

Chapter One

“Hi gorgeous. You wanna play lions? ’Cause I’m ready to chase your meat.”

Shay Bommer stared as the little redhead in skintight jeans wobbled on her five-inch heels and finished the line with a playful roar. He expected her friends, a group of ten women at a table in the corner of the LA International Airport bar, to applaud her drunken effort. Clearly, they’d concocted a crazy version of “double-dare-you” to pass the time and she’d drawn the wrong straw.

The moment provided more proof for a theory Shay had observed in nauseating detail lately.

People did strange fucking things in airport bars.

A hand snaked around his waist from behind, elegant fingers topped by slick blue-black nails. Its owner had a sultrier voice than the redhead’s, now murmuring in his ear. “I have a better game. I wanna play war. You lay on the ground and I’ll blow you up, baby.”

Hell.

Six months undercover with one of the world’s most notorious criminals, and the worst bullets he dodged these days were lines like that.

Remember why you’re doing this. Remember who you’re doing this for.

He swung a polite smile at the redhead then swiveled to peer at her friend, an equally petite woman with a deeper tint to her mahogany pixie cut, showing off ears with four piercings apiece. “Ladies, I’m flattered but—”

“Ohhh, nooooo,” flirt number one protested. “We don’t like the sound of that ‘but.’”

“Not to be confused with the butt we *do* like.” Her friend slid the goth fingernails under his ass, squeezing him through the fabric of his tailored dress trousers. For the fifteenth time tonight, he missed his regular camouflage “work attire” worse than Scout, the Siberian Husky who’d been like another brother to he and Tait through boyhood.

“You’re so gorgeous.” The first woman pushed his knees apart and stepped in for a feel from the other side, sliding a hand over the fabric covering his cock. “Oooo, and *hard*. You don’t just look like Superman, do you? You feel like him—”

“*Everywhere.*” Her friend kept exploring, finally wrapping eager fingers around his balls. “Mmmmm. He’s not Superman, Brynn. He’s Ironman.”

Shay tensed. He threw a subtle but thorough glance around the room, wondering if he’d missed anything on the first five sweeps. *Ironman*. How the hell had the woman blurted his radio call-sign? Had Cameron Stock, the evil prick he’d been hanging out with for half a year, directed the woman to act shitfaced in order to drop the name and see how he’d react?

Or are you freaking out like a little girl now, Bommer? For fuck’s sake, her fingers are all over the junkyard between your thighs—and the size of your “pipe” isn’t a state secret. You may have earned the nickname by setting timed run records in PT but your cock isn’t a bad ally for the cause.

He rolled his eyes at the smartass in his head as the woman nuzzled his neck. When her margarita-heavy breath hit him, he had the answer to his dilemma. Her hit on the name had really just been stupid coincidence, though he rarely believed in that kind of cosmic shit. He couldn’t afford to.

Brynn sidled closer, fitting the apex of her thighs against the same part of his anatomy. “Come on, stud. What about it? Ellie likes to share and so do I. Two redheads, grounded by fog in the same airport as you, with a room waiting for us over at the Hilton...”

“And at least one of us isn’t wearing panties.” More margarita breath fanned his face.

Brynn giggled. “Make that neither of us. Horny, panty-free dancers from a hot Vegas show. Find a blue moon somewhere in that muck outside and you’ve been handed a once-in-a-million memory, honey.”

Part of him screamed to simply agree with her. That same part filled his imagination with a fantasy painted in shades of *ohhh*, *fuck*, and *yeah*. Both women kneeling before him, servicing his cock in all the ways any heterosexual male dreamed. He’d find a way to clamp their nipples as reciprocation for their naughty behavior before they licked every inch of his erection, preparing him to fuck them both...

Thoughts he didn’t dare indulge for another second. Not now.

He pushed off the barstool, rubbed the back of his neck, and faked an awkward laugh. “I’m certain you’re right, ladies, but I can’t. I’m here on business. My colleague should be here any minute.”

The reply was a string of lies. Where the fuck was Wyst? The guy was thirty minutes

late. *Not* a development Shay wanted to take with the normal calm that had earned him a fast place in Cameron Stock's inner sanctum. But tonight, everything was different. Within the hour, they'd solidify the plans that would make this burglary happen, finally bringing him to the last stretch of this disgusting mission.

Shay had been working closely with the spooks to make this shit go down as seamlessly as possible. His personal investment in taking out Stock was intense. Last year, Stock helped engineer a scheme that nearly drenched the US West Coast beneath a nuclear fallout cloud, a plan thwarted in an operation by his brother Tait's Special Forces team—though the price had been devastating. Tait's ladylove, Luna Lawrence, had eventually died as a result of the standoff's violence. The trauma had turned Tait's heart into a husk and his liver into a distillery. And watching that shit happen? Shay grimaced from the memories. The term "emotional waterboarding" fit the bill nicely.

But exacting revenge on behalf of Tait was only the first half of the picture. Shay never lost sight of the second goal for this escapade, equally driving every step he took and move he made. He was going through this hell to find another victim of Stock's rise to criminal glory—a piece of prey who'd then been forced to become a cog in the monster's machine.

A cog he'd once known as Mom.

His gut turned. Certainly wasn't a new experience, especially if he counted all the years that had been wasted since she "deserted" them, as their father had always alleged. He'd been only nine. Tait was ten though counting the days until his eleventh birthday, when he'd enjoy the six-month period he was officially two years older than Shay. Life's concerns were so simple. They were still a halfway-functioning family. Dad's drinking was still just uncomfortable instead of unbearable. He only went after Mom once a week rather than every other day—until the four-day bender that had ended with her leaving in the middle of the night. And never coming back.

Harkening the start of the shit years.

Tait did his best to make sure they were safe when Dad got bad. There was the "hideout" in the basement next door courtesy of Mrs. Verona, stocked with canned food for emergencies, thanks to Uncle Jonah. Mrs. V always baked fresh cookies, too. Damn, he wanted those cookies again. He wanted the long conversations he and Tait had while savoring them.

Most of all, he wanted all the time he'd missed with his mother.

Who Tait and he had joined Dad in vilifying for the last eighteen years—when she'd

never intended to leave forever.

Who had signed on with Cameron for six months but had been forced by the man to stay for the rest of her life, used for her brilliant scientific mind—and probably a lot of other hideous things.

Who'd been forced to erase Melody Bommer and instead live as Melanie Smythe, never once permitted to contact him and Tait. Not just a stranger to her children. A ghost.

Now, Shay was achingly close to raising that ghost. To finally finding and freeing her.

All he had to do was help Cameron's team steal a commercial airliner.

After an hour, when they'd landed the bird, he'd be standing at the front door of her lab.

It was going to be a night for tricky feats—beginning with peeling off the women who'd re-draped themselves against him.

Where the *hell* was Wyst?

His cell vibrated on the bar, dancing across the sticky granite to notify him of an incoming text. *Not a second too soon, dickwad.*

“Sorry, ladies. I really need to get this.”

While the message saved him from the paws of his new fan club, it also slammed him with disappointment. Only three people knew the number to this phone, all smarmy sons of bitches. The device belonging to Shay Bommer, not “Shane Burnett,” was secured in a locker in Langley, Virginia, its voice mail stating he was on deployment and didn't know when he'd be back.

He yearned for that other phone now. For even five minutes on the line with Tait. The last time he'd seen his brother had been such a bizarre fluke. Shay had just gotten started on this assignment and was working his way into Cameron's good graces, finishing one of the man's “special projects.” They'd been on the island of Kaua'i, where Cameron had attempted to sell a beachfront estate to the North Koreans for use as their forward base in an assault on the western United States.

To Shay's shock, Tait and his sniper teammate, Kellan Rush, led the op to crush Cameron's scheme and save the estate's owner, an islander named Lani Kail. The whole episode actually helped seal Stock's buy-in on Shay's cover but had nearly made Lani another casualty of the man's evil. Not a great twist, considering Tait had damn near proposed to the woman after she was safe. Tait's fresh love for Lani made him deaf to any explanation Shay had for his

involvement with Stock, officially turning him into a traitor in his brother's eyes.

The four months since then had been complete hell. And this text likely represented another extension of the ordeal.

Yo, Shane. You still at the airport?

Called that one right.

Shay clenched his jaw again. In addition to violating the team's rule about refraining from personal names on all mobile communication, Wyst also confirmed he wasn't at the airport, meaning the great airplane heist was again a no-go. *Damn it.*

Am I supposed to be anywhere else?

The sarcasm wouldn't translate but Wyst wouldn't get it even if he stood here for the verbal version. The guy's DNA strand had obviously been taking a leak during the distribution of higher brain function, making him Cameron's ideal lap dog.

Guess you've been waiting for me. Sorry. Was eating dinner.

Shay refrained from jibing about whether the guy would indulge a manicure or a *Friends* rerun after eating. Mainly, he worried about Wyst actually answering.

So Cameron's called off the op again?

Once more, there was a hell of a lot more he burned to type. No; to demand. Like why the hell they weren't moving on the plan when the Pacific Ocean itself was cooperating tonight, dumping fog porridge over half of LA. He watched the departure gate crews get itchier by the minute, waiting for word from the control tower that every flight would be grounded until morning. Their wait wasn't long. After a few minutes, the PA system crackled. *We regret to inform passengers...blah blah blah...due to abnormal fog and dangerously low visibility...blah blah blah...Los Angeles International Airport will reopen at six o'clock tomorrow morning.*

It was such a rarity for LAX, the crews clapped like kids on Christmas. In a way, it was. All the tarmacs had just been turned into Cameron's airliner goody bag, complete with a cloak of subterfuge to better enjoy the "fun."

So why the hell was Stock stalling this time?

New tactic. No joy on taking golden egg tonight.

Not enough yolk to hatch the plan. Extra roosters called to watch the henhouse.

"Fuck."

Now the guy switched to code speak? "Not enough yolk" likely meant none of the jets outside had enough fuel in them, even for a short hop to the desert outside Vegas. But that defense was thin. Why couldn't Stock get a couple of fuel crew ID's falsified, since he'd passed off Shay and Wyst as "airport contractors" for the last month? And "roosters" in the henhouse clearly referred to extra security for the terminals, determined to keep the largest airport in the state a drama-free zone tonight.

No. That defense didn't wash either. Stock had a shit-ton of resources for this kind of thing. He'd called up a small mercenary army to face Tait's Special Forces battalion in Hollywood last year, not to mention the team of pretty-boy cutthroats gathered by his bitch, Gunter Benson, for the Kaua'i adventure.

So what wasn't adding up here?

Shay hoped to God it wasn't his cover story.

His next text exchange with Wyst would supply the answer to that.

When is hatch time rescheduled?

If Wyst's answer was slow or evasive, he'd know the jig was up. It'd be clear Stock had learned about Shay's true purpose and was plotting to cut him out of the mission—and into a bunch of little pieces, too.

Shit.

It would be time to risk contacting his CIA point man, Dan Colton. He'd need an exfil fast, if he lived that long. Finding a place to disappear for the night would be a priority, too.

Trusting the LAX security team wasn't an option. He had no way of knowing who Cameron owned around here.

Escaping to the Hilton with his two new dancer friends suddenly seemed the best plan for the night—if they really weren't working for Stock themselves. Which, despite his earlier assumption, was an option on the table again.

How the hell was he going to figure them out? Getting them naked wasn't a fail-proof answer. Wasn't like he'd find wires or trackers on them. Cocksuckers like Stock had sneakier ways of keeping tabs on a guy these days, especially if they'd researched their prey and learned he belonged to several high-end BDSM clubs in Pensacola and Panama City. Wasn't a secret that he was tapped to teach rope bondage classes when he wasn't tromping a desert or jungle with his Seventh Special Forces Group operational detachment, as well. All those women had to do was entice him into a little rope play, knowing he'd throw his entire attention into the scene, before distracting him just enough for Stock to put a bullet through his skull or a knife across his throat.

It'd be a viable theory if he still had conscious women on his hands.

He turned back toward the bar in time to hear the *clink* of Ellie's piercings as her head dropped to the marble. A contented smile was plastered on her lips.

"El?" Brynn leaned over her friend, persistently poking Ellie's shoulder. "El? Heeyyy, wake up. We were just starting have some fun. Elliiieeee...woooo hoooo...anyone home?" She knocked on El's head like it was a neighbor's front door. When she added doorbell sounds, Shay wrote off his suspicions of the girls as Cameron Stock conspirators. Or sadly, as potential playmates for the night.

As he allowed his big head to deliver the depressing news to his small head, another text came in from Wyst.

New hatch time. 8 AM tomorrow. Sunset Airlines #403 to Sin City.

Papa Fox wants hens as insurance now.

Meet at the gate by 7.

So much for the rest of his hard-on. A strange recognition followed. While the update pushed one concern off his shoulders, another replaced it. The blatant details of Wyst's message proved Shay's cover story was still rock solid, but also revealed their target wasn't an empty

airliner anymore. *Papa Fox wants hens as insurance.*

Hell.

The burglary had turned into a hijack.

Shay glowered at his cola on the bar. He was tempted to shove the drink back and demand something stronger, but didn't. Watching Dad pickle his liver into an early death, as well as Tait's temporary surrender to the bottle after losing Luna, guided him to pick and choose his dance cards with Mistress Booze.

Besides, Ellie and Brynn seemed determined to use the cards for everyone in the room.

"Elliiie! Wake uhhh-hup. Hunk-of-hotness is off his phone and looks like he's gonna punish us for getting so turpsy. I mean tits-bees. I mean *tipsy*."

Shay held back from huffing again. At any other time the girls' antics would've coaxed him into at least an indulgent chuckle, but he couldn't shake off tonight's tension. The feeling turned into a freak case of Papa Bear syndrome. The hijack wasn't set to go down for another ten hours but he couldn't stand thinking of the pair, embracing life with such mindless happiness, to be anywhere near this airport when it did.

"No," he told Brynn. "I'm feeling benevolent tonight. No punishments for you two. Let's just get you both on a shuttle back to the hotel, and—"

"Thank you, but they're okay."

The soft dictate didn't come from Brynn. It sure as hell didn't come from Ellie, who giggled in her sleep then started snoring. *Then who...?*

Shay stared at a third woman who'd broken free of the estrogen pack in the corner. Damn. How'd he gotten so distracted that he stopped focusing on his surroundings? Clumsy shit like that landed guys like him at the wrong end of blades or bullets.

Especially if they were wielded by a beauty like her.

Holy fuck.

So what if the woman was here to kill him? He almost prayed for it. With her face as his last sight before the other side, Hades wouldn't feel like a penance for all the messy turns of his life. Seven years in Special Forces, taking more lives than a man should be comfortable with. Relationships that had ended with even worse carnage. A fucked-up obsession with honor and protectiveness, learned entirely from characters in the movies he'd snuck into rather than doing homework, likely meaning he had no real concept of the shit at all.

But in this moment, he sure as hell yearned to. Practically craved it as he soaked up her heart-shaped face with its bow of a mouth, along with thick-lashed eyes framing irises that entranced him like skies on the verge of wild storms. Her nose wasn't a petite cliché, and was decorated with a sapphire stud that matched her gaze. The same navy blue color adorned the ends of her hair—holy God, what hair—its near-black waves tumbling down her back despite her efforts to contain it in a loose braid.

She was otherworldly. Ethereal. He felt like a knuckle-dragging ape in comparison, especially because words still eluded him.

Finding his tongue didn't get easier when the woman bent to help Ellie but also gave a view of her cleavage that banged another wake-up call for his cock. She'd never be a curvy pin-up star, but what she had was tight and firm, two ideal handfuls.

"El," she murmured to her friend. When the woman only snored louder and pushed her away, she resorted to a full yell. "Ellie. Ay. Come on; you can't do this. Let's go back to the hotel, *corazón*, where you can sleep it off."

"Looks like Ellie's one step ahead of you, beautiful."

Her eyes widened when he slipped in the endearment. Through the moment after that, he basked in the searing paradise of her appraisal of him. He lifted his gaze, answering her heat signal with a return beacon of his own. Thank God the messages were comprised of raw sexual attraction, undetectable by the spooks' radio chatter experts. If that were possible, the guys in the control room would interpret the exchange as a plot to blow something up. Not that exploding something here was such a bad idea...

Her scowl threw a soaking blanket on his illicit thoughts. "Look, Mr.—uh—"

"Burnett." The cover name rolled out as easily as his own. Six months of regular usage came in handy. "Shane Burnett. But please make it Shane." *And please say it in your sweet, spicy accent, too.*

Brynn tittered again. "If you bellow something like 'only my father's called Mr. Burnett,' I'll *die*." She used an exaggerated baritone for the middle portion.

"Good news." He smirked a little. "Nobody will be writing your obit tonight." He'd called his father many things over the years, but nothing resembling the respectful address. Tait had actually tried it once, and been whacked into the wall for being a "cheeky jokester."

"Well," said the newest arrival to their exchange, tugging on a blue-tipped strand.

“*Muchos gracias* for that, at least. Now what do we do about El?” She shifted her fingers to the ends of a tie-dyed scarf, seeming lost. Shay took advantage of the chance to scoot closer. The top of her head barely came to his armpit. Once more, he fought the sensation of feeling like an ape next to a butterfly. No. It sounded better in the language her accent hinted at. An exquisite *mariposa*.

“Ladies.” He tagged it with another smile, relishing the chance to bury the ugliness of tomorrow beneath tonight’s courtly façade. “Perhaps I can be of service.”

The two women stared as if he’d really turned into a giant chimp. Was that a good or bad thing?

“Holy shit,” Brynn finally blurted. “Maybe I really will just die—but only if you’re waiting on the other side, Mr. Shane Burnett.”

He breathed easier. All right, a good thing.

Until the *mariposa* stepped forward again.

“We’re grateful for the offer,” she stated, “but we’ll manage everything fine. Have a good evening.”

At least Brynn was still on his side. As she glared at her friend, she grunted with impressive force. “Zoe Margarita Madonna Chestain,” she snapped. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Besides that you’re loving an excuse to babble my full name?” The woman arched a brow, kicking up the same side of her mouth. Part of Shay’s gut followed suit, kicking to life at her mirth. The way it made her eyes shimmer no longer aroused his body alone. She really was an exotic anomaly, intriguing him deeper by the minute. He yearned to see her face come alive with a thousand more expressions. How did she look when she laughed? Cried? Or parted those curvy, sweet lips on a long, breathy orgasm...

“You deserve every pissed syllable,” Brynn fumed. “What’s wrong with you, spewing with the ‘tude when the world’s last chunk of chivalry is standing here in *that* suit, offering us the aid of *those* arms?”

Zoe Margarita Madonna Chestain had the grace to flush at that. She lifted her gaze to his. “I’m sorry, Mr. Burnett. It’s been a long day. We had performances at all ends of the city today, and we’re a little tired.”

He swung a glance toward her snoring friend. “Never would’ve guessed.”

“I don’t mean to be rude—”

“Then don’t be.” He made good use of the interruption. Before she could speak again, he stepped over, slid a gentle grip around Ellie then pulled her off the barstool and into his arms.

“Lucky bitch,” Brynn muttered. “And she won’t even remember it in the morning. Irony is such a douchebag.”

The woman’s drunken giggle wasn’t shared by her friend. Zoe was glaringly sober, verified by the half-drained water glass on the table near the purse she grabbed—and her taut expression while doing so. Shay weathered another twinge to his gut. And a fresh surge of blood to his groin. Deduction dictated she was a dancer, too. Every move she made flowed into the next, never giving his attention respite from her supple muscles and well-trained grace. Damn. She was probably flexible as shit, too.

Fine. He was attracted to her. A lot. That still didn’t explain the “twinge.” He mentally backtracked the feeling. He’d first weathered it when realizing he’d ticked her off with his boldness. *Not* normal shit. Since when did he care about irking anyone other than Tait, his CO, and lately, Cameron Stock? Indulging in “caring” meant a sacrifice of focus.

Nope. Not normal. Not acceptable, either.

Which was why he now smiled at her, trying to be a gentleman and smooth her ruffled feathers?

Forget unacceptable. He’d moved straight on to surreal.

As soon as he entertained the thought, it fled his mind. No. It was again replaced by his fascination with her peregrine beauty. She treated him to an unguarded moment of it after she gathered her friends’ purses, too, letting him stare his fill of her huge midnight eyes and temptress’s lips.

All too quickly, she cast her gaze back down, elegant even in that movement.

Just like a flawlessly-trained submissive.

Good-bye, surreal. Hello, torture.

This isn’t the time for dungeon fantasies, asshole. Tame your dick and focus your mind.

“The Hilton runs regular shuttles to the outside curb,” Zoe told him after she walked back over. The group she’d just left released a collective whoop as they ordered two more pitchers of margaritas. “At least I hope they do now.”

Brynn answered the quizzical stare he threw to both of them. “Their shittle—err,

shuttle—van was all broken when we called for it a couple of hours ago.” She turned her hands up, fingers splayed like a little girl. “And we’re all in heels. And it was after dark. And the hotel’s, like, a bunch of blocks away. A drink sounded good, and they told us the fix time wouldn’t be more than an hour.”

“Which was two hours ago?” Shay couldn’t help a wry laugh after Brynn answered with a sheepish nod. In all seriousness, he wondered if their hot-ass Vegas show company had considered hiring a bodyguard to travel with these girls. If any of them were his woman, he’d be demanding it.

Zoe’s heavy sigh broke into his speculation. “Let me call them again. Maybe they took down my number wrong, or—”

“Fed you a line just to get you off their backs,” Shay interjected.

She yanked up her chin. Little sparks appeared in her eyes, tantalizing cobalt against the deep blue. “Which means what?”

So much for not irking her again. Fine by him. He was a little rankled himself now, largely from how cavalier she—and her half-wasted friends—were about their own welfare. “It means they’re likely not going to pick up even if you do call, Miss Chestain.”

Her lips twisted. She’d obviously expected what he said, but didn’t like it. “Fine. Then we’ll just take a cab.”

“Bet your ass we will.”

“We?”

He repeated the brow-jerking thing before glancing to her friend, still totally toasted in his arms. “So you’re saying you can handle all of this yourself, tiny dancer?”

The stubborn woman tightened her pout. “Look—Mr. Burnett—”

“Let’s go. The taxi queue is this way.”