

Chapter One

AJ

“Stone. Blade. Get your asses in here.” Chief Harris stalks into his office, his bad attitude following him through the station like a cloud of Axe body spray in a sauna. *Shit*. Ten more minutes and I would have been on I-35 headed home.

I push up from my chair as Jasper shoots me a look I know all too well. We ain’t gettin’ out of here on time. We’ll be lucky to get out of here at all.

“Keep the piss and vinegar to yourself if you don’t want to spend the next month doing the chief’s paperwork,” I mutter.

My twin brother snorts. “You’re the one gunnin’ for captain. I’m going fishing tomorrow.”

“We’ll see about that, *little* brother. I’ll pull rank if I have to.”

“You’re *five minutes* older than I am, AJ. That don’t mean shit and you know it,” he grumbles.

“Maybe not, but the chief likes me more. Or *dislikes* me less.”

“Shut the goddamn door.” Harris barely glances up from his computer until the din from the bullpen falls away. The scent of stale coffee in here could choke a hog. He doesn’t ask us to sit down, a sure sign we ain’t gonna like what he has to say.

“The Cordova Cartel is making moves again. One of Marvin’s CIs thinks they’re running some distribution operation off Rundberg. Shipments goin’ in and out of a strip mall at all hours of the night.”

“Marvin hasn’t had a reliable CI since Jasper and I were in college.” I glance at my brother. “You hear any chatter about a strip mall op?”

“Nope. Dead silence.” Jas holds his hand to his ear. “I reckon that was a pin droppin’ in the break room.”

“You’re a goddamn comedian now?” Harris barks.

“No, sir.” Jasper shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and stares down at his boots.

Fuck. We're gonna be on the chief's shit list for months if we ain't careful. "What my brother means, sir, is that *our* CIs say the cartel's been quiet the past few weeks."

"And quiet usually means they're up to somethin'. So you're gonna work on your jokes while you run stakeouts for the next two nights."

I shake my head. "Chief, I'm takin' Grace up to Lake Livingston this weekend. We're fixin' to leave in a couple hours."

"Not anymore."

He slides a piece of paper across his desk. I have to squint to make out his messy scrawl. With that handwriting, he should have gone to med school.

"Stone, take McGrath to location Alpha. Blade, you're with Billings on location Bravo. I expect a full report from each of you by ten a.m. tomorrow. Now get the fuck out of my office."

"Goddammit." I punch Jasper in the upper arm once we're back in the bullpen and out of the chief's earshot. "Next time, keep your wisecracks to yourself."

"This wasn't my fault and you know it," Jasper snaps. "Marvin's had it out for us since I pranked him last year. That idjit can't take a fucking joke."

"You spiked his coffee with ghost pepper extract. He was shitting fire for a week! Thanks to you, I gotta tell Grace we can't go up to the cabin this weekend."

Jasper cringes. "Fuck. I'm sorry. But Grace knew what she was signing up for when she married you. She'll understand."

"Not this time." I pull my phone out of my back pocket and stare at the screen. Grace smiles back at me from the finish line of last year's Austin Half Marathon. "She taught her final class of the term yesterday. We were goin' up to the cabin to celebrate."

"So you'll go next weekend." He waves Billings over from across the bullpen.

"Can't. She's got the Austin Marathon in two weeks and she keeps talkin' about carb loading and taper runs. Apparently, her sleep schedule has to be 'on point.' Whatever the hell that means. Once this weekend's over, she won't touch a single drop of alcohol til she crosses that finish line. Then she's back to a full teaching load. Including summer session. This was our last chance to get away until Christmas."

"Shit, man. I'm sorry." Jasper checks his watch. "But if we don't start to look like we're takin' this assignment seriously, Harris is gonna have our asses. Call Grace so we can get to work."

A few feet away, McGrath pushes back from his desk and grabs his jacket.

Fuck.

“McGrath, don’t even *think* about leaving. We’re pullin’ an all nighter.”

The guy snaps to attention, drops the jacket on his chair, and follows Billings over to us.

“What’s going on, lieutenant?” He’s practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, he’s so goddamn excited. He and Billings have only been on the job a little over a year, but they’re both solid. They’re also kids. McGrath is only thirty-two and Billings might be even younger.

Jas and I are north of forty, and the prospect of no sleep has my back aching already.

“Stakeout. Chief’s orders. You’re with me. Billings is riding with Jasper. Head down to the motor pool and pick up two sedans. Then go to Siren Coffee for traveler boxes. Be back here in thirty.”

“On it.” The two of them double-time it out of the bullpen like their asses are on fire.

For the next twenty-seven minutes, Jas and I go over every line of the file Marvin put together. His source provided nothing but vague rumors that don’t stand up to a lick of scrutiny.

“This is horseshit,” I say as Jasper shrugs into his jacket.

He shakes his head. “Tell that to the chief. Marvin’s so far up his ass, he can tell you what Harris had for breakfast.”

I choke back a snort, but my brother isn’t done.

“The fucker ain’t been on his game since that failed drug bust last year. He’s got more CIs than a centipede has legs, and none of ‘em can ride and chew at the same time.”

“Tell me how you really feel, Jas.”

He gives me the side-eye as we wait for the elevator down to the garage. “You call Grace yet?”

“Fuck.” Billings and McGrath are due back any minute, and if we don’t get a move on, we’ll never hear the end of it.

Jasper cringes as I thumb out a quick text message.

AJ: Caught a case. Jasper and I are on stakeouts all night. Tomorrow too. I’m sorry, but we gotta cancel our trip this weekend. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.

My phone rings less than sixty seconds later. I’ll catch hell for it tomorrow, but I tuck the device back in my pocket and let the call go to voicemail.

“AJ, you’re playin’ with fire. Grace is as easy goin’ as they come, but ignoring her? She’s gonna have your ass in a sling for months.”

My brother’s right. I should call her back. Apologize. Grovel, even. But she’s been looking forward to this trip all winter. Hearing the disappointment in her voice might do me in.

AJ: About to get in the car. We’ll talk in the morning. I promise. I love you.

The message status changes to *Read*, but Grace doesn’t reply. Or call again. It’s gonna be a long damn night. And an even longer morning.