

Chapter One

“Is this a dream?”

The words were whispered into Ethan Archer’s ear by the forest goddess he was seconds away from kissing. Corny comparison? Roger that. But completely true? Double on the affirmative. She was mesmerizing. Thick mist rolled around the pine tree to which he’d pressed her, stroking the waves of her auburn hair, leaving droplets on the long lashes bordering her indigo eyes, caressing every inch of the light bronze skin that the cowl of her sweater would allow. Lucky bastard, that mist.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he murmured. “Maybe we’d better do some recon, just to be sure.”

“Yeah. Recon...” Her voice trailed away into a needy sigh, suffusing his chest with warmth and his cock with fire, as they leaned toward each other. He caught the end of her breath with a brush of his mouth to hers.

His gentle intent lasted two seconds.

As soon as he tasted her, he needed more. Strawberries. Mango. Sunshine. Sudden summer in this chilled bower. *Fuck, yes.* He used his lips to spread her, demanding deeper entrance. When she yielded with an eager mewl, he swept in, coaxing her tongue into a sensual dance. By raw instinct, he found both her wrists with his hands. With one sweep, he had them locked over her head, against the tree’s trunk.

He pulled away to lock his gaze on her, too. “My dream includes this,” he growled.

A slow smile curled on her lips. “Mine, too.”

“That’s not what your eyes are telling me, sunshine.”

Her lashes flew wider, exposing those indigo depths even more. “Wh-what do you—”

“What is it? What are you holding back? Tell me now.”

“I—umm—”

“*What?*” he demanded.

“Tighter,” she finally rasped, working her wrists against his grip. “I need it tighter, Ethan. Please...”

She had him at the throaty delivery and the subtle Spanish accent, but the request itself ignited his lust from a spark to a rager. With a snarl, he rammed her wrists harder to the tree. With a gasp, she gave him the full access pass to kiss her again. Forget sweet preludes. He went for the depths of her mouth with passionate intent, spearing her throat just like he yearned to get his dick, now aching to the point of pain, inside her body.

A set of words echoed in his brain. They’d come from his Army Special Forces teammate, Garrett Hawkins, as glasses were raised to toast the guy’s upcoming wedding. *Fate gives you the best shit when you least expect it, guys.* Ethan was way on board with that credo now. When he’d shown up to help with Hawk’s last-minute ceremony, none of his wildest expectations had yielded someone like Ava Chestain, especially after he “introduced” himself by tackling her in Garrett’s living room in a misguided rush of paranoia.

When she’d grinned and joined the banter in teasing him about the incident, he’d been intrigued. When she’d agreed to join him on a hunt through the woods for the bridal bouquet flowers, he’d been encouraged. When she’d given him that beautifully submissive whisper, he was a fucking goner. Just like that, a piece of his spirit plunked out into her gorgeous little palm—

And had remained there for the last seven months.

“Shit.”

The self-directed oath blasted him out of the memory like an air horn. In an instant, he opened his eyes to the current suckage that was his life. The mist, the trees, and the once-upon-a-time forest were gone, leaving a Mexican Desert sunset that matched the battlefield in his head. Orange, red, and yellow shot at each other past billowing cloud boulders. It was over thirty-eight degrees Celsius, which sounded a lot better than a hundred Fahrenheit. It was well over *that* inside his boots and BDUs.

He slumped against one of the unit’s mud-caked Hummers.

Every minute of the last seven months suddenly weighed on him like lead.

Could it be because you’ve fixated too many times on that kiss, dumbass, and not enough on what came after it?

Oh, yeah. All *that*. Never mind that thanks to the criminal who crashed the wedding, he’d ended that day in battle gear and a debriefing instead of in his dress blues, hogging every dance with her. And the rest, what came after? He forced himself to remember that, too. The phone calls she never picked up. The texts she never answered. Even the acknowledgement that never came after he sent her a goddamn florist’s shop worth of birthday flowers.

“Fuck.”

He muttered it before dropping his head between his shoulders. A glance in the Hum’s rearview showed that he looked as defeated as he felt. Thick dust transformed his nearly-black hair into a weird blond. His blue eyes were bloodshot, his face streaked with grime, his lips dry as a concrete gargoyle’s.

He was tempted to laugh. If only all those talent scouts and modeling agents, always ready with the business cards and glam offers, could see him now. Because the best hunk of the minute was the guy covered in five inches of dirt, ten inches of rage, and fifteen inches of what-the-fuck-am-I-doing-with-myself, right?

Behind him, the creak of a rusty door sliced the humid air. The shack to which the portal belonged nearly collapsed from the movement, a strangely appropriate symbol of the interrogation that had taken place inside. Ethan grimaced. Nothing like the sound of a grown man’s sobs to kill the lure of humor, appetite, or any hope of forgetting about the head fuck he’d just performed on the poor shithead.

“Bernardo, it’s been a pleasure.” Every word of the cordiality was dipped in Rhett Lange’s distinctive mix of highbrow London and cocky New York. Ethan almost expected the man to whip out a party bag stuffed with plastic favors but knew better. A month back, Rhett had used the same tone before dicing up a double agent’s gut.

“*Chupa mi pito*, Captain America,” wailed the guy who stumbled from the shack behind Rhett. His wrists were still secured behind his back with plastic cuffs. When he lifted his tear-streaked face and noticed Ethan, he shuddered and cried harder. “You too, *culero*.” He spat in Ethan’s direction. “You and your devil word tricks. I curse you to the bowels of the hell you came from!”

Ethan parked his ass atop the Hummer’s front tire and flung his gaze to the dust. With a shitload of weariness, he mumbled, “Bernardo, my man, you may be on to something there.”

Pounding footfalls yanked his head back up. The stomps also came from the shack, making the thing look like the San Andreas Fault was opening beneath it, as a third man emerged. Daniel Colton, whom they’d nicknamed CIA Ken in honor of his flawless haircut, ducked to avoid whacking his trademark locks on the shack’s awning before strolling free, thumbs hooked into his Dragon Skin vest, a chortle on his lips. ““Devil word tricks?” ‘Bowels of

hell?’ *Mui bueno, Señor Galvaz*. Been catching up on your comic books between those heroin runs into California, huh?”

“Screw you, Colton. And your *puta* mother. And your whore of a sister.”

Ethan tensed some more. It took a lot to get Dan Colton riled, but everyone knew the women in his life were sacred. The spook surprised him though, keeping his shit tight, pivoting back at Galvaz with enough smooth game to earn a spot on Usher’s back-up line. “My mama’s baking bread with the angels, *mucha gracias* for your concern. But I’ll thank you right now to refrain from the sister references, *amigo*. They’re not gentlemanly. Or wise.”

Bernardo glowered. “Or what? You gonna come after me, big bad spy man?”

Colton let out a long, low growl. “*She’ll* come after you, little narco.”

“Bah. Just keep centerfold boy away from me.”

Ethan kept his stare locked on the ground. The heroin dealer had laughingly given him the nickname when they’d started the interrogation this morning, and nobody had suggested a revision. The call was correct. When a prisoner thought he was nothing more than a set of dreamy blues, some lucky bone structure, and a well-worked pair of biceps, it made his mental scalpel that much easier to use. Less painful for everyone concerned.

And then there were the exceptions—like Bernardo. Guys who resisted every cut, making his job a sheer hell. He’d had to slice deep today, digging into emotional marrow he hadn’t expected. By the time the dealer had finally spilled, weeping his way through the details they needed to stop the truckload of heroin and illegal guns bound for the states tonight, Ethan had staggered to the shack’s sink and scrubbed himself from fingertips to elbows. Not that it helped. You didn’t wash the dirt of a man’s soul off your own with rusty water. You barely did it with *holy* water. He should know. He’d tried.

Are you seriously pulling a pity party about this, dickface? You were the one who joined this machine to feel more valuable and connected to the world, remember? To feel like you mattered beyond your pretty face and your prettier checkbook, right?

Guess he’d just stepped into a pile of the world’s biggest lesson-learned-the-hard way. *Careful what you wish for, shit-for-brains.*

Colton’s harsh *pfift* broke into his funk. “Damn, Galvaz. Why’re you still all Bambi tears on me? We haven’t touched a hair on your head, man. What the fuck?”

His pragmatic tone matched the gray matter under the government haircut. As spooks went, Colton was one of the better ones. He’d wisely listened to the advice of his peers—*let Archer do his prisoner whisperer thing then stand back and reap the benefits*—and now his cocky swagger emulated his triumph in the decision. “It’s time for you to grow a pair, man. You only have a few tiny scratches from where we cuffed you. Keep your wrists covered for a few days and nobody’s going to suspect you’re the one who surrendered the playbook on this shit for tonight. If it makes you feel any better, you saved some lives. Even without the smack on the truck, you know the family who paid the cartel to be hidden in the back would’ve never seen San Diego alive.”

“Save your emo act for a fourteen-year-old who cares, *cabron*.”

Dan’s answer to that was a soft *thwick*, the ejection of his pocketknife blade. “I’m cutting you out of these now, Galvaz. I need your hands at full circulation by the time we get you back to town. But try anything weird and we’ll toss you right out of the transport. If you survive that part, you can play man against nature, Sonoran Desert style. Glad to see you don’t like that option because *I* sure as hell don’t. Your return to the Aragon Cartel is of much better use. You’re clear on that? *Sí, amigo?* You get back in there and stay alert. We may be coming by for

a play date with you again real soon.”

Bernardo took advantage of his physical freedom to wipe the tear-streaked grime off his face with his forearm. “If you bring the centerfold bitch again, you can eat my shit. And I expect to be paid next time, spy man.”

Colton rolled his eyes. “I’m not sure you’re square with how this whole thing works, *amigo*.”

“Oh, I am ‘square,’ *chingado*. Make sure your palms are growing lettuce next time or stay home and let them whack you off to videos of your slut sister.”

“Hell,” Ethan spat. He pushed off the tire and slammed his cap back on, expecting to pull Dan’s fist out of Galvaz’s face any second. But again, CIA man impressed him. Though Colton’s chiseled features went tight as stone, all he did was swing his weary gaze back toward Ethan, like they wrangled an obstinate teen together.

Ethan spread his hands and shrugged during his approach back to the shack’s porch. What mental poker would be the best to shove back up Bernardo’s ass? He had a lot to pick from. A childhood of abuse and poverty. Teenage days capped by being blackmailed to make his first drug run, followed by getting tossed out by his grandmother when she’d learned of his involvement with the cartels. The girlfriend who left him when she discovered the same thing. Terrifying, what the mind believed once the heart lost its trust.

Silver lining? Galvaz was trying to do the right thing now. Too bad the dickwad was being a little snotty about the process, including the dramatic sob as Ethan got near. “Get away from me!”

Ethan turned up his hands. “Shit, ’Nardo. You need to chill.”

“Don’t come another step closer!”

“Not a problem.” He let his left eyebrow kick up. “As long as you treat my associates with better respect.” Squaring his stance sent up a small but effective cloud of dust. “To be clear, that’s an ongoing request. If I hear otherwise, I’ll be happy to hop back on the helo and come for another visit. They know how to reach me real quick.”

“Fine. *Fine*.” Bernardo’s lips trembled as he inched a step backward. “Just stay the fuck out of my head. And watch out for my family. You promised you would.”

“That we did.” He exchanged an affirming glance with Colton. “And that we will.”

“You fuck me over on that, centerfold boy, and I’ll be up inside *your* head—with the barrel of my pistol.”

The guy stalked away. Colton and Rhett grabbed him by the elbows and walked him toward the dry riverbed serving as their helipad. Soon a Black Hawk helo hovered into view, though the modified bird made as much noise as a pinwheel, allowing Dan and Rhett to exchange a hearty handshake and promises that they’d get together when Dan made his way through Seattle, where their battalion was based out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Colton tossed a wave before joining more government Ken dolls aboard the helo, where someone had already latched Galvaz in.

As the Black Hawk arced away into the sky, Rhett strolled back with a pace that suggested he was about to strip down to a Savile Row suit and whip out a perfect martini. Once they stood together again, he gave Ethan a solid clap on the shoulder. “You,” he uttered, “are a bloody god.”

Ethan feigned swatting at a fly to break the contact. Damn, he craved a shower. “And you’re full of shit.”

He went back into the shack. Wrong move. Bernardo’s tears, sweat, and resistance clung

to the air, uploading every hellacious minute of the day back into his mind. Rhett followed him in and started packing the recording equipment from the interrogation, which had fed all the data straight to the big heads at Special Ops Command. By now, they were scrambling a team to seize that truck as soon as it crossed the border tonight, at the time Bernardo had just supplied to them.

“You want to vent?” Rhett ventured.

“No.”

“All right. Re-phrase. You *need* to vent. So let it rip, asshat.”

He sucked in a hard breath. Shot up half a sardonic smirk. “Seriously? You pulling rank on me, old man?” Rhett had three ranks and two years on him, though the difference was always used by either of them as a joke more than an operating procedure. He really hoped the guy didn’t start that bullshit now.

“I’m pulling concerned buddy on you and nothing else.” Rhett stilled halfway through closing the camera bag. “Look, mate...you were amazing this afternoon. You know all the work that brought us here. Two teams, three continents, and twice that many countries. You may not be digging lead out of your hide, but everyone knows what you did for the cause. You swam into the psychological thick of it with Galvaz so we’d get one step closer to the Aragons, and hopefully to the bigger strings of this thing in Afghanistan and Somalia.”

“Hurray, team.” He swirled a finger in the air. And yeah, he probably should’ve said more after that, pulled out maybe one more stupid one-liner to reassure Rhett this wasn’t the first time he’d been through this. It would’ve diverted the guy from guessing at the sick truth: that his sole attempt at the “venting” thing had nearly caused the brain bashers at Mental Health Services to slam a temporary disability card on his ass. *Not going to happen, assholes*. He hadn’t defied his parents and given up a cushy ride to college with the promise of a Silicon Valley corner office to be told his head was too fucked-up for living his dream. At the moment, he just needed to scrub it out a little. Some bleach, wax stripper, maybe a few lye pellets, and he’d been right as fucking rain.

“Fine,” Rhett finally said. “Then how about I take you to get some Olympus-type nectar?” The guy curled a suave grin. “Or maybe just a truckload of *cerveza*?”

“No.”

He bit it out harder this time. He was so damn tired. All he wanted was a transport home, along with the engine drone and ear buds full of an Incubus album as his lullaby.

The second he allowed that hope to blossom a little more, his radio crackled. The line boomed with the voice of John Franzen, their CO. “Double-O, Runway, got the word from Colton that’s he’s bugged with the target. You two pretty boys packed up yet, over?”

Ethan punched the comm button at his ear, connected to the speaker line that was formed to his cheek. “Just about. Advise rendezvous point for the exfil, over?”

Franz’s answer carried a laugh. “That would be the Twisted Iguana cantina, over.”

Ethan frowned. “Repeat please?”

“You heard me right, Sergeant. The Twisted Iguana. *La Iguana Torsida*. Double-O knows where it is.”

Rhett nodded acknowledgement to that. But before Ethan opened the line back up, he cocked his head in puzzlement, almost pulling a physical double-take. “Er—Franz—”

“Is there a problem with that command, Archer?”

“Uh, well, no. But you called me—” A glance down at the pin on his collar, displaying the double corporal stripes, emphasized how ridiculous he would have sounded through the rest.

You called me Sergeant.

Big fucking deal. Okay, it sounded nice but that didn't make it true. Nor did pointing out the dick-up make any sense. Franz was likely—probably—just as tired as him, and now compounded that with a very large beer on a half-empty stomach. Thinking fast, Ethan concluded with, “Never mind. We're nearly wrapped and ready, and will be Oscar-Mike in less than ten.”

“That's outstanding news, Sergeant. Franzen out.”

Ethan didn't hide his confusion this time. Only the decrepit walls were witness to his reaction since Double-O was already outside, halfway to the Hummer with a load of equipment. It was only those walls that heard his quiet quip. “Right, Captain. And I'll just forget about that shit-eating grin you forgot to mask in your voice.”

* * * * *

When Rhett pulled off the main road and guided the Hummer down a road that likely resembled a dusty Candy Land board from the air, Ethan cocked a brow at his friend. “Love the scenic detour, man, but even if there's a waterfall and fairies at the end, I'm not sucking face with you.”

“Ha bloody ha.”

“Okay, then. If you're thinking of doing the execution thing, I'll let you know right now that Hawkins has dibs on my books and Hayes gets all my guns. The engraved pilsner glasses are still up for grabs—”

“Archer.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut it.”

Both words were underlined in arrogance. The next moment, Ethan saw why. They rounded a steep rock corner into a clearing with a parking lot of sorts, filled with every kind of vehicle from their monster military stuff and gas-guzzling clunkers to some new Ducati motorcycles and even a pair of beautifully restored classic Mustangs. The owners of those rides were packed onto about thirty picnic tables tucked beneath a massive lean-to shelter that was wedged between a gutted stake-bed truck and an old VW van with one side shaved off. Atop the stake bed, a DJ adjusted levels on the Pearl Jam tune that throbbed through the air. The van had been converted into a bar. A redhead with a great rack in a tight Godzilla T-shirt popped beers and poured drinks with saucy cheer. Strings of carnival lights were draped between the overhang and the nearby cholla trees. The décor consisted of every groan-worthy pop culture trend from the last twenty years, including Homer Simpson bobble heads, a pirate ship with little Jack Sparrow dolls in nasty positions, Victoria's Secret model posters, and a bunch of commemorative Super Bowl footballs that “flew” from the ceiling on fishing line.

Positioned in front of all this, with a grin that suggested he'd just screwed all the poster models himself, was John Franzen. Flanking him were two of Ethan's battalion mates, Zeke Hayes and Garrett Hawkins. Their smiles also widened as he and Rhett got out and approached. Despite that, Ethan threw up his guard, keeping his face neutral. When the CO greeted you, in addition to the two guys who called the shots on most of the team's missions, it was either a really good thing or a really bad thing.

Franzen gave a fist bump to Rhett. “Nice work, Double-O. You got him here without rope or handcuffs.”

“Damn good thing.” Rhett chuckled and swung his gaze around. “The kinky shit is all

yours, my friends. He even thought I was taking him to the wilderness to make out. I felt awful for busting his bubble, but—”

“Fuck you,” Ethan drawled as Zeke and Garrett snickered. Franz didn’t join them. With his newfound solemnity, he slammed a hand to Ethan’s shoulder.

“You look like shit, Runway. You okay?”

Ethan didn’t return Franz’s scrutiny. A string of illuminated GI Joe heads became a perfect diversion for his gaze and an excuse to keep his tone insouciant. “Lid’s on fine, Captain. So does Godzilla Girl have anything besides beer?” An inch or two of scotch sounded really fucking good.

Franzen, damn him, didn’t move his hand an inch. “No,” he declared. “I don’t think you’re fine, Archer.”

He left the Joes behind, sliding a glare over at his CO. “I’ll *be* fine if everyone stops asking about it.”

Franzen contemplated that before shaking his head and stating, “Uh-uh. You’re still missing something.”

“What the hell are—”

“You’re missing this.”

The man yanked on Ethan’s collar, pulling the fabric taut so he could jam a pin into the triangle panel. Before Ethan could say a word, Franz finished off the business by detaching the pin that had originally been there, bearing the double stripes of his corporal rank.

Garrett cracked a bigger grin. “Now isn’t that prettier’n a fresh drop of dew on a morning glory?”

Zeke rolled his eyes. “Hawk, you’re a serious dork sometimes.”

“It’s okay,” Ethan interjected. He stared at the new pin on his collar. Counted the stripes there for the tenth time. One, two, three. Sure enough, they were all there. “This time he’s right.” The pin was pretty. Fuck, better than pretty. It was perfect. So was the identical one Franzen placed into his palm.

“I’ll let you get the other collar,” his CO said. “And sorry we’re not doing this on a stage in our Class A’s, Archer. Figured you’d appreciate getting the pay step that much faster.”

“You figured right.”

“Oh, yeah. That reminds me. You’re buying first round tonight.”

Ethan chuckled. “Sure thing. And thanks, Captain.”

Franz busted out a wide smile, gleaming in stark contrast to the jet-black hair of his skull cut, before murmuring, “You want to thank someone, look in the mirror. You worked hard for this. Congratulations, *Sergeant*.” He shook his head, his equally dark eyes glittering in amusement. “I can finally say that without worrying I’ll fry your gray matter.”

“I say we let Serenity take over that chore.” Rhett nodded toward the bar and Godzilla Girl. While Ethan repeated his laugh, this time because he seemed to be the only one noticing the irony of a girl named Serenity with a fire-spewing lizard across her chest, the redhead noticed Rhett and gave him a soft wave.

“All right, everyone,” Franzen announced, “pomp and circumstance is over. Shuck at least the tops so we can celebrate properly.”

Three minutes later, after stowing their jackets in the Hummers, they reconvened at a long ledge, really a faded surfboard affixed atop cement blocks, that formed one side of Serenity’s workspace. Despite her preoccupation with Double-O, the woman had a line of five frosty bottles lined up by the time they got to the bar. After taking his first swig, Ethan jutted his

lower lip in respect. Beer wasn't usually his thing but the microbrewed lager from a California-based outfit was strong and smooth.

"Well, well, well." Franz tipped his bottle at the bar mistress. "Breaking out the good stuff for us now, Serenity? What happened between last night and now?" He flicked a glance between her and Rhett, clearly following the sparks zipping between the pair. "Or should I ask *who* happened?"

The woman snapped a towel at him. "Bugger off, Franzie Panzie. I'm tryin' to be nice."

"Franzie Panzie?" Zeke's face, normally the texture of a granite cliff, crumpled in humor. "Damn, why didn't I come up with that one first?"

Franzen eyed him. "Because you have to put up with me after tonight and she doesn't."

Serenity defiantly jerked up her chin. "I noticed you wankers had some kind of special event goin' down so I broke out the good swill."

"You figured right," Garrett offered. "Mr. Dark and Chiseled over there is basking in his first hour as a full-fledged sergeant."

The redhead's face lit up. "Brilliant! Nice work!" She swatted the towel at Ethan too, though her intent was playful this time. In two seconds she was full of feisty fire again, arching brows back at Franz. "Though I'm happy to get the piss water back out for you, Panzie, if you fancy it?"

Franz held up a hand. "Nope, nope. This is just fine, sweetcakes." He dropped that hand in order to scoop up Serenity's, grazing her knuckles with a kiss. "Thank you for the thoughtfulness."

It escaped nobody, especially Serenity, that Rhett looked ready to punch their CO for the move. The redhead giggled before turning to load up the tabs on more of the bar's customers, which seemed to be a friendly mix of locals and American ex-pats.

"Shit." Garrett examined the label on his bottle. "Never thought I'd say this, but some of these California beers are good."

Rhett huffed. Parts of the man would never acclimate to the rest of the world and his booze preference was one of them. "Whatever."

"Hmm." Franz suddenly found the lip of his own bottle fascinating, though his tone was too contemplative for a place where an inflatable Batman in an evening gown was tied to the rafters over the bar. "I hear there's a lot of good things about California."

Without missing a beat, Zeke added, "I hear the same thing."

"Beer's damn tasty," Garrett said.

Rhett shook his head. "Hell. I give up."

"I do, too." Ethan frowned. "What the fuck with the cryptic California tourism commercial?"

Franz cocked up one side of his mouth. "Because maybe I talked to the high-levels about how my guys grinded their guts to gravel to uncover a new international drug shipment stream, then tracked it across the globe in order to start breaking the assholes' weakest links. And maybe after that, I also told them one of my boys was about to score his sergeant's stripe. And maybe after *that*, I convinced them that because of all this, my guys deserve a few days of fucking around in the land of beaches, babes, bikinis, and," —he held up his bottle— "really good beers."

Rhett shifted forward. "Are you bloody serious?"

Like they'd choreographed it, Franzen took a step back to let Zeke move up and continue. "And maybe *I* talked my sexy bird of a girlfriend into meeting us in LA so she could arrange a

friendly visit with her cousin...on the set of the TV show she works on.”

That got a fist pump out of Rhett. “Oh, yeah! Hollyweird, here we come!”

Zeke chuckled, accepting Rhett’s happy offer to knock bottle necks. Franzen and Garrett joined the toast. When the four of them swung expectant stares at Ethan, he somehow got his muscles to function at returning the *chink*. The action validated his new belief in miracles. How he functioned at all, considering how every blood cell in his body hit a red light at the same time, had to be divine intervention at work.

“Shit, Runway,” Garrett drawled. “don’t let all the excitement eat you up at once, okay?”

Zeke released a knowing snort. “Oh, he’s excited.”

Garrett seconded the laugh. “Figured your mention of a certain cousin might do it.”

Rhett grinned. “You mean the one he tackled into a pile of poof before Hawk’s wedding, thinking she was Hezbollah in heels? Or the one who did a personal GPS trek in lipstick across his face? Oh, wait. That was the *same* cousin, wasn’t it?”

“Goddamnit,” Franz snapped. “I missed all the good shit, didn’t I?”

“Not all of it.” Garrett scowled. “We finally got the vows in but Sage isn’t settling for the courthouse thing. Soon as the baby’s born, she swears she’s slimming down for the big dress and the Hollywood wedding production again. She wants to go ‘Nouveau Renaissance’ this time.”

“Oh, hell.” Zeke laughed his way around another swig. “Are goldenrod napkins involved again?”

“Not sure. But I told her if I’m wearing pants that button at my knee, I’d better damn well get a sword, too.”

The banter was background buzz in Ethan’s mind. For the chance to see Ava again, he’d hop on a plane to goddamn Antarctica. Okay, Rhett was right; they’d first met because he’d let paranoia into the party and body-slammed her into a mound of wedding fabric—but even that had been perfect. No stupid pretenses. No feigned interest behind a social handshake. Just their gazes, meshed with honesty, awareness...connection. Every breath tangled. Every touch a tiny fire. Every second a new beginning. It was the core of what he craved from being a Dominant—hell, what he was searching for in *life*—yet seemed his personal Atlantis, a lost nirvana never to be realized.

Until Ava.

Fuck.

He took a long gulp of his beer, medicating his frustration. Summoning the memories back only reconfirmed that everything he’d felt seven months ago was so damn real. And damn it, those kinds of sensations weren’t possible without return ammo. Like the way she’d lingered near him even after he’d pulled her upright from his tackle. The way her eyes danced like the rarest, darkest sapphires when she’d invited him into the forest for those flowers. The way she’d followed him through the trees then begged him to grip her harder when he pinned her against one of them...

None of it added up to the way her radio had gone dark on him since. After Garrett and Sage’s wedding had gone down in a blaze of disaster, including Zeke being zapped with a neurotoxin and Rayna getting carried off by a psychopath with a huge ax to grind, Ava stayed long enough to be sure that Ray was officially out of harm’s way then headed straight for the airport, telling everyone she’d been summoned back to Hollywood by her whack-a-diva of a boss. He hadn’t bought the line for a second. Said diva had only been in the third week of recovery from an extensive nose and lip job. He doubted Bella Lanza was conscious enough to dial the phone let alone capable of a text or email. Ava had fled Seattle for another reason. In the

following weeks, the crickets that greeted *his* calls and texts were ample proof of that reason.

Would seeing her again explain anything? Prove anything?

At first, the hollow walls of his beer bottle were the only response he got. But suddenly, something replaced that fucking uselessness—something besides the anger, the exasperation, the loss. Resolve. It started in the core of his chest but spread out fast, making his extremities flex and his spine straighten. Once it got to his mind, it met up with a new friend: the Dom deep inside who now issued a surprising update. He hadn't given up on the goddess in the forest. He hadn't white-flagged it on a second of the desire in her eyes, the need in her kiss, the urgency in her voice when she'd begged him to pin her down harder. He hadn't let go of the hope that she wanted more from him...had more to give him in return.

And he wasn't giving up unless she told him to. With her own lips. Standing face-to-face with him.

He grinned. Somehow he found that harder to envision than their Hummer turning into a Lamborghini.

And once he had Ava in front of him again, he'd get to the truth—even the naked version, if she forced his hand—of why she'd decided to go AWOL on him after what they'd shared in that Washington forest.

“Serenity.” It was more a command than a call, bolstered by his first real hope in seven months. The bar mistress wheeled, cocking brows in a silent *you-did-not-just-summon-me-like-that*, but softened when he twirled a finger toward the table and said, “Round two, please? The good shit again. On me.”

Franzen kicked up one side of his mouth. “You know, Runway, when your morose silences lead to stuff like this, I'm okay with it.”

“Copy me in on that.” Zeke held his fresh bottle high. “So what're we toasting to, Archer?”

Ethan turned to his battalion mates and leader. His stare was as level as a sniper's crosshairs. “What else, man? To California.”

“To California!” the other four men bellowed.

After they knocked bottles and took deep drags from their drinks, Franz's smile grew into a wicked grin. “This should be an adventure. And I'm sure as hell not missing it this time.”

Ethan stepped away from their huddle and paced back out toward the cars. The lights and music of the bar faded a little. He looked up into the sky, where twilight lingered in a special strip between the horizon and the stars. It looked like the universe had scooped the color right out of Ava's eyes, then painted it there. The indigo hue, a perfect mix of deep blue and purple, held his stare long after he should've walked back.

He drilled his gaze hard into that sky and gave it a small smile of his own.

“Adventure,” he murmured. “That might be one way of putting it.”