the dining room, and then he glances back at Nick.

Nick smirks at him. “I can’t believe you’re going on a date. It’s like you want her to pick me.”

“She already made her choice,” Will replies. “And it wasn’t you.”

Nick narrows his eyes. Will turns on his heel and leaves the room without waiting for a reply.

Frankie is waiting for him in the dining room. Her arms are still crossed over her chest. She’s leaning against the long table, half-sitting on the edge the way she does sometimes on bar stools. Will shuts the door behind him, and then turns to face her. He doesn’t beat around the bush.

“I’m sorry.”

Her expression remains impassive. “For what?”

“Everything. I know how it feels to watch you with Nick. So I know how it must have felt to see me with Bianca. I’m sorry you had to go through that. And that you’ll have to do it again tonight.”

She drops her gaze to the floor. “You were just doing your job.”

“Yeah,” he agrees.

“It’s no different than what you had to watch me do with Raf. Or with Nick.”

“Yeah,” he agrees again.

He waits, but she doesn’t say anything else. She doesn’t look at him either. He can’t remember the last time he saw her this closed off, but he knows it was a long time ago. He knows it’s a defense mechanism and not a reflection of how she feels about him, but it still stings a little.

“But?” he prompts.
She shakes her head. “There is no but.”

“Francesca,” he murmurs, starting toward her.

She shoots to her feet and skitters around the side of the table as if she doesn’t want him to touch her. That stings too.

“It’s fine, Will,” she says, lifting her chin stubbornly. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t tell me what I am.”

“You said it,” he reminds her. “Back at the Dead Drop, you said if it was you in my shoes you didn’t think you’d be able to do it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she insists. “You’ve got a job to do, and so do I. So we’ll just get through it and do what we have to do.”

“And what you have to do is fly to Naples?”

He sees a spark of annoyance in her eyes, but it doesn’t burst into anger yet. “We need wetsuits.”

“So I heard,” he says. He can’t quite keep the bitterness out of his voice. “And despite the fact that we’re standing in the middle of a floating city, you apparently have to go to Naples to get them. Which requires you to get on a plane. With Nick. Alone.”

“Standish is going too.”

“That makes me feel so much better.”

She purses her lips at his sarcasm. “He’s a good pilot, Will. We’ll be fine.”

“You’ve flown with him before?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

The brief flash of guilt on her face tells him everything he needs to know, which is good considering her response is vague as hell.

“A long time ago,” she replies.

For some reason, he suddenly finds himself thinking about that Ben Affleck movie Susan loves, *Pearl Harbor*. Not the whole movie, of course. Just that one scene where Josh Hartnett takes Kate Beckinsale up in a plane, and they flirt while he flies around the harbor at sunset, and then they land and have sex in the hangar with violins crooning in the background. Except it’s not Josh Hartnett and Kate Beckinsale he imagines. It’s Frankie and Nick.

“Romantic,” he mutters.

Frankie bristles. “Maybe you can get your pilot license and take Bianca. Or would that get in the way of how you guys usually end your dates?”

Will sighs. “There it is.”
“There what is?”

“I know you’re mad at me, Frankie. Just be honest and tell me that you’re mad at me. That’s what we agreed, remember? No more secrets, no more lies.”

“I’m not mad at you,” she says with a hint of snarl. “That would be stupid. You had to watch me play house with Nick all morning, and you’re not mad at me, are you?”

“No. You were just doing your job.”

“So were you. So why the hell would I be mad at you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Maybe because I’m going on a date with her tonight?”

Frankie’s eyes flash, but the emotion disappears quickly. “You didn’t have a choice. You need to be in that meeting, and she wasn’t going to let you if you said no. It’s fine.”

She’s lying. It’s definitely not fine.

“Frankie,” he says gently, taking half a step toward her. “It’s okay to feel how you feel.”

“Don’t shrink me right now, Will,” she snaps, brandishing her finger at him. “I don’t need that shit from you. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

For a second, Will blinks at her in confusion. He doesn’t understand why she’s so determined to pretend she’s fine when she’s obviously not. And then it hits him—she doesn’t want to be vulnerable right now. Not with Nick so close. Because when she’s vulnerable, that’s when Nick pounces.

He immediately feels terrible for putting her in this position. Like, sick to his stomach, ache deep in his bones terrible. He briefly considers letting her stay walled-up inside her emotional armor. If disengaging with him will make her feel safe, then maybe he should give her some space. But he quickly dismisses the idea. If she doesn’t let him in and they don’t get on the same page, the tension between them is going to fester. She’s going to get on that plane with Nick, and Nick is going to say all the right things, and she’s...he doesn’t even want to think about it.

“Okay,” he says. “We’re going to have to do this the old fashioned way.”

Frankie frowns. “What the hell does that mean?”

Will closes the distance between them, puts his hands on either side of her face, and kisses the hell out of her instead of answering.

Her entire body goes rigid. She leans away from him. He follows her. They stumble backward into a wall. He presses his body into hers. He strokes his thumbs over her cheeks and his tongue over the seam of her lips and thinks *Come on, boo, let me in.*

She shudders, and then it’s like a switch has been flipped—she wraps her arms around his torso, clutches the back of his shirt, and opens her mouth to him.

She tastes like scotch. She smells like Frankie, like peonies and violets, and the guilt that’s been pulsing in his chest ever since he had to leave her standing on the dock to go meet Bianca finally dissipates.
He doesn’t pull back until she’s liquid in his arms. When their lips part with a soft pop, she lets out a shaky sigh that is definitely the most adorable thing he’s ever heard. He leans forward and presses his lips against hers again because he can’t resist.

“I don’t want her, Francesca,” he whispers. “I want you. I love you.”

She ducks her head forward and exhales slowly. He kisses her forehead. He doesn’t try to lean back and look her in the eye. She’s come a long way since Prague, and especially since Monte Carlo, but she still opens up faster if she doesn’t have to make eye contact.

Her hands are on his chest now. She flexes her fingers, her nails scratching lightly against his shirt. “I’m mad at you,” she murmurs.

There’s no anger in her voice. She’s just confessing what they both already knew was true. He has to try really, really hard not to smile. No matter how many times she lets him in, it still feels like winning the lottery every time.

“I know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.”

She sighs. He pulls her closer. A beat of silence passes. He still hasn’t looked at her, and she hasn’t tried to look at him. He closes his eyes and inhales. He wants to memorize the way she smells so he can remember it later when he’s surrounded by the scent of gardenias.

“I can’t believe you slept with her on your first date,” Frankie murmurs.

Will winces. He should have known she’d pick up on that. “I slept with you for two months before we even went on a date,” he points out. “So I think you win.”

She doesn’t reply. Will traces a pattern on the small of her back. She drapes her arms around his shoulders, and then scratches her nails lightly across the back of his head. He loves when she does that.

“Penny for them,” he whispers, because he’s learned the words *What are you thinking?* freak her out a little.

A beat of silence passes before she answers.

“She’s pretty.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“She’s got a great laugh.”

“I like yours better.”

There’s a long silence. It grows in intensity, seems to crescendo, and then Frankie whispers in a barely audible voice, “Please don’t sleep with her.”

The vulnerability in her voice breaks his heart.

“Frankie,” he breathes. He leans back, but she keeps her head bent and doesn’t look at him. Her eyes are closed. “Look at me,” he tells her, lifting his hand to brush over her cheek.

She shakes her head. “Just say you won’t.”

“I won’t. I would never. I promise.”
She shakes her head again, and her throat bobs as she swallows.

“Look at me, Francesca.”

Her eyes flutter open.

He holds her face in both his hands. “The only woman I’m going to sleep with for the rest of my life is you.”

She surges forward and kisses him. He wraps his arms around her, determined to banish any concern about Bianca from her mind. He slips his hand beneath the hem of her shirt and strokes his fingers along the curve of her spine. She shivers a little and kisses him deeper, arching into him.

And then there’s a knock on the door.

“Excuse me,” Standish’s voice says. “I’m opening this door in approximately twenty seconds so if y’all are naked and thrusting Imma need you to stop and put some clothes on.”

Will breaks their kiss with a sigh. Frankie is far more demonstrative. She huffs in annoyance and glares past his shoulder at the door. “Fuck off, Standish.”

“I’ve been sent to tell you that we’re going to be late.”

“No we’re not. I still have three minutes.”

“Look, I don’t like interrupting your afternoon delight either, okay? But I was told I don’t get pizza if you’re not in the courtyard in two minutes. And I want my pizza, Frankie. It’s very important to develop my palate so that when I retire from my life as an international man of mystery I can become an influencer on Instagram who posts about food and makes enough money to support an extravagant lifestyle without actually doing any work.”

Frankie looks at Will. “I can’t promise I won’t shove him out of the plane.”

“I’m tempted to let you,” Will admits. “But then you’d be alone with Nick, and I hate that way more than Standish interrupting us.”

She smirks. “So I can’t be alone with him, but you can be alone with her?”

“Touche.”

He reaches out and twines a strand of her hair around his finger. Something shivers across her face. He can’t quite tell what emotion it is. All he knows is that it makes him feel guilty all over again.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he promises.

“How?”

Will leans closer to her. “Well for starters—”

“I’m coming in,” Standish announces before Will can finish.

The door swings open. Will turns to see Standish in the doorway with his hands over his eyes.

“Are you clothed, or is lowering my hands going to make me want to wash my eyeballs with bleach?”
Frankie rolls her eyes. “We’re clothed.”

Standish lowers his hands and then grins. “Hey, you are clothed. Good job, guys. Proud of you for not being naked.”

Frankie mutters something rude under her breath.

“Heard that,” Standish says.

“You were supposed to,” Frankie replies.

“You should eat a snack before we go,” Standish tells her. “You’re hangry.” He looks at Will. “Don’t worry,” he says, puffing his chest out a little. “I’ll make sure James Bond keeps his hands to himself. Think of me as her human chastity belt.”

Will grimaces. “That is not a good image, kiddo.”

“Ugh,” Frankie agrees.

Standish crinkles his nose. “Yeah, I didn’t think that one through before I said it. I regret it.”

Will turns to Frankie. “Text me when you land?”

She shifts a little closer to him. “Wait.”

Will frowns.

Frankie glances at Standish. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Nope,” Standish says. “If I leave y’all are going to start making out again, and then I’ll never get my pizza.”

Frankie looks like she might kill him. “Fine. Plug your ears then.”

Standish gapes at her. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Plug your ears or I’m going to break your face.”

Standish sighs dramatically and rolls his eyes, but he does as he’s told and plugs his ears.

Frankie turns toward Will. “I’m sorry about what you saw in the courtyard,” she murmurs. “It wasn’t what it looked like. At least not for me.”

Warmth blossoms in Will’s chest. He told her once that he thought she’d be pretty good at relationships if she tried. And he was right.

“It looked like he was in love with you,” he murmurs, brushing his hand over her face.

She smiles. “I’m in love with someone else.”

“Yeah? He a good looking guy?”

“He’s not bad.”

“Ouch.”

She grins and leans forward to kiss him. Will wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her closer.
She skims her nails over the back of his head again.

“Ten in a tux,” she murmurs against his lips.

“Naked?”

“Twelve.”

“Shit,” Will mutters and slides his hand down toward her ass.

Standish unplugs his ears. “Seriously? You said plug my ears, not cover my eyes. I’m going to have nightmares.”

Will ignores him and keeps kissing Frankie. She lets him.

“Come on, guys,” Standish whines. “I’m right here.”

Will leans back from Frankie’s mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Do you also love me?” Standish asks. “Because I’m very lovable and I’m still waiting to hear the words you apparently have no problem saying to Will every ten seconds.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and heads for the door without a response.

“Come on, look at this face,” Standish says, pointing at his face as she walks by him. “It’s adorable. I’m adorable.”

“You’re annoying and I hate you.”

Standish grins at Will goofily. “She loves me.”

“Obviously,” Will laughs.

“Naples sucks,” Standish announces, flopping down into the chair next to Frankie.

They’re sitting beneath an umbrella on the outdoor patio of one of the city’s most famous pizza joints. The restaurant is crowded, and waiters wearing black pants and aprons and crisp white shirts are hurrying down the aisle between two rows of packed tables. There’s a line out the door and an hour wait just to get a seat.

Unless you’re Nick Walker. Then they give you a table as soon as you walk in.

“Sucks,” Standish repeats when neither Frankie or Nick acknowledges him. “Sucks as hard as the world’s best vacuum cleaner. Or...something else that sucks real good.”

Nick smirks at Frankie.

“Don’t,” Frankie warns.

He sips his beer and stares at her mouth but doesn’t say anything.

Standish sighs like a teenager and folds his arms over his chest. “Can we go? I hate it here.”

“Since when?” Frankie asks, turning toward him.
He frowns at her. “What?”

“Five minutes ago you said this pizza was the best thing you’d ever eaten and you wanted to live in an apartment across the street so you could eat it every day,” she replies, gesturing at the remnants of the four separate pizzas he insisted they order. “And then you disappeared to go to the bathroom, and now you’re back and all of a sudden you hate it here.”

“The pizza was great,” he sighs, picking at a crust on his plate. “Definite food orgasm.”

“Gross,” Frankie says.

“What he makes all these innuendos on purpose?” Nick asks Frankie in Spanish.

“That one was intentional,” she replies, also in Spanish. “The other one wasn’t. You just have a filthy mind.”

“I’m not the only one,” Nick says with a smirk. “I remember at a club in Berlin you—”

“Shut up, Nick.”

Standish frowns at them. “Why are you speaking Spanish? Are you flirting and you don’t want me to know?”

“No,” Frankie says.

“Maybe,” Nick says.

Standish scowls at him. “Quit flirting with my mom, dude.”

“Quit calling me that, it’s weird,” Frankie tells him.

“Will likes when I call him dad.”

“Will’s weird too.”

“I’m going to tell him you said that.”

Frankie shrugs. “I’ll tell him myself.”

Standish huffs at her and then proceeds to start pouting again. Nick studies them from the other side of the table with his eyebrows lifted. Frankie knows he’s noticing how different her relationship with Standish is compared to her relationship with RJ. She doesn’t like that.

“Why do you hate Naples?” she asks Standish in an effort to distract Nick.

“Girls are mean,” Standish mutters glumly. “Saw a pretty one and tried to talk to her and she was not about that life. And she was rude as hell about it.”

“Maybe you’re not her type,” Frankie says.

Standish scoffs. “I’m every girl’s type. I’m like chocolate sex on a stick.”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth,” Frankie mutters.

Nick leans forward. “They’re not rude, Standish. You’re just bad at flirting.”

“I’m bad at flirting?” Standish repeats incredulously. “How the hell would you know?”
“I watched you do it at the airport,” Nick replies with a shrug. “It’s like driving past a car wreck—I couldn’t help but stare. You have zero game.”

Standish looks offended. “Excuse me? You did not just…” He looks at Frankie. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you going to defend my honor?”

Frankie snorts and reaches for her beer. “No.”

Standish looks appalled. “How dare you.” He glares at Nick. “And how dare you. It’s not like you’re some…” He trails off, sizes up Nick from across the table, and then sighs and says with a hint of resignation, “You get a ton of ass, don’t you?”

“I used to.” Nick shoots a meaningful look at Frankie from across the table. “Until your spy mom ruined me for other women.”

Frankie pushes away a dozen different memories of having sex with Nick and swallows some beer instead of responding.

“Aw hell no,” Standish says. “I do not want to hear about how Frankie ruined you with her sex stuff.”

Nick smirks. “Look, the good news is that you’re not a bad looking guy. You’re smart. Funny. Once you get past the first hurdle, you’ll be fine. But you won’t get past that hurdle until you master the most important part of picking up women.”

Standish frowns. “Which is?”

“Nonverbal communication.”

Standish scoffs.

“Scuff all you want,” Nick says. “But if your words are writing a check your nonverbal cues aren’t cashing, you’re going to spend a lot of nights alone with your hand.”

Standish purses his lips and considers Nick for a moment, and then he turns toward Frankie. “Do women care about nonverbal communication?”

“Nonverbal communication is, like, 75 percent of all human interaction, Standish.”

“Yeah, but do women—”

“Women are human too,” Frankie cuts him off. “So yes.”

“Do you think I’m bad at it?”

“I’ve met dogs who are better at it than you.”

Nick snorts.

“You could have just said yes,” Standish says with a hint of bitterness.

Frankie shrugs. “I could have. But I didn’t.”
“Okay, fine,” Standish says, turning back to Nick. “Let’s say that you’re right—which you’re not. And that I might need some pointers—which I don’t. What, uh…what would you tell me to do?”

“Well for starters, quit using that voice you use.”

“What voice?”

Nick waves his hand. “That weird smarmy thing you do when you lower your voice to sound sexy.”

Standish frowns. “I don’t do that.”

“Yes you do,” Frankie says.

“Can you be on my team instead of your asshole husband’s for, like, one second?” Standish snaps at her.

Frankie rolls her eyes and reaches for her beer.

“Just talk in a normal tone,” Nick says. “Skip the weird baritone thing. When you can tell she’s into you, lower your volume. Make her lean closer to you.”

“But how do I get her to be into me?”

“Introduce yourself. Smile. Ask her questions about herself. Actually listen when she answers. And make sure you open up your body. Quit hunching forward. Push your shoulders back and stand up straight. You’ve got the posture of a nerd.”

“I am a nerd,” Standish says.

Nick shakes his head. “That doesn’t mean you have to look like one. And quit staring at their boobs when they’re talking.”

“I don’t—”

“Yes you do,” Frankie cuts him off.

Standish sighs.

“Eye contact is key,” Nick says. “Look her in the eye, but don’t stare. Staring is creepy. If she’s blinking a lot, or if she won’t hold your gaze, she’s uncomfortable. Take a step back and give her some space. But if her pupils are dilated, and she’s smiling, she’s into you. And for god’s sake, smile back. Don’t smirk. You smirk too much. Just smile.”

“I feel like I need to take notes,” Standish mutters.

“No you don’t.” Nick glances around the patio, twists in his chair to study the crowd of people lined up out the door, and then turns back around and smiles. “Learning by doing is better.”

“What?”

Nick points his thumb over his shoulder. “See that girl in line behind me? The one in the green dress?”

Frankie and Standish lean to the side in unison and look toward the crowd of people lined up on the sidewalk. Toward the front of the mass, there’s a pretty girl in a green dress standing alone.
“Yeah,” Standish says.

“Go talk to her.”

Standish looks shocked. “What? I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Come on, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“She could shoot me down like the other girl did.”

“Who cares? We’re leaving soon anyway. You’ll never see her again. You have nothing to lose.”

Standish glances at Frankie. Frankie shrugs at him.

“I’ll buy you a gelato when we get back to Venice,” Nick offers.

Standish straightens. “Deal.”

Nick grins. “Remember—normal voice, stand up straight, eye contact, smile.”

Standish nods. “Right. Normal voice, stand up straight, eye contact, smile.” He gets to his feet. “Normal voice, stand up straight, eye contact, smile.” He continues to repeat the phrase as he walks away.

Frankie leans to her left and watches him over Nick’s shoulder. When he stops in front of the girl, he visibly straightens his posture. The girl looks over at him. He smiles and offers his hand. The girl smiles and shakes it. Standish smiles wider, says something, and then appears to listen attentively to the girl’s answer.

“It’s working, isn’t it?” Nick asks.

Frankie leans back in her chair. “So far. Until he whips out that weird ass voice he uses.”

Nick grins. “I can’t believe you’ve worked with him for two years and you haven’t taught him how to pick up a girl.”

Frankie shrugs. “It’s kind of fun to watch him crash and burn.”

“Yeah I could see that,” Nick laughs. “He’s not totally hopeless though, is he?”

“No. He does okay.” A memory floats to the surface of her mind. “There was this one time in Buenos Aires when I made a bet with Will that Standish couldn’t get this dancer’s number. He thought she was so hot he could barely form a sentence. I thought it was a sure thing.”

“He got her number didn’t he?”

“Yes. And he took her back to his hotel. She couldn’t keep her hands off him. Most bizarre thing I’ve ever seen.”

Nick laughs. “Some girls like the weird voice, I guess.”

“Apparently.”
They sit in silence for a minute. Frankie traces her thumb along the curved edge of her beer bottle and wonders what Will is doing. Is he thinking about her? Or is he thinking about his date with Bianca? She wonders what he’ll wear tonight. Maybe that blue suit she loves. Or one of those sweaters that she used to mock but now finds kind of sexy. The idea of Bianca’s hands on him, pushing off his suit jacket or sliding along his sweater, makes her skin crawl.

She shakes the image from her mind and looks up at Nick. He’s staring at her, his eyebrows furrowed just a little. The longing in his eyes steals the breath out of her lungs. He used to look at her like that a lot before they got together. Even once they were married, she’d still catch him staring at her like that sometimes. Like he couldn’t believe she was real.

Frankie shifts uncomfortably in her chair. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like used to.”

“I can’t help it.” He sets his beer down on the table. “You know, I’ve been traveling the world since I was eighteen. I’ve been everywhere. And I’ve never seen a woman as beautiful as you.”

Frankie drops her gaze to the table and doesn’t answer. Nick and Will have this in common—this way of looking at her and saying something so painfully romantic that her heart doesn’t know if it wants to stop or race. It’s one of the reasons why she used to go AWOL every time Will broke one of their rules. It wasn’t just because it scared her that she liked it. It was because it reminded her of the last time she was with someone who thought she was extraordinary.

Nick leans forward and reaches for her left hand. She pulls away instinctively, but he tightens his grip just enough to catch her. He doesn’t fight him. He strokes his thumb over her bare fourth finger.

“I meant what I said the day I put a ring on this finger,” he murmurs, lifting his gaze to hers. “For better or worse, until death do we part. You’re the only good thing that’s ever happened to me. And I’m not letting you go without a fight.”

Frankie doesn’t know how to respond to that. She doesn’t get a chance to think about it very long anyway. A commotion breaks out in the line of people on the sidewalk, and when she glances past Nick’s shoulder she sees a giant of a man looming over Standish and snarling at him in rage.

“Shit,” she says, shooting to her feet.

Nick is out of his chair in an instant. He turns around, and Frankie can tell by the way his shoulders straighten what he’s going to do. He strides in Standish’s direction.

She darts after him and grabs his arm. He glances at her. “I can handle this,” she tells him.

He shrugs out of her grasp gently. “I got it.”

“Nick—”

“Relax, baby. I got it.” He closes the remaining distance and stops next to Standish and the man. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Oh thank god,” Standish says, and lunges behind Nick. “Giant scary dude is yelling at me and I can’t tell if it’s because she’s his girlfriend or his daughter.”
The tall, barrel-chested man with an impressive mustache roars in furious Italian about Standish trying to steal the virtue of his daughter.

“Daughter,” Frankie tells Standish.

“Oh man, dad rage is the worst,” Standish whines. “Please don’t let him kill me.”

“Nobody’s going to kill you,” Nick says calmly. He holds his hands out placatingly to the man. “Relax,” he says in Italian. “It was an innocent conversation. Nothing happened.”

“Stupid fucking Americans come into my city and try to ruin my daughter!”

“What is this, the eighteenth century?” Frankie says. “They were just talking.”

The man turns his gaze toward her and then spits on the ground at her feet. “Shut up, bitch.”

Annoyance flares in Frankie’s chest, but she doesn’t get a chance to reply because all of a sudden Nick steps in front of her and shoves the man hard in the chest.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” he snarls as the man stumbles backward.

Frankie digs her fingers into Nick’s arm. “Don’t start something, Nick.”

“I didn’t fucking start it,” he says incredulously, turning to look at her. “He called you a bitch.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Not in front of me. Like fucking hell am I letting that go. He started it, I’m going to finish it.”

Nick’s move toward Frankie has left Standish exposed. The man notices. He snarls and lunges toward Standish, but Nick is too quick. He steps in front of Standish and shoves the man backward again.

“You touch him, I’m going to break your neck,” he threatens.

“Nick, his daughter’s right there,” Frankie hisses.

“Fine,” Nick says. He glares at the man, who’s breathing so hard he looks like he might spontaneously combust with rage. “Your lucky day, asshole. She doesn’t want me to break your neck, so I’ll just break your arm instead.”

“For god’s sake,” Frankie sighs. “Can you just let it go?”

“No.”

“Is that guy going to beat up Nick?” Standish mutters in her ear, probably because he has no idea what any of them are saying since he doesn’t speak Italian.

“It’s not Nick you need to be worried about,” Frankie replies.

As if on cue, the man roars and tries to throw a punch. Nick catches his fist, wrenches his arm behind his body, and then yanks. There’s a faint but sickening crack. The man howls, his daughter wails, and Standish mutters, “Holy shit he broke his arm!”

“I warned you,” Nick says in a deadly calm voice as he leans toward the man’s ear. “You didn’t listen. Now should I break your face too, or are you going to apologize for being a fucking
“Neanderthal?”

“Please don’t hurt him!” the girl in the green dress sobs. She looks at Frankie. “Please!”

Frankie steps forward and puts her hands on Nick’s arm. His flexed muscles are as hard as steel beneath her grip. “Let him go, Nick.”

“Not until he apologizes to you.”

“Look at me.”

He turns to look at her. There’s rage in his eyes, dark and dangerous, but she’s not afraid of him.

She squeezes his arm gently. “Let him go, baby,” she murmurs. “Please.”

Nick lets go immediately. The man doubles over, clutching his arm in pain, and his daughter throws herself at him. Two other men rush forward. One of them bends over the man in concern, but the other looks at Nick with his hands curled into fists.

Nick doesn’t even glance at them. He reaches out and puts a hand on Frankie’s face. The rage is evaporating from his gaze. All she sees now is the worshipful look he gave her that night when they got in a fight because he said she was too good for him and she told him to get over it because she was in love with him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie can see Standish glancing between them. She turns her head away and steps out of Nick’s reach.

Nick drops his hand and glances at Standish. “You okay?”

“Yeah man,” Standish says. “No worries.”

There are restaurant employees coming out to the sidewalk to check on the commotion, and one of them has a police officer in tow.

“We should go,” Frankie says.

Nick nods. They start to walk in the direction of the car they rented. They don’t get far. The man who had his hands curled into fists mutters in a quiet tone that Frankie’s pretty sure she’s not supposed to hear. “Yeah, listen to your whore.”

Nick freezes.


He ignores her.

It only takes him four strides to close the distance between him and the men. The first man is ready, his fists up, but when he swings, Nick dodges the punch easily. He shoves aside the second punch too, and then kicks the man in the ribs and sends him flying backward into the wall of the restaurant.

The second man steps up. He’s got a knife in his hand.

“Frankie?” Standish squeaks when he sees the knife. “Aren’t you going to help him?”

“He doesn’t need help,” Frankie sighs, folding her arms over her chest.
The man swipes his knife at Nick. Nick dodges the blade, catches the man’s wrist, grabs his shoulder, and then brings the knife-wielding arm down over his knee with a sickening crack. The man screams, but the sound chokes out as Nick wraps his hand around his throat, lifts him into the air, and then slams him down onto the pavement.

“Holy shit,” Standish breathes.

Nick turns toward the last man, the one who started it all and is now sputtering with rage about what Nick has done to his sons.

“If you’d taught your sons how to respect women we wouldn’t have this problem,” Nick growls. And then he pulls his arm back and punches the man straight in the face.

He’s unconscious before he even hits the pavement.

“Holy shit!” Standish repeats.

Nick turns away from the three men who are now crumpled in the street and walks back toward Frankie with his jaw clenched. The crowd of people waiting for tables stares after him with a mix of admiration and terror on their faces. Even the police officer seems too startled to do anything.

“Are you finished?” Frankie asks him disapprovingly when he stops at her side.

He smirks at her. “Unless someone else decides to insult you, yes.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Holy shit,” Standish says for the third time. “They just...and you...that was one punch! You knocked him out with one punch!”

Nick smiles at him. “I can teach you that too if you want.”

“Absolutely not,” Frankie says.

“Oh come on, Frankie,” Standish whines, following her when she starts to walk toward the car. “I should know how to do that!”

“Yeah come on, mom,” Nick says, draping his arm around her shoulders. “The kid needs to know how to protect himself.”

“No,” Frankie says, shrugging out of his embrace. “He can protect himself just fine.”

“But I—” Standish starts.

Frankie doesn’t let him finish. “No.”

“Maybe he could—”

“No.”

“Naples sucks,” Standish pouts, kicking a small stone that’s sitting in the street.

“Don’t worry, kid,” Nick says, nudging Standish with his elbow. “We’ll buy her some gelato and she’ll change her mind.”

Frankie shakes her head. “No I won’t.”
Nick smirks. “We’ll see.”

“So?” Will asks, holding out his hands. “What do you think?”

“What do I think of the suit you’re wearing to go on a date with a woman who is not Francesca?” Jai asks from his seat by the fountain in the courtyard. He doesn’t even look up from his laptop. “I’m sure the woman who is not Francesca will think you look fine.”

“Jai,” Susan chastises.

Jai ignores her.

Susan rises from the seat next to him and walks across the colorful tiles of the courtyard. The sun is starting to set, and the sky is a gorgeous blend of purple and orange. The courtyard is beautifully lit, with several lamps built into the palazzo walls and a few strings of lights hanging across the open space. The fountain is also lit up, and bubbling in a cheerful contrast to Jai’s obvious annoyance.

Susan stops in front of Will and smooths her hands across his shoulders. “You look handsome. Blue has always suited you.”

“You should have put on something hideous,” Jai says petulantly. “Then maybe she’ll keep her manicured claws to herself.” He finally looks up at Will with a glare. “Unless you want her to touch you. In which case I will skin you alive.”

“You’re not even joking, are you?” Will asks.

Jai narrows his eyes. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Ignore him, cariño,” Susan murmurs. “He’s just being overprotective.”

Will tugs on his tie because it suddenly feels too tight. “He should be. I hate myself as much as he does right now.”

“Will,” she sighs.

“I’m serious, Susan. You should’ve seen her face. I hurt her. I hate hurting her.”

“You said you two talked things out.”

“We did. But now I’m leaving her alone with Nick while I’m out with someone else, and I feel like shit.”

Susan opens her mouth to reply, but she gets cut off by the sound of the wrought iron gate swinging open.

“You’re making that up,” Standish’s voice says in the shadows. “There’s no way.”


Will turns toward their voices. Frankie, Nick, and Standish appear at the edge of the courtyard and step out of the shadows and into the light. Standish is laughing, his eyes bright with amusement as he looks up at Nick. Nick is grinning down at Frankie. Frankie has a soft, nostalgic smile on her face. All three of them are eating gelato.
A wave of nauseating jealousy crashes over Will. That’s his girlfriend. Standish is his spy son. Why are they smiling at Nick? What are they talking about? And why the hell are they eating gelato? If anyone should get to eat gelato with them, it’s him. Not Nick.

Frankie is the first to see him. Their eyes meet across the courtyard, and the smile freezes on her face. Her eyes flicker down over his body, taking in his polished shoes and his suit, and her smile fades. When their gaze collides again, she looks like she feels the same way he does.

“Hey, look who we caught on the way to his date,” Nick says. “Looking good, Casanova. Bianca’s going to love that suit.”

He winks at Will. Frankie presses her lips together and stares down at the tiles beneath her feet.

“You stopped for gelato?” Will asks. He tries to keep the bitterness out of his voice. He’s pretty sure he fails.

“It’s my reward for talking to a girl!” Standish says proudly.

Susan frowns. “You talk to girls all the time.”

“Yeah but this time I did it without my weird voice,” Standish says. “And it worked.” He frowns. “Well, up until her dad tried to kill me. But Nick knocked him out with one punch! You should’ve seen him, guys. He was like duck, pow, grab, slam, boom.”

He mimics what Will thinks is supposed to be a fighting sequence, but it looks a little disjointed and awkward.

“And then he was like, Next time, teach your kids to respect women, and then boom. Dude was out like a light before he even hit the pavement!”

“Respect women?” Susan repeats in confusion.

Standish waves his hand. “Oh, some dude called Frankie a bitch. And a whore.”

“What?” Will and Jai demand in unison.

“Can we not?” Frankie sighs. “I’ve had enough testosterone for the day.”

“Cause of Nick’s badass punching,” Standish says helpfully.

“Yes, thank you for the clarification,” Jai says. “I wouldn’t have understood otherwise.”

“Okay, my bad, sassy pants,” Standish says, crinkling his nose. And then his expression smooths out. “You’re grumpy cause you been cooped up all day, aren’t you? You want some gelato? I got spicy chocolate!” He holds out his bowl. “You want some spicy chocolate?”

“No I don’t want spicy chocolate,” Jai snaps, shoving Standish’s hand away. “Get that out of my face.”

Standish leans toward Nick. “I think he’s mad we didn’t take him to get gelato.”

Nick smiles. “I think you’re misreading the situation, kid.” He glances at Jai. “You iron out some options for us, JD?”

Jai clenches his jaw and looks like he’s about to explode.
Frankie shakes her head. “Don’t call him that.”

Will expects Nick to smirk and say something snide. But he doesn’t.

“Sorry,” he says in what sounds like a sincere voice. “Did you iron out some options, Jai?”

Jai nods. “I have several. One, in particular, is superior to the rest, but I assumed you’d want a say before I bought materials.”

Nick tips his head toward Frankie. “Well you know boss lady will.”

“Screw you,” Frankie murmurs in response, but there’s no anger in it. It sounds almost...affectionate?

Will feels like he’s going to throw up.

Nick smiles at Frankie. “Want to crack open a bottle and go through our options?” He glances around the courtyard. “With everyone else, of course.”

Standish perks up. “I get to help plan out the mission?”

“Sure,” Nick says with a shrug. He looks at Susan. “We could use your input too, Susan. Your eye for detail is pretty remarkable.”

Susan looks surprised, but she nods. “I can help.”

Nick smiles at her, and Will feels suddenly and extremely left out. A vivid fantasy of his team not even noticing he’s gone plays across his mind. Nick asks Susan all the right questions about her work, and she lights up and responds by explaining the finer points of trauma-informed care. Nick tells Jai he’s impressed with his plans, and Jai smiles the way he does when he’s proud of himself but doesn’t want to show it. Nick shows Standish how to knock someone out with one punch, and Standish gives him that hero-worship gaze. Nick stands too close to Frankie. Nick makes her laugh. And then, when she gets too deep into work mode, Nick kisses her just right and she realizes she never fell out of love with him.

“Dude, don’t you have to go?” Standish says, interrupting Will’s terrible mental image of Frankie and Nick making out on the terrace. “You’re going to be late.”

Will snaps to attention and glances at his watch. “Right. I, uh...I guess I should go.”

His eyes are drawn back to Frankie. He can’t help it. She meets his gaze from across the courtyard. He wonders if she can sense how he’s feeling. He wonders if she hates this as much as he does. He wonders what happened in Naples and if, in the few hours since he last saw her, he lost her.

“I’ll walk you out,” she offers, stepping toward him and away from Nick.

He feels like he’s going to keel over in relief. He smiles. “Great.”

“Are you...?” she asks, gesturing in the direction of the dock.

“I’m going to walk,” he replies. “Her office is only ten minutes from here.”

Jealousy shivers across Frankie’s face. Will feels immediately guilty.

Frankie walks across the courtyard and toward the back exit of the palazzo. She leaves her gelato cup on the fountain next to Jai as she passes. Nick watches her go, longing clear in his eyes. Will
swallows the acid in the back of his throat and follows her.

The back exit is a giant, steel-reinforced wooden door. Frankie pushes it open and steps out into the narrow, cobblestone alleyway behind the palazzo. Will follows her. She leaves the door propped open a few inches and then turns to face him.

The setting sun and the towering walls on either side of the alley have made the narrow corridor almost dark. It’s a residential pathway, but Nick’s palazzo is so large that there aren’t many other doors nearby. It’s quiet. They’re alone. If it was a different kind of night, they might be walking down these uneven stones hand in hand on their way to dinner. She would tease him, and he would tease her back, and they’d end up pressed against one of the walls, kissing and whispering and laughing.

Except it’s not that kind of night.

“You get your wetsuits?” he asks, because he’s an idiot and doesn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah,” she says.

Her hands are in the pockets of her jeans. Will wishes she would touch him. He wants to reach for her, but something stops him. He doesn’t know what.

“Jai help you with the proposals you told her you’d have?” Frankie asks.

He nods. “Yeah.”

A painful silence follows. It’s almost deafening in the confines of the alley. The distance between them seems like miles. Frankie chews her bottom lip. Her gaze flickers over his body, and then her eyebrows furrow.

He glances down at his suit, suddenly self-conscious. “Do I have something on my shirt? Should I change?”

“No.”

“Why do you have that look on your face?”

Her teeth scrape along her bottom lip as if she’s considering whether or not to answer the question. “You wore that suit when you took me to that place in SoHo,” she says quietly.

Will knows immediately what she’s talking about. About a month into their official relationship, once he was confident that she wasn’t going to change her mind and bolt, he took her out on the kind of date that he’d been expressly forbidden from taking her on before. It was a French restaurant, quaint and intimate and romantic as hell. There were white tablecloths and flickering candles and soft music. He wore this suit. She wore a dress that made it impossible to look at anyone but her. She was happy that night. Reserved, because it was early in their relationship and she was still trying to limit how much of herself she showed him. But even then, he knew her well enough to see it in her eyes. She was happy.

He doesn’t see anything even remotely resembling happiness in her eyes right now.

“It’s the only suit I packed,” he says apologetically.

She nods and presses her lips together. His heart aches in his chest. He tells himself to reach for her, to be the one who closes the distance, but his body won’t listen to him. Suddenly all he can
think about is the way she’d been smiling at Nick, and it keeps him glued in place.

Frankie pushes her hair behind her ear and takes a deep breath. “Will,” she starts.

“I hate this,” he blurts out before she can finish.

She looks up at him in surprise.

“I’m trying to be the bigger person,” he says. “I swear I am. But I just...I hate him, Frankie. I hate watching you with him. I hate that he’s making me do this to you. And now Standish apparently loves him, and you guys ate gelato together, and he’s going to charm Susan and Jai next, and then you’re going to…”

He doesn’t finish his sentence. He can’t. The words hurt so bad he can’t even get them out.

Frankie studies him. She looks painfully beautiful in front of the backdrop of a Venice alleyway. He can barely stand to look at her.

“I’m going to what?” she prompts softly.

He swallows. It crosses his mind that he may have made her mad—that his fear that she might give in to Nick’s advances is a step too far, no matter how overwhelming his near-constant jealousy feels. But when he looks closely at her, he doesn’t see any anger in her eyes. She’s looking at him the same way she did after they opened Nick’s anniversary gift together.

When he doesn’t answer her, she steps toward him. She slips her fingers under the lapels of his jacket and slides her hands down the fabric like she’s adjusting it. Will watches her, studying her face in the dimness, struck once again by how pretty she is.

She raises her gaze to his, and lifts her chin the way she does before she says something she’s sure of.

“I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you,” she whispers. “And nothing is going to change that.”

He almost chokes on his relief. “Promise?” he whispers, tilting toward her.

She reaches for the hand hanging at his side, and twines her fingers around his pinky. “Cross my heart.”

Tears spring to his eyes. He leans forward and kisses her before he says something desperate and stupid like Let’s just run away and never look back. He lifts the hand she’s not holding and slides it along her jaw, his thumb stroking the arch of her cheekbone. She kisses him back, gentle but somehow insistent too, and he tries to pour everything he’s feeling into the movement of his lips over hers.

When they finally break apart, it’s too soon. They linger close together, their noses brushing, breathing the same air as the faint sounds of the city echo in the distance. And then she leans back.

She lifts her hands to his lapels again, straightening his jacket. She reaches for his tie next. He watches her face. She’s got that look again, the one she wore right before she asked him not to sleep with Bianca, and he knows what she’s thinking.

“Hey,” he whispers, lifting his hand to her cheek again.
Her eyelashes flutter as she looks up at him.

“I belong to you,” he murmurs. “I’m yours.”

She searches his eyes. “Promise?” she whispers.

He leans forward and presses his forehead against hers. “I promise.”
Thirty-Eight

The kitchen in Nick’s palazzo is stunning. Gorgeous black granite countertops. Beautiful white cabinets. Top of the line appliances. Gleaming pots and pans hanging from a rack over the center island.

Frankie studies it all without really seeing it. It’s the silence she came in here for. The emptiness. She just...she couldn’t be out in that salon anymore. Her mom’s books on the bookshelves, Miles Davis playing through the bluetooth speaker, her team talking to Nick like he’s one of them, and Nick gazing at her with that look that used to make her weak in the knees. It’s just...it’s too much.

She sets her wine glass down, grips the edge of the counter, and leans forward with her head bent. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. There’s a faint but increasingly present headache pounding between her eyes. She’s exhausted, and she doesn’t think it’s because she spent last night sleeping in an airplane seat.

They’ve spent the past few hours working on how to get in and out of the catacombs beneath Blake’s palazzo without being detected. At first, she was glad Nick invited everyone to help them strategize. She didn’t want to be alone with him. But she realized fairly quickly that inviting the rest of the team was a mistake. Nick has stepped into Will’s role perfectly. He’s amused by Standish’s commentary and antics, but he keeps the younger agent focused. He seeks out Susan’s opinion and genuinely listens to what she says. He isn’t condescending, he’s charming without being a flatterer, and he’s talented and knowledgeable enough that everyone is impressed.

Everyone, that is, except Jai. But Jai’s hands are tied and he knows it. Whatever plan they come up with is going to be something that both Frankie and Standish have to do. Jai has a vested interest in making sure this mission goes off without a hitch. And that means he has to work with Nick whether he likes it or not. It didn’t take long before they were building off of each other’s suggestions the way they used to. Now, after a few hours and a few bottles of wine, they’re all pretty comfortable with each other. Nick seems like part of the team, and there’s not a damn thing Frankie can do about it.

She wishes Will was here.

It’s a little past seven o’clock. Bianca’s meeting with her senior staff was scheduled to last until seven. That means everyone is probably pushing their chairs back from the conference table and discussing their weekend plans. Bianca is probably eyeing Will from the other side of the room, her dark eyes tracing a slow trail up his body as she admires the cut of his suit. She’s probably thinking about where they’re going to go for dinner. She’s probably thinking about what they’re going to do after dinner.

For the millionth time since Frankie stood in that back alley and watched Will walk away, she finds herself drowning in a flood of images. Will in a candlelit restaurant, smiling when Bianca laughs. Will reaching across a white tablecloth to hold Bianca’s hand. Will with his arm around Bianca’s shoulders as they walk slowly down a cobblestone street. Will at Bianca’s front door, trying to be noble and trying to walk away, but getting swept up in the moment and leaning in to kiss her goodnight. Will realizing the past isn’t past. Will standing in Bianca’s bedroom whispering This feels like fate as he unzips her dress and slides his hands over her skin.

The last image makes Frankie’s breath catch in her throat.

_He belongs to you_, she tells herself. _He’s yours._
But is he, really?

“Damn it,” she whispers, lifting her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose.

She hears the door behind her swing open, and she straightens immediately. She expects it to be Nick. In all the years she’s known him, Nick has never failed to notice when she sneaks away to steal a minute for herself. He always follows her. There was a time when she liked that. But now’s not a good time for him to find her alone.

It’s not Nick. It’s Susan.

“Hey girl,” she greets softly.

“Hey,” Frankie says in relief.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” She heads for the diamond bin wine rack that’s on a nearby wall. “Just thought I’d grab another bottle.”

“Standish has had enough,” Susan says dryly. “He’s trying to convince Jai to go to a karaoke bar.”

Frankie snorts. “Jai doesn’t do karaoke.”

“Wine drunk Standish disagrees with you.”

“Wine drunk Standish is going to wake up with no eyebrows if he doesn’t leave Jai alone.”

Susan laughs. “I’m going to put him to bed soon, I think. Now that the plan is mostly solidified.”

Frankie studies the dozens of wine bottles in the rack. “You think it’s a good one?”

“Yeah. Seems sound. Will might have some ideas about how to streamline it.”

Frankie’s heart aches at the sound of his name. She ignores it. “Jai seems pretty sure that the entry point he picked is the best one. I hope he can get what he needs from that supplier though. Otherwise we’ll have to take some risks.”

“I’m sure he’ll get what he needs. He always does.”

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees, reaching for an expensive bottle of red. “He’s magic like that.”

She turns around and walks back toward the island to set the bottle down on the granite.

“You want another glass?”

Susan shakes her head. “No, I shouldn’t. I promised Ray I’d call him.”

Frankie wishes she could call Will. She doesn’t say so. She reaches for the corkscrew Nick left out on the counter and gets to work opening the bottle. Susan is watching her. She’s wearing her profiler face, the same expression she wears when she’s studying a subject, but Frankie pretends she doesn’t notice. She opens the bottle, pours herself a little more wine than she probably should, and lifts the glass to her lips.

“I can see why you fell in love with him,” Susan says.
Frankie freezes. Susan isn’t the type to play mind games, but her statement feels like a trap. There’s no right way to respond to it. She can’t pretend like Nick is just another ex. The fact that she married him makes that impossible. And even if Susan didn’t know about the marriage, she’s too good at her job not to have noticed the way Nick’s been watching her all night. Frankie can keep him at arm’s length all she wants, but arm’s length doesn’t lessen their chemistry. And planning a mission side by side—which puts how easily they work together on full display—isn’t helping matters.

But discussing all the reasons why she used to be head-over-heels, wind-beneath-my-wings, you-had-me-at-hello in love with Nick while Will is out on a date with a woman who seems perfect for him feels dangerous. So Frankie doesn’t say anything. She just drinks her wine.

“He’s smart,” Susan continues when it’s obvious Frankie isn’t going to respond. “Funny. Quick-witted enough to keep up with you. Easy on the eyes. Charming as hell.”

“Should I tell Ray he’s got some competition?” Frankie asks dryly, swirling the wine in her glass.

Susan smiles a little. “I’m just saying I can see what you saw in him. When he’s not being a jerk because he’s jealous, he’s actually pretty…”

Frankie can think of about a dozen words to finish Susan’s sentence, but she refuses to verbalize any of them. She knows Susan is just trying to give her a safe space to talk about how she’s feeling. But drinking a glass of wine while analyzing Nick and their relationship reminds her of Mina, and thinking about Mina hurts. There’s nothing to analyze anyway. She chose Will.

“I’m still Team Whiskey,” Susan adds as if she can read Frankie’s mind. “Just in case that wasn’t clear.”

“You don’t need to pick a team, Susan. There’s no competition.”

Susan hums in response. Frankie doesn’t know if it’s a good or a bad thing that Susan didn’t confirm she knows there’s no competition.

Frankie sets her glass down on the counter. If Susan wants to help, she knows a better way.

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course.”

“When Standish is sober, I need you to talk to him. Tell him to knock it off with his stupid man crush on Nick. He’s going to hurt Will. He’s upsetting Jai. And he could end up jeopardizing the mission.”

Susan tilts her head. “You don’t want to talk to him yourself?”

“He’ll listen better if it comes from you. Because if I try to do it, I’ll just end up smacking the shit out of him.”

Susan snorts.

“I’m serious. I thought he was pretending. Trying to beat Nick at his own game. But he’s not.”

“He could be,” Susan points out. “He’s done things like this before. He’s not always as clueless as we think he is.”
“I can manipulate people when I’m drunk,” Frankie counters. “Standish can’t. He’s not good enough to play a role when he’s got a bottle of wine in his system. He’s acting like an idiot and it’s hurting people.”

“He’s young, Frankie. And you know how insecure he is. He latches onto people he thinks have it all together and then he emulates them. That’s what he does. And to him, Nick seems cool.”

“Nick isn’t—”

“I know,” Susan cuts her off gently. “I’m not disagreeing with you. I’m just saying you have to understand that Standish isn’t purposely trying to hurt anyone. He doesn’t know most of the details about what Nick did. I don’t think he fully understands what you and Jai went through or how hard this mission has been on you and Will. If he did, he wouldn’t be so careless.”

“I don’t care why he’s doing it. Will has enough on his plate with me. He doesn’t need Standish making it worse. And Jai needs a friend in his corner, not a Nick fanboy.”

“I know. You’re right.”

“So will you talk to him or should I kick his ass?”

Susan smiles. “I’ll talk to him. If he ignores me, you’re free to do whatever you want.”

“Thank you.”

A long moment of silence passes. The lull in conversation drags Frankie’s mind straight back to Will. She stares down into her glass and tries not to wonder whether he and Bianca will drink red or white wine at dinner. Maybe they won’t drink either. Maybe Bianca’s more of a liquor girl. She probably likes whiskey.

“Did Will really tell you that she’s the one who got away?” Frankie blurts out before she can stop herself.

“That was years ago, Frankie.”

“So yes.”

Susan sighs. “Yes, he said it. But that was before he met you.”

Frankie lifts her wine glass to her lips in an attempt to drown the jealousy that’s suddenly burning the back of her throat. She has so many questions. They’ve been pummeling her brain ever since she first saw that photo of Bianca. How long were they together? Did they fight a lot, or were they annoyingly happy? What kind of sex did they have? What did he love most about her? What drove him crazy? Did he have the same dreams of a future with kids and cardigans and book stores? Or are those dreams just for her?

She knows Susan could answer most of her questions. But she doesn’t want to ask them. Partly because she doesn’t want to seem pathetic. Mostly because she’s afraid to know the answers.

“Frankie,” Susan says softly.

Frankie looks up at her.

“Will loves you.”

“I know.” Frankie glances back down into her wine glass. “But he loved her too. And I can see
why. She’s…”

She doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. Gorgeous? Smart? Funny? Kind? Exactly the kind of woman that someone like Will Chase should end up with?

“She’s not you,” Susan finishes.

Frankie swallows. “Maybe that would be better for him.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“Sometimes I do.”

The words hang in the air for a second, quiet and pathetic and vulnerable. Frankie closes her eyes. This is what she didn’t want. She didn’t want to sound like this. She doesn’t want to feel like this.

“Sweetie,” Susan breathes. She reaches across the counter and puts her hand on top of Frankie’s. “Look at me.”

Frankie looks at her.

“I’ve known Will for a long time,” Susan says. “I’ve seen him with every single woman he’s ever been serious about. And I can promise you, without a shadow of a doubt, that none of them made him as happy as you do. He is completely, head over heels in love with you. And Bianca and her cheekbones aren’t going to change that.”

Frankie snorts despite herself. “They are nice cheekbones,” she admits.

“They’re terrible,” Susan contradicts. “Definitely fake. She’s got a real Maleficent vibe. And her hair is way too shiny. Looks greasy.”

“She has gorgeous hair, Susan.”

“It’s all extensions and dye. And she laughs like a hyena.”

“She does not.”

“She totally does. The Lion King is on Broadway. I bet she’d be a shoo-in for one of those hyena parts. She could win a Tony with that cackle.”

Frankie shakes her head but can’t suppress a smile. “You’re terrible.”

“You like it.”

“I don’t hate it,” Frankie admits, smiling wider.

Susan leans her elbows on the counter. “You know what Will told me once?”

“Hm?”

“He said if you stuck him in the middle of Grand Central Station, and surrounded him with a thousand people and then blindfolded him, he’d still be able to find you if you laughed. I think his exact words were: Best thing I’ve ever heard.”

Frankie’s heart clenches in her chest. “He’s such a sappy idiot.”
“Yeah, but he’s your sappy idiot. Will isn’t Standish, Frankie. He doesn’t get distracted by shiny things. He’s with Bianca because he has to be. He’d much rather be here with you.”

“Okay,” Frankie says, waving her hand. “I get it.”

“You sure? Because I’ve got some really great points all lined up if you still need convincing.”

“I’m sure. I appreciate the pep talk, but you can go call your boyfriend now.”

“I can stay if you want.”

Frankie shakes her head. “You don’t need to. Jai’s around. We’ll probably go sit on the terrace and do that thing Standish hates.”

“The thing where you sit next to each other in silence for hours?”

“That’s the one.”

Susan laughs. “Well then I’ll put our drunk nerd to bed. If you want to talk, though…”

“I know,” Frankie says. “I’ll come find you.”

Susan smiles and squeezes Frankie’s hand. She heads for the door, but pauses in the doorway and turns back with her eyebrows furrowed.

“What?” Frankie asks when Susan doesn’t say anything.

Susan’s eyes flicker over her face as if she’s trying to gauge Frankie’s mood. “This might annoy you, but I love you, so I’m going to say it anyway.”

Frankie frowns. “Okay.”

“Be careful with Nick tonight.”

Frankie’s heart shoots up into her throat.

“I’m not implying anything,” Susan says firmly. “But I’ve been watching him the last few hours, and the way he looks at you…” She trails off and shakes her head. “That look is hard to resist from anybody, let alone someone you used to love so much. And he knows you’re vulnerable right now.”

A tiny flicker of annoyance flares in Frankie’s chest even though she knows Susan is just trying to look out for her.

“I can handle Nick,” she says.

Susan nods. “I know. Just...be careful.”

At some point over dinner, Will realizes that he’s missed Bianca.

He’d have to be blind or a liar not to acknowledge that she’s beautiful. She’s wearing a scarlet dress that made her look powerful in front of her staff but somehow makes her seem soft and ethereal in the dim lighting of the intimate restaurant she chose for them. She’s just as smart and funny as she used to be. She’s extraordinarily kind to their waiter. It’s like she has her own gravitational force, like everyone within a hundred yards of her can’t help but stare at her in
admiration. Will can’t help it either. She’s spectacular.

He forgot how much they have in common. They experience the world the same way. They’ve both seen the worst of people, but they’re still optimistic that things can get better and people can change. They’re both the youngest sibling in a close-knit family, and they have parents they adore and a brood of nieces and nephews they like to spoil. They have the same sense of humor. The same interest in movies and books and music. The same work ethic and moral code and flaws.

Dinner seems to pass in a flash. There are several different courses—Bianca knows the owner, and the chef has created a special menu just for them—but Will doesn’t look at his watch once. Their conversation flows from one topic to the next without a single lull. They talk about their families and their friends. Work. Pop culture. Politics. There’s a lot of memory swapping, and a lot of laughing, and honestly? It’s kind of nice. Really nice.

But right from the start, there’s something wrong. Not blaring-siren wrong. It’s more like sitting in a chair with one leg that’s shorter than all the others. Something’s just a little bit off. Bianca is spectacular, but she’s not...

Frankie.

She’s not Frankie.

Will used to think—even after they broke up—that Bianca was the perfect woman for him. Maybe fate had frowned on them and they hadn’t ended up together, but he was convinced that he’d end up with someone just like her.

Except he was wrong. Frankie is nothing like Bianca. And it has never been more clear to him than it is right now, as he sits across from a woman he used to think was perfect, that Frankie is the one for him. He doesn’t need a mirror image of himself. He needs someone to balance him out. He needs a partner, someone who is good at all the things he’s terrible at, someone who can temper his optimism and challenge his viewpoints. Someone who makes him better.

He needs Frankie.

“So?” Bianca says as she sets her spoon down next to the now-empty plate of tiramisu they were sharing. “What do you think?”

“One of the best dinners I’ve ever had,” Will says honestly. He exhales heavily. “Fullest I’ve ever been too, I think.”

She laughs. “Venice has a cure for that.” She gets to her feet. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

Will frowns. “We haven’t paid.”

“Ms. Ricci doesn’t pay here,” the waiter says, appearing behind Bianca as if the mention of payment summoned him from another dimension.

“No,” the waiter replies, shaking his head. “Friends of Ms. Ricci are included.”

“Please, I insist.”

“I will lose my job if I take money for a meal Ms. Ricci eats,” the waiter says firmly. “She is a guest of honor in this place.”
Bianca smiles at Will as she puts on her coat. “Let it go, caro. You will not win this battle. Believe me, I have tried.”

Will sighs and gets to his feet. “I don’t suppose I could offer you a tip?”

“No, signore,” the waiter says, bowing his head. “But your generosity is appreciated.”

Will shoots Bianca a defeated look. She laughs, and reaches out to grab his hand. “My poor American,” she purrs at him in Italian. “Too noble to accept something for free.”

Will’s heart shoots into his throat. Her hand is soft and warm, but he wants to pull away. He knows he can’t.

“I don’t know about all that,” he says modestly.

She winks at him. “I do.”

She leads him toward the exit, and he follows her with his fingers still woven through hers. When they step out into the street, she leads him around the corner, through a short but dark tunnel, down a narrow alley, around another corner, and then down another alley that empties out onto a much wider sidewalk lined with several brightly lit shops and restaurants.

“Tucked back there, isn’t it?” Will says.

Bianca smiles. “Away from the tourists. That’s how they like it. Especially so close to a major tourist landmark.”

“Which one?”

Her smile widens. “Come on. I will show you.”

She leads him forward, her hand still clasped in his. Will tries to focus on the ancient stones beneath his feet instead of her hand. All of this feels uncomfortably familiar. The scent of gardenias in the air. A blanket of stars above them as they wander the streets of an Italian city after dinner. If he closed his eyes, he could still conjure up a perfect image of the flat they shared in Rome. The little kitchen he used to cook for her in, the sketch books she left scattered throughout the place, the chaise where they had sex after their first date.

A flood of unwelcome images follows his memory of the chaise. Bianca’s skin beneath his lips, Bianca’s legs wrapped around his waist, Bianca’s mouth by his ear, whispering yes in breathy Italian. He shakes his head, trying to dislodge the memories, and turns to look at her.

“So what did you do to earn a lifetime of free food at such a great little place?”

“I’m on the board of a nonprofit called ISC,” she replies. “We organize law students and lawyers to take on pro bono cases. When I first arrived in Venice, the owner was in danger of losing his restaurant because of some shady lease negotiations and faulty flood insurance.”

“And you helped him keep it,” Will guesses.

Bianca lifts her shoulder. “The lawyers who took the case helped him keep it. I merely made the introduction.”

“Still swooping in to save the day,” Will says. “Some things never change.”

She smirks at him. “Pot meet kettle.”
Will laughs. They walk in comfortable silence for a minute or two, still holding hands. When they get to the foot of a massive bridge, she leads him up and across it. The entire length of it is lined with shops and booths. She stops when they get to the middle, and lets go of his hand to gesture out at the canal.

“Here we are.”

Will glances down at the boats gliding down the canal, and then at the buildings that are lit cheerfully along the shore, and then back at the shops behind him. “I know they call it the City of Bridges for a reason, but you’re going to have to help me out here, B. Which one is this?”

“The Rialto.”

Will’s stomach lurches. This is Frankie and Nick’s bridge. The one where they traded their first *I love yous.*

“You should be grateful you are here in November,” Bianca says, oblivious to his sudden nausea. She puts her elbows on the white stone railing and leans forward. “This place is insufferable during the tourist season. There are people everywhere.” She smirks at him. “Plenty of Americans.”

“I thought I sensed some of my brethren,” he jokes, leaning against the railing next to her.

“Is that like a sixth sense you have?” she teases.

“Nah, still just the five,” he says. “They smell like Big Macs and sound like bald eagles screeching the word *freedom.*”

Bianca throws her head back and laughs. Will used to love that laugh. Even now, it makes him smile. But it doesn’t make his heart skip a beat like Frankie’s does.

Bianca looks down at the canal, and he follows her gaze toward a gondola that’s gliding through the water. There’s a couple inside, wrapped around each other and kissing beneath the stars.

“You know, they say Paris is the City of Love,” she says quietly, her eyes still fixed on the couple. “But I’ve been to Paris. It didn’t suit me. I prefer Venice.”

“Something about the water, maybe,” Will says. “No cars, no traffic. It’s quieter. Time seems to go slower without all that noise.”

“Normally I would agree with you,” she says, turning her head to look at him with a smile. “But our three hour dinner seemed to last only a few minutes.”

“Three hours?” Will sputters. He straightens and glances down at his watch, and is shocked to see that she’s right. It’s past ten o’clock.

His mind immediately drifts to Frankie. What’s she doing? Is she thinking about him? Waiting for him? Does she miss him? Or is she so busy planning the mission with Nick that she hasn’t even realized he’s still gone?

He should text her. Just to check in, and make sure she knows he’s thinking about her. Maybe he could send her the link to their song. The words seem fitting for tonight.

“Is it past your bedtime?” Bianca asks, pulling him from his thoughts.
“No,” he laughs. He wants to pull his phone out and text Frankie, but it feels rude and he doesn’t trust himself to lie convincingly about who he’s texting. He leaves his phone in his pocket and rests his elbows on the railing instead. “Just didn’t realize we were at the restaurant that long.”

“All that time and we still didn’t talk about us,” she says, reaching out to weave her fingers through his.

Her hand is small in his. There are other people around, but it doesn’t feel like it. It feels like they’re alone. He knows the tone of her voice. It’s the same voice she used when she said *I love you too* after he told her for the first time.

She lifts her other hand, and brushes her fingertips over the ridges of his knuckles. “About a year after you and I ended things, I fell in love with someone else.”

Will stares at her. “You did?”

“I did,” she confirms. “He’s a doctor. And a very, very good man.” She lifts her gaze to his. “He asked me to marry him a few weeks ago.”

Will is stunned. And also maybe just a little bit jealous. Not because he wants to be the man she marries. He doesn’t. It’s just...memories. That weird feeling you get when you find out that someone you used to love has moved on and loves someone new.

“I don’t see a ring,” he observes, glancing down at her bare fourth finger.

She shakes her head. “I told him I wasn’t ready.”

“Why?”

“It didn’t feel right.” She studies him for a second, her eyes flickering over his face. “Being with you now, I think I understand why.”

The atmosphere around them shifts. Will can feel it. It’s charged all of a sudden, and his body is reacting to it even though his brain hates it.

Bianca leans a little closer to him. “He and I are on a break,” she murmurs. “He works with Doctors Without Borders. He’s in Haiti at the moment. We’re taking some time for ourselves while he’s gone, trying to figure out whether we really want each other. And this morning when I woke up, I thought I knew. I thought I was ready. But then I saw you on the steps of that bridge, Will, and I...”

She trails off. Her eyes dip down toward his mouth, and guilt threatens to eat him alive. This is wrong. This is *so* wrong. Frankie is at home, waiting for him in a palazzo that her asshole husband bought for her, and he’s out holding hands with another woman. Bianca has another man who loves her, a good man who wants to marry her and make her happy, and he’s leading her on and making her second guess things.

“Maybe it’s just an illusion,” she murmurs. “I loved you. I wanted a life with you. And then all of a sudden we were apart, and it hurt too badly to talk about it, so we never really...”

“Got any closure?”

“Yes,” she says with a nod. “Maybe we just need closure.” She swallows, the elegant line of her throat constricting, and her eyes flicker down to his lips again. “Or maybe there’s more to it than that.” She lifts her gaze back to his. “Maybe you were right. Maybe fate is giving us another
chance.”

Will hates himself. He has to tell her. Maybe not all of the truth, not anything that will put her life in jeopardy, but he can’t lie to her anymore. Not when she’s looking at him like that. Not when she seems willing to throw away a real relationship with a good man for a lie.

“Bianca,” he says, turning toward her. “There’s something I have to—”

He stops talking abruptly when he recognizes someone over her shoulder in the distance, walking up the bridge and toward them.

Ollerman.

He isn’t looking at Will. He’s looking off to his right, listening as the man next to him—

Blake. The man next to him is Blake.

Will knows he has two, maybe three seconds to make a decision. He’s armed. But he can’t shoot Ollerman and Blake in cold blood in the middle of the Rialto Bridge. He can’t arrest both of them at the same time when he’s by himself. Even if the whole team was here, he couldn’t arrest them. The Trust has survived Ollerman in custody before, and there’s no reason it won’t happen again. It’s better to stick with Nick’s plan. But Nick’s plan is going to fail if Ollerman sees him. And if Bianca sees Blake, or if Blake sees her, they’re going to recognize each other and say hello. And then Ollerman is going to know that Will has a connection to Bianca, and he’ll use Bianca the way he once tried to use Frankie, and Bianca will end up dead.

Shit.

Bianca is staring up at him, her eyebrows furrowed because he stopped talking mid-sentence. Ollerman’s head is swiveling toward him. Will is running out of time, he has one second left to make a decision, and suddenly all he can think is, What would Frankie do?

His brain conjures up a memory from their friends-with-benefits days. He and Frankie were running from a gang of mercenaries at Mardi Gras in New Orleans. She grabbed his hand and yanked him down an alleyway, threw herself into his arms, and muttered People don’t look at couples making out right before she stuck her tongue down his throat.

Will makes a decision.

He kisses Bianca.

He puts his hands on her cheeks to cover her face, and he turns them so that she’s pressed against the railing of the bridge and Ollerman and Blake can only see his back. He kisses her like he means it, the same way he kisses Frankie, because if Bianca doesn’t buy it and she pushes him away then they’re screwed.

She buys it. She sucks in a breath in surprise, her chest hitching against his, and then wraps her arms around him and kisses him back. Her tongue slides into his mouth, and he shudders because it’s not right. Everything about this is wrong. But he closes his eyes tighter and kisses Bianca deeper and pretends that it’s Frankie in his arms, that they went out for dinner at some romantic restaurant she pretended to hate but secretly loved, and now they’re walking back to their hotel but he couldn’t resist the urge to stop and kiss her senseless in the middle of one of Venice’s most famous landmarks because she’s the love of his life and he’s lucky enough that he gets to kiss her whenever he wants.
Bianca tastes like chocolate and wine. He’s surrounded by the scent of gardenias. She’s a great kisser, and her body feels just familiar enough against his even all these years later that he can feel desire sparking in his veins. He hates this. But he’s afraid that Ollerman or Blake will pause to look in one of the shop windows or tie their shoes or something, and if he pulls away too soon they’ll be spotted.

He’s never going to forgive himself for this.

He hopes Frankie can.

And then it hits him suddenly, like a sucker punch to the gut, that even if he’s successful and Ollerman doesn’t notice them, Bianca still won’t be safe. If things go sideways tomorrow, Bianca and her security system are going to be blamed. Ollerman doesn’t tolerate mistakes. He’ll kill her just to make an example. Will can’t risk that. He can’t just tell her the truth about how he feels (or doesn’t feel). He has to warn her about Blake.

He can’t do it here, though. Ollerman and Blake could come back. He can’t risk taking her somewhere else that’s in public either. He needs somewhere safe and secure, somewhere he knows isn’t bugged, and he suddenly remembers the security system Bianca had installed in their flat in Rome.

Bianca pulls him closer. Will presses her back against the railing. She arches into him with a soft sound. Will thinks of Frankie, of the sound she makes sometimes when he kisses her like he’s kissing Bianca now, and he can’t do it anymore. He can’t kiss someone who isn’t Frankie.

He pulls back from Bianca’s mouth. He glances quickly over his shoulder before she opens her eyes. Ollerman and Blake are nowhere to be seen. When he turns back around, he’s just in time to see her eyes flutter open.

She exhales a shaky breath. “Wow,” she murmurs with a smile.

Guilt claws at his chest. “Let’s go back to your place,” he murmurs.

She arches an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

He drapes an arm around her shoulders and starts to lead her in the opposite direction of Ollerman and Blake.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

It’s almost midnight.

Will still isn’t home.

Frankie is standing on the terrace of the palazzo with a wine glass in her hand. She’s definitely not standing on the terrace because she can see the dock from here and would know if a water taxi pulled up. Her cell phone definitely isn’t sitting on the stone parapet in front of her, screen facing up, in case someone were to call or text her.

There have been no water taxis.

No one has called or texted her.

She lifts her glass to her lips and finishes the rest of her wine. She’s not drunk. She’s not tipsy,
either. But she’s not exactly sober. She’s just sort of...buzzed. She holds her alcohol well. She could still hit the bullseye of a target with every single bullet in her gun, and she could take down a man twice her size without breaking a sweat. But she’s...well, she’s starting to feel the wine.

She wishes she could stop feeling this goddamn ache in her chest.

Jai appears at her side. “No.”

Frankie looks over at him. “What?”

“No more wine.”

Frankie gazes at him in the darkness. The terrace is lit, but not very well. It’s more like mood lighting, the kind of low glow that you’d find in a romantic restaurant like the one her boyfriend took another woman to.

“I didn’t say I wanted more wine,” she tells Jai.

“You didn’t have to.” He reaches out and plucks the wine glass from her hand. “When Will gets back, you guys will need to talk. And…” He crinkles his nose as if in disgust. “...do whatever else it is you do. And you can’t do either of those things if you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“I know that. But you will be if you open another bottle of wine. So the answer is no.”

“Okay, dad.”

Jai doesn’t seem offended by her response. She didn’t expect him to be. They stand in silence for a while. Frankie spins the ring on her index finger—one of Jai’s tracker rings—around her knuckle absently. Beneath the terrace, the sound of the water lapping up against the canal and the motors of a few nearby boats echo softly.

“You have to go,” Frankie says eventually.

Jai clears his throat. “I have time.”

“No you don’t. You scheduled the meeting for a quarter after.”

“I’ve still got time.”

“Jai,” she sighs, finally turning to look at him. “If you’re late, we won’t get what we need to pull this mission off tomorrow. And if we don’t pull it off, we don’t get Ollerman and The Trust. So just go. I’m fine.”

He meets her gaze. She can read the look on his face clearly. He’s worried about her. Not like he was this morning. Not like he is before she does something dangerous. This is that deeply troubled look, the one he wears whenever Nick is around, and she both loves and hates him for it.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he whispers.

Any annoyance she was feeling evaporates immediately. Sometimes, when she thinks back on the last decade of her life, she wonders how she managed to get through it all. But then she looks at Jai, and she knows.

She reaches out and presses her hand against his cheek. His beard is rough beneath her skin. He
turns his face into her palm and closes his eyes, an act of reciprocity that he would never, not in a million years, do in front of anyone else.

“T’ll be fine, Francesca. I’m fine.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not fragile. I’m…” She nearly says fine, but catches herself. “I think I can manage to look after myself for an hour or so while you’re gone. In fact, I think I’ll go to bed. I’m tired, and we’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Jai opens his mouth.

“Nick’s not going to sneak into my bedroom, Jai,” she cuts him off. “He’s a lot of things, but he’s not that.”

Jai closes his mouth. He glances at her phone. “You should call him. Ask him when he’ll be home.”

Frankie shakes her head. “No.”

“He’s wearing his watch. I could track him and tell you where he is.”

“No.”

Jai sighs. Frankie stares out at the canal. She can feel Jai’s gaze on the side of her face but she ignores him. This isn’t the first time tonight he’s asked her if she wants him to track Will. She said no all the other times too. She doesn’t want to know where he is. He’ll tell her when he gets back.

If he ever comes back, that is.

The ache in her chest has returned. She tries to think of a list of reasonable explanations for why Will is still out with his beautiful, talented, charity-involved ex. She can only come up with one, and it immediately conjures up an image of Will and Bianca naked in bed.

“He wouldn’t cheat on you,” Jai says into the silence.

The word cheat hangs in the air like a curse. Frankie wants to agree, but the wine in her system is eating away at her usual confidence.

“He wouldn’t,” Jai insists even though she didn’t disagree with him. “He’s too good. If he’s not back yet, there’s a reason. He’ll have a good explanation. And it’ll be the truth.”
“Who are you trying to convince, Jai?” she asks quietly. “Me or yourself?”

“Francesca—”

She turns to face him. “Just go. I’ll be fine. And you can’t be late.”

He looks like he wants to argue with her, but he doesn’t. He exhales heavily. “Call me if you need me. Even if you just want to sit silently on the line, or if you want to meet me at a bar after I’m done, or if you want—”

“Okay,” she cuts him off gently. She reaches up to adjust his tie. “I’ll call you if I need you.”

He studies her for a second, his eyebrows furrowed, and then he wraps his hand around her arm and leans forward to kiss her forehead. When he leans back, he smiles at her. His eyes flicker over her face in concern one more time. He squeezes her bicep. And then he turns on his heel and leaves.

For a minute or two after he’s gone, she’s fine. Venice is beautiful at night, and despite the fact that it’s November and she’s outside, it’s not that chilly. Of course, it probably doesn’t feel chilly because she’s wearing one of Will’s sweatshirts—that faded FBI crew neck that she stole from him months ago. It smells like him.

She wonders if he’ll smell like Bianca when he comes home.

That awful mental image from before returns. Bianca on her back, her body arched beneath Will as his hips thrust against hers. Frankie tries to shake it away, and she succeeds, but whether she’s thinking about Will or thinking about something else, she’s alone. That old, familiar loneliness that makes her feel like she’s drowning starts to well up inside her.

She used to be a pro at dealing with it. She’d go to a bar, knock back some liquor until she was just tipsy enough, and then scan the place for a man who looked as dangerous and reckless as she felt. She never had to approach him. She’d just make eye contact and sip her drink, and he’d come to her. If he knew how to talk to her, she’d go home with him. She’d let him take her clothes off and take her, and maybe it was meaningless and transactional and sad, but at least it helped her momentarily forget how broken she felt.

She can’t do that anymore though. She’s in love with Will—the truly, madly, deeply kind that means she doesn’t even want to look at another man, let alone sleep with one. But Will isn’t here. Will is out on a date with his ex, and it’s almost midnight, and she’s standing here waiting for him like some kind of pathetic moron who can’t function without him. She hates herself. She hates how much she misses him, and she hates how scared she is that he doesn’t love her enough to say no, and she hates that she can’t stop imagining him fucking Bianca.

God, she needs a drink.

She pinches the bridge of her nose and grits her teeth against the internal tug of war. She should go to bed. That’s what she told Jai she was going to do. But there’s this destructive voice in the back of her head whispering that she should go out to the nearest bar and order a drink and flirt with a stranger. Will might not want her right now, but someone else will. And when Will finally comes home, and their bed is empty and she’s nowhere to be found, he can find out what it’s like to wonder what she’s doing and who she’s doing it with and why he wasn’t enough.

Yeah, it’s time for her to go to bed.

She slides her phone into her back pocket and turns away from the canal, but she freezes before she
even takes a step.

Nick is standing in the doorway leading to the palazzo. One of his broad shoulders is leaning against the doorframe. He’s wearing a cream colored henley that’s stretched across his chest and his biceps, and it’s probably the wine talking, but he really has no business looking that good in a shirt that plain. It’s open at the neck, and she can see the chain of his St. Michael pendant peeking out. She remembers grabbing that chain to pull his mouth down to hers for a kiss. She remembers she was wearing nothing but that chain and her engagement ring the night he woke her up and said I don’t want to wait, marry me tomorrow.

“Hi,” he says softly.

“Hi.”

He glances down at the watch she bought him, and then back up at her. “Chase still not back yet?”

There’s nothing accusatory in his tone, but she feels the indictment anyway. “No,” she replies. Because what else can she say? She wouldn’t be out here alone if Will was back. She folds her arms over her chest. “I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

She feels stupid as soon as she says it. She sounds defensive, and she hates that. She doesn’t need to defend Will. Certainly not to Nick.

“I’m sure he will be,” Nick says without a hint of sarcasm. He smiles that devastatingly handsome smile that she’s seen turn other women to mush, and holds up a bottle of scotch and two glasses. “But in the meantime, I brought the good stuff.”

Frankie shakes her head. “I’m going to bed.”

His smile widens. “You afraid to have a drink with me?”

He’s trying to goad her into saying yes. And it’s working. Because if she goes to bed, it’ll look like she doesn’t have the willpower to resist him. And even if she’s supposed to be leading him on a little, she doesn’t want him to think he’s got that much power over her.

She lifts her chin defiantly. “No.”

“Good.”

He pushes off the doorframe and crosses the terrace to stand next to her. He sets the glasses on the stone parapet with a soft clink, and then unscrews the lid from the bottle.

“Dewar’s isn’t the good stuff, you know,” Frankie tells him as he pours.

Nick smirks at her. “Watch your mouth. This is the world’s best scotch.”

“You’re a billionaire, Nick. You can afford the good stuff now. Buy some Macallan.”

“I don’t want Macallan. You know why?”

“No. But I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

He smiles and offers her one of the glasses. “You and I were drinking Dewar’s the first time I ever kissed you. Every time I taste it, I think of you.”

The memory is immediate and vivid—the smell of his cologne, his hands in her hair, his chest hard
against hers. She pushes it away and doesn’t take the glass.

Nick watches her for a second. When it’s obvious she’s not going to take the glass, he sets it down on the parapet between them. He reaches for the other, and then lifts it to his lips as he studies the canal beneath them.

They stand in silence for a while. Frankie’s still facing the palazzo. She leans her elbows on the stone railing behind her but doesn’t turn around to join him in gazing out at Venice. It feels safer that way. She’s gazed at a lot of Venice canals with Nick. Most of the time, that gazing ended with kissing. She’s not interested in repeating the past.

“You know, when I’m away from this place, I’m convinced I’m misremembering it,” Nick says quietly. “That I’ve just romanticized it because of how much it means to me, and that it can’t be as great as I thought. And then I get here, and it’s even more beautiful than I remembered.” He looks over at her. “Kind of like you.”

Frankie presses her lips together and doesn’t reply.

He sets his glass down on the parapet and turns to face her. “Francesca,” he murmurs in a low voice that makes her think of his hands on her skin. “I know you don’t—”

“Stop it,” she cuts him off.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“I know exactly what you were going to say. And I don’t want to hear it.”

He looks amused. “You sure?”

“Why can’t you just let me go?” she asks, turning toward him. “You could have anyone you wanted.”

“I want you.”

She shakes her head. “No you don’t. You just don’t want someone else to have me. I’m not yours anymore, Nick. You have to let me go.”

“I can’t. I couldn’t if I tried.”

“Have you tried?”

He tilts his head. “Are you asking me if I’ve cheated on you the way you cheat on me?”

A flurry of emotion storms through Frankie’s chest and up into her throat. She swallows it but can’t seem to dismiss the guilt. He’s not wrong. She’s spent years cheating on him. Even if Jai was right that she doesn’t owe him anything, and even if their relationship was over the second he put a bullet in RJ’s skull, they’re still married. And that means she’s a cheater.

“I don’t blame you,” he murmurs. “For sleeping around, I mean. I hate it, but I’ve never held it against you.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t care if you do.”

“Yes you do. Your team might think you preferred things casual until your boy scout reformed you, but I know you better than that. You weren’t made for bed hopping. That’s just who I turned you into.”
Frankie glances up at him in surprise. He’s not looking at her. He’s staring down into the canal with an expression that looks a lot like guilt. She tells herself it’s just for show. But she knows it’s not.

They stand in silence for a while. He’s not touching her, and he’s standing a good two feet away, but there’s something humming between them. Frankie can feel it. She can always feel it—there’s always an almost audible crack of chemistry between them—but it hasn’t felt this strong in a while. Not since the last time they were alone together, when he whispered to her in her kitchen two years ago, and she gave in and melted into his arms.

“Did you know James Morrison has a new album out?” he says into the silence.

“No,” she says honestly. “I haven’t listened to him in years.”

He looks at her. “You didn’t listen to my anniversary gift?”

“Did you really think I would?”

“No. But I hoped.”

The words feel like a slap to the face. She thinks of another city, another breathtaking view, another man. She misses Will. She tries to ignore the feeling and fails.

Nick reaches into his pocket. He pulls out his phone and sets it next to his glass, and then pulls out a set of AirPods and holds one out for her.

Frankie arches an eyebrow at him.

“One song,” he says with a crooked smile that used to make her want to kiss him. “And then you can go to bed.”

Frankie glances down at the AirPod in his outstretched hand but doesn’t take it. “I don’t think so.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then prove it.”

Frankie plucks the AirPod from his fingers and shoves it in her ear.

He smiles, clearly pleased, and puts the other one in his ear. He taps the screen of his phone. A moment later, the beat of a drumset fills her ear followed by the voice of James Morrison.

My soul is broken and bruised

I guess that it’s fair

I am lost, I am lonely, but not afraid

To say that I’m scared

I’ve been through enough heartache to know
I’m never going to heal

Cause I’ve lost the one thing that made love seem real

Only through her can I know

Life’s a little better

When you’ve got someone

Only through her can I see

Life has no meaning

When she ain’t next to me

I can see that the tables turned round

Cause I see that you don’t need me now

Like I still need you

Like I still need you

Frankie’s heart shoots into her throat. She expected the words to be some sort of message. But she wasn’t prepared to hear something so clear, or for the longing that seems to drip from the words. She’s heard James Morrison on the radio in passing a few times over the years. His voice makes her ache every time. But this is different. She’s standing in a palazzo Nick bought for her in the city where they fell in love. She’s trying and failing not to second guess Will. And Nick is...well. Nick.

She glances up at him as the song continues to play. The second their eyes meet, she knows it was a mistake to look at him while James Morrison is crooning in her ear. He has that look on his face. The one Susan warned her about, the one that used to make her melt. She feels a little dazed all of a sudden. Flushed, maybe. Is the wine hitting her harder than she thought? Or is it just Nick in that damn henley, muscled and dark and just as painfully good-looking as he was the first night they met?

“I do, you know,” he says quietly.

She frowns. “Do what?”

“Need you.”

He lifts his hand and tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear. Her heart starts to beat a step faster.

“I know I broke your heart,” he murmurs, brushing the backs of his fingers along her cheek. “I know I don’t deserve you. But you’re the only thing in this fucked up world that’s ever made sense to me, Frankie. Falling in love with you was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Frankie’s breath catches in her throat. It’s similar to what he said to her in Barcelona, and a memory of that night—of being soaked in his blood and feeling like someone was ripping her heart out of her chest—threatens to devour her.

“I don’t want you to be the only good thing about me,” he whispers. He cups her face in his hand.
“I want to be good for you. I’ve been trying. I know it doesn’t bring them back, but I’ve been trying to make amends. To make things right. And I did it all for you.”

Frankie frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“Let me back in,” he whispers instead of answering. “Please, baby. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live without you. Let me be yours again.”

He leans even closer to her—when did he get so damn close?—and when the hand that’s not on her face slides along the small of her back and his eyes flicker down to her mouth, warning sirens start to blare in her mind.

She jolts away from him.

“Frankie,” he breathes. His voice is ragged.

She reaches up and pulls the AirPod out of her ear. “I can’t do this,” she says, shoving it into his chest.

He covers her hand with his, trapping her palm against his chest. His skin is warm. “Why not?”

“You know why not.” She pulls her hand out from beneath his. “I’m in love with Will.”

She pretends she doesn’t see the pain on his face and turns away from him to walk toward the palazzo. She feels unsteady on her feet. She’s furious with herself. What the hell was she thinking, letting him stand that close to her while that song played? She should have left him standing alone with his scotch the minute he stepped out onto the terrace.

“Would you still be in love with him if he cheated on you?” Nick calls out after her.

Frankie stops dead in her tracks. She stands for a moment, frozen and suddenly sick to her stomach. She tries to keep that awful image of Will and Bianca in bed together at bay. It takes a considerable amount of effort. When she finds her equilibrium again, she turns around.

“He wouldn’t do that to me.”

“He already did.”

The stones beneath Frankie’s feet seem to tilt. “You’re lying.”

“No I’m not. He kissed her. It wasn’t part of the mission. He’s not undercover. He had no reason to do it. But he did it anyway.”

Bile rises in the back of her throat. “You’re lying,” she repeats.

Nick grabs his phone off the parapet. He bends his head forward, his thumbs moving across the screen as it casts a glow on his face, and then he looks up at her and holds it out wordlessly.

Frankie stares at it from the other side of the terrace. She knows what she should do. She should turn around and walk away. She should call Jai, and go with him to his meeting. She should go upstairs to Susan’s room and ask for a pep talk. She should go up to her bedroom and pull on her Mets t-shirt and go to bed. She should call Will and tell him that she tried to wait and she’s sorry if it’s pathetic but she really needs him to come home.

But she’s curious. The desire to know what’s on that phone—even if it’s terrible—is eating her alive. And curiosity has always been one of her downfalls.
She crosses the terrace and takes the phone out of Nick’s hand.

There’s a video paused on the screen. She recognizes the Rialto Bridge, lit up and stunning in the moonlight. A memory of being there with Nick tugs on her, but she pushes it away. She presses the play button. There are people walking back and forth across the bridge, but she doesn’t recognize any of them. And then suddenly, walking slowly toward the center of the bridge, are Will and Bianca.

Their fingers are woven loosely and comfortably together. It’s the same way he holds her hand when they walk to the coffeehouse that’s two blocks from her brownstone. Jealousy burns like acid in the back of her throat.

They stop at the top of the bridge. Bianca gestures out at the canal. She leans against the railing and smiles at Will, and he smiles back and joins her. Will must say something funny because Bianca throws her head back and laughs, and Will watches her with an awed sort of smile that makes Frankie’s chest ache.

They talk for a while. Bianca reaches out for Will’s hand, and he doesn’t flinch or pull away from her. She leans closer to him. He stares at her like he’s trying to decide what to do. And then he lunges at her, his hands on either side of her face as he presses her back against the railing and kisses the hell out of her.

Frankie feels like a white-hot knife has been shoved straight through her heart. It’s hard to breathe. She tries, her chest hitching with the effort, but she can’t seem to get any air into her lungs. Her vision is spotty. Her legs feel unsteady. But rising in prominence above everything else is the memory of the last thing Will said to her.

I belong to you. I’m yours.

He sure as hell doesn’t look like he’s hers.

She waits for the kiss to be over, for Will to remember himself or for Bianca to push him away, but it doesn’t happen. Bianca arches against him, and Will leans into her body and kisses her deeper.

They look good together. Like they were made for each other. Like everything in their lives was leading up to this moment, and now they’re going to pick up where they left off as if the last few years never happened.

As if she never happened.

When Will finally pulls away, he glances over his shoulder. Frankie wonders if he was looking for her, concerned that he might get caught, but she doesn’t have the energy to be furious or vengeful. She’s just...hurt.

Bianca smiles. Will smiles too. And then he drapes his arm over her shoulders and leads her down the bridge in the opposite direction from where they came. The video cuts out, and then a replay button appears in the middle of the screen.

Frankie stares at it. She doesn’t need to replay it. She can close her eyes and see it all clear as day—Will’s hands on Bianca’s face, his hips pressed against hers, his tongue in her mouth. The timestamp in the corner of the screen says the video is from a little after ten. So what’s he been doing for the last two hours? Where has he been? Did he…?

I won’t, Will’s voice cuts into her thoughts. I would never. I promise.
“I’m sorry,” Nick says softly.

Frankie clears her throat and looks up at him. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Nick looks like he feels sorry for her. “Baby—”

“There’s no context,” she insists before he can finish his thought. “You don’t know why he did it. Maybe he had to.”

“Why would he have to?”

“I don’t know. But he wouldn’t just do this. There’s something we don’t know.”

“He asked her to go back to her place after he kissed her,” Nick says gently. “That’s where they are now. They’ve been there for hours. That video was taken a little after ten.”

Frankie knows he’s telling the truth. She saw the timestamp in the corner of the screen. But she shakes her head anyway.

“He wouldn’t do that.”

Nick holds out the AirPod she’d shoved into his chest a few minutes ago. “You can hear him ask —”

“I don’t need to,” she cuts him off, brushing his hand away. She shoves his phone into his chest. “I know him. Even if they’re at her place, it doesn’t mean he slept with her. He wouldn’t do that to me.”

She expects Nick to argue with her. He doesn’t. He just takes his phone out of her hand and slides it into his pocket with a look of sympathy.

“You could have doctored it,” she points out. “It could be fake.”

“That would be stupid of me,” Nick says, though not unkindly. “All you’d have to do to prove me wrong is call him. And if you did, and you found out I was lying, then any semblance of your trust I still somehow have would be gone forever. I wouldn’t risk that. I’m on thin enough ice as it is.”

Frankie swallows. He’s right.

“But you should call him if you think I’m lying,” Nick says. “Or call Jai. I’m sure Jai has a tracker on him. He can tell you whether Chase was on the Rialto at the same time as that timestamp. He can tell you where he is now too.”

Frankie chews her bottom lip. She doesn’t need to call Will or Jai. If Nick is telling her to call them, it’s because he knows what she’ll hear on the other end of the line. That video is real. Will kissed Bianca. And then he took her back to her place, and he’s been there for hours, and they have a history of fucking on the first date.

Frankie turns away from Nick and reaches for the glass of scotch he poured for her. She downs its contents, and then presses the back of her hand against her mouth because she feels like she might vomit. She closes her eyes, but the image of Will and Bianca is seared into the inside of her eyelids. She can’t decide which feeling is stronger—the hurt, the humiliation, the rage, the jealousy, the pain. They’re like a hurricane in her chest, swirling and tearing apart everything she’s tried so hard to heal. She’s been stabbed and shot and tortured, and none of it felt like this.
She lowers her hand and forces herself to breathe. Her eyes feel warm. Her vision is starting to swim. She is not going to cry about this. She is not going to cry in front of Nick. She clenches her jaw and wills the tears to go away, and it takes a few seconds but they do.

Beside her, Nick grabs the bottle of Dewar’s and unscrews the cap. He reaches out and curls his fingers around her forearm to hold her hand steady. His touch feels like an electric shock. Frankie watches as he pours more scotch into her glass. His thumb strokes over the back of her hand, and a shiver drills down her spine.

She lifts her eyes to his. He lets go of her arm, but he holds her gaze as he screws the cap back on the bottle. He sets it down and then shifts a little closer to her. Something sparks in the air. It’s familiar, but new somehow too, and it feels dangerous. She feels dangerous.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

She shakes her head. “No you’re not. This is what you wanted.”

“Not quite,” he says. He licks his lips, and she finds her gaze drawn to his mouth and her mind drawn to a memory of what he can do with it. She forces herself to look back up into his eyes. He smiles. “But we’re getting closer.”

She lifts the glass to her mouth and takes a sip instead of answering. He watches her lips around the edge of the glass. She thinks of earlier, in Naples, when he looked at her the same way and she knew what he was thinking. She knows what he’s thinking now too. He’s always liked her mouth.

The scotch burns all the way down her throat. Her body feels suddenly warm. She’s going to tilt into tipsy in about ten minutes. Maybe sooner. She lowers the glass from her mouth. Nick pulls it gently from her hand and sets it on the parapet. He steps more fully into her space, his muscled body looming over hers and making her feel small, and she tips her head back to hold his gaze. She should look away. She should walk away. She does neither.

He lifts his hand and brushes his thumb along her bottom lip. “You’re going to taste like Dewar’s,” he whispers.

She shakes her head. “I’m not going to kiss you, Nick.”

He smiles. “Sure looks like you want to. Your pupils are dilated.”

“It’s dark.”

He presses his fingers against the pulsepoint beneath her jaw. “Your heart is racing.”

“I’m upset.”

He trails his fingers down her throat and she tries to suppress a shiver.

“I’m also drunk.”

His fingers pause on her throat. He studies her for a moment, his eyes flickering over her face, and then he shakes his head. “No you’re not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if you were, you’d have kissed me by now.” He curls his hand around her neck and trails his thumb along her jaw. “I’ve seen you drunk. This isn’t it. This is you wanting me.”
“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

“It’s not me I’m sure of.” He tilts toward her. “I know you, baby. I can see it in your eyes.”

She pushes him back a step. He traps her hands against his chest and steps forward again. She can smell his cologne. His muscles are hard beneath her fingertips, his palms warm on the back of her hands, and her brain is conjuring up one memory after another of his lips on her skin and his voice in her ear and his body between her legs.

“I can make you feel better,” he murmurs. “I can give you what you want.”

She shakes her head. “Nothing has changed. I’m in love with Will.”

“And where is he now?”

It hurts to breathe again. Nick leans closer to her. It’s the closest he’s been since they slept together in New York two years ago. All she’d have to do is tilt forward an inch or two and it would all be over. There’s tension sparking in the air, and the alcohol in her system is making her feel reckless, and her body is aching to be touched.

“He’s not here, baby,” Nick murmurs. “If he wanted to be with you, he would be. But he’s not. He’s with someone else. And you should be too.”

Frankie studies him. There was a time not that long ago when she would have given in. She would’ve wanted to feel good instead of feeling hollowed out. She would’ve thrown up her hands and said screw the consequences and fucked herself straight out of the best thing that’s ever happened to her. But she’s not that person anymore. Will made her a promise. Will doesn’t break his promises. And neither will she.

“Maybe you’re right,” she murmurs. She gazes at him for a second, her eyes flickering over the face that she knows so well, and then she pulls her hands out of his grasp. “But that someone won’t be you.”


“Good night, Nick,” she says.

She walks away from him without another word.

She doesn’t look back.
Chapter Notes

Mind the rating, kids.

It takes Will a while to explain everything to Bianca.

He was right about her apartment being Fort Knox. She’s got the kind of security features that you’d expect to find at a bank, not in a flat. She seems more than a little confused when he asks her to scan for bugs and surveillance. But she does as he asks, and her search comes up with nothing, so Will leads her over to her couch and sits her down and tells her everything.

Well, not everything. There are things she can’t know because they’re classified or because they would put her in danger, and there are things he knows Frankie wouldn’t want him to share, but he tells Bianca everything he can.

It’s obvious that she’s deeply hurt. She doesn’t cry, but her eyes are glassy. He apologizes profusely and repeatedly, and tries to explain things as clearly as possible so that she can see that he never wanted to hurt her. The more he talks, the more sympathy he sees in her eyes. He isn’t surprised. She’s one of the kindest, most empathetic people he’s ever met. But the way he used her is awful, and the fact that she’s not yelling at him and kicking him out is...well, it’s more than he deserves.

When he finally finishes, she’s quiet. She gets up from the couch and walks toward her fireplace, and stands facing the mantle with her back to him for a long moment. Another apology is welling up in his throat, but he swallows it. At this point, repeating it would be for his benefit, not hers. He’s done enough things at her expense already. He won’t add something else to the list.

When she turns to face him, there’s determination in her eyes. “There are some things you should know about the catacombs.”

Will gapes at her. “What?”

“You’re not the only one who kept secrets,” she replies. “There’s an entire security system in the catacombs that I didn’t tell you about. Your team will know about it since they hacked my network. But there are a few additional protocols that exist outside the system they have access to. If you’re going to get in and out without being caught or killed, there are things you need to know.”

It takes Will a second to realize that she’s offering to help him. Once again, he’s struck by the fact that she’s treating him with far more kindness than he deserves.

“I’ll tell you everything,” she says when he doesn’t respond. “That way, when you go back to your team, you can make sure they adjust their plans to take into account what they didn’t have access to.”

“Bianca,” Will starts.

“I suggest you take notes,” she says, nodding her head at a sketchbook that’s sitting on her coffee table. “It’s complex. And you’ve got a lot at stake.”
He sits motionlessly for a second, completely dumbfounded. And then he reaches for the sketchbook and does as he’s told.

Bianca paces her living room as she explains things. Will furiously scribbles detailed notes in the sketchbook. On more than one occasion, he finds himself thinking that Jai would really appreciate Bianca’s eye for detail.

It feels weird to do this without the rest of the team. He wants to call Frankie and tell her what he’s doing so she won’t wonder why he’s been gone so long, but he knows he can’t. Nick watches every move she makes, and he’ll be keeping a close eye on her tonight. Will can’t risk him—or Ollerman and Blake in case they’re all working together—finding out that Bianca helped them. So even though he’s dying to hear Frankie’s voice, he keeps his phone in his pocket.

When Bianca has finished explaining everything, and Will has asked all the questions he can think of, a brief silence hangs in the air. Once again, he has to force himself to swallow the urge to fill it with another apology.

“What’s she like?” Bianca asks quietly from her spot in front of the fireplace.

Will tilts his head. “Who?”

“Your Francesca.”

He’s surprised all over again. He shakes his head. “Bianca, I don’t—”

“It was one day, Will,” she cuts him off.

He frowns.

“It’s barely been twelve hours since we saw each other outside that cafe,” she clarifies. “It would be a lie to say that what you did tonight didn’t hurt me, or that I hadn’t entertained the idea of you and I trying again. But you’re not the only one who fell in love with someone else after we broke up. And twelve hours isn’t enough time for me to have fallen out of love with him and back in love with you. I’m hurt, caro. But I am not heartbroken.”

Will blinks at her. On the one hand, that’s nice to hear. He’s glad she’s not devastated. But on the other hand...

Bianca smirks. “Your ego is bruised.”

“No,” he scoffs.

“Yes,” she disagrees, her smirk deepening. It’s not all that different than the smirks Frankie gives him when she calls him out for his ego. Not for the first time, he finds himself thinking that Bianca and Frankie would probably be pretty good friends if things weren’t so complicated.

Bianca crosses the room and sits a respectable distance away from him on the couch. “If we had met again under different circumstances, I would have liked to get to know her,” she tells him. “But we didn’t, and I can’t. I’m glad you’re happy, Will. And I’d like to know more about this woman you are willing to risk so much for.”

Will studies her. He doesn’t see anything but openness and curiosity in her eyes. Bianca doesn’t say things she doesn’t mean. So he takes a deep breath, and he tells her about Frankie.

He tells her about their rocky start as partners, and how they went from colleagues to friends to
lovers to soulmates. He tells her about all the things he loves about Frankie, and that even when she drives him crazy he’s crazy about her. And then he tells her what he realized in the restaurant—that even though he and Frankie are very different, their differences aren’t a problem to overcome. They’re a strength. They complement each other. They make each other better. And someday, hopefully not too far in the future, they’re going to get married and make babies and run a bookstore and wear cardigans.

When he finishes, Bianca has a pensive look on her face.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, nodding. “I was just...thinking about someone.”

Will doesn’t know what that means, but he doesn’t want to pry so he doesn’t ask.

Bianca smiles at him. “It’s late. She will be wondering where you are. You should go.”

Will starts to get up, but Bianca reaches out and puts her hand on his knee. He stops.

“Will you tell her I’m sorry?” she murmurs. “If I had known you were hers, I wouldn’t have flirted with you in front of her. I would have behaved much differently. And I certainly wouldn’t have kissed you. I’m sorry if I caused her pain. Promise me you’ll tell her that.”

Will nods. “Yeah. I’ll tell her.”

“Thank you.” She gets to her feet with a smile. “I’ll walk you out.”

He rises and follows her to the door, but he stops when he sees a framed photograph on the wall. In the picture, Bianca is wearing a pretty sundress and standing in the arms of an extremely good looking man.


Will looks at her. “Your dreamy doctor who’s a good man?”

She smiles. “That’s the one.”

Will feels a stab of guilt. “I’m sorry, B,” he says. “I didn’t mean to make you question whether you should marry him.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault.” Her eyes flicker toward the photograph. “Actually, you helped.”

Will frowns. “I did?”

“You said you love your Francesca because she is different than you. And that she makes you better.”

“Sounds like Frankie,” Will says with a chuckle.

Bianca(nods at the photo. “That’s what Gio is. He is stubborn and impulsive and outspoken and messy and we are just as dissimilar as you and I are similar.”

Bianca smiles. “When you described her to me, that is what I thought too. She sounds like Gio.”
She looks down at her left hand and strokes her thumb over her bare fourth finger. “I told him I wasn’t ready because I was worried about how different we are. I never got any closure from you, and I think I romanticized what we were. I thought that because I was so happy with you, I should spend the rest of my life with someone like you.”

She looks up at Will and smiles. “But you were right. Being with Gio might not always be easy, and sometimes he drives me crazy, but he is worth it. He makes me happy. He makes me better. And my life is more complete with him in it.”

“Well shoot,” Will sighs, swiping at his eyes.

Bianca laughs. “Same old Will,” she murmurs in Italian. She steps toward him. “You must call me tomorrow if something goes wrong and you need me.”

Will shakes his head. “I won’t put you in harm’s way.”

“I’ll be fine. I have had dangerous clients before.” She smiles. “Perhaps I’ll fly to Haiti and visit Gio until things die down.”

“I think he’d love that. And I would too, because then I know you’ll be safe.”

“Well then that is what I’ll do first thing in the morning.” She lifts her hand to his face. “Take care of yourself, caro. And take care of that woman you have too. She sounds extraordinary.”

Will smiles. “Congrats on the engagement.”

“I haven’t said yes yet,” Bianca points out. But she can’t seem to keep a smile from her lips, and Will is so thrilled for her he’s grinning.

“You will,” he says confidently. He leans forward and kisses her cheek. “Take care of yourself, B.”

“Goodbye, Will,” she murmurs.

He smiles at her one last time, and then he heads for her front door and doesn’t look back.

The moment he’s out on the pavement, he calls Frankie.

It goes to voicemail.

He thinks of this morning, and how she hadn’t answered then either and everything turned out fine. But then he glances down at his watch and sees that it’s past midnight, and he’s flooded with guilt. He wasn’t supposed to be gone this long. He should’ve texted her. He should’ve sent her the link to their song. He should’ve called her sooner.

Is she mad at him? Did she start to doubt him since he’s been gone so long? Did she go looking for comfort and find it in Nick?

He hails a water taxi and calls her again. This time, he leaves a voicemail.

“Hey,” he says. “I know it’s late. Maybe you’re asleep. Or maybe you’re not and you just decided not to answer. But I’m, uh...I’m on the way home. I wanted to hear your voice, but I guess I’ll have to wait until I get back.”

He pauses and rubs his temples. He can’t stop imagining her with Nick, which makes him feel like shit considering he kissed Bianca a couple hours ago. He’s going to have to explain that to her. What if she doesn’t forgive him?
“I love you,” he sighs. “Tonight sucked and I hate everything about this mission but I love you. I am so crazy in love with you. I can’t wait to see you.”

His throat feels a little tight so he hangs up before he starts crying.

When the water taxi finally pulls up outside the palazzo, he can’t get out of the boat fast enough. He jogs down the dock, through the gate and into the courtyard, and rides the elevator up to the entryway. The palazzo is dark and quiet. The salon and the terrace are empty, and so is the kitchen. He goes back to the marble staircase, and takes the steps two at a time up to their bedroom.

It’s empty. The bed is still made. One of her blazers is thrown over the back of an armchair that’s next to the balcony doors. There’s a pile of clothes on the floor in the corner of the room. It’s the red sweater and boots she had on earlier. She must have changed. He checks the bathroom just to be sure, but it’s dark. She’s not here.

He doesn’t bother calling her again. She would’ve answered the second time he called if she wanted to talk to him. He has no idea where she is, but he knows someone who will.

He’s in the hallway outside their bedroom, on his way to talk to Jai, when he runs into Nick walking up the stairs with a bottle of scotch in his hand.

He’s shirtless.

Will stops in his tracks in surprise. He can’t help but stare. He knew Nick was muscular. But he didn’t know he was *this* muscular. Chiseled chest, rounded shoulders, abs that look like they were cut from rock. It’s just…it’s absurd. Who the hell has that many muscles? He wonders if Frankie wishes he had muscles like that. He tries to remember if she’s ever said anything about it, but all he remembers is her saying how much she likes tattoos.

And Nick’s got a lot of those.

His entire upper body and both his arms are covered in ink. Words and symbols and patterns are etched across nearly every inch of his skin. Will remembers Frankie telling him that Nick got some of those tattoos for her. He thinks he remembers which ones too. There’s a small likeness of the Rialto Bridge beneath his collarbone on the right side of his chest. The lyrics to their song are inked across the left side of his ribcage among a swirl of other patterns and images. Starting at his wrist and winding upward around his right arm is a quote from *Wuthering Heights* that Frankie’s mother used to lecture on. And then there’s his wedding ring tattoo, which looks like a band but is actually the word *Francesca* inked in a flowing script around his finger.

Nick smirks as he gets to the top of the steps. “Well look who’s finally back from his hot date.”

The phrase *hot date* makes Will want to point out that the only reason he had to go on a date in the first place was because Nick is too selfish to let Frankie go, but he has no interest in playing mind games. All he wants to do is see Frankie, and he’s opening his mouth to ask where she is when he remembers Ollerman is in town. His temper flares.

“Did you know Ollerman’s here?” he asks.

The smirk drops off Nick’s face. “What?”

“Ollerman is here,” Will repeats. “He’s in Venice. I saw him talking to Blake while I was out with Bianca.”

“Did he see you?” Nick demands, stepping toward Will with a wild look. “Does he know you’re
“Here?”
“No.”
“You’re sure?”
“Pretty sure, yeah.”
Nick pushes a hand through his hair and mutters a string of curses under his breath.
Will watches him in curiosity. “You didn’t know he was here?”
“No. He’s supposed to be in Santorini with his mistress.”
“Well he’s not.”
“Obviously.”
Will studies him. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think Nick is just as surprised that Ollerman is here as Will was on that bridge. But nobody lies better than Frankie’s husband, and Will isn’t going to fall for it.
“You can cut the act,” Will tells him. “Frankie’s not here.”
Nick’s eyebrows furrow. “What?”
“You’ve been on your best behavior for her today,” Will says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I’m guessing you’re going to be like that all the time now because you can tell it throws her off. Sucking up to Susan, sticking up for Standish, trying not to be a dick to Jai. You know how important they are to her, and you know you can’t get her back if they hate you, so you’re going to be nice.”
“Got it all figured out, huh?” Nick says with a smirk.
“They might not see through it, but I do,” Will says. “You’re the same selfish asshole you’ve always been. You don’t care about anyone but yourself. And whatever bullshit you’re going to sell her about Ollerman being here, I’m not buying it.”
“Does it matter if you buy it?” Nick asks. “The only person I need to believe me is her.”
“Yeah, except she won’t believe you if I don’t. And you know it. That’s why you hate me so much. Because she cares more about what I think than what you think. And I think you’re setting us up.”
Nick clenches his jaw. “I didn’t know Ollerman was here.”
“Bullshit.”
“If I was going to set you up, it wouldn’t be this early in the game. It would be stupid to betray you before I’ve gotten my time with her. If you’re as smart as you think you are, you’d know that.”
“But you are going to set us up eventually.”
Nick shakes his head. “I don’t need to. She promised me forever, and she meant it. She’ll choose me eventually. And when she does, you can go find yourself the girl scout we both know you want.”
Will steps toward him with a glare. “If she gets hurt because you’re too selfish to let her go—”

“Oh fuck off, Chase,” Nick snaps. “You screw her for a couple months and you think that makes you her protector? I’ve been protecting her for a damn decade. She doesn’t even know half the shit I’ve done to keep her alive. And you think I’d throw all that away to give her to Ollerman?”

“Maybe not her,” Will acknowledges. “But you’d give him us.”

“You just said I couldn’t do that if I wanted her back.”

Will opens his mouth to argue and then realizes he can’t. Nick’s got a point.

“Jealousy makes you illogical,” Nick says with a smirk.

“I’d rather be illogical than cruel,” Will throws back at him.

Nick narrows his eyes. They stare at each other for a second, and then Nick pulls his phone out of the pocket of his athletic shorts.

“I’ll prove it to you.”

Will frowns at him as he swipes his thumb over the screen. “Who are you calling?”

“Ollerman.”

Will’s heart stops in his chest. A moment later, the sound of ringing fills the hallway. Nick must have put the call on speaker.

“Yes?” Ollerman’s voice says.

“I have an idea,” Nick says. He holds Will’s gaze. “I want to discuss it. I just landed in Athens. Let’s meet in the morning. I’ll come to you.”

“I’m not in Santorini,” Ollerman replies. “I flew to Venice to meet with Blake.”

“Is something wrong?”

Ollerman laughs. “Don’t worry. Your money is secure and being spent well. It’s just a check-in. We had dinner and talked shop. Nothing major. I like to drop in unannounced to keep people on their toes.”

“I like to do the same. Hence my phone call. Except you’re not where you told me you’d be.”

There’s a dangerous lilt to Nick’s voice. He looks furious. And it doesn’t seem like an act.

“I’ll be on a plane tomorrow morning,” Ollerman says soothingly. “Would you like to meet for lunch instead of breakfast? I can meet you in Athens.”

“I have plans for lunch and for dinner. We’ll have to do the following afternoon.”

“Done. Send me the location and I’ll be there.”

“Will do.”

Nick hangs up the phone, and then slides it back into his pocket. “Told you,” he says to Will.

Will still isn’t convinced, but he can’t figure out how Nick could have possibly warned Ollerman
that he’d be calling. He knows Ollerman likes unannounced drop-ins because he did them all the
time when he was Will’s boss. He said he had dinner with Blake, which could explain why they
were walking across the Rialto Bridge. There are quite a few restaurants over there. And Nick is
right that it doesn’t make sense for him to be setting them up this early. Will isn’t ready to say that
he believes Nick is telling the truth—that’s Frankie’s call. But all signs point to yes.

“Fine,” Will says begrudgingly.

Nick glances at the open door to Will and Frankie’s bedroom. “You looking for Frankie?”

Will wants to say no, but it feels pathetic to lie when the answer to his question is so obvious.

“Yes.”

“She’s sleeping.”

“No she’s not. The bed’s empty.”

“Your bed,” Nick says. He smirks and tips his head toward his closed bedroom door. “Mine’s not.”

A sense of dread washes over Will. The image springs to mind immediately—Frankie, naked and
asleep, curled beneath the sheets of Nick’s bed.

Nick’s smirk deepens. “I wore her out.”

The floor seems to tilt beneath Will’s feet. “You’re lying.”

“Door’s right there,” Nick says, gesturing toward it with the bottle of scotch. “If you don’t believe
me, go check.”

Will glances at the door but doesn’t move. Silence hangs, thick and uncomfortable, in the air.

“You can’t do it, can you?” Nick murmurs quietly. “Because if I’m telling the truth, then you’ll
have to see her naked in my bed. But if I’m lying, and that bed is empty, then you’ll have to explain
to her why you assumed she’d fuck me even though you’re the one who stuck your tongue down
someone else’s throat tonight.”

Will blinks at him in surprise.

“Oh yeah, I saw it,” Nick says with a chuckle. “I saw the whole thing.”

“You had me followed,” Will says in disbelief.

Nick shakes his head. “Didn’t have to. Standish isn’t the only one with micro-drones that have
surveillance capabilities. I had one of those tiny fuckers programmed to follow you all night.
Figured it was worth a shot just in case you got handsy. And lo and behold, I hit the jackpot.”

Will clenches his jaw against the feeling of violation that wells up in his chest. It’s not quite as
strong as the feeling he got when Frankie told him that Nick had hacked Ollerman’s surveillance
and watched them in his apartment, but it’s close.

“The funny thing is, it’s actually your fault I got such a great view,” he continues. “See, the drone
was hovering behind you on the bridge, so I couldn’t see your faces. But lucky for me, you picked
one of Venice’s most famous landmarks for your makeout session. So I hacked a police camera
with a better angle, and I got a front row seat to the whole thing.” He grins. “And so did Frankie.”

Will feels like he’s going to be sick. He knew Frankie would find out about the kiss. He was never
going to keep it from her. He planned to tell her the second he saw her. But now he won’t get the chance. The last thing he wanted was for her to find out from someone else. Especially Nick.

He can barely stand to think about what it must have been like for her. He knows how it feels to be in her shoes. He watched her kiss Rafael. But this seems different, more horrible somehow, and he knows it’s because of Nick. Will didn’t have a devil sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear while he watched her. But Frankie did. He imagines her watching that kiss while standing next to Nick, who is so good at exploiting her vulnerability and using her pain, and he’s terrified.

Did she sleep with Nick because he kissed Bianca?

Nick walks toward him slowly, like a predator who’s caught sight of trapped prey that he won’t have to work very hard to kill.

“You broke her heart, Chase,” he says. “I watched it shatter into a million pieces. But don’t worry. I picked them up and put them back together. Gave her a shoulder to cry on. And then when she wanted revenge, I made her come so hard she forgot all about you.”

Will clenches his jaw and curls his hands into fists. He can barely see straight he’s so furious and jealous, but Frankie’s voice is whispering in the back of his mind.

*It’s going to seem like you have something to worry about. But you don’t.*

Nick glances down at Will’s fists with a smirk. “You going to punch me, Chase?”

“So you have something else to twist to your advantage?” Will says. “Hard pass. And I’m not going to open that door either. Because you’re lying. Frankie wouldn’t do that to me.”

He turns on his heel and walks back toward his bedroom.

“Enjoy sleeping alone,” Nick calls out after him. “I think I’ll go wake up my wife for round two.”

Will slams the door behind him in response.

The bedroom is quiet and dark. He paces across the room and tries to control his rage. His hands are shaking. His heart is racing. It feels suddenly, excruciatingly hot, and he sheds his suit jacket and loosens his tie while he paces the floor. He can’t breathe. He sucks in a ragged breath, and then another, and closes his eyes.

When he finally feels like he’s not suffocating anymore, he pulls his phone out and calls Frankie.

No answer.

All the rage bleeds out of him in a rush. He hangs up and sits on the edge of the bed. He opens his camera app, and thumbs through his pictures until he finds the one he’s looking for—Frankie standing in their kitchen in his sweatpants and one of his t-shirts, her hair pulled back, her eyebrows furrowed as she studies the grilled cheese sandwich in the skillet in front of her with the concentration of a professional chef.

He’d wrapped his arms around her after he took this picture. *You’re beautiful, I love you,* he whispered into her neck.

She leaned back against him and smiled. *I love you too.*

That smile. He’d move mountains for that smile.
He falls backward on the bed, closes his eyes against a wave of tears, and wonders where she is.

Frankie is at a bar.

It’s not a particularly nice bar. It’s got a dive feel, the kind of dark and slightly worn atmosphere that’s different than the old-world charm of Venice’s more tourist-friendly places. It’s filled with locals. The bartender, a pretty brunette with large hoop earrings and bright red lipstick, is attentive but not nosy. Frankie likes that in a bartender. She’ll tip her well.

She’s drinking club soda with lime. Which, honestly, is a little embarrassing. Oh, she knows Jai would be proud as hell of her, and she knows Will would be too, but if ever there was a night when she earned the right to drink a whole damn bottle of vodka, it would be this one. And yet here she sits, drinking something that’s not alcohol like some kind of mature adult.

When the fuck did she become a mature adult?

Will called her over an hour ago. She didn’t answer. He called her again. She still didn’t answer. He left a voicemail. She didn’t listen. He called her a third time. She ignored him again. She seriously considered asking for a shot of vodka after the third call. She decided against it. And then she spent the next eighty-six minutes trying to decide whether or not she wanted to listen to his voicemail. She hasn’t listened to it yet.

There’s a man sitting on the other side of the bar. He’s good looking and muscled and he’s got a sleeve tattoo, and he’s been staring at her ever since she walked in even though she’s wearing a sweatshirt that very clearly says FBI. Maybe he doesn’t know what FBI means. Maybe he doesn’t care. If she looks at him, she knows he’ll come talk to her. She hasn’t looked at him.

“Another?” the bartender asks, stopping in front of Frankie.

Frankie nods. The bartender grabs her empty glass and reaches for another one.

The man on the other side of the bar gets up and starts to walk toward her. Frankie watches him, and then glances at the bartender. She holds Frankie’s gaze as she sets the new glass in front of her.

“If you need anything else, I’m here,” she says with a meaningful look.

Frankie won’t need her help, but she appreciates the sentiment so she smiles.

“Hi,” the man with the sleeve tattoo says as he slides onto the bar stool next to Frankie.

“Hi,” Frankie replies in the most unfriendly voice she has.

She lifts her drink to her lips. The man stares at her mouth. Frankie considers punching him and decides against it.

“What brings you to Venice?” he asks in passable English.

Frankie shakes her glass so that the ice clinks together. “I’m good.”

He leans toward her. He smells like cigarette smoke. “You’re American.”

“Yes.”

“What brings you to Venice?”
“Work.”

He smiles. “But not pleasure?”

Frankie barely resists the urge to roll her eyes. She can’t believe she used to sleep with guys like this.

“Work is pleasure,” she says, setting her glass down on the bar.

The man leans closer and sets his hand on her knee beneath the bar. “If that is how you feel, your American men have not been showing you a good enough time.”

Frankie looks over at him. “You should move your hand.”

He smiles crookedly. “Should I?”

Frankie considers her options. She could break his hand. Or she could give him one more chance to do the right thing. She decides on the latter. She blames Will. He’s made her soft.

“I’m married,” she says.

The man grins. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

Frankie sighs. And then she reaches underneath the bar, grabs his hand in both of hers, and dislocates his thumb.

The man screams and immediately falls off the back of his bar stool. Everyone in the bar turns to look at them. Frankie gets to her feet calmly. She pulls some cash from her pocket and sets it on the bar with a nod at the bartender. And then she grabs her glass and turns toward the man.

“I told you to move your hand,” she says. She turns the glass over and dumps the contents all over his head. He sputters as he clutches his hand to his chest. “Next time, maybe you’ll listen.”

She sets the glass down next to the cash and walks out of the bar.

It’s chilly outside. She pulls her hands into the sleeves of Will’s sweatshirt and hunches forward against the cold. She should have grabbed a jacket. Jai would fuss at her if he was here. She wonders if he’s done with his meeting. Probably not. He always texts her when he is. Old habits.

Her phone feels like it’s burning a hole in her back pocket. She tries to ignore it. She fails.

She takes a detour into a dark residential alley where no one will bother her and pulls her phone out. Her thumb hovers briefly over her voicemail, and then she presses Will’s message and lifts her phone to her ear.

“Hey,” his voice says. Frankie closes her eyes at the sound of it. “I know it’s late. Maybe you’re asleep. Or maybe you’re not and you just decided not to answer. But I’m, uh...I’m on the way home. I wanted to hear your voice, but I guess I’ll have to wait until I get back.”

Her heart clenches in her chest. He’s said that to her before. When he called to tell her that he was flying to Huntington after his parents got in that car wreck. When she was in D.C. for Rafael’s trial prep. When he had the flu and she refused to take care of him because she didn’t want to get sick, but then he called and asked her to read him a book over the phone because he wanted to fall asleep to the sound of her voice, and she caved and went over to his place and read him a book like some kind of stupid lovesick moron.
“I love you,” he murmurs in her ear. “Tonight sucked and I hate everything about this mission but I love you. I am so crazy in love with you. I can’t wait to see you.”

There’s a brief pause, and then there’s a click as he hangs up. Frankie lowers her phone from her ear and stares at it in the darkness. A choice materializes in front of her, but it barely seems like one. She knows what she needs to do.

Time to go home to Will.

Will is exhausted. He’s worried. He’s pissed at Nick, and pissed at himself, and he’s panicking. He wants to go to sleep. He wants to punch something. He wants to drink a whole bottle of whiskey.

He wants Frankie.

He’s pacing the room like a caged animal when she finally walks in the door.

She stops in the doorway when she sees him. She’s wearing jeans and his FBI sweatshirt, and he hates himself for it but his first thought is If she’s still wearing my clothes then she’s still mine.

For a second she just stands there, her hand on the doorknob, and they stare at each other from across the room. Eventually she looks away and steps over the threshold. She shuts the door behind her with a soft click.

“Hey,” he says.

She ignores him. She toes her boots off and then pads across the room toward the long dresser. She takes her phone out of her pocket and sets it down, and then she pulls a gun out from her waistband and sets that down too. She still hasn’t said anything. He wonders if she’ll crawl into bed and go to sleep without saying a word.

“Where were you?” he asks. His voice comes out sounding way more demanding than he meant it to. She goes still, and Will instantly wishes he could have a do-over.

“Where was I?” she says, turning to face him.

He winces and holds out his hands. “I didn’t mean—”

“I went for a walk,” she cuts him off. “Thought the fresh air might help me get the image of you kissing another woman out of my head. Spoiler alert: It didn’t.”

For the millionth time tonight, Will hates himself. “I’m sorry, Francesca.”

“Don’t Francesca me right now.”

“I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You didn’t have a choice? You had to stick your tongue down her throat?”

“Yes.” He steps toward her and gestures at the bed. “Let’s just sit down and I can—”

“I don’t want to sit down,” she snaps at him. “Stop talking to me like I’m a fucking child.”

He holds out his hands. “Okay. All right. I’m sorry.”

She folds her arms over her chest. He can feel the rage coming off of her in waves, but he knows
her well enough to know that this isn’t just anger. She’s hurt. He hurt her. Again.

“Do you still love her?” she asks.

That catches him off guard. It shouldn’t. She doesn’t have any context for whatever video Nick made her watch, so he shouldn’t blame her for assuming the worst. But he’s still surprised.

“Do I...what?” he says stupidly.

She lifts her chin. “She’s the one who got away. You said it yourself.”

“I don’t love her, Frankie.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. I didn’t kiss her because I love her. I kissed her because I saw Ollerman and I didn’t want him to see us.”

Frankie blinks at him, stunned. “What?”

“Ollerman is in town,” Will says. “I was standing on the bridge with Bianca and then I saw him over her shoulder, and he was talking to Blake, and I just...I panicked. I couldn’t let him see me, and I couldn’t let Bianca and Blake see each other, and it was like...it was like Mardi Gras, remember? You told me people don’t look at couples who are kissing, and you were right, and I didn’t want to screw up the mission so I just...I kissed her.”

For a second, Frankie doesn’t say a word. She just stares at him, aghast. And then she turns toward the door. “I have to talk to Nick.”

“No wait,” Will says, darting forward to grab her arm. The last thing he wants when she’s pissed as hell and he hasn’t gotten a chance to reassure her is for her to go talk to her smooth-as-the-devil, muscled-like-a-greek-god husband.

Frankie looks down at his hand with her eyebrows raised. He lets go of her instantly.

“Sorry,” he says. “But I already talked to him.”

Frankie’s eyebrows lift even higher. “You talked to Nick?”

“Yeah.” He remembers Nick lying to him about Frankie being in his bed, and rage flickers in his chest. “He’s a real charmer, your husband,” he mutters.

Frankie purses her lips the way she does when she’s annoyed.

“Sorry,” Will mutters again. He has a feeling he’s going to be really tired of the word sorry by the end of the night. “He called Ollerman in front of me. Ollerman is only here for a brief visit. He’s leaving for Santorini tomorrow morning.”

“And you believe that?”

“I don’t know Nick as well as you,” Will acknowledges. “But he seemed just as shocked as I was. I don’t know how he could’ve warned Ollerman to lie on such short notice. And the only reason we’re here is because he wants you. Betraying us now would ruin his chances of getting you back.”

Frankie doesn’t argue. Will wants to ask if Nick actually has a chance to get her back now, considering what happened tonight, but he doesn’t.
Frankie gives him one of her famous scrutinizing looks. He stands patiently beneath her gaze and waits, because he knows better than to rush her when she’s trying to get a handle on her emotions.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” she says eventually. “RJ’s program should be able to prove if Ollerman gets on a plane. If he doesn’t, the mission is off. I’m not breaking into that server room when Ollerman is upstairs with Blake.”

Will nods. “Smart call.”

“Yeah,” she says dryly. “That’s why I made it.”

Will smiles. She’s such a smartass, and she’s cocky as hell, and god, he is so in love with her. There’s nobody like her.

She notices his smile, and it seems to make her self-conscious. She shifts beneath his gaze the way she used to when they were just friends with benefits and he said something romantic.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

She folds her arms over her chest again. “About what?” she asks, even though they both know she knows exactly what he wants to talk about.

“About Bianca,” he answers patiently. “About everything that happened tonight. I want you to know everything. No more secrets, remember?”

Frankie’s gaze dips toward the floor. Silence hangs in the air, and then she says quietly, without looking up at him, “Did you sleep with her?”

“No.”

“Did you want to?”

“No.”

She lifts her gaze slowly to meet his again. There’s hope mixed with fear in her eyes, and his heart aches in his chest. He wants to hold her so bad, but he knows that even though she speaks through touch, she’s not ready to be spoken to yet.

“I’m an eagle scout,” he whispers instead. “We keep our promises, and I promised that I wouldn’t sleep with her. I’m still yours, boo.”

The impassive mask on her face trembles just enough for her to briefly look like she’s in pain. “Don’t call me that,” she whispers.

He knows she doesn’t mean it. At least not permanently. It takes every ounce of his self control not to reach for her. “Sit down, Frankie,” he murmurs. “Let me tell you everything.”

“I don’t want to sit down.”

“Okay. But can we...can I talk to you? Can I tell you what happened? Please?”

She stares at him for another few seconds. And then she leans back on the edge of the dresser the way she did earlier on the dining table. She lifts her hand, gesturing at him as if to say go ahead. So he does.

He starts with Bianca because he knows she’s got questions that she hasn’t had a chance to ask. He
explains how they met, how long they were together, what their relationship was like, why they broke up. He tells her everything he would want to know if he were her. Frankie is a hell of a spy, and she’s great at controlling her facial expressions when she needs to, but he can see the jealousy and the hurt in her eyes while he talks. He wonders if this is what he looked like when she told him about Nick. He hopes not, because it sucks.

When he’s done, he moves on to what happened tonight. He tells her about the meeting. He tells her about dinner. He tells her about the bridge, and seeing Ollerman, and remembering that Bianca always has state-of-the-art security systems in her flats because she takes her work home with her sometimes. He tells her about how he sat Bianca down and told her the truth, and about the information she gave him on the catacomb security system. He tells her that Bianca will probably be engaged soon, and that Gio is a good man and a doctor. And then he tells her what Bianca asked him to.

“She said to tell you that if she knew about you, she would have behaved differently,” he says. “She made me promise to tell you that she’s sorry.”

“Oh course she is,” Frankie sighs. She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Saint Bianca,” she mutters under her breath.

“I think you’d really like her if you got to know her,” Will says. “You’d probably end up being pretty good friends.”

Frankie gives him a look.

“Under different circumstances,” he adds quickly.

Frankie rolls her eyes. For a long moment, they stand in silence. Will tries to be patient and give her the time she needs to sort through how she feels, but every second feels like torture. He likes that she’s different than him, but this is one of those things that takes some effort to deal with. When he needs to sort through something, he does it verbally. He shares everything with her and wants feedback and engagement as he works through it. She’s not like that. She likes to sort through things on her own in her head and then share her conclusions.

Eventually, he can’t stand it any longer.

“You believe me, right?” he asks tentatively. “I would never lie to you about this, Frankie. I would never sleep with someone else. You know that, right?”

Her expression softens a little. “You promised me no more lies, Will. And you’re annoyingly insistent about keeping your promises.”

Will feels like he might burst into tears from relief. “So you believe me.”

“It’s not about believing you,” she says on an exhale. “It’s just…”

She trails off and chews her bottom lip. He forces himself to wait. It’s torture all over again.

“Is this how you felt when I kissed Rafael?” she asks.

He blinks at her in surprise. That’s not what he expected her to say. “How do you feel?” he wonders.

“Like shit,” she answers bluntly.
Guilt gnaws at him. He nods. “Yeah, that’s how I felt. Like I was going to throw up. And like I wanted to cry. But also like I wanted to punch him in the face, and then set him on fire, and then drink some whiskey and watch while he burned.”

Frankie lifts her eyebrows.

“I really hated him,” Will says defensively.

“Obviously.” A brief smile tugs on her lips, but it doesn’t last. She shakes her head. “I don’t hate Bianca. She seems pretty great, actually.”

“Yes. But she’s not you.”

Frankie’s expression softens again. Will has learned, over the course of the last two years, that her seemingly endless and indestructible confidence is neither endless nor indestructible. She’s not insecure by any stretch of the imagination. But she is human, and Nick has screwed with her head so much that she has a hard time being vulnerable when she feels uncertain about herself. It doesn’t take a genius to know that she probably needs his reassurance right now.

“I thought about you, you know,” he tells her.

She arches an eyebrow at him. “You thought about me while you were kissing her?”

Will shrugs. “Yeah. That’s the only way I could do it. I had to pretend it was you.”

She looks surprised, but also a little pleased, and he presses on.

“But not just on the bridge. I thought about you the whole time I was gone. Every second, Frankie. I’m always thinking about you.”

She doesn’t look suspicious, but she doesn’t look like she believes him either.

“Ask me what I thought about,” he tells her.

She lifts her eyebrows. “Ask you?”

“Ask me,” he repeats.

She sighs. “What did you think about, Will?”

“Your laugh.”

He’s got her there. He can tell by the way she’s staring at him. He’s telling the truth—he did think about her laugh over dinner when he said something that he thought she would think was funny—but he also remembers earlier, when she said Bianca had a great laugh, and he doesn’t want her to think that there’s anything about Bianca that he prefers.

“I think you have the best laugh I’ve ever heard,” he says. “If you put me in the middle of Grand Central Station with a thousand people and blindfolded me, I could find you if you laughed. It’s contagious. I smile every time. It’s like Pavlov’s dogs.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s the nerdiest thing you’ve ever said to me. And you once made me listen to you talk about Buffy the Vampire Slayer for twenty minutes.”

“That show is iconic, Frankie. One of these days, you’re going to watch it with me. And you’re going to love it.”
“Whatever,” she says, rolling her eyes again.

He smiles. “You know what else I thought about?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me,” she says, and even though she’s feigning disinterest he can tell that she is very, very interested in what he’s saying.

“That thing you do with your mouth when you’re mad and you’re about to kick someone’s ass.” He purses his lips and snarls a little like she does before she beats the shit out of someone. “Like that.”

“You thought about that?” she says incredulously.

“I love it,” he says honestly. “Especially if it’s followed by an uppercut, because your uppercut is a thing of beauty.”

“I do have a nice uppercut.”

“Also, your hair.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “My hair,” she repeats, deadpan.

“It’s soft,” he explains. “Smells nice. And when I play with it while we’re watching TV, you get all cuddly. If you could purr like a cat, you would.”

“I would not.”

“You would.” He nods at her hands. “Also, that.”

She looks down with a frown. “What?”

“The way you pull your hands inside the sleeves of my sweatshirts so only the tips of your fingers stick out. It’s adorable.”

She shifts a little on the edge of the dresser and pulls her hands all the way inside the sleeves of his sweatshirt. He smiles. She always gets self-conscious when he calls her adorable. It makes her even more adorable.

“I told Bianca about you,” he tells her.

“Did you,” she says softly.

He nods. “Yep. I told her that you’re brilliant. Book smart and street smart. I told her you’re a badass. Best shot I’ve ever seen, and I’m still a little terrified by how accurate you are with throwing knives, and you can pick locks with your eyes closed. I told her you’re funny, and that sometimes you make me laugh so hard my abs hurt. And even though you try to keep it under wraps because you don’t want anyone to think you’re soft, you care about people. You’re protective and loyal.”

“That’s just a rumor,” she murmurs, shaking her head. “I don’t care about people. I’m heartless.”

He smiles. “I told her you’re the love of my life. I told her that we’re going to get married and make babies and run a bookstore while we wear matching cardigans.”

“I never agreed to the cardigans.”
“You will.”

She shakes her head, but she’s smiling at him and she doesn’t argue.

“There’s a reason she and I didn’t work out, Frankie,” he tells her softly. “There’s a reason things didn’t work out with Gigi, or Vanessa, or anybody else. And it doesn’t have anything to do with living in different cities, or having different priorities, or cheating. It’s you. I’m not with them because I’m supposed to be with you. My whole life, I’ve been headed straight for you.”

He can’t stand it anymore. He has to be closer to her. He crosses the room to stand in front of her. He doesn’t touch her—he still doesn’t know if she’s ready for that—but he wants to be close enough that if she wants to touch him, she can.

“When I was growing up, my dad talked a lot about this thing he calls the second yes,” he says when he stops in front of her. “He said that when you make a big, life changing decision, you have to make it twice. The first yes is important. It’s the commitment, that initial decision where you choose what you want. But the second yes is what’s really important. It’s the decision you have to make when things get hard, or when they aren’t working out like you expected, or when it would be easier to just quit and walk away.”

He’s dying to touch her. He feels like his whole body is literally vibrating with the urge to reach out and hold her face in his hands. He slides his hands in his pockets instead.

“I’ve said yes to you every day since Prague, Francesca. I’m going to say yes every day for the rest of our lives. Even when life is hard, choosing you won’t be. Because you’re the best decision I’ve ever made. You’re the only yes that’s ever mattered. And I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

She chews her bottom lip again. He has a sudden and very intense desire to lean forward and nibble her lip herself. He resists.

“Hell of a speech, Whiskey,” she murmurs eventually.

He smiles. “You like it? I was going to use it in our wedding vows, but now seemed like a better time. I can recycle it.”

“I don’t want to write vows. I want the traditional ones.”

He lifts his eyebrows in surprise. She looks equally stunned, like she hadn’t expected to say that out loud.

He grins. “Traditional it is.”

He leans toward her because seriously, if she doesn’t touch him soon, he’s going to die of longing. Her gaze flickers down toward his mouth. It’s a clear sign—Frankie-speak for I want to be kissed—so he leans forward to kiss her.

He stops abruptly when she flattens her hand on his chest and holds him away from her. Her eyebrows are furrowed as if she’s just realized something. “You smell like her,” she murmurs.

A wave of guilt washes over him. He can see it all on her face again—jealousy and disappointment and pain—and he contemplates making another speech but decides against it. Actions speak louder than words.

He turns on his heel and heads for the bathroom that’s attached to their bedroom. It’s large, with a
clawfoot tub and a separate walk-in shower. He heads for the shower, slides the frosted glass door open, and reaches in to turn the faucet on. There are dual showerheads, and they both immediately gush to life. He twists the faucet almost all the way over to the side marked as heat, and within a few seconds there’s steam rising in the stall.

He glances over his shoulder. Frankie has followed him, and she’s standing in the bathroom doorway watching him with a puzzled frown. He winks at her. Then he steps beneath the falling water with all his clothes still on.

It feels more than a little odd to stand completely clothed in a running shower. But he twists his body beneath the spray, making sure that every inch of his clothing gets properly drenched. Frankie appears in the opening of the shower stall, looking even more bewildered than before. He pretends he doesn’t notice, and grabs her bottle of shower gel. He squirts some into his hand, and then proceeds to rub it directly into the shirt he’s still wearing.

“Um…?” Frankie says.

Will keeps his focus on the task at hand, whistling as he tries to lather her gel into a nice, rich foam. It’s a little more difficult to do on fabric than on his skin, but he manages. He spreads it along his sleeves too, and once he’s satisfied that it’s rubbed in pretty well, he starts to wash it off.

“Will,” Frankie calls.

He looks at her as he rubs a hand over his shoulders. “Yeah?”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“It’s my clothes that smell like her,” he explains. “I didn’t take them off so my skin doesn’t smell like her. It’s just my clothes. So I scrubbed them, and now I smell like you.”

He pats some bubbles on his shoulder, and water sprays up into his face. He sputters a little and then wipes his eyes, which isn’t super smart, because now his left eye stings a little.

“Ow,” he grumbles.

“Why didn’t you just take your clothes off?” Frankie wonders.

“Because getting naked in front of you when you’re upset is creepy,” he replies. “This isn’t creepy. It’s romantic.” He rubs at his eye. “Or at least I hope it’s romantic, because I’ve got soap in my eye and it stings like hell and if you’re still upset after this then I’m going to feel really stupid.”

A soft smile tugs on her lips. She gazes at him for a second, shaking her head a little. And then she steps into the shower stall and joins him under the spray. The front of her sweatshirt is immediately soaked, and her jeans start to turn an even darker shade of blue. She puts her hands on his jaw and tips his head backward beneath the water, and then she uses the cuff of her sleeve to wipe gently at his eye.

“Better?” she murmurs.

He slides a hand along her hip and tugs her closer. It brings her fully under the spray, and he uses his other hand to brush her wet hair back from her face. “You make everything better.”

She searches his eyes like she’s looking for something. He isn’t sure what she’s looking for, but he’s an open book. He’ll give her whatever she wants.
“I didn’t go for a walk because I was trying not to think about you and Bianca,” she confesses quietly. “It was one of the reasons. But it wasn’t the only one.”

Apprehension flickers in his chest, but he ignores it. “What was the other reason?”

She exhales, and reaches up to drape her arms over his shoulders. “Nick came on to me pretty strong. Which isn’t new. But this time he had a video of you making out with another woman and I…”

She pauses like she’s trying to find the words. He feels jealousy welling up in his throat.

“It threw me off,” she continues. “Sometimes when it’s just me and him, it’s hard to…”

She trails off again, except this time she exhales an annoyed sigh, almost like she’s frustrated with herself that she can’t find the words. He waits for her even though he’s terrified of what she’s going to say.

“He knows me,” she says softly. “He knew what to say, and what to do. I’d been drinking, and watching that video hurt like hell, and when I’m drinking and hurt I don’t always make the best decisions. I didn’t want to do something stupid just because I was jealous and hurt and angry with you. So I left.”

She lifts her gaze to his and scratches her nails over the back of his head. “Nothing happened, Will. I promise. I’m still yours.”

There’s a different feeling welling up inside Will now. He pulls her closer and murmurs, “I’m so damn proud of you.”

She blinks at him for a second in surprise, and then rolls her eyes. “Jesus, Will.”

“No, I’m serious,” he insists. “I know it sounds weird, but I just...all this shit you’ve been through, and you haven’t let any of it beat you.”

“I don’t like to lose,” she says with a half smile.

“I love you so much it’s insane.”

Her smile deepens. “Always knew you were insane.”

He strokes his hand over her back. He wants to kiss her. He wants to do a lot of things to her, but they all require consent.

“You still drunk?”

“I never was,” she sighs. “Just tipsy. I stopped at a bar on my walk, but I ordered club soda like a boring adult and now I’m sober.” She tilts her head and furrows her eyebrows. “I did pour it on some guy who wouldn’t stop hitting on me, so I guess that’s not boring.”

“You threw your drink in a guy’s face?” he asks incredulously.

“No, I poured it on his face,” she clarifies. “After I dislocated his thumb. He screamed like a girl.”

Will snorts. “You didn’t punch him?”

“No. You proud of me again?”
“So proud.”

She laughs.

He tilts toward her like a moth to the flame. “There it is,” he murmurs.

“Sappy,” she accuses.

“Guilty,” he whispers, and then he closes the remaining distance between them and kisses her.

It’s the best kiss of his life. He says that every time, of course. But it’s true every time. Kissing Frankie just feels so...right.

The kiss starts innocently. It doesn’t stay that way. The curves of her hips fit perfectly in his palms. She arches into him, and her chest presses against his. She’s holding his face in her hands like she doesn’t want to let him go, which is just fine with him because he has no intention of going anywhere. He’s going to stay right here for the rest of his life, standing beneath these showerheads fully clothed and wrapped in her arms, kissing her like it’s all he knows how to do.

Well, okay. Maybe not fully clothed.

She takes his tie off first. Then she finds the buttons on his shirt and undoes them one by one. She pushes it off his shoulders, and then pulls his undershirt out from where it’s tucked into his pants. When her hands are finally on his skin, his body reacts immediately.

Yeah, her clothes need to come off.

She smiles against his lips like she can read his mind. She pulls his undershirt up and over his head. He removes her sweatshirt next, and he’s more than a little pleased when he finds that she’s wearing one of his t-shirts beneath. There’s a giant walk-in closet in their brownstone, and she has an entire dresser all to herself, but when she’s not at work or they’re not going out somewhere, she lives in his clothes. He loves that.

She helps him strip off her t-shirt. He reaches for the back clasp of her bra, but all he finds is a smooth band of fabric. He paws at it for a second, frowning, and she laughs into his mouth.

“Front clasp, Casanova,” she whispers.

“Knew that,” he mutters, sliding his hands along her skin to the front clasp.

She tips her head back and smirks up at him. “Mhmm.”

“You know, a lesser man would be offended that you’re laughing at him while he takes your clothes off,” he points out.

She strokes her hand along the front of his pants. “Are you a lesser man, Whiskey?”

He barely swallows a groan. “No,” he somehow manages to say.

She moves her hand, stroking and squeezing him through the soaked fabric of his pants, and he grits his teeth against the urge to buck into her hand. She looks way too pleased with herself. She always does whenever it’s obvious that he wants her really bad.

He turns her body and backs her up against the wall. “Cold,” she says, flinching a little when her back touches the tiled wall.
“Sorry,” he whispers, ducking forward to kiss her. He unclasps the hook of her bra with a flick of his wrist. She arches off the tile and rolls her shoulders back, and he guides the straps down her arms, lets the bra drop onto the shower floor, and then pins her against the wall again.

There are rivulets of water running down her newly exposed skin. He tastes every single one, his tongue tracing the trails. He lets go of her waist and lifts his hands too, and sets to work licking and squeezing and stroking every inch of her chest. She hums, low and pleased, in the back of her throat. He knows how to pull a better sound than that from her lips. He lowers his mouth and sucks hard, using his teeth and his tongue to stiffen one of her breasts into a hard peak, and she responds exactly like he expected.

“Shit,” she hisses, arching greedily up into his mouth.

He grins into her skin and sets to work on her belt. When he’s got that unbuckled, he undoes the button and lowers the zipper of her jeans. They’re practically suctioned to her legs thanks to the water, but he doesn’t mind. It gives him a chance to kneel before her, peeling the denim and her underwear down her legs with the reverence her body deserves.

When he finally gets the fabric down around her ankles, she steps out of them and he tosses them aside into a wet heap. He trails his eyes slowly up her naked body but doesn’t stand up. There’s steam filling the shower stall, swirling around them as the hot water pounds out of the showerheads, but he doesn’t think that’s the reason he feels like his blood is on fire.

“You’re staring,” she whispers, reaching out to comb her fingers through his wet hair.

“You’re beautiful.”

She smiles at him, one of those soft, pleased smiles that makes him feel like he’s melting into a puddle. He coasts his hands up the outside of her thighs to her hips and then back down. He’s aching to be inside her, but there’s something else he wants first.

There’s a bench built into the shower wall to his left. It’s not as large as the one they have in the shower stall in their brownstone, but that’s okay. He can still use it. He tugs gently on Frankie’s right ankle, and she lifts her foot and lets him rest it on the bench.

She’s open to him now, and he doesn’t hesitate. He tilts forward to taste her, the flat of his tongue swiping over her in long strokes. She whimpers, her hips jerking toward his mouth, and grabs a fistful of his hair. He loves when she makes that sound. He rests a hand on her hip to hold her steady and looks up at her.

She’s watching him, her pupils blown wide with desire and her mouth open slightly. The heat of the water has made her skin flushed. She’s breathtaking.

He glides two fingers slowly inside her. Her chest lifts as she inhales. It’s tempting, and he doesn’t resist. He lifts the hand that’s not inside her to palm one of her breasts. She covers his hand with hers.

He sets a steady rhythm with his fingers. It takes some concentration, but he leans forward and strokes his tongue over her at the same speed his fingers are moving. She whimpers again and her hips buck. He lets go of her breast to hold her hips steady, and then stops licking and starts sucking. Her eyes slam closed and her head falls back and she chokes on a moan.

He keeps the same insistent rhythm and doesn’t let up. He loves doing this for her. He likes the way she tastes. He likes that she can’t seem to stay quiet. He likes the way her breathing hitches
and the way it lifts her chest. He likes that he has to hold her hips because she can’t seem to control them, and how her body arches into an elegant arc when her release hits.

“Will,” she whispers, her hand tightening in his hair. He can feel her starting to tremble. He adjusts his fingers and does that thing with his tongue she likes. She gasps, stiffens, and then comes with the most sinful moan he’s ever heard.

God, she’s gorgeous when she comes.

Triumph races through him as he works her through the aftershocks, pulling every ounce of pleasure from her that he can. No matter how many times he gets her off, it always makes him feel like the king of the world.

Eventually, he kisses his way back up her body. She drops her foot from the bench and sighs contentedly, leaning forward to press her forehead against his shoulder once he’s standing. He strokes his fingertips lightly along the back of her neck. She shivers and nuzzles closer to him. He smiles. She’s clingy after particularly good orgasms. He likes that too.

“I love you,” she whispers into his shoulder. She lifts her chin, and her lips brush over the pulsepoint beneath his jaw.

“I love you too,” he murmurs.

She drapes her arms around his shoulders and kisses his neck. He runs his hands along her sides, his palms gliding along her wet skin, and then he feels a dull but insistent pain. He jolts away from her.

“Did you just give me a hickey?” he asks incredulously, lifting his hand to the spot on his neck where she definitely just left a mark.

She smirks. “You’re mine.”

He blinks at her, stunned but definitely turned on by the possessiveness in her voice. He really didn’t think it was possible for her to get any hotter. Apparently he was wrong.

He reaches out and strokes his fingers along her throat. “So if I wanted…?”

“Don’t even think about it,” she says, shaking her head.

He plants his other hand on the tiles beside her head and leans over her. He likes how much taller than her he is when she’s barefoot. She tips her head back against the tiles and smiles up at him, clearly satisfied with herself. He coasts his hand across the line of her clavicle, and then down to one of her breasts again. It might make him a frat boy to admit that he loves her breasts as much as he does, but he justifies his obsession with the knowledge that she seems to like how much he loves them. Also, they’re fucking perfect.

“That’s not fair,” he points out.

She tugs on his belt. “I’m sure I can think of a way to make it up to you.”

His pants are starting to feel uncomfortably tight, so he’s more than a little grateful she wants them off. She holds his gaze as she unbuttons his belt and then unbuttons and unzips his pants. He wants to kiss her, but there’s something decidedly sexy about watching her undress him with an expectant smirk on her lips. She pushes off the wall and he leans back to give her the space she seems to want. She hooks her fingers into the waistband of his boxers and starts to sink toward the ground to
pull his pants off, but he catches her shoulders and stops her from kneeling at his feet.

“No,” he murmurs, shaking his head.

She frowns.

“I won’t last,” he explains, pressing her backward against the wall. “I hardly touched you all day and I’m already...” He can’t seem to find the words, but he doesn’t think he needs to. It’s pretty obvious what he is right now. He’s so hard for her it’s moved past aching and into a dull pain. He brushes his thumb over her mouth. “You’re too good at it. I’ll finish in seconds.”

For the record, that’s not flattery. He still remembers the first time she got him off that way. Well, he sort of remembers. He remembers stuttering You don’t have to do that. He remembers she glanced up at him with a surprised look and then murmured What if I want to? He remembers staring at her, feeling like he was drowning in lust, and then nodding like an idiot. After that, everything is...blurry. He remembers heat and wetness and pressure. He remembers tipping his head back against his couch and saying fuck repeatedly. He remembers coming embarrassingly fast. And he knows that’s what would happen tonight, too.

“We’ve got all night,” she points out.

“Yeah,” he agrees, still tracing her bottom lip with his thumb. “But I’d rather be inside you.”

Her eyes darken. She likes when he says things like that. It’s ironic, seeing as nobody has ever told him to shut up more times than she has. But as soon as he gets her naked, the rules change. She likes to be talked to. And he’s more than willing to oblige.

First things first though. He needs these pants off. She watches him strip, first his pants and then his boxers, and as soon as he’s bare she pulls him close. He glides his hand down toward her thigh. She lifts her leg to set her foot back on the bench again. They watch each other as they both make small adjustments to their positioning, but neither of them say a word. They don’t need to. They’ve had enough sex in the shower to know that unless he wants to turn her around—which he doesn’t, at least not this round—this position works best.

He holds tight to her thigh and kisses her as he guides himself inside her. He moves slowly, but he doesn’t pause. He just presses forward, inch by inch. He loves this part. He loves taking her clothes off, and he loves mapping her chest with his mouth, and he loves making her come, but this—he loves this. How slick she feels the first time he pushes in. The initial shock of her hot and tight all around him. It’ll never get old. Never. She’s perfect.

She exhales once he’s buried to the hilt. He starts moving in slow and easy strokes, his hips rolling against hers. She told him once that she likes when he starts this way. Like you’re planning to fuck me all night, she’d whispered. That’s exactly what he wants to do.

Her head falls back against the tiles. “God yes,” she whispers. “This is all I wanted all day.”

Her confession makes arousal flare in his gut. He tightens his hold on her thigh and starts moving a little faster. She doesn’t hesitate to voice her approval. The water is hot, but it’s nothing compared to the heat of her. She feels amazing. He leans forward and licks the water droplets along her collarbone.

“You feel so good,” he breathes into her skin. “It’s so fucking good every time.”

She digs her nails into his back and whispers, “Harder.”
He obeys. He stops rolling his hips and starts snapping them forward with more force. He feels pressure start to build deep within him almost immediately. He doesn’t want to come yet. He wants to make it last. It’s pride, or maybe just selfishness, but he likes to screw her for as long as possible before he lets go. Usually, he can hold on pretty long. She’s admired him for his endurance before. But they were apart for too long today, and he barely got to touch her, and now that he’s inside her all he wants to do is claim her like some kind of possessive neanderthal.

He gentles his movements and goes back to easy, shallow strokes in an attempt to settle himself down.

“Will,” she whines immediately. “Please.”

“Oh come on,” he mutters into her neck.

She laughs. She knows what it does to him when she says please. She turns her mouth toward his ear, her breath hot on his skin. “Fuck me like you mean it, Whiskey,” she whispers. “Like I belong to you.”

Lust drills down his spine. His hips jerk of their own accord, and suddenly he’s back to that hard tempo that makes his mind go fuzzy.

“Yes,” she groans. “Like that. Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t want to, but he’s got a tenuous hold on his self control. There’s something welling up inside him, and it feels savage. He wants her to forget she’s been with anybody but him. He wants to make sure she knows she belongs to him. It feels dangerous. He doesn’t want to hurt her.

“Frankie,” he murmurs, trying to gentle his hips again.

“You’re not going to hurt me, Will,” she whispers as if she can read his mind. Her nails rake across his back. “I’m yours. Take me.”

It’s all over after that. There’s water streaming down her body and she’s gorgeous and willing—not just willing, begging—in his arms, so he gives her what she wants. And it’s…

Holy shit.

She comes right before he does. Somehow through the haze of his lust he hears his name fall from her lips on a strangled sob. He feels her orgasm hit, and it drags him straight over the edge and into his own. White-hot pleasure explodes inside of him, wave after wave of a sensation so intense that it makes him groan loudly enough for his voice to echo off the shower walls.

When the pleasure finally ebbs, it takes him a minute to find coherency again. His face is buried in the curve of her neck. His body feels pleasantly numb, his limbs warm and loose. Frankie’s breathing is slowing and evening out, her chest rising and falling against his. He kisses his way up her throat and finds her mouth, and she kisses him back with a sweetness that makes his heart ache. His hands are trembling as he curls his fingers around her waist. He feels drunk on her. The full force of everything that happened today is finally hitting him, and he’s exhausted. He feels spent and raw and desperate to make sure she knows how much he loves her.

“Francesca,” he breathes.

He can’t seem to find the words to voice what he feels. There’s emotion clogging the back of this throat, and if he can hear it quivering in his voice, he knows she can. She strokes her hand over the back of his head.
“I love you,” she says as if she knows what he needs to hear. “You’ve got all my yeses, Will. Every day. Always. I love you.”

He pulls her close and kisses her again and he knows, way down in the depths of his soul, that nobody will ever love him like she does.
The next morning, Frankie’s alarm goes off at seven-thirty.

Will, who is famously and annoyingly an early riser, groans into the back of her neck and says, “Turn it off.”

She turns it off.

Five minutes later, a second alarm goes off.

“Frankie,” Will whines. “What the hell.”

What the hell is also, incidentally, what Frankie is thinking, because she has no idea why she set an alarm for this early in the morning after such a late night. Then she remembers—she’s going out to breakfast with Jai.

Frankie leans out of Will’s arms and reaches for her phone on the bedside table. Will tightens his hold on her and yanks her back into bed and against his chest. She somehow manages to keep a grip on her phone.

“Will,” she chastises.

He nuzzles into the back of her neck. “Bed’s cold without you.”

“I’m getting breakfast with Jai this morning. Remember?”

“No,” he grumbles.

“Yes you do. I told you when I set my alarm. And you told me I was a good friend.”

“I changed my mind. Ditch him and cuddle me.”

Frankie presses her lips together around a smile. He sounds like a petulant child. She knows he’s not serious. He’d never let her ditch Jai, even if he does want her to stay in bed.

“Not going to happen,” she tells him. She shuts her remaining alarms off. “You’ve got one minute until I get out of this bed.”

She hears him huff behind her like he’s pouting. She ignores him. He’ll let her go.

Ten seconds later, his hands start to roam. Innocently at first. Then...well, not so innocently.

“Will,” she warns. Her voice comes out way breathier than she meant it to. It’s almost embarrassing how fast her body responds to him.

“Ten minutes,” he whispers in her ear. “You always hit snooze five times anyway. We’ve got time.”

He presses an open-mouthed kiss to the back of her neck, wet and hot and suggestive enough to make her shudder. His right hand is sliding across her chest and down the front of her body, the calluses on his palms rough on her skin. His chest is pressing against her back, warm and solid. She can feel him behind her, already hard but getting harder, and she knows two things: If she agrees to stay, he’s going to roll her onto her stomach. And that angle is going to feel so good.
His fingers stroke over her, and she arches against him and swallows a moan.

“Say yes, boo,” he whispers in her ear. “Tell me yes.”

“Yes,” she breathes. And then, “I swear to god, if you make me late...”

He laughs, low and sexy. “Challenge accepted.”

Approximately twenty minutes later, her body feels like jello and she’s still thinking about Will as she skids to a stop in front of Jai.

“Here,” she says. “Not late.”

Jai, who is sitting on the edge of the fountain out in the courtyard, glances at his watch. “Two minutes and forty-five seconds late.”

“Elevator,” she says. “Had to wait for it.”

She sounds out of breath. She hopes he doesn’t notice but knows he probably already did.

Jai arches an eyebrow at her. “Your cheeks are flushed.”

“Jogged down the stairs,” she says. Which, for the record, is not a lie. But the real reason her cheeks are flushed is because Will just made her come so hard she briefly forgot her own name.

“For god’s sake,” Jai sighs. He gets to his feet and starts toward the door that leads out to the alley. “The two of you have a problem.”

Frankie follows him. “Doesn’t feel like a problem. Feels like—“

“Do not finish that sentence.”

She laughs. He smiles. She reaches out and loops her arm through his.

They eat breakfast at a tiny bakery that’s located across from a shop selling sunglasses. The front window of the bakery is stuffed with drool-worthy baked goods. Frankie follows Jai inside, and stands silently at his elbow while he orders a bunch of pastries and two espressos in perfect Italian. She doesn’t tell him what she wants. She doesn’t need to.

It’s early enough that there aren’t many people around, so they have their choice of places at the bar. There are no stools or chairs—it’s standing room only. The pastries and the espresso are so good Frankie doesn’t care that she has to stand. She knows Jai doesn’t care either. Mina loved this place.

Frankie knows he wants to ask her about last night, but she asks him about his meeting with the supplier first. He tells her about it as they sip their espresso and eat. They strategize for a while after that, working out some backups and alternatives in case the plan they came up with last night goes awry. They always have contingency plans in place that the rest of the team doesn’t know about. Old habits.

Jai catches her eyeing some cream puffs in a nearby glass case during a lull in conversation. He walks over to the cashier and orders half a dozen, and then plops the white paper bag onto the bar next to her. She arches an eyebrow at him.

“For Will,” he says with a smirk.
Frankie has no idea how he knew she was thinking about taking some cream puffs back to Will, but she doesn’t ask. She gave up trying to figure out how he reads her mind a long time ago.

“Thanks,” she tells him.

He leans his elbow on the bar. “So what happened last night after I left?”

She tells him about Nick and what happened on the terrace. He listens, his expression pensive.

“Do you think rejecting him will make him turn on us before we finish the two missions?” he asks when she’s finished.

“No.” She rubs her thumb along the rim of her cup. “It’s not the first time I’ve told him no.”

“But Will wasn’t around those other times. Rejection feels different when it happens because there’s someone else.”

“There’s always been someone else,” she points out. “I wasn’t a nun before I met Will. I’ve been sleeping with other men since Krakow. Nick knows that.”

Jai shakes his head. “It’s different. That was sex. This is love. Will kissed someone else last night and you don’t even care.”

“I care,” Frankie says with a frown.

“Right,” Jai says, holding up his hand in apology. “Of course you care. What I mean is that even though Will kissed someone else, you still trust him. Your relationship is stronger today than it was yesterday. I guarantee that’s not what Nick thought was going to happen. When he realizes what happened last night didn’t break you, he might snap.” Jai frowns. “Or he’ll just try harder. He’s stubborn like that.”

“It’s going to make him try harder,” Frankie replies, studying the remnants of her espresso in the bottom of her cup. “He’s always liked the chase. Sometimes I think that’s all it is.”

“That’s not all it is.”

Frankie purses her lips but doesn’t disagree. Jai’s right. Nick might have a warped view of love, but whatever’s left of his heart belongs to her.

“He told me he’s not going to give me up without a fight,” she says quietly. “I think he meant it. And if he wants me back, he knows he can’t touch any of you.”

She glances up at Jai, expecting him to agree with her, but he’s still frowning.

“You’re worried,” she observes.

“I’m always worried.” He finishes his espresso and sets the cup back in the saucer. “I assume, given your tardiness this morning, that I’m right about you and Will being on the same page after what happened?”

“We talked everything out,” Frankie confirms. She smirks. “And then we did a lot of not-talking.”

Jai crinkles his nose in disgust.

Frankie laughs and decides to take pity on him and change the subject. “Will told Bianca about what we’re doing. And she told him some things we didn’t know about the catacombs.”
Jai lifts his eyebrows. Before he can ask for more details, though, the door to the bakery opens. A crowd of people walk in. And they're talking very loudly.

Jai studies them with a look of distaste. “Let’s take a walk,” he suggests.

Frankie smiles. He hates people who talk too loudly. She grabs the paper bag of cream puffs and follows him out of the bakery and onto the sidewalk. As they walk leisurely back in the direction of the palazzo, she tells him what Bianca told Will about the extra security features in the catacombs. He listens eagerly.

“Any of that a deal breaker?” Frankie asks when she’s finished.

Jai shakes his head. “No. I need to buy some more supplies, but nothing major.”

“Nick can’t know we got this from Bianca,” Frankie warns. “She needs to stay out of it.”

“I’ll tell him I found the information last night while I was digging through the system details. He’ll believe that. I’ve done it before.”

“She told Will to call her if we need something. So if something goes wrong or we get stuck, you’ve got that option.”

“You think we can trust her?”

Frankie smirks at him. “You tell me. I know you looked into her as soon as you found out we’d be working with her.”

A sly smile tugs on Jai’s lips. “I may or may not have done some digging.”

“And?”

“And she’s the female version of Will. She’s not just clean, she’s spotless.”

Frankie’s not surprised. She expected as much.

“She’s a good person,” he adds. “She handled last night with a lot of grace. I didn’t expect her to be concerned that she might have hurt you.”

“And how do you know she was?” Frankie asks, looking up at him with an arched eyebrow.

Jai lifts a shoulder casually. “Just a guess.”

“A guess based on a bug you’ve got hidden in Will’s watch?”

Jai’s sly smile is back. “I was instructed to put trackers in his watches. Not bugs.”

“And you always do exactly as I say.”

“Of course.”

Frankie rolls her eyes. “I can’t believe you just made me spend all that time telling you everything when you already knew it all.”

Jai shrugs. “I wanted to make sure he told you everything.”

Frankie snorts. That doesn’t surprise her either.
“He didn’t lie to you,” Jai says. “He kissed her on that bridge, but as soon as they got back to her place, he told her the truth. Nothing happened.”

Frankie nods. “I know.”

She studies the stones beneath their feet as they walk. She thinks about how awful Bianca must have felt when she found out Will had been leading her on, and how she was willing to risk her life and her career to help them anyway.

“She didn’t deserve what we did to her,” she says quietly.

Jai nudges her with his elbow. “Look at you feeling compassion for the woman who kissed your man. Color me impressed.”

“I know, right?” Frankie says. “I feel like I deserve a prize or something. You should buy me a trophy. Get it engraved. World’s most compassionate spy. Will would be so jealous.”

Jai catches her elbow and pulls her to a stop. When she turns to face him, she finds that his smile has faded.

“What’s wrong?” she says, furrowing her eyebrows at him.

“Yesterday was terrible,” he replies. “I can’t even imagine how it must have felt. It would have been completely understandable if you’d acted out of a place of anger or pain. But you didn’t. I’m proud of you. And you should be proud of yourself.”

Warmth blossoms in Frankie’s chest. She knows Jai loves her unconditionally. He’ll have her back no matter how many stupid things she does. But she likes when he’s proud of her.

“What about you?” she asks.

He tilts his head. “What about me?”

She reaches out and latches onto one of his cufflinks. It’s an onyx pair edged with silver. She knows they were a gift from Mina. He only wears them on special occasions, or when he’s missing her more than usual. He goes still when she touches them.

“Yesterday was terrible,” she tells him quietly. “But not just for me.”

Jai swallows and glances out at the canal that’s a few steps away from them. Frankie lets go of his cufflink. He immediately starts to fiddle with it, his thumb rubbing over the onyx absently. She waits for him the way he usually waits for her, watching his face as he searches for the right words.

“I thought I saw her yesterday,” he murmurs eventually.

“Mina?”

Jai nods. “It was the hair. She had the same color hair. Same height. Even her walk was the same. You remember the way she used to walk? Like she was gliding almost, even in those spiked heels she loved.”

It’s a rhetorical question, but Frankie nods anyway. Jai swallows, his throat bobbing, and clenches his jaw the way he does when he’s trying to get a handle on his emotions. Frankie’s heart aches in her chest.
“I thought for sure it was her,” he continues, his voice barely audible. “But then I realized it couldn’t be and I…” He trails off and shakes his head.

“You felt like you lost her all over again,” Frankie finishes when he doesn’t.

Jai looks up at her. “I know you know how that feels. Except you really did lose him all over again.”

The words send a pang of sorrow through Frankie’s body. She used to wonder what was worse—losing Nick in Barcelona and thinking she was a widow, or getting him back in Moscow and realizing he was a traitor. She still doesn’t really know the answer. What she does know is that all that pain and grief and rage eventually led her to Will. She can’t say she’s glad she went through everything she did to get to him. She’s not. She’s always hated people who say things like *everything happens for a reason or it was all worth it in the end.* She knows they mean well, but it makes her feel like she’s supposed to be glad she lost so much, and she’s not. She wants her parents back. She wants RJ and Mina back. That’s never going to change. Ever.

But it helps to have Will. She still misses everyone she lost. She still aches. But Will knows how to soothe her, even if he isn’t always aware he’s doing it, and that’s a form of relief that Jai has yet to find. Frankie wants it for him so badly she can barely stand it.

She shakes her head. “What happened with Nick is different. I didn’t lose him the way you lost her.”

“What you went through is worse.”

“No it’s not.”

“I couldn’t do what you’ve had to do.”

“Yes you could.”

Jai shakes his head but he doesn’t voice another argument. He’s rubbing his cufflink again.

“I’ve been thinking about what she would say if she was here,” he says. “What she would think of how I’ve spent my time since I lost her.”

“She’d be proud of you.”

He shakes his head. He looks pained. “I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of.”

“So have I. Nobody bats a thousand.”

A faint smile tugs on his lips. “Thanks, Will.”

Frankie laughs. “He’s not wrong.”

“He rarely is. It’s very annoying. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“I would never. He’d be insufferable.”

Jai snorts in agreement.

“Do you remember how badly Mina wanted us to like each other?” Frankie asks.

“Yes,” Jai confirms with a soft smile. “She predicted pretty early on that we’d be best friends.”
“Yeah. Except you’re more than just my best friend, JD. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. And I don’t just mean alive. I mean here. Part of this team. Doing good things. Happy.”

“Will—”

“Will makes me happy,” Frankie cuts him off. “He makes me a better person. But he only gets to do that because you made sure I didn’t suffocate in that rabbit hole. You saved me, Jai. You did. If Mina were here, I’d tell her that. And she’d be proud as hell.”

Jai looks touched by her confession. He reaches out and grabs her hand. “I love you.”

“I know,” she says, smiling. “I love you too.”

He squeezes her hand briefly and then drops it, and they start walking again. After a minute or so of comfortable silence, Jai speaks again.

“There’s something else I’ve been thinking about.”

Frankie looks over at him. “What’s that?”

“Thanksgiving is next week.”

“If this is about those damn brussels sprouts—”

“No,” Jai laughs. “I promised I wouldn’t bring brussels sprouts into your brownstone and I’ll honor that promise. Even if you are one hundred percent wrong about them.”

“I’m not wrong,” Frankie insists. “They’re gross little cabbage wannabes that belong in the trash. I hate them more than you hate oranges. And we both know that’s saying something.”

Jai smiles. “I think we should invite the team to join us for Thanksgiving this year.”

Frankie is so surprised she stops in her tracks. “You want to do what?” she says, turning to gape at him.

“Mina would be glad that you and I have a new family,” Jai says, stopping next to her. “She’d want us to share our traditions with them.” He frowns. “Unless you were going to go to Huntington with Will?”

“Thanksgiving is our holiday, Jai. I wouldn’t leave you to celebrate it alone.”

Jai shifts from one foot to the other as if he’s uncomfortable. “I know you guys are serious now. I assumed you would want to start spending holidays with him, so—”

“There are a lot of holidays, Jai,” Frankie cuts him off. “Will can have the rest of them. But if he wants Thanksgiving, then he’ll have to be where I am. And I go where you go.”

Jai studies her as if he’s searching for a hint of indecision, but she knows he won’t find any. She means what she said. A genuine smile spreads over his face, and the affection in his eyes is so clear Frankie feels her heart warm in her chest.

“Okay,” he says. “Then we should invite them to join us.”

“You’re sure that’s what you want?”

“I’m sure.”
Frankie thinks it over for a minute. “All right,” she agrees. “But you know this means Standish is going to find out how good of a cook you are.”

“Yes,” Jai sighs. “I’ve come to terms with what I’m sure will be daily requests for food.” He smirks at her. “It also means he’s going to know where you live.”

Frankie crinkles her nose. “I changed my mind. Thanksgiving is cancelled.”

Jai laughs.

When they get back to the palazzo, Jai disappears up to his room to iron out some details for their mission tonight. Frankie follows him upstairs, but when she peeks into her bedroom, Will isn’t there. She goes back downstairs, but he’s not in the salon or on the terrace either. She briefly considers that he might have gone for a run, but dismisses the idea. He would have texted her to let her know. She decides to check the kitchen, and finds him standing with his back to the door while he watches the Keurig brew him some coffee.

She pauses briefly in the doorway to study him. He’s wearing that green jacket she likes, the one with the zipper on the left breast pocket and the collar he wears popped, and a pair of jeans that cut over his ass just right. Even when he’s waiting for coffee after a long night, his posture is almost perfect. It’s the marine in him maybe, or maybe the eagle scout, or maybe it’s just who he is. He stands up straight, like a man who doesn’t have secrets and isn’t afraid of who he is, and she fucking loves that. She loves the way he carries himself—the athletic ease in all his movements, the subtle confidence of his walk, the way his face always looks like it’s ready to break into a smile.

His hair seems darker than usual, and she realizes he probably just got out of the shower. She wonders if he thought about last night while he was in there. She’s certainly been thinking about it. She wonders, sometimes, what she’d say if someone asked her about the best sex she’s ever had. Last night is certainly on the list. So is Monte Carlo. She can think of about a dozen times at his place, and a dozen more in their brownstone. Maybe it was that time she showed up at his hotel room in Brussels before they were together. Or that night in Huntington in the back of his dad’s pickup truck. Or New Orleans. Havana. That train on the way to Berlin. Tel Aviv. Belarus.

Fuck, Belarus was so good.

She realizes, suddenly, that all her options for best-ever have occurred with Will. Nobody else has even crossed her mind.

She smiles to herself and walks toward him, dropping the pastry bag on the kitchen island on the way. When she stops behind him, she wraps her arms around his torso and buries her nose in his shoulder blade. She inhales his scent, but she does it quietly so he won’t know she’s doing it.

“Hi,” she murmurs into his back.

He strokes his hand along her forearm. “Hey you. How was breakfast?”

“Good. I brought you a present.”

He turns around in her arms, and she tips her head back to look at him. He smiles and brushes his hand over her face. “Are you the present?”

“Do you want me to be the present?”
He tilts his head. “If you’re asking me if I want to go upstairs and have sex, the answer is yes.”

She grins. “You know, before we met, I never would’ve guessed an eagle scout could be such a sex fiend.”

He smirks. “You complaining?”

“Not even a little.”

“Must be nice to finally be with someone who can keep up with you.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Who said you can keep up with me?”

“You did.”

“Those words have never come out of my mouth.”

“They were implied.”

“When?”

“Tons of times. Like this morning, when you wanted me to get you off so bad you said _please_ before eight AM. You were polite before you had any coffee. Now I can cross witnessing a miracle off my bucket list.”

Frankie rolls her eyes but can’t argue. She did say _please_ and it was because she was desperate for him to get her off. She slips out of his arms to grab the pastry bag, and then turns back around and shoves it into his chest. “I brought you some cream puffs.”

“Oh,” he says, his eyes lighting up.

He takes the bag from her and slips his hand inside, and comes out holding a cream puff that’s frosted with chocolate. He gives the pastry the same kind of adoring look that Jai gives explosives.

“God, I love you,” he sighs.

“Are you talking to me or the cream puff?”

Will grins at her. “Well considering I’m planning to eat both of you in the near future—”

“Will,” she laughs, shoving his chest.

He winks at her and shoves the whole pastry in his mouth. His eyes roll back into his head and he groans. “Guh, s’good,” he says around a mouth full of cream puff. “S’really good.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she chides. “Were you raised in a barn?”

Will smiles at her as he chews, his eyes twinkling.

“Oh, right,” she says, taking advantage of his inability to respond. “Farm boy from the midwest. So yes on the barn raising. I forgot your first car was a tractor.”

That’s not true. His first car wasn’t a tractor, and he didn’t grow up on a farm. But she loves teasing him about his childhood, and he seems to like it when she does, so she does it often.

He sets the bag on the counter and then reaches out to grab her leather jacket and yank her forward
against his chest. Frankie swipes her thumb over a bit of chocolate in the corner of his mouth and then licks it off the pad of her thumb. Will’s eyes darken. He swallows the rest of his pastry, and then immediately leans forward to kiss her.

“You taste like cream puff,” she murmurs into his mouth

“Like it?”

“Jury’s still out.”

He grins and kisses her again. She smiles against his lips and weaves her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. It’s damp, which reminds her of last night, and arousal flares in her body. She presses him back against the counter and kisses him deeper. His hands slip into the back pockets of her jeans, and he cups her ass and holds her against his hips. She can feel him through his jeans, and she wonders if they really do need to go upstairs for another round.

“Aw hell no,” Standish’s voice says from somewhere behind Frankie. “It’s too early for this shit.”

Will breaks the kiss, and Frankie glances over her shoulder to see Standish standing in the doorway of the kitchen looking more than a little worse for the wear. He’s pale. He clearly didn’t bother to shave. His t-shirt is on backwards, and the tag is sticking up against his throat like a tiny little flag. He scowls at them. “If you’re going to make green eyed Chase babies, can you do it somewhere that’s not here?”

“Are you okay?” Will asks in concern. He’s still got one of his hands in one of Frankie’s back pockets. “You look rough.”

“Rude,” Standish mutters, shuffling toward the pantry like an old man with arthritis.

“He’s hungover,” Frankie says, watching him with a smirk.

“Am not,” Standish argues halfheartedly.

Frankie glances up at Will. “He drank an entire bottle of wine last night and sang thank u, next repeatedly until Susan tucked him into bed like a five year old.”

“Yikes,” Will says. “You feeling sick, kiddo?”

“I wasn’t until I saw you grabbing my mom’s ass,” Standish grumbles as he disappears into the pantry.

Frankie frowns. “He really needs to quit calling me that.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Will says.

“It’s not sweet. It’s weird. We’re not his parents.”

Will pouts. It’s kind of cute, and his hand is still on her ass, and apparently she finds him irresistible, because she kisses him.

“Seriously?” Standish’s voice groans off to Frankie’s left. There’s a rustling sound, and Frankie breaks away from Will to see the younger agent shaking a box of Cap’n Crunch at them from the door of the pantry. “Can you not do this in front of me and the captain? We want to eat our crunch in peace. Go feel each other up somewhere else.”
Frankie frowns. “Where did you find Cap’n Crunch in Venice?”

“I brought it from home.”

“You brought a box of cereal with you from home?” Frankie says incredulously. “Who does that?”

“I do.” Standish opens a set of cupboard doors, frowns, and then closes them. He opens the next set of doors and then frowns again. “Why are there no bowls? Do criminal masterminds not believe in bowls?”

“Here, kiddo,” Will says, reaching into the cupboard behind him and pulling out a bowl.

Standish shuffles across the kitchen, reaches out to take the bowl, and then freezes. He squints at Will, and then screws up his face in disgust.

“Man, that’s nasty.”

“What?” Will asks with a frown.

“You got a hickey,” Standish replies. “Ain’t nobody need to see that. Go put on a turtleneck.”

Frankie snorts. Will blushes and finally pulls his hand out of her pocket so he can adjust his jacket collar over a faint bruise on his neck. Now that Frankie’s looking closely at it, she realizes it’s almost unnoticeable because it’s covered by concealer.

“You raid my makeup, Whiskey?” she murmurs, trying and failing not to grin at him.

He shoots her a look. “I’m already plotting my revenge.”

She gives him a once-over. “Sounds fun.”

“This must be what hell is like,” Standish sighs.

Frankie’s opening her mouth to say something that will make Standish even more uncomfortable, but Nick’s voice cuts through the room before she can.

“Morning,” he says brightly.

Standish glances toward the doorway and his eyes go wide. “Oh damn,” he mutters.

Frankie turns to follow his gaze and immediately freezes. Nick is shirtless, his muscles and tattoos on full display, and he’s covered in sweat. Her eyes are drawn immediately to the words that are inked along his ribcage, and she can’t help but remember last night, when James Morrison was singing in her ear and Nick was standing too close and looking at her like she hung the moon.

“You’re very sweaty,” Standish observes.

Nick smirks. “I went for a run.”

“Do you uh…” Standish clears his throat. His eyes are flickering enviously over Nick’s body. “Do you lift weights?”

Nick’s smirk deepens. “I prefer boxing.”

“Right, right, of course,” Standish says. “Explains the whole one punch thing.” His eyes are glued to Nick’s abs. “You ever seen Creed?”
Nick frowns. “What?”

“It’s a boxing movie,” Frankie replies. “Standish, quit staring at his abs.”

“I wasn’t staring at his abs!” Standish snaps. He grabs his box of Cap’n Crunch—probably to shake it threateningly in her direction again—but he fumbles and drops it, and it spills all over the kitchen island.

“Son of a bitch,” he sighs. His shoulders slump. “Remind me never to drink wine again,” he mutters, though it’s unclear who he’s talking to. “Devil’s juice.”

“Drink some water,” Will says.

“You need carbs,” Frankie and Nick say in unison.

Their eyes meet from across the room. An awkward pause hangs in the air, made all the more awkward by Standish murmuring, “This is awkward,” before shoving a handful of cereal in his mouth.

Nick smiles at Frankie. “Took the old route this morning. Brought you a present.”

He tosses something at her, and it isn’t until she catches it that she realizes it’s an apple.

“Is it candy?” Standish asks, sounding hopeful.

Frankie doesn’t reply. She’s staring at the apple in her hand, trying not to think about all the times she and Nick went for a morning run down to the Mercati di Rialto and wandered among the stalls before running back to the safehouse and showering together.

“It’s an apple,” Nick answers when Frankie doesn’t.

Standish scoffs. “Frankie doesn’t eat apples.”

“Actually, Frankie loves apples,” Nick says. Frankie glances up at him. He’s standing with his hands on his hips and an affectionate smile on his face. “She used to make apple pie with her mom for the Fourth of July.”

Frankie feels Will stiffen next her, and she knows it’s because he didn’t know that. She leans toward him, her shoulder pressing against his, and feels him relax a little.

“Go put some clothes on,” she tells Nick. “We need to talk about Ollerman.”

Nick winks at her. “Sure. I’ll be in my room when you’re ready.”

He turns on his heel and leaves before Frankie can tell him that she is absolutely not going to meet him in his bedroom. She sighs. She can’t wait for this mission to be over.

“Nobody should have that many muscles,” Standish says once he’s gone.

Frankie glances at Will. He’s staring at the empty doorway Nick just disappeared through, and he’s got an odd look on his face. She isn’t sure what it is. Jealousy, definitely, but there’s something else too. Worry, maybe? She’s guessing he’s concerned that Nick might be setting them up. They agreed before this mission even started that she’d take the lead in deciding how to handle Nick. But that’s easier said than done. Will likes to lead just as much as she does. With the stakes so high, it’s probably hard for him to take a backseat.
She sets the apple down on the counter and reaches for his hand. “You okay?” she asks him quietly, just in case he wants to talk about it.

“Oh come on, Frankie,” Standish says around a mouthful of cereal before Will can reply. “Your husband looks like an underwear model. Of course he’s not okay.”

Frankie turns to glare at Standish. “Can you go somewhere else? Maybe somewhere you’re actually wanted?”

“I can’t just leave my cereal here,” Standish says, gesturing at the cereal bits strewn across the counter. “That’s a waste. And besides, I’m in the kitchen. That’s where food belongs. You guys are the ones who should go somewhere else. Also, for the record, I’d be making that face too if my girl’s ex looked like that. Dude has abs for days.”

Frankie’s temper snaps. She strides toward Standish, yanks the cereal box off the counter, and then grabs his ear. Standish squeals like a wounded animal. Frankie ignores him and pulls him toward the door by his ear.

“Will!” Standish shrieks. “Help! Tell her to let go of me!”

Will doesn’t say anything. Frankie wouldn’t stop even if he did. She leads Standish out of the kitchen and down the hall, and then she shoves him into the dining room. He stumbles into the room, and she throws the cereal box into his chest. Cereal flies through the air and spills at his feet.

“You can eat in here because this is where people eat,” she snaps.

“I don’t have any milk,” Standish whines. He rubs his ear. “And that really hurt.”

“Eat it dry,” she growls. “And I swear to god, Standish, if you walk back in that kitchen before I’m done talking to Will I’m going to rip your ears off and make you swallow them.”

Standish looks horrified. Frankie slams the dining room door in his face before he can reply.

When she gets back to the kitchen, Will is cleaning up the remnants of Standish’s mess. He’s still got that look on his face. Frankie crosses the room and stands next to him. He doesn’t look at her.

“You going to tell me what’s going on, or should I guess?” she asks.

Will turns away from her to grab another bowl from the cupboard. “Everything’s fine,” he says in a voice that she thinks is supposed to sound cheerful. “Just cleaning up Standish’s mess, as per usual. When we have kids, they’re going to learn to clean up after themselves. We’re going to have a chore chart and everything.”

“Will,” she says pointedly.

He pushes a pile of cereal into the bowl. “I’m fine, Frankie.”

“That’s my line. And I say it way more convincingly.”

He snorts but doesn’t reply. Silence hangs in the air, broken only by the faint sound of cereal being pushed into a bowl. Frankie watches him, waiting for the inevitable word vomit, but it never comes. He’s stonewalling her.

He’s stonewalling her.
She can’t decide if she’s annoyed, worried, or amused by their role reversal. Maybe all three. Regardless, this isn’t going to work. If he doesn’t trust her professional judgment when it comes to Nick, then they need to talk about it.

“Will,” she says, reaching out to put her hand on his arm. He goes still beneath her touch. She tilts a little closer to him. “Can you let me in please?”

He says that to her sometimes when she’s got her walls up. She expects it’ll have an effect on him, and she’s right. He closes his eyes briefly, and then sets the bowl on the counter with a deep exhale. Frankie waits as patiently as she can.

“Has he always looked like that?” he says eventually, his voice soft.

Frankie frowns. “Who?”

“Nick.”

For a second all she can do is stare at him, completely taken aback. She hadn’t even considered that Standish might be right about Will being jealous of the way Nick looks.

After she gets over her initial shock, her first impulse is to soothe him. She wants to tell him that in case it hadn’t been abundantly clear last night in the shower, or this morning in bed, he has absolutely nothing to worry about. But she knows him. He has to talk through his feelings before he can move past them, and he won’t be ready to hear her reassurances until she answers his questions.

“Yes,” she answers.

Will rubs his thumb over a spot on the countertop. “Is that why you were attracted to him?”

Frankie hesitates. This feels like a dangerous road to go down, but she can’t change the subject after she just insisted they talk about it.

“It was a contributing factor,” she says neutrally.

“How much of a contributing factor? Like, if you were to compare it to planning a mission, would you say it was like Standish’s contributions or Jai’s?”

For the first time in a long time, Frankie wants to lie to him. She knows she can’t.

“Probably more like Jai’s.”

Will furrows his eyebrows the way he does when he gets bad news. He hasn’t looked her in the eye since she came back in the room. “What about his tattoos?”

“What about them?”

“Did he have them when you met?”

“Some of them. But not all of them.”

“Because he got some of them for you.”

A sudden memory crashes through Frankie’s brain: Rubbing ointment over Nick’s ribs, her fingertips brushing the raised skin where the words of James Morrison had recently been inked, and then laughing when Nick plucked the tube of ointment out of her hand and yanked her into
their bedroom.

“Yes,” she confirms, pushing the memory away.

“And you liked that?”

“I did at the time.”

Will scratches the back of his head. His eyebrows are furrowed again. “What else did you like about him?”

That’s too far. Nothing good is going to come from answering that question, and there’s no way she’s going to give him more ways to compare himself to Nick.

“Will,” she says gently. “Why are you asking me all these questions?”

He’s silent for a minute or so like he’s trying to find the right words, and then he says quietly, “You’ve got a type. You like brawny guys. Broad shoulders. Big arms. Abs. Tattoos.” He shakes his head. “That’s not me.”

She reaches up and grasps his chin, and lifts his head so that he has to look at her.

“And you think that means I’m not attracted to you?”

“I know you’re attracted to me,” he says, wrapping his fingers around her wrist and lowering her hand from his face. “I just thought maybe you…” His eyebrows furrow. He shakes his head and looks away from her. “This is stupid. I’m being stupid. I’m sorry. Forget it.”

He looks embarrassed all of a sudden, and she doesn’t like that. She doesn’t want him to be embarrassed about being honest with her. If she can tell him that Bianca is pretty and has a great laugh, then he can tell her how he feels about Nick.

“We said no more secrets,” she says. “Remember?”

He looks up at her in surprise. “It’s not a secret.”

“Then say it.”

He searches her eyes for a second, looking conflicted. And then he lifts his chin stubbornly. “Do you wish I looked more like him?”

God, she wants to kiss him so bad. She wants to shove him into the pantry and close the door and show him exactly how much she prefers him to every brawny tattooed guy she’s ever slept with. But that’s not what he needs. Not yet anyway. He needs words.

She briefly considers telling him the truth in the plainest terms possible so that there won’t be any room for misinterpretation. She could say she loves his body, and that she has never, not even once, looked at him and wished he was different. She could tell him that he looks so good in a tux it makes her ache, or that sometimes she wants him so bad she feels like her body is going to spontaneously combust.

But she dismisses all those options as soon as they occur to her. Her eagle scout is a romantic. And sometimes, he needs her to be one too. Which, full disclosure, is kind of terrifying. He stood in front of her last night and rattled off the most romantic fucking speech she’s ever heard and he didn’t pause, stutter, or struggle once. Not even once. He’s eloquent and sweet and romantic as shit.
and she’s just...not.

But she wants to be. Or at least she wants to try, because she knows how much it would mean to him. Over the course of their relationship, she’s done a lot of things that she’d normally refuse to do just because she knew he would love her for trying. Outdoor movies in the park. Country music. Shopping for scented candles. Those damn frittatas. That one time he wanted to have sex at—

The realization hits her like a lightning bolt, and she straightens.

“Do you remember the first time you ever made me a frittata?” she asks.

Will frowns at her, probably because that’s not a valid answer to his question.

“It was May,” she reminds him. “It was the third, maybe fourth time I stayed over at your place. And when I woke up, you already had it made. You insisted that I try it even though you knew I hated eggs. You said you knew I would like it.”

The memory seems to pull a faint smile across his lips. “I was right.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “And now it’s my favorite thing to eat for breakfast.”

He looks thrilled. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

She erases the remaining distance between them and lifts her arms to wrap around his neck.

“You’re like a frittata, Will,” she tells him quietly. “My whole life, I only ate certain things for breakfast. I thought those things were what I wanted. But then I found something new, something different, and I like it so much more than I liked all the other things.”

“How much more?” he asks almost shyly.

“Best I’ve ever had,” she says without hesitation. “And it’s the only thing I want for the rest of my life.”

His eyes are gleaming. She doesn’t think he’s actually going to cry, but he’s clearly touched by her words. If Jai were here, she thinks he’d tell her he’s proud of her again. She’s proud of herself.

“Wow,” Will murmurs. He sounds proud too. “That was romantic as hell.”

Frankie grins. “Well, it’s not wedding vow material, but it’s all right.”

He smiles. And then he leans forward and kisses her, soft and sweet and perfect, and her heart flutters in her chest.

When he leans back, he tangles his hand in her hair. “You know, I could get another tattoo for you if you wanted.”

Frankie lifts her eyebrows. “Oh yeah?”

“Sure. I could get your name on my ass.”

Frankie throws her head back and laughs, and Will looks so pleased with himself she has to rise up on her toes and kiss him again.
“What about a butterfly on your hip?” she suggests, dropping back down to her heels. “Or some flowers on your lower back?”

“Maybe some barbed wire around my arm.”

“You should get I love mom on your chest,” she says, tracing a heart over his chest with her index finger.

Will tilts his head. “My mom might actually like that.”

“Well then tell her it was my idea. She can thank me with a pecan pie.”

Will grins. He slips one of his hands beneath her leather jacket, and traces a pattern over the base of her spine.

“You know, Thanksgiving is next week,” he says quietly. “If we pull this mission off with no issues, we could fly to Indiana and celebrate with my family. Alex has been asking when you’ll be back. And my mom would be so thrilled to see you she’d probably make you your own pie. You wouldn’t even have to share with me.”

“Sounds great,” Frankie says honestly. “But I can’t. That’s me and Jai’s holiday.”

Will frowns. “What do you mean?”

Frankie takes a deep breath. She knew she was going to have to explain this to him sooner or later, so it isn’t hard to find the words.

“When we first started working together, our team didn’t click very well,” she starts. “We argued a lot. Mina said it was because we needed to form stronger bonds and establish a shared history. She had a lot of the same ideas as you as far as our team needing to be a family. The first holiday after we started working together was Thanksgiving. So she insisted that we celebrate it like a family would.”

Frankie pauses as memories of that first Thanksgiving float to the surface of her mind. Jai in the kitchen, cooking up a storm in an attempt to impress Mina. RJ devouring large quantities of foil-wrapped, miniature chocolate turkeys that Mina found somewhere. Nick sitting next to her on the couch, flirting with her over a glass of wine.

“The first year was fun,” she says. “The second year was better. But the third year was the best. Nick and I had just gotten married, though we hadn’t told anyone yet. RJ created some ridiculous video game he made us all play. Jai and Mina were together, and they were so happy it was disgusting.”

Frankie swallows around the sudden tightness of her throat and stares at the collar of Will’s jacket as she tries to keep her grief in check.

“Our first Thanksgiving without them, we were in Sydney,” she continues. “I figured Jai wouldn’t want to celebrate because it hurt too much. I didn’t sleep well, and I had an awful nightmare just before dawn, so I went for a run. When I came back, Jai was up and working on the turkey.”

She looks up at Will. “He does it to honor her, I think. It was important to her, so it’s important to him. We celebrate it every year. It’s our thing.”

Will smiles. “Then you should stay in New York and celebrate with him. I can fly to Huntington so I’m out of your way.”
“Actually,” Frankie says, shifting a little closer to him, “Jai wants you to join us this year.”

Will blinks at her in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. He wants the whole team to be there. He said that Mina would be glad we found a new family, and that she’d want us to share our tradition. I was going to ask everyone after the mission was over.”

“Everyone? Even Standish and Ray?”

Frankie smiles. “Yeah, even them. If you want to go to Huntington, though, I can—”

“I want to be with you,” he cuts her off, his palm sliding along the small of her back.

She loves when he says things like that. She knows how important his family is to him. She’d never make him choose. But she likes that he wants to be with her.

“We can spend Christmas with your family,” she offers.

Will’s eyes light up, and he gives her one of those megawatt smiles that can brighten even the darkest room. “I already have the perfect Christmas sweater picked out for you.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “Absolutely not. I did not agree to that.”

He grins at her. “You will.”

Will doesn’t say it to her, but he’s pleased that Frankie doesn’t rush out of the kitchen to talk to Nick.

After he tells her he already has her Christmas sweater picked out, she rolls her eyes and pulls out of his embrace. Then she steals his coffee. She always steals his coffee. He makes himself another mug without comment, and she gives him one of those smiles that makes him feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

He expects her to excuse herself after that and go upstairs. He knows she wants answers about why Ollermand and Blake happened to be in the same place as him and Bianca last night. But she seems to be in no hurry. They drink their coffee and eat the remaining cream puffs together, and she tells him what to expect from Thanksgiving with Jai. (Apparently he’s supposed to prepare for the best meal of his life. He’s already drooling.)

Once she’s finished her coffee, she puts her empty mug in the sink and sidles up to him. “Wanna come?” she asks, wrapping her arms around his waist and tipping her head back to look at him.

“To talk to Nick?” he asks in surprise.

She nods. His heart flutters in his chest. It always does when she goes out of her way to reassure him.

“Appreciate the offer,” he says, brushing his hand over her face. “But I think you’ll get more out of him if it’s just the two of you.”

She sighs. “I hate this.”

She rises up on her toes to kiss him. “I love you too.”

She lingers by his mouth for a minute, kissing him lazily around a smile, and then she exhales and extricates herself from his arms. “Okay. Wish me luck.”

“Go get ‘em, boo,” he murmurs.

She winks at him over her shoulder and then disappears.

Will stands motionlessly in the silent kitchen for a moment after she leaves. There’s a faint but familiar twinge of jealousy in his gut. He pushes it away. If Frankie wanted to be with Nick, she would’ve given in to him last night. She didn’t. Now it’s his turn to trust her, even when she’s alone in a bedroom with Nick and all his muscles.

Will sighs, annoyed with the awful images trying to flood his mind, and puts his mug under the Keurig. He texts his mom while he waits for another cup to brew. Call me when you wake up. Want to update you about Thanksgiving.

She calls him thirty seconds after his text goes through.

“Mom?” he answers. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course everything’s okay,” she says brightly. “You told me to call you, so I did.”

“It’s, like, four thirty in the morning there.”

“Your father and I are driving out to the ridge to watch the sunrise and have a breakfast picnic.”

“Good morning, son,” Will’s dad’s voice says in the background.

“Hi dad,” Will replies.

“It’s beautiful this time of year with all the leaves changing colors,” his mother continues. “You really need to take Frankie up here when you come home for Thanksgiving. It’s very romantic.”

Will winces. This is what he was afraid of. He never actually told his mom that he and Frankie were coming home for Thanksgiving. Between Jai’s doctor appointments and rehab, moving in together, and work, he and Frankie haven’t gotten a chance to sit down and discuss the holidays. Every time his mom brings up Thanksgiving, he sidesteps the question and says he isn’t sure because of work. But he’s not surprised she assumed they were coming. Chases are optimists.

“Yeah, about that,” he says. “We’re not going to make it out there this year.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then his mom says very softly, “Oh.”

“We’re spending it with her family,” he says quickly. “Which I thought was only fair since she’s coming home with me for Christmas.”

“Oh,” his mother says, her voice lifting excitedly. “She is?”

“She is. But listen, mom, we’re going to have to talk about some things before then.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you can’t be talking about how twins run in the family and how pretty she’d look in a wedding dress and all that. And you can’t be hanging mistletoe all over the house and demanding
that we kiss every time we walk under it either.”

“You have to kiss under mistletoe,” his mother insists. “It’s tradition. Does she think we’ll think less of her if she kisses you in front of us? Did you tell her that we don’t mind if you sleep in the same bedroom? Honestly, as long as we don’t hear you—”

“Mom,” Will cuts her off. He’s alone and his mother can’t see him, but he can feel his face flushing with embarrassment. “This isn’t what I meant when I said I wanted to talk about Christmas.”

“Oh don’t be silly, Will,” his mom laughs. “Your father and I are under no illusions that you two are saving yourselves for marriage. If you think I didn’t know that you snuck her out of Sophie’s party so you two could knock boots in the back of your father’s truck—”

“Mom!”

“All right, Lori,” Will’s dad says in the background, laughter threading through his voice. “I think what Will is trying to say is that for Frankie’s first Christmas we should respect that their relationship is still new.”

“New?” his mother repeats incredulously. “They live together, Rick. He’s been in love with her for two years. I knew as soon as I saw them together that they’d get married.”

“I’m sure you did,” his dad says soothingly. “But maybe we’ll wait until next year to tell her that, hm?”

“Well all right. But I’m telling you, they’re going to have twins. And they’re going to be the cutest babies in the world. Aren’t they, bug?”

“Definitely,” Will admits with a grin. “Listen, I have to go. You guys have fun on your picnic.”

“Are you being careful? You need to be careful.”

“I’m being careful, mom. I promise.”

“Tell Frankie we said hello and that we love her. And Susan too. Oh, and I’ll ship you some pie. You can’t have Thanksgiving without pecan pie.”

Will grins. “Thanks mom. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He hangs up the phone and then grabs his now-full coffee mug. He lifts it to his mouth and sips, and then finds himself smiling at the thought of Frankie’s face at an ultrasound appointment if they do end up having twins. Then he imagines the rest of it—painting a nursery, chasing babies through the brownstone when they start to crawl, watching Frankie read them books at night—and he feels like his heart is going to burst.

Now’s not the time to get lost in daydreams, though. They’ve got a lot to do tonight, and he needs to check on Standish and make sure Frankie didn’t do any permanent damage to his ear. Or his ego.

Will takes his coffee with him and wanders down the hallway. Frankie told him that she left Standish with his box of cereal in the dining room, but when Will swings open the dining room door, Standish is nowhere to be found.
He wanders out into the salon, but finds it empty as well. The terrace is similarly unoccupied. He decides to try Standish’s room, but runs into him as he’s leaving the salon.

The younger agent appears to have showered and changed, though he still looks a little pale. “Will,” he greets. “I was just looking for you.” He casts a worried glance over Will’s shoulder. “Where’s your violent other half?”

“Upstairs,” Will replies. “You okay?”

Standish rubs his ear with a frown. “Do ears bruise?”

Will grins. “I think you’re going to find out.”

“You didn’t even pretend to help me,” Standish grumbles.

Will shrugs. “Gotta pick your battles.”

“For future reference, you should pick the ones where I’m being violently assaulted.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Standish narrows his eyes. “Liar. You’re so whipped. I’m going to have to call Omega and tell him my spy parents are abusive just to get some justice for my earlobe.”

Will frowns. “Who?”

“Omega,” Standish repeats. “You know, international vigilante who wears an Omega watch and just so happens to—”

“Standish,” Will cuts him off. “We’ve talked about this. Omega isn’t real.”

“He is too real.”

“He’s not.”

“He was on the news.”

“So?” Will says with a shrug. “Lots of myths have made the news. Bigfoot. The Loch Ness Monster. Omega isn’t real. It’s just a conspiracy theory.”

“That’s what people say about the Illuminati.”

“Because the Illuminati aren’t real either.”

Standish snorts. “They’re definitely real. And I’m going to prove it to you by asking them and Omega to join forces and bruise Frankie’s ear so she knows how bad that shit hurt.”

Will smiles. “Look, Standish, I know it’s fun for you to provoke Frankie and push her buttons. And usually I don’t mind when you do it. She likes it just as much as you do. It’s your weird way of being affectionate with each other.”

“Sure as hell doesn’t feel affectionate,” Standish mutters.

“But things are different on this mission,” Will continues. “Working with Nick is hard for her. And what we’re doing is dangerous. She worries about you a lot more than you realize. So maybe, just until we leave Venice, you could try not to say anything that you know is going to piss her off?”
Especially tonight when it’s just the three of you in the field.”

Standish nods. “Yeah. I can do that.” He shifts awkwardly from one foot to the other and rubs the back of his neck. “Also, I uh...I wanted to apologize.”

Will frowns. “For what?”

“I know it probably seemed like I thought Nick was cool last night,” he says. “But I didn’t. I don’t think he’s cool. Definitely not cooler than you. I mean, it’s kind of badass that he can knock people out with one punch, and it was kind of fun to hear stories about some of his old missions with Frankie, but I know he’s a dick. A giant dick. I know he’d kill all of us if it wasn’t for Frankie. So I’m sorry. If I hurt your feelings, I mean.”

Will feels his eyes start to warm. “Thank you, Standish. I appreciate that.”

Standish looks relieved. “Just to be clear, I think you’re way sexier than him too.”

Will blinks at him in surprise.

“Not like that,” Standish says quickly. “Not for me. I mean for Frankie.”

Will tilts his head.

“Not that I imagine you and Frankie having sex,” Standish blurts out. “I definitely do not. That is...that is so gross I can’t even find the words. Y’all are nasty.”

Will frowns. “This is getting weird.”

“I just meant I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Standish says. “Frankie seems pretty eager to have sex with you even though Nick has muscles in places I didn’t know there were muscles. And obviously she doesn’t care if Nick knows y’all got nasty seeing as she left that giant ass hickey on your neck—”

“All right,” Will says. “Let’s just move on.”

“Okay,” Standish says. He holds his arms out. “Hug?”

Will sets his coffee mug down on a nearby shelf and holds his arms out. “Get in here, kiddo.”

Standish grins and buries himself in Will’s arms.

“You give good hugs,” he says, his voice muffled by Will’s chest.

Will pats him on the back. “Yeah. I know.”

“Aww, look at you two,” Susan’s voice says.

Will looks up and sees her walking down the hallway with a broad smile on her face. He grins at her. “You want to join?”

“I’m offended you’d even ask,” she says before wrapping her arms around Standish so that he’s sandwiched between them. Will grins and hugs them both tightly. Standish sighs contentedly in his arms.

When Susan straightens, she pats Standish on the back. “Did you do what we discussed?”
“Yes,” Standish says, pulling away from Will.

“To both?” Susan asks, arching an eyebrow.

Standish frowns. “Just this one.”

“Well go on,” she says, tipping her head toward the hallway. “Get moving. He’s in your room.”

Standish sighs and trudges obediently down the hallway.

Will watches him go with a frown and then looks at Susan. “What was that about?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” she says. She narrows her eyes at him. “We have some catching up to do. I haven’t heard about how last night went.”


Susan grins. “I know that look. Somebody got lucky.”

“Very lucky,” Will murmurs as a memory of what happened last night in the shower materializes.

Susan’s grin widens. “I’m going to make some coffee, and then you’re going to spill.”

Will matches her grin. “Deal.”
Hey guys. I know things are rough right now for a lot of y'all, so hang in there and stay safe. I'm sending good vibes your way.

Also, two notes:

1) This chapter is long. Next week is shaping up to be long too. Yikes.

2) In this chapter and the next few, some of the places and things that are mentioned are real. But some of them are only loosely based on real things, and others are just the product of my imagination. So don't be confused if you Google something and it ain't real. And remember—there are no catacombs in Venice.

Frankie isn’t sure what she was expecting to see when she knocked on Nick’s bedroom door to talk about Ollerman, but she sure as hell wasn’t expecting him to be in nothing but a towel.

In retrospect, she probably should have expected that.

“Hey,” he greets after he swings the door open.

He’s giving her that smile that makes women swoon. She forces herself to keep her eyes on his face and not on the droplets of water that are currently carving wet trails down the indentations of his abs.

She gives him a look. “I thought I told you to put some clothes on?”

“Had to shower first,” he says with a wink.

He turns away from her and walks back into his bedroom. His back is a ridiculous looking V that’s covered in tattoos and scars that seem to move as his muscles flex. She knows what those muscles feel like beneath her hands. The memory makes her purse her lips in annoyance. She steps into the room but doesn’t close the door.

“I’m guessing Chase told you he saw Ollerman and Blake on the Rialto,” Nick says over his shoulder.

“Yeah,” she confirms. She crosses her arms over her chest. “Quite a coincidence that he’s here when we are.”

Nick pauses in the doorway of the bathroom and turns to look at her. “You think I’d sell you out?”

“I think you’d sell them out.”

He furrows his eyebrows. “The last time I hurt people you cared about, I lost you. I don’t make the same mistakes twice. Why would I risk losing you again?”

“I don’t know,” Frankie says with a shrug. “Why’d you order a hit on Jai in Monte Carlo?”
He shakes his head. “I didn’t. I told you, that wasn’t me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He studies her for a long moment, his eyes flickering over her face. She stares back at him. He runs a hand through his hair. It’s not much longer than Will’s, but it’s fuller. It’ll wave a little as it dries. She used to love that. She used to wonder if her kids would have his dark hair. Now she wonders if they’ll be as blond as Will is in the baby pictures hanging on the walls of his parents’ house.

“You remember that guy we interrogated in Cairo?” Nick asks. “The one we had two hours to break before that terrorist attack?”

She remembers. She knows she should say yes because she’s supposed to be leading him on, but she hates admitting that she remembers just as much of their past as he does. So she lies.

“No.”

He sees right through her. “Yes you do.”

“Why does it matter, Nick?”

He crosses the room, a look of determination on his face, and she takes a step back toward the hallway. She’s not fast enough. He catches her hand. He lifts it to his neck and presses the pads of her fingers against the pulsepoint beneath his jaw. His hand feels huge around hers.

“Nobody does this better than you, baby,” he murmurs. “Human lie detector, remember?”

It’s what RJ used to call her and Mina. The human lie detectors. Frankie presses her lips together and doesn’t respond. She can feel Nick’s heart beating beneath her fingertips, steady and even.

“I didn’t tell Ollerman to kill Jai,” he says. “I told him how important Jai was to your team. I was trying to get him to understand that I knew your team better than he did, so it was in his best interest to let me decide how to deal with you. I didn’t expect him to take what I said and use it against you. I put Jai in the crosshairs, and he got hurt, and I’m sorry. But I didn’t do it on purpose. And I made sure it won’t happen again.”

His heart rate hasn’t changed. It’s steady. He’s holding her gaze unflinchingly and blinking normally. He didn’t pause during his explanation. He’s not swallowing more than usual, and he’s not fidgeting. If it was anybody else, she’d say he was telling the truth. But it’s not anybody else. It’s Nick. And even if he’s telling the truth now, it doesn’t change their history.

“You lied to me every second we were together, Nick,” she says, pulling her hand away from his neck. “I might be the human lie detector, but I didn’t see through you. I don’t make the same mistakes twice either. I don’t believe you.”

She can see the hurt in his eyes. She ignores it and takes a step away from him.

“Go put some clothes on or I’m leaving.”

He stares at her for a second, looking more like a kicked puppy than the extremely capable spy she knows, but then he turns away from her and heads toward the bathroom. When he’s out of sight, Frankie closes her eyes and exhales a deep breath. She can’t wait for this mission to be over. She just wants to go home and sit on the couch with Will and watch one of those stupid movies he loves while he plays with her hair.
Nick isn’t gone long. When he comes back out, he’s lost the towel but is wearing Calvin Klein boxer briefs and nothing else. Which, honestly, is even worse than the towel.

“For fuck’s sake, Nick,” she sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“My jeans are right there,” he says, gesturing at his bed with a hint of a smirk.

Frankie rolls her eyes and wanders toward the balcony so she won’t have to watch him pull his pants on. She already has plenty of memories of watching him get dressed in the morning. She doesn’t need another one.

“Will said Ollerman told you he stopped by unannounced for a check-in with Blake,” she says, staring out at the view of Venice from the balcony doors.


“I don’t buy it.”

“Neither did I. So I did some digging.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I used RJ’s program to hack into all of Ollerman’s communications over the last week. Like I told your boyfriend, he’s supposed to be in Santorini. He’s had a ridiculously expensive villa booked for him and his girlfriend for weeks. She’s there now, waiting for him and pissed as hell that he left her there. She spent an hour on the phone yesterday ranting to her sister about it.”

“Why’d he leave her?”

“Because the agency apprehended The Trust’s most prolific operative in Zurich yesterday morning.”

“What?” Frankie says, turning around in shock.

Nick’s finally got his jeans on and fastened, but they’re sitting low on his hips and she can still see the thick waistband of his briefs above the line of his jeans.

“Blake is paranoid,” he tells her. “He doesn’t leave Venice. So when he needs something done outside the city limits, he has an operative who does it for him. And that operative is currently in the custody of the CIA at a blacksite in Nuremberg.”

Frankie shakes her head. “That’s impossible. Casey would have called me.”

“Casey doesn’t know the guy he’s got is affiliated with The Trust,” Nick replies. “All he knows is that two of his agents apprehended a guy who was trying to assassinate an American diplomat. Scott Pierce, thanks to his job at Interpol, was the one who found out. He called Ollerman. Ollerman called Blake. And because Blake is paranoid and won’t leave Venice, they met here last night to discuss their next move.”

“Pierce was here?” Frankie says. “In Venice?”

“Yep,” Nick says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “All three legs of the stool in one place. They had dinner at Osteria Bancogiro. Sat down at their table a little after seven, and got up a little after ten. Pierce took a water taxi back to his hotel. Ollerman and Blake walked back to Blake’s palazzo for the night. Ollerman got on a private plane about an hour ago and is in the air, headed for
Frankie opens her mouth, but Nick beats her to it.

“Yes,” he says with a smile. “I can prove it.”

He walks across the room in the direction of a desk that’s sitting next to the balcony doors. He bends forward and taps an iPad to life. Frankie walks toward him but stops a respectable distance away. Nick gazes at the iPad screen, his fingers moving quickly as he taps and types and taps again, and then he straightens and hands the iPad to Frankie. He steps closer to her, his bare chest close to her arm, and even though she wants to shove him away she can’t because he needs to be close enough to touch the screen.

“Oh’s Ollerman landing in Venice yesterday afternoon while you and I were in Naples,” he says, gesturing at a video of Ollerman disembarking a private jet.

“He went straight to Blake’s palazzo, which we know based on this footage of him walking through the front gate.”

Nick pulls up another feed, and sure enough, there’s Ollerman walking through the front gate of Blake’s stunning palazzo. Nick flicks his finger and brings up another video.

“Oh’s Pierce arriving three hours later, though he flew coach instead of private.”

Frankie watches Scott Pierce walk through the Venice airport with a bag slung over his shoulder and his phone to his ear.

“He checked into his hotel, then went straight to the restaurant. The other two met him there. Here’s the three of them at dinner.”

Nick pulls up an additional feed and presses the fast forward button, and Frankie watches as the clock in the bottom right corner runs forward quickly. The three men are talking animatedly and at warp speed at a table in a dim restaurant with wooden floors and vaulted brick ceilings. Nick hits play after a few seconds, and Frankie watches as the speed returns to normal and the three men rise from the table. The timestamp says it’s a quarter after ten.

“Oh they are leaving,” Nick narrates. “That’s Pierce getting on a water taxi. And then…” He pulls up what appears to be a map of Venice. “That little red dot is Ollerman’s phone. You can see it moving, leaving the restaurant to walk in the direction of the Rialto because Blake’s palazzo is on the other side of the canal, and then...boom. Here’s his cell phone crossing the bridge at the exact same moment this happens.”

He flicks his wrist, and up pops the video of Will lunging toward Bianca to kiss her. Jealousy flares in Frankie’s chest. She pushes it away. Nick lets the video play a little longer than he needs to, and then pulls up another one. In it, Ollerman is boarding another private plane.

“Oh’s him boarding the plane this morning. And here,” he pulls up what appears to be a map of Europe with a red dot hovering over the Adriatic Sea, “is his current phone signal at 30,000 feet.”

Frankie pushes Nick’s hand out of the way. She can see him watching her out of the corner of her eye, but she ignores him. She taps back through all the feeds he pulled up and watches them all again, taking note of timestamps and landmarks and details.

“Oh other than me and Jai, nobody knows how RJ’s program works better than you,” Nick says quietly. “Which means you know there’s no way I could have doctored all this. This footage is
real, and I’m telling the truth. Ollerman was in Venice last night, but it wasn’t a set up. It was just how things worked out. And now he’s gone. Your team is safe.”

Frankie looks up at him. “Why didn’t they invite you to the meeting?”

“Because I’m not part of The Trust,” he says with a smile. “I’m just the funder. I get a say in how they spend my money, but I don’t get a say in how they handle crises. Also, Blake and Pierce have no idea I’m involved. Ollerman likes to keep things separate the same way Clarke did. It prevents coups.”

“What are they going to do about the operative in custody?”

“An inside man is giving him a cyanide capsule any minute now. Which is good news for him, because about an hour ago Casey told the head of the Nuremberg blacksite that if they don’t break him by the end of today, he’s going to call you in. And you’ve never met an operative you couldn’t break.”

There’s a hint of pride in his voice. Frankie looks down at the iPad again. She stares at the little red dot hovering over the blue image of the Adriatic Sea and feels frustration well up in her chest.

“We could have gotten all three of them last night,” she says. “They were right under our noses.”

“They were under our noses,” Nick agrees. “But we couldn’t have gotten them.”

“Why not?”

“Nothing has changed, Frankie. You could have killed them all, but someone would have filled the vacuum. You could have arrested them all, but you have no grounds to hold Blake or Pierce. We have no proof yet. Ollerman would’ve broken out in a month just like he did last time. Our best bet is to stick to the plan.”

Frankie sighs. He’s right. But the fact that the three leaders of The Trust were all in the same city as her last night and she didn’t get to make any of them bleed feels infuriating.

Nick rubs his hand gently over her back. “Just be patient, baby. I’ll make sure you get them. I promise.”

“And then what?” she asks, looking up at him. “You’re just going to ride off into the sunset?”

He smiles. “I’m planning to ride off into the sunset with you.”

“You really still believe that after last night?”

“I believe what you told me the day you married me. You promised me forever, baby. And I’m going to hold you to it.”

Frankie sighs. “Things changed, Nick. You changed them.”

“And I’m going to change them back.”

He shifts a little closer to her, and her eyes briefly drop to the small likeness of the Rialto beneath his collarbone.

“I know you don’t trust me,” he says. “I know you haven’t forgiven me yet. But you will. I’m not a boy scout, but I’m just as good as him.”
“So if you can’t get Will to cheat on me, you’re just going to become him?” Frankie asks. “That’s your plan?”

Nick shakes his head. “I started this before you even met him.”

“Started what? What are you talking about?”

He smiles. “Can’t put all my cards on the table just yet.”

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Go put a shirt on,” she says, pushing his shoulder. “We need to explain the plan to Will and nobody wants you half naked.”

“We both know that’s a lie,” he says with a wink. He nods at the iPad. “You going to give that back to me?”

“Apparently you have trouble following directions, so I’m going to go through it until you’re fully clothed.”

He smirks. “And I’m going to let you. You know why?”

“Because there’s nothing on here you don’t want me to see?”

“Because I trust you,” he corrects. “In case you’re curious, Ollerman is saved in my contacts as AOT.”

He winks again, and then turns away from her and heads toward his walk-in closet.

Frankie rolls her eyes and looks down at the iPad. RJ’s program is open. There are about a million things she could search for or do, but none of them would destroy the dead man’s switch Nick has in place, and that’s all she really cares about. She might as well take advantage of the opportunity to see what else he’s got on here, though she suspects it’s nothing since he doesn’t seem worried about her snooping.

She flicks her finger and brings up the home screen. She opens his texts, expecting to find the app blank, but she’s surprised to find that the iPad is linked to his phone. She can see every text he’s sent, including one he sent to her yesterday at the Naples airport.

Apparently he wasn’t kidding about trusting her.

A quick skim reveals nothing worthy of suspicion. He doesn’t text very many people. There are no messages from Ollerman. His phone log isn’t much different. He’s only made two phone calls in the last twenty-four hours—one yesterday afternoon that she knows was to his wetsuit guy in Naples, and another late last night to Ollerman. That must have been when he called Ollerman in front of Will.

She dismisses his call log, and goes for his email. Once again, she’s surprised to find that he’s got a dozen different personal accounts on the iPad. One of them is labeled RAF, and her curiosity is piqued. She met some of his military buddies from the RAF back when they were together. She didn’t realize they were still in touch. She wonders how he explained his miraculous return from the dead considering most of them were at his funeral. She’s getting ready to open the inbox when her eye catches on a different email account labeled Foundation.

It’s a weird name, so she presses it. A notification box pops up and asks for a password. Frankie bites her lip and thinks it over, and then types in Rialto. The box blinks and tells her that’s incorrect. She tries their wedding anniversary next. That’s not correct either, and an alert pops up
that says she’ll be locked out with one more wrong answer. She glances up at the closet, but Nick is still out of sight. She’s got nothing to lose. So she hazards one more guess and types in her full first name.

It works.

An inbox appears on the screen. After she gets over the shock of guessing the correct password, she skims the contents. She immediately notices that the name Sebastian Tauren comes up repeatedly. The subject lines of his emails are weird. They say things like grant application and fundraiser and funding request. She opens an email chain titled Meeting with UNHCR reps. The initial message is from Tauren, and it’s brief.

*Humanitarian crisis in Burkina Faso is of deepest concern. Requesting immediate relief funds.*

Frankie scrolls down and finds a similarly brief response. *How much?*

$2 million, Tauren’s reply says.

Based on the timestamp, the response to the request was almost immediate. It’s only one word. *Done.*

Frankie stares at the email exchange, completely baffled. Tauren’s electronic signature says he’s the chief executive officer of the Smith Foundation. And the replies to his emails have an electronic signature that simply reads *Jack Smith.* But she’s never heard of the Smith Foundation or Jack Smith. So why the hell does Nick have access to Jack Smith’s emails on his iPad?

There’s a revelation fluttering just beyond her grasp, something that feels not just important but urgent, but she can’t reach it. It’s like her vision has been draped in white, and even though she can see a dark shape ahead of her, she can’t seem to push through enough of the whiteness to figure out what it is.

She dismisses the nagging feeling that she’s missing something and refocuses on the inbox. She scans the most recent emails, looking for another subject line that might catch her eye. She stops cold when she sees a name she recognizes.

Eitan Adelman.

RJ’s youngest brother.

Frankie feels like she’s been punched in the gut. The subject of the email says *You’re Invited!* She presses the screen with a trembling hand, and an email appears.

*Dear Mr. Smith,*

*I am writing to offer my sincerest gratitude for your generosity. I can’t begin to explain what your foundation has meant to my family. You have lifted a great burden off the shoulders of my parents, and my brothers and I are eternally grateful for God’s auspicious timing in bringing you into our lives.*

*Mr. Tauren informed me that you’ve requested to be kept in the loop on how my studies at Harvard are progressing. With that thought in mind, I would like to formally invite you to campus on Monday, December 9th at 2:00 pm. I will be presenting on the applications of machine learning in clinical medicine alongside one of my esteemed professors. It would be an honor to have you in attendance. I am eager to express my gratitude to you in person, and to share with you what your financial assistance has empowered me to accomplish.*
Please say you’ll come.

Sincerely,

Eitan Adelman

The response is short, but polite.

Eitan,

I am thrilled to hear you are doing so well. I would very much like to attend your presentation, but I’m afraid I’ll be out of the country on December 9th. Please do let me know how it goes, and if I or my foundation can be of further assistance in your studies.

I wish you the best of luck.

Sincerely,

J. Smith

Frankie stares at the reply. That nagging feeling is back, but this time she thinks she knows what it is. Nick isn’t a tech guy like Standish. He knows far more than the average person, but he’s not a hacker by trade. RJ’s program is what gives him the ability to hack into whatever he wants. And if Nick was hacking into Jack Smith’s emails, they’d be open in the program. But the emails aren’t open in the program. They’re on Nick’s iPad with all his other personal email accounts.

A memory suddenly floats to the surface of her mind. A hotel room in Miami. Nick in a suit, his hands sliding along her hips as he whispered I like this dress, but I’d like it better on the floor. His chest hard beneath her hands as she pushed him gently. Quit feeling me up and focus, Nick. We need cover names. Nick’s green eyes bright, and his smile sexy as hell. I’ll be Jack Smith. You be my wife Jill.

Frankie’s heart stops in her chest.

“How’s this one?” Nick’s voice asks. “You’ve always liked me in blue.”

Frankie looks up from the iPad. Nick is standing on the other side of the room in the doorway of the walk-in closet. His arms are out, and he’s wearing a light blue short-sleeve shirt.

His eyes flicker over her face, and he tilts his head. “You okay, baby?”

“Why are you getting emails from RJ’s brother?”

The smile freezes on Nick’s face. He glances down at the iPad in her hand, and then back up into her eyes. He drops his hands.

“That inbox has a password,” he says with furrowed eyebrows.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out.”
“How—”

“You have it tattooed on your fucking finger, Nick.”

He looks taken aback. She stares at him. He holds her gaze for a second, and then he closes his eyes and clenches his jaw the way he does when he’s been caught. She studies him, trying to figure out if it’s just an act, but she already knows the answer. It’s not. He didn’t expect her to find what she did in such a short amount of time.

“I’m not going to ask you again,” she says. She tightens her grip on the iPad because her hands are shaking. “Why is Eitan emailing you?”

Nick pushes a hand through his hair and looks up at her. “Because I’m paying for him to go to med school.”

The world seems to stop on its axis. Frankie stares at him, completely floored. She didn’t know what she expected to hear, but it sure as hell wasn’t that. Her ears are ringing. Her mouth feels dry. She feels suddenly dizzy.

“What?” she breathes.

“RJ’s parents don’t have a lot of money,” Nick says, sliding his hands into his pockets. “So I paid off their house. I paid for his brothers to go to college. And then I paid for Eitan to go to med school.” He smiles, and it’s so soft and proud that Frankie’s heart flips in her chest. “He’s at Harvard. He’s going to be a surgeon. He’s fucking brilliant.”

Frankie moves her mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. It takes her a second to find her voice again.

“What?” she breathes.

“‘The Smith Foundation?’”

“‘Yes.’”

“‘Who’s Jack Smith?’”

Nick’s eyes flicker over her face, and if she didn’t know any better she’d think he looked nervous.

“‘Me,’” he says softly.

Frankie stares at him. “You…?”

She can’t seem to find the right words to finish her sentence. Maybe because she can’t seem to figure out what the hell she’s feeling. It’s like there’s an emotional hurricane roaring through her chest, and it’s moving so fast she can’t single anything out. She can barely breathe.

She sets the iPad down on the desk with trembling hands and turns away from him. She paces toward the balcony doors. She expects Nick to take advantage of her silence, to invade her space and start to explain, but the room stays silent and he doesn’t move any closer. It’s something Will would do, and the similarity leaves her unsettled and sends her brain even further into overdrive. She stares out at the canal, trying to focus on her breathing. She can feel panic welling up in her chest, its icy fingers wrapping around her throat. She closes her eyes and clenches her jaw and
conjures up a memory of Jai’s voice.

*Breathe, Francesca. Breathe.*

It takes her some time. Nick doesn’t interrupt. After a long moment, she turns around. Nick is watching her with an apprehensive look on his face, as if her next words have the power to make or break his entire existence. She thinks they probably do.

“Is this what you meant last night when you said you were trying?” she asks him softly. “This is what you started?”

“It’s part of what I started.”

Frankie’s heart skips a beat. “There’s more?”

“It’s complicated.”

“So uncomplicate it.”

“I can’t,” he says, stepping toward her. “You’re not ready to hear it all yet.”

“Not ready?” she repeats. “What the fuck, Nick.”

“Let me take you to dinner after this mission,” he says, holding her gaze. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I’ll answer every question you have. All my cards on the table, baby. I promise.”

“No,” she says immediately. “I’m with Will. I’m not going on a date with you.”

He smiles.

“What the hell are you smiling at?”

His smile deepens. “I like when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“That thing where you say you don’t want to do something, but all your nonverbal cues contradict you.”

Frankie clenches her jaw. Nick crosses the room to stand in front of her. She stiffens, but there’s nowhere for her to go. He’s between her and the hallway, and the balcony doors are closed behind her.

He lifts his hand to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “You did it last night too.”

“You and I remember last night very differently,” she says, pushing his hand away. “You set me up and it didn’t work. I chose him. You lost.”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t lose.”

“Nick—”

“What’d you do last night, Francesca?” he cuts her off gently. “Push me away? Fuck someone else? You’ve been doing that for years. It doesn’t mean you don’t love me.”
I don’t love you, she wants to say. And she’s opening her mouth to say it, but then she remembers—she’s supposed to be leading him on. She presses her lips together and doesn’t say anything.

He steps closer to her. “You think because you love him that everything has changed,” he says softly. “But he hasn’t changed anything.”

He reaches out and grabs her hand, and then he smooths her palm along his right forearm where the inked words of Emily Bronte twist up his arm. Frankie was with him when he got this tattoo. She used to trace the letters with her finger when they watched Tottenham games together and he insisted on holding her close because he said she was good luck.

“We’re not the seasons, baby,” he murmurs. “We’re the rocks. You’re the beautiful heiress with the world at her feet, and I’m the street rat covered in scars, and we fell in love the second we saw each other. It doesn’t matter how much time passes or how much the world changes or who else shows up. This thing between me and you is forever. Whatever we’re made of, it’s the same. I don’t exist without you. And you don’t exist without me.”

The words hang in the air. His skin is warm beneath her palm. His face is close to hers, his green eyes bright in the morning sun. His expression is just as sincere as it was when he woke her in the middle of the night and asked her to marry him the next day. When she asked him if he was sure, he said the same thing he said just now—almost exactly word for word—and for a second, she feels like she’s right back in that bed again.

“Francesca,” Jai’s voice calls.

Frankie jolts out of her memory and glances at the door. Jai is standing framed in the doorway with two long cardboard tubes in his hand and a troubled look on his face.

“Jai,” she greets. She pulls her hand away from Nick’s arm and takes a step back. “Ready?”

“Yes,” he confirms, glancing between her and Nick with a frown.

Frankie brushes past Nick and heads for the door without saying anything to him.

“Impeccable timing as always, Jai,” Nick mutters as she passes.


“Frankie likes it,” Nick says petulantly.

“No I don’t,” Frankie says as she grabs Jai’s elbow and tugs him toward the stairs.

Will is standing by the doors to the terrace with Susan and Standish, laughing at something Standish said, when Frankie and Jai walk into the salon.

Will knows immediately that something is wrong.

Frankie’s hand is curled around Jai’s elbow. Her head is bent forward, her face turned toward Jai, and she must be whispering because Will can’t hear her voice. Jai has an unmistakably alarmed look on his face. They pause just inside the threshold of the room. Neither of them glance at the rest of the team. Susan shoots Will a look, and concern flickers in Will’s chest.

About a minute later, Nick appears. He’s in a short sleeve shirt that shows off his tattoos, and it’s a shade of burgundy that brings out his eyes. He’s watching Frankie. Frankie glances at him. Their
gaze holds, and then she releases Jai’s elbow and walks across the salon to stand next to Will.

Will is surprised when she folds herself into his side and puts her arm around his waist. He drapes his arm around her shoulders, and then leans forward and presses a kiss to her temple just because he can.

“Okay?” he asks quietly.

“I am now,” she answers as her hand slides into his back pocket. She looks across the room at Jai. “Ready?”

“Dining room would be better,” Jai replies.

Frankie pulls her hand out of Will’s pocket and weaves her fingers through his instead. “Dining room it is.”

She leads him toward the dining room by the hand, and the rest of the team files down the corridor after them. When they get in the room, Jai clears his throat and walks toward the table. He sets two long cardboard tubes on a chair, uncaps one of the tubes, and then pulls a large, rolled sheet of paper out. He opens it on the dining table with a flourish, using two paperweights he seems to pull out of nowhere to keep the ends from rolling up, and then straightens.

He looks at Will. “Bianca only told you a fraction of what she did for Blake.”

Will pretends to look surprised even though he’s not. Last night, Bianca told him everything that Jai is about to tell him now. But Nick can’t know that. It’ll put Bianca in danger. So Will has to act like he’s hearing all this for the first time, and he needs it to be convincing.

“What do you mean?” he asks, furrowing his eyebrows.

“She explained the palazzo’s security system in detail, but when you asked her about the catacombs, she brushed you off,” Jai answers. “She said it was the usual. But what she’s got down there is anything but the usual.” He frowns. “But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s start with finding our entry point. This is a map of the catacombs.”

He gestures at the large printed map that’s now spread over the table. Everyone in the room crowds closer. Will is especially curious, since he didn’t get much time to study it when Bianca showed it to him yesterday.

“The orange lines indicate the boundary walls of Blake’s palazzo,” Jai continues. “The green lines are the actual palazzo itself. As you can see, the catacombs extend far beyond the palazzo grounds. That’s good news for us, as it will give us a chance to get down into the tunnels that lead to the server room without breaking into the palazzo.”

“How many entrances are there?” Will asks.

“Four that we know of,” Jai replies. “The first is on the grounds of Blake’s palazzo. Obviously, that’s a no go. The second best option is here.” He points to a spot on the map. “The Basilica dei Santi Pietro e Giovanni.”

“That’s a mouthful,” Standish mutters.

“It’s one of the largest and most famous churches in the city,” Nick says. “World-renowned for its beauty and architecture, but also for its history. Twenty-five doges are buried there, and six of them are buried in an elaborate crypt. The crypt is famous because it’s permanently flooded with about
two feet of water. The water acts as a sort of mirror. Photographers come from all over the world to take pictures.”

“You should look at some pictures later, Will,” Susan says. “It’s gorgeous.”

Jai nods in agreement. He reaches into the second cardboard tube and pulls out a smaller sheet of paper. He spreads it out over the table.

“This is the floor plan for the church. Here’s the crypt which, obviously, given its name, is underground. The six tombs are here. But in this corner is an entrance that leads into the catacombs. This entrance is the closest to the server room and it’s also the driest route to get there. We could follow this pathway to and from the server room and never encounter more than two feet of standing water.”

“Less than two feet of water is good,” Standish says. “I vote we break into the church and use that entrance.”

“We can’t,” Jai says.

Standish frowns. “Why not?”

Jai shoots Standish a look. “We discussed this last night. I’m sure if you hadn’t indulged in so much wine you’d remember.”

“Okay, Mr. Judgmental,” Standish says. “Next time you drink too much bourbon Imma put you on blast. See how you like it.”

Jai looks unbothered. Probably because he’s never, not even once, been even slightly drunk in front of any of them.

“All three of the entrances outside the palazzo have been walled over,” Susan pipes up, probably in an effort to smooth things over before Jai and Standish descend into bickering. “In order to get to them, we’ll need to demolish part of a wall.”

“Which Jai would normally love to do,” Frankie says, smiling at her best friend. “But that church just so happens to be hosting a very swanky fundraiser tonight that’s raising money for acqua alta damage. A who’s who of wealthy, famous, and powerful people are going to be crawling all over the building until around midnight, and it’s going to be extremely difficult to get in and out unnoticed. Let alone set off some explosives.”

“Particularly since Matthew Blake is going to be in attendance,” Jai adds.

“Blake is going to the fundraiser?” Will asks in surprise. “Why?”

Nick shrugs. “He has to. He’s one of Venice’s richest citizens, and his dad was a famous philanthropist. He has to keep up appearances so that he doesn’t draw any attention to himself. People would notice if he didn’t go to a fundraiser in his own backyard.”

“The fundraiser means we can’t get in through the church,” Frankie continues. “But it works in our favor that Blake will be there. His palazzo and the server room are extremely secure, but they’re slightly less secure when he’s not home.”

Will frowns. “Wouldn’t there be more security when he’s gone?”

“Bianca’s system is the same all the time,” Frankie clarifies. “It’s Blake’s security detail that’s the
issue. He’s got a security team with him twenty-four seven. If something goes wrong in the catacombs while Blake’s gone, say Standish accidentally trips an alarm or something—"

“Hey,” Standish says, clearly offended.

“Then there’s a team on standby to respond,” Frankie continues, ignoring him. “But it’s a small team and Nick and I could easily incapacitate them. If it goes wrong when Blake is in the house, though, he’s going to send his team down. And they’re all former special forces.”

“Not the kind of guys you fuck with,” Nick says. “Since they’ll be at the church, we shouldn’t be.”

“So the church is out,” Will says. “What’s left?”

Jai shoves the map of the church crypt aside. “There are two other entrances.” He taps his index finger on the map of the catacombs. “This one is the next closest, but some of the tunnels we would have to follow to get to the server room are completely flooded. Also, the exterior entrance is located in the basement of a bank.”

“Not impossible, but extremely difficult,” Frankie says. “And risky.”

Jai nods. “That leaves this entrance right here.”

Will squints at the map. “The Ruzzini Palace Hotel?”

“Yes,” Jai says with another nod. “It’s on the bottom floor.” He pulls out another sheet from one of his tubes and spreads it over the table. “Here’s the hotel floor plan. The entrance is inside this boiler room.”

“It’s been walled over, just like in the church,” Frankie says. “So Jai will need to blast us an entry hole.” She smiles. “And you’ll get to help.”

Will frowns. “Jai’s going to be in the field?”

“I don’t have a choice,” Jai replies. “Everyone else will have jobs to do, and I’m the explosives expert. And with you there to watch my back, I won’t need to throw any punches should someone come along.”

Will glances at Frankie because he knows she’s been worried about Jai’s recovery. He can see the concern in her eyes, but she nods at him. He wonders if she argued with Jai about it before giving in. He knows what it means that she’s trusting him to watch Jai’s back.

“Okay,” Will agrees. “What’s the plan?”

“Wait, I remember this part,” Standish says, straightening. “At five o’clock—”

“Six o’clock,” Jai corrects.

“Six o’clock,” Standish adjusts, “I’m going to—”

“No,” Jai cuts him off. “At six o’clock Susan is going to enter the Ruzzini. Unless you’d like to wear a skirt and pretend to be a maid?”

Standish crinkles his nose. “Hard pass.”

“Good, cause nobody needs to see that,” Frankie mutters.
Standish glares at her. Frankie grins at him.

Jai taps the map of the hotel. “The boiler room is located next to the laundry room, so Susan should be able to sneak down there without drawing any attention. Instead of going into the laundry room, though, she’s going to go into the boiler room. And then she’s going to break their HVAC system.”

Susan grins. “Whoops.”

“The hotel will call for repairs,” Jai says. “Their call will be rerouted to us thanks to Standish.”

“E-Z HVAC repairs, how can I help you?” Standish says in a high-pitched voice, his hand at his ear and his thumb and pinky finger out as if he’s talking on the phone.

“You sure you don’t want to wear a skirt?” Susan asks.

Nick snorts. Standish glares.

“You and I will be playing repairmen,” Jai tells Will. “Once we arrive, we will survey the damage and warn the hotel that repairs may make a considerable amount of noise and take a considerable amount of time. We will also give them a heads up that they could be dangerous, and all staff and guests will need to stay off the floor where we’re working.”

“So no one will see what we’re doing,” Will supplies.

Jai nods. “Then we’ll blow a hole in the wall.”

“A small one,” Frankie clarifies.

Jai tilts his head. “Medium-sized.”

Standish looks Nick up and down. “If mountain man over here is going to make it through, we’re going to need a big one.”

“No we don’t,” Frankie insists. “We just need it to be big enough to climb through.”

“Francesca—”

“Small, Jai.”

Jai looks disappointed. “Small,” he agrees with a resigned sigh.

Frankie smiles at him affectionately, and then turns toward Will. “The noise will draw attention. You’ll meet with hotel staff and tell them things are worse than you thought, and you’ll call for assistance.”

“I’m guessing you’re our assistance,” Will says.

Frankie grins. “Yep. Standish, Nick, and I will bring all the tools and equipment we’ll need to get through the tunnels once we open the door.”

“There’s a door?” Will asks.

“A hermetic door,” Jai says with a nod. “Controlled by the main system that Standish has already hacked into. He’ll be able to open the door for us. And that’s when things get tricky.”
“Tricky doesn’t sound good,” Will says.

“It’s not,” Nick replies. “There’s a reason your girlfriend’s company is in such high demand around the world.”

Will barely resists the urge to glare at him for calling Bianca his girlfriend. Frankie doesn’t resist. She glares. Will wants to kiss her.

“She specializes in what security experts call a five-sense system,” Nick continues, oblivious to Will’s thoughts. “It’s designed to detect intruders using features that are modeled after the five senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound.”

Will frowns.

“That’s the same face I made,” Standish says to Will. “It’s creepy as shit. It’s like the security system is alive or something.”

“How do you know all this?” Will wonders even though he knows the answer. “She didn’t mention any of it when we were at the palazzo.”

“We didn’t need her to,” Jai replies. “This is why Standish hacked her system, remember? Once he got in, he had access to every blueprint, schematic, and detail. I spent yesterday sorting through it all and identifying all of the features we’d need to get past. And then last night, we came up with a plan for how to do it.”

“While you were on your date,” Nick says with a smirk.

“Shut up, Nick,” Frankie says.

Nick winks at her.

Will turns toward Frankie and slides his hand down her back comfortingly. “So Jai blasts a hole in the wall and we’re looking at a hermetic door,” he says, trying to get them back on track. “What next?”

“The door serves two purposes,” Frankie answers. “The first, obviously, is that it’s a locked door. If renovations or accidents damage the wall, the entrance will still be sealed and the catacombs will still be secure.”

“Why put in a door though?” Will asks. “Why not just seal it up with another wall?”

“You’d have to ask Bianca to be sure,” Jai pipes up. “But if it were me, and I was a paranoid millionaire working for a global crime syndicate, I’d want my security contractor to leave escape routes open that could get me out of my palazzo without anyone on the outside knowing where I went.”

“Smart,” Will admits.

“It gets smarter,” Frankie says. “There’s a reason Bianca went with hermetic doors. They’re soundproof, waterproof, and airtight. When they’re closed properly, nothing gets in or out. No chemicals, no animals, no water.”

“She didn’t want rats in her tunnels,” Standish says. “And who can blame her? They’re nasty.”

“No, Standish,” Frankie sighs with an eye roll. “She can’t have rats in her tunnels. Because the
Frankie turns toward Jai and holds out her hand. Despite the fact that she hasn’t said anything, Jai sets a mechanical pencil in her palm. Frankie bends forward and jots down the five senses on a blank corner of the map.

“The first sense is sight,” she says, looking up at Will. “There are state of the art cameras covering every inch of those catacombs. Standish is going to put them on loop before we blow a hole in the wall, so the people Bianca pays to watch the cameras around the clock won’t see us.”

“Loop de loop,” Standish says gleefully.

“The next four senses are more complicated to bypass,” Frankie says, gesturing at the list she made. “For touch, there are sensors beneath the floor. Any weight over five pounds triggers an alarm.”

“We all weigh more than that,” Standish points out helpfully. He casts a glance at Nick. “Some of us more than others.”

Frankie shoots him a look.

“I’m just saying,” Standish says defensively.

“Wait,” Will says with a frown. He glances at Nick. “You said these tunnels were flooded.”

“They are,” Nick confirms. “There’s three feet of standing water in this side tunnel we’ll have to walk through to get from the hotel to the server room.”

“And the weight sensors work through the water?”

“It’s Venice,” he answers with a shrug. “Everything is waterproof.”

“Can we rig a pulley system?” Will asks, looking at Frankie. “Zip line you guys down to the server room and back? Or maybe use those sticky suits Jai made for us in Oslo?”

“No,” Nick replies. “The walls and the ceiling are also a sense. Taste.”

“Taste?” Will says incredulously.

“The surface of your tongue is covered with thousands of taste buds,” Nick says. “And taste buds are receptors. They react to the presence of certain chemicals and send messages to the brain. The walls and the ceiling in the catacombs do the same thing. They’re covered with millions of little receptors and they register anything that touches them. You brush even one of them, game over. Alarm triggered.”

“Next is hearing,” Frankie says. “There are sound sensors located every ten feet, and the sensors she’s got are cutting edge. They hear better than a goddamn bat.”

“This shit just keeps getting creepier,” Standish mutters. “Tongue walls and bat ears. It’s horrifying.”

“Anything over twenty decibels triggers an alarm,” Frankie says, ignoring Standish. “Whispers, footfalls. You breathe too loud, one of those sensors is going to know.”
“Shit,” Will mutters.

“Yeah,” Frankie agrees.

“That’s not all,” Nick says. “Let’s say, by some miracle, you manage to get through the hermetic door and down the tunnel without stepping on the floors, without touching the walls or ceiling, without making a sound, and without getting caught on camera. That’s when you run into the last sense—smell.”

“Don’t like this,” Standish says, shaking his head. “Don’t like this at all.”

Susan smirks. “That’s what drunk Standish said last night.”

“Drunk Standish knows what’s up. Dude’s a genius.”

Frankie closes her eyes. “Standish,” she sighs. “Shut up.”

Standish opens his mouth to respond. Will shoots him a look. Standish seems to remember the discussion they had earlier and closes his mouth.

“So how’s it smell us?” Will asks.

“How much do you know about mosquitoes?” Jai asks in return.

Will blinks at him. “Um...they suck my blood and make me itch?”

Frankie snorts.

“What?” Will says, holding out his hands. “What kind of question is that?”

“Mosquitoes use a variety of methods to track down humans,” Jai says, folding his hands behind his back in one of his let me explain something to you because I’m a genius poses. “Our body heat and the carbon dioxide we expel when we exhale, for example. But they can also sense our odors and follow them to us. Sort of like the insect version of a bloodhound.”

“Little bastards,” Susan mutters.

Jai smirks. “Bianca’s applied science division has duplicated what mosquitoes can do, and programmed those abilities into micro-drones that are about the same size as the face of your watch.”

“She’s got a ventilation system spread throughout the catacombs,” Frankie tells Will. “It houses thousands of them. And at any given moment, there are hundreds of them flying through the catacombs and looking for targets.”

“Wait a second,” Will says. He doesn’t have to try very hard to act surprised because he’s still just as shocked about this as he was last night when Bianca explained it to him. “You’re telling me she has tiny mosquito machines that can smell human beings?”

“Yes,” Frankie confirms. “And if they find one, they trigger an alarm.”

Standish shudders. “Horrifying.”

“Brilliant,” Jai corrects with no small amount of admiration. “It’s the most remarkable security system I’ve ever seen.”
“So how the hell are we going to get into the server room?” Will asks. This is the part he doesn’t know. He knew the basics of the system thanks to Bianca, but he has no idea how they plan to beat it.

“Ooh, wait, I know this one!” Standish says. He raises his hand like a kid in class, waves it wildly, and shoots Frankie a pleading look.

Frankie sighs and rolls her eyes but gestures at him to go ahead.

“Power surge,” he tells Will proudly.

“No,” Frankie says, shaking her head. “Wrong.”

“Nu uh,” Standish whines. “You said we had to fry the generators.”

“With an EMP, not with a power surge,” Frankie replies. “Shouldn’t you know the difference, nerd?”

Standish crinkles his nose and looks at Will. “Your girlfriend is mean.”

Frankie ignores him and turns toward Will. “Bianca has her system backed up by two generators. If we cut the power, the generators immediately take over. It’s a five second lapse. Not enough time to do anything. But if we use an EMP to fry the generators and then cut the power, we’ve got twenty minutes before the backups for her backups can get the system up and running again.”

“She has backups to her backups,” Jai says gleefully. “She has, quite literally, thought of everything.”

“Jai has a crush,” Standish says in a sing-song voice.

Jai looks offended. “I do not. It’s professional admiration.”

“That’s how they started,” Standish says with a grin, tipping his head toward Will and Frankie. “Turned sexual real fast.”

Susan smacks the back of his head.

“Ow!” Standish yelps, cowering away from her.

“I’ve watched you fall in love with someone just because she picked Yoshi in Mario Kart,” Susan says. “Leave Jai alone.”

Jai looks pleased. Susan winks at him. Frankie shoots Susan a fond look, and Will wants to kiss her again.

“So how do we get to the generators?” he asks instead.

“The generators are beneath the canals,” Jai replies. He points at the map. “The ones we want are located here and here.”

“Wait, they’re under canals?” Will asks. “Do we have EMPs that are waterproof and strong enough to get through stone?”

“Jai does,” Frankie says with a proud smile. “Designed them himself.”

Jai waves her off. “It’s not that difficult.”
“It’s extremely difficult,” Will disagrees. “Nice work, Jai.”

Jai smiles shyly. Will wants to hug him. He resists the urge.

“So who plants the EMPs?” he asks.

“That would be me,” Susan says. “After I wreck the HVAC system, I’m going to hop in Nick’s boat, drop the EMPs over the two generators, and wreck them too.” She grins. “I’m a one woman wrecking team.”

“The devices have navigation built in,” Jai adds. “All she needs to do is get them in the general vicinity. As soon as she drops them into the water, they’ll find their way to the exact location of the generators, burrow into the canal floor, and wait for me to trigger the pulse.”

“Wait, isn’t there something else?” Standish asks with a frown. “I seem to remember chanting a lot about blackouts.”

“You chanted a lot of things last night,” Frankie says dryly. “Most of them were Ariana Grande lyrics.”

Standish looks faintly embarrassed. “She’s a generational talent with extremely catchy songs,” he says defensively.

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“We don’t want Blake and Ollerman to realize that someone got into their server room,” Nick says to Will. “Even if we get in and out without getting caught, if the palazzo and the catacombs go dark and nothing else does, it’ll be clear they were targeted.”

“Before we head for the hotel, I’m going to plant other EMPs in strategic areas surrounding the palazzo so that the entire grid goes out,” Jai says. “The strongest pulses will be over the generators so we can make sure they go out. The other EMPs I plant will be much weaker, but they’ll be enough to shut down the grid. It’ll look like a system failure instead of targeted interference.”

“So once the generators are off and the power is out, they can move freely through the tunnels,” Will says.

“Yes,” Nick confirms. “But we’ve still only got twenty minutes. It’ll take us about six minutes to get to the server room from the hotel. The server room has a hermetic door, but we can open it like the others. Standish says it’ll take him five minutes or so to get his SHIT sticks up and running.”

Standish snorts. “SHIT stick. Gets me every time.”

Nick smirks. “Once he’s done, we’ll head back. We’ve got three minutes of wiggle room. Once we’re out, we’ll fix the hole in the wall and get out of there. End of mission.”

“Actually,” Jai says, holding up his index finger, “there are three additional security protocols we need to be aware of.”

Nick frowns. “What?”

“I discovered them last night,” Jai replies. “They were buried in an encrypted file that Standish’s initial hack job didn’t cover.”

“So you hacked it yourself?” Nick asks.
Jai lifts a shoulder. “I couldn’t ask Standish. He was too busy drunkenly singing pop ballads. And as I’m sure you’re aware from your days with The Collective, I’m more than capable.”

Nick studies Jai suspiciously. Apprehension flickers in Will’s chest. They need Nick to buy Jai’s lie. If he doesn’t, he’s going to figure out that Bianca was involved. And that can’t happen.

“Come on, Jai,” Standish whines before anyone can say anything. “You know hacking shit is my thing. Why you gotta be good at my thing? Why can’t you stick to EMPs and bombs and shit? You’re going to make me obsolete.”

“Yeah, it’d be such a shame if we didn’t need you anymore,” Frankie says dryly.

Standish huffs at her. Will glances at Nick. The former MI6 agent has his eyes on Frankie, and he looks amused by her teasing Standish. Will breathes an internal sigh of relief.

“So what are the other protocols?” Susan asks.

“First is the generator protocol,” Jai says. “If the power is off and the generators are rebooting, the security team Bianca has on standby descends into the tunnels and patrols them until the power is back on.”

“We can handle that,” Nick says, waving his hand. “Between me and Frankie, no one will touch the nerd.”

Standish frowns. “I think I prefer being called the sidekick.”

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Second is drone protocol,” Jai explains. “The micro-drones operate on batteries, so the EMP won’t affect them. Normally, they’re harmless. They search for the presence of humans and then send alerts up to the control room. But when the power is out, they weaponize.”

Standish’s eyes widen. “That’s not good.”

“It’s not lethal,” Jai assures him. “They’re armed with tiny needles that stab whatever they find and deliver a small dose of sedatives. Enough to knock you unconscious and keep you in one spot until the security team can retrieve you.”

“So how do we make sure we don’t get stung?” Frankie asks.

“Well, the drones are programmed to locate humans just like mosquitoes,” Jai replies. “So I’m going to—”

“Oh my god, you’re going to douse us in bug spray!” Standish screeches.

Jai frowns. “That’s a significant oversimplification. But yes.”

“We should take a bug zapper with us,” Standish says to Frankie.

Frankie gives him a look. “Bug zappers are electric, Standish. You want to take an active electrical grid with you into a bunch of flooded tunnels?”

“Oh,” Standish says with a frown. “No. I think I’ll stick with bug spray.”

“It’s not bug spray,” Jai argues.
Standish scoffs. “It’s bug spray.”

Frankie rolls her eyes again.

“What’s the final protocol, Jai?” Will asks.

Jai purses his lips. “Flood protocol.”

“That sounds bad,” Susan says.

“It is bad,” Jai says. “If the micro-drones alert the control room repeatedly of an intruder that hasn’t been apprehended, or if the security team that’s in the tunnels calls in a distress signal, the system automatically triggers flood protocol. The catacombs will be completely flooded within five minutes.”

Everyone in the room stares at him in shock.

“Completely?” Susan repeats in disbelief. “Like, floor to ceiling?”

“Floor to ceiling,” Jai confirms. “No oxygen.”

Will frowns. “That would drown anyone who’s down there. Bianca wouldn’t do that.”

“Bianca probably didn’t have a choice,” Jai points out. “She was hired to do a job and she would have been required to honor Blake’s requests. Given all the steps she’s taken to make sure that no one could get into the catacombs, it’s reasonable to assume that she thought flood protocol would never be triggered.”

“So we need to hope that your spray keeps us from getting stung,” Frankie says. “And that Nick and I can keep the security team from calling anything in. And we need to do it all in twenty minutes.”

“Yes,” Jai confirms.

For a second, no one says anything. Will looks down at Frankie. She looks up at him. Their gaze holds, and he knows she can see how worried he is. She weaves her fingers through his and squeezes his hand. He swallows around a sudden lump in his throat.

Standish clears his throat. “If we make it out of this alive, do you think I could get a raise?”

Susan smacks him on the back of the head again.

“Ow!” he yelps. He rubs the back of his head. “Seriously, what is it with women and violence today?”

“Instinctual reaction to your stupidity,” Frankie mutters.

Standish glowers at her.

“I have to go plant the EMPs,” Jai says. He looks at Standish. “Get your sticks up and running while I’m gone. Make sure they all work.”

“They’re called SHIT sticks, Jai. Say it right.”

“I refuse to call them that.” Jai looks at Nick. “I need you to steal a card key for Susan. And she needs a uniform too.”
Nick nods. He glances at Frankie. “I could use an assist.”

“I’ll help,” Susan says, stepping forward.

Nick frowns.

Susan smirks at him. “You afraid to be alone with a shrink, Agent Walker?”

Her voice has a challenging edge to it, almost like she’s giving him a dare, and Nick’s frown slides into a smirk.

“I’d be honored to share your company, Dr. Sampson,” he says gallantly. He offers his arm, and Susan loops her arm through his. He leads her toward the door. She winks at Will over her shoulder on the way out. Will grins after her.

“Guess I’ll go deal with my SHIT sticks,” Standish says. And then he grins. “God, that’s funny.”

“It’s not funny,” Jai says, shaking his head as he heads for the door. “It’s childish and unoriginal.”

Standish frowns and follows him out. “It’s totally original. And definitely funny. You wouldn’t know funny if it bit you in the…”

His voice trails off as he disappears. Will turns toward Frankie.

“We didn’t get a job,” she says thoughtfully, staring after Jai and Standish with her eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t know if I’m offended or relieved.”

“I think Susan and Jai did that on purpose,” Will says, sliding his hand along her hip to pull her toward him.

“They do like to conspire,” Frankie acknowledges. She straightens the collar of his jacket. “They’re dangerous when they team up.”

“I think I’m okay with it this time.”

She smiles. “Me too.”

“We’ve got a few hours to kill. Want to play tourist with me?”

She lifts her eyebrows. “There somewhere specific you had in mind?”

Will smiles.

Will won’t tell Frankie where he’s taking her.

He pulls up some directions on his phone when they get out into the alleyway behind the palazzo. She thinks if she tried—and by tried, she means pressing him up against the wall and kissing him senseless—she could probably steal his phone and find out where they’re going. But she decides not to. She doesn’t usually like surprises. But with Will, surprises feel different. Safer. So she lets it go.

When they get to Santa Maria Formosa, she realizes where they’re headed. She doesn’t tell him she figured it out. She just holds his hand and listens as he tells her about his phone call with his mom and what Christmas is like in Huntington. It’s cute how thrilled he is that she’s going to be with his family for Christmas. And honestly, she’s kind of looking forward to it. It’s been a long time since
she celebrated Christmas with a family.

When they finally slow to a stop outside Liberia Acqua Alta, and she sees the faded, handwritten sign that says *Welcome to the most beautiful bookshop in the world*, she feels warmth flood through her body.

“I know you’ve probably been here with him,” Will says quietly. “But I thought you might want to make some new memories. Maybe we can find something for your mom’s collection.”

Frankie isn’t sure how to explain to him how much she likes his thoughtfulness, so she doesn’t try. She just pulls his face down to hers and kisses him.

“I did good, huh?” he murmurs against her lips.

She smiles. “So good.”

She kisses him one more time, and then she leads him down the faded stones and into the shop.

As soon as they cross the threshold, his eyes widen. “Wow.”

Frankie smiles. They pass mountains of books sitting in bathtubs and boats and on high tables. Everything seems slightly disorganized, but that’s part of the charm. She loves it here because she knows her mom would have. *You never know what you’re going to find hidden among the stacks,* her mom would say.

A black and white cat wanders toward them and rubs against Will’s shins. Will jumps in surprise and slides between Frankie and the cat.

Frankie snorts and prods him in the back. “Protecting me from stray cats,” she murmurs. “My hero.”

He turns to face her with a grin. She winks at him. He kisses her. She smiles against his lips, and then pulls away and tugs him farther back into the store before they become *that* couple.

They wander in companionable silence for a while. He holds up books every now and then, and she shakes her head or nods. They’re standing side by side, sorting through a gondola full of novels, when they come across a copy of *Wuthering Heights*.

Will’s hand pauses over the book. He glances up at her, and sees that she’s noticed it too. They stare at each other for a second. Frankie thinks of what happened this morning with Nick, and how sure he was that Will was just a passing season, and the bookshop suddenly feels small and suffocating.

She slides her hand over his. “Let’s go.”

He weaves his fingers through hers and doesn’t argue. She leads him out of the shop, down the sidewalk and around a corner, and then in the direction of a bridge. There’s a cozy little restaurant not far from here that she thinks he’ll like.

They’re in the exact center of the bridge when Will stops and turns toward her. “If you’re not ready to talk about whatever is bothering you, we don’t have to.”

She blinks at him in surprise. He smiles at her. It’s genuine and kind and so Will Chase that it makes her ache.
“I know you’re not keeping things from me anymore,” he murmurs. “So if you’re taking me somewhere we can talk, but you’re not actually ready to talk, we don’t have to. You don’t need to prove yourself to me, Frankie.”

Frankie stares at him. He waits patiently beneath her gaze, his lips still curved into a smile.

“You just can’t help it, can you?” she says softly.

He frowns. “Can’t help what?”

“Putting me first. Loving me like I deserve it.”

“You—”

“Don’t,” she cuts him off, though not unkindly. “I wasn’t looking for reassurance. I was just...making an observation.”

He looks confused, and maybe a little concerned, and she feels self-conscious all of a sudden. She turns toward the iron railing that runs along either side of the bridge and leans forward to rest her elbows on it. After a beat of silence, Will joins her. They stare out over the canal at a brick bridge in the distance. A boat floats slowly under the bridge beneath their feet and out the other side. The sky is a brilliant shade of blue, and the sun feels warm on her face.

She hasn’t been to Venice in years. She’s avoided it, for obvious reasons. But she likes being here with Will. She likes being everywhere with Will.

“You deserve it,” he says quietly after a while.

She should’ve known that he wouldn’t let it go. She looks down at the iron beneath her elbows. There are raised letters embedded in the surface of the railing, and she traces her thumb over the letter C.

“You make me feel like I do,” she murmurs.

“Good. That’s what I want.”

She looks up at him. Her throat is tight all of a sudden, and she’s not sure why except that she doesn’t think he has any idea how much of a relief it is to be with someone who loves her the way that he does.

_Tell him that_, a voice murmurs in the back of her mind. She obeys it.

“I don’t think you understand how much that means to me. And I don’t think I’d do a very good job explaining it. But I wish I could.”

He leans closer to her, his shoulder pressing against hers. “You explain things just fine, Frankie. You do it differently than I do, but that’s okay. I like the way you do it. I like everything about you.”

“Everything?” she says, arching an eyebrow.

He smiles. “It’d be nice if I could eat a meal without you stealing food off my plate for once.”

“Sharing is caring, Whiskey.”

“So I’ve heard. Usually while you’re chewing my food.”
She bites her lip around a smile.

“Actually, that’s not even true,” he tells her. “I like that too. Because the only other person you do it to is Jai, and if you trust me like you trust him, then I’m a pretty lucky guy.”

Frankie studies him. If he was Nick, she would assume that he’s manipulating her—casually mentioning how much she trusts him so that she’ll tell him what’s on her mind. But Will isn’t Nick.

“I want to tell you about what happened with Nick this morning,” she says. And it’s true. She does.

Will gives her an encouraging smile. “Okay.”

She takes a deep breath and looks out over the canal, and then she tells him everything. Why Ollerman was in Venice. How she knows Nick isn’t lying. What Nick did for Eitan, and how he asked her on a date, and how he rattled off a paraphrase from *Wuthering Heights* because he knew it would get to her. She tells him about Jai too—his face when she told him about the Smith Foundation, and how he’s doing some digging to see if the foundation is legit.

Will listens without comment and without any reactionary expressions. Frankie wonders, sometimes, if he learned that from Susan. He isn’t as good as his best friend at keeping his thoughts and feelings off his face, but he tries when he knows she’s talking about something that’s difficult for her. And talking about how Nick is trying to win her back by being the man she thought she married is...well, difficult is understatement.

When she’s finished, Will doesn’t say anything for a while. She can’t read the look on his face, and that scares her a little, but she keeps her mouth shut and waits him out.

“Does this change anything for you?” he asks eventually.

She frowns at him. “What?”

“Does it change how you feel about Nick?” he rephrases, meeting her gaze. “Or us?”

“You’re joking, right?”

The polite but blank expression on his face finally shivers and reveals some apprehension. “Frankie,” he starts.

“No,” she says before he can finish. “Nothing’s changed. I just didn’t want to keep any secrets from you.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “Because if you—”

“Will,” she cuts him off. She reaches for his hand. “Why would I want to be with someone who’s pretending to be you, when I could just be with you?”

He blinks at her in surprise. He looks hopeful, but also a little unconvinced, so she does one of her favorite things—she throws his words back at him.

“Ask me what I love about you,” she says, turning toward him so that only one elbow is resting on the railing.

He shakes his head. “You don’t need to—”

“Ask me, Will.”
The corners of his mouth are tugging upward, but he hasn’t smiled yet. “What do you love about me?”

“Your posture,” she answers immediately.

He lifts his eyebrows. “My posture?”

“You stand up straight,” she says. “Like you know what a good man you are and you’re proud of it. And I like that because I’m proud of it too.”

And just like that, his heart eyes are on full blast. There’s a smile on his lips too, but she’s not done yet.

“I love that you’re a good tipper,” she says. “Even when the service is terrible, you always tip twenty-five percent. And you’re never rude. My dad used to say you can tell a lot about a man by the way he treats a waitress. And he was right.”

Will’s eyebrows furrow. “I didn’t know you noticed my tipping.”

“I’m a spy. I notice everything.”

He tilts his head. “Fair enough.”

“I love that you wave at babies,” she continues. “And I love that they always smile at you. You make stupid faces at kids in the grocery store and they laugh. You FaceTime your nephew to read comic books together. And Standish is way less self-involved than he used to be, and that’s because of you.”

“It’s probably also because you and Susan smack him around a lot,” Will says with a smirk.

Frankie snorts. He’s not wrong, but that doesn’t prove her point so she doesn’t agree. She latches onto the lapels of his coat and tugs him closer.

“You know what I love most?”

“How good I look in a tux?”

She smiles. “No.”

“That thing I do with my tongue when I—”

“Will,” she cuts him off with a laugh.

He grins. “What do you love most, Frankie?”

“That you don’t try to do any of those things,” she answers. “You just do them. They’re just who you are. You don’t have to go through a checklist to be a good man, Will. You just are one. Nick isn’t like that. He’s…”

She trails off. She can’t seem to find the words. She hates when this happens. She did it last night too. She has all these words swirling around in her brain, and all these feelings swirling around in her chest, but she can’t seem to pick any of them out and verbalize them in a way that doesn’t sound stupid.

Will waits for her, his hand tracing patterns on the small of her back, and it’s the familiarity of his fingers dancing across her skin that seems to make the words materialize.
“I don’t want to be with someone who’s only good because he thinks that’s what I want,” she murmurs. “I want to be with someone who’s good even when I’m not looking. Someone who makes everyone and everything around him better. And that’s you, Will. You’re good. You’re so good.”

He lifts his hand to brush along her cheek. “You know, you’re really getting good at this romantic declaration thing.”

She grins. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” he says. “Keep it up, and you’ll be better than me pretty soon.”

“I doubt that,” she laughs. She leans closer to him. “Did I answer your question?”

“Yeah,” he says with a nod. “But there’s one more thing I think I need to hear.”

She frowns. “What?”

He gives her a painfully serious look, his eyebrows furrowed and his eyes searching hers, and then he murmurs, “I need you to tell me it’s sexy that I’m an eagle scout.”

For a second, she just blinks at him in surprise. A faint smile tugs on his lips. And then she shoves his chest and he stumbles backward a step or two with a surprised laugh.

“I hate you,” she says, but she can feel a smile on her lips and she knows it negates her words.

“Come on,” he laughs, pulling her toward him by her leather jacket. “You pretty much just said it.”

“I said I like that you’re a good man.”

“Right. And…?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Please?”

“No way. You’ll never let me live it down.”

“Come on,” he cajoles, sliding his hand along the small of her back. “Tonight is going to suck. I’m going to have to watch you and Nick be really great together in the field, and it would be nice if I could have something else to think about. Something that I know he doesn’t have.”

“You mean something other than me?”

“Yes.”

She arches an eyebrow at him. “What if I show you instead?”

He purses his lips and considers the offer, and then shakes his head. “Nope. I want words.”

Frankie sighs. Will gives her an expectant look. She wants to tell him that he’s shit out of luck because there’s no way she’s admitting that, but there’s something about the hope in his eyes that stops her. He might be teasing her, but she thinks that deep down there is some part of him that really wants to hear it. Maybe even needs to.

“Fine,” she says at last. “It’s sexy.”
“What’s sexy?”

“What’s sexy?”

“Come on, Will,” she complains, pushing halfheartedly against his chest. “I said it’s sexy. That’s enough.”

“I think you can do better than that. And I think I can help.”

He slides his hand along her jaw and back into her hair and kisses her.

“Cheater,” she murmurs against his lips.

“It’s not cheating,” he whispers. “It’s helping. I’m helping.”

And then he’s really kissing her, one of those kisses that makes her toes curl and her body ache, and she drapes her arms around his shoulders and pulls him closer and lets herself get lost in it.

Eventually he pulls back. He doesn’t go far. Their faces are close, their noses bumping gently, and one of his thumbs is brushing over the arc of her cheekbone the way it did this morning when she kissed him goodbye before she left to meet Jai. It’s the tenderness of it that does her in. It’s always his tenderness.

“I think it’s sexy you’re an eagle scout,” she whispers.

His thumb freezes on her face, and his body tenses against hers in surprise. “Oh my god,” he breathes in disbelief. “You actually said it.”

“You asked me to,” she says incredulously, leaning back to look at him.

“Yeah but I didn’t think you actually would,” he replies. His eyes are wide, and so is his smile. “Oh my god. This is the best day of my life.”

“I take it back,” she says, shoving him away from her. “I changed my mind. I hate it and I hate you.”

“You can’t take it back,” he says, catching her elbow and pulling her close. “What’s done is done.”

“Same could be said for murder.”

He’s unfazed by her threat. He grins, giddy and gleeful, and leans forward to kiss her again. She resists him for a second, maybe two, and then she melts against him. He’s such a good kisser. It’s the worst. She can’t even threaten him convincingly anymore because all he has to do is kiss her and she turns into a pile of goo.

“I love you,” he whispers into her mouth.

Frankie pulls him closer, her heart warm in her chest. “I love you too.”

Maybe being goo isn’t the worst thing in the world.
Forty-Two

The first part of the mission goes as smoothly as Will could have possibly hoped.

Susan gets into the boiler room without drawing the attention of anyone. She follows Jai’s directions to get inside the HVAC system and removes a few necessary parts. The system shuts down almost immediately. She stops at the front desk on the way out, and reports that some of the guests are complaining about the temperature in their rooms, and then it’s game on.

Standish intercepts a maintenance call from hotel management and assures them someone will stop by. Will and Jai show up half an hour later in matching jumpsuits and hats. They’re led down to the boiler room by a clearly frazzled manager, who speaks in rapid Italian about all the high profile guests they have staying in the hotel to attend a nearby fundraiser, and how it is absolutely imperative that the system be fixed. Jai assures him that it will be.

When Will and Jai are finally alone, they cut a six foot tall and two foot wide hole in the drywall, and carefully pull it out and set it aside because they’ll need to fit it back into place when they’re done. Behind the drywall is a wall of stone.

“That’s some solid stuff,” Will observes.

Jai grins wickedly. “Nothing is ever as solid as it seems.”

“That was a terrifying statement coming from a guy armed with explosives,” Standish says over comms.

“You have no idea,” Frankie replies.

Jai presses four small charges about the size of post-its onto the stones visible through the hole in the drywall. “Bring me that long tube, Will,” he orders.

Will obeys. Jai unrolls a giant sheet of what appears to be saran wrap from the tube, and then drapes it over the charges like you might smooth foil over a pan of leftovers.

“What does that do?” Will wonders.

“Protects us and the hotel from the blast,” Jai says, frowning in concentration as he smooths his fingers over the edges of the clear sheet. “This will send all the debris in the direction of the catacombs and the door, and spare us the trouble of needing to replace more drywall. Unfortunately, it can’t dampen the sound.”

“How the hell does it do that?” Will says in disbelief. “It’s saran wrap.”

“It’s stronger than steel,” Jai says.

Will glances at the nondescript looking tube, and then back at Jai. “How?”

“Spider webs and technology,” Jai murmurs. “It would take a very long time for me to explain and I doubt you have the knowledge to comprehend the details anyway.”

Will tries not to be offended and definitely fails.

Over comms, Nick snorts. “Same old Jai.”
“You think I can borrow some, Jai?” Standish wonders. “I want to do some remodeling in my place.”

“You mean Will’s place,” Frankie pipes up. “Pretty sure your lease says no remodeling.”

“Yeah, but if I could borrow Jai’s spider saran wrap—”

“Absolutely not,” Jai replies, straightening. He steps back, surveys his work, and then smirks in satisfaction. “It costs a fortune.”

“How much?” Susan wonders.

“$250,000 per square foot.”

“What?” Will demands. “I didn’t approve that purchase!”

“Francesca did,” Jai says with a shrug.

“Frankie?” Will says. He folds his arms over his chest even though she can’t see him. “We’re supposed to jointly approve large purchases. You can’t just sign off on things without consulting me.”

“I did consult you,” Frankie says innocently. “You signed off on it.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did. I watched you sign the paperwork.”

“When?

“That night we ordered that pesto pizza from Dellarocco’s and started season three of Stranger Things.”

Will frowns. “Wait. The night that you…?”

“Yep,” she says, and he can hear the grin in her voice.

“Unbelievable,” Will says, throwing up his hands. “How am I the one who gets accused of entrapment when you seduced me to get your best friend some spider saran wrap?”

“Yeah, you seemed to really hate it,” Frankie says dryly.

Will feels his face flush. He definitely did not hate it. In fact, it was probably one of the best things that’s ever happened to him. But that’s not the point.

“Not the point,” he says.

“Just to be clear,” Standish says before Will can continue, “is this argument about how Frankie used her sexy venus flytrap moves to trick Will into spending a couple million dollars on spider saran wrap?”

“Yes,” Jai answers. “Now can we please focus on the task at hand?” He turns toward Will. “You’ll want to step back and shield your eyes just in case.”

“Oh, does the million dollar spider web not protect my eyes?” Will says petulantly.
Jai purses his lips. “You’re petty when you feel used,” he observes. “I like it. Now get your ass over there.”

“We’re not done talking about this,” Will says as he follows Jai’s directions.

“We can talk about it tonight,” Frankie offers with just a hint of suggestion in her voice.

There’s a gagging sound over comms, and then Standish says, “Pretty sure that means they’re going to bone.”

“Shut up, Standish,” Frankie says.

Jai sets off the explosives before Standish can reply, and there’s a loud boom. The building trembles, and then Will lowers his hands from his eyes. There’s no damage to the boiler room or the hotel wall, and the clear sheet that is apparently worth millions appears to be covered in dust.

“Did it work?” he asks.

“Let’s find out,” Jai says. He crosses the room, peels back the edge of the clear sheet, and reveals a sizable hole in the stone. Beyond that, there appears to be a door embedded in a second stone wall.

Jai grins over his shoulder. “It worked.”

“Is it small?” Frankie asks.

“Yes,” Jai answers.

“Meh,” Will says.

Jai shoots him a look.

“Jai,” Frankie says sternly.

Jai throws up his hands as if she can see him. “It’s three feet in diameter, Francesca. That’s the smallest I could go and still have enough room for Nick to get through.”

“Sorry,” Nick says. He doesn’t sound sorry.

“Hotel staff coming toward you, Will,” Standish reports.

Will heads for the door. “I’m on it.”

It takes Will fifteen minutes to talk the manager down from what appears to be a panic attack. He’s walking back in the direction of the boiler room when he hears the door to the stairwell open behind him. He turns around, expecting to see the manager in need of more reassurance, but sees Frankie, Standish, and Nick instead. They’re carrying duffel bags and backpacks and they’re dressed in the same jumpsuit he’s wearing.

Will’s eyes linger on Frankie. He’s not sure how she looks that good in a navy jumpsuit. Nothing about her outfit is even remotely sexy, and yet somehow he’s thinking about having sex with her anyway. It’s really not fair how pretty she is.

She smirks at him like she knows what he’s thinking. He narrows his eyes instead of smirking back because he’s still a little miffed at being seduced over some spider saran wrap.

Standish is the last one out of the stairwell. “Party don’t start ’til I walk in,” he says as the door
slams shut behind him.

Will snorts. “Come on. We’ve got to get the door open and get this show on the road.”

They start in the direction of the boiler room. Nick is first in the door, and then Standish, and Will is about to cross the threshold when Frankie’s fingers wrap around his arm and tug him back out into the hall.

He turns to face her. The boiler room door closes with a thud, and they’re alone in the hallway. Frankie steps into his space and tips her head back to look at him.

“You mad at me?” she asks in a low voice. There’s a smile on her lips and mischief in her eyes, probably because they both know he’s not really angry with her.

“Yes,” he says.

She tugs on the zipper that’s on the front of his jumpsuit, slowly lowering it down to his ribs to reveal the black t-shirt he’s got on underneath. She bites her lip, and then lifts her gaze to give him a come-hither look that makes his jumpsuit feel suddenly tight below the waist.

“Want me to make it up to you later?”

“Oh, does Jai need something else?” he asks. “Maybe some high-tech duct tape that costs $2 million a roll?”

She smirks. “Like you weren’t planning to do the same thing to get me to wear that stupid Christmas sweater.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. But it is.”

She laughs. He smiles because he can’t help it. She trails one of her hands upward along his chest, her palm smoothing along his t-shirt. He can feel the warmth of her skin through the fabric.

“You know what’ll make you forget all about this?” she murmurs.

“Having full control of purchasing approvals from now on?”

She smiles. “You can have that if you want. Or, when we get back to New York, you can have me in that red lace you like so much. Your call.”

“Still on comms guys,” Susan’s voice says with a hint of amusement.

“And vomiting uncontrollably,” Standish adds.

Frankie grins at Will, slides her hand upward to the back of his neck, and pulls his mouth down to hers. It’s one of those kisses that he hates and loves, because there’s just enough promise in it to make him annoyed that they have to do this stupid mission instead of disappearing upstairs into a hotel room with a giant bed.

There’s a faint creaking sound off to Will’s left, and then Standish’s voice says, “Seriously?”

Frankie leans back and breaks their kiss, and Will looks over to find Standish standing in the
doorway of the boiler room.

He clicks his tongue at them. “So unprofessional,” he says, shaking his head as if in disappointment. “Also, the two of you should really see a therapist. It’s not healthy to suck face this much.”

“Jealous,” Frankie accuses.

“Get your ass in here, Frankie,” Nick calls.

“Speaking of jealous...” Standish mutters with a grin.

Frankie winks at Will, and then saunters into the room. Will follows her. Nick tosses a wetsuit at her with a scowl on his face. “Get dressed.”

Frankie presses her lips together around a smile and unzips her jumpsuit. Will watches as she steps out of it. She’s in leggings and a long sleeve shirt that are black and skin tight. She catches him staring and grins.

“Quit drooling and get over here, Will,” Jai calls.

Will snaps to attention and hurries over to Jai, who is bent over a duffel bag that Nick brought in. Jai hands him an aerosol can.

“For the drones,” he says. “Each of them needs an entire can sprayed on them once they’re in their wetsuits. Nothing less than an entire can. Understand?”

“Yep,” Will says.

Jai shoves two more cans at him. Will straightens and turns around with an armful of cans. Frankie and Standish are still pulling on their wetsuits, but Nick is done.

“Ready?” Will asks.

“Depends,” Nick replies. “You going to skimp on me so I’ll get stung?”

“He can’t,” Frankie answers for Will.

Nick looks at her. “You mean he won’t.”

“No, I mean he can’t,” Frankie says, meeting his gaze. “He is literally incapable of not protecting people. He’s too good.”

Nick and Frankie stare at each other for a second. Will glances between them because it’s obvious they’re having a silent conversation, but he’s surprised to find that he’s not jealous. Maybe because in the past five minutes, Frankie has made it abundantly clear which one of them she prefers. And it’s not Nick.

Nick is the one who looks away. “Let’s go,” he says to Will.

Will follows him out into the hallway. Once the door is closed, Nick holds his arms out and closes his eyes. Will shakes one of the cans and then starts to spray. He makes sure to spread whatever repellant Jai’s concocted evenly, coating every inch of Nick and his wetsuit until the can is empty.

When Will is finished, Nick drops his arms and heads for the door. Will sets the empty can down and reaches for another. When he looks up, though, he’s surprised to find Nick standing frozen by
the door with his hand on the handle.

“I won’t let anything happen to her,” he says quietly. He glances over his shoulder at Will. “Or him.”

Will blinks in surprise. The words hang in the air for a long moment. Will is certain that something snide is going to come out of Nick’s mouth to negate what he just said. But nothing does.

“Thank you,” Will says sincerely.

Nick nods curtly, opens the door, and disappears into the room. Frankie comes out into the hall a moment later. Their eyes meet, and even though she doesn’t say it, he can tell she heard his exchange with Nick.

Standish appears before either of them can say anything. “Okay, Will. Raid me.”

“It’s not Raid,” Jai calls out from the boiler room.

Standish snorts. “It’s fancy Jai Raid.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and steps forward, holding her arms wide. “Shut up, Standish.”

Standish opens his mouth. Will shoots him a look. Standish shuts his mouth.

Frankie endures her spray-down without any commentary. Standish, on the other hand, whines about how bad it smells and how creepy it is that he’s about to be hunted by drone mosquitoes.

“EMP’s are both in place,” Susan reports over comms.

“GPS monitors confirmed?” Jai asks.

“Yep,” Susan replies. “Ready and waiting for you to pull the trigger. I’ll hang out and visually confirm the grid has gone out before I head back to you.”

“Roger that.”

Will follows Frankie and Standish back into the boiler room. “Spray’s done,” he tells Jai.

“Come here, Francesca,” Jai says, beckoning his best friend forward. He’s holding what appears to be a utility belt that’s lined with weapons, tools, and storage pockets. He shoots a look at Standish. “Show Will how to open and close the doors. Do it on the iPad though. I need your laptop to monitor the system while you’re gone.”

Standish nudges Will in the direction of the back wall. He pulls an iPad out of his backpack, and then taps the screen to life.

“How complicated is this?” Will asks worriedly.

Standish shakes his head. “It’s super easy.”

Will’s frown deepens, because Standish’s fingers are flying over the screen with an unsettling amount of speed and certainty. When he hands over the iPad, though, Will is surprised to find that the screen isn’t covered in complicated code.

“You’re looking at the same control panel the security team sees in the control room,” Standish says. “Everything is labeled. It’s all in Italian, but I figured—”
“I’m fluent,” Will confirms. He points at the screen. “So I press the label for doors and then what?”

Standish presses the label, and another screen appears. “All the door options will appear, and you just hit open or closed. You can open or close them all at the same time with this button, or you can open individual doors using the rows below.”

“Which one is this door?”

“Door five,” Standish replies. “The server room is one. After that, they’re in order of distance from the server room. So the palazzo is two, the church is three, the bank is four, and this is five.”

“Door one and door five,” Will repeats. “Got it.”

He turns back toward the rest of the team. Jai is bent over his laptop. “Bring me your laptop,” Jai tells Standish.

Standish obeys. Will glances at Frankie. She’s sorting through the pockets of her utility belt. Nick stops next to her and holds out a switchblade from the belt around his waist. She takes it from him without comment, and holds out a flashbang. He takes it, also without comment, and then holds out a wristband. She arches an eyebrow at him.

“Istanbul,” Nick says.

Frankie’s eyes light up, and she takes it from him and puts it on her right wrist. Will realizes, all of a sudden, what they’re doing. Apparently he’s not the only one Frankie trades supplies with before a mission. Before she did it with him, she must have done it with Nick.

“You want another flashbang?” Frankie asks, looking up at Nick.

Nick grins. “Didn’t you learn anything from Johannesburg?”

“That was your fault,” Frankie tells him.

Nick laughs. “Yeah. Sure it was.”

Frankie rolls her eyes, but there’s a smile tugging on her lips. Will ignores a faint twinge of jealousy and heads toward Jai.

“Can you handle door duty?” Jai asks without looking up when Will stops next to him.

“Yes.”

Jai squints at Standish’s laptop, swivels his head to squint at his own laptop, and then nods. “We’re ready.” He looks up at Frankie and Nick. “Let’s go.”

Nick crosses the room to stand in front of the door. Standish, who is already standing there, glances up at him.

“You should know that I’m afraid of small and enclosed spaces,” Standish says. “Also deep water where I can’t see the bottom. And the dark. And heights.”

“Is that all?” Nick says dryly.

“Snakes,” Standish adds. His eyes widen. “Oh my god, are there going to be snakes down there?”
“No,” Frankie says. Will feels her fingers weaving through his, and he looks down to see her standing at his side. She smiles up at him. “Try not to miss me too much.”

“Twenty minutes is an eternity,” he says, helpless against a smile. “How can I possibly survive?”

She grins. “Picture that red lace and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Deal,” Will says, leaning forward to kiss her briefly. When he pulls back, he gives her a stern look. “Be careful.”

She winks at him. “Always am.”

“Never are,” he counters.

She grins and heads for the door.

“All right,” Jai says. “I’m going to trigger the EMPs.” He looks at Will. “When I say so, open the door. Not a second before, you understand?”

Will nods.

Jai looks at Frankie. “After the door opens, you’ve got twenty minutes. I have tracking devices in each of your wetsuits, so I’ll be able to guide you through the tunnels to the server room. But in case we lose contact, it’s left, right, right, second left, right.”

Standish frowns. “Who the hell is going to remember that?”

“Left, right, right, second left, right,” Nick repeats dutifully.

“Show off,” Frankie accuses.

Nick winks at her.

“Ready?” Jai asks.

“Ready,” Frankie confirms.

“Are we sure there’s no snakes?” Standish squeaks.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Do it, Jai.”

Jai types something on his computer, and then there’s a very anticlimactic pause of about ten seconds where everyone stands as still as statues and nothing happens. Standish, of course, breaks the silence.

“That was so lame,” he sighs. “I thought there’d be a boom or something.”

“There was out here,” Susan says over comms. “Power’s out, Jai.”

“Multiple buildings?” Jai asks.

“All the ones I can see,” Susan confirms.

“Jai?” Frankie asks, turning to look at her best friend. She’s got a gun in her hand and that gleam in her eyes. She’s ready for action.

Jai is staring fixedly at his laptop. “The entire grid is down,” he mutters, more to himself than to
“Generators are out.” He glances at Standish’s laptop. “System is registering the failure. All senses are powering down from reserves. We’re on in three, two…” He looks up at Will. “Go.”

Will presses the iPad screen. The hermetic door hisses and then there’s a soft click. Nick reaches out and pushes it open, and it swings away from him and reveals a steep staircase descending into darkness. A wave of stale and chilly air rushes into the room. Will feels goosebumps rise on his skin.

“Nope,” Standish says, shaking his head. “Not doing it. Changed my mind. Imma stay right here where there’s light and oxygen and no crypt snakes. Y’all have fun without me.”

“Nick,” Frankie prompts.

Nick flicks on a flashlight. “Front?”

“Yes. Whistle for clear.”

“Click for threat.”

“One for each.”

“Confirm.”

Standish glances between them incredulously. “What the hell is happening right now? Are you speaking English? Did I have a stroke and not know it?”

“Stay between me and Nick,” Frankie says, prodding him forward. “Go, Nick.”

Nick steps through the door and starts to descend the stairs. Standish starts to follow, and then freezes. Frankie runs into his back and huffs in annoyance. Standish’s hands curl around the edges of the door, his knuckles white as he hangs on.

He shakes his head. “Can’t,” he whispers. There’s no humor in his voice. He sounds genuinely scared. “What if there’s something down there? Like in The Descent?”

“Standish,” Frankie says. Her voice is authoritative, but also gentler than it usually is when she’s talking to him. “Nick’s going to kill anything before it gets to you. And I’m right behind you.”

“You won’t leave me?”

Will expects her to say something sarcastic.

“I won’t leave you,” she says instead.

Will glances at Jai in surprise. Jai smiles knowingly. He doesn’t seem surprised.

Standish sucks in a breath and then starts down the stairs. “Okay. I can do this. I’m a badass.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Frankie says dryly. She glances over her shoulder, winks at Will, and then she’s gone.

When Frankie steps off the final stair and down onto the floor of the tunnel, she’s surprised to find that she doesn’t need her flashlight. There are small, wand-like lights embedded in the walls just beneath the ceiling, and they line the entire length of the tunnel as far as she can see.
“Battery operated,” Nick says as if he can read her mind. He’s studying one of the lights. It’s eye-level for him because the ceiling is only a few inches above his head.

“Jai did say that Blake considered the catacombs his escape route,” she says. “He’d want it to be lit regardless of power outages.”

“Works for us.”

Frankie hums in agreement and steps up next to him to study the wall. There are hundreds of tiny receptors sticking out. It almost looks like the wall is covered in rubber fur.

“Not going to lie, this is kind of a bummer,” Standish says, appearing on her other side. “These walls suck.”

Frankie smirks at him. “What were you expecting? Skulls?”

“Uh, yeah,” Standish says. “Maybe a creepy archway made of femur bones that says All y’all who come down here gonna die. But in some other language so it sounds badass.”


Standish frowns. “How many languages do you speak?”

“Nine,” Nick replies. He looks down at Frankie. “We should get moving.”

Frankie nods.

“Head east,” Jai’s voice says over comms.

“Dude, we’re in a tunnel,” Standish says. “How the hell are we supposed to know which way is east?”

“That way,” Nick says, pointing to his right.

Standish gives him a look. “Do you have to be such a know it all?”

Nick grins and starts in the direction he pointed. “Haters gonna hate.”

Standish’s eyes widen, and he trips in his haste to follow. “Are you a Swiftie?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Nick replies.

“Taylor Swift,” Standish says. “She’s a singer. Hits include Shake It Off, Blank Space, and, my personal favorite, We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together.”

“Is that who you were singing last night?”

“What?” Standish says incredulously. “No. Last night I was singing Ariana Grande. I’m talking about Taylor Swift.”

“Never heard of her,” Nick says with a shrug. “She’s got the same last name as a poker player I once knew.”

Standish looks extremely offended. “Taylor Swift doesn’t play poker.”

“Are you sure? I played in a tournament in Macau with a $10 million dollar buy-in—”
“Hold the phone,” Standish cuts him off, reaching out to grab his arm. “Are you—” He stops abruptly, and his eyes widen. “Holy shit, your bicep is like steel.”

“Standish,” Frankie warns.

“Sorry,” Standish says, yanking his hand away from Nick’s arm like he’s been burned. “I just...so, like, when you say you won $10 million in Macau—”

“I didn’t win $10 million,” Nick interrupts. “That was the buy-in. I won $120 million.”

Standish chokes. “One hundred and...what? Seriously? You just go around winning hundreds of millions of dollars for fun?”

“It was for work. Frankie was there.”

Standish’s eyes get even bigger. He whips around to look at Frankie, and then turns back to Nick. “Are you telling me you were in a poker tournament just like James Bond in Casino Royale? Did you ride the boats in Skyfall?”

“Kid likes movies, huh?” Nick says to Frankie.

Frankie rolls her eyes. “Understatement of the century.”

“Well?” Standish insists. “Was it like that?”

“I’ve never seen those movies so I don’t know.”

“Were there criminals and spies and babes in long dresses that were there for good luck?”

“Yeah,” Nick confirms with a shrug. “There were criminals and spies. Not sure about the babes though. Was pretty focused on my wife at the time.”

He shoots a look at Frankie. Standish looks at her too. Frankie stares straight ahead and tries not to remember anything that happened between her and Nick in Macau.

“So you won the whole tournament?” Standish asks.

“No. I needed to place second to get what we needed. So I got second.” He shoots another look at Frankie. “Felt like I won though.”

Frankie can’t resist the memories anymore. Brief flashes race through her mind—a stunning suite at the Ritz-Carlton; sipping champagne as she watched Nick wink at her and announce he was all-in; the feel of her red silk dress sliding down her body and pooling at her feet; Nick’s hands gliding over her revealed skin.

She wonders what Will is thinking, and hopes he’s not feeling as awful as she did every time she had to listen to Bianca walk down memory lane.

“That is so badass,” Standish breathes.

“First turn up ahead,” Jai reports. “Hang a left.”

“Any security teams down here yet, Jai?” Frankie asks.

“Negative. I’ll give you a heads up. They’ll be descending from the palazzo entrance, and the server room is between you and that entrance. You should get there with no issues. Though some
of you might want to stop fangirling and walk a little faster.”

“That was Jai’s version of telling you to shut the hell up,” Frankie says to Standish.

Standish glares at her. “Yeah, I got that.”

Nick laughs, and Frankie can’t help but smile.

The tunnel starts to slope downward. They walk in silence for a while, taking the first left, and then Nick holds his hand out.

“Stop,” he murmurs.

Frankie glances up ahead, tightening her grip on the gun in her hand, and spots what appears to be a cluster of small birds hovering a few feet off the ground.

“Is that…?” Standish says.


“You can’t,” Frankie says, stepping forward too. “If it doesn’t work and you’re unconscious, Standish and I can’t carry you back. I’ll go.”

He frowns. “Frankie—”

“Non-negotiable,” she says, brushing past him without waiting for his approval.

She holsters her gun and walks slowly toward the cloud of small drones that’s hovering about chest-height. She stops about a foot away and waits, holding her breath.

They float closer to her. They pause and linger for an interminably long twenty seconds or so. And then the cloud parts and they fly around her, leaving a foot of space on either side of her.

She exhales in relief.

“Francesca?” Jai says in her ear.

“It works,” Frankie reports. She grins. “Good job, Jai.”

“You can add homemade bug spray to your list of talents,” Standish adds jubilantly.


Frankie and the others press on. They wade through a tunnel with water that’s about waist high until the floor slopes upward and they’re back on dry stones. After that they take two more right turns. When they get to an intersection with several offshooting tunnels, they pause. The intersection itself is flooded, and the lights embedded just beneath the ceiling are reflecting an eerie glow off the surface of the water.

“That is some creepy ass shit,” Standish says.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Nick says.

Frankie swallows the urge to agree. It’s breathtaking. Will would love it.

“Second left,” Jai orders.
They wade through the water and into the tunnel Jai directed them toward. As they approach the final turn, Jai snaps, “Stop.”

They all freeze. Frankie slides in front of Standish. Nick slides in front of her.

“Three armed guards just took up residence outside the server room,” Jai reports. “Two more are headed your way.”

Nick looks at Frankie and holds up his gun. Frankie shakes her head, and gestures at their surroundings, spinning her finger in a circle. Nick pulls a silencer off his belt and holds it up. Frankie considers his suggestion. Then she lifts her right hand and pulls the garrote a few inches out of her wrist band. Nick smirks, nods, and holsters his gun.

Standish looks between them, obviously bewildered, but Frankie pretends she doesn’t notice. She grabs a fistful of his wetsuit and drags him ten yards back in the direction they came from. She pushes him up against the wall, brandishes her index finger in his face, and gives him a look that she hopes says *Move and I’ll kill you.*

Judging by the way his eyes widen and he nods, it does.

“Closing in,” Jai says. “They’re right next to each other so you’ll have to take them out silently and simultaneously.”

Nick glances at Frankie. She walks toward him, winding the garrote tightly around her left hand as she goes. When she stops beside him, he nods at her garrote and holds up one finger, then points at himself, tilts his head, and holds up two fingers. She nods. He flattens his back against the tunnel wall. Frankie scoots closer to him, her muscles humming in anticipation, and watches his hands. His hands will move first.

“Incoming,” Jai murmurs in her ear.

A moment later, Nick’s hands dart forward. One of them knocks the Glock out of an armed guard’s hand, and then flies upward to cover the man’s mouth. He grabs a fistful of the man’s tactical gear, picks him up like a rag doll, and deposits him directly in front of Frankie.

Frankie immediately lifts her garrote and slips it around the man’s neck. She kicks his right knee out and then yanks hard. He collapses onto his left knee and chokes on what she’s sure was going to be a warning yell. He gurgles, reaching up to claw at his neck as his face starts to turn red.

She tightens her hold and glances up at Nick. She watches as he catches the second guard rounding the corner, wraps his hands around the man’s head, and snaps his neck with brutal efficiency. The man hits the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Nick turns to look at Frankie. The man she’s strangling is struggling, his hands clawing wildly at his neck as his face turns purple. One of his hands drops to his belt, and Nick’s eyes suddenly flash with rage.

He darts forward, grabs the man’s hand, and then shoves it into his chest. The man’s body collapses back toward Frankie, his arms falling limply at his sides and his head sagging forward over the garrote. She loosens her hold on the garrote and lifts it away from the man’s neck. When she kneels him in the back, he collapses forward. She uses her foot to roll him onto his side and sees a knife sticking out of his chest. He must have been reaching for it when he reached for his belt. Nick saw it, and stabbed him with it.

She looks up at Nick. He gazes at her, his eyes flickering over her face, and then reaches up to
press his hand against her cheek. She curls her fingers around his forearm and taps him gently three times. He exhales, and she watches the rage evaporate out of him. He smiles, strokes his thumb over her cheek, and then drops his hand. Frankie tugs on the garrote, and it snaps back into the band around her wrist like a measuring tape.

Nick beckons Standish forward. He scurries toward them, and then all three of them peek around the corner. About sixty yards down the tunnel, there are three guards armed with AK-47s standing outside the closed door of the server room. Frankie and Nick share a look, and then they all lean back into the other tunnel.

“What now?” Standish whispers. “We lure them down here?”

“Don’t need to,” Nick says, pulling his gun out. “It’ll only take me three bullets.”

“No way,” Standish scoffs. “Not even you can shoot three guys from this distance in this lighting with only three bullets.”

Nick glances at Frankie as he screws a silencer on the end of his muzzle. “You want to tell him, or should I?”

Frankie shrugs. “Just show him. That usually shuts him up.”

Nick grins. He turns back toward the tunnel edge, lifts his gun, and takes aim. The watch she bought him glints in the dim lighting. He takes a deep breath, lets it out, and then pulls the trigger three times. The faint pfft of a silencer fills her ears.

Nick lowers his gun. Frankie looks over at Standish. He darts toward the tunnel entrance, gapes at the three dead men in the distance, and then whirls around to face Nick.

“How…?”

“Queen’s Medal for Champion Shots of the Air Forces,” Frankie answers for him. “And the most accurate shooter in MI6 history. He’s a better shot than me. And you know how good I am.”

“Holy shit, you are literally James Bond,” Standish says.

Nick smirks. “I’m way better than Bond.”

“You’ve got fourteen minutes until the system is back online,” Jai says irritably over comms. “Get moving.”

Nick and Frankie move in unison toward the server room. Standish hurries after them.

“Open the door, Will,” Frankie says once they’re ten yards away. She pulls her gun out.

“Opening now.”

The hermetic door opens with a click just as they stop in front of it. Nick flattens his back to the wall, nods at Frankie, and she pushes it open with her foot. They cross the threshold and move through the room in tandem, smooth and silent.

The server room is nondescript. Unlike the tunnel, it has cement floors and walls. There are five servers, just like Nick predicted, and they’re huge. A small computer terminal sits next to each. A round table and five chairs are situated just inside the door. Other than the equipment and furniture, it’s empty.
“Nobody home,” Nick says, lowering his gun.


Standish reaches for his belt and pulls out one of his SHiT sticks. “Time to make The Trust my bitch,” he mutters gleefully.

Frankie rolls her eyes.

“Three more guards descending from the palazzo now,” Jai reports. “I’ll let you know if they’re headed your way.”

“Better get the bodies in here,” Nick says to Frankie. “Don’t want the guards to see them and sound the alarm.”

Frankie holsters her weapons and follows him back out into the tunnel. She grabs the feet and he grabs the shoulders of the first guard. They haul him into the server room, and then head back out into the tunnel. She’s bending forward to grab the second guard when a thought strikes her.

“Shit,” she murmurs.

Nick looks up at her. “What?”

“Jai?” she says.

“Yes?” he says in her ear.

“We didn’t think about the bodies.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the EMPs make it look like the whole grid went out so it doesn’t look like the palazzo or the catacombs got targeted,” she explains. “But if the security detail doesn’t come back from patrolling once the system goes live again, they’ll know someone got into the server room.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Jai says. Frankie waits, but he doesn’t offer any further explanation. She frowns. He’s being vague and cryptic, which definitely isn’t unheard of for him, but he’s never vague and cryptic with her. Ever.

“Jai,” she says, her voice dropping into a warning.

“He didn’t have time to tell you, so don’t be mad at him,” Nick says, straightening.

Frankie frowns at him. “What are you talking about?”

“While I was out with Susan earlier, I had the same thought you did,” he answers, gesturing at the body between them. “If we have to take out guards, then we’ll be leaving a trail. Thanks to the additional security protocols, we can’t get in and out cleanly. So I found someone to blame the break-in on, and I used the program to plant some evidence. We’ll be fine.”

“Who’s taking the blame?” Will asks.

Nick smirks. “Don’t worry, Captain America. Nobody will get hurt.” He looks at Frankie. “I told Jai right before you and I left the palazzo with Standish. He didn’t get a chance to tell you. So don’t be mad at him. He didn’t break your honesty rule.”
Frankie folds her arms over her chest. “Who’d you set up?”

“Ever heard of Omega?”

“I KNEW IT!” Standish shouts from the server room. There’s a scampering sound, and then he appears in the doorway, his eyes wild. “I told you, Will! I told you Omega was real!”

“Omega’s not real,” Nick says with a smirk.

Standish frowns. “What? But you said…”

“I said I made it look like Omega broke in. That way Ollerman will be chasing a ghost instead of your team.”

“A ghost?” Standish repeats.

“A ghost,” Nick echoes. “He’s not real.” He looks at Frankie. “I figured you’d want this to be bloodless.” He glances down at the dead body between them. “Well, as bloodless as possible.”

Frankie blinks at him in surprise.

He smiles at her. “I told you,” he says, his voice dropping into a soft and insistent tone. “I’m trying.”

Frankie’s heart shoots up into her throat. Nick gazes at her steadily. Standish glances between them. “The tension is thiiiick in this tunnel,” he murmurs.

“Go do your damn job, Standish,” Frankie snaps at him. “We’re on a deadline.”

Standish crinkles his nose. “Somebody forgot to eat her pre-mission snack,” he mutters as he wanders back into the server room.

Frankie and Nick are suddenly alone in the hallway. Nick is still watching her with that familiar look of affection and longing on his face. Frankie clears her throat and bends forward to grab the dead guy’s feet.

“Let’s go,” she orders.

Nick grabs the dead man’s shoulders dutifully and they carry him inside. They set him down, go out for the third, and then set him inside the server room next to the others. Nick watches her the whole time. Frankie Pretends she doesn’t notice.

When they’re finished, she takes up residence by the door with her gun in her hand. Nick stands across from her on the other side of the doorway. For a long moment, the only sound in the room is Standish typing furiously and humming a song that sounds an awful lot like Taylor Swift’s Bad Blood.

Eventually, Nick holds his hand out. Frankie looks down and sees a stick of gum sitting in his palm. A dozen memories of him offering her gum right before they did something incredibly dangerous bubble up.

When she looks up at him, he smiles. “Don’t be stubborn, baby,” he says. “A habit’s a habit.”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t chewed gum in the field for years.”

“Make you miss me?”
“It made me remember things I want to forget.”

Hurt shivers across his face. He lowers his hand, and Frankie almost feels bad. Almost.

“Francesca, the three guards are headed your way,” Jai reports. “Should reach you in two minutes. If you leave now, you can be gone before they get to the server room.”

“Can’t leave now,” Standish says. “Still working on the last SHIT stick.”

“How long?” Nick asks.

“One minute,” Standish replies.

Nick looks at Frankie. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Quebec,” they say in unison.

Nick grins and pulls out one of the flashbangs she gave him earlier.

“What’s Quebec mean?” Susan asks over comms.

“We lure them in with noise, toss a flashbang, then incapacitate them,” Frankie replies.

“Scream?” Nick asks her. “Gunshot?”

Frankie shrugs. “We can do both.”

She aims her gun out into the hall and squeezes the trigger. The sound of the resulting shot reverberates loudly off of the stone walls of the tunnel. Standish screams in surprise and hits the floor, his hands covering his head. Nick snorts.

Frankie smirks at Standish. “That scream was operatic. Taylor and Ariana would be so proud.”

“Shut up,” Standish mutters, getting back to his feet. “I hate you. I want a new mom.”

“Fine by me.”

“Closing in on you,” Jai reports over comms. “Forty yards. Thirty.”

“Ready?” Nick asks.

“Standish, cover your ears and close your eyes,” she says.

Standish rolls his eyes but obeys.

Frankie nods at Nick. “Go.”

He tosses the flashbang, they both take cover, and a moment later there’s a burst of light and a deafening boom out in the tunnel. When she looks up, Nick nods at her and then lunges out of the server room. Frankie follows him.

Two of the men are on their hands and knees next to each other, their eyes screwed shut tightly as they clutch their ears. The third is a few feet away, and he’s pawing at his chest.

Nick quickly dispatches the two men who are side by side by putting bullets in the back of their heads. Frankie strides toward the third, her gun ready. He scrambles backward, but it’s just instinct—his eyes are closed so there’s no way he can see her. She lifts her gun and buries a bullet in his
forehead. He dies instantly.

And then the wand lights all along the tunnel walls suddenly change from white to blinking red.

“Shit,” Jai mutters in her ear. “Shit. *Fuck.*”

“Jai?” she asks.

“Ummm why is everything flashing red?” Standish hollers. “Flashing red usually means something bad.”

“Get him out of that room, Frankie,” Jai says. She can hear the panic in his voice. “Now.”

“What? Why?”

“One of those guards triggered the flood protocol.”

“What?” Frankie demands, turning on her heel to sprint toward the server room door.

“You have to get Standish out of the server room before the door closes, but don’t go in there yourself!”

“Standish!” Nick roars, striding toward the door.

“One second,” Standish says from the back of the room. “Just need to type in this last string of code…”

“Flood protocol overrides the server room door, Standish!” Jai bellows. “Get the hell out of there or you’ll be trapped!”

Standish slams his index finger down on the keyboard one last time and then bolts toward Frankie and Nick who are hovering in the doorway. He’s two steps away when a faint clicking sound emanates from the door and it starts to swing shut.

Standish leaps forward. Frankie’s heart stops in her chest. He’s not going to make it.

Nick reaches across the threshold, grabs a fistful of Standish’s wetsuit, and yanks him through the doorway and out into the tunnel a fraction of a second before the door slams closed. It locks with a click and a hiss as Standish hits the ground at Frankie’s feet with a grunt.

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “That was close.” He gets to his feet and looks at Nick. “Thanks man.”

“Flooding starts now,” Jai says in Frankie’s ear.

There’s a grating metal sound, and then all of a sudden black holes about the size of basketballs appear on the walls beneath the lights. The tunnel floor and walls seem to rumble, and then water bursts out of the holes with a considerable amount of force.

“Run!” Frankie shouts, shoving Standish down the tunnel.

All three of them bolt forward, their path illuminated by the flashing lights that are casting an eerie scarlet glow. The floor is rapidly being covered by water.

“How long, Jai?” Frankie asks, water splashing up to hit her face as she runs.

“The whole tunnel system will be completely flooded in five minutes.”
“We can’t make it back to the hotel,” Nick says. “That flooded intersection of tunnels will fill faster and we’ll get stuck. What’s the closest exit to us, Jai?”

“The church. Two minutes.”

“Wait, the one with the gala?” Standish squeaks. “Blake is there.”


“Hang a right up ahead.”

They skid around the corner, water flying, and continue sprinting. The water is already up to their ankles.

“Holy shit it’s filling fast,” Standish mutters.

“There’s a pipe every ten fucking feet and we’re underneath a floating city,” Nick replies. “We might have less than five minutes.”

“The church entrance is walled off,” Susan says. She sounds worried. “What are they going to do when they get there?”

“Frankie has charges in her belt,” Jai replies. “Second right up ahead, Francesca.”

They sprint around the corner. Frankie cuts the turn too tight, and ends up running beneath one of the open pipes. She’s immediately drenched. She flicks her wet hair out of her eyes and keeps running. The water is up to her shins, and it’s getting harder to run, but she pushes on.

“How far out are they?” Will asks after a moment.

“Forty-five seconds. Francesca, take that left.”

Frankie takes a hard left behind Nick. Standish stumbles, and Frankie reaches out to steady him.

“Wasn’t made for this,” Standish pants, falling in step next to her. “Too much running.”

“The door should be in a crypt up ahead on your right,” Jai says in Frankie’s ear. “Will, open door three.”

They race forward and then burst into a small side room that’s about the size of Frankie’s bedroom. It seems to be filling faster than the tunnels because the water is now above her knees.

“Shit, that’s a tomb,” Standish says, recoiling from the stone coffin that’s not far from the door. “Get me the hell out of here.”

“Will, open the door,” Frankie says.

“It’s open,” Will replies.

Frankie shakes her head. “It’s not open.”

“Give it to me,” Jai snaps, probably to Will. A beat passes, and then he says, “It’s open, Francesca.”

“It’s not open, Jai,” she says, her temper flaring. “I’m looking right at it.”
Nick wades toward the door. He runs his hand along the edge of the frame that’s embedded in the stone, and then presses his ear against the metal. “Press it again, Chase.”

The door still doesn’t open.

“It’s clicking,” Nick says. “It just won’t open.”

“Of course,” Jai hisses. “It’s a safety feature. It won’t open when it senses water.”

“Can you override it?” Nick asks, straightening.

“I got this, Jai,” Standish says, reaching into his belt and pulling out his phone. “Give me one minute.”

“Hurry, Standish,” Will says.

Standish furrows his eyebrows as his thumbs fly over his phone. Frankie and Nick share a look. The water is almost up to her waist now. She can feel panic eating away at the edges of her mind, but she pushes it away. They’ll be fine. They’re always fine.

“Get the charges out, Francesca,” Jai says.

Frankie pulls the four small charges out of her belt and wades toward Nick and the door.

“Nick, do you have that steel cylinder I showed you?” Jai asks.

Nick shoves his hand into one of the pouches on his belt and pulls out a metal cylinder that’s about the size of a wine cork. “Yes.”

“Francesca, when the door opens, place those charges in a two-by-two square on the wall,” Jai coaches. “Nick, put that cylinder on the floor in the doorway so the door doesn’t slam closed from the blast. It should drill into the stone and stay put if you press the button on the side. Close the door against the cylinder to help shield you from the blast and then step back. The entrance of the crypt should be far enough, but don’t go out into the tunnel. There’s a current.”

“Will the charges work if they’re wet?” Frankie asks, looking down at the squares in her palm.

“Yes,” Jai replies.

Frankie looks over her shoulder. “Standish?”

“Almost done,” he says. He’s holding his phone up at eye level.


Frankie looks at him.

“I’ve got a grenade,” he says. “Last resort.”

Frankie nods, but she hopes it doesn’t come to that. Jai designs his charges to focus on localized points. Grenades aren’t like that. They could end up caving in the tunnel and killing themselves.

“Standish,” she says again. She can feel the water rising against her stomach, and her panic is starting to rise with it.

“Done,” he says. He keeps typing for a few seconds, and then there’s a hissing sound and the door
finally cracks open.

Nick lunges for it. He grasps the handle and pulls, his muscles straining against the force of the water to open it. Frankie hurries forward when he’s done. Nick sucks in a deep breath and ducks beneath the water. She presses the charges onto the stone wall in a two-by-two square and then steps back.

A beat passes, and then Nick bursts back to the surface. He shakes his head, water flying from his hair, and then puts his hand on her back.

“Go.”

She moves toward the tunnel entrance, but the water is at her chest now and it’s more like swimming than walking. She casts a glance at Standish, and sees his expression taut with fear as he paddles toward the entrance.

“Look on the bright side, Standish,” she says. “You’re definitely going to get a raise.”

“Yeah,” he says. He doesn’t crack a smile.

When she’s a few feet from the tunnel, she can see the current Jai mentioned. It’s stronger than she expected, and she has no idea why the hell there’s a current down here, but she doesn’t have time to think about the science of it. Jai can explain it to her later. The lights are still flashing, casting an eerie red glow over the top of the water, which is rising rapidly and dangerously close to her chin.

“Come here,” Frankie says, grasping Standish’s arm and tugging him up against the archway that leads into the tunnel. She presses him into the wall and then huddles close to him, her chest pressed against his back and her arms on either side of his body to hold him in place. She wraps her hands around the edges of the archway and tries to get a good grip, but the stones are slippery beneath the water.

She feels Nick moving behind her, wrapping his left arm around her waist tightly and then lifting his right arm to rest his hand against the stones above hers. His bicep presses against her cheek, and she knows it’s because he’s trying to shield her head from the blast.

“I got you,” he says in her ear. “Trigger the blast, Jai.”

“I can’t. The remote is in your belt, Francesca.”

“Fuck,” she swears.

Nick slides his hand along her waist. “Where?”

“To the left.” His hand moves. She’s standing on the very tips of her toes now, and she lifts her chin above the water. “One more over. That one.”

She can feel him reaching into the pocket. “Got it,” he says. “Standish? You good?”

“Yeah.”

“Hang on, baby,” Nick murmurs in her ear as he wraps his arm around her again. “Three, two…”

Frankie closes her eyes and turns her face away from the explosives. She hears the blast, a deep and almost deafening boom, and then she feels it—an incredible amount of force in the form of a tidal wave of water. She feels Nick’s arm flex around her, his chest hard against her back, and then
she feels Standish’s body go suddenly and alarmingly limp against her.

She opens her eyes just in time to see his head dip beneath the surface of the water.

“Standish,” she calls, letting go of the wall to reach for him.

He doesn’t answer. She can feel his body slipping between her fingers. She tries to grab him again but she can’t grasp his wetsuit and the current is yanking him away from her. Terror squeezes her heart.

“Standish!” she shouts.

The current sucks him out into the tunnel, his body whipping through the water like a rag doll, and Frankie does the only thing she can—she lunges out of Nick’s grasp and goes after him.
Forty-Three

There’s a moment, right after her fingers close around one of Standish’s arms, when Frankie realizes she’s going to die.

She’s got one minute, maybe less, before the entire tunnel is filled with water. There’s only one way out, and it’s back in the crypt she just willingly swam away from. Everything is dark, and the flashing red lights are suddenly blinding, and the current is pulling her under. She can’t tell which way the crypt is. She can’t even tell which way is up. She can’t breathe.

Water fills her mouth. It’s going to fill her lungs soon. She’s going to drown beneath the streets of Venice and she never even got to wear that stupid Christmas sweater for Will.

Her body lurches backward abruptly. She tightens her hold on Standish’s arm. She’s not going to let him go. She said she wouldn’t leave him.

And then, suddenly, her body shoots upward and her face breaks the surface of the water.

There’s not much room between her and the ceiling, but it’s enough. She coughs and chokes and then gulps in some air.

“Swim, baby,” Nick’s voice says. “I need you to swim.”

“Standish,” she gasps.

“I’ve got him,” Nick says. Standish’s body tugs against her grip, and she can tell it’s Nick pulling and not the water because he’s moving against the current. “Let him go and swim.”

Frankie obeys. She swims forward blindly. Nick is behind her, shoving her forward, and she can’t tell whether she’s moving because of her own efforts or because he’s pushing her.

She can see a tiny sliver of yellow light up ahead, and she realizes that it must be the door. She swims harder. She reaches out, and her hands close around the edge of the door. She pulls, but the door doesn’t budge. It’s only open a few inches. She’s guessing it’s resting against the steel cylinder Nick drilled into the floor, but something is preventing it from swinging open any farther.

“Nick,” she gasps.

He’s at her side in an instant. Standish is floating behind him, his nose centimeters from the ceiling.

“I can’t open it,” she says. She can hear the panic in her voice, and she can see it in Nick’s eyes as his face is lit with flashing red from the tunnel lights.


Frankie latches onto Standish with her right hand and wraps the fingers of her left around the door. Nick takes a deep breath and then ducks beneath the surface of the water.

As soon as he disappears, Frankie feels a sudden and terrible sense of desperation. Standish isn’t moving, and she’s trying to keep his face pointed upward so he can breathe, but it’s hard to hold on to him and the door.

“Will?” she says. “Jai?”
Neither of them answer. There’s no sound at all in her ear. She must have lost her comm in the current.

The water is still rising. The lights are still blinking red. The ceiling is getting extremely close to her face, and even though she can see through the three-inch crack in the doorway that there’s a hole in the wall leading into what must be the church crypt, she can’t get to it. She’s so close to freedom and safety and oxygen, and she can’t get there.

Nick bursts to the surface. “There’s debris from the explosion blocking the door.”

“Can you move it?”

“I’m trying. Don’t let go if the door moves.”

“Hurry, Nick.”

And then he’s gone again, and there’s only an inch of space and air left, and Frankie sucks in a giant breath before it disappears.

It’s quiet under the water, and that terrifies her. She’d give anything to hear Will or Jai talking in her ear. She feels the current tugging on Standish again, and she pulls him closer and wraps her arm around his chest. She can’t see anything. It’s too dark, even with the lights still blinking red. She keeps her eyes on the sliver of light spilling through the crack in the doorway. It’ll get bigger when Nick finally moves the debris. The door will open, and she can shove Standish through the hole in the wall and then follow him, and everything will be fine.

The sliver of light doesn’t get bigger.

Her lungs are burning. Her vision is turning into black spots.

Come on, Nick.

It happens fast. Her lungs are aching, screaming for air, and she’s trying not to descend completely into panic when the sliver of light explodes in size and nearly blinds her. She feels something shove her forward. She takes Standish with her, her arm tight like a vise around his chest, and they tumble through the hole together and hit water and then a stone floor.

The landing hurts like hell and pries Standish loose from her grip. Water fills her mouth and she chokes. A pair of large hands curl around her waist, and she feels her body being turned and pulled from the water and into chilly air.

“Frankie,” Nick’s voice says. He’s breathing raggedly. “Are you okay? Look at me.”

She coughs and sputters and opens her eyes.

There’s terror written clearly across Nick’s face. He brushes her wet hair back and curls his hands around her face, bending forward so that he’s eye level. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Can you breathe?”

She nods and presses her hand against his chest to try and find her equilibrium again. She feels like the room is spinning. Her lungs are on fire. “Standish,” she gasps.

They both turn toward the floor. Standish is floating face down in the water next to them. Nick lets go of her immediately and bends forward to roll Standish over onto his back. Frankie clutches Nick’s arm before he can pick Standish up.
“Wait,” she rasps.

“I got him.”

“Let me,” she says hoarsely. “Get the cylinder. Close the door or the crypt will flood. Go.”

She shoves him toward the hole in the wall, where water is pouring out of the catacombs and into the crypt. The water level in the room is already higher than it was ten seconds ago. Nick lunges obediently toward the door.

Frankie grabs Standish. She scans the room. There’s a tomb nearby, a stone casket that’s about four feet off the ground and not yet covered by water. She pulls Standish toward it by his wrist, his body floating along the surface of the water. When she gets there it takes some effort, but she manages to lift the top half of his body onto the stone, and then his legs. She clambers up after him and tilts his chin back, leaning forward so her cheek is just above his mouth. There’s no exhale over her skin. His chest isn’t moving.

He’s not breathing.

She immediately starts CPR. She’s done it a million times, but it’s never seemed as important as it does right now. There’s emotion thick in her throat and hot in her eyes, but she clenches her jaw and moves methodically.

“Come on, Standish,” she mutters.

He doesn’t respond. She keeps going. There’s a loud bang, and she looks up. Nick climbs out of the hole in the wall a second later. The water has stopped.

“Door’s shut,” he says.

Frankie leans down to blow more air into Standish’s lungs. Nick wades toward her.

“Come on,” Frankie says through gritted teeth when she leans back to start compressions again. “Don’t do this to me.”

Standish’s head tilts back and his body seems to seize. He makes a terrible gurgling noise, and then water shoots out of his mouth and floods down the sides of his face.

Nick stops next to the tomb, and he helps Frankie turn Standish onto his side as the younger agent coughs and spits up water. His fingers curl around the edge of the tomb.

Frankie pats his back. “Cough it all out,” she orders.

He coughs and then vomits. He’s holding the stone so hard his knuckles are white. Frankie stops patting him on the back and starts rubbing small circles instead. He groans and heaves but nothing else comes up.

“Frankie,” Nick says quietly.

“What?”

Nick gently grabs Standish by the shoulders and guides him into a sitting position. Standish’s head lolls forward, and Nick lifts his chin just enough for Frankie to see a wound on Standish’s forehead. It’s bleeding.

“Get the med tape in one of my pockets,” she tells Nick, pressing her forearm against Standish’s
head so that her wetsuit is against the wound. Standish recoils from her touch and whimpers.

“Stay,” Frankie orders, curling her other hand around one of Standish’s shoulders. “You’re bleeding. It needs pressure.”

Nick starts sorting through the pouches on her belt. Standish groans. One of his hands claws feebly at his chest.

“Stop panicking,” Frankie tells him as gently as she can. “We’re safe. We’re not going to run out of air. Try to breathe slowly.”

It takes a second, but Standish obeys. He inhales and exhales a few breaths. She looks up at Nick. He’s got the roll of medical tape in his hand, and is folding up a long portion of it to create a makeshift bandage. When he’s done, Frankie lowers her arm. He presses the folded tape against Standish’s wound. Standish hisses.

“Hold still,” Frankie orders. She takes the roll of tape from Nick, and then winds it tightly around Standish’s skull like a headband to keep the pressure on the wound. It’s not ideal, and it’s definitely not sterile, but the wound needs pressure and Standish needs both his hands and this is the best she can do.

When she’s finished, she drops her hands. Standish finally opens his eyes. He glances at Nick, and then he meets Frankie’s gaze.

“Thanks,” he rasps.

“You owe me a drink,” she says.

He smiles weakly. “Buy you two.”

Frankie smiles, but she can’t ignore how awful he looks. His arm is trembling as he lifts it to wipe the back of his hand across his mouth. His face is pale. His pupils are dilated. Worry flares in her chest.

“We have to move,” Nick says, touching her shoulder. “Security’s on the way.”

Frankie frowns at him. “How do you know that?”

Nick frowns too. “What do you mean, how do I…?” He reaches out and pushes her wet hair away from her ear. “You lost your comm?”

“Yeah. Somewhere back in the tunnel.”

“Take mine,” Standish says, fishing it out of his ear and holding it out to her. “Say something to Will and Jai before they have dual aneurysms.”

Frankie slips the comm in her ear. “Will? Jai?”

“Frankie,” Will sighs, relief clear in his voice. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. There’s security?”

“A team of seven,” Jai reports. “At their current pace, they should get to you in ninety seconds. You need to incapacitate them and then I’ll guide you from there. Susan and Will are on their way to you now.”
“You’re alone?” Frankie demands.

“Someone had to fix the wall,” Jai replies. “I’m fine.”

“Will—” Frankie starts.

“We don’t have time for this,” Nick says, grabbing her wrist. “He’ll be fine. We have to move.”

Frankie huffs in annoyance but she knows he’s right. She slides off the tomb and lands with a splash. Nick helps Standish down, and then they wade through the thigh-deep water toward the only exit in the room, an archway that frames a stone staircase leading upward. They have to climb three wide steps to get up to the raised platform where the archway sits. The water is only ankle-deep on the platform. Nick flattens himself against the wall on one side of the archway, and Frankie heads for the other with Standish in tow.

She presses Standish’s back against the wall and brandishes a finger at him, “You do exactly what I tell you,” she says. “No fucking around. You hear me?”

“My head hurts too bad to fuck around,” Standish says with a grimace.

Frankie feels worry flare up in her chest again. She’d bet her favorite gun he’s got a concussion, maybe something worse. She shoots a look at Nick. He shakes his head at her as if to say We can’t focus on that right now. And he’s right. Again. She hates when he’s right.

“Closing in,” Jai says.

Frankie can hear a door creak open at the top of the stairs, and then the sound of footsteps smacking against stone. She pulls a switchblade from her belt and flicks it open. Nick has a knife in his hand too. They both stand frozen for a beat, their hands ready, and then everything happens in a blur.

Nick grabs the first man that steps into the crypt. He catches him by his suit jacket, drags him through the water, and slits his throat.

Frankie takes the next guy. He’s got his gun raised and pointed toward the catacomb door, so she steps up to his side and slams her fist down onto his hands. He fumbles the gun. She darts her left hand out to catch it before it falls into the water, and then jams her switchblade into his carotid.

The next three men come all at once. Nick sucker punches the first one in the face. Frankie yanks her knife free, swivels, and kicks the second one in the crotch. The third man aims his gun at Nick, who ducks behind the man he just punched and uses him as a human shield from a barrage of bullets. Using the gun she caught, Frankie kills the man shooting at Nick and the man bent before her and clutching his crotch.

“Not bad for my non-dominant hand,” she muses.

“Showoff,” Nick says as he lets go of the now-dead man he was holding as a shield.

He pulls his gun out and puts a bullet in the forehead of the next man who comes charging into the crypt. Frankie darts forward, catches his body before it falls into the water, and uses it as a shield from a sudden spray of bullets that are coming from the stairwell. Nick ducks behind the wall. Frankie flips the knife in her hand, glances up to take aim, and throws. The blade turns end over end and sinks into the final guard’s throat. He clutches his neck with wide eyes, tumbles down the stairs, and lands at her feet with a splash.
Frankie drops the guy she was holding. She bends forward, pulls her knife out of the other man’s neck, and wipes it on his shirt. When she straightens, Nick is grinning at her.

She gives him a look. “What?”

“Nothing,” he says.

She knows what he’s thinking even though he won’t say it. She rolls her eyes and holds out the gun she stole. “Take this, Standish.”

When Standish wades forward and takes it from her without making an obnoxious comment about how easily she and Nick just killed seven people, she knows he must feel awful.

“Where to, Jai?” she asks, putting her switchblade away and reaching for the gun at her hip.

“When that team doesn’t report all clear, they’ll send more,” Jai replies. “You need to get out of there. Go up the stairs. The door opens into a vestibule. The caterers are in the room on the right, so go into the room on your left. It’s a storage room. We might be able to find something that can help you get out.”

Frankie takes off up the stairs with Nick and Standish in pursuit. She pauses at the top and pushes one of the doors open a crack. There are four waiters holding silver trays and standing in the vestibule. They’re huddled close together and talking worriedly. Frankie’s willing to bet they’re discussing the loud boom and foundation-shaking rattle that, unbeknownst to them, was her and Nick blowing a hole in the crypt wall.

Frankie closes the door and turns back toward Nick and Standish. “Group of waiters. They don’t look like they’re going anywhere anytime soon.”

Nick glances down at his wetsuit. “Can’t run any of the usual plays dressed like this.”

Frankie bites her lip. He’s right. “There’s a chance they saw the security team go down there,” she points out.

Nick studies her for a moment, his eyebrows furrowed, and then he says, “You want to pull a switch like we did in Bucharest.”

“You got a better idea?”

“Nope,” he says and takes off down the stairs.

“Where’s he going?” Standish asks, his voice a little slurred.

“To get some clothes.” Frankie frowns and steps closer to him. “Can you see me?”

“What kind of question is that?” Standish asks, but it lacks all his usual sass.

“Am I blurry?” she rephrases.

“Sort of,” Standish mumbles, lifting a shoulder. “But my contacts are messed up.”

“Will,” she prompts.

“Yeah?”

“Plot a route to the hospital.”
“Frankie,” Standish starts.

She holds up her hand. Standish goes silent.

“Does he have comms in?” Will asks in her ear.

“No.”

“How bad is he?”

“Nearly drowned, bleeding from the head, and I’d bet my favorite gun he’s got a concussion,” she says, but she says it in Spanish so Standish won’t understand. “He hasn’t said something obnoxious yet and I don’t like it.”

“Not fair,” Standish mutters grumpily. “Susan, you gotta teach me Spanish.”

“That was too fast, Frankie,” Will says. “All I got was bleeding and that you don’t like something.”

“Nearly drowned, bleeding from the head, concussion,” Susan translates. “We’ll get a route to the hospital, Franks.”

“Yep, we’re on it,” Will agrees. He sounds worried.

Nick appears at the top of the stairs with two fistfuls of clothes before Frankie can say anything.

“So who’s playing prisoner?”

“Standish,” Frankie replies. “He looks the part.”

“Hey,” Standish says weakly.

Nick throws a suit jacket and pants at Frankie. She pulls the jacket on over her wetsuit and buttons it, and then tugs on the pants. They’re huge on her.

“Come here,” Nick says, beckoning her forward.

She obeys. He pulls the wristband from her arm, tugs the garrote out, and weaves it through her belt loops and ties it at her waist. He rearranges the jacket to cover the knot. Frankie tests it out, moving around and lifting her knees, and the makeshift belt holds.

“Smart,” she admits.

He winks at her.

Frankie pulls her hair back into the neatest ponytail she can manage while Nick puts on his suit jacket and pants. The jacket is tight across his shoulders. She wonders if it’ll rip down the back. She’s seen it happen before.

“Gotta move,” Jai says over comms. “HQ just asked the crypt team to report.”

“Can I ditch Standish’s belt?”

“Yeah. I put all the good stuff in yours.”

“Come here, Standish,” Frankie says. She takes his gun from him and shoves it into her belt. Then she unclips his belt and leaves it in a pile on the floor.
“Hands behind your back,” she tells him. “Nick and I are going to pretend to be security. Your job is to look as dazed as possible. Won’t be hard. Don’t say anything. That might be hard.”

She’s trying to get a rise out of him so he’ll act normal. It only half works.

“Ha ha,” he says halfheartedly.

Worry flares in Frankie’s chest again, but she ignores it. “Let’s go.”

She grabs Standish’s arm, Nick grabs the other, and they head for the door.

“My lead?” Nick asks.

“Football coach voice,” Frankie replies.

Nick grins, and then they burst out of the double doors with Standish between them. The group of waiters whip around, their eyes wide and terrified.

“Get out of here!” Nick bellows. “This is a compromised area! Get in that room and don’t come out!”

The waiters all scurry into the room where the caterers are set up. Once they’re gone, Frankie and Nick veer to the left and into the storage room. They hurry inside, and then close the door.

“Wait,” Standish says. “Why didn’t we just go for the exit?”

“Because civilians are too scared to notice that we’re not actually security,” Nick replies. “But the security guys at the front entrance won’t make that mistake. We won’t make it out like this.”

“So what now?” Standish asks.

“What’s in the room?” Jai asks over comms.

“Cleaning supplies,” Frankie replies. “And a cleaning cart with a trash can.”

Standish frowns at her, confused, and then seems to realize she’s not talking to him. “Man, this no comms thing sucks,” he mutters.


Frankie shoves aside the cart laden with cleaning supplies and a large trash can mounted on the end. She studies a wall full of shelves. “Lots of tourist crap which we could use on any night but tonight,” she reports. “Stupid fundraiser.”

“No custodian jumpsuits?” Jai says hopefully.

“No,” Frankie answers.

“I found a hat,” Standish says, holding up a hat that’s embroidered with a cleaning company logo.

“I got a lost and found,” Nick says. He’s crouched by a box near the door. “We’ve got multiple coats.”

“Anything I can wear?” Frankie asks.

Nick holds out a long wool coat. Frankie takes it from him, and then immediately recoils. “Shit
that smells bad.”

Standish covers his nose. “And I thought my headache couldn’t get any worse.”

“We’ve got a navy polo,” Nick reports. “Big enough to fit me.”

“Who the hell leaves their polo at a church?” Standish wonders.

Frankie grins at him, because it’s the first Standish-like thing he’s said since they came out of the catacombs.

“I could put on the polo and the hat and push the cart,” Nick says, ignoring Standish. He holds up a purse. “Frankie can blend in long enough.”

“What about me?” Standish asks.

“You go in the trash can,” Nick and Frankie say in unison.

Standish crinkles his nose. “No way.”

“You have a medical tape headband,” Frankie says. “You’ll attract attention if you’re out in the open.”

“So will you in that stinky-ass coat,” Standish points out.

“A second security team is on the way,” Jai reports over comms.

“A second team is on the way,” Frankie echoes for Standish’s sake. “Nick, play custodian. I’ll play invisible woman. Standish, get in the trash can.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Frankie interrupts. “The longer we stay here, the more likely it is that we run into Blake’s special forces security detail. You’re in no condition to defend yourself, and Nick and I can only do so much.”

“ Frankie—”

“Listen to your mom and get in the damn trash can,” Nick says.

Standish pouts but he shuffles toward the trash can.

“Wait until the second team goes down the stairs to the crypt,” Jai says. “Block the door and let me know when you’re done. I’ll kill the lights and guide you toward an emergency exit so you have more of a chance to slip through unnoticed. Frankie, have your lock pick set ready.”

“If they can’t see in the dark, neither can we,” Nick points out.

“Ye of little faith,” Frankie accuses. “What’s in the belts, Jai?”

“There are two pairs of glasses folded into plastic cases in one of your back pockets,” Jai replies. “They have night vision applications.”


Frankie grins at him as she pulls her lock pick set out of her belt. “You should have known better.”
“I really should have,” Nick admits.

“We’re two minutes out from the exit you showed us, Jai,” Susan says. “Is that the one you’re taking them to?”

“Yes,” Jai answers.

Frankie rips her suit jacket off and then realizes Standish still isn’t in the trash can.

“Standish, get in that damn trash can or I’m going to give you another head wound.”

“Fine, but now you owe me a drink,” Standish mutters, but he finally gets in.

Frankie pulls the stinky coat on with a grimace and then ties the belt around her waist. Despite it’s smell, it’s a pretty nice coat. She should be able to briefly blend in to the crowds if, for some reason, Jai can’t cut the power. She slips the lock pick set into her pocket. Then she smooths a hand over her hair and reaches for the purse.

When she looks up, all she can see of Standish is his face from the nose up.

“This is like middle school all over again,” he says morosely.

Frankie lifts her eyebrows. “Did bullies shove you in trash cans?”

“And lockers,” he says. “And my Spanish teacher’s storage closet one time.”

“No wonder he didn’t learn Spanish,” Susan muses.

“When we’re done here, give me their names,” Frankie tells Standish. “I’ll pay them a visit.”

“You’re not doing that,” Will says.

“Yes I am,” Frankie argues. “I’m the only one who gets to shove my nerd in the trash can.”

Standish lifts his eyebrows. “Your nerd?”

Frankie rolls her eyes and waves him off. “Don’t make it a thing.”

“Frankie, give me the garrote,” Nick says, holding out his hand. “I’ll use it to secure the door.”

Frankie undoes the knot on the garrote that’s holding her pants up and hands it to him. She slips the pants off and tosses them in the corner, and then turns back to Standish.

“There are two plastic cases in a pouch on the back of my belt,” she says, lifting the back of her coat. “Grab them.”

Standish roots around in one of the pouches on her belt, and then says, “Here.”

Frankie takes the cases from him and flings off the lids. She pulls a set of folded eyeglasses out of each container. She unfolds one carefully, and then slides them onto her face. “How do the glasses work, Jai?”

“Top right frame. Tap once for night vision, twice for enhanced vision.”

Frankie taps the frames once, and immediately the glasses switch to night vision.

“What do they do?” Standish wonders.
“Night vision,” Frankie replies.

He lifts his eyebrows. “Do they work?”

“Of course they work,” Frankie says, tapping the frames back to neutral. “Jai made them.” She unfolds Nick’s pair and turns back to Standish. “Get all the way in.”

“It’s going to smell,” Standish complains.

“I’m wearing a coat that smells like death. Get in the damn trash can.”

Standish huffs but obeys. Frankie sets the lid on top, but leaves it slightly off-kilter so that there’s a crack for air.

“Jai?” Nick asks from behind her. Frankie holds his glasses over her shoulder, and he takes them.

“Where’s the security team?”

“On their way to you now,” Jai says. “Twenty seconds.”

Frankie slips her gun into the purse and then slides her arm through the handles so that it’s balanced in the crook of her elbow and easily accessible. Then she opens the door a crack to peek outside. She waits, watching the far end of the vestibule, and sure enough, a team of four men in suits come tearing around the corner. They sprint across the marble floor, guns in their hands, and disappear down into the crypt.

“Go,” Frankie says, flinging open the door.

Nick sprints out of the storage room and toward the double doors. As he winds the garrote around the handles so they won’t open, Frankie wheels the janitor’s cart out of the storage room and into the vestibule.

“Door secure,” Nick reports. He jogs toward Frankie, and grabs the handle of the cart. “Cut the lights, Jai.”

The room immediately goes black, and more than a few screams echo out of the room with all the caterers. Frankie taps the frames of her glasses. Night vision mode switches on.

“Good?” she says to Nick.

“Good,” he repeats. “Tell us where to go, Jai.”

“Head in the direction the security team came from.”

Nick takes off for the far end of the vestibule, and Frankie follows at a brisk pace. Nick uses the end of the cart to shove the double doors open, and Frankie hears a faint squeak from inside the trash can.

“Hush, Standish,” she hisses.

“Tell Vin Diesel this ain’t Fast and Furious,” Standish hisses back.

Frankie rolls her eyes but doesn’t respond. She’s glad he’s acting like Standish again.

They’re in a hallway. Up ahead, there’s a group of waiters fumbling blindly along the walls and toward them. They’re muttering about how they can’t see anything in the pitch black. Frankie slides behind Nick and lets his broad shoulders shield her from them as he clears his throat and says
“Excuse me” in Italian.

“Almost out of the hall, Jai. What now?” she whispers when the waiters are out of earshot.

“The doors will open into the lobby. Take a left. Look for a hallway with a single door that’s marked Authorized Personnel Only. You’ll have to pick the lock, Frankie.”

“Only take me thirty seconds,” she says, slipping her hand into her coat pocket to wrap her fingers around the lock pick set.

“Probably less,” Nick says at the same time Will says, “It won’t take that long.”

There’s an awkward pause, and then Jai continues.

“Once you’re in, you’ll pass a bunch of offices. At the end of the hall is an emergency door. It opens out onto a small dock. Will and Susan will be there in two minutes. The door will set off an alarm, so don’t open it until I confirm they’re ready for you.”

“Roger that,” Frankie reports.

“Heading into the lobby now,” Nick says. He uses the cart to shove the next set of doors open. Standish doesn’t make a sound this time. Frankie finds herself worrying about him again. What if his condition somehow got worse and he’s unconscious inside that trash can?

She doesn’t have time to dwell on her worry. The lobby is in complete and utter chaos. Men dressed in tuxedos and women wearing evening gowns and draped in jewels are huddled in clusters and talking worriedly. Through the greenish tint of her night vision glasses, Frankie can see the fear on their faces. There are men in suits hurrying through the crowds with their hands to their ears as they talk over comms. Event staff are trying to reassure people, but it’s obvious they have no idea what’s happening.

Frankie keeps her head down and follows a foot or two behind Nick, who weaves the cart through the crowds skillfully and says Excuse me, please in flawless Italian when he needs to.

When he stops in front of the door, he turns the cart sideways. Frankie slips around the end of the trash can and kneels before the lock. Thanks to Nick she’s shielded from the crowd by the cart, but it’s so dark it doesn’t matter. She pulls the lock pick set out and gets to work. It takes her twenty seconds.

“Done,” she says.

Nick flips the top of the trash can off. “Let’s go, kid.”

Standish stands up unsteadily. “I can’t see anything,” he murmurs.

Frankie reaches out and grabs his arm, Nick grabs the other, and they help him out of the trash can. Frankie tightens her grip on his arm once he’s on the floor. “Come on.”

Standish stumbles blindly toward her. Nick follows and they slip through the door and into the hallway. When they close the door behind them, Frankie ditches her coat, pulls her gun out of her purse, and then ditches the purse too. Nick tosses his hat aside and rips off his polo.

“How far out are you, Will?” Frankie asks.

“One minute,” he answers.
“Wait to open the door,” Jai reminds her.

“Yep,” Frankie confirms. “Come on, Standish,” she says, putting her hand on his back to guide him toward the end of the hall.

“Did I mention I’m afraid of the dark?” Standish says, his voice a little slurred.

Frankie frowns at him through the darkness. “How’s your head feel?”

“Fine.”

“Standish,” she says pointedly.

“Hurts,” he admits. “Trash can ride made me nauseous.”

They get to the end of the hall and she positions him in front of the door. “Stand here. Don’t move. Don’t open the door.”

Standish slumps a little against the wall and sighs.

Frankie turns around. Nick is behind her. She can see through the night vision glasses that he’s flickering his eyes over her face to read her expression. He reaches out and grabs her hand.

“Almost there,” he whispers.

“Shit,” Jai says in Frankie’s ear before she can respond.

She frowns. “Jai?”

“They’re rebooting the system,” Jai answers. “I’m going to get kicked out.”

“So?”

“So the power’s about to come back on, and so are the cameras. They’ll see you. Event security has Blake’s team on standby. If they see you in an unauthorized area dressed in wetsuits, they’ll send his team.”

“How far out, Chase?” Nick asks.

“Thirty seconds,” Will answers.

“Close enough,” Frankie says.

She shoves the door open and an earsplitting alarm immediately fills the air. She guides Standish out onto the small dock to stand in the moonlight, and then follows him. Nick steps out behind her and closes the door after him.

“Coming around the corner,” Susan reports.

In the distance, Frankie sees a boat turning down the narrow canal. She exhales a sigh of relief, but it gets caught in her throat when she realizes there’s a boat occupied by uniformed cops idling between them.

“Up ahead of you, Susan,” she warns.

“You’ve been spotted,” Nick notes. And sure enough, Frankie can see that a few of the officers are staring interestedly at the boat Susan and Will are on. One of the cops, though, appears to be
looking at Nick.

“We’ve been spotted too,” Frankie says. “Hit the gas, Susan.”

Susan’s boat roars past the police boat. The officers shout and scramble to their feet. Susan pulls up along the dock with a spray of water.

“Get in,” Frankie says, and shoves Standish into Will’s arms so hard they both tumble backward onto the floor of the boat. She leaps in after them.

Nick follows her. “Go!”

Susan hits the gas, and the boat lurches forward. Frankie hangs onto the side and just barely maintains her balance, but Will and Standish are a tangle of arms and legs as they roll around the bottom of the boat.

Behind them, the police are still shouting. Their boat roars to life, and then suddenly they’re in hot pursuit.

“Nick,” Frankie calls. She lets go of the side of the boat to stand, but as soon as she does Susan takes a hard right.

Frankie tumbles to the side and collides with Nick’s chest. He wraps his arms around her and falls back against the side of the boat with an oompf. She lands on top of him, and she can tell he’s trying to cradle her fall.

His fingers wrap around her shoulders. “Croatia,” he murmurs in her ear over the purr of the boat engine.

“Croatia,” she echoes, because that’s exactly what she was thinking. She pushes off him and into a crouch and then slides her hand along his belt. “Where?”

“Left,” he answers, reaching for his gun. “On your word.”

Frankie fumbles at his belt for another second or two, finds what she’s looking for, and then says, “Go.”

In one fluid motion, Nick rises into a crouch as Frankie leans back to give him room. He aims his gun at the police boat and starts to fire. She pulls the flashbang free from his belt. The driver of the boat and the other cops inside duck to avoid Nick’s shots even though he’s purposely sending them over their heads.

“Susan, Will, flashbang incoming,” Frankie says.

“What’d she say?” Standish mutters.

“Got it,” Will says.

“Got it,” Susan echoes.

“Now,” Frankie tells Nick.

Nick stops shooting. Frankie rises to her feet and hurls the now-active flashbang into the other boat. She crouches immediately. Nick covers her with his body, and she plugs her ears and waits.

A second later, there’s a bang and a flash of light and some screams.
“Go Susan!” she shouts.

Susan obeys and the boat takes off. Nick leans back. Frankie straightens and glances backward. They’re not being followed.

“We’re clear,” she reports. She gets carefully to her feet and then heads toward the front of the boat where Susan is standing at the wheel.

“Get us to the hospital,” she tells Susan. “When we get there, I’m sending you and Will in with Standish.”

Susan frowns at her in an unspoken question.

“I have to get Jai,” she answers.

“I’m fine, Frankie,” Jai says over comms.

“I’m going to get Jai,” Frankie repeats. “Standish needs Will. And Will needs you.”

Susan nods. “Hospital isn’t far. Four minutes.”

Frankie nods and turns around. Standish is sitting on the floor of the boat, his back resting against the side. Will is crouched next to him and examining his head wound.

Will looks up as if he can sense her eyes on him. Their gaze meets, and she feels it immediately—that pull deep in her gut that feels like the world’s strongest magnet.

She stumbles the few feet toward him, unsteady because of how fast Susan is driving, and ends up half-kneeling, half-collapsing against him.

He winds his arm around her shoulders and presses his mouth against her forehead. She fists her hand into his shirt and presses her face into his neck and breathes him in.

“I love you,” she sighs.

His arm tightens around her. “I love you too.”

The hospital visit takes a few hours.

For Will, it feels like days. He’s worried about Standish and he’s exhausted, but it’s more than that. He wants to be with Frankie.

He knows she’s fine. She and Nick picked up Jai without any problems, and they’re all back at the palazzo. After the suffocating terror of thinking he’d lost her in the catacombs, there’s some relief in knowing that she’s alive and safe. But it’s not enough. He wants to be close to her. He needs to be close to her. He needs to hear her voice and see her breathing and feel her body against his.

Susan helps. Her presence is soothing. She knows what to say and when to say it. But every time Will thinks about how grateful he is that his best friend is next to him, he remembers that Frankie knew he’d need Susan and it makes him miss her even more.

By the time they get back to the palazzo, Standish looks dead on his feet. He slumps against the wall inside the elevator and is uncharacteristically silent. He doesn’t make any cracks about how they might get stuck. He doesn’t look like he even cares if they do.
“I’m in the room next door,” Susan tells Will quietly. “I’ll keep an eye on him tonight.”

Will glances at her. “I can help.”

She smiles. “You’ve got someone else you need to keep an eye on. I can handle him.”

Will doesn’t want to argue with her, and he knows there’s no point anyway, so he doesn’t bother. “Okay.”

When the doors open to reveal the entryway, Standish stumbles out of the elevator and onto the marble floor. Susan slides her hand along his back and guides him toward the stairs. Will follows a few steps behind.

“Night kiddo,” he says when they get to the next floor. “Let me know if you need something.”

Standish nods but doesn’t answer as he heads for his bedroom. Susan smiles at Will encouragingly over her shoulder and then follows Standish.

As soon as they’re out of view, Will takes the steps two at a time. He pauses in the hallway when he sees that his bedroom door is shut, but Nick’s is open. He wonders if Nick is downstairs, maybe in the kitchen or on the terrace, and then he remembers that Nick told Ollerman he’d meet him in Greece tomorrow. He probably left to catch a flight.

Will wonders what Nick’s conversation with Frankie was like before he left. He wonders if she thanked him for saving Standish’s life and hers. He wonders if they did that thing they do where they stare at each other a little too long and a million unspoken things hang in the air. And then he realizes he doesn’t care. He just wants to see Frankie.

He pushes open the door to his bedroom and closes it softly behind him. Frankie is in bed, fast asleep and curled beneath the sheets. He freezes when he realizes she’s on his side of the bed. She never sleeps on his side of the bed.

He smiles. There’s only one reason she’d be on his side of the bed. She was waiting for him.

He ditches his shoes and sheds all his clothes except his boxers. He pads across the room, stops next to the bed, and pauses to stare at her. Her shoulders are rising and falling slowly. He loves how peaceful she looks because that’s not always the case. She sleeps lightly and has awful nightmares and sometimes, depending on what happened during the day, she has a terrible time even getting to sleep, let alone staying that way. Ever since Monte Carlo, though, he’s noticed that her sleep habits seem to have improved. It feels presumptuous to admit, but he knows it’s because of him. She sleeps better when she’s with him.

She’s wearing his Mets t-shirt. She looks just as good in it now as she did the first time he ever saw her in it. Her hair is fanned out over the pillow, dark against the white pillowcase. The line of her jaw looks sharp and gorgeous.

God, she’s beautiful.

He reaches out and strokes the backs of his fingers over her cheek. Her eyes flutter open. He can tell when her always-on-alert instincts kick in because her body tenses and she starts to roll toward her side of the bed where her gun is sitting on the bedside table.

“Francesca,” he whispers.

She pauses at the sound of his voice. He puts one of his hands on the mattress, leans forward, and
reaches for the hand that was about to grab her gun. He lifts it to his mouth and presses a kiss against the inside of her wrist where her pulse is thrumming.

Her fingers uncurl and she cups his face. “Will,” she breathes.

He trails his mouth down the inside of her forearm. Her skin is soft beneath his lips. “I love you.”

She closes her eyes the way she does sometimes when he says that, almost like she wants to tune out the world and soak in his words and nothing else.

“Will,” she says again, but it’s different this time. It’s a request. She reaches out with her other hand, her palm warm on his ribs, and pulls him forward.

He climbs beneath the sheets. She scoots back to give him room, but when he opens his arms she burrows into him, her face finding a familiar spot in the curve of his neck. He combs his fingers through her hair the way she likes. He feels her exhale against his skin.

He loves this. All her eye rolls and denials and snide comments say otherwise, but he’s known since Prague that she likes to be held. His smartass, hardass, badass girlfriend is a cuddler. The fact that she prefers to be cuddled by him still amazes him. He thinks he’ll always be amazed by her. How could he not be?

“Standish?” she whispers.

She already knows Standish is fine. Will texted her while they were at the hospital. But he tells her anyway because he knows she wants to hear it again.

“Fine,” he says, smoothing his hand down her spine. “Concussion and some other stuff, but he’ll be okay. Susan is keeping an eye on him tonight.”

A beat of silence passes.

“Jai?” he asks.

“I scared him,” she murmurs. “But he’s fine.”

Will remembers the moment when he and Jai realized that Frankie wasn’t responding to them, and neither were Nick and Standish. He knows now it’s because Frankie lost her comm and Nick was underwater and Standish was unconscious. But at the time, they both thought they’d lost her. And the look on Jai’s face…

Will barely stifles a shudder.

“You scared me too,” he tells her.

She nuzzles closer to him but doesn’t respond. He learned pretty early on in their relationship that her silences communicate just as much as her words. There are different kinds of silences with Frankie, and they mean different things. He’s pretty sure the silence between them now is one of those where she’s trying to find the right words to tell him something. He traces a pattern on her back because that’s seemed to help her in the past.

“I lost my comm and I couldn’t hear you,” she whispers. “Nick was trying to unblock the door and Standish was unconscious and all I wanted was to hear your voice and I couldn’t.”

Will feels tears start to warm his eyes. She’s in his arms and she’s fine but god, if he’d lost
devastation doesn’t even begin to cover it.

He presses his mouth to the top of her head. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

She wraps her arms more tightly around him. They hold each other in silence for a minute before she speaks again.

“Nick is gone. He had to meet Ollerman. He said we could stay here as long as we want.”

Will tangles his hand in her hair again. “You want to stay?”

“I want to go home.”

He holds her closer. “Then we’ll go home.”

The Park Plaza Diner is a six minute walk from Frankie’s brownstone.

After she and Jai rejoined the CIA and moved into her brownstone, they used to walk here a few times a week. Frankie likes it because she used to come here with her parents. Jai likes the food, and he likes a certain booth by a window that gives him a prime spot to people watch. He loves to people watch.

Three days before Thanksgiving, Frankie walks through the front door of the diner and sees Jai already seated in their booth. It’s pretty early, and despite being the city that never sleeps, it seems like much of New York hasn’t woken up quite yet. The diner is quiet and nearly empty.

When Frankie slides onto the bench across the table from Jai, he doesn’t look up from the newspaper he’s reading. “I went with lox.”

“Grits?”

“Cheese.”

“Bacon?”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Frankie smiles. A waitress appears with a mug and a pot of coffee. She fills the mug for Frankie and then wanders away without asking if Frankie wants any food. She doesn’t need to ask. Jai already ordered for both of them.

Frankie wraps her fingers around the ceramic mug and pulls it closer. Jai finally closes the paper. Frankie studies him as he folds it. He looks tired and frayed.

“It’s legit, isn’t it?” she asks quietly.

He exhales slowly. “Yes.”

“How long?”

He brushes some nonexistent lint from his sleeve. “The earliest paperwork is dated fifteen days after Moscow.”

Frankie gapes at him. “What?”
Jai finally meets her gaze. “Nick started his charity fifteen days after Moscow.”

Frankie leans back against the booth, completely floored. Fifteen days? That was before she started sleeping with other men. Before she and Jai killed their first Collective member. That was back when Jai was numb and robotic from grief, and the only time Frankie would leave him alone was when she would shower, and every single one of those showers ended with her sobbing alone beneath the spray because she was shattered and ruined but felt too guilty to cry in front of Jai.

Frankie thinks of all the times she and Nick have fought since Shanghai. All the times they’ve snarled and snapped and all the awful things they’ve said to each other. She thinks of New York, of his hands on her body and his mouth on her skin and his voice low as he whispered how much he loved her and how beautiful she was. She thinks of the look on his face when she kicked him out after they were done, and the way she started crying before he was even out the door.

“Why didn’t he tell me?” she whispers. “It’s been years, Jai. Years.”

Jai sighs. “He knew that’s what it would take. You weren’t going to forgive him because he started a charity, Francesca. But you might forgive him if he spent years running that charity to prove that he was still the man you married.”

“He could have helped us bring down The Collective.”

“He did,” Jai says. “You know that.”

She shakes her head. “No. He didn’t—”

“Francesca,” Jai cuts her off, leaning forward. “I’m not defending him. I’m just saying that you and I both know he worked Clarke and The Collective to make it possible for us to destroy them. Krakow isn’t the only time he saved our lives.”

Frankie lifts her mug to her lips with trembling hands. The coffee scalds her tongue, but she barely notices. She swallows and sets her mug down with a dull thunk on the table.

She clears her throat. “What’s he funding?”

“Everything.”

“Give me specifics.”


“Jesus,” Frankie breathes.

“None of it is directly carried out by his foundation. They don’t do actual charity work. Probably because he recognized the legal hoops he’d have to jump through. Instead, he funds well-known, well-respected organizations.”

“Such as?”

“UNICEF. Doctors Without Borders. St Jude. Save the Children. Wounded Warrior Project. Red Cross. He’s a top donor for every single one of them and dozens more.”

“And Jack Smith is…?”

“Nonexistent. He’s just a cover for Nick. But it’s a good cover, thanks to RJ’s program.”
“So who does everyone think Jack Smith is?”

“A reclusive billionaire who started giving away his fortune after his wife’s untimely death.”

Frankie blinks.

“That’s the public story,” Jai clarifies. “The foundation’s CEO, Sebastain Tauren, has told it to dozens of journalists over the years. Apparently Smith fell in love with his wife at first sight. She was his soulmate, she made him a better man, and then he lost her in a car accident that he believes he could have prevented. Her death changed him. He became a recluse, and now he uses his billions to help people because that’s what his wife would have wanted.”

“He said that?”

“He says a variation of those exact words every time.”

Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose. “God damn it.”

“That’s not all.”

Frankie drops her hand. “There’s more?”

“The foundation funds organizations,” Jai replies. “But it also funds specific projects. And all of them mean something to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“You remember that hospital The Collective blew up? The kids who died?”

Bile rises in the back of Frankie’s throat. “Yes.”

“The hospital wings and labs were rebuilt bigger and better. Every family who lost someone has been financially taken care of. And that’s not the only tie to The Collective. I cross-referenced the Smith Foundation’s annual reports with our files on The Collective. There’s not a single shred of damage done by The Collective that Nick’s foundation hasn’t tried to make up for in some way.”

“RJ’s family?”

“Everything he told you is true.”

Frankie’s afraid to ask, but she has to. “And Mina?”

Pain shivers across Jai’s face. “There are scholarships in her name at every institution she attended. All three of her nephews have college funds and more. He paid for her mother’s cancer treatments prior to her death. And…”

Jai trails off and swallows hard. Frankie reaches out and covers his hand with hers. He stops fiddling with his cufflink and clutches her hand tightly, almost like he’s afraid he might slip away if he doesn’t hang on.

“You remember how much she loved Greek and Roman mythology?”

Frankie nods. Mina loved to talk about how mythology and psychology were intertwined. Jai loved to listen to her talk about it.

“He’s funding museums and preservation societies all over the world that specialize in Greek and
Roman antiquities,” Jai says. “There are collections and even a children’s program at Antikensammlung that…”

His voice hitches. He clenches his jaw and looks out the window. Frankie waits him out.

“She would have loved it,” he whispers.

Frankie’s heart aches in her chest. She wants to comfort him, but she knows there’s nothing she can say. She wants to apologize, but she knows she can’t. Jai hates when she apologizes on Nick’s behalf.

A long moment passes before he speaks again.

“There are scholarships at Yale for disadvantaged kids,” he says, looking at her again. “There are music programs in New York public schools. Reading programs in the public libraries.”

Frankie’s throat tightens. “Are they in my parents’ names?”

“No,” Jai says, shaking his head. “They would have had to let you know if they were.”

“Is that it?”

“He’s one of the New York Philharmonic’s biggest donors. He paid for a new playground at the school Kelly’s son attends. There are small, independently owned bookshops all over the city that are only open because of grants from his foundation. There are—”

“Enough,” Frankie cuts him off. She pulls her hands from his and leans back against the booth. She feels suddenly short of breath. Her heart is racing in her chest.

“Francesca—”

“I don’t want to hear anymore, Jai.”

He doesn’t argue with her. Frankie puts her elbows on the table and her head in her hands and stares down into her coffee. She tries to wade through all the new information, tries to sort through it all and come to terms with the fact that Nick has spent years trying to make up for what he did, but she feels like she’s back in the water-filled catacombs all over again. She’s drowning, and she can’t find a way out. She can’t breathe.

And then she remembers their conversation in Venice. *It’s part of what I started.* The memory brings back that same nagging feeling she had when she found his foundation email account. She’s missing something.

But what?

It’s something about the foundation. Something about the money. Nick has always had a strained relationship with money. He didn’t have any as a kid, and he saw both his parents do awful things because of it, and that trauma made him hate anyone who didn’t live paycheck to paycheck. In the early days of their relationship, he used to tease Frankie about it. *The heiress and the street rat,* he’d say with a grin. *What would your rich friends think if you took me home?*

It took her a while to realize that his teasing was masking something deeper. He made jokes about her affluent background, but the truth was that her inheritance and her brownstone made him feel inadequate. They weren’t the only things that made him feel that way, of course. He’d always struggled with the idea that he wasn’t good enough for her. But the money thing was particularly
difficult for him.

She remembers they got into a screaming match about it during a mission in Cannes. She was undercover, seducing some rich guy by playing hard to get, and Nick was more jealous than usual. He kept making snide remarks about how good she looked with the rich guy, and how happy she seemed being with “her kind of people.” It wasn’t until Frankie lost her temper and told him she didn’t give a shit about money and never had, and that she’d rather give it all away and be poor with him than rich with someone else, that it finally seemed to sink in for him.

Once again, the memory brings back that awful nagging feeling. Nick doesn’t care about money. He views it as a tool, and he’d use that tool to win her favor, but surely he didn’t think that money alone would—

It hits her like a baseball bat to the face. A dozen seemingly unrelated details suddenly connect in her brain. His twenty-sixth birthday. Her vendetta against The Collective. The ease with which he adjusted their plans in Venice when he realized they couldn’t get in and out of the catacombs unnoticed.

“Oh my god,” she breathes.

“What?” Jai says.

Frankie looks up at him. “It’s not just the charity.”

Jai frowns. “What do you mean?”

“He’s got a shit ton of money so he’s using it to his advantage. But he grew up on the streets, Jai. Spending money isn’t his first instinct. His first instinct is usually—”

“Violence,” Jai cuts her off.

Frankie leans toward him. “He’s doing what he thinks I want.”

“So?”

“So I spent three and a half years chasing The Collective all over the world and punishing them for the shitty stuff they did.”

She watches as understanding dawns on her best friend’s face. “It’s not just reparations,” he murmurs. “It’s retribution.”

“What if we were wrong?” she says. “What if he isn’t just using RJ’s program to keep himself alive? What if he’s been using it the way RJ intended for it to be used?”

“You think he’s working with law enforcement?”

“I think he’s doing what you and I did to the Hungarian mafia.”

Jai blinks at her. “You’re saying he’s a vigilante.”

“I’m saying he knows that money alone wouldn’t win me back. Justice would.”

“Francesca—”

“I gave him an Omega watch for his twenty-sixth birthday, Jai. He never takes it off. Ever.”
Jai stares at her, completely stunned. “You think…?”

She nods. “Yes.”

Jai shakes his head. “Omega is a myth.”

“That’s what everyone says about the Zaqr Network. And Hector’s underground network. Shit, Jai, people think we’re a myth. You heard Anton. There are Bratva thugs who think the demon mistress is just a story. Omega isn’t any different. It’s Nick. I know it.”

For a moment, all they can do is stare at each other as the words sink in. Jai looks stunned, and also a little horrified. Frankie feels dizzy again.

The silence between them is broken when the waitress brings their food. After she leaves, neither of them touch their plates.

“What can you find out for sure?” Frankie whispers.

“I can try.” He gives her a look. “Standish would be helpful.”

“Fine,” she agrees. “But don’t tell him why.”

“Are you going to tell Will?”

“Yes.”

Jai studies her. “Does this change things for you?”

Frankie stares at her bowl of cheese grits and swallows around the lump in her throat. “I made my choice,” she answers. “It doesn’t matter what Nick does. He’s not Will. And I want Will.”

“But?” Jai prods.

Frankie sighs. Sometimes she hates that he knows her so well.

“But it might have,” she confesses. “Before Will. Before we met. If I knew, I might have…”

She can’t bring herself to finish that sentence.

Jai leans across the table and grabs her hand. “What might have happened doesn’t matter, Francesca. What’s done is done. If it doesn’t change things now, then it doesn’t matter.”

Frankie shakes her head. “Everything matters, Jai. Even if we don’t want it to.”
On Thanksgiving morning, Will wakes at five o’clock to the familiar sound of his alarm.

He unwraps himself from around Frankie, rolls over to shut the alarm off, and then rolls back toward her.

“Going for a run to make room for all Jai’s food,” he whispers in her ear. “Love you.”

She grunts at him. He grins, plants a kiss on her temple, and gets out of bed. The second his feet hit the floor, he misses the warmth of the blankets and Frankie’s body. He briefly considers climbing back in bed and skipping his run, but he knows he’ll regret it later. He casts one last look at Frankie, and then forces himself to go.

He gets dressed, grabs his running shoes from the closet, and then heads downstairs. He’s halfway to the kitchen to grab a granola bar before he realizes there’s someone standing at the kitchen island.

“Shit!” he yelps, reaching for his hip even though there’s no gun there.

Jai, who is elbow deep in the largest turkey Will has ever seen, raises his eyebrows and says nothing.

Will presses his hand to his chest and tries to remember how to breathe. “What the hell, Jai.”

Jai’s eyebrows furrow. “Did Frankie forget to tell you I would be here early?”

“She said early,” Will acknowledges. “But she didn’t say five in the morning.”

“I have a system,” Jai says, lifting his chin. “It requires a considerable amount of time. Particularly since I’m feeding more people this year.”

There’s a hint of defensiveness in his voice, and Will doesn’t like that. He doesn’t want Jai to feel like he’s not welcome in this house anymore, or like his traditions with Frankie are in jeopardy. He wants Jai to know that he would never stand between them, and that he respects their traditions and their relationship the same way Frankie respects his family.

He gives Jai the most nonthreatening smile he can. “Of course. Sorry. I know it’s a ton of work. Can I help? I’d love to help.”

Jai gets a funny look on his face. “I don’t need help.”

“Okay,” Will says affably. He tips his head toward the front door. “I’m going to go for a run. But if you change your mind while I’m gone, I’d be happy to help when I get back. Whatever you need.”

Jai blinks at him. Will turns around without waiting for a response. He has to do this with Frankie sometimes too. Even though they’ve been together for a while now, she’s still taken aback sometimes by his willingness to drop everything and help her. She’s not good at accepting help when he offers it either. He’s learned the best thing to do is offer his assistance, walk away and give her some time to get used to the idea, and then offer again so she knows he meant it. He’s betting Jai is the same way.

He’s halfway to the front door when Jai calls his name.
Will turns around. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re making a feast,” Will points out with a smile. “It’s the least I can do.”

Jai shakes his head. “I didn’t mean for that.”

Will tilts his head in confusion.

“For Francesca,” Jai clarifies. “I’ve always...”

He trails off and furrows his eyebrows like he’s searching for the words. Will waits. He does that for Frankie too.

“I’m glad she has you,” Jai says quietly after a long pause. “You make her happy. And that makes me happy.”

Will’s throat feels suddenly tight, and his eyes are suddenly warm. He didn’t expect to be having a heart-to-heart with Jai at five in the morning over a massive raw turkey, but Jai’s unexpected like that. Will knows better than to dismiss such a rare display of vulnerability.

“I think the same thing about you all the time,” he says honestly. “And I’m really looking forward to spending Thanksgiving with you for the rest of our lives.”

Jai smiles, one of those rare and genuine smiles that makes him look young and carefree, and Will smiles back.

He steps forward. “I think we should—”

“I’m not hugging you,” Jai cuts him off. “If you take another step, I will beat you with this turkey leg.”

Will laughs and turns toward the door. “Love you too, Jai.”

When Will gets back from his run, he’s surprised to find Frankie in the shower. He peels his sweat-soaked clothes off and joins her beneath the spray. She turns to face him with a smile, and he feels his heart flutter in his chest. He loves her smile.

“You’re up early,” he says, sliding his hand along her hip to pull her close.

She drapes her arms around his neck. “It’s Thanksgiving. I have jobs to do.”

“What kind of jobs?”

“Shucking corn, peeling potatoes—”

“Wait,” he interrupts. “You guys have corn on the cob for Thanksgiving?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffs. “I shuck the corn and then cut it off the cob so Jai can use it.”

“You’re right. That’s way less ridiculous than just eating it.”

Frankie smiles. “He makes creamed corn from scratch.”

“And that means you have to cut it straight off the cob? Does he really think it’s that much better
than the canned stuff?”

“Have you met Jai?”

Will laughs. “Touche.”

Frankie combs her hand through the hair on the back of his head. “It’ll be worth it. Trust me.”

Will watches a droplet of water travel down her neck and remembers his conversation with Jai an hour ago. “I offered to help him before I left and he seemed offended.”

“Don’t take it personally. He likes to be in control. Especially when he’s nervous.”

Will looks up at her with a frown. “Nervous about what?”

“It’s the first time he’s cooking for you guys,” Frankie replies, lifting her shoulder in a shrug. “Cooking is special to him. He grew up doing it with his mom. He used to do it for our team and for Mina. He does it for people he loves.”

Will grins. “Jai loves me?”

“Sometimes,” Frankie says dryly. “But if you tell him I said that, I’ll deny it.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“Also, just so we’re clear, if Standish says anything about Jai’s food other than the fact that it’s delicious, I’m going to throttle him. I don’t care if he’s recovering from a concussion. If he hurts Jai’s feelings, he’s dead.”

Will can tell by the tone of her voice that she’s not joking. Her muscles are tense against him, and she’s standing straighter than she should be considering they’re naked in the shower together. He realizes all of a sudden that Jai isn’t the only one who’s nervous to share their traditions. He can practically feel the pent-up energy crackling just beneath her skin.

Will slides his hand over the curve of her spine. She needs to work off some of that energy before the team gets here. And he can definitely help with that.

“How much time do you have before you have to shuck corn?” he asks.

A slow, mischievous smile spreads across her lips. “I need to be done by nine when the parade starts.”

The totally inappropriate visions of shower sex that were slowly taking over his mind vanish. He blinks at her. “You guys watch the Macy’s parade?”

She looks a little embarrassed. “Yeah,” she says, shrugging as if it’s no big deal. “Usually just the first hour because we have stuff to do. But my parents loved it, and Jai likes to see the Broadway shows that perform, and we drink this hot spiced tea that Jai’s grandfather used to make, and it’s...”

She trails off. Her cheeks look a little flushed, and normally Will would say it’s just the heat of the shower, but he knows it’s more than that this time. He imagines a tiny version of Frankie sitting on the couch between her parents and watching the parade. Then he imagines Frankie and Jai sitting next to each other, sipping tea and talking about Broadway musicals, and he feels like his heart is melting in his chest.
“It’s just something we do,” Frankie finishes quietly. “It’s not a big deal. You don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to.”

“Are you kidding?” he says incredulously. “I love parades.”

She rolls her eyes. “Shocker.”

He smiles at her because he can’t help it.

“Stop smiling at me like that,” she orders, pushing against him halfheartedly. “And if you tell anyone Jai and I like the parade, I’ll murder you in your sleep.”

Will lifts his hand to her face and strokes his thumb over the arc of her cheekbone. “Thank you for letting me spend today with you.”

Her expression softens. She searches his eyes. “You don’t wish you were in Huntington?”

“Only place I want to be is right here with you.”

She looks thrilled, and he feels like his heart is melting again. Then she arches an eyebrow at him. “Are you just saying that because you’re about to get lucky?”

“Am I about to get lucky?” he asks hopefully.

She grins and pulls his mouth down to hers.

When the doorbell rings five minutes before noon, Will watches as both Frankie and Jai freeze in perfect unison on the other side of the kitchen island.

“I’ll get it,” Will says, jumping off his stool.

Frankie shoots him a look. “Make sure—”

“I know, boo,” he cuts her off. He leans across the counter and kisses her. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m behind schedule,” Jai murmurs. He sounds a little panicked. “They’re here and dinner’s in an hour and I’m behind.”

Frankie turns toward him immediately. “We’re not behind, Jai. We’re fine.”

“But the pies—”

“Won’t get eaten for a while. You’ve got plenty of time.”

“But the appetizers—”

“Are done. I plated them for you.” She opens the fridge and pulls out a large serving tray. “See? I even did the pattern you like. And the others are right here. Already done.”

He blinks at her. “How did you…?”

“Not my first rodeo,” she says with a wink.

Jai smiles. Frankie smiles back. Will glances between them, swallows the urge to say you guys are so adorable I can’t stand it, and heads for the front door.
When he swings it open, he finds the rest of the team standing on the other side. Susan has a bottle of wine in one hand and Ray’s hand in the other. Ray is holding what appears to be a bottle of bourbon in his free hand. Will doesn’t get a chance to look closely at the label because he’s distracted by Standish, who is literally bouncing up and down as he clutches his laptop to his chest.

He stops bouncing when he sees Will. “Oh my god, you really do live here,” he breathes in awe. He tips his head back to look up at the towering facade of the brownstone, glances down at the pumpkins sitting on the stoop, and then says, “Do you think if I’m really nice to Frankie she’ll write me into her will?”

“Standish,” Susan warns.

Standish ignores her and lunges forward like he’s going to push past Will and into the brownstone. Will shoots his arm out to block him, shoves Standish back out onto the stoop, and then steps out after him and closes the door.

“Hey,” Standish says indignantly. “Let me in.”

“No yet,” Will replies.

“But I was invited,” Standish insists. “Frankie said so. I recorded her saying it so she can’t take it back. No take-backsies.”

“We have to go over ground rules first,” Will says, folding his arms over his chest.

“Ground rules?” Standish repeats incredulously. He gestures at Susan. “Witchy powers lady already gave me the rules!”

Will glances at Susan.

“No questions about Frankie’s family, childhood, or friends,” Susan starts, ticking the list off on her fingers. “No questions about how much money she has. No going through cupboards, opening drawers, or peeking into closets. And absolutely no touching of anything even remotely personal in nature.”

“Punishable by death,” Standish says darkly.

“I said no snacks in the Dead Drop for a week,” Susan tells Will with a smirk. “Apparently that’s death.”

“The rules also apply to me,” Ray pipes up with a goofy grin. “But don’t worry, buddy. I would never ask Frankie invasive questions about her rich parents. I know better than that.”

Susan shoots him a look.

“Not that they’re rich,” Ray says quickly. “Because we don’t actually know, right? I mean, maybe she got all her money from being a terrifying assassin.”

“Ray,” Susan hisses.

“Sorry,” Ray mutters with a wince.

“Oh please, have you seen this place?” Standish asks, tilting his head back to gaze at the building again. “Either she’s a trust fund baby or she killed a small country’s worth of people.”

Susan pinches the bridge of her nose and mutters something in Spanish under her breath.
“All right guys,” Will says. “Listen up. This is a big deal for Frankie and Jai. You need to realize that this isn’t easy for them. This is a holiday they used to celebrate with their old team.”

Both Ray and Standish look suddenly sheepish.

“It’s really special to them,” Will continues. “That means it’s special to me. And if you ruin this for them, or you make them feel uncomfortable in any way, I’m going to be extremely disappointed in both of you.”

“Oh no,” Standish groans. “He’s got the look.”

“Yeah,” Ray agrees gravely. “I hate the look.”

Will frowns. “What look?”

“The Danny Tanner look,” Standish says.

“Jason Seaver,” Ray offers.

“Carl Winslow,” Standish adds.

“Tony Micelli!” Ray says.

Standish frowns. “Who the hell is that?”

“Seriously?” Ray says, rounding on him. “How do you not know who Tony Micelli is?”

Standish glances at Susan. “Is this an old person thing, like when they were mad I’d never seen that movie about the lot of sand?”

“Did you just call me old?” Susan asks.

“No,” Standish says. “I called them old.”

“Susan’s older than me,” Ray says helpfully.

Susan shoots him a look.

“But that doesn’t matter,” Ray says, reaching out to wrap his arm around his girlfriend’s shoulders. “Age is just a number. And your number is small, babe. So small.”

“Yeah, this is definitely the sandbox thing all over again,” Standish decides.

“It’s called The Sandlot, Standish,” Will says, rubbing his temples. “And it’s a classic. The fact that you still haven’t seen it makes me want to cry. It would take me an hour just to explain all the nuances of—”

Now it’s Will’s turn to get a look from Susan.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter,” Will says. “That’s not what we’re talking about right now. We’re talking about ground rules. Are you ready to hear them?”

“Should I take notes?” Standish asks dryly.

Susan smacks him on the back of the head.

“Ow!” Standish yelps, cowering away from her and rubbing the back of his head. “Seriously, this
is a hostile work environment. I’m going to HR.”

“All your HR complaints go through me,” Ray says brightly.

“Great,” Standish mutters, glancing between him and Susan.

“Rule number one,” Will says. “You are not, under any circumstances, to go upstairs. You have to stay on the main floor, downstairs, or outside. No exceptions.”

“What if I have to pee?”

“There’s a bathroom on every floor.”

“Of course there is,” Standish mutters. “The toilets probably have gold-plated seats.”

Will ignores him. “Rule number two. If you don’t like something you’ve eaten, you don’t tell Jai or Frankie. The only words that are allowed to come out of your mouth when discussing Jai’s food are words that are positive and complimentary.”


“Rule three,” Will continues. “No questions.”

Standish frowns. “You mean no questions about Frankie’s family and stuff.”

“No, I mean no questions period,” Will says. “If Frankie wants you to know something, she’ll tell you. If she hasn’t told you, you don’t need to know it. So no questions.”

Standish narrows his eyes. “Am I allowed to ask Jai questions?”

“No.”

“Can I ask you questions?”

“Not if they’re about Frankie and Jai.”

Standish huffs.

Ray grins. “Thought you had him there, huh?”

“Shut up, dude,” Standish says, scowling at Ray.

“All of Susan’s rules also apply,” Will says. “If you break her rules, you get no snacks. But if you break mine, you answer to Frankie. And I won’t be intervening on your behalf.”

Standish looks appalled. “I’m wounded, Will. And she’s a savage.”

“You’re fine,” Susan scoffs.

“I almost died!” Standish screeches.

Susan prods him in the chest with her index finger. “And you didn’t because Frankie saved your life.”

Standish scoffs but can’t argue.

“Just behave, okay?” Will sighs. “Please. This is my first Thanksgiving with Frankie and I want it
to go well.”

“We’ll all be on our best behavior,” Susan assures him, reaching out to squeeze his arm. She looks at Ray. “Won’t we?”


“Man, that ain’t even a word,” Standish huffs.

“Standish?” Susan prompts. “Do you agree to follow the rules?”

“Yeah, fine,” he mutters. “Not like I got a choice anyway. Taking my snacks and threatening me with Black Widow. You people are evil.”

“Will?” a soft but unmistakable voice suddenly calls out. “Is that you dear?”

Will turns and sees Mrs. Kaplan standing on her stoop next door. He grins and waves. “Good morning, Mrs. Kaplan. Happy Thanksgiving! I love your sweater.”

Mrs. Kaplan, who is wearing a thick wool sweater that has pictures of apples, corn, pumpkins, and a turkey sewn across the front, puts her hand over her heart. “Oh you sweet thing,” she sighs. “Happy Thanksgiving to you too!”

“She totally made that sweater herself,” Standish mutters under his breath.

“Totally,” Ray agrees.

“Are you having a party?” Mrs. Kaplan calls, gesturing at the team.

“Frankie and I are having some friends over for Thanksgiving dinner,” Will calls back. He shoots a meaningful look over his shoulder at the two men standing behind him. “They’re really more like family than friends.”

Ray and Standish puff out their chests in unison. Susan smiles.

“Is Jai coming?” Mrs. Kaplan asks hopefully.

“Yep, he’s already here,” Will confirms. “He’s inside. Would you like me to get him for you?”

“Oh no, I’m sure he’ll stop by later,” Mrs. Kaplan says, waving him off. “He always drops off food for me. Such a sweet boy. And a wonderful cook.”

“Is she talking about the same Jai we know?” Standish mutters. “Or is there some other Jai who delivers food to old ladies who think he’s sweet?”

Susan elbows him in the ribs and he grunts.

“I have something for you, Will,” Mrs. Kaplan says, holding up a cardboard box. “Would you be a dear and save me the trouble of the steps?”

“Of course,” Will says. He jogs down the steps, across the sidewalk, and up the stairs to Mrs. Kaplan’s stoop.

She reaches for his face the second he stops in front of her and pats his cheek. “Look at you, all handsome in blue.”
“Frankie likes me in blue,” Will says with a grin.

“Of course she does,” Mrs. Kaplan says indulgently. “You two are going to make beautiful babies. I can hardly wait.”

Will’s grin widens. “So I’ve heard.”

“I’m not too old to babysit, you know.”

Will laughs. “I’ve heard that too.”

Mrs. Kaplan presses the cardboard box into Will’s hands. “I’m sorry to say I only baked enough for you, Francesca, and Jai. I didn’t realize you’d be having guests.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Will says. “We can share. Are you sure you don’t want to join us?”

“Oh yes, quite sure,” Mrs. Kaplan says. “My son will be here any minute to pick me up. But I do hope we can have another canasta game soon. You boys still need to redeem yourselves.”

“This weekend, maybe,” Will suggests. “I’ll talk to Frankie and Jai.”

She beams. “Wonderful. Now come here and give this old lady a kiss.”

Will leans forward obediently and kisses her on the cheek. Mrs. Kaplan curls her wrinkled hands around his arms and squeezes, and then she leans back with a grin.

“Happy Thanksgiving, dear.”

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Will echoes. He helps her back into her brownstone, and then jogs back over to the stoop where the team is waiting for him.

“Who was that?” Standish asks.

“Mrs. Kaplan.”

“What’s in the box?”

Will pulls the box out of Standish’s reach. “Something for Frankie and Jai and me.”

“What, you can’t share?”

“Not until I let them look at it. You know Frankie doesn’t share well.”

Standish rolls his eyes. “She seems to do just fine sharing spit with you.”

“Just for that, we’re going to makeout in front of you later,” Will says.

Standish mimes throwing up.

“Okay, let’s go inside before this descends even further into childishness,” Susan suggests.

Will shoots a look at Standish. “You’re going to behave?”

“Yes,” Standish sighs, drawing out the word and sounding eerily similar to an annoyed teenage girl.

Will nods in satisfaction and opens the door. Standish immediately darts inside. Susan and Ray
follow him, and Will brings up the rear and closes the door behind him.

When he turns around, he finds Standish and Ray standing just inside the entrance and gaping in awe at their surroundings. Susan is smirking at them, probably because she’s been here quite a few times already so the wow factor has worn off.

Standish lets out a low whistle. “It’s like HGTV up in here.”

“Watch a lot of HGTV, do you?” Susan asks.

Standish shrugs. “Helps me fall asleep after scary movies. Does that fireplace work?”

“They all work,” Will replies.

Standish gives him a look. “How many do you have?”

“Three.”

Standish’s jaw drops.

“All right, let’s not stand in the entryway like weirdos,” Susan says, ushering Ray and Standish forward. “Be polite, go say hello to your hosts.”

They walk toward the kitchen. Standish tries to take a detour on the way and bolt downstairs, but Susan catches the back of his jacket and yanks him back on course. When they stop next to the island, Will makes his way around them to stand next to Frankie. He skims his hand along the small of her back, and she leans toward him.

“Mrs. Kaplan wanted me to deliver this,” he says, bending forward to kiss her temple as he presents her with the box.

“Oh my god,” Frankie breathes, ripping the box out of his hand. “Jai.”

“Hm?” Jai says without turning away from the stove.

“Lemon loaf.”


“Here,” Frankie says, setting the box down on the counter. She opens the top gingerly, the same way someone might handle something fragile and priceless, and Will watches as she and Jai gaze in wide-eyed wonder at the three loaves of bread covered with gleaming white icing that are sitting inside the box.

“Why are there three?” Jai asks with a frown.

“You know she loves Will,” Frankie says, waving dismissively at Will.

“Hey,” Will says. “I hope she’s not the only one.”

“Yeah yeah, love you blah blah,” Frankie mutters. “Jai, look at them. They’re bigger this year.”

“I see,” he says, and it almost sounds like a purr.

Standish glances between them with a frown. “Why y’all being so creepy over some lemon bread?”
“This isn’t lemon bread,” Jai says, shooting a disgusted look at Standish. “It’s Mrs. Kaplan’s lemon loaf.”

“What’s the difference between bread and loaf?” Ray murmurs to Susan.

“I have no idea,” Susan murmurs back.

Standish looks unimpressed. “So?”

“So it’s the best thing on the planet,” Frankie says, straightening. “And she only makes it at Thanksgiving and Easter.”

“Well can I have some to see what all the fuss is about?”

“No,” Frankie says, snapping the lid of the box closed. “We don’t share lemon loaf.”

“Will?” Standish asks hopefully.

“Will isn’t the keeper of the loaf,” Jai says, snatching the box from the counter. He cradles it close to his chest as if it’s a baby. “I am.”

“But I get some, right?” Will says. “She made a loaf just for me.”

Jai narrows his eyes. “Did she specifically say it was for you?”

“Yes,” Will says. “She said me, Francesca, and you.”

Jai looks unconvincing.

“Frankie,” Will says, turning toward his girlfriend. “Tell him I get some bread.”

Frankie looks him up and down thoughtfully and doesn’t say anything.

“Seriously?” Will says incredulously.

“We could each have a loaf and a half,” Jai whispers in Frankie’s ear. He cracks the lid of the box open and holds it out to her. “Do you smell that? An extra half, Francesca.”

Frankie looks seriously tempted. She glances up at Will. “You don’t really need it, do you? You won’t even know what you’re missing.”

“Do you really need sex later?” Will asks, folding his arms over his chest.

Frankie looks at Jai. “We have to give him his loaf.”

Jai rolls his eyes. “I’ve never hated your libido until just now.”

Frankie snorts.

“Let’s put the bread away,” Susan suggests. “You guys can duke it out later.”

Jai holds it closer. “I’ll put it away when no one is watching me so I know none of you will sneak back and steal it.”

“Nobody’s going to steal your bread, Jai,” Susan sighs.

“I would,” Standish says. And then he shoves a handful of cheese from a nearby platter into his
mouth. “Shit that’s delicious,” he groans around a half-chewed mouthful. “Y’all got the good stuff for us, huh?”

Will and Susan each give him a look.

“What?” Standish demands. “I said it was good.”

Susan rolls her eyes and turns to Frankie. “Thank you for having us, Frankie.”

“Yeah, thank you,” Ray says earnestly. “You have a beautiful home.”

Frankie looks surprised. “Thank you, Ray.”

“We brought some bourbon for you, Jai,” Ray says, setting the bottle in his hand down on the counter. “And wine for you, Frankie. Seriously, thanks for the invite. I’m really happy to be here.”

He sounds genuinely thrilled that they invited him, and Susan is beaming up at him with a look of adoration. Maybe it’s just because Will is already feeling sentimental today, but his eyes warm. Frankie and Jai exchange a look.

“Thanks,” Jai says. He seems just as surprised as Frankie, but he’s also clearly touched by Ray’s gesture. He reaches for the bottle of bourbon and glances down at it with a soft smile on his lips.

“I got y’all something too,” Standish announces. He sets his laptop down on the island. “And it’s way better than booze.”

Jai looks at the laptop with distaste. “You’re giving us your used laptop?”

“No, dude. There’s something on the laptop.”

Frankie folds her arms over her chest. “If you’re about to force us all to play Fortnite with you again—”

“No,” Standish says, waving his hand dismissively. “This is way cooler than Fortnite.”

Everyone stares at him, waiting. Standish just grins at them all and doesn’t say anything.

“Well?” Frankie prompts. “What is it?”

“You don’t want to guess?”

“Do I look like I want to guess?”

Standish rolls his eyes. “You suck the fun out of everything, Frankie. You’re a fun sucker.”

“ Heard that before,” Frankie mutters with a grin in Will’s direction.

Susan laughs. Ray looks at Will with wide eyes. Will feels his cheeks flush, but also a flare of desire in his gut.

“Come on, man,” Standish whines. “Now I need my brain bleached.”

“Just tell us what you’ve got,” Will says.

Standish clears his throat and lifts his chin proudly. “My SHIT sticks got through The Trust’s servers. Well, I got through the servers. But I used my sticks.”
Everyone stares at him, stunned. For a long moment, the room is dead silent.

“What?” Frankie breathes eventually.

“I’m in,” Standish tells her.

“You said it would take a month,” Jai says. “Maybe even two.”

“It would have,” Standish says. “But then I had a stroke of genius yesterday while I was…” He stops abruptly and looks uncomfortable. “Doing stuff.”

“Stuff means sex,” Jai says to Frankie. He looks Standish up and down. “Though it’s unclear whether he was solo or partnered.”

“Ew,” Frankie replies.

“Oh you’re one to talk,” Standish says. “It’s only noon and you’ve probably gotten nasty with Will like five times already.”

“Yeah, we had sex right there before you got here,” Frankie says, nodding her head at the stool Standish is leaning against. “Stopped right in the middle of peeling potatoes and went at it.”

Standish leaps away from the stool and makes a disgusted sound in the back of his throat.

“That didn’t happen,” Will says.

Frankie grins wickedly. “It could have.”

“He said stroke of genius,” Ray cackles, nudging Susan with his elbow. “His brain wasn’t the only thing that—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Susan cuts him off.

Ray closes his mouth obediently.

“Look, it doesn’t matter what I was doing,” Standish says. “The point is I had an idea. Nick said the program I used to identify The Trust was similar to what RJ did to find The Collective. Both of them identified patterns. So I thought if I could—”

“Nobody except Jai is going to understand what you’re about to say,” Frankie cuts him off. “Give us the SparkNotes without nerd words.”

Standish sighs at her. “I identified the security patterns, used them to hack all five servers, and installed the program I created.”

“You mean the program you created to destroy RJ’s program?”

“Yep.”

Once again, the room goes silent. A flurry of emotion storms through Will’s chest. A sudden, overwhelming sense of hope rises above everything else. If Standish is right, and he did what he’s saying he did, they could take control of RJ’s program. They could keep it out of the wrong hands for good. Nick would have no leverage and no power. Frankie would finally be free.

“Oh my god,” Susan breathes.
“How sure are you?” Jai asks quietly.

“I still need to run a few tests,” Standish says. “Double check some things. But give me a week, and we should be good to go.” He looks at Frankie. “Once I’m ready, we can do exactly what you said. I’ll pretend I can’t hack the servers. You convince Nick to run RJ’s program and hack the servers for us. I’ll hijack it. And then you can finally get rid of your asshole husband Frankie-style.”

Will glances down at Frankie. Her expression is taut. It’s the same look she wears when she’s feeling overwhelmed but is trying to keep her emotions in check. He wants to pull her close and ask her what she’s thinking, but he can’t. She might be fine with PDA now, but she still doesn’t like having private, serious conversations in front of the team. Especially when it’s about something that makes her so vulnerable.

He can’t resist touching her though. He slides his hand along the small of her back. Her muscles are tense beneath his palm. She doesn’t loosen at his touch, and that worries him a little. He doesn’t want her to spend the rest of her favorite holiday brooding.

“We’ve got at least a week before it’s ready,” he points out to her. “We don’t need to worry about it today.”

“Will’s right,” Susan says gently. Will shoots her a grateful look. “We know we’ve got a chance now, and that’s good,” she continues. “But let’s focus on celebrating Thanksgiving today. We can worry about work tomorrow.”

Frankie bites her lip and doesn’t respond.

“I agree,” Jai says quietly.

That gets Frankie’s attention. She looks at him.

He smiles at her. “No shop talk during Thanksgiving.”

Will isn’t sure what that means, but he’s guessing it’s an inside joke of theirs because it brings a faint smile to her face.

“No shop talk during Thanksgiving,” she agrees. She looks at the rest of the team. “Anybody want a drink?”

“Oh my god,” Standish groans as he collapses onto the sectional in the basement of Frankie’s brownstone. “I have never been this full in my entire life. Jesus could take me now and I would die a happy man.”

“There’s still dessert,” Jai says from the foot of the stairs.

“Pie?” Standish asks, picking his head up from the cushion.

“Three kinds,” Frankie confirms sleepily from the chaise. She’s sitting between Will’s legs, her back against his chest and one of his arms draped possessively over her body. His free hand is playing with her hair. It feels so good she thinks she might fall asleep.

“You really outdid yourself, Jai,” Susan says admiringly. “Everything was spectacular. Definitely the best meal I’ve ever had.”
“Agreed,” Ray sighs. “I don’t know what you put in your mashed potatoes, but if I could only eat one food for the rest of my life, it’d be those.”

“Secret recipe,” Jai says.

Frankie can tell by the tone of his voice that he’s pleased by their admiration. She smiles. Will leans forward to press a kiss to the top of her head. Frankie slides her hand over his knee.

“What kind of pie is there?” Standish asks.

“Didn’t you just say you were full?” Susan asks.

“Yeah, in my regular stomach,” Standish says as if Susan has just asked him the dumbest question he’s ever heard. “I have a separate dessert stomach. And it’s always ready for duty.”

Will laughs, and Frankie can feel it rumble through his body. “That’s the most Standish thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Yeah, I’m hilarious,” Standish says. “Seriously, Jai, what kind of pie did you make?”

“Pumpkin.”

“Is there whipped cream?”

“Obviously,” Jai scoffs. “I also made an apple pie that will be served with vanilla ice cream. And a chocolate cream pie as well.”

“Chocolate cream?” Ray says excitedly.

“The chocolate is mine,” Frankie announces without opening her eyes or lifting her head from Will’s chest. “I get first dibs and the biggest piece or all of you die.”

“Excessive,” Will murmurs to her.

She shakes her head. “You won’t say that after you taste it.”

“So is the lemon loaf still a no go?” Standish asks.

“We don’t share lemon loaf,” Jai and Frankie say in unison.

Will laughs again. Frankie smiles. She likes the sound of his laugh, and she likes the way his body feels when he’s laughing against her.

“Well they’re nothing if not consistent,” Susan says.

Standish huffs. “Y’all need to go back to kindergarten and learn how to share. When is it pie time?”

“Give the rest of us with only one stomach a few minutes to digest,” Susan says. “You’ll get your pie, don’t worry.”

“Does anyone mind if I turn on football?” Ray asks. “It’s kind of a tradition for me.”

Nobody seems to have a problem with that, so Ray turns on the TV. Frankie can hear everyone settling into seats, but she doesn’t open her eyes. Will continues to stroke his hand through her hair. She’s half asleep when the strident voice of a news anchor cuts through her drowsiness like a fog
Frankie bolts upright. “What?”

The news anchor is gone, and the TV screen is showing a commercial for Tostitos. It doesn’t matter though. The words are still echoing in Frankie’s ears. Terrorist attack. Dangerous chemical.

“Dude, Frankie, relax,” Standish says. “She said crisis averted.”

Frankie twists to face him. “She also said there was a chemical.”

“So?”

“So a month ago The Trust bought a shit ton of cyloraxin. And in case you forgot, that’s one of the most dangerous chemicals on the planet.”

Standish goes pale. “I thought we exchanged it for water.”

“We exchanged the batch we intercepted,” Jai says, shooting Frankie a worried look. “But that doesn’t mean Ollerman didn’t buy other batches.”

“Do we know if The Trust has used it yet?” Susan asks.

“No,” Will replies. He straightens behind Frankie. “Last we heard, they were still sitting on it because they had something big in mind.”

“Grand Central on one of the busiest travel days of the year fits the bill,” Frankie says. She looks at Ray. “Have you gotten any calls from the director?”

Ray pulls his phone out to check. “No.” He glances at Frankie and Will. “That’s good, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Will answers. “If they don’t know it’s cyloraxin, then Casey wouldn’t realize this could be related to The Trust.”

“Guys, we don’t even know if it’s cyloraxin,” Standish says.

“Give me the remote,” Frankie orders.

Ray tosses the remote at her, and Frankie immediately flips through channels until she finds a news anchor sitting behind a desk. Beneath her, the words TERRORIST ATTACK AVERTED AT GRAND CENTRAL STATION are typed in a bold black font that stretches across the screen.

“...police and federal agents are still investigating,” she says gravely, “and we don’t yet know any details about the chemical. But Channel 6’s own Andy Patterson is live at Grand Central with the employee who found the bomb. Andy?”

“Thanks, Julie,” a man who looks like the real life version of a Ken doll says. “I’m here with Bobby Barnes, the transit authority employee who found the bomb. Mr. Barnes, can you tell us what happened?”

Bobby Barnes is a man with graying hair, a beer belly, and an impressive looking black eye.

“Yeah, I uh...I was just on my rounds, you know?” he says. “I went in to check the gauges cause
we was getting some weird readings from the one, and I found this contraption hooked up to our vent system. I never seen nothin like it. Kinda looked like that thing with the colored liquids from *Die Hard 3*. You know, the one where Samuel L. Jackson and John McClane was traipsin all over New York?"

“Right, of course,” Andy says impatiently. “So what did you do next?”

“Well it had a timer on it,” Bobby replies. “And the numbers was countin down, and I figured that can’t be good, ’specially since it looked like it was going to finish right around the time we was expecting all them people to come through the station after the parade. I was gettin ready to call the cops when this guy bursts in.”

Frankie’s heart stops in her chest. She squeezes Will’s knee.

“Frankie?” he says softly.

She ignores him and keeps her focus on the TV.

“A guy?” Andy repeats, leaning toward Bobby eagerly.

“Yeah. Big strappin guy. Looked like a linebacker for the Giants. Dressed in all black and had a baseball hat on. He went straight for the thing on the vents, and I was like ‘hey, buddy, you can’t touch that I gotta call the cops.’ But he ignored me. So I tapped him on the shoulder real polite like and said ‘hey buddy’ and then he gave me this shiner.”

Bobby points at his black eye. Andy grimaces. “And then what?”

“Well he knocked me out cold,” Bobby says, throwing up his hands. “I told ya, the guy coulda played for the Giants. By the time I came to, he was gone and that timer wasn’t runnin no more. I called the cops, they called the bomb squad, everyone got evacuated, and now I’m standin here talkin to you.”

“Hey!” someone offscreen shouts. “You can’t be talking to the media! Turn that camera off!”

Bobby’s eyes widen. Andy glances over his shoulder, his eyes widen too, and then he turns back to the camera.

“And there you have it, Julie,” he says in a rush. “A mysterious hero saved the day and thousands, maybe even millions of New Yorkers owe him their lives. Back to you in the studio.”

The video cuts back to the anchor woman, who smiles. “Well, folks, you heard it here first. Who is this mysterious hero who saved New York City? Stay tuned to Channel 6 for more updates.”

The camera angle shifts, and the anchor woman starts talking about the high winds and the impact they had on the parade balloons. Frankie mutes her, and the ensuing silence is deafening. She feels like her breath is caught in her throat and she can’t get any oxygen into her lungs. She squeezes Will’s knee again, probably harder than she should, but she feels off-kilter and she needs him to steady her.

“Frankie,” he says quietly. He smooths his hand over her back.

She glances over her shoulder at him. “It’s Nick,” she says quietly.

Will looks surprised, but only for an instant. It’s the same reaction he had a few days ago when she came home from breakfast with Jai and told him that Nick started his foundation fifteen days after
Moscow, and that she suspected—but couldn’t yet prove—that her husband was Omega.

She wonders briefly if he’ll question her. She’s one hundred percent sure that the bomb in Grand Central was rigged with cyloraxin, that Ollerman is responsible for it, and that Nick was the one who stopped it. But her certainty is backed by zero facts. She doesn’t have any evidence to prove she’s right. She’s only got a gut feeling. It would be totally reasonable for Will to question her.

But he doesn’t. He clenches his jaw. He searches her eyes. And then he reaches for her hand and holds it tightly. His palm is warm on her knuckles, his fingers familiar around hers, and the gesture sends a wave of calm through her. He nods.

She turns and glances around the room. Everyone looks shocked.

“What do you mean it’s Nick?” Standish asks.

“The man in the baseball hat,” Frankie tells him. “The one who stopped the bomb from detonating. It was Nick.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that’s what he does. He’s been doing it for years.”

“Doing what for years?” Standish says incredulously. “Saving the world?”

“Yes.”

Standish scoffs. “No way. Ya boy’s a traitor, Frankie. He’s—”

“Omega,” Frankie cuts him off. “He’s Omega, Standish.”

Standish, for maybe the first time in his life, seems stunned into silence. Susan looks shocked. Ray looks shocked too, but also confused. Jai looks like he’s going to be sick.

“Nick said Omega isn’t real,” Standish says eventually.

“Nick says a lot of things,” Frankie replies. “Most of them aren’t true.”

“We don’t know for sure yet,” Jai says.

“We know enough,” Frankie counters, meeting his gaze from across the room. “It’s my holiday, Jai. My city. He wouldn’t let Ollerman ruin it for me.”

Jai doesn’t argue. She can tell by the look on his face that he knows she’s right.

Will squeezes her hand. Frankie turns to look at him.

“What do you want to do?” he asks softly.

She wants to go back in time to five minutes ago, when he was playing with her hair and she was falling asleep. But that’s not an option. The good stuff never is. She learned that the hard way.

“There could be another bomb,” she says. “Something else planned.”

“How do we find out?” Ray asks.

Frankie keeps her eyes on Will. “Nick will know.”
Will straightens his shoulders in determination. “Then let’s call him.”
Forty-Five

The phone rings only once before Frankie hears Nick’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Frankie?” he says. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Frankie closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. She’s standing outside her brownstone on her brick patio. It’s framed by an eight foot privacy fence made of redwood, so unless someone is looking down from one of the windows in the surrounding buildings, no one can see her. No one, that is, except Will and Jai, who are standing near the outdoor staircase that leads up to her kitchen. Everyone else is still inside. She can see them through the glass of the French doors. Standish is pacing.

“Baby?” Nick prompts when she doesn’t answer.

“I’m fine,” she replies.

“You want me to stop at the grocery store on the way home?”

Frankie exhales. He’s speaking in code. It’s a system they worked out early on in their relationship. If she says no, then that means everything is fine. But if she says yes, then that means she needs his help but can’t say it.

“No, Nick,” she says quietly. “I’m fine.”

He doesn’t reply at first. Frankie glances at Will. He’s watching her closely, but not suspiciously. She hates that he can’t listen to their conversation. She wants to put Nick on speaker phone, but she can’t. He’ll notice.

“You haven’t called me in a long time,” Nick observes. “You need something.”

“Where are you?” she asks, turning away from Will. It’s too hard to look at him and talk to Nick.

There’s a moment’s hesitation on the other end of the line. “In a hotel room,” Nick says eventually.

“Where?”

“Does it matter?”

“Where, Nick?”

He sighs. “New York.”

Frankie closes her eyes. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“What was me?”

“The bomb in Grand Central. It was cyloraxin. It was The Trust. And you stopped it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Nick,” she murmurs.

She doesn’t mean to sound so agonized, but she can’t help it. Her throat is tight and her chest is
too. She and Jai are supposed to have one day a year—just one day—where they don’t have to deal with all this shit. Thanksgiving is supposed to be that day, and this year she was supposed to get to share it with Will. And yet here she is, surrounded by ghosts again.

Will teased her once, about a week after they got back from Monte Carlo, that they should run away together and never look back. He wasn’t serious. But now she wishes he was, and she wishes she’d taken him up on it.

“Tell me the truth,” she pleads.

There’s another long pause. Frankie waits with her heart in her throat. Her pulse is thundering in her ears.

“It was me,” Nick says quietly.

She knew that’s what he’d say. She knew it was him. But even still, the words feel like a punch to the gut.

“Why?” she manages to say.

“Because half the cyloraxin in that bomb came from the batch you gave me in Monte Carlo.”

Frankie’s blood runs cold. She turns back to Will and Jai. “Only half of what was in that bomb is what you took from us?” she repeats for their benefit. They both look shocked.

“Yes,” Nick confirms.

“Where’s the other half from?”

“Somebody else.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. I took care of it. They’re not a threat anymore.”

“Is there another bomb?”

“No. That was the only one.”

Frankie shakes her head at Will and Jai, but neither of them look relieved there was only one bomb. Will looks concerned. Jai looks furious.

Frankie swallows and tries to keep her breathing even. This is worse than she thought. Nick didn’t stop a bomb with fake cyloraxin. He stopped a bomb with real cyloraxin. If he hadn’t shown up, thousands of people could have died. For the rest of her life, she would have associated her favorite holiday with the mass murder of thousands, and she would have blamed herself for it.

“I couldn’t let it go off,” Nick says. “I know you. You would’ve felt responsible. I didn’t want that. Not on your favorite day of the year.” There’s a brief pause, and then he adds softly, “I don’t want you paying for my mistakes anymore.”

Frankie rubs her hand over her face and paces across the bricks. He sounds sincere. She thinks he probably is sincere. He means what he’s saying, or at least he wants to mean it. But his sincerity doesn’t change anything. Mina and RJ are dead. She has nightmares about all the awful things she’s done. She’s put Will through hell. And all of that is Nick’s fault.
“Ollerman won’t be happy,” she observes.

“I’m not worried about Ollerman.”

“Maybe you should be.”

“I didn’t let Clarke have you, Frankie. I’m sure as hell not going to let Ollerman. You don’t need to worry about him. I’ve got it under control.”

Maybe it’s the mention of Clarke. Maybe it’s that she happens to glance at the doors leading back inside, and she sees Standish still pacing across the room. Maybe it’s just a random stroke of genius. Whatever it is, an idea suddenly strikes Frankie, and it’s so good she doesn’t even pause before she follows it through.

“He could’ve killed thousands of people today,” she says. “He’s escalating, and there are more lives at stake than just mine. You might not do this for a living anymore, Nick, but I do. Every person he kills is blood on my hands.”

“You’re not responsible for him.”

“It’s my job to stop him from doing shit like this. If you cared about me as much as you say you do, you’d be helping me do that. But you’re not.”

“Bullshit,” Nick says angrily. “I risked my life in Venice to get you in and out of those catacombs. Without me, Standish wouldn’t have gotten those sticks planted. He wouldn’t even be alive. Once he’s in, you’ll have a third of The Trust dead to rights and you’ll be able to predict Ollerman’s next move.”

“What about before then? Standish said it’ll take him a month to crack the servers, maybe more. How many people are going to die before then?”

“Frankie—”

“We can’t wait that long, Nick. I can’t wait that long. I know it’s going to take time to bring the whole thing down. But we could keep them from doing too much damage while we wait. Between Standish’s sticks and RJ’s program, you could hack into those servers in minutes and you know it.”

Nick doesn’t answer. Frankie takes a deep breath and chooses her next words carefully.

“Don’t make me responsible for more death,” she murmurs, dropping her voice to the low tone she used to use when she soothed him after he woke up from a nightmare. “Please.”

There’s a long pause. Frankie closes her eyes and hopes she was convincing enough. She can’t bring herself to look at Will. She hates that he has to watch her grovel like this.

“Is Standish with you?” Nick asks after a while.

“Yes.”

“Does he have his laptop?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

He doesn’t say goodbye. She only knows he’s gone because she hears a click on the other end of
the line. She lowers her phone from her ear and stares at it for a moment, stunned.

“Frankie?” Will calls.

She turns to face him. “We can do it today.”

He frowns. “Do what?”

“Hijack the program. He’ll be here in half an hour. He’s coming to hack the servers using Standish’s sticks and RJ’s program. This is our chance.” She glances at Jai, and then back at Will. “We can do it today.”

Will and Jai share a look.

“Then let’s do it today,” Will says.


Gratitude and love wrap around Frankie’s throat and squeeze, but now’s not the moment to get emotional. They don’t have a lot of time. She strides toward them, nodding at Jai as she goes. He nods back. She grabs Will’s hand briefly as she passes and squeezes it. And then she opens the door and steps inside her brownstone.

The team turns to look at her from their positions on the couch.

Frankie fixes her eyes on Standish. “You said you planted your program in The Trust’s servers.”

Standish frowns. “Yeah. Why?”

“And it’s ready?”

“Yes,” he confirms with a shrug. “I mean, I need to run some tests to make sure—”

“We don’t have time for that,” Frankie cuts him off. “Nick will be here in half an hour. He’s going to use RJ’s program and your sticks to hack into The Trust’s servers for us. You need to be ready to activate whatever latency protocol shit you talked about in the Dead Drop before Venice and take control of RJ’s program from him.”

Everyone in the room stares at her in shock. She can feel their eyes burning into her, but she keeps her gaze focused on Standish.

The color drains from his face. “I can’t. There are still tests I need to run. Things I have to check.”

“Yeah,” he confirms with a shrug. “I mean, I need to run some tests to make sure—”

“We don’t have time for that,” Frankie interrupts impatiently. “It’s now or never.”

“No,” Standish says, shaking his head. He looks at Will, and then back at Frankie. “Guys, I can’t. I’m not sure everything is failproof yet. He could figure out what we’re doing. I could mess everything up.”

“You’re not going to mess everything up,” Will says gently. “You’re going to try your best. That’s all we’re asking.”
“But why today?” Standish asks. “Why now?”

“Because he thinks the cylonaxin bomb scared me,” Frankie replies. “He’s not an idiot, Standish. He knows I want that program gone. On any other day, if I asked him to run it for me, he’d be more likely to refuse than agree. But today is different. I’m giving him another opportunity to play the hero, and he can’t resist that.”

“She’s right,” Jai says softly. “We won’t get another chance like this.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Standish demands. “What then?”

“Then we’ll go back to the drawing board and find another way,” Will says.

“This isn’t all on you, sweetie,” Susan adds, getting to her feet and reaching out to put her hand on Standish’s arm. “If it doesn’t work, then it doesn’t work. No one will blame you.”

“Easy for you to say,” Standish says, yanking his arm out of her grasp. “You’re not the one who has to do it.”

“We’re in this together, Standish,” Will insists. “We’re a team. A family.”

“Yeah until I fail!” Standish practically shouts. He gestures at Frankie. “If I can’t do this, she’s going to hate me.”

“Standish,” Frankie starts.

“Don’t try to bullshit me, Frankie,” Standish snaps, turning to look at her. “I know what this means to you. I know I’m your last hope. If I screw this up then you and Jai are going to hate me, and you’re never going to be able to marry Will, and the one thing I contribute to this team—the one thing I’m actually good at—will be a total fucking bust.”

“Standish, listen,” Will says, starting in Standish’s direction, but Frankie grabs his arm and stops him. He gives her a confused look. She shakes her head at him. He stares at her for a moment. She can tell when he realizes what she’s silently asking him because he nods. She lets go of his arm.

Frankie walks across the room until she’s standing in front of Standish. He avoids her gaze. The expression on his face is agonized. It reminds her of the way he looked in Monte Carlo when he realized she and Will were going to break up.

“Look at me,” she orders. Her voice is firm, but it isn’t angry or cruel.

Standish hesitates briefly, but looks at her.

“You’re annoying as hell.”

“Frankie,” Susan chides.

Frankie holds up her hand. “You’re annoying as hell,” she repeats. “You’re immature and self-absorbed and nosy and I want to strangle you at least a dozen times a day. But I don’t. You know why?”

“Because it would make Will mad?”

“Because I love you.”

Standish’s mouth drops open in shock. Frankie can feel everyone else staring at her too. She
ignores them and forges on.

“I need you to do this for me, Standish,” she says quietly. “I need you to try your very hardest to make this work because you’re the only one who can. But if it doesn’t, and you fail, it won’t change anything between me and you. I promise.”

Standish studies her. Frankie lets him. It’s uncomfortable. She wants to fidget. She wants to look away. She wants to make a joke, or say something insulting, or do something, anything to make herself feel less vulnerable. But she can’t.

“You mean it?” Standish says eventually. “You’re not just saying it to get what you want?”

“I mean it.”

He holds his hand out between them. “Pinky promise.”

Frankie gives him a look. “What are we, twelve?”

“I’ve seen you do it with Will.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Well for starters, Will and I have sex. A lot.”

Standish crinkles his nose. “You didn’t have to add that last part.”

“Just being honest,” Frankie says with a shrug.

Standish shoves his hand closer to her. “Pinky promise or no deal.”

Frankie glances over her shoulder at Will. He smiles at her. “Don’t look at me,” he says in amusement. “He gets his negotiation skills from you.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and turns back to Standish. She sighs dramatically so that everyone knows how much she hates this, and then she reaches out and loops her pinkie around his.

Standish looks thrilled. “I love you too, spy mom,” he gushes gleefully.

Frankie yanks her hand away from his. “Just go do your job before I change my mind and strangle you.”

Standish grins. “Yes ma’am.”

When Frankie swings her front door open thirty minutes later, she finds Nick standing on her front stoop with his hands in his pockets and a backpack slung over one shoulder.

He’s wearing a henley again. It’s a dark crimson color that brings out his eyes. She can see the chain around his neck peeking out from under his shirt along with some of his tattoos. He’s wearing the watch she gave him. Her eyes linger on it, but she forces herself to meet his gaze.

“Hey,” he greets with a smile.

Frankie swings the front door open. “Hey.”
She steps back to let him through, and he walks past her and into the brownstone. She closes the
door behind him and locks it. When she turns to face him, she finds him frozen. She follows his
gaze, and sees that he’s noticed the framed photos that are arranged on the mantle above the
fireplace.

The last time he was in this house, there were only two photos on that mantle. They’re still there.
One is a candid shot of Frankie’s parents walking down the aisle after they got married. The other
is of nine-year-old Frankie and her parents standing on a sidewalk on the Yale campus beneath a
gorgeous canopy of fall-colored trees. All three of them are laughing.

In the time that’s passed since Nick last stood in her entryway, four new photos have been added to
the mantle. Two are of Will’s family. The first is a photo from last Christmas. It shows Will, his
parents, his sister and her husband, and all of his nephews posing in red and green striped pajamas
in front of a brightly lit Christmas tree. The second is a photo from Will’s childhood—his parents
smiling broadly, his sister beaming in a cheerleader uniform, his older brother decked out in a
mud-stained football uniform, and Will smiling goofily in the front, his brother's too-large
letterman’s jacket draped over his scrawny shoulders.

The other two photos are more recent. On the right is a photo Susan asked Hector to take of the
team while they were in Havana. They’re all seated around a table, drinks in front of them, smiling
happily about another successful mission. The photo on the left is from this summer, when Will
dragged Frankie to a Mets game. He’s wearing a pinstripe jersey and a blue baseball hat. His lips
are pressed against Frankie’s cheek, one arm outstretched to take the picture and the other draped
around her shoulders. She’s wearing a plain white t-shirt and holding a beer. Her eyes are cast
heavenward as if she was rolling them when he snapped the picture, but there’s a faint smile on her
lips that says it all. She loves him.

She’s never admitted it to Will, but she loves that picture of them.

“You redecorated,” Nick says quietly.

“It’s not just my place anymore. It's his too.”

Nick’s eyes flicker toward her. Frankie holds his gaze. A few weeks ago, he would have said
something snide about how she’ll be living alone again soon enough. He would’ve made sure to
point out to her that they’re still married, and Will is only temporary. The fact that he says nothing
now leaves her feeling unsettled, and she doesn’t want to think about why.

“Standish’s laptop is over here,” she says, walking toward the kitchen. She turns to face him when
she gets to the island.

“Where is everyone?” he wonders.

“Downstairs.”

He casts a glance at the stairs. “I would’ve thought Chase would want to keep an eye on us. Or
Jai.”

“Will trusts me,” Frankie says, leaning against the counter. “And Jai doesn’t want to see you on
Thanksgiving.”

Something that looks an awful lot like regret shivers briefly over Nick’s face and then disappears.
He glances toward the sink, and then back at her. She immediately knows what he’s thinking. She
clenches her jaw and wills her mind to stay blank. Nick leans closer to her, his muscled body
looming over hers, and when the scent of his cologne hits her nose, her mental defenses fall.

The memory that surfaces is so vivid it’s overpowering. Nick’s hands on her face. The British lilt in his voice as he whispered *I love you.* His lips brushing against hers, gentle at first, and then more insistent until she gave up trying to fight what was blazing between them, and reached out to pull him closer and kiss him back.

“You’re thinking about it,” Nick murmurs. “Aren’t you?”

Hatred flares in her chest. She hates that he knows her so well. She hates that she can’t make every memory she has of him disappear. She puts her hand on his chest and pushes him away from her the way she should have done two years ago.

“I’m not doing this with you,” she says firmly. “Do what you came here to do or get out.”

Nick studies her, his eyes flickering over her face as if he’s trying to decide whether she means it. He must decide she does, because he turns away from her.

She exhales a shaky breath. Her hands are trembling, and that annoys her, so she grits her teeth and curls them into fists. Nick slides the backpack off his shoulder and reaches inside to pull out a laptop. He sets it on the counter next to Standish’s and opens it.

He glances up at her. “Can you…?”

“Turn around so I don’t see your passwords?”

He smiles. “They’re a little more complicated this time.”

Frankie rolls her eyes but turns her back to him. It doesn’t matter if she knows his passwords. He’s probably got a million other security measures in place that would prevent her from doing any damage even if she did figure them out. If Standish’s program works, it’ll be a moot point anyway. He’ll hijack RJ’s program and give her control of the dead man’s switch, and Nick won’t have anything keeping him alive anymore. Once the program is gone, she can kill him.

Something stirs in her chest at the thought. She isn’t sure what it is, and she isn’t sure she wants to know. She thinks of Shanghai, of standing over his bed with her gun pointed at his heart, and the same question that overwhelmed her then overwhelms her now.

Can she pull the trigger?

“Okay,” Nick says.

Frankie pushes the question from her mind and turns around. Nick is typing, glancing between his laptop and Standish’s. She recognizes RJ’s program on Nick’s screen, and she can see things moving and scrolling on Standish’s screen even though Nick isn’t touching the keyboard.

A question wells up into her throat, and she blurts it out before she can stop herself.

“How’d you learn to run it?”

Nick’s fingers pause over the keyboard. He looks up at her.

“I know you watched RJ start it before you killed him,” she says, meeting his gaze. “But you didn’t know the ins and outs of running it. None of us did. Unless you lied about that too.”

Nick shakes his head. “I didn’t lie about that. The Collective had a guy who taught me how to use
“What happened to him?”

“You killed him.”

Frankie drops her gaze to the floor. The silence in the air is thick. There are things she could say, things she maybe should say, but she doesn’t want to. She’s spent seven years trying to avoid the conversation that’s hovering between them now because she doesn’t know what’s going to happen when they finally have it. She doesn’t know how this ends. And she doesn’t like to start things if she can’t predict how they’ll end.

Nick turns toward her. “Francesca,” he starts.

“Don’t,” she cuts him off, taking a step back. “Just do what you came here to do.”

He gazes at her for a second. She can tell he wants to ignore her request, but he doesn’t. He turns toward the laptops and gets to work. Once again, Frankie finds herself unsettled by his sudden inability to be snide with her.

For a while, the only sound between them is his fingers tapping on the keyboard. Her mind wanders. She wonders what her team is doing downstairs. Standish has some type of program running on her laptop to mirror whatever is happening on his, so he can see everything Nick is doing. Jai and Susan and Ray are probably crowded behind him, watching the screen.

But not Will. Will is probably standing at the bottom of the steps, ready to sprint upstairs if she needs him. And she does need him. She needs him to be standing at her side. But she can’t have that right now. Nick is more pliable and less suspicious when they’re alone. Which means she’s on her own.

“Okay,” Nick says, his hands falling away from the keyboard. “It needs to run for five minutes or so, and then we should be good to go.”

“Five minutes?” Frankie repeats.

“Give or take.” He gives her a crooked smile. “You want me to wait outside until it’s done?”

“Yes.”

His smile widens. “Not going to happen.”

Frankie rolls her eyes and folds her arms over her chest.

Nick slides his hands into his pockets. “The parade was good this year. I was worried the wind would keep the balloons from going up, but it worked out.”

Frankie doesn’t reply.

He tries again. “How was dinner?”

“Fine.”

“Did Jai make his mashed potatoes?”

“It’s Thanksgiving. What do you think?”
“Are there any left?”

She arches an eyebrow. “If I give you some will you shut up until the program is done?”

He smirks. “Sure.”

Frankie brushes past him and toward the refrigerator. She pulls out the container of mashed potatoes but leaves the gravy behind. Jai would have a fit if he knew she shared the gravy. She doesn’t really want to share the potatoes either, but at least if Nick is eating there will be some kind of buffer between them. It’s better than letting him stare at her longingly for five minutes.

When she turns back around, she realizes he has one of her kitchen drawers open and is pulling out two forks. She stops dead in her tracks as a sudden sense of violation wells up in her chest.

Nick notices her staring. “What?”

“Nothing.”

She sets the container between them and pulls off the lid. He offers her a fork, and she takes it without looking at him. She’s afraid if she looks at him he’ll realize that she’s trying not to think about all those times they came back late from missions or a night out and ate food Jai left in the fridge for them.

“Can I ask you something?” Nick asks after a while.

She shakes her head. “No.”

A beat of silence hangs in the air. He’s going to ask her anyway. She knows it.

“Did you think about me today?”

Frankie sighs. “You know I hate that,” she says, giving him a look. “If you’re going to do whatever you want, don’t bother asking me for permission.”

“Sorry,” he says with a faint smile.

He’s not sorry, but she doesn’t care. She stopped wanting apologies from him a long time ago.

“So?” he prompts. “Did you think about me today?”

“Why would I think about you?”

“It’s our holiday.”

“It was our holiday. It’s not anymore.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“No,” she says bluntly. “I didn’t think about you. I took a shower with Will, and I watched the parade with Jai, and then I had dinner with my team. You never even crossed my mind.”

He shakes his head as he scoops another forkful of potatoes. “You’re lying.”

Annoyance flares in Frankie’s chest at the accusation. She stabs her fork into the potatoes and leaves it there, and turns to face him with a glare.
“When were you going to tell me that you’re Omega?”

He whips his head up to look at her. “What?”

For a second, she wants to say nevermind. She wasn’t going to tell him that she knew. She was going to take a page out of his book and wait to reveal it at the perfect time when it would do the most damage. But once again, her impulsivity has cost her. When is she going to learn not to blurt shit out without thinking about it first?

Too late now, she thinks wryly.

“You heard me,” she says, lifting her chin defiantly.

Nick stares at her. She stares back. The conversation she’s been avoiding flutters to the surface again. She knows she’s opening up a can of worms. This is her very own Pandora’s box. But she can’t let it go.

“I know it’s you,” she tells him when he doesn’t answer. “I know everything. I know you started the foundation fifteen days after Moscow. I know sightings of Omega started after Shanghai. I know that all the things the foundation funds, and all the people Omega has gone after, are tied to The Collective or to me.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I’m a spy. It’s what I do.”

He shakes his head. “You mean it’s what Jai does. You sent him on a recon mission for you.”

“Can’t hate a wolf for being a wolf.”

“You always did like throwing my words back at me.” He tilts his head at her. “I love you, baby, but arguing with you can be infuriating.”

“I’ll make you a deal, Nick,” she says, ignoring the jab. “You said we’ve got five minutes until RJ’s program is done.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So until it is, I won’t lie to you. But only if you don’t lie to me.”

Nick considers her proposal. Frankie waits for him as patiently as she can. Eventually, he sets his fork down on the counter.

“All right. You first.” He puts his hands on his hips, and it stretches his henley across his chest.

“Did you think about me today?”

God, she wants to punch him so bad. She’s so sick of being manipulated into confessing anthills that he turns into mountains. But she knows what she needs to say in order to get him to tell her the truth.

“Yes,” she admits through gritted teeth.

“What’d you think about?”

“Thanksgiving.”
“Which one?”

“The last one.”

His expression softens. “When we were married and no one knew.”

“When Jai was happy with Mina,” she corrects. “Before you killed her.”

Nick shakes his head as if he’s frustrated but not surprised by her response. “At what point are you going to stop willfully ignoring that I had no fucking choice that night?”

“Probably the same point you admit that the only reason you had no choice that night was because you made the wrong choice every night before that.”

Nick clenches his jaw. “Frankie—”

“Shut up, Nick,” she interrupts. “It’s your turn. When were you going to tell me that you’re Omega?”

The frustration that was on his face dissolves into guilt. He runs a hand through his hair. “I was waiting until you were ready.”

“Bullshit,” she snaps. “You were waiting for the perfect time to use it as leverage.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Yes,” she argues. “That’s what you do, Nick. It’s who you are. You wait until everything lines up perfectly in your favor and then you pounce. I watched you do it for years.”

“Our marriage isn’t a mission, Frankie,” he says, his eyes blazing. “You’re not a mark I’m trying to manipulate.”

“Are you kidding me?” she demands. “All you’ve ever done is manipulate me. Last week was a damn master class. You forced me to stay in that damn palazzo, you sent Will off with his ex, you played that song and made me watch that video—”

“None of that would matter if you didn’t still love me,” he interrupts, stepping toward her so that they’re facing off like boxers in a ring. “You do this every time, Frankie. You blame me for making you feel things, but we both know I can’t make you feel shit. If you’ve got feelings for me, it’s not because I made you feel them. They were already there.”

“You want to know how I feel about you? I hate you. I hate you for taking RJ from me. I hate you for taking Mina from Jai. I hate you for lying to me every second we were together and making me think it was my fault you never told me the truth. I hate you for turning me into someone my parents would be ashamed of. Someone I’m ashamed of.”

Nick looks like she’s just slapped him. She ignores him and forges on.

“I loved you. I married you. I gave you everything I had, everything I was. All of me, Nick. And you ruined me.”

“Baby,” he whispers, reaching for her.

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps, shoving his hands away. “You don’t get to call me that. You sacrificed that right in Moscow. You sacrificed everything in Moscow. Me. Us. Everything you promised me. All because you didn’t love me enough to tell me the fucking truth.”
The words hang in the air. Frankie feels like a dam has shattered in her chest, and the flood of emotion it’s unleashed is sweeping her out to sea. There are tears threatening to fall, and she’s trying to keep them at bay, but she can’t. Her heart feels like it’s going to beat out of her chest. Her hands are shaking even though they’re curled into fists, her nails digging into her palms.

“I’m sorry,” Nick whispers. She can see tears in his eyes too, and it makes her hurt in places she forgot existed. “I’m so sorry.”

She swipes at her eyes. “No you’re not.”

“I am,” he insists. “Look at everything I’ve done for you. The foundation, Omega—”

“That are just more things you lied about,” she cuts him off. “A lie by omission is still a lie, Nick. You should’ve told me you were working for The Collective. You should’ve told me about the foundation and Omega.”

“Would you have forgiven me if I did?”

That stops her cold, because that’s a truth she doesn’t want to face. “It doesn’t matter.”

He sees right through her. He always does. “It matters, Frankie. Everything matters.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I know you’re scared—”

“I’m not the one who’s scared. That’s you, Nick. You destroyed us because you were too much of a coward to tell me the truth.”

“I didn’t want to lose you—”

“Then you should have told me the truth! I deserved the truth. How can you not see that? You said you don’t make the same mistakes twice, but that’s all you’ve done for the last seven years, Nick. You kept more secrets and you told more lies. All you do is lie.”

Nick reaches for her face. She doesn’t push him away this time.

“Tell me what it’s going to take, Francesca,” he murmurs. “Tell me how to make it right. I’ll do whatever you want.”

She’s never seen him look so desperate. She’s seen hints of it before, like that night in Venice when he begged her for a second chance. But she hasn’t seen this look on his face in a long, long time.

“Please,” he breathes. He leans closer to her, and she can’t help but remember the last time they were this close in this kitchen. “Please, baby,” he whispers.

A soft beeping sound echoes from Nick’s laptop before Frankie can say anything. Nick doesn’t move. For a second, Frankie doesn’t either. They’re standing on the precipice of something big. If she rejects him now, it’ll have an air of finality that’s been missing from her other refusals. She can’t do that. She’s still responsible for the lives of her team. She’s still the only person who can protect them. Breaking Nick’s heart will get them all killed. And she can’t deal with more blood on her hands. She’ll drown in it.

She steps out of Nick’s reach and lowers her gaze. “I can’t do this with you right now.”
“Why not?”

“Will is downstairs.” She tucks her hair behind her ear and tries to look as conflicted as possible. “You should go.”

His hands hover in the air between them for a second and then drop. Eventually, he turns away from her.

“You’re in.” He shuts his laptop. “Let me know when Standish has planted the funds. I’ll get Blake out and my finance guy in.”

“And Pierce?”

“I’m working on it. We have to wait for the right opportunity or we’ll tip our hand to Ollerman.”

“So you’ll call me.”

He nods. “Yeah. I’ll call you.”

He shoves the laptop into his backpack and slings it over his shoulder. He’s halfway to her front door when he stops. Frankie stares at his back, waiting, because she knows he’s going to leave her with a parting shot.

When he turns around, the look on his face sends her heart shooting into her throat again. “Do you remember what you told me in Cape Town?” he asks quietly.

“We were in Cape Town more than once.”

“The night Hard Livings tortured me in front of you.”

She remembers. The thud of beatings, the smell of blood. The all-encompassing fear, followed by overwhelming relief when Jai and a tactical team finally burst in the door to save them. She remembers standing in a hotel shower later that night, carefully washing Nick’s wounds, trying not to notice the red-tinged water swirling around the drain at their feet. She remembers crying, and thinking Nick might not notice her tears thanks to the showerhead raining down on them, but he did.

“You said it was hard for you to let people in because you’d lost so much,” he murmurs. “You said you were afraid to lose me because you loved me more than you’d ever loved anyone.”

Frankie swallows around the lump in her throat. That last part isn’t true anymore. But it was at the time, and the memory still makes her ache.

“I remember,” she says.

He adjusts the backpack strap on his shoulder. “You’re right,” he says softly. “I should’ve told you. I was a coward. But it wasn’t because I didn’t love you enough, Frankie. I loved you too much. I still do. And I think deep down, in some place you’re trying to pretend doesn’t exist anymore, you still love me too.”

He glances toward the framed photos on the mantel, and then back at her. The longing is clear as day in his eyes, and she knows it’s because he’s thinking that there should be pictures of them instead of pictures of her and Will.

“I’ll call you soon,” he murmurs. He turns as if to go, hesitates, and then says, “Be careful.”
And then he’s gone.

The moment the door closes behind him, she feels a bone-deep weariness sweep over her. It leaves her feeling shaky and weak. She leans forward and puts her elbows on the counter and her head in her hands. Silence rings in her ears. She tries to focus on her breathing instead of the tidal wave of memories threatening to drown her.

_Inhale._

_Exhale._

In the back of her mind, there’s a nagging voice telling her to go downstairs. She needs to check on Jai. She needs to ask Standish about the program. She needs to touch base with Will, and make sure he knows nothing happened.

She needs to get her shit together first.

_Inhale._

_Exhale._

It takes longer than she likes, but she gets there eventually. When she feels like she’s finally got a handle on her emotions, she puts the potatoes away and sets the forks in the sink. She grabs Standish’s laptop from the counter, and then heads for the stairs.

Will is standing at the bottom, waiting for her.

Frankie goes still on the top step when their eyes meet. It’s the look on his face—a mix of relief and concern and love. She’s seen the same look a million times before, but for some reason it feels more profound today.

She really doesn’t deserve him.

He climbs up a few steps as she walks down. They meet in the middle of the staircase. She’s standing on the step above him, but he’s taller than her so they’re eye level. He lifts a hand to her face and strokes his thumb over the swell of her cheek. The gesture is identical to what Nick did a few minutes ago, but it feels different. Everything feels different with Will.

“You okay?” he whispers.

She tilts her head into his hand. “I am now.”

He smiles. She wonders if he’s remembering the first time he said that to her, or the first time she said it to him, or if it’s just his resting smile face. Whatever it is, it draws her closer to him. She’s always had a hard time resisting his smile.

“Penny for them,” he whispers, his hand tangling in her hair.

She exhales a slow breath. “I’m tired.”

“I know,” he whispers. He looks like he wants to cry, but he doesn’t. “We’re almost there.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t know that. We don’t know if it’ll work.”

He looks like he wants to disagree with her. She’s not surprised. He always hopes for the best. It used to annoy the hell out of her. Sometimes it still does. But sometimes when she seems annoyed,
she’s really just scared. She hates to see him disappointed. And she hates when she’s the one who
disappoints him.

“Say we’ll be okay,” she whispers. She presses the hand that isn’t holding Standish’s laptop against
Will’s chest over his heart. “Tell me that even if this doesn’t work, we’ll be okay.”

He lifts both his hands to her face. “We’ll be great. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because we’re unbreakable. Me and you, boo. That’s all I need.”

He leans forward and presses his forehead against hers. She curls her hand around his forearm and
closes her eyes. She wants to say a million things—that she doesn’t deserve him, that she’s never
loved anyone more than she loves him, that she’s terrified of what it means if this doesn’t work.
But her eyes are warm, and her throat is tight, and she’s afraid if she gives voice to it all then she’s
going to fall apart.

Eventually, she leans back. Their team is waiting for them. They have a job to do.

“I love you,” Will says.

She squeezes his arm. “I love you too.”

He weaves his fingers through hers and lifts her hand to his mouth to press a kiss to her knuckles.
She smiles at him and traces her thumb along his mouth. He purses his lips to kiss the pad of her
thumb, and then he turns away from her and leads her down the stairs by the hand.

When they descend the last step, the team turns to look at them. Frankie doesn’t let go of Will’s
hand.

“It’s going to be a few hours before we know if it worked,” Standish says without being prompted.
“I’ve got an alert set.”

An awkward silence follows. Frankie leans toward Will. He presses his shoulder against hers,
steady and strong.

Ray glances around the room. “Soooo...what do we do until then?”

“Something to take our minds off work,” Susan suggests. “Maybe a game?”

Standish gestures at Frankie and Will. “They’ve been promising to teach me how to play poker.”

“We can do that,” Will says with a nod.

“Or we could play canasta,” Jai offers.

Standish crinkles his nose. “Ain’t that what old ladies play?”

“No,” Jai scoffs. “Everyone enjoys canasta.”

“I love canasta,” Susan says supportively.

Jai smiles at her.

Standish rolls his eyes. “How about spoons?”
“I feel like that’s a bad idea,” Will says.

“We should play egyptian ratscrew!” Ray cries.

Standish gives him a look. “Is that a thing you just made up?”

“No,” Ray huffs. “It’s the best card game ever.”

“I prefer crazy 8s,” Will says with a shrug. “We used to play it when I was a kid.”

“Francesca?” Jai asks. “What do you want to play?”

Everyone turns to look at her.

Frankie smiles. “I think I’ve got an idea.”

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