

## Chapter One

Agent Zoey Blackwood shifted uncomfortably in her wooden chair. No armrests and not much of a cushion to sink into, not even for a reasonably small ass like hers. After all these years, you'd think the good doctor would've taken pity on her patients and sprung for a more comfortable chair. Zoey eyed the blue velvet sofa across the room but resisted the urge to nap through the rest of her psych eval. "That's right," she said, returning her gaze to the sexy, fifty-something psychologist sitting cross-legged in front of her.

"Really? Still no memory of your life before you met Sterling." Dr. Pokal looked up from her notes, frowning at Zoey over the rim of her Cartier glasses. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were eleven when he took you in."

Zoey nodded. There was an awkward silence. She checked her watch.

Dr. Pokal set her notebook on the small table beside her chair, slid her glasses off, and folded them neatly in her lap. "Zoey, we've done the same song and dance every year for the last twelve years." She sighed. "Aren't you getting tired of this?"

"Definitely. And it sounds like you are, too. But the good news is, there's an easy fix. All you have to do is stop asking about the first eleven years of my life." The fortress Zoey had built around her past was impenetrable. It was high time this doctor accepted that.

Dr. Pokal remained quiet and studied Zoey with a scrutinizing gaze. She was a striking woman with stone-gray eyes, high cheekbones, and short gray hair who seemed totally at ease within the confines of her aging body. She, and she alone, administered the annual psych eval to every CIA agent. Known around the local field office as *Dr. Poke*, she'd ruthlessly poke and prod you until you revealed your deepest, darkest secrets. She was the only thing standing

between Zoey and the rest of her career.

Dr. P uncrossed her long legs and leaned forward. “When will you let me see you?”

“Naked?”

“Not where my mind was headed, no.” Dr. P leaned back in her chair, gracefully crossed her legs, and resumed her scrutinizing stare down.

“But now you’re thinking of me naked. Right?”

“Naked or not, you still need to answer my question. You’re safe in here, Zoey. Whatever you share will stay between us.” She let a beat or two of silence hang in the air. “When will you let me in?”

“You make it sound like I’m a big steel safe that you don’t have the combination to, but you’ve got me all wrong. I’m more along the lines of a cozy little house that nobody bothers locking because the neighborhood is so safe. You don’t need a combination to get inside.” Zoey stood and turned in a full circle. “Here I am. What you see is what you get.”

“You used the word *safe* twice in that little spiel.”

“So?”

“That’s your subconscious saying you don’t feel safe enough here to talk about your past.”

“Nothing to talk about.”

“Which is it? You don’t remember anything, or there’s nothing to talk about?”

Zoey sank back down to her chair, squeezed her eyes shut, and brought her fingers to her temples. For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out why the CIA wasn’t making better use of this doctor’s interrogation skills. The Anti-Terrorism Task Force could really use her right about now. “Either give me your stamp of approval, and let me get back to my job, or—”

“Or what?” Dr. P prodded.

“Or don’t.” Zoey shrugged. “Totally your call.”

“What happens if I don’t sign off this time, Zoey?”

“The earth will be knocked from its orbit, and life as we know it will cease to exist.”

The doctor nodded. “Knowing what’s at stake is a good first step. Do you have a plan B?”

“For what?”

“Your career.”

Zoey cringed at the thought of being ousted from the CIA. She was made for this job. And she was damn good at it. She’d pretty much shot out from the birth canal with a *reserved for the CIA* post-it on her forehead. “Are you serious?”

“Very.”

“When will you realize you're better off just skipping this whole interview and letting me get back to catching the bad guys?”

“We both know what you do as an undercover field agent isn’t that cut-and-dry. If it was, you wouldn’t be here.”

Zoey recognized the truth when she heard it. She’d definitely witnessed more atrocities while working overseas than she cared to admit. “It’s just you and me in here. One of us has to cave. Your tedious collection of notes from our sessions over the years should’ve already told you it’s not going to be me.”

“I’ll ask one more time.” Dr. P centered her gray gaze on Zoey. “When are you going to let me in?”

“Fine. You win.” Zoey reached inside her coat pocket, withdrew her iPhone, and started

scrolling through the calendar. “How’s November ninth at two o’clock?”

“Three days from now?” Dr. P asked, clearly surprised as she stood and reached for the day planner on her desk.

“In the year 2085.” Zoey smiled as she watched Dr. P’s shoulders sag in defeat. “It’s a Friday, just in case you were wondering.”

“Since it’s doubtful I’ll live to see my hundred-and-tenth birthday,” Dr. P replied, “that won’t work for me.”

“Sorry, but I’m booked solid until then. Can’t say I didn’t try.” Zoey pocketed her cell. “Not my fault if your lack of availability prohibits the completion of my psych eval.”

Dr. P returned to her chair. “Last chance, Zoey. It’s now or never. If you leave this office today without revealing something—anything—about your past, your security clearance will be revoked indefinitely.”

“Why’re you being so pushy today? Our annual chats are usually way nicer than this. Are you going through menopause? There’s nothing to be ashamed of if you’re experiencing menopausal symptoms. Help *is* available. In fact, I’ve read up on it, and—”

“The difference is Sterling.”

“Sterling?” Zoey leaned back in her hard-as-a-rock chair. “Has he been paying you off for the last eleven years to pass me?”

“He was your handler, Zoey, and therefore able to vouch for your psychological fitness. As you know, he’s since retired.”

“Then just go ask my current handler.”

“Which one? You’ve had five in the last eight months.”

Zoey thought for a moment. “Peyton...something or other.”

“I’ve already spoken with her. Agent North finds herself in the same predicament as me.”

“Adrift in a sea of despair because I haven’t given either of you the hugs you so aptly deserve?” Zoey stood and opened her arms. “Come on. Bring it in.”

Stoic as ever, Dr. P remained seated. “Despite her numerous and well-documented attempts to work with you, you’ve shunned Agent North at every turn.”

*Well-documented?* Henceforth, her handler’s new name would be Agent Tattle Face. Hug-less, Zoey sat back down, her thoughts on Peyton North. How could anyone expect her to work under a recently promoted handler who’d been in the field less than she had?”

“Your connection with Sterling was genuine,” Dr. P went on. “But there’s no one to vouch for you this year.”

Zoey slipped her phone out once again and started dialing. She put it on speaker.

Sterling answered in the calm, soothing voice that Zoey was accustomed to hearing, “Hey, Zo. What’s up?”

She cut to the chase. “Do you have any concerns about my psychological fitness?”

“Annual PE’s,” he said with a sigh. “That time of year already?”

“Better than Christmas,” she replied, rolling her eyes for the doctor’s benefit.

There was a brief silence. “One of the many perks of retirement is not having to be in the middle of you two anymore. Best of luck, Zo. See you for dinner at seven.”

She leaned back in her chair and stared at her cell phone’s dark screen.

Dr. P raised an eyebrow.

“There.” Zoey stood, reached for her trench coat, and draped it over one arm. “If Sterling had any concerns, I’m sure he would’ve voiced them. We good?”

“Far from. Sit down, Agent Blackwood.”

She did. Being addressed by her last name was a step in the wrong direction.

“What are you thinking right now?”

“You want an honest answer?”

Dr. P crossed her legs. “Is your first inclination to lie?”

“I’m thinking about your legs,” Zoey admitted.

“What about them?”

“They’re long.”

“What else?”

“Now I’m thinking about pizza. And beer.” She rapped her knuckles softly against the side of her head. “Sorry to disappoint you, but that’s all that’s in here. Sexy legs, beer, and pizza.”

Dr. P stood and walked to her desk. She opened a drawer, withdrew a thick file, and returned to the diamond-tufted armchair across from Zoey.

“Is that my file?”

Without a word, Dr. P reached for her glasses, slid them on, and rifled through several dozen pages until she found what she was looking for. “Your test scores are off the charts. It’s noted here that your IQ was the third highest of anyone the CIA has tested in the last twenty years.”

*Third* highest? She was tempted to ask who had landed the top two slots but held her tongue. “I’m a good guesser.”

Dr. P removed her glasses and pierced Zoey with a forthright gaze. “They tested you twice to be sure the score was accurate. In fact, the results from your second test were tied with number two.”

“What’s your point?” she asked impatiently.

“My point”—Dr. P closed the file and set it aside—“is that I know there’s more going on inside that head of yours than just pizza and beer.”

“You caught me.” Zoey threw her hands up in surrender. “Blueberry pie.”

“Pardon me?”

“I’m craving a slice of your homemade blueberry pie right now. With hard sauce,” she added in the resultant quiet.

Dr. P cast a cursory glance around her office. “What blueberry pie?”

Zoey pointed to the mini fridge in the corner.

“What makes you think there’s pie in there?”

“I watched you carry it in from your car this morning.”

Dr. P checked her watch. “That was six hours ago, Zoey.”

She shrugged. “I like to be early for my appointments.” She could see the doctor’s wheels turning.

Dr. P stepped to the mini fridge, pulled it open, and withdrew a round green container.

“This?”

Zoey nodded.

“How do you know there’s blueberry pie inside?”

“Just a hunch.”

Dr. P lifted the lid, withdrew a silver pie server from a basket atop the fridge, and set two slices on harvest-themed paper plates with matching napkins. She scooped a generous helping of hard sauce onto their plates. “I baked it yesterday and put it in this container last night before bed.” She stepped over to Zoey, handing her a plate, fork, and napkin. “But you already knew

that.”

“Are you accusing me of being psychic?”

“I’m accusing you of being clever.” Instead of resuming her post in the armchair, Dr. P sat in the wooden chair beside Zoey. “You knew about today’s appointment.”

“Obviously,” she replied around a mouthful of pie. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You also knew I’d be pushing you for more because Sterling can’t vouch for you this year.”

Chewing, Zoey said nothing.

“So,” Dr. P went on, “instead of participating in this mandatory evaluation with any degree of authenticity, you chose to stalk me—”

“Surveil,” Zoey interjected. “Not stalk.”

“You chose to *stalk* me in an attempt to dig up some dirt—something you could use to strongarm me into signing off on your evaluation.”

Fork halfway to her mouth, Zoey simply returned the doctor’s gaze, neither confirming nor denying. But, yeah, that about summed things up.

“Do tell.” Dr. P trimmed off a bite-size portion of the pie with her fork. “How’d that go?”

Zoey casually took another bite, chewed, swallowed. “Not well,” she confessed.

Dr. P nodded thoughtfully.

“To be perfectly honest, I couldn’t find a single sketchy thing about you. Have you really led such a squeaky-clean life? Or are you just as skilled at covering your tracks as you are at baking?” She turned in her chair to meet the doctor’s gaze. “Because this is really, *really* good.”

“Thank you.” Dr. P sipped her water. “So, what now?” she asked, scooping in another dainty mouthful.

It suddenly occurred to Zoey that bringing an entire pie to the office was, perhaps, a tad peculiar. No parties or office get-togethers today. The goody-two-shoes doctor had spin class after work and would head home after that for dinner with her husband and teenage kids. “Who’s this pie for anyway?”

“That’s a very good question,” Dr. P answered in a patronizing tone.

She stopped chewing, gazed at what remained of her pie, and regarded Dr. P suspiciously. Perhaps it was no mere coincidence that blueberry pie with hard sauce was her all-time favorite dessert. The only soul on earth who knew that was Sterling. “Have you seen Sterling lately?”

“Funny you should ask. We caught up over coffee just last week.”

She nodded, slowly coming to terms with what had happened. “So, this was a set up.”

“Looks that way.”

“Sterling figured I’d come snooping around, so he told you to bake me a pie?”

“After Sterling’s retirement, *I* figured you’d come snooping around. I contacted him because I wanted to know your favorite dessert.”

“Why?”

“You tell me.”

Zoey set her fork down and thought for a moment. She had to give credit where credit was due. Not only had Dr. P anticipated Zoey’s surveillance, but she’d baked a pie and brought it to the office in an effort to bait her, knowing, all the while, that she was being watched. Dr. P had undoubtedly chosen blueberry pie because she was trying to make Zoey feel comfortable—comfortable enough to share the secrets of her past. This was the doctor’s way of showing she cared.

The pieces came together in slow motion. Zoey realized, too late, that she was in over her head. “I know you can’t talk about the other two smarty pants in the CIA, but I’m assuming the person in first place is a—”

“Psychologist?” Dr. P finished for her. “You *are* a good guesser.”

Zoey winced. Figured. She had only two plans left up her sleeve, both of which had a slim-to-none chance of working. Dr. P was just too smart. Not to mention ethical.

“And in case you’re considering a last-ditch attempt to pay me off or, worse, seduce me—”

“Why would seducing you be worse than paying you off?” she asked, insulted as she watched her last two ideas spontaneously combust.

“You should know I’m financially stable and happily married. I’m impervious to your wit, charm, and beauty, so don’t waste your time.” Dr. P set her empty plate down and glanced at her watch. “You have exactly fifteen minutes to spill your guts. Convince me you’re mentally suited to continue your work in the field after what happened in Niger.”

## Chapter Two

Peyton North tiptoed up the brick steps of her Beacon Street brownstone in Boston, Massachusetts. She quietly unlocked the door and slipped inside before Horace could poke his head out and offer his condolences...*again*. Living next door to a man with a traumatic brain injury was taxing, especially when he kept telling her how sorry he was to hear about her husband's death. As luck would have it, his brain's ability to retain information had frozen in time to the day her husband died. Like Bill Murry in the movie *Groundhog Day*, she was being forced to relive the moment over and over.

She rested her back against the door and gazed around the open living room and kitchen. Beautiful lilies, orchids, roses, and irises—all of them, white—occupied every available table, corner, and shelf. Similar sympathy bouquets also dotted all fourteen steps leading up to the second floor before spilling into the bedrooms, study, and workout room upstairs. She was actually starting to wonder if the flowers were grown with a Fountain of Youth elixir. They lasted an unseasonably long time.

Changing the water from the vases was an all-day affair and took up the majority of her one day off each week. Part of her longed to shed the immense responsibility of their care and just let them go, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Horace had gifted them to her. She would continue to honor both Horace and her late husband by taking care of them. There was simply no other acceptable course of action to take.

A knock at the door jolted her from her thoughts. Right on cue. She didn't bother peering out the peephole. She knew Horace would be standing there with another bouquet. Her stealthy-as-a-ninja entrance made no difference at all. She was half-convinced he spent all day, every day,

watching the video feed from his security camera, like a faithful dog waiting for his master to return.

Peyton took several deep breaths. She actually welcomed his visits. She just needed a few moments to collect herself. To mentally prepare.

More than once, she'd considered leaving the doorbell unanswered—only on especially hard days when the grief felt much too heavy. Today was one of those days. But she'd be damned if she was going to keep an old man waiting on her stoop in the cold.

Peyton opened the door and welcomed Horace inside, ready for another rerun of *The Handyman Horace Show*.

He handed her the bouquet—more white lilies—and leaned in for a hug. “I’m so sorry about Ben,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the hug and flowers with a smile.

Horace was wearing the clothes she'd set out for him last night: dark-blue Levi's, a long-sleeved forest-green shirt, and an insulated red-and-black lumberjack button-down in case he went outside and forgot his coat again. “My goodness!” His eyes grew wide as he gazed around the room. “I see I’m not your first visitor. Ben must have had a lot of fans.”

She nodded. One flower-loving fan in particular.

“Anything I can help out with while I’m here?” he asked, a hopeful tone keeping the usual gruffness of his voice at bay.

Peyton pretended to give his question serious thought. She had run out of projects for him months ago. If she didn't give him a project, he wouldn't accept dinner. He was old-school, through and through. “I hate to impose on you,” she said, biting her lip in feigned uncertainty.

“No imposition,” he shot back. “Just give me a list, and I’ll take care of it.” He followed

her gaze to the gaping hole in the bathroom door.

She'd become proficient at removing doorknobs around the house each morning before work. It gave Horace something to do while she cooked. "I bought new doorknobs," she said, careful not to lie. She had, in fact, purchased all the doorknobs in the house four years ago when she and Ben had finished renovations. "There are three more holey doors upstairs. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He plucked the doorknob off a nearby bookshelf and knelt on the folded towel she'd already laid out for him. "I'll have these on in a jiff."

"I really appreciate it, Horace. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he said proudly.

"Will you stay for dinner?" she asked, sticking to the usual script.

He slipped the metal hardware in place. "As long as I can earn my keep," he replied on cue, without looking up.

She set a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, grateful for the distraction that his daily companionship offered. She knew he wouldn't remember any of this tomorrow. Chances were slim-to-none he'd ever regain his ability for short-term recall. But she was okay with this new routine.

Horace didn't have any family left. His sweetheart of a wife had died eleven years ago, and their only daughter had perished as a young adult after a lifelong battle with cystic fibrosis. Peyton and Ben were the only people Horace had come to trust over the years. She wasn't about to betray that trust by putting him in a long-term care facility when he was perfectly capable of day-to-day functioning. The routine they'd established gave him the independence she knew he would have wanted.

She glanced at her watch: 7:01 p.m. Right on schedule. Horace was always in bed by nine and asleep by nine-fifteen. She unlocked his door at nine-thirty on the nose every night to check mail, pay bills, add some groceries to the fridge, and set out his clothes for the next day. Without the ability to recall the previous day's events, he had no way of remembering which clothes were clean. He had the same annoying habit as her late husband—he'd undress at the end of the day and toss his clothes over the nearest piece of furniture. More than once, he'd mistakenly dressed himself in the clothes he'd worn the previous day. Since Horace was a heavy sleeper, sneaking into his room each night to gather his laundry carried minimal risk.

Peyton readied the sauce for fettuccini Alfredo. She'd stop by the flower shop on her way to work tomorrow and reload the balance on her gift card. At her request, the florist had stopped accepting payment from Horace months ago, only pretending to run Horace's credit card each time he dropped in to buy more flowers.

She decided she'd also drop by the senior center and donate his most-recent bouquet. Real estate was at a premium, and there simply wasn't enough space for the newcomer.

"Alexa, play Bing Crosby's Christmas Classics," she announced to the Echo Dot beside her. Thanksgiving was still a week away, but she decided to kick off the Holiday Season early. Ben had always been a sucker for Bing.

Ben would be pleased with her decision to transition from agent to handler. Less risk in the field. Less traveling. The only wrench in the mix so far was Zoey Blackwood—a headstrong agent whose list of successful missions abroad was longer than a supermarket receipt for a family of ten. For reasons beyond her comprehension, the CIA's pairing algorithm had matched them, having ranked the union as *successful with a high degree of certainty*. The algorithm failed to tell her, however, exactly how she was supposed to break through the glacier of ice

surrounding Zoey. Not to mention, the smart-ass attitude that teetered on insubordination.

“All set,” Horace said, joining her at the sink to wash his hands. “Do I smell garlic bread?”

She nodded, setting thoughts of Zoey aside for the moment.

“Smells delicious.”

She stirred the sauce and handed the dish towel to Horace. “Salad, garlic bread, and my grandfather’s famous fettuccini Alfredo.”

He grinned as he dried his hands. “I should install your doorknobs more often.”

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Niger. Zoey took a shallow breath, willing her voice to remain even. “Nothing to talk about. It was a successful mission.”

“Why was the mission successful?” Dr. P asked. “Was there one defining moment, in particular?”

No way. Dr. P *knew*? Had Agent Tattle Face seriously included that in her report? Zoey shrugged as nonchalantly as possible. “I completed the mission objective. End of story.”

“And the mission objective was...”

“Shared on a need-to-know basis.” She crossed her arms. “And since you weren’t part of the mission, you don’t need to know.”

“You’re already aware that my security clearance supersedes yours, which means you can discuss the details of your missions here.”

“As far as I know, I’m only authorized to discuss them with my handler.”

“Would you prefer, then, to talk about this with Agent North?” Dr. P stood and reached for the phone on her desk, her movements confident and graceful. Zoey caught a whiff of her signature perfume: a subtle fragrance with traces of sandalwood and vanilla.

“You mean, Agent Tattle Face?”

“Agent North is on standby. I can ask her to swing by and lend the two of you my office for an hour.” Dr. P held the phone’s receiver to her ear, finger poised and ready to dial. “Your choice.”

Zoey sighed defeatedly. “I’d rather stick needles in my eyes.”

“Good.” Dr. P returned the phone to its cradle and sat on one corner of the desk.

“Whether you like it or not, we need to discuss what happened in Niger.”

She felt her fight-or-flight instincts kick in as the snare around her cinched tighter. “To make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

Dr. P eased her chastising tone. “That’s up to you, Zoey. The CIA allows you to use whatever tools are available to you during a mission.”

Zoey rolled her eyes at *tools*. She still couldn’t believe Agent Tattle Face had the audacity to, well, tattle. Sterling never would have included such sensitive information in his report. Hell, he would’ve run interference by crashing the party himself with guns blazing, so *it* never would have happened in the first place. She realized then how angry she was with Peyton. Her handler had let her down.

Dr. P collected their empty paper plates and tossed them in a nearby trashcan. She returned to the armchair and crossed her long legs, her charcoal-gray Karen Klein pantsuit crisp and wrinkle free. “Let’s start by acknowledging the elephant in the room.”

“Finally. You have a booger the size of a small planet hanging from your left nostril.”

Dr. P didn't even flinch. How she held back from doing a cautionary finger-to-nose check was beyond Zoey. "Did the CIA surgically remove your sense of humor?"

Dr. P's face was devoid of emotion. "I'm laughing on the inside."

Zoey stood, stepped behind her chair, and set her hands over the chair's wooden slats, aware that she was placing a symbolic barrier between them. "I did my job. Why can't we just leave it at that?"

"Because you identify as a lesbian."

She cringed. She had always hated that phrase. Why couldn't she just *be* a lesbian? Like a physical characteristic, it was so deeply ingrained in who she was. She didn't identify with having brown eyes. They were brown. Simple as that. "Would you be bringing this up if I'd had sex with a woman on the mission?"

Dr. P thought for a moment, her gray gaze unwavering. "No," she said finally. "But you didn't have sex with a woman. You had sex with a man."

"As a last resort."

"I know. I read the report. Your reasons for doing so were sound."

"Then why are we talking about this?"

"You tell me."

Zoey already knew where this was going. Could see it a mile away. "You think I'm gay because there's some trauma in my past that was perpetrated by a man. You're worried having sex with a man during my mission brought up old baggage."

Dr. P studied her. "The thought has crossed my mind."

"Then let me put your mind at ease." She let a brief silence punctuate the moment. "I've never been assaulted or abused by a man."

“I believe you.”

“Great. Then we can move on.”

“Were you ever abused by a woman?” Dr. P asked.

The question knocked her off balance. She reached for a clever comeback but came up emptyhanded.

“Tell me about it.”

“You’re mistaken,” she countered, a beat too late. “Never happened.”

“You’re lying. Try again.”

She wasn’t lying. Exactly. But her subconscious probably thought she was lying. The good doctor had obviously cued in on a tell that Zoey wasn’t aware she had. She made a mental note to pinpoint the subtle action that had betrayed her so this would never happen again.

Zoey thought back to her childhood, loathe to return to the place where she’d learned her hardest lessons in life. She paced the office a few times before retracing her steps to sit in the world’s most uncomfortable chair.

## Chapter Three

Zoey met the doctor's gray-eyed gaze. "From the time my dad split, my mom was addicted to heroin. There wasn't much I admired—or even liked—about my mother. But there is one thing."

"What's that?" Dr. P asked.

"Her all-or-nothing attitude. When she did something, she gave it every ounce of energy she had. Like, full-on commitment."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Two, actually," Zoey said, looking away as she fought the urge to get up and move around. "My mother set her sights on two goals in life: doing heroin as often as possible and having sex with as many men as possible to obtain said heroin." She shook her head, still in awe of her mother's fervor for self-destruction. "Her dedication to the cause was seriously mind-blowing. I think it's safe to say she had sex with every penis in the tri-state area."

Dr. P nodded, a knowing look in her eyes.

"No one ever touched me," Zoey went on, "but I saw enough to know sex with a man just wasn't for me."

"Do you think seeing that as a child—"

"Do *not* ask if that's what made me gay." Something deep inside told her the circumstances in which she was raised had nothing to do with her sexual orientation. She simply was who she was. She had no animosity toward men. She'd just never been interested in them. Period.

"Do you think seeing that as a child made having sex with your target more difficult?"

Dr. P finished.

A question that cut right to the heart of things. Dr. P was on her game today. “Yes,” she said honestly, aware now that her tell would probably give her away if she tried to lie again. There was no going back now. Better to just plow through these questions, give the doctor what she wanted, and get this over with as quickly as possible—kind of like having sex with her target. “I’ve asked myself why it was so hard for me to have sex with a man, and I keep circling back to the same answer.”

“Which is?”

“You’ll just have to go with me on this one because I know it’s a stretch. Could it be because I’m, oh, I don’t know”—Zoey leaned forward and sighed—“*gay*?”

“Have you ever been intimate with a man before?” Dr. P pressed.

Convinced the doctor had no funny bone at all, she leaned back in her chair. “No.”

“Agent North reported that what she heard through your earpiece sounded consensual. Was that, in fact, the case?”

“I made the choice to seduce the target, yes.”

“In an effort to stop him from engaging in sexual relations with a minor.”

She nodded. Such behavior was commonplace in that region of Niger. Her target had planned to sample the goods three days before his scheduled marriage to the nine-year-old girl in question. “It was either seduce the target or put a bullet in his head.” Which she’d seriously considered.

“And had you gone through the proper channels to request the latter, that request, more than likely, would have been denied.”

“Which is why I seduced him.”

“Do you regret your choice?”

That was a complicated question. Part of her did—and always would—regret sleeping with a man. An even deeper part of her knew she never would have been able to live with herself if things had gone the other way. “It was the right thing to do.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Dr. P leaned forward. “Do you regret your choice, Zoey?”

“Yes and no,” she said finally. “If I had to go back and do it over, I’d make exactly the same choice.”

“And how do you feel knowing your target is now dead?”

“Do you expect me to say I feel sad about it?”

“I expect you to give me an honest answer.”

If Sterling hadn’t retired, none of this would be happening right now. This was all his fault. Damn him for wanting to travel, relax, and enjoy life. “As soon as my target gave me the name of the man responsible for transporting arms into Chad, he was no longer my focus. If he’d died *before* I got that name, and you asked me how I felt about it, I’d say, well...slightly pissed off.”

“I’m asking you now. How do you feel knowing your target is dead?”

Dr. P took the saying *a dog with a bone* to a whole new level. She was more like a starving T. rex that had finally managed to sink its teeth into a juicy rib-eye steak, still on the cow. “If I had to pick one feeling out of a lineup, I guess it would be indifferent.” The truth was, she felt indifferent about it *now*. At the time, however, she’d found the news of his death immensely gratifying.

“Any ideas on the person responsible for his murder?”

Photos of Zoey’s one-night affair with the target had mysteriously appeared on the

family's doorstep. She'd worn a disguise and made the two-hour trek on foot under the cover of darkness to deliver those photos herself. Polygamy was an accepted practice in Niger, but the target's choice to sleep with an outsider would've been viewed as a betrayal. "My money's on the girl's father. But she also had four older brothers." Zoey shrugged. "In all fairness, I guess it could've been one of them."

Dr. P gave her a once-over, frowned in silent accusation, and glanced down at her notes. "And how do you feel about Agent North as your handler?"

"Fine."

"Another lie. Should I start calling you Agent Pinocchio?"

This was getting annoying. How had she lived for thirty-five years without knowing what her tell was? Sterling had to have figured it out by now. He'd obviously been keeping it in his back pocket this whole time.

"Let me break it down a little more for you." Dr. P slipped her glasses off and set her notebook aside. "How do you feel about having a woman as your handler?"

"Let me get this straight. No pun intended," she added. "You're asking *me* how I feel about having a female handler who's drop-dead gorgeous?"

Dr. P raised an eyebrow. "So, you've noticed."

"Who wouldn't? You'd have to be dead not to."

"Do you think that's how people see you?"

"Dead?" She laughed. Where was Dr. P going with this?

"I'm sure it doesn't come as a surprise when I say you're quite beautiful. Like Agent North, it's impossible not to notice."

She was sure Dr. P wasn't flirting with her, but she couldn't resist the opening. "It's

never too late to switch teams, you know.”

“You’ve used your beauty to your advantage in the field for years,” Dr. P stated matter-of-factly.

“It’s a tool that comes in handy when I need it,” she admitted.

“Has that tool been compromised?”

Zoey leaned back in her chair and shook her head. Everything made sense now. “I’m nothing more than an asset for the CIA. You’re here to determine if this particular asset has been damaged. Since we’ve already established that it was, your next order of business is deciding if said asset should be salvaged or sent to the scrapyard. Right?”

Dr. P looked genuinely offended as she uncrossed her legs and got to her feet. “Stand up, Zoey.”

“Are you going to hit me?”

“Of course not.”

Zoey narrowed her eyes. “Kiss me?”

“Definitely not.”

“Okay, then. Everything else I can handle.” She stood, meeting Dr. P eye to eye.

“May I?” Dr. P opened her arms.

“Why do you get to decide when it’s time to hug?”

“It’s my office.”

“Fair enough,” Zoey said, stepping forward. But she halted halfway through and drew back. “Hold up. *Why* are you giving me a hug?”

“Because you’re more than just an asset,” Dr. P said, leaning in to finish the job with a warmth and sincerity that took Zoey by surprise.

There was a soft knock at the door. Dr. P released her and checked her watch. “I also thought that a hug might soften the blow.”

She should’ve known better. A hug was never just a hug. “Who’s at the door?” she asked suspiciously.

“Agent North.”

“You invited Agent Tattle Face to my psych eval?”

“We’ve concluded your PA.” Dr. P walked to the door and set her hand over the handle. “I’m approving your return to the field.”

Best news ever. Zoey reached for her coat.

“Pending a sit-down with Agent North.” Dr. P opened the door and waved Peyton inside.

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Zoey willed herself to remain calm and keep her anger in check. Peyton was now sitting in the identical twin of the world’s most uncomfortable chair, her posture as ramrod-straight as the chair’s wooden slats. Dr. P had repositioned both chairs so they were facing each other. Agent and handler were knee to knee, just inches apart. With Zoey’s career in the balance, Dr. P encouraged them to look at one another and speak openly about what had happened in Niger.

Zoey watched as Peyton crossed her legs and laced her fingers together in her lap. Peyton was feminine and strong all in one breath. The dark-auburn hair that she sometimes wore in a thick ponytail fanned out in wavy locks over a heather-blue blazer. Her eyes were blue-gray today, but their mysterious hues could change at a moment’s notice to match Peyton’s mood or

chosen attire. Save for an occasional layer of rose-tinted lip balm, Peyton never wore makeup. Her natural beauty was riveting. She shared a body type similar to Zoey's: lean, athletic, and curvy in all the places that mattered. Peyton was always impeccably dressed, her nails short and well-manicured. But the biggest draw of all was how she smelled. She smelled *amazing*—a tantalizing blend of shampoo, body cream, and fragrant oils. Zoey was convinced her handler had a part-time gig as a walking ad for Bath and Body Works.

They'd already rehashed the events in Niger—everything leading up to her decision to seduce the target. Peyton's blue-gray eyes searched her face. "From what I heard, it sounded like you were enjoying yourself."

"I wasn't," Zoey shot back.

"Then you're really good at—"

"Faking an orgasm?"

Peyton stared at her, stoic.

"I'm gay," Zoey blurted.

Peyton narrowed her eyes. "That's not included anywhere in your file."

"Well, I am. Happy to prove it to you, if you're game."

Peyton broke the staring contest to glance at Dr. P. "Is that true?"

"You're asking *her* when I'm sitting here right in front of you?"

"I'm asking her to corroborate the information," Peyton said calmly, her gaze focused on Zoey once again.

"Trust me. I'm gay."

"Like I trusted you when you told me where to buy the best baked goods in Niger?"

Zoey shrugged. "My way of congratulating you on your promotion."

“By sending me out to unknowingly purchase and consume my own marijuana chocolate-chip cookies?”

She rolled her eyes. “They’re called *cannabis* cookies. And you needed to loosen up.” Peyton was as high as a kite by the time she returned to the hotel where they’d shared an adjoining room. Zoey had watched in amazement as her handler downed a party-size bag of chips in record time. Finished, Peyton had gazed into the empty bag for long minutes. When Zoey sat beside her and asked if everything was okay, Peyton had burst into tears, convinced the chips had families—mom and dad chips, little baby chips, grandma and grandpa chips—and she had just killed them all. She was inconsolable. Zoey finally left the room to buy more chips, intent on returning to eat them to show Peyton that they really were just food. But Peyton confiscated the bag and threatened to call the police if she heard any telltale crunching during the night. Chip by chip, Peyton lined them up on the bed, placed cotton balls under their “heads” as pillows, and covered each one with a square of toilet paper as a substitute blanket. Then she tucked them in for the night and sat in a bedside vigil until morning.

Even in all her stoic wonder, Zoey could see Dr. P was finding it difficult not to laugh.

“I’ve never been high before,” Peyton said in her own defense. “And I’ll never look at a potato chip the same way again.”

“I guess we’re even. Because I’ve never slept with a man before.”

Peyton looked up. “Never?”

“Never.”

“You believe I should’ve run interference.” It was more an accusation than an admission of guilt.

Zoey nodded. “Would’ve been the considerate thing to do.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“You’re my handler. Omniscience is in your job description.”

Peyton uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “If you had talked to me and opened up a little, the mission could have gone differently, Zoey.”

“Goes both ways. You’re not exactly an open book yourself.”

Peyton sat back, quiet as she searched Zoey’s face. “Listen, I know you and Sterling were together for a long time. Having a new handler is a big adjustment. Just ask for help the next time you need it. I’ll be there.”

“When was the last time *you* asked for help?”

“I’m here to provide guidance and support when you need it.” Peyton frowned. “Not the other way around.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The whole reason Sterling and I worked so well together is because we supported each other. Give and take. Trust and be trusted.”

Peyton studied her. “What do you want from me, Zoey?”

“I want you to loosen up, for one. Learn how to take a joke.”

“Fine. I’ll try. What else?”

“Don’t ever let what happened in Niger happen again. If I’m getting naked for a man—any man—that means I’m backed into a corner and need a way out.”

“Understood.”

There was an awkward silence as they regarded one another, knee to knee.

“You seriously never smoked a joint before?” Zoey asked.

“Nope.”

“Not even as a rebellious teenager?”

Peyton shook her head. “Until you, I was a cannabis virgin.”

Zoey blinked once...twice...never taking her gaze from Peyton’s. “Did you just make a joke about me losing my virginity?” She watched, amused, as Peyton’s cheeks turned a deep shade of crimson.

“Too soon?” Peyton asked, still holding her gaze.

“A little,” she admitted with a wink. “But the effort was solid.”

## Chapter Four

Peyton lifted the binoculars and zoomed in on Zoey from behind the wheel of Ben's black Volvo XC90. She'd parked on the far side of the lot to avoid being spotted as Zoey circled the track. Zoey's long raven hair was pulled back in a thick ponytail, which dipped and swayed as she ran. Her running form was flawless, relaxed, and natural, like an Arabian horse that was bred to race.

Zoey's body seemed to adopt the characteristics required for any situation. She could be strong, athletic, and unyielding one minute, and then sexy, voluptuous, and alluring the next. With long black eyelashes and eyes as dark as her inky-black hair, she'd held Peyton captive in her gaze more than once.

Peyton lowered the binoculars and checked her watch as Zoey finished her final lap. She added another line in the notebook on the seat beside her, totaling twenty-eight lines. Zoey had just completed seven miles in under an hour. Not bad.

She'd been tailing Zoey on and off for the better part of a week—something handlers were required to do every few months to ensure the integrity of their operatives. Blending into the background and surveilling a target without being noticed fell well within her skill set. Years of training and hard-won experience in the field meant her chances of being spotted were negligible.

She hadn't made any headway with Zoey since their meeting with Dr. Pokal last week. Maybe it was time to ask Zoey to join her on a trail run. Could handlers run with their agents? She wasn't aware of any rules prohibiting the practice. She knew just the place, too. Ben had been the one to introduce her to her all-time favorite run—an arduous nine-mile trail that snaked

through state conservation land. She ran it every weekend all year long, even in winter. It looked like they ran about the same pace, so Zoey shouldn't have any difficulty keeping up.

Peyton made up her mind to extend the invitation first thing tomorrow. She slid the key in the ignition, switched the heater on high, and glanced at the time on the dash: 4:17 p.m. With daylight savings in effect, the day was drawing to a close. She'd head back to the office and kill some time while Zoey returned home to shower and change. Today was Sunday, which meant Zoey would be heading to Sterling's for football and pizza. That gave her all the time she needed to comb through Zoey's belongings at her apartment—a task she despised. But she knew it had to be done.

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Zoey finished her run on the track, grabbed her Camelback off the bleachers, and squirted some water in her mouth as she walked a final lap to cool down. The track lights switched on as daylight faded.

New Englanders often complained about these shortened days, but she'd always loved this time of year. Shorter, colder days made most people sleepy, longing to curl up with hot chocolate and warm blankets. But it did just the opposite for her. The colder it got, the more she felt like everything was coming alive. She grew energized as crisp, clean edges sprang up all around her. After being cloaked in burdensome attire, nature finally shed its clothes to reveal the more startling beauty of bare, jagged branches.

Darkness ruled this time of year with an iron fist, unforgiving, cold, and sometimes calculating. But to Zoey, darkness symbolized freedom. The freedom to do and be whatever the

hell she wanted. Cast in shadows, the world became secretive. This was the world to which she belonged—a world of dark beauty and secrets.

Aware of her handler's binocular gaze, she pulled her sweat-soaked tank top over her head and slipped into the Burberry sweatshirt that had once belonged to Sterling. She'd won it in a bet they made when she was twelve. He'd been trying to win it back ever since.

Zoey stopped her workout music and, still wearing her wireless earbuds, called Peyton's cell from her Apple Watch.

Peyton answered on the first ring. "Agent North."

She skipped the usual niceties and cut straight to the dig on Peyton's last name. "Who has the most-sculpted body in the North Pole?"

Peyton sighed. "Fine. Who?"

"The Abdominal Snowman," she said, grinning at her own joke. She'd always liked that one.

There was a prolonged silence. "What do you call a blackwood tree that commits espionage?" Peyton finally asked.

Zoey shook her head, amused as Peyton gave her a dose of her own medicine. "What?"

"A leaves-dropper."

Peyton was learning how to take jokes *and* dish them out—a sign that her handler was starting to loosen up. "Not bad."

"Thanks."

Zoey set her hands on her hips. "But no points will be rewarded to you at this time."

"I don't care about points. I am *not* engaging in some ridiculous juvenile competition."

"Whatever you say. But I'm up by one." Zoey waited, confident she'd tapped into

Peyton's need to be the best at everything when she'd hinted at a friendly competition several days earlier. Peyton, of course, hadn't fallen for it then. Zoey knew she'd eventually come around.

"But if I did care about points—which I seriously don't—why wouldn't I get any for that joke? It was better than yours."

"Because you looked it up on your phone after I told mine. That's cheating." The prolonged silence during Peyton's online search for a joke had given her away.

"And you didn't look yours up before you called me?"

"Nope," she said proudly.

"You just happened to have a joke with my last name in your back pocket."

"Sure did." Zoey slipped behind a tree, unzipped her duffel bag, and withdrew her binoculars. Under the cover of darkness, she lowered her body to the ground and zoomed in on Peyton's car.

"I don't believe you."

Fortunately, just as she'd hoped, Peyton had exchanged the binoculars for a cell phone. She watched as Peyton rolled her eyes, unaware that the tables had turned. "I've memorized every book of jokes ever published since nineteen sixty-eight."

Peyton's bewilderment was palpable on the other end of the line. "Why?"

Zoey had timed her run perfectly and now used the darkness to her advantage. "Why not?" she asked as she hurried along the tree line toward Peyton's car.

Peyton sighed. "Is there a reason you're calling me on a Sunday?"

"I'm inviting you to Sterling's to watch the game." She kept her breathing in check so as not to give away the fact that she was on the move.

“Pats against Baltimore?” Peyton asked.

“Against a background of obnoxiously loud cheers and delightful commentary from yours truly. But, I must warn you: potato chips *will* be present”—she side-stepped a gnarled tree root—“which will likely result in a lot of crunching.”

“Thanks, but I can’t. Prior commitment.”

“Suit yourself.” Zoey circled Peyton’s car and approached from the rear. “By the way, your hair looks nice today. I’ve never seen it in a braid.”

Peyton looked over as Zoey knocked on the passenger’s window. Frowning, she disconnected the call and unlocked the door.

Zoey slipped inside with a grin.

“I..I came here to go for a run,” Peyton stammered. “I saw you and decided to wait until you were finished.”

She took immense pleasure in letting Peyton squirm in the resultant quiet. “I thought you preferred trail running,” she said finally.

“I do, but...” Peyton narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute. Have *you* been following *me*?”

Zoey pointed to the binoculars around Peyton’s neck. “This is like one of those movies where the wife finds hubby in bed with another woman and then accuses *her* of cheating.”

Peyton said nothing and continued to glare at her from the driver’s seat.

“Here.” She held out a Mr. Potato Head keychain.

Peyton made no motion to accept the offering. “What’s that?”

“It’s a key,” she said. “To my apartment.”

“Why would I want a key to your apartment?”

“So we can start our illicit affair.” Zoey rolled her eyes. “Why else?”

“How long have you known?”

“About how handlers tail their agents, break into their homes, and rifle through their personal belongings, emails, and bank accounts to see if they’ve been compromised by a foreign power?”

“Yeah.” Peyton sighed. “That.”

“Figured it out my first year on the job.” She studied Peyton. “You didn’t?” There had to be others within the agency who’d uncovered the same truth over the years, but such secrets never sprang a leak and trickled through the ranks. Field operatives were inherently tightlipped. In the CIA, it was every man for themselves.

Peyton looked away but didn’t answer. Her competitive ego had just taken a hit.

“In case you were wondering, you suck at surveillance,” she went on in an effort to really drive it home. “You’re even worse than Sterling. And Sterling was *totally* inept—”

“Okay. I get it,” Peyton said impatiently. “You’ve made your point.”

Zoey grinned. “I’m kidding. Sterling’s way worse at it than you are. You’re actually pretty good. If I hadn’t been expecting it, I probably never would’ve spotted you.”

“And you’re giving me a key to your apartment because...”

“It’ll make snooping a lot easier. No need to pick a lock or risk being spotted by one of my nosey neighbors.”

Peyton studied her. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Sterling and I had the same arrangement. He had a key, too.”

Peyton glanced at the keyring. “On a Mr. Potato Head keychain?”

“My way of paying tribute to your fallen comrades.” Zoey watched as Peyton’s wheels started turning.

Peyton shifted in her seat, her gaze accusatory, her tone indignant. “You only invited me to watch the game today because you knew I wouldn’t come.”

“I can’t help it if you made other plans.” She thought for a moment. “Did you *want* to come to Sterling’s to watch the game?”

“No, not really.”

“I see. You’re upset because you wanted the chance to turn down a genuine invitation as opposed to a fake one.”

“I am *not* upset.”

“Right. That steam coming out of your ears is just, what, a result of smoking too much reefer?”

“Just give me the key.” Peyton plucked the keyring from her grasp. “If there’s a booby trap waiting for me inside your apartment, it’s going in your file, Agent Blackwood.”

“*That’s* the worst you could come up with?” She grimaced, feeling disappointed in Peyton’s lack of creativity and offended at being addressed so formally. “It’s going in my file?”

“Are you saying you’ve booby trapped your apartment?”

“I’m neither confirming nor denying the existence of this alleged booby trap.”

“Let me put it this way.” Peyton thought for a moment before looking up. “If you’ve rigged some kind of booby trap, I’ll make it my life’s mission to stand on your last nerve. Every. Single. Day.” She fixed a fierce hazel gaze on Zoey. “Like you’re standing on mine right now.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off Peyton. Anger only accentuated her beauty.

“Well?” Peyton stared back at her in evident frustration. “Aren’t you going to say

something?”

“I like hearing you say the word *booby*.” She shrugged. “I was just sitting here quietly, hoping you’d say it again.”

“You can leave.” Peyton leaned across the seat, careful not to touch her as she opened the passenger’s door. “Now.”

Zoey inhaled deeply, reaping the benefits of Peyton’s talent for mixing such soothing, intoxicating aromas. “I’ll make you a deal,” she said, not budging.

“Not interested. Get out.”

“Are you good at guessing passwords? Because mine are totally unguessable. You’ll still be there when I get home from Sterling’s, trying to puzzle them out. Neither of us wants that, right?” She glanced at the duffel bag on the backseat. “Unless you have feejays packed in there.”

“What are feejays?”

“Have you been living under a rock? They’re sweatpants with feet. Best invention since the wheel.”

Peyton rubbed her temples. “What do feejays have to do with your passwords?”

“Nothing, really. Since you don’t want my list of passwords, I’ll swing by the store on my way home to pick up some ice cream for our slumber party. I have an extra set of feejays you can borrow.” She held up the orange paper that she’d folded into an origami pumpkin. To keep Peyton on her toes, she’d written in the smallest print humanly possible—a skill she’d perfected as a note-passing student in her youth. Once Peyton unfolded the pumpkin, she’d need a magnifying glass to read the passwords inside.

“So, you’re offering to give me your passwords in exchange for something.”

Zoey nodded. “Unless you have your heart set on feejays and ice cream.”

“Hard pass on the slumber party.” Peyton frowned, looking back and forth between Zoey and the origami pumpkin. “What do you want?”

“A secret,” she replied without hesitation.

“You can’t be serious.”

“And it can’t be something trivial or made-up.”

Peyton rolled her eyes and then looked out the windshield, quiet for a long moment as she thought. “I’ve wanted to get my nose pierced since I was fifteen.” She glanced at Zoey. “Not a hoop or anything gaudy. Just a small stud.”

“Why haven’t you?” she asked, her instincts insisting that Peyton was telling the truth.

“Because I’m not ready for the way people might see me.”

“As a rebel?”

Peyton nodded.

“Are you saying there’s a part of you that longs to be rebellious?”

“Maybe.” Peyton shrugged. “A little.”

“Wow. That’s deep.” This cast a new light on the straight-laced rule follower beside her. Maybe she’d been too quick to stuff Peyton inside a box. “But a desire to put a hole in your nose doesn’t begin to match the magnitude of listening to me having sex with my target.”

“That’s what we’re doing here?” Peyton asked, shaking her head. “You’re trying to put us on even ground?”

“You’re my handler. As far as I can tell, you’re not going anywhere. I can already see you’re too stubborn for that. Fact is, you heard me having sex with a man for the first—and, hopefully, *only*—time in my life. I feel too exposed. We’ll never get past it, unless you give me something of equal or greater value.”

“You’re making *your* choice *my* problem?”

“You’re the other half of this relationship, so...yes. Unless you’d like a divorce like the other four handlers before you.”

Peyton pursed her lips determinedly. “I was raised Catholic.”

“Then give me something juicy to balance the scales.”

“Watching me disintegrate over the loss of my newfound potato family was compensation enough.”

“I disagree.”

Peyton turned away, switched on the headlights, and stared out across the parking lot in silence. “I’m pregnant,” she said finally.

Zoey sat back in her seat and glanced at Peyton’s gold wedding band. “Congratulations?” she asked, confused by the somber feeling in the air.

“My husband passed away four months ago.”

“I’m sorry.” She threw a glance at Peyton’s stomach. She wasn’t showing at all. “How far along are you?” she asked, treading carefully in case the baby wasn’t her husband’s.

“Sixteen weeks.”

“And...the father?”

“My husband, of course. I’m not confessing some illicit affair.” Peyton rolled her eyes. “I just haven’t told anyone yet.”

Peyton was pregnant during their trip to Niger? It took Zoey a moment to grasp what she’d done. “Holy shit. I’ve corrupted your unborn baby with reefer.”

“And managed to slaughter generations of innocent potato chips in the process.” Peyton narrowed her eyes. “You should feel proud of yourself.”

“What if the marijuana hurt—”

“It didn’t,” Peyton said, cutting her off. “I saw my obstetrician. The baby’s fine.”

## Chapter Five

Zoey studied Peyton's profile in the resultant quiet. *Pregnant*. Wow. She found herself wondering if the baby would be as beautiful as the handler sitting beside her. "I hadn't heard about your husband. I'm sorry."

"I prefer to keep my private life, well...private."

Zoey's recent search of Peyton's home had revealed her marriage to Benjamin North—a tall man with kind eyes and a boyish smile. "That explains all the flowers."

Peyton's mouth fell open. "You've been inside my house?"

She shrugged, on the verge of feeling guilty.

"How'd you get past my neighbor?"

"Baited him with a pie from Ernesto's." No one could resist pizza from the North End. "Figured Horace would forget about my visit by the time he saw you again."

"So..." Peyton sighed. "You know about Horace."

Zoey met her handler's gaze. "What you're doing for him—it's beyond admirable." She took a breath. "But how long can you keep looking out for him like that?"

"I have the situation under control." Peyton crossed her arms. "And that's *really* none of your business."

"You already have your hands full with your career, this recent promotion, and with me," Zoey said, ignoring the warning. "Truth is, I can be a handful."

"That's the understatement of the century. Five Horaces would be easier than supervising you."

Five? No. Three, maybe. "And now, with a baby on the way..." She glanced at Peyton's still-flat stomach. "All I'm saying is, sometimes you have to prioritize."

Peyton frowned. “How’d this trade deal turn into a lecture from my agent on prioritizing?”

“You’re the one who decided to drop the mother of all secrets.”

“Like I had a choice?”

“You could’ve picked something else.” Zoey breathed deeply, feeling the weight of this secret squarely on her shoulders. “*Anything* else.”

Peyton stared at her blankly. “But I don’t have any other secrets.”

“You’re kidding. Just the nose ring and the pregnancy?”

Peyton nodded. “What’d you expect?”

“Something juicy. Like you slept with your college roommate.” She shrugged. “Maybe you had a threesome once when you were drunk.”

Peyton rolled her eyes. “Have you met me?”

“Or maybe you masturbate to *Push It* by Salt-N-Pepa.”

“First—not that it’s any of your business—I don’t masturbate. Second—”

“Ever?”

“Never.”

She stared at Peyton, dumbfounded.

“Second,” Peyton went on, “why do all your imagined secrets for me have to do with sex?”

“Duh. Need I remind you? You listened to me having the grossest sex of my life with a man who was harrier than bigfoot.” Her target could’ve easily endured subzero temperatures without clothes. “I was hoping for something equally compromising.”

“Well—” Peyton stared down at her own stomach—“I had sex to get this baby. Doesn’t

that count?”

“With your *husband*. That’s a far cry from listening to me fake an orgasm with bigfoot.”

She looked away from Peyton’s gaze, feeling somewhat disgusted with herself as her thoughts drifted to Peyton’s boss. “Have you told Alvarez?”

“It was in my report.”

Zoey frowned, confused. “You put your pregnancy in a report?”

“No.” Peyton looked over. “Sorry. I thought we were still talking about...the other thing.”

“Have you told Alvarez about the *pregnancy*?”

Peyton looked away. “Not yet.”

“He’ll sideline you until you have the baby.”

“I know. And that’s why it’s called a *secret*. By definition, a secret is designed to elude discovery.”

“Until when?” Zoey pressed.

“Until I decide it’s not a secret anymore.”

“Hate to break it to you, but babies have this habit of growing. All soon-to-be mothers inevitably look like they’ve swallowed a basketball.”

“Not there yet.”

“You will be.” Zoey reached down for the overflowing trashcan at her feet and held it aloft. “And very soon, from the looks of it.” Discarded food wrappers succumbed to the pressure of tight quarters and burst forth. Snack-sized potato-chip bags—too many to count—sailed through the air, spilling countless crumbs as they landed on the front seat. “Tell me these aren’t yours.”

“They’re not mine,” Peyton blurted.

“Must be—what—twenty, thirty bags here?” She sifted through the carnage and looked up. “You *ate* your new family?”

“Hormones make you do terrible things.”

“How can you eat like this and still look like that?” Zoey pointed to all of Peyton.

“I run, and, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m eating for two now.”

Zoey tried to stuff the empty bags back inside the small trashcan, to no avail. “But how much can a tiny human actually consume?” she asked, finally giving up and letting the bags scatter.

Peyton lifted her shirt to reveal a flat, well-toned stomach. “She’s three inches long and weighs an ounce.”

“She?” Zoey asked, her eyes on Peyton’s stomach as she tried to imagine a tiny replica of her handler floating around inside.

“I had a blood test.” Peyton lowered her shirt. “It’s a girl.”

Peyton hadn’t smiled once since sharing the news of her pregnancy. Understandable, considering the circumstances. Facing pregnancy as a single mother was one thing. Facing it after your spouse had vacated the planet was another. Peyton’s discovery that she was pregnant had to have been bittersweet. “You know,” she said, softening her tone, “it’s okay if you have mixed feelings about this baby.”

Peyton was quiet for a moment as she gazed out the window. “Ben worked Secret Service,” she said finally. “We never planned on having kids.”

Zoey didn’t bother asking how Ben had died. Being a Secret Service agent was a high-stakes job.

“The CIA scouted me when I was still in high school,” Peyton explained. “Once they got their hooks in me, I never looked back. I never wanted anything as much as I wanted a career in the CIA.” Peyton set a hand over her stomach. “And now...”

Was Peyton saying what Zoey thought she was saying? “If you’re not ready—”

“I’m definitely not ready.” Peyton met Zoey’s gaze with a tenderness that surprised her. “But I’ve never wanted anything more than this baby.”

Well. Fuck. This definitely complicated things. Peyton’s pregnancy would be nothing but a liability on their missions. If her handler intended to keep this from Alvarez, maintaining a united front was of utmost importance. “Have you told anyone else?”

“No.” Peyton glared at her. “I only told you because you threatened me with feejays.”

They held one another’s gaze in silence. Zoey was acutely aware that something had just changed between them. Peyton had shared a secret and revealed a vulnerability. Doing so had forged the beginning of a bond. Her resolve to oust her new handler faltered as she felt the first stirrings of a connection. “Fine. I’ll keep your secret.” She pried her gaze from Peyton’s and studied the dashboard clock. 4:59 p.m. Kickoff was at six. “On one condition.”

“If you’re about to raise the issue of masturbation and insist that I try it—”

“Yuck. No. Gross.” She grimaced. “Get your mind out of the gutter. You’re about to become a mother.”

“My mind is never *in* the gutter.” Peyton rolled her eyes. “What’s your condition?” she asked impatiently.

“If things get hairy during a mission—no pun intended—you’ll accept my help and let me have your back. No arguments. No pushback.” Without a doubt, this would be the most challenging part for a proud new handler who believed help should be given, not received.

Peyton narrowed her eyes. “Define *hairry*.”

“Anything that puts you or the baby at risk.”

“I know how to handle myself in the field, Zoey.”

“No doubt about it, you’re a badass,” she said with a wink. This was the first time Peyton had addressed her by her first name. They were now standing on even ground—a realization that made her feel both satisfied and afraid. She was setting the foundation of a relationship with a new handler. This was the first step toward accepting the permanence of Sterling’s retirement. A big step. One she didn’t feel ready for just yet.

“I’ll keep your secret,” she went on. “But I’m putting in for a new handler if you don’t agree to my terms.” She was offering Peyton a way out of their partnership. The ball was in her court now.

Peyton took a long moment to think before turning to meet Zoey’s gaze. “I’ll agree to your terms but only on the condition that—”

“Stop.” Zoey put her hand up. “You can’t put terms on my terms.”

“Technically, I was placing a *condition* on your terms.”

“Whatever. Your condition isn’t getting anywhere near my terms.”

“To be fair, you didn’t specify *no conditions* as part of your terms.”

“Didn’t know I had to,” Zoey said. “Besides, that’s *not* a recognized loophole.”

“It most certainly is.”

“Is not.”

Silence reigned as they stared one another down. They were at an impasse.

“Fine.” Zoey crossed her arms. “Then I’m making an addendum to my terms that no conditions are allowed.”

“You can’t make an addendum to your terms *after* you’ve laid them out.” Peyton frowned. “Besides, I was only going to suggest that we draft a list of preapproved scenarios.”

“Preapproved scenarios.” Zoey repeated. “For what?”

“Plausible situations in the field that would require intervention on my behalf because of a legitimate safety concern.”

“Let me get this straight,” she said, shaking her head. “You want to list every possible scenario where I might have to step in and save not only your ass, but the still-developing ass of your baby?”

“I just think it could be helpful to draft specific parameters that must be met to set your terms in motion.”

Zoey sat in silence, pretending to give the suggestion some thought. “My answer,” she said finally, “starts with an *n* and rhymes with *glow*, which you’re not doing much of, by the way. Your stubborn handler persona is disrupting the whole pregnancy glow thing.”

“That’s not a thing. Women do not glow when they’re pregnant.”

“Glowing is a useful tool that I think you should seriously reconsider. It could distract the casual observer—for example, our boss—from the steadily increasing size of the pregnant woman in question—aka you. It would be in both our best interests if you started glowing, like, yesterday.”

Peyton stared at her like she’d just proposed marriage. “I can’t *make* myself glow.”

“You can try. Just think happy thoughts. Puppies, kittens, rainbows, shit like that.”

Peyton shook her head and sighed angrily. “You’re being unreasonable by denying my request.”

“And you’re being unreasonable by denying mine,” Zoey shot back.

“To start glowing?”

“Exactly.”

Peyton set both hands on the steering wheel and gripped it hard, as if to keep herself from strangling Zoey. “All I’m saying is, optimal results are achieved when the expectations are clearly understood by all parties involved. Which is what we would accomplish by drafting parameters for your terms,” she insisted.

“How the hell did you survive in the field as an undercover agent?” Zoey asked.

“By utilizing a very specific formula, known as RPC.”

“Ooh, I’m good at acronyms. Let me guess. RPC...” She grabbed an empty bag of Lays off the seat and held it up. “Regurgitate potato chips. Am I right? Because what you ate here could feed a small village. All that grease is bound to come back up.” She searched the floor and then turned to scan the backseat. “Where’s your barf bucket?”

“Research. Plan. Communicate,” Peyton went on, ignoring her. “A tried-and-true formula under which my handler and I consistently operated. It might interest you to know that our mission success rate was six percent higher than average.”

Zoey reached over and pinched Peyton’s arm. Hard.

“Ouch!” Peyton swatted her hand away.

“Just testing to see if you’re human.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Zoey sat upright, stiffening her body, arms, and neck. Jerky, robotic movements accompanied her monotone voice. “My name is Pey-ton. Fun is not a-llowed.”

“Just because I take my job seriously doesn’t mean I don’t have fun.”

“Taking this job seriously and having fun are synonymous,” she explained, baffled by

Peyton's insistence on coloring inside the lines. Where was the fun in that? "The best part of this job is making decisions on the fly. Each mission is like a mystery vacation. Sure, we know what the ultimate objective is, but how we achieve it is entirely up to us. We read our targets, engage, improvise, and adjust accordingly. A mistake in the field can cost us our lives—*that's* the part I take seriously, in case you were wondering. The rest is, like you said, RPC: relax, party, celebrate."

"Successful with a high degree of certainty," Peyton muttered under her breath.

"What is?"

"After reviewing our files, that was the conclusion reached by the CIA's pairing algorithm."

"We have a pairing algorithm?"

"Yes. Designed and implemented four years ago to ensure the successful assembly of all agent/handler teams." Peyton stared at her. "Don't you read the internal memos?"

"Not if I can help it."

Peyton shook her head. "Honestly, I have no idea why we were paired."

"Couldn't be more obvious. Al saw how tightly you were wound and knew you needed me to help you loosen up."

"Who's Al?"

"The algorithm."

"No one refers to the pairing algorithm as Al," Peyton said matter-of-factly. "It's known as CHUK, and it stands for—"

"Looks like Al hooked me up with an intelligent, no-nonsense, take-charge handler with a keen mind for detail."

The compliment stopped Peyton in her tracks. “Thank you,” she offered, looking somewhat perplexed.

“But even the tug-of-war world champions couldn’t pull *that* needle out of your ass.”

“I am *not* uptight. Disciplined, yes. Which you could use a pretty hefty dose of, by the way.” Peyton pressed a button on the center console. A cover slid aside near Zoey’s knee, revealing a hidden compartment. Peyton withdrew a miniature handheld vacuum and sucked up the potato chip crumbs from the front seat before they even knew what hit them. “There. That’s better. Now I can think,” she said, slipping the tiny vacuum back in place.

Zoey had the sudden urge to slip her hands inside some powdered latex gloves and slap handprints all over the car’s black interior. “Missed one.” She pointed to a partially concealed crumb near Peyton’s thigh.

Once again, Peyton deftly withdrew the tiny vac, showed no mercy, and sucked up the last brave soldier.

Zoey raised an eyebrow. “I’m seriously starting to wonder if you’re beyond my help.”

Chapter Six