

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN YOU

By Victoria Paige

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CHAPTER ONE

Bullets shattered the rear windshield as their car careened dangerously close to the steep embankment. Their vehicle swerved left, the motion catapulting Caitlin to the right of the backseat. She lost hold of her gun.

“Are you all right?” Jase yelled from the driver’s seat.

“I will be once you learn how to drive.”

“Stop fucking around, Caitlin. Did you get hit?”

Caitlin didn’t answer him; instead, she groped through the darkness for her Beretta. Finding the weapon, she resumed her shooting position. With the barrier of the windshield gone, it was now easier to fire from the car.

Another spray of bullets zinged past their car. If their attackers managed to shoot out their tires, it would be game over.

“Keep the car straight!” Caitlin screeched as she hunkered down, keeping herself steady by kneeling on a leg and bracing her other foot against the seat in front of her. With two hands gripping the gun, she focused below the glaring headlights of the black SUV pursuing them.

“Steady...” Caitlin muttered more to herself.

Deep breath and hold. Focus. Squeeze trigger.

Almost simultaneous with the recoil of her gun, their attackers’ car listed to the right and then fishtailed before screeching to a halt.

“Fucking A!” Jase shouted, thumping the steering wheel with his fist. “Good job, buttercup!”

Caitlin grunted and shook the shards of glass from her hair. She hadn’t had time

to gather her blonde locks in a ponytail. The minute Jase had barged into their apartment and ordered her to get moving, she'd known that there hadn't been a second to spare.

She scooted in between the front seats and plopped down on the passenger side. After his initial exhilaration, Jase had gone deathly quiet. And he had winced.

"Are you hurt, Jase?"

"It's nothing."

"Where?"

"I said it's nothing!" he snapped.

"Pull over."

"Are you nuts? You know they hunt in pairs. Their backup won't be too far behind."

Caitlin knew he was right. She could feel some glass cuts on her knees and forearms, but they were superficial. If he was shot, he needed attention. Bleeding out was not an option. They couldn't go to a hospital without attracting attention, and the quicker they attended to the injury, the less likely they'd wind up there.

"If it were me—"

"Damn it! Left shoulder blade, okay?"

"Is there—"

"No exit wound."

"Jase—"

With a muffled curse, he pulled off to the side of the road. They were twenty miles from Berlin on a two-lane country road lined with trees, tall grass, and miles and miles of nothing. This was their eighth escape in three years. They had gotten better at evading whoever wanted them dead. The first time was challenging because Caitlin had been encumbered by the casts on her leg and arm. She had cried for Jase to leave her, but he had refused, and somehow they had made it out alive.

Caitlin shuddered at the memory as she got out of the car. "The medical kit is in the trunk."

Just as she reached the back of their vehicle, it shot forward twenty feet.

Her heart leapt into her throat. *Was Jase abandoning her? What the hell?*

A backpack was tossed out; she watched as it tumbled down the ditch.

Caitlin ran toward the car knowing Jase had already rolled up all the windows. She had a brief image of herself climbing through the broken rear windshield.

She angrily tried the door. Locked.

She banged on his window. He was staring straight ahead, his jaw working convulsively. Finally, he lowered his window an inch.

“What are you doing?” Caitlin screeched.

“I’m a dead man walking, Caitlin,” Jase said sadly. “They could still leave you alone. But they want me dead.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“There’s a village about two miles up,” he continued without answering her question. “Hide there for two days, and then go to the American Embassy in Berlin.”

Caitlin was confused. “They’ll arrest me.”

Jase sighed, his shoulders slumping. “No, they won’t.”

“I don’t understand.” Fear started clawing up her throat. There was a grim resoluteness on his face—one she had never seen before. “Open the fucking door, Jase.”

“I didn’t mean for it to end this way between us,” he whispered.

“You’re scaring me.”

There was a suspicious sheen in his eyes. He lowered the window, reached out with his good arm, pulled her head down and kissed her. Just as quickly, he let her go. “It’s time for you to stop running. I’m not the one you love.”

With that cryptic message, the man who had been her rock for three years left her by the side of the road.

Travis Blake stared at the stack of résumés before him and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. For every ten he received, only one deserved a call. He had been interviewing applicants for the past two days, and only three had made the cut.

Blake Security Inc. had made its name by providing high-quality security services. Each client had different needs and each client's profile was individually assessed by any of his five team managers before they made recommendations in terms of manpower and equipment requirements. Most of his clients were politicians and foreign dignitaries. He frequently received assignments from the Secret Service, and his deep connections within the CIA and FBI didn't hurt either.

In just two short years, he had cultivated a client list of the who's who in Washington DC. Repeat business and word of mouth had quickly turned his security company into a multimillion-dollar enterprise.

"Will that be all, Travis?" a lilting musical voice spoke from the entrance of his office. Emily was his personal assistant. She was married to Edward Shephard, one of his team managers and a former Navy SEAL just like Travis. Emily did everything from office management to logistics, and Travis was thankful that he had her to take care of the mundane activities that went with running a business. With the rapid growth of BSI, Ed had been grumbling to Travis about hiring an assistant for Emily, who was consistently putting in almost sixty hours a week.

Travis glanced up at Emily, his eyes cutting over to the clock on the wall. It was 8:00 p.m. on Friday night.

"Yes, Em. Thanks. Sorry for keeping you so late."

"If you need me to stay, Travis, I can."

"No, I'll be bugging out soon," Travis lied. "Go on home. Ed's arriving tonight, right?"

"Yes, his flight arrives at nine."

"Enjoy your weekend."

Emily hesitated at the door. A troubled look crossed her face, and it seemed like she was about to say something, but changed her mind. "You too, Travis. See you Monday."

After Emily left, Travis leaned back in his chair and sighed, thankful that Emily had not lectured him again about finding a girlfriend. His eyes drifted to the photograph on his desk—a picture of an achingly beautiful woman with long blonde hair and the

most amazing hazel eyes. Sarah . . .

No. He would not allow himself to think about her tonight. He'd done enough of that this morning when he'd sat in front of his laptop at 2:00 a.m. and looked for her. If anyone knew of his predawn habits, he would lose his business and would be committed to an asylum. A man looking for his dead wife—if that didn't scream of insanity, he didn't know what else would. Three years ago, his mind had buried her. She was in a closed casket. All logic dictated that the DNA result and autopsy hadn't lied. But his heart and soul had refused to accept that the putrid flesh the authorities had recovered, which Travis had banished beneath six feet of earth, was his Sarah.

Travis stood up and walked to the liquor cabinet to pour himself some Scotch.

Not a single day. For three years, not a single day had passed without him thinking of her. Although the ache in his heart had dulled with the passage of time, it could sometimes still spike to an unbearable pain. Like this week—tomorrow would be their wedding anniversary. They would have been married for five years. He'd only had her for two.

But there was a method to his madness. A little over two years ago, while working security for a senator, Travis had managed to take down an assassin. The coroner had sent him pictures of all the man's markings to determine if he belonged to any organization. He had many tattoos, including one on the sole of his foot that looked like the infinity symbol. Sarah had the same mark in the same location. She'd told him she had done it as a form of teenage rebellion.

He threw back the Scotch and welcomed the burn of the alcohol down his throat. He had no time to do this. He blanked his mind for the next few hours to tackle the résumés in front of him.

At about 11:00 p.m., his cell phone buzzed.

"Nate?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"What's wrong, buddy? Did something happen to Perot?"

"Our detail wrapped up with no problem. Did you check your e-mail?"

"No. What—"

“Check it.”

Frowning at his best friend’s vagueness, Travis opened his email and clicked on the most recent one from Nathan Reece.

The bottom fell out of his gut at the graphic pictures before him. “What the fuck?”

“The fingerprints threw up alarms in the CIA database,” Nate said grimly. “Luckily, I was working out of their station in Frankfurt. I hauled ass to Berlin. That man is John Cooper . . . or was.”

“John Cooper died with my wife,” Travis said, his voice turning hoarse. “How can he be alive?”

“Or recently dead?”

Travis stared at the picture of the man he had hated with every fiber of his being. John Cooper’s blood had been found at their house the night Sarah had died. Their bodies had been found together.

“He was killed execution style?”

“That’s the initial report. They’re still doing the autopsy.”

“I’ll take the next flight out.”

“Travis, let me handle this. I’m already here. Use me.”

“No!” Travis snapped. “If Cooper is . . . was . . . alive, Sarah—”

“Can you just leave?”

Travis hated the challenge in Nate’s voice because it was true. He had shit to wrap up.

“Give me forty-eight hours. I’ll charter a flight out.”

“There’s something else. I’ll see what I can dig up from here, but Cooper had three passports on him. His American passport says his name is Jase Locke. The other two passports were German and Russian with different names. And Travis?”

“Yeah.”

Nate sighed deeply, twisting the knot in Travis’s gut further.

“What, Nate?”

His friend hesitated another beat before saying, “John Cooper had the same tat on the sole of his foot.”

“Fuck! Are you telling me that—?”

“I’m pretty certain now that specter agents are real.”

“Including Sarah?”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“I couldn’t find a single fucking shred of substantiated evidence of their existence, Nate. They’re fucking urban legends of the CIA. Ghosts.” Also probably why they were called specter agents.

“Much like the Delta Force, man. The government once denied they exist,” Nate said. “You’re tight with Admiral Porter. What does he say?”

Benjamin Porter had been one of the high-ranking naval commanders when Travis had been a SEAL. It turned out the admiral was a top-level recruiter for the CIA Special Activities Division, which was a euphemism for Black Ops.

“He wouldn’t confirm or deny.”

“Son of a bitch,” Nate muttered. “Look, I’ll keep you posted.”

“Nate, watch the embassies.”

“I will. Chances are, if Sarah’s alive, she would hold the same passports.”

If Sarah is alive.

Travis ended the call. His mind was in a daze and he wanted to jump on the next flight out to Berlin. He stared at the stack of résumés before him again. *Fuck.*

The sounds of pans in the kitchen woke him. Travis was chest down on his bed, his face smashed into a pillow. He looked up at his alarm clock and groaned. It was noon, and the only person who could be in his kitchen was his mom, Lillian Blake. His mom had called him last night to let him know she was dropping by this morning, so he left the alarms off.

Pushing up from the mattress, he stumbled into the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and brushed his teeth. Travis stared at his reflection. His blue eyes were bloodshot, and three days’ worth of stubble outlined his jaw. Throwing on some clothes, he made his way to the kitchen. The smell of bacon hit him. And his stomach actually grumbled. He hadn’t eaten since lunch yesterday, that is, if one could consider candy

bars food. He winced when he noticed the empty wrappers had disappeared from the dining table where he had left them. After leaving the office, he came home only to continue pounding away on his laptop until 6:00 a.m.

Lillian Blake was a reed thin, elegant woman of sixty. She was of average height, had pale skin, and chestnut hair. He was a carbon copy of his dad. Travis was slightly taller at six-three, but the dark hair and blue eyes were all Daniel Blake.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“Mom.” Travis gave his mom a hug and a peck on the forehead. “You never told me why you wanted to see me this morning.”

“Emily gave me a call last night.” At his scowl, his mom added, “She’s worried about you, Travis. She says you’ve been working too hard, and you’re not eating right.”

“I’m thirty-five years old, Mom.” Travis poured himself some coffee. “I have a company to run, and I can take care of myself.”

“Trav—”

“Emily should stay out of my fucking personal business. She should be thankful I’m keeping her man and her in style.”

“Travis Blake.”

He was careful not to curse whenever Lillian Blake was around because even at his age, his mom could shrivel his balls with just a look and a censuring tone. But sometimes, like right now, he could slip.

“Sorry, Mom. Look, her concern is duly noted,” Travis said to appease her. “Now, is the bacon ready? I’m hungry.”

His mom smiled at him indulgently and fished the bacon from the pan, transferring the strips to a paper-lined plate. “Take the pancakes to the table, sweetie.”

Travis had to admit, as the only sibling on the East Coast, he was the frequent recipient of motherly concern. His sister, Lisa, lived in California with her husband and two kids.

“Have you talked to Lisa lately?” Travis asked to deflect the focus from himself.

“This morning actually,” his mom replied. “We’re both wondering when you’ll meet a nice girl and settle down.”

“Mom—”

“It’s been three years, Travis,” his mom said. “I know you loved Sarah so much. Do you think she would want you to continue grieving for her like this?”

“Mom, I don’t know—“

His mother’s face turned grim. She reached for his laptop at the other end of the table, turned it around to face them, and touched the keys to take it out of hibernation. There, as a screen saver, were pictures of Sarah. Tears suddenly filled his mother’s eyes. “Please, Travis. You’re alive. She’s dead. Don’t do this, son.”

Anger surged through his veins. This was his life. His fucking choice to grieve.

He gave a mirthless laugh and threw his fork on his plate. “Is this some kind of intervention?”

“Take it however you want. I’m a mother concerned for her son.”

“This. Is. My. Life.”

“You’re my son.”

His mom couldn’t begin to understand how it was to lose the love of his life. Her telling him that Sarah was dead was making his conversation with Nate last night sound like a dream. And in the cold light of day, he panicked for a moment that it was. He lost his appetite, pushed the plate away, and stood up.

“I need to get to the office.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“I’m flying out of DC tomorrow.”

His mom sighed, knowing better than to ask him where he was heading. She rose from the chair, walked over to him, and hugged him tightly.

“I just want to see you happy.”

“I will be,” Travis said in what he hoped would be a prophetic statement.

Caitlin sat in the special interest section of the American Embassy in Berlin. She still wasn’t sure why she had come here and was surprised she hadn’t been hauled away in handcuffs after she told the guard who she was—a fugitive wanted by the U.S.

government. The guard had looked at her as though she had lost her mind. He barked into his shoulder radio and waited for instructions. It didn't take long before she was promptly photographed and fingerprinted. Afterward, she was led into a small room without windows and told to wait. Half an hour later, she was taken to this section—someone from the Office of Consular affairs wanted a word with her.

Her first instinct before coming here was to head straight for Russia, where there were tenuous extradition laws with the U.S. However, some of the men who were after them had spoken Russian.

Jase explained that the CIA covert group gunning for them frequently used Russian mercenaries and ex-KGB agents. But her main reason for coming to the embassy was because she was tired. Tired of running. Tired of hiding and tired of getting shot at. She was ready to take the risk. She knew why they were after her, and if she could just get the right people to hear her case, she would be safe. It didn't help that the sum of her memories was three years. And what she knew was only from what Jase had told her. Amnesia sucked.

Damn Jase for deserting her. She was pissed at him, as well as worried. His whole left side was drenched with blood in the short time he was shot. Jase. Stupid. Stupid. Jase. Didn't he say they were stronger when they stuck together? She should have seen the signs. They hadn't been intimate for over three months, but she had noticed him withdrawing from her six months ago. They had been living more as roommates than lovers. He was preparing to let her go.

And what the hell had he meant when he said he wasn't the one she loved? Of course, she loved him. Even if friendship was all that was left between them that still counted as love, right?

She tapped her foot impatiently. There were ten people ahead of her, and she wondered what their stories were. She managed to buy some decent clothes at a shop in the village where she had holed up for two days. The backpack Jase had thrown out for her was packed with bare essentials, such as cash in different international currencies. She also had two other passports but left them at the hotel along with a sub-compact 9mm.

A lady, who looked to be in her forties, stepped out of one of the offices and walked up to the line of seats.

“Ms. Caitlin Kincaid?”

Startled that she was called ahead of the others, Caitlin stood up apologetically and raised her hand.

“Here.”

“Follow me, please.”

They walked further down the hallway and made a right toward a bank of elevators. A Marine joined them. Security.

“Um, are you going to detain me after all?” Caitlin asked in a resigned voice.

“No, dear, but we want to ask you a few questions.”

Right, Caitlin thought snidely. With armed security?

They got into the elevator and went down a floor. When the woman motioned her to enter a room, Caitlin noticed that her female escort also had a side arm.

“Ms. Lopez will be with you in a minute.” The woman smiled stiffly and closed the door.

Ms. Elena Lopez was the assistant to the Consul General. She appeared to be of Spanish descent. Caitlin paused. How did she come up with that? She frequently had flashes of observation when her mind became vigilant of her surroundings. What usually followed wasn't pleasant. Caitlin took several deep breaths to calm down. She felt vulnerable without Jase.

“Can I get you anything, Ms. Kincaid?” Ms. Lopez inquired.

“The water is fine.” Caitlin nodded to the plastic tumbler beside her.

“How long have you been in Germany?”

“Five months.”

“And before that?”

“Provence for six months.”

“You move around a lot.” Ms. Lopez raised a brow.

“Yes,” Caitlin said. “Do I need to lawyer up?”

“What made you say you were a fugitive from the U.S. government?”

Caitlin pursed her lips. “I thought I was cleared. That there were no warrants for my arrest.”

“There aren’t. But around half an hour ago, the embassy received a call from a person belonging to an important branch of the government who wants to speak with you, and I’m trying to determine if I should protect you from him.”

Her heart lurched. “They don’t always do things legally, do they?”

“You’re smart, Ms. Kincaid. So, what is the supposed crime you’ve committed?” Ms. Lopez asked.

“I’ve been told that I’ve laundered money for organized crime. It was supposed to be a setup, but the operation derailed, agents undercover were compromised. We became an embarrassing liability, and we were disavowed.”

“We. Someone else worked with you? You worked for the government?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Ms. Kincaid, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me everything.”

“I don’t remember,” Caitlin repeated. “I was in an accident after everything went down. I . . . I have amnesia.”

Elena Lopez looked at her dubiously and shook her head. “Do you think this is funny, Ms. Kincaid? If I turn you over to this person, you’ll disappear forever and not in a good way.”

“Can you protect me?”

“Absolutely. But only if you give me sufficient reason to put the weight of our office behind you.”

There was a knock on the door. The same woman who led Caitlin to the room walked in and handed Ms. Lopez a piece of paper. Shock registered on the assistant consul’s face, which she quickly schooled to a bland mask.

“Do you know a Travis Blake?”

Caitlin shook her head.

“How about a Nathan Reece?”

“No. What’s this all about?” Caitlin asked. “Do they know me?”

Ms. Lopez stood up and looked at her. "I'll try to get to the bottom of this. From no warrants to three people asking to see you, something tells me you're in big trouble, lady. While I go sort this out, you better rethink your amnesia story."

"Where the hell are you?"

"I'm getting into my rental," Travis replied as he dumped his suitcase into the cargo area of his vehicle. His charter arrived forty-five minutes ago at the Berlin International Airport, and after clearing paperwork, he was glad the Mercedes SUV was already waiting for him. He tried to recall if Germany drove on the right or left side of the road. "You have any news?"

"Sarah showed up."

He froze at Nate's words, his hand gripping his phone tight. Words failed him as though a piece of shrapnel had severed his vocal chords. His surroundings receded just as the words sunk in, and all he heard was his breathing and the roaring of his pulse in his ears.

"Travis? Shit, man. Shouldn't have sprung this on you. Travis!"

"Where?" Travis managed to choke out when he realized he'd zoned out on Nate.

"U.S. Embassy. Her fingerprints were run against the FBI wanted list."

"Why the fuck would they do that? She's not a criminal or a terrorist." Protective instincts kicked into high gear as he reined back the million emotions rushing through his system. Compartmentalize. Years as a SEAL had taught him this.

"Someone thinks otherwise," Nate replied. "Get in your car, Travis, and get the fuck over here. Someone from the CIA, Lewis Adler, wants first dibs on talking to Sarah. I'm trying to hold him off with all I've got, including calling in some favors at the agency. I suggest you do the same. Call Porter."

Travis slammed into his car, programmed the GPS for the American Embassy, and was thankful that it was only twenty minutes away. He navigated his way out of the airport and took out his phone to call Benjamin Porter. It was 5:00 a.m. on the east

coast. *Fuck*. He made the call.

Nate was already waiting for him at the main entrance located on the north side of the building. Travis had to park some distance off because the embassy was built to protect against car bombs. The short-term street parking behind the embassy wouldn't cut it since Travis had no idea how long this whole business was going to take. Despite the relative calm he tried to exude on the surface, his insides were threatening to explode with hope and excitement as he pictured an emotional reunion with Sarah. Travis tried to ignore the nagging anxiety of why she had not contacted him all these years, and the only thing he could come up with was that John Cooper had kidnapped her and held her captive. His gut clenched at what she might have experienced at his hands. He never trusted Sarah's drifter friend. And why hadn't she contacted him immediately once she was clear of that motherfucker? It didn't matter. He was here now to take her home.

Nate had a smirk on his face when he spotted him. That was a good sign. Looked like Porter pulled through for him after all. The admiral wasn't too pleased to receive an early morning call, but when he realized what was at stake, the man assured him that he was on top of it.

"Ms. Lopez is talking to Ben Porter right now," Nate informed him as they walked past the guards.

"Ms. Lopez?"

"Elena Lopez is the assistant to the consul general and is in charge of Sarah's aka Caitlin Kincaid's case."

"Caitlin Kincaid? What are you talking about?"

"Ms. Lopez is insisting that the woman they have in custody is Caitlin Kincaid," Nate informed him as they got into an elevator. "I had to pull in several documents from our database, including your marriage certificate and some pictures to prove that Caitlin Kincaid and Sarah Blake are the same person."

"Aren't the fingerprints and pictures enough?"

Nate stared at him incredulously, and Travis felt heat crawl up his neck. With the

work they do, he should know better. Only DNA analysis, with full-proof chain of custody in place, was the only reliable method of establishing identity. Travis just wanted to get this over and have his wife back.

A woman was waiting for them when the elevators slid open. Her eyes appraised Travis critically, much like putting him under a microscope.

“I believe you’re Travis Blake,” the woman said. “I’m Elena Lopez. I’m in charge of Ms. Kincaid’s case.”

“Sarah Blake,” Travis bit out.

“I’m going with what’s on Caitlin’s paperwork,” Ms. Lopez said coolly. “I’ve established that you have the right to talk to her first. Mr. Adler is not pleased, but you have many friends in Washington that have vouched for you. I will be with you in the room. That’s non-negotiable. At the first sign she feels threatened, you will be removed immediately. Am I clear?”

Travis was tempted to tell the woman to fuck off, but Nate shot him a look to shut up. His friend was right; he shouldn’t let his infamous temper delay or ruin his reunion with Sarah.

His heart pounded wildly against his sternum when they reached the last room at the end of the hallway. Ms. Lopez opened the door to reveal its lone occupant.

Sarah. His Sarah.

There was not a fucking doubt.

Same long blonde hair with streaks that reminded him of warm honey. His eyes focused on her face, and the first inkling that something was wrong triggered the alarms in his head. It was the same beloved face, the same gorgeous hazel eyes, but instead of love and fucking joy, what was reflected in them was suspicion and enmity.

“Ms. Kincaid. This is Travis Blake and Nathan Reece. Do you know them?”

Why wasn’t she jumping up and rushing into his arms? Travis thought with rapidly deflating hope.

Sarah sat back and crossed her arms on her chest in a defensive posture.

Her next words shattered his world all over again.

“So which agency are you guys from?”

CHAPTER TWO

Shock. Pain. Confusion.

These were the first emotions that hit him. What Travis wasn't prepared for was the feeling of betrayal and anger, followed by a strong wave of possessiveness. This woman looking at him as if he were a stranger would know by the end of the day who he was to her.

"I'm your husband, Sarah." His voice was calm.

He was irritated by the way her body jerked at his statement, and how the distrust in her eyes turned into full-scale suspicion.

"Who the hell is Sarah?"

"You. Are," Travis bit out.

Sarah gave a scornful laugh. "You guys would stoop to just about anything." She turned to Ms. Lopez and said, "You told them I have amnesia, and they suddenly cooked up this story?"

"You have amnesia?" Travis whispered, his mind reeling with this new revelation. This changed everything. *Fuck*. What if she didn't want to come home with him?

"Don't pretend—"

"I haven't informed them of your memory loss," Ms. Lopez said quietly.

Sarah suddenly looked flustered, unsure.

"This . . . this . . . doesn't change anything," she said in opposition to his own thoughts. "I don't know him. He's not my husband. I have a boyfriend."

Travis swore a blood vessel popped in his head.

"You're my goddamned wife!" he roared at her.

“I have a boyfriend,” Sarah repeated coolly. “A. Lover.”

Travis took an angry step forward and said, “Who? John Cooper?”

“Who the heck is John Cooper? I’m telling you, asshole, I’m not your wife. I don’t know any of the names you’ve just mentioned.”

“Jase Locke.”

At this, her eyes widened like saucers and fear veiled over her once defiant demeanor.

“What do you know about Jase?”

“He’s dead.”

“No!” Sarah whispered in horror.

“Damn it, Travis.” Nate was furious. Travis didn’t blame him, but at the moment, he was beyond caring. He wanted to hurt her the way she was hurting him.

“Who is Jase Locke?” Ms. Lopez demanded.

“John Cooper aka Jase Locke is the man who took Sarah from me,” Travis said coldly, turning his eyes on his reluctant wife. “You— are — Sarah — Blake.”

“Jase, what happened to Jase?” Sarah’s eyes were brimming with tears, inflaming his anger to an ugly breaking point.

“Outside. Both of you,” Ms. Lopez ordered him and Nate. “Now.”

“Tell me what happened to Jase!” Sarah screamed after them, her face crumpling in anguish by his one statement that her lover was dead.

“He was found dead three days ago. Murdered. That motherfucker deserved everything—”

“Goddamn you, Travis,” Nate shouted. “Enough!”

His friend grabbed his arm and dragged him out the door. Travis was consumed with bitterness and betrayal as he watched his wife break to pieces in front of him.

He couldn’t comfort her. She was crying over another man. *Fuck*. He couldn’t breathe.

Travis stumbled out of the room, jerked his arm out of Nate’s grip, and stalked up the hallway. Finding an empty room, he entered it, and paced around like a caged tiger.

“Are you out of your ever-loving mind?” Nate yelled at him. “Jesus Christ, Travis!

Could you be more cruel? I thought you loved Sarah, but you're nothing but a fucking asshole."

Crack!

Travis stared blankly at his friend who staggered back a few steps.

He fucking hit Nate. *I'm losing it.*

Travis found himself taking deep inhalations. He felt like an IED had exploded in his chest, tore his insides to pieces, and had opened the floodgates of every single emotion that he had tried to hold at bay for the past three days.

"She was with someone else," he said hoarsely. The words grated on his throat like sandpaper.

Nate took a couple of tentative steps toward him. "We don't know the whole story, buddy."

"How the fuck could she do this?"

"You need to get a grip. She doesn't remember you or your life together."

His eyes snapped to Nate's, prickling with stinging heat.

"Well I remember!" he shouted as excruciating pain lanced through him. "Her smile, her laugh, how she used to fucking look at me!" His voice turned ragged. "I fucking remember. And while I was grieving over her, she was fucking someone else."

He flinched at his own words.

Nate stared at him with a mixture of sadness and consternation. Travis turned away and gripped his head with both hands in frustration. "FUCK!"

"Knowing this, do you still want her back?"

Travis searched inside himself for the answer and it didn't take long. "I do. It'd kill me to lose her a second time."

"You'll have to get over what happened with John Cooper."

"I know."

"Maybe you should let her decide. Leave her alone at first."

"No—fucking—way."

"Travis," Nate eyed him warily. "You have to consider that she might have left with John Cooper willingly. They've been friends since they were kids."

“Not another word on that, Reece, or you’ll be picking yourself off the floor,” Travis warned. “I’ll say this to you only once. John Cooper may have been a fixture in Sarah’s life. I hated it. But what Sarah and I shared was real. I just fucking know it. I suspected that fucker Cooper had always been in love with her, but Sarah never looked at him the way she looked at me. That was how I knew her heart was all mine the way it fucking mattered.”

Nate nodded solemnly.

“The only way Sarah or Caitlin would know that she belongs to me is if she spends time with me. We fell in love overnight, Nate. I’m not saying it’s going to happen that way again, what with everything that’s gone down between her and Cooper, not to mention this distrust she’s harboring against me right now. But fuck, man, I’ve held on for three years. You think I’m going to let her get away now?”

“It might not be up to you.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve made contingencies and flew via chartered flight instead.”

“Uh . . . you don’t mean abduct her?”

“If I have to, yes.”

Nate barked with laughter, although there wasn’t much humor in it. “Kidnapping is a class-1 felony where we’re from, my friend. You can kiss your reputation and business goodbye.”

“She’s my wife.”

“Not according to her.”

Travis realized his friend was going to poke holes in all his plans. They were not the type of best friends that stuck their heads up each other’s asses. They could be blunt and to the point and keep each other honest. This didn’t mean Nate didn’t annoy him, which was particularly true at this moment when it concerned what he wanted most: Sarah. Or Caitlin—he’d call her that, if that was what she wanted. If that was what made her feel comfortable.

Just then, the door opened, and Ms. Lopez stepped into the room. The scowl on her face indicated her displeasure with what had transpired.

“I’d like to go on record, that what you did was the stupidest way to win your wife back,” Ms. Lopez said.

“You neglected to tell me she had amnesia. How the fuck did you think I was gonna react when she tells me she has another man?”

“I had to protect her best interests. People are after her. It makes me worry what she really knows.”

“Do you believe I’m her husband?”

“I do, Mr. Blake. And I’ve talked to Ms. Kincaid at length to calm her down. I’ve shown her the evidence of your claim that proves she’s your wife, and she’s considering this.”

“Considering,” Travis repeated the word before his eyes flashed angrily. “What do you mean considering?”

“She may not want to leave the embassy with you.”

“The fuck she isn’t. Where would she go? And didn’t she say there were people after her?”

“That’s what I tried to tell her. You own a security business. Who best to keep her safe if not you?”

“Thank you.” Hell, that was the first compliment this woman had paid him.

“Don’t thank me yet. Now, the CIA wants a word with her, and I suggested that you and I should be present. She was amenable to that.”

Travis looked at Nate who grinned at him. Finally, some headway.

When the three of them emerged from the room, Travis immediately sensed something amiss. The guard in front of Sarah’s room was missing, and there were droplets of dark liquid on the floor. Blood. His anxiety deepened when Ms. Lopez sprinted in front of him and barged into the room, Travis close at her heels.

Sarah was gone, and there was an unconscious guard on the floor with an apparent gunshot wound to the neck.

Nate cursed a blue streak behind him as Ms. Lopez picked up the phone to alert security.

Travis had one thought in mind as his eyes followed the bloody tracks on the floor, smeared purposefully by a shoe. Sarah had left them some breadcrumbs, and he was going to get her back.

Caitlin was numb. The news that she had a husband had thrown her for a loop, but it was the news of Jase's death that eventually caused her to implode into a crying mess. He was gone. How could he be gone? Caitlin should have stood in front of the car and insisted he take her with him.

Whoever was after Jase could still be after her. And Ms. Lopez was insisting that this man, Travis Blake, could be the only person to keep her safe. Wasn't it convenient that the man was also her husband? What if Travis Blake was telling the truth that Jase was the one who took her from him?

It's time for you to stop running. I'm not the one you love.

Did he mean Travis? That she loved Travis?

So had Jase been lying to her all along?

Caitlin admitted there was something viscerally familiar about Travis when he walked into the room. Her mind didn't know him, but there was *something*, although fleeting, that drew her to him. Of course, he being a damned good-looking man skewed her senses a bit. And then he opened his mouth and nothing but hateful words spewed forth.

No. They weren't hateful. Her words were, for that was genuine pain in his eyes when she had scorned his claim that she was his wife. And she had flaunted another man in front of him.

Caitlin cringed with guilt. *Adulteress* came to mind. Was it adultery when she had no frigging clue that she was married?

A scuffle by the door drew her attention. She stood up in alarm when she heard the familiar muffled sound of suppressed gunfire.

She tensed when the door opened, and a man she had never seen before came in with a gun pointed at her, dragging an unconscious, hopefully-not-dead Marine into

the room.

“Time to go, sweetheart.”

She was screwed.

The man, who Caitlin suspected was Lewis Adler, led her up a flight of steps back into the main floor where she had originally waited to be interviewed. But instead of heading for the front entrance, he guided her to the back—the southwest wing where there was some street parking. Caitlin knew this because she had scoped out the embassy last Sunday in case she had to make an unexpected exit. Adler was doing exactly what she would have done.

He had the gun in his coat as he held her arm firmly. He whispered in her ears, “I have no problem blowing your brains out. They’d pay me whether you’re dead or alive, but you’re worth more to me alive. And if you make your deal right, you may just come out of this alive as well. Don’t try anything, or you’ll have more than the guard’s death on your hands.”

“You’re the one who shot him. Don’t try your killer’s psychology on me.”

That earned her a painful squeeze on her upper arm.

“I thought your employer was the CIA?”

The man had the gall to laugh. “Sweetheart, you can’t blame a man for wanting to make a little dough on the side.”

There were few people milling around in this area of the embassy, and no one paid attention to the pair of them. Finally, they reached the rear exit. Caitlin made pleading eye contact with the guard, but the Marine only looked at Adler and inclined his head.

“God, do you have everyone on your payroll?” Caitlin groused as she was dragged toward a street corner.

“There’s a CIA station at the embassy. I work here, girl.”

Great. She just walked into a trap. She dug in her heels and stopped walking. Maybe she could make a run for it. Adler showed her the imprint of the gun’s muzzle through the thin fabric of his trench coat.

“Listen, Ms. Kincaid. Do you see that mother with her kid across the street?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Do you really want to test that theory right now?” Adler looked at her cruelly. “Get fuckin’ moving.”

He jerked her to start walking again as they headed down the street that ran parallel to the length of the embassy. They stopped; she heard Adler curse. It appeared his contacts were late. He started getting agitated as the minutes ticked by. Caitlin bit back her tongue before she could make a smart-ass remark that might successfully put a bullet through her head. Jase always did say her mouth got them into trouble.

“Where the fuck are they?” Adler muttered as he looked at his watch and craned his neck to look up the street. Caitlin was figuring out how to make her getaway. There were too many people, which would have been great for getting herself lost in the crowd. But if Adler was as sadistic as he sounded, she couldn’t risk innocent bystanders getting hurt, even if it were to save herself.

A familiar sensation crept up her spine. Oh no. Not now. She tried to control the surge of adrenaline that would release the ugliness within her. A late model Audi sped down the street and screeched to a halt in front of them.

“You guys are late.”

“Komarov had some last minute change of plans. He wants the girl alive.” A bald man with a Russian accent stepped out of the car and opened the back door. He grabbed Caitlin from Adler and whispered in her ear. “But if you give us a problem, you’ll be ending up like your boyfriend. And we’ll make it look like an accident.”

These men killed Jase. She was so tired of people threatening to kill her.

Fury joined the adrenaline surge to form the worst nightmare her enemies could ever imagine. She resisted the push inside the car, which solicited a quick punch to her gut. Pain was the final stimuli. Her veins popped as power coursed through her sinewy flesh, and before a mindless rage took over her entire being, her last thought was: *They have no idea what they have unleashed.*

Her mind blanked.

Travis burst out of the southwest entrance of the embassy with Nate. A guard had reported seeing Lewis Adler leave with a blonde woman about five minutes ago. He had ignored Ms. Lopez's warning to let them handle the abduction because he would be damned if he wasted another minute. He had no weapon on him, but that didn't mean he was any less deadly. He had taken men down with his bare hands before.

There was a commotion down the street that had drawn a couple of spectators.

No! His mind screamed. He couldn't be too late. Travis ran in that direction.

"Nate," he yelled. "You're on stealth."

Nate nodded as he dematerialized into the crowd.

He reached a haphazardly parked Audi. Two men were down with bullet holes in their head. Sarah was standing over another man whose nose was clearly broken. She had a gun pointed at him. The man had an outstretched arm begging her to let him live, but she was staring down at him with an expression so lifeless that it raised goose bumps on his skin.

"Sarah?"

The gun shifted to him. *Shit.*

"She's crazy, man. She's fucking crazy," the man on the ground said.

Her pupils were dilated. *What the fuck?*

"Sarah? Babe, it's me. Travis." Fuck. That was really stupid. She didn't fucking know him. The hand on the gun tightened.

"Caitlin." Her eyes blinked. *That's it.*

"Caitlin. Give me the gun, babe." Travis inched closer and spotted Nate making his move behind her. The finger on the trigger squeezed just as Nate knocked her arm upward and wrestled her to the ground.

"Don't hurt her!" Travis yelled.

Nate grunted as Sarah landed an elbow into his gut. She spun her legs in an upward scissor, the momentum bringing her back to her feet. When had she become Bruce Lee?

She came right at him. Her fist flying out so fast, he barely had time to dodge the

blow. He came up under her and had her in a sleeper hold. She struggled. Damn, she was strong.

Too strong, Travis noted grimly.

"I'm sorry, babe," Travis whispered as her struggles diminished with the reduced blood supply to her brain. He noted belatedly that Nate had gone after the man with the broken nose. Security swarmed around them as Sarah finally succumbed to his stranglehold.

Travis swept her up in his arms and marched back to the embassy.

"You're so beautiful, sunshine girl."

"Keep that thing away from me."

"Sex hair. You look thoroughly fucked."

Laughter.

"I love you, Sarah."

Caitlin opened her eyes. That was new. The recurring dream always ended with the laughter. In the dream she was in bed, a ruffled white sheet partially covering her nakedness. The window was open, an ocean breeze fluttering the gauzy drapes. A face was blurry and blocked mostly by a smartphone taking pictures of her. Travis. It was his voice. Either the dream was a memory or a complete figment of her subconscious.

Her eyes took in where she was. She had woken up earlier, disoriented and a bit panicked. A soothing baritone voice coaxed her to take some water and, she suspected, a sedative. She always roused alert, this grogginess was drug-induced.

She blacked out and probably scared the shit out of everyone. The embassy wouldn't want to protect an unstable person. Dangerous. Liability. She wouldn't be surprised if Travis Blake hightailed it out of Berlin and figured the best recourse was to let the dead stay buried. Only Jase knew how to talk her down from losing control, which was why when they were being pursued by assassins, she was herself.

A voice floated in from the outside room. Caitlin frowned and appraised where she was. This was not a typical budget hotel. Luxurious beddings surrounding her in

such opulent warmth, she loathed to emerge from its depths. The walls were Italian plaster that was finished with a damask stencil; the room was five-star deluxe all the way.

She reluctantly swung her legs to the floor. Her limbs were bare. She was in her underwear. *What the hell?*

Caitlin was no prude, but getting undressed by a stranger was still mortifying. She had to admit that it was probably to make her feel comfortable. She tamped back her indignation and decided to suck it up and be grateful to whoever put her into bed.

She padded to the closet. A hotel of this caliber should have a robe. Finding one, she wrapped her aching body in plush terry cotton. Her muscles were always sore after an episode, although she wouldn't put it past whoever subdued her to use justifiable force. Neither her jaw nor head hurt, but her throat was a bit tender. Blood choke.

She opened the door and immediately spied Travis Blake standing by the window with a phone to his ear. He immediately turned to face her and ended his call. He was barefoot, his long legs encased in worn jeans, and a white undershirt outlined an impressive upper body. Her eyes tracked past his neck, the firm lips, the high-bridged manly nose, until finally, she was arrested by piercing sapphire blue eyes. Her mouth went dry as she felt the magnetic pull of pure masculine sex on a stick.

What the hell was wrong with her? Even if Jase lied to her, he was her man until three days ago or three months ago, depending how she defined their relationship. *And Travis is your husband*, a righteous voice nagged her.

"How are you feeling?"

Standard question.

"I'm groggy. Did you give me something?"

Travis inclined his head. "We had to sedate you." His tone was wary. "I need to know how often you get this way."

"By *this way*, you mean violent?"

"Sar-Caitlin. Do you remember anything at all?"

She shook her head.

Travis was silent for a beat and then, "What brings this on? Is it accidental or can

you control it?”

“I can’t control it,” Caitlin replied, ignoring the first question and answering the second.

It was not lost on Travis that she was evading his question. His brows puckered into a frown. “Caitlin, I need to know what sets you off. I can’t have you on a plane 40,000 feet in the air and have you go all ninja on us.”

If the situation wasn’t so serious, she would have laughed. She didn’t think Travis was in a joking mood either. “When I feel threatened, it kicks in. Adrenalin sets it off.”

“Who did this to you, Caitlin?” Travis asked quietly. There was an underlying menace in his voice, though not directed at her.

Caitlin moved away from him and walked to the kitchen. “I’m not sure I trust you enough to tell you everything.”

“But you will.”

She cut Travis a sharp glance, but he was staring at her with determination.

“You’re awfully sure I’m coming back with you.”

“There’s nothing for you here except danger.” His nostrils flared. “That stunt you pulled this afternoon is all over the internet. My people are trying to clean it up, but I don’t think that’s possible. It’s already on the news.”

“What—”

“I used another identity to check into this hotel, but we still need to leave immediately. If possible, within the next two hours. I already have my plane on standby.”

“But—”

Travis closed the distance between them and gripped her shoulders. “Listen to me. The men who are after you are Russian mafia—arms dealers. I have no idea how the CIA got caught up in their mess, but you shot and killed Adler, and so far it’s a dead end. The Berlin police are taking the lead on this, and it’s out of our jurisdiction.”

“How many did I kill?”

“Caitlin, it doesn’t—”

“How many, Travis?”

“Two.”

“Why am I not in police custody?”

“The embassy and I took care of it.”

“What? How?”

“It’s not your problem anymore.”

“Travis—”

“Damn it, Sarah. I handled it, okay? Get dressed; we leave in a fucking hour.”

Childishly determined to get in the last word, she said, “My name is Caitlin.”

She turned and strode back into the bedroom.

“They’ve taken her to ground.”

Alexandr Komarov’s gaze flickered away from his aquarium and landed on his henchman who had entered his study. His man inside the CIA had underestimated the strength of the specter agent. Adler thought they were myths, but Komarov knew better because he had a few as members of his Bratva. Unfortunately, they were away on assignments, and he had to use some of his lower level crew.

Taking down Jase Locke wouldn’t have been easy if the man hadn’t already lost half the blood in his system. He was almost dead when they shot him. He had been useless for information, refusing to give up anything on his partner. His lover.

Caitlin Kincaid had his money. There were rumors that she had amnesia, which would explain why Locke had nothing to bargain with. Not that the man could negotiate out the death sentence Alexandr had condemned on him. Locke murdered his two sons. There was no forgiveness for that. His sons should have been the next in line to take over the Bratva. The double-crossing Locke turned out to be an embedded deep cover agent known as specter agents—a special division of the CIA. Locke’s cover was blown—ratted out by one of the specter agents during a meeting. A bloody shootout occurred and Locke disappeared, along with \$100 million of Komarov’s money.

The experimental branch of the CIA known as Project Infinity was rife with corruption. The loose oversight and billions of dollars passing through the hands of their agents from money laundering schemes were too tempting to keep most of them

honest. And so the project imploded, and the agency cut them loose. The few that were honest were hunted down and assassinated. The corrupted specter agents dispersed and joined the organizations they were tasked to infiltrate. They had become the deadliest enforcers of the mob.

“How could she just disappear?” Komarov asked. “Don’t we have eyes inside the embassy?”

“We do. But we have a big problem.”

Alexandr remained silent, which was a signal for his man to continue.

“The man who subdued her at the embassy is a security specialist, Travis Blake.”

“The name sounds familiar.”

“Blake Security Inc. is a rapidly growing security firm.”

“What kind of security?”

“Mostly executive protection. One of the best on the U.S. east coast.”

Alexandr cursed. “So you’re telling me she could be on a flight to the U.S. right now?”

“Yes.”

“How could this have happened?” Alexandr roared as his henchman cringed. He had been so goddamned close to his goal with a fucking man in place to execute his plan. “One little girl and those three idiots couldn’t handle her.”

“She moved quickly—“

“Fucking Adler underestimated her. You know how our friends can get . . . a little crazy,” Komarov said.

“Yes, sir.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Komarov turned back to his aquarium to calm his rising frustration. “The timing of a security specialist showing up and taking Ms. Kincaid tells me someone is aware of what she knows. I want you to find out everything about Travis Blake. See if he has any weaknesses—family members—anything we can use to make him give up Caitlin Kincaid.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alexandr waved his hand to dismiss his henchman. At least he had flushed out

the elusive Ms. Kincaid, and they weren't exactly at a loss for where she could be. Travis Blake was a dead man for even thinking he could steal that money.

