

CHAPTER ONE



TIME HAD DICTATED a lot of Brynn Monet's life. Watching it, abiding by it, dancing to it...and praying to it for better things to come.

This was one of the prayer moments.

Lots of prayer.

No one confirmed that point better than Shay Bommer, the husband of Brynn's best friend Zoe, as he drove a fist into the living room wall of the Las Vegas suburban home he shared with Zoe.

But Zoe wasn't here right now.

The emptiness was symbolized to sickening perfection by the crater left behind as Shay stepped back, snarling at everyone in the room like a cornered animal. It took a while. It was a full house tonight with eight other people in the room, five of them legitimately qualifying as humanized Mack trucks. The men had dropped everything to fly here for the guy who'd once served side-by-side with them as part of the First Special Forces Group. Brynna stood nervously in an opposite corner with El Browning and Ryder Monroe, the friends she couldn't be without right now.

Shay pulled his fist back, leaving a gaping cavity behind. The hole joined the other two he'd already made. Brynn doubted anyone would blink if he destroyed the whole wall.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking on her own behalf.

Taking out a wall felt like a damn great idea right now.

Even better idea? Obliterating the bastards who'd kidnapped Zoe six hours ago.

“Shay.” The word, hammered with command, was issued by the pirate hunk who stalked forward. Though Rebel Stafford didn’t have an eye patch or a peg leg, the comparison fit in every other way. Those shoulder-length waves of jet-black hair. Those eyes, shot with Caribbean blue specks. That accent, laced with earthy Creole. Those tattoos covering both arms—or so she assumed. The form-fitting T-shirt he wore over his camouflage pants prevented final confirmation—not that her mind’s eye hadn’t already re-outfitted him in breeches, riding boots, a tricorn, and nothing else.

No time for the rest of that vision. Brynn would have been thankful for it too, if the reason was anything other than this.

Dear God. Why Zoe? Anyone but Zoe.

Except that no one but Zoe made sense.

A truth that ravaged every inch of Shay Bommer’s face.

“What?” The man spun and glared at Rebel. “*What?* Have you come bearing any useful information about where the *fuck* my eight-months-pregnant wife is, Reb? If you haven’t, then get the hell out of my sight.”

A pulse ticked in Rebel’s stubbled jaw. If she blinked she would’ve missed it, so formidable was the man’s self-control. “Can’t do that, man, and you know why.”

“Fuck off.”

“Not happening. You know I need to run through the details with you again.”

Shay slumped against the wall. Brynn’s heart broke for him. In this case, “the details” only meant one thing: the horrific sequence of events between his wife’s bathroom break during their dinner date, and the moment she’d screamed before being shoved into the back of a black van at the restaurant’s back door. Shay had sprung to his feet, bursting into the alley in time to notice only two things about the van before it sped away. One, it had no plates of any kind. Two, the driver maneuvered the bulky thing like a seasoned pro.

“Damn it.” Shay exposed locked teeth. “I’ve told you everything I know!”

“I know.” Rebel squared his shoulders. “But I need you to sit down, take a shitload of deep breaths then tell me again. I need everything you can possibly remember.”

Shay dropped his head. Dragged both hands through his thick chestnut hair, choking back a broken breath. “I...can’t.”

“Yes, you can. We need more to go on. Something. *Anything.*”

By “we,” Rebel included the guy right behind him, whom he was rarely seen without. Rhett Lange, call-sign Double-Oh, served as their battalion’s tech and covert identity specialist on all missions—the fancy way of saying that on the team’s most dangerous missions, his dependability was key. Nobody knew that more clearly than Rebel, who as the “blow-shit-up guy”, needed rock-solid intel at every turn of an op.

Brynn jerked her head, forcing the tangent away. Why the hell did she know all of that? Even worse, that it gave her the same adrenalin kick as her *Teen Scene* centerfolds wall from high school? Even right now. Especially right now.

Focus, Monet. Focus on what you can do to help. Zo wasn’t just your dance captain for three years. She was your rock through all the shitty times—and the days that were worse than that. You have to be there for her now. You have to do something.

Another silent but desperate plea. She was going not-so-slowly insane, sitting here in helpless dread and disbelief—

A feeling she was no stranger to.

Good afternoon, Brynna. I’m Officer Feld and this is Officer Smythe, Vegas PD. Sorry to pull you out of rehearsal, but I’m afraid we have some bad news. It’s about your sister, Enya...

She was saved from the memory in the nick of time—by the man who stepped up and pulled her back to safety—mentally, at least. Rhett Lange’s effect on her body wasn’t so simple. The man matched his friend for sheer physical potency—with one difference. He wasn’t a pirate. No other comparison worked for Rhett but *Viking*. Though no wild hair tumbled to his shoulders, the red tips of his short blonde spikes lent the Icelandic flair. His eyes, the color of North Sea depths, were bracketed by rugged creases that deepened as he focused on Shay.

“Reb’s straight up on this, Bommer. I can’t do a thing with what you’ve given me. *Think*. You’ve been trained to do this. Close your eyes. Focus. Can you at least tell me which way the van turned at the end of the alley?”

Shay slid down the wall, *thunked* to his backside, and buried his head in his hands. “You mean as I watched them drive away with my helpless, screaming wife?”

The room fell silent—until a small sob stabbed the air to Brynn’s left. She reached over, locking hands with El and Ryder again. The woman who’d danced with her as many years as Zoe, along with the male model who’d become the D’Artagnan to their Three Musketeers, joined their desperate grips to hers. The connection was comforting, but didn’t fill the void left by Zoe’s absence. Nobody knew her as deeply as Zoe. Enya didn’t count. Not anymore.

Stay strong. You have to stay strong. Zo would do the same for you.

She managed to keep from trembling—until a three a.m. breeze snuck in through the patio, threaded with enough of a March chill to thwart her effort. El began to shake, too. Ry yanked them both against his chiseled chest...again, a huddle missing a key player.

“Zoe.” El’s sob was broken with grief. “Oh my God...Zoe.”

Her cry yanked Rhett’s head around. As he took in their miserable clump, a grimace stabbed his soldier’s veneer. “Fucking bollocks.” The desperation in his voice, underlined by the accent clipped by both London and New York, reached into Brynn’s heart. “We have to figure this fucker out.”

Rebel stalked back across the room. “Damn it, Bommer. I get that this is hell for you—”

Shay surged up, a bestial sound bursting out. “You get it? Is that so? Then enlighten me, Moonstormer.” The call-sign might as well have been hot oil on his tongue. “Tell me what the hell you *get*. You go through a different submissive each month. You flog ’em and fuck ’em, with aftercare barely over before you’re eyeing the next skirt in line. Forgive me, asshole, if I have trouble believing how you *get* this.”

Under other circumstances, the accusation would’ve earned Shay a black eye from Rebel, followed by the other guys in the room. Every one of them had dropped everything to be here for their buddy in his blackest moment. Rebel and Rhett had flown from Seattle with Garrett Hawkins and Zeke Hayes, where the four of them still served in Special Forces out of Joint Base

Lewis McChord. Another former battalion-mate, Kellan Rush, had arrived an hour ago from Hawaii—an odd sight, since Tait Bommer wasn't with him. Shay's older brother was also Kell's best friend, damn near surgically attached to the man except for when he'd been hauled off for training in the middle of the ocean. Also taking part in that training were the battalion's captain, John Franzen, and language specialist Ethan Archer. While awaiting clearance for leave from the training, Franzen and Archer had joined Tait in calling every hour to check on Shay. The coincidence was very likely a blessing in disguise. Shay was already crumbling at the seams. Tait's presence would likely make that worse.

As if the assumption needed affirmation, Shay twisted back, trying to use his forehead on the wall. After three attempts, he gave up. The mountains of his shoulders heaved with his breaths.

Rebel filled in the other end of the composure spectrum. With barely a change to his stance, he calmly murmured, "Glad we got that covered. Do you want to talk about something that matters now?"

Shay's breaths stretched longer. "Left," he finally grated. "I think they turned left."

"That means they went south." Across the room, Rhett flashed a small smile. He'd clearly been hoping for that answer.

"Out of town, then?" Ryder queried. "To California? Or Arizona?"

"Not necessarily." El added her knowing gaze to Rhett's. Brynn looked on, hiding a bizarre bite of envy for their connection. Or *was* it that strange? El's mind worked like a hard drive, able to process a thousand pieces of information and spit out a conclusion in seconds. It was the key behind her impeccable dancing, why she always got audition callbacks before Brynn, who performed mostly from her gut. Two different routes to the same result—except when that outcome was impressing a man as incredible as Rhett Lange.

Focus! This is your best friend's living room, not a damn cocktail bar. Phone numbers on napkins are not why you're here.

Getting Zoe back. It was the only thing that mattered—no matter what it took from all of them to do so.

“The airport.” El’s hazel eyes favored dark green, betraying her anxiety. “Shit. They could have been headed for the airport, right?”

“Airports,” Rhett corrected. “Not just McCarran. In this case, Henderson Executive fits that bastard’s MO better.”

“MO?” Brynn looked from him to Rebel, who nodded grimly. “What bastard?”

“Yeah,” Rebel muttered. “It does.”

“*What* bastard?”

El twisted her lips. “Homer Adler. He’s the only one who makes sense. Right?”

Rebel’s jaw hardened while throwing another glance at Shay—for good reason. Even the mention of Adler’s name stripped the color from Shay’s face. Could he be blamed? Brynn’s gut wrenched, thinking of what that beyond-mad scientist had put him through as a “test subject” of the Big Idea, a secret human-animal genetics experiment. As the only victim who’d been dosed with the serum as a child, Shay had become critical to Adler as a grown man. After weeks of cutting him open to learn the secrets behind his animal strength and speed, Adler had Shay drugged into a stupor, preparing him to be the main stud horse for mutant super babies.

A lot of the guys in this room had prevented that from happening, staging an off-books rescue worthy of a Hollywood adventure. The team hadn’t failed—thanks to the secret weapon they’d brought along for the mission.

Zoe.

Who, beyond anyone’s knowledge but her own, had already been carrying the super baby so important to Adler and his goons.

Important? As adjectives went, it barely dinged the bell—and was probably the only treat that could’ve enticed Adler out of whatever slime hole in which he’d been hiding for the last year. Clearly, the worm had learned of Shay and Zoe’s happy announcement, and gotten so eager to get his hands on the baby, he’d bounded back into the limelight with a damn ballsy leap. By grabbing her tonight, Adler had shot to the top of every government watch list ever conceived, including countries who weren’t even friends with the US. Finding Adler and his minions meant finding Zoe—and the first

baby of an entirely new race of humans. That meant a new breed of warriors. And, in fifteen to twenty years, an unstoppable army.

“Fan-fucking-tastic.” Zeke growled it low and tight, exposing the dismal downturn of his own thoughts. Garrett scowled with similar intent.

On the couch, Kellan leaned forward, chin balanced on his clasped hands. “Those piranhas could have very well slithered back into the bog they came from, too. Vanished without a trace.”

“With a gagged pregnant woman?” Brynn countered. They might have forced Zoe to stay on her feet, but no way would she be quiet about it.

“Valid point.” While his tone remained at mission gravity, Rebel cracked an approving smile. “That narrows down the search.”

His smile widened. Brynn’s heart flipped a little, and the reverberations didn’t stop there. *Great*. She had her dread over *Zoe and* a throb between her legs to contend with now.

Rhett’s nod coincided with his buddy’s, doubling the pressure of her frustration. The speed at which the two men processed things was as captivating as the packages their brains came in. “Right,” he agreed. “We focus on Henderson Executive.”

“Let me help.” El scooped up her laptop again, then nodded at Rhett. “Amazing what a girl in dance tights and heels can get the guys in the Caesar’s security office to spill during her break. I may know a few new shortcut hacks into the airport’s security feed.”

Rhett chuckled. “Legally, I’m not supposed to love every word you just said.”

“Me neither.” El shrugged, making the piercings along her right ear wink in the light. She tucked a strand of her pink pixie cut behind the row of jewelry. “But I hate everything about the reason I’m here, so it’s a wash.”

Rhett’s full lips thinned into a commiserating line before he led the way back to the dining room. In their wake, nobody else had much to say. Brynn only had to take a glance around to know thick silence wasn’t the norm for these guys. If they were working, conversation was likely all Spec Ops sarcasm between the soldier acronyms and radio code. If they were off the clock, it was probably more smack-talk, blended with their chosen off-duty “amusement”—a term Brynn was determined to leave alone right there.

She'd overheard enough conversations between Zoe and her sister, Ava, as well as their cousin, Rayna, to figure out what those pastimes might be. Ava and Rayna, now both married to guys on the team, used expressions like *safe word*, *subspace*, and *aftercare* as if they merely chatted about the new flowers they'd planted or movie they'd seen. It hadn't escaped Brynn's notice that with Shay's arrival in her life, Zoe had joined that party.

What the hell? Had submissiveness become a virus?

If that was the case, Brynn vowed to get the vaccine right away.

It wasn't like she was a puritan. Being kinky, even deeply so, didn't transform her friends *or* their husbands into different people. If it made them happy—and she understood at least the sexual dynamite part of that equation—then why fault them for their consensual choices? Dan Colton, the boyfriend she'd met in this very room, had actually revealed himself as a Dominant by the time they went on their third date. By that time, Brynn had been so nuts about him that she copped out with flirtation, declaring his revelation “bold” and “sexy” but secretly hoping it was his way of simply stating a need for intensity between the sheets.

For almost a year, that had been just the case. By day, Dan had been attentive and sweet, enduring the steps of recovering from the explosion that had disfigured half of his face. By night, he was everything she'd ever fantasized about in a lover: forceful and powerful, the only man who'd ever met the mighty needs of her libido and still had passion to spare. Through it all, he'd never brought out one satin blindfold or pair of fluffy handcuffs. His “I'm a Dominant” Tourette's had seemed just that—or maybe his accident had changed more than his flesh. Whatever the reason, she'd been damn grateful—and giddily on her way to falling in love.

Until Dan confessed he wanted to take her to a BDSM club.

“Beginning of the end” had never fit a night in her life more aptly.

He'd tried a hundred poetic phrasings. Told her they'd take it slow, that he would explain things as they went, that she'd discover new parts of her submissiveness that she'd never known before—

At which point, she'd rocketed off the couch and seethed her reply from across the room.

I'm not a submissive, Daniel. Nor will I ever be.

Why did Dan's answering stare still burn so brightly in her memory? His assessment, hard as steel but fathomless as morning sky, had been potent to the point of brutal—and over six months later, still confused the hell out of her.

Because you may have...liked...being stared at like that?

Because you may have truly knelt for the man, had he commanded it?

Never.

She was stronger than Enya. She could never be anything less. If she needed a reminder of the consequences otherwise, she could always take a quick drive to the Sandbells Psychiatric Facility...in hopes that her sister would say more than ten words in a row to her this time.

Nope. No kneeling in her future. Not for a man who commanded it, at least.

And wasn't that irony's ideal cue to come knocking?

She didn't care. As Shay slipped back down the wall and hunched back over his knees, she didn't think twice about dropping down next to him.

"Shay?" She squeezed his shoulder. "Hey, don't check out on us now, buddy. Come on. Stay strong."

Oh, sheez. *Stay strong?* She was really going with that?

But if she didn't, who would?

Garrett, Kellan, and Zeke were a dark, darker, and darkest row of uncertainty, shifting weirdly on their feet. Under other circumstances, Brynn would've chuckled. Ask these guys to lead hostages from a hot zone, extract an emissary from an embassy, or haul a buddy from a battle trench, and they were aces for the job—but Shay's torment was a jungle they didn't know how to handle. Never mind that all three of them had slogged similar bogs of despair within the last two years—but as best as Brynn recalled, they'd also been able to act right away on the crises with their women. Zoe had been snatched from that alley nearly eight hours ago, and Shay didn't have even a step one.

No wonder his friends looked like prisoners. They were staring down their worst fear—and were shackled by it.

Ironically, the guy who “didn’t get it” was the only one who came near. He crouched next to Brynn, presence still huge as Blackbeard. “The woman has *beaucoup* brains as well as beauty, Bommer. Heed her, *mon ami*.”

Shay raised his head, already glowering. Clearly, Rebel’s unique mix of Creole ’tude and soldier drawl didn’t impress him in the least. Maybe it was a guy thing, because all that musical French drawl was so sexy to Brynn, even her neck hairs tingled.

“*Merde*,” Rebel spat. “Look. You’re not doing Zoe a microsecond of good by giving up the ghost on your shit now.” He bent over farther, meeting his buddy’s glare, warrior-to-warrior. “I’m not going to insult you by coating this in weasel-speak. You know as well as I do that the condition we find Zoe in may not be pretty,”—he gripped Shay’s forearm when the guy grimaced and grabbed at his hair—“and she’s going to need *you* all in one piece.” He shook his friend hard. “I-Man? *Fuckhead*? You hearing me?”

No response came from Shay except an angrier coil of his hand, twisting deeper into his thick chestnut hair. Brynn’s throat throbbed with emotion, and she wondered how the man hadn’t fully scalped himself yet. The only thing worse than a loved one in trouble was being helpless to do anything about it.

“Enya, please let me back in. Let me help you through this!”

“You can’t, bibi. Nobody can help me through this except Peter, and he doesn’t care anymore. He never will.”

Of course he hadn’t. And wouldn’t. Someone newer, fresher, and shinier had entered the submissive program at Club Catacomb, captivating the bastard like an infant with a new shiny—the same way Enya had charmed him eight months prior to that.

No time for that bitterness now. She had to stay focused on keeping Shay sane.

“Why don’t I make you something to eat?” She curled a little smile at the spark of interest in Shay’s eyes. “I can’t unscramble security video feeds but I *can* scramble eggs. Are there some in the kitchen?”

Shay’s forehead crunched, giving his face a uniquely boyish light. Brynn half-expected him to rub the “sleep” from his eyes with a knuckle. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I guess we do. I mean, we usually do. Zo goes to one of those

farmer's markets on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She likes to get tomatoes and carrots and onions...and apples." His face contorted again. "Yeah. Apples. She loves those. Don't touch the apples, okay? She'll want one when she gets home."

It was a line worth waiting for. *When she gets home.* If he believed Zoe would survive this, then Brynn would too. If things like psychic connection really existed, she was certain Shay and Zo shared such a bond. Their love was palpable when they were in the same room, infusing everyone around with its magic. Brynn didn't harbor the illusion of finding such a thing for herself one day; cosmic connection required an emotional bridge she just didn't have anymore—but she could sure as hell jump on Shay's train and use *his* bridge this once.

She made sure he got the point by tightening her fingers around his.

Damn.

Beneath her grip, his skin was icy—or maybe her impression was skewed by Rebel's nearness. The man was a walking furnace. No wonder his eyes were always intense as blue flames, and his nearness felt like a rush from the oven on a frosty morning.

And there she was, doing it again. Mooning over her personal fantasy pirate when there was a crisis to focus on—when the dearest friend she'd ever had was God-knew-where.

Zoe. Oh God, girlfriend. Hang on!

"Got it." She forced a small smile along with the reassurance to Shay. "No apples will be harmed in the making of Brynn's famous scrapple."

Shay laughed again—but this time, to her shock, seemed to mean it. "No, no, no. *Zoe* makes the best scrapple."

Brynn squeezed him one more time before rising with a tease of a glower. "We can settle it with a little friendly competition when she's back."

"Yeah." His laughter faded all too quickly. "When she's back."

Brynn swallowed down more rocks. They landed in the aching valley of her chest. Shay Bommer had been a warrior, a fighter, a secret operative, and a spec ops wonder, likely ordered to summon some crazy-ass courage for all those battles and missions—but none compared to the bravery demanded of

him right now. Brynn had a sudden yearning to drop back down and hug him in encouragement.

Remarkably, Rebel beat her to the punch.

She looked on, wonderment growing, as Rebel embraced his friend with gruff ferocity. “You’re going to get through this, Shay,” he said. “You *and* Zoe. You hear me?”

Brynn giggled as Shay muttered, “Yeah, yeah. Fuck you, too.”

She turned to head into the kitchen—

But was stopped short as Rhett and El bounded back into the room.

“Got ’em!” El pumped a fist into the air.

“Thanks to I-Man.” Rhett nodded toward Shay. “Sometimes it takes just a nibble of intel. You gave us the right bite, man.”

El bounced forward again, face full of excitement. “After we determined the most likely route those assholes would take to Henderson Executive, factoring in traffic on highway fifteen and their need for ‘laying low’ as much as possible, Rhett got onto the city’s mesh network and searched for cameras that had any glitches in their feeds over the last eight hours.”

Rhett set his laptop on the ledge between the living room and the entry foyer. A digital map of the city filled the screen, emblazoned with a glowing green path between the Paradise area restaurant where Shay and Zoe had eaten and the tarmac of the Henderson Executive Airport. “They might as well have dribbled paint behind them,” he remarked.

Garrett lived up to his call-sign by eyeing the monitor like a wary hawk. “Or maybe they left the digital breadcrumbs on purpose, to throw us off?”

“Excellent question.” El nodded. “One *we* also asked,”—she paused as Rhett clicked his tracking ball, bringing up a new image—“until we found this.”

The buoyancy drained from her tone. The next second, everyone understood why. Brynn’s gasp was smothered by the guys’ *f* bombs as a security camera feed appeared, time clock in the corner, along with the words *Tarmac Two*. The footage wasn’t so grainy to prevent everyone from recognizing an unconscious Zoe, her baby bump evident at the front of her tiny form, being carefully dragged from the back of the van by a pair of muscle-heads. The second they transferred her onto a rolling gurney, they

stepped back and let a third man take over. Clad in dark dress pants and a crisp white dress shirt, he moved swiftly over Zoe, taking her vitals—and possessively clutching her round stomach.