

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 temptation to nap through the rest of her psych eval. “That’s right,” she said, returning her gaze to the sexy, forty-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.”

“Yup.” There was an awkward silence. Zoey 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?”

“If I say yes, will you 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.

Studying Zoey with a scrutinizing gaze, Dr. Pokal remained quiet. 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 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. Am I 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 me.” 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.”

“There’s 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. “Your call.”

“And 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. There was one in particular that would forever haunt her. “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 you 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.”

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

“Well, I’m booked solid until then. Can’t say I didn’t try.” Zoey pocketed her cell with a grin. “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 suspended indefinitely.”

“Why are you being so pushy today? Our annual chats—which I very much look forward to, by the way—are usually much 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 Tattleface. Hugless, 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 Zoey was accustomed to hearing, “Hey, Zo. What’s up?”

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

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

“My favorite time of year,” she confirmed, rolling her eyes for the doctor’s benefit.

“Better than Christmas.”

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.”

Dumbfounded, 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.”

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 of pizza,” Zoey admitted.

“What else?”

“Beer.”

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 she held her tongue. “I’m a good guesser.”

Dr. P removed her glasses and pierced Zoey with a forthright gaze. “They tested you three times to be sure the score was accurate. Each time, there was marginal improvement. In fact, the results from your last go-around 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.”

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

“Pardon me?”

“I’m really 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 blueberry pie in there?”

“I saw you carrying it from your car this morning.”

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

She shrugged. “What can I say? 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 each of 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?” Zoey turned in her chair to meet the doctor's stone-gray gaze. “Because this is really, *really* good.”

“Thank you.” Dr. P took a sip of 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 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 the doctor 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. “So...this was a set up.”

“Looks that way.”

“Sterling figured I’d come snooping around, so he told you to bake a blueberry 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 the doctor 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. This doctor 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 interrupted, insulted as she watched her last two ideas spontaneously burst into flames.

“You should know I’m a financially-stable, happily-married woman. I’m impervious to your wit, charm, and beauty, so don’t waste your time.” Dr. P set her 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

Using the darkness for cover, 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 Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day*, she was being forced to relive the moment over and over.

Her back against the door, she 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 that. 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.

Right on cue, there was a knock at the door. She didn't even 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—but 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.

Taking one final breath, she now felt ready for a rerun of “The Handyman Horace Show.” Peyton opened the door and welcomed Horace inside.

He handed her the bouquet—more 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 white 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. Ben and Horace had grown close after Horace's wife died eleven years ago. In many ways, they were like father and son.

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

Peyton pretended to give his question serious thought. She had run out of projects for him months ago. But 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 finally finished renovations. “There are three more knob-less 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 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. She and Ben were the two people he’d 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. Fortunately, Horace was a heavy sleeper. Sneaking into his room each night to gather his laundry was never an issue.

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 every time he dropped in to buy more flowers.

She decided she'd also drop by the senior center and donate his most-recent bouquet. Up to her eyeballs in flowers, there simply wasn't any room 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.

He'd 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 linked 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 teetering 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.”

Stirring the sauce with one hand, she held out the dish towel to Horace with the other.

“Salad, garlic bread, and my grandfather’s famous fettuccini alfredo recipe.”

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

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

“And *why* was the mission successful? Was there one defining moment, in particular?”

Dr. P asked.

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

“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 Tattleface?”

“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.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Zoey exhaled defeatedly.

“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 instinct 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 the word “tools.” She still couldn’t believe Agent Tattleface 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 the trashcan. Elegantly clad in a Karen Klein charcoal-gray pantsuit, she returned to the armchair and crossed her long legs. “Let’s start by acknowledging the elephant in the room.”

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

Dr. P didn’t even flinch. She wasn’t falling for it. How she held herself back from doing a

friendly finger-to-nose check-in 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.”

“Remind me never to play you in a game of strip poker.” 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. End of story. 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.”

“What about 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. “I was never abused by a woman.”

“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 for a few moments 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 wasn't for me."

"Do you think seeing that as a child—"

"Please don't 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 he 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 miffed.”

“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 tyrannosaurus rex on the brink of starvation finally sinking 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?”

“My money’s on the girl’s father.” Photos of their one-night affair had landed on the family’s doorstep by way of an anonymous delivery boy—to whom she’d paid an exorbitant

amount of money for said delivery. Polygamy was an accepted practice in Niger, but the target's choice to sleep with an outsider would've been viewed as a betrayal. "The girl also had four older brothers." Zoey shrugged. "So, in all fairness, I guess it could've been one of them."

Giving her a once-over and seemingly satisfied that she was telling the truth, Dr. P 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?"

Puzzled, she thought for a moment. 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," 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. Am I 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?” The good doctor opened her arms.

“Why do you get to be the one 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. “Wait a minute. 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 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 Tattleface to my psych eval?”

“We’ve concluded your PA.” Dr. P walked to the door and set her hand over the doorknob. “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.

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 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 had 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, expressionless.

“I’m gay,” Zoey blurted.

Peyton narrowed her eyes. “That’s not listed 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 eyes focused on Zoey’s once again.

“Trust me, I’m gay.”

“Like I trusted you when you told me to where to go to buy the best baked goods in all of Niger?”

Zoey shrugged. “My way of congratulating you on your promotion.”

“By sending me out to unknowingly purchase and consume my own marijuana-laced 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 six minutes flat. Finished, Peyton had gazed into the empty bag for a long time. 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 and demonstrate 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 tissue as a substitute blanket. After tucking them in for the night, she 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. “I’ll never look at a potato chip the same way again.”

“Well, then, we’re even. I’ve never slept with a man before.”

Peyton looked up. “Never?”

She shook her head.

“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.”

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.”

“See, 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.”

“What else?”

“Don’t ever let what happened in Niger happen again. If I’m shedding my clothes for a man—any man—that means I’m backed into a corner, and I 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 losing your 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.”