

Chapter One

A woman screamed.

Normally, that sound got the Dominant in Zeke Hayes' blood pumping in all the right ways. Into all the right body parts.

Tonight, the wail reached into his chest and gave a terrifying twist. It grabbed his legs next, hauling them into a sprint up the front walk to Rayna Chestain's Tacoma bungalow. Past his thundering heartbeat, he muttered, "Hang on, little bird. I'm here."

Little bird? Fuck. He'd given her a nickname. When had that happened? *Why* had that happened? He'd known the woman for all of three months, the last two happening via web chats and texts from over five thousand miles away, thanks to a "little day job" called the First Special Forces Group.

Even if that wasn't the case, they weren't supposed to be in nickname territory. He didn't go to that domain with *any* woman.

Especially this woman.

The admission slid him to a stop. He cracked his neck, trying to knock his thoughts back into their proper peg holes. All right, Rayna was special. All right, she was different. All right, she was the first woman in years he hadn't instantly slotted into one of his three preferred categories: all-kink-no-strings, flogger wench, or horny-and-flexi rope bunny. He had no illusions about the reason why. On the night they'd met, a shithead madman had done the honors of tying Rayna up already. The bastard had left nothing to the imagination, and not in *any* of the good ways. Zeke would never forget the sight of her, head sagging and shoulders slumped, her knees bloodied by the packed dirt floor of a Quonset hut in a remote jungle. She'd accepted her fate, that she'd soon be someone's new slave, a conviction that didn't disappear even when he'd gotten to her. She'd kept her wrists pressed together even after he cut the zip ties from them, and shook like a leaf when he'd pulled her close.

Finally, she'd gazed up at him. Tears had pooled in the

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dark green depths of her eyes, like he'd pulled down a star from heaven just for her. And what had *he* done? Cracked a stupid-ass grin as if she'd just done the same. It had been one of the best moments of his life.

Which still doesn't earn her a pedestal in your brain, jackass.

The second car in her driveway had a parking sticker for the courthouse, meaning whatever brother was here on guard duty had some heat and knew how to use it. That would buy him a few seconds—if Rayna was screaming at anything other than a bug or a nightmare. Goddamn, he prayed it was just a bug. He could squash the fucker, make sure all the doors were secured then get the hell out before said broheim made with the Ward Cleaver foot tap, waiting for him to ask if he could take her to the movies and hold her hand. He didn't do the hand-holding thing. Life had yanked that circuitry from his brain over twenty years ago.

Rayna needed to have her hand held. She deserved it.

Yeah, he'd be in and out. Make the fast SitRep then beat feet for the ex-fil. He'd text her tomorrow to check in. That'd be good. Maybe they could meet for coffee sometime. Someplace public and safe, no hand-holding required. No mess. No nicknames.

Another shriek ripped through the air, longer and louder than the first. Z broke into a new sprint. The mist seemed to part for him as he neared the bungalow's door. The action wasn't necessary. A man yanked back the portal, clearly having heard his approach. The guy's dark auburn hair was disheveled, and his scowl fell just an inch short of meeting Zeke eye-for-eye, meaning he could turn himself into a six-foot-five big brother blockade if he wanted to.

Despite that recognition, Z was in no mood to play diplomat with Trevor Chestain tonight. Yippee. He'd drawn the short straw and gotten lawyer brother tonight, along with an empty living room and an otherwise peaceful house.

"Sergeant Hayes. What a pleasure. Long time, no see."

"Trevor." He managed to keep the tone civil as he dropped his car keys on the table inside the front door. Damn,

he wished for a robber instead of the guy who rocked back on a pair of classy cowboy boots. The shoes were a weird but perfect match with his staid threads, giving Z a couple dozen openings for some smart-ass quips, but he stayed his tongue. Rayna was proud as hell of her brother, despite how his overprotective act danced on the edge of asshole. For her sake, he'd zip up the wisecracks.

Didn't matter the next moment, anyhow. Another whimper filled the air, shooting from the hallway that branched to the bedrooms.

Zeke grimaced. "She's gotten worse, hasn't she?"
"A lot worse."

"Fuck."

Trevor let him squirm through a silence thicker than the fog outside. Finally the guy said, "You were gone longer than she expected."

The comment fit Trev's M.O. Simple statement transformed to instant accusation. The man never left the courtroom, did he?

"Sorry about that. Next time I'm undercover in a South Pacific rogue state, I'll stroll next door with a Bundt cake, tell 'em I'm on a time schedule and ask if they can help out with a few nukes in return."

"Or you can delete my sister off your contacts list."

So much for lawyerly subtlety. Zeke spun a glance around the room, wishing a jury and judge really would spring out of nowhere. Judges came with gavels. Gavels could do serious damage to a jerk brother's head, never mind that said brother was soon going to get his way about the issue. Not that he was going to spill that nugget for the asshat.

He just had to see her one more time. Especially now. He couldn't leave when she was in torment. Not when he knew he could ease her pain and chaos. Not when he could help her, even in this little way, once again.

He crossed Rayna's living room without a backwards glance at Trevor.

She cried out again as he got to her bedroom door.

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He blinked for a second, letting his vision adjust to the dim room. Everything was the same as he remembered, decorated in soft shades of cream and blue, except for a small lamp on her vanity table. That was new. The bottles of medications at the lamp's base? Not so new. Zeke scowled at the containers on his way to the bed. All of them were still close to full. She wasn't sticking to her plan. No wonder she was worse.

Two more steps got him to the bed. To her side at last.

He was grateful for the excuse to let his knees give way, plummeting him to the mattress next to her. He couldn't account for why the rest of his body felt like C-4, mush with the capacity to create craters, only needing the fire in his chest to detonate.

Wait. Of course he could explain what was happening. Absence made the heart grow fonder, but when the real estate in a guy's heart was limited, fondness found a home elsewhere, like the rest of his body. Suddenly, all sixty days of their separation weighed on his muscles like bricks of the explosive—and damn if he didn't yearn for a few to go off, too. God please, only a few. To let her get to him...just a little. To know what it was like for the simple nearness of a woman to heat his blood, to storm his senses, to flood his cock with need...

But that was impossible. He only got that rush in one way. It was a fact, plain and simple, another default setting on the Zeke Hayes re-wire project. His body's explosives only got discharged by one thing.

Control.

A *hell* of a lot of control.

That was another zip code he'd filed into No-Man's Land with Rayna.

Her tears pulled him back to the real reason he was here. Hell. Huge drops soaked her copper eyelashes, still closed in sleep. They flowed over her high cheekbones and across the slender plateau of her nose but never made it to the tip of her heart-shaped chin, because she backhanded them away. All this, and she didn't wake up once. Zeke watched in

amazement—and anger.

“You shouldn’t be wiping your own tears, Ray-bird.”

His whisper was only heard by the shadows. Rayna cried out again. She flailed, fighting off an attacker only she could see. Her hand whacked the heavy oak headboard but her nightmare had her mind trapped tight. She whimpered and thrashed the other direction.

Her arm headed toward the nightstand, and the large glass of water on it. Zeke caught her wrist half an inch before it would’ve collided with the container and sliced up her hand. He got in a breath of relief before realizing, too late, that he’d probably just intensified the torment of her subconscious.

“Nooooo!”

Sure enough, she started fighting his hold.

“Fuck,” Zeke muttered. “Rayna.” He jerked her hand to his chest, crushing her knuckles against his sternum. “Sshhh, bird. It’s going to be—”

“You’re dead! You’re—you’re supposed to be dead!”

He kept her hand locked to his chest as he forced in a breath. Her words, twisted with her despairing tone, painted a searing picture of what was happening behind her twitching eyelids. She was ranting about the cocksucker who’d been part of the human trafficking network she’d run from for over a year. Once she’d gotten recaptured, King transferred her to Thailand then gotten ready to sell her as a sex slave without a flicker of hesitation. That’s when the squad had stepped in, busting up the bastard’s party to rescue Rayna, her best friend Sage, and five more American women. It had been damn satisfying to lock King away in a Bangkok prison—until they’d learned the Feds had extradited King’s sorry ass back *here*. Inside a day, King pulled a fucking Criss Angel on them all, his backside never seeing a second of time inside FDC Sea-Tac, thanks to switching places with a secret twin brother he had waiting on the back burner.

“I’m—I’m going to kill him. I need to kill him. Where’s the gun? Where’s the gun?”

Despite his tension, a proud grin jerked up the corners of his mouth. The angels knew what they were doing when

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making her hair the color of fire. “That’s it, honey,” he murmured. “Fight back.”

He was pretty damn certain where her flashback went now. King hadn’t been happy to slink back into the gutter from which he’d slithered. The monster had the goddamn nerve to take Rayna and Sage again, along with Josie Hawkins, Sage’s pregnant houseguest. King had gleefully enjoyed the triumph until he realized the stateside “clients” who showed to buy his booty were actually trained Special Forces operatives. Correction. Trained and *pissed* operatives. Sage’s fiancé, Garrett, was one of those men. Josie’s husband, Wyatt, specially reactivated for the off-the-books mission, was the second. Zeke was the third.

Once the jig was up and the women were safe, King had been taken out—but the bullet hadn’t been fired by him, Garrett, Wyatt, or any of the FBI agents stationed outside the target house. The finger on the trigger had been Rayna’s.

To the day he died, he wouldn’t forget that moment. Tiny redhead. Tiny blue latex fetish dress. Trembling arms. Shaking lips. Complete resolve. Total bravery. Incredible. Beautiful. She’d taken his breath away. What breath he had left, anyway. Having just taken a knife in the gut from King himself, staying conscious had required a deep tap into the determination reserves. It hadn’t stopped him from dreaming about kissing her, though. Oh yeah, that would’ve been good. It wouldn’t have been like the chaste lip brushes he’d indulged with her until then, either. He’d yearned to open her wide, filling her mouth, tasting every corner of her. Taking her fear and replacing it with his adoration.

Exactly like he longed to kiss her now.

Rayna moaned and flinched again. She kicked at the covers. Her hand wrenched in his. Z’s chest felt like cracking ice. His thoughts of passion were demolished by fantasies of fury. He’d never thought of exhuming a guy just to kill him again, but putting a few more bullets in King’s carcass sounded really fucking good right now.

“Sssh.” He ran his other hand gently up her other arm. She was breathing fast, gripped tight by the dream. Breaking

her out of it at this point would be worse for her psyche than letting her process the memories. “Rayna, it’s all over. You got the gun. You killed the bad guy. You got him, honey.”

“No. He’s—he’s coming.” She sobbed and kicked. “Bringing guards this time. Th-they’ve got the woman with the n-needle. Don’t. Please don’t. Not down there!”

Z’s muscles went to sludge a second time. Relief had liquefied him the first time. Rage was the villain now. He forced his way through it, wrapping her hand tighter in his.

“Needle?” he demanded. “What needle, Rayna?”

He prayed this was some strange glitch of her nightmare, and not a remembered reality. If it was, so help him God—

“Not there. Why there?” Her whole body seized. The only part of her that moved was her face, flinching and twisting with strains of horror. “Don’t. Oh, god. *Donnn*’t!”

He pulled her up, cradling her against him. He needed to help her fight off the demons, even if they were only in her mind. “I won’t let them do it.” He pressed his lips to her temple. “I won’t, okay?”

She whimpered and struggled at him. “Zeke!”

“Here,” he assured. “Right here, Rayna.”

“Zeke!”

He frowned. She’d started to blink her eyes, but her gaze swept the room without seeing it. Shit. She was still dreaming—and pleading for *him* from that misty mental realm. His reaction was a double-edged blade. Hearing his name on her lips brought a jolt of elation. The panic in it yanked him back to earth. Painfully.

Fuck it.

“Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty.” He gave her a gentle shake. A second one, harder and longer. She flailed at him again.

“Zeke!”

“Honey, I’m *here*.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. She blinked with slow confusion. Her free hand curled into his tan T-shirt. “You really are,” she whispered.

Her lips parted on a slow, sweet smile. The expression fascinated him so much, Zeke wrestled with his reaction. He liked to smile, right? Then why couldn't he remember how to do it now? Why couldn't he think of *anything* to do right now?

He finally forced his mouth around one syllable. "Hi."

Her smile became a full grin. "Hi." Jolt of elation, the sequel. "How was the mission?"

Was she kidding?

He already knew the answer to that. Nope, she wasn't kidding. The question was typical Rayna, filled with concern for everyone else despite how the tears from a post-traumatic nightmare still gleamed on her cheeks. "Time of my fucking life," he cracked. He wouldn't be able to reveal anything beyond his cynical tone, so he squeezed her shoulder to indicate he was changing the subject whether she liked it or not. "You were having a pretty shitty episode, honey."

Rayna pulled her hand from his top in order to swipe her cheeks. "Yeah. Probably."

He still held her other hand. If she thought she was getting that one back, she could also think it snowed in hell. He squeezed those fingers harder. "The episodes weren't this bad before I left."

"I know."

"You were also staying on your meds before I left."

"Zeke—"

"You don't have to be on them forever, Rayna."

"I *know*, okay?"

"Apparently, you don't."

"Stop it." She tried to jerk free again. Zeke gripped her tighter. "I don't want to talk about it. About any of it."

He treated that statement like a badly-hung door on a drug lord's hut. Kicked it into non-existence. "You went on about King for a while."

She sighed. "Yep. Sounds right."

Strands of her brilliant hair fell into her eyes. Zeke let her hand go so he could brush them back. Change of tactic. There were occasions for busting down doors, and there were moments made for silken ropes—especially when they came

before the questions he asked next.

“Have you ever dreamed about the bastard’s guards, too?”

Her shoulders wiggled on a semi-shrug. “Of course.”

“What about them using needles on you?”

She tensed again. He’d anticipated that and made sure he had her tucked in tight, but his bird dropped a shiz of shock on his precautions, turning him inside out by grimacing through fresh tears. But one thing about her expression dug at him the most. The tremor of her chin. It said everything. That valiant, determined wobble...fighting back images that weren’t dreams at all.

His gut writhed in a bath of acid. “Holy shit.”

She slammed a hand on his chest. “No. Don’t. Don’t go ‘holy shitting’ me, Zeke. It’s done. It’s in the past. I’m leaving it there.”

“Right,” he countered. “And that’s why you’re still having screaming nightmares about it.”

He watched her wrestle with that before she pushed at him again. This time, Zeke let her roll back to her pillow. A time and a place for everything—including the silence he allowed to build into uncomfortable stillness.

Rayna squirmed and huffed. Her chin didn’t tremble anymore. She was too busy glowering at him. “You going to sit there and gawk at me until they ship you out again, Sergeant Hayes?”

He let her stew as he got back to his feet in one precision move. He unzipped his jacket and unlaced his boots then placed both on the floor near her little reading chaise. On his way back across the room, he shut the door with a quiet click. “I’m respecting your request not to talk about it.”

Her eyebrows high-fived her forehead. “You are?”

“Yep.”

She pushed herself up until she leaned against the headboard. “Thank you.”

He joined her again on the bed. “Hmm,” he finally said, stroking the top of one of her feet through a cute bootie sock. “That may be premature.”

Her foot flinched. He maintained his grip on it. “Premature?” The syllables were laced with suspicion. “Why?”

Zeke carefully schooled his features before looking up from her ankles. He’d honed the talent since the age of ten. When he was a teen on the streets, his facial wall saved his hide countless times. As a sensual and sexual Dominant, it had submissives taking numbers for sessions with him. As a Special Forces mission leader, it came in handy so many ways, the team gave him a new callsign: Zsycho.

Right now, it bought him a much-needed ten seconds. He used them well. By the time he issued his reply, he’d swung all the way up on the mattress and gotten both her feet beneath his hands. He leaned closer, his jaw hovering over her knees, in order to let her see two truths in his gaze. One, for the sake of her well-being alone, he wouldn’t accept her refusal again. Two, he was more than ready to back that assertion up, even if it meant waiting her out all night.

“Because you’re not going to like what you’ll do in place of talking, Ray-bird.”

Comprehension began to shimmer against the forest depths of her eyes. Her lips pursed, and she flattened harder against the headboard. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Zeke didn’t move. He kept his hands atop her feet in a gentle but firm embrace. He barely blinked as he willed her stare toward him with equal command. She curled in her arms, surely sensing what he was about to say. And dreading it. And probably hating him a little for it. Like that was going to change one word of what he ordered.

“Show me, Rayna. I need to see what they did to you.”