

A Warrior's Challenge series

To be read after Code Name: Ghost

Bridging Chapters

Code Name: Ghost Surrenders

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Chapter One

Thane stood on the starboard side of the commando carrier as the sun breached the horizon. The sea breathed calmly. It had been a long night. He didn't allow the *whop, whop* of the helo to distract him. Instead, it merged with his heartbeat in a familiar rhythm. A SEAL recognized chopper blades as signifying extraction or insertion. Either way it meant he had to get moving.

"Captain Austen! Bus is leaving." Mace stepped up beside him, his weapon slung across his shoulder. "What is it, sir?"

Thane tipped his head, not wanting to take his eyes off the sight before him.

Mace scanned the surface of the water and nodded. "Morning play," he said, referring to the two dolphins vaulting from the water as if dancing together only fifty feet off the ship's starboard quarter. "Pilot wants to depart. The exercise is over, isn't it, sir?"

An image appeared in his mind of the painting he'd given Kayla at Christmas, and hung over her bed. He'd never told her what it really signified. The two of them—free to be together. He wanted to walk down the street with his arm wrapped around her like every other couple he seemed to notice now. He wanted to walk in the kitchen, and see her in a little slip of a negligee, making coffee, and then bring it to her in bed.

Nothing had changed since the day the Blood Shark left Miriam Brown, a grade three school teacher, out for a morning jog, skinned and eviscerated in his garage.

Kayla was under guard twenty-four/seven, living with Mace instead of him. He was no closer to finding the Shark, which meant he had to keep her quarantined like a prisoner to protect her, and she was getting mulish about it. The rare seconds he found to visit her, they'd fight. The sexy bantering had altered into angry words, but he put hers aside, dug for patience which amazed even him, because he knew she was frustrated.

“Captain?”

He sighed and nodded. “Exercise is over. We’re RTB, Mace.”

“Roger that, sir, let’s get the hell home.”

“What’s the rush?”

“Kayla said she’d make us breakfast if we finished before she left for her first shift back at work.”

He knew better than to ask, but he did anyway. “Open invitation?”

Mace jerked his gaze away. “No, sir. She’s kinda pissed at you right now. I’d stand clear.”

“Captain Austen, lift off,” the pilot mouthed, the blades swiping the sound away before it reached them.

The deck crew signaled for takeoff, and he and Mace jumped in as the skids lifted from the carrier, and the sun rose above the sea’s surface. The dolphins continued to play in their Shangri-la as the comm chatter in his ear tried to break the peace.

“Command—Echo Three, returning to base,” the pilot checked in.

Kayla’s voice answered, “Echo Three, Base Command, roger, parking lot is full, beach drop and proceed to NAS.”

“Roger, Snow White,” the pilot advised, and switched from the VHF VOX so only the occupants in the chopper could hear him. “Shit, that woman makes me hard.”

Thane wrenched his neck turning instant anger on the pilot. “You’re talking about one of my team, Pilot. Stow it,” he said sharply.

Pilots ran in their own crowd, and didn’t like taking orders. He laughed. “Sorry, Ghost, but it’s the truth. Since that babe showed up, I check in twice as much. Keep meaning to drop by. Need to take the woman out to dinner and more, if I’m lucky.”

“I don’t fuc...” Fingers dug into his leg, and his eyes darted to Pat Cobbs, his friend and the team’s lieutenant, sitting on the rubber matt beside him. Cobbs gave a negative sway of his head. The cool morning wind grabbed at Thane’s fatigues, and he sucked in a chest-full to center himself.

“Guys say she’s as hot as they come in bed,” the pilot added, regurgitating bullshit.

Although he was fast, his men were quicker, and they landed on him like a football team before he tore the pilot’s head off, and crashed the craft.

“Been a long night, Ghost,” Cobbs voiced, releasing his hold at the same time. “Want to debrief when we get back or after we get some rack time?”

His anger popped like droplets of water hitting a hot coil, but allowed Cobbs attempt to divert his attention sink in. “Later,” he gruffed.

Mace settled on the deck across from him. “Guess I’m out one breakfast.”

“Should have been faster rescuing the hostage,” he fired back. The rest of the squad remained silent, seeing he needed to take his anger out somewhere, and Mace was always too willing to roll with it.

“We took communications down, controlled the environment, made a two deck ascent, neutralized the enemy, and found the hostage,” Mace shot back.

Obviously he was pissed about missing Kayla’s cooking. The pilot flew them on a low path straight for NAB Coronado. “The hostage had timed IED’s strapped on. He was showing signs of losing control. You ignored those signs, and focused on the timer. You need to do both.”

Mace’s attention shot to the open hatch. “Yes, sir.”

The chopper ate up the distance quickly, and hovered over the beach for them to disembark. He was the last to depart, and leaned over the pilot. When the guy craned his head around, he gripped his shoulder. “Snow White is off limits. Understand, flyboy?”

With full face shielding, he couldn't see the man's eyes, but he read the clamping of his jaw. "You sayin' she's seeing somebody?"

"I'm saying she's a no-fly zone, asshole. Got it?"

"Think I do," he drawled.

"Good."

With a quick step he exited the open hatchway, but the pilot had already begun to lift, causing him to land and roll to stop from breaking a limb. "Fuckin' asshole." The squad kept their distance when he straightened up. "Back here at fifteen hundred hours," he barked, and headed for the boathouse to store his gear.

"We were going to head to Breakers for breakfast, since Kayla's already working," Nathan, their youngest member shouted over the departing helo.

"We'll catch up," Cobbs hollered back.

The rest of the team ran up the beach. He turned a *don't friggin start* look on his friend, but that wasn't going to stop Cobbs.

"Two weeks, no sleep, juggling too many balls—you gotta give it a rest, man," Cobbs said, grabbing his shoulder as he tried to walk away.

"Not stopping."

"The Shark is going to make a mistake, but so are you if you don't back off. Or is it something else?"

"Go home, Pat. I'm going to hit the rack too," jumping over a log, nested above the high tide line, he headed toward the roadway.

The familiar sounds of men storing their weapons, and the clash and clatter of stashing their gear in the boathouse didn't replace Kayla in his thoughts. "Men! A word before you stand down."

The squad gathered round, some of them half dressed, Mace and Tinman were already changed into their civies. “It’s against my better judgement to allow Snow White back to work. It means while I’m investigating with Lieutenant Manchester, I can’t watch her.”

“Caleb, stepped forward pulling a T-shirt over his head. “Sir, we’ll keep an eye out for her.”

He let out a deep sigh. “This isn’t an order. I’m not asking you to do that.”

“No, sir, but you know we will.” Caleb crossed his arms over his chest. “I made her appointment with Dr. Shenko at the hospital. She needs to see him. She told me to go to hell by the way, when I mentioned it to her.”

Thane grinned to himself. “Told me the same.” She didn’t want to see the shrink, but she was going, even if he had to drag her kicking and screaming all the way. “Mace I want you to take her.”

“Great, why do I get the hard assignments?”

Tinman poked an elbow into Mace’s ribs.

“Because she can’t say *no* to you, and you’re her best friend.”

“I don’t know if it’s just me,” Mace began, “but she’s been seriously cranky lately.”

“She’s always had her freedom, and she doesn’t like being pinned down. That’s why I had to relent, and let her return to Base Command. It’ll take her mind off the Shark.”

Mace gave him a half-hearted shrug. “Think it’s you that’s making her cranky, actually.”

“What? Spill it, Mace.”

“I think she would have left us already if you hadn’t put her into lock down after her episode. I don’t mean to listen when you drop by, but you’re not exactly quiet, sir. She wants to move on, and you’re smothering her.”

“I want her to get help. You were there. You saw how bad her PTSD is. Snow White needs to deal with this. Instead, she’s trying to bury it, but it’s got nowhere to go, but back inside her. It’s

poisoning her. We know where this ends up. We've seen our teammates and other service personnel battle with it until they fall victim, and their lives are ruined. I'm not going to watch that woman destroy herself."

Mace's gaze dropped to the ground. "I don't want that either, but I just think you need to give her some space," he paused. "Either that," and Mace raised his gaze to meet him eye to eye, and it was harsher than hell. "Or man up, and tell her the truth."

Now it was his turn to look away, something his men didn't see him do a lot. "You're dismissed, men, and thank you."

Thane made his way to the parking lot with Pat on his heels.

"Come over to my place after you get up. Marg will make us breakfast," Pat offered as they reached their vehicles.

"Thanks, I'll just grab something on my way in."

Mace and Tinman had already jumped in Mace's car, and were heading for the gates, the other guys not far behind.

"Things aren't good with you and Snow White, are they?"

He ripped his camo jacket off, dropping it on the hood of his car. "No, shit." A deep sigh resonated in his chest. "I can't figure her out. Mace is right, she's been acting nuts lately. She tears into me every time I go see her. If I didn't know better, I'd think she really did want to dump me."

Pat's arrow-like chin dropped, and his silver eyes pinned him. "That would have to mean you two are together, as in boyfriend, girlfriend."

"What is this, grade school? We're together," he said sternly, but his brow wrinkled with doubt. "At least in my mind."

"Not sure she sees it the same way."

“Why do you say that? Couples have arguments. I remember you and Marg having some knock down drag out fights.” His heart swelled with warmth thinking about his feisty little she-warrior, and how she liked to take him on in a battle of words. Kayla never backed down from him, and when he seduced her, her passion was as hot as his own.

“Marg was talking double-time to Kayla last night on the phone, Thane.”

He popped his trunk, and dumped his sea bag inside, then slammed the trunk closed. “Once I find the Shark, it’ll change, but my focus is on that. I know she doesn’t like being roped down, that’s why she’s been so damn hostile.”

“Your focus better shift a little. Kayla’s thinking about going home.”

“What?” he barked, the search for his keys forgotten.

“Marg was talking a mile a minute to try and change her mind,” he said, leaning back against the car, and crossing his arms.

“Over my dead body.”

“Maybe hers. Have you considered it might be better if she does leave?”

Pat cursed him with a look, and although it wasn’t meant to judge, that’s how it felt. He hammered the roof of his car.

Cobbs lowered his head. “Um, buddy, ya just put a major dent in a one hundred thousand dollar car.”

He didn’t give a shit about his car, then started to pace. “She’s safer here where I can watch her.”

“Thane, you’re not thinking with a straight head. You haven’t been for months.”

“I never lose my concentration,” he argued, stopping in his tracks, but the lie vibrated in his heart.

“She’s got you all twisted up, and you’re being a selfish bastard by keeping Kayla here when she’d be safer out of the country.”

“The Shark could follow her.”

“Yeah, maybe, but doesn’t she have that friend in JTF—He’d...”

He jabbed a finger at him. “Don’t you even fuckin’ say it, man. That guy is in love with her. I’d be crazy to let her go to him.”

“You’re crazy now.”

“I just need some sleep, and if I wasn’t here debating my relationship with you—”

“You don’t have a relationship according to Snow White.”

“We do,” he said firmly.

Pat shrugged. “If you say so. Have you even taken the woman out for dinner? To the movies?”

“Little god damn hard when there’s a serial killer on her tail.” He fingered his keys, and considered his options. He shrugged a shoulder. “Pat...I want a normal life with Kayla, but we can’t even begin to do that if the Shark isn’t identified.” He yanked his jacket from the hood, and tossed it inside. “We’d always be looking over our shoulders. I don’t even want to let her go back to work, but I couldn’t come up with a good enough argument.”

“I get that, but you don’t get women. They need to have at least a few bread crumbs leading them to a tomorrow.”

He flapped his arms. “How the hell am I supposed to know that?”

“My point exactly, Thane. You’ve been on bachelor-auto-pilot for too long. If you want a relationship with Kayla, you have to prove it. Translated, that doesn’t mean stopping in for a fast roll in the sheets, and out the door.”

He ran a slow hand through his hair, and gazed with wary eyes toward Base Command. “If he went to see her now, they’d end up snapping at each other. He was past tired. “When this is over, I’m hog-tying that woman, and she’s coming home with me, for good.”

Pat let out a laugh. “Yeah, right. I’m sure she won’t put up a fight.”

He tossed an *eat shit* look at his friend.

“If it were anyone else, I’d say no worries, but we’re not talking about anyone, we’re talking about Snow White, and you have about as much control over her as I do Marg. None. So you better start wooing the woman because I’m not having you take out your broken heart on the team if she leaves your sorry ass and heads north.”

“Go to bed, asshole.”

“See ya at fourteen hundred hours for breakfast, Frog.”

Chapter Two

It felt good to be back at work, but it didn't stop Kayla from writing a resignation letter and plunking it on Captain Austen's desk. He picked it up, scanned it, and then tore it in half, dumping it unceremoniously in the garbage can.

Anger mingled with mirth as he waited for her to lose her temper. "Anything else, Ms. Banks?"

She swiveled to look at Captain Redding sitting at his desk, his cane hooked on the file cabinet behind him. "Sorry, my dear, I guess that's a 'no'. To be honest it would have ended up in the same place if you'd given it to me."

Whose side was the Captain on anyway? If she wanted to resign from the U.S. Navy, she could. "I'm civilian. I can resign if I want to. You can't do that."

"Just did," Thane said calmly, daring her to say something offensive. "Or I could accept it with one condition," the half grin he wore slid into a full-on wolf smile.

Thane leaned back in his chair, and fingered his pen. He only wore that smile when he thought he had her in a corner, which he never did. "What condition would that be, Comman...Captain Austen?"

Everyone was still getting used to calling him Captain now that he'd accepted his promotion. Yet, he was so much more than a man on a fast trajectory for admiral, and every day he crawled deeper under her skin to the point of a volcanic eruption. Her emotions ran amok like her ancestors screaming on the warpath. She was autonomous—less than woman—more androgynous, but the man in front of her turned her into a girl by infiltrating every cell inside her.

A graduating class of BUD/S recruits required him to don his number ones for the ceremony he was attending later this afternoon. He filled a uniform like no other man at the Naval Amphibious Base. Broad, eye-popping shoulders accentuated the ceremonial suit, and made half the women in San Diego swoon, pant and otherwise slobber all over themselves. With rugged male model features, and eyes the color of a tropical ocean, he made the other half consider

cheating. The ribbon racks layered on his chest pockets sat with a silent boast of his bravery. What was worse—she knew what was underneath the clothing!

He'd asked her three times to get on a plane with him in the last week. Hiding out on some tropical island would not help track down the Blood Shark. Her response was the same. "Transfer me, Captain."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes pinned to hers. "Denied."

"Oh, you're such a..." She couldn't flip him the bird, but the swish and flick she thrust at him would make an Italian jealous. Calling him something derogatory, and she had plenty of names lined up, would be grounds for disciplinary action in Coronado Base Command, even for her. At the base, he was her senior officer.

His shoulders rose with a silent laugh, knowing the strain it took for her to keep a lid on her comments. Every time he turned his damn smile on, stretching his tanned skin across a strong, handsome jaw, it made her blood thick and gooey, which made her even more annoyed.

"Kayla," Captain Redding said, pulling her attention to him.

"Yes, sir."

"We have a new candidate coming in for a tour next week. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind showing them around, and then reporting on your first impressions."

She narrowed a look at Thane. "I'd be happy to find someone to take over my position."

"You're leaving?" The new admin assistant hovered in the doorway.

Carrie Watson had been hired soon after Karen received her walking papers. Although Carrie was older, she wasn't any less beautiful. Sweaters were her favorite attire, emphasizing her swelling 'D' cups, and not a single blonde hair roamed out of place. *Who the hell hired these women anyway?*

Not answering, Thane spoke up. "Good morning, Ms. Watson."

“Good morning, Captain Austen, Captain Redding.” She nodded at Redding, and quickly glued her topaz stare back on Thane.

Carrie didn’t have to turn on the sex; she was a walking poster for it with her lithe legs. The bitch didn’t even need nylons. Crossing the room, she stopped in front of Thane’s desk. With all of her five-foot-ten inches of curves and hips, she handed him a folder.

“You’re signature, Captain—when you have a moment.”

Thane’s gaze locked with hers. *Did his eyebrow just quirk?* Kayla glanced at Captain Redding, who suddenly found the paperwork on his desk very interesting. Jesus, was there a woman on the planet who didn’t fall under Thane’s wheels?

Karen, their last admin assistant, had been young, exuberant, and in lust with Thane, but she didn’t trust Carrie. Every time the woman looked at her, she plastered a coy expression on her perfect mug as if satisfied Kayla was an old worn doormat with frayed ends compared to her silkworm smoothness. It might be true, but screw her.

“When do you expect the candidate, sir?” she asked Captain Redding, ignoring the fact Carrie still hovered for no good reason. Thane was perfectly capable of picking up a pen and signing documents on his own.

Redding didn’t look up when he said, “Around ten, a week from Monday, I believe.”

She didn’t need to look. Nope, she wasn’t looking. Frig-it—she looked—and jealousy charred marks into the carpet beneath her feet. Carrie had shifted around Thane’s desk, and stood close enough to rub her hip against his shoulder as she pointed out where she wanted his signature. As if he didn’t know. “Isss.” She cleared her throat. “Is there anything I should know about their background, Captain?”

Captain Redding looked up, across at Carrie practically sitting on Thane’s shoulder, and back to her. “Uh, no. They have previous experience in tactical logistics. I think you’ll find they’re quite knowledgeable.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned to leave, but feeling exceptionally malevolent today, she paused.

“Problem, Ms. Banks?” Thane asked.

They argued all the time. Thane called it sparring. She called him annoying.

Carrie didn’t move away from him—if anything—she shifted that much closer. “I’m curious Carrie. Where were you born?” An infinitesimal sneer crept to the corners of Carrie’s perfect, pouty, peach-colored lips. Botox! Her lips had to be a cow-poison infusion. No one had lips like that.

Sliding a manicured hand to her hip, she said, “South Dakota, why do ask, Kayla?”

“Huh, that’s odd. I can hear a Russian inflection every once in a while. Can you speak the language?”

“No, of course not. My family is several generations American.”

“My mistake.” *That should do it.* She mentally slapped herself for being a scheming bitch. It wasn’t like her, except for maybe right now. Today. This minute. Okay, so she’d felt this way for the last couple weeks. Every woman had a right to swing her bitch stick once in a while.

A hungry tiger had more patience staring down a chunk of raw flesh than she had since she’d been sequestered in Mace’s apartment. Thane spent hours working with the Naval Criminal Investigative group to track down the Shark. The fact that he’d acquiesced, allowing her to come back to work, was the eighth wonder of the world.

Coronado was under full attack by the media. A reporter by the name of Casey Burton, trying to make a name for himself, did a stellar job of pointing the finger at the Navy SEALs, intimating that one of them had slipped over the edge, and become a serial killer. Several readers were taking up the chant with pitchforks and torches, but those associated with the Navy SEALs, and there were plenty in San Diego, thought Casey Burton was trying to be the next “*Anderson Cooper*,” and using the vicious murders as a pathway to success. Anderson had earned his position with good reporting, Casey Burton was nothing but a shark himself.

Thane’s gaze swung from her to Carrie, and back to her. Although Kayla took a step toward the door, she knew damn well she wouldn’t get there.

“Ms. Banks, a moment please.” Giving a dismissive nod to Carrie, he said, “I’ll sign the rest later.”

Carrie’s glare sharpened to razor-sharp points as she walked past her. *Too bad sister, Carrie was playing with the queen of thinking three steps ahead.*

“Close the door,” Thane ordered.

Kayla grasped the door, and swung it closed with a twist of one wrist.

“Are you screwin’ with me?” he said, not waiting for a breath to pass.

“All right then,” Redding said, standing up, and reaching for his cane. “Think I’m going for coffee. Ghost—”

“Thanks, don’t want any,” he said sharply, not taking his gaze off her.

“That’s not what I was going to say.” Redding patted her shoulder as he departed. “He’s not very good at this stuff my dear. Give it to him between the eyes, he deserves it.”

“What the hell?” Thane’s shoulders lifted. “What did I do?”

With his hand on the doorknob Redding said, “Son, you’re just gonna have to learn it like the rest of us—the hard way. Tear his ass a good one, Kayla.”

She and Thane glared at each other after Redding left the room. “What was that?” she spouted, breaking the he-who-blinks-first standoff. For the moment, Kayla kicked the fact she was acting like the epitome of a jealous lover to the curb.

“You’re slapping resignation letters on my desk.”

“What was that—giving Miss Curvaceous a cute quirk of the eyebrow crap?”

Thane reached a hand to his neck and rubbed it. “Just checking.”

“Checking what?” She took an angry step toward him, sizzling from his adolescent attempt at making her jealous. Or was it? Carrie was beautiful, why wouldn’t he be interested in her.

Thane flipped the file folder closed, and let out a deep sigh before rising from his chair. “I was thinking we should try that new Italian place tonight in the Gaslamp district.”

Evasion tactic? Don't think so. “Nice try.”

“What? The guys say it’s really good.”

“Take Miss Sweater-too-tight.”

“Kayla, fine—shit—I’m sorry. I just...” He leaned against the cabinet, and crossed his arms, looking everywhere but at her.

“Save it, Commander.” *Crap.* “Captain. Ask your new secretary, she’s the proverbial sex-in-silk-sheets type. The way she’s drooling all over you, I think she’ll say yes. I’m glad to see you’re back to your old self. Now accept my resignation.”

A hard scowl painted itself across his features. “You tried to dump me last night. You’re giving me resignation letters.” Standing at full height, he took three steps to put himself front and center of her. “I am not going in the same shoebox as Lapierre.”

“Speaking of which, did I mention Greg’s coming for a visit.”

“What? Lapierre?” His voice rose at least thirty decibels. “When?”

Kayla fingered the document folder waiting for his oh-so-lofty signature. It was obvious where he had to sign. “Tonight, I’m meeting him at the airport.”

“Have you told him about us?” Thane’s stance stiffened.

She bit the inside of her cheek, fetching a non-committal look to plaster on her face. “Us?”

Thane grabbed the hem of his blazer, and gave it a hard tug. “Yes. Us.”

The scene reminded her of a cartoon. Any more air gusting from his mouth would have had her curls flying backwards with wind shear. She knew what was coming next. Standing at close quarters, they prepared to volley at one another like two old brigantines with cannons pounding.

“Well?”

Unable to stop herself, she crossed her arms. A protective stance, one he could read subconsciously. “No. Why? Did you want me to post a billboard at the Seaport Village?”

“No, I was thinking more like Point Loma with big fucking lights,” he yelled back, finally losing his cool facade. He always did when it came to Greg Lapierre, her ex-brother-in-law.

“I know—how about a highway sign, the speed limit is seventy, and by the way Thane’s fucking Kayla,” she hissed back.

His brow popped with that one, and he leaned over her with his ‘I’m big and scary look’. “I am not *fucking* you.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s what they call it,” she said, taking a step back. She should have held ground.

“Shit, you are one frustrating woman. I make love to you. There’s a goddamn difference. At least it used to be, when you weren’t yelling at me, and throwing me out every night.” His eyes turned steel blue, and lit like an illumination flare.

“Bullshit. You have a code, stick to it.”

Thane flapped his arms in frustration. “What damn code, Kayla?”

“In, out and gone, remember. You don’t do relationships.”

His jaw ground taut as he glared at her. The glare most people shriveled from. “How am I supposed to *do* a relationship, when I’ve been saddled with the most stubborn woman in the free world?”

“I—am—not—stubborn, you pompous Yankee asshat.”

“That’s, Captain Asshat, to you, Ms. Banks.”

“Fine, Captain Asshat.” Thrusting a finger at him, she said. “Don’t you ever try to make me jealous again.”

Thane’s mouth dropped open.

“You look like a grouper. Close your mouth.”

“Is...Lapierre?”

She shook her head. “Although I could call him if you’re busy with Miss Curvaceous tonight. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind jumping on a plane.”

Their glares collided, and created a tectonic blast that lashed back at both of them.

“Belay resigning, I should fire your ass,” he growled, sending another shockwave through her.

His glare burned the clothes right off her, and she wanted nothing more than to be wrapped in his strong arms, pressed against him, skin on skin. She missed the feel of his lips, always possessive. Thane’s touch brought the illusion of trust and safety. She stepped back quickly. “Go ahead.”

Thane was not the kind of man to stand down, and he closed the gap. “You make me crazy, woman. You’re taking the afternoon off, and so am I.” He leaned closer. “And you’re going to spend it under me.”

The back of his hand brushed against her cheek, but she stood firm, even though her insides liquefied. “Captain Austen, you’re forgetting your position—and mine. You know the company policy as well as I do.”

“Then resign.”

Say what? “You’ll accept it?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “But you won’t be crossing any border. Not without me hot on your tail, speaking of which...”

“I can’t survive on jell-o and Smarties, Captain. I need to work.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do. I’m nothing if I don’t have this,” she said, waving toward the ops room. “I’ve done it all my life. I have nothing else.”

Thane’s warm fingers cradled her jaw. “You have me. You keep forgetting that.”

A bitter laugh sputtered from her mouth. “Sure.” Her voice lowered into a sarcastic drawl. “You have a short memory, Captain. You’re a Navy SEAL, deployed for most of the year. What exactly have I forgotten?”

Thane’s hand dropped like a dead weight to his side as he backed away. “We both have options, Kayla.”

“You might, but I don’t, sir.”

Thane shook his head. “You do, sweetheart.” He reached for her hand. “Give me a little slack in the line.”

“Captain, I don’t want a line attached to my resignation. We’re going to cut the line, and set whatever we are adrift.”

He turned his back on her, a sure sign of his frustration. Thane walked to the window to stare out at Glorietta Bay. Her warrior made a formidable image. He didn’t have to say a word to demand men to follow or lure women to his strength. She swallowed heavily staring at his broad frame. “You and I have been thrust together because of circumstance.”

His head nodded but he kept his eyes averted. “More like a head-on collision.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he murmured.

“We have been doing this dance for months, and it’s nothing but a distraction to both of us.” She was just one of many, and she wanted to pull back before her heart fell into the line of fire. The fact jealousy had bit her in the ass with Miss Curvaceous rubbing against him, proved it. “I don’t want to watch women like Carrie coming on to you.”

Thane was barely holding his temper in check. “You’re like a cryptex, and every time I feel like I’m getting close to you, you change the code and lock down. Why is that?” He shook his head. “Every night I come over, and every night you push me away. If you were anyone else, I’d be gone.”

Her heart fluttered with warning not to say what lingered on her tongue. “Follow your instincts, Captain Austen. They’ve never steered you wrong, have they?”

After she’d crumbled in a violent Post Traumatic fit in front of the entire team, she’d tried to regroup, but they all handled her like rice paper these days, including him. Except of course when they fought, which was every day.

It had been years since she’d had a bad episode, but seeing the slaughtered woman in his garage, set it off. She wanted him to move on, and Carrie was just his type, but for some reason Kayla was sending mixed signals, confusing herself and him. Captain Redding returned, and they both fell into their professional roles.

“Ms. Banks—” Thane’s commanding voice was all business. “Miss Watson’s clearance checked out. Did you actually hear something in her annunciation?”

“Yes, sir.”

Talking over his shoulder, he said, “I’ll have intelligence look into it further, thank you.”

Redding gave her a sympathetic smile as she brushed past him to return to the Operations room. “By the way.” She stopped at the door. Thane refused to turn around. “I’m moving out of Mace’s this weekend, and back into my own condo. The Shark has killed two other women in the last two weeks. I’m not a target any more, Captain Austen.” She paused, and even though the thought made her heart clench she said, “My job is still open in Canada. I’m going home, Captain.”

The white uniform jacket tightened around his broad shoulders. “You belong here,” he said, barely above the hum of the air conditioning. “With...us.” Slowly he turned on his heel to stare at her. His brow tightened, and his eyes darted a quick look at Redding before they fell back on her and softened. “We need you, Kayla.”

He was wrong. She was like her forbearers, the aboriginal people of the West Coast. Her home was wherever she pitched her tent and made a fire. "I'm sure my replacement will do a fine job." Done sparring for the day, she made to leave. He didn't let her escape without getting in the last word.

"No one can replace you. Not in the team's eyes, not in mine."

She shouldn't have turned to look at him.

"I know two things with certainty; I will catch the Shark, and you are the same woman in my eyes that you were the first day I saw you, no matter what haunts you."

She swallowed heavily as his gaze kept her feet glued to the spot. He was always able to get a message across with those unbelievable eyes, whether it was an expression of pride for his men on a job well done or the depth of his need for her when they were together privately. This man was a legend, her lover and all things heroic to her. She glanced at Redding, and his expression questioned her.

"Although we work together, Kayla, he is like a son to me, and you are like my daughter. My idiot son isn't being upfront. He's never backed away from a challenge," he growled. "I don't know why he's doing it now."

Her brows shot up with that. It wasn't often Redding didn't show Thane a deep respect.

Thane turned with a reprimanding look. "This isn't the place for that..."

"Afternoon, Captain Redding," Commander Masters intervened, leaning in the door. "Ghost."

Thane's expressions altered to mild dislike. "Masters, what can we do for you?"

"Hi, Snow White," Masters' gaze rove across her face, and down to her breasts, his inspection giving her an uneasy feeling. She didn't flinch even though she felt like she needed a shower. They'd had their quarrels, but Masters kept coming around as if testing the waters. He was a married man.

“Ms. Banks, you can return to duty,” Thane said, with a hum of agitation in his tone.

“Actually my request is about Snow White,” Masters jumped in. “I’d like to borrow her tomorrow for an exercise with my team.”

When Thane turned, there wasn’t an ounce of acquiescence to be found. “Sorry, Masters, Kayla stays within this building or her accommodations. You can pick someone else.”

“What type of exercise?” she butted in. Protocol demanded she keep her lips zipped, but the thought of getting outside, and away from the suffocation of being watched made her talk out of turn.

Masters twisted his wrist. “It’s lunch time, join me, and I’ll explain.” He eyed Thane. “She’ll be watched the entire time, Ghost. I know what’s going on with the Shark. I wouldn’t put her in danger.”

“I wouldn’t mind—”

“Use someone else from the Command Center,” Thane said harshly. “It’s Kayla’s day off tomorrow. She won’t be in.”

Masters face coiled with discontent. Not many men faced off with Masters. SEALs had a way of looking scarier than hell when they wanted to, Masters more than most with his rugged complexion and bald head. Near black eyes, peered from under his ball-cap, and locked on Thane. “Then it would be her decision, wouldn’t it?” He tilted his chin downward. “What do you say, Snow White. I want to test my men in some tactical evasion. Like to have you there. Join me for lunch, and I’ll give you the details.”

She didn’t have to turn around to know Thane was scorching her with a look of displeasure. A hand suddenly came down on her shoulder.

“Kayla,” Captain Redding, interjected. “Do you want to assist him?”

“Yes, sir,” she said not daring to look at Thane.

“Kayla, has to return to duty. You can speak with her when she’s finished her shift,” Captain Redding said. The man didn’t sound like a fatherly figure anymore, but a warrior in charge.

Masters’ lips pursed, and then slid into a warm smile. “Then we’ll discuss it over dinner. I’ll escort you from the building. Wait for me.” Masters turned and left them.

Thane watched her escape. The door closed, separating them again. Anger had him vibrating, but the curl on Red’s face when he swung his attention on him, made him pause.

“You two are going to either drive each other insane or grow old together. Which is it?” Red said, limping back to his desk.

“What the fuck are you doing, Red? You just sent her into the clutches of that asshole. I’m not letting her see him after work.” He took long strides for the door, prepared to have it out, and loudly if need be, but she wasn’t going anywhere with Masters.

“How do you plan to stop it, Ghost? Have you given her any reason to believe you want something other than what you want from other women?”

Wheeling around, he knew it was better to walk away then take his anger out on Red. He stopped at the window, quietly looking out across the bay toward the Del Hotel where six small rubber boats with phase two BUDS/s recruits conducted exercises. “She drives me crazy.”

“Why do you think that is, son?”

He shot Red a look from under his bangs. I’ve...she’s...I mean what does she want?” he said exasperated as all hell. “I’ve told her in so many words.”

“So many words, huh?”

“Yes, I’ve...shit, Red, she’s got all her spines out these days, and she won’t let me near her.”

Red pointed at the visitor’s chair across from his desk. “Sit, son.”

Whenever his old lieutenant called him son, he knew a speech was on the horizon. Over the years, there hadn't been many, but it was like stepping on a claymore, step off before Red had his say, and it would explode. "Red, I know what you're gonna say." He sat down in the leather chair, and dropped his head back with a sigh, and stretched his long legs out in front of him.

"No, you don't, and that's the problem. You're a little old for the birds and bees speech, but the truth is you don't know squat about women."

"You're the second person to accuse me of that today." Pushing himself up in the chair, Red had his attention. He couldn't wait to hear this.

"The way you look at each other, I know you've already crossed the line. So far the ranking food chain hasn't caught wind of it, but if they do, one of you will be removed from this department."

The first niggles of worry sprouted its green curled head through the ground. The base had a strict policy the U.S. Navy adhered to, without exception. Two people who worked in a classified department couldn't be lovers. Not bothering to hide his frustration, he grumbled, "For the last month we haven't broken any policy."

"Kayla will be the one removed, and she may or may not have a job with the U.S. Navy. She may be transferred across the country. She may have to resign, and if she does, she can only go one place, and that's back across the border."

"I won't let that happen." One option kept popping in his head, but she wasn't making it easy. Kayla threw him out of Mace's apartment every time he tried to see her, never mind trying to steal a kiss. Alone in his bed, he'd caught himself reaching for her at night. When all he'd grab were cool sheets, he'd lay awake staring at the ceiling getting even more pissed off. Obviously, he was doing something wrong.

"She's putting up road blocks to protect you, not her," Red explained.

Considering she was doing it to protect him never even entered his head. He was the protector. "What do you mean?" sitting up even straighter.

“You fell in love with her the second you saw her. You’ve been torturing yourself ever since. Yelling at her isn’t working. Trying to make her jealous with Carrie is only building a wall between you, and you’re letting her do it. You’ve corralled yourself in your own tome.” Red shook his head. “You’re not drivin’ the boat, son. Your prop is outta the water.”

Thane stared down at the mottled green carpet. “What the hell am I supposed to do? She keeps pushing me away since the Shark killed that woman in my home. I think she’s embarrassed because of what the team witnessed. If I bring it up, she quickly changes the subject.”

“It’s not embarrassment. I would think you had figured that out by now. Sometimes, you have to lay down your weapons and surrender, and you’ve never surrendered, but if you don’t—you will lose her, Ghost.” When Red’s phone rang he ignored it, letting it transfer to Carrie. “Kayla can throw up a smoke screen thicker than Baghdad under fire. Obviously, she’s got you fooled. She’s a decisive woman, and she’ll decide to get lost, and I don’t think even you’ll be able to find her.”

Red had become a wise old warhorse. Other than Pat Cobbs, there wasn’t a man on earth he trusted more. “Do you really think I could lose her?”

Red smiled thoughtfully. “Have you ever tried telling her how you really feel? Women need to hear the words. Right now she’s holed-up, and the only way to roust her is take the first step. She may or may not show herself. You have to accept that too.”

“What if I’m the worst thing for her?”

“Bullshit.”

“What if she doesn’t really want me?”

“Still bullshit.”

“What if I promise her forever and forever is only six months?”

Red leaned forward, and crossed his aging hands. “That’s really been the issue all along, hasn’t it? No SEAL loves a woman without worry in his heart. Your heart is saying something loud and clear. Listen to it.”

Thane grinned to himself. “I’ve had some good role models with you and Pat. You all survived the strain of separation, being faithful, but so many don’t. Divorce, adultery, the list goes on, doesn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Marriages stretch to the breaking point in our line of duty. It really comes down to morals and faith. If you don’t think my strength wasn’t tested over the years, think again.”

Thane arched a brow. “Red, you’re not going to tell me you crossed the line?” he questioned, not believing what he was hearing.

Red shifted uncomfortably. “Long time ago. Long deployment. I slipped—once.”

Lydia and Red had been married for forty-one years. With six daughters and a herd of grandchildren, they were the tightest couple he knew.

Red nodded. “Hardest thing I ever had to do was tell Lydia, but I did. Things were tense for an entire year, but I never gave up showing her she was the woman I loved more than anything in my life, and she forgave me.”

Red’s revelation floored him. Getting tangled up in a messy relationship with one woman was something he’d always avoided. He wasn’t blind to the fact he might have broken a heart or two, but it wasn’t until he looked into Kayla’s eyes that he saw the man he was, the man he wasn’t, and a future he didn’t believe existed until her. No woman would ever make him veer off course. Kayla was his true north. He was just confused if they were heading in the same direction. “What if I tell her—you know, and she...”

“Tell her again, and keep telling her, Ghost, because no matter how many times that woman thrusts her spines out to keep you away, what she really wants is a happily ever after.” Red eyed him. “I think she wants it with you.”

His heart did a somersault hearing the old man's words. "That's what I want too," he said quietly. "But I'm not convinced I'm what she needs."

Red sank back in his chair, and waited. This was always the point where his old lieutenant wanted him to figure things out. Normally he did. Through life, he'd always taken sure, strong strokes, but right now he was dog paddling like a seven year old thrown in the deep end.

"Son, have you ever told a woman you loved her?"

His eyes darted everywhere but at his mentor. "No," he admitted, his gaze coming to rest on Red. "Because I never have, until now—and it hurts like hell to be honest."

Red nodded. "So does a bullet, but it didn't stop you."

"What if I screw up? What if I can't protect her? What if the Blood Shark—" He sighed deeply, knowing 'what ifs' did nothing but confuse a plan.

"What if all that's in your future is happiness? You're never going to have another Kayla."

"I know that," he said quietly. He thrust his fingers through his hair. "I know that, Red. I'm still dazed. I went from committed to my country to feeling like I should be committed every time she's around me. She makes me laugh. She makes me feel, and she pisses me off," he ground out.

Red tapped his finger against the edge of his desk. "And?"

"And what?" But he knew *the what*, Red wanted to hear. He never second-guessed himself, but Kayla had him in knots.

"Tell her," Red ordered like they were in the middle of a mission.

"No." Red raised his brows in surprise. "I have to prove it to her." He stood up and walked to the window that gave them an open view into the Command Center. Kayla was settled in front of the SATCOM computer on the east wall. It was read only, but the specialists could view the satellites on their track to gather intel. "I need to find the woman inside her before she was nearly

killed by the first man who claimed loved her. I just don't know how the hell I'm going to do that."

"You better show, not tell fast, because that barracuda they hired as our new admin assistant isn't going to take rejection well. That one's a fighter, and she smells blood already."

"Not concerned," he said stepping to his desk and picking up the phone. There was one thing he had to deal with. "Commander Masters. I'd like to see you in my office."

"I'll be there after lunch," Masters said, his voice filled with discord being ordered to appear.

"Nooo, not after lunch. Now, Commander." He slammed the phone down. Kayla was going to be pissed at him, but he'd rather have her railing at him any day of the week than see her put in a vulnerable position with Masters. He knew exactly what Masters would do if he got her alone.

Red's lips curved with a grin. "You're a different man, Ghost. Must be the promotion to captain."

He heeled back in his chair. "Just occurred to me there's a plus side to outranking that idiot."

"Turning against a SEAL brother isn't our way."

"He's not a brother. He's a womanizing son of bitch. SEALs have a code of honor, and that extends to the women we ask to spend the rest of our lives with." He clenched his hands together so he wouldn't bust another pen in half. He'd gone through boxes of them since Kayla had come.

"What do you intend to tell Masters? He isn't beyond advising the Admiral something is going on between you and Kayla. He's not exactly your best friend."

Masters knocked on the door.

Collecting his thoughts, weighing his options, he knew there was only one. The one he wanted for a long time. "I don't give a shit to be honest. Kayla is going to be my wife. She knows it and so do I. Getting there will be a mission I'm not going to give up on." He crossed the

room and yanked the door open. “Take a seat Masters.” Todd hesitated, seeing the poorly hidden dislike he held for the man.

“What is it you want to discuss?”

“There is no discussion,” he shot back. “Stay away from Kayla. Take her off your radar. Don’t come sniffing around here. If it’s work related, it goes through me. You copy me?”

Masters shot a look at Red, whose expression was as stoic as a rock. He might be playing devil’s advocate, but he was brutally protective of Kayla, and he knew Masters track record.

Masters straightened his shoulders, his stubbled chin jutting out with anger. “You’re out of the equation, Ghost.”

“So are you, friend,” he ground out. “You’re married.”

“We have an arrangement.”

“Screw—your arrangement. Stay away from Kayla, that’s an order or I’ll help her fill out the harassment paperwork.” He backed up, and slammed the door loud enough the staff in the Command Center turned to look, including Kayla. He positioned himself at the window, and stared at the woman who had changed his life. “I love you, Ms. Banks. I’ll be damned if I’ll let anyone take you from me. Not the Shark, not Masters, and especially not your demons.” He tossed a look over his shoulder at Red.

“That’ll do,” Red said, giving him a knowing smile.