

A romantic scene featuring a man and a woman in leather jackets. The man, on the left, has short brown hair and is looking down at the woman. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair and is looking up at him. They are in a close embrace, about to kiss. The background is a solid blue color.

# COVERT SEDUCTION

**A CRUSH NOVEL**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CHRISTINE GLOVER**

# COVERT SEDUCTION

## C.R.U.SH. BOOK 1

CHRISTINE GLOVER

*Here's to all the everyday heroes and heroines out there who strive to make our world a safer,  
better place for everyone!*

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## CHAPTER 1

Special agent Colton Sutler hated three things: the tuxedo currently strangling him, snakes, and drug dealing scumbags. No snakes in the grand ballroom—unless he counted the human one who might be at this historic manor house tonight. To secure an invitation, he had to call in a favor from Alexandra, the owner and a friend from his hometown in Virginia. One he hadn't talked to in forever.

Only tonight he hadn't come to party. He'd come to stop a monster.

He'd just wrapped up an investigation for the Drug Enforcement Agency when the intel came in about a suspect moving into Magnolia Falls' jurisdiction. Someone who'd surfaced as a connection to a case haunting him for three years.

Mario Rossi.

Colton was here to spy on the bastard, and finally get somewhere in a coveted drug investigation that cost his agency already too much time and lives. Now he had a chance to expose Mario and his crime boss. He'd learned they planned to import heroin to the region and Mario's boss planned to handle the details personally.

Colton could finally discover the brains behind this worldwide operation. He'd shut down the drug cartel and even the score on a personal level. His last operation in Magnolia Falls' had resulted in losing one of his best friends. He still blamed himself for the loss. This time no one he loved would die because of a deadly betrayal.

"Colton." Alexandra crossed the room and moved toward him, then brushed his cheeks one by one, European style. "I finally see you after all these years."

He smiled. She'd always been elegant with an air of sophistication even back in high school. Tonight, she exuded class in her strapless golden formal gown and her honey blonde hair swept into an elegant chignon. "It's been too long," he said, holding her hazel eyes with his.

"True." She lifted a glass of red wine from a passing server's tray. "I was surprised when you called, especially wanting to visit my winery, let alone attend my family's annual charity event. So not your thing."

"You'd be astonished by how much I've changed since you attended university overseas," he said, focusing on their past friendship revealing nothing about the real reason that brought him here.

And that reason still hadn't shown up at the gala. Not anywhere obvious. Had his informant been mistaken? Frustrated, he glanced at the dance floor where several guests swirled around the gleaming parquet surface. Some catchy pop song he hadn't heard before played and then a flash of red had him riveted on the woman twirling away from her partner's arms. Her smiling face, gorgeous and flushed, filled with laughter as she spun back into the man's body.

A slow burn simmered beneath the surface of his skin, catching him off guard. As did the thrumming of his pulse in his ears along with the instant attraction. He took another hit of his rich red wine and wished he'd chosen a crisp, cold chardonnay instead.

Her dance partner whirled her away from him again and before she could rebound into his waiting arms, her gaze collided with his. He locked onto the sultry dark eyes for a mouthwatering instant. Her lips parted, curved into another seductive smile just before her partner swiveled her away.

He swallowed another large gulp of wine. "Who's that woman?"

"Isabella Cavelli."

The hairs on the back of his neck raised. Her name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Yet. "Tell me more," he said, nodding toward the gorgeous brunette.

She switched dance partners, moving with grace over the floor despite the man's girth. He kept her in his sights.

"How'd you meet her?"

"She's one of my partners in a Global Winery Consortium to promote our wines. And she's become a friend," Alexandra said. "She owns a centuries' old vineyard in Tuscany and comes from a prosperous background." She placed her empty wineglass on a passing server's elegant silver tray without missing a beat, her movement as well-timed as a karate expert.

He tilted his head and stared at the dance floor. Adrenaline beat a tempo behind his ribcage. Mario Rossi grew up in Tuscany. He operated his primary resort on the coast near Isabella's winery. With declining harvests, did she have another source of income? "Sounds like she's on top of her game," Colton said, continuing to track her movements on the dance floor, mesmerized. Damn. He had to get his shit together. Mario might show up at any moment. But was he connected to Isabella somehow? He didn't recall her name showing up in any of his research before.

"Your sister Reagan told me about your business venture," Alexandra said, cutting into his thoughts. "I'm curious. Are you going to operate this venture from your office in Washington, D.C. or are you making this break a permanent one?"

His pulse accelerated, sending a drumbeat of wariness behind his sternum. If he hadn't known her throughout his childhood, he could have sworn she had more than a casual curiosity by her probing hazel eyes and carefully modulated tone of voice. Almost as if she didn't buy his cover story.

He swirled the wine in his glass, stalling until he had his heart rate and his unwarranted suspicion under control. His friend only wanted details about his return Magnolia Falls, and his pretense of taking over a bankrupt river rafting business. Part of him wanted to make his venture a reality. After all, his memories of growing up here made him nostalgic for easier, simpler times. Times when rafting the rivers and hiking the Shenandoah mountains while hanging out with his friends had given him a strong sense of security and love.

Unfortunately, the security had been false. Even this beautiful region had skeletons and problems lurking in the shadows of the sun-dappled pink rhododendrons, lush green forests, and acres of vineyards.

Which was why he'd committed himself to the DEA.

"Well?" she asked. "Are you moving back?"

"Not sure," Colton said. "Depends on how things play out." He continued scanning the room for Mario.

"Getting more tourist money into the region will be good for the local economy," Alexandra said.

The prickling intensified as he continued to survey the room. No sign of the bastard yet. But his



stomach clenched and his intuition beat a warning against his breastbone. The Italian socialite's attendance at his friend's charity gala couldn't be coincidental. Not when they came from the same region and could easily have run in the same social circles.

Mario Rossi would show up. Possibly to meet Isabella. Could she be the leader of Mario's cartel?

"Exactly," he said. "Hiring locally will bring a lot more cash into our hometown and the county." The right kind of money, not the kind that brought more crime and death into the area. Maybe after he wrapped up this case, he'd opt out of the DEA to follow through on his cover with real money. After he stopped the flow of tainted heroin—the street term white snow sounding innocent when the consequences of using were anything but—into the region and saved countless innocent lives.

But he didn't know how to be anything else. He'd miss the rush, the adrenaline of stopping criminals in their tracks.

People gathered in lines beside the buffet tables, but Mario wasn't among them. He hoped like hell this wasn't some god damn dead end. Colton had been tracking the drug dealer's movements, and they'd brought him here according to all his sources. Mario's boss wanted to oversee every detail. Bringing this person into custody meant everything to Colton. He trusted his sources. They'd never let him down before. Plus, his gut instinct confirmed his intel.

"We'll get more tourists into the area," Alexandra said.

He gave his former high school friend a sidelong glance. She'd been overseas throughout her university days and they'd lost touch. When he'd learned she'd returned to Magnolia Falls to run her family's vineyard following her mother's death, he'd been glad to hear she'd returned to her roots.

Roots meant something. And he aimed to safeguard his from getting spoiled before he returned to Washington to take on his next assignment.

"Is that Spencer Caldwell?" he asked, pointing to where his old friend danced with a leggy redhead.

"Yes. Hired him a few years ago."

"You convinced our local genius returned to Magnolia Falls to work for you?" he said. "He rocked the New York Stock Exchange."

"Money isn't the only thing that motivated Spencer to sign on with Saxon Vineyards," she said, then drank again.

"Oh?"

"He missed his family," she said matter-of-factly. "I offered him a way home."

"Nice." He briefly wondered if he'd find his way back to Magnolia Falls on a permanent basis, then pushed the wayward desire down deep to make small talk with Alexandra about local business to maintain his cover. "Your ongoing investments into updating historic Magnolia Falls will bump up the tourism numbers," he said, continuing to gaze at the dance floor.

The music's tempo ramped up to a bump and grind of 80s hits. Once more Isabella's dance partner spun her away from him, then brought her back to hold her close. She kept pace, matching him step-for-step.

Her sexy red dress swish-swooshed around her long legs, the hemline risque enough to draw some serious male appreciation and yet demure enough to convey a hint of innocence.

His collar seemed to strangle him and his groin tightened. *Damn it again. Keep your head in the game and get your cock out of the equation.* He was here for work and not pleasure. He undid the top button of his dress shirt to loosen it and killed the attraction with the last crime scene photos he'd processed.

The song ended, Isabella and her dance partner exited the parquet floor, then they made their way toward one of the wet bars tucked into the ballroom's corners.

He followed her movements, the sway of her full hips sending another rush of heat to his groin.

Alexandra nudged him. "Instead of drooling over her from a distance, you could just ask her to dance."

"Who?"

"Isabella. You've been watching her all night," Alexandra said while stopping another server to lift a new glass of wine from his tray. "Can't blame you. She's a trustworthy friend on top of being absolutely gorgeous."

"Yes. She's a real beauty."

"What's up with the sarcasm I hear in your voice?" Alexandra asked, then raised her glass and drank.

"Not sarcasm. Just figure she's out of my league."

She laughed. "Colton, I don't remember you ever having a problem getting a date."

"Well, you turned me down fifteen years ago." He'd liked her, admired her for more than her looks. He'd never considered her as a potential girlfriend until he'd had a particularly nasty breakup. She'd comforted him after he'd had one beer too many—as a friend. And then he'd made a first-class fool of himself.

"You didn't know what you were doing. Plus, you were a good friend back then," she said. "Go ahead. Ask her to dance. She's a super person with a heart of gold."

"You're right." He could use the opportunity to discover what her connection to Mario Rossi was until Mario showed up. "Think I'll slide the DJ a tip and tell him to play another slow song."

"Ha. Still can't get those two left feet of yours to cooperate?"

"What I've got in mind doesn't require stellar dancing ability," he said. "Catch you later."

Going into deep cover meant blurring the lines to get close to his enemies. Isabella probably had no connection to Mario, but he'd double his surveillance and run a quick background check on her before giving Isabella the all clear. And that meant the next dance she danced would be with him.

ISABELLA WIGGLED her toes in her Jimmy Choo's, trying to regain the feeling in the tips. She'd give anything to kick the damn things off, go to her room, read, and chill before her meeting with Alexandra tomorrow. Instead, she flashed a smile at—Tony? Tom?—who'd been sweet, but she didn't want to encourage him. Time to put the brakes on his interest.

"Thanks for dancing with me," she said.

"You sure you don't want to spend the rest of the night with me?" he asked, holding her gaze with slightly bleary eyes. "We'd be good together."

*Great. Scratch sweet.* "Aw. Only good? Sorry, not interested. I expect great when I go to bed with a guy," she said with an edge in her voice.

Tom-Tony's gaze narrowed. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No." Isabella stepped back, scanning the room for a quick escape and spotted her import-export rep milling with their clients. "I never kid around when it comes to my expectations."

He made a move toward her, but she jammed her spiked heel on top of his foot. "What the fuck?" He jumped away and bounced on his one good leg.

“My point exactly,” she said. “*Arrivederci bastardo.*”

She swept around him and made her way toward her rep without bothering to look back.

“Good move,” a masculine, deep voice said from behind her.

She stopped, turned around, and locked eyes with the man approaching her. “Old boarding school trick,” she said. “Still comes in handy when guys try to go too far.”

The sexy man who had been watching her while she danced with that idiot closed the remaining distance between them. “Shouldn’t have to put up with that crap from anyone,” he said. “You want me to boot the jerk out?”

“No reason to draw any negative attention to the event. We’ve raised a lot of money and positive awareness for the International Miracle Network,” she said. “I’d rather keep the media’s focus on the charity than put its lens on an ugly incident. He’s taken care of.”

“For now.”

“And for later,” she said. “The contract he hoped to sign with our company won’t happen. That’ll be tough to explain to his superiors at Vincenzo Resorts. Might even cost him his job.” Isabella held her head high and locked her gaze onto his. “What’s your name?”

“Colton Sutler.” He stretched his hand.

Ah, the accountant from D.C. Alexandra had mentioned in passing. Someone Alexandra had known in high school. Clearly, not someone she needed to worry about.

Isabella took his hand and shook it. A tingling sensation traveled along her skin, then arrowed deeper. Did this handsome guy always make hearts race? Most likely. “I’m Isabella,” she said, pulling her hand from his and rubbing her arm to erase the sudden sparks.

Colton cocked his head to the side and lifted a brow. “You always this mercenary with overzealous dance partners?”

“Only when it’s necessary.”

The air crackled between them, overriding the clinking glasses and party chatter. He held her gaze. “I like a woman who knows how to handle her affairs, Isabella.”

She inhaled his woodsy, dark scent and more awareness sizzled along her nerve-endings. Oh, he’d be more than great in bed. Probably beyond impressive. But she didn’t casually hook up with guys no matter how appealing, especially not with a man who exuded a powerful ruggedness despite the tuxedo contouring his broad shoulders to perfection.

“Speaking of *business*.” Not affairs or anything remotely sounding like getting between the sheets with someone. “I’d like to continue mingling with the guests to drum up more donations for the charity.”

“Another excellent idea,” he said, then smiled. “Mind if I join you? You know, just in case another jerk tries to come at you. I can be your pro bono bodyguard.”

“Why would you be pro bono?”

“Because I’m still in training. Need experience.”

His grin reached his pewter rimmed gray eyes, turning them into liquid silver. Her heart hopscotched inside her chest. Not good. Not good at all. Colton Sutler did things to her carefully guarded libido, but that didn’t mean she wanted to brush him off. She pressed her palm against her sternum and waited for her pulse to slow down. Spending the evening with a guy like him wouldn’t upend her carefully laid plans for the future.

Plans that kept her on the straight and narrow after coming close to losing everything she’d worked for during her senior year in university.

“Fine. I’ll help you with that only because I’m feeling charitable tonight,” she said, smiling and

lighthearted despite still searching for a way to diffuse the attraction pinging between them. “But first I’d like to speak with my public relations person. We haven’t touched base since the silent auction. She’s over there.” Isabella pointed to her pretty American colleague, Jillian Baxter, whom she’d hired over a year ago to expand her promotions and marketing into the US marketplace. Jillian’s ebony curls with light highlights framed her tawny brown face as she stood by the buffet at the opposite side of the expansive ballroom. Her spirals danced as Jillian nodded, laughed while chatting animatedly with a man whose back blocked the rest of Isabella’s view.

“Looks like she’s occupied with someone else.”

“Probably a potential donor or contact,” she said. “I should go.”

“How about I walk you there, then grab some food while I wait for you to wrap up,” he said easily. “You know., so I’ll be close by as your pro bono bodyguard in case you run into trouble.”

A laugh bubbled inside her. This guy seemed legitimately fun. And she hadn’t had a whole lot of fun lately. “Sure. If I need your assistance, I’ll snap my fingers.”

“Awesome. Let’s go over then.”

They walked side-by-side with mere millimeters separating them as they made their way to the banquet tables. Though they didn’t touch each other, electricity crackled and sparked over her bare skin. Then the charges zipped beneath the surface into her nipples, making them pebble into tight points.

Her nerves jangled, but no way would she let Colton see how much he’d affected her.

Then the man talking with Jillian turned around and the familiar face sent a wave of relief through her. “Mario,” she said, quickening her pace.

Colton kept up with her. “You know that guy?”

“Oh, we’ve been friends since we were kids. Like *famiglia*,” she hastened to add before they reached Mario.

“I didn’t know you’d be here.” She embraced Mario and kissed his cheeks one-by-one. “Alexandra didn’t tell me.”

Mario’s expensive cologne wafted into her nostrils, another familiar touch point and she inhaled it gratefully. “Actually, I told her to hold off. I wanted to surprise you, darling.” Mario held her at arms’ length and laughter crinkled the corners of his espresso colored eyes.

“I wanted to tell you ages ago, but Mario insisted we wait until he could tell you in person.”

Isabella looked at one, then the other. “Wait. Are you two?”

“Dating?” Jillian shot Mario a sultry look with slanted amber eyes. “Yes. We met at a food and wine conference a few months ago.”

“Well, this is a crazy coincidence,” Isabella said. “But a nice one.” She genuinely wanted her friends to be happy. Though the fact that they were an item caught her off guard.

“Definitely.” Mario tugged Jillian a little closer and kissed her temple. “I had no idea she worked for you until after we... connected.”

“And well, we never knew how long this would last, but here we are,” Jillian said, twining her fingers through Mario’s hair. “I hope this isn’t a problem for you.”

“No,” Isabella said, moving a little closer to Colton despite her desire to keep men at a distance until she’d established her career. “Not at all.” Truthfully, seeing her colleague’s happiness made her wistful for her own.

Another ballad piped through the speakers, Jillian looked up at Mario. “I love *Slow Hands*,” she said.

“I know,” Mario said, stroking her arm until he linked hands with her. “Let’s dance, *tesoro*.”

“Join us,” she said over her shoulder as they moved toward the parquet floor. “It’ll be fun.”

“Sounds good,” Colton said before Isabella could protest, turning to glance her way. “I’m game. Are you?” He shot her a charm-the-panties-off-a-girl grin.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.* Her hormones hummed to life, making her head spin. “Absolutely,” she said after a beat of hesitation. After all, she could handle her urges during one song. “But then I’m done. My feet are killing me.”

Isabella took his hand. Her skin sizzled at the contact, igniting sparks. They licked their way into every erogenous zone she possessed. By the time he wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his muscular body, the flames discovered places she’d forgotten existed.

COLTON SWAYED WITH ISABELLA, close, but not too close or he’d let his other brain do all the talking. Around them, other couples crowded the floor and he could see Jillian cozying up with Mario, leaving no doubt about what she had planned for the rest of the night.

“Your PR rep is nice,” he said, wondering about the connection between Mario and Isabella besides being childhood friends.

“Yes. She’s excellent at her job. I’m glad I hired her.”

He held her slender waist, resisted the urge to cruise his palms down her full hips and over her incredible ass. “That’s crazy how she hooked up with your friend at a conference,” he said with a fake note of incredulity in his voice.

“Hmmmm. Small world.”

“Yes.” The coincidence didn’t escape Colton’s radar. After everything he’d been through in the field, he questioned anything happening by chance. What was Isabella’s real connection to Mario? Most people who knew him were on the wrong side of the law in a bad way. Only a fool would believe she didn’t know the real Mario.

But maybe not. She seemed genuinely amazed when she spotted Mario in the crowd. Still, she could be part of the drug cartel—his partner. Perhaps even the person directing the entire operation. “How long have you two known each other?” he asked, though he’d crosscheck anything she told him with a database search afterward.

“Oh years. Our parents...,” her voice trailed off and her shoulders stiffened, then she shrugged. “Let’s just say we have a lot in common and leave it at that.”

Interesting. Mario’s family had been embroiled in an international embezzlement scandal when he’d been a kid. As had another fashion icon and her husband. Colton searched his memory and bam... He connected the dots. Isabella’s parents had also been arrested and jailed for a time. “Yeah. Like you’re both Italian, and he’s in the hospitality business,” he said, not betraying his thoughts. “You supply his hotels and resorts with your wines too?”

She twined her arms around his neck and turned her head to glance over at her friends. “We have a contract with Rossi Resorts and Spas,” she said quietly. “Our way—my brother and me—of maintaining our families’ prior business connections while showing the world that the Cavelli/Rossi names are synonymous with honest transactions.”

Not Mario Rossi’s. Not given the last bit of intel he’d received before returning to Magnolia Falls. “Now?” he asked. “You mean they weren’t before?”

She stiffened ever so slightly. “No. But I don’t like to think about those days.”

He could imagine why. Isabella would have been almost ten-years-old when the scandal made the news. She'd disappeared off the paparazzi's radar shortly before they had announced the prison sentences. "I understand." He brought her closer to him. A huge part of him hated bringing up her history... her voice had gone flat, lost its sparkle when she'd replied. "Glad things have changed for the better."

"After my grandfather saved our vineyards and restore our finances, my brother and I busted our tails to maintain our family's reputation." She swished her head back to meet his gaze. "Trust is our watchword."

He inhaled more of her delicious aroma. Damn. She smelled good—like an exotic perfume but not too bold.

Light. Expensive. Elegant.

But despite his inclination to go with his gut and believe her, he couldn't relax his standards. Not after what had happened three years ago when he'd been betrayed by the woman he'd been with while undercover. Danger could lurk beneath the understated perfume.

"Song's ending," she said as the last notes played through the speakers. "Thanks for the dance."

He caught Jillian and Mario leaving the dance floor and tracked their exit all the way to a hallway leading to the manor house's grand foyer. Knowing Mario had been given a suite of rooms while staying at the winery's manor house, Colton decided to stick with Isabella. Because he had to make sure her story checked out. "How about we go for another round?" he asked.

She broke their contact and pointed to her shoes. "My feet need a break, remember? Plus, you've just reminded me I need to talk with Mario before he leaves the party."

An alarm rang in his ears, flashed a neon warning in his mind's sight. The daughter of criminals meeting with the son of criminals? Another non-coincidence. No way would he let her out of his sight. "You always all business?" he asked as he escorted her off the floor.

"Not at all. I want to thank him for making sure my parents are well-taken care of while my brother and I are in the States." She stopped walking and leaned against a white pillar. "They're staying at his resort in Tuscany. My father's health isn't good ever since his heart attack last year. Mario offered to have his staff look after them, discreetly. My parents are proud people, especially Papa."

"Nice of him," Colton said. But he doubted the bastard had a decent bone in his body.

"Mario's a great guy. He helped me out of a few jams when I attended college. We look after each other." She grabbed a glass of wine from a server's tray and sipped. "Thanks again for wanting to get rid of that jerk for me. And for the dance."

The adrenaline rushing through his veins charged into his extremities. Jams meant trouble. And he knew the kind of trouble Mario circumvented. Colton lowered his head to study her more closely, trying to read her dark brown eyes for anything else in them. "Maybe I'll see you around the vineyard next week," he said after discovering nothing suspicious other than a hint of pain glimmering in their depths.

"Perhaps," she said. "*Ciao*, Colton." Isabella kissed both his cheeks, then scooted around him.

Shit. She'd just given him a polite, cool friendly brush off. He turned on his heel to go trail her. His eyes locked on her sensually swaying hips and the bright red dress that flirted against her long legs. She'd be easy to find in that dress.

He'd come here to tail a monster and discover the drug lynch pin's ringleader. Now he had a big wrinkle to smooth out. Things had gotten a lot more complicated. The woman he was attracted to could be the leader of the most dangerous drug cartels in the world.

And he'd stop at nothing to stop the cartel from gaining a foothold in this region.

## CHAPTER 2

Before she could find Mario and shed her toe pinching shoes, another potential US client interrupted Isabelle's attempt to leave the room. She'd used the time to solicit another donation for the International Miracle Network. "*Grazie*," she said when the reed thin man passed his generous check to the charity's representatives.

"An excellent cause and an excellent tax deduction," he said. "My personal assistant will contact your people in Washington, D.C. to arrange the shipment to our stores in Charlottesville."

"Wonderful," she said. "Cavelli Vineyards is eager to work with you. I hope you and your wife enjoy the rest of your evening."

"We will."

"*Buona notte*," she said, then left, searching the ballroom for Mario. She supposed thanking him could wait until morning, but she wasn't sure how long he planned to stay in the region.

And, if she were being honest with herself, she had questions about his liaison with Jillian. Why keep their relationship a secret as soon as they discovered their mutual connection? It made little sense to her.

She supposed it was none of her business other than wanting to make sure he wasn't using her rep or... a niggle of doubt twisted around her spine followed by regret for even going there for a moment. Her only motivation for hunting down Mario to thank him had been to escape Colton Sutler's very sexy presence.

She'd promised herself not to lose her focus with another relationship. No more complications. She couldn't afford them.

Deciding to head to her room and make good on her plan to see Mario while on her way there, she skirted through the remaining guests. She entered the hallway that led to the main staircase, stopped long enough to toe off her high heels, then made her way down the corridor.

The hardwood floors cooled her hot feet and dimmed iron sconces lit the way before her. As the party's sounds faded behind her, she heard the murmur of another conversation wafting out of the library located just ahead.

Her heart rate ramped up. That was Mario's voice she heard speaking in Italian. Something about a shipment from what she could make out. Picking up her pace, she hurried to the open door, hoping she'd catch him alone considering Jillian wasn't fluent in her language.

Stepping inside, she stared at his back. Tension emanated from his broad shoulders. And his terse tone made her pause before speaking. Clearly, he had a business to attend to. She moved to back away, then he cursed. "*Merda. You'll get your payment for the dope after I secure the drop and we have it in our possession.*"



Her breath hitched. No wonder he'd been able to help her so easily when she'd been caught in a drug raid during a party she'd attended with her boyfriend while in college.

*"And the hit I ordered is on. I want that informant in Italy dead before the end of the week."*

She stifled her gasp. Fear skittered up her spine, and icy fingers clamped her neck muscles. *Get out before he sees you.* She willed her feet to move, but before she could get out of the room Mario turned around.

His ebony eyes were hard slates. "How much did you hear?"

*Enough to know you're a monster who deals drugs.* She clamped her mouth shut and swallowed the words. "Enough to know I want in," she said, then pasted a fake smile on her face and moved closer to him on legs that threatened to buckle beneath her.

He laughed. "You want in? You're so clean nowadays, you squeak." Mario lifted his tumbler of amber liquid and held it with one pinky extended. Waving it slightly, he continued, "I don't work with people who have a history of sampling the product."

"You know the truth. I'd attended a party at the wrong time with the wrong guy," she said through numb lips. "You made sure my brother wouldn't find out. For which I'm still grateful. He's the one with the squeaky-clean reputation."

"That's why he's boring as fuck." Mario drank while staring at her over his glass's brim. "You swore drugs weren't your thing, but I remember you smoking some pot during high school too. Guess you're not as dull as your brother."

"You've got that right." she said, her heart thundering in her ears as she struggled to remain calm while she moved closer to him.

He drank again. "I've always wondered if you had a dark side," he said. "You are your parents' daughter. But I haven't heard your name come up in my circles."

"I've never heard yours either. Guess that makes us even, Mario," she said. "Looks like we've both taken after our dear old mothers and fathers. Frankly, I only recently got into the business end of dealing," she lied while praying he believed her.

"Why now? The winery is successful under your guidance."

She examined her fingertips with feigned nonchalance even as her pulse skittered wildly in the hollow of her neck. Thinking fast, she pulled a page out of her parents' misbegotten playbook. "I got myself into a financial meltdown with a bad investment," she said, glancing away from her nails to look Mario in the eye. "Had to make some quick cash before my family found out, especially my brother."

He regarded her with renewed interest. "Black tar is a lucrative industry," he said when she stood inches away from him. "You have expanded rapidly in the wine market. Takes a lot of capital."

Her knees wobbled, but she held herself steady. *Keep your cool. Don't let him see you flinch.* "I'm surprised Jillian didn't clue me in," she said, holding her head high and refusing to break her gaze from his. "That is if she's involved."

Shadow and light played across his handsome features. "No. She's merely a distraction," he said smoothly. "Why were you eavesdropping on me?"

"I wasn't." Isabella gripped her high heels. Part of her considered whacking him with the points and running. But she didn't dare risk angering him until she made sure her parents weren't in any danger. "Just found you at a very good time. There's no reason we can't work together now that I know you're horning in on my territory."

He looked at his glass, chugged the amber liquid, then carefully set it on a table. "We're not looking for a partner, especially a green one."

"I learned fast. And the only green I'm interested in has a dollar sign attached." She continued to hold Mario's gaze, unwavering, desperate for him to buy her story to buy time until she could contact the authorities. Otherwise not only her ass would be in trouble, but everyone in her family could be in trouble, especially her parents. "Until I accidentally overheard your side of the conversation, I had no idea you were here for the same reason as me. Moving into the territory should be much easier if we pool our..." *Our what? Dio. Think. Say something before he calls your bluff.*

"There you are, Isabella."

She whipped her head around when she heard Colton's deep voice. She relaxed her grip on her shoes and the pain in her knuckles evaporated as they dropped to the floor. "Ah, yes. I was just on my way up to my room," she said.

"That'll have to wait," he said, striding inside. "Alexandra wants you to meet her in the ballroom to announce the fundraiser's final numbers. Unless you'd rather go straight to your room." He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her close to his side.

"No. Not yet." Once she got out of the parlor, she'd call the authorities. Then contact someone in Italy to get her parents out of Mario's resort without causing alarm. "I just needed a quick break to rest my feet. But then I ran into Mario and we've had the most delightful chat. We were just about to return to the party. Weren't we?"

Mario nodded. "*Si*. I'm sure Jillian's wondering where I am."

"Great." Colton let her go, knelt and picked up her shoes, then stood. "Hate to break it to you, but you'll have to put these on again."

"And I thought they were so gorgeous when I bought them." She took the wretched Jimmy Choo heels, quickly put them on and kissed her so-called friend's cold cheeks. "We'll finish our discussion later."

He raised his tumbler and drained the contents while holding her gaze with dark, gleaming eyes. "*Certamente*," Mario said. "And give my best to your parents the next time you talk with them. My people are taking excellent care of them, monitoring them discreetly to make sure they undergo no more health scares, especially your father. I'd hate to see him get overly excited and suffer another heart attack."

His tone was light, but carried a hint of menace. Her heart dropped into her stomach and bile threatened. Swallowing hard, she struggled to inject steel into her voice when she replied. "I'm sure they'll be happy to hear from me." The sooner the better. But even then, how could she risk overwhelming her father? She couldn't upset them with a sudden change. Not only that, Mario could easily create a situation with a simple phone call or email. *Dio*.

Colton caught her hand in his, squeezed gently. "Let's roll."

"See you later," she said with feigned nonchalance before Colton and she exited the wood-paneled library.

When they'd gotten far enough away, she looked over her shoulder to make sure Mario wasn't right behind them. "You have no idea how grateful I am that you arrived when you did," she whispered, struggling to keep pace with Colton. She didn't know what Colton did for a living, but he had offered to be her bodyguard and he'd turned up just in time... a warning clanged in her head. "Were you following me?" And why?

"No. Just overheard you and thought I'd pop in. You know, to guard you. Your friend didn't sound so friendly."

"He's not. He's dangerous."

"I know."

“You do? How?”

“Let’s just say I’m not working for the IRS. You’re officially under my guard until I know just how deeply involved you are with Mario.”

Heat flared, replaced the ice flowing through her veins. “I don’t need a bodyguard, I need the police.”

“I’m not sure you’re interested in involving the police.” He stopped and turned her to face him, bracketing his arms on the wall behind her, caging her in. “That’s why I’m sticking to you until I find out.”

His silver eyes lasered onto hers, sent a jolt of fear through her blood. Adrenaline rushed along her nerves and her pulse skittered, skipping beats. “You think *I’m* a drug dealer? I’m not.”

“Then why are you hanging out with one of the most notorious criminals in the industry?”

Her lungs emptied, and she gulped in air. “I had to pretend or...,” she said. Her voice echoed high in her ears. “Get me to Alexandra. I’ll explain everything to her.”

“Quit talking. Or you’ll blow everything.”

“I can’t. Not when...”

“Isabella.” He closed the remaining distance between them. “What part of *be quiet* don’t you get?”

She opened her mouth, and he lowered his mouth to within a millimeter of hers. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, her heart rate speeding up, dizzying her.

“Protecting you from yourself,” he said, then covered her lips with his.

How dare he? He’d accused her of being a criminal. She pushed his shoulders, but then she heard footfalls, inhaled the scent of Mario’s expensive cologne. And, instead of fighting Colton’s kiss, she parted her lips and clutched his jacket lapels, deepening their connection.

HE’D ONLY INTENDED to stop Isabella from fucking up his undercover investigation with a short kiss. Nothing more. But when she opened herself up and crushed him into her body, Colton’s brain cells decided to take a hike. Man. She tasted good. Like rich wine mingled with her incredible scent—decadent, delicious, and tempting as sin.

Heat filled his veins, rushed hot blood to his groin. On auto-pilot, he moved against her, wanting a hell of a lot more.

She moaned softly, and though they had a barrier of clothing between them, he could feel her pebbled nipples when she melded to him.

Damn. His cock turned to granite. He caressed her hips, stroked the length of her body until he cruised his hands over the soft swell of her breasts.

Then a soft chuckle echoed in his ears. Fucking Italian jerk just passed by them. The blaze he’d ignited simmered to cool. *Get your fucking head together. And figure out how the hell to get her to cooperate until you clear her. Or prove she’s guilty.* He eased the intensity of their kiss, gentling his movements over her mouth until he was sure Mario had returned to the party.

Thirty seconds later, he dragged his mouth from hers. “Coast is clear,” he said, still hovering so close to her lips he could taste the wine on them. “But we’re not finished here.”

She blinked rapidly. “Please. I have to let people know about Mario.”

“Yeah right. You could be lying through your pretty little lips.”

"I'm not," she said. "I lied to Mario to buy time. Now we need to go to the authorities before he does something awful to my parents."

He'd be the final judge of that story. "Even if you're telling me the truth, I won't let you undermine my investigation."

"What investigation? Alexandra told me you're an accountant. So who the hell are you?"

He didn't answer right away. How much should he tell her? If anything? "You have to trust me."

"You've got to be kidding, especially since you don't believe me," she said, then pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Are you assuming I'm guilty by association?"

Fuck. His gut said no. She may have gotten caught in a web of lies she had no clue about, but until he confirmed his instinct, he couldn't let her out of his sight. "I never assume anything."

"Except you won't let me prove I'm not involved and I have no idea why..." She pushed against him. "So I have no reason to trust you. For all I know, you could be part of the cartel."

Damn. Stubborn had to be Isabella's middle name. He pinned her against the wall to stop her and fear flashed in her eyes. "I won't hurt you and I'm not a drug dealer." He opened his tux jacket, withdrew a slim leather wallet, and flipped it open. "My identification."

She snapped her gaze onto the badge, scanned it. "You're with the Drug Enforcement Administration?"

"Yes."

"Then why won't you do something and arrest Mario?"

He appraised her from head to toe and back again. Maybe she was telling the truth, but no way would he jeopardize this case. Not when he'd requested the lead on this case to right a major wrong from his past. "He's only one part of the organization. I'm going after the head of the snake."

"And you think I'm part of his crime ring," she said. "But I can prove I'm not by going to the authorities. Why won't you let me go?"

He needed to know what she'd overheard before he acted. If she wasn't guilty, she might have information that could help him. The ballroom's din of music and chatter wafted down the hall. In a matter of minutes, the gala would wind down. "Fine, but not here. In there." He tilted his head in the library's direction.

Within seconds, they'd returned to the room, and he locked the door behind him. "Tell me again. How long have you known Mario Rossi?" he asked without preamble.

"My entire life." She crossed the hardwood floor and sank into a high-backed chair. "We have the unfortunate distinction of being linked to a scandal that nearly destroyed both our families."

"I know. I realized after we ran into him."

"So, I wasn't a suspect when you asked me to dance?" she asked. "Or were you using me all along to get to Mario? Because I didn't know he'd be here tonight."

He paused. Locked eyes with her, the attraction still humming through his veins. "No. You didn't fake your astonishment. That's in your favor."

Isabella crossed her arms. "Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Innocent or not, there's a chance your past connection could be a link to what he's doing here." And he didn't believe in coincidences. Not in his profession.

"No. I know what my parents did. Mario's too. I had to live with the embezzlement, the destruction of our family, but drugs didn't have a role in their crime."

"Why'd you tell him you were a dealer?"

"I lied to him because he helped me get out of a drug raid back in college. I figured he'd believe me. I'd been caught at the wrong place at the wrong time." Isabella raised her chin and the muscles in

her neck stood in stark relief against her pale skin. “I thought he was like me and my brother. On the right side of the law to make up for the disaster of our parents’ crimes. He’s always been so good to us, especially after his parents died. Now I know everything he did to get me out of trouble... oh *Dio*... I just...” Her teeth chattered.

Shit. Most likely, she was telling the truth. “You’re in shock.”

Fuck. Colton grabbed one of the throw blankets artfully tucked in a basket next to a cold fireplace, then draped it over her.

“The man I heard talking on the phone today isn’t who he claims to be. I have to stop him.”

“That’s my job.”

“So do your damn job,” she demanded, locking her eyes onto his.

“I am.”

“Then why aren’t you arresting him? Calling for reinforcements?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “If I make a move, it will compromise the entire investigation.” And he’d waited too long to avenge the death of his best friend. No way would he allow her to fuck that up. “Tell me everything you know.”

“He’s expecting a shipment of dope—black tar I think he said, whatever that is—in eleven days. A week from Wednesday.” She continued holding his gaze. “Whoever is coordinating the exchange is personally supervising the delivery. He... ordered a hit in Italy. I have no idea who or when.”

Adrenaline spiked along his nerves. He was one step closer to discovering who’d been responsible for everything that had gone wrong during his undercover mission three years ago. “You hear a name?” he asked.

“No, but if Mario believed me earlier, I’ll find out soon enough.”

His ears buzzed. “What the hell are you talking about?” he asked, his voice steady despite the different scenarios racing through his brain.

“I told Mario I want in on his deal,” she said.

“Why the hell would you do that?” Jesus. The woman didn’t even know the proper slang for heroin.

“To buy time so I could protect my parents before he did something to them. Or to my brother. His wife.” She grasped the blanket and huddled inside. “Not to mention, my family and Cavelli Vineyards can’t afford another scandal of this magnitude. We might lose everything.”

“Why’d he believe you?” One wrong place, wrong time drug bust in her past didn’t qualify her for dealing the damn stuff.

“I let him think I take after my parents even though they’re completely rehabilitated. I smoked a little pot in high school too. Just experimenting, really.”

“Shit. You know nothing about drugs.”

“Shit is the understatement of the year.” She blew out a puff of air. “But here we are. I can’t reverse what I put into motion unless you stop him.”

“That won’t happen until Mario’s boss turns up. That’s who I’m after.”

She sprang to her feet, the blanket falling to the ground. “I can’t let you do that. My family might be in danger. I overheard him ordering a hit on someone. My parents are at his resort. My father doesn’t need any additional stress. He’s recuperating from heart surgery. And if Mario comes after me, then what? He could send someone to kill me.” She closed the distance between them and jabbed him in the chest. “I’m not a drug dealer. Nor do I want to become one. This ends today.”

He held her jabbing finger. “This ends when I say it ends.” But man, he’d have to catch her up on the jargon pronto or Mario would see right through her charade.

“Wait a minute.” She jerked her finger free and pursed her lips. “Why are you working undercover and using your real identity? Shouldn’t you use a phony one?”

Add *too smart for her own good* to his current list of middle names for Isabella. “Everyone in Magnolia Falls thinks I’m an accountant. I couldn’t change my name or identity while running this investigation here.”

“Fair enough.”

“After I got the anonymous tip, I asked the powers that be for this assignment. I know the territory. I know the hideaways. And I’m motivated to get this crime ring’s leader.”

“Great. So you’re here running an investigation and I’m supposed to back off?”

“Isabella, you played a dangerous trick when you lied to Mario—if you’re telling the truth,” he said. “It’s too late to back off. I’m not screwing up this case and rushing the arrest. I’ll lose my primary target.”

She paled. “No. Mario’s capable of murder. If I don’t stop him, he could kill my parents. He already gave me a veiled threat before we left him.”

“You’re rich. Hire security guards for them.”

“He’s got people watching them. His people,” she said. “If I warn them and freak them out, maybe even cause my father another heart attack... Mario will know I’m not a dealer. Then what?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. She’d created a mega problem even if she was innocent. Fuck. “You’re right. One false move will screw this up for the DEA too,” he said. “We’ll have to play along until we wind up the investigation.”

“*We*? There is no *we*.”

“Unfortunately, for me, there is now.” Colton swallowed hard. As much as he wanted to pretend Isabella hadn’t put a major wrench into his plans, he couldn’t deny the truth. “You’ve got to see this lie through until the shipment arrives. Otherwise, everything you want me to stop today will lead to serious consequences.”

The little color that remained in her face drained. Her lips turned white. “Why?” she asked.

“Mario’s employers won’t care if he’s in jail, but they’ll go after you, your family, everyone you love if you turn him in.” He had no choice. Isabella didn’t either. And hopefully he’d get them out of this mess without creating any collateral damage.

But this time the stakes were a lot higher. This time he had to run an investigation with someone who didn’t have an ounce of experience in the dark underworld he’d been traveling in for years.

EVERYTHING IN ISABELLA stilled when she registered Colton’s words. “But what about Jillian? I have to warn her. Tell her Mario’s not the man she thinks he is.”

He cut her off. “No. She might be involved.”

“Mario said she’s just a distraction. That she knows nothing.”

“I’ll contact my handler to confirm Mario’s claims.” Colton scrubbed his hand over his face. “This is fucked up. But we’ve got to come up with a way to get you closer to Mario. Find out who he’s working with before this spirals out of control.”

“It’s already out of control from where I’m standing,” she said. “Because I am extremely unqualified to run a drug deal.”

“Don’t remind me. I’ll give you a crash course first thing tomorrow.”

"I've got a meeting with Alexandra."

"Reschedule."

"Fine. But won't she suspect something's wrong? I'm here to coordinate our next promotional marketing campaign for the consortium." She rubbed her neck, desperate to ward off the rising headache clawing at the base of her skull. "And are you positive I can learn everything I need to negotiate a drug deal with Mario?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're a smart woman. Plus, I've got no choice," he said. "Just wish you never got caught in the middle of this situation. I know you were desperate. But you've made things worse by interfering."

She ground her teeth and the pain in her neck shot through her brain, lancing her temples. "You can't blame me for being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Once again. But just as before, tonight hadn't been her fault. "Besides, what would you have done in my position?"

He held her gaze. Steel glinted in his eyes' gray depths. "The same damn thing," he said.

She heard a small crack in his voice. She wondered if he had a personal stake in this case? The hint of vulnerability, more than anything, made her willing to cooperate with him despite her fear. "Okay. I won't warn Jillian," she said. "I'll follow your lead. But what, exactly, am I supposed to do?"

"We've only got a little over a week before the shipment arrives. Mario has to believe you're serious about being in on the deal. That's where I come in. I'll back you up with information that'll prove you're not lying," he said after several tense beats of silence. "Tell him we're partners."

Her headache subsided just enough to make her weigh the idea. With Colton taking charge of the intricate details, she didn't have to pretend knowledge about an industry she only learned about via the news. "We only met today," she said carefully. "How will we keep him from suspecting that I'm lying?"

"Have you been here before?"

"*Si*. I joined Alexandra at a conference in Washington to iron out the details of our consortium's next global marketing push," she said.

"Then we met there—and how can Mario deny we couldn't be capable of the same thing he did? He kept their relationship a secret from you longer than we did," he said. "I'll reinforce the fact that we've been laying the groundwork to come into this territory for several months. But we don't want a turf war to screw up our plans."

"*Buono*. That's true. I can use that," she said, then pressed her lips together and mulled over Colton's suggestion. "There's only one problem. We aren't in a relationship."

"We are now." He finished closing the scant distance between them until he was just a breath away from her. "In every way."

She blinked and shock shot through her entire body. "What do you mean *in every way*?" Isabella squeaked while already registering exactly what his response would be. Once again, her crazy hormones started thrumming an *eccellente* idea for a *buona notte* in all-caps through all her nerve-endings.

"I mean we'll be spending tonight together," Colton said softly. "And we'll be together every other night until this deal leads me to the mastermind behind Mario Rossi's cartel."

The atmosphere in the room seemed to thicken, grow heavy, and electricity sparked between them like the first signs of an intense storm building, intensifying. Thundering until she wanted—oh how she wanted—to yield to the pressure and act on the desire drawing her to him.

She licked her lips and his gaze tracked the movement, lingering on her mouth before flicking

away. Heat pooled between her thighs, dampened her panties. *Dio. Oh, Dio mio.* His rugged masculinity combined with the sophistication of his tuxedo had an insane, almost intoxicating, impact on her system. Clearly, she'd been man-free for far too long.

"Your idea is ridiculous." She'd barely met the man, danced with him once, and sure, all her long-neglected erogenous zones had gone into hyper alert simply by being within a few feet of the guy. Not to mention when he'd held her close during the slow ballad. "I don't sleep with my business partners."

"You've got nothing to worry about," he said. "All we'll be doing is sleeping, nothing more."

Another surge of relief ran through her, but this time it ran alongside a disappointment she didn't want to feel. She crossed her arms, still unsure about Colton's plan. "How will Mario believe we're an item if we're not acting like..."

"Like a couple having hot sex whenever and wherever possible?"

Isabella swallowed hard, held her waist a little tighter. "*Si*," she said. "I'm not an actress, Colton. I don't know if I can fake that kind of sexuality or attraction to a man."

Again, his gaze dropped to her mouth, lingered, then traveled lower and lower still. "You're not faking anything right now," he said.

"Perhaps not," she said. "But I can control what I do about my body's reaction. The question is: can you?"

"I'm a special agent, and trained to control my impulses," he said. "Trust me. Nothing will happen between us that isn't part of fooling Mario."

A flash of their dance, the way he'd held her, and the heat flaring between them argued with his cool, matter-of-fact tone. "Couldn't we just be business partners without pretending we're lovers?"

"Won't work," he said. "I have to be with you day and night for another reason."

"What?"

"To shield you at all costs."

Understanding dawned. "And if anyone tries to harm me," her voice trailed off.

"Or if anyone tries to kill you. You're stuck with me until this deal runs its course," he said. "No way will I let anything happen to you."

"That's more than a week," she said. "We'll have to do more than be seen together in public. We'll have to..."

"Act like a couple who can't get enough of each other."

She blew out a breath she didn't know she was holding. "Which means we'll be doing more than holding hands. Great."

"This isn't negotiable, Isabella. When we return to the party tonight, no one will question why I'm spending the night in your room afterward."

"As I said, I can control my urges if you can." Easy? No. Necessary? Yes.

"We start now," he said, holding out his hand and taking her palm with his.

The second they connected, electricity sparked along her skin and traveled deep into her core. She tried to ignore the heat emanating between them, pulsing, promising something beyond anything she'd ever imagined having with a man.

As they walked out into the hallway, moving closer to the sounds of music, people laughing, Colton brought her closer to his side, then whispered, "Show time."

His warm breath tickled her senses, and more need unfurled low. "I'm ready," Isabella said, staring straight ahead and fighting the desire coursing through her veins. Desire that made her hot, wet, and hungry to taste everything he had to offer.



She'd have no problem showing her attraction to Colton when her body seemed to have a mind of its own. One that craved beyond anything she'd ever experienced. And a part of her wondered what it would be like to have him with her, his attention truly focused on her for all the right reasons.

## CHAPTER 3

When they reentered the ballroom, Colton scanned the interior for Mario and Jillian, spotted them on the dance floor. He scanned the rest of the room. Alexandra stood next to one of the drink stations. When she caught sight of them, she waved them over.

“Took you long enough to get back,” she said after they reached her. “You missed the final tally announcement.”

“We were busy.”

Isabella edged closer to Colton, then rested her head against his shoulder. “*Si*. Very busy. Sorry we lost track of the time,” she said, her accent deepening, becoming even more sensual. “You know how these things happen.”

“Sure do.” Alexandra sipped her white wine, tipping her head to the side and studying him. “Just didn’t expect you to be gone so long.” She shot Colton a wow-you-move-fast-look while she spoke.

“I’m sure no one missed me too much,” Isabella said soothingly, reading the tension pinging between the pair. “After all, everyone had fun, and we raised a lot of money, *si*?”

“More than we projected,” Alexandra said. “The International Miracle Network’s chairperson is thrilled. She’s already planning next year’s event.”

“Fantastic.” She slipped her hand free and cruised it up Colton’s back until her fingers toyed with his hair. “Then I don’t feel too bad about missing the announcement, especially since the distraction was so entertaining.”

Colton’s ears grew hot and the rush of blood thundered in them. Damn. He’d thought he’d have to take the lead on this screwing around scenario, but Isabella’s flirtation, sexy voice, and innuendos had taken him by surprise.

The crowd had thinned significantly since Colton had left the winery’s grand ballroom to search for Isabella, but a few couples still danced on the parquet floor.

Mario and Jillian clung to each other and swayed in time to the music, the sultry melody ending within moments.

“Let’s say goodnight to your PR rep,” he said, wanting to make contact with Mario before turning in for the night. “Later, Alexandra.”

“Sure. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Colton snaked his arm around Isabella’s waist, then sauntered to the edge of the dance floor until they were within a foot of his target. “Glad we caught you before you left the party,” he said easily.

Jillian arched an eyebrow. “Well, well, isn’t this astounding? No wonder you didn’t make it in time for the announcement,” she said knowingly.

Isabella laughed. “Exactly,” she said. “All work and no play... I don’t want to be a dull girl as the

American saying goes.”

“You could never be dull,” Colton said, stroking her bare arm, enjoying the feel of her satin skin way too much. “You two staying through the week?”

“Si,” Mario said. “I’m scouting new hotel locations while Jillian and Isabella finalize their promotional campaign.”

Suspicion raised the hairs on the back of his neck. What if Isabella was wrong about Jillian? Could her public relations person have ties to Mario’s illegal business? “Excellent,” Colton said, linking his fingers into Isabella’s, which had turned cold as ice. “Then we’ll see you tomorrow at the Mother’s Day brunch.” And, beforehand, he’d glean more information about Jillian’s connections via his handler at the DEA.

“Who’s catering? Same company as tonight?” Jillian asked as they walked toward the ballroom’s exit.

“Yes.” Though if he’d known a criminal mastermind had tentacles in Magnolia Falls, and one of his henchmen stood in front of him, he’d have tried to convince his sister to reject the lucrative contract. “She’s the best in the area.” Though he wouldn’t link Reagan to him unless absolutely necessary.

“If tonight’s artisanal buffet is any indication, then I know I won’t be disappointed,” Jillian said easily while they strolled down the hallway that led to the winery’s grand entrance.

“Neither will I,” Isabella said when they reached the central stairway and began climbing to the second floor.

“Though I hope I get some sleep tonight,” Jillian said, giving Mario a sultry look at the top. “Otherwise I might not enjoy the rest of the festivities tomorrow.”

“Not to mention, we have a worldwide marketing campaign to iron out,” Isabella said. “I know we scheduled for early morning, but I’ve got to take care of some family business first.”

“No problem. I’ll take care of the preliminary promotional details until you arrive.”

“I’ll text you to let you know when I’m done,” she said then shot her rep a smile though her heart wasn’t in it.

“Sounds good,” Jillian said, then wrapped her arm around Mario’s waist. “Let’s go. Wouldn’t want to keep these two from enjoying the rest of their evening.”

“Si.” Mario nodded. “*Buona notte*, Isabella. Colton.” His dark eyes narrowed, assessing them before he sauntered to the opposite end of the long balcony with Jillian.

Beside him, Isabella said, “He doesn’t trust me.”

“It’s his job to not trust anyone,” Colton said, continuing to watch the pair until they disappeared into their suite. “Give me your room and cell phone numbers. Go there while I grab my stuff before Alexandra gives me the third degree for fooling around with you. Shouldn’t take me long. Lock the door until you get a text from me.”

She nodded, rattled off her numbers, which he punched into his cell phone, then he waited until she’d safely disappeared into her room.

He joined her within fifteen minutes, barely missing a run-in with Alexandra, and tossed his duffle into a corner next to one of the love seats next to the fireplace. “Got any extra hangers I can use?” He knelt and dug out his sweatpants and a jersey shirt.

“Yes. Plenty.” She walked to one of the love seats near the fireplace and sat down, then waved her hand toward the closet. “Help yourself to whatever you need.”

She’d already ditched her sexy red dress and heels for black yoga pants, a figure hugging T-shirt to match, and fuzzy slippers. Damned, but she wore the slippers like they were as sexy as her

stilettos. And man, oh man, he really wanted to see those sexy feet bare again.

"Thanks." He crossed the floor and grabbed two hangers, then carried them into the bathroom. "I want to change into real clothes before I contact my handler at the DEA."

"Are you sure my parents are safe as long as Mario believes I'm a criminal?"

He paused in the doorway when he heard the anxiety in her voice and glanced at her. "I have faith in you," he said. "And you've got me to guide you. This sting will work out, Isabella." He'd make sure nothing went wrong this time.

"But nothing is guaranteed, is it?"

Her face was devoid of makeup, giving her a youthful, heartbreakingly vulnerable appeal. One he wouldn't lie to in the face of all the possibilities and outcomes he'd personally dealt with throughout his years as an undercover agent.

"No," he said before breaking his gaze from the concern and worry floating in her expressive brown eyes. "I'll be out in a few." He'd gone into deep cover to make up for his best friend's death which had made his sister a widow far too young. But when this tip landed in his path, he'd made the command decision to return to his hometown as himself. And everyone he'd grown up with in Magnolia Falls believed his cover story. That he counted money as an IRS accountant.

He'd made his case with his handler and won the right to bring this cartel down. Now he'd make good on his promise to Isabella. No way would he let anyone come within an inch of hurting her or discovering her charade which could jeopardize her parents' lives."

This cartel's history of murder and chaos would end permanently.

After he finished changing, hanging up his monkey suit, and phoning his handler, he turned to Isabella. "I'll let my handler at the DEA know what's going down, but only him," he said. "That's all until I nail down the bastard who fucked up my bust three years ago."

He sat across from Isabella on the love seat facing hers. "Your parents will be okay."

"What about my brother and his wife? Can I tell them what's going on?"

"Isabella, they've got constant security because of her fame," he said gently. "And what they don't know won't harm them. We're better off keeping this information as close to the hip as possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but still wish I could warn everyone, including Jillian."

"Not yet, we have to be sure if she's involved or not."

"Then I'll try to figure out if she is whenever we're alone," Isabella said. "After all, I hired her. I had her travel to Italy to attend that conference last year. For all I know, she played me for a fool."

"Or Mario played her for one," he said. "Treat her as if nothing is different, but definitely be with her for any slips and report them to me. My handler will update me no later than tomorrow morning."

"Speaking of tomorrow," she said, glancing behind her at the king-sized bed. "Not sure what to do about our sleeping arrangements."

"I'll take the floor." Colton moved to the closet and pulled it open, then dragged out an extra blanket and a set of sheets. "Toss me a pillow."

She picked up two and threw them his way. "Here."

He caught them, then made a pallet for himself. Then he pulled his Glock 17 out of his shoulder holster and tucked it under the pillow.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Always," he said. "Remember, I'm not here for any other reason than to make sure you're still alive by the time this is over."

But if he'd have met her any other time, any other place, after he got this fucking assignment

completed, maybe even quit the DEA to make his cover story a reality. Then he'd be crawling into that bed with her and doing a lot more with her than lying on the floor with a Glock under his pillow and his senses on hyper-alert to ensure her protection.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Colton woke up just after dawn. Turning on his side, he glanced at the king-sized bed where Isabella still slept. He'd heard her tossing and turning throughout the night. Man. He'd have given anything to hold her, soothe away the restless dreams, and yeah... a whole lot more. Letting her sleep, he got off the hardwood floor, then rolled up his pallet. After quickly showering and dressing, he moved back into the suite's living area and grabbed his cell phone off the small dining table tucked in the room's corner.

No messages yet.

The sound of rustling sheets brought his attention to the bed again. Isabella sat up with her back against pillows lining the wrought iron headboard. "Good morning," he said.

"It won't be good until I have my first cup of espresso." She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Of course, it won't top what I can get at home, but the winery's staff does a decent job."

The movement raised her jersey shirt higher to reveal a scant line of golden skin. Heat arrowed low and he squelched the sudden rush of desire with a nod to the day they faced. "I'll order up a pot and breakfast. You okay with an American style breakfast?"

"Sure. That's what I love about visiting other countries. Discovering their cultures and cuisines." She slipped out of bed. "I'll clean up while we wait for it to arrive."

He loved the way her brown hair fell in disheveled waves around her face. Something about her rumpled state along with those pretty bare feet made him like her a bit more. "You care what I order?"

She shook her head as she walked toward the closet to grab a robe. "Surprise me, but be warned. I'm not a dainty eater even when I'm eating my favorite meats and cheeses on my veranda back in Italy. I miss the view and the food, but this area is beautiful too. So, order me something you love to eat."

Funny. She'd struck him as one based on her slim figure. "Will do," he said to her back as she continued to stretch and yawn loudly on her way inside the bathroom, pausing at the closet to withdraw her clothes. After snagging her underwear from the chest next to it, she stepped inside.

Half an hour later, she emerged freshly showered and wearing a feminine spring dress with a scoop neck. "Ah, thank goodness the coffee's here." She crossed the room toward the table and picked up a cup, poured the steaming rich blend, then sipped it. "Now we can get down to business."

She moved around him, her skirt's lacy fabric dancing just above her tanned knees. Pink-colored flowers dotted the dress's bodice, enticing him more than the full American breakfast room service had delivered five minutes earlier.

He looked down as she crossed her legs. Yep. Feet still bare, giving her an air of vulnerability. And sexy too.

Heat traveled low. Every inch of him craved her more than the plates of eggs, meat and sides of fresh fruits he'd ordered for them. Who'd known pretty feet with painted toes could be such a turn-on? Colton swallowed hard, stuffed the desire into a mental duffle bag.

"Hope you like your eggs sunny side up," he said, then scooped up a mouthful of crispy fried hash

browns and shoved them into his mouth.

“Love them,” she said, lifting the silver dome covering the plate of eggs, sausage links and golden crisp toast. “Mmmm. I’m starved. I never get enough to eat at fancy parties. And after what happened last night.” She lifted the bread and slathered butter on it, then bit in and sighed. “This is just what I needed.”

“Good,” he said. “We’ll finish eating before we go over the information you’ll need when you’re talking with Mario. I’ll also give you a blue tooth headset so I can feed you answers when we’re apart.”

She cut her eggs and held his gaze. “What if that raises his suspicions?”

“It’s the age of constantly being plugged in, even here in Magnolia Falls, but we have cell tower issues that’ll cut into our communications when we’re on the river or in the mountains.”

“You love your hometown a lot, don’t you?”

“Great place to grow up if you’re into the outdoors. It’s good to be home even if it’s for a crappy reason.”

“Will you come back for the right reasons? Leave the DEA?”

“Not sure. I’d miss the adrenaline rush, but not the paperwork. Or the red tape.” He ate another scoop of potatoes, then checked his mobile on the table when it vibrated. After reading the message, he said, “Looks like Jillian’s in the clear. Southern small-town girl with big city ambitions, but no record and no reason to suspect her.”

Across from him, Isabella straightened while she clenched her knife and fork European style. “Thank goodness. I knew she wasn’t involved all along. I can warn her...”

Colton cut her off. “No. We can’t tip Mario off until we close this case.”

She nodded. “I’ll play this your way, but this better end fast. I want nothing to happen to her. She’s more than my US rep, she’s a friend.”

“Understood.” He knew all too well the pain of losing his best friend. “We’ll do our best to keep those two apart after today’s Mother’s Day Luncheon.”

“The drop is in less than two weeks,” she said before spearing a sausage link so hard, the fork scraped against the plate. “I’ll keep her busy with handling the consortium’s business which should keep Mario away from her during the day.” She bit hard into the link and chewed fast.

His hash browns went down like razor blades, knowing the concern behind her assault on her food had been born out of a fierce desire to shield Jillian. He put down his fork, then covered her free hand with his. “You’re doing the right thing. She’ll be safe here,” he said. “This will be over before you return to Italy.”

“I hope so,” she said, lowering the half-eaten sausage. “I suppose I’ll have to testify for the DEA. Get on the witness stand.”

Her skin grew cool beneath his touch. The memory of her family’s scandal slammed into his gut. She’d already been through so much and yet, he believed she’d do what she had to do to make sure his operation ended well. He admired her willingness to proceed no matter what. “We can get your written testimony and most likely that’s all we’ll have to use in court.” Colton squeezed her hand gently, hoping to comfort and reassure and drive away the clouds building in her answering gaze. “This sting guarantees Mario and his entire operation, the mastermind behind this incursion will be arrested. They won’t beat the charges either. And I won’t let you go through more than necessary. You’ve earned that.”

She smiled and withdrew her hand from beneath his. “Well, one way to prove I have earned it is by learning everything you can teach me in less than two hours.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Let’s wrap up breakfast and I’ll give you a crash course in how to be a badass drug dealer.”

“Me. A badass.” She combed her fingers through her still damp hair and shook it, then gave him a saucy grin. “Who’d have thought I’d ever be one?”

## CHAPTER 4

Isabella finished chatting with Colton's sister about her exquisite pastries and savory breakfast food she'd brought to the Mother's Day brunch. "Thanks for agreeing to share your recipe for lemon cheesecake bites with my winery's cook," she said to Reagan.

"My pleasure." Reagan smiled, then leveled her blue eyes onto Isabella's while rearranging a plate of assorted cheeses. "Say hi to Colton for me. It's about time he started having fun again."

Isabella highly doubted Colton had any fun while sleeping on the floor, but she flushed just the same. After all, before the events that had forced them together had unfolded, he'd been more than interested in her *that way* when he'd approached her at the gala.

Today her head was filled with street names for heroin, information about how dealers arranged drops and the harm tainted junk could cause if used. No wonder Colton wanted to stop this *White Nurse* from invading his home turf.

Though they'd separated when they first got to the party to act casual, they remained in constant communication via blue tooth headsets and mini microphones. When she heard Colton tell her the operation was underway, she had to put on the act they'd rehearsed. No more honest shop talk. Now she'd engage in dirty money discussions. "Speaking of Colton, I should catch up with him," Isabella said. "Talk to you later."

"Sure," Reagan said as she tucked a wayward blonde lock behind her ear. "And if you get a chance, swing by my restaurant while you're in the area."

"Absolutely."

Isabella stepped away from the banquet table and made her way to the patio located off the back of the renovated 1800s manor house.

Around her, people milled with drinks, chatting. In the distance, Mario and Jillian had cozied up to each other at one of the picnic tables dotting Saxon Vineyard's vast property. Overhead the sun beat down on them, warming her skin, but the entire idyllic setting seemed surreal given what she had learned during the charity gala the night before.

"Here," Colton said, then gave Isabella a mimosa when she reached his side. "You look like you could use a drink."

She accepted the flute and sipped. "I could use an injection of liquid courage right about now. What did your handler say when you told him about what we're doing?"

Yards away, the late morning sun glinted and reflected off the vines just beginning to grow new shoots. They'd be ripe with grapes ready for harvesting in the autumn. But instead of the usual thrill she felt about the possibilities of the year's new vintage, a cold chill settled in her bones.

Colton drank a healthy swallow. "He's not happy," he said. "But he agreed we have no choice



about proceeding with the plan now that the wheels are in motion.”

The mimosa’s usual sweetness turned bitter in her mouth. “Thanks to me.”

“This situation isn’t your fault,” he said gently. “You did what you had to do at the time. Frankly, I admire your fast thinking.”

A wave of female empowerment washed over her. “Really? I thought you were furious with me.”

“I was frustrated, yes.” He held her gaze for a moment longer than necessary. “You stepped into a minefield. If I had warned Alexandra, but...”

“You’d have endangered her too,” she said. “Alexandra has no idea you’re not just an accountant for a firm in the D.C. area.”

He pressed his lips together, then looked away and back at her. “That’s only part of the reason,” he said. “After I realized your connection to Mario, I wondered if you were the mastermind behind his operation.”

Her mouth slackened, and she blinked rapidly. “You thought that *I* was a drug lord?” she asked, her voice hitching a notch. “Are you kidding? Do you know who my brother is married to? My sister-in-law’s a world-famous actress. I don’t need to deal anything.”

“I realized I was wrong almost immediately.” He leaned in, kissed her temple, and whispered, “Calm down. Mario, Jillian and Alexandra are walking this way. We don’t want them to question what’s going on between us.”

She huffed. “Fine. I’ll calm down. But this conversation isn’t over. Not by a long shot,” she said, then pasted a fake smile on her face as they approached. “*Ciao*. A wonderful day for an el fresco brunch, *si*?”

“*Certamente*,” Mario said, then kissed her cheeks and greeted Colton. “Alexandra says you’re restoring a major tourist company to the area.”

“Yes. Black River Outfitters went bankrupt four years ago,” Colton said, wrapping his arm around Isabella’s shoulders. “I used to work there when I wasn’t bussing tables for my folks at their restaurant during my summer breaks. I’ve been exploring ways to get back to Magnolia Falls. This opportunity came up—thought I’d start the ball rolling before I turned in my resignation.”

“Perhaps we can merge our interests after I open my next resort,” Mario said easily. “And by the way, Isabella, just spoke to your parents earlier this morning. I arranged for them to take a small cruise to visit my second island where they can take in all the scenery from the beachside cabanas.”

“Good to know you’re taking such great care of them,” she said with a smile but inside her stomach churned and the mimosa bubbled like acid in her throat. Her parents would be harder to check in with thanks to Mario. Quickly, she focused on anything but her concern for them. “Thanks. Now Colton, tell us why you’re so interested in this river outfitting business. I’d love to hear more.”

“I like to take calculated risks.” Colton played with Isabella’s hair, pausing at her nape. “I’m always open to new opportunities.”

His touch stopped her stomach’s roiling, comforting her. And more. A delicious thrill traveled though her and heat filled her cheeks. They might be pretending they’d spent the night together, but her body continued to cooperate with every little touch, especially the ones that sent a clear signal to the competition: she was Colton’s. And frankly, she didn’t want it any other way.

“I’m just glad we could combine business with pleasure,” Jillian said, tracing her fingers down Mario’s arm until they linked their hands. “Especially the pleasure.”

Her PR rep behaved like a woman who, if not in love, definitely had a serious case of the hots for Mario. But how could she not see any of his wrongdoings? Still, Isabella had been clueless about Mario’s criminal activity up until this week.

“You got that right,” Colton said, still playing with her hair and doing all kinds of crazy things to Isabella’s insides. “How soon do you expect to get established in the US?”

Mario raised a brow ever so slightly. “Within a year tops. I’m checking out a few properties while Jillian coordinates your public relations’ campaign.” He drained his mimosa. “Alexandra, is this delicious drink made with your wine?”

“Yes. We’ve got a sparkling white that’s become popular locally.”

“And in Italy,” Isabella added. “Next we’ll create global buzz for wineries in the United States and throughout Europe.”

“I’m only concerned with the here and now.” Mario turned to Jillian. “I’d love another glass of this. Would you mind getting me one, *tesoro*?”

“Not at all. I’ll ask the servers to bring a round for all of us along with a few plates of the appetizers.”

“Speaking of that, I’ve got to check in with the rest of the guests.” Alexandra smoothed her hand down her simple light green dress as she studied the group before locking her gaze onto Isabella’s. “We’ll talk about our next shipment tomorrow.”

“I’ll tag along,” Colton said. “See if my sister needs any extra help.”

“You’re a good brother,” Isabella said.

“Tell her that. She keeps threatening to trade me in for a better, less pushy model.” He brushed his lips against hers. “I’ll be back soon, then we can talk about how to bring even more tourists to Magnolia Falls in the future.”

“Excellent idea,” Mario said.

Their conversation sounded so normal—innocent. Yet, deep in her heart, Isabella knew Mario’s luxury resorts were a cover for his illegal activities. But after she’d learned Jillian had no idea about Mario’s criminal enterprises, she couldn’t wait to get her colleague out of the area and safely in their D.C. office.

Now she stood alone with Mario. And she had to enact Colton’s plan before Jillian returned with food, more flirtations and distractions.

“So, have you considered bringing me in on your special deal?” she asked in English, feeling decidedly over her head but pressing on.

Mario examined his buffed nails, then held her gaze. “Tell me, Isabella, what communications methods do you use to get your skag out to the clientele?”

Colton’s crash course rattled through her brain. Ah. Skag. Slang for heroin. She touched her earpiece. “Nokia’s, graffiti on sides of buildings to alert users about the fairy dust,” she said.

“Packaging?”

Damn. She wracked her memories. Hesitated and licked her lips. Then Colton’s reassuring voice spoke in her earpiece, giving her the answer. “Nickel Decks and Brick Gums depending on the nature of the deal. But quit jerking me around, Mario. This new market will require more than delivering the skag to local dealers. First, we have to establish delivery of the goods to a secure location.”

He pressed his lips together and slightly raised his brows. “There’s no *we* in this equation. What would your brother do if he discovers your new sideline?”

“Who cares?” she said, feigning nonchalance though her heart threatened to leap out of her chest. “He’s not our concern.”

“If anything goes wrong and you’re implicated, he’ll never forgive you,” he said. “He spent years rebuilding the Cavelli name and reputation. His name is his bond.”

White hot rage flashed when she heard the contempt in Mario’s voice. Standing here, holding his

hooded gaze, she reined in the desire to punch him in the throat for his scorn and deceit. After all, she'd entered this nightmare charade for the same reason her brother fought so hard to restore their reputation. She'd protect her family's name at all costs.

She willed the rage to simmer to a low boil. Colton spoke to her via the earpiece, encouraging her with his words of praise. She was handling the conversation with Mario, holding her own. "Why do you think I turned to you for help after the drug raid in university? No way would I involve him. He's got his fancy life with his Hollywood star and I've got mine," she said when her pulse slowed to normal. "He knows nothing about my current activities. I guess the family's criminal gene bypassed him and went straight to me." A part of her wanted to warn her brother about their so-called friend's false front, but Colton was right. As long as he toured the states with his wife and their entourage of bodyguards Isabella didn't think he'd be in danger. Yet. Besides, she didn't want to mess up Colton's operation.

She wanted to stop Mario. And she wanted to ensure her parents' safety.

"Perhaps I should question your timing instead," she said, injecting determination into her voice despite her quaking knees. "After all, I've busted my ass to get a foothold in these mountains for over a year and suddenly you're horning in on my action. Why?"

"A year? Really? The only contact you have here is Alexandra Saxon."

"That's where you're wrong," she said. "You think my hook up last night with Colton Sutler was a coincidence?"

Mario narrowed his eyes. "You telling me that when he interrupted our conversation last night, it wasn't an accident?"

Oh, was it ever. She stifled the retort. "No. He contacted me after he learned about my intentions six months ago. We have mutual connections that passed along the information. He's familiar with the region having grown up here. Now he's my partner. When he heard someone was in the area working a new angle, he asked me to eliminate you as a possibility. I didn't believe him. I sure as hell didn't expect you to show up here for Saxon's fundraising gala. Imagine my shock when you ended up being my competition."

"I guess we all have our secrets. Go on," Mario said. "What do you propose?"

"Either you work with us or you risk losing everything you've set in motion." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot on the patio, channeling her famous mother's aristocratic tone which brooked no argument. "The choice is yours, Mario. I haven't spent the better part of the last year gaining people's trust and building my network to let you or your superiors stand in my way."

COLTON GRABBED a plate and loaded it with food while keeping a casual eye on Isabella and Mario while they talked alone. Listening to her replies to Mario's questions, encouraging her with the right answers when she stumbled. After her last challenge—what an amazing woman for standing strong against this jerk—he figured they'd been talking shit long enough. Isabella had set their plan into motion. Now he'd get closer to the bastard to find the mastermind behind the major influx of black tar coming into Magnolia Falls.

"Hey," Reagan said, interrupting his thoughts. "You've got enough food piled on your plate to feed a small army. Save some for the paying guests."

"I'm sharing," he said, tilting his head toward Isabella.

“You better watch yourself with her. She’s not exactly your type.”

“Why not?” he said, grinning. “The last time I checked hot, gorgeous women were definitely on my radar, especially the kind that don’t expect long-term commitments as part of the arrangement.”

Reagan’s high ponytail swayed as she shook her head. “I like her. Too bad she’s not from here. I bet she’d tame your wild ass.”

“Trust me,” he said. “She’s not into tame.” God. Lying to his sister sucked, but he had to play the game or he’d blow their cover.

“Go. Before I feel compelled to give you a lecture about how to properly treat women.”

“Gladly.” He grabbed another one of her amazing pastries, then walked away.

Truthfully, he wanted Isabella in a bad way. She’d occupied his dreams all night long. Dreams featuring her sexy, long legs and holding her lush curves while he plunged into her. Dreams that had him turning the shower to glacier temperatures to douse the heat filling his groin when he woke up hard as granite.

As he approached Isabella and Mario, he heard the forcefulness in her voice. He read her body language loud and clear. Her stiff shoulders and back, the fisted hands on her full hips, all reflected tension.

As did the glowering, hooded dark gaze in Mario’s narrowed eyes. “Looks like you’ve let Mario in on our secret,” he said easily though everything in him wanted to haul her away from the jerk.

“*Si*. But I’m still waiting for his answer to our bargain.”

“This isn’t the place to discuss business,” Mario said. “Not until I’ve run your offer past my partners.”

“You’ve got one night, Mario.” Isabella didn’t relax her stance. “Otherwise, you’ll be facing more problems than you’d expected.”

Damn. She sounded fucking convincing. If he hadn’t already confirmed her innocence, Colton would question it now.

“Isabella, threats won’t influence my people’s decision,” Mario said. “Only our history might sway them.”

Damn. The last thing Colton wanted was a turf war in his neck of the woods. He wanted Mario to bring him to the person behind the cartel’s invasion into his hometown.

The mountain breeze carried a hint of wildflowers on it along with the scent of pine. Usually, the familiar aromas brought a sense of calm, but not today. His secret, the deep cover operation he’d run while using an alias three years ago, might surface if Mario’s connections had access to his information.

“The property I purchased is about an hour north of the winery.” He set the plate of food on a wrought-iron table next to them. “We’ll discuss our mutual interests there tomorrow—undisturbed—meanwhile we enjoy the rest of the day.”

“*Perfetto*,” Mario said, then his entire face transformed, the lines bracketing his mouth relaxed and the furrows in his brow evaporated.

The reason for Mario’s sudden change in demeanor glided by Colton and gave Mario another mimosa. “I just spoke with Alexandra,” Jillian said. “We’re meeting tomorrow morning at nine to go over the consortium’s marketing campaign.”

“Great,” Isabella said. “I hope Colton lets me get some sleep tonight.”

“Same,” Jillian said, then laughed. “In fact, I’d love to take a nap. You game, Mario?”

“An afternoon, alone, with you? I’m always game.” Mario wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “*Ciao*. Looking forward to discussing how your new enterprise will interface with my next

acquisition, Colton.”

“Until tomorrow, then.”

As soon as they were out of earshot, Colton said, “You did great. Threatening him might accelerate the deal. But make no mistake, he’s not someone you want to anger.” He kept his voice low, but the clipped words revealed his concern. “Glad he knows you’ve got me on your team. That’ll keep him on his toes.”

Chin raised, Isabella held her ground. “There’s one thing that men like Mario respond to—a strong negotiator,” she said steadily. “Plus, I had to make sure he agreed to include us in the deal.”

“You’re right, but discuss nothing with him unless I’m within range. I can’t risk a civilian from another country getting killed during this sting,” he said. “My ass is already in deep shit with my handler. He’s not happy about how this is going down.”

“Then you’ll just have to keep me alive.” She downed the rest of her mimosa, then placed it on the wrought-iron table next to her. “I may have been wrong about Mario, but now that I know what I didn’t know, I won’t let him get away with his plans. This ends here. In Virginia.”

“Agreed. I only trust a handful of people at the DEA so we’re playing this our way with minimal contact unless completely necessary.”

“I’m sorry you have to put your faith in me, but I won’t let you down.”

“We’re still not in, Isabella. From this point forward, I’ll control dialogue with Mario,” he said. “I don’t want him to trip you up and we’ve got to prove we’re legit.”

“How will we do that? It’s not like I have a stash of heroin hidden in my rental car.”

He laughed. “No kidding. I arranged for a sham shipment to get in the pipeline when I contacted my handler.”

“You think Mario will join forces with us?”

“That depends on his partners. They won’t like that we’re positioning ourselves as their competition.” He took her hand. “Pretend you’re happy. Smile.”

“I’ll be a lot happier when we get his sorry ass behind bars,” she said and then grinned.

“I like the way you think,” he said. “I’ll breathe a whole lot easier after I get these shitheads out of my hometown and region.”

Mario and Jillian sauntered to the buffet table, spoke briefly with his sister. His insides clenched. Though his sister no longer shared the same last name with him, it wouldn’t be long before Mario connected all the dots. Life and death had already been on the line once before. This bust was crucial.

He turned her to face him, cradled her cheeks and brushed his lips against her forehead. “Trust me. I understand,” he said. “This isn’t my first time running the show. So follow my lead. I won’t let anything happen to you or the people you love.”

Nor would he let anything else horrific happen to people he loved. Not this time. Not on his watch. Not again.

## CHAPTER 5

After going through developing a promotional plan for the next three months with Jillian on Monday morning, Isabella returned to her suite of rooms to find Colton pacing the floor. “Did you arrange a meeting with Mario?” she asked without preamble though she had a damn hard time untangling her tongue to speak at all.

Why did he have to be so gorgeous? The jeans he’d put on accentuated his chiseled ass, hugging it to drool worthy perfection. And the black T-shirt he’d partially tucked into his waistband molded to every muscle he possessed in his torso.

He paused and scraped his fingers through his hair. “I arranged to take a picnic to the Black River Trail Outfitters when I had breakfast with him,” he said. “Told Mario no one would be there to overhear our discussion.”

“I’ve got Jillian tied up in meetings with Alexandra’s public relations’ director. I told her we were going on a date, but would hook up with her later to discuss the outcome of her discussions,” she said. “We’re ironing out the details of our upcoming promotions.”

He inhaled a deep breath and his chest expanded, making him look even more delicious with his shirt’s soft fabric outlining the contours of his pectorals and ten-pack abs.

Her belly fluttered, need skittered along her nerves, and her naughty nipples tightened. Two days of sleeping in the same space with Colton, of pretending there was so much more going on between them than tucking into separate corners overnight, had definitely taken a toll on her ability to squash her desire.

“Excellent idea,” Colton said. “That’ll give her top cover. I’m glad my handler confirmed she’s not part of Mario’s plans.”

“I honestly always thought her incapable of doing anything evil. She catches and releases spiders and lizards.” Isabella put her bag on the sideboard under the flat screen television. “Too bad I was way off in my assessment of Mario’s true character.”

“Sometimes we see what we want to see even when people reveal their true nature,” Colton said. “It’s human nature to give people the benefit of the doubt when small signs turn up that make them question their viewpoints.”

“Maybe.” Isabella held Colton’s gaze. Who would have thought she’d be negotiating a drug deal with someone she once considered a friend? Even now she had difficulty wrapping her brain around the events unfolding in her life. “But I’ve seen who Mario really is, and I won’t let him fool me again. When are we heading out to your new property?”

“He’s meeting us there at noon. We should head out of here in about twenty minutes,” he said. “I told him it’s best we arrive. As far as Alexandra is concerned, you and I are going on a romantic

date.”

*If only.* “Perfect.” Isabella crossed the floor and entered the suite’s bathroom. “Maybe he’ll have good news for us.” Brushing her hair, she glanced toward Colton and saw him holster his gun.

“He’ll want to work with us,” he said grimly as he shrugged on a light denim jacket that concealed his weapon.

She gripped her hairbrush. “You sound very confident considering Mario’s reluctance.”

“I’ve got a few things in the pipeline that’ll nudge him in the right direction.”

She swallowed hard. “Fabulous,” she said, then popped her hair into a high ponytail and reapplied a light sheen of gloss onto her lips with a trembling hand. “Do you really have to bring that gun today?”

“Yes. Because every day there’s a possibility I’ll need to use it.”

Icy fingers snaked down her back. The enormity of the danger they faced pushed all the air out of her lungs. *Stay calm. He knows what he’s doing even if you don’t.* She forced herself to breathe, held the oxygen for several seconds before releasing it slowly.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He stared at her reflection in the mirror, his gray eyes holding hers. Steel glinted in their depths. Strength emanated from his powerful body. And something more, something greater than the attraction still pinging between them skirted alongside his promise.

“I believe you.”

“Good.” He held out his hand. “Ready to roll?”

She nodded, slipping her palm into his firm one. While they might be pretending to be lovers, there wasn’t anything phony about her faith in his ability to guard her. And, as they made their way to the manor house’s lobby, she didn’t want to let him go. Not when his touch, his steady presence, smoothed away the edges of her fear.

TWENTY MINUTES after picking up the picnic basket from the winery’s kitchen, Colton exited off the highway and drove his SUV onto a narrow gravel road. The ruts and larger rocks beneath his tires jerked the vehicle, making the interior rattle. Beside him, Isabella gripped the passenger side worry handle.

“I hope you didn’t pay a lot of money for this property,” she said as they rode through tall weeds overtaking the only entrance into the formerly flourishing tourist attraction.

He’d arranged the deal with his savings, figuring he might quit the DEA after he wrapped up this case. “Bank cut me a good price.” Helped that he’d known the loan officer since grade school and played high school football with the dude all the way to the state championships. He rounded a bend and the river came into view. “But it’ll take a lot more to get the company back into shape.”

He slowed as they approached a row of ramshackle buildings with broken windows and doors hanging by a thread on rusty hinges. A black Land Rover idled in front of the main building. He pulled up next to the passenger side, parked, and waited for Mario to turn off his rental before doing the same.

Mario exited his vehicle, and Colton unbuckled his seatbelt. “Wait for me to help you out,” he said, leaning over to give her the instructions while presenting the illusion of intimacy. Only the scent of her made his blood flow south. Nothing artificial about his desire. “If anything happens before I get

to you, slide over to the driver's side, get the hell out of here and contact the sheriff as soon as you're in the clear."

"But what about you?"

"Isabella. You're the only one who matters here. Do exactly what I said if anything goes wrong. Got that?"

She nodded. "I understand."

"Good."

He got out and shut the door. "You ready to do business with us?" he asked, holding Mario's gaze.

"Si." Mario tilted his head toward the SUV. "But I'm not discussing this without Isabella. After all, she's the brains behind your operation."

His gut clenched. Damn. She was more like the wrong-person/wrong-place got in the middle of a shit storm, but he couldn't deny she had savvy. "We're partners," Colton said, rounding the front of the SUV and opening her door. "There's no way either of us will decide without the other one agreeing to it."

"Everything okay?" she asked when he took her hand to help her out of the SUV.

"He's willing to negotiate," he said as they walked to Mario and faced him head-on. "But before I agree to a partnership with your friend, I expect his respect."

"*Certamente.*" She raised her chin a notch. "Colton is my partner in every way, Mario. Try to remember that when we're negotiating our deal, and after we start collaborating. He'll hook us up with dealers who can run the streets, smart ones who'll do more than low dirty trashy ones."

She sounded so sure, like the tough no-nonsense owner of a vast conglomerate of businesses and wineries who'd brokered transatlantic deals with finesse. Not one ounce of fear emanated from her despite how frightened she'd looked when he'd caught her worrying about this meeting less than an hour ago. Then she'd barely been able to take a breath.

"Isabella compromised my people's position when she learned about our plans," Mario said. "That's the only reason they're willing to bring you on board."

"You're fortunate I discovered your intentions before we moved ahead with our operation," Isabella said. "Otherwise we would have been involved in a turf war that neither one of us can afford."

Though she sounded confident, unafraid, her fingers were ice cold in Colton's. He squeezed her hand, and edged a little closer, brushing her shoulder with his. Her skin warmed beneath his touch and a blush painted pink across her cheeks.

"I've heard rumors you're having trouble getting the merchandise into the country from Mexico," Colton said. "I'm betting you need us more than we need you."

Mario bared his teeth and his nostrils flared. After a few tense beats of silence, he gestured toward the river bank and the wooden picnic tables which had turned gray and weathered by too many rough winters. "Is this where you're stashing and dealing in your drugs?" he asked, sneering.

Colton tamped down the impulse to punch the jerk to swipe the disgust from Mario's face. "All kinds of secret spots along the river," he said, pointing to the rushing water, its sparkling blue waves with tufts of white caps an idyllic contrast to the dark negotiations occurring along its shoreline. "You'd be surprised what can happen right under people's noses."

"What about the police river boat patrols?"

Colton held Mario's black eyes with his. "I know how to avoid them."

"We wouldn't have chosen this site if it didn't have potential," Isabella said.

"Exactly," Colton agreed. Potential for real tourism to flourish again, not running drugs. "Once I



have this place brought up to code, the legal company will be my front. No one will be the wiser. A bit of graffiti on the outbuildings, invisible to prying eyes from the main road will alert users and we're good to go."

Mario rubbed his chin, scrutinizing Colton with astute dark eyes before nodding. "Your rumors about my company's problems are correct," he said. "We need a new place to set up our transaction. However, this site isn't operational and our shipment is due in nine days."

"Doesn't have to be operational for me to arrange a drop at one of the river's coves," Colton said easily. "We hadn't planned to start this early, but your profits will add to ours."

"A win-win," Isabella added. "We all come out ahead."

"What will you do on your end to facilitate transportation of white junk?" Mario asked, focusing his gaze on Isabella.

Shit. Isabella didn't know crap about facilitating anything outside of her wines and subsidiary products. "I...", Colton started to speak.

Mario held up his hand. "Isabella?" he asked, still holding his gaze steadily on hers. "Are you sure you know what you're doing? Or are you being played for a fool by your business partner?"

ISABELLA CAUGHT Colton's quick glance that warned her to keep her answer short, sweet, and safe. Her back muscles tightened and pain shot through her jaw as she ground her teeth. How often had she dealt with the men in her family telling her how to behave, to wait for what was rightfully hers? Too often, which meant she'd had to fight for the vineyard her traditional grandfather had bequeathed to her brother. And Rafe had never had a passion for the vines she had flowing through her veins her entire life.

The memory of her final push to influence Rafe once and for all to give her full control over the Cavelli vineyards flashed. She hadn't gotten the go-ahead by acting like she was an empty-headed idiot. And Mario knew everything that she'd done to prepare her proposal.

She didn't dare act any differently today, not even for Colton despite his expectation for her to let him control the discussion.

Besides, he should have trusted her with any information he had about diverting the cartel's drug shipment.

What was the American saying? *Fake it till you make it*? Well, she could do that no problem after having her name and face smeared all over the Italian tabloids because of her parents' embezzlement scandal.

She held Mario's dark eyes with her own and injected a healthy dose of false bravado into her voice. "I don't give away any information until your people guarantee us a cut in the profits," Isabella said, letting go of Colton's hand. "I can assure you, however, that Colton's got a secure location for the drop. Once we receive the product, he'll distribute it via his network of connections locally and in the Washington D.C. area."

He draped his arm around her shoulders and brushed his firm lips on her cheek. "You heard the woman. So quit fucking around. Do you want our help or do you want to lose any chance of making a profit on your shipment?"

Isabella sucked in more air, held her breath and waited for Mario to respond. He put his hand inside his coat and her pulse accelerated, sending prickles through her skin.

Colton released her shoulder and moved her slightly behind him, shielding her while reaching inside his coat. “One wrong move and I can end this here, right now,” he said.

The feet of a thousand spiders crawled into the nape of her neck and into the base of her skull. “Mario. Don’t do anything rash.”

He laughed. “You’ve got nothing to worry about,” he said, then opened his coat to reveal his cell phone, which was tucked into his shirt’s pocket. “Someone is trying to contact me. The only person packing a gun here is your partner. I prefer to let other people do my dirty work for me.”

Isabella’s purse vibrated. “Same here.” She unzipped her bag and withdrew her cell phone. “It’s Jillian.”

“Si,” Mario said. “Same for me. She’d like us to have a double date at Colton’s family restaurant, Drink N Thyme, for dinner tonight.”

Her stomach dropped to her toes and she curled them in her shoes. She didn’t want Colton’s family or friends to be involved with Mario on any level. Jillian’s request had given Mario a way to connect the dots between Reagan and Colton despite their different last names. She wanted to say no, but couldn’t without raising questions.

“Excellent idea,” she said. “There’s no reason to make her wonder why we wouldn’t want to go out together since she knows nothing about our side business interests.”

Mario smiled, his white teeth gleaming like a wolf baring its fangs. “I can’t deny her anything so of course we’ll go,” he said. “I also want to get a feel for the people you’re lying to, Colton. Even your sister can’t be completely clueless.”

“She’s been too busy running the Drink N Thyme to pay attention to what I do other than ask me to run the beer taps for her when things get busy,” Colton said. “Perfect way to find out who wants to use and who doesn’t.”

“Then we should leave this quaint setting and return to Saxon Vineyards, freshen up and join each other later tonight.” Mario tilted his head toward the Land Rover he’d parked at the site an hour earlier. “I’ll instruct my staff in Belleza Resort to send over a bottle of our best Prosecco to your parents’ island cabana today to celebrate our little reunion. I’m sure you want them to have a fantastic experience while under my staff’s care. *Ciao*.” He turned on his heel and returned to his Land Rover.

Everything inside her felt like it was sliding into the ground below her feet. If anything happened to her parents, she’d never forgive herself. She waited until the dust kicking up behind Mario’s Land Rover disappeared in the distance before allowing herself to speak.

“I guess that went as well as we could have expected.”

Colton kicked a piece of gravel into the grass and weeds, then another one. “If he does anything to my sister, I’ll kill him with my bare hands. I swear it.”

She reached out, touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I feel like I put your entire family and mine in danger,” she said. “I wish this never happened.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

“We can fix this, Colton.”

“I wish to hell there was no *we* in this situation, Isabella.” Colton stopped booting the stones and stared straight ahead. “Hell, I suspected *you*. And you’re innocent. You did what you had to do to stop a monster from destroying your family.”

“I know, but I...”

He caught her in his arms and held her close, finally looking at her. The anguish in his eyes lancing her deep. “We’re in this mess because I want to catch the one who ripped mine apart,” he rasped out, his voice raw. “My sister’s a widow because of a sting going wrong three years ago. I’ve

got to stop these damn bastards.”

She didn't know what to do. What to say. She only knew she wanted to comfort him, knowing all too well the weight of responsibility she felt for her own family. “Colton,” she whispered, pressing her lips against his throat, kissing the pulse that pounded in the hollow. “You're not in this alone. You have me. We won't let anyone hurt the people we love.”

## CHAPTER 6

Isabella's warm breath, the sweet touch of her mouth against his skin, her whispered promise undid Colton, sending heat and a rush of blood through him. His ears thundered, and he couldn't hear anything but the overwhelming need coursing into every inch of his body.

He didn't think. He acted on the impulse surging between them and raced his hands down her back, anchoring her to him, his mouth seeking hers until their lips melded.

Hunger met hunger with an intensity that bordered on starvation. She wound her arms around his neck and opened herself to him, her tongue sliding against his, drawing him in deeper.

Everything blurred. Over and over, they feasted on each other, and he couldn't get enough. She tasted like heaven, like everything he'd denied himself for years. This wasn't a kiss designed to entice a false trust. This wasn't a kiss he'd perfected a detached control over for the end result. No. This was passion, real and filled with everything he'd been missing.

Trust. He'd forgotten what it was like to simply be a man with a woman with the promise of nothing more than the amazing pleasure of exploring each other—no boundaries but a million possibilities.

Christ. He didn't even know how much he'd lost of himself with each mission.

He tangled his fingers through her hair, pulled the elastic from her high ponytail and twisted the silken strands in his fingers, wanting more. More of her. More of where this could lead.

She moaned into his mouth and he sucked it in, deepening his kiss, ranging his hands over her hips and cruising them higher until they cupped her full breasts. Her nipples pebbled instantly when he grazed his fingers over them.

More heat raged through him, and his cock throbbed, aching for release and aching to plunge inside her.

He skimmed one hand down her side, tugged her shirt out of her jean waistband and reached under, returning to caress her taut points through the lacy fabric of her bra.

She gasped, and moved against his groin, driving him crazy, wild. His dick grew harder. He wanted her. Here. Now.

As if reading his mind, Isabella rubbed herself against him again as she raced her hands down his back, cupping his ass and moaning his name.

He barely heard her over the galloping heartbeat in his ears. Breaking away from her mouth, he lowered his to her beautiful breasts, the rosy nipples puckering beneath the sheer red fabric. He sucked one in while tweaking the other one.

Here in the wilderness where only wind and water and earth and tall trees could hear, she didn't

hold back her cries. Her nipples were beyond sensitive, promising another awesome response when he finally exposed her clit to his touch.

“I want you. So, fucking bad,” he rasped, lowering his hand to rub her sweet spot between her legs.

“Yes. God. Now.”

Somehow, he managed to move her against the side of the SUV to brace her against it, then unzipped her pants and pushed them over her hips, taking her red thong down with them. Stroking between her slick folds, he felt her tremor and the shudder of her instant reaction to his finger dipping into her hot, wet sex.

He flicked his thumb over her clit, and she jerked. “Don’t fight it, Isabella, let me make you come.”

“Too much. I want to...,” she gasped and twined her fingers through his hair, crushing him back into her luscious breasts. “Don’t stop. Don’t you dare stop.”

No way in hell could he stop. Not when his cock wanted out of his pants and into her. But first he wanted to see her come apart, shatter in his arms. He slipped another finger into her and drove in deep, fucking her with both while raking his thumb over her nub.

“Now. I’m—”

He nipped her tender nipples one by one, driving his fingers into her harder, faster. She clenched him, her arousal flowing, and he could feel her legs trembling as the first waves of her orgasm crashed through her.

He held her, waiting for the tremors to subside while quickly releasing his cock, ready to... crap. Condom. “I haven’t got protection,” he barely ground the words out. Usually he was as prepared as a boy scout, but hell. He’d made some dumbass decision that he’d never cave to his desire for Isabella.

“I’m on the pill,” she said, reaching for him and stroking his length. “But if you think you need one.”

“I’m clean. But I don’t have the paperwork with me.”

“Email them to me later, and I’ll do the same.” She jerked his pants and briefs down his hips. “I want you inside me.”

He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist, his cock head pushed between her hot, slick folds. Bracing her against the SUV, he plunged into her all the way to the hilt, filling her.

Her pussy walls clenched around him, and he withdrew fast, drove into her again until the aroma of her musky arousal melded with the scents of the surrounding wilderness. Christ. “You feel so fucking good, so perfect.” He drove into her again and again, and she held onto him, crying his name again as she shattered around him again, her orgasm’s juices pulsing around him, milking his cock.

His balls contracted and blood engorged his dick, making it impossible to hold back. He thrust into her one last time and his release shuddered through him, pulsing so hard, he thought might just die until everything inside him exploded and pulsated into her.

*Mine. She’s mine now.* The insane thought pinged into his brain and suddenly the heat of the taking cooled. A warning clanged. Danger. “Man. Isabella,” he rasped, breaking their connection and easing her to the ground. “That was...” Wrong. But it had been right, so right too.

“Surprising. Incredible,” she said, holding his gaze.

What in the hell had he just done? Oh, yeah, fucked someone he was supposed to keep from harm, not someone to get close to and believe she could ever be his. “Yes, but...”

She flinched, shook her head as if to clear it. Without speaking, she knelt to grab her discarded jeans, pulled them on, and turned to face him. “This was bound to happen, eventually. I just didn’t

expect it to happen here. Certainly not so fast, or so wild,” she said. “But I’m not sorry we did. Are you?”

No. Yes. And everything in between. Colton scraped his fingers through his hair. He didn’t want to upset Isabella. Hell, he liked her.

But emotions clouded missions. Emotions led to mistakes. And continuing to act on the need, the desire between them could only lead to more of the same. “No regrets,” he said carefully, feeling more naked on the inside than standing bare assed in front of her. “But I won’t let this happen again. It’ll only make things more complicated.”

But now that he’d had her, he didn’t know if he could stop himself.

THOUGH THE SUN beat down and the spring air carried a warm breeze, frost flowed through Isabella’s blood. How dare Colton make what they’d done sound so... so unwanted by him? “You won’t *let* this happen again?” she asked.

Oh, she wanted to hit something, anything. Him. Instead, she crossed her arms, looked down her nose at the jeans that puddled around his ankles, then back at him and used another weapon in her arsenal. Her disdain. Because no way would she let him know he’d wounded her. “I didn’t force you to have sex with me out here in the middle of nowhere. It’s not like I deliberately tried to seduce you. *We* did this, you arrogant jerk. But whatever. I can live without doing this again.”

A muscle worked in his handsome jaw. The one she still wanted to slap, and kiss, and damn... She raised her chin and squared her shoulders. “I’ll wait for you in the SUV while you get dressed.” Isabella walked away from him, circling the front hood and entered the sunbaked interior without giving him another chance to say anything else ridiculous.

He’d wanted her. She wanted him. Period.

And she’d never had such spectacular sex. Ever. He could lie to himself all he wanted, but she knew the truth. They hadn’t had just ordinary, get-it-out-our-system sex.

They’d had an explosive, out-of-this-world, physical connection born out of shared needs that had more to do with what they wanted to give each other than what they wanted to take.

“Isabella, I’m sorry,” Colton said when he got into the SUV. “Any other time—if we’d met under different circumstances.”

She stared through the windshield, unseeing. “Do me a favor,” she said through numb lips. “Leave your explanations and excuses out of the equation. I deserve better than that and you know it.” She’d heard enough excuses during her parents’ embezzlement scandal when it became public along with dealing with their tumultuous relationship. One of them had always tried to make her choose sides. To pick the better parent. Because the other one was always the worst one. She’d forgiven them long ago for the pain they’d caused, but the wounds they’d inflicted never totally healed.

She heard him swallow hard before he started the engine. “Fair enough,” he said gently. “You’re right. You do deserve better.”

A stinging sensation bit behind her eyes, and a terrible lump lodged in her throat. First her parents used her love for them to get back at each other. Later, boyfriends used her to get close to her for her connections. And that guy in university. She’d loved him. Trusted him. And he’d nearly destroyed her hard-won reputation with his foolish actions the night of the raid.

When would someone just accept her, love her without false promises and without making their

inability to do so her fault somehow? When would someone actually admit he cared even just a little without hiding behind *it's complicated*?

"Thank you," she said after she tamped down the urge to force the issue.

They returned to the winery in silence and went their separate ways for the rest of the afternoon. She soaked in a hot bath, washed the scent of him from her skin, tried to wash the rest of him away—the heat, intensity of his touch, his hungry kisses, his powerful possession—and failed.

Even worse, she couldn't avoid him forever. She had to go out with him, pretend they were lovers which should have been easy enough given what had happened beside the river. But it was torture to sit next to him in a small booth for over an hour. She hated having to act coy with his sister while she made jokes about Colton and his gorgeous Italian girlfriend. And she nearly jumped out of her skin whenever he touched her, draped his arm around her casually like he gave a real damn about her.

Like tonight. He toyed with her fingers, playing with them while Mario and Jillian talked animatedly about the foreclosed hotel and land they'd gone to that afternoon.

"Sounds like an excellent location for your expansion into the United States," Colton said.

Mario brought Jillian's hand to his lips and kissed it. "Couldn't have found it without your help. She's been invaluable to me," he said. "You sure you won't let me steal her from your company?"

Isabella smiled, her jaw tight. "Absolutely sure," she said. "She's too valuable to me to lose her."

"Thanks," Jillian said warmly. "I love what I do. Plus, I make it a policy never to sleep with my colleagues, especially not my employers." Her eyes sparkled and the extra glass of wine she'd indulged in brought a rosy hue to her cheeks.

"That's good thinking," Colton said. "Keeps things simple."

He traced lazy circles on Isabella's bare forearm, igniting tingles she didn't want to feel. Electricity crackled through her, sparking delicious sensations in her nipples and between her legs. Oh, how she really didn't want to feel any of these reactions, but she did.

Forcing another fake smile, Isabella concurred. "And far less complicated." She emphasized the last word, then pretended to stifle a yawn though her senses were on hyper-alert. "Sorry. I've had a long afternoon. And I have a feeling I won't get much sleep tonight."

Jillian laughed. "Me either," she said. "We should get going. I've got a lot of ground to cover with Alexandra's PR person tomorrow."

They settled their check, then left the restaurant while Colton went to the kitchen to say goodbye to his sister. By the time Isabella stepped outside of Drink N Thyme with him, her nerves twisted into a million knots.

"I hope I can keep Jillian free and clear of Mario until this ends."

"Except for their nights together, you've done a great job," Colton said.

"Thanks, but why do I feel so guilty?"

"I hate to say it, but this shit is part of the job."

Colton tried to take her hand, but she waved him off. "We don't have to pretend anything now."

"Anyone could be watching," he said, tilting his head toward Drink N Thyme. "My sister's a snoop."

She glanced toward the restaurant, noted the warmth of the low-lit interior and the owner milling close to a table next to one of the windows that faced the street. "She's a wonderful person who loves her brother." And who didn't know how much Colton had sacrificed to watch over his sister... his hometown... and Isabella?

"Exactly. And she wants me to be happy." He closed the scant distance between them, clasped her hand and lowered his forehead to hers. "You're part of that equation. Not to mention she's got to

believe what we've got going on is the real deal or no one will."

His warm palm, the steady grip, and the liquid silver in his darkening gaze sent a blaze of heat through her. "I know," she said, unable to resist moving even closer to him. "But you're not being completely honest with me about what's real and what's a sham when it comes to us. You're using your duty to keep me at a distance." She could accept his commitment not to compromise the mission by becoming involved with her, but damn it, she wanted him to admit the truth. That what had just happened between them that afternoon wasn't just a crazy sexual release. No. It was born out of a need burning in them to connect at every level.

In that one unguarded moment, when he'd lowered his defenses to reveal the pain in his heart, she'd given herself to the man behind the protector.

COLTON'S HEART squeezed and the air in his lungs seemed to evaporate, making it hard to breathe. Damn. He'd worried about the marks on her back after they'd had sex, but they paled compared to the bruises floating in her eyes.

"We got lost in the moment," he said gently while stepping back to create some distance before he acted on the urge to kiss her again. "But yeah. I wanted to be with you before this crazy situation forced us together." Not that it would have led to anything beyond amazing sex and a few laughs. After all, Isabella belonged in Italy.

And he belonged here. In Magnolia Falls. More now than ever before. To reconnect with the natural wonder and glory and bust his tail to keep the rolling mountains, rivers and lakes safe havens.

She walked beside him toward his SUV. "You wanted me... that's all you have to say about what happened this afternoon?" she asked when he opened the door to let her in.

"Isabella, you're a smart, gorgeous woman," he said. "Of course, I was attracted to you. Every straight guy at that gala wanted you."

"But you thought I was a criminal."

"Not for long," he said, still feeling like a total shithead about his suspicion. "But I'm certain I'm not the kind of guy you usually date. You would never have done a thing with me if we weren't thrown together."

"You have no clue about what I'd do or who I'd do it with," she said, then jerked the seatbelt down and buckled it. "Every man in that ballroom might have wanted me, but they didn't catch my attention. You did."

Something shifted behind his sternum, leaving behind a pang he couldn't explain. But for how long? He didn't voice the question. "Good to know," he said. "But it wouldn't have gone anywhere. And it's not an option." But damn it all to hell and back again, he couldn't deny how much he still wanted to be with Isabella.

When he got into the driver's seat, he glanced at her, noted her raised chin, her razor thin lips and the white line encircling them. Anger replaced the pain. Probably better that way. Would make it easier to keep their hands off each other.

"Now that we've got everything straight between us, we can focus on bringing down Mario's cartel." He started the SUV's engine. Once they cut off the head, the crime syndicate's minions would scatter.

Only to find new assholes to round up and send them out to deal drugs all over again.



“Yes. Perfectly straight,” she said. “What do we do next?”

He backed out and began driving, turning onto the highway leading to his house a few miles away.

“Stopping by my place to get the heroin delivery on track,” he said. “Won’t take long.”

“Do I really need to be with you for this?”

“Yes,” he said. “No way I’ll leave you alone until this is over.”

She crossed her arms and huffed out a breath. Ignoring her frustration, he drove the rest of the way in silence while mentally running different outcome scenarios and solutions.

By the time they arrived at his home, he’d ruled out the most dangerous locations for the delivery and settled on a cove only a handful of people knew about.

“This is nice,” she said when he let her inside the open foyer.

“You sound surprised.”

“I just didn’t expect it to be so normal.” She moved into his great room to stand next to his natural stone fireplace and peered at the row of framed pictures on the mantle. “How much does your family know about what you do?”

“They know I have a high-level government job that’s demanding and believe that I want out.” But he’d miss the rush of bringing down the criminals. And the satisfaction of stopping their brand of hell. Could he quit? Even now, he remained confused about his future. He avoided her, heading for his kitchen. “You want something to drink? Wine? Soda?”

“I would love a glass of wine. Still feel jittery about everything we’re doing.”

“Red or white?” he asked, opening up a cabinet to withdraw a glass.

“Red.”

“Red it is.” He pulled a bottle from the built-in rack and opened it, then poured her a glass. After grabbing a bottle of beer out of his fridge, he carried both to where she stood. “Here.”

She took the glass, careful to avoid touching him, and sipped. “One of Alexandra’s,” she said. “Excellent year.”

“Yeah. She’s got excellent wine.”

“Her vineyard’s been established since the American revolution.” Isabella slanted her gaze over to the photos on the mantle again. “Was that one taken when you were in high school?”

Fuck. He didn’t want to make small talk. Not with Isabella. Hell, he’d never brought a woman to this place other than his friends and family. Just his luck he’d bring the only one he couldn’t have when he wanted her with an intensity he couldn’t shake.

“Just after we graduated,” he said, taking the photo off the mantle. Seeing his best friend Scott, so full of life, with his arm draped around Reagan’s slim shoulders brought a lump into his throat. He swallowed hard. “Those were the days. We thought we could have it all.”

“And now?”

He put the picture back. “Now we know there’s no such thing as having it all so you better be damn sure you appreciate what you have and take fucking good care of it while you have it.”

The air crackled between them. Heat radiated throughout his chest, rushed low. He wanted to lose himself in her, forget everything all over again. Too bad he’d done exactly the opposite. The irony didn’t escape him. He slugged back half the contents of his beer to bring his internal boiling point down to a simmer.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said when the fire in his veins evaporated. “Might take me a while to arrange everything with my handler.” Might take him even longer to rearrange his caveman thoughts about taking her again when he knew damn well he had nothing to offer her when he had no fucking idea what the hell he wanted to do in the future.

## CHAPTER 7

Two days later, Isabella finished her paperwork for the next Global Winery Consortium's marketing campaign, saved it in her computer files, then sent a copy to Jillian and one to her personal assistant in Italy.

Normal. Safe. Ordinary. Everyday routine. She glanced at Colton who sat across from her, looking at his laptop screen with a scowl on his face.

"Everything okay?"

"Just a hiccup in the delivery," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm fixing the problem right now."

In other words, don't bug him while he worked.

She suppressed a sigh. "Sure thing," she said, pushing away from the desk that separated them, then standing. "I'll just check my text messages while you get things under control." Her luxurious suite at the winery's manor house seemed to close in on her.

"Go for it," he said without looking at her, his fingers hitting the keyboard hard.

Colton stuck to her day and night, but unless they were in the presence of others while acting like lovers, he'd kept his distance from her. She had a difficult time reconciling the passion that flared between them only days ago with the extreme freeze in his demeanor toward her.

If she still didn't carry the fading marks from their explosive encounter, she'd almost believe it had never happened.

She pulled her phone out of her purse, turned off the Do Not Disturb feature and read the incoming texts while pacing across the suite's hardwood floors.

Her brother sent one with an ultrasound picture attached. *It's a girl* was written in pink at the bottom. A lump lodged in her throat. At least one of them had found someone to love. Quickly, she texted her congratulations, then she read several business-related messages with Colton's rejection clanging a constant, annoying background noise.

A headache threatened. Rubbing her temples, she continued reading until an urgent one from Jillian had her heart racing. "Colton." She moved to his side and thrust her phone in front of his face. "She's upset. Wants to meet for lunch and talk about Mario."

His back stiffened. "Ask her what it's about."

She replied and within seconds she read Jillian's. "She doesn't want to go into the details in writing." Her heart seemed to want to burst out of her chest. Her friend was completely innocent. But now, Isabella feared for her safety.

"Call her. Could be Mario screwing around with us."

Isabella nodded and complied. "What's so awful that you can't talk to me?" she asked.

"I need face-to-face time. You know how it is with men," Jillian replied.

She sounded tense, and spoke in low, clipped tones. "Fine, I'll meet you right away," Isabella said. "Take care."

"I will," Jillian said, then ended the call.

Isabella clutched her cell phone. "Either she's discovered something, or she's got problems with Mario that have nothing to do with his sideline. I have to meet her to find out what's wrong."

"Alone? No way."

"We'll be in public," she said. "It might have nothing to do with the drug deal. And there's no way she'll buy into you joining us. Women just don't want other women's guys around when they're talking about their relationship problems. You should know that. You have a sister for crying out loud."

He pursed his lips and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're right, damn it, but do nothing without clearing it with me. And tell her you'll meet at the winery's restaurant. That way I can get to you if you need me."

With trembling thumbs, she texted Jillian. "Okay, she's cool with meeting downstairs before the crowds pile in for afternoon tastings."

A knock sounded. "Hold on," Colton said, standing then concealing his weapon before answering the door.

Mario stepped inside. "We need to talk about the logistics for the drop next week," he said without preamble.

Isabella's heart sank to her toes. She couldn't meet Jillian without tipping Mario off that something might be wrong. "Sure," she said, pretending a nonchalance she didn't feel one bit. "Sit down, both of you. I've got to wrap up a winery issue before we discuss yours."

He and Colton claimed the two chairs opposite the small couch in the suite while she reluctantly rescheduled her meeting with Jillian for later that day. When she finished, she sat on the sofa ready to pretend she knew all the ins and outs of running a heroin drug deal.

An hour into the conversation, which Colton subtly controlled, her phone chirped. "Excuse me," she said. "This could be important."

"More important than making millions?" Mario asked.

"Perhaps." She shielded the screen from his view, then read the text Jillian sent. "Looks like Jillian's heading back to D.C. to take care of a promotion for our consortium at one of my winery's local suppliers just outside of Fairfax." Why now? After she'd begged Isabella to meet her. Something didn't feel right and fear slithered into her belly.

"Si," Mario said smoothly. "She told me this morning she had a pressing situation that couldn't wait for her to finish up here."

The muscles at the base of her neck loosened, and the pain pulsing in her temples subsided. "I'm just sad I didn't get to say goodbye." She sank into the couch's back cushions, relieved that Jillian would be over a hundred miles away from Magnolia Falls before things escalated. "I hope you're not upset that she's leaving."

"I'll miss her. She's been invaluable to me in my pursuit of a location for my next resort hotel," he said, adjusting his gold cufflink. "But she's her own woman and our relationship works because we allow each other to pursue our business and lives without asking questions. Or making demands. We've already arranged to meet in D.C. before I return to Italy."

"Excellent," she said, standing. "Do you have anything more to discuss, or are you satisfied with our plans?" They'd hashed out the details of the drug drop along with the payment via the dark web in cryptocurrency. His primary contact would be there to finalize their agreement in person.

"Only the coordinates for the drop location," Mario said.

“You’ll get them the day before the delivery date.” Colton leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. “The information isn’t necessary until then.”

“My boss might not see it that way.”

“Doesn’t matter what your boss thinks. Someone in your organization compromised your original deliver location, No way I’m risking another security breach,” Colton said, his tone brooking no argument.

“You give me no choice.” He cracked his knuckles, then pushed out of the chair. “However, we are plugging the leak. Once we have disposed of the problem, we’ll expect full disclosure from the onset of our next transaction.”

“We’ll discuss our mutual expectations for the future after we successfully execute this deal,” Colton said without moving a muscle.

Mario’s face darkened, then he gave a quick nod. “I’ll relay your message to my superior,” he said, stepping toward the door.

On instinct, Isabella moved to let him out of the suite, but stopped short when Mario held up his hand. “I’ll see myself out,” he said. “We’ll talk again when it’s necessary. And it might be sooner than you think. I’ll be sure to tell my resort staff to keep an extra eye out on your parents now that they’re back on the mainland. Wouldn’t want to lose them. *Ciao*.” He exited, shutting the door behind him with a soft tug.

Ice crept along her spine, chilling her to the bone. The veiled threat in his voice made her fear for her parents even more. She couldn’t let him discover her subterfuge. “What does he mean, *sooner than you think*?” she asked, staring at the closed door and hugging her waist.

“He’s playing with us, trying to assert himself.”

“Because you antagonized him,” she said, turning around slowly to lock her eyes onto Colton’s. “Why? When there’s so much at stake?”

“Because this is part of the game,” he said, standing. “The only way to gain his respect is to force him to bend to our will, not his.”

“But what if he doesn’t want to bend?” she asked, fire sparking along her nerves and blasting away the cold in her veins with white hot anger. “Are you really willing to take chances with other people’s lives? Your sister? Your friends? My family?”

He crossed the floor and pulled her into him. “Isabella, you have to trust me,” he said, wrapping his arms around her

“I want to trust you but....” She’d heard those words before from her parents, her grandfather, her last boyfriend and they’d failed her. In the end, she’d only been able to truly rely on herself.

“Isabella,” he said, tightening his hold on her, “Trust me, please. I know what I’m doing. I know the game. And I play to win.”

The scent of him, the feel of his arms around her, the closeness she’d yearned for him to give again nearly undid her. She wanted to sink into the caress, draw strength from him, but Isabella had learned long ago that her strength lay within herself.

She put her hand on his chest, looked into his gorgeous gray eyes. “I don’t like playing dangerous games,” she said. “But it’s too late for me to back out. However, it isn’t too late for me to stop you from taking this discussion into a territory we’ve already made the mistake of visiting. You’ve made it clear a few days ago that’s a decision I’ll regret.”

He released her. “Point taken.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” She returned to her side of the desk, determined to pretend that the riot of need swirling through her didn’t exist. Because if she

didn't, she'd end up losing more than she'd bargained on when she'd agreed to their bogus relationship.

*And, like Colton, I also play to win.*

"I'M MEETING with Alexandra and the vintner in an hour," Isabella said, exiting the bathroom and strolling into the suite's living area the following morning. "When I'm finished with them, I've got to go over my real shipments with my staff in D.C."

Colton stopped reading the encrypted file on his laptop, then looked her way. "Sounds good to me," he said, raking his gaze from the top of her high ponytail all the way down to her light blue sneakers and back up again.

She'd dressed simply, choosing figure hugging jeans and a white button-down shirt she'd tucked into the waistband. Man. When he'd first met her, she'd been wearing a sophisticated dress that screamed sexy. But he preferred her like this—wholesome and fresh and approachable.

She flushed beneath his gaze, and her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink before she masked her reaction with one of those down-her-nose glances that she'd probably perfected while attending some fancy boarding school. "We're having lunch on the terrace later," she said, injecting more frost into her voice. "Do you want to join me and Alexandra?"

Yes, but not with the Ice Queen he'd brought out in her. But he had no one to blame but himself for her attitude. "You'll be in fine," he said. "I've got someone tailing Mario. He's in Charlottesville for the day pretending to give a shit about American history." The man had ostensibly gone to historic Monticello for a tour, but Colton put his money on the jerk scoping out other potential markets for his associates.

"*Eccellente*." She grabbed her cross-body purse and draped it over her body. "A day without putting on a lovey-dovey act for your friends is exactly what I need."

The purse's strap cut across her torso, bringing his gaze to her breasts and then lower to where it rested at her side by her full hip. Colton's blood rushed hot and his pants felt uncomfortably tight. Damn. When he'd set up his makeshift pallet on the floor the night before, he'd told himself he'd done the right thing by pushing her away.

But he'd spent half the night tossing and turning with images of Isabella flashing in his brain, self-retributions warring with the never-ending impulse to kick his idiotic sense of duty to the proverbial curb. And join her in that great big bed to get close to her again.

Nothing phony about the hard-on he had going on pretty much perpetually whenever she was within reach.

"We could both use a break." He pushed away from the desk, stood and crossed the room to grab a soda from the in-room fridge. "Check in with me while you're gone just to be on the safe side. And for God's sake, keep the Do Not Disturb function turned off." While he admired her discipline of not letting a small screen dictate her day, preferring to control when she communicated with her staff and family, he didn't need her incommunicado.

"Shoot. I almost forgot." She pulled her phone from her back pocket, then tapped her screen. "*Dio*. No. This isn't like her. Not one bit." Isabella's voice shook, she pressed her fist to her mouth, and the color leached from her cheeks, turning them ashen.

He was beside her in an instant. "What's wrong?"

“Jillian never showed up at the supplier’s warehouse. Or at the office this morning,” she said, showing Colton the screen. “Jillian’s never like this. If she has a hangnail that’ll make her late, she checks in. She’s a stickler for keeping people in the loop.” She grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into his skin.

“Don’t panic.” At least, not yet. He guided her to the couch. “Sit. I’ll get you some water.”

“I don’t want to sit and I sure as hell don’t want water,” she said through trembling lips. “I want to know why Jillian disappeared. Because she didn’t just fall off the grid without someone shoving her.”

He heard the rising hysteria in her voice. The tendons stood out in her neck and her pulse pumped hard at the base. Not good. He couldn’t have her going off the deep end. “I understand,” he said calmly. “I want to find her too. But I can’t if you don’t let me do my job. So, sit. Please. I’ll make some calls.”

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut, sinking to the sofa’s cushions and clasping her head in her hands. “I wish I’d never come here. I wish I’d never walked into that stupid library and overheard Mario. If something’s happened to her... This is all my fault.”

“No—you can’t blame yourself for circumstances beyond your control,” he said, kneeling in front of her, then placing his hands over hers and stilling her movements. “We don’t know what’s happened. Until we do, we have to maintain our composure and do our best not to set off alarm bells if they aren’t necessary.”

“You mean we need to be careful not to tip off Mario.”

Her words rang true, bringing a sick feeling in his gut. A sure sign something was off about Jillian’s disappearance. Still, he couldn’t search for her or he could lose out on discovering the person behind the fucking cartel he’d spent three years trying to bring down.

He wouldn’t lie to Isabella. “Agreed,” he said. “The wheels are in motion and we’ve got to navigate with extreme caution or more people could be hurt. The very people you wanted to protect when you lied to Mario last Saturday. You did that for all the right reasons, so let me keep doing what we need to do to make sure we get the end result we’ve been working for—without endangering more lives.”

Her shoulders shook, but then she took a deep breath and as it shuddered through her body, she raised her head from her hands and looked at Colton. “You’re right,” she said, her eyes gleaming bright with unshed tears. “But I hate that you are.”

“The good news is there’s no waiting period for searching for missing people.” Colton gave her shoulders an encouraging squeeze while every cell in his own body fired adrenaline. No point in admitting his worst fears. He’d been wrong before. “I’ll call in a few favors, get the sheriff to check the routes with a few of his deputies. We will find her. Okay?”

“Okay, but I don’t think I can face Alexandra and the vintner now that I’ve got this hanging over my head.”

“Reschedule. Tell her you’re sick.”

“Sick of this nightmare.”

“You and me both,” he admitted, caressing her cheeks, sliding his thumbs over them. “But it’ll be over in a week, then you can move on.” And he would too.

Resisting the urge to kiss away the starkness in her brown eyes, and erasing the bleakness in his head, Colton stood. “I’ll get you that water,” he said. “Then I’ll make those calls.” He walked away, telling himself he had to avoid confusing either of them again.

But hell. Sometimes doing the right thing felt really fucking wrong.

## CHAPTER 8

“Are you sure it’s her?” Isabella whispered, her throat scraped raw.

“We will be once you identify the body,” the medical examiner said. “But according to the sheriff, the make and model of the car match the description Colton gave me yesterday so I’m fairly certain it’s your friend.”

Acid churned in her throat and she tasted bile. Pressing her palm against her chest, she asked, “Do you have any idea how this happened?” The bright overhead lights glared like angry eyeballs, making her own blaze hot with unspoken guilt. She might not know the cause of the accident that took her friend’s life, but she damn well knew who was behind it even without one shred of evidence to point his way.

Mario Rossi could act anguished all he wanted—and he sure gave a spectacular performance when Colton broke the news to him earlier that day—but she didn’t believe him. Not when he’d successfully hidden his real personality from her for years.

“Based on the sheriff’s investigation, she lost control of her vehicle about twenty miles north of Magnolia Falls and careened off Riverbend Pass. No skid marks. Just sailed off the damn mountain without braking.”

“I know that. He told me, but why? Why didn’t she try to stop the car? So far they’ve found nothing wrong with it.”

“Not yet, but perhaps my autopsy will point them in the right direction.”

“Sheriff Fuller told us she probably fell asleep at the wheel,” Colton said as they walked towards the medical examiner’s autopsy room.

Isabella swallowed hard when they reached the door. “I want answers,” she said. “There’s no way Jillian would fall asleep. There has to be a reason.” The hallway felt like the inside of a freezer, and the double doors’ steel handles reminded her of prison cell bars. The ones that had separated her from her parents for ten years before they’d gotten released from jail.

“Ms. Cavelli, she’s in rough shape,” the medical examiner said gently. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

No. The last dead person she’d seen was her *Nonno* and that had been in an open casket. She didn’t like saying goodbye to the shell of who he’d once been, but at least her grandfather hadn’t been in a cold, sterile hospital morgue.

“I want to,” she said firmly. After all, Jillian was probably dead because of Isabella. “I need to...” If she couldn’t stop her friend from getting killed, at least she could honor her memory in this small way.

“Colton, the car was mangled beyond recognition,” the medical examiner said.

Which meant the woman lying under the sheet on the autopsy table wouldn't be easily recognizable. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the thought. *Be strong for her. You owe her that much.* She twisted her purse strap and inhaled a deep breath, the aromas of antiseptic, bleach, and blood. *Dio.* She gagged and brought her hand to her mouth.

"Isabella," Colton whispered, caressing her shoulder. "You can't do this."

"I have to."

"No, I do," he said firmly. "You don't want to remember Jillian this way."

The medical examiner nodded. "He's right," he said. "You wait out here, and we'll get this over with as soon as possible." He gestured to a row of metal chairs lining the wall next to the doors.

"I..." She didn't know how to articulate her grief or guilt without exposing their mission. And that was the most difficult part about the situation. She couldn't be honest, and she'd spent her entire life trying to shed the image her parents had fostered by being the exact opposite of them: genuine and trustworthy. A woman who treated people fairly.

"Could you give us a minute?" Colton asked the Medical Examiner.

"Sure thing. Just come on in when you're ready."

He left them standing in the hallway and Colton turned her around to face him. "You're not going in there out of some misguided sense of duty."

She bristled. "You're a fine one to talk about misguided duty," she said.

"I know you're angry at me and you have every right. After this is over, I give you permission to punch my lights out if it'll help, but there's no way I'm letting you go in there."

"You can't stop me." But honestly? She wanted him to try.

"I'm an agent with the DEA. While I don't relish identifying her body, I know I can handle the aftermath. You can't," he said, holding her gaze.

"I should have warned her about Mario but you wouldn't let me."

"I'm sorry." He took her hands in his. "More than you can possibly know. But I'd rather you blame me than yourself for Jillian's death. If you really believe you have to see her one last time, then you won't be going in there alone. I won't stop you, but that doesn't mean you can stop me from being beside you when the medical examiner lifts that sheet to show you who is underneath. Or you can give me a small way to make up for my role in her death. And let me do this for you because I care about how making the identification will impact you."

"Is that the only thing you care about?" she asked, reading the plea in his gray eyes and struggling to understand the undercurrents in their depths. "Protecting me from myself?"

"I care," he said. "I've tried to distance myself from you, but it's impossible. I like you. A lot. And as shitty as I feel about not warning Jillian about Mario, I feel a hell of a lot worse about denying how much I want to be with you. Don't make the same mistakes I've made. Don't go in there out of a misguided sense of duty. After I do, I want to make up for being a jackass about what happened between us last week. What do you say, Isabella? Will you give me a second chance to get this right with you?"

ISABELLA'S HANDS trembled in his, and Colton squeezed them. Had he really fucked up so badly that he'd pushed her away for good? "Well?" he asked. "What do you say?"

"You said we acted in the moment, that what happened was just an aftereffect, an adrenaline



rush,” she said, then worried her lower lip.

“I lied.”

She looked at their linked hands, then back in his eyes. “Don’t do that again,” she said. “Promise? No matter what happens, I need your word that you’ll be honest with me from now on.”

“I promise,” he said, meaning it. “You still want to go in there?” Colton indicated the morgue.

She shuddered. “No. You’re right. I don’t want to remember her this way. Just please make it fast. I hate this place.”

“I will.”

He guided her to the chairs and she sank into one. Then he went inside the room and confirmed Jillian’s identity, though the accident had made it almost impossible to see the lively, laughing woman he’d met only days earlier.

Afterward, he quickly joined Isabella. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

“Yes. I don’t think I can stand another minute in this place,” she said, then stood and walked beside him to the exit. “Mario called me while you were in the morgue.”

The hairs on the back of Colton’s neck raised and a prickling sensation skimmed beneath the surface of his skin. Mario had claimed that Jillian had no connection to his illegal business interests. Colton had confirmed the information. Jillian didn’t know the truth about Mario’s background, but the chances of the two meeting were slim to none unless Mario had engineered the entire scenario.

But why? Colton glanced at Isabella as they walked across the parking lot toward his SUV. “What did he want?”

“He offered to identify Jillian’s body.” She stopped beside the passenger door. “I told him you had that covered. He got really choked up—he even cried.”

“You swallow his bullshit?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore,” she said. “Maybe he did love her.”

“He loved having an insider in your organization even if she didn’t realize he was using her,” Colton said. “Bastard probably wanted to make sure she was dead before she told you whatever she’d found out about him.”

Her eyes widened. “But that’s insane.”

“I know, but there’s a link.” He had some of the puzzle pieces, but not enough to put the picture together. Not yet. “None of this makes sense, but it will.”

Colton shut her door, circled the SUV, then climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. As he pulled out of the parking space and made his way to Main Street, she put her hand on his thigh and cleared her throat.

His cock got a little too happy at her touch. “What?” he asked, shooting her a sidelong glance before focusing on the road ahead.

“I don’t know how I’ll tell her parents,” she said, her voice wavering. “Or what I can tell them. I hate lying.”

“You won’t be alone in delivering the news,” he said. “I’ve had to knock on doors to deliver this kind of devastation to families. Never easy. But then there’s never an easy way to tell someone they’ve lost a loved one regardless of the hows and whys for the death.”

He continued driving down Main Street with its colorful storefront awnings, sidewalk chalkboards inviting people to step inside the shops, decorative pots filled with spring pansies winking at the world around them, and the decades’ old Magnolia trees ready to bloom.

The sight usually brought a warm feeling to his chest. But today, a heavy weight pressed down on his lungs.

“I can’t imagine how difficult your job is,” she said. “But thank you for offering your support. It means a lot to me.”

He turned onto the street that led to his home. “But we’re missing something important. Something I think Jillian wanted to tell you. Now she’s dead.”

“And I rescheduled the meeting to keep up our charade with Mario,” she said. “The same day. She needed me and I abandoned her. I’m responsible.”

“You’re not guilty of anything other than knowing Mario.” He took one hand off the steering wheel and covered hers, which still rested on his leg. “After we get back to my place, we need to go over what happened when you were a kid.”

“Okay, but I hate talking about those days.” Isabella’s fingers dug into his pants. “Even now the memories make me want to crawl into a hole and hide.”

He pulled into his driveway and parked in his garage. “I’ve read the details about the scandal.” And he’d seen her frightened face in the tabloid pictures.

The press had hounded Isabella and her brother along with Mario, who’d been an only child. “My parents went to jail, but they got paroled early because of good behavior,” she said, removing her hand from beneath his. “Now they’re involved in various philanthropic organizations, including the International Miracle Network. They’ve raised thousands of dollars for multiple charities.”

The two-car garage seemed to shrink around them, the walls closing in. “Your parents redeemed themselves,” he said, his stomach tightening. “What about Mario’s?”

“They served their time, then got out and tried to reboot their modeling agency.”

“Tried—that means they didn’t succeed,” he said carefully while opening his door. “That’s where we start.”

She climbed out of her side and they went inside. “Can we start later?” she asked when they reached his kitchen. “I’m exhausted.”

“Hell of a day.”

“More like a hell of a week.” She sagged against the counter next to the fridge. “I just want this to be over.”

Shadows darkened the skin beneath her eyes, and she’d worried most of her lipstick off her full lips. The knot in his gut grew tighter and he scrubbed his hand over his face. God. He could be such an ass. How could he force her to relive one of the worst times in her life when she’d just gone through something even more brutal? “Come here,” he said, closing the distance between them to wrap his arms around her. “We’re not doing a damn thing until we both get a chance to recharge. This shit can wait until tomorrow.” And tonight he’d make up for being a total jerk.

His shirt grew damp where she rested her head. “I don’t know how you do this all the time,” she said. “I feel so helpless. So powerless. I haven’t felt like this since…” She didn’t finish, sobbing instead.

“That’s it babe. Let it all out,” he said, drawing her even closer wanting only to comfort her.

A shudder traveled across her shoulders and she looked at him, tears streaming down her pale cheeks. “I want to forget,” she whispered. “Help me forget everything, Colton.”

He shouldn’t. But he couldn’t stop himself from giving her what they both needed. “We’ll help each other,” he said hoarsely, then anchored her head, lowered his mouth to hers, tasting salt, sadness, and something seductively sweet. So sweet he didn’t think he’d ever get over her intoxicating flavor.

## CHAPTER 9

Colton's mouth on hers sliced through the anguish, and Isabella opened herself to him, clinging to him as if he were a lifeline. For now, she didn't want to feel anything but his lips moving across hers. She didn't want to know anything but his tongue sliding against hers. Oh, how she loved the sweet sensation of his hands gliding down and up her body, caressing her and bringing her into his.

Over and over their tongues tangled, he deepened his kiss and matched her hunger with his own. Fire replaced ice that had been flowing through her veins. She twined her fingers in his hair, wanting more. More of him. More of everything he had to offer.

He stroked his broad hands over her waist, her hips and then lifted her. She could feel his erection at the apex of her thighs and liquid heat dampened her panties instantly. She thought he'd give her a repeat performance of their first explosive encounter. And that would be fine with her... more than fine... because she'd yearned for a repeat.

But Colton wrenched his mouth from hers. "Not here. Not this time," he rasped.

"So, there will be a time we do the deed in your kitchen?" she asked breathlessly.

His gray eyes darkened, and the pewter lining his irises went black. "I've got a lot of rooms. We can christen them all, but right now I want you in my bed," he said, moving them away from the counters. "Where I can do everything I've fantasized about doing with you—no way am I rushing what I've got in mind. Not this time." He crossed the hardwood floors and stepped into a room next to the living area.

He lowered her to the floor, sliding her down the length of his body until her feet touched the surface. She could feel every hard ridge of his muscles and the bulge of his erection along the way. Slowly, he tugged her shirt free from her jeans and she followed his lead, the desire building inside her with a fierceness she'd never known.

She trusted him to guard more than her life.

Without words, they finished undressing each other until they stood naked, entwined in a soul searing kiss as the late afternoon sunlight illuminated the room. Slowly, they made their way together to the king-sized bed, unwilling to break their connection, unwilling to part until each had drawn in their fill. Breath-to-breath, sigh-to-sigh, heart-to-beating-heart they lowered themselves onto the downy comforter.

Isabella roamed her hands down Colton's back, gliding her palms and fingers over his smooth skin. An exquisite ache tugged at her sex when his muscles corded beneath her light touch. And liquid heat pooled low when he mirrored her movements.

She wanted, yearned, craved him. On her, with her, inside her...

He rolled on top of her, deepening his kiss, his tongue sliding against hers with increasing urgency while he skimmed his hands over her breasts. Her nipples grew tighter, and she thrust them higher to give him easier access.

He played with them, teasing and plucking the engorged tips, igniting electrical charges that zoomed through her. Her clit pulsed, throbbed, and she hitched her hips, moaning into his mouth.

He wrenched his lips from hers. "I want you too," he said, moving his fingers over her nipples. "But we're taking this one slow and easy."

His cock juttied against her thigh and she could feel his precum on the tip. "You sure you don't want to hurry things along?" she asked, her voice rising an octave as he continued teasing her sensitive breasts.

"I'm not rushing this," he said, then sucked in her lower lip and released it with a pop while holding her gaze. "Even though you're making it damned tempting."

Continuing to play with one breast, he abandoned the other and reached between her legs to stroke her slick folds. "Very tempting, as a matter of fact," he murmured. "Considering how incredibly wet you are right now."

Her clit tugged hard. "Then why wait... Ooooooh." She lost the ability to speak when he slid his finger inside her. And oh, the sensation of his thumb grazing over her bud shot a sudden charge through her.

"Because I want you wetter, hotter, crazy for me." He stroked in and out of her, adding another finger while kissing his way down to her breasts.

She spread her legs, writhing beneath him while he sucked her nipples one-by-one. Sensations spiraled from the tips to her clit, each one more intense, more electrifying, more overwhelming. Liquid heat flowed through her and her muscles clenched around his fingers, wanting them deeper, deeper still.

"Colton, this feels so... *Dio... Dio mio...* don't stop. I want to..."

"I know. And I'm going to get your pussy there with my fingers, my mouth and my cock."

He thrust his body against hers as if he was already in her, and oh, she wanted it all too. "Yes," she gasped. "I love this. I love everything you're doing." She was lost in a haze of anticipation, craving the release he promised.

Colton raised his head from her breasts, stroking inside her and sweeping her juices over her clit faster and faster. "You're close. So fucking close," he said, holding her gaze as he drove his fingers into her harder, faster, deeper. "I love watching you come. Turns me on. Makes my cock so fucking hard for your pussy."

More electricity shot through her, charged into her clit when she heard his words—so raw and animalistic and real. She loved hearing how good she made him feel too. And she loved feeling his length sliding against her thigh, knowing she had the power to bring him to this point of no return.

"Colton," she cried his name one last time as the pressure coiling in her snapped free, whipping current upon current of pleasure from her core until stars burst inside her head, obliterating all thought, all reason, annihilating everything except the yearning to go there again and again with Colton.

She landed back into herself, an empty sensation floated inside her too, making her wonder if she'd ever be this free, this satisfied, this fantastically taken to the extreme with any other man.

HOLY. Fucking. Hell. Isabella's hot juices pulsed around his fingers, making Colton's cock grow even harder. He wanted her now. He wanted her so much he ached. *Slow down. Take your time. She deserves more.*

"You're awesome," he said, still sliding his fingers in and out of her as he moved to lay beside her to capture her mouth with his, kissing her.

She undulated her hips and thrust them closer to his cock, and wrenched her lips from his. "You promised me more." Isabella reached between their sweat slicked bodies to wrap her hand around the length, then stroked him in tandem with the rhythm of his fingers driving inside her. "And I want it all."

Heat flashed low and he thrust into her palm, loving the way she boldly glided her palm down to the hilt before returning to the tip of his cock to skim his pre-cum across the swollen head. "Oh, yeah. I did, but I've got a specific order in mind."

He wanted to hold off long enough to taste her, and make her come apart once more with his mouth. Because he wanted to extend every second he had with her... to make up for taking her like he was some horny teenager with no impulse control the first time they were together.

She smiled and the amber flecks in her dark brown eyes glimmered. "How about we revise your plan of action?" Isabella asked, sucking his lower lip into her mouth, then releasing it. "Because I want you inside me."

She played with his balls, tickling them and stroking them. They contracted, more blood pulsed into his length, dizzying him. He struggled to string together a coherent response. "I—ah—damn that feels good." He stopped driving his fingers into her and pumped into her hand. He couldn't get enough of her... he doubted he'd ever shake the intense need driving him to the edge of insanity.

"You like this?" she asked, then increased the pressure on his length, milking him harder, harder still.

"Like? I fucking love."

"You'll love this more," she said, then rolled him onto his back and positioned herself above his pulsating cock. "I know I will." She guided him to her hot, slick folds and lowered herself onto him inch by inch until she took him all the way into her tight, wet pussy.

His breath caught in his throat, white lights flashed inside his sex muddled brain. "You're fucking incredible," he said, holding her hips and ass while urging her to move her sweet body on his. "Ride me, Isabella. Ride my cock until you make us both come."

"Yes. I want to feel you explode into me," she said, moving up his length, then impaling herself on him again.

Her full breasts bounced and he reached for them, filling his hands to caress and play with her peaked nipples.

She moaned, threw her head back and rode him faster, their bodies slapping together in a frenzied rhythm. Her honeyed heat flowed over him, and her musky arousal scented the air. He thrust deeper, unable to get enough of her.

"Colton," she cried, bending over him. "You... you're making me..."

"Come again," he urged, letting one breast free to stroke her clit which was slick with her juices. "Ride me and make yourself come all over me." He thrust into her again, deeper and harder while adding even more pressure to her slick clit.

"I am. I will."

Her pussy clenched around him and she impaled herself on him all the way to the hilt. His cock head pulsated, and his balls contracted, bringing him closer to the edge. He rammed into her one final

time and his release surged through him, exploding into her as she cried his name again.

She collapsed on top of him, and he could feel the waves of her orgasm shuddering around him. Breathless, barely able to think, he held her close and murmured her name as if it were a prayer.

He didn't want to move. He didn't want to break their connection. And he sure as hell didn't want to let her go.

Ever.

And, miraculously, his cock wasn't through with getting its fill of her either. He hardened again almost immediately after coming inside her.

She raised her head and gazed at him with wide eyes. "Seriously?" she asked. "You're insatiable."

"Only when I'm with you," he said, then tenderly reversed their position until he was on top of her.

She cruised her hands down his back to caress his ass. "The feeling's mutual," Isabella said softly.

He wanted her with a ferocity that bordered on addictive. And addictions were dangerous. But then, as his cock filled with blood and turned to granite, he'd always been a risk taker. And Isabella was definitely worth taking a risk for.

"Excellent." He withdrew slowly and then buried himself inside her again. "Because I have a lot of promises I want to make good on before the end of tonight," he said before taking her mouth with his, joining them completely, making them one.

"WE SHOULD HEAD BACK to the winery before Alexandra sends a search party out for us," Isabella said reluctantly, tracing circles on Colton's bare torso. "Not that I have any desire to see Mario again." She continued running her fingers lightly over his smooth skin and snuggled closer.

"Unfortunately, that's not an option."

Here, in Colton's arms, she'd briefly escaped the painful knowledge about her role in causing Jillian's death—and possibly risking the lives of her parents. Now, after everything they'd shared, she didn't want to pop the bubble of tranquility enveloping them as the early morning sunlight filtered into his bedroom.

But she couldn't avoid reality forever. She roamed her hand higher until she discovered a scar puckering Colton's shoulder. A sudden cold feeling slithered into her veins. Shivering, she feathered her index finger over it. "How'd this happen?"

"Got caught in the crosshairs of a drug deal gone bad."

"Is that why you're not sure you want to stay in the DEA after you catch the person behind the drugs coming into the region?"

"Partly," he said softly. "Sometimes I just want to put this part of my life behind me."

"Won't you miss the excitement? The adrenaline rush?" Isabella asked.

"Not going to lie. Yes. But I might need to get out of the DEA before I lose what's left of my faith in humanity," he said.

"That'll never happen."

"Thanks, but I also want to make sure my sister's okay. Now that our parents are always on the road in their RV, I feel like one of us should be close to Reagan. I don't want her to be alone."

“You’re very protective of her,” she said, then kissed his scar. “Reminds me of how my brother treats me, but she seems like a strong person. Plus, she has a lot of friends—from what I could see at her restaurant.”

“You’re right. She’s tough. Even tougher now that she’s a widow.” His stomach muscles flinched. “The guy she’s with in the picture you saw the other day married her. He—”

Her pulse skipped and she tilted her head to look at Colton. He’d revealed very little about his sister’s terrible loss, but she knew deep down that what he’d say had something to do with their current predicament. “He what?” she asked, holding herself still while waiting for him to answer.

“He’s—was—one of my best friends. We grew up together. Me, Spencer and Scott,” he said. “Then Scott started dating Reagan.”

“I’ll bet you loved that,” she said, knowing full well that her own brother wouldn’t like any of his friends sniffing around her when she was a teenager.

“Well, we had words.”

“*Words?*”

He laughed. “Okay. I punched his lights out when I found out they’d been secretly dating, but I got over it. He made her happy. They went to college together, got married, and then...”

“Then what?”

“He died in a car crash.”

She covered her mouth with her palm. “That’s awful. Poor Reagan. They were so young.” Isabella lowered her hand to his chest, felt his heart beating.

“What’s even worse is that I’m part of the reason we lost Scott.”

“Why?”

“The woman who T-boned their car was my girlfriend—I hooked up with Nina Lang when I went undercover to find out who’s behind the cartel Mario’s in,” he said hoarsely. “Only my friends and family didn’t know my connection to her at the time. Someone tipped Nina off about my connection to the DEA. She went off to get to her boss with the intel. I couldn’t let her get there and blow my cover.”

“Were you in the car with her?”

A shudder went through his body. “No. I was in the SUV chasing it.” He tightened his hold on her, drawing her near. “She took a hairpin curve too fast and lost control of her car, spun into the oncoming traffic lane—which is usually empty that early in the morning, but Scott and Reagan were on their way back from a doctor’s appointment. She hit them head on.”

His voice caught, and her own breath seemed to bottle in her lungs. She didn’t know what to say. Nothing would sound right. “And you were the first one on the scene?” Better to focus on the events and let him tell his story.

“Yes,” he said. “I had to choose who to get out first. Scott was still conscious, but severely injured—paramedics told me he had severe internal bleeding after they arrived on the scene. He begged me to get Reagan out first. I didn’t want to move her, but there was a gas leak. Damn thing could have blown up. Got her out, then went back for Scott. And,” his voice broke, “he was gone.”

Tears pricked behind her eyes, and a lump lodged in her throat. She couldn’t even begin to imagine the depth of his loss or Reagan’s. “There’s nothing I can say to change what happened.” She feathered her fingers over his chest and upward until she reached his strong jaw. Her heart hitched when she discovered the first signs of his tears tracking through the rough stubble. “I don’t know why you were forced to make such a terrible judgment call, but I believe in my heart that you made the right one.”

"I'm the reason my best friend is dead and why my sister is a widow."

"No. The informant is. You were and are attempting to end the flow of heroin into the country."

She propped up on one elbow and gazed into his gleaming gray eyes. "You keep telling me it's not my fault my family's in danger because of my lie to Mario. So now I'm turning that around and using it on you. You were doing your job."

"I fucked everything up."

"You didn't tell that woman who you were," she said.

"Yeah, I know, but I can't figure out how she discovered my real identity," he said. "Someone blew my cover and I still don't know the reason."

"You stopped her from getting to her boss with the information."

"But the price was too high."

"That's why you insisted on following up on the anonymous tip when you went to the DEA."

"Yeah. I've got a little screwed up after Scott died," he said. "My superiors didn't want me on the case, but I couldn't let this go without doing something to..."

"To make up for what happened to Scott."

"Exactly."

"You said you stopped her. Is she in jail?"

"She's dead. Her car spun off the mountainside. There was nothing I could do to save her," he said. "Not that I wanted to which doesn't say a whole lot of good about me."

"You're a human being, not a machine. No one could fault you for feeling that way. Doesn't mean you wouldn't have saved her if you could have done so."

"I don't know. Anyone could have gotten to her while she was behind bars to get the information."

"What would have happened to you if they did?"

"More people would die."

"Including you."

"Still could happen if I screw up again, which is why I won't let Mario get away with what he's been doing and will do," he said. "I won't let anything interfere this time."

"Too bad I got in the middle of this situation," she said. "Now I know why everything is so complicated."

"Yeah, but I don't mind complicated right now." He kissed her shoulder, traced his tongue along her skin.

A different kind of shiver traveled through her, then heated as it rushed along her nerve endings. "Complicated is good," she said, then crossed one leg over his and scooted closer, letting him know just how incredible his kind of complications made her feel.

"Better than good." He rolled her over in one smooth move, holding himself just off her body, then stroking her hair from her temples. "It's fantastic."

"Then I'm glad I complicated your plans just a little bit," she said, her sex wet and ready for him and her heart expanding, making room to let him nudge inside her. Not just physically, but emotionally.

"Isabella, you may have complicated my case, but not my life. Before you came along, I didn't know how much I needed someone to just *be* with. I love having you here," he said, then rocked into her in one long stroke, filling her.

She raised her hips to take him deeper, and when they moved in tandem, she let herself get lost in the sensation of being wholly, completely taken.

But when he locked his mouth onto hers, she wondered if he'd have the same thoughts if things



went horribly wrong because of her.

## CHAPTER 10

“Alexandra just texted,” Isabella said, walking into Colton’s bathroom already dressed with her hair still damp from the shower they’d taken together. “She’s got business in Charlottesville today. Wanted to know what I was doing to take my mind off what happened to Jillian.”

He stared at the fogged mirror, then swiped the mist away. “What did you say to her?”

“Not to worry about me.” She met his gaze in the reflection. “I’ll tell her you’ve already got it covered.”

“Sorry. Once this is over, we’ll tour the area together.”

She smiled, but it didn’t quite make it to her eyes. “Sure, that’ll give us time to sightsee before I return to Italy,” she said. “It’ll be nice to do something normal for a change.”

“Agreed.” He nodded, then tilted his head toward the open bathroom door. “Let’s get out of here, grab breakfast in Magnolia Falls. Pretend things are normal.”

“I like the idea a lot.”

She turned around and gave him a great view of her awesome ass. Damn. He couldn’t get enough of her.

Exiting the bathroom, Colton shook his head. *Get a grip. She’s leaving in less than two weeks. You’ll have to let her go eventually.* He grabbed his wallet from the nightstand along with his cell phone and tucked them into his jean pockets. “Let’s roll.”

Telling Isabella about his role in Scott’s death had lifted a huge boulder from Colton’s shoulders. But after making love, then showering together where they continued to discover more ways to satisfy their craving for each other—hell, it was more than craving given the tenderness, the understanding she’d given to him—another weight pressed on his back.

He said he wouldn’t screw up again, but he had. He’d gotten emotionally involved with Isabella. And that would make moving forward more difficult. While he wanted Mario’s fucking boss behind bars, he didn’t want to jeopardize Isabella’s life to achieve his goal.

The heaviness dropped lower, lower still until it landed in his gut.

By the time they arrived in Magnolia Falls and walked into Lattitude to order breakfast, the heaviness tasted like tar coating in the back of his throat. They stood in line and his cell phone vibrated. He withdrew it, then checked the screen and read the message from the medical examiner’s office.

“Is everything okay?” she asked as they stepped up to the counter.

“Yes and no.” The ME confirmed Colton’s suspicion, but he’d wait until he got Isabella out of the trendy Internet cafe before telling her that reality had definitely crashed their date day. “I’ll tell you about it when we get back to the car.”

“Hey Colton, you want the usual?” the server asked from behind the cash register.

“Yes. What do you want?” he asked Isabella.

“Skinny Vanilla Latte and a double chocolate muffin.”

“Make that two on the muffins.”

“Sure thing,” the server said.

She rang up his order and he paid, then they moved to stand with the other customers waiting for their orders.

“I’m guessing I won’t like what I hear when we get out of here,” she said under her breath as she crossed her arms.

“You guessed right.”

They stood side by side in silence for their lattes and breakfast muffins, then they made their way through the growing group of customers to the exit. Carrying their coffees, he pushed open the cafe’s door with his hip and held it until she stepped outside. “Preliminary autopsy report is in,” he said when they reached his SUV.

“Do they know why Jillian lost control of her car?”

The paper bag she held shook, and he put his hand over hers. “Carbon monoxide poisoning,” he said quietly. “She passed out at the wheel.”

The spring breeze kicked up and caught her hair, whipping strands around her face. “Mario’s behind her death even if he doesn’t get his own hands dirty.”

“Yes. We’ll figure out how he made the accident happen and nail him for her murder too,” he said, letting her go long enough to pull open the passenger door. “Get in.”

He circled the SUV, entered his side, then popped the coffees into the cup holders. Slugging back a healthy swallow, he pulled out of the parking lot. “We’ll stop by the sheriff’s station to check on the results of their examination of the vehicle. I’ll give my handler the intel after we leave the sheriff’s office.”

Shadows crisscrossed the road he turned onto. The magnolia trees lining the broad sidewalks swayed in the wind as sunlight warred with the clouds starting to cover the robin’s egg blue sky.

“Hell of a day,” he said, then gulped more coffee. “And it’s not going to get any better.”

“I hate him. I just hate him so much,” she said, her voice raising. “How did he do this? Do they have any idea?”

The sound of the paper bag crushing filled the SUV’s interior. He shot her a quick glance and read the tension in her profile—the flat line of her lips, the brows furrowed and her gaze narrowing to a slit. If she were china, she’d break, but she was flesh and bone and stronger than she realized.

A gust of wind jarred the SUV. “No,” he said carefully, gripping the steering wheel, then loosening his hold when he regained control. “The car didn’t have any issues during her drive from D.C. to the winery, or when Mario was with her looking at properties.”

“I want that bastard behind bars.”

He grit his teeth, the pain of his jaw clenching reverberating in his temples. “That makes two of us.” The hair at his nape raised and electrical pulses pinged adrenaline into all his extremities. He didn’t have the complete picture and without it they were in more danger than he’d anticipated. “Mario’s capable of murder—a fucking sociopath. He’s manipulating a lot of moving parts. I’m still not sold on you coincidentally overhearing his deal last Saturday.”

She snapped her head around and grabbed his leg. “You think he set me up?” she asked. “But that doesn’t make any sense.”

Complicated was good as far as being with Isabella was concerned, but complicated sucked

when it came to dragging her through the rest of their charade with Mario.

“Neither did his dating your import-export rep.” He swerved onto the highway that led to Saxon Winery. “I don’t need to wait for the final accident report to prove someone tampered with Jillian’s car. We’re going straight to the source.”

HER HEART RACING, Isabella squeezed Colton’s thigh. “I don’t know if I can spend another minute with Mario without blowing your operation.”

“This is *our* operation,” he said. “I believe you can handle whatever he throws at us.”

His confidence warmed the blood flowing through her veins chilled at the thought of pretending she wanted to do business with Mario. Yes, she’d started playing this dangerous game with a very reluctant partner—because they’d had no choice—but still, something had shifted in Colton’s attitude about her involvement.

A lightning bolt cracked in the distance. “He’s a monster,” she said, lifting her latte from the cupholder, then took a drink. “I’ll do whatever you need until this nightmare is over.” Thunder sounded and rain splattered the windshield.

The wipers swiped the glass, swooshing back and forth at warp speed. Ahead, the storm’s surging waters pounded against Saxon Vineyard’s sign.

“Text Mario. Tell him you know what happened to Jillian,” Colton said, slowing down to exit the highway to drive into the winery’s vast property’s winding road.

She complied. Within minutes, Mario responded. “He wants to meet me.” Swallowing hard, she forced herself to open the crushed bag and looked at the mangled muffin remains inside. “Alone.”

“He won’t do anything that’ll draw the authorities’ attention. Not at the winery,” Colton said, then cruised into the first available parking spot in front of the manor house. “Agree. But only if he meets you here and no sooner than half an hour from now. I don’t want him taking you off property, and I need time to wire you.”

“Wire me? Why?”

“A. I want to get whatever he says on tape as leverage. B. I need to know what he’s doing so I can intervene if necessary,” Colton said. “Tell him how and when you meet are the only parameters you’ll accept. You’re in charge. Never let him get the upper hand.”

Her stomach rolled and she tasted acid. How could she meet with a killer without blowing it completely? “Done.” She texted Mario back with trembling fingers.

Within thirty minutes, she paced her suite of rooms in the manor house. “You sure you can’t tell I’m wearing a wire?” she asked, the sensation of the tracking device seemed to scream *I’m here* against her skin.

“Positive,” Colton said, handing her a light sweater. “Put this on. It’ll give you more camouflage.”

She shrugged it on. “All right,” she said. “Here goes nothing. He’s waiting for me in the library. I can interpret what he reveals after we get everything on tape.” Oh how she dreaded returning to the place where she’d discovered the face Mario presented to the world was a complete fraud.

Colton took her into his arms, then kissed the top of her head. “Don’t worry about a thing,” he said. “You’ve got this and I’ve got you covered.”

She wanted to stay in his arms, keep feeling the warmth and strength of his body enveloping her. Looking into his gray eyes, she said, “I should go before Mario wonders what’s taking me so long. If

only we could tell the sheriff about him, but I know it'll blow everything."

"We've got to get proof first."

She brushed his lips with hers, then stepped out of his embrace. "I'll get him to admit he's responsible for Jillian's death today," Isabella said, then made her way out of her suite on wooden legs.

When she arrived in the library, she raised her chin and marched toward Mario who stood next to the fireplace with a glass of wine. "You always take care of problems without consulting your partners?" she asked, going for the jugular in Italian—using the anger pulsing through her veins about her friend's murder to fuel her attack.

He glanced at her through hooded eyes, his gaze dark and cold. "Jillian got too close to the truth," he said, continuing to speak in their native tongue. "But I had nothing to do with ensuring her demise. I never let my hands get dirty. Too risky."

Her chest constricted, white heat flashed into her vision, and her fingers itched to scratch his smug look off his face. *Stay cool. Don't let him see how much her death hurts.* She held his gaze, willed the fire flaring inside her to simmer down with a will born out of years of dealing with negative press and her parents' constant emotional battering.

Feigning nonchalance, she examined her manicure and then tilted her head to send him her best you-are-beneath-me looks. "You've jeopardized our deal by drawing attention to my employee's untimely death," she said with exaggerated casualness, ice lacing her tone. "Now that the medical examiner knows the cause of death, it'll only be a matter of time before they discover someone tampered with Jillian's car. That'll throw suspicion on me too."

Mario curled his lips into an ugly smirk and waved his wine glass dismissively. "You think I care if you go down for something I arranged? You're lucky I didn't call a hit on you after you overheard me in the library. Good thing you're more bad ass than I expected," he said.

"I have no doubt you'd have killed me. But not when we've got a reason to live. Money."

"Exactly. I'm not worried about the authorities," he said. "You've got your boyfriend to keep the local sheriff and his hick deputies off your back. Colton's extremely cozy with them. How do we know he's not in their pockets? Why should we trust him when he's a possible threat?"

Her stomach quivered and bile crawled into her throat. Mario's accusation skirted the vicinity of the truth, narrowly missing the subterfuge they'd concocted. "Colton grew up here and knows everyone," she said. "Not acting concerned about Jillian's death would have thrown up a huge red flag. Park your suspicions, Mario, and allow him to keep the authorities off our asses."

"Such language."

"You have your double life. I have mine." She moved away from him toward the half bottle of wine and an empty glass on the table next to a wing chair. "There's no reason to pretend politeness while we're being honest with each other." She poured the ruby red wine, swirled it slowly, then sipped while holding Mario's gaze.

"Honesty's preferable." He closed the distance between them to stand toe-to-toe in front of her. "Such a refreshing change of pace."

Her breath caught in her throat, adrenaline sent prickles into the back of her neck, and her muscles tensed. Colton's skepticism about the conversation she'd overheard raced to the forefront of her mind. How had she been so idiotic? They'd set her up because of the shady history she shared with Mario, but confirming the connection didn't reveal the reason he'd targeted her.

Until she had the answer to that question, she had to continue acting like a willing participant in this horrific farce. Only then would she prevent Mario from threatening everyone she loved again.

She dragged one finger down the front of his crisp, tailored button-down shirt and paused just above his waistband. “Incredibly refreshing,” Isabella said. “Just remember that we need Colton more than he needs us. Without him, we don’t have a safe channel for the drugs we want to move into this region.”

“And after we clear this hurdle,” Mario said, catching her hand with his and bringing it to his cold lips, “We cut him loose.”

“Of course.” She stood her ground, praying the shudder traveling through her body didn’t betray the fear slithering up her spine. “That was always my plan, but until then I have to keep leading Colton on or he’ll pose a threat to our operation.”

## CHAPTER 11

Leaf-dappled sunlight danced along the edges of the Black River bank and reeds nodded in the wind as Colton cruised through the water at a steady speed. Beside him, Isabella continued reading aloud the notes she'd transcribed for him the night before.

Though he'd already heard the account once and had delivered a copy to his superiors at the DEA for their input, Colton still wanted to dissect the conversation piece by piece. And as far away from their enemy as possible.

"Mario targeted you for a specific reason," he said. "And it has to do with the scandal that sent your parents to jail."

"After the way he acted last night, I agree, but I can't figure it out." She pushed her sunglasses up her nose and furrowed her brow. "Everyone paid the same price and served time."

Spray skimming over the *Wanderer's* bow dampened his skin and ducks lifted to the sky from the shallows near the shore. Ahead, bright shards of spring sunlight glittered off the choppy river's flow.

Inside his veins ran cold. Mario had made his desire for Isabella clear on the wiretap. Colton didn't need to understand a fucking word of Italian to hear the creep's lust in Mario's voice. "Where did you all live while they incarcerated your parents?"

"We stayed at Terra Cavelli with my grandfather when we weren't in boarding school," she said, folding the sheaf in half. "We lived with him until the authorities released my parents and still spent most of our holidays with him."

"And Mario?"

"We attended the same boarding school," she said. "Then he'd go to one of his relatives or he'd come home with us to *Nonno's* during our breaks. I don't understand what happened, Colton. I remember Mario and Rafe vowing to clear our family's names. They even had some kind of blood brother oath."

"Your parents got out of jail earlier for good behavior." He took the next river bend with an easy turn of the wheel. "What happened to Mario's?"

"His father had a heart attack and died while behind bars, and his mother passed away shortly after her release," she said, shielding her eyes from the glaring sun's reflection.

"Where did he end up?"

Isabel swiveled in her seat, her notes still in hand and pursed her lips. "His aunts and uncles took him in," she said after several beats of silence where only the sound of other boat motors cut through the air. "We went to the funerals, but his family wasn't particularly fond of ours. Can't say I blame them given the circumstances, but Mario seemed fine when he was at school. Still, we didn't run in the same circles. He was pretty popular with the girls in his group. Plus, I was like a kid sister to him."

That's how he always treated me, even after we all grew up. Which was why I went to him after the police raided the party and arrested me. I knew my brother would be horrified. I thought he cared about me, my family."

Her denim skirt rode up her thighs and his mouth went dry. "Until last night."

"True. Trust me, I've never seen him as boyfriend material even when I thought we were friends. Now?" She shuddered. "He repulses me."

"That makes two of us." Colton took them to a small cove and cruised into the secluded water, then shut down the engine. "Who looked after him when he wasn't in school?"

"Mario's an only child, but he has a big family."

"In other words, he was passed around a lot. Didn't have a real home anymore. That'd piss me off."

"You think he blames me—my family—for how his family treated him?"

"Maybe."

"Don't you think that's a bit extreme?"

"Right now, I don't know what to think. I mean hell, I don't even know who I can trust at the DEA. Someone leaked my information to Nina." He glanced at the shoreline, listening to the sound of other boats cruising through the river current. "Mario didn't tamper with Jillian's car. But he sure as hell ordered the hit."

"So far as I know my parents are fine. I called them this morning before we left the winery." Isabella tucked the papers she held into the boat's center console, then took Colton's hand. "But I'm worried about them just the same. He keeps making little comments to remind me how easily he can harm them. When my brother finds out I didn't warn him about this situation, he'll be furious."

"Once we have all the facts, he'll be grateful," Colton said. "You know, Mario sure didn't treat you like a kid sister yesterday."

"I know. What if he pushes the issue? What should I do?"

"He won't. Not as long as I'm in the picture," Colton said. "Despite what he wants to do to me, he's stuck with me until after the first drug drop is over. Then it'll be too late for him to fuck with either of us."

"Will he be extradited?"

"We'll nail his ass here in the states. No bail. No way for him to get out of the country once we have him locked up."

"And whoever is behind the cartel too?"

"Yes. But until the drop happens next Wednesday, there's nothing more we can do other than wait," Colton said. "In the meantime, I've got someone's eyes and ears on him while he's here."

"I'm glad Alexandra is still on her business trip."

"Same here," Colton said. "I don't want another person I care about to get caught in the middle of this sting."

She glanced around the cove. "Is this where we'll do the drug deal?"

"No," Colton said. "Just one of my gang's favorite hangouts when we were making out."

"You brought me here to make out?"

"Figured we should try to make the most of our free time before heading back to the winery." He'd brought a picnic with him and the speedboat's back seats had the ability to lay flat. Something he planned to take advantage of after he dropped anchor.

"I like the sound of that," Isabella said, then kissed his palm and flicked her tongue over his wrist. "In fact, I planned for it when I got dressed this morning. I want to do anything to take my mind off



what's happening."

"You did?"

"Why do you think I put on this mini skirt?" She spread her legs ever so slightly and he caught a flash of her crotchless panties. "Easier to fool around that way."

Heat flashed low and his groin tightened. "First, we eat."

She reached for his belt and unbuckled it, then flicked open the top button. "You know we could start off by enjoying each other as the appetizers." Isabella slowly lowered the zipper, slipped her fingers inside and feathered her fingers over his length.

"Now I like the sound of that way more," he said. "But not until I secure the boat otherwise we might end up going overboard."

Isabella shot him a sultry, sexy look. "I'd survive," she said. "I won a national medal for swimming for my high school."

"Current's fast, and the water's freezing," he said, his cock twitching. "I'd rather check out your athletic skills on deck."

"Go drop your anchor," she said, releasing him with a laugh. "Then get back here and drop your pants."

He didn't waste a second. In fact, he doubted he'd ever gotten an anchor lowered faster. By the time he finished, Isabella had lowered the seats in the back to convert them into loungers. And she'd opened her red blouse buttons to reveal her sexy lace matching bra, her taut nipples visible through the fabric.

He caressed them, grazing his thumbs over the tips. "God damn, you turn me on," he said, nudging his groin close to her face. "I want to feel your mouth on my cock."

"I want a lot more than that." She tugged down his jeans, taking the briefs along with her movement and kissed the head. "I've never made love in a boat before."

Colton played with her full breasts, pressing the mounds together. "Then you're in for a treat." He clasped her hair, twining the silken strands in his fingers, urging her to take more of him into her mouth.

She moaned, then swirled her tongue around the rim while clasping his length in her palm. The boat rocked beneath his feet, but he held on as she licked her way down his erection—the sight of her loving him with her tongue and mouth made him dizzy, crazy with need.

She flicked her tongue back up to his cock head, then sucked him deep into her wet, hot mouth, obliterating everything in his brain. He groaned, pushed into her and she took him deeper, deeper still.

She teased his balls with her free hand, and they contracted while more blood flowed into his engorged cock. He had to have her—he had to take her here.

Her breasts were close to him, the peaks of her nipples harder than when he'd first started teasing her. "Your nipples are so hard. I bet your pussy is ready for me too," he said, still fucking her mouth and loving the feel of her tongue gliding over him. "Is it?"

She sucked him deep one more time, then slowly drew herself away from his pulsating length, then licked her lips as she glanced up at him. "Yes," she said as he slowly undulated his cock back and forth across her flushed face. "Just thinking about being with you makes me hot."

He pushed her down to the seat, then positioned himself over her and shoved her skirt higher. "And wet," he said, stroking the seam of her exposed, slick sex until he reached the tiny nubbin hidden between the folds.

Her hips hitched and she gasped, "Now Colton. I want you inside me."

The boat rocked faster and nudged his cock head inside her heat, then rammed into her all the way

to the hilt. Her silky panties rubbed against his groin, making him hotter. Every sensation—the skin, the silk, the sweet honeyed heat of her taking him deep inside her and clenching around him—shot through him, blinding him.

Nothing mattered. He'd never wanted a woman more than he wanted Isabella. She'd literally become an addiction—more than that—one he didn't want to risk losing any more.

He pumped into her faster, harder, deeper. His cock head filled with more heated blood and his balls contracted even tighter. "Come with me," he rasped as the first surge of his orgasm crashed through him.

"Yes. Oh, I am," she cried, her own release flowing around him.

He collapsed on top of her, spent. "Damn. You make me weak," he murmured into her ear.

"Then we should definitely eat something," she said, stroking his back. "Because you need to keep up your strength."

He laughed, and the sound echoed against the rocks in the secluded cove. And then another noise whirred into his ears. "Fuck. Someone's here." Gazing over the boat's rocking sides, his heart went cold.

"WHAT'S WRONG?" Isabella asked, scanning the river. "I thought no one really knew about this place except your friends."

"Yeah. My sister knew about it," Colton said, then rolled off Isabella. "And she's not alone." Laying low, he tugged his pants on.

Her pulse raced and adrenaline zipped into every cell she possessed. "Who's with her?" She scrambled to sit and fumbled with her buttons.

"Mario Fucking Rossi." Colton moved to the boat's bow, grabbed his holster, then slipped a denim jacket on to conceal the weapon.

"But he was supposed to meet with his real estate agent today," she said as she pushed her skirt down and finished adjusting her clothing.

"A lie. Typical too."

Reagan's speedboat came to within several feet of theirs and she waved. "Hey there," she called. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Why? Is there something wrong at the restaurant?" Colton asked. "Speaking of that, why aren't you working?"

"Even I deserve a day off every once in a while," she said. "And why assume something wrong? Everything's great—even better thanks to Mario."

His lips flattened and jerked his chin upward. "Oh yeah?" he asked after an infinitesimal beat of silence.

"She's agreed to assist me with setting up the kitchen, hiring seasonal staff for the resort I just purchased," Mario said as Reagan drew closer.

"Fabulous," Colton said drily. "When are you going to find time to do that on top of everything else you do?"

"I've got staff," she said, raising her chin. "God, Colton, sometimes you can be such an overprotective jerk. I thought you'd be happy for me."

Their boat rocked faster in the wake of Reagan's as it moved alongside the speedboat, Isabella

scooted closer to Colton and took his hand. He squeezed her palm, gripping tightly.

"This is a surprise," Isabella said. "But how wonderful." Not really, but as long as she was pretending to be Mario's friend and covertly working a drug deal with him, she couldn't say anything else. "When will you start?" *Think. There has to be some way I can shield Reagan from Mario.* She had no doubt in her mind that Mario was using Reagan to keep Colton in line.

And they both knew what Mario had done to Jillian.

"Come aboard," she said. "We can chat about your exciting new adventure while we eat the delicious lunch together."

"*Eccellente* idea," Mario said, his voice smooth as silk though his dark eyes were black as coal.

After they'd rafted their boats together and Reagan dropped her anchor, Isabella brought out the contents of their picnic from the insulated basket Colton had packed earlier that day.

"You know I have a fantastic idea," Isabella said while she passed the plastic plates around. "There's a celebrity chef in Washington who's been featuring Terra Cavelli's wines on his television show. He's one of my top clients."

"You talking about Brady Peterson?" Reagan asked.

"The one and only."

She clapped her hands together and clasped them. "I'd kill for him to bring his show's film crew to my restaurant. Talk about an instant marketing boost."

"I believe Drink N Thyme could interest him with the right added incentive."

"What kind of incentive?"

"He told me he wants to branch out and feature a restaurant's development from the ground up," Isabella said. "I can pull some strings and get him to meet with you."

"How soon?" Reagan asked. "Because I've got a finite amount of time to give Mario and I can't stay away from my place too long."

"Once we get back to shore I'll contact him," Isabella said. "I'm sure he'll be flexible." Especially when she offered to give him an exclusive about her vineyard and family. Not something her brother would likely approve of, but to quote the old American cliché desperate times called for desperate measures.

And she desperately wanted to get Reagan away from Mario before he added another body to his murdered list.

"I'm not sure I like this idea," Mario said. "I prefer to manage my own business and I choose who I work with extremely carefully."

"I know, but think of the extra publicity," Isabella said. And when they finally got him behind bars, his entire company would be up for grabs. Something she planned to let her brother know about as soon as she got through this nightmare.

Beside him Reagan nodded. "Mario, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity," she said. "Let's grab it. My assistant manager can run Drink N Thyme for a few days without me. Maybe you could come with me if Isabella can arrange this for us."

*Merda.* Not in her lifetime.

"He's got other commitments," Colton said. "So, you'll have to go without him."

Mario shot Isabella a hooded glare. Beside her, Colton tensed and she could hear his jaw click as he ground his teeth. "Your brother's right. Although I would rather go with you, I have other obligations that force me to remain here."

"Plus, we still have to handle the arrangements for..." Isabella couldn't finish saying the words.

"*Si*," he said softly. "I can't let down Jillian's parents. They requested my assistance with her

transportation back to her hometown in Georgia once we complete the investigation.”

A shiver crawled up her spine. He even sounded like he cared. Mario wasn't just a criminal, he was a sociopath, incapable of feeling real emotion.

“The sheriff's department hasn't completed its investigation into the accident,” Colton said. “I'm sure they're close.”

“Her parents will finally have the closure they deserve. And so will you,” Isabella said with real sympathy for Jillian's mother and father.

He couldn't say no. Not without making Reagan question him. They were all ensnared in a web that neither of them could get out of until the drug deal was over.

“You're right.” Mario dropped his paper napkin onto his plate, then stood and held out his hand. “Come on, Reagan, let's return to your boat so Isabella can expedite the process and make it happen.”

“Absolutely,” she said after she placed her empty dish and utensils on the small table between them. “Isabella, you're amazing. I can't wait to hear if you can hook me up with Brady Peterson.”

Oh, she'd make sure this meeting happened by Monday. “There's no *if* about it,” Isabella said. “I promise I won't let you down.” Nor would she let Colton down either.

As Mario took his seat while Reagan raised her anchor, Isabella locked eyes with his black hot gaze. Sunlight reflected off a throbbing vein in his temple and his cheekbones protruded as if the skin covering them had shrunk. His mouth curled into a sneer, and he rubbed his index finger over his brow.

Ice lodged in the back of her throat. Prickles raced along her nerve endings, buzzed over her scalp, and every hair on her body raised into goose bumps.

The subtle movement mimicked the shape of a gun and the barrel pointed directly at her.

## CHAPTER 12

“Thanks again for getting Reagan out of Mario’s line of sight,” Colton said after they walked into his house.

“I knew Brady would agree,” Isabella said. “He’s wanted to do an exclusive about my family’s vineyard in Italy for over a year.”

“Bastard is trying to manipulate us.” He turned to look at her. “But at least my sister’s safe thanks to your quick thinking.”

“Mario hates me,” Isabella said, her face pale as parchment. “How could I have missed how much he loathes me? My family? My brother...” her voice trailed off and she wrapped her arms around her waist.

“He’s a sociopath,” Colton said, pulling her into his arms and holding her. “Incapable of real feeling or emotion.”

“He set this up without knowing for sure I’d go along with him, but.” She tapped her chin with her index finger. “Unless he wanted me to overhear him so he’d have a reason to kill me. If not at the gala, then at another event. He’s dated Jillian for months, tracking my movements. I think the only reason he hasn’t killed me yet and tried to make it look like an accident is he wanted me to suffer. But I don’t understand why. Plus, my brother would go to the highest levels of his connections to uncover the truth.”

“Then you caught him off guard with your lie.”

“And until he could prove otherwise, he’d have to go along with my story or risk losing his foothold in the region. After all, I was arrested once before and my parents weren’t angels. He said he’d always wondered if I’d taken after them. *Dio*. Nothing I did would save my family, not in the end. I’m a fool.”

There’s no way you could have known, but he wanted you to discover the truth.”

“And I did,” she whispered. “He wanted to see me dead. Still does, most likely. But I won’t let him intimidate me.”

“You’re a strong, brave woman,” Colton said. But he didn’t want to put her in anymore danger. He’d seen the look on Mario’s face after he’d climbed back onboard Reagan’s boat. There had to be a way to catch the bastards behind his brother-in-law’s death that didn’t include risking Isabella’s life.

“You sure we’ll stop him?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, but there’d be no *we* in the equation. Not now. His top priority had changed from catching the mastermind and destroying the cartel to protecting Isabella. He wasn’t sure how he’d finesse the situation, but he had three days to come up with a new plan.

She trembled, and he lowered his forehead to hers. “There’s nothing we can do other than wait.”

Her skin was cool to the touch, clammy. Her body's shaking increased. "You're scared and I don't blame you." Hell. He had to do something, anything, to take her mind off Mario's veiled threat.

He held her tighter, kissed her temples, caressed her back with long, languid strokes, trying to warm her, to warm the ice clogging his veins and chilling his heart. He heard her breath hitching, could feel her pulse racing beneath his lips.

They only had a few more days left before this nightmare ended. And even less for him once he removed any chance of her being involved in the final equation. His own heart rate accelerated, and a heavy feeling weighted down his chest.

One way or another, no matter what he did to shield her, he risked the possibility of losing the fragile connection that formed between them.

And he didn't want to snap that thread. Or risk breaking it so completely he'd never have another chance like this again. A chance for something more than he'd thought he deserved after what had happened during his horribly botched investigation.

"Isabella," he said, caressing her cheeks with his thumb pads and holding her gaze. "You're the one good thing to come out of this mess."

She brought one hand to his face and feathered her fingers over his lips. "I feel the same way. We may not have started our relationship in the usual way... and adrenaline might have pushed us together sooner than either of us expected, but what's inside me for you is real and I want to see where it goes after..." her voice trailed off.

"Don't go there mentally," he said, bringing her closer, seeing heat and desire replace the ice-cold fear he'd read moments earlier in her eyes. "Just be here. Where nothing matters except you, me, us." He cupped her cheeks, and lowered his mouth to hers, brushing her lips.

"I want to forget everything that happened this afternoon," she whispered, her breath warm on his skin as she encircled his neck with her hands. "Everything except when we were alone, before..."

"You will." He caught her mouth with his again, not because he wanted to take the kiss to the next level, but because he wanted to comfort her as a lover would without demand for more.

And yet, when she moved against him, pressed her body into his and melded to him with a long soft sigh, he realized she needed more. He deepened their kiss, sliding his tongue against hers, drinking her in. She answered his demand, met him stroke for stroke, and twined her arms around his neck.

Need met need. Want met want. Desire met desire.

He slid his hands down her back, gripped her bottom and brought her closer... closer still... obliterating everything that pressed in around them until there was only her, only him, only the mad sensation of losing themselves to each other.

He wanted to do more than take. He wanted to give—he wrenched his mouth from her sweet lips. "This. Us. I don't want it to end," he said, holding her gaze. No. He didn't want what was building between them to stop, but he had no idea how he'd keep her after he betrayed her.

But if he didn't, he might lose more than her trust.

THERE WAS something more in Colton's gaze than she wanted to see. A tinge of regret. Her heart thudded against her sternum, and her pulse tapped a slow beat in her ears. She didn't want to think about tomorrow. Only this moment.

“It doesn’t have to,” Isabella said, moving her hands from Colton’s neck to feather her fingers over his cheeks and strong jaw.

He kissed her palm, intensity coloring his blue eyes and turning them indigo. “No,” he said. “It doesn’t.”

“Good.” She wanted nothing to come between them after they made it through Wednesday. Somehow. Some way, they’d find a way to be together.

They’d discover what else they could be once they moved past the danger facing them in the days ahead.

She ghosted her fingertips against his lips, closed the scant distance between them and kissed the pulse pumping in the hollow of his neck. Where once there was fire, now there was a slow burn. A desire to connect in ways that had less to do with physical attraction and more to do with the emotions swirling through her mind.

She cared. Oh, how she cared. Never in her life had her heart been so turned inside out for a man. For a man like Colton. A man who would sacrifice his life for her. Her throat ached. No one had ever put her first.

He lowered his forehead to hers, caressed her cheeks. “Just be with me.”

“I will.” Today. Tomorrow. And afterward.

They linked hands and moved out of the kitchen, making their way to Colton’s bedroom with the familiarity of lovers, of friends. Of so much more.

Waning rays of sunlight suffused the room with an ethereal glow, catching dust motes and turning them to bright sparks. Electricity zipped along her skin, shot to her core. Oh, how she wanted him. Body, mind, soul.

Slowly, they removed their clothes, savoring and stretching out the time, lingering, savoring every touch. Discovering and rediscovering each other as if they’d never been together and yet she memorized every inch of him all over again.

He lowered her onto the satin comforter, covering her body with his, kissing her temples, stroking her hair from her brow and then tracing his hands all the way down the length of her body. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said before catching her lips with his.

Liquid heat flowed through her veins, pooled low and an exquisite ache pulsed between her thighs at her core. She hitched her hips, felt the hard ridge of his cock against her legs... more fire burned and she reached for him.

Clasping his length, she guided him closer to her entrance. “I want you inside me,” she said. She didn’t know where this would go, but she trusted him completely in ways she’d trusted no one before. Only he could give her what she needed, here, now.

“That makes two of us.” He pushed the tip of his cock inside her folds. “Always. No matter what...” Colton’s voice cracked, then he melded his mouth against hers, kissing her deeply as he drove into her, filling her.

She lost herself in the haze of his taking, moving in tandem with him. Meeting him stroke for stroke, reaching for more, so much more. Every inch of her wanted him, loved the feel of him moving inside her, loved the increasing intensity of his cock ramming into her. Loved the sensation of being loved by him.

Body moved against body, skin slid against skin, beat for beat—over and over he drove into her and she rode him, rode the incredible sensations building at her core... reaching... reaching... reaching for the release...

She could feel him grow inside her. Steel and velvet melded as he pushed into her deeper, deeper.

Deeper until electricity turned to lightning and flashed from her clitoris all the way through her.

“Colton,” she cried, clasping his butt and holding him as she arched her hips higher. “I. Oh my God...” Stars burst behind her eyes and she flew over the edge, taking him with her as he called her name and joined her, his cock pulsing inside her, matching her shuddering orgasm.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” Isabella asked, watching Colton exit the bathroom fully dressed.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” he said.

She sat, pulling the sheet around her breasts to cover them. “I don’t believe you.” Her heart tapped a warning in her ears.

They’d spent two days together at his house before returning to the winery. For a brief period, life seemed like nothing awful would happen on Wednesday. But he’d been tense during the drive back to Saxon Vineyards and, after another night of incredible sex, she’d awakened alone to hear the shower running.

He holstered his gun. “Stop asking questions and let me do my job.”

“But I’m part of your job.”

“Not anymore.”

“What about our act for Mario?”

“You’re no longer a part of that equation.” He grabbed his coat and shrugged it on. “No way I’ll let you near that bastard.”

Outrage coursed through her. How dare Colton go all caveman on her? “Are you kidding me? We’re in this together.”

“Not anymore.”

“But he’ll... he’ll,” she hesitated. Mario had been the epitome of kindness when he’d dealt with Jillian’s parents to coordinate the transfer of her body to her hometown. But she knew better than to believe anything Mario said or did. He’d been angling for a way to get her into trouble for months. Not only that, but if Colton went off on his own, he could jeopardize her family. “You can’t do this without me. He’ll never trust you.”

“You know he set you up.”

“And until we go through with the deal, I won’t truly know exactly why. I deserve to know the truth,” she said, dropping the sheet and climbing out of the bed. “I won’t let you do this alone.”

“You have to trust me. This is not negotiable.”

His face was hard, the planes of his cheeks harsh against his skin and his blue eyes cold as a lake iced over in winter. For a moment, her breath stilled, turned to frost in her lungs. No. No. No. She’d trusted him with her body, her heart. They were a team. He was taking over as a professional, but she didn’t want him to leave her out of the equation. Not when Mario still held all the cards.

She marched to the closet, opened it and withdrew her robe. Shrugging it on, Isabella fought for air and for warmth. For enough heat to burn in her blood to stop him. When fire replaced ice, she whipped around and crossed the hardwood floor to stand toe-to-toe with him.

“You can’t cut me out.”

“I don’t want you to get caught in the crossfire. I won’t lose another person I care about.”

“I’m your insider contact for this mission whether or not you like it.”

“I don’t need you to complete the mission.” He moved around her, careful to avoid touching her.



“Don’t follow me.” Colton exited the room without another word.

His masculine scent, a combination of woods and musk stayed in the room. Isabella sucked in a deep breath, resisting the urge to pick up the lamp on the bedside table and tossing it at the closed door. Instead, she gathered her wits and marched into the bathroom.

Colton might think he’d successfully tossed her to the proverbial curb, but she refused to let him dictate her future. She had too much to lose. She, her entire family, would never be safe from Mario and his machinations. How could she end this unless she knew why he loathed them all so much?

She had no choice. She had to go to the one person she loathed to make that happen.

## CHAPTER 13

Colton arrived at Black River Trail Outfitters, noted the black SUV already parked in the overgrown lot, and pulled in beside it. When he stepped out of his vehicle, the passenger opened and a long, lean leg poked out.

Fuck. His pulse kicked into overdrive. She was the last person he wanted to see today. “What are you doing here?” he asked Isabella as she exited the SUV.

“Making sure you don’t screw up my plan,” she said, her voice resolute.

Colton looked at Mario. “I thought we had an agreement.”

“You have one with Isabella. I refuse to let you cut her out.” Mario stared at him, his eyes black as night. “That’s why she’s here with me today.”

Isabella shot him a narrow glance. “I went to Mario after you decided to take over my business dealings,” she said. “This is my operation. I only brought you on board because I need an American contact. Don’t try my patience again, Colton. You’re not indispensable.”

She sounded every bit like the CEO, but beneath her voice there was a tremor. “Fine. I won’t,” Colton said, fisting his hands and then releasing them. She couldn’t back out without raising suspicion. Damn it all to hell.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Your contact ready?”

Mario gave a small nod. “Yes.” He didn’t betray any emotion in his tone. “You have the coordinates?”

“I’ll plug them in as soon as we’re on our way,” Colton said, hating the way Mario’s arm slinked around Isabella’s waist. What the hell did she think she was doing with him?

He turned toward the dock, still rickety with its gray wood and crooked posts, and walked toward it. The sound of footfalls behind him, along with the scent of Mario’s expensive, ridiculously overpowering cologne, followed him.

Once underway, he forced himself to focus on the task he had before him. The inky waters of the river swirled around the boat’s bow and sides, rushing behind them, leaving a wake of waves.

“The coordinates?” Mario asked over the motor’s din.

“Here.” Colton handed the bastard a piece of paper with the longitude and latitude numbers on it. “Your contact ready?”

“Of course,” Mario said.

“Excellent.”

They continued plowing through the river until an owl’s hoot permeated the air, breaking into the boat’s motor when he crested the bend that led to the cove where he’d arranged the drug deal. He still had no idea who he was meeting despite the intel he had from his handler at the DEA.

“Where is he?” he asked while weighing anchor.

“You’ll meet soon,” Mario said, wrapping his arm around Isabella’s shoulders and drawing her closer.

Her face looked pale as blank paper in the moonlight. Every line in her face seemed to stand in stark relief against her skin. “Mario has been in constant contact with...,” she broke off.

“Now let’s not spoil the surprise,” Mario said.

Colton watched her throat work as she swallowed. “Yeah. Wouldn’t want to do that,” he said. “I love surprises.” Not. But no way would he let Mario know he was unnerved.

Not now. Not when he was so close to catching the mastermind behind his best friend’s death.

A slow hum purred in the distance. A luxury yacht cruised into the bay and came to a stop within feet of Colton’s boat. Then a woman stepped onto the deck and adrenaline zipped into all his extremities, making his scalp tingle. He knew her.

Genevra Conti.

And he’d been around her on more than one occasion.

A harmless widow of an old family friend who definitely defied “drug dealer” descriptions. With thinning white hair and a dumpy, short physique she’d aroused no one’s suspicion other than calling for a routine background check through the DEA’s data base.

“Well, this *is* a shocker,” Colton said. That was an understatement of epic proportions. Fucking shit. Nothing had turned up during his last investigation other than her ongoing philanthropic activities, including the International Miracle Network.

She epitomized do-gooder with all-caps.

Only she wasn’t a real do-gooder. Fuck. Not if she was here.

But no one would ever suspect her of transporting drugs. Unfortunately, Colton had been in her periphery when he’d been working undercover.

“Zia.”

Isabella shot Colton a quick shocked, wide-eyed look and shook her head slightly. Standing, she moved toward Mario and took his hand. “So, your aunt? She’s the mastermind?” she asked.

“*Si*,” he said. “Zia Genevra is my greatest ally. She took me under her wing after they jailed my parents. And then she molded me into one of her best operatives after they passed away.”

“You’ve been dealing drugs for her since you were a teenager?”

“All part of a bigger plan,” Mario said with steel in his voice.

“I see,” Isabella said. “I wish I’d known sooner. We could have arranged our lucrative alliance earlier.”

“We hadn’t anticipated your involvement in our industry when I’d discovered you’d be attending the charity event in Virginia,” Mario said. “That complicated things, but everything we’ve arranged will still happen. There’s no going back.”

Colton remained rooted to the spot, his mind racing. Quickly, he connected the dots. All Genevra Conti’s connections to the charities she supported had been fronts to cover her criminal activities along with providing excellent laundering for her profits, hiding every dime. Forensic accounting would have a field day with this information—if he got both he and Isabella out of this situation alive.

Jillian had unwittingly given Mario all the information he needed to force Isabella into the danger zone. But Mario hadn’t counted on Isabella’s deception. Her lie had saved her life.

“Exactly,” Colton said. One way or another Mario and Genevra wanted Isabella’s family gone. Dead. Why? “We should board.” He moved toward Mario and Isabella, then tilted his head toward the luxurious yacht.

“*Si*, we don’t have time to waste,” Mario said, helping Isabella climb out of the speedboat and step onto Geneva’s.

Colton followed them, climbing the ladder until he stood beside Isabella on the deck while facing the woman responsible for his brother-in-law’s death and the deaths of countless others.

“Quite a revelation to discover your sideline business coincided with mine.” Geneva played with the pearls on her necklace, her eyes slits. “You’ve hidden your tracks well, Isabella. Initially, I didn’t want to join forces with you and your partner. In fact, I’m still not sure about this man’s involvement. Either way, my plans are coming together rather nicely.”

Her voice was soft, but a veiled threat slithered into her tone. A cold, hollow sensation dropped into Colton’s stomach. This woman confirmed she’d had more than making a deal on her radar.

Widening his stance, Colton said, “Quit fucking around. I’ve got dealers lined up who’re counting on this shipment.” The last time he’d seen Geneva, he’d been in disguise with phony tattoos, beard and mustache. His hair had been dyed black and he’d worn brown contacts. Still, he had no guarantee Geneva wouldn’t recognize him.

“Why are you brokering this exchange?” Geneva asked.

“Why else? Money.” He edged closer to Isabella. Though proud of her for not wavering, he didn’t like the ramifications facing them. “Isabella and I stick together through every transaction. Every decision.” He hoped Isabella got the message loud and clear. They couldn’t back out. But she had to stay close to him so they could escape together.

He shifted his gaze to the left, then back at the cartel’s leader. If he could make his way back to the speedboat, with her in tow, they’d have a chance to get away, radio the state police cruisers to come in to arrest Geneva and Mario.

“There’s something about you I recognize,” Geneva said, stopping in front of Colton. “You’re not a drug dealer. But you played the role to perfection a few years ago. Isabella, are you in league with this agent?”

“What? No.” Isabella crossed her arms. “How can you even accuse me of that? Our families have known each other for years. You can trust me.”

“Like hell we can,” Geneva said. “You lied to Mario after you overheard his phone conversation about the hit. Bought yourself time, Isabella, but your time is running out tonight.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Isabella said.

“You don’t,” she said, shaking her head. “Dear, you’re more idiotic than your parents. That conversation you overheard wasn’t an accident. We’d been planning this scenario ever since we learned you’d be at the gala. We knew you’d do everything in your power to protect the people responsible for my brother- and sister-in-law’s deaths. Pretending to deal was a good cover, but you’re outed.”

“Why do you hate my family so much? We did nothing.”

“Your parents conned my brother and his wife into an embezzlement scheme that led to their financial ruin and ultimately killed them while your mother and father got a second chance they didn’t deserve.” She locked her eyes onto Colton’s. “Your boyfriend getting involved is a bonus. A lovely bonus to bring down another agent from the DEA. One less asshole to combat when we set up our operations here in Virginia.”

ISABELLA'S HEART thudded against her sternum. They had set her up and God only knew what Genevra and Mario had planned for her, her brother, her parents. And now Colton. She took a deep breath, held it long enough to count to ten and released it slowly. When her pulse returned to a normal rate, she allowed herself to speak, not willing to betray the fear flowing in her veins.

"We were friends. Together in a terrible situation," Isabella said, searching Mario's face, trying to find the man she thought was a good one behind the hard planes of his cheeks etching a stark relief against his skin. "Victims of a massive mistake. Surely, you don't blame me or Rafe for our parents' mistakes."

"You had each other," Mario said. "Your *Nonno*, a life filled with summers at the vineyard, friends... your parents when they were released early from prison. I had no one."

"Until I realized they had shuttled him to my cousin's home, if you could call it that given how he neglected and abused my poor nephew," Genevra said, then walked to Mario and stroked his jaw. "My poor boy. If I had known sooner, I could have spared him. But my various business interests kept me moving around."

"You mean your crimes kept you on the run," Colton said, moving closer to Isabella. "Making it impossible to reach Mario."

"I had a break in my schedule which allowed me to intervene on my nephew's behalf," Genevra said. "He wanted to come after you years ago, but I convinced him to wait until we'd established a trust with your family. Then we'd take you down one by one."

The purr in Genevra's voice along with her ongoing touching of Mario's cheeks and jaw crept Isabella out. Perhaps Mario's aunt had more than a family interest in her nephew. Isabella tasted bile and licked her lips. Insanity had to run in the Rossi's blood. And if she didn't stop them, everyone she cared about would be targets.

"You wanted to trap me. You have," Isabella said. "But leave Colton out of this. He was just guarding me."

"The only reason I allowed him to live this long is I wanted to see your face when I kill him," Mario said.

"That will never happen." Colton slid his hand down Isabella's back, and she could feel him slip the speedboat's key into her back pocket. "Not if you want to get out of here alive."

The words were spoken to Genevra and Mario, but meant for Isabella's ears. She heard him loud and clear—get out as soon as she could find a way out.

Save herself. And hopefully get to the rest of her family before these monsters went after them too. But she had faith in Colton. He'd stop them.

Genevra narrowed her ice-blue eyes and studied him. Finally, she nodded. "Everything about you reeks of DEA interference again. Where are the rest of your agents?"

"I've got none stationed here."

"You haven't got back up?" Genevra asked, moving closer to them. "Why did you risk your neck for a stranger?"

"Deep cover. Only on a need to know basis with one handler. Isabella's interference meant including her or losing the bust."

"How unfortunate for both of you," Genevra said, casually examining her short, manicured nails before looking at them again. "But then you've got a habit of using women to get what you want, don't you? Women like Nina Lang."

"Part of the job."

"Excellent. Then they won't know where to look for you after I kill you," she said. "Mario, take

care of this scum. Then we'll see what we'll do with this little liar-who is the daughter of liars."

Colton pushed Isabella out of the way. "Hell no."

Silencer muffled shots popped. Head down, Isabella crawled on the deck, cried out when a sharp sting cut into her thigh. Instinctively, she reached and felt the slick goo of her blood. Its iron scent permeated the air. Still, she continued crawling toward the ladder.

"You're not going anywhere." Mario jerked her to her feet.

Her leg throbbed, but she couldn't let this asshole win. "Watch me." Ignoring the searing pain in her right thigh, she put all her strength into kicking him, hitting his shins while simultaneously grabbing his groin and squeezing until his grip slackened.

Her heart pounding in her ears, she twisted away, saw two more men exit the boat's main cabin with their guns.

"Run Isabella," Colton shouted. "Don't look back."

More shots cracked through the air. Her heart in her throat, she scrambled to the edge of the boat where they'd only climbed aboard minutes earlier. Before slipping open the half-door, she looked over her shoulder. Colton had Mario in his grip, edging back toward the cabin with his gun at Mario's temple.

*Dio.* She didn't want to see more. Her lungs screaming for more air, she gulped in breaths and made her way down the stairs. Overhead she continued to hear bullets zinging, the commands from Genevra to get Colton. Mario yelling for more help.

Suppressing sobs, focusing on the ropes linking the two boats together, another volley of bullets whizzed by her, pinging into the churning river water and reverberating off the speedboat. She dodged them, her fingers trembling as she worked frantically to untie the knots.

Everyone. Everything. Every person she held close to her heart depended on her to get away, find help. Finally... finally the ropes worked free just as the yacht's engine sprang to life and pulled away. *No. No. No.* The ropes tangled around her feet and tripped her. She plunged into the murky, swirling water and went into the depths.

"Where is she?" Mario called.

Her lungs barely inflated, she stayed below the surface and kicked her way out of the boat's path. Opening her eyes underwater, darkness engulfed her. Barely, she made out the shape of the speedboat's stern. Daring to risk being discovered, Isabella pushed her head out of the water long enough to inhale as much air as her lungs could hold. Then she slipped beneath the surface again.

The roar of the yacht's engine became a muffled, deadly reminder of what she had to do to save Colton... her parents... her family. Bullets entered the water near her left side. She frog kicked and stroked away.

They couldn't see her in this inky night. Only random shots to stop her continued to enter the water, but she left them behind, praying Colton hadn't already been killed. She prayed he'd overcome their manpower. Trusted he had the skills to free himself and stop them. No matter what, she had to get to the speedboat, figure out how to get into it, and find a way to contact the authorities.

Her clothes weighted her down, and her arms turned to lead, making it hard to move. Cold, icy water chilled her to the bone. Part of her wanted to sink, surrender to the elements pressing her down. The rest of her, the outraged parts of her, refused to listen to the siren of sleep.

*Don't give up. Focus. Stay the course.*

She kept the mantra going as she swam toward the hull until she reached the slick edge. Surfacing again, she took another breath and grasped the side and made her way slowly, painfully to the metal ladder that dipped below the waterline. The roar of the yacht's engine approaching sent waves of fear

through her. Her legs shook and every muscle in her arms fought her attempts to pull herself up the ladder.

Still, she had to try. She had to beat the yacht to get inside the boat and start the engine. Escape. Find help. Save herself. Save Colton...

The memories of him holding her, loving her, making plans for a future she wanted to have with him flashed. Adrenaline surged and she clasped the metal steps, then dragged herself up one rung at a time until she rolled onboard.

Anchor. She had to raise it before she could escape. Or could she just break the damn thing if she accelerated fast enough? She didn't have time to waste. Either she'd destroy the boat or she'd prevent a disaster.

Her heart in her throat, she crawled to the steering wheel and dragged out the key from her back pocket. Shaking uncontrollably, she missed the slot and dropped the key. *Damn. Get a grip, and get this boat started or you'll lose everything.* Freezing, she channeled her fear into anger. The heat of her rage toward Mario and his aunt fired into her nerves. She clawed the deck for the key and shoved it into the starter.

Lights approached and the sounds of gunfire still punctuated the air. But she didn't dare leave without trying to help Colton. Her heart in her throat, she gunned the engine and revved the accelerator... the boat lurched... jerked back... gritting her teeth, Isabella tried again and prayed she hadn't made a mistake of epic proportions when she throttled up the speed.

## CHAPTER 14

After Mario escaped his chokehold, Colton took shelter behind a lifejacket stand and returned fire. Gunfire, muffled by silencers and then joined by other shots Genevra's henchmen didn't bother to cover, pinged off the yacht's deck and the bulwark on the starboard side. Fuck.

Reloading his Glock with another magazine, he popped off more shots, bringing down one of Genevra's men.

"Pull up the anchor and start the engines," Genevra called, edging toward the main cabin. "We'll get them where no one will find their bodies."

Colton rolled out of the way, then heard the splash. His stomach turned to lead. Isabella had to be in the river. The temperatures were still frigid. Three other men ran port side and fired random shots into the water.

Another man moved into the cabin and the roar of the engine rushed into the air. Mario, clutching his arm, raced to the lifejacket stand. "You'll never save her," he yelled, shooting at Colton.

"Keep shooting. She's in there," Mario commanded as he grabbed Colton and put him into a headlock. "Bitch might know how to win medals, but she can't out swim bullets."

The acrid scent of blood, metallic and nauseating, filled Colton's nostrils. The only way he could save Isabella—if she was still alive—was to beat this gang of hoodlums on his terms. Reaching his free arm around Mario's neck, he flipped him over and pushed his gun against the jerk's temple. "Give me one reason not to kill you."

"We have other plans in the works," Mario grunted, sweat beading on his forehead. "You kill me and you'll never be able to stop us."

Colton knocked the base of his gun handle against Mario's temple. Mario's eyes rolled back, exposing the whites. Sufficiently satisfied that the bastard couldn't cause any more damage, Colton pushed him toward a pile of ropes and wrapped one around Mario's wrists, tying him to the bulwark's handrail.

One more down. Two more to go. Easing his way to the main cabin, he made out Genevra and the person captaining the yacht through one of the windows. Heaving a breath, he pressed his back against the side and checked his gun. Three more shots and only one magazine remained in his pockets.

He heard the speedboat come to life. Relief expanded his chest walls, renewing his focus. Isabella had managed to escape. But as the yacht turned away from the cove, he clenched his jaw. They were going after Isabella.

He had to stop Genevra before she barreled into the speedboat.

Whatever Mario and his bat-shit crazy aunt had in store for Isabella's family would be destroyed



if he killed either of them. But that might be the best way to protect Isabella.

The river yacht built speed and accelerated toward the speedboat, Isabella at the wheel. He had one chance to save Isabella and stop the wheels of destruction Genevra had put into motion. But, as he bust his way into the cabin, firing his gun, he prayed his decision wouldn't end up with him losing Isabella.

Genevra crumpled to the deck, clutching her stomach. "*Bastardo*," she cried.

Her henchman released the wheel, but not before getting off a shot at Colton. Dodging the bullets, he fired another shot and brought the man down. The yacht careened, speeding toward the rocks jutting out of the water just in front of the cove's shore.

Bracing himself, he moved toward the wheel.

Genevra grabbed his leg. "This doesn't end today," she said, tugging his jeans. "Not unless you go down with me."

Before he could take the wheel and attempt to swerve away, the boat's bow hit the first rocks, jerking him forward. He hit his head on the console, stars flashed behind his eyes, then everything went black.

GRIPPING the steering wheel as the speedboat wrenched free of the anchor mooring it, Isabella watched in horror as the luxury yacht hit the rocks fortifying the cove's shoreline. "*Dio*. No." This couldn't be happening. Something had gone terribly wrong on board.

Colton. His trouble had gone from bad to worse.

He'd told her to escape. But she couldn't leave without trying to save him first.

Her teeth chattered so hard that her skull rattled. *Think Isabella. You can't just barrel in there without a plan.* Scanning the scene, she noted zero movement on the yacht's deck. Most likely, Colton had taken down the people working for Genevra.

She had to believe he'd neutralized everyone otherwise the yacht wouldn't have rammed into the outcrop of rocks. Then she heard Mario screaming in Italian for Genevra to release him.

Her muscles tightened and her heartbeat accelerated, catapulting a rush of thunder into her ears. She shook off her fear, determined to stop them, refusing to give anyone an opportunity to escape. She slowed the speedboat down, then lifted the Marine radio.

Pressing the call button, she hailed the emergency channel three times, then said, "This is the *Wanderer*. Over."

A voice cutting in and out answered, "This is River Rescue Delta One, switch to channel nine. Over."

She repeated the station call. "This is the *Wanderer*. Roger channel nine. Out," she said, then quickly switched to the new station. Only a few seconds passed before someone communicated with her.

Her pulse racing, she nearly forgot protocol, fear for Colton driving her. "Boat capsize on Black River. Lives at stake." Though the only one she cared about rescuing was Colton. "Over."

"What are your coordinates? Over."

"I don't know exactly." Colton hadn't given her the longitude and latitude of their meet up before he'd decided to run the operation without her. "But we're about an hour from Black River Trail Outfitters' dock. There's a cove. Over."

“Lots of coves out there. Can you be more specific? Over.”

Waves lapped against the sides. An owl hooted in the distance and a stand of cattails rustled near the shoreline. Besides the rocks that had impaled the yacht, she shared the additional details. “Colton Sutler. He says only a handful of people know about this cove, but it’s close to another one.” The place where they’d made love only a few days earlier. “Over.”

A sob caught in her throat. What if she never felt the slide of his body against hers again? “He used to go there with his friends to party. Over.”

“That one I know. You think you’re east or west of it? Over.”

She noted the moon overhead. Remembered the feel of the sun on her back dipped below the horizon only hours earlier. “East. Over.”

“We’re heading that way now. You got a flare in your boat? Over.”

“I don’t know. I’ll look,” she said as she cruised toward the listing yacht. “There are injuries. People dead. We’ll need medical people. State police. Over.”

“Hang on. We’ll find you. Get that flare gun and shoot it when you do. Over.”

“I will,” she said, but she wouldn’t wait for help to arrive before going to save Colton. “Over and out.”

She cut the engine, allowed the speedboat to float in the river a few feet away from the yacht while she finally checked her leg. The bullet had grazed her thigh and it throbbed like hell, but she’d survive the flesh wound. Quickly, she unearthed the first aid box in the center console and withdrew gauze which she wrapped tightly around the impacted area. She wouldn’t do Colton any good if she let the injury go untreated.

Staying low, she grabbed a blanket from the same console to cover her shoulders and bring her a measure of warmth while she searched for a flare gun inside the starboard storage units. She opened side panel after side panel until she found the distinctive orange case.

She opened it and retrieved the flare gun, then took one of the six flares out and loaded it.

If she shot one off, she’d alert whoever was still alive on board the yacht. Gritting her teeth, she decided to wait until she got back on the luxury boat’s deck before shooting the flare into the air. She grabbed a tote bag and dumped out the sunblock lotions, hairbrushes, and water toys. After loading the flare gun with one shot already in it she added the other flares as Mario’s screams for help continued to punctuate the air.

No one answered. And no one exited the cabin.

A band tightened around her lungs, and the backs of her eyes stung with jabs of heat. She swallowed past a lump in her throat and pushed down the fear and anxiety with every ounce of strength she had within her.

After shedding the blanket, she securely tucked the tote bag over her shoulder and torso. Then she tossed a looped rope to the yacht’s fenders. Missed. *Merda. Concentrate. You don’t have time to make mistakes.* Once again, she inhaled a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, willed the adrenaline making her arms shake to evaporate as she exhaled. When the trembling subsided, she squinted and lobbed the looped rope again. This time it caught the fender, hooking the boats together again.

Coming in at an angle, she allowed the river water to draw them together. She pulled to draw the boats closer, then hitched the line to the cleat. Carefully, she climbed to the half-door, gagging on the acrid scent of blood. When she reached the half-door, she stayed on her hands and knees, careful not to betray her presence before peering over the edge.

Bodies lay sprawled on the deck. All dead except for one.

Mario. But he wasn't going anywhere. Not with the way Colton had tied him down. Still cautious, she looked for Geneva. No sign of her.

Though every inch of her wanted to avoid the carnage waiting for her inside, she pushed the handle down and the half-door creaked open. Now or never. She withdrew the loaded flare gun and crawled back onto the deck.

"Geneva. She's here," Mario yelled. "Isabella's here."

Heat flushed through her body, her anger replacing cold dread. "Yes. And I'm not leaving without seeing you get arrested," Isabella yelled, shooting the flare gun and watching it light the sky.

The cabin door bust open. Colton weaved in the entrance with Geneva struggling in his powerful arms. "Get off this boat before you get yourself killed," he yelled.

She made out a gun in Geneva's hand as Colton held one arm high, blood dripping down his face and into eyes. A shot fired, ricocheted off the starboard bulwark next to Isabella.

Love filled her chest, expanded throughout her veins, warming her from the inside. Colton needed her whether or not he thought so. She laid low, rolled behind a stack of life jackets. "Not without you," she answered while reloading the flare gun.

The sound of motors echoed in the distance. Whoever she'd contacted had located them. All she had to do was buy enough time until they arrived.

The yacht listed, ropes and life jackets slid down the deck, dumping into the water churning below with loud splashes. Colton and Geneva dropped, rolling over and over each other until screeching to a halt when crashed into the yacht's stern.

The gun still flashed in Geneva's hand, but Colton's had joined it as he battled to wrench it away from her. Isabella held onto the railing on the side to steady herself and fired her second flare just as the sound of another shot went off.

Screams filled the air. Everything seemed to slow to a standstill as the bodies grappling on the deck stopped moving. She crawled to the lifeless bodies, her heart in her throat until she reached Colton. His face was pale, blood caked the skin at his temple and bruises mottled his cheeks, brow and jaw.

Fumbling for his wrist to check for a pulse, Isabella couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but the mind-numbing horror that she'd lost the only man she'd ever cared about. The only man she believed she could love if they'd had the chance.

COLTON COULDN'T MOVE. Not with Geneva's weight on him. Hell. His head stung like a son of a bitch and he couldn't make out anything but hazy shapes when he pried open his eyes. The deck beneath his back lurched again, shifting him closer to the edge of the yacht.

The whir of motors approaching and sobbing permeated his muddled brain. "Colton," a strained voice begged. "*Dio*. You're covered in blood. Please don't die. Please don't leave me."

"I won't," he managed to croak. "But if we don't get off this thing, we're in trouble."

The crushing sensation evaporated as Isabella rolled Geneva's body off him. "Don't worry," Isabella said when her gorgeous face came into view. "Help is on the way."

The yacht listed again and creaking timbers along with the crack of wood snapping ripped through the air. "You shouldn't have come back."

"I had to," she said, caressing his face. "There wasn't any other way to let the authorities know

how to find you.”

He caught her hand in his. “I should be mad at you, but damn it. You did good.”

“So, did you.” She glanced at the body lying next to him, drew in a sharp breath and a tremor moved through her body before she looked away. “She’s dead.”

“Mario,” he said, wanting to close his eyes, sleep. He fought off the concussion’s pressure. “We have to save him. He knows more.”

Her brown eyes narrowed. “You first,” she said.

Floodlights blasted the yacht with a yellow glow and a siren blared. “Lower your weapons. No sudden moves,” someone called through a loudspeaker. “We’re coming aboard.”

The roar of helicopter beaters sounded overhead. Another spotlight beamed down on the yacht, illuminating the entire deck. “How many injured?” another voice called over a second loudspeaker.

“Two,” Isabella called, waving toward the light.

The yacht listed again and they slid toward the side. Colton grabbed a rope and held onto Isabella’s waist. “Hang on. Don’t let go.”

“Never,” she said, clinging to him. “I’ll never let you go again.”

Wind swirled around them, and Isabella’s hair whipped against her pale cheeks. Bits of algae clung to the strands and a smear of mud streaked across her nose. She never looked more beautiful. “That makes two of us,” he said, lifting a hand to caress her jaw, ghosting his fingertips across her shivering lips.

She kissed them one by one. “Just don’t die on me.”

“That’s not happening. Not today.” But he definitely wanted to pass out. “You think you can handle regular life after all this excitement?”

“I doubt anything will be regular when I’m with you.” She tilted her head toward the night sky where a rescue basket lowered from the helicopter. “They’re here.”

The yacht continued to lurch and more timbers cracked. Genevra’s body slid over the edge and splashed into the dark river. The waves slapped the boat and sent water cascading onboard.

A red-headed woman wearing a uniform he didn’t recognize didn’t waste a second, quickly assessing the situation. “You’re going into shock, and she’s not far behind.” She radioed the helicopter. “Two with injuries, gunshot wounds and a head wound. I’m sending them both up. The rest are dead except for one.” She lifted Colton and put him on the gurney, then turned to Isabella. “We’ll send a second basket for you after we get him on board.”

“Mario Rossi. He’s wanted for murder and drug trafficking,” Colton rasped while the medic strapped him in. “Cuff him. I want him alive for questioning.”

“You with the FBI?”

“DEA. Special cover.”

“The sheriff will want your badge once you’re stable.” She looked at Isabella’s tourniquet. “You get hit?”

“Yes. But it’s just a graze.”

“You’ll need stitches.” The medic tapped the gurney basket, sent a thumbs up signal to the man waiting in the helicopter’s open bay. “See you in a few.”

The basket raised toward the hovering helicopter while the medic signaled for another basket and made her way toward Mario who clung to the boat’s rail, the knotted rope still holding him fast.

By the time Isabella reached the inside of the open bay, Colton didn’t care if Mario lived or died. He only cared about the woman leaning over him with concern in her eyes. He’d almost lost her, but he still didn’t know how in the hell he’d keep her after they got through tonight.

## CHAPTER 15

Colton winced when he looked at his reflection in the mirror. The bruise on his forehead had turned an ugly shade of mustard rimmed with puke brown. A butterfly band aid covered the five stitches near his hairline. And the angry red scratches on his jaw where Genevra had clawed him did nothing to offset the damage done to the rest of his face.

He refused to avoid seeing her despite the reality of their impending separation. They cared for each other, but he couldn't wrap his brain around how to make anything permanent come from the intensity of their connection.

"You ready yet?" Spencer asked. "Everyone's waiting for you." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and leveled his gaze onto Colton's.

Not really. Not when it meant saying goodbye to someone he cared about and still had no idea how to make things work now that he'd completed his assignment. "Sure, just wish I didn't look like shit."

Spencer clapped him on the back. "Why change things?" he asked, his voice teasing but the concern in his dark brown eyes spoke the truth. His friend had gotten to Magnolia Falls' hospital in record time when he'd learned about Colton's brush with death.

Colton's sister and Alexandra hadn't arrived immediately afterward. Though his heart should have been full knowing that his family, his friends, and his hometown community considered him a hero, Colton didn't feel anything but hollow. He'd be returning to D.C. the following week.

He hid the sense of dissatisfaction with a grin as he turned away from his reflection. "Just doing my bit to make the rest of you assholes look better than me," he said. "My gift to humanity."

"You wish." Spencer adjusted his glasses again. "It's your last day with Isabella before she returns to Italy. You sure you're okay?"

"Never better. I've tons to look forward to and we made no promises to each other."

"Just business as usual?"

"You could say that."

He and Isabella had stopped the cartel and she'd been by his side in the hospital, afterward too. But now that he'd completed his assignment, he had a new one to dig into despite his desire to stay in Magnolia Falls.

And nothing to offer Isabella other than taking a chance on a guy risking his life while engaging in more undercover missions. Now that the adrenaline, the rush of the case had evaporated, what did they really have to hold them together? And yet, he still wanted her. He finally found someone he could envision being with forever, but he didn't know how to bridge the concrete differences between them.

They lived in two different worlds. Polar opposites with little in common other than the heat that had brought them together. But still he'd grown to respect and trust her with so much. His heart had tumbled for her. Hard. Plus, no way could he risk anyone else he loved because of his job at the DEA.

He tossed the desire, the wanting aside. *Focus on today. Enjoy what you had and say goodbye.* "Let's go," Colton said, grabbing his jean jacket and for once not carrying his weapon. "Don't want to waste what little time I have left with her." At least he could let her go with the knowledge that her family wasn't in danger. They'd stopped Mario's insane plans after he'd confessed what he'd put into motion.

Her brother had extra bodyguards as a matter of course as the husband of one of America's top Hollywood stars. And a mysterious entity of security personnel had infiltrated Mario's resort, then spirited Isabella's parents to safety before anyone could act on the Conti scheme.

He exited the suite he'd been staying in, careful to avoid the packed designer suitcases propped by the door. The sheer volume of her wardrobe along with the expensive luggage served as another reminder of their differences. Differences that stood in stark relief against the backdrop of the rustic mountain scenery since the case that had brought them together no longer existed.

Maybe it had all been a mirage after all. Born out of a shared mission, nothing more. And now that the thrill of the danger had disappeared, he and Isabella had nothing to bind them together.

But he'd make damn sure this last day would be special. They owed each other that much. Hell, he owed her that and more.

He and Spencer hurried down the circular staircase and stepped outside. "There you are," his sister said, looking up from the buffet table she'd filled with her trademark delicious appetizers, desserts, and a carving board of succulent beef, herbed chicken breasts, and seafood dishes that'd tempt even the most hardened mariner.

Isabella stood next to Alexandra, a glass of Saxon chardonnay wine in her hand. Sunlight haloed around her face, giving her an ethereal glow and the breeze flowing in from the mountains picked up the hem of her skirt, making it dance around her long, gorgeous legs.

He raised his hand and called her name. She locked her deep brown eyes onto Colton's and smiled. His heart squeezed and a strange floating sensation made the brick patio tilt beneath his feet.

After she left, he'd miss her. A lot.

He'd miss that smile, the intensity of her passion for her family, the commitment to them and the willingness to do whatever she needed to make sure everything would turn out all right. Bravery, courage underscored her decisions, her actions selfless and giving.

She'd fought for him that night on the river. And he'd returned the favor by letting her go. Fuck. He'd acted like a total ass. Christ. How could he let her go when she embodied everything he'd ever wanted in a woman?

He couldn't. Not now. Glancing at the family and friends he'd had his entire life as they milled around the patio, laughing and talking, a pang lanced behind his sternum.

He wouldn't to let her go. Period.

A plan forming, he grabbed a glass of wine from a passing server's tray and moved toward Isabella. The adrenaline and danger that had pushed them together no longer existed, but the heat blazing between them still did and he wanted to feel the burn a whole hell of a lot longer.

His mind made up, he'd turn in his resignation, walk away from the DEA, make a go of the trail outfitters. Maybe, after he got his business up and running, he'd have the freedom to be with Isabella. If she'd forgive him for being a world-class fool for not figuring out how until now.

ISABELLA'S HEART tumbled in her chest when Colton crossed the patio to stand in front of her. He still carried the bruises and cuts on his face which reminded her daily since their near miss on the river he'd almost died, but she found him even more handsome.

"I was just telling Alexandra that I'm planning to come back next year," she said quietly without betraying the need rushing through her veins.

"Yes. We've got big plans for a new event," Alexandra said. "Plus, should you invest in Black River Outfitters, we can tie your company into the overarching theme. Executive retreat."

"Adventure during the day," Isabella said. "Sophistication in the evenings."

"I'm planning on putting my energy into rebooting the trail outfitters," Colton said, holding her gaze.

His gray eyes seemed to draw her into him. Her pulse kicked up a notch. "But running Black River will be less exciting than working for the DEA."

"That's true, but I've found I prefer finding my excitement in new ways," he said.

"Oh?" She sipped her wine and gazed at him over her glass's rim. *Don't let him see how much you want him to admit he really cares. That this insanity between them meant more to him too.* "I suppose white water rafting will be adventurous." Better to let him focus on the life he wanted to build from the time he lost his brother-in-law. Let him be there for his sister, his friends. Let him be there for himself.

He'd earned that much. But oh, how she wished she could be part of that future too. They could at least try. If only to see where all this heat flowing between them would go. After all, cross continental relationships were possible. Her brother had proven that when he proposed to his famous Hollywood star.

Alexandra coughed discreetly, then stepped back. "I'll go check on that limo I ordered for you," she said. "Catch you later."

"Yeah, later," Colton said without looking at his friend, still holding her eyes with his. "So this adventure thing... I have a different idea about what that means now." He slipped one hand into hers, intertwining their fingers.

Her heart stuttered. "You do?" she asked, afraid and yet wishing he'd say the right words.

"I do." He moved a little closer. "I want one with you."

Bubbles popped along her veins, lifting her spirits. Hope bloomed and reached into every crevice of her heart. "That'll be hard with us being in two different countries, running two businesses, dealing with two families who rely on us."

"True, but the way I see it is that anyone who's brave enough to tackle a criminal cartel with zip experience has what it takes to make all those variables work," he said softly.

She lowered her lashes, then raised them again to take in the expectant look in his sister's face, his friends' knowing ones. "And how do you propose we make each other happy when we're miles apart?" She gestured to his family and friends who had joined them for their final breakfast. "You belong here. With your sister and your friends, running your business, building the life you deserve."

"I'm not sure I need to live here full time to be where I belong," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and caressing her cheek.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to explore this thing between us and see where it leads. I have a feeling it'll take us both

to where we need to be...”

“Where’s that?”

Colton caressed her face, then lowered his mouth to within a scant millimeter of her lips.  
“Together, Isabella,” he said, then kissed her.



## EPILOGUE

*Later that evening...*

“You’re sure about quitting the Drug Enforcement Agency?” Alexandra asked while placing three champagne glasses onto the wine tasting room’s counter.

Colton wrapped his arm around Isabella’s shoulders. “Not going to lie,” he said. “I’ll miss the adrenaline rush of being out in the field, but not the red tape tying my hands.”

“If you could eliminate the red tape, still make a difference,” she continued as she deftly popped her vineyard’s signature sparkling wine, “and have the life you want with Isabella, would you consider being an operative again?” She poured three glasses, raised one and tilted it toward him.

A glint of steel entered her sharp, hazel eyes. He held his friend’s gaze and tightened his hold on Isabella’s now stiff shoulders. “Considering there’s no way to do that, I haven’t.” He picked up the remaining glasses, then passed one to Isabella. “I’ve made my mind up. There’s no way I’m giving up Isabella.”

“I’m not talking about serving our government,” Alexandra said. “However, my company would love to hire you.”

He laughed. “I’m not a vintner.”

She moved to the opposite side of the bar, shot him and Isabella a glance. “No kidding. However, I’m not talking about my vineyard interests,” she said, then pushed a bottle in the wine rack deeper into the wall.

The wall receded from the back counter and swung to the right to reveal another, modern room that seemed to go on forever.

Adrenaline charged through his veins, careened into his brain with rapid fire. He shook his head, clenched and unclenched his fists to ward off the stinging sensation. “What the fuck?” Standing, he stared at the rows of desks and people sitting in front of them while working on sleek computer monitors and keyboards.

“You know, Colton. I wish I’d known about your off-the-grid sting operation a lot sooner,” Alexandra said, waving her arm in a come-on-in motion. “Would have saved me a ton of time and legwork. I hated thinking one of my old friends could be a drug smuggler.”

“You thought I...,” Colton said as Isabella hopped off her chair to stand beside him. He took her cool hand in his, then they made their way around the bar top.

“This is crazy,” Isabella said. “Who are you? Why would you even begin to believe Colton is a criminal?”

Alexandra sipped her champagne before speaking again. “Trust me.” She held Colton’s gaze. “I didn’t want to even after I received the intelligence report from my operatives. That’s why I

investigated him myself. And you too.”

Isabella’s breath hitched. “The business trip.” Her voice trailed off. “You were checking us out??”

“Yes. There’s no way I’d have let anyone else follow up on the investigative report I received regarding Genevra and her activities with Mario.” Alexandra tilted her head toward the room. “I can tell you everything once we’re in a secure zone. Let’s go in where we can talk freely.”

Every sound in the room beyond amplified a notch. More adrenaline bolted into his nerves. He didn’t know this side of Alexandra, but he liked the possibilities she dangled in front of him.

He looked beyond the rows of desks, recognized the woman who’d rescued him days earlier. She stood in front of one of the big screen consoles. Interesting. “I’m ready to listen,” he said.

“Excellent.” Alexandra hooked her arms into Isabella’s and his, then guided them toward the bustling hive of activity. “Now that we’ve confirmed you’re one of the good guys, I’d like to extend an offer to you. If Isabella’s willing to go along with my proposal.”

“Me?” Isabella asked after the secret panel shut behind them.

“Yes.” Alexandra continued making her way into the room.

Walking beside her, Colton indicated the red-head. “I recognize her from the helicopter ride,” he said. “I thought her uniform wasn’t standard military or local cops, but I wasn’t firing on all cylinders when she showed up.”

“Yes. Tori Mason. One of our best field operatives. She was between assignments so I put her on your watch.”

“What about Mario? The arrest of those assholes?”

“Turned over to the proper authorities after we finished interrogating them.” Alexandra stopped in front of a satellite screen. “You see that lovely piece of property? I’d love to install my Italian branch of operations there.”

“Wait. What?” Isabella asked. “I don’t understand.”

Colton peered at the image. “Looks like a vineyard.”

“Correct. Terra Cavelli’s to be exact,” Alexandra said. “The location’s excellent for my expansion. The only thing I’m missing is a strong commander.”

“Commander of what? And how in the hell did you get into the business of busting crime?”

“Part of my heritage.” She let him go, then moved to stand beside a crest painted on the wall next to the satellite screen. “That elite school I attended in France after I graduated high school was a training ground for when I took over the real family business. Covert Rescuers’ Undercover Shield. C.R.U.S.H.”

He wrapped his arm around Isabella’s waist and they moved toward where his friend stood smiling. “Intriguing. How are you funded? An operation this big has got to cost tons of money to run.”

“My great-grandfather’s vast wealth along with three other men’s investment initially established CRUSH,” she said. “Plus, we broker secret contracts with the government. They hire us for off-the-grid missions whenever red tape ties their hands. Spencer Caldwell oversees and manages our portfolio among other tasks. We’re well in the black.”

“Ah, that would explain why you could lure him back to Magnolia Falls.” The ongoing hum of sophisticated technology and computers buzzed in his ears. “Why establish headquarters in Italy?”

“One of our original founders was Italian. A bomb strike destroyed his headquarters during the second world war,” she said. “We’ve wanted to rebuild there for years to reestablish another firm foothold in Europe. And to honor his name.”

“How many headquarters does CRUSH have?” he asked.

“Four. Five if you agree,” Alexandra said. “Most of our agents live regular lives until we assign them to a new mission.”

“I’m interested, but Black River Outfitters still needs to re-open,” he said. “This area needs the tourism.” And a way to ward off the ongoing temptation of easy money gained by dealing drugs.

She held his gaze. “I’ve already got that covered if you say yes.”

He looked at his friend, then glanced toward Isabella. “I want to give you an affirmative, but not if Isabella’s against the idea.”

Isabella held onto him. “I’m game if you are,” she said. “Just as long as I never have to chase criminals again.”

He read the motto running alongside the bottom of the crest. *Courage Defies Danger*. “This could still bring threats into our lives. Are you sure?” he asked, though he prayed she’d say yes.

“I am. You’d never let anything happen to me. But one day... if we have a family...”

“You’d be completely off the grid,” Alexandra put her hand on his shoulder, “running the operations behind the scenes and coordinating with my other commanders and the government. Out of the field, but still in the game of busting crime, terror and the usual assortment of crap bad people want to do to make our world a dangerous place. So what do you say?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yes.” Once, he’d thought he’d lost everything, but he had all that he needed and loved here in this room with Isabella with a stellar opportunity to continue making a difference in the world.

“Excellent,” Alexandra said. “Welcome to CRUSH.”

DEAR READER,

I hope you loved Colton and Isabella’s story as much as I loved writing about their journey to their Happily Ever After. COVERT SEDUCTION is part of my sexy, action packed contemporary romance series! Covert Rescuers’ Undercover Shield (C.R.U.SH./CRUSH) is an elite team of undercover operatives acting to bring justice to the world.

CRUSH... where *Courage Defies Danger* and love is always on the line!

Here’s a peek at [DANGEROUS AFFAIR](#)...

CEO Dylan Wainwright could use a break. Someone from the dark web stole millions from his company’s account and rerouted the cash to an unknown entity. He also has a mysterious enemy who wants him dead. He hires help, but he didn’t expect to be working day and night with the super-hot undercover operative Tori Mason. Despite another attempt on his life, he’s forced to bring her to his family’s estate in the Hamptons for a gala. While there, he’ll fake a relationship with her until they catch the culprits behind the theft and stop the threats against him.

Keeping his desire for her a secret is a different story.

Tori always keeps her personal feelings separate from her missions. Until her commander assigns her to protect Dylan. A man she once had a crush on when they attended the same university. Not only does the past come back to haunt her, but Dylan is even sexier than she remembered. He makes it clear he’d love to act on the attraction sizzling between them. When danger closes in on him again, she’ll show Dylan and the culprit just what the new Tori is made of.

KEEP READING for an excerpt from [DANGEROUS AFFAIR](#)...

Riding the elevator up to his office, Dylan Wainwright focused his attention on the floor numbers and counted them instead of paying attention to the bodyguard he'd hired two weeks ago. Used to his privacy, he didn't like being tailed 24/7, but two close calls on the road and other suspicious life and death incidents had given him no choice in the matter. He'd be damned if he died before he discovered who'd stolen hundreds of thousands from him and his investors.

They reached the twentieth floor and the doors opened. He stepped into the lobby without glancing back.

"Whoa. Hold on a minute," his bodyguard said. "Slow down."

Her sharp command stopped him in his tracks. "Sorry, Tori. Just not used to getting followed or waiting around for people." And he sure wasn't expecting a leggy, redheaded, gorgeous woman to protect him when he'd contacted her private agency.

But hell, hindsight was 20/20 and Tori Mason knew what she was doing, given her excellent references and her agency's top-notch reputation.

"Hello? You hired me, remember?"

"Yeah. I know. And you're damn good at your job." Maybe too good. And way too sexy, which added another layer of complication to his situation. He needed space to think, root out the trail to his missing cash. Thinking didn't come easily when he had the hots for his bodyguard.

"Thanks." She moved beside him. "You seem grouchier than usual. What's up?" she asked as they made their way to his corner suite and entered the spacious rooms.

"I'm still no closer to discovering the asshole who diverted my investment for Prism Tech." He'd met with his new financial team and accountants, some of whom had invested in the research as a favor to him, but they got him nowhere. And one of them could be the thief. Regardless, if he didn't find out fast, Prism's board members would be suspicious. Didn't help his annual meeting would be in less than a month. They could strip him from his position, and worse, slap him with charges.

Then his father would want to get involved. And after Anthony Wainwright's health scare, Dylan didn't want to risk his father's life by adding stress. One heart attack had been frightening enough.

She closed the door, shut out the thrumming workforce in the accounting cubicles. "Along with providing you round the clock protection, our agency can help you with that too, if you'll let them."

Dylan paused at his desk, scrubbed his hand over his face, hating the impotence, hating the damned death of fiancée more than ever. He'd wanted to do something positive after Becky died a year ago after a fucking laser on the windshield caused his pilots to lose control. No one survived the impact. So as his family company's Chief Financial Officer, he'd taken a huge gamble and invested a hefty amount of his own money in Prism's Research and Development department to create a counter measure to prevent similar incidents.

He'd done so while continuing to work for his family's company. Multiple projects energized him and he thrived on the challenges. Plus, keeping busy meant stuffing his feelings about Becky's death into a mental closet.

While originally, he didn't want to involve Tori's secret organization in his business affairs, now he realized he needed their expertise despite his misgivings. "I'll consider your offer on one condition."

She sat down across from him. "You're the one paying the bill," she said holding his gaze with steady, brandy-colored eyes. "What do you want?"

You can keep reading this sexy love story! Order [DANGEROUS AFFAIR](#) today!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* Bestselling Author Christine Glover writes sexy, intriguing contemporary romances. She loves discovering how her determined heroines and super sexy heroes with heart journey toward their own happily ever afters. Her characters are real people from all walks of life who embody classic love stories with a modern twist. She enjoys finding the silly in the serious, making wine out of sour grapes, and giving people giggle fits along with heartfelt hugs. When she's not writing, you can find her traveling the world, cooking gourmet food, and desperately seeking a corkscrew.

If you enjoyed this book and would like to leave an honest review, Christine would really appreciate it because that's how other readers discover their new Happily Ever Afters.

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